



Belfast Community Circus Annual Report April 2000 – March 2001

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Chairs Report

I am amazed to realise that my first year as Chair of the Belfast Community Circus School has come to an end. It has been an exciting and challenging year. I came to the committee as a parent whose only knowledge of circus was that her son really enjoyed Saturday mornings. To say that I was daunted and apprehensive at the task, especially when following in Nora's footsteps who had been such a marvellous Chairperson is an understatement.

My task has been made much easier because we have a particularly strong committee who has given unstintingly of their time, energy, skills and knowledge. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for the support they have given to the circus and in particular the support and patience they have extended to their new Chair.

Our very proactive committee has led to the organisational structure becoming strengthened with a number of very active subcommittees being set up to drive forward and support the central circus and to support the staff.

The community circus itself has continued to grow and develop. There has been increased use of the building and the atmosphere, while extremely welcoming, positively buzzes with energy and excitement. The new Youth circus structure is very successful and under Ian's direction, there have been some super performances by the young people. There have been a number of successful evening cabarets and workshops, leading towards the fulfilment of our aim to make circus as inclusive as possible.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff and tutors for their hard work. It is due to their professionalism, skills, dedication and energy that make the circus so successful. In particular I would like to thank Will, Paula, Carol and Ian for all of the above but also for the patience and support that they have extended to me.

I look forward to the next year. I feel that we will continue to grow and make an invaluable and cutting edge contribution to Youth and Community Arts in Northern Ireland.



Director's Report

It has been another good year for Belfast Community Circus School. We have seen tremendous growth in the level of Outreach work, performance work and real progress with the Youth Circus. All of which places the Circus School firmly at the forefront of Youth and Community Arts in Northern Ireland. It also means that we continue to deliver on our mission statement:

To develop circus arts to as high a standard as possible, making participation and viewing as accessible as possible.

The single most important factor that has contributed to this continuing success story is the astonishing level of commitment and dedication which is witnessed at every level throughout the organisation. After five years with the Circus School I am still moved and amazed at the outstanding contribution made by staff, tutors, performers, the management committee, parents and, of course, the children themselves. There is a truly remarkable spirit which exists at the Circus School which makes me very proud to be a part of this wonderful family. I would like to thank everybody for their hard work over the past year and look forward to great things ahead.

Having completed our training course in May 2000, we have now had over a year to see its impact on what we can achieve. The results have exceeded our hopes.



Not only have we been able to double the amount of Outreach projects and Professional performances delivered over the past twelve months, but we have seen the quality of these services improve steadily at the same time. We have witnessed growing demand for our Youth Circus go hand in hand with some of the best learning to have taken place since it began. Our members are not just developing their circus skills, but gaining an awareness of production values and, perhaps most important of all, are doing so much to help each other to learn and grow.

Although there has been no full time course for adults this year, we have been able to offer quality training experiences on a weekly basis with specialist tutors on hand at Adult Circus every week and the successful piloting of an Introduction to Circus course held in the Autumn.

As ever, at the Circus School, there is no time to rest on our laurels because there are so many exciting challenges ahead. Over the coming year we are hoping to pave the way for another full time course to train the next wave of professionals; aiming to broaden our international links in order to enhance the experiences of the young people who enjoy circus in Northern Ireland; secure the long term future of the Circus School premises in Gordon Street; establish a presence in schools along with a mainstreaming of funding sources; and stage more quality performances than ever before. So, in the great circus tradition, 'Here we go again'.

Outreach Report

BCCS Outreach has once again been at the forefront of youth arts delivery with a high number of workshops and projects throughout Northern Ireland. From Drogheda Samba Festival to Augher Community Festival; from Arodyne Youth Club to Muckamore Abbey.

In the past year outreach has continued to offer a high quality experience for children and young people from areas of high social need. Many community and youth leaders have commented that the standard of the tutor team has been outstanding. In particular, tutors have received comments like “the tutors were flexible and easily understood” (Glenravel festival), “the leaders were on the same level as the kids because of the way which the skills were demonstrated no child felt that he/she could not take part” (Lower Old Park), “children responded well to the approach taken by tutors, they were friendly and approachable whilst making it clear that the work could be difficult and therefore needed concentration and attention.”

In addition to the ten week projects, Outreach has been able to deliver successful long term projects with performances as the end goal. These have gone down well with the receiving groups. An opportunity given by Arts Council of Northern Ireland with the Community Arts Incentive Scheme to work with Ardglass Youth Club was a fine example of this. This project brought together circus, dance, puppetry, and prop making.

In order to manage the benefits of the skills, training and experience which the outreach team already has, we have compiled a profile of each tutor with regards to their possible contribution to performance with outreach.



The above developments go hand in hand with the greater expertise which the tutors have now developed in terms of circus skills and performance skills. This in turn has created a demand for tutors to deliver more quality performances with outreach as well as offering high skill levels. Over the forthcoming year, BCCS intends to build on this area with more long term performance driven projects.

This reflects the wonderful changes, which have taken place due to the Advancement training course. Through general observation, many tutors and myself have observed the increased quality, which the tutors are now offering beginners. The children are learning new and even more exciting tricks and are constantly inspired by the tutors ability to demonstrate these tricks. An independent evaluation of the advancement course stated:

“The students from the Advancement course assessed themselves as having improved their tutoring skills, some as much as 6 points in a scale of 1 to 10. Even the experienced tutors considered that their tutoring had improved.”

Outreach intends to approach all District Councils in the next year in order to encourage sustainable circus schools (youth or community circus) in their area. We also intend to pursue the notion of large scale performances with outreach and attempt to develop some ideas which tutors have in mind.

Once again none of the above developments would have been possible if it wasn't for the hard work, professionalism and constant demand for high standards from the tutors and project leaders.



Youth Circus Report

I have been in the position of Youth Circus Director for eight months to date. For the purposes of this report I have commented on the major projects and issues that I have had to deal with during this time:

- Queen's Cabaret: end of term performance
- Summer School

The issues I have commented on include:

- Attendance
- Style of training

One of the problems encountered when I first started was the lack of attendance from some of the students, making it impossible to get coherent progression throughout the class. This was addressed by introducing the rule that: if a student misses a 4 week period without talking to the school, they may have their place taken by some one on the waiting list. This has turned out to be quite effective, as the main culprits have left, leaving a core of dedicated students.

I have tried to keep a constant push for an increased skill level, without being too strict; this is backed up with as much consistency from tutors as is possible. This was made easier with the training regime started the three months prior to my tenure by David Archer

There was an end of term show, which was primarily to compensate for the lack of parades due to the foot and mouth problem. The show was run with the intention of giving experience to the whole youth circus both on and backstage. The teenage members took care of lights, sound, stage management costumes and props, and the younger groups performed. This was a one off show *Alex and the Queens Cabaret* very loosely based on Alice in Wonderland.





A class has been started on Wednesday nights with the aim of realising more focused performances from those members who are keen to explore this area of their circus work. Auditions for the performance class were held at the start of the Summer with nine students participating throughout the holidays. This number is due to increase to sixteen in October.

The Summer School was a great success with every student learning at least one new skill. More importantly a great sense of community and family developed and was commented on by participants of all ages; the residential played a large part in this. The students worked very hard and thoroughly enjoyed the training and the more social aspects of the camp. The performances were a great success for all involved. The Summer School also continued a long tradition of bringing in tutors to work with members. This year we welcomed a tutor from the Oakview Youth Circus in Fairfax, Virginia.

The future plans for performances are: the Christmas cabaret; a show by the teenage group to be performed at the start of the outreach programs; there will be another adaptation on the Alice in Wonderland theme; and a collaboration between youth circus and outreach. The lesson plan for the teenage class will contain classes in light and sound, script writing, stage management and prop making plus the usual circus skill. I am also hoping to start a circus band of mixed ages.



Finance

2000/2001 saw BCCS continue to demonstrate prudent financial management with a small surplus showing over the year despite a climate of reduced European funding and increased competition for resources.

The year got off to a promising start with the award by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. An 80% increase on the previous year demonstrating a recognition of the worth of BCCS and enabling the Circus School to use part of the grant to cover core costs for the first time. A successful application for Gap funding went some way to addressing the problems caused by the ending of Peace I, although it still left a shortfall on the previous year.

One of the real success stories of the year has come from the capacity BCCS has shown for raising income through fees for workshops and performers. The contribution made in this area has meant that BCCS finished the financial year with an element of stability.

However, due to the increasing annual turnover of BCCS, there remains a problem over the level of available reserves which have remained relatively static over the past five years. This means that these reserves which once represented around 30% of annual turnover now represent less than 10% and leaves a small margin for error. Boosting these reserves remains financial priority for BCCS. Early indications for 2001/2002 are that things may be moving in the right direction.

Another area of concern relates to the short term nature of most of the grant aid received by BCCS. With funding commitments generally capped to twelve month periods, this leaves BCCS vulnerable to sudden shifts in priorities by funders. Whilst it is not anticipated that BCCS will be hit by such a shift in the near future, it remains a prudent policy to look for more long term commitments with funders and to investigate the possibilities of mainstreaming proportions of grant aided income.



Director
Will Chamberlain

Performance & Finance Manager
Carol Napier

Outreach Officer
Paula McGrogan

Youth Circus Director
Ian Hall

Administrator
Rosie Ferguson

Chairperson
Alison Anderson

Treasurer
Mike Moloney

Committee Members

Nora Greer
Dennis Palmer
Marie Abbott
Jo Williams
Jennifer Dempsey
David Archer
Katherine Hanratty
Kathryn Montgomery
Angela Deuntsch

Co-optee
Vincent Crossey



Number Crunching In the past year BCCS has

- *Staged 6 circus cabarets featuring 60 performers
- *Hosted 11 performances by visiting companies
- *Opened its doors for 310 days for a total of 2,500 hours
- *Hosted 1 conference and 2 press launches
- *Provided 201 performers for 97 events
- *Staged 4 major performances from the Youth Circus
- *Run 120 sessions of training for the Youth Circus
- *Enrolled 120 members of the Youth Circus
- *Run 10 beginner classes for adults
- *Held 48 training classes for adults
- *Run 316 Outreach Workshops for 24 children and young people per session
- *Staged 12 performances of Maths in Motion educational circus show

