WHY CIRCUS WORKS

How the values and structures of circus make it a significant developmental experience for young people.


This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

(Reginald Bolton)
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Abstract

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Circus is increasingly being used as a developmental and remedial activity for children. However, it is in the paradoxical nature of circus that it operates in a way both mysterious and easily accessible. This thesis proposes that circus as education is more effective when both teacher and student have a better understanding of circus as an art form.

To explain this I first introduce six 'elements' of childhood, whose absence often seems to result in an incomplete personal maturity. I then conduct a wide exploration of both the real and the imagined circus, showing how these elements occur or are evoked there, and I establish a correspondence or 'homology' between the two entities - childhood and circus. The discoveries shed light on the aesthetic code of circus itself, leading to the conclusion that circus works as an artform because its essential composition recalls profound experiences of childhood.

I argue that contemporary Western childhood presents unexpected hazards, mostly involving passivity and over-protection. In other parts of the world, and in some Western populations, childhood has other problems, linked to deprivation, exploitation and physical danger. In either case, a child involved in circus activities has a chance to make good some deficits, by experiencing constructive physical risk, aspiration, trust, fun, self-individuation and hard work. My hope is that this dissertation will contribute some strength to the case for well-designed programmes of circus activities for young people, in both formal and informal settings.
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