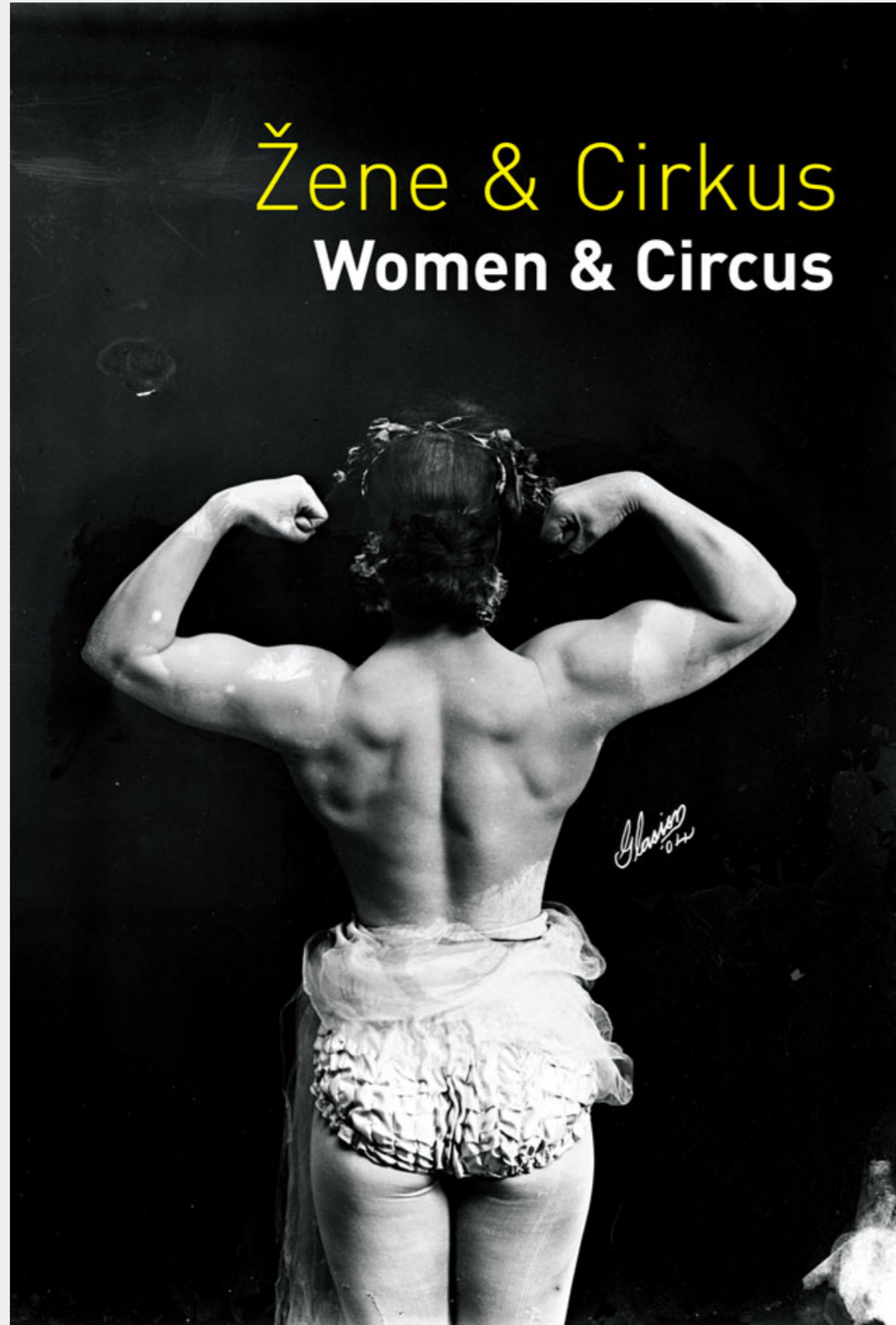


SIDESHOW MAGAZINE

ISSUE 2 // CIRCA





A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS AND TALKS BY IVAN KRALJ, PETA TAIT, VALÉRIE FRATELLINI, CAMILLA DAMKJAER, ROSE ENGLISH AND OTHERS ON GENDER AND REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS

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Reader! Welcome to Sideshow Magazine Issue 2, where, striking like summer lightning (FLASH!), we bring you extensive coverage of Auch's Festival Circa a mere fourteen weeks after the event itself. (FLASH!)

Circa's an interesting one — a ten-day festival of professional and student work that invites the participation of dozens of circus schools — and it's covered here principally by a long yrstruly diary piece, a little frothy, which at times is probably going to read like the footnotes of the penetrating sociological essay I would have written about the behaviour of 'key promoters' if I had the jones (or, frankly, the penetrating sociological insights) to do so.

While at Circa I scored a couple of interviews that are represented in the following pages: one with Olle Stranderg, the director of *Undermän*, who speaks in a Nordically candid way about the triple-heartbreak that inspired the piece, about coming under the wing of Cirkus Cirkör, and about his own life as a performer; and the other with French director Aurélien Bory, famous more or less the circus world over for shows like *Sans Objet*, *Les sept planches de la ruse* and *Plan B*, and who was at Circa with his new piece *Géométrie de caoutchouc*. The end of the interview with Bory actually got clipped off because my dictaphone ran out of space and I don't really trust myself to paraphrase the interesting things he was saying about the vertical/horizontal in theatre and workshop spaces, but can confidently communicate at least that one of his future ambitions is to open his own studio / creation space in Toulouse, and that he would like it to be more horizontal than vertical.

(I also interviewed Jay Gilligan at Circa, and that was interesting as well, but I got ominous carpal twinges transcribing the other two, so have let that one for now; it's coming soon. (... FLASH?))

Leaving Circa behind, we have an article from US aerialist and choreographer and director Kevin O'Connor on his experiments in ensemble aerial; move thereafter into reviews, which cover productions at the London International Mime Festival alongside appraisals of Mathurin Bolze & Hedi Thabet's *Ali*, DeFracto's *Circuits Fermés*, and Stumble danceCircus' *Box of Frogs*; and finish with a short preview of the Roundhouse's upcoming CircusFest.

I hope you enjoy the exceptional cultural relevance of this up-to-the-minute coverage.

John Ellingsworth

Cover image: Cirkus Cirkör's *Undermän*. Photo Mats Bäcker

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PROFESSIONALLY INTERESTED, PERSONALLY BORED

DIARY ENTRIES FROM THE FESTIVAL CIRCA
MARKETPLACE

ONE OF THE BIG NAMES ON THE EUROPEAN CIRCUIT, AUCH'S **FESTIVAL CIRCA** IS LIKE NO OTHER: HELD IN A SMALL TOWN IN SOUTHERN FRANCE, IT INVITES DOZENS OF CIRCUS SCHOOLS TO PRESENT THEIR WORK ALONGSIDE A PROGRAMME OF PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTIONS CREATED, MOSTLY, THAT YEAR. FOR TEN DAYS STUDENTS, CIRCUS ENTHUSIASTS AND BOOKERS ALIKE DESCEND ON THE TOWN. **JOHN ELLINGSWORTH** IS ONE OF THE INCOMING CROWD...

Friday: Parallel World

2pm: Coming in by mini-van, crammed three to a row with promoters just landed at Toulouse, trying discretely to read the letter the woman in front is bumpily writing in French on her laptop, in a comfortable international silence and on a sunny mid-afternoon, Auch: framed in the windscreen, the hill rising steeply to the Cathedral, its wide, sprawling base flanked by a ribcage of flat stone supports that give it a stolid, sepulchral aspect. I've been here before, once, last year, and remember the route as we drive through the old town to the Maison du Festival, a municipal building requisitioned for ten days each year as Circa's hub and information centre. It's a hall, long and high, with a croft roof above and stone flooring below, the space divided by screens into a main area with a stage, bar, tables, etc; a canteen where students and other supported parties (e.g. freeloading journalists) can eat for free; and a crash-zone of comfortable sofas and lounge-ready beanbags ordinarily occupied by gangs of circus students. A wooden mezzanine level runs round three sides of the building — a wide balcony that houses the promoters desk as well as commercial ticketing, plus has small groups of tables and chairs welded in organic shapes from heavy metals. It's actually the same configuration as last year, to an almost eerie degree, like the complex music box of the festival froze when I left and resumed when I crossed back over this threshold.

5pm: A couple of agents from the festival drive me to my quarters, the same place students from the FEDEC schools will be once they arrive, which is a huge boarding school a little way downriver of the old town. Up then to the third floor, pressing on timer lights and releasing magnetic locks, and to my room, a neat and self-contained little unit that still has the term-time occupant's possessions packed away in a wardrobe (on which is bluetacked, over the head of the bed, for whatever reason, a



clipped newspaper image of a woman knitting a cock & balls). I turn out the messenger bag I've been given containing the festival's welcome information and sift through the bundle of maps and glossy programmes to find the photocopied, comb-bound, unredacted agenda, which alongside information on the 22 professional productions gives the lowdown on the dozens of student presentations (ranging from showcases of very young diabolist making their stage debut, to open stage afternoons for teenage acrobats, to CIRCLE, a festival-long series of twenty-minute presentations put on by the students of visiting FEDEC schools) and the extensive side-programme of public exhibitions, concerts, talks and professional meetings and receptions lasting every day from early morning to late night. In all there are scores of events spread over the ten days, but the first for me — and the only show of this abbreviated day — will be the closest to home: Welsh company NoFit State Circus' *Mundo Paralelo*.

9pm: Work at Auch is early. With a couple exceptions, the shows in the programme have been created the year of the festival (though no one *premieres* at Auch — they always have a couple performances somewhere else first), which makes Circa both a magnet for the programmers of international festivals, who come to shop, and a place where you see work that's still, mostly, in need of anything from a minor underhaul to a full-scale overhaul. With this in mind, NoFit State's *Mundo Paralelo*, a collaboration with the Serbian director Mladen Materic of Theatre Tattoo, feels very much like a presentation of everything the company has developed to this point: it's edging toward two hours long, and has an interval, and there's an uncertainty or vagueness of purpose that comes from too many shifts of tone and a dramaturgy not adequately contained by the premise of parallel worlds. There are some things I like about it — mostly those parts, I suppose, where the circus wasn't really used as circus, but was instead an element within a whole-stage visual composition. There are sections in the first half of the piece that have a sensitivity to the verticality of aerial that feels quite rare and unusual, and there's an at times very strong sense that spaces are being created within the theatre — that high rooms and empty halls are forming and dissipating — yet all that's suggesting this is a woman on a rope, a man on a ladder, and half a dozen squares of projected light. The second half of the piece, the dusk half, played out in crepuscular half-light, jump-cuts to something more like a presentation of the artists' set-pieces and routines. The introduction of custom equipment (like a tightwire on a welded and internally rigged structure of cables, chains and metal poles — a cubist visual art interpretation of a rig) necessitates clunky set changes that are covered by some forced meta-theatrical gaming (two clowns playing with the controls that activate the theatre's canned laughter and booing). But anyway: early, and I leave the theatre having resolved to come and see the piece again in three months at the London International Mime Festival, where much might have changed.

Saturday: Concept Circ

1pm: During an interview with Olle (pronounced: OU-ley)

Strandberg, director of Poetry in Motion and a director and artistic project leader with Cirkus Cirkör, I make the mistake of sitting next to what looks like an uplighter but which through gradual, increasing insistence reveals itself in the course of the interview to be a mushroom-headed space heater emitting waves of heat that flow down, then smack *up*. Is Olle bothered? He seems Nordically stoic, not sweating, nor flushing, nor even glancing at the wretched heater as I take about twenty minutes and considerable muscular coordination to progress in an imperceptible glacial drift to the rightmost edge of my bench seat — the Polar region, comparatively. What OU-ley's saying is interesting, though, and after we've run through the nominally formal questions the structured interview devolves into 40 minutes of watching YouTube videos while Olle tells me about his upcoming piece, *Ballroom House*, and his experiments combining street dance and juggling, giving artists randomised performance scores, shown also to the audience, that reveal the mechanics of how a sequence of movements is assembled.

4pm: I don't get the wrong time for the Crida Cabaret. I get the *right* time and it just happens I'm in the wrong time zone. I gather afterward that it's not so much a circus show but is, and perhaps not so surprisingly, a cabaret, held together and driven forward by the (allegedly) remarkable singing of Jur Domingo, a roughed-up chanteuse with the voice of a woman three times her age.

8pm: As the lights dim and a winter wind blows through the tent, two figures dressed all in white come slowly into vision, and the festival director sitting next to me leans over and proffers a small mint. 'It's ecstasy,' he whispers. I decline, though several times during the course of the ensuing production I wonder what it might have been like had it been true and had I accepted. *Rivages* is one idea, executed by two performers: the man, Lionel About, is on the ground, manipulating two mid-length poles that can be fitted together and locked into one long pole; the woman, Marie-Anne Michel, never touches the ground, stepping on the ends of the staves as they are slid beneath each footfall, or climbing the height of the double-pole, held vertical and braced at the bottom by About. The movement is, with one — *one* — excepted moment, slow and deliberate, the choreography intricate within the bounds of its own self-imposed rule, like a flowing, crossing design contained in a circle. That winter wind motif, and the sound of footsteps crunching on snow, runs through the piece, but it's very bare, and in a way tyrannically forces that bareness on the audience themselves. Just as there's no relief for Michel, who can't get down, nor for About, who can't *put* down, we're locked into a severe and single-minded interpretation of what is essentially the child's game of a self-imposed rule: I won't step on the cracks in the pavement; I'll hold my breath until I reach the end of the road. But where a child freely abandons what they create, here there's reverence and capitulation; for 50 minutes I feel trapped.

11pm: What we have for Kitsou Dubois' *Sous le Vertige* is a square of dark water, black until disturbed, a shallow film that takes the heart of the stage. A heavy pole is hung over it, attached to rigging at a point one-quarter its length so that the three-quarter side dips toward, but does not touch, the water.



There are two men in the space, notable in their difference, one a heavy-set older man, a dancer, in a grey suit and sporting a security guard crewcut; the other a young, inexplicably *Oxbridge* buck with leonine hair and rolled shirt sleeves. What follows is a series of thin variations on the basic action of the acrobat leaping onto the pole and the older dancer skirting the edge of the water, taking the other end of the pole, sometimes guiding the young man's flight, sometimes disrupting it. It seems as though the idea is to set circus and dance, youth and age, and vertical and horizontal movement planes against one another, the dancer planting his feet very firmly and heavily as the acrobat dangles crazily. There's perhaps some evidence here as well of choreographer Kitsou Dubois' experiments with weightlessness (the acrobat's limbs are queerly floaty, his body splayed over the pole as though he has fallen *upwards* into it), but an idea isn't a show, and in spite of a few coldly stylish images, it leaves me with the same sense of substanceless conceptualism as *Rivages*.

And so with the day's *second* interminable self-involved pole piece behind me, the imagined hearty laughter of the person responsible for its scheduling ringing in my ears, I return to my boarding school lodgings, where (as the circus schools still haven't arrived) I have the shivery yet not unpleasant sensation of being the only human occupant of a building meant for several hundred.

Sunday: Catechism

4pm: In what will eventually become an Auch motif of persistent heat discomfort, the tent for *âm*, the 22nd end-of-year presentation of the Centre national des arts du cirque (CNAC),



is hot as the roiling surface of the very sun. The audience, in substantial part students from other schools (arrived today), is like a crowd at a sports game, massed and tumultuous, starting up chants and slow claps as the process of fitting the seemingly unending stream of latecomers onto the bench seating draws tediously out, stewards/ushers approaching wedges of seating and making that *compress! compress!* gesture with their straightened arms, the audience dutifully shuffling on their arses toward a compacting centre.

These Circa performances are in fact the last for *âm*, which is directed by Stéphane Ricordel (described as ‘ancien des Arts Sauts’, which makes me imagine him, pleasantly enough, as a flying trapeze artist with a simple robe and flowing beard), and has been touring venues in France these last months as a professional production. It’s still a student show, though; everyone gets a turn. I’m disappointed by it — disappointed to see what are essentially acts from a school that’s turned out so many unusual and interesting artists, and to see another graduation piece where the director seemingly just fills in the gaps (here with variations on the theme of a giant wooden plane that’s tilted as a slope, suspended low as a swing, or high as a flying stage). Afterwards all I remember is the charm of a few of the artists as performers — particularly the puckish and adept cloudswing artist who, following a sham technical error, is forced to perform his routine to a piece of solemn choral music, and the acrobat who invented a suite of eccentric new movements while wearing full carbon-fibre skis — and then the spectacular if meaningless final image of rain, real rain, falling down in the centre of the ring, projected clouds flowing fast across the moving screen of the water.

5pm: Probably as a protest against the aggressive packing strategies necessitated by Easy Jet’s luggage restrictions my laptop refuses to power on — a fact doubly unfortunate given that getting ready for Auch I was directed once again by the fantasy that I would write all my reviews and articles while here, between the shows, and therefore pointedly didn’t bring anything to read or distract myself with. After a long walk along the bank of the River Gers (stopping in the scrubby park before one of the festival venues, the Hall du Mouzon, where boredom drives me to compose a poem about a passing toby dog) I’ve no choice but to return to the Maison du Festival and expose myself to the constant current of key promoters.

What happens when you bump into someone you know at Auch, particularly in those cases where that someone is a someone to whom you don’t have much to say, is you make use of the typical conversational icebreaker/crutch and run through this rigid catechism of questions: When did you arrive? When do you leave? Where are you staying? What have you seen? What have you liked? What are you going to see? Bumping into the same person as you did yesterday it’s perfectly permissible to rerun the exact same script, and in this way you can woodenly act your way through some rather staid interactions. (In among this there’s also, perhaps, a normalising effect: as we repeatedly illicit each other’s snap judgements on the work a sort of lumpen mass opinion begins to aggregate, and you can imagine the Programmers of Auch as a sort of secret society that vote shows in or out.) Today the catechism reveals that *Le Repas* has passed muster, a production which my schedule has ruled out but which involves getting bussed out of town for a cabaret dinner show, the circus artists performing around and over the tables



— standard enough fare, except that it lasts all evening and the whole audience has to help cook the food and do the washing-up. There’s enthusiasm from many, though it’s understood as quintessentially French: ‘English audiences wouldn’t stand for it — £40 and then you have to wash-up for half an hour.’

Monday: Radio Circa

12pm: Whose terrible idea was this? I’m on the balcony mezzanine of the Maison du Festival, it’s just gone midday, I have a translator at my left, and I’m about to be interviewed on Radio Circa as one of four journalists invited to participate in a segment on critical writing and circus. The other three in the group are someone from HorsLesMurs’ *Stradda* magazine, a dance critic, and a reviewer for a French national newspaper. Public speaking is always problematic for me as an *idea*, but, as is the way with these things, the actual experience is altogether different, and the opaque screen of nervousness fairly quickly defogs under the hot air of all these *opinions* waiting to blast up. When the presenter asks a question about how the media should approach coverage of Festival Circa, I cast slitted eyes at the newspaper guy who’s hogging all the airtime, one of those critics who looks like he must consume or at least draw some calorific surplus from the shows he covers, and who’s admanant that it doesn’t matter what they cover or how they cover it — proof once again that mainstream media has the most resources and yet makes the least effort. I’d like to say something but I get passed over on the topic, and am asked instead the sensationally broad, ‘Where do you think contemporary circus is going?’. I manage about six blandly optimistic sentences and

then that’s a wrap.

3pm: The book I’ve managed to semi-consensually borrow from a producer (Graham Greene’s *Monsignor Quixote*) has in short order revealed itself as the book a vicar or historian or grandfather might enjoy, a tedious and didactic novel about a town major and a Catholic Monsignor going on a low-incidence roadtrip. The dust jacket promises the ‘fleshspots of modern Spain’. I can’t affirm or deny this absolutely. At the midpoint, however, the fleshpot count is zero.

8pm: Karl Stets has many of the characteristics of a street performer — an easy (though here silent) rapport with the audience, a suite of crowd-friendly skills, the confidence to accelerate over any small bumps that might come from lapses in technique, and a seemingly bottomless accordion bag, black leather, from which the props of his show emerge. *Cuerdo* is a series of inventions using three cords of different lengths and thickness: one is rigged between two bamboo poles to become a slackrope; another winds itself as a cotton snake out from its hiding place inside a cane and over Stets’ hand, the visibility of the string that leads its movement no detriment to the sinuous believability of the puppet; the last, thin piano wire, is pulled tight around Stets’ face to turn him into a disfigured monster, hopping and lurching over the audience seating as he searches for the wig that will hide his bald head and cover two cauliflower ears. It’s very charming, and sometimes beautifully simple: when Stets walks the tightrope there are two bells tied at either end, one large, one small, and their irregular, delicate chiming — like the chiming of bellevethers, one far, one near — is the only sound. For the finale, Stets ties a simple knot in a piece of