Chwallow or Friction

Louise Gouwy-Bacquet

This article is part of the "Inter-magazine Circus Festival 2026" project that is a collaboration between the UP-Circus & Performing Arts Festival, the Université Libre de Bruxelles and six international circus magazines: Juggling Magazine, Stage Lync, Zirkólika, DYNAMO Magazine, Sztuka Cyrku, CIRQUEON, all part of the INCAm network. Students at Université Libre de Bruxelles share their thoughts on current stage and circus performances. Their diverse backgrounds ranging from literature and journalism, to acting and cultural studies bring unique perspectives, whether already familiar with the art form or newcomers. They are united by a curiosity about performing arts, which led them to the MA Arts du spectacle program, offering exposure to various art forms, including the circus. As part of the interdisciplinary and international project Circus | Studies led by Dr. Franziska Trapp, theatre students explore circus, collaborate with emerging artists, and engage in performance analysis and critique. Their experiences culminate in MA theses or articles like the one that follows.

Chwallow, by the Habeas Corpus Compagnie, begins with balls sliding across a white stretched canvas, its four corners pulled by lines extending into the offstage, like a stretched chewing-gum. The hardness of the stage floor is now covered by an unstable surface that appears unusable for human movement. Light clings to it like on a screen, reflecting shades of blue. The atmosphere is calming. A few balls appear suddenly, drop by drop, then invade the canvas and sometimes spill over the audience. They slide, circulate, and roll across this plastic-like material, guided by it. Emerging "by themselves" in an almost total darkness, an entire ecosystem of interacting balls unfolds on this surface whose effect of agency relies on a willing suspension of disbelief. Gradually the canvas begins to move. It rises toward the fly system (and does not disappear completely) and slowly reveals the bodies of the performers who seem to peel away from it.

The interpretative framework is established

The apparatus is the stage, and the stage apparatus is as much a restraint as a partner. Indeed, the scenic writing, according to the director Julien Fournier (as he mentioned in the interview for the programme accompanying the production: "On est plutôt entre le bubble gum et la science-fiction"), is constructed without hierarchy, creating a space where bodies, apparatus, objects, light and sound coexist in a horizontality without a single focal point. *Chwallow,* by virtue of its hybrid nature, departs from traditional codes, setting aside the performer's individual virtuosity and the pursuit of a linear narrative, in favour of a space where its components are in constant mutation, developing a dramaturgical form based on the materiality of the scenography. *Chwallow* also explores physicality through bodies in tension, constrained and engaged in relations of force, forces that include weight, balance and traction, which themselves become dramaturgical materials. A sense of autonomy emerges from this interdependence of each element on the movements of the others and the spectator's gaze is not guided but invited to circulate within a space where meanings are not fixed. From the outset, we are plunged into an almost immersive set.

However, being experienced as a backstage technician, I identify a relevant zone of "friction" within this pursuit of immersion, situated between the acting area and the

offstage, between illusion and fabrication. Indeed the scenic set up produces a blurred dramaturgy, namely through the choice of an open German-style legs which allows glimpses into the wings and makes visible not only the lanterns but also the fly bars and the rigging system of the canvas as well as a clear view of double layers of upstage curtains, usually used as a corridor for “magical appearances”. This partial exposure of the material conditions of stage is charged with meanings. Intended or not, the visible machinery systematically produces an alienation effect, in direct opposition to the immersive effect evoked earlier. *Chwallow* oscillates in a constant movement between magical apparition and the pragmatic way of apparition. “Friction” is a force resisting relative motion between two contacting surfaces, here understood as a resistance between two different levels of interpretation, between illusion and the fabrication of illusion which continually confront each other. The friction becomes more perceptible as it evolves through the performance. In the opening scene, the show chooses an aesthetic close to “new magic”. The stage bathed in dark blue tones, renders the performers almost invisible, absorbed into the black box and when objects fall from the fly system onto the white canvas, the manipulation remains imperceptible and the effect is immediate.

The black box fades

The lighting evolves, the stage brightens and shifts toward warmer orange tones. In this same movement, the wings become visible, technical devices are revealed and the lines supporting the scenographic elements appear, extending beyond the immersive frame yet remaining visible. Thus, magic seems to dissipate in favour of an exposure of processes and transformations. What belonged to illusion shifts toward a demonstration of its own fabrication. This shift does not concern objects alone but also bodies. Initially perceived as integrated into a (science-) fictional environment, characterized by non-human forms of language and movement, the performers see their status transform. When they leave the stage to manipulate backstage devices, in their white and orange costumes, their presence shifts to a different level of interpretation. From object-bodies to operating-bodies engaged in a technical execution. The perception of physicality itself is displaced. While the performance involves bodies subjected to performing constrains, the attention given to the materiality of the set up (machines, lights, manipulations) tends to relegate these bodies to background. Immersive physicality does not disappear but becomes less clear, hidden by the visibility of the production process which is not a neutral space, but is deeply rooted in the reality of material conditions and physical efforts required to make things appear on stage. A tension arises between performing physicality and physical operations, between materiality and material conditions, reinforcing the impression of an unstable dramaturgy.

The stripping of the machine is not totally disenchanting

Chwallow reveals a visual and technical inventiveness marked by a colourful pop aesthetic which nevertheless maintains its immediate and immersive pleasure. It is in a sequence near the end that the friction stabilizes. Two performers suspended in harnesses enter into a counterweight relationship with large fabric poufs, while a rope supports a circus artist (whose performance here becomes more of an individual display of virtuosity, under a

backlight and where the time also seems suspended). The lighting shifting into chiaroscuro effect, restores a near-magical quality to the stage without completely returning to the initial opacity. At this precise moment, sensory immersion and exposure of mechanisms fully coexist. The rigging systems are visible yet participate in the overall aesthetic. The sonic dimension reinforces this symbiosis. Equipped with megaphones the performers broadcast whale songs and by spinning around themselves, produce an echoing and spacializing effect of sound, adding a sensory layer, that recedes and returns with the physical movement. The stage space becomes a volume traversed by light, sound, materials and physical flows. Bodies, apparatus, machinery, light and sound function in unison. In a form of synchronization where each element is moved by or acts upon the others.

The technical materiality is no longer merely visible but it is fully experienced as a global sensory experience and by exposing its own conditions of manufacture, the show opens an experimental space where illusion and fabrication coexist, nourish one another and are seemingly reconfigured. This blurring of levels of presence and the refusal of hierarchy place the theater space in an experimental condition where actors and actants are made to participate in a process of exploring stabilization, not as a static end state but as a continuous negotiation between physical effort (or training) and fluidity of a visual display. Virtuosity does not lie in the erasure of constraints but in a dynamic stability where effort and fluidity coexist.