

this is *(not)* the end



*the facts,
the rumours
and the
dreams*

FOCUS UK IN RETROSPECT

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P. 10

“Society is becoming increasingly diverse while contemporary circus is very self-centred at the risk of becoming irrelevant.” P. 38

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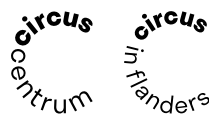
P. 5

“We are going to have to be more ambitious: dare to look beyond ad hoc touring opportunities for a few productions and consider long-term collaborations and structural commitments around residency, creation and participation.” P. 25

this* is (not) the end

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Translations by Jonathan Beaton

RETROSPECT

brexit as a stimulus to

RECONNECT

IN

2021 the United Kingdom left the European Union. Following the exit the European Union created the Brexit Adjustment Reserve (BAR), a financial support to mitigate the negative impact for European private companies and public authorities. The fund was made available for the cultural sector in Flanders and thanks to this an opportunity opened up for the circus sector to reconnect and to put the collaboration with the UK high on our agenda in 2022/23. Brexit has created not just extra barriers, but also invited us to search for new ways of working together. As a result, the presence of Flemish circus in the UK today is stronger than ever.

Connecting and reconnecting has been the leitmotiv throughout the three BAR projects coordinated by Circuscentrum. Whether it was about facilitating networking, creating presentation opportunities, sharing experiences, information or knowledge, we managed to bring together about 100 professionals across various activities. On 7 July 2022 during Flanders day in London the foundations were established for the successful cooperation with the UK that would follow. A successful three-day work visit in March 2023 to the UK consolidated the bonds between Flemish and British circus professionals. This exchange was part of the project: 'Circus connections between Flanders and the UK – Towards a new normal'. In the second half of 2023, we built on the connections that had been established in the meanwhile. We worked with various renowned British festival organisers and producers during the 'Spotlight on Flanders' project. Flemish circus

talents presented their work in a great many places such as Kensington and Chelsea Festival, Greenwich+Docklands International Festival, Freedom Festival and Out There Festival. With these partners we explored more sustainable ways of touring, providing multiple, successive opportunities for companies that cross the channel. In October 2023, we joined the Rural Touring project, organised by Crying Out Loud.

But our focus wasn't solely on creating a 'Flemish wave' in the UK, we also looked for common ground. With a number of partners we collaborated in the professional programmes organised by the festivals. The broad dialogue that was set up between circus organisations and professionals like UPSWING, NCCA, ... on the challenges that the sector is facing, provide a solid base for long-term cooperation. We tackled the topics of diversity, producing, programming, safety and many more. By putting our efforts into sharing knowledge between circus professionals, we want to build sustainable relations between both regions. In this publication we have collected the results of our efforts in images, words and reflections. The Brexit Adjustment Reserve might be finished but we are eager to find ways to continue the cooperation with the UK. ✨

Noemi De Clercq

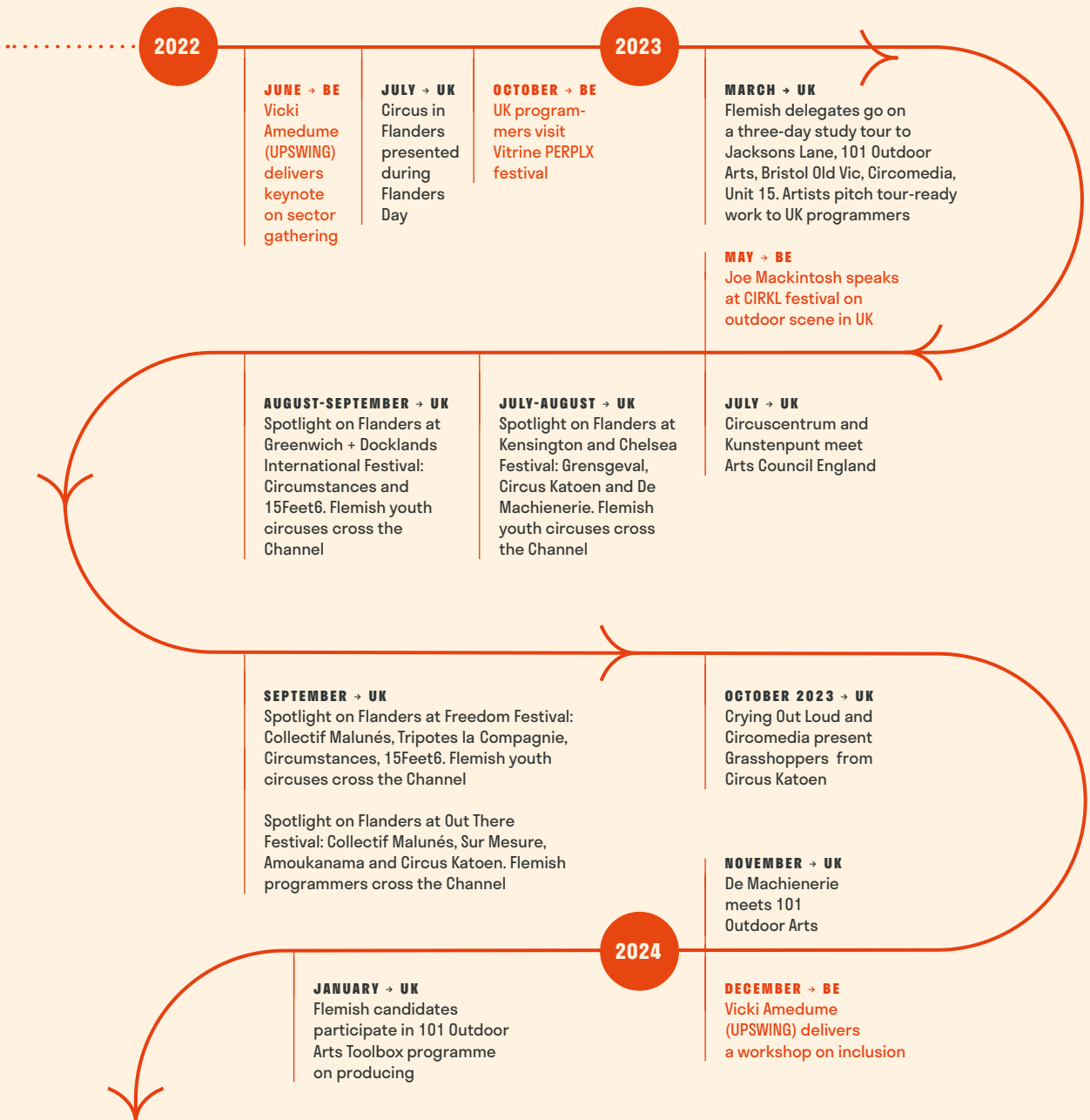
Managing director Circuscentrum

Séverine Van der Stighelen

International relations Circuscentrum

COOPERATION WITH AT A GLANCE

Flemish and British professionals met on several occasions in 2022 and 2023.



THE UK



Kortijk, Vitrine
PERPLX festival
Leuven, CIRKL Festival
Antwerp,
UPSWING is invited
to give a workshop

Belgium

Freedom Festival
Hull

101 Outdoor Arts
De Machienerie meets
101 Outdoor Arts
101 Outdoor Arts
Toolbox A Development
Programme &
Residency for
Producers

Newbury

Out There
Festival
Great Yarmouth

Bristol Old Vic, Unit
15, Circomedia
Crying Out Loud
Bristol

London
Flanders Day
Jackson Lane
Meeting Arts
Council England
Kensington and
Chelsea Festival
Greenwich +
Docklands
International
Festival

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Strange to realize that there might not have been that much interaction between the Flemish and British circus sector the last couple of years if it weren't for Brexit. It made us examine consciously how we could restore and strengthen the ties. And it prompted us to actively think about the concrete added value of cross-Channel cooperation.


First important step was consulting the circus sector to get a better view on the contacts and collaborations that were already there and on concrete plans for the future. In addition, we asked about the barriers in the collaboration with the UK and how we could facilitate matchmaking in order to (re)connect. Based on the input we got from the sector, we worked out a plan to inform, exchange and set up actual cooperation between our two countries. And then we just dived into the big UK adventure.

On 20/06/22 we attracted Vicki Amedume of UPSWING as a keynote speaker on our yearly sector gathering. She invited us to think on 'how we can genuinely embrace diversity and inclusion in Circus and Street Arts'. Soon after, we crossed the channel for the first time on the occasion of Flanders Day where we gathered 14 circus professionals from 8 different organizations (festivals, youth circuses, schools for higher education, companies,...). We gave a presentation on circus in Flanders and actively reached out to explore common ground. This meeting appeared to have laid a solid foundation for a lot of the actions that were developed later on. On 7/7/2022 Flanders House not only welcomed us as a host for this meeting, we also got the opportunity to programme work of two companies (Rode Boom and 15ft6) during the reception in the Spiegeltent on Cavendish Square.

During this meeting, we all agreed on one thing: although cooperation has gotten more complicated by the consequences of Brexit, there is a pronounced desire to continue (or start) working together. As a center of support for the sector we decided to focus on following actions:

- 1 to provide opportunities for exchange between professionals by launching a call for a working visit to the UK in the first half of 2023.
- 2 to set up a cooperation with circus festivals in Flanders in order for programmers (and the broader public) to discover (new) work and meet artists and other professionals.
- 3 to invite programmers from the UK actively to festivals to discover Flemish work.
- 4 to invest in knowledge & reflection, with a special focus on sustainable ways of working internationally, inclusion and safety.
- 5 to actively stimulate the mobility of artists between Flanders and the UK by providing info on artistic developments, new work,... on the one hand and on touring in the UK on the other hand.

Soon after, from 7 – 9/10/2022 during Vitrine PERPLX – a festival with a focus on fresh talent with international potential - a group of UK programmers joined us in Kortrijk to continue the conversation and to discover Flemish work.

It was the beginning of a fruitful cooperation and exchange. 



PART 1



UK

EXPEDITION

THE
BRIDGE
OVER
TROUBLED
WATER



Bruxelles-Midi



THE BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER



In early March, Circuscentrum went to the UK on a study tour with 20 artists, organisers and programmers from the circus sector in tow, as well as a delegate from the Flemish government's Department of Culture. The goal: to visit some interesting circus hotspots and get to grips with some hot topics – relating to inclusion, production and (psychological) safety – relevant on both sides of the pond.

First, perhaps, the bad news: Brexit's repercussions for the exchange between artists and organisers affect us, too. There are the changed rules with regard to work permits, the ceasing of European subsidies for cross-border collaborations, not to mention the age-old hassle of passport control now being an issue once again. That said, the good news is that – if the public transport gods are on your side – you can still depart from Brussels and be in the heart of London in the space of two hours. That wasn't the Flemish delegation's final destination, however: we had to travel a little further, to Jacksons Lane in north London.

Inclusion as a mirror of society

Jacksons Lane Arts Centre calls itself the UK's leading venue when it comes to supporting and presenting contemporary circus. It boasts an extensive circus programme, a youth studio, residencies and (micro-)grants for artists. For 45 years now it has played another important role, too, as a meeting place for the neighbourhood. In the 1970s, an empty church was turned into a community centre, which grew into a vibrant performing arts venue where comedian

Suzy Eddie Izzard first began her career, among others. In the lull of activity surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, Jacksons Lane took the time to thoroughly renovate the place: the old church was divided into several spaces, with a large multipurpose hall in the roof that is mainly rented out for events (80% of the total income comes from hall rental) and four small but high-ceilinged rehearsal rooms downstairs that, at 6.5 metres in height, are ideal for practising aerial techniques.

Adjacent to this area is the theatre auditorium and a cafeteria. The latter is popular among the neighbourhood's young families and senior citizens. In this way, Jacksons Lane remains true to its social origins, which are reflected in initiatives like its traditional Christmas dinner for people of lesser means or – with the current energy crisis – their participation in the Warm Welcome concept, where, from 10am to 10pm during the winter months, people are invited into the warmth of the building with no obligation to participate in activities or consume anything. This inclusive approach may not translate directly into higher ticket sales but it does contribute to achieving a more inclusive audience mix in the long run. It is the initiative of Adrian 'Ade' Berry, artistic director of Jacksons Lane:

'I want audiences here to be representative of the people on the street.'

This is also the goal of Kelsie Acton, inclusion manager at Battersea Arts Centre, the well-known arts centre in south London that is the world's only entirely 'relaxed venue'. There they

TEXT Liv Laveyne
PHOTOS Paula Alvares & Noemi Clercq





★ **Waldo's Circus of Magic and Terror**
by Extraordinary Bodies,
Royal Theatre, Plymouth
and The Old Vic, Bristol

An inclusive musical about a colourful circus troupe during the Nazi terror and how the persecution of Jews and minorities causes internal cracks to form but also necessitates solidarity. Set in the 1930s, this inclusive performance also subtly bears a topical message of tolerance and equality. The company Extraordinary Bodies puts people with physical and mental disabilities on stage together, while also maintaining an inclusive approach to audiences. Audio description is provided for people with a visual impairment, for example, and sign language is transformed into an utterly moving choreographic gem by the wheelchair-using BSL interpreter, who uses their hands and facial expressions to full effect.

present low-stimulus 'relaxed performances' and have an adapted accessibility policy which provides for chill-out rooms and noise-cancelling headphones for people with psychosocial disabilities, such as those with Tourette's syndrome, ADHD or high sensitivity. 'When talking about inclusion at our venue, we have to keep the outside reality in mind. According to demographic data, 15% of people have physical disabilities and 7% of people suffer from ADHD or are neurodivergent in some other way. We want to see that reality reflected in the shows we put on.' Kaveh Rahnama is not averse to quotas either. He is the project leader of Future Formed, a London-based initiative supporting under-represented young people (between 16 and 30) in their artistic careers. Kaveh sees quotas as desirable, not dogmatic. 'I want to reach 90% of groups who are under-represented. This could be in terms of gender, economic status or cultural background. Some find this sort of objective paralysing but I find it reassuring because I know what I'm striving for.'

Els Degryse of Cirque Plus in Bruges agrees: 'With inclusion, people tend to lump everything together and that's just counterproductive. A scattershot approach is no good. It's important to make a choice about what specific topic you want to engage with, as well as with and for whom.' Every year since 2018, Cirque Plus has developed a show featuring people with physical and mental disabilities. 'In the coming years, the festival plans to develop this further with an educational programme focused on circus and theatre, thus creating opportunities for people with physical or mental disabilities to become professional circus performers.' For Degryse, this addresses a long-held gripe. 'As a youngster, I went along to a Jomba camp [holiday camps for children with disabilities, ed.]. There I realised that it was not about what the children could not do but what they *could*. Still today, we too often start from the limitation rather than the possibilities.'

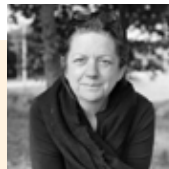
'On stage, there is more and more attention being paid to inclusion and diversity, but when you look at the internal workings of things, especially in arts organisations, there is still a lot of work to be done, in terms of staffing, the audiences being targeted, and so on', says Rahnama. 'Too much of the money circulating in the arts sector is spent on the purely creative side of things as opposed to internal operations. Or we talk about diversity but then it's often still an old white guy working with black children.'

'I piss on pity,' says Acton: words that were originally the slogan of musician Johnny Crescendo, who in the 1990s denounced the pat-on-the-head attitude and advocated for a more considered disability policy. 'You may have a completely gender-neutral disabled toilet but what good is that if you cannot enter the building with your wheelchair? Inclusion means being a place where everyone is welcome. Makes sense, right? But saying everyone is welcome and everyone actually feeling welcome are two different things.' This everyone can agree with. Equity is not equality. In other words, it's not about equality – everyone is different and has different needs, after all – but about offering equal opportunities. 'And, yes, maybe inclusion for one side means excluding someone on the other side, and that's okay, as long as you are honest and transparent about that, because that is precisely how a dialogue emerges,' says Rahnama.

But perhaps most important is the 'call to action': just doing it, with the necessary trial and error. Not fixating on the potential hurdles but rather seeing them as opportunities. If you ask Acton, that's precisely what's so exciting about it: 'A stage performance requires a concentrated form of being together with strangers, in this case the audience. That makes venues such as ours the most interesting test beds for society.'

Where are the Flemish circus producers?

The group heads further afield to Newbury, a half-hour train journey from London. It's a sleepy town best known as the birthplace of Michael Bond, the author of *Paddington Bear*, and for being the location of the former Greenham Common RAF airbase from 1942 to 1993. It is here, in an old aircraft hangar, that 101 Outdoor Arts has been housed since 2014. This circus creation centre, which hosts around 60 companies-in-residence each year, acts as a knowledge centre and has a construction workshop with a focus on outdoor performances that are taken on tour around Newbury. The



Martine Linaer

Artistic Coordinator Dommelhof circus creation centre & Theater op de Markt festival

'It was a particularly nice three days – intense and inspiring. Usually, as a programmer, you're mostly occupied with taking in a lot of performances, but this time you also got to know organisations and discuss hot topics. It struck me how, in certain areas, the UK is already much further ahead than we are in Flanders, especially when it comes to inclusion and safety. That session in Bristol on the importance of safe spaces has really stuck with me. In the large structure of the Dommelhof Provincial Domain, where I work, those mechanisms are already more or less embedded in HR, with a confidential advisor, but for artists that safety net is just not there. I want to work on that from within the circus creation centre as well. To figure out, on the one hand, how we as a circus creation centre and festival organiser can factor this into our HR policy, but also how I as coordinator can broach that conversation with artists and create awareness of the issue.'





Wouter Rogiers

Cultural Advisor to the cabinet of Flemish Minister-President Jan Jambon

‘As an outsider, I was able to observe how diverse the circus sector is. I was also struck by how driven everyone is and how very open everyone was to each other and to their colleagues abroad. In that sense, it was a learning experience for me: on the one hand, it was valuable getting to know the Flemish circus sector better, and, on the other hand, it is always good to see how things are done elsewhere. It is clear that there is a more commercial approach to circus in the UK, and a more artistic approach in Flanders. That also highlights the strength of subsidies in Flanders: it creates a safe environment where there is time and space to create and to make the most of that artistic freedom, whereas in the UK the time and financial pressures are not always conducive to quality. Having said that, we can still learn a lot from the way private financing and fundraising is done there. One thing I definitely take away from this experience with regard to policy: the issue of inclusion and psychological safety are important topics that are still not given enough attention in the decree and we should provide additional incentives within the subsidies to address this. Unlike in the Arts Decree, in the Circus Decree there are not really any out-and-out circus producers, so we don’t see any opportunities there to get that into the decree as a new additional organisational form, but we should see to it that the role of producer can be fully included within the festivals, workshops and companies, so that this process of professionalisation can continue down the right path.’

remote location encourages focus, with two large rehearsal/practice halls, a shed for wood- and metalwork, sleeping units for 15 people and a fantastic kitchen (they plan to publish a cookbook on the theme of healthy food for circus artists). What makes it all the more remarkable is that, in addition to offering this infrastructure, 101 Outdoor Arts also shares expertise through artist development programmes. For instance, there are labs on (eco-friendly) design, dramaturgy and directing, and with the ‘Toolbox’ training series they teach producers about cultural leadership and entrepreneurship.

Suffice it to say, we couldn’t have found a better place for a roundtable discussion on new models of creation and production. A discussion that begins in a Babylonian confusion of tongues. First to be untangled is the term ‘commissioned work’, or what we in Flanders would call *besteld werk*, to be understood as co-production in the form of a strictly monetary contribution. Then there is the British understanding of ‘co-production’, where the producers are supported in offering expertise and infrastructure, i.e. the ‘with thanks to’ part of the credits. When it comes to subsidies, we learn that such funds are more limited in the UK, while the convoluted search for private funding remains a struggle on both sides of the channel. Perhaps the most striking observation to emerge is that there are actually no circus producers in Flanders.

The role of producer is quite normal in the UK, where there can even be quite significant differences in approach: some step down as performers to produce either their own work or the work of others, and then there are the odd few, like producer duo Split Second, who are not creators themselves. But one thing is abundantly clear: the task of the producer is crucial and broad in scope: ‘The producer is the intermediary and facilitator between idea and execution, from concept to the stage or arena. As a producer, you are there to realise the creative vision. As such, (1) people need to know what that is, (2) the money needs to be found to make it happen, (3) people and resources need to be brought together, (4) those people and resources must be properly followed-up on and finally (5) all this needs to be properly communicated about,’ says Luke Hallgarten, artistic director of The Revel Puck Circus. In short, the producer is the one who materialises the immaterial, a kind of X-Men-like figure or, in



the words of Upswing's Vicki Dela Amedume: 'We as producers make sure the artist can focus on *what* they want to make, whereas the producer looks at *how* this can be made.'

On the Flemish side, there are immediate murmurs as mentalist-juggler Tim Oelbrandt wryly remarks: 'Then we circus performers in Flanders are all our own producers.' In Flemish we'd say Tim's statement 'puts the finger on the wound'. From burn-outs to the lack of funding and inefficient pooling of resources, productions in Flanders are almost entirely artist-driven. Artists here are both maker and producer – and, if necessary, driver and plumber, too. There are no producers or production houses in circus here. According to Danielle Corbisly, head of 101 Outdoor Arts' residency programme, this is also determined by the historical context: 'In Anglo-Saxon countries, in the tradition of Shakespearean theatre, there are prescribed roles: the writer, the director, the (lead) actor and supporting roles, the costume and set designers and indeed the producer. There is much less of that tradition in Flanders, where the artist combines all those different roles under the single role of maker.'

'We need to keep cherishing that in circus,' says Ezra Trigg of the trapeze-centric Gorilla Circus. 'That's where our resilience comes from. If the whole theatre apparatus were to implode, we circus folk would still be able to put on a show. I don't really see that happening in the other disciplines.' Jan Daems, head of training at circus college Codarts Rotterdam, makes the (serious) joke: 'What's the difference between an actor, a dancer and a circus artist? A circus artist knows the name of the technician! It is this respect that we also like to pass on at our school; a production is only as strong as your team.' Circus artist Jakobe Geens agrees: 'I like that philosophy in circus. Where you set up and dismantle the tent together, where you are jointly responsible for the entire process.' Others, like circus dramaturge Margot Jansens, think this is too romantic a way of looking at things:

'We have to be careful about taking on too many roles, because that only invites burnout.'



Emma Ketels
Je Buro booking office

'I was struck by how circus is viewed much more as an industry in the UK. There's a huge number of producers there while here in Flanders the concept of producer is virtually unknown in this context. Artists aside, in all these supporting professions – and when I say that I'm referring to programmers, co-producers, circus creation centres, distribution offices – you notice how these functions are performed very differently depending on the situation and that this can also be a source of frustrations and misunderstandings. After the talk at 101 Outdoor Arts I did feel that there was a need to better define those tasks and responsibilities in Flanders as well. A theatre booking office in Flanders, for example, is primarily a sales agency, while a circus booking office in France is involved from the outset in trying to help secure financing and then touring with the show until the end. At Je Buro, I also manage files, prepare grant applications and seek out co-producers. It made me realise that maybe I don't run a booking agency after all: maybe I'm actually more of a producer ...'

We can say that doing everything is part of our identity as circus artists, but an identity is not some fixed idea but rather something that is changeable in time and space.'

With regard to the need for the professionalisation of the Flemish circus sector, this is an important conclusion to remember when it comes to policymaking. In England, there are grants for producers but not in Flanders. In the Flemish Arts Decree, there are some alternative management agencies (e.g. Vincent Company) and production houses (e.g. GRIP), but the producer's tasks are still mainly taken on by the companies and artists themselves, resulting in too much pressure on artists and too much overhead for each organisation. Margot Jansens felt a different approach was in order: she has founded the non-profit Detail Company, which, rather than a collective, will act as a collection of different makers whose roles are assumed on a rotational basis.

While there is certainly something to be said for dividing up the roles, this approach must go hand-in-hand with a certain vigilance, says Vicki Dela Amedume. 'When an industry professionalises itself it also erects barriers, with the producer becoming the gatekeeper and the one who controls the purse strings determining the direction things will take. This is a regrettable development. Producing is not about taking control but about creating a framework that affords the artist the space they need.'

Safety first: from school age to the stage

From the old aircraft hangar in Newbury, the group moves on to the port city of Bristol, home to trip-hop music and the main circus city in the UK, with a major circus college and youth circus (Circomedia) and the nation's largest concentration of circus organisations (such as the collective creation space Unit 15). We gather at an iconic venue: The Old Vic. Built in 1766, this is the oldest working theatre in the English-speaking world where performances are still put on every day. We enter into discussion with Anna MacGregor, co-founder of Safer Spaces, an organisation that provides festivals and events with sensitivity training, offering specific tools for creating an inclusive environment free from sexual violence and harassment. This is by no means a mere luxury, since – just as in the Belgian arts, circus and education sectors – numerous #metoo situations have come to light in the UK in recent years.



The discussion takes place in a little lounge area that feels quite literally like a safe space, a place of trust behind closed doors. What is said here is said in complete confidence. MacGregor reads us some disconcerting figures from Belgium. We learn that 4 in 5 women and 2 in 5 men say they have experienced 'hands-off sexual victimisation'. More than 9 in 10 women in Belgium say they have been sexually harassed in public places, and 94% of these cases were not reported to police. Forms of sexual intimidation range from offensive objects, sexual jokes and comments to provocative noises, unwanted stares and unsolicited messages, photos or videos.

Since, like sports, circus is not only physically but also mentally demanding, it is important to define the boundaries of what is okay and what is not, both physically and psychologically, and before, during or after a show. And that goes beyond 'no means no'. 'Consent means doing something that you are sure is your choice, without any pressure or fear of the consequences. Consent can be withdrawn at any time and you have the right to change your mind. Many circus performers work freelance and have no social protections. That often means there are unequal power relations when it comes to getting or keeping a job,' says MacGregor.

Larger organisational structures tend to have an internal confidential advisor for their employees – preferably a democratically elected team member and not a person in a managerial position – and an external confidential advisor. To make safe spaces for audiences out of semi-public spaces, such as theatre auditoriums or festival squares where many different groups meet (young people, people without homes, people without internet access, etc.), an audience mediator can regulate the interrelations of locals and passers-by.

However, there is no structural approach in the case of freelance artists. While Kunstenpunt has made two psychologists available at a safe-disclosure office where artists can report transgressive behaviour, an approach that addresses the root cause is lacking. In contrast, on-set intimacy coordinators have been a fixture of the Anglo-Saxon performing arts and film world for years now.

Everyone stresses the importance of a comprehensive approach from school age to the stage. Jan Daems tells of how an anonymous safe-disclosure office for cases of sexual harassment was set up in Codarts but that

this anonymity formed an obstacle: students indicated that they needed someone to be able to speak to face to face, as hard as that may be to do. McGregor stresses the importance of a network where bystanders are proactive about assisting those in need. 'For victims it is especially important to initiate the process and deal with the situation at hand immediately, to destigmatise it and offer clear communication.'

Perhaps that is the main takeaway of this trip: rather than remaining mere bystanders, we should actively assist where we can, whether the need relates to inclusion, production or safety. And whether it concerns Flanders or our colleagues over the water. However choppy the waters may sometimes become, we are a bridge to each other. Or as Jan Daems puts it in his warm farewell to the WhatsApp group: 'Colleagues, this was circus at its best, complete with laughter, soul-searching and silences. Glad I was able to experience this together with you all.' ✨



Maarten Janssens

Street theatre and youth circus
De Machinerie

'I have been in many artist meetings and it's often a pragmatic meeting capped at two hours. A three-day tour like this provides the opportunity not only to learn about other places abroad but, above all, to finally get properly acquainted with the people who make up the Flemish circus field. I am equally convinced that this will lead to further cross-fertilisations and collaborations. What surprised me enormously is how the British circus field subsists mainly on arts funding and private money, although I am still curious about how exactly they achieve that. Of course, the visit to 101 Outdoor Arts was also nice for me as a builder and designer. The approach of residencies in combination with a construction studio certainly results in a different energy because then you can really test things out scenographically without the creation necessarily being the end product. But what struck me most about the UK trip was the session on psychological safety. We are taking tentative steps in Flanders but we are nowhere near as far along as they are in the UK. We often talk about physical safety but neglect mental well-being. I also want to figure out what my contribution could be in this area.'

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



Stanley Smith

Artist / The Doing Group

The Focus UK project is one project I immediately am envious of. There is a real

issue of a hard cultural border between Scotland and England, with very few chances for Scottish artists or English promoters to span across meaningfully. For a small, narrow island with a wholly unified general culture this is frankly ridiculous. I thank you enormously for reaching out from Flanders with this international project, but saddened that there is more effort coming from across the sea than within the same land mass.



Jennifer Paterson

Artistic Director / All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre

In Scotland circus and outdoor arts are much younger

as an artform and not as developed – no dedicated creation space, no higher education training.



Angie Dight

Artistic Director / Mischief La-Bas

It seems to me that there are a lot of differences, that

the arts scene (particularly the circus scene

as per the article) is very well supported and valued. We've also performed in Europe at various festivals in the past and encountered many Outdoor Artists from Flanders, the work has always been very good, also more reliance on the plastic arts and using film than in the UK which is interesting. (This was before digital technology really burst across the scene generally though.) Unfortunately, I feel that I don't get to see as much work now as in the past, due to the lack of it now in Scotland and the fact that we haven't worked internationally for a while. I look forward to re-engaging with it and being able to see what artists in Europe (and beyond) are creating. I feel that Outdoor Arts across Flanders and some other European areas are often more interesting and of a better quality than that created in the UK. There is a longer history of it, and the resources and support given to it and the larger audiences it attracts make for a very healthy sector.



Alan Richardson

Director / Surge

In Scotland at least there is no investment in qualitative infrastructure. There are

only two circus schools in Scotland, neither receive any real financial assistance. There are no circus festivals in Scotland, though one or two festivals and venues programme it.



Flora Herberich

Head of Programmes, Pathways and Participation / Circusful

From the presentation at Jacksons Lane, I can definitely

say that the level of subsidy for circus and outdoor arts in Flanders far exceeds the level of support in Northern-Ireland. The fact that there is a central support organisation, Circuscentrum, that can advocate for and support the development of the sector is incredible – we don't even have this on a UK wide basis. In Northern-Ireland we are somewhat lucky to benefit from the activity of ISACS which operate Ireland-wide. Proportionally Northern-Ireland has a very active circus scene – we have a great facility

for circus here in Belfast and we are excited about In Your Space Circus Derry having taken on a building which will be transformed into a circus school and creation centre, further strengthening the sector in Northern-Ireland and making us a powerhouse of circus in years to come.



Rachel Melaugh

Creative Director / In Your Space Circus

The sector in Flanders is aspirational to us here in Northern

Ireland. The appreciation and support of circus in Flanders is something we have not reached here yet, but will continue to push towards.



Tom Rack

Artistic Director / NoFit State

It is my understanding that in the 1990's we were in a similar position but the Flemish

arts funding bodies have taken it more seriously and better invested in creation spaces, schools, festivals and support for artists which helped drive the breadth and

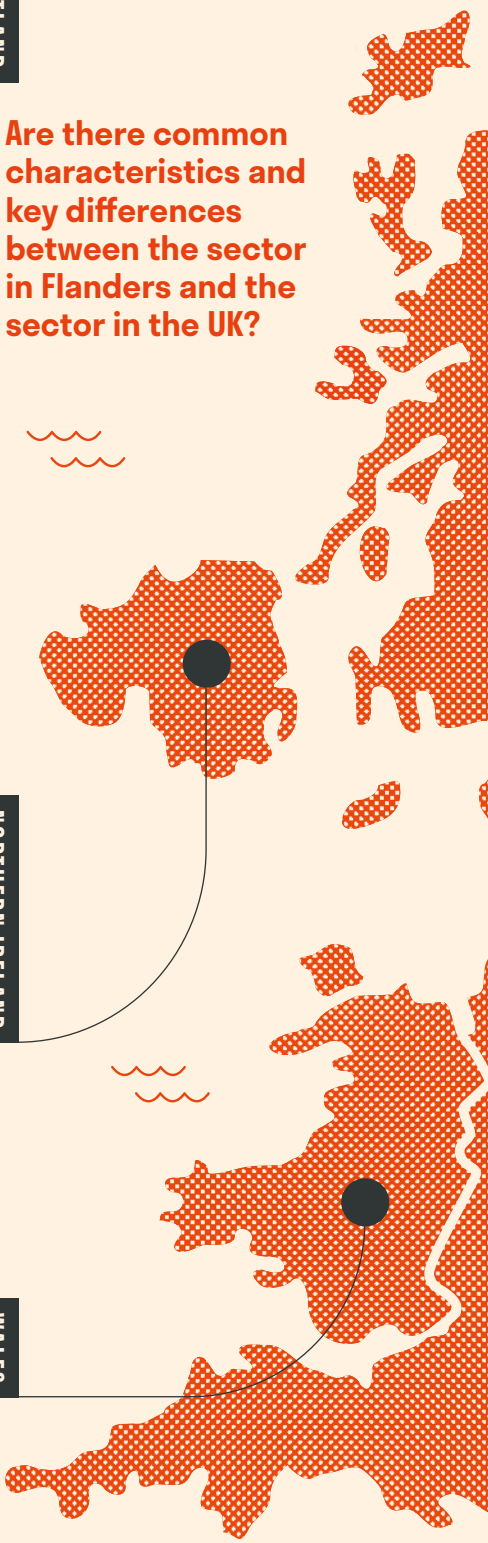
quality of the work. Having an organisation like Circuscentrum to advocate and drive the agenda must have been a real asset and a boon in anchoring the region within the wider European initiatives. Without such a body in the UK and post-Brexit we are in a significantly worse off and vulnerable position in the UK.

SCOTLAND

NORTHERN IRELAND

WALES

Are there common characteristics and key differences between the sector in Flanders and the sector in the UK?



UNITED KINGDOM



Lynn Carroll

Director /Circusworks

The sector in Flanders has substantial support from their culture department, both financial and as advocates for the art form. They have dedicated creation centres to create work, and strong advocacy organisations to promote the art form.



Clive Lyttle

Artistic Director / Certain Black
Flanders has more creation centres. There are few in the UK.

ENGLAND



Simon Chatterton

Strategic Lead / 101 Outdoor Arts

There are many similarities between the sector in Flanders and the UK however the focus on artform support and strategy from a governmental level is something that we are not currently seeing strongly in the UK and although we are grateful for the support we receive here in the UK, the strategic prioritisation of support for creation through building networks of residency centres for example also appears exceptional in Flanders. It is also very welcome that Flanders are dedicating funds to working with the UK post-Brexit as resources to do this are unfortunately lacking on this side of the channel.



Kate Wood / Bill Gee

Director - Activate Performing Arts / Co-Artistic Director - Inside Out Dorset festival

There seem to be similarities in the sector between Flanders and the UK. One of the main differences I can see is the government support for artists that is akin to the French model, which makes a significant difference to an artist or company being able to sustain their work/career.



Joe Mackintosh

CEO and Artistic Director / Out There Arts

There is quite a strong cross-over between indoor/outdoor circus work in companies. In Flanders the circus artists might have a bit more leaning towards outdoors as they are more familiar with it and see the market opportunities. Flemish companies and programmers are much more able to work internationally easily and as a matter of course. The levels of difference in per capita investment in both circus and outdoor arts between UK and Flanders is very stark (much higher in Flanders).



Lindsey Butcher

Artistic Director and Performer / Gravity & Levity

There is a lack of funding for circus other than for outdoor arts through (the much appreciated but ultimately piecemeal) Without Walls consortium. Unlike in Flanders there are only 2 main Circus Schools, in London and Bristol there are additionally lots of small aerial studios working at grassroots level, with communities and also providing practice time for aerial

professionals but they aren't producing the next companies- more the solo artists for the commercial sector. So where are those new companies/artists interested in engaging with outdoor arts coming from other than the 2 main schools? And who is underpinning, offering guidance/signposting a means to creating that work for these emerging artists?



Juliet Hardy

Artistic Director / Stockton International Riverside Festival

From my experiences I can see a lot of similarities within the sector in Flanders and the UK. We have a number of circus schools and development programmes to ensure traditions are passed on and not lost, but also as circus is one of the most accessible routes to engage any individual due to the nature of people's curiosity to have a go. Many festivals for example have circus workshops on site at their festivals and you can see children and Dads who wouldn't possibly try other artforms joining in. In the Tees Valley we have an increase of circus fitness clubs that are growing momentum, ribbon, aerial and hoop work which are being accessed by people who have never considered circus as an interest but are interested in different fitness activities. I feel from the work I have experienced from Flanders so far represents more freedom that some UK work currently. Artists taking risk, being bold feels more present, potentially due to the difference in health and safety restrictions in the UK? Not to say that UK professionals are not pushing the boundaries of their practice, it is more that UK artists are doing this in different ways with dramaturgy, narrative and adding different disciplines rather than an increase levels of danger with skills such as parkour in some Flemish works.



Kate Hartoch

Associate Director / Handstand Arts

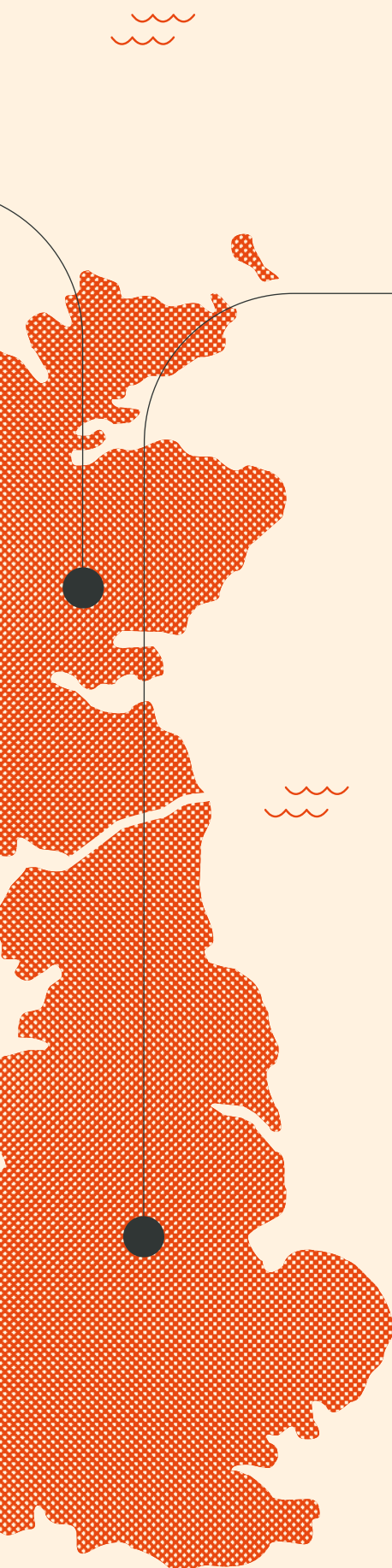
I think there are in terms of a circus/ theatre approach and an appetite for dark clown work.



Ade Berry

Artistic Director / Jacksons Lane

More companies and more funding in Flanders being the main two.



MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND

PART 2



GIRGUS IN THE

UK

Programmers
and circus
companies
cross the
channel



PHOTO: Jakob Rosseel, Séverine Van der Stighelen, Liesbeth Bonner
 TEKST: Liv Laveyne

This year, Circuscentrum undertook to re-establish the link between Flanders and Great Britain. Not a moment too soon, either, as both Corona and Brexit had driven a wedge between them. But where there's a will, there's a way. In September, a number of Flemish circus programmers and companies headed for Out There Festival in Great Yarmouth with a view to fostering long-term collaborations.

Among the potential barriers to long-term collaboration are cost and bureaucracy, of course. In September, the circus arts cropped up in national politics and headlines when Dieter Missiaen of Compagnie Krak was slapped with a sky-high fine for entering a low-emissions zone in London with his van. A British collection agency had received the details of the foreign travellers via an Antwerp-based bailiff. Called upon to take legal action, the courts found this handling of personal data to be in contravention of privacy laws and therefore illegal.

So, with a bit of luck, Compagnie Krak's eye-watering fine will be thrown out. However, this situation does illustrate what an enormous administrative chore it has become to go on tour: there's the visas, vignettes and other permits (ATA carnet, GMR, ...), the long queues at border control and the suspicion of customs officers when informed of the nature of your journey ('Circus?! Who's paying you for that then?'). At this point, some have resorted to 'travel hacks' such as joining the queue just before they close the gate so as to ensure you get waved through quickly. With all this fuss, artists and festival organisers are discouraged from crossing the pond. 'If you do, be sure to make the trip





worthwhile,' says Joe Mackintosh of Out There Festival. 'A more organised approach is needed when it comes to touring and developing partnerships. For artists, this is the most sustainable approach – financially, ecologically and in terms of mental health. We used to be able to rely on EU subsidies for international collaboration, but Corona and Brexit have left us isolated. We need to get to know each other (again) and figure out what each other's specific needs are.'

We couldn't agree more. And thanks to BAR (Brexit Adjustment Reserve) funds, Circuscentrum was able to organise an exchange project this year aimed at strengthening relations between Flanders and Great Britain. After valuable meetings in March 2023, a delegation of artists from Flanders (Collectif Malunés, Amoukanama, Circus Katoen and Sur Mesure) headed onwards to Great Yarmouth. This was also a great opportunity for the Flemish programmers travelling with us to turn their attention back to the UK, especially as the

crisis has had repercussions for international programming. 'The UK may perhaps be less interesting for many programmers due to the wealth of quality offerings in Flanders and continental Europe, but Great Britain does have a strong tradition when it comes to street arts and the inclusive philosophy behind it,' says Joe, whose festival in Great Yarmouth faces some significant challenges.

The Golden Mile

Located on the coast of Norfolk is Great Yarmouth, the British port town closest to the Netherlands and a remarkable resort town to say the least. Its long coastal strip, the Golden Mile, is alive with slot machine sounds and flickering lights thanks to its numerous amusement arcades. The old Britannia Pier juts out over the sea and is capped with an old theatre that houses a bowling alley. Nor far from there is the Hippodrome Circus: built in the early 1900s,

'If you do, be sure to make the trip worthwhile'



it is one of only two stone circus buildings in England, not to mention one of only three circuses in the world with an arena that can descend into a pool and be ready for acrobatic water ballet in a matter of minutes! The Jay family has been in charge of the place since 1979 and presents four spectacular themed shows every year.

Great Yarmouth exudes a sense of the nostalgic fun fairs of the past, but, beyond the veneer of simple entertainment, the melancholy and the poverty here is palpable. Behind the dazzling sights of the Golden Mile are narrow ascending streets lined with small worker's houses that look to have seen better days. According to a report from the town regarding the economic consequences of Brexit, the residents of Great Yarmouth are 'among the most vulnerable in the United Kingdom'. The fishermen have moved away and the resort is not hip enough to draw tourists any more. On a typical week, the Golden Mile

feels more like a 'boulevard of broken dreams', only coming alive on the weekend thanks to day-trippers from Norwich or, as now, festival-goers.

Attracting an audience of half locals, half tourists, Out There Festival presents mainly free performances that take place on the beach, in the city park and on its surrounding streets. The central meeting point of the festival is The Drill House, a former army building that in 2012 was transformed into Out There Arts, a circus and street theatre venue offering residencies and circus studios. In 2025 the organisation will expand to encompass an additional location: a former ice factory that used to help local fishermen keep their catches fresh. This is perhaps the key to the economic revival of this one-of-a-kind city: by doubling down on cultural experience and creation, it could become a cultural hub by the sea – a winning combo for tourists and local residents alike.

le,' says Joe Mackintosh of Out There Festival.



Opportunity knocks

The relentless enthusiasm of Joe Mackintosh and the many volunteers of the Out There Festival is truly admirable. While the festival seeks to keep international ambitions high by inviting artists from all over the world, it is also keen to nurture ties with the local community. And so Collectif Malunés travelled to local schools with its participatory piece *We agree to disagree*, which challenges high-school students to trust and confide in each other. An ambitious remit so early in the school year, but nevertheless a fine exercise and a welcome alternative to the obligatory rounds of introductions. A discussion on the topic of how to live and work in an eco-friendly way was organised at the local Climate Café together with Circus Katoen, which invented the discipline of turf acrobatics with their show *Grasshoppers*. ‘Honesty compels me to admit that not a soul showed up at the cafe,’ reports Willem of Circus Katoen. However, the collaboration with the Flemish-Guinean company Amoukanama did turn out to be a big hit, with the local African Choir of Norfolk providing a musical accompaniment to the performance *Amoukanama Travels!* ‘In 2025, we will move beyond the Eurocentric view of the world and look towards including African and Latin American artists,’ Joe reveals, ‘but in everything we do internationally, we pay particular attention to connecting that with the locality here.’ This is something that did not escape the attention of Ghent-based Seraina De Block of *Sur Mesure*. The latter company, which combines circus and street theatre with an impressive musicality and broad representation, has a history of regularly touring the UK. On its most recent trip it presented the new production *Barrière*. ‘In Flanders we still have a lot to learn about inclusivity in cultural activities,’ says Seraina. ‘Circus and street theatre festivals such as those in Milton Keynes, Greenwich, Hull and here in Great Yarmouth often take their performances to more underprivileged neighbourhoods as well, and they do so with a great deal of attention and respect, not to mention

‘The festival volunteers are out here every day singing the praises of whichever production is on. And this work really pays off.’





too, it is presently often a matter of rebuilding networks in the wake of Corona and budget cuts. BAR support is also set to end in late 2023. Is either government willing to invest in the future of circus? 'No, not at the moment' is the honest answer of Arts Council representative Jennifer Cleary. 'But there are ongoing discussions between the Arts Council and the Flemish government about how we can make cultural collaborations more sustainable.' 'The use of BAR funds is limited to certain period of time (until the end of 2023), so the important thing now is not to let encounters like this fizzle out but to maintain a dialogue and establish long-term relations,' Circuscentrum stresses.

In this way, this exchange project has proven to be essential, paving the way for more such projects. In the networking meetings with organisers, everyone had an opportunity to share their unique takes on scale and financial clout, indoor and outdoor activities and different content focuses. These events were also a chance to glean artist tips and take in showcases. 'It's the more formal and informal relationships that are best maintained,

but we are going to have to be more ambitious: we need to dare to think beyond ad-hoc touring opportunities for a few productions and start thinking about long-term collaborations and structural commitments with regard to residencies, creation and participation,' says Joe.

Specific proposals are not yet on the table, but another international programmer's meeting has been planned to take place sometime around mid-January in Ghent, Belgium, to coincide with Smells Like Circus. Everyone agrees on the necessity to make the circus ecosystem more sustainable by organising tours. It should be a logical reflex, after all – part and parcel of the nomadic DNA of the circus. But what it always comes down to is: who is going to pay for it? Programmers, speaking of their heavy workloads, say that the organisation of tours necessitates a lot of work, time and energy that they simply don't have. Artists and circus companies likewise cannot be expected to take on this burden themselves. Because time is money, too. ★

Organising sustainably

Tips for artists and (festival) organisers

- 1 Reduce the administrative hassle surrounding travel, work and transportation.
- 2 Continue to draw on subsidy channels for international ad hoc collaborations as well as recurring collaborations.
- 3 Group performance and residency dates consecutively as tours. There is a handy, central database of all European (and UK) festivals that lists the locations and dates. There is call for this to be made for residencies, too.
- 4 Think global, act local: make international collaborations sustainable by also engaging locally in robust audience engagement and location-specific programming.

★ From a conversation with programmers from the UK and Europe, Circuscentrum and Arts Council England at the Marina Centre on the Golden Mile in Great Yarmouth.

FLEMISH WAVE IN THE UK

During the summer of 2023 Circuscentrum worked together with various renowned British festival organisers and producers to bring Flemish circus talent to the UK.

SPOTLIGHT ON FLANDERS

Greenwich + Docklands International Festival

2 7

Kensington and Chelsea Festival

1 3 4 10

Freedom Festival

5 6 7 11

Out There Festival

8 9 10 11



1 Les fabuleux aventures de Marquis De Quevilly De Machienerie



2 Les Patineurs 15Feet6



3 PLOCK! Grensgeval



4 L'imaginarium du Capitein Gustav II De Machienerie



5 Primus 15Feet6



6 Encore une fois Triptotes la Compagnie



8 FA Amoukanama



9 Barrière Sur Mesure



10 Grasshoppers Circus Katoen



7 EXIT Circumstances



11 We Agree To Disagree Collectif Malunés

St Verena Cornwall

UK PROFESSIONALS ON THE CIRCUS AND OUTDOOR ARTS SECTOR

1

Why do you think that presenting work outdoors plays such a role in the UK?

2

What are the current trends (in the arts form(s) that you are commenting on/in the part of the UK that you are talking about)?



Simon Chatterton
STRATEGIC LEAD
/ 101 OUTDOOR
ARTS (ENGLAND)

- 1 Presenting work outdoors creates connection with the widest possible audience. A recent study in the UK showed that outdoor arts was the only artform where the demographic of the audience mirrored that of the town in which it was staged. Staging work outdoors and in urban and rural locations are also powerful experiences which create community and transform an audience's relationship with place.
- 2 There has been a big shift in focus in the funding system towards supporting more place-based projects – grown in response to particular cities and areas and working with specific communities. These are often places of low cultural engagement where outdoor work can play a special role. This creates exciting opportunities for artists who see participation and co-creation as part of their practice but can also raise questions about how work can achieve wider distribution.



Kate Wood
DIRECTOR - ACTIVATE
PERFORMING ARTS /
CO-ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR -
INSIDE OUT DORSET
FESTIVAL (ENGLAND)

- 1 Presenting work outdoors, in the public realm, plays such an important role here due to a variety of reasons – from an audience engagement perspective, it is primarily around reaching a diverse audience and from an artistic perspective it is both about the extraordinarily different visceral nature of work and how the landscape, be it rural or urban can play an integral role in the work.
- 2 The current trends are around socially engaged practice, the climate emergency, co-creation, diversity and interdisciplinary practice. Making work that is relevant to place, that has legacy. There is some discussion post covid on the amount of work that is or should be uplifting given the very troubling period of the pandemic, austerity, lock-down.



Sadé and Kristina Alleyne
CO-ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR / ALLEYNE
DANCE (ENGLAND)

- 1 Few people are exposed to dance in their regular daily schedule. Outdoor work is very important as we can bring the art to the community. Engaging with new dance audiences of all ages.
- 2 Immigration – there are a few productions out there that are talking about live and current issues in the work. Perhaps we cannot physically change history, but we can change minds through art.



Clive Lyttle
ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR /
CERTAIN BLACKS
(UK)

- 1 Entertainment, Education and Joy
- 2 Continued development of dance for outdoor performance. Good contemporary circus development. The support for outdoor arts to reach new audiences which are hard to engage in the arts.



Liz Pugh
 CREATIVE
 PRODUCER /
 WALK THE PLANK
 (UK)

- 1 We use fire, light, special effects, puppetry, music, magic, new technologies and analogue tools like movement, procession, and performance, all with gay abandon – and we have found that commercial festivals and other clients, like BID’s are all now thinking about the Experience Economy. The immersive installations we make – like the Fire Gardens or BODY – as well as the processions and parades offer high quality experiences to audiences and participants. Plus, some of us have been inspired by seeing the amazing work that companies from France, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Flanders make and some of us want to do what we can to remind people that we are, in fact, still European in terms of geopolitics and heritage!
- 2 In outdoor arts, we’re thinking about how to diversify the workforce, particularly in the areas of technical and production...which means changing education and training, and creating less precarious conditions which is hard in a sector that is project by project, with little room for independent growth. We are trying to fund our own talent development programmes – which need to be paid, supported opportunities if we are to attract young people who come from less privileged backgrounds, without easy access to financial support from parents.



Joe Mackintosh
 CEO AND ARTISTIC
 DIRECTOR / OUT
 THERE ARTS
 (ENGLAND)

- 1 It’s not really that big in the UK considering the population size. Outdoor Arts scene in France (same population size) is probably 20 times the size with a Culture budget 5 times the size. Outdoor Arts done well in public urban spaces is the most effective deployment of subsidy to engage audiences, especially those otherwise unengaged with culture.
- 2 Artistic companies often seem to feel obliged to make work about current issues such as climate change or identity to secure funding, commissions or gigs. Without Walls has an over dominant role in touring for outdoor arts and many companies feel that if they are not in this then there is little market left for them. International collaboration post EU funding has fallen of a cliff in comparison to the UK/FR Interreg Programme days. Artists (especially emerging companies) are relying too heavily on Arts Council England funding for creation to live, with a scarcity in volume of UK gigs, and are having to turnover ‘new projects/ creations’ too frequently in order to be receiving subsidy (it would be better if more of this subsidy was put into gigs rather than creation – higher public benefit and raising of quality standards). Participatory aspects to performances are a growing trend, not just in UK but more broadly.



Ade Berry
 ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
 / JACKSONS LANE
 (ENGLAND)

- 1 It appears to have grown for obvious reasons during COVID, also the nature of the work being accessible and usually free.
- 2 Neuro-divergence, environment, mental health being core themes that arise out of new work



Tom Rack
 ARTISTIC
 DIRECTOR
 / NOFIT STATE
 (WALES)

- 1 Presenting work outdoors in a free to access environment brings a new audience to the work and creates a different context for performance. Working outdoors creates very specific challenges for circus and this necessitates a creative response which can make innovative and exciting shows.
- 2 A lot of work is being created for theatres and the theatre audience. Whilst diversifying the market has to be a good thing, many (mostly young) artists feel the need for storytelling expressing of themselves in their work and make issue based autobiographical content. They assume the audience will automatically care and be interested but without adequate investment, development time and ambition, this isn’t always the case. Issue-based introspective projects might sound great on a funding application but present a danger of perpetuating mediocrity and ‘turning off’ an audience from contemporary circus.

1
Why do you think that presenting work outdoors plays such a role in the UK?

2
What are the current trends (in the arts form(s) that you are commenting on/in the part of the UK that you are talking about)?



Alan Richardson
 DIRECTOR /
 SURGE
 (SCOTLAND)

- 1** It engages the public not reached by other art forms due to its presentation on the streets and also in Scotland in very rural locations, providing cultural activity those with little other access.
- 2** I think there is a growing use of technology and the internet in the integration of work rather than just a means of promotion.



Flora Herberich
 HEAD OF
 PROGRAMMES, PATH-
 WAYS AND PARTICI-
 PATION / CIRCUSFUL
 (NORTHERN IRELAND)

- 1** Whilst we are trying to increase our indoor program, we still believe outdoor programming to be one of the most accessible ways of reaching people who would perhaps otherwise not engage with the arts on a regular basis.
- 2** In terms of circus creation, we are definitely seeing increasing ambition from Irish artists to make work that deals with issues, talks about important personal/political topics and comes from an increasingly diverse pool of voices which is great. Artists are seeking to tell a compelling story and weaving a narrative through their work and practice – often working to ensure audiences are emotionally engaged and challenged and posing questions through their work.



Fiona Matthews
 CREATIVE DIRECTOR
 / SUPER CULTURE
 (ENGLAND)

- 1** We think everyone should have the opportunity to experience and participate in exceptional arts and culture. We're based in a community where there is a lot of socio-economic disadvantage – so all our work is free to access (often in the public realm) or Pay What You Decide to minimise financial barriers. For our audiences, we know our programme is often the only arts activity they will engage in. Last year - 50% of our attendees were 'infrequent cultural attenders' (attending cultural events or participating in arts and cultural activities twice per year or less). This includes 26% for whom attending one of our events was the only arts activity they had done in the last 12 months or more.
- 2** Light Festivals have become huge since the pandemic as they could be safely presented outdoors in a socially distanced manner. In Weston, locally based light artist Paula Birtwistle launched GLOW festival, which has become hugely popular and is now a staple of the calendar (funding dependent of course!). This pattern seems to be the same across the UK, and demonstrates the huge value that communities place on culture and connection even in the darkest of times. GLOW is particularly strong on light-based work that actively engages audiences, rather than providing passive spectacle, and as such it sustains the participatory focus of Weston's wider cultural offer.



Rachel Melaugh

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
/ IN YOUR SPACE
CIRCUS (NORTHERN
IRELAND)

- 1 Our work taking place on the street allows audiences to engage with art for free with no barrier (financial, geographical, etc). We are also living in an area of post-conflict, where there is still division, and we are proud that our work (particularly our festival 'Carnival of Colours') brings people from every area and background together to laugh, play and enjoy our city.
- 2 We are seeing a lot of European influence across Circus, with a strong contemporary vibe and exploration in new concepts which use audiovisual and other artforms (dance, music, film) to enhance circus. We are also seeing heritage and mental health messaging coming through as a catalyst for development of new work. Sustainability is a theme which is also prevalent across all areas of work, particularly with how we function as an organisation and how we deliver our events and programmes.

CRYING OUT LOUD: TOURING PILOT

In 2021, Circus Around & About was a pilot rural touring project aimed at bringing high quality, small-scale, family friendly circus to 27 village communities in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Somerset from July to September 2021. The project was funded by Arts Council England and delivered by a partnership between Take Art and Crying Out Loud. Following the impact of Covid-19 on community life, Circus Around & About offered a varied selection of circus double bills in outdoor locations. Each outdoor event featured two shows by extraordinary national and international touring companies. All the events were set up and ran in accordance with current government guidelines on social distancing. Circus Around & About 2 was announced in October 2023. Additional Arts Council England funding was secured to cultivate and tour incredible circus shows Around and About the South-West in 2024. Circus Around and About 2 will build on the successful 2021 pilot tour and go to new lengths to foster the burgeoning UK contemporary circus sector and tour extraordinary circus shows to rural and urban communities across the region. This 21 month project is spearheaded by a partnership between Somerset-based Take Art, London and Portsmouth based Crying Out Loud and national touring Extraordinary Bodies. This ambitious new project will add value to everyone involved in the under-supported circus sector. The Project launched an Open Call, inviting artists and circus companies wanting to tour from June to December 2024 to apply to be part of the Circus Around and. This will offer a choice of four companies to the rural and urban community presenting partners to programme in their spaces. The project was seeking 60 minute shows that are ready to tour (with adaptations in some cases) as well as a children and young people's workshop and residency programme. In October 2023 Crying Out Loud presented Grasshoppers by Circus Katoen in collaboration with Circuscentrum as a small, touring pilot to small, indoor and rural venues in the Southwest of England. ★



BY
Vera
Cornwall

DE MACHIENERIE



What does your organisation do?

National centre for the support of arts in public space offering residencies and artist development programmes.

What excites you about the sector here at the moment?

More and more organisations from outside the arts are interested in the possibilities of work in public space – for regenerating high streets, boosting tourism, increasing wellbeing, connecting people with natural landscapes and generally increasing access to cultural experience. There have also been so many new artists and companies

come into the sector over the last few years, it has really diversified the field. 101 celebrates its tenth birthday next year and it's been remarkable that it has become such an essential part of the fabric of support for outdoor arts here. We are now hosting over sixty residencies and welcoming more than three hundred artists to stay with us each year as well as hosting an ever increasing programme of professional development events.

What are the most important challenges here at the moment?

There's no denying it's a tough climate at the moment

economically. We saw a decade of austerity after the financial crash in 2008, followed by Brexit, the pandemic and now a cost of living crisis. Festivals have seen their production and staffing costs rise exponentially, squeezing their artistic spend and along with this, inflation means it's harder than ever for artists to sustain themselves.

What is the role of audiences in the work that you host or deliver?

Over the last fifteen years we have built an audience for the work we do in Newbury where 101 is based. We've

Interview with **Simon Chatterton**, Strategic Lead / 101



★ 101 OUTDOOR ARTS

always asked people what they think of the performances and sometimes they will even stop you on the street to tell you. We also know that sometimes people don't know that they want something until they see it. 101 has often brought local people into the productions as participants and the work support in the centre is often brought into contact with audiences at an early stage allowing for feedback. We've done some work in local neighbourhoods recently where audiences are seeing outdoor performance for the first time

and have been moved to tears – that has been truly special.

Thinking about the companies that you work with, what draws you to select them?

I'm attracted to artists that understand and are passionate about working in public space and creating encounters with the public that leave those audiences transformed. I want to work with artists who understand their practice in relation to the very particular possibilities of working in public space and who want to build on these rather than simply take work for the stage and present it outdoors.

In December 2023 Maarten and Joris from Flemish company De Machienerie visited 101 Outdoor Arts - National Centre for Arts in Public Space in Newbury, UK. There they worked with Martin West - Head of Creative Design to contribute their vast experience and specialist knowledge to the refinements in the making and animation of giant puppet features and to exchange know-how with the UK team whose specialisms include fabrication and pyrotechnics. 101 receives over 60 companies in residence each year and so the skills exchange with De Machienerie will be disseminated to the wider UK outdoor arts community via these networks. In January 2024 there are plans for Martin and fellow maker Olivia Stephenson to make a return visit to Belgium.

Outdoor Arts – National Centre for Arts in Public Space

PART 3



UK


EXPEDITION

SHARING IS CARING





FLEMISH YOUTH CIRCUSES CROSS THE CHANNEL



In 2023, Circuscentrum undertook to re-establish the link between Flanders and Great Britain. Not a moment too soon, either, as both Corona and Brexit had driven a wedge between them. But where there's a will, there's a way. After a preliminary trip in March 2023, Circuscentrum returned at the end of the summer with a delegation from the youth circuses of Flanders. They visited number of festivals in London and Hull with the goal of exchanging good practices. Among the valuables they packed was this most important of questions: what role can circus play in creating a diverse, inclusive and caring society?

IT'S

a frequent point of criticism: most youth circuses in Flanders are still not sufficiently diverse and inclusive. Or, to put it bluntly: they are made up predominantly of people who are able-bodied, white and wealthy. This point has not been overlooked by the youth circuses; in recent years they have set up several projects in response, but the difficulty remains that these are often temporary initiatives with minimal impact on the status quo. For this reason, the youth circuses are devoting increasing attention to projects with various focuses, such as underprivileged neighbourhoods and children who are victims of intrafamily violence. Because it turns out that circus can be an essential gateway to well-being.

At the end of the world

The question of how to connect children and young people from underprivileged

neighbourhoods with circus is also a major concern for Verena Cornwall, artistic director of the Kensington & Chelsea Festival (www.kcfestival.co.uk). Chelsea is a notably affluent neighbourhood and running right through it is the economic artery that is King's Road – a long street lined with chic shops. However, the further you follow King's Road away from the centre, the more the glamour fades, culminating in the drabber, less idyllically named district of World's End. There you will find the small Chelsea Theatre wedged between St. John's Church and some apartment buildings. We watched residents trickle down from there and seat themselves on the deck chairs in the square to watch the piece *CODE* by Justice in Motion (www.justiceinmotion.co.uk).

This British company performs physical theatre with a focus on social justice issues, always doing intensive preliminary research beforehand. For example, previous performances included *Bound*, about modern slavery in the sex industry, and *On Edge*, which shone a light on exploitation in the construction industry. Their new creation, *CODE*, focuses on the issue of 'county lines': drug trafficking networks where young people, even children aged between 9 and 12, are used as couriers. They are recruited via social media and mobile phone with the promise of earning money as a 'mule', but the dangers in such criminal environments are legion. The figures are startling: in Britain, there are said to be around 1,000 active county lines, and between 2012 and 2016 the number of convicted minors aged between 10 and 17 increased by 77 per cent.

The setting of *CODE*, complete with iron scaffolding and a graffitied wall, couldn't be more fitting for urban circus. In the story, an innocent kid is approached while skating and

PHOTOS Jessan Jimenez Leon & Noemi De Clercq
TEXT Liv Layre

given a mobile phone, then money and drugs ... but when the deal goes wrong, he also gets a knife put in his hand and must ultimately go into hiding with his family when the police come knocking. The show – narrated by a rapper, with skaters and parkour runners setting the tone – doesn't shy away from morality: a message is clearly communicated to audiences. For Verena, it's important that this performance is shown and discussed in this particular environment. After the show, those who come to discuss the issues raised are mainly concerned parents or parents who face active county lines operations in their own neighbourhoods.

CODE is a hard-hitting performance that is introduced with the necessary trigger warnings, as is the custom in the UK: *there will be emotionally shocking scenes, a knife will be shown ...* This kind of thing is always clearly mentioned on the posters and communicated verbally before the show. Spectators are also urged to use the app that directs the user to crisis centre assistance.

The minority is the majority

In terms of inclusion and diversity, the arts sector in Britain can be considered a pioneer compared to Flanders. And this was certainly noticeable at Greenwich & Docklands International Festival (<https://festival.org/gdif/>). An extensive survey was distributed across the two boroughs of Greater London that the festival spans, with questions such as 'which societal group do you associate with?' (with a long list of possibilities underneath). Here change is often already reflected in the language. In Britain, they consistently speak not of 'minority groups' but of the 'global majority'. A sign language interpreter is present at every circus performance that has a verbal component. Trigger warnings are communicated everywhere for the sake of people with needs relating to neurodiversity, as well as to warn people when a show contains content that may cause offence. In the idyllic Greenwich Park – through which the famous meridian runs – there are signs that challenge passers-by to reflect critically on our attitudes to ableism and diversity.

Still, you do hear critical voices say that the inclusion on display is just a form of lip service. That while there may be diversity in communication, there remains a lack of diversity in policy and recruitment. In response to those voices, Vicki Dela Amedume of Upswing Company says: 'When it comes to inclusion, fifty percent of



the success is accounted for by the will to bring about change, the other fifty percent by time and resources and therefore money.'

She welcomes us to Thamesmead, right on the Greenwich border. The town, which is crisscrossed by lakes and wetlands, is described as an 'opportunity area' in London's urban development plan. In other words, it is a place where there is still a lot of untapped potential. In its current state, it's mostly 1960s social housing in the form of striking, brutalist concrete flats. One of the festival volunteers proudly announced to us that these blocks of flats served as the backdrop for the legendary film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*. In that context, Upswing Company's show *Ancient Futures* is so out of place here. This Afrofuturist production mixes dance, circus and hip hop with African-inspired masks, queer voguing, capoeira and a form of female empowerment that refers to the



matriarchy typical of many tribes in West Africa. Thamesmead has the largest population of people of West African descent in the whole of the UK. Vicki, who herself has Ghanaian roots, grew up in Thamesmead. For her, to be able to put on this show here is a personal statement of sorts.

‘My family wanted me to become a scientist. That way, you earn good money and contribute to society. So I did study sciences, but my heart always lay with circus. It took me a lot of strength and many discussions to convince my family of my choice to pursue circus. Not just because they thought it was too risky physically and economically, but because they just couldn’t imagine it being a viable career option.’ Starting in 1997, Vicki worked as an aerial acrobat with various circuses abroad, but she started to get the feeling that her identity was not being honoured in that context. This led her to create her own company, Upswing Company (<https://upswing.org.uk/>), in 2007. With this, her main objective was to ensure that the global majority felt represented in shows as well as in training.

‘We shouldn’t underestimate the importance of role models and authenticity.’ Circus – and, by extension, all contemporary arts – is still based around a Eurocentric view, which is also reflected in the current influx of young and new artists. When people from the global majority do end up in circus, they often find they need to blend in, as they don’t feel represented. They don’t feel they are in a safe space, they feel out of place.’ For this reason, Upswing Company recruits participants in its productions via unorthodox channels. ‘Open calls don’t work – however democratic and open they may seem – because you’re not reaching people through the right channels. For *Ancient Futures*, we took the search into our own hands: we found the percussionist-juggler in the park, one b-boy is from the hip hop scene and another is from the dancehall scene. It ended up being that only one of the artists in this circus performance had actually been to a circus school.’

‘When people talk about the global majority, it’s too often rooted in shortcomings and the us-them way of thinking: we are going to offer

something that’s good for *them*. This is a white saviour mindset. It is well-intentioned but isn’t rooted in the strength of the group you want to reach and doesn’t establish a working relationship characterised by equality.’ For Vicki, it is clear: ‘The worst motivation for diversity is because it looks good on paper and you can tick that box. You have to be convinced of the fact that participation in culture is a human right and that you want to share the possibilities of culture with more than just a limited group of people. Society is becoming increasingly diverse, while contemporary circus remains very self-centred and risks becoming irrelevant. However, we only have to look at the circus of the past to realise that it has long been among the most inclusive art forms and communities. So, let’s grow together in what circus is and can once again become.’

Circus is also a job

London’s circus school, the National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA), also faces that challenge of attracting a more diverse student body. Brexit and the discontinuation of certain funds have not helped with international appeal. Nor, for that matter, has the high application fee (£9,200), which makes the financial barrier to entry very high, in spite of a handful of possibilities for scholarships and student loans. However, the biggest advantage of this circus school is that the youth circus and the circus college are together under one roof, which creates opportunities in terms of educational continuity.

Housed in a characterful old power station in central London, the NCCA (<https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/>) consists of two studio spaces, many small classrooms and one large hall used mainly for practising aerial acrobatics. This hall is also rented out for events to generate additional income. During the summer holidays, for example, rehearsals took place here for a big musical in the West End. ‘The school used to be part of an umbrella organisation that included the conservatoire for dance and drama. Four years ago we got out of that arrangement as the system



was not working for us. Now we have the freedom to initiate our own projects, but it does make our financial situation very precarious,' participation coordinator Rio Chanae-Hayles tells us.

In 2021, the NCCA launched an accessibility and participation plan comprising several projects. One was an initiative working with blind veterans in collaboration with Graeae Theatre Company, and now there is an ongoing project at the studios for children on the autism spectrum. However, this project can only continue as long as the funds allow, and this represents the biggest challenge, says Rio: 'We depend on funds and donations for everything, which has limiting repercussions for our long-term vision and activities.'

The school's idea with the high enrolment fees is to use the funds in its drive to guarantee greater diversity in its intake. With this in

mind, they created the 'CircoSpire' project, which seeks to connect the neighbourhood with the youth circus and the circus college. In collaboration with two local secondary schools, they run workshops where, after twelve weeks, the most engaged students are invited to join in the youth circus activities. These students get to train for free at the circus school, attend shows and debates, and collaborate with the professional performers who train at the school. All this in the hope that they might choose a professional career in circus at the end of their high-school education. Because that is often the first step:

'The realisation that circus is a career option is a revelation for many of these young people.'



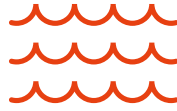
Seeking to practice what they preach, the NCCA is also working hard to diversify their teaching staff. To this end, they are also strengthening ties with Upswing Company, a relationship that had to be put on the back burner due to the pandemic. They are also looking for teachers beyond the discipline of circus, casting a wider net to include the likes of opera singers and theatre directors. They apply the same transdisciplinary strategy when recruiting students for the circus college. The NCCA travels to sports-oriented schools and gymnastics clubs where it puts on workshops with a view to inspiring people. It's only logical, they feel: gymnasts often have the same intrinsic motivation but lack the freedom and creativity that the circus can offer.

The school is honest about its efforts. 'Whether all these projects will yield the desired results remains to be seen. We are engaged in a learning process and these projects are often very cost- and labour-intensive, and only accessible to a limited number of young people. And it remains difficult to find ways of making the regular youth circus more diverse as well. At the same time, it's often simple things that lower the barrier to entry: ensuring that the young people can get something to eat at the location, that their transportation costs are reimbursed, that you can sign up easily with pen and paper. It's also important to involve the parents as much as possible and to always be in contact with youth

officers and other care providers. A couple of passionate teachers could make the difference between succeeding or not.'

Circus as (self-)care

The importance of cross-sectoral collaboration was also at the heart of the 2023 edition of the Freedom Festival (<https://www.freedomfestival.co.uk/>), which took place in Hull during the first weekend of September. Prior to Brexit, Hull was the eighth largest port city in Europe and it owes its wealth mainly to that economy. The implications of this for the future can be imagined. Unsurprisingly, the reaction to Britain's cutting ties with mainland Europe is one of contempt. 'I hope they come to their senses in London and see to it that Brexit is reversed. The importance of international collaboration lies in the shared awareness that other people in other countries harbour the same desires and struggle with the same problems as you and me. We are isolating ourselves from each other more and more, losing connection and especially dialogue,' says Mikey Martins, director of Freedom Festival. He is sad to see how Britain's isolation, including and especially in Hull, is pushing people increasingly into poverty. 'There is a need for solidarity. When weather conditions permit, we can see the Netherlands from here in Hull. Over there they have a social security system that actually works, so what are we waiting for?'



Freedom Festival is a multidisciplinary festival with a major focus on outdoor performing arts, visual arts and participatory projects. ‘But,’ Mikey stresses, ‘I’m not a social worker. What we do always is always based on an artistic premise.’ Take Collectif Malunés, for example. Based on its production *We Agree To Disagree*, this Franco-Belgian collective set up a project that they took to a number of secondary schools with a view to exploring the topic of trust and trusting one another. With the debate series Freedom Talks, the festival reflects on how the arts can have an impact on issues such as climate change, social injustice or, as during the latest edition, the impact of circus on well-being, specifically in relation to children and young people. For this, the festival invited a delegation of Flemish youth circuses to share some impressive achievements such as the project *TaRMaK* by Antwerp youth circus *Ell Circo D’ell Fuego* and *Circus Clinic* by Leuven’s *Cirkus in Beweging*.

The panel discussion brought together not only cultural workers but also many people from the care sector and the academic world. Andrew Smith works for the University of Belfast, where he researches modern slavery, a term which he adds is very loaded and open to discussion given its reference to colonial history. ‘With the term *modern slavery* we describe all practices by which people are exploited against their will.’ His particular academic focus is the sexual or criminal exploitation of children. In fact, he refers explicitly to the ubiquitous county lines also highlighted by the *Justice in Motion* production.

Toon Heylen, trainer at *Cirkus in Beweging*, spoke about *Circus Clinic*, which was an international collaboration between the Leuven-based youth circus, the Italian *Fondazione Uniti per crescere insieme* and the Czech *Cirqueon*. ‘We endeavour to bridge the gap between the world of circus and that of mental well-being.’ Together they also developed a handbook *Circus Clinic: the art of wellbeing*, in which therapist Vicki Pompe was closely involved. Vicki is from the UK but has lived in Ghent since 2008. Originally an acrobat (with *Fullstop Acrobatic Theatre*), she

retrained as a dance and movement therapist. She now works at *De Korbeel*, a psychiatric hospital for children and adolescents in Kortrijk, and has her own practice in Ghent. She uses circus as a therapeutic technique, about which she shares some great stories in her book.

‘I don’t teach circus or dance,’ Vicki makes clear. ‘I let the movement come from the person, which enables them to express what words cannot.’ She recounts the story of a 13-year-old girl who had been sexually abused and was admitted to the psychiatric ward. ‘She didn’t want to talk about what had happened to her and we didn’t want to push her into it. When I asked what she would like to do, at one point she said, “I would like to make a choreography myself”. When I asked, “about what?”, she shrugged her shoulders, so I suggested she do a dance about what had happened to her. At first you could feel she was shutting it out, but then she overcame this and said “yes” to the process. We spent three months working on the choreography together. The fact that she could exercise her creativity while also maintaining full control over the process felt really freeing for her. At one point, she asked whether I would play the role of the perpetrator in the choreography. I found the notion really intense and the funny thing was she was the one assuring me, saying: “Relax, Vicki. You’re going to do a great job, just dance.” When the choreo was finished, she wanted to share it, so we presented it to the ward and care staff. Everyone was crying. That surprised her because, as she said: “We didn’t cry during the making of it, we mostly had fun and laughed a lot.” The accounts Vicki shares are moving. Such as the one about the girl who, after a suicide attempt, regained her trust in others and herself by forming a pyramid together with the group.

Why not use circus as a tool in therapy? The arguments are numerous and heart-warming,



if you ask Vicki: ‘There’s the aspect of play; the non-verbal nature of it; being in control of your own body; exploring your limits; the patience and repetition it requires; the rediscovery of the inner child; allowing yourself to be creative; learning from your mistakes through trial and error; the promotion of self-reflection and self-confidence; the inclusivity of it with regard to different customs, backgrounds and languages; the opportunity to offer and accept help, to take responsibility, to set your own pace ...’

These are qualities that Ell Circo D’ell Fuego also wants to convey with *TaRMaK*. Originally created at the Antwerp youth circus and subsequently further developed at Circusplaneet in Ghent, this project focuses on children and adolescents aged 8 to 14 who have faced intra-family violence. Joris Herweyers is the project coordinator of *TaRMaK* and previously worked as a social worker at the Family Justice Centre Safe Home. ‘I noticed that people talked *about* the children a lot but rarely *with* the children. Too often, children end up in care after the damage has already been done. Studies have shown that this increases the risk of them remaining in that spiral of violence later in life, either as a victim or as a perpetrator. The earlier the intervention, the easier it is to break that pattern.’

‘It is very difficult for children and young people in vulnerable home situations to simply express themselves verbally. In such cases, circus can be a physical outlet for them. We organise weekly training sessions, working in small groups and with extra guidance to ensure we are able to give all the attention they need. In addition to that, we also do camps specifically in the neighbourhoods where police statistics indicate high rates of domestic violence. For the child or young person, it is especially nice not to be treated like a client, patient or problem for once, but simply appreciated for who they are.’ Or as one child says in the documentary made about the project: ‘*TaRMaK* is just a circus school.’ ★

AND WHAT DO THE YOUTH CIRCUSES THEMSELVES HAVE TO SAY?

Some recommendations on inclusion, diversity and educational continuity.

The outside world is closer than you think

'The world is often well represented in the square kilometre around your youth circus. Walk around the neighbourhood, ask if they know about your activities, ask how familiar they are with circus, if it's something they might like to try. With all the studies, we sometimes forget that it all comes down to real-world engagement.'

Work with people and organisations that have the necessary expertise and network

'You don't need to do all the work yourself and reinvent the wheel. Make use of the existing neighbourhood initiatives, youth centres and so on. These are points of contact, advisory services and safety nets all rolled into one.'

Don't let go

'The problem is not in finding children and young people from diverse and difficult backgrounds but rather keeping them connected over an extended period of time. Make use of strategies like home visits and

WhatsApp groups. Keep them wanting to come to classes even when there are no classes.'

Treat them kindly

'The importance of a warm reception shouldn't be underestimated. That means offering something to snack on, having someone who creates a good atmosphere but also has time to listen to them. Ideally, in addition to there being a teacher, there would be a second supervisor who can act as a "sponge".'

See the individual

'When you feel that a child or young person has the desire to stick with circus, don't waste time helping them move toward an area that captures their full interest, because attention spans have their limits. It's important to invest in personal paths of development independently from the day-to-day activities.'

Diversify your teaching staff

'Provide role models that participants can identify with so that they see there are future prospects.'

Encourage (international) exchange

'Share local experiences and expertise relating to good practices as well as challenge areas. Invest in international exchange for teachers and students alike, such as by organising an exchange camp, for example.'

Time is money

'Making all the above recommendations possible on a structural basis requires more time and energy. And that is something that we do not currently have, with our existing youth circus activities and certainly with the boom in popularity of our regular circus classes. More time and more energy in turn requires more money, people and resources.'

Thanks to Kiki, Jecsan, Jasmijn, Janne, Julian, Line, Silke, Therese – associated with EII Circo D'El Fuego and Circus Planet – for the animated discussion in a sun-drenched Greenwich Park



BY Verena Cornwall

BUT WHAT ABOUT INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IN THE UK?

With regards to the artistic side of the work of your company, is Inclusion and Diversity a focus?



Alan Richardson

DIRECTOR / SURGE (SCOTLAND)

Surge works a lot with mixed ability groups and promotes a lot for work both at its festival and across its programmes. Work with disabled groups and professionals is one of the areas that is more developed in Scotland, our work enables the sector driving this important work onto the streets.



Rachel Melaugh

CREATIVE DIRECTOR / IN YOUR SPACE CIRCUS (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Our audience is key to how and why we develop work. We are passionate about everyone on the street being able to enjoy our work, no matter background or ability. Through our circus school we have our general classes (age 4-adult) and we have a programme for age 55+ and 'CircAbility' – working with neurodivergent participants. It is extremely important to us that we reach as many people as possible with the healing and rich qualities of circus. Our outreach programme sees us taking circus

workshops and performances out to some of the most disadvantaged areas and groups across our city (and beyond). Circus, in its nature, does not discriminate nor hold allegiance with any particular religion, background or region.



Flora Herberich

HEAD OF PROGRAMMES,
PATHWAYS AND PARTICIPATION /
CIRCUSFUL (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Inclusion and Diversity are definitely a focus for us, both in terms of our participants and also with regards to the artists we would like to support. We feel like we are behind the rest of the UK on this – but are looking at ways and strategies of diversifying and also upskilling our trainer and facilitator team is a key focus for us now and for the years ahead. We are committed to undertaking regular trainings, we accommodate more young people with additional needs than previously and we are keen that our artistic workforce also reflects the increasingly diverse population of Northern Ireland.



Vicky Dela Amedume

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CEO /
UPSWING (ENGLAND)

Yes, inclusion is a focus. As a Black-led company it has been impossible to ignore or be inactive in conversation about diversity. We have endeavoured to take action around supporting Global Majority communities and creatives in particular, as the lived experience present in the company that has helped us understand and address some of the barriers experienced by Global Majority people. We have also taken action to reduce other barriers - improving the accessibility of our performances, creation and touring as well as finding ways to reduce barriers to access caused by economic status.



Lynn Carroll

DIRECTOR /CIRCUSWORKS (UK)

With our European partners Circus Works created a course specifically for circus trainers in inclusion and diversity. As part of the creation process we produced an inclusion manifesto, entitled 'This Space is for You' and we are working on getting it displayed on every youth circus wall in Europe.

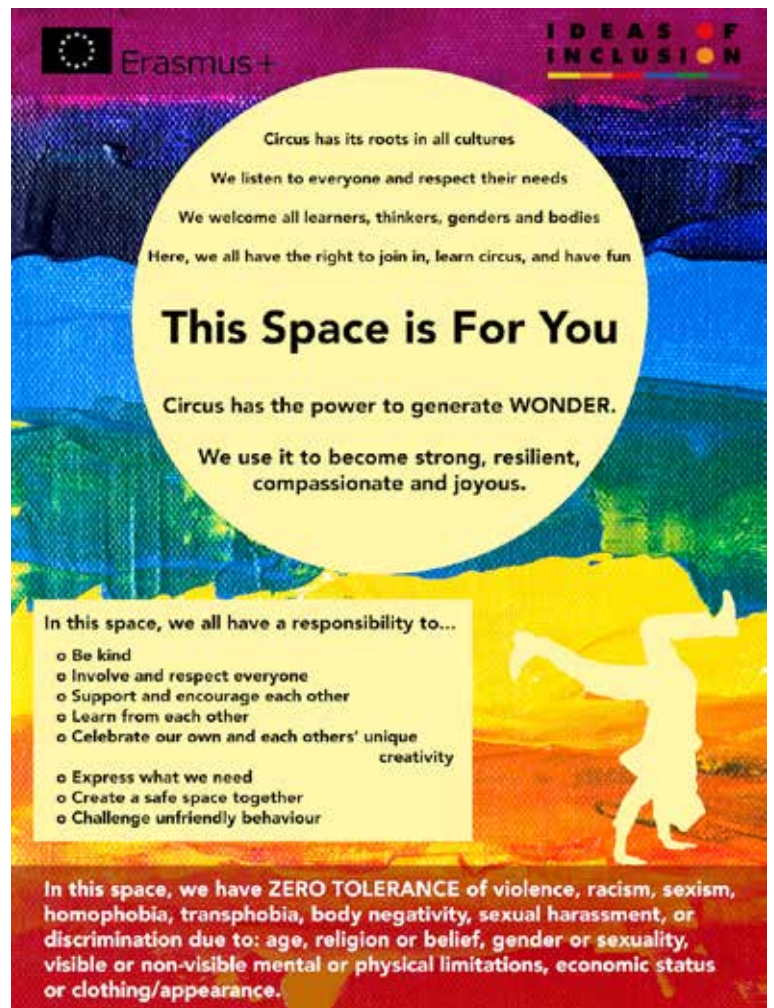


Silvia Fratelli

JOINT ARTISTIC DIRECTOR /
MIMBRE (ENGLAND)

Since our first steps, we've always strived to make space for underrepresented groups in the arts: as a company led by three female artists, we first gave space to women on stage, making a point about celebrating the beauty of our different shapes, abilities and bodies, challenging stereotypes and sometimes going against audiences expectations of how women usually present themselves on stage. We've also given space to mothers and developed a company culture of a flexible and caring working environment, to allow artists with caring responsibilities

to keep working as touring performers if they wish to do so. As we grew as a company (artistically and in size), it became clearer that we needed to diversify our pool of artists and collaborators to ensure that the stories and experiences presented on stage are still representative of the world we live in and to make sure that a more diverse audience can see themselves represented on stage and hopefully be inspired by this! We use the discipline of circus in outdoor settings, and it hasn't always





been easy to find as diverse a cast as we would like with the skills we need. We realised that in the circus and outdoor theatre sectors there are very little training opportunities for diverse artists. It's an exclusive industry which only recently is starting to diversify and opening its opportunities to become more inclusive. As a small company (and within our limited capacity), we're developing a professional development programme open to a diverse pool of artists. We are hoping this will help us to train, learn from and collaborate with a broader range of perspectives, cultural backgrounds and abilities, which will hopefully open up new possibilities for artistic expression as well as creating a deeper connection between the audience and our artistic work. We recognise that this is an ongoing journey and constant reassessing is required to achieve a more inclusive and diverse industry, but we do hope our commitment and contribution will make a small dent in achieving this!



Tom Rack

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR /
NOFIT STATE (WALES/ENGLAND)

Diversity, Inclusion is very important if we are to create a more representative sector. In general, by virtue of people having to pay to train the circus community is disproportionately white and middle class. And this perpetuates itself as there are very few diverse or disabled role models that potential future artists can project themselves on. We make a point of looking harder and looking longer for people with protected characteristics to put into our shows to try in some small way to offset this. Artistically for us it is important as each show is ultimately always at its heart about humanity and we feel it is fundamental that humanity is represented in all its forms within the work



Fiona Matthews

CREATIVE DIRECTOR /
SUPER CULTURE (ENGLAND)

Underpinning our mission is a longstanding commitment to inclusion, equity of access to the arts and the belief in the creative potential in each of us. We are driven by our first-hand experience of the power of arts, culture and creativity to create space to address vital social issues, provide a voice and agency for the underrepresented, strengthen community bonds, help individuals to reach their potential and act as a transformative force for positive social and community regeneration. We are committed to developing a diverse and inclusive organisation and practice, underpinned by annually reviewed EDI policy. Our 2023 annual Diversity and Equality survey showed our governance, leadership and workforce was representative of our community re age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and socio-economic background vs local population profiles. We are the only arts organisation with a North Somerset wide remit that incorporates a creative talent development programme and work closely with Weston College as one of their Careers Excellence Hubs. Currently we're really looking to strengthen and deepen our creative talent development support for people from under-represented groups focusing specifically on disability and socio-economic background and create new career and leadership pathways through our Future Producers programme.★

INVISIBLE CIRCUS
THIS WAY ↑ ↑

FOCUS UK THROUGH THE



Gab Bondewel



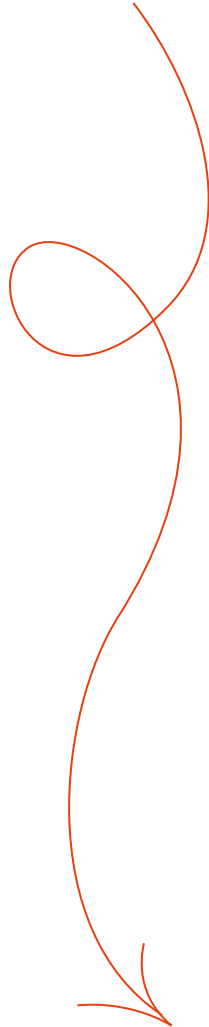
Noemie De Clercq



Séverine Van der Stighelen

EYES OF CIRCUSCENTRUM

The Flemish circus sector has helped to shape its own forward trajectory through two major bilateral initiatives: the Focus France project and the sector's various BAR-funded collaborations with the UK. It was Circuscentrum that outlined the UK collaboration projects and stepped up to keep everything on track (in as far as possible). Colleagues Noemi De Clercq (director), Gab Bondewel (Focus France project leader) and Séverine Van der Stighelen (internationalisation) reflect on what was achieved.



Two bilateral collaborations with a neighbouring country – twice the same?

SÉVERINE With Focus France, the main focus was on promoting Flemish talent, creating performance opportunities for Flemish companies and creating general visibility for the developments in Flemish circus. With Focus UK (funded through the Brexit Adjustment Reserve) we experimented with different types of collaborations and activities. In the latter case, the focus was also on knowledge exchange and the facilitation of networking opportunities.

France is a country with a big circus tradition. What impact did this have on the collaboration? Was this an advantage or a challenge?

GAB On the one hand, it's an advantage: France has a highly developed network of performance venues and circus is programmed in a lot of places. So, circus is already firmly rooted there. On the other hand, this fact does raise a challenge: when it comes to circus development, France is one step ahead of the game; there is a rich tradition there and they have a great number of circus companies of their own, so they're not really on the lookout for foreign acts so much. Getting a foot in the door of their robust network is the challenge.

Was it then more about presenting Flemish circus as being unique and distinct from French circus?

GAB Flemish circus does already have its own unique character. But, at the moment, circus in Flanders is undergoing an enormous development and this does pique the curiosity of the French. Because, in France, circus artists and companies have somewhat gone beyond that phase of development and craziness.

NOEMI As some French professionals put it: 'Flemish circus does not shy away from experimentation and searching, and that's precisely what makes it interesting'.

What was it like meeting your foreign colleagues in the UK and France?

GAB Getting through to the French professionals was not always easy.

NOEMI That fact that it's more difficult to get them on side is also to do with the context: France has its own extensive circus offering. The project

As some French professionals put it: 'Flemish circus does not shy away from experimentation and searching, and that's precisely what makes it interesting.'

started during the COVID-19 pandemic, which got us off to a rocky start. Including when it came to actually setting foot on French soil. But, thanks to our investments, the many conversations with the French professionals and the invitations we extended to them, things did take a turn for the better at a certain point. Then we were finally able to reach the right people and the possibilities began to open up. As a result, the project really gained momentum in the last year.

Were things different with the UK partners?

NOEMI France was a deliberate and logical choice for us with a view to establishing a bilateral collaboration. Brexit was what prompted us to collaborate with the UK, which gave the project a different character. In France we sought to create performance opportunities, while in the UK we had the freedom to also work together and conceptualise things with them more, in terms of how it was all realised. In the UK, they have a lot of expertise when it comes to inclusion, for example. There were more themed discussions and projects there.

SÉVERINE With the UK collaboration, we were more in search of common ground. Various delegations of circus professionals headed to the UK, including programme coordinators, people from the artistic field and from the youth circuses. We succeeded in bringing together around 100 Flemish and British professionals over the course of various different activities, which is a lot of people in relation to the number of people who are active in the sector. With the result that we have now established an extensive network of partners: colleges, festivals, youth circuses, companies, festivals ...

The UK collaboration came about thanks to BAR funding. Were there times when, by contrast, Brexit caused a hindrance?

NOEMI The mountain of paperwork and the uncertainty of it all had a big impact, we noticed. There are still many things that are unclear about the legislation, so it was sometimes a case of 'fixing the plane while flying it'. For example, Compagnie KRAK received eye-watering fines in the mail on returning from the UK, because

they had driven their van into a low-emission zone in London without registering. We ended up sharing this incident – and the best and worst ways to resolve it – with the sector, so that everyone can learn from it. We had a good partner in Cultuurloket, who also helped us in organising various info sessions.

What would have made these projects even better?

NOEMI If we had been able to reciprocate more. Companies from France and the UK requested performance opportunities and residencies here in Belgium but we were not allowed to use the budgets we had for such purposes.

What did you still want to do that you didn't get around to?

SÉVERINE In Great Yarmouth, I would have loved to test the real-life Hungry Hippo game in one of the amusement parks. (laughs) I didn't get around to it, so I'll have to go back at some point.

GAB It would have been nice to do Festival d'Avignon with some companies. It's a super important festival, but that wasn't possible, budget-wise.

How can the new relationships be extended into the future?

GAB The expanded network must be maintained. That's why we're lucky to have Séverine on the team now – someone at Circuscentrum who can work on internationalisation on a permanent basis. Keeping in contact with the professionals on a personal basis is an important factor.

NOEMI Now the question that remains is mostly: how frequently should such projects be arranged in order to keep that link and that attention? When can one say that there is enough new work? I think it's also important to embrace the French way of working in terms of how they promote their shows. Now we have that transparency.

GAB In my view, it would be very valuable to continue collecting information. For example, the data we collected from the 'Cour des Belges' pavilion at Chalon is limited in scope. Perhaps, now that the project is just coming to an end, it's still too soon to assess its effects. But what if, in

a few years, we would crunch the numbers on it all? By then it should be clear that the return on investment is enormous.

A personal question. Which moment has stuck with you the most?

SÉVERINE I started working at Circuscentrum just before the Focus France project was about to enter its third year, so unfortunately I missed the now-legendary ‘Cour de Belges’. What stuck with me the most about the collaboration with the UK was my many pleasant encounters with Flemish circus professionals on the different visits.

For me, as a newcomer to the sector, this was a unique chance to get to know many different players from the sector all at once. In addition to the smooth collaboration with the UK partners, I also remember a number of unique places there. Like 101 Outdoor Arts, located on a former air force base. And Great Yarmouth, with its Hippodrome Circus and a kilometre of flickering amusement parks along the seaside.

NOËMI For me, it’s the conversations that, in retrospect, turned out to represent a turning point in the collaboration. Like when we negotiated the professional programme during SPRING with Yveline Rapeau in Leuven, or the walk with Joe Mackintosh along the Neman River in Kaunas, which would lead to the spotlight in Great Yarmouth. Then there was the meeting Stephanie Bulteau in Marseille to discuss a possible collaboration during CIRCA. These are moments when we clicked and laid the foundations for our continued collaboration. Another moment when we established important connections was the meeting with a delegation of British circus professionals at Flanders House in the beginning of July 2022.

GAB Several things come to mind. The ‘Cour des Belges’ was fantastic. I remember that there were easily over a thousand people in attendance for the show *We agree* to disagree by Collectif Malunés. That was just huge. Another nice memory from the ‘Cour’ was tapping beer in the tent at 2am: there were so many people that the six taps were just constantly flowing. We were literally pouring beers in series. ✨



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