

CIRCUS IN THE 2014 MELBOURNE FESTIVAL

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CIRKOPOLIS
CIRQUE ELOIZE
Fri 10 – Sun 12 Oct
Arts Centre Melbourne,
State Theatre

Putting circus centre stage at an international arts festival? Thirty years ago it would never have been considered. Circus has been considered a sideshow to the ‘serious’ arts, just cheap thrills family entertainment: or perhaps it brought a touch of Vegas – also seemingly a bit crass for an important international arts program. So what’s it doing in the Melbourne Festival?

Other art forms have met the same raised eyebrow at being included in major festivals at various times - cabaret, film, digital arts and even children’s programs were not considered ‘real’ art – but now they’re all part of the landscape.

But one form of performance that has been leaving its footsteps all over the performance landscape in recent years is circus. New circus - contemporary circus, physical theatre, whatever you like to call it – has been tumbling and writhing its way into our theatrical spaces as never before.

The Melbourne Festival’s special focus on circus this year opens a door to this phenomenon and reveals a rich new story: a story of circus as an influential art form and not just a sideshow.

THE ‘TRAD’ AND THE ‘NEW’

Thirty-plus years ago, when new circus (in Australia and elsewhere) first appeared, it featured a new generation of performers subverting a ‘traditional’ form while using the language of acrobatics to tell a different story. This was circus without animals, with a new approach to design, to music and humour. It could occur on different scales and in venues other than travelling circus tents. It wasn’t a family business. It wasn’t even all *roll-up-roll-up, hoopla and boom-tish*. But these new forms weren’t exactly iconoclastic – many manifestations paid a kind of homage to the traditions of family touring circuses, made comedy out of traditional routines and characters and kept the carnival atmosphere. Just no animals and a bit of a rock’n’roll hippie sensibility.

So by the early nineteen-eighties we had ‘trad’ circus and ‘new’ circus. But ‘new’ circus hasn’t stood still. In the ensuing decades it has grown and developed in ways that probably couldn’t be foreseen. There is now not just one kind of new circus – there are dozens of variations. You can still find new circus in a tent, but you can also find it on theatre stages, in cabaret dives, in dance schools, on cruise ships, in Olympic ceremonies, streets, parks, stadium shows and art galleries.

This growth has been partly fuelled by developments in training – there are youth circuses all over Australia, several major companies and

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two central training institutions – The Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury-Wodonga which has students from 8 to 18, and the National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA) in Melbourne which offers Australia's only Bachelor of Circus Arts degree. The trainers in these establishments also inject new styles and practices into the work, coming as they do from all over the world – China, Russia, France, Argentina and many other places with their own circus traditions and skills.

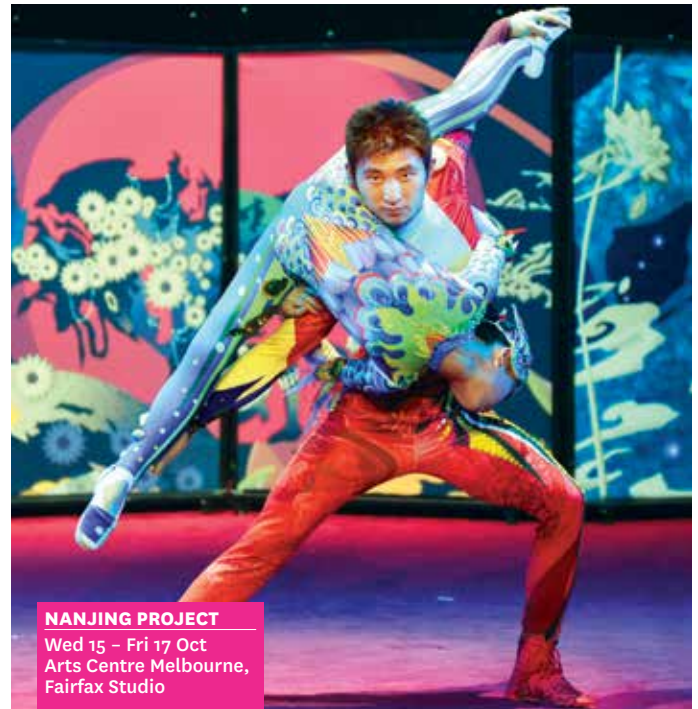
TAKING ON THE WORLD

The new centre of gravity of global circus is, arguably, Montreal – the home of the popular behemoth Cirque du Soleil and several other brilliant companies approaching circus in new ways. Near the top of the tree is Cirque Eloize (pronounced 'El-Wahz'), a company which has invaded the theatre using the techniques of the stage – tight choreography, eye-popping design, original music and a theatrical approach to narrative and spectacle. Taking its style cues from Fritz Lang's immortal *Metropolis*, Cirque Eloize has brought its wonderful, award-winning, world-touring production of *Cirkopolis* to the Melbourne Festival. It's not often a circus wins the New York Drama Desk Award. When New York critics give you an award for Unique Theatrical Experience you know you're onto something.

Another company going gangbusters on the international scene is Australia's Circa, based in Brisbane. Artistic Director Yaron Lifschitz has charged ahead of the pack with this company, winning hearts all over the world as it has gone. Two years ago the Melbourne Festival joined forces with the Perth International Festival, the Brisbane Festival and seven European presenters in France, Luxembourg, Britain, Spain and Germany to commission a new work from Circa which was to be their greatest yet. *Opus* opened in Lyon, France, to ecstatic reviews. The Guardian called it "an evening so remarkable as almost to defy description"; Les Echos called it "a perfect composition... sublime... a masterpiece". While the critics struggle for superlatives, they also struggle to describe the performance. Is it dance? Is it music? It certainly has the amazing Debussy Quartet from France playing live on stage throughout, and it is set to an all-Shostakovich score. Doesn't sound like a circus does it? Because it is so much more – a thrilling, lyrical night in the theatre which shows that Australia is out there in defining new forms for these age-old arts.

THE CHINA CONNECTION

A huge part of Australia's new circus identity comes, amazingly, from China. Thanks to the cultural curiosity and foresight of Carrillo Gantner and the late Clifford Hocking, a tour by the 'Nanking Acrobatic Troupe' in 1980 paved the way for a training visit by Chinese acrobats from Nanjing, and the impact resonated across the country as the new circus movement quickly took up Chinese tricks and methods. In this festival we're extending the Nanjing acrobatic connection to a new generation of young performers with *The Nanjing Project* – a four-week project in Albury-Wodonga and Melbourne that brings five of China's most highly-skilled circus performers, hand-picked for the tour, to teach, train and rehearse; and to appear on stage with Australian students of circus in the Fairfax Theatre. We'll see how, after three weeks of intensive



NANJING PROJECT

Wed 15 – Fri 17 Oct
Arts Centre Melbourne,
Fairfax Studio

work together, the jaw-dropping skills of the Chinese combine with the energy and style of the Aussies to form a new, once in a generation show.

But the *Nanjing Project* isn't just to make an exciting show for us – it's a continuation of that thirty-year link with China for the next generation of circus artists, at a time when the cultural scene in China is changing faster than we can imagine, and international collaboration and interaction is more possible than ever before. It's a connection, especially between Melbourne and Nanjing, Victoria and Jiangsu Province, that can keep on giving to both sides.

...AND THERE'S MORE

We also want to show in this festival that circus is fragmenting into a myriad of styles, scales and forms. Talented duo Dirk Van Boxelaere and Fien Van Herwegen from Belgium use comedy acrobatics with a huge dose of childhood imagination to create a wonderful world of flying pianos and impossible dreams. The show is called *Carrousel des Moutons* (Literally, *The Sheep Carousel* or *The Sheep-Go-Round*). It's not a circus show as such, it's a delightful theatre show for all ages, but the acrobatics are a central, essential part of the construction of the piece, and another indication of the new territory being colonised by the circus arts.

Another theatrical exploration with physical skills at its centre comes to the festival in the form of a world premiere by local independent ensemble Dislocate, who have honed their skills in streets, parks, theatres and in the air all over Australia and around the world. *If These Walls Could Talk...* brings a new dimension to live theatre – a bit of circus, a bit of magic and a stage sensibility to tell a story with a breathtakingly adventurous theatrical approach.

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OPUS
CIRCA AND DEBUSSY
STRING QUARTET

Fri 17 – Sun 19 Oct
Arts Centre Melbourne,
State Theatre

To round out our look at new circus today, we take a look into the past – and a look into the future. Melbourne’s own much-loved Circus Oz will inhabit Arts Centre Melbourne’s gallery throughout the festival – not with a show, but with every show they have ever performed! Several years of work digitising and cataloguing hundreds of videos of Circus Oz performances since 1978 becomes an interactive electronic archive in *Vault: The Non-stop Performing History of Circus Oz*. Created in association with RMIT University, the exhibition offers new ways of accessing and getting involved with these archival treasures. In one part of the exhibition, the whole collection will be screened in chronological order from beginning to end over the seventeen days of the festival. In fact, we probably won’t even get to the end of it during that time. Playing around in *Vault* will in itself offer insights into where much of Australia’s circus has come from in the past thirty-five years.

To look into the future, we gather together a number of experts who can see some of the trends emerging. The festival’s two-day *Circus Futures Forum* is open to anyone who is professionally involved with circus or has an interest in the field. The first day, to be held at Circus Oz’s brilliant new headquarters in Collingwood, will look at the extraordinary potential of so-called ‘social circus’ – using the teaching of circus skills to create surprising social outcomes. This world-wide movement has seen astonishing results in communities of disenfranchised youth and disadvantaged communities across the globe – from outback Australia to South America, Sweden and Nepal. It’s a huge success story.

On the second day the Forum will move to the ANZ Pavilion in Arts Centre Melbourne, and the topic will move to the future of circus performance around the world, informed by special guests who have seen much of it – Yohann Floch from Paris; Kiki Muukkonen from Sweden and Gil Favreau from Montreal’s Cirque du Soleil. If you have even a passing interest in what might become of this fast-moving art form, come to the Forum. The final session is free to all.

SO WHAT?

So what will this circus focus program leave behind? Who can tell – but we do know this. A bunch of young circus performers will have had an intensive four-week encounter with some top drawer acrobats from modern China; we will have seen some new and very different approaches to circus as it develops new dalliances with dance, theatre and music; we will have seen how circus arts are adding a new dimension to other forms of live performance; we will have had the chance to reflect on the art form’s past 35 years in Australia; and the chance to chew the fat about its future. On top of that, circus practitioners from around the country will have come to Melbourne to join in and rub shoulders with each other.

There’s talk about the need for Australia to have its own international circus festival, as many other towns and cities in other countries are doing. If Paris is the circus capital of Europe and Montreal is circus central for the Americas, Melbourne has a claim to develop itself as a hub for the circus arts in Asia and the Pacific.

With influences from east and west and our own Aussie sense of adventure and humour, Australian circus itself can find a place on the world stage.

Maybe we’ll look back at the 2014 Melbourne Festival and its focus on circus, and see it as an important step (or perhaps it’s a cartwheel) in taking our place on that stage. Maybe it will be seen as the first incarnation of a developing international circus festival in Melbourne; or perhaps just the time when we truly realised that the circus of our past is not the circus of our future – just the underpinning.

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