

Freaks No More: Rehistoricizing Disabled Circus Artists

Katrina Carter

In her detailed analysis of aerial performances, circus historian and commentator Peta Tait (2006) suggests that cultural memory is complicit in both sustaining and blurring realities of the past through a process that Joseph Roach (1996) calls “selective memory.” He explains that this “requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed” (3).

Selective memory offers an opportunity to erase those aspects of the past that are uncomfortable or less desirable, and Diana Taylor (2003) proposes that the writing of history is itself a process of perpetual reinvention. It is a constant “back and forth. The versions change with each transmission,” she writes, “and each creates slips, misses, and new interpretations that result in a somewhat new original” (xx). This process of remembering and forgetting is therefore “imbued with ideological bias” (Tait 2006, 28) and the circus artists remembered or forgotten are undoubtedly dependent on the opinions of those recording at the time, the culture in which they performed, as well as the interests of those writing the associated histories that follow.

In relation to disabled¹ circus and variety performers, I agree with Leonard J. Davis (1995) that, “in the realm of the body, ableist culture still reigns supreme” (6). Circus histories focus attention on nondisabled elite artists, some of whom had accidents that might have rendered them disabled,² but I have discovered that numerous *performing* disabled artists also existed in the nineteenth century.³ Even Steve Gossard (1994), who shares a photograph of one-legged gymnast Frank Melrose in his *Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, proffers him as an example of novelty, alongside animal acts that “were known to employ trapeze features” (20). Despite Melrose being acknowledged by one of his contemporary critics as “America’s most wonderful one legged gymnast,” who was “a fine performer in the variety profession, and command[ed] a high salary” (Saint Paul Sunday Globe 1882, n.p.), latter-day historians appear to dismiss disabled artists as novelty or ignore them completely. I propose here that, as disability and circus have most commonly been associated with the excesses and discourses of freak shows, where individuals with diverse impairments were exhibited as “oddities” and “monsters”⁴ before being medicalized, institutionalized, and removed from public view, artists like Melrose were ostensibly forgotten because they offered an oppositional account; in Roach’s words, they presented obvious discontinuities to the freakery narrative and were therefore dismissed. Focusing on the highly emotive subject of freakery, and reexhibiting those performers as “other,” leaves little room for performers like Melrose to sit within accepted knowledge. It is easier for them to continue to be forgotten. Their omission has arguably distorted cultural perceptions of disabled people and the circus that, once reviewed, could realign and relegitimize disabled circus

Katrina Carter holds a PhD from Royal Holloway University and is currently an associate lecturer in the School of Music and Performing Arts at Canterbury Christ Church University. A world leader in Accessible Aerial, Katrina is also the founder of Airhedz (airhedz.co.uk), working internationally with circus schools, individuals and companies to find ways of making the aerial arts available for disabled people. She choreographed the aerial scenes in the London 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony.

practitioners within today's circus, not merely as social participants, but as artists. Disabled performers are not *new* to the art forms, but twenty-first-century artists like Jennifer Bricker, Erin Ball, Amelia Cavallo, Milton Lopes, and all those involved in London's *Paralympic Opening Ceremony* of 2012 are reclaiming an art form to which they have had an association for centuries.

Documentary evidence shows how some disabled freak-show performers often did more than expose their unusual physiques by engaging in acrobatic activities for their public (Johnny Eck (1911–1991) and Eli Bowen (1842–1924) for example), but there is also evidence of established disabled artists from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were top-billing attractions in circus, music halls, and variety shows.⁵ Furthermore, at least a few disabled gymnasts can be credited for significantly contributing to technical developments of acrobatic forms now embodied by their nondisabled descendants, upon which this paper will focus.

In *The True Art and Science of Hand Balancing*, renowned hand-balancer Philip Henry Paulinetti (c. 1863–1940) is shown holding a “one hand planche”⁶ that, we are informed, “has never been duplicated” (Paulinetti and Jones [1945] 2007, 40). Paulinetti's student and friend, Robert L. Jones, explained that the photographer, also an enthusiastic hand-balancer, was so stunned at Paulinetti's ability that it took three attempts to take the photograph. In the final photograph, Paulinetti's prowess was, according to Jones, tainted by fatigue and therefore not quite as exquisite as it might have been. It is undoubtedly still an impressive action and one that was only rivalled by Jules Keller (c. 1860) who also regularly performed a one-hand planche. However, Jones instantly dismissed Keller's action as unworthy of comparison because, in his words, “Keller, you see, was a cripple” (42). He continued:

[Keller] stood but four and a half feet in height, and while his body is like that of a normal well built man, his legs and hips were very, very small as a result of . . . paralysis in his youth, and were of no use to him. The slack of weight in the lower body of course gave him tremendous advantage in leverage, his weight being entered almost in the shoulder instead of near the waist as in a normal individual. His planche, held with the legs curled behind the back instead of straight from the hips was really little more than a one handstand—the arm was vertical, and held at a right angle from the body, whereas Paulinetti's planche is held with the arm at a considerable angle . . . making the feat exceedingly more difficult. (Paulinetti and Jones [1945] 2007, 40)⁷

As if needing to find ways of undermining Keller's abilities by highlighting his deficiencies, Jones concluded this excerpt commenting, “Keller was so ‘top heavy’ that he could not perform the half arm planche, a feat that is readily performed by almost anyone willing to practice a little” (Paulinetti and Jones [1945] 2007, 40); if *anyone* could do such tricks, however, I wonder why a performer would waste time on demonstrating them! Later, Jones writes that “Paulinetti did various ring and bar feats that have never been duplicated by a normally formed man” (44), and Paulinetti himself comments in the following chapter how he managed to “master a number of feats which the leading gymnasts of the world contended were impossible of accomplishment by [again] any normally formed man” (47). Clearly, there was an anxiety over differentiating himself from anyone he considered to be *abnormal*, or whom he felt might have had additional advantage in mastering similar feats owing to their specific physiology; I sense he thought they were somehow cheating and that their involvement might have a negative impact on how his own achievements were received. Much is made in the book of Paulinetti's small frame and how, “were you to meet him on the street you would readily

take him for a banker, or a lawyer, or a doctor” (45) rather than a skilled gymnast. His pre-performance physical anonymity provided a surprise to his audiences (including other gymnasts) who doubted such a slight man could embody such power and control, and he appeared to enjoy that element of surprise, yet he did not extend such a perspective to Keller whose body clearly differentiated from his own. After seeing Keller perform for the first time, however, and clearly anxious over the praise the “crippled” acrobat was receiving at his expense, he wrote, “I walked out of that theatre with my sails drawn considerably, and did some deep thinking for a couple of weeks. . . . Mr Keller’s most difficult feat, as I noticed was a planche on one hand. So I started to work on that also” (51).

Certainly not lacking in self-congratulation, Paulinetti concluded of his new accomplishments, “the writer feels safe in saying that this routine performed in the way explained is the most difficult and scientific of any routine ever accomplished in the art of hand balancing or gymnastics” (Paulinetti and Jones [1945] 2007, 51). Not satisfied in raising his game above Keller’s, Paulinetti ventured to master other actions being performed by Stuart Hall (d. 1902), a one-legged gymnast performing with one or other of his brothers as the Dare Brothers or Brothers Dare. Challenged by Mr. Hugo Moulton, allegedly “one of America’s very finest horizontal bar performers” (52), Paulinetti declared, “I am absolutely certain that I could accomplish all the feats that yourself and all the others have said were impossible for a normal man: besides, I am sure that it is quite possible to add a few more, even more difficult, than what either Mr Keller or Mr Dare is performing” (52). To his credit, he did achieve his goals, and as Stuart Hall left his brother Thomas to perform in Europe, Thomas invited Paulinetti to perform in his stead at some of the great US vaudeville establishments of the time, including Leavitt’s and Koster & Bials.

Keller and Dare led successful professional lives as international circus and vaudeville artists until their deaths in the early twentieth century. Audiences clamoured to see them, and I have only found a few references to potential freakery or significant “othering” in their regard.⁸ I surmise that especially in the aftermath of the American Civil War, which produced hundreds-of-thousands of amputees, seeing performers with missing limbs became quite commonplace. I have uncovered dancers, acrobats, leapers, cyclists, and aerialists with one or more missing limbs touring professionally especially across the US and UK—instances that my UNFRIQUE™ project aims to unpack further.



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The image above is of a poster I made for a sharing of UNFRIQUE™ in 2015 that shows some of the historical and forgotten (disabled) dance, circus, and music hall performers of previous centuries alongside three contemporary disabled performers (shown in red) who worked on the project. It aimed to demonstrate how disabled performers were not unusual in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While some did perform in freak Shows and exhibitions, this was not the only platform on which they were welcome. Zampi and others were also top-billing attractions.

Paulinetti's career of fifty years also saw him touring internationally. Each of these artists would have been seen by thousands or tens-of-thousands of people throughout their careers, and certainly, Dare and Paulinetti trained in spaces with other gymnasts, with the latter also becoming a coach in his later years; undoubtedly therefore, others would have tried their novel feats. If Paulinetti is to be believed and it was he who copied Keller and Dare's original hand-balancing actions, introducing them to the nondisabled community of gymnasts and circus artists, then all three have arguably made significant contributions to the discipline. The skills he described, not least the one-hand planche with bent or straight legs, are almost commonplace in today's hand-balancing acts. The increasing number of circus artists (and historians) who are surprised by my findings, however, demonstrates that many are unaware that disabled acrobats existed in the past and are astonished that some of the actions they now perform originated from two of them.

Returning to Tait's theories of memory and the biases of history shown to be evident in such recollecting, the omission of Dare and his fellow disabled performers highlights not only a loss to circus's rich history but also the predominance of an "ableist culture," as Davis calls it, and a perhaps perverse obsession with freakery that persists as the dominant feature linking disabled people with the circus. The existence of Dare, Keller, and others suggests that the nineteenth century was perhaps more diverse in its circus performers than has been remembered. The disabled circus artist, who is today considered a relative newcomer, can look back in time and see their precursors and challenge the conventions of the profession being solely for the nondisabled. The ring or stage should be more welcoming to disabled practitioners as circus artists and not merely social participants.

Notes

1. I choose to use the term disabled here to reflect both the medical and social models of disability as it is not only that the bodies of the artists bore impairments, but, as I argue, that the historians rendered them invisible and forgotten, therefore historically disabled by omission.
2. See Steve Gossard's book *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance: The Evolution of Trapeze*, in which he comments on several prominent aerialists who fell and either returned to the air or remained on the ground.
3. For more detailed information on this see my PhD dissertation, *Suspending Conventions: How "Disabled Aerialists" Are Challenging Aesthetic and Methodological Practices in 21st Century Aerial(ism)*.
4. See Bogdan (1998), Adams (2001), and Thompson (1996) for examples of diverse literature on freak show participants and discourse on the subject.
5. See Carter's UNFRIQUE™, available at <https://vimeo.com/127269529>.
6. The one-hand planche appears impossible as the acrobat's entire weight is held almost parallel to the ground, legs held together with feet pointed, on a single hand; the second arm extends the horizontal line of the body away from the head for balance. The balancer's supporting arm is almost straight, but leaning slightly in the direction of his head.
7. On page 41 of *The True Art and Science of Hand Balancing*, Jones includes a composite of images including one of Keller's one-hand planche.
8. An unnamed writer for the *Salt Lake Herald* wrote in 1889: "the phenomenon Jules Keller, whom nature has put on hands instead of feet, is a phenomenon indeed, but an uncomfortable one more suited to a museum than a theater" ("Amusements"). Stuart Dare was depicted in cartoon formation in *Funny Folks* (1878) alongside three other performers under the heading "Odd fish at the Aquarium," but in his duet with his brother Thomas, he was the serious gymnast while the latter played the clown.

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