

Sideshow Magazine

Issue 1 // Bristol

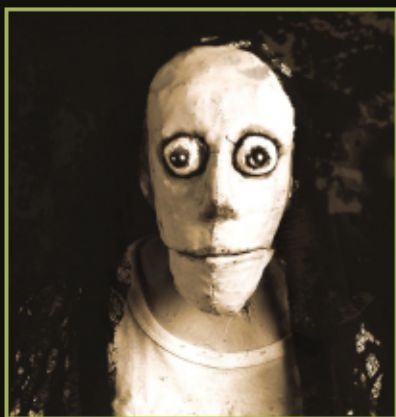




BLIND SUMMIT



HIROAKI UMEDA



INVISIBLE THREAD



CIE L'IMMÉDIAT / CAMILLE BOITEL

LONDON INTERNATIONAL MIME FESTIVAL

11 > 29 JANUARY 2012

'THIS EPIC FESTIVAL SHOWCASES SOME OF THE MOST GASP-WORTHY THEATRE YOU'LL SEE ALL YEAR' THE GUARDIAN

PROGRAMME INCLUDES

BLIND SUMMIT THEATRE (UK) *THE TABLE*
 CLAUDIO STELLATO (BELGIUM) *L'AUTRE*
 CIE L'IMMÉDIAT / CAMILLE BOITEL (FRANCE) *L'IMMÉDIAT*
 CIE TÊTE DE PIOCHE (FRANCE/UK) *FRAGMENTS*
 FLEUR ELISE NOBLE (AUSTRALIA) *2 DIMENSIONAL LIFE OF HER*
 GANDINI JUGGLING (UK) *SMASHED*
 HIROAKI UMEDA (JAPAN) *HAPTIC + HOLISTIC STRATA*
 INVISIBLE THREAD (UK) *PLUCKED*
 KULUNKA TEATRO (SPAIN) *ANDRE & DORINE*
 NOFIT STATE CIRCUS (UK) *MUNDO PARALELO*
 SUGAR BEAST CIRCUS (UK) *EVENT DIMENSION*

BARBICAN • JACKSONS LANE • ROUNDHOUSE •
 ROYAL OPERA HOUSE • SOHO THEATRE • SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Join our free mailing list for the latest updates, or find us on Facebook

www.mimelondon.com +44 20 7637 5661

Presented in association with barbicanbite 12 and Southbank Centre



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
 ENGLAND**

Issue 1, Winter 2011

Sideshow started in Bristol, when I was at circus school and once a month would Google 'circus magazine' or 'corde lisse article' or 'circus handbook' and scratch through the paltry return hoping that, in the time since I last checked, someone would finally have started something. So in choosing to make Bristol the focus of this, the first issue of Sideshow Magazine *Magazine*, I feel a little like I'm writing back to myself circa 2008-2009, perhaps with a stern but benevolent eye, certainly full of advice.

Back in those days the Invisible Circus were just coming into the Island, their ramshackle home in the quarters of an old police and fire station, and in the first pages of this magazine you'll find an interview with one of the Invisible co-founders, Doug Francis, on the subject of their residency there (**Staggering Out**)—as well as a map of Bristol's key centres of circus and theatre activity, and a central article, **Circus in the Invisible City**, that speculates why, in spite of the proliferation of training and rehearsal spaces and the presence of Circo-media (one of only two degree-accredited circus schools in the UK), there are so few companies coming out of Bristol with ambitions to make contemporary circus.

Thereafter the scope of interest pulls out, away from Bristol, and we have an interview with Sugar Beast Circus director Geneva Foster Gluck on her piece **{Event(Dimension):}**, due to premiere in January at the London International Mime Festival. It's a strange one: a work that divides the audience in two in order to twist and refigure their perspectives and reflect on the differences between classical and quantum physics—in the process somehow managing to work in some supergirls in leotards and a game show aesthetic of chintzy excess. Read all about it; they've thought it through.

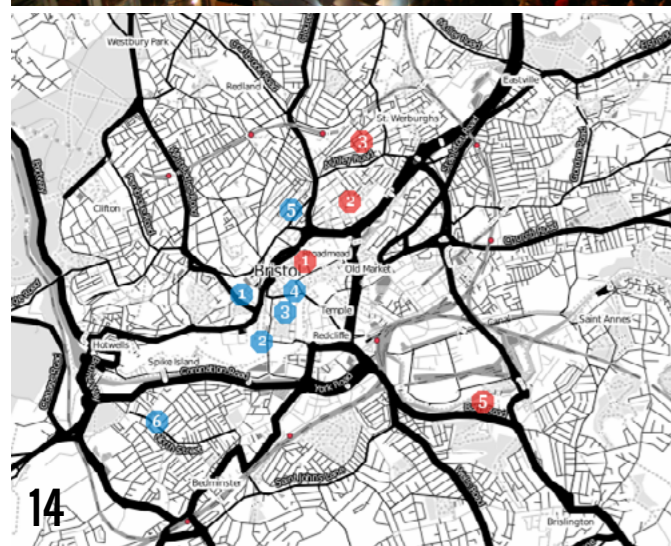
Then it's a trip to Croatia for an interview with Ivan Kralj, the fierce and ethically rigorous director of Festival Novog Cirkusa, from whom we hear about the trials and tribulations of running a contemporary circus festival in Zagreb in **Is Your Festival on Fire?**; and to France for a look at the work of Mélissa Von Vépy, an artist whose piece *Miroir, Miroir* sees her making an elusive journey on a large, suspended aerial mirror (**The Inverted World**).

For reviews, we have appraisals of **Gandini Juggling's Blotched**, their third consecutive commission from the National Theatre's ever-excellent Watch This Space festival (+ we sneak in an extra feature, **Wild Colour**, where the show's costume designer Gemma Banks gives a small tour of some of the bizarre and wonderful outfits from the piece); the circus elements of **Greenwich + Docklands Festival 2011**, including work by Company FZ, Elastic Theatre and Acrojou Circus Theatre; and **Cirque Éloize's** disappointingly flat and dissimulating entertainment *iD*.

I hope you enjoy it, and hope also that there's someone at a circus school, somewhere, who discovers this by accident and finds it, at the least, a little interesting.

JOHNELLINGSWORTH

Contents



Features

6-18: Circus in Bristol

Sideshow travels to Bristol, where the relics of Victorian industry are being transformed into utopian artist-led projects.

6: Circus in the Invisible City

14: On the Map

16: Staggering Out

19: {Event(Dimension):}

What do you get if you research a piece of contemporary circus that explores the differences between classical and quantum physics? Sideshow talks to Sugar Beast Circus Director Geneva Foster Gluck.

24: Is Your Festival On Fire?

An interview with Ivan Kralj on the subject of European circus, the Croatian Ministry of Culture, hallucinations, and the festival he directs, the amazing, exploding Festival Novog Cirkusa.

32: The Inverted World

Mélissa Von Vépy writes on the research and creation process for the strange and unyielding *Miroir, Miroir*.

37: Wild Colour

Inspired by Alexander McQueen, Bernhard Willhelm and Björk—Gemma Banks on designing the costumes for Gandini Juggling's *Blotched*.

Reviews

35: Blotched

Deconstructed imagist poetry and abstract chaos in Gandini Juggling's tribute to the work of the fashion designer Alexander McQueen.

41: iD

Expensive and shallow, Cirque Éloize's *iD*—an evocation of urban life that celebrates individualism with one hand and erases it with the other.

42: Greenwich + Docklands

A round-up of the action at Greenwich + Docklands Festival 2011, with work by Acrojou Circus Theatre, Elastic Theatre, Company FZ, and others.

44: Media

Reviews of the hefty new book *Women & Circus*; Naomi Smyth's access-all-areas documentary about the Invisible Circus, *No Dress Rehearsal*; and the DVD *France Russie: traces de l'échange pédagogique*, a record of the exchange between the French school CNAC and the Moscow Circus School.



Circus in the Invisible City

A self-training space-laden utopia that produces next to no circus for theatres.

What's going on in Bristol?

Slipping Away

Down then into the sunken arena at the back of the Book Barn by your choice of stage staircase—plain ones, starred ones, podium steps radiating out—the ambient, omnidirectional light joining you from high side-windows and skylights streaked with mossy rain sediment. It's closed, partly, sectioned off on the one side by the thick blue canvas of an old circus tent laid in overlapping strips, looped rope ties hanging free like the fastenings of a giantess' divested corset. On the ground: patches of green striated school carpet, crash and jigsaw mats, great quantities of localised bird shit. Up against the furthest wall there are leaned-to squares of wood flooring, an old iron-bound teeterboard, and supermarket longlife bags bulked out with the foam-block springs that give a tumbletrack its bounce; someone has scored 41 on the dartboard hung above.

The Invisible Circus' whole Bristol history is here, in some places organised—the wood sets racked up like clothes on a rail; the fridge graveyard; a collection of mannequins taken apart into their top and bottom halves, legs arranged to stand like they might be having an excellent time at a sophisticated party; the many shelves of paint (Durable Acrylic Eggshell, HW04 White Protection Coating, Retardant Coating, Stain Block, Liquid Rubber, Aqua Steel, Vinyl Silk, Diamond Matt and Supermatt (next to each other, as though competing), Weathershield Smooth Masonry Paint, etcetera, etcetera)—and in others looking as though moved here by a helpful but careless spirit that *inhaled* everything then just blew it all the fuck out. You could lose time in here, especially if you had a guide to explain to you what the life-size, wall-mounted tiger was used for—or the stacks of astroturf, or the dentist's chair, or the fake wedding cake iced with grouting, or (still game for a spin) the handmade Wheel of Misfortune where your possible endings are Decapitated, Drowning in Vomit, Bored to Death, Sex Game Gone Wrong, Breast Asphyxiation, and Slipping Away.

Over at one side are what look like airplane parts, metal cylinders and compartments you could climb inside, divided and cross-sectioned; exposed panels are set with blue circuit boxes, so blocky and simple that they don't look real, but so neat and particular and solid that they look very, very real. Available for turning: square arrangements of round metal dials like you'd see in a 50s black and white SF film. A passing mechanic explains that these are the pieces of a training module that were formerly used by an aeronautics company in Filton. The model became obsolete and the company were going to throw everything out—so the Invisibles appeared and took it all in.

//

The Invisible Circus, an ever-changing band of artists and creative squatters and interventionists, that's

what they do: take everyone and everything in. They formed—or better: *materialised*—in the early 90s out of the free party scene, travelling Europe performing in warehouses and derelict spaces. In 2005 they came to Bristol, where their first major venue was the Audi Garage, a multilevel, abandoned concrete structure that they squatted and used as a performance space for a couple large, site-specific shows before being forced out by a court ruling. After that they had a very brief stay in an old 19th Century cinema, and a slightly longer tenure at Horfield Police Station, before entering into an agreement with the commercial developers of a dilapidated Cathedral in an upmarket quarter of Bristol—the Pro-Cathedral in Clifton—which marked a turning point in the company's working practice and set them on their current, unusual course.

Up until the Cathedral the Invisible Circus had been squatters—the nice kind, who generally improve the conditions of the buildings they occupy, but nonetheless illegitimate tenants—and the Pro-Cathedral was going to be their first above-board project: the developers wanted the company to run the site as an arts venue for a while in order to raise its profile and—in a controlled, discrete, tasteful way—to muddy up the airbrushed image of the luxury apartment complex the Cathedral was destined to become. The Invisibles moved in, bore down on the job of scrubbing and clearing what was in those first days a wrecked building, flushed out the resident pigeons, got clearance from Health & Safety, and after five months opened the venue for an all-to short run of haphazard site-specific shows and programmed arts events; after weeks rather than months, as agreed, they had to leave.

It was a heartbreak, but not long after the Cathedral they landed something even bigger: Bridewell Island. The Island was constructed somewhere around the turn of the century (the last one) as a cluster of municipal buildings—enclosing a fire station, police station, yard, clocktower, jail cells, courtrooms, and stables—that occupied an entire city block at the centre of Bristol. You know it was built a while back because it's just got that public building thing of feeling... *defensible*, these great stone walls sheering up from the pavement like the sides of a fortress. For the incoming Invisibles, in 2007, it was in many respects the same story as the Cathedral: the site had developers with grand future plans, but in the meantime they wanted to have the premises occupied and infused with a certain liveliness and presence.

No one knew it at the start, but the Invisibles would eventually spend four years at the Island. During that time they ran a number of small projects and initiatives—including running a load of cheap, affordable artist studios—but the two big ones for the circus community were that they opened an aerial training studio where artists, from inside and outside the Invisible collective, could train at low cost; and that they put on,

several times, in various guises, a show called *Carny-Ville* that took over the entire Island site, with multiple stages and miniature cabarets, performance and music and dance spilling out all over, and the corridors patrolled by walkabout characters often indistinguishable from the punters who'd taken the trouble of costuming up (in Victorian style, or 40s style, or steampunk—it varied)—all this radiating out from the fiery square of the central yard, the floor crammed with people, the night air a vision of swinging aerialists and wall-walkers descending the stone sides of the great old buildings.

Really, it was never my thing—too crowded, too burlesque, too much like a club night—but they had massive audiences, and they were right there in the centre of town, just round the corner from a titanic shopping mall, Cabot's Circus, that opened in 2008, and at the outlet of the main high street arcade, Broadmead. It felt as well as though every circus artist I knew in Bristol had gotten involved—some up to their waist, others to the neck—performing in the show, or designing the sets, or sewing the costumes, or whatever. At its largest, *Carny-Ville* had several hundred people working on it and performing in it. The Invisible Circus was never full.

The shows I went to all seemed disorganised and last minute, and the final product was consequently, understandably, quite rough around the edges, but it was a reminder that the haphazard, full-throttle approach can cover more ground if there's a will or a spirit to hold the whole thing together, and it always felt to me, in those shows, as though all that was happening could only happen here, in Bristol. Earlier this year the Invisible Circus moved out of the Island and into the Paintworks, a Victorian industrial complex (formerly a paint and varnish factory) that's big and full and lively but that lies a little more toward the edge of the city. The company are changing their way of working as well—still wanting to make performances, still wanting to be invisible and down low at the roots of things, but wanting to do so on a smaller scale and in a sustainable way. The energy and industry that centred on the Island for the four years the Invisibles spent there hasn't dissipated, but it's in search now, I think, of something new.

Capacity

If you're doing it per square metre or proportional to total population then Bristol has, by a long way, the most circus artists of any UK city. Part of this is that circus artists live where they can train. Living where there's work is helpful but not in the same way essential, and the two qualities are in natural opposition: circus facilities tend to be adapted from large, old, post-industrial spaces, and the cities with the most commercial activity (and therefore the most need for ornamental aerialists) have usually either redeveloped those spaces into expensive residential/retail blocks or else still need them

for actual industry. You can fly out for a gig, but you can't commute to another city to train every day—not really, or not for long.

There's work for circus artists in Bristol, and there are training spaces in London, but in the balance of these things we can say that Bristol is the training city, London the work city. Alongside that aerial studio at the Island—which is still open, even though the Invisibles have left—Bristol has several big halls up in a suburb called Kingswood (run by Circomedia—more on them later); an old church called The Albany Centre that's overseen by a collective of keyholders; and a couple of new spaces run by the Invisibles at the Paintworks.

The fact that there are so many places to train is down in part to the Capacity scheme, an initiative started in 2007 by Ruth Essex in the role of Neighbourhood Arts Officer at Bristol City Council which acts both to license out disused spaces owned by the local authority and to encourage commercial owners / property speculators to do the same. Ruth was the one who first brought the Invisibles together with the Island developers, and through the Capacity scheme she's found buildings for around fifty arts organisations/groups, including installation/exhibition or live/work spaces in the Control Room of Redcliffe's old bascule bridge, the Porch of what was once Henry VIII's Bristol home, a former motorcycle showroom, an old library, and a set of closed-down Victorian toilets.

Another early Capacity-supported project was Residence, which came out of a Theatre Bristol Open Space breakout on the difficulties of finding rehearsal and devising space, and which has emerged as a collective of thirteen independent theatre-makers that share a workspace. They were in with the Invisibles for awhile at Horfield Police Station, then in 2009 Capacity landed them their current home, The Milk Bar, an old Victorian shop which had been empty for six years. They have four floors, spread across which are two making/showing spaces as well as an office and storage basement, and from out the Residence they run micro-scratches, a book club, a look club (they see shows, then talk about them), a small library, and otherwise just get on with their work. Ultimately the building has what I'm told (by one of the Residence founders) are the four necessary qualities of an artists' space: it's dry, it's warm, it has Internet, and it has a kitchen. It was founded and operates on the assumption that if you share space then you naturally share a lot else—knowledge, resources, time, and (difficult to quantify but nonetheless critical) the pain and joy and doubts and wobbly moments of independent arts practice that might otherwise be lived through in isolation.

Capacity isn't the only project working on filling old buildings (another major one is Artspace Lifespace, a company founded by many of the same people as the



Invisible Circus; they run the Island and exist to redevelop rundown sites into arts centres or social projects), and you can see the effect of all this activity on Bristol's theatre-making and live art communities: they are *vibrant*; networks of busy, productive people who work hard in the light of recognition and support, and who draw strength from their place within an active community. Taken together they also form a picture of something like a Bristol style: valuing the handmade and the home, working fast and with lightness, producing work that's emotionally out-on-a-limb, and having a utopian view of the audience as an equal partner in the never-finished devising process.

In one sense the Invisible Circus' tenure at the Island fits right into this picture: it was a very strong, building-based community where artists could train and perform and in all sorts of ways give each other a leg up. But there's one major difference, which is that whereas the theatre-making scene in Bristol is a loose weave of companies and individuals working independently, producing scores of shows that then (some of them) tour outside of Bristol, the Invisible Circus was geared toward the production of gigantic events that could only happen in that one unique Bristol space. So what you have in Bristol's circus community is people making cabarets and acts and the occasional short-form street show, but few companies, and practically no contemporary circus being made for theatres. One of the key agents in this—the landscape that now exists, and the one that might be about to emerge—is Bristol's only

circus school, the oldest in the country, Circomedia.

The B-team

Rising out of the ashes of its antecedent, Fool Time, Circomedia was founded in 1994 by Bim Mason and Helen Crocker, Bim a graduate of the Lecoq School in Paris and the founder of the influential company Mummer&Dada, Helen a choreographer and performer. Circus wasn't unheard of in the UK at that time, nor was physical theatre, but they were a long way outside the scope of mainstream attention (being connected instead with the politically active counterculture), while at the same time the interest from artists was greater than the available training resources. Circomedia set out with the goal of combining circus and theatre, constructing a broad course that taught students mime and movement alongside circus skills. Among the alumni from the school's early years were Matilda Leyser, author of the seminal aerial trilogy *Line, Point, Plane* and now working with the devising company Improbable, and Al Seed, one of the few mime artists in the UK working in the highly evolved, virtuosic style that we more often associate with Russian companies.

These days Circomedia is split between two main premises: up in Kingswood their teaching spaces and offices are set within a quiet and leafy estate (making it probably the closest a circus school will ever come to being a campus university); and then down in the city proper

they have St Paul's Church, an adapted 18th Century site which opened six years ago as a performance venue and which remains one of the most beautiful places in the country to watch aerial.

Today their approach is much the same as it was fifteen years ago—they train generalists, introducing students to a broad array of skills rather than having them specialise to master one or two—with the recent change that they've been accredited by Bath Spa University to run a two-year Foundation Degree (FdA) alongside their shorter courses. Among the international network of circus schools the uncharitable way of seeing Circomedia is as the B-team—they pick up the students who don't make the grade elsewhere—but actually I think they just have a different and broader catchment: they attract more people with backgrounds in acting and other theatre forms, or sometimes in outlying things like visual arts practice or computer engineering, than they do circus performers or gymnasts or sports acrobats already trained to high levels (and with the benefit, I've been told by several people who've worked with Circomedia students, that they're more open and less precious about the work they do).

The school still styles itself as combining circus and physical theatre, but these days that's actually sort of an odd distinction—contemporary circus *is* physical theatre—and what it really means is that circus training at the school is informed by a particular style or branch of physical practice: Lecoq mime, mask (/Commedia), and broad street theatre/provocation—all that stuff that was strange and inciting back in the 80s and into the 90s but that's now been absorbed pretty well into semi-mainstream theatre practice. And what's wrong with learning something old-fashioned? Nothing of course, but I'm not sure it goes well with generalist training. If audiences are familiar with a particular form or aesthetic then you'd better be damn *good* at it—there's more to compare to, more to outdo; less distraction. It's easier to accept something that's rough and uneven if it feels *new*, bobbing somewhere on the turbulent, expanding edge of contemporary performance. For the students, it cuts them off to some degree from the rest of the sector—who else in Bristol is doing Commedia or mask?—an effect worsened by the fact that Bristol hasn't, until very recently, had venues to attract many touring circus shows.

Classes at Circomedia mostly divide into technical instruction (circus) and creative/expressive work (physical theatre), and I think in some ways what it comes down to is how you want to approach circus—as a technical art that is then interpreted by a dramatic vocabulary acquired outside the form, or as a complete discipline where expression, meaning, character, choreography might all lie *inside* the technique itself. Students' first attempts at the former tend to follow along the lines of: learn some aerial technique, do some Lecoq animal

exercises, make an aerial routine as a cat playing with silks as though they're curtains. Taking a nervous stab at the latter, a student might produce an abstract aerial piece about risk and falling performed to the soundtrack of their own heavy breathing. You could say it's a matter of taste, but I think it's also part of the reason why so few companies come out of Circomedia with the ambition to make full-length contemporary circus productions (compared to Circus Space generating about three per graduating year, despite London having scarcer resources in terms of rehearsal and devising space). To create something of length and substance, rather than just a character-based act, you need to go deep.

You have to spend time with a skill, any skill, to really use it, and for a long time students at the school have been grouching that they only get three hours a week of taught aerial, and then in a large group class. You'd think that aerialists wouldn't apply in the first place, but every year there are students who arrive wanting what the course can't adequately give them—or leave wanting it—and the school at present offers an 'aerial specialisation' on its degree course (which costs £1150 extra a year). It also seems that the students who don't get on with the physical theatre classes are driven into the seductive, open arms of pure skill training—which they then complain there isn't enough of—and that they tend to end up working as soloists or in duos rather than producing more formally ambitious work because that's how circus at the school, taken alone, has been taught.

There are a couple of changes that are starting to come through at Circomedia though. A recent one is the appointment of Jonathan Priest as joint Head of Aerial with Mike Wright. No one's got a bad word to say about Mike, who's a renowned teacher in the aerial world and who has, for years, given his time for free to students wanting to push themselves outside the course; but having Jonathan onboard means that instead of having two pure technical classes, students can have one technical class and one creative class. Also, last year Circomedia invited John-Paul Zaccarini, an arch defender of circus' inherent theatricality, to direct their end of year show (the students *loved* it: 'he treated us like actual artists'), and he'll be back again to work on another project at the school next year.

The other major change is that, as part of an investment grant from ACE, Circomedia are developing St Paul's Church as a venue, meaning they now have the opportunity to programme it rather than simply let it out as a theatre space for hire. Alongside live art and dance—which will see the Church a partner in two major festivals: Mayfest and Inbetween Time—there will (and really for the first time) be a Bristol venue that can take contemporary circus shows, bringing in the new styles and influences the Circomedia course, and Bristol as a whole, needs.



Do It Yourself

One important bit of context for all this, and the reason I think Bristol is an especially intriguing city right now, is that the arts and higher education sectors in the UK are currently under the chilly shadow of government disinvestment. From September 2012, tuition fees at Circomedia will rise from £2980 p/a (£4130 with the aerial specialisation) to a flat £7850 p/a for UK/EU degree students. This is roughly in line with the hike that's due at all undergraduate university courses in the country, and the only other circus degree, at London's Circus Space, will jump from £3375 p/a to the maximum £9000 p/a. I asked Circomedia's Chief Executive Officer, Jan Winter, what might be the impact on the school and she gave a cautious and non-committal *nobody knows*, and nobody does, but the best guess says that universities will seek to offset tuition fees with scholarship funding and with support, where available, from big employers (they're actually required to do this to some degree); that established universities with large bodies of rich alumni will do better than newer or less moneyed institutions; and that prospective students will think harder and look harder before they sign-up for a burden of debt their degree might not give them the tools to repay.

And so it's at this point that the cultural sector Bristol has built—one with a DIY attitude of artists and organisations getting on with their own projects, working cooperatively, recognised for their worth—will really come into its own. Recent central and regional government cuts have led to an approximate 50% reduction in Bristol City Council's Arts and Events team, but whatever happens to Capacity it's proven itself as an initiative that *works*—for artists and for property owners—and the Council will hopefully embed the fundamental vision of the project within its regenerative policies. The first generation of Capacity-supported organisations, also, are starting to inspire new ones...

Bristol has always been a self-training Mecca—with all those spaces, a ready supply of incredible technical artists (particularly aerialists) to tap for private tuition, and a couple of big agencies (Cirque Bijou and Impact Artists) selling acts abroad—but this seems to me like it might be the time when the do-it-yourself spirit can find a route into producing ambitious contemporary circus. The structure is falling into place. It's currently in an interregnum period following the departure of Mike Martins, but there's a Circus and Outdoor Performance Producer job at Theatre Bristol, an organisation that exists to support work in the theatre sector and that

recently scored core funding from Arts Council England (in recognition of the fact that it's been doing, on a general consensus, very good work). In November 2011, Bristol will host the second edition of Circus Futures, a major international circus conference that will invite delegates to showcases of UK artists as well as provide residencies for companies. Plus there are ongoing projects like Ausform, a company headed by ex-pat Swede and circus-type Lina B. Frank, working with artists in something like a creative producer role, and holding a biannual platform event in an old collective-run theatre/cinema called the Cube Microplex (often bringing over small Scandinavian companies and artists to place alongside UK practitioners).

With the Invisible Circus still present in Bristol but less central and manically active, there's an opportunity for what has been a great mass to pull apart into a network of independent artists who collaborate and support one another in the creation of smaller projects—the kind of self-organising, idealistic movement that Bristol is uniquely able to nurture and encourage. There are a number of different ways it could go in the next few years, but it is, excitingly, the artists themselves who have the power to direct the development of their changing culture, and as London's dwindling resources

push those based there to consider more sustainable alternatives, many are facing the decision of whether to watch Bristol from the outside or to head west and take a stake in circus' future. Give it some thought. //

JOHNELLINGSWORTH

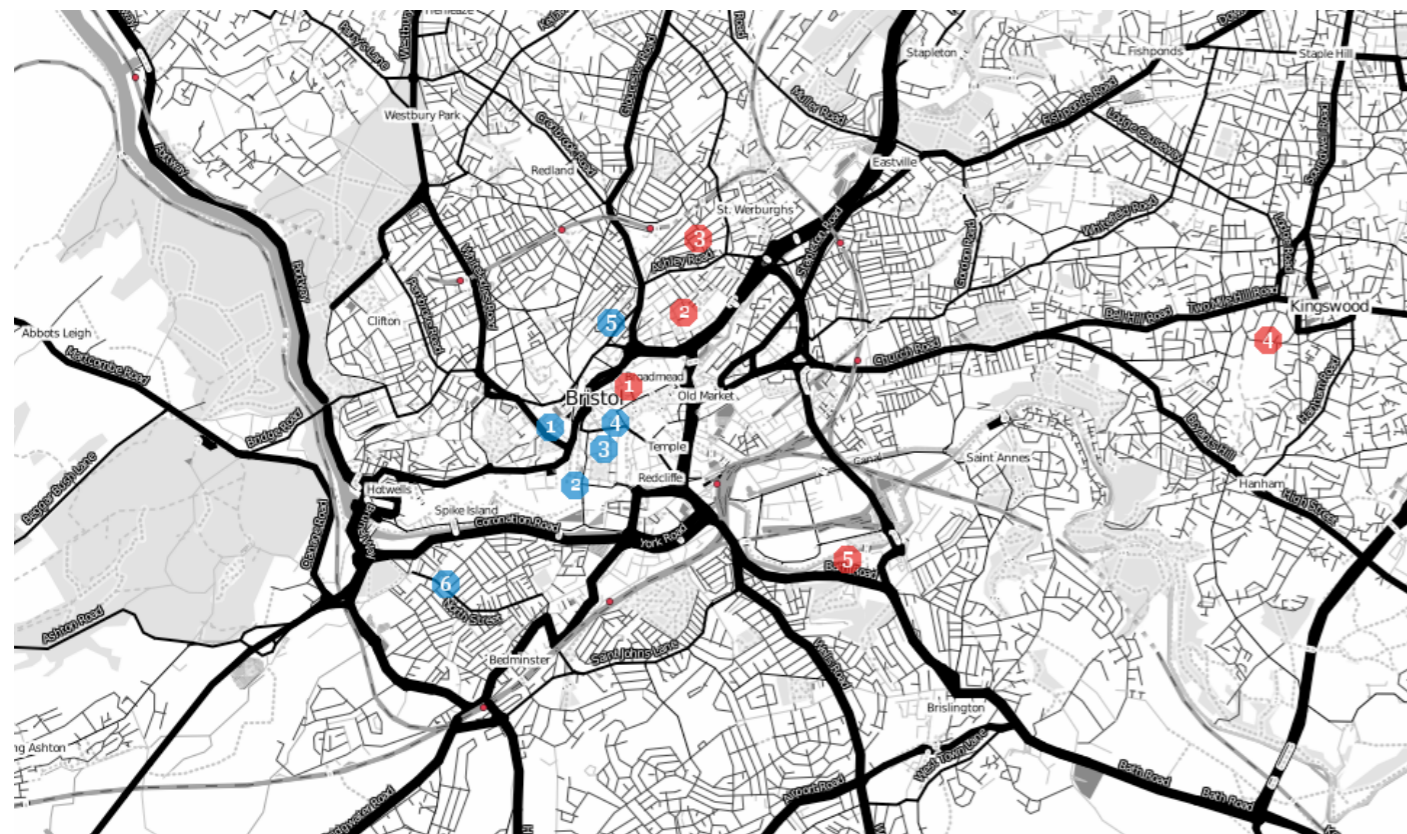
////////////////////////////////////

- www.invisiblecircus.co.uk
- www.capacitybristol.wordpress.com
- www.residence.org.uk
- www.circomedia.com
- www.theatrebristol.net
- www.circusfutures.org
- www.ausform.co.uk

Images:
 Page 7: St Paul's Church (photo: Circomedia)
 Pages 10 & 12-13: The Invisible Circus at the Island (photos: The Invisible Circus)

////////////////////////////////////

On the map: Sideshow's guide to Bristol's **circus** and **theatre** spaces



1. The Island

The Island is two giant ex-municipal buildings—the Old Police Station and the Old Fire Station—which together form a sort of sheer, stone fortress that sits in the centre of the city like a landed spacecraft. After years of abandonment, the site was taken on by the Artspace Lifespace Project (which turns vacant/unused buildings into creative venues) in 2008, and for around four years it became the home of the Invisible Circus, an amorphous collective who put on a number of huge immersive shows using every corner of the site. The Invisibles have since moved on, and the Old Police Station has been divided into a number of studio and workshop spaces while the Fire Station will be redeveloped as a state-of-the-art youth centre. Other than the old set props still visible, washed-out by rain, in the interior, semi-sheltered courtyard separating the two big buildings, the site's circus legacy is maintained by an aerial studio that's still in use, available for private training but also running timetabled morning sessions.

www.invisiblecircus.co.uk/theislandbristol.com

2. St Paul's Church

After a lengthy refurb project, in 2005 Circomedia (see 4.) opened a new training and performance space within St Paul's Church, a dreamy structure that looks from the outside, on account of its symmetry and clean white stone, as though it's a model of a church that's been

magically enlarged. Inside it's been rigged for aerial, and glass panelling separates the main space from the front-of-house operations, but otherwise the restoration and adaptation has changed as little of the interior as possible—the choir still has its wooden pews, the stained glass and ornate plastered ceiling are both still intact, there are balconies overlooking a nave that retains its elegant smooth pillars, and, all in all, it still *feels* like a Church. In the past Circomedia have used it for their own shows (student presentations etc) and event hire, but are now in the early stages of developing the Church as a venue with a full artistic programme.

www.circomedia.com

3. The Albany

Next to an always-deserted playground in Bristol's Montpelier district, the Albany is an old church (another one!) run by a collective of artists who act as the space's keyholders. It's not as spectacular as St Paul's, and not as high, and nowhere near as renovated, but it's considerably more available for independent training. It's warm in winter, therefore full in winter.

www.albanycentre.org

4. The Kingswood Estate

Formerly a reformatory school for child offenders, the Kingswood Estate is a collection of large Victorian and pre-Victorian buildings that house a number of charitable and creative organisations. Their largest tenant is

Circomedia, one of only two circus schools in the UK offering accredited degree training, who rent the Estate's two largest halls as well as a couple of studio/gym spaces and their offices. Kingswood is where the school's courses are, in the main, taught.
www.circomedia.com / www.kfl.org.uk

5. The Paintworks

It sometimes feels like Bristol has a million of these: old Victorian sites, former centres of industry, repurposed in the mid noughties as cultural spaces after long periods of dereliction and neglect. Even by Bristol standards, though, the Paintworks is a large project. Labelling itself as the city's 'cultural quarter', it has several dozen creative organisations on-site, a beautiful café/restaurant, and some swanky flats in a newer art deco building. The grounds, 12 acres in all, are a strip, and as you walk down the road the buildings become uglier 70s constructions. At the *end* of the road is the Invisible Circus' new home. They have two buildings, either side of the street. The first is Jackdaw Studios, a blocky two-story that feels a little like a prefab school building and is still inhabited by the drab musty spectre of prolonged disuse. At the ground level the Invisibles have a long, carpeted studio space—rigged for aerial but not as high as you'd like—and, upstairs, space for offices and a costume archive ('the costume department').

Across the road from the Studios is the Book Barn, a massive warehouse of which the Invisibles have requisitioned one quarter. It's high and dusty and open-plan, and right now filled with the company's old sets and props and miscellaneous junk, but one end of the space has been partially blocked-off and slated as the performance space, and it's possible to train there.

www.paintworksbristol.co.uk

1. Interval

Typifying both Bristol Council's willingness to license unused buildings to creative interests for peppercorn rent, *and* the DIY attitude of its performer/makers, Interval is a loose collection of artists—working in performance, mostly in live art—who share devising, rehearsal and office spaces within the Parlour, a crumbling old house formerly used as the mayor's reception venue.

www.interval-bristol.org.uk

2. Arnolfini

A little like the ICA in London but with greater coherency and vision, the Arnolfini is a waterfront arts centre with a number of exhibition spaces and studios that programmes, exhibits and supports visual arts, performance, dance, film and music. Their keen interest in the intersection of these artforms has led them to a strong relationship with Bristol's live art sector, and Inbetween Time, a major biennial performance festival oriented toward live art, emerged from the Arnolfini's Live programme. The festival is now produced independently, but the Arnolfini is still a collaborator and host.

www.arnolfini.org.uk

3. Bristol Old Vic

The city's biggest theatre, Bristol Old Vic is a Georgian-era venue that was in a half-finished state of redevelopment for some 30 years. In spring 2011, however, work on the building's facilities resumed, and completion is now scheduled for 2016. As a key regional theatre, and one with a lot of history, BOV supports text-based work and new writing, but also programmes a strong line of devised theatre and dance. Within this there's a strand of work, Bristol Ferment, curated by producer Kate Yedigaroff (co-artistic director of Bristol's Mayfest) and assistant producer Lina B. Frank (artistic director of Ausform – see 5.), which supports the development of new work across performance disciplines.

www.bristololdvic.org.uk

4. Residence

Similar to Interval, though established before it, Residence began as an initiative to get artists out of their bedrooms and into a common space—with the idea that artists working under the same roof would nourish and support each other's work, and, naturally, share resources and ideas and expertise. The collective rent The Milk Bar, an old Victorian record shop, squeezed tall and thin, with four floors.

www.residence.org.uk

5. The Cube Microplex

The Cube Microplex is a shoestring cinema and performance space, characterful, crumbling, run by a small band of dedicated volunteers. Over the years it's played a significant, if quiet, role in the history of Bristol's performance art scene, and lately, occasionally, it's been a home for circus, with the odd cabaret plus the now twice yearly Ausform, an experimental performance platform which has already done much valuable work in bringing over artists and small-scale companies from Scandinavian countries. Last year the Cube got rigging points to accommodate Chinese pole, but is otherwise limited to ground-based disciplines.

www.cubecinema.com / www.ausform.co.uk

6. The Tobacco Factory

South of the River Avon, Bristol's a different city—mostly suburban, residential—and it's on an otherwise unremarkable street that the high square red-brick of the Tobacco Factory rises suddenly on the skyline. Owned by the remarkable architect, philanthropist, and former High Sheriff and councillor George Ferguson, the building is a multi-purpose arts centre that includes the Tobacco Factory Theatre. The Factory also runs a second space outside the main building, The Brewery, where currently they have an interesting policy of giving new companies big two-week runs with the idea that they can develop their work in a live-fire environment.

www.tobaccofactorytheatre.com



Staggering Out

For four years **The Invisible Circus** occupied **The Island**, a huge premises enclosing an old police station, fire station, clocktower and yard at the heart of Bristol. John Ellingsworth talks to one of the company founders, **Doug Francisco**, about how a permissive, ever-changing band of artists, creative squatters and interventionists came to run the site...

So how did the Invisible Circus end up at the Island building?

It was kind of a follow-on from two projects that we'd done before—at the Audi Garage in Stokes Croft, and the Pro-Cathedral in Clifton—and Ruth Essex from the City Council had been very supportive of us since we came to Bristol. She contacted us and Urban Splash [the Island developers] about the site to see what was happening there because she does a lot of stuff putting art into unusual spaces. She's really sort of the unsung hero of a lot of the crazy things that have gone on in Bristol.

We ended up with a year free to redevelop the space and then started paying a low rent. We made the performance spaces and the circus training space a real focal point, then we sort of regenerated various bits of the site and got a studio rent in. There's lots of different small artist studios in there.

And you were given the go-ahead to do whatever you wanted with the building?

More or less, within reason, creatively. Obviously we weren't allowed to sort of knock in the walls or whatever because it's all listed, but they were pretty up for us doing what we wanted to do as long as we paid rent and didn't break the law.

Did you know what you wanted to do with the site when you went in?

Not completely clearly. We were looking for a performance venue and every single project we do responds to the site in some way. The Island was kind of too big really; we were like, Oh god it's *huge*. But it's one of those opportunities that doesn't really come round that often: a fire station, in the city centre, where we could do something big and invisible in the middle of the city rather than on the periphery. So we sort of took it on with a slightly daunted feeling of knowing what it was going to take—this big old crumbling edifice that was built at the turn of the century.

You'd come off the back of doing two large-scale projects at the Audi Garage and the Cathedral—but was it a different thing to be at the Island, right in the city centre? Had you

done anything like Carny-Ville before?

We'd never done anything quite like *Carny-Ville* before. We'd probably never had a site like the Island; the Audi Garage was quite big, but very different: lots of closed spaces, car parks and different levels and stuff. The Island had this big courtyard... *Carny-Ville* came about sort of by accident; the first one we did we were sort of just having a bit of a party and thinking we could invite our friends and help fundraise to finish work on the building quicker. All the electrics had to be replaced and that kind of stuff. So I think we were five or eight grand away from being properly able to open the place, and then the recession kicked in and Urban Splash didn't have any more money to put into it. So we just set up a lot of stages really and were like, Let's have a party, it won't be too much work... We didn't want to put on a big show and have it be too much work, and of course then it turned into this huge project. We had to stop performers coming in the end because there wasn't enough room to put them on the six stages. It just snowballed, and we used it as a fundraising event for the next three that we did. It served to sort of fund that whole project, to run the venue; it subsidised the Island to a degree.

It was sort of a funny thing because *Carny-Ville* was probably one of the biggest shows in the country as far as concentration of performers goes, and everyone wants to book it but then you can't really because no one can afford to pay for it. It's kind of an interesting phenomenon in a way. I don't know if you could make it happen anywhere else. It was very Bristol-centric.

Those shows were huge, but very ephemeral in a way...

Yeah, when we sort of staggered out, we were a bit like, 'Where's it all gone!'. That's the nature of the beast though because the circus—I think one year it turned over nearly £200,000 because we did two *Carny-Villes* and a load of other stuff. But all the money got used to do the gigs, and then we were like £8000 under the barrier over which you're no longer eligible for rates relief, so we were suddenly like, 'Shit! don't do any more gigs!'. If we'd earned another £8000 we would have been liable for another £130,000 in rates and it all would have gone horribly sideways. There were a lot of big things like that when suddenly you're like, Oh my god, and realise

how delicately balanced it all is.

A lot of the artists performed in the shows for free or for fairly low rates. Do you think that's because there aren't a lot of outlets for circus artists to perform their own work in Bristol?

A lot of the circus scene has been very corporate-led for the last ten years or so because you get people graduating and going into corporate entertainment. So I think they're really appreciative of this more underground Archaos-y sort of stuff—because that's what it's all about in a way. If you spend three years training up to be a circus performer and then end up doing a duet show for loads of corporate gigs it's a little bit limiting creatively.

And a lot of the Circomedia students got involved?

When we first turned up we used to get loads of their rejects—you know, people who dropped out of the course would come and do stuff with us... but then we started to get more of their graduates.

“The last Carny-Ville, Carny World, was kind of a piss take of us 20 or 30 years later, still here and trolling out this stuff—so we were a bit tired.”

They did a 25 year anniversary at the Circomedia Church earlier this year and they kind of invited us to be a part of that. We were always fairly distant of each other until then I suppose—just because we were doing different things. And we were kind of the crazy squatters that came to town and actually had no idea of the rich circus history that we were stumbling into. So I guess it was sort of an interesting thing to see the lineage of circus in Bristol, which has gone on since almost the inception of circus, and you realise that Circomedia was born out of a similar sort of scene when all those guys were younger and came together. There are a lot of parallels... Loads of our crew went through Circomedia years ago and stayed on in Bristol. That's the effect of Circomedia in one way—that people have carried on living in Bristol after the course because there's a big circus community: everything is here and everybody is here. It's kind of like everyone goes out to work everywhere else—there's not a big corporate entertainment market here really, compared to London or other places. So I guess we kind of plugged into that a bit and created something where people can perform.

After four years, how did you guys feel about moving on from the Island?

It's a mixed bag. Loads of people are like, Oh it's such a shame, but we were a little bit relieved almost, because it'd been four years instead of one-and-a-half and it kind of takes up a lot of time and energy to keep something that big going. So it was sad on the one hand, but we felt like we did it proud. The last *Carny-Ville, Carny World*, was kind of a piss take of us 20 or 30 years later, still here and trolling out this stuff—so we were a bit tired. And that was never what we were really about; we were always about short-term interventions.

Now you're installed at the Paintworks, what's next for the Invisibles?

We're not really a solid troupe; it's sort of the thing we've been wrestling with: how we actually make this work. The Cathedral was a little more distant, it was kind of tucked away a bit, but the Island and the Audi Garage were in a place where people were kind of coming through: they were quite accessible, easy to find and to be a part of. Trying to condense that down into a company that works in a normal sort of way... at some points there are 250 of us, but then at others there are like six of us. The Invisible Circus—that's what you get for choosing a name like that.

When I formed the company with Wim I guess the dream was to be a travelling circus. But I also really like taking over old buildings, so we're in this constant dichotomy of what is it, what are we, and what do we want to do? We're looking at maybe taking on sites that have been closed-down more recently—because up until now we've only been given really knackered buildings, and I don't think we've got too many more of them in us. There's only so many floors of pigeon shit that you want to clear out in your life and I think I'm pretty much getting to my limit.

For years we've wanted to do what we did in the last few, but four years at the Island has kind of taken its toll. There probably won't be another *Carny-Ville* that's quite like the old ones. It would cost a million to do the show. But that's the beautiful thing really: we did it because we could. We don't need your corporate sponsorship, we don't need to spend months writing funding proposals to fit into your cultural strategy. We are Bristol and we want to do this. //

////////////////////////////////////

Doug Francisco was interviewed by John Ellingsworth 23 September 2011 at the Paintworks, Bristol.

www.invisiblecircus.co.uk

Image of Doug Francisco: Courtesy of the company

{Event(Dimension):}



“The proposition on which I mean to insist at present, is simply this, that fringes of colours are produced by the interference of two portions of light; and I think it will not be denied by the most prejudiced, that the assertion is proved by the experiments I am about to relate, which may be repeated with great ease, whenever the sun shines, and without any other apparatus than is at hand to every one.”

— Thomas Young preparing to describe the first double-slit experiment to the Royal Society in 1803

A piece taking its inspiration from the differences between quantum and particle physics, featuring lycraed supergirls, black holes and volcanoes, and based on a famously baffling experiment... John Ellingsworth talks to **Sugar Beast Circus** director Geneva Foster Gluck about the company's new show *{Event(Dimension):}*.

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE HAD THIS left-brainer experience with mathematics that the tighter you try to grasp the workings of something the faster it all slips away; or else the sensation that a line of scientific reasoning, a theory, makes sense only for the length of time that someone spends explaining it to you, like it's a polite but uninterested guest that'll accept the invitation to *visit* your understanding but sidle out as soon as the introductions are over and attention shifts away. For most people I'd guess this is how it is: the system of our world is known by names and analogies and small, fleeting efforts of concentration. To really *feel* mathematics you would have to be a particular kind of person.

But that's exactly what we're here this evening in St Paul's Church—and isn't a church a perfect venue?—with the hope of experiencing: an intuitive sense of the machinery of our universe—or of our universe as it's presented after having been examined, reinterpreted, miniaturised and turned into *{Event(Dimension):}*, a show by Sugar Beast Circus about gravity, light, implosion and explosion, volcanoes, rainbows, superheroes, physics and metaphysics, time and space.

What we see is short enough, just a showing of some ideas that might never, in this form, be shown again. Silent white letters write themselves across a diaphanous

veil that reaches the height of the stage, telling us the properties of a black hole; it's quiet and private, but then suddenly the majesty of space is interrupted by a game show as a glittery host carries on a stack of black, wrapped boxes 'full of numbers' and tosses them one-by-one through a hula hoop that the attached sign identifies as, itself, a Black Hole. As this happens, appearing behind the gauze, an aerialist rolls down the curve of a cloudswing. In another scene, two women in superhero outfits are captured, multiplied and projected in ranks up the gauze, their heads obscured by wheels of light broken into a rainbow's spectrum. As music starts, and in unison, they perform a jerky dance as if their limbs are a card puppet's articulated cut-outs.

It's a brief showing, but those who've seen the company before would perhaps spot the thread that reaches back to their previous work: the sophistication (and weirdness) of the projection, the provocative friction between tones/registers (particularly, ethereality and kitsch), and then just the *substance* of the piece, the richness and texture that's been woven in from patient, long-term research.

When Sugar Beast started working on *{Event(Dimension):}* it was centred on science fiction and B-movies, but its focus soon drifted into harder science, catching on one

particular point of interest: the different theoretical approaches of classical and quantum physics. 'The piece is looking at this idea of quantum physics,' explains Sugar Beast director Geneva Foster Gluck when I meet her after the show, 'and with this secret agenda of how the more science knows about itself and the refined workings of science the more it actually starts to be close to metaphysics.... We're kind of trying to tread the line between what science is and what metaphysics is, and because we're looking at quantum physics in kind of a funny way it gives us artistic liberties to bring in the type of aesthetic we want to work with—rainbow heads and superheroes and everything else—as well as draw from real scientific theories and experiments.'

Among the many branches of research available in classical and quantum physics, the company has chosen to venture out on two of the thickest: first, the study of light, both for its own complicated workings, and for its properties as a tool by which we understand other phenomena and can measure the scale of the universe (by, for instance, using it to discern the distance of planets); and second, the study of explosive and implosive energies, looking at their centrality to the thinking of, respectively, classical and quantum physics. The research, which Geneva explains has been ongoing for about two years, has

also provided the formal structure of *{Event(Dimension):}*: 'The way the show is working, which I think is actually really exciting, is it's kind of based on this double slit experiment...'

(First conducted with light in 1803 by Thomas Young—when it led him to the half-true conclusion that light is a waveform—the most famous iteration of the double slit experiment was performed in 1961 by Clauss Jönsson using electrons. How it goes is this: you fire a beam of electrons at two thin slits cut into an otherwise impenetrable panel; a wall behind the panel records the pattern the electrons make as they pass through the slits and hit the wall. Since the electrons are particles you expect them to make a regular impact pattern: two vertical bands that are in line with the slits. But oh hey, turns out the pattern that emerges is actually a *spread* of bands—a recording of the sort of interference pattern you'd see if a wave passed through both slits and created two waves, originating at each aperture, that would then cross and interfere. In other words, the particles behaved like a wave. So the next refinement of the experiment was to fire a single electron at the panel, but doing this returned the same result: an interference pattern emerged on the back wall, meaning that one particle was somehow passing through both slits. Or neither slit. Or one slit in a crazy way. Anyway, it was impossible. To solve the mystery a device was placed at the panel to record exactly what happened as the electron reached the slits, but whenever the experiment was run with this level of observation the electron would pass through just one slit and create a regular particle pattern on the back wall. So if someone, via a recording device, *watched* the experiment at its critical moment the electron behaved like a particle; if they didn't it behaved like a wave—as though the electron knew someone was looking. It's really fucked up and if anything

“We're looking at the poetics between events. Like the idea that the butterfly flapping its wings causes the hurricane or the tsunami—a chain reaction—which I think is quite beautiful in that quantum physics kind of says that it happens on the quantum level.”

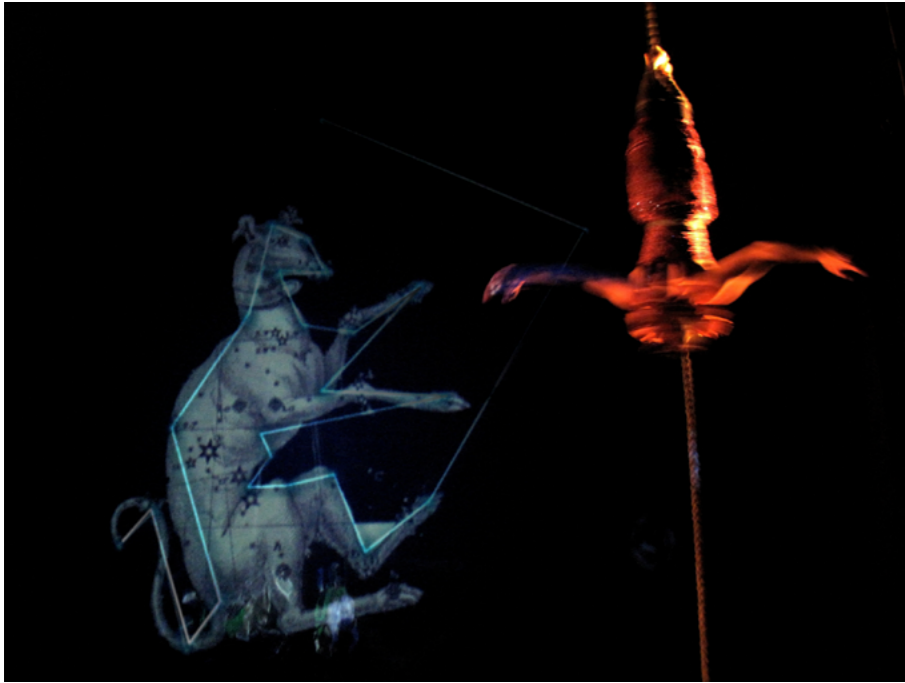
further experiments have just made it all worse.)

'It was the introduction to there being something else, the quantum side of things,' says Geneva, 'and the way the experiment is affected by the person watching seems like such a fundamentally interesting idea to bring into making a performance—because the only reason you're *doing* it is for the audience. So for *{Event(Dimension):}* we're using two different spaces, and we're maybe looking at one as a classical physics space and one as a quantum physics space. The audience enters, they have twenty minutes in one space with the soundtrack, then they switch places and have twenty minutes in the other space with the same soundtrack, which repeats. And the idea is that the two experiences, the two spaces, overlap, and the soundtrack will make you remember scenes from one space and associate them with what you're seeing in this other space.'

The circus performers used in the show are the tie, or the twist, between the two aesthetics, the physical and the metaphysical. Geneva: 'I think that with the circus trained body you have the ability to look like a superhero, to have this kind of superhuman thing of appearing weightless or having this impossible sense of equilibrium, but then all of that is actually grounded in this highly controlled, highly rigorous training and in this

kind of dedication to your body and to achieving those skills. The training and the dedication and the structure leads to this thing that's actually quite magical—and that seems like it must be a contradiction, and yet the two are totally linked. Somehow to me that fits into the story of what we're doing.' There's also, she admits, a certain, shrugging attitude of *Well why not?* 'I want to be a storyteller and I want to tell stories in the most interesting way I can. And if people are going to be involved why shouldn't they be these people who can be on stage and be present and do whatever they need to do *as well as* stand on one hand or be weightless and have this extreme capability within their bodies? It's part of the medium we want to work with—alongside the new technologies and animation. It's just such a lovely... *material*, in a way.'

Combining with the circus performance, the other main expressive tool in Sugar Beast's work is animation/projection, and for *{Event(Dimension):}* they've been experimenting with how they can use technology to connect audience, performer and projection in a kind of triangle of causal dependency—but without using fully interactive or semi-improvised methods. 'We're trying to work with live feed that goes through a programming, processing device to allow the show to be live in a pervasive media way,' says Geneva. 'So very affected by the audience



or by the performer, and not just a replica or a recording of the real thing. When we started we were like, “Oh, we want to do pervasive, we want to work with pervasive technologies—we’re going to use accelerometers to interact with the audience, they’re going to feed into the performance”... but I think slowly we’re realising that what we’re actually interested in is creating a constructed reality, or a very controlled aesthetic, and not in audience participation, or if there’s participation then how that happens has to be very controlled. This way of using the programming feels like it’s totally live, it’s totally interactive, but we’re in control of how it works.’

The technical and programming work in *{Event(Dimension):}* is being handled by Jean-Christophe Nicolas, a fine artist and designer who’s worked on Sugar Beast’s previous shows (as well as with vaunted multimedia stars 1927), plus the company have lately spent a good block of time working with Blast Theory, an interactive media company based in Brighton who’ve helped them on two counts: one, simply by supporting and encouraging the technical choices they’ve made; and two, by sharing some expertise in building interstructural narratives that sort of scaffold

around complex issues or ideas.

With a piece that has the challenging formal arrangement of *{Event(Dimension):}* it’s really the only approach that can work, and this method of breaking a story down into a network of loosely connected feelings or moments—which needn’t be actions or events, but could instead be simple elements such as a look, a colour, a sound, a mood—Geneva describes as ‘contemporary storytelling’, seeing it not just as a way to present work, but also a means to devise it: ‘The way we operate as a company is I come up with the structure, I kind of have these images, and I have this concept—and then we just define the ways the ideas and the staging will meet. The more work that you do the more meeting points there are.’ And this method of structuring a narrative, where the parts might be connected in unforeseen but significant ways, once again draws comparison with the company’s research: ‘We’re looking at this theory of entanglement, which is that classical physics would say that anything that moves has to have a physical force that moves it, but in the quantum world it’s like there are these connections between things and we don’t understand how it works. Things affect other things

without having this condition of physical touch. It’s something we’re looking at in the two spaces, the poetics between events. Like the idea that the butterfly flapping its wings causes the hurricane or the tsunami or whatever—a chain reaction—which I think is quite beautiful in that quantum physics kind of says that it happens on the quantum level.’

So, all in all, it’s an ambitious show. Heading toward a premiere in January 2012 at the London International Mime Festival, the company recently spent four weeks in La Brèche, an incredible custom-built creation space in Cherbourg, northern France that seems to have been warped back from a superior future. They went in with the idea that they’d put the whole show together in a month, but when they tested the structure of *{Event(Dimension):}* the project responded with further challenges: ‘The space that we’re calling the quantum space has come together really beautifully,’ explains Geneva. ‘What we’re doing in there—the way the soundscore works, the closure between the beginning and the end—has a really nice feel. But then, well, then we’ve got *the lecture*, the classical side that tries to explain everything or that’s more practical, and it’s proving to be really hard—because we’re trying not to be condescending, but also because we don’t really *know*. We’ve done a lot of research and read around the subject for the last couple of years, and we’re prepared to talk about it, but at some point I just don’t understand it well enough to give a lecture.’

The silent white text from the St Paul’s presentation will be part of how the company communicate the theory of the classical physics section—and though there was some feedback from La Brèche that the text was heavy, Geneva is keen to keep it, if only for the aesthetic effect of the writing appearing on the gauze then something else materialising in the space behind

“We had people in the audience who kind of looked like professors and admitted that they’d been reading about quantum physics for the last fifteen years.”

it, as though called. And even if the classical side is the ‘serious’ or ‘heavy’ side, it’s still got a multiplied projected cadre of dancing rainbow-head supergirls, and a spangly black hole, and, Geneva promises, a volcano.

What Sugar Beast showed at St Paul’s, though, is just one solution to the ‘problem’ of the classical space, and they’re looking to find a little more development time to test out some other ideas. To even consider this is a luxury: ‘It’s been really great to have support from the beginning of the project,’ says Geneva. ‘This is the first time that we’ve gone in with money and a date that we know the show is going to premiere, and it’s stressful and scary and there’s a pressure to it, but it’s just been really amazing to go into Cherbourg with five people that I wanted to work with, and with Jean and his technical abilities, and with all of our ideas and images, and to just *work* on something. It’s scary, you know. Definitely it’s like you can *fail*, but it’s really good.’

The support from La Brèche and its director Jean Vinet has clearly been important to Sugar Beast, and opened doors for them on the French festival circuit, and you get the feeling that the warm response there has done a lot to bolster the confidence of the company in making the sort of work they’re

making. Geneva, starry eyed: ‘How amazing is the audience out there? They’re pretty amazing. We had people in the audience for the *{Event(Dimension):}* showing at La Brèche who kind of looked like professors and admitted that they’d been reading about quantum physics for the last fifteen years.’ And what did they make of the show? ‘They said that they were just really happy that we’d approached quantum physics from an intuitive or subconscious perspective... I think that the liberty of approaching something creatively as artists rather than scientists was recognised and appreciated.’

It was another reminder to be respectful of the research, which is a living, changing thing, and to work from instinct. ‘That’s where the danger is,’ says Geneva. ‘If we start pretending that we know too much or if we start to say too much and then be wrong or be called out, then I think we could have an audience that was quite unhappy with the show or that thought it was a crock of shit and we didn’t know what we were talking about. Whether the audience will need us to explain the links between the theory and the performance, between the two spaces, or whether they can *see* them—I think that’s our challenge.’ //

////////////////////////////////////

John Ellingsworth saw a work-in-progress showing of *{Event(Dimension):}*, and interviewed director Geneva Foster Gluck, at St Paul’s Church, Bristol on 24 September 2011.

{Event(Dimension):} will premiere at the London International Mime Festival 27-29 January 2012 at Jacksons Lane.

www.sugarbeastcircus.com / www.mimefest.co.uk

Images:
Page 19: *{Event(Dimension):}*
Page 22: Sugar Beast Circus, *Milkwood Rodeo*

Images courtesy of the company.

////////////////////////////////////

Is your festival on fire?



Last year the organisers of Croatia's **Festival Novog Cirkusa** decided to turn their five-day festival into a one-day conceptual event, with one performance, one lecture, one exhibition, one poster, and one programme (of mostly blank pages). John Ellingsworth talks to festival director **Ivan Kralj** about scandals, struggles, hallucinations, the Ministry of Culture, and the necessity of provocation.



How did you come to start Festival Novog Cirkusa?

It was actually a two-year process to figure out how to start the festival. One of the ideas was to hold it somewhere on the Croatian coast, but over time I decided it should be in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, because commercial sponsors are located there and most of the public money for culture is spent there. I thought it would be much easier to start it in Zagreb, but soon found that it was virtually impossible to make the festival with other people's money—so I did it mainly with my own investment.

Did you know how to start a festival?

No, but I think nobody who starts from scratch knows what to do. Back then I'd been learning to juggle for a few years, and I was involved a bit in the juggling community where there were some people that wanted to try to start some sort of circus festival or juggling convention of some kind. But then every time it failed they said, 'Oh, it's so complicated, it's impossible.' I'm quite a stubborn person. So for me it was like, 'What's so complicated? If you want to start a juggling convention just get with fellow jugglers and there it is.' It didn't seem so demanding.

But of course the thing I wanted to do was not really a convention—it was a festival to gather professionals and general audience, among others—with workshops for Croatian artists because there is no education for circus in our country. And beyond all this the real goal was to put the festival front and centre in the public cultural life of Zagreb and Croatia.

Yeah, it was quite a task—but I was a journalist and for me it followed on from that. When I started the festival journalists interviewed me and asked, 'How did you end up in circus and what's the difference?' It was very hard for me to explain



what the difference is between journalism and circus (isn't the difference apparent!?), but in another way they are the same thing: media. It's all media in the sense that you're trying to reach the public with something—with the content. So I didn't really feel like I was doing something extraordinarily special—it was just communicating, which was already the core of my work.

And then of course I knew that at the start it was really important to involve the press—because circus in Croatia really needed rebranding, in a country used only to traditional circuses travelling around with their series of acts. So I felt there was a really big need to involve the media in discovering this other side of circus.

I suppose one characteristic of journalism is political awareness and engagement, and looking at the work Novog Cirkusa has programmed it seems like you've been out to collect work that has a political slant, an edge, rather than the more abstract style of work that predominates in Europe.

I think that most of the festivals in Europe do support this abstract style of work that is made for

everybody—or maybe for nobody specific. When you're programming a festival you're trying to feel what the audience wants and how to respond to the audience's needs, while I think our approach was quite different in the sense that we didn't really make compromises. We wanted to push the artform.

So it was really risky, in a way, to programme what we did, but it was also much easier for us because our audience were completely new to contemporary circus. So their expectations were not resisting the work; it was much easier to challenge their expectations than with someone that already has experience of what contemporary circus should be.

Maybe also we miseducated the audience—because maybe now they think contemporary circus is always very political... but I'm not intending to write a circus encyclopedia or a circus history, and if someone would measure that *through* our festival they wouldn't do a wonderful job. For me it was more important to create a platform for the works that don't easily find support. I remember during the fourth festival some of the programmers who came from Europe, or almost all of them, saw



the programme—which included two different performances with schizophrenic people on stage, and one with an HIV positive artist—and said, 'Are you really sure that you want to put all of this in front of your audiences? You're not worried that your audiences will reject it or that no one will come?'

For me it was a strange question because the audience really *want* to be challenged and don't want to see the same thing that they saw last year. I think our programme was quite unsettling for European programmers because usually you want to have at least *one* major piece or something good that's played somewhere else—there is this complex of inferiority in a way that you feel it's much more reasonable to programme something that was already successful in Avignon or Edinburgh... you know, that you should not risk so much. Which is a very strange concept to me, because circus is all about risk.

For us also it was an economic question—it felt as though working with some new names, or making some new combinations, would be easier. But I think it was also part of the success of the festival because then we managed to put some artists on stage that years

later played in Avignon or went to the Mime Festival in London. It made it easier for us to find our own festival spot in Europe—so programmers and professionals didn't come because they weren't available during some other important festival, but because they wanted to see why this company premiered in Zagreb and not somewhere else. And then obviously when some of these companies did find success in Europe it became more interesting...

How did you programme the festival? Did you take open submissions?

I might become interested by DVDs or promo materials, but usually I watch every show at least twice before inviting it. For me it's interesting to go to the festival that's not yet so discovered, or if I happen to be at some big festival to go to some other place where performances are playing—it

doesn't have to be an established venue, it can be quite underground, like Area 10 in Peckham (now closed), where I discovered Psychological Art Circus. Big festivals love big names, but I feel comfortable skipping seeing Aurélien Bory for the fifth time. Then maybe I can try to find something in the same city that doesn't have a big promotional campaign behind it—something that is much harder to discover—and I can go see that and give it a chance.

I also believe that the programmers of today are still very Francocentric—and I think this too is a symptom of not trusting audiences. They think, 'Oh, the audience like French shows—there's high production standards, there's poetry, the visual aesthetic of French circus.' France have also been Francocentric as they never really used to programme companies from the rest of Europe—they've

only just started to in the last few years. One of these festivals that I was invited to attend many years ago was Circa Festival in Auch. It's actually changed quite a lot in the meantime, but back then I think no one was speaking English and there were not so many international programmers coming; today it's become a meeting place for European programmers coming to discover work—but still coming to discover *French* shows. They programme maybe one or two companies from abroad every year. But it was also the case that when Marc Fouilland, the director of Circa, made his first international journey to a non-French circus festival it was to Zagreb, to Croatia.

How would you describe the Croatian circus scene? You mentioned that there's no formal education, but a Croatian circus company, Room 100, were recently successful in Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe...



It's hard for us to produce something for our festival because there are no venues that programme circus during the year, and if a Croatian company wants to bring work to our festival then they're really brave because they're taking the risk of creating something that will not have the possibility to play in Croatia...

Outside the festival I would say the circus scene has a history of splitting up which is probably connected with it developing in a country that is in transition. Because there was this big boom of shopping centres, of course, as Croatia entered into capitalism, and suddenly there was this challenge to artists of how to respond to generous offers of work juggling for the shopping centre or the new perfume launch. You know, doing all this stuff which is not actually art—performing circus.

I would say the scene all started with one or two companies, and when money got involved people started to concentrate on their own interests, or started to think that someone else was getting a better part or a bigger share—so it split up, and basically became a country of solo performers and small companies and rearranging companies. Room 100 was part of one big company that split (in the Croatian city that is actually called Split); the direction they took was very individual and I think uncommon.

“It's a young art-form with young companies and young artists who rarely open themselves to outside influence”

There's a lot of live art and body-based practice going on in Croatia. Does that stuff cross over with circus?

Not really. It doesn't cross over because I think they're totally separate worlds. Also circus is not yet recognised, a circus artist is not recognised as an artist, and when you have these sorts of crossovers you always have to make some exchange or compromise, which I don't think can happen yet. It's a young artform with young companies and young artists who rarely open themselves to outside influence. Also, they are everything: they are the directors, the actors, the technicians, everything.

I ask because Room 100 seemed to have some resonance with live art practice...

They're an uncommon example, but also they went through the JTCE programme, which wasn't just about money but also about getting advice and mentorship—and I think when they got the opportunity they used it. It's really important I think to understand the role of other people around you—because if you're working on a performance project it's not bad to open up to people outside. You can't be everything—can't be a manager *and* an artist—but most artists are still living in the old Croatian reality where you turn off the house lights yourself before you walk out on stage. The art is always combined with the economics...

It's difficult of course without subsidy. Tell me about the relationship Festival Novog Cirkusa has had with Zagreb and the Ministry of Culture.

So, well, for the first edition we got some support from the City of Zagreb, which I think we got because I'd previously been the creative producer for this small corporate street festival produced by Sony. It was seen by some influential people in the city and they said, 'OK,

let's give his new project a try'—otherwise we wouldn't have gotten any money from anywhere. The Ministry didn't support it at all. And then... I understood I wanted to do it anyway, and that it didn't really matter who supported it, but at the same time I felt that they were supporting so many things that were not really mainstream culture, and that if they at least came and saw the performances, checked out what I was applying for, then maybe next year they'd consider it. But they didn't want to come to the festival at all because it was considered not enough artform—there was not enough art inside of the form. So they *couldn't* go to see the circus; they had their cultural dignity. We had media support and sold-out performances, and for the public it really put a new light on what circus is—but not for the Ministry. And then what helped us in the second year was that there was a big scandal. Our festival is quite often at the centre of scandals unfortunately...

In the second year it was very hard for us—we had two performances planned at the two biggest theatres in Zagreb. They're not so big, but anyway the biggest we have. Basically these were the only places we could go to with these performances, and suddenly it happened that both of these theatres cancelled their agreement with us without reasonable explanation. I never found out what happened for sure, but that year we ended up being considered within the city council's theatre remit, which might have been seen by them as a threat—us coming into their territory and competing with them for money. But I don't know. The reasons they gave were really silly—they were not available for the date we'd agreed, and then when I asked what date they *could* do, they said September, totally the wrong month for our festival. But I said, 'Yes, OK, we'll take it.' Then they raised the price on us—at first, for the National Theatre, it was something like

7000 Euros. But then, oh, it became 10,000 Euros. I would always say, 'It's, OK, we'll take it', and they'd say 'It's 10,000 Euros + VAT'. 'It's, OK, we'll take it.' In the end, when they couldn't find a new excuse, the last answer they gave was that it was technically impossible to stage our show in their theatre. This was the show by O Ultimo Momento, *Contigo*, so you know how technically complicated it is: it's one Chinese pole in the middle of the stage and nothing else.

So we ended up in a former factory and we put all of these performances there instead, and we made a kind of performance connected to this scandal because it felt like these venues were really sabotaging our festival. There's even a city policy that says cultural festivals should use all these theatres for free if they are city funded. So we ended up creating these gloves, which we called Gloves for Applause, and which we presented in high fashion on a velvet pillow—it was like some celebrity glove. And basically these gloves had the faces of these two women that ran those theatres, and still run them, five years later, and there was a mime artist who presented how to use the clapping gloves, which also had the initials of their names, which were L and D, the letters in Croatian for left and right, so you knew how to use them. It ended up on the news, and the same night the Minister of Culture, Bozo Biskupic, descended. I guess he was upset or surprised or whatever and decided to come to this factory beside an underground music club where we moved our programme. He came with his four main assistants—one of them is actually now the new Minister of Culture—and they ended up in the box office line to buy the tickets. Nobody knew they were coming. Every year our festival has a topic or theme, and that year everything was designed with the vocabulary of planes and airports and flights, and we had boarding tickets to go into the theatre, and check-in

and duty free shops and flight attendants showing you how using mobiles is forbidden and things like that. And also we had a tannoy speaker, a man giving announcements, and to make fun of the Ministry's ignorance we had made this recording: 'This is the last call for Mr Bozo Biskupic. Please proceed to the gate.' And basically he came and that's what he heard. After that somehow the festival did get slightly more support because they had *seen* the work we programmed. That night the Minister came it was Moglice-Von Verx, *I look up, I look down*, one of the most amazing pieces—a very important piece.

So I think they had seen that our festival was something totally different from their prejudices. Things changed after that year, but things never changed enough that they would fully support the success of the festival.

We tried to sell the gloves for 10,000 Euros, the same price as the National Theatre hire—we were promoting them as the most expensive gloves in the world. We thought maybe some lunatic would buy them, but they ended up in the Museum of Festival Relics, which we opened in the last festival as a collection of different weird artefacts witnessing Festival Novog Cirkusa's history of struggle.

I think I know, more or less, but tell me: why was No. 6 packed down into one day?

Basically I think the fifth festival was a really successful one to end the story on because it never became easy enough to produce. I mean, it's really hard to work to produce a professional high-level festival with a totally volunteer team, and with nobody being paid, renting *everything*. If we could have rented a cake for the festival and claimed back every slice that wasn't eaten we would have done it. Everything went to the artists and to technical realisation and

“The fifth edition of the festival was really the year that it came to the cultural wall, as they say”

a little bit to promotion, and the cultural funders never responded to the fact that this was a festival that really served its audiences and measured its success by them. Croatia's critical community has celebrated it as one of the most important festivals that's happening in Croatia—which is quite a brave thing to say for circus.

Zagreb is the city that likes to say it has the biggest cultural budget in Europe, proportional to GDP, and it might be true but it's also true that this money is not being disseminated in any logical way. So I decided that the fifth edition of the festival was really the year that it came to the cultural wall, as they say. We had like 60 programmers coming from Europe, journalists from abroad, a big international conference on women and circus, artists who were giving international premieres, audiences filling up the theatres. We even let audiences sit on the stairs. So it was a really successful one again, but also, for us, a destructive one: all of my team were collapsing, crying after not sleeping for two months. It really became a health issue; myself I started to hallucinate.

What did you see?

This one night I had to fill out some food vouchers. I had to write 'Laura Herts', the name of this American artist who was performing. To make this food voucher all I had to do was write her name and I just remember I tried so many times to write it—an indefinite

number of times, just throwing it away and trying again on a new voucher. And then at the end I managed somehow—and I thought, ‘It’s kind of weird, but it will be OK, it will be usable.’ And in the morning I checked and I found that the real name of Laura Herts on this voucher was FEEDING THE ANIMALS.

Sometimes there was this unconscious moment of feeling like you’re awake but also sleeping and you can’t really control your hands—your body is someone else’s body. It’s quite frightening I think.

So after two months of abnormal stress and effort I decided I didn’t want to do this anymore to my friends. Because let’s be honest there are not many generous people in the world who would really

be done, that it wasn’t enough. We made an autonomous decision that we would cut the festival to one day and they said, ‘No it has to last more than one day.’ They didn’t like our provocation and retroactively cut 20 percent of funding that we’d already spent. That year everything was a total provocation. We cut our expenses by producing only one poster—no other promotional material. The audience still came. We printed booklets that were half empty, illustrating the fact that the festival should have more programming. Everything was one by one: one performance, one lecture, one exhibition, one workshop. It was a really conceptual realisation of the festival, and it was strange because the programmers were still coming to see the performances. It’s a really big trip to come to see one performance which you probably already

provide for. So for me it was really important for someone to make a decision: is this a public need? Don’t lie; I don’t want to participate in this lie. If it’s a need then OK let’s do it; if it’s not a need then let’s kill it. Really. Sometimes it’s like building igloos in the desert as they say.

We actually do this in Zagreb: we have I think Europe’s biggest ski cup on our mountain, which has no snow so we produce the snow, and give the biggest prizes to the skiers in competitions. Millions and millions are spent for nothing—they describe it as promotion for the country, but what are we promoting? A country without snow.

In the application forms for 2011 I wrote in the description of the project that if you want to support



“I was expecting... I wanted to produce a non-festival, a festival that is not enough. Which was actually a sincere confession.”

sacrifice as much as one’s friends would do—these are the people who take holidays from their real jobs to destroy themselves with work. These are the real supporters of the festival. I couldn’t even give them the money for the gas to pick people up at the airport.

We never used this organisational problem or health issues for promotional value—so nobody really knew that something was wrong. We pretended to be a really professional festival—made everything seem very well organised.

So I had this idea to organise a one-day festival that would actually use the support it gets from public funds—I wanted to show what could be done with public money in service of the public need. Then even the Ministry would understand that it couldn’t

saw, so there were people coming to give their support.

What did you expect to be the outcome of the provocation?

I was expecting... I wanted to produce a non-festival, a festival that is not enough. Which was actually a sincere confession. It’s totally crazy to invest your private funds into the public need in the percentages that I did, we did. So I think it had to be cut—after six years.

It’s not enough that you work 365 days in a year just for the cause of making a festival without being paid—but also to invest your own means and sacrifice so much of your personal life, because you can imagine that you also have to work other jobs to provide for yourself and the other people you have to

the festival then please support it properly—or don’t support it at all. It doesn’t make sense. In Croatia we support festivals that have one person at a concert, or 70 people at a huge, expensive opening.

What’s next for your organisation, Mala performerska scena?

We recently finished the book *Women & Circus* and we’re now trying to promote it all over. There are some new publishing projects planned for 2012, some new circus and sideshow projects, and we’re still producing the *Red Room* Cabaret, which we’ll tour as much as we can. We should also start a residency programme next year. In addition, we’re partners in several European networks and we’re participating in ongoing projects and in the preparation of new ones dedicated to critical writing and

and mobility. There is also this big idea of a new magic festival (magie nouvelle) we would like to kill ourselves with next year.

But currently we are of course occupied with the seventh Festival Novog Cirkusa that will, magically again, happen from 25th to 30th of October, with Les Colporteurs, *Red Room* and the finished piece by Room 100. The festival refuses to disappear somehow. One of

the reasons is probably the new government elections, happening just after our festival. We can’t expect big changes in the cultural sector really, but this is certainly the political point where we want to comment on the reality. Now, this seems like a lot of projects in the making, but our team of lunatics working without pay is growing. I’m not sure if I will personally be involved in all of this. I don’t know. This may in fact be

my job application. I’m really open to finding a new work placement somewhere in Europe, so we’ll have to see if any interesting employers are reading your magazine... //

////////////////////////////////////

Ivan Kralj was interviewed way back in January 2011 next to the roaring kitchen of a central London pizzeria.

Prospective employers (or prospective buyers for the precious *Gloves for Applause*) should contact Ivan on ivan@cirkus.hr

www.cirkus.hr

////////////////////////////////////

////////////////////////////////////

Images:
Page 24: Postering Zagreb
Page 25: Ivan Kralj
Page 26: Angela Laurier, *Déversoir*;
Cie Moglice-Von Verx, *I look up, I look down*
Page 27: *Gloves for Applause*
Page 31: Cultural Minister and Flight Attendant

All images courtesy of Festival Novog Cirkusa

////////////////////////////////////



The Inverted World

In *Miroir, Miroir* a suspended aerial mirror is the stage for **Mélissa Von Vépy**'s work on identity, the unknown, and the symbol of the looking glass. Here she talks about the making of the piece.

I trained as a trapeze artist at the Centre national des arts du cirque in Châlons, and aerial technique and the vertical dimension have remained central in my research. It is a skill, an art, a form of expression that allows me to change a situation or a common theme into a metaphorical idea that lifts it out of the ordinary.

For *Miroir, Miroir*, the design of the 'set' and the design of the 'apparatus' are inseparable; the two were intertwined from the start.

There's a scene in Ingmar Bergman's film *Cries and Whispers* in which a man puts his wife in front of a mirror and describes

his own characteristics through each of her features. There's a tension in the scene that fascinates me—it's the question of what we choose to show of ourselves through our exterior appearance. What do we protect or hide, and what, beyond this, makes up our selves?

In *Miroir, Miroir* I wanted to capture a sense of a person horrified at their own reflection, and to give as well this feeling that the distance between the reflected and the real has almost disappeared.

So it seemed interesting to construct a **mirror—suspended, floating—on which I could move but where I would be 'stuck' in**

my own image, as well as being there with flashes of the reflected audience, who would be involved in the piece and returned to their own reflection.

After we made the mirror, it took me some time to tame it, to figure out how to use it and move it, and to see how to reach the freely expressive states that make up the show.

I build my shows on issues that are of paramount concern to me—issues that I think can be shared by everyone but I interpret the woman in *Miroir, Miroir* as a character, a metaphorical 'figure'.

The audience aren't the subject of



the piece, but **I'm urging them to come 'through the mirror' with me.** The most beautiful thing is when members of the audience tell me that they too plunged into the mirror, crossed its threshold, and that the piece invoked personal emotions and experiences, connections that they may have felt at the time without being fully aware of them.

It's not very interesting for the audience to just watch a female character having her own identity crisis, but it takes on another dimension when it comes to wider questions: Who am I? How does my environment affect me? In what sense am I an 'identity'? How do people perceive me?

What object refers to itself more than the mirror?

The Looking Glass is a very strong symbol. It is the world of the imagination: the inverted world, the unknown, the unreal. Rather than referencing a specific story or fairytale, in *Miroir, Miroir* the mirror is a symbol of the 'irrational', and a metaphor for the other side—the more secret part of our selves.

We perform the piece outdoors and indoors, and though the set design and choreography remains exactly the same, the environment greatly influences the audience's perception. **Indoors, I think the audience experience a full immersion: you can really leave the real world.** Outdoors, there are more elements to contend with—wind, sky, trees, concrete...

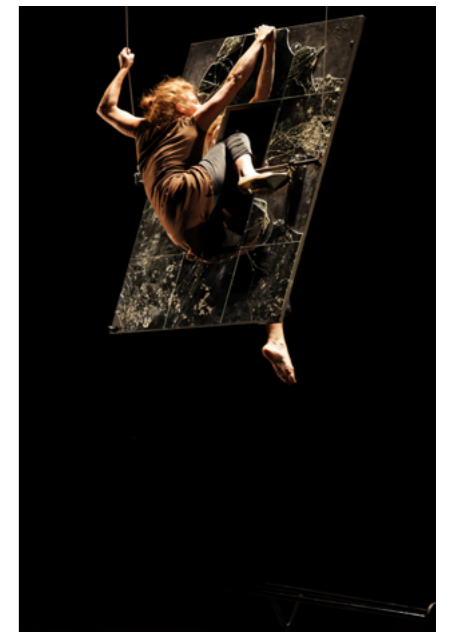
I don't like having to put the piece within a genre. It's



difficult because the word 'circus' often evokes a world of great feats, entertainment—a lively and colourful world.

The rhythm of *Mirror, Mirror* is played on a stretched, slender thread of inner feelings, yet the physical dimension, the risk-taking, the dizziness... they are all at the heart of the piece, and they are the characteristics that belong to the circus, the world I come from.

MELISSA VONVEPY



Mélissa Von Vépy was interviewed by John Ellingsworth September 2011. Her piece *Miroir, Miroir* was created in 2009 in the frame of Sujets à Vif, SACD, at the Festival d'Avignon.

www.happes.org

Images:
Page 32 & first of 33: © M Houlet
All others: © Christophe Raynaud de Lage



Reviews

p.35 // Gandini Juggling: Blotched

p.37 // Wild Colours: Gemma Banks on Blotched

p.41 // Cirque Éloize: iD

p.42 // Greenwich + Docklands



Gandini Juggling: Blotched



THE COMPANY, ELEVEN OF THEM THIS TIME, thread through the crowd. Sean Gandini comes close and rustles past looking like a piñata, his voluminous, papery coat and trousers layered pink, purple, yellow and orange, with a turquoise band settled at the waist as the cummerbund of this evening's attire. What looks like perhaps a peak cap resting on his head will later reveal itself to be a semi-realistic plastic donkey mask. Elsewhere, the other members of the troupe are picked out among the dark crowd by these small sacks, carried by hand, that emanate a soft, whispering light. I can see grass skirts, aprons, lei garlands, mouse ears, string vest nets used for vests and not-vests, elbow guards, calf-length cheerleader socks, and a particularly striking hat sewn together from plush toy animals (+ a Pikachu) like a Katamari Damacy ball. The colours are chemical azure, hardhat yellow, orange, pink, various day-glo; patterns range across khaki, cheque, stripes and rich coral-like African prints. The company converge on the stage for a group shot, and it looks, sort of, post-apocalyptic—in that way that humanity has forgotten the

meaning of its own signs, as though there was a huge tidal wave and this kitsch is all of what washed up of civilisation.

It's an aesthetic which on first sight felt to me like the lingering influence of director and chaos lord Maksim Komaro (who the company worked with on *Motet*), but I read after the performance that *Blotched* was devised based on a series of illustrations by costume/fashion designer Gemma Banks, that these were in turn inspired by the work of Bernhard Wilhelm and Alexander McQueen, and that the idea had been to work on creating a piece *from* images rather than starting with a thematic framework and using that to develop the visual language of the piece.

What you see on stage has some of the same characteristics I think as improvisation or, say, sound poetry: images are decoupled from literal or sequentially-derived meaning, and instead you're placed in a state of disorientation—one that makes it all the more startling when the piece's intangible, sliding elements

suddenly, and for just a moment, click together. A melody, a sound, an image—it might feel uncanny, or sublime, or unsettling, or familiar, but these are smuggled-in, bootlegged feelings: strong stuff of unknown provenance. For me the finest and strangest moment in *Blotched* was when a lone male juggler is circled by female members of the troupe who spit paint down his white front, this act accompanied by Elvis singing one of the immortals, 'Always On My Mind'. It's hard to say why it works, and even if I knew I'd probably prefer not to.

Elsewhere in the piece the images, for me, streamed by a little inconsequentially. As the costumes come off to reveal simple white outfits beneath, the show uses paint as its central medium—one man juggles clubs under a long line of red liquid spouting from a can another holds high above him; a woman has her white dress sprayed with paint fired from syringes; the stage becomes wetter and wetter. I'm widely, risibly ignorant of visual art, even more so of fashion, and sense that there was a fair amount of allusive game-playing that was sheared off by the narrowness of my view. But I also felt that by aligning itself with the techniques of absurdism and aggressively deconstructed visual art *Blotched* overwrites the character of the performers—by which I don't mean the assumed, narrative 'characters' (there's certainly no trace of them, and good riddance), but instead the particular quality of a performer's individual presence, their physicality, their life, all the things which make them more than just the actors or components of an image. I think the audience struggled with this, and with an ambiguity of tone which vacillated between humour

and existential misery (not a bad combination, but it needs a rhythm). In a way it seemed as though they'd taken the playful dissonance between the ultra-serious and the fundamentally ridiculous that made their last show *Smashed!* so delightful and turned all the dials into the red zone. The end of the piece, which sees the company writhing in Guernican agony on a paint-soaked floor, isn't so ambiguous, but by then the audience seemed unsure to the point of unresponsiveness: OK, but what is it?

Right now *Blotched* feels to me as though it has a few very interesting lines of thinking—about analogue and digital imagery, and abstract meaning—active within a formalistic sort of interest in composition and colour (there's a quite lovely scene where the cast walk in sequence across a white canvas, drawing juggling clubs and batons in circles which leave faint marks—nothing else), but also like there's more ambition, more *idea*, behind *Blotched* than the performance I saw quite managed to contain or use. The word

'experimental' is muddy and insipid, but here's a performance that redeems it—one that's in search of something new, that's a research process without a predetermined outcome—and it's a great commendation for Watch This Space that they support this sort of theatre year after year. The Gandinis continued to work on their commission from 2010, *Smashed!*, after its initial showings, and presented it again at WTS this

////////////////////////////////////

Gandini Juggling's *Blotched* played at the National Theatre Square as part of Watch This Space Festival on 5 August 2011.

www.gandinijuggling.com
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/wts

For more on the Gandinis see www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com/artists-companies/gandini-juggling

Images:
 All *Blotched* photos, pages 34-40, by Ryoko Uyama

////////////////////////////////////

year in a revised, longer version. With *Blotched* there's more to do I think, but I'd love to see it come back. //

JOHNELLINGSWORTH



Wild Colour



Gemma Banks on her work designing the costumes for Gandini Juggling's **Blotched**

THE GANDINIS FIRST APPROACHED ME with this single, strong idea: they wanted to make a show with paint, where the primary *idea* was paint, and where they'd wind up getting messier and messier throughout the piece.

We had a meeting. I didn't know that much about the company, but they had a few references for the project: one was Bernhard Willhelm, who's this quite wacky fashion designer who also does a lot of costume work—like he did an amazing shoot with Björk for Dazed and Confused maybe a year, two years ago; and then the other idea was to make a tribute to the designer Alexander McQueen—they wanted to have one of their performers, Doreen Großman, in a white dress and splatter her with paint. It's an idea from a piece McQueen did where a model came out and her feet were strapped onto a plinth, and then she was twisted around on this central dais while robotic arms sprayed her dress with paint. I think they just loved the image—this idea of the pure white ballerina and then something so anarchic happening. It's violent, as well, in some ways, and I think they wanted to work with that aspect.

I liked these initial ideas because they were both fashion references and I come from a fashion background, and I think the company were really excited because I seemed to get what they wanted to do. They had some stuff they wanted to draw on—they were picking out images—but then with other things I was able to run with ideas. I looked a lot at the Willhelm book, *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, and then coming from that I saw some central themes that I could work with.

We had a month, and for the amount of costumes that was actually quite a tight period. You can't really make more than one outfit a day, at best. The process is design, amendment, then you go away and you shop,

but when I brought them the drawings they didn't want to change a thing, and decided to base the show around the drawings.

I think the show started off quite innocent, and that, even though it had dark undertones from the beginning, it got progressively darker and darker. I'd been sending them these e-mails about *Clockwork Orange*, and we'd had this discussion of whether it should be the boys spraying Doreen with paint. I liked the idea that I could put them in white boilersuits and it would be quite violent, but it wound up being the two girls that did the scene and it ended up, in a way, being quite beautiful as she got absolutely drenched in this black paint.

I think that something the Gandinis are aware of is that they're inherently funny; even when they're doing something quite dark, they're inherently really funny. That's what I liked about the costumes—they were so funny at times, even though there was that undertone of darkness.

They had late shows starting at 10pm every night, and so you'd always have this audience from the National Theatre building come pouring out midway through the show. It was a wonderful moment every time: they'd come out during the spitting, when a group of performers were spitting paint down another's front.

Something Sean said was that before the dress rehearsals they went onstage to try out the spitting—doing it just with water to see how it would work. And when people saw it with water they were really quite appalled and disgusted—it was just *grotesque*—but Sean said it was a different response when it was done with paint. People found it a lot funnier. Because they could see the paint it somehow went from repulsive and disgusting to being a little more comedic. //



1. One of the things I really liked and picked up on from the Bernhard Willhelm book was the raffia, which is this straw-like material. From the raffia I think I got this tribal idea, and that was one of references I kept returning to. I went on to look at this amazing book called *Maske* by the photographer Phyllis Galebo, and I started looking at her images; something about them seemed to fit this idea of a tribe, like an urban tribe, but something a bit deconstructed—with no rules almost.

I've never worked with jugglers before, and there was the added problem that they have to have their arms free and they can't have too much interfering with their bodies—around their thighs or their hips as well as the upper body. So there was that practical element that I was worried about, the actual working of the costumes, but I designed them and said I'd bring them to the company so they could see if there needed to be any amendments.

In the end, they didn't want me to change anything and decided that if one of the costumes wasn't easy to juggle in then they'd just give the person wearing it less juggling and a little more dancing. That ended up

happening with Kim Huynh, who wore the big raffia coat, which was immensely difficult to juggle in. I discussed changing the design, but they just liked the look of it so much that they wanted to keep it. And I was so pleased because in the end Kim had some amazing moments—one in particular where the others, in a really tribal way, circled around her and she was dancing in the coat. The movement in the raffia was just so beautiful; that coat came to life in such a wonderful way.

2. That's a jack pyke balaclava. It's a type of camouflage. You can buy whole suits, everything you can possibly imagine in jack pyke: jack pyke underpants, jack pyke gloves... if I could have afforded it Jon would have been covered entirely in jack pyke.

3+4. Sean and Kati chose who was going to be wearing which costume and I think they chose really, really well. So Malte Steinmetz, who's the really tall juggler, wore this king costume; he's so tall anyway but with this crown on top as well he just looked remarkable. And obviously they're great performers, so they've really worked to bring the costumes to life. There's one

section where Sean has the piñata suit on, and his head back with a pole balancing on his chin, and he has this donkey mask that he's pulled down to be like his face. He was shaking trying to hold the balance, the whole costumes was shaking, and it just looked so *freaky*. I really delighted in those moments.

5. This pom-pom hat was based on one the designer Søren Bach made for Björk. Björk was actually a really big inspiration for the designs—her costumes are just fantastic, and you can see there are a few Björk references throughout.

One thing that was really fun as well is that I've worked in haute couture fashion before, but I haven't really had much experience of making hats, and every single *Blotched* outfit has a hat. Most of them were made with these really old-fashioned swimcaps, the ladies ones with the chinstraps.

6. Their last show *Smashed!* is a family show—almost like a Pixar movie where it appeals to small children

and adults alike—but *Blotched* is an adult, challenging show. I'd been really surprised because originally they'd discussed maybe doing the Doreen section with her topless; I was really taken aback that the National Theatre were happy with that and that Watch This Space's producer, Angus MacKechnie, had OKed it to have a topless section outside the National Theatre.

But it was actually me I think, with Kati's support, that ruled out the idea. I actually felt it would have been pointless, and maybe even a little gratuitous, to have her topless. It's much better that in all this colourful madness Doreen just sort of floats out in the ballerina costume and strikes a serene pose. //

GEMMABANKS



Gemma Banks was interviewed by John Ellingsworth 15 September 2011 at a pavement café outside a Clapham grocers.



Cirque Éloïze: iD



In *iD* we travel across the city, in day and night, for vignettes of urban lives. At the back of the stage the blank faces of a big, blocky set receive projections and transform into the different districts of the city: a construction site, a broad night view of slitted yellow windows, a residential building with its storeys criss-crossed by fire escape stairs. Doors and windows shutter open to admit and eject performers, while ledges and ramps provide the platforms and kicking-off points for a collection of acrobats who look like nothing so much as children who've raided the dressing-up box (although one's in a sort of leather teddy, so maybe that's from a different closet).

The fundamental idea behind *iD* is to collect specialists from across disciplines—so alongside your common and garden circus artists there's a dude on a bike who jumps and traverses a precarious vertical course on the skyscraper set, a couple of breakdancers and an inline skater—to reflect something of the blended diversity of huge urban environments. Mostly the separate artists just do their own thing, though there's a duet between a contortionist and a breakdancer that really works—her insectile ability to articulate each limb for independent movement matched against his fast, compact, squared-off style; she picking her

way as he crosses the floor like a spinning top.

Elsewhere the *West Side Story* ur-narrative exerts its influence, and a rival gangs motif leads to an underworld encounter where a character is beaten up and tied into his straps for a bit of masculine aerial self-torture that's actually quite nice, for straps (/self-torture), and which at the end, back on the ground, suddenly bleeds out into what proved to be my single favourite image in the show: the aerialist stepping *through* the two straps, parted, but not quite through a literal door—rather into a different future that arranges itself around him, his once captor laying himself neatly unconscious on the ground like a ragdoll that's lost its animating life.

These few scenes aside, there's not a lot that works. I suppose the intention behind the multi-disciplinarity is that *iD* is about (urban) individualism and the rich diversity and universal persistence of human creative expression. Although you can read that script easily enough, I don't think it's woven into the real material of the piece, and in fact, for me anyway, it's undermined—Cirque du Soleil style—by the commodification of the performers, who are flattened out to become decorative panels in a work they don't fully own. The show actually opens with

hand-to-hand from Justine et Philippe, artists who I saw, and liked, at Cirque de Demain in 2009. It's the same routine, I think, largely, but they've lost their music and their costumes, and instead of using the acrobatic vocabulary as the codified language of a deep intimacy, now it's about strangers colliding on a pedestrian way, and the heart is gone, and it's just another hand-to-hand routine where the partners turn away from each other dramatically/emotionally after each set (*I couldn't possibly do a handstand / Darling, you must*). There are ways to reinterpret skills and to shift them into new environments, and the same goes for individual acts, but in a show that's meant to celebrate youth, independence and liberty, stripping artists and artforms of their context (personal, social or cultural) might not be the best action to attain authenticity.

At the end, following an aggressively bizarre piece of roue cyr against a projected backdrop of a whirling space vortex cut with lasers (a spectacle that persuades the Sharks and the Jets to rip off their coloured wristbands (badass!) and renounce gang life), *iD* cranks up for its finale, a trampovall sequence that sees the cast diving and falling off the tall set, emerging and disappearing through narrow or hidden apertures. Here at last the show becomes what I think it always wanted to be—tight, pacey, exciting—but it's athleticism only, impressively skilled, no better or worse, nor more or less meaningful, for everything that went before. //

JOHNELLINGSWORTH

////////////////////////////////////
Cirque Éloïze's *iD* was at the Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury 12 October 2011.
Image: © 2010 Theatre T & Cie / Valérie Remise

Greenwich + Docklands



A SQUALLY CLOUDED-OVER DAY, then, to accompany the revival of Greenwich Fair, a hoary old tradition in Greenwich Park which, until it was banned a century and a half ago, annually saw the erection of open-air markets, lurid theatres, bandstands, fairground rides, penny shies, and insalubrious premises (licensed and unlicensed), to accommodate a sudden competitive influx of entertainers, musicians, hawkers, and exotic beast-tamers—plus of course the roiling crowds of audience/punters/buyers/marks who came to be amused by the dreadful melodramas, fleeced by the mountebanks, and psychically obliterated by liquor.

The 2011 reimagining of the Fair, contained within Greenwich + Docklands International Festival, is a rather more genteel affair, shifted in large part from its ancestral pitch on the sloping green leading up to the Royal Observatory to the flat, lovely grounds contained within the squared walls of the Old Royal Naval College, alongside the Thames and across the water from the Isle of Dogs. Nested within the Fair, which is nested within the Festival, the

smallest matryoshka doll is Gravity, an open showcase of circus, street arts, dance and physical theatre co-presented with FiraTàrrega.

So here along one tree-lined avenue, audience mounted either side on the slick grass, rolls Acrojou's *The Wheel House*, company members Jeni Barnard and Barney White crammed into the interior of their German Wheel, the frame of which is fitted out with miniature cupboards, drawers and curtains that fly open and slam shut as they circle over gravity—the compaction of living space, the awkward exits, the clambering all instantly familiar to anyone who's lived on a boat. Our two performers are covered in grime and wearing rags in what is possibly becoming the Acrojou *couture*, and play an old couple living in a bleak, depleted future of junk vehicles and windstorms, the piece a dusty kind of conflation of *Mad Max* and *When the Wind Blows*. It's a meandering, gentle sort of show, sweetly good-natured, a little unfocused, best perhaps unannounced and encountered—as a strange visit from another world—and best



also I think to imagine that in the entire time between performances the House is only rolling slowly between festivals, dropping clutter along the way, London to Whitfield to Uckfield to Chilstone, all the summer long.

Elsewhere in the Naval College grounds, two shorter works from circus artists: **Max Calaf's** trampoline solo, *Somewhere... nowhere!*, and an acrobalance set from the French/Catalan company **Fet a Ma**. *Somewhere... nowhere!* I liked when I saw it at a Circus Space show; it's a magic realist sort of evocation of drifting and the road, with Max a hitch-hiker in a dirty vest and open shirt, but the piece is perhaps not that suited to the well-tended grounds of the College, and the details of Max's interaction with a frontline audience member are (even though I'm nearby) lost on the air. Fet a Ma – the acrobatic pairing of Pau Portabella and Marta Torrents Canals – perform a short, pitch-perfect piece of outdoor theatre, he a stocky/beefy archetypal base, she a slim gymnast who is both as rigid and as pliable as a wireframe sculpture, the two of them acting

out a fresh and playful act—because it is, definitely, an act—that spins out from the man's exertions to avoid the woman's queerly reaching embrace, and that wins the applause of the audience as well as the catcalls of a gang of boys passing at the riverside.

Company FZ, having decided to disband (with founders John-Paul Zaccarini and Flick Ferdinando continuing to work independently), gave one of their final performances at GDIF: a weird string of motifs that begins with John-Paul Zaccarini—immaculate and white-suited, resembling perhaps a character from a Poliakoff garden drama if not for the handsome leather boxing gloves enclosing his hands—tied by several lengths of string to a bale of hay that anchors his movement and slows to a crawl his progress toward the scissors that he anyway can't pick up because of the gloves; then there's a long section carrying bales over tottering wooden planks; a slow-motion boxing match that our performer can't be said to win; and a final strip-down on top of a bale tower as JPZ is showered with water from a hosepipe and gives a faltering rendition of 'Suicide is Painless'. Taking a guess, I'd say it was sort of a purposefully obtuse collage of previous FZ shows. I haven't seen most of their work, but figured the bales were alluding to *Horse*, the string to *We Can Be Heroes* and the wet nakedness to *Throat*—and always in a rough, dismissive, disrespectful way, like these careful pieces of art had been broken to pieces and re-combined in a mosaic of a cock. The girls in front of me were quite pleased with the final nudity, but mostly the audience were baffled. Personally I enjoy the keen edge of disdain that seems to underlie JPZ's actions as a thinker and performer—if for no other reason than no one else in UK circus is saying Fuck You with any vigour—but would rather see that combative, destructive attitude directed toward bigger and more deserving

than his own work and its attendant audience.

Finally, it isn't circus by anyone's definition, but **Elastic Theatre's** *Baroque Box* capped the day and ended the Fair on a high note. Presented in the King William Colonnade, the pillared walk skirting the edge of one Naval College building, the piece is a compact mask / physical theatre / opera piece performed in and on top of a compartmented black box, the audience split and placed at either end to see characters continually disappearing and reappearing within the box's curtained interior.

Supported by the Wellcome Trust (who seem to have a really good eye for artistic projects) *Baroque Box* takes, in a way, a pedagogic approach: by the end of it you know a little about the four 'humours' recognised by 17th Century science—sanguine, choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic—and about some of the era's conceptions of the body, but it's all delivered through the narrative of an Italian painter (inspired, apparently, by Caravaggio and Bernini) who's been commissioned by the Pope to paint *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* and who's stuck with the question of how to depict ecstasy. What is ecstasy? Is it in the body or in the

mind? Played by Chiara D'Anna—wearing a half-mask, sporting an impassioned, trilling accent, and fairly sloshing with choleric humours—our artist rushes around and through the black box, seeking out Teresea, the Angel and Jesus himself ('Hesus!'), exhorting the audience to watch out for these characters and fuming at our uselessness ('You are against the pope and you are against me personally!').

Introducing each of the four humours is the Scientist, played by baritone Nicholas Simeha, who climbs on top of the box to sing the factual interludes. I loved this; loved all of it. The production, written and directed by Jacek Ludwig Scarso, had such a light touch in its depiction of a moment when religion and science parted company forever, and it was a simple but genuinely moving ending when, after a fervid ecstasy of dry ice, the two audiences were chivvied around by the artist, united to watch the final painting played out. Elastic Theatre recently put out a call for circus artists to participate in the R&D of a new show, so keep an eye out... //

JOHNELLINGSWORTH

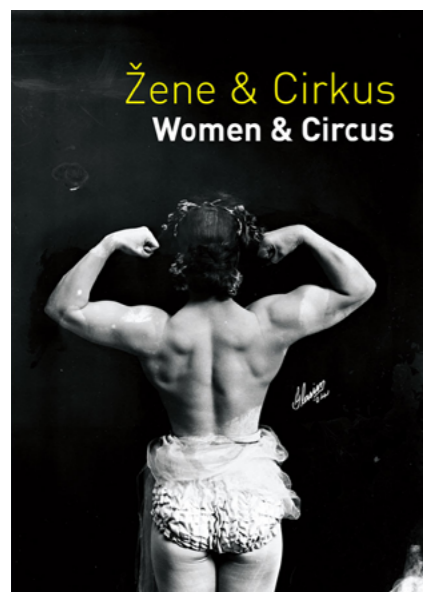
John Ellingsworth was at Greenwich + Docklands 24 June 2011. The festival ran 24 June - 2 July.

www.festival.org

Images:
Page 42, clockwise: Elastic Theatre, *Baroque Box* (photo Doug Southall); Company FZ (photo Scott Vincent); Acrojou Circus Theatre, *The Wheel House* (photo Scott Vincent)

Media

BOOK: Women & Circus



////////////////////////////////////

Edited by Ivan Kralj
Published by Mala Performerska
Scena

ISBN: 978-953-56509-0-4
£34.99

////////////////////////////////////

Documenting the conference, also called Women & Circus, that took place alongside the fifth edition of Croatia's Festival Novog Cirkusa, this book is a sumptuous 542-page volume that interleaves 191 full-colour (and often full-page) photographs from circus' glorious past and fractured present between the edited transcripts of thirteen conference papers. If you imagine that the event's central impetus—the provocation to speak about women and circus—is the hub, then each of the papers is the spoke of a wheel, travelling outward from the same origin but in individual directions. By turns, the writing tracks the shifting intersection of gender, sex and identity; examines the friction between gender performance and circus performance; lays bare the stark disparity between the life of the circus and its marketed image;

gives us a personal account of the relationship between Annie and Valérie Fratellini, mother and daughter; and relates the autobiographical practice and philosophies of Angela Laurier and Jacques Derrida—doing so from the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, performance arts criticism, journalism, personal experience, and artistic practice. Many of the papers also include transcripts of the Q&A sessions that followed the talk, and the book ends with a final selection of 'Circussions' (neologism grade: C+) between the conference speakers and on the subject of work presented at FNC (with a particularly good back-and-forth concerning Jeanne Mordoj's *Eloge du Poil*, with Jeanne herself contributing).

Among the papers, in line I suppose with my own interests, I liked best the pair from Yoram S. Carmeli and Jana Drasler—both of which, instead of taking what I think of as the 'newspaper clipping' approach that cuts out historical facts to illustrate academic points, instead get into the gritty and ambivalent reality of individual lives. So Yoram's essay, 'At the Circus Backstage: Women, Domesticity and Motherhood, 1975-2003', tells the story of two generations of the Santus Family, focusing particularly on the matriarch Mama and her daughter-in-law Eva, using their respective and semi-occluded roles in the day-to-day workings of a traditional circus to reveal the consequences of its isolationism; while Jana's piece, 'Taming the Pain: Female Body in Circus Performance', relates a number of encounters with a brilliant, disaffected tightwire artist, Aura, as the spine of an essay about pain, the realness of the body, and the truthfulness of the performance image. Jana's writing also turns out the odd sentence like this, my favourite in the book: 'Stage fright

(or better "ring" fright) right before the show, moments of quietness, total concentration on "here" and "now", these segments all followed one another as on some kind of assembly line, creating a regular, but never monotonous rhythm of the everyday life.'

A couple of the other pieces don't work so well as straight transcripts, and would perhaps have been better seen from the perspective of a report: Laura Herts-Gladys' in-character clown interlude; a corde lisse essay, 'The Roperesentation of Gender', by Camilla Damkjaer, which is further complicated in transcription by the fact that the lecture theatre at the last moment forbid the speaker/artist from rigging her rope, so she performed instead on the ground; and a photo essay by Rose English, 'Heavenly Horses & Exquisite Equestriennes', where the delicate thread of text is too bare and too fast without its accompanying images.

Each paper is given in Croatian and English, as are the captions of the many images. These little caption vignettes, sitting in the inside margin of the book on about half of all the pages, are a curious pleasure, variously covering biographical sketches—'Victoria Chaplin was born in 1951 under public spotlight turned on by her grandfather Eugene O'Neill and her father Charlie Chaplin. Gracious on the stage, modest in private life, this pioneer of contemporary circus never does interviews. Perhaps this media silence is the reason why her role in renovating the circus stayed in a historical corner – Victoria and Jean-Baptiste Thierrée founded their first circus company in 1971!'—little flashes of contemporary circus history—'After the huge success of the performance *I look up, I look down...* which had

its international premiere at the Festival novog cirkusa and was later enlisted in the anthologies of contemporary circus performance at the beginning of the 21st century, the Avignon festival recognised the potential of Mélissa Von Vépy and for its "in" programme commissioned and co-produced *Miroir, Miroir* (2009). A large mirror hangs like a trapeze above the stage, calls out and denies encounter. The mirror is an object directly referring to many movies, stories, fairy tales and mythologies and provokes existential and sometimes horrifying questions related to auto-reflexion.'—and anecdotes: 'In the period of creation of the performance *Après la pluie* (Le Cirque Désaccordé, 2004) Fabienne Teulières had unusually strong dreams about wanting to become pregnant. There wasn't a potential father in sight, but this didn't stop her in creating the character of a pregnant woman walking on the tightwire while using a pillow as her belly. At the end of the creation period, she met a man and soon after the premiere announced she was really expecting a baby. During the tour of the show, three women artists had to be replaced because they all got pregnant.'

As some of the above quotations probably make clear, the usual disclaimer applies: the translation isn't always localised to the extent you might like. It's never unmanageable though, and I can accept a little blurring of the writing's complexity and fine detail in return for, well, the writing itself—this sort of book, for circus, is a rare and important thing. //

DVD: France Russie: traces de l'échange pédagogique

////////////////////////////////////

Published by CNAC
1hr 40mins / 120mins

10 €

////////////////////////////////////

As part of the Institut Français' L'Année France-Russie 2010, the Centre national des arts du cirque in France and the Moscow Circus School in Russia undertook a creative exchange where students from both schools were brought together to share their different experiences and aesthetics—to train together—with the project culminating in two presentations in Moscow and Châlons. This double DVD documents the process.

DVD 1, which you can listen to in French or Russian, interleaves footage of the students training with talking head contributions from teachers/trainers and the students themselves, touching a little on the difference between French poetics and Russian skill, and on the individualism of circus vs the development of a collective spirit. The Frenchies get a load of ballet; the Russians have to pretend to be gorillas.

DVD 2 has full reels of the two presentations in France and Russia. They're a lot like your average student presentations, honestly, though it's quite funny to see the difference between the French studio presentation (which tends to be silent or else goes for rap music or thrashy rock) and the Russian circus ring showing (which starts off with a Swan Lake ensemble dance and lets in a little French style with some *Amelie* music). There's one piece that stands out: a juggling duet between a French guy and a Russian girl that responds intelligently to the conditions of its own creation and that's also very erotic in creating a game of tension, risk and response; watch the French version though, where the only sound is the bouncing juggling balls, and not the Russian version, where it's been set to Saint-Saëns' 'Danse Macabre'.

All in all, it's a little bit interesting, but probably one for libraries and researchers rather than casual audiences.

DVD: No Dress Rehearsal

////////////////////////////////////

Directed by Naomi Smyth
1hr 38mins

£12.99

////////////////////////////////////

Following the highs and lows and the grand scruffy dreams of Bristol's Invisible Circus as they inhabit a series of abandoned public buildings, *No Dress Rehearsal* is a feature-length documentary shot from the inside by filmmaker Naomi Smyth—who began as an outside eye but soon enough went fully native, joining as a performer in some of the Invisible productions.

Starting as the Invisibles come to the end of their stay at the Audi Garage, a huge four-storey building with low broad open levels, all concrete, in Bristol's Stokes Croft, we see the company making an ambitious, politically motivated site-specific production about urban dereliction and the underclass. They're kicked out by the Council, and have a very brief stay in a former 19th century cinema, and a slightly longer stay in the old Horfield Police Station, before moving onto the two buildings with which the film is principally concerned: the Pro-Cathedral in Clifton and The Island block (comprising an old police and fire station) in the city centre.

These two projects marked the point at which the Invisibles went, in a sense, legitimate: rather than squatting they entered into agreements with the owners to license the buildings at peppercorn rent in return for maintaining the premises and perhaps raising the profile of the site. When they go in the Cathedral is a mess, and it takes a dedicated band of volunteers (there are a few who remain constant, a sort of core, but the faces of the Invisible Circus change throughout the film as people come and go) five months to get

the building into the necessary shape for it to be opened as a venue. They get to put on a number of their own large-scale productions, and programme other events, but as their agreement comes to an end they also put on a tense final show for the developers who own the site...

At the Island everything cranks up a notch—it's a bigger site, with bigger developers, more offers of corporate work, and it's here that the Invisible Circus starts the process to separate its activities into creative work (the circus) and the essentially administrative job of taking on and managing old buildings (incorporated as Artspace

Lifespace). As the company begins to take on its current shape, there are fraught meetings and building internal tensions that break in the production of their first huge Island production, *Carney-Ville*.

No Dress Rehearsal is a low budget one-woman-and-her-camera (and-her-husband-and-his-boom) production, so the camerawork is at times demonstrably handheld, and the sound levels heave and fall, and it all gets a bit choppy from time to time. I'm not convinced, as well, that the story of Naomi's making of the film is really a strong enough line that *No Dress Rehearsal* wouldn't be better off

without its occasional inclusion—it can feel like the film is addressed to her friends in the Circus rather than to the broader audience. But for me these are small things, and I don't think it'll matter too much for those who seek the film out. It's a good and candid documentary of a fascinating bunch of people—an inside look at a group who both embody the do-it-yourself Bristol ethos and who've been instrumental in creating it. If you know the Bristol scene and some of the people in the film already then it's a lot of fun; if not, then there are certainly worse ways to get an introduction. //

JOHNELLINGSWORTH



Colophon

Well, this is the end. How was it? If you enjoyed the magazine and you'd like there to be another, then please consider a resolution to stop one person in the street each day to tell them about the cascade of wonders contained within these pages. Wealthy benefactors and sponsors are also urged to get in touch, in the first instance with a cheque or a parcel of cash wrapped in brown paper and tied with rough string.

Note as well that this PDF version of Sideshow Magazine which you have just awkwardly tracked your way through is also available in print (+ several other digital formats) and can be purchased at www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com/shop

This first edition was edited by John Ellingsworth. Texts are copyright of their respective authors; images likewise belong to their respective photographers. Bit more on that over in the right column. Don't be a dick, though, basically.

Coming up in issue 2, if there is an issue 2: the most comprehensive and exhaustively lived-through report on Festival Circa 2011 anywhere available, including an interview with the epic-level director Aurélien Bory. What else? I don't know. Suggest something:

sideshow@sideshow-circusmagazine.com
www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com

© Sideshow Circus Magazine
All rights reserved

The views expressed or the opinions stated in Sideshow Magazine are not necessarily the views of the editors or publishers. Similarly, statements made or opinions expressed by the advertisers are not necessarily shared by the editors or publishers. Reasonable care has been taken to avoid error in the magazine, but no liability will be accepted for any errors which may occur. No material in this publication may be reproduced in any way without the consent in writing of the publisher.

Sideshow Magazine accepts no liability, responsibility or blame for any loss of breath or degradation of eyesight that may occur in the reading of this fine publication.



Available now from Sideshow's market:
www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com/shop



WWW.SIDESHOW-CIRCUSMAGAZINE.COM