

ARTICLES

In Search of the Dramatic Composition: A Contemporary Circus Performance as a Structure of Signs

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Circus scholars have long debated the issue of performance analysis, that is, how to analyze contemporary circus performances in the absence of an actual circus-specific framework. However, while contemporary circus itself—being a rather young discipline—may be said to lack a traditional framework or approach, it may well benefit from the utilization of approaches used elsewhere. This analysis thus picks one specific Other as a logical starting point: the well-documented and minutely explored world of theatre.

Is it possible to analyze a contemporary circus performance in the same way as a theatre performance? In an attempt to provide an answer to this question, I am proposing a basic framework derived primarily from Czech theatre theory based on presemiotic and semiotic studies. In my previous work (Štefanová 2016) I have extensively examined the work of leading Czech theatre theorists of the 1930s and 1940s, specifically the precursor of Czech theatre semiotics, Otakar Zich, and members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which I believe forms a framework applicable to the analysis of all performing arts—including contemporary circus. Since I understand contemporary circus production as a form of dramatic art (i.e., not unlike a theatrical production), I employ theories which make use of the theatre sign system and theories which perceive the theatrical—and thus also contemporary circus—production as a structure comprised of individual components. A contemporary circus performance, like a theatre performance, does not necessarily require scenography or music. However, since each of these components reinforces the other, the overall communicative function of the performance thus grows as a result of their mutual interconnection. In a contemporary circus performance, the communicative function of the movement component (i.e., the circus arts element) is strengthened by virtue of the existence of the remaining components. As raw circus movement is thus transformed and stylized, it becomes removed from its original raw form and produces certain associations in the viewer. All components making up the contemporary circus performance may be perceived as assuming the role of signs, in accordance with the writings of theatre scholar Petr Bogatyrev: “in the course of the play things on the stage that play the part of theatrical signs acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life. Things in the theatre, like the actor himself, are transformed” (1938, 101).

Clearly, the Prague Linguistic Circle of the 1930s primarily focused on theatre and not on the as yet nonexistent genre of contemporary circus; however, a contemporary circus performance may be seen as resembling a theatre performance. In fact, it may be viewed as a synthesis of circus and theatre aesthetics, which do not exist in parallel but must function continuously and simultaneously for the contemporary circus work to achieve its full meaning. Theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that “when multiple sign systems are involved in the creation of a complex sign, the meaning of the complex sign does not arise from a simple sum of meanings of the individual signs, but rather from the relationships between them” (1993, 21).¹

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From the perspective of theatre theory, a contemporary circus performance may be said to include theatre and circus components coexisting within a dramatic composition, a complex structure determined by dramaturgical and directorial concepts. The dramatic composition in turn determines the organization of individual components within the work. While contemporary circus does share many components with theatre (scenography, light, sound, text), it also includes a component which is unique to the genre, namely the circus arts. When these circus arts, including gymnastics, acrobatics, and juggling, are viewed within the context of the dramatic composition, the circus component of a given performance is infused with additional meaning. In his study *The Mobility of the Theatrical Sign* (1940), theatre scholar and director Jindřich Honzl writes:

The whole of stage reality—the dramatist’s words, the actor’s performances, the stage lighting—all these represent other realities. . . . Otakar Zich expressed this view in *The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* when he stated that “dramatic art is an art of images and this holds in absolutely every respect.” (129)

The circus component, which frequently constitutes the dominant aspect of a contemporary circus performance, requires the presence of a circus artist. Such an artist’s performance on the stage may be described as a physiological expression, but, as in the case of dance and theatre, the expression is also psychological. Like a mime, theatre actor, or dancer, the circus artist uses movement to create a stage metaphor, which is, as theatre director Emil František Burian sums up,

anything that, emanating from the stage, evokes the idea of something different from what it really is. A stage metaphor uses one reality to hide another reality in the spectator’s imagination. This imagined reality is often very different from or the complete opposite of the reality that is being performed. (Burian 1937, 499)

In dramatic genres, these stage metaphors—signs—constitute the very building blocks of each genre’s sign system, that is, the code employed in communication with the audience. While circus acts may be considered as signs, meaning may also be conveyed by the elements comprising these acts. An artistic or circus act may be broken down into individual figures, which are subject to the rules of a given circus discipline; the figure itself may be further subdivided into separate physical movements, which are also capable of assuming meaning.

The transformation of physical movement into meaningful signs within the context of a dramatic situation is mediated by the circus artist. This process produces a specific character, and, in subsequent interaction with the audience, creates a *dramatis persona*. Following Zich’s theorization of these terms (1986, 42–48), in a theatre context, the audience may be said to perceive a live actor acting on stage (signifier) but in effect experiences a *dramatis persona* (signified); the same concept may be applied to some narrative contemporary circus performances featuring circus artists who—like actors in the world of theatre—may likewise become *dramatis personae* engaging in dramatic situations.

In order to test the validity of this theatre-based approach, let us analyze a brief dramatic situation from *La Putyka* (2009), the first major performance by the Czech contemporary circus company Cirk La Putyka. One of the first scenes includes three characters: an innkeeper played by an actor and two barflies portrayed by circus artists. The innkeeper brings the patrons only one pint of beer instead of the expected two, and a subsequent session of hand-to-hand acrobatics portrays the resulting conflict. In my perspective, in the same way that the creators of the performance do not

wish to showcase acrobatic numbers for their own sake, they also specifically focus on suppressing the very material used in the construction of individual acts, that is, the performers' bodies, by employing bulky costumes and masks: performers playing the role of pub patrons are dressed in stuffed leotards which deform their bodies to resemble chubby old men.



Petr Horníček and Jiří Weissmann in *La Putyka*. Photo by Martin Faltus.

Furthermore, the creators of *La Putyka*—Martin Kukučka, Lukáš Trpišovský and Rostislav Novák, all directors with theatre experience—were looking for a way to utilize circus disciplines to create a complex performance capable of communicating content based on a defined environment and designated set of situations. As Novak mentions in an interview (Štefanová 2014), they turned to contemporary circus as an experimental platform which would serve as a springboard for providing new images within the dramatic arts context. They had to learn how to transform circus arts (movement material) into the language of theatre. The creators first had to understand the laws of circus artistry in order to start interlinking them with additional ingredients essential for the final form of the stage work. The goal was to transform movement into a meaningful sign on stage. The resulting interlinking of significant and simultaneously physically extreme movement—belonging to either one or more artistic techniques—led to the development of larger and more complex choreographic structures which make up the imagined reality of *La Putyka*.



Left to right: Petr Horníček, Anna Schmidtmajerová, Vojtěch Fülep, Rostislav Novák, and Jiří Weissmann in *La Putyka*. Photo by Martin Faltus.

La Putyka may be subject to a theatre-based semiotic analysis specifically because performers—by virtue of becoming characters and interacting with the audience—are thus transformed into dramatis personae. On the other hand, this approach is not suitable for analyzing, for example, Cirk La Putyka's later performance entitled *Black Black Woods* (dir. Linda Kapetanea and Josef Fruček 2016). Dramatis personae are absent here: father and son Rostislav Novák Sr. and Jr. are present as just that: father and son. Moreover, not only are there no characters, but there are also no distinct stage metaphors: more or less all movement and actions seem to be self-contained. While *Black Black Woods* is something of an exception in the body of work produced by Cirk La Putyka, semiotic analysis clearly constitutes a method that cannot be indiscriminately applied to all contemporary circus performances in a meaningful way.

In contemporary circus productions that adopt narrative, responsibility for creating meaningful work that presents to the audience some other reality rests with the director. A contemporary circus director must be able to engage in analytical and synthetic thinking about circus movement while also being capable of combining—from a directing and dramaturgical point of view—the full range of meanings created by individuals with respect to space and other artists.

As the director is responsible for assembling the dramatic composition of a performance on the basis of his or her dramaturgical and directorial concept which dictates how and why individual components—including the circus component—are represented within a work, the theories discussed here are suitable for analyzing contemporary circus performances conceived and developed by a director, an approach generally utilized in the world of theatre.

Note

1. Translation from Czech by David Konečný.

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