

# **THE CIRCUS SNAPSHOT DATA PACK**

This Data Pack contains details of the Circus Snapshot Research methodology and a summary of the information and data gathered during the course of the project.

This pack should be read in conjunction with the Circus Snapshot Cards and the Snapshot Film both of which are available at [www.cryingoutloud.org](http://www.cryingoutloud.org)

# CONTENTS

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<b>3-4</b>	THE PROJECT TIMELINE
<b>5</b>	THE ADVISORY GROUP
<b>6-7</b>	INTERVIEWEE LIST
<b>8</b>	SECTOR PRIORITIES
<b>9</b>	THE PROPOSALS
<b>10-13</b>	ACTION NOTES
	<b>OVERALL</b>
	<b>THEM</b>
	<b>US</b>
	<b>ME</b>
<b>14-19</b>	AUDIENCE FINDER DATA
<b>20-28</b>	CASE STUDIES
	<b>KNOT</b>
	<b>BEDTIME STORIES</b>
	<b>THE HOGWALLOPS</b>
<b>29</b>	CREDITS

# PROJECT TIMELINE

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## MARCH 2019

Crying Out Loud commission Daisy Drury to undertake research into the current situation in the professional/performance-based circus sector – A Circus Snapshot.

Agreed aims are:

- To provide an opportunity for reflection on success and challenges
- To generate material that can be used to advocate for the sector
- To create, collectively, some proposals for how we might build a resilient and thriving sector

## APRIL 2019

Advisory Group contacted and confirmed as:

- Angus MacKechnie (Outdoor Arts UK)
- Kate Hartoch, (Circus City, Bristol)
- Rachel Clare (Crying Out Loud)
- Stephen Munn replaced by Phil Hargreaves (Déda, Derby)
- Steve Cowton (The Lowry, Salford)
- Vickie Amedume (Upswing)

## MAY-SEPTEMBER 2019

Interview Phase – DD interviews 50 people working in the sector including artists, programmers, venues, producers and circus education organisations.

## AUGUST 2019

Additional funding from Arts Council England is confirmed enabling us to extend the scope and scale of the Conversation Events, commission case studies from John Ellingsworth, and draw down data from Audience Finder.

## OCTOBER 2019

Snapshot Cards are commissioned and printed. Designed by Amy Lines the aim of the cards is to stimulate conversation and debate. The cards represent themes and ideas that emerged during the interviews. The difference in opinions around these themes and ideas are demonstrated through direct (anonymous) quotes from interviewees.

## OCTOBER 2019 – JANUARY 2020

The Conversation Phase - Four Conversation Events take place in Bristol, London, Salford and Derby. Attended by 95 people. Chaired by Chris Rolls from 64 million artists the Conversation Events are evolved and refined over time.

The final structure is:

- The Missing - After being introduced to the cards for the first time participants are invited to think about what cards/issues/themes are missing from the pack
- The Circle – The full pack of cards are arranged in a circus either on the floor or on the wall and participants are asked to choose the card that they identified with most closely and then explain to the group why.
- The Top 5 – In small groups of approx. participants are challenged to select their Top 5 cards that represent the most important, urgent, significant challenges that the sector faces
- The Proposals – Based on those Top 5 cards the groups are then asked to develop a proposal that somehow tackles the issues that those cards represent.
- The Action Notes – The Conversation Events culminate in asking each participant to write down actions that they would ask Funders/Outside Bodies (Them) to take, the Circus Sector (Us) to take and Individuals (Me) to take.

## FEBRUARY 2020

Consolidation and Analysis of the findings from the Conversation Events and development of The Missions.

The Missions are a series of Actions, Programmes and Interventions drawn out of the research findings. Once signed off by the Advisory Group these Missions will be put back to the sector and individuals who have been either heavily or lightly engaged with the Snapshot Project will be invited to engage with/commit to/involve themselves in, one or more of The Missions.

## MARCH 2020

Presentation of Analysis and The Missions to the Advisory Group which has been extended to include:

- Adrian Berry (Jacksons Lane, London)
- Pam Kent (Worthing Theatres)
- Lynn Carroll (CircusWorks)
- Leila Jones (Arts Council England)

## APRIL 2020 ONWARDS

(unable to continue due to COVID19)

The Mission Phase – The Missions (agreed by the Advisory Group) are put out to 'tender' and the sector is invited to put the thinking into action.

# THE CIRCUS SNAPSHOT ADVISORY GROUP

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## VICKI AMEDUME

Artistic Director, Upswing

## RACHEL CLARE

Artistic Director, Crying Out Loud

## STEVE COWTON

Head of Programme, The Lowry

## PHIL HARGREAVES

Independent Producer and Creative Producer at Déda, Derby

## KATE HARTOCH

Independent Producer and Founder of Circus City, Bristol

## ANGUS MACKECHNIE

Executive Director, Outdoor Arts UK

The following people joined the group in February 2020:

## ADRIAN BERRY

Artistic Director, Jackson's Lane

## LYNN CARROLL

CircusWorks

## LEILA JONES

Senior Relationship Manager, Arts Council England

## PAM KENT

Head of Marketing & Development, Worthing Theatres



# THE CIRCUS SNAPSHOT INTERVIEWEES

It was never going to be possible to interview every person working in the sector and so in order to curate this list we worked with the Advisory Group to draw up a long list of potential interviewees from which we curated a balanced, representative short list.

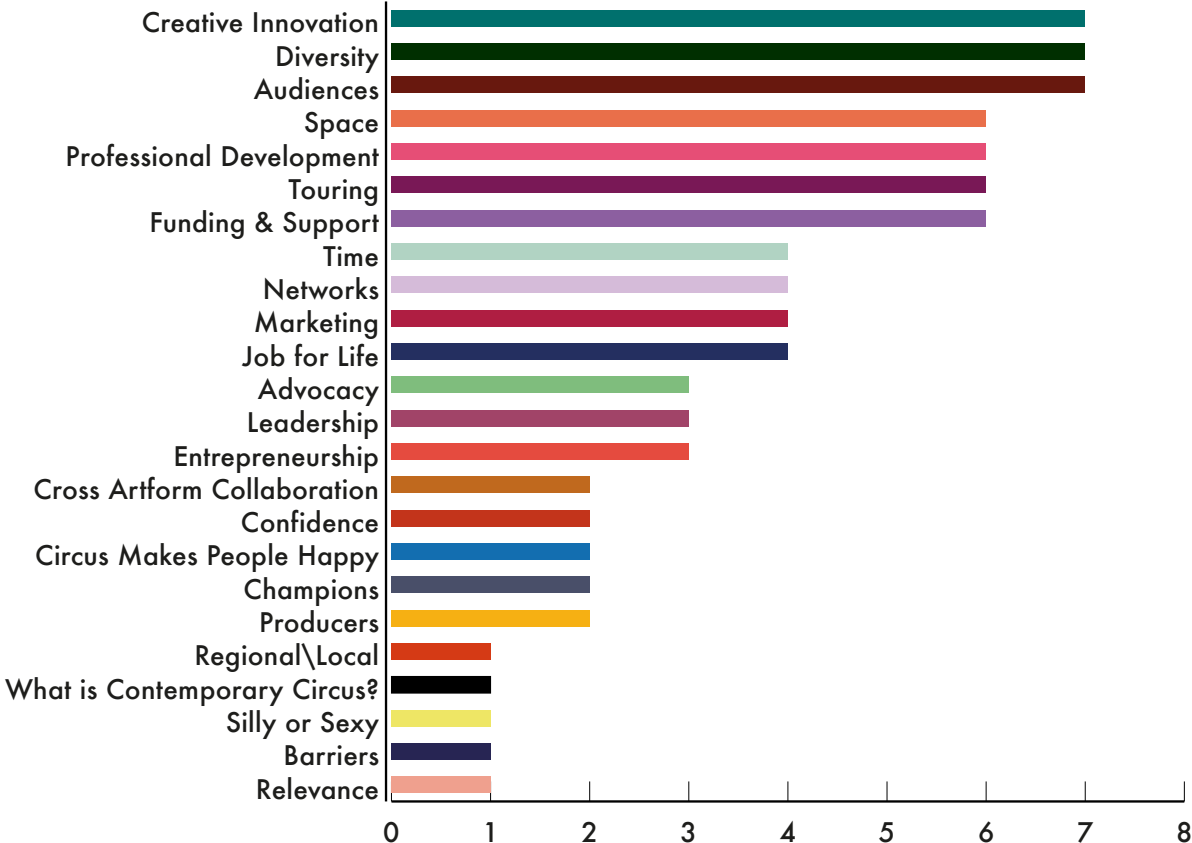
Billy Alwen	Cirque Bijou/Extraordinary Bodies	Artists/Producer	Bristol
Vicki Amedume	Upswing	Artist	London
Jessica Andrade	Independent Artist	Artist	London
Kerry Andrews	Birmingham Hippodrome	Programmer	Birmingham
Helen Averley	Let's Circus	Artist	Newcastle
Adrian Berry	Jackson's Lane	Programmer	London
Sheana Brandel	Pirates of the Carabiner	Artist	Taunton
Daniel Brine	Norfolk and Norwich Festival	Programmer	Norwich
Poppy Burton-Morgan	Metta Thetre	Artist	London
Annabel Carberry	LiT Circus	Artist	Norwich
Julia Carruthers	Warwick Arts Centre	Programmer	Coventry
Maggie Clark	Xtrax	Advocate	Manchester
Gabbie Cook	Independent Artist	Artist	Bristol
Steve Cowton	The Lowry	Programmer	Salford
Claire Crook	Victoria Works/Independent Artist	Artist	Sheffield
James Doyle-Roberts	Citrus Arts	Artist	Pontypridd
Ellie Dubois	Superfan	Artist	Inverness
Sean Gandini	Gandini Juggling	Artist	London
Bill Gee	Independent Producer/Programmer	Programmer	London
Teo Greenstreet	Greentop	Training/Community	Sheffield
Luke Hallgarten	Independent Artist	Artist	Cardiff
Phil Hargreaves	Deda & Independent Producer	Producer	Wakefield
Kate Hartoch	Circus City	Programmer/Producer	Bristol
Bradley Hemmings	Greenwich and Docklands Festival	Programmer/Producer	London
Flora Herberich	Independent Producer	Producer	London
Lina Johansson	Mimbre	Artist/NPO	London
Leila Jones	Arts Council Englnd	Advocate	London
Pamela Kent	Worthing Theatres	Programmer	Worthing
Ali King	Turtle Key	Producer	London
Sacha Lee	The Point	Programmer	Eastleigh
Tilly Lee-Kronnick	Independent Artist	Artist	Bristol
Milton Lopes	Independent Artist	Artist	London
Angus MacKechnie	Outdoor Arts UK	NPO	London
Elsbeth McBain	The Lighthouse	Programmer	Poole

Charlotte Mooney	Ockham's Razor	Artist/NPO	London
Ian Morley	Barnsley Civic	Programmer	Barnsley
Aislinn Mulligan	Independent Artist	Artist	London
Stephen Munn	Déda (now Absolutely Culture, Hull)	Programmer	Derby
Amanda O'Reilly	Worthing Theatres	Programmer	Worthing
Tom Rack	No Fit State Circus	Producer	Cardiff
Kaveh Rahnama	Nearly There Yet	Artist	London
Nikki Rummer	Independent Artist	Artist	London
Axel Satge	Independent Producer	Producer	London
Rupert Thompson	Southbank Centre	Programmer	London
Jon Udry	Independent Artist	Artist	Bristol
Pam Vision	Arts Council Englnd	Advocate	London
Mish Weaver	Independent Artist	Artist	Bristol
Charlie Wheeler	Barely Methodical Troupe	Artist	London
Kate White	National Centre for Circus Arts	Training/NPO	London
Kevin Wratten	Roundhouse	Programmer/Producer	London
Nic Young	Circomedia	Training/NPO	Bristol



# SECTOR PRIORITIES

During the Conversation Events participants were invited to select the cards that they felt represented the most important or urgent issues for the sector.





# THE PROPOSALS

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During the Conversation Events we invited participants to draw up Proposals to tackle some of the issues presented on the Snapshot Cards.

## In Summary:

- Mobile Circus Creation Space (Derby)
- An advocacy organisation similar to OneDanceUK that can harness the power of circus in all its forms (Derby)
- The Strictly Greatest Circus Show on Earth (Derby)
- Something that's bigger than individual interests that brings the sector together. But that requires a lot of trust and there isn't enough in the sector at the moment. (London)
- Creative Lab Hub - 10 venues. Commit to 10 emerging and 10 established artists over two years. They become part of the family of the venues. (London)
- Creating a big hub with lots of region hubs. Circus Village. Taking over an abandoned rural village. A space where companies and actors can come. Have different spaces. (London)
- A space (London)
- Something that tackles the problem of gatekeepers and that encourages venues, artists and producers to work together. (London)
- Bringing circus into the National Curriculum (London)
- Diversity Across the Board – diversity of shows, people, artists, venues, spaces etc (London)
- A National Youth Pass to enable young people studying circus to see shows across the country (Salford)
- World Circus Day – embrace, exploit and celebrate (Salford)
- A series of micro-solutions – connecting artists with residential accommodation, creating more NPO's, networking artists with opportunities available to them.... (Salford)

# ACTION NOTES

At the end of every Conversation Event participants were invited to write up suggested actions in three different ways –

## ACTIONS FOR 'THEM'

– those outside the circus sector eg. government, funders, other artforms

## ACTIONS FOR 'US'

– those working within the sector

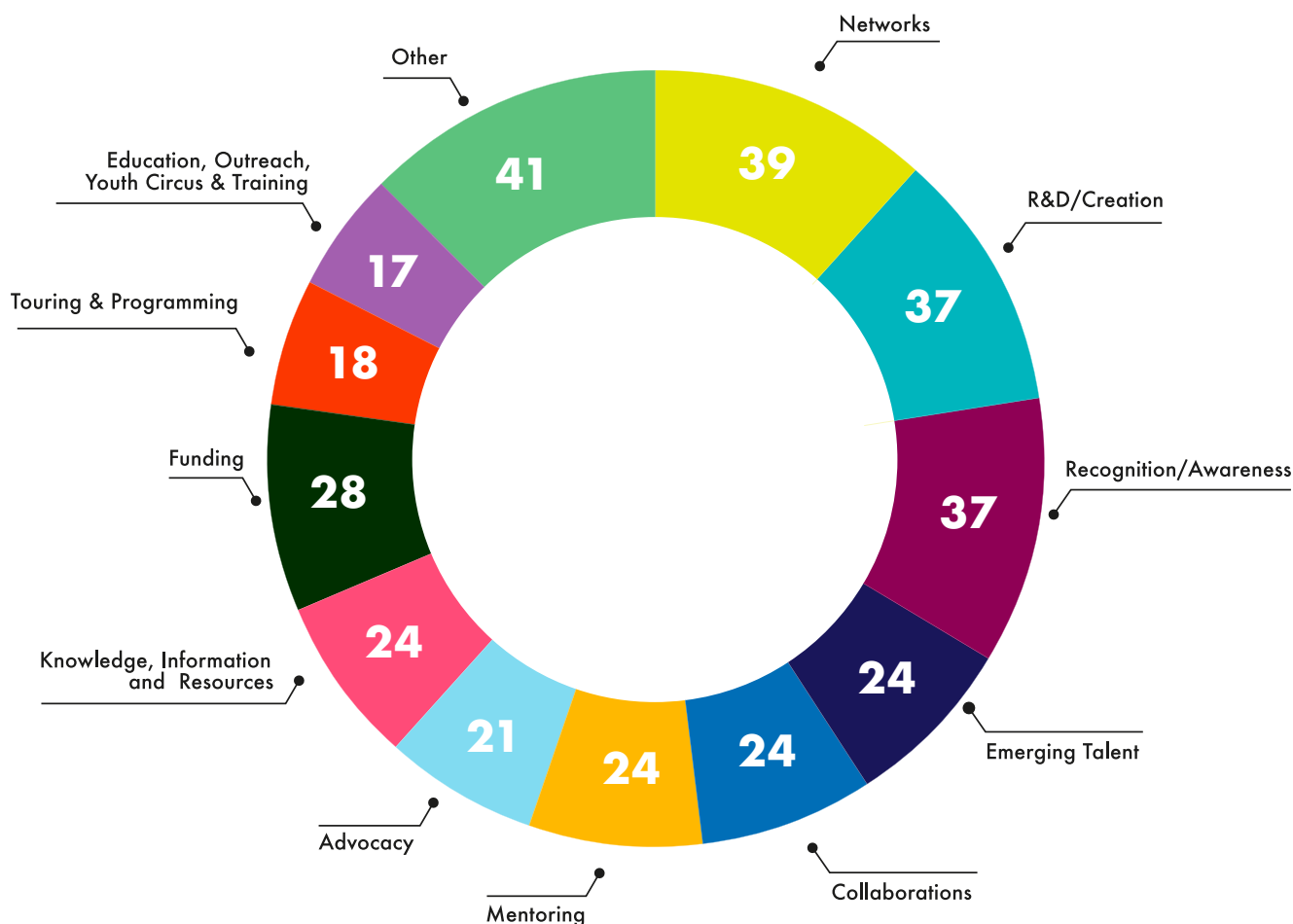
## ACTIONS FOR 'ME'

– a personal commitment to action. Participants shared these with the rest of the group.

There were 387 Action notes in total and once categorised around themes and issues they offer data.

## OVERALL ACTION NOTES

(categorised into themes and issues)



Action Notes: Them



Action Notes: Us



Action Notes: Me



# AUDIENCE FINDER DATA

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## SUMMARY AUDIENCE INFORMATION

The following information is from Audience Finder – a database of audience information of all Arts Council England National Portfolio venues that sell or issue tickets upload information. Other venues can also join the database.

When uploading information to Audience Finder, venues selling tickets define the artforms of the work that they present. One of the possible artforms in the system is “circus”.

82 venues uploaded data into Audience Finder detailing 416 shows presented between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2019 (3 years) which they defined as “circus”.

45 of these venues (55%) gave permission for us to know the number of performances and tickets issued for 345 shows (83% of the total shows). From venue marketing material we also analysed the shows according to the following questions:

- Were they marketed as family shows?
- Were they mainly suitable for smaller scale venues (less than 400 seats)
- Were they presented by international companies?

## SUMMARY DATA

The information below is not close to a full picture of ticketed audiences for circus in the UK, but it may be a useful illustration of the programming and audience histories of 45 venues.

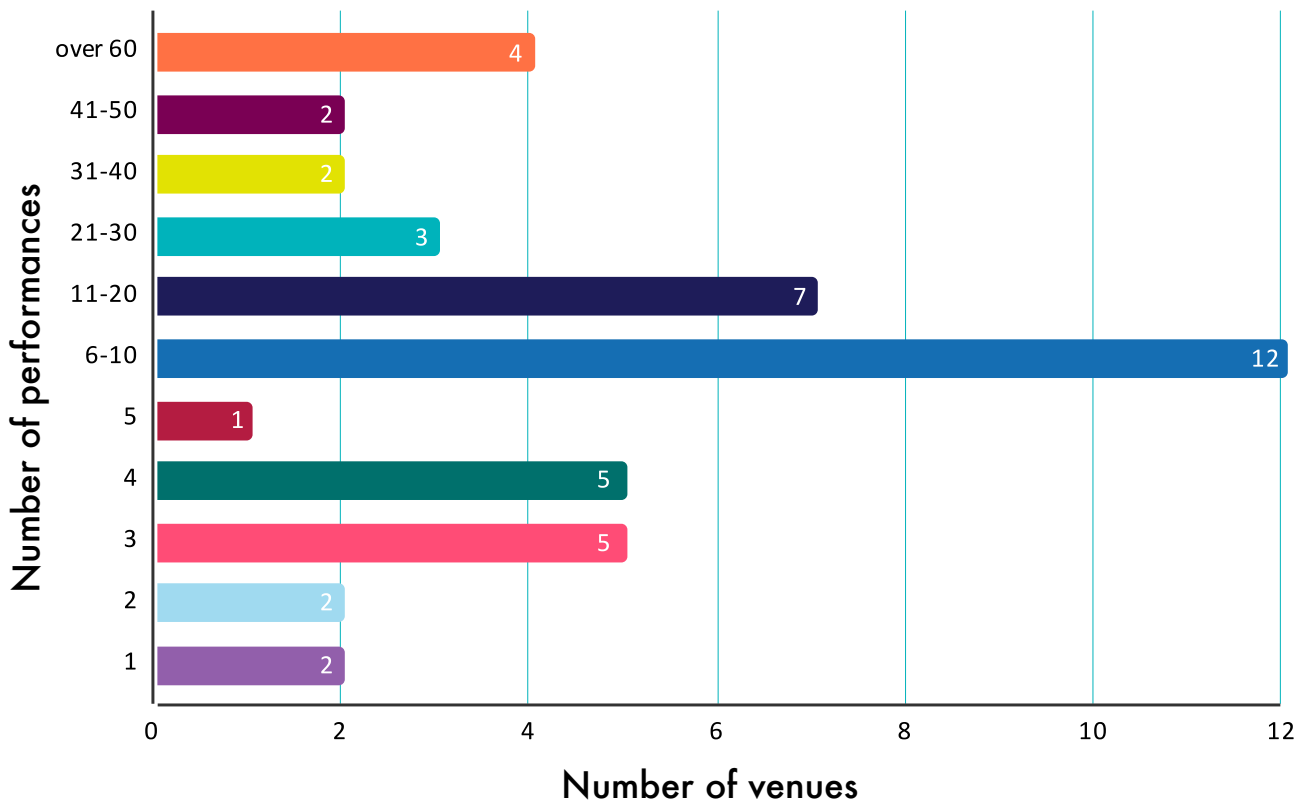
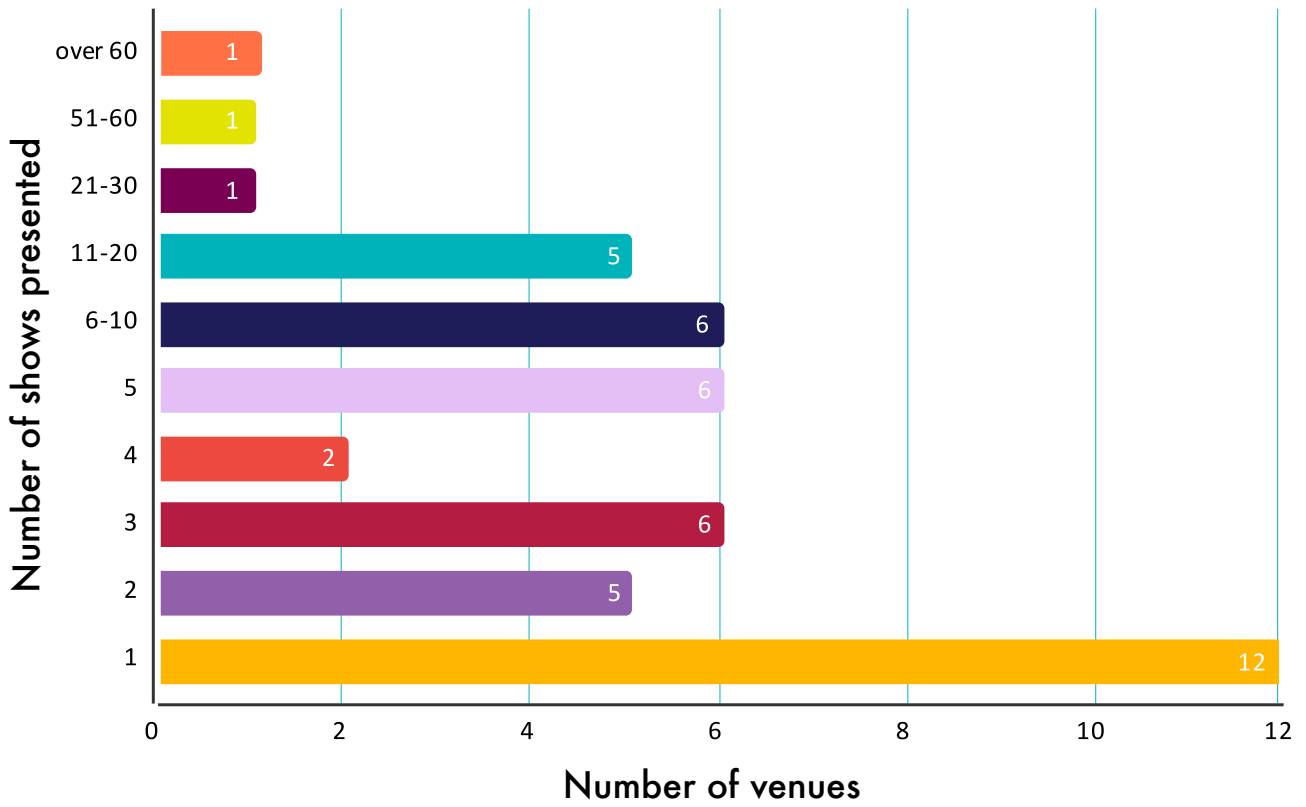
### Data across three years

Shows presented across all venues	345
Number of different venues	45
Total performances	809
Total tickets issued	218,160
Number of different shows	198
Number of family shows (% of total)	73 (36%)
Number of smaller scale shows (% of total)	148 (75%)
Number of international shows (% of total)	42 (21%)

### Data by individual year

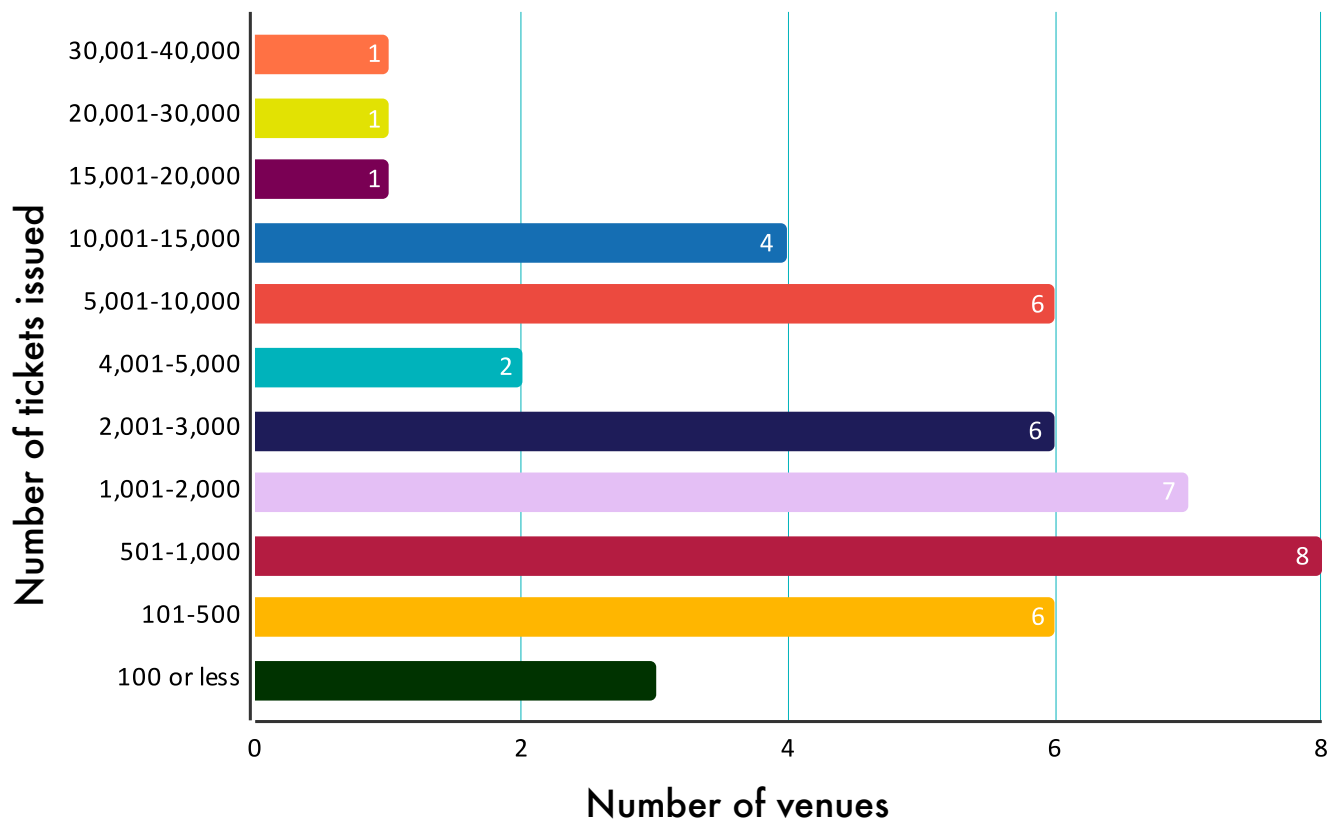
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Shows presented across all venues	100	119	126
Number of different venues	34	31	27
Total performances	252	263	294
Total tickets issued	84,990	67,062	66,108
Number of different shows	65	78	83
Number of family shows (% of total)	28 (43%)	29 (37%)	24 (29%)
Number of smaller scale shows (% of total)	44 (68%)	57 (73%)	66 (80%)
Number of international shows (% of total)	15 (23%)	17 (22%)	12 (14%)

### Audience Finder Data: Analysed by venue

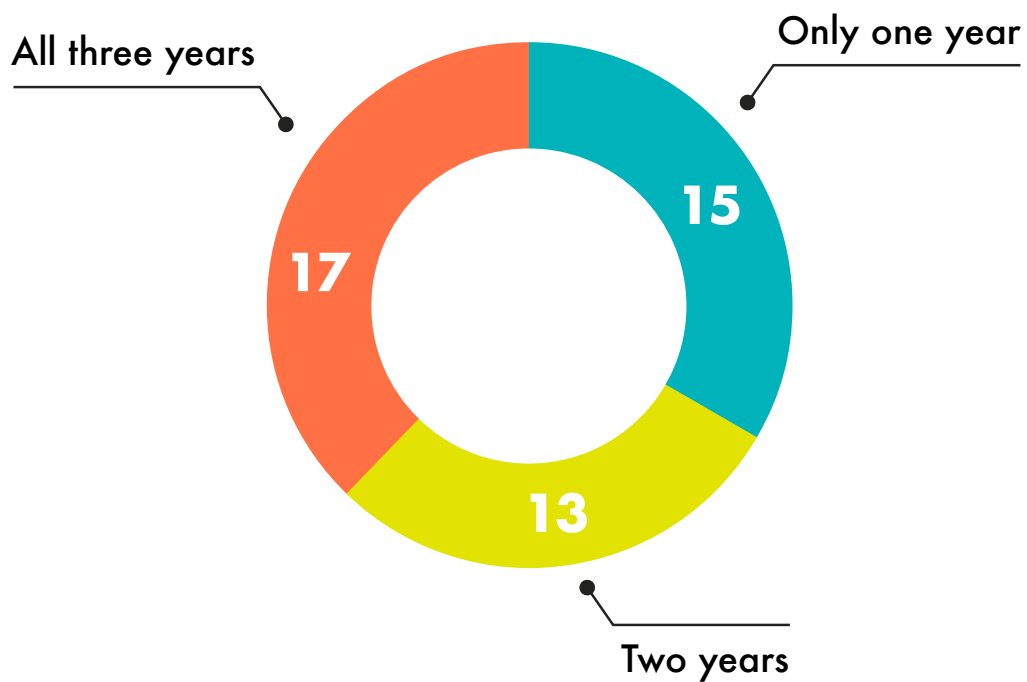




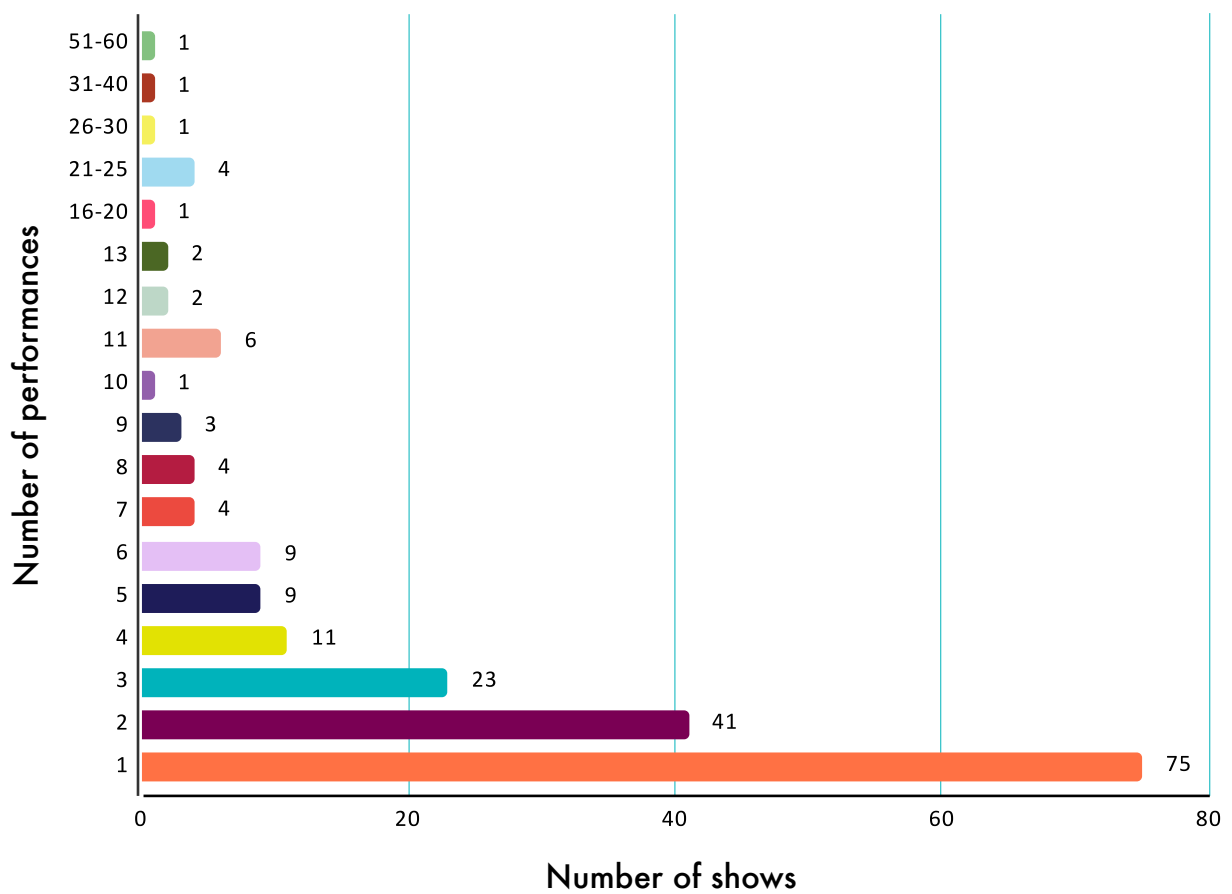
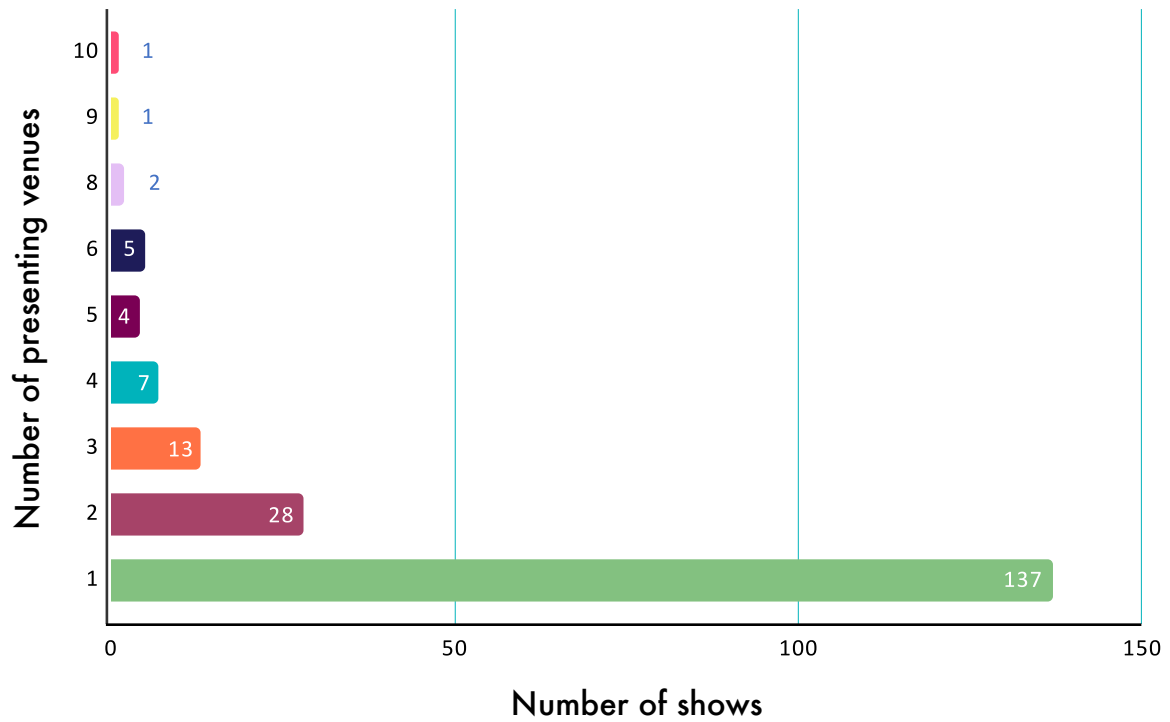
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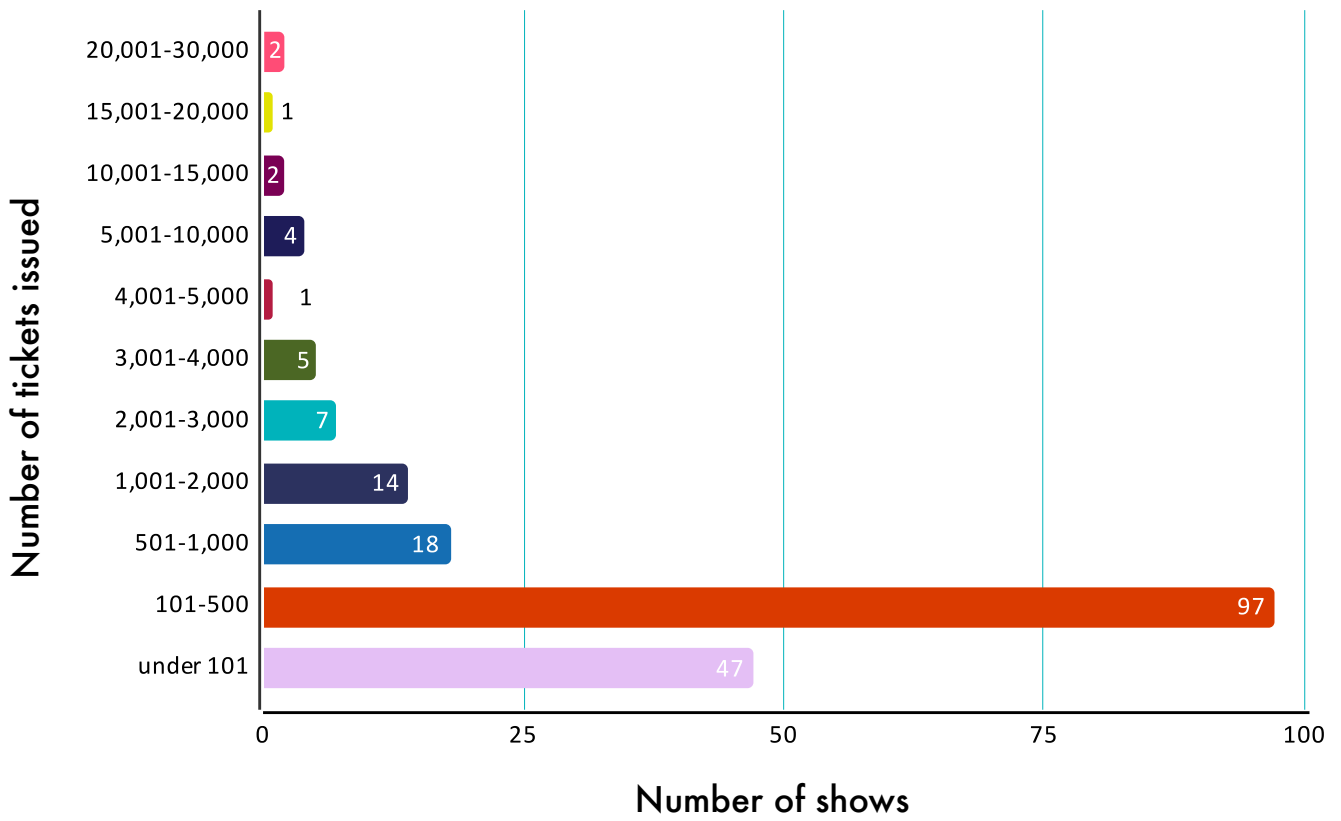
## Number of venues vs Number of years



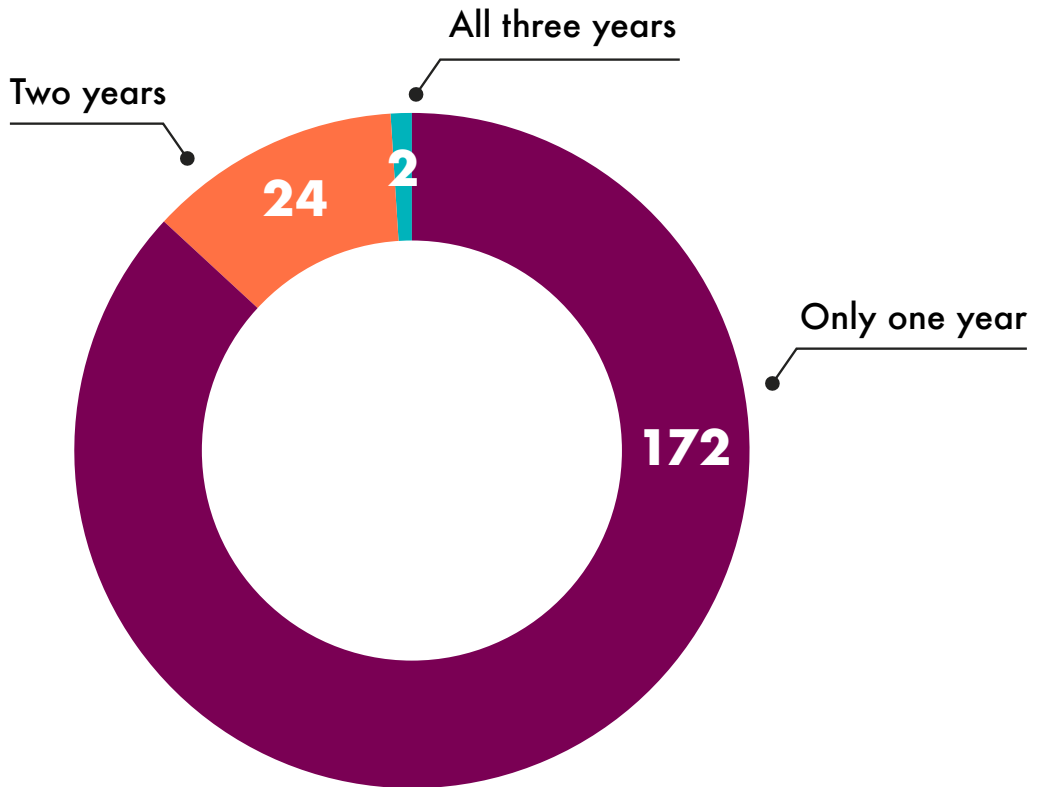
## Audience Finder Data: Analysed by show



### Audience Finder Data: Analysed by show



### Number of venues vs Number of shows



# CASE STUDIES

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In order to place the Snapshot Cards in context and provide some additional materials for the Conversation Events we commissioned John Ellingsworth to research and write up three Case Studies that focussed on the journey that individual shows (rather than companies) had taken from earliest R&D to full performance.

## THE FIRST PERFORMANCE: NIKKI & JD'S KNOT

How long does it take to make a first performance? You have an idea, some skills, a few supporters — but the road might be longer than it first appears. When does a creation begin and where does it end?

Beginnings are hard to pin down. In the circus field, artists can spend years developing the unique technical vocabulary which they take into a 'creation' process. In the case of Knot, however, a two-person show by the hand to hand duo Nikki & JD (Nicole Rummer and Jean-Daniel Broussé), there was at least a clear point of inspiration.

As JD tells it: 'One day we did a cabaret where the director had told us to kiss at the end of our act. I was always annoyed at this — having to play the straight couple. My discipline makes that inevitable in a way: if you have a man and woman on stage then, most of the time, people think they're together. But when the moment came in this cabaret, I couldn't do it. We were going to kiss and at the last second I pulled away.'

Chewing over this experience the two began to conceive of a show that would revolve around its critical moment. It would be a performance playing with what an audience perceives onstage, as well as what we perceive in our own relationships, when one individual sees another. From first steps through to its full-length version, Knot's creation would stretch over almost two and a half years.

### All it takes is time

Circus creations often take more time due to the intense work needed to develop new physical material or acquire new skills. Especially among younger companies, making a show can be a dual process of collective creation and individual development. Nikki and JD had experience working together on other shows (they met while working on Square Peg's Rime) and performing shorter acts, but producing their own full-length production was a step beyond this.

JD: 'With Knot we wanted to talk onstage, we wanted to dance — all these things we hadn't trained. You also need your movement to have a lot of variation to fill a longer show. The movement in each section would need to be different enough that it wouldn't feel repetitive — and that just takes time.'

The company's first step was to crowdfund the money to match an ACE grant, awarded in autumn 2015. This allowed the company to work on a first phase of the project with director Rosamond Martin, and later with the choreographer Ben Duke, in a series of short bursts. 'The most exciting thing for me about Knot,' remembers Rosamond 'was this peeling back of layers of story. Nikki and JD were both really sure from the

beginning that the show needed to be very honest, and one of the kind of joyful and challenging things was to ask how it could stay honest when it also needed to be a good story and it also needed to be theatrical.' An exploration of these and other questions led the company to an initial short version of Knot which was shown in February 2016 at The Place as part of their Resolution festival.

Things subsequently slowed down a little as Nikki and JD dived into working on Barely Methodical Troupe's Kin (which premiered in April 2016 at the Roundhouse's CircusFest), but then in late 2016 they had an opportunity to take Knot out on the road as part of Crying Out Loud's regional touring programme Circus Evolution. Too short for standalone presentation, the piece was paired as a double-bill with the show Gasp! by Belgian company Circoncentrique. For Nikki and JD, it was a good opportunity to run Knot, but one that wouldn't be feasible without the extra funding to back it.

The short version of the show ended on the 'twist' of the aborted kiss, and with JD coming out to the audience, but the company had already started to work towards a longer version that would place this moment centrally, like the knot of the title, and in its second part explore the truth of the duo's relationship.

In January 2017, the company were one of eight supported by the Jerwood Choreographic Research Project, which paid for a total of three weeks of research and gave the company input from yet another angle. Working with choreographer Ellis Saul, they looked at creating new movement and connecting it with their existing circus vocabulary to 'create an emotional journey'.

Perhaps moving a creation forward in smalls steps, with specific residencies dedicated to key areas of research, is a good way to organise creative work, but it can also be a strategy to appeal to funders who are reluctant to support the same project more than once, and who want clear, specific outputs. The company would eventually have three grants from Arts Council England: one supporting the first phase of the project and the short version of the show, a second to extend it to a full-length production, and a third to take the show on a national tour in 2019.

Working in this way, timelines stretch and distend. But looking back the company would mark their slow progress as an advantage. JD: 'It meant we could go back through videos and say, "Oh, this works, that doesn't." If you're returning to something six months later it's much easier to be clear about what you think works and what doesn't.'

By the premiere of the full version in February 2018, Knot had racked up a total of 15 weeks of creation. 'That's a lot for the UK,' says JD, 'but if you're working on a creation and you only have six weeks, with a premiere at the end of that, you can only do what you already know. I think the extra time really gave the show a lot of depth.'

### Out on the road

That depth has paid off. While its taken time (of course), the show has gradually built momentum and audiences. Knot has now played in circus and dance programmes, as well as in general theatres, led by the producers the company has worked with, the networks they've built, and of course by chance encounters.

During autumn 2019, Knot has been one of seven performances on the road as part of the Rural Touring Dance Initiative run by the National Rural Touring Forum. Nikki & JD's nine-date tour takes them to school and village halls across the country. 'It's

been so rewarding,' says JD. 'People are so excited to have the project coming to their community, and we're getting better audiences — or better than we do in regional theatres outside the big cities like London, Cambridge, Manchester. We're playing in schools and village halls in these really rural areas, but we've been getting 150 people each time — people really come.'

In August 2019, Knot was part of the British Council's Edinburgh Showcase at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where it won a Herald Angel as well as the Total Theatre & Jacksons Lane Award for Circus — accolades that cap multiple waves of touring and leave the company feeling that they've 'done' the UK and need to look further out.

In fact, the performance has already started to play internationally. In May 2018, Crying Out Loud took the company to South Korea for the Seoul Circus Festival. Performances of Knot coincided with a meeting of the Circus Asian Network, and led to a Japanese promoter picking up the show for the BIRD Theatre Festival in Tottori. Axel Satgé, who produced Nikki & JD at Crying Out Loud and now works independently with the company, explains this kind of international touring will be an integral part of the company's future plans: they've calculated that they need three times as many international dates as UK ones to keep the books balanced. 'We definitely do better when we go abroad,' says Axel 'In the UK we always have to negotiate and bring the cost down. With an international booking we know we're always going to be paid the full amount.'

Even off the back of their recent momentum, the company find themselves in a position where it's hard to tour in the UK without extra funding. They've talked about putting in another ACE application for a further tour, but feel it doesn't stand much chance as a 'repeat' project. 'The UK's our home but we need Europe and the rest of the world to develop,' says Axel.

Wherever it goes, Knot seems to capture the interest of promoters and the imagination of its audiences. In some respects, you could say it's a typical first show — small in scale, light on set, rooted in the artists' technical practice. From another perspective, it has been exceptional for its success and longevity. It looks simple, but it isn't. You have to cut from many angles to make the gem, and the company brought in choreographers, mentors and producers as they spent weeks and months spinning the performance round to work on this facet and that.

As the final production wins accolades and makes inroads into the international market, the rewards of that careful work are clear — even as the company turn their sights beyond Knot. JD: 'The timeline for these things is so long, in a way, between the creation and performance. It almost feels like Knot isn't as relevant to my life now as it was four years ago. It's nice to be getting recognition for the show, but we've definitely reached that moment of "what's next?".'

[www.nikkiandjd.com](http://www.nikkiandjd.com)

## THE FAMILY SHOW: UPSWING'S BEDTIME STORIES

In one sense, performances come and go. In another, they leave patterns and lasting marks — not least on the companies that make them. So what happens when a performance goes wrong — or both right and wrong — and what happens to the company that makes it?

After a creation period that spanned eighteen months, after a successful opening at Stratford Circus, and a small summer tour of venues in the UK, Bedtime Stories had made its company, Upswing, a huge loss. 'I think it was our lowest moment,' says artistic director Vicki Amedume, 'coming out of that first run and looking at the deficit.' What's worse, they'd been warned: the advice from all sides was that the show was too ambitious in its staging and too big for the market. 'We found ourselves with loads of enquiries but we knew we couldn't build a tour,' says Vicki. 'I remember thinking, We've made something which is actually quite good here, but it's still not moving. How do we make it work?'

### Making a show

Bedtime Stories is Upswing's first performance for families. With the action taking place in the round, the audience circle the stage — first in two rings of beds, then in ranks of seating furnished with blankets and pillows. The show itself weaves a double narrative, detailing the relationship between a young girl and her imaginary friend (Three) at the same time as it explores the trade-offs and tensions of a single mother trying to stretch herself between parenthood and career.

Creation for the piece was paced as a series of small steps. As an NPO organisation — one of only four among artistic companies in the circus field — Upswing receives annual funding of £115,667 which covers around 80% of their running costs. For projects, they must fundraise beyond that — with ACE's project funds off limits. 'There are very few organisations or foundations and trusts that fund creation,' Vicki explains, 'so we had to look into other things.'

Initial seed funding came from Appetite Stoke, an arts engagement programme connected to the New Vic Theatre, which gave a small grant to take Bedtime Stories, then little more than an idea, and to 'shape the vision' for the show. From there, Upswing received support from Creative Black Country, working out a structure for the performance and a timeline for creation that helped bring partners onboard — including Stratford Circus as co-commissioners. Final pieces of the jigsaw were provided by the Leche Trust and the Austin and Hope Pilkington Trust, two bodies supporting arts charities.

What these funding sources have in common is that they take a view on art and creative work that puts the emphasis on process. In its early stages Bedtime Stories was developed through participatory workshops with children and families — a collaborative approach which Vicki feels is becoming typical of Upswing's strategy for both finding resources and creating 'new spaces for artistic development and deep thinking'.

In early 2015, as Bedtime Stories began to take shape, Jacksons Lane and the Albany gave creation space, and the company had one of its larger blocks — three weeks of rehearsals in — at Hangar Arts Trust, a multipurpose rehearsal and training space in Greenwich (since closed).

By this time, the scale of the show was becoming clear, with a semi-transparent central tower, like a giant lampshade, raised and lowered over the set to create its imaginary worlds. Animations were to be projected on all four of its sides — not easy in itself, and calling for a complex lighting set-up that would ask the company to install their own equipment at each venue. The feedback from peers, while supportive, was doubtful: the show was technically too complex, performing in the round would limit where they could take it, and they might struggle to sell the show given that it wasn't attached to a 'known property' like a popular children's book or well-known fairytale.

'In hindsight,' says Vicki, 'what we were doing was trying to make an almost commercial-level production through the subsidised system. But we didn't really understand that at the time — we just wanted to make the best show we could.'

### Making it work

The company had anticipated taking a hit on the first tour of *Bedtime Stories*, but how to turn it into a viable project? For venues the show was expensive, but also unproven. 'There wasn't the confidence in the work for them to take a risk on it,' says Vicki, explaining that for a lot of theatres family shows are the big earners. More expensive to bring in, they can also generate significant income. In this scenario of shared risk and reward, venues are initially harder to persuade but equally can be more committed once a deal is done.

Things started to turn around in 2017 when the company was awarded a grant of £135,000 from ACE's Strategic Touring Fund. Rather than underwrite fees, the extra money paid for an audience development programme that accompanied the show and helped mitigate the risk for venues.

More importantly, the strategic tour gave Upswing time — and feedback — as they reworked the guts of the project. Radical changes came in small steps. By the end of the tour, audience capacity had more than doubled from 200 to 450, but only after the company had redesigned the projection to be sharper and brighter, introduced elements of sound amplification into parts of the set, and worked on sightlines and movement to ensure the performance still read well at its larger scale. During the tour they also brought in raked seating, and were surprised to find it an enhancement. The families in the rings of beds close to the stage had always had a communal experience, but now the furthest seats could also watch the show play out against the backdrop of its audience (making it, as Vicki says, a kind of 'fireside story').

Looking for more ways to drive down the cost of the show and invest in its future, Upswing took a bank loan of around £20,000 to buy their own projectors (they had previously hired at each venue). Other measures that improved the sustainability of the project included training two casts for the show, developing better marketing assets, cementing a tech team, and zeroing in on the best times for performances (in the morning, after breakfast but before lunch; in the afternoon, after lunch but 'way before school pick up' — with the precise best times changing for each venue).

Finally, the strategic tour was a way of proving both that Upswing had the expertise to support venues in reaching an audience, and that *Bedtime Stories* could be a good seller. 'If we can get it right,' says Vicki, 'we know we can get to nearly 100% sales in some venues.' On the strategic tour, the lowest attendance the company had was at a venue that didn't have a regular family audience and saw the show as a first step



to building one. Over a one-week run, audiences rose from 40% to 60% — past the company's break even point.

'That year of touring gave us everything we needed to move the work forward,' says Vicki. 'Without it we wouldn't be where we are now — on the cusp of international touring.'

Indeed, the show now has an agent in the US and another in China, with China dates currently shaping up for 2020. In 2018 it was at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Studio Theatre as part of the International Arts Carnival. A run of 16 shows, with an audience capacity of 400, sold out in 48 hours, leading the venue to add another 8 performances. In Argentina for the Buenos Aires International Circus Festival, it played six shows, which also sold out.

International dates hold the promise of higher fees for many companies, but for Upswing they also offer opportunities for the longer runs that suit Bedtime Stories. Aside from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (where the company went for two weeks in 2016 and 'made money, surprisingly') opportunities to create longer runs in the UK mostly revolve around Christmas and school holidays. In December 2018, Bedtime Stories was at Dartington for four weeks, and going forward the minimum the company will take on for the UK is now a four-show run. The plan for 2020 is to work on international touring while looking to secure week-long runs in the UK during holiday periods.

In other words, Bedtime Stories has seen a very successful turnaround, and one that begs the question: would they do it all again? Well, not the same, no. But not all the way different, either. 'On one level we did everything wrong,' says Vicki. 'If we just wanted to make money we should have worked with an existing story, made it low tech, had a short get-in... But if you just do the sensible things all the time you won't make anything new and different. I think people appreciate with Bedtime Stories that it's a kind of experience they haven't had before.'

All the same, gathering information about new fields, and understanding the logistics of working there, has established itself more firmly as an integral part of the company's process. 'The economics of touring in the UK mean you have to make sure you at least understand the stupid choices that you're making,' says Vicki.

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## THE MID-SCALE ENSEMBLE: LOST IN TRANSLATION CIRCUS' THE HOGWALLOPS

To form an ensemble, to create on a larger scale, to work with trust, understanding and complicité... These are ambitions for many artists, but the devil's in the detail. How do you turn a dream of collective creation into a model of work?

In late 2013, Lost in Translation Circus were living in a deserted, wintertime Great Yarmouth and pouring themselves into their work. Commissioned by the circus festival SHOWZAM! to create a mid-scale performance for family audiences, they had just a few months ahead of dates at the Blackpool Grand Theatre.

Though starting from scratch, the company had two points of inspiration. The first was the Italian film *Brutti, Sporchi e Cattivi* ('Ugly, Dirty and Bad'). Set in the slums of Rome, it follows a four-generation family (dominated by the conniving one-eyed patriarch Giacinto) as its members wage war against one another by means of theft, poisoning and arson. The second was Roald Dahl's *The Twits*, the grotesque tale of two retired circus trainers who come to a bad end when tricked to stand on their heads until they vanish (victims of the Dreaded Shrinks). 'We didn't go quite that dark,' says Annabel Carberry, one of the directors of LIT Circus, 'but that was the inspiration.'

Drawing on this source material, the show that slowly took shape was *The Hogwallops*. In its portrayal of a chaotic, dysfunctional, yet loving family, life and art had seemed to merge a little. Living and training together, LIT Circus had seized the opportunity to realise a long-held ambition: to make ensemble circus performance.

### In it together

Working as an ensemble has its artistic challenges but most groups don't live to see these, having been wiped out first by the practical ones. *The Hogwallops* was LIT Circus' second show, after the outdoor project *La Ballade de Bergerac*, and early experiments in operating as a collective had run aground on the usual problem: the difficulty of holding together a group of artists in a field where individuals must juggle multiple projects, sometimes in multiple countries, across multiple companies, in order to make a living.

Measured against the challenge of making it all work is the prize: ensemble work can provide a kind of fabric — a richness of group interaction and play — that unifies diverse circus disciplines. For *The Hogwallops*, which would combine the company's signature disciplines of cloudswing and Korean cradle with juggling and acrobatics, it was this continuity and completeness, with every artist involved at key moments, that LIT Circus wanted to explore.

'I believe that to create a show you need to create a complicité within the performance,' says Massimiliano Rossetti, the other director for LIT Circus. 'With a strong group of people you create more opportunities for circus performance, but you can also rest a little bit in the show. Performing a very physical two-person show, you're totally devastated at the end of an hour. With five people you can find some space to breathe.'

Tight on resources, the company survived off teaching work on Seachange's education programme, and used the organisation's Drill Hall in off hours as their personal training space. The bulk of the creation took place over two months at the end of 2013, and in early 2014 the company brought in Chris Dingli, a director whose background is mainly

in text-based theatre, to structure the physical material they'd developed and bring a fresh perspective. He got the company to sit at a table and talk about their characters and what their motivations were, thrashing out a narrative and a script. The script would subsequently get winnowed down, but the characters stayed, and made their way to Blackpool.

### Stepping out

After a successful run at the Blackpool Grand, the company hit a wall. Forming a strong ensemble of artists was one challenge, but the next was to deal with the practicalities of touring a mid-scale show: *The Hogwallops* was technically complex (with, ideally, a two day get-in), and often either a little too large or a little too small. 'At that scale,' says Annabel, 'it isn't really economically viable unless you're on a longer run somewhere like Edinburgh or London.' Venues were interested in the show itself, but could usually only offer one or two, or perhaps three, performances — a situation that the company put down partly to their emerging status and partly to a lack of familiarity with contemporary circus among the venues themselves. They also found that 'almost no venues would actually pay what it cost to take the show'. The company did score a couple gigs in their local area but successive dates remained elusive.

Then, in 2015, a new path opened for the show and company in the form of an ACE Strategic Touring project produced by Jacksons Lane. One of its purposes was to give venues more experience of programming circus. 'In *The Hogwallops* we saw a show that we thought could adapt to a lot of different spaces and sizes of venue,' remembers Adrian Berry, Jacksons Lane's director. 'It was a good fit for what we wanted to do: a performance with broad appeal for children and families that still had a contemporary aesthetic.'

The extra funding brought down the price of the production for venues, but also allowed Jacksons Lane to support them with technical and marketing work. Running for a year in 2015/2016, the tour went to 15 venues, playing 40 performances to more than 7500 people — an experience that taught LIT Circus to be flexible. 'We became experts at understanding how to make the show work in lots of different circumstances, and in making quite a big show fit in some tiny spaces,' says Annabel. 'I think that our willingness to be adaptable is one of the things that has allowed us to tour *The Hogwallops* as much as we have. And I think a lot of the venues really appreciated that flexibility and that capacity to adapt.'

Jacksons Lane's producer Flora Herberich was in charge of venue liaison, but LIT Circus had the opportunity to look over her shoulder and observe the process. The tour let them get to grips with the minutiae of contracts and 'all those details where, as a young company, you could trip up and get into financial trouble'. In this way, the strategic tour has had a double legacy — for the venues, some of whom were programming circus for the first time, and for LIT Circus, who found themselves the recipients of a detailed education in touring. Annabel: 'When we came out of that process we were in a much better place to understand the indoor market and to start taking on that side of things ourselves.'

## A model of work

Keeping an ensemble together means providing enough work and stability that the members don't drift away into other projects. LIT Circus saw The Hogwallops as a 'turning point', but were quickly left asking themselves how they could do it again.

The tour with Jacksons Lane had helped build a base of knowledge, but The Hogwallops 'would never have happened' without access to Seachange's training space. So when the Drill Hall was closed for refurbishment, LIT Circus, recently moved to Norwich, started looking into other options. Finding nothing suitable, they resolved to open a space themselves, moved into an old church, and the Oak Circus Centre was born. 'The centre is a creation space for our own shows,' says Massimiliano, 'and that's what we needed as a priority. But with a building that big we also had the responsibility to do something for the community. It's through the community that we've been able to develop our audience. If people join our classes they get to see what circus is, or one side of it, and they're more keen to come and watch shows.'

Founding the space has been accompanied by a broader push to diversify the company — with the goal of stabilising cashflow and creating enough work to hold onto their core performers. The Hogwallops has stayed in repertoire, with milestones in recent years including performances in Belgium at Festival PERPLX and in Tenerife at the Festival Internacional de Circo de Punta Brava. The show will go to Bermuda in 2020.

Knowing the ins and outs of UK touring has helped the company to plan their work, and they have already returned, or shortly plan to return, to around half of the venues from the strategic tour. Nonetheless, selling a show remains a difficult process. The cycle of negotiating with venues, securing guarantees, putting in a grant, and waiting for a decision can take 3-6 months, during which time the schedules of the company, venues and artists can easily fall out of alignment.

This happened with another LIT Circus show, Hotel Paradiso — intended as a kind of spiritual successor to The Hogwallops. Awarded an ACE grant in 2018 to tour the UK, the company had to postpone because confirmation came too late for some venues. Moving one set of dates necessitated moving another, venue and artists schedules started clashing, and finally the whole house of cards collapsed.

The plan had been for the core team from The Hogwallops to manage and direct the new show, but they found themselves stepping in for a last minute remake, with Chris Dingli back as director. In spite of the stress, they pulled it off. 'It left us feeling that this is a creative team that works and a model that works,' says Annabel. 'It's about ensemble circus that has a narrative and clear characters, that's comic but can have some poetry in it, and that's accessible for a broad audience.' To which one might add that it's about a disparate group of people pulling together when it counts — just like a family.

# CREDITS

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