

## Gender Asymmetry and Circus Education

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The relatively recent global rise of professionalizing circus schools has both reflected and created the evolving landscape of contemporary circus performance. Many types of circus education exist today and can be found in most countries around the world. While students attend professionalizing circus schools to develop an artistic vocabulary, they also learn career management and become socialized into the norms of the circus industry.<sup>1</sup> A list of these schools can be found on the European Federation of Circus Schools' website,<sup>2</sup> along with other types of circus programs worldwide (European Federation of Professional Circus Schools 2008a). This paper discusses asymmetrical gender treatment in circus schools where graduates obtain both an academic diploma and the competencies to begin a professional career in circus arts.

While attending circus school, students are being socialized into the cultural, interpersonal, and professional behaviours of the contemporary circus market (Herman 2009). The behaviours students learn in circus school will influence how they pursue work and behave in professional settings. These behaviours will inform their expectations regarding peers, employers, and other artists. Even when unintentional, therefore, gender-based differential treatment has long-term repercussions on how circus performers will develop networks and professional environments.

There are several key ways in which gender stereotypes affect circus education. One of these is gender ratios; many of the most competitive<sup>3</sup> Western (European and North American) circus schools have a majority of male graduates even though most recreational circus students identify as female (Salaméro 2009; Davis and Agans 2014). Second, gender-based divisions in discipline choice affect employment opportunity and income potential (Garcia 2011; Cordier 2007). Finally, gender-differentiated teaching strategies seem to be reproducing stereotypical gender roles regarding risk management, which in turn influences how a student pursues technical development of their skills (Legendre 2014; Lafollie 2015).

This paper summarizes the rise of professionalizing circus schools and explores key critiques levied at circus educational systems through the lens of gender equality. I then expand the scope of investigation to consider, from the perspective of circus schools, what factors might predicate gender disparity in circus education. In conclusion, I explore what actions can be taken by circus schools, circus students, and the circus community to favour gender parity.

### A Brief Overview of Circus Education

Public access to circus training is relatively new; circus has traditionally been a closed community (Achard 2001). Until recently, the primary predictor for working in the circus was being born into a circus family. Formal circus education arrived in the Western hemisphere, from the Eastern Bloc, near the end of the Cold War when the first two European schools opened in 1974 (Vitali and Goudard 2009; Leroux 2014). Currently, many countries offer accredited, professional circus

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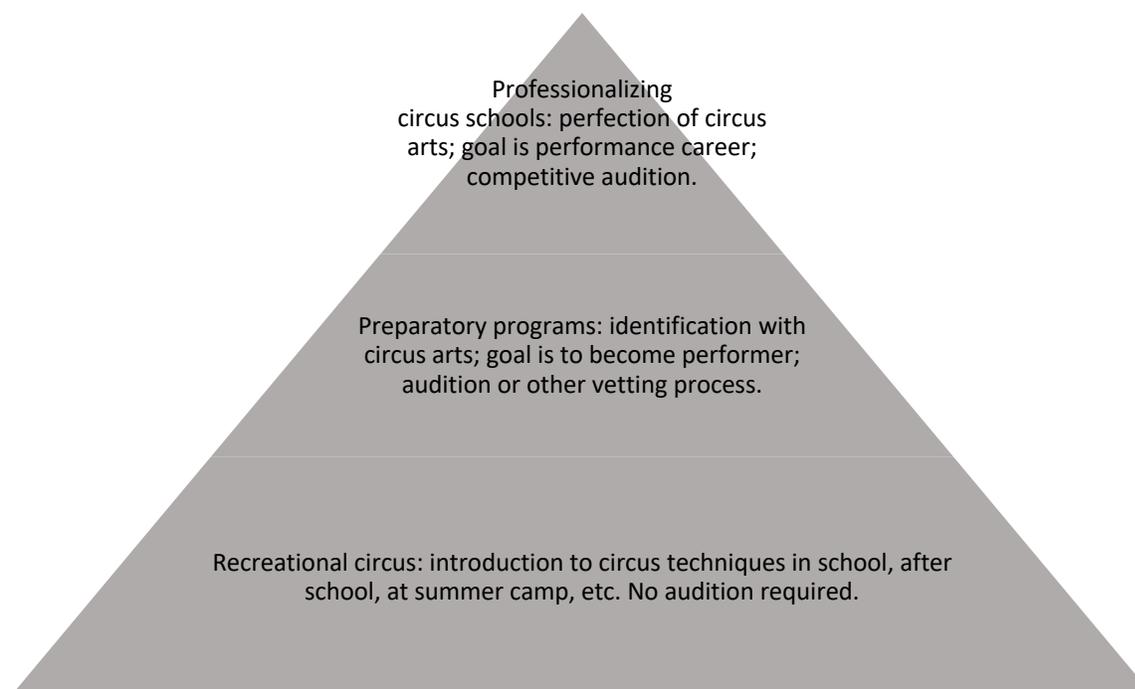
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education, including degree-granting circus schools for undergraduate and higher education (European Federation of Professional Circus Schools 2008a). These schools have comprehensive full-time programs that generally last three years and are dedicated to preparing their students for entry into the professional performance market. The curriculum is devised to both meet core academic requirements and instruct the necessary artistic and physical skills to pursue a circus career as a performing artist. Courses at circus schools include circus techniques, acrobatics, flexibility and physical preparation, dance, theatre, creation workshops, improvisation, music, circus history, career management, and often stage techniques like costume and makeup (Funk 2017). Most circus artists entering the market learn their trade within these types of programs, though schools are not the only way to become a professional performer.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to structured programs like these, data is increasingly available about circus education.

An argument can be made that, by providing a creative crucible for artistic exploration, circus schools were a key progenitor of the contemporary circus movement. Although the firmly established image of tents, animals, clowns, and sequins may still come to mind when one hears the word *circus*, contemporary circus is characterized by a rise in human-centred shows with an artistic focus including emotional nuance, narrative arc, and cross-disciplinarity with dance, theatre, and music. Currently, contemporary and traditional styles exist side-by-side and share many similarities, including the types of activities that are considered circus. Because of the nature of contract work, circus artists are likely to perform in both traditional and contemporary circus contexts during their career, as well as cabaret, theatre, and street performance scenarios. The research presented here addresses contemporary circus education, which is strongly correlated with contemporary circus performance and rejection of the aesthetic, racialized, and gendered roles that typify traditional circus.

Some countries, like France, have well-established, formal trajectories for circus education, traversing all stages of talent development, from the early years to professionalization (Bloom and Sosniak 1985). In the West, France is regarded as the gold standard for circus education because healthy funding, ample educational trajectories, and social support have led to a thriving and diverse circus culture (Coudert 2013; European Federation of Professional Circus Schools 2008b). French researchers have therefore provided essential foundational studies of circus arts, which in turn provide the critical first steps toward further investigation of contemporary circus internationally.

In other countries, students participate in recreational courses until they are able to audition for an accredited school, either in their own country or another one. The educational channel toward a circus career is pyramidal in structure, both regarding the number of programs available and the number of students in those programs.



This pyramid starts with recreational classes, ideally at the primary and middle school ages.<sup>5</sup> When the student decides to pursue a career in circus, they audition for preparatory or preprofessional schools, which provide focused training, generally associated with the early high school (secondary) years. Finally, auditions for the relatively few professional schools narrow the field into those who enter directly into the job market. Because circus schools strongly favour solo or small group acts, they often have a 1:1 or 1:2 student-to-instructor ratio, and the average size of graduating classes from the five most internationally-known programs between the years 2010–17 is only eighteen students.<sup>6</sup> The audition process to access accredited circus schools is highly competitive.

### Implicit and Explicit Learning in Circus Schools

Circus school curricula can be weighed and understood through models proposed by curriculum theorists (Langlois 2014; Funk 2017). Eisner describes the explicit curriculum as “an educational menu of sorts; [the school] advertises what it is prepared to provide” (Eisner 2002, 88). Circus schools teach the tools of the trade and also socialize students into the interpersonal and professional behaviours of contemporary circus. While each program has unique qualities, students will experience many of the same learning categories. Circus technique is a priority: all of these schools teach both focused work in specific disciplines and general circus knowledge, usually with an acrobatic base. Other performance techniques like dance, theatre, music, and voice are usually part of the curriculum. Beyond performance disciplines, students have coursework in career management, training hygiene, entrepreneurship, and core academic courses like philosophy, languages, and art history (Funk 2017).

Circus students learn techniques and tools for their future career through both formal (explicit) and informal (implicit) knowledge pathways (Legendre 2014; Langlois 2014). The explicit/formal curriculum is the sum of courses, content, and objectives written in the curriculum for a program. The implicit curriculum defines everything students learn *in addition* to the explicit content described

by a school. This implicit, or hidden, curriculum “socializes [students] to values that are a part of the structure of those places” (Eisner 2002, 88). It is through these values that circus students learn about their career and professional behaviour.

Amanda Langlois conducted the first curricular research on circus schools in North America through interviews with graduates of Montreal’s *École nationale de cirque* (ENC). Seven professional performers, one male and one female from the major circus disciplinary domains of Aerial Acrobatics, Ground Acrobatics, Balance, and one male graduate from Juggling (about which more will be written later), voiced their perceptions of the ENC curriculum, their expectations, and how it related to their careers. Among the many insightful themes that surfaced, Langlois observed that graduates experienced building a new “circus family” while at school (Langlois 2014, 91). This “family” consisted of their peers and, most often, their primary technique coach, and established both an emotional support system in a fragile profession and a network of qualified peers who became sources of performance work. Langlois describes this process as “embracing circus life,” which includes learning and “abiding by unspoken rules” (the implicit curriculum) and “developing a circus identity” wherein the students describe defining themselves against both traditional circus and other performing arts through their education (60). These sustained interactions with their primary coach regarding aesthetic decisions, risk management, and gender roles serve as modes of informal knowledge transmission. Investigating asymmetrical gender expectations and experiences, transmitted through the implicit curriculum, provides a platform for educators to evaluate and assess not what schools teach, but rather what students learn.

### **Evidence of Gender Asymmetry in Circus Schools**

Some examples of differential gender expectations are glaring while others are more subtle. For instance, Montreal’s ENC graduated its first, and only, female juggling specialist in 2016 (Langlois 2014; “*École Nationale de Cirque | National Circus School*” 2016). With an average of twenty-four students per year graduating from the ENC, whose mission purports innovation in contemporary circus, the fact of only one female juggler in over thirty years begs inquiry into the implicit gender norms being transmitted through the audition and education process. It seems impossible that there could be an explanation other than an industry desire to preserve stereotypical roles for female and male artists.

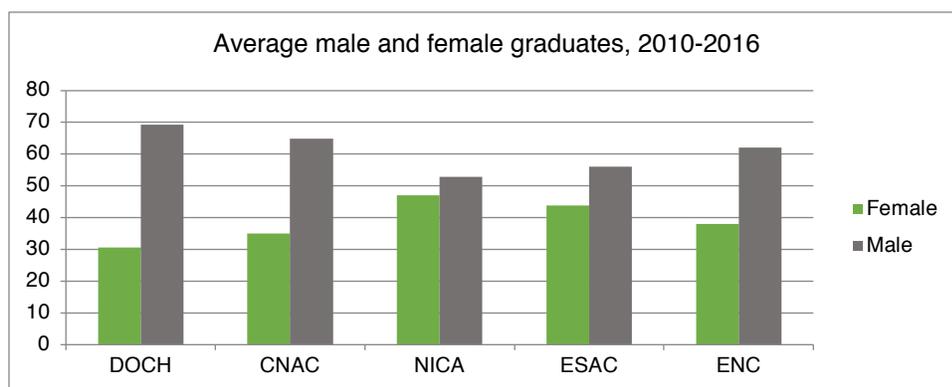
At first glance, this type of evidence makes it easy to criticize circus schools. Yet there is much more complexity than first meets the eye. As evidence of gender asymmetry comes to light, then, we must be encouraged to consider implicit student, administrative, and structural reinforcement of that asymmetry so that explicit, and more conscious, choices can be pursued in the future. Taking into consideration the goals and constraints of professionalizing circus programs offers one pathway toward discovering potential solutions.

### **Gender Ratio**

The most visible form of gender asymmetry within circus programs is the significantly greater percentage of male students. All circus programs with a goal of forming/supporting professional circus artists have an audition and application process. Although each school has variations, criteria for entry globally consider physical fitness, anatomical structure, performance ability, artistic ability, creative ability, personality, student goals, and completion of prerequisite academic work. And while each school has certain differentiating characteristics, one striking similarity among all

professionalizing circus programs is the consistently higher rate of male graduates. Researchers found that both the student and staff populations of preparatory and professional circus schools in France were 70 percent male (Salaméro 2009, 411; Cordier 2007, 88). Emilie Salaméro notes that the CNAC graduating classes had between zero and 32 percent female artists from 1989, with 2006 representing the only year where female students outnumbered male students (411). Unsurprisingly, analysis of working circus artists in France showed 70 percent male representation and a negligible number of women in creative, production, and artistic direction roles (Salaméro and Haschar-Noé 2008, 95).

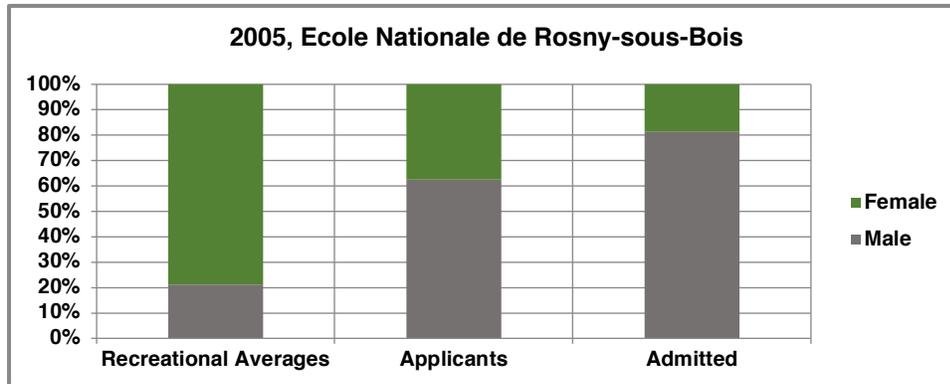
Average gender ratios from 2010–16 for graduates in five of the most competitive circus schools worldwide show a similar pattern. Overall, graduates are 60 percent male, which, while not quite as extreme as the earlier French graduate numbers, is still exclusively weighted toward male graduates.



Data from respective school websites and available Internet data gathered by A. Funk in March 2017.

How to account for this disparity? Are there simply fewer female students interested in circus arts? Multiple authors have noted a majority of female practitioners in recreational circus programs, anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of the student population (Salaméro 2009; Davis and Agans 2014). It seems likely that the interested population exists, which points to a blockage somewhere between recreational interest and career aspirations.

Research from France suggests the on-site audition as the key bottleneck moment. Salaméro gives the example of the ENACR's 2005 class: female hopefuls made up 33.6 percent of applicants and 37.6 percent of those selected for auditions but were only 18.7 percent of accepted students (2009, 415). By comparison, 66.4 percent of the initial applicants were male and 81.2 percent of the admissions. These rates are one example from one school for one year; however, they seem to mirror the stages where female matriculation drops away. At the very least, more research would help to better understand these statistics or clarify if this pattern is being challenged.



Source: Salaméro (2009).

What possible reason, other than discrimination, could account for this pattern? Although each school develops its own curriculum, culture, and networks, there are many commonalities between professionalizing circus schools in the Western hemisphere. Circus schools take seriously their responsibility to their students; they accept students who have the capacity to complete the program and go on to a professional career in circus arts. For this reason, they consider the student who enters the school, the artist who will graduate, and the industry that they will be entering. In the rapidly changing circus industry, circus educators are tasked with considering available work while simultaneously predicting how to provide their students with the tools to create an as-yet-unknown future of circus performance. Educators also know that working in circus is emotionally and physically demanding; their graduates must be resilient, autonomous, perseverant, and skilled in order to maintain job opportunities (Funk 2017).

It seems reasonable, then, that circus schools would value physically and psychologically healthy students who have attributes enabling technical multidisciplinary and the ability to collaborate. Circus schools therefore select candidates who present as able to learn the physical, artistic, and psychological qualities necessary to earn work opportunities in a precarious career. These tools will likely include the ability to compellingly perform more than one circus technique, knowledge of injury prevention and healthy training practices, and, functionally, a body which learns effectively, retains information, and is not prone to injury. The student's history of movement, as well as their genetic attributes, will play a role in how they manage physical risk during the acquisition of circus techniques.

It seems unlikely that circus schools assume that female students *as a category* are less likely to achieve the necessary curricular and professional requirements. After all, there have been many successful female artists, creators, and directors. Outside of circus, there are also many examples of accomplished female gymnasts, skaters, divers, and athletes. Therefore, we must look elsewhere for roadblocks to more egalitarian representation in circus schools.

### Gendered Discipline Choice

Most circus artists choose a specific discipline for their specialization. These disciplines come with years (sometimes centuries) of assumptions and habits about what type of body should perform them and how gender can be encoded into the performance of that discipline. Pioneering circus scholar Peta Tait, in her excellent treatise on gender in the traditional circus, observes that stylized costumes and hyperstereotypical movement flourishes evolved in order to communicate gender to spectators; the triple somersault on flying trapeze has no gender, and the body which accomplishes it

must be strong, flexible, and have appropriate proportions for the catcher, regardless of gender (Tait 2005). Therefore, performers project their attributes through costume choice and their “*style*,” the way that they pose, wave, and interact with the audience while on the flying platforms. Aesthetic gendered affectations have been an integral part of circus spectacles and are often continued to this day, with female aerialists emphasizing flexibility and male aerialists emphasizing strength positions.

Marine Cordier further describes gendered performance in the traditional circus by revealing how male bodies are aesthetically coded to demonstrate “heroic” strength and risk-taking while female artists are encouraged toward showcasing their “supposed grace and natural flexibility” (2007, 80).<sup>7</sup> She also notes that female artists were guided toward solo work, for instance contortion, while male performers were often part of a troupe, such as Flying Trapeze or teeterboard. Male and female performers were thereby encouraged into different disciplines. Additionally, within certain circus disciplines, individual tricks evolved to be read as masculine or feminine and are still dominantly performed by those genders in a traditional show. To illustrate, in many flying trapeze performances the female flyer will perform an inverted split under the bar before being caught, a trick rarely done by male performers. It is a relatively easy trick for professional performers, in an industry where flexibility is regularly trained, therefore the only real difference when choosing the trick is gender. While contemporary circus ostensibly does not ascribe to these gender stereotypes and in fact many performers and companies actively challenge them, discipline choice remains surprisingly gendered.

The traditionally established “gender”<sup>8</sup> of circus apparatus and tricks is still being implicitly transmitted within circus schools. In Langlois’ study, one male student remarked that he “didn’t know aerials [was] a gay thing until I moved here” (2014, 99). In this case, because aerial disciplines<sup>9</sup> were considered by his peers and educators to be a feminine discipline, his interest in performing an aerial discipline was perceived as feminizing him. Performing aerials was therefore seen as “gay,” despite having no relationship to his sexuality. Aesthetic traditions like this are implicitly taught in a variety of ways, both by students and circus teachers. Students from the ENC described an emphasis on their physical appearance as “an unspoken rule” learned while at school through observations that “those who were better looking tended to be favoured by the school, and employed more often” (98).

More subtle, however, is the way a performer’s gender is used as a proxy for aptitude toward specific disciplines. Marie-Carmen Garcia observes that both coaches and students in circus school believe that male and female students “naturally” have different specialties. Through a series of interviews, Garcia finds that

For coaches, physicality has different importance depending upon the sex of the students. While dexterity and muscularity appear as “workable” (for “masculine” disciplines or those connoted as “neutral”), weight and size are seen as permanent (being small is an asset for many “feminine” disciplines). (2011, 90)<sup>10</sup>

The male student’s “muscularity” can be trained into a variety of potential disciplines while the female student’s size predisposes her to be encouraged into specific disciplines. If the female student is small, she will become a *flyer*, lifted in a hand-to-hand act or tossed about as the only female member of a *banquine*,<sup>11</sup> swinging trapeze, teeterboard, or similarly acrobatic troupe. If she is not small, not portable, she will be encouraged toward a preconceived idea of a feminine solo discipline, not toward being the *lifter*, nor toward the diversity of acrobatic and object manipulation disciplines.

Gendered assumptions about stamina and performance longevity are also present in the circus community. Some administrators in my 2017 study of Quebec circus schools spoke of male peers still performing acrobatics in their fifties while female peers had long since stopped that type of career. While they acknowledged that performers must have “luck” and good “training hygiene,” there was tacit awareness that differential gender experiences will impact each student’s career trajectory (Funk 2017).

Furthermore, discipline choice affects the type of injuries a performer is likely to accrue. Reciprocally, surveying injuries can tell the researcher what type of discipline an artist is practising. Investigations of injuries in circus schools are sparse. Those which exist, however, show consistently lower rates of injury than would be expected when based on sports models (Shrier et al. 2009; Hamilton 2009). In circus school studies, “results indicated that there is no gender-based difference in the overall rate of injury” (Munro 2014, 253). However, reports from both schools and professional artists indicate that “there are gender specific differences as to the location of injuries” (Wanke et al. 2012, 153). The consistently “higher rates of hip injuries” in female students reinforces observations of gendered discipline choices. The NICA students are again replicating an emphasis on flexibility and static poses for female students and dynamic, powerful, acrobatic skill sets for male students,

with many more females undertaking extreme contortion and flexibility training during their time at NICA compared to males. . . . Although not exclusively, male students often undertake specialty training that places high loads on the lower arm (e.g., handstands, straps, Chinese pole, and base work in adagio). Male students will typically engage in more training activities and specialties that place high loads on the ankle, such as tetaboard [sic], tumbling, and high-impact landings. (Munro 2014, 239)

Although the injuries for one sex are not more severe than for the other, they demonstrate quantitatively that male and female students are still pursuing traditionally gendered discipline choices. It is less clear whether the origin of these choices lies with the students or with the teachers.

### Employment Ramifications

Naturalizing an anatomical divide between “male” and “female” expertise disguises real financial and career consequences which have a lasting impact on female presence and income in the workforce. Discipline choice predicts future training and working environments for contemporary circus performers because the technical needs of the equipment influence whether the act will be hired by restricting when and where an artist can train to maintain or develop their specialty. This is because, when training, an aerial apparatus requires a space with adequate height, a sound structure for rigging, a means of accessing the rigging points and adjusting the height of the equipment, and mats to place under the equipment during training. The artist may also require a spotting line,<sup>12</sup> which entails additional rigging and a qualified person to *pull* the spotting line. These spaces can be expensive to rent, complicated to access, and have limited availability, whereas a juggler can generally train fundamental elements in any space or outside, reducing expense and scheduling constraints.

These expenses can carry forward into the work environment: in order to incorporate rigged equipment, a show must be able to provide consistent, safe rigging points, hire a head rigger to ensure safety, and only work with venues that meet the requirements. As contemporary circus leaves circus-specific locations such as tents, artists and producers must negotiate for venues able to

accommodate complex rigging needs. These venues are often large and established, and therefore expensive to rent and potentially less amenable to experimental work. Easier then, perhaps, to avoid complex rigging and not hire the expensive solo act, reducing work opportunities for the heavily female disciplines. Discipline choice therefore directly impacts earning potential because:

- A. Female students are often encouraged into solo disciplines with heavy equipment requirements such as aerial work and tight-wire.
- B. These disciplines are more complicated to rig and therefore more expensive to train, which increases the cost of maintaining performance readiness.
- C. Those same reasons make these disciplines more difficult to employ because not every venue can accommodate the requirements nor every show has the budget to transport equipment and hire appropriate technical support.
- D. These factors conspire to leave female artists with fewer net earnings.

Therefore, even if a solo juggler and solo aerialist are paid the same, the aerialist must spend more money for quotidian training expenses, functionally reducing their income.

A cursory glance at contemporary circus companies shows that within majority male casts, the lone female soloist is still far too frequent.<sup>13</sup> And while it is nearly impossible to find all-female troupes, the preponderance of all-male and male-dominated troupes persists.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the asymmetrical gender make-up of circus schools, a shift in methods for act and show creation may also be a contributing factor (Cordier 2007, 83).

Small-group collective creation has become the staple of creative instruction within circus schools and a common methodology for generating material in professional shows. This deviates from a more traditional focus on a hierarchical ordering of tricks for maximum audience impact. Collective creation is usually centred on acrobatic research and creation, seen in shows such as Barely Methodical Troupe's *Bromance*, Casus' *Kneedeep*, and Throw2Catch's *Made in Konglistan*. Three factors contribute to troupes born of collective creation skewing male: peer groups, "creative masculinity" (Cordier 2007, 83), and economic considerations. First, the emphasis on "collective" posits the method as enabling equal contributions from all participants, yet "collective" creation is very difficult to accomplish on a solo apparatus. Because female artists tend to be encouraged toward solo disciplines, and solo disciplines are more frequently discluded, fewer female artists find themselves participating in collective creations.

Second, participant selection and inclusion remains asymmetrically gendered because male students create troupes with their friends, who are likely also male (because the female students have been pushed toward solo disciplines). Cordier describes the competitive, artistic masculinity of these male-dominated collectives as a function of "creative masculinity":

Creative masculinity describes the way in which male collectives produce and promote their work, defining themselves against gender assignments . . . it remains a domain which asserts the superiority of men over women, to the extent that works by women are not valued in the same way as the products of male collectives. (Cordier 2007, 93)<sup>15</sup>

Finally, because equipment-heavy solo disciplines (again, the disciplines chosen by most female performers) cost more in time (rigging) and resources (renting space), thereby limiting rehearsal and

performance venues, they are less likely to be included in small acrobatic collectives. This feedback loop often leaves solo artists to be freelance, independently contracted participants in a group show, and therefore not part of the collective or the creation.

While it is logical that a group of (dominantly male) tumblers would avoid the limitations of rigging and create a show with minimal technical needs to better enhance training and performance opportunities, the unexamined assumption of masculine and feminine disciplines, once again, replicates cultural and traditional gender divisions. Because female soloists often specialize on apparatuses that are therefore difficult to train, complicated to hire, and come with more cost, their presence in the circus industry is effectively diminished. Thus, through the implicit curriculum transmitted by coaches and administrators, reinforcing gender-specific discipline choices, circus schools exert significant influence on the gender representation of performers in the circus industry.

### **Gendered Teaching Strategies**

As the number of circus schools increases, so do the specialized factors that differentiate schools from their peers. In France, although every program has coexisting acrobatic and artistic education, circus schools differentiate themselves through a curricular emphasis on artistic, creative, or technical specialization (Salaméro and Haschar-Noé 2012). Drawing from their interviews with students and circus coaches, Salaméro and Haschar-Noé observe that within school communities, the athleticism of acrobatics techniques, like tumbling and partner acrobatics, is perceived as masculine, while artistic knowledge, such as dance and theatre, is seen as “feminine” (2008, 96). In contemporary circus performance and the rhetoric of circus school mission statements, artistry and technique are described as both important and interrelated (Funk 2017). Yet close observers note that in practice, the implicit curriculum in circus schools values athleticism over artistry (Salaméro and Haschar-Noé 2008, 2012).

An asymmetrical attitude toward supposed “feminine” disciplines is the result; interviewed students indicated that disciplines perceived as “feminine” were less respected by the staff and male students (Salaméro and Haschar-Noé 2008, 95). This attitude began with dance classes but extended to aerial circus disciplines as well. Salaméro also notes that in the CNAC and its sister school ENACR, where acrobatics is prioritized during the audition process, male students outnumber female students compared to other professionalizing schools (2009, 413). Furthermore, a study of risk transmission in French circus education found that only 39 percent of the staff was female, additionally noting that female staff were dominantly responsible for techniques considered to be more artistic than athletic, like dance and theatre, while the male staff taught techniques with high acrobatic skill (Legendre 2016, 120). This division of labour reinforces the gendered perception of athletic and artistic domains and perhaps represents implicitly biased hiring practices.

Discussions of risk and danger, once taboo among circus performers, are increasingly the subject of study. Beginning with Goudard’s analyses of the European circus industry, which included a strong critique of the dearth of institutionalized frameworks for risk assessment and risk management (Goudard 2005, 2010), a variety of authors have investigated how risk is introduced during circus education (Lafollie 2015; Legendre 2014, 2016).

Sociologists including Garcia, Salaméro, and Lafollie have noted that within French circus schools male and female students are taught subtly different values regarding risk assessment and risk management. Legendre (2014) explored the transmission of risk assessment knowledge in

professionalizing French circus programs. Among many fascinating nuances, she noticed that male and female students were differently encouraged regarding physical risk. Legendre reports that coaches perceived the female students to be weaker, to learn more slowly, and to require more encouragement than the male students. They used these perceived differences to justify different strategies toward male and female students. When hesitant, the male students were encouraged to complete a risky technique, being told “Go ahead, do it, you’ve got this!” while female students were told to self-evaluate for readiness: “If you feel ready, then you do it, but if you don’t feel it, don’t do it” (Legendre 2014, 11).<sup>16</sup> However, a female student described how the instruction to “feel” if she was ready brought her to focus on her fear. She realized that she had to ignore her fear in order to progress and had to instead listen to the instructions given to her male peers. A coach’s external knowledge of performance readiness teaches students how to assess their own internal readiness; the coach teaches both the technique and what it feels like to be prepared to complete the high-skill movement. The informal, implicit transmission of asymmetrical risk management strategies could therefore have a lasting impact on the type of work and the type of creation opportunities female students undertake.

The assumption that male performers are stronger, and therefore more physical, may also have an impact on expectations for academic and core curriculum content. In my study, staff from both schools divided students between physical and creative expertise. One circus coach struggled to find the right words to explain the difference, eventually saying that “there are two types of artists, you have artist-artists, and then there are technicians” (Funk 2017).<sup>17</sup> Although these divisions were never gendered in the discussion, coaches related that they had heard rumours about gender differences in academic learning attitudes. They were told the male students were more difficult to teach because they fall asleep in class more than female students. Even though female students also slept in class, they were generally considered better at academic work. Is it possible that because male students are implicitly perceived as more physical, there is an equivalent assumption that they are not interested in academic content? Are the teachers subconsciously assuming that the male students are more physically active and therefore justifying their lack of academic engagement? Investigation of asymmetrical expectations in academic engagement could shed light on pockets of gender discrepancies and the tacit reinforcements present within the circus school curricula.

### **Reframing the Problem of Gender Asymmetry in Circus Education**

The first, and simplest, barrier is gender parity in circus schools. We have already seen that this should be possible—the large, international female majority in recreational circus represents a broad candidate pool. It also seems likely that circus schools will accept qualified candidates. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate to rephrase the pivotal question from “Why do circus schools accept so few female applicants?” to “Why are so few female applicants prepared for the circus school audition process?” Framing the question this way shifts our focus to factors that limit female involvement even before the bottleneck of professionalizing schools. Although this does not reframe the implicit asymmetrical education within schools, it does enable circus educators and practitioners to reflect on the complex ways that gender asymmetry is perpetuated within the recreational and preparatory community. However, professionalizing circus schools also have a responsibility to reflect on their habits and stereotypes in order to uncover the ways they are perpetuating or challenging gender divisions.

### Physical Development

Physical attributes are individual and diverse; however, the global differences in physical development between boys and girls must be taken into consideration. In competitive sports like gymnastics and figure skating, which require paired athleticism and artistry, many female acrobats begin rigorous training at an early age and reach peak competitive levels in their teen years. Their male counterparts peak somewhat later. At the 2012 London Olympics, the average age for the artistic acrobats, calculated from the average ages for trampoline, aerobic and acrobatic skills, was 23.35 for men and 20.95 for women (International Gymnastics Federation 2017).

It is possible that the differences in the average ages for competitive strength and skills are different for men and women, and that those differences could have an impact on the audition process for circus schools. Although they are ostensibly close together, the difference between 23.35 and 20.95 is significant when considering entry into professionalizing circus programs. If competitive gymnastics age ranges are a proxy for peak skill and stamina, male students auditioning for postsecondary circus programs are expected to peak after they leave, while female students are likely entering their prime stamina at the tail-end of school. It seems natural that a circus program, intent on developing maximum healthy training, would favour the opportunity to intervene well before a student body's anticipated peak ability.

Of course, this does not prohibit female circus performance; instead, it suggests earlier formalized instruction would increase female readiness for postsecondary programs. In fact, girls auditioning from comprehensive preprofessional training programs would have an advantage because they would have more of the requisite neuromuscular patterning already in place to undertake the rigours of superior circus training. The standard educational system is a preliminary structural barrier for competent auditionees. In response to this, several schools have created preparatory circus programs for committed secondary students. France has six preparatory schools whose programs last between one and two years and whose supposed goal is to ready students for the two superior programs, and both Quebec schools offer an intensive circus program for local students. From this perspective, it might be interesting to explore what type of training successful female applicants to these schools completed: specialized preprofessional circus programs, gymnastics, dance, or other activity types.

The fact of different developmental rates may have a significant influence on the other discrepancies in gender treatment. The coaches who described the male body as workable may have been accurately reflecting age-related development potential. Perhaps this also accounts for female artists being encouraged into solo disciplines. Multidisciplinarity requires more time-on-task hours to perfect technique. Because many schools still use the marking-post of an *act*,<sup>18</sup> students must achieve adequate skill to graduate with approximately seven minutes worth of employable circus. With the time constraints of a three-year program, coaches may be effectively supporting female artists by aiding them in choosing a discipline for which their body is more suited, and where they can focus on their relationship to the apparatus without further complicating it with another person's body.

Developmental differences, however, should not enable deferral to gender stereotypes. Encouragement toward a solo discipline may give a student more time to focus on a specialty, but there is no reason that a female body is inherently more suited to aerials than juggling. The dearth of female jugglers worldwide indicates that strongly gendered ideas are still guiding student and coach choices of equipment.

### Preparatory Training

Students in many locations do not have access to an accredited secondary circus program, but many have local recreational circus programs. Frequently, these programs have intensive programs for committed students, including thorough training and performance opportunities. With so many female students in recreational circus, why aren't more ready for rigorous circus school auditions? One possibility is that recreational circus educators are not teaching broad foundational skills, and instead enabling narrow skill training. Another possibility is that without national and international gatherings, recreational students are not exposed to rigorous expectations. In sport, both of the above problems are solved using competitions. In gymnastics, for instance, qualified coaches identify youth perseverance early. That student subsequently pursues a clear progression of skills designed to prepare their body for high-skill performance. Competitions enable gymnastics students to meet other students pursuing similar goals and regularly assess themselves against peers through competition.

I am not suggesting that circus emulate a competitive model, a scenario which undermines the collaborative individuality of circus performance and subsequent improvements in confidence, motor competence, and a reduced gender gap with regard to physical literacy (Kiez 2015). But because circus is not competitive, students rarely have an opportunity to gain perspective on their skill level in relation to their peer group. From the program standpoint, there may not be an incentive for students to increase their acrobatic ability, physical strength conditioning, and flexibility, and learn diverse skills across circus disciplines. Far easier, and more enjoyable, to let a student learn a new trick in their preferred discipline. And while the student may well become competent in the aerial fabric, their overall physical integrity is more important for circus school auditions. After all, schools are looking for students who will learn and grow in new ways; they are not casting a show.

If recreational programs are not preparing their students for the audition process with adequate foundational skills, then this majority female population of circus students is not getting quality training. Worse, they may be receiving biomechanically inappropriate training that effectively prevents their body from being well prepared. Injury, improper technique, lack of multidiscipline training, and recreational pacing may all provide insurmountable barriers for these circus students. It is unfortunate when a passionate student arrives at school auditions only to find themselves without competitive strength and flexibility after years of intensive training in a circus program. Perhaps recreational coaches need more training to support the development of future circus professionals so that students who have grown up doing circus can be comprehensively educated ahead of the audition process.

### Intervention Possibilities for Professionalizing Circus Schools

Do professionalizing circus schools have a responsibility to support gender parity in circus arts? Each program must be responsible for answering the above question, at the very least. As seen above, there are many factors influencing auditionee readiness for circus programs, but circus schools themselves also have a role. For those programs whose goal is balanced gender representation, focusing on certain explicit and implicit learning environments could help identify the means for better integration.

The first intervention zone for each program is to explore which challenges may be unique to female students. Salaméro (2009) noticed a weaker retention rate of female students in French professionalizing circus programs. An investigation into the factors that lead female students to leave school might influence both acceptance and support strategies during the duration of the program. Are these students leaving because of an injury? If so, where are the intervention points for catching injury risk? Are students getting work and dropping out early? Are there financial or social pressures? Or are they choosing another career during the program? Schools must be prepared to recognize and intervene across these potential risk zones.

Coaches, usually hired for their technical prowess, might be encouraged to take workshops on teaching multiple coping strategies, to offset psychological stress. Socially, encouragement of cross-gender collaborative projects could be considered an obligation, both to facilitate future professional networks and also to habituate the students to creating work with people outside their friend group.

We must also consider who chooses to audition for circus programs and how they found out about the opportunity. What are their reasons for pursuing circus? What are their impressions of the industry and expectations of the educational process? If gender parity is important to circus programs, these programs might follow up their discovery of which female applicants are most likely to pass the audition process with active recruitment of these young women.

## Conclusion

The issue of gender representation in professional circus and circus education is complex and nuanced. Circus schools take many factors into account when auditioning future students. Among these, physical and emotional health seem to be highly valued because those traits increase multidisciplinary and collaboration—which are in turn highly prized abilities in contemporary circus performance (Funk 2017). While this priority should not be compromised because it could endanger the very career it ostensibly prepares students for, investigating why there are so few female graduates from professional schools is critical if the circus community would like to see more diverse gender representation in the professional circus world.

Circus schools are in an excellent position to positively influence the professional gender equilibrium by becoming more inclusive of diverse performers across multiple disciplines. By undertaking internal research in their programs to understand who is auditioning for their program, what their background training is, and what challenges they face once in the program, schools can work toward creating an environment that optimizes healthy bodies learning healthy physical and psychological skills. Outside the schools themselves, it is incumbent upon recreational teachers to understand the requirements and rigour of superior circus programs, whose aim is to prepare students for professional work. Through better awareness of the demands of professional circus, recreational programs can better prepare circus enthusiasts for entry into a professional training school.

## Notes

1. In this paper, the term “circus school” indicates an academically accredited circus program and the word “professionalizing” indicates circus programs that prepare performers to enter the professional circus performance market. Many recreational programs refer to themselves as “circus schools,” while some “professionalizing” programs are not academically accredited.

2. <http://www/fedec.eu>.

3. At the time of publication, several schools within the circus industry are consistently perceived to offer the highest calibre of postsecondary circus education and have correspondingly competitive audition processes: École nationale de cirque (ENC) in Montreal, Canada; Le Centre national des arts du cirque (CNAC) in Châlons-en-Champagne, France; École supérieure des arts du cirque (ESAC) in Brussels, Belgium; the School of Dance and Circus (DOCH) in Stockholm, Sweden; and National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA) in Melbourne, Australia. In part, this is due to their longevity and in part to the types of work their students pursue. However, many students pursue education and succeed in their goals through other professionalizing circus schools and programs.

4. In this paper, I will not address entry into the circus profession through apprenticeship, private coaching, or other viable pathways outside of accredited programs.

5. Many recreational programs exist for students of all ages interested in circus activity. The American Youth Circus Organization (<http://www.americanyouthcircus.org>) and the European Circus Organization (<http://www.eyco.org>) websites can guide interested parties toward local possibilities.

6 Author's calculation from Internet sources about the DOCH, CNAC, NICA, ESAC, and ENC, March 2017.

7. “Aux hommes, les démonstrations de force et d’adresse et les prises de risque les plus spectaculaires; aux femmes, les disciplines aériennes ou acrobatiques davantage centrées sur l’expression de leur grâce et de leur souplesse réputées naturelles.” All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

8. In this context, I have placed “gender” in quotation marks to indicate that there is no actual gender; it is a continuation of arbitrarily ascribed masculinity or femininity.

9. The text does not specify the type of aerial work, but Langlois includes aerial hoop (cerceau) and aerial silks (tissu, fabric) as the participants’ primary or secondary disciplines.

10. “La corporéité revêt, pour les formateurs, une importance différente selon le sexe des élèves. En effet, si la dextérité et la musculature apparaissent comme pouvant être ‘travaillées’ (pour des disciplines ‘masculines’ ou connotées comme ‘neutres’), la corpulence et la taille (être petite est considéré comme un atout pour nombre de disciplines ‘féminines’) sont perçues comme permanentes.”

11. Also called *adagio*. *Adagio* is a circus discipline which has a group of people (bases) launching a few smaller acrobats (flyers) into various flips and balances.

12. A spotting line is a rope which is attached to a performer’s waist-harness at one end and, through a series of pulleys, held by a qualified professional at the other end (either a coach, rigger, or otherwise knowledgeable individual). In performances such as handbalance on a stack of chairs or swinging trapeze, the artist usually has a spotting line in case of accident, though the line does not assist with their actual performance.

13. Some examples of the lone female aerialist from Quebec: the long-touring *Traces* by the 7 fingers; both shows by Flip FabriQue, *Barbu* by Cirque Alphonse (where the second female character is a pasties-wearing mud-wrestling magician’s assistant); and *Made in Kouglistan* by Throw2Catch.

14. Some examples of male-dominated or exclusively male troupes that have performed at Montreal’s international circus festival: Machine de Cirque (Quebec), *The Elephant in the Room* by Cirque le Roux (France), *Kneedeep* by Causus Circus (Australia), *Bromance* by the Barely Methodical Troupe (UK), *Entre deux eaux* by La Barbotte (Quebec), and *A Simple Space* by Gravity and Other Myths (Australia).

15. “La masculinité créatrice désignerait ainsi la capacité des collectifs masculins à produire et faire valoir leur travail, tout en se démarquant des assignations de genre, . . . Elle demeure cependant un ressort de la supériorité des hommes sur les femmes, dans la mesure où les œuvres de celles-ci ne sont pas reconnues au même titre que le produit du collectif masculin, qui est lui valorisé.” My translation to English.

16. “Pour la prise de risque, un garçon on peut lui dire: “Mais vas-y c’est bon, fais-le, t’es capable,” tout ça. Et une fille, on peut lui dire: “Si tu l’sens, tu l’fais mais si tu l’sens pas, tu l’fais pas.” My translation to English.
17. “Il y a deux types d’artistes, t’as les artiste-artistes, pis t’as les techniciens.”
18. Otherwise known as a circus *number*. If you visualize a wire-walker’s entire presentation, that would be considered their *act*. The performer usually owns their *act* and can hire it out to different shows, cabarets, and organizations.

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