

by Professor Vanessa Toulmin

In the Beginning

In 1768 a uniquely British invention created from entertainment popular in late Georgian London was born. The innovator was Philip Astley who with his wife Patty, a gifted equestrienne, and his horse Gibraltar, gave riding displays at Glover's 'Halfpenny Hatch' between Neptune and Angel Streets in April 1768. On this site Mr and Mrs Astley developed scenes of horsemanship and later incorporated older forms of entertainment such as acrobatics, performers from the street and clowns to draw the crowds. It was this combination of speciality skills that developed into the circus entertainment we recognise today.¹

As we celebrate 250 years from when modern circus was created, the narratives and histories that are being revealed, especially in the United Kingdom, demonstrate the complex and global history of the genre that is circus; an evolving language of visual and physical performance.² The Astleys settled at Westminster Bridge Road where initially they used an open-air circular arena, then built a partially covered 'amphitheatre' styled 'Astley's British Riding School' which opened in 1770. Some historians take this as the date from which the Astleys first presented circus.³ Since then the journey of modern circus has been truly remarkable. However, its development is not a linear trajectory but one marked by periods of decline and renewal, divergence of presentation and concepts and reinterpretations by successive generations of practitioners.

Circus from its onset was international with Astley touring to Ireland, Belgium, France and many other countries and incorporating artists from Europe in his shows.⁴ Astley and his troupes operated within the existing entertainment industries of the time. Alongside his Amphitheatre in London he opened temporary wooden circuses at fairs, pleasure gardens and festivals. Astley developed scenes of horsemanship with his horse Gibraltar performing tricks such as taking a boiling kettle from a blazing fire and filling a goblet and bowing to the King. The equestrian show played in provincial theatres, in

Paris in 1772, in the open-air in Bristol in 1772, opened the New Riding School, Dublin on 17 December 1773. Astley's

combination of performance genres within a ring of a set diameter quickly became global and by the early nineteenth century circus could be found in thirteen different countries including the United States in 1793, Canada in 1797, Mexico in 1802, Russia in 1816. Within the European and North American traditions evolutions in popular entertainment from the music hall to the menagerie tradition of previous centuries played a key part in changing and challenging the concept of what is circus. Incorporating the performance styles of the cultures it travelled and adapted to, circus has evolved and incorporated many more elements with each generation of proprietors and artists challenging and innovating the art form. It is truly a performance genre that one can truly run away to and influence with innovations introduced by impresarios and producers from non-circus families sitting alongside traditional family circuses in its development and artistry. Nineteenth and twentieth century circus performers became household names, with the proprietors feted by royalty.

Today, European, Russian, Chinese and South American performers are the staple of the classic tenting shows and Canadian, Australian and French artists dominate the contemporary scene. French-Canadian Cirque du Soleil, arguably the largest circus ever to perform internationally, employs 4000 artists with twenty-two shows operating globally. Circus has adapted by opening in villages and halls, stadiums and theatres, playing to successive generations and, despite facing challenges and sometimes hostility, always providing an arena where



J. Smith sculp.

PHILIP ASTLEY.

Born Jan^y 8th 1742

*'Twas here the Painter's Task to trace
But the mere Semblance of his Face,
The Portrait of whose Mind, more true,
Lo! his own Work presents to view.*

Silhouette of Philip Astley taken from Astley's System of Equestrian Education, 1801. NECA University of Sheffield Library



Exterior View of Astley's Amphitheatre as it appeared in 1777 from an original drawing by William Capon 1777. Tibbles Circus Collection Ringling Museum of Art

talent can shine. Circus today has moved beyond the ring and back to the ring, and can be found in the fields of Glastonbury, West End Theatres and multi-purpose stadiums.

"Circus, is in the words of Peta Tait, performative, making and remaking itself as it happens".⁵

It incorporates dance, new media, is performed with or without animals, can contain a narrative based on immersive theatre and is fused with the skills of practitioners outside the traditional circle of the family-based performance. Today circus is not always limited to the concept of a thirteen metre diameter ring or forty-two foot ring finally settled on by Philip Astley and his contemporaries, but has always incorporated at its heart exceptional human bodily skills being pushed to the extreme for the gratification and entertainment of the audience regardless of gender and race.⁶

Today over fifty contemporary and classic circus companies operate in the United Kingdom, ranging from No Fit State who transferred their immersive talents to the ring for *LEXICON*, to Martin Burton of Zippos Circus whose theatre style *Cirque Berserk* is designed for the proscenium arch stage.⁷ Alongside home grown troupes such as the *Invisible Circus* from Bristol are international companies and performers from Africa, South America, North America, Australia, Asia and Europe who regularly tour the United Kingdom. From high art to popular music, the circus has interfaced with other performance genres, visual culture, high fashion and design. Fashion designers including Vivienne Westwood,

John Galliano and Marc Jacobs have taken the glamour and styling of the circus costume. Writers have embraced the circus as a source of inspiration; Charles Dickens and his ringmaster Mr Slearly in *Hard Times* (1854) and Sergeant Troy's dramatic reappearance in the circus in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) are two nineteenth century highlights. Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Enid Blyton's *Mr Galliano's Circus* (1938) are examples in the twentieth century. Artists such as Degas, Renoir, Picasso, Seurat, Matisse, Toulouse Lautrec, Jack Yeats and Dame Laura Knight returned repeatedly to its other worldliness and beauty. Film provided perhaps the greatest visual representation of the circus, ranging from the macabre fascination of Tod Browning and Lon Chaney in *The Unknown*, (1927), the terror of Hammer's *Vampire Circus* (1971), to the Hollywood



Invisible Circus. Blackpool 2012

Cast of *Cirque Berserk!* 2018. Courtesy of Martin Burton, Zippos Circus



spectacle of *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952) and *The Greatest Showman* (2017). Actor and former trapeze artist Burt Lancaster appeared in possibly the greatest circus film, *Trapeze* (1956) in the real Cirque D'Hiver in Paris. For many generations Walt Disney's *Dumbo* is the eternal circus classic, now being reimagined by Tim Burton. 2008 saw two huge circus inspired stadium tours and albums - Take That with *The Circus* and *Circus Live* and *The Circus Starring Britney Spears*.

However, in the wider history of the circus the role of gender and race, along with local stories are often overlooked in the spectacle of the sawdust and spangles and the narratives of the families or businesses who produce the attractions. The historical circus is often presented through American entertainment, dominated by male impresarios such as Barnum and the Ringling Bros, the self-claimed showmen who trademarked 'The Greatest Show on Earth'.⁸ Recent important scholarship by Peta Tait, Janet Davies and others has started to shift this, but the majority of circus histories are recorded through the lens of the larger institutions, both pictorially and through narrative, this canonical approach without a

critical context.⁹ As Marius Kwint writes,

"Most circuses fail to engage in a conscious dialogue with their own past and so risk becoming slaves to a dwindling repertoire of hackneyed traditions..."¹⁰

Additionally, as the linear national history sometimes overshadows the cultural and social context of circus, some contemporary circus companies deny any relationship between the historic or classic form, claiming a lineage of fifty years only.¹¹ Instead they ally themselves to a past more recent and relevant to their practice. More importantly, the British origin of this universal performance genre is neglected and the names of Philip and Patty Astley largely forgotten.

This essay aims to provide a curatorial overview of how the research that underpins *Circus! Show of Shows* – three interlocking exhibitions in three different venues – is revealing new stories, reinterpreting histories within a contemporary and local context for a modern audience and arguing for intersections and dialogue within the global circus family. Covering the place of women and the history of black performers, the life stories examined in detail relate to material exhibited in each specific venue and can be used as an additional layer through which to view the exhibitions. It seeks to act as a guide to further research and investigation and articulate the curatorial research and findings as part of the 250th anniversary. It attempts to bring together hidden histories that can inform and inspire because:

For the performer or producer of circus or of theatre, as for any creative arts practitioner, the past offers an inexhaustible supply of refreshing source-material to inform and inspire contemporary practice..."¹²



Carynville Invisible Circus Bristol 2008. Photograph: Richard Davenport

The First Lady of Circus

Much has been written about Philip Astley and two new biographies dedicated to him appeared in 2018.¹³ However, his wife Patty, who from the first advertisements is headlined alongside Philip as ‘Mr and Mrs Astley will perform’ and whom I have deliberately reintroduced into the text as part of a reshaping of the originating narrative of circus, has been previously written out of the historical record or reduced to a footnote.¹⁴ Described as either the wife of Philip or later the mother of John, with even her name and identity still debated by some historians, the real story of Patty Astley (nee Jones) equestrienne rider par excellence, first lady of circus and an accomplished performer deserves to be told - in her husband’s words... *“my wife who will finish the show”*.

Patty Astley was born Martha Mary Polly Jones in Flintshire in 1741. She married Philip Astley on 8 July 1765 at the Church of St George in Hanover Square, London. Details of her early life and family are being researched by the Philip Astley Project, but on the marriage license she is stated as a spinster of the parish of St George, with Philip listed as a gentleman of the Parish of Egham Surrey.¹⁵ In April 1767 John Conway Astley was born, the only child of Philip and Patty and the future star of the fledgling dynasty. Later circus chroniclers such as Thomas Frost or reminiscences such as Decastro mention Mrs Astley in passing, but details are lacking.¹⁶ The earliest newspaper advertisements of the Astley’s exhibition of horsemanship are in the British Library, many of them unattributed but some traceable to the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*.¹⁷ These accounts present a clear chronology of Patty’s development as a trick rider and an essential part of the story of early circus. The initial advertisements for Philip Astley’s ‘Activities on Horseback’, can be found in early April. By the end of May, the entertainments were being publicised as Mr and Mrs Astley, with detailed descriptions of Patty’s act from 30 May 1768:

*Mr and Mrs Astley ride two horses both together at one time, and yet they only have two to ride on – she leaps the bar between two horses at full speed she rides two horses with one foot in each saddle and fires a pistol – she leaps the bar on a single horse and she exhibits on full speed the different guards made use of by Elliots Prussians and Hellian Hussars... also the manner in which Elliots charged the French troops in Germany in the year 1761.*¹⁸

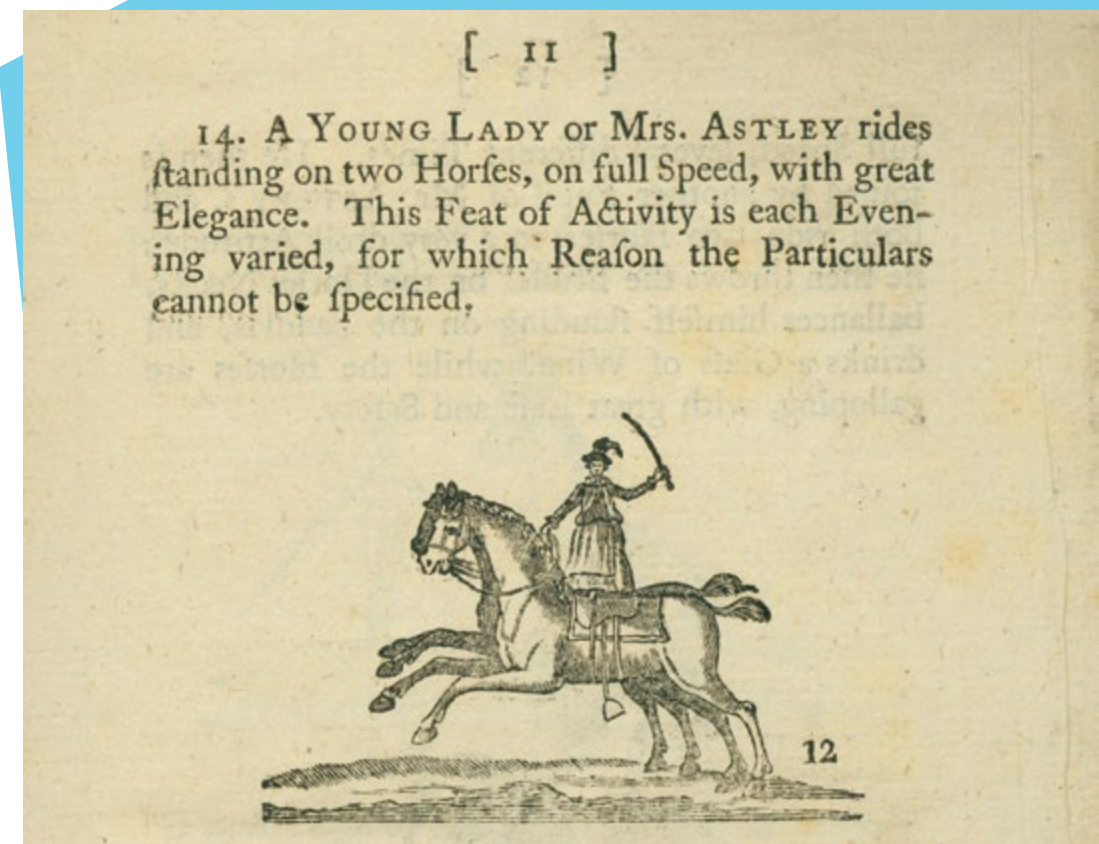
By 11 June the importance of Patty in the show is demonstrated by Astley’s ditty, reproduced by M. Willson Discher in 1937 but published in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, in which Astley concludes the show with...

*“When you have seen, all my bills expressed, My wife, to conclude, performs the rest...”*¹⁹

And what a conclusion it was, with Patty standing on her head and riding two horses:

*Mrs Astley the modern rider performs several feats, amongst which are, leaping the bar with one foot in each stirrup, riding two horses standing with one foot on each saddle...*²⁰

Over the next four years Patty’s act continued to develop and be an essential part of the show as the Astley’s moved to Westminster Bridge in 1769. Their son John joined the act, first riding alongside his mother from the age of five. On 3 June 1769, Philip presented what would become one of his most famous routines, the Tailor of Brentford, a routine soon copied by his rival Charles Hughes.²¹ As the new Amphitheatre was created, the show added apprentice rider Mr Griffiths and later his wife, acrobat Signor Colpi and Mr Merriman the clown.²² On 9 July 1770, Patty was awarded her first benefit performance, a theatrical practice where the takings of the evening are given solely to the named artist.²³



Woodcut of Mrs Astley taken from *A Short Description of the various Feats of Activity exhibited at Astley’s British Riding School, London, 1773*. Tyne & Wear Archives, Arthur Fenwick Collection, Accession 944/150.

An early handbill in the British Library from 1771 illustrated with a crude wood cut of Astley on two horses proclaims:

*Horsemanship. This and every day, at six o’clock in the evening (Sundays excepted) Mr. Astley, the original English warrior from Gen. Elliott’s Light Horse, and Mrs. Astley, will exhibit the most wonderful and surprising performance, ... on one, two, and three horses...*²⁴

In the spring of 1772 Patty and her husband were invited to perform for King Louis XV at his castle of Fontainebleau, an honour seized upon in advertisements for the 1772 season:

*Likewise Mrs Astley will display the same feats of Activity as she did before their majesties in Richmond Gardens, and likewise before the whole Court of France at the Grand Camp on Fontainebleau, being the only one of her sex that ever had that honour.*²⁵

The London papers were quick to bestow praise on Patty, especially important at a time when Charles Hughes and his wife were operating a rival concern less than a few hundred yards away, featuring Mrs Hughes, a Miss Huntley and Hughes’s eight year old sister.²⁶ Advertisements increased rapidly for Astley’s presentations and Patty’s trick riding, describing her skills with two horses, riding with her five year old son and concluding:

*Praise for Mrs Astley – what is more extraordinary is the various equilibriums of Mrs Astley we hear she was much admired when exhibited before her Majesties last summer but now she is greatly improved in several feats of her horsemanship...*²⁷

Patty appears in over fifty different references in the London papers in 1772. An illustration from the handbill dated Tuesday 14 September includes a female rider standing sideways on the saddle in a long dress and mentions Mrs Astley within the text.²⁸ This image of a female equestrienne on two horses also appears in a pamphlet from 1873 and is referred to in the text ‘as a young lady or Mrs Astley rides two standing on two horses on full speed with great Elegance. This Feat of Activity is each Evening varied, for which Reason the Particulars cannot be specified’. The numbering on both the handbill and the later pamphlet do not match the image description but do seem to illustrate a female rider namely Patty and a such is, the only known image of Mrs Astley.²⁹

The first appearance of Wildman's Bees is advertised on a handbill from 28 July.³⁰ A later advertisement from 3 August confirms the appearance of Mr Wildman 'between the acts of horsemanship' riding with 'a curios swarm of bees on his naked arms then on his head in the imitation of a bob wig'.³¹ By 17 August, Wildman's act had been adapted to incorporate Patty, now presented as 'Mrs Astley and Mr Wildman's Exhibition of Bees':

Mrs Astley and Mr Wildman between the several acts of horsemanship will ride with a swarm of bees in the following manner. Mrs Astley with a swarm of bees on her arm, imitating a lady's muff, then Mr Wildman will move them on his head and face in a most extraordinary manner.

The advertisement goes on to describe how...

*Mr and Mrs Astley with their son five year old and their three pupils will exhibit the whole of that amazing activity on one two three and four horses, so as not to be equalled by anyone in the world.*³²

Patty continued to develop her bee routine with Daniel Wildman expanding it to include three hives of bees and incorporating additional tricks into the performance. A description from Patty's Benefit performance in Dublin in 1774 reveals the additions:

*See, Mrs. ASTLEY, well known for her great Command over the Bees, will (this Day and To-morrow) exhibit with three Swarms of Bees, which will truly surprise the Spectators (she will command them her Arm, imitating Lady's Muff will order them to march across a Table, which they will absolutely a manner beyond Conception.*³³

Although Daniel Wildman is not listed in the show, he is still associated with the Astleys and produced a thirty-eight page pamphlet on the 'Management of Bees' printed by Philip Astley for the Dublin performances. The bibliographic detail reveals it was 'also sold by Mrs Astley, well known for her great command over the bees'.³⁴

As the Company toured the regions in 1775 and 1776 Patty continued to ride and 'command her bees'. Appearing in Norwich in January and October 1776, her return to London for the summer season saw Patty receiving another benefit show on 31 August.³⁵ However, the programme of entertainment in Astley's Amphitheatre was incorporating more floor acts, additional female riders, and the Young Astley as the star performer. Circus, although not yet presented under that name, was recognisably a genre in its own right. Patty's presence in the newspaper adverts becomes reduced or non-existent and the memory of her early performances and the role she played with her husband vanishes from the public conscious and from the historical narratives.

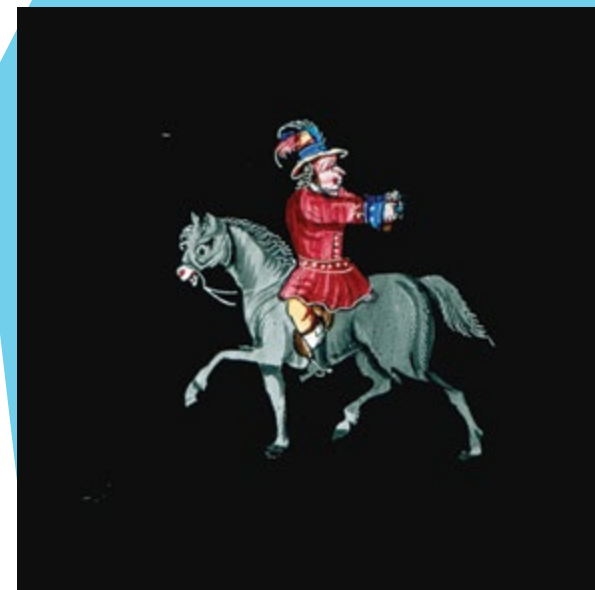
Despite the trials and tribulations of the later years, the loss and rebuild of Astley's Amphitheatre and a bitter rivalry with Charles Hughes, Philip and his wife prospered.

The earliest surviving eight page pamphlet 'A Short description of the Various Feats of Activity at Astley's British Riding School, Westminster', contains both his record in the management of the horse and a fully detailed illustrative description of his latest 'activities' as exhibited.³⁶ Much of this can be found within 'The Modern Riding Master' published two years later (afterwards expanded and republished as 'Astley's System of Equestrian Education' in 1801, dedicated to the Duke of York). In 1782 he appeared in both Brussels and Belgrade, and on 5 July, in Paris. He returned to Paris the following year to set up the 'Amphithéâtre Astley' on 16 October. The London Amphitheatre was rebuilt on three occasions with the final lavish one in Astley's lifetime a mainstay of the capital's entertainment culture.³⁷ As for Patty, in August 1803 the *London Gazette* published an announcement of her death.

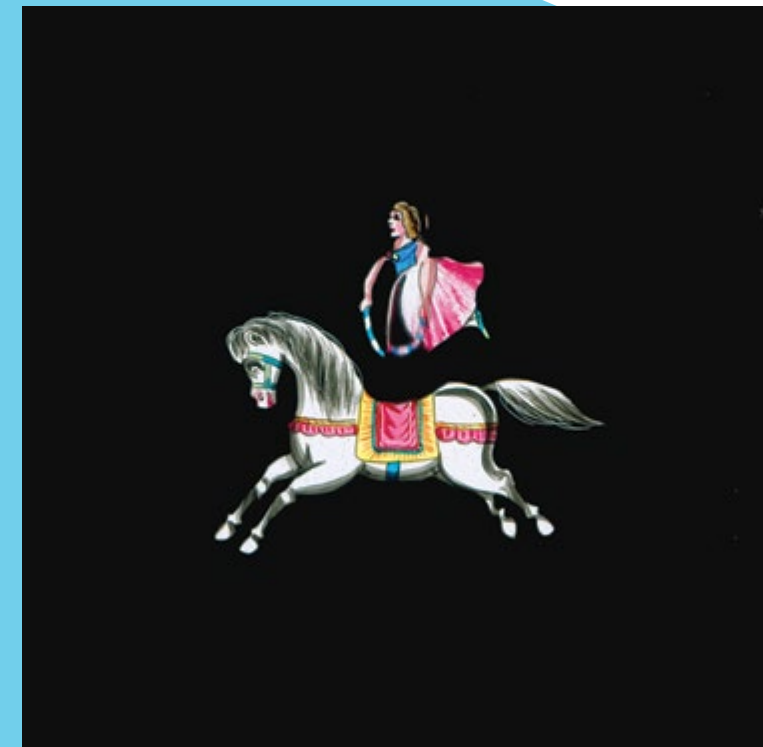
*'On Thursday last, after a long and severe illness, Mrs P Astley, Mother to John Astley, Esq. of Royal Amphitheatre, Westminster Bridge, died aged 61 years'.*³⁸

Her husband Philip followed her eleven years later; diagnosed with gout in the stomach, he died in 1814 aged 72 and was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery. He had spent forty-six years developing his art of equestrian entertainment and, 250 years on, it is still recognisable today. However, he did this with the support and participation of his wife, who for at least the first eight years was an equal partner and one of the shows early stars. Later chroniclers may have lessened her impact, but to her contemporaries she was described as such in the following way:

*"She with uncommon Art and Matchless Skill, Commands these Insects to obey her Will, With bees all others cruel means apply, She takes the honey but them death not destroy..."*³⁹



Female circus riders from hand painted magic lantern slides, c.1870s, Dick Moore Collection



By PARTICULAR DESIRE, a few Evenings longer.
ASTLEY'S Activity of HORSEMANSHIP, and the celebrated Mr. WILDMAN'S
EXHIBITION of B E E S, on Ho feback.
 Mr. WILDMAN, between the Acts of Horsemanship, will ride with a Swarm of B E E S on his Arm, then on his Head, which will imitate a Bob-Wig

ASTLEY'S Riding-School, Westminster-Bridge.
 TUESDAY, the 28th of JULY, 1772.
 Mr. ASTLEY had the Honour, last Night, to exhibit to upwards of Two Thousand of the Nobility, Gentry and Others, at whose earnest Request (with many more that could not possibly be admitted for Want of Room) he was prevailed upon to continue his Performance a few Evenings longer, as he found it impossible to satisfy the generous Public in so short a Time.
 Mr. and Mrs. A S T L E Y,
 Who had the Honour of exhibiting before their M A J E S T I E S of England and France, &c. &c. &c.
 With Master Astley, only five Years old, a young Lady nine Years old, &c. &c. &c.
 Will exhibit all their amazing FEATS, never yet attempted by any One in the World. Also the surprizing 'Little Animal, the Military Horse, whose Abilities far surpass Human Conception.
 They ride in the above, and so o her different Attitudes, with Elegance and Ease, and give general Satisfaction to every Beh older
 The Whole to conclude with the French Piece, &c. &c.
 * * Doors to be opened at half past FIVE, to begin at half past SIX o'Clock precisely. — Admittance on this Occasion as usual.

Illustrated handbill for Philip Astley, Tuesday 28 July 1772, London. British Library Collections accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

Women in Circus

Miss La La Olga Kaira at the Cirque Fernando 1880. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University.

Many thousands of women have entered the circus ring since Patty Astley first performed in 1768. One of the earliest female troupes were nine rope dancers who in 1786 were advertised as 'the Royal and only Troupe of Female Rope Dancers will perform their surprising exercises 'The Venetian Exercises of Strength''.⁴⁰ Circus acts developed in the nineteenth century and the standard programme included aerial performances such as tight rope and trapeze, equestrian and trick riding, along with ground acts such as acrobats incorporating such novelties as the perch act and breakaway ladder, juggling, and the staple of circus performance, the clown. Without exception these acts were also performed by women and by the late nineteenth century women aerial artists were among the highest paid of all circus performers.⁴¹

Circus was an arena where women could perform without fear and at a time when Victorian women were not allowed to play professional sport, the ring was an arena for daring trick riders such as Pauline Newsome and astonishing rope walkers and aerial wonders.⁴² It was not until 12 November 1859 at the Cirque Napoleon in Paris that Jules Leotard, a young French acrobat first performed a twelve minute routine involving a mid-air somersault and leapt from one trapeze to another.⁴³ His other great legacy is the costume still named after him, the leotard, an all-in-one knitted suit which was both aerodynamic and allowed greater freedom of movement.

Leotard's innovations transformed the circus with women aerialists in particular becoming highly sought. The aerialist troupes or the single strong woman speciality act were the most glamorous of all artists featured on the beautifully lithograph posters. None more so than Rossa Matilda Richter who, aged fourteen, was launched from a cannon at the Royal Aquarium in London in 1877 and became known throughout the world as Zazel the human cannonball. Performers such as Zazel, Pansy Chinery - the Human Arrow and Miss La La, executed their aerial skills with fearless grace

and recent scholarship has placed much attention on the significance of aerial performance in body identity and cultural norms. Interestingly, the first triple somersault was performed by a woman, fifteen year old Lena Jordan appearing with the Flying Jordans in a Sydney theatre in May 1897, but it was only recently that her place in circus history has been recognised.⁴⁴ The triple somersault remains



Female artists Lord George Sanger's Circus masquerading as wild west performers, c. 1887 NFCA University of Sheffield Library.





Poster for Shelby, Pullman & Hamilton's 8 Shows: Zazel Cannon Feat, Strobridge Lithograph Co. 1881. The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art Tibbals Circus Collection Florida.

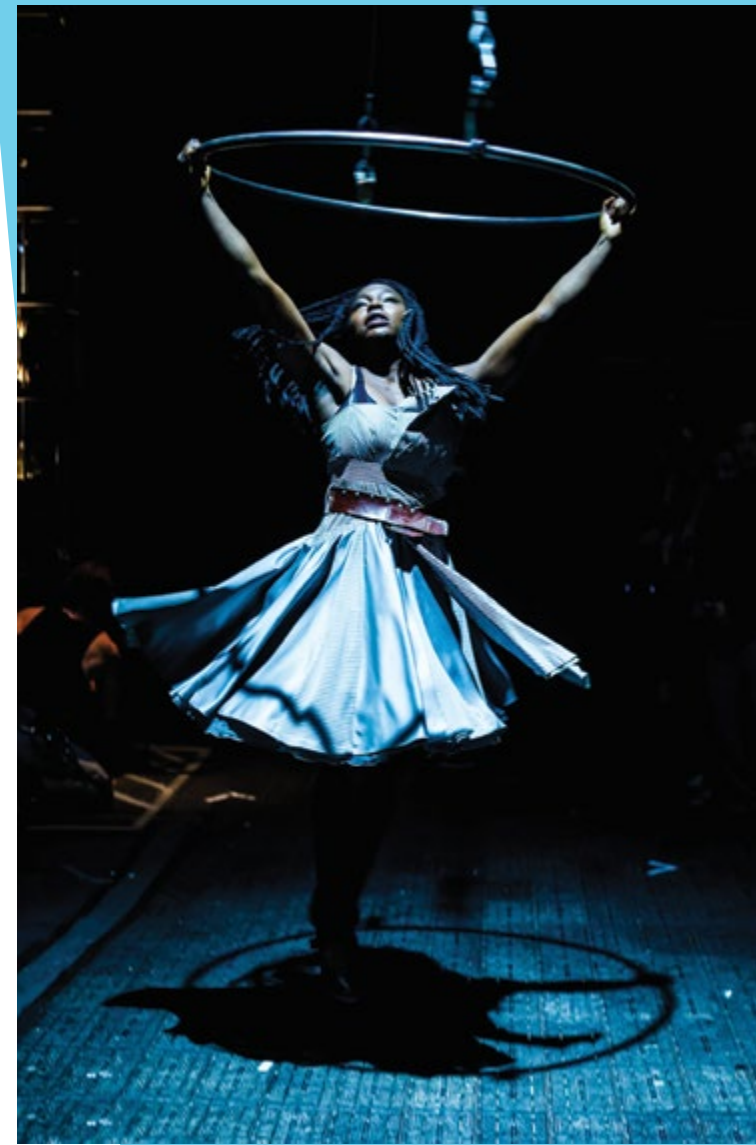
the water mark of an exceptional act but it is her male counterparts who are more widely known and celebrated.⁴⁵ This fascination for the body in flight continued throughout the twentieth century. Lillian Leitzel was the highest paid performer on the Ringling Bros Circus in the 1920s and her death in Berlin was met with widespread sorrow from press and public alike. Aerial performance is still the mainstay of both vintage and contemporary circus, with many different routines such as the Cloud Swing, Aerial Perch, Aerial Hoop, Silks and Straps among the numerous ways that artists challenge for supremacy of the air. One of the most spectacular contemporary aerial ballets is the beautiful *Place des Anges*, originally created by Stephane Gerard and the legendary Pierre Bidot, performed as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad and Hull City of Culture 2016.

The circus provided an opportunity and a refuge from normal conventions where limbs could be shown and bodies could be athletic. Women flew through the air, straddled their steeds, tamed wild beasts and achieved feats of astonishing bravery and skill.⁴⁶ These sisters of the sawdust challenged conventions and pushed boundaries, with one troupe described by the Coventry newspapers in the 1850s, as being:

'as graceful as they were disgraceful!'

Their narratives demonstrate the range and diversity of women's performances across the centuries. Navigating between the sauciness of Adah Menkeh, who shocked London in 1865 with her bare limbs when appearing as Mazeppa, through to the gracefulness and respectability of later artists catering for the more refined middlebrow, these stories and the impact they had are hidden from conventional narratives and the range of roles occupied in the circus arena is often overlooked. From the bravery of the Lion Queens, the mesmerising talent of fakir and animal mesmerist, Koringa, and the comedic dexterity of lady clown Lulu Adams, all aspects of circus performance were presented by women and their stories are only now being told, critiqued or fully researched in the context of both circus and feminist history.

Circus performers were drawn from many traditions, nationalities and ethnicities, with pleasure gardens and travelling fairs providing the artists at the start of the nineteenth century. But what place did circus in the United Kingdom hold for people of colour and black performers? Was it, in the words of Thomas Horne writing in 1905, a place where there was 'no colour line' and with the only 'test being ability'?⁴⁷



Blaze Tarsha in *No Fit State's Bianco*, Turning Savage, 2016. Photograph: Richard Davenport



Lion Queen from Hugues Le Roux, *Le jeux du cirque et le vie foraine*, Paris, 1889. NFCA University of Sheffield Library.



Postcard of circus act from early 1900s. NFCA University of Sheffield Library



Lulu and Albertino illustrative postcard c. 1935. NFCA University of Sheffield Library.

Black Circus Performers in the 19th Century

The story of black circus performers being accepted within the camaraderie of the ring is one that is difficult to trace and identify within a profession where names were often non de plumes and biographies an exaggerated or often fantastical version of reality. Additionally, scholarship on the circus is dominated by the North American manifestation and its associated midway that combined both European traditions, the circus and the sideshow into one amalgamated attraction complete with racial stereotyping and freak-show narratives.⁴⁸ European and British circus history also has a problematic past with colonial narratives framing later performers of Black artists within ethnographic exhibitions.⁴⁹

Scholarship is unearthing stories which demonstrate circus as a diverse arena where people of colour presented their skills. Within the archival record, small but vital scraps of information are still being retrieved with photographs, first-hand accounts and posters providing clues to a larger body of knowledge waiting to be discovered.

The most common activity associated with black performers was animal acts, especially lion taming and many names can be found in the historical record.⁵⁰ Maccomo (1836-1871) of Mander's Menagerie fame and Sargona Alicamoussa are two of the most famous.⁵¹ A new story is that of Madame Salva, who appeared with Wombwell's menagerie for over eight years appearing prominently on a poster from 1887 held by the Circus World Museum in Baraboo. It reveals the existence of women of colour performing in other arenas within the circus.⁵²

Other occupations include Herr Christopher, a native of Swansea, described as one of the finest rope dancers in the world in the 1850s, who appeared at Astley's and Carlos Trower, the African Blondin whose engagements included Raikes Hall, Blackpool and many others in the 1870s.⁵³ The field of equestrianism includes Joseph Hillier, who after working solely for Andrew Ducrow from the 1820s unsuccessfully attempted to continue the company after Ducrow's death, but must be credited as the first black circus proprietor in the United Kingdom. Also the remarkable Pablo Paddington, a native of Cork whose skills included horsemanship, dancing with skipping ropes, leaping handkerchiefs,

and incredible feats on the Corde Volante or Flying Rope!⁵⁴ Their lives and others such as Eph Thompson, the American elephant trainer who triumphed in Paris, London and Blackpool, demonstrate how circus presented an opportunity and escape from prevailing attitudes of gender and racism.

It is also important to understand the period in which black artists were performing and to separate later accounts from contemporary records where, in the case of some of the earlier performers, the colour of their skin is barely mentioned. The period between 1840 and 1870 should be looked at in the context of the abolition of slavery within the British Empire and the period from the late 1870s when colonial discourse, racial superiority and the concept of Englishness was recast.⁵⁵ As Jeffrey Green has noted for the Edwardian period:

Hundreds of black people worked in Edwardian Britain's entertainment industry.

The presence of black Victorian circus performers is equally apparent.⁵⁶ Their activities are not restricted to animal training but cover the spread of acts performing at the time – aerial, equestrian and animal training, and although described as 'black or coloured' have a range of countries and ethnicities far more complex. Nationalities of the performers range from a North American elephant trainer who achieved fame in the United Kingdom and Europe but not in his country of birth, and both male and female performers who were of African extraction but born in Europe, Ireland or Britain.



Unknown black performer with Lord George Sanger's Circus in the 1880s. NFCA, University of Sheffield Library

Bell's Circus Town Moor, June 15 1835 featuring Mr Arlo Pablo Paddington. Fenwick Collection Tyne and Wear Archives.

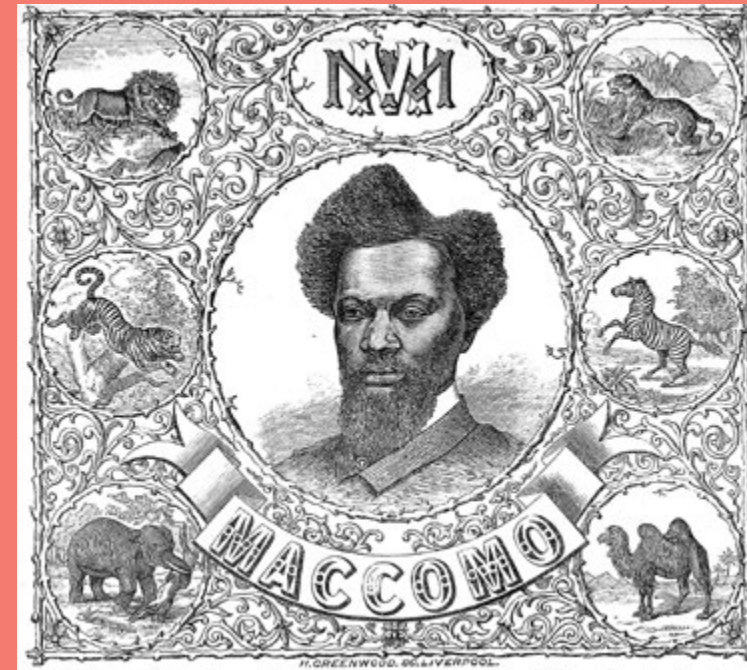


Illustration taken from the Illustrated and descriptive catalogue of Manders' Grand National Star Menagerie, with life and adventures of Martini Maccomo, the African lion king by E. Stevenson. Liverpool, H. Greenwood, printer, Steam Printing House, 1870.

Cabinet Card of Sargona Alicamoussa c.1890. The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art Tibbals Circus Collection Florida.



Miss La La – Olga Albertina Brown

The marvellous artist that was Miss La La was captured in images by Edmond Desbonnet, the father of physical culture in France, whose 1911 publication contains the only contemporary biographical details and photographs.⁵⁷ He marvels at the size of her biceps (38.5 cm), her ability to do a two handed press with a man weighing seventy kilos hanging from her jaws and her incredible canon act. But it is Degas who immortalised her, capturing her strength, poise and sheer athleticism. *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando* (1879) by Edgar Degas is arguably one of the most famous paintings of the genre. Acquired by the National Gallery in 1925 the work portrays the astonishing performance of aerialist, acrobat and circus artist Miss La La suspended at a great height from a rope clenched between her teeth up in the upper echelons of the famous Parisian circus building.

But who was Miss La La and how does her story and this painting in many ways contradict the stereotypes and clichés of how circus is both represented and perceived today and historically?

Degas captured the star of the Parisian circus in over twenty sketches, drawings and pastels, brought together by the Morgan Library & Museum in New York in 2013 in the exhibition *Degas, Miss La La, and the Cirque Fernando*.⁵⁸ For perhaps the first time, the true story of the performer within the painting was revealed, albeit beautifully framed in the context of art rather than performance history. By painting an astonishing female performer of colour, Degas was presenting a visual reality of the circus of his day where women were the stars of the show. This is one that has been forgotten and largely overlooked until a new generation of female scholars such as Peta Tait, Helen Stoddard and Janet Davis have reaffirmed the importance of gender and race in the development of nineteenth century circus. Olga's race and skill are clearly outlined by Degas and provide a vital clue to the existence of black performers in nineteenth century circus.

A black female body in exceptional action at height momentarily outmanoeuvred its low social positioning. At least during aerial performance La La's black womanhood could be esteemed'.⁵⁹

Miss La La, a woman of mixed race born to a black father and white mother is one of many hidden histories that can be found within the circus arena and challenges our view of how circus developed,

Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando, Hilaire Germaine Edgar Degas, 1879. National Portrait Gallery.



what it represented then and still represents today. Miss La La was the stage name of Olga Albertina Brown, born in Stettin, Prussia (modern day Poland) on 21 April 1858 to Wilhelm Brown and

Marie Christine Borchardt. She joined the circus at the age of nine. Some authors believe that her entry at that age demonstrates that her parents were also performers, but this has not been proven. What is known is that from an early age she was proficient on the high wire, the trapeze and the flying cord and was one of many strong women and iron jaw performers prominent in the 1870s.⁶⁰ Her signature feat included hanging from a trapeze upside down with a cannon weighing 150 pounds hanging from her teeth which was then fired. Although other performers copied or presented variations of this sensational feat none achieved the fame of Olga.⁶¹ She performed at the Westminster Aquarium in London from February to March 1879 and at the Cirque Fernando where Degas executed his famous painting, and where it was reported that La La eclipsed all previous acts. She also appeared at the Folies Bergere (a poster was done of her performance in 1880 by Cheret) and the Hippodrome Au Pont De L'Alma in 1880 as part of the Kaira troupe for which Emile Levy designed the poster.⁶²

Her other names included: Olga, Olga the Mulatto, Olga the Negress, Venus of the Tropics, The Cannon Woman, The African Princess, The Black Venus and, with her partner Theophilia Szterker, as part of the Kaira Troupe. In the early 1880s, again with Theophilia, she formed an acrobatic duo named the Black and White Butterflies - Olga and Kaira. A series of posters for Olga and Kaira show their international reach covering France and Spain, with the contrast in their ethnicities clearly presented.⁶³ Their British debut in October 1883 at the Royal Aquarium drew much press attention and the nature of the advertisements emphasises the contrast in racial language:

Olga and Kaira – a pretty Circassian and an equally fascinating African acrobat beauty are also announced as having been persuaded to appear in public.⁶⁴

There is no mention of the famous cannon act that made Miss La La an international star and their roles seem to be equally billed and publicised:

Olga and Kaira the grandest female artists in the world – see Kaira's headlong plunge and Olga's long swing in mid air.⁶⁵

After a two month engagement at the Royal Aquarium they appeared at the Canterbury Theatre of Varieties, Westminster Bridge for the Christmas season from 24 December onwards.⁶⁶ They travelled internationally appearing in Paris in August 1884 at the Cirque d'Ete where they were described as 'exceeding in daring anything accomplished by the renowned Leotard'. The sexualised multiple identities that personified the publicity of Miss La La are no longer apparent in the publicity or press notices, Olga is referred to as a woman of colour



Poster for Black and White Butterflies Olga and Kaira. Madrid c. 1880s

or a beautiful African and the posters that survive reflect this change in representation.⁶⁷ Appearances at Circo De Price in Madrid, Cirque Rancy in Paris, Circus Wolf in Germany followed until Kaira's tragic death from a fall on 21 June 1888.⁶⁸ In October 1888 she met and married Emmanuel Woodman, an African-American contortionist, in Heligoland and gave birth to their daughter Rose Eddie Woodson on 3 March 1894 in London. Olga became part of a new troupe, Three Keziahs, and appeared with her husband on the variety circuit worldwide, including Australia, New Zealand. They settled in Belgium where Manuel managed the Palais d'Ete circus in Brussels until his death in 1915. The final resting place of the extraordinary artist Olga Woodson nee Brown is not known, other than an application for US passport in 1919.⁶⁹ What we do know is that the artistry portrayed so magnificently by Degas was only one aspect of her life and career.

Pablo Fanque

Pablo Fanque, ‘late of Pablo Fanque’s Fair’ is the only circus owner to be immortalised in a Beatles lyric. *Being for the Benefit for Mr Kite* was inspired by a poster purchased by John Lennon relating to a circus in Rochdale presented by Pablo Fanque in the 1850s. The true life and adventures of Pablo Fanque showman, circus proprietor and equestrian was brought to wider public attention by circus historian Dr John Turner, whose articles and research on Pablo form the basis for all later scholarship.⁷⁰

Born William Darby in Norwich in 1810 to John Stamp of African origin and Mary Stamp, he was apprenticed to William Batty at an early age. He first trained as an acrobat and aged thirteen was described as the Flying Mercury. Later, his act would culminate with a leap over a Post Chaise! Two of the earliest posters from his time at Batty’s Circus survive, the earlier from Cork in 1836 and the later Saturday 8 September 1838 in the Tyne and Wear Archives. However, it was in his later career as an equestrian that he achieved lifelong fame. Operating in the period following the abolition of slavery and before colonial discourse presented a narrow definition of Englishness, his acceptance in both circus and mainstream Victorian society appears exceptional.

From 1841 onwards Pablo progressed to become one of the most successful circus proprietors of the age, a celebrated and gifted equestrian who operated circuses in a loose association with W. F Wallett, the famous Victorian clown, throughout the North of England, Ireland, Scotland and the Midlands. At the height of his fame in Astley’s Amphitheatre in 1847 he is described:

‘as an artist of colour and his act the ‘hit of the evening, never seen surpassed or even equalled’.

This reference to his race is one of the very rare occurrences in contemporary accounts and his ethnicity is seldom mentioned in the many hundreds

of newspaper reports covering his circus. His early life and career was marred by tragedy with the death of his first wife Suzannah in Leeds in 1848 when the galleries in his own circus collapsed on 19 March. His second marriage to Elizabeth, daughter of George and Martha Corker, licensees of the ‘Bull and Yoke’ in Sheffield, occurred when Pablo’s company was at the Alexander Theatre, next door to hostelry. The marriage resulted in two additional children to add to his son Lionel. Some of the greatest names in circus appeared with Pablo Fanque and at his height his circuses, sometimes juggling double or multiple companies in the same year, in both tenting and wooden venues, were among the finest in the land.

Appearing in Sheffield on a number of occasions from 1847 as well as the North East and his home town of Norwich, the 1840s and 1850s were a period of great success for him, operating two parallel shows in Sheffield, Liverpool or Manchester. After successful seasons in the North of England, Pablo travelled back to the city of his birth with his Royal Circus and enjoyed successful tenting runs from 29 December 1848 to March 1849.⁷¹ Posters from Norwich reveal a diverse bill of entertainment including an Athenian equestrian pageant of male and female equestrians on 18 Palfries.⁷² By the 1860s, a decline in prosperity resulted in periods of bankruptcy and selling of his equipment and circus. In April 1863, he took a short engagement as manager of the Tyne Concert Hall in Newcastle, which had been converted into a circus. Despite the serious nature of his finances he was still hailed as the ‘renowned Pablo Fanque’ by the local press and toured parts of the North East with his ‘Alhambra Circus’.⁷³

The following years saw his circumstances sink dramatically. His death in poverty at the Britannia Inn, Stockport in May 1871 was greeted with widespread sorrow and his funeral in Leeds, where he was interred in the grave of his first wife, was a spectacular occasion. The story of Pablo at first appears to reveal a time of greater tolerance where ability was the key to his success and his race never commented on. Interestingly it is only in later anecdotal accounts by contemporaries published after his death where such problematic descriptions occur. Whilst praising Fanque, Frost the chronicler of *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*, refers to him as ‘dusky’ and his closest friend and colleague Wallett the Clown also references his ethnicity in what we would now perceive in a derogatory manner.⁷⁴ However, although the language is problematic the sentiment regarding his ability was universal. This well-loved purveyor of public entertainment was in the words of the Rev Thomas Horne writing in 1905:

A genius, both in the training of humans and dumb beasts, many were the splendid equestrians he trained and great was his power with horses and other animals.



Pablo Fanque's Circus Royal Victoria Gardens, Norwich December 28, 29 and 30 1848. Norfolk Heritage Centre



Final thoughts

The three performers I have highlighted demonstrate how the circus provided an area where exceptional skill could prevail and flourish despite the prevailing attitudes of the time. From Patty Astley, the first woman to perform feats of horsemanship in a circus ring, to the skill and artistry of black performers such as Miss La La and Pablo Fanque, their stories are remarkable.

This is not to say that the history of circus is not affected by colonial representations of people of colour and American circus history in particular has a very different legacy and story. Circus is shaped and influenced by the socio-cultural context that it was and is part of and very few women made the leap from artist to producer or owner over the past three centuries. It is only with the development of contemporary companies since the 1970s that women producers are becoming more visible.

Circus from its inception has operated both within the mainstream of the society it interacted with, but also provided an arena for those marginalised by conventional attitudes to shine and flourish. Over the past 250 years, innovation, reinvention, reform and rebirth have been the key themes of circus and, as a performance genre, it has evolved and developed with a trajectory that is both linear and, befitting its origin, cyclical. Aspects of its history will need to be constantly researched contextualised and re-examined and the archival record will continue to bring new stories that helps us understand all aspects of its 250 year history in all its diversity and complexity.

Farewell Benefit for Mr Pablo Fanque
Saturday 22 July 1854, Sheffield.
Sheffield Local Studies and Archives.



Vilhelmina Sinervo, LEXICON, No Fit State Circus.
Photograph: Richard Davenport.

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¹ Of the many 1000s of books published on circus the date of 1768 is universally accepted with discussions relating to the month, or date of its actual birth. Marius Kwint’s work on early Georgian Circus discusses in detail the competitors to Astley and similar types of performances at the time which evolved into what we now consider to be circus.

² See Circus 250 a year-long celebration of the anniversary of Circus led by Dr Dea Birkett www.circus250.org

³ Dominique Jando *Philip Astley the Horseman who invented the Circus*, p. 33.

⁴ Individual national histories mark the date of the introduction of circus to their respective countries, see Pascal Jacob, Circus for the development in France, Dominique Jandon’s www.circopedia.org for a detailed historiography of circus see Tools Stott they all trace back to Philip Astley and 1768.

⁵ Peta Tait, p.6.

⁶ See Helen Stoddard *Rings of Desire*, on Circus as ‘an exceptional human physical achievement’ p 4. And Marius Kwint ‘The modern circus is, in essence, the theatre of various physical feats and marvels, usually taking place in a ring approximately 13 metres (42 feet) in diameter in Marius Kwint, ‘Circus’ in David Wiles (ed), *Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 210 – 226 (211).

⁷ See Circus 250 for range of events in 2018 www.circus250.com

⁸ See M Willson Disher, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, which although an important book still presents this patriarchal nationalistic overview.

⁹ See Helen Stoddard, p. 1-2, for a good overview of the foundation myths of circus, and the uncritical approach taken by subsequent chroniclers. This is standard entertainment hyperbole and like Buffalo Bill Cody a century later, Astley is actually shaping and creating his own foundation myth as the actual show is being created and formed to add legitimacy and gravitas and romance to the birth of his show as opposed to that of his rivals.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 210

¹¹ Originally Crying out Loud <http://cryingoutloud.org/about/circus-timeline/> accessed 1 September 2018 allied itself to a history unconnected to traditional or historical circus forms going back to 1968, but recently celebrated through Circus Samplers – a programme of events celebrating ‘250 years Philip and Patty Astley first pioneered Circus in London’ <https://www.somersetshouse.org.uk/whats-on/circus-sampler> accessed September 3 2018.

¹² Kwint, loc. cited, p.211.

¹³ Dominique Jando, *Philip Astley The Horseman who invented the Circus* and Steve Ward, *Father of the Modern Circus*, Billy Buttons, *The Life & Times of Philip Astley*.

¹⁴ For ongoing discussions about the identity of Mrs Astley see Dominique Jando, p. 209 where he argues that it is not conclusive that the argument for Charlotte Taylor being Mrs Astley as opposed to Patty Jones is quite plausible.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Andrew Van Buren of the Philip Astley Project <http://www.philipastley.org.uk/> for information pertaining to Patty Astley.

¹⁶ Thomas Frost, p. 19 and Charles Dibdin the Younger, p. 20.

¹⁷ Astley’s Cuttings from Newspapers 1768 – 1856, held by the British Library contain important descriptions and details of the early shows but some are missing both key dates and titles of original newspaper.

¹⁸ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Monday, May 30, 1768; Issue 12244. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*. See *Tuesday May 31 for same description*.

¹⁹ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Saturday, June 11, 1768; Issue 12254. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*. See also Willson Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth*, (1937) for same verse.

²⁰ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Saturday, August 13, 1768; Issue 12 308. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*.

²⁴ Handbill for Philip Astley, London July 28th 1771, British Library Collections, accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

²⁵ *Public Advertiser* (London, England), Wednesday, April 22, 1772; Issue 11692. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*. See also *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Friday, April 24, 1772 description of Patty’s act in front of their majesties.

²⁶ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Monday, May 18, 1772; for details of Mrs Hughes display of trick riding where she also shoots a pistol and performs a very similar routine to that of Patty.

²⁷ *London Evening Post* (London, England), April 30, 1772 - May 2, 1772.

²⁸ Handbill for Horsemanship and Activity by Mr and Mrs Astley, Riding School Westminster, 14 September 1772, British Library Collections, accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

²⁹ Philip Astley, ‘A Short Description of the various Feats of Activity exhibited at Astley’s British Riding School’, London 1773, Tyne & Wear Archives, Arthur Fenwick Collection, Accession 944/150.

³⁰ Illustrated handbill for Philip Astley, Tuesday 28 July 1772, London, British Library Collections accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

³¹ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (London, England), Monday, August 3, 1772; Issue 997. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*.

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³³ *Saunders’s News-Letter*. From Friday May the 6th, to Monday May the 9th, 1774

³⁴ Daniel Wildman *A complete guide for the management of bees, throughout the year*. National Library of Ireland, 1774.

³⁵ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (London, England), Wednesday, August 28, 1776; Issue 2269. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*. Then again August 31st 1776 For the Benefit of Mrs Astley.

³⁶ Philip Astley, A Short Description of the various Feats of Activity exhibited at Astley’s British Riding School , London 1773, Tyne & Wear Archives, Arthur Fenwick Collection, Accession 944/150.

³⁷ Richard D. Altick Shows of London.

³⁸ *London Chronicle*, 3 August, 1893. I am indebted to Andrew Van Buren for supplying these details.

³⁹ *The Norfolk Chronicle*, 26 October, 1776, p. 2.

⁴⁰ The Thomas Horne, 1905 citation is found in many articles on Pablo for details see John Turner, *Pablo Circus Black Circus Proprietor*, p.38.

⁴¹ Young Astley, Royal Grove, Westminster-Bridge. This evening, young Astley will display his astonishing equestrian exercises, in three parts, on several horses, among which are his still vaulting. London: H. Pace, printer, No 56, Borough High Street, 1786.

⁴² Tait p. 2.

⁴³ John Turner, *Victorian Arena*, for biographies of the many women performers active at this time.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, p. 94 & 102.

⁴⁵ Tait, p. 57-8.

⁴⁶ Peta Tait Janet Davies are just two of the feminist circus historians who are challenging perceptions in relation to its history.

⁴⁷ See Hilda Nelson, and Sakina Hughes work on images of African American artists in the circus.

⁴⁸ The Thomas Horne, 1905 citation is found in many articles on Pablo for details see John Turner, *Pablo Circus Black Circus Proprietor*, p.38.

⁴⁹ Sakina Hughes.

⁵⁰ Bernth Lindfors, for a discussion of black performers within the freak and side show exhibitions.

⁵¹ See for example <https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/black-lion-tamers.html>

⁵² See Jeffrey Green’s website for detailed articles and these and many more black fairground and circus performers who were active in the entertainment industry at the time. www.jeffreygreen.co.uk

⁵³ Red printed letterpress poster, for the real Bostock and Wombwell Menagerie, 1887, advertising Miss Salva the Beautiful Sable Lion Queen, Circus World Museum.

⁵⁴ For information pertaining to Carlos Trower see <https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/carlos-trower.html>

⁵⁵ Van Hare, *Fifty Years a Showman* p. 36-37.

⁵⁶ James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society 1555-1945*.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Green, p 80.

⁵⁸ Desbonnet Les Rois cited in Wolk-Simon et al Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando.

⁵⁹ Wolk-Simon et al, *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*.

⁶⁰ Tait, p. 45.

⁶¹ Tait, pp 41-45.

⁶² Linda Simon, (2015).

⁶³ Jacobs, p. 102.

⁶⁴ See Biblioteca Nazionale de Espana, Circo Price Poster of Olga and Kaira, c. 1880s.

⁶⁵ *The Sportsman Saturday* 13 October 1883.

⁶⁶ *Sporting Life*, 14 November 1883.

⁶⁷ *Hendon and Finchley Times* 29 December 1883, *Essex Herald*, 31 December 1883.

⁶⁸ John Turner’s Dictionary of British Circus Biography Database held in the National Fairground and Circus Archive, University of Sheffield Library.

⁶⁹ Details of Olga and Manuel marriage can be found at <https://thecircusgirlblog.wordpress.com/tag/olga-kaira/> accessed 17 August 2018 but certain facts appear misleading for example the three children and their association as the Keziahs when it is clear from newspaper reports that this company was exhibiting in the 1890s with Olga part of the troupe. For details of the genealogical records of Olga and Manuel see www.genealogyfreelancers.com file posted on Olga Kaira accessed 18 August 2018.

⁷⁰ John Turner, Pablo Fanque, pp 20-38.

⁷¹ See Gareth H Davies, Pablo Fanque and the Victorian Circus for details of his upbringing in Norwich and subsequent shows and appearances in the city. See also Pablo Fanque posters held by Norfolk History Centre.

⁷² Pablo Fanque’s Circus Royal Victoria Gardens Norwich, 28th, 29th and 30th, 1848. Norfolk Heritage Centre.

⁷³ <https://www.labonche.net/2016/06/pablo-fanques-visits-to-the-north-east/> for details accessed 11 August 2018.

⁷⁴ See W.F Wallett, p. 118.

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