

## A Personal Perspective

By Stewart McGill, Director, Playbox Theatre, Warwick.

To consider the work of Circus and multi-disciplinary arts with young people here at Playbox Theatre is to also reflect and consider where Circus as both entertainment and art form has emerged in last 20-30 years. Maybe the 'Little Seedlings' are more than young people aspiring to gain confidence, skills and talent – maybe the image can be applied to a movement that swept across the world backed by Government visionaries and motivators in places like France and Quebec.

To put it into a context one has to go back some time. In the post-war years Circus was big entertainment business – here in the UK Circus directors divided the country into three segments - West Country/Mid and South/North and Scotland – the big three circuses, Chipperfield, Bertram Mills and Billy Smart's rotated in 3 yearly cycles with massive tenting shows – animal based but certainly in the case of Smarts heavily influenced by the now gigantic US Road shows, The Three Rings of Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey, Cole Brothers, Clydel Beatty etc. With Smarts the focus shifted to 'The Spec', large arena fantasies based on Wild West, Fairyland and Arabian Nights themes involving the whole company on ground, in air, on floats – this was dynamic, interactive, passionate, visual and aural circus for the new age ... until TV came along and audiences deserted many forms of live entertainment for the miracle Box (see Greatest Show on Earth – Circus of Horrors – preserved on film for the live visuals).

When Playbox Theatre began its mission with young people in 1986, Circus was off most agendas in the UK ... certainly it was not considered an art form at all. In the UK Circus was all but dead – killed off by more sophisticated forms of leisure.

I had always cherished a love of circus as entertainment art, and its possibilities – Degas, Picasso, Lautrec – and not lost on ballet creators – Diagalev, Stravinsky. As means of communication – the language of circus being universal, the body as communicator of emotion, fear, anxiety, love, jealousy ... Who could forget the classic circus movie 'Trapeze' playing out a love triangle high above the ring of Cirque D'Hiver in Paris?

As part of Playbox Development we started looking at an emerging new form ... we lovingly called it 'New Circus' and it was a step away from street entertainment – busking with attitude, juggling, acrobatics and often poor attempts at narrative. Traditional circus hated it – condemned as having 'no skill at all' – 'the great unwashed' – anarchists – rubbish. Yet here was something that seemed to capture the imagination once more, in theatre and dance – we sensed a potential to steal from the new form for Playbox – we

met and were inspired by young rebels forging new identities – Archaos – living the Mad Max existence. Plume – in Paris – creating poetry in circus and a bunch of hippies inspired by Peter Schumauus Bread and Puppet theatre – called Cirque Du Soleil. In UK don't ignore work of Brian Dewhurst – Andro who inspired Guy Laliberte and Gilles Ste-Croix with his human circus!

London – early 90's – rows of CD's

Here was work out of the recognized 'Box' mentality of UK – where theatre, opera, ballet, visual art – stayed in its own compartment and rarely crossed – once a theatre critic always a theatre critic – a job for life – some critics I read when I was at school!! – Don't ask me about other forms – not in my brief ... they would say!

But what changes were coming ... Playbox in the early 90's was active in the changes. At Playbox Theatre in those days of the 90's we were caught up in a huge movement screaming circus can be reborn – can be enjoyed by and made by everyone – you don't have to be a Fratelli or great Italian family troupe ... make it now, make it here. Arts Council England and its allies did not agree and severe under funding lost many shows.

I guess the great dislike of 'New' or contemporary circus by the traditionalists was the fact that participation enabled so many non-families to get off their backsides and create – oh god – how many bad jugglers did we all encounter, how many festivals were peopled by inferior artists – but the statement was clear – circus is mine, I can do it, I can make my thoughts and ideas clear through this form ... chain-saws – clubs – balls – whatever the choice ... park, community centre, street, no big top required – suitcase circus – do it here.

So Playbox Theatre made a policy decision to incorporate circus arts in the programme – both for the participatory value to young people and for the potential it was clearly offering in creation of work. Narrative – story – spectacle and emotion when the words stop.

We were lucky at that time, our colleagues at Cirque Du Soleil in Montreal were young, emerging and full of ideas ... We kept in touch, learnt from their work about the multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural developments across Quebec that seemed far more advanced and much less 'box ticked' than here – seeing early Cirque work was a revelation as music, dance, circus, clown, commedia, narrative, cultural diversity and risk created work beyond imagination at the time – nothing like it in UK anyway.

Thanks to a visionary funding support input from Quebec Government Cirque could grow, fulfill its visions and today put 28 million \$ back into economy .... Through taxes a little investment yields much. Here traditional circus remained a pretty shabby idea for arts establishment. Circus is much to blame – poor outfits, shabby, undernourished animals – mud and tat.

You can find further information and more discussion at  
[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

Our pre-dream factory years created circus with young people in shows like The Red Shoes 1995, A Goldoni Doubling, Pinocchio and Cirque de la Lune. All combining circus with other art disciplines – for our young people new doors were opening, for audiences an introduction to circus in contemporary fashion and to the region the potential of circus with the young as artistic avenue of exploration. Rented spaces, guest trainers and directors helped growth.

In any case study there comes, I guess, the pivotal moment in a company history. For Playbox it was the opportunity to develop the centre, The Dream Factory. The vision to make a Dream Factory in our region where children and young people could train, gain confidence in, perform and experiment across the arts – no division, no pigeon-holes.

I recall the then officers at West Midlands Arts saying 'go for excellence', the best – don't cut corners – all this from Arts Body – we had been used to asking for pounds, getting 50!! What a change!

With WMA support the directors of Playbox were able to travel to Montreal, to look at Cirque du Soleil's plans for a centre in outskirts of city, to rejuvenate an area through circus.

We talked at length to their design arm Sceno-Plus - about a UK vision for circus and theatre to co-exist in one building alongside other forms for young people, we invited them to work with us – no money guaranteed if lottery fell through – and gasped when they said 'Yes – we love it'. So with Glenn Howells Architects, Sceno-plus and Playbox planning The Dream Factory and The National Lottery, Warwickshire County and District Council, Trusts and hundreds of supporters backing the vision – in July 1009 we cut the soil for the project here!

Now more than ever in the 10 years since we opened the building circus is at the core of our work with theatre. We don't really make the differentiation... young people aged 5 – 25 train in a range of skills and discipline. Yet, whilst we all recognize the social value of circus as participatory activity, Playbox aims to develop the creation potential and the inclusion of circus to a high level in production, narrative and form.

Over the past few years the Playbox circus has taken us into creations that could never have been achieved without a facility on hand. The building has enabled us to bring together production elements, multi media, circus, air, music etc., to rehearse technically to a level that we are excited about.

An example is our 2008 creation – originally called Lunar Lakes – evolving into Princess of Mars – until this point our circus creations had explored themes with direction – urban myths, opera, the colour red, Shakespeare's sonnets but last year it seemed time to imagine what it must have felt like in 1929 to be at the premiers of Fritz Langs' Woman in the Moon ... a night to remember – the

whole of a Palace cinema in Berlin covered in a collage of earth and moon against a starry sky with rockets flying between them.

So – our new theatrical show applied the visual vocabulary of 1950's cinema to a live event – aiming to give both participants and audiences a feel of being on a 'ride' inspired by Edgar Rice Burrough's pre-Tarzan pulp sci-fi – Under the Moons of Mars.

We were paying tribute to those glorious films and taking the audience with us on a space ride.

Within the show we were partnered by ACA guest trainers, our own creators, multi media design and a great team of young people aged 11 – 20 who devised, developed and made the show 'Princess of Mars' (pictures on screen). Christina who now heads our circus programme worked as both co-coordinator and performer. The show was a great success – on very limited funding - we managed to obtain a little from the WDC to support the whole training, R and D, rehearsal and execution. Could have done with so much more – not lack of aspiration rather money.

It would be churlish and ungrateful to say that there is little support for circus with young people but there is not yet an understanding, I believe that takes circus creation as a development of participatory circus with the young. We have a UK belief in access and participation – arts as a cure for social ills whereas a little more discovery will push the concept further to support and partner flagship young circus ventures. As with NYT – NYDCompany we should be looking towards a young circus able to hold its place on the world stage.

In 1996 Playbox was selected to represent UK at major circus festival in Germany. Despite our thrill and pride at being in the ring, it was obvious our artists were not in the same league – the UK infrastructure so weak that we could not hope to achieve beyond the general level. In 2005 Charlotte and Christina's team won a 3<sup>rd</sup> – delightful but we are able with infrastructure support to do so much more. Playbox would propose

1. emphasis on directing circus for young people
2. design and environment input
3. circus and multimedia potential
4. more sharing of work – ideas – debate – viewing – visiting

as a start –

In the autumn we launch company DF – it's a development of our ideas through R and D, experience and viewing the wider world picture. We hope the project(s) will help elevate the concept of young circus as artistic form in its own right.

Spidermoon – is a new work created with Kate Brown from the comic DFD – with a large company developing narrative through dance, circus, film.

Whilst Christina creates Realms with our Advanced Training performers.

(EXTRACT)

Last month I saw an ex Playbox member in his graduation show at TCS. He was great – of course, yet I wonder if he will find employment beyond the corporate.....

There is a dreadful myth right now that no UK circus artists want to work in Circus (Malc.Clay NACP) – rather do corporates

I think rather its UK Circus not wanting to pay them a professional rate – easier for foreign labour – If I ask Playbox artists their aspirations they want to work creatively in field, develop artistry, new styles, original approaches, creations that do not duplicate CDs ideas but stand alone. The Region has the opportunity now to harness the talent, the energy and the desire to create – it would be tragic if we all let it go.