

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*
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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*
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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.

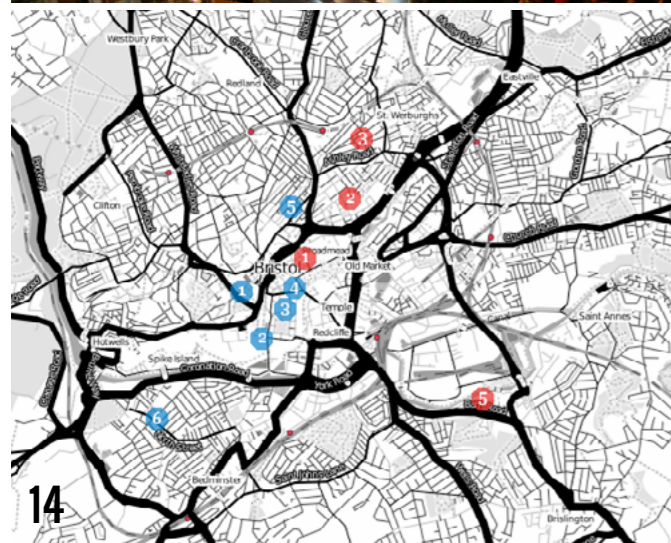
Then it's a trip to Croatia for an interview with Ivan Kralj, the fierce and ethically rigorous director of Festival Novog Cirkusa, from whom we hear about the trials and tribulations of running a contemporary circus festival in Zagreb in **Is Your Festival on Fire?**; and to France for a look at the 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

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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.

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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