

Article for CNRS Editions

CIRCOMEDIA

-Combining Circus with Theatre

by Bim Mason

The aim of this article is twofold - to describe Circomedia's approach to training for circus, physical theatre and circus theatre and to indicate how that approach has been influenced by the work of Jacques Lecoq, amongst others.

Introduction to Circomedia

Circomedia is the Centre for Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance; apart from running intensive professional training courses, it operates a number of other projects - a professional touring company, a teacher training programme, an agency for ex-students and teachers, introductory sessions in flying trapeze for disadvantaged youth, acting as consultants to other circus schools and hosting conferences and showcases of new work.

Circomedia is the successor organisation to Fool Time, founded by Richard Ward in 1986 as the first British circus school. For the first five years of Fool Time the Course Director was Franki Anderson who gave the school a strong emphasis on performer skills based on a particular mix of bouffon and clowning. She was succeeded in 1991 by Helen Crocker who brought to it her knowledge of contemporary dance, aerial skills, site-specific and and visual theatre. I was one of the main teachers at Fool Time from the beginning although my performing and directing work reduced my involvement in its middle period. Apart from my training at Lecoq's school I also brought experience of masks, mime, comedy and street theatre. When Fool Time suffered financial collapse in 1993 Helen Crocker and myself decided to set up a new organisation building on the accumulated teaching experience and the established reputation.

None of the teachers came from a conventional circus background, indeed no circus training for outsiders existed in Britain in the nineteen-seventies when we were learning our craft. At that time the conventional circuses kept their skills to themselves so that we had to pick up knowledge where we could find it. Because of the lack of teachers and facilities we were not able to emulate the spectacle of conventional circus but nor did we want to. Our background was what was then called Fringe Theatre and Dance. We were passionate about creating a truly popular theatre and using the

circus skills as a means of attracting the interest and respect of the general public.

The aims of the Circomedia courses are to enable students to discover and develop their optimum performance range, a solid technical foundation in their chosen skill area, devising and choreographic skills, their fitness potential and self management and promotional skills. The course breakdowns into four main areas: Specialist Skill choices, Performance and Movement Expression, Body Training, Evaluations and Theory.

Our general aim is to expose the students to as many different techniques and styles as possible while allowing enough time to focus on and develop individual strengths so that students leave with marketable skills. Because of the time restrictions it is necessary to be as efficient as possible so that students are not engaged in activities that do not interest them or that do not come easily and that they spend as much time as possible meeting the challenges within their chosen area of specialisation. The first (6 week) stage is to identify individual strengths and weaknesses. At this stage they try all of the 4 discipline areas - aerial, acrobatics, physical theatre and equilibristics & manipulation. At the end of this period, in consultation with tutors and taking into consideration their interest as well as their strengths, they opt for two out of the four. During the second stage (18 weeks) they are exposed to different styles and techniques within these options. During this period there are opportunities for them to develop one style or technique more thoroughly, the result of which may be included in the final show at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre that provides the culmination of the final stage. We have to bear in mind the different rhythms of the discipline areas - a circus career will involve the development of a limited number of acts over a long period. A theatre career will comprise many different pieces of shorter duration. Therefore the training for physical theatre involves trying out many ideas rather than a long development of one or two.

Circus and Theatre

There is a whole range of work that uses theatre and circus in varying degrees - at one end there is a show like Cirque de Soleil's Saltimbanco that, despite a theatrical looking packaging, uses the traditional format of a series of impressive displays of technique. At the other end there are

shows such as Barnum, various opera productions and Peter Brook's Midsummer Nights Dream that use circus skills to enrich a piece of theatre, raising the level of play with its dynamism and fun, or by giving variety and surprises - a kind of populist spicing up. The circus skills are used to serve the text. With Cirque de Soleil the skills are the text.

At Circomedia we prepare a new generation of performers for work in both circus and physical theatre but also for an emerging area of work which we call circus theatre, where the use of skill is not an end in itself, nor is it a momentary effect in a theatrical production but is fully integrated as the main means to an end. Circus theatre is a theatre of images that uses circus skills. Because a picture can carry a whole range of meanings simultaneously, images can be put together to convey a deep meaning or complexity of relationships with a lightness of touch. Circus theatre can offer much greater possibilities for image creation than other forms of theatre because the performers can operate in an increased spatial dimension - jugglers use objects to extend their energy into the space around, acrobats push off and away from the earth and aerialists can dance in the air. Cirque Baroque's work provides a good example of these kind of images.

The one advantage that theatre has over the electronic media is that it is happening right there in front of you. Circus theatre emphasises this because the difficulty or danger of the circus skills provides a real dramatic tension - there is no pretence, the performer is not 'acting' this tension, they have to be much more consistently focussed in order for the scene to be realised. (A good example of this is the Cirque Ici show in which Johann Le Guillerm walked on the tops of bottles.) Although circus theatre images are real they are not realistic. As discussed below it is very difficult to switch from a naturalistic style into an image using circus skills. What is more effective is to use metaphor, for example the danger of being at a height can stand for other kinds of dangers.

What is the aim of circus theatre? If theatre aims to affect an audience - to get it to think, feel, reflect, see life in a different way, circus is about effects - we feel a thrill at the time but, like a firework display, our lives are not deeply affected. Circus theatre aims to use the effect as part of the affect. For example we can imagine a scene in which a tragic figure throws themselves from a height and is saved by being caught by another - the emotions of the story are sufficient in themselves but the

impact is doubled because of the real drop. This is only possible if good acting is combined with good skills - something that is rarely achieved.

In order to prepare performers for a career in circus, physical theatre or circus theatre two fundamental elements must be kept in balance: the exterior physical development and the development of internal imagination that informs the movement and drives the action.

So unlike other circus schools we do not select prospective students purely on physical ability - an inquisitive mind and a desire to communicate are just as much valuable assets. We recognise the need to provide a foundation for future thinkers, directors, choreographers and educators and therefore we invite a wide variety of students to enter the training; the mix is not only in terms of nationality, age range (18 - 45), academic achievements (some have almost none, others have an M.A.), but also in terms of aims and outlook. Some arrive with previously acquired circus techniques and seek help developing character, ideas and creative methods to produce an original act. Others arrive with very little circus technique and are not interested in displays of skill but are interested in the extended vocabulary that circus skills offer - these tend to come from a background in contemporary dance, visual art or physical/conventional theatre. Over the period of the course these two groups begin to develop an understanding of each other - the former type begin to become more open to unfamiliar approaches, to appreciate the value of internal intentions and the possibilities of different styles. The latter gain a respect for hard earned technique and learn the value of entertainment as a means to appeal to a wide range of the public as well as maintaining engagement during the performance. The pedagogic approach is to avoid imposing particular tastes or preferences, merely to identify work that is original, interesting or effective whilst acknowledging that it may appeal to different audiences.

Lecoq's work is immensely useful as a link between circus and theatre for three reasons. Firstly circus is a medium of the body; Lecoq's approach to theatre was by means of the body. Secondly, because he dealt with the link between mime and theatre, he explored the relationship between the exterior and the interior, between the routine and the acting. It also meant that he explored ways to mix styles. Thirdly he gave the responsibility for creation of work back to the performer, as opposed to the writer and this is an essential ingredient for circus which depends so much on the particular abilities of individuals.

The Body As the Medium

Lecoq's approach to theatre (and other art forms) was by means of the body. He did not exclude the spoken word or deny its importance but he was concerned to reinstate the body as the prime medium of communication. His is a theatre of action and physical image rather than an interplay of ideas and concepts. So, for example, his approach to text was less about interpretation and more about the physical and vocal rhythms within it. He took a tough line on 'psychological' acting. He promoted a human drama where the protagonists are pushed and pulled by passions so strong that they take extra-ordinary action; the source of human drama is therefore visceral rather than cerebral.

Many of Circomedia's students will go on to work in large-scale events or in circus. Outdoors or in large arenas it is difficult for an audience to listen to large amounts of speech because of the problem of surrounding noise, so visual and physical image and are a much more effective means of communication. Large-scale theatre and literary theatre are not easily compatible. For this area of work it is, of course, essential that the body is finely tuned to convey the appropriate quality. Therefore the Circomedia course includes a number of approaches to body training. Firstly by means of a fitness training to increase strength stamina and flexibility. Secondly by increasing awareness - through observation of others, using the Neutral mask, and by observation of self, using methods influenced by Feldenkrais technique, the Alexander Method and experiential anatomy. Thirdly by broadening an individuals range of movement abilities - developing strengths, mitigating against weaknesses - by means of an exploration of space, time, weight, tension and the qualities of movement found in nature. Fourthly by training in movement technique - mime, mask, contact and contemporary dance. All these classes are for all students and are ongoing throughout the course and are supported by lectures in anatomy and injury prevention.

At Circomedia we have adopted Lecoq's analytical approach. This is not theoretical analysis but is always firmly rooted in actuality - phenomena that can be observed, studied and referred back to. Students are given the task of studying natural phenomena - and, by studying the rhythms and qualities of movement within it, to re-present it, not in a naturalistic or narrative way, but by means of physical image and action.

Observation of human life is common practice in drama schools but, influenced by Lecoq, we use a much broader range of source material - natural phenomena of every sort, animals, different materials, elements and qualities of light. Phenomena that, of course, needs to be treated in order to be interpreted by the human body. This treatment brings the potential of circus skills to their best advantage - the undulating nature of rope work is well suited to represent the flowing qualities of water. Moreover, because of the detailed observation, the precise feeling of a specific body of water can be communicated rather than just the general idea.

For both circus and physical theatre the ability to learn and construct movement sequences is fundamental. I had been acting for several years before experiencing Lecoq's teaching and it was a revelation to realise that any piece of movement could be analysed, broken down into its constituent parts, ordered, clarified, re-constructed and given a new life. Having to learn a long sequence of separate movements with their correct rhythm, tension and breathing patterns gave an infinite variety of possibilities to explore. For physical comedy this method is an excellent way of analysing why sometimes you get a laugh and sometimes you do not.

Within theatre this approach is immensely useful. In any piece there can be ongoing exploration of all the nuances of action - how many steps into the room before stopping, of what size and rhythm, what is the breathing pattern? How extended, tense, long is that arm gesture? This continuing research keeps the performances alive during a long run when more conventionally trained actors may feel they have arrived at doing it the best way they can much sooner and therefore lose the freshness of playing. Of course, a director may be able to give detailed physical instruction but unless the actor is used to working in this way they will not be able to remember long sequences and they tend to resist working in such a technical way.

There are two dangers with constructing physical routines; firstly that they remain as displays of technique - the dramatic action is only a pretext for the routine and the acting loses quality while performing the routine. Secondly that the acting takes over to the extent where the technique becomes inaccurate. With some skills this can become dangerous - a good example of this is in the teaching of stage fighting.

Using the Lecoq method I encourage students to break down the action - preparation move, action, appropriate reaction, extending the body, timing, impulses and so on, building up a sequence purely technically without acting. The moment they are instructed to add in the acting by means of vocal sound they find it hard to resist the excitement and they revert to the playground; accuracy is lost and this not only spoils the effect but can lead to accidents. Thus in constructing all routines the balance between focus on technique and emotional acting has to be carefully maintained.

Interior and Exterior

What characterises classic circus is the emphasis on display of technique as the prime purpose of the act. At its best the performer transcends the skills - the spectator relates a deeper level to the metaphor for endeavour contained in the struggle to accomplish difficult and dangerous tasks. At its worst the technique, however highly accomplished, remains uninteresting for the spectators because of its emptiness - the performer does not appear to have any internal relationship with their partners, their equipment or the audience.

One of the main problems of combining circus and theatre is the difference between actors and skilled performers. Good actors tend to work from the inside, using their intuition, responding to the moment and resisting mechanical repetition. The skills performer works with exteriors - the body and equipment - and uses repetition and precisely set routines to achieve an exact, pre-defined goal. It is no accident that jugglers often have an aptitude for mathematics and computers - they love systems. If narrow attitudes are uncorrected by training the skilled performer will tend to insist on including their most accomplished technique whatever that may be. They cannot imagine why it may not be appropriate to use their 'best trick' within the context of the piece and may insist on the narrative taking some bizarre twists to include their skills.

As well as investigating this new hybrid of circus theatre, we also believe that the 'purer' versions of both circus and theatre have something to gain from each other. Some students wish to go on to work in circus and cabaret and therefore simply require a good, original act, others on the other hand wish to create theatre pieces using the circus skills very peripherally.

So what does theatre work do for those focussed on an act which is simply a demonstration of skill? There are obviously many styles that are normally covered in a conventional theatre training. For the area of work that we specialise in and given the limitations of time we have selected a few that are not only relevant in terms of visual and physical theatre but are useful for others as a means to another end. For example mask work is useful for acquiring an expressive body and precision of movement especially in the area of isolating individual parts of the body. It is also useful for finding the meeting between manipulating an object and emotions - the abstract and the human. The Chorus is used to develop an awareness and sensitivity to others in the group; gradually the size of the group is reduced to duos and even to one person working with an object in order to stimulate a fresh responsiveness that can result in more original work. The skills-based student learns about the absolute necessity for establishing and developing relationships not only in abstract terms - physical, spatial, temporal, but also emotional; the juggler can sometimes forget that they are as much the focus of the public's attention as their objects.

We explore different relationships with the audience in the styles of Storytelling, Clown and Buffoon. The storytelling module also assists students to think about the construction of a narrative; this information can be transferred across to a skills-based piece - the act is thought of in terms of its narrative even if there is no intention to represent a story; we can search for the source of dramatic tension - how it is set up, develops by stages and meets its resolution.

Clowning develops sensitivity and openness to the public and can ease a student's fear of the public as it deals with making positive use of weaknesses and failure. The buffoon style empowers the student to raise their status in relationship with the audience; it removes timidity and gives them licence to take liberties with the public's expectations. The 'Bouffon' style was created by Lecoq; the buffoons are those who are rejected by society and create their own hierarchy, making fun of the pretensions and hypocrisies of mainstream society. It is very popular with young performers, particularly those involved in contemporary circus. Many of them are trying to survive at the fringes of the performing arts and quite rightly identify as outsiders if not as rejects. They may have experienced prejudice towards the world of beggars, travellers and the disadvantaged and are excited by the use of comedy as a weapon rather than the naive, sexless comedy of clowns. The huge success of

Archaos in Britain was in part due to their urban, streetwise adaption of this style. This style can be used in two ways. The first way is derived from the absurd, ritualistic games that are played by the buffoons; I use these as a basis for developing eccentric physical comedy. Recently I have been looking at ways to develop this area in which the comedy is created purely through abstract movement particularly using contrast and juxtaposition. Buffooning can also be useful for outdoor performing which we arrive at towards the end of the course. Buffoons reject conventional behaviour in order to confront the public with their own limitations. When done well this kind of work can be a liberating experience for performer and public alike. The aim is to provoke the public into asking questions about the performers behaviour and by implication realise how constricted they are by conventions. The outdoor performance module helps to integrate the techniques with the performance work in that it covers the three areas of walkabout work, site-specific work and 'circle' shows (street acts that comprise a display of skill). The practical experience gained trying these out at the Bath and Glastonbury Festivals ensures that students leave the course with marketable work.

What the theatre students gain by working on acts is craft - bodies that are capable of much more than those of ordinary actors and the discipline of working difficult moves to the precise timing given, for example, by a piece of music. However it is not only the craft which is acquired - they learn the importance of keeping the public entertained - a skill taken for granted by Shakespeare and Moliere with their influences in the Commedia del Arte - but which are sometimes forgotten in some modern theatre. Whatever the serious intentions of the piece the 'how' is as important as the 'what' - there needs to be rhythm, pace and above all accessibility. Students that have studied theatre from an academic point of view tend to create work that may be worthy and sophisticated in its concept but is only comprehensible to a tiny minority.

Which type of audience and how wide a spectrum of the public taste it appeals to is an important issue for contemporary circus and physical performance. Work is not necessarily better or worse for appealing to a wide range of taste, what is important, and what we try to encourage, is that the work is neither self-indulgently obscure on the one hand nor reinforces banal out-moded stereotypes on the other. This kind of issue is discussed at our weekly lectures; the issues are not only of interest

from a theoretical point of view but have very important practical consequences because clearly if a student's work appeals to more people this will affect their future income and working patterns. We also discuss the practical considerations within the different skill areas - the cost and transport of equipment, whether work is to be done solo, in small or large groups, employed or self-employed. These considerations focus students' attention to the practical consequences of their choice of skill area and style of work. Because of the very limited funding possibilities in Britain it is useful if those who wish to go on to do more experimental work also have acts that are more commercially viable. The weekly lectures also inform about methods of marketing, legalities, Health & Safety and basic business skills.

Mixing Styles

One of the most important contributions Lecoq has made to British theatre is his encouragement to mix styles. He was chiefly responsible for the 'heresy' of mixing mime with the spoken word. He embraced Post-Modernism and rejected the purism of Marceau. He was constantly experimenting with mixing mime with storytelling and melodrama or with mixing melodrama with tragedy. He was excited by the idea of using the chorus outside the context of classical tragedy. This research obviously has implications for the inter-relation of circus and theatre.

There are two ways to mix styles within one piece - by integration or by juxtaposition. In the first case the problem is to how to integrate the skill and routine while avoiding the kind of awkward and unconvincing transition that happens, for example, in musicals where the shift is from naturalistic acting into song. This can be a big problem in circus theatre, in fact it is often **the** problem.

There are many different tactics to find a smooth transition in and out of 'the number' but it is essential to avoid a drop in the level of acting whilst engaged in the technical routine. This is not easy if the routine is difficult or dangerous, inappropriate body tension or facial expressions are the most obvious manifestation but we may also see preparation moves or even a complete reversal of the dramatic action such as the cooperative cueing signals at the beginning of a fight. Audiences for the Mummer&Dada shows found it refreshingly different that we did not present and bow at the end of difficult routines but continued with the dramatic action. (We might briefly acknowledge applause if possible but

would never cue it.)

Juggling is difficult to use as representing something else; unlike aerial or certainly acrobatics the body is not so much the main focus and the equipment itself is hard to disguise, so there have been two solutions to this problem, either to extend and develop the functional movements of juggling for abstract dance as the Gandinis have done or to abandon the usual equipment altogether and use the jugglers ability at throwing and catching without necessarily using their best tricks. The best example of this I saw was in a show by the Jerome Deschamps company that I saw in Paris about fifteen years ago where single objects were thrown and caught in unexpected ways, but one also thinks of the biscuit routine in Peepolykuses third show in which the emphasis is on the throw rather than the catch. In Mummer&Dada we used the effect of mass juggling to create a celebratory fountain of objects.

Performer As Creator

One of the characteristics of physical theatre is that it is usually, at least partly, devised by the performers with the director responsible for the dramaturgy. This challenges the traditional demarcations between writer, director and performer, re-establishing the performer as the key source of creativity. This method has been shown to work well with British Lecoq trained physical theatre groups like The Moving Picture Mime Show and Theatre de Complicite.

In circus theatre the contribution of the performers to the creative process is even more important because their range of particular skills and qualities will be fairly unique and so are impossible to 'write' in advance. Even in larger circuses the act occupies a much more autonomous position as compared with a scene in a conventional play. Therefore the ability of the performer to create material is essential and the more unique is the work the better - originality can be as important as a high level of technique.

In this period of Post-Modernism the tendency is to cherry-pick ideas from a wide range of existing sources. The originality comes from the particular mix of elements. However to come up with work that is really new a much longer and deeper process of research, experimentation and evaluation must be applied. This more analytical approach was applied by Lecoq drawing, as he did, on the Modernist approach from the earlier 20th Century. Because circus theatre is such a new form

there is much that can be discovered. Some of this requires expensive resources - for example in research into new pieces of equipment - but from a performers point of view what is required is a spirit of enquiry and some empowerment to feel that they can successfully produce interesting new ideas, ways and means.

Circomedia has adopted the 'auto-cours' (self-teaching) aspect of the Lecoq course which takes the form of weekly projects, devising to given specifications which are then presented and assessed. Students learn the problems of group dynamics, develop an ability to propose and listen to ideas and also to identify other people with whom one shares similar taste and aims. Gradually they learn it is better to try out everyones ideas as they are suggested rather than editing ideas by discussion beforehand. In this way all the group stay involved in solving the presented problems. This is obviously much easier with small groups. With larger groups there is a necessary process of identifying leaders and followers.

As well as the weekly devising projects we have also instituted a longer process in which students develop whatever they are intersted in over a twelve week period. These may be solo or with others and either be an experimentation with new styles or techniques or a refinement of existing techniques. This long process helps them to take responsibility for their own creativity, drawing on the support of others, in order to develop their own personal style. They learn to avoid the tendency to add ideas onto other ideas, embellishing to the point where the piece becomes like a structure whose essential form is hidden under a mass of ornamentation. It is satisfying to build up layers of meaning in order to give a rich texture but one must beware of cluttering to the point where the initial idea becomes obscured. Lecoq was always stressing the word 'efficace' meaning both efficient and effective. In terms of movement the less there is the more effective it can become. Gesture, like music, can be a better means of communication than words. For example a light touch on the cheek will probably be more effective than saying 'I love you'. Moreover the effect is not doubled by adding the words; it is inefficient and less effective. In this sense the work should be a series of Zen strokes - clear, accurate and simple, aiming always to capture the essence of the subject matter.

When performers trained in this way are involved in productions with a

traditional hierarchy they can be frustrated by being denied their creativity by an unsympathetic director who may feel threatened by ideas coming up from lower down. A sympathetic director, on the other hand, will be glad of this input. Because the actors feel responsible for the work and are concerned for the whole and not just their own part the shows will continue to develop during the run whether the director is present or not. This improvement is not merely in the sense of 'running in' the show but actually expanding, diminishing or changing material.

By developing performers who can work in ways other than the top-down hierarchical structures of traditional theatre and circus we hope that more people will be involved in creating more different pieces and the infinite possibilities of the combination of of circus and theatre can be more fully explored. This will provide the performers with a more fulfilled and self-reliant career and provide the public with a myriad of exciting, undreamt-of experiences.