

# Amazing Feats: Step Right Up and See the Dancers

**D**ANCE and circus have been kissing cousins forever, as far back as mankind could move gracefully or make a funny face. So while their convergence may not be new, these intermingling forms retain their power to charm. In fact, two of the loveliest dance programs I've seen this year were suffused with circus imagery.

The more overt was Lloyd Newson's dance film "The Cost of Living," released in 2004 and based on stage performances by his DV8 Physical Theater of London. It depicted marginal circus performers lost in a lonely town on the North Sea coast of England, in and around one of those entertainment piers better known at Brighton or in Santa Monica: lost souls who manage to connect with one another, mostly through dance.

The other was Rachel Cohen's "If the Shoe Fits," with more oblique circus references: characters like gently ironic Pierrots and an ambience of charmed, childlike wonderment. This was a delightful fantasy about Cinderella, Jack of beanstalk fame; and other fairy-tale figures. A lot of flour (20 pounds a performance, the flier

exclaimed) was strewn about and kneaded into dough. Makeup and hair stylings made the dancers look like puppets. Costumes and sets were fantastically crocheted. For the audience, it was like being lost in a fun-house mirror, sweet and innocent and threatening all at once.

The links between dance and circus may go back a long way, but they cropped up with increasing frequency throughout the 20th century. Especially in France, with — to name just two examples — the carnival-sideshow setting of Fokine's "Petrushka" (1911) and the homage to circus performers in Roland Petit's first ballet, "Les Forains" (1945). In the United States, Ruth

*Clowns. Freaks. Dance and the circus bond in an artistic pas de deux.*

Anna Botz's "Cirque de Deux," quite apart from its French title, was first done at the Hollywood Bowl in 1947 and is described in *The Dance Encyclopedia* as a "gently satirical" look at "various typical circus acts."

The variety within circus is indeed extreme, and each aspect has found an echo in dance. Clowns are a natural, in their funny, scary way. The opening sequence of "The Cost of Living" captures both sides of that dichotomy with eerie perfection. Freaks are — or used to be, before the advent of political correctness — a staple of circus sideshows, and David Toole's legless man brilliantly and poignantly represents that side of circus life in Mr. Newson's film. Trapeze, trampoline and acrobatics find no parallels in Mr. Newson's or Ms. Cohen's dances, but performers like Elizabeth Streb have championed a new athleticism in dance today.

Even animals have found their place in dance, most notably in Balanchine's "Circus Polka" (more exactly, "50 Elephants and 90 Beautiful Girls"), with music by Stravinsky, first done in 1942 by Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden. A hit, it offered

Vera Zorina, then Mrs. Balanchine, riding the lead elephant.

Further afield, forms that aren't quite circus or dance but are closely related to both have found ample expression in dance: puppetry (group in New York), gymnastics (the Laya alone signified the connection between competitive athletics and dance), synchronized swimming (two Canadian women did a witty water dance for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, set to music by Meredith Monk and shown on video as a tribute to Ms. Monk last fall at Danspace). There are plenty of traditional circuses trucking from town to town in Europe to this day, reinforced by an army of circus performers from Asia and the former Soviet Union. The modern form of circus, born in France and propagated in circus schools there, is called the "cirque nouveau" or "cirque moderne"; the Canadian Cirque du Soleil is a spinoff, and a spectacularly successful one. Such circuses stress artistry over mere skill; most of them list a choreographer among their credits.

Circus — and dance — might seem hopelessly old-fashioned in our age of popular, electronically powered entertainment. Our continued fascination with circus imagery and circus performers must reflect a nostalgic longing for an idealized past, or for an escape back into the innocence of childhood, as in Ms. Cohen's lovely dream world.

In "The Cost of Living," the very loneliness, the sense of isolation, reinforces the bonds among the circus performers. Mr. Petit's "Forains" suggests the same thing: the French word forain is linked to foreign, implying a similar proud separation from society, like that shared by Gypsies.

Anna Kisselgoff called DV8 "the Sex Pistols of dance," and punk rock was a similar outsider rejection of, and violent attack against, the mores of conventional society. Punk rockers (however much they may, not so secretly, have aspired to commercial success) were scorned as freaks by nonpunks; hence the continued, formidable presence of green-tinted elongated Mohawk hairdos in London, reduced to mere tourist attractions.

Despite signs of mainstream acceptance, gays could be seen as another group of outsiders, especially in today's political climate and the prolonged era of AIDS. Much of Mr. Newson's earlier work was devoted to gay themes. And perhaps it was no accident that so many circus ballets appeared in the early 1940's, with the world fearful of war.

Do dancers feel similarly bound together against an unfeeling society? Maybe one reason the dance community is so tightly and defensively knit is its sense of being ignored by a bustling great world and its crassly commercial popular culture. Does that mean dancers are clowns, tricksters, freaks? Not exactly. But sometimes they may feel that way.



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Michelle Vargo, center, and other dancers in Rachel Cohen's "If the Shoe Fits," at Walkerspace in TriBeCa last month.

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