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Transatlantic Journeys: John Bill Ricketts and the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus

John Bill Ricketts is generally credited as the founder of American circus, setting up a circus in Philadelphia in 1793. This paper examines evidence from Ricketts' early career in England and Scotland and argues that the successful transplant of the early modern circus form initiated by Philip Astley into America rested on Ricketts' experiences with a small circus in Edinburgh, established by the equestrian performers George Jones and William Parker. Not only did this circus provide a repertoire and a business model which Ricketts replicated in his American circuses but, crucially, provided him with a network of experienced performers whom he subsequently employed. The first circus in America owed much to the first circus in Scotland. Kim Baston is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Drama at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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The equestrian performer, John Bill Ricketts, is generally credited with being the founder of circus in the Americas, setting up a circus in Philadelphia in 1793, and going on to establish circus buildings along the eastern seaboard, and in Canada. As an originating figure, his achievements are listed in almost every history of the American circus, whether popular or academic. Many existing histories, however, attach Ricketts in a seamless lineage to either Philip Astley, founder of Astley's Amphitheatre and the institution of the early modern circus in England, or, more commonly, to an apprenticeship with Astley's rival, Charles Hughes, founder of the Royal Circus.¹ This link was first questioned by James S. Moy and more recent scholarship suggests that his early career was more closely linked with the less well-known circus proprietors, James and George Jones, and particularly with the circus they established in Edinburgh.

Between 1786 and 1792 Ricketts developed into the principal equestrian performer at the newly established Edinburgh Equestrian Circus and it was with this company that he not only matured as a performer, but also encountered a repertoire and a model of circus proprietorship that he reproduced in America. Other members of the Edinburgh company at that time included the rope-dancer Antonio Spinacuta, the extended Sully family (including the *pater familias* Matthew Sully, his sons Matthew and William, and at least one of his daughters) and an apprentice equestrian, Master MacDonald. These performers subsequently worked with Ricketts' circuses in America. Spinacuta and Matthew Sully Senior were not random employees as they have been presented elsewhere,² but had worked together with Ricketts for an extended period with the Joneses' company, and brought crucial expertise in areas in which Ricketts did not appear to excel, such as direction of the pantomime entertainments.

James and George Jones have received little attention from researchers. George Jones was the founder of Jones's Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitechapel, London (a short-lived establishment that appears to date from 1786), and subsequently entered into partnership with James Jones, jointly becoming the proprietors of the Royal Circus in 1795. Research on the early modern circus has focused on the major establishments in London. James and George Jones, though, were influential outside London, establishing the first permanent circus building in Scotland, the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, and other, more temporary, performance spaces in north Britain. Between them, they apparently operated multiple establishments, and also formed a number of partnerships with other equestrian managers, such as William Parker and Benjamin Handy, for both short- and longer-term projects. They present some difficulties for researchers; it appears they were not related, and the billing conventions of the day make it difficult to distinguish between them at a time when they were in partnership, but not necessarily working in the same place at the same time. George Jones initially established the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus in conjunction with William Parker, but by around 1796 it appears that both Joneses were involved in its operation, and later that George left both the Edinburgh circus and the London Royal Circus, ceding management to James, and his son-in-law, J. C. Cross.³ The only references in the Edinburgh press are to a generic 'Mr Jones' or as 'Jones's Royal Circus,' which could mean one or both of them. For the purposes of this article, then, I will refer to them individually when it is possible to do so, but recognise that it is almost impossible to determine this completely. Ricketts, who was performing in both the London and Edinburgh concerns, would have worked with both of them.

Research on Ricketts' later career has been enabled by the memoirs of John Durang, an American-born performer who worked with Ricketts, and there is an amount of extant scholarship on the acts presented by Ricketts in America, most notably that of James S. Moy.⁴ A comparison with the acts described in Moy

reveals that Ricketts' repertoire in America was defined by his experiences in Edinburgh, including the appropriation and re-definition of the skills of other performers. Ricketts may be accorded a place as founder of the first circus in America, but his success rested on the people and experiences he encountered in the first circus in Scotland.

The first circus in Scotland

In 1786, George Jones and William Parker advertised for subscriptions to build the "Edinburgh Circus; or Amphitheatre for Exercise and Amusement."⁵ In February of that year they had opened a place of entertainments, called *Les Varietes Amusantes*, in the yard of the Black Bull Inn, Pleasance, under the management of Jean-Baptiste Dubois. Dubois, a celebrated comic actor, tumbler, juggler, singer and rope-dancer had come from Sadler's Wells and many performers from that theatre were employed for this Edinburgh season. At *Les Varietes Amusantes*, Dubois offered a number of entertainments that replicated those at Sadler's Wells including singing, dancing, acrobatics and rope dancing, shadow puppetry, dancing dogs, and other specialty acts. The brief season concluded when the company returned to London to open at the Joneses newly established "Amphitheatre Equestrian Academy [sic]" in Whitechapel on Easter Monday.⁶

In August, as part of the Edinburgh race season, George Jones and Parker returned to Edinburgh with a company of nine equestrian performers, led by Parker, to perform at the "Circular Riding School in Dr Hope's Park, adjoining the Physical Gardens, Leith Walk."⁷ Riding instruction (also by Parker) and a horse-breaking service was advertised.⁸ On 16 August, Dubois re-opened *Les Varietes Amusantes* at the Black Bull Inn, augmenting the cast with some child performers, and augmenting the programme with the addition of a Harlequinade.

The first reference to Ricketts appears in advertisements for *Les Varietes Amusantes* that year, where a "Master Ricketts" is listed as a clown to the rope-dancing.⁹ The equestrian performers at Leith Walk are not listed individually, but as the equestrian performances took place during the day (at 12.30 pm), and the Black Bull entertainments at night (at 7 pm), it would have been possible for him to perform in both companies. He had certainly been performing as an apprentice equestrian in London at the Joneses Whitechapel amphitheatre in April of that year, along with two other apprentices, King and Sutton.¹⁰ Both the equestrian troupe and the 'variety' company left the city in mid-September, apparently to go to Glasgow, before returning to Edinburgh for nine days in October (11-20), with the added attraction of another celebrated rope-dancer, Abraham Saunders.

No performances were advertised the following year (1787), although members of both companies (including Ricketts) were performing at Jones's Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitechapel over the winter of 1787.¹¹ However, the equestrian company returned to Edinburgh during the summers of 1788 and 1789, performing at the temporary manège established in Leith Walk, while waiting for the requisite subscriptions to underwrite a permanent building.

Attempts to chart the skills of circus performers in the late eighteenth century are often problematic. In the newspaper coverage of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, it is only when a new trick appears in the repertoire that any details of the circus performance are given. There was already a 'repertoire' inherent in the emerging genre of circus that obviated the need for further description for the contemporary audience. Reviews and details contained within the advertising material pragmatically concentrate on the novelty of the changing programme of ballets and pantomimes that also comprised the entertainment at the circus. This emphasis tends to obscure the extent and importance of the equestrian and acrobatic acts, which formed the spine of the entertainment. But if detailed descriptions of 'standard' acts are rare, the repetition of acts means that it is possible, by tracking the progress of performers in other venues, to make some assumptions about their performances in Edinburgh. If a skill has been acquired and demonstrated in a previous performance, it is reasonable to assume that that skill remains in a performer's repertoire until injury or advancing age renders it impossible. Secondly, if a skill was present in another contemporary circus, it is also reasonable to assume that it was swiftly emulated elsewhere.

Only one advertisement given in the *Caledonian Mercury* in 1788 provides details of what can be assumed to be a template for the equestrian performances, a programme bearing similarities to Ricketts' American performances. It also points to emerging differences between individual equestrians, with Ricketts performing more difficult and athletic acts of equestrianism than his peers, Sutton and King. In 1788 Ricketts would have been around 18 years of age, no longer an apprentice and, as an athlete, in his prime.¹²

Along with other unspecified entertainments, the programme offered by the equestrian troupe included:

1. HORSEMANSHIP upon the single Horse by Mr King, Mr Sutton, Mr Ricketts, and Mr Jones.
2. COMIC PERFORMANCES by Humphrays [sic], clown to the horsemanship.
3. Mr Ricketts will display many pleasing and astonishing Exercises standing upon the horses in full speed, particularly his Trick with the ORANGE, FORK, SWORD, &c. not to be equaled in the world.

4. Mr Jones will exhibit various Feats of Horsemanship upon two horses, accompanied by Mr Humphreys the Clown.
 - 5 Mr Sutton will display his wonderful Performance upon the single horse, by dancing a Hornpipe upon the Saddle, the horse in full speed, with several other pleasing Feats peculiar to himself.
 6. An entire new piece of Activity, called Still Vaulting, by Mr Ricketts.
 7. Mr Parker will display great strength and activity in taking flying leaps over a leaping bar, in different attitudes upon two horses.
 8. The pleasing Flag Dance, by Mr Sutton, standing upon one horse in full speed etc.
 9. Mr Ricketts will ride standing upon two horses in full speed, alternately throwing up and catching Four Oranges – throws a Back Somerset from the horses in a manner never attempted by any person but himself.
 10. Performances upon three horses by Mr Parker, and Mr Jones, carrying Mr King upon their shoulders etc.
 11. The most astonishing Leap over the Garter by Mr Ricketts, twelve feet high; - he rides standing upon the saddles, quits the horses, leaps over the garter, and lights with his feet standing again upon the saddles.
 12. He likewise rides with his head upon the saddle in a manner superior to any.
 13. Mr Parker will ride standing upon two horses, and carry Mr King in the attitude of Mercury, standing upon his shoulders, the horses in full speed.
 14. The wonderful sagacity of all the Horses, some sitting, some lying, and others kneeling, at the word of command.
- The whole to conclude with Horsemanship Burlesqued, or the Tailor's Journey to Brentford – Humphrays, clown.¹³

After their month-long Edinburgh season, the company advertised that they would tour to Dundee and Aberdeen. In the summer of 1789, the troupe returned to Edinburgh, with essentially the same company of performers. Ricketts triumphed in the finale to this season, performing “a Grand Display of Trampoline Tricks over Men and Horses” including “a SOMERSET over seventeen men's heads” and riding “on TWO QUART POTS Placed on the Saddles.”¹⁴

The Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, in a permanent amphitheatre built at the corner of Leith Walk and Broughton Street (on the site of the present day coffee shop for St Mary's Cathedral), opened on 25 January, 1790.¹⁵ The first season of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus in its new permanent building united the equestrian performances of Parker's troupe with the acrobatic and balletic presentations of *Les Varietes Amusantes*. A typical evening's entertainment at the circus opened with equestrian exercises (which were also interspersed between the other items), followed by a burletta or ballet, tumbling, songs, individual dances (either Scottish dances such as strathspeys, or minuets and pas-de-deux), rope dancing, and occasional specialty acts, concluding with a pantomime, or

spectacle. The entertainments alternated between, and sometimes combined, the ring and the stage. The circus also opened during the day for the purpose of giving riding lessons, and carried on a horse-breaking and livery business which continued after the performance season ended, the ring proving as useful to display horses for sale, as to display them for entertainment.

Entertainments during the first three seasons followed a similar pattern to that established at Astley's Amphitheatre and The Royal Circus in London. The link with performers from Sadler's Wells, already present in *Les Varietes Amusantes*, continued and the circus also presented pantomimes and spectacles based on prior productions at that theatre. Sadler's Wells has been somewhat neglected by circus historians, as it did not present the equestrian acts in the ring that orthodoxy has established as the defining characteristic for the emergence of the modern circus. But until the Joneses took over the Royal Circus in 1795, the majority of performers in Edinburgh came from Sadler's Wells, and for a period in 1793 the Edinburgh circus even called itself the New Sadler's Wells. At this period, Edinburgh still took its cultural pulse from London and the main newspapers of the day, the *Caledonian Mercury* and the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, were more likely to give accounts of plays at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, than home-grown entertainments. The cachet of a London success apparently made good business sense, evident in the programming of both the circus and the established patent theatre, the Theatre Royal. The circus seemed to feel no need to make any significant transformations to London models for the local audience.

On the opening night the *Evening Courant* commented favourably on the elegance of the building, the scenery, decorations, and "large chandelier with the patent lamps." The performances were judged to be successful:

Of the *horsemanship* the public have already judged; and it is but justice to say that Mess. Parker, Rickets, Sutton, and King acquitted themselves in their best manner. Jenkinson, the new clown, is a tight, dapper, agile fellow, and both as a horseman and a tumbler, was received with much and deserved applause¹⁶ – A little cherub who succeeded Master King in the part of Mercury,¹⁷ also excited the approbation, but at the same time the fears of the audience.

The *tumbling* was executed in a very complete manner by Mess. Jenkinson, Rickets[sic], King, Humphreys, and two other young performers. Antonio Spinacuta was also mentioned:

The *tightrope dancing* by Signior Spinacuta is a most wonderful performance. With agility equal to the Little Devil he has infinite more grace. His performance on the violin on the rope, his descent into the

circus (to the terror of the fidlers [sic] under him) excited the highest approbation.¹⁸

Only the band, which was apparently a large one, and which played mostly “Scotch” music, appeared under-rehearsed, but apparently not enough to detract from the “universal satisfaction” provided. The success of this entertainment impacted badly on the immediate fortunes of the Theatre Royal, which performed “to a very thin house indeed.”¹⁹

In establishing this circus, George Jones and Parker were drawing on a proven repertoire and also on a network of performers, many of whom were in continuous employment with the company. Decastro noted of the Joneses that:

“--- never was a place of amusement carried on with more spirit than that was at the time, and an engagement in that concern then was very advantageous, as the company were kept together all the year round.”²⁰

The lengthy season in Edinburgh, with a return during the lucrative Leith Race season, was followed by performances at Jones’ Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitehall, and touring to various provincial venues, such as Newcastle and Glasgow. The core equestrian troupe (which included Parker, Ricketts, Sutton and King) remained the same between 1786 and 1792. Similarly the billed actors, singers and dancers remained consistent over the first three seasons of the Edinburgh circus.

Unlike the turbulent trio of Hughes, Giuseppe Grimaldi and Charles Dibdin Senior at the Royal Circus, or the autocratic Astley, George Tuttle characterises the Joneses’ enterprise as one of “reasonable managerial affability.”²¹ Decastro estimated James Jones as “a gentleman in the true sense of the word, incapable of doing wrong, unless led away by misrepresentation.”²² A good reputation enabled him to secure the lease for the Royal Circus in 1795, being “well known and highly respected in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel, as well for his EQUESTRIAN EXERCISES there, as for the punctuality of his payments, and the approved conduct of his public and private character.”²³

Ricketts, during his progress from apprentice to mature performer, was fortunate to be in continuous employment under a benign management with a stable company. These conditions would have enabled the development of strong working relationships with the members of the company who joined him in his performances in America, Sully and Spinacuta.

Matthew Sully Senior appears in a number of occupations, initially as box office manager.²⁴ The first record of him as a performer is playing Pantaloon in *The Spirit of Fancy; or, Harlequin Statue*,²⁵ and at various times he acted, sang, and directed at least one pantomime. In apparent violation of the law pertaining

to minor houses, at his benefit he performed Garrick's monologue, *Linco's Travels*, to apparent success.²⁶ He also possessed tumbling skills, appearing in 1791 "going round like the Fly of a Jack, with fireworks fixed to his body."²⁷ Moy notes this versatility in Sully's subsequent career in America and his son performed a similar trick in Ricketts' American circuses.²⁸

Spinacuta had come to Edinburgh directly from Astley's Amphitheatre at the Royal Grove, where he had performed to acclaim: "It is no joke—the Devil is certainly overmatched. Signior Spinacuta, the Rope-dancer at Astley's, has outdone all the devils that ever appeared before him."²⁹ Spinacuta's original billing had been for six nights only and his success as a performer is indicated by his continued appearances at Astley's for the remainder of the summer season (his last performance there was 8 October, 1790). Sully's son, Matthew Jr. became his apprentice in Edinburgh and soon began performing with him. Other key performers who had significant long-term employment with the Joneses and Parker included James Williamson Lassells and John Holland, principal dancers in the French style, and pantomime directors, Mr and Mrs Davies who were the principal singers, and a talented acrobat and clown, Joseph Jenkinson.

The majority of ballets and pantomimes presented at the circus had been previously performed in London, although a success of the first season appears to have originated in Edinburgh. *Harlequin Triumphant; or, The Witches of the Cavern*, a pantomime directed by Sully (who introduced it with a song), does not appear to have been performed elsewhere, though its gothic settings and transformations were familiar ingredients, opening "with a dreadful precipice of rocks, and the witches descending from a stupendous cavern, which was very well received."³⁰ Rickett's acrobatic prowess was intimated here, performing as the second Harlequin. The audience was greatly astonished by the transformation of a woodshed, "which changes into Roscius's monument, then into a hay mow, and afterwards into an infirmary, through the dome, on the top of which last, Harlequin makes his escape." According to the *Evening Courant*: "This surprising leap gained Mr Ricketts, in Harlequin, very great applause."³¹ The climax of the season, though, was a production of *The Death of Captain Cook*, directed by Lassells, which had been a success at Covent Garden.³²

The first season of the Edinburgh Circus was also its longest, capitalising on the novelty of the enterprise. The company closed on 2 June, with a prologue composed for the occasion given by Matthew Sully Senior.³³ While Parker remained in Edinburgh to give riding lessons, the rest of the company decamped to perform in North Shields and Sunderland, returning, as advertised in Sully's prologue, to Edinburgh for a short season (8 July to 23 July) to coincide with the Leith Races.³⁴ The repertoire comprised performances from the previous season. Parker's wife, Sophia, who became the principal dancer and actress of the company in subsequent years, made her first appearance in Edinburgh during this season.

The circus reopened on 20 December 1790, retaining many of the same performers but with the notable additions of Pietro Bologna, his wife and at least three children, Barbara, Louis, and Johannes (or Jack). This troupe of multi-skilled acrobats was originally from Genoa and had toured the provinces since 1786 as “The Italian Family.”³⁵ In Edinburgh, Pietro Bologna was initially billed as a strongman in an act called ‘The Force of Hercules,’ in which he formed the base to a human pyramid consisting of the rest of his family while balancing “two Drums, on which he will beat at the same time.”³⁶ His son, Jack (who went on to achieve acclaim as an acrobatic Harlequin to Grimaldi’s Clown), was apprenticed to Spinacuta, soon appearing with him on the tightrope, supplanting the presumably less talented junior Sully. Pietro Bologna also performed in the pantomimes, on the slackwire, as a clown and introduced a number of firework exhibitions.

This season also introduced a young riding sensation from London, Master Giles, a performer of around 13 years of age who was a pupil of Hughes at the Royal Circus.³⁷ He and Ricketts rapidly achieved prominence in the billing, Master Giles as “the Little Devil on Horseback” and Ricketts as the “Equestrian Hero.” Ricketts did not appear at the circus until 22 January, but his imminent arrival was not only heralded in the advance advertising, but also considerably puffed afterwards. At his first appearance, to a house so crowded that “many were obliged to stand” the “remarkably brilliant” audience received him “with unbounded applause...He certainly must be acknowledged the first performer in his line we have seen.”³⁸ By this time Ricketts was regularly performing on one, two and three horses, and carrying Holland’s son as Mercury on “two Horses, without holding the reins.”³⁹

As in the previous season the equestrian and acrobatic acts alternated with dance, pantomime and song. Imported successes from London included *Don Juan; or, The Libertine Destroy’d* and *Vulcan’s Gift*.⁴⁰ Matthew Sully (and members of his increasing family) and Spinacuta were prominent performers in these, both in Edinburgh, and in America, when Ricketts restaged them there.

The circus went on to present what was to become a highly popular performance in subsequent seasons: *The Humours of Newmarket; or, the Pony Races*. This appears initially to have been a ballet, but it achieved more success with the added attraction of a real pony race and opportunities for gambling, a formula repeated by Ricketts in America.⁴¹ Following this season (which ended on 23 April), the company toured to Glasgow, returning again for the race season.

At the end of the season a notice from the managers of the circus, thanking the public of Edinburgh for their patronage, was posted in the *Caledonian Mercury*.⁴² Ricketts’ name now appears for the first time alongside

Jones and Parker, suggesting that he has become a partner in the enterprise. By the following season (opening 1 December, 1791), all notices for the circus are headed “Mess. Jones, Parker and Ricketts.”⁴³ Ricketts’ drawing power was apparently such that his name would confer substance to the enterprise.

In the 1792 season, while the equestrian troupe remained largely the same, there were some changes to the acting company. In place of the Bolognas, the circus re-engaged the equally multi-talented Dubois, who performed as “The Modern English Hercules” supporting “on a Large Table, a Great Number of Persons, while Displaying a Variety of Pyramidal situations,”⁴⁴ and, at least once, singing on horseback.⁴⁵

The equestrian troupe, dominated by the performances of Ricketts (though again he did not perform until mid-January, for reasons unknown), included in this season a Master McDonald who displayed “several Comic Feats on the single horse, in character of the celebrated Monkey General Jackoo.”⁴⁶ General Jackoo was a celebrity monkey performer at Astley’s, so this ‘skin role’ enacts the curious situation of a child performing a monkey, who was presented as performing a human. In addition to his performances on the rope, Spinacuta provided firework displays, some of which replicated those of Bologna in the previous season. This season was substantially shorter than the previous years, ending on 31 March to coincide with the beginning of the summer season in London.

At the end of this season Ricketts, Spinacuta, the numerous Sully family, and the apprentice MacDonald emigrated to America and all performed in the circuses that Ricketts established there.⁴⁷ Matthew Sully joined his brother-in-law, Thomas Wade West, who had established a theatre in Charleston, and the Sully family went on to become favorites of the Charleston stage.⁴⁸ Sully had intimated to the audiences in Edinburgh at his benefit that this would be his last set of performances in Europe.⁴⁹ Given that he had a useful family connection already established across the Atlantic, could it have been Sully who provided the impetus for Ricketts and the other Edinburgh performers to emigrate?

Although the first three years of the Edinburgh circus had been successful, there are indications that the company was entering a period of difficulty and it is possible that at the end of the 1792 season the Joneses were no longer in a position to offer such secure employment. Rather than return for the lucrative race season, George Jones had leased the circus firstly to an equestrian troupe run by Benjamin Handy and J. Taylor, and then to Stephen Kemble who remodeled the building for use as a theatre in 1793. William Parker also appears to have left the company at this time, as no subsequent mention of his name in connection with Jones appears, and by the mid-1790s he was in partnership with a group of other equestrians (including Handy) presenting circuses in England and Ireland.⁵⁰ Jones’s Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitechapel was also in

difficulties, apparently due to their inability to gain a license for the venue.⁵¹ Not until 1795, when the Joneses took over the lease of the Royal Circus in London, did their company restabilise.

But while it is impossible to establish conclusively the reason for Ricketts' decision to leave for America, it is surely more than chance coincidence that he swiftly reunites with fellow performers from the Edinburgh circus. Spinacuta and MacDonald appear in his Philadelphia circus only a month after he gives his first American performances (April, 1793). Matthew Sully and members of his family (who had settled in Charleston) joined Ricketts the following year, after Ricketts had brought his circus to that city. All of them remained in Ricketts' company until at least 1797.

An 'advantageous engagement'

Ricketts, then, needs to be understood, not as a lone pioneer of American circus, but as imbricated in a set of relationships with other performers, many of whom he worked with for years. His formative years in Edinburgh had served him well. The early years of the Edinburgh circus demonstrate a considerable fluidity of roles and interchange of responsibilities, both creative and administrative. Both Sully and Sophia Parker, who were leading performers, were recorded as staffing the box office when necessary. The theatrical and dance performances were also 'performer-centered'; the responsibility for their direction (which might also include compiling the music) was usually undertaken by whoever featured as the principal performers in them. George Jones' generosity is indicated in the number of benefit performances given for the majority of the company, including for some of the apprentices. The impression of an intriguingly collaborative enterprise at this time is heightened when compared to the period later in the decade when J.C. Cross (James Jones' son-in-law) took managerial responsibility and apparently creative control. From 1796, Cross is listed as director of all the pantomimes and spectacles and references to other performers' creative contributions diminish considerably. Under Cross's management the number of benefit performances sharply decreases (limited to 'star' performers), and the turnover of personnel from season to season markedly increases.

A company in which many performers are related is likely to promote cohesion and it is also reasonable to assume bonds of friendship operated between individuals who worked together, not only for the lengthy seasons in Edinburgh, but who continued to encounter each other professionally on what appears to have been a regular basis thereafter.⁵² Charles Dickens, for example, recounts the long-lasting friendship that existed between co-performers Grimaldi and Jack Bologna, and, in the course of his narrative, incidentally provides a number of anecdotes that also indicate the friendship that existed between Davis (principal singer in Edinburgh), Dubois and Richer (the rope-

dancer of *Les Varietes Amusantes* and of later seasons with the Edinburgh circus).⁵³ The company did not only work together, but also, as was usual at the time, lived in close proximity, both to the circus, and to each other.⁵⁴ Performers were concentrated in lodgings next to the circus building itself (Jenkinson and Sutton); in the adjoining James Square and James St (George Jones and Ricketts lodged in the same building from 1790-92, Mr Lassells and the Parkers shared lodgings close by in James St, the Sully family lodged in various houses in both locations in different seasons); and in the nearby Shakespeare Square (Davis and Spinacuta), the location of the Theatre Royal.⁵⁵

Scattered references to some of the key performers indicate that they might have contributed to the relative harmony of the enterprise. Charles Dibdin Jr., for example, noted of Mrs Parker that she was “a Lady of the first Talent in her profession” and “as celebrated for good nature and urbanity, as for professional tact.”⁵⁶ Tate Wilkinson, theatre manager in Doncaster, described the Bolognas as “well-behaved, honest people”⁵⁷ and Lassells not only as a “clever” Harlequin and “excellent clown” but also as a “very well-behaved industrious man.”⁵⁸ (Wilkinson was not so generous to all the personalities described in his memoirs.) Matthew Sully appears to have become a favourite of the Edinburgh audience; his “private character is so very respectable,” and his family so numerous, that he especially deserved public patronage for his benefit.⁵⁹ Durang’s references to Ricketts in America reveal him to be not only socially skilled enough to become a riding companion of George Washington, but someone who was prepared to ‘muck in’ on an apparently equal basis with his performers.⁶⁰ Durang described his disposition as ‘hasty,’ “soon hot and soon cold, not to offer an insult, and the first ready to make apology if in the fault, and ready to serve them with a good heart.”⁶¹

Davis, the singer, is the only performer who contemporary accounts reveal may have been a difficult person. When he later worked at Sadler’s Wells, according to Findlater, he was so “addicted to practical and dirty jokes, and his language and manners were so coarse that he was dismissed after a few years, in spite of his popularity with the gallery.”⁶² But between 1790 and 1799 he regularly worked both in the Edinburgh circus, and also at the Royal Circus, after the Joneses had taken over its management, suggesting that they, at least, had fewer difficulties with him.

In the early years of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus there is evidence that not only were performers undertaking a number of different roles, but also that they were acquiring skills from others in the company. Holland, for example, had a primary role as a dancer, but Tuttle notes that during his previous employment at the Royal Circus, he “inherited Olive’s mantle” as composer in 1789 and his music for *Incle and Yarico* was praised.⁶³ In context, this role was predominantly to compile the music from other sources. Holland, like many of the other performers in the circus, could play a musical instrument, and well

enough for him to be listed in the billing of local concert performances. For his benefit in 1791 he announced that “For the first time in Edinburgh, (and for that night only)” he would “Play several Favourite Airs on the Violin on Two Horses.”⁶⁴ What is surprising is that from a predominantly earth-bound career, he has made the sudden leap to horseback. As this is the only reference to equestrianism performed by Holland, and as no details such as speed (or actual movement) of the horse are given, it appears likely that for his benefit, when he chose what to perform, he had been given some basic instruction for the occasion from someone in the equestrian troupe. Similarly Lassells, usually billed as principal dancer, suddenly and surprisingly demonstrated a slew of new skills. For the benefit of Master Giles and Mr Sutton in 1791, Lassells did not only dance, but also participated in the ground and lofty tumbling, performed on the slack wire, and as Clown to the Horsemanship made his appearance “in STILTS, four feet high, without the assistance of his hands.”⁶⁵

There were many conditions operating in the Edinburgh circus that would foster the development of diverse physical skills, not least an active system of apprenticeship in a necessarily sequential acquisition of acrobatic abilities. The apprenticeship system would also have contributed to the cohesion of the company; performers were actively involved in training the children of other performers and also, presumably, taking responsibility for their physical safety. Matthew Sully Jr. and Jack Bologna were Spinacuta’s pupils, George Jones’, Parker’s and Holland’s sons appeared as child performers with the equestrian company, and Holland’s daughter was probably trained in dancing by Sophia Parker.⁶⁶

But, as with Holland and Lassells, there are other intriguing indications of formal or informal training, which can be seen in the appearance of particular skill sets that appear to have been transferred between performers. Pietro Bologna, along with his many other skills, provided a number of firework displays from the beginning of the 1791 season (these are lavishly described in the adverts, suggesting their drawing power). Four months later Spinacuta produced fireworks for his own benefit. As no fireworks were presented during the 1790 season (in which Spinacuta was present but not the Bolognas) it seems that Bologna brought this skill to the circus, and Spinacuta learned the art from him. Spinacuta continued to present fireworks both in the following season (in which the Bologna’s did not perform), and in subsequent appearances with Ricketts in America. There is no record of Sully tumbling with fireworks attached to his costume until Bologna’s employment with the circus.

Within the organisation of the circus there were, therefore, opportunities for the transmission and transfer of skills, and various levels of performer can be distinguished. The children of performers learnt from the adult performers, and the mix of high level physical skills practised by a cadre of young men is balanced by the presence of older performers, who might be semi-retired (as it seems

George Jones was by this point) or moving into less athletic roles, such as singing or pantomime.

The equestrian and acrobatic acts, and creation of new acts, were, of necessity, based on the particular skills of any given performer. But, when new athletic skills were advertised, these were frequently linked with the names of William Parker and Joseph Jenkinson. Most of the skills advertised for Ricketts on the horse originally appear as performed by Jenkinson on the ground, or by Parker. Testing skills on the ground before they are adapted to horseback can be attributed to the higher level of skill required for equestrian acts, but there are no examples of acts that originated with Ricketts, though he might subsequently improve them.

For example, one spectacular act that Ricketts presented in America, the “leap through the blazing Sun” which he was performing to acclaim by July 1793, he had, unsurprisingly, first presented in Edinburgh.⁶⁷ But in Edinburgh this act appears as the culmination of a number of developments. The first mention of the leap through fire (8 March, 1792) is a performance by Parker, when he took “A FLYING LEAP upon his YOUNG CALEDONIAN CHARGER Through a suspended Hoop surrounded with Fire.”⁶⁸ A week later, Jenkinson is apparently leaping over a “GARTER TWELVE FEET HIGH; in performing which he will force a Passage through a BALLOON IN FIRE, suspended in the Air.”⁶⁹ A ‘balloon’ usually refers to a paper-covered ring, and from this description it appears that the surrounding frame was set alight. Although Jenkinson performed as both a tumbler and as a horseman, this appears to be a leap with the aid of a trampoline. Jenkinson certainly seemed to be capable of this level of physical skill, as he was able, for example, to “summersault over a Number of Men’s Heads; likewise OVER SIX HORSES, Without the assistance of a springboard.”⁷⁰ By 19 March, Ricketts is advertised in a “Leap through the Blazing Sun. This performance never has been attempted by any one but Mr Ricketts – and the beautiful Sun through which he so dexterously leaps, renders it the most brilliant spectacle ever exhibited.”⁷¹ But if Ricketts’ act reached a new pinnacle of display, as implied here, it is an act that did not spring, fully formed, into existence, but appears as the culmination of experiments by Jenkinson and Parker.⁷²

The making of an equestrian hero

If the record of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus indicates that Ricketts cannot necessarily be considered an innovator, it adds further evidence that he was an outstanding performer. Although the earliest advertisements for Ricketts indicated a distinction between his performances and those of his peers, it is only at the start of the second season that his reputation had become assured, with “The Equestrian Hero” becoming his *de facto* title from then on. The other members of the equestrian company, which remained substantially the same

until the end of March 1792, are, unless introducing a new trick, relegated to “others” or “&c.”

In the early circus it was equestrian performances that particularly ennobled the performer. Earlier equestrian performers such as Mr Makeen and Mr Hyam were similarly billed as ‘Hero,’ suggesting that ‘equestrian hero’ was used interchangeably of performers on horseback as the title of ‘little devil’ was used of tightrope dancers.⁷³ As the most skilled equestrian in the company, Ricketts was the obvious candidate for elevation to heroic status.

The link between circus equestrianism and militarism in the early modern circus had been established with Astley’s earliest performances. A common feature of these had been the performance of the Manual Exercise, a set of drill instructions for the handling of muskets and swords, and these were performed in the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus on horseback, on the tightrope and as part of the pantomime entertainments.⁷⁴ In an increasingly militarised society, just prior to the advent of the French Revolutionary Wars, and with an audience that included both soldiers and their commanders, these oft-repeated displays of martial prowess were obviously popular.

But the attribution of heroic status for equestrian performers is not solely due to the performance of militarism. Central is the status of the horse, and, importantly, the circus was not confined to a brief performance season, but maintained its presence in Edinburgh throughout the rest of the year as a daily business dealing with horses. If the proliferation of riding schools and manuals devoted to equestrian training during the eighteenth century initially stemmed from military concerns, to ride well was becoming increasingly a necessary attribute of the gentleman. Edinburgh already had an established riding school, The Royal Academy for Teaching Exercises, which operated into the early nineteenth century (despite numerous financial problems), and this drew its membership from the aristocracy throughout Scotland.⁷⁵ Donna Landry considers that in the eighteenth century “horsemanship became synonymous with the art of politics and imperial rule”⁷⁶ and argues that horses “functioned as ideal selves for early modern people in the British Isles” (which Swift satirised in *Gulliver’s Travels*).⁷⁷ Good horsemanship was becoming synonymous with a noble, idealised and patriotic masculinity, and advertisements in the Edinburgh press continually emphasised that the equestrian pursuits were ‘manly’; not ‘effeminate’ French dances, but hearty masculine British fare.⁷⁸ For the Edinburgh audience, it appears that Ricketts’ appeal lay less in his ability to handle a musket, than in his expertise in a socially desirable activity.

Ricketts’ performances were distinguished by both speed and athleticism. Many of the advertisements mention Ricketts’ riding ‘at full speed,’ obviously a fact worth mentioning, and suggesting that this was a point of difference

between his equestrian performances, and those by other members of the company:

As to Mr Rickett's exercises on horseback, they must absolutely be seen to be credited; the fleetness of the steed is such as to make spectators express their surprise [sic] how it is possible he preserves equilibrium in his different attitudes.⁷⁹

By 1786 he was performing a back somersault from a horse to the ground, a degree of acrobatic skill apparently not attempted by any of his fellow equestrians. But Ricketts' high level of acrobatic skill was also accompanied, importantly, by aesthetic qualities.

A broadsheet titled *The Critical Balance of the Performers at Drury-Lane Theatre* (1765) reveals the qualities of theatrical performance admired most highly by the Georgian audience. This publication ranked the actors at Drury Lane according to certain attributes that include figure, grace, spirit and ease, sensibility, taste, dignity, manners, and dress.⁸⁰ These qualities are the ones most frequently remarked upon by contemporary spectators of Ricketts' performances. Ricketts was "perhaps the most graceful, neat, and expert public performer on horseback that ever appeared in any part of the world" enthused a Philadelphian writer in 1794, "at least the Amateurs, who have seen the best equestrians in Europe are of this opinion."⁸¹ Another spectator in the same year was similarly impressed:

The [...] gracefulness of Mr. Ricketts, exceeds everything I ever beheld in this line of performance. His attitudes are so well chosen and his exertions so neat and lively that none of them are of a nature to injure the most delicate feelings of the spectators. Even that of carrying a boy on his shoulders whilst he rides himself, in the attitude of Mercury, on the horse at full speed is done in so perfect and severe a style that it never causes the least pain or anxiety.⁸²

For the sensibilities of the Philadelphian audiences, the 'perfect style' of Ricketts' performances implied that the aesthetic experience, rather than a daredevil performance, was of paramount importance. Edinburgh audiences also remarked on his ease and grace, with many reports reiterating his status as both a star equestrian and as an audience favorite, particularly with the female spectators.

Neatness, elegance, and 'taste' were also hallmarks of his personal appearance. The *Caledonian Mercury* remarked: "The neatness of his figure was shewn to every advantage by a dress of great taste and elegance."⁸³ As Amanda Vickery argues, 'neat' was an "utterly positive quality," a "keyword" in Georgian society with a wider application than modern connotations of 'tidy' dress, being

applied to “towns, houses, objects, personal appearance, and even events.” Neatness was “the opposite of showy excess.”⁸⁴ An etching of Ricketts in America balancing on his horse Cornplanter in the attitude of Mercury, depicts an elegant ensemble of knee-breeches, waistcoat and tailcoat. Lawrence E. Klein suggests that: “as the appetite of the wealthy for cultural consumption increased, those who served up culture were required to adopt the comportments of those who sought out their services.”⁸⁵ While it is likely that Ricketts would have adopted a military style costume for the martial performances, it is significant that his dress in this etching echoes the dress of a gentleman. Ricketts dressed genteelly for the genteel crowd. In contrast, Marius Kwint notes that other riding masters such as Charles Hughes, Thomas Johnston and Jacob Bates were usually garbed as jockeys, “to invoke the pleasures of the turf,” while Astley, in contrast, maintained a military costume.⁸⁶ A contemporary report on the equestrian Price, disapprovingly noted that he “is not neatly dressed and wears his hair in the ridiculous French manner.”⁸⁷ Ricketts’ success as a performer can be attributed to the combination of athletic skill and a performance persona that embodied the taste and elegance so prized by the Georgian theatre audience.

‘A Circus Transplant’d’

In Ricketts’ career in America, his model remained the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, not just in the nature of the entertainments presented but also in the business organisation. As George Jones and Parker had taken entertainments from the London houses and transplanted them to Edinburgh, with no apparent need to elaborate them further, so in his turn, Ricketts took a successful model, a model which he had ‘grown up’ with, and transported it with little alteration. He appears to have been a successful imitator, rather than an innovator, as comparison with his American and Canadian performances reveal so many direct traces of the Edinburgh circus.⁸⁸ As an excellent equestrian who apparently surpassed the skill level of his contemporaries he may have had little incentive. It is also possible that he had reached the limits of his skills, or, given the demanding nature of his performances, his physical capability.

Skills-based acts in the early modern circus, such as equestrian performances, were already, through their repetition, developing into standard acts. As the acquisition of these skills is a lengthy and demanding process, acts developed incrementally rather than demonstrating startling change. A standard act of the early circus was riding “in the attitude of Mercury,” which, at its simplest, involved standing on one leg on the back of a horse. This was the pose chosen for the weathervane on Rickett’s Pantheon in Philadelphia, and, like the equestrian statue with a standing rider adorning the Royal Circus in London, functioned as a metonym for the circus.⁸⁹ In Edinburgh, on 24 April, 1790, it was advertised that “Mr Ricketts will, this Evening, carry Master Jones, a child only six years old, in the attitude of Mercury, on a single horse. This feat of activity was never preformed [sic] by any person but himself.”⁹⁰ In early notices for his

performances in America, Ricketts and a pupil are performing “two Flying Mercuries; the Boy pois’d on one Foot on Mr Ricketts’ Shoulder, whilst Mr. Ricketts stands in the same Manner with one Foot on the saddle, the Horse being in full speed.”⁹¹ By April 1791 in Edinburgh, Ricketts was performing ‘roman riding,’ carrying Master Holland on two horses “without holding the reins.” He replicated this with McDonald in America in 1794.⁹² Durang describes a development into a three-high pyramid, with Durang as the base riding two horses, Ricketts standing on Durang’s shoulders, and in turn supporting an apprentice, Master Hutchins, as Mercury.⁹³

Ricketts’ benefit night in Edinburgh (held 19 May, 1790) gives the first performances of *The Metamorphosis; or, the Peasant’s Frolic on Horseback*, a transformation scene in which the performer, hidden inside a sack, changes his costume to emerge as another character, an act Ricketts performed in 1794 in America.⁹⁴ Other transplants from the Edinburgh circus include the Jockey Hornpipe, the Manual Exercise, and a ‘glory trick’ in which he would leap “from Two Horses, THROUGH A HOGSHEAD Suspended in the Air, and recover his situation, the Horses being in full speed.”⁹⁵ *The Tailor’s Ride to Brentford*, a staple comic riding act first developed by Astley, appeared in many different guises, and often given local references, in his American circus.⁹⁶ Ricketts’ juggling skills had been present from the earliest descriptions of his acts in Edinburgh, though an intriguing, yet not fully described, trick involving a hoop and a wineglass might have been an American development.⁹⁷ The training of his horse, Cornplanter, to jump over another horse also appears to have been a new trick, although learned horse acts had been presented from 1786 in Edinburgh.

Ricketts also appears to have learnt circus management from the Edinburgh circus. The circus Ricketts established in Montreal is described by Durang and was run on almost identical lines to the Edinburgh circus. This is true from the opening of the house and time of performances, to the hours of box office operation (11am-3pm in Edinburgh, 10am-3pm in Montreal), through to the provision of a coffee house attached to the circus, and even to the establishment of a one-way system for the management of carriage traffic.⁹⁸ As George Jones had established in Edinburgh, Ricketts gave riding lessons in the ring during the day. The most obvious difference was that, as noted by Moy, he appears to have taken a rather more leisurely approach to the number of nights the circus opened.⁹⁹ But the Edinburgh circus provided more than a successful business model; it also provided a proven repertoire.

In America, Ricketts also presented a number of dramatic performances that had been successful in Edinburgh, most prominently *The Death of Captain Cook, Don Juan; or, The Libertine destroy’d, Vulcan’s Gift, Oscar and Malvina*, and the old favourite, *Harlequin Statue. The Sports of the New Market; or The Pony Races*, a popular item in both Edinburgh, and at Sadler’s Wells in London, was staged in Ricketts’ Philadelphia circus. These productions were not unique to the

Edinburgh circus but were also performed in London, and in other regional theatres, so it is unsurprising that these 'blockbusters' of the day were the chosen fare. Ricketts' choice, though, was predominantly for productions of which he had direct experience of performing in Edinburgh. These might be embellished with local and topical references. What is also notable is that these theatrical entertainments were only produced after Matthew Sully Sr. had joined his company. Sully, the experienced and versatile performer, had already proved himself by producing pantomimes in Edinburgh. Apart from some early advertisements in which pantomimes were listed under the direction of Mr Ricketts, the majority of subsequent pantomimes were directed by Sully or Spinacuta, who appeared willing and able to take over this role. While Ricketts provided the lead in the equestrian acts, and proved to be a capable manager, the success of his ventures also crucially rested on Sully and Spinacuta who were perhaps more skilled in the presentation of theatrical spectacle. This creative role appears to have passed to Durang in his subsequent career with Ricketts. Durang also increasingly provided the American gloss, which the promiscuous form of the pantomime could easily absorb.

Ricketts' career in America, then, appears to owe much to direct experiences of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus. The presence of experienced performers with whom he had already developed a working relationship; a business model derived from his experiences in Edinburgh; and a tested repertoire provided a solid basis for his ventures. If not an innovator, he appears to have played to his strengths as a performer, and become an able manager and harnesser of other people's skills.

Ricketts' subsequent story could have fuelled a romantic spectacle of its own – journeys to the frontier of civilisation, meeting natives, success, ruination through a disastrous fire, pirates in the Caribbean, and eventual disappearance at sea. He remains an interesting, though elusive figure: an excellent performer with the sensibility and the social skills to maintain a circle of willing and able collaborators, and a decent manager able to transplant a circus model from Scotland and help it to thrive on a new continent.

¹ See, for example, John Culhane, *The American Circus* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 4; Isaac Greenwood, *The Circus: Its Origin and Growth Prior to 1835* (New York: Dunlap Society, 1898), 63.

² Including influential texts such as Culhane, *American Circus*, 4; S. Thayer, *Annals of the American Circus 1793-1829* (Michigan: Self-published, 1976); George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1980), 113. This has not been challenged in more recent scholarship (e.g. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames and Matthew Wittmann, eds. *The American Circus* (New York: The Bard Graduate Center, 2012)).

³ The Edinburgh Room in the Edinburgh Central Library has a folder with material related to this circus, including the assignation of sub-tacks naming George as the Jones of the Edinburgh Company (I am indebted to Anne Morrison for locating and sending me this information.)

⁴ Alan S. Downer, ed. *The Memoir of John Durang: American Actor 1785-1816* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 1966); James S. Moy, "John B. Ricketts' Circus" (PhD Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1977); "Entertainments at John B. Ricketts's Circus, 1793-1800," *Educational Theatre Journal* 30:2 (1978): 186-202. Moy was the first scholar to question the link of Hughes with Ricketts (Moy, "Rickett's Circus," 8). See also Douglas S. Harvey, "Strolling Players in Albany, Montreal, and Quebec City, 1797 and 1810: Performance, Class and Empire," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 38 (2009): 237-260; Lynn Matluck Brooks, "A Decade of Brilliance: Dance Theatre in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Dance Chronicle* 12:3 (1989): 333-365; "Staged Ethnicity: Perspectives on the Work of John Durang," *Dance Chronicle* 24:2 (2001): 193-222. Rickett's purported apprenticeship to Charles Hughes is derived from one sentence in Durang's memoirs. While Durang appears to be a generally reliable source, this statement cannot be corroborated elsewhere. If Ricketts was a pupil of Hughes it could only have been between 1782 and 1785. But none of the extant PhD dissertations on the Royal Circus, or Moy's work have turned up a definitive connection. Decastro does not mention him with the other apprentices of the period he notes, and he appears in no benefit performances at the Royal Circus in 1785, in which other pupils are mentioned (*The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian* (London: Sherwood, Jones, & Co., 1824).

⁵ *Caledonian Mercury* (CM), 20 March, 1786. The first advertisements I have been able to locate for Jones's Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitechapel are from April 1786, indicating that the Edinburgh and London ventures were embarked on at roughly the same time.

⁶ CM 8 March, 1786.

⁷ James C. Dibdin locates these performances at the corner of Broughton St, but they were further along Leith Walk (James C. Dibdin, *The Annals of the Edinburgh Stage with an account of the Rise and Progress of Dramatic Writing in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Richard Cameron, 1888), 332). The location of both the Physick Garden and the subsequent permanent amphitheatre, built at the corner of Broughton St and Leith Walk can be seen in John Ainslie's 1804 map (*Old and New Town of Edinburgh and Leith with the proposed docks*) which can be viewed online at: <http://www.nls.uk/maps/towns/view/?id=415>. Accessed 28 August, 2010.

⁸ CM 5 August, 1786.

⁹ CM 23 August, 1786.

¹⁰ Master Ricketts is listed in an advertisement for Jones's Equestrian Amphitheatre, Whitechapel in *The Daily Universal Register*, 24 April, 1786.

¹¹ Advertisements in the *Gazetteer* and *New Daily Advertiser* indicate a performance season at Jones's Equestrian Amphitheatre, Whitechapel from 28 December, 1786 to sometime after 19 May, 1787. They were performing again in London over the winter months of 1788. *The World* lists a benefit for Dubois, at which Parker performed broadsword exercises (5 February, 1788), and Parker's benefit itself (24 March, 1788). This advertisement indicates that the company would continue their summer amusements in London.

¹² When Ricketts was lost at sea around 1800, Dominique Jando considers he was in his early thirties. Dominique Jando, "The First Circus in America," accessed 12 January, 2012, http://www.circopedia.org/index.php/John_Bill_Ricketts. Although his age is not listed anywhere else, this would seem to be a reasonable estimate. In 1788 he begins to be billed as an adult performer.

¹³ CM 19 July, 1788.

¹⁴ CM 13 August, 1789.

¹⁵ I use 'Edinburgh Equestrian Circus' as this title was first used in advertisements. This became shortened to Equestrian Circus, and then 'circus' and 'amphitheatre' were used interchangeably in the advertisements. The circus had many different names during the 1790s: The New Theatre (under Stephen Kemble's brief management), and then the New Sadler's Wells in 1793; New

Theatre Circus or Amphitheatre Circus or Jones's Circus apparently at random during 1795; Jones's Royal Circus, later shortened to Royal Circus from 1796-1800.

¹⁶ Joseph Jenkinson.

¹⁷ This act involved a performer on horseback balancing on one leg, or being carried in this one-legged balance by another equestrian. The 'little cherub' was George Jones' son.

¹⁸ *Edinburgh Evening Courant (EC)* 28 January, 1790.

¹⁹ *EC* 20 January, 1790. Complaints that the Theatre Royal had been playing to empty benches over the winter were repeated later in the season (*EC* 8 February, 1790).

²⁰ Decastro, *Memoirs*, 153.

²¹ George Palliser Tuttle, *The History of the Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy, 1782-1816, St. George's Fields, Surrey, England* (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1972), 212. Charles Dibdin the Elder notes that parents of apprentices were always complaining to him about Grimaldi Senior (Charles Dibdin, *Royal Circus Epitomized* (London, 1784), 29).

²² Decastro, *Memoirs*, 148-149.

²³ *The Times (TT)* 9 March, 1795.

²⁴ According to Highfill, his real name was O'Sullivan, and he first appears as a dancer at Sadler's Wells in 1778 (Philip Highfill Jr., Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973-93) Vol.14, 338).

²⁵ *CM* 6 February, 1790.

²⁶ He also performed this in Ricketts' circus in America (Moy Ricketts' *Circus*, 103).

²⁷ "Turning round like Fly on a Jack" appears likely to be a reference to the eighteenth century 'roasting - jack' (a spit). The performer of this act turns revolutions, either tumbling, or on a tightrope. George Plimpton includes a seventeenth century print (though an "imaginative representation") of a man 'dressed' in fireworks, showing what might have been possible at the time (George Plimpton, *Fireworks: A History and Celebration* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), frontispiece illustration).

²⁸ Moy, *Ricketts' Circus*, 60.

²⁹ *TT* 2 July, 1789. A Spinacuta is mentioned as having appeared at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket in 1768, dancing on the rope "with two boys tied to his feet" (James Granger, *A Biographical History of England, from Egbert the Great to the Revolution* Vol 6. (London: W. Baynes, 1824), 172.) From the dates it is tempting to speculate that this was Antonio's father, and, given the family nature of the trade, that Antonio Spinacuta was one of the boys tied to his feet.

³⁰ *EC* 8 March, 1790.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² The book of the production at the Theatre Royal Hull (published 1790) can be found at <http://www.nla.gov.au/apps/doview/nla.aus-vn1599183-p>, accessed 27 January, 2011. The outline of the Edinburgh production conforms to the actions described in the Hull book, which lists Lassells as a performer.

³³ *CM* 3 June, 1790.

³⁴ The advert that gives this information also notes that the company was awaiting the completion of a circus building in Newcastle, in order to perform there (*CM* 3 June, 1790). It is possible that George Jones and Parker had already established themselves as performers in Newcastle, according to a document contained in the Edinburgh Room (Anne Morrison, email communication with author, 10 November, 2010).

³⁵ Highfill, *Dictionary* Vol 1-2, 193- 194.

³⁶ *CM* 23 December, 1791.

³⁷ A "Giles Sutton" appears in a list of apprentices at the Royal Circus in 1790 (*TT* 7 July, 1790). It is not clear whether he was related to the other equestrian performer in Edinburgh, who is only billed as 'Mr Sutton,' though other references indicate two distinct performers of the same name.

³⁸ *CM* 24 January, 1791.

³⁹ *CM* 2 April, 1791.

⁴⁰ Versions of *Don Juan* by Angiolini and Gluck (first performed 1761) abounded. The plot of the ballet is given in Marion Hannah Winter, *The Pre-Romantic Ballet* (London: Pitman, 1974), 132-134. It is a Gothic moral tale involving illicit love, duels to the death, an animated statue, a mausoleum, Hell and its dancing demons, possibly an earthquake.

⁴¹ Moy, *Entertainments*, 195.

⁴² *CM* 25 April, 1791.

⁴³ Postponed from 29 November, as it appears the new scenery was not finished in time (*CM* 29 November, 1791).

⁴⁴ *CM* 23 February, 1792.

⁴⁵ *CM* 17 December, 1792.

⁴⁶ *CM* 15 March, 1792.

⁴⁷ Ricketts' brother, Francis, who performed with him in America, according to Durang, is curiously absent from the record of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus.

⁴⁸ Highfill, *Dictionary*, Vol.14, 339; Glenn Hughes, *A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950* (New York: Samuel French, 2007 [1951]), 72.

⁴⁹ *CM* 12 March, 1792.

⁵⁰ George Speaight, ed., *Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1956 [1830]), 34 ff.

⁵¹ Paul Alexander Daum, *The Royal Circus 1782-1809: An Analysis of Equestrian Entertainments* (PhD diss. Ohio State University, 1973), 177. See also Tuttle, *Royal Circus*, 191 and Decastro, *Memoirs*, 149.

⁵² Examining advertisements for Sadler's Wells, Royal Circus and Astley's Amphitheatre (Royal Grove and Olympic Pavilion), given in *The Times* between 1786 and 1806 turns up many instances of the Edinburgh performers on the same bill.

⁵³ Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*. ed. Richard Findlater. revised version (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 95-103.

⁵⁴ Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 68.

⁵⁵ This has been established from the addresses given for obtaining tickets for individual performers' benefits.

⁵⁶ Speaight, *Charles Dibdin*, 35.

⁵⁷ Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee* (York, 1795) Vol. 3, 20-21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁹ *CM* 24 May, 1790.

⁶⁰ This is especially revealed in Durang's account of their tour to Canada (Downer, *Durang*, 47-94). A brief, yet endearing example is a story of hunting for a turkey to eat which involved Durang and Ricketts, along with their landlord and his son. Following the capture of the turkey, "Mr Ricketts superintended the cooking of it with the landlady in the kitchen as this was his day to turn valet (we took it by turns). When occasion required to take on himself the stewardship of the day, everything was done to please us." (*Ibid.*, 54).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 110

⁶² Findlater, in Dickens, *Grimaldi*, 95, note 2. Findlater states that 'Jew Davis' (the name apparently deriving from a reputation as the "best stage Jew upon the boards"), a comic and singer, came to Sadler's Wells theatre in 1797 from the Royal Circus (of which James Jones was then the proprietor) (*Ibid.*, notes to p.95). Charles Dibdin described him as "a performer of great merit in every department of stage performance, dancing excepted" and that "had he, for he was a man of understanding and address - when he chose to exercise it - cultivated the graces as much as he did la grosiérté, he might have been an ornament to the stage." (Speaight, *Charles Dibdin*, 42). He also played at least one practical joke on Dibdin, although Speaight also notes that when Dibdin was imprisoned for debt in 1819, Davis apparently turned up and offered him half his weekly salary pending his release. (*Ibid.*, 126). Dickens also offers an account of a hilarious,

though possibly ill-advised, upstaging of Kemble's Hamlet (Dickens, *Grimaldi*, 117-119). Davis appears to have been a complex personality.

⁶³ Tuttle, *Royal Circus*, 180-181. Holland was employed at the Royal Circus from around 1786. The term 'composer' can be misleading, as the theatrical scores of the day were frequently compiled from other sources (see e.g. Marian Smith, "Borrowings and Original Music: A Dilemma for the Ballet-Pantomime Composer," *Dance Research* 6:2 (1988): 3-29). The word 'composer' also appears to be used for the choreographer, further reflecting the loose boundaries between different art forms. In the absence of any extant score by Holland, considering his 'music' to be synonymous with 'composition,' as Tuttle implies, is dubious.

⁶⁴ Advertised *CM* 2 April, 1791, for his benefit on 4 April. Other performers who are mentioned as playing instruments include Spinacuta (violin and guitar) and Pietro Bologna (flute, drums).

⁶⁵ *EC* 28 March, 1791.

⁶⁶ A review in *The Times* (8 August, 1796) comments favourably on the performance of Holland's daughter at the Royal Circus (who was possibly under four years old), and also approves of the fact that Mrs Parker appeared to have been her model. Sophia Parker also trained her own stepdaughter, Nanette. Similar links recur through the later history of James Jones' management of the Royal Circus in London. Harriet Cabanel, who danced in the 1799 and 1800 Edinburgh seasons, had a brother Rudolph (or Rodolpho) who was responsible for the redesign of the London Royal Circus after it burnt down in 1805.

⁶⁷ *CM* 19 March, 1792.

⁶⁸ *CM* 8 March, 1792.

⁶⁹ *CM* 15 March, 1792.

⁷⁰ *CM* 10 May, 1790.

⁷¹ *CM* 17 March, 1792.

⁷² Jenkinson's career ended, tragically, at the Royal Circus in London. Decastro relates that "Mr. Joseph Jenkinson, in performing the Trainpoline [sic] for Mrs. Parker's benefit, in 1797, overthrew himself, broke his breast bone, and fatally injured his spinal one. He was carried out of the ring, and lingered only a few days afterwards; aged 27; he was much revered and esteemed, leaving a wife and three children behind (*Memoirs*, 158). *The Times* gives this detail: "Making a somerset, by turning once oftener in the spring than he should, he pitched on his neck and broke the vertebrae of his back (*TT* 19 October, 1797). He died on Monday, 16 October, 1797.

⁷³ An image of Makeen standing on one leg on the saddle is titled "Mr Makeen the Equestrian Hero" (reproduced in Speaight, *History*, 29). A Mr Hyam, who in 1773 presented feats of horsemanship at a pleasure garden in Brompton and at Price's Riding School was billed as "the English Hero" (*Ibid*, 28).

⁷⁴ See for example *The Manual Exercise, as ordered by his Majesty, in 1764: together with plans and explanations of the method generally practis'd at reviews and field days &c* (New York: printed by H. Gaine, 1780).

⁷⁵ Julian Small, "The Riding House, Edinburgh," accessed 12 September, 2013, http://sites.scran.ac.uk/ada/documents/riding/riding_house.htm.

⁷⁶ Donna Landry, "The Bloody Shouldered Arabian and Early Modern English Culture," *Criticism* 46:1 (2004): 43.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 41. Landry also points out that "the horse portrait was an eighteenth century innovation" (42).

⁷⁸ Christopher Forth notes that "claims that British bodies and morality had grown soft through good living and the sartorial extravagance of "macaroni" fashion were rife during the late eighteenth century, which is why some cultivated the mythology of the common sailor whose loyalty and virility, supposedly untainted by luxury of sedentariness, was proven through feats of martial prowess and military discipline." (Christopher E. Forth, *Gender, Civilisation and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 88.) As Forth points out, British eighteenth century writers were concerned with the deleterious effects of civilisation, and that France was repeatedly singled out as being "effeminate."

⁷⁹ *CM* 29 January, 1791.

⁸⁰ Reproduced in Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance and the Eighteenth Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2010), 2, Fig. 1.).

⁸¹ Quoted in Greenwood, *The Circus*, 64-65.

⁸² *General Advertiser*, 3 November, 1794. Quoted in S. Thayer, *Annals*, 8.

⁸³ *CM* 24 January, 1791.

⁸⁴ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 180.

⁸⁵ Lawrence E. Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 45:4 (2002): 880.

⁸⁶ Marius Kwint, "The legitimization of the circus in late Georgian England," *Past and Present* 174:1 (2002): 90.

⁸⁷ Entry for Tuesday, 16 June, 1767 in Basil Cozens-Hardy, ed., *The Diary of Syllas Neville 1767-1788* (London: Oxford UP, 1950), 12.

⁸⁸ Descriptions of Ricketts' performances in America, including reproductions of playbills, on which these comparisons are based are given in Moy, *Rickett's Circus*. Other sources used include Culhane, *American Circus*, and Downer, *John Durang*.

⁸⁹ Culhane, *American Circus*, 8.

⁹⁰ *CM* 24 April, 1790.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹² *CM* 2 April, 1791; Moy, *Entertainments*, 192.

⁹³ Downer, *John Durang*, 68.

⁹⁴ Moy, *Entertainments*, 190.

⁹⁵ *CM* 10 May, 1790. A repeat of this act in 1791 is illustrated by a standard woodcut (*EC* 11 April, 1791). An identical illustration for Ricketts' American performances appears in *The Diary; or London's Register*, 13 September, 1793 (reproduced in Moy, *Rickett's Circus*, 83).

⁹⁶ Moy, *Entertainments*, 190-191. Spinacuta's tight rope performances are not given in enough detail to compare them with his performances in America.

⁹⁷ Moy, *Rickett's Circus*, 86.

⁹⁸ After the first performances of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, when no doubt the problem was identified, very detailed instructions were given in advertisements for the setting down and taking up of spectators arriving by carriage. The Royal Circus in London similarly had a coffee house attached to the circus.

⁹⁹ See James S. Moy, "The First Circus in Eastern Canada," *Theatre Research in Canada* 1:1 (1980), para. 14, accessed 29 December, 2011, http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/TRIC/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol1_1/&filename=Moy.html