

(IM)POSSIBLE

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NICA

HUMAN history has always been shaped by the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which embodies the indomitable spirit that propels us beyond the boundaries of conventional thinking. The rich and varied history of circus, in particular, is replete with instances where the inconceivable has been transformed into the attainable, and the extraordinary has defied the constraints of the ordinary. The narrative of the impossible becoming possible is a testament to human innovation and resilience, as well as our unwavering belief in the power of the human spirit. The impossible is a core component of circus arts and, on the circus stage, anything is possible in the eyes and minds of the audience.

There is perhaps no greater example of the ability of circus to turn the seemingly impossible into the possible than the recent pandemic years. Creativity, performance and togetherness, which were impossible for a short period of time, have once again become possible. From this re-imagining of the possible, the circus world has continued to bloom, diversify and evolve. The tyranny of distance, once a physical impossibility, is now an opportunity for geographically and culturally diverse groups to gather virtually to share and develop thoughts, ideas and creations.

This issue of *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences* draws upon the most fundamental of circus skills: suspension of disbelief. I invite you to cast aside skepticism and believe the unbelievable not only for the sake of enjoyment, but also to nourish your creativity and further your academic learning.

Our first article in the Sciences section is “Catastrophic Injuries in Circus” by Melanie Stuckey et al. If there is one defining catchphrase that has stood the test of time in circus, it is “death-defying.” This oft-used descriptor has been inextricably linked to circus since its earliest incarnations in the sawdust-covered rings of old, such as Barnum’s, The Flying Wallendas’ and The Ringling Brothers’ circuses. This study explores one of the potential consequences of

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making the impossible seem possible: injury. While safety remains the number one priority within the circus world, a lack of real data and evidence surrounding adverse events makes it difficult for the industry to best direct resources to specifically address this crucial issue. Given the lack of much-needed published data, Stuckey et al. undertook a detailed and systematic search of the grey literature to gain a better understanding of injury and fatal events in the circus world. The results were compared to similar “non-circus” industries, sports and activities to better understand the incidence of circus-related injury in a broader sense. This article challenges us, as an industry, to keep safety at the front of our minds and use evidence-based data to guide and inform best-practice protocols.

Many of us are very aware of the myriad benefits that circus performance, teaching and audience engagement make possible. We know that circus is good for our bodies and souls, but where is the evidence? Do we actually need evidence, or is simply knowing good enough? In our second sciences article, “Comparative Affective Outcomes Associated with Circus Arts Instruction in Quality Physical Education,” Adam Woolley et al. explore the growing body of evidence suggesting that circus arts instruction (CAI) is an effective means of developing an array of social, psychological and physical competencies in young people. The use of social circus as a vehicle for delivering a wide range of physical and personal development skills has been implemented worldwide; however, to continue to deliver these life-improving skills effectively, it is important to understand what works well, what does not work well and how to best measure results. Woolley et al. remind us that CAI outcomes have been shown to be aligned with features of quality physical education as described by UNESCO. Reading further into the study, we begin to understand that when compared to other high-quality physical education, CAI participants had greater odds of experiencing pride, enjoyment and an overall positive emotional state. I would thoroughly recommend that you immerse yourself in this article to further discover and understand in more detail why circus is, as we all know, good for us.

The Life section of this issue features Val Wang’s *The Flip Side*, a stunning video documentary submission about one acrobat’s personal pursuit of the highest possible achievements. Through Wang’s profile of Daqi, a single circus artist, viewers are taken on a shared adventure that explores the greater cultural role of Chinese circus. The influence of Chinese circus culture and performance on Western circus is profound, not only in a historical sense but also in relation to the more recent growth of contemporary circus. Traditionally, one may have seen Chinese circus through the singular lens of performance; however, this documentary challenges us to expand our views and contemplate the impacts of Chinese circus more broadly. Wang’s film compels us not only to consider what we watch on stage, but also to think more deeply about how Chinese circus contributes to and collaborates with different cultures. *The Flip Side* invites viewers

to reconsider what Chinese circus is, what Western circus is, and where the two intermingle. I would suggest viewing this documentary with curiosity and a willingness to consider whether we are actually witnessing a new form of circus that is no longer defined in cultural or geographical terms.

Our first article in the Arts section, “*Un entrainement fait par soi et pour soi : persévérance d’une pratique amatrice non encadrée de la corde lisse*” (Self-Directed and Self-Motivated Training: Perseverance in the Recreational Practice of Aerial Rope) by Lucie Bonnet, reflects upon the unique experiences made possible when one commits to an amateur, or recreational, practice of the *corde lisse* (aerial rope) discipline. This article shatters illusions and preconceptions that many readers may have about the pleasures and difficulties of professional versus amateur circus practice. Bonnet’s qualitative study of what self-identifying amateur aerial rope artists experience is beautiful, subtle and profound.

The second article in the Arts section, “‘That’s What Makes Somebody Circus’: The Collaborative Process of Transforming the Meaning of Pain Through Discourse in Circus Organizations” by Laura Martinez, explores a well-known feature of circus performance: pain. As one featured performer notes in the article, “You put your body through so much just to make people happy [. . .] that’s what makes somebody circus.” Martinez explores the meaning of pain in relation to the evolution of aerial circus arts in this qualitative study of thirteen circus acrobats, which analyzes four excerpts with underlying narratives regarding pain in performing aerial acrobatics. “That’s What Makes Somebody Circus” examines how pain-related discourse influences and is reproduced by discussions between members of the aerialist community. This fascinating contribution suggests that pain is expected, accepted and embraced to achieve the skill sets necessary for aerial performance. Interestingly, Martinez’s study finds that the meaning of pain is transformed collaboratively through shared pain narratives. The implications of these findings suggest that pain fulfills multiple roles and purposes in circus performance—and the pursuit of the impossible—that merit further exploration.

Our first book review is by Claudia Irán Jasso Apango, a librarian from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and documentation researcher at the Rodolfo Usigli National Center for Research, Documentation and Theatre Information (CITRU). She is responsible for preservation processes, cataloguing, user training and specialized consultation. In 1939, Ediciones Botas published the book *Los payasos, poetas del pueblo* (The Clown Poets of the People) by Armando de Maria y Campos. In 2018, researcher Sergio López Sánchez, also from the CITRU, created a critical edition of this title. Reviewing López’s annotated edition of Armando de Maria y Campos’s work makes it possible for readers from other cultures and languages to journey through the world of clowning in Mexico with scenes from the global history of the circus arts.

Naila Kuhlmann further expands on the theme of the impossible becoming possible in her review of *What a Body Can Do* by Ben Spatz (2015). She discusses Spatz's epistemological proposition that technique underlies all embodied practices, while also drawing a clear distinction between technique and practice. She challenges readers to reflect more deeply on what Spatz's theorization of technique means to us as individuals, as members of a troupe and as an industry. Should the concept of technique actually be redefined within the discussion of circus bodies? Kuhlmann offers the thought-provoking proposition that "the body is the site of research in how to engage with material reality." This serves to remind us, as both circus practitioners and supporters, that the circus body is in a continual state of exploration, research, testing, teasing, succeeding and failing as it pushes toward the acquisition of new knowledge. Although this review is a detailed and extensive submission spanning several key concepts of circus practice, knowledge, learning and performance, a central question emerges: How does one move from embodied practice to the *discovery* or *invention* of new knowledge? As a beautiful complement to our current issue's theme, this proposed contextual framework invites us to ask ourselves, "How does one move from the impossible to the possible?"

Our third book review examines one of the classic historical, and yet still contemporary, characters of circus: the fool. John Mayberry presents a self-reflexive and empathetic review of Johanna Skibsrud's *Fool* (2024). He comes to appreciate this book as a very personal account of the author's journey of discovery, in which she tries to carry out her self-assigned job of exploring the connections between her work in literary theory and her interest in fools. She approached this job as a clown would, with complete attention and without fear of failure. This review will appeal to a broad range of readers, including academics interested in literary theory, those interested in the performance, practice and theory of clowns or fools and, finally, practitioners of clowning or fooling.

The contents of this issue remind us that circus has always prided itself on inclusion, diversity and, of course, possibility. As global events continue to create division, promote exclusion and present untenable solutions, circus once again acts as a beacon of what is possible. As the world continues to move forward without an instruction manual, a how-to guide or a precedent, it may wish to take some guidance from the circus repertoire and consider not what is impossible but what is, in fact, possible.