

TOWARDS A CULTURAL HISTORY OF COMMUNITY CIRCUS IN AUSTRALIA

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Community circus comprises an integral part of the contemporary Australian circus ecology – a field that includes high-profile professional companies, traditional family-based circuses, as well as contemporary circus-infused physical theatre, neo-burlesque, and street performance. The overlapping practices of contemporary ‘youth’ and ‘social’ circus are direct descendants of the community arts movement that was prevalent in Australia – as in some other developed Western nations – during the 1970s and 1980s. Governments at Australia’s federal and state levels enacted fundamental shifts in attitude to the role of the arts in society during those decades, in turn provoking changes in the ways that cultural practices were stimulated and participated in by the new and diverse audiences whom they targeted. The creative opportunities opened up by the community arts funding initiatives of the 1970s–80s attracted young and enthusiastic arts workers whose alternative approaches to art and performance-making were infused with energetic idealism for social change at the grassroots strata of society. Re-imagined paradigms of circus and variety appeared in Australian community arts performances during the 1970s, seeding the establishment of enduring

organisations such as Circus Oz and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. Despite four decades of activity, the persistent phenomenon of community circus has to date received very little attention within cultural or performance histories. The author recognises, for the first time in Australian performance scholarship, that there have been three distinct 'waves' of community circus activity. Briefly adumbrating the development of community circus since its early stirrings during the 1970s, this article lays the groundwork for future scholarly enquiry concerning Australia's dynamic community circus sector.¹

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, the youth-oriented performance forms of both 'social' and 'youth' circus have established a considerable global presence, both in developed and developing nations. 'Youth' circus activity emerged as a discernible component of grassroots engagement with the arts in the developed nations of Europe, North America, and Australia during the 1970s through to the 1990s. The closely associated processes of 'social circus' first appeared in numerous sites around the globe in the early 1990s, and both of these expressions of circus, collectively referred to as 'community circus' in this article, indicate a re-imagining and a re-purposing of the circus arts within a social situation other than the professional/commercial entertainment arena. Australia has been a leader in both 'youth' and 'social' circus, yet despite nearly four decades of evolution, the phenomenon of community circus has received very little scholarly attention in histories of Australian culture and performance.²

Throughout the almost forty years since its nascent stirrings as a result of the community arts of the 1970s, community circus has maintained some of the strong beliefs that informed the movements for social change from which it sprang. A primary focus on young people, and those who are disenfranchised either physically or socially, continues to guide the

sector, in tandem with the utopian belief that creative engagement can be co-opted for positive change in people's lives. Just a small sample of activity indicates the diversity of creative engagement currently offered by Australia's community circus organisations: the Women's Circus, established in 1991 to develop and maintain a sustainable women's circus community in Melbourne; the Performing Older Women's Circus, founded in 1995 to offer skills development and performance opportunities to women in the over-40 age range; Blackrobats, established in 1994 in the town of Kuranda, north Queensland, continues to provide Indigenous young people with circus arts participation; the many 'youth circus' organisations across Australia, of which the longest running are the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, established in 1979 in Albury–Wodonga, and Cirkidz, established in 1986 in Adelaide; and *Unthink the Impossible*, a 2013 Queensland Government-sponsored initiative with Brisbane's Flipside Circus that has trialled circus skills therapy to aid development of physical and social skills with disabled youngsters. These are just a few examples of participation opportunities in the circus arts available to different social groups and age cohorts across Australia.

Following several waves of establishment and diversification, first during the 1970s, and second during the 1990s, Australia's community circus organisations are now experiencing a time of growth that workers in the field characterise as unprecedented.³ This growth is not without complications, arising from the inevitable change that occurs over time in cultural policy. The exigencies of sustainability are different for cultural producers now as compared to the social environment from which community circus sprang in the 1970s. In the oft-quoted *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (1976), Paul Bouissac makes the trenchant proposal that the circus 'is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed and at the same time transcended'.⁴ Bouissac's suggestion provides the intellectual provocation to 'get to the bottom

of' the complex cultural, political and aesthetic trends that gave rise to community circus in Australia, and the shifting cultural and aesthetic influences that have worked in unique ways, influencing its diversification. However, such a large historiographic project, applied to four decades of national and international performance history, is beyond the synoptic scope of this article, which recognises for the first time in Australian performance scholarship that there have been three distinct 'waves' of community circus development in Australia: the 1970s–80s, the 1990s and the 2010s. Following the focus of this issue of *Australasian Drama Studies*, my attention slants towards the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting the conditions of the emergence and establishment of community circus in Australia. Continuing the synoptic analysis, the final section of this article draws attention to the second 'wave' of community circus development that occurred during the 1990s, and which arguably grew out of the preceding decade. A critical consideration of notions of 'community' (below) introduces the reader to the terminology of youth and social circus. I stage a return to ideas about 'community' at the end of the article, and offer some preliminary theorisation regarding the 'spike' of community circus activity that took place during the 1990s. There is much work yet to be done to bring to light the cultural and aesthetic provenance of Australia's dynamic community circus sector. This article puts forward some foundational threads, in the hope that other scholars may latch on to these and join in progressing research concerning 'youth' and 'social' circus in our region.

TROUBLING 'COMMUNITY'

I have used the word 'community' as if its meaning were unequivocally clear and not without complication, though in recent years the term has become problematic and contested. For Raymond Williams, in the mid-1970s 'community' was 'the warmly persuasive word' describing 'an

existing set of relationships' or 'an alternate set of relationships'. Williams posited that: 'it never seems to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term'.⁵ Reflecting in 2002 upon the enduring positive connotations of the word, Miranda Joseph observes that: '[c]ommunity is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging'.⁶ Baz Kershaw, writing at the very end of the twentieth century, claimed a different reception of the word, noting that the 'destabilising effects of post-modernism' had dislocated the value previously ascribed to 'community' by Williams almost twenty-five years before:

Anything that smacks of collectivism, whether in the 'traditions' of conservative thinking or in the 'communes' of left-wing Utopias, is treated with suspicion, so that sometimes even the slightest hint of 'community' becomes a disease of the imagination, a nostalgic hankering after a shared sense of the human that never actually existed.⁷

Several years later, Joseph also summoned the term's nostalgic undertones, noting that past use of the term 'community' indicated: 'the defining other of modernity, of capitalism'.⁸ Embedded in the 'Romantic' discourse of community was a 'narrative of community as prior in time to "society", locating community in a long-lost past for which we yearn nostalgically from our current fallen state of alienation, bureaucratization, [and] rationality'.⁹ For contemporary theorist Jean-Luc Nancy, 'community' indicates 'the place of a specific existence, the existence of being-in-common',¹⁰ a condition of being in social relations, such that: '[i]t is the work that the community does *not* do and it *is* not that forms community'.¹¹ Philosopher and political scientist Iris Marion Young's assertion that social groups are 'situations of clustering and affective bonding in which people feel affinity for other people'¹² perhaps shares something in common with Nancy's view. Young and many other theorists of 'community' since the 1980s

have described social practices that formulate identity-based communities as *exclusionary* – since the terms and relationships that determine who is included also establish who is excluded. As Chantal Mouffe observes, ‘[t]o construct a “we” it must be distinguished from the “them”’.¹³ Regulation has also been aligned with community formation, since to *belong* means to *conform* and thus to censor behaviour or beliefs that are contrary to the rules determining and regulating the community.¹⁴

With acknowledgment of the complex ideas that now attach to ‘community’, I use the term ‘community circus’ as it is vernacularly deployed within the circus sub-culture: to identify circus arts activity that is not-for-profit and occurs outside the sphere of commercial and professional production. (Although, that is not to say that it is outside the processes of all cultural production and consumption.) It is the term used within the contemporary circus sub-culture to indicate social and performance activities that address young people in normal society, and those others who are deemed to be ‘at-risk’ for a variety of reasons, or marginalised from the normative expectations of citizenship.

ESTABLISHING THE TERMINOLOGY: ‘YOUTH’ AND ‘SOCIAL’ CIRCUS

The term ‘youth circus’ refers to not-for-profit organisations that provide recreational, extra-curricular circus skills training to young people aged up to eighteen years (and in some cases, up to twenty-five years) through weekly classes that are timetabled in tandem with school terms and thus match the quotidian rhythms of the family unit.¹⁵ (In this article, ‘youth circus’ indicates organisations whose primary role is teaching circus skills to young people; the term does not extend to the many instances where circus-style tricks are integrated into theatrical performances of one kind or another by young performers.) School holiday workshops, intensive short courses, end-of-term performances, and the opportunity for high-

er-achieving young people to train at an advanced level for participation in elite troupes are on offer through many organisations. This pattern of activity is repeated by youth circuses across the country, allowing this aspect of community circus to be described as 'institutionalised'. It is a model of extra-curricular, user-pays public education that has much in common with dance schools and music conservatoriums; children and youth could, in principle, move from one youth circus provider to another and encounter similar offerings of public classes. Several youth circus organisations have had intermittent success in attracting limited funding from philanthropic as well as local, state and federal government arts funding sources, but this financial support pales against the long-established pledging of public funding for music conservatoriums and sport. After forty years of activity, the circus arts are still a relative newcomer to the state-sanctioned province of extra-curricular activity for young people in Australia.

Looking internationally, this pattern of operations is replicated in youth circus organisations in North America and Europe. As one example, CircusWest in Vancouver (established 1983) is typical of Canadian youth circus organisations, operating along similar lines to those in Australia with age-group classes from three to nineteen.¹⁶ In the United States, the American Youth Circus Organisation (AYCO) first convened in 1998 with eight member organisations and currently represents 'about 8,000 youth practicing circus regularly',¹⁷ estimating moreover that 'there are at least 2,000 more youth in circus that we haven't yet connected with'. Youth circus is a more recent phenomenon in the United States, with most organisations having been founded within the past twenty years, but AYCO projects that the sector has significant potential for growth, predicting that 50,000 young people will be engaged with the circus arts to some extent by 2015. As elsewhere, youth circus organisations in the United States operate on slim margins (in general, individual organisa-

tions operate on less than \$100,000 per annum), with national annual turnover in the sector estimated at \$10 million.¹⁸

In Europe, perhaps unsurprisingly, youth circus operates on a much larger scale, although in some regions, an exponential growth in youth circus activity is a very recent phenomenon. Finland is a case in point: over the past decade, the number of youth circus organisations has grown from zero to forty-two.¹⁹ The European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO) currently represents nine countries where there is an affiliated national youth circus organisation. Those national organisations represent, in turn, circus schools, youth circus groups, and more formal youth circus organisations that chose to affiliate under the umbrella of the respective national organisation. A total of 388 European youth circus organisations are currently affiliated and EYCO predicts that in the near future it will represent around 551 nationally affiliated youth circus organisations. Current estimates are 512,000 participants and 1,870 teachers (these figures will increase at EYCO's next audit), but this survey does not capture engagement in circus arts with groups that are not affiliated with EYCO or the national umbrella organisations that it represents.²⁰

This leads to the second term requiring definition: 'social circus'. More than simply a recreational pursuit of the circus arts, 'social circus' designates the co-opting of circus skills to an agenda of social change. It is the Cirque du Monde programme – initiated by the Montreal-based co-operation agency Jeunesse du Monde in partnership with Cirque du Soleil – which has given the name *social circus* to an interventionist approach to social ills that uses the circus arts. Established in 1995, Cirque du Monde (nested within the Global Citizenship arm of Cirque du Soleil) operates in partnership with many non-government organisations and community organisations around the world, using the circus arts as an intervention for children and youth who are marginalised as a result of complex social factors, or who are deemed to be 'at-risk' – that is, at risk of not taking

their place in society as contributing adults, at risk of suffering disenfranchisement through low achievement in education, or as a result of mental or physical health challenges.²¹ The term ‘social circus’ is a direct translation from the French (*cirque social*),²² but theatre and performance scholars and practitioners who are familiar with the aims and processes of applied drama/ theatre will appreciate that the term ‘applied circus’ would carry the same inference, since social circus and applied drama/theatre share processes, goals and fundamental ideologies. Quoting from Cirque du Monde’s *Community Workers’ Guide* (2011), social circus

prioritizes the personal and social growth of participants. It encourages the development of self-esteem and the acquisition of social skills, artistic expression and occupational integration ... social circus is distinct from what we might call the professional circus or even the recreational circus insofar as it gives more importance to the experience had by the participants than to the artistic result of this experience, and it establishes a relationship between the participants and the community that goes beyond the aesthetic and entertaining role of the traditional circus.²³

Cirque du Monde’s identification of the early 1990s as the period when the idea of social circus began to gain traction in different parts of the world certainly chimes with events in Australia; Women’s Circus (established 1991 in Melbourne) is perhaps the earliest organiser of ‘social circus’ projects, directed initially at women survivors of sexual violence. During the past fifteen years, other organisations – including Westside Circus (Melbourne), Vulcana Women’s Circus and Flipside Circus (both in Brisbane) – have joined this path-breaking, interventionist model. Two periods stand out as significant in the development of community circus in Australia: the mid-1970s, which gave rise to the performance innovations that burgeoned into the sub-genres of alternative circus²⁴ and youth circus (a first ‘wave’); and the early 1990s, which saw a spike of

growth and diversification in community circus activity (a second ‘wave’). In the next section, I survey the stimuli for these first two ‘waves’ of Australian community circus.

CULTURAL POLICY: STIMULATING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY ARTS

A number of academics have argued that community arts emerge from complex threads of politically and socially engaged arts practice spanning several centuries and numerous international sites.²⁵ Possible precursors for socially engaged arts practice include: the medieval religious theatre, pagan ceremonies, *commedia dell’arte*, Victorian music hall, circus, Meyerhold’s theatre, worker’s theatre movements of the 1920s and 1930s, the 1960s counter-culture, as well as the British and American political theatre troupes of the 1960s.²⁶ In Australia, performance historian Geoffrey Milne observes: ‘[T]he community arts movement, and community theatre ... were undoubtedly politically influenced in their incubation (if not altogether in their creation) and in their practice, much of which was distinctly left-leaning’, while its ‘working methods, socio-political ethos and theatrical genres of radical activist political theatres’ were ‘certainly adopted from abroad’.²⁷ As with the parallel community arts movements that occurred in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Ireland from the late-1960s onwards, Australian live performance became a forum for re-imagining, and at times re-inventing, popular forms (such as circus and variety) that had entertained earlier generations in great numbers.

Community circus sprang, with considerable energy, from the many community arts programmes and initiatives that were supported – if not always financially, then certainly ideologically – by successive Labor and Liberal governments during the 1970s and the 1980s. Broadly speaking, the years 1966 through 1980 gave rise to a ‘new nationalism in Australian culture’ that produced the correlative desire to find new expressions in

theatre that were distinctly 'Australian'.²⁸ The emergence of a vernacular community circus field in Australia during the latter years of this period thus matched newly nationalist inflections across other art forms. These years saw the beginnings of robust alternative theatre endeavours, coupled with an 'Australianisation' of theatre production.²⁹ One significant development that positively stimulated the production and consumption of an expanded range of art forms was the establishment of a taxpayer-supported, national funding body to provide advice to government about the arts and stimulate production through financial support for the arts (the Australian Council for the Arts, established 1968, later the Australia Council). In 1972, the decision by the incoming federal Labor Government 'to widen access to the understanding and application of the arts in the community generally' signalled a shift in ideology concerning the role of the arts in society. As a result of this renovating approach, culture and recreation were endorsed at government level as being essential to the process of transforming the social environment.³⁰

The effects of the resulting growth and development of Australian theatre during the 1970s are described by Geoffrey Milne thus:

It vastly increased the number of people working in the profession and widened its audience, not only among theatre-going adults in the cities but also in the country. It also tapped a huge audience of young people – not as the now-clichéd 'audience of the future' but as an audience in its own right.³¹

This renewed and focused outreach to young people, coupled with the democratising imperative to tour productions to country areas and to stimulate participation in cultural activities in rural regions, is crucially relevant to the development of community circus in Australia.

It was not until 1977, however, that new federal funding initiatives for community arts signalled 'the first time a serious attempt was made to deal with those art forms and artistic activities which did not fall within

the purview of traditional performing arts' such as music, dance, opera and theatre.³² Significant to the focus of this article is the fact that funding from the Community Arts Board during the 1980s flowed to community youth initiatives such as Cirkidz in Adelaide. Set up in the industrial inner-western suburbs of Adelaide in 1986, the guiding aim of Cirkidz' founders was to provide a healthy, recreational focus for disadvantaged youth in the area – goals that spanned the two frequently intersecting objectives of what we nowadays describe as 'youth' and 'social' circus. Government-sponsored funding through the Community Arts Board also supported the Street Arts Community Theatre Company (established 1982) based in West End, Brisbane – a group that 'began its life proper' in 1983 with Australia's first community circus festival.³³

With policies 'based on principles of accessibility and participation',³⁴ the Hawke Labor Government that came to power in 1983 continued and strengthened the ideological trends concerning the arts in the community that had first been initiated by the federal government of the mid-1970s. These recognised the importance of cultural rights, engendered through state support for arts activities at the grassroots level of society. By 1984, it was widely recognised that innovative and experimental artists and companies were an important part of Australia's performing arts ecology,³⁵ and 'programs which will reach new audiences and involve more people in arts activities at all levels'³⁶ – such as the poorly funded fields of 'young people's theatre, puppetry, regional and experimental theatre, dance and mime groups, innovative projects and individual performing artists'³⁷ – became the recipients of government spending. Without overstating a teleological argument too much, these initiatives contributed to the community arts environment in which community circus was incubating and developing.

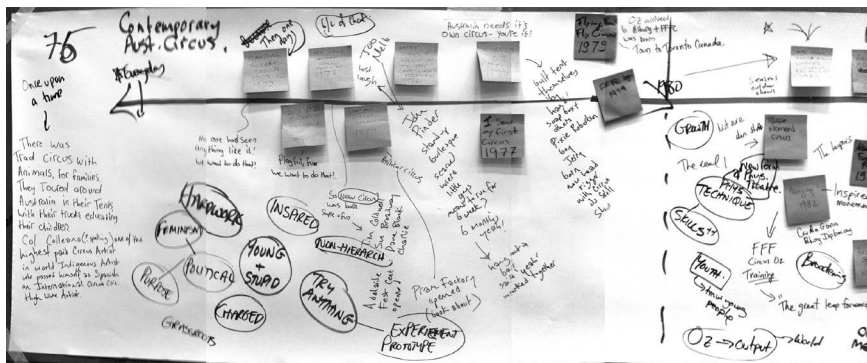
The utopian ideals of the community arts movement of the 1970s and 1980s aligned participation in the creative arts with movements for

social change, across a substantially expanded field of artistic endeavour. The quotidian and the community became targets for government arts funding that effectively drew people who were not ‘artists’ *per se* into participatory creative situations conceived to mesh art with working life, and art with everyday activity.

A COLLABORATIVE ACT OF HISTORY-MAKING

In December 2010, the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA) convened a ‘muster’ in Sydney for people who were either working or interested in circus and physical theatre. One of the activities undertaken by everyone present at an afternoon session in Legs on the Wall’s big red shed in Lilyfield was the creation of a ‘timeline’ of contemporary circus in Australia – an exercise in group memory (see Figures 1–5). The ACAPTA timeline is a record of personal knowledge held by people at the ‘muster’; neither infallible nor absolutely thorough, it is nevertheless a contribution, via lived experience and memory, to the historical record of contemporary Australian circus. Its logic and its inconsistencies highlight the historiographic challenges of writing the history of a community, when the community already tells its own stories.

Somewhat tellingly, the timeline begins in 1975 – a point at odds with the rich history of circus in Australia that dates from the 1840s – but a touchstone date for the current generation of circus performers who consider that *their* circus was (re)invented in Australia in the mid-1970s³⁸ (Figure 1). Reflecting events that the people present had lived through and been key contributors to, the first performance season by the troupe named New Circus from Adelaide is noted in 1973, alongside the first season in 1974 by the Melbourne-based Soap Box Circus, a street theatre and agit-prop group that emerged from the Australian Performing Group at The Pram Factory (Figure 2). Members of New Circus and Soapbox



Circus were, subsequently, the co-founders of Circus Oz (founded 1978) who, according to the group-sourced memory line, ‘built tent themselves “by hand” and responded to the recognition that ‘Australia needs its own circus – you’re it’ (Figure 3). Family-based, traditional tenting circuses toured Australia during the 1970s, but the young producers of Australia’s new circus wanted a different sort of circussian iteration that embodied the new directions of live performance which they were a part of. A perfunctory and slightly facetious note at the commencement of the timeline acknowledges a separate Australian circus history that, to the innovators of Australia’s alternative circus, belonged to a parallel performance universe: ‘Once upon a time there was trad circus with animals, for families. They toured around Australia in their tents with their trucks educating their children’ (Figure 1).

Graffitied across the early stages of the timeline are single words recalling the socio-political imperatives and identity politics central to early alternative circus: ‘feminism’, ‘hard work’, ‘grassroots’, ‘purpose’, ‘political’, ‘young and stupid’, ‘try anything’, ‘charged’, ‘inspired’, ‘non-hierarchy’ [*sic*], ‘experiment’, ‘prototype’ (Figures 1 & 2). Among the many notes on the timeline that record small and large events between 1975 and the early 2000s, as well as influential events in the broader Australian performing arts sector (such as the building of new venues, laws regulating street performance, and

insurance legislation), these words illuminate the values germane to early alternative circus and inscribe its genealogical links to the wider community arts movement of the 1970s.

Nearby on the timeline are shorthand recollections of Australia's growing theatrical bricks and mortar infrastructure, such as the opening of the Adelaide Festival Centre, and La Mama and The Pram Factory in Melbourne. Within the same slice of time, another

entry remembers the 1976 show 'Waiter, There's a Circus in My Soup' at the Last Laugh venue in Melbourne, signalling the links between the renewed interest in circus arts and the emerging new comedy field.

Since its emergence in urban settings in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, the modern circus's freedom from language has enabled it to move internationally, crossing geopolitical and language borders with great ease. Two early entries on the timeline acknowledge the international flow of circus and, in particular, 'community' circus performers, to Australia during the early 1970s. In 1972, the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe visited from China – a professional performance troupe skilled in traditional Chinese circus forms. And in 1975, El Circo de los Muchachos (The Boys' Own Circus) toured Australia (Figure 2). This troupe was led by a Spanish priest, Father Jesús Silva, who had established a 'city republic'



for underprivileged boys in Galicia in 1956. Building on his own circus family heritage, Silva later established first a circus school, then the boys' circus troupe that eventually toured internationally to great acclaim.³⁹ El Circo de los Muchachos was an exemplar that embodied elements of what we now term 'youth' circus, as well as the socially engaged aims of 'social' circus, *and* the commercial interests of traditional circus – one of Father Silva's aims in establishing El Circo de los Muchachos was that the troupe's earnings might contribute financially to La Ciudad de los Muchachos (the City of Boys), the 'city republic'.

Comments appended to these two events on the timeline (Nanjing and Muchachos) – such as, 'No one had seen anything like it! We want to do that!' and 'Playful, fun, we want to do that!' – are perhaps good humoured, mythologising statements belying the familiarity of popular entertainment forms. In her doctoral study tracing the international emergence of alternative circus (2005), Jane Mullett notes popular performance as an influence on alternative circus during the 1970s, 'typified by the growth of street performance and particularly the craze for skills like juggling, unicycling and fire-breathing that swept through the university campuses of Australia, the United States, Canada and France in the 1970s'.⁴⁰ Far from being out of view of everyday life, traditional circus performance, although on the wane, was still a popular family entertainment during the 1960s and accessible, at least on an annual basis, to those living in metropolitan or regional areas. Moreover, the circus arts have been a consistent element of highly visible variety/vaudeville performance in Australia since the late nineteenth century. Recent research by Jonathan Bollen has shown that variety acts became one of the staples of live television production in Australia during the 1960s, just a few years after mainstream television broadcasting began in 1956.⁴¹ My point is that Australians of all ages were exposed to circus-style performance during the 1960s, either because of attendance at the circus tent or through

popular live broadcast television variety shows. Thus the young producers of alternative circus re-worked and re-purposed popular forms that they were peripherally aware of, producing shows with a new aesthetic and developing processes that metonymically reflected social change and new subjectivities emerging in the broader society.⁴²

Absent from the timeline is recognition of the very early stirrings of community circus (youth training is noted post-1980, at Figure 4). From the mid-1970s, circus skills workshops targeting young people were a part of community arts programmes. Pipi Storm Children's Circus, for example, toured nationally from 1975 through to the 1980s, introducing performance-based circus skills to young people through workshops and community performances.⁴³ The introduction of these skills, together with the opportunity to gain proficiency in them and to showcase them in community performances, generated interest in audiences and participants across the country, especially in regional areas where touring was focused. Alongside the growth of alternative circus (most visibly through Circus Oz), the establishment of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus for young people in 1979 provided a high-profile, national focus for the circus arts, which, by the late 1970s, were enjoying an established interest and demand as the result of early touring by troupes such as Pipi Storm.⁴⁴

Throughout the 1980s, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus became even more of a focus for youth-oriented circus arts activity. It was as well the locus for several international skills training workshops, which – according to accounts of those involved – substantially changed the culture of Australian alternative circus by leading to a markedly higher level of skills⁴⁵ (Figures 4 & 5). The institutionalised growth of youth circus was ostensibly slow throughout the 1980s. By the end of the decade, Australia had just two youth circus organisations: the Flying Fruit Flies and, 1,000 kilometres away, Cirkidz in Adelaide.⁴⁶ Although the *institutionalised* outcomes of Australia's first 'wave' of community circus development were slim by

decade's end, the 1980s were nevertheless a period that gave rise to several women's circus initiatives; the first community circus festival in Brisbane (Street Arts, 1983); a strengthening of ideas around what youth circus could be (as a result of the flagship Flying Fruit Flies youth circus); a consolidation of alternative circus's style and ethos, particularly through Circus Oz; the arrival of Reg Bolton from the United Kingdom, (clown, teacher, community arts worker) who settled in Western Australia in 1985;⁴⁷ the inclusion of physical circus skills and a community arts ethos in university programmes, such as those at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst; and the increasing ubiquity of circus arts in conjunction with many community arts projects across the country. These, and other factors – such as the growth of arts festivals, the increase in arts events funded by local government, and a by-now-entrenched fascination with *the physical* in new Australian performance – all contributed to the second 'wave' of community circus during the 1990s.⁴⁸

A COMMUNITY CIRCUS EXPLOSION IN THE 1990s

In consideration of the period focus of this volume, I could end this article here. But following my primary premise (that there have been three 'waves' of community circus activity to date in Australia), and my synoptic intention, I want to briefly summarise the surge in community circus that occurred in Australia throughout the 1990s and provide some preliminary theorisation about this spike of activity that mirrored similar trends overseas.⁴⁹ My early data indicate that at least twelve new community circus organisations which began during the 1990s are still operating currently, but this figure does not include either start-ups that enjoyed a limited life, or short-term projects providing interventions and outreach to special interest groups.⁵⁰ Circus arts were also trialled in a few New South Wales primary schools during the 1990s as a strategy to engage

children who were difficult to teach or experienced problems fitting in. Long-ranging influences of these circus-in-education initiatives have yet to be measured and examined.⁵¹

Of the not-for-profit organisations that began in the 1990s, many have now been operating for between fourteen and twenty-three years, most with minimal external funding and at times none. The extraordinary resilience of these groups and the operational models that they have developed begs further investigation. In general terms, the groups that commenced in the 1990s, and continue today, began in shaky financial circumstances with goals that included enriched social integration for the individual, contribution to the community, as well as improvements to the individual's health and social wellbeing. A recent document written by Brisbane's Flipside Circus articulates a knowledge base germane to community circus – that the circus arts can, and do foster:

[P]ositive development of young people by promoting active participation and community-mindedness to encourage leadership, resilience, confidence, improved communication skills, respect, and a healthy lifestyle.⁵²

The same document names the organisation's core values: 'to show off, to take risks, to trust, to dream and aspire, to work hard and to laugh' – aims that capture also the values that infuse community circus.

Circus skills are attractive for numerous reasons, among which the *risk* factor that has been shown to be so attractive to youth.⁵³ The enduring *mythology* of the circus, as well as the circus's inviting call to *play* and have *fun* are elements that resonate with Johan Huizinga's seminal proposal that mankind is a playful species, and that play is closely allied to artistic creation. Huizinga itemises the characteristics of play as follows:

It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in visible order, according to the rules freely accepted,

and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow.⁵⁴

While Huizinga draws a parallel between play and 'poetic creation', skilful and social engagement with and through the paradigm of the circus arts similarly aligns with his description of the play realm.

Overwhelmingly, advocacy for community circus, whether 'youth' or 'social' circus, is couched in what M.H. Abrams has defined as a 'pragmatic' theory of art, 'the work of art as a means to an end, an instrument to get something done'.⁵⁵ In particular, arguments on behalf of the circus arts for children and young people, within a setting that is sociable and supportive, focus on the benefits of personal wellbeing (mental, social, and physical), and quality of life.⁵⁶ Of significance is that the process of engaging with circus skills within a social environment is just as important, and indeed, perhaps more important, than the aesthetic quality of the product(s). This point of view aligns with Madden and Bloom's definition of art therapy as 'the use of art in service of change on the part of the person who created the artwork'.⁵⁷ In art therapy of one kind or another, as in the fields of 'youth' and 'social' circus, the artistic process is dominant, as the subject takes on the role of producer rather than consumer.⁵⁸

The spike of community circus activity during the 1990s, and its various meanings, offers a challenge for future scholars. At a time when 'community' (after Kershaw) was supposedly 'coming to an end', community circus activity went through an unprecedented period of growth and took on a new institutionalisation. Across the field of expanded arts practice internationally, the 1990s saw what art critic and academic, Clare Bishop, calls a 'return to the social'.⁵⁹ This 'social turn' in the visual, live and performance arts coincided with movements for social change and resulted in a surge of cultural participation and collaboration. In broad

terms, the expansion of youth and social circus that occurred in Australia and internationally during the 1990s is commensurate with Bishop's analysis that participatory art during this period derived from a 'utopian rethinking of art's relationship to the social and of its political potential'.⁶⁰ Following postmodernism's dissolution of a unitary view of 'community', we see a substitution of communities, especially micro-communities (such as those created through community circus activity), reflecting Young's 'affective bonding' and 'feeling affinity for', and Nancy's 'places of specific' existence (such as localised geographies) and 'being in common'.

Community circus in Australia (as in North America and Europe) is now experiencing a third 'wave' of development and interest. The extent of current activity is unknown, but anecdotal indications are that the appearance of new initiatives in communities across Australia is unprecedented. The *terra incognita* that is contemporary community circus needs to be mapped, both in terms of its sites, its constituencies, and its effects. There are many 'histories' folded within the arc of community circus of the past forty years.

NOTES

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- 2 A very useful overview of activity is, however, provided in Geoffrey Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited: Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004).
- 3 Ben Collins, 'Australia's Other Boom: The Rise of Community Circus', see online: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/10/03/3602775.htm> (accessed 10 October 2013). This observation is also gathered from discussions with members of ACAPTA.
- 4 Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) 28.

- 5 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976) 64, quoted in Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1999) 191–2.
- 6 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) vii.
- 7 Kershaw 192.
- 8 Joseph 1.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) xxxvii.
- 11 *Ibid* xxxix.
- 12 Marion Iris Young, 'Polity and Group Difference', in *Throwing Like a Girl* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 123.
- 13 Chantal Mouffe, 'Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community', in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, and Community*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992) 234 (quoted in Joseph xxviii).
- 14 Joseph xxvii.
- 15 Classes include skills training in acro-balance, a range of aerial work, hula-hoop, stilt-walking, juggling, acrobatics/tumbling, silk/tissu, unicycle, diabolo, German wheel, poi, etc. Strength, flexibility, discipline and playfulness result from the training; team-building and collaboration are central elements in classes.
- 16 'CircusWest' website: <http://circuswest.com/> (accessed 10 October 2013).
- 17 'American Youth Circus Organisation' website: <http://www.americanyouthcircus.org/> (accessed 10 October 2013).
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 'CircusInfo Finland' website: <http://www.sirkusinfo.fi/en/organisatin./circusinfo-finland> (accessed 10 October 2013); 'The Effective Circus Project' website: <http://www.vaikuttavasirkus.fi/index.php?page=home> (accessed 10 October 2013).
- 20 All data are drawn from 'European Youth Circus Organisation' website: <http://www.eyco.org/> (accessed 10 October 2013).
- 21 Michel Lafortune, *Community Worker's Guide: When Circus Lessons Become Life Lessons* (Montreal: Fondation Cirque du Soleil, 2011).
- 22 Interview with Gil Favreau, directeur – Action et responsabilité sociales (director, Social Action and Responsibility, Global Citizenship Service), at Cirque du Soleil International Headquarters in Montreal, 18 November 2011.
- 23 Lafortune 14.
- 24 For a history of the emergence of new circus, see Jane Mullet, 'Circus Alternatives: The Rise of New Circus in Australia, the United States, Canada and France', PhD dissertation, La Trobe University, 2005.
- 25 See Milne 219–20 for analysis of work by critical commentators on this.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid* 123.
- 29 In addition to Geoffrey Milne's excellent commentary on this period, see also Julian Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002) and Gabrielle Wolf, *Make It Australian: The Australian Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2008).
- 30 Justin Macdonnell, *Arts, Minister? Government Policy and the Arts* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1992) 103.
- 31 Milne 217.
- 32 Macdonnell 345.
- 33 Milne 346.
- 34 Barry Cohen, Opening Address, Conference of Federal–State Ministers with Responsibility for the Arts and Cultural Affairs, Canberra, 24 February 1984, media release, 3, CAPP files, quoted in Macdonnell 345.
- 35 Macdonnell 361.
- 36 Australia Council, media release, 16 October 1984, quoted in Macdonnell 357.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Australian circus historian Mark St Leon asserts that the first organised circus performance to occur in Australia was in 1847 in Launceston, Tasmania, *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2011) 29.
- 39 Obituary for Father Jesús Silva, *The Telegraph* (London), 12 September 2011.
- 40 Mullet 94.

- 41 'Television promoted itself as the new medium of entertainment by indulging its audience's nostalgia for past genres of variety entertainment from the stage. Minstrel shows, music hall songs, old-fashioned dances, period costumes and veteran stage performers were standard fare in the first decade of variety television in Australia.' Jonathan Bollen, 'From Theatrical Nostalgia to Modernist Design: Nightclubs as Venues for Live Entertainment in Mid-Twentieth-Century Australia', in *A World of Popular Entertainments*, edited by G. Arrighi and V. Emeljanow (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012) 68–82 at 73.
- 42 For scholarship on alternative circus, see Mullet. See also St Leon 239–48.
- 43 Interview with Brian Joyce, an early member of Pipi Storm Children's Circus, 15 November 2010.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 In 1983, the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe of China provided a training project at Flying Fruit Fly Circus (Nanjing 1), followed by a second training project in 1986 (Nanjing 2). Training projects with artists from the Moscow Circus followed. See Rosemary Farrell, 'Nanjing Project: Chinese Acrobatics, Australian New Circus and Hybrid Intercultural Performance', *Australasian Drama Studies* 53 (October 2008): 186–202.
- 46 In Western Australia, Reg Bolton had arrived from the UK and set up his Suitcase Circus by 1985, through which he initiated circus-in-schools projects and circus arts projects for special interest groups; this was not an institutionalised operation in the way that Cirkidz and the Flying Fruit Flies were.
- 47 The influence of Reg Bolton upon the development of community circus in Australia has been significant.
- 48 The most useful source for this analysis is Milne; for acknowledgment of the rise of *the physical* in Australian performance, see also Jacqueline Lo, 'Dis/orientations: Contemporary Asian-Australian Theatre in the 1990s' and Veronica Kelly, 'Old Patterns, New Energies', in *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, edited by Veronica Kelly (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998).
- 49 R. Sugarman, *Circus for Everyone: Circus Learning Around the World* (Vermont: Mountainside Press, 2001). See also S. Ward, 'The Not So Naughty Nineties: A Decade of Circus Developments, 1991–2001' (2001) online: http://www.americanyouth-circus.org/Default.aspx?pageId=794362#steve_ward (accessed 29 March 2011).
- 50 Groups include: Warehouse Circus (established 1990, Canberra); Women's Circus (1991, Melbourne); Spaghetti Circus (1992, Mullumbimby, northern New South Wales); Blackrobs (1994, Kuranda, north Queensland); Theatre Kimberley (1995, Broome, Western Australia), a subsidiary of which is Sandfly Circus; POW Performing Older Women's Circus (1995, Melbourne); Vulcana Women's Circus (1995, Brisbane); Westside Circus (1996, Melbourne), from a project for female juvenile offenders; West Australian Circus School (mid-1990s, Fremantle); Slipstream Circus (classes from 1997, established 2000, north-west Tasmania); Flipside Circus (1997, Brisbane); Aerialize (1999, Sydney).
- 51 Paul Woodhead at Dubbo South Primary School led these initiatives and I am indebted to him for sharing records of his work with me.
- 52 Flipside, briefing, April 2013.
- 53 Kate Donelan and Angela O'Brien, *Creative Interventions for Marginalised Youth: The Risky Business Project* (Victoria: Drama Australia, 2008); Sharon McCutcheon, 'Negotiating Identity Through Risk: A Community Circus Model for Evoking Change and Empowering Youth', MA dissertation, Charles Sturt University, 2003.
- 54 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970) 154–5.

55 M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) 15, quoted in Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, *The Social Impact of the Arts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 146.

56 Advocacy on behalf of community circus, both in Australia and internationally, emanates from the 'community' itself.

57 *Ibid* 102.

58 *Ibid*.

59 Clare Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012) 3. See also Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Milton Park, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011).

60 Bishop 3.