

Transformations of Circus in the Contemporary Era: La Central del Circ as a Catalyst of Change

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

The evolution of contemporary circus in Catalonia, driven, among others, by La Central de involves a radical transformation from its traditional origins into a rich and multifaceted artistic expression. This shift has made the circus artist a creator and performer who defies traditional classifications and promotes a personal and collective narrative. The intersection with advanced technologies and the exploration of concepts such as the posthuman highlight the adaptability of circus to multiple times and realities, reshaping its history and practice.

La Central del Circ has been a key part of fostering a circus that engages with contemporary issues through a cohesive dramaturgical approach. This postdramatic and performative approach underlines the importance of structure and technique beyond the simple demonstration of skills, allowing artists to communicate effectively with the audience. Circus creation becomes an act of cowriting with the audience, where space and interaction are fundamental to the meaning of the show.

Thus, contemporary Catalan circus, with its diversity and innovation, not only provides entertainment but is also a platform for artistic expression and cultural dialogue. La Central del Circ has established a model of experimentation and critical reflection, showing how circus can capture the complexities of our time and enrich the contemporary cultural landscape.

Keywords: contemporary circus, Catalan circus

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Contemporary circus

Contemporary circus in Catalonia has diversified greatly in terms of formats and disciplines. It is no longer common to find shows that include all circus disciplines; instead, some specific acts such as tightrope, *portés acrobatiques*, hair hanging and the Cyr wheel, to name but a few, have given rise to autonomous performances, from solos and duets to large groups of specialised artists. Moreover, the traditional circus tent has given way to other spaces of creation and performance: from halls and streets to museums and digital platforms, all these spaces host shows that have left their mark, such as *Bèsties*, by Baró d'Evel Cirk Cie., and others that have developed a dialogue between research and new dramaturgies, such as *EZ* by Elena Zanzu and *MASHA* by the Palimpsesta company, CircusNext laureates and residents at the Fàbrica de Creació La Central del Circ.

An essential characteristic of this new era is the vision of the circus artist as a creator and performer. This perspective goes hand in hand with a vocation to innovate, question and, at times, adopt a political or social stance. This evolution in the role and social perception of the circus artist highlights the importance of originality and creation as a work of art in itself, recognising circus as an artistic discipline that can be as profound and moving as any other form of expression.

However, this quest and diversity in contemporary circus defies any attempt at rigid classification. It is a fluid art, constantly evolving, responding both to the demands of a versatile market and to a personal creative project. This adaptability and resistance to categorisation demonstrate the dynamism and vitality of circus in today's world, confirming its place as an essential and constantly renewing artform.

Exploring the complex universe of contemporary circus demands a methodology that includes various theoretical currents. As we have explained, circus in Catalonia, with its rich history and adaptability, has evolved beyond

simple acts of entertainment to become an artistic manifestation that intertwines the personal and the collective.

This shift in performance initially appropriates the postdramatic ideas put forward by Hans-Thies Lehmann, where the narrative breaks with linear structures, allowing the meaning to develop and transform beyond the pre-established text. But it is important to explain that it is not a new element, since circus has varied in its historical forms, such as the variety show and vaudeville, where this adaptability in traditional circus could already be seen.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, with her focus on performativity, provides a framework for understanding the circus as a place where action has intrinsic meaning. The relationship between the artist and the audience is not simply that of observer and observed; it is a dialectical relationship where both actively participate in the construction of meanings. Circus performance deploys physical skills that become a dialogue that transcends mere performance to become a shared and collective experience (Fischer-Lichte, 2014: 202).

Moreover, the concept of the posthuman, introduced by Rosi Braidotti, a feminist philosopher and theorist, expands this perspective by questioning the boundaries between the human and the non-human. In the context of circus, this is reflected in how performers, with their almost superhuman abilities, interact and merge with advanced technologies, and create a synergy that challenges our conventional notions of what it means to be human.

By combining these approaches, our analysis seeks to place circus at the intersection of these contemporary theories. This theoretical amalgam provides a multidimensional lens to understand and appreciate circus as an act of entertainment, but also as an artform that engages with contemporary issues and reflects the tensions and transformations of our times.

However, as we explore these vast philosophical and sociological fields, it is imperative that we stay on course and not lose sight of the main aim: to understand circus in Catalonia from the perspective of contemporary dramaturgy. This discipline guides us to ensure that the research is coherent, focused and, above all, revealing of the profound art of circus.

Contemporary circus and its relationship with postdrama

We understand that contemporary, as a concept, encompasses multiple dimensions, including self-designation with an interest in circulation at a distance, the simultaneity of times, and an approach that is both historical and philosophical and artistic. It is not only a label to identify the present, but also represents the circulation of ideas and perceptions across time and space, implying a constant re-evaluation of what we consider “current”.

In Agamben’s view, there is a fundamental contradiction in contemporary man: the lack of an experience of time that is coherent with his conception of history (Agamben, 2007: 143). This idea highlights the complexity of living in the present without a full understanding of time in relation to history. Groys expands on this notion by arguing that being contemporary involves being “with time” rather than simply “in time”, suggesting a deeper and more reflective integration with temporality (Groys, 2014: 93).

Chilean philosopher, Willy Thayer contributes to this debate by pointing out that the contemporary implies the coexistence of multiple realities and times within the same era, challenging the notion of a single, uniform and transcendental time (Valderrama, 2011: 13). This suggests a reconfiguration of history, as proposed by Miguel Valderrama, a Chilean historian and doctor of philosophy, where the question about the contemporary reveals a change in the very idea of history, a history comprising times and heterogeneous narratives (Valderrama, 2011: 105).

Finally, Chilean philosopher Sergio Rojas points out that the contemporary entails a particular “historical awareness”, which paradoxically implies the irreversible catastrophe of history as narrative (Valderrama, 2011: 53). This suggests that contemporaneity is not only concerned with understanding the present, but also implies a critical reflection on how we understand and narrate history itself. Circus, as an artistic manifestation, has evolved in synchrony with society and culture, experiencing a profound metamorphosis in its aesthetics and praxis. Now, far removed from traditional conventions, this circus renaissance develops in a range of heterogeneous forms, reflecting a melting pot of social values and meanings.

The concept of “contemporary circus” reflects this new era in which each circus act becomes a chapter in a wider, unconventional narrative. Belgian dramaturge and researcher Bauke Lievens’ analysis, *Dramaturgy: from Aristotle to contemporary circus* (2009), takes on crucial relevance. Lievens not only traces the evolution of circus art over the years but also explores the intricate relationship between dramaturgy, which has been the backbone of theatre since the time of Aristotle, and contemporary circus.

Lievens’ analysis is essential for the circus community today, as it offers a unique perspective on how narrative and dramatic techniques can enrich and deepen circus performances. Lievens addresses this evolution by guiding the reader through the changing tides of theatrical performance. From the Aristotelian trinity of “*mīmēsis*, *mythos* and *kátharsis*”, which has cemented the foundations of drama, taking in the ideas of the 20th century avant-gardes with such emblematic figures as Artaud, until the emergence of postdramatic theatre and its break with established conventions.

This analysis invites the reader to reflect on a fundamental question: in this age of constant change and reinvention, what does dramaturgy really mean? And is it still relevant to us? By connecting theatrical tradition with the world of circus, Lievens lights the way for future generations of circus artists, encouraging them to explore new forms of expression and break traditional moulds. In an era when circus art constantly seeks to renew itself and preserve its relevance, Lievens’ work has become an essential source of inspiration and reflection for artists and enthusiasts alike.

What is dramaturgy? Do we still need it?

Dramaturgy, a concept that has been intrinsically linked to the world of theatre since its beginnings, has undergone profound transformations in its definition and application over time. Although at first it focused almost exclusively on the written text, today its scope is much broader. It has become

the backbone that lends coherence and unity to a variety of stage performances, beyond simple dramatic theatre.

Although the word *dramaturgy* immediately conjures up images of a theatrical script or a classical play, in the contemporary world its meaning has expanded to encompass the structure, rhythm and cohesion of any kind of stage presentation. This transformation has become especially evident in the world of circus. While traditional circus used to focus on individual acts without a clear narrative connection, contemporary circus seeks to tell stories, not necessarily linear ones, to evoke emotions and communicate deeper messages.

In this new paradigm, dramaturgy plays a crucial role. In contemporary circus, it is not enough to perform acts of physical skills, it is essential that these acts are intertwined with an underlying concept that gives them meaning and depth. Dramaturgy, in this context, acts as a bridge between pure circus technique and the art of storytelling through physical actions.

So, do we still need dramaturgy? The answer is a resounding yes. As the performing arts evolve and merge, the need for a strong, coherent structure to guide and shape these productions becomes more imperative than ever. Dramaturgy has adapted and redefined itself based on the changing needs of the artistic world, proving its relevance and versatility in each new incarnation. At its core, dramaturgy is the language that allows artists to effectively communicate with their audience, no matter the medium or form the production takes. It is, and will continue to be, a fundamental pillar in building meaningful stage experiences.

Circus dramaturgy: reflections from contemporaneity

The debate about the identity and specificity of circus is still alive and constantly evolving. Its place in the artistic and institutional world has been the subject of discussion and revision, with some voices arguing for a redefinition closer to equestrian theatre, while others argue for maintaining distinctive traditional characteristics, such as the arena or the round stage. This dichotomy shows the complexity of establishing a single definition for contemporary circus and, even more so, for its dramaturgy.

France has become a centre of debate and reflection in this field. Authors such as Arianne Martinez from the University of Lille, Jean Michel Guy, a specialist in circus studies, Marion Guyez, with her innovative doctoral thesis on dramaturgy and acrobatics, and Philippe Goudard from the University of Montpellier, have laid the academic foundations that allow us to understand and contextualise the emergence and evolution of contemporary French circus since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their work has been essential to understanding and appreciating the transformations of contemporary circus.

2020 saw a valuable contribution to the academic literature on the subject with the publication of *Contours et détours des dramaturgies circassiennes* (Moquet et al., 2020) by CNAC and the Chaire ICiMa. This book, edited by Diane Moquet, Karine Saroh and Cyril Thomas, brings together essays by leading academics and practitioners with the CNAC certificate in circus dramaturgy. Among them, figures such as Thomas Cepitelli, Maroussia Diaz

Verbèke, Marian del Valle and others already mentioned, provide in-depth perspectives and analysis on contemporary circus dramaturgy in Europe.

France's academic legacy in this field has been fed by both theatrical avant-gardes and the creative and evolutionary development of circus in its territory. Although focused on the French context, these writers provide us with tools to approach circus dramaturgy from a broader perspective, which recognises its complexity and the need for a multidisciplinary and constantly adapting approach. Thus, dramaturgy in circus is presented as a structure or technique and also as a reflection of the society and culture in which it develops, offering a mirror on our aspirations, fears and advances as humanity.

Dramaturgy, although essentially theatrical, is a concept with diffuse contours, as we have explained. Historically, a playwright is both a writer of plays and an artistic collaborator. Dramaturgy thus positions itself at a crossroads where different polarities meet and sometimes collide. It is halfway between practice and theory, between knowledge and experimentation, and between creation and perception. This transition zone, described as “wandering”, challenges and transcends conventional oppositions to enrich the panorama of contemporary circus creation (Moquet et al., 2020: 9).

Contemporary circus, with its non-linear and fragmented structure, aligns itself with postdramatic and performative evolution. However, simplifying this link can be problematic. Arianne Martinez, in her publication, argues that contemporary circus has adopted a “dramaturgical mindset” due to its fusion with theatre, dance and performance art (Martinez, 2018: 21). This hybridisation reflects the definition of the term *circus*, which also indicates a search for its own dramaturgy, distinct from a mere repetition of traditions.

Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (1998: 150), addresses how the representation of the world in the performing arts is now necessarily fragmentary. Instead of a single coherent dramaturgy, performance can take on multiple dramaturgies. The idea of dramaturgical choices proposed by Pavis accurately reflects contemporary trends and the various aesthetic-ideological approaches adopted by artists.

The evolution of circus has transformed the succession of acts into a multidisciplinary amalgam, nourished by the influence of other arts such as theatre and the visual arts. This metamorphosis has given rise to the “creative circus”, a format that tends to more resemble theatre, thus reflecting the contemporary language of the arts (Soler, 2016: 40):

Once we have accepted that circus skills are a language — and, consequently, a code of poetic transmission —, the next challenge is of a dramaturgical nature: it consists of being able to amalgamate the circus specialities (kinetic language) and the narrativity inherent to the show in question (mainly non-text-based language) in a unitary discourse. It is remarkable that not all current European circus shows dramaturgically meet such as challenge (Jané, 2017: 20).

Contemporary circus, heir to the new circus, remains an omnivorous entity, absorbing and adapting different arts. While traditional circus offered

a fragmented structure of acts, contemporary circus seeks to create a non-linear but coherent and cohesive narrative with its discourse, reflecting the continuous dialogue between circus artists. Jean-Michel Guy perceptively sums it up.: “Our present and future vary according to the stories we choose to tell” (1998: 15).

Circus has always been a melting pot of forms of expression and, while the dividing lines between disciplines were once clear, contemporary circus seeks to fuse them, without strictly adhering to their regulations, but adapting them to its own essence and context.

While traditional circus prides itself on its rich history, with roots in displays of physical prowess and daring acts, contemporary circus has begun to question and deconstruct these traditions. Such reinvention does not seek to erase the past, but rather build upon it, adding new forms of expression and experimenting with narrative structures.

Disciplines that were once strictly demarcated — such as trapeze art, acrobatics and horse riding — are now intertwined with dance, physical theatre and multimedia projections. This interweaving of disciplines challenges traditional perceptions of circus, enriching the audience’s experience by offering multiple points of attention to the show.

Today’s circus artists, armed with multidisciplinary training, blur the lines between actor, acrobat and dancer. They become storytellers through movement, word and expression, bringing an additional layer of complexity and depth to the circus dynamic.

The circus arena itself has experienced a transformation. The traditional round tent, an iconic circus symbol, has undergone innovative variations. Some artists choose open spaces, others traditional theatrical stages and some even take their art to unexpected urban locations, bringing the circus closer to people’s everyday lives.

Funding and institutional support have also played a role in the evolution of circus. In countries where arts and culture are promoted, such as France, contemporary circus has flourished thanks to government recognition and support. This investment in funding, training and the creation of dedicated circus outlets has allowed artists to experiment and bring their visions to the stage.

As we look to the future, it is clear that circus will continue to be a space of innovation and experimentation. Whether inclining to tradition or dipping its toes into the avant-garde, circus, at its core, will continue to celebrate wonder, skills and storytelling, while adapting to and reflecting the changing times in which it lives.

In the evolution of contemporary circus, the relationships with tradition are palpable, but the artistic choices are plural and often break with pre-existing norms. These choices, whether in movements, sounds, *colours of gestures*, costumes or make-up, are not anchored to any defined norm, showing a refreshing artistic freedom. With this diverse and innovative nature, it gives the impression that contemporary artists are distancing themselves from the strategies of their predecessors or sometimes even opposing them.

Circus in Catalonia

Catalonia has witnessed the coexistence of three generations of circus artists, each of whom has brought their own distinctive stamp to the art. The first generation, which emerged after Franco's regime, was predominantly self-taught. The next generation was nourished by the teachings of the Centre de les Arts del Circ Rogelio Rivel and the Carampa school in Madrid. Today, a generation with international higher education is emerging, enriching the artistic panorama with an amalgam of styles and techniques.

Circus companies in Catalonia reflect diversity in their approaches and themes. Through the irreverent humour of Random Circ and the technical experimentation of the Companyia de Circ "eia", these companies represent a broad spectrum of artistic expressions. Catalan circus is dedicated to the display of physical skills, as well as being deeply involved in the research into and fusion of different performing languages, such as dance and theatre.

A notable feature of circus in Catalonia is its penchant for innovation. Companies experiment with materials such as clay, metal and wood, and explore the expressive possibilities of specific apparatus and techniques. Original live music is another distinctive element: artists and musicians work together to create immersive and unique soundtracks for each show.

Catalan circus is characterised by its ability to connect with audiences through improvisation and direct interaction. It also proactively addresses social and cultural themes, reflecting and challenging contemporary social roles and norms. Issues such as disabilities, vulnerability and women's empowerment are addressed through performances that are both provocative and enlightening.

The artists and creators of Catalan circus face physical risks inherent to their art and also take on the artistic challenge of developing their own stage language. This process of constant evolution ensures that circus in Catalonia is not just a spectacle, but also a dynamic and constantly changing medium for artistic expression.

Circus in Catalonia, through its different generations and approaches, has managed to establish itself as a sphere of creative freedom and profound cultural expression. Its ability to evolve, adapt and challenge conventions makes it a vital and vibrant component of the Catalan art scene.

General panorama of circus companies in Catalonia

The landscape of circus companies in Catalonia is diverse and dynamic. According to statistics from the Government of Catalonia in 2018, 11.7% of performing arts companies in the region were dedicated to circus, with a total of 22 companies that meet specific criteria of professionalism and regular activity. However, the Associació de Professionals de Circ de Catalunya (APCC)'s *Guia de Companyies de Circ* expanded this vision by including up to 120 companies in 2020, reflecting a larger and more varied sector (APCC, 2021).

Most of these companies are small groups, with 57% made up of two or fewer artists, and have an average lifespan of six years. This characteristic

underlines a trend towards more agile and adaptive structures, capable of responding quickly to the changing demands of the audience and the cultural environment. Most of these companies are located in the province of Barcelona, thus concentrating creative, training and performance resources.

Catalan circus companies usually open a new show every two years, although they often keep several running simultaneously. This practice shows a rich creative diversity, as well as underlining the companies' ability to maintain a constant and dynamic presence on the cultural scene.

One notable aspect is that most circus artists complement their craft with other activities. Circus training is one of these parallel activities, with up to 41% of the sector involved in it. This diversification helps artists maintain a stable economic base, encouraging a continuous exchange of knowledge and skills within the circus community.

Although the concentration of companies in Barcelona offers advantages in terms of access to resources and audiences, it also poses challenges in terms of geographical distribution and reach. There is significant potential to expand the presence of circus to other areas of Catalonia and thus reach a wider and more diverse audience.

Circus companies in Catalonia represent a vibrant and essential sector of the region's performing arts. With a tendency towards small, agile groups and a strong concentration in Barcelona, Catalan circus is distinguished by creativity, diversity and adaptability. As these companies continue to evolve and expand their reach, they have the potential to further enrich Catalonia's cultural landscape.

Circus scenarios in Catalonia: visualisation, learning and creation

Circus in Catalonia takes place mainly on the streets and in a variety of festivals. More than half of the performances by Catalan companies happen in public spaces, reflecting its accessible and community essence. Some festivals such as the Festival Internacional de Pallassos de Cornellà-Memorial Charlie Rivel and the Fira Trapezi stand out in this panorama, offering a platform for both established and emerging artists. These festivals, together with others that dedicate part of their programming to circus, have made this art a regular and expected presence in the cultural circuit.

There has recently been a growing movement to include circus in theatre programming. Venues such as the Ateneu Popular 9 Barris and L'Estruch Fàbrica de les Arts en Viu in Sabadell have been pioneers in this initiative by programming a significant number of circus shows. This transition of circus from the streets to theatres offers new horizons for artists, opening up this art to a wider and more diverse audience.

Projects such as Nilak Circ Teatre Itinerant and Pobles de Circ are working to bring circus to areas less exposed to this artform. These travelling projects seek to entertain and engage local communities through shows and workshops, thereby fostering a greater appreciation and understanding of circus.

Big top circuses, such as Circo Raluy Legacy and Circo Històric Raluy, represent a vital travelling circus tradition in Catalonia. These companies,

with their nomadic tents and shows, take the circus to various towns, culturally enriching each one they visit. The existence of specific regulations would facilitate and unify the granting of permits, optimising their cultural impact.

The Centre de les Arts del Circ Rogelio Rivel stands out as an epicentre of professional circus training, as it offers an outlet where aspiring circus artists can learn and perfect their art. This institution, along with other training venues, plays a crucial role in fostering and developing new talents in Catalan circus.

The Circ Cric, established in the Montseny area, is an icon of Catalan circus that has maintained a constant and significant presence in the region. With a permanent venue, it offers an intense programme ranging from traditional circus shows to innovative contemporary productions. It acts as a performance venue and also as a centre of learning and experimentation for circus artists, contributing significantly to the development and preservation of circus arts in Catalonia.

Los Galindos is another notable company on the Catalan circus scene. Known for their unique approach, which combines traditional circus elements with contemporary approaches, Los Galindos have revolutionised the way audiences perceive circus. Using a travelling or permanent tent in a more intimate format, they provide an up-close and personal experience that contrasts with large circus productions. Their focus on artistic quality and emotional connection with the audience has made Los Galindos a benchmark in modern circus art.

The richness and diversity of circus in Catalonia are reflected in the variety of its performance and creative spaces. From the iconic Circ Cric, anchored in tradition but always seeking to innovate, to Los Galindos, which reinterprets the circus experience with a contemporary twist, Catalonia offers a varied and constantly evolving circus scene. These companies, along with geographic expansion initiatives and festivals, ensure that Catalan circus remains a vital and dynamic part of the regional culture.

Creation centres in Catalan circus

In Catalonia, the need for venues dedicated to circus creation is widely met, although their geographical distribution tends to be concentrated. These spaces are fundamental for the development and innovation in circus arts because they provide artists with places where they can experiment, train and develop new concepts and shows.

La Central del Circ, an epicentre of creation

La Central del Circ, in Barcelona, the biggest circus creation arena in Spain, is a key initiative that emerged at the request of the APCC. Supported by the Government of Catalonia and Barcelona City Council, this space not only serves as a centre of creation, but also as a point of meeting and collaboration for the circus community. Its role in the network of Fàbriques de Creació in the city makes it a major player in Barcelona's cultural scene.

L'Estruch and other spaces of creation

L'Estruch, in Sabadell, is another important example, with a cross-disciplinary focus that includes a specific section for circus arts. In addition, there are several other venues throughout Catalonia that promote circus creation. Among them, initiatives such as the Espai de Circ Cronopis in Mataró and Tub d'Asaig, 7,70 in Terrassa, which provide platforms for entertainment and group training, as well as La Crica in Manresa, Can Batlló and La Bonita in Barcelona, and La Fàbrica de Somnis in Vic.

The emergence of new outlets such as Konvent Cirk in Berga and La Bau in La Garriga shows a continued growth in support for circus creation. These spaces, which are often cross-disciplinary and self-managed, offer additional opportunities for artists to experiment and work together, thus strengthening the diversity and richness of circus in Catalonia.

The existence and continued development of these spaces of creation are indicative of the dynamism and vitality of circus in Catalonia. They provide the necessary resources for circus artists and companies to innovate and thrive, contributing significantly to the evolution of circus art in the region. The collaboration between these venues and the circus community ensures an exciting and creative future for Catalan circus.

Catalonia: tradition and experimentation

In Catalonia, the evolution of contemporary circus and its dramaturgy have stood out for integrating modern elements and merging with other arts, despite the lack of a consolidated critical analysis. The APCC has been a key part of disseminating material on circus, but without an organisation that provides critical coherence, unlike initiatives in France such as CARP and FEDEC. In contrast, the private sector, represented by the Circus Arts Foundation, has promoted classical circus, while contemporary circus is still seeking its space and recognition.

Educational institutions, such as circus schools and universities, could play a vital role in compiling and analysing the vast circus material, offering an academic reference for the sector. Catalonia saw the birth of the "Catalan signature circus" at the end of the 20th century, reflecting its cultural identity and standing out for its initiative in promoting circus art, evidenced by the creation of specialised venues and festivals.

Catalonia's contribution to circus is not limited to the local level, as the influence of international productions that have fostered cultural exchange is also recognised. Europe and Africa have renewed circus with new aesthetics and techniques, an example that should be followed to strengthen circus dramaturgy in Catalonia and beyond.

Despite the lack of political and financial support compared to other European countries, Catalonia has kept its circus tradition alive thanks to the will and creativity of its artists and the support of organisations such as the APCC. The adaptability of the sector was demonstrated by the discontinuation of the Premi Nacional de Circ, with the creation of alternative awards that continue to value this art.

Training has been key to the evolution of Catalan circus, with the Escola de Circ Rogelio Rivel-Centre de les Arts del Circ Rogelio Rivel leading the way in professionalisation and the establishment of academic standards. The rich and constantly evolving history of circus in Catalonia reflects the resilience and vitality of the sector, adapting and innovating in response to contemporary challenges.

Circus education in Catalonia has been notable for its intensive approach and projects such as Circ Cric, while La Central del Circ has become a centre for creation and training. The proliferation of festivals and events, such as FiraTàrrega, has celebrated circus, providing platforms for national and international artists.

However, circus dramaturgy in Catalonia is facing challenges, such as the limited number of academic sources and the need for more extensive research. Although companies such as Baró d'Evel Cirk Cie. and Escarlata Circus have developed unique dramaturgies, academic and critical coverage remains limited. It is essential to adopt a structured approach that includes critical analysis and the voice of artists to understand and develop circus dramaturgy in the region, and that underlines the importance of expanding academic research so that circus continues to flourish with the rigour it deserves.

La Central del Circ. Dramaturgy in the context of contemporary circus

La Central del Circ, located in Barcelona, emerges as a critical epicentre for the promotion, research and dissemination of contemporary circus arts. Its relevance is accentuated through the analysis of contributions and dialogues developed in the 7th Jornadas de Dramaturgia y Escritura Escénica held in 2023, which marked a milestone in the cultural and artistic panorama, both locally and globally.

Among its most outstanding attributes, La Central del Circ is distinguished by its drive to innovate in circus creation and education. By acting as a catalyst for artistic experimentation and critical reflection, it provides artists with essential tools and support for exploring new languages and expressions, positioning itself as a vanguard in contemporary circus.

Additionally, it encourages dialogue between artists and critics, understanding the importance of this interaction for the enrichment of the sector. Through initiatives such as Esfera Circ, La Central del Circ underlines its commitment to circus criticism and analysis, building bridges between creators, critics, programmers and the audience. This approach not only elevates artistic quality, but also promotes a deeper understanding of circus art.

Its role is crucial in developing a cohesive circus community, as it provides a space for the exchange of knowledge and experiences through artistic residencies, workshops and training programmes. This community-based approach is essential for the sustainable development of circus arts.

However, challenges remain, such as the need for greater recognition and professionalisation of circus criticism. La Central del Circ must continue

to strive to make innovations in circus accessible and understandable to a wide audience.

La Central del Circ plays an indispensable role in the promotion and evolution of contemporary circus, as it is a model for centres dedicated to circus arts. Its comprehensive approach, which encompasses creation, education, criticism and community, contributes significantly to cultural and artistic enrichment. However, it is vital to continue to face current challenges in the sector, innovating and connecting continuously.

Dramaturgy, in this context, has become a crucial element that goes beyond mere circus performance, with La Central del Circ playing a key role in its development. Since 2016, it has organised annual conferences, becoming an international forum for the study of circus dramaturgy thanks to the contribution of renowned researchers and artists. These conferences have served as a valuable outlet to explore and define dramaturgy in circus, documenting debates and reflections that serve as a record of the development of this field.

Unravelling circus: Catalan dramaturgy

In a conversation in the journal (*Pausa.*) no. 20 (2020), Johnny Torres and Vivian Friedrich discuss the role of dramaturgy in contemporary circus.¹ This conversation is part of the project *#reflexionsdecirc*, which seeks to pose questions rather than providing answers about dramaturgy and stage writing in the world of circus.

Torres and Friedrich view contemporary circus as an evolving artform that transcends the traditional notion of mere spectacle to convey deep feelings, ideas, messages and values. Through a thoughtful dialogue, they explore how it is distinguished from theatre and dance by its unique nature. Their discussion emphasises the importance of understanding the essence of circus in order to theorise about its dramaturgy, which they consider to be based on elements such as rhythm, action, and interaction with the audience, and is built on aesthetics, use of the body, technique and space.

The authors trace the history of circus, from its decline as an artform in 19th-century France, to the founding of the modern circus by Philip Astley in 1768 and its transformation over the years. Despite facing restrictions that limited performances, circus found ways to tell stories, especially through circus pantomimes, reflecting the social and political changes of its time. Torres and Friedrich argue that although circus dramaturgy has always been present, its recognition as an art has fluctuated, and they emphasise the need to revalue contemporary circus.

1. This article is a summary of the conversations between Vivian Friedrich, creator and circus researcher, and Johnny Torres, pedagogue and artistic director of La Central del Circ (2016-2020). Held between 2017 and 2019, these conversations explore the dramaturgy of contemporary circus, questioning its definition and highlighting its commitment to society, distancing themselves from traditional and commercial conceptions. These reflections form part of the project *#reflexionsdecirc* and the Jornadas de Intercambio sobre Dramaturgia y Escritura Escénica at La Central del Circ, started in 2017. The discussions deal with issues such as the history and evolution of circus and the contemporary challenges in its practice and teaching, while stressing the importance of a dramaturgy that is not based on the text and the need to contextualise and understand circus in modern society (Torres and Friedrich, 2020).

The analysis extends to how circus has undergone a profound transformation in Catalonia, reflecting the changes in society. The transition from traditional to contemporary circus illustrates how globalisation and local identity intertwine, creating new forms of artistic expression that challenge stereotypes and clichés. It discusses the importance of education in circus arts and the need for spaces to learn and experiment with contemporary circus, and notes the role of institutions such as La Central del Circ in combating the exodus of talent and the weakening of the local artistic community.

Moreover, the conversations between Torres and Friedrich in venues such as MACBA and La Central del Circ shed light on how contemporary circus in Catalonia, and in general, navigates the crossroads of identity, legitimacy and artistic expression. They compare the evolution of circus with that of graffiti, in which the search for authenticity and acceptance stands out. They reflect on how circus challenges the laws of physics and how that challenge becomes a manifestation of life and creativity, beyond mere technical skill.

They discuss “major dramaturgy”, which considers how space and context influence the narrative, and “minor dramaturgy”, which focuses on the story being told. In Catalonia, circus dramaturgy is seen as co-writing in real time, evolving with the performance, underlining the dynamic and participatory nature of contemporary circus.

Finally, they examine how regulations and social perception can influence circus, reflecting on the balance between safety, bureaucracy and the free and anarchic essence of circus art. This dialogue between Torres and Friedrich not only highlights the richness and complexity of contemporary circus, but also its constant struggle for relevance, acceptance and definition in an ever-changing world.

The pending reflection

The 7es Jornades de Dramatúrgia i Escriptura Escènica, led by Elena Zanzu at La Central del Circ, highlighted the vitality of innovation and reflection within contemporary Catalan circus. This meeting, which took place from 29 September to 4 October 2023, brought together approximately 30 participants in a dynamic exchange of ideas, where artistic projects in development were presented and the latest trends in circus dramaturgy were discussed. Outstanding figures such as Franziska Trapp, Guillaume Martinet and the Compañía Circo Físicoquímico offered perspectives ranging from circus criticism to analysis of power and gender dynamics in this art.

Roberto Magro, with his presentation “L’escriptura, bastida de l’espectacle de circ” (Writing, the Scaffolding of the Circus Performance), proposed an analytical framework based on the metaphors of Circ IKEA (IKEA Circus), Circ Fusta (Wood Circus) and Circ Iceberg (Iceberg Circus), which offered a lens to understand the various methodologies in circus creation. This analysis reveals how each approach reflects a unique depth and complexity in the creative process, from the accessibility and efficiency of Circo IKEA to the deep and contextualised reflection of Circo Iceberg.

Circ IKEA represents a form of creation that, like the furniture of this Scandinavian brand, is accessible, easy to assemble and seemingly personal property despite being mass-produced. This approach to circus writing suggests a fast and efficient methodology that saves time and effort both in the creation and understanding of the show by artists, audience and programmers. However, it may imply less depth and uniqueness in artistic creation.

Circ Fusta refers to a more organic and experience-based creative process, comparable to the growth and treatment of wood. This type of writing involves time, from conception to final realisation, and is based on lived experiences, which gives it greater durability and robustness. It represents a deeper and more considered approach to circus creation, where time and personal experience play a crucial role in the development of the production.

Circ Iceberg focuses on the visible and invisible parts of a creation, where only a fraction of the total structure is apparent to the audience, inviting them to intuit the magnitude of what lies beneath the surface. This concept emphasises the importance of the context that surrounds and shapes the creation, as well as the possibilities of intuiting the depth and complexity of a production. It embodies a highly reflective and contextualised approach to circus dramaturgy, where the meaning and structure of the production transcends what is immediately visible.

Magro advocates an exploration beyond the surface in circus creation, encouraging artists to experiment with methods and forms that reveal the depth, complexity and richness of circus. These metaphors not only offer a way to categorise different approaches to circus creation, but also encourage reflection on the creative process, originality, and emotional and intellectual connection with the audience. Magro's approach invites creators to carefully consider how their productions are constructed and perceived, promoting a circus practice that values both the process and the final product.

The conclusions drawn from this conference underline the importance of a conscious and reflective approach to circus creation, which promotes experimentation and originality. The diversity of approaches discussed demonstrates that, far from being limited to the execution of physical skills, contemporary circus is a fertile field for artistic innovation and profound cultural expression. Through events such as this conference, La Central del Circ consolidates its role as an incubator of talent and critical thinking in contemporary circus, presenting circus not only as entertainment, but as a reflective and evolving artform.



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