

THE SCOTSMAN

the festival

SATURDAY 2 AUGUST 2014

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THE WIZARDS



Pictures: Scott Loudon

LIZARDS OF OZ

Circa go through their paces ahead of a four-week run in Edinburgh. Since completing an eight-month season in Berlin last year, they've performed *Beyond* all over Europe, as well as in New Zealand.



THE WIZARDS

Jo Caird meets Australian circus troupe Circa and discovers that behind the death-defying acts is a constantly evolving exploration of the human psyche ... plus sweat patches

Il just have a look at that for you," says Rudi Mineur to a member of the technical team, before pulling himself vertically up a pole so fast that he has disappeared into the rig above the stage before I've even finished my gasp of amazement. The other acrobats involved in preparations for this evening's performance of *Beyond* at the Festival des 7 Collines in Saint-Etienne don't blink an eye.

The strongman's reappearance, shinning down a different pole five minutes later, having resolved whatever issue needed fixing, is greeted with the same nonchalance. For the members of Australian contemporary circus troupe Circa, this is just another day on the road.

It's less than a month until the start of the company's four-week run at Edinburgh's McEwan Hall when I catch up with them on tour in France. Since completing an eight-month season in Berlin last year, they've performed *Beyond* all over Europe, as well as in New Zealand and Australia, appearing at venues from 2,000-seat amphitheatres to 200-seat Spiegel tents. "We could basically do this show in a car park if we wanted to," tour manager Terri Herlings tells me before rushing off to direct the acrobats in a walk-through of the show on this unfamiliar stage.

Having made its Fringe debut in 2009, Circa returned in 2013 with *Wunderkammer*, a riff on new variety, vaudeville and cabaret which earned the company a Herald Angel Award. *Beyond*, Circa's third Edinburgh outing, "comes from a different place", says artistic director

Yaron Lifschitz. "It's a very warm, tender, empathetic, joyous show."

Inspired by such diverse sources as *Alice in Wonderland*, Charles Darwin and Rainer Maria Rilke, *Beyond* explores the tug of war between the rational and the primal within each of us. Seven acrobats in bunny heads and bear suits throw themselves and each other around the stage, perform breathtaking balancing acts and manipulate their bodies in remarkable ways. It's enormous fun, but there's an underlying seriousness too: a comment on the way we repress elements of ourselves in order to conform to society's expectations.

It's a subject that resounds with the show's ensemble. "You just learn how to behave in life," says Mineur, still fizzing with adrenaline as he stretches after the show. "That's not actually how I really am but I know what to do for people to like me." Skip Walker-Milne, who only joined the company this year, agrees: "It's great for us to be able to vent those little bits of crazy that we're so in touch with."

It's no accident that the performers feel so emotionally engaged. Finding ways for ensemble members to invest in the production is a crucial element of the development process on every Circa show, Lifschitz tells me down the line from Berlin, where he's creating a new work with the German theatre company that hosted *Beyond* last year.

It's not difficult to impress with physical wizardry – there are plenty of contemporary circus companies out there with the skills to make audiences 'oooh' and 'aaah'. Where Circa is unusual is its capacity to move people too. "How much investment [the performers] have in the material and their ownership of it makes a huge difference to what you experience," the director explains.

Another innovation that allows Lifschitz to create work that feels genuinely different is his attitude to gender. "I'm genuinely genderblind. I really don't care. I don't mind what you are – if you're a man, if you're a woman, straight, gay, lesbian, trans," he says. It's not the body that's important, it's what the performer does with it that counts – and the Circa ensemble are delighted with the creative opportunities this opens up.

"Everyone's able to do everything if they want to," says Kathryn O'Keefe, who trained as a gymnast and dancer before she ran away to the circus. There aren't many other circus shows where you'll find a female acrobat at the bottom of a human pyramid.

Where some contemporary circus feels neat and tidy, Circa's work is raw, rough and tumble. Muscles quiver with effort, and sweat patches form. Very occasionally, small mistakes are made. These flashes of vulnerability are an important element in the Circa aesthetic but they're also a reminder that circus is not without its risks. This only really becomes clear to me as I watch the *Beyond* "get-in" in

Saint-Etienne.

Running several hours behind because of a technical problem at the theatre the night before, the ensemble and technical staff work together to address problems as they arise. The trapeze keeps catching on a piece of the rig. Screws are mysteriously raining down onto the stage. One of the Chinese poles comes loose at its base. There's no

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room for error here – lives and livelihoods depend on everything going to plan.

Circus touring may be a dangerous business, but it certainly "keeps you on your toes", says Walker-Milne. "Different theatres and different stages, they all have their own challenges and their own excitement," says O'Keeffe.

"The director is always encouraging us to try something a different way," says Mineur. "Go with a new choice: just make sure it's the right choice.' He's always saying that."

"And if it's not the right choice," rejoins O'Keeffe, "find a new right choice tomorrow!"

This approach not only keeps the show fresh for the acrobats performing it night after night, but it also means that *Beyond* is constantly evolving. "The stock on which the show is based gets richer and richer the more you add to it and the longer you spend with it," says Lifschitz. "I think the way we make the most of our shows really benefits from them having long lives. Our ability to master different situations is what really makes changes to the show."

Without this flexibility, cutting the show to suit the conventions of the Fringe would have been a tricky prospect, says the director. *Beyond* changed enormously over the course of its eight-month run in Berlin and was shortened before it went on tour, but editing it down to suit the conventions of the Fringe was an additional challenge. What was once a two-hour show with an interval will be squeezed into a 60-minute slot.

"*Beyond* is not slow but it has a kind of languidness to it, almost a groove which makes it quite difficult to cut

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down. It's only achievable because of the maturity of this performing company and how familiar they are with it," says Lifschitz.

There's no question that the hard work is worth it – the Fringe is an inspiring place to make connections. "The whole world is here and ideas get created, loves get made and fall apart," he explains. The director enjoys working in Berlin for the same reason. Both cities have the "extraordinary energy of a place that's in constant motion".

Lifschitz may take his inspiration from engaging with people from around the world, but there remains something undeniably Australian about the company's work.

"It's a freshness of perspective. You could call it the arrogance of cultural youth. We don't feel terribly tied down by anyone's tradition. And so that gives us a bit of a licence to have a go," he says. "The beautiful thing about the circus is that we get to create our own world. That world can have its own rules."

● *Circa: Beyond* is at Underbelly McEwan Hall, until 25 August, 7pm.

Pictures: Scott Loudon