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Source: *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Popular Entertainments (Mar., 1974), pp. 65-70

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144863>

Accessed: 09/03/2010 23:13

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The Classification of Circus Techniques

By Hovey Burgess

In writing on theatre, various authors have pointed out that circus-type performances have always been more prevalent than performances of literary drama; that circus-type performance has been a deep secondary tradition of the theatre from which the legitimate stage has repeatedly drawn new strength and vitality; and that the circus is looked to by the public "for violent satisfactions, the intentions of which do not deceive them."¹ I use the term "circus-type" to emphasize an important distinction between the very ancient "circus-type" skills of contortionists, equilibrists, tumblers, jugglers, clowns, etc., and the modern form of "circus," even though the latter is the most obviously significant depository of the former.

The modern circus is by no means a direct descendant of the ancient Roman circus. Roman circuses, such as Circus Maximus, were architectural structures designed primarily for chariot races. Some confusion arises from the frequent translation

¹Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 84.

The title photo, courtesy of Alexander M. Voloshin, shows Zinovy B. Gurevich teaching at the Moscow Circus School.

of "panem et circenses" as "bread and circuses" when, in fact, it means "bread and races."² While circus-type performances probably did take place in the circuses, they most likely also took place in the theatres and amphitheatres. These ancient performances, in any case, were not called "circuses."

The first modern circus was not called a circus either. It was called the New British Riding School or Amphitheatre Riding Ring and was built by Philip Astley (1742–1814) in 1770. Exhibitions given there combined several elements: the riding ring, cavalry horsemanship, clowning derived from the *commedia dell'arte*, vaulting as developed to a highly skilled art in the sixteenth-century French courts, and other circus-type skills brought from ancient to modern times via the mimes and jongleurs of the Middle Ages. This form was to spread worldwide—although not always along parallel lines—and to become known as "circus," "zirkus," "circo," "cirque," "tsirk," etc. The one thing that has remained constant and universal is the diameter of the circus ring, which Astley set at about forty-two feet. This seems to be the diameter that creates the steadiest speed and the optimum balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces for a man attempting to maintain his balance on the back of a galloping horse.

In the final analysis, then, the essence of circus cannot be associated with any one particular time and place, nor even solely with the two-hundred-year history of the circus as a theatrical form. Rather, it must also take into account the origins of that form—the work of the ancient acrobats, medieval jongleurs, courtly vaulting masters, etc.—and the as yet unknown innovations that lie somewhere in the future.

In 1956, I began a continuing search for this "essence of circus." I first met Carlo Mazzone-Clementi in 1966 when the *commedia* and other theatrical masks of Amleto Sartori were displayed at the Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum.³ We spoke the same "language": Knowing that I had worked with circuses, he suddenly raised his arms and bent his knees. The meaning of this was unmistakable to me, and I responded by jumping on his shoulders. He was a good "understander." (In circus parlance, the bottom man is an "understander," as opposed to a "top-mounter.") It was through his support that I began a career of teaching circus techniques for actors.⁴

As a circus pedagogue, I searched for a classification of circus techniques on which to base my teaching. I found only two lists that were helpful. The first was an outline of approximately two hundred basically unclassified circus stunts by George Chindahl in his book, *A History of the Circus in America* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1959; pp. 196–207). The second was an illustrated list of sixteen regular and forty-three supplementary gymnastic apparatus and their parts compiled by Hartley Price and Joseph Giallombardo in *Gymnastics and Tumbling* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1959. Reprinted, New York: Arco, 1973; pp. 51–58). It included such circus equipment as the trapeze, unicycle, tight wire, and teeterboard.

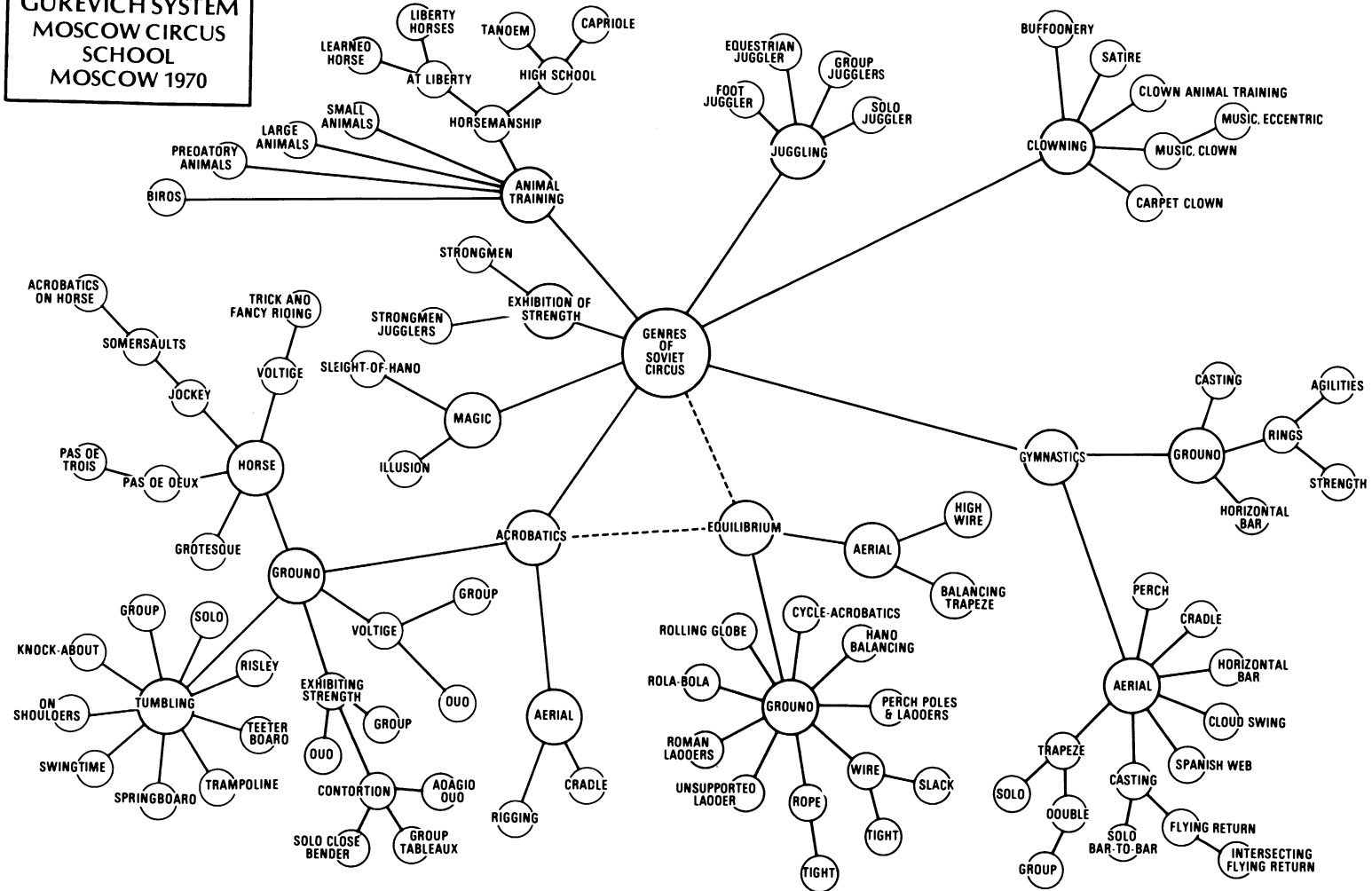
I have also been influenced—as were Jacques Copeau, Jacques Lecoq, and Mazzone-Clementi—by "hèbertisme," a detailed analysis of movement compiled by Georges Hébert (1875–1957) in his encyclopedic, five-volume, 3,500-page treatise *L'Éducation Physique, Virile, et Morale par la Méthode Naturelle* (Paris: Vuibert, 1936). His approach to movement is based on a direct analysis of the following ten categories: walking, running, jumping, "quadrupédie," climbing, equilibrium, lifting,

²This error is found in such standard texts as Earl May's *The Circus From Rome to Ringling*.

³It is interesting to note that Brander Matthews—the first man in the United States to be appointed a professor of dramatic literature—had, as a youth, learned elementary juggling and flying trapeze. In a practice session, he "dropped the bar" to Jules Léotard, originator of the flying trapeze.

⁴See "Circus and the Actor," an interview with Hovey Burgess in *The Drama Review* (March, 1972), T-53.

**GUREVICH SYSTEM
MOSCOW CIRCUS
SCHOOL
MOSCOW 1970**



throwing, defense, and swimming. "Quadrupédie" means "on all fours," but for Hébert it also includes any activity that transcends "bipédie," such as tumbling, walking on one's hands or undulating like a snake. His section on equilibrium contains eighty-four categories, ranging from "natural" actions, such as crossing a stream by balancing on a log, to occupational hazards, such as construction work at high altitudes, and to circus skills, such as walking on a tightrope, hand balancing, and human pyramids. In each case, Hébert sees circus skills as a natural conclusion to the continual development of basic movement skills. Juggling, for example, represents an advanced level of throwing:

And finally there is juggling, a very particular game of skill (of throwing and catching); its range is limitless. But it is a difficult art that is only accessible to professionals, or to amateurs who tie themselves down to a long apprenticeship. The elementary exercises consist of juggling first two balls in one hand (the left as well as the right) and then three balls in two hands. Beyond this, to manipulate five objects begins transcendental juggling, reserved to an elite. (Hébert, Vol. 4, pp. 746-748)

My first discovery of a real attempt to classify circus techniques came in 1970 when I visited the Moscow Circus School.⁵ The director, Alexander M. Voloshin (1905-), permitted me and my wife to spend an entire week at the school as observers. It was not until the second day that I noticed a large colored chart mounted on the wall. It consisted of increasingly smaller circles that radiated from a single large circle in the center. All of the blue circles were labeled with the names of some form of juggling; the yellow, forms of clowning; the green, forms of gymnastics, etc. Our student host, Boris Moskalenko, with the approval of the faculty member who designed the chart, Zinovy B. Gurevich (1913-), presented me with a 2' by 3' black and white copy of the chart. The diagram that accompanies this article is not merely a literal translation of the chart into English, but an attempt to transpose it into the technical jargon of American circus performers.

Gurevich's chart is not meant to be definitive and, in fact, there have been some revisions.⁶ Previously, for example, there was a line from the center circle to the circle labeled equilibrium, but this has now been deleted and equilibrium is presently considered a subdivision of acrobatics; the dotted lines in my rendition of the chart represent these two ways of thought. At the Moscow Circus School the basic curriculum—even for clowns—consists of only five areas from the Gurevich chart: juggling, hand balancing, tight wire, tumbling, and gymnastics. The last two are the extended development of the akrobatika and the gimnastika of Soviet physical education.

Because of the amorphous quality of circus techniques, any attempt to classify them, however useful, will be somewhat arbitrary. My own efforts, which started before I saw the Gurevich chart and which are still being revised, have led me to a division into three broad categories:

1. **Juggling:** balancing, tossing, catching, kicking, twirling, and

⁵The Russian circus was nationalized in 1919 and the Moscow Circus School was established by the Soviet government in 1927, making it the first such school in the world. Today, "Soviet circus" includes 50 permanent circuses, 13 summer tent circuses, 13 animal circuses, 50 teams doing concert acts, 6,000 employes and performers, more than 500 circus acts, 32,000 annual performances, and 43 million spectators annually.

⁶See Gurevich's "Zhanre Sovetskogo Tsirka" in *Sovetskaia Tsirka* (1961, no. 2).

BURGESS CIRCUS TECHNIQUE CHART

January 1974

PRELIMINARY

ESSENTIAL

DIVERSIFIED

J
U
G
G
I
N
G



Balancing objects: **cue stick**, broom, chair, feather, etc.

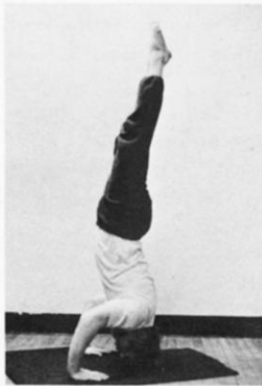


Toss juggling of objects: nuclear (balls), linear (**clubs**), and curvilinear (rings, plates).



Manipulating gyroscopic objects: **devil sticks**, diabolo spools, rope and plate spinning, etc.

E
Q
U
I
L
I
B
R
I
U
M



Headstands and hand balancing.



Balancing: on rolling objects (unicycle), "stilting" objects (stilts, **unsupported ladder**), and human columns.

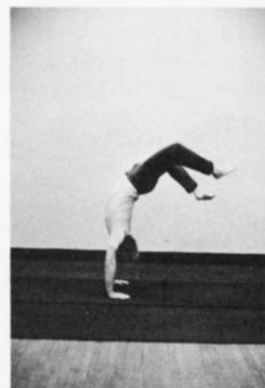


Rigging: **trapeze**, horizontal bar, slack wire, tight wire, etc.

V
A
U
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T
I
N
G



Jumping: broad jump, high jump, jumping rope, **hoop jumping**, etc.



Turning the body on its long (pirouette), medium (**hand-springs**, somersaults), and short (cartwheels) axes.



Catapults: springs (**spring-board**, trampoline), swings (trapeze flybar), and human pitches (risley, adagio).

spinning of objects; knife-throwing; sleight-of-hand; puppet manipulation; trick and fancy roping, etc.

2. **Equilibrium:** *balancing on rolling and “stilting” objects; balancing on and hanging from rigging; hand balancing; human pyramids; skating; skiing; surfing; horseback riding, etc.*

3. **Vaulting:** *jumping rope; broad jump; tumbling; flying trapeze; springboard; trampoline; teeterboard, etc.*

This division can be compared, if only metaphorically, to Newton’s third law of motion: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In vaulting, what we are interested in is the action. In juggling, we are concerned with the reaction. In equilibrium, it is the interaction between action and reaction that interests us: the equilibrist adds and subtracts movement to stay in balance.

Reading down my chart, the column on the left represents simple actions, which many people can perform without previous training. The middle column includes essential circus techniques, usually done with a minimum of equipment. The column on the right represents more esoteric activities, usually involving more complex laws of physics and requiring more diversified equipment.

Although my chart is smaller than the Gurevich chart, the intention is to provide a framework for everything. Clowning is not a separate category, since a clown, too, makes use of these three basic aspects of circus movement. In a similar manner, performing animals, such as a sea lion balancing an object on its nose, also participate in these same basic categories.

The desirable system of classification is one that facilitates—but does not limit—both training and understanding of circus techniques. While combining circus and theatre may be a “good idea,” watered-down circus for actors is ultimately self-defeating. We must go as far as necessary in our understanding and development of good circus.