

ARTICLES

Carriers, Those Seeming Heroes: Might They Be But Ordinary Humans?

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Translated by Sunita Nigam

Being a (Dis)equilibrist

I am an equilibrist. Installed on my hands or at my desk, I seek out instability, disequilibrium, the feeling of being set off-kilter. I adjust and recentre the weight of my body and of thought, of limbs and ideas. I reevaluate my posture, surprise myself in metamorphosis.

Gender, when one is balanced on one's hands, matters little: it will require patience and conviction to find the lightness of the body suspended on the palm of a single hand (and to stay there), strength and flexibility to resist the tremors of the descent into square angles, inventiveness to play with the fulcrums of the upside-down body, with their instability and disequilibrium.

Sex, when one is balanced on one's hands, matters more than gender: having a perfect forward split while you have your period, and as a costume, a delicate top and a simple white bottom. Fearing a leak despite your careful precautions. Ignoring the pain. Performing as on other days. Not letting anything show.

But the handbalancer is also human. And although she is determined to be more at ease on her anterior limbs than her inferior ones, she surely explores most deeply the plasticity of the human species. She escapes neither the assignations and stereotypes associated with sex and gender nor the powers of patriarchal and heteronormative domination that cut through the circus (like the rest of society). Whether she conforms to, resists, or is subjected to the violence of gender norms, these norms influence the artistic and academic trajectory of the female artist/academic who, disequilibrium after disequilibrium, adjusts and readjusts her posture as an equilibrist, as a woman, as an artist, and as a researcher. It is for this reason that I am attentive to the place of women and to the manner in which gender is performed in my artistic work (namely within *La Compagnie d'Elles*¹), as much as gender studies and queer studies are important epistemological tools for my academic work. What place do circus stages leave for men? For women? How do they represent men, women, gender, and sexuality? Do they reproduce stereotypes or, on the contrary, do they seek to deconstruct and trouble them? These are some of the questions I investigate here, starting with an analysis of the show *Undermän*,² written and directed with subtlety by the Swedish acrobat Olle Strandberg in 2011.

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Marion Guyez in *Inacheveux*. Photo by Cie d'Elles © Photolosa.

Love Stories and Great Feats

Hand-to-hand is a “demanding acrobatic discipline performed by two or more acrobats on the ground in which the base executes various moves involving strength, balance, elevation and flexibility by carrying the flyer on the hands” (Barlati 2016, 300). In order to reach the highest levels of virtuosity, professional mixed duos are often composed of a massive “carrier” or “base” (a man) and a slim (but no less strong) woman “flyer,” who balances on the hands of the carrier. The extraordinary exploits and risks performed in hand-to-hand endow these acrobats with a heroic quality. As the semiotician Paul Bouissac reminds us regarding the performance of great feats, the “life which asserts itself at the end of the act has added value of having triumphed over a major challenge through which the subject has acquired a heroic status” (2016, 39). In a certain sense, the work of the carrier, who literally holds the life of his partner in his hands, consists of saving the life of his flyer at every turn: “You can’t fall / You won’t fall,” sing the carriers in *Undermän*. This job, which demands great responsibility and physical strength, accentuates the image of the carrier as possessing a virile masculinity, free of fault or fragility.

This type of duo executes numerous dynamic and highly impressive numbers. Whether or not the duo forms a couple outside of their professional relationship, the discipline of hand-to-hand lends itself to the *mise en scène* of heteronormative seduction games, sensual choreographies, and love stories. Certain duos use humour to stage the difficulties of living and working together. The carriers of *Undermän* treat an issue more rarely touched on in the circus, namely the separation of these couples-duos.

“I’m Just a Man, an Underman” (*Undermän*)

Undermän—or “carrier” in Swedish—is an acrobatic and narrative documentary show performed by Mattias Andersson, Peter Åberg, and Matias Salmenaho that tells the story of three carriers (who share the stage with a musician, Andreas Tengblad). All three carriers have broken up with their girlfriends, who were also their hand-to-hand partners. In order to overcome the personal and professional difficulties related to their separations, the three friends collaborate on a show without women/flyers. In addition to performing acrobatic sequences, the three performers take turns speaking in short monologues. They also play music and sing about their loves lost in folk rock ballads. Though the performers are Swedish, they speak in English.³ Many questions arise from this documentary show about the activity of the carrier: How do you go on living after a breakup? How do you go on working without your partner? How do you create a hand-to-hand show without flyers? The last question serves as both an acrobatic challenge and a narrative device. *Undermän* foregrounds the carriers and, in the process, seeks to reveal the fragile and sensitive sides of these acrobatic heavyweights who are usually portrayed in terms of their strength and virility. The show seizes on and shifts one of the leitmotifs of the *mise-en-scène* of mixed hand-to-hand duos, namely the heteronormative sentimental register, taking advantage of the absence of flyers to stage a more complex masculinity. Might carriers, those seeming heroes, be but ordinary humans after all?

Let us look at how the absence of female flyers in this men-only show enables us to think about the visibility of the role of carriers and flyers in mixed hand-to-hand duos, and to interrogate the representations of sex and gender in hand-to-hand more broadly.



Mattias Andersson (foreground) in *Undermän*. Photo by Mats Bäcker.

Acrobatic Autofiction

“I loved her so much,” begins the prologue in which a man tells a love story: his own, that of a hand-to-hand carrier.⁴ He stands at the centre of the stage, facing the public, and recounts in the first person the story of his relationship. The feel of the first date, the complicity, the joys, the imperfections, up until the moment when this beautiful story turned into a nightmare. He then relates the cruelty of hand-to-hand: “I couldn’t even touch her without falling apart. And then we were, twice a night in front of thousands of Americans, doing nothing else than touching each other on stage.”

While the tone is confessional, the story troubles the relationship between autobiography and fiction. The fact that the narrator uses references to cinema and the performing arts to relate his personal story contributes to its fictionalization. The way in which the story is narrated further contributes to this process. This is what makes *Undermän* an autofiction. Certain anecdotes show how personal and artistic identity mix in the carrier’s real life, as on the beach in Brazil where the couple-duo performs acrobatic lifts for fun: “We did classic moves, like the *Dirty Dancing* one. The crowd on the beach applauded.” He compares his life several times to a film. He imagines: “I think that if my life were to be turned into a movie, this would be the part where everything is pretty and shiny.” He runs through the romantic steps of his professional dislocations: “Paris,” “Italy.” The “big dream” of the duo—“to go to Las Vegas one day”—becomes a reality, making their lives even

more like a movie. But this dream ends in disaster: no more companion, no more work partner. “So in a way, here I am,” he concludes. A banal love story.

At the end of the prologue, varied numbers follow one another,⁵ separated by three short monologues, confessions of each of the performers. In what follows I turn to the progression of these three lift numbers.



Matias Salmenaho, Peter Åberg, and Mattias Andersson in *Undermän*. Photo by Mats Bäcker.

After the Breakup: Carrying

If the prologue exposes the underside of the life of these hand-to-hand duos, the acrobatic part of the show takes us behind the scenes of acrobatic exploits. The carriers of *Undermän* thus compose a first number from a series of exercises specific to the training of the carrier. In the absence of flyers, the three carriers maintain their physical condition with the help of weights, staging pure demonstrations of strength. The weights (a standard training tool for carriers) take the place of the women, implicitly highlighting the reification of the person who is carried. The absence of flyers in this number, which is a succession of classic *tours de force*, shifts the gaze toward the bodies of the carriers (and asks us to look at their competencies as strong, muscular, and virile men).

Next, Mattias Andersson soberly performs a solo version of a classic sensual hand-to-hand number, in which he executes the movements with precision. He manipulates an invisible flyer, while a follow spot ironically seeks to illuminate empty space. The presence of the flyer is spectral, but her absence highlights the role and the movements of the carrier: his anchoring to the ground, his precision, his concentration, the attention of his gaze to the body he manipulates by tracing an incongruous choreography.

Finally, in the third number, the three carriers change postures, transforming into flyers themselves and performing a number as a trio. While all-male acrobatic lift trios are common, the passage from carrier to flyer isn't so obvious. Strandberg explains this transformation in an interview: "How do you support someone who actually weighs twice as much as your partner? Now you're going to be the flyer and not the base and you're going to have to trust that this person under you can lift you even though you weigh like 90 kilos" (2011). This number symbolizes the strength of the new bonds of friendship forged through the affective reconstruction the performers have undergone together. Romantic tribulations are forgotten; even memories of the women flyers are erased. These men are ready for new human adventures: they thus invite the audience (men and women) to change places in the auditorium so that they find themselves sitting among strangers for the end of the show and take advantage of this opportunity for new encounters with the people sitting near them.

Situating itself in the fragile time that follows a breakup, *Undermän* astutely appropriates one of the leitmotifs of hand-to-hand performances, namely romantic relationships. This show pays homage to the place and the job of the carrier, shedding light on the qualities and the competencies involved in their work. It carefully eludes the cliché that would represent the carrier as a strong man. Without minimizing the exploits carriers accomplish (nor escaping a hegemonic heteronormativity), the show works to put on display the fragile, sensitive, and sentimental parts of an ordinary masculinity whose strength resides as much in fraternity as in muscle mass. From reequilibrium to disequilibrium, the show eclipses the women and flyers, whose traces disappear, little by little. One question thus hangs over the performance: what happens to the flyers after the breakup?

Undermän does not resolve this question, but perhaps circus creations featuring exclusively women performers, which have become more and more common in recent years (Groupe Bekkrell, Naga Collective, the Collective du Biphassées, Portés de femmes, Gynoides Project, the Femmes de Crobatie, etc.) respond to it indirectly. We must, therefore, as we are trying to do in our creations at Compagnie d'Elles (which include both mixed and all-women performances), take charge of the way in which women and gender are represented in the circus.

Notes

1. La Compagnie d'Elles, based in Toulouse (France), creates experimental, feminist circus productions (adaptation of texts to the circus context, site-specific acrobatic performances, etc.).
2. Seen at Festival Circa in Auch, France in 2011.
3. Here I am referring to the performance I saw in France.
4. This citation and the following ones are taken from the production.
5. Hand to hand, but also juggling and Cyr wheel.

References

- Barlatti, Anna-Karyna. 2016. "Glossary of Circus Terms." Translated by Susan Kelly. In *Cirque Global. Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*, edited by L. Patrick Leroux and Charles R. Batson, 294–307. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
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