

## Is it circus? Or is it dance?

**And does it really matter, as long as it's wonderful? Ismene Brown reports on how modern companies have blurred the line between clowning and choreography**



*"O, he flies through the air with the greatest of ease,  
This daring young man on the flying trapeze."*

GRACEFUL Gertrella, "The Wonder of the World" in waspie and ribbons, nonchalantly hooking her high-heeled foot over the bar high in the theatre ceiling, was clearly a woman of the greatest of ease - one of the legion of aerial performers who filled Saturday night variety audiences 100 years ago with that thrill unique to circus skills.

Circus had yet to snatch aerial performers out of the theatre and into the big top; once it had, they lost their precarious footing in the artistic pecking order, and - no matter how incredible their gymnastic skills - became irredeemably low-brow.

In ballet, there is no more cutting abuse than to accuse a dancer of circus tricks; when people want to decry the idiosyncratic French ballerina Sylvie Guillem they refer to her childhood as a gymnast. Pens are already being sharpened to deal with English National Ballet's plans to incorporate jugglers and acrobats in their Albert Hall *Swan Lake*. Now is not the time to request a revival of a 1942 ballet by the classical genius Balanchine called *Circus Polka* (music by Stravinsky), for 50 beautiful girls and 50 elephants in the Barnum & Bailey Circus.

But a fight-back has begun. Recently modern dance has started to see circus skills as instruments for new adventures in movement, not simply novelties.

Opening today in Woking, a French company run by Philippe Decouflé (formerly a pedigree modern dancer with Karole Armitage and Régine Chopinot ) gives Britain a rare view of a show that has brought it Europe-wide celebrity, a weird hybrid entertainment called *Decodex* which defies categorisation. Is it circus? Is it gymnastics? Is it modern dance? Is it pointless to ask?

Hinted inside 'Decodex' costumier Philippe Guillotel's brilliant creations there seems to be an overwhelming rage at neatness. Surreal leotards alter the dancers' bodies, extruding bits of them as if Guillotel had been playing with Plasticine, feet pummelled into huge flat flippers, hands, elbows, heads rolled and twisted into swaying squid's tentacles. There's a memorably angry man whose foot is cemented to a giant manhole cover. The results are both gross and elegant, an unsettling combination.

Once Guillotel has satisfactorily unbalanced, or re-balanced, the body, choreographer Decouflé's fun begins; he sends these mutated humans hopping, toppling, spinning in ways not possible in our normal state. Other games against gravity are played with spindly machines whose purpose, under their delirious visual illogicality, is to get some highly unlikely kind of movement going. In its bitterness and period flavour, it deliberately harks back to those variety shows of Graceful Gertrella's era - recreating, with today's spin, the sense of disturbed wonder that audiences would have felt a century ago.

IRMA Omerzo, a 27-year-old Croatian former international gymnast, has been with the company four years. "Is it art or entertainment? Well, it's difficult to say. That implies that art can't amuse, or entertainment be serious. I just find that if I amuse people and they like it, it's enough."

Isabel Rocamora , one of the two trapeze-women in the unique British dance company Momentary Fusion, rephrases my inquiry: "In our field, the question is: Is it art or an 'act'?"

Momentary Fusion and the Gandini Juggling Project are Britain's answer to the celebrated circus-skilled foreigners, Decouflé, the Cirque du Soleil and Victoria Chaplin's *Le Cirque Invisible*. The difference is profile. In Britain, to stray too far into circus skills is to give yourself a thundering funding headache.

Momentary Fusion uses trapeze, the Gandinis use juggling; and though both companies consider themselves more dance than anything else, the Arts Council has such difficulty classifying them that they are constantly thrown back into the commercial field, where, ironically, their skills are more appreciated.

Since Rocamora, 28, and Sophy Griffiths, 30, a former circus trapezist, started Momentary Fusion in 1993 , they have notched up a most esoteric CV - a nude duet on ropes high up in the white columns of an Austrian castle, a pop video for Massive Attack, a TV commercial for Daihatsu, an appearance in the pukka modern-dance venue of The Place, the Edinburgh Festival later this year.

It is a frustrating business, says Rocamora; the obvious appeal of two young women on a trapeze hardly needs spelling out, as Graceful Gertrella knew only too well, but Momentary Fusion want artistic credibility. Having seen their mesmerising doubles-trapeze finale to their first touring work, *Stung*, I would say that they have it. But they have yet to convince the Arts Council to give them funding stability.

"People are saying that for our next piece we must have a contemporary choreographer in, but I say no," protests Rocamora. "This is a new vocabulary, original work - a language that you can't categorise. Why don't they welcome it instead of saying, oh it isn't quite dance, or not quite 'live arts'?"

"I hope this doesn't sound snobbish but circus is about showing off a skill. The psychology of the audience is to clap, to say 'Wasn't it colourful/ incredible/ spectacular?' I would *die* if somebody said that about us."

Sean Gandini, 33, and his partner, Kati Yla-Hokkala, 27, have given up seeking Arts Council grant, supporting their "art" work in the Gandini Juggling Project by performing at corporate events (the teamwork of juggling is a popular business-management metaphor, apparently).

He is an Irish-Italian street performer who went to a serious dance class run by the admired dancer Gill Clarke (of Siobhan Davies's company), and began incorporating juggling into her choreography. "I wanted to move on from novelty value," he says. For four years Clarke has been creating pieces for them. *Septet* is planned for the Brighton and Edinburgh Festivals this summer.

"Although our starting point was what movement could add to Sean's juggling," says Clarke, "it became fascinating on my side too. Because of the objects they're using, I'm having to deal with gravity in a way different to pure dance. And there's a different way of watching it too - the pathway of the balls through the movement, when you focus on them, can help the eye to see a complexity of movement clearly."

Inevitably, many "real" jugglers and trapezists despise the "arty" brigade, but once circus skills are accepted into dance, where can they go?

Irma Omerzo, briefly unharnessed from her 'Decodex' contraption, welcomes the miscegenation of theatre arts but warns: "It's a two-edged sword. You can mix it and enrich it, but it can also stop you going further and deeper in one direction."

One is conscious of this in 'Decodex', which sprays out tantalising ideas faster than it can develop them. Like several other circus-based shows, it trumpets its appeal "to the child in us". The acid test for Momentary Fusion and the Gandinis in their quest for serious status surely lies in their managing to appeal to the adult in us too.

*Compagnie Philippe Decouflé, Woking Dance Umbrella, Mar 6-8. Momentary Fusion, Banbury Mill, Mar 6, High Wycombe Swan Mar 12. Gandini Juggling Project, Brighton Arts Festival, May*