

# UK CIRCUS SECTOR OVERVIEW

## COMMERCIAL/SUBSIDISED; CLASSIC/CONTEMPORARY

Circus is a popular, adaptable and historic art form with a flexible ecology of relatively small organisations and independent artists alongside large, temporary performance venues. While Classic circuses usually function as commercial enterprises, many artists now work within mixed models of commercial and subsidised support from the Arts Councils and trusts/foundations with a broader creative, social and civic agenda. The workforce tends to **work across all aspects of the sector as well as both nationally and internationally**.

Recent research highlights that innovation and reinvention has been and continues to be a major contributor to the success of circus over time including innovating technologically, adapting to audience demands, using circus as a tool for teaching social and life skills, overcoming trauma, stimulating social cohesion and integration, as well as supporting the development of creative skills.<sup>1</sup>

This diverse sector has no central coordinating agency. The Association of Circus Proprietors (ACP) advocates strongly on behalf of its members - mainly touring big-top circus companies. Many speak through other formal and informal networks including the Arts Councils, Independent Theatre Council, SOLT/UK Theatre, Outdoor Arts UK, and the Youth Circus Network.

Circus is a relatively small part of the UK performing arts sector, but it is a distinctive artform for UK audiences with a demonstrable and powerful reach across different social and cultural groups.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CIRCUS SECTOR OFFER DURING COVID-19 AND TOWARDS RECOVERY

- Circus can offer audiences a **high-quality, often non-verbal and highly visual creative experience with a demonstrable and powerful reach across different social and cultural groups**; and a strong appeal for intergenerational family groups.
- Much circus work – including commercial big-tent circuses as well as smaller more ‘theatrical’ companies -- work in **outdoor spaces** where audience concerns about mass assembly can be mitigated.
- Recent EU research<sup>3</sup> estimated the UK Circus network to include at least **50 professional circus organisations** and **500 working circus artists** – though Equity records over 2,000 members registered as Circus practitioners. It’s a workforce that has more than doubled in the last 15 years.
- There are two Higher Education accredited **circus schools** plus other vocational training/ development opportunities. In 2019, over **3,800 young people** were regularly learning circus in 45 **youth circuses in England<sup>4</sup>** with significant numbers in the other 3 countries with key organisations like Belfast Community Circus, No Fit State in Wales and Organised Chaos and Aerial Edge in Scotland)
- Creative companies hold creative assets - **existing performance works** that could be quickly re-developed/ re-toured and with the right infrastructure in place, can generate income
- Circus is currently maximising to the greatest extent possible the **development of online** teaching, streaming, community engagement, development of future creation, and presenting.

## WHAT THE CIRCUS SECTOR NEEDS FROM POLICY MAKERS AND PUBLIC FUNDERS

**What we, the Circus Sector (encompassing a wide range of commercial, subsidised, presenters, producers, content providers, and schools) need from policy makers and public funders:**

1. Ongoing consultation and engagement with a **representative range of companies and organisations** to ensure that the needs of the entire sector continue to be heard within ongoing policy development, emergency support planning and the development of future focused solutions.
2. An assurance that public support mechanisms are inclusive of the circus sector and are adaptable to our

<sup>1</sup> The Situation of Circus in the EU Member States (Creative Europe, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Organisations collect their own audience data but it is not collected for the sector as a whole

<sup>3</sup> The Situation of Circus in the EU Member States (Creative Europe, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> 2020 UK Youth Circus survey conducted by Circus Works

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requirements – specifically a recognition that the Circus Sector (commercial as well as subsidised) will need support for as long as social distancing is necessary. Support to include:

- Ongoing support for **freelance artists** – particularly those not eligible for support through SEISS;
  - **VAT on ticket sales to be reduced to 5%**;
  - A new '**guarantee against loss scheme**' to enable presenters and producers to manage the risk of COVID-19 related loss of earnings caused by business interruption;
  - A guarantee that **international artists** who are unable to return home can access public funds on the same basis as UK residents for the duration of a future crisis;
  - **A new designated fund for local authorities** to ensure costs of **Big Top and open-air circus performances and festivals** are not passed on to producing and presenting companies and organisers;
  - The creation of a **new investment fund** to support both content creation and adaptation and the development of new business models to ensure future sectoral sustainability;
  - Continuation of the **Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme** until the sector (including outdoor and indoor venues, training facilities and schools) are allowed and practically able to reopen;
3. An assurance that any resources made available through the Arts Councils are shared strategically across the arts ecology and that less visible art forms, such as circus, do not lose out accidentally.
  4. A continued dialogue with the sector to ensure that there are avenues to support the entire Circus sector – recognising that there is no current overarching circus development body.

### SPECIFIC CIRCUS SECTOR CHALLENGES DUE TO COVID-19 SITUATION

The Circus Sector currently faces many of the same challenges facing all arts/culture organisations in responding to Covid-19 including loss of income, challenges of social distancing/reopening, inability to manage strategic planning and overcoming public perceptions/fears about attending venues/performances.

However, there are additional more specific, more nuanced challenges facing all Circus sector organisations regardless of funding structures, programming style and/or audiences:

#### ONGOING ARTISTS' TRAINING/CIRCUS SCHOOLS

- **PHYSICAL ARTFORM:** Circus is fundamentally a physical, kinaesthetic form – teaching online is an inadequate/impossible substitute;
- **TRAINING:** As would be the case with professional athletes, Circus artists must constantly train to maintain skills; extended periods of break are damaging to skillsets and increase risk of injury.
- **FACILITIES:** There are limited 'circus-specific' rehearsal/training facilities with specialist equipment; physical distancing will create significant access challenges within these venues – particularly in circus schools;
- **INFORMATION:** With no sectorial advocacy body access to information on Covid related H&S concerns for circus training and creation is difficult to gather, consolidate and distribute.
- **OPPORTUNITIES:** Current students are losing their opportunities to complete their training with final 'acts' and losing showcase opportunities to launch professional careers.
- **MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS:** The mental health challenges for students graduating into an unstable industry where the employment and career development pathways are no longer clear.

#### PROFESSIONAL CIRCUS ARTISTS

- **HIGH RISK CAREERS:** The vast majority of workers in the sector are freelance and dependent on a precarious 'gig economy'. Very few organisations have employed workers that can be supported through government furlough schemes.

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- **OPPORTUNITIES LOST TO BAME/DISABLED ARTISTS:** These challenges are of particular concern in supporting talented individuals from vulnerable groups and marginalised communities who already face limited opportunities and will likely be in lockdown until a vaccine is available.
- **LESS ACCESS TO EMERGENCY FUNDS:** Due to nature of employment in the sector, including the frequent practice of last-minute short-term contracts, commercial work, much international work, and the high overheads-to-profit basis many freelancers operate on, many of the UK emergency support funds (Furlough, SEISS) are not appropriate or available.
- **LIMITED EMPLOYERS IN THE SECTOR:** Artists are dependent on a small number of employers who have been made unstable and at risk due to loss of touring and commercial work, with some unable to honour existing contracts.

### CREATING WORK

- **INTERNATIONALISM** Circus creation and its touring ecology are international. Regional isolation and travel restrictions severely reduces opportunities for artists to train, work and create.
- **INSURANCE:** There are now greater challenges securing insurance for what was already a high-risk activity. With no sector support body Circus is reliant on policy and rules devised for adjunct sectors like sport and dance with can pose challenges for the sector.

### PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE

- **OUTDOOR/SEASONAL WORK:** Loss of entire 2020 summer season for Outdoor Festivals and Big-Top Tent Touring - where most earned income is concentrated in a few short months.
- **INDOOR/PERFORMANCE WORK:** With venues struggling to re-open, the complexity and cost of circus work will make circus a much lower priority for these venues. Pathways to investment in new content will be severely limited reducing capacity of artists and companies to earn income and reach future audiences.

### PUBLIC FUNDING

- **ARTFORM SUPPORT:** Circus does not have a specific advocacy or support body therefore is at risk of not being properly understood, supported and championed strategically at the national level.
- **ACE NATIONAL PORTFOLIO:** As there are limited 'Circus' NPOs, the majority of NPO's with a Circus focus are in band 1, (the lowest funding band) with no organisation funded above band 2. The sector ecology is highly dependent on commercial income and earned income opportunities for survival.
- **PROJECT FUNDING:** Limited or no Project funding over next 18 months will limit opportunities for small companies including BAME-led organisations/artists to develop new work.

#### Signatories:

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Billy Alwen - Artistic Director, Cirque Bijou / Extraordinary Bodies

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Alison Woods - Executive Director, No Fit State

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Steve Cowton - Head of Theatre Operations, The Lowry, Salford

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Phil Hargreaves - Creative Producer, Deda, Derby

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Kate White - Chief Executive, National Centre for Circus Arts

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Adrian Berry - Artistic Director and Joint CEO, Jacksons Lane

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Nicolas Young - Artistic and Managing Director, Circomedia

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Kate Hartoch - Director, Circus City and Handstand Arts

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Rachel Clare - Artistic Director, Crying Out Loud

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Vicki Amedume - Artistic Director and CEO, Upswing