

FOCUS
MEETINGS
OF THE
NETWORK

CIRCUS AND MUSIC: FROM MUSICAL ILLUSTRATION TO SOUND CREATION



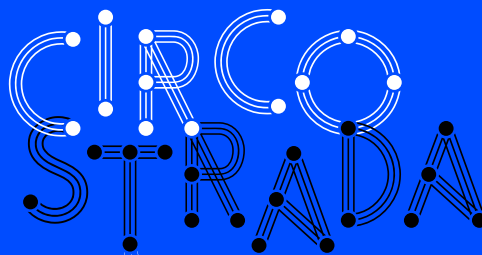
As part of the Spring Festival and in cooperation with the Rencontre Cirque organised by Onda, Circostrada Network, HorsLesMurs and La Brèche - Pôle National des Arts du Cirque de Basse-Normandie/Cherbourg-Octeville, organised the first Focus Meeting on 20 March 2015.

The meeting looked at new relationships between circus arts and music and provided the opportunity to examine how these forms of artistic expression are cultivated through their interaction within the circus environment.

HorsLesMurs

Coordinator of the network, HorsLesMurs is the French national resource center for street arts and circus arts. Founded in 1993 and funded by the ministry of Culture and Communication, it works for the development of these fields through activities of documentation, training, counselling, networking, research and publishing.

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European Network
Circus and Street ArtS

This report was
written by
Charlotte Lipinska
and coordinated by
Anne-Louise Cottet.

Since 2003, Circostrada Network works to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 70 members, it contributes to build a sustainable future for the sector by empowering cultural players through actions of observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.

EDITORIAL

As part of the Spring Festival and in cooperation with the Rencontre Cirque organised by Onda - Office National de Diffusion Artistique, Circostrada Network, HorsLesMurs and La Brèche – Pôle National des Arts du Cirque de Basse-Normandie/Cherbourg-Octeville, organised the first Focus Meeting on 20 March 2015.

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In a new format introduced by Circostrada Network, Focus Meetings aim to examine cross-cutting or interdisciplinary themes in partnership with members of the network. The network then publishes meeting reports online.



SPEAKERS

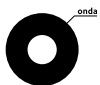
- **Angela Laurier**, acrobat, director (Compagnie Angela Laurier)
 - **Marine Mane**, writer, director (Compagnie In vitro)
 - **Christophe Ruetsch**, composer
 - **Nicolas Mathis**, director, juggler (Collectif Petit travers)
 - **Roland Auzet**, writer, composer, director (Compagnie Act Opus)
 - **Alexander Vantournhout**, acrobat, director
 - **Moderator : Charlotte Lipinska**, journalist
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PARTNERS OF THE FOCUS MEETING



La brèche
LES CENTRES D'ARTS SCÈNES
DE BRASSE-MIRAMANDIE / THERESAURE-BOYVILLE

SACD

Hors les murs

CIRCOSTRADA



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THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The presence and use of music

While music is a normal aspect of circus performances (no one in attendance had ever seen a circus performance without music, other than short acts lasting just a few minutes), the way it is used and its relationship with writers can vary. Speakers shared their various approaches to music based on their experience. Three aspects were identified: balance, development and counterpoint.

Marine Mane on commented on her latest creation, *La tête des porcs contre l'enclos*, with original music by Christophe Ruetsch: "My main priority was to be in tune with what was happening [on stage]. The idea of balance was ever-present. When you bring in different languages, you have to know if everything is working in the same direction and make sure there isn't too much icing on the cake. You have to figure out how to create space between things so that the other possibility - the relationship with the audience - can come into existence."

Nicolas Mathis on *Pan-pot ou modérément chantant*: "The performance is made up of forty or so short 15-second to 3-minute musical excerpts [Bach, Ligeti, Mozart, Beethoven, etc.] The idea was to develop the juggling sequences then create connections with the music. (...) For instance for one fugue, we worked on the idea of patterns, with variations and potential for proliferation. In other spots, we created a line of intensity with the music, which acted in counterpoint with the juggling."

"When you bring in different languages, you have to know if everything is working in the same direction and make sure there isn't too much icing on the cake. You have to figure out how to create space between things so that the other possibility - the relationship with the audience - can come into existence." Marine Mane

Director and composer: four-handed creation

Working with a living composer juxtaposes two creators, each with their own language, their own codes, their own way of thinking, their own concerns, and their own challenges. The question is, how do you bring all this together?

thinking, their own concerns, and their own challenges. The question is, how do you bring all this together? Who gets the say on the final cut? Although everyone hopes for smooth collaboration, it goes without saying that there are sometimes conflicts, disagreements, compromises to be reached and ego issues to be resolved.

Nicolas Mathis talked about his collaboration with Pierre Jodlowski for *Les beaux orages qui nous étaient promis*: "We always kept the final work as our

Working with a living composer juxtaposes two creators, each with their own language, their own codes, their own way of

focus. We each had our own way of thinking and we had to get past that. We always discussed the problems rather than our own wants and needs. We had to remove the problem from each situation. Pierre has his own aesthetic view that's not going to change, but that's exactly why I wanted to work with him."

Roland Auzet, who composes the music for his own performances: "Over time, I've come to realise that I'm fine with cutting [music] out. This summer, I have a project and I already know that I'll have to cut out about a third of what I've composed. The stage sets the tone. But I'd like to add that if composers were called on more often, they wouldn't worry so much if their work isn't at the forefront..."

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Roland Auzet

Musicians on stage

Over the past few years, it has become increasingly frequent to see musicians and/or composers on the stage. This can be attributed to new, more cross-cutting and interdisciplinary staging approaches. There has been a transition from the traditional circus band to genuine artists who are integrated into the dramaturgy and take part in the action on stage.

Roland Auzet: *"I think that the progress made in opening up the relationship with time and space paved the way for composers to be present. Projects still depend on the work of a director, writer, or choreographer, but musicians are slowly stepping out of the shadows. (...) The notion itself of composer-led music is reinventing itself on the stage."*

Angela Laurier: *"After beginning my career with Cirque du Soleil, I worked a lot in cabarets with a soundtrack. It's completely different. I need the musicians to be on stage with me, taking part in the story."*

Marine Mane: *"We thought for a long time about whether or not to have Christophe on the stage. Ini-*

tially he was going to be present, but in the end we decided against it. It just wasn't the right place for him to be properly heard. However, it was obvious that he should play the music live, even if the audience couldn't see him. Doing it live allows you to be more in tune with the emotions and relationships being played out and to be carried along by what's happening on stage."

Christophe Ruetsch: *"Live performances give me a lot of flexibility. I've got a pretty broad musical score that I use as a map to keep me on a rough course. I change the tempo and nuances, and I don't always play the same sounds at the same times. It was out of the question to use a score that was set in stone for this type of performance."*

"Doing it live allows you to be more in tune with the emotions and relationships being played out and to be carried along by what's happening on stage." Marine Mane

AESTHETICS

All the speakers agreed that music is the most immediate way of generating emotion and that all types of music can be used in the circus as long as there is a coherent storyline. None of this excludes fads and various passing trends. After the punk-rock of the nouveau cirque movement in the 80s and 90s, the success of Flemish companies brought a modern flare to baroque music. Now classical music has come back on the scene. Some speakers expressed disappointment that producers and distributors are more hesitant when it comes to more avant-garde music. So-called contemporary music seems to still make some people uneasy...

Nicolas Mathis on his collaboration with Pierre Jodowski for Les beaux oranges qui nous étaient promis: *"It was poorly received in the sense that it wasn't the place for listening. We got a lot of criticism from the public and circus professionals about the music. Incidentally, we didn't tour much with the show... In most circus performances, the music brings a certain energy to the show. In this case it was the opposite. It*

was something you had to overcome to find the energy in the juggling. We had to use the juggling and imagery to make the music heard."

Roland Auzet on the radical nature of some scores and the lack of involvement of living composers: *"It's like a guy who doesn't have enough to eat every day and suddenly someone says to him 'tomorrow you'll have all you can eat!'. So he stuffs himself silly and ends up being sick! It's exactly the same for composers! It's the worst in opera houses. They always use the same repertoire: Purcell, Stravinski...and then every 10 years, they say to a guy, 'Next year you're up.' He feels like he's been chosen by the gods! So he puts all he's got into it and all of a sudden, it's often a bit too much. A fascinating study was done. Do you know how many living composers have been featured in music and opera houses for the*

"In most circus performances, the music brings a certain energy to the show. In this case it was the opposite. It was something you had to overcome to find the energy in the juggling." Nicolas Mathis

2014-2015 season? 0.9%! 3,000 young composers are trained each year in France. You may as well just tell them that they're useless... I know that SACD [French Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers] keeps a close watch on it, but spaces that cater to the wider general public should also fight harder. There also needs to be a greater focus on the role of the composer."

Finally, Roland Auzet warned those in attendance about what future productions are looking for: "I worked on an experiment with the IRCAM [Insti-

tute for Music/Acoustic Research and Coordination] where we put sensors on the spectators to see what rhythm their bodies reacted to the most. The pop music industry does exactly the same kind of thing. The tempo which the human body responds to the most is 84 BPM measured in 1/4 notes. You'll notice that every major record label aims for this tempo. But it's physiological. It's what sells! You have to be careful and know whether you're working in the public sector to develop the arts or in a Universal Music office..."

MUSIC AT THE HEART OF THE SHOW

Sometimes music is the cornerstone of a circus show. Alexander Vantournhout and Angela Laurier touched on this as they spoke about their respective works, *Caprices* and *Art piste*. The discussion highlighted a problem shared by all the speakers, which is the distribution network. They are forced

to weave their way between music venues and circus performance spaces without necessarily fitting in at either. In the end, the general performing arts network seems to cater the best to interdisciplinary performances.

Caprice, written and performed by Alexander Vantournhout

Alexander is a Flemish acrobat, specialised in the Cyr Wheel, and a Circus Next 14 laureate. In *Caprices*, his solo performance is built around the music of Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino in a long violin solo.

Alexander explained his Mickey Mouse concept: "It's like in a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Each movement illustrates a note or a noise. This way of moving naively

to the music is the basic principle behind the performance. But the music is extremely complex, precise and structured, so it becomes a huge constraint. I discovered the music at a spectral music concert. Basically, there aren't really any notes but you focus on the note's spectra. The musician actually never presses the strings down completely. So he doesn't play notes but strange sounds..."

Art piste, directed by Angela Laurier

For the first time ever, Angela Laurier will not be on the stage. She directs acrobat Thomas Bodinier (tightrope artist) and harpist Sophie Béguier, whose difficult years learning how to play the instrument are the inspiration behind the performance.

Angela Laurier: "Sophie recorded every class she had with a highly tyrannical teacher over a ten year period. She lost all confidence in herself. Listening to one of the tapes became the starting point of our work. Sophie and Thomas began learning their art forms at a very young age, when they were six. So it will focus on

learning, in what I consider to be a trio, because the harp will be a character in its own right. There's actually a major point in common between a harp string and a tightrope wire. They have exactly the same tension: 1.5 tonnes! Thomas' tightrope wire will be equipped with sensors to capture sound. We're still rehearsing..."

"the harp will be a character in its own right. There's actually a major point in common between a harp string and a tightrope wire. They have exactly the same tension"

Angela Laurier

What distribution network caters to interdisciplinary performances?

Angela Laurier faced this problem for *L'Angela bête*. Was it too musical for the circus scene? Too acrobatic for the music scene? She explained that she was often told by people that they did not know where to put the performance because it "didn't fit neatly into a box".

Roland Auzet shared his experience in various fields. "The interdisciplinary approach was introduced by

specialised theatres wanting to diversify. But once projects got off the ground, they were always seen as too much of one thing and not enough of another. In the end, the general performing arts network stepped up to challenge, handling the specific nature of interdisciplinary performing arts with great intelligence."

MUSICAL TRAINING FOR CIRCUS PERFORMERS

One key question came up frequently during discussions: What kind of musical training should young circus performers be getting? Can they, should they also learn to play instruments? At school, what kind of teaching do they get in music and its future use? The speakers agreed that it is impossible to learn how to play an instrument in such a short number of years at school and that learning how to analyse music would be much more useful to them.

Alexander Vantournhout, trained at the ESAC school of circus arts in Brussels and the Performing Arts

"They try to train an actor, circus performer, dancer and musician [...] But you just can't do it!"

Alexander Vantournhout

Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S): "They try to train an actor, circus performer, dancer and musician in 3 years of studies. But you just can't do it! They try to teach stu-

dents how to play an instrument but in my opinion, it's a waste of time. It would be better if they learned how to analyse music..."

Roland Auzet: "I agree. Analysing music is what's most important. At the CNAC (National Centre for Circus Arts), I was told to teach the students how to play an instrument, but I kept telling myself, 'it's a disaster. None of them are able to play the accordion!' So I made them listen to lots of music to teach them how to understand harmony, timbre, etc. It's so much better for their development as artists and for opening up their ears."

A spectator in the audience and former CNAC student: "A distinction needs to be made between music awareness and playing music. I may not have got the best theory training, but I didn't feel like they wanted to turn us into musicians. We at least learned how to play together and listen to each other, even though we weren't very good. Being together is something I really learned at the CNAC."

"We learned how to play together and listen to each other"

a former CNAC student

Nicolas Mathis: "That's something that we really insist on in our company: being able to understand music, analysing it, structuring it and working on rhythm. We're all musicians in our own small way. That said, I think that having a deep-seated feel for tempo and producing rhythm is relevant to all disciplines, from dance to circus arts."

Angela Laurier, who has also taught at the CNAC: "Personally, I like working with the body as a starting point. I prefer working without music, and just the sound of the body and the apparatus, silence and breathing, because in the end, it's all music!"

Cover

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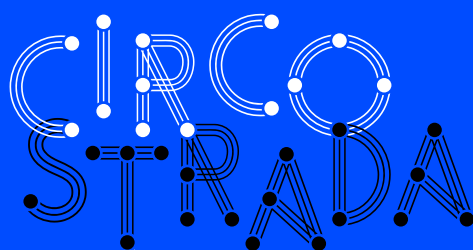
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