

Contemporary Circus Mobilities

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In continuity with earlier circus forms that persist today, the so-called contemporary circus developed in Europe during the mid-1990s. The label “contemporary” refers not only to a change in content, form, and aesthetics but also to a shift in socioeconomic conditions that raises new challenges of production, living conditions, and mobility. One of the major trends that becomes obvious in the contemporary context is the shift from performances in big tops to performances in traditional theatrical venues, consequently impacting mobility patterns and tour volumes.¹ This article, drawing on interviews with six Europe-based circus artists, serves as a first reflection on the particular context of the European Union where mobility is at the heart of contemporary circus practice. The author is interested in how mobility interacts with location and economic factors, what tropes it evokes, and how it contributes to a process of othering. The paper is structured in three sections following three different stages of a circus artist’s career: education, creation, and touring.

Circus Education

Contemporary circus artists today are by large majority graduates of higher circus education and often have a middle-class background. It can be assumed therefore that until the age of eighteen most of the artists grew up in fairly sedentary² conditions, developing emotional attachments to places, and learning to think of “home” and “family” in a normative way, founded on place-based attitudes about how personal relationships should be conducted. While some of the artists might have regularly attended international circus festivals, conventions, and workshops before, for many studying at a circus school abroad constitutes their first sustained mobility experience.

In 2013 the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC) launched the “ESCALES”³ project that focuses on mobility experiences of circus students in order to estimate its impact on their level of skills and employability (FEDEC, 2017a). A draft of the “ESCALES Survey”⁴ on students’ international mobility in circus arts education highlights that a majority of students have been trained “outside their country of origin” (FEDEC 2017b, 14). This finding prompts the question: Why do students decide to attend a school abroad rather than stay in their home country, and how do they decide where to go? While mobility can be understood as an “expression of individual intentions, motivations and plans” (21), my interviews with current circus students have highlighted the impact of factors such as economics, location, reputation, and accessibility on students’ decision-making.

The presence or absence of infrastructure at a future student’s initial location is certainly the single strongest motivation for studying abroad. For instance, while France offers a dense landscape of circus training facilities at secondary, vocational, and higher education levels, artists who are based in countries such as Austria have no choice but to cross borders in order to attend university-level circus education. Quality of education can have an equally important impact on students’ mobility. A school’s curriculum and artistic vision, the success of its graduates, and the reputation of current

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(often guest) teachers tend to be crucial: “Today’s circus student looks at the world for training opportunities. ‘I heard about a teacher in . . . Brussels or Torino or Lomme, Cuba, China, Moscow . . . that I want to study with’” (Lehn 2013). Yet, as much as students seem to be willing to move for the right education, there are factors that can limit their mobility.

One important factor is accessibility: for instance, the better a school’s reputation, the higher the number of applicants and the more competitive the admissions. Furthermore, eligibility can differ across schools with regard to age, language requirements, skill level, and certified preeducation. Students’ nationality and residence permit status determine whether a visa is required and whether or not a move is possible.

Economic factors are equally as important. Living expenses can differ vastly from location to location. Depending on the school’s national context and whether it is privately run or associated with a public university, tuition fees can range from free to €10,000 per year. While some circus schools offer scholarships, the Academie Fratellini in Paris is currently one of the few institutions *paying* their students under their apprenticeship program.

We can conclude that students’ decision to study abroad is influenced by a mixture of personal motivations, a school’s reputation, location, and accessibility, as well as economic factors. However, there seem to be only limited possibilities for students to experience mobility and study exchanges during their two- to four-year education (FEDEC 2017b). This is surprising considering that mobility competencies seem to be a core prerequisite to success in the profession: “A circus performer must be comfortable moving, living in different places, working with people from different cultures, and performing for people with enormously different backgrounds” (Lehn 2013). It therefore seems important to raise the question of schools’ responsibility to help students negotiate contradictions between their normative-sedentary upbringing and the everyday mobility of their chosen field. In what way are graduates prepared for the future mobile lifestyle that the profession implies?

Circus Creation

When creating a contemporary circus piece, the questions of how to finance the production and where to rehearse are crucial. My interviews with six Europe-based circus artists highlighted several strategies.

First, many established artists choose to continue touring their existing shows while working on a new artistic creation. While show revenues do not cover the totality of the production costs, it can allow for more income stability, but it might also fragment and slow down the creation process. Other artists choose to immerse themselves fully in a dense creation period. Not touring, these artists solely depend on savings, co-productions, or funding.

When looking for creation support, the choice of where to register a company or where to base oneself as an artist is an important consideration. Many artists from countries that do not provide state funding for circus tend to move to more favourable locations, such as France, where they gain access to a better infrastructure (subsidized training centres, a generous social security system, and a legally recognized *statut d’intermittent de spectacle vivant*, which provides state support between contracts).

Another strategy is to make use of Europe's well-developed network of artistic residencies for circus creation. Spread over a number of different countries, these creation centres offer rehearsal space, mentoring, and financial support. This system allows artists to use mobility as a tool of production, following such resources in order to bring their artistic projects to fruition. Yet artists' agency remains limited. As one of my interviewees remarks,

My current artistic creation is developed over several countries, implicating collaborators of different disciplines and nationalities. I have to be geographically flexible in order to get funding or to do residencies, find dramaturges to work with, and so on. It all involves a lot of travelling and at the end of the day I don't have that many choices. (Irish circus artist interview, 2013)

When seen in this light, the creation process offers insights into the complex interplay between location, mobility, and economic factors. It becomes clear that a lack of resources and local infrastructure might incite artists to relocate or might even lead to a situation of compulsory mobility. This seems especially the case for emerging artists with little financial means; waiting for a breakthrough, they often depend on their mobility to network and to be seen at the right venues:

It is actually pretty tiring, especially without having the necessary financial means: I'm constantly on the move, from venue to venue, sleeping on people's couches as I can't afford hotel rooms and spending hours and hours on grant applications, never being able to deny a gig I'm offered no matter what the conditions. (Irish circus artist interview, 2013)

There are also emotional challenges. It seems that deeper contact with the world outside the small theatre universe of technicians and other artists during the creation phase is rare, which can create a feeling of alienation and furthermore has the potential to raise important questions about an artist's role in society:

I feel like our lives are so disconnected that it is hard for me to find common ground with people that don't live our lifestyle. When I'm on tour I often completely lose sense of time and space because our life rhythm is so different and because we have so little contact with the outside world. (Canadian circus artist interview, 2013)

Circus Touring

When considering circus mobility in the European context, it is important to underline its embeddedness in a broader context of globalization, EU transnationalization, and labour market liberalization; complex mobility realities and work-life arrangements shape the everyday lives of an ever-growing number of people worldwide (Muffels 2005; Lipphardt 2012). This reality seems to be in direct opposition to romanticized ideas of mobility, alternative lifestyles, and the freedom metaphors that are often used by circus artists and audiences alike to refer to circus practice. This ambivalence between the romanticism of "circus life" and the economic reality of market forces was nicely summarized in an interview with an Irish circus artist: "I am free to go wherever I have to be!" (2013).

While they have stable costs such as rent, healthcare, and liability insurance, circus artists tend to

face a high degree of (financial) precarity. Being dependent on irregular income (as is especially true for emerging circus artists and graduates fresh out of school, who might take a while to find their way into the market) increases the pressure to tour frequently, or to find complementary jobs such as teaching or directing.

In order to be able to perform the same show over several years, circus artists must continuously expand their touring networks and renew their audiences. In this regard, the European Union provides “one of the most favorable spaces for mobile artists” (Lipphardt 2012, 112); its varied urban landscapes and density of cultural centres allow for a very efficient touring environment (assuming one has a European passport or work permit).

The contemporary mobility logic follows the demand of festivals and theatre houses rather than geographical imperatives. Efficient and cheap means of transportation such as airplanes allow artists to perform on consecutive days in geographically distant locations. In this case, the artist is practically teleported from one venue to the next without ever really being able to contextualize the move spatially or culturally. Taking this idea to an extreme, one could argue that contemporary circus artists experience a constant shuttling between airports, train stations, hotel rooms, training facilities, and performing venues, but little else. This necessarily finds its reflection in the artists’ subjective experience of their environments and their interaction with and relationship to space: “No matter where I go, I can never really invite anyone to my place. I’m always a guest in temporary places that I don’t attach to” (Canadian circus artist interview, 2013).

It seems as though the infrastructure of nonplaces (Augé, 1995) that forms the artists’ daily reality isolates them from the societies they are moving through. And while the majority of circus artists keep an apartment somewhere that functions as a point of departure and return, mobile artists are faced with challenges such as: How can one justify and afford to pay rent for an apartment that is inhabited only around 25% of the year? Who will take care of the flat during the long periods of absence? Existentially: how does one learn to feel at home on the move?

Reconciling one’s at home and on tour lives becomes a whole lot more complicated when children are involved. Neither funding schemes nor hosting venues seem to consider this challenge in the contemporary mobile logic. A Canadian circus artist said, “My biggest challenge today is to master my family life despite my mobile lifestyle. To balance family life and professional life. I’m not going to lie: it’s complicated” (2013).

Similar challenges seem to apply to the maintenance of personal relationships in general:

When on tour you get to meet a lot of people, but at a certain moment you just get cynical because you have to leave straight away and if you get too attached it doesn’t work, and you never know if you will see them again. (Italian circus artist interview, 2013)

Conclusion

Mobility is an important variable throughout key moments of a circus artist’s career. This variable appears to be intrinsically intertwined with location and economic factors and has an impact on

artists' relationships to their spatial and social environments, to their artistic practice and, last but not least, to themselves.

The widespread abandoning of the circular performance space coincides with the adaptation of modern scenographies, venues, formats, markets, production logics, and mobility practices of theatre and dance. Yet, despite changing mobility and life conditions, the contemporary circus appears to be affected by a historically evolved exoticization that stylizes artists as “mobile others” and projects cultural expectations onto them that are all too often associated with traditional circus images. An Irish circus artist tells me: “That is probably the most painful thing about always travelling: always having to repeat the same story. My lifestyle is somehow exotic, especially for people who don't move around a lot” (2013).

It seems that in the exoticization of circus artists a central element is a fetishization directly linked to their mobility practices: a double process of projection and concealment through which the mobility lifestyle is being romanticized by the projection of freedom desires, while the underlying material realities are being concealed. At the same time, the artists themselves tend to subscribe to similarly nostalgic and out-dated travel and freedom narratives; here, circus life is stylized as a counter-model to the corporate world and highly regimented “office jobs.”

In particular, this freedom metaphor evokes Bourdieu's sense of a “collective *illusio*” that artists continuously invest in (1990, 66). It can be assumed that this is an essential strategy that enables artists to find lasting fulfilment in their everyday mobility and to overcome emotionally stressful situations: the pressure to be mobile, the emotional costs of hypermobile realities, permanent job insecurity, and financial precariousness, as well as the embeddedness of artistic mobility in unbalanced power relations. While it seems that, in a globalized postmodern society, circus artists (as part of the so-called creative class) are just as much a gear in the system of self-exploitation that fits perfectly into the European Union's neoliberal call for flexibility (geographical, economic, and otherwise), the maintenance of this “ideology of travel,” as Alzaga calls it, is evermore important to artists' ability to live their lives in a satisfied way (2007, 52).

When thinking about contemporary circus mobility, however, it is equally important to keep in mind the inherent privilege involved, and how easy it is to “think global” with a European passport. As Homi Bhabha has written: “The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers” (1992, 88).

Notes

1. This article in no way wants to promote the assumption that there is only one form of mobility among contemporary circus artists. Rather the author reflects general tendencies of this field, all the while being aware of the complex and nuanced realities that exist beyond these tendencies.
2. See Bogue (2004), Cresswell (2006), and Urry (2007) for reflections on the complex interrelations of sedentarism and mobility, and the sedentary paradigm's connection to agricultural cultivation, the production of the state-nation, and the politics of legibility and control.
3. French for “stop over.”
4. This report is set for publication in 2018.

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