

" I think many who saw the shows felt the same tears in their eyes, maybe out of the feeling of seeing  
a vision of something that we all long for ...

the total obliteration of barriers,

whether social, economic, or gravitational."

- RABBI MARC ROSENSTEIN

# so • ci • al

/soh-shuh-l/ *adj.*

# ci • rus

/sur-kuh-s/ *n.*

a definition;



PHOTOS: CIRCUS HARMONY

It was perhaps the single most important circus thing I have ever done in my life: taking ten of my flying children from St. Louis to Israel to work with a group of Jewish/Arab circus children. It was July, 2007. Since 1989, I had been coaching the St. Louis Arches, a youth circus troupe I was asked to create by the late David Balding of Circus Flora. The children ranged in age from ten to sixteen years old and were from a variety of different backgrounds and St. Louis neighborhoods. For many of them, it was their first time going to another country. Most of them knew next to nothing about Israel or the conflict there between Jews and Arabs.

It was over a 12-hour plane ride to Israel. We were met at the airport by Rabbi Marc Rosenstein, who had invited us. We travelled by bus for another hour and a half and pulled into a parking lot where we could see a group of kids waiting for us. As we got off the bus, one of my students asked me, "How do we tell who's Jewish and who's Arab?" The Israeli kids ranged in coloring from light skinned, blue-eyed, and blonde to dark tan skin with dark eyes and black hair. In America, it is generally easy to tell who is black and who is white. It often amuses me that people think all of the African-American children in our troupe are poor, since that is not the case.

The kids lined up and stared at

each other as if they were at a middle school dance. Then one of the Israelis took five balls out of his backpack and started juggling. Our Lemond did a five ball take-away. Everyone applauded, and the ice was broken. More people started juggling and then talking, and the adventure truly began.

Go back a moment. When my St. Louis Arches troupe was first invited to Israel, my initial reaction was, "Absolutely not. Too dangerous." At that time, I was working with a 79-year-old woman who wanted to do an aerial act for her 80th birthday (she is a story in herself—look her up and buy her book: Elizabeth Bunny Herring, *Still Swinging in Wonderland*.) She did not worry about the "what-ifs" as she worked on her aerial act. For her it was more like "why not?" Bunny has a tattoo on her ankle that reads "*Esse quam videri*," which is a Latin phrase meaning, "To be, rather than to seem."

Days after I refused the invitation to Israel, I went to Chicago to speak at the first American Youth Circus Social Circus Conference. It was an amazing, inspiring conference. There was one group session that developed into a very emotional discussion of the definition of social circus. There was some strong disagreement—one participant was moved to tears—about whether or not the term social circus only

applied to youth in marginalized situations.

Returning from that first AYCO social circus conference in Chicago, working with my soon-to-be octogenarian aerialist, I felt there was only one answer now to give to the circus in Israel. So, when I returned to an email from Rabbi Marc asking if I knew some other mixed group of about 15 circus kids, I answered "We'll go." *Esse quam videri*. It would either be a heck of an adventure and/or an incredible news story.

We first went to Israel in 2007. A movie called *Circus Kids* was made about the journey. Since then, the Israelis came to St. Louis in 2008; we went there in 2010; they came here in 2012; and we just went back again in 2014. There is a book coming out about our partnership called *Watch Out for Flying Kids*. This Peace Through Pyramids partnership is a great example of social circus and how it has affected individuals, the two circuses, and all the audiences who have witnessed it.

It was 1973 when I first started circus in college. In 1974, I did my first tour with The Circus Kingdom, a youth circus run by a Methodist reverend. He brought together young people from across the country to tour the East Coast in the summers. Every town we performed in, we also did a show for people who couldn't come to us: senior

citizens homes, institutes for the mentally ill, prisons. The show had a message of unity and harmony. In a way, The Circus Kingdom had many elements of a social circus in that the purpose was to go beyond just entertainment. It was meant to create community, connect people, and overcome stereotypes and isolation.

After my first season touring with The Circus Kingdom, I came back to my circus teacher, Warren Bacon, and said, "This is what I want to do with my life. How can I repay you?" He answered, "I'll tell you what my teacher told me: 'Pass it on.'"

I did not originally start teaching circus arts to motivate social change. I just wanted to share the amazing feeling I had found in doing all things circus. My circus journey led me to study circus arts with Moscow Circus stars Nina Krasavina and Gregory Fedin, to become a founding member for both Big Apple Circus and Circus Flora, to tour numerous circuses with my unique Hentoff & Hoyer double trapeze act, and eventually to found Circus Harmony. I started the youth circus troupe, the St. Louis Arches, in 1989 because Circus Flora wanted to do circus work in the community of the city of St. Louis. Along with some other performers, we started teaching in the city's public schools. From these early classes, we chose

ten children and started the Arches. Because we were teaching in low-income inner-city neighborhoods, those are the children who comprised the original Arches troupe. I was just sharing something I loved. I did not know that what I was doing had a special name until Reg Bolton came to visit around 2003.

I had never even heard of the term 'social circus' until Reg asked what I thought of it. At that point, the term 'social circus' had edged out 'community circus' to refer to the sort of work Reg and I both did that went beyond just teaching children to flip, fling, and fly. Our circus work was changing how they felt about themselves and how other people viewed them. When Reg came to visit me in St. Louis, I had already started Circus Salaam Shalom to bring together children from a Jewish temple and a Muslim mosque. While the two places of worship were only blocks away, the children had never crossed paths until they joined the circus. This program showed everyone, including me, how much more we have in common than what is different about us.

Even though the term 'social circus' won out, the word 'community' comes up in this work over and over again, both in how circus builds community within the group that is working together and also in the relationship

between participants and their community.

Social circus has been used in volatile situations like the early work of Reg Bolton in Ireland with Catholic and Protestant youth years ago and the current work in Israel done by the Galilee Circus. Why use circus over sports or theater? Rabbi Marc, who started the Galilee Circus, explains,

*"First of all, you don't need a language, and it doesn't matter if they speak Arabic or Hebrew. Second of all, they need to trust each other. When one young person jumps the second one must catch him, and they have to trust each other completely. The third and most important advantage, which affects all areas of life, is the need to overcome fear. This isn't something natural or something you can take for granted when you're talking about circus exercises, and certainly not when you're talking about the fear of other people."*

Is 'social circus' a tool, a school, or something else? Is it a noun, verb, or adjective? Is 'social circus' what is being used or is it what an organization is? It is, has, and can be used in all those contexts. In all cases it is about overcoming some aspect of one's personal or social situation.

In 2004, I emailed Reg asking for a definition of social circus and got this back:

*"Circus with a purpose. Circus as a way for young people to do all those things children do so well—for the common good. When children show off, take risks, dream impossible dreams, and celebrate themselves as children—that's social circus. When a circus represents a neighbourhood."*

On Cirque du Soliel's Cirque du Monde website it says,

*"Social circus is an innovative social intervention approach, which uses the circus arts as a tool for fostering the personal and social development of at-risk individuals. It targets various at-risk groups living in precarious personal and social situations, including street or detained youth and female survivors of violence. The primary goal of this approach is not merely to learn circus arts. Rather, it's designed to help participants achieve personal and social development by nurturing their self-esteem and trust in others, teaching them social skills, inspiring them to become active citizens, and helping them to express their creativity and explore their potential. Social circus is a powerful catalyst for creating social change, because it helps marginalized people to assume citizenship within a community and enrich that community with their talents."*

The impact of social circus never ceases to amaze me. It includes everyone and exudes

the power of transformation. I have worked with children from a variety of different backgrounds and a number of assigned labels—from ADHD, BD, and LD to children who had hearing impairments, Downs Syndrome, and autism. All of them got something powerful and positive out of their accomplishments with circus arts.

While there is still discussion of the exact definition of social circus, to me it is the intention behind the work that is being done that defines it. Many of the attributes we credit to social circus can also be gotten through organized sports. What sets circus apart (and above, in my opinion) is that circus is not generally competitive and has an artistic, creative aspect. Recreational circus primarily just teaches the multi-genre skills that make up circus arts. Students certainly benefit from learning these. In addition to improving their spatial orientation, fine and gross motor skills, hand-eye coordination, balance, strength, and flexibility, they also develop life skills such as teamwork, persistence, focus, trust, and responsibility. This is where the overlap to social circus begins: as the impact of the process of developing these skills changes the perceptions of the student in how they see themselves, relate to others, and are seen by others.

The positive influence of circus

arts on youth development is the focus of the wonderful work by Jacqueline Davis, Ed.M. in the field she calls Developmental Circus Arts. Jenn Agans, Ph.D. pointed out that,

*"Coaches have the responsibility to help young people understand how they're developing life skills, help them develop those life skills, and help them translate those life skills into other contexts."*

Still, that does not mean all circus teaching is social circus. It is when the primary purpose of the participation is to change a person's relationship with themselves and others that the work becomes social rather than recreational circus.

My own belief is that all children need a safe place to test their physical, mental, emotional, and social limits; to define themselves instead of being defined by their race, religion, or socio-economic background; and to feel they are part of a community that cares about their future. Additionally, most teenagers deal with life in the short term and need to develop critical life and employment skills such as time management, customer service, and anger management. Many of the children we work with at Circus Harmony are growing up without a sense of community, and gangs hold a very real appeal. Circus education is an opportunity to engage in

positive, productive activities and behaviors which are not otherwise available to them; to build important leadership and relationship skills; to develop a sense of belonging, purpose, and power; and to experience excitement, uniqueness, and appreciation for the contributions they make to their community.

Certainly part of what makes the work 'social circus' is the population that comprise the participants. There is no question that when circus classes are offered to people in marginalized situations, they are labeled 'social circus' because the activity is being offered for the reason of giving them a positive alternative to the personal and social situations they happen to be in. It is meant to go deeper than just teaching someone to juggle. The intention is for the circus activity to be a bridge to take the participant from one point in their personal and/or social lives to another.

Helizete Da Silva Rodrigues Avrillon, Doctor of Anthropology and Sociology, put it this way:

*"Social circus goes beyond the goal of giving spectators the joy of seeing the glorification of the human body performing magnificent feats. Its intention is firstly to give young performers the power to break the label of "good for nothing" or "stupid kid" and accomplish something extraordinary ... that empowers*

*the students to return to the neighborhoods they live in with a new feeling of self-worth. To offer them a place to express themselves gives them the opportunity to know themselves and to recognize their individual assets, offering them a positive image of themselves and the opportunity to create healthier relationships in society. ...*

*The purpose of the social circus is not to transform youth ... into contortionists, clowns, trapeze artists, etc. but to teach life lessons, like Circus Harmony's theme of "teaching the art of life through circus education." When you give youth the opportunities to develop and become aware of their capacities ... and offer them programs that open new doors, giving them the possibility of interacting with society in a positive way, they can become contributors to society instead of 'social cases' living in at-risk situations."*

Social circus is the appellation applied to Mobile Mini Circus in Afghanistan, Phare in Cambodia, Circolumbia in Colombia, and countless others. Cirque du Soleil's Cirque du Monde's map of social circuses, available on its website, shows an incredible spread of programs around the world. The map explains which programs are included: "As part of its activities, the organization offers a social circus program, with the personal and social development of the participants as its primary goal." Whatever it is, social circus,

in general, is not meant to be a gateway to a professional circus career. But it can be! It has been for a number of my students and for students from Cambodia, Colombia, Israel, and other places. My personal definition of social circus is the use of teaching and performing circus arts to build character in individuals and build bridges between communities in order to motivate social change.

Right now, my advanced students, the St. Louis Arches, are performing with Circus Flora, a professional one-ring theatrical tent circus they work for on an annual basis. Helping me direct the Arches this year is an alum of the troupe, Sidney 'Iking' Bateman. Iking's hoop diving act with his partner, Melvin Diggs, who is also an alum, will also be part of Circus Flora. The act is on a short break from their tour with Les 7 Doigts de la Main's *Cuisine & Confessions*. The soundtrack for Iking and Melvin's hoop diving act is them talking about growing up in St. Louis and just waiting to be the next person shot or arrested. It was recorded before the Mike Brown incident that literally set Ferguson on fire. The act symbolizes the hoops or doorways they went through to escape those circumstances.

Iking's first plane flight was to the 2005 AYCO festival in San Francisco. At the 2009 AYCO Festival in Pennsylvania, I remember Melvin speaking

to the assembled group saying that if he weren't in the circus, he'd probably be dealing drugs. Melvin and Kin were both part of the Peace Through Pyramids partnership with Israel. Traveling in Israel helped prepare them for living in a foreign country when they went to school at Ecole Nationale du Cirque in Montreal. Now, they are successful world-renowned circus artists touring the world! Another of our students, Renaldo Williams, from East St. Louis, is currently working with Cirque du Soleil. There are two students from Phare in Cambodia attending Ecole Nationale Du Cirque in Montreal. One of the Galilee Circus alums is at a Flic Circus School in Italy. Members of Circolumbia tour all over the world.

This spring, we were able to bring Peace Through Pyramids to Ferguson thanks to grants from the Regional Arts Commission and the Arts & Education Council of St. Louis. Funding was augmented by the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, and we created a Peace Through Pyramids partnership with children from Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, which is located in an affluent St. Louis suburb. We created a show with twenty-eight children. The program was meant to help participants learn circus arts, define themselves as circus performers instead of being from a certain neighborhood,

work with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and change public perception about young people from Ferguson.

As I was leaving after the last show, one of the Ferguson moms pulled me over to share with me just how much being part of this social circus had meant to her daughter. Their family lives very close to the Ferguson police station that had been an epicenter for a lot of the violence in the past year. The girl learned to juggle in her very first class. In the final show, she hadn't dropped a ball in her solo or partner juggling. This little piece of circus success had given her a very real feeling of empowerment along with a strong dose of pride and joy. Social circus helps participants connect with their own power and potential.

One night of that first journey to Israel, we stood around watching my students do somersaults over a campfire. Rabbi Marc turned to me and said "When I first invited you to Israel, you said it was too dangerous. I'm watching this and I have to ask you, "What is your definition of danger?!" I honestly told him it was when I felt we were not in control of a situation. I knew my flying children could safely leap over a campfire. I didn't know that we would be safe in Israel. But we took the risk anyway, and it was the beginning of a great social circus adventure that

has rippled out into the world and continues to do so. Most importantly, students from both countries are performing, living, and working all over the world, still in touch with each other and still inspiring people wherever they go! They took control of their lives and are showing the world that anything is possible. "Esse quam videri." Social circus is about helping young people to overcome not only gravity but labels and other limitations placed on them by society. It is about giving children the power to define themselves.

—JESSICA HENTOFF is the artistic/executive director of Circus Harmony, the social circus organization she founded in 2001. She has been teaching and performing circus arts for 40 years and using circus arts to motivate social change since she started the St. Louis Arches youth circus troupe in 1989. Her remarkable vision and use of circus arts to build character and expand community has brought about ground-breaking and bridge-building programs like Circus Sa-laam Shalom, which connected Jewish and Muslim children, Far East Meets Midwest, which combined Asian and Midwestern arts and artists, and Peace Through Pyramids, an ongoing collaboration between the St. Louis Arches in the United States and the Jewish/Arab Galilee Circus in Israel. These trademarks of Circus Harmony are the embodiment of the organization's mission to help children "defy gravity, soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers, all at the same time."