
For a new pact between society and circus

Leandro MENDOZA

leandromendoza@gmail.com

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Trained at the Escuela de Circo Criollo in Buenos Aires, he worked in different neighbourhood and amateur theatre companies. In 1998 he arrived in Barcelona, where he became involved in projects such as the Escuela Rogelio Rivel and La Vela. He has been a member of the Board of Directors of APCC, director of La Central del Circ and of Fira Trapezi. Artistic director of 15 productions, notably including *Retalls*, *Pals*, *Guadual* and *Vetus Venustas*. Creator of the Sectorial Circus Table. Ciutat de Barcelona Award 2016.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

The conceptual foundation that is reflected in my artistic identity comes from a set of experiences, cultures and aesthetics resulting from the integration of personal involvements ranging from Creole circus, traditional Latin American circus, busking in the street, the most professional development in Spain, and active participation in Latin American projects and co-productions.

In view of what has happened in this last quarter century within the Spanish circus sector, I review recent history and current events, and analyse what role our art had and has in society and how something so mobilising a few decades ago cannot find a way out of the margins of culture. What do we contribute to today's society? Why is circus no longer popular? What role should public authorities have? What internal review do we have to carry out as a sector in order to achieve critical mass?

I propose a reflection on what a new pact with society should be like, contemplating all the ways of doing circus, and which concepts help to integrate its past, present and future.

An example of this pact can be found in the creation of *Vetus Venustas*, a documentary circus theatre, where all the concepts mentioned are considered to better understand diversity and the life experience of diverse circus artists.

Keywords: Circus, *Vetus Venustas*, Leandro Mendoza, contemporary circus, circus and society, Ciclicus

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Vision and concepts of artistic direction

Integrating experiences on the path of artistic identity, between creole circus, traditional Latin American circus and busking in the street, discovering my contemporary language in Spain, and participating actively in projects and Latin American co-productions: with this range of experiences, cultures and aesthetics, I find my conceptual foundation in circus artistic direction.

Poetic body

Since the beginning of civilisation, and perhaps before, there has been nothing more primal than a poetic body communicating. Without the need for words, the body communicates not only an intention but also emotions, actions, relationships and spirituality. The poetic body is a body that can execute a technique and express emotion simultaneously, a studied and spontaneous tool. It is, without doubt, the greatest exponent of the collective imaginary: a poetic body is the first tool of humanity, it is the permanent and temporary state of being.

Space

The popular space par excellence is the circle and the circus ring, its scenic materialisation, loaded with symbology and transcendence. This magical space is connected to all social strata: it is elevated because it connects the dome and the ring (heaven and earth); it is democratic because the show can be seen from any point in the stands and, as the audience members observe each other, it works as a multiplier of emotion; it is also transparent because nothing is hidden from view. It is, without doubt, a universal ritual space.

Collective creation

One of the most important and enriching values of popular creation is that of inventing an imaginary between people who feel and think differently. I always say that it is often more difficult to create a common imaginary in a

group than to put on the show itself, since the entire team must consider the need of the project, put aside their egos and start working for the common good of the show. Thus, the role adopted by the director is very different from other arts, less hierarchical. He or she is the articulator or content manager, a catalyst and support in the search for that integral idea that contemplates all the wills and values that are sought to be explained in the artistic work.

Generational transfer

Generational transfer is the foundation of culture and society. Therefore, the most enriching situation you can find is to transfer this diversity to a stage, talk about something specific, and create an opening up of views. In this way, we will be much more empathetic with an audience that identifies with a story, not only because of the story or who is telling it, but also because of the place from which it is told, always respecting and recognising the knowledge of those who preceded us.

Stories, plots

Organically, most of the stories that come to me are from the vision of the circus world and internal circus themes. What life looks like through the eyes of a circus artist always gave me something to think about and it is a vision that I always strive to value.

Music

Circus has a live resonance, every bodily act has a rhythm, it has a sound and its materialisation is in the music that is fundamentally related to the movement of the poetic body. The circus artist has always created through image and rhythm, and live music is an essential tool to create a comprehensive and sensory circus; their relationship is intimate and historical in equal measure, it is the logic and coherence in the narration of the senses.

Nature

I believe in nature and its legacy, in the collective unconsciousness where society can read the primitive and complex of the cycles and their matter. I see it as necessary to bring nature to the stages of big cities as a vehicle and context for the stories to be told. On stage, natural materials have an intimate reading and create spaces with warm and welcoming textures. Nature represents me!

Applause

Applause has deep anthropological roots since the first applause is attributed to chimpanzees. Human beings love applauding; we need to do it, because it creates pleasure in two basic needs at the same time: expressing our emotions and sharing them socially. That is why we do not applaud alone, but as a group.

I would like to pause to consider the circus artist's management of applause as a real factor within the communication between artist and society.

In circus we find very different ways of approaching this management, which leads me to reflect on the intuitive relationship of the two parties, discovering "where" the artist relates to his or her audience. For example, there are artists who do not wait to do a sequence or technical choreography before asking or demanding applause and constantly look for a forced provocation. In this case, I understand that they seek to demonstrate or confirm constant approval of their act. And, in the opposite case, other artists do not build or pause at that possible and enriching dialogue with their audience, whom they leave as an observer of a private act.

I believe that circus has to normalise the relationship with the applause from its audience and I feel that it would help to strengthen this relationship not to use the audience as an accomplice or leave them in a distanced role. Is applause management about the artist's self-esteem?

Circus can improve its relationship with the audience, dialogue, leave them with the freedom to express themselves in a natural and transcendental manner, generate that state — as Joan Brossa explained on the concept of stage poetry — where at the moment when the artist and audience have a collective experience, where everything foreign to that moment does not take place, where the laws of common sense do not predominate, where there is an emotional connection; that ephemeral and transcendental moment that the audience is with the artist, and the artist is with the audience; that moment when time stops, the body is weightless, and you breathe eternity.

I encourage reflection with these antagonistic examples since a mature and intelligent relationship would make us grow and help create stage poetry.

Society and circus pact

Antecedents

In the last decade of the last century, we were excited about a new state of play in the sector: interesting projects, activities and actions were being developed that already showed a path to progress. Circus reconnected with the administrations and began to reorganise; the few existing companies had a presence and the international circuit was emerging and showed a path to the artists and the companies being created.

The beginning of the new century brought fresh highly sought after projects such as a circus school, the creation of the professional circus association, the founding of some residence and training spaces like La Vela, in Vilanova i la Geltrú, the involvement of the administrations to organise *The art of risk. Contemporary Catalan circus*, an exhibition and catalogue that reflected that upward movement in normalised culture, until achieving the greatest milestone, which was having a comprehensive plan for circus that the sector itself had created and negotiated with the administrations, with La Central del Circ as its outstanding achievement, still managed by the professional association.

Chronology:

- 1981 Circ Cric
- 1984 Fira de Circ al Carrer de la Bisbal d'Empordà
- 1991 Associació de Circ de Catalunya (ACC)
- 1996 1st Circ d'Hivern at the Ateneu Popular 9 Barris
- 1997 Fira de Circ Trapezi in Reus and Vilanova i la Geltrú
- 1999 Escola de Circ Rogelio Rivel
- 2004 Associació de Professionals de Circ de Catalunya (APCC)
- 2005 La Vela, in Vilanova i la Geltrú
- 2005 Parliament of Catalonia declaration: "Circus is a high cultural interest performing art»
- 2006 *The art of risk. Catalan Contemporary circus* (exhibition and catalogue)
- 2008 1st Circus Integral Plan
- 2008 La Central del Circ
- 2010 Zirkòlika Awards

But in 2011, society was going through an economic crisis where culture was no longer a priority in budgetary matters. Perhaps this circumstance had something to do with the fact that since those years circus has not been able to develop again in new important projects.

However, in the last 10 years we can talk of progress:

- The programming of circus shows has grown in public venues and prestigious festivals such as Festival Grec de Barcelona, Temporada Alta, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, and Mercat de les Flors, where it is usual to find one or two shows in their annual programme, and the presence of some renowned international companies in private theatres in the city of Barcelona has also increased.
- In public subsidies, new lines of funding have been added to the structures of companies on a multi-year basis, which help and at the same time condition them to enter into dynamics that are not natural for companies. One of them is the 1st Circus Integral Plan, which at the time was presented in haste and without consensus with the sector, managed mostly by the APCC and which caused more problems than real solutions.
- Moreover, the bodies and institutions that bestow awards on the performing arts are beginning to see circus in their nominations, such as the Talía Awards of the Academia de las Artes Escénicas de España and the Critics' Awards of *recomana.cat*, which used to be inexistent. We find it unfortunate that the city of Barcelona in its restructuring of the Ciutat de Barcelona Awards has eliminated the circus category after so many years.

And, with a view to the future, new areas for reflection have been created within the sector that we will have to learn how to take advantage of on crucial issues:

- The **Circus Sector Conference** organised by the APCC, which seeks consensus in the sector on the public policies it wants to debate with the administrations.
- At state level we have two new initiatives. The first is the congress of **CircoRed** (Federación de Asociaciones Profesionales de Circo de España), which provides interesting activities and debates on current realities.
- And the second is the **Sectorial Circus Table**, created in 2021 and made up by all the state circus federations: CircoRed, FEECSE (Federación Española de Escuelas de Circo Socio-Educativas), FEFPAC (Federación de Formación Profesional de las Artes del Circo), PATEA (Artes de Calle Asociadas), AECC (Asociación de Empresas de Circo de Creación) and the committee of producers of UPAAC (Unión de Profesionales y Amigos de las Artes Circenses). This table seeks to be an arena to share the actions that each association implements and design a common plan among all the bodies that make up the sector in their many ways of doing circus.

Diagnosics

The present of the circus sector is difficult and lacks many structural aspects. Twenty years after the founding of the Associació of Professionals de Circ de Catalunya, which brings together the sector in general, specific actions for improvement have been carried out, but its internal organisation has not been able to find new paths or structures.

Much of current circus activity functions through municipal programmers and festivals, with the little public money there is for the sector.

The general spread of the independent artist model makes them free in creations, but totally dependent on funding.

In reality you can have relative "artistic success" while living in precariousness. The absence of the private circuit and the overabundance of companies in relation to contracts in Catalonia creates heavy stagnation and a feeling of failure, since many shows are almost never presented to the public. In the Catalan professional sector, there are about 130 circus companies with approximately 700 people.

APCC statistics for 2021 indicate that the sector is experiencing a critical situation:

- 25% of the sector earns under €500 per month net.
- 64% of the sector earns under €1,000 per month net.
- 62% of professionals work in solo companies or as a duet.

Spaces for reflection on capital issues are urgently needed, such as, for example, how to normalise an artistic sector still on the margins of culture. There are situations and/or thoughts by a large part of the sector that are very far from the actions undertaken for the normalisation of our art, the organisation of circus infrastructure is precarious, there is a lack of professional management in the sector and programming circuits, the role of production companies is non-existent, and the approach to and trust in a demanding and rigid system is lacking. Most of the time this system does not solve the shortcomings of the sector and hinders its work, opening up a significant gap between the subsidised and the non-subsidised.

The only way to exit the margins is to improve internal organisation to be able to create coherent policies by putting pressure on the powers that be. We have to imagine ambitious projects such as an established circus, a national school or a consolidated national production, and continue designing the future with public policies and the promotion of private resources. Beyond the fact that the priority of governments is to protect cultural artistic heritage, where circus is obviously located, this is not enough for us to live decently: we have to find other parallel ways of working to strengthen the sector and be able to achieve critical mass and social recognition.

In the current situation I pose the following questions:

- What is the value of creation without performance?
- Can there be a circus-society relationship without the authorities?
- Do we work for the programmer or the audience?

Culture is a clear right of today's society, which justifies subsidising it. But we would have to educate society to demand, value and pay for it. We are experiencing a paradigm shift in cultural consumption where private agents play a significant role. Can we participate in this change?

Circus boasts a rich and important history, and this is reflected in the collective imaginary and in the great companies and renowned artists still present in our memory. Despite the love and fascination it creates, circus does not occupy the place it deserves today. Its evolution needs a bold and determined push by strategic cultural agents to reconnect with its audience, refresh its relationship and be reborn as the popular art it has always been.

But the lack of internal structure in companies in terms of management, communication and business strategy is not addressed in the new cultural consumption. I think I understand that the current audience may be loyal to a few spaces or festivals, but they are not going to see a particular company or discipline, they are going to see circus, that circus that creates communion between the audiences of different generations, and that on most occasions attend an activity, such as a major town festival, and occasionally encounter circus. Clearly, it is good news that circus is scheduled for the town festivals; in fact, street circus is the most common.

New pact between circus and society

The circus-society pact of the last century has expired: neither aesthetics, nor ethics, nor current organisation corresponds to it; the contributions made by the circus art of the last century have nothing to do with the circus of today.

Today's circus follows an ethic similar to today's society and does not exploit wild animals or human deformities. And, in terms of aesthetics, we can now find as many trends in circus as there are in society. It is also beginning to take root in other areas such as children's and family training schools, since these groups are part of the knowledge of our art and the main architects of generating a new audience. Circus no longer corresponds to a single form and a single place: it has been deconstructed into hundreds of different formats and hybridisations, and now we have to regenerate its new diverse identity and create a new pact with society; we have to awaken the intelligence of adaptation that we have exercised so much in circus.

We are going through a very special artistic context to be able to reinvent ourselves: currently there is more cooperation between artists from different spheres, and this helps us to be reborn as many other languages and disciplines of contemporary art have been. We must connect with different ways of structuring the discourse that unites us as art, and rescue memory, respecting the wisdom of those who preceded us, to find our own emotional score, that sensory journey, what circus has contributed and no other art can offer, and that the audience can identify as exclusive. We must also study the experiences of other countries as an example of organisation, and artistic and political evolution, prioritising the primal responsibility of knowing what we want to say (narrate, dance or do) on stage.

From my perspective, circus has to carry out an act of anthropophagy, like the example of modernist Brazilian culture, with the idea of creating a modern circus by recovering its roots, which have been deep since the beginning of its existence. This act of anthropophagy can be revealing in its new forms if the background of a profession and a way of life is maintained, where risk, surprise and technical excellence do not compete with narrative and social demands.

Without doubt this is the way to redirect the lines of the circus, an unparalleled art in which the ritual of putting oneself at risk in public makes it unique, genuine and indestructible. There is nothing like circus.

It only has to CIRCULATE IN TIME!

From *El circo de los jubilados* to *Vetus Venustas*

My latest production is a plea for the integrative diversity that society demands, an appreciation of maturity and the diverse formats of understanding art and being in society, a hymn to the possible evolution and necessary transfer of intergenerational cultures.

El circo de los jubilados

In 2020, just before the pandemic, I met Peter Panero, a veteran Zirkus Kran artist from Switzerland, catcher and comedian. He always told me about the

idea he had with contemporary artists before the turn of the century to create *El circo de los jubilados* and, with the experience of having worked with other veterans such as Miguel Ángel Fernández Vanelli, better known as Tinga Tinga, and with Graziella Galán Bueno, a leading active trapeze artist of retirement age, the idea began to develop.

At the end of the year, I suggested doing a pilot experience with an act at the Trapezi's cabaret as a veteran troupe. The idea excited them and we scheduled a two-week creation meeting to prepare it.

Working together during those weeks was magical, especially after dinners where we watched videos of their early days and there were endless conversations about traditional circus techniques and its people. Marta Sitjà, Joan Arqué and Erol Ileri also participated sporadically in the creative process. For physical and choreographic training we have Mònica Alsina, who normally teaches physical fitness classes to older people and has a unique ability to motivate and make dance enjoyable.

And that is how the show, renamed *Vetus Venustas*, was presented with its act at the Trapezi's cabaret on 12, 13 and 14 May 2022. It was quite an event: journalists wrote notes about the old acrobats, the artists who shared the ring were delighted, the programmers commented that they had never seen anything like it, and an endless number of interesting reflections arose from this first experience.

I recall with special fondness a call from Tinga Tinga a few days later when he told me how happy he was that people had stopped them on the street to tell them important things. He said that he had come across an older person who was deeply moved; he did not talk to him about the acrobatic technique or the costumes; they were not empty words, but rather expressed verbally and bodily emotion. And it is because in each house there is an elderly person or a young person who sees themselves after retiring from the activity they are passionate about, and *Vetus Venustas* gives the audience an important message of hope and joy.

Vetus Venustas

Aiming to expand the project into a complete show, I resumed the collaboration with Joan Arqué and we agreed to speak openly about the topic of old age in a contemporary language.

Among the different spirals of reflection, we saw that none of the artists who participated were from a circus family tradition and that they represent the first features of old age of contemporary circus, artists who if they do not tell their story it will not be passed on to new generations and society. We find the need to value a generation that has shifted the paradigms and has experienced radical change, as the bridge between the old forms and the new and the legacy for today's artists are fundamental to understanding the changes in this art and its new language.

With the realisation that the power of the discourse and experiences of their careers was the most compelling, we thought that just as documentary theatre already exists, we would create documentary circus to explore a didactic way of transmitting craft, history, humanity and legacy.

We decided to introduce young characters to provide contrast and close the circle of the old and the new, not only highlighting the differences but also sharing what unites them, which is really a great deal, to deepen the dialogue between the different generations as far as possible.

An important part of the show was recording personal interviews where the protagonists felt free to comment on intimacies, anecdotes and even gossip. Here we saw the depth of the content we were handling and the respect that putting their life on stage deserved.

Working with people with so much experience was new and enriching for me and, although it put me under constant subtle pressure, I loved it for sharing all the details seen from experience and old age, the subtleties of the possible and the attainable or of the beautiful and the magical.

We did the first show with the audience before incorporating young people. At the end everyone told us that they liked it, that it had a unique beauty, the beauty of old age, even that there was no need for young people, that everything was said with the three of them.

But we were confident that adding this new ingredient would be a multiplier for everyone, not only because the young people were excellent circus artists, but also because I knew their humanity and trusted that they would give flight to the older ones.

The final stage began with the inclusion of the young artists Iara Gueller and Christian Padilla and the three live musicians: Nacho López, musical director, and on percussion and strings; Celeste Alías, singer, and Tanja Haupt, on wind, accordion and various gadgets.

The set design would simulate a warehouse where society places and locks up unprofitable artists; and not only the older ones end up there but also the young artists who cannot enter the market, since it is scarce and overcrowded.

We had practically designed the roadmap for the scenes, from the beginning of the process we had talked about making a video to open the show that would openly raise the debate and the demands of each character, creating a conceptual framework, without preambles, that would place the audience in an empathetic situation in relation to the artists and their circumstances.

When the general structure was finalised, with a first act of presentation of characters and a second with different acts and particular testimonies, the final act was yet to be resolved at all levels. And, finally, we felt that to finish they had to leave the warehouse together to begin the path of transferring the legacy. Thus, this work would be the beginning of a relationship between generations that could only multiply the craft and teach the audience the truth about the artist's life as an agent of reflection in society.

A fundamental part of the show was live music, which created a musical atmosphere that transcended the mind, reached much closer to the skin, made one enter a highly sensory layer and thus elevated the narrative.

And it happened on 29 April 2023, the day of the preview at the Cardeu theatre. There was really a great deal of desire to present it and also a lot of nerves, since a few people had seen the entire piece that same week. We knew that there were some very fragile scene links, but above all we hoped



Performance of *Vetus Venustas*, 2023. Photograph: Manel Sala

to understand the dynamics of the narrative with the audience, when they laugh, when they applaud, when they get excited, which scene takes a long time or, conversely, which scene can be developed further due to the audience's expectations, a world of unknowns that are revealed on the first day in front of the audience.

The lights come on and a wandering time begins that creates that magical moment of changing the cycle, of going from creation to artistic work.

The audience enjoyed the show and above all was generous with the little mistakes made. But, if there was anything that surprised and moved me, it was that in the hall the faces of the audience were lit up, talking with great emotion: as Claret Papiol told us, "*Vetus Venustas* is Humanistic Circus".

From this moment and in the following performances, what we were trying to understand, as it intrigued us more and more, was how society receives this show. And so we continue to see that the audience falls in love with artists, with what they are and represent more than what they do, and that *Vetus Venustas* is a universal piece that reflects society.

After each show we see the emotion in the hall. When the artists go out to bid farewell to the audience, they are protagonists, but in an equal situation. The audience talk to them, get excited, share personal anecdotes, take photos as if they wanted to take home the artist who has moved them the most or with whom they have identified. The feeling is that this show belongs neither to contemporary nor classic circus, it is wonderful that everyone feels it is theirs.



From box office to takings.
From lorry to van.
From tent to street.
From sequins to casual.
From fantasy to reality.
From excitement to emotion.
From feat to poetics.
From family to group.
From virtuosity to humanism.
From businessperson to artist.
From attraction to sensation.
From seeing to feeling.
From yesterday to today,
And I am your legacy.

Leandro Mendoza
Artagaveitia