

RESEARCH  
TRIPS  
ETHIOPIA

# ETHIOPIA

## AN INSIGHT INTO AFRICAN CIRCUS ARTS



ARTCENA

ARTCENA is the French National Centre for Circus Arts, Street Arts and Theatre, funded by the French Ministry of Culture. It coordinates the Circostrada network and has a permanent seat on its Steering Committee. It works towards its missions in three main areas: sharing knowledge and resources through a digital platform; supporting professionals via mentoring and training; promoting and strengthening the circus, street arts and theatre fields by carrying out international development projects.

This publication  
was edited  
by Circostrada

CIRCO  
STRADA

European Network  
Circus and Street Arts

Since 2003, Circostrada Network has been working to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 100 members from over 30 countries, it helps building a sustainable future for these sectors by empowering cultural players through activities in observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.

Co-funded by the  
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## FOREWORD

For its second research trip, which was held from February 26<sup>th</sup> to March 4<sup>th</sup> 2018, Circostrada took its members to Ethiopia for a one-week immersive experience into African circus arts. Co-organised with Fekat Circus in the frame of the second edition of the first pan-African festival dedicated to contemporary circus – the African Circus Arts Festival – hosted in Addis Ababa, this trip was the very first one undertaken by the network on the African continent. Accompanied by a delegation of 15 members coming from all over Europe, Circostrada and Fekat Circus designed a rich and diverse programme that was intended to gain better understanding and knowledge of African circus arts, to map key actors of the field and to foster partnership opportunities between the network's members and Ethiopian circus professionals.

While the first edition of the African Circus Arts Festival in 2015 had brought together around 12,000 participants and a hundred artists coming from all parts of Africa, thus laying the foundations for this meeting between African circuses, the second edition of the festival marked the sector's willingness to gather on a more regular basis, to strengthen the ties between African circus professionals and to share and exchange with other international actors. Supported and implemented by Fekat Circus, the festival acts as a showcase of the vitality of African circuses and has become a key unifying event for circus professionals across the continent.

This publication provides an insight into the Ethiopian circus arts scene, reviewing its development over time, its characteristics, aesthetics, the stakes it is currently facing but it also provides a broader overview of the cultural environment of Addis Ababa, putting forward local initiatives, key African circus companies and the synergies and dynamics of a sector that has started to pave the way for a shared development. Last but not least, the present record also highlights key issues discussed during the two days of professional meetings and workshops between Circostrada members and Africa-based professionals.

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[www.circostrada.org](http://www.circostrada.org)

# CIRCUS IN DEVELOPMENT

An article By Stéphane Segreto-Aguilar,  
Head of Development at ARTCENA/Circostrada  
Network Coordinator

## Report on the research trip to Ethiopia organised by the Circostrada network

The Ethiopian circus world, revitalised in the 1990s through the mediation of two North Americans, has not stopped diversifying for the last decade, developing new approaches to innovation in the circus arts. In order to meet with the key players of this transformation, the Circostrada network<sup>1</sup> organised a research trip in February 2018, during the second edition of the “African Circus Arts Festival” (ACAF) organised by Fekat Circus. The following is a report on an enriching week of exchanges and encounters.

In *La grande bellezza*<sup>2</sup>, Paolo Sorrentino says to a character belonging to the upper classes of Roman society, “the only interesting jazz is Ethiopian jazz.” Generally called ‘ethio-jazz’, this style of jazz, born in the early 1960s in the bars and hotels of Addis Ababa<sup>3</sup>, entered its golden era in the 1970s. Its rediscovery beyond Ethiopia’s borders was defined by two major moments: the release of the collection “Ethiopiques” in the 90s by the independent French label Buda Musique<sup>4</sup> and the international success of *Broken Flowers*<sup>5</sup>, a film by Jim Jarmusch, the soundtrack of which includes music from Mulatu Astatke, considered the father of ethio-jazz.



It is important, though, to not confound this with the circus – as much its genesis and its evolution differ from the music industry. It should be said that this distinction allows for a deeper reflection on the modes through which European and African artistic figures come into contact. This is the primary takeaway from this short research trip, which sent a delegation of 13

Circostrada members<sup>6</sup>, during which the central question was that of adjusting the essential lenses of understanding, all while building new tools of analysis in the field in order to better comprehend the mechanisms of artistic creation in Ethiopia. At the same time, this opportunity to explore interdependencies, both real and symbol-

ic, one fed by the globalised North which a European delegation represents despite itself, all while avoiding impossible-to-satisfy expectations. In other words, this trip allowed us to witness adaptive forms of collaboration, respecting the specificities and interests of all, ensuring that they can be implemented in the long-term.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, the European network Circostrada aids in the development and structuring of the circus arts and street art in Europe and beyond. With more than 100 members in 30 countries, it is under the guise of ARTCENA and supported by the program Creative Europe of the European Commission and the Ministry of Culture (France).

<sup>2</sup> Released in 2013, the film was nominated for an Oscar in 2014, taking home the Best Foreign Language.

<sup>3</sup> Addis Ababa, which means ‘new flower’ is a city with more than 3 million inhabitants and is home to the HQ of the African Union since 1963, located in the centre of the country on a plateau at an altitude of 2,500 meters.

<sup>4</sup> The collection, created and directed by Francis Falceto, has allowed for the rediscovery of ethio-jazz albums produced in the 1960s and 1970s by Amha Esthète, founder of Amha Records.

<sup>5</sup> Released in 2005, the film is nominated at the Cannes Festival where it went on to win the Jury grand prize.

<sup>6</sup> The delegation was composed of the following organisations: Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni (Italy), La Brèche – Pôle National Cirque de Normandie (France), Café de las Artes Teatro (Spain), Circus Xanti (Norway), Crying Out Loud (UK), FiraTàrrega (Spain), HH Producties (Netherlands), Mala Performerska Scena (Croatia), Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde (France), Le Prato (France), The Roundhouse (UK), Spoffin Festival (Netherlands), and Subtopia (Sweden).

The research excursion to Ethiopia started out easy, first with meetings with the innovators of the Ethiopian cultural landscape (Zoma Contemporary Art Center, Fendika Asmari Bet, Muya Ethiopia), different representatives of foreign cultural institutions based in Addis Ababa and the long-time partners of Fekat Circus<sup>1</sup> (Alliance Ethio-Française, the Delegation of the European Union, Goethe Institut, Instituto Italiano di Cultura).

Each interview allowed us a more precise reading of the local context, a better understanding of the mutual risks and opportunities, as well as a chance to identify difficulties, like the lack of appropriate spaces for

In meeting Giorgia Giunta, member of the administrative board of Fekat Circus and cofounder of the ACAF, the question of the status of contemporary circus arts in Ethiopia could be raised through a new prism. Fekat Circus, “the circus that blossoms” in Amharic<sup>2</sup>, was founded in 2004 by a group of young circus performers living on the periphery of Addis Ababa. Based since 2009 in Piassa, the historic heart of the city, they experienced a rapid growth in their missions. Made up of around thirty permanent participants, its primary focus is today centered on two primary axes: training young people in the circus arts by offering them the chance to work in Ethiopia and abroad,

days<sup>4</sup>. Fekat Circus is also an active participant in the construction of ASHARA, the first contemporary national circus network, created in 2017, which groups together six different artistic structures in Ethiopia.

The following two days involved meetings between European and African professionals with presentations by various organisations and artistic projects, round tables for artists, programmers and administrators of invited companies, as well as structured talks on various themes. Many plans of action came out of this chance to share advice on best practices and motivational stories. From this came the idea to develop a portal for sharing information in order to combat the lack of training available in Africa, with videos, MOOCs and adapted teaching tools. Others proposed diversifying the source of financing for cultural organisations by exploring the option of new financial backers for social change. In regard to the issue of the role and place given to the female body, opinions were divided, but all participants were in agreement that it is imperative to achieve gender parity in performances and to privilege employment of women, not only in performance work, but also on production teams. Everyone, though, agreed to promote the development of new international events, a vital source of networking opportunities.

The final three days of the trip were dedicated to the festival itself. The second time the ACAF was held, supported largely by the EU Commission<sup>5</sup>, took place on the esplanade of the Officers Club, one of the rare green spaces in the capital, rented out especially for the event. A red and white big top<sup>6</sup>, the first in the Horn of Africa, along with an outdoor stage anchored each end of the esplanade. Numerous stands of local food, contemporary artisanal works and regional products, as well as an area reserved for children, were lined up between these two focal points.



rehearsals and professional development of artists, limited financial means aside those already put in place by foreign NGOs and foreign cultural representatives, a reduced artistic mobility, further complicated by difficulties related to the procurement of visas (not restricted to Europe, but also for travelling to other African countries), and the general public and political institutions’ tendency to be overly cautious regarding an aesthetic often deemed to be too contemporary or overly explicit.

all while developing social action projects aimed at children in hospitals, orphanages and prisons.

Fekat Circus, which went from being under the Ministry of Sports to Culture<sup>3</sup>, is now leading the charge for innovation of the circus arts in Ethiopia, largely thanks to the creation of the first pan-African circus festival, ACAF, which in 2015 brought together more than 100 artists (8 invited companies) and around 12,000 spectators over three

<sup>1</sup> Fekat Circus is directed by Dereje Dange, who is also the artistic director of the company.

<sup>2</sup> Amharic is the most commonly spoken language in the capital but also the second most spoken language in the country after Oromo. There are more than 90 different languages spoken in Ethiopia.

<sup>3</sup> This change confirms the recognition of the circus arts by public entities but brings with a new restriction: the cultural events are heavily taxed, contrary to sporting events.

<sup>4</sup> The official numbers for the festival in 2018 are not yet available, but the initial estimates seem to confirm a similar number of spectators.

<sup>5</sup> The first time the festival was held in 2015 it was supported by, among others, UNESCO, the Prince Claus Foundation and the Alta Mane Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Purchased second-hand for 16,500€ thanks to a public fundraising campaign.

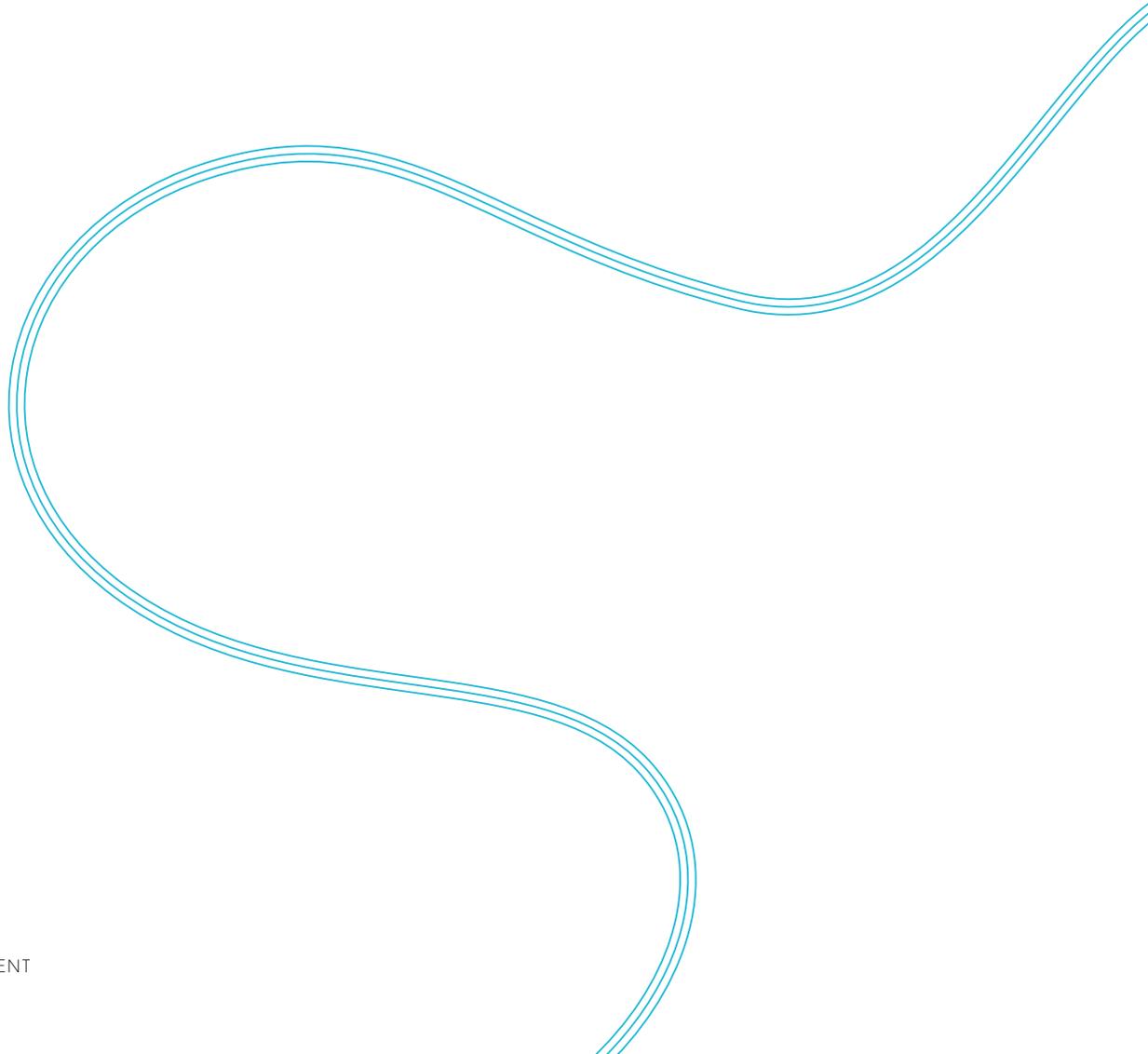


unta closed the second ACAF. An undeniable success, an unforgettable experience, promising and looking to the future. Several new opportunities for collaboration have been put in place thanks to this research trip, among them are a few that are already beginning to take shape: artistic collaboration initiatives, possible expansion of African circus artistry in Europe, as well as a genuine exchange of knowledge, information and experiences via a dedicated publication that will become available by the end of this August on Circostrada's resources portal.

The next research trip for Circostrada will focus on a new continent. A delegation is headed to South Korea in October 2018 in order to observe the "Seoul Street Arts Festival" and participate as part of the European focus organised by the PAMS, Performing Arts Market Seoul.

Aside from Fekat Circus, several circus companies from all over Africa were in attendance to present their projects: Marionetas Gigantes (Mozambique), Circus Bahar Dar (Ethiopia), Sarakasi Trust (Kenya), Colokolo (Morocco), Circus Diredawa & Hawassa (Ethiopia), Tinafan (Guinea), Cir-

cus Debre Berhan (Ethiopia) and Zip Zap Circus (South Africa). In addition, Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde presented a project called *Addis Abagneux*. In total, lots of performances, but also many poetic, surprising and touching moments. "Circus will save the planet!" With these words, Giorgia Gi-



# THE ETHIOPIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: A POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

An article by Heruy Arefe-Aine,  
Former Artistic Director  
of the Ethiopian Music Festival

Heruy Arefe-Aine is an arts presenter and cultural activist based in Addis Ababa with close to 30 years' experience as an art presenter, working in both the US and Ethiopia. He has written on Ethiopian art and music for various publications, was the co-founder of the Ethiopian Music Festival and served as its Artistic Director for 10 years, curating a series that mixed traditional and experimental Ethiopian music with a wide list of international musicians. He has organised multiple festivals and tours in Ethiopia and abroad, helped develop various film and music initiatives and has served as an advisor on the development of multiple projects in the cultural sector. He also helped shepherd projects, and consulting with agencies such as the United Nations on popular participation strategies which entailed finding means of using culture as outreach to various constituencies to spark discussion around issues.

## Letter from Addis Ababa

With respect to the original *Letter from Addis Ababa*, by Solomon Deressa<sup>1</sup>, published in *African Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (Winter, 1969)

Though on the surface, a brief overview of the cultural landscape in Ethiopia seemed simple, it became much more difficult to find an entry point than I initially anticipated.

Defining and explaining what culture means, and how it is used or expressed in Ethiopia in a short overview was challenging. An understanding also of the historical impact of the 1974 revolution and the 17-year Marxist-Leninist military regime named the Derg that followed, seemed essential. Initial drafts became overly dry and a recitation of facts, which led to paralysis.

Turning back to the 1969 piece by poet and essayist Solomon Deressa cited in the title and pieces from the great *Addis Reporter*<sup>2</sup>, a weekly publication which ran from Jan 1969-1970 helped me resolve some of these issues. What struck in re-reading these old pieces from another era, was how many of the challenges being faced by artists were the same.

For decades Ethiopian cultural expression was preserved as if in amber. The Derg's censorship policies and political repression stifled creative expression, a curfew crippled live music, mistrust and suspicion of urban bourgeoisie intelligentsia led to a backlash against the wave of modernity that had been sweeping Addis Ababa, and as in other similar political states, cultural expression was deemed not to have value unless it expressed the spirit and values of the revolution.

Though creative expression has dramatically improved since the 1991 fall of the Derg, dramatically in some sectors, there are other factors which must also be considered. One factor itself is the definition of culture in Ethiopia, generally described as *behal/be'al*



<sup>1</sup> Solomon Deressa was a leading Ethiopian writer whose poems, essays, and reviews are important documents of the cultural and intellectual ferment of Ethiopia's 1960s and 1970s. An obituary from online website the Ethiopia Observer can provide greater detail on him <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/tag/solomon-deressa/>

<sup>2</sup> Addis Reporter was the literary and journalistic expression of the modernity exploding in Ethiopia in the late 1960s. Its entry in the Encyclopedia Aethiopica stated that "it was one of the most essential sources for the study of the intellectual history of the period coinciding with its own history" and concluded "Nothing that approaches its quality and frequency of appearance has appeared since it ceased publication in 1970."

which though it literally means culture, has a very strong built-in connotation of tradition. This in and of itself presents particular challenges for people working in the cultural sector in Ethiopia. Efforts to stimulate various sectors face challenges as there is at a governmental level a disconnect in understanding what cultural practitioners, activists, and entrepreneurs face. Support at the governmental level is almost entirely geared towards preservation of historic artifacts or to the preservation of indigenous and traditional cultural practices.

There is very little understanding or appreciation for contemporary forms of expression, and governmental policies therefore reflect that. Tax policies are shaped without an understanding of how a sector works, so musicians see their instruments designated as luxury items where they pay import duties ranging from 100-300%, in addition to high taxation rates on their work. Visual artists and galleries face regulations that are designed for hotels or commercial businesses without a sense of their unique work status. *"One should not get the mistaken impression that there are not enough things of artistic worth taking place in Addis. What we sorely need is serious-minded criticism that would be at least worthy of the efforts of the practicing artists."* SD 1969

Sadly, for the most part this is still the case. There is a deep lack of critical discourse which can work to your benefit, your press release becomes your 'review'; however, I believe, for artists to develop there needs to be informed, constructive criticism and engagement with the work. People across various sectors, including filmmakers, visual artists, and musicians have all called for that.

That being said though, having witnessed changes here since 1994, striking developments have occurred in various sectors. Literature and theater are wildly popular and have a committed audience. Poetry nights have become a popular gathering spot, attracting a young audience. However, what remains true to this day is the fact that, as stated by Solomon Deressa *"One does not hear of Ethiopian literature outside of Ethiopia for the simple reason that our writers*



*write in Amharic"*. This is a strength in terms of these writers being able to express themselves in their own multiple mother-tongues, but lacking translation, the strong and evocative voices of playwrights and writers here lack an avenue where they can be heard. While there is a huge value in writing in national languages it has impaired Ethiopia's ability to tell her own stories to the world, largely relying on outsiders to do so.

Yet with the Derg came the movement of Ethiopians to different parts of the world, laying the way for the recent Ethiopian Diaspora voice in the many form of arts both in the national languages as well as in English. To be noted though, there are members of the diaspora writing abroad, primarily in English, who have garnered attention and acclaim.

Film especially has exploded over the past decade with a hugely popular and thriving local cinema, films being made in local languages for local consumption. Ethiopia film production is now asserted by some in the sector to be one of the highest in the world with hundreds of films being produced annually; whereas 1998 was the first film being shot on film in Ethiopia since pre-revolution times. Here again while there is a strong base and eagerness, the quality, with few exceptions, has yet to meet the quantity being produced. However, initiatives such as the Addis International Film Festival, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> edition, work to present audiences with a curated selection of local and international films with a focus on social justice, helping to expand the popular conception of films and documentaries.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest strides in gaining international attention have been those mediums in which an understanding of the language is not essential. The plastic arts have always been strong, with artists across painting, sculpture, photography, and multimedia producing high-quality works that have gained international acclaim, leading publications such as the New York Times to list Addis Ababa as a leading art destination. Musicians like pianist Sammy Yirga, drummer Teferi Assefa, and saxophonist Jorga Mesfin are leading transformations in the city's jazz scene. Internationally acclaimed photographer Aida Muluneh, through her biennale Addis Foto Fest, champions the field of photography and aids in its development continent-wide.

After the disastrous strictures of the curfew, live music has both revived here and been exported successfully with a thriving traditional music scene, outlets for pop and ethio-jazz, and a new developing electronic dance music community. Dance, both traditional and contemporary, are thriving and have popular audiences here and abroad.

Fashion has become a sector that has grown by leaps and bounds with the annual Hub of Africa Fashion week becoming an important meeting spot for fashion professionals from across Africa and helping showcase emerging Ethiopian designers.

While I have only touched on the overall landscape and have given short shrift some to some sectors and interesting initiatives, I hope this does prove an initial entry point.



# TO GO FURTHER

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## CULTURE IN ADDIS ABABA

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### Sidebars on Arts initiatives/Spaces

- **Addis Foto Fest**

Founded in 2010 by Aida Muluneh, the biennale is poised to become the biggest photography festival on the continent.

🌐 [www.addisfotofest.com](http://www.addisfotofest.com)  
[www.aidamuluneh.com](http://www.aidamuluneh.com)

- **Addis International Film Festival**

The main objective of Addis International Film Festival (AIFF) is to promote films that bring awareness to major local and global issues in Addis Ababa and other major cities of Ethiopia.

🌐 <https://addisfilmfestival.org>

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### Galleries and art centres

Asni Gallery, Lela Gallery, Zoma Museum, Guramayne Art Centre, and Addis Fine Arts are important players and developers of the visual arts scene in Ethiopia

🌐 <https://www.facebook.com/AsniGallery/>  
<http://www.lela-gallery.com>  
<https://addisfineart.com>  
<http://www.zomamuseum.org/zcac.html>  
📞 <https://www.facebook.com/guramayne.artcenter>

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### Fendika/EthioColor

Led by Melaku Belay, these initiatives and projects seek in some cases to preserve traditional dance, in others to push the boundaries of the definition.

🌐 <https://www.melakubelay.com>

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### Jazzamba Music School

Founded by some leading Ethiopian jazz musicians, a music education school that provides full scholarships to all accepted students

🌐 <https://www.jazzamba.org>

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### Cultural institutions

The Alliance Ethio-Française, the Goethe Institute, the Italian Cultural Institute and more recently the British Council, have played important roles in supporting and developing various cultural programmes.

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### LinkUpAddis

It is a new publication focusing on culture around the city while Ethiopia Observer attempts a magazine roundup of arts, politics, society and culture.

🌐 [www.linkupaddis.com](http://www.linkupaddis.com)  
[www.ethiopiaobserver.com](http://www.ethiopiaobserver.com)

# ZOOM ON LOCAL INITIATIVES

## Zoma Museum



Zoma Museum is an environmentally conscious museum located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Formerly known as Zoma Contemporary Art Center, the focus of Zoma Museum is on multidisciplinary contemporary art, international exchange between artists, and the conception and implementation of sustainable, innovative, and environmentally conscious art projects. The concept was developed and is co-directed by curator and anthropologist Meskerem Assegued and multidisciplinary artist Elias Sime.

Zoma is constructed using vernacular architecture techniques by utilising materials like mud, straw and stone to create a futuristic and sustainable result. The museum is committed, through the use of sustainable construction materials, vernacular techniques and innovative art projects, to finding new solutions to climate change and urbanization. The construction of the museum itself is predominately cement free and handmade.

Zoma Museum will have a school and kids programme, art and video galleries, a library as well as a residency programme. The kids programme is designed to encourage

young children to learn about art, nature, and language. Through painting activities, crafting sessions, educational videos, and other activities visiting children are encouraged to express their artistic inclinations. Furthermore, the Zoma School is part of the museums programme, inspired by Alice Waters' The Edible Schoolyard Project, the Zoma School aims to provide a hands-on environment for students to take the skills learned in the class room and apply them practically. They will be exposed to farming and gardening at the school garden, preparing food in the school kitchen, milking cows and other activities.

The compound is fitted with wheelchair ramps and handicap bathrooms, to make the museum accessible to everyone. It will also house an ever-growing library, with books donated by the Smithsonian Museum and The New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) that is open to the public with shelves stocked with various books related to art, architecture, landscaping and many other topics.

Zoma Museum will also continue its artists-residency programmes that are

designed around different themes (architecture, landscape design, art, documentary film and education), which continues the current programme of educational exchange. Local and international artists are provided with the opportunity to live in harmony with nature, develop new forms of artistic expression as well as experiment with new techniques and materials and to find alternative, unique, and creative solutions to current environmental problems.

The landscape is one of the attractive aspects of the museum, with carefully landscaped vegetable, herbal and Zen gardens and more than 40 bridges that symbolise the museum's mission to be a bridge between the international/global and the local and African artists.

### Contact

🌐 <https://www.zomamuseum.org/>

Related article:

<http://www.artnews.com/2018/07/10/ethiopian-enterprise-artists-build-future-addis-ababa-beyond/>

## Contemporary Nights



©Mekbib Tadesse

Contemporary Nights (CN#) is an artists-for-artists initiative that meets once a month at various spots in the capital Addis Ababa. They collectively construct a space for art, relevant discussions and constructive criticism. CN# gatherings focus on building a sturdy feedback channel between the artists and the audience by exhibiting works of art at

various stages, including ideas, works in progress, finished and annotated works. One of their main goals is to incorporate the audience in the art-making process and instill in them a sense of agency not only in the creation and interpretation of meaning but also in determining the relevance of the exhibited work within the context of our momentarily shared space.

Artists from different disciplines share a venue to showcase their artworks and enter their chosen medium of expression into dialogues of interconnectivity. CN#, in its endeavor to introduce and display new and critical works from artists of all disciplines, constantly redefines Addis art scene both critically and pedagogically.

# CN#

### Contact

✉ [contemporarynights@gmail.com](mailto:contemporarynights@gmail.com)

📌 [facebook.com/AddisArt](https://www.facebook.com/AddisArt)

## DESTINO Dance Company



DESTINO is an Addis Ababa based contemporary dance company established in 2014 by two Ethiopian contemporary dancers, Addisu Demissie and Junaid Jemal Sendi. The mission of the company is to promote Ethio-contemporary dance in Ethiopia and abroad as a unique dance style as well as to use dance as a tool for

social change in social programmes with the community (young people, people with disabilities, etc.). DESTINO is subtitled in Amharic as Yene Hager Zemenawi Dance, “my country’s contemporary dance” since the founders work in Ethiopia to share the experience they have gained throughout the years in different parts of the world in

order to introduce and promote progress within the Ethiopian dance scene. Likewise, DESTINO Dance Company preserve traditional dance and promote the creation of contemporary dance companies and works all over the country.

 **DESTINO**  
DANCE COMPANY

### Contact

🌐 <http://destinodance.org>

✉ [info@destinodance.org](mailto:info@destinodance.org)

📌 [facebook.com/destinodance](https://www.facebook.com/destinodance)

# CIRCUS ARTS IN ETHIOPIA

An article by Sarah Bushra, Communications Officer at Fekat Circus

## The development of circus arts in Ethiopia: a little history & current stakes

The beginning of circus arts in Ethiopia has a notable social root and was primarily driven by a socio-economic change it aimed to bring. Circus Ethiopia is the first circus organisation formed in the country with the initiative of Marc Le Chance, a French Canadian who came to Addis Ababa to teach and Andy Goldman, an American working in the National Association for the care of Ethiopian Jews. Most of its members were street children that used the circus as a haven for creativity and expression.

Prior to Circus Ethiopia, the exposure of Ethiopians to the circus arts was minuscule. During the Derg regime (1974-1991), due to the government's affiliation to socialist Russia, performances of "Moscow State Circus" were broadcasted on Ethiopia's national television station (ETV). Circus as a form of art that is enjoyed by everyone regardless of class, race, gender was classified as an egalitarian art in line with the socialist governments' principles.

Circus Ethiopia began in 1991 on the door steps of Le Chance and moved to a make-



shift office in his house before establishing a designated space in the capital city six years later. The organisation and its performers gained critical acclaim and staged performances internationally. The success of this circus troupe inspired youngsters living in various regions of the country including, Jimma, Tigray, Bahir Dar, to form circus groups in their cities. The rapid expansion of the circus troupes across the county in the

last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the peak of circus arts in Ethiopia.

Through the years Ethiopian circus has developed defining characteristics. Performances are carried out by children and youth not adults. With acrobatics as gateway to the circus arts for many Ethiopian performers, the prevailing perception of circus in the country became circus as a sport activity rather than an art discipline. Circus shows in Ethiopia are didactic in nature. Urgent social messages – for example, awareness about HIV, almost always accompanied the circus shows. Similar to other circuses in Africa, Ethiopian circuses incorporate traditional costumes and music in their shows.

Having experienced the lucrative circus market in the global North, circus artists from Ethiopia started to runaway during their tours abroad. This habit left a stain on the international image of Ethiopian circus artists and instilled a lasting suspicion towards the motives of Ethiopian circus artists travelling abroad.

Today Ethiopian circus continues to be more popular abroad than within the country. Local



audience for the circus arts is mainly constituted by expatriates and the Diaspora communities. Circus artists/groups/companies can only generate small incomes from circus activities in the country, therefore, international tours remain vital for their sustenance.

In the past decade, there had been a sort of renaissance in Ethiopia's circus scene with several circuses in the country to form competent troupes. Fekat Circus, Circus Bahir Dar, Circus Dire Dawa, Circus Debre Berhan, Circus Arbaminch, Circus Hawassa are examples of the reemerging circus sector in the country. Still with a strong social component, these circus groups stage competent shows and undertake regular tours abroad.



In the movement to develop the circus sector in Ethiopia, Fekat Circus took the lead by organising initiatives like African Circus Arts Festival (ACAF). As the first and only one of its kind, this continental Festival aims to promote African circus arts by casting

a network across previously unconnected African circus troupes around the continent and strengthening their relationship for collective development of Africa's circus arts. ACAF is also a catalyst for identifying and linking the key players of circus in Ethiopia.

Parallel to the Festival, Fekat Circus also organises capacity building workshops and has established a nationwide circus network, *ASHARA*, to leave a collective and lasting imprint of Ethiopian circus arts in the world.

## FEKAT CIRCUS - History of a blossoming organisation

From within the hall of Circus Ethiopia, the first circus organisation in the country, a group of 6 artists, still in their young age decided to venture out by themselves in search of better conditions to nurture and grow their love for circus. Fekat Circus traces its beginning to this moment - when young creatives

from underprivileged backgrounds commit to their ambitions in circus arts. They first obtained support from an international NGO based in Addis. While rehearsing in the space provided by the NGO, the founders of Fekat Circus decided to involve and impart their skills to other youngsters

from the neighbourhood. The Fekat Circus informal school came about by opening its doors to the surrounding community.

In 2008, while Fekat is still in its infant stage, its members planned a trip to Kenya where they visited Sarakasi Trust, an organisation dedicated to empowerment through cultivation of culture. This trip was a turning point for Fekat Circus artists who were previously exposed to the limited option of touring abroad. It was an eye-opening experience of what can be done with circus in an African context.

Fuelled by the inspirational trip, the troupe returned to Addis with a renewed vigour to transform their love for circus into activities with positive social impact. The Smile Medicine was immediately started at the largest referral hospital in Ethiopia and it has continued to function till date. Other outreach programmes in prison, orphanages, street children projects, and private schools were also initiated complimented with constant capacity building activities for the young team.



Thinking space is essential for their existence; Fekat Circus moved into an old charming house in Piassa, the historical centre of Addis, which has since become the heart of the circus. It is a space where the troupe rehearses and trains a new generation of artists. The central location in Addis, which is the political capital of Africa, hosting many foreign residents, created opportunities for new income generating activities to arise. Fekat Circus began as a social circus and slowly became a performing space and one of the few private cultural venues in the city.

Additional value is brought to Fekat through the exchange programmes and international tours, the latter which started in 2010 and have been happening every year since. While travelling, the troupe's vision grew: they started probing at the circus scene in Ethiopia, which has been repeating the same acts and shows for over 30 years.

Fekat Circus took the challenge of moulding a contemporary identity for Ethiopian circus. This challenge was compounded with traditional and religious society that clings to its customary ways and the risk of falling



into a stereotypically African style, which is easily sold on the market.

In 2015, Fekat Circus conceived The First African Circus Arts Festival as a means to reinvent the image of circus in Ethiopia while stimulating the development of the circus sector in Africa. The first edition of the Festival was driven by the idea to gather

African circus artists and strengthen their belief in what they do.

Through the various plans envisioned during this Festival, it was understood that African circuses are not yet at a stage to work in a continental level. Fekat Circus decided to focus on what can be done nationally – and thus established the ASHARA network. Gatherings and capacity buildings among Ethiopian circuses were organised through EU funding obtained for the development of Ethiopian circus sector. As a consequence of ASHARA, the second African Circus Arts Festival in 2018, hosted an increased number of Ethiopian circus troupes.

In the second edition, African Circus Arts Festival, as one of the emerging continental arts and cultural events, sets on a path to becoming a taste maker for the latest African circus productions. Aimed at looking outwards and forwards: becoming open and accessible to the global contemporary audience while meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing market, this edition was an event to gauge the current status of circus arts in Africa and anticipate/shape its future course.



# ASHARA

ASHARA (fingerprints in Amharic) – the Ethiopian Network of Contemporary Circuses, was created in April 2017 by 6 Ethiopian circuses (Circus Arbaminch, Circus Bahar Dar, Circus Debre Berhan, Circus Dire Dawa, Circus Hawassa, Fekat Circus).

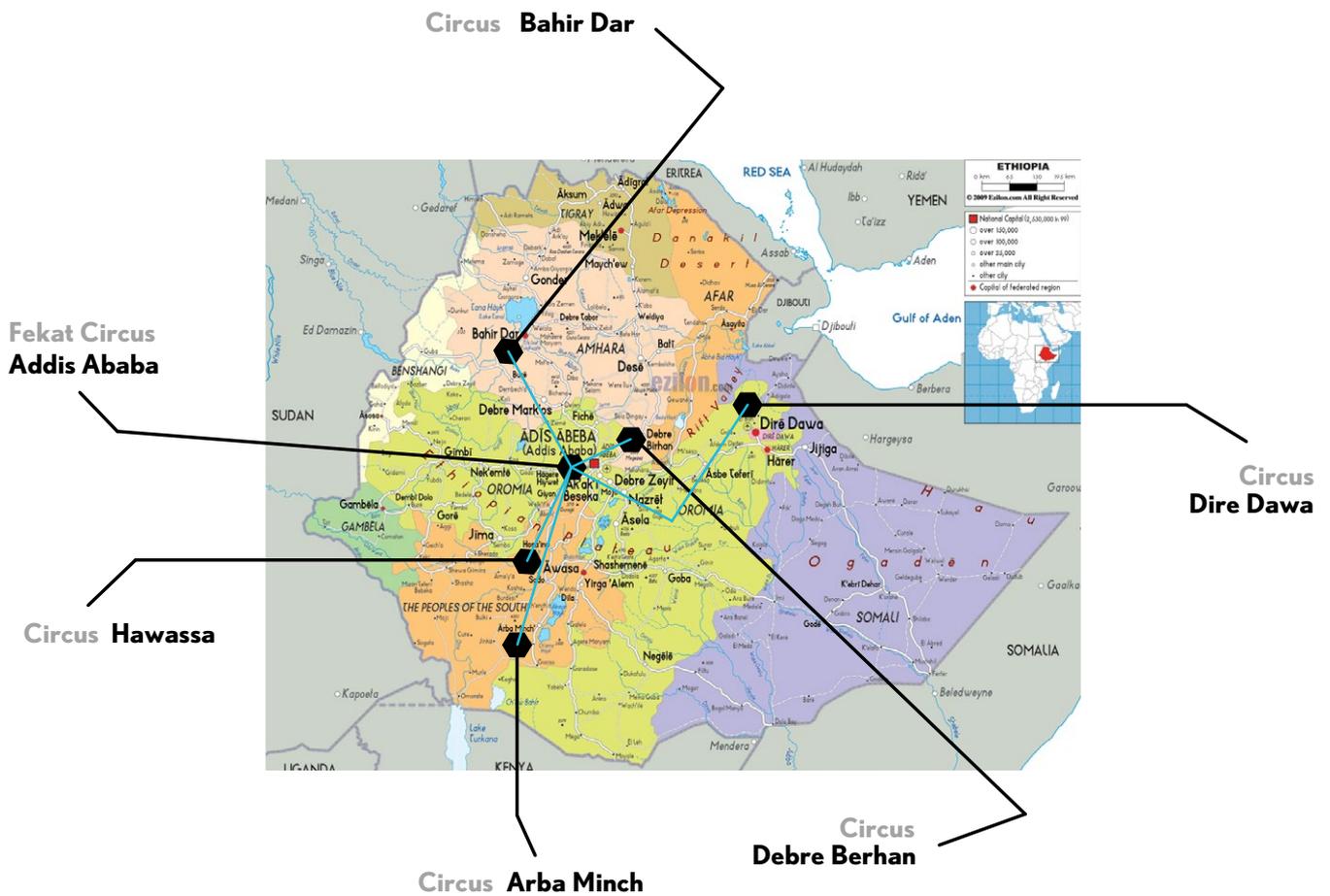
The network’s members believe in the existence of a great potential in terms of both talented performers and market in the

country, and the importance to develop that potential. Ashara aims to develop the circus art sector in Ethiopia through four main strategies: renewing the image of circus in Ethiopia, professionalising the sector, increasing recognition, and developing new models of sustainability. To date, the Ashara members participated in three trainings organised by Fekat Circus in cooperation with Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde and Crying

Out Loud. They also performed and participated to exchange skills with African artists at the African Circus Arts Festival in Addis Ababa.

In the coming future, Ashara performers will further meet, share and perform at the Fekat Circus Road Show in the Southern and Northern regions of Ethiopia.

## ASHARA - Overview of the network's members



## The Circus of Postcards: an example of cooperation project

“Circus of Postcards” is a fundraising project primarily aiming to distribute postcards at various festivals, performing arts venues and similar places where regular audiences could buy them, and thus support the improvement of the training facilities for the Ethiopian social circus.



The project was initiated in 2018 by Mala Performerska Scena (Zagreb, Croatia) and led by Ivan Kralj, President of Mala Performerska Scena, photojournalist and editor. It consisted in a photographic work carried out by the Croatian NGO from photography to design and printing, using the sales profits to support the Arba Minch Circus and Theater Group, based in Arba Minch, at the base of the western side of the **Great African Rift Valley** in Ethiopia.

**Arba Minch Circus** is a social circus group rehabilitating the street kids by teaching them acrobatics. “For many of them, the circus is saving their lives!” (Ivan Kralj). Faced with a strong lack of proper facilities for their circus training hall, where

many disadvantaged and/or street children would come to learn and practice circus, Mala Performerska Scena came up with the idea of the “Circus of Postcards” and just went ahead with it.

“The idea is that with a small act of buying a postcard, we can contribute to building a better training facility for African social circus”, said Ivan Kralj.

Each batch of postcards included nine postcards with different motives, all depicting Arba Minch Circus performing what they know best in the streets of their town. Each postcard was sold 1€.

### Contact

**Ivan Kralj**

✉ [center@circus.hr](mailto:center@circus.hr)

### Related resources on the project:

🌐 <http://www.pipeaway.com/arba-minch-circus-street-kids-acrobatics/>

🌐 <http://www.pipeaway.com/circus-of-postcards-ethiopia/>

🌐 <http://www.pipeaway.com/circus-of-postcards-fundraising-extended/>

# THE BLABLA MORNINGS... LET'S MEET & TALK CIRCUS!

## Developing and maintaining a professional network in Africa

During the Blabla Mornings, 14 African and 1 Asian circus managers and 23 European professionals in the circus sector addressed core issues related to African circus arts today. The sessions included presentations by participating organisations and lively roundtable discussions. You will find below the presentation of the participating structures, followed by a summary of the main issues debated as well as key contact information.

## Key African circus organisations

### Fekat Circus - Ethiopia



Fekat Circus, blossoming circus in Amharic, was started in 2004 in the outskirts of Addis Ababa, by a group of young Ethiopians united by deep passion for circus. They shared a common dream – to create a circus of youngsters who spread their infectious energies

from stage. Today Fekat Circus comprises of 30 professional artists who perform in Ethiopia and abroad. Besides staging professional shows, Fekat Circus spreads the circus arts in the capital through its private school and outreach programme. Since 2009 Fekat Circus has been running a doctor clown project called “The Smile Medicine” at the pediatric ward of the largest referral hospital in the country.

With the aim of developing the circus sector within Ethiopia and African continent, Fekat Circus offers capacity building and exchange programme opportunities for young local and international circus performers. In 2017, Fekat Circus co-established ASHARA – the Ethiopian contemporary circus

network connecting 6 circus teams from all over the country.

In the African circus scene, Fekat Circus is playing an important role by initiating and organising the African Circus Arts Festival in 2015. Fekat continues to strengthen cross-continental ties by organising the second edition of the Festival in March 2018 in Addis Ababa. With a successful crowdfunding campaign, Fekat Circus purchased a 500-seat circus tent, the first and only circus tent in the Horn of Africa, which was inaugurated at the second African Circus Arts Festival.

🌐 [www.fekatcircus.com](http://www.fekatcircus.com)

📌 <https://www.facebook.com/fekatcircus/>

### Sarakasi Trust - Kenya



*Sarakasi* is the Kiswahili word for circus or acrobatics. Sarakasi Trust is a performing

arts development organisation and its main purpose is to respond to the need for further development and growth in the cultural and performing arts sector as well as economic, entrepreneurial and social support of young people from the informal settlements and the low-income areas in and around the major cities in Kenya.

Among its main programmes, Sarakasi provides: outreach training, capacity building and cultural exchange programs, implements special programmes such as the Talanta training (involving deaf perform-

ing artists), the Smiles for Change Project (bringing edutainment to hospitalised children and children in homes and remand homes), monthly musicians workshops, artist agency activities and the implementation of its own cultural agenda at the Sarakasi Dome.

🌐 <https://www.sarakasi.org>

## Marionetas Gigantes - Mozambique



The group emerged in the context of the project "National and international valori-

sation of the artistic practices of Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau by the creation, formation and exchange" carried out by the Franco-Mozambican Cultural Centre in Maputo, in 2011.

Under the guidance of four members of the French Company Les Grandes Personnes, Mozambican, Bissau-Guinean, South African and French artists worked together to create masks and giant puppets that gave rise to the street show performed in the vicinity of two popular markets in the city of Maputo.

Currently, the Giant Mozambican puppets have developed activities with students from private and public schools. And it has also made interventions in festivals and street parades for the development of the arts and culture in Mozambique. Up to now, outside Mozambique, the troupe has participated in festivals in Swaziland, Portugal, Japan and Brazil.

📌 <https://www.facebook.com/marionetas-gigantes.democambique>

## Colokolo Cirque Urbain - Morocco



Colokolo Moroccan urban circus is a company created in 2013, bringing circus artists from the National Circus School Shemsy based in Sale. The Cie Colokolo opened its own space at Casablanca in the ancient slaughter house called THE LABO, space dedicated to the creation, the promotion and the collaboration between circus and street artists in Morocco.

Unfortunately, the LABO is no longer available for the company, and today Colokolo is struggling without their own space.

Colokolo has performed all over Europe and has worked in close collaboration with the French.

📌 <https://www.facebook.com/CieColokolo/>

## Zip Zap Circus School - South Africa



Zip Zap was established in Cape Town, South Africa in 1992, with the aim of pro-

viding a space for children from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds to come together as a means of encouraging inter-racial contact and dialogue in a safe, fun environment. Zip Zap has since grown and matured into a fully-fledged social circus – not simply a place to learn performance skills, but where circus is used as a tool for individual and community development, as well as social transformation.

The projects provide opportunities for young South Africans from very different

backgrounds to play, learn and live together using the vehicle of circus training and performance to model and demonstrate "UBUNTU" (definition: 'I am what I am because of who we all are' – the essential human virtues; compassion and humanity)

🌐 <https://www.zip-zap.co.za>

## Circus Tina Fan - Guinea



Circus Tina Fan is a school of acrobatics created in 2001. First circus of West Africa, the shows incorporate the circassian art in music and art in Guinean tradition. They try to respond artistically to the concerns of the youth of Guinea in particular and Africa in general but also to raise awareness on often taboo topics such as: violence, exile, female genital mutilations, etc.

Over the past, Tina Fan has been performing in several African countries and were the winners of the programme *L'Afrique a un incroyable talent*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> African TV show. It is the adaptation in Francophone Africa of the British programme *Britain's Got Talent*. Like the other foreign versions "Africa has an incredible talent" is a contest of artistic talents (magic, acrobatics, dance, football, aerial silk, contortion, singing, fire-spitter, etc.) selected by a jury, which is aimed as a springboard for the candidates' career.

## A brief recap of the discussions

In roundtable discussions, participants selected five topics concerning African circus arts from various angles and analysed these issues to identify concrete actions.

### Table 1 Capacity Building & Business Models

Discussion on capacity building and business models focused on empowering the artist and making available a well-rounded education in the creative sector. To mitigate the lack of training opportunities and absence of resources to fund studies abroad, an online portal with access to templates, tool kits, performing videos, training modules is proposed. Other suggestions include the development of joint curriculum and business plan approach to learn from each others' models but also adapt to individual/unique situations.

### Table 2 Aesthetics and Artistic Creation in African Circus

In the discussion concerning aesthetics and artistic creations of African circuses a question was raised whether African artists could use circus as a language to address relevant themes in the continent. Participants identified circus skills to be the common element in African shows and observed the gap in creating storylines. Integration of local spoken word is a method suggested to strengthen the story-telling capacity of circus shows.

### Table 3 Sustainability of circus organisations

To improve the sustainability of circus organisations, participants discussed about diversifying income streams and boosting visibility and partnerships. This dialogue also included securing loans/funds from social impact investment sector.

### Table 4 Gender and Woman in Circus

In the discussion, gender and women in circus, participants identified the African circus arts as a male dominated field. Recognising and supporting women role models, offering professional development and promotions of women leaders and managers, creating directory of female artists, organising all-women shows/ festivals, are some of the many concrete actions proposed to equalise gender representation in the circus arts.

### Table 5 Recognition + New audience for Circus in Africa

Recognition + New audience for circus in Africa is a discussion which resulted with far-reaching actions. From establishing good relationship with local governments to designing innovative methods of exchange opportunities to organising international festivals in the continent, the conversation brainstormed on conquering new performing platforms for the African circus arts across the globe. The discussion highlighted the importance of pioneer organisations and promoting network opportunities in all levels. It was a recurring and shared dream to have professional circus schools in the continent.



# CIRCOSTRADA CONTACT SHEET

Organisation	First Name	Surname	Country	E-mail
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<b>Babawatoto</b>	Habiba	Issa	Tanzania	<a href="mailto:ffl.bbw@gmail.com">ffl.bbw@gmail.com</a>
<b>Circriolo</b>	Ana	Moraes	Cabo Verde	<a href="mailto:circriolo@gmail.com">circriolo@gmail.com</a>
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<b>Circus Bahar Dar</b>	Wude	Zekele	Ethiopia	<a href="mailto:wudezeleke@yahoo.com">wudezeleke@yahoo.com</a>
<b>Circus Debre Berhan</b>	Henok-Teklu	Ashager	Ethiopia	<a href="mailto:circusdb@yahoo.com">circusdb@yahoo.com</a>
<b>Circus Dire Dawa</b>	Amin	Anwar	Ethiopia	<a href="mailto:circus.diredawa@gmail.com">circus.diredawa@gmail.com</a>
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<b>Zip-Zap Circus School</b>	Brent	Van Rensburg	South Africa	<a href="mailto:bvr@zip-zap.co.za">bvr@zip-zap.co.za</a>