

# Total Theatre Critical Practice Debate

Jan 2000

## Circus as theatre

A couple of hours ago Johnny Melville was doing his show in the Foyer. It is good to see him perform here in Britain again. His group Kaboodle created a show called Monkey at the Oval House in 1978 that combined the story of the Chinese legend with circus skills and mime and knocked me out when I first came up to London in 1978. This was the first show that I saw that actually integrated skills with theatre. After a few years picking up various bits of technique and later attending Lecoqs theatre school I formed Mummer&Dada, that used the format of Mummers plays but with a Dada twist. We were interested in a popular theatre that used a variety of skills - singing, mime, mask-work, brass band, magic as well as juggling & acrobatics. Over the subsequent years the circus flavour increased and I began to describe it as circus theatre, a term that I don't think had been used before.

For me 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 Soleils Saltimbanco that, despite a theatrical looking packaging, uses the traditional format of a series of impressive displays of technique. At the other end there is - Barnum, various opera productions and Peter Brooks Midsummer Nights Dream that I was lucky to see in the early seventies - these use the skills in a decorative way, to serve the text. With Cirque de Soleil the skills are the text.

What I am interested in is the middle ground 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. What I enjoy is a theatre of images because a picture can carry a whole range of meanings simultaneously and, as in the work of say DV8, 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 - 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.

Secondly 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.)

Finally circus skills can be useful 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.

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.

So what are some of the problems that circus theatre presents? Certainly one that seems unlikely ever to disappear is the difference between actors and skilled performers. This has been partly to do with narrow attitudes that have been uncorrected by training - typically the skilled performer insists on including their most accomplished technique whatever that may be and cannot imagine why it may not be appropriate to the theme with the result that a narrative has to take some bizarre twists to include their skills. A much longer training period needs to be an option in Britain if we are to address this problem. (4 years) However there does seem to be a deeper reason - 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 a pre-defined goal. It is no accident that jugglers often have an aptitude for mathematics and computers - they love systems.

This may be one reason why juggling itself remains 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 use the movement qualities 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 - 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. There is certainly much more research to be done in this field.

Because of the prevailing image of both circus and theatre one of the major problems for circus theatre in this country is satisfying expectations. The image of circus has been strongly associated with mass appeal since the days of the Roman Empire and remains so. Theatre lovers, on the other hand, tend to expect acting rather than performing and a clear narrative. Whilst it is impossible to satisfy all expectations, the hybrid which is circus theatre has a greater struggle to change perception than other hybrids such as mime theatre or dance theatre because its elements appeals to very different audiences. For example - the Gandinis at one time were driven to the ludicrous position of dropping the word juggling out of their name in order to obtain funding and to avoid the general publics expectations of light entertainment and clowns.

It was an issue in the eighties for groups such as Ra Ra Zoo who changed from more "difficult" work to a more cabaret style to satisfy wider audiences but, along with all the other British New Circus companies - were axed when funding responsibilities were moved to the theatre department of the Arts Council. It's an issue for me because I get caught in the middle - Mummer&Dadas work was regarded as too populist by many theatre people - too sweaty and raw; other groups I've directed - Rejects Revenge and Peepolykus - were regarded as too much of a light entertainment. However I'm also seen as an elitist by many in the circus world.

The issue came up with the first show of our new company - Dark Horse

We'd chosen the admittedly rather difficult subject matter - that of the issues that face society at this Millennium moment, in particular the conflict between increasing individual choice and the need for collective solutions to global problems. Our source material was Eric Hobsbawm's book on the 20th century and in it he suggests that the cultural experience of the future will be fractured into a bewildering kaleidoscope of images and words coming at us from all sides. Because circus has always been an odd mix of elements it seemed appropriate to use the format of a collage of images around a theme not unlike the style of Cirque Baroque - we would be able to achieve a unity of form with content. However, although this format is not unfamiliar to Live Art audiences, we found that the wider public wanted more structure and coherence even though the breakdown of it was our point. For economic reasons, we need to make this show work for a wider public, including those at outdoor venues. So we are currently reworking it to make it take account of this need and incorporating this issue of art versus entertainment. Our aim is that by working on many different levels we can appeal to the wider public as well as those picking up on the deeper significance. We've obviously set ourselves a lot of difficult problems to resolve but we are learning a lot in the process.

The British public is certainly not as open to new formats as elsewhere in Europe and this conservatism has meant that research and innovation is hampered by the need to prioritise the earning of money above and beyond other considerations. The commercial circuses are obviously reluctant to use difficult work. It was good to see in Archaos an example of resistance to compromise winning by the boldness of its approach. I believe this was due to the French having much greater insistence on the value and integrity of art but also to the massive investment that was made and is still being made by their government.

And this raises another issue that circus theatre has to address - one that we found with Dark Horse - how to develop the work with such financial constraints. Circus theatre cannot be written like a normal play because it is so dependent on the abilities of particular performers and their practical research, therefore it needs to be devised. Devising a physical theatre show takes a minimum of four weeks, circus theatre has the added problem that skills routines must not only be devised but take hours of practice. Also Circus Theatre is inevitably much more equipment intensive and this will present a host of technical problems

and delays. Most British New Circus or Circus Theatre companies are cheap and cheerful duos and trios. With Dark Horse we have tried to break out of that ghetto with a company of seven performers but, of course, it is extremely difficult financially. Cirque Plume has the entire company (15 - 20), supported by technical advisors in rehearsal for three months. Within the current British situation the innovators either have to work unpaid for substantial amounts of time or the work will just not develop in this country.

Before Christmas I went to see Complicites Mnemonic, a wonderfully complex interplay of stories, ideas and levels of meaning that uses images as much as words as its media. It would be wonderful sometime in the future to see this level of sophistication combined with the fantastic possibilities for image making that is offered by circus theatre. Its a long road to achieve this goal but I'm sure it can be done.

Bim Mason

Co-Director of Circomedia, The Centre for Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance

### Statements from conference

Gerry Cottle: “, All these van at Glastonbury that call themselves circus aren't really circus at all. Used to be talent in circus. Circus must improve its image [- just marketing?] Circus shouldn't need funding. [Surely it does to be innovative]”.

Angela : “Sponsorship is alternative to funding”?!

Deb: “ Circus now works in different spaces. Opens up concept. Soleil & Dome has good performers who are not doing their best. Artistic development is not going to come from those preoccupied with being media friendly/commercial.”

Rodrigo” Need to make definitions to understand what we are doing ( not about being divisive) “

“ Circus theatre images are real but not realistic”

“Height provides metaphor for other dangers”

“Use abilities of skill performers without necessarily using their best tricks”