

Acts of Conscience – Dr Jane Mullett

This paper explores aspects of the inclusion of progressive political comment in alternative circus performance. It has been re-edited from a paper given at the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Conference, Wollongong, Australia, December 2006

Alternative circus began in the 1970s on the basis of a radical political agenda. The founders of the new circuses were influenced by the huge changes in Western society that were happening at this time. The underlying forces for this change have been well documented.¹ Social movements like feminism, civil rights, indigenous rights, conservation and animal liberation challenged basic tenets of Western society including the structure of the family, the meaning of work, and the role of gender and race in defining people's status. These movements helped literally shape the way we live. The political protests that they generated were influenced by forms of spectacle and conceptual art that ultimately altered the understanding of what constituted political activism (Stephens 1998). Michael Watts provides a great description that gives a sense of the energy and inventiveness of political protest of the period:

Need I remind anyone that the late sixties produced Jerry Rubin, Alan Ginsberg and company attempting to levitate the Pentagon; the yippies causing havoc on Wall Street by throwing money on to the floor of the exchange; the Strasbourg Situationists denouncing boredom; the Dutch provos unleashing pandemonium in Amsterdam by releasing thousands of chickens in rush-hour traffic; the Diggers declaring love a commodity; and not least Ed Sanders and the Fugs setting off on their march on Prague to masturbate on the Soviet tanks? (2001:160:132)

These forms of protest, although often inventive and humorous, were based on a profound loss of trust in the structures of society - the government, the law, and in most forms of entrenched authority. They were also connected to experiments with alternative governance and living structures. This paper looks at how the early alternative circus made use of the ideas within conceptual protest and makes a comparison with some pointed performances by contemporary circus and physical theatre groups.

Within the circus genre conceptual protest is best seen in the work of Philippe Petit. Petit echoes the interests of his generation. He says of himself in 1968 at the beginning of his work, "I am barely eighteen years old, free, rebellious, and untrusting" (Petit 2002:5) .Petit is a French high-wire walker who is known for his three spectacular and daring clandestine wire walks. They were illegal, they involved the infiltration of three citadels of institutional power: the church, the state and private enterprise (if he'd done the military it would have been a perfect set).

¹ See:

Bolton, Geoffrey. 1990. *The Middle Way 1942-1995*. Edited by A. G. a. K. Steward. Second ed. 5 vols. Vol. 5, *The Oxford History of Australia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press Australia.

Gagnon, Alain G. and Mary Beth Montcalm. 1990. *Quebec: Beyond the Quiet Revolution*. Ontario: Nelson Canada.

Marwick, Arthur. 1998. *The Sixties*. London: Oxford University Press.

The first walk in 1971 was between the towers of Notre Dame in Paris. A black and white photograph of him on the wire between the towers sums up all the concerns of this artwork. Petit is as small as an ant in the distance, with the cathedral filling the frame of the picture and a policeman and police car occupying the immediate foreground (Petit 2002:8).² Danger is pictured on two levels, first there is the breathtaking height of the wire and second there is the real presence of the law. Dualities of freedom and restraint, questions of individual freedom and public responsibility, the dichotomy between the sky and the earth are all seen in this photo. The second walk, in 1973 took place between the two pylons of the Harbour Bridge in Sydney (2002:9). The third and final in this series was in 1974, between the Twin Trade Towers in New York (2002:192). This photograph, also in black and white shows Petit close up, sitting in the rigging ready to walk, with the city of New York falling away from him at his feet. He is cradled in the wire and hemp rope of his art.

There are no other performances like these that I know of – although some of the infiltrations of targeted buildings by Greenpeace and some anti-logging protests where people have occupied trees about to be cut down for woodchips, have elements in common. Petit's work is the ultimate expression of the strong anti-authoritarian, romantic aspect of alternative circus. The illegal occupation of these iconic buildings for the period he was rigging the tightwire and walking the wire was an expression of defiance that was the epitome of its period. Benign, fun, brave and clever. He was arrested after each event, but was never held for long. The intent of the act was not to cause pain or hurt – rather it was to celebrate life. The acts also remind us of earlier tightwire walkers who concentrated their efforts on overcoming the hazards of natural features such as the Niagara Falls. These events all celebrated team-work. Petit had a team working with him to break into the buildings, to get the gear in place, to rig the wire, and ultimately to film the walk. In this way the event is also part of the ephemeral installation artwork movement, which relied on film to record it. The clandestine walks are a testament to the lasting power of a right performance in the right place at the right time. Timing is everything in non-violent conceptual performance protest.

Of course, the New York Twin Towers no longer exist, having been targeted by a much more violent form of organised protest that gives us insight in to the period we are living in now and the one that circus artists must deal with in their response to the world.

Alternative circus, however was, and is, not particularly concerned with direct political action. Circus Oz, and its precursor Soapbox Circus, are two of the few groups that took their politics out of the circle of caravans and into the political arena in the early years of new circus. In the program of the Circus Oz 1985 show there is a picture of Circus Oz at Pine Gap - the joint US-Australian military satellite tracking facility, outside Alice Springs. The heading is "Circus Oz 'invades' Pine Gap" and it is teamed with a series of quotes from the local paper, the Centralian Advocate, "I shall return" announced Australia's first marsupial spy, holding high his banner of anti-imperialism". Behind the quotes is a photograph of one of Circus Oz's signature life-sized kangaroo puppets at Pine Gap, fist aloft, holding a flag that is an amalgam of the red, yellow and black design of the Aboriginal flag and the southern cross of the official Australian flag. Like Petit's

² In the original paper illustrations were used, some without the correct permissions – given that it was a once only presentation in a non-commercial situation. For this paper those illustrations have been removed and replaced with descriptions and a reference to the source of the image.

clandestine walks, this pointed performance is site specific and entertaining. While alternative circus has rarely become involved with direct political action, it did not ignore contemporary politics. Judy Finelli of the Pickle Family Circus, founded in 1974 in the US says, "Circus Oz. ... comes right out and says, 'we're the non-sexist, non-racist, anti-nuke Circus Oz'. I can't see the Pickle Family Circus doing that, But simply ignoring what's going on isn't it either" (Lorant 1986:72). So how did the alternative circus express their politics?

The founders of the new circuses, looked to the circus as a way of living out their politics. Most alternative circus founders had already served an artistic apprenticeship within radical alternative theatre groups or had worked as buskers. They came to the circus with a sophisticated understanding of popular performance (Mullett 2005). The lack of direct political statements in early alternative circus, it can be argued, is related to the circus environment itself, which provided a way for the performers to live out their political convictions. To fully embody one's politics was a widespread goal of the 1960s and 1970s. The feminist catch cry "the personal is political" dates from this time, as does the environment movement mantra, "think global - act local". To the outside world, including the founders of alternative circus, traditional circus appeared to inhabit a self-contained, lived environment. It was an example of a visible apparently self-governing sub-culture. Circus was "a way of life"; it existed on the margins of society, in some ways. This was one of the substantial attractions for the founders of the new circuses in the 1970s. There were other attractions including; the visible strength of the women performers (Tait 2005) and the popular form of the circus show itself (Orenstein 1998). This paper, however, will concentrate on the visible performed life within the alternative circus. I hesitate to call this performed life 'performative' in the sense that it is used by Judith Butler (1990) nonetheless, I think that the way that the early new circus artists took on the circus was informed by contemporaneous debates about gender and identity. Butler talks about the parody of gender and the impossibility of an authentic original in a way that rings true to me when compared to the way that the new circus artists parodied and 'performed' the circus family, and visibly performed 'being a circus' on the road. Of gender parody Butler says,

The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a 'figure' in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin (1990:138)

The circus family that the alternative circus constructed was in itself a construction. The performance of being a circus on the road similarly was always already a performance. In making this statement I am using the foundational work on traditional circus by Yoram Carmeli (1987b; 1990). Within this context I want to briefly look at the tent as a symbol of the inhabitation of a performed life and the constructed family that inhabits the performance.

The tent has become one of the enduring symbols of the circus, even though circus regularly performs in buildings (Dupavillon 2001). We are all familiar with the hard top circus venues in Europe and the move from tents to stadiums by Ringling Bros

Barnum and Bailey in 1960s. The tent is a symbol of the modern circus although most alternative circuses perform their work more often in theatres than in tents. Circus du Soleil uses the tent as its identifying symbol on both books it has produced about itself, although it has at least four shows permanently connected to permanent casino buildings (Drake 1993; Babinski 2004). It is significant, however, that when alternative circus started, all companies either built their own tents or performed outside in a 'virtual tent'.

The first tents of Cirque Aligre (1976), Big Apple Circus (1979) and Circus Oz (1978) are classic. They all have a single ring surrounded by bleacher seating and were put up by the artists and their friends. The earliest alternative circuses Cirque Bidon (1974), New Circus (1974) and the Pickle Family Circus (1974) all operated with aerial rigs, performed within a ring, under the open sky.³ The tent, or the aerial rig, gave control over the performing environment. With a moveable rig or tent, alternative circus performers could reach a wider audience than that of the traditional middle-class theatres. In this, the new circuses were continuing the work of alternative theatres which engaged with new audiences in their workplaces, in the streets and in non-traditional theatre venues in the 1960s and 1970s. The tent or the outdoor rig was also closer to the street and to the busking tradition which was another significant influence on the start of alternative circus. In the period when Pierrot Bidon was involved with Archaos it had a deep understanding of the relationship between space and politics (Little 1995). But most importantly, the tent was part of the performed politics of the early years of new circus.

The act of living in a cooperative community was performed publicly in public spaces. There are many published photographs that document the life on the road of the alternative circus. For example, Cirque Bidon on the road with their extended family was photographed by Bernard Lesaing (1981). In this book, there is a black and white photograph of one of the members of the company wheeling a pram across a small European town square. The man pushing the pram across the ancient cobbles of the square is large and brawny with strong hands. Inside the old fashioned pram, with circus painted on its side, are a small blond-headed child and two large water containers. There is something primitive about the contrast between man and the child, the simplicity of the pram and the ancient function of fetching water. It is a very public display of the meaning of life.

The traditional circus family was a constructed and performed family, as Yoram Carmeli has described (Carmeli 1991). It was also an extended family and a publicly displayed family. In the Cirque d'Hiver Bouglione 2003 program there is a page on which beautiful black and white photographs of the founding brothers are matched with photos of the contemporary Bouglione family. Each individual is photographed formally and separately. There is no sense of familiarity between them. This represents the traditional family - a 'real' family – expressed in its most conservative aspect. Further into the program there are a series of photographs of public Bouglione weddings – women in full bridal costumes riding horses or elephants. There is one photograph that shows the wedding party surrounded by the extended 'family' of the circus including a number of dwarves in clown make-up holding the bride's white net train. The pictures are produced

³ It can be argued that the earliest alternative circus in France is Cirque Bonjour (later Cirque Imaginaire) although the first show of Cirque Bonjour was a clear collaboration with a traditional circus. It is also interesting that 1974 was a seminal year for new circus in France - Cirque Bidon; in Australia - New Circus (also a precursor to Circus Oz), and in the US - The Pickle Family Circus.

and framed on the page to give the feeling of a conservative family album. All photos are black and white and most are tinted nostalgic sepia. Similarly on show, although performed differently is the alternative circus family. Terry Lorant photographed the Pickle Family Circus for years. One of her black and white photos (1986:126) shows three women of the circus pregnant. The women are posed informally against the sidewall of the show with their shirts pulled up to expose their various states of pregnancy. It is a casual photograph that has the feeling of an intimate family moment. At the same time it is confronting the viewer with a subject that until very recently has been taboo. The women have eye contact with each other and are sharing a wry sense of amusement about the occasion. The name itself, the Pickle Family Circus, is a parody of the traditional family circus name. The early alternative circuses were generally run as loose collectives and often made decisions through collective meetings. Even when there was a director in charge, the circus members can be seen to have influence on the development of the performance. Thus the cooperative nature of early alternative circus was used as a laboratory to investigate and experiment with alternative or radical models of societal structure.⁴

In the contemporary alternative circus, radical politics is less often expressed in terms of a lived experience of communal familial structures. Today the alternative circus structure is much more likely to mirror the formal structure of a dance or theatre company with hierarchical roles of director, choreographer, and performer and so on. There are more small circus groups generated by students graduating from circus schools. So, how does the current alternative circus express its politics and have these politics changed?

The current use of tents by alternative circuses illustrates one way in which the political climate has changed. Many alternative circus companies are no longer seen as outside the mainstream and many receive funding directly from the government. They have access to privileged spaces that are rarely available to the traditional circus – Big Apple Circus puts its tent up in collaboration with the Lincoln Centre in central New York, Circus Oz puts its tent up in central Melbourne with the support of the Melbourne City Council, Cirque du Soleil as a rule looks for strategic sites of privilege to place its tents. There are of course exceptions, Cirque Ici appears to have a philosophy that links it to the tent and the meanings of being outside the normative structures of the society. Most alternative circuses do not own tents and the artists are also less likely to live full-time on the road in caravans. But the alternative circus still likes to bring 'home' to its audience, and to claim the circus ring as part of their performed familial life. The poster for the 2006 show that the Canadian group Les Sept doigts de la main toured to Australia, depicts the entire cast emerging from an old-fashioned fridge, clearly linking their work with the domestic daily routine of a family. The show is set in a quirky home, more reminiscent of a student group house than a traditional family, and the characters emerge from a series of domestic settings including a bath and a bed. To start this show, the group invited the audience into their 'home' by escorting them though the back stage and

⁴ There are other earlier examples of a direct link between theatre and politics. Susan Maslan "explores the relation of art and politics during the complicated and violent birth of mass political participation and modern democracy in late-eighteenth century France (2005:vii). She argues that "popular revolutionary drama linked the home ... to the larger public world" (2005:x). The stage was no longer confined to the theatre, but was found throughout society.

through the fridge on the set on the stage before getting to their seats, implying that the audience was also part of this domesticity. In a 2006 poster of the Australian group acrobat, the image is of one of the members halfway through a summersault in a private house. It is a picture of the acrobat at 'home'. The show was extra-ordinarily personal and powerful and the material came straight out of the performer's lives. The place of the circus' 'home' in both these images is not the caravan on the road, but the suburban house. The life of the circus that was so clearly identified with progressive politics in alternative circus is no longer on show. Collective living is no longer a clear option and many of the radical performers of the 1970s now have nuclear families of their own.

One of the qualities of capitalism or free enterprise is its ability to appropriate fashions, events, movements, styles, critiques. Many of the critiques of the mainstream that were part of the alternative circus movement in the 1970s and early 1980s have been absorbed into the mainstream or taken up by the cultural elites (this conference is one such example). At the same time, the need for direct engagement with the political events occurring now is as urgent as it ever was, with the imperfect workings of democracy, the powerful corporations that operate outside legal democratic frameworks, and the threat of climate change, the circus is a perfect place to produce shows that deal with these issues.

Sometimes there are great synergies in performance when everything comes together. When art illuminates a contemporaneous predicament for an audience, a generation. A transformation of information that re-presents complex ideas in a poetic luminous set of images that allows us to see the world differently for a moment. An instance where art can change our lives. I look to the circus for this level of experience now, as I did in the 1970s.

Current world events are no less horrific than those of the Vietnam War era. The solutions that alternative circus companies had found to deal with the current issues are more directly linked to the content of the shows than to the performance of a life/style.

This year I have seen three Australian companies address contemporary political issues in ways that have been inspiring. *Honour Bound*, written and directed by Nigel Jamieson, and *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper*, devised by Simon Yates, Jo Lancaster and Mozes of acrobat, are two powerful shows that appear as part of the 2006 Melbourne Fringe Festival. Both draw on the practice of alternative circus and contemporary dance. Both provide precise observations of contemporary politics through physical performance. *Honour Bound* deals with the detention of Australian David Hicks in the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay. In the interaction between projected media, focused lighting, strong choreography and tight text *Honour Bound* presents a physicalised exploration of the moral and ethical implications of Hick's imprisonment and raises some acutely uncomfortable questions by its portrayal of Hick's torturers. *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper* is a howl of anguish for our times. It is Brechtian in the way it lays bare the devices of the acrobatic troupe's performance, peeling back layers of circus/theatre artifice until there is only the body, not even the costume. This is poor theatre at its most direct. It deals in the most personal way possible with major political preoccupations of this era including gender and identity, pandemics in the form of HIV/AIDS, and the meaning of wealth and poverty. These two shows mark an important turning point for physical theatre. Neither uses the easy gambit of nostalgia or sentimentality. Both have powerful things to say about the place of women and men in the world. Both raise moral issues of great importance for us all.

The third company is Circus Oz and its act 'the crash mat of human kindness' Circus Oz has produced a comment on the treatment of refugees in Australia since the Howard government set up the off-shore detention centres. The piece is usually based around the human cannon act with the performer having to fly over the barbed-wire of intolerance to land on the crash mat of human kindness. This act often involves audience participation.

Without the performed life of the 1970s perhaps political commentary is finding its way into the circus performance? Perhaps the times demand it.

Bibliography

- Babinski, Tony. 2004. *Cirque du Soleil: 20 Years under the Sun*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Edited by L. J. Nicholson, *Thinking Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Carmeli, Yoram S. 1987b. Why Does the 'Jimmy Brown's Circus' Travel? A Semiotic Approach to the Analysis of Circus Ecology. *Poetics Today* 8 (2):219-244.
- _____. 1990. Performing the 'Real' and 'Impossible' in the British Travelling Circus. *Semiotica* 80 (3/4):193-220).
- _____. 1991. Performance and Family in the World of the British Circus. *Semiotica* 85 (3/4):257-289.
- Drake, Sylvie. 1993. Cirque du Soleil. In *Cirque du Soleil*, edited by V. a. H. D. Vial. Montreal: Productions du Cirque du Soleil Inc.
- Dupavillon, Christian. 2001. *Architectures du Cirque: Des Origines à nos Jours*. 2nd. ed. Paris: Le Moniteur. Original edition, 1982.
- Lesaigne, Bernard. 1981. *Le Cirque Bidon*. Saint-Pons: Pandora.
- Little, Kenneth. 1995. Surveilling Cirque Archaos: Transgression and the Spaces of Power in Popular Entertainment. *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (1):15-27.
- Lorant, Terry and Jon Carroll. 1986. *The Pickle Family Circus*. San Francisco: The Pickle Press.
- Maslan, Susan. 2005. *Revolutionary Acts : Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mullett, Jane. 2005. Circus Alternatives: the Rise of New Circus in Australia, the United States, Canada and France. PhD, Theatre and Drama, La Trobe, Bundoora.
- Orenstein, Claudia. 1998. *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe*. Edited by S. Harrison-Pepper, *Performance Studies*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Petit, Philippe. 2002. *To Reach The Clouds*. New York: North Point Press.
- Stephens, Julie. 1998. *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tait, Peta. 2005. *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity and Aerial Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Watts, Michael. 2001. 1968 and All That. *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2):157-188.