

Animystic Productions

Animystic Productions is the creative project of Jake Ruddle and Ayla Terzi. Using puppetry and sculpture, they create amazing, moving, thought-provoking art. Their work is all about incredible creatures and exciting meetings.

Tara Jones and Daniel Smith, 3rd year History undergraduates at the University of the West of England found out more...



Photograph of Hessi and Kalli, Jake and Ayla's elephant creations

Why do you think animals were used in the circus?

We think there are two sides to this answer, the positive and well meaning side, and the more sinister side.

On the one hand, animals always have been and still are amazing things to behold and enjoy. A Circus wanting to share and indulge an audience's curiosity would find animals to be a fantastic way to do this. Who wouldn't be impressed by seeing tamed tigers and performing elephants in front of your very eyes? They are able to cause a spectacle without even trying.

On the other hand, animals did not have the same rights that they do today. They were a free source of entertainment who couldn't complain in the same way that humans can. We're quite sure that a large appeal to many owners would have been the apparent ease of keeping them. Ready to roll out whenever there was a need for it.

What animals gained the most traction in Britain?

We would imagine that horses would have gained the most traction. Purely due to the fact that they were more readily available and recognisable to more circuses. As well as this they are already domesticated and so easier to train into what a circus would need.

What acts did these animals perform?

We would think they would perform dressage, balance, and work with the performers in various speed-based acts.

Were any of the acts dangerous to the animal or to the audience?

The levels at which the animals were expected to work would likely to have at times been very dangerous to the animals. And with this in mind, the audience as well. You cannot ever have full control over an animal. Particularly one that is stressed, scared, or in pain.

Why was it these animals excited the British populous?

The spectacle and the beauty would have been captivating. Seeing them perform the extraordinary would be amazing. As well as that, people simply love animals. We love seeing them doing nothing more than just sleeping, so seeing them jump through hoops would be almost too much to bear.

Where do you think the animals from the circus originated from?

We believe that some of the animals may have been bred and bought, e.g. horses. But some of the animals will have been captured from the wild and trained, e.g. elephants. However, there are some examples where animals have been bought from zoos, who may have been bred in captivity.

How did the circus treat these animals and did these treatments breach the animals' rights?

Purely based on our opinions, we imagine that the quality of life for the animals wouldn't have been very high. There would have been specific carers for the animals, but just down the very fact that the animals would be travelling, performing, (some in isolation due to cost; e.g. elephants), they were not able to exhibit natural behaviour. This in itself is one of the greatest slights to an animal's rights that there can ever be. As well as this, the upkeep of animals such as elephants is extraordinary! It is very unlikely that they were able to access the full breadth of their dietary needs and so would have had severe deficiencies in vital nutrients.

So yes, by today's law's standards they most definitely breached the animal's rights. By nature's standards, they most definitely breached the animal's rights. Though by the laws at the time, we believe that they most likely didn't breach any rights, as the level of knowledge about animal needs has grown so significantly since then.

Many performance animals underwent taxidermic restoration after death and some describe this process as a second life of performance. Do you share these thoughts or was there a problem with this tradition?

On a cultural level we do not believe that this particular practice is problematic. So long as the animal is treated with the respect it deserves and was not killed for the very purpose of creating the taxidermy, it is causing no harm. This does not extend to taxidermy that has been obtained for taxidermy's sake. (e.g. hunting and killing for the purpose of preserving the body through taxidermy.)

On a more personal level, we are here to celebrate the life, behaviour and energy of the animals we portray through our puppetry. We see taxidermy more as a way of engaging in the fantasy of what an animal might have been like, which is not what we like to do. It doesn't celebrate the animal in an effective enough way to justify its existence.



Hessi and Kalli making new friends during one of their performances

In regard to your Animystic productions...

Why were you drawn to the use of animals within the circus and what caused you to kickstart your organisation?

Our interest in using animals actually came about separately from our interest in their use in the circus. We are both sculptors who greatly admire both the natural and the performative world. It was a natural step for us to begin to play with puppetry because of this.

Our initial kick start into using elephants particularly was from the want to generate interest in endangered species. Our two elephants are anatomically comparable to the endangered Sumatran Elephant, and we found that through using puppetry we have an exciting and engaging way to pass on education about these beautiful creatures.

It has only really dawned on us through the celebration of Circus 250 how well our puppets can be applied to circus culture. However, since engaging more with circus skills and events, we are incorporating more elements such as hand to hand acrobatics into our puppetry designs for future projects.



Ayla performing as Kalli as Jake acts as a doctor teaching the public about the elephants and their importance

Were you aware that acts such as Zeboy from Bertram Mills' Circus had existed, and did they contribute to the inspiration of your organisation?



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

We were not aware but are always delighted to find out about such things! For us the idea of puppetry and costume is completely captivating, and any parallels we find in historic or contemporary performance are wonderful!

You can find more about Animystic productions in the following places:

Instagram: @Anymystic_Productions
Facebook: @Anymysticproductions
Email: animysticproductions@hotmail.com