

A support scheme  
for emerging creators of contemporary circus in Europe



***Think Circus!***

**For an utopian circus!**

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Jean-Michel Guy

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Jean-Michel has been a member of Jeunes Talents Cirque's jury since its creation (and vice-president and president some years). He has several tasks in hand, and juggles with various professional activities. He is a research engineer at the French Ministry of Culture and Communication (future studies and cultural policies department), where he leads sociological studies on various subjects, in particular on performing arts audiences. He is an author and a circus shows director, in particular those of la Scabreuse, a company that he co-founded. He was co-author and performer in *Jongleur pas confondre* by Non Nova company (Phia Ménard), and a co-author of the movie *Un rêve de cirque*. He also assists various circus companies on dramaturgy matters. He teaches critical and aesthetic analysis at the National School for Circus Art du Cirque of Rosny-sous-Bois and at National Center for Circus Art of Châlons-en-Champagne. He wrote on circus and for circus (articles, books, DVD such as *Le Nuancier du cirque*, elaborated in collaboration with Julien Rosemberg).



*Historical figure at JTC, JTCE, and then CircusNext. He brought his support right from the beginning of the adventure, non-stop. He chaired the jury several times.*

After Philippe Goudard's narrative last night, I will carry on with these notions of dream and utopia. It must be the privilege or old age and grey hair, coming on stage to say whatever.

I'm going to dream out loud and I will probably die before my dreams come true, so it's easy. Rather than assessing the past 50 years in circus, or the circus cultural policy, or CircusNext, rather than a strategic prospect, which, depending on the analysis of the recent or old evolutions as well as a few hypotheses for the future, would identify potential scenarii for the circus world, here I would like to raise a few utopia. I will therefore not talk about statistics, or research; I'm dreaming. But why? Is everything already not for the best in the best possible world? Circus shows are amazing, right? Artists are fantastically paid and acknowledged, right? Schools are amazing? Right, let's stop joking, rather than complaining and demanding like trade unions, I prefer presenting a few potential leads in a positive and optimistic way, looking at the future.

## **A CITIZEN CIRCUS**

The circus I dream about will be citizen and wildly imaginative. Going back to Philippe Goudard's last words last night « circus is part of this world, it's not off-ground ». Global scarcity in circus skills often made people consider circus people as superhuman beings, and often forced them to adopt a marginal lifestyle or to stick to themselves, thus almost pushing them to consanguinity. I also wanted to add that nowadays, artists are more and more attracted to research themes that seem timeless, out of history, such as balance, gravity, or some kind of mysterious poetry; all this contributes or contributed to considering circus as a world apart, a bit isolated from social, economic and political stakes. However, my utopian circus is very much anchored into this world. It is feminist and eco-friendly. It fights for human rights, and in particular cultural rights. Its social usefulness is acknowledged by the public power which financially supports it, that is to say by all the citizens, in the name of principles which are clearly voiced and debated. What's important is not its popularity or radicality, its novelty or its diversity, its contribution to peace or solidarity. What's important is the voicing of these very principles by any kind of public support (which can be numerous and contradictory), as long as it reasserts freedom of expression, or, as stated in a recent French law, freedom to create, and therefore freedom to do it in a private framework. Given that circus is an art, it is obviously difficult to separate this citizenship objective from its aesthetic translation. But whatever the aesthetic dimension or the aim of a creative process, in my opinion, it will be citizen if and only if it promotes certain rights and if it fights to promote them on a daily basis. The most urgent thing is gender equity (starting with salaries and equal access to creation means or project management), and equal dignity, which implies fighting gender stereotypes which are still very much ingrained in circus schools, that, for example, associate women with grace and men with strength.

I'm not gonna dwell on each topic but what I'm saying is that there's an awful lot to be done on these issues, and it is time to assess the situation, and have deep debates on the selective treatment of men and women in circus organisations (schools, production and distribution places, etc.).

Another urgent matter regards the contribution circus can bring to the fight against global warming. We are all delighted that the European Union just announced a research plan to implement an eco-friendly circus tent (No, I'm joking, I'm dreaming !). If we want a tent in the years to come, we will have to seriously reduce its carbon footprint, solve air conditioning, heating and transport issues...

We have to tackle these issues urgently and I can't see how we can do this without mobilising a lot of means and energy, probably at European level, or at least at national level.

The issue of cultural rights is more recent, but no less important. The key-word here is co-building. This notion forces us to deeply rethink the way circus is taught, all the mediation and notions that were derived from it historically speaking, such as, for example, audience schools or even the notion of support, which were created in the 90s. In my utopian world, for example, we do not support artists, unless they also support those who support them. In this vision, a certain top-down concept of democratisation is not relevant anymore. The collective discussion of all choices, the transformation of the role of expert and 'knowledgeable' people has to eradicate demagogy. This is the utopia that refuses the notion of transmitting aristocratic values to as many people as possible, be them related to art, and replaces it by a debate on values, thus taking the risk to eradicate artists' sacred dimension, and that refuses to give in to the easy option. The citizen stake is there, it modifies the status of art in society: not considering art as isolated from the rest of the world, but as fully part of it.

There are obviously other citizen stakes on which I don't want to dwell, such as fighting all kinds of wars and inequalities. To be an art<sup>1</sup>, circus can not ignore these issues. The wording is ambiguous in French and I accept it: in order to be an art, circus has to be at the very heart of citizenship and democracy. Let's be clear, I'm not saying that it has to deal with these political issues in the shows themselves (gender equity, eco-friendly ambitions, etc.), but I'm saying that artists have to be political, that is to say aware of the political impact of their work.

## **ARTISTIC UTOPIA**

The key word for me is 'surprise'. I have absolutely no idea, and I think nobody here has got the slightest idea, about what the future will be like. 15 years ago, nobody could foresee the emergence of new magic, and unlike Philippe Goudard, I do not know whether in 2052 artists will manipulate nano-holograms; and I don't want to know. In my utopian circus, circus is always surprising. Let's be clear, today the lack of imagination is obvious for people like me who see a lot of shows in various places. I'm going to say the opposite right away to avoid insults and rotten tomatoes: imagination was never as great as today. The problem is finding the right balance. For a few bold artistic pieces, programs, audience relationship experiences, education, or articles, how many tedious, harmless, cynical ones are there? The question I'm asking does not have to do with the quality of the shows, whose assessment will always be both subjective and social, but it rather has to do with imagination. Artistic imagination remains limited by the surrender of circus teaching to sports values (and bureaucratic values as well, but that's another story...). It is also limited by the conformism in circus representations (you know that as well), and also by the market. In order to have surprising and imaginative circus, for me you need 3 conditions: curiosity, dialogue (more generally speaking, opening up to others), and thinking. Maybe you also have to be brave. Imagination is related to thinking, to culture (as knowledge and flexibility). I think that it is more necessary than ever, as a way of intellectually catching up (I know that my words are very strong but I wanted them to be) compared to other forms of art. My generation launched the notion of circus recognition, but I know that it is far from taken for granted everywhere, as well as the notion of common right: circus is not worth less than dance or theatre and demands to be treated in the same way as other forms of art. All the same, circus still lacks a place to think, and I find the title of this conference totally accurate: "Think circus! ».

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1. « To be an art », or « Pour être un art » in French, can mean both 'it's not because it's an art' (as you would say 'it's not because it's a monster, that it can not be defended') or 'in order to be considered as an art'.

I think there is a real emergency, and thinking has to be done at all levels, be it knowledge, artistic curiosity from circus artists towards everything, citizen inclusion, research, critics, and being demanding towards oneself. I think it will come over time, and this effort to think, to take a step back from daily practices (which is very heavy, as Géraldine Werner said last night), this effort to criticize all words commonly used in the circus world has to be done. I've just given an example with the word '*accompagnement*', which for me is not self-explanatory at all, and in fact I think no concept in the circus world goes without saying.

## **AESTHETICS**

In art, there was always, traditionally speaking, 2 ways for renewal: opening up to others, and looking for specificities in your own art. The current specificity, which will not necessarily be the same one in the future, is going over your body limits. This is how circus is traditionally described. I think it can go much further than that. Utopian artists will probably work on these topics (opening up to others and circus specificities) in a new way. I think that the issue of going beyond limits has already been launched with certain current shows (I won't name them but they themselves come from hybrid forms from the years 2000 or even 90s), but so far this is still in the field of shows, that is to say that we mix together, in a way, dance, video, theatre, circus, puppets, etc. But in fact it can go far beyond that, just like certain pieces already show, that is to say expose circus to things that are completely unexpected, unthinkable today, such as aeronautics, chemistry, cooking, etc. As for looking for specificities, it recently led to innovative shows, looking for pure potentialities in acrobatics, trapeze, etc. This research is indeed formal, but not necessarily formalistic, and it makes it possible to identify values, to raise moral questions related to mutual aid or solidarity. There is a specific aesthetic dimension in circus, which is admiration, which is obviously not only seen in circus, but that circus nurtures more than any other form of art. This dimension is now starting to be seen differently. I think there is an opportunity here for another approach, if I may say so. It's not by chance that everybody now talks about dramaturgy in circus, which is now seen as a major criteria to rate shows. The issue of meaning has now become major in circus. Nobody expects only brio, or something fascinating. A certain form of consensus is being reached, around the idea that circus has to generate meaning, and even more, meaning in its own meaning. The idea today is not anymore to use circus for external purposes (like illustrating Romeo and Juliette, for example), nor is it to make it hyper specific (very rare gesture), but rather to show how what it expresses can only be expressed by circus. Free the imagination, that is to say encourage curiosity, exchanges, open up and most importantly build a dialogue of some kind between all circus players, and beyond. Dialogue means that you don't necessarily agree, you don't necessarily talk about the same point of view, but you have a dialogue. Producers talk to artists, artists talk to educators, etc. and you establish a dialogue by questioning the other's point of view. In order for it to work, for conditions to be met – which for me is the number one condition for being surprised – you have to tackle power relationships in this field, which are very often tainted by a kind of cynism, which is understandable in a state such as France where budgets are rare, and where there is a real unbalance between demand and supply in shows. The notion of support, which is to me a bit patronizing, does not help us at all in raising again the issue of power circulation and public speaking in this field.

## **RESEARCH**

Research of all types is absolutely crucial: speculative research on circus, will all the possible tools, from medicine to anthropology and aeronautics, such as research in art, which is for me a real emergency. Philippe Goudard said yesterday that he supervises several PhD students, especially in Brazil and China. These PhDs are led by artists, but I'm not entirely sure they are ON art.

To my knowledge, the only university that works on research in art is Stockholm. I am absolutely delighted to see that 2 circus artists, Jonathan Priest and Molly Saudek, are currently leading PhD studies there. I think that it will considerably change our vision of a "trick" (the concept on which Jonathan works is almost impossible to translate in French). As for research on tight rope, which is still in its early days, I am waiting with great impatience the results of Molly Saudek's work. It is essential so that we have concepts that are more precise, and that we get used to analysing things in depth. Research and critical analysis go together. When I say that dialogue is not enough, it all goes back to the same thought process. We absolutely have to get used to being more precise, to analyse each word, to be brave enough not to admit the current meaning of words, but rather, to question it. Research and critical analysis (written, university, but also the usual ones), do not speak to one another enough, let me reassert it. Most of the time, artists struggle so much to know what people think of them, especially people who decide to include them in their programs or not. It's a constant race to understand how people's tastes work in this field. It also takes a bit of courage to talk, talk a lot.

Surprising imagination, is not necessarily yet another 90 minutes circus show, it's about inventing formats, contexts, partnerships, meetings, which today are unlikely. As far as the body itself is concerned, the idea is not necessarily to discover new virtues, but rather to think of it as a critique instrument, especially nowadays or in the future, where bodies are enhanced by thousands of prosthesis, or where sport worship might represent a risk to greatly belittle circus skills. Obviously, there are more and more media available for circus, but circus can have objectives that are not only artistic. For example, you might have a dream that in 30 or 50 years, the whole human kind know how to juggle with three balls as easily as writing with a fountain pen or using thumbs to type on smartphones.

I don't want to conclude, of course, but I would just say that my utopian circus will keep on striving for excellence, but not excellence *in abstracto*, in general, or universal, on which everybody would agree. More modestly, I would like excellent circus to be huge, and even a bit bigger for people and contexts that give it its value, that is to say that it shouldn't be diverse for the sake of being diverse, but rather, to be excellent. This has a huge value, this idea of giving up on the universal dimension. Today, still, this fantasy of universality that touches everybody, people who don't even speak the same language in various countries, struggles to hide this submission to an elite or populist bourgeois ideology in which I don't believe anymore. I believe that the new universality, if it happens, will come from reasserting diversity, excellent diversity, or more simply reasserting the absolute singularity in each artist and each person, educator, producer, etc. that is committed to this sector.



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# CircusNext

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