NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Body Arts: Circus at the Commonwealth Games

Report on the circus events during the International Cultural Festival accompanying the Melbourne Commonwealth Games from 15 to 26 March 2006

The International Cultural Festival accompanying the Commonwealth Games was a winner. Free outdoor events for the large crowds included music concerts, roving performances, and dance, physical theatre, and new circus shows. The music performances in particular were representative of a broad spectrum of Commonwealth countries and included major performers such as Miriam Makeba. However, this is a report about the new circus performances because the Festival offered a snapshot of this genre in 2006; the scale of the Festival required a focused approach to even the new circus. An emphasis on circus, that most athletic of art forms, seemed very appropriate to accompany a major international sporting event. As a unique blend of extreme athleticism and artistry, circus performance and achievement rely on the training and discipline of muscular bodies from a young age, as do athletic sports.

I am interested in how muscular bodies in physical theatre and circus provide texts of cultural meaning, at times inadvertently. While the traditional circus in the ring presented animal bodies performing human actions in a subordinate relationship, this species hierarchy has been inverted in most of the Festival's new circus, animal-free productions. Humans masquerading as personified animals or birds figured prominently in this new circus work performing across species, along with some strikingly innovative technology. Performers often worked inside the imaginative apparatus camouflaged as large puppets.

The Cultural Festival was free for an estimated one million spectators across the state of Victoria, attending events with two thousand performers. The strategy of making the Festival free stands in contrast to the usual practice of Australia's major city arts festivals, which offer some supplementary free events in the main programme. A $13 million Festival subsidy was allocated from an overall Games budget of a reported $1.22 billion – one critic claims that every sold sports ticket was subsidized by $550.[1] Leaving aside comparisons between unequal subsidies for the arts and for sports, the Commonwealth Festival was, then, a unique event, a full festival of free exhibitions and performances programmed to accommodate large numbers of people in indoor and outdoor venues. Although, predictably, Australian works dominated, there were significant numbers of professional performers from the larger countries that make up the seventy-one nations participating in the Commonwealth Games. Some events also had a mixture of student and professional performers.

When the Australian state of Victoria last staged a major international sporting event, the 1956 Olympics, Australia's pre-eminent traditional circus of the era, Wirth's Circus, produced a special season. Fifty years ago, this popular art form was unlikely to cross over into the sporting arena itself in the Games pageantry or even into the 1956 Festival of Australian arts that included music concerts, sculpture and painting exhibitions, literature events, and performance focused on a new Australian play, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. In 2006, circus skills were central to the Festival, which did not promote an Australian play in production, and they featured in the sporting stadium for the opening and closing ceremonies. As part of the opening ceremony there were acrobatic koalas in slapstick routines on the ground while, above, a twenty-strong aerial ballet moved twenty metres in the air on body harnesses, holding fireworks. Included in the closing ceremony were twelve aerialists in bright striped lycra costumes with large wigs, turning and balancing, ascending and descending, on six large, purpose-built aerial rings. Aerial performance derived from circus acts has become an indispensable part of large public spectacles.

The Festival's physical theatre and new circus, curated by associate producer Sue Broadway (ex-Circus Oz), happened in and around Melbourne central city's six arenas along the Yarra River between the Alexandra Gardens and the Victorian Arts Centre, and across to Federation Square. Most of the work described below was performed in or near the circus Big Top in Alexandra Gardens or at the Arts Centre.

New circus continues to experiment with form and therefore apparatus invention even in its roving outdoor performance. The Festival's most exciting aerial apparatuses were unquestionably those of Britain's The Dream Engine's two nighttime acts, with inflatable air-filled apparatus lit from inside. *The Conedancers* in the Arts Centre forecourt was staged on a large eight-metre inflatable cone that allowed a male performer and female performer to be suspended by harnesses

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from its top, moving in circular motion around the coloured cone. *Heliosphere* was a white balloon floating just above spectators, who, en masse, stopped everywhere, looking up. Manoeuvred with hand-held ropes by two ground-based crew, the lustrous sphere had a female performer suspended in a waist harness beneath the balloon, slowly turning in simple circular-action that required a fearless temperament if not specialized aerial skill and technique. As it moved gently through the air in romantic aerial action, the Heliosphere seemed like a large low moon.

During the day, the crowd favourites were the very large, roaring dinosaurs from Gondwana created by Australian group Erth. As they ran around, these large mobile puppets, worn by one or two puppeteer operators, parted the crowds of delighted, screaming, scrambling children and accompanying adults. Acts with large mobile outdoor puppets were everywhere at the city arenas: from Australia's Circus Solarus with a stilt-walking emu to two human-sized Scottish 'seagulls'. There was Born in a Taxi's *Boat of Faith*, a three-dimensional boat on wheels, with a boy and a duck inside, a tribute to two cartoon characters by Leunig, whose cartoons are widely loved social and political commentaries appearing in Melbourne's daily *Age*. Another outdoor act with clever apparatus was the longstanding international festival favourite, Australia's Strange Fruit, its performers tied to the end of tall flexible swaying poles dressed this year in courtly eighteenth-century wigs and ballooning dresses. The Australian group Kage put its performers on stilts to play a cricket match mocking the sporting obsession in Commonwealth countries.

In a league of its own was *On the Case* by Legs on the Wall, Australia's pre-eminent physical theatre company. This was the most recent work in this group's extraordinary oeuvre of abseiled performances off the side of high buildings – the group also creates indoor stage shows. This production had the performers working on the three-storey-high side wall of the National Gallery of Victoria, suspended on a horizontal pulley system from the roof of the building. Directed by Deborah Batton and Mark Murphy, with animation by David Jones and music by Carl Polke, this production travelled seamlessly and cleverly across multiple genres.

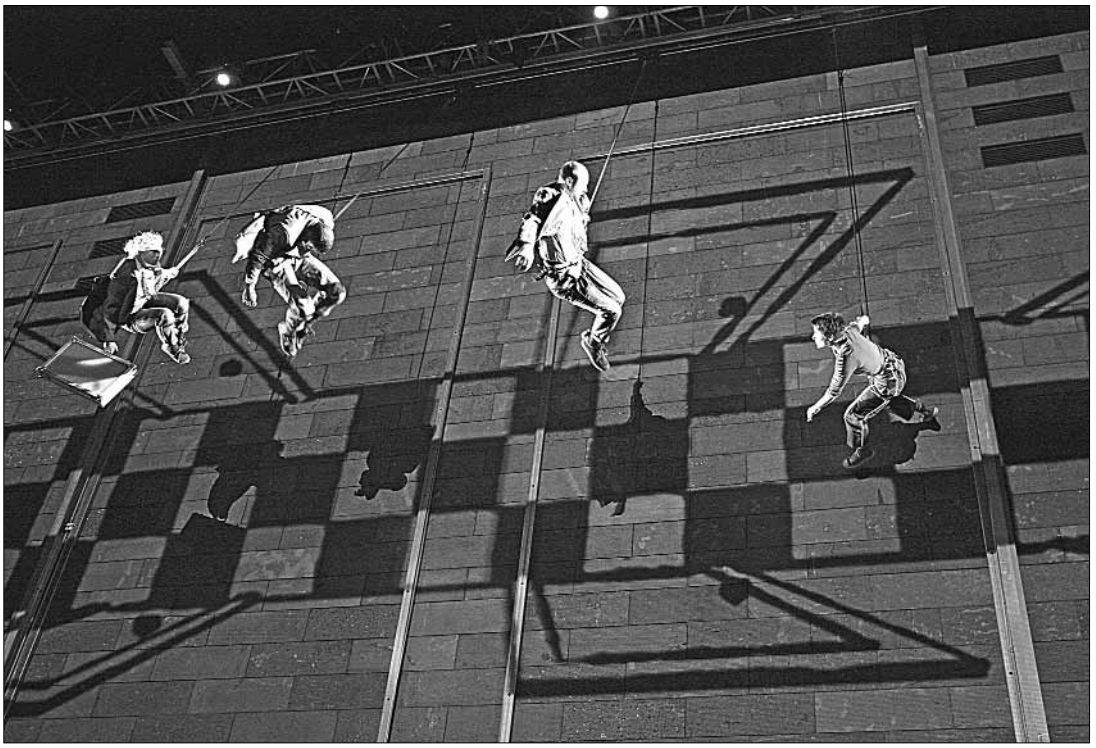
A projected animated image of a red heart flew through grey space chased by a lone female performer (Alexandra Harrison). The show evoked action stories throughout from this suggestion of superman (woman) to the animator's tribute to *Sin City*. Harrison appeared in mid-air, her feet against the Art Gallery wall. Behind her, projected on to the wall, were animated images of outer space that conveyed her descent to earth. The animation created the special effect of Harrison travelling downwards. She came to 'earth' on the top of a high-rise building, as the imagery looked down at the street below. She fell again, ledges of windows passing by, into a green world with trees and a pond; and her foot caused ripples in a pool of water. Three opponents in suits appeared suspended in harnesses, and the music cued a non-specific action film – perhaps a Bond movie – as the four engaged in a (stunt) fight. The red heart was trapped in a briefcase and the imagery became black and white.

Harrison bounced out from the wall slowly as the image shattered. Was she a detective on the case or a player in a game? The projected animation created an illusion that the performers were moving through outer space or in a game or falling from a high-rise building or walking along a corridor or fighting in a car park. All the while the performers walked or bounced out from the side of the building, turning somersaults or colliding. The actions of the live performers transformed the animated images, and vice versa, realigning visual spaces for the spectators. The animated imagery set out to distort the spectators' sensory perception of their surroundings by reordering the vertical and horizontal planes. The spectators standing on the ground below were looking up at performers walking along a vertical surface as if they were upright on the ground. The performers' feet were at right angles to spectators' feet in an inversion of the axis of physical space. This became especially pronounced when the moving animation took the viewer into the giddy trajectory of falling downwards or flying through space.

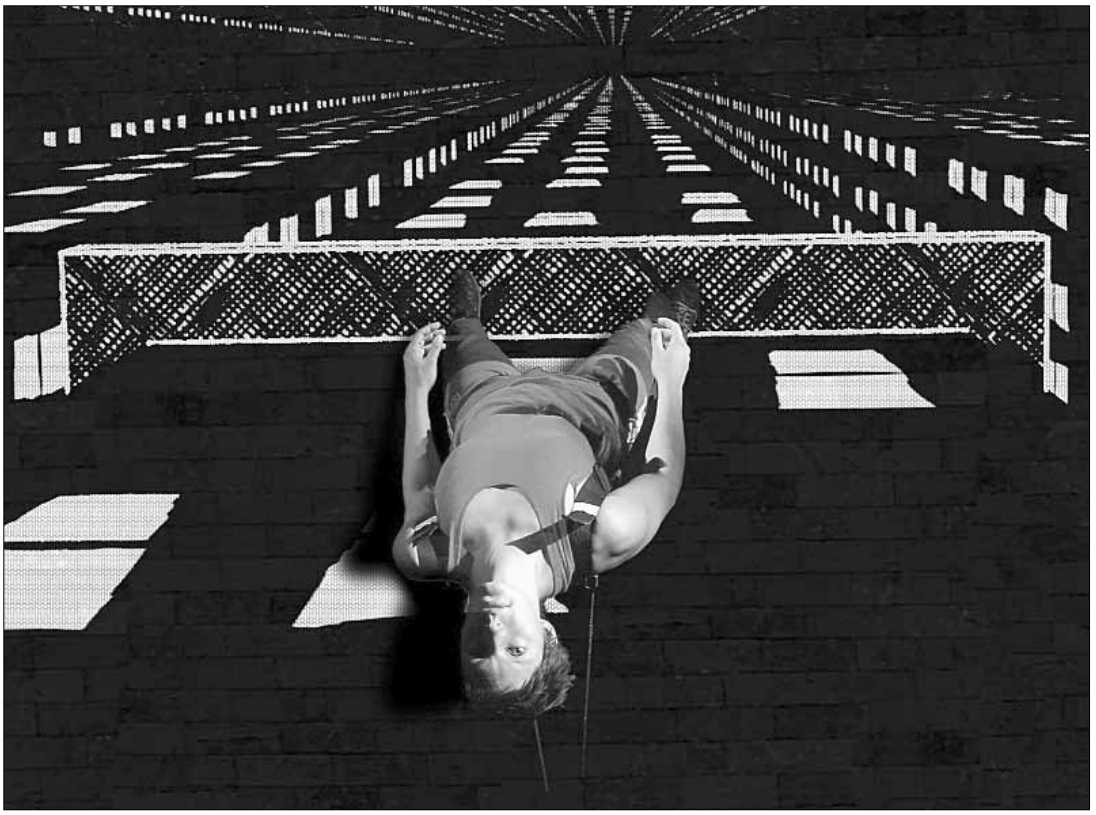
This show was a highlight of the Festival because of its capacity as a live performance to activate the kind of heightened sensory responses usually associated with computerized virtual realities. It made the vertical plane of the body's space reverse with the horizontal plane. Several colleagues were as astounded as I was by this production; but responses from three students were interesting in that they seemed to expect either a cinematic slickness to the animated imagery and/or an impossible degree of virtuosity in the live stunt movement. It was as if the show's crucial physical dimension of live bodies working off the ground on a vertical wall was overpowered for them, as if the limitations of what can be done with a live body have been irrevocably changed by cinematic or digital invention.

For Australians, the Festival provided a chance to see circus acts like India's Jaipur Kawa Brass Band in tartan turbans, and with a highly skilled juggler doing a small-object manipulation act; and the Afro Jambo Kenyan acrobats doing fast-paced routines with three-people-high balances. The Indian Daksha Sheth Dance Company's production, *BhuKham – Circus of Earth and Sky*, was a full-length new circus production in the Big Top from outside Australia (there were nine Big Top

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Moments from *On the Case* by Legs on the Wall. Photos: Jeff Busby (above), Victor Musat (below).



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shows). Here, two female performers, five male performers, and three musicians in a live band fused circus apparatus, Western and Eastern dance movements, and Eastern philosophy. A female performer contorted in slow, dance-like action on aerial apparatus as a ringmaster delivered a verbal text with references to a metaphoric inner world and outer space in his observations of planetary movement and the human condition.

Multimedia projections of planets were replaced by three suspended vertical drums back-lit like planets. A whirling dancer on a pedestal turned around like a Sufi-dancer folding and unfolding large fabric wings. A solo dancer on an aerial ring mirrored the ringmaster's spoken line, 'Time is like a circle.' His spoken text evoked gods, rockets, and the physics of attraction and repulsion, while a male and a female duo performed on the ring. Below, a contortionist on a pedestal folded up her costumed body, insect-like and alien. Then a complete change: from dreams of flight into documentary footage about Charles Lindbergh, to a second abrupt shift as the musicians became a rock band to the ringmaster's rock and roll solo. I enjoyed the surprising incongruity of programming in *BhuKham*.

Imitative of a traditional circus, the show *Circus Olé* was a collaboration between two Australian companies, Snuff Puppets and Acrobat, and was both satire and homage. The human-sized domestic hen clowns hopped and pecked the audience as they entered the tent. These were large puppets worn by their operators and the puppets became progressively larger throughout the show. The humans in the fictional Farelli and Da Silva circus families squabbled before they entered the ring, and with comic self-mocking salutes, executed accomplished acrobatic and aerial acts.

The ringmaster was a purple-suited tall puppet with a very big head, and the mix of puppets and humans marked an innovation in clowning but confirmed once again Australia's reputation for comic silliness in new circus pioneered by Circus Oz. A fascination with the human imitation of animal acts was taken to a new level in this production with its larger-than-life animal and bird puppets. Interspersed between the skilled cloud-swing (a swinging rope hooked up at both ends), trapeze and trampoline acts presented by the internationally renowned performers of Acrobat were the scenes with Snuff Puppets' puppets: two gigantic seagulls, a life-size African elephant that was worth seeing on its own, three cows and a not-to-be-forgotten, wrestling, man-eating life-sized puppet crocodile that drew blood on its trainer's bare chest.

The acts mimicked animal routines in humorously entertaining but bizarre sight gags. At the same time there was the considerable skill of 'Basil Farelli' bouncing up from the trampoline with somersaults and twists to land on the shoulders of his acrobatic partner at the other end of the trampoline. In joining Snuff Puppets, Acrobat has once again created a show with no obvious precedent. This Festival work was completely unlike Acrobat's astounding recent aerial productions; semi-naked females with tape across their nipples and naked males with long beards, as if they were straight from the Australian outlaw bush world, feature in the group's unique and very accomplished adult shows.

Another adult new circus group, the Candy Butchers, presented their black comedy *A Circus Sweetmeat*, which had been the winner of the Most Outstanding Production Award in the 2004 Melbourne Fringe Festival. The show was distinguished by burlesque, carnivalesque performance aesthetics overlaying the acrobatics, body balancing, rolling-ball balancing acts, and aerial duo routines. Hints of early 1900s vaudeville merged with touches of 1950s sideshow. Several Australian politicians have recently nostalgically evoked 1950s values and family life as a safe and secure era; but in *A Circus Sweetmeat* there was an undercurrent of menace and threat accompanying the delivery of the wholesome acrobatic tricks with candyfloss. It insinuated sinister worlds beneath the family-familiar circus ideal and evoked Freud's ideas of the uncanny. The four-person Candy Butchers group includes two experienced new circus performers, and two recent graduates of Australia's National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA), based in Melbourne.

The new circus in the Festival was thus dominated by puppetry, acrobatics, and aerial arts, and, importantly, featured young performers, often new graduates from national training schools. The Festival displayed the strength and agility of young circus performers who, like athletes, are often at their physical prime during the time that they are at training institutions. Therefore new graduates need to move into professional performance as soon as possible. *Love Happens* was a show drawing on more recent graduates from NICA and produced by NICA (where I am a guest lecturer). It was devised and directed by the ex-aerialist and teacher Rodrigo Matheus and physical theatre director Carla Candiotto, both from Brazil.

Brazil is not in the Commonwealth, but Australia's first record of a circus had two young Brazilian rope-walkers working with the Dalle Casse troupe in Sydney in 1841, and Rodrigo has lived and performed in Britain. He and Carla directed a wonderfully entertaining theatrical production that made the most of the circus skills of the young performers with a fast-paced, slick delivery against a backdrop of patchworked love letters. While boy-meets-girl or girl-meets-boy provided conventional gender-defined narratives and interactions, the show made 'sport' with such

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romantic conventions through innovative twists. A relationship break-up, described in acrobatic action and set around a large bed, followed the male into a slow, sensuous adagio with his new, very pregnant lover. A clown bride was left at the altar until the clown groom turned up, very late, inviting the divided audience to call out 'no' to the angry bride's rejection of his pleas. Four males wheeled out prams to sound effects of screaming babies, and in a very funny act, juggled crying babies on short sticks. The solo cloud-swing and solo trapeze artist swung above as if it is accepted without question that aerialists are cultural emblems of love, especially in scenarios about romance. This show demonstrated the value of accomplished direction for new circus, a vital but sometimes overlooked artistic contribution.

There were two new full-length Canadian circus shows, *Circus Inferno* by the two slapstick clowns of the Daredevil Opera Company, and *Traces* by Les Sept Doigts de la Main with five new young recruits, graduates of Canada's National Circus School based in Montreal. *Traces* was an athletic physical theatre show with a minimalist anti-illusionist design – echoes of the theatrical legacy of Meyerhold and Brecht here – and had the four males and one female performer working in street clothes with everyday objects: chairs, an old lounge chair, a piano made of packing-case timber, an overhead projector. This physical theatre – with traces of dance – established a dynamic stage world inhabited by young bodies moving to contemporary music. The group could have been on a city street anywhere with their basketballs and skateboard action, and there were intervals of comparative stillness as if the performers were waiting for something to happen.

The tone of the show remained light and playful, even with an occasional passing reference to Mururoa, synonymous with French nuclear testing in this region. The performers' influence is television; chalk bodies are drawn around each other's bodies as in a crime scene as a prelude to a quiz show about death. It was highly skilled and captivating, with slow exchanges between performers suggesting the familiarity of friends or siblings, and only one adagio between a male and the female in a red dress to convey a sexualized relationship. At the climax, the acrobatic balance hoops escalate in difficulty to five high, and audience members jumped to their feet clapping as the performer did a very difficult dive backwards through the top hoop on his second try. A straw poll of spectators suggests that this was the favourite of the Big Top performances because of its display of superb acrobatic skills in an everyday setting by engaging performers.

On the outdoor rig next to the Big Top were daytime demonstrations by some of NICA's current students as well as night-time outdoor productions. *Fly by Night* by more recent NICA graduates delivered beautiful aerial artistry with strongly sensuous ring and tissu acts, with a red-suited compere whirling around in a harness, and two bare-chested males in a co-ordinated duet on straps doing muscular lifts, poses, and balances. *Shenzo Swing* had the three musicians of Shenzo's Electric Stunt Orchestra in black tie swinging up mid-air on harnesses and playing electric guitar and violin, with Dislocate's two aerialists performing a prelude off a cloud-swing in shiny black latex body-suits, dressed like characters in a Bond movie, coming out of gently comic body-balance tricks with finger guns pointing at the audience. An epilogue was presented by Misha Reale in white latex, swinging high in a powerful and sexy cloud-swing act, noticeably without the safety line worn by other aerial performers.

It was a new experience for this writer to find circus 'sold out', and this happened in the tight schedule that allocated only four to five days for most productions. Although I queued for an hour, I missed one of the first shows, *3wAyXchange*, with adolescent students from Zip Zap Circus School in South Africa, Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury/Wodonga, and Brewarring Youth Circus with its indigenous young people from New South Wales. But I am pleased to report that eight hundred people in the queue in front of me did see the show. Over twelve hundred adults and children were prepared to queue for two hours to see a circus production, three times a day for two weeks, many not getting in – confirmation that circus arts are thriving.

Over two centuries of technological invention and technique innovations lie behind circus, and the expansion of body-based arts sees it move into the twenty-first century with new creative verve. The national circus schools are having an impact on the art form in developing the theatrical potential of its performers. Nonetheless, where the imaginative apparatus becomes the star of the act, it can sometimes demand less skill from a performer. Alternatively, apparatus can also camouflage the vital physical skills of performers working live. Regardless, this Festival confirms that training in circus arts, and in particular acrobatic and aerial work, continues to break new artistic ground. Most importantly, it shows new circus is a thriving performance form, its young athletic performers seemingly the reason for its popular appeal with audiences. In 2006 new circus is attracting a large, youthful crew and crowd, and free access is potentially increasing interest.

Note

1. Robin Usher, 'Culture: a Big Hit when It's Free', *The Age* (Melbourne), 28 March 2006, p. 17; *In the National Interest*, ABC National Radio, 1 April 2006; Peter Ker, 'Games Spending Within Budget', *The Age*, 15 September 2006, p. 10.

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