



Women In Circus Symposium

Western Bank Library
Wednesday 5th August
9.30am – 4.30pm



**University of
Sheffield**

**The University
Library**

Speakers' papers and biographies

Anna Clements:



Anna Clements has more than 20 years' experience working in information technology, digital transformation and senior library roles in higher education. She has been the University of Sheffield Director of Library Services and University Librarian since 2021 and provides strategic leadership for the University Library.

Anna serves on the executive board of LIBER (Association of European Research Libraries), Content Strategy Group of SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) and the White Rose Libraries Executive Board. She is also a member of national and international academic library networks, including N8, RLUK and IATUL.

Arantza Barrutia:



Arantza Barrutia is the Senior Archivist at the National Fairground and Circus Archive. Her career in the heritage sector expands 25 years including museums, art galleries and archives. Arantza has a BA in Fine Arts, Conservation and Preservation from the University of the Basque Country, an MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester and an MLitt in Archives and Records Management from the University of Dundee. She has extensive experience in all aspects of collections management and stewardship, curation and community engagement amongst others.

Dr Dea Birkett:



Dr Dea Birkett is Director of Circus250, a circus creation and touring company. She's an award-winning British writer, journalist, broadcaster and former circus performer.

Dea is the author of nine books including *Serpent in Paradise*, *Jella* (winner Somerset Maugham Award) and *Spinsters Abroad*. From 2012-16, she was Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the University of Brighton. Dea was a Guardian feature writer and columnist. She founded and ran charity Kids in Museums, an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation. She has a history PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Her circus career began in 1992, when Dea ran away to Togni Circus in Italy through a Winston Churchill Fellowship. As a broadcaster, she made and presented *Who Killed the Circus?* documentary on the last Ringling show for BBC. She has written and presented films for Channel4, through her Bafta-winning production company Many Rivers Films, including documentary *Circus Days*, *Circus Nights* about the challenges facing Circus in Britain. In 2018, she stepped down from Kids in Museums and established Circus250 to promote and celebrate the 250th anniversary of modern circus. Circus250 now makes and tours shows internationally www.circus250.org www.deabirkett.com

Rebecca Truman:



Rebecca Truman is the founder and artistic director of Skinning the Cat, a ground-breaking, all-female circus troupe from Bradford. From 1988 to 2003 the company was at the vanguard of the contemporary circus movement in Britain. Emerging from the counter-cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s, these groups carried a message of social justice and protest linked to women's liberation movements, gay rights, peace, anti-racism, environmental conservation and other activism.

Rebecca's circus career centred on Skinning the Cat until her retirement from the air in 2003. Since then, she has remained a prominent figure in circus and the visual arts. She has lectured at Bradford School of Art and authored her book, *Aerialist*. She has also continued specialising in costume making, special effects and rig design, life casting, poetry, sculpture and mask-making.

Rope Woman

Rebecca Truman's talk will explore her life and work as an aerial performer, company director and artist. Rebecca will share her inspiration and processes for developing characters and narratives. She will discuss her creative style including her unique approach to aerial costumes and rig design. She will also explore how the innovative work developed during her aerial circus career has shaped her subsequent and ongoing creative practice.

Professor Vanessa Toulmin:



Professor Vanessa Toulmin is the Director of City & Culture at the University of Sheffield and the Curator and Producer of Festival of the Mind and Ideas Bazaar. Since 2020 she has been the Chair of the Morecambe Winter Gardens Preservation Trust.

Vanessa graduated from Archaeology at the University of Sheffield, where she conducted a PhD inspired by her showman roots entitled “The Social and Oral History of Travelling Showpeople from 1890 to the Present Day”. In 1994, she established the National Fairground and Circus Archive at the University of Sheffield with the support of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and the Fairground Association of Great Britain, which she developed into a major international research resource into the history of popular entertainment. In 2007 Vanessa became a professor taking a Chair in Early Film and Popular Entertainment, making her the first academic to be awarded a Personal Chair in this subject in any university. Vanessa is the author of several books, including “The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon”, “Electric Edwardians”, “Pleasurelands” and four books on the architecture and history of Blackpool. She has also curated Show of Shows a national exhibition celebrating 250 years of Circus with Sheffield, Tyne & Wear and Great Yarmouth Museums and she has published papers on Patty Astley and Miss La La. Additionally, Vanessa has acted as historical consultant on “Circus Come to Town” and Madame Tussaud for BBC 4 and presented internationally on circus history in France and in the US including at Ringling Museum and the World Circus Museum.

An introduction to the Aerial Body – Women in Flight

Professor Vanessa will provide an overview of the history of the aerial body touching on the aspects of glamour and body difference. This presentation will demonstrate the sheer number of women performers whose histories and contributions are still to be researched.

Beatrice Behlen:



Beatrice Behlen studied Fashion Design in Germany and History of Dress at the Courtauld Institute in London. Since then, she has worked in curatorial positions at Historic Royal Palaces, has taught at art colleges including Central Saint Martins, and since 2007 has been Senior Curator at London Museum. Between 2018 and 2022, she was one half of the *Bande à Part* podcast, a weekly conversation about fashion and film with Rebecca Arnold.

Beatrice has written about royal clothes and London couture clients, as well as subcultures, cosmetics, and the display of dress in museums. Her main interests are people and the relationship of clothes to locations, what she likes to call sartorial geography.

Parallel Lives: The case of the two Azellas

In 1993, the Museum of London acquired a sturdy corset fitted with a hefty steel catch to allow attachment to a suspension wire. The accompanying, promotional brochure included quotes from reviews of appearances of a “flying dancer” with the stage name Azella. For a long time, it was assumed that Azella referred to lady gymnast Emilie Anne Zanfretta (b. 1848), also known as “the Female Leotard”, a member of a family of tightrope performers and acrobats from northern Italy. Re-examination of the garment and the leaflet, as well as contemporary sources revealed that the corset had belonged to a woman born in 1858 in Clerkenwell, much closer to the museum’s new home.

This talk will disentangle the parallel lives of the English and Italian Azella while discussing the dominant discourse about the bodies and costume of female performers undertaking daring physical feats traditionally associated with the “rougher sex”.

Alison Young:



Alison Young is a researcher, writer and music hall expert who after a twenty-year career as a solicitor in the City of London turned her legal research skills to music hall history and currently works as a freelance educator with Magic Lantern, an Art History education charity and has also worked at Wilton's Music Hall. She is the Chair of the British Music Hall Society and a regular contributor to their journal. Additionally, she has written articles for The Guardian newspaper and gives regular talks on music hall.

The Right of Women to a Voice: Ada Isaacs, Female Jester and the Politics of the Victorian Circus Clown

In March 1869, a newspaper review of a Birmingham circus noted that "Women's Rights ought to find an able exponent" in a performer billing herself as "Miss Ada Isaacs, the celebrated American female clown and jester." The following year, a Leeds reviewer observed that she "could certainly demonstrate to perfection the right of women to a voice in the affairs of the nation". These were not incidental remarks; they were part of the bill matter which Mary Ann Maskell actively cultivated.

Born in Brighton and reinvented across a lifetime of stage names, bigamous marriages and transatlantic tours, Mary Ann was in many respects a woman who lived women's liberation before it had a name. This paper examines her career as a female clown and jester in the context of the nascent women's rights movement of the 1860s and 1870s. It argues that performers like Ada Isaacs occupied a uniquely liminal space, simultaneously exploiting and undermining the gender expectations of their audiences from inside the most populist entertainment form of the age.

Dr Kim Baston:



Dr Kim Baston is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Her research focuses on popular entertainments in the eighteenth century, circus history and culture, and the intersection of music and theatre. She is co-editor of *Researching Popular Entertainment* (Baston and Price, Routledge, 2024), a volume that explores methodological approaches to the study of popular performance. Other publications include “The Equestrian Circus” , “Circus at the Edge of Europe: Acrobatic Entertainments in the Ottoman Empire” , “The Celebrated Circus Tunes: Music in an Eighteenth Century Circus,” and “Circus Music: The Eye of the Ear”. Forthcoming publications include “Circus in Great Britain”, (Vol.1 of “Circus in the Long Nineteenth Century”, Routledge), co-edited with Gillian Arrighi and Kate Holmes and Kim Baston and Gillian Arrighi “The Bastard Child: New Readings in Circus History”. Currently Kim is also working on a monograph on the late-eighteenth century circus in Great Britain.

The Roles and Experiences of Women in the 18th Century Circus

This paper argues that while women appeared in highly visible capacities as equestrians, tightrope performers, pantomime actresses, singers, and dancers they also contributed essential but less acknowledged labour within the family-based troupes that structured early circus enterprises. This combination of roles made them central to the development of circus as a commercial form.

The paper further interrogates the gendering of female performance roles, by examining what women performed, and did not perform. Martial and hunting displays that were common in equestrian performance were typically framed as “manly,” reinforcing the heroic male rider as normative, while female equestrians generally performed solo acts and were largely absent from group riding displays. Adult females also did not appear to participate in the group formations that often predominated in strength acts, and in “ground and lofty tumbling”. Rigid gender assumptions, however, are far less evident, for example, in tightrope performance.

Dr Debanjali Biswas:



Dr. Debanjali Biswas is an early career researcher in social anthropology and theatre, performance and dance studies, with a performing career of over two decades as a dance practitioner and performance maker. Her writings examine the performance cultures of South Asia from the intersections of marginality, precarity and resistance, and have been published as solo and co-authored articles, book chapters, reviews, academic blog posts, and in edited collections. This research was funded by the TaPRA- Showtown Fellowship and Women's History Network, UK.

Their Chameleon Lives: Traveling Show-women and Dangerous Animals Acts, 1895-1945

At the turn of the twentieth century, a few show-women headlined touring wild animal acts and menageries in a new type of public entertainment in the transnational circus, sideshows and fairground circuits. Resoundingly popular in appeal, the viewing of these dangerous acts flourished as a pastime and the women were lauded for their bravura. Some of them created elaborate fictional personas, claiming to be mystics or Indian royalty while weaving in their shows elaborate tales of their life in the subcontinent, which they integrated in staged scenarios of confrontation in animal performances.

This paper traces the popularity of these acts among the British, European and American audience, emphasising the underrepresented stagecraft, skills, and agency of the female performers in menagerie entertainment. It also examines the understanding the racial other that was constructed in the British imagination as a source of both fear and desire, while investigating orientalist discourses and racialised identities within these performances.

Emily Rose Greenwood:



Emily Rose Greenwood is a multi-disciplinary circus artist celebrating twenty-five years of high-level practice. Primarily an aerial specialist (trapeze, rope, silks, duo aerial hoop), her experience reflects sustained expertise across stilts, fire/LED, sideshow, clowning, and Chinese pole. Her extensive career spans the spectrum from underground cabaret with Lost Vagueness and site-specific work with Invisible Circus, to high-profile staging for Louis Vuitton and the European Ice-Skating Championships opening ceremony.

Since 2021, Emily has driven her own career evolution, independently producing over 20 successful shows. Leveraging producer fees from Greentop Circus, she launched Quirkus Circus Company in 2023, creating sell-out, politically and environmentally themed adult shows at venues like Theatre Deli and the University Drama Studio in Sheffield. At 52, Emily actively challenges the industry's age bias, exemplifying sustained creative reinvention.

Producing Your Platform: Celebrating Veteran Expertise and Entrepreneurial Success in UK Circus.

This paper outlines a robust framework for sustained, high-level practice in contemporary circus, leveraging 25 years of multi-disciplinary expertise across aerial arts, stilts, fire/LED, and sideshow. Drawing on Emily's extensive performance career this study celebrates the resilience and creative reinvention possible for veteran artists.

The core of this work examines the successful pivot toward entrepreneurial agency as a key strategy for career evolution. Since 2021, Emily has independently produced over 20 successful shows, culminating in the 2023 launch of Quirkus Circus Company, which delivers sell-out, politically and environmentally themed adult productions in Sheffield venues. This transition demonstrates a successful, market-responsive model for generating high-quality performance opportunities.

Dr Marisa Carnesky:



Photograph Sarah Hickson

Dr Marisa Carnesky is a British performance artist and Showwoman. She uses spectacular entertainment forms, including stage illusions and rare circus skills to create new esoteric feminist shows, from reimagined fairground rides to cyclical body cabarets that combine visual, spoken and sensory material. She has created 15 major touring performance works since 1994 including Carnesky's Ghost Train, a large scale art-house theme park ride, (2004-2014) and Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman (2016-19) a 7 strong cast exploring menstrual rituals through stage magic and live art action, Carnesky's Tarot Drome, an ensemble tarot spectacle on roller skates (2012-14) and Showwomen, a feminist archival circus spectacular, which evolved from a 4 women theatre show into a 33 women outdoor promenade work. Her solo shows include Jewess Tattooes (1999-2002) toured internationally including LA International Festival). Past collaborations include the Olivier Award-winning C'est Duckie. She was an AHRC fellow at The University of Sheffield's National Circus and Fairground Archive. Marisa was awarded her PhD at Middlesex University in 2019. A new book about her work edited by Erini Kartsaki *Obsessions Of A Showwoman, The Performance Worlds of Marisa Carnesky* was published by Intellect (2024). She created the degree BA Contemporary and Popular Performance at Rose Bruford College (2022) and is currently developing a new performance project.

Reclaiming Showwomxn Heritage as Matriarchal Resistance

This paper explores the "Showwomxn Sideshow Spectacular," a large-scale promenade show directed by Marisa, which premiered at Bartholomew Fair (2023) and toured to the Brighton Festival (2024). Rooted in Marisa's fellowship research at the National Circus and Fairground Archive and her stage production "Showwomen", the paper explores how she uses heritage stories to reframe contemporary performance through a diverse, feminist, and queer lens.

The paper will examine how "Showwomxn Sideshow Spectacular" disrupts patriarchal histories by channelling the ghosts of forgotten female performers. It will detail the reflection process, where historical acts are matched with contemporary practitioners to expose shared experiences of both marginalisation and visceral euphoria. By examining these pairings, the paper will demonstrate how Carnesky's work moves beyond notions of the

Showgirl to establish the Showwoman and Showwomxn as a figure of autonomy who both performs the extraordinary and runs the show.