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editorial

All the arts (including circus) respond to a way of looking and understanding the world and of communicating this gaze while assuming the risk of being (and, therefore, the right to be) wrong.

Jordi Jané

The first time I went to Rome I was six. With my parents I visited the Imperial Forum, the Coliseum and, finally, the Circus Maximus. I still remember how disappointed I felt when I realised that the latter had no big top, no tigers or clowns: this for me was the image of a circus. But, beyond personal anecdotes, probably for many of us circus has always been, first and foremost, a *topos*. A *topos* partly formed by childhood experiences, literature, posters, films (who has not seen Disney's *Dumbo*?), a certain rhetoric, and a marked stereotyping. We grew up thinking of circus as pure entertainment, in which its protagonists perform feats of skill and daring; a showcase to display abilities and unique bodies, which would find their *raison d'être* only under the shelter of a big top. In its most stereotyped form, circus contains and brings together a set of phenomena in exchange for buying a ticket, giving a monetary value to these "supernatural" bodies. The image of the employee enabling the spectators to enter the ring by opening the tent a little; or the image of children looking through an opening or over the fence explains how the big top – exactly like a theatre curtain – prevented the view of a secret, almost mystical, place. And there is no better form than the circle to embody this enclosure, which is primarily a mental enclosure. This is why, among other reasons, a dossier on circus is so useful: in the first place, to break down stereotypes and rhetorics, researching circus in an array of facets that do justice to its highly polyhedral nature.

To understand what classic circus was and meant, it was necessary to recover its origins and consider the cultural, social and political context in which it emerged, how it was established, and its hegemonic form over decades. Based on these premises, we could approach a new circus which, for around fifty years, has worked with a focus on a completely revolutionary form, artistic practice, and ethical involvement. In the centre, once again, we find the issue of the body and its capacities; those categories of strength, balance, grace and dexterity that for Sebastià Gasch underpin the notion of circus at any time, and that are now transforming tradition to keep it alive. Therefore, we open the dossier with this indispensable overview by Jordi

Jané, who takes us from Philip Astley's late-18th-century equestrian circus to interesting examples of contemporary productions (many of which, by the way, are cited with references and links to videos available on social media, which are very useful tools for readers). Jané gradually opens windows on the category of "personal circus" and the dramaturgical potential derived from it, enabling us to read circus in its point of intersection with the category of theatricality. A discourse on the activity of the spectator that goes beyond the limits of circus to expand our vision of models of physical performativity such as dance or theatre-dance, in which the parallels are clearer. Because, where there are no words, the audience is asked to have "a given receptive attitude, a predisposition to let the show penetrate, not forcedly into the intellect, but, and above all, into their sensory perceptions."

In the same vein, in a kind of open letter with a biographical tone, Roberto Oliván points to the future of the circus art based on his facet as a choreographer and dancer. He invites us to reflect on losing the fear to experiment, the need for trial, and the possibility of error. Everything within the context of a hybridisation that paves the way to the future of the performing arts and the arts of movement.

The body is the place where the individual aspirations and the aesthetic and political pressures of society make a knot; where — following Bourdieu — social structures are incorporated. Thus, Marissa Paituví suggests that we understand circus not only as a form of entertainment, but as "a framework that reinforces a certain way of perceiving and experiencing the world," in which technical command of one own's body reflects the human being's command over nature. The political aspect of the circus art emerges, therefore, in the relationship of the body with the other bodies, objects and in general the world surrounding it; the predisposition of the "sensing-thinking" body is defined in the Affect Theory: "The contact of the self with the world in an interactive process of human and non-human agencies that challenge the idea of the autonomous individual constructed in modernity." The circus body challenges us, and it challenges anthropocentrism.

It is unquestionable that circus, like all the arts, is political insofar as it puts forward a given vision of the world. Companies such as the Australian Circus Oz are paradigmatic of a type of contemporary circus that combines acrobatics, humour and sociopolitical reflection. Peta Tait reflects on a curious and paradoxical fact: the use of the term *circus* to discredit popular attitudes regarding climate change meetings; she does so by arguing that, contrary to what we might think, circus requires a sense of danger, strength and collaboration, and therefore it would be a word to be used as a positive metaphor for what we should do to contain and revert the current environmental catastrophe.

Raffaele De Ritis explains this evolution of contemporary circus by relating it to two phenomena: the democratisation of artistic practice (circus schools and courses, linked to dissemination of physical theatre) and a poetic approach to tradition, supported by a dramaturgical evolution of the notion of a show, also based on a more developed awareness of the experience

of the audience and their specificity, which eventually leads to a definitive emancipation of the concept of pure entertainment.

So where are these new aesthetic-political forms heading? Víctor Bobadilla suggests a focus on contemporary circus through an approach that considers, re-develops and fuses different theories: postdramatic, the aesthetic of the performative, and posthumanism. In this way, circus can be understood as a particular form of expression of certain concerns that imbue our era; a peculiar form that challenges the boundaries of the performing arts by challenging fundamental pivotal aspects such as the word, the body or the very concept of representation.

These changes are reflected in the productions, but also in the relation of circus with its space. In an interesting historical journey through the circus arts, Juan José González Ferrero analyses the different existing circus typologies through an architectonic approach, such as how its circular form emerged, the big top or the travelling structures, from Philip Astley's first intuition in London in 1769 to contemporary circus that returns to the street, or re-inhabits theatres, auditoria and arts centres with a frontal arrangement of the audience. This would push the creator to new performance forms freed from the classic matrix, in which the space is built based on the aesthetic approach, strengthening the relationship between form and content, and expanding the notion of dramaturgy into a renewed dramaturgy of the space.

The expansion of the concept of dramaturgy is paramount to understand its role as a coherent binding element of the acts performed in the ring under the gaze of the audience. Contemporary circus has adopted a dramaturgical mentality, which, on the one hand, assimilates it to theatre and dance, based on which it has traditionally achieved a theoretical legitimacy that is slowly finding its own way. Víctor Bobadilla reminds us that "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." This also brings us back to Catalonia: how has the Catalan panorama responded to this ongoing evolution of the circus arts?

Leandro Mendoza reminds us that in Catalonia there are 130 companies made up by 700 professionals facing a critical situation, despite the progress in recent years. Mendoza looks at the reasons why circus is not so significant in the cultural and social debate, and how we can remedy this situation. He suggests the show *Vetus Venustas* as a paradigmatic example of how circus can interact with the demands of contemporary society.

Finally, Xavier Barral guides us on a valuable historical tour through circus, from the Middle Ages to the present, when traditional circus and contemporary circus have come closer together. With a special emphasis on the Catalan situation, in which – along with the challenges arising from a new conception of the presence of animals in the ring – the preservation of the Catalan language and the normalisation of its use are the most important challenge for the circus of the future.

We close the dossier with a real jewel: the open letters between Bauke Lievens and Sebastian Kann, which help us identify “a critical [space], or one that draws connections between circus practice and the wider (political) world ‘outside’ of circus.” By addressing issues such as pleasure, consumerism, the arrangement of the space and the work relations in terms of power and position, they open up horizons in terms of the link between the circus arts and contemporary philosophy. In reality, these letters are brilliant documents of aesthetic philosophy, which go beyond the field of circus and refer to the performance device in its broadest sense. Certainly, Bauke Lievens analyses and dismantles some of the myths about circus such as the freedom and the marginality that can decline into self-reference and self-commiseration, distancing the artistic practice from the world, but, in fact, the discourse might be perfectly applied to theatre and to those live arts that find the roots of their own configuration in the metanarratives of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Understanding how and why given artistic practices are shaped as hegemonic is of capital interest not only for the circus arts but also for art in general.

Among the articles outside the dossier, Antoni Font tells us about the consolidation of Catalan lyric theatre between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, taking as an example *Pel teu amor*, by Josep Ribas and Miquel Poal-Aregall, from which many remember the song “Rosó”. Juan Carlos Llerida, in “Flamenco Dance Improvisation: An Expanded Perspective”, explains the differences between improvisation *in* flamenco, which respects established structures and norms; improvisation *with* flamenco, which emerges by acknowledging the established codes to reconfigure them and extend the limits of the discipline; and, finally improvisation *from* flamenco, which challenges these limits and even reconsiders the very concept of “limit”. By researching the concepts of postcolonialism and decolonialism, Adriana Segurado analyses the narratives and artistic practices characteristic of decolonial creations in Latin America – with a special interest in Augusto Boal – to compare them with the contemporary Catalan panorama, asking whether a decolonial stage creation in our country is possible (and how). The objective is to detect to what extent colonial power relations exist today in Catalonia, and how far we are aware and have the capacity to challenge them.

Here you have material that invites reflection. The concepts on the pages of this dossier might help us to shed new light on research on contemporary theatre. I am thinking about how we could make the politic aspect of the new circus forms resonate with Angélica Liddell’s discourse in *La casa de la fuerza*; or how we could analyse the role of freaks, trapeze artists and freedivers in the acclaimed *Ophelia’s Got Talent*, by Florentina Holzinger, a show produced by the Berlin-based Volksbühne, which broke all the moulds a couple seasons ago in Germany; or if we could have a better understanding of *Burned Toast* by the Norwegian company Suzie Wang, which we saw at the Teatre Lliure a year ago, as an example of hybridisation... But, beyond how circus relates to dance or theatre, the invitation is to re-read circus as an autonomous art while thinking about how this art interacts with the others

to expand in general the concept of “representation”, in the sense of the term that relates not only to its aesthetic nature, but also ethical and political.

Art and knowledge are a matter of connections and collaboration: what can demonstrate this better than circus?

Enjoy reading!



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