

Behind the Scenes

History undergraduates, Tara Jones and Daniel Smith find out about the circus detectives at Orchard Secondary School.

Year 8 have been researching and investigating the history of circus to help commemorate the anniversary of the first circus in Bristol 250 years ago. The journey to becoming circus detectives began with a visit to Bristol's Theatre Collection, one of the world's largest archives of British theatre history and live art. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection/>

The students began with research on Bertram Mills Circus and Menagerie located in London. Bertram Mills was challenged to put on a show after exclaiming, "If I could not give the people a better circus than that for their money, I'd eat my hat" after watching Wilkins Circus at the Olympia. "Zeboy" caught the interest of many.



Bertram Mills circus pamphlet and itinerary courtesy of Bristol University Theatre Collection. (MM/REF/TH/SU/C1/17/6)

The students also interviewed local residents about their memories of circus in Bristol. Archie and Shay interviewed Wendy and Angela, who shared their fascinating memories of the circus parade that took place every May bank holiday. They also reminisced on watching Billy Smart's Circus every Boxing Day; a Christmas family tradition. Tiffany and Kedesha interviewed Val. Val was fourteen when she first experienced the circus in Bristol which was held at Bristol Downs. She remembered clowns, chimps, lions and seals that performed tricks throughout the show. Yuusef and Sasmit interviewed Tony and Nancy. Tony and Nancy illustrated the broad experiences people had with the circus. Tony told the boys how living in the city he was able to go to the circus every day it was in town, although Nancy living in rural Ireland, only experienced the circus once. Malkeet and Rishan interviewed Shelia and Derek who both noted how the most memorable experience was the animals' performances. Both Malkeet and Rishan related these memories to the experience of riding elephants and their use in Indian traditions which they saw when they were growing up.

When the students reflected on what they had enjoyed Archie said that he was happy to have had the chance to talk to the older generation and hear about their memories. This was something he did not get to do often. Tiffany responded by saying she was happy to see the people happy, which made her happy also. Yuusef also commented on the importance of recording and reflecting on these memories that would have otherwise been lost.

Also during this project, we took the students from Orchard School to a private viewing of the 'Clown: The eggs-hibition' at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery. During this exploration of the Gallery's unique exhibition the students got to see how clowns secured their signature look through the collection of clown eggs which were patiently hand crafted by the Clowns International organisation.

The Year 9 Art Class had been making their own Bristol Clown Register (below) that were later on display at the Museum At Night Circus Spectacular.



As the project came to an end the students were asked to plan and film a two-minute video evaluating what they had learned through the Circus250 project. Yuusef, Rishan and Sasmit teamed up to film a story of P.T. Barnum that addressed the concerns of animal welfare. One by one they were led through a 'hoop of fire' demonstrating the safety of the act. Ciaren and Malkeet decided to hold a homage to the intergenerational meeting and construct an interview with an experienced clown played by Ciaren. Mai, Julia, Shay and Archie all decided to show off their hula hoop skills whilst telling the audience what they enjoyed and learnt during the project.

At the end of the project the students were asked to reflect on what they had enjoyed the most during the project as well as what they had learnt. Mai and Julia said they enjoyed going on the trips that the project offered, whilst Tiffany and Sasmit enjoyed interviewing the local residents in the memory exchange. Archie and Shay said that they learnt that animals were often subject to cruelty in the circus. Whilst, Malkeet and Rishan both enjoyed the 'Eggs-hibition' and trips out of school. Ciaren's favourite part of the project was summarising what he had learnt during his two-minute video. Every student enjoyed the entirety of the project and was rewarded with a ticket to the Circus Spectacular held at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.