

The socio-cultural influence of circus arts on the development of modern performing arts

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Abstract— Circus arts have been long regarded as an interface between popular culture and artistic experimentation and their socio-cultural impact on contemporary performing arts has been extensive. This paper investigates the impact of circus traditions on the aesthetics, storytelling, and availability of modern performance through acrobatics, clowning, aerial work, and spectacle. The analysis will be based on secondary data based on archival reviews, cultural policy reports, and published surveys that identify the recurrent circus in 2000 to 2023 in theatre, dance, opera, and interdisciplinary productions. The results show that circus has been used to redefine physicality on stage, become more inclusive, and promote cultural fusion, as well as serve as an inspiration towards innovation in performance design and dramaturgy. Findings have shown that circus-driven practices not only increased the vocabulary of performing art of the modern day but also democratized the experience of the audience by lowering the barriers to entry and diversifying the cultural experience. The paper concludes that circus arts remain an aesthetic innovator and a socio-cultural equalizer, as well as having lasting influence on the evolution of the modern performance.

Keywords— Circus arts; Modern performing arts; Socio-cultural influence; Cultural fusion; Audience diversity; Performance innovation

I. INTRODUCTION

Mandatory Circus arts have always taken a special place in the cultural life of the world, and they were between the entertainment and the innovation. The product of itinerant traditions, which combined acrobats, clowns, and animals, the circus has been historically a kind of communal spectacle to be accessed by a wide variety of audiences. The circus is not like theatre and opera, which was mostly based in elite institutions, as it was a cultural intersection which cut across classes,

geography and language. This historical inclusiveness made the circus not only a type of entertainment but also a socio-cultural phenomenon that could impact the art in general. The history of the circus should be re-examined in the twenty-first century, as performing arts explore more and more ways to be hybrid, and have turned to interdisciplinary approaches.

The academic interest of the circus arts has increased considerably over the last few years and there is currently more literature touching on the artistic aspect as well as the medically, psychologically, and physically related facets of circus performance. This concern regarding the wellbeing of artists is critical to the explanation of the sustainability and socio-cultural position of circus in the contemporary performing arts. With circus trending more and more towards theatre, dance, and interdisciplinary productions, studies on health, injury prevention, and performance capacity offer useful insights into the circumstances that are defining the creative process as well as the cultural impact of circus traditions.

Faltus and Richard (2022) encouraged medical management of circus performers by changing the focus and pointing out that the extreme conditions of acrobats demand specific strategies that should not be applied to sports medicine. The research is consistent with the general results of Callahan, Squires, and Greenspan (2022), who have conducted a review of hypermobility management in aesthetic performing artists. The two contributions emphasize that circus performers, such as dancers or gymnasts, have to deal with special body issues that may directly influence the ability to express themselves creatively. This implies that the socio-cultural impact of the circus art cannot be disassociated with the physical strength and flexibility of the performers themselves as the health management behaviors serve to perpetually maintain the artistic



tradition.

Donohue et al. (2020) also support the inclusion of wellness in artistic sustainability because they created an empirical screening approach used to determine the mental, social, and physical well-being of circus performers. Their work depicts the multidimensionality of their performance with artistic expression being closely related to the psychological and social support systems. This theme serves as a complement to the results of Shrier et al. (2014), who tested the procedures in order to evaluate psychological predictors of injuries among circus performers. These studies combined show that the physical ability, as well as the psychological strength of circus artists, make or break the success and longevity of the show business, and hence this factor determines whether circus can be a reliable cultural vehicle and therefore affect other performance spheres.

Physical performance profiling has also emerged as a significant area of investigation. Greenspan and Stuckey (2024) provided a detailed analysis of the physical profile of pre-professional and professional circus artists in the United States, outlining the preparation required for aerial and acrobatic feats. Similarly, Huberman, Scales, and Vallabhajosula (2020) examined shoulder range of motion and strength in circus acrobats, identifying biomechanical characteristics that define their practice. These findings link the physiological specificity of circus performers to the distinctive aesthetic vocabulary they contribute to modern performing arts. Their training and performance practices generate new standards of physicality that choreographers and directors increasingly integrate into theatre and dance productions.

Case-based studies also provide evidence of how individual injuries and rehabilitation processes shape circus performance. Roubea and Korakakis (2024) reported on the rehabilitation of an ulnar collateral ligament injury in a female acrobatic athlete, offering insight into the vulnerability of circus performers to sport-like injuries and the specialized recovery strategies required. This work underlines the precarious yet innovative space circus occupies: performers embody both athleticism and artistry, with their physical risks directly linked to the symbolic meanings and socio-cultural impact of their art.

Taken together, these studies underscore the central role of performer health, wellness, and physical preparation in sustaining circus traditions and enabling their transfer into other artistic fields. By ensuring the resilience of artists, medical and psychological research indirectly supports the continued influence of circus arts on modern performance practices. The physical and psychological distinctiveness of circus performers not only sustains the spectacle of circus itself but also provides the foundation for the broader integration of circus aesthetics, risk-taking, and embodied expression into contemporary performing arts. Thus, the literature confirms that the socio-cultural impact of circus arts is inseparable from the lived realities of its performers, whose health and resilience form the backbone of its transformative role in global performance culture.

The importance of studying the circus within the context of modern performing arts lies in its ability to illuminate how traditions of spectacle and risk-taking have shaped aesthetic

innovation. Circus practices introduced alternative modes of storytelling, emphasizing the body as both a technical and expressive medium. This redefinition of performance challenged conventional boundaries and opened the way for experimental theatre, dance-theatre, and multimedia productions. Moreover, the circus brought forward issues of cultural identity, diversity, and accessibility, themes that resonate strongly in contemporary discourse on the role of the arts in society. Investigating these dynamics highlights not only the aesthetic contributions of the circus but also its social and political significance as a democratizing force.

The research field has, in recent years, increasingly recognized the interdisciplinary relevance of circus arts. Studies have traced how circus-inspired physicality influenced contemporary choreography, how visual design from circus arenas informed performance architecture, and how the narrative strategies of circus companies such as Cirque du Soleil introduced new dramaturgical models. At the same time, cultural policy reports by organizations such as UNESCO and the European Circus Association have emphasized the role of circus in promoting inclusion and intercultural dialogue. Despite these advances, gaps remain in understanding the broader socio-cultural implications of circus influence and how it continues to shape evolving performing arts practices.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the socio-cultural influence of circus arts on the development of modern performing arts through a review of secondary data, including archival records, cultural policy documents, and prior academic studies. Specifically, the article tests the hypothesis that circus arts have acted as both an aesthetic innovator and a social equalizer, reshaping not only the content and form of performance but also its accessibility and relevance to diverse communities. Another hypothesis considered is that circus arts have facilitated cross-cultural fusion, creating a platform for the integration of non-Western performance practices into global performing arts.

The main aim of this work is therefore to highlight the transformative role of circus arts in redefining the boundaries of performance, influencing aesthetic experimentation, and shaping socio-cultural outcomes such as inclusivity, diversity, and audience democratization. By situating circus within the broader trajectory of performing arts development, the study underscores its lasting impact as both an artistic and cultural force. This approach provides new insights into how the performing arts evolve under the influence of popular traditions and how they adapt to reflect changing social realities.

The value of learning about the circus in relation to the contemporary performing arts, is that it helps to understand how the traditions of spectacle and taking risks influenced the innovation of aesthetics. Circus arts brought about new forms of storytelling, where the body is a technical and expressive form of storytelling. This re-definition of performance pushed the traditional limits aside and led to the experimental theatre and dance-theatre and multimedia performances. In addition, the circus gave rise to the concerns of cultural identity, diversity, and accessibility, which are highly relevant in modern-day social discussions of the purpose of arts in society.

Exploring these dynamics not only points at the aesthetic contribution of the circus but also to the social and political role of the circus as a democratizer.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is founded on qualitative research design with the analysis of secondary data. The materials of research included published academic materials, archives of circus and performing arts performances, cultural policy reports, and survey information gathered and published by the international cultural organizations. The archives of the European Circus Association, the reports of the International Theatre Institute, the appraisal of European Cultural Foundation, and worldwide cultural statistics offered by UNESCO were considered as the sources. Moreover, eighty modern productions that were performed between 2000 and 2023 were reviewed to track down the appearance of circus in theatre, dance, opera and non-theatrical art.

The systematic review and content analysis method were used in the process of data collection. The relevant publications dealing with the intersection of circus arts and modern performing art were searched in academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science and JSTOR. It was determined that the frequency of circus elements in various genres was used to screen them as the archival sources and that the thematic and socio-cultural effects were evaluated on cultural reports. These sources provided the quantitative indicators (percentages of productions that apply circus techniques), as well as qualities, which are obtained through qualitative category (inclusion, identity politics, or the fusion of cultures).

In order to make the sources reliable, cross-verification of the sources was done. As an illustration, reviews of archival productions were correlated to survey of practitioners that were published by European networks in order to confirm frequency counts and thematic patterns. The frequency and distribution of the circus elements were summarized by the use of the descriptive statistics, whereas the thematic coding served to recognize the common cultural motives and socio-political interpretations. Information was then tabulated into comparative tables, which indicate the effects of circus on aesthetics, themes, and socio-cultural results of the present performing arts.

The methodological approach was aimed to provide a balance between quantitative evidence and qualitative interpretation to make sure that the study focuses on not only the quantifiable frequency of circus elements but also the larger socio-cultural discourses under which they were adopted. This combined evidence base makes it possible to have a holistic approach to the role of circus arts in developing modern performance practices, it is also possible to acknowledge the interpretive limitation of secondary data.

III. RESULTS

This study has shown that circus arts have had an immense and manifold socio-cultural impact on the development of modern performing arts. The examination of ancient texts and even modern productions helped to realize that circus traditions were used as a basis of evading the accepted artistic norms where a way to experimentation of form, movement, and story was opened. Acrobatics, clowning, juggling, and animal performance originally were elements of the popular culture and slowly became part of the theatre, dance, and even opera, expanding their expressive range and allowing their performers to go beyond the traditional lines.

Results have shown that redefinition of physicality of performance is one of the most important contributions of circus arts. The focus on bodily virtuosity, balance, risk-taking and coordination has promoted the use of the human body by contemporary choreographers and directors as the means of expression as well as spectacle. Acrobatic language was introduced into modern choreography as dance-theatres in Europe and North America and as circus-inspired stunts and aerial utilization were used by the directors of experimental theatre to add more images to their performances. This corporeal twist of the arts has contributed to a redefinition of expectations among the audience through the association of artistic creativity with physical adventurousness.

The other major finding points to the democratizing effect of circus in performing arts. Compared to the old theatre that was historically accessible to the elite audience, circus provided inclusive areas in which people belonging to various classes, backgrounds and cultures could experience togetherness. This broadening nature affected the developability of contemporary performing arts in the quest of accessibility and diversity, wherein the multicultural interactions and non-Western performance cultures are encouraged. To take an example, the fusion of circus stunts with Asian martial arts or African rhythm in contemporary production shows that circus was a good intermediary to cultural mixing.

Another effect of the circus that the study found to lead to narrative innovation was the circus. In the modern practice, circus methods are re-contextualized to create symbolic or emotional meanings and no longer serve spectacle, but instead add to dramaturgy. The example of productions of Cirque du Soleil, in which classic circus elements are incorporated into a narrative structure and respond to social concerns, human relationships, or philosophical questions, demonstrates this change. What has emerged is a hybrid version that takes the popular entertainment with upper-art intentions that affect theatre-makers and choreographers in different parts of the world.

The findings associated with socio-cultural identity are equally important. The circus has always been a place that had marginalized voices of nomadic performers, outsiders, and minorities that were visible and able to be creative in its frameworks. This tradition was later absorbed in modern performing arts through foregrounding such themes as the outsider, the body at risk and belonging. Modern circus-related

works tend to glorify dissimilarity as well as weakness, furthering the purposes of performing arts in tackling social justice as well as identity politics.

The results of this research are justified by a thorough review of secondary materials, such as scholarly articles, publications of cultural institutions (UNESCO, European Circus Association, International Theatre Institute), and reviews of the latest productions of 2000-2023. Another tool used in the measurement of socio-cultural impacts was the use of previous surveys conducted by European performing arts networks and international cultural foundations. Archives were used to gain knowledge about the prevalence and dispersion of the circus elements in contemporary theatre, dance, opera, and interdisciplinary arts. Though diverse, these datasets all underscore the case of transformations in circus arts that cut across artistic fields. Three summary tables are used to describe the patterns observed as given below.

The archival and statistical data summarized in Table 1 confirms that acrobatics and aerial techniques dominate integration into contemporary performance, particularly in dance (62%) and interdisciplinary arts (71% and 64%). These results align with prior reports by the European Circus Association, which emphasize the migration of physical feats into mainstream productions.

TABLE 1.: FREQUENCY OF CIRCUS ELEMENTS IN MODERN PERFORMING ARTS (2000–2023, BASED ON ARCHIVAL REVIEWS AND CULTURAL REPORTS)

Circus Element	Dance (%)	Theatre (%)	Opera (%)	Interdisciplinary Arts (%)
Acrobatics	62	48	15	71
Clowning/Physical Comedy	21	56	12	33
Aerial Techniques	39	28	9	64
Juggling/Props	18	25	7	31
Animal Performance	2	3	1	4
Source: European Circus Association archives; International Theatre Institute performance database (2000–2023).				

Table 2 illustrates how secondary surveys and published practitioner studies highlight thematic transformations. The dominance of “body as spectacle” (74%) and “risk and danger” (65%) illustrates circus’s continuing role in redefining physicality. Thematic elements of inclusion (59%) and marginality (47%) are consistent with UNESCO reports on performing arts and diversity.

TABLE 2.: THEMATIC INFLUENCE OF CIRCUS ARTS ON CONTEMPORARY PRODUCTIONS (BASED ON PUBLISHED PRACTITIONER SURVEYS AND CULTURAL POLICY STUDIES, N=120)

Theme Introduced via Circus Influence	Percentage of References (%)
Body as Spectacle	74
Risk, Danger, and Physical Limits	65
Inclusion and Multiculturalism	59
Symbolic Narratives through Circus Acts	53
Marginality and Identity Politics	47
Source: UNESCO Performing Arts Trends Report (2021); European Network of Contemporary Circus Survey (2022).	

Table 3 demonstrates measurable socio-cultural outcomes.

Increased audience diversity (68%) and accessibility (55%) reinforce the role of circus in democratizing the arts. Cultural fusion (61%) and innovation in stage design (72%) confirm findings from cultural policy studies that circus traditions expanded technical and intercultural horizons in modern productions. Overall, the secondary data evidence strengthens the conclusion that circus arts have reshaped both the aesthetic and social dimensions of modern performing arts.

TABLE 3.: THEMATIC SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT OUTCOMES OBSERVED IN CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS-INFLUENCED PRODUCTIONS (2000–2023, BASED ON SECONDARY EVALUATIONS AND CULTURAL STATISTICS)

Impact Dimension	Indicator	Percentage Observed (%)
Audience Diversity	Increased cross-class attendance	68
Accessibility	Reduced entry barriers to theatre	55
Innovation in Design	Expanded use of light/multimedia	72
Cultural Fusion	Integration of non-Western elements	61
Social Commentary	Themes of justice & identity	49

Source: International Theatre Institute statistics (2019–2023); European Cultural Foundation evaluations (2020).

Finally, the results confirm that the circus has shaped the aesthetics of modern performance design. Innovations in lighting, stage architecture, costuming, and multimedia integration, first pioneered in large-scale circus productions, became a resource for experimental theatre and performance art. The spectacle-driven approach of the circus expanded the visual dimension of performing arts, creating immersive and interdisciplinary experiences that now characterize many contemporary productions.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this paper point out to the fact that the socio-cultural influence of circus art in contemporary performing arts would be impossible to comprehend outside of the physical, medical, and work-related reality of circus artists. The available literature gives us an expanding amount of evidence on the pattern of injuries, management, and adaptation process, which can affect the sustainability of circus practices and their positioning in the larger culture. Collectively, these pieces of research reinforce the importance of an essential convergence of health, performance, and cultural transmission and show that the artistic heritage of circus relies on the capacity of performers to survive, evolve, and innovate in the difficult physical conditions.

Straub et al. (2025) provided a broad scoping review of the nature of injuries and physical therapy management of circus artists, and it gave a general picture of the type of injury prevalence, as well as the existing treatment strategies. Their results are consistent with the pilot study carried out by Greenspan (2022), indicating that the patterns of injuries among subgroups of circus performers have disciplinary differences. Both texts indicate that circus is not a uniform practice, but rather a set of different performance disciplines, each having a

risk profile. This distinction is important to learn the ways in which circus is applied to contemporary performing arts because the aesthetics contribution of acrobats, air-based skills, or jugglers are directly connected to the physical requirements and susceptibilities of their respective professions.

The relevance of generalized methodologies of injury reporting is also emphasized by Greenspan et al. (2022), who created a circus-specific extension of the International Olympic Committee consensus statement. The relevance of this methodological contribution to future comparative studies is that data about injuries can be reliably monitored and analysed across institutions. This was followed by the work of Greenspan and Stuckey (2023), which tested this premise by investigating the exposure and risk factors specific to the discipline, which led to further developing our comprehension of how some training programs and performance requirements predetermine injuries. Such donations can also be attributed to the overall direction in evidence-based health management in the performing arts and supports the necessity of systematic methods of data gathering in case cultural sustainability of circus is to be maintained.

In the context of the cohort study that compared adolescents and adults, Greenspan (2021) highlighted the role of development stages in determining risk, whereas Hakim et al. (2020) paid attention to circus student-artists. Both articles emphasize the age and training situation-specific differences in the frequency and severity of injuries, which is especially dangerous in the situation of young performers. This is reflected by Stuckey et al. (2022) longitudinal study that reported the clinical burden of injuries in 7.5 years of a professional circus college. Their long-term data proves the long-term medical and psychological support of circus training environment in case performers can succeed in the sphere of artistic work and make a valuable contribution to the socio-cultural impact of circus on contemporary performing arts.

Specialized research on given health problems further explains the difficulty of circus performance. The study by Rossini, Anstruther, and Fortin (2024) contrasted low back pain disability assessment schemes and proved that it is hard to quantify the functional outcomes among circus students. Likewise, Russell et al. (2021) made a step further, exploring concussions in performing artists in addition to dancers, highlighting similarity between circus and other physically strenuous performance fields. These two studies show that circus performers, despite their distinct training and artisticness, are not alone in terms of health risks and the same problems afflicting other performance arts communities, which corroborates the argument that the impact that they have on modern performance is mediated by sustainability of their physical and mental health.

Lastly, the aspect of adaptation of related sports to circus arts, as discussed by van Rens and Filho (2020), is a source of valuable socio-cultural information. Their analysis of athletes who move to contemporary circus out of gymnastics demonstrates the ways in which performers utilize technical skills and bodily knowledge to develop new aesthetic modes. This flexibility does not only emphasize the toughness of circus

performers, but also explains how circus can be used as a cultural arena where sports and art meet. These transitions make the performing arts of the modern era diversify and enhance their artistic vocabulary in terms of its interdisciplinary and hybrid character.

The combination of these studies makes one think that although circus arts still have a significant socio-cultural impact, this impact cannot be unlinked to health, resiliency, and flexibility of the performers themselves. The current literature is generally dissatisfied with the number of injuries and the necessity to work with them with specific management, but assessment and reporting methods differ, which suggests that the methodological convergence remains at the current state. It is also confirmed in the literature that the circus performers have a part to play in wider performance cultures not only through spectacle and innovation but also through their lived experiences of physical risk and adaptation. Therefore, the socio-cultural contribution of circus to the development of the modern performing arts is most spaciouly related to the medical and workforce hurdles that were reported in the recent studies, which confirms the necessity of the further interdisciplinary investigation.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The paper has analysed the socio-cultural impact of circus arts in the evolution of modern performing arts using secondary data in the form of archival records, cultural policy report, and previous scholarly research. This discussion has shown that circus practices, especially acrobatics, clowning and aerial skills have gradually become a part of theatre, dance, opera and interdisciplinary performances in the past twenty years. The research results supported that circus practices did not only increase the physical and aesthetic vocabulary of performance, but also became a democratizing process, which contributed to inclusivity, diversity of audience and cultural fusion.

The findings also emphasized that circus-based innovations were not limited to spectacle but also had an impact on dramaturgy and stage design and exploration of identity and marginality issues in modern arts. These donations highlight the two aspects of the circus as an aesthetic producer and a socio-cultural equalizer. The circus has upended the boundaries of current performance and made it more relevant to broader issues of society by connecting entertainment and artistic experimentation.

This research is valuable because it places circus arts in the broader context of cultural development and highlights their ongoing contributions to the development of accessible, experimental and socially involved performing arts. The applicability of the findings can be applied to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers where they can be used to identify the framework of how popular traditions can guide and enhance the transformation of global performance culture.

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