

# Circus and Society in Catalonia: Realities and Challenges after the Turn of the Century

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## Abstract

In the early 21st century, circus, in the widest sense of the concept (that includes artists, impresarios, ring staff and audience), is facing challenges of all kinds: on the one hand, those of culture in general, artistic creation and the global consideration of circus within society; on the other, the effects of the time in which we live. The diversification of genres and traditions has affected the forms and structuring of shows. This article presents these issues that affect society's perception of circus today. It examines the co-existence between traditional small travelling shows and big multinational spectacles, between small festivals and major historic international festivals such as those in Monte Carlo or Budapest and, in Catalonia, Reus (Trapezi) and Girona (Elefant d'Or), the latter now expanded with the circus museum, Circusland, in Besalú. Moreover, it also analyses the balances between the more local festivals, between fixed, stable, permanent circuses and the more occasional shows. Two aspects deserve increased attention: the future for animal-free circus and for the Catalan language in circus.

**Keywords:** animals in circus, APCC, Circ Cric, circus festivals, circus history, Catalan language in circus

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## Circus and Society in Catalonia: Realities and Challenges after the Turn of the Century

In a quarter of a century, circus in Catalonia has transformed from being dependent on others to having a life of its own, from being non-existent at national level to attracting the interest of young people from all over the world in what happens here. Catalan companies and groups, especially young ones, trained here and which have often improved their skills abroad, receive offers to perform in other countries. How can we explain this? Well, by a radical change of centrality. When Tortell Poltrona went into exile in Palautordera with the *Circ Cric*, little could be imagined about the future of circus in Catalonia. When, in the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, in 2002, a journalist asked the circus critic Jordi Jané if Catalan artists participated, he replied: “Monte Carlo only chooses artists of a level that, at present, ours can’t reach.” At the time, the current boom could hardly be foreseen. Is this reality perceived by the general audience? Or, for many, is circus still only a mass audience show like those of *Cirque du Soleil*?

In the early 21st century, circus, in the broadest sense of the concept that includes artists, impresarios, ring staff and audience, is facing all kinds of challenges: on the one hand, those of culture in general, artistic creation and the global consideration of circus within society; on the other, the effects of the time in which we live. The diversification of genres and traditions has affected the forms and structuring of shows. These are problems reflected in how society sees circus today. What is the experience of the coexistence between traditional small travelling shows and big multinational spectacles, between small fairs and major historic international festivals, such as those in Monte Carlo or Budapest and, as far as Catalonia is concerned, the Catalan versions in Reus and Girona? What are the necessary balances between the fixed, stable, permanent circuses, which Catalonia still lacks, and those that are the result of a circumstance? All this in the middle of two issues that deserve increased attention, one of a general nature and the other specific to Catalonia: what is the future of free-animal circus? What is the future for the Catalan language in circus?

The first thing we need to consider is how to place current circus within the history of this show, a history of circus extended to the performing arts that elicits reactions from the audience with unexpected effects as a result of multicultural performances by artists who are not limited to a single discipline, because what we call circus is the result of multiple and varied experiences that converge in a complete, complex show that requires mastery of often very diverse specialities.

We give the name *circus* to a show formed in the 18th century, that has its beginnings in the world of training horses until developing highly synchronised and spectacular group movements. Generally, these equestrian events are considered the start of modern circus, when Philip Astley believed, in 1768, that the best frame to display these feats was a circular delimited space. But circus and all its skills existed long before this moment considered as its founding point. The minstrels, tightrope walkers and acrobats of the Egyptian world performed circus, just as the Greek artists included it in their strength and agility shows in squares and streets. The Romans put on shows in closed spaces such as hippodromes and amphitheatres; there were wild animal tamers, tightrope walkers and all kinds of fights, fictitious and real, which in some cases could have fatal consequences, within shows that pitted factions, neighbourhoods, cities and social classes against each other.

For me, however, real modern circus began in the Middle Ages when minstrels, jugglers and acrobats invaded the streets of villages and towns with their feats. Liturgical dramas were performed in churches, and street theatre on the parvises in front of churches and monasteries were common. Texts and images record puppet shows seen in both religious and secular



Figure 1. The Romanesque minstrels of Sant Joan de Boí (MNAC). Photo by X. Barral.

areas, while jesters and animals could be seen in palatial settings. The sculptured or painted decorations in churches have engraved the memory, as have illustrations in the margins of manuscripts. In Catalonia, a good example can be seen in the Romanesque mural painting that was in the central part of the north wall of the old parish church of Sant Joan de Boí (Vall de Boí, Alta Ribagorça region, today at MNAC); stagings that date from around the year 1100. Three characters, minstrels and acrobats, perform while playing music and juggling, against a decorative background of red, black and ochre bands. The figure on the left is depicted upside down juggling three swords. The one in the middle, who seems to be on some rocks, may also be juggling three long knives or two balls and a knife, or perhaps he has cut an object in the air with a long knife, although we cannot rule out the idea that, like the stars on the side, these balls are painted elements in the firmament. Finally, the figure on the right is playing the harp, or more likely a psaltery, perched on a small architectural structure.

Shows with animals were also frequent in the Middle Ages, exotic animals at the service of the richest, or trainers of wild and domestic animals to entertain people. The streets were the usual place for these small moments of relationship between men and animals that were also seen in processions and other religious parades. Illustrated accounts are frequent, such as from a bear trainer who is seen getting his animal to perform acrobatics before the



Figure 2. Minstrel bear tamer, c. 1120-1130 (Tours BM, ms 291, fol. 141v). Photo by X. Barral.





Figure 3. Circus show with bears on a Paris bridge, c. 1317 (Bnf, ms. Fr., 20091, fol. 47).  
Photo by X. Barral.

surprise and admiration of the people in the middle of one of the bridges of Paris in a manuscript about the life of Saint Denis, from 1317 (Paris, BNF, ms. Fr. 20091, fol. 47).

The history of circus, in the broadest sense of the concept, is very long, and we only need to recall that a space with fixed or temporary circular architecture already existed in Roman times to put on all kinds of shows, often with animals. The idea of a circular space with tiers that bring the audience closer to the show and where they are on the same level as the performers actually predates its foundation, when, as we have said, in the second half of the 18th century Philip Astley used this circular shape for equestrian displays. It is worth noting that art and architecture have always been linked to the world of circus, even if these performances have not always been called circus. Since the Renaissance and the Baroque, many forms of shows in the street and in closed places such as theatres allowed society, both the most aristocratic and the simplest and lowest classes, to enjoy unexpected human movements. Automata, mime, pantomime and puppets are aspects of shows that, with their various forms and structures, were destined to transform irony, comedy and mystery into art. And, above all, even in the Italian concept of *commedia dell'arte*, there is the figure of the comic who satirises the most tragic concepts of society, the rustic jester who has become the clown.

All this is the history of circus, as well as the architecture of circus, the music of circus, the cinema and literature of circus, and “performativity”. But above all, art. Because artists of all eras have painted and reproduced the magical moment in which the movement of an instant that cannot be halted

in order to immortalise it is captured by the artist in all its dramatic immensity. Renoir, Degas, Seurat, Chagall or Picasso, but also Klee, Léger or Rouault have given the harlequin, the clown and the acrobat to posterity. It is the bodily movements of circus figures that have created a challenge for artists. How to capture movement in painting as if it were a photograph, how to associate the movement with the image that must be fixed on the canvas or paper? That is why artists who have been interested in circus have also been interested in dance and, in general, the play of the body, in improvisation and the effect of surprise associated with mystery; in other words, everything focused on the clown's performance. This was already noted by Sebastià Gasch (1897-1980), who considered circus as the most complete show when he said: "An imaginative eccentric, a perfect mime, an audacious gymnast, a confident juggler, how are they inferior to a poet or a musician?" And all this has its history, often forgotten in the general histories of art, despite the fact that, as I said, it has been championed by many artists.

In 1958, Sebastià Gasch stated: "Painters have always loved circus." And in Catalonia we have good examples that still await a thematic history of this iconography in art. Without having to go back as far as the aforementioned Boí paintings or the art of the centuries between the Middle Ages and the modern era, in Catalonia many sculptors, painters, drawers or engravers of the first half of the 20th century have depicted circus. In 1946, a memorable exhibition of drawings, paintings and sculptures of circus themes was seen in Barcelona, at the Foment de les Arts Decoratives. Later, artists of all kinds, such as Opisso, Manuel Capdevila, Ramon Moscardó or Pere Clapera, continued this theme occasionally or, more regularly, such as Joan Soler-Jové or Ramon Pujol Boira (under the name Pujolboira).

I would like to focus on two "forgotten" figures but who belong to the great history of 20th-century art: Josep Amat i Pagès (1901-1991) and Josep Maria Rosselló (Tarragona, 1950). Between the 1940s and 1960s, the travelling circuses passing through Catalonia, such as the Canadà, the Dorado or the Continental, set up on the beach and esplanade of the port of Sant Feliu de Guíxols. The Amorós-Silvestrini company dominated the circus market in those years, taking its four circuses through towns and villages. Amat set up on a platform located above the entrance and made his quick drawings, which he later transferred into canvases in his studio. Many drawings and paintings have survived in private collections or museums. The big tops, the interiors with audiences and the details of the shows fuelled the painter's inspiration. Let us recall the celebration that has heralded the arrival of a travelling circus in town. For Josep Amat, the circus big top was a landscape. Josep Maria Rosselló, on the other hand, gave priority to the characters, tightrope walkers, trapeze artists and acrobats, who he has always placed in the colour of the Mediterranean context that forms part of all his production.

If that traditional circus painter, present in the big tops, has disappeared, it is because circus, rather than painting, has changed. Today the effervescence of circus has transformed the history of this show in a wide variety of directions. And Catalonia has gained presence, here and abroad. However, few venues programme circus, venues that contemporary circus and the



Figure 4. Josep Amat (1901-1991). Interior d'un circ [Circus Interior] (private collection). Photo by X. Barral.



Figure 5. Josep M. Rosselló, *Amazona* (Horsewoman), 2016 (private collection). Photo by X. Barral.

youngest artists need. There is a general call for theatres to open to circus and still a lack of a powerful stable circus, with its own architecture in Barcelona or in other cities in Catalonia, which programmes high-level shows all year round. If Mago Pop (Antonio Díaz, Badia del Vallès, 1986) has done it at the Teatre Victòria in El Paral·lel in Barcelona, why can't circus do it? Tortell Poltrona (Jaume Mateu, Barcelona, 1955) saw this clearly when in the early 2000s he re-founded, with Montserrat Trias (Barcelona, 1956) — the clown





Figure 6. Circ Raluy, ticket.  
Photo by X. Barral.

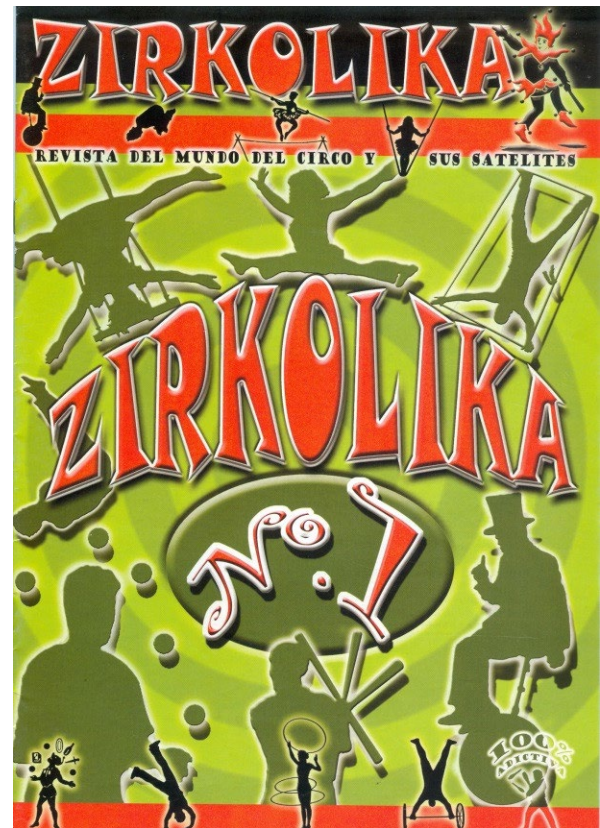


Figure 7. Journal *Zirkòlika*, first issue,  
summer 2004. Photo by X. Barral.

Senyoreta Titat in the ring — the Circ Cric in Sant Esteve de Palautordera, where they had been since 1995, after several periods and difficulties that went back to the years of formation, when in 1976 Tortell Poltrona and Claret Papiol were the clown couple Germans Poltrona. This reformation project earned the first National Circus Award in the history of Catalonia, in 2005.

Catalonia now has impresarios-artists of the so-called traditional or classic circus with the consolidation of the two Raluy circuses, the Històric and the Legacy, derived from two family branches after the death of the brothers Carles Raluy (1944-2019) and Lluís Raluy (1942-2021), the famous mathematical clown. Catalonia also has circus schools, such as Escola de Circ Rogelio Rivel (1999), based in Nou Barris (Barcelona); a journal, *Zirkòlika*, edited by Vicent Llorca; and several annual circus awards. And in 2004 the Associació de Professionals de Circ de Catalunya (APCC) was founded, based, like its forbear the Associació de Circ de Catalunya (1991-2000), at the Ateneu Popular 9 Barris, until in summer 2008 it moved to La Central del Circ, which had just set up at the Parc del Fòrum in Barcelona. The APCC protects the interests of the profession (artists, technical staff, directors, impresarios, set designers, teachers, theoreticians, managers, programmers and journalists).

Catalonia also has very popular festivals. The first, in 1984, was the Fira de Circ al Carrer in La Bisbal d'Empordà, the pioneer in the peninsula, and we should also mention the Fira de Teatre al Carrer in Tàrrrega (now Fira Tàrrrega), founded by the City Council in 1981 and promoted by the group Comediants based in Canet de Mar, which has always programmed circus shows. Without these indispensable references, we would not be where we are



today in circus. Alongside the Trapezi festival in Reus (Fira del Circ de Catalunya), notable in the international and local field is the Festival Internacional del Circ Elefant d'Or, which, after starting out in Figueres has moved to the Gran Carpa Camp de Mart in Girona. In 2024, it has held the 12th edition with 81 artists from 16 countries and considerable audience success, under the direction of Genís Matabosch and with a clear model, the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, which this year has reached its 46th edition. In Girona, inspiration also comes from the Parisian Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain, which now boasts many years of existence. But the festival in Girona, of equal quality, is held in Catalonia and in Catalan.

And in Catalonia, the circus already has a great museum. At the end of 2020, the first stage of Circusland, a museum-archive dedicated to protecting, preserving and exhibiting the legacy of circus in all its forms, opened in Besalú, partially occupying the old Benedictine monastery of Sant Pere in its post-medieval outbuildings. It covers history, painting, sculpture, posters, photography, cinema, and so on. Circusland has received important legacies from circus people, photographers and artists, collectors and patrons, the founders of the Circus Arts Foundation, created in 2011 and which has managed the Gran Circ de Nadal in Girona since 2014, the Festival Internacional del Circ Elefant d'Or and many activities such as the Nits del Circ in Besalú during the summer. The second reform phase is underway.

The Christmas festivities in Catalonia have also become synonymous with circus, and the tradition of going to the circus during those days has become well established among families. If I take last Christmas in 2023 as an example, the shows on offer seem to confirm this tradition in Catalonia, although it must always be said that it has not been enough. The 7th edition of the Circ de Nadal was held in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat on the esplanade of the Feixa Llarga, with *El viatge de Magui* by Leandro Mendoza (Companyia



Figure 8. Circusland, circus museum, Besalú. Photo by X. Barral.

Cíclicus and Bipo·lart), who, in 2001, had created the Curtcirckit circus festival in Montgat and directed the Fira de Circ Trapezi between 2017 and 2022. In Barcelona, the Ateneu Popular 9 Barris organised the 28th edition of the Circ d'Hivern with *Glatir*, a show that brings together circus acts and folkloric traditions, such as the *fallas* festival in Valencia, the *aurresku* (traditional ceremonial dance from the Basque Country) and *capgrossos* (big heads) from Catalonia. The Circ Històric Raluy, with its old caravans, occupied the Port Vell in Barcelona (alternating with the Raluy Legacy, which was in Valencia). The Circo Universal, a travelling circus based in Catalonia, visited Can Dragó. In Terrassa, the Circ Pistolet presented its future project. At the Palau Firal i de Congressos in Tarragona, the Parc de Nadal also included circus. And in Girona, I have already mentioned the 10th Circ de Nadal. Moreover, just after Christmas, at the Centre de les Arts Lliures of the Fundació Brossa in Barcelona, Maria Palma Borràs premiered *La veu submergida*, a show by this former synchronised swimmer who brings circus into dialogue with water. Also during the month of January, the Australian Circa Contemporary Circus performed in the Teatre Coliseum the show *Humans 2.0*. And on 2 February, the Circo Smile from the Zavatta family, another circus based in Catalonia, came to Mataró. And I could extend this list, though not the purpose of this article, with the activities of the Centre de les Arts of the Circ Rogelio Rivel or the biennial programming of the Circ d'Ara Mateix, which in 2024 was held from 27 April to 11 May at the Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona. In this case, the inaugural show was held, as in the Trapezi Reus, outside in the middle of the crowd, in Plaça Margarida Xirgu.

With such effervescence, it is not surprising that in all its world tours, the Canadian Cirque du Soleil, media-wise and economically the most powerful



Figure 9. Kolev Sisters, Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, 2024. Photo by the Direction de la Communication-Manuel Vitali-Frederic Nebinger, with the authorisation of the Festival.



in the world, made a long stop in Catalonia. In March 2024, after touring Japan and London, the new formula of the *Alegria* show, created in 1994, could be enjoyed here. We are obviously talking about another context, planetary in this case, that of a company that has many platforms to create content in various formats, a company that has 45 shows, some travelling and others permanent, like the six that can be seen in Las Vegas, or the one in Orlando in Disneyworld. The Cirque du Soleil company has sectors specialised in multimedia productions or immersive experiences. It also participates in theme parks and organises special events. It is a different kind of circus, a different kind of business, and a different cultural context.

Big or small, in tents or in theatres, circus shows have recovered from the decline suffered by European circus and, consequently, Catalan circus, during the 1960s. Aged and old fashioned, the circus show was boring and far from modern. From the 1970s the situation began to change with the emergence of the so-called contemporary circus. But there was also a professional war started by those who believed that contemporary circus was coming to definitively kill off traditional circus, classic circus. This did not happen. The new circus arrived to bring the old ways to new audiences with a breath of fresh air. And, slowly, the two forms of circus, though they have not merged, at least have been moving closer.

Today, however, they still keep their distance. In the world geographically closest to us, there are few places where these two circus models can fully coexist. There is actually only one, Monte Carlo. On the one hand, because the New Generation Festival meets there every year, aimed at emerging talents, the youngest, often heirs of famous dynasties or anonymous



Figure 10. The elephants of the Errani family, Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, 2024. Photo by the Direction de la Communication-Manuel Vitali-Frederic Nebinger, with the authorisation of the Festival.



figures who will be stars and who come from training centres all over the world. Above all, however, because the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo fuses the old traditional acts with balancing acts and creations of the most current circus, because this festival receives the great national, Asian, Russian or Latin American companies, but above all, because there traditional acts with domestic and wild animals and exotic species can still be seen. In the Monte Carlo Festival, the Catalan Charlie Rivel received the first Clown d'Or in 1974 and the festival continues 46 years later to bring together excellence (which does not mean modernity) worldwide.

Can you imagine, in 2024, circus and the big top without animals? From Roman times and through the Middle Ages, as I have said, the street, travelling or entertainment shows, based on what circus has become, have always been put on with trained, exotic animals, those that people did not often see in their everyday lives or that, if they were everyday animals, the audience did not imagine they could do the things they did. In this 2024 edition, Monte Carlo wanted to pay tribute to a patriarch, Alexis Gruss, without knowing that he would die shortly after, on 6 April, when he would have turned 80 and the company that bears his name 50. He was and will always be a legend; he had already been recognised with the Clown d'Or at the 25th festival, and this year the whole family was present. He made his famous horse D'Artagnan do somersaults, while the many members of the family, children and grandchildren, performed extraordinary acts such as the great equestrian pyramid with five horses and eight riders in the manner of their ancestors. The great equestrian figure of the Gruss family, with eight horses and eleven



Figure 11. Prince Rainier of Monaco presenting the Clown d'Or to Charlie Rivel (first edition of the Festival International du Cirque de Mont-Carlo, 1974). Photo by the Direction de la Communication, with the authorisation of the Festival.



Figure 12. Typical popular image of the animals of the circus Medrano. Photo by X. Barral.

horsemen and horsewomen, is a great moment of equestrian art, while the horsewomen acrobats perform classic old-fashioned circus acts reminiscent of the great and famous female horse riders of the early 20th century.

I do not particularly defend the presence of animals in circus shows. I am simply describing the current situation and its impact on the history of circus. In the past, and also in this case since the Middle Ages, when a minstrel and acrobat show came to town with a snake charmer and an elephant or a bear, it was a big celebration. Until not many years ago in the villages north and south of the Pyrenees the bear tamer was the favourite show. Let's remember, for example, that the founding patriarch of the Raluy circus, Francisco Raluy Meda (1880-1970), originally from Fonts (Ribagorça, Huesca), began, at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, to earn a living by going around villages with his wife juggling and balancing with a goat and a bear. And until not long ago, every major circus had its animal park available to the public to visit as an essential supplement of the show. In Monte Carlo, with its particular animal park, there has also been no shortage of elephants who have won a Clown d'Or this year with another historic family, the Erranis. I take the opportunity to point out that the balance sought in Monte Carlo between traditional circus and contemporary circus has brought a third Clown d'Or this year to the Kolev Sisters, two young Italian girls, aged 22 and 24, performers of an extraordinary hand-to-hand act, a speciality in which usually only men excel.

There are those who consider that lions and lionesses, panthers and tigers are the very essence of circus and that the tamer's job is the most impressive in the history of this performing art. There is a great deal of literature on





Figure 13. The spectacular pyramid on horses of the Gruss family, Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, 2024. Photo by the Direction de la Communication, Manuel Vital, Frederic Nebinger, with the authorisation of the Festival.

the subject, memoirs and training manuals written by famous tamers. The tamer of wild animals is like the goal keeper, a unique character. In 1903, the famous British tamer Frank C. Bostock (1866-1912) claimed that the tamer's risks were no more dangerous than those of a doctor who may catch a disease or of a soldier who, when going into battle, does not think he can die, and he explained that the tamer is as afraid as ordinary men in the face of danger, only that he is trained to face it in cold blood.

From 8 July to 9 October 2023 at the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie in Châlons-en-Champagne, France, within the framework of the early stages of the future circus museum of this city, a large exhibition could be seen dedicated to the history and disappearance of animals in circus: *No Animo Mas Anima. Adieu aux bêtes de cirque?* (the title is significant: *Without animals there is no soul*).<sup>1</sup> It has been a first reflection on a question of great importance for the future of circus and which has often been treated solely from the animal point of view without taking into account the history of circus itself. In recent years, the animal-free circus has had to reinvent itself, and when it has not done so out of conviction, it has had to do so out of obligation. We note that animal-free circus is different and that this has an impact on society and on the very perception of circus. Attempts by some circuses here, such as the Circo Universal, to present holograms of the typical traditional circus animal acts to replace the animals have not been of much use. In a certain way, it is as if the films of the human cannonball or the Raluy's triple somersault with a car from the 1960s were to be shown in the circus today. This is another kind of historical show, it is not current circus.

1. Eponym inspired by the title of the show presented by Cirque Plume in 1990.



A final fundamental challenge for circus in Catalonia is language. I have to praise the fact that the most international circus festival in Catalonia, the Festival Internacional del Circ Elefant d'Or in Girona, maintains its Catalan identity and that its Monsieur Loyal always speaks in Catalan to the international jury, the artists and the audience who come from all over. There are other efforts in this regard, but they are always individual. In the world of circus in Catalonia, I must confess that, unfortunately, as in other areas of society, with the false and erroneous pretext that outsiders understand you better in Spanish, communication takes the path of Spanish very easily. The aforementioned Jordi Jané has very often condemned this and has fought to standardise circus vocabulary in Catalan (the *Termcat* dictionary of circus terms, although incomplete, exists and can be consulted online). The country's institutions and the Institut d'Estudis Catalans must be involved in the question of language. A few years ago, Jordi Jané himself taught courses on this subject at the Universitat Catalana d'Estiu in Prada de Conflent. Especially now that so many foreign actors, mainly young, are performing in Catalonia, the use of the Catalan language is essential.

