

Re-routing traditional circus performance: towards a cultural history of community circus in Australia

Introduction

Community circus activity in Australia has evolved and diversified over the past four decades into an institutionalised and thus identifiable sub-culture of the circus arts. Although linked intrinsically to traditional circus through its physical activities,¹ the primary goals of community circus are very different to the motivating drives of the traditional circus. Nowadays comprising 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 persistent phenomenon of community circus has been left out of cultural and performance histories. This paper begins a narrative history of community circus in Australia, framed by the national trends and political policies that have shaped it.

Clustering in two discrete, yet interrelated spheres of activity that are identified by contemporary workers within the field as ‘youth’ and ‘social’ circus, the umbrella category of community circus is a direct descendent of the community arts movement that was prevalent in Australia, as in some other developed Western nations, during the 1970s and 1980s. The community arts movement of the 1970s-80s stimulated alternative approaches to art and performance making, provoked, in turn, by government-funded initiatives during this period. Fundamental shifts in attitude to the role of the arts in society were adopted by governments at the federal and state levels and resulted in the flow of funding for arts projects that targeted Australia’s increasingly diverse community interests. These government-sponsored initiatives provoked changes in the ways that cultural productions were delivered, consumed and participated in by the new audiences they targeted. Young and enthusiastic individuals with few or no ties to institutionalised arts practices of production and consumption were drawn to the creative opportunities opened up by these funding initiatives. Their collaborative and often aesthetically rough approaches to art and performance making were infused with energetic idealism for social change at the grass roots strata of society.

Communities that were distantiated—either geographically, socially, or both—from participation as audiences in culturally high brow productions of music, dance, theatre and the visual arts—in concert halls, theatre houses, or galleries—became the focus of government sponsored community arts funding initiatives. The utopian ideals of the community arts movement of this period aligned participation in the creative arts with movements for social change, across a substantially expanded field of artistic endeavour. The quotidian and the community were the new target subjects for

government arts funding that drew people who were not ‘artists’ into participatory creative situations conceived to mesh art with working life, and art with every day activity.

A visible decentralisation of performance and event locations occurred as a result of a series of waves of arts activity across Australia, giving rise at different times and in different locations to *ad hoc* performance and rehearsal venues in former warehouse or light industrial areas of major centres. At the same time, the touring of performance events to suburban and rural areas at considerable distance from the CBD locations of established theatres, concert halls, and galleries augmented the strategies through which community arts initiatives were enacted. Young people, school children, immigrant and indigenous communities, factory workers, rural communities at a geographic distance from Australia’s major cities, and people who were—for all kinds of reasons—marginalised from the normative expectations of Australia’s welfare state policies, became the target audience for socially engaged community arts practice.

At specific times and locations the Australian community arts initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s evoked the collectivist Australian workers’ theatre movement of the 1930s.² As with the parallel community arts movements that occurred in the UK, the US, Canada and Ireland from the late-1960s, Australian live performance became a forum for reimagining, and at times re-inventing performance forms that had enjoyed popularity with earlier generations. Re-imagined paradigms of circus and variety appeared in Australian community arts performances during the 1970s, seeding the establishment of long-lived companies that have endured to today, such as Circus Oz and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus for young people.³ The artistic creators of the new wave of socially committed live performance that was aimed at non-theatre going audiences of the 1970s chose artistic democracy as their preferred creative method, in favour of the hierarchical structures of power linked to text-based theatre. The social and political aims of some of this new work, as well as the democratised method of its collaborative creation, thus ‘ghosted’ politically engaged theatre practices targeted at effecting social change in the UK, the US, the Soviet Union and other parts of Western Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴

Australia’s prolific contemporary physical theatre and circus arts spectrum maintains performance action today that is firmly rooted in the traditional circus. However, the impetus for what is broadly referred to in this paper as community circus did not come from Australia’s traditional circus sector. Instead, community circus sprang, with considerable energy, from the many community arts programs and performance groups funded by government initiatives during the 1970s, as well as the many limited-life projects, workshops, festivals, and *ad hoc* events that were also a by-product of this re-focussing of official attitude to the role of the arts in society.

Forty years after its nascent stirrings in the community arts movement, contemporary community circus in Australia maintains some of the strong ideologies that informed the movements for social change from which it sprang. A primary focus upon children, youth, and those who are disenfranchised either physically or socially has continued to sustain the guiding imperatives of the sector, as well as the utopian belief that creative engagement can be co-opted for positive change in people’s lives. Just a small sample of activity rehearsed here will serve to indicate the diversity of creative

engagement that is currently offered by Australia's community circus organisations. The Women's Circus,⁵ established in 1991 to develop and maintain a sustainable women's circus community in Melbourne; The Performing Older Women's Circus,⁶ founded in 1995 to offer circus arts skills development, as well as ensemble performance opportunities to women in the over-40 age range; Blackrobats,⁷ established in the town of Kuranda, North Queensland, and providing indigenous youth with circus arts participation opportunities since 1994; the many 'youth circus' providers across Australia, of which the longest-running is the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in the New South Wales and Victoria border towns of Albury-Wodonga; 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,⁸ are just a few examples of participation opportunities in the circus arts that are currently available to a variety of social and age groups across Australia.

Up to this point, both in my introductory discussion and in the title of this paper, I have used the term 'community' as if its meaning is unequivocally clear and not without complication. However, I use the term with the recognition that it is problematic, as Miranda Joseph warns us in her 2002 publication, *Against the Romance of Community*.⁹ Later in this paper I refer to the tensions currently emerging within some of Australia's key community circus providers and set these alongside the critique brought forward by Joseph concerning "deployments of community, both verbal invocations and practices."¹⁰ But for now, in this introductory section of my paper, I use the term 'community circus' in the way that the circus sub-culture uses the term: to identify circus arts activity that is not-for-profit and thus occurs outside the sphere of commercial and professional production. It is the term that the contemporary circus sub-culture uses to indicate its activities in both 'youth' and 'social' circus, two discrete yet closely related fields of activity that aim primarily at children, youth, and young adults.

Terminology

The term *youth circus* refers to not-for-profit organisations that provide recreational, extra-curricular circus skills training to young people aged up to 18 years (and in some cases, up to 25 years) through weekly classes that are timetabled in tandem with the school terms and thus match the quotidian rhythms of the family unit. Within this paper the term *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. Age-specific (and therefore skill-level) group classes are offered on a weekly basis by youth circus organisations for toddlers aged 18 months and up (mothers or carers also participate in classes for pre-school age children), and in age/skill bands that align with development age brackets all the way up to the young adult age band of 18-25. In addition, youth circus organisations provide school holiday workshops, intensive short courses, end of term performance outcomes, as well as the opportunity for higher achieving children and youth to train at an advanced skill level in order to participate in elite performance troupes. This pattern of activity is repeated by many youth circus organisations across the country, thus allowing me to describe this aspect of community circus as 'institutionalised.' It is a model of extra-curricula, user pays, public education that has much in common with dance schools and music

conservatoria across Australia; children and youth could, in principal, move from one youth circus provider to another and encounter similar offerings of public classes organised according to age and skill bands. 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 conservatoria and sport. After forty years of activity, the circus arts are still a relative newcomer to the state-sanctioned province of extra curricula activity for children and youth in Australia. (Looking internationally, the situation is very different in Finland, for example, where 45 new youth and social circus groups have emerged in the past decade, buoyed by funding from the Finnish government and EU-wide interest in the physical and social benefits that are claimed to ensue from social participation in the circus arts.)

This leads to the second of the terms requiring definition in this paper, that of *social circus*. More than simply a recreational pursuit of the circus arts, the term *social circus* designates the co-opting of circus skills for social change. Whilst *Circus Elleboog* in Amsterdam, established in 1949, claims to be the oldest ‘youth’ and ‘social’ circus organisation in Europe, it is the *Cirque du Monde* program, initiated by the Montreal-based co-operation agency Jeunesse du Monde in partnership with the mega-production conglomerate, *Cirque du Soleil*, which has provided the name *social circus* to an interventionist approach to social ills that uses the circus arts.

Dating the ‘emergence’ of cultural trends that co-opt ancient creative skills for the social good can be problematic. Once a date is settled, the proof that these skills have never before been mobilised to improve the self-esteem and social integration of a person will inevitably be difficult to establish. The Global Citizenship arm of *Cirque du Soleil* observe loosely that early in the 1990s was when the idea emerged that circus arts could be meaningfully applied as an intervention approach for people who were marginalised as a result of complex social factors or who were deemed to be ‘at-risk’—at risk of not taking their place in society as contributing adults, at risk of suffering disenfranchisement through low achievement in education, of as a result of mental or physical health challenges. The term ‘social circus’ is a direct translation from the French (*cirque social*)¹¹ 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.¹² 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. It gives participants the chance to express themselves and be listened to, to realize their own potential and to make their own contribution...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.¹³

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 that were directed, initially, at women who were survivors of sexual violence. During the past fifteen years or so other community circus organisations such as Westside Circus (Melbourne), Vulcana Women's Circus and Flipside Circus (both in Brisbane) have joined the path-breaking interventionist model pioneered in Australia by Women's Circus.

As markers in the development of community circus in Australia, my research is revealing two significant periods: the mid-1970s that gave rise to the performance innovations that bourgeoned into the sub-genres now widely understood as New Circus and youth circus, and the early 1990s when community circus went through sudden and significant growth and diversification. In the next section of this paper I will survey the markers of the developments I am indicating and tease out the cultural and political stimuli for these changes. Community circus in Australia, as elsewhere, is currently experiencing a third stage of growth and interest, coupled with challenges arising from changes in national and international economies and new sustainability imperatives. In the final section of my paper I will highlight some shifts occurring within the sector and highlight some of the factors that may be at the root of new directions in the sector.

Australianising theatre and performance in Australia

In *Theatre Australia Unlimited* (2004), Geoffrey Milne has identified a 'second wave' of Australian theatre, extending roughly from 1966 until the early 1980s. Broadly speaking, these years gave rise to a "new nationalism in Australian culture" that produced the correlative desire to find new expressions in theatre that were distinctly 'Australian.'¹⁴ It is within this period that community circus emerged and maintained a marginal presence in Australian performance culture.

The early years of Milne's 'second wave' saw the beginnings of robust alternative theatre endeavours, stimulated by invigorated young people who were emerging from activity in new university Drama departments in Sydney (UNSW), Melbourne (Monash), and Adelaide (Flinders). Young writers using a confident vernacular voice, small new alternative venues such as La Mama in Melbourne, new theatre companies such as the Australian Performing Group (working out of a disused Pram Factory in Melbourne), and Sydney's Nimrod Street Theatre Company (working out of a refurbished stable in the inner city suburb of Surry Hills), together with the performers, directors and designers that clustered around these initiatives, were some of the key elements that contributed to the *Australianisation* of theatre production throughout this 'second wave' period.¹⁵

Another significant development for the production and transmission of cultural forms throughout this period was the establishment of a tax-payer supported, national funding body to provide advice to government about the arts and stimulate production through financial support for the arts. In late-1967 the federal Liberal-Country Party coalition government (which, contrary to its name, was on the conservative side of the political fence) announced the creation of the Australian Council for the Arts

(established in 1968). By 1976 the subsequent Labor government, led by prime-minister Gough Whitlam, had replaced the Australian Council for the Arts with the Australia Council, vested with the role as the government's arts advisory body. The six initial art-form boards that comprised the Australia Council served Aboriginal arts, literature, music, theatre, crafts and visual arts, whilst a seventh board, the Community Arts Board was added in 1977 (subsequently succeeded by the Community Cultural Development Unit).¹⁶ The emergence of a vernacular community circus field in Australia during this period thus matched newly nationalist inflections across other art forms.

Milne has described the effects of the 'second wave' of theatre development in Australia 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.¹⁷

Whilst the recognition of children and young people as a discrete audience has been a feature of theatre production in past 'moments' of Australian cultural history,¹⁸ the renewed and focussed outreach to this subset of society, coupled with the democratising imperative to tour productions to country areas and to stimulate participation in cultural activities in rural regions, is signally relevant to the development of community circus in Australia.

Also relevant here is Milne's analysis of a debate that emerged in the early 1970s around issues of 'cultural democracy' and the 'democratisation of the arts.'¹⁹ Less than 5% of Australians identified themselves as 'theatre-going' (although this figure, in all likelihood, may not capture national participation in the country's amateur theatre field that, in some regions, was an underlying element of community social life),²⁰ whilst a small proportion of the population regularly visited other cultural institutions such as art galleries, or ballet, opera, and symphony orchestra performances. In light of these figures however I would argue that the population's participation in, and attendance at, cultural events in their own community such as: brass bands and other genres of group music-making, choral events, eisteddfods, social dancing, cabaret/nightclub entertainments (such as those currently being investigated by Jonathan Bollen), and amateur/community art and craft societies, are not captured in these figures that reflect attendance at professionally produced, so-called 'high-brow' events.

One of the Australia Council's key objectives was "to promote the general application of the arts in the community" and for the social-reformist Labor government of the mid-1970s, "the community" really did reach beyond the bourgeois suburbs of the major cities. Whilst the whole of Australia has always proved difficult to reach, the new Labor government's social reform-agenda aimed for as much of Australia's population as could possibly be reached. Amongst the stated aims of the Australia Council was the priority "to provide, and encourage provision of, opportunities for persons to practice the arts" and "to promote the appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of the arts."²¹ "Participation" was also a key objective,²² together with the primary aim to "provide excellence in the arts."²³ Milne provides a brief analysis of work by critical commentators who have argued that community arts emerge from complex threads of

politically and socially engaged arts practice spanning several centuries and numerous international sites. The list of possible precursors for socially engaged arts practice includes: 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, British and American political theatre troupes of the 1960s. Milne concludes that "the [Australian] community arts movement, and community theatre more particularly were undoubtedly politically influenced in their incubation (if not altogether in their creation) and in their practice, much of which was distinctly left-leaning," whilst its "working methods, socio-political ethos and theatrical genres of radical activist political theatres" were "certainly adopted from abroad."²⁴

A collaborative act of history-making

In December 2010 the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA) convened a 'muster' in Sydney (not a 'conference') for people involved with or interested in circus and physical theatre production. I was one of two representatives from the tertiary sector (the other being one of my postgrad students), there because I was keen to open up the field of youth circus to interrogation, cognisant that I needed to meet with workers and producers in this field and that any subsequent research required a dialogic relationship with the sector. One of the activities everyone engaged in one afternoon was the creation of a 'timeline' of circus in Australia, an exercise in group memory. (*See images*) Somewhat tellingly, the timeline began in 1975—a contentious matter for me in light of my research into Australasian circus of the 19th and early-20th centuries—but a touchstone date for the current generation of circus performers who consider that *their* circus was (re)invented in Australia in the mid-1970s. Reflecting events that some of them had lived through and been key contributors to, the first performance season by the troupe named New Circus from Adelaide was 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. 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."²⁵ There were still quite a few family based, traditional tenting circuses touring Australia during the 1970s but the young producers of Australia's New Circus wanted a different sort of circusian iteration that embodied the new directions of live performance they were a part of. (One of the timeline entries is the 1976 show, "Waiter there's a circus in my soup," at the Last Laugh venue in Melbourne, indicating the common territory that was shared by the renewed interest in circus arts and the emerging new comedy field.)

Graffitied across the early stages of the timeline are personal notes that recall the socio-political imperatives and identity politics central to the community arts movement of the 'second wave'—'feminism,' 'hard work,' 'grassroots,' 'purpose,' 'political,' 'young and stupid,' 'try anything,' 'charged,' 'inspired,' 'non-hierarchy' (*sic*), 'experiment,' 'prototype.' 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. A perfunctory and slightly

facetious note at the commencement of the timeline acknowledges a separate Australian circus history that, to the young innovators of Australia's New Circus, was part of a parallel and non-intersecting 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."

Two entries near the start of 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 highly skilled in traditional Chinese circus forms; and in 1975 (not 1972 as noted in the timeline) El Circo de los Muchachos (the boys' own circus) toured Australia. This troupe had been established and was, at that time, led by a Spanish priest, Father Jesús Silva, who had established a 'city republic' for underprivileged boys in Galicia in 1956. Later, building on his own circus family heritage, Silva established first a circus school, and then the boys' circus troupe that eventually toured internationally to high acclaim.²⁶ El Circo de los Muchachos was an exemplar that embodied elements of what we now term youth circus, 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 might financially contribute 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): "No one had seen anything like it! We want to do that!" and "Playful, fun, we want to do that!" are perhaps mythologising statements that deny the extent to which circus and variety performance was in circulation during the years when the people leading the emergence of community and New Circus were growing up. Traditional circus performance was a prevalent family entertainment in Australia during the 1960s, and the circus arts have infused Variety performance in Australia from the late-19th century onwards. Jonathan Bollen's research has shown that live Variety became one of the staples of live television production during the 1960s, just a few years after mainstream television broadcasting began in 1956.²⁷ This was the period when the innovators of community and New Circus were growing up, and thus it is likely they were exposed, through television and family outings, to various skill divisions of the circus arts such as acrobatics, tumbling, juggling, cycle acts and the like. At least one of the early New Circus innovators, Sue Broadway, came from a family of Variety performers.

The circus timeline is a very useful record of personal knowledge held by the people at the ACAPTA 'muster' in early December 2010; neither infallible nor absolutely thorough, it is nevertheless a good basis upon which to build. Absent from the ACAPTA timeline is recognition of the very early stirrings of community circus. From the early-1970s circus skills workshops targeting young people were a part of many community arts programs run by groups in Brisbane (Circus Arts), Sydney (Pipi Storm), and Canberra. 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.²⁸ The introduction to these skills, 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 focussed. Alongside the growth of New

Circus, most visibly through Circus Oz, the establishment of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus for young people in 1979 provided a high profile and national focus for what was, by the late-1970s, already a well-established interest and demand.

Throughout the 1980s the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury-Wodonga became a focus for youth oriented circus arts activity. It was as well as the locus for several international skills training workshops that, according to accounts of those involved, substantially changed the culture of Australian New Circus by leading to a markedly higher level of skills.²⁹ The institutionalised growth of youth circus was however slow throughout the 1980s. By the end of the decade, Australia had just two youth circus organisations, the Flying Fruit Flies and, 1000 kilometres away, Cirkidz in Adelaide, South Australia. Set up in the industrial inner-western suburbs of Adelaide in 1986, the guiding aim of Cirkidz's 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 now describe as 'youth' and 'social' circus. Although the *institutionalised* outcomes of Australia's community arts movement may appear to have been slim, by decade's end, in the field of community circus, the 1980s were nevertheless a period that gave rise to several women's circus initiatives; the first community circus festival in Brisbane (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 New Circus's style and ethos, particularly through Circus Oz;³⁰ the arrival of Reg Bolton from the UK (clown, teacher, community arts worker) who settled in Western Australia in 1985;³¹ the inclusion of physical circus skills and a community arts ethos in University programs such as Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, New South Wales; an increase in disused light industrial spaces that *ad hoc* collections of artists occupied for rehearsal and classes; and the increasing ubiquity of circus arts in conjunction with many community arts projects across the country. These, and many 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 community circus boom of the 1990s.

Community circus institutionalisation during the 1990s

Throughout the 1990s a surge in youth and social circus in Australia mirrored similar trends overseas.³² At home, this growth occurred alongside an increase in adult physical theatre and contemporary circus companies producing new work for commercial marketplaces that included national and international arts festivals.³³ The following list records community circus groups that began in the 1990s and are still operating. Thus, all of the following not-for-profit organisations have been operating for between 14 and 23 years, most with minimal, and at times no external funding from sources such as local councils, community organisations, philanthropy, state, and federal arts funding sources. Part of my larger project will involve an interrogation of the extraordinary resilience of these groups and the operational models they have developed. With regard to groups that started up during the 1990s and are still operating, the following list may well be incomplete. Not recorded here are the many groups and *ad hoc* community circus projects that were either short-lived or attached to public funding through local councils or larger community arts projects.

Warehouse Circus (established 1990 in Canberra), a youth circus “dedicated to improving the mental and physical health of young people through the medium of circus”;

Women’s Circus (established 1991 in Melbourne), perhaps the earliest organiser of social circus projects that were directed, initially, at women who were survivors of sexual violence;

Spaghetti Circus (established 1992, Mullumbimby, northern New South Wales), a youth circus about to mark 21 years of operations;

Blackrobats (established 1994 in Kuranda, North Queensland), providing indigenous youth with circus arts participation opportunities;

Theatre Kimberley (established 1995, Broome, Western Australia), a subsidiary of which is **Sandfly Circus**, providing public youth circus classes and performance outreach to remote communities in WA’s northwest;

POW Performing Older Women’s Circus (established 1995 in Melbourne), to offer circus arts skills development, as well as ensemble performance opportunities, to women in the over-40 age range;

Vulcana Women’s Circus (operating since its first project in 1995 in Brisbane), outreach programs to “marginalised communities of women and young people,” support for emerging arts workers, performers, and riggers, and project work with “youth services, health services, counseling and support services, Indigenous services/groups, schools and local councils;”

Westside Circus (Melbourne) established 1996 by Debby Maziarz who was a member of Women’s Circus. Out of an initial project for female juvenile offenders, the program extended to offer circus skills training and performance opportunities for young local women. Socially engaged intervention projects, a public program of classes for children and young people, and public performances have been the basis of the group’s operations up to the present;

West Australian Circus School (established mid-1990s, Fremantle) provides classes and performance opportunities for people from 3+ to young adults;

Slipstream Circus (classes from 1997, established 2000, northwest coast of Tasmania), community youth circus organisation;

Flipside Circus (established 1997, Brisbane), circus arts training for children and youth from 18 months to 18 years; social circus programs with various community partners;

Aerialize: Sydney Aerial Theatre (established 1999, Sydney) “to promote circus and aerial skills in the community.” Public classes, corporate and community performance. In 2000 Aerialize established **Zany Yare**, a public youth circus program in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney;

The **decade of the 1990s** was also when dedicated **community circus festivals** began to occur on a regular basis, and when circus arts were trialed in a few NSW **primary schools** as a strategy to engage children who were difficult to teach.³⁴

Each of the groups mentioned above began in shaky circumstances with interwoven 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. The drives of the people that began these not-for-profit organisations

were idealistic; each of these groups was founded with an unwavering belief that participation in the circus arts can foster good health, creativity, and a strengthened sense of self-esteem and well-being. A recent document written by Brisbane's Flipside Circus articulates a knowledge base that has always underpinned youth and social circus activity—that the circus arts can, and do foster:

positive development of young people by promoting active participation and community-mindedness to encourage leadership, resilience, confidence, improved communication skills, respect, and a healthy lifestyle.³⁵

By its very nature, circus training and performance is hybrid. Both sporty and creative, it produces imaginative outcomes as much as it develops highly skilled physical proficiencies. With music and dance it shares the development of rhythm and precise physical skills; with sport it shares the development of strength, speed, physical development and team building whilst avoiding the competitive spirit so essential to sporting endeavour; with drama it shares the development of self-confidence, performance skills, and lateral thinking (recognising there are many solutions to a single problem) but is without the spoken word and character demands intrinsic to a written text. The physical exuberance of the circus arts, within the nexus of discipline and creativity, are factors to which parents and circus trainers attribute its popularity. The same document from Flipside names the organisation's core values as: "to show off, to take risks, to trust, to dream and aspire, to work hard and to laugh," a list that captures some of the values that have infused community circus activity in Australia since its emergence during the 1970s.

With the exception of some of the core activities of the various women's circus groups named above, children, youth and young adults have been and continue to be the principal target subjects for most community circus activity. The separation of 'youth' and 'social' circus, both in terminology, and in practice, is a relatively recent distinction that has gained some traction within the sector. Both instincts informed the establishment of most of the groups named above, a self-conscious legacy of the community arts movement in Australia throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The terminological distinction that I have had recourse to throughout this paper is in use throughout the circus sector in Australia but its use is by no means absolute. My larger project—to gather, interrogate, and narrate the cultural history of Australian community circus—has led me to describe a field of activity that has not previously been the subject of historical investigation, within a context that recognises both national and international trends, and terminology.

It is incumbent upon me, within my longer-term project, to interrogate and tease out the broader aesthetic, social, and political conditions that contributed to the growth of community circus in Australia during the 1990s—some of the contributing historical influences have been mentioned above. Across the field of expanded arts practice internationally, the 1990s is a period when, according to art critic and academic, Clare Bishop, a "return to the social" occurred throughout many art forms.³⁶ This 'social turn' in the visual, live and performance arts coincided with movements for social change and resulted in a surge of participation and collaboration in the arts. In broad terms, the expansion of youth and social circus that occurred in Australia and internationally during the 1990s chimes 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.”³⁷ As discussed in this paper however, the genesis of the flowering of social engagement through the circus arts that took place in Australia during the 1990s occurred two decades earlier, when a new trajectory for the circus arts emerged from the community arts movement.

Concluding comments (provisional)

Anecdotally, the community circus sector is undergoing another period of growth in Australia, primarily in youth circus. The full extent of activity is not fully known and it is generally thought that a mapping of activity is due. Since 2000 new groups have become established, a few have evaporated, in most cases, the genealogies of organisations within this sphere are intertwined. Pockets of indigenous activity currently operate outside of more mainstream sector activity in Australia’s major centres.

Circus action is also leaching into gymnastics, dance, and fitness organisations where aesthetics, playfulness, best safety practices, and what can be summed up as the ethos of community arts practice, are frequently omitted, and at best, secondary, to the function and novelty value of physical circus action.

Current challenges to the sector include the matter of certification for circus trainers. There is at present no requirement for certification as a circus trainer but matters of insurance, liability, health and safety are much more pressing in our society that twenty years ago. The youth/social circus sector is deciding amongst its peers whether, or how, to institute agreed-upon levels of certification, and whether these will become a mandatory element of best practice.

As a result of recent discussion with two of Australia’s youth and social circus organisations, I perceive another, ideological challenge—what to do with the ‘community’ in community circus. Most organisations that set up prior to 2000 have experienced a change of leadership and in some cases, the lead instigator of the group departed with misgivings about the direction in which the organisation was heading. With boards of governance, weekly wages and infrastructure bills, established programs to maintain, and the need to become ‘competitive’ in the competitive field of funding and philanthropy, utopian ideals that underpinned the precarious and labour-intensive formation of these groups are competing with sustainability goals in a changed economic environment. The exigencies of surviving in the current economy (when flourishing is a better goal than just surviving), the desire to lay down surety for the future of the organisation, and pressure to produce work of a high aesthetic value that will, in turn, attract centralised arts funding, are just some of the challenges influencing the sector today. In previous eras of change—the 1970-80s, and the 1990s—‘the process’ in community arts was more important than the aesthetic quality of ‘the product.’ Community was, as posited by Miranda Joseph, “the defining other of modernity, of capitalism.”³⁸ 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, rationality.”³⁹ The foundation of community circus has always been

its humanizing and enabling values. Balancing these values, alongside the sector's growing popularity, and within current economic constraints, are just some of the challenges that community circus organisations in Australia are negotiating.

NOTES

¹ 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.

² Sydney's New Theatre was established in 1932 and continues today. In the Hunter Valley region the Workers' Education Association (WEA, established 1913) nurtured "a broad range of cultural activities, including amateur theatre [and] was associated with the emergence of a Newcastle branch of the New Theatre in the 1930s." (G. Arrighi and David Watt, "(Re) Constructing the archive: a regional perspective on performance histories," in *Scrapbooks, Snapshots and Memorabilia: Hidden Archives of Performance*, ed. Glen McGillivray (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011), 67-82, at 48.

³ The Flying Fruit Fly Circus is both a training centre of excellence for young people aged 8-18 and a performing arts company. Substantially subsidised by State and Federal funding, FFC also provides high school education and is one of Australia's elite arts training centres. <http://fruitflycircus.com.au/>

⁴ See for example the *Blue Blouse* agit-prop troupes and *Living Newspapers* in Soviet Russia (1920s), British Workers' Theatre Movement (est. 1926), Red Magaphones in the Weimar Republic, and the Federal Theatre Project in the US (est. 1935).

⁵ <http://womenscircus.org.au/>

⁶ <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~powcirc/>

⁷ See photographic still at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/festlinx/3037277411/>

⁸ <http://www.flipsidecircus.org.au/Circus-Classes/Unthink-The-Impossible.aspx>
<http://www.qld.gov.au/disability/children-young-people/circus-therapy-experiences/>

⁹ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Joseph, *Romance of Community*, 1.

¹¹ I gained this insight during a meeting in November 2011 with Gil Favreau, Directeur – Action et responsabilité sociales (Director, Social Action and Responsibility, Global Citizenship Service), at *Cirque du Soleil* International Headquarters in Montreal.

¹² See: Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: the gift of theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Monica Predergast and Juliana Saxton, *Applied Drama: a facilitator's handbook for working in community* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013); Philip Taylor, *Applied theatre: creating transformative encounters in the community* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003).

¹³ Michel Lafortune, *Community Worker's Guide: when circus lessons become life lessons* (Montreal: Fondation Cirque du Soleil, 2011), 14.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 123.

¹⁵ See also Gabrielle Wolf, *Make it Australian: the Australian Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2008); Julian Meyrick, *See How it Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002).

¹⁶ See Mark Gauntlett, "Funding 'Australia,' *Canadian Theatre Review* 74 (Spring 1993): 12-17; Justin Macdonnell, *Arts, Minister? Government Policy and the Arts* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 215.

¹⁸ Ongoing research by myself and Victor Emeljanow on the *Entertaining Children* project has brought to light mainstage theatre productions produced for children and their families during the period post-1880; the Easter and Christmas pantomime seasons of the late-19th centuries were produced, arguably, for youthful consumers and their families; theatre in schools initiatives occurred during the 1950s in parts of Australia, and reappeared with great strength during the 1980s.

¹⁹ Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 217. See also David Watt, "Community Theatre in Australia: 'Excellence / Access' and 'Nation / Community'", *Canadian Theatre Review* 74 (Spring 1993): 7-11.

²⁰ To date, very little research has been undertaken in consideration of amateur performance in Australia.

²¹ Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 217.

²² Watt, "Community Theatre," 8.

²³ Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 217.

²⁴ Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 219-220.

²⁵ For a history of the emergence of New Circus in France, the US, Canada and Australia, see Jane Mullet, "Circus Alternatives: the rise of New Circus in Australia, the United States, Canada and France," PhD diss., La Trobe University, 2005.

²⁶ Obit for Father Jesús Silva, *The Telegraph* (London), 12 September, 2011.

²⁷ "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-20th century Australia," in *A World of Popular Entertainments*, G. Arrighi and V. Emeljanow eds., (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 68-82 at 73.

²⁸ This information comes from a conversation with my colleague, Brian Joyce, an early member of Pipi Storm Children's Circus.

²⁹ In 1983 the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe of China provided a training project at FFC (Nanjing 1), followed by a second training project in 1986 (Nanjing 2). Training projects with artists from the Moscow circus followed.

³⁰ "In the [Circus Oz] 1988 show the circus' skills and politics were probably most effectively combined. Since then the circus has changed markedly, with an increasing emphasis on family-style entertainment. By 1995, there was virtually no sign of the left-wing political edge although the skill level and the entertainment value of a very slick, professional production remained high." Milne, *Theatre Australia*, 35.

³¹ The influence of Reg Bolton upon the development of community circus in Australia has been significant.

³² R. Sugarman, *Circus for Everyone: circus learning around the world* (Vermont: Mountainside Press, 2001); S. Ward, "The Not So Naughty Nineties: a decade of circus developments 1991-2001," (2001) at http://www.americanyouthcircus.org/Default.aspx?pageId=794362#steve_ward, accessed March 29, 2011.

³³ Geoffrey Milne, "Promoting Agency or 'Stepping-stones R Us'? Recent Melbourne Youth Theatre," *Australasian Drama Studies* 47 (Oct 2005): 121-139 at 135.

³⁴ Paul Woodhead at Dubbo South Primary School led these initiatives. I am indebted to Paul for sharing everything he has written about these projects with me.

³⁵ Flipside, briefing, April 2013.

³⁶ 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).

³⁷ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3.

³⁸ Joseph, *Romance of Community*, 1.

³⁹ Joseph, *Romance of Community*, 1.