

THE “CIRQUE ÉDUCATIF”, Prof. Hugues Hotier

A popular cultural and educational movement founded in 1975

The Cirque éducatif is a popular cultural and educational movement founded in 1975 in Douai (northern France) by Hugues Hotier, a university professor with a long experience in show-business. It meets cultural, pedagogical and social objectives, and operates mostly in the northern and north-eastern parts of France, known as “Grand Est” and “Hauts de France”. The Cirque éducatif is a community organization, run by volunteers. While the show itself is only held between early January and mid-March, the Cirque éducatif is active throughout the year. Because we spend one month in each of the two cities where we have settled, we have a solid relationship with our partners, strengthened by our deep and longstanding experience of the field (42 years in Hauts de France and 36 in Grand Est). We belong, indeed, to the cultural and educational landscape of the area, and we like to think of the Cirque éducatif as a “circus for dreaming, learning and developing personality”.

The *Cirque éducatif* and its contribution to culture

Not only do we not oppose culture and entertainment, but we consider that the latter is the first step towards a cultural policy. Culture starts when entertainment enriches knowledge and fosters thought. The show follows a scenario and revolves around a theme, such as the popular roots of circus, the evolving relationship between circus and society, circus and music or circus and songs. These themes are enacted by the best international artists, recruited throughout Europe and beyond, particularly China and Cuba, and performances are enhanced by an orchestra. Themes give coherence to the show, but also facilitate pedagogical treatment, since our shows are designed both for immediate enjoyment and later utilization in class.

The cultural activities surrounding and completing our shows have two characteristics. First, we establish a dialogue between the circus and various forms of artistic expression. Second, we create partnerships with local cultural structures. Circus and music, circus and painting, circus and cinema, circus and literature thus turn into concerts, exhibitions, screenings, readings, for which we seek the help of regional cultural organizations and associations.

The *Cirque éducatif* and its contribution to pedagogy

“Educational” and “pedagogical” should not be confused, although pedagogy is clearly part of education. Registered by the Ministry of Education since 1993 as an “educational association complementing public education”, the *Cirque éducatif* truly provides additional education through:

- A show meant to be developed in class. Once chosen, the theme is submitted to a pedagogical committee of about fifteen teachers from different educational levels, to determine if and under what conditions it can be used within the framework of official programs.

- Pedagogical tools devised to prepare for and make use of the show: light exhibitions easily carried in the trunk of a car, DVD's on the making of the show, photo CD's, pedagogical booklets...
- Visits to schools or *in situ*, under the big top.

The *Cirque éducatif* and its contribution to society

The *Cirque éducatif* seeks to meet the needs of two social groups, the mentally handicapped or intellectually deficient, and underprivileged individuals and families. Examples for the handicapped include:

- Special accommodation under our big top to facilitate attendance. Since it relies a lot on simple emotions, the circus is pleasing and well suited to the mentally handicapped. In 2016, we were able to accommodate 1840 such visitors, of whom 236 were in wheelchairs.
- Access for the handicapped, who shared with the general public to the workshops introducing participants to the various circus disciplines.
- An exhibition of plastic art based on the theme of the show, prepared in schools from September to January, and presented under the big top from January to March.
- With the collaboration of specialized institution, hosting “transfer” mentally handicapped teenagers to allow them to spend a week at the circus, where they mingle with artists and technicians.

We help the underprivileged in two ways:

- With the complicity of the audience and the association, we invite with the utmost discretion one thousand underprivileged spectators free of charge.
- Within the framework of a “city policy” and with the cooperation of the national and regional public authorities, we work with the underprivileged and use the appeal of the circus to restore their self-esteem and facilitate their social integration. This is a long-term project and, since 1986, we have been working non-stop in the same disadvantaged neighborhoods. We encourage children, with the help of their parents, to create and manage a local mini-circus, which involves the preparation of circus numbers, the making of costumes and sets, as well as communication and budget management.

Circus values at the service of school and social integration

We like to make a distinction between “contemporary” and “traditional” circus, which we prefer to call “classical”, on the model of contemporary vs. classical music or contemporary vs. classical dance. This distinction, which can be first applied to the conception of the show, is fundamental in terms of culture, since contemporary circus performers lead lives which are similar to other populations. The “traditional” circus society, on the other hand, still lives according to heritage values shaped during the two-and-a-half centuries of circus existence. Its first characteristic is mobility. Circus members move together from one town to the next and rebuild their trailer village around the big top every day. They live in families and,

because schooling is done by correspondence under parental supervision, children treat the ring as a playground and can somersault before they learn their multiplication tables! Life is structured by work: preparing and fine-tuning acts, training daily and performing during the show. The troupe only exists to produce entertainment. Another characteristic of the traditional circus is its cosmopolitan aspect. At the circus, one is defined by artistic specialty, rather than nationality. One is a trapeze artist or a juggler before being Russian or Moroccan, and cohabitation is harmonious.

It must be added that we strive to show children and adults alike that it is possible to live together when working towards a common goal. Contrary to popular discourse, we make people discover a different conception of social life, through encounters in the wings or at the end of the show, and mainly through workshops. This conception is less selfish and nationalistic, and more accepting of differences. We make participants realize that success is the result of work and effort.

Finally, we would like to make two remarks. First, experience always trumps talk; what children observe through action is better internalized than what they have been told. Second, school is not a separate world, cut off from social life. Throughout our long experience, we have noted that results were more consistent when we intervened both at school and in the neighborhood.