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La Circassienne: A Study of the Female Circus Artist in French Literature

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La Circassienne

A Study of the Female Circus Artist in French Literature

A Thesis Presented

by

CRYSTAL KATHLEEN MENNINGA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

September 2022

French and Francophone Studies

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Luke Bouvier, Chair

Thomas Vacanti, Member

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French and Francophone Studies

DEDICATION

To my duo trapeze partner.

Thank you for joining me on the journey to be a circassienne (the circus kind).

Catch. Fly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and my fellow graduate students in the department of French and Francophone Studies at UMass Amherst. Without their encouragement and guidance, I would never have taken a leap of faith and uprooted my life in order to chase a dream in France, which, through a series of most unpredictable events, has led to experiences I never would have imagined possible.

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Finally, thank you to my circus family throughout the world who inspired this project.

ABSTRACT

LA CIRCASSIENNE

A STUDY OF THE FEMALE CIRCUS ARTIST IN FRENCH LITERATURE

SEPTEMBER 2022

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This study examines how the female circus artist is represented in twelve pieces of French literature ranging from the late nineteenth century to the modern day. The books are divided into three categories by author type: first, authors without a circus background; second, male authors involved in the circus world; and third, women involved in the circus world. Although predicted that the first section would reveal the largest use of stereotypes and misogyny, the second would show the sexist expectations of the *circassienne* onstage and off, and the third would call out these stereotypes and suggest improvements, there was less variety found than expected. Only two authors—one from each of the first two categories—used *circassienne* stereotypes in an extremely negative manner, authors who were unfamiliar with circus but did research as well as the majority of the male authors familiar with circus bluntly stated some of the bias but did not offer solutions, and the majority of the female circus artist authors also stated the bias they faced but were limited in their opportunities to challenge stereotypes.

Eleven of the books focus on artists from traditional circus, and only *Circassienne* looks at contemporary circus. Whereas there is a variety of literature about the contemporary circus scene in Quebec, *Circassienne* was the only book found to be written by a French *circassienne* that deals with normalizing the life of a circus artist in who lives in a house, sends their children to school, and creates pieces designed to expose children to contemporary circus as well as pieces with calls for activism.

Overall, it was found that the situation for the female circus artist in traditional circus in France has not greatly changed in the past century. She is still expected to be feminine, to wear revealing costumes, and to flirt with the audience, often serving as the “female element” in an otherwise male-dominated group of performers. Reducing sexism in circus and the fight for gender equality remain part of the agenda of circus going forward, and progress is being seen faster in contemporary circus than in its traditional counterpart.

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CHAPTER 1

WHO IS *LA CIRCASSIENNE*?

Introduction

In French, the word *circassienne* has multiple, possibly distantly related definitions and serves as multiple parts of speech. The word itself is as nimble as the artists it can be used to describe and who are the subject of this study. No equivalent word exists in English; in fact, English requires three separate words to communicate the same idea: female circus artist. If one were to be pedantic, one could argue that this English translation implies the *circassienne* is an artist and that “a female who does circus activities” might perhaps be a more accurate, although less tidy, translation, as *circassienne* does not necessarily imply the person being described is an artist—merely that they participate in circus-related activities. However, even in modern-day France, the word is most often used by circus artists to refer to professional female circus artists, and it is not uncommon to have to explain to a native French speaker not involved in the circus world what *circassienne* means.

This study aims to look at the representation of the *circassienne* in French literature through a variety of lenses. The main breakdown will be based on the person writing about the *circassienne*, divided into three major categories: 1) the author is an outsider (someone generally not involved in the world of circus), 2) the author is a male artist (circus performer or amateur, festival producer, circus historian...), and 3) the author is a *circassienne*, writing about herself and/or other *circassiennes*. The literature chosen for this analysis varies in publication date, content time period, focus, fiction vs historical fiction vs nonfiction, target audience, and intent. The majority of the works are

focused on the world of circus. Many of the more contemporary works include the word *circassienne*, which was not yet in use with our intended meaning when the older literature was written. Occasionally the *circassienne* will merely serve as an object of curiosity for the male gaze; other times she will be a source of inspiration to young girls. The *circassienne* herself has evolved yet retains the stereotype of a liberated woman. Perhaps today she is freer to choose her public image than in the nineteenth century, but how others see her is still often of as much importance as her skill onstage.

Etymology

To understand who *la circassienne* is, it is important to understand the nuances behind the word. Originally, *circassienne* was the equivalent of the English word “Circassian,” which, according to Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, means either 1) a member of a group of peoples of the northwestern Caucasus, or 2) the language of the Circassian peoples (“Circassian”). However, this *circassienne* is not our desired subject. The heroines of books such as Just-Jean-Étienne Roy’s 1870 *Aïssé ou la jeune Circassienne*, published under the pen name Marie-Ange de T***, Alexandre Marie Anne de Lavaissière de Lavergne’s 1866 *La Circassienne*, or the recent 2011 novel that resulted from Guillemette de Sairigné’s biographical research on Leïla du Luart, *La Circassienne*, all belong to the first definition encountered. As explained in the following forum post, “dans l’univers des arts et de la littérature, *circassienne* est surtout associé à un type de femmes, souvent appréciées dans les harems par leur blancheur et leur beauté” (Desiderius). As of 2000, this was the only sense of the definition given in Le Robert, a popular French dictionary.

Over time the word took on an entirely new, seemingly unrelated meaning, still doubling as an adjective and noun: “Relatif au cirque. *Les arts circassiens*. – *Les circassiens* : les gens du cirque” (“Circassien.” *Le Robert*). Understanding the etymology of this new definition and tracing its development from the 16th century’s “beautiful white woman” to the modern day’s “circus artist” leads to a confusing trail of clues and hints without a clear path, resulting in a word/definition combination of which not even all modern French speakers and dictionaries are aware. As of 2010, *Le Robert*’s website gives the above definition but with the example, “C’est là que nous dansions, sur le rythme circassien, au son de nos vieilles musiques,” taken from Pierre Loti’s 1906 *Les Désenchantées, Roman des harems turcs contemporains* (Loti 24). However, it is clear from the context of this excerpt that *circassien* in this case is not describing the circus-like quality of the music. “Un village circassien, bien loin, au-delà de Koniah, qui s’appelle Karadjiamir” and “les jeunes filles circassiennes ne sont pas voilées ; elles dansent et causent avec les jeunes hommes, et choisissent leur mari selon leur cœur” are found on the same page, describing both a culture and the young ladies, entirely unrelated to the world of circus. This emphasis on freedom and liberty will in fact come to be part of the connotation of the circus *circassienne*, but it is a poor example to accompany the given definition.

The spelling of the word has also been a source of debate. A researcher attempted to track down the origin and development of the circus-inspired *circassien* and found that the word is also occasionally written *cirquassien*, which they state is used more frequently by people from traditional circus families (Visiteur_Loolitz). An excerpt from their findings was published in a blog post in 2007, three years before *Le Robert* included

the new definition, and laments the fact that not a single dictionary included a definition of either *circassien* or *cirquassien* relating to circus. Le Trésor de la Langue Française, which has not been updated since 1994, gives the first definition of *circassien* as “qui est originaire de Circassie, qui habite cette region,” and the subsequent definitions all relate to the first (“Circassien.” *Le Trésor de la langue française*). *Cirquassien* redirects to *circassien*. However, under *cirque*, there is a note that “on rencontre ds la docum. le subts. masc. *cirqueux*. Personne appartenant au monde du cirque,” and as an example there is a phrase from page 44 of Queneau’s 1942 *Pierrot mon ami*, “Mounnezergues demandait à tout cirqueux qu’il rencontrait si celui-ci ne saurait lui dire où il aurait des chances, lui Mounnezergues, de rencontrer Psermis” (“Circassien.” *Le Trésor de la langue française*). A quick Google search reveals a few hits for more modern uses of *cirqueux*, mostly from circus centers sending out announcements to their clientele and one instance in an online newspaper’s article titled “Les enfants font le cirqueux Ehpad” (“Les Enfants”).

Throughout all this unclarity, just how did *circassien* come to mean a circus artist? There are two theories under debate, one by the researcher previously mentioned, and one anonymously on Wiktionary. The researcher looked at the definition of *cirque* in Le Robert, “édifice ou tente (circulaire, ovale...) où ont lieu des exercices d’équitation, de domptage, d’équilibre, des exhibitions, des scènes comiques (clowns, augustes),” and proposed that *circassien* “pourrait donc être évocateur de la forme circulaire” (“Cirque,” Visiteur_Loolitz). For their purposes, they decided to use the spelling *cirquassien* “car elle associe la définition du lieu et des Hommes qui y sont liés. Les cirquassiens étant de tradition orale, il n’est pas étonnant de ne pas en trouver une définition dans un

dictionnaire de la Française” (Visiteur_Loolitz). This theory would perhaps also apply to the folk dance called the Circassian Circle, a Scottish folk dance now practiced in many countries (including France), which may be related to Circassian dances performed in a circle (“Circassien Circle”). The other theory, given as an explanation to the second definition on wiktionary.com without any resources, says that the use of the word *circassien* relating to the circus probably started around 1971, likely due to “la proximité sonore des mots *circassien* et *cirque*. Ce sens peut aussi être dû au fait que les peuples du Caucase ont donné nombre de cavaliers ottomans, et par le fait que ces peuples étaient surtout nomades, de même que la plupart des cirques actuels sont itinérants” (“Circassien.” *Wiktionnaire*). Neither of these theories has clear supporting evidence, and each seems to be an educated guess. Nevertheless, *circassien* is a word greatly used within the circus community to describe a male circus artist, and *circassienne* refers to a female circus artist. Like their homophones, they may also be used as adjectives to mean circus-like. The words are still evolving, and today it is possible to hear an energetic child described as *circassien* even though word is still largely unknown within the non-*circassien* Francophone world. In a newspaper article about *Circassienne*, a book published in February 2022, the journalist felt the need to include a quick note at the bottom to help his audience understand the terminology used in the title and his article: “*Circassien : qui concerne le cirque, les gens du cirque*” (Garcia Interview). Convention may demand the masculine singular version of the word for the definition, but *circassienne* deserves just as much attention.

CHAPTER 2

THE OUTSIDER LOOKING IN

As it was necessary to define who the *circassienne* is, it is also critical to clarify who she is not. Her male equivalent is the *circassien*, someone who has spent centuries in very different circumstances than his female counterpart, despite working in the same domain. Both the *circassien* and the *circassienne* perform for audiences generally comprised of people outside the circus world. The computer programmer, the plumber, the history teacher, the movie critic, the soccer coach, the stay-at-home parent... representatives from all walks of life can all be found in the audience of a circus performance, whether the show is contemporary circus in a theater or traditional circus in a circus tent. The circus audience brings together a wide variety of people to entertain, much more so than certain other genres of live performance such as opera or ballet. Touring circuses of today often have different levels of ticket prices related to how close to the ring each seat is located, but there are often tickets given away to schools and advocacy groups, resulting in a complete mix of those who can afford the highest priced tickets and those who cannot afford other live entertainment but profit from free tickets every year. Although, by definition, these audience members are *in* the theater or *in* the tent, for this chapter they will be referred to as outsiders. They have little to no knowledge of the training circus artists go through to achieve a professional level, nor of the inner workings of a circus as a business. They appreciate the *spectacle*, pay their entrance fee (or acquire free tickets), applaud when impressed, and leave at the end of the show, hopefully in awe of what they have just witnessed. Due to the circus' ability to

astonish and amaze, it and its performers are often the subject of outsiders' stories that may take the form of songs, novels, children's books, or movies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many circus artists in literature are written by authors who do not have any firsthand knowledge of the circus world. That world seems exciting and mysterious, and their characters display the same traits. There are also many authors who have more intimate knowledge, do their research, interview circus artists, become experts, and perhaps even observe training or try out circus classes, but this section is not about their point of view. This section focuses on the stories of the *circassiennes* told by those for whom the world of circus remains a mystery; the authors may want to invoke an aura of disbelief, of otherworldliness, of exoticism... there are many reasons circus artists are found in literature, and the *circassienne* plays her role well.

A Rebours

A Rebours was published in 1884 by Joris-Karl Huysmans. It tells the tale of a rich Parisian who retreats to the countryside to immerse himself in intellectual experiments. In chapter nine, the protagonist, Jean des Esseintes, reminisces about several of his prior mistresses, including two *circassiennes*. In the book they are nothing more than sex symbols that allow for psychological exploration. Their acts are barely described, but the reader learns about the stereotypes of *circassiennes* and the affairs they were expected to have to earn more money than their meager wages at the circus.

The first *circassienne* des Esseintes falls for is an acrobat and trapeze artist. First he describes her physical appearance: "... des dents longues et blanches, une peau satinée, toute rose, un nez taillé en biseau, des yeux de souris, des cheveux coupés à la

chien et blonds” (Huysmans 84). Only after this description does he get to her name, along with more physical description: “C’était miss Urania, une Américaine, au corps bien découpé, aux jambes nerveuses, aux muscles d’acier, aux bras de fonte,” and her profession, which is quite impressive: “Elle avait été l’une des acrobates les plus renommées du Cirque” (84). This insistence on her physical appearance is because, for des Esseintes, she is a woman who can be paid to be his mistress. He is not particularly attracted to her abilities and has no idea of her personality or interests, but circus artists, like dancers, often served as rich patrons’ mistresses in exchange for expensive presents and money, so watching her at the circus was akin to observing a horse at an auction—she was eligible for purchase. Throughout the two pages Huysmans devotes to this brief affair, Urania is repeatedly noted as being beautiful. The first few times he sees her, that is all he notices. “Elle lui était apparue telle qu’elle était, c’est-à-dire solide et belle, mais le désir de l’approcher ne l’étreignit point” (84). He then gets the idea that, because she is muscular and a powerful trapeze artist, she must be masculine and uphold masculine stereotypes when in bed. Over a period of time, des Esseintes creates both a personality and sexual behavior for this circassienne to whom he has never spoken:

Peu à peu, en même temps qu’il l’observait, de singulières conceptions naquirent ; à mesure qu’il admirait sa souplesse et sa force, il voyait un artificiel changement de sexe se produire en elle ; ses singeries gracieuses, ses mièvreries de femelle s’effaçaient de plus en plus, tandis que se développaient, à leur place, les charmes agiles et puissants d’un mâle ; en un mot, après avoir tout d’abord été femme, puis, après avoir hésité, après avoir avoisiné l’androgynie, elle semblait se résoudre, se préciser, devenir complètement un homme. (84)

He fell in love with the personality he invented, derived from the stereotypes he projected on Urania and assumed she must live up to as a *circassienne*. He juxtaposes her imagined masculinity with his growing sense of femininity and poeticizes it. “Il envia décidément la possession de cette femme, aspirant ainsi qu’une fillette chlorotique, après le grossier hercule dont les bras la peuvent broyer dans une étreinte” (84). He wants her to take charge in the bedroom and dominate him, yet he also wants to possess her, knowing that he would be the one paying her for her services. The complete lack of respect for the young artist is astounding to the modern reader but was considered normal at the time. In Annie Fratellini’s autobiography she mentions having to earn the public’s respect and change their attitudes toward clowns and the circus. Here, Huysmans, by way of des Esseintes, shows the general opinion, using clowning as an insult to degrade the artist. “Alors, de même qu’un robuste gaillard s’éprend d’une fille grêle, cette clownesse doit aimer, par tendance, une créature faible, ployée, pareille à moi, sans souffle, se dit des Esseintes...” (84). It would be nearly a century before Fratellini became the first *clownesse*, so the use of the word in this instance is only to show disrespect. After being disappointed with his mistress, he again uses the clown as an insult. “En sondant bien le vide de ses convoitises, peut-être eût-il cependant aperçu un penchant vers un être délicat et fluet, vers un tempérament absolument contraire au sien, mais alors il eût découvert une préférence non pour une fillette, mais pour un joyeux gringalet, pour un cocasse et maigre clown” (85). None of the people he has referred to as a clown are actual clowns, so Huysmans is merely alluding to the negative connotations that his readers would have about clowns and the circus world, reducing the *circassienne* to a muscular prostitute to be preyed upon.

Otherwise stuck in her status quo, the artist has little choice in the matter. “Miss Urania crut nécessaire de ne point céder, sans une préalable cour ; néanmoins elle se montra peu farouche, sachant par les oui-dire, que des Esseintes était riche et que son nom aidait à lancer les femmes” (85). Her career is the most important aspect in her life, so she does what is necessary to advance, even if it means accepting propositions that should have no relation to being a performer. Unfortunately for des Esseintes, he learns that neither the performer’s onstage personality nor the personality he invented were her real personality, as is true with all *circassiennes*:

Il s’était imaginé l’Américaine, stupide et bestiale comme un lutteur de foire, et sa bêtise était malheureusement toute féminine. Certes, elle manquait d’éducation et de tact, n’avait ni bon sens ni esprit, et elle témoignait d’une ardeur animale, à table, mais tous les sentiments enfantins de la femme subsistaient en elle ; elle possédait le caquet et la coquetterie des filles entichées de balivernes ; la transmutation des idées masculines dans son corps de femme n’existait pas. (85)

Des Esseintes is surprised that being muscular does not make a *circassienne* masculine and being strong does not make a *circassienne* a dominatrix. He seems shocked and dismayed that his *circassienne* of choice is a regular person when not onstage. This highlights the audience’s expectations of the female circus artist. She needs to command the stage, expertly execute her act, and, perhaps most importantly, be sexy. The average outsider never considers that offstage she is a regular woman and is just as likely to be shy as she is to be outgoing. Des Esseintes may not have learned his lesson, but he does at least see Urania now as a woman, not a primeval, testosterone-filled beast: “... ses

impressions de féminité, de faiblesse, de quasi-protection achetée, de peur même, disparurent ; l'illusion n'était plus possible ; miss Urania était une maîtresse ordinaire, ne justifiant en aucune façon, la curiosité cérébrale qu'elle avait fait naître"(85).

In the same chapter, des Esseintes describes another performing artist he solicited as his mistress. This woman was a ventriloquist, and he again became more intrigued by the sexual possibilities related to her talent than by the woman herself. Again, due to his willingness to pay well for his pleasure, the artist agrees to his proposal shortly after meeting him. "Des Esseintes avait été fasciné ; une masse d'idées germa en lui ; tout d'abord il s'empressa de réduire, à coups de billets de banque, la ventriloque qui lui plut par le contraste même qu'elle opposait avec l'Américaine" (86). He again describes her physical characteristics, noting her beauty, but for this artist he never does mention her name. She is an anonymous *circassienne*, subjected to sexual abuse as part of her profession's lot in life. To fulfill his fantasies, des Esseintes purchases a sphinx and a chimera and forces the ventriloquist to act out their scene from Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*. He is so overcome by the artist's rendition that he carefully clings to her, both amazed and terrified by what "he" has created, oblivious to the artist's annoyance at being forced to work one job while at another. "Doucement, il étreignait la femme silencieuse, à ses côtés, se réfugiant, ainsi qu'un enfant inconsolé, près d'elle, ne voyant même pas l'air maussade de la comédienne obligée à jouer une scène, à exercer son métier, chez elle, aux instants du repos, loin de la rampe" (87).

This book does not portray the *circassienne* in an especially glamorous light, reducing her to a sexually appealing body up for purchase by the highest bidder. The author has no interest in developing the *circassiennes'* characters, and they remain mere

objects to help the reader better understand des Esseintes. These stereotypes were held by many at the time of publication, and readers would not have been shocked at Huysmans' use of the female circus artist to make his point. This is the worst treatment she receives throughout the books in this analysis, but it may be the most accurate depiction of stereotypes held about *circassiennes* through the early to mid nineteenth century. Huysmans has no special feelings toward *circassiennes*, and he is not particularly sympathetic to their plight.

Les Kuntz, une famille du cirque

A century after *A Rebours* was published, Elisabeth Aghion published *Les Kuntz, une famille du cirque* in 1985. It is part of a series of children's books titled "Histoire d'un métier, de 1900 à nos jours," for which Aghion wrote two books the same year: one about the circus and one about a family of railroad workers. Little information is available about the author, and she has not published any other books under the same name. It seems she was an author and historian who engaged in research to create the content for her books; she did not write from personal experience and she is not a circus historian. Her treatment of the *circassienne* is fairly standard for the time—there is an emphasis on the beautiful young acrobat clothed in sequins and rhinestones who marries early and performs with her father/brother/husband. The book follows the Kuntz family from 1900 to 1985, so the *circassiennes* who appear are those who were born or married into the Kuntz family.

Aghion devotes two pages to each snippet of the story, often jumping years from one part to the next. Over all the women do not get much mention other than as

performers and love interests, as the author describes many duties as being done by the family, not specifying men or women. One of the few times she does mention gendered roles is when talking about the first tasks the family must undertake when arriving in a new town, even before raising the circus tent. “Georges... va se procurer du fourrage et du terreau pour la piste. Les femmes sont allées puiser de l’eau à la fontaine du village” (Aghion 10). The men take care of the dirty jobs dealing with the animals and dirt, and the women fetch water. Both jobs involve heavy lifting, but the women are afforded the cleaner chore between the two. Aghion says that “toute la troupe” works together to raise the tent, yet illustrations and anecdotes from other sources rarely mention women participating (10). After this quick description, Aghion does not again mention a difference in roles between men and women until World War I when the men leave to fight. “Les femmes et les enfants restés seuls ne peuvent pas s’occuper du cirque en cette période troublée où l’on manque de tout” (21). One wonders if it is truly the lack of men that causes the family to sell their equipment and retire to the countryside or if they simply do not have enough performers to make a travelling circus viable during a time when money and resources are scarce. As the patriarch of the family is away, perhaps those still at home feel they should not proceed on their own, trying to make a living in entertainment during a war. Their circus is a family effort, and continuing without a third of the family does not seem correct.

The only other instances where Aghion mentions gendered roles pertain to performing and relationships. On the second page of the story, a young man attends a travelling circus and is fascinated more by who than what he sees. “Il est ébloui par le charme et le talent d’une jeune artiste particulièrement dans son numéro de danseuse de

corde” (9). Several pages later, the author explains what she means by a *danseuse de corde*, noting that because of the importance of grace and elegance expected, it is rare to encounter a *danseur de corde*. “Plus que dans toutes les autres discipline [*sic*], la danse est importante dans le travail au fil de fer. Ici, plus qu’ailleurs, interviennent la grâce et l’élégance de l’artiste et ce sont souvent les femmes qui se spécialisent dans ce numéro. En 1900, on les appelle « danseuses de corde »” (19). Aghion shows that the company is aware that their clientele belongs to a patriarchal society, so they appeal to the male interest when advertising their show in an effort to convince men to bring their families: “Dans quelques instants, vous pourrez voir à l’intérieur du chapiteau la plus gracieuse, la plus éblouissante artiste que vous ayez jamais vue, Mlle Rosa, dans son numéro exceptionnel de danseuse de corde !” (12). Naturally, the circus would have also advertised itself to children who could convince their parents to buy tickets, but the author does not mention anything to this effect. The acts are divided according to gender, with the men as clowns and bases and the women as tight wire dancers and flyers. Several generations later, Julia, a *circassienne* from another family, astonishes a young Kuntz with her juggling act. “Une jolie fille apparaî, tout habillée de rouge. Elle danse sur un fil en jonglant avec six anneaux de toutes les couleurs. Son entrée est féérique ! Une fois arrivée au milieu du fil, elle fait passer deux anneaux sur une jambe, tout en continuant à jongler en équilibre sur un pied...” (51). The men are never described as having a *féérique* entrance, nor as being *joli*. The *circassienne* is still socially barred from certain acts, even if little by little she masters more. Later in the book one of Julia’s children points out his mother and notes that “avant, elle était jongleuse et fil de férisme. Maintenant, avec la formule de notre cirque, elle a dû apprendre aussi à être écuyère,

maître de manège, équilibriste...” (59). Clowning and feats of strength are still off limits. Flexibility, however, is still primarily a skill for women. Just like in several of the other books analyzed in this paper, the author describes the women’s warm up as focused on stretching: “Devant leur roulotte, Rosa et Célestine s’échauffent et s’exercent au grand écart et à la jambe à la main” (12). The men, who also would have had to work on flexibility in order to achieve and maintain their high level of acrobatics, are never mentioned as sitting in splits or standing while pulling their foot to their head.

In addition to Rosa and Julia, there are other *circassiennes* in the story who show the expectations of a female circus artist. First, when Célestine sells tickets before the show, she is described as “Célestine, souriante” (13). Later, when she prepares for her act as an écuyère, the author describes her costume. “Célestine... a vraiment fière allure dans son costume d’amazone, coiffée de son chapeau haut-de-forme et ne semble faire qu’un seul corps avec sa monture” (17). Little is known about her personality, but she looks sharp in her outfit and knows to smile when dealing with the public, vital skills for a female circus artist. Eventually she marries and has a child. Aghion wants to emphasize the fact *circassiennes* must train continuously or else lose their flexibility and strength, so she describes the *circassienne*’s version of maternal leave: “Après l’accouchement, Célestine reprend ses exercices de danse et son entraînement le plus rapidement possible. Car plus on s’arrête de travailler, plus il est dur de reprendre !” (18). As for dealing with a newborn and a postpartum body, Célestine seems to have little choice. “Entre les exercices, elle retrouve son bébé qui sourit déjà aux grimaces de son oncle... Bientôt, elle pourra redevenir la ballerine légère et délicate qui saute le ruban sur le dos du bel étalon pie [sic] Frenzi” (18). A *circassienne* must be light and delicate, graceful and sexy.

Menstruation, postpartum bodies, lactation... all had no place onstage. One of the men in the family, Richard, becomes a clown and uses the stereotype of the *circassienne* as the basis of his sketch. “Quand debout sur un élégant cheval blanc, Richard entre en piste, habillé en ballerine, c’est l’éclat de rire général. Le fin tutu de tulle blanc met en valeur ses grosses jambes musclées et poilues. Il parodie les grâces et les coquetteries de l’écuyère à panneau qui saute le ruban” (36). The circus artists are well aware of the aesthetic required for each performer, and everyone knows it is entertainment for a man in a tutu to mock women but scandalous for a woman in pants to mock men.

As in many of the other books in this analysis, there is a never-ending list of which *circassien* marries which *circassienne*. Guillaume falls in love with Juliette, a contortionist, asks for her hand in marriage, receives her father’s blessing until Guillaume tries to take her to live with his family, kidnaps Juliette, and marries her several weeks later (31). Richard marries Laura, “une jeune artiste issue d’une famille de forains qui possédait une somptueuse ménagerie au début du siècle” (35). Thaïs falls in love with both Alfredo and flying trapeze. Being “déjà une danseuse et une acrobate confirmée,” she convinces her father to make a deal with Alfredo’s father to train her. Once she has several tricks she can perform reliably, she creates an act with Alfredo. “Unis dans le même amour du métier et découvrant le bonheur d’être ensemble, Thaïs et Alfredo se marient quelques mois plus tard et deviennent un couple de trapézistes connu pour l’harmonie et l’élégance de leurs numéros” (25). It would be considered indecent for a young woman to work in such physical proximity with a man who was not her husband, and marrying a non-*circassien* would generally require leaving the circus world. Therefore, it is of little surprise that Thaïs and Alfredo marry each other.

Les Kuntz also looks at stereotypes held by the public about circus artists as members of society. Although people pay to be astonished and entertained by circus artists, they do not always approve of the lifestyle. This book was published in 1985, so it reflects the attitudes toward circus artists at that time. To confront this mindset, Aghion describes sixteen-year-old Sandrine, who comes from a non-circus family in France. “Au lycée, elle n’est pas vraiment douée pour les mathématiques et le français. Ce qui l’intéresse, c’est le sport et les disciplines artistiques... Elle apprend par hasard qu’il existe une école du Cirque à Paris. Elle décide d’aller s’inscrire à cette école. Ses parents essaient de l’en empêcher, car pour eux le cirque, ce n’est pas très sérieux” (56). Tactfully, the author attempts to challenge the reader’s beliefs, knowing that it is highly probable her book will be read to children (who do not yet have pre-conceived notions of circus life) by their skeptical parents, even though circus is a strong part of French history and culture. To wrap up the book, Aghion forces the reader to reflect. “En France, pour la population comme pour les pouvoirs publics, le cirque est souvent tenu pour un art à part, marginal, peut-être à cause du mystère dont s’auréolent les gens du voyage. En considérant son évolution et son rayonnement, ne mériterait-il pas d’être tenu pour un élément vivant de notre culture et traité comme tel ?” (61). The same could be said for the *circassienne*—should she not also be considered a living element of our culture and treated as such?

Contes et récits du cirque

Contes et récits du cirque, published by Laurence Gillot in 2004, is a historical fiction book comprised of a collection of ten short stories about circus artists, ranging

from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the end of the twentieth century. The author was fascinated with the circus as a child but did not see an actual circus until her teenage years (Gillot 154). Despite her love for the circus, she is not a *circassienne* and not a circus historian. To prepare, Gillot read several books by circus artists and circus historians before choosing her subjects and interviewing those she could. She chose ten circus stories, of which five are focused on *circassiens*, two on animals, two on animals and their handlers, and one on a *circassienne*. The stories are written for children and are very short, so there is limited description and detail in each, barely allowing the reader to get to know each circus artist before the story wraps up and the book passes on to the next. Perhaps because of this brevity, there is little commentary on the *circassienne* throughout the stories, yet Gillot does include brief snippets that show she has done her research.

The first anecdote Gillot embellishes tells the story of Europe's first tiger tamer who was inspired by love—he had fallen for the daughter of the director of a rival circus and needed to impress her father. Smitten with the circus' menagerie, he befriends Goya the mandrill and complains: “Le problème... c'est que ton propriétaire, M. Van Aken, ne veut pas entendre parler de notre mariage. Hier, il m'a dit que je n'étais pas assez fortuné pour épouser sa fille ! Mais c'est l'amour qui compte, ce n'est pas l'argent, n'est-ce pas, Goya ?” (Gillot 6). M. Van Aken, a successful circus director, is concerned with his daughter's future and forbids Henri from courting her. Circus families frequently intermarried and the women did often enjoy more freedom than non-*circassiennes*, but in the early 1800s a marriage still required the father's permission, circus family or not. As the owner and director, M. Van Aken knows that Maria enjoys a life with social prestige

in her community, as she is his daughter and the circus is well known and profitable. Although Maria is described as the ticket seller for the menagerie and the reader is left to guess what her other roles are in the Van Aken Circus, her father naturally wants her to live a comfortable life as a *circassienne* with a circus that is not at risk of folding (8). M. Van Aken respects Henri's talent with horses, but he is not convinced. "Je le sais, tu es un cavalier fantastique, mais tu es endetté jusqu'au cou avec ton cirque qui ne fait pas recette. Tu n'as pas assez d'avenir pour épouser Maria... Je ne veux pas qu'elle vive comme une saltimbanque, dans la misère et la pauvreté" (8). Here M. Van Aken highlights the struggles that female acrobats often faced, condemned to a life of misery and poverty that strongly clashed with the glitz and glamour in the ring. Their jobs neither paid well nor brought a life of prestige, and they had to fight for respect in a patriarchal society. Henri decides to tame M. Van Aken's lion and become Europe's first lion tamer. After months of patience and determination, he finally shows his love's father what he has accomplished. "Pensez-vous dorénavant... que je sois capable de gagner ma vie et d'amasser assez d'argent pour faire vivre femme et enfants ?" (15). He has correctly deduced that Maria's father is more interested in his ability to earn money than in Henri's love for his daughter. Fortunately for Henri, his future father-in-law is impressed by the economic potential of this new and dangerous act and agrees to the marriage. "En bon patron de ménagerie, il mesurait très bien à quel point le spectacle d'un homme enfermé aux côtés d'un fauve pouvait attirer et faire frémir le public" (15). At the end of the book, Gillot shares that Henri Martin was in fact motivated by love when he became the first tiger tamer, but she created the details of the story (155-156).

The second story tells the tale of Coco, the tamed deer, and the woman who gave birth while attending the show, but the only *circassiennes* mentioned are a dancer and a trick rider who assist the expecting mother (24). In the story of the *Homme Oiseau*, we learn about the prodigious acrobat's mother. "Dans le ventre de sa mère, il bondissait déjà ! m'expliqua Théophile Gautier. Celle-ci était écuyère et elle montait, paraît-il, à cheval tous les soirs malgré son état de grossesse avancé" (37). This reveals that *circassiennes* were not always forced by societal standards to hide themselves while pregnant and were free to continue performing as long as they and their family agreed. Many stopped performing once they were visibly pregnant, but some women were able to continue into their third trimester. There have long been stereotypes in flying trapeze that being a catcher will damage a woman's reproductive organs and render her sterile or that a pregnant woman should stop flying as it will harm the fetus. Therefore, this quick anecdote reveals that *circassiennes* have been fighting social stigma around pregnancy since at least the 1800s, both in the circus world and out, but little else is revealed in this story.

In the story of Jumbo, the large elephant brought to the United States from England, the reader learns of the American sideshow tradition, in this case at Barnum's, and the utter lack of respect afforded to the *circassiennes* who were put on display for their unusual physical appearances. "'Voici Dorothy, la femme à barbe.' 'Elle exposée au même titre qu'un animal ?' a-t-il demandé, choqué. Mon ami américain semblait trouver cela tout à fait normal et il a désigné du doigt d'autres créatures bizarres : 'Il y a aussi... Olga, qui est plus large que haute, et les sœurs siamoises et...'" (51). The author's choice to use the word *créature* reflects a separation in the American's mind between other

women and these. In *Le Cirque interdit* the contortionist is also described as a creature, but it is a compliment, commenting on her otherworldly movement quality. Here, it is an insult designed to show a distinction between “normal” women and those in the sideshow. Barnum was not known for his ethics, so Gillot’s description of his attitude is based on fact, even if she created the actual dialogue.

The only story focused on a *circassienne* is the story of Emilie Loisset, a trick rider, or, as she is presented in the book, “la plus grande, la plus belle, la plus célèbre écuyère de tous les temps : Emilie Loisset !” (65). Like many other *circassiennes* in this paper, she is first described as beautiful before the reader finds out what the artist does or what their personality is like. The young boy who is watching her is delighted to see that she has the same mole on her cheek as his mother did, but upon meeting his new idol later that night, he remarks that she no longer has the beauty mark (66, 70). This was the author’s quick way of commenting on *circassiennes*’ comprehension of society’s emphasis on their beauty and their attempt to keep abreast of the latest beauty trends, as much as a circus costume would allow. At the back of the book Gillot specifies: “Les belles écuyères, comme Emilie Loisset, étaient particulièrement appréciées, admirées et adulées...” (158). As *circassiennes* were considered beautiful, graceful, and exotic, they often attracted the attention of the male gaze. Loisset shares that “j’ai aimé un prince, le prince de Hastfeld. Il était venu me voir un soir et il était tombé amoureux de moi. Et moi, de lui. Il voulait se fiancer avec moi” (73). To help the young boy understand why she might have been interested in the prince, she explains that “beaucoup d’écuyères épousent des hommes riches, tu sais...,” giving the example of her sister, who married a prince (74). *Circassiennes* could leave the circus world with their father’s permission,

but, as noted in this story, it was generally to marry a wealthy lover and escape from circus life.

The last story that mentions a *circassienne* is about the tight wire family, the *Diabes blancs*. In this tale Gillot focuses on the strength and traditions of a circus family while emphasizing stereotypes surrounding the *circassienne* and her family. One of the artists presents the performers to the audience by naming them and describing their relation: “Karl-Trista, mon grand-père!... Anna et Rudolph, mes parents !... Kusti, Mathis et Karla, mes oncles et tante !... Ma fille Berty et... et... pour la toute première fois sur scène, mon tout jeune fils : Rudy junior !” (112). Although it would not be unusual to complete the troupe with a couple of artists who are not in the family, this particular family is an entire troupe by itself. In their act, the little boy pretends to shampoo his grandmother’s hair, messing up her elegantly coiffed hairdo. The audience loves his irreverence, poking fun at the respect generally afforded to women, especially of a grandmother’s age (113). Much like a king’s jester, circus artists (and clowns in training!) have long been able to get away with mocking respected people who would be otherwise off limits for such behavior. Another point Gillot makes is the expectation that the children will grow up doing the family act, whether that be flying trapeze, tight wire, or group acrobatics. She has the little boy complain at a special publicity event: “‘Aujourd’hui, je n’ai pas envie de faire le numéro !’ confia Rudy junior à Berty, sa grande sœur. ‘Moi non plus... mais il ne faut pas le dire à papa car il va hurler’” (115, 116). This is a realistic dialogue, as telling a *circassien* parent that you do not want to do the act would be grounds for a severe scolding. Just as farmers’ children assist with chores, *circassien* children do their act. The fact that Berty, who is an adolescent and no

longer a young girl, is also afraid to do the act but more afraid of her father shows how ingrained it is in circus children what their responsibilities are. Many years later she becomes the star of the show and has a new nickname. On one special day in particular, “les gens se bouscullaient, se chamaillaient pour bien voir... Quoi ? Qui ? Les Diabes blancs bien sûr, et tout particulièrement Berty, la « Diabesse blanche », qui se mariait ce jour-là” (118). In true circus style, her wedding was turned into a grand event, drawing paying customers and building publicity for the circus. Several years later her younger brother had a similar wedding when he married Colette, a woman who was not born a *circassienne* but learned to walk the tight wire in order to integrate herself into her new husband’s life. “C’est ainsi que Rudy junior et Colette se marièrent, en 1959, au-dessus de la place du casino de La Roche-Posay” (122).

This book has an accurate portrayal of family life in the circus world, even if it has little space for detail. The reader witnesses the family duties and traditions that are unique to circus families, and the author neither praises them nor criticizes. Although the stories are simply too short to paint a broader picture of *circassienne* daily life, the book cannot be faulted for focusing on negative stereotypes. Reflecting on the uniqueness of circus families, Gillot succinctly summarizes the family dynamics she has described throughout the book: “Il y a des familles de médecins, d’agriculteurs... et il y a des familles circassiennes” (159).

Le Cirque interdit

The fourth book in this section is Célia Flaux’s *Le Cirque interdit*, published in 2019. It follows Maria, a young woman who takes an undercover job with France’s last

circus in a dystopian society overly focused on security, where all risky behavior has been banned. Secretly working for a rival insurance firm in an effort to disband the circus and its own insurance company, she becomes the director's assistant while trying to uncover the secrets surrounding her parents' death at the circus many years earlier. Flaux is not a circus artist and writes mainly science fiction and fantasy ("Célia Flaux"). *Le Cirque interdit* was her second book and the first to take place in the circus.

Maria, the main character, is destined to be a *circassienne*, growing up in a circus family in a travelling circus. However, she is taken from the circus world after the death of her parents and brought up in a society far removed from the wonders and magic of the circus. Therefore, she cannot be truly considered a *circassienne*, as she supposedly remembers very little of her artistic life, yet, as she begins to change her opinion of the circus artists and circus way of life, she picks up more *circassienne* traits. The majority of the other characters she interacts with are men, giving little room for insight to the author's treatment of true *circassiennes*. The acrobat brothers make several comments that reveal the author's thoughts about life as a circus artist, but the only *circassiennes* in the story are Yenanga the magician, Julia the contortionist, Amandine the costume mistress, and perhaps the grandmother who is the head of the circus' insurance company and never reveals if she has traveled with the circus or not. The book fairly accurately reflects life in a travelling circus even if a few details are implausible.

The concept of the elegant and beautiful *circassienne* resurfaces multiple times. When Maria first meets an artist outside of the director's family, she is introduced as "Yenanga, notre belle magicienne..." (Flaux 30). The director's wife is introduced as "une dame d'une soixantaine d'années, très élégante" (78). For both of these women,

being elegant or beautiful is one of the first defining characteristics presented to the reader. Their personality follows later, as does their background. Very little is ever shared about Yenanga, so she remains a pretty face and little else. Mme Vazatta's overbearing personality is soon revealed, and, although she is not a main character, the reader gets to know her better and simultaneously cheer for her while fearing for Maria's safety in her presence. As Maria starts to participate in the daily workings of the circus as a ticket seller, her biggest fear is being ridiculed, not found out. She does not have the grace of a *circassienne* who has been training acrobatics from childhood, nor is she accustomed to makeup and revealing clothing. After Mathieu does her makeup for the first time, as she has never worn any, she worriedly inquires, "Tu ne me trouves pas ridicule ?" (68). The highest compliment the *circassien* can think to offer her in reassurance is to comment on her beauty: "Tu es très belle, dit-il sans hésiter" (68). This insistence on physical beauty reflects the assumption that all *circassiennes* are naturally beautiful or can make themselves beautiful with makeup, with "beautiful" being considered physically attractive in accordance with society's standards.

Maria does worry about being associated with the circus world, which still holds negative connotations for her. This could be explained by the environment in which she grew up (a Big Brother-type society, overly concerned with safety), but is likely also the author's own interpretation of the audience's attitude as of the time she published the book. Once Maria finds out that she, minutes after being orphaned, asked the director to keep her, she finds it impossible to thank him for having been willing, fearing what a life in the circus would have done to her. "Les regrets qui vibrant dans sa voix ne me laissent pas indifférente, mais je n'ose lui dire merci. J'imagine une enfance sur les routes, loin de

l'école et des foyers, pas d'études ni de boulots sérieux, mais une vie consacrée au cirque. Que serais-je devenue ?" (53). The outsider often wonders about life in the circus, alternating between romanticizing it and rejecting it as strange and bizarre. Maria represents an ambitious and motivated businesswoman who adores rules, lists, and organization. She would not be out of place in today's society. Multiple times she mindlessly quotes government and insurance propaganda and is determined to land a job at the large insurance company after causing the downfall of the circus and rival insurance company. There is no place for wonder or art in her life, nor in the society she represents. The costume mistress tries to get her to grasp the difference between everything she represents and the magic of the circus: "Tu portes un costume de working girl dans un lieu dédié à la fantaisie. Ici, nous vendons du rêve, pas des produits à la chaîne" (66). Julia later also implores Maria to change her wardrobe: "Ici, tu peux te permettre un peu de fantaisie. Laisse tomber ton uniforme de working girl!" (126). This emphasis on the otherworldliness inspired by the *circassiennes* resurfaces multiple times throughout the novel and is a stereotype that has long existed, encouraged by the *circassiennes* themselves. Maria, still the picture-perfect no-nonsense businesswoman is taken aback when she first meets Julia:

Je remarque la mystérieuse créature qui roule sur un socle rond, au centre d'un cercle de lumière. Ses bras reposent le long du sol, sa taille s'arque en arrière et sa tête repose entre ses jambes tendues, une position impossible qui me donne le frisson. Elle porte une combinaison moulante, parsemée de paillettes, dont la couleur chair donne l'illusion d'une seconde peau. Sa fine silhouette se déplie, elle passe en grand écart puis ses bras, ses épaules et ses hanches ondulent avec

une grâce inhumaine. Elle me sourit et je recule, troublée par ce mélange de grâce et de douleur contenue. (95)

Unsettled by this encounter, Maria cannot help but stare. She highlights Julia's inhuman grace, still mentally referring to her as a creature instead of a fellow woman about her same age. Maria is also intrigued by the pain she assumes Julia must be feeling. How could a body bend to such extremes without being in agony? The ideas of stretching, flexibility, and hypermobile joints seem to be lost on Maria despite her insurance-mandated yoga classes. In a society where Maria has learned to avoid emotional reactions, she is almost repulsed by Julia's contortion just as strongly as she is enthralled. Still obsessed with the juxtaposition of pain and peace, Maria describes Julia's routine: "Elle se tient en équilibre sur les mains, la taille cambrée, et ses jambes dessinent des formes dans l'air. Des angles, des courbes, et toujours ce sourire, ce calme dérangeant, comme si la souffrance n'existait pas" (95). In Maria's world society claims to have eliminated suffering, yet she sees it every time a person who has been through Reeducation breaks down. Voluntarily choosing to put up with something unpleasant is still a foreign notion for the businesswoman. It is not until Julia takes a break from training that Maria notices her physical features instead of her movement quality. "Lorsqu'elle reprend forme humaine, je remarque ses cheveux bruns coupés court..." (96). Again, Maria considers Julia as a creature, not completely human. The *circassiens* do not have the same effect on Maria; she admires their strength and acrobatic skills, but she is not fascinated to the same degree. The juxtapositions are too great: imagined pain versus extreme flexibility, grace versus power, strength versus delicacy. Maria is afraid to shake her hand. "Julia semble fragile, malgré sa force et sa souplesse" (96). The grace

and movement quality expected of female contortionists today often has them costumed as jellyfish, cats, or seaweed, and the descriptions of Julia's actions uphold the same ideal. This grace cannot be turned off and on—it becomes part of one's style after many years of training, much to Maria's dismay and at odds with Maria's remark about Julia regaining her human form. Later, startled by Julia's sudden presence, she laments, “avec sa démarche féline, elle a le don de surgir à l'improviste et de me prendre au dépourvu” (126). Toward the end of the book, much more at ease with Julia's grace and coordination, Maria still describes her actions by invoking nonhuman movement qualities. “Julia, toute fine dans sa combinaison, s'enroule autour de lui comme du lierre à un tronc” (239). The ethereal quality helps to define the *circassienne*.

The *circassiens* are the ones in the story who reveal clichés and stereotypes about the circus world, most of which apply to both male and female artists. One of the stereotypes the author relies on heavily is that nearly all of the troupe is related. The grandfather is the director and clown, the grandmother is head of the circus' insurance company, the father is the head of security, the mother takes care of everyone, and the children perform as acrobats, trapeze artists, and clowns. Other circus artists and crew have been hired to join the Zavatta Circus, but the Zavatta family literally runs the show. Just as in any group of living beings, there is a social hierarchy in the circus. The director is at the top and his or her family is next in line. When Maria finally asks Mathieu about the “creature” she has been watching warm up, he describes Julia's place in the circus, as Flaux has already described her physical appearance and movement quality: “C'est la contorsionniste de la troupe et la fiancée de mon frère” (95). With these two quantifiers Maria now knows what Julia's act is and her social role within the group. Mme Zavatta

later accuses a bemused and slightly offended Julia of simply wanting to advance her career by sleeping with her grandsons, “comme si j’avais besoin d’eux pour justifier mon numéro” (118). It seems Julia has been with the Zavatta Circus for a while when Mathieu further explains: “En fait, je sortais avec Julia en premier. Elle m’a largué pour mon frère. Ou plutôt, Jean me l’a piquée. De toute façon, elle nous confondait souvent ; pour elle nous sommes tous pareils” (98). Who is dating who is a topic of conversation in the circus world just as it stereotypically is at the office—a close-knit community where everybody knows everybody and it is difficult to keep secrets. The director tries to explain this closeness to Maria, who has grown up as an orphan, in terms of how the Zavatta Circus cast and crew celebrate Christmas. “La troupe forme une famille, cara mia. Le 24 au soir, nous dînons tous ensemble, et le lendemain matin, tout le monde ouvre ses cadeaux” (127). Despite being close to her legal guardian, Maria does not comprehend how unrelated friends can form a chosen family and insists throughout the book that she does not belong, despite having been born into this travelling circus and rejoining it years later. She calls the director *monsieur*, attempts to avoid the circus-family-wide Christmas party, and excuses herself anytime someone includes her in a general reference to the circus family. By the end of the book she has come clear as to her original intentions, helped to save the circus, and still addresses her boss as *monsieur*. Exasperated, the latter gently reprimands her: “Après tout ce que nous avons traversé ensemble, tu m’appelles encore ainsi ? Voyons, cara mia, je mérite bien le titre de papy” (236). This emotional shift reminds the reader of the importance of family to a *circassienne*. As someone who has given up all semblance of what society considers a

normal and stable life, a *circassienne* finds that family, both biological and chosen, becomes of utmost importance.

The author's treatment of the *circassiennes* is mostly based on fact, even if stereotypes play a larger part than the *circassiennes* themselves. They are beautiful and graceful and work to befriend the main character. No boundaries are pushed, which is disappointing for a book published in 2019 about circus artists. Instead, the book focuses on its main purpose—to make the reader question to what lengths society should go to to keep its citizens safe. This debate does have a place in the circus world with arguments such as whether the kamikaze drop on fabric should be allowed, but the danger in the book is reduced to missing catches in flying trapeze. Misses happen every day, even among professionals, so it would have been more interesting for the real dangers of circus life to be explored. Flaux's treatment was over all fair, but the book is pro-circus, not pro-*circassiennes*.

Reflection

Throughout these four books there is a wide variety in the authors' treatment of the *circassienne*. Sometimes she is a sexual object, sometimes an essential part of a circus family, and sometimes just a supporting character. However, she is always beautiful and graceful, capable of splits and always agreeable. She does not fight for what she wants and does not use her platform to make a statement. Des Esseintes' mistresses from 1884 are not much different from Julia in 2019 other than that circus artists are no longer expected to be the mistress of a rich man. This is an important development in her self-sufficiency, but it does not represent the modern *circassienne*. The authors who did

research to present an unbiased history of circus did successfully incorporate the least amount of sexism into their works compared to authors like Huysmans who rely on stereotypes. Overall, her treatment by the outsider is disappointing.

CHAPTER 3

THE MALE ARTIST'S VIEW

Authors can be divided into two categories: those who are familiar with circus and those who are not. The last chapter looked at representation of the *circassienne* by authors uninitiated into the circus world. The remaining authors can again be divided into two main categories: those who identify as male and those who identify as female.¹

First up are the male authors, educated in the world of circus. These authors range from circus festival producers to amateurs to professionals from traditional circus families. Although they do not all share the exact same experiences, they understand the audience's expectations of each circus performer and know that a circus artist's value is based on a blend of skills, ingenuity, physical appearance, and ability to interact with the audience. The stereotypes held by these male authors regarding the *circassienne* have developed in a world whose private life is largely hidden from outsiders, steeped with tradition and superstition, and are not necessarily the same stereotypes held by outsiders. Although the *circassienne* is frequently hailed as a liberated woman, free to shock audiences with revealing clothing and un-ladylike athleticism, these authors reveal a long tradition of a harshly patronizing world, a far cry from the feminism often present in today's contemporary circus companies. Some make note of it; most seem unaware. Although the gender biases "uncovered" in this analysis never had the intention of being hidden, it will hopefully be interesting for the modern reader to learn more about the stereotypes and the atmosphere female circus artists have dealt with over time.

¹ It should be noted that all the authors of the works in this study are identified as male or female in the biographies or interviews that accompany their publication.

L'Acrobatie et les acrobates

One of the earliest books included in this study is George Strehly's *L'Acrobatie et les acrobates*, first published in 1903 and republished in 1977. The book was considered extremely important in the world of acrobatics, becoming the first thorough written record of acrobatic possibilities and those who accomplished them. Fratellini, a famous clown and circus school founder, makes a note in her autobiography for the year of publication, highlighting the importance of the book by comparing it to the most popular French dictionary. "Strehly écrit son ouvrage L'Acrobatie et les acrobates, qui deviendra notre Larousse" (Fratellini 33). At a time before Instagram and YouTube, this book permitted artists around the world to see what others were doing, to pick up on Strehly's performing and training advice, and to learn the names of the most skilled acrobatic performers. Strehly was considered one of the top experts at the time and wrote several books on acrobatics, including physical education guides for schools ("Strehly, G.").

In this book the author describes numerous acrobatic skills, covering everything from tumbling to trapeze to balancing, and unashamedly includes his opinion any time he has a comment to add. For instance, when describing the top twenty *sauts acrobatiques*, he prefaces the descriptions with an explanation of why long and high jumps are generally uninteresting and warns the reader that these *sauts acrobatiques* should not be practiced too much by young people, as it will deform their legs and lead them to have an unusual gait (Strehly 115). Starting with the *saut périlleux en arrière simple*, or the back tuck, Strehly advises the reader as to how to execute the movement, describes how to learn it, warns of the dangers, and gives a brief summary of its etymology in Italian, German, English, and French (116-118). This continues for the next seventeen tricks until

he gets to number nineteen: the *saut plongeant en arrière avec les tables*, a trick he describes as being “l’exercice le plus palpitant que j’aie jamais vu,” capable of being performed by a singular artist by the name of Nathan Jackley (132-135). Immediately after describing this death-defying tumbling sequence, Strehly moves on to number twenty: the *saut du plongeur dans le filet*. Hardly having saved the best for last, Strehly introduces this figure with the following description: “Le saut du plongeur est un mouvement à effet, mais sans grande valeur gymnastique, car il est souvent réservé à des femmes...” (135). In addition to classifying the terrifying trick as having little acrobatic value, Strehly’s use of “*car*” certainly adds a touch of misogyny, bluntly stating that the trick is of little value *because* it is performed by women. As an aside, for the curious reader, this trick involves hanging from one’s feet from a very high trapeze, letting go, falling headfirst toward the net, and doing a strong sit up roughly one meter before landing in order to land on one’s back, parallel to the net. Any hesitation or lack of force in the sit up results in immediate death or severe injury. Nevertheless, the author specifies that the trick “ne nécessite aucun effort musculaire,” ignoring the abdominal muscles required to save the performer’s life at the last second (136). Some artists perform it with their head already in the sit up position, resulting in a much easier and less terrifying trick, but the truly great performers hold their position completely perpendicular to the net as long as possible.

In the following section, Strehly discusses group ground acrobatics. He goes through two highs and three highs and eventually discusses some of the groups that have left a lasting impression on him. One of the last groups mentioned is Les Héras, a German group that added “deux ou trois jeunes porteuses et même cascadeuses,”

although he feels the need to add “que leur vigueur musculaire permet difficilement de ranger dans le sexe faible, bien que leurs attraits ne les excluent pas du beau sexe” (Strehly 146). The author does not take the time to comment on the physical attractiveness of any of the male artists mentioned in this section, nor does he suggest that body type makes it difficult to accept any of the men as men. After mentioning his favorite male groups, he acknowledges a group of female artists, “les sœurs Daineff... d’origine belge, si je ne me trompe. Elles méritent d’être applaudies sans qu’il soit besoin pour cela de faire appel à l’indulgence qu’on accorde généralement au travail féminin” (146). In this passage he references sexism in the circus arts, but he does not mention that he also holds a fairly biased view, as his writing shows throughout the book. Strehly never explains what the group did in particular that merited praise, but there is a photograph on the next page of the six women standing in height order (147). Perhaps surprisingly for today’s readers, one of the women is much larger than the stereotypical female acrobat of the time, and several are larger than the typical female acrobats of the twenty-first century, yet Strehly does not comment on their size. In 1902 Pathé Frères released a three-minute video of the sisters showing off several of their stunts, and a trained eye can see that all six women are capable of floor acrobatics (handsprings, cartwheels, somersaults) and both fly and base each other (Pathé Frères).

Strehly does eventually comment on male artists’ body types, expressing why he is sometimes unimpressed with aerial ring artists’ bodies, first warning the reader that “...l’emploi exclusif de cet appareil nuirait à l’harmonie des formes du corps” (Strehly 161). Determined to make the reader understand this grave risk, he explains:

Les anneaux tendent à donner aux muscles trapèzes et aux grands dorsaux un développement disproportionné avec celui des autres groupes de muscles, et notamment ceux de la région inférieure. Voilà pourquoi certains faiseurs d'anneaux ne m'ont pas laissé une impression esthétique satisfaisante : le colosse péchait par la base. (161)

As opposed to when Strehly discussed the *circassiennes*' physical appearance, he does not suggest that the artist's physical appearance has anything to do with their gender. It is not surprising to him that these men are muscular in some areas and less so in others, nor does it make him feel the need to comment on their sexual attractiveness as a result of their physical appearance.

Freely continuing to share his opinion, Strehly launches into a description of rings acts that are interspersed with flying trapeze acts, allowing the flyers a few moments to breathe before continuing with their act. Withholding little criticism, Strehly critiques:

C'est un numéro un peu sacrifié. Aussi est-il souvent dévolu à des femmes, qui suppléent à la force par la grâce. Bien entendu, leurs figures sont très simples et d'une médiocre valeur acrobatique : dislocations, balancements, tourniquets avec les cuisses engagées dans les anneaux. Pour peu qu'elles soient jolies et bien faites, le public se montre indulgent pour elles, d'autant plus qu'il a besoin, pour ainsi dire, de se remettre des émotions troublantes que lui procurent les passes aériennes des hommes volants. (166-167)

Strehly seems to assume that the women were incapable of the same tricks as the men. Perhaps there is another reason they did not focus on the most dangerous stunts; perhaps the women were trying to live up to the audience's (and venue's) expectations of being

graceful and sexy as opposed to pushing boundaries of strength and power. Directors hire acts that encourage ticket sales, so catering an act to what has been a tried-and-true formula (daring young men showing off their strength and bravery contrasted with sexy young ladies showing off their beauty and flexibility) is a sound business strategy. If you know what the person booking is looking for, why not cater your act to that? In flying trapeze troupes today, there is often a lead flyer who throws the most difficult tricks and the rest of the flyers are hired to compliment the lead flyer. Most lead flyers are male, so females are still expected to throw splits, legs, and heels across whereas the other male flyers throw planches, tricks requiring an uprise, and tricks with straddles, all of which are generally considered too masculine for female flyers. There are now many women who throw doubles, long considered a men's trick, and there are an increasing number of women who throw triples. Audience expectations have changed, and now women throwing the "big" tricks draw in the public just as much as men throwing the same tricks. If that were not the case, women would still only be throwing the "pretty" tricks in order to remain employed.

As of when Strehly was writing his book, women were still considered to be weak and incapable of tricks or acts requiring great strength. "En général, les femmes réussissent peu dans la gymnastique de force, et cela par une raison inhérente à leur conformation anatomique" (167). Professionals know that building the muscles required to perform the bigger tricks simply takes hard work and perseverance. True, many males build big muscle easier and faster because of their testosterone. However, the female body is capable. Surprisingly, Strehly even praises two different all-female gymnastics acts. The first, the Klaus Sisters, "déployaient une force de biceps bien rare dans leur

sexe” (168). The second, the “merveilleuses” Foucart Sisters, “[ont] montré, malgré la faiblesse inhérente à votre sexe, que l’entraînement peut triompher de tous les obstacles créés par la nature” (168). The author seems truly impressed by their ability and admits that “à mon avis, ce sont les seules femmes qui aient réellement pratiqué la gymnastique de force avec autant de succès que les meilleurs artistes de l’autre sexe, et qui aient provoqué des applaudissements où la galanterie n’avait aucune part” (167). Whereas throughout the book he constantly refers to women as the weaker sex and states that certain tricks are done by women because the tricks are easy and require little muscular effort, he contradicts his assumption that women must be weak while describing the physical appearance of the Foucart sisters:

Leur conformation n’était pas sans doute ce qu’il y avait de moins remarquable en elles, et montrait jusqu’à l’évidence combien la culture physique peut réformer et même contrarier les dispositions naturelles. Elles avaient des biceps énormes, de véritables pectoraux, un bassin étroit et des jambes nerveuses qui ne rappelaient aucunement les contours gracieux, mais indécis, du corps féminin. (170-171)

Here we again have the juxtaposition of the strong woman with the author’s idea of the female body. He is truly impressed by their muscular stature, but he almost laments the fact that they seem to have sacrificed a curvy silhouette for a strong and athletic body. Referring to the earlier discussion of what an audience expects, Strehly notes that “leur numéro ne plairait certainement plus aujourd’hui, car il s’adressait surtout aux connaisseurs, et manquait un peu d’attraction. Si je puis ainsi m’exprimer, il sentait trop le gymnase, et pas assez le cirque” (168, 170). What does he mean by too much gymnastics and not enough circus? Perhaps he means that they were not “feminine”

enough, interacting and flirting with the audience. Strehly is so astonished by their physique that he ends this section with a piece of poetry about a young girl who did not fear facing the most vigorous of men (171).

Strehly's book tends to generalize and lumps all *circassiennes* into a group of moderately talented artists who found success through beauty and grace instead of hard work and determination, with a few notable exceptions. His overt sexism makes the praise for certain women that much more genuine, but it is frustrating to hear him dismiss complicated figures and dangerous tricks as easy and not worth his attention simply because they are performed by women. If he could see contemporary circus, with the strong, independent, feminist *circassienne*, would he be impressed or repulsed? Would he praise her for her abilities, or would he critique her for not being feminine enough? Would he be torn between the two?

Trente Ans de cirque : souvenirs et anecdotes

The second book in this section is *Trente Ans de cirque : souvenirs et anecdotes*, originally published in 1954 and republished in 2009. It is Achille Zavatta's autobiography and told from his point of view. Born in Tunis in 1915, Zavatta would eventually become a famous clown, movie star, and circus director (Zavatta 12). As of the publishing of his book, he had only completed one small movie and was virtually unknown in the world of cinema. Throughout his memoir he mostly discusses his own thoughts, pranks, and acts, most of which involve his performance partners (mostly male) and/or his family. He came from a large family with thirteen siblings, many of whom went to work in other circuses and eventually married into other circus families (161). As

Zavatta puts it, “pour mon compte personnel, je pense avoir des parents (frères, oncles, cousins) sous tous les chapiteaux du monde” (67). The women in his family also performed and managed, so by referencing brothers, uncles, and cousins, he means to include their female equivalents.

Growing up in a circus family, Zavatta was aware of the stereotypes of travelling families—no good outlaws who enslaved children, raped local women, and stole to make ends meet. Zavatta directly addresses the reader: “Ai-je l’air d’un ravisseur d’enfants, d’un trousseur de jupons, ou d’un détrousseur de poulaillers ?” (13). He might argue that the women the male circus artists encounter are safer from the *circassiens* than the *circassiennes* are! When in a traveling circus, headed to a new destination every day, anyone would have a difficult time finding a partner, even for a short fling. As shown in the next book’s discussion, the *circassiennes* often ended up marrying one of the men in their act, such as Zavatta’s sister: “Ma sœur Isoline assurait les exercices au trapèze ainsi qu’un numéro de perchistes avec le jeune garçon qu’elle venait d’épouser” (64). It also happened frequently that the *circassienne* married another circus artist, even before creating an act together. “Mon frère Charles, par contre, avait de bonnes raisons pour ne pas partager mon opinion personnelle sur l’organisation du cirque Lamy. La fille du patron était fort gentille... Comme dans les chansons, ça termina par un mariage” (65). Circus families married into circus families, particularly if they wanted to continue working in the circus world. It was expected. However, due to the social norms of the day, it was more acceptable for a *circassien* to marry an outsider who joined the circus than for a *circassienne* to marry an outsider and continue to perform.

Part of the reason *circassiennes* did not marry outsiders while continuing their career was that women at the time were simply not trusted with that much liberty and responsibility, except by those already familiar with the circumstances. The idea of a woman wearing revealing clothing and working in close contact (many circus disciplines involve touching parts of the body that would otherwise be off limits for those not in a romantic relationship) with a man who was not her husband or directing a company and being in charge of payroll and hiring was simply unheard of outside the circus world. The circus world may be sexist, but it is one of the few places that offer opportunities to women that they would be hard pressed to find elsewhere, especially at the time Zavatta was growing up. Training for children did not discriminate between boy and girl as Zavatta learned on his first day: “« Traction sur les bras », commanda papa Zavatta. Et tous, garçons et filles, de se coucher à plat ventre et de s’élever à la force des biceps” (Zavatta 33). His father was known as a relentless coach, demanding hard work and perfection from his students and his children, both male and female. It was not unusual for him to yell insults, hoping to inspire success. “« Gamins ! Vous vous endormez ! Du nerf ! ou je vais vous battre. Tous, les grands et les petits, les garçons comme les filles ! » (Mon père n’avait pas de préférence)” (33). Few other professions in the world allowed for such equal beginnings at the time. Girls were not taught to aspire to be pilots, doctors, lawyers, CEOs, or directors. In Zavatta’s family? Each had their speciality, but they also trained multiple disciplines together. “Isoline, une de mes sœurs, s’exerçait au trapèze. Eléonore était fildefériste. Mais toute notre petite troupe connaissait la voltige” (36). In addition, his mother fulfilled several administrative roles for their small company, as he shares when recounting his first performance: “Seule ma mère, avant d’aller prendre

possession de ses fonctions de directrice-caissière-contrôleuse-ouvreuse, m’embrassa plus tendrement que de coutume” (39). Later, starting in 1949, he would co-direct the Bostok circus with his sister, Titine, who had married Jean Figuiet, the owner of a small circus (68, 159). His oldest sister, Emma, also followed the family business and married a *circassien*. “Elle fut reine du Cirque en 1950. Elle adore la piste et vient de se fiancer à un fils Bouglione, ce qui resserrera les liens avec cette grande famille amie” (162). Even Zavatta’s children, although not forced to perform in the circus, were pushed to try out different performing arts, developing skills as young children that could eventually allow them their own place onstage. Zavatta’s oldest child, Lydia, was fifteen at the time of publication. She was born around the time he made his clown debut, and he credits her with bringing him good fortune. Although she does not perform much in the family business, “elle adore la musique, et j’en ferai sans doute une championne de l’accordéon. Cela est du domaine du futur. Mais je la crois douée, et ceux qui ont déjà entendu sur les antennes de France chanter son accordéon peuvent lui faire confiance” (161). As an adult, Lydia has licensed out her name, Lydia Zavatta, to Steeve and John Caplot, to create the Lydia Zavatta / Caplot Brothers Circus (*Cirque Lydia Zavatta*). This circus is still touring and causing just as many disputes with local mayors as her father’s, refusing to take no for an answer when asking permission to set up (Chollet, Meunier). Other family members have also licensed out the Zavatta name, so it is now possible to attend the previously-mentioned cirque Lydia Zavatta/Frères Caplot, the cirque Achille Zavatta fils, the Nouveau Cirque Zavatta, the cirque Nicolas Zavatta, the cirque Claudio Zavatta, and others.²

² See *Cirque Lydia Zavatta*, *Cirque Achille Zavatta fils*, *Nouveau Cirque Zavatta*, *Cirque Nicolas Zavatta*, “Cirque Claudio Zavatta.”

Zavatta does describe one woman, Tirana, who defied the odds and lived quite an adventurous life in the circus. Living in a convent and about to pass from postulant to novice, Tirana, along with her religious community, was evacuated to Arc, where she lived in the town center in complete freedom. The eve of taking her vows, she met a boy, fell in love, and ran off with him, living a life of luxury in a Côte d'Azur palace. Soon thereafter he abandoned her, and she found herself practically homeless and working as an usher at the Cirque d'Hiver in Liège (Zavatta 24). One day an animal trainer asked Tirana to bring him his four bears, thinking that at best they would arrive in their cage. Much to his surprise, Henry "trouva dans le wagon les quatre ours en liberté s'amusant avec leur dompteuse occasionnelle !" (92). Tirana did not look like a *dompteur*, men who "avaient des figures bestiales, le verbe haut, le geste brutal et des allures de matamores" (50). Very few women aspired to fulfill the role. However, after her experience with the bears, Tirana trained and became a well-known *dompteuse*. Eventually, the company went abroad, and "la troupe revint du pays de M. Mossadegh, sauf notre montreuse d'ours, qui s'était entre-temps mariée légitimement avec un caïd de ce pays des Mille et Une Nuits" (92). Being a *circassienne* who had married an outsider, she was expected to abandon her circus life and incorporate herself into her husband's life, wherever and whatever that may be. The circus, assuming they were down one bear tamer, gave her bears to the Pinder circus. Much to everyone's surprise, "... elle s'évada du sérail de son mari, rejoignit la France, et retrouva, chez Pinder, ses quatre ours, qu'elle présente chaque soir avec une belle assurance" (92). Quite the *circassienne*, indeed.

This book presents a fairer portrayal of the *circassienne* than *Acrobatie et acrobats*. Zavatta shows he is aware of the stereotypes that *circassiennes* live with and

treats artists of both genders with respect. He gives space to *circassiennes* in his memoir and does not describe every female artist first by her beauty and then by her physical characteristics. It may be that his father inspired this early form of feminism, but he also maintained it throughout his adult life in the traditional circus world that has not made large amounts of progress in this area, unlike contemporary circus. After several of the other sexist books, it is refreshing to see girls trained with boys and to hear about the adventures of independent *circassiennes*.

Une Vie de Cirque

The next book is Jérôme Medrano's autobiography, *Une Vie de cirque*, published in 1983 (Jando, "Cirque"). His father, also named Jérôme Medrano, was the famous clown affectionately known as Boum-Boum who founded the *Cirque Medrano* in 1897 (Medrano back cover). The Parisian circus was one of the largest circuses in France and well-known throughout the world. It became known for its clowns and the high quality of both the acts and technical aspects. Whereas most of the large circuses have long shut their doors, the Cirque Medrano was relaunched (not for the first time) in 1987 by Raoul Gibault, but it is a touring circus under a big top and offers little of the glory of the original (Jando, "Cirque").

Medrano grew up in the circus and offers a fantastic viewpoint of the *circassiennes* and how they were treated. While describing his childhood, he talks about the men who would come to watch rehearsals:

J'étais trop jeune pour le comprendre, d'autant que j'avais grandi au milieu de ces gens en tenue légère et que n'y faisais pas attention, mais tous ces « aficionados »

du cirque qui en fréquentaient les coulisses avec autant d'intérêt ne le faisaient que pour venir contempler des femmes en maillot. En tout bien tout honneur, c'était au cirque que l'on voyait les femmes les plus déshabillées. Avec le recul du temps, il faut bien reconnaître que la vogue du cirque a été inversement proportionnelle à celle des plages. Est-ce une coïncidence ? (Medrano 41)

As an adult he was well aware of the sexism that *circassiennes* had to face, even if as a child he was not. He neither reproaches the men nor encourages them, merely commenting on the inversely proportional trends in women being “covered” at the circus versus at the beach. Continuing with his childhood and his father’s early exploits in the world of circus, he reaches the end of World War I and describes the rising success of the Fratellini brothers by noting the change in observers at rehearsals: “Les plus grands peintres, les plus grands écrivains, les plus grandes personnalités se bouscullaient à « la barrière »” (Medrano 44). Their observers were now of a higher status than the painters and gentlemen who came before. “On ne venait plus pour admirer les jambes des écuyères – on voyait maintenant celles de toutes les femmes dans la rue—on venait pour rire avec les Fratellini” (44).

Of course, it was not only gentlemen at rehearsals who came to admire the artists at the Medrano. Women were also attracted to handsome young men with muscular statures and flattering costumes such as the trick rider, Roberto de Vasconcellos. “L’allure de Roberto à cheval lui attirait partout où il allait une importante clientèle féminine : il fut d’ailleurs surnommé le « Valentino du cirque »” (Medrano 58). In general, however, male circus artists are more prized for their stage presence and feats than their sex appeal, which is a bonus but secondary characteristic. If a *circassien* is

simply good looking but has no skill, he will have difficulties booking his act. Medrano reminisces about a flying trapeze artist, immensely popular at the time, who had both qualities and was one of the first flyers to successfully throw a triple salto: “Je dois dire que, même aujourd’hui où plusieurs trapézistes exécutent le triple et même le triple et demi et où l’on frôle le quadruple, aucun de ces voltigeurs ne possède... l’élégance et la sûreté d’Alfredo Codona avec ses retours en double pirouette et demie” (65).

Surprisingly, Codona’s second wife, Lilian Leitzel, broke with tradition. She was not considered particularly beautiful, a quality one might say was essential for *circassiennes* at the time, but she had the same traits as her husband: stage presence and sex appeal. “Quant à Lilian Leitzel, si elle n’était ni la plus jolie, ni la plus élégante, elle avait une autorité et une présence que l’on n’a jamais revues” (65).

Not all women were as lucky as Leitzel. Often beauty and sexiness counted for much more than skill when it came to the *circassiennes*. Medrano once found himself short of a Spanish dancer for a show he was mounting in a rush, and an acquaintance set up an audition for a dancer staying near the Medrano Circus. “Je fus agréablement surpris lorsqu’elle arriva avec son habilleuse et ses costumes car elle était très jolie et avait beaucoup de classe. Ses costumes étaient magnifiques. Elle nous présenta deux ou trois danses très typiques qui convenaient parfaitement au spectacle” (Medrano 86).

Medrano’s reaction to her audition is based primarily on her physical attractiveness, the beauty of her costumes, and her class. He mentions nothing about how skilled she was as a dancer other than saying that her traditional dances worked with the show he was putting together. It seems she could have been a mediocre dancer with fantastic costumes, and he would have been just as pleased. Indeed, for another show Medrano pulled

together a variety of performers, and when naming them he just lists the names of the men but comments on the women: “Manetti et Rhum, Alex et Porto, Recordier et Boulicot, Tony et Hadada, la jolie et étonnante danseuse contorsionniste Barbara La May... une importante figuration et la troupe des 20 merveilleuses Bluebell girls...” (129). The clowns are just expected to impress with the prestige of their name, but the *circassiennes* have a qualifier added.

Medrano, like other directors of Europe’s high-profile circuses, did expect quality from his performers, both male and female, but it seems the men were held to a higher standard than the women. Whereas men were expected to be the best at one discipline, women served more as the circus equivalent of chorus girls—they had to dance, do aerials, balance, be flexible, etc. Throughout the entire book, Medrano constantly talks about his star performers but mentions very few women. One of the few times he did want a female star for his show, he was inspired by a Russian artist he saw and adored. “Pour en faire une version française il fallait... une jeune comédienne qui sache chanter mais qui soit aussi capable de faire un numéro de corde lisse, d’être une écuyère à panneau et de jouer d’un instrument de musique quelconque” (Medrano 114). Alas, he did not find the Francophone *circassienne* of his dreams, but it represents just how versatile female artists were expected to be. Today artists of all genders are expected to have trained in multiple disciplines, including acrobatics, juggling, aerial work, and balance, and the current trend is also for them to have studied modern dance or hip hop. Gone are the days when the men specialized in one or two disciplines while the women trained to a moderate level in multiple.

Another issue faced by circus artists, especially females, is ageism. Younger performers tend to book gigs more easily than older performers unless the older performers have already earned the public's respect. If a young woman and an older woman with a similar amount of experience both apply to be an aerialist with a circus company, there is a much higher chance the younger *circassienne* will be hired than her older counterpart, simply because of her age. The same was true during Medrano's time, and his magic formula for his shows included an emphasis on beauty, youth, and laughter. "Ce spectacle devait être avant tout gai et le rire ne devait faire de concessions qu'à la jeunesse et à la beauté. Et c'est cette formule Rythme, Rire, Beauté, Jeunesse et un peu de suspense que j'ai toujours appliquée et qui ne m'a pas mal réussi" (Medrano 119). When he first met his future wife, Violette Schmidt, she had just turned sixteen years old. As a side note, they did not marry until 1958 when he was fifty-one and she was thirty-one, even though it would have been common for her to marry much earlier (Denis). She was a classically trained dancer and acrobat, and one of her main features at the time, in addition to her remarkable talent, was her youth. "Son charme indéfinissable et sa légèreté aérienne marquèrent le spectacle. Elle obtint un très gros succès et les applaudissements qu'elle recueillait au final confirmait l'impression qu'elle avait produite. Elle avait à peine plus de seize ans" (Medrano 197). Schmidt ultimately chose to give up her performing career once she married Medrano in order to help run the circus (Denis). Multiple times Medrano casually mentions that the main selling point of other performers he engaged was their youth. When in need of an aerial ballet, he asked the Bisognos: "Enfin nous avons aussi confié à Miss Diane et à son mari André Bisogno le soin de créer spécialement pour nous, un très beau ballet aérien dont Miss Diane était la

vedette et qui apporta à l'ensemble du programme un souffle de jeunesse" (Medrano 232). When talking about a controversial magician, Medrano does not just describe his assistant as beautiful, as her youth is just as important for the star quality of the act: "...il nous présenta son sujet, une jolie jeune femme brune vêtue d'une simple robe blanche, qu'il endormit à l'aide de quelques passes magnétiques et qu'il étendit sur le plateau de la machine" (240). When sharing the improbable questions he overheard from the audience after the show, Medrano shares how, yet again, the assistant's youth is a main feature of her identity: "Dréna fut assailli de questions invraisemblables dans le genre de celle-ci que je garantis authentique : « Mais comment faites-vous pour trouver une jeune femme comme celle-là à chaque représentation ? »" (241). Finally, Medrano describes a terrible accident when a movie star made her debut as a lion tamer. The act was set to be followed to an aerial number: "C'était celui d'une jeune trapéziste très audacieuse qui travaillait juste sous la coupole, ce qui représentait environ 18 mètres de hauteur. Les tigres venaient de sortir de la cage. Elle vint me trouver – elle tremblait comme une feuille... elle se nommait Mireilly" (192). The trapeze artist's youth, act, and reaction to the mauling are all described before Medrano finally shares that she is named Mireilly, as if her identity as a young *circassienne* were more important than her name.

Women were expected to fulfill certain roles, but there were also roles that were simply always done by males with very few exceptions: flying trapeze catchers, aerial bases, Spanish web setters... and, perhaps surprisingly to a modern audience, clowns. Medrano, who gave many opportunities to women that not all other directors did, went on an international trip to find new acts and had an idea for a new show. "Je conclus pas mal de contrats à Hambourg, à Copenhague et à Berlin et j'eus l'idée de présenter un

programme entièrement féminin—à part les clowns évidemment car je ne voyais pas bien comment les remplacer” (Medrano 159). Could he not figure out how to replace them because he had never encountered a strong female clown or because he could not fathom the idea of one? As the next section will show, a female clown was simply unheard of. Medrano would soon employ Annie Fratellini in her stage debut, a young acrobat who would eventually become one of the first French female clowns. However, in her youth and early adulthood, neither she nor Medrano supposed she would eventually follow in her family’s footsteps. Medrano did try to get her to reprise her rolling globe act: “Un peu distante, elle me répondit d’un ton qui me sembla teinté de mépris en faisant une légère grimace : « Peuh ! Le cirque, pour moi, c’est fini et bien fini ! » Heureusement, pour elle, que par la suite elle a changé d’avis” (200).

Never mind Medrano’s inability to replace his male clowns with *clownesses*; he mounted his all-female show with a wide variety of acts by some of the most talented women of the day. Sadly, “le deuxième programme, celui du « Triomphe de la femme » n’eut pas, de loin, le succès qu’il eut [*sic*] mérité. Il se terminait le 29 septembre 1938” (159). The beginnings of war were affecting the Medrano Circus, but a Parisian show focused on *les circassiennes* was a flop. However, in Berlin, at the same period, in a country about to launch a war, it was a female troupe that was given the honor to precede and transition to Hitler’s own band. “...Les fameuses Hiller Girls firent une danse militaire habillées en uniformes de la Garde Prussienne de la guerre de 1914 et coiffées du fameux casque à pointe” (161). Despite being horrified at the thought of war, Medrano found himself truly impressed. “Les Hiller Girls étaient connues et réputées pour leur

ensemble, mais dans ce costume et dans cette ambiance, elles se surpassèrent et je dois reconnaître que ce fut très impressionnant” (161).

Women’s roles in the circus often guided their personal lives. It was generally assumed the female flyer in a flying trapeze troupe was dating or married to the catcher or lead flyer, a quick change artist would be in a relationship with her performance partner, and frequently the only way to join a group act was to date, marry, or have an affair with one of the males in the act. Returning to Lilian Leitzel, Medrano does not mention that she was actually Alfredo’s second wife. His first wife, Clara Groves, divorced her first husband in order to marry Alfredo and leave on tour with him as part of his flying trapeze act (Jando, “Codonas”). When she got badly injured, she left the act and filed for divorce. Meanwhile, Alfredo began having an affair with Leitzel, and he married her as soon as his divorce was official (Jando, “Codonas”). Medrano explains that Alfredo was her rigger and always inspected her equipment before she performed, but the one time they were on separate contracts with him in Berlin at the Wintergarten and her in Copenhagen at the Valencia, her swivel broke (Medrano 65-66). She fell, suffered extreme injuries, and passed away two days later (Jando, “Codonas”). When Groves left the flying act, Leitzel had recommended adding her friend Vera Bruce to the act, as they no longer had a female flyer (Jando, “Codonas”). After Leitzel’s death, Alfredo mourned her while courting Bruce, whom he married a year and a half after Leitzel’s fatal accident (Jando, “Codonas”). Alfredo suffered several serious shoulder injuries that ended his career as a flyer, and he even left the circus world for a while to work at a relative’s garage (Jando, “Codonas”). Five years after their wedding, Bruce asked for a divorce on grounds of abuse (Jando, “Codonas”). The divorce was granted,

they had a meeting with a lawyer to finalize the details, and, after asking their lawyer to give them some time alone, Codona shot and murdered Bruce before committing suicide (Jando, “Codonas”). Medrano summarizes this terrible tale in four short sentences. “*Une seule fois ils travaillèrent séparément et son mari ne put vérifier son matériel : l’accident se produisit et Lilian fit une chute mortelle. Alfredo fut comme fou. Il ne se remit jamais de la mort de sa femme. Peu après, il tua sa partenaire et se suicida*” (Medrano 65-66). Why does he not go into detail about what happened? Why does he refer to Bruce as “*sa partenaire*” instead of Codona’s third wife or by her name? The circus world loves gossip. Medrano includes a fair bit throughout his autobiography, but in this case it seems that as Bruce was not a star, simply *une circassienne*; she did not merit being included or even named, similarly to Groves, another nameless flyer who married the same star flyer of the flying trapeze troupe she worked with. Many women have been a part of circus acts, flying trapeze acts in particular, to bring the “feminine element.” These women were the girlfriends, wives, or lovers of the male star and were taught the basics in order to join the act and earn their way on tour. Strehly often comments on the unimpressive quality of the female acrobats who never strive for the most advanced tricks. He also fails to explain that many of them did not set out to be circus artists and were only taught enough to pull their own weight in the show when they fell in love with a male star. This is largely changing today, partially inspired by the #metoo movement and platforms such as the Instagram account @victims_voices_circus where people who have been abused can anonymously share what happened (“Victim's_Voices_Circus”).

As women have fought for equal rights and equal treatment, they have protested the use of derogatory and belittling language. Medrano frequently refers to all-female

groups as “girls.” Sometimes the word “girls” is in the name of the act, such as with the Hiller Girls, but often it just means beautiful young women who dance, like when he talks about the previously mentioned “*Bluebell girls*” he hired for a show (Medrano 129). The French adopted “girls” to refer to music hall dancers, as proclaiming “Girls! Girls! Girls!” in front of a venue was much more enticing and exotic than “*Filles ! Filles ! Filles !*,” not to mention it appealed more to foreigners who had some notions of English. Each time Medrano mentions hiring a group of these women, he refers to them as girls, never as *danseuses*. They seem merely to be decoration to encourage male clientele: “Cette belle histoire, toute fleurie de sentiment et d’aventure sous le soleil de la prairie, devait être agrémentée par les sourires d’une troupe de girls...” (166). Shortly thereafter, he decides to go for another group of dancers, “une troupe de girls anglaises fournie par la maîtresse de ballet du Casino de Paris” (166). Continuing this trend, he eventually finds himself in need of a large dance chorus. “J’avais prévu de la place pour des attractions et des girls européennes. Il y avait 12 girls américaines et j’engageai à Paris 12 girls françaises et à Londres 12 anglaises” (205). Medrano could easily have called them women, *filles*, *femmes*, *danseuses*, dancers... but the sexist language of the day meant that “girls” was the best choice. For female dancers who were classically trained, “*fille*” was the word of choice. The first time Medrano heard about the woman who would become his wife, he was talking with a friend and director, Gilles Margaritis, who wanted him to employ a dancer he had seen. “...[II] me dit : « Il y a en ce moment à Tabarin une fille extraordinaire. C’est une danseuse classique et acrobatique. Elle est belle, elle est aérienne... elle va apporter une note de grâce et de charme au milieu de tant de comiques, ce sera sensationnel »” (196-197). Just as in English “girl” can refer to an unmarried

woman, so can “*fille*.” Whether it is a compliment or an insult depends upon how it is said and whether the receiving party appreciates the nuance of the term or not. In this case, Violette Schmidt was both young and unmarried, but even if she had been in her twenties it is likely she would have been referred to as a “*fille*.”

The allure of women who looked foreign was also a huge draw. For the *España* show, Medrano hired a torero who was accompanied by his wife, “la plus blonde américaine [*sic*] que l’on puisse imaginer” (87). Another young blonde stood out amongst the chorus girls in *Rhum à Rome*: “Voici maintenant le marché des captives parmi lesquelles une jeune femme blonde d’une grande beauté Barbara La May est choisie par l’empereur” (129). It was not only blonde, white women who were chosen for their “exotic” features. Medrano brought in another set of stars for the same show after seeing them in a film. “Je venais de voir le film Roman Scandals avec Eddie Cantor dans lequel on présentait un trio de grosses chanteuses noires sinon romaines, du moins de poids : les Peters Sisters qui faisaient une inénarrable danse de claquettes” (164). Although the sisters were well respected in the United States, Medrano had to decide if his audiences would also appreciate their talent even though they were quite different from the young, slim, white women who graced the Medrano stage every day. The sisters were not *circassiennes* by trade, although they were trained in dance and acrobatics. Medrano knew how much he enjoyed their performance and convinced them to come to France. “Elles m’avaient beaucoup amusé... C’était un peu risqué car, à part leur taille et leur danse, leur numéro était un tour de chant et pour un cirque... hum ! Mais le cirque n’est-il pas l’endroit de prédilection pour présenter des phénomènes ?” (164). Could the sisters become *circassiennes* despite not fitting into the traditional mold? They were a hit and

proved that, despite stereotypes and tradition, talent could overcome prejudice. There were a few problems that showed how even the venue was not built with non-traditional circus bodies in mind, such as when one sister got stuck backstage during a show. “On frôla l’êtreintement, surtout lorsque l’une des trois sœurs, la plus grosse, se coinça dans l’étroit escalier des loges au cours d’un changement de costumes et faillit ne pas pouvoir retourner en piste” (167). However, things worked out, and Medrano was pleased with his gamble: “Ce fut un franc succès malgré le danger que représentait une attraction de chant dans une piste circulaire, mal sonorisée, avec les micros au centre d’une couronne de haut-parleurs et, de plus, les Peters Sisters chantaient en anglais !” (167).

Medrano enjoyed experimenting with new features, from lighting to costumes. For *Le Fils de Buffalo Bill*, he decided to have Sylvia Carson wear UV paint for her number with her husband under a blacklight. “Ce fut, je crois, la première fois qu’une femme fut entièrement maquillée pour la lumière noire” (Medrano 168). As it had not been done before, she had to go undergo several medical tests to ensure the safety of the paint. “[Elle] se maquillait tout le corps et le visage avec un produit spécial fluorescent à la lumière noire pour son numéro du lancement de couteaux et le déshabillage à coups de fouet que lui infligeait son mari dans l’obscurité à la seul [sic] lueur de sons corps” (168). Would a man ever partner a woman with a whip while covered in blacklight paint, having her strip off his clothing? Perhaps. Was Medrano proud of having the first woman covered in blacklight paint on his stage? Yes.

Another first Medrano was proud to present was his orchestra conductor, Germaine Mordant, whom he had hired at the end of the war and who stayed with the circus while Medrano spent several years in the United States (Medrano 214). “Elle

dirigeait son orchestre masculin avec une grande maîtrise et était, je crois bien, la seule femme chef d'orchestre à Paris dans un établissement de variétés" (214). The first and only female conductor of an all-male orchestra in Paris at a variety show, Mordant had to earn the respect of her musicians in addition to the respect of her employer, meaning she was likely one of the best conductors of her time.

Medrano is honest about sexism in his circus and makes no attempts to cover it up. He witnessed it as a child, understood it as an adult, and accepted it as a circus director. The *circassiennes* in his book are given the space for their stories, but they are also beautiful, young, and graceful and are expected to attract the male gaze. The current version of his circus still relies on glitz and glamour, and the women still wear revealing outfits and sequins. Traditional circus has continued to fight for its place alongside the rise of contemporary circus, and it has not updated its ideals from Medrano's time.

Un Cirque pour la vie

In 2007 Guillaume Marsault published *Un Cirque pour la vie*, a fictional story about Alice, a 10-year-old girl who literally runs away with the circus to become a flying trapeze artist just before World War I breaks out. Based on true events but embellished for the sake of the story and playing on stereotypes, this children's book introduces readers to a fairly realistic view of life in the circus while keeping it interesting and appropriate for young readers. It introduces themes of coming of age, sexism, and war while following Alice's adventures with the Cirque Raider. Marsault, the author, was first introduced to circus arts at elementary school (Marsault 4). Although he became a history teacher and not a circus artist, he soon became involved in a circus project while teaching

in the northern area of Marseille that resulted in him writing his first book, *Un Cirque pour la vie* (4).

Alice, who is small and frail, is constantly scolded by her father for being “fragile, très fragile, trop fragile même... [et] d’une maigreur extrême” (8). Being chronically sick, she fails to advance at school, is unable to contribute to family life, and feels unloved by her family. Her small stature will be a plus for her future circus career, as small flyers are easier to partner and toss in the air, but that does not help her integrate herself into family life. Alice is so unhappy with her life that when she encounters a travelling circus broken down on her way to school, she implores them, “je vous indique où réparer votre caravane, mais ensuite, vous m’emmenez avec vous!... Emmenez-moi, emmenez-moi, je vous en supplie” (26-27). The author chooses this stereotypical line of the misfit child who runs away with the circus, which did happen but more rarely than stories would have one believe, to explain how a girl with no circus background managed to penetrate a world usually reserved for those who belonged for generations. Certain disciplines could be learned later in life, but acrobatics and contortion are difficult to excel in unless one has a strong foundation from a very young age. A woman in her twenties without any athletic training who decides to be a trapeze artist is very unlikely to succeed, even if she would have had potential had she started at the age of five. Would a circus really accept runaway youth? Yes, but there was rarely extra money to throw away on someone who could not pay their own way (which would be rare indeed for someone running away with the circus!). The newcomer would be expected to earn their keep while learning the trade, perhaps by caring for the animals, serving as a costume assistant, or working publicity. They would participate with the entire company in

erecting the tent, hawking food and merchandise, and breaking down post-show. In this way, everyone in the company became a family, whether or not they were blood members of the original family. Flavio, the director and clown of the troupe, explains to Alice (who has chosen the alias, Maria): “Nous formons une seule famille, celle du cirque ! Nos origines familiales n’ont aucune importance. Ce qui compte, c’est que le spectacle vive” (29). This family structure meant children of many races played together, the women in the troupe mothered the children, and the men in the troupe provided paternal care. The dynamic would be different in a larger, site-specific circus like the Medrano or the Cirque d’Hiver, but this tightly knit family unit was and is vital to the success of the small travelling circuses. “Si tu veux entrer dans notre famille, la seule chose qui doit compter désormais pour toi, c’est le spectacle, le cirque” (30). Several days later, after watching the company seamlessly work together to mount and break down the tent, Flavio explains to Alice that mounting the structure, “est un peu comme construire notre maison... l’espace dans lequel nous sommes tous réunis : clown, acrobate, jongleur, dresseur d’animaux, contorsionniste...” (60). This magical world was created by what would be known today as a chosen family. “Comme tu l’as vu, nous sommes d’origines très différentes, et ce qui nous réunit tous, c’est le chapiteau. Participer à son édification, c’est la preuve que nous appartenons au même groupe” (60). The brave little girl, immediately after learning that there is an empty spot in the caravan due to their sister’s death during a flying trapeze trick a few weeks earlier, decides she is in. “Elle quittait le monde des hommes pour entrer dans celui du cirque” (31). Could this happen to a boy as well? Certainly. However, as mentioned elsewhere, there is often a “feminine element” in group acts dominated by men. Alice is ten at the time she joins the Raider Circus, but she

will soon be expected to play the *circassienne*'s role onstage- flirting with the audience, sporting tight fitting and revealing costumes, wearing makeup that makes her look beautiful from afar... such is the life of any young woman joining a life in the ring.

Alice starts to discover the stereotypes of circus life while exploring her new surroundings, including her bedroom in the caravan, outfitted with “un grand lit... une armoire... un petit bureau sur lequel reposait des bijoux ... et... une peinture de la Vierge” (Marsault 31). The bed, naturally, would be for sleeping and could double as a couch, the armoire would be her closet, the desk would be for applying makeup, and the painting of the Virgin Mary reflects how many travelling circus artists were devout Catholics, which is still the case today in many of the multi-generational circus families. Later, Alice sees a female contortionist warming up—a woman “habillée d'un collant tout blanc... [qui] faisait longuement tournoyer ses bras, balançait ses jambes, s'arrêtait, s'assouplissait et enchaînait des mouvements du cou et du bassin” (42). Alice had never seen such an outfit before nor a contortionist. Alice also sees her first duo pair—stereotypically comprised “d'un colosse et d'une toute petite femme” (42). When watching them practice their foot-to-hand and Icarian games act, she gets to see why petite *circassiennes* are always flyers and will start to see that male/female performing partners are often married. “L'homme faisait voltiger sa partenaire. Cette dernière, projetée par les bras puissants, multipliait les acrobaties, saltos ou vrilles pour retomber à chaque fois, un pied dans chaque main de son mari” (44).

Alice soon makes her stage début with Ringo, a young elephant. Here, the author uses the elephant to point out stereotypical male behavior and how *circassiennes* were able to use it to their advantage. “Au lieu de saisir directement Maria par la taille, il

souleva la jupette de la fille avec sa trompe, suscitant une explosion de rire de la salle” (56). Backstage, the elephant’s trainer scolds him, letting him know that is improper behavior toward a young lady. “C’est plus fort que toi, il faut que tu regardes sous les jupes des filles ; franchement tu exagères !” ‘Mais ça a fait rire le public’, tenta Maria pour justifier la conduite de son amie Ringo qui se mit à barrir pour la remercier de son aide” (57). Alice shows that she has already understood that by choosing to use the situation for laughs, she owns it and can call attention to improper behavior. At the same time, the token male, Ringo, is excused. *Circassiennes* put up with a lot of sexist, unwanted behavior from their male colleagues, and the author here has brought it up, humorously, in a children’s book as a topic for further discussion between the young readers and their parents or teacher.

Alice is eventually assigned to Svetlana, the contortionist who amazed her with her flexibility and tight unitard. Little does she know that most contortionists are women, often Eastern European or Asian, and their acts are designed to be highly sensual, leading to the many sexually based stereotypes of contortionists. True to tradition, this contortionist is “russe, de la region d’Ukraine” (Marsault 67). She becomes Alice’s coach in order to teach her “la gymnastique, la danse, la souplesse, la grâce... Enfin, tout ce dont tu auras besoin pour devenir la star du trapèze volant !” (66). These qualities, grace, flexibility, and coordination, are all essential for a *circassienne* who wants to succeed. *Circassiens* are expected to look masculine, strong, and powerful. For *circassiennes*, “il faut avoir de la grâce... les gens croient toujours que la grâce est quelque chose de naturel... ce n’est que le résultat de répétitions incessantes” (69). The flying trapeze brothers chime in, “La grâce... c’est l’art d’être beau” (70). After watching Svetlana’s

performance, Alice understands “ce que la grâce signifiait : la russe envoûtait le public rien que par son regard, ses mouvements, ses attitudes. La grâce à l’état pur !” (71). Soon thereafter Alice learns of Svetlana’s background, why the circus is so important to her, and why she was willing to train Alice. Her father was a sailor in the Tsar’s marines, but he was killed when he participated in a revolt. She and her mother fled to Germany where her mother was arrested and Svetlana was found and hidden by the circus (82). Although not unique to *circassiennes*, this scenario created by the author did happen—travelling circuses welcomed orphans and war refugees into their patchwork families, and, following today’s war in Ukraine, circuses around the world are still welcoming those who need a home and a family and are drawn to the circus.

Alice’s place in the circus follows tradition for a petite *circassienne*—she rides the elephant, drops the return bar in the flying trapeze act, and is the flyer tossed between the two men (Marsault 86). The brothers adopt her as their little sister, and they become the Trio Velasquez (91). However, Flavio insists they wait before debuting their new flying trapeze act. The night they finally do present their act for the first time, Alice’s tutors “remarquèrent que Maria avait une présence sur scène inhabituelle. Elle irradiait avec sa chevelure rouge et son visage clair. Elle faisait rire les spectateurs, mais elle devenait aussi attirante. Maria avait une sensualité nouvelle, inconnue, enivrante” (94). The author explains her transformation as “la fillette s’effaçait pour laisser place à une belle jeune fille,” but it might be more correct to say that *la fillette devenait une vraie circassienne*, full of talent, charm, skill, grace, and sex appeal (94). After the show, her colleagues congratulate her with the highest praise they know: “Ce soir, tu avais la grâce! Tu as été aussi étincelante que Svetlana !” (99). Alice begins to experience the joys and

frustrations that come from being a *circassienne*. Others feel free to comment on how attractive her body becomes as she goes through puberty. Marsault describes these changes as “sa poitrine s’était formée et elle avait pris des formes de femme qui lui donnaient une réelle beauté nordique. Les messages de compliments qu’elle recevait se transformaient progressivement en messages d’amour” (102). These undesired love notes bring to mind the men who would watch rehearsals at the Medrano Circus, just to watch their favorite women move around in little clothing or the unwanted calling of rich gentlemen looking for a mistress. One day Alice goes to complain to Svetlana about a love note, and Svetlana unhelpfully promises there will be more. Alice counters, “mais lui, il n’aime pas ce que je fais dans le numéro. Il est amoureux de mon corps !” (104). Svetlana explains that, as a woman in the circus, she will have to get used to it, advising Alice that “c’est une chance d’être belle... c’en est une autre de plaire aux hommes. Tu as ces deux qualités ma fille, tu ne peux pas imaginer ton bonheur. Tu es une femme maintenant, il faut te rendre à l’évidence” (104). This is the first Alice has heard about the sexism surrounding *circassiennes*, and she wants no part of it. “Il y a des gens qui me regardant bizarrement, j’ai l’impression qu’ils me déshabillent avec leurs yeux” (104). Svetlana again helps out by stating that Alice will simply have to get used to it; it comes with the territory of being a *circassienne*. “Ce que tu dis est sans doute vrai, et tous les hommes n’ont pas toujours la retenue nécessaire pour respecter la pudeur des femmes. Cependant, que tu le veuilles ou non, il va falloir que tu acceptes de grandir. Et qui plus est, de grandir en étant une belle femme” (104-105). Alice turns into a moody teenager, striving for new and better tricks. After finally succeeding at her double salto, “Maria [Alice] évolua radicalement. L’adolescente sombre se transformait chaque jour un peu

plus en femme, souriante et accomplie” (112). Why does becoming a woman entail smiling and not having mood swings? Because it is expected of a *circassienne*. “De nouveau, elle retrouvait ses sensations, de nouveau, elle maîtrisait totalement son corps et de nouveau surtout, elle acceptait le regard des autres” (114). As a *circassienne*, Alice has to find a way to deal with the unwanted attention from her male admirers. She cannot tell them to go away; she cannot make a scene. She has to act the part of the *circassienne*. Eventually, she finds her own take on the situation: “Pour Maria [Alice], désormais, même si les hommes regardaient son corps, c’était avant tout la femme qui réussissait un double salto au trapèze volant qu’ils voyaient. Cela lui suffisait pour être heureuse” (114).

Un Cirque pour la vie truly takes the *circassienne*’s point of view and interests to heart. Marsault follows his heroine through understanding what being in a circus family entails to the more detailed nuances of what being a *circassienne* entails. It is rare for a male author to talk about the sexism a woman will have to face from the time she goes through puberty. Marsault does so with honesty unimpeded by fear. It would be preferable for Svetlana to teach Alice how to stop the unwanted attention instead of telling her to just accept it, but there is not yet a plausible solution to be shared in the book or modern society. This book in fact is part of the solution—making children aware of unwanted attention and of their own actions.

Reflection

Much more than the last section, this series of books by *circassien* authors shows an understanding of the *circassienne*’s situation, for better or for worse. Strehly describes

many of the tricks and acts commonly performed by women, albeit with a healthy dose of sexism. Zavatta reveals more about the *circassienne*'s daily life and treats her more equally. Medrano hides nothing and speaks openly of sexism in the circus, and Marsault takes the *circassienne*'s point of view, addressing the problems head on but sidestepping any offer of a solution. The *circassienne* in these four books becomes a more sympathetic character than the women presented in the previous chapter thanks to this character development. She has hopes and dreams and expresses thoughts and desires. All four authors are aware of the sexism she faces in traditional circus, yet she cannot find a platform from which to demand change.

CHAPTER 4

LA CIRCASSIENNE

At last—representation of *la circassienne* by none other than a *circassienne* author. These women have the shared life experience of being female circus artists involved in the professional world of circus. The levels of discrimination, harassment, training, and opportunities experienced by each vary from one individual to another; however, they all are invested in the professional world of circus. Two of the authors have written about their own families, descendants of traditional circus. Another has written a children's book about one of those same circus descendants. Although the authors do not always directly call out any discrimination or sexism faced by their characters, they share their stories from a woman's point of view and use different adjectives and descriptions than their male counterparts.

Destin de clown

The first book, titled *Destin de clown* and published in 1989, is Annie Fratellini's autobiography. She tells the story of how her family became a circus family, starting with a quick mention of her great-great-grandparents, giving way to an in-depth look at her great-grandfather who literally ran away with the circus, continuing with an extremely detailed biography of her grandfather and two great-uncles' lives, and wrapping up with her own experiences. Ms. Fratellini is a fourth-generation clown, a descendant of perhaps the most renowned clown lineage in French history, and is famous for being one of the first French female clowns. *Destin de clown* starts as a history book and takes on the feel of a diary once she begins to describe her own circus journey, not just her lineage.

Fratellini is remembered for being a feminist and fighting to break boundaries in traditional circus. She became a clown at a time when clowning was reserved for males and opened a circus school in Paris, letting outsiders penetrate the barriers of the close-knit traditional circus world for the first time. Her book, perhaps surprisingly, is the oldest in this section as well as the most feminist, placing an emphasis on the idea that women should not be restricted from doing the same things as men rather than arguing that women should be doing the same things as men. Her personal anecdotes are interspersed with quick notes about which *circassienne* married which *circassien*, revealing a society that emphasized marriage over faithfulness juxtaposed with an intimate community where everyone raised the children and collaborated at work and at home.

Fratellini's family was not originally a circus family. Her great-grandfather ran away to join a travelling circus at the age of ten, but he was quickly returned to his family and forced to continue his academic studies (Fratellini 15). It was not until he left the army that he was able to form an acrobatic trio and break into the travelling circus world (15). It was in this first circus that "Gustave apprendra tous les métiers du cirque avec bonheur : il assure le montage et le démontage, l'installation de la piste, aide les autres artistes et présente un travail d'écuyer et d'acrobatie. De plus, il doit faire la parade..." (16). For the future generations of Fratellinis, this was part of their childhood education, far more important than grammar and science lessons. Being a versatile acrobat, knowing the rules of the ring, and being able to set up/break down were essential skills for anyone in a circus family. Everyone participated: husband, wife, son, and daughter. The children generally did not attend school or else left school early before graduating. Fratellini was

the first in several generations to attend a public school, but her father did not consider her education complete, even though he expected excellence on her report cards. “Il trouvait normal que je sois dans les premières places, et refusa de signer mon livret le jour où je fus classée sixième. Il me fit apprendre le solfège, le piano, le violon, le saxophone, le vibraphone ; il m’enseigna l’acrobatie, le concertina. Les jours de congé, je partais pour Paris prendre des cours de danse et de claquettes” (122). This education prepared her for a life in the circus, as she eventually left school and worked with a tutor instead but had her début at the Medrano the day she should have taken her *brevet*, the junior high graduation exam (124). “Je quittais l’école du Perreux après la sixième. Mon père avait décidé que j’en savais suffisamment, je devais gagner ma vie... et travailler, comme il l’avait fait, et son père avant lui” (129). Her lack of a more advanced academic education was not due to the fact that she was female, as might be expected. In fact, she had more schooling than the majority of her family. Quite simply, her family was a circus family, and everyone was expected to contribute financially as soon as they were able. Everything revolved around getting booked—even her presents were related to her future career in the circus, as there was time (and money) for little else. Her father never ceased to encourage his daughter while restraining any praise. “« Travaille bien, ma fille » fut le leitmotiv de mon éducation. Il n’y avait aucune place pour l’amusement, les cadeaux étaient toujours liés au travail : saxophone, soprano, alto, accordéon, concertinas, grands et petits” (123). Circus, circus, circus. Fratellini does not express any joy when talking about her rolling globe act, and the tone leaves the reader pitying the young girl who would rather be doing almost anything else than following in the family’s footsteps. Many years later, after the birth of Fratellini’s daughter, she continued working onstage

to earn a paycheck, not for the pleasure. “Cette naissance a bouleversé ma vie, m’écarter d’elle devenait un déchirement. Je faisais mon métier par nécessité et ne me sentais pas à l’aise dans le monde du spectacle révolutionné par l’arrivée de nouvelles sonorités” (144). Sadly, Fratellini reflects upon her life and laments, “je n’avais pas eu le temps d’être une enfant” (160).

However, Valérie, Fratellini’s daughter, was able to experience her grandfather’s love in a very different way. As the person who cared for her after school every day, Victor showed his granddaughter that his love for her was much stronger than her future obligations to the circus. “Il lui donnait toute la tendresse refoulée volontairement. Peu lui importait que Valérie soit une fille ou devienne une artiste. Il l’aimait” (154). This shift in priorities shows Victor’s changing perspective toward *la circassienne*. She was no longer obligated to follow her family’s profession. She could choose without being cast out of the family. Victor’s own grandmother was stuck on the other side—she was an outsider and would never truly belong to the circus family, as she was not a *circassienne*. Watching her young sons train under the stern eye of their father, she felt even more excluded from this world that her sons and husband shared. “Pour eux, comme pour leur père, c’est une évidence, leur vérité, même s’ils n’en sont pas conscients. Leur mère craint pour ses petits ce monde du cirque refermé sur eux ; elle l’accepte par raison, mais elle sait qu’elle n’en fait pas partie, elle y est étrangère” (23). Time softened the confines of the circus world on the family, but the draw of the circus was too strong for most of her descendants to ignore. As Fratellini notes at the time, “les troupes de cirque ne peuvent exister qu’entre père et fils” (18).

Fratellini, the bright, talented woman who was determined to rebel and break away from the life her father expected for her, reveals many other stereotypes about *la circassienne* through simple comments and anecdotes, without obviously trying to make a statement or commentary on the matter. First of all, she highlights the importance of religion to the *circassienne*. In a profession where one small mistake can cost a life, a belief in a higher power often helps to reassure a nervous performer or parent. The original Fratellini trio, Fratellini's grandfather and great-uncles, were brought up in a religious environment despite their father's lack of religion. "Ils suivent leur mère dans les superbes églises, émerveillés par les richesses, impressionnés par les popes à barbe blanche. Gustave méprise ces pratiques. Il reste à l'extérieur de l'église parce qu'il est anticlérical. Pourtant, il fera baptiser ses fils. On ne sait jamais..." (25). Gustave's willingness to baptize his sons and let them attend church likely reflects more on his desire for a little extra luck keeping them safe while training and performing than on his fear of the possibility of an afterlife. By the time Fratellini was born, her family was Catholic, like many circus families. "Si ma grand-mère anglaise était protestante, nous étions tous de religion catholique. Seule ma tante Régina pratiquait sérieusement : elle avait refusé le divorce lors du départ de son mari pour ne pas être excommuniée" (125). Fratellini herself was a practicing and devout Catholic, at least in her childhood, regularly attending mass and Sunday school and participating in her first communion (125). However, she learned at an early age that there was a discrepancy between what she learned and practiced in her circus training and what was considered appropriate in the eyes of the church. "Il m'a fallu une santé morale à toute épreuve pour résister aux questions insidieuses posées au confessionnal. Je fis mes débuts d'acrobate à la fête

paroissiale avec ma cousine. Les Petites Sœurs... nous demandèrent de supprimer certaines acrobaties jugées indécentes” (125). She never again mentions religious morality aside from wanting a religious marriage, which would have required her fiancé to convert. As he was uninterested in Catholicism but willing to go through the motions, and her religious advisor essentially told her she would be living in sin if she married outside the church, Fratellini questions her religious beliefs, rebels, and opts for a civil ceremony (139). Her experiences with the church would have been familiar to many other *circassiennes*, balancing religious beliefs with the reality of circus life.

Fratellini also juxtaposes her family’s “just-in-case” attitude toward religion with their superstitious beliefs, another trait common to *circassiennes* and their families. They would never admit they were superstitious, just as Fratellini’s great-grandfather did not feel the need to proclaim himself a Christian. However, the entire family embraced a “you-never-know” approach that, in their eyes, did not make them superstitious and was compatible with being a Christian. Their superstitious beliefs generally involved misfortune, such as avoiding unlucky situations that could bring harm to someone. Fratellini’s large family ate together, “mais surtout, il ne fallait jamais être treize à table ; on n’était pas superstitieux, mais on ne sait jamais... Un convive de plus, et l’un de nous mangeait debout” (129). Signs of *malheur* to come were also taken seriously and accepted as fate against which the family was powerless to act. Shortly before her grandfather’s death, he was the subject of such a situation. “Un soir, un portrait de [Paul] se décrocha du mur ; ma grand-mère dit : « Il va arriver malheur à Paolo » (117). Just over a decade later, the family also felt forewarned of François’ passing by similar events. “En 1951, François Fratellini fêta au cirque Médrano ses soixante-dix ans.

Comme pour son frère Paul, une photo de lui s'est détachée du mur, et une corde de sa guitare s'est cassée, annonçant sa mort" (136). A *circassienne* in a circus family would be raised with this mix of religion and superstition, learning to accept both as fact. As previously mentioned, in a world where a small slip or moment of inattention could have huge, disastrous consequences, it seems natural to do everything possible to minimize risk.

Another indirect comment Fratellini makes about *circassiennes* is the importance they place on the public's opinion of them coupled with their desire to spend as frugally as possible. Her anecdotes, though varied, reveal this emphasis on being thought of as beautiful, elegant, and not poor. The men were not excluded from wanting to pass as a higher social class, and circus artists of both genders employed several tricks to achieve their desired effect. Some wore designer clothing, others invented wild backgrounds, and others put on fake accents. The Fratellini family also took measures to appear as if they had more money than they did, wanting to encourage public admiration. Her family traveled in third class when they took the train, to save money. However, "avant l'arrivée à destination, les femmes se pomponnaient, sortaient leur parure cachée dans le bas de leur jupe, préparaient leurs enfants et traversaient les compartiments pour descendre d'un wagon de première classe !" (107). Another travel-related anecdote reveals the way Fratellini's family was able to get their new employer to pay for the entire family's tickets to England. As the employer would only pay for those who were in the act, the Fratellinis decided to add her mother, who was not a performing *circassienne*, although she did come from a circus family. To be a *circassienne*, Suzanne needed to pass herself off as an *artiste*, elegant and refined. The family decided to have her catch her husband's

cape that he threw down from the trapeze. It was a very simple role that existed solely to justify asking the director for another ferry ticket, yet she went all in. “On fit un costume pour elle : tout bleu, à brandebourgs, jupe portefeuille et casquette à galons. Le tout porté avec élégance. Cela lui fit dire par la suite, avec malice, qu’elle avait été une artiste” (107). Suzanne knew the stereotypes of the *circassienne* and strove to fulfill them, playing her part in the ring and out.

Along with wanting to appear sophisticated and elegant, *circassiennes* were expected to be beautiful and sexy and flirt with the audience. Fratellini describes the expectations for *circassiennes*, no matter their talent level, at the local talent agency: “Il y avait encore des agences où l’on se présentait pour trouver du travail... Si on était jeune et jolie, on vous offrait des contrats à l’étranger ; une clause mentionnait : « L’artiste devra rester dans la salle après son passage. » Je ne fis jamais ce genre de cabaret...” (134). This clause was strictly for the *circassiennes*. Staying in the room to flirt with the male audience members would be the precursor to today’s requirements for artists to stay in the bar at night to drink with the customers (mainly in venues like cruise ships and Club Med), flirting still required. Unwanted sexual advances from men toward *circassiennes* was commonplace, and the latter were simply expected to deal with it. When Fratellini began working in music halls, she caught the eye of Philippe Brun, the “meilleur trompettiste de sa génération” (138). They collaborated, which was a risk for Fratellini as a young female. “On avait promis de me « respecter ». Alors...” (138). As was common at the time, Brun ended up proposing to his work partner, Fratellini, once she came of age. Her father encouraged the union, more for appearances than because he approved of Brun. “Je fus majeure. Philippe Brun me demanda en mariage. Mon père me

dit : « Quand on passe des nuits à travailler avec un homme, c'est plus correct d'être mariée avec. » La morale toujours...” (138).

Whereas the other books studied so far have made it clear that *circassiens* marry into other circus families or else quit circus, Fratellini emphasizes the point by noting the circus link with each mention of a marriage within the family. Some examples include, “Louis a épousé en 1896 une écuyère née à Kransentschuz, en Russie, mais d'origine italienne : Alexandrine Proserpi. Sa mère est une Renz, grand nom de l'art équestre,” “en 1900, Paul épouse Gladys Kenworthy, fille d'un patineur à roulettes anglais,” and “François épouse Jeanne Peres, écuyère, en 1905. Albert se marie avec Amalia di Palma, danseuse, en 1906” (Fratellini 35, 36, 39). Each time, it is important to state what the act or circus family link is. The family expects their offspring to marry into other circus families, and the children have often grown up seeing each other from time to time when the families accept contracts in the same circus. However, as opposed to arranged marriages, the children are free to choose their partner, even if they are guided to marry their performing partner. One of Gustave's early contracts was with the Carré circus, and it was during that time that his third son was born. “Gustave ne se doute pas qu'une de ses petites-filles, Luisa, fille d'Albert, épousera un fils Carré – ils ne sont pas encore nés” (22). Marrying into the more famous circus families was also a guaranteed way to receive more bookings and take advantage of the family name. The famous Fratellini trio's children and grandchildren allowed themselves to be billed in such a way that made the public think they were the popular brothers; the brothers gave them permission to continue. The family eventually took in a young girl who wanted to become a *circassienne* and let her live and train with them. When the brothers bought houses in the

same area, she went with them. “François vient les rejoindre dans une autre maison avec ses enfants Kiko, Albertino, Popol et Baba, et une petite fille qui vient d’être accueillie : Fernande. Plus tard, elle se mariera avec Baba et deviendra vraiment une Fratellini” (83). This “petite fille” became a Fratellini in action through training and in name by marriage. It was and still is common for acts to use one person’s last name, even if not all of the performers are part of the same family. For example, “Régina se marie en 1927 avec un acrobate espagnol, Juanito Lopez. Jusque-là, elle travaillait avec son frère Victor. Elle a rencontré ce trapéziste au cirque d’Hiver. Victor montera un numéro avec lui sous le nom des « Lopez »” (93). Here there is a Fratellini working under the name “Lopez,” attempting to make a name for himself without using his family connections, unlike his siblings. The Fratellinis were known as clowns and acrobats, so choosing another name for a trapeze act made sense. Sometimes, the children simply needed to create a new name for themselves to distance themselves from the public’s expectations of a Fratellini. When Fratellini lists the various marriages of Louis’ children, she notes either the act name or the circus connection for each.

Ses cinq fils, les Gimma Boys, partent pour l’Amérique où ils feront une brillante carrière. Ses deux filles se marient avec des directeurs de cirque en Italie, les Togni. Max s’éteint en 1960, laissant deux fils : Gigi et Nino, acrobates. Gustave s’est marié avec Dolly Price, fille d’un célèbre clown, Tilly Price ; sa sœur a épousé Albert Rancy, et dirige le cirque Rancy. Gustave s’éteindra en 1952, laissant Tilly et Gilles, régisseurs de cirque. (42)

Today there are many circuses taking advantage of the Fratellini name, all licensed out by different family members; several boast descendants of the original Fratellini clowns.

Perhaps Fratellini's biggest contribution to expanding the possibilities for the *circassienne* was becoming a female clown at a time when women were considered sexy and classy, but it would have been improper for a women to appear neither graceful nor elegant. Being a circus artist was not considered a noble profession by society, but being a well-loved clown was very well respected within the circus world. Fratellini faced ridicule from outsiders for simply being a *circassienne*, whether at school: "le premier jour, une religieuse me demanda : « Ton papa est clown ? Alors parle-nous du mensonge. » Le mensonge, je ne savais pas encore ce que c'était... tout ce que je savais, les chutes, les gifles, les rires, pour moi c'était vrai," or in music lessons: "Pour le solfège, l'harmonie, j'allais chez Mme Machabee. J'étais la seule à prononcer son nom correctement. Cette vieille dame charmante me trouvait trop douée pour faire du cirque ; je réussissais parfaitement les dictées musicales et les devoirs d'harmonie " (112, 123). She had planned to run away from the circus world by becoming a singer, musician, and actress. Fratellini first married to escape her family and later divorced, "voulant « être adulte » et profiter de ma liberté" (139, 140). *Circassiennes* often enjoyed more freedom than average women in society, but they were still in a patriarchal system that expected them to be under their father's careful eye until they married. Fratellini played with gender expression early in her singing career when she sang songs about clowns and the circus. "Pour le chanter, j'enlevais les chaussures à talons hauts, mettais un chapeau melon, un nez rouge, un grand manteau qui cachait mes formes. Faire disparaître la femme dès que j'évoquais le clown. Déjà évident pour moi, sans me l'expliquer" (141). As all clowns were men, she used androgynous, baggy clothing to render homage to the clowns in her life. When she finally becomes a clown, she continues using a similar

costume with a loose-fitting jacket, bowler, red wig, and red nose. Whereas other women used makeup to look sexier and more attractive, Fratellini used it to her advantage in a different way. “Le maquillage me permet d’extérioriser ma tendresse de femme. Et de me rebeller enfin contre l’autorité” (160).

Not everyone was convinced she should be a clown, even if it was the family profession. As a woman, she was supposed to be treated with respect, even if female performers were reduced to sexual objects in much of the public’s eye. With her husband as her partner, Fratellini changed the audience’s idea of what was acceptable to see onstage. “Tomber d’une chaise, recevoir une gifle, comme j’étais une femme, cela pouvait choquer. Nous l’avons fait accepter” (161). Before becoming a circus clown, she starred as a clown in a movie; however, this was before her career led to a change in the public’s opinion. “Les articles de presse titraient : « Trop jolie pour être clown »” (142). Even her own father, a *circassien* by birth, found it difficult to imagine his daughter as a clown, which recalls all too well his own desire to be a clown that was ignored by his relatives. “Il aurait tant voulu être clown, et ses oncles ne le lui avaient pas demandé. Moi, j’étais une fille, il ne pensait pas que je puisse le devenir” (122). Not long after forming their clowning partnership, Fratellini and her husband began to find success as France’s most innovative clown duo, yet Fratellini’s father’s reaction reflected society’s reaction to a female clown: incredulity, skepticism, and doubt. “Il fut étonné de nous voir partir, Pierre et moi, clown et auguste d’un nouveau genre, tels qu’il n’en avait jamais vu. Incrédule sur mon identité. Comment une femme pouvait-elle être clown ? Comment pouvait-elle arriver à faire rire ?” (155). Could Fratellini have been just as successful becoming an auguste on her own? It is likely that her success lies largely in the fact that

she worked with her husband and was a descendent of the famous Fratellinis. These advantages, coupled with her own determination and grit, allowed her to push boundaries and challenge the status quo.

The other major effect Fratellini had on *circassiennes*' lives was being the gatekeeper to the circus world who flung open the proverbial gate to outsiders for the first time. Previously, circus was passed from one generation to another. In Fratellini's family, she notices that over the span of a decade, little has changed other than a new generation has entered the chapiteau. "Les dix années qui viennent de s'écouler n'ont changé en rien le comportement de cette famille. Les enfants ont grandi, ils travaillent dans le cirque et vivent tous la même aventure, celle de leur métier" (65). Once a circus family, always a circus family. The main discrimination within the circus world was toward outsiders. Racism and prejudice were much less a problem amongst *circassiens* than in a non-circus population, as identifying as a *circassien* took precedence over other demographic identities. "Au cirque, on pouvait être de toutes les races, on s'en fichait, si toutefois on était du cirque—sinon, on était un « pantrio », injure suprême" (121). Up until Fratellini's adulthood, circus families would occasionally take on the care of young people who were not born into the circus world, either runaways or those entrusted to the circus family in exchange for money, and train them and welcome them into the family. This was one of the few ways for an outsider to become a *circassien*. As Fratellini became a clown, she saw the public's appreciation for circus start to decline. The Médrano used to attract famous artists to its shows and rehearsals, reading like a Who's Who of the art world: "Les artistes, les poètes deviendront les spectateurs assidus du cirque Médrano : Mistinguett, Maurice Chevalier, Colette, Cocteau, Picasso, Léger, Jean Hugo,

Hemingway, Milhaud, Sauguet, Mac Orlan, Max Jacob, Henry Miller, Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Firmin Gémier, Antoine, Rouault, Radiguet” (53). Once the Medrano was torn down, the artists also felt the decline of the circus and rallied for a solution. What could save the circus? Fratellini decided that opening the circus world to passionate outsiders would bring in the breath of fresh air that was desperately needed. “Marcel Marceau nous avait écrit : « Un art ne peut survivre qu’à travers une école »” (153). Schools existed for painting, drawing, writing... why not for circus arts? “Jean Richard, Jean-Louis Barrault, Madeleine Renaud, Ariane Mnouchkine, les Gruss, Sylvia Montfort, Jacques Tati, Raymond Devos et Jerry Lewis soutenaient cette idée : une école pour que vive le cirque” (151). However, not everyone agreed that a circus school was the missing factor to assure continuity of the artform. Historically, the circus world was closed to outsiders. The general public entered the chapiteau for the performance and left before the magic dissolved. Even those devoted artists who came to watch rehearsals for inspiration (or men who came to watch scantily clad women) did not see everything behind the scenes. Dressing rooms were both practical for changing costumes as well as a meeting point where men could pay their respects to a *circassienne*, so they were still treated as semi-public spaces. The Fratellinis were unusual in that they entertained company in their dressing room: “On se rendait dans leur loge comme dans celle d’une danseuse” (53). The public did not assist with mounting the circus tent, with finances, or with planning the route for a travelling circus, and did not understand the nomadic lifestyle of the *circassiens*. A *circassien* had to earn his keep, as did the *circassienne*. Coaching the children, participating in the publicity parades, assisting with other acts, babysitting while parents were performing or rehearsing... being a circus artist meant

living and breathing circus all day, every day. However, the problem persisted—how could this close-knit community revive itself? Fratellini was sure she had the answer. “Pour qu’un art vive, il lui faut une école... Ceux du cirque que j’avais avertis de cette idée naissante, les anciens, pensaient trahison. Le cirque n’était-il pas réservé uniquement à ceux qui y étaient nés ?” (150). Fratellini, the determined *circassienne*, decided to open up the world and successfully established the first French circus school and a travelling circus for her young artists to gain professional experience. In 1974 she founded the *Ecole française du cirque*, France’s first circus school that welcomed ambitious youth and trained them in a variety of circus arts, and the *Nouveau Cirque de Paris*, the touring circus (“Historique”). The school is still thriving today, now renamed the *Académie Fratellini*. Her brother took over the management after she passed away from cancer, and her daughter, Valérie, is the pedagogical director (“Historique”).

Fratellini was a pioneer in the circus world. A strong, independent, and rebellious *circassienne*, she first ran away *from* the circus at age eighteen and returned to find her true calling both onstage and off. Through her autobiography she casually shares the stereotypes and prejudice *circassiennes* faced, the lifestyle they could expect, and the resistance they encountered when they dared to rebel. Reflecting upon her journey, Fratellini comments: “Il allait falloir donner beaucoup de nous-mêmes pour que les mots « clown » et « cirque » ne soient plus péjoratifs” (151). Not only did she manage to change the negative image of circus artists and clowns, but for the first time she opened up the circus world to passionate outsiders while enjoying a career breaking boundaries and convincing the world that women had other options onstage than being attractive to the male gaze—humor is a feminine trait as well.

Annie Fratellini, la dame du cirque

Chronologically, next is a children's story about Annie Fratellini, titled *Annie Fratellini, la dame du cirque*. It was published by Dominique Duthuit in 2016 with black and white illustrations by Célia Portet. The latter does not specialize in circus illustrations, and, looking at the artwork on her website, she does not seem to have pursued any other circus-inspired artwork aside from a portrait of Vimala Pons, a French actress and juggler (Portet). The author, however, specializes in the fine and performing arts and childhood education and frequently leads school workshops to introduce children to the performing arts (Duthuit 2, "Dominique Duthuit"). Although she has a very different experience with circus than the other authors in this section who come from a circus lineage, she is familiar with at least the basics of circus disciplines, training, and the effort required to put together a successful show. *Annie Fratellini, la dame du cirque* is her only published book, and she is a reporter for multiple news stations, focused on childhood and youth news.

Annie Fratellini, la dame du cirque lacks overt misogyny. This is likely due to three major factors: 1) the author is female, 2) the book was published in 2016, and 3) the book is intended for an audience of eight to twelve year olds. As we saw in earlier chapters, just because factors 1 and 3 are true does not imply the book will be free from bias against women, but the fact the book was written in 2016, just before the viral rise of the "me too" movement, means it was developed for children growing up in a society that encourages gender equality and outlaws harassment (Burke). Unfortunately, there are still sexual harassment and gender stereotypes present in contemporary society, but most of

the children who read the book are growing up in a world where they are not expected to follow the same life paths as their grandparents, the boys becoming businessmen or laborers and the girls becoming housewives. Before becoming a journalist, the author was an elementary school teacher for nearly a decade, and her awareness of how to pique a child's curiosity is clear throughout the 45-page book (Burke). The vocabulary and expressions are fairly neutral throughout in terms of gender bias, and the author avoids mentioning much about Annie Fratellini growing up with gender expectations or limitations. There are, however, a few phrases that stick out. First of all, the title of the book, *Annie Fratellini, la dame du cirque*, refers to the circus star as a *dame*. The word has many definitions, but it primarily implies an adult woman whose status demands a certain level of respect ("Dame"). In the case of Annie Fratellini, it shows just how well respected she is by circus audiences and within the circus world as well.

Although Annie was the first in her family to attend public school since her family first joined the circus several generations prior, she did not stay long (Duthuit 16). When she was 12 years old, after only four years of formal education, her father took her out of school and told her she had learned enough—it was time to start working as a circus artist (Duthuit 9). The fact that Annie had little desire to stay in the circus world but was forced to follow her in father's footsteps would be unusual if the family profession were in another domain—if, say, her father were a tailor or a lawyer. In that case, her parents might be praised for encouraging their daughter to not marry early, be a housewife, and raise the children. However, in traditional circus, women are expected to perform and work just as much as the men although they might stop performing after having children. Annie is described as "la rebelle [qui] rêve de liberté, rêve d'un autre

monde que celui dans lequel elle est née” (Duthuit 9). Being a rebel is not gender specific, but it is quite a change from how the world viewed the early *circassiennes* as liberated, independent women. The young Annie wants to be free from the confines of circus life, which is in fact what liberated her predecessors and allowed them to travel, do extreme physical activity, and wear revealing costumes. Even Annie’s mother is described as contributing to this image- she was raised in a “collège religieux” and “se réjouit d’être adoptée par une famille de cirque où elle peut enfin s’amuser” (Duthuit 13). However, as Annie knows firsthand, the life of a *circassienne* is a far cry from the public’s image of female circus artists. A *circassienne* will be expected to obey her father’s wishes and training regimen, earn money to support the family, eventually marry another circus artist, raise children, obey her husband, stay with her husband while he has several affairs, continue working in the circus either behind the scenes and/or onstage, and look young and attractive while doing all of this. These expectations have thankfully shifted over time, but this is the reality Annie was facing. Her father was known for being extremely authoritarian and became the patriarch of her grandfather’s *Villa du rire* upon the latter’s death, “dans laquelle il règne sur une tribu de femmes, mères, soeurs, épouses qui font semblant de lui obéir” (Duthuit 18). Her father certainly took his role seriously, taking charge of Annie’s circus education and forcing her to redo any failed acrobatic exercises ten to twenty times on their tile floors (Duthuit 18). Certain disciplines were off limits to women, no matter their skill level, just as it was once shocking to hear of female doctors or pilots. As of Annie’s time, “seuls les garçons pouvaient devenir clowns” (Duthuit 10). It might be surprising for the reader to learn that there was a period of several hundred years when there were not many female clowns despite the fact females

have been clowning professionally since at least the seventh century BC with the Dorian Mimes Troupe in Greece (SGrindle).

Annie's first performance happened at the Cirque Medrano in 1948, right at the end of the Second World War (Duthuit 7). Both world wars were challenging times for circus companies, and gender expectations in society shifted due to young men leaving their homes and going to war, leaving the women behind to keep their country running. We will see this spirit of independence throughout Annie's adult life. On the very first page of the story the author sets up the scene, giving a bit of background information on the main character, and says, "Dans sa loge, au sous-sol, Annie Fratellini se sent toute petite" (Duthuit 7). "Small" is a word often used to describe children, but Annie is already 16 years old when she makes her debut. It would be uncommon for a 16-year-old boy to be described as feeling small instead of nervous or anxious. Nevertheless, Annie makes her debut, playing saxophone while balancing on a rolling globe ("L'Enfant"). She reluctantly continues with this act for three years, eventually discovering jazz and becoming an accomplished jazz musician and singer to the point where she performs nightly in bars, salons, and hotels, and Philippe Brun, a well-known trumpeter and her performing partner, asks her to marry him (Duthuit 22). The author next states, "L'oiseau a enfin réussi à s'envoler" (Duthuit 22-23). It is a bit ironic that this freedom comes directly after the statement that she escaped her father by getting married—passing from the "responsibility" of one male figure to another.

Each marriage brings new possibilities, and when Annie's soon-to-be third husband tries to convince her to star in his new film, *Le Grand Amour*, he appeals to the circus she left behind and tells her, "Tu es née pour être clown. Pour être ma femme

aussi” (Duthuit 30). This very forward marriage proposal could be considered extremely egotistical and sexist, but it seems to have worked for the couple. Annie became the *auguste* to Pierre Etaix’s whiteface. Her role was that of the “*auguste rebelle et tendre [qui] est l’enfant qu’[Annie] n’a pas pu être*” while her husband became “*le clown blanc, celui qui représente en quelque sorte le père, l’autorité, celui qui distribue les gifles*” (Duthuit 31). As female clowns were extremely few and far between at the time, audiences would have been shocked to see a female onstage. Imagine that Annie and her husband switched roles—she would have been the authoritative figure keeping the other clown in line. This might have worked had they performed in drag, with Annie wearing men’s clothing and Pierre wearing a dress or skirt, but it is unlikely they would have been as successful as they were if they had dared to put Annie in charge. Nowadays, no one would think twice about having a female clown boss around a male clown, but gender stereotypes take time to overcome. As it was, Annie’s clown was not overly feminine. Duthuit explains, “*Son clown n’est ni un homme, ni une femme. Il serait plutôt du côté de l’ange, personnage sans âge, espiègle et naïf, presque muet. A l’intérieur de son clown, Annie se sent bien, elle est vraie*” (Duthuit 34). Annie herself states that “*la piste est un coin de paradis où nous créons un monde différent qui se moque des frontières et des codes*” (Duthuit 34). Eventually Annie and Pierre decided to found a circus school, open to any children who wanted to take lessons. This was extremely controversial at the time as traditional circus artists considered the circus arts to be a family affair, rendering the Académie Fratellini the first circus school in western Europe (“Historique”). Nevertheless, the couple created their school without hesitation, and Annie is described as choosing the instructors carefully, “*Elle leur fait confiance, elle fonctionne avec son*

cœur. Jamais elle ne dit “moi, moi moi” (Duthuit 37). This last comment about Annie never saying “me, me, me” might be construed as typical positive feedback for a woman, but here the female author, familiar with the circus world, gives as sincere praise as she can, letting the readers know this phenomenal and innovative woman worked from the heart, for the youth, removing the traditional ego-centered place of authority that has long directed so much circus education in the world of traditional circus.

Duthuit paints a generous picture of Fratellini and the *circassienne*, sharing her troubles, describing her solutions, and supporting her in her storytelling. Thanks to Duthuit’s style, it is possible to empathize with Fratellini and see why she became one of the fundamental links between traditional circus and contemporary circus. The author does not attempt to calm Fratellini’s feminism and instead finds ways to highlight her rebellious spirit without compromising her integrity and passion.

Plus qu’une vie

The most recent book in this section is Antoinette Chamberyron’s *Plus qu’une vie: les Mongador, une famille de cirque*, which she published in 2018. She tells her family’s story of how her grandfather ran away with the circus to escape a life in the travel business and how the newly invented circus family, the Mongadors, continued to leave their mark on clowning and juggling for three generations. The author, an accomplished circus artist herself, was born in France in 1928 to a French father and English mother and passed away in 2020 (“Ninette Mongador”). Following in her family’s footsteps, she developed a juggling act with her parents that debuted after World War II. *Les Mongador* were known for impressive juggling feats, including Ninette’s

(Antoinette's) feature with five oversized clubs ("Ninette Mongador"). Throughout the book she follows her grandfather through joining the circus, becoming a clown, meeting his wife, and the birth of their three children, then shifts to the children (her father and uncles) once her grandfather steps aside and retires from the circus life. She wraps up just as a circus director offers to hire her parents if they include her in the act.

Ninette's writing style is less feminist than might be expected for a book published in 2018, but she was already 90 years old and should not be expected to have the same tone as someone of a younger generation. Throughout the book, she constantly reveals implicit bias toward the women, often mentioning how patient and sweet they were, content to stay in the background supporting everyone. She also reveals gender biases at the time, starting with a quick description of her grandmother's childhood: "Née à Parme, en Italie, Mathilde avait à peine connu sa famille légitime. Tout enfant, elle avait été confiée à une famille de funambules, et à cinq ans déjà avait fait ses débuts, poussée dans une brouette tout au haut du câble tendu" (Chambeyron 23). Although there do not seem to be written records detailing why Mathilde's family gave her to the Piérentioni family, one can speculate. Wealthy families do not often entrust their children to travelling circuses, and as a news article about two siblings sold to an Indian circus states, "there are many factors which come into play, such as poverty, lack of education, inequality and limited life choices" ("A Story"). Ninette's grandmother grew up in her adoptive circus family, "attachée à l'école des Piérentioni [qu'] elle avait suivi... dans ses pérégrinations, à titre de disciple / fille adoptive / artiste, forme de tutelle couramment en usage dans les cirques d'alors" (Chambeyron 23). In the twenty-first century it is uncommon to hear of children being sold to the circus in most countries, but this form of

child trafficking does in fact continue to be a problem between Nepal and India over a century and a half later. Her family likely received money in exchange for Mathilde's services, and the young girl would have had to train daily with the other children of the families travelling with the circus. She likely learned all the arts that were considered appropriate for women, that is to say equestrian arts, acrobatics, juggling, dance, and contortion. Women were rarely bases for acrobatic stunts, and, if they were of small stature, were the designated flyers in group and partner acrobatics and aerials. Most circus children did not attend academic school, and it is unlikely Mathilde did either. Her entire world would have been the circus: training, helping with set up and tear down, assisting backstage during other acts, sewing costumes, repairing costumes, and performing. Mathilde stayed with the family throughout her childhood and found talent as an equestrian, which she performed until meeting George and being secretly whisked away, essentially kidnapped with her permission. George did ask Mr. Piérentioni's permission after Mathilde agreed to marry him, but the circus owner refused. "Quoique paternel avec ses pensionnaires, Piérentioni n'en menait pas moins sa troupe avec fermeté. Il n'avait nullement l'intention de perdre la tutelle d'une aussi talentueuse écuyère. Mathilde fut mise au « couvent »" (Chambeyron 27). This young *circassienne* was treated as property, unable to marry her love because the person raising her did not want to lose his star pupil. Her fiancé had to secretly acquire her *état-civil*, as Piérentioni kept her origins a secret (Chambeyron 27). In order to finally marry her, Pierre got a letter from his parents, signed by a notary, that "Monsieur Baptiste Chambeyron et son épouse qu'il autorise ont conjointment déclaré consentir au mariage de leur fils avec Mademoiselle Capelli. Donnant tout pouvoir à qui de droit de réitérer ce consentement

partout où il sera nécessaire” (Chambeyron 27). Neither Pierre’s mother’s individual permission (or name) was required nor any permission from the bride’s family. Yet again, Mathilde was little more than property in a male-dominated world.

Mathilde continued performing in her husband’s new circus troupe, with more authority now as a mother and soloist, but she still was a *circassienne* who was expected to follow her husband and obey gender divisions. She continued performing her equestrian skills, adding diversity to her husband’s acrobatic trio. Following fashion standards at the time, Mathilde performed in a costume that did not lend itself to ease of movement. “Le tutu de ballerine n’était pas encore de mise et c’était impitoyablement corsetée dans une robe de satin bouffant, à cerceau, s’arrêtant au genou et décolletée sans excès qu’elle exécutait au rythme de trot de son cheval sauts et pas de danse en équilibre...” (Chambeyron 23). Eventually Jules Léotard’s costume would become *de rigueur*, but Mathilde and other women spent many years in corset-styled costumes, as seen on the Hippodrome’s poster of Olga and Kaira (“Hippodrome”).

When the Chambeyron troupe went to Russia, they were asked to be part of a pantomime, which was “souvent toute la deuxième partie des programmes de cirque [qui] déversait en piste un riche pot-pourri de cavaliers sabre au point, de militaires aux uniformes rutilants, de chameaux chargés de trésors, d’éléphants portant ornements et maharajahs” (Chambeyron 41). These pantomimes were essentially large-scale, elaborately choreographed ballets designed to impress the audience with the size and scope of the production through a large cast (nearly everyone in the circus was involved), wild animals, and illusions of grandeur, luxury, and exoticism. Mathilde was invited to dance despite having joined this particular contract “uniquement à titre d’épouse,” as the

director wanted to impress the audience with the largest cast possible (Chambeyron 40). The author describes how “pour les grands mouvements de foule, appel était fait à tous : artistes, musiciens, femmes, enfants, garçons d’écurie...” (Chambeyron 43). It is interesting to note three of the categories in particular: *artistes*, *femmes*, and *enfants*. There is a fourth category missing, which would be *hommes*. The author’s word choice implies that either anyone who traveled with the circus to accompany a performing artist must be someone’s wife or child or that male relatives accompanying their female family members were not included in the pantomime. Considering the goal was to have the largest possible cast, the latter is unlikely. Therefore, by leaving out the category of *hommes*, the author reveals that this mass call for participation in the pantomime is in fact deceptively discriminatory. It could be reworded to say that even those who were not otherwise stageworthy were invited to participate in the group scenes. Being a circus family meant that everyone participated in the act, so women who were not included in the *artistes* category were likely women who were taking time off or had retired from performing in order to raise their children, such as Mathilde in this instance. The author insists on the fact all of the performers were expected to participate: “Au programme... avec mis-en-scène grandiose, la pantomime, ‘La Vie Parisienne’... qui comptait, en plus de la contribution de tous les membres de la compagnie, un corps de ballet au grand complet sous la direction de A. Tignani, maître de ballet renommé” (Chambeyron 41).

This book is not particularly kind in its treatment of the *circassienne* and reveals how little power she had at times. It is a reflection of an era well before its publication date, and Chambeyron does not modernize her style to keep up with the twenty-first century. Similar tones are found in books written by non-*circassiennes*, but Chambeyron

places less emphasis on being sexually appealing and more on relationships and marriage. That is the circus that she experienced and learned about; it is too bad she does not give her thoughts on contemporary circus where the *circassiennes* aspire to a different aesthetic.

Circassienne

The last book, *Circassienne*, was published in February 2022 by circus artist Coline Garcia. A *circassienne* immersed in the contemporary circus world, Garcia started in gymnastics when she was 6 years old and eventually switched to circus. She graduated from the *Centre national des arts du cirque*, toured as a circus artist for several years, and founded her own contemporary circus company in 2016 (Garcia Interview). SCoM, or Sterno Circo Occipito Mastoidienne, focuses mainly on creating shows for children, choosing themes and a structure that will encourage the children to imagine and question. To reflect this emphasis on the *jeune public*, the company uses childhood photographs for each person associated with the company on the *Equipe* page of their website in place of traditional headshots. Recently the company has been exploring with themes for a general audience. Garcia is very clear in her intentions and includes a description of how she and her company are fighting for sexual equality in the world:

Enfin, la compagnie SCoM développe une démarche de création militante en faveur de l'égalité femme-homme. Dans sa forme tout d'abord, elle veille scrupuleusement à ne jamais véhiculer – et donc reproduire – des stéréotypes sexués dans ses créations. En outre, elle veille à créer des rôles mixtes dans ses créations. Cette approche singulière sera poussée encore un peu plus loin dans le

projet TRAIT(s) avec la mise en place d'un processus de création mixte (une circassienne et un circassien) d'un solo. Enfin, la compagnie développe un projet de création (2023) qui interrogera les manières dont la sexualité (au sens large : drague, séduction, érotisme, pornographie, pratiques sexuelles, orientations et inclinaisons hétérosexuelles, homosexuelles, bisexuelles) et ses représentations (liées aux pratiques) s'articulent avec la domination masculine. ("Compagnie SCoM")

Nevertheless, she and her company are still working on creating contemporary circus for a young audience and exposing children to the idea of contemporary circus. Motivated by the lack of children's literature about contemporary circus, Garcia decided to publish the first children's book that looks at a circus world without the traditional elements that often separate traditional circus from contemporary circus and focuses instead on what it means to be a modern day *circassienne*. In an interview with La Dépêche, Garcia states that "ce travail d'autrice répondait à une envie de stimuler une création circassienne contemporaine exigeante pour le jeune public" (Garcia Interview). Prompted further as to why she felt this need, Garcia discusses France's status in the circus world and her motivation for writing *Circassienne*:

La France est une figure de proue au niveau mondial dans le développement du cirque contemporain. Malgré cela, j'ai fait le constat qu'aucun livre destiné aux enfants n'empruntait les codes du cirque actuel. Les ouvrages étaient uniquement basés sur les codes et images du cirque traditionnel : le chapiteau, les animaux, les caravanes, les hommes forts et les femmes en tutu à paillettes. Le cirque ne ressemble plus du tout à cela aujourd'hui ! Il était donc urgent de s'adresser aux

spectateurs et aux spectatrices de demain et aux parents qui les accompagnent sans reproduire sans cesse cette image en complet décalage avec la réalité de l'actualité du cirque. "Circassienne" est donc un album jeunesse qui permet d'accompagner sur la pointe des pieds les enfants vers le cirque contemporain.

(Garcia Interview)

True to her aim, Garcia has written a book that challenges the reader's understanding of the twenty-first century *circassienne*.

The plot follows Noûr as she starts first grade and befriends Charlie, a new girl in her class. Noûr soon notices that Charlie's father is the one who does everything she is accustomed to mothers doing—her father brings her to school, prepares her lunch, helps her with homework, does the laundry, cheers for her at basketball games, and even sews sequins on her *carnaval* costume (Garcia). Noûr imagines several fantastic explanations as to why Charlie's mother is away, and she is surprised to learn that her class will have a field trip to see Charlie's mother in a contemporary circus. Immediately the book starts to challenge stereotypes of the *circassienne*. "Elle vole d'un trapèze à l'autre ?" asks one child. "Elle doit être incroyablement élastique !" exclaims another (Garcia). For the first time in French literature, the answer is not an obvious yes. "Oh, vous savez, elle est surtout très musclée, avec des mains râpeuses !" (Garcia). Never before has a *circassienne* been described by her calloused hands and muscular stature without any mention of her beauty, grace, lightness, sex appeal, or elegance. The children continue to pester Charlie with questions, all based on their understanding of the stereotypical *circassienne* from traditional circus. "Mais vous avez un chapiteau ?" "Est-ce que vous dormez dans une caravane ?" "Et ton père, il dresse des otaries ?" (Garcia). The author's

pent-up frustration from enduring a lifetime of these stereotypes explodes off the page as Charlie replies, “Non, rien de tout ça !” (Garcia). Charlie explains that her mother leaves on tour sometimes, but their family lives in a house and her mother participates in normal family life when she is home. At the show, as opposed to glitter and sequins and a circus tent, Noûr goes into a small and intimate theater where she sees a bald musician, five boxes, and an aerial rig. There are no horses or tigers or elephants, and the sole performer, other than the musician, is Charlie’s mother. She does Chinese pole, which could be considered a very controversial apparatus in the eyes of those unfamiliar with circus. It is a pole covered in rubber, and the artist performs flips, poses, and slides that astonish the audience. However, most people unfamiliar with circus would assume it is a dance pole, also known as a “stripper pole.” Both apparatuses require training, muscle, flexibility, resistance to pain, and confidence. Sexual movement is not mandatory in either sport. However, because of the stigma attached to dance pole, Chinese pole, at least in the Western world, is often regarded with a skeptical eye until the viewer watches the artist in action and realizes it has nothing to do with sexual arousal. Many countries have a traditional form of pole-based apparatus in their culture, such as India’s mallakamb, China’s Chinese pole, Europe’s maypole dancing, Holland’s Fierljeppen, and African tribal ritual dances (Hall). The fact that Charlie’s mother’s performance primarily uses acrobatics, Chinese pole, and *corde lisse* for a children’s performance shows the break with tradition. Chinese pole, along with dance pole, can now be performed by *circassiennes* who are not interested in sexual movement and instead use their vertical apparatus as a tool to show off their agility and acrobatic skills.

Noûr continues to be amazed by what she sees. “Il n’y a ni lion, ni clown, ni étoile. Le spectacle raconte des histoires de famille” (Garcia). Through various projections she sees a family with seven children and another with two fathers, and in the posters there is an image of two women sharing a meal and others of interracial families. The images and text descriptions are drawn from Garcia’s show M.A.I.S.O.N., so they accurately reflect the author’s show, created in 2019 (“Compagnie SCoM”). In the illustrations Charlie’s mother is dressed in blue pants, a mustard yellow t-shirt, red shoes, and a black leotard. In a YouTube video of the actual performance, she has a baggy white and blue windbreaker, black skinny jeans, a hunter green leotard, and white tennis shoes (Cie SCoM). There is no glitter or flouncy skirt, and she only wears basic stage makeup. At the end of the book there is a brief illustrated dictionary to teach children about words like *chapiteau*, *mât chinois*, and *corde lisse*.

This book truly is revolutionary in that it depicts the modern *circassienne* as she has never before been presented in literature. She does not have to perform in a traditional circus where she is athletic eye candy, caught up in revealing costumes full of glitter and sequins. In the *cirque contemporain*, she is free to show a range of emotion, wear ordinary clothing or as little as she chooses, and present herself as an ordinary woman. She can make statements about politics, gender identity, the environment, and race. She can choose whether she wants to pointe her feet or smile or be graceful. She does not have to be born into a circus family nor marry into one. For her, circus is freedom, a passion, and a choice. It is liberation.

Reflection

The timeframe in which all of these books were published is much shorter and more recent than those for the other sections. Whereas French men have been writing about *circassiennes* for centuries, it seems the French *circassienne* has had little encouragement and opportunity to do the same. In this section, two of the books focus on a circus family's history before talking about themselves. This puts their story into perspective and allows the reader to understand changes in the *circassienne*'s daily life. In both *Destin de clown* and *Plus qu'une vie*, the authors start by describing how their family first became involved in the world of circus, work through each descendant, and finally finish with themselves. They do not sugarcoat life in the circus and speak bluntly about sexist expectations and treatment. As both *Destin de clown* and *Annie Fratellini: la dame du cirque* are about France's first famous female clown, the authors go into more detail about how Fratellini broke down barriers by becoming a clown and by opening a circus school. This huge break with tradition led to a major shift in French circus, eventually giving rise to contemporary circus in France. *Annie Fratellini: la dame du cirque* and *Circassienne* are both written as children's books, but they do not shy away from stating that sexism has long been a problem in circus and explain how *circassiennes* have challenged tradition and have/are pushing for change. *Circassienne* is the only children's book written by a French author as of mid-2022 that discusses contemporary circus and normalizes being a *circassienne*. The evolution of the circumstances surrounding the *circassienne* from the beginnings of *Destin de clown* and *Plus qu'une vie* to the modern *Circassienne* truly shows how much the *circassienne*'s situation has improved in France over the past two centuries.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In response to the original question, who is *la circassienne*, we now have twelve different answers, not all of which agree. She has long been a feature of French culture, yet only recently has the stigma around her existence begun to be erased. Why does it matter how she is represented? Books written by outsiders use stereotypes to base their characters on. People who are not her are unlikely to push for change in her favor. She has been told time and time again that things are the way they are, and she does not hold enough power to change it. This analysis will hopefully help the reader understand the changes that have occurred and see where there is need for new literature that reflects the changes in process.

Throughout these twelve books the *circassienne* is portrayed as a mistress to be purchased with gifts of money and expensive presents, an ambitious artist, a loving mother, an undevoted mother, a clown, a trick rider, a dancer, a child, a tight wire walker, a contortionist, a flyer, an acrobat, a wife, a magician, and a change maker. She is beautiful, graceful, elegant, light, airy, mysterious, flexible, pretty, and muscular. The authors all used the *circassienne* to evoke a certain image; however, those images vary in nature. There has been a generational shift in how authors treat her, yet there is a greater difference depending on the author's identity. Generalizing, the outsiders used her as an object of sexual attraction, the *circassiens* portrayed her as an artist who was expected to deal with her lot in the circus world, and the *circassiennes* focused on the changes she brought about. Within each section there are authors who did not follow these generalizations, leading to a broad spectrum of what being a *circassienne* in France

looks like. All of the books show the author is aware of the stereotypes and sexism, and each deals with it in a different way. Only two, *A Rebours* and *Acrobaties et les acrobates*, are disparagingly misogynistic whereas many show they are aware of what she has to put up with but do not have a solution to offer. *Circassienne* is the only book in the selection that covers contemporary circus instead of traditional circus, and it directly addresses the stereotypes about *circassiennes*; it was also the only book written to address these stereotypes unlike the majority of the others that were written as (auto)biographies.

In modern day France, traditional circus and contemporary circus coexist. If you live in a city, it is possible to go to a matinee performance to see a traditional show under a *chapiteau* with artists who live in caravans and spend their lives on tour and to attend a contemporary circus show that evening in a theater with minimal lighting and a strong message for the audience. The *circassiennes* in each live very different lives, even though they are both professionals in French circus. This unique situation is not found in many other countries. In the United States, traditional circus has been replaced by large corporations that are focused more on money than artistic integrity. As with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, sometimes the focus on always offering more comes at the expense of the circus itself. There are very few small, family-run circuses left. Quebec has become the center of contemporary circus, giving rise to companies like Cirque Eloize, les 7 doigts de la main, and Flip Fabrique. Of course, the ever-popular Cirque du Soleil also arose from a modest contemporary circus company in Quebec that nearly followed Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey when Covid shutdowns forced the company to disband its shows. Two years later, it is re-employing its artists and restarting

its shows. Circa, the premier Australian company, leads contemporary circus in the southern hemisphere. Some things have not changed, such as artists coming from around the world to collaborate and present an evening of artistic entertainment, but as the portability of Chinese pole replaces the popular flying trapeze, one wonders where circus is headed in France. Will the unpointed, expressive feet of the contemporary *circassienne* win out, or will her traditional sister of pointed feet for classical lines manage to hold her own? Will traditional circus lose its place as *circassiennes* claim freedom from sexism and fight to take a stand for causes they believe in? In time, the next books about the *circassienne* will tell.

“Il y a des mots comme des fruits exotiques.

Une salade de circassienne, s’il vous plaît, monsieur !

Vous reprendrez bien un peu de circassienne, madame ?

J’ai préparé un jus de circassienne, un vrai délice !” (Garcia)

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