

CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS, LONDON: ROUTLEDGE,
2019. 221 PP. KATIE LAVERS, LOUIS PATRICK
LEROUX AND JON BURTT

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KATIE Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burt's *Contemporary Circus* is a valuable sourcebook arranged in four distinctive sections under the topics of "Apparatus," "Politics," "Performers" and "New Work." Each section comprises a critical-theoretical introduction provided by the authors, as well as a collection of "voices." These "voices" are made up of transcribed and edited conversations the authors undertook with an impressively diverse range of circus artists, and each conversation benefits from accompanying images that richly illustrate the work discussed.

In their introduction, the authors compellingly argue that scholarship on Contemporary Circus has not yet caught up with the form's popularity in the world and rightly note the continuing underrepresentation of circus within academic discussions of contemporary live performance. At the same time, they suggest that the field of critical circus studies has largely addressed the older forms of Traditional Circus and New Circus at the expense of more innovative and contemporary creative practices. This book attempts to identify and address persistent lacunae in both circus practice and circus scholarship. On the one hand, the authors argue for a more developed critical-theoretical framework in which to encounter and engage circus; on the other hand, they also advocate for the primacy of the artists' voices. Indeed, it is the circus performer who is at the heart of *Contemporary Circus*.

While each of the four sections offers new ideas, information and points of focus, the first, "Apparatus," perhaps most pointedly challenges how we see and think about circus performance. This section interrogates the very notion of a circus apparatus, tracking back to the thinking of Michel Foucault and Giorgio

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Agamben to construct a more “radical and transformative” definition (8). The authors remind us that “Contemporary Circus performers now most often specialise in one form of circus apparatus” and that training systems in professional circus schools pursue “the ultimate aim of being able to create an innovative act through which to present mastery over the apparatus in the final performance at graduation” (10). The authors conduct conversations with nine different artists to elucidate their comprehensive understanding of what passes as apparatus in Contemporary Circus practices. The breadth of their discussions facilitates an understanding of the very basics of apparatus work while also examining how these basics have been both challenged and remade.

Even as circus studies scholarship has begun to fill in the gaps in the field’s history, Philippe Petit (best known, of course, for his 1974 high-wire “walk” between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City) observes that “there is no serious and accurate history of wire-walking in print” (19), alerting the reader to the ever-present need for properly detailed and informed histories of different kinds of circus performance. Particularly intriguing is Petit’s description of how he has developed a method of “greeting” his props: “Before taking a prop and putting it into action you need to say hello to the props, you need to gently wake yourself up to the props and wake up the props to you” (17). His practice corresponds to the turn toward matter explored in New Materialist theory, an area that the broader discussion of apparatus might have engaged. Johann Le Guillerm (*Cirque Ici*), by contrast, sees the apparatus not as matter but rather as “an extension of the human being” (32). For each section topic, the authors use a range of conversations to demonstrate the variety of practices and beliefs that comprise Contemporary Circus and elaborate on its differences from more traditional circus modes.

Throughout the volume, the authors show how the formalizing of circus training has produced an emphasis on “prowess” rather than, say, aesthetics or ideas. Some schools, they suggest, fail to develop their students’ abilities “to create work and make creative decisions” (157). Contemporary Circus, they argue, has “actively problematized” prowess (112) and requires a more malleable performer. In addition, the book takes on the problem of representation that dates back to the “separation between the big top and the sideshow annex” (57), the former celebrated in tent circuses such as Barnum’s and the latter in the freak show. According to the authors, “the boundaries of the norm are still clearly visible in Contemporary Circus by the almost total exclusion of performers of colour, First Nations performers, performers with adaptive or extraordinary bodies, queer performers, sexually ambiguous performers, transgender performers, and increasingly of female performers” (57). The section conversations—especially the one under the “Politics” heading—explicitly counteract these absences through the “voices” included. Not only does Contemporary Circus promote “performers of differing shapes, sizes, and training,”

it also supports “creating work which calls into question the social processes of gender assignment” (63). In the “New Work” section, the authors reveal how Contemporary Circus contests the circus form by encountering and engaging with other artistic genres—for example, in Gandini Juggling’s collaboration with the English National Opera on Philip Glass’s *Ahknaten*. This is an opportunity, as Sean Gandini puts it, to escape “our imprisonment in circus” (176). Gandini’s interest in music and dance reveals what the authors consider a defining characteristic of Contemporary Circus as a whole: a focus “on flows and dynamic patterns of movement as opposed to the stop-start rhythm of the conventional circus act” (165).

The authors suggest that their book’s geographic coverage (Scandinavia, Europe, America, Canada and Australia) is limited by “reasons of necessity and length” (1–2) and likely reflects the scope of their knowledge and networks. As *Contemporary Circus* is a relatively slim volume at 221 pages, it would have been all the more compelling had the authors found “voices” from elsewhere, especially from the Global South. Let’s hope that a companion book with this mandate might soon be undertaken. With this caveat, however, *Contemporary Circus* is a thought-provoking and engaging text that scholars, students and practitioners should regard as essential reading. The authors make an excellent case for more theoretically informed circus scholarship, as well as for the serious critical attention deserved by the many artists who choose to create performances in such a dazzling array of pure and hybrid circus forms.