

The History of Circus Oz

by Jon Hawkes



The origins of Circus Oz can be traced directly back to the new Australian theatre of the late sixties and early seventies. The ideas that informed the theatre of that time (the development of an Australian voice, ensemble playing and group creativity, heightened and exuberant physicality, an interest in contemporary international trends, breaking down the barriers between spectator and performer, an exploration of comedy, populism, overt political stands and a strong focus on the performer) were integral to the philosophical base upon which Circus Oz was founded.

Many of the original members of Circus Oz were active in the new wave of Australian performance and brought to the company attitudes that were forged and developed during that time.

Founded in December 1977, with its first performance season in March 1978, Circus Oz was the amalgamation of two already well-known groups - Soapbox Circus, a roadshow set up by the Australian Performing Group (APG) in 1976, and the New Ensemble Circus, a continuation of the New Circus, established in Adelaide in 1974. Between them these two groups had performed over seven hundred times to an audience of more than 300,000.

None of the original twenty-five members had a traditional circus background although some had worked in circuses in order to learn particular skills first-hand. Rather, the group chose circus as its medium through an intellectual (and somewhat romantic) process. The circus form, at least theoretically, provided the perfect context in which to develop the sort of performance and, as important at the time, the sort of life that the group wanted.

On the one hand, the group was frustrated by being unable to match the populist rhetoric of the new theatre with a practical capacity to attract large audiences. On the other hand, it found the ossification and semi-feudal structure of traditional circus too hard to deal with.

The solution was to combine the philosophy of the former with the practicalities of the latter. The principles upon which the company was founded followed naturally from this original premise: collective ownership and creation, integration of working and living situations, multi-skilling of personnel, gender equity, aiming for a uniquely Australian signature, being open to the widest possible range of inspiration, maintaining a balance between intimate, accessible performance and a high level of experimentation and innovation and a concentration on creating a show that exemplified teamwork rather than star turns.

These principles have, more or less, continued to inform the group's work throughout its history. The group has become more specialist and structured but, apart from that, the original coda remains. What began as an APG project continues to manifest the same spirit that inhabited the work of three decades past. Those that mourn the passing of the Pram Factory (which, as the

APG headquarters, has become the symbol for a mythologised 'Golden Age of Australian Theatre') are failing to recognise a seamless continuity. But although Circus Oz may be one of the few surviving remnants of the seventies, the group continues to demonstrate that the values espoused then retain all their vigour and relevance now.

The most significant developmental elements in the early years of Circus Oz were the 32 week 1979 season at the Last Laugh Theatre Restaurant in Melbourne, the Chinese acrobatic master classes and the group's relations with the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. Still to be seen in today's shows is a professional culture developed through that interminable season (and never subsequently lost), along with many of the technical skills learnt from the Chinese acrobats with whom the group trained in 1983/84 and again in 1985 (hoop-diving, pole climbing and group bicycle to name a few). In the early eighties, the relationship between the 'Fruities' (the regionally based children's circus) was usefully symbiotic: not only did they share a big top but many Circus Oz members taught there and many of the second generation Circus Oz performers were ex-Fruit Fly.

Since the mid-eighties, when contemporary circus and related physical performance really began to take off, Circus Oz has enjoyed mutually fruitful relations with the myriad of smaller groups that have emerged. The fairly constant movement of people and exchange of ideas between Circus Oz and groups like Bizircus, Club Swing and Rock'n'Roll Circus, and Circus Monoxide, indicates the energetic growth of a country-wide physical performance ecosystem that has developed on the basis of values similar to many of those espoused by Circus Oz. This ecosystem has contributed to, and benefited from, the continuing vitality of Circus Oz.

From the mid-nineties on, the group reassumed one of the functions it performed in its early days. Once more, it has become a crucible in which mature performers, looking for a change from working individually or in small and under-resourced groups, can grapple with the challenge of large-scale presentation (big team puts big concepts to big audiences).

The overall tenor of the performance has changed little over the years. There are usually eleven to thirteen performers (normally including at least two specialist musicians) who present an unrelentingly energetic pastiche of intimate spectacle, the hallmarks of which are subversive humour, multi-skilled playing (everyone appears to do everything), knockabout physicality, youthful grace, social satire and live, brash music. Whilst the honing of physical skills has led to even more breathtaking demonstrations of daredevil behaviour, the group has never been tempted to present these tricks seriously. They appear to be unable to resist sending themselves up (which is perhaps their most endearing - and peculiarly Australian - quality).

Along with having a sense of humour, the company has always been inclusive, embracing, eclectic, curious and democratic. And no more so than when it comes to working co-operatively. To its founders, and to the generations that have followed, teamwork has never meant unity in all things. The company has always eschewed the corps de ballet notion of indistinguishable ciphers breathtaking in their ability to all do exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. Rather, Circus Oz grapples with the challenge of a group of autonomous individuals finding a way of

working together so that all can find realisation in a supportive environment.

It is a tribute to the enduring strength and relevance of the original principles of the company that, even though there are only two people left from the original 1978 group and that over seven hundred individuals have worked with the company during the past twenty-nine years, the shows the group presents have continued to be as consistent and vital as ever. Its twenty-fifth birthday season under the Big Top in Birrarung Marr was enormously successful, both in terms of box office and critical response.

Probably the group's major achievement is that it has lasted so long, and as healthily, as it has. Thirty years on and after over 200 seasons, Circus Oz has toured every state and territory of the commonwealth, performed in over 100 different communities, in 25 countries on five continents, been seen at three Adelaide Festivals, broken box office records at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, represented Australia at scores of international festivals, toured Arnhem Land in a DC3, was the first circus in history to perform on three continents in one year, has performed at the Kennedy Centre, on 42nd Street, at the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, London's Royal Festival Hall and in a glass opera house in the middle of Brazilian rain forest.

While Circus Oz is more circus than it is anything else, it simultaneously embraces and argues with a range of traditions and forms, all at the same time: circus itself, music hall, cabaret, variety, popular music, knockabout comedy, movement, visual and music theatre and physical performance. As with all popular and contemporary forms throughout history, it has been an artistic currawong (magpie to the eurocentrics), always more excited by the next astonishing and unlikely juxtaposition than questions of consistency or continuity.

It may be this polymorphic artistic perversity that has led many commentators to describe Circus Oz as being apart from, or contrary to, the circus tradition. Other factors may also contribute to this perception: the predilection to performing in venues other than big tops; the apparent anarchy and self-deprecation of the performance style; the assumed ideological correctness of having a circus without animals, although it's debatable how important this ever was within the company itself, given that it's most likely that economics not philosophy determined the human focus. (Anyway, what was once one of the group's defining characteristics is rapidly becoming standard practice, with many traditional circuses now treading this same path.)

But, despite the desire of critics to be the first to recognise and describe a new form, as the company has developed, it has become clear that the similarities between Circus Oz and the tradition it pilfered from, revised and, some would say, resuscitated, are far more significant than the differences. Circus Oz has become as much a seamless part of the circus continuum as it is a critique of or theft from it. At the most obvious level, as with traditional circus, there has always been an impressive number of aerial routines: tightwire, trapeze, slackwire, cloud swing, web rope and roof walk are standards; there are clowns; there are acts of physical skill and dexterity; - but the parallels are more fundamental.

By revivifying the tricks and ambience of circus (and in response to the development of the bubble gum version) Circus Oz has revised, extended and made relevant a form in danger of withering

away or being co-opted by the entertainment industry. It has searched for and found the key elements of the form it once (always lovingly) parodied: the theatricalisation of risk, the manifestation of danger, the sense of circus as contagious virus, the edgy, larrikin, exotic, eccentric, outsider element that made the nineteenth century travelling shows simultaneously attractive and scary to the communities through which they passed. Circus Oz has built upon its understanding of the primary characteristic of circus – that it is both an artistic form and a tangible social entity; it exists in, and acts upon, both the imagination and the material and social world.

And Circus Oz occupies a place in Australian culture of far more importance than simply as a living museum that has kept alive a unique vocabulary of skills and attitudes.

It has demonstrated that thinking performers, technicians and administrators can collectively create exciting and enduring work. It has created a new context for accessible artistic experimentation. It has encouraged women to work in areas long perceived as exclusively male domains. It has created a public manifestation of the Australian identity that is accessible to and appreciated by other cultures. It has successfully blended artistic experiment, entertainment and social comment. It has demonstrated that collective endeavour does not mean the death of individuality (indeed the opposite). It has found ways of exploring sexuality, unavoidable when working as physically as they do, that are both upfront and playful – sexy without being sexist. It led and won the battle to have circus and physical performance accepted as a legitimate part of state-supported public culture. It has become a fundamental element in what is now recognised as one of Australia's major contributions to global culture – physical performance. And, perhaps most interestingly, it has, and continues to, synthesise elements of the old and the new. Simultaneously traditional and avant-garde, its practical and artistic efforts blend remarkable mixtures of age-old technologies and arts with modern innovations and attitudes.

Circus Oz continues at the international cutting edge of its form. What began as a radical experiment in both form and structure has become one of Australia's primary cultural standard bearers. Circus Oz has embraced this transformation into an institution without losing its original bite and pizzazz.

