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HD **MOVING TIME**

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COVER STORY

Once seen as revolutionary, Circus Oz is now seen as the Establishment, writes JOHN BAILEY.

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Moving house is hell. Ask Anni Davey, a Circus Oz veteran who took up the job of co-ordinating the **company**'s shift to its glossy new Collingwood home.

"Moving into the new building, I've been reminded how much shit Circus Oz has got. When I say shit, I really mean that in the nicest possible way, because I go through all those props and there's so many memories of all those great shows that people did. There's all this stuff. Now we can see it all because it's in these open shelves and it's full of resources."

Circus Oz isn't one of those homemakers who only keeps the absolute essentials, either. It's more of a hoarder, and the new venue's prop storehouse includes items that go back to the very beginning. Hundreds of gadgets and outfits and set pieces and safety items line shelves that tower ceilingwards, and each has its own story.

Programming director Matt Hughes pulls out a time-wearied miniature chariot that belonged to faux-stuntman act Special Robert. "This is a chariot that Special Robert used to ride in on. When we did it at the Melbourne Town Hall we had a draught horse. I think it's the only animal act Circus Oz has ever had. We had to bring the draught horse in on a lift, and although people wanted the horse to parade around, what the clowns wanted was for it to have a shit on stage. But then someone would have had to clean it up. I think we were required to have a nappy."

On one shelf is a pile of skateboards, but they never appeared on a Circus Oz stage. They were used by performers lying flat on their stomachs in the tiny space beneath that stage, whizzing from one side to somehow appear on the other within seconds. There's also no shortage of mechanisms to suspend performers high above, including the harnesses that allowed an entire band to play upside-down near the peak of the big top.

"There was only a certain amount of time that act could go for before people would start to feel dizzy," says Hughes.

Until you see so much history dusted off in one space, it's easy to forget that Circus Oz is one of the country's oldest pillars of culture. It pre-dates both the Melbourne Festival and Melbourne Fringe by a good handful of years, and institutions such as our comedy festival and Bell Shakespeare are unruly teenagers in comparison. Now, at 36, Australia's leading circus outfit has finally settled down in a new Collingwood home tailor-built to its requirements. It's a homecoming, of sorts - the **company** was largely created by the sorts of rabble-rousers who frequented Carlton's Pram Factory in the late '70s and flung around wild ideas over coffee at Marios in Fitzroy.

The anarchy and big dreams of that era gave birth to the irreverent, DIY spirit that was synonymous with the fledgling Oz. It was New Circus - animal-free, a punk aesthetic, no desire to do things the traditional

way. "We began as part of a larger cultural push against a sort of conservatism in theatre," says costume designer Laurel Frank. "When we started there was not a great deal of circus activity in Australia. There were a number of touring circus families that had been around for a long time, but we were at the forefront of the new circus movement."

Frank is one of the founding members of the **company**, and has been a part of its history across four decades. "When we started we were in a basement in Carlton, and everything happened from there. We built our first tent and painted the trucks and made the costumes. It was exciting but inhospitable. For a while I went to having a sewing machine in my bedroom."

The **company** later set up in a dilapidated warehouse in Kensington, which was "flood-prone and lined with asbestos". After various moves, Circus Oz landed in Port Melbourne, where it was to stay for the next 15 years. In comparison to the previous spaces her costume workshop had operated out of, the Port Melbourne office "seemed like paradise but was actually a very cramped and dusty room right next to the rehearsal space, so we had the band booming up at us all the time".

It's only fitting that Frank's new costume studio is the one of the best in the house - indeed, one of the most attractive studios in Melbourne. "We have the best space in the building. That's what everybody says. We have this lovely south light, so it's going to be very even all year, and we're quite protected from harsh north and west sun which we've had in other places and which are really bad for fading costumes."

During the **lead**-up to a new production, there will be about eight or so people working under Frank's command. Right now she has two milliners and three people pattern-making and costume-cutting.

The main feeling Circus Oz's new home has afforded Frank "is that I can breathe out". She says it with a palpable sense of relief. She's been holding her breath that long? "Holding your breath for 36 years, I know!" she laughs. "It's not good for you!"

At first, Frank and her colleagues were the bolshie young revolutionaries reinventing circus. But what happens when the rebels become the establishment? When you've been kicking against the pricks so long that you find yourself in their place?

"Being an institution is good and bad," she says. "We define ourselves as that, but also against it."

In the beginning, Circus Oz was "trying to use circus to make political statements or talk about important things".

"Those initial aims have probably softened as the circus community has grown in Australia and a lot of other younger, leaner companies have grown up and picked up that mantle. We've had to redefine ourselves now we're not brash, young, necessarily cutting-edge in the way we felt ourselves to be when we started."

Davey began performing with Circus Oz in 1987. She says that there's a natural tension when a **company** defined by its independent spirit achieves the status of a national icon.

"Absolutely, yeah. The tension is constantly fought at the coalface, which is in the boardrooms and offices of the Australia Council and the funding bodies and government. The thing that Circus Oz has done really successfully over the years is to maintain its purpose and its way of doing things in spite of the pressure to do it like everybody else. They keep going, 'Get yourself a blah blah and do this and make sure you've got that', and Circus Oz goes, 'No, we'll do it our way, actually'. We've been doing this for a long time. We know how to do it. We do it our way."

Davey says that over the years "there has been pressure to de-collectivise, to have a hierarchical form of reporting that they can read, or reflects more familiarly for them".

"There was a lot of pressure in the last few years to force artistic turnover. The other pressure obviously is that people get angry if you say something about their government in the show. So there's that balance as well. It's a balancing act. To go, 'Yes, you give us money, but you're the government and it's arts' purpose to comment on the government of the day'."

Hughes says that in 1978 the **company** "started as a true collective in those days and then gradually morphed into the organisation we are now, where it is a collective in the way we make decisions, but there's more departments specialising".

"When I was originally in the **company** you'd put the tent up and then you'd perform. The problem with that was that the audience didn't see you putting the tent up. They only saw the resulting lack of **energy** when you were on stage performing."

One of the implications of the Circus Oz's early days as a collective was that everyone did everything, which means that even Frank took to the stage as a performer. "You didn't have to be any good, so, hey, I was in the show," she says.

Now the **company** has various departments - and hires people to do the tent-building - but like Davey and Hughes, many performers go on to work elsewhere within Circus Oz. "There's not many career paths for circus performers post-circus," says Davey, "so we do try and offer a career path, even if it's an informal one. For example, Mel Fyfe was the strongwoman for years and years and is now our **operations** manager. I was a performer for years and now I work with the new building and do all sorts of other things."

Performers who have recently left the ensemble are frequently offered teaching gigs with Oz's public classes program, "so they've got some **bread**-and-**butter** work as they work out what they want to do. There's a lot of people around the periphery who are still here and who know stuff about what's been going on."

The collegiate atmosphere is probably in large part due to the shared perils circus performers face. In 1991, Davey broke her neck and both wrists performing an aerial trick. She was five months in traction, and spent the entire time thinking over her routine so she wouldn't forget it. That kind of get-back-on-the-horse-that-threw-you mindset seems characteristic of the art.

"I think it's a characteristic of circus performers, because circus is a series of setbacks," says Davey. "And we're very familiar with injury. You work in this arena, you hurt yourself. You get used to pain. A lot of our work is very painful and it's something you have to overcome. I'**m** not just talking about injuries. You get somebody on a trapeze for the first time and everybody goes, 'Oh no, that really hurts!'. You say, 'Yeah, that's right'. You have to get used to it."

Hughes says that circus is safer than sport, however, since everyone is at least on the same team. When the **company** is on the road, there's still that sense of all-in that drove the team back in 1978. "To have 12 people on stage is very unusual. A few of the big commercial companies do, but we're a **group** of 20 people on the road, whereas Cirque du Soleil moves with 65. It's quite a different model. It's a lifestyle. You have input. When you're in the ensemble you get to decide what you want to tell the audience, and although there's an artistic director, he's a facilitator, not an editor."

Mike Finch is that artistic director, and he says the upcoming new show, But Wait, There's More, is concerned with the history of entertainment. "The whole **company** comes out of a wicker trunk at the beginning, like an old vaudevillian **company** that's been packed in an old road case for 50 years. Gradually the show accelerates until we get to the end of the first half, and these acts are almost like Australia's Got Talent on speed, sped up until we reach this frantic flying trapeze act with all of the performers in it."

But while the show does make some pointed comments about the role of circus in the screen age, Hughes says Circus Oz will always have something going for it that can't be saved to disk.

"These days you can see the best physical acts on television, or you can watch sport, but what people really want at our show is to have an interaction with people. To see someone on stage and see that they're affected by you. If you clap or something more, they react to it, and that sort of dialogue between the audience and the performer is what live performance is about."

THE **BRAND** LEADERS

ROOF-WALK

Along with costume designer Laurel Frank, Tim Coldwell is the only founding member of Circus Oz still with the **company** after 36 years. And he's still performing, too. His most memorable act involves what might be the oldest piece of equipment in the Oz storeroom, though its one you're not supposed to see. His Roof-Walk has him play out a **B**-grade detective yarn upside down, shuffling around the ceiling as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

NANJING ACROBATIC TROUPE

Many of the iconic Circus Oz acts owe their existence to a cross-cultural exchange with a **group** of **Chinese** acrobats in the 1980s. The Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe taught the Aussies a range of new skills such as pole-climbing, hula-hoop and **group**-bike. The new Circus Oz building even has a room decorated in memory of the collaboration, its walls lined with **Chinese** circus sayings such as: "Miss one day, you know. Miss two days, your coach knows. Miss three days, the audience knows."

STRONG WOMEN

One of the founding principles of Circus Oz was gender **equity**, and the **company** has featured a range of women taking on the feats once limited to the traditional circus strongman. Longtime performer Mel Fyfe, for instance, was known for her half-tonne leg press, and the Circus Oz kitchen still houses her Breville of Death: an oversized sandwich press lined with hundreds of rusty nails, between which she would lie while someone tap-danced on its lid.

THE KANGAROOS

Kangaroos have been one of Oz's most recurrent symbols. While most of the **company**'s performers have probably suited up in the legs and tail over the years, the earliest appearance of the fauna was probably during the legendary 32-week season Circus Oz played at The Last Laugh in 1979.

BLAKFLIP

Dale Woodbridge-Brown isn't the first indigenous performer to work with Circus Oz, but he is the first to come through its BLAKflip. A Kamilaroi man from Mungindi, he was eight when Circus Oz visited his hometown and inspired his future career. Through BLAKflip, the **company** now has a regular program for training and recruiting indigenous acts.

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