

Bristol City of Circus Audio transcript



Phoebe Bullzini: Definition of circus? I suppose it's using your body to perform, to entertain other people. You can tell a story that a lot of people can relate to.

Chris Bullzini: Circus is for everyone; you can have high art lovers and they can be standing next to somebody who maybe just watches television, and they can both really enjoy the same show.

Billy Alwen: I like to think that circus is telling stories in a different way, it's very filmic, it's very visual and it's more immediate than theatre, and it breaks down some walls and barriers, it's very accessible and that's what I love about it I guess.

Kate Hartoch: For me when I watch physical performers sharing how they use their bodies, how they use their bodies to communicate, I think it's a very generous and open process and I think that audiences really feel that.

Mike Wright: It's no good at the end of the day if it was just 'wow, that was fantastic, did you see all the mechanics, and the machinery, and the tricks were wonderful', and there's not a little pain in your heart, oh what an exquisite moment, something that touched you. If you don't take anything away that's not circus.

Chris Bullzini: I'm Chris Bullzini, tightrope walker...

Phoebe Bullzini: I'm Phoebe Bullzini, Chris's wife, and also a tightrope walker.

Chris Bullzini: A story is a great way to put on a show because it gives people a journey to follow, but what's more important is people's emotional engagement. The first one to come to mind is the show that Phoebe and I made together - a love story, not quite our love story, but not too dissimilar. I was always the showman character in the show and then Phoebe was a washer woman, and as they meet on the wire and this magic of this kind of hypnotic floating in the air kind of movement is what gets these two people's hearts to meet then and obviously - who doesn't love a Love Story!

Doug Francisco: My name is Doug Francisco, I'm a ringmaster with Invisible Circus company. I think you become yourself in a way, without the construct or the limitations of society maybe. I was quite a shy person really, but it's interesting because you're in that position to talk to a lot of people at once so you can sort say of things that maybe need saying, or critique things in society that everybody thinks, all that sort of stuff, so it's quite a powerful position I suppose. And the great thing about that character is that you know you've got a great thing to introduce so it doesn't matter if there's a flat moment, or you can let things drop, and play with that tension and play with that discomfort if you like, sometimes, cos you know the next thing's going to come along, so circus is especially good like that.

*Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to the show,
Now we're here to talk about some things you may not know;
The fantasy and reality of everything we see
And the lies behind the billboard signs of our throwaway today.
I can sing you songs of freedom, of happiness, of woe.
Now you'll laugh and you may cry but give it a try,
It's your show this life that you're living,
And you'll live and you can die,
But in between you can fly if from your heart you can keep giving.*

Mike Wright: A lot of us don't want to be on display, and yet there's a passion or a drive behind you that forces you to be judged every single day of your life, and confront your worst fears.

Bim Mason: You kick in to the show and the timing is tight between you, you're responding to the audience as you're doing it, you're noticing what's happening at the back. You sweat a lot, you're dynamically active, you're jumping up and down, you're running around - you feel incredibly capable, and I suppose at the height of one's possibilities - you're giving out energy. It's like a heightened sense of being and you feel alive in those moments.

Billy Alwen: The moments I love actually was working with Mike and some of the flying guys in the early days when we were doing flying, particularly flying outdoors. A buzz, it's just a buzz really, it's a drug, it's adrenaline. You know, you do it for yourself I think, rather than the audience, as that level of performer you know.

A kid: Look, look. Lights and sort of smoke, and a trapeze.

Billy Alwen: The bit of flying trapeze I think people who've done it will recognise, is the togetherness of the team. You kind of got everybody's lives in each other's hands and there has to be a huge amount of trust. It's all about living in that moment - catch and release, whether you're gonna make it, whether you're not going to make it, you live in those moments.

Reading from newspaper 1898: There must have been fully 25,000 visitors to Barnum and Bailey's show at Bedminster yesterday, their tents being crowded at each opening. Never before have so many people flocked through Bedminster as during the show. There is so much to see that there is never a pause, the eye has something constantly before it and even the moments between the change of artists are not those of optical rest, for a number of funny clowns are fooling around in the arena. The aerial and acrobatic business is most bewildering - so many people are turning and twisting and swinging and jumping about at the same time that in trying to see one specially good performance the visitor misses another.

Mike Wright: My name is Michael Wright. I'm a performer. Circus is a spectacle which is part of the thing people come to circus for, they want the potential of death and blood and gore without actually ever having to face it.

Doug Francisco: Danger and risk, the tweaking the nose of terror, isn't it? We're controlled by our fears as a species, people are very frightened I think, and maybe the role of danger is to show people that there is nothing to fear but fear itself really and seemingly impossible things are possible, so when you see someone being that brave, it's not just that they're that brave, it's that humans can be that brave and sort of challenge those rules.

Chris Bullzini: You definitely have to learn to work with fear, a lot of what we do is very high and it's without a safety, and often we're above, you know, concrete or something. If fear is there to make you focus and put all your energy into being exactly where you need to be at exactly the right moment, and have the right timing, then the fear is healthy, and it's good to work with it. If the fear causes irrational actions like to panic and over tension up, or close your eyes because you just don't want to see what's going on, then obviously that's not very safe. And so we have to learn to override that fear.

Mike Wright: I had an accident where I broke four vertebrae. We had agreed to do a year's contract in Denmark, and we put two flying trapeze acts together for the one season, side by side, and you work in sync and, when you negotiate your contract we were told that the tent was going to be a 12, 13 metres high and when we got there the tent was ten metres high. So we reluctantly agreed and we rigged the way they did. The net is normally 8 foot 6 off the ground, and we put it into just under 6 foot. Also in those days the old canvas tents, it was icy and the tent master was a little worried about the tent, so he heard what he thought was our final bows, and it was us doing our double passage. And I was the last person over, and what had happened was he rolled the tent down 1 metre, to take the tension off the tent because he thought the tightening of the ice on the tent was going to rip the canvas. Meanwhile what had happened; the people on my right side both missed and my flyer going underneath me had also missed, so when I looked down I was ten metres in the air, and where they were standing their weight had taken the net all the way to the ground. It's amazing how time slows down, you know when they say how your brain works so incredibly fast to make decisions. I had the thought do I land on my feet? No, my legs will go up through my hips and I will never walk again, do I land on my belly? No, my lungs will collapse. What's the strongest part of the body? The back muscles. I was 10 metres in the air so...splot. I broke 4 vertebrae and they said I was incredibly lucky because when they went apart, and with the strength of the muscle they just zapped back together again, and I was fortunate in that I didn't pinch the spinal column. We had a full house, it was a performance, so we were fortunately the last act. So that's my big advice to students - you're the expert, it's your life, and the biggest tool you have in your box is 'no'.

Gerry Cottle: I'm Gerry Cottle, I'm a circus proprietor and in recent years I'm one of the proprietors of the Wookey Hole Caves. I just saw my first circus when I was 8 years old. Mum and Dad were just ordinary suburban London people. I lived near Chessington Zoo and I used to go there from when I was 11 years old; grooming the ponies, shovelling up the ponies' mess, picking up the sweet papers at night. I used to juggle, used to stilt walk, used to ride the unicycle round the park saying what time the next show was, and I just wanted to be in the circus, and I just think it's a bit of excitement - living away from suburban London. Even now I'm a bit like that - I get frightened of being bored. You know, Dad used to go to the city with his rolled up umbrella and his bowler hat, and he used to come home at exactly the same time and he did everything the same. Mum and Dad said 'well you better just get some GCSEs', I run away before I took any.

Chris Bullzini: I was definitely a misfit. I didn't feel like I fitted into any category for education or the real world and getting a job, and I found at circus was a place where it really opened its arms, opened its doors to any body type and any mindset, and there's no boundaries in circus.

Phoebe Bullzini: My background is in costume making. I went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and always wanted to get into circus but thought you either had to be born into it or do gymnastics since you were 5 or whatever, and then I volunteered for the Invisible Circus making them costumes, and Chris started teaching me the ropes, made me feel very free.

Chris Bullzini: Well I suppose for me, I was a traveller before I did circus. In a way circus was a logical job to choose because it meant I could keep travelling. Personally, I'm most happy sleeping out under a tree or in the back of the truck, pulled up on the side of the motorway, as I am in a posh hotel - in fact I'm probably happier on the road.

Gerry Cottle: I always wanted to be the boss and then when I was 25 I bought a tiny little tent, and we just started from nothing. We started down here in the West Country. First place we ever played with Sturminster Newton, we'd travelled all around the South West and we were very lucky - I mean we just grew very quickly. I had a partner call Brian Austin, we're still mates 50 years later. He was another boy who'd run away from home.

Reading from Circus Bill 1842: Cornwall's Temple of Wonder and Circus of Variety, back to the Full Moon North Street, Bristol. Among the professors of equestrianism and performers of gymnastic exercises, are the following artistes: Mr Lavater Lee, celebrated as a somersault vaulter, for the ease and rapidity with which he throws an immense number of somersaults. Mrs McIntosh, the Pride of Caledonia, whose equestrian exercises are both peculiar and interesting. Mr Samwell, the Herculean Horseman. Mrs Cornwall who as female rider has no equal.

Gerry Cottle: It's very exhausting the circus life, it is hard work. When you move, whatever you do, whether you're selling tickets in the box office, or whether you're performing as a clown, you're at it all day long, you know you do two shows, you then take the tent down, everybody helps take the tent down, then you're driving a lorry and you're getting in 2, 3 or 4 in the morning and you're getting up at 7, 8 to start put the tent up again. My son in law, Engo, is in charge of the Moscow State Circus, he's so tired all the time.

Phoebe Bullzini: So it usually starts 2 hours before the performance and it'll be makeup, costume...

Chris Bullzini: It starts four days before the performance, swinging sledgehammer, and carrying heavy bits of metal.

Phoebe Bullzini: We have to move about a ton of metal from inside a truck, and set up this high wire and that might mean banging in 50 stakes.

Paul Green: My name is Dr Paul Green, or they call me PG in the circus. I am one of the many people who multi tasks on a regular basis. There's nobody in the circus that I can think of that just has one role, there's just not enough money to go around, it's much more of a collective. And at the end of it all, at the end of a long hard day, it will go on into the morning through celebrations and blowing off steam, and that's always been the hardest part for me actually - I can do the build, I can do the performance, I can do the take-down, but I cannot keep up with the partying at the end of all of it. I am such a delicate flower when it comes to that, but these guys it's like 'where are you pulling the energy for this from? how you doing it?' and it is that joie de vivre, that joy of life, that keeps everybody going.

Chris Bullzini: Because there is the hard work side and that is really real, then there does have to be a reward, and it's really really rewarding when people come up at the end of the show and say how much they've been moved.

Phoebe Bullzini: It's about the endorphines you get from performing, but also the feedback you get from performing, and being able to touch people and entertain people.

Paul Green: I mean there's always energy coming back at us from the audience, from the crowd.

Bim Mason: Of course you're giving out with a lot, but the more you give out the more you get back. It does fill you - the applause or laughter.

Mike Wright: The biggest reward's leaving something behind; an impression, a thought, an inspiration, make a change.

Kate Hartoch: My name's Kate Hartoch, I've worked as a producer, behind the scenes, helping companies to achieve their artistic vision. Generally circus people are really brilliant at working as a team. I think that kind of more DIY attitude, that does roll-on from traditional circus, where people muck in, and do a bit of everything is really special, really beautiful, and it makes the circus world really lovely to work in.

Paul Green: I mean I'd relate it to a family but it's a family of choice.

Phoebe Bullzini: It is an extended family, that's not a blood family but it's people that you trust your life in completely and so you become really close.

Paul Green: A rehearsal is going on for a show which is going to be on next Tuesday and Wednesday. So it's a group of physical performers, visual artists and sound designers. I do walkabout character stuff with the circus so I'm kinda throwing that into the pot as well. Some of us only just met each other last week and so it's a really intensive 10-day programme ending with two performances.

Doug Francisco: I think people are tired of digital experiences, and it's coming round that people want like a real thing made by a real person. That's where things like circus and theatre come into it, and what's interesting is the way that's kind of infiltrating with music festivals say - we're reaching out to younger generations that's kind of taken circus out of its own comfort zone, and into new realms.

Kate Hartoch: For me contemporary circus is performance that has an ambition to be more than just entertainment, and ambition to communicate either a story or a concept and is devised in a very different way from traditional circus.

Bin Mason: Of course traditional circus relies on established formats, it's familiar. Contemporary circus I think it's much more about the group, the collective. I think it does have more of a sense of a bigger world view, of going outside the little bubble which is the circus tent.

Billy Alwen: Billy Alwen, artistic director of Cirque Bijou. Well, there is definitely a political with a small 'p' side to what we do, because we take circus, outdoor arts, to audiences often don't see live performance in that way. I've always had a quite a good connection with traditional circuses, you know, I've worked with Gerry Cottle. I think there's a lot to learn from traditional circus, from skills, and there's obviously a crossover between us. But the world that we make shows in is very different, it's not big tops, it's in outdoor spaces, in city centres, it's spectacles, it's in theatres, but it's still making circus, it's still about the skills.

Chris Bullzini: I don't like to see this polarisation, I don't like to see the division. I believe that Circus is Circus, and what we need to do is not say 'oh that's like that – it's called trad, and that's like that - it's called contemporary', and just like embrace it all.

Kate Hartoch: Bristol is an important place for circus because we have a good infrastructure here for people to come and train, and make work here. I think Bristol has a strong DIY attitude as far as circus goes. I think that there's been a lot of influence from underground music scenes, and summer festival scenes that creates a radical approach to the work that's made.

Paul Green: There is something about Bristol; it's certainly held a lot of people here that had been very nomadic before. I'd never lived anywhere very long before coming to Bristol. There's a lot of creative people packed into a very small space.

Doug Francisco: Circomedia being established here quite a long time ago, and Fooltime before it, has meant that a lot of people have come and trained here.

Bim Mason: My name's Bim Mason and I'm the co-founder of Circomedia and its Artistic and Education Director. Once we got Circomedia going, ex-students would stay and then start to make work, and it was connected with the street theatre scene.

Street performer: Children in the audience, this is a dangerous stunt, I'm a professional that's why I work on the streets, OK.

Phoebe Bullzini: Grassroots things go on in Bristol in it's always had a kind of slightly rebellious side to it as well, hasn't it?

Street performer: Kids don't do this at home, do it at school.

Chris Bullzini: It's really different to any other city and there really is this open doors policy, and this support from local government. There is always this feeling that they want creative, cool stuff to happen in this city.

Billy Alwen: The work that comes out of Bristol is very unique. When we make shows we can often make our shows with Bristol based artists and with other Bristol based companies expertise, whether it's rigging, equipment... and I think that's a great export for Bristol really.

Kid: I like the man on the upside down table in the sky, it was really funny, especially when his trousers fell down.

Billy Alwen: Bristol's got that energy I think. It's important that there's a lot of young people coming into circus in Bristol all the time and giving it new ideas.

Ruby Burgess: I'm Ruby Burgess, I'm a third year student on the BA course at Circomedia. This afternoon I've been making a mask, I've made a mould of my face and then we've used clay and plaster of Paris. It's got a big nose with massive nostrils and sort of turned up at the end, and it's got big eyebrows pointed into the middle so it looks like someone who is angry but looking down at you at the same time.

Interviewer: And what's that piece going to be about then?

Ruby Burgess: It's about women as consumable objects. I'm going to use food like how 'sweetie', 'honey pie' - women get named after food and that sort of thing. To me the stuff I make needs to have something behind it, some kind of social political message so finding ways to put those into circus is what I'm really interested in.

Mike Wright: Circus is now, it's here, it's vital, it's risky. And you're never satisfied. Even now at 70 there's still the same challenges about having to communicate something, and not just do stuff.

Paul Green: It's certainly full of incredibly bright intelligent people who have a philosophy and an ethos.

Doug Francisco: I feel incredibly honoured that we've played our part in the long story of circus in Bristol. I wish I could be here to see where it is in 250 years time.

These stories have been collected and edited by multi-media producer, Tot Foster of Wildman and Herring Ltd.



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