

Afterpieces: A miscellany of well-considered trifles

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Circus Studies: where to next?

The developing academic field of circus studies has been enriched in recent times with several new publications that attest to the circus's specialised history in different parts of the globe. Matthew Wittmann's *Circus and the City: New York, 1793-2010* is, as the title indicates, a diachronic study of the circus in New York where it "has been part of the city's cultural fabric for over two centuries."¹ Though not dwelt upon at any length by Wittmann, the intrinsic links between the development of the North American circus and urban modernity pervade the historic narrative of this book, with its acknowledgement that both the city of New York and the circus "have been characterized by the same restless energy and brilliant spectacle."² This book is both a richly detailed catalogue of the 2012-13 exhibition of the same name, and a lucidly written historical survey of major trends and events in the evolution of the circus in North America—from the time of its transmission from the United Kingdom by equestrian John Bill Ricketts in the closing years of the eighteenth century, to the present. Resulting from the author's curatorial association with the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan, *Circus and the City* reflects the Center's purpose to innovate thinking about the decorative arts, design history, and material culture.

Of all genres of the performing arts, the circus is perhaps the most colourful and materially focussed. Its generation of a diverse variety of paper artefacts—posters, heralds, broadsides, tickets, cabinet cards, educational and commemorative pamphlets—is liberally represented in *Circus and the City*. Additionally, the comprehensive sampling of circus 'paper' captures more than the evolving diversity and action of circus performance. Reflected equally here are the advancements in print reproduction technology that occurred across the temporal span of Wittmann's study—from woodcuts to engraving and lithography—as well as the various developments in photographic technology—from glass plate, to stereoscopic, panoramic, and moving images. Typically, high-end circuses have always striven to utilise the latest developments in technology in service of their productions and their marketing to a mass consumer audience.

Selected from a considerable number of public and private collections, the diverse range of material artefacts reproduced in *Circus and the City* reflects both the unique visual codes of the circus—arguably aligned in our contemporary imaginary with the North American circus of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century—and the penetration of the visual signs and symbols of the circus into everyday material culture. A child’s board game, decorative glassware, paintings and etchings, toys and figurines made of cast iron or wood, are just some examples of the ways that circus imagery has been utilised in the décor of the quotidian. Props and costumes possessing the aura of the artists who used them, such as Clive Beatty’s pith helmet, whip, and bentwood chair used in his wild cat ‘taming’ acts of the mid-twentieth century, Merle Evans’ band uniform, and Felix Adler’s clown suit, clown shoes, and birdcage hat (also mid-twentieth century artefacts) convey the haptic attractions of the circus. Wooden sculptures cut from once elaborate and now long-decayed circus wagons are evidence of the circus’s embrace of all kinds of human skill and artisanry.

A “selected catalogue” section provides 32 detailed commentaries of items as diverse as an unfinished portrait of equestrian John Bill Ricketts (d. 1801) by the similarly celebrated painter Gilbert Stuart (1756-1828), to a wooden globe used in an equestrian foot-juggling act circa 1860, and photographs of mid-twentieth century circus audiences.³ A short-form “checklist of the exhibition” reproduces most of the items together with their archival provenance.⁴ As mentioned above however, *Circus and the City* is much more than a meticulously produced catalogue of a selection of circus artefacts, perceptively chosen for their inherent ability to ‘narrate’ the diversification and evolution of the North American circus. The essay that opens the book surveys four periods of the circus in New York, meshing circus history and its discrete body of literature with contextual commentary concerning the industrial, social, and geographic transformation of the city. The early years (1793-1830); the mid-nineteenth century (1830-1870) when the circus “advanced from its European roots into an innovative and thoroughly Americanized cultural form”;⁵ the ‘golden age’ of the circus (1871-1919) when the circus “came as close as any cultural form to capturing the essence of the manifold and restless city,” and when “both the circus and the city were icons of modernity undergoing a constant process of change and reinvention,”⁶ constitute the principal part of this essay. A shorter fourth section (1920-2010) acknowledges the “fragmentation of the traditional American circus” from the mid-twentieth century.⁷ The weight of this essay concerns the first one and a half centuries of the modern circus, an emphasis reflecting the fact that the majority of dedicated circus scholarship focuses on its first 150 years or so, from 1767 to 1920.⁸

The origin of the modern circus as an institutionalised cultural form, with its own codes of skilled physical performance, visuality, and business management, can be found in Philip Astley’s equestrian performances in London, Paris, Dublin, and rural France and England during the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Its global transmission by performers and entrepreneurs, whether due to drives of commerce or colonialism, led to the establishment of the genre in different societies around the globe from the late eighteenth century. Its evolution has been (and continues to be) the result of the unique

confluences of the political environment, artistic heritage, and aesthetic trends particular to its geographic context. Julietta Infantino's discussion in this issue of the late-nineteenth century hybrid Circus Criollo of Argentina, and its influence on later, vernacular revisionings of circus by young activist-artists in post-dictatorial Argentina, provides insight into a specific instance of this.

From its earliest days as an equestrian spectacle interspersed with skills-based performances of one kind or another, mobility has been a fundamental characteristic of the circus. Its artists have been geographically mobile border crossers, enabled by their lack of dependence upon the spoken word for their performances, and driven by commercial necessity to always seek out new audiences. Circus, and the histories of the performers, agents, and entrepreneurs who made their living from it, are germane to the recent scholarly interest in global transmissions of theatrical culture and the aesthetic and commercial processes of that transmission. For some circus performers, 'mobility' also meant moving freely between the discrete aesthetic domains of the circus ring and the dramatic, pantomime, or variety stage.⁹ Mimi Colligan's recent monograph, *Circus and Stage: the theatrical adventures of Rose Edouin and G. B. W. Lewis* (2013) has made meticulous use of primary sources to bring to light the careers of Rose Edouin Bryer (1845-1925) and her husband George Benjamin William Lewis (1818-1906) who, as professional performers traversed geo-political borders and moved freely between the circus and the dramatic stage.¹⁰

Lewis was a child performer with Andrew Ducrow's circus in London and soon after arriving in Melbourne in 1853 he co-ventured the building of an arena (named Astley's Amphitheatre) for circus and the syncretic equestrian drama (hippodrama) so closely identified with the early development of the English circus and his first employer. Edouin Bryer was also English-born and also commenced her stage career as a child. Her early performances in Australia were with the American comic, Joseph Jefferson. She and Lewis married in Shanghai in 1864 when Lewis was touring dramatic shows to colonial outposts of the British Empire; by this time he had also toured equestrian shows out of Melbourne along the theatrical touring routes that were developing between Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, China, and India. Lewis's entrepreneurial activities were inflected with the factors of mobility and risk that were vital to the early spread of the circus.

Colligan's retrieval of the careers of Rose Edouin Bryer and G. B. W. Lewis brings into focus the fluidity between the early circus ring and dramatic stage—that fluidity is also underlined by Infantino as a feature of the circus's evolution in Argentina, and has re-emerged as a feature of contemporary circus in different parts of the globe. *Circus and the Stage* also draws attention to the international networks of theatrical commerce that linked its professionals, as well as the influence that internationally connected performers such as Edouin Bryer and Lewis exerted on the development of Australian theatre.

The two books surveyed here, together with the Infantino essay in this issue, point to the interdisciplinary nature of enquiries and scholarship that are opened up by circus studies. Considered together they also hint at the potential

for circus enquiry to draw together researchers from different disciplinary and methodological bases. The field of circus studies has been attracting wider academic interest over the past decade and is consequently beginning to be recognised by publishing houses. Not solely the domain of performance studies, scholarly investigation of the social and aesthetic conglomerate that is 'circus' invites disciplinary enquiry from cultural history, music, social anthropology, design and sociology, just for starters. The great showman P.T. Barnum's tactics for drumming up business and understanding his consumers' psychology have long been revered and utilised by the marketing industry.

So where to for circus studies next? A slow creep in the number of dedicated circus performance university degrees available internationally will likely continue the trend for contemporary circus to infuse other creative domains such as dance, modern variety, stand-up comedy, and burlesque, mirroring the nineteenth-century circus's 'restless' ability to innovate other domains of performance. Scholarly interest has very recently begun to focus on the international phenomenon of Social Circus, an intellectual 'turn' that further opens circus studies to enquiries emanating from the health disciplines. Considering the testimonies of practitioners of Social Circus over the past twenty years or so, this global evolution of circus needs to be documented, problematised, and understood, both for its recent past and its potential to innovate cultural policy. It is to be hoped that in the near future new scholarly voices and new critical enquiries will contribute to our understanding of the multiple historic and contemporary inflections of the circus.

¹ Matthew Wittmann, *Circus and the City: New York, 1793-2010* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2012), 88.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 102-165.

⁴ Ibid, 168-181.

⁵ Ibid, 33.

⁶ Ibid, 54.

⁷ Ibid, 88.

⁸ A companion volume of essays by a multi-disciplinary aggregation of scholars examines the circus through the lens of its Americanization. Susan Weber, Kenneth L. Ames, Matthew Wittmann, eds., *The American Circus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁹ See for example Mark Cosdon's 2009 monograph, *The Hanlon Brothers: from daredevil acrobatics to spectacle pantomime, 1833-1931* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Mimi Colligan, *Circus and Stage: the theatrical adventures of Rose Edouin and G. B. W. Lewis* (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2013).