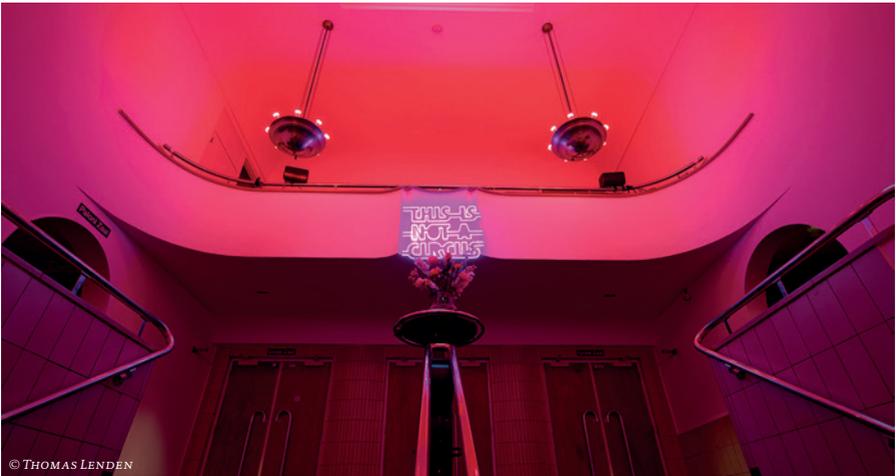


• A DAY --- AT THE --- CIRCUS

REPORT 26/11/21 • PROFESSIONALS DAY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS SCENE • A DAY AT THE CIRCUS was organised by the Circuscoalition and Circuspunt during THIS IS NOT A CIRCUS, a festival by TENT house for contemporary circus and Theater Bellevue in Amsterdam.

THE CIRCUSCOALITON is a national collaboration of presenting and (co) producing organizations with an interest in a flourishing circus climate in the Netherlands. By stimulating talent, venues and audience for circus we would like to continue developing the genre • CIRCUSPUNT is the platform for the united Dutch circus field. They support and stimulate the overall development of the circus sector, and they represent circus interests to parties outside the circus world • TENT is the place for boundlessly ambitious contemporary Dutch-based circus, for and by circus makers dedicated to their profession. They have been supporting makers at various stages of their artistic development and creative process since their foundation in 2010.



Introduction • ROSA BOON • director *TENT house for contemporary circus*

A day at the circus was part of *This is not a circus*, festival for new circus forms in Theater Bellevue and took place on the 26th of November 2021. The day was organized by TENT, the Circuscoalition and Circuspunt.

Circus in the Netherlands is conquering more and more space in the Dutch performing arts field. In the latest allotment of the national and local structural funding circus really earned a spot in the system. More companies receive structural support, new makers are accommodated in various talent development programs and festivals have strengthened their position. Diverse circus performances are produced and presented, but there is still a world to win when it comes to audience building and audience development. The partners organized this day to celebrate the steps that have been made the last decade towards where circus in the theaters is nowadays. Eleven years ago, when TENT was founded, a day like this was unimaginable and I would have murdered for an opportunity like this. Since then, both the amount and quality of the created work has been growing and I am proud to see where we are now and of all the great people who helped to build. Several of them have spoken during the day. We used this first edition of *A day at the circus* to build even further and hopefully in five years circus is an independent discipline and artform within every theatre, fund, newspaper, magazine and festival.

This is a report about *A day at the circus*. A report about the inspiring keynote speakers Zinzi Oegema, Daphne van Iperen and Marieke van Oosten. It gives an insight in the more active afternoon sessions and you can read how Roufaida Aboutaleb experienced the day through her instant column. As a dessert you can also read the first 'State of the Dutch Circus', pronounced by Benjamin Monki Kuitenbrouwer, housemaker of TENT. Huge credits for Theater Bellevue for hosting us and Jördis Cordua (Circunstruction/Circusstad), Sandra Smits (Buro Piket) and Marc Eysink Smeets (Festival Circolo) for organizing together.

I hope this report is a nice way to look back on an inspiring day and hope to see you next year.

Keynote • ZINZI OEGEMA • *independent circus maker*

Hello everyone, my name is Zinzi and I am a circus creator and artist. We are here today to understand each other better, so I will speak from my background, about how I think we could make performing circus in theatres easier. My message is a little cliché; what makes circus complex is also what makes it worthwhile. If my experiences don't line up with yours, please share them, as well as adding your own. I started with youth circus Elleboog in Amsterdam and graduated in Codarts Circus Arts Rotterdam a long time ago, as well as Acapa the year after (where my acrobatic partner attended), for both schools the first graduation year of their existence. In the Netherlands there was not a lot of circus to start working in after that. TENT realized that and started the company, we made LOOP together. I also, after a lot of discussion and still frowned upon, participated in Hollands Got Talent on tv to promote circus here to a large audience. Other than that, in the Netherlands I've done a big theatres tour with Tilt! By Gerrit Reus and then left abroad to work with The 7 fingers and XY. We performed that show in only three theaters (and Circolo) here. I came back to do the Nieuwe makers Traject 2017-2019 with TENT. I created MEMO for small venues, *Barstool bound* for in café's, *PIT* a location installation and *GRIP*, a pocket on tools for circus creation. I then created with colleagues our own collective and show *Common Ground*, for large venues and then Corona hit so I will stop here. The next project I'm working on now, is called *Proof of Insanity*. How I now try to integrate past experiences already in the creation process inspired this keynote. A big strength of circus is in my opinion its ability to break patterns of expectancy. Daily objects are used differently, bodies move in ways you thought impossible before, there are plenty of examples. To be able to create that kind of work, we must think creatively, out of the box. And so, we do. To be able to present that work, we need an environment that is open to it, willing to let themselves get carried away in it a bit.

This goes for the entire creative team, but also the communication (How can you sell a secret? How can I capture in an image that a water boiler becomes more than just an object, that it comes alive?) and ideally also the programming and funding. For a circus maker it is for example not obvious to have the audience on one side, or to have a rectangular stage. We see opportunities to approach our audience differently, to have them see us differently. Ideally a theatre would think with us how to make that possible. This takes more effort, but also provides a unique experience to our audience. Practically, the performance will have to adapt to the theatre and the theatre to the performance. Being able to build up, perform, build down in one day, makes a show easier to program. That sounds simple and logic, but it has a lot of consequences. A strength of circus is that it can be spectacular, but it takes a specific 'different' build up in a theatre. When there is rigging involved, it takes a lot of time, because every theatre is different. The bounce in a rope depends on its length, but every theatre has different dimensions. We must provide materials for all possible situations. We must know within which margins we can work and take time for a 'bounce check' to adapt to each space. Theatres can help us by providing safe and easy to reach rigging points and offer all necessary practical information clearly and precisely (A height of around 5 meters might just fit or just not). Then there is light, often needed to cover more height, without blinding the artists, because that would be dangerous. This too is different in each theatre, takes more lamps to cover more surface and a longer focus time, not to mention the extra time needed for a light safety check. Theatres can hang the lights the night before or provide an extra technician. Some shows don't require rigging, but have an extensive décor, mats under the dance carpet, live music that requires a soundcheck etc. Sometimes an extra building day is simply unavoidable, but as a creator I'll already be making choices to save time. Either way it's a long day. Theatres can help by providing catering and understand that a warm meal before backbends is not ideal, but very welcome after the show (circus artists get cranky when they are hungry).

Most circus artists create their own work, it's built around their specific body and abilities pushed to a limit. A new show then often is a new collaboration of artists; Every creator is different, each creative process unique and on top of that every discipline demands its own approach. Which means an amazing diversity in methods, resulting in an amazing diversity of shows. It also means a lot of time for creation. Often a whole new body language is invented, or a new apparatus to work around, which requires exploration, then repetition to make the work safe before choreography can be made of the material. Also, for a circus maker it is not obvious that there is a hierarchy, creating collectively is not rare. Creating on that basis is again a different method and every decision takes more time. It makes communication to others involved, like theatres not easier, but somehow an audience tends to feel the equality even if the show is not about that. In short, creating such work is very time-consuming and therefore costly. This has several consequences. There are not many structurally funded companies. Most shows are created from personal previously built income and/or project-based funding. Often they then go on to tour internationally for several years. That makes it impossible (as usual in the Netherlands) to foresee and partly fund all dates. Costs for performing will have to be covered by the show fee. On the bright side, programmers can go see a show before booking it (if there are still festivals and theatres that support new work of course). Opposite that is audience revenue. We are all working hard to improve the image of circus, including artists. Everyone here knows that, and we've made progress. In an ideal world, soon every theatre will have the genre circus in their program, if programmers need convincing, we can express what is special about circus, I've mentioned several points today. It is our role to create quality work too and communicate the content of each show the best way possible. We have pictures made, teasers, trailers, texts written, we should ask for help with that if we need it, I personally have not found it easy to find the right people to work with on this front. Perhaps we can share a network of creative thinkers that understand circus already? It is up to programmers to go see the work and select that which fits their location. I want to ask them to also look beyond the big names from abroad. For circus artists it is not usual that things go as we plan them. Things go wrong sometimes. Even after endless rehearsal, the possibility remains that you drop the ball or fall off the wire. On the bright side, that keeps us and our audiences in the moment. Of course, we have a backpack filled with solutions to, but a certain flexibility is essential to our practice. We give it to our audiences, and we would like to ask it from others.

Keynote. DAPHNE VAN IPEREN • *programmer circus & theatre and business director Korzo*

Good morning, everybody! My name is Daphne van Iperen and I'm the financial manager and programmer theatre & circus of Korzo, based in The Hague. Korzo is programming circus for more than 6 years now and since January 2021 we added circus maker Michael Zandl to our production house. Michael premiered last September with the Sawdust collective (consisting of Michael, David Eisele and Kolja Huneck) their first show Sawdust Symphony. Perhaps some of you have already seen it, otherwise be welcome. The organization of *A day at the circus* asked me a few weeks ago to dazzle you with a keynote about chances and restrictions to bring circus into the theatres, my vision on the Dutch circus field at this point and the challenges we still have. Those are big questions and therefore I need to start with the beginning of circus in Korzo. It was actually at this stage, 7 years ago, where I first got in contact with contemporary circus, new circus, circus theatre or whatever definition you like. I watched a preview of a performance by Circuswerkplaats Boost, now Boost Productions in corporation with Jakob Ahlbom and was amazed and touched by the fact that 5 performers could overwhelm me in just 5 minutes. It was a mix of creativity, storytelling and exceptional movement that made me realize that Korzo had to extend her disciplines with circus. We were already a movement-based theatre,



with a lot of dance, and some physical theatre. Circus would fit perfectly. Luckily Korzo gave me a wildcard to discover this discipline and so my circus journey started... I didn't have a *A day at the circus* to meet programmers, makers, festivals or other circus experts. Let alone least circus lovers or an audience. I had to - like we say in Dutch - put on the bad shoes (de stoute schoenen aantrekken), and make appointments with the academies, festival programmers and makers to inform myself about this art discipline. It was time consuming, but I felt immediately that it would be worthwhile eventually. One of the things that I noticed was that the Dutch circus was segmented. On the one hand you had a vivid traditional circus field and on the other hand there were just a few contemporary circus makers that stayed in The Netherlands after graduating. To me, that's not only a pity for the evolution of the circus arts, but also an economic tragedy. Why would you invest as a society in circus art students and let them go abroad afterwards? Why? And who or what is the solution to this 'problem'? Us! Programmers and theatre directors! We're the ones that can let art grow by giving a stage - literally. And with this appeal, I found the motivation for starting the Korzo circus program and our festival Cirque Mania. Of course, there were a lot of challenges and restrictions. One of the most important challenges is the lack of qualitative good performances. Which is a direct result of a bad breeding ground for the circus arts. Just a handful of programmers dared to present circus in their theatre. Second, there were no (structural) subsidies for the creation process and performances. And third, when they were booked, it was mentioned on the website or in a brochure as 'entertainment' or 'spectacle' or, the most depressing of all 'other event'. Because of this poor breeding ground, a lot of artists performed at companies abroad. In Belgium, France or even further at Cirque du Soleil in Canada. As a result, they asked for fees that are normal in, for instance, the France cultural system, which is totally different than ours. In The Netherlands the creation process is funded, so the buyout fees for theatres are quite low because most of the expenses are already covered. Abroad, the system is the other way around, so theatres pay (for Dutch standards) high fees. It made it hard to negotiate with artists within The Netherlands but also with companies across the border. Again, it was time consuming, but I knew it would be worthwhile eventually to program foreign companies like Un Loup pour l'Homme, Compagnie Ea Eo and Alexander Vantourhout. By adding these companies to the Cirque Mania program, the level of our festival would increase, audiences would be more excited, professionals were able to see a future in The Netherlands, and so on... Next to this, Korzo started a warm collaboration with one of the academies, Codarts in Rotterdam. Within the context of Cirque Mania, we presented group shows or graduation acts. Together with the board of the Circus art department we made sure that Korzo was not only a stage to present circus, but also a place to create. Students of the group shows were given the opportunity to work outside the walls of the academy for a week, and interesting graduates like Camiel Corneille and Benjamin Kuitenbrouwer were invited to work on their own performances in one of our studios before their premiere in Cirque Mania. As a result, Korzo became slowly their home. These were contextual challenges, but I also experienced some practical issues and they had everything to do with persuading my colleagues that circus was an opportunity for our organization. And that adjustments at the building for rigging, but especially adjustments from our team to work with circus artists, was necessary. Circus artists have a different rehearsal rhythm and are used to do a lot themselves, comparing to - for instance - dance. This meant that production, marketing, and technical managers had to change their way of working. I remember, only 4 years ago, Korzo had to deal with cuts by the government and there were just 4 people of our staff that mentioned we didn't have to stop programming circus as a solution for our financial problems. It was our directors, my former marketing colleague Marieke van Oosten and myself. Nowadays, the team proudly presents that Korzo is the place for circus in The Hague and one of the most important breeding grounds in The Netherlands. So, let's take us to the chances and opportunities. That's much more fun to talk about, right? Well, I can be short on that. The audience is ready! Why?

Circus is accessible and therefore interesting for a big audience.

Circus is diverse, because of all these different disciplines.

Circus can contribute to the development of the performing arts.

Circus wants to collaborate with other art disciplines like dance and theatre to make crossovers.

Circus shows the wow effect but can also be moving.

Circus is ready! Are you?

Keynote. MARIEKE VAN OOSTEN • *freelance marketeer*

Hi, my name is Marieke van Oosten. For 11 years I worked as the head of the marketing department of Korzo and now I'm a freelance strategic and creative marketer. When I was asked to speak on this wonderful event by the Circuscoalitie and Circuspunt, I immediately thought: 'but I don't have that much experience in contemporary circus. Why not ask a marketeer from one of the big festivals?'. But Rosa convinced me because of my marketing background at Cirque Mania, the tour pilot Great Catch and working for a decade with new makers in dance. She asked me how to reach an audience? A big question as well and not one solid answer. Contemporary circustheater is still in the developing stage here in the Netherlands and so many wonderful things are happening. But there are also challenges. A lot of new makers are searching for a healthy sector where they can develop their work, programmers must take risks because there is no established audience yet and circus is just becoming part of the theatre field in the Netherlands. Lots to do and lots to learn. So, I will share some of my experiences with you here today. Daphne already told a lot on Cirque Mania. I got immediately excited about developing Cirque Mania. It was new, the circus theatre is fresh, and it spoke to my imagination. But I also felt alone in this. Where do you start, I didn't know anything about circus. I didn't know the potential audience, didn't know the artists and their ambitions. That's why I love this idea of sharing experiences and knowledge. Combined there is a lot to achieve. But imagine if you are a theatre programmer, you are curious, but you will have to find colleagues who want to explore this with you, put in the extra effort and start this from scratch. It worked very well with Cirque Mania because we came up with a programming concept we could launch and we worked together with various colleagues: technician, marketing, and programming. Combined we had a lot of knowledge, but also face a lot of unknowns. I decided, because it was new in The Hague, to start with local media. It's a great way to reach visibility and tell the story you need to tell. Daphne started exploring what was already happening in The Hague. We asked local artists to join the professionals program, asked national partners to be part of the professionals program and asked some of them to also be a spokesperson for the festival. They had the knowledge, could explain why it was so important and what the audience could expect. I learned a lot in this first weekend. Why new circus might not be the right term, but what then? That we had to communicate for families with kids but also the adventurous art audiences. That circus had a certain image that didn't fit the contemporary circustheater, that the professionals were still searching for how to explain what it is and how to profile it. So much has happened from that first introduction till now, and sometimes I'm still struggling with it. So, I always go back to my basic marketing knowledge, talk to people in the field and try and find the right words, images, and stories to tell. I thought it might be nice for you to know which steps I take in this process, the challenges I faced (and you probably as well) and how the questions I ask myself help me to find workable and creative solutions. Every project, I start with three main questions: What's the news in this project? Why is this project unique or special? And if you use the words special or unique in your pr and can't explain why...it's not unique or special. (Never use those words). The answer always helped me to bring focus in the message. But a message can be very urgent for some

people and uninteresting for others. So, the second question is for who do we create this project? There can be different answers but try and differentiate this into primary and secondary audience groups. The last question is the most difficult one, but if you do find your answer(s) it really helps in focus, profile, and storytelling. Why is this project so important, what do we want to accomplish with this project and which story do we want or need to tell? Big questions with very different answers; its zooms in on your objectives, your vision and what drives you. And these are questions that don't just focus on one project but on yourself as an artist, you as an organization or you as a coalition with joint objectives. A question that helps me to make it more concrete in this is which problem do I want to solve, or which needs I want to meet? And the second question I ask myself is what is important? Writing down these answers helps me to focus the marketing strategy and from there on develop a communication strategy where I make choices in message, visuals, channels etc. So, to give examples I want to zoom in on two aspects I learned and still research in the field of circus: the audience and profile. I agree with Daphne that there is a huge potential audience, look at the popularity in other countries. Circus is a medium that speaks well to families with kids. But...the contemporary circustheatre is also experimental, innovative, hybrid in its form. And therefore, not always suitable for kids. You want to reach next to the professionals from the theatre / circus field the more adventurous art audience groups. And they might think circus is not for them. So, families, or art-minded audiences or... both? I did the marketing of the touring concept Great Catch by the Circus Coalitie. Three great performances were chosen from upcoming talents. But when I started, I found out it was sold to some of the theatres as a family performance, to some of the theatres for an adult audience and some of the theatres choose to do both. And then off course it also had to be launched to the professionals. Three totally different groups, three ways of communicating the same concept. Pfff. But how? It can be done, but in the end, you must choose a focus. I decided that the focus was launching the concept of Great Catch with new artists and new forms of theatre. So automatically my first focus was on professionals and adult audiences, but I kept the families always in the back of my head. I decided to make one campaign together with Hanneke Meijers around Great Catch: one image, one message. I wanted it to be recognizable because it was new. Not just drop the name but make it stick. And let's face it, one campaign is also cheaper. From there on I worked out three different communication strategies. The basis was the same, but the planning and the way I communicated was different. For instance, the professionals: you want them to be involved instead of just sell to: So, I decided to involve them much earlier in the process, by inviting them to a try-out (which was months before the premiere) and set up means to meet the artists and the people behind the Circuscoalitie. See if you can find joint objectives and promote the circus. I asked the partners to help me with that and make sure that in the process there is attention to aftercare. And not just press and programmers, but also the marketers. The main campaign focused on the adult audiences: try to take away the unknown and make them enthusiastic about circustheatre. Like an introduction, try something new. Explain what they can expect and trigger them by inviting them to enjoy different artists and different styles. I asked the theatres what they would need from me. As content marketing I decided to introduce the artists as great catch and ask the partners of the Circuscoalition why they were a great catch. From there on I developed the campaign and content. For the theatres who programmed it as a family performance, I decided to focus on the accessibility. Parents want to know for sure that their kids will enjoy themselves, they want it to be safe. They know the entertainment value of circus but not of contemporary circus. For this I leaned heavily on the experiences and knowledge of the theatres because they know this audience the best (which parents will be up for this). From there on I rewrote the texts: more accessible for the family shows, zooming in on the introduction for the adult audiences, and for the professionals more on the artists and launching this as a new programming concept (and all in English and in Dutch). And I decided which channels to use, always with the same concept. Unfortunately, the lockdown lasted and lasted, and a lot of these plans couldn't be worked out

because of cancellation and rebooking. I asked Ruth to do the pr of the couple of shows we could do. So, if you are curious which choices worked, maybe she can answer that during the break. We faced the same challenge with Cirque Mania, and it took a couple of editions until the programming and marketing found the right way to work with these different groups. So, this week I asked Rosa if they made a choice which group is their focus on *This is not a circus*. (asking Rosa / Ruth for the answer). So, choose and then build a different strategy around every group. Every choice will help you to decide what is the right next step. And if it doesn't work out, it will be easier to evaluate and make new choices for the next time. And if you think: don't we make it smaller by not trying to reach everybody? In my experience you can better start small and focused and build from there then trying to reach everybody and not reach people at all. They must feel it is for them. This afternoon in the session I would like to zoom in more on those groups of audiences that could be potentially interesting for the circus field and make it an interactive session where our knowledge is shared. For those who join in I would like to create some personas together with their needs, obstacles, habits and share those with the circus community. The one I struggle with the most is the profile of contemporary circus because of the image and that it is still unknown in the Netherlands. I saw the new performance of Michael Zandl and got really excited. But I also as a marketer asked the question how would I profile this performance? Because it is circus... but so much more. It reminded me of Alex d'Electricque. Physical theatre that speaks to the imagination. Do we restrict ourselves by profiling it as circus? Shouldn't we call it physical theatre? There is a huge potential in involved audiences, look at the fanbase of Bambie, Jakop Ahlbom and other groups. Or should we do both and how do we find the words that speak to the imagination? I don't have the answer (yet), but I do know we have to make a next step into branding this new circus forms, so people get excited. So, I think our objective is to learn how to tell our story collectively and at the same time learn how to tell your own story. What drives you? Who are you? What are your values? What kind of theatre do you make and what stories do you tell on stage? And share openly and go into dialogue. Start small and build from there. Your audience will grow with you. I want to finish with a plea: keep working together: Artists, share the same marketers, actively approach the marketers from the theatres and festivals. If they are enthusiastic and understand your work, it's so much easier for them to find and build an audience. Marketers find each other and share knowledge. Programmers work together with your marketers from the get-go. And circus field, I'm amazed of how well you work together, I think the dance and theatre world can learn from that. It sounds simple, but we all know it's not.



Report Afternoon Session with

NOORTJE SANDERS • *independent visual artist*

Encounter with young circus makers who explore the limits of the circus

Our conversation was introduced as an encounter with (young) makers who explore the limits of the circus field. It is an interesting sentence 'exploring the limits of the circus field'. It proposes circus as a thing with a core, some sort of clear definition, with a vague space around it, a space that you can explore (if you're bold enough), moving further and further away from the core, until you finally find the limits of it. Read it like this, it is no surprise that a big part of our conversation centered around this exploration of limits. This needs to define the field of circus, and where your own work fits inside of it. Some makers talked about their complicated relationship with what is described as 'traditional circus'. They felt that to be taken seriously as an art form, they had been pushed to distance themselves from this history. But what does it mean to distance yourself from your own heritage? Are you the one that gets to decide what to leave behind and what to keep? Or is this decided for you? Almost all makers saw a difference between how they view their own work and how the great big 'outside world' views circus. Could that mean that this exploring of the limits isn't about the limits of the Dutch circus field at all, but rather about the limits of an outsider perspective on this field? And if this is the case, does the exploration happen in one's own work or in how to accurately present this work to the outside world? A topic that kept coming up during the day, and in our conversation as well, was about the proper name for what it is we do. Is it contemporary circus? Circus theatre? Modern circus? Or do all these 'additions' to the name of circus only reinforce the limited idea of all that circus is, or could be? And should the work just be called what it is, circus. A representative of Performing Arts Fund gave an interesting example of why this discussion of language is so important, by remarking that circus makers applying for funding often check both the boxes 'circus' and 'theatre' when asked what discipline they are applying with. And by doing so, this means that the application will be judged both as a circus project and as a theatre project. Two different disciplines that each have their own committee members, guidelines, and checklists. Miscommunications like these can be unfortunate, however they are also a clear sign that more and more makers are finding their way to funding, and the rapid growth of the Dutch circus field. Makers who already had a few years of experience talked about things that were possible now, which were unthinkable ten years ago. And everyone involved in our conversation agreed that mutual understanding, communication, and overall visibility of the Dutch circus field had improved immensely over the past few years. So, although no one is entirely sure where those limits that started our conversation lie exactly, more and more people are exploring them every day. From within the field as outside of it. Happy exploring!

Report Afternoon Session with

MARIEKE VAN OOSTEN • *freelance marketeer*

Marketing opportunity and pitfalls, circus image problem and the needs of the Public

How do you interpret contemporary circus, and how do you get audiences to the circus, were the big questions during *A day at the circus*. I was asked to share my experiences and took the makers, programmers, and marketers through how I marketed the Cirque Mania festival and Great Catch tour concept. What always strikes me is that marketing comes last in the list of priorities of makers. So, I decided to share my thoughts on how I arrive at choices. The three big questions are: 1. What is the news value of a project? Why is it unique and special? 2. For whom are you creating this project? Who is the audience, because what is interesting for one person may not be interesting for another. 3. Why is the project important, what do you want to achieve with it? This helps in the focus, profiling, and storytelling. I zoomed in on the audience and

how you can develop different strategies per group in your campaigns. And not just by sending, but by thinking about how you want to activate them. From there, you can also better determine which resources you want to use and who you need for what. Secondly, I zoomed in on the image and profiling of the circus because it is still struggling with being seen as entertainment and less as an art form. It emerged that day that the makers and programmers struggle with what to call it. And I, as a marketer, wrestle with the same problem. It was decided to just call it circus. To reload the branding of circus, I think a new story needs to be told together, a collective story. The afternoon session was full of programmers, makers, and marketers, which gave the opportunity to share the challenges. In a round of introductions, everyone told what they wanted to get out of the afternoon and what questions there were. This varied enormously due to the varied group, but at the same time gave the opportunity to share knowledge and questions. And that is what happened! It was a very inspiring session. We zoomed in on the different audience groups and what the experiences were in terms of programming and marketing. Makers told us that they struggled with how to make themselves visible and were included in the thoughts of programmers and marketers. And programmers and marketers shared what they needed from the makers. The afternoon ended with a work session in which personas were made up from the audience. At the end, one maker enthusiastically told us that he finally knew for whom he was making performances. The day had made everyone think again about who they do it for, why they want to do it and how they could achieve that.

Report Afternoon Session with

PIA MEUTHEN • artistic director Panama Pictures • FREDERIQUE CHAUVET • director Barok Opera Amsterdam • MARC EYSINK SMEETS • business director Festival Circolo

Artistic crossovers with Circus: A round table discussion

Pia became fascinated with circus artists through a small project where she worked with some acrobats. She discovered that she could make much more use of height with them and that this gives an extra dimension. By attending many presentations at circus schools, new perspectives for her work as a choreographer emerged. Panama Pictures has developed strongly in the blending of circus and dance. Where in the early years it was clear who was a circus performer and who was a dancer, Pia has made the circus performers dance more and the dancers become more of a circus artist. That is a long way to go, which is why Pia has chosen to work with a very solid base of artists who have been able to learn from each other and grow towards each other. It takes a lot for everyone to understand each other's 'language' and see possibilities. Panama Pictures takes a lot of time for (movement) research with the actors. In a dialogue between the artists on the floor and the choreographer, they experiment and search for an integrated movement language. Frederique Chauvet is artistic and orchestral director of Barokopera Amsterdam. This company performs accessible, lightly comic operas. Frederique saw contemporary circus forms in France and because (travelling) opera and circus stem from more or less the same tradition, she became interested in bringing the disciplines together. The integration of circus in the operas can enhance the narrative power and accessibility of the performances. The Baroque Opera also hopes to reach new audiences with this. The company is still in the early stages of merging. In the first production, the circus was still too much of a separate addition to the performance. In the new production, it has already gone one step further. For circus artists, opera is often still new and a little strange, and this also applies to the musicians and singers. Everyone is motivated, enthusiastic, and curious, but for everyone it is also a quest. Under the guidance of a director with circus experience, the singers worked on having them climb into the set, but also on singing standing on the shoulders of a fellow actor. The circus artists participate in the chorus. Everyone still must pull out all the stops to make it work.

Instant column

ROUFAIDA ABOUTALEB • *musician, program maker and agent at Codarts Rotterdam*

Hi everyone, my name is Roufaida. I am a singer and writer half of my life, and the other half I spend supporting other artists finding their way into world, amongst whom circus artists from the university of the arts in Rotterdam. From where I am standing, it looks like there's no form of art that sparks imagination the way circus does. The sad thing of becoming a grown up, is that we lose our ability to fantasize, to imagine. Imagination has the power to change our perspectives, and boy, do we need a change of view sometimes. . . It can be hard to imagine the glass half full, given the realities of the world. In circus I see people taking risks to find solutions, whereas my nature would be to stand down. Circus artists seek possibilities, whereas I tend to accept the limits to my physical and mental capacities. In circus I see humans achieving the impossible. There's a lot to learn from the way circus artists work and behave. It makes me wonder what I could be capable of if I could stretch the borders of my abilities. However, in the infrastructure around circus I see hesitation. Which makes sense, since contemporary circus is relatively new, and it requires more time, money, and effort than most other performing arts disciplines. But if we want our societies to benefit from what circus has to offer, we should keep these artists and companies closer to us than we do now. But how? I've heard great answers today. On ways to improve the position and profile of circus. But during lunch I learned about another bridge to gap. The circus scene is young and vulnerable and in dire need of consolidation, and I can think of two things that could help to that respect. Firstly, I think this community should take more seats in the advisory committees of funding parties to gain influence on the money influx. Instead of waiting for people with power to make change, we should become the people in position of power. Secondly, I feel like this community could benefit from presentation partners outside of the circus bubble. There are festivals eager to program exciting new forms of performance art, such as Le Guess Who? in Utrecht, Motel Mozaique in Rotterdam, and Grasnepolsky in Groningen. The people in this room with a network of festivals directors and programmers could actively instigate these relations to encourage the emancipation of circus sector wide. Coming together like this today is a wonderful step in this emancipation. I hope it inspires to contribute, not only to this community within its own dimensions, but also to the impact that it can make in the world. I want to finish with a quote from one of my favorite writers ever. His name is Christian Bobin, a French essayist. His work came to mind after our discussion about the role of language in positioning the circus community in the arts and culture field.

'What we know about people keeps us from knowing them. What we say about them, imagining that we know what we are saying, makes it difficult to see them. We say words like someone sleepwalking, without coming out of the sleep of language. We do not say it, we let it say itself. We let the words come out. They come out in an order that is not our own. (...) Very few genuine words are exchanged in a day. (...) Perhaps we only fall in love in order finally to be begun to speak. Perhaps we only consume art in order finally to begin to hear.'

Christian Bobin - The Very Lowly, a meditation on Francis of Assisi.



State of Dutch Circus

BENJAMIN MONKI KUITENBROUWER • *independant circus maker*

Pronounced on 26/11/2021 on the occasion of the opening of This is not a circus by TENT • Theater Bellevue

Delivering the State of Dutch Circus feels a bit like I am about to embark on an evaluation of how well a toddler can climb trees. And if Dutch circus is a crawling toddler, then I'm a bumbling intern at the day care center who has only just learned that you have to test the temperature of the milk on your wrist before giving it to the baby. Not exactly an authority when it comes to toddlers and their development. But I do like climbing trees. Today Dutch circus has landed in quite a big ball-pit full of other kids and playthings. Sometimes it's not so easy to play with those other kids, or even to be sure that nobody lands on us from on top of the slide. And sometimes it's impossible to even find the floor through all the balls and sometimes we get angry because the other kids are so much bigger than we are. They bury us in the balls and leave us there, frightened that there will be no more cookies or lemonade left over for us, come snack time. Will the parents of the Dutch circus please come and pick up their child at the exit? But we don't have any parents. Or should I say: We've left our parents behind. In the hope of finally being taken seriously. We left our trailers and tents, together with that warm campfire, and we moved on to the big city. We went to live in concrete and work under low ceilings. We traded the mud and the grass for level floors and we laid mattresses on those floors to try to make them a bit softer. We taped off the windows so we didn't have to look out on the squares where we used to play, and we kept our screens on continuously to give us a bit of light again. We hooked up all the lights to motion sensors and we used the strap ratchets to strap ourselves into bed, to keep out the light at night. We stood dead still in the middle of the stage and each time the light went on by accident we were shocked to see that there was still nobody sitting in the audience. We freed all the animals and we sat in the cages ourselves. We always stayed indoors, with the heating on 10. Or the air conditioning, depending on the season. The drip of the air-conditioning became a kind of morse code communication with the outside world. We bought beamers to project trees on the windows we'd taped over, and we took an old unicycle and a chain saw to make speakers on which we played soundscapes of the city we could no longer hear. We made friends with the theatre, with dance and with music. But not such good friends with music, because our parents did that before us. We only made friends with the electronic sort, the kind that we were sure our parents despised. We moved in with performance art and their vague friends. That'll show them! We hid our old clothes under the bed and started to wear only outfits from H&M, so we would stand out as little as possible. We bought the same Eastpak schoolbag as everyone else and with a black marker we turned the E into an L so it said Lastpak, just to prove to everyone that we were not always that much fun to be around. We did everything only in brown and grey to prove that we were just as boring as the concrete which surrounded us. Our only light was open white, preferably from straight above for the hard shadows or from just a bit behind us to make everything so wonderfully sober, to show the world that we were suffering just as much as everybody else. At the first Sint-Maartens we gave our colour filters away to use for next year's lanterns, and we told the children that from now on we would only be opening the door for adults. We invited everyone we ran into to come and see our shows but in every sold out performance the best seats in the middle were always left empty for the really important people. We took an artist name so we wouldn't have to admit that we had a family, or who they might be. We had disputes with our father who said that we ought to call our mother once in a while. We made very clear that we hadn't chosen them to be our parents. We stopped going to family dinners and started drinking on Thursday evenings. We got drunk with the outdoor festivals, and dancing on top of the bar we screamed that we would rather do it with the theatres. We sent love letters to the theatres under pseudonyms which we changed every twelve months so we could write them once again the year thereafter. Warmest greetings, circus-theatre.

Kisses, the modern circus. Best regards, contemporary circus. Hope to see you soon, new circus forms. And when we had torn all the pages out of the dictionary with synonyms for 'contemporary', and when we then realised that our parents were still our colleagues, we paged further, to the T, and we began to call them traditional, just to make it very clear that we didn't do the same things that they had done. Or should I say the things that they still do. Because that's the rub: the moment has come to admit that we are all in the same playground. Because even if I owe my father nothing, I do call my mother now from time to time. Or I shyly come and take a place at the campfire once again, stare into the same flames, and have conversations about the fact that everyone in the family has the same nose. And I would like to make an earnest request that the Dutch circus world spend less time discussing whether glitter is still in fashion and more time comparing our noses to see how much they might be the same. I often present myself as a maker of modern circus. With that label I distinguish myself from my proverbial parents in the traditional circus. Because if I would tell the programmers and the audience that I am a circus artist I think I know the kind of images that would conjure up. And I think often I'd be right. But meanwhile the definitions 'modern' and 'traditional' are both fighting it out. The winner has the right to claim the title 'contemporary' while sentencing the loser to 'history'. That's how we deprive the other of the space to develop. It's a form of verbal oppression. Of course that's not our intention. We do it out of fear. Fear of not getting a piece of the pie, or of being misunderstood. But there's no honour in it. There's no honour in saying that we are not like the other. Of course we are not, and of course there are differences and in the end perhaps even different genres we can recognise, but that being said, why don't we begin by defining ourselves in positive terms, rather than pouting on far sides of the playground because we are different, so much more different than all the other different ones. It's tempting to fall into that trap. That you do circus but NOT in a tent. Or NOT like Cirque du Soleil, NOT with elephants, or CERTAINLY NOT with clowns! Or that you're a circus house that organises a circus festival that is NOT A circus... Or a Chinese pole artist is ABSOLUTELY NOT a pole dancer. I want to talk about what we DO do, and what we DO want. About what circus includes rather than what it is not. I think that we would all be better for it. These past years I've been fortunate enough to work together with many people from outside of the circus field. You know, those friends I originally made just to get back at my parents? Well in the meantime they really have become my friends... And funnily enough, working with them has taught me a whole lot about circus. First of all because those partners always approach circus with a refreshing sort of reverence. This is always confronting because it often feels like for them circus is just about the awesome trick. While I, the 'modern circus maker', am trying very hard to make it about more than that. But in the end I find that their assessment is a blessing, because circus is also about that trick, or better said, that ability. And we must never renounce that. That reverence from the others has helped me to remember what I am capable of as an acrobat, and not be shy in using those skills to bring wonder to an audience. But the most important thing I have gained from my encounters with people from outside the circus world has been how they experience what I can only call the 'circus culture'. Time after time I hear my new partners marvel about this circus world of ours, and about how warm and open it is. I often found those observations to be exaggerated, or felt they were romanticizing something they barely knew. To be honest it reminded me of when my friends used to tell me how much they liked it at my house, and what great parents I had. While for me my parents had been, as usual, much too present, and the houses of my friends were always so much tidier. But meanwhile I realise that they are right. It may not be so tidy, and we may not be as wealthy as the others, but I wouldn't want it any other way. That warm and open culture is a priceless treasure. And those parents of mine are in fact a lot of fun. I think the time has come for us, circus makers, to shift our focus. Rather than getting stuck on how different we are from one another, perhaps we need to define what it is that distinguishes us from all the other kids in that big cultural ball-pit. I see all around me a new way of working which is less self-absorbed and more

engaged with the world around us. Less involved with being angrily unique and more in search of a constructive role to play in society. And I think that's just fantastic. You see, I am a big fan of hip hop, and I've always had a soft spot for what they call 'conscious rap'. It's a sub-genre that came out of the 80's, when most hip hop was a shout of rage against an unjust world. A justified shout for attention. Where most rap of that era seemed harsh and violent because it mostly talked about the way things were, conscious rap tried to talk about the way things could be. It started offering a vision for the future. With fantasy, playfulness and with stories. My dream for circus is that we expand our vocabulary in the same way. That we widen our vision and use our powerful discipline to say something about the world and the future. And more than anything, that we start to take pleasure in our differences. That we celebrate each other's work and that we relate to each other in a better way. From now on, I for one am going to try to define myself in positives: what I am and what I do want. What circus means to me. My circus is a place where we give shelter to hope. In these complex times I think it's so important to keep training in hope. Not hope as a place to retreat to or that passive attitude of 'it will all take care of itself' but the hope that saltos are made of. I recently read something from Edith Eger, a woman who survived the nazi concentration camps, pretty good credentials when you are talking about hope. She writes: 'We never know what the future will hold. Hope is not a white paint that you use to cover up suffering. Hope is an investment in curiosity. The realisation that if we give up now, we will never find out what is going to happen after this.' I'm often frightened. Frightened that we will give up. Frightened by how easily we forget to believe in ourselves and frightened by a cynical view of humankind. My circus is an act of resistance against that cynicism. In a study they did about compassion, two apes were placed next to each other, side by side, but each in his separate cage. One of the apes was offered two different tokens: one red and one green. If he chose the green token, then both he and his neighbour would get something to eat. If he chose the red token, only he would get the food. So for the ape who had to choose it didn't matter. A cynic would predict that for such a simple being the choice would be a moot point. It would be irrelevant to the animal which token they chose since one way or the other, they would get the food. But in this case the so-called 'realism' of the cynic turns out to totally miss the mark: almost every ape chose the green token: Food for everyone. If the ape can understand that, then so can we. In a world where problems often appear impossibly big, I think it is important for circus artists to continue to do the things that the audience can't imagine. Turning on your own axis in the middle of the air, three people who together stand taller than a house, or continuously swinging back and forth from one arm, 6 meters up in the air. Long enough until it becomes impossible not to believe in humanity. Because in the end, if we are capable of doing such wonderful things, then maybe we can also solve those other problems? Not because it's easy but because we want to and because we can... right there before your eyes! Edith Eger also says in her book: 'Hope is not a distraction from the darkness. It is a confrontation with the darkness. (...) Hope is the most daring act of imagination that I know.' And circus is the most daring act of imagination that I know, that I can do. I can't think of a better discipline than circus to help me perform that act of imagination, my resistance to the darkness. And I look forward to doing that, together with all of you, again and again.

TEXT Benjamin Monki Kuitenbrouwer • Dutch original version, can be downloaded at WWW.TENT.EU
TRANSLATION Craig Weston & Benjamin Kuitenbrouwer

THIS IS NOT A CIRCUS