WORDS

circus centrum

popcorn

dynamic perspectives on circus

1

‘POPCORN!’,

I announce to my colleagues upon arriving at the office. The bike ride from Gentbrugge to Dok Noord has proved fruitful: we have a name for the planned series of in-depth publications on circus.

Popcorn is the puffed corn that is traditionally consumed in large quantities on the narrow wooden benches of a circus tent. But it is also a fitting term to describe the wealth and diversity of ideas, imagination and creativity in the sector. Although the corn kernels are exposed to similar conditions, they pop at their own pace and go in many different directions. Today, circus takes countless forms and is created using different techniques.

As a support and knowledge centre, we want to fuel the discussion in the coming years and focus even more on reflection about what circus is and can be. In addition to *Circusmagazine* as a permanent fixture, we therefore delve a little deeper once a year by devoting a publication to a specific theme that provides an insight into developments in the circus field. We are particularly proud that, at the start of the new policy period 2026-2030, we can present you with the first edition of *Popcorn - dynamic perspectives on circus.*

It is no coincidence that this first issue zooms into the relationship between circus and words. A good six years ago, I started as director of Circuscentrum and discovered circus as an embodied artistic practice. Just as a writer uses words to shape a story, body and object are central to circus creations. Coming from a background in literature, I found it fascinating to bridge the gap between these two worlds and zoom in on the special relationship that circus has with the spoken and written word.

How do you put circus into words? How rich or limited is the vocabulary that is currently at our disposal? What is the value of words within the circus arts? What do words add to a creation, in relation to the audience, in communication between artists, in making a sector visible?

Get inspired by the multiple explorations we have embarked on. We hope that the diverse range of thoughts & insights will lead to further reflection and dialogue.

Noemi De Clercq
Director of Circuscentrum

Liv Laveyne
Knowledge Officer
and Editor-in-Chief

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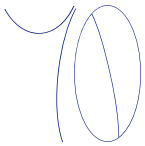

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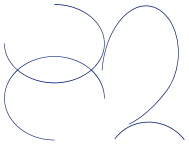

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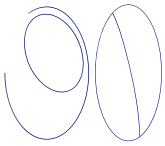

"Never Say 'Nice.' 'Nice' Means Nothing.'"

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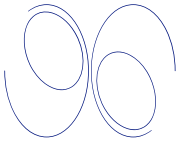

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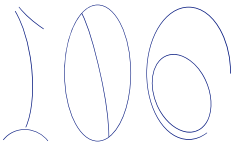
LIV LAVEYNE



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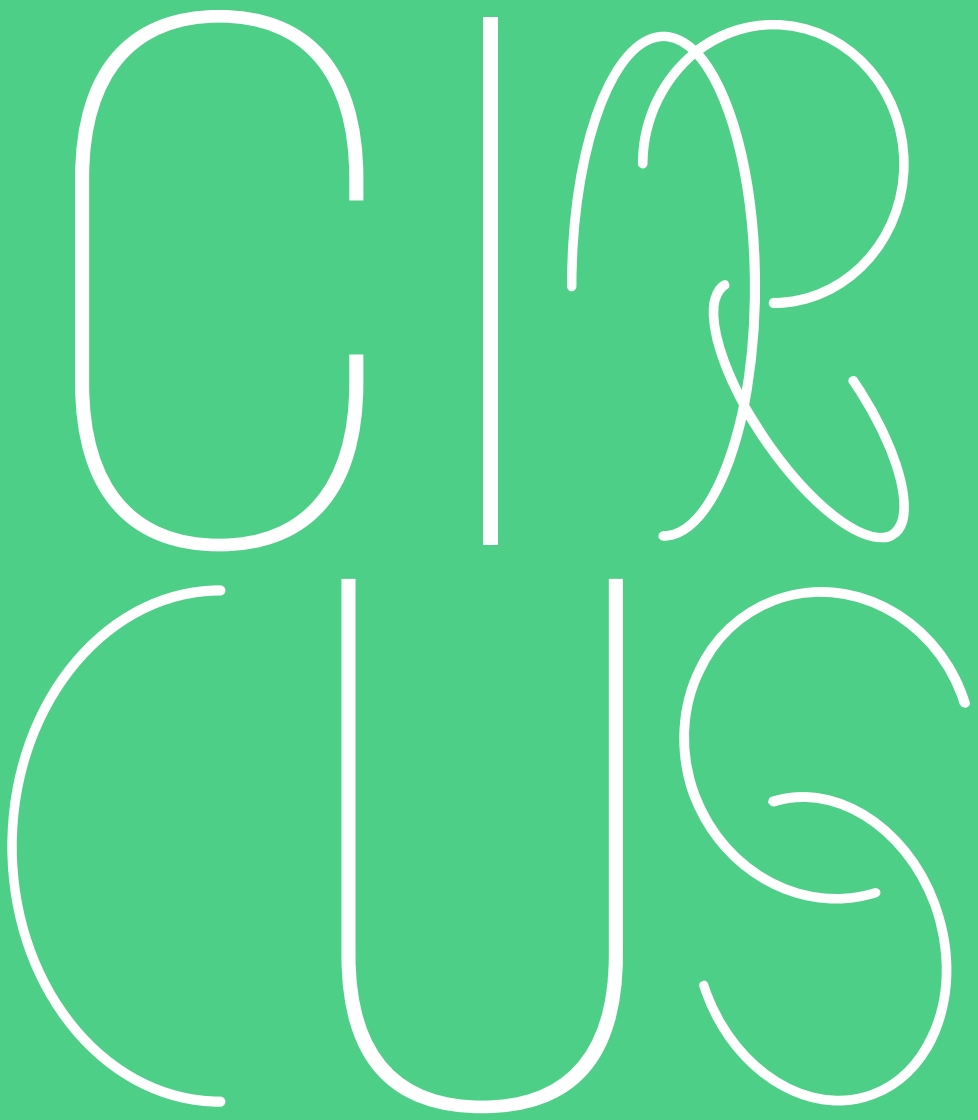
‘Word gets around
when the circus
comes to town, don’t it?’

AUTHOR CORMAC MCCARTHY, 1953

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS ~~THE WORD~~



BY LIV LAVEYNE

Words, words, words. Beyond the field of circus arts, the word ‘circus’ often has the negative connotations ‘disorganised’, ‘chaotic’, ‘rowdy’, ‘unprofessional’: the political circus, the media circus, the household as an unmanageable circus … There’s also a whole laundry list of circus-related vocabulary: you could fill entire libraries with books on juggling, acrobatics, teeterboard, and so on, each discipline having its own terminology. So how do we speak about circus while correctly identifying the line between the proverbial and the technical?

Circus is an embodied practice, usually wordless. In fact, the latter used to be an obligation! In France in 1807, the circus was deemed so popular and such competition for the theatre, that the Parisian *conseil* decided that words were no longer allowed to be used in it. The resulting ‘patent laws’ obliged circuses to set themselves apart from theatre. For example, circus theatre was restricted to mime shows and *harlequinades* (acrobatic pantomime), and circuses were limited to equestrian acts and the like.

Is this the reason that we in the circus arts have remained silent for so long? Especially in Flanders. We circus folk are people of actions and few words. Still, the field of circus arts is growing increasingly aware of the need for words in reconciling thoughts and actions, as well as in creating a bridge to the outside world. After all, just because there is not much speaking on stage, it doesn’t mean that speaking about circus is impossible or unimportant. On the contrary: there is a lot to say, both about it and for it.

In this in-depth publication by Circuscentrum, titled *Popcorn: Circus & Words*, we will dive into the fascinating relationship between circus and word, with a focus on circus vocabulary, criticism and feedback, or ‘words in circus’, ‘circus in words’ and ‘worded responses’.

Let this be an invitation to write even more, to speak, to engage in discussion, to give the word to others as well as taking the floor yourself, to seek out a shared language, invent new words, and most of all to allow thoughtful or dreamy silences in between the lines, because circus is still capable of saying a lot more than words can.

NO ART without CRITICISM

BY WOUTER HILLAERT

→ WHAT

is needed for circus to be considered an art form? Of course, it's essential to have challenging artists and driven arts programmers. But to build a house you need more than foundations. And even with creation centres, creation festivals and a diversified subsidy policy – all necessary preconditions in which the Flemish circus arts have made significant strides in recent years – the status of art is not reached. The chain of Flemish circus arts is still missing one crucial link: a robust critical discourse of its own, a continuous critical practice focused on circus arts. This is changing, partly thanks to the project that review website pzazz and Circuscentrum have set up together.

There may be those who feel that the popular spirit of circus needs above all to be safeguarded from too much reflection. That circus is all the better for its lack of criticism. Hence the popular cliches about critics. That they are failed artists. That they are speccy figures whose minds have been warped by too much time on university benches, prone to unnecessarily academising and overintellectualising matters. That they suffer from moralism, attention-seeking or worse: a secret lust for power. That they see only what they want to see, while they have never even set foot on a stage. 'Critics are like eunuchs in a harem', begins the famous quote by Irish playwright Brendan Behan. 'They know how it's done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves.' Statler and Waldorf, the two house critics of The Muppet Show, did little to improve the public image of the reviewer. We're still quick to associate such balcony critics with the mouthy uncle at a family function.

"The chain of Flemish circus arts is still missing one crucial link: a robust critical discourse of its own, a continuous critical practice focused on circus arts."

However, 'criticism' can be so much more than is implied by its negative connotations of 'trashing' and 'bringing down', especially for an artistic practice as young as circus. Critical reflection can also serve as positive promotion for performances, makers and new developments, with critics often able to articulate their arguments more convincingly than even die-hard fans. Reviews enable creations to reach further afield than the usual circles, to gain the attention of busy arts programmers, to get a valuable endorsement for

subsidy dossiers, to generate a wider buzz. Or take the email I recently received from a publisher of plays, saying that my positive review of a new one-person show was the encouragement they needed to go ahead and publish it. When critics pair passion with expertise, they can open new doors as an impartial authority. They maintain a broad view of things like few others.

At the same time, the importance of criticism goes so much further than the promotional aspect. It hones a new or more nuanced vocabulary regarding the profession and the medium. It popularises sectoral questions and academic research among wider audiences. It tests the arts against contemporary social evolutions. And over the years, reviews create an archive useful in later research – especially important given how ephemeral circus is as an art form. After all, 'art' is not an innate characteristic of any creation or discipline. It is a qualification and an evaluation bestowed by others. And trusted critics play a key role in that.

But perhaps the most pressing reason the Flemish circus arts should seek to foster structural criticism is their still somewhat periphery position in the broader field of performing arts. Youth theatre, stand-up comedy and social-artistic

An extended version of this call appeared in Circusmagazine in 2023 and helped initiate the circus criticism project that was launched by Circuscentrum and the review website pzazz. See p.68 *Writing a review is terrifying.*

"However, 'criticism' can be so much more than is implied by its negative connotations of 'trashing' and 'bringing down', especially for an artistic practice as young as circus."

work were once in the same position: the feeling that they were looked down upon, that they had to fight against all kinds of clichés from 'real theatre', that they were not taken seriously. Sound familiar? At time of writing, the circus arts may boast its own decree and several quality festivals, but they can still stand to gain in symbolic capital. The fact that youth theatre is now properly recognised and participatory work is spreading across the arts like wild fire is partly down to critics. Critics who have made themselves at home in these specific forms of expression, who fought for their due attention in the media, who have co-determined the discourse. In the long run, then, critics are not enemies of art, but supporters. Just ask the makers of Flemish Wave of the 1980s, from Guy Cassiers to Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. It was partly thanks to a new wave of critics, who held up a keen critical mirror to their strange formal innovation, that these artists went on to become big names. Those young 'balcony critics' won over a whole audience through their readings of work that was initially difficult to comprehend.

So, dear circus sector, as mad as it may sound: create your own culture of critics. A new generation of 'eunuchs' will cause a little friction of course, but in the end it will be worth it. ●

REVIEW

Symbiosis

Symbiosis Circus

BY TOM PERMENTIER

Nocturne of deviant behaviour. René Magritte could have come up with it on one of his darkest days: a pitch-black circus tent, a lanky man with a child's wheelbarrow, two legs sticking straight up out of the sand on the stage, like palm trees swaying in a gentle breeze. Surrealism reigns in *Symbiosis*, the Dutch-German collaboration between aerial acrobat Luuk Brantjes and juggler Kolja Huneck. This makes for a wondrous viewing experience. With the bizarre conclusion that even the things that don't work actually do work.

→ ANYONE

entering the tent has to blink twice to be sure of what they are seeing. In this dark setting, the stage is like a catwalk that runs between two small grandstands that face each other. Huneck walks around the performance area, hunched over his wheelbarrow. His head torch illuminates and distorts not only Brantjes' legs but also a scaffold supporting a raised platform. The soundtrack is an electronic soundscape that feels like it was created by a computer after an hour in the washing machine.

Once Brantjes has freed himself from his thorny situation, he climbs the ironwork of the tent like a beetle and takes a seat on one of the sandbags dangling like punching balls from the top of the tent. Huneck takes over and brings some LPs on stage, which he uses to demonstrate the whole spectrum of juggling, with some particularly creative displays of object manipulation. One detects the spirit of *magie nouvelle*, in which illusions are used to distort reality into a universe with its own laws. Such as when the music chimes in just as Huneck gets a toy car to start doing laps around a record. With the shadowy, UFO-shaped tent and a modest animal routine centred on a worm, the sense of alienation is pushed to the max. Everything circus stands for is turned on its head – even considering that circus is already a world in which deviation is the norm.

Deception is king in Symbiosis. At first, the characters appear to be miners adrift in the core of the earth. When Brantjes starts to climb, you end up in a documentary about nocturnal creatures. But then where do Huneck's records fit into it all? Perhaps the explanation lies in the inexplicable. Gradually it becomes clear that the artists use their solos as a means of exploring and transforming the subject matter. There is scarcely any interaction between the two performers. One could see this as a bold artistic choice, or as a lazy move to allow the artists to incorporate their older solo work. Occasionally it does feel like that, but, against all probability, the duo usually manages to get away with it.

TOM PERMENTIER

is a musician and music teacher, but for many years his heart has also belonged to the circus arts, in the capacity of a fan. This led him to take part in Circuscentrum's Circus Criticism Programme in 2016. Tom also writes for Circusmagazine and, since 2025, for reviews platform pzazz. This review of *Symbiosis* (Symbiosis Circus) is just one of the reflections he wrote during past criticism workshops. You can recognise his writings by their concise style. For Tom, reviewing is a sprint, not a marathon.

‘In terms of absurdity, Huneck and Brantjes are each other’s equals, even if the differencein their material is day and night.’

Of course, there is the material itself, which is rock solid in both cases. One surprise follows another in Huneck’s sequences, which begin with the vinyl records but gradually move onto blobs of tar. By the end of the show, Brantjes eventually finds his way to the raised platform, where he boggles spectators’ minds with innovative circus that is quite literally top tier. As individual performers, Huneck and Brantjes manage to captivate the audience with their own stories. Together as well, and in this way you quickly forgive them as a viewer for the ungainly thematic contrasts that result from combining their work.

There are also elements that effectively reconcile the narrative lines, such as the atmospheric soundtrack by F.S. Blumm and the experimental lighting. Head-mounted and handheld torches of all kinds create a fascinating chiaroscuro effect that bathes every image in moodiness. In terms of absurdity, Huneck and Brantjes are each other’s equals, even if the difference in their material is day and night. Both make extensive use of *magie nouvelle* to maximise the feeling of being in a dream.

The title, *Symbiosis*, encapsulates the heart of the show: the term, from biology, refers to two different species of organism that need each other to survive. In the case of Brantjes and Huneck, the two organisms are, in a way, each other’s opposite: one stays safely on the ground and manipulates objects, while the other hangs in the air and the objects manipulate him. It’s such a visual treat that, as a viewer, you end up letting go of your conceptual questions to bathe in the dark but glorious imagery, which stands up even without explanation.

Seen on May 9, 2025, at CIRKL, Leuven. This review can also be read on pzazz.

WORDS IN CIRCUS

‘The songs
are my lexicon.
I believe
the songs.’

MUSICIAN BOB DYLAN 1997

“The impetus to write these letters stems from a lack of surprising, multi-layered, and artistically innovative performances that I experience as a spectator, but also from a lack of a common language, shared starting points, or references that I experience myself and see in others in my work as a dramaturge. The two are, of course, interconnected. They point to the absence of what I want to open with these letters: a broad dialogue that embraces many voices and strong viewpoints.”

RESEARCHER BAUKE LIEVENS, OPEN LETTERS TO THE CIRCUS, 2015

SPEECH IS SILVER?

On the use of words in a wordless art form

BY MAARTEN VERHELST

Ask any circus fan what the defining qualities of circus are and among their top three criteria will no doubt be that it is a wordless art form. Likewise if you ask what makes circus so powerful and universal.

→ INDEED,

you'd be hard-pressed to find many examples of successful Flemish circus performances from the last 20 years in which words – or text, language – were of essential importance. There is of course the hilarious *OK? OK!* by Bert & Fred, and Danny Ronaldo's equally hilarious pseudo-Italian *gibberish*. There are the poems of Daniil Charms in Alexander Vantournhout's *Red Haired Men*. And there are numerous artists and collectives who sing live, recite passages of text or express a whole gamut of emotions through words. But such uses of language can hardly be called essential. Rather, they are gimmicks and while they do often add value – comedic or otherwise – they could just as easily be left out.

Dramaturg Elisa Demarré puts it as follows in Circusmagazine #84 (September 2025): 'Text outside the context of text-based theatre is always difficult. To integrate text into a dance performance, for example, the key is often to approach the text in terms of its raw sounds and not in terms of its grammatical qualities. It's about tempo: either it has to be delivered fast or it has to sound good. So that for a moment you transcend intellect and as a viewer you don't have time to really analyse or interpret it. It's sort of a matter of coming up with strategies so that the text can do what music does, or what hair hanging does, or what dance does. Namely: outpacing reason and skipping straight to emotion.'

Still there are a number of circus artists who, in creating a performance, place words on an equal footing with the discipline of circus – or so it would seem. We asked the silver-tongued **Bram Dobbelaere** (of Cie Pol & Freddy and Cie Ea Eo), the mentalist **Kurt Demey** (of Rode Boom) and self-proclaimed diva **Sien Van Acker** (*MORE IS MORE,* 2025) about their relationship with language and why they use words in their performances.

A cup of sugar

'For me, it's simple: I use words because I can't keep quiet,' confesses Sien Van Acker. 'When I'm developing a character, it's a given that they are going to talk. A character lives, breathes, is real. Talking is part of that. My clownesque persona exists primarily to communicate with an audience, and while language is not necessary for that – especially in circus – I am quick to use words in my creative process. For me it's just intuitive to do so.'

Talking is also second nature to Bram Dobbelaere, especially in front of an audience. 'I like speaking in front of groups, always have done; it never stresses me out. I'm trained as an educator. Standing in front of a class is like giving a stage performance. One-on-one communication, on the other hand, I find much more challenging. I break into a sweat if I need to ask the neighbours for a cup of sugar. Regarding circus: when we started out with Cirq'ulation Locale around the year 2000, we were inspired by the buskers of the 90s. They talked non-stop. Dirk Van Boxelaere's *Tobe2* was a key influence.'

Kurt Demey started his career as a visual artist in the same period and made the switch to circus a few years later. 'As a visual artist, I regularly worked with words. I once made a visual work that consisted entirely of words. For one particular project, I made a side-step in the direction of circus – I learned all sorts of circus techniques at what was then the Kay Fou youth circus and at Espace Catastrophe, and yeah, I was sold. I stuck with the circus. Incidentally, those who were following me as an artist got a good laugh out of that. They called me a funfair artist. They didn't understand what I saw in circus. As a young, up-and-coming visual artist, I had been put on a pedestal, but as a circus artist I fell right off it, just like that. I thought that was great,' says Kurt. 'As a street and circus artist, I soon started working with words. My companion at the time, Frank Pelvoorde [with whom he founded the festival Gevleugelde Stad, ed.] played an important role in that; he was really into poetry. Funny thing, by the way: the only performance I had ever made without words – or at least with very few – was with the poetess and word artist Maud Vanhauwaert *[Wij zijn mogelijk, 2019]*.

'It was only during the creation of *MORE IS MORE* that I realised that I lean quite heavily towards comedy. In terms of rhythm and style, there are many similarities.'

For Bram Dobbelaere, it was almost 20 years ago that he last performed in silence. 'Our only wordless performance was *Ready!* (2006). That worked very well. But in all my other creations I couldn't resist opening my trap. In *m²*, the debut performance of Cie Ea Eo (2009), I did

a monologue about the lack of space on buses and trams. In *Le Cirque Démocratique de la Belgique* (2013) and *De Cuyper vs. De Cuyper* (2020), I was the presenter, the glue holding everything together.'

'I have a clown act in which I hardly speak,' says Sien. 'It's three words, to be exact. Initially I didn't speak at all during the act, but that started to feel awkward. I was searching for the right words, the right voice, the cadence that fit with my clown persona. I ended up speaking one word to bring the act together and two more words to amplify the sense of frivolity and playfulness.' However, in her warmly received debut performance *MORE IS MORE* (2025), Sien speaks continuously. Reviewer Wouter Hillaert describes it on Pzazz as follows: 'Van Acker is not from the school of suggestion. She puts words to everything she sees and thinks, then revels in adding another layer, playing a clever game with expectations and stereotypes.

'As a mentalist, you have to explain or introduce many things, often rather technical in nature. I find that really boring. The challenge is to do it differently, to infuse it with poetry.'

When the audience spontaneously starts to applaud her first steps and twirls on the high wire, she promptly interjects: "Pff, it's not all that impressive." Later in the review, he wonders whether she even needs her circus techniques for what she does and says in the act.

Bram Dobbelaere can't resist talking in his performances. Image from *Le cirque démocratique de la Belgique* (creation 2013)

‘Talking on stage is a profession in itself.’

Bram Dobbelaere as the presenter who glues the whole show together in Le *Cirque Démocratique de la Belgique* (2013).

‘It was only during the creation of *MORE IS MORE* that I realised that I lean quite heavily towards comedy. In terms of rhythm and style, there are many similarities,’ Sien admits. ‘But I still feel like a circus artist first and foremost. Unlike in other disciplines, physical performance is an essential part of my act. For me it’s really about the combination of circus techniques and the use of different forms of language.’

With mentalism, unlike most other circus disciplines, it makes perfect sense that speaking would be so central. ‘Mentalism and text undeniably go hand-in-hand,’ says Kurt. ‘As a mentalist, you have to explain or introduce many things, often rather technical in nature. I find that really boring. The challenge is to do it differently, to infuse it with poetry. To turn dull moments into fun moments. The text should be interesting, content-wise. So that it ends up being more about that than the tricks or the element of surprise.’

What script?

‘Talking on stage is a profession in itself,’ says Bram. ‘It’s not something you just tack on in the last week of the creative process. Take it seriously, practise and rehearse, polish, make 17 versions of your text, keep polishing it until it’s right. And above all, enlist the help of experts for both the content and the delivery. For me it was comedian Wouter Deprez, a good friend, who after seeing *m²* made it clear that my delivery was not up to much. For *De Cuyper vs. De Cuyper* – a juggling act with myself in the role of commentator/referee – I not only analysed many sports competitions, I also worked with a real sports commentator.’

‘I remember the first day I received coaching from actor Steven Beersmans,’ says Sien. ‘The creation was already pretty far along, and the intention was just to work on the text together. He asked me where my script was. I said, “What script?” And he was like, “What do you mean, what script? You don’t have a script?!” I had never written down any of my performance texts. I had a few song lyrics on loose bits of paper, and that was it. The rest was all stored in my head. So we wrote down all the texts and honed them. It was fun, actually, really getting into the fine detail of the words, and

© Stefan Gevaerts

'The only performance I had ever made without words – or at least with very few – was with the poetess and word artist Maud Vanhauwaert.' Kurt Demey and Maud Vanhauwaert in *We are possible* (2019).

concluding, for example, that in that one sentence the word 'yet' was essential to the meaning of the whole performance.'

'I learned a huge amount from Ludo Goos at the academy in Borgerhout,' says Kurt. 'Especially in terms of how to present your text. Take my poetry: how do I avoid the trap of there being 'a poetry moment' in the middle of the performance; how do I present it in such a way that it seems like you are telling a friend something intimate? There are a lot of fun techniques to try out and practice. How you deliver sentences or pronounce words, the intonation, the volume … He was always talking about the little spin you put on words: soft or hard, sweet or angry, and so on. With that approach, a whole world opens up to you and words are just fun to work with.'

With a French twist

'Before I started circus college, I did a year of Word Art and Drama,' says Sien. 'I worked with and performed a lot of theatre

texts. But at the circus school, too – L'Esacto'Lido in Toulouse – I was encouraged to work with language. In the south, circus and language are much more closely linked than they are here. Language is a medium that is experimented with a lot there. I'm a big fan of *MDR* by the Spanish company Los Galindos. The three clowns speak incessantly, both with each other and to the audience, amid all the slapstick and burlesque. For me, these clowns became all the more real, direct and accessible as a result. Words can be so powerful in combination with humour.'

'When I think of circus and words, I automatically end up in France,' says Bram. 'They really have a tradition of talking a lot there. In all art forms. A great example of how important words can be is Mathieu Despoisse & Etienne Manceau's performance *Pling-Klang*. I worked on it as a coach. It's a slapstick performance in which they are constantly talking – all very French. It's about a couple that's trying to put together an Ikea cabinet. In the beginning, the dialogue was a load of rubbish and the show just didn't work. By the end, we had decided to completely flip the text, making it much more serious, much deeper. Now it's about the real problems you come up against as a couple. It works superbly in combination with the slapstick Ikea stuff – it really turned out to be a great show.'

'In France they have a real culture of words,' Kurt agrees. 'A monologue with three hours of text will draw in a crowd of 700 night after night. That's a bit rich for me, I have to say. My French isn't good enough. I've never been really good in languages. I'm too lazy for that. Besides, I was always told that I would never make it on stage because my articulation was too poor. Now look at me, I perform a lot in France as a mentalist.

'In the heyday of *cirque contemporain*, it was hip to mix circus and theatre. It often felt like watching a bad porno: should I be looking at the images or following the story?'

The French find my accent charming. Even my mistakes they find interesting. Certain expressions that I translate literally from Dutch, they find fresh: it confronts them with the quirks of their own language. And they are forced to listen more closely in order to understand me, which draws them in even more – I've got them in the palm of my hand, so to speak.'

© Delphine Lebon

'I use words because I can't keep quiet,' says Sien Van Acker in *More is more* (2025).

Words can add value, but they are definitely not a must for a successful circus performance. 'I can get great enjoyment from wordless circus performances,' says Kurt. 'It's rare that a lack of text bothers me. Or that I think: 'Hmm, I would have used text here.' More often it's the other way around: there is text, but it's about as useful as a chocolate teapot. Around 20 years ago, in the heyday of *cirque contemporain*, it was hip to mix circus and theatre. It often felt like watching a bad porno: should I be looking at the images or following the story? Because the two seem completely unrelated.' ●

WORDS ARE A CIRCUS DISCIPLINE

A dive into the practice of Laura Murphy, Kathrin Wagner and Roxana Küwen Arsalan

BY VALENTINA BARONE

Physical languages usually distance themselves from spoken words and emphasise through gestures and movement the magic of non-verbal communication and understanding. In a broader sense, they do not necessarily need words, creating a silence filled by significance on their own. However, what happens when circus artists perceive words and their voice as a vehicle for their artistic practices? What are the implications and the role of talking on stage in their dramaturgy choices? And what does it mean in terms of them as a physical technique combined with their circus practices?

→ THREE

circus artists, Laura Murphy (and producer Nicole A'Court-Stuart) of Contra Productions, Kathrin Wagner, and Roxana Küwen Arsalan, reflect on why and how they use words on stage. Their responses reveal the significant power of words in their current dramaturgy choices. Leaving aside the impostor syndrome of "not being an actor", in contemporary circus, words on stage can become a necessary tool, often combining a personal political gaze with a way of addressing universal problems. Conceptually they can be a powerful augmenting dimension that expands their artistic practices. Then, words can be intended as physical language itself, deeply influencing their circus techniques and apparatus relationships.

LAURA MURPHY: "I see circus and words as different languages in dialogue in my artistic practice, where each other can express things, the other cannot, especially considering the political meaning of aerial performances addressing themes as perfection, gender and labour. I use them together to convey their message, and the interaction between non-verbal and verbal elements provides context for each other. We can also qualify them as a circus medium, noting that playing with words requires virtuosity, practice, training, and editing, like physical acts. Text helps contextualise the physicality in my aerial practice, acting as a bridge to new choreographic approaches. In *Contra*, for example, the aerial element helps contextualise the verbal monologue, especially regarding patriarchy and the objectification of bodies. In *A spectacle of herself,* they also offer a perspective on the internal landscape, conceptually meeting the external physical body on stage. They can be instructive, allowing me to tell the audience how I wish to be perceived, likening it to 'drag without makeup'. My use of text holds a political and ritualistic quality. They enable me as an artist to enact conflict and convey how I wish my body to be perceived and connect my performance to wider

Lip syncing as a layered form of performing. Laura Murphy in *A spectacle of herself.*

socio-political events. My monologues are highly technically structured, like a song, and I learn lines musically, visualising words and their meanings existing in space. I think of lip-sync as a layering game where I can reclaim, criticise, re-contextualise and or re-present voices through the container of my own body (and in dialogue with the curated performance environment). For example, through some of the lip sync scenes in *Contra*, I layer misogynistic voices with my naked body, drawing attention to violence and degradation presented through humour. In *A Spectacle of Herself,* I parody Elon Musk: lip-syncing his voice whilst zooming around the stage on a gold hoverboard, reminding the audience of his commitment to technological development and his desire to conquer space at any cost. In this way, the displacement and decontextualisation of the voice through lip-sync becomes a method for responding to wider social and political dialogue, channeled through, and in partnership with, my own body."

NICOLE A'COURT-STUART: "Words on stage reclaim the context and frame how a body is read in that space, emphasising the choice to use or not use silence. In Laura's approach, the use of text aligns with magic, like sleight of hand or illusion, by creating instructions that guide the audience's focus and frame of mind. Even the lip-sync can be seen as a levelling effect, creating a parallel world where the artist's own voice and other powerful voices coexist. Terrence McKenna says telepathy exists through "small mouth noises", reinforcing the magical quality of words. His presence as a voice-over in *A Spectacle of Herself* embodies the shaman clown archetype, representing an outsider who returns with knowledge and provides a self-critical perspective on idealism versus power structures."

KATHRIN WAGNER: "Using my voice has made me find my identity as an artist. Parallel to my love for juggling, I followed my passion for language as well as its relation to cultural studies, which is what sparked my interest in spoken word as an art form. The more I got involved in poetry, the more similarities I discovered to juggling. Despite wanting to keep spoken word separate from my circus life (who was *I kidding*), there was too much untapped potential waiting to be explored. Learning about aspects involved in performing poetry led to a deeper understanding of my ring juggling practice. Joining poetry slams - where props are generally not allowed - taught me to express myself through my voice and shifted my focus onto my body language. I learnt to live an experience on stage instead of carrying out what had been rehearsed. In the process, I gained self-confidence and conscious presence.

Introducing spoken word to my circus practice has made my work more profound, detailed, and multifaceted. In the creation of *I Was Told.*, my urge was for spoken word and juggling to exist parallel to each other, whilst being interwoven. To me, talking on stage is very similar to creating juggling sequences. Improvising juggling as well as interacting with the audience requires great timing, reflexes, trusting your skills and experience to make spontaneous decisions, making room to surprise yourself and each other. Having two disciplines that can co-exist means they have the potential to enrich each other, be dependent on each other or -in turn- change the audience's perception. Crafting a poem follows similar rules as creating a

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'The voice through lip-sync becomes a method for responding to wider social and political dialogue.'

Kathrin Wagner merges poetry slam and juggling in *I was told.*

© Carla Dacal

Using words is an equally profound circus technique- according to Roxana Küwen Arsalan.

juggling piece. Intonation is the rhythm that can be seen in a juggling pattern. Changing small variables throughout is where contrasts appear, and the stories we tell become more detailed, certain moments are highlighted, and there is room for interpretation. Examples would be the height of throws, the pitch of a voice, tempo and pauses. Using a simple pattern as a baseline for a poem establishes parallel rhythms in interplay. Each can put emphasis on the other, shift the audience's focus, add details to a story or express something else entirely. In *I Was Told.*, for example, I restart one of the poems every time I drop. It implies that what I talk about in the poem itself happens frequently and repeatedly, whilst showing the fragility and risk of failure involved in juggling. Every time I start juggling again, the tension rises,

and the audience focuses on both my rings and my words. After the final catch, there tends to be a collective exhale followed by empathetic excitement. They want to see me succeed because everyone can relate to making mistakes and trying again."

ROXANA KÜWEN ARSALAN: "I see language as a medium, akin to a circus technique, through which movement and gestures can be manipulated. Both using and not using words should be seen as deliberate artistic decisions, rather than one being more "normal" than the other. It is the cultural context that often influences perceptions of using words in circus. In France, where I live, for example, language as part of the performance surprises no one. Using words on stage stems from my performance art education at Fontys (academy Tilburg), which emphasised the "realness" of telling a story and using available means to achieve a better level of communication. I use language as a technique for precise storytelling and audience interaction. In my foot juggling duo with Ariane Oechsner, *Play Nice* and in my solo *Oma*, words are part of the choreography, complementing or contrasting with movements. Even noticing their absence during rehearsal feels like something is missing. In *Oma*, the decision to use specific words from specific languages is deeply personal and influences its dramaturgy, sometimes leading to unconventional choices. Playing in different languages also allows them to be seen as integral and equal level elements as objects, sounds, or music, which can evoke different associations and travel experiences for the audience. It also provides connection, keeping the performance fresh with an emotional approach tied to each respective language. Addressing questions directly to the spectators creates a shared space where communication develops naturally. I deliberately choose precise words in provocative or political segments, inviting the audience to reflect in real-time. Working with words involves familiar elements from juggling, such as rhythm, and I find it helpful to think of them in a juggling manner; integrating words and considering how and where they are spoken has become as profound as other circus techniques, deepening my identity as a circus artist and adding another discipline I need to care for and train. I am still experimenting with seamlessly associating and dissociating the two techniques, which sometimes results in slightly off timing, where it's unclear whether it was the juggling, words, or overall timing that caused it." ●

'The more I got involved in poetry, the more similarities I discovered to juggling.'

Open letters to the CIRCUS 10 years later

A look back with Bauke Lievens

BY LIV LAVEYNE

In 2015, circus dramaturg Bauke Lievens set a cat among the pigeons of the Flemish circus arts. With her *Open Letters to the Circus*, she sought to redefine the circus and managed to debunk myths surrounding popular terms like freedom, authenticity and virtuosity. A look back with forward-thinking insights.

→ TEN years after her first *Open Letter*, Lievens has consciously shifted her focus. Today, she teaches and conducts research in the drama department of KASK in Ghent. Still, what she does now is not that far removed from what she had in mind back then. She is currently working on a research project called *Crip Earth (Re) Generation*, focusing on disability and how the embodied knowledge it comes with can be unlocked and shared. 'Physical and mental limitations or chronic illness are experienced in the body and thought to be very individual, but that is not the case. If you want to share that experience, one of the most important ways of doing so is to search for words that allow us to understand each other better. Connection begins in the body, as does the search for a shared language.' This same impulse was what led Lievens to start writing her *Open Letters to the Circus*.

Ten years ago, when you posted your first open letter, did you feel there was a lack of something in the field of circus – knowledge, courage, skills – that was impeding expression?

LIEVENS: 'Having worked in a few circus companies, I noticed that the same issues presented themselves over and over: in the working process, a lot of time and energy was actually going into what we meant by the words we were using. Do we mean the same thing when we use words like 'performance', 'play' or 'content'? I observed a general lack of self-confidence among makers. At that time I was, among other things, a dramaturg at compagnie Un loup pour l'homme, and the artists there grew to realise that your mere presence on stage can be enough. I saw many other companies wrestling with that and feeling that what they were doing was empty. They felt obliged to 'add a bit more substance', such as by imposing a narrative. I started the *Open Letters* because, on the one hand, I felt that we lacked a shared lexicon

Session with circus artists at PAF (FR), following the publication of Sebastian Kann's third Open Letter. Pictured is Bauke Lievens with inscription 'temporary faith'.

'Do we mean the same thing when we use words like 'performance', 'play' or 'content'?

for communicating with each other and, on the other hand, I was convinced that there was a link between being able to engage in deep conversation and making interesting work that went beyond the known.'

Did you feel this issue was already being explored more in other countries?

LIEVENS: 'In France they at least *thought* they were more advanced in that regard [*laughs*]. They had more words for speaking about circus, but I did still have the feeling that, when it came to representation and narrative, the framework within which they were speaking was terribly outmoded – especially if you considered the progress we had made in the Flemish performing arts. Their thinking was still very much rooted in *nouveau cirque*. Much had been written about circus, but when it came to dramaturgy, the discussion was still mired in the semiotic tradition à la Paul Bouissac [professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, *ed.*]. The idea that everything you do on stage is symbolic of something else and the tendency to view everything from an anthropological perspective – toe-curling, I felt.

In Flanders, a lot was being published on the history of the circus thanks to André De Poorter, but there wasn't really any writing on dramaturgy. I was particularly interested in to what extent the post-dramatic discourse in the performing arts might be applicable to the circus arts.'

And what was the conclusion?

LIEVENS: 'That the content and expressiveness of a work is already to be found in the present body and does not need to be sought elsewhere per se. Jan Steen [lecturer at KASK

Ghent, *ed.*] was a great inspiration in this, in his conviction that performing is a here-and-now phenomenon that arises in the relationship between performer, audience and material – whereas in other traditions the meaning is attributed much more to external things, such as a text or decor. When it came to circus techniques, I felt that same confidence with the choreographer and later fellow researcher Sebastian Kann.'

Your letters elicited some strong reactions.

LIEVENS: 'I still stand by most of what I said in them, albeit I could have perhaps taken a different tone. I spoke from an academic perspective that was often far removed from many circus performers, and, at the same time, by positioning myself outside of the field, I rendered myself oblivious to the position I occupied within it. It was an almost colonial perspective that I took. Now I would seek to indicate that I am part of that which I am criticising and also incorporate other frameworks of thought and other references – non-Western ones and unheard voices. There was also a fourth and a fifth *Open Letter* written by others but – at their own request – they were ultimately not published: the fourth letter was about circus and objects, the fifth about the search for other frameworks of thinking.'

Someone accused you of destroying circus by thinking about it, that by putting it into words you were stripping it of its magic.

LIEVENS: 'I've always found that dangerous, because then you end up in a bubble that can't be popped and that doesn't allow in any oxygen. And we are already so often trapped in bubbles, especially in the arts. It creates a monologue with no room for conversation, because you believe that something has meaning by virtue of your actions, while meaning is actually created through the relationship between giver and receiver. On the other hand, there were also a lot of artists who were happy with the letters, which they felt had suddenly put into words all the things that they themselves had been wrestling with. The three letters were also translated into different languages and are now being used in education.'

'I spoke from an academic perspective that was often far removed from many circus performers, and, at the same time, by positioning myself outside of the field, I rendered myself oblivious to the position I occupied within it.'

© Jakob Rosseel

‘But, through having conversations, I gradually found my stance becoming less single-minded.’

The nice thing is that a critical community arose from it in order to continue the reflection.

LIEVENS: ‘Indeed, the letters led to the creation of *The Circus Dialogues*, where we had conversations with circus artists as well as thinkers and creators from beyond the field of circus. It created a deeper understanding of what circus is and can be, stemming precisely from the conversation among people who practice the techniques. That is an embodied perspective that I did not share. Those conversations gave me the insight that technique is not only a source of discipline, but that there is also something very special in technique-as-devotion and how your body becomes entwined with that. Also enlightening for me were the discussions surrounding gender and sexualisation, such as in female aerial acrobatics, where you have to spread your legs on rope or aerial silks and the image attached to that.’

It opened your eyes?

‘Initially I was very adamant about addressing the ontological question of ‘what is circus?’ and especially ‘what is it not?’ Perhaps that is a necessary rite of passage that everyone has to go through *[laughs]*. But, through having conversations, I gradually found my stance becoming less single-minded.

‘Also, the publication *Thinking Through Circus*, created in dialogue with circus artists, arose from the need to really enter into a collective discussion. I can’t abide research into circus that pretends to understand circus, to establish frameworks for artists, while the research is not practice-based. As if the practice is not the primary source of knowledge.’

Do you need words to be able to change things? Do words determine your actions?

LIEVENS: ‘I don’t believe that your words determine your

actions, but if you want to share embodied knowledge, then you do need language. In the case of *The Circus Dialogues*, language was so important because I was a dramaturg and was not on stage myself, so I could only speak to what I saw. Language can speed things up; by writing things down, you are more readily able to reproduce and share them. With *The Circus Dialogues*, we were very much seeking a different perspective to that typical Western tendency to divide everything up into the false dichotomy of words and actions, thinking and feeling, because I believe that knowledge is rather a confluence of the two.'

How do you look back on it now? Have things changed?

LIEVENS: 'A lot has changed in master's courses and doctoral research. And in festivals, too, there is a growing desire to go deeper with reflection programmes. I have the feeling that circus artists are starting to speak more about what they do and to question themselves more. I think that used to happen in the past, too, but more behind closed doors, in private rehearsal spaces. Now more is being shared. This is no doubt influenced by social media, but also a mentality shift toward a culture of knowledge sharing.'

What message would you like to pass onto the sector?

LIEVENS: 'Have fun and trust in an informed gut feeling. I used to think that intuition was a weak point in an argument – "I can't speak to that but I feel this way or that way" – but I believe increasingly that it can be trusted.

Research week (Zwarte Zaal, KASK & Conservatory) during Smells like Dialogue: A Circus Symposium (2020), the symposium accompanying the publication Thinking Through Circus during Smells.

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'With The Circus Dialogues, we were very much seeking a different perspective to that typical Western tendency to divide everything up into the false dichotomy of words and actions, thinking and feeling, because I believe that knowledge is rather a confluence of the two.'

That's not to say that you shouldn't think about things, but that the two go together. It's important to feed your intuition and to realise that what feeds your intuition is also bound to a certain context.' ●

BOUNDARIES BEYOND WORDS

Grensgeval on the grammar of the circus

BY ELENA STANCIU AND VALENTINA BARONE

What do words do in circus? What does circus do with words? Language brings fascination as it provides clarity; words remove distances, as they complicate relationships; this duality of language is its beauty and its necessity. But perhaps duality is not entirely fitting to address the role of language in how we experience, create, present, and engage with circus. It may not be a matter of speaking or staying silent; a matter of forming words or of using one's body to express an idea. The *either/or* may be the wrong premise; we may gain more from considering circus as located anywhere on the spectrum between the worded and the un-worded.

→ WE sit down with Mahlu Mertens, one of the co-directors of the Flemish company Grensgeval. We discuss language, words, and overarching approaches to a grammar of performing arts impact their work. Operating at the crossroads of circus and theatre mixed with other artistic expressions, their work stages strong visual and sensory material. But what role do words play in the distinctive oeuvre of Grensgeval?

Mahlu, can you share us more about how you're currently exploring words and circus?

MAHLU MERTENS: We often work in interdisciplinary teams. Everyone thinks speaking the same language—usually English—but words carry different meanings in different fields. For example, "poetic" meant something very specific to us from theatre, but it took weeks to realise our sound designer interpreted it differently. We were in a space of 'prolonged misunderstanding' until we unpacked what we meant by it. Similarly, circus artists often resist "acting" because they associate it with something fake or grotesque. But as theatre directors, we know there are many authentic, subtle styles of acting.

That's a very interesting syntagm: 'prolonged misunderstandings'. Are they always frustrating, or can they be creatively productive?

MERTENS: They can be productive if everyone's aware there's a misunderstanding and is open to exploring it. In our multi-disciplinary teams, it's important to make sure we have a common language.

In theatre—and also in literary studies, my background as well—you have a very elaborate vocabulary to talk about what you're doing. In literature, you talk about the 'focaliser', the 'narrator',

Photo from PLOCK © Bart Grietens

‘Everyone thinks speaking the same language but words carry different meanings in different fields.’

the ‘temporal setting’, or the pace at which time moves in a novel. In poetry, you have technical terms to describe structure, rhythm, and form, but also a rich vocabulary to talk about the poem’s style and effect.

It’s the same in theatre. We talk about the ‘intention’ of a scene, the ‘motivation’ of a character, and dramaturgical concepts like ‘horizontal or vertical development within scenes’. There’s a shared language to describe both the mechanics and the meaning of a performance.

What does circus bring to this?

MERTENS: Circus has its own vocabulary and is largely centered on technique, on tricks or the names of specific disciplines. Which is valuable. We’ve educated ourselves in that technical language, but what we noticed is that it’s often tied to *what* you do—not *why* you do it or what it *means*.

However, the field is shifting. Where circus used to be more of a sequence of five-minute acts—entertaining and impressive, but without a cohesive narrative or emotional arc—artists are now creating performances that aim to hold an audience for 40 minutes or more, often with a single discipline or a consistent

team on stage throughout.

To do that successfully, you have to be able to talk about what you're trying to achieve beyond just technique. You need more— to consider structure, emotion, atmosphere, and intention. And to explore those elements, you need language.

Especially for directors or outside eyes...

MERTENS: "For us, as directors, language is crucial. If you're a collective of circus artists who've trained and worked together for years, you might not need as much verbal communication—you can rely on body language, shared experience, and intuitive connection. But some directors don't share the artists' embodied knowledge, we do need language. We need to give feedback, make suggestions, and reflect on what's happening; for that, we rely on words.

While there's a circus robust technical vocabulary, there's still a lack of language around 'relationships'. And I mean that in the broadest sense—relationships to your discipline, to the person you're on stage with, to the director (if there is one), to the audience, to the objects you're using, or to the space itself. All of these affect a performance profoundly.

And this idea of relationships—it's somewhere in between technique and content. It's not purely about *how* you do something, and it's not only about *what* you're trying to say either. But relationships *carry* content, and they're shaped by technique. There's a kind of in-between space there that I think is still underexplored in circus."

How do kids respond to your work?

MERTENS: "We invite them into rehearsals early. With four-year-olds, verbal feedback is tough—body language tells us more. Seven or eight-year-olds are more verbal, but they interpret instructions literally. We had a funny instance, where we invited them to 'walk through space' which is theatre shorthand for engaging with the space, but they started to act and walk like astronauts. If we ask them to 'feel each other', another shorthand for being aware of the energy of others, they start physically touching one another. It's a reminder of how much jargon we internalise in the arts. But in some instances, we create performances *with* children, not only for them, so it's important to teach them this language, to help them feel like professional actors."

'Circus has its own vocabulary and is largely centered on technique, on tricks or the names of specific disciplines.'

It's interesting how kids don't have fixed assumptions. What about the idea of meaning as a fixed or negotiated concept? How do you approach meaning in your work?

MERTENS: "Our background in theatre drilled into us: know what you want to convey before you choose the form; not necessarily draw out the beginning, middle and end, but know what you want to say with the piece before you start giving it shape. But working in circus and studying posthumanism and new materialism has changed that. It's entirely possible—and sometimes desirable—to start from a material or object and arrive at a content, and a meaning I believe humans are still needed to narrate stories, but in times as these where anthropocentrism is more and more questioned, it's crucial to rethink our relationships with objects, nature, and the non-human world."

'While there's a circus robust technical vocabulary, there's still a lack of language around 'relationships'.'

Do you think audiences search for shapes or forms? Can 'meaning' present itself as a shape-led experience for the circus audience?

MERTENS: "Yes. People crave order and logic, even in abstract pieces, they will order what they see on stage, to draw meaning from it. In terms of shape and more conventional considerations of aesthetics, we've learned to shift from calling things 'beautiful' to calling them 'satisfying'. Something considered ugly can still be satisfying if it conveys the right feeling. We work with objects that are not conventionally beautiful, they're brutalist, kind of harsh."

Could you talk about building grammar in your shows, or operating with a type of syntax, considering also all these thoughts about form, shape, and meaning?

MERTENS: "When adults come to the theatre, they bring expectations. Kids don't. So, we work to create a shared grammar, a set of rules, that make everyone feel safe to interact, and which they can learn quickly, in the space of the performance. We destabilize norms by asking people to take off shoes or wear protective suits. Kids follow, thinking this is just what you do. Adults are surprised.

One way we interrupt the pre-existing grammar of expectation is by having very creative titles for our performances, which seem to mean something but not quite. It's interesting when kids ask their parents what the word means, and the parents themselves don't

Photo from PLOCK © Bart Grietens

know—that space of uncertainty and openness puts adults and children on the same level, trying to figure out what's going on."

Language is a convention and the words we use reaffirm the conventions, often to assure us, help us trust others or be at ease. Circus has its own conventions, maybe in technique, relationships... How do you explore these?

MERTENS: "For instance, in theatre, applauding mid-show is rare. In circus, it's normal. We try to manage that in our work depending on the mood we're building, and we do this by establishing certain codes for the audience and letting them know what's ok to do. Similarly, asking for and receiving consent, within the space of the performance, in real-time, is a subtle thing—we sometimes have to lift kids, as part of their participation. We can't always ask for consent before the show, so we must create codes with the audience, so they understand what they become a part of, and can consent to it. These are non-worded exchanges; we don't say much, but we exchange quite a lot." ●

'We had a funny instance, where we invited children to 'walk through space' which is theatre shorthand for engaging with the space, but they started to act and walk like astronauts.'

THE MATHE-MATICS BEHIND LANGUAGE BROWSING

Alexander Vantournhout's circus lexicon

BY LIV LAVEYNE

Alexander Vantournhout has been making circus at the crossroads of dance and visual art for years, but now he's turning his attention to writing as well. About what circus is, but equally about what circus is not. About why a door handle is a door handle, but a circographer is not a choreographer.

→ VANTOURNHOUT

is currently busy working on a book to be published by Routledge in autumn 2026. The book will be practice-based, drawing on his own experiences. Reflecting on his own artistic practice and working processes, the book will also present a more general view of what circus is. Using some aphorisms from his own poetics, Vantournhout aims to spark inspiration and reflection. Reflection within the circus sector but also beyond, not only about art but also social relations and economics.

= CIRCUS?

Vantournhout's book begins with his first experience of circus. 'I saw my sister cycling with her feet in the air and then standing on the frame. And I remember thinking: this is circus! Why did that thought strike me in that moment and why do I still feel it's true today? Why was what my sister was doing more than just cycling on the street? The answer was simple: my sister was looking to find a special way of cycling and to impress me and my parents. This is the essence of what circus is.'

CIRCOGRAPHY ≠ CHOREOGRAPHY

Creating circus is fundamentally different from creating a dance performance. 'With a circus performance like Frames, you always run the risk that things could go wrong. Even if you only rehearse a certain sequence once. As a *circographer*, this leads you to think and work much more hypothetically than you would in dance. What's more – something I realised when working as *circographer* on the graduation show at ESAC – you have those thirteen disciplines of students and they all have to be incorporated in some way. Even before the creative process can begin, there are technical conditions that shape the content, form and order of things to a significant extent. The rigging, the harnesses of the trapeze artists, the chalk for your hands … These are things related to the discipline of circus that are not circus in themselves but are necessary in order to realise it. Circography entails a knowledge of those things and an awareness of how you use them, how you incorporate them on stage. Jet fighters flying in different formations or those drone events they have

SYMBOLS

= / ≠
is equal to / not equal to

>
is greater than

⊄
is not a subset of

f
is a function of

lim
is the limit of

⇒
if A is true, then B must lso be true

in Macau or Hong Kong, we don't strictly consider these to be circus, but those flying skills do use a very circographic approach.'

APPARATUS > *AGRÈS* > OBJECT

In Flanders, we speak of the *object* but this does not go so far as to define the relational dynamic or the space in between. In English, they speak of the 'apparatus', in the sense of Foucault's *dispositif*, but this is likewise a very broad term related to the definition of space. This view asserts that in social, political and economic systems, space (streets, a city, a prison) is organised in such a way as to either allow or deny people to meet. In circus, silks or straps are more than just objects, they also co-organise the space.

For me, the French term '*agrès*' best matches what I define as the relationship between circus body and object. Originally a navy term, it refers to the navigation system used by boats. The word is only used in gymnastics and circus, which makes it very specific and singular.

'Even circus disciplines such as contortion or acrobatics that would seem not to deal with objects still carry vestiges or memories of them that are rooted in trainin.'

Even circus disciplines such as contortion or acrobatics that would seem not to deal with objects still carry vestiges or memories of them that are rooted in training: the acrobat only got to where they are because drop mats were present in training; the contortionist by virtue of the resistance bands or ropes with which they stretched out their body during practice. In circus there is almost always a relationship to an external object, which might be a partner or a teacher, a so-called spotter or helper who stands by in case something should go wrong during training or sometimes during the performance, as in the last scene in Frames. It is this *agrès* that shapes one's movement practice.

That's the difference with dance. These days, a dance school is often an empty studio, usually there isn't even a barre or mirrors anymore. Ontologically, there is very little difference

between a *pas de deux* in ballet and a main à main in acrobatics, but, in developing the movement material, there were mats and spotters that facilitated a more virtuosic practice. Even if the mats are no longer visible, they do remain something that one can feel.

JUGGLING ⊄ CIRCUS

If you define circus as a mutually dependent relationship to your object or *agrès*, then you cannot consider juggling to be a circus discipline. After all, the body is not affected by the object; it is the person who leads the object. To put it simply: you don't have some prosthesis that changes your body or your posture, as you do with high heels, for example, or other *agrès* in circus. I personally see juggling as evolving into an art form unto itself, more than a choreography with objects. It's no coincidence that you find fewer and fewer jugglers in circus colleges.

The fact that the art of juggling is becoming independent can be seen, for example, in an institute like La Maison des Jonglages, where the focus is solely on the art of juggling. Or a convention like the European Juggling Convention: the number of jugglers who actually define themselves as circus artists is small. Juggling is a form of expression in itself, with its own specialisms and forms of experimentation. Certain circus disciplines are splitting off like the discipline of magic did. Some may find that regrettable, and there will always be a connection to circus, even if it's purely the historical link, but you have to dare to ask whether a circus college is the ideal place for a juggler or a magician to

© Bart Grietens - Photo from *Frames*

Frames: spotter or helper in *Frames*. It is this *agrès* that shapes one's movement practice.

develop their skills. Many colleges present their graduation projects in an arena that is not the ideal space for juggling or magic.'

f (AFFORDANCE)

In his Ecological approach to senses, the psychologist-biologist Gibson defines affordance as the object that invites action. 'It's akin to how a door handle invites you to open or close a door. You're free to conceptualise that object however you please, but if it's over-designed, the function may become unclear to the point where it no longer invites that action.'

'Circus plays with the tension between usual and unusual affordance: a juggling ball is made to be thrown in the air, so if you go and stand on it, that's an unusual affordance. In the performance *Screws*, I use the bowling ball by sticking my fingers in the holes – as intended. But then instead of making a rolling movement that distances the object from the body, I spin around to generate centripetal force, so then it again becomes an example of unusual affordance. Circus is very conscious of the logical and illogical use of objects. Such as when you juggle with objects other than clubs or balls.'

© Bart Grietens

Spotter or helper with *Frames*.

lim {VIRTUOSITY}

Etymologically, the word acrobat comes from the Greek for 'one who walks on the extremities' (akros, meaning at the edge or extremity). Whether the acrobat is doing a somersault or a handstand, they submit to the danger of falling to either side. 'Circus is circus because it could go either way. There's a risk it will go wrong. But then the trick succeeds after all. In the intervening moment, the viewer feels the presence of a ticking clock. There is an eternal timelessness in a moment of mid-air suspension, as if the clock is tickling a little more slowly. It's the tipping point that is followed by a sense of freedom when it does succeed.'

'Sometimes virtuosity is a means to an end. At other times, it's an unavoidable byproduct of circus performance. When engaged in a virtuosic performance, the circus artist is completely absorbed in their actions. The body is completely trained on that goal. Herein lies the paradox: those virtuosic demands limit the expressive palette of the

performer. It's true what choreographer Jonathan Burrows says: "It's hard to find a reason to jump." In that moment, it's difficult for a somersault to be more than a somersault. The expression is in the movement itself.'

'The irony is also that if the circus artist exhibits too much virtuosity, the circus of it is taken for granted. After all, the more virtuosic the performance of an act, the less the audience will perceive the effort. This is why a trick will often be preceded by an accident, an attempt or a slip-up. A feigned slip or planned error makes the trick that follows all the more exciting to witness.'

© Bart Grietens

Screws: usual and unusual affordance of a bowling ball in *Screws*.

DANGER ≠ RISK

'Danger is the condition or situation in which injury or damage is possible. Risk is the realisation that a trick has a potentially undesirable outcome within a completely controlled environment. For a circus artist, the possibility of failure always looms large. They place themselves in a challenging, sometimes life-endangering situation and thus reveal their humanity. When an aerial acrobat is hanging six metres above the crowd, the act itself takes on meaning. The *Circassian* archetype embodies courage, strength and freedom, but perceiving the possibility of failure humanises the seemingly superhuman figure.'

'The calculation of risk is comparable with what a mouse does when it enters a building, remains close to the wall to avoid being exposed, and can thus easily find its way back to safety. A skilled circus artist does the same thing, also reflexively limiting the choices that have to be made in the moment. Circus arts seek to play with the possibility of danger rather than with danger itself. That which the *Circassian* tries to rule out, the audience imaginatively incorporates into their mental circography.'

'Danger, more than virtuosity, has a long-lasting effect on the viewer. Risk interrupts the linear temporality to the extent that the viewer forgets what has just happened. The

© Bart Grietens - Beeld uit *Screws*

situation takes over. Reality breaks through the fiction.'

NOTEWORTHINESS ⇒ INDIVISIBILITY

Rather than speaking in terms of virtuosity in circus, Vantournhout prefers the term noteworthiness, emphasising that which is worthy of being noticed. 'In the last two centuries, circus has become spectacle and perhaps for too long this has been the case, but it didn't start out that way. It's about eliciting attention through singularity. You're doing something that few others can. This can be achieved by doing something extraordinary in a very virtuosic way, but it can also be done by establishing a different way of looking at a normal movement or at the relationship to, or function of, an object.'

'That unique, singular quality paradoxically leads me to dare call circus a *non-shared* practice, because in it the individual sets themselves apart from others. This is not to say that circus is protectionist – even if that may still be the case in some very specific disciplines, such as hair hanging and magic – but rather that circus is a solitary and momentary language that you develop and share within a certain group and not outside of it. There are no circus schools that teach a certain acting method or movement theory, in contrast with theatre and dance schools. In their practice, a dancer will not set themselves apart from another dancer; they are more inclined to say that every body is unique and interprets movements through that unique body, such that a dance is performed differently from person to person. A circus performer is more likely to say: this is my trick and that is what sets me apart. They will always be in search of originality, excellence. Which is why there is not really much of a circus repertoire. This indivisibility circus has is starting to make way for a more shared practice, which is certainly positive, but also leads to a reduction in singularity, putting all bodies on an equal footing.' ●

REVIEW

iRRooTTaa

Grensgeval

BY JASPER DELVA

***Trop* is simply too much. Circus Katoen and Grensgeval convey this message in a tantalising way with the help of an enormous pile of white ceramic balls in *iRRooTTaa*, a performance for young (4+) and old, devised by Hanne Vandersteene, Mahlu Mertens, Sophie van der Vuurst de Vries and Willem Balduyck. The fact that the climactic torrent of balls is so predictable takes nothing away from this fascinating composition of image and sound.**

→ YOU

can see the final scene of *iRRooTTaa* coming from a mile off. A deluge of white ceramic balls overwhelms acrobatic duo Keivin Benavides Hidalgo and Liza Van Brakel. Its arrival is foreshadowed by an ominous soundscape containing the slow, hollow sound of clattering hail. The pair can do nothing but accept their fate. Unlike in the beginning, they still try to catch as many of the balls as possible, but this time just for the sake of it. In this way, the once lost joy of playing is restored.

It all starts with a sudden rumbling. A lonely white ceramic ball rolls out unceremoniously under our feet. Notably, it emerges from behind the circular grandstand set up on the stage in front of the closed theatre curtain facing us (the curtain will never open but we don't know that yet). With a swift fwooooosh, first Keivin Benavides Hidalgo and then Liza Van Brakel dive from under that curtain and make for the little ball. 'Fooo, fooo, fooo, fooooo.' On their hands and knees, they huff and puff, trying to direct the ball, while diving over and under each other, gliding and crawling.

The fact that the ball preceded the performers is already a hint at the way the show will unfold. The ball does not allow itself to be controlled; it seems to be the one leading the dance. This is what the duo would have us believe, at least. Until things suddenly start to go wrong and the ball threatens to disappear behind the scenes. You can see Hidalgo hesitate. Against the unwritten rule of the game, he stops the ball with his hand just in time. Why? Can't the game continue behind the curtain? At times, the duo's visible reluctance to let the ball proceed on its way or take the reins saps the momentum out of this first playful scene.

It's not a dealbreaker, though. The joy of the performance is clear to see, and that's the main thing. Through a variety of playful approaches, Hidalgo and Van Brakel discover the personality of the ball together with the audience: how it rolls and tumbles, falls and flies. The kids in the audience eat it up. Their eyes are all lit up, perhaps with the hope of more ball games to come.

‘In the final scene, we learn that a dropped ball can even lead to new opportunities. Falling down is never really the end. You can always get back up again.’

Gradually, more balls start to appear. They all have little differences and come rolling in from all over the place. Some bigger, some smaller. Some are more or less smooth, others fall apart like chalk. Still others move (seemingly) by themselves or bounce around. Occasionally a ball turns out to be edible or malleable. In the beginning, some of the balls are also coloured, until the duo intervene and they mysteriously turn white and disappear into the increasingly large white mass.

Especially striking: the more balls, the more the duo seeks to keep them together, to keep them under control. First they collect the balls on the backs of their hands, like an old-fashioned game of jacks. Next they stuff as many as possible into their trouser pockets and other garments. Later, an almost desperate Hidalgo drags Van Brakel across the stage while picking up as many balls as she can and collecting them in her lap.

Hidalgo even selects a child from the audience and lifts him up onto his shoulders. He holds him in such a way that his knees are tucked in close to his body. This makes the child’s lap an ideal receptacle for Van Brakel to dump the collected balls in. I recognise this kind of intervention from previous Grensgeval performances: they always involve the audience in the performance, albeit only in the role of an object or prop. In *PLOCK!* (2017), preschoolers were hoisted into white overalls to later be used as human paint brushes in a session of action painting. In *KORROL* (2023), some spectators were employed as aesthetic building blocks. In *iRRooTTaa*, however, the chosen child is not content to be relegated to the role of ball basket. When the balls collectively regain the upper hand and start overflowing from the child’s lap – things are going ‘wrong’ – the kid appears to get visibly upset. Happily, Hidalgo returns

him to his parent just in time. This is characteristic of the performance: even this initially fun, participative moment gets derailed and leads to overwhelm.

And then follows the flood of balls that everyone easily saw coming. Still, it remains intriguing to watch how the duo responds to the situation. In this way, Circus Katoen and Grensgeval manage to make a predictable outcome and narrative arc engaging and exciting. Through a stimulating composition of image and sound, we learn the lesson that it is impossible to keep all the balls in the air. Sometimes life is just (too) overwhelming. What's more, in the final scene, we learn that a dropped ball can even lead to new opportunities. Falling down is never really the end. You can always get back up again. It's 'Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better.' packaged for preschoolers.

This is the point *iRRooTTaa* seems to be going for. At the same time, you can read much more into it, because the show's simplicity leaves room for imagination. For example, in the sea of white balls I can also read a ecological critique of monoculture. You could even read into it a critique of anthropocentrism and the 'triumphant human subject'. After all, does humankind always need to control every object and keep it in check? Perhaps this is the real core message that Circus Katoen and Grensgeval seek to convey: trop is simply too much. That they manage to translate this message into a playful, exciting and well-balanced show that keeps audiences young and old engaged is nothing short of remarkable. Note: this show is performed in alternating duos. One is Keivin Benavides Hidalgo and Liza Van Brakel (the pair I saw) and the other is Willem Balduyck and Sophie van der Vuurst de Vries.

JASPER DELVA

is a sociologist and works as a research coordinator at the Flemish government's Department of Culture, Youth and Media. For some years now, in his free time he has been writing about performance arts and visual art for the likes of *pzazz*, Etcetera, Metropolis M and Tubelight Magazine. Circus may not be his wheelhouse, but it is a discipline he has been curious about for some time – and not only professionally. As a participant in Circuscentrum's Circus Criticism Programme, he wrote the following review of *iRRooTTaa*, the latest performance by Circus Katoen and Grensgeval. He has been following the work of the latter company for a while. In his review, Jasper takes a closer look at how all the makers' choices play out on stage and what meaning ultimately emerges from the collaboration.

Seen on 11 October, 2024, at Budascoop during VITRINE PERPLX (Kortrijk)

CIRCUS IN WORDS

‘I would like to call
criticism a creation
from what has been created.’

WRITER OSCAR WILDE, 1890

“People speak to you because they’ve read the reviews. I would miss it, the reviews, the blah-blah in the newspapers. But actually, that kind of success is fake. As a circus artist, you shouldn’t have a problem with just playing in the street and collecting a thousand francs with your hat, if you get as much satisfaction from that audience as you do from our audience now. If I look deep inside, it shouldn’t make a difference. Now it does make a difference, but that’s the only thing we have to lose.”

CIRCUS ARTIST DANNY RONALDO IN DE STANDAARD, JUNE 29, 2001)

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Between distance and proximity

BY EVELYNE COUSSENS

Circus criticism is on the rise, in step with the steady professionalisation of the circus arts. Today, in contrast with 15 years ago, circus is very much on the radar of a great many reviewers and of culture-critical media in general in Flanders and the Netherlands. This heightened attention has, in turn, generated criticism of circus criticism itself. And rightly so, because one might well ask: who is watching, from what perspective and with what expertise?

→ THE point was made previously in this publication: a healthy discourse is the marker of maturity for any art discipline. Without any (academic or art-critical) discussion surrounding it, a creation is doomed to be left floundering in the margins. Defining, researching and reflecting on art not only serves a historical function – documenting how an art form emerges and develops – it is also a necessary condition for growth: without critical reflection, there is no questioning, no evolution, no progress. Reviews, the most well-defined form of criticism, are an important part of such art-critical reflection. In this light, it's a promising sign for this relatively fledgling art form that so many circus performances are being reviewed these days on major performing arts platforms (Theaterkrant, Etcetera, *pzazz*, and more). More than that, it is essential.

The right distance

Or not? At a debate held during the 2024 Nederlands Theater Festival, an animated conversation unfolded between Dutch theatre critics and Dutch theatremakers. One of the notions central to that discussion was that of distance: how close or how far should a critic be from the practice in order to be in a position to say something meaningful about it? In other words, how specialised does a critic have to be, how much expertise do they need to have in order to be authorised to write reviews? In more autodidactic fields like literature and especially poetry, reviewers are often writers and poets themselves. This makes them effectively more embedded in the practice. At the same time, it seems very unhealthy, levelling criticism against one's own colleagues. In highly technical artistic disciplines – such as classical music, but also circus – critics usually have no physical or practical experience. Does someone have to be a circus performer in order to write about it well? It would seem not: in fact, it may even be the case that distance is a necessary condition for reflection. The right distance, that is: not too far, not too close.

Above all, what this means is that the critic, and especially the circus critic, is a person engaged in a process of *learning*.

I admit that when I write about circus, I have to look up all the technical terms (Cyr wheel? Chinese pole? Aerial straps?). Fortunately, writing about circus – indeed, writing about any art form – is always rooted in curiosity, interest, love. As a result, in their first reviews, beginner circus critics bear a striking resemblance to beginner artists: searching, uncertain, grasping for the right words and perspective. *Learning* on the job. Often viewing things through the lens of a discipline that they are already familiar with, such as theatre or dance. The first circus reviews on the Dutch site theaterkrant.nl appear in 2012 under the tag 'circustheater'. On the Flemish review website *pzazz*.theatre, the earliest circus reviews are mostly written by dance critic Pieter 'T Jonck, and they are often about creators straddling the fields of dance and circus: Alexander Vantournhout, Piet Van Dycke. In Etcetera, the first contributions on circus appear around 2013. They are written by Tuur Devens, a theatre critic specialising in puppet theatre but also an attentive follower of the circus developments taking place in Flemish Limburg (Dommelhof in Pelt).

Those writing pioneers follow the sector with love and enthusiasm, but their reviews distinguish mainly the performative and theatrical qualities of circus performances. Much is said about dramatic tension, the quality of choreographies, plot development – all concepts typically associated with theatre and dance. With the expansion and development of circus today as an increasingly professional and more vital art form (it is precisely its 'youthful' status that provides a refreshingly open terrain for artistic experiment), there seems to be space for the following step: the development of a generation of critics who see circus from within the medium itself, possessing the vocabulary and requisite knowledge of its processes and (international) developments. Circuscentrum already organised an in-depth workshop for circus critics-in-the-making in 2024, together with *pzazz*.

Whose side are you on now?

A second observation, heaving read a lot of reviews, is that the circus critic benevolently follows the journey of creators from a suitable distance, like a faithful hound. The critic takes note of new developments within the circus sector, but equally mirrors in their writings any developments in terms of content. Reviews that are purely 'technical' – reviews focusing on judging the spectacle value or wow-factor of a performance – are hard to find in the earliest years. This makes sense, since such performances, often from before the 2000s, were simply not on the radar of art critics. The first reviews within the art-critical media discuss, as mentioned, (the lack of) a dram-

aturgical framework – even in the reflections on big events like the Groot Kerstcircus Den Haag or the street theatre festival Deventer op Stelten, the reviewer for Theaterkrant seeks depth and meaning rather than qualitative tricks. The shift that has taken place in circus criticism over the last five years especially validates the artistic shift beyond the dramaturgical potential of performances to the connecting, relational potential of circus. In other words: the relationship with the public enters the picture, and in its weight, it overpowers the traditional relationship with the object. Indeed, anyone who reads the reviews on *pzazz* will sense in them a strong aversion to 'circus tricks' and a great enthusiasm for imperfection, vulnerability, participatory theatre, in short for – however counterintuitively for a discipline like circus! – anti-spectacle (a term coined by Pieter 'T Jonck).

© Maryan Sayd

The performance *60 degrees of separation* by Boegbeeld/Camille Paycha, which, according to some, can hardly be called a 'circus' anymore: unspectacular yet intriguing.

The question remains, though: which audience does this anti-spectacular circus seek to connect with? In his essay 'Where's The Critic?' (2009), Thijs Lijster beautifully describes how, in the historical development of (Western) art criticism, the critic 'switches camps' at a certain point: while the origins of art criticism lie in the expert's affirmation of the 'new taste' of a bourgeois class (the audience!), at some point in the Romantic nineteenth century, that expert crosses the boundary and joins the side of the artist. From that moment on, the critic no longer defends and represents the taste of the broad public, but that of the artistic genius and the small but dedicated audience that surrounds them. Audiences and artists thus risk drifting apart, with the critic only deepening that gap. Illustrative of this is Camille Paycha's performance *60 degrees of separation*, which for some people would barely qualify as circus these days. How unspectacular is it to calmly spin yourself around hanging by one arm (however technically demanding that may be)? As I walked out of *60 degrees of separation* – I thought it was a fantastic performance – I felt (and heard) the disappointment of quite a few audience members,

© Andy Paradise

Alegria van Cirque du Soleil : het is noodzakelijk dat de criticus ook buiten zijn bubbel treedt.

who thought they had come to a circus performance, only to end up in a warm ritual. In Flanders today, we mainly evaluate the impact of performances. Not what circus is, but what circus does.

A second bias threatens the circus critic, and it lies in selection. The array of reviews on *pzazz*, and likewise on Etcetera, makes it seem as if contemporary Flemish circus consists solely of only social-artistic, participatory circus or circus with marginalised groups *(PIEDESTAL, Tout va hyper bien, Permit, oh Permit My Soul to Rebel, 2m2, ...)*. Or meta-circus, like Circus Ronaldo's often historicising work, which scrutinises its own medium. It's a history that has already repeated itself in various disciplines (take the seemingly dominant presence in the discourse of post-dramatic theatre in the 1980s – as if there were no other theatre being made than that of Fabre, Lauwers and Decorte) and it's also the path that circus is going down – perhaps already has. In the development of the nomadic circus into a fully-fledged artistic discipline that circus has become, criticism has naturally come to focus on what is new, fresh and artistically exciting. Ignoring the fact that for some viewers, those developments are too fast, too brutal. Liv Laveyne's review of Cirque du Soleil on *pzazz* was a necessary correction: a critic must also be sensitive to what is going on outside the rapidly evolving avant-garde. And realise that there are other performances and other kinds of audiences beyond their own bubble.

'In Flanders today, we mainly evaluate the impact of performances. Not what circus *is*, but what circus *does*.

Labour of love

It's the whack-a-mole dynamic that comes with a sector seeking to move forward. This doesn't mean that the artistic evolution of the medium needs to be reined in, but rather that the circus critic should ensure they are well aware of the position they occupy with respect to the sector. Of the critical distance needed to be able to see clearly, however great their love for the medium may be. Of the relativity of one's own authority, without losing it in the process, as Thijs Lijster argues at the end of *Where's the Critic?* In parallel with the global wave of democratisation that is rooted in the internet (a tide that seems to be turning today, but I digress), there is also the art-critical field that has become permeated by the need for diverse perspectives and dialogical reflection. Gone are the days when British reviewers had an entire page dedicated to their name in the newspaper. Today criticism is to be a modest affair if it is to exist at all.

In recent years in the Low Countries, there have been quite a few experiments aimed at making art criticism more inclusive of different voices in a healthy way. The Flemish De Zendelingen achieved this mainly by including the voices of (theatre-going) audiences in its reflections, through multimedia concepts such as The Confessional or Theatre Tinder. The concept proved financially unsustainable. In the Netherlands, the Laboratorium Actuele Kunstkritiek (Laboratory of Contemporary Art Criticism), an initiative of the Domein voor Kunstkritiek, is mainly focused on exploring alternative forms, such as digital art criticism or video criticism, with a view to reaching wider audience.

> 'A critic must also be sensitive to what is going on outside the rapidly evolving avant-garde. And realise that there are other performances and other kinds of audiences beyond their own bubble.'

So it seems that the circus critic, still wet behind the ears, stands before a great challenge. Just like critics from other disciplines, they must remain very aware of the scope of their task: following and interpreting the artistic developments within this fledgling sector, monitoring the connection between what was and what the future will bring, forming a link between audiences old and new. And all while maintaining an attitude of service and an openness to *learning*. Someone at the debate in Amsterdam described the work of the reviewer as a labour of love. That's exactly it. Let love rule – and may the circus industry be blessed with a new generation of impassioned reviewers. ●

‘WRITING A REVIEW IS TERRIFYING’

Trajectory circus criticism in Flanders

BY MAARTEN VERHELST

Dries Vanwalle is a circus creator with Sinking Sideways, Lina Matthys is part of the team at circus school Zonder Handen and Tom Permentier is a musician and circus critic. These three have something in common besides their unbridled love for circus: they all took part in the 2024 Circus Criticism Programme, along with five other aspiring critics. We sat down with them for a coffee and a good chat about the sense and nonsense of reviewing.

Circus Criticism Programme

Together with review platform *Pzazz*, Circuscentrum organised a Circus Criticism Programme in 2024. The eight participants attended a variety of circus performances at four different circus festivals throughout the year: Smells Like Circus (Ghent), CIRKL (Leuven), Cirk! (Aalst) and Vitrine PERPLX (Kortrijk). In addition to the performances, post-show discussions and informal chats over drinks, there were also info sessions, conversations with artists and organisers, and plenty of reviewing. You can read some of the results in this publication.

Why did you all sign up for the Circus Criticism Programme?

LINA MATTHYS: For me it was mainly a good excuse to see more shows and discuss them. I regularly go to circus performances, but I always find it difficult to share a proper opinion about it. I rarely get beyond 'I liked it' or 'I didn't like it'. Through this programme, I wanted to be able to articulate my opinion better: to be able to make the case for why I felt something was good or bad.

DRIES VANWALLE: I'm not a writer, so I didn't sign up right away. It was only once the programme had already started and I heard from Tom that other non-writers were taking part that I thought, 'it might be cool to join in after all'. I always enjoy seeing and analysing shows anyway, dissecting them in a bit more depth. Hearing what others think and why is enriching to me.

TOM PERMENTIER: I've always had a love-hate relationship with circus as an art form. It's a whimsical scene that – so the cliche goes – is still in development, still growing. There are so many areas of contrast between, for example, auteur circus and crowd-pleasing entertainment. Even more than loving circus, I would say that I'm fascinated by it. And certainly by circus artists. I'm always hungry for new encounters and new performances. And I really enjoy reflecting on them, either orally or in writing. I have quite a bit of writing experience, so for me the challenge of the programme also lay in getting better at reading and judging circus from different perspectives.

What have you learnt from the programme?

TOM: I think I learnt the most from the discussions and how everyone sees circus in their own way.

DRIES: My writing is – how to put it? – just awful. So it was genuinely helpful to be provided with some tools to make it better. Besides that, I am also better able to formulate my opinion now – in more than one sentence. *[he laughs]*

LINA: I learned to word my ar-

guments better. And another takeaway, besides structure and style tips, is not to give pointers to the artist. But I still find the writing itself difficult. It's one thing to be aware of what you feel, but it's another task entirely to find the right words. Chatting about it is easier. In conversation you can bounce back and forth. That's helpful for me. So I definitely learnt that it's very difficult to write about shows, especially negatively.

Because you don't dare to share your opinion?

LINA: Because a performance is the artists' baby, so I don't want to trash it. Maybe also because it's such a small world and everyone knows everyone else.

TOM: The difficult thing about reviewing, and especially with negative critiques, is finding the right way to present your argument. As a reviewer, if you don't like a performance, you have a responsibility to the artists to communicate that with respect and to use clear arguments. One of the principles that I try to hold on to as an occasional reviewer is: just because it's popular, doesn't mean it's good. As a critic, you're allowed to going against popular taste as long as you can make the case for why. If you ask me, you don't need to hold back when it comes to big, commercial productions like Cirque du Soleil. When it comes to debut performances from young companies, I would be less harsh. Choose my words a little more tactically. Pull my punches a little as a critic.

How do you see it, Dries, as a circus creator? How do you feel about reviews?

DRIES: We haven't gotten many reviews yet. And I think that's a shame actually. Even if I'm also afraid of getting bad reviews. The thing is, I stand by my work and I know that not everyone will like it. So I'm also prepared to receive a bad review.

LINA: As long as they can properly articulate why it doesn't work for them.

DRIES: Indeed. We have had a few rave reviews, but if someone comes and tells me, without mincing their words: I didn't like it, for this and that reason – that's okay and won't destroy my career. I think. Of course, if you only get bad reviews, that's another matter.

LINA: Actually a review should be made even before the premiere – of a debut performance, say – during the creation process. A review only for the makers, so that they can actually do something with it, take it into account and possibly address issues.

DRIES: Perhaps, as an artist, one should involve a critic in every creation as an outside eye. As part of your creative process. On the other hand, as soon as you involve

© Tom Van Mele

Critic Tom Permentier: "I think I learned the most from the discussions and how everyone views circus in their own way."

someone in your creation on that fundamental level, they become too close to the process to truly offer an outsider's perspective. Then your 'outside eye' would understand where you're coming from and what you're trying to achieve; a reviewer should in principle have little to no prior knowledge.

Do you need to have a good knowledge of circus to be able to review it properly?

DRIES: You should at least have some experience with it, no? But you shouldn't be cynical about it. You have to be able to empathise with others, I think.

LINA: You have to know your own position. And to know why your opinion is what it is: because you've already seen a lot, because you're comparing it with other performances, and so on. And then you're able to put it into words, too. Whereas, if you're seeing a circus performance for the first time, you probably only see the spectacle and struggle to see beyond that. After a

‘I think that what many artists are afraid of is the reviewer as judge, while that’s just one of his functions.’

few more experiences, you start looking for more than only spectacle.

TOM: As a novice in the circus world, I would write about certain performances very differently than I do today. Having seen so much circus has changed my way of seeing. So I often jokingly say that I am against circus festivals. At circus festivals, you see one ‘amazing’ thing after another. In that way we become so spoiled that, for me at least, it becomes difficult to still be impressed when there’s three people standing on each other’s shoulders right in front of you. I’ve seen it countless times before, so it doesn’t wow me. Which in turn makes it an opportunity, because circus should go in search of new ways of stimulating and challenging audiences, asking questions – that’s when it truly becomes an art form.

Do you guys think reviews are important, actually? Are they a measure of whether performances are worth watching?

LINA: I rarely read the whole review. Just short passages.

DRIES: I never read reviews. Never. I wouldn't even know where to read them.

TOM: I recently saw a theatre performance and then set about looking for reviews afterwards.

LINA: After the performance? What's the point?

TOM: During the performance I found it difficult to decide how I felt about it. I was in doubt the whole time: do I value this or not? I couldn't come to a conclusion alone. In that case, the reviews helped me to understand the performance better. Sometimes one of the reviewer's tasks is to provide clarity. Not just to judge. The reviewer is, in the best case scenario, someone who has a good read of the performance and can translate that into a clear text. I think that what many artists are afraid of is the reviewer as judge, while that's just one of his functions.

LINA: When I write texts myself, I find it scary to have others read them. What if my reading of the performance isn't right? What if I haven't understood it properly and start writing things that are inaccurate? Perhaps it's comparable with an artist who is showing their work for the first time and is scared of being reviewed. I find writing reviews terrifying.

TOM: It can be very stressful indeed. But you can never really have a 'wrong' reading of a performance. It is always a meeting between your inner self and your outer perception; it's different for everyone. And besides, a critic is also just a person, subject to circumstances like hunger, thirst, sleep deprivation, relationship problems … Different factors that can influence your opinion or experience.

Lina, you're a circus artist yourself. Does that help when judging a circus performance?

LINA: On the technical side of things, yes. Sometimes I see things and think, 'wow, I want to try that'. And sometimes, 'that looks difficult but is actually not that hard'. So I can see through some things more easily. It certainly also helps to appreciate some of the techniques that are used. Teeterboard, for example: it always looks very smooth, but you have to work incredibly hard to attain even a beginner level.

DRIES: If you do circus yourself, your respect for circus is even greater. A three high for example: to do that just standing is already extremely difficult. But to do it while walking? That's really insane to me. It's so tough.

LINA: All circus techniques actually hurt to do. Rope, trapeze, mast, straps … even

'Do people read reviews these days? Who reads them?

© Circuscentrum

In 2024, Circuscentrum and *pzazz* will jointly launch a project on circus criticism.

juggling: if one of those clubs lands the wrong way on your hand, you really feel it.

DRIES: And it all looks so effortless on stage.

TOM: A while back I saw a performance by people with disabilities. To me, their circus was circus at its most essential, very disarming: more or less standing on a gym bench and then jumping off again. And then arms open to welcome an applause. I really think that it was very difficult for them to achieve. It puts things in perspective.

What criticism does circus need as an art form in development?

LINA: Honest criticism.

TOM: I think that, even in his most negative criticism, the critic should always show a certain degree of respect. If you ask me, a critic should never be a sourpuss. He should always approach a performance wanting to like it. Having the intention of appreciating it.

Dries, what criticism do you need as a circus artist?

DRIES: I'm thinking … I really don't know, actually. Can I think a little more?

Let me rephrase the question: does the circus industry need reviews?

DRIES: Do people read reviews these days? Who reads them? A very specific audience probably. People who are very much into the arts, who think critically and see a lot of performances. Who have a broad view of the arts. In fact, it's all the rest who you need to be able to reach. The people who only know Cirque du Soleil. They stand to learn a lot. Because the point remains: for general audiences, Cirque du Soleil is the only real benchmark. Even though there's so much more, so many styles and forms.

LINA: I was thinking the same thing: circus should be written about to ensure it is more widely known. If no one

writes about it, people won't know about it. It doesn't have to be encyclopaedic essays or reviews either. Some short quotes would already go a long way. People should be encouraged to discover circus performances. The traditional image of the circus of elephants and clowns is still too prevalent.

TOM: It's persistent, right? Some time ago, I thought, 'we are done with that, we don't need to keep explaining it anymore', but indeed, I recently heard people talking about circus that way on the [Flemish] radio station Klara. We're not rid of it yet. That's a big task for reviewers and other writers: we have to keep hammering on this point until the cliché has disappeared.

DRIES: I sometimes say that I'm a dancer, which often makes it easier to describe what I do.

TOM: Dance does seem to suffer less from such persistent clichés. But that's just it: critics and reviewers in the 1980s and 1990s played an important role in that.

LINA: And that's why we need people writing about circus. The mainstream media needs to devote sufficient attention to the broad range of styles.

So, the primary purpose of circus criticism is promotion?

LINA: At this point in time, yes.

DRIES: The festivals are already doing good work in terms of promotion – which is why I am in favour of circus festivals, unlike you, Tom. But I think that our cultural centres could still make some headway in that area. It's not easy to attract audiences to a non-spectacular circus performance. Circus that is not typical circus. I think cultural centre audiences could be better informed, more could be done to stoke interest, and reviews could play a part in that. The cultural programmer could share their own opinion: why is this show worth watching? A short and sweet mention of that in your brochure could convince people to buy a ticket.

LINA: That already works with books and films: pithy quotes that arouse your curiosity, without trying to mislead you. With Sinking Sideways, if they only described the performances as 'circus', people would be set up for disappointment.

DRIES: Serious disappointment! *[everyone bursts out laughing]* ●

'That's a big task for reviewers and other writers: we have to keep hammering on this point until the cliché has disappeared.'

COLUMN

CRITICAL acrobatics:

different approaches to circus criticism in the Netherlands and Flanders

BY KATRIJN DE BLESER

October 2023. The curtain has just gone up on the programme *Schrijflab Circus of Critics*, an initiative of the Dutch Foundation Domein voor Kunstkritiek. For the next six months, I will be joining six Dutchies – as the only Fleming in the group – as we all seek to immerse ourselves in circus criticism, an art still in its infancy. Even more so in the Netherlands than in Flanders, perhaps? Though our shared language may bind us, do we see circus criticism in the same way in Flanders as they do in the Netherlands?

→ AT

the first meeting at Circolo festival in Tilburg, we are welcomed in a round tent with colourful sides, a circus tent. Dutch journalist and critic Joost Goutziers, as guest lecturer, gives an introduction to the field of contemporary circus and the place of circus criticism within it. While Joost leads the proceedings, he leaves plenty of room for participants to give input regarding the history of circus and current developments in the field. It becomes clear that there is no single way to define the boundaries of this field, given the abundance of answers and differing visions. And that's par for the course for this art form that is both old and new. Because what exactly does circus entail today? We are encouraged to make our own definitions and to keep the discussion open on that point.

> 'I conclude that I may as well use the English terminology rather than the French words, for the sake of clear communication.'

Throughout the course, the differences in our shared language naturally emerge. In the Netherlands, for example, they speak of 'modern circus', while I would say 'contemporary circus'. They say *drie hoog* ('three-high') while our acrobats do a *colonne à trois*. We do *acrobatie* while they do *acrobatiek*, and in the Netherlands what we would call a Chinese mast is a Chinese pole. I conclude that I may as well use the English terminology rather than the French words, for the sake of clear communication. I consider that a circus dictionary would be handy to have. Preferably in about five different languages and dialects.

© Jan Castermans

'Colonne à trois' or 'drie hoog'? Acrobats at cie XY

As the only Fleming in this group of Dutch people, they frequently turn to me to ask: 'What's the Flemish equivalent? Because you guys are a fair bit ahead of us. With your own Circus Decree and a recognised and subsidised circus support centre. What does modern circus mean to you and what's your thinking on walkabout acts?' The fact that walkabout acts do not fall under the umbrella of circus according to the Flemish Circus Degree is met with consternation. 'Why should walkabout circus acts on the street not be considered equivalent to a 'black box' performance? That's where it all began, after all. What is it that makes circus circus?'

In Flanders, circus has certainly gotten more recognition at the policy level, but during the course I get the feeling that this has led us to have a narrower view of circus. The decree establishes a number of criteria for what counts as circus, which is

'In Flanders, circus has certainly gotten more recognition at the policy level, but during the course I get the feeling that this has led us to have a narrower view of circus.'

to say it defines the limits of circus, at least in terms of what is recognised under the decree. Before the start of the course, I didn't really know how to write criticism about a circus performance that comprises a succession of tricks but has no common thread running through it. In the Netherlands, however, every circus performance is deemed worthy of criticism. Case

in point: the position held by Christmas and Winter Circuses in the Netherlands, which prove a great success year after year and are covered widely in the media.

The Dutch course places the emphasis on writing and sharing feedback with each other. Accordingly, we are visited by writer Gerda Blees and theatermaker and writer Saskia de Haas to give us a grounding in the skill of descriptive writing. This reveals a different understanding than in the Flemish Circus Criticism programme (that took place in 2024), which was much more about watching performances together and talking about their content, analysing the scenography and figuring out the intentions of the maker. I feel that circus criticism in Flanders tends more toward theatre criticism, where a significant focus is placed on scrutinising the maker's intentions, deconstructing the show and putting it in context. Whereas in the Netherlands the focus is more on writing, describing the circus acts/performances and their deeper effect on the viewer. But perhaps that difference has everything to do with the viewer who is also the reader of circus criticism. Perhaps audiences are different in Flanders' recognised circus sector? In contrast with the much broader Dutch circus sector, where there is no requirement for acts to fall within the scope of a decree and where the main factor informing the viewing experience is a great love of circus in all its forms. ●

© Compagnie XY

'I feel that circus criticism in Flanders tends more toward theatre criticism, where a significant focus is placed on scrutinising the maker's intentions, deconstructing the show and putting it in context. Whereas in the Netherlands the focus is more on writing, describing the circus acts/performances and their deeper effect on the viewer.'

REVIEW

Fractures

Asaf Mor

Circographie

BY LINA MATTHYS

Six figures march across the scene in beautiful formation. Clubs in hand, shirts neatly tucked into dress trousers, long hair twisted into buns. This is how the premiere of *Fractures* begins at Vitrine Perplx, a festival of young creators. *Fractures* is Asaf Mor's third show with the French Compagnie Circographie and the first time he has directed six jugglers, including himself. What was meant to be a tight first scene, with the group moving in sync as one entity, is unfortunately disrupted when one of the jugglers drops a club, falling a little out of step with the others. The young man tries to recover, but alas, everyone in the room has spotted it. Can it be chalked up to first-night nerves? We try to overlook it and imagine the scene and the feeling of this opening gambit as it was initially intended. Fingers crossed that this slip doesn't have a knock-on effect for the rest of the performance.

→ THEN

one of the marching jugglers gets distracted by some balls at the edge of the scene – this time it is a staged anomaly, thankfully. He appears drawn to them and succeeds in separating himself from the group, clearly to the dismay of the others. Not thrown off by his colleague's misstep, Thibault Michel performs an intriguing solo in which juggling and dance coalesce naturally, supported by swirling lighting effects. The white balls fly around him in a smooth orbit, rolling over his arms and legs, while he dances around the stage. The show continues in this vein: impressive scenes, solos alternating with group choreographies built around a mix of acro and object manipulation, but with just a few blunders too many to be dismissed as superficial errors.

Juggling is perhaps a thankless discipline in the sense that one must be no less than virtuosic to be taken seriously on stage. Mistakes are simply too difficult to mask. An errant club falls inexorably to the ground. Does this mean that every juggling show is doomed to failure at the slightest slip-up? Of course not. Sometimes jugglers are able to hide a mistake or integrate it into their performance, or they have a plan b. Often the performer will even start the trick from the beginning. The audience has sympathy and admiration for the artist on stage and can be very forgiving. If a trick succeeds after the second, third or sometimes fourth try, the applause is often twice as enthusiastic.

But the chosen form of movement in *Fractures* leaves little margin for error by design. Nor is there a plan B. The piece as a whole demands a tightly synchronised acrodance chore-

‘A choreography with peaks and valleys in energy, the accumulated tension dissipating along with the low-hanging theatrical smoke.’

ography in combination with clubs thrown and caught with great precision, while performers simultaneously pull and drag each other. This combination is asking for trouble. From the stands, spectators see a group that seems in need of further rehearsal. In moments when things are visibly not going well, it’s almost touching to see how a fallen club is passed back to its thrower, who in turn falls behind for the next movement. The group scenes that are meant to be an orchestrated chaos of catapulted clubs and carried bodies, of pushing and pulling, turn out a tad messier than intended.

In line with the theme, it may also be a conscious decision of the makers to opt for a narrow margin of error: failing is inherent to and unavoidable in a dysfunctional group dynamic. This performance pits the individual against the group. This theme is played out with clarity in the first 20 minutes in particular. The group is the norm, but as soon as someone (temporarily) wriggles free, then cracks or fractures start to appear in the collective – illustrated here by the juggler who prefers balls to clubs. Cooperation is enforced, escape attempts are obstructed, and the throwing, carrying and catching take on a brutal undertone. Performers grab, quite brusquely it appears, at each other’s wrists. The costumes quickly start to exhibit signs of these rough interactions. Seams tear and shirts are

soon no longer tucked neatly into the performers' trousers.

What does Asaf Mor want to tell us with this? Does this social pressure within a group also apply to the outside world? Undoubtedly. When a juggler breaks free from the group, his solo breaks in style with that of the collective. In real life, do we as individuals likewise behave differently than in groups? Why are individual differences not readily accepted in groups? Is it always the case that the divergent behaviour of a few can skew the mechanism of an entire group, as demonstrated here? Why is that person not excluded instead of being forced back in line? Mor is reluctant to provide answers to those questions. In the second half of the show, the mood of aggression and chaos persists, but the number of 'narrative' scenes is reduced. Now it is mainly feeling that provides shape to the choreography. A choreography with peaks and valleys in energy, the accumulated tension dissipating along with the low-hanging theatrical smoke.

In a recent interview with Circusmagazine, Asaf Mor notes that a performance is never finished at the time of the premiere. After this performance, I couldn't agree more, assuming that the failure during the premiere at PERPLX was not a conscious decision. Which is to say that we did not yet see the full potential of the show *Fractures* that evening. ●

LINA MATTHYS

works for Circus Zonder Handen. The Circus Criticism Programme felt it needed a new language for discussing performances in a more nuanced way. In her review of (the premiere of) *Fractures* by Asaf Mor and Circographie she explores the age-old question of virtuosity and its flip side: the unintended moments when jugglers lose out to gravity. How do you respond in such situations? And what exactly is the relationship between the individual and the collective?

Seen on Friday 11 October, 2024, at Budascoop during PERPLX (Kortrijk)


BACK
BACK
BACK
WORDS
WORDS
WORDS

‘We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.’

TECHTYCOON BILL GATES, 2013

‘If we deliberately choose to give and receive feedback in a verbal way, maybe words should be chosen deliberately as well.’

CIRCUSARTIST AND DANCER KARLIEN DE SAVOYE, 2025

NEVER SAY ‘NICE’. ‘NICE’ MEANS NOTHING.

Roberto Magro on the art of giving feedback

BY LIV LAVEYNE

In speaking, Roberto Magro exhibits the same attitude with which he has guided generations of students and artists. He draws on many examples, radiating a grounded enthusiasm and showing a clear love for circus while remaining firm but fair. His feedback style is characterised by getting hands-on wherever possible. 'Don't talk the talk if you can't walk the walk.'

→ ROBERTO MAGRO

is a phenomenon, not only when you hear him speak in his animated way, but perhaps all the more in his work as a teacher and professional 'feedback-giver'. Having started out as a circus artist himself, he has now been teaching at various international circus colleges for years. His way of giving feedback and looking at circus have inspired many students and proven valuable further down the line in their careers. Or: how feedback fuels the fire …

Magro emerged from a circus context where any kind of artistic feedback was directly linked to the specific vocabulary of the company he was in. 'In the late 90s, I was a performer in the French company Les Oiseaux Fous, which was one of the groups we would now consider "the dinosaurs" of circus, such as Cirque Plume and Cirque Baroque. They had a specific artistic identity and each company had their own tagline: Archaos' was *"Cirque de Caractère"*, Cirque Plume's was *"Cirque d'Image"* and Les Oiseaux Fous' was "forever far from conventions". If, as an artist, you received feedback from the director or from fellow artists, it was always given with that identity in mind.'

'After an improvisation or training session you would never get personal feedback in the sense of: you could do this or *you* didn't do that. All feedback was in relation to the style in question and the associated methodology. For example, if someone came running onto the stage performing a certain emotion, the feedback would be: "Now, was that tempo 7 or 8? Your entrance was too fast and remember not to overlap an emotion with a movement." All the feedback was extremely technical and organised around a common vocabulary. In that respect, it was akin to a choreographer in classical ballet giving feedback to a ballerina: up the pace, raise your leg higher, extend your foot more.'

ROBERTO MAGRO (IT)

has worked in various different countries as an artist, dramaturg, teacher and circus director. He trained at the Académie Fratellini, and was part of Les Oiseaux Fous with whom he travelled around Europe before founding his own company, Rital Brocante. His strong affinity for transmission and reflection led him to become artistic director of the Flic Circus School in Turin between 2005 and 2011. From 2013 to 2015, he was artistic director of La Central del Circ in Barcelona. He is the jury chair of Circusnext. He regularly teaches at schools and cultural institutions in Europe and Latin America.

No more mister nice guy

Magro has taken a different approach ever since becoming a teacher himself. 'I start – in a manageable way – with one specific paragraph and my feedback is based on that

paragraph. With a view to being helpful, I take the mind-set of a sort of sculptor, helping to reveal the form in the block of stone bit by bit. For me, feedback is not something delivered at the end of the line, but something that evolves together with the vocabulary and the experience you develop together. When I first start working with someone, I find it shocking to go straight to the feedback in the first ten minutes. Giving and receiving feedback implies taking the time to get to know each other.'

'When I give feedback, I try to get on stage as much as possible.' Instead of speaking, I show what I want to say. Non-verbal feedback makes everything much more tangible. I show the different possibilities, for better and for worse. It's important to show the physical application of verbal feedback, because words are sometimes understood differently, often saying too much and sometimes, as a result, not enough. I impress upon my students the idea that at a certain point you have to stop talking and start doing, even when giving feedback. In this way, you make yourself vulnerable and can feel if something is working or not.'

'I try to convey my verbal feedback physically in a movement or scenographic proposition. My rules are: Never say "I like it" or the word "nice." *Nice* is a word I hear far too often. Nice means nothing. It's just as bad to say: "I would do it this way." We avoid speaking in terms of personal suggestions, and if you do have a personal suggestion, you act it out on stage.'

'It's the Socrates' tried-and-tested method called *maieutics*, where you gain knowledge by askingquestions.'

The tip of the iceberg

From his years of experience on the jury of Circusnext, the European platform for new circus talent, Magro learned how important it is to try and translate your thoughts into questions. 'It is in fact Socrates' tried-and-tested method called *maieutics*, where you gain knowledge by asking questions. Instead of saying: I found your silence on the trapeze expressionless, ask: what do you want to express with that? Just asking a question like that helps a lot of

artists. By asking such questions, I also learn a lot: if an artist can very precisely explain the reason behind something, then I say: 'I understand your point – respect – but perhaps now we can discuss a way to convey this in a way that comes across more clearly, if you want?' I call this 'discovering the iceberg': eighty percent of the iceberg is underwater. You don't have to make it visible – then you leave nothing to the imagination – but you do have to make sure it is felt.'

For Magro, the hardest part is giving feedback after a show. 'I used to give feedback immediately after the show if I was asked to do so, because I felt it was only fair to engage in an direct and open dialogue. I could also be very radical in my opinion, especially if it was a performance for which I felt a strong affection. But with time I have learned that it's healthier to take a little distance. Now when I'm asked for feedback, I take notes, pick up the phone the day after or arrange a meeting. Having that distance in time and space is important. You can't give feedback while the artist is being embraced by friends and family and everyone is saying how incredible it was. Or even worse, now nice the costumes were and how *amazing* the lighting was. If nothing is being said about the performance itself, about the relationship between the space or the object, well, that usually says enough.'

Roberto Magro: 'When I give feedback, I try to get on stage as much as possible.'

The seven invisible threads

Roberto Magro developed a method that can be used as a practical model as well as a feedback model, which he named 'the seven vectors' or 'the seven invisible threads'. 'The invisible threads guide our *scenic body*. By using the term scenic body, I make it clear right off the bat that I'm not talking about you and me as individuals but about a

'Instead of speaking, I show what I want to say.'

body that works like a marionette. The audience doesn't see the threads but feels them: tempo (speed of your movement), rhythm (frequency of the movement), body lines, texture (the quality of the movement), space, levels (with level A: the groundwork, B: the middle and C: in the air) and dimensions. In addition to those seven threads, there are other relationships, too: with the circus object, the audience, the theme and the evolution or narrative.'

It's impossible for all those elements to be equally in focus – completeness is not the goal, anyway – but by constructing feedback in this way, you provide a method at the same time. Say, for example, that you performed a technically brilliant tightrope act. Speaking in terms of levels, you could ask: why do you always remain in the middle of the rope? Or in terms of texture: why are you always with your arms out straight, and why do you never break the body lines? This questioning mode of feedback is actually a way of "growing into the method". That's why I love giving feedback: the sparkle you see in the artist's eyes when what was already latent in the work is revealed. The feedback is primarily for the artist in question, but if I'm working with students and giving feedback, then the other students are aware that I'm also speaking to them, and so it's important to have a shared vocabulary and a consensus about what something means.'

'If you start out wrong, you often continue down the wrong path and then it's difficult to change direction.'

Honest feedback

'When I was a teacher at La Central del Circ, they often asked to do away with *instrucción* (where the students had to show their act to their fellow students who would in turn give their feedback). Fair enough, since the feedback was usually of no help at all to the artists. If you start out wrong, you often continue down the wrong path and then it's difficult to change direction. We stopped doing that casual feedback and I from then on I invited a professional artist to come every month, with the weighty responsibility of giving them honest feedback, carefully worded but without fear.'

This is a concern for Magro: the noticeable shift among the new generation, who show a well-intentioned caution

that is not always productive or constructive. 'I notice that a certain fear has infiltrated the new generation, a fear of saying and doing the wrong thing. There is a fear that you will destroy something by invading the artist's personal space. I don't know if fear is the right word – perhaps it's the drive to be kind. I can understand that coming from the schools; we all know that physical and mental boundaries have been violated by certain teachers in certain schools. I know how important it is to protect the student, in their vulnerable artistic research, from the sometimes harsh technical feedback teachers give, but that protective attitude should not stop one from giving honest feedback.'

'By always being cautious in giving and receiving feedback, you run the risk of creating a fake arena. What happens when students finish school and it turns out they've been living in a bubble? When they meet their real audience – not only their peers and family and relations but other artists and professionals from the residencies, jury members from Circusnext … – and suddenly receive completely different feedback? And I'm not talking about differing tastes, but fundamentally different feedback. Say I'm a juggler and my whole education I hear that my juggling is so personal, but after graduating, when I'm sending my portfolio around, I hear that they don't see anything original in it, and that it's completely derivative? That's a going to be a real slap in the face, leaving you feeling like you've been fed lies for years, don't you think? As a teacher, it's important to handle feedback with care, but it's even more important to be honest.'

'As a teacher, it's important to handle feedback with care, but it's even more important to be honest.'

'I sometimes forget what a wonderfully awful task it is and the responsibility you have to bear when you give feedback. The more specific and concrete your feedback, the better. I hate abstract feedback. The ultimate goal is to help the artist or student to lift the veil on whatever is still unclear, to make choices that move them toward abundance and to break open the subconscious aspect of what you're doing. You need a guide. Feedback can be contradictory and then it's important to have a method. We need to know that we're talking about the same thing – with the same words – in order to be able to decide which direction to take.' ●

LISTENING IN SILENCE

the art of receiving feedback

BY LIV LAVEYNE

Put yourself in the shoes of the artist. You're in the middle of the creative process. Doubt starts to creep in – or maybe it doesn't, which in turn sparks doubt. Inspiration is in short supply or perhaps in overabundance. You feel alone or even overcrowded. Either way, the need for feedback presents itself. Feedback that goes beyond 'I like it' or, even less helpful, 'I'd do it this way'. You're desperate for critical feedback, but not so much of it that it makes you want to throw in the towel.

→ WHEN

When is the best time to ask for feedback and what do you do with all that input? In the performing arts, various methods have been developed over the years to structure feedback. In the Flemish circus sector, too, there is a growing need for an organised approach as opposed to ad-hoc chats after the fact. In Flanders, with circus still being a relatively recent art form, artists still prefer to surround themselves with a circle of insiders. Added to this is the fact that circus, like dance, is predominantly a non-verbal art form, often involving an international mix of artists. When words sometimes say different things, how do we know if we all share the same understanding?

DasArts: feedback in eight rounds

Barbara Van Lindt, current artistic director of Brussels-based Kaaitheater and former head of training at DAS Theatre, was one of the initiators of the widespread DasArts feedback method: 'In Amsterdam's DAS Theatre master programme, students work primarily to develop their own projects and share their works in progress. We noticed that the feedback at these work-in-progress presentations was rarely constructive. It was always the same people taking the floor, with artists feeling obliged to respond and forced into a defensive position. There was a lack of structure. What was intended as a means of collecting valuable insights ended up overshadowed by uncertainty and emotion. We realised we needed to develop a method that offered both a safe space as well as quality artistic feedback.'

Together with philosopher Karim Bennamar and dramaturg Georg Weinand, Van Lindt developed the DasArts feedback method. DasArts feedback sessions last around 90 minutes and follow a clear format. The key principle is that you present your work by showing it, not by talking about it yourself. Before you show it, you give a brief outline of the idea and say what you would like to the feedback to focus on. What is already certain? What do you still have doubts about? Participants

then provide feedback over the course of eight different rounds, following set formats (see info box). The creator listens in silence. 'When you present something as a maker, it's best to speak as little as possible. This way you can concentrate entirely on receiving the feedback instead of thinking about how you will formulate a response. As a maker, you often have the tendency to want to defend your work, but with this method that's not necessary. Without that discussion, you can sometimes end up with two to four times as much input as with traditional methods.'

The dog's perspective

'The most important thing with feedback is to differentiate what works from what doesn't (yet) work. A lot of feedback has the following pattern: "I liked this or that, but ...", and then artists often only remember the negative part. Bear in mind that opinions are always going to differ. What works for one person doesn't always work for another. That's why I find the "perspective round" so interesting: in it, the giver of feedback makes clear from what perspective they are speaking and, adopting a forward-thinking attitude, poses the question: "As a ..., I need this or that in order to understand or appreciate something." This approach helps the maker to understand why a comment is being made. For example, your feedback might be: "As a feminist, I'd like to know why you've dressed the female character that way". This comes across completely differently than saying something like: "I think you've dressed this female character stereotypically." Even when it's coming from a perspective you don't share as a maker, this feedback can still be very valuable. Sometimes we take a jokey approach, assuming the perspective of a dog, to show how important it is to have multiple perspectives.'

'...with feedback, the real work takes place afterwards, when you decide which parts of the feedback to take to heart and which to let go. And I mean really let go. Because it's impossible to take all opinions into account.'

'But listening remains crucial to everything. Ideally, you would ask someone to note down the feedback in a structured way or to record it. Some people take those remarks to subsequent rehearsals; others hang them above their bed. Because with feedback, the real work takes place afterwards,

when you decide which parts of the feedback to take to heart and which to let go. And I mean really let go. Because it's impossible to take all opinions into account.'

Compañeros and comrades

Who do you let into this fragile phase? Usually it's artist-friends, or just friends, perhaps a few cultural programmers … This can often result in the feedback being too 'friendly' or too centred on the feedback-giver's own practice. An increasing number of creation centres are opening up the process to a wider audience by pairing their residencies with a work-in-progress presentation and feedback session. The Kortrijk-based arts centre BUDA has over 80 companies in residence each year. They used to have open presentation moments where everyone was welcome to come and watch and give feedback. 'But that turned out to be a bad idea,' says BUDA's general director Kristof Jonckheere. 'At the same time, the opinion of an unknown non-professional can be very valuable. That's why we created the compañeros concept: a 'dedicated' audience that is used to going to these presentation moments shares their reactions with the artist in a post-performance discussion. These can be informal discussions guided by specific questions the artist has, or structured sessions based on the DasArts feedback method.'

© Victoriano Moreno

Circusartist Emiliano Cedillo completed the WIPCOOP program. Emerging artists outside of art school can develop their skills there.

WIPCOOP: feedforward instead of feedback

How to get feedback on your work? Art students are often trained in this as part of their college courses, but what about those who are not arriving via the beaten path? From the test bed of the Mestizo Arts Platform (MAP) emerged WIPCOOP, the Work in Progress Co-operative, which is tailored to precisely such non-conventional entrants from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds. Emerging artists can gradually develop their skills there, showcase their work, and engage with the

© Lien De Trogh

The compañeros at the Buda arts center in Kortrijk. An engaged audience attends performances and provides feedback.

arts sector and the public. It's often a first opportunity for mutual acquaintance.

WIPCOOP sees feedback not as a momentary event after the creation is completed but rather as part of a longer process, during which time is taken to prepare the artist to receive feedback. 'Those joining WIPCOOP are prepared to receive feedback. Everyone gets the chance to follow a workshop on how to pitch and how to ask for feedback, and this is subsequently linked to an individual feedback session in which we identify the artist's 'blue sky vision' – their ideal. The artist takes home the prepared format of the consultation, along with all the feedback, tips, and contacts after the feedback session, so they can move forward with concrete tools. MAP remains a sparring partner in this process as we continue to refine the development process with new partnerships."

'When receiving feedback, what the artist wants to know most of all is: what did you think of it? Whereas at that stage, the focus should be: what do I need as an artist?'

'When receiving feedback, what the artist wants to know most of all is: what did you think of it? Whereas at that stage, the focus should be: what do I need as an artist?' says Mulanga Nkolo of Mestizo Arts Platform. 'What's important is that the maker gets a clearer overview of the possibilities for further development, and not just a review of a temporary result. For this reason, we prefer to think of it as 'feedforward' or a 'moderated discussion' rather than feedback.' ●

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Portrait of Barbara Van Lindt, current artistic director of Kaaitheater in Brussels, was one of the initiators of the widely used DasArts feedback method.

so many opinions, so many feedback methods

DasArts: the most commonly used and widespread methodology in the Low Countries was developed at the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam. An in-depth documentary can be found here.

Critical Response Process: CRP was developed by US choreographer Liz Lerman. CRP is a feedback method based on giving constructive criticism on a work in progress. Its basic principles are mutual questioning and putting off sharing opinions until later.

WIPCOOP: focuses mainly on the development of the artist as maker (rather than on the creation). WIPCOOP is also currently exploring the provision of feedback for pre-existing performances via methodical post-performance discussions with the audience.

For children: the Walloon Brabant Cultural Centre developed a manual for helping young audiences articulate their impressions.

Within dance: the Brussels organisation contredanse dedicated a publication to the topic of formulating feedback in the field of dance.

Non-verbal feedback: gestures from the Occupy movement are often used to respond non-verbally to different opinions. To avoid reaffirming a given feedback and not providing new info, it is best to just say +1.

A TOOLBOX FOR GIVING FEEDBACK ON CIRCUS

BY LIV LAVEYNE

→ WHEN

Ghent-based Miramiro transformed from simply a festival into a circus creation centre – complete with artist residencies and presentations of works in progress – the importance of feedback became all the clearer. 'We started out a bit naive on that front. We thought: we'll give our little team a bit of training in giving feedback following the DasArts method, and do it all ourselves,' says Celine Verkest of Miramiro. 'We soon ran into the limitations of that approach, though: mainly practical ones, because too often you're engaged in the organisational side of how to do that best, but as a creation centre you also have a different relationship to the artist in question. I wouldn't call it a position of power, but there is undeniably an imbalance. What is often forgotten is that there has to be a match between the person giving feedback and the artist. There has to be a critical confidence between the two, where the artist feels safe but where the feedback is also sufficiently in-depth.'

Like the other circus creation centres, Miramiro never obliges the artist to present their work-in-progress during the residency. 'Circus artists used to get very anxious about the idea of receiving feedback and only invited friends during the creation process. This is less the case now, thankfully. More and more circus artists recognise the need for feedback and how enriching it can be.' Realising that external expertise is important – not to mention that the need often arises on an ad-

'Circus artists used to get very anxious about the idea of receiving feedback and only invited friends during the creation process. This is less the case now, thankfully.'

hoc basis, that the right person to give feedback is not always available, and that there is always a price attached –, the idea emerged to develop a toolbox specifically tailored to giving feedback on circus that can be used by the artists themselves. 'I really see the toolbox as a handbook that forces artists to reflect on what they expect from feedback. Now when I ask artists, "do you want feedback at the end of the residency and who do you want to invite?", I often get the reaction: "Uhh, I didn't think about that yet." Also, who are you making it for? Artists ask that question only rarely, or too late, but it can be helpful when faced with the various choices that arise during your creative process.'

Miramiro asked circus maker and dramaturg Margot Jansens (Detail Company) to consider what the toolbox might look like. 'Ideally, the toolbox is an actual, physical toolbox with all kinds of drawers and compartments where you can find inspi-

Margot Jansens wants to develop a toolbox for circusfeedback

ration, depending on the phase you're in and whether you have a specific question,' says Jansens. 'It's important that the box works in all the different phases of the creation process, is always able to respond to changing needs. I don't believe that feedback should only come at the end of the process; it should be available at any point where it could be useful. Feedback often feels like the final judgement. And everyone responds to feedback differently. I only ask for feedback if I think it things are working for me, to know if my feeling is right. Others permit uncertainty much earlier on. I see feedback as the discussion between two voices, the richness is found in the dialogue, not in the commentary. A test audience can sometimes find it difficult to put their feelings into words, with practised viewers speaking the most, which creates the impression during feedback moments that everyone agrees with them. I, however, believe very much in the spontaneous impressions of the unpractised viewer. A moderated conversation with targeted questions can elicit a greater diversity of voices and perspectives.'

Abroad we are also seeing a growing interest in coming up with a structured approach to circus feedback. Circusstad (Netherlands) together with Zirkus On (Germany) and Cirkus Kolektiv (Croatia) submitted a European subsidy application with this goal in mind. 'We want to develop this method during a residency programme of three different circus projects who are going to show their works-in-progress in three different countries. *Circus Loops* is focused on the development of a nuanced feedback methodology that can be shared and which takes distance from the ad-hoc, post-performance feedback sessions that are often not helpful for the creator or the audience,' says Jördis Cordua. 'The goal is to develop an innovative and vital dramaturgical tool that enables circus artists to gain clarity on the impact of their artistic choices on different audiences and use this to refine their work. By structuring the feedback as a dialogue with the audience and using innovative digital tools for this purpose, artists are able to gain nuanced insights that have a direct impact on the development of their circus performances.' ●

'I see feedback as the discussion between two voices, the richness is found in the dialogue, not in the commentary.'

REFLECTIONS ON FEEDBACK

Freedom of choice²

DOOR KARLIEN DE SAVOYE

→ WHAT

do you want to hear? What kind of feedback do you want? I was somehow surprised when one of my circus colleagues asked me these two questions. It was in a feedback session right after one of the very first informal showings during the creation of my latest piece *Lyubov*. It must have been somewhere near the end of 2022 or so.

I was like "Oh okay, eehhm... well, ehmm... maybe just tell me what you've seen? Or what you've felt?" And then she said

"Je vois une femme qui souffre, mais sans tristesse"
Or, in English "I see a woman who is suffering, but without sadness"

I instantly fell in love with this phrase and it stayed with me during the entire two years of creation and during every single performance of the piece. Sadly, we only performed Lyubov twice, so the informal showings and try outs and feedback sessions by far outnumber the actual number of performances.

I do prefer the French phrase to the English one, or to any other translation, just because that is the exact way my colleague pronounced her feedback. It was verbal feedback on a mainly physical form of expression. This specific case leads to my first observations and question marks in these brief *memoires to feedback:*

- → First of all, Why do we mainly opt for verbal feedback? Why not a drawing? Or a song, a dance? Or a walk in the park? Or a hug or a kiss???
- → Secondly, words carry meaning, so if we deliberately choose to give and receive feedback in a verbal way, maybe words should be chosen deliberately as well.
- → Thirdly, there is a certain amount of freedom of choice regarding feedback. If you don't want feedback, you can also choose to not ask for it. If you don't want to give feedback, you can also choose to not do so.

About the hugging and kissing by the way, it actually happened to me later on in the creation. I think it was in spring 2023, or maybe 2024, I'm not sure. It was after another showing that one of the audience members, a complete stranger to me, an elderly lady, short white hair, this tall more or less *my shoulder height*... She walked towards me, smiling brightly and maybe even with a tiny teardrop in the corner of her left eye, and she asked:

KARLIEN DE SAVOYE

nam als circusmaker deel aan het Traject Circuskritiek. Op VITRINE PERPLX in oktober 2024 gaf dat een boeiend c*onflict of interest*: ze ging er met haar nieuwe creatie *Lyubov* in première voor het oog van de hele groep. Als critici maakten we van de nood een deugd: we kozen meteen na de voorstelling voor een alternatieve wijze van recenseren, in de vorm van een collectief feedbackgesprek. Met behulp van de associatieve woorden die daarbij vielen, brouwde Karlien vervolgens een speelse beschouwing op haar eigen voorstelling.

“Mag ik u ne kus geven?” Or, in English “Can I give you a kiss?”

I was sweaty and not wearing so much clothes because often my costumes are just cheap underwear, so I was a bit confused and hesitating but I agreed and enjoyed anyway. It was only afterwards that I found out that that lady was the lesbian music teacher of my musician when she was a teenager.

Maybe she was just trying to hit on me. Anyway, on the hindsight, I truly appreciated her sincere way of giving feedback.

At a certain point during the creation I was fed up with feedback in the classical sense of question and answer because often it leads to too much talking and thinking and hard questions and sleepless nights trying to find answers to hard questions and emotional breakdowns because of sleepless nights and so on. For example:

“Maar wat wilt ge nu eigenlijk zeggen? Or, in English “But, in the end, what do you want to say with this piece?”

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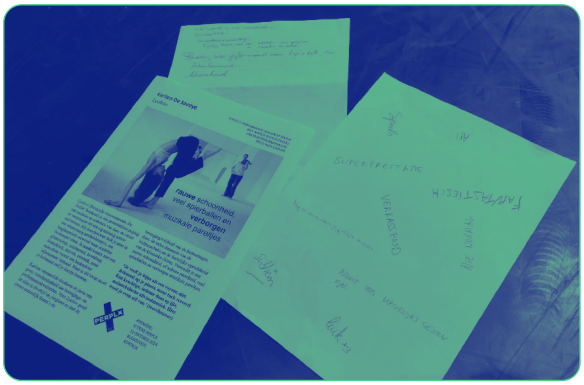
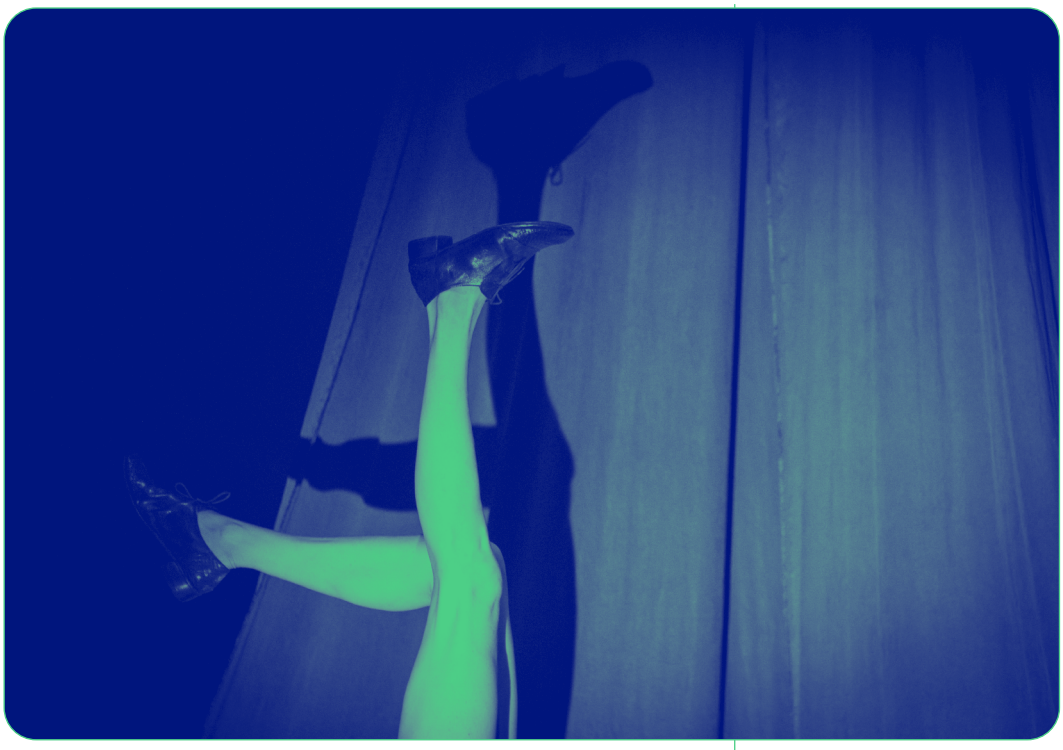


© Natalie Glas

Whenever this question pops up, my brain would start cooking and I would hear myself uttering a stream of words that somehow form a relevant answer to this question but to be honest, actually, I feel more like: What the fuck? I don’t want to say anything! If I would, I’d rather wright a book or hold a lecture, you know. I always wonder when Vivaldi came up with his Four Seasons, would people also ask him: “Hey, Antonio, what do you want to say with all those violins?”. Winter is cold, summer is hot, maybe?

So let’s say in the second half of the creation, I kindly asked the audience to write down just one word when leaving the black box or rehearsal space – and only if they felt like. As I said, we had many more try outs then actual performances so we ended up with a very long list of words – some of which you can read over here. And, I must admit, I’ve learnt a lot by implementing this strategy.



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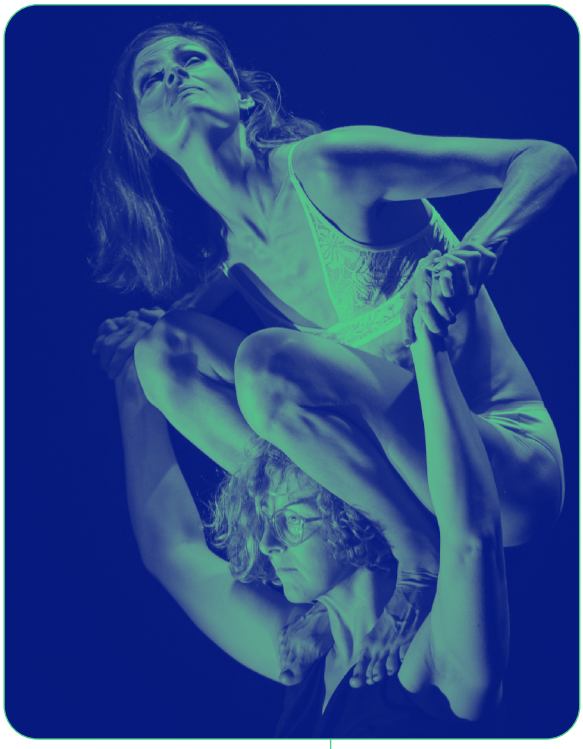
→ First of all, I learnt that some people cannot count until one or at least, they have another conception of 'one' and also some people adhere to a very personal way of spelling.

→ Secondly, words carry meaning, and maybe also the amount of words matters. The more words you put onto something, the less meaning they have.

→ Thirdly, I found out that this method was waaaay more digestible for my brain then endless blablabla so in terms of freedom of choice, there is definitely something to say about choosing the format that works best for you.

Lyubov premiered in October 2024 in Kortrijk, during Vitrine PERPLX (big shout out to PERPLX for supporting me!!!). On beforehand I was asked by Circuscentrum whether or not I was willing to participate in a feedback round with my fellow 'circus reviewers' as part of the program around circus criticism. Yes, of course, sounds fun. I must admit, I don't remember much of it, I was still super high on adrenaline of performing and rushing to get dressed and get my aerial silks down and moreover, I got up waaay too early that morning so by the



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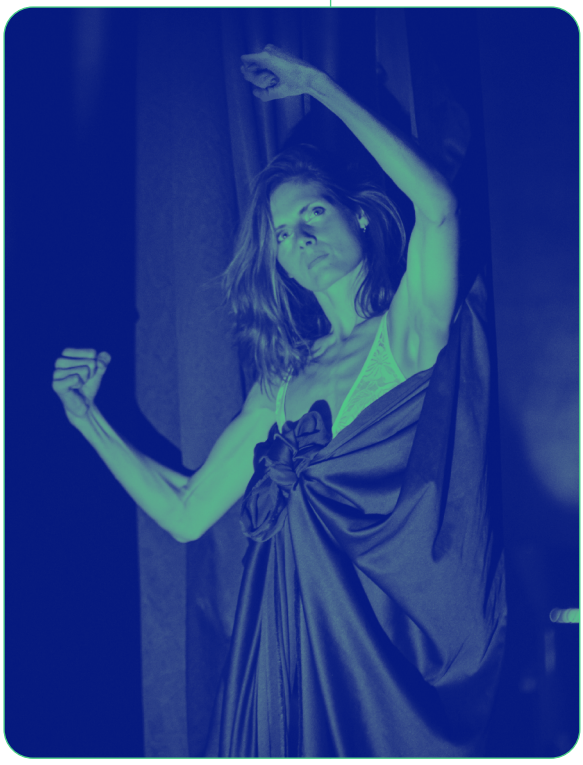

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time I arrived in the Irish pub in front of Budascoop I felt a bit like this *pointing at the picture*. Empty. I just gave birth to my baby. I was still trembling and bleeding and not sure whether I would be a good or a bad mother.

I do remember that I had a terrible headache and that there was not enough time. Partly my fault, because on my way to the Irish pub I bumped into Rinus and we started chatting while the circus reviewers were waiting for me around the big massive wooden table in the private room in the Irish pub. Also partly because the feedback plan was too ambitious to fit in in between two shows. Before I knew time was up and we were sitting in the theatre for the next show and Lyubov got washed away. Maybe I was disappointed because just like any mother I believed that my fresh newborn deserved a great amount of attention and I just wanted to hold her in my arms for a little longer.

There were fourteen programmers who saw the premiere of Lyubov, not bad hey?! In the weeks that followed, I was in contact with every single one of them. Some just very briefly by mail or on the phone, with some I had an on line meeting and with others I had a live chat with tea and cookies.

I think if ever I'm bored I want to make a sliding scale and rank these conversations from highly motivating to completely demolishing and almost humiliating. Although I am totally convinced that most programmers have the best intentions, they don't always know how to bring them across.

Suddenly my piece of art, my dearest baby becomes a commercial product. At the same level of a random box of chocolate chip cookies from Aldi. Imagine you're selling cookies with

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exquisite dark chocolate but the programmer only fancies milk chocolate because that's what they believes the majority of the audience prefers. Then you're fucked. Well, I got fucked several times.

I have plenty more stories like these so if you want to hear them, please call me, I'll give you my number, but now I'll take a shortcut to my conclusions and I apologize on beforehand for making them sound like heavy life lessons:

- First of all, There is no such thing as THE TRUTH, only millions of personal versions of the truth. Therefore, feedback I receive from a school friend of my five year old son is as valid and valuable as feedback from the most important programmer in the world.

- Secondly, One can also choose to not listen to feedback or simply not use it. It's not only about how to give feedback – it's also about how to receive feedback, it's a shared responsibility.

- And last but not least "Art reveals more about the spectator through their opinion of the work, than it reveals about the maker."

"Art reveals more about the spectator through their opinion of the work, than it reveals about the maker."

REVIEW

Roller-coaster

Van Thorhout

Wes Peden

Not Standing

Alexander Vantournhout

BY LEONIE MAES

1

The wordless

In November 2023, I enrolled in the Circus Criticism Programme, an initiative of Circuscentrum in collaboration with *pzazz*. I felt drawn to circus, though I couldn't yet say why. All I knew was that I was excited to immerse myself in a new world and to enlarge my own. During that first weekend in Ghent in January 2024, I quickly realised that I would have to jettison my ideas about circus – all the clichés I'd held onto about the circus 'archetype'. Despite the centuries-old tradition and history of circus, contemporary circus is still in its infancy. There is a need to establish a frame of reference, a jargon, a way of speaking about circus. And that's what we, the programme's participants, would set out to find.

Circus has traditionally been a metier centred on skills, craft, 'virtuosity' (a word I heard a lot that first day). Circuscentrum selected a number of performances for us to watch together at Smells Like Circus 2024. I'd like to highlight two of them: *Rollercoaster* by U.S. juggler Wes Peden and VanThorhout by Belgian choreographer and performer Alexander Vantournhout.

During the show *Rollercoaster*, I felt an initial answer bubbling up inside me to the question of why I'm attracted to circus. An attempt to put it into words: circus touches on my desire for the impossible. I found myself dazzled by one trick after another. I thought, yes, show me what is (im)possible, amaze me. Whenever I found myself unimpressed by the trick being performed, my attention began to wander. I expect more from the circus artist than from any other performing artist. Perfection almost. I want to be affirmed in my assumption – however naive – that perfection does exist after all, and in my desire to believe it.

But Wes Peden is a step ahead of me. He installs a mental seatbelt in the form of a small disco ball on a tripod. Peden juggles five fluorescent clubs, several times in a row, and every time the trick 'fails' – that is, every time the clubs fall to the ground – he turns on the disco ball. This way, a failure is not a failure, just an attempt. With that, I am forced to adjust my expectations.

I remember *VanThorhout* like a poem. Alexander Vantournhout enters the tent as Thor, the steely god of thunder from Norse mythology – primal, uncompromising. The show comprises three parts. In the first part, Vantournhout wins the audience's trust. With control and elegance, he slowly winds himself up, as if tensioning a spring. Or winding a watch. The audience sits in a circle around him, the space well matched to this choreography of twisting, turning mo-

LEONIE MAES

is a writer and holds a master's degree in Word Art from the Antwerp Conservatory. Circus was an unknown to her before her curiosity led her to sign up for the Circus Criticism Programme. Her dual relationship with circus also ended up being reflected in her attitude as a reviewer: the text that follows is a lyrical, essayistic review that spans the timeframe from our first weekend attending shows at Smells Like Circus (January 2024 in Ghent) to the summer following the programme. What is it exactly that appeals to her about circus? What is the sense and nonsense of reviewing?

tions. His body has the impression of being indestructible; every movement is precise and controlled.

→ In the second part, Vantournhout introduces a hammer with a long handle. He drags the hammer's head around the performance area, creating a striking sound that makes the sense of violence exuded by this object palpable. I enjoy the audience reactions. The trust built up thus far comes a little into question, appears dented in places, among those either side of me. The audience flinch, adjust their seating positions. Will this end well? Vantournhout continues his endless whirling, this time with hammer. Slowly but surely, doubt arises in his relation to the object: the handle becomes bendy (and thus less predictable). The relationship between the artist and the object is re-examined. Perhaps it's this that stayed with me the most after that first weekend: that circus is a place where our relationship to the world is explored and represented. It's a place that is all about interaction and connection.

→ After the hammer – the menace with a will of its own, kept in check by the god of thunder – comes the third part, in which the hammer is replaced by a white flag. The symbol of peace. The choreography remains unchanged, but space is made for tenderness. That's why I look back on this performance as being like a poem: the world keeps on turning, relentlessly, and we spin along with it. We find our relationship to war and love. To violence and to tenderness. The flag floats above the audience members' heads; people gaze up in wonder, slowly rediscovering their trust. I too experienced this performance as a sort of ritual: after the shock comes the consolation. And the wheel never stops turning. The top keeps spinning.

2

The second day of that weekend in January began with a talk about the history of clowning. Bram De Laere, a tightrope walker by training, enters the room in clown garb, carrying an oversized briefcase. I go to sit down on a chair, but Bram stops me: 'Not this chair! This one's mine.' The chair is part of his 'lecture performance' and collapses as soon as you sit down on it. I blush: saved from embarrassment, just in the nick of time. The group laughs.

- → I'm both charmed and repelled by all things clownesque. I take in a lot of new information, oscillating constantly between comfort and repulsion.

- → I'm learning a lot. When do we need clowns? In times of crisis. The heyday of the clown was the interwar period. The function of a clown is, on the one hand, to elicit a laugh or a tear from the audience and, on the other hand, to hold up a mirror to society.

- → I'm learning a lot. A clown will not make statements about ethical issues, such as flying abroad on vacation. No, a clown will get his disproportionately huge rolling suitcase stuck on an airport runway (the case doesn't fit in the plane's cargo hold and a bungling hilarity ensues).

- → I'm learning a lot. The clown has been called the philosopher of the circus, or 'the underdog who wears their heart on their sleeve'. I hastily throw open my notebook to scribble down Bram's words: 'The soul of the clown is as old as humanity itself.'

- → I'm learning a lot. Clowns are thieves. The clown repertoire arises from clowns stealing from each other and then putting their own individual spin on things. An oft-recurring image, for example, is that of the party horn standing in for a cigarette.

- → I'm learning a lot. Circus is a historically nomadic phenomenon: journeying companies brought colour and wonderment to (often) grey landscapes. We still have the unshakeable image of a red tent against the background of an industrial area.

- → I'm asking myself questions. In whose face would I want to throw a pie?

On the second day, I began increasingly to question the point of criticism. When is a review useful and why? What does it

even matter how I experienced a performance? What is the critic's responsibility? To help set the course of developments? Or is it that circus needs a voice, a megaphone, a language?

I think it would be fascinating to write about the consolation that comes from clowning or about what makes a duet between an artist and an object so poetic, instead of why a performance works or not. I want to observe and to get to the bottom of how a performance changes me; what are the takeaways and the things that linger? Who was I when I entered the venue and in what state do I leave it? I found it difficult to let go of my prose-aligned way of seeing things, I noticed. What touches me is language. I want to make a new jargon of my own: a language for juggling, say, or tightrope walking.

3

The juggler draws out a pattern in the air with clubs. The audience hold their breath as the performer's concentrated gaze seems to bring everything to a halt – except for the rhythmic motion of throwing and catching. An abyss opens up above the juggler's head. *When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you.* The pattern is an aerial landscape, defying gravity; those who enter it encounter themselves. The waltz offers a more gentle analogy. Juggling three clubs follows the same rhythm as the Viennese dance: 1-2-3 1-2-3.

4

Reviewing can be learned, according to theatre critic and culture journalist Wouter Hillaert. Over the past year, we've talked a lot about the value of criticism. For me, the biggest takeaway from these discussions has been that a review is only interesting when it brings something to the table that goes *beyond the performance itself*, when it elicits questions that are also relevant in the 'real world'.

→ And perhaps the art of reviewing lies in being democratic, so that, as a reader, you can still choose whether or not to go to the performance, regardless of the reviewer's opinion. The review writer is both modest and assertive. They dare to assert their opinion, but they don't cram it down the reader's throat. The writer is constantly in search of balance, like a tightrope walker (sorry, low-hanging fruit).

→ As a reviewer, you can situate a show within a body of work and within the history of circus arts. As a reviewer, you maintain an eagle-eyed overview. This way, the reader grants you their trust and takes you seriously. It takes time to develop a practised gaze, however. Longer than a year.

→ *It's a response - could it also be a poem?*

5

Why am I drawn to circus?
Another attempt, almost a year later.

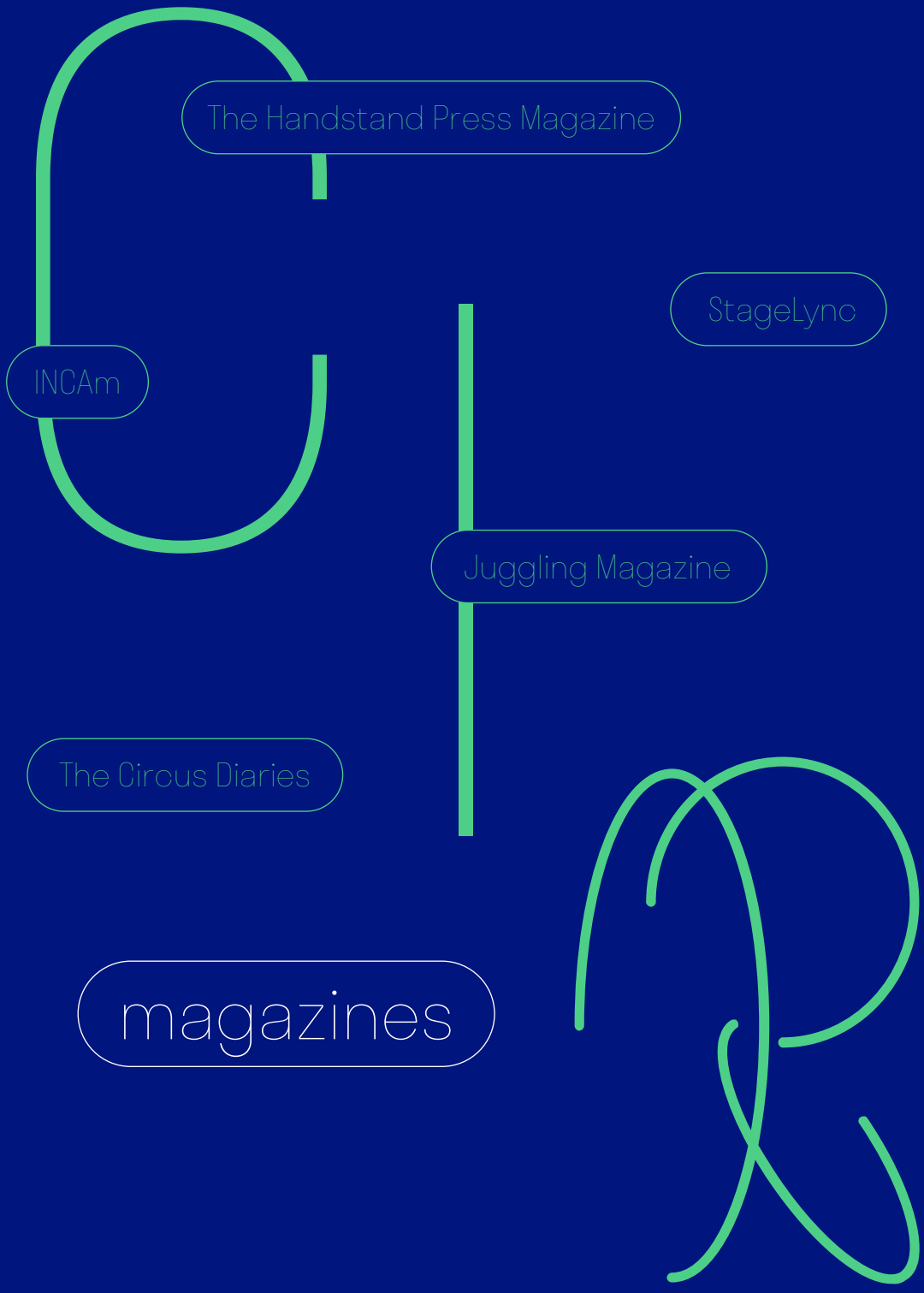
→ Last summer, I spent some time at PAF, a former monastery in northern France that, since 2006, has served as a place for exchange and artist residencies. I was in a rough spot: due to budget cuts, a subsidy I had been awarded was retracted (along with my hope, time and above all enthusiasm to write!) and my romantic partner had dumped me without too much explanation. For a few months, it seemed like I had lost control of my life; things happened without warning, and it was up to me to absorb and bear the aftershock of it all. I took the train to PAF to catch my breath and write.

→ There I met theatremakers Geert Belpaeme and Salomé Mooij. They were doing artistic research on 'stumbling'. Invisible objects lay on the ground everywhere in the monastery, with Geert and Salomé at risk of tripping over everything, whether it was actually there or not. I don't think there could have been a better moment in my life to meet them, to share the company of two clowns in the north of France. The laughs and the tears.

→ At a work-in-progress showing, they presented to us the archive that they had created: *Ways to stumble*. After five or six demonstrations, I was suddenly overcome by emotion – pure and unadulterated emotion. In life there is always the risk of losing your balance, but with an involuntary, intuitive sidestep, you can still manage to stay on your feet. We are constantly self-correcting. Allowing in sorrow only to the extent that it does not paralyse us completely: a small bit at a time. It was such a consoling image: we muddle along, stumble, walk on, stumble again, fall, get up. Feigning utter clumsiness, Geert and Salomé managed to elevate stumbling to an art form.

And maybe that's the thing that appeals to me about circus. It's an attempt to control the uncontrollable. To master the unmasterable. To translate the wordless into image and form. And to admit that, despite all the virtuosity, it is only ever an attempt, a line of research. That we are essentially no more than stumbling creatures seeking consolation and stability and beauty – yes, beauty most of all. ●

Rollercoaster seen at Viernulvier, VanThourhout seen at Wintercircus on 19 January 2024 as part of Smells Like Circus (Ghent)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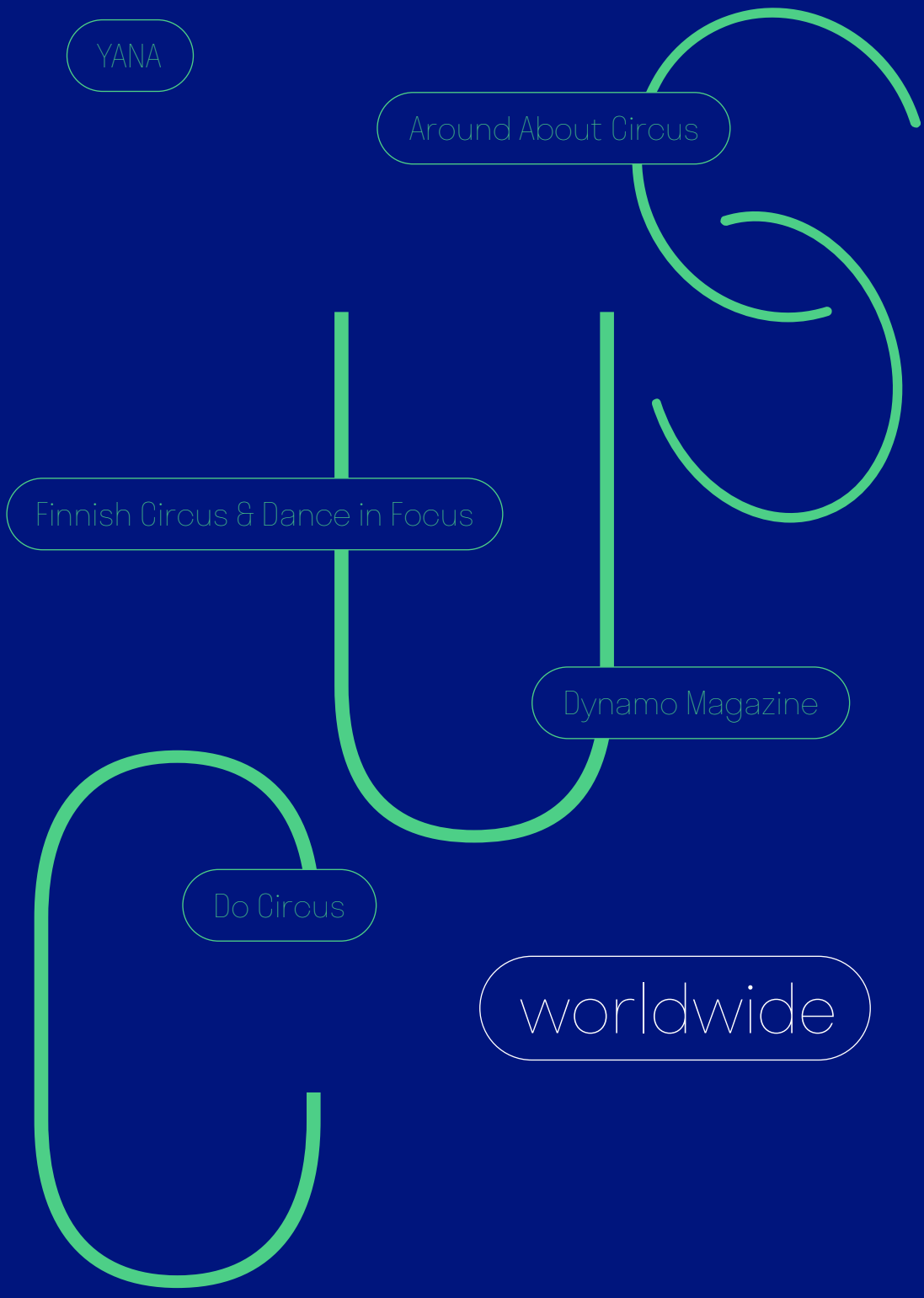
Juggling Magazine
The Circus Diaries
magazines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Around About Circus
Finnish Circus & Dance in Focus
Dynamo Magazine
Do Circus
worldwide

INCAm

International	Adolfo Rossomando	Coördinator

What's the scope of your magazine network?

As a network, gathering more than 20 different media projects, we share an open attitude towards international collaboration and exchange. Internally, we want to broaden our professional horizons, sharpen working processes, and share. Externally, we want to bring circus to wider audiences, present the art form with intelligence and mindfulness, and play our part in pushing the sector forward.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

Words and text are the bricks of media projects. Yet from INCAm's perspective, the issue of wording & talking about circus plays a complex role. While circus shows travel internationally and beyond language barriers, many media projects are still language-based. INCAm's main challenge is to facilitate the circulation and understanding of great content expressed in many different languages and addressing many different audiences around the globe.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

As a network, we don't write articles (not yet!). I would say that one of the most significant texts we have written together originated during an INCAm meeting in 2015, where participants engaged themselves in defining the network's mission and objectives. Thanks to John Ellingsworth's great editing and wording, those thoughts are still on our website as the backbone of our network.

Juggling Magazine

Italy	Adolfo Rossomando	Editorial Director

What's the scope of your magazine network?

Since 1998, in Italy, we have served the need for a reference publication to promote, connect and develop a lively and growing galaxy of organisations and professionals committed to contemporary circus. We aim to bridge professionals to audiences and institutions, circus to other performing arts, circus projects to society, and the Italian scene to the international one.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

Circus as a performing art has rarely relied on writing and talking to catch audiences and critics' attention. Yet we all need (and love!) talking and writing to share emotions, meanings, and information about what we experience. Nowadays with contemporary circus engaging more and more in social and political issues, the need for "words" both on stage and off stage helps in reflecting on values and issues.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

Choosing between 3.500 articles which involved almost 1400 authors in the writing makes it hard to select! I'm sure each of them has been influential both for the interviewer/editor and the artist/professional behind it. Every article is the landing point for many people involved in the making, including the graphics! A trusting relationship, teamwork, and mutual enrichment are the elements which make it unique.

Dynamo Magazine

Denmark	Elena Stanciu	Managing Director

What's the scope of your magazine network?

DYNAMO Magazine explores the richness of circus through reflection, inspiration, and deep artistic process. With print and digital issues, we celebrate and support the field, amplifying diverse voices. Our readers span from creators and performers to directors, teachers, and enthusiasts.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

In a non-verbal artform like circus, words become acts of generosity—ways to share intentions, spark empathy, and foster connection. Language doesn't confine; it invites others into the work.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

Producing our fourth issue was a reminder of how circus flourishes in unexpected places. Photographer Lily Schlinker brought circus to urban spaces, while Hendrik van Maele blended poetry and dust during renovations. These collaborations revealed the beauty of circus meeting other art forms—raw, intimate, and unforgettable.

YANA

France	Florence Schroeder	Director and Editor-in-chief

What's the scope of your magazine network?

YANA is an independent art magazine compiling curated artworks and essays created by jugglers. The magazine contains works from every part of the world, shedding light on the unique brains making the practice so special and focusing on an intimate perspective rather than performative. YANA is multilingual, self-published, and -financed by a team of women and non-binary peeps.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

YANA is in great part a visual magazine. As circus is a physical and visual practice, it can draw people who find it hard to relate to text. I find it crucial that writings on circus exist, for research and academia to tackle specific topics and elevate the discourse, and for journalists and writers to share the right wording and a true interest in the art form to make it more accessible.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

Gaze, a photographic interview. A selection of 10 people around the globe are given the same 20 questions and a disposable camera. They answer the questions with photographs. This allows us to enter each of their own little world and have people from very different backgrounds, origins and relationship with juggling without any language barrier.

The Handstand Press Magazine

Ireland	Elise Missall	Founder & Director

What's the scope of your magazine network?

The Handstand Press is curated in collaboration with contributors from the world of Handbalance. We fill our pages with insights into the practice, different approaches towards being upside down, artistic research, teaching methods, and with stories of life as they relate to handstands.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

Capturing Circus on Paper, whether that be with words, photography or illustration, serves many purposes. Written and visual Circus can inspire fellow artists and the general public on a much larger scale. For the art form, this leads to legacy, through digital and paper libraries, archives and the random magazine from twenty years ago found in an attic.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

An earlier issue of The Handstand Press: Caring Hands. Articles covered the many ways in which caring for others has an impact on the way handbalance is trained and framed, and on how art is made on hands.

Do Circus

Taiwan	Tai-jung Yu	Founding Editor-in-Chief

What's the scope of your magazine network?

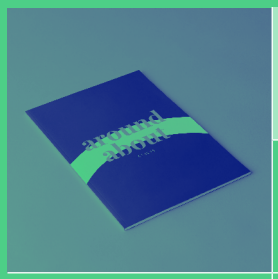
Do Circus is dedicated to exploring circus culture. We strive to reinterpret the spirit of circus—it is a way of life, representing the courage to push boundaries, the freedom to innovate, and a mindset that refuses to be confined.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

We still need print, but not just print—we need a way to bring print to life. That means making it as physical, immersive, and irreplaceably real as circus itself. We need words that evoke sensations, words that carry the weight of movement, presence, and raw energy. The poetic and aesthetic depth of circus is too beautiful to remain undescribed.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

Last year, the summer issue No Pain No Gain featured an interview with Chen Guan-Ting, a founding member of FOCASA Circus, in an article titled Pain as a Discipline. This piece explored pain as a formative experience—something, an inevitable process but also about the reshaping of mental resilience—and how circus, through this process, becomes a way of being.



Around About Circus

Germany	Valentina Barone	Founder and Editor-in-chief

What's the scope of your magazine network?

Around About Circus disseminates reflections on circus as a language. The platform is born from the need to create a collective independent narrative dedicated to an interdisciplinary audience interested in circus culture. As a communication partner, we support professional curatorship for discussion programmes for organisations, artists, companies and projects around Europe.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

Reflecting is recognising something, or someone else, rather than just yourself. Interviewing artists, or writing a reflection around a piece or event, often gives each personality the agency to explain what is behind the scenes, or extend the meaning far beyond what you "see". We need words to discover more about what's on around us and inject it into circus practices.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

Circus Trends, from the lecture of the three-day conference Circus Today: *Aesthetics*, *Politics*, *Technology*, curated by the Polish Sztuka Cyrku, and Fundacja Sztukmistrze. I loved connecting the dots around several shows and I found motivation for publishing a yearly anthology.

StageLync

USA	Anna Robb en Andrea Honis	Co-Founders, Ann Robb CEO and Andrea Honis, COO

What's the scope of your magazine network?

StageLync was founded by Anna Robb and Andrea Honis through the merger of TheaterArtLife and CircusTalk, with the mission to revolutionise how the performing arts industry connects. Through our highly popular podcast, articles, interviews, and expert perspectives, we bridge the gap between creators, professionals, and audiences, fostering a deeper appreciation and engagement with live performance.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

While StageLync embraces all forms of performing arts, circus arts hold a prominent role within our current member base. As the successor to CircusTalk, StageLync remains committed to elevating circus as an essential and respected art form within the broader performing arts industry.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

The Explorations of Research and Creation with Charles Batson series. This four-episode feature delved into the intersection of research and artistic creation, offering new insights into how creative processes and academic inquiry fuel innovative work.

The Circus Diaries

UK	Dr Katharine Kavanagh	Founding editor

What's the scope of your magazine network?

Critical perspectives on 21st Century circus performance, primarily in the form of show reviews. Content is contributed by circus practitioners - either past or present - giving an 'insider' perspective often missing in mainstream review publications.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

I wrote a whole PhD on this! But, in brief: Being able to articulate our values and practices allows for more nuanced discussion and subsequent development of the art form, plus more effective communication with collaborators, bookers and audiences. Engaging with circus discourse prevents unintended repetition of earlier discoveries and insights, and so allows the field to flourish and grow.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

This is a bit of a cheat, but everything that was published out of the four editions of the *#CircusVoices* programme I led a few years ago. The programme trained circus practitioners in practical reviewing and analytical techniques, but I also learnt so much from all the different perspectives participants brought to the mix.

Finnish Circus & Dance in Focus

FI	Sanna Kangasluoma	Head of Communications, Editor-in-chief

What's the scope of your magazine network?

Finnish Circus & Dance in Focus is an English-language publication primarily aimed at an international readership, including presenters, performing arts professionals, and other key stakeholders. It showcases current affairs and phenomena within the Finnish circus and dance fields, as well as introducing Finnish artists and creators. While the magazine serves a promotional purpose, it is edited to high journalistic standards. All articles are commissioned from professional writers to ensure quality and credibility. This free publication is released once a year and it is also available online.

Why do you we need words (to talk about circus)?

Words are essential because they help us conceptualise reality and forge a shared understanding. With language, we can articulate the art of circus and connect it to the surrounding world—and to the surrounding vocabulary. While the language of circus is often physical and corporeal, words facilitate communication about the meaning and relevance of circus art.

What was the article that you most remember? (because of was influential, and gave new insights ...)?

The article that stands out most is Gender on the Circus Stage: *'Being yourself and doing what you want is what matters'* from our 2024 issue. In it, we discussed gender and artistic freedom on stage with two female circus artists who follow their own unique paths: Sanja Kosonen (from MAD in Finland, an all-female circus company) and Miradonna Sirkka (from Recover Laboratory, a multi-art collective). It was influential because it provided insightful perspectives on contemporary artistic identity and agency within the circus field.