PILLOWNOTES
by Maura Keefe

The PillowNotes series comprises essays commissioned from our Scholars-in-Residence to provide audiences with a broader context for viewing dance.

Circa’s works are embodied explanations of physics—such as balance and counterclockwise, pressure, gravity, momentum, and inertia. Bodies at rest, bodies in motion. The performers are not dispassionate scientists, costly observing the outcomes of experimentation. They are active investigators of the theoretical; the best scientists, they do not seek to revisit the known, rather to explore the unknown. No white lab coats of the scientist, but no circus trappings either. There’s no clown makeup, no top hat and wand, nor any sparkling costumes to lead us into a fantasy world. On the contrary, these performers are stripped down—in trousers and button-down shirts, or muted leotards and bare chests. No matter what these performers are doing, they make no attempt to hide their human-ness. A woman dangles from the ceiling. Moving up and tumbling down. Caught. Tumble again. Upside down, now sideways, now supported only by one arm.

Circa, the company, is based in Brisbane, Australia, and led by artistic director Yaron Lifschitz. Lifschitz, who trained as a director and has worked in opera, theater, and physical theater, found his theatrical home with circus, stating that his “passion is creating works of philosophical and poetic depth from the traditional languages of circus.” Different paths of training, seemingly as different as they are, have shaped the Circa performers. In some expected ways, some less so. Training in gymnastics and acrobatics is to use, as are backgrounds in break dancing, synchronized swimming, and modern dance. Skills on a trampoline serve alongside excellence in handstands and on teeterboards.

Circa performers engage in silent conversations: “If I arch my back in an exaggerated manner while standing upright, does the back of my polyavic girde become a surface on which you can stand?” one asks another. “I can stand on it, sure, but I think I can also fall backwards out of a handstand and meet your pelvis with mine,” says a second. Their pelvises meet. Hair tangling as they curl their limbs. “Can I launch myself at you and use you as a springboard?” Feet hit chest with a solid thump. “What happens if we both fling ourselves into the air? Who will catch us?” Midair catch and fall, spring up and do it again.

Circa made its Pillow debut in 2012 with the eponymous CIRCA, returning in 2014 with the work simply known as S 6 W. What Will Have Been, again, they bring no elephants, no clowns, no ringmaster, but this time a violinist who joins them onstage. In an interview with Dance Informa, Lifschitz talked about the relationship between circus and music, starting off with the observation that, “There’s almost always music present in circus, but it’s often not thought about very much. Thinking back to my earliest works with music, I was very aware of the relationship and what the music was doing.” What Will Have Been is one of three works thus far that Circa performs to Bach. For Lifschitz, it makes sense as “circuit and classical music seem to work really well together because there’s a kind of mutual respect for each other’s virtuosity, but it’s so different.”

Oh, just done up in the wings.

Despite Lifschitz’s current interest in classical music, he thinks that circus performances are essentially different from the classics, stating in the same Dance Informa interview, “For me, circus exists for its musical heart, which is more like jazz. Like Lifschitz’s performers’ creative exploration, the connection to jazz suggests the importance of improvisation and play, and investigation, as well as risk taking, without absolute trust in the ensemble.

Over here, a woman holds herself actively still. She, too, is in a handstand, balanced on the hands of a man who seems to be resting flat on his back. She reaches up through her pointed feet toward the ceiling and presses down into his hands. She doesn’t speak, but he knows. He sits up. She presses down in encouragement. He shifts to his knees. She lengthens through her spine impelling him upward. He stands up to his feet. She reaches even further down to him and up from him.

Circa strips away our expectations of the circus, and even the circus as it relates to dance. Once they’ve removed all of the expected trappings of the circus, what’s left? What Circa keeps is their starting point, which is simply the human body. They trust the body’s ability to make meaning, grounding their work most assuredly in the world of concert dance.

Two people doing an. A woman launches from nowhere visible into the space and then slides on her belly. A man tumbles floorward, bouncing softly off his open shoulder, rebounding and tumbling sideways. Another man balances, and another is moving, stretching and yielding. On the edge of control. Sometimes they catch each other. Often, they glance at each other. They always look out for each other.

“We’re in this together.”

“Trust your partner,” you say.

“I promise I’ll be there for you.” I’ll be there even if it was unplanned.”

What Will Have Been, what is Circa. Physically improbable, deeply human.

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Dance writer Maura Keefe has led audience programs at various venues around the country and is the Associate Director of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Massachusetts, College Park, where she was nominated as the Dorothy G. Madden Professor of Dance in 2018.
COMPANY

Director of Festival 2018: the arts and cultural program of the 21st Commonwealth Games. In 2018, a Litschf directed four new Circa creations, and directed a new production of Madame Butterfly which opened in Lisbon at the Teatro Nacional de São Carlos.

Libby McComb (Associate Director) works across disciplines as a designer, choreographer, director, and performer and has an Associate Degree (Dance) from the Queensland University of Technology. McDonnell has co-directed and been resident choreographer and designer for Blue Room Theatre Company. As Associate Director with Circa, McDonnell has designed costumes for all of Circa’s major productions since 2010 and has show directed and managed tours in Australia and abroad.

Hamish McCourt (Performer) is an acrobat and musician. He began his circus journey at Cirkl on Adelaide when he was eight years old, and since graduating from the performance program he’s been creating new work, touring nationally and internationally. McCourt has been focusing on fusing his circus training and musicality, he contributed to a new work by a choreographer and performer, and has been given the opportunity to be the very first member of fast track, a program designed for young and aspiring performers within Circa. In 2011, O’Brien left Circa Zoo and fast track to become a full-time ensemble member. Since then, O’Brien has toured numerous shows in various countries and participated in the creation of many new Circa works. One of her highlights was performing Wunderkammer at the Sydney Opera House.

Lachlan O’Dell (Violinist) is a Sydney-based violinist/violist who regularly performs throughout Australia and abroad as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral leader. Ensembles with which he appears on a regular basis include the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Sydney, Melbourne, and Queensland Symphony Orchestras, Orchestra Victoria, the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (as guest Artist). As a soloist, O’Dell has appeared at major concert halls throughout Europe and Australia, performed live broadcasts for ABC Classic FM, 3MBS, WQXR New York, and SR2 Swiss radio, and has performed concert with the Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra, Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria, and ACO Collective, the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra’s regional touring ensemble. He has appeared at major international festivals including the Lucerne Festival (Switzerland), the Aldeburgh Festival (U.K.), Pisteur d’Etat (France), the Melbourne Festival, the Queensland Music Festival, and the Musica Viva Chamber Music Festival (Australia). In 2017, he performed solo works of J.S. Bach and H.J. Biber at festivals and conferences. He is currently Artistic Director of Circa Contemporary Circus, a production by Ensemble Offspring (Sydney) and Kuppa’s Piano (Brisbane), and has worked closely as a soloist/chamber musician with Boulez, Philippe Manoury, Isabel Mundry, Brett Dean, Elena Kats-Chernin, Chris Dench, and Anthony Pateras. O’Dell has a strong interest in the exploration of conducting workshops at regional conservatoriums throughout the eastern states, and has guest lectured in contemporary music and extended performance techniques at the Australian National University, Canberra. O’Dell has also presented a Masterclass in Advanced Performance (Ion) from Griffith University and a M.Phil from the University of Queensland.

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Thank you!
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HAMIISH MCCOURTY (Performer) is an acrobat and musician. He began his circus circuit at Cirkid in Adelaide when he was eight years old, and since graduating from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), where he was the youngest director ever accepted into its prestigious graduate director’s course. Since graduating, Lifschitz has directed over 60 productions including large-scale events, opera, and Shakespeareian theatre, with his passion for circus and honed his skills to a level that allowed him to join Circa as an ensemble member in 2015. He has since performed in many iconic Circa works, including What Will Have Been, Closé, and Humans.

KIMBERLY O’BRIEN (Performer) grew up competing in athletics and playing the violin and cello. After seeing one of Circa’s shows, O’Brien joined the youth performance troupe Circa Zoo. After two years of training and performing, O’Brien was given the opportunity to be the very first member of fast track, a program designed for young and aspiring performers within Circa. In 2011, ‘O’Brien left Circa Zoo and fast track to become a full-time ensemble member. Since then, O’Brien has toured numerous shows in various countries and participated in the creation of many new Circa works. One of her highlights was performing Wunderkammer at the Sydney Opera House.

LACHLAN O’DONNELL (Violinist) is a Sydney-based violinist/violist who regularly performs throughout Australia and abroad as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral leader. Ensembles with which he appears on a regular basis include the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Sydney, Melbourne, and Queensland Symphony Orchestras, Orchestra Victoria, the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (as guest Associate Concertmaster). As a soloist, O’Donnell has appeared at major concert halls throughout Europe and Australia, performed live broadcasts for ABC Classic FM, SBS, WQXR New York, and SRF2 Swiss radio, and has performed concert with the Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra, Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria, and ACO Collective, the Australian Chamber Orchestra’s regional touring ensemble. He has appeared at major international festivals including the Lucerne Festival (Switzerland), the Aldeburgh Festival (U.K.), Pistoie d’Ettico (France), the Melbourne Festival, the Queensland Music Festival, and the Musica Viva Chamber Music Festival (Australia). In 2017, he performed solo works of J.S. Bach and H.I.F. Biber at festivals and concert venues throughout Europe as part of What Will Have Been, a production by the Australian company Circa. An keen advocate of new music, O’Donnell is a regular guest performer with the Queensland Symphony company Circa. A keen advocate of new music, O’Donnell is a regular guest performer with the Queensland Symphony company Circa. A keen advocate of new music, O’Donnell is a regular guest performer with the Queensland Symphony company Circa.

YARON LISCHTZ (Artistic Director) is a graduate of the University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, and National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), where he was the youngest director ever accepted into its prestigious graduate director’s course. Since graduating, Lifschitz has directed over 60 productions including large-scale events, opera, and Shakespeareian theatre, with his passion for circus and honed his skills to a level that allowed him to join Circa as an ensemble member in 2015. He has since performed in many iconic Circa works, including What Will Have Been, Closé, and Humans.

Under the direction of circus visionary Yaron Lifschitz, Circa features an ensemble of exceptional, multi-skilled circus artists who have been a regular feature at leading festivals in Berlin and Montreal with their production at Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Barbican Centre, Les Nuits de Fournier, and Chamalèon Theatre, as well as major Australian Festivals.

At the forefront of the new wave of contemporary Australian circus, Lifschitz is pioneering a new extreme physicality can create powerful and moving performances. It continues to push the boundaries of the art form, blurring the lines between movement, dance, theatre, and circus, and is leading the way with a diverse range of thrilling creations that “redraw the limits which circus can aspire” (The Age).
JACOB’S PILLOW EXTENDS A SPECIAL THANKS TO ITS VISIONARY LEADERS

VISIONARY LEADERS form an important foundation of support and demonstrate their passion for and commitment to Jacob’s Pillow through annual gifts of $10,000 and above.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

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Circa performers engage in silent conversations: “If I arch my back in an exaggerated manner while standing upright, does the back of my pelvis begin to become a surface on which you can stand?” one asks another. “I can stand on it, sure, but I think I can also fall backwards out of a handstand and meet your pelvis with mine,” says a second. Their pelvises meet. Hair tumbles floorward, bouncing softly off his own shoulder, rebounding and tumbling sideways. Another man balances, and two people diving on. A woman launches from nowhere visible into the space and then slides on her belly. A man tumbles floorward, bouncing softly off his own shoulder, rebounding and tumbling sideways. Another man balances, and another one is doing the same. The circularity of these performers is stripped down—in trousers and button-down shirts, or muted leotards and bare chests. No matter what these performers are doing, they make no attempt to hide their human-ness. A woman dangles from the ceiling. Moving up and tumbling down. Caught. Tumble again. Upside down, now sideways, now supported only by one arm.

Circa made its Pillow debut in 2012 with the eponymous Circa, returning in 2014 with the work simply known as S. What Will Have Been, again, they bring no elephants, no clowns, no ringmaster, but this time a violinist who joins them onstage. In an interview with Dance Informa, Lifschitz talked about the relationship between circus and music, starting off with the observation that, “There’s almost always music present in circus, but it’s often not thought about very much. Thinking back to my earliest works with circus was to think about what music was doing.”

Despite Lifschitz’s current interest in classical music, he thinks that circus performances are essentially different from the classics, stating in the same Dance Informe interview, “For me, circus exists for its musical heart, which is more like jazz. Lifschitz and his creative exploration, the connection to jazz suggests the importance of improvisation and play, and investigation, as well as risk-taking, as absolute trust in the ensemble. Over here, a woman holds herself actively still. She, too, is in a handstand, balanced on the hands of a man who seems to be resting flat on his back. She reaches up through her pointed feet toward the ceiling and presses down into his hands. She doesn’t speak, but he knows. He sits up. She presses down in encouragement. He shifts to his knees. She lengthens through her spine impelling him upward. He stands up on his feet. She reaches even further down to him and up from him. Circa strips away our expectations of the circus, and even the circus as it relates to dance. Once they’ve removed all of the expected trappings of the circus, what’s left? What Circa keeps is their starting point, which is simply the human body. They trust the body’s ability to make meaning, grounding their work most assuredly in the world of concert dance. Two people doing on. A woman launches from nowhere visible into the space and then slides on her belly. A man tumbles floorward, bouncing softly off his own shoulder, rebounding and tumbling sideways. Another man balances, and another one is doing the same. The circularity of these performers is stripped down—in trousers and button-down shirts, or muted leotards and bare chests. No matter what these performers are doing, they make no attempt to hide their human-ness. A woman dangles from the ceiling. Moving up and tumbling down. Caught. Tumble again. Upside down, now sideways, now supported only by one arm.

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What Will Have Been is one of three works thus far that Circa performs to Bach. For Lifschitz, it makes sense as “Circus and classical music seem to work rear ends together because there’s a kind of mutual respect for each other’s virtuosity, but it’s so different.” Oh, someone just dove in from the wings.

Despite Lifschitz’s current interest in classical music, he thinks that circus performances are essentially different from the classics, stating in the same Dance Informa interview, “For me, circus exists for its musical heart, which is more like jazz. The connection to jazz suggests the importance of improvisation and play, and investigation, as well as risk taking, as absolute trust in the performer.”

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In the broader context for viewing dance.

* Former Trustees, staff, faculty, interns, The School’s dancers, or artists-in-residence
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CHOREOGRAPHY
Funded in part by the Expeditions program of the New England Foundation for the Arts, made possible with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional support from the six New England state arts agencies.

VIOLINIST
Daniel O’Brien
Libby McDonnell
Lachlan O’Donnell
What Will Have Been
(2015)
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HAMSIC MCCOURTY (Performer) is an acrobat and musician. He began his circus career in Cirkid in Adelaide at the age of 10. He was eight years old, and since graduating from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, he has performed in leading internationally. McCourty is a keen performer and multidisciplinary artist with a strong interest in music education, and has taught university level courses at the University of Queensland. He is an acrobat and musician. He began his circus career in Cirkid in Adelaide at the age of 10. He was eight years old, and since graduating from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, he has performed in leading internationally. McCourty is a keen performer and multidisciplinary artist with a strong interest in music education, and has taught university level courses at the University of Queensland.

DANIEL O’BRIEN (Performer) has been physically active throughout his life but turned his focus primarily on his gymnastics training in his hometown and a few small gyms along the Queensland coastline. After high school, O’Brien made a decision to transition from the sport of gymnastics to a possible career in circus performance. O’Brien moved to Melbourne and studied at the National Institute of Circus Arts, specializing in hand-balancing and aerial straps, where he gained his first experiences as a performer. He spends his spare time feeding his unhealthy addiction to video games while also using his free time to pick up new skills to a level that allowed him to join Circa as an ensemble member in 2015. He has since performed in the many iconic Circa works, including What Will Have Been, Closer, and Humans.

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- Early access to tickets for events
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