

Freak and Queer

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Toward a Queer Circus: Lessons of and from the Theatre with Jean Cocteau, Barbette, Phia Ménard, and *Les Précieuses des nuits de Montréal*

Charles R. Batson

We'll do this queerly, we said. Musings on questions about queer circus deserve queer treatments, we said. My co-contributors here have no doubt risen to that occasion: Taylor and circus as/through invitation, Kelly with circus as/in kink, Hayley on circus and/of a bearded lady. We'll see how I do, as I examine what appear to me to be intertwining and mutually informing notions of queerness, in-between-ness, danger, and risk in certain circus practices and theories. Through explorations in particular of what queer writer and artist Jean Cocteau, queer circus performer Barbette, queer theorist Mark Franko, and transgender artist Phia Ménard may offer in understanding these intersecting notions, I turn to the 2014 circus cabaret *Les Précieuses des nuits de Montréal* to look a bit more deeply at what it might mean for us all to move toward a queer circus.

Seeing and Seeking Queer Circus

This is not an easy task for me, however, even as I readily identify as—and am just about always read as—a queer dude. I've so long *already* conceived of circus as queer, you see. As I've written elsewhere, I'm a habitual wearer of what, to borrow a concept from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I might call reparative-reading lenses.¹ Genealogies of critics' recent turn to explore the meanings of affect and feeling in cultural productions almost always include Sedgwick's 2003 *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Sedgwick there offers affect and its ontological knowledges as keys to readings that are "reparative" (Sedgwick 2003, 123). For Sedgwick, a strategy familiar to many of us trained in structuralism and its several "posts" is the "paranoid reading" (123), which would work to show how certain voices and experiences are kept *out* of a particular text. A "reparative reader" would instead seek how that text could, through meanings proffered in vocabularies of affect, offer "sustenance" (150) even to readers not avowedly sustained by the culture surrounding that text. One might imagine, for example, a queer reader thrilling to science fiction texts, with their presentations of emotional and material alterity overpowering, in a reparative reading, the striking paucity of non-heterosexual relationships in their pages. One might similarly imagine a queer circus-goer taking meaning in the very noncommonplace of the spectacle, even as gender roles and gendered

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expressions in those performances often repeat heterosexist codes from beyond the stage. And, yes, you've by now guessed it, I'm sure: I am that sci-fi reader, I am that circus-goer.

If I'm already feeling circus—with its freakish performances and its palpable textures of difference—as queer and as queerly pointing to the humanly and differently possible,² I just might be performing a reading of circus as a taste, in the manner of queer theorist José Muñoz, of an alter-world-making. Muñoz's "then and there" of those queer utopias he has invited us all to cruise (see Muñoz 2009) and in which minority subjects have voice, just may be alive for me already: circus's lived and showcased differences already place me, a queer in reparative-reading mode, at home in its own here and now.

You will no doubt see why an exercise on writing about queer circus may be difficult for me. What brand of circus do I explicitly call queer when I the queer have already been feeling at home in just about all of its brands? I mean, goodness, who fergoshsake chooses to hang and twist and go up and down and up and down and up and down again a billowing red silk fabric for six-minutes-fifty-five-seconds except someone in my tribe, a queer, an abnormal, a freak who does stuff differently, who is different? And the oddball gets a huge round of applause at the end! Yes, *that's* the world I want to be in; that's a world that gives to me—someone whose own differences have not always been received with warmth and applause—life-affirming sustenance.

In order to dive a bit more deeply into the task the editors of this journal issue have given us, I may have to remove (some of) my reparative-reading lenses and look more critically for and at contemporary circus's queer shapes, figures, and impulses.³ Those lenses off, it becomes certainly intriguing to note the relative paucity of scholarship devoted to the queer in circus and/or devoted to queer circus. As we know, queer theory, musings, and explorations have come to inform much scholarship in many of the performing arts, from dance through music to theatre. And yet in the burgeoning field of circus studies, very little has been written examining queerness, even as one might argue (even *sans* reparative lenses) that the queer—always already the exceptional, the odd, the outsider, the outcast—lies at the heart of circus practices and meaning. There are, of course, notable exceptions to this rule of the silent, absent queer. Peta Tait, for example, has consistently offered important work on circus bodies (including her groundbreaking 2005 *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*) that includes the queer. A recent (March 2015) Study Day in Toulouse, France, focused on "Queer Circuses and Esthetics," which featured work by PhD students, pointing thus to a potential future of this research. And Mark Sussman penned as early as 1998 a study on New York's Circus Amok called "Queer Circus," perhaps the very first peer-reviewed academic article using those two words together in a title.

The mere fact that these pieces focusing on the queer are rare, with scholarship that engages explicitly with queer theory even rarer, calls out for more work. I thus propose my pages here as one exploration of an explicit engagement with both queer theory and a self-consciously queer performance that draws on specificities in particular cultural and performance contexts, those of Montreal. That city is a self-affirmed circus capital due in no small part to it being the home of the billion-dollar-revenue-stream Cirque du Soleil, even after its recent sale to a multinational conglomerate of financial interests; of the École nationale de cirque (ENC), one of the very few national circus schools on the planet; and of the world-renowned summer festival Montréal Complètement Cirque, which receives support from local, provincial, and national agencies. Indeed, let me insist on saying that the pages that follow present only one, initial, potential exploration of

this particular combination of elements—queer, circus, theory, Montreal. They represent most assuredly a work in progress, a preliminary presentation of a blended engagement with live(d) performances and queer(ed) theories.

Before I look at that explicitly queer-themed production in Montreal in 2014, however, I must note that there is a somewhat vibrant space for some things called queer circus in other parts of North America. There is and has been, for example:⁴

- The Topsy Turvy Queer Circus in San Francisco, which has intimate relations with the famed kink-fest Folsom Street Fair and the city’s Queer Cultural Center
- Sir Cupcake’s Queer Circus in Portland, Oregon, with resonances, it would appear, to previous events in Portland called “Pervert the Cirque,” touted as bringing “kink to the big top”
- A Queer Youth Circus project in North Carolina with funding from “The Pollination Project”
- A queer circus collective called Tangle Movement Arts in Philadelphia
- New York’s famed Circus Amok, whose very own bearded lady, Jennifer Miller, served as a keynote speaker for the Montreal 2016 conference on Circus and Its Others, and which serves as the key field of exploration for Hayley Malouin’s contribution to this section
- The boylesque star the Luminous Pariah in Seattle, who has performed in queer circuses like Iceland’s Sirkus Islands
- A Queer Circus Weekend held in December 2016 at the New England Center for Circus Arts, billed as a “weekend of celebratory LGBTQI circus community”
- A Facebook group called Queer Circus Artists Unite, whose moderator(s) appear to be based in North America
- The 2007 iteration of the queer Montreal circuit party Black and Blue, which featured a (luminous and sexy—I was there) Chinese pole number with Quebec acrobat Dominic Lacasse
- The 2016 version of the gay circuit party Martinée Las Vegas, which featured performers from Cirque du Soleil’s Vegas show *Zumanity*, and, in particular, if the publicity stills are to help us judge (I was not there), at least one of the artists involved in the staged male queer coupling in that show (which I have seen)

I must mention that North America is of course not the only site for queer circus productions. Australia, to take a notable example, has the Briefs Factory (long billed on Facebook as “all-male sharp shootin’ cabaret of burlesque with balls, high-flying circus bandits & savage gender offenders” [see Briefs 2015]) which Kristy Seymour explores in this journal issue, as well as the Lamplight Circus, a “Circus & Sideshow Burlesque” with what looks to be queer flavours. Australia is also home to the company Circa, which recently hired the queer-identified ENC graduate Nathan Knowles (he is the artist known as Roscoe de l’Amour in the Montreal production described below), and which frequently features its female base Rowan Heydon-White as the strong body who supports the weight of (both male and female) acrobats above her. While my own writings here do not explore a *non*-explicitly queer-themed performance, I would certainly note that, in the case of Heydon-White, having a traditionally male role (that strong base) played by a female does point to at least some flavour of queer somewhere—as does having a bendy boy perform contortionist skills so

very frequently reserved for women . . . but I'll leave the development of these thoughts, perhaps, to others in the section in Gender and Difference in this issue, even as some of them may already be intimated in the intriguing thoughts that Kelly presents below on re-presented gendered bodies. But while I'm pointing in this direction of circus work conceived as nontraditional in gender(ed) terms, I should also mention Stockholm's Gynoïdes Project, billed as "an artistic operation that raises and examines the question of women's agency in circus art . . . engag[ing] in a female-centred circus making" (Gynoïdes), an extremely rich field of exploration and production and creation, given the continued male dominance in training and performance (explored by Alisan Funk in this issue). The time seems ripe to explore the queer more fully, as toward a queer circus we may indeed be going.

Besides, here in North America in the 2010s, the "freak" has returned to take a sometimes literal front stage position. The musical *Sideshow*, featuring in particular so-called Siamese twins, was revived on Broadway for the 2014–15 holiday season; the television series *American Horror Story* had "Freak Show" as its theme for the 2014–15 season; and that festival of things alternative, Burning Man, had as its 2015 theme Carnival of Mirrors, with the event-goers, including myself, making frequent performance and artistic reference to the freak over the course of the week.⁵ Indeed, in his review of the Broadway revival of the musical *Sideshow*, the *New York Times*' Charles Isherwood explicitly links contemporary movements that include "geek chic" to circus culture by saying, "Being a freak is virtually the new normal" (Isherwood 2014).

You will have noticed, no doubt, a slippage from my digging to locate the queer in performance and scholarship to this reference to the very-much-still-present freak. The slipperiness may well be at the heart of our questions, however. Where the freak has become foregrounded from the stage to television, becoming, virtually, that "new normal," can we say that the freak is still freakish, that the queer is still queer? And, then, in the words of the editors of this journal issue in their prompt to us here in our queer(ing) section: "How are contemporary circus practices exploding or extending the stigmas around conceptions of freak and queer?"

It is here that it seems helpful for us to turn to Hayley Malouin's response to our editors' question—indeed, her *own* question, as she serves as one of this issue's editors—to get some deeper understanding both of these multiple intertwinings and of the uses and meanings of this arguably (nay, demonstrably) slippery word "queer." Her "Queer Hatchings: Carnival Time and the Grotesque in Circus Amok" offers a productive examination of the celebrated New York-based queer troupe and what happens when its bearded lady does/is/becomes/remakes/deforms Lady Liberty. Is it carnival? Is it grotesque? Is it queer? Does it do queer things? Are we queered by it? What might appear if the grotesque itself is queered?

To Hayley, then:

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Queer Hatchings: Carnival Time and the Grotesque in Circus Amok

Hayley Malouin

In the fall of 2006, in a park in New York City, on a portable wooden stage painted a garish purple and adorned with bright red curtains, Jennifer Miller emerges from a plywood egg dressed as a swan.⁶ She recites, in a frank, conversational tone, Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus." Given Miller's rather unorthodox emergence from this giant prop egg, her high-glam outfit

prominently featuring a white feather boa, and her full beard, her performance—evocative of both drag and cabaret—is perhaps a vastly different turn of phrase than the one intended by the stern engraving at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Lazarus [1883] 2002, 233)

The scene is from *Citizen*Ship: An Immigrant Rights Fantasia*, a show by Circus Amok—New York City’s queer free-to-the-public circus collective that tours its public parks. Jennifer Miller, circus artist and professor at the Pratt Institute, is Circus Amok’s emcee and artistic director.



Jennifer Miller in *Citizen*Ship*. Photo by Shehani Fernando.

In 2006, *Citizen*Ship* took the ramp-up of the US war on terror under the Bush administration and subsequent US presence in Iraq, as well as the surveillance of citizens and residents within US borders, as inspiration for its sardonic commentary. The political observations in Miller's distinct delivery of the words "world-wide welcome," dripping in sarcasm, are self-evident, as is the poignant irony in Miller's (and Liberty's) call for the world's tired, poor, homeless, and tempest-tossed to join her.

Miller emerging out of her plywood swan egg is a very different kind of "mighty woman" than the one described in Lazarus' poem. She is not only vastly different in appearance to the lady liberty, who, by way of being made of copper, embodies those conventionally idealized feminine traits of silence and immobility; her tone is also simultaneously derisive and passionate, and she takes serious liberties (so to speak) with the text, teasingly foregrounding the nationalistic contradictions interwoven into the American cultural imaginary. The language, so elevated and expertly structured in Lazarus' poem, is sloppy and windingly topsy-turvy in Miller's rendition. As she thus de-forms the text, Miller's sing-song delivery ends up being both direct and exploratory, inviting her audience to peek in between and at the words and stanzas as she does; her performance is a lesson in critical thinking, delivered with expert comedic timing.

The contradictory tension thus implicit in Miller's performance evokes certain conceptions of the grotesque and queer. As Miller slinkily creeps out the tip of her roughly hewn shell, she can be seen to both emerge onto and produce a carnivalesque space, a space of "becoming, change, and renewal" (Bakhtin 1968, 10). Her emergence onto the stage is also an emergence *into* the space—that is, she is simultaneously revealed and coming into being—in which she is "reborn for new, purely human relations" (10). Importantly, and as evidenced by Miller's oh so frank and free delivery, such relations are loosely structured and deceptively complex, allowing for an equally complex, politically-oriented carnivalesque style of expression to also emerge alongside (and, indeed, within and through) her. The grotesque, championed by Miller, not only takes part in these new human relations but produces them, thus invoking a politics that is itself resoundingly grotesque and resoundingly comical—inescapably funny.

What's more, the humour is the point. As Andrew Stott writes, the grotesque denotes "a form of humorous monstrosity devised for satiric purposes, [which] marries the repulsive and the comic" (2005, 87). The humorous monstrosity in this case is not necessarily Miller herself—although her own unique brand of gender-queer "monstrosity" is no doubt foregrounded, with her pristine white feather boa and her bushy, dark beard—but rather the illogical contradiction between the words engraved on the Statue of Liberty and the US immigration policies she alludes to. The grotesque in this instance marries traditionally comedic circus elements—the comically large egg, the general satirical and festive atmosphere of the event—with the repulsive: the xenophobia and racism masquerading as policy in discourses of national security. Rather than display itself *as* the abjected, humorous monstrosity on the margins of normative society, the grotesque in this case, including those dripping de-/re-formed words, demonstrates the monstrosity *of* the normative society. Such a process readily invokes a particular queerness because the grotesquery of the moment and of Miller refuses to remain securely in the margins—the margins of society and, yes, the margins of Lazarus' poem—instead insinuating itself within and through normative space, within and through the text. The grotesque in this case, then, is not only queer, but also a queering force.

That Circus Amok is most definitely a queer entity is not news. The troupe describes itself as "a queer celebratory spectacle" committed to providing "free public art addressing contemporary issues

of social justice to the people of New York City” (Circus Amok 2017). The folks at Amok are already in the queer business, both by way of their content and their subversion of many classic sideshow tropes. The infamous “Bearded Lady” is no longer the nineteenth-century subject of fear and intrigue; she is emceeing the show. Bodies of all shapes and sizes perform acrobatic routines, play instruments, and walk on stilts; rather than focus simply on dazzling feats, these routines—in words, allegory, gesture—also educate or instruct the audience on anything from immigration policy to handling a stop-and-frisk encounter. The freaks are quite literally running the show, and they are queer as folk/fuck.



Cast of *Citizen*Ship*. Photo by Shehani Fernando.

The implicit critique and challenge to historically marginalizing notions of freak and queer in Circus Amok’s work are thus self-evident. As explored above and below, I propose that the freakiness and queerness of Circus Amok are also implicitly grotesque—that is, that Circus Amok as a freaky and queer/ing entity functions in a larger socio-political milieu much in the same way as the grotesque. Further, this queer force reverberates in a myriad of directions, so that the very notion *of* the grotesque is subverted and re-imagined by such queer manifestations.

The terms queer and, to a lesser extent, grotesque are no doubt contentious. In that arena we call the “real world”—by which I refer to those social spaces of colloquial interaction rather than the supposedly “unreal” world of circus and performance—the explicative “Queer!” is not so much uttered as an exuberant celebration of nonconformity, but as an act of violence. An exploration of the act of *queering*, then, is not and cannot be a simple act of reclaiming those words that accompany, to quote Miller herself, the “seething, white, heterosexual, patriarchal, misogynist fist of social control” (2016). As such a brutish description suggests, this social control is distressingly adept at recapturing and harmfully reinforcing even the most resistant of terms and concepts. And so, even as I work through what we might ever so easily refer to as “the queered grotesque” and “the grotesqued queer” in Circus Amok, it does well to remember that simply naming the grotesque as queer and the queer as grotesque through linguistic sleight of hand does not do the “good works” it may seem to. Further, the risk is run of identifying these terms too closely with the bodies and

movements of Circus Amok in a manner that reduces them to the sideshow exoticism they attempt to disrupt.

To engage with the queer and the grotesque, then, is to engage in the fraught and ever-pressing project of bodies—plural. While the grotesque body and the queer body make fine critical tools in resistance to aggressive heteronormative, patriarchal regulation, to render them as exclusively such is to be complicit in the ongoing violence waged against a myriad of tender, brittle, firm, mutating, leaking, racialized, gendered, pathologized, entrained, multiplicitous bodies that continue to *be*.

Grotesque, the Noun

That many-formed moniker of literature, art, and culture we call the grotesque has a long history of disruption and unrest. Emerging out of the tense relationality between the classical world of art, culture, and civilization and the unnatural world of wilderness, animality, and paganism—a relationship dating back to the Italian Renaissance rediscovery of Roman art and aesthetic treatises (Russo 1995, 3)—“the grotesque” can be seen to emerge out of and in relation to the norms that it exceeds. Kayser claims that the grotesque is a restructuring of the categories that constitute our view of the world: “The grotesque is the estranged world . . . it is our world which has been transformed” (1963, 185). Similarly, Thomson suggests a basic definition to be: “the unresolved clash of incompatible in work and response . . . the ambivalently abnormal” (1972, 27). A key characteristic of this category, claims Thomson, is “the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates” (20).

Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque and the carnival in *Rabelais and His World* echoes this notion of disharmony. He writes, “[the grotesque] reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (1968, 24). The disharmony of the grotesque, thus, is the discordance of process; it is becoming itself. This discordance also conversely constitutes an unbecoming, as the grotesque represents the undoing of the social order, of the world, as we understand it. The realm in which this simultaneous becoming/unbecoming, doing/undoing is made possible is the carnival, subject to its own carnivalesque time. In this sense, the grotesque can also constitute what Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizome, a being “always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzi*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25).⁷

More specifically, the grotesque body is in disharmony with the social world and as such is estranged from it. The grotesque body is never fully expelled, however, as it must emerge as a deviation from the norm in order to maintain the borders of normalcy itself. In other words, the grotesque is granted a marginal status so that bodily regulation may persist. Bakhtin refers to this process as the degradation of the grotesque body, the “transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1968, 20).

Herein lies the rub. Even if the carnival and the grotesque represent, as Bakhtin claims, a “temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank” (1968, 10), carnival time and the reign of the grotesque conceived as such will always retain the majority of their power because of their brevity. Despite Bakhtin’s claim that, during carnival time, life is subject only to “the laws of its own freedom” (7), the grotesque and the carnivalesque remain undeniably subject to the prevailing laws of social order that arguably emerge all the stronger after carnival time is over. The freedom of carnival time is always contingent on the rigidity of official time, just as the grotesque Other is always contingent on the normative Same.

Queer, the Verb

Can the grotesque, then, ever be freed from such a dynamic of control? In order to see how queerness can challenge or even halt what seems to be the inevitable recapture of the grotesque, let's first explore how the grotesque interacts with queerness. In some ways, given its functions of discordance and disharmony, the grotesque is already queer. As E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen write, "queerness has always been marked by its untimely relation to socially shared temporal phases" (McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011, 6). They continue: "More often than not, this connection remains defined in negative or hurtful ways, ways that reinforce queerness as a failure to achieve the norm. Or queerness is altogether excluded from the very possibility of trajectory" (6). Such a fate rings similar to that of the grotesque as always and persistently marginal, and to the conceiving of carnival time as wholly separate from and irreconcilable with official time. Like the grotesque, the queer is that abject, marginal entity through which the heteronormative patriarchal order maintains itself. Also like the grotesque, however, "it is precisely the skewed relation to the norm that . . . gives queerness its singular hope" (8).

In *Circus Amok*, artistic director Jennifer Miller is both at the centre of the ring and the centre of this kind of resistant queer hopefulness. Miller's work with Amok and other groups is a common enough topic in circus studies—for good reason. As a queer woman with a beard, Miller plays a key factor in the mobilization of certain notions of the grotesque in *Circus Amok*'s work. Bearded ladies, as they have been known, have been a longstanding staple in circuses and sideshows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Miller herself has performed at Coney Island's Sideshows by the Seashore as Zenobia, a woman with a beard who encourages women in her audience to embrace their own facial hair. Bearded ladies, as Rachel Adams notes in *Sideshow U.S.A.*, "have typically been figures of exaggerated femininity whose facial hair stood out in jarring contrast to their voluminous gowns, jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles" (Adams 2001, 221). When presented as freaks or curiosities, "bearded ladies" uphold the "normality of the binary opposition between the sexes" (221). If the secondary sex characteristic of facial hair is meant to signify a normal transition for men into healthy adulthood, any deviation from this pattern must be simultaneously "othered" and captured as freakish, abnormal, and grotesque.



Jennifer Miller in *Citizen*Ship*. Photo by Shehani Fernando.

Miller, with her beard, occupies this freak-ish space, in part by way of pervasive binary maintenance that renders her as other and thus marginalized, and in part by her choice to perform in circus and sideshow contexts. A key notion in Miller's work is personal agency; by acknowledging the simultaneous emancipation and exploitation of women's (and other) bodies in sideshow contexts, she inverts this image of the bearded lady from within the same trope of circus that has historically profited from the exploitation of such freakishness. Miller is, as Adams says, "thus ideally positioned to dispute received notions about sex and gender in a manner that coincides forcefully with contemporary feminist, queer, and transgender politics" (Adams 2001, 222).

A longer piece than this might explore how, despite her (often literal) central position in the Circus Amok project, continuous fascinated engagement on the part of scholars with Miller's body as a site of gender trouble runs the risk of re-inscribing the very harmful tropes of spectacle she aims to challenge. Returning to the cautionary disclaimer mentioned above, that terms such as freak and queer cannot be so easily reclaimed and de-barbed, let us instead change course ever so slightly by returning to *Citizen*Ship*.

An Open Dialogue

Part of the political potential inherent in the grotesque⁸ is its ability to reorient the marginalizing gaze in order to see monstrosity and disharmony in the official social order. This ability is exemplified in *Citizen*Ship* in a scene between a Latinx nanny and her white employers, who are bemoaning her resignation due to her being "so good with the kids" and "so affordable."⁹ As the two parties argue, moderated comically by Miller and a posse of juggling clowns, a man stands up in the crowd—who are seated for the most part on camping chairs and blankets on the ground—and screams "Why don't you go back to Rio Argentina and leave the jobs for good Americans like me!?" The performers onstage engage him readily, admonishing him for interrupting the act with such xenophobic sentiments. Upset, the man yells, "I thought this was an open dialogue!" at which point the performers onstage scoff and the audience erupts into relieved laughter as they realize the man might not be an audience member after all, but another performer.

A highly theatrical grotesqueness emerges throughout this scene. From the outset, it is characterized by disharmony, which Thomson claims to be fundamental to the grotesque, not only between characters—the former nanny and her employers, the performers onstage and the audience plant—but also between performers and audience. As the racist audience plant emerges out of the audience, rather than from behind a stage curtain, it is not clear at first whether this interruption is a scripted moment or an authentic outburst. The barrier between performer and audience member, made mutable already by the nontraditional venue, is blurred even further. Having a player emerge from the space coded for audience occupation—although not unique to Circus Amok and indeed perhaps not even that remarkable a theatrical technique in and of itself—works to estrange the audience from the theatrical world. The space is grotesque-d, is carnivalesque-d. This is the world where the grotesque body—exemplified by Miller and her entourage of gender-queer freaks—reigns.

Further, and more importantly, such an exchange demonstrates an instance of what Bakhtin calls "a special type of communication impossible in everyday life" (1968, 10). After the initial interruption, the scene is disrupted once more by another audience plant who engages the first heckler and further decentralizes the stage as the primary playing space. She screams, "Man, why don't you just shut up and sit down! No one wants to hear your pathetic, American, paranoid ranting anyway."

Everybody knows the whole immigration issue is just glitter in your eyes, it's a ruse to get you to not pay attention to the stuff that's really wrong in this country."

Boundaries between performer and audience are once again disturbed as the audience adjusts to another rearrangement of their relationship to the performance. The world of the event is thus doubly estranged; the hierarchical rank, as Bakhtin calls it, of onstage performers and audience—already troubled by the emergence of the heckler—is suspended, as the realm of the playing space is flattened and widened to encompass more and more terrain. This second disruption exemplifies an intensification of Bakhtin's notion of carnival time, which in turn leads to a "carnavalesque, marketplace style of expression" which permits "no distance between those who [come] in contact with each other," who are in turn liberated from "norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times" (Bakhtin 1968, 10). In the case of *Citizen*Ship*, this special carnivalesque communication takes the form of a shouting match about civil rights, immigration, and US imperialism.



Cast of *Citizen*Ship*. Photo by Shehani Fernando.

It is vital that we do not forget what such a liberated carnival time is contingent on, however. As argued above, any freedom or liberation granted by carnival time is always partially made possible by the re-institution of official time, just as any liberating qualities of the grotesque body only exist because of their marginal status in abject contrast to the normative body. This scene in *Citizen*Ship* contains a similar critique. Just as the argument between onstage performers, hecklers, and hecklers of hecklers reaches an apex, the audience plants make their way—still arguing—to the officially designated stage space and join the onstage performers, who are all subsequently chased offstage by a goat.¹⁰ The expanding carnivalesque forum is absorbed back into the stage reality, and the supremacy of the official playing space is reasserted. The special carnivalesque communication, in which distance between parties and official norms of etiquette and expression are suspended, comes to an end, only to be replaced by another scene. Thus, carnival communication and carnival time are always contingent on the re-emergence of official communication and official time, even if this official-ness comes in the form of another circus act.

Nevertheless, any potential melancholy or hopelessness this critique might incite is suspended because of its characteristic queerness. Returning to the core of Circus Amok's mandate, the "queer

celebratory spectacle” of the event prevents both apathetic cynicism and the seemingly inevitable marginalization of the grotesque body. The grotesquery of Circus Amok is always already queer/ed—thus, even though the special carnival communication of the event is absorbed back into a semblance of official time, what is communicated in the carnivalesque space retains lasting resonance directly because of its queer orientation. Queerness can resist normative models of temporality but can also challenge the division between “official” and “unofficial” (or carnivalesque) time. As McCallum and Tuhkanen write, if we conceive of the notion of queerness “not as an identity or a substantive mode of being but as a way of becoming, temporality is necessarily already bound up in the queer” (2011, 8).¹¹ Thus, the queerness of Circus Amok works to undo the stark contrast between carnival and official time, effectively queering the grotesque so that the kind of liberation found by Bakhtin in the pages of Rabelais, the “special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal” (Bakhtin 1968, 7), might actually take form and emerge—swanlike—from the queer, grotesque egg.

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Returning with Batson: “Toward a Queer Circus”: Cocteau, Barbette, Franko

As we let resonate Hayley’s final thoughts on queered time and its possibilities of de-/re-forming traditional reception given to the outcast and the oddball, I’d like to turn back several decades to explore, if briefly, Jean Cocteau’s “Le numéro Barbette,” that signal and seminal examination of a freakish queer artist of the early twentieth century in France. Across some thirty-five pages, Cocteau offers his musings on the risk, power, and place of the performative work of the (male) American trapeze and wire artist Vander Clyde as the female-gendered Barbette, which had, upon the act’s Parisian début in 1923, attracted rapturous attention from the European avant-garde. Importantly, the very title of Cocteau’s 1926 essay, which could be translated as “The Act Barbette,” points to his sense that it is the *performance* effected by the artist which is the site of what Cocteau calls a “Leçon de théâtre.” That polysemic “de” of the French undoes, however, any solid sense of her lesson’s relationship with theatre. Does Barbette, in the act, offer a lesson *of* and *about* theatre, thus showing, perhaps, what theatre is capable of doing and making? Or is hers a lesson that comes *from* or *out of* the very locus of the theatre, making, say, “Barbette” and “theatre” co-equivalents, wherein Barbette *is* theatre, they are one, mutually informing, mutually forming? The distinction lies, perhaps, in the directionality of our gaze of what and how we learn: are we looking back upon this thing called theatre from some distance, or do we find ourselves within its transformative cauldron? Such ambiguity of positionality may be intentional: we do well to remember Cocteau’s noted penchant to celebrate crossing and crossed boundaries, visually rendered perhaps most famously in his films like the 1930 *Blood of a Poet* and the 1946 *Beauty and the Beast*, in which self-reflective mirrors are also just as many points of passage from one state to another. What is it that we learn, in this lesson of and from the theatre, then? Importantly, in this bi-directional gaze, we see that we, the spectator, are engaged and not “mere” gazers. We are called to cross boundaries. We are called away from solidity. We are called to learn.

In 1992, some six years prior to Sussman’s essay on the queer Circus Amok, Mark Franko offered a fascinating—if arguably unheralded—contribution to the then-burgeoning field of queer studies with his essay “Where He Danced: Cocteau’s Barbette and Ohno’s Water Lilies.” He argues there that “a common strategy of [then] recent scholarship has been to reinscribe homosexuality in the suppressed subtext of the dominant discourse, thereby naturalizing what discourse labels unnatural” (Franko 1992, 594): we queers have been here all along, no matter (or, even better, in light of) what

you've been trying to do to us. Franko then warns, "Despite its aggressive sophistication, this strategy has its dangers. It could stamp gay identity as a historical by-product of male hegemony" (594). Watch out: we may be reinscribing the discourse and the hegemony as generative, primal, and essential, or as, if not necessarily our *raison d'être*, our *source d'être*. He proposes a way beyond: "Could the most radical objective for gay discourse now be to reconceptualize maleness in terms of neither the feminine nor the ideologically masculine? By moving onto the terrain of an amplified maleness, gay theory could disqualify, rather than merely subvert, the basis of phobia" (595). His proposed queer goal: an undoing, a changing, of the terms of discourse itself. As Franko then explores this "amplified" nature of gender presentation and representation that would re- and de-form the very building blocks of such (re)presentation, it is instructive to note that it is to a boundary-crossing circus artist that he turns. Furthermore, we remember of course that it is writings *about* such an artist that the boundary-crossing Cocteau pens.

Thus, Judith Butler's presentation of drag as not a mere imitation of gender (re)presentation but also its disruption in her hugely important 1990 *Gender Trouble* find themselves enhanced, with Marko and Cocteau, in the locus of the circus and its own enhanced and amplified crossings. For, you see, not only does the Act Barbette leave us in an ambiguity of gender—which it does: at the end of the number when the male artist takes off his feminizing wig to "reveal" he is a man, Barbette, according to Cocteau, ends up in his gestures showing us even there he is *performing* the role of a man, "interprète le rôle d'homme" (Cocteau 1980, 38), taking on its performative codes: he "rounds his shoulders, spreads out his hands, pumps up his muscles, exaggerates the sporty walk of a golfer" (38–40, my translation). But the ambiguity which is Barbette's multiply-layered performance is also importantly sketched out over the course of a trapeze act, an act of what Cocteau calls "équilibre"—a word frequently translated as balance but which we should remember derives origins from the notion of "equal weight," firmly placed in an in-between-ness. We are not, say, in the realms of liminalities, of margins, of "neither-ness" but, rather, in a space created in and formed of what happens on and across points of balance. And it is *there* we see the radical lesson from and of this theatre. Interestingly, Franko refers to the resultant space, through Cocteau and Barbette, as a "no man's land" (Franko 1992, 596), "outside the tight sexual polarity from which it emerged" (596). I would argue that it is the trapeze and its complex demands on space and balance that reminds us that *this* "outside the polarity" is, rather, a situatedness of being *between*, enhanced by, taking movement and meaning and momentum from, the poles.

Although Franko is less specific about its connection with the circus act itself, he does suggest that the gender performance that has effected Barbette's androgyny is one that makes a "death-defying leap across . . . boundaries" (598). These acts are risky. A polarity/binary-driven system does not allow for the easy purchase of its in-between spaces. Peta Tait's signal work on the aerialist intimates, of course, that the physical risk of the trapeze calls for even more intense engagement with the risk already at play in the fantasmatic flesh of the artist. This risk, with the trapeze, is more than fantasy, more than metaphor, more than metonymy. It is palpable, corporal.¹²

Before I continue my own queer musings, it seems instructive to add Kelly Richmond's voice here at this intersection of fantasy, risk, and body. Her writings offer a close look at burlesque theatricality as it enters and informs certain circus practices and productions. This work engages indirectly in dialogue with Hayley's piece both in its explorations of the promises and failures of the carnivalesque and in its playfulness in working with "queer" as a fertile noun-verb-modifier cluster-construct. Kelly demands us here, however, to experience the potential rewards of seeing pain in the play, of attending to the fruitful frictions among fleshy bodies and fantasies.

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Monsters in the Cabinet: The Queer Burlesquing of Circa's *Wunderkammer*

Kelly Richmond



Alice Muntz in *Wunderkammer*. Photo by Sean Young.

A fascinatingly queer and kinky trend in contemporary circus practice is the incorporation of burlesque theatricality into the aesthetics and athletics of circus acts. Today “burlesque” conjures a glittering imaginary of glamourized striptease acts, such as those popularized by international burlesque superstar Dita Von Teese and reimagined for the silver screen in the 2010 film *Burlesque* starring Christina Aguilera and Cher. In her 2016 touring show “Strip Strip Hooray,” Von Teese recreates a number of routines that originated in the 1940s and ‘50s “Golden Age of Burlesque”: stripping while riding a sparkling fuchsia mechanical bull, and luxuriating in a champagne bubble bath in an oversized martini glass.

Since the 2000s, referents to such hypersexual choreography and retro-glam aesthetic have become increasingly abundant within circus performances. In the 2011 Montréal Complètement Cirque Festival, *Wunderkammer* by Circa, *Le Cabaret* by 7 Doigts de la Main, and *Slips Inside* by Okidok all featured burlesque elements. Cirque du Soleil’s *Zumanity*, the “part cabaret, part burlesque . . . sensual side of Cirque du Soleil” opened in 2003 and continues its residency in Las Vegas to this day, thousands of performances later.

Alexis Butler notes that while glitter, glamour and explicitly erotic choreography define popular contemporary conceptions of burlesque, during its origin in the late nineteenth century, burlesque was distinguishable from other variety show acts due to its use of “irony in the form of theatrical commentary [and] . . . emphatic deployment of camp and irony to socially critical ends” (2004, 44). Although the literary use of “burlesque” in reference to grotesque parodies dates from the seventeenth-century *Ixion*, the debut performance of the all-female performance troupe The British Blondes in 1869 marks the theatrical origin of burlesque. This pantomime retelling of the eponymous Greek myth—in which the king of Lapiths has sex with a cloud believing it to be the goddess Hera—was the impetus of a dramaturgical and uniquely feminine genre. The British Blondes created a sexualized parodic showcase of gender through a mix of cross-dressing and

curvaceous feminine bodies, high culture mythos, and low culture dance fads: the result amazed and horrified reviewers: “though they were unlike men, they were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both” (W. D. Howells, quoted in Allen 1998, 25). Burlesque and *The Blondes* defined themselves less through theatrical form than through the performers’ attitude; as reviewer R. G. White noted: “The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather it forces the conventional just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is the defiance of system” (quoted in Allen 1998, 2). It was the irreverence of burlesque that in turn aesthetically fascinated and morally repulsed reviewers. Peculiarly queer yet feminine, and jarringly self-aware, the burlesque performers were like nothing Broadway had seen before.

In the 150 years since this radical origin, the dramaturgical practice of burlesque has undergone a number of revolutions. As burlesque performance adapted to the predominantly male working-class audiences of variety hall stages at the turn of the century, the sexual content no longer functioned as a subversive performance of androgyny and gender parody. By the time it was incorporated into the middle-class vaudeville of the 1930s, “burlesque” was synonymous with striptease rather than political grotesquery (see Warren 2005, 240; Butler 2014, 46). While the Golden Age solidified a showgirl iconography of glitter, feathers, fringe, tits, and tassels in the popular imaginary, the emergence of the “neo-burlesque” subculture in the 1990s has brought politicized grotesque sex comedy back onto the burlesque stage. This trend has led Butler to suggest that these dialectical conceptions of burlesque can be understood by defining “burlesque” as both noun and verb: the noun refers to striptease script formula coupled with showgirl aesthetics; the verb refers to a critique of sexual norms accomplished via exaggerated theatricality.

If contemporary circus is adopting the noun form of burlesque into its practice, we do well to ask if it might also engage in the verb. What does burlesquing look like in contemporary circus practice? What are the sexual norms present in circus, and how does burlesque reveal and critique them? How does this critique re-constitute the sexual outsiders of the circus—the freak and the queer?

The spark needed to illuminate answers to these questions comes from the flashing talons of a pair of high heels suspended in a dark abyss, approximately halfway through *Wunderkammer*, the 2011 production from Australian circus company Circa.¹³ The act unfolds like so: It begins when a male performer leaps from the ground to catch a trapeze hanging about ten feet in the air. He wears long black pants, no shirt, his chest a bright beacon against sheer darkness. Below him, three female members of the company stand in a line, each differentiated by a sexy bustier costume piece, each perched in a pair of platform stilettos—two shimmering black, one juicy red. One by one, the female performers shimmy up the male performer’s body to perform a trick on the trapeze. The woman in the red heels goes last, her partner now suspended upside down, his knees gripping the trapeze beam. As she climbs his body, she forcefully steps into his mouth and her weight transfers, resulting in the crushing pressure of body into shoe onto skull. This single step is loaded with meanings that tie together and burst apart gender, desirability, arousal, agency, and circus.



Jesse Scott and Emma Sergeant in *Wunderkammer*. Photo by Justin Nicolas.

At first glance, these glistening cherry shoes readily hail cultural codes that dictate the performance of feminine sexuality. The costume piece cites a script where the wearing of high heels has the power to both feminize and sexualize the performer in the eyes of the spectator. This act of gendering and sexualization is, as we know from Judith Butler and others, performative and thus fallible: the script requires the performer's movement to seem effortless, rather than rehearsed and carefully navigated. Under the performative conditions the ability to balance and move with ease and grace atop minuscule platforms is a given, the constant injury these confining torture devices inflict on the body erased: should the performer reveal to the spectator the calculation or pain that underlies the wearing of the high heels, she will fail to be perceived as feminine or sexy.

By this same performative requirement of perceived effortless, the shoes serve as a symbolic representation of the practices regulating the artistry and eroticism of circus activity. Circus scholar Helen Stoddart calls the fundamental principle of circus artistry "the illusion of ease," a theatrical style maintained by choreography that works to cover the "level of physical discipline, body regulation and hardship which are unrivalled by any other western performance art" (2000, 175). The performance of effortless is a defining feature of circus theatricality, allowing the athletic activity of circus performers to be differentiated from the practised skill of sports or rehearsed choreography of dance. Thus the circus is also performatively fallible: should the trick be performed without the illusion of ease, it fails to read as artistically circus to the spectator.

The illusion of ease regulates more than just the mode of athletic artistry conveyed by circus performers. Rather than a product of rigorous training, the ease with which circus performers defy gravity can be imagined by the audience as near supernatural (see Tait 2005, 108). This fantasy of boundless freedom extends past the material bodies of the performers and into the cultural imaginary surrounding circus: the carnivalesque.

The carnivalesque is imagined by Mikhail Bakhtin as “a world turned inside out,” where all organizing social principles are overturned, allowing for the “working out in concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterpoised to the all-powerful socio-hierarchal relationships of the noncarnival life” (1998, 251). Depictions of the circus as a carnivalesque space proliferate across media and are often embraced within the core narratives of circus shows themselves. This would seem to position circus as the ideal medium with which to critique the noncarnival social life, including the scripts governing the sexual desirability and agency of performing bodies.

Paradoxically, however, expectations of the carnivalesque have prevented spectators from recognizing how quotidian hierarchies dictating the distribution of agency and desirability onto socio-sexualized roles of gender, orientation, ability, race, and class are replicated in performance. As Stoddart has noted:

Far from being a carnivalesque space in which disorder, illegitimacy and inversion reign, [the circus is] rather one in which there is an incorporation but also a hierarchal ordering of both the force of chaos and inversion and those of order, ascendancy and power in which the latter invariably maintain the upper hand. (2000, 5)

As long as the illusion of ease perpetuates the fantasy of a dis-ordered space of freedom and otherness in the circus, any hierarchical regulations that limit sexual agency and desirability to normative bodies within the circus remain concealed from the audience. Thus in order to reveal and critique sexual norms, burlesquing the circus must also parody and unpack the illusion of ease.

So to return to the shoe. How can the piercing insertion of stilettos serve to overturn the insidious imaginary of carnivalesque dis-regulation? When Circa performer Emma Sergeant steps into her partner’s mouth, she critiques the presumption that her performance grants her freedom from the pain and confinement of gendered sexuality. In order to engage this critique, the spectator must be made aware of the fallibility of feminine sexuality. This work is done by camp, the hyper-exaggeration of style involved in burlesquing. Bursting in contrast to the bare feet of her male counterpoint, or the disappearing matte black of her female costars, Sergeant’s six-inch glistening blood-red talons bring the spectators’ attention to how her feminine sexuality is theatrically constructed and campily artificial. Having signalled the sex-gender scripts at play with supersaturated iconicity, Sergeant works them ironically. Instead of using the devices to hide the rigour her body endures to ignite the spectator’s desire, Sergeant sadistically externalizes this pain onto the body of her partner. This ironic inversion of the campily exaggerated sexual script fulfils Butler’s definition of burlesquing, but the work of the critique does not end here. In live performance the gasps, groans, and giggles from the audience indicate the empathetic connection created by the act: rather than being affectively immersed in the wonder of Sergeant’s precarious balance, they feel the crushing weight placed onto the partner. The rejection of typical circus affect critiques not only the effort of feminine sexuality, but also its tie to the illusion of ease.

This burlesque of gender and circus transforms the sexual dynamics at play between Sergeant and her partner, and between Sergeant and her audience, catalyzing an exchange where the submissive balletic sexual object becomes surrogated with a dominant queer subject. Historically, circus has used the theatrics of hyperfemininity to distract spectators from the athletic muscularity of otherwise feminine bodies (see Tait 2005, 69). Partnered with the gentle sensuality generated by the illusion of ease, hyperfeminine costuming coded the female circus body as a nonvolatile sexualized object. However, violent action disrupts passive heteronormative coding. As Tait has noted in relation to the “aggro femme” character of Circus Oz:

Aggressive physical action by female performers remains double trouble. It exposes the way that bodies are socially identified according to patterns of movement so that atypical action undermines gender demarcation. . . . When a female displays brute force towards others, this can imply a parody of masculine aggressiveness or feminine gentleness but both upset conventional ideas of identity. (2005, 131, 137)

In *Wunderkammer*, it is not only ideas of identity that are disrupted, but also feelings of desire. Sergeant becomes queer not only because her activity falls outside the heteronormative script, but also because of the way it ignites arousal in the spectator. I take my definition of queerness from Moynan King who describes it as “a multiplicitous state suggesting transgression, dissent, desire, and self-identification” (2012, 5). Under this definition, queerness emerges somewhere between its use as an explicit indicator of sexual orientation (desire and self-identification) and its cooption as a more general term for any and all nonnormative practice (transgression and dissent). Queerness in burlesque is always rooted in a dialogue of desire, where the desired, arousing object transforms into the desiring, aroused subject through a violation of regulatory sexual practices. Sergeant undergoes this queer transformation as she inflicts her rejection of a fetishized feminine role onto the flesh in front of her, and like an act of voodoo, the spectator recoils in sympathy. Sergeant’s queer subjecthood allows her to sadistically control the bodies on both sides of the footlights, requiring them to desire her differently, queerly, affectively aroused by her agentic activity rather than passive presentation. Carried by a traditional sexualized and feminine circus body, Sergeant’s eroticism would be dependent on the illusion that her body is harmless, weightless and pliable, without matter or agentic impact on the spectator: the spectator is the agent who desires. By burlesquing this dynamic, Sergeant reveals how circus artistry denies agency to feminized circus bodies and offers an alternative. In place of the illusion of ease, burlesque transforms sexualized circus into a queer practice where the physiological engagement of the spectator is evidence of the performer’s effort and empowerment.

The theme of queer eroticized pain continues throughout *Wunderkammer* as glistening scarlet campily coded props reeking of sexual fetishism (ribbons, bows, tassels, bustiers, lace panties, scarves, and pointe shoes) all have their moment in the sadomasochistic spotlight.

Yet even when these explicit burlesque referents disappear, the violence inherent in circus’s regulation of sex and gender is revealed through the burlesquing of circus activity. In the penultimate act of *Wunderkammer*, two of the female performers engage in a number of adagio, hand balancing, and tumbling tricks. The movement between poses is slow and sensuous, as the performers run their hands along one another’s bodies, signalling a touch to enjoy and explore rather than simply to hold and balance; as a result, the act feels explicitly erotic. Just as the spectator becomes lulled and aroused by this gentle movement quality, one performer leans suggestively across her partner’s body only to finish the motion by biting her partner’s arm and aggressively tears

her into the next balancing trick. From there, the act disintegrates into a confusion of erotic violence where the hair, ears, and mouth are transformed in handles for lifting the body, all without disrupting the sensuous quality of touch and reach.



Freyja Edney and Emma McGovern in *Wunderkammer*. Photo by Justin Nicolas.

The lack of burlesque props and costume in this act allows the activity of the bodies to read as pure “circus.” Thus the critique in this sequence reveals how even in the absence of theatrical indicators of gender and sex, circus works to regulate both. Here the campy stylization is in the posture and movement of the bodies, rather than their adornments. Gender becomes camped as the two female performers repetitively strike mirroring postures, drawing to attention how tableaux subtly reiterate gender norms in the circus. Peta Tait has noted how in hyperathletic circus acts such as aerials or acrobalance, moments of free fall are framed by gendered gestures taken from a culturally recognizable ballet vocabulary (Tait 2005, 24). The doubling of these gestures in *Wunderkammer* draws attention to the artifice of this convention, emphasizing for the spectator how the femininity of the performers relies on the perceived femininity of these shapes.

Similarly, the sensual stylized touching showcases how the effortless circus body is equated as erotic. The theatricality of the reaching, stroking, and gripping between bodies in this act is standard among contemporary circus shows, a core element of how artistry, ease, and erotics are inextricably linked in circus. As Tait notes, “a mystique arises with artistry of seamless fluid action when it falsely looks easy and painless” (2005, 108). *Wunderkammer* rejects this aesthetic throughout the show; instead, hand gestures, grip adjustments, and the occasional vocalized signal are all clearly demarcated in performance—occasionally creating the sensation that the spectator is watching a rehearsal rather than a finished show. In contrast, the two female performers here engage in balances and lifts identical to those performed in the rest of the show, while the exaggerated theatricalized movement

quality creates a hypersexual affect missing from the effortful theatricality that characterizes previous acts.

These exaggerated codes of gender and sexuality are once again ironically played with through the introduction of violence. The performers become paradoxically feminized and masculinized, virginal and licentious, through the genre-defying mix of effort and ease. The performers do not lose their coding as feminine and sexual upon the introduction of violent action, but instead this burlesquing re-constitutes how their agency and effort create and transform this code. They become queer subjects performed into being, using the very circus conventions that exist to prevent such monstrosity.

Thus the burlesque of the illusion of ease through erotic violence begins to evoke the spectre of the freak. In traditional circus, the coding of circus space as big top/sideshow created a united identity of the carnivalesque performers as “exceptional” but differentiated the basis of this exceptionality: superhuman achievement of feats vs. subhuman irregularity of biology (Stoddart 2000, 25). The burlesque re-constitutes the origin of arousal from the fantasy of freedom not onto the skilful effort of the performers, but rather through their aggressively material bodies.

Burlesque proves to be a queer and freaky practice when set at play among the codes and conditions of circus performance. Left unexposed, the erotic regulations of circus are insidious and normative, limiting the role of desirable bodies to cis-hetero-able-bodied performers who successfully create an illusion that their bodies lack matter, and therefore pain, pleasure, desire, or agency. To fail at sustaining the illusion of ease, in most circuses, is to fail at the successful completion of the trick, or the surrounding theatrical choreography. This failure is distinctly unsexy, intentionally depicted only by the clowns (Tait 2005, 123, 132). Yet burlesquing the illusion of ease proves to be an erotic re-mattering of circus bodies. As the performers in *Wunderkammer* complete their tricks in ways that bring the freaky flesh of their bodies to the centre of attention, they demonstrate that they too feel pain and pleasure. The performers transform the eroticism of their trick through queer violation and violence, by exaggerating rather than erasing their materiality, by effortfully and intentionally engaging an audience of voyeurs in a sadomasochistic exchange. This queer freaky eroticism does more than performatively produce sexual agency; it also deconstructs the carnivalesque fantasy. If circus is truly a carnivalesque space, there would be no regulations to break down and no arousal generated from these violent acts. For both performer and spectator feeling queerly and feeling freaky offer a way of desiring against the revealed normativity of circus.

While *Wunderkammer* is not particularly radical in the circus bodies it burlesques into sadomasochistic sexual power (the performers are all read as white, able-bodied, and of a size normative for circus acrobats), the successful queering of sexualized gender dynamics suggests that race, ability, and size could too be confronted in a burlesqued circus. Burlesquing, camp and irony, exaggeration and inversion are stylistic tools available to any director, choreographer, or performer interested in sexual play and critique. Queerness imagined as spectator-desire ignited by performer-transgression, and freakery as the exploration of exceptionally material bodies, offer generative new sexual identities, positions, and dynamics to be explored through further burlesque, performance, theory, and circus.

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Returning with Batson: “Toward a Queer Circus”: Phia Ménard, Danger

Kelly’s exploration of re-generated fantasy and re-formed convention as a site for queer(ed) practices and stagings calls me now to add to *Wunderkammer*’s pain-transferring blood-red stilettos the image of shattering and melting glass as evoked and presented in the work of French transgender circus artist Phia Ménard, in particular through her 2012 video declaration “Manifestly Phia.”¹⁴ Over the course of more than thirteen minutes, Ménard walks through principal tenets of what she promises to come in an artistic manifesto that she tells us will be a book, an object that we shall be able to “hold in your hands” (Ménard 2012), even as we don’t have it or see it yet. Exploring the theme she declares to inform all of her work, that of “the meaning of transformation and erosion and our relationship with this situation” (Ménard 2012) in which transformation is a constant in human life—and where, for example, upon the instant we are born, we “begin to age”—she speaks to us through the moving, intangible pixels of electronic media about a physical object yet-to-come (and still yet-to-come, as I write these lines in 2018). Evident in-between-ness indeed, for this queer artist, as the very medium of a message of constant change, constant trans-formations, and constant crossing of forms.



Phia Ménard. Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès.

For her 2008 creation *P.P.P.*, which she describes as an exploration of the decision to change sex—in her words, to “change fundamentally one’s path in society and in life” (Ménard 2012)—she chose

to work with the theme of ice: water, frozen, yet *not* in stasis as she conceives of it and works with it. H₂O always moving from state to state. And dangerous. As she says, there is not only a *mise en scène*; there is a “*mise en danger*,” where the staged scene is one with real peril. Ice falls, randomly; it breaks, randomly; and the artist is in it, on it, under it. Indeed, for Ménard, “the circus artist knows death,” and necessarily “makes the spectator think of the danger of life, of the danger of death.” But, importantly for both the spectator and the performer, the artist must also know how to “créer l’imaginaire,” a French-language phrase which may find itself transformed in English as “create the shared meaning-filled image.” She must also “savoir mettre en valeur l’élément pour que ça devienne de l’imaginaire” (Ménard 2012): bring forth, make present, that dangerous element that is carried, through images, to the viewer, the gazer, the participant-spectator.

Perhaps this is where I have been going throughout these pages: even as the queer—the artist, the art—may take literal front stage, the queer—the artist, the art—offers danger, brings forth a threat that is not only metaphorically present in the queer circus arts, in which we are reminded, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, that bodies matter. They bear and, in these lessons of and from the theatre, transmit risk as well as the meaning-filled image of risk. In the 2005 *In a Queer Time and Place*, J. Halberstam offers yet another vocabulary that may prove germane to our examination of the risks of the queer circus arts. For Halberstam, the queer participates in structures outside of “reproductive and familial time,” living “outside the logic of capital accumulation” (Halberstam 2005, 10). Such queers are not only LGBT individuals; for Halberstam, they can be “ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed,” occupying “time and space . . . limned by risks they are willing to take . . . as they destabilize the normative values that make everyone else feel safe and secure . . . [or live] outside of organizations of time and space that have been established for the purposes of protecting the rich few from everyone else” (10). These “queer subjects” à la Halberstam are not about being productive in terms of reproduction, of safety, of norms. Even as Halberstam does not use the word, we can see, now, after Ménard, that they are, in fact, dangerous; carriers, transmitters of danger. In their nonproductivity, they present and represent death, death to, of, and in a system structured for accumulation and production of progeny, capital, status; a system structured for upheld stasis at and of delimited poles, away from the threat of the movement and momentum of the in-between spaces.

Before I turn to my exploration of the explicitly queer-themed cabaret show in Montreal that offers, in my analysis, an eloquent working out of queer risks and dangers, I’d like to use Taylor Zajdlik’s contributions to our editors’ questions to remind us of the power of a queer(ing) performance. The power to show and effect change. The power of exploring, living, moving, feeling differently.

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Queering Circus Sessions

Taylor Zajdlik

My initiation into the world of contemporary circus came in the form of an invitation. On May 21, 2016, I was invited to attend the final production of Circus Sessions,¹⁵ a weeklong Toronto-based creative laboratory produced by Femmes du Feu at the Toronto Harbourfront Centre. I had been researching and preparing to assist with the Circus and Its Others conference held in the context of the Montréal Complètement Cirque Festival later in the summer, and I had not seen a stage show that would fall under the classification of “contemporary circus.” As we know, this new circus formula blends traditional circus skills with performing arts such as dance and theatre and tends to

follow a more character- and aesthetics-driven approach. My readings thus far, which included Robert Bogdan (1996), Yoram Carmeli (2001), Shayda Kafai (2010), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), had suggested that, through its dramaturgically-oriented formulae and the agency employed by its exceptional, physical bodies, these contemporary circus performers might be able to find and create a space where they can transcend objecthood and retain control over their distinct corporealities to perform in acts that then open the audience up to new physical and ethical potentialities. In conversations with the leaders of the Circus and Its Others project, I had begun to process the possibility that contemporary circus could use current narratives to create a noticeable aesthetic and ethical distancing from traditional circus. By creating a performing space for freaks, queer and socio-cultural outsiders, these progressive shows could be capable of becoming productive sites of exploration of and for gender performativity—or so I had come to understand intellectually. I thought I was ready . . .

I arrived in Toronto on Saturday, the morning after the festival's first performance. My day began with a series of discussion panels in the Harbourfront Centre that truly set the stage for what was to be an eye-opening experience for me as a newcomer to the circus world. Presentations about directing and dramaturgy in contemporary circus and a Q&A with representatives from the Quebec-based organization En Piste speaking about their national research on circus initiated rich discussions about contemporary circus's place within the performing arts. I came into these discussions unaware of many circus terminologies and—now that I look back—I feel that my lack of experience enabled me to make several observations, with fresh and new eyes, about this vibrant group. I noticed the tangible sense of community within the theatre space which endorsed and perhaps foreshadowed what read as the personal narratives of the circassians that constructed the show itself. I learned throughout the day how many of the people surrounding me during the discussions were actually performers in the show. As these conversations took place in the stage area itself, there grew a tangible, visceral connection between the group and the theatrical space throughout the day. Even with this palpable sense of connection, however, I really did not know what to expect.

The 2016 Circus Sessions featured twelve circassians handpicked and led by Adell Nodé-Langlois. The troupe hailed from diverse backgrounds spanning five families of circus: aerial, acrobatics, balancing, object manipulation, and clowning, while Nodé-Langlois herself, a French clown-actress and aerialist, served as the ringleader for the show (Nodé-Langlois n.d). With just five days to create and rehearse an hour-long performance, the circassians were challenged to use their memories and narratives to stage presentations of their respective self-identities. Under such time constraints, the real-life journeys, talents and camaraderie of these performers—to my eye—forged the show's very foundation, using the adversities and exceptionalisms of its charismatic cast as its creative raw material. Furthermore, the venue, a nontraditional circus complex with no previously installed rigging system, served not only as a communal space that captured and called for the physical prowess of these talented circassians, but also as a space in which the audience could engage—without a proscenium barrier—with the themes and explorations prompted by—I ultimately discovered—the show's queering of heteronormative positions.

In Erin Hurley's words, performing arts are able to cast "subjective experience into readable molds," and she also claims that "emotional expression objectifies the subjective experience" (Hurley 2010, 17–18). And Mary-Margaret Scrimger's descriptions of the pressures of performing suggest that "it also drives exploration and discovery into just how far the limits of body and mind can be pushed" (Scrimger 2016). This became crucial for understanding the impact that this performance had on me

as a viewing/experiencing subject, and, looking back at how much I was affected by the stimulating acts of courageous physicality, I recall a sense of liberation as my understanding of human limitation was stripped away in recognizing these new potentialities.

By generating this connective tissue of affect in the spectator, the intrepid achievements of the performers initiate a suspension of (prior) beliefs, or as Hurley argues, they provide “super-stimuli” which allow for the tangible constructs of the performance to trigger real-life similarities and mental processes (Hurley 2010, 23). By performing in acts that compel us to make connections with real life, these performers use the theatrical space to initiate a reciprocal dialogue with the spectator. By concentrating and amplifying the world’s “natural sensory effects,” theatre is able to activate what Hurley calls “feeling responses” by focusing the audience’s attention on these effects, which then generate *affect* by presenting complementary and/or contrasting viewpoints that, in turn, affect audiences’ perception of the world (23, 29). If both parties embrace the potentialities of this relationship, the performance may present opportunities to alter/expand on previously inscribed conceptions of human limitation, both physical and emotional. Such a process underscores these arts’ possibilities of showcasing the performativity, potentiality, and malleability of the human form, especially relating to gender.



Roy Gomez Cruz and Yuri Ruzhyev. Photo by SVPhotography.

Perhaps conveying this particular notion most prominently for me was the double act between the troupe’s only two male performers, Roy Gomez Cruz and Yuri Ruzhyev. Ruzhyev and Cruz performed an intimate dance in drag, followed by a daring aerial hoop routine that, through the delicate actions of the two performers, called into question—for me—a rigidity of heteronormative gender dispositions. Their emotion-marked routine worked to queer the circus stage and open the audience up to potentially new ideas of biological orientation, gender, and performativity. I use the word “queer” here not necessarily to be synonymous with questions touching on the LGBTI community but rather, as clarified by Schuhmann, as a radical, anti-identitarian position that endorses subversive, transgressive, and transformative practices (2014, 94). This is one facet that

surprised me, a relative newcomer, about *Circus Sessions*: its ability to create moments of intimacy and emotional connection through stimulating and intricate acts of physicality that cleverly call into question many preconceptions of normativity, thus opening up spectators like myself to new lifeways and potentialities of the human form. I'm a living example of Schuhmann's statement: "The arts can play a role to confuse dominant assumptions of single stories and static identities of gender, sex, age, sexuality, class and so forth" (2014, 95).

Back to Hurley: the affective stimulation offered in theatre allows us to "move out of our ontological isolation, to connect with what and who is around us" (2010, 35). I certainly found this sense of connection, and the act between Ruzhyev and Cruz featured enough camp, satire, and physical exuberance to generate a response in me that was sufficiently provocative that it initiated a re-examination of my own biases and preconceptions of gender. As Schuhmann states:

people seem to still see the categorising of a body's sex as based in biological difference; as an either/or binary rather than an as well as possibility. We are doing gender constantly and it is so normal to us that we only realise this practice in the absence of its automatism: it makes us feel awkward if we cannot determine the sex of the person next to us in a split second. (2014, 95)

Observing this affecting routine as a straight male, I was forced to recognize many heteronormative paradigms as they were deconstructed by the performers, placing me in an unfamiliar state of re-evaluation. It was the transgression of certain corporeal rigidities that alienated me, à la Brecht, as a spectator. By calling out and undermining strict gender positions through the use of drag, makeup, and camp performance, the performers' malleability challenged heteronormative gender roles by displaying the possibility of the erasure of fixed physical difference. This echoes the work of Bert O. States, who speculated that "the pleasure of viewing such theatrical limitations . . . arise[s] from a dimension of actuality in which the self and the other are joined and exchange natures, thus offering a momentary solution to the enigma of our ontological isolation from the things of the world" (1994, 19–20). As such, *Circus Sessions* revealed to me that something could exist and excel outside the norm, and thus the Sessions' attention to constructing more fluid gender roles showed itself capable of shattering ontological boundaries to promote acceptance of the nonnormative through the agency invoked by its exceptionally abled actors.



Yury Ruzhyev. Photo by SVPhotography.

Yury Ruzhyev is a circus acrobat, aerialist, magician and clown who exemplifies a contemporary theatricality through his exceptional physical prowess and onstage creativity. Roy Gomez Cruz, on the other hand, is an academic who studied contemporary circus (as a multidimensional artistic space) before delving into the performance side of the art, ultimately demonstrating talent as a performer by singing and performing aerial skills in this tandem act. Together, these artists' interactions called me to ask myself: How do we sexualize bodies? This question also led me to examine how my thoughts on queerness were initially formed as they were challenged and reconfigured by the performance.

So what was this moving performance? The two men enter the stage area separately; Ruzhyev is in drag, having donned a dress, mid-thigh-high sequined leggings, high heels, and a paper bag mask, this latter's recurrent use and re-use throughout the show ultimately serving as a symbol of individuality, change, and transformation as it was moved and removed and replaced throughout the show. Cruz sings and plays a Spanish love ballad as he paces the stage, shirtless with a bandana on his head. He is closely followed by Ruzhyev, who appears magnetized by Cruz's ethereal movements. Noticing Ruzhyev approach, Cruz turns, pushing Ruzhyev away to maintain a certain distance. They near the silks (an apparatus constructed of hanging fabric on which artists climb, wrap, and drop to create their numbers) that have been positioned at the far end of the stage. Cruz

ascends the silks while Ruzhyev removes his mask, revealing clown makeup on his face as he gazes upwards. Cruz begins discarding his attire while Ruzhyev stands below in anticipation. After catching Cruz's bandana, Ruzhyev runs across the stage to an aerial hoop, climbing up and performing intricate movements. As he does this, Cruz dismounts the silks and follows him to the hoop—and they meet on the stage floor. Cruz assists Ruzhyev in taking off his dress as the two stare at one another, suddenly raising their fists, as if preparing to fight. This immediately reminds us of macho male characteristics that have become predominant gender expectations in a heteronormative society. Here at Circus Sessions, however, the two men lower their fists, looking relieved as the unveiling of the theatricality behind this macho act and its associative trait of dominance becomes queered, made into an act of submission rather than of conquest. Now almost entirely undressed, unflinching in their gaze, they climb up—performing a tandem hoop act relying on one another for support and balance as they spin rapidly. The routine is intimate and physically demanding as the two performers, sexually ambiguous now in their submissively muscled, dragged and de-dragged male bodies, demonstrate their physical mastery in a daring aerials routine that accentuated the connection and harmony between them, even without directly connoting any specific sex-charged eroticism.

These adept bodies perform the scene, exuding a technical mastery and emotional connection that directly points to the bodies' very cultivation. As Hurley suggests, this “cultivation” is what “distances the performer body from its fleshy compatriot” (2016, 133) and reveals those aspects of gender which, as Judith Butler puts forth, “are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (1990, 187). If we follow Butler here, can we say that these bodies are performing *outside* of their corporealities, extending the queer space, and dismissing preconceived normative notions of gender for the audience by revealing the inherent performativity involved in heterosexual, hegemonic dispositions?

Descending, the two actors embrace one another, and the rest of the Sessions cast (all female) join them, assisting Cruz in putting on the dress and the high heels before he and Ruzhyev exit the stage on opposite sides. The male-bodied Ruzhyev is then—fascinatingly to my eye that is by now shaken into an awareness of the multiplicities of gendered expression—welcomed into a sisterhood as he is greeted at the edge of the stage by the remaining circassians, further pointing to questions about binary gender coding and rigidity.

Together in their undermining playfulness around the markers of gendered identities, Ruzhyev and Cruz reveal the social coded-ness of gender with devastating elegance. They thus work toward displacing normative gender association by unveiling the potential of gendered malleability. They may well have ended up queering *me* in their work, if we follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggests that “queer” is simply “a space which disrupts hegemonic and linear interpretations of gender” (1993, 8). She further notes that queer spaces allow for “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlays, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically” (8). Cruz addresses this in an interview with me during Circus Sessions, stating that the performance forces us to think “How can we use this space to think about outside?” for he believes “we create our gender identities every day” and that “circus for [him] is a way to conceptualize [this performativity]” (Gomez-Cruz 2016). Here, as Butler suggests, drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but it establishes that “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (1993, 125). The space is thus queered by the gender ambiguity displayed in both attire and performance, in addition to the physical work of both Ruzhyev and

Cruz. The queer space created by the performance therefore felt very personal and seemed to express the liberated spirits of the Circus Sessions actors. As Cruz states, “you don’t have to be gay, you don’t have to be queer to be open to thinking about gender” (2016).

Carlos Alexis Cruz uses L. Patrick Leroux’s words to remind us that in contemporary circus “the body becomes the site of the action” (2014, 272). When these bodies overcome physical and/or emotional obstacles, it therefore becomes “a triumph not only for that individual, but also of humanity over obstacles” (272). Watching these bodies generated a bodily response in *me* in which I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand on end as the energy of the performance—seemingly overbearingly—made me feel almost numb and certainly overwhelmed as my preconceived notions of heteronormative boundaries were disrupted by the unveiling of corporeal actions that opened me up to the potentialities of gender fluidity. This became a transformational experience, one in which my response demonstrated a suspension of prior conceptions and readings of bodies, which were—in the course of these Sessions—replaced with a more complex understanding of the possibilities of physical bodies in motion. As a spectator who was truly opened up to new perceptions of gender expression, I can say that my affective response was a thoroughly bodily reaction to the circassians and their transcendent performance that destabilized my rather normative ways of thinking about sexual and gender expressions. Because it “reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Butler 1993, 125), the influence of drag and the confusing of gender norms become powerful tools for subverting heteronormative constructs. As exemplified by the performance of gender within Circus Sessions, queer art practices are capable of creating “escape routes through patriarchal heteronormativities” and, as Schuhmann claims, can be done through “subversion, irony, and confusion” which can often be “more fruitful than clear cut opposition to regimes of domination” (Schuhmann 2014, 96–97).

This was me. There. Circus Sessions was a major point of self-realization for me, as the construction of the show proved to me that these performance spaces are capable of generating affective responses so powerful as to initiate a reevaluation of one’s own preconceptions. I credit this response not only to the performers but also to the established sense of community between them and the emotional responses to some of the performances that I recognized both in myself and in the audience members around me. Although I can only speak for myself, I think that these components of contemporary circus had a resonating impact on the entire crowd at Circus Sessions and will continue to serve as valuable ethical tools in the performing arts. I immediately was welcomed into this space where I was inspired not only by the dedication that drove these performers to their physical limits, but also by the tangible emotional connection that made the show’s transgressive themes reverberate and resound.

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Returning with Batson: “Toward a Queer Circus”: *Les Précieuses des nuits de Montréal*

The title of Taylor’s affecting piece of welcome, invitation, and change nods back to the fruitful ambiguity of what it means to be and do queer things queerly, joining his voice to that of Kelly and Hayley to remind us of the power of that which is not completely legible or legibly complete. His “Queering Circus Sessions” seems not only to point to the potential of the Sessions to become queer(ed); the Sessions may be able to perform the action of queering, making their spectator-

participants, in actions and in affect, queer themselves. If Hayley and Kelly have suggested that, through certain circus practices and engagements, the carnivalesqued, burlesqued queer just might be able to live into another day beyond utopic carnival time, Taylor may well have shown us that the queer can indeed remain with us. And in us.

Here is where I wish to turn to that explicitly queer-themed cabaret circus show mounted in Montreal in October 2014. The show's venue itself, the famed CaP Conç, points to certain Montreal specificities as they touch on queer life. This theatre was created in the lower levels of the Château Champlain, a hotel that opened in 1967 with the initial purpose of housing many of the visitors to that year's World Exposition. Montreal as a city was then riding the waves of what is known as the Quiet Revolution, which offered, at least in principle, a greater openness of the city, its province, and its peoples to the world as the province famously went about casting off conservative governance and the related dominance of a tradition-bound Catholic church. As we look at queer (hi)stories here, however, it is important to remember that the city, under the leadership of its mayor Jean Drapeau, also embarked upon a program to clean up its streets and sights for international visitors, resulting in the closing of the previously semi-tolerated queer brothels and bars and sending its queers literally into the streets and parks, including Dominion Square, just steps from the hotel.¹⁶

Louis Guillemette, a dancer who was part of the founding of the ground-breaking troupe La La La Human Steps in the early 1980s and current instructor at Montreal's ENC, conceived and directed the show. Emceed by noted drag king Nat King Pole, the performance offered a starring role to drag persona Billy l'Amour, who had also danced with La La La Human Steps some twenty-five years after Guillemette, and it featured ENC students as well as dancers from other Montreal companies such as the Ballets Jazz de Montréal. This was not Guillemette's first queer circus scene. I will long remember the notable numbers in 2008 he staged at the kink-themed soirée *Kuir* at Montreal's Bain Mathieu, with, again, ENC students and others doing black-and-white-clad hand-balancing and trapeze work with evident queer touch and eroticism in the same- and multi-sex pairings (and triplings and other poly-ings). There was, I can assure you, no need for any reparative-reading lenses that night, as the queer sustenance, not only of the *imaginaire*, was palpable and nourishing. Guillemette also crafted the work for a bar-sponsored float in the 2008 Montreal Gay Pride parade which had taken the theme "Place au Cirque!"¹⁷ *Les Précieuses des nuits de Montréal*, Guillemette's thirty-five-minute production in 2014, stands, however, as perhaps one of the few fully developed, explicitly queer circus shows in Montreal, a city whose history of queer performances in theatre has, it is probably not an exaggeration to say, helped give expression to the province's very understanding of itself since the 1960s, given the complex, sometimes troubled, public engagement with works of such queer playwrights as Michel Tremblay, René-Daniel Dubois, and Michel Marc Bouchard.¹⁸ Montreal, too, has hosted queer dance performances that have offered new physical vocabularies since at least the 1980s, contributing to what has been dubbed the *nouveau bouger montréalais*, the newly vibrant physical movements nourishing cross-developments in theatre, dance, and circus in that decade and the years following.¹⁹ As we look at this history, it appears that it is not only queer circus *scholarship* that is rare; even in that Montreal where queers have for some time marked and made its streets and stages, explicitly queer circus *performance* seems yet rarer still.²⁰

The opening sequences. Spotlight on Nat King Pole in front of the closed curtain stage. He offers welcome and invitation to "Mesdames, Mesdemoiselles, Messieurs, Kings, Queens, and Queers of the Night." He slides open the curtain to reveal four performers, those "précieuses des nuits de Montréal," circus artists all, that will "entertain, seduce, and ravish" us over the course of the evening. Billy, "la seule et unique Billy l'Amour," then enters, all seven feet of her from heel to wig,

and proceeds to move, within seconds, from a purple-and-black-clad welcome and link her use of the French language with her—and our, the audience’s—facility with French kissing. Only four minutes into the evening, and this queer show has already presented one of its dangers: blurred boundaries, blurred identities, effected from across the footlights. This audience is to be as queer(ed) as its performers, who are no mere entertainers; they are called, after all, to do things to us, to ravish us, to move us. As Billy immediately proclaims, before she begins a non-lip-synched medley of Edith Piaf songs: “quand on a l’amour on a la joie; quand on a l’amour on est gay; et vous mes amours vous avez l’amour et vous êtes gay!” (“When one has love, one has joy; when one has love, one is gay; and you, my loves, you have love, and you are gay”) “Oui?” A rousing “Oui!” in response is shouted from throughout the hall, even as many of those shouting audience members would not, outside of that hall, self-identify as queer.

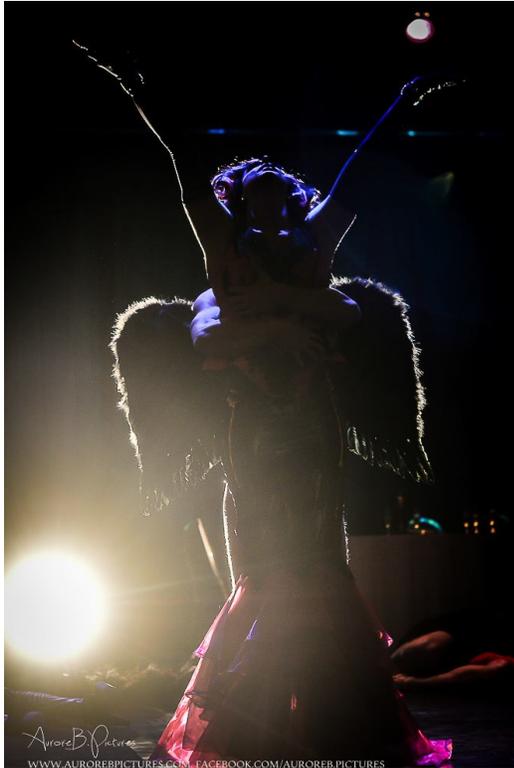
From this stasis-threatening queer communion rises another. Billy introduces the first solo circus act, a contortion number performed by Roscoe de l’Amour (mentioned above as a current member of Australia’s Circa), naming Roscoe her child—and fathered by none other than myself (in a shock, as the spotlight turned to me in the audience), as one of our many children conceived together. Queer filiations indeed, with a Halberstam-like emphasis on a family that is *other*, one formed beyond productive reproduction. Billy and I have made a child, a contorting, scantily clad, boylesque-star child. This, of course, in a context in which all of us in that Caf’ Conç have been made queer, in a gesture that recalls Fintan Walsh’s 2009 study of Irish drag performer Panti Bliss in terms that see relationships formed not by legal and patrimonial ties. These queer bonds are those of shared experience and feeling in particular times and places which are themselves queered—in resonances that reach back to Hayley’s and Taylor’s contributions to these pages—by our recognition of ourselves as queers within them.



The Précieuses of Les Précieuses des nuits de Montréal. Photo by AuroreB.Pictures.

But the queer work is not yet finished in this show. Prior to singing “C’est beau un homme,” whose lyrics suggest that a man is always (conceived of as) good and handsome, Nat King Pole offers a short (and real) biographical sketch that tells of the power of becoming the performer he always wanted to be, once he put on his moustache. With Pole, we may find ourselves distanced from those undertones in certain analyses of drag that can suggest that a certain melancholy accompanies the play, with all those glittered identities that may also point to a loss behind them in their paste-on of that which cannot be fully had.²¹ In *his* drag, there seems little loss: Pole explicitly becomes *more*, a *performer*, a singer, with the signs of maleness becoming vehicles toward the *art*, and not (only) the gender. After all, Pole here sings the song from the first person: this “homme” who is “si beau,” this man who is so good and handsome, is a “je,” an “I,” and in that voice Pole reworks the ending of this classic 1960s torch song to sing, repeatedly, “Je suis un homme,” “I am a man.”²² The moustache makes the (singing) man. It is perhaps also interesting to note that, with Pole, we are granted a look back at Marko’s reading of Cocteau’s *Barbette*: Pole shows us, exhibits to us, performs on us an amplification, an art made possible precisely in an in-between-ness and because it partakes *of* that in-between-ness.

And then, in a closing number, we discover that this queer world—one also peopled and made in an intervening hand-to-hand number by tutu-clad muscly artists labelled as “une espèce en voie de mutation,” de-/re-formed humans lying expansively at multiple points in a gendered spectrum—is one destined for a beautiful death. As Billy sings Dalida’s famed “Je veux mourir sur scène” (“I want to die on stage”), one of the Circus School artists, whom we’ve previously seen as the tutu-wearing base of that hand-to-hand number, returns as a thong-clad angel of death, reaching out to feel his fellow performers and guide them, as they collapse upon his touch, to the floor. Lee Edelman’s 2005 *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* stakes a claim for the very centrality and importance of death—death of production, of reproduction, of the explicitly clear and legible—that the queer represents. Indeed, Edelman’s queer is one that refuses to embrace established political and social order, one that abandons accommodation, and one that accedes to a state of *jouissance*. And I must say that it is a very *jouis-sif* Billy who, arms raised, sings, full-bodied, of a death brought, in Dalida’s words, “fusillée de laser,” shot by stage lights as her queer stage family collapses, showing itself explicitly desirous *not* to go on.



Billy L'Amour, "Je veux mourir sur scène." Courtesy AuroreB.Pictures.

This, too, is that queer family Billy has described in English, as the song begins, as one that has embraced the notion "To choose to live an artfully authentic life is to choose to be unafraid of life, and to be unafraid of death." For Billy and her (our) family, we artfully true ones live a life of death, and we embrace it. As the music ends, her spotlight is extinguished; her arms remain raised as her death-angel grasps her around the torso. She is only backlit from the brightest light on the stage, creating Billy-contoured shadows cast upon the audience. In this lesson in and of this theatre in Montreal, we've all been cast in this show, with something dangerous reflected upon us. An awareness of that very danger, a participation in it.

It seems important to me to use this closing moment to step outside, if briefly, of the *CaP Conç*, to remind us of the queer relationship with danger. ENC-trained Cyr wheel²³ artist Matthew Richardson recently found himself on a performance contract to create a number with his partner, the ENC graduate Francis Perreault, also a Cyr wheel artist. That creation process ultimately led to their 2016 video project "The Arrow," showing the two male artists in intimate, embracing, colour-filled movement on a single wheel. I'll now let Richardson tell this story, as presented on his Facebook page:

Why does love between two men, or two women make so many people uncomfortable, or angry . . . even violent. The inspiration for this project began over a year ago. Francis and I were training to create something together, and I was constantly telling myself, "No we can't do that move, it's too intimate. It's too gay. We're too close. People are going to be uncomfortable seeing that." And at some point I said, "No. Enough. Why can't we tell our story, exactly how it is? Or just be who we are. Why can't we show that we genuinely love each other and have a beautiful story together. Why do I constantly

have to change my nature for the comfort of the masses? Enough. I'm ready to show something REAL." . . . By chance, we filmed the day immediately after the horrific events in Orlando [at the Pulse queer nightclub that left forty-nine dead and fifty-eight more wounded]. Suddenly this creation meant more. This was such a huge blow on our community, we all felt it, and I knew when we filmed that I would credit the project in their memory.²⁴

So yes. Even on front stage, as our freaks have contorted, hand-balanced, and hula-hooped us toward a queer circus, it is strikingly important to see that the queer in circus is still queer, offering the risk of a social order, a community, a performance, a practice that finds amplification in its in-between-nesses while it necessarily points to the real possibility of its own end, its own elimination. As we look to learn our lessons from and of this boundary-crossing theatre, we do well to remember, with Phia Ménard, that, for the queer circus performer, ice—medium, message, apparatus—is never in stasis. It drops and breaks. But, wow, *quelle jouissance*.

Notes

1. I have explored, briefly, some of this reparative-reading potential in an earlier publication (Batson and Provencher 2015).
2. Some of this language is influenced by Roy Gomez Cruz, who is currently completing a PhD at Northwestern University that explores multiple aspects of circus's possibilities and their others with a dissertation tentatively entitled "Transnational Acrobats: Performance, Flexible Labor and Contemporary Circus Communities in North America." Gomez Cruz has suggested that it is fruitful to contemplate the notion of "the possible" rather than the more traditional trope that circus offers, "the impossible."
3. Certain theorists of the current moment and status of queer studies may offer instructive—or at least provocative—intertext here (as I muse about expansive and reparative postures and contexts) concerning the roles and places of queer theory's antinormative stances. See for example Halperin 2003 and Weigman and Wilson 2015, along with, importantly, Halberstam's 2015 critique of Weigman and Wilson.
4. For the list that follows, I draw my information from the following web sources, listed here in the order of the list in the body of the article: <https://www.topsyturvy.org>, <http://www.sircupcake.com/home.html>, <https://thepollinationproject.org/2016/06/03/abby-hylton-queer-youth-circus-north-carolina/>, <http://tangle-arts.com>, <http://www.circusamok.org>, <https://www.theluminouspariah.com>, <http://www.pridecentervt.org/misc/event/13142-queer-circus-weekend-with-necca>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1504776763148470/>, <http://www.dominiclacasse.com>, <http://www.matineevegas.com>.
5. I invite exploration of any of the videos published from that year's Burning Man and recommend a quick glance at <https://vimeo.com/138807400> to examine the multiple visual cues toward the freak.
6. Footage of Miller's performance can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7ugmGE2PTU>.
7. Such a comparison falls short, however, when taking into account what Deleuze and Guattari might call *the radicle-system or fascicular root of the grotesque*, which does not break with dualism (the binary of carnival and non-carnival) but instead reaffirms it through ultimately asserting unity, an all-encompassing worldview in which the grotesque is continuously marginalized. Deleuze and Guattari may very well admonish Bakhtin's carnivalesque breaks from state-sanctioned order, as I attempt to do in this piece, for being "all the more total for being fragmented" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6).
8. In this context I refer specifically to Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, as well as the work of Kayser and Thomson, rather than other conceptions of the grotesque in relation to psychological interiority and the uncanny (Russo 1995, among others).

9. Footage of this scene can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTKhku092V8&t=2s>.
10. Or, rather, a performer dressed as a goat.
11. Among others, J. Halberstam expounds this notion of a queer time in *In a Queer Time and Place*, arguing that the “new temporal logics” of queer time and space are “useful frameworks for assessing political and cultural change . . . (both what has changed and what must change)” (2005, 2–4). In their conceptualization, time and space are irrevocably intertwined, so that to queerly adjust our thinking about time is to both require and produce a queer conception of space.
12. For other work on some of these gender anxieties and ambiguities, see Ritter and Forrest.
13. All references to the *Wunderkammer* performance are courtesy of a DVD recording made available to me through the library at l'École nationale de cirque in Montreal.
14. Filmed in 2012 and published online in 2014 at <http://cryingoutloud.org/circus-posts/manifestly-phia-1348>. The English-language translations here are my own from her spoken French in the video.
15. My use of the term “Circus Sessions” throughout this article is deliberately—and perhaps queerly—ambiguous. On the one hand, the term refers to the week-long creative laboratory in which circus artists worked collaboratively toward producing a final show; the term also refers to the two-day event of public interaction, which includes the Friday night production, Saturday’s dramaturgical discussions and Saturday’s show; it also refers to the actual show itself, which carried the title *Circus Sessions*. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly for me, it refers to this significant, and first, exposure to contemporary circus and its sessions: times, periods, forums, discussions, meetings, gatherings that can transform and engage.
16. For exploration of Montreal’s streets as queer, see Batson 2012.
17. English-language translation of this rather idiomatic French-language phrase might give us “Give Space to Circus,” or, even, “Make Way for Circus.”
18. For a sampling of this rich theatrical history and its multiple meanings and uses in Québécois discourse, see, for example, the work of Robert Schwartzwald.
19. See Tembeck for reference to the *nouveau bouger montréalais*. The work of Guillemette with his partner Pierre Blackburn stands as one example of queer dance performances marking and being marked by this *nouveau bouger*, along with the notable homoerotic stagings of the 1993 show *Bagne* by PPS Productions (recreated in 2015). I should also mention Dave St-Pierre and his striking presence with queer dance in the 1990s and then his own choreographies of the 2000s.
20. I welcome further information that points to yet more queer circus productions in Montreal and elsewhere. I am perfectly thrilled, however, to mention here the presence of explicitly queer stories and histories in the 2017 creation by Montreal-based Les 7 doigts de la main for the Montréal Complètement Cirque festival and the city’s celebrations of the 375th anniversary of its founding. In their show *Vice & Vertu* produced at the SAT (Société des Arts Technologiques), situated near the corner of the crossing of St. Laurent and Ste. Catherine streets and thus not far from the original sites of some of the city’s queer venues of the early part of the twentieth century, they reconstructed for the circus-theatre performance space certain aspects of the life and performances of the 1950s drag queen Armand Monroe. See for example <http://blog.7doigts.com/index.php/2017/07/14/les-personnages-en-quelques-mots/>.
21. For a deeper exploration of melancholy performance, see Batson 2004.
22. It is, of course, hugely tempting to see Pole’s crafting and claiming of this phrase, “Je suis un homme,” as some 2014 intertext to the famous closing declaration “Chus t’un homme” of Michel Tremblay’s drag character Hosanna in the 1973 play of the same title, particularly in the context of queer performance in Montreal. Space here does not permit further exploration of such potentially rich and multi-layered connections.

23. A non-aerial acrobatic apparatus made of a single metal ring, in which the performer stands, moves, and rotates. The name comes from Daniel Cyr, one of the founders of Quebec's Cirque Éloize, who crafted its modern form in the mid-1990s in Montreal.

24. <https://www.facebook.com/circusspinner/>. The video "The Arrow" can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtnJUS30oIE>; the "making of" can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57uxLr4ZoUE>.

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