

The Way Forward - Bim Mason

As a teacher and director I can only speak about the way that I would wish circus to move forward in terms of its artistic goals.

Coming from a theatre background it seems to me that the trouble with much of British Contemporary circus is that the starting point for creating pieces is often 'What skills do we have and how can we use them?' rather than "What do we want to get across to the audience and why?". The motivation for work is crucial in determining whether the result is skills dressed up with lights, choreography and the occasional strong image but ultimately empty or whether the skills are used only as a medium with which to create something which can be called art rather than just looking 'arty'. Circus is spectacular but if it is to rise above being merely a spectacle, the spectacular effects must be harnessed to work within the theme of the piece. The success of any work of art must be evaluated in terms of its effect on the spectators; if they are only wowed and nothing has been communicated then it has either failed in its aims or has not had artistic aims in the first place. (By 'communication' I do not necessarily mean a 'message' but a specific feeling, atmosphere or even an abstract theme such as the relationship of objects in space.) Assessment of the quality of the work should be done more in terms of its artistic achievement than in terms of its technical standard.

If the aims have not been there in the first place then contemporary circus has no right to call itself a new art form. I am concerned because contemporary circus is frequently using cross-overs with Live Art and Dance and if this is done without an understanding of the other art-form then the result is people moving well but pointlessly or a random collection of images that don't add up to much. The work is then facile and superficial. I would be very worried if British contemporary circus went in this direction. It seems to me that Cirque De Soleil has gone down this route and whilst being a commercial success I find it uninteresting in terms of ideas and themes.

So, without wanting to lose the visceral physicality and immediacy of circus skills, I would argue for two elements of theatre to be encouraged in the circus art of the future. Firstly the role of the author is important because they conceive the piece and lay down its themes before the process becomes overwhelmed with the mechanics of practicalities. In French contemporary circus this role is taken on by the artistic director. Secondly to utilise dramaturgy and, specifically, dramatic tension as ways to enhance the effect of the skills. This would prevent the meandering formlessness of many pieces. Again I do not necessarily mean using a narrative, although Cirque Baroque effectively used the story of Candide; the dramatic tension can be created in a less literal way through the relationship between people, objects or actions and careful scenario construction. Of course, circus already has its dramatic tension - people attempting difficult or dangerous tasks but these tensions can be enhanced if the task is metaphorical as well as being actual. I believe if these two aspects of theatre are applied to circus then the tendency to make beautiful but vague images can be checked.

In order to achieve this three elements are required.

1) Creative performers - Performers need to be not only technically proficient but also aware of artistic criteria, able to come up with ideas, disciplined, dedicated and able to perform and move well. Unless the performer understands what they are trying to achieve and can internalise it in the same way as an actor then the work will remain superficial. If they are working in a cross-art style they must be knowledgeable about the artform they are mixing with circus. Because of the superiority of their training establishments French performers are way ahead of those in this country in this respect.

2) Creative Directors - Again these need to be well educated in the style that they are working in, be it Live Art, Dance or Theatre but also knowledgeable about the practicalities and potential of circus skills. They also need to have very good group devising skills because, however clear their vision, the detail of the work will need to be done in co-ordination of the performers. The work cannot be seen as a theatre play with skilful routines added on; it is an entirely different animal. They need to be aware of such elements as the potential of the body off the floor, the dynamics of objects travelling through space, abstract concepts of speed, dynamics, space and time and the intricate architecture of scenario building.

3) Sufficient funding - This is obvious and needs no further emphasis but we are all wasting our time if no-one is prepared to invest in producing this kind of work. We have the talent in this country but not the public support

because the public's perception continues to be entrenched in the old clichés. Only last week I had to answer a question from a BBC radio journalist about 'running away to join the circus'. The idea that it is an escapist, frivolous activity persists partly because the traditionalists have a business interest in perpetuating the romantic myths.

As far as funding is concerned what is required is not piecemeal A4E projects but a strategy for Contemporary Circus. We should aim to have at least one company that can demonstrate what we are capable of. Ideally this should be a leader company that acts as a focus for the best people in this country. It should be a permanent company to enable ensemble work rather than a production house that commissions projects. It could start small, say 5 or 6 people but would aim to be a large company within five years. This company need not be attached to any existing organisations and I would argue for it to be located outside London in order to facilitate the laboratory conditions impossible amongst the swirl of influences and circus politics in the capital.

How this funding is achieved is a matter I leave to others better informed to deal with, particularly because it seems to be tied up with the intricacies of ACE internal politics and what can now be seen as the unfortunate decision taken some years ago to include circus within Combined Arts.