

FOCUS
MEETINGS
OF THE
NETWORK

WHERE DANCE MEETS CIRCUS



On 27th January 2017, the Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (ISACS) organised a Focus session exploring the boundaries between dance and circus. Presented in partnership with the Circostrada Network and the MA in Festive Arts, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, this event was an opportunity to gather choreographers, performers, programmers, researchers and policy makers, among others, to explore where one art form crosses into another, and how this is articulated.

ARTCENA

ARTCENA is the French National Centre for Circus Arts, Street Arts and Theatre. It works towards its missions in three main areas: the sharing of knowledge through a digital platform and activities of documentation, the support to professionals via mentoring and training, the development of these three artistic fields by providing funding to authors and carrying out international development. It coordinates the Circostrada network and has a permanent seat on its steering committee.

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Circus and Street ArtS

This report was
written by Sheila
Creevey and edited
by Circostrada

Since 2003, Circostrada Network has been working to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 100 members from over 30 countries, it helps building a sustainable future for these sectors by empowering cultural players through activities in observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.

FOREWORD

Where Dance Meets Circus was hosted on 27th January 2017 by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, centre of academic and performance excellence housed at the University of Limerick, Ireland. The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance provides a space where musicians, dancers, composers, singers, conductors and choreographers explore together. Through the MA Festive Arts Programme and Dr. Niamh Nic Ghabhann (course director), it partnered with the Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (ISACS), member of Circostrada since 2013. Together, they designed and presented this new Focus session exploring the boundaries between dance and circus. This event was an opportunity to gather choreographers, performers, programmers, researchers and policy makers, among others, to explore where one art form crosses into another, and how this is articulated.

Focus meetings are a new format introduced by Circostrada aiming to examine crosscutting and interdisciplinary themes in partnership with a member of the network. Following each Focus meeting, Circostrada publishes an online report both in English and in French.

SPEAKERS



- **Chantal McCormick**, Artistic Director of Fidget Feet Aerial Dance and the Irish Aerial Dance Festival, and Founder of the Irish Aerial Creation Center
- **Hazel Hodgins**, Programme Manager, Dance Ireland
- **Stéphane Segreto-Aguilar**, Coordinator of Circostrada Network and Head of International Relations for ARTCENA, Paris
- **Alex Allison & Davi Hora**, Company Maleta, Ireland/Brazil
- **Jazmin Chiodi**, Choreographer, Co-founder Iseli-Chiodi Dance Company and Tipperary Dance Platform with Alexandre Iseli
- **Benjamin Perchet** (absent), Director of the Dublin Dance Festival

MODERATOR

- **Sheila Creevey**, Head of Performance, Pavillon Dance South West, Bournemouth, UK

CURATOR

- **Lucy Medlycott**, Chief Executive Officer of ISACS, Dublin

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PARTNERS

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SETTING THE STAGE

Sheila Creevey

Creating a shared space for discussion

On the occasion of the Focus session, an expert panel of speakers was drawn together, providing perspectives from both the dance and contemporary circus sectors, and of cross art form exploration and experience. The aim was to provide examples of practice, provocation, and above all a space to discuss and debate the fundamental differences and similarities of these art forms, while considering how each can learn from and support the other to further develop the conversation.

The focus of the event was placed on current practice in Ireland, with acknowledgement of the international context in which these art forms exist. Presentations included physical demonstrations of shared compositional approaches, philosophical reflections on the meeting point(s) of dance and circus - in body and mind, as well as an exploration of the history that has led to the development of policy and infrastructure to support future shared ambitions.

Achieving a better mutual understanding and finding new ways of working together

Where Dance Meets Circus is a meeting point. An opportunity to explore the boundaries between art forms and to consider how each can nourish and support the development of the other. It is my belief that the most exciting contemporary arts practice is happening at the boundaries of art forms, where tension creates challenge, sparks curiosity and creativity, and opens new perspectives and opportunities

to those practicing and supporting contemporary arts. Dance and circus have strayed into each others' territories in many ways, both by necessity as movement based performing art forms, or by accident, as artists trace the edges of their practice, seeking new ways of working.

We could add that these two disciplines also meet by design, when those who support and nurture these in many ways undernourished art forms, discover how infrastructure - including festivals, support organisations, networks, policy makers and the artists themselves - can acknowledge this shared space and explore the way each art form may inform and develop the other. And indeed, how the infrastructure itself can evolve in response to practice.

In order to achieve this, we need to find a way to articulate and describe this shared space. *Where Dance Meets Circus* is a meeting point and a step towards achieving this understanding.

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INTERCONNECTING ART FORMS

Aerial Dance: a hybrid discipline at the crossroads of circus and dance seeking recognition and acceptance

Chantal Mc Cormick spoke about her own journey through dance and into aerial work. Without an established practice – or even terminology – to describe or define her work, Chantal knew she wanted to be “a dancer in the air” following experiences with Scarebeus, among other companies. She followed up with training at the National Centre for Circus Arts in London.

Determined to establish a practice in Ireland, Chantal formed Fidget Feet Aerial Dance, which has been based in Ireland since 2007. Speaking of the difficulty in building acceptance of the art form, in view of

the liminal space that aerial dance has occupied in policy terms – not quite circus, not quite dance – the legacy of this commitment can be seen in the establishment of the Irish Aerial Dance Festival and the Irish Aerial Arts Centre.

A final challenge from Chantal, asked of us “What is aerial dance?” and posed a physical task for delegates which illustrated the choreographic, structural and logistic considerations in the practice of aerial dance; and a provocation to consider through the rest of the session.

Zoom in: Aerial Dance

On the morning of 27th January 2017, a further gathering was hosted by the Irish Aerial Creation Centre at Plassey House, University of Limerick.

The aim of this event was to reflect on the meeting point of contemporary dance and contemporary aerial circus in the form of aerial dance. It was the opportunity to gather together practicing artists as well as professionals supporting

dance, circus and aerial dance in a round-table discussion. The structure of the discussion set out to address key areas of inquiry that will instigate the next steps in the articulation of the art form of aerial dance, and consider how to support its development.

Following brief introductions the attendees were split into three working groups, each considering one of the following questions:

- Communication & Exchange: How can we increase and strengthen communication and collaboration possibilities between dance and aerial?
- Practice & Learning: What professional development is needed for the aerial dance sector to grow? How and what can dance and aerial learn from one another?
- ‘Aerial Dance’: What is your understanding of aerial dance? How do other art forms receive it? Is there a difference between ‘Contemporary Aerial Circus’ and ‘Aerial Dance’?

The space between dance and circus/aerial art is a vulnerable area, yet also a creative space.

The resulting discussions drew out issues and understandings including:

- There was an unintended representation of the lineage of practice of aerial dance at the event, and perhaps it was time to acknowledge, trace and document this history in order to understand its current context and future potential.

- The space between dance and circus/aerial art is a vulnerable area, yet also a creative space. Whilst aerial practices take physical risks, artists can learn from the conceptual risks taken by dancers in exploiting their vulnerability through improvisational practices.

- How aerial dance is perceived by other art forms depends on the context: the location (country), the curator, and how open minded – or indeed, territorial – artists and promoters can be.

Overall, these round-table discussions provided a starting point for further research and development in Irish aerial dance history and current practice, which will hopefully encourage further understanding and a clearer vision for its future.

The key role of infrastructures and resources in art form development

As a dance support organisation, Dance Ireland aims to “celebrate, develop and promote the diversity of dance practices in Ireland today¹”. Hazel Hodgins emphasised the importance of demystifying dance, whilst retaining the integrity of “dance as art”, and how Dance Ireland works across the sector in order to achieve this. She outlined the role of a support organisation, and the infrastructure and resources it has, to build understanding and to share experience across art forms. Areas of particular focus include education, professional practicing artists and developing training opportunities.

Whilst acknowledging that there is limited opportunity for artists to explore across several art forms within existing structures, Hazel outlined some of the support available to artists, which has in the past also embraced contemporary circus in its many manifestations, including aerial dance. Both art forms must

face similar challenges, including a lack of space, producer support and funding for productions. It is important to take action to address these challenges, which Dance Ireland has taken steps towards. This is most obvious in international projects such as *Léim* – an EU dance leadership programme which supported producer development² – and *Communicating Dance*³, a project that sought to address issues in communication and visibility of dance practice and the development of audiences internationally (both projects are initiatives of the European Dancehouse Network). These are experiences with learning outcomes that can be shared across art forms.

Hazel left us to reflect upon a series of questions about responsibility, and indirectly, capacity. The resource organisation and, its infrastructure alone is not enough to effect change. How much comes from such organisations and policy makers? How much must be driven by individual artists or companies (as illustrated by Chantal Mc Cormick), and how sustainable is that?

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¹ <http://www.danceireland.ie>
² <http://ednetwork.eu/project/leim/>
³ <http://ednetwork.eu/project/communicating-dance/>

Dance and Circus across the world

Stéphane provided some international context to the Focus session, introducing Circostrada Network and the work it does in advocacy, art form and professional development, and how Circostrada works as an international network.

These testimonies illustrated a shared space, if not always at least shared understanding, in which practice and theory are explored across both art forms.

As a provocation, he presented us with multiple perspectives on the intersection of dance and circus – in artists' own words. These testimonies illustrated a shared space, if not always at least shared understanding, in which practice and theory are explored across both art forms. The following quotes convey this idea of interconnectivity between the two disciplines:

- *"Circus artists are extreme artists. They don't fear pain, they don't have a problem with putting their bodies into situations that seem impossible at first. Their strive for virtuosity puts them into another dimension."*
– Juliana Neves (dance artist)

- *"We wanted to explore different sensations in order to find new physical, visual, auditory markers. What is a body? In dance, everything is well organised, fixed. When you're in the air, you discover another physical reality."* – Cecilia Bengolea & François Chaignaud (dance artists)

- *"People often say that we are somewhat at the edge of circus and dance. I think we are somewhere in between.*

[...] We just do a choreographic work with a different set of tools." – Cridacompany (circus artists)

"People often say that we are somewhat at the edge of circus and dance. I think we are somewhere in between. [...] We just do a choreographic work with a different set of tools."
– Cridacompany (circus artists)

Stéphane went on to put forward what he identifies as three paradoxes in current support and practice at the point of interconnectivity of dance and circus:

- **Seduction vs. Representation:** the first paradox raised pointed out to the existence of a mutual attraction or seduction between many dance and circus artists, nonetheless quite ambivalent and sometimes misleading with inaccurate preconceived representations.

- **Forgetfulness vs. Legacy:** the second paradox raised aimed at highlighting the importance for the artists to be aware of where they come from to be able to move forward in their practice. One tends to forget that dance and circus have long been closely linked to one another and, as a result, the debate more often focusses on what differentiates them rather than on what brings them together. If there is an interconnectivity between them today, it also implies there were already common grounds in the past, and the awareness of this legacy matters for the transmission of a collective history.

- **Ambiguity vs. Categorisation:** the third paradox raised evoked the difficult position in which dance and circus artists may find themselves, being torn between the desire to keep fluid identities, therefore allowing intersections and bridges between both art forms, and the necessity for each art form to fit into a specific "category" in order to exist and to be acknowledged as such.

These three paradoxes led to the formulation of three suggestions, leaving the audience with much to ponder and discuss, namely, the necessity to explore disobedience, to observe areas of confrontation and to embody fluid identities.

How the body and object relate to one another

In their presentation Alex Allison and Davi Hora explored where the body and the object meet from the perspective of juggling, and the journey from composition to choreography. They began with a definition and demonstration of traditional juggling compositional techniques and using this as a starting point, Alex and Davi reviewed their practice through the lens of the phenomena of movement. They referenced the work of Rudolph Laban and the Accumulation work of Trisha Brown (1971), and how this study has helped their understanding and appreciation

of their art to move beyond the classical structure of juggling, to dance.

As a reflection on the impact of academic exploration across art forms, Alex and Davi established a place in which the physical manifestation of this shared space, the meeting point of form and function, was clearly demonstrated and shared with the delegates. As the beginning of a journey of curiosity and creativity, the support and encouragement of those present across both forms was evident in their response to the presentation.

Mutual influences

Jazmin began by acknowledging the challenge she faced by engaging with the subject of her talk, and how, by asking this question of herself and her practice, she found herself involved in a deeper investigation of what is intrinsic to dance. What are the values? She explored this further through three areas of inquiry: Practice - Creation - Transmission. Having teased out issues of confrontation, formation and transformation, Jazmin identified shared spaces across art forms that infor-

med her understanding of common values and empathy of practice, creation and transmission in dance and circus. These included the sensorial investigation of body and space; the interaction of both forms with a wider spectrum of social topics; accessibility, and issues of transmission and the continuity of the art form. Having thus explored her own practice, Jazmin presented three ways in which circus transforms dance: by expanding perceptions of space, challenging the physical body, and opening access to unusual contexts

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Festivals as breeding grounds for the emergence of new opportunities and experimental work

Whilst Benjamin was unable to attend in person, his words in response to the theme were circulated to the attendees following the event. In exploring the role of programme curation, in particular within the context of a festival, Benjamin presents a case for dance as an art form that is leading the way towards "new cross disciplinary horizons". The meeting point of dance with circus as a "quintessentially hybrid art" can be seen through their shared histories and engagement with the choreographic, as well the virtuosic within performance.

Benjamin considers how, within the context of a festival, experimental work across art forms can open up new presentation opportunities beyond the theatre, into unusual spaces. He discusses the potential of this to develop audiences, as well as forming creative relationships in the co-production of new work. Benjamin suggests that the establishment of such collaborations enhances the infrastructure of the festival, and the possibility to raise funds in support of commission and performance opportunities.

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CLOSING WORDS

A starting point

Where Dance Meets Circus was a starting point. The discussions brought to the surface questions - both physical and conceptual - currently being asked by artists, academics and those who support art form development. It felt appropriate, therefore, that this event was hosted at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick - a place where art forms meet, exchange and evolve through practice and thoughtful consideration. The presentations and resulting conversations,

highlighted a desire to understand, articulate and share best practice. It became clear that the boundaries are fluid, and in order to progress this area of inquiry, we must continue to explore the 'physical reality' of where dance meets circus, as well as its conceptual and theoretical dimensions. The language we use is important, and finding common ground will support learning and understanding how best to advocate for both art forms, individually and collectively.

Lessons learned and how to go ahead?

The outcome of this Focus session is the acknowledgement that there is a clear desire, and an opportunity, to work collaboratively with existing support, infrastructure and policy to respond to the needs of the communities who strive to make art that has integrity and resonates with a broader public.

The next steps will shape the future of any such collaborative approach, and it is the responsibility of all those present at this seminal event to push this agenda forward.

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Cover

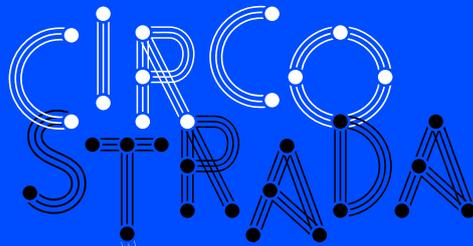
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