



A Moveable Famine

Mapping the youth,
community and social
circus and street
theatre sector in
Scotland

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Mapping the youth, community and social circus and street theatre in Scotland

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to map the current activities in youth, community and social circus and street theatre in Scotland and to provide recommendations on how to support and build the sector.

Although the sector involves large numbers of participants, and to a greater or lesser extent a large number of practitioners and organisations, it remains largely unmapped.

Rationale for Proposal

Circus and street arts have enormous potential both in terms of artform and audience development. They have a huge impact in terms of engaging and inspiring new audiences and can often break the perceived barriers to engagement that can exist with more conventional art forms. Their reach extends to people of all socio-economic groups of all ages, including those who do not usually participate in cultural activities.

The sector

For brevity and to avoid confusion, the term 'sector' will be used when describing youth, community and social circus and street theatre activities. For specific areas terms will be used as set out in the definitions.

For the purposes of this study a number of related areas of work have been grouped together. In so far as a blanket definition can be given, this has included all participatory work involving or engaging participants whether they be children, young people, targeted groups in the community or the general public, and whether the purpose is to develop performance skills, for enjoyment or for other 'social' reasons.

Circus and street arts have been taken to mean any work that could be loosely held to fall into these categories, and more importantly not to fall into other categories (i.e. dance or theatre).

The professional sector

The professional Circus and Street Arts sector is undergoing a significant period of rapid development, partly as a result of several new initiatives which have secured Creative Scotland support (eg Conflux and the development of the Briggait proposal). There are also other developments that have arisen without direct financial support as well as a gradual increase in programming.

Opportunities

This increase in profile in the professional sector brings increased opportunities and interest in the youth and social sector. There may also be opportunities for the sector via the cultural programme around the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Street theatre and circus are specifically mentioned within one of the Cultural Olympiad's themes: "make public spaces exciting through street theatre, public art, circus skills and live big screen sites".

These developments bring with it significant opportunities for the sector, but also exposes the sector to considerable vulnerabilities.

Definitions

Introduction

The attempt to establish definitions is always controversial and full of pit-falls. In setting out these definitions, the intention has been descriptive rather than prescriptive, and driven by a commonly shared understanding of the terms. The terms chosen to define have been limited to the scope of the exercise and others which are deemed to fall outwith this remit have been omitted (leisure, hobbyists, educational, vocational etc).

Circus and street arts

For the purposes of this document the broadest definition of circus and street arts has been adopted. In essence this has been taken to include all activities traditionally associated with circus as well as those encompassed by street arts.

Skills used and taught in circus include aerial, acrobalance and human pyramids, the broad range of equilibristics and manipulation (juggling, plate spinning, etc.), unicycles, stilt walking, fire performance and clowning. Street arts can combine a wide range of genres including theatre and dance and is taken to include all outdoor performance.

Youth

Although there are many cases that blur the lines, youth arts traditionally provide opportunities for young people to learn their chosen art form (theatre, circus, dance etc.) within a supportive context. As such they tend to target those who have an interest in the performing arts and seek to develop this interest either as a hobby or potential vocation.

Social

A controversial term, social circus has its roots in South America. Essentially it can be summarised as circus for a social purpose. Social circus uses the skills, techniques and discipline of a variety of artforms (circus, theatre dance and street theatre) to engage, empower, educate and inspire participants, often including those who have shown no previous interest in the performing arts.

Social circus can be used to tackle a wide range of social or individual challenges (anti-social behaviour, social or racial integration, personal or social development, becoming a catalyst to changing the image, outlook and capabilities of participants. It tends to be much more fluid in the art forms used and more participant centred in choosing approaches or outcomes.

Community

Often closely linked with social circus, community circus seeks to be a positive activity that will produce outcomes of benefit to the wider community and not just those involved in the activity.

Outreach

The work done with young and not so young audiences as a way of informing or attracting interest and hopefully audiences to professional work.

The Research

Objectives

- To gather information on the sector, about the nature, quality and range of work.
- To consult with key practitioners to gather experiences, and to identify gaps or weaknesses in the sector
- To gather suggestions and recommendations for the development of the sector.

Methodology

A variety of methods was used to collect information.

- An initial request for participation in consultation was put out on both Scot-Nits and SSCAN.¹
- Direct contact was made with individuals or companies known to work in the sector.
- Searches were made through internet, databases and through shared contacts for other companies or individuals working in the sector.
- A number of key practitioners outside of Scotland were also consulted.
- A number of people working for organisations that commission work from the sector were also interviewed to understand the perception of the sector from the 'other side'.

Those contacted were sent the list of questions (see appendix 4). Respondents were offered the choice of answering by mail or taking part in a conversation. Occasionally follow up conversations took place to help to clarify further details.

Challenges

This research proved much trickier than expected for a number of reasons.

1. Lack of shared understandings of definitions.
2. The huge variety (in nature and quality) of work carried out.
3. The very diverse make up of people and organisations working in the sector.
4. A lack of enthusiasm for participating in the research.

1. Scot-Nits is a e-discussion forum; SSCAN is Scottish Street and Circus Artists Network, an informal network of professionals working primarily in the street and circus arts sectors with its own e-discussion forum.

Research Results

Professional experience

Inevitably most questioned had had a varied career with the large majority combining both teaching and performing, and many crossing genres (mostly into theatre or dance).

It is worth noting that a significant proportion of those questioned (c.30%) had worked largely or solely for one or two organisations. There is a concern that such lack of cross fertilisation can be stultifying for the sector, and allow bad practice to continue unchallenged.

60% also worked in professional performance in a wide variety of contexts. This included staged work, corporate work, festivals and street events. Other practitioners cited a range of other employment from music management, and environmental education to running a removal business and bird box construction.

Training

Given that there is no directly appropriate full time course for people working in the sector it is unsurprising that the training was at best mixed.

40% of those questioned had undertaken full time courses in theatre, circus or dance. These ranged from 1 year diplomas to 3 year degrees. Several had trained at Circomedia in Bristol and some of the younger participants had been through the Diploma in Physical Theatre. Others have trained in other subjects and transferred that knowledge.

60% described themselves as peer or self taught. Of these a significant number mentioned short courses or workshops as augmenting their skills or knowledge. Aerial work seemed to be most successful in encouraging CPD and continued training. Other areas less so.

Only 4 of those questioned mentioned any training specific to working in a social or youth context. This mirrors the SSCAN census when only 16% said they had any training in teaching.

This lack of training, both in the artform, and in its application in a youth and social context is deeply concerning, and has profound ramifications in terms of encouraging professional standards across the sector.

Commitment

Across the board the average percentage of professional time spent working in the sector was 40%. Only one company questioned described work in this sector as its primary focus, and only one individual worked solely in the sector.

Significantly, in follow up conversations, many of those questioned said that if funding permitted they would reduce or curtail entirely the work they did in this sector in favour of performing professionally.

Contexts

Work spanned a wide range of contexts working with the below groups in descending order.

- Adult classes
- Community centres/ youth groups
- Secondary schools
- Primary schools
- Targeted groups (young offenders, young people presenting challenging behaviour, special needs etc.)

Although there is a fairly wide range of area covered over half of the work was with adult classes or with youth groups. In terms of building capacity, reaching out to new audiences or reaching a critical mass of young people across the board there is clearly a huge amount of work still to be done.

Funding sources

Below is a fairly comprehensive list of all funds cited by respondents. While the complexity of the equations makes it hard to come up with totals or percentages, the perception was that most of the funding came through in the form of commissions or contracts. This was then followed by grants and participant fees. A relatively small percentage was funded through the individual or organisations own fundraising.

Significantly only one company (Conflux) had significant core funding allowing it to plan strategically. All the rest of the respondents were essentially working on an opportunistic project to project basis.

Importantly, a significant proportion of funding came from non-arts sources, with CLD, regeneration and socially targeted funding providing significant sources.

- Participant fees
- Local Authorities/ Councils
- Legacy trust
- Creative Scotland
- Schools
- Charitable trusts
- Government funding
- Lottery funds
- Community Grants
- Corporate funds
- Traders associations
- Own fundraising.

Initiation of Projects

The majority of projects were initiated by the funder (whether this be Creative Links Officers, Cultural Coordinators, schools, local councils, events' committee, festivals etc). Given the above findings in regard to sources of funding this is maybe not surprising. Some were initiated by the respondent although this seemed to expose the difficulties and vulnerability of self funded projects, and very few were initiated by the participants.

This reliance on commissions or contracts creates an opportunistic market in which pricing rather than quality can become dominant. It also removes the possibility for companies or individuals to develop long term projects or strategic plans.

Perceived benefits

The perceived benefits of circus are wide reaching and varied depending on its context, and its purpose. Below is a summary of those benefits named by respondents.

- Community participation and engagement
- Skills acquisition
- Demonstrable achievement
- Social and/or personal development
- Fun
- Cultural inclusion
- Artistic quality in a community context
- Promoting an area of interest for a client
- Healthy activity
- Development of team work
- Confidence
- Physical well being and fitness
- Discipline and tenacity
- Body awareness
- Mental well being

Collaborating/commissioning organisations

- Councils across Scotland
- Secondary Schools
- Primary Schools
- Corporate companies (launches, roadshows, events, fun days etc)
- Community centres
- Youth Groups
- Charity events
- Public events (galas, Xmas lights, Fireworks etc)
- Events companies
- Festivals
- Theatre Companies
- Arts/Youth Organisations

Gaps in Provision

- No centre of excellence for circus
- No open circus classes or schools for young people
- No regular sustained long-term training provision
- Lack of facilities, equipment, venues
- Not enough regular professional work to attract or sustain teachers/professionals
- Lack of funding
- A lack of trained practitioners

What would be useful to develop your work?

- Funding for artistic/professional development
- Joined up thinking by funding bodies

- Facilities, venues, equipment
- Access to youth/professional circus training
- Dedicated circus centre

What would be useful to develop the sector?

- A lead organisation
- Leading companies to push standards and best practice.
- Good high quality teaching.
- More regular day to day work to support current practitioners
- Professional training facilities
- Teacher trainings for youth circus
- Circus training
- Encouraging integration into courses
- Develop models of good practice
- Develop shared goals and achievement systems
- Raise awareness of activities and benefits
- A regulatory body
- Online portal to network, develop and connect
- Regular staff training and up-skilling opportunities
- Long term opportunities for youth engagement.
- Create partnerships with courses companies and institutions
- Modify knowledge, systems and practice from 'neighbouring' sectors.
- Sector support re: health & safety, risk assessments, child protection and insurance

Examples of good practice

Respondents were asked to name companies or individuals they would cite as examples of good practice. Depressingly only 4 answered this section, the rest choosing to pass or leave it blank. Of the rest of the answers no one cited a company working in circus in Scotland, either citing non-Scottish companies or companies working in other genres. This lack of positive examples/enthusiasm for the Scottish sector speaks volumes about the problems facing the sector.

Summary of Findings

- 1) The sector is hugely diverse, incorporating a wide range of activities, purposes, individuals and organisations. Practitioners are roughly equally divided between one man bands, individual freelance practitioners and small 'part time' or project based companies. In addition there are a handful of larger organisations but these tend to carry out work in the sector as a minor arm of their activity. Finally there are a large number of organisations and individuals who take part as 'hobbyists'. Although this diversity can be a strength, it poses real challenges in setting standards.
- 2) There is a perceived lack of skilled, trained practitioners. This is particularly the case in terms of teaching / working with young people and even more so when it came to working with hard to reach or challenging young people. Several organisations felt that the lack of skilled practitioners was an impediment to their growth.
- 3) There is a perception both within the sector and from commissioning bodies that the quality of work is very variable. While there are examples of good practice, the sector also has many practitioners of dubious quality, projects that are perceived as poorly thought through, opportunist in outlook and shoddily executed. This has been noted as a disincentive for booking further work.
- 4) While in theatre and dance youth and community work has become a real sector in its own right and it is acknowledged that the skills to teach are different to the skill set for performers, in circus and street theatre this has still not been established. People still tend to look to performers to work with non-professionals even though they might not have the skills or mindset for this type of work.
- 5) A significant percentage of those working in the sector do so to supplement their income and acknowledge that they would happily cease or significantly reduce this area of work if they had the choice.
- 6) There are no organisations that solely and exclusively work in the sector, and only (Theatre Modo) defines it as its core activity.
- 7) There is a real lack of clarity about what is involved in the sector or the distinctions within the sector.
- 8) The sector suffers a perception of being at the bottom of a pecking order in which professional performance takes precedence, and work that supports or encourages professional performance follows, with work that engages younger or harder to reach participants seen as of less value.
- 9) Within the sector there is also a pecking order of skills with aerial skills being perceived as the pinnacle of the art form (maybe helped or pushed by several highly skilled practitioners working in this area), often to the detriment of more accessible skills. Equibrilistics and manipulation are still awaiting their champions.
- 10) The sector suffers from a poor profile. Without national bodies to champion it, and given so much of the work happens 'buried' in communities, there is little public or professional awareness of the work.

- 11) There are no national bodies or companies that take the lead on developing good practice or setting standards. (As Ydance or SYT or Promote YT can in their sectors).
- 12) There is little opportunity for CPD, or even initial training. Although there are some informal possibilities to develop performance skills there are no training opportunities at any level to develop skills useful in a participatory context.
- 13) There are no recognised standards of achievement for young people. Without such shared goals their achievements remain unmarked.
- 14) There are no ongoing or permanent circus school or classes for young people. This means that young people interested in pursuing it further have no obvious routes to follow, or institutions that can encourage such aspirations.
- 15) There are no models of good practice that are shared or agreed upon within the sector. Without these it is hard to regulate the sector, or to encourage standards.

Conclusions

Nature of the sector

In some senses the sector shares more with an area like folk music than with mainstream theatre. It is something that many people do for fun, and enjoy the 'hobby' status of. While in theatre there are clear lines drawn between Amateur Dramatics and professional theatre, in the circus world that is often not so clear. Without such a regulated industry, and without clear training or standards, many dip in and out of professional activity.

The sheer range of skills employed (from trapeze to clowning, plate spinning to stilt walking) make it a very difficult sector to regulate, to provide training in, or even to set standards of good practice.

The issues

While youth arts are well provided for, and well supported and resourced (SYT, NTS Exchange, NT National Connections, Promote YT etc), social circus and community theatre often slip below the radar. The social arts suffer a reputation as a poor cousin of other art forms and struggle to have a profile that matches its scope and possibilities.

Often funded through non-arts funding and with outcomes that are only promoted at a very local level, social circus and community theatre involves a huge number of participants in the arts, many taking part for the first time. They have the potential to bring huge benefits to participants, to communities and ultimately to the perception and survival of the arts.

Visibility

Social circus and community theatre practitioners often operate in isolation. Their work naturally leads them to work in a context that is outside of mainstream arts activities, and even the possibility of coming together for exchanges or festivals is harder and less appropriate. This can mean that practitioners are left to reinvent the wheel, can get stuck in a rut working only within tried and tested frameworks, find it hard to access new techniques or approaches and are limited in the possibilities for the exchange of ideas, experiences and approaches.

Profile

The sector suffers from a very low profile. Much of the work happens on a very local level, a significant proportion takes place behind 'closed doors', and often outside of mainstream arts activities. All this means that the sector has a very low profile in all areas; amongst other arts professionals, in the circus and street arts sector, but also with funders, councils and potential collaborators.

Reputation

The sector also suffers from a poor reputation. It is often perceived as being a poor cousin of other artforms. While the youth theatre and youth dance sectors have developed their own identity there is still often a snobbery that perceives the sector as less skilled or less exciting than the professional performing sector.

Advocacy

Without either supporting/promoting bodies, or a thriving network of practitioners it is hard for the sector to advocate the benefits that it can offer, or to compete with other artforms for funding or profile. Although in some countries social circus has become established and its benefits clearly recognised, in Scotland it remains largely unrecognised. The sector needs a powerful advocacy to promote the possibilities and opportunities. With competition

for funding becoming more intense it is increasingly important that the sectors arguments are championed in order to compete with other sectors.

Training

For practitioners working in social circus and community theatre there is a constant need to match the approach and outcome to the participant's commitment. This leads to a constantly changing array of skills, approaches and presentations. In terms of training it relies on the skill of the workshop leader to engage the individuals involved. This makes it far harder to train at a theoretical level. It is not just about being competent at your chosen art form, but also your ability to adapt this for the group or community with which you are working. In terms of health and safety it also clouds the issue as each decision has to take into account what you can realistically expect of the participants.

Health and safety

As with its professional counterpart the sector has suffered from some fairly heavy handed application of health and safety. Unfortunately this has been occasionally justified by some very lax standards and poor practice. However it has also made it much more difficult for many safe activities to take part. Significantly this has led to some organisations working without adequate insurance or risk assessments, as they have been too fearful of the consequences of investigating the situation, and the financial or legal ramifications this might have.

Standards and Good Practices

Given the fragmented nature of the sector, and the huge range of skills and contexts in which it works, it is very easy to understand why there are no sector wide models of good practice or professional standards. However these seem to be key in driving up the quality of the practitioners and delivery within the sector and giving all involved clear benchmarks against which to judge work and practice.

Recommendations for action

- 1) **Skills sharing and training.** There is an urgent need for practitioners to develop and share skills and approaches within the sector. Although most practitioners asked were interested in learning or developing performance skills, the real dearth is in skills in teaching and working in a participatory context.
- 2) **Advocacy.** The sector needs persuasive championing to promote the possibilities and opportunities, to advocate the benefits that it can offer, or to compete with other artforms for funding or profile. The potential benefits are wide ranging, and the potential participation is huge. Powerful advocacy could have real benefits for the whole sector, and ultimately (in terms of attracting participation and audiences) for the whole circus and street arts sector.
- 3) **Good practice and standards.** There is a real need to develop standards and good practice for practitioners to endorse and sign up to. The challenges here are the lack of national bodies to take the lead, and the lack of time or incentives for individual practitioners or organisations to commit to this process. In order to implement these standards and practices there is also a need to look for a stick and carrot approach to incentivise cooperation across the sector.
- 4) **Accredited courses.** In the medium term, looking at the possibilities of accredited stand alone courses should be looked at. There are various courses upon which this could be modelled (e.g. Albert and friends have recently devised a course on teaching circus in the community with the OCN). Although there may be crossovers between future accredited courses and the current PTS course it was felt that future courses should not simply be 'tacked on' to the existing course, as this would dilute the focus of both.
- 5) **Health and safety.** A focused effort is needed to establish guidelines and resources in this area open to all practitioners, both to pacify over cautious clients and councils, but also to weed out poor practice in the sector.
- 6) **Database.** Given the low profile there is little awareness of who works within the sector, both internally and externally. This reduces the opportunities for work, for collaboration or for development. A sustainable website that lists all practitioners and organisations working in the sector, along with details about the sort of work they deliver would make this much more accessible and transparent.

Proposals for immediate action

1) Interchange

A series of networking and skill sharing opportunities to bring together practitioners and professionals working in the field. This would kickstart the process of exchanging ideas, approaches and experiences, and begin to build a more coherent, confident and articulate sector. This could also provide the start for a collective voice that could advocate the enormous potential and benefits of the sector.

Given the insularity and lack of teaching skills in the community it was felt that this needed to have significant input from experts either from outwith Scotland or outwith the sector. There is significant experience and expertise to be tapped into beyond Scotland, and it is important that the Scottish sector piggy backs and absorbs this.

Outwith of circus, there have been significant developments of approaches to teaching, to engagement and to standards in the theatre and dance sectors and many of these could be easily adapted to be appropriate to the sector.

2) Advocacy Document

Create, publish and circulate an advocacy document that sets out clearly the nature of the artform, the benefits it can bring, and the range of potential participants and partners. This is important in informing and educating about the benefits that social circus can bring, and in competing for profile against the better mobilized dance and theatre sectors.

At present few potential partners (schools, youth groups, councils etc) are aware of the range and depth of benefits that circus can bring in a social or youth context. Powerful advocacy of the advantages that circus can bring and a better understanding of how it can be used or incorporated is needed to increase partnership and participation.

The dance and theatre sectors are much more developed and have over the years built up a great network of connections and understandings. Social circus needs to raise its profile significantly to become a perceived option for organisations looking for youth arts activities.

A highly professional and eye-catching document that sets out clearly and potently both the shared and unique benefits that participation and partnership in social projects can bring should be created and circulated widely to councils (Education, Arts, Community Action, Community Learning and Development), to Arts officers, to Festivals, to organisations working with young people. Hopefully this combined with the above could act as a jump-start for the sector.

Appendix 1: Suggested Topics for training

Areas for training

Management
Funding
Planning, delivering and evaluating projects
Marketing, audience development
Event management
Working where infrastructure for circus is limited
Implementing policies

Leadership

Coaching skills
Developing networks for projects (funders/community groups)

Working with young people

Understanding youth work context
Teaching techniques
Motivating young people
Discipline – rights and responsibilities
Working in education settings
How to teach progression routes (e.g. career options)
Teaching to be accredited
Creating / devising work with young people
Good practice in teaching physical activities

Working with target groups

Inclusive practice (disabled young people in particular)
Working with younger children

Working in partnership

Working in criminal justice settings
Collaboration with other artforms, ensemble work
Working with professionals and hobbyists

Circus specific skills

Rigging, fire, tumbling, acrobatics, trapeze, tightrope
Circus in parades
Updating existing skills and learning new skills
Circus in performance
Health & Safety, Risk Assessments

Performance skills

Creating performances
Performance and narrative, storytelling
Circus and theatre, dance or music

Appendix 2: Contributing Practitioners and Organisations

Aberdeenshire Council

Aerial Edge

Alan Dear

Albert and Friends

All or Nothing

Aviatrixicks

Barry Henderson

Bright Night International

Circus Development Agency

Circus Space

Chloe Dear

Conflux

Edinburgh Performers

Fuzzy and Britta's Circus School

Gandolf

Glasgow Life

Highland Council

Jen Paterson

Jesters Knot

JL Cassells

NEAC

Performing Arts coordinator, Scottish Borders

Phyllis Martin

Ruaraidh Milne

Simon Abbott

Steve Cousins

Tartan Juggler

Te POOKa

The Big Top

Theatre Modo

Urban Circus

Appendix 3: Further reading and related research

YPPT Youth Circus Programme, Independent Evaluation Report

Airborne: mapping of youth circus activity in the UK, ACE

WHY CIRCUS WORKS, How the values and structures of circus make it a significant developmental experience for young people, Reginald Bolton

Swamp Circus Trust, YPPT evaluation on Youth Circus Network pilot project

Euphoric Circus, Curriculum development in circus skills

Kevi Cirkus Klowns, Research paper for Home Office on positive effects of their circus group

Lydney State Circus, King Pole issue 146

The Secret Circus, Circus School Project 2007- 2008 Evaluation (commissioned by NCC Extended Services dept)

Youth circus: Exploring the production process behind performances, Toy Box Circus, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship report, 2002

Charnwood Juggling Club, various reports written for United Nations on the use of arts in conflict and post-conflict situations

Galway Circus Projects, Translation from German to English of Kiphart (sports professor) about youth circus

Circus Health check, the 2006 review of Arts Council's 2002 Circus Strategy

Development of the Street Arts Sector in Scotland, SAC Research and Evaluation

SSCAN Census, SSCAN

Overview of Physical Performance sector in Scotland, Articulation

Appendix 4: Youth / Social Street Theatre and Circus Mapping Exercise Questions

About you

What would you define as your core skills?

What is your professional experience?

What training have you had as a circus performer and / or as a teacher?

What % of your professional time do you work in youth/social circus/street theatre?

What other work do you do?

About the work

What activities are you involved in? (Circus, street theatre, particular sub genres)

Would you define it as a social or youth activity* (or give a percentage for each)

In what contexts do you work? (Primary/secondary/further education, informal education, prisons, young offenders, youth groups, general public etc)

What skills do you employ? (List key skills)

Where does the funding come from?

Who initiates the projects? (You, council, companies, participants)

What are the perceived benefits of your main activity (if you are involved in more than one please highlight the unique benefits of each activity?)

What companies / organisations / individuals have you worked with?

About the numbers

Numbers of workshops per week/month/year?

Number of separate projects per week/month/year?

Numbers of participants per week/month/year or per workshop/project?

Ages of participants?

About the future

What are the key gaps in provision?

What would be useful to develop your work?

What would be useful to develop the sector?

What projects /companies/individuals/organisations/events would you cite as examples of good practice?