

## PERSEVERANCE

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“**P**ERSEVERANCE” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the quality of “constant persistence in a course of action or purpose.” Not too long after choosing this concept as the guiding theme for this issue, we found ourselves sitting in the audience of a cabaret at Le Monastère during the 14th annual *Montréal Complètement Cirque* festival. It was a satisfying surprise when we heard the master of ceremonies, Anthony Venise, read the following introduction to introduce a young hand-balancer:

Louis Thomas commence sa formation en danse et principalement en ballet. C’est en voyant *Triptyque*, un spectacle de la Cie les 7 doigts de la main, qu’il tombe amoureux d’une discipline: les équilibres sur les mains. Il bifurque alors vers l’École Nationale de Cirque de Montréal à l’âge de quinze ans pour développer sa pratique et sa souplesse. *L’inspiration de son numéro se résume en un seul mot: persévérance!*

[Louis Thomas began his training in dance with an emphasis on ballet. He fell in love with the discipline of hand-balancing after seeing *Triptyque*, a performance by The 7 Fingers. This led him to the National Circus School of Montreal at the age of fifteen, where he began developing his own practice and flexibility. *The inspiration for his act can be expressed in one word: perseverance!*] (our translation and emphasis)

This ability to persevere, to steadfastly pursue a goal despite setbacks, is undoubtedly a key characteristic of the circus artist. In the circus world, one must persevere through various challenges to succeed: pain, failure, physical setbacks, financial challenges, psychological blocks, and even social repression, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism and other obstacles. This journey forces those who embark upon it to find a sense of purpose, to create a means of expression,

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and to embrace the challenge of continued physical, psychosocial and creative development.

And yet, while circus practice requires perseverance, the practice of circus combined with sound pedagogy reciprocally teaches it. This is perhaps most visible in social circus settings, where the intent may be specifically focused on developing resilience and other skills. Circus can be practiced to specifically train competencies—such as self-regulation, mental performance, and key social and physical habits—that help artists persevere and thrive in both their artistic careers and personal lives. As social circus expands and pedagogies improve, we are now learning more about circus artists from under-represented groups (based on, for example, race, gender, ability, sexuality, body shape or body size) that continue to persevere in their quest for equitable participation in the circus arts.

The circus industry, like its artists, has persevered through many challenges. Most recently, it has survived the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, circus has endured despite disruptions from pandemics, endemics, wars, recessions, social crises and other events. This issue of *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences (CALS)* brings together scholars and practitioners from many disciplines whose work explores what perseverance means for the circus arts.

In the Arts section, Louis Patrick Leroux and Mathilde Perahia contribute companion articles analyzing how Quebecois circus performers, companies and institutions chose to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Both articles draw from a large database that documents circus initiatives that occurred within *la belle province* between 2020 and 2022. Leroux's "From *Cirque Global* to Local Circus: the Quebec Professional Circus Scene during the COVID-19 Pandemic" pinpoints important changes and trends that have emerged in the circus industry over these chaotic past few years. Perahia's "*Cirque Hors Piste à l'ère COVID-19 : incubateur de nouvelles pratiques sociales et artistiques*" (Cirque Hors Piste in the COVID-19 Era: Incubating New Artistic and Social Practices) tells the story of how Canada's largest social circus organization found ways to grow in the face of adversity.

Jo Kreiter's contribution to the Life section is "Apparatus of Repair," the third installment in a series of public art projects called "The Decarceration Trilogy: Dismantling the Prison Industrial Complex One Dance at a Time." Brechin Flournoy's stunning photograph of performer MaryStarr Hope balancing on the side of a law school was taken during this project and has been chosen as the cover photo of this issue of *CALS*. Following Restorative Justice processes, this project brought together currently or formerly incarcerated dancers, designers, composers and survivors of violence. Based on experiences in vicarious Restorative Justice circles, the performance expresses the shared humanity that is often forgotten when people are given the labels "incarcerated" or "victim." Overall, this piece depicts the perseverance of social justice movements, of people

changing their stories from “victim” to “survivor,” and of recognizing the complex non-duality of abuser and abused. This video essay also explores ongoing cycles that perpetuate violence, the failure of the prison system to repair trauma and human relationships, and the hope for healing and repair required by all those affected by violence and incarceration.

In the Sciences section, Joanna Nicholas and colleagues present a feasibility study exploring holistic outcomes among beginner recreational pole dancers. With an impressive adherence rate of 93.8% over an eight-week pole dance course, the authors reported small to large effect sizes in a number of psychological and physiological outcomes. These include measures of body image, physical self-concept and physical fitness. This article demonstrates the possibilities for how our minds and bodies can adapt to training as little as two hours per week for eight weeks, which leads one to question what could be achieved with persistent training regimens on all pole apparatuses: Chinese pole, aerial pole, etc.

This issue also includes two book reviews. The first is Susan Bennett’s review of Katie Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burt’s *Contemporary Circus*, which brings to light not only the perseverance of circus practice and performance, but also that of circus scholarship. Such scholarship is growing (as evidenced by this journal and the ever-increasing number of circus researchers registered on CARP),<sup>1</sup> but is still catching up to other performing arts research. Bennett highlights important differences between traditional, new, and contemporary circuses. She notes that while contemporary circus remains exclusionary to many “non-normative” social groups, Lavers, Leroux and Burt intentionally promote performers with different body types, training styles, genders, backgrounds and other qualities. Also in this section, Marco Bortoletto reviews both the first and second editions of *Circo-Teatro: Benjamim de Oliveira e a teatralidade circense no Brasil* (“Re-Writing the History of the Circus in Brazil Through the Fabulous Journey of the Black Clown and Multi-Instrumentalist: Benjamim de Oliveira”) by Ermínia Silva. While recounting Benjamim de Oliveira’s life, this book also documents the stories of other circus artists, families and companies who crossed his path. It purposefully highlights stories of Black artists who have largely remained undocumented in the history of circus. In this way, Silva provides a commentary on the current state of circus scholarship and highlights gaps that require critical attention. Both reviews leave the reader with the hope that while the field of so-called “circademics” grows, so too does the potential for more inclusive practice, performances and scholarship.

Perseverance is indeed an apt descriptor for those who participate in circus in a variety of roles, whether professionally or recreationally. The contributions to this issue of *CALS* reveal the deep connections—a reciprocal intertwining, in

fact—that connect the concept of perseverance to the circus arts. In this spirit, we thank Julie Ulrich for her copy edits of this issue, Élodie Levaux for her French translations and Joan Kwaske for her digital publishing support. As this journal continues to grow, we hope this discussion and the exploration of this theme will also expand. Perseverance, after all, is both a personal and a communal endeavour.

## Note

1. Circus Arts Research Platform: [circusartsresearchplatform.com](https://circusartsresearchplatform.com)

