

## Intensity in Tent City: Circus as a Model for a Liveable Community

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31 10 2002.

In "The Death and Resurrection Show", Rogan Taylor writes "no wonder we get a whiff of magic every time we enter that most shamanistic of wigwams, the Big Top." (Taylor 1985) His view of the circus as a sort of tribal repository of wonders reminds me of my own humble research dwelling at Murdoch University. The sign on the door says Teepee 3. But sadly, the dwelling is not exotically conical, but drably rectangular. T.P. stands for "Transportable". Unfortunately, it's not. I haven't budged since I moved in early last year. To me, the best bit is our doormat. As you step out, not in, it says "Welcome". It's like the home of Wonko the Sane in that most underrated philosophical tract "So Long and Thanks for all the Fish", the fourth book in the Hitchhiker's trilogy. Wonko's house is apparently inside out. Outside his door is the insane asylum, namely the rest of the world. (Adams)

When you are part of the circus, the rest of the world is the "other". Your life is normal. And yet, that same other has appropriated your existence for their metaphors. "Parliament is a circus". It is a pity it's not. A succession of specialists doing their job so well that we clap; an organization that functions with no apparent administrative army around it; something so interesting that we take our family to see it. A circus would be insulted to be called a Parliament. Consider some other images borrowed from circus and used every day. "Backflip by Bronwyn Bishop". We'd like to see that. Jump through hoops, juggle the books, keep the balls in the air, crack the whip, face the lions, jump on the bandwagon, walk a fine line, fall through the safety net, bend over backwards to learn new tricks, play the clown, and be in the spotlight. My point is that just as the images of real or imagined circus performance have entered our metaphorical language, often inaccurately, so the structures and values of circus life are a part of our collective psyche, and are equally available for our consideration in any context, including that of liveable communities.

Ernest Hemingway wrote, "Everything else is supposed to be bad for you. But the Circus is good for you. It is the only spectacle I know that, while you watch it, gives the quality of a truly happy dream." (Hemingway 1953) This seemingly bland description of a circus holds great significance. As I shall explain, a circus show is simply a procession of phobias, resolved, containing elements of most people's recurrent dreams and nightmares. Hemingway concerns himself with what we see in the ring, what has been offered to us. However, Hotier, in "Signes du Cirque" writes of a "Double Transgression" technique in which a hand-balancer called Tandis, seemingly accidentally, puts into the minds of the audience the thought that his assistant is responsible for almost causing an accident. (Hotier 1995) We in the audience, after applauding them for successfully completing the act, all wonder what words will be exchanged backstage. So we go beyond the here and now of the act into a mythical interpretation of circus life which is evoked in the metaphors mentioned earlier.

Many authors and film-makers cannot resist portraying a fantastical dark-side of the backstage circus. "Circus Parade", the 1928 novel by Jim Tully portrays the circus as an

unbearable purgatory of sex, violence, gambling and cheating with tales of murder, sodomy, child-rape, lynching, and animal abuse. It is a book written with irony and humour, but hardly objective. (Tully 1928)"Geek Love"(Dunn 1983), "Roustabout" (Chalfoun 1997), "Josser"(Stroud 2000) and "Something Wicked This Way Comes"(Bradbury 1962) are other readable books in this genre. Films like Todd Browning's "Freaks", "Santa Sangre" and even Fellinis "I Clowns"<sup>1</sup> portray a circus much more rooted in imagination than reality. The irony of course is that circus rarely objects to misrepresentation, as long as it brings the people in.

Visiting the circus is always to visit strangers. We rarely learn their real names. Is she a trapezist selling fairy floss, or a "carny" daring to fly? Is that really her husband? Helen Stoddart extends these paradoxes to the whole genre, "The circus is mendacious, eternally opportunistic, at turns demotic and status-seeking, absurd and charming, breathtaking and predictable; prone to material catastrophe and yet driven by unparalleled physical skills.....Alternately, sometimes simultaneously, it is conservative and outlawed, conformist and transgressive." (Stoddart 2000) Paul Binder is the co-founder and director of the Big Apple Circus<sup>2</sup>, New York. He has spent the last thirty years closely confronting the true nature of the beast he created. He says, "Circus is basic. It is entertainment that comes closest to confronting our primitive fears." E T Kirby has written on the shamanistic origin of popular entertainments(Kirby 1974), as has Rogan Taylor, mentioned above. These authors are proposing that circus acts, the circular scenography, and the tent itself hark back to humanity's primal instincts of fear, mystery and courage. I would go further and suggest that the psychic significance of circus lies in its very associations with just those elements which most occur in human phobias, ancient and modern. Consider the things circus artists face: heights, unstable ground, crowds, isolation, wild animals, knives, fire, bullying, wrong clothes, exposure and so on. All these are classic phobic triggers, and we see them faced and resolved one by one in the ring. All this goes towards explaining the attraction/repulsion that the public has for circuses.

Paul Binder started, like so many new circus companies by gathering a new family around him. Michael Christenson, his performing partner, Gregory and Nina Fedin, defectors from the Moscow Circus, assorted New York buskers, eager circus students and the "Back Street Fliers" from Harlem. "The first time I saw a circus I was I in one", said one of these young Afro-American acrobats.<sup>3</sup> Eventually Binder married Katja Schumann, from the circus aristocracy of Denmark, and his new family has the potential to become a new dynasty. This aspect of family is crucial to the continuation of circus. Many families, such as Knie, Ashton, Chipperfield, Gasser and Hanneford have had four or more generations working with the circus.

Children are seen as the currency of the future in the circus. Their training often begins around five years of age, and naturally, they are most valuable to the show as young adults, when their good looks and talents are peaking. The difficulty of their leaving the circus is clear, and explored by McConnell(McConnell 1992)and Ramsland/St-

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<sup>1</sup> "Freaks" Dir Todd Browning, 1932. "Santa Sangre" Dir A Jodorowski, 1989. "I Clowns", Dir. F Fellini, 1970

<sup>2</sup> The story of Binder's circus is told in photos and narrative in "Big Apple Circus" Simon, P. A. (1975)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in "Big Apple Circus".

Leon (Ramsland 1993). Inter-marriage between circus families is common, which ensures genetically modified new acts, and also as in royal intermarriage throughout history, it cements alliances and prevents hostilities between rival companies. Visit any traditional circus and you will see a multi-generational community. Often an elderly grandmother is seen selling ice cream or mending costumes. She may well be the matriarch of the family, whose experience is the wellspring for the younger family running the show. There will always be children, nurtured by the whole company, whose training and gradual exposure to the ring are of interest to everybody. Circus children today usually do distance education, occasionally attend primary school on the road, and are often sent to board at high school. They have a wonderful household of aunts and uncles, astonishing pets, and grow up learning to relate well to their daily guests, the public.

A child sees the work of his parents, and joins in with it when he is able. I have visited Lennon's Circus on several occasions, and always found Lindsay Lennon busy, but not too busy to stop for a cup of tea. He may be making a new tent on a heavy-duty sewing machine outside the big top in Balga, doing the accounts in a paper-strewn caravan in New South Wales, or soothing old Sampson, his pet lion on a film-set in a regional park. But his boys are never far away, each one learning from his father, and later applying the experience as they run their own circuses. The African proverb says "It takes a village to bring up a child", and a circus village environment provides all those opportunities so often and ominously denied to most children today, namely the chance to take risks, to trust and be trusted, to show off, to aspire to the impossible, to laugh a lot, and to work hard.

I asked Pixi Robertson<sup>4</sup> why the circus life suited her. She recalled a morning in England, when she was outside her caravan, dew on the grass, animals munching, beautiful smells in the air, and she realized that this was her job. She worked here. She also referred to Circus Oz who were at the time camping and performing in the Alexander Gardens, on the banks of the Yarra, in central Melbourne. Doing the job you love, waking up in amazing places, why would you do anything else?

The paradox in circus architecture is that although the location may be different, the configuration of the circus village is always the same. You will have the same neighbours, the same proximity to the animal grazing yard and the big top. Your boundary may be variously defined by a road, a fence or a river, and the water tap may be in a different place, but children will still meet and play in the same place, the food tent will be where you expect it, and you'll be able to find your way home in the dark.

Many circus fictions dwell on the "Hey Rube!" events. This is the traditional cry, in the USA at least, when the circus or fairground is under attack. All able-bodied fighters will rally to the call, and according to authors like Tully, will arm themselves with star pickets, tent pegs and elephants to defend their homes and work-place against invaders. These are usually gangs of local young men, threatened and affronted by the presence on their territory of a self-contained nomadic community, whose charismatic performers have allegedly proved irresistible to the local ladies. This type of confrontation, beloved of authors, does still occur frequently although not always dramatically, and it inevitably bonds the members of the circus village closer together.

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<sup>4</sup> Pixi Robertson worked for European circuses and toured for years with her small family circus "Carnival Circus". She is currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing.

While we in the cities are cushioned by the remnants of a welfare state from the fluctuations of fortune, a circus, even more than a farming community, can lurch from good times to bad, and must be ready to cope. Katherine Susannah Pritchard's "Haxby's Circus" (Pritchard 1930) portrays the perils of this kind of existence in early twentieth century Australia. Con Colleano, the world renowned Aboriginal wire-walker, wrote in his memoirs, "the circus was pretty much an up and down affair. One day we would have two or three thousand pounds and after six or eight weeks bad run we would be broke. So we all decided that we would concentrate on whatever act we could do best." (Ramsland 1993)<sup>5</sup>

This aspect of each doing what they could do best is the essence of circus economy, and surely places circus as a model for a human community. Apart from their specialities in the ring, all members of the circus have at least one other talent and occupation, whether it be negotiating site fees, fixing trucks, selling popcorn, moving animals. Truly the circus expects "from each according to his abilities"<sup>6</sup>.

Even when Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows toured in the nineteen forties with a company of fourteen hundred people, there was always a feeling of being a part of a system, an extended family whose senior members were still within reach. In the past twenty years, Cirque du Soleil has revolutionized this system of circus economy, with a corporate, global model where shows are designed in the Montreal head office, and sent off around the world. Performers are dispensable and replaceable, and newcomers often have to ape the exact movements and mannerisms of their predecessors. However, the overwhelming majority of circuses still operate at a human scale, respecting each performer's individuality. This community of interdependent individuals serves as a model of a liveable community.

As we move from the economy to the ecology of circus, it is worth noting Kershaw's interpretation of a parallel phenomenon in theatre, namely the international festival production, which tours the world for years. Examples would be Peter Brooke's "Mahabarata", "Cirque du Soleil" and Slava's "Snow Show".

"Created by high-profile marketing of scarce products, intercultural performance work by 'world leaders' in the field can become, despite its best intentions just another hot ticket to be snapped up by the jet-setters of the international cognoscenti. So wherever they are staged, these events partake of the disciplines of a newly globalised 'theatre'. In this context, how can intercultural performance hope to avoid being turned into a commodity, a hot property with little chance of resisting or displacing, let alone transcending, the forces of consumerism that would turn it into an object to be owned, a piece of cultural capital?" (Kershaw 1999) Most circuses have the small size and degree of autonomy never to be seen as a consumerist cultural commodity.

Now I speak briefly of oecology with an 'o', an earlier word than the 'e' form, defined in the Shorter OED as "Study of the spatial distribution of a population in reference to material and social causes and effects." There are few such relevant studies, but clearly the circus is not a great drain on the world's resources. Compared with say, Rally

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<sup>5</sup> Con Colleano's story is told in "Wizard of the Wire" by Mark St Leon. 1993. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx. Communist Manifesto. 1848

Australia or most sporting events, the circus has a light footprint. In fact its sudden magical disappearance often inspires poets; in "Epilogue", Rachel Field writes:

"Nothing now to mark the spot  
But a littered vacant lot;  
Sawdust in a heap, and there  
Where the ring was, grass worn bare....." (Field 1982)

and Robert Lax, in "Circus Days and Nights",

"Have you seen the circus steal away?  
Leaving the field of wonders darkened  
leaving the air where the tent stood empty,  
silence and darkness where sight and sound were,  
living only in memory?" (Lax 2000)

Circus is not generally known for consumption nor waste. It certainly travels, and like the rest of the world, the evolution from horse-power to trains to diesel trucks may be seen as environmentally regressive. But they travel light. Their possessions are necessarily few. They value each other not for consumer durables, but for talent, stamina and goodwill, and in the case of circus animals, this same situation applies. Circus animals live longer than those in zoos and in the wild. The obvious reason is that circus people have a vested interest in keeping their animals healthy, happy and alive. There is currently opposition to animals in circus from a minority who argue for a kind of animal apartheid. Marx wrote, "The rich will do anything for the poor but get off their backs". It seems to me the same irony is present in animal liberation politics, where more attention is paid to the few well-kept animals in circuses than to the millions of animals throughout the world killed or threatened by man's greed for food, real estate and cash crops. Dr. Kyle-Worthington, in her study commissioned by the RSPCA on circus animals concludes,

"Ethically, ecologically and ethologically acceptable ways of inter-species associations are possible and desirable, and they **could** develop even in zoos and circuses. For this to happen, though, such institutions must change, not be banned." (Worthington 1990)

Humanity's desire for inter-species association is manifested in our desire to keep pets, and to show them off. This instinct, with its necessary understanding, care and communication is exemplified in the circus village.

Watching Lunar Circus last week relaxing outside their tent in Russel Square, Perth, confirmed for me that this is a community life so much richer and more human than many that we allow ourselves to experience. Gareth and Bronte were warming and stretching their fit and healthy bodies. The intimacy of their own personal partnership extends into their performance. Not for them this modern separation of body and function. Trainer Matt was on the grass, balancing four-year-old Jai on his hands, watched by Jai's parents. Others in the accumulated family of circus associates were involved in tasks of shopping, cooking, and administration. The Perth season enables them to catch up on old friends, to cross paths and exchange news with another circus, Stardust Circus, performing at Bassendean, and each night to astonish and inspire an

audience among whose number will be future friends, future performers or future dreamers.

Lunar Circus represents a new generation of young people who have re-invented a tribal nomadic culture that, like Australian Aboriginal peoples<sup>7</sup> and Asian and European gypsies has the family as its basis, a reciprocal commitment between the individual and the group, and a way of contributing to the well-being of the land across which they travel.

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Waite, in his anthropological study of Circus Oz, draws parallels between that collective and Aboriginal tribal structures. Waite, C. (1985).

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