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Women in Australian Contemporary Circus

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The emergence of women's circus in Australia coincided with the third wave feminism movement of the 1990s, in which several seminal companies formed such as: Vulcana Women's Circus, Women's Circus and Club Swing. This article explores the influential role that women in the Australian contemporary circus sector have played in shaping the reputation of the artform and in shifting normative perspectives of what female bodies are capable of in contemporary performance. Drawing on concepts from Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz, Butler and Agamben, this article discusses key feminist performances in the Australian contemporary circus history. Through using elements of ethnographic and auto-ethnographic analysis, I aim to discover how cultural shifts associated with the rise of feminist movements inspired feminist driven aesthetics in community and contemporary theatre in Australia which were in turn emulated in the 'New Circus' era, notably from Circus Oz and Women's Circus (Melbourne/Narrm). Additionally, this article sets out to uncover the trajectory of the role of women within the artform, their obstacles and triumphs, and to critique and investigate the recurring trope of more recent times that has seen the representation of women in contemporary circus to be somewhat disparate, as such creating a new wave of political and artistic resistance within the emerging feminist circus companies such as Yuck Circus.

L'émergence du cirque féminin en Australie a coïncidé avec la troisième vague de mouvement féministe des années 90 qui a vu se former plusieurs compagnies précurseures, comme Vulcana Circus, Women's Circus et Club Swing. Cet article explore le rôle marquant qu'ont joué les femmes dans le cirque contemporain en Australie, la manière dont elles ont façonné la renommée de la discipline artistique et ont fait bouger les mentalités au sujet des capacités physiques des femmes dans une performance contemporaine. En s'appuyant sur des concepts élaborés par Deleuze et Guattari, Grosz, Butler et Agamben, cet article évoque les performances

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féministes qui ont marqué l'histoire du cirque contemporain en Australie. À l'aide d'éléments tirés d'analyses ethnographiques et auto-ethnographiques, je souhaite découvrir comment des changements culturels, associés à l'essor des mouvements féministes, ont inspiré des esthétiques tournées vers le féminisme dans le théâtre communautaire et contemporain australien, qui ont à leur tour créé une émulation durant le renouveau du cirque australien, notamment sous l'impulsion de Circus Oz et de Women's Circus (Melbourne). En outre, je tente de déterminer la trajectoire du rôle des femmes dans la discipline, les obstacles auxquels elles sont confrontées et les victoires qu'elles ont obtenues. Cet article fait également une critique et enquête sur la reproduction des clichés dans une période plus actuelle qui a vu la représentation des femmes dans le cirque contemporain évoluer de manière quelque peu disparate, entraînant une nouvelle vague de résistance politique et artistique au sein des compagnies circassiennes féministes émergentes, à l'instar de Yuck Circus.

Keywords: Circus, Deleuze, feminism, body, Australian circus, cirque, Deleuze, féminisme, corps, cirque australien

Introduction

Frequently the distinction between classical family circus and contemporary circus is defined by the absence of performing animals. However, the merging of feminist politics with the performance of strong, muscular and powerful female bodies can perhaps be seen as a defining presence and as such even more significant for the de- and reterritorialization[1] of the artform. This article will examine the emergence of women's circus in Australia and its ongoing legacy within the artform. I set out to trace historical elements of the artform and the emergence of feminist influences within early companies that paved the way for the formation of the women's circus movement that emerged in the 1990s. Further, I aim to uncover how the integration of feminist perspectives in the creative processes and narratives of independent and major companies within the sector challenged social standards of traditional gender binaries. Additionally, I explore the recent retrograde representation in some of the major companies that in turn has inspired a new wave of resistance within the sector.

What a woman's body can do

There was a significant increase in the prominence of women's circus in Australia in the early 1990s which coincided with what is often called the "third wave" of Australian feminism. Several companies were formed during this period, notably Vulcana Women's Circus (Brisbane) and Women's Circus (Melbourne).

Women in Australian performing arts were, however, using the artform of circus to push boundaries of the representation of gendered bodies considerably earlier with Circus Oz and the Wimmin's Circus (Tasmania) performing circus acts with feminism at the forefront of their artistic ideology as early as 1979.

During Nanjing Project I,[2] which began in late 1983, Circus Oz remained firm in their insistence that women could, and would, train and perform all the skills being taught at the training intensive. The company has had a strong policy in relation to gender equality as part of its ecology since its first performances. It always featured women taking on what were considered "male" skills in classical circus culture, such as basing human pyramids and performing hoop diving. Clearly this is not to suggest that women were not performing high level physical feats in circus prior to the New Circus era. In the earliest years of aerial performance, particularly in flying trapeze, women were achieving higher skilled and far riskier tricks than their male counterparts. In Australian theatre scholar Peta Tait's work, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*, Tait demonstrates that female aerial artists were outperforming males by 1880, with aerialist Lena Jordan being the first artist to successfully perform the backward triple somersault to a catcher (Tait 57).[3] While the movement for women's suffrage was underway, the late nineteenth century was by no means marked by women experiencing increased rights or freedoms nor did the dominance of female aerialists in circus come without heavy disapprobation in relation to what female bodies should be capable of and particularly how they should look. Female aerial artists from the late 1800s to early 1900s were continuously scrutinised and criticized for their performance of danger and the muscularity of their bodies. Indeed, later in the history of aerial performance, there was a return to traditional gender roles which saw female circus artists placed into much less risky roles in performance. This was not without problems in that it disturbed other gendered expectations. As Tait explains:

> At the same time, male bodies in graceful flight displayed qualities contradicting manliness and muscular females went completely against prevailing social patterns of bodily restraint. In defiance of public criticism, female aerialists trained for all aspects of aerial work up to the 1930s. By the 1950s however, glittering female assistants working with star male flyers and heavier bodied male catchers finally succumbed to fashions in cultural identity. (*Circus Bodies* 3)

Thus, although women trapeze artists had continued to demonstrate the capacity for high level skills, they were no longer able to lead the way in skill or levels of danger. Until the late 1970s, the strength of the female circus body was often masked with delicate choreography, sparkling high cut leotards and equally

glittering smiles. Celia White, a leading feminist circus artist in Australia and current Artistic Director of Vulcana Women's Circus, discussed with me how New Circus began to push traditional gender roles out of the glitter and into more challenging and subversive terrains for female performers:

> This is a conversation about artform, but it is also a conversation about gender, I think. How can a woman's body do that? There is a strong underlying [strand] of women's circus through the entire history of Australian contemporary circus performance. I think it was a really critical part of New Circus. There is often a focus on the absence of animals, but the thing I remember watching was the "equal opportunity aerial act" that Jane Mullet and Stephen Champion did in *Circus Oz*. That, as a young emerging feminist and lesbian, stood out for me: it was about sexuality and gender for me and my work. I saw that performance and I saw that it was actually about redefining the role of women in circus. As much as taking the animals out of circus, it was about how to get rid of those leotards and the fact that they (the women) were pretending that they were just the fluff on the side. (White)

The equal opportunity aerial act was performed on a triple trapeze[4] and was a comment on a range of state and federal legislation regarding equal opportunity[5] that had been or was being passed in Australia. In typical Circus Oz style, it was extremely tongue-in-cheek while still holding a strong message against gender discrimination, using the metaphor of equal distribution of strength and power within the trapeze performance. Circus Oz, particularly during its development from the mid-1980s to late 1990s, continued to subvert conventional expectations of women in contemporary circus performance, producing acts that pushed boundaries and provoked strong reactions from audiences.

Circus Oz women behaving badly

Aerialists Simone O'Brien and Kareena Hodgson (formerly Oates) performed a double aerial act that was just what Celia White described as definitive of the era, moving as far away from the "fluff" and sparkly leotards as possible. The act began with Simone O'Brien striking body building poses, showing off her biceps centre stage, only to be interrupted by Kareena Hodgson who ran onto the stage, pushed O'Brien over, stood on top of her then ran into the audience, after which O'Brien chased Hodgson around the Circus Oz Big Top "seeking revenge". Their slapstick brawl continued as they made their way up onto the trapeze bar where they performed their duo act. The brash characterisation continued

into the physical execution of the trapeze performance. Their movements were sharp, dynamic and almost staccato and highlighted the strength and musculature of their aerial bodies in action, rather than being masked with feathery choreography. This performance exemplified rebellion—not only against what had become the expected, sequinned, "feminine" performance values for women aerialists but also against the expected demeanour of women in general. O'Brien and Hodgson continued to be anything but delicate, poised and polite in performance: the glitter and showgirl smiles were replaced with mutiny and chaos. In her analysis of how central Circus Oz has been to challenging gender expectations, Peta Tait captures something important about this element in performance when, having described several such performances through to 2001, she writes, "[w]hile this gender role reversal is delivered as physical clowning, it remains provocatively disturbing. Why is it not quite funny?" ("Circus Oz" 79).[6] She later answers her own question with the recognition that:

> The gender fights in Circus Oz arise from female larrikins displaying competitive behaviour. They are not quite funny because female physical competitiveness is not quite acceptable even at the beginning of the twenty-first century because competitiveness is associated with masculinity. These interactions are edging towards a larrikin subversion of female competitiveness when the latter concept is scarcely acceptable in the wider Australian society. (Tait, "Circus Oz" 80)

It is significant in this connection that the last decade (2014–2024) has seen increasing media attention given to women's competitive sport with national television coverage not only of conventional "women's" sports such as netball but also of established women's competitions and national representative teams in conventionally "male" sports such as cricket, soccer and basketball. Heartening as this coverage has been, changing social attitudes towards women expressing extreme physicality in competitive sport have been considerably more noticeable with the launch in 2017 of the women's national competition in Australian Football (i.e. the national game, Australian Rules), attended by large crowds and given widespread media attention. As the 2018 season opens in the AFLW competition, the continuing crowds, media hype, creation and promotion of several star women players and so on, indicate that great physicality in women's sport, for the followers of this national competition and Women's Rugby Sevens, has become not only acceptable but exciting and aspirational for younger women and girls. A proportion of the AFLW women are muscled, tattooed, powerful looking athletes, while others have apparently a more "feminine" presence until the play starts, when they all demonstrate strength, skills, highly trained bodies and a willingness to engage in a body contact sport with the same gusto as men.

But decades before women were finally being lauded as trailblazers in previously male-only competitive sports, they were working on equal terms with men in contemporary circus in Australia. Circus Oz has long been renowned for a larrikin style for both genders. However, Tait recognises that the women's performances acquired a different relation to the social from those of the men ("Circus Oz"). Seeing such performances, I felt the same as an aerialist myself and, as a younger woman, it impacted on my notions of what was aesthetically, stylistically, politically and performatively possible. The Circus Oz women's attitudes, in combination with their skill, implied danger and risk beyond the performance of the circus body, suggested a further menace: the threat of women misbehaving, breaking social boundaries by exceeding anything that was considered appropriate for their gendered identity. Tait also explores the effects of these elements of performance in relation to 'Australianness': "The female circus larrikin . . . may be an accomplished athlete but she is not a good sport who willingly follows the rules of circus or even the gender game. Circus Oz presents the female larrikin as gender outlaw" ("Circus Oz" 81).

These "gender outlaws" demonstrate the degree of social, cultural and creative risk that women in circus and the women's circus movement brought to the developing artform. The presence of women in intimidating roles combined with their powerful, skilled circus bodies represents a serious threat to patriarchy on multiple levels. Assumptions about male dominance are disturbed by female contemporary circus artists through the powerful ways in which they inhabit their own bodies, their muscularity and their creative choices regarding how that muscularity can be performed and what it might represent. Combining social and artistic risk-taking in their work, leading Australian circus artists such as Anni Davey, Deb Batton, Kim Kaos, Nikki Wilks, Sue Broadway and (in)famous Circus Oz strongwoman Mel Fyfe are, as Australian feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz explores, effectively making their own bodies sources of novel rules and laws, and in turn inscribing those onto the society in which they perform:

> If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices. The activity of desiring, inscribing bodies that, though marked by law, make their own inscriptions on the bodies of others, themselves, and the law in turn, must be counterposed against the passivity of the inscribed body. (36)

Grosz continues, "[i]f women are to be granted a position congruous with but independent of men, the female body must be capable of autonomous representation"

(36). Female circus bodies in Australian contemporary circus performance present themselves to be seen *being as they are*, congruous with but not in comparison to male circus bodies. They invite their presence to be understood as being "such that it always matters" (Agamben, np). Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of "whatever being" is particularly useful in considering how the bodies of female circus artists desire to be understood as independent of their assigned gender role as assumed by the dominant values of their culture and without comparison to their male counterparts as the assumed standard of what a powerful body should be (np). As Agamben notes, "the whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference in respect to a common property (being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*" (emphasis in original, np).That is, each positions herself as a singularity that does what she does in the collective, collaborative context of circus—a singularity that contributes to the making of multiplicities. Elaborating on this concept, Agamben states: "Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal" (np). This can help us to then consider the singularity as free of an expectation of style, message or a fixed gendered role in performance, that the role of the "whatever" within the feminist expressions of Australian Contemporary circus provides an opportunity to belong "as such", that is, as they are.

Women's bodies and the politics of resistance

Jo Lancaster, a founding member of the independent company Acrobat, has consistently created work that confronts and disturbs mainstream ideologies regarding the roles of women and of female bodies in contemporary performance. In Acrobat's work *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper*, the traditional glittering leotard is challenged by Lancaster who performs predominantly topless, wearing only white, typically male underwear and black boots. In one of her solo moments within the show, parodying the stereotype of the newly married housewife, she subverts the expected sexualization of topless female bodies. As Lancaster stands centre stage, another performer throws a veil over her face, tosses a handful of rice at her then hands her a vacuum cleaner. Lancaster vacuums up the rice, removes the veil using the vacuum cleaner then sits down on a chair, nurses the vacuum as though it is an infant and attaches the vacuum hose to her bare breast. In this performance moment, Jo Lancaster resists a patriarchal society's view of "her place". In the edited collection *Women and Circus*, creative producer and writer Ivan Kralj remarks:

> [a c]onservative outlook of the world regards the circus woman as the enemy of a concept which defines a woman's position as 'her place',

> pointing out that her only juggling potential lies within balancing housekeeping and taking care of the children, cooking, cleaning and the need of being a fine wife. (42)

Lancaster's artistic choices in this performance expose an uncomfortable truth around the ordering of women's bodies; she is openly questioning "her place" and the existence of traditional gender roles. This creative risk provides a subverted version of the performance of gendered bodies and at the same time, it emphasises the need to question the social expectations placed upon women daily. This kind of performance as resistance recalls for me the work of well-known gender theorist Judith Butler who presents the question, "[a]nd what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire?" (*Gender Trouble* 139). I want to point to Lancaster, and other women in circus, and answer with: "this kind".

In the same show, soon after her vacuum cleaner moment, Lancaster performs an exquisitely skilled solo swinging trapeze act, costumed once again in only white male underpants. Her body is revealed in such a way that the rise and fall of her ribs is evident with the execution of each complex aerial acrobatic sequence as is the exertion of her abdominal muscles and the flexing of her biceps as she grips the ropes of her trapeze. She is both vulnerable and powerful all at once, human and more than her physical body and the social assumptions that are tied to her gender. Her aerial apparatus becomes an extension of her body, a means of expression that carries cultural and social meaning within the movements of her trapeze performance. As Butler observes, "[t]he question is not: what meaning does that inscription carry within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meaning between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible?" (*Gender Trouble* 146). Lancaster utilises a familiar household item and the tropes of marriage (the bridal veil and rice throwing) alongside her circus apparatus to interrogate conventional perceptions of the roles of women that persist in contemporary society.

Brisbane-based artist Chelsea McGuffin has also taken creative, social and physical risks in her work, not least in her choice to continue performing throughout the majority of her first two pregnancies. She predominantly freelanced during her first pregnancy, performing solo gigs right into her final trimester. With her second pregnancy, McGuffin was a principal performer with Circa. She explained to me that she had an open discussion with artistic director Yaron Lifschitz about how she would work while pregnant and they had agreed she could work until she was ready to stop. McGuffin noted that the show season coincided with significant media attention around sportswomen working while pregnant, "So because there was a lot of media around that, I ended up

doing a lot of interviews, in the mainstream media and in pregnancy magazines about my work." (McGuffin)

I saw McGuffin perform during this period (it was the very early 2000s). The work was made even more significant by the implications of a pregnant body, that from a traditional perspective should be overly protected, performing skills that are highly physical and that are also often considered exceedingly risky for a non-pregnant body. Two acts particularly stood out for me both for their aesthetic and the signification they held. The image of McGuffin walking across a tight wire in ballet shoes, balancing on pointe, her petite frame shadowed across the back wall of the theatre, her round belly adding to the poetic aesthetic of the act, is still firm in my mind some fifteen years on. This performance, in which McGuffin delicately balanced her heavily pregnant frame with superb control, demonstrated for me the power and determination of the female circus body. So, too, did her performance of a double trapeze act with fellow cast member Andrew Bright. She reflected on this act in our interview, noting that due to the close friendship she shared with her trapeze partner, the risk was minimal as the trust shared provided a safe working environment: ". . . I knew that in that period I wasn't going to learn anything [sic] new tricks. I would just do the things that I could already do, and if anything felt uncomfortable or not right, I wouldn't do it. But it rarely did, I felt great!" (McGuffin)

McGuffin also said that responses to her performances during pregnancy were not always positive, with some reviewers stating that it was an unnecessary risk for both McGuffin and the company to take on. Regardless, McGuffin was, as she stated, completely at ease with her choices (McGuffin). As discussed earlier, negative reactions to how women perform their bodies in circus are by no means a new occurrence nor is it exclusive to circus that external powers are inclined to insist on imposing control over women's bodies. It is an ongoing struggle for the female circus artist to *be such* as she is, without questioning of her choices by those outside circus.

Circus, however, can provide a space for such artists to provoke and confront conservative ideas of "her place" and in turn offer audiences the same opportunity to question the limitations placed on women. Cultural studies scholar Laurence Senelick discusses how performers questioning representations of gender can carry a significance that is more loaded and provocative than the performance of gender by individuals in their daily lives. "The performance of gender" he writes, "is doubly fraught with implication when it moves from the everyday sphere onto the stage, where presentation invariably entails representation" (Senelick 1). While the effect of presentation becoming representation will occur anyway, circus artists inevitably communicate their political and social perceptions of gender in a heightened way precisely because those perceptions are being enacted in the circus which, in its classic/traditional form,

was not expected to be political. The spatiality of any given circus performance contributes significantly to how that performance is perceived by its audiences.[7] Lighting, staging and artistic direction all contribute to this. Senelick argues, "[c]onsequently, gender roles performed by performers never merely replicate those in everyday life; they are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented, the inherent iconicity offering both an ideal and a critique" (xi).

Circus space as women's space

Founded in the early 1990s, Club Swing, a collective of female circus artists who identified strongly as feminists, arose out of a desire to create work autonomously, according to director Gail Kelly. The women wanted to have the freedom to create whatever content they were interested in without the boundaries that could arise due to the performance values and ideological positions of existing major companies. Kelly said, "We thought, let's make a company and make our own show so we can do exactly what we want and not be told 'you can't do that there and you can't say that there'. And it could be whatever we wanted it to be" (Kelly). The collective featured Anni Davey, Simone O'Brien, Katherine Niesche, Celia White and Kareena (Oates) Hodgson with Gail Kelly as artistic director. Club Swing took their work *Appetite* on a national tour. It was an aerial theatre show that experimented with concepts of sexuality and desire combined with the tactile messiness of food on bodies, and the tour was successful. This led to them bringing the show to the 1995 Edinburgh Fringe Festival where the work came under scrutiny from a local politician, as Celia White explains:

> There was some controversy around the show in Edinburgh due to a councillor, a local politician. Each year there is usually something that she picks on in the festival program that she deems morally inappropriate. And we had a poster that was based on an image in the show, and it was Anni Davey naked and the rest of us were around her and she was wearing a hat, hanging from a trapeze. It was a pretty bog-standard cultural reference. Anyway, she picked on us, which was actually a boon for us in the end. We had to edit all of our posters; they had to have a slash put across Anni's pubes! They couldn't be seen. We had lots and lots of media coverage that was about four women doing a show about sexuality. (White)

The controversy provided by the local politician's need to censor the performers' bodies of course brought the show more attention, marketing and exposure than the company could have anticipated and as a result their season was incredibly

successful. Furthermore, their projected demographic of regular arts festival goers and feminist theatre enthusiasts was extended to include large groups of men on bucks' nights[8], something that was not at all anticipated. Club Swing went on to make other successful works including *Razor Baby* (1998), an exploration of superhero characters in the context of the popular CD-ROM video game culture of the 1990s. *Razor Baby* emulated the virtual worlds of the CD-ROM era and combined its female heroes with the vigorous chaos of aerial apparatus that seemingly fell apart mid performance. Around the same period, many of the artists from Club Swing went onto work together in another all-female circus inspired collective called The Party Line which Celia White describes as:

> A physical theatre company that wanted to explore the feminist shit! We tackled the French feminists. Anni and Simone and Gail were in The Party Line. There were lots of connections to other companies from who was working in The Party Line at that time; there were connections to street theatre and various different types of physical performance in the '90s. There was a real blur there – we were always looking at different genres not just circus. (White)

The troupe Vulcana Women's Circus was founded in 1995 in Brisbane by circus artist Antonella Casella who had been working with a group of local female circus artists running circus classes at the Princess Theatre. Casella had returned to Brisbane after completing a contract with Circus Oz in Melbourne. She had recently started a university degree and at the same time she began teaching circus classes specifically for women.

Vulcana Women's Circus's first show was well received and the participants in the project expressed their interest in the possibility of an ongoing circus program for women. As a result, Casella quit university and focused on developing Vulcana as an ongoing company, securing funding to run regular classes for local women. Casella notes that although she left university to pursue Vulcana, her time while studying at university influenced the company's philosophy and in turn the work that they created:

> I was reading about feminism in critical theory at uni[versity], so when I began running Vulcana as a company I was very much aware of the idea of a contemporary reclaiming of the representation of women, it was very much at the core of what we were doing. (Casella)

White was drawn to the role of artistic director with the women's circus as the company aligned with her artistic and political ideologies, stating that, "[t]here was the extraordinary combination in Vulcana of feminist, circus and community

so it seemed like a perfect fit for me at the time the role of artistic director became available" (White).

Vulcana Women's Circus is titled as an homage to an early female circus performer who used that stage name. Born Miriam Kate Williams in 1875, "Vulcana" began her career in gymnastics and calisthenics and swiftly went onto become a renowned circus strong woman. She would often perform alongside William Hedley Roberts whose stage name was Atlas. Under the guise of "Atlas and Vulcana" they travelled extensively performing their feats of strength. It is noted that Vulcana often outperformed Atlas in strength and control (Ward) much to his dismay. Vulcana was also known for speaking openly about her political views and against the restrictive clothing for women of the time, namely corsets and high heeled boots. She expressed her preference for wearing clothing that allowed her to exercise her body and maintain physical comfort. In "Sawdust Sisterhood: How circus empowered women", Steve Ward discusses Vulcana's involvement in the political causes of her era:

> Kate was outspoken and unafraid of becoming actively involved in many causes during her life. On her return to Britain, she became a member of the organisation of Women Variety Artists, and in 1906 she helped campaign against the introduction of the Dangerous Performances Bill. If it had been passed, the Bill would have abolished thousands of acrobatic acts; it would have been under the jurisdiction of the police and magistrates to decide what was dangerous and what was not. (135)

Four years prior to the formation of Vulcana Women's Circus, The Women's Circus was founded by Donna Jackson in 1991 in Melbourne. The company began as a small project of the Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC), a multicultural community arts organisation. Director and circus artist Donna Jackson had a personal investment in supporting women recovering from sexual abuse at the time, after witnessing several of her friends going through the process. She wanted to provide a creative space that enabled them to feel safe, empowered and supported in their recovery. In her chapter in the book documenting the first six years of the organisation, *Women's Circus: Leaping off the Edge*, Jackson explains how The Women's Circus began and what their initial agenda was:

> The first women to join the circus were survivors of sexual abuse. Membership was then offered to women generally, with an overwhelming response from women of many different backgrounds. The circus gave us a chance to explore the strength, endurance and skill our bodies can attain. The workshops are a place where we can reaffirm control over our

> bodies, and performances communicate our vision and ideas to a broad cross-section of society. (5)

Jackson suggests that the success of the company was due to its diversity of representations of women coming together with a shared philosophy in a space where embracing otherness was central to the company's mission. That philosophy soon extended to The Women's Circus's audiences with the company regularly performing both corporate and community gigs in Melbourne. Jackson explains that "[a]s the Women's Circus developed, it began to challenge audience expectations by combining theatre and circus skills to develop an original style that was absurdist and surreal" (4).

Over twenty-five years on from their initial pilot program with FCAC, The Women's Circus has facilitated workshops for thousands of women, both in their ongoing circus program in West Melbourne and with their consistent work with the local community. Alongside their community engagement programs, they have produced performances at the Melbourne Festival, Adelaide Fringe Festival and Pride March (Melbourne). The organisation has received numerous awards for their ongoing commitment to social circus practice including a 2005 Melbourne Award for Community Development and a 2010 Innovation Award from the Melbourne Festival. Further, the company has provided a platform for offshoot organisations such as the Performing Older Women's Circus (POW)[9] to emerge. Beyond their local achievements, the Women's Circus toured Beijing in 1995 as part of the United Nations Conference on Women (Women's Circus) and more recently, in 2017–2018, the company has begun a creative exchange project with Circus Kathmandu, a Nepalese social circus company who work with youth at risk.

The existence of feminist led circus companies such as The Women's Circus and Vulcana inspired a number of all female organisations to emerge around Australia. With the company motto of "ordinary women doing extraordinary things", Circus WOW (Women of Wollongong) was created by Penny Lowther in 2001. It was a rich time for circus for the city of Wollongong with Circus Monoxide taking up residency in the city in 2000 through an invitation from the local city council. Circus WOW has seen its participants go onto become professional artists in the contemporary circus industry and maintains its original vision: "Circus WOW is a creative community that supports women to do the extraordinary" (Circus Wow).

In a similar vein to the work of POW, in 2013 Deb Batton and Sue Broadway, both icons of Australian contemporary circus, formed Batton and Broadway, a duo with the objective of challenging perceptions of people over the age of fifty in contemporary circus performance. In their own words, "Celebrating the circus of Cinquegenarians [sic], or the over 50s if you like, Batton and Broadway

presents the works of circus artists with a history" (Facebook).[10] Batton and Broadway's first project was a cabaret style variety show called *The Classics*, presented in 2014, which featured performances from artists over the age of fifty and was presented in the Circus Oz Melba Spiegel Tent. In 2017, they presented their new show *One and the Other*, a slapstick, theatre and circus hybrid in which they delve into the difficulties, apparent messiness and chaos of aging in contemporary society. Both Batton and Broadway still work extensively in the sector as guest directors and mentors for the next generation of female artists.

The women's circus movement survives although many of the organisations have suffered in the wake of major arts funding cuts under successive conservative governments. Significant damage was when the Abbott Government's Arts Minister (and Attorney General) George Brandis cut A$105 million from the Australia Council for the Arts in the 2015–2016 Federal Budget.[11] The impact of this was particularly harsh in Queensland where, not long prior to the federal cuts, the former state Premier Campbell Newman made major cuts to funding for arts and community organisations which saw Vulcana Women's Circus lose its entire recurrent operational funding. However, Vulcana ran a successful crowdfunding campaign which raised $50,000 to enable it to continue to operate while seeking out a new business model to ensure its sustainability. As for other companies, as I noted earlier, Australian contemporary circus has developed a strong national and international reputation and most companies have managed to continue their operations due to touring more, thus increasing their sustainability and reducing their reliance on government funding. It is, though, a worrying trend that various conservative governments at both state and federal levels have tended to target the arts for savage funding cuts. In the performing arts, these have hit particularly hard in youth and social theatre programs, community arts organisations, social circus, etc.: that is, the segments of the arts industry that try to help the disadvantaged and therefore have been, and remain, most critical of government policies that disadvantage women, the poor and those who are different, whether in terms of their ethnicity, their abilities or their sexual preferences.

Can we talk about the girl in the red dress?

The most influential period for women in Australian contemporary circus, during the 1990s and early 2000s, produced a legacy that still resonates in the sector. Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is a considerable disparity between the number of women on stage in the major touring circus companies compared to the number of men. Furthermore, in many cases the artistic/aesthetic and performative representations of female artists within some companies

can be seen as problematic and somewhat tokenistic. For example, Company2's work *Scotch and Soda* features nine men alongside Chelsea McGuffin while Gravity and Other Myths' (GOM) work *Backbone* sees nine men performing with three female acrobats. GOM expanded their existing cast of seven artists (two women and five men) to eleven for this new work, adding only one new female artist and three males. There is a visible pattern toward this split of gender in the company across their productions.[12]

Casus work with a smaller cast. However, early versions of their significant work, *Knee Deep*, saw three male artists and one female. All three companies have toured these shows extensively across the international arts festival circuit. Casus have moved towards a more balanced representation of gender in their recent works including their most recent show, *Apricity*. It could be argued that the style of acrobatic movement where acrobats are thrown in the air and caught landing in the hands and on the shoulders of their cast mates, known as pitching or in more traditional terms it was once referred to as "toss the girl", may lend itself to require a certain number of male and female bodies. Females are smaller, they are typically flyers and more bases are needed than flyers in this style of work. However, companies such as Circa, who perform the same techniques of pitching in their work, have consistently demonstrated an even representation of gendered bodies on stage, in both the cast numbers and the way the acrobatic bodies work. In several of Circa's shows, we see all genders performing similar skills, male and female bodies both flying and basing.

It is important to note that this gap in gender representation in contemporary circus performance is not unique to Australia. There is currently an international trend in contemporary circus towards staging six or more burly men alongside one petite woman. She is often costumed in a red or sometimes white dress and is flipped and thrown across the stage by her sturdy male acrobatic bases. Although an educated audience will know that the female artist is highly skilled with equal acrobatic capacity to her male counterparts, she is frequently portrayed as something akin to an attractive prop. At a time when a mid-twentieth century retro aesthetic is obvious in fashion and home decorating, as well as in musical theatre and film revivals, this trend in circus has very sad redolence of "back to the Fifties". Clearly it is not simply an aesthetic choice, and it has very real implications for the futures of women artists in contemporary circus. Audiences rarely encounter "the girl in the red dress" performing a solo in the show. She is, for the most part, flanked by multiple, often shirtless, men and relies upon them to catch her, throw her and spin her. In further examples, Quebecois company Cirque Eloize toured their show *Cirkopolis* to Australia in 2017. The show features eight men and four women, one of whom is costumed in a floaty red dress. Also from Montreal, Les Sept Doigts de la Main's (7 Fingers) highly successful work *Traces* has seven male artists and one female. And, despite their

usual gender-neutral staging, the girl in the red dress appears in Circa's most recent collaboration with the West Australian Opera, *Orpheus & Eurydice.* While there remains an equal representation of gender casting in the production, the costuming and movement emulates the stereotype we have seen across the sector. The five female acrobats are costumed in red dresses, standing on male bases and are "tossed" in the air, dresses flowing, etc.

At the national and international circus research conferences and industry gatherings I have attended since 2014, there have been a number of in-depth discussions around the tokenism of this trend towards "the girl in the red dress". The topic repeatedly surfaces as a contentious issue in both artistic and academic areas of the sector. It is, quite simply, not good enough that gender representation in what can be seen as some of the leading companies in contemporary circus over the last decade has shifted such that we routinely see women artists taking on the role of supporting artists rather than lead acts. There is no question that the women artists in all the aforementioned companies are capable of standalone performances at an incredibly high skill level, both artistically and technically. Consequently, we *must* ask: why are women currently underrepresented in too many major companies and what are the potential repercussions of this global trend?

I discussed this with former artistic director of Circus Oz Mike Finch, asking him how we ended up where we are now, with this as a global issue for the artform. He observed,

> I think we got there by letting our guard down and by letting market forces kick in. It requires vigilance. In terms of gender and a few [other] areas, I believe in quotas. They get a bad name in the business world, in terms of it perhaps being seen as patronising. But the end result I think is positive. It takes time and requires vigilance. It slips away so quickly when a company puts eleven men on stage and two small women in red dresses (Finch).

As mentioned previously, Circus Oz has had a strong company ethos *and policy* for equality and diversity in their shows since the company's inception. This is why, some forty years on, the company remains consistent in its equal casting of female artists and in its artistic choices around the representation of women on stage. Mike Finch explains that a policy of quotas of gender existed at Circus Oz since the company's inception and that there was also a priority of representation of diverse body types within the ensemble.

> . . . I would prioritise a mixture of bodies; types that break the mould of what people expect on stage, not just petite female flyers, but strong,

> solid female bases alongside them . . . when you play to a mainstream audience in Australia, say for instance a small country town audience that may only be exposed to mainstream media and mainstream stereotypes, it is totally mind blowing for them to see women performing in this way and to see the diversity of female bodies on stage. We used to get a lot of mothers who would come up after the show with their daughter and they would come up to Mel Fyfe [Circus Oz strong woman] and they would just be in awe of her and exclaim that watching her perform has inspired their child to do more physical activity and to think outside the box (Finch).

At the start of my own circus career, at the age of nineteen, one of the most influential moments for me as a young artist was seeing the women of Circus Oz break down the barriers of the dainty female aerialist. I recall watching iconic artists such as Anni Davey and Antonella Casella with their amazing strong, dynamic bodies. As a petite female, I identified with Casella who is around the same height as me (151cm) —watching a smaller woman doing amazing things with strength and risk gave me permission to explore the same terrains myself. Seeing Circus Oz was a turning point. It was both the ideology of women performing their bodies in ways that were unexpected and the brashness of the company: there were no delicate girls/women on stage; they were brash, raw and rebellious. Consistently, the company ideology that Circus Oz supports in relation to gender equality provides a platform for women to be just as they are. The comparative element of female artists as "other" or "less than" their male colleagues is greatly diminished when they are represented as equal to those colleagues.

However, with a great majority of the leading companies producing work that is far from balanced in terms of diversity of gender on stage, it is important to reflect on how this disparity impacts on the sector overall and moreover how "the girl in the red dress" reduces the opportunities for women in contemporary circus. Grosz, like many other feminist scholars, argues strongly that:

> If women are represented as the bodily counterparts to men's conceptual supremacy, women's bodies, pleasures, and desires are reduced to versions or variants of men's bodies and desires. Women are thus conceptualized as castrated, lacking, and incomplete, as if these were inherently qualities (or absences) of their (natural) bodies rather than a function of men's self-representations (38).

In an influential 1988 article, "Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," Butler writes:

> [a]s an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation (521).

The insight was, and remains, highly significant for women considering how their bodies are experienced, by both themselves and others. Later Butler observes, "[t]he formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted" ("Performative Acts" 525), which amounts to a simple and powerful statement of why it really does continue to matter how we perform gender in contemporary circus.

There are several analyses regarding how underrepresentation of women in some of the major touring companies has become a global trend. Notably, Alisan Funk explores this, discussing a study about the disproportionately low number of women applying for and graduating from the major tertiary circus training institutions (Funk). With many circus companies casting from such institutions, this is potentially a contributing factor to the lack of female artists being cast in major roles. On the other hand, I'd suggest that the opposite could as readily be the case—if young women do not see women represented in touring shows, they are less likely to enrol in a program that trains them for a sector that appears not to offer them a secure future as a performer.

Mike Finch suggested potential cultural factors that could be responsible might stem not only from the training institutions but also the gendered nature of childhood, with young boys being encouraged to take physical risks more than young girls, which is perhaps why we see men performing more frequently on high-risk apparatuses such as the teeterboard[13]:

> . . . it goes back to the roots of gendered childhoods where the boys are encouraged to get their ten thousand hours of risk taking out and to throw their bodies around, so that by the time they graduate from the circus schools of course they are good at teeterboard, etc. It becomes a perpetuating cycle with less encouragement of the female bodies to excel, etc. (Finch)

There is an emergent spike in small, independent, all female companies across Australia, anecdotally as a reaction to "the girl in the red dress" trend. It is heartening to see such resistance reappearing. Predominantly, the new feminist led companies are growing out of the existing women's circus culture with established industry leaders such as Celia White providing artistic direction and

mentoring to the next generation of feminist circus artists. In 2017, two new companies were formed from Vulcana Women's Circus: GUSH Circus and Common Thread. On its Facebook page, GUSH Circus describes itself as ". . . a feminist circus ensemble that uses the repertoire of circus and the theatricality of contemporary performance to explore the way the performing feminine body is read and misread" (GUSH Circus).

Another new feminist circus group, Yuck Circus, is an award-winning collective from Western Australia who describe themselves as "a West Aussie production company keen on championing the female voice across live performance" (Yuck Circus). With five independent shows touring nationally and internationally, companies like this are a promising response to the gender gap currently being experienced in the sector. Obviously more needs to be done to ensure that the tendency for leading women to dissolve into the shadows is not repeated. After all, it was seen in classic/traditional circus so that by the 1950s, women were reduced to pretty sequinned additions to the performances of men.

But the sequins were de-territorialized and the circus was reterritorialized as part of the radically resistant, larrikin, edgy and risky work of the women and men who worked so hard and so creatively during the development of New Circus and contemporary circus in Australia. In my analysis, what we are seeing with a small but significant renaissance of women's circus in Australia at present is a line of flight that takes off from the recognition that something has been lost, then loops back to form rhizomes with the people and practices who drove Circus Oz and women's circuses. These rhizomes can impel the reemergence of work that is gender sensitive and alert to differently sexed bodies and at the same time pick up on newer concerns for all of us in terms of how bodies are valued and what bodies can do.

Conclusion

It is useful here to consider Mike Finch's astute recognition that we must be vigilant. In doing so, we will need to maintain the ties with existing women's circus and nurture emerging companies. This requires alertness to how gender and sexuality inform the artform at all levels, from circus schools to major companies. In the contemporary period, our ideological project in relation to genders and sexualities must address the backwards trend that has occurred, by de-territorializing "the girl in the red dress", reterritorializing performances with more women and promoting equal representation. However, at the same time, we must deal with significant changes in social and cultural attitudes and policies in relation to queer and non-heteronormative sexualities, transgendered

and non-gendered bodies. Perhaps, while remaining vigilant, we can also look to the resistance and persistence of the innovators and trailblazers across the artform's history. The continuation of legacy and mentoring from artists such as Celia White, Sue Broadway, Debra Batton and Antonella Casella pulses through the next generation of emerging feminist circus artists, enabling a resistance and a reclaiming of what a women's body can do. To enable circus artists of all genders to "be such as they are", we can draw on the multiplicities and threads that link us from the past to the present as we create new works and respond to the persistence of retrogressive politics through performance. If any artform can give a home to emergent and transformative sexualities and ideologies, it is surely contemporary circus. It might almost be seen as a social duty for contemporary circus companies not only to reverse current retrograde trends but also to take up the challenge of multi-representational performances.

Notes

1 See Deleuze and Guattari (1987), they refer to an ongoing creative transformation of territories as 'de-territorialization'. In this instance, the territory could be understood as classical circus. See also Seymour 2018.
2 The Nanjing Project was an intensive circus skills training project in Albury-Wadonga which saw a group of Chinese acrobats conduct an intensive skill development with the Australian circus sector in 1983.
3 Tait notes that Lena Jordan's backward triple somersault was omitted from circus histories for a period of sixty years with Ernie Clark instead being acknowledged as the first to perform this feat (*Circus Bodies* 57).
4 A triple trapeze is a static (non swinging) trapeze made up of three trapeze bars woven into one aerial apparatus. Traditionally, this apparatus was often performed by three women with highly choreographed skills.
5 These included the New South Wales *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977*; the South Australian *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*; the Western Australian *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*; the Australian *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*; and the Australian *Human Rights Commission Act 1986*. Legislation in other states and territories followed from the early 1990s, for example, *Discrimination Act 1991* (Australian Capital Territory) and *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* (Queensland). All were framed as guidelines and legal requirements for equal opportunity in employment and in areas such as property and financial services, that did not discriminate on the grounds of sex/gender, race/ethnicity, disability, political beliefs, etc.
6 Tait also describes a number of *Circus Oz* slapstick acts in which cross-dressed men were "victimised and terrorised" by women (2004, p.79), describing how a "recent spate of acts with physical attacks on hapless male personae is both acrobatically inventive and socially defiant in that it is demonstratively meanspirited females winning the fight with force of cunning" (p.80).
7 See Seymour, Kristy. "The spatiality of Australian contemporary circus." *360° Circus*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 161–178.

8 The Australian term for a men only pre-wedding outing, known elsewhere as a bachelor party (US) or a stag night (UK).
9 POW was formed in 1995 out of The Women's Circus community. It is a collective that challenges ageist attitudes towards women.
10 People aged 50–59 are correctly referred to as quinquagenerarians, however, even if it is an accidental misuse, somehow the French word for five (*cinque*) echoes the word and the world of circus *(cirque)* more than the Latin for fifty (quinqua).
11 This funding was reallocated to a program called "The National Program for Excellence in the Arts" (NPEA). The funding model for the NPEA is exempt from the mechanisms that had, at least since the 1970s, maintained the independence of the Australia Council from government interference. It was immediately obvious to many in the arts sector that the change in previously arm's length funding principles would weaken smaller companies and community/grassroots arts organisations that had conventionally been more critical of government while giving government more direct power to determine which companies, organisations and artists are recognised as 'excellent' for funding purposes.
12 *The Pulse*: a large-scale work with a cast of thirty-two acrobats has a split of thirteen female and nineteen male performers; *Ten Thousand Hours*: a cast of eight acrobats, three female, five male; *The Mirror:* a cast of eleven acrobats, three female and eight male performers; and *Out of Chaos*: a cast of eight with three female and five males performers.
13 A teeterboard is a ground-based apparatus made of wood which acts as a seesaw/catapult. It is a group-based apparatus that sees acrobats launched into flight, performing multiple flips, aiming to land safely back on the teeterboard. It is known for having a high rate of injury.

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