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Movement and Development: The Young Artists of *Circus Kaos*
Ruth Schleicher



Photograph by Stephen Boroviczeny

Not a normal circus?!

***Circus Kaos* might not be your typical image of a circus – it doesn't have any animals and its artists come under the Youth Protection Act.**

One of its fundamental principles is inclusiveness . Individual ability and group solidarity are the basis of a process in which all children have the opportunity to show their own skills. They only take part because they want to, and they participate at every level of a production: creating the story, the numbers, the scenery, the choreography, the costumes and so on. The work of the circus is based on creativity, supporting the expression of each child's personality while at the same time helping the children to work and learn together.

Circus Kaos is based in Austria. This year it celebrated its 15 th anniversary. A circus village with caravans to sleep in, a communal kitchen and outdoor showers was assembled for the occasion, giving 43 young artists from 8 to 17 years old the opportunity to live and work together. The circus village was their home and their family for four weeks, as they lived together, attending school and rehearsing the production, which was to be called "Masks".

A closer look at the circus village

A circle of old and new caravans surrounds the big top, a tent which can take 800 people. Kids are running around it, a girl is repainting the mask she has made herself for the third time. Others are talking to their supervisors while four girls withdraw to their nicely decorated room in one caravan, after having worked on their unicycle number and played with some materials lying around: clubs, walking globes, rola-bola. This evening's daily meeting to discuss concerns and organisational matters has been quite straightforward. Rules in the village are few and simple: no smoking within the village and no noise around the caravans after bedtime. They were decided by all the members of the group (both children and supervisors), and of course they apply to everybody.

The 2006 production: Masks

This year's show is about three children's attempts to write a story. They each have their own ideas and propose something different. The three narrators reflect on our diverse identities, how we play with them and how they sometimes play with us. Real and imaginary worlds meet through their stories: there is a drama, a comedy, and something surrealistic, and in the end all three combine in a statement about differences of identity. By the end of June there will have been seven performances, and some 5,600 people will have seen the show. School classes will have formed the majority of the audience at the morning performances, while evening performances will have had a broader Viennese audience.

How the circus began...

Tilman Schleicher and Walter Winkelhofer, searching for a concept that would provide for a comprehensive body experience, founded *Sportverein Para* in Vienna in 1986. They developed a series of workshops called "Anders Turnen" (alternative gymnastics), which aimed at giving young children the opportunity to develop their personalities and freely express themselves through movement.

Feeling that the older children didn't find enough stimulation in the "Anders Turnen" course, Tilman Schleicher kept on looking for further concepts while visiting democratic school projects over the world, including the Pestalozzi School (Ecuador), Summerhill (England) and Moo Ban Dek (Thailand). In 1991, he visited the "Benposta Nación de Muchachos" (Nation of Children) in Ourense, Spain. In their circus, "Los Muchachos" (The Kids), he saw the fulfilment of some of his ideas about self-expression through movement. That same year he started a circus school as a part of *Sportverein Para* . They devised a performance and this led to the foundation of *Circus Kaos* .

How does it work?

Circus workshops take place after the school day is over during the school year, and children from the age of six can join at either semester. June usually sees the performance of small productions by those who wish to take part. Children who show a particular interest in the workshops can join *Circus Kaos* and participate in the bigger production.

Circus techniques – acrobatics, tissues, trapeze, trampoline, juggling, balancing (tightrope, walking globe, rola-bola, etc.) – and different workshops – acting, writing, painting, music, composition, dancing, clowning and so on – are always on offer. Some children participate in the courses four times a week, some only once; it's up to them.

Movement and self esteem

Circus Kaos finds much inspiration in the idea of "Bewegungslandschaft" (the promotion of movement by means of a prepared environment). Differently organised settings call upon different types of movement that are chosen by the children. Creating a particular space and using a variety of materials allows children to demonstrate inventiveness and creativity, thus giving a motive for movement, and in turn an impulse towards inner progress. All individuals experience themselves, their abilities, strengths and weaknesses through movement, hence gaining independence and self esteem. In 1979 Kiphard had already stated that movement is the most important medium of communication and self-realisation in childhood.

The Circus as seen by children

For this year's anniversary, a questionnaire was distributed to all past and present Kaos members: children, instructors, helpers, parents, musicians, professional artists, etc. These are some comments taken from answers to the question about what they liked about the circus.

I like being taken seriously and being able to bring in your own ideas. All the instructors and children are so nice and you always get to know new people. Of course there are also all the circus tricks you learn through the year. Being part of a circus is a wonderful feeling, because it's sometimes like a big family. Everybody is happy to be there and has similar interests.

Luise, 17, member of the circus for 4 years

I liked the open atmosphere, the fact that everyone could do whatever they liked and that there was someone there you could ask to show you something; furthermore, the creativity at the performances, the story, the music, all this combined with the philosophy behind it, and it was a great project to be involved in.

Raina, 19, former member of the circus for 3 years

[I liked] every child being able to participate even though they are not so good at gym at the moment, and not having to be working at full stretch all the time, and being able to take breaks and do nothing, too.

Britta, 13, member of the circus for 7 years

I always associate the circus with my childhood (I think I'm actually a child still). I can't imagine what it would have been like without the circus, I would have been a different person. I experienced so much there and have found friends who I'll remember my whole life.

Kathrin, 18, former member of the circus for 7 years

Further information is available from the circus website at www.kaos.at or ruth@kaos.at

[Back to Articles](#)