

Suspending Conventions:

How 'disabled aerialists' are challenging aesthetic and methodological practices in 21st Century aerial(ism)

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Katrina Carter, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I consult the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

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Abstract

Aerial(ism) is the art of suspended movement, generated by aerialists working with equipment such as trapezes, ropes and harnesses. It is frequently but not exclusively associated with the circus and throughout its history has been dominated by non-disabled performers. Increasing numbers of disabled artists are however, now engaging with aerial. This thesis therefore examines how ‘disabled aerialists’ are challenging aesthetic and methodological aerial practices in the twenty-first century.

As a professional aerialist working extensively with disabled performers, the research draws on my practice and direct correspondence with other disabled and non-disabled practitioners. It features two case studies in which I was aerial choreographer and trainer: *Hang-ups!*, a short film featuring Sophie Partridge who performs in a fabric cocoon and the *Paralympic Opening Ceremony* of London 2012 which included more than twenty ‘disabled aerialists’ using diverse aerial equipment. Historical and cultural perspectives of aerial are drawn from the few academic experts in the field, notably Paul Bouissac, Steve Gossard and Peta Tait; disability perspectives are guided by a wealth of theorists including Erving Goffman, P. David Howe, Tom Shakespeare and Rosemarie Garland Thomson.

The research shows how aerial has been connected to disability and/or impairment throughout its history. It provides evidence that ‘disabled aerialists’ existed in the past but have been forgotten, despite at least one unipedal aerialist contributing significantly to what Tait calls the ‘living history’ of the form. It demonstrates how twenty-first century ‘disabled aerialists’ offer significant opportunities to alter the form’s increasing aesthetic of conformity, but that challenges continue to exist in both how this can be done, and how the work might be understood.

I see myself reflected in the mirror, and I say to Tina, "I look big!"

Big.

Substantial.

Filling the space.

In other mirrors too, when just myself, I fill that space.

It is only when a mirror's window is shared with another that I become small, yet today with Tina, myself suspended, we are both big in the world, the reflection does not diminish me.

We share an equal presence.

Well, this is a duet after all!

And the music is the motion of the air, the singing is our breath, film will be our reflection, our window to the ground.

Seismic shifts mirrored in space.

(Partridge in *Hang-ups*!)

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DVD	Back Sleeve

Acronyms

DDA	Disability Discrimination Act (UK)
EADF	European Aerial Dance Festival (UK, France, Ireland)
ENC	École Nationale de Cirque (Canada)
FEDEC	Fédération Européenne des Écoles de <i>Cirque</i> Professionnelles
NCCA	National Centre for Circus Arts (UK)
NECCA	New England Center for Circus Arts (USA)
OERD	Oxford English Reference Dictionary
OCC	Olympic Closing Ceremony
OOC	Olympic Opening Ceremony
PCC	Paralympic Closing Ceremony
POC	Paralympic Opening Ceremony
RBBBC	Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus (USA)

Introduction

For twenty years I have trained, performed and identified myself as an aerialist, touring across the world, working on diverse aerial equipment in traditional and contemporary circuses, in theatres, studios, nightclubs, casinos, even old factories and churches as well as in numerous outdoor settings. This experience has led me to understand that there are perpetual repetitions and linked developments occurring throughout the aerial arts. The suspension equipment like trapezes and ropes, the movements performed on and with them and most pertinently the aerialists and their bodies that populate our art form. These are what I term the 'conventions of aerial'. Admittedly, the equipment and movement languages are constantly evolving, but they maintain direct connections to earlier versions, and I will show how there is a particular logic to such developments. All aerialists are of course individual, each with their own creative, performance and bodily nuances; nevertheless, the most familiar trait that such artists embody is an athletic, agile and often powerful physique; the conventional aerialist is predominantly non-disabled. In the twenty-first century, however, the aerial arts are attracting increasing numbers of disabled people.

In retrospect, it was in 1994, whilst training with Zippo's Circus in England, when I was first prompted to question whether the aerialist (and particularly the aerialist's body) could differ significantly from what I perceived to be the conventional aerial physique, as I helped a one-armed woman onto a trapeze. Later in 2000 my company's research performance *One Blind Eye*, resulted in this question being provoked once more as I worked with Chris Pavia, a dancer who has Downs Syndrome, who also found his way into the air. In each instance I was unprepared and surprised by their aerial endeavours, but each activated my curiosity into the potential of the 'disabled aerialist'. This research therefore stems essentially from my practice as an aerialist. It asks what happens when a disabled performer engages with a corporeal form that has been, and continues to be, dominated by not only the non-disabled but by the sometimes überable aerialist. It investigates some of the similarities, challenges and benefits potentially inherent within work by diverse 'disabled aerialists'.

In Colette Conroy's thesis she asked what happens '[i]f you change the types of people who make, and the types of people who watch theatre' and whether 'disability [would] change anything of the practice and criticism of theatre' (*Performing* 6). In this thesis, I ask how the 'disabled aerialist' is provoking similar questions to be asked of the circus and the aerial arts in particular. How is the 'disabled aerialist' challenging the conventional aesthetic and methodological practices of the aerial arts in the twenty-first century? In addition, what impact do these challenges have on the disabled artists themselves?

Conventions of Suspension: on Remembering and Forgetting

Aerial(ism)¹ is an historical, corporeal form that uses suspended equipment such as trapezes, ropes and harnesses partnered with an evolving movement canon through the body of the aerialist. It is distinct from other off-ground gymnastic forms as the aerialist's bias is towards upper body manipulations unlike the tightrope walker whose action is more concentrated on the legs and is distinct from the acrobat due to the constant interplay with the suspended equipment. Throughout this thesis, 'aerialist' will be the all-encompassing term for those working with suspended props and is generic as they often work with a wide range of equipment, in a variety of venues, performing in different aesthetic or dramatic mediums. Other tropes such as 'rope artist' or 'trapezist' will be used specifically for a performer working with those forms of apparatus. Although 'aerialist' is used elsewhere synonymously with for example snowboarders (Olympic.org), pilots (Russo), tightrope walkers (OERD; Schmitt) and the like, such disciplines lie outside the remit of this research. Similarly, some of the findings here may transfer across to those other forms, but the disciplines do not necessarily share the same lineage or vocabulary as that under investigation. Complicating matters further, in the nineteenth century the aerialist was often referred to as a gymnast, flyer or at times acrobat (FultonHistory.com; Paulinetti & Jones); whilst these terms might conjure different images in today's terminology, it is the context of the writings that will show their relevance here.

Despite its multiplicity, there are conventions of equipment, actions and even bodies associated with aerial that reach through time from the earliest pioneers to today's aerial creators which will be analysed in detail in the first chapter. Such conventions sustain and transform through today's aerialists in what prominent circus historian, Peta Tait, calls a 'living history' ("Body" n.pag.).

Aerial acts contain sequences of movement called tricks developed by successive generations of performers. They are emblematic of a living history and demonstrate one way in which levels of physical attainment are bodily maintained and retained within culture. (ibid)

Tait suggests in her article that there are two types of memory occurring in the creation, presentation and appreciation of aerial; each will be shown to be problematic when referencing the 'disabled aerialist'. First, there is 'muscle memory'² that is employed by the

¹ Many aerialists use the term 'aerial' and 'aerialism' was used by Mary Russo in *The Female Grotesque* (1994).

² Tait states that 'muscle memory' is a term 'widely used in conversation by young aerial performers in Australia' ("Body" n.pag.) and many of us use it in the UK. It refers to the familiarity built into the body by repeating actions so much that it seems (to the performer) that less conscious thought is required to deliver them. Lindsey Stephen describes it as a process of 'moving thought into the body [which]

aerialist who develops her form ‘through practice and repetition’, leading to the mastery of these actions (ibid). It is this bodily engagement that enables the actions to be remembered both by the artist undertaking them and by those witnessing them. Tait interviewed (mostly female) aerialists for her article, who were all inspired to become suspension artists after being exposed to other aerialists, and she concluded that ‘a performer’s stimulus for aerial action develops from seeing external action’ (ibid). Thus, the memory of past aerialists continues through today’s aerialists as the actions performed by the former are reincarnated through those that watch them and then venture into the air themselves.

Although I attended circuses as a child, the aerialists I recall most prominently were from the UK’s contemporary aerial troupe *Skinning the Cat*, whom I first saw at the Oerol Festival in the Netherlands in the late 1980s. Their suspended actions presented in elaborate costumes invoked possibilities in me that I had never before considered. Determined to try this for myself, I built my first trapeze from an old wooden broom handle and suspended it from the university lighting rig on lengths of thin twine. I attempted to recall what I had seen with varying degrees of success until I formally engaged in classes with other aerialists. The first of my teachers happened to be from *Skinning the Cat*, and so my formal integration into the lineage of aerialists began. I now pass on those same skills blended with twenty years of experimenting, training and re-learning, so the ‘living history’ continues through me. Research into, and practical investigations with diverse ‘disabled aerialists’, particularly Sophie Partridge who appears in the first case study, demonstrate how this physical memory determining a connection to aerial is itself questionable. It is Partridge’s limited action and necessary negation of aerial movement (and musculature) that undermine the very essence of the conventions of aerial thus resulting in my asking: is Partridge engaging in ‘aerial’ or is it something else?

In addition to an individual’s memories of aerial instigating her involvement in and therefore aiding the sustainability of the form, there is the second type of memory. Tait suggests that *cultural* memory is complicit in both sustaining and blurring realities of the past through a process that Joseph Roach calls ‘selective memory’. He explains,

[S]elective memory requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed. (3)

functions for performers like a kind of redistribution of labour’ that enables them ‘to perform the more valued parts of their work’ such as ‘emotional expression’ (276).

An aerial example of selective *remembering* is the pervasive association of flying trapeze with the art form. Regardless of whether or not the individual has witnessed flying trapeze, it is often forefront in discussions of aerial with non-aerialists, implying a prominence of a particular form even at a time when it is less common in touring circuses and is less popular as a discipline in circus schools (Jacob; Drury). When I first tell someone I am an aerialist or trapeze artist, oftentimes they make reference to the flying trapeze, or describe the iconic action of swinging from one bar to another or to a catcher. Admittedly anecdotal, this continues to be the case even after twenty years of working as an aerialist and with only one of those years actually working on the flying trapeze. Its sustaining presence in cultural memory might be connected to it being the aerial form most written about with the two most influential contemporary writers on aerial, Tait and Gossard, focusing especially on this. The latter also hails its rise in the mid-nineteenth century as being synonymous with the rise of industry and ‘the feeling that all things were possible’ (7), so its position in culture might be acutely aligned to aspirations. Furthermore, Jules Léotard is arguably still the most well-known aerialist, being generally considered the inventor of flying trapeze (Coxe 33; Tait *Circus* 11)³, and classic circus films such as *Trapeze* (Dir. Reed 1956) and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Dir. DeMille 1952) profile flying trapeze as the most important act in the circus arena. It is perhaps no wonder then that cultural memory sustains flying trapeze in the forefront of aerial recollections.

Contrastingly, selective *forgetting* is also prominent within aerial’s histories. Originality and indeed ownership frequently dominate aerial discussions, with a Facebook page entitled “Ownership” of Tricks – what do You Think? (A. Williams), set up in 2010 to discuss this very topic. Recent publications of aerial actions seek to ‘honour the pioneers’ (Leach *Beginning* viii) lest they are forgotten, without any real guarantee that those claiming to be the inventors are in fact the *only* ones, for it is of course possible for more than one person to have ‘invented’ the same action as will become evident in the following chapter. Clear cultural forgetting has inevitably occurred. Aerial actions described in decades or even centuries-old gymnastic manuals are hailed as ‘new’ and equipment, specifically the single-point trapeze, is currently celebrated as having been invented by Terry Sendgraff in 1976 (Bernasconi & Smith; Sendgraff).

Paul Adrian, Steve Gossard and Jan Todd provide evidence that the single-point trapeze was utilised by nineteenth century promulgators of gymnastic exercise. Gossard writes they were referred to as ‘triangles’, so called ‘because the ropes met at a point above the athlete’s head – hence the name *trapeze* was applied to the device which came later’. Signor

³ This is, however, questioned by Gossard who suggests that Thomas Hanlon might have performed something similar in his act entitled ‘L’Echelle Perilleuse’ (37).

Voarino, Gustavus Hamilton, J. A. Beaujeu and Peter Clias are all cited as mentioning the triangle (Adrian 25; Gossard ; Todd 37-54), but it is Clias who claims the invention of it in 1819.



1: Airhedz Performer, Suzy-Jade Carter, on 'Triangle' Trapeze. Author's Collection.

He wrote, 'De tous les instruments gymnastiques de mon invention, le triangle mouvant a toujours la préférence, parce que c'est au moyen de cet instrument que j'ai développé mes meilleurs élèves' (Clias 105). The triangle was his favourite of all his inventions, because it was with this that he made the greatest progress with his students. Sendgraff, known as 'the matriarch of aerial dance' (Vogel 7; Cari Cunningham), has had significant influence over the aerial dance form particularly in the USA (see Bernasconi & Smith) and the specifics of her design do differ from those used in the nineteenth century (not least through modern materials such as karabiners and nylon ropes); the fundamentals of the single-point trapeze, however, are the same. Thus, this apparatus was one of the precursors to the aerial form rather than resultant of later aerial developments. My point here is to demonstrate how perceptions can be misleading and understanding our aerial past (as with any history) is necessarily incomplete and ostensibly biased – if unwittingly.

This bias reappears in other ways through the (currently) only book specifically on aerial dance, by Jayne Bernasconi and Nancy Smith. They describe the form as 'new' defining it as distinct from circus aerial as it can be 'anything that lifts a dancer off the ground with an apparatus such as a trapeze, hoop, rope and harness' or even more domestic appliances like

'bed frames' (6). The writers adamantly affirm that the 'story of aerial dance begins in the late 1960s and unfolds within the world of postmodern dance' (4). They do concede that 'circus arts and dance are assisting one another with the blurring of the two forms' (7), but they stress that it was dancers who lowered the trapeze, utilised different methodologies for generating movements and thus created the new form. Furthermore, they stress that it is the interconnectivity of movements that separates aerial dance from circus aerial, suggesting the latter is still dominated by the traditions of 'preparation for a trick, the build-up to the trick, and then the "ta-dah", the spectacle' (6) that have been disappearing from aerial acts (at least in contemporary or 'new' circus) for decades. Though I accept their argument that there is a 'blurring' between the two worlds, I find the segregation of histories – aerial dance and circus aerial – more problematic. The appropriation of equipment is acknowledged, but they seek to isolate themselves wholly from anything else related to the circus. Their condemnation appears most telling in the following statement that implies it is only aerial dance (and not circus aerial) that can be considered an 'art'.

It's one thing to know vocabulary and how to execute a series of moves or skills in aerial vocabulary; it's another entirely different thing to integrate the vocabulary into a seamless blend of transitions to form a work of art. (6)

This thesis is not specifically concerned with the differences between aerial dance and circus aerial, but the example is offered as a means of demonstrating what Roach stated above. 'Selective memory' offers an opportunity to erase those aspects of history that are uncomfortable or less desirable. Diana Taylor proposes that the writing of history is a process of constant reinvention. In her view it is a constant '[b]ack and forth. The versions change with each transmission' she writes, 'and each creates slips, misses, and new interpretations that result in a somewhat new original' (xx). Milan Kundera goes a step further, suggesting that although 'people are always shouting they want to create a better future' he believes they actually desire to have the power 'to change the past. They are fighting' he stresses, 'for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories written' because it is the past that 'is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us' (22). Perhaps Bernasconi and Smith do not wish their art form to be tarnished by some of the unsavoury associations that circus has had in its past – such as the freak shows that will be explored later on. Or perhaps, coming from dance rather than circus backgrounds themselves, they feel it is more pertinent for them to view the form from that personal standpoint, just as my theatre and circus pasts influence my reading of aerial from those perspectives. It is their judgement that one can be considered 'art' whilst another seems not to be, as well as the

perpetuation of a lost history that I find unnecessary and disconcerting.⁴ Sonya Smith's more detailed analysis of the aesthetics of aerial dance and circus aerial is however, more nuanced, and the diversity of aerial artists and companies (globally and just in the UK) certainly suggests a plethora of ways to use the same elemental aspects of aerial to generate markedly different performances. Perhaps aerial dance, aerial theatre and circus aerial are useful descriptors to enable makers and audiences to anticipate and understand the created work, each drawing on their respective adjoined histories in the process, whilst still acknowledging they share at least some of the same lineage – aerial?

Irrespective of the unstable specificities of origin, the physical histories of all aerial arts are, nevertheless according to Tait, 're/membered' through the body – both in the 'doing' by aerialists, and the witnessing of audiences – but she states that the 'performer who first did the action and trick can be forgotten' ("Re/membering" 28). The process of remembering and forgetting, Tait argues, is 'imbued with ideological bias' (ibid), and who is remembered or forgotten is undoubtedly dependent on the biases and opinions of the time and culture in which they performed, as well as the interest and agenda of those writing the histories.

Tait proffers the triple somersault, the iconic movement of flying trapeze, as an example of such bias.

Recognition given to the execution of the very first triple was accorded on the basis of who might feasibly have done it, and execution of this most difficult of actions was presumed to be a masculine accomplishment. (ibid)

It has since been discovered that a triple somersault 'was actually executed by fifteen-year-old Lena Jordan' in 1897, much earlier than Ernie Clarke's in 1909 that had been hailed as the first (ibid); whether Jordan was in fact *the* first, however, is still and might always be uncertain, but her erasure is important. Tait proposes Jordan's 'omission from the history books for sixty years might be attributed to a polarization of geography and of gender body identity', as her extraordinary feat 'was first executed on the colonial margins of the British Empire' ("Re/membering" 32). The social and cultural belief that the first triple *could* have been performed by such a person was, Tait suggests, unthinkable, and therefore easily forgotten. It may remain unclear precisely why Jordan was omitted from this history, but what does become clear is that 'circus history, like most history, invariably depends on the authority of the claimant and [...] culture's memory of feats is [...] shaped by its beliefs' (ibid). The conventions of that time persuaded all to accept that the first triple somersault was performed by a man.

⁴ For further discussion on how some aerialists determine what 'art' is and is not, see Lindsey Stephens.

Furthering Tait's claims that history has been biased towards male aerialists, I suggest that aerial's history has also ignored, if not wholly erased, the 'disabled aerialist'. Citing Deaf and Disability Studies writer Lennard J. Davis, '[i]n the realm of the body, ableist culture still reigns supreme' (6). Aerial histories, whilst still limited in number, focus attention on non-disabled elite aerialists. Such narratives are also populated with accidents that might render a former aerialist 'disabled', but I have discovered that *performing* 'disabled aerialists' also existed in the nineteenth century. As some women's extraordinary feats were erased from history, replaced by the expected convention of the time (male aerialists), so aerialists of a less conventional physique seem also to have been (almost) forgotten.

The significant findings I have made of historical 'disabled aerialists' have come late in my research with detailed information on them still proving difficult to uncover. Simple listings and brief descriptions repeated in newspapers leave much of their work tantalisingly absent. Gossard described some of the problems he faced when conducting his research that included the regular practice of performers using different names: 'most performers did not use their real names, but instead adopted stage names or the names of whatever troupes they might be working with' (6); this meant that artists might change their names several times throughout their careers. Additionally 'many circuses did not publish their routes or rosters' (ibid) so it is difficult to trace the artists' whereabouts. Finally, whilst I am intrigued by the presence of such artists, they may have failed to attract significant attention of those writing at the time with familiar aerial names such as Jules Léotard, the Hanlon Brothers, Lillian Leitzel, Luisita Leers and Alfredo Codona dominating many of the circus writings (Gossard; Tait; R. Taylor etc.). Nevertheless, I have discovered that some 'disabled aerialists' were performing professionally in the mid-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in music halls, private functions and even touring circuses.

Amongst the historical 'disabled aerialists' were a few small-statured artists (discussed in Chapter 3), but the majority were unipedal trapezists of the late nineteenth century. Gossard provides a photograph of one such performer, Frank Melrose, discussed in a short section looking at 'factors [that] could make the single trapeze a novel presentation', and in which he also includes animal aerial acts (20). The notion of novelty particularly in relation to freak shows and the exhibiting of the unusual reveals an area for later analysis as I wonder whether some 'disabled aerialists' will be condemned to such exoticism once more. Perhaps the most established unipedal aerialist of the time was Stuart (also Stewart) Dare, described by George C. D. Odell as a 'one-legged gymnast' (73) and 'athlete' (317) who was tutored by his

sister, the famed Leona Dare (100)⁵; he appeared at least between 1874 and 1876 in several theatres working as a soloist. He also toured in partnership with Thomas Hall appearing as the Dare Brothers, and in Chapter 3 of *The True Art and Science of Hand Balancing*, Paulinetti and Jones write,

Stuart Dare had but one leg, and a very short stump left of the other. He did all of his feats on a single horizontal bar, and three of the feats he performed were considered impossible by all the leading gymnasts of Europe and America, for a person to accomplish who possessed two lower limbs in normal proportion. (52)

Paulinetti wrote that he found Dare's abilities to be 'extremely fine' (ibid), he also argues that *he* would be able to achieve everything Dare had managed – despite having two legs. Intriguingly, Dare's partner (and others) were convinced that the actions the one-legged gymnast was able to undertake were in part owing to his less conventional physique, but Paulinetti successfully (in his own words) proved them wrong. He describes the actions (via his own doing rather than those undertaken by Dare) as including the 'roll-up [or if performed] on the trapeze bar or rings it is known as a throw-in', then a back-balance from 'hang[ing] in the arms under the elbows' and finally 'a planche on top of the bar, after a handstand' (54). He reports that '[u]p to date the writer has never seen either of these feats performed by a normally built person' (ibid) but nor does he say if he had seen any other unipeds present them. Thus, a second area emerges that challenges the conventional movements presented by conventional aerialists or gymnasts: the 'disabled aerialist' can offer creative wealth to, as well as challenge conventional presumptions of the form itself.

Returning to Tait's theories of memory and the biases of history shown to be evident in such recollecting, the omissions of Dare and his fellow 'disabled aerialists' highlight not only a loss to aerial's rich history, but to the predominance of an 'ableist culture' as Davis called it. The existence of Dare, Melrose and others suggest that the nineteenth century was perhaps more diverse in aerial performers than has been remembered. The 'disabled aerialist' who is today considered a relative newcomer to the aerial arts can look back in time and see his or her precursors and challenge the conventions of the form being solely for the non-disabled.

Accepting Tait, Taylor and Kundera's words that histories will always be affected by bias and opinion, I accept that my writings will also carry particular biases and opinions that will not necessarily be shared by others. As I argue throughout this thesis that the 'disabled aerialist' is challenging the conventions of aerial, the conventional aerialist will therefore refer

⁵ Odell states that Stuart Dare was Leona Dare's sister, when in fact she was probably his sister-in-law. It seems most likely that Thomas Hall was Stuart's brother and together with another sibling George, they performed as the Dare Brothers. Leona was married to Thomas for a time whom some claim taught her the trapeze, on which she later made her fortune. (Footlight Notes).

to non-disabled aerialists. Detailed explication of the 'disabled aerialist' is undertaken in Chapter 3, but in general terms, it refers to someone who has a physical, mental or sensory impairment that potentially affects his or her approach to, or relationship with, the conventions of aerial. The engagement of the 'disabled aerialist' with the form is what presents the opportunity to examine the aesthetic and methodological conventions of aerial and to see what happens when fundamental aspects of those conventions disappear. What happens to the aerial form and how is the 'disabled aerialist' understood within it?

The thesis title therefore suggests two ways of viewing 'suspending conventions'. In the first instance, it proposes an investigation into the conventions of suspension, the art of aerial that is most familiarly (though not exclusively) associated with the circus. I define these conventions as the interplay of equipment, canonical movements and the non-disabled aerialist's body. In the second, it offers a disruption, a hanging up of conventions for further examination. It implies that these aerial conventions are open to scrutiny and potential suspension as the 'disabled aerialist' challenges or even contradicts them.

Conjoined Histories of the 'Disabled Aerialist'

We are not born with any sense of time, of place, or cause and effect, or of the society in which we live. We learn about these things through social interaction, and what we learn depends on the society in which we live and our particular place within it. (Ian Robertson qtd. in G. Albrecht 28)

The period of the Industrial Revolution has been marked as a significant point in the histories of both aerial and disability. If not the actual birth place or time (as both aerial and impairment existed prior to these dates) then it certainly plays an important role in the development of the two. This section therefore examines the conjoined histories of the 'disabled aerialist' who can be seen to have emerged from sometimes contradictory social and cultural roots.

Focusing specifically on the period '1850 to 1900', Gossard calls this time the '*era of reckless innovation* in aerial' (italics in the original) as the technological advancements 'together with the Romantic attitudes which were so popular [...] created conditions which led to innovations in the performance arts', and enabled trapeze performance to be 'introduced and developed to its full maturity' (7). His comprehensive research, which plots the evolutionary history of the flying trapeze in particular, demonstrates the highly competitive nature of the newly forming discipline where extraordinary varieties of simulated flying, leaping and controlled falling were pushed to extremes for faster, higher, stronger demonstrations of the seemingly impossible. He provides vivid detail of aerialists who pushed the known boundaries of what the human body could achieve at a time when the appetite for

the extraordinary was voracious. Aerialists performed on ropes or trapezes suspended from hot-air balloons that led to numerous deaths and ultimate prohibition of such exhibitions (12). They demonstrated phenomenal 'feats of strength' as exemplified by Alice Napier who held 'five men whose combined weight was 849 pounds' whilst hanging from her knees on a bar (15). Performers flew vast distances over audiences' heads in the 'leap for life' (74) that morphed into the flying trapeze with its exponential development of tricks that propelled one body into the hands of another in myriad ways (122).

Tait argues that such exploration of the space above mere mortals exemplified the 'nineteenth-century ideas of empire and spatial domination' (*Circus* 13). Furthermore, if aerialists 'could claim to be the first to do a feat' not only did this give them kudos, prestige and promotional and economic advantage over their competitors, it also 'reflect[ed] the cultural celebration of pioneer inventors and explorers' (16) of the time. Aerialists of the nineteenth century were therefore seen to embody the dreams and aspirations of the new industrial age, and at least 'in popular perception, [the aerialists] came to exemplify the promise of human physicality, its future' (15). Tait suggests that:

During the 1870s a male aerialist's effort to competitively perfect his physique had become indicative of scientific principles and was loosely accommodated within notions of social advancement and species progression. (ibid)

If the male, athletic and non-disabled conventional aerialist of the time represented 'species progression' in the aftermath of the American Civil War, what might the unipedal aerialists such as Dare and Melrose have represented? If all aerialists were seen to have represented the 'promise of human physicality', perhaps the earlier 'disabled aerialists' shared that representational impact, but physicalised the potential for industrialised labour, war and aerial to impair the body?

According to Guy R. Hasegawa, in his study of prosthetic limbs provided to soldiers on both sides of that war,

The frequency of the [amputating] operation, which occurred at least 60,000 times during the conflict, prompted citizens of the era to comment on how common it was to see young men returning home with an empty sleeve or empty pant leg. (xi)

Dare, Melrose and nearly twenty other one-legged gymnasts I have found to date might have provoked mixed emotions in their audiences, referencing both the horrors of war and the potential for humanity to defy odds through aerial. It seems strange therefore that I have

failed to find much written on them other than the brief sentences in Gossard, snippets in archival newspapers and brief acknowledgements of their existence.

A l'issue de la guerre 1914-1918 on vit au cirque des numéros d'unijambistes. Deux ou trois amputés d'une jambe formaient une attraction d'acrobates de force. Généralement privé chacun de la jambe opposée, deux unijambistes se tenant par le cou faisaient leur entrée en piste: un duo porté seulement par deux jambes! Bistrew travaillait seul, il était parmi les plus célèbres unijambistes. Ses prestations étaient constituées d'arrachés, d'équilibres, de portés. (Renevey 326)

Monica Reveney mentions that 'two or three amputees' presented strong performances in the post first world war era; additionally, Martin Monestier provides two photographs of *unijambistes*, Eddie Gifford standing on his one leg on his bicycle, and two unnamed one-legged 'brothers' in the other (156). Renevey's use of the word *généralement* (usually, or generally) suggests that the existence of amputee gymnasts (not only aerialists) was more commonplace than might be presumed by the lack of information on them, but Monestier's situating them within a book on 'monsters' suggests they were not necessarily held in the same regard as the non-disabled aerialists. This is a point I will return to later on.

Returning to the twentieth century, when I was touring with Zippo's Circus in the early 1990s, I was very surprised to discover that one of the 'hen party', participating in a workshop, was wearing a well-disguised, prosthetic arm. I recall her questioning whether she would be able to do the trapeze whilst not disclosing her reasons and in my cavalier manner I told her of course she would be able to do it, with my help. I remember her being young and looking no less fit or healthy than the others in her group, so I presumed she was simply nervous. It was only when she put out both hands to take hold of the low trapeze bar that I noticed one hand did not move. Until that moment it had been so well disguised by her clothing, and of course I had not been looking for it. She managed to sit on the trapeze and demonstrate a few simple postures that minimised the use of both arms, just as her fellow 'hens' had done and was thrilled with her success. No mention of her arm was made before, during or afterwards. At a time when amputation was no longer as commonplace in everyday life as it was in 1870s America, the presence of a one-armed trapeze artist (if a total beginner) was at least to me, extraordinary. Thus, the 'society in which we live' as Robertson states above, and the specifics of cultural time and place will be important in determining how the 'disabled aerialist' affects and is affected by his or her relationship with aerial.

Aerialists certainly benefited from technological advancements by devising new and exciting ways to propel themselves through space, but in the process even conventional aerial bodies became ambiguous. On the one hand, they symbolised godlike, evolutionary or

superhuman abilities through their athletic physiques and pursuit of flight, but on the other, they generated confusion over gender identity and at times challenged social conformity. Russo argues that the 'female aerialist' appears in 'historical sources, as well as fiction and visual representations' as 'masculinized or ambiguous in relation to gender' (171), and Tait demonstrates that male aerialists were also 'feminised' or at least presented 'atypical male behaviour' owing to their 'graceful flying' epitomised by the likes of Alfredo Codona (*Circus* 95-6). Further contradictions or ambiguities were prevalent in aerial through deliberate cross-dressing.

While cross-dressing was common in nineteenth-century theatre, what made aerial acts distinctive is that muscularity blurred gender identity, and therefore it was, and is, staged as part of an act's heightened physical action. Cross-dressed male aerialists and highly muscular female aerialists challenged prevailing social assumptions about the body's gender identity [...]. (ibid 66)

Clyde Vander's performance character, Barbette, is possibly the best known cross-dressing aerialist of his/her time. Described in Bertram Mills Circus programmes of 1927/28 as 'The Fashion-plate of Circusdom', Barbette played with ideas of gender in aerial action through exaggerating his/her sexuality, or disguising it completely, at different times in the performances. Tait explains that the 'feminine effect was the first part and it was accentuated by aerial action' (*Circus* 72) that included 'displays of precision in balancing and pointed footwork usually deemed feminine' (75). Mark Franko agrees that owing to 'conventional gender norms [being] rigorously respected' in Barbette's performances, the audience were dissuaded from 'processing the otherwise obvious discrepancies between feminine dress and masculine effort' (596). Whilst Barbette openly exploited notions of bisexuality and androgyny (Franko; Russo), s/he ended the act firmly back in his male body, with "a wrestler's salute", one arm raised with a clenched hand to reveal maleness at the finale' (Tait *Circus* 71).

There were times, however, when onlookers were unable to discern the gender of the artist owing to their extraordinary corporeality and/or aerial actions seeming 'to defy nature' (ibid 38); or when their aerial actions suggested their sexuality or grounded behaviour might be less than socially conventional of the time. Arthur J. Munby offers an example in his edited diaries of when he came across 'The little Azella'. He began describing her as a 'lad [who] seemed to be about ten years old; a sturdy well knit little fellow, with broad shoulders, and a round plump smiling face, and curly hair parted on one side' (255). In asking a child standing close to him whether the performer was indeed a boy or a girl he was informed that 'her name's Betsy Asher, and she's a Jewess, & only nine years old' (ibid). Disguising oneself as a boy may have been in part to enable Azella to continue working, as 'the Dangerous

Performances Act of 1879 [that] specifically target[ed] children and women to be excluded from performing certain kinds of gymnastic and high-wire acts' was being drafted at this time (Stoddart *Rings* 172). Irregardless of her reasoning however, she was obviously successful in hiding her gender from some members of the audience owing to perceived ideas of what was possible for men and women.

In addition to some deliberate cross-dressing by artists, '[t]here was a clear gender division of labor (sic) in acrobatic acts that some performers [...] violated in order to make their acts novel' (Kibler 145). Offering renowned *fin de siècle* aerialist Ruth Budd as an example, who more unusually worked as catcher for her brother as flyer in their aerial duets before she turned to a solo career, M. Alison Kibler suggests this reversal of roles 'brought her fame as well as controversy' (ibid). The reversal of roles was only part of the story however, as it was also her body, with its *aerialised* physique and power (transformed through aerial action) that also demonstrated she proudly approved of the growing demand for women's rights. According to Kibler, in response to a journalist questioning her on women's suffrage, 'Budd directed the reporter to touch her biceps: "Does this arm feel like a clinging vine?"' (143) she is purported to have asked, implying of course the opposite. Napier, Barrette, Azella and Budd (to name just four) suggest that even in the art form's prime, aerialists embodied complicated social positions being both aspirational and socially complex, which are examined in Chapter 2.

The histories of aerialists stemming from the period of increased industrialisation, therefore suggest that they were socially and culturally progressive whilst also being ambiguous in appearance and reception. Their physicality and aerial abilities highlighted industrial society's ambitions to conquer new territories – the air – but their developing physiques challenged social and cultural presumptions over who ought to be capable of what. Would the 'disabled aerialist' not fit well within this group then, where they could demonstrate a defiance of expected *disability*?

Gossard suggested that amputee aerialists such as Melrose added novelty to the trapeze that had become 'so popular in the 1870s' (20), and such amputee performers might have symbolised the dangers of such industrial progress, whilst still demonstrating that 'all things were possible' (7). Gossard does not suggest that he was in any way socially risky but that position is arguably upheld today by Partridge who in the first case study will be seen as an aerialist who cannot move independently, radically demanding a reconsideration of what aerial is and who can in fact claim the descriptor of aerialist. Her determination to be accepted for what she 'can't do' and what she 'can do' (Partridge "Here's"), as well as her public invective against the UK government's cuts to the Independent Living Fund (aimed at supporting disabled people to live independent lives), arguably place her alongside Budd in

demonstrating that she too is 'no clinging vine'. She blatantly defies what is conventionally expected of an aerialist *and* a disabled person by being suspended.

If aerialists were predominantly profiting from social and technological changes, the industrialisation of society and the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism' (Hahn 163) was impacting more negatively on some members of the general workforce, most particularly through the spatial separation of work and home. According to Harlan Hahn, 'many disabled individuals [...] made important contributions to household economies' during the feudal system by working in 'peasant farms and small shops' (ibid). Brendan Gleeson even suggests that 'physical impairment was so commonplace among the medieval peasantry that it was "probably a general feature of peasant social space"' (qtd. in Borsay 102). However, Hahn and Gleeson agree that it was the 'separation of work and home' that brought into question 'the economic value of disabled workers' (Hahn 164). The growth of industry resulted in the generation of standards, means and averages that were defining the hegemonic body that could enable society to prosper through labour. Economic involvement therefore favoured those that could adhere to the evermore stringent working conditions of the factories, and 'this defined 'the "standard" worker as being fit, fast and untiring in addition to having an average body [...]' (Gosling 1083-85). It was also these very workplaces that Friedrich Engels believed were instrumental in crippling many people out of work through 'long-working hours' and 'factory working conditions' leading them 'into want and starvation' (qtd. in Abberley 127). Thus regardless of what the impairment or how it came about, the demand for bodily standardisation meant that 'people with impairment began to be systematically excluded from direct involvement in economic activity' (C. Thomas 46) and became more reliant on charitable and social support.

In her IFTR⁶ presentation, Conroy suggested that it was the Poor Law of 1834 that created a clear distinction between the 'deserving' and 'underserving' poor ("Paralympic"), with disabled people being placed in the former group owing to the 'supposition that disability signified an inability to work' (Hahn 164). Such emergence is questioned by Anne Borsay who argues there was already significant isolation and deprivation amongst people with impairments prior to heavy industrialisation (104). In addition, Borsay stresses that industrial expansion did not happen at all quickly for 'in 1841, for instance, only 6 per cent of the total labour force worked in textile plants, the one sector where mechanization was significant' (ibid). However, she does agree that it was during this time that greater isolation and marginalisation impacted upon disabled people through an increase in 'workhouses for the destitute', 'lunatic asylums', 'mental deficiency institutions', and charity-run 'segregated

⁶ International Federation for Theatre Research

provision for physically impaired adults and children' (ibid). For Michael Oliver, 'the economy, through both the operation of the labour market and the social organisation of work, plays a key role in producing the category disability' as well as 'determining societal responses to disabled people' (qtd. in C. Thomas 47). Meanwhile, other theorists (such as Bogdan, Koppers, Shakespeare) argue that it is not simply materialism and economic strictures that impact on people with impairments but also culture. How people with impairments are treated will differ through time and place dependent on the cultures of their time and will be looked at specifically in the following section.

The stringent environmental demands for standardized corporeality necessitated by the increased industrialisation of the workplace, the separation of work from home, and the resulting economic deprivation, were at least partially responsible for marginalising those that did not fit the newly conceived ideas of what the human body should look like and how it should function. The growth of industry segregated (economically, physically and socially) those that did not adhere to the new physiological and social expectations. Of course, the majority of aerialists *chose* to participate in aerial action and therefore had an element of control over their potential social stigmatisation, and they could also disguise their *aerialness* when away from their working activities. People excluded from society's industrial expansion, such as those with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments, however, had arguably fewer choices open to them. They could 'beg for alms' (Norden 27), they could 'turn themselves into a workhouse, starve or', particularly pertinent to this research, they could 'display themselves in one of England's many fairs that capitalized on physical difference' (Lacom 548).

According to Rachel Adams, what made someone 'worthy of display for profit' was their 'inability to fit into fixed categories of definition' ("American" 278-9). Alongside other freak show analysts, Adams distinguishes between two types of freak performer. There were 'individuals born with bodily differences, such as Siamese twins, dwarfs and midgets, or the human torso, [who] would premise their sideshow exhibits on displays of their normality' that included demonstrating 'everyday tasks with ease', showing their intelligence and engaging 'in respectable relationships with others'; she refers to this type of performer as 'true freaks' (ibid). Alternatively there were performers who 'emphasized their *difference* from the average person' through their unusual skill or presentational abilities such as 'the snake charmer, the savage, the strongman, or the tattooed person' (ibid, italics in original).

For Elizabeth Grosz, '[f]reaks are not just unusual or atypical; more than this is necessary to characterize their unique social position' ("Intolerable" 56). In her view, the 'freak [...] is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening' (ibid). Adams broadens this perspective stating that for each type of freak performer, the exhibiting

currency lay in 'the deviance of the freak's body', as it merged or 'transgressed' accepted boundaries such as 'savage/human, child/adult, man/woman, self/other [thereby calling] into question the audience's preconceived notions of the possibilities and limitations of the human body' ("American" 279). Such language starts to echo that previously associated with the aerialists, where they too were seen to challenge what was considered humanly possible. It also provokes questions about how 'disabled aerialists' might be perceived: will they be seen *as* freaks exhibiting their unusual bodies in a different manner? Or, will they be seen and accepted *as* aerialists?

Cindy Lacom suggests that people exhibiting themselves *as* freaks were particularly distinctive because they were 'both a visual signification of difference, comforting to spectators because they [were] not the ones on display, and a reminder of potential sameness' (549). The sameness could occur at any time because any of us 'might be diagnosed with a disease that disables [us], lose a limb in an accident, or give birth to a child with physical or mental disabilities' (ibid). Once again, there is a direct correlation to the early aerialists who perpetually flew in the face of danger with many in the nineteenth century becoming seriously and permanently injured or dying from their aerial failures (see Gossard; Soden). Risk and danger will be explored as conventional aesthetics of aerial as well as physical realities in the following chapters, where some audience members even callously awaited disaster to occur (Cosdon).

Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains that 'the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and our world' (*Freakery* 1) and the circus is precisely where extraordinary people with extraordinary bodies were particularly celebrated – by what they looked like, by what they did and the two combined. This sense of the 'extraordinary' can relate to both aerialists *and* to people with visible physiological impairments, but the aerialists were arguably only extraordinary when demonstrating their aerial actions, whilst people with impairments might remain constantly extraordinary. Paul Bouissac suggests that circus 'is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed and at the same time transcended' proposing that it 'seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center' (*Circus* 9). The circus might therefore have been the ideal performance arena in which the 'disabled aerialist' could appear. Considering only the unipedal aerialists for a moment, they appear to have been celebrated at the time of performing as great athletes at least on a par with, if not more impressive than, those with two legs as the discussion on Dare earlier explored. They were therefore extraordinary by being aerialists, but also because they were unipedal. They were also representative of their time, highlighting aerial's industry (defying perceived human frailty) as well as visually demonstrating industry's price on the body. They were arguably pertinent to their time of

post-American Civil War or WW1 where amputees were considered numerous, and yet their existence has almost been eradicated. If their presence continues to be unknown, does this further complicate the 'disabled aerialists' of the twenty-first century whose connection to the circus might only be considered that of the freak shows?

In the twenty-first century, aerialists continue to push their bodies with and against gravity's pull exploring their capacity to control their falls on verticals such as ropes and silks in ever more elaborate ways. They are developing complex mixes of aerial and dance vocabulary and where it still exists, the swing of the flying trapeze is also being pushed higher, further and in constantly shifting variations of apparatus. The aerial canon has therefore been exponentially increasing since the 'reckless era' of previous centuries. Nevertheless, the spectacle of danger is now framed within more rigid Health & Safety legislation and participation in aerial has become more widely available as a hobby as well as a profession. The perception of corporeal risk and indeed the potential superhuman mythology of aerialists have also undoubtedly decreased, even if the athletic body is still considered aspirational. Furthermore, whilst accepting the existence of highly successful individual companies, circus as a whole (particularly in the UK) arguably lost its lustre in the mid-twentieth century, and despite continuing efforts by present-day aerialists to reinvent their form, they no longer epitomise human evolution. Whilst aerialists continue to be linked to their predecessors through what Tait calls the 'living history', she also suggests that 'cultural paradoxes' exist 'in the perceptions of bodies' (*Circus* 8). Aerialists are linked through muscle and cultural memory and are particularly associated with the circus, but they do not necessarily have any intentional connection to it in their performances or their working lives. The position of aerialists in twenty-first century culture is therefore markedly different to that of our predecessors in the nineteenth century.

The twentieth century also saw the rise of the Disability Rights Movement which had some success in 'secur[ing] rights for individuals in the areas of employment, education and cultural and consumer activity' (Conroy *Performing* 5). Writing between 2012 and 2014 with the current government's 'austerity measures' starting to take effect there are, however, fears that greater segregation and isolation of people with impairments may well return as a direct result (Partridge *Independent*). In terms of disability performance, the freak show in its nineteenth century format has all but disappeared, yet its historical association continues to linger. Conroy calls the freak show the 'retrospectively claimed history of disability performance' (*Performance* 12), whilst Thomson writes

Today the notion of a freak show that displays the bodies of disabled people for profit and public entertainment is both repugnant and anachronistic, rejected but nonetheless recent and compelling in memory. (*Extraordinary* 48)

The freak show might have been 'rejected' by many, but performance artists like Mat Fraser and disability-led companies such as Graeae have recently used it as a premise to expose some of the continuing difficulties disabled people face in society. Similarly, the 999 Eyes in American also continue to use a more conventional freak-show format that has more ambiguous social values (see Butchins). The freak show as an alternative performance genre with its focus on 'made freaks' (such as tattooed or highly pierced performers), rather than 'born' or 'cultural freaks' (for example those with corporeal 'differences' seen through race or impairment), is also prominent on the cabaret scene (see Hill). Ju Gosling believes that whilst the freak shows of the past may have disappeared, the idea lingers, replaced by voyeuristic television shows that 'often focus on disabled people going about their normal daily lives, as well as showing their interactions with the medical system' (2155-59) thus offering 'one overwhelming image of disabled people: as freaks' (2145-47). In both examples, the specificity and social positioning of the 'freak' may have changed but its connection to people with discernible impairments still remains. Thus, the echo of freak shows in disability performance might be equal currency to that of the flying trapeze in the appreciation of aerial.

This section aimed to highlight two particular social and performance lineages potentially associated with the 'disabled aerialist': the histories of aerial and disability, particularly in performance. I have shown that they each seemed to reflect and transgress social norms particularly through what was expected or perceived to be possible through the body. Similarly, though each has moved significantly away from the performance arenas of the nineteenth century (the circus and the side-show), both continue to carry with them aspects of their pasts – through muscle and cultural memory. If it is impossible to release the weight of history from the aerialist or the disabled performer, the clash of identities living through 'disabled aerialists' of the twenty-first century then becomes apparent. They are disabled, with the burden of the freak show heritage and social marginalisation pressing down on them, yet they are also aerialists and therefore carry the expectancy of demonstrating an athletic physique and the propensity to engage in the aerial form through recognised associations with the movement canon. It is after all, an aerialist's inherent functionality that proves her *aerialness*. In essence, aerial action is not possible without the aerial physique, which itself is developed through repetitive aerial action. Nevertheless, the pursuit of civil rights and equality for disabled people in all areas of life is more prominent in the twenty-first than in the nineteenth century, so the desire for equality in the air can perhaps be seen as one more area in which freedom of choice and activity should be *expected*. Just as the presentation of and performance by disabled people has changed since the nineteenth century, so too has society's understanding of disability altered. To analyse the twenty-first century 'disabled

aerialist' therefore requires a close examination of disability, particularly in relation to impairment, and the theoretical frames that are associated with it.

Disability: Language and Theory

'Disability' is a multifaceted term heavy with political meaning so any writer on the subject conventionally declares his or her position. Writers usually establish their defining territory, because 'the concept of disability unites a highly marked, heterogeneous group' and without doing so the work could be condemned as homogenising the disability experience (Thomson *Extraordinary* 24). Traditionally writers also acknowledge which modular approach they will be taking: will the work follow the 'social model', the 'medical model' or any number of the hybrid forms such as the 'interactional' model of disability? Each choice and declaration necessarily situates the writing within a particular discursive frame in a growing corpus of work on the subject. This section therefore sets out to define the territory pertinent to this analysis of the 'disabled aerialist' whilst acknowledging there are inherent difficulties in such a closing-in of terms, and that there will of course be alternative ways of viewing the same material from other perspectives.

Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes proffer four reasons why definitions of disability are important in *The New Politics of Disablement*. Firstly, they suggest that definitions portray meaning, and once meaning is apportioned, behaviour (both by and towards those embodying such meaning) is subsequently determined by it. Secondly, by establishing who was included and who excluded by any definition of disability meant legitimacy could be afforded to those 'defined as *unable* to work as opposed to those who may be classified as *unwilling* to do so' (14-15 my italics). Thirdly, they argue that 'disablist language' has exacerbated 'problems for individual and group identity' particularly when that language perpetuates 'the ideology of personal tragedy' rather than 'social oppression' (ibid). Finally, they propose that definitions become important economically for governments seeking to provide 'services for disabled people', not least through the management of budgets and the anticipated demand for such services (ibid). In his extensive analysis of disability language, Davis suggests that something else is also occurring.

As coded terms to signify skin color – black, African-American, Negro, colored – are largely produced by a society that fails to characterise 'white' as a hue rather than an ideal, so too the categories 'disabled', 'handicapped', 'impaired' are products of a society invested in denying the variability of the body. (L. Davis xv)

Defining the meaning and territory of 'disability' is therefore important, not only to acknowledge that all bodies are 'variable' – from one another and in relation to themselves

over time – but also to redress the injustices of bias imposed by establishing as social ‘norms’ or ‘ideals’ that of ‘white’ and ‘able-bodied’. What is disability, how does it differ to impairment and is there still place for handicap? These three terms (amongst others) have been used interchangeably over time and in different cultures, but they did have considerably different meanings when defined in the UK by ‘the first national survey of disability [...] in the late 1960s’ (Harris qtd. in Oliver & Barnes 17).

- Impairment: ‘lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body’;
- Disablement: ‘the loss or reduction of functional ability’; and
- Handicap: ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by disability’ (ibid).

Davis, Oliver, Barnes and others espouse that it was through industrialisation that disability was borne. Davis writes for example that before industrialisation ‘impairments existed, but the impaired body was part of a lived experience, and [...] was not defined strictly by its relation to means of production or a productive economy’ (74). However, the distinction between impairment and disability arose, he argues, when ‘[i]ndustrialization re-created the category of work, and in so doing re-created the category of worker’ (86). Consequently, ‘the impaired body had become disabled – unable to be part of the productive economy, confined to institutions, shaped to contours defined by a society at large’ (74). In essence, therefore, impairment can be considered to be *of* the body, whilst disability relates *to* the body in conjunction with cultural, political and social factors. The various ‘models’ of disability, however, reflect this relationship differently.

The ‘medical model’ of disability

According to the UK’s Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1995, with updates in 2010, a disabled person has:

[A] physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his [sic] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. (3)

Here the DDA is describing the ‘medical model’ where the disability is directly associated with the person’s impairment; from this perspective ‘disability’ is the condition that arises from reduced functionality caused by the impairments. Also referred to as the ‘individual model’ the implication is clear, the disability lies within the specific individual who bears the impairments. ‘Medical’ also suggests that with intervention such an individual may be cured or have their impairment minimised or adjusted regaining (or attaining for the first time) an ‘ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (ibid). For example, some deafness can be

alleviated using hearing aids; certain types of visual impairment can be minimised if not cured through surgery or the wearing of contact lenses or glasses, and someone born with 'congenital deformities' may be able to undergo 'corrective' surgery. The examples for deafness and visual impairment might be easier to appreciate as apolitical especially if the conditions are developmental and cause significant and unwanted change in the individual. The last however already begins to imply that there is a societal 'norm' to which we all do and should aspire, both in terms of function and appearance. Under this model, those that remain disabled, owing to medical interventions not being possible or inappropriate for their conditions might benefit from therapies or charitable assistance to accommodate their 'deficiencies'.

Johnson Cheu argues that 'medical cure, the possibility of a "normal" body, is a *perspective* that is assigned by the able-bodied viewer to the disabled body' (138).⁷ The very pursuit of cure or change is biased, he argues, with a normative human being in mind. Oliver and Barnes agree that 'disabled people become objects to be treated, changed, improved and made "normal"' (19). As mentioned above in relation to race, where 'white' was considered an ideal rather than a 'hue', Davis argues that at one time there was an aspirational *ideal* physiology to which all people were compared whilst society accepted that 'all members of the population are below the ideal' (24). The rise of industrialisation provoked a shift to being compared to an average, a standard or indeed a *norm* (ibid). For Davis, the earlier society placed 'no demand that populations have bodies that conform to the ideal' whilst the latter that worked towards a concept of normal, implied 'that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm' (ibid). Rather than *no one* meeting the 'ideal', only *some* would not meet the 'norm'. Thus, he extrapolates that the result is the bringing into existence of 'deviations or extremes' with the effect that 'people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants' (29). The 'medical model' therefore aims to alter individuals' bodies to adhere to society's ideas of 'normal' bodies. S. Brisenden suggests that on occasion, 'doctors have been too willing to suggest medical treatment and hospitalisation, even when this would not necessarily improve the quality of life for the person concerned' (qtd. in Oliver and Barnes 19).⁸ Thus, by defining disability in 'medical model' terms, the emphasis is placed on the

⁷ The 'able-bodied viewer' could also be the person with the impairment looking at and judging themselves. I have recently had to start wearing glasses when reading; I judge my current body in relation to my past body. I cannot do all that I used to do – such as reading unaided.

⁸ Gail Weiss suggests that some separation surgeries on conjoined twins have been done with limited concern for the wellbeing of both those being operated upon. She writes, '[w]hile in the past many individuals judged to be corporeally deficient have escaped life-threatening attempts to normalize them because they could not afford the costly surgeries deemed necessary to "correct" them, the rising popularity of separation surgeries of conjoined twins in order to "showcase" the brilliance of the doctors and cutting-edge technologies of a given medical center and even nation, has meant that more and

individual to change themselves or be altered medically by others to (re)turn them to the social norms that society expects.

The 'social model' of disability

Bill Hughes accuses society of being guilty of developing 'spaces and places' that are 'designed with particular kinds of bodies in mind' ("Disability" 70). He explains, for example, that 'the world made by and for *Homo erectus* is alien to the wheelchair user, and the visual culture of postmodernity excludes visually impaired people' (ibid). As a political reaction to the over-medicalization and exclusion of people with impairments, and an acknowledgment of a disablist environment, the 'social model' therefore spearheaded situating disability within the environmental and attitudinal spheres of society and (at least in its early phase) completely separated it from an individual's medical descriptors. The UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) is credited with steering the emphasis away from a medical towards a social definition of disability, when in 1976 they published their manifesto, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*. In it they continued with the medical model's definition of impairment as a 'lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body' but redefined disability as:

[T]he disadvantage or restriction of activity *caused by a contemporary social organisation* which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream social activities. (UPIAS qtd. in Oliver & Barnes 21 my emphasis)

The wording has continued to change, most prominently replacing 'physical impairments' with 'physical, sensory and cognitive' impairments (ibid), but the essence remains the same. No longer is disability to be considered pathologically determined and medically healed, but socially constructed and therefore socially responsible. Rather than being a matter of semantics, this had significant practical implications. The 'healing' of disability (rather than impairment) shifted away from mending a broken body, to fixing a disablist society, meaning a society that is 'discriminating or prejudiced against disabled people' (OERD 403). To offer a visual example, a wheelchair-user is faced with a set of stairs as the only means of reaching her chosen destination; she is disabled by the lack of accessible pathways. The social disability disappears with the presence of a lift or ramp. The wheelchair-user neither miraculously loses her impairments nor the need to use the wheelchair but she is able to reach her destination.

more often these procedures are being performed *pro bono*, so that the patients', their families' or their guardians' economic class need not be an obstacle' (31).

By separating physical or mental impairment from social processes of discrimination, exclusion and oppression, the social model of disability was able to make the case that disability was a public issue rather than a personal trouble. (B. Hughes "Disability" 59)

According to this model, both the creation and the solution of disability are presented in society and not in the individual. According to Tom Shakespeare, the social model had significant achievements in benefiting disabled people. In the first instance, '[i]t identified a political strategy: barrier removal', that transformed the struggle away from 'cure and rehabilitation' of an individual, towards the pursuit of 'civil rights' for all (*Disability* 30). Secondly, it liberated disabled people from feeling obliged to change themselves, and instead, demanded that society needed to change to accommodate them in all their diversity. Comparing disabled people to feminists and gay rights activists, Shakespeare suggests that 'disabled people began to think of themselves in a totally new way, and to become empowered to mobilise for equal citizenship' (ibid). Finally, he states that the new model of interpreting disability 'opened up new lines of enquiry' within academia by extending the research parameters 'from studying individuals to exposing broader social and cultural processes' relating to discrimination, capitalism and 'the varying cultural representations of people with impairment' (ibid). Thus, the 'social model pushed the study of impairment to the fringes of disability studies' (Barnes, Oliver & Barton 11) in order to focus on the social exclusion and oppression agenda. Nevertheless, it is this very separation that Shakespeare and others argue had negative results for some disabled people.

Excluding impairment and redefining disability specifically as a form of social oppression meant for Deborah Marks that 'it becomes difficult to distinguish disability from other forms of oppression' (qtd. in B. Hughes "Disability" 67). Furthermore, Shakespeare argues that

[T]o mention biology, to admit pain, to confront our impairments has been to risk the oppressors seizing on evidence that disability is really about physical limitation after all. (qtd. in B. Hughes "Disability" 69)

Thus, the 'social model' has been accused of suggesting that everyone with impairments was disabled solely by society rather than in conjunction with their bodies, whilst for some people with impairments this was not necessarily the case. Barbara Rosenblum wrote, 'I live in a world of random body events. I'm hostage to the capriciousness of my body, a body that sabotages my sense of a continuous and taken-for-granted reality' (102). She stated most defiantly that it was her physical rather than any social condition that had imprisoned her.

Furthermore, Shakespeare argues that the social model and other relational models of disability have risked 'conflating the variety of disabled people's experience' by failing to acknowledge the existence of an 'impairment continuum' (*Disability* 60). He asserts that the social model is guilty of 'emphasising disabled people who have static conditions which do not degenerate or need medical care' resulting in people with for example, 'multiple sclerosis, HIV/AIDS or cystic fibrosis' being potentially excluded from the definition (*ibid*). Not only have some disabled people been excluded from the 'definition' but, according to J. C. Humphrey, the social model also excluded them from 'adopting a disabled identity and participating in a disability community' because that 'identity' had come to represent people with specific types of impairment: 'physical, immutable, tangible and "severe" ones' (69), and not for example those 'with learning or mental health difficulties' (68).

Paradoxically therefore some disabled people believed there was an element of oppression (or at least suppression) either way. If impairment were to be a consideration then there was a danger that the social oppression would be overlooked, but by purportedly ignoring impairment those who were experiencing significant pain or difficulty due to their impairments felt compelled to suppress this from any political discussion. It is unsurprising that Shakespeare, Hughes, Humphrey and others therefore sought alternative approaches that would re-evaluate the interconnection between impairment and disability.

The 'interactional model' of disability

Shakespeare offers his alternative theory on disability from a 'critical realism' perspective which, he explains means 'the independent existence of bodies which sometimes hurt, regardless of what we may think or say about those bodies' (*Disability* 54). 'The approach to disability' that he proposes, therefore

[S]uggests that disability is always an interaction between individual and structural factors. Rather than getting fixated on defining disability either as a deficit or a structural disadvantage, a holistic understanding is required. The experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual, and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself. (55)

Regardless of the 'different views or beliefs or attitudes to disability, impairment has always existed and has its own experiential reality' (54), which he believes needs to be taken into consideration. The most significant difference between his suggested methodological approach to understanding disability and the 'social model' is that for him, the 'problems associated with disability cannot be entirely eliminated by any imaginable form of social

arrangements' arguing that 'people are disabled by society *and* by their bodies' (56 my emphasis).

In addition to cures and forms of rehabilitation that the 'medical model' proposes, and the removal of environmental and attitudinal barriers that the 'social model' addresses, Shakespeare suggests that there is another 'often neglected aspect of disablement: personal attitudes and motivation' (61) of disabled people themselves. He suggests that developing 'self-esteem and self-confidence may sometimes transform [...] lives as much as providing better facilities or access to medical treatments' (ibid), and this has certainly proved to be the case through recent social circus studies that will be examined later on. He proffers that there needs to be a more holistic approach to addressing disability that enables the diverse factors impacting on any individual (or group) to be addressed with the goal of 'improv[ing] quality of life' (62). Ultimately, he purports that there cannot be 'prior assumption that one approach is automatically preferable in all cases' but that owing to the complex nature of disability it does in the very least require a 'coming to terms with impairment' (ibid).

Ultimately, Shakespeare's proposal 'allows for different levels of experience, ranging from the medical, through the psychological, to the environmental, economic and political' (ibid) to be considered. Rather than focusing solely on 'individual interventions' or 'structural change', the interactional approach offers a multitude of options and he offers a list of suggestions that could be utilised individually or in tandem to improve the quality of life for disabled people.

[C]oaching or therapy to improve self-esteem; medical intervention to restore functioning or reduce pain; aids and adaptations; barrier removal; anti-discrimination and attitudinal change; better benefits and services. (ibid)

Disability is therefore complex to define as it can be interpreted as solely being *of* the body, housed within an individual; it can be interpreted as a social construction where the removal of social barriers will also remove disability; it can also be considered a combination of these factors. Whilst the eradication of disability (or impairment) is not realistically proposed by any model, the minimisation of discrimination and the acceptance of difference are prevalent in all. Returning to the 'disabled aerialist', if disability can be interpreted in such diverse ways, how then is it possible to define who the 'disabled aerialist' is? Oliver provides a succinct definition that 'comprises three elements: having an impairment; experiencing externally imposed restrictions' and finally 'self-identification as a disabled person' (qtd. in Shakespeare *Disability* 70). Although Shakespeare continues to question the role of identifying *as* disabled or associating *with* disability culture for many people with impairments –

particularly if as Humphrey demonstrated above, some people with impairments find themselves marginalised from other disabled people owing to their particular impairments – working in tandem with his interactional model, Oliver’s definition is helpful here. Certainly the majority of the ‘disabled aerialists’ involved in the following case studies have disclosed a physical, sensory or cognitive impairment. Many have experienced some form of social restriction relating to the environment (especially in relation to aerial) and their impairments and most, if not all, disclose as being disabled. Interestingly, however, they do not all necessarily associate with disability culture with several participants of the *Paralympic Opening Ceremony (POC)* admitting they had not known any other disabled people prior to their involvement in that event.

Thus, any definition will have its challenges, but as Shakespeare’s approach offers a holistic consideration of diverse concerns, this will be used throughout this thesis, where impairment, social oppression and personal attitude are necessarily interlinked with one another. As aerial is a fundamentally corporeal art form, it is necessary to analyse the aesthetics and functionality of the aerialists’ bodies and working within this model also enables both ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ factors to be considered when making the various analyses. To clarify, impairment will refer to a physical, sensory or cognitive condition that would be accepted as such under the DDA but temporary curtailment of activity through minor injuries would not necessarily be considered. Disability will refer to the interconnection between impairment and the social framework under investigation. As this work analyses both the aerialists and the conditions in which they train and perform, the term ‘disabled’ is most appropriate to demonstrate that complexity of relations. Therefore the twenty-first century ‘disabled aerialist’ is someone who discloses as disabled, who has a sensory, physical or cognitive impairment and who has faced social, political or cultural barriers associated with their impairments – if only in terms of accessing circus and aerial training in this instance.

It is also useful at this juncture to explain that there are linguistic nuances relating to disability that vary between cultures even within the English language, particularly between the UK and the USA. In the UK the term ‘handicapped’ is now rarely used but it is still prominent within American vernacular; their reserved parking for wheelchair users or accessible toilets for example are still advertised using this particular term. In the UK, writers use the phrase ‘disabled people’ as the ‘social model of disability’ demonstrates how society disables those with impairments. However in the US this particular phrase is considered a ‘term generally not in common use today’ (Dahlinger) because it suggests a ‘reduction of the person to the disability’ (L. Davis xiii). Davis, Dahlinger and others therefore favour the phrase ‘people with disabilities’ where the disability is ‘a quality added to someone’s personhood’ (ibid). Contradictorily however, UK-based Jenny Sealey (artistic director for Graeae and of the

POC) who lost her hearing at the age of seven, finds this phrase to be a particular ‘bug bear’, saying ‘we’re not ‘with’ anything’ (Interview). Sealey readily admits that terminology continues to be challenging even for Graeae who now opt for phrases such as ‘physical difference’, but commenting on the similar phrase ‘differently abled’, Davis wrote a decade earlier that it ‘strictly needs to apply to everyone, since all people, not just those who are paraplegic or autistic, are differently abled’ (xiii). As I am writing in the UK I will follow in this culture’s tradition of terms, thus using ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘people with disabilities’ and also ‘disabled aerialist’ instead of ‘aerialist with disabilities’.

Having established the reasoning behind the term ‘disabled aerialist’ clarification for the term ‘conventional aerialist’ is also necessary. As the overview of aerial’s history has demonstrated, the more familiar aerial body has been non-disabled, even if there have been some (forgotten) disabled artists. Using the term ‘conventional’ rather than ‘normal’, the aim is to demonstrate that it is just that, a convention, ‘a custom or customary practice, esp. an artificial or formal one’ (OERD 313) leaving it open for interpretation and analysis. As the aforementioned loss of unipedal aerialists and gymnasts from aerial’s histories demonstrate, aerial histories have been specifically focused on the ‘able-bodied’, regardless of the physical and corporeal realities of ‘disabled aerialists’ now known. In order to re-establish the latter into history, as well as to understand how the twenty-first century artists might be perceived in the light of a sustaining ‘able-bodied’ history, a differentiating language is necessary. I refer to the ‘disabled aerialist’ in quotation marks to enforce the questions embodied within it, while simultaneously offering it up as a term to be questioned. Are the aerialists ‘disabled’ or are they simply aerialists?

The Social Circus: Appropriate Participation

Disabled people have so far been shown to have a mixed relationship with the circus. They have appeared *as* freaks in sideshows or the mid-way that have been and continue to be well documented (see Bogdan, Adams, Thomson et al), or they have performed as aerialists and gymnasts, celebrated in newspapers of their time but omitted from later historical records. People of small stature have also had a long association with circus clowning with significant reference to them in clown and circus literature (see Denis, Kervinio and Jamieson for example) as well as evidence in historical and contemporary circus memorabilia. The collection of postcards and programmes at the library of École National de Cirque (ENC) in Montréal included numerous pictures and descriptions of small-statured clowns from Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus (RBBBC) from the mid-nineteenth century to present day, Cirque Royal in the 1920s, Bertram Mills Circuses in the 1930s and Zippo’s Circus in more recent decades to mention just a few. Despite their prevalence in the circus, however, such ‘an

occupation [...] tends to be regarded as demeaning' in the twenty-first century, according to Betty M. Adelson writing in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (6). She disclosed for example, how '[p]arents of dwarf children' recently told her 'that their obstetricians "broke the news" about their child's condition by saying, "You have given birth to a circus dwarf"' (ibid). Small statured people do continue to perform as circus clowns and Frank Theriault was vehemently 'unapologetic about his time in the circus' (ibid). He had after all 'gone to clown school and considered himself a professional', but he accepted that 'because of the availability of other vocational opportunities and the prejudice against circus jobs in the dwarfism community' it had become harder for some circuses 'to enlist dwarf clowns' (ibid). I return to some of the difficulties faced by such performers later in Chapter 3, but what is important to note at this time, is that diverse disabled performers have had complex associations with the circus. It might therefore seem ironic that in the twentieth century, the circus began to offer something markedly different to communities of disabled people through what is often interchangeably known as social or community circus.

According to Michel Lafortune, Social Circus Director at Cirque du Soleil from 2006-2011,

The beginning of the 1990s saw the emergence of the idea of creating an intervention approach by using circus arts as an educational alternative to help at-risk youth, an approach that today has come to be known as social circus. [...] Over the last 15 years, social circus has met with ever increasing acceptance. We are now witnessing a profusion of initiatives aimed at different groups facing a wide range of problems, from youth with mental health problems, women survivors of violence, prison inmates and refugees to the physically disabled. (*Community* 3)

Furthermore, he explains that projects are supported 'from more traditional sectors, such as education, mental health and the courts, which see them as a creative and dynamic form of social intervention' (ibid).

In August 2014 I attended the American Circus Educators conference organised by the American Youth Circus Organisation. It highlighted the interest in social circus from circus practitioners, physical and occupational therapists and those generally interested in the 'wellbeing effects' (Kekäläinen 5) that engaging in circus skills activities can produce. Hosted by Canada's National Circus School whose 'primary mission [is] to prepare circus artists' (ENC), I was surprised that not more discussion took place on the profession of the circus arts, or at least the potential for young people attending the various programmes to aspire to join the profession. Certainly, reference to disabled participants focused almost exclusively on the potential improvement in physical, mental and emotional well-being *through* circus; the professional art form still seemed beyond consideration if not totally beyond reach. For

example, Frédéric Loiselle presented some of his research based on working with a small group of 'young adults living with physical disabilities' that adapted the Cirque du Soleil social circus programme Cirque du Monde to suit his research and his specific group. The project involved twelve young people, two circus artists and one Occupational Therapist, Loiselle, and it took place twice a week for a year resulting in 150 hours contact time. The project concluded with a presentation, but as this was not the project's goal, the quality and presentational format was not of great importance. He spoke of the success of the project in terms of the young people developing self-esteem and self-confidence, building aspirations for their futures and learning transferable skills. He also spoke of the additional benefits to the participants' families who 'stopped being the taxi drivers' and 'got their Friday nights back'. His detailed findings will be published when he completes his PhD in December 2014, but ultimately he disclosed that the project had been a 'success' and those involved in the programme managed to find ways to 'transition to adult life' that might not otherwise have been available to them (ibid). Whilst the project's success in social and Occupational Therapy terms has been demonstrated by his centre, the Centre de Réadaptation in Montréal, now using circus as an accepted 'methodological approach', there is still no plan to promote the circus as a potential career for his participants. In fact it was unclear as to whether or not those who had been involved in the initial study would continue to have access to the circus arts afterwards.⁹

The Cirque du Monde map of social circus¹⁰ reveals how widespread the activity is across the globe (though involvement of disabled people is still quite minimal) and my focus on it here is not to question the work that is taking place, but to demonstrate the curious connection circus continues to have with disabled people. The past demonstrates that diverse disabled people performed professionally in the circus and circus related activities, but today access seems predominantly for therapeutic purposes. My research is not on therapeutic purposes of the form, but investigates the involvement of disabled people as *artists* within it – even if participation might also provide 'wellbeing effects' for disabled and non-disabled performers alike. The predominance of circus as therapy for disabled people and the continued negative associations of the past potentially influence how 'disabled aerialists' of the twenty-first century will be understood. In addition, if disabled people do not need or desire therapy, and access to elite training schools is limited, it also provokes a question of how disabled people can access the circus arts in other ways. These points will both be discussed in detail in the second case study that looks at the bespoke training programme and performance of the *POC* of London 2012.

⁹ For more information on the origins of Social Circus see Reg Bolton. For a European example of work with diverse disabled participants see Caravan's report on the "Handicirque" project.

¹⁰ Visit <http://apps.cirquedusoleil.com/social-circus-map> to view the map.

Research Methodologies

My methodological approach to this research has been a continuous integration of aerial practice and theoretical analysis, and it was my work in social, community, recreational and professional circus settings that provoked my initial questions surrounding the 'disabled aerialist'. Firstly, from a practical perspective, how much of the aerial repertoire was accessible to people with diverse impairments, and how could I best facilitate their aerial ventures? Secondly, if for some, their participation was necessarily physically limited (regardless of extensive training), would this mean that the aerial and they as artists were compromised, or would their involvement open the form to greater creative potential? Finally, how would their work be received in aerial and disability communities? Later research into disability politics and culture also led me to question the practice from those perspectives, with particular interest in the different forms of 'access' that participation of disabled people invoked – practical access to space and equipment, and access in terms of aesthetic incorporation of difference: corporealities, movements and means of expression.

This research therefore engaged in a hybrid approach. I worked ethnographically using observation and active participation particularly in both case studies, and recorded my experiences in extensive diaries. This has been enhanced by discussion with disabled & non-disabled artists and participants connected and external to those case studies. In addition, I drew on critical and historical analysis in circus and disability studies literature, fiction relating to both areas and archival circus materials held in Bloomington, Illinois and the ENC in Montréal, Quebec.

Literature overview

To date, I have found no critical literature on professional disabled circus artists outside of freak show related works. The latter is however prolific in academic texts with Thomson's *Freakery*, Bogdan's *Freak Show* and Adams' *Sideshow USA* for example offering diverse histories and analyses of different types of freak performers and their practices, social and cultural interpretations of the freak show's rise and fall, and its reappearance in literature and the arts respectively. They all include extensive bibliographies that further demonstrate the wealth of material available on the subject. Texts on freak show performers are also prominent outside the academy, where they are often re-exhibited, through photographs and vivid descriptions, as beings that have 'shocked and offended' (Hornberger xiii) "'Regular" folks' (xiv) as in Francine Hornberger's *Carny Folk*, Marc Hartzman's *American Sideshow*, Daniel P. Mannix's *Freaks: We Who are Not as Others* and M. Parker's *The World's most Fantastic Freaks*. Whilst the 'disabled aerialists' do not appear to have presented themselves in freak show presentations, freak literature is important here because of its direct link with the circus,

and also because, as Petra Kuppers asserts, since ‘the eighteenth century, disabled people’s performances have been historically *confined* to the sideshow, the freak display [...] and the medical theatre’ (*Disability* 31 my emphasis), making them significant forerunners to today’s disability performance cultures.

As the previous section on social circus demonstrated, the re-integration of disabled people to the circus has taken a new turn in the twentieth century, and increasingly research is appearing to match the growth of practice, but according to Rachel Trotman in her literature review of the sector, ‘[a]cademic and research based literature on community circus is [still] sparse’ and ‘[c]ommunity circus practitioner views are at least as strong in this review as those of researchers and other commentators’ (4). Additional research by Anna-Karyna Barlati, librarian at the ENC demonstrates similar findings. She recently provided me with her initial (unpublished) bibliography on circus as a therapeutic and educational tool, particularly but not exclusively relating to disabled participants. This is the working document for a new research project the school is hoping to undertake in 2014/15 looking at ‘adaptive circus’ practice particularly working with a group of disabled participants. The compilation includes texts in English and French, from the scientific, therapeutic and circus sectors. Many are concerned with juggling such as Joenna Driemeyer et al’s *Changes in Gray Matter Induced by Learning* and R. Huys et al’s *Multiple Time Scales and Multiform dynamics in learning to juggle*. Young people with learning disabilities are particularly well-documented for example in Abbas TaghipourJavan et al’s joint paper *Effectiveness of Rhythmic play on the Attention and Memory functioning in Children with Mild Intellectual Disability (MID)*, and documents on the Streetwise Community Circus project at Knockavoe school that was ‘devised, rehearsed, managed and performed by a group of around 20 adults with learning disabilities’ (McCaffery 1). There are two texts that relate tangentially to aerial: Bianca Chera-Ferrario’s *Means of improving motor control in children with disabilities*, that investigates the use of ‘artistic gymnastics’ in competition for disabled children, and Ruth and Clayton Taylor’s joint paper, *Circus ‘C’: An Innovative Approach to Leisure for People with Disabilities* which analyses the social and cultural benefits of developing a circus programme for a group of ‘20 students aged 12-18 years with a range of intellectual and/or mobility disabilities’ (128). There is no text listed (or so far found) on working specifically with disabled people in the air.

In his “Bibliographical Essay”, Robert M. Lewis states, ‘[o]f all the fields of popular entertainment, circus history is the least analytical’ (367). Circus literature is certainly rich in historical and biographical texts as demonstrated in Raymond Toole-Stott’s *Bibliography of Circus Books in English*, and his three volumes of *Circus and Allied Arts* (1958-62) but the

quality of all of it is, he affirms not guaranteed.¹¹ The breadth of texts is further echoed in the online circus bibliography hosted by Simply Circus, and Philippe Goudard's *European Circus Arts Bibliography* published by Hors les Murs in 2009. Searches through all of them confirm that texts on aerial are still relatively limited. Gossard provides one of the most comprehensive histories of the form in his *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, the Evolution of Flying Trapeze*, which has subsequently been cited in many later works on aerial including Tait's *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*. Tait's text has since been described as 'being sure to become a classic in the discipline of performance studies' (Goodall 2009) as it is perhaps the first close reading of aerial within the academy. Bree Hadley writes that, of particular importance is that the book combines 'historical content with the sort of critical analysis sometimes absent in biographically focused books on circus' (3). These two books will therefore feature prominently throughout this thesis.

Helen Stoddart's *Rings of Desire* offers a chapter dedicated to representations of the female aerialist (166-192), and increasing numbers of discipline specific manuals and teaching guides are widely available in book, website and DVD forms that are looked at in Chapter 1. There are only a few biographical works on aerialists with Dean Jensen's on Lillian Leitzel, Janet M. Davis's on Tiny Klein and Martin Cosdon's on the Hanlon Brothers all relatively new releases. Despite the scarcity of works on live/d aerialists, the fictional aerialist continues to be well represented in novels and is often associated with falling, injury or even disablement that will be addressed in Chapter 3. Finally, as demonstrated above, circus and aerial have been attractive to researchers in science and social science sectors, some of which will be of particular interest here. Yoram Carmeli's extensive work on British circuses from the 1970s is viewed from anthropological perspectives and his work on risk, danger and small statured clowns will be of particular pertinence later in the thesis. Paul Bouissac's *Circus and Culture* (1976) analyses the different circus disciplines from a semiotic approach, addressing the 'codes' inherent within the aesthetics and structures of conventional performance practices. This aids my discussion on the aerial canon in the first chapter.

Whilst academic sources on aerial might be relatively scarce, the opposite is true on disability, with Disability Studies now a recognised discipline in the academy. Admittedly, not all universities in the UK house specific schools on the discipline, but Leeds University's Disability Studies Centre demonstrates its significance in the UK as it has been in existence since 1994. The website explains how

¹¹ In the Author's Foreword Toole-Stott comments on one book that it 'is important because it contains a valuable – if highly unreliable – chapter on Andrew Ducrow', and he makes similar comments in his other collections.

Much of [their] early work was concerned with British policy issues, with the role of disabled people's organisations in policy and service development, and with developing greater theoretical and methodological understanding of the social model of disability.

The prominence of social and political research explains how most of the academics associated with the school are continuing research in Sociology, Social Policy, Education and Law with the arts absent as an area of specific research. This might therefore explain why a web-search of the site for 'aerial' produced no documentation, and only two documents emerged for 'circus': *Small Bodies, Large Presence*, a Master's thesis by Lesley Ellis that offers a recent (2012) consideration of small stunted clowns, and Tom Shakespeare's *Joking A Part* that questions the same topic from personal and academic perspectives. The Society for Disability Studies in the US is also a 'scholarly organization dedicated to promoting disability studies' internationally 'to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change'. Similarly, no documentation was linked to either topics (aerial and circus) on their site.

Understandably, however there is a wealth of literature concerning disability politics and culture particularly from sociological perspectives. Inevitably, there are many more writers that could have been accessed in this research and my choices to use these and not others were owing to suitability of specific subject matter, awareness and availability. Shakespeare's *Disability Rights and Wrongs* offered ways of understanding and addressing the different models of disability; Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* offered insight into addressing my own non-disabled perspective of a disability practice that will be addressed later on; Conroy's thesis *Performing Disability: Theatre and the Politics of Identity* presented parallels between disabled people and the theatre that I found useful when looking at the circus, and P. David Howe's *The Cultural Politics of the Paralympic Movement* provided great insight into the Paralympics from the viewpoint of an ex-Paralympian, thus enabling me to situate the POC in the broader international Movement. Other writers also feature in particular chapters owing to their areas of expertise, such as Martin F. Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation* in my analysis of the short film, *Hang-ups!* and Thomson's *Staring: How we Look* and Goffman's *Stigma* providing useful guidance to understanding the politics of observing disability.

Looking outside the academy, websites such as Disability Arts Online have also been useful in offering information and discussion on contemporary artists particularly in the UK, including circus projects that have been reviewed and critiqued from disability perspectives.

Primary Source Material

As the previous sections have demonstrated, significant texts are minimal in regard to this particular research, and those that do exist, focus on aerial and disability practices from the past. Although relevant, these do not represent the primary aim of this study which is to analyse the challenges faced by twenty-first century 'disabled aerialists' and in turn the questions the art form potentially faces by their inclusion. My personal experience in working with and observing disabled artists in different settings (primarily through teaching and choreographing), is therefore used as primary source material.

In support of this, I have been a professional aerial practitioner for twenty years, undertaking my formal training in aerial with Zippo's Academy of Circus Arts in 1994 having completed a BA in Drama & Theatre Studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury, and continuing my professional training at *Le Centre National des Arts du Cirque* in France. My career involved touring with traditional big top and contemporary circuses, working with theatre and dance companies as well as corporate agencies. I also founded Expressive Feet Productions in 1999, through which I instigated the research performance *One Blind Eye*.

Throughout my aerial career I have worked with disabled people in educational, community and institutional settings – initially offering short-term sessions in general circus skills or clown/acrobatic performances for special occasions through my first joint company, the Kent Circus School. In the mid-2000s I began regular work with Cirque Nova in London as their main aerial trainer, continuing to do so until it closed in 2011. This was primarily a community project that set out to 'promote personal and social development and enhance the lives of young disadvantaged and disabled people through the culture and spirit of circus arts' (Cirque Nova). We ran weekly training sessions in diverse circus skills and despite the project's untimely closure, it provided several disabled artists (and me) with the necessary skills to be involved in the *POC* of London 2012.

Prior to the *POC*, I had also been involved with Graeae Theatre Company, providing training for some of their artists in experimental taster sessions to see what was indeed possible for each of them in the air. Together, these projects provided me with significant experience that led to my extensive involvement in the *POC*, first as one of the four core trainers on the intensive training programme, and then as a member of the creative team that enabled me to choreograph the aerial numbers in the event (see Chapter 5). In the aftermath of the *POC*, I have continued working with Graeae, recently choreographing the aerial in *The Limbless Knight*, and *Belonging* that was made in conjunction with Circo Crescer e Viver in Brazil. Additionally, I was invited to choreograph an aerial piece for the *Spirit in Motion* Paralympic Legacy events in 2014. I continue to work with Gravity and Levity on the Paralympic Aerial Legacy Intensive programmes, and have recently been awarded a grant from Arts

Council England to conduct archival and studio-based research for a new work, *Disabled Circus Artists: Then and Now*, that will present findings in the spring of 2015.

There are of course challenges in using personal experience – no matter how extensive – as it is not immediately verifiable, so by way of balance, the voices of other aerialists, disabled and non-disabled are also introduced through interviews, email correspondences and forum discussions in the different chapters. I am also particularly interested in the views of audience members who engage with the different disability aerial projects, so where possible these are drawn from published reviews in newspapers and online (for example on Disability Arts Online) and in the case study on *Hang-ups!*, a Survey Monkey was conducted to elicit opinions from its audience members.

Rationale for the case studies

Diverse examples of ‘disabled aerialists’ are included throughout these pages, but focus has been given to two case studies: *Hang-ups!* and the *POC*. By limiting the case studies in this way, it enables a close reading of the works that can then potentially project out to other works, past and future. They have been chosen because I had direct involvement with each of them, providing privileged information that other researchers will not have had. As they each took place in the same year (2012) and in the same country (England), they also present the opportunity for synchronic dialogue – temporally and geographically. The broader political, cultural and economic environments were the same, whilst each project (and my involvement in them) was markedly different. *Hang-ups!* was a small, private project involving three artists (Partridge, me and film maker Anton French), spanning only three days studio-work with the resultant piece being a tightly edited short film. Fundamentally, the aerialist involved engaged minimally in conventional aerial action and therefore presented an unconventional, even unique approach to the form. By comparison, the *POC* was a global event with significant international funding, a complicated creative hierarchy and was ultimately substantially dissimilar in its aims, objectives and responsibilities to *Hang-ups!* Importantly, it involved more than forty ‘disabled aerialists’, some of whom had more conventional aerial physiques and so the challenges differed significantly to those analysed in *Hang-ups!* Thus, together, they aim to present a broad scope of participation by ‘disabled aerialists’ at this time, whilst also presenting diverse and sometimes contradictory challenges.

Originality and contribution to knowledge

My research that is steeped in practice gives me a unique perspective in writing on aerial, as to date the majority of writers appear to have had little or no direct aerial experience. I can therefore write from inside the form, viewing historical and contemporary materials from an experiential aerial perspective. For example, I can ‘read’ images of aerial

from a particularly practical viewpoint, noting when things appear physically simple, challenging or indeed impossible. This experience is especially pertinent in Chapter 1 when I inspect manuals on gymnastic and aerial disciplines that lead to my defining the 'aerial canon'.

I have demonstrated that there is to date no significant literature on the 'disabled aerialist' in the fields of either circus or disability studies, with much of the work currently being undertaken from medical or therapeutic perspectives. I welcome such research as it appears to be providing a sense of legitimacy to the work that has been taking place for more than three decades. However, such practice tends not to be concentrated on the quality of arts practice, as the social outcomes are of primary importance. This research, therefore begins to bridge that gap, as it questions how disabled people have been, are, and can be involved as *artists* in the circus and in particular in the aerial arts.

My research into and findings of historical 'disabled aerialists' also provides unique insight into a forgotten past where disabled artists were celebrated within the wider circus culture and not only as performers in the freak shows. Finally, I hope to counter concern that disabled people *should* be involved in circus at all (Adelson; Shakespeare; Ellis). In "The Freaks Enter the Big Top", Robert Sugarman explains how the tented space was a privileged site for 'disciplined bodies of professional athletes', that the sideshow housed 'human oddities' (72), but how in recent times the non-disabled have taken over the freak shows. Disabled performers have arguably been pushed out of each circus arena, forgotten as artists in previous centuries, and owing to 'objections to the display' (74) of disabled people *as* freaks, this option was also removed from them. I suggest therefore that it is perhaps apposite that 'disabled aerialists' are returning to the air to stake their claim once again on the circus in whichever way they choose.

Ethical efficacy as a non-disabled researcher

Here we come to a point I am sure many readers are asking themselves: is Lennard J. Davis a person with disabilities? And what is his disability? [...] The question demands an answer. [...] Can someone without disabilities ever understand what it is to be disabled? (L. Davis xvi)

Davis writes this in *Enforcing Normalcy* but refuses to answer it immediately. Nevertheless, he obviously feels compelled to do so eventually, calling himself a CODA, a hearing 'child of Deaf adults' (xvii). Many, if not all, the writers on disability cited in this research explain their association with impairment or disability at some stage in their works. For example, Shakespeare explains in *Joking A Part* that he has 'restricted growth' (1), and in *Disability Rights and Wrongs* he writes, 'I have the genetic condition achondroplasia, the commonest form of [...] dwarfism' (4). Koppers describes herself as 'a disabled performance

artist' (*Disability* 122), Oliver and Barnes explain they 'both have impairments, though [their] personal journeys to self-identification as disabled people are obviously different' (2), and Thomson admits in the opening of *Extraordinary Bodies* that the book is in fact 'the consequence of a coming-out process' (ix) into acknowledging and accepting herself as a disabled woman.

Emma Stone and Mark Priestley offer some explanation for this as they compare the non-disabled researcher to non-affiliated researchers of communities of 'Black and 'Third World' peoples' (699). They suggest that

Disability research has attracted much methodological criticism from disabled people who argue that it has taken place within an oppressive theoretical paradigm and within an oppressive set of social relations. (ibid)

They explain that disability has been particularly conceptualized in 'terms of tragedy, the impaired body and Otherness', thus locating 'the 'problem' within the body' instead of 'within the structures of society' (ibid) that the social model of disability demands. They believe that it is important for non-disabled researchers to acknowledge an 'inherent power relationship between researcher and researched' that is potentially 'accentuated by the unequal power relationship which exists between disabled people and non-disabled people in the wider world' (701). A similar ethical dilemma is proposed by Diana Taylor writing about ethnographic practices.

The target group that is the object of analysis (the natives) does not usually see or analyse the group that benefits or consumes the [researcher's] accounts (the audience). And it rarely, if ever, gets to respond to the written observations that, in some cases, it might never even see. The live audience [...] is not the intended audience. (76)

There is therefore an imbalance of power that is both real and perceived between non-disabled researchers and the researched disabled people, through the potential objectification of the latter through the process, but also because the latter do not necessarily have access to the findings undertaken by the former. In addition, disability activists have strived for 'disabled people's leadership in anything having to do with disability' and the slogan "Nothing about us without us" has become a familiar 'rallying cry' (Sandahl & Auslander 7). 'The role of the non-disabled researcher' within Disability Studies, has consequently caused some concern (Barnes & Mercer 6). Some writers believe 'their lack of personal experience of disabling barriers [might mean] that their contribution lacks authenticity' whilst others believe

that 'disabled and non-disabled researchers live in a disablist society and can both contribute to disability theory and research' (ibid).

I disagree that for 'authenticity' first-hand experience is *required*, because the majority of works on circus and aerial, for example, have demonstrated great insight into the form without such first-hand knowledge, and distance can provide a sense of objectivity that those inside the form might not have. However, I do propose that experiential knowledge also offers something unique to the research, as witnessing through the whole body (as I do in aerial), through extensive periods of time, will offer additional knowledge to enhance the research. Whilst disabled people will necessarily write on disability issues from different perspectives to non-disabled researchers, the significant difference for disabled people is of course that they have historically been oppressed by the non-disabled (see Oliver & Barnes, Shakespeare et al); aerialists have not suffered the same injustice by non-aerialists.

As a non-disabled researcher focusing on disabled performers, I therefore feel a particular ethical approach is required. This thesis concerns 'disabled aerialists' and necessarily makes comparisons between them and the conventional aerialists discussed earlier, but this is not to re-Other them, but to see what parallels exist, what challenges emerge and indeed what opportunities present through their renewed engagement with the form. As aerial is made with and through the body, each aerialist's physiology (disabled and non-disabled) is necessarily important to discuss. If the aerialist's corporeality presents differences in relation to conventional aerial, then this will necessarily be addressed; impairment/disability narratives, however, are only examined in so far as they relate to the aerial. Accepting that disability is both individually and socially determined (following Shakespeare's interactional model) I also address external as well as individual factors relating to the aerialists, particularly in Chapter 5.

To minimise the development of a relationship hierarchy that Taylor described above, I have maintained contact with several of the people discussed – most importantly Partridge. I have had informal conversations and email correspondences with some, and made an open invitation, for example to members of the *POC*, to read the relevant chapters at appropriate times. In addition, original names are used where public record makes it nonsensical to alter them, but when anonymity is functional, has been requested or deemed appropriate then names have been anonymised.

Chapter Summaries

The first two chapters offer detailed analysis of the conventions of aerial. Dividing the analysis enables easier management of the ideas and quantities of material, but they are necessarily linked. Chapter 1 provides an examination of the Physical Fundamentals of the

movement form, concentrating on particular types of equipment often used by 'disabled aerialists' and across sub-genres of the form, and the canonical actions associated with these aerial props. Diverse gymnastic and aerial manuals are analysed as well as three aerial pieces performed by established international aerialists, to demonstrate Tait's 'living history'. This is a history, she argues, that lingers in the muscle and cultural memories discussed earlier. Furthermore, Johnny Dawes' theory of a 'kinetic museum' is referenced to demonstrate how aerial equipment houses the potential for aerial actions prior to the aerialist enacting them, resulting in many aerialists discovering the same or similar movements. This chapter presents the basis of the form that is presented by aerialists and arguably anticipated by audiences.

In Chapter 2 an examination is made of the Conventional Aesthetics associated with the form and some of the inherent contradictions they present. The aerialist's body unites the two chapters being physically fundamental to aerial, but is also the embodiment of complexity and contradiction. Aerialists are often described as defying gravity, when in fact we play with and perpetually manage its constant pull. While risk is characteristic of what aerialists do, sometimes that risk is hidden or exaggerated and audiences may or may not appreciate what is real and what is perceived risk at any given moment. Aerialists have been considered superhuman, but have also been considered socially risky, challenging ideas of human potential – especially when the aerialist was female. Finally, the chapter looks at the pain-free performance of control presented by aerialists that Sam Keen calls 'beauty' (75), which belies the 'torture' many aerialists actually experience (Bouissac *Circus* 49). Although 'disabled aerialists' will be seen at times to resist elements of the physical fundamentals presented in the first chapter, they may in fact have more in common with conventional aerialists through the form's aesthetics.

The first two chapters offer ways of analysing aerial from an aerial perspective, and in Chapter 3 the form, particularly presented by disabled performers, is analysed from a disability politics perspective. It begins with a critique of *One Blind Eye*, the research project that provoked my investigations into the potential of 'disabled aerialists', exposing some of the complexities that my inexperience in working with disabled artists presented at that time. Goffman's theories on stigma and Thomson's investigations into staring offer ways of understanding some of the potential contradictions in observing disabled artists. An overview of disability performance culture is offered with particular reference to how freak shows continue to resonate within it. This is followed by an examination of how disabled performers have engaged with the circus over time, particularly through the art of clowning. The chapter concludes with different interpretations of the term, 'disabled aerialist', paving the way for examining the two case studies that follow.

Stacy Wolf argues that ‘visibly disabled bodies seldom occupy a drama’s center [sic] stage’ and instead ‘they function to allow non-disabled characters to demonstrate their generosity and non-disabled spectators to experience their normalcy’ (302). The final two chapters therefore reverse this trend by placing the ‘disabled aerialist’, as a professional performer, firmly at the centre of each performance. Chapter 4 examines *Hang-ups!*, focusing in particular on the lack of aerial action open to Partridge, the potential (but hidden) risks she faces, the freakish propensity her suspension holds and the necessary use of additional theatrical tools such as lighting, spoken word and music. It also examines the partnership between disabled and non-disabled performers and questions if equity is possible in such an environment. Ultimately, it studies Partridge’s choice to be suspended high in the air using stillness rather than aerial action, accompanied by her voice. Drawing on audience experiences from an online questionnaire, some of the responses are surprising.

Chapter 5 explores some of the difficulties encountered in the training programme and rehearsal process for the *POC*. The project that included more than forty aerial trainees with differing experience and diverse impairments raised concerns over access, individual agency, equality and discrimination as well as political and aesthetic concerns over exposing impairment. The chapter is framed within the culture and history of the Paralympic Movement based predominantly on Howe’s cultural and historical assessment of the Games, and Myles Garcia’s *Secrets of the Olympic Ceremonies* whilst also applying my own experience and that of the participants. Ultimately, it concludes that the enormity of the project, the limited time frame and the creative strictures incumbent within it, simultaneously enabled and disabled participants at different times and to different degrees.

In the Conclusion some thoughts for the future are offered, returning to members of the *POC* aerial cast to discover how their aerial careers have progressed since 2012 and what the legacy has been for National Centre for Circus Arts that provided the training. Finally, analysis of *Mobile*, by Claire Cunningham, demonstrates how making aerial accessible to a more diverse population can significantly enhance the form – methodologically, aesthetically and artistically – as well as encourage a wider audience to engage with it.

Chapter 1: The Physical Fundamentals of Aerial

Aerial skills have transferred from aerialist to aerialist across time in what Peta Tait calls a 'living history' ("Body" n.pag.). '[A]erialists repeat physical techniques of earlier generations', she writes, developing the 'heightened physical action through practice and repetition' (ibid). Such repetition develops the aerialist's musculature that in turn makes further actions possible. As the majority of aerial bodies have been physically non-disabled, so the form has evolved with this particular body at its core. This chapter examines the 'living history' of aerial and focuses on the UK in the twenty-first century. It demonstrates, through examples, how aerial is conserved through constant transfer of suspended actions, how it evolves through imaginative explorations of a 'kinetic museum' (Dawes) and how it will therefore have significant bearing on *all* aerialists.

Aerial Lineage in the UK

Prior to commencing my PhD research, during the period of 2008-2009, I interviewed several prominent aerialists, working in the UK. I was particularly interested in discovering how they had started their training, who had been significant influences on them and, as creators of contemporary aerial works, what creative methodologies they employed. Their testimonies led me to understand how the lineage of aerial does indeed exist through the 'living history' Tait described and how creative methodologies can in fact lead aerialists to 'invent' the same types of movements. By demonstrating how (at least some) aerialists are interconnected to one another, and sharing some of the ways in which other artists have learned, trained and developed their own aerial practices, I aim to demonstrate how the aerial form has been preserved. I also aim to show how this lineage in particular is influencing work with and by 'disabled aerialists' in the UK today.

Juliette Hardy-Donaldson is the Head of Aerial at the National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA) in London, formerly known as the Circus Space. She is therefore in a prominent position to determine what aerial skills today's NCCA students are taught, by whom and in what way, but she too was particularly influenced by the early phase of the Circus Space's development. She explained to me how her dance career came to a 'fairly sudden stop' through injury. She realised she was 'missing being physical' and so responded to a 'tiny little advert in Time Out magazine for Acrobatics for Beginners' that was run at the Drill Hall in London. It was there that she learned about a space in North Road that was in the early stages of being set up to teach circus skills. That was the original Circus Space.

I got to do acrobatic tumbling; a little bit of flying; a little bit of static and acro-balance and I loved acro-balance. I loved tumbling too but unfortunately I sprained my ankles really badly several times; the last time being crunch time when basically it became apparent that I couldn't land any more. I couldn't tumble because I couldn't land. [...] And the guy who started the Circus Space, Jonathon Graham said, well why don't you try trapeze? [...] The whole point is that you don't land. So I got into my flying and static trapeze. And shortly afterwards Mark Morreau joined me and we started doing doubles trapeze and I haven't really looked back. (Hard-Donaldson)

The Circus Space, in its various forms, has been influential in enabling many of my generation to access aerial and circus skills in a mix of formal and informal training. Mish Weaver, artistic director of Stumble Dance Circus also trained at the original centre and was Hardy-Donaldson's predecessor, as the first Head of Aerial. Other significant aerial figures of the late 1990s include Abigail Yeates, of The Generating Company that produced the Dome Show of 2000 and Victoria Amedume, whose company Upswing is one of the only aerial companies in the UK to hold National Portfolio Organisation status (Upswing.org) with the Arts Council England (ACE). Chantal Daly began her aerial training at the Circus Space and now leads Ireland's prominent Fidget Feet Company, that has recently received a 'Leader grant to have a feasibility study done on converting a barn in County Westmeath into Ireland's first Aerial Dance Creation Centre' (Fidgetfeet.com), and for All or Nothing's Jennifer Paterson based in Edinburgh, her 'first taste of aerial was in 2000 with Fidget Feet, when Chantal got [her] in the air' (Paterson).

Circomedia is the UK's second largest circus school and similarly has a wide influence. Matilda Leyser (whose *Lifeline* is discussed later in this chapter) trained with Yeates and Mike Wright at the Bristol-based school, where she later taught and Weaver joined Circomedia to teach in September 2014, maintaining that interconnection for another aerial generation. Charlotte Mooney, Alex Harvey and Tina Koch all trained at Circomedia, before forming Ockham's Razor, possibly the UK's most established aerial theatre company. Their first piece, *Memento Mori*, won the Jeunes Talents Cirque award in 2004, and 'Every Action...', [which] premiered at La Route du Cirque, Nexon in 2005 to critical acclaim' (Turtle Key Arts 1), is what led to them being considered 'important and influential [...] in the development of UK contemporary circus', according to circus commentator John Ellingsworth ("Ockham's Razor").

Other significant aerial artists and trainers mentioned by several of those interviewed include Claire Midgley, Deb Pope, Morreau (Hardy-Donaldson's initial aerial partner), Pauline Palacy, Rita van Ox and Skinning the Cat. Le Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC) in France provided some of the artists with later professional development training opportunities (Weaver, Yeates and Amedume) and continues to influence the UK, not least through the international artist Fred' Deb', of Drapés Aériens Company. She too trained at CNAC, most

importantly working with André Simard whom, she suggests, began the phenomenon now known as aerial fabric. She has continued to develop her own aerial language on this apparatus and through her teaching in the UK particularly through the European Aerial Dance Festival (EADF) as well as in Europe and the USA, her influence is widespread. A more recent but equally important influence on the UK's aerial communities is Serenity Forchion Smith of the New England Centre for Circus Arts (NECCA). She too began teaching here through the EADF and now runs regular teacher training programmes across the UK (Brighton, Newbury, Cardiff, Ireland in 2014/15) as well as offering private classes to professional artists.

My own story also interconnects with many of these artists, as I undertook short acrobatic courses at the original Circus Space and later taught aerial fabric to degree and recreational students, in the Hoxton base. Fidget Feet's Chantal Daly attended one of those classes, which led to us working together for several years in each other's companies. Prior to this, I had my first formal aerial training with *Skinning the Cat*; my intensive training at Zippo's Academy of Circus Arts was under Wright's tuition, and I too ventured to CNAC to develop my aerial skills that happened to coincide with Weaver's time there. There has therefore been a constant criss-crossing of aerialists, sharing experiences, training and venues as well as engaging in one another's work. This has sustained and maintained the UK's aerial ecology. As many of these aerialists continue to be instrumental in the passing on of aerial skills, the 'living history' of aerial continues, but this influence is also very apparent when looking at prominent training programmes for 'disabled aerialists'.

The unique *POC* training programme, addressed in the second case study, was hosted and managed by the Circus Space with Morreau, Lindsey Butcher (G&L) and me being among the core trainers on the programme. The Paralympic Aerial Legacy Initiative (PALI), which emerged from the former, has been organised by Butcher and held in London¹² in which she, Forchion Smith, Deb' and I all taught and which has been to date, the only dedicated intensive training programme wholly accessible to disabled artists in the UK. Additional training facilities are becoming more accessible, but according to Butcher, the main challenge to those attending PALI 2014, was finding access to regular training, that I address in the Conclusion. What is evident here, however, is that there are direct links between the aerialists involved in each of these events. This demonstrates that a particular aerial lineage is in existence and is influential in what and how aerial knowledge is transferred to 'disabled aerialists' training in the UK.

¹² In 2013 PALI was held at the NCCA; in 2014 it was held at both the NCCA and at Graeae studios, both in London.

Canonical Equipment and Movement Vocabularies

Historians of gymnastics and circus claim that the ancient Romans and Greeks employed precursors to what is now called aerial in their games and rituals (Croft-Cooke & Cotes; Janet Davis; Gossard; Loken & Willoughby; Tait), and more recent histories demonstrate how plentiful and ingenious aerialists have been in finding ways of suspending themselves (Gossard; Adrian; Tait). The Iron Jaw, or the 'Little Aerial', for example, required aerialists to 'hang by their teeth', and according to Tiny Kline who became famous for performing this in the early twentieth century, it was relatively simple to learn (Janet Davis *Circus Queen* 217). 'In four weeks', she wrote, 'there could be a brand-new act in anyone's repertoire since the only rigging it required was a rope and pulley' (ibid). Similarly, 'hair hanging' that 'involves tying up the hair with a metal ring and then dangling from it' predominantly requires 'build[ing] up [the] neck muscles' as 'the real secret is in the hairdo', according to recent exponents of it, Sanja Kosonen and Elice Muhonen (qtd. in Winship). The dominant forms of aerial, however, continue to be the trapeze and rope that date at least from the early nineteenth century, and the harness that became more popular in the late twentieth century.¹³ Whilst plentiful variations of each exist, there are particular traits that retain their connection to the earlier versions. As it is these (and connected disciplines) that proliferate through the work of today's 'disabled aerialists', and that are considered in greater detail in the two case studies, prominence is given to them here.

The Trapeze

The most recognisable aerial prop is arguably still the trapeze, and despite its constant evolutions in dimension, shape and even material, it is still recognisably a trapeze: a horizontal bar suspended between two upright ropes or cables. It can be hung high or low; be used by one person or several at the same time, and it can be used in a static position or in constant motion. Although less common now than in previous centuries it is the flying trapeze that still maintains an iconic status within the annals of circus and aerial histories, not least because it provides the 'most extreme aerial action' demanding 'relentless practice and the benefit of longstanding partnerships and skilled catchers' (Tait "Body" n.pag.).

Gossard provides a comprehensive history of the form whose invention is generally attributed to Jules Léotard in 1859, when he set up several trapeze bars above his father's swimming pool and experimented with swinging from one to the other (46). He depicts the

¹³ Harnesses were used to suspend '[f]airies or acrobatic' performers in the late nineteenth century (Rees & Wilmore 150) and the practice continues through companies such as Flying by Foy, who have been involved in developing new technologies for portraying 'highly-controlled, natural-looking free flight' (Flying by Foy) since the 1950s. Aerialists use a diverse range of harnesses that are discussed in Chapter 5.

exponential development in flying trapeze from its early days as a static fitness prop through to the astonishing feats accomplished by renowned circus stars of the twentieth century like Alfredo Codona and Tito Gaona. The work is dense with detailed information which aims 'to answer the proverbial questions about trapeze: *who, what, where and when?*'. Although such details are not necessary to repeat here, he concludes his book with a celebratory acknowledgement that the 'greatest trapeze act of all time' (170) is possibly that created in the late twentieth century by The Flying Cranes based at the Moscow State Circus. His acknowledgement of their aerial prowess leaves him in no doubt that even after such a lengthy history, there is still potential in the form, declaring that 'under the direction of such consummate performers the art of trapeze will certainly continue to develop and reach new heights of excellence' (171).

Gossard is not alone in his belief that the flying trapeze was a significant transformer of the aerial arts, where it pushed the boundaries of what was perceived as humanly possible. Mark Cosdon's detailed historical investigation into the Hanlon Brothers also demonstrates how one family pushed the form adding more twists, turns and number of somersaults to their routines. They also devised new equipment (including the safety net) that added more complex movement potential for increasing numbers of performers in the act. Gossard argues that the flying trapeze typified the spirit of adventure and experimentation prominent in the Industrial Revolution but his belief that the flying trapeze would hold aerialists' imaginations further into the twenty-first century may have been optimistic.

According to Keen, in his meeting with legendary aerialist Miguel Vasquez (who is famed for successfully and consistently performing the quadruple somersault) and his brother Juan (who catches him), their former belief in the evolutionary life of the flying trapeze has been deflated, to the extent that they no longer perform their most challenging stunt. The latter says that the 'average American audience can't tell the difference between a triple and a quad, so we quit doing it' (qtd. in Keen 93). Furthermore, they confess that their particular Las Vegas audiences are indeed 'pretty jaded and unresponsive' (ibid). However, it is not only the audiences that are less inspired to engage with it; the flying trapeze is now failing to draw the same excitement and competitive adventure from contemporary aerialists as it once had for their predecessors. A recent FEDEC¹⁴ report comments on its drastic demise from European circus schools, as students are more interested in developing their skills in solo aerial arts rather than the troupe forms like the flying trapeze (Jacob). Although companies like Cirque du Soleil, RBBBC and Les Arts Sauts do continue to feature the flying trapeze, its 'reckless era' may have indeed passed, but the trapeze does continue to evolve.

¹⁴ La Fédération Européenne des Écoles de Cirque Professionnelles or the Federation of European Circus Schools of which the Circus Space in London and Circomedia in Bristol are members.

In the present day, trapeze-type props appear with different combinations of rope and metal (or even wood). They morph in shape from squares, to cubes and triangles, to hoops and globes bearing soloists, duets and troupes alike. In America, the ‘dance trapeze’ (which is the same as the 1830s ‘triangle’ discussed earlier), which is generally suspended low to the ground and from a single rigging point, has become increasingly popular with contemporary dancers learning aerial as well as appearing more frequently in the circus aerial repertoire; it featured at the long-established circus competition, Cirque de Demain in Paris 2010, possibly for the first time. A further development was made by Terry Sendgraff who added a second bar to the ‘triangle’ in what she calls her ‘motivity swing’ (Sendgraff)¹⁵ and designed participatory workshops for wheelchair users working in partnership with non-disabled dancers (Sendgraff “RE: Your”), although the former often remained in their wheelchairs whilst the non-disabled aerialists actually worked in the air.¹⁶ More pertinently still however, is that four aerialists performed on the single bar version in the *POC*, the PALI workshops utilise this particular apparatus for disabled participants, and artists such as Penny Clapcott have continued to utilise it in her recent performances.

It seems, therefore, that just as Gossard saw the flying trapeze evolve from the Industrial Revolution’s explosion of invention and experimentation, so the twenty-first century continues this trend of aerial (re)invention, only moving away from troupe swinging acts with their complex and costly rigging requirements (as well as their high levels of corporeal risk), to more individualised forms. It appears, that where the flying trapeze was the most popular form of aerial in its ‘reckless era’, the most prevalent form of aerial in the UK today is that facilitated by rigging from a single point: dance trapezes, hoops, cocoons, ropes, silks and harnesses. This bodes well for the ‘disabled aerialist’ as these are potentially more accessible than the flying trapeze.

The simplest trapeze performances were single trapeze routines in which the aerialist performed tricks by treating the bar as if it were a stationary object without any swing of the cables. [...] These tricks consisted of *classical* posing in various positions on the bar. (Gossard 10)

Many aerialists begin their aerial training on a static trapeze bar because it offers numerous foundational tools upon which all other aerial can be built. Jeff Davis writes in his *Teaching Methodology* booklet commissioned by FEDEC, that it is the ‘basic techniques [that] are the most important part of an individual’s training because it is this that he or she builds

¹⁵ See Sendgraff “Terry Sendgraff” for a photograph of this.

¹⁶ Recent email exchanges with Sendgraff have confirmed her work with wheelchair dancers in collaboration with Axis Dance Company. She discovered a VHS copy of the dance but did not arrive in time for consideration here.

everything else upon' (23). Early training in trapeze (and other aerial disciplines) involves more than learning the 'basic techniques' including dealing with acrophobia (the fear of heights) and understanding where the body is in space when upside down. More often than not, the aerial neophyte becomes disoriented when first inverted, oftentimes losing basic directional familiarity; they lose track of where they are in space. By hanging the trapeze low to the ground, the aerialist can also take advantage of the floor to kick up to the bar if she does not have the power to lift herself in the first instance – as well as using the floor for adding choreographic links as is prominent in much aerial dance. Perhaps more importantly still however, is that it offers a place to sit so the beginner does not require the physiological power of the professional on the first day. In addition it is possible to develop a training sequence of actions that can increase in complexity and physical requirements, thus enabling the body of the aerial trainee to adapt gradually in strength and flexibility ultimately preparing the individual for the more advanced actions.¹⁷ The single or double-point trapeze is therefore one of the safest pieces of equipment to use to confront these challenges and is frequently the foundational tool on which to access the aerial arts.¹⁸

The simplest of aerial actions are static postures and poses. These can take place on top of the bar: sitting, standing, balancing on the hips or the lower back. They occur under the bar: such as hanging by the knees, the hands, the feet, the elbows for example. Such actions also take place with the ropes by wrapping different body parts. There are familiar shapes or movements that apprentice trapeze artists are taught as ends in themselves or as aids to building strength and stamina. They also enable the beginner to extend their pain thresholds through developing appropriate tolerances in muscles and skin alike.

Images depicted in Gossard's book, taken from William Ripley's *Instructions for Professional Acrobats and Gymnasts* printed in 1879, show three images that are still within the basic canon of static trapeze today. His images are unnamed, but I know these as the 'candlestick', the 'birdie' and a 'wrapped hocks hang'.¹⁹ An image of the 'birdie' appears in

¹⁷ My East 15 teaching partner, Andrea Meneses, and I devise different conditioning sequences for our students at different stages in their training. In addition, I visited NECCA in September 2014 and participated in some private trapeze classes. Their teaching methodology included an extensive version of this approach with three 'series' of movements that incorporated strength, stamina, flexibility and balance in increasing difficulty.

¹⁸ I do not profess that all aerialists do or indeed should begin on the trapeze, but that it is often used as the starting apparatus. Where the static trapeze is itself impossible for some to access, the double-point harness can also offer some of the same learning tools in terms of spatial awareness, but strength and power in the limbs in particular is less developed requiring much more core stability and control than any other form of power. More frequently I use the fabric cocoon as a starting point incorporating aerial-yoga practices to develop strength, stamina and spatial awareness whilst staying close to the ground.

¹⁹ There is no international consistency of aerial names, so I will use those that I generally use or that I know to be used quite widely. If I need to assign a name, I will use something descriptive of the action.

Stoll's guide of 1915 (Fig. 5 13), on the gymnastic rings in Loken & Willoughby's *Complete Book of Gymnastics* (131), in Davis's 'basic moves' (30) and in Yvette Chalande's first guide to trapeze (15). The 'candlestick' appears in Chalande with the moniker 'perroquet' (141). The 'wrapped hocks hang' is clearly demonstrated by Madame Sanyeah dating from the early 1870s (Tait *Circus* 19), and it appears again in Chalande with clear instructions and variations of the very same position, the 'Enroulé-pieds' (Vol. 1 76). Similarly in Charles Spencer's 1866 combined history and instruction manual, *The Modern Gymnast*, familiar poses and moving actions prevail in today's aerial vocabulary, which he pictures on the gymnastic high bar. Poses such as the 'crucifix' (46), the traditional 'hocks hang' (47), and the 'single hocks hang' (50), as well as more advanced front mount and balance (42), 'toe-hang' (53), and the back and front horizontals or 'planges' are clearly demonstrated (57).

There are of course numerous ways of utilising the bar and the ropes together to form more complicated and physically taxing shapes that Chalande's books certainly demonstrate; the more strength or flexibility that a posture requires, the more advanced it is perceived to be. Chalande even provides a guided star rating to the movements in some of her books that roughly translate as beginner (1 star), intermediate (2 stars) or advanced (3 stars). An aerialist might draw from each level in a performance, which will become clear when analysing specific aerial performances, with the more complex actions traditionally concluding the piece, at least in conventional circus aerial acts. Looking at one particular action can explain how an aerial position can demonstrate different technical proficiency if presented in different ways.

An aerialist, who can perform strong and flexible 'splits', can suspend underneath the bar with one leg extended in front, the other behind. This gives a good demonstration of flexibility, but holding the bar in order to present this pose is far simpler than holding the same shape on the ropes. The bar is more stable than the ropes therefore less balance is required and to enter the pose on the ropes usually requires greater upper body strength. The 'splits' can also be held by pushing the ropes apart with the legs and then releasing one hand (or both), again demonstrating precision, flexibility, balance and strength. Of course if the aerialist can remove both hands this is more skilful still. Furthermore, it is possible to hold the splits in the vertical plane by pushing the extended legs into one of the upright ropes, but this requires additional strength and balance as the legs are working against gravity rather than allowing gravity to aid in the formation of the posture. The shape of the body in each of these examples is more or less the same, with the legs held far apart in the 'splits'. The manner in which it is demonstrated also suggests the particular aerialist's capacity for strength, balance and stamina, thus potentially pushing them outside the realms of the basic and into the intermediate or advanced level of static trapeze.

In addition to the static positions, there are also ways of manoeuvring the body around the trapeze. The aerialist can work horizontally around the ropes for example in a 'carousel' (one hand on the bar, the other on the rope lifting the body up to rotate around the rope and return to the bar); or 'monkey-roll' (similar to the carousel but starting from standing position, with one leg wrapped around the rope). She can move vertically over the bar in 'barrel rolls' (forward rolls around the bar starting in front balance) or use the leg-swing or 'swizzer' (Spencer 35) (one leg either side of the bar where the motion propels the person around it in a forward or backward motion) (35). These actions are generally more advanced than some of the postures. They require at least enough power for the aerialist to hold and sustain her body in the air for the duration of the movement – if her arms are not strong enough for example, the movement will not be completed, and the aerialist may well find herself back on the ground. These moving actions are often used to link the static poses together, in what I call 'glue actions', providing the facility to create a fluid sequence or routine that is more familiar today than perhaps in the nineteenth century, though some more advanced actions like the 'muscle grinds' (where the aerialist propels her legs over her head while holding onto the bar by the hands or elbows) are still used to demonstrate aerial prowess.

Advanced actions called 'drops' provide more visually dramatic actions than the static or rotating actions and can be more dangerous for the aerialist. A relatively simple drop would be from sitting to the 'half-angle' position. The aerialist sits on the bar with one hand holding it, the other holding the opposite rope. She releases the grip on the rope, allowing her body to lean backwards, sending her legs to the side of the released rope, eventually catching it with her flexed foot on that side; the other leg continues past the rope to point down to the ground, thus forming the 'half-angle' position. For an unsuspecting audience member, it may appear that the aerialist is falling backwards from the bar, and if the position of the body or feet is incorrect this may well be the final result. The nineteenth century gymnastic guides do not offer such actions within their pages, but Challande includes several advanced options in the section "Chutes et Rattrapes" (Vol. 1 125-135), demonstrating again how the form has evolved since the previous centuries, yet maintains much of its early incarnations.

Finally, the most advanced movements on the static trapeze are the releases; these require the aerialist to leave the trapeze at some point. Usually working momentum from a swinging action the aerialist is able to release the bar at one point and return fractions of a second later. This swinging action differs from the swinging or flying trapeze, however, because it is the aerialist's body that moves rather than the trapeze bar itself, creating the same momentary weightlessness that creates the opportunity to twist or turn before catching again. A relatively simple example of this would be the forward swing twisting to a 'hocks'

catch. Hanging from her hands, the aerialist swings her body backwards and forwards to develop enough height and momentum to send her legs up towards the ropes; once high enough she twists her body one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, releases her hands and catches by her knees. She could also do the same action and catch by her flexed feet against the ropes. This is sometimes called 'skinners' as it often removes the skin from the top of the feet, if unprotected. Power to generate the swing, keen awareness of her body in space, as well as perfect timing are required to master this early stage release manoeuvre. Error in any of these stages could result in the aerialist falling head first to the floor.

The static trapeze, even as a foundational aerial apparatus, still enables an aerialist to explore and deliver some highly technical, extraordinary, dangerous and exciting manoeuvres. If judging an aerial piece purely on technical ability, then an advanced example of a static trapeze performance would often incorporate elements of all four groups of actions: poses, rotations, drops and releases. Brutally stripping away the individual performance specifics of the piece in order to see the trapeze canon at play, the solo trapeze act presented by Australian circus company Acrobat in *Propaganda* (2010), gives an example of the mix of actions that may appear within a sequence. As I watched the piece, I noted down the actions the aerialist, Jo-Ann Lancaster, included within her short sequence. The following is taken from my rapidly written notes during the live performance, and the names given are ones that I know or describe the action, rather than those potentially employed by the aerialist.

Neck hang – back balance to hocks to heels; meat hook is spun by man – comes to sitting – waits – carousel – splits; star up to angel – one hock – sitting – back roll up to knee balance and lean out – sitting – twist drop to skinners; back balance – rolls to crucifix – and waits. Front balance to barrel rolls – beat to toe hang – back roll up to sitting – back roll to skinners – drop to heel hang!!! And is lowered to the ground staying in heels! (T. Carter *Journal*)

Analysing this routine from a purely canonical viewpoint, it is clear that there are representative aerial actions from each of the sections described above and of varying degrees of technical complexity. The balances (neck hang, 'meat hook', knee balance etc.) present advanced examples of the poses and postures; there are rotating 'glue actions' including the 'carousel' and the twisting drop to 'skinners'. There are drops, one to skinners and one to heel hang – the first is of moderate difficulty but the latter is certainly a very advanced movement, with the 'back balance to hocks to heels' once again being an example of extraordinary skill. Finally, there is the 'beat to toe hang', which can be considered a form of release by the manner in which she performed it. This could have been a placed manoeuvre, carefully planting the feet over the bar and slowly releasing the hands, but Lancaster chose to do it in motion, thus developing it into a release.

Acrobat, considered 'one of the treasures of regional Australia' (Croggon n.pag.) and described by Le Progrès as, '[i]nnovative, daring, funny, virtuoso, inventive, original, [and] surprising' (Gintzburger n.pag.) are an internationally recognised contemporary circus company exploring narrative, character and politics through their world-class acrobatic and circus skills. Prior to this trapeze act, the male performer (Simon Yates) had recited a poem on propaganda (which was also the name of the show) that ended with him crying out 'DO SOME FUCKING TRICKS!' Regardless of the ingenuity of their production, their athletic physiques, their technical proficiency and their choice of actions perfectly demonstrated aerial's 'living history'. As an experienced aerial observer, I was able to enjoy their individual performances and associate it directly with others I had seen and my own embodied knowledge. This experiential awareness will be returned to in the following chapter, as well as the first case study, where aerialists and disabled people offer their opinions on the aerial that Partridge and I presented; some were disappointed by the lack of aerial action but others enjoyed its minimalism.

The *Corde Lisse* and Aerial Fabric

The trapeze is often used as an introductory apparatus but the vertical rope and especially the aerial fabric have become particularly popular since the late twentieth century. The trapeze will be shown to be relatively accessible, but the verticals present more challenges. The *corde lisse*, or rope, used to be the humble access or descent line for aerialists to or from their equipment rigged high in the big tops or theatres. Robert Lewis Taylor suggested that '[m]ost circus artists just climb the rope as a kind of commuter nuisance; they're compelled to travel by hemp to get to the office' (217). For example, increasing in popularity in the late nineteenth century was the Leap for Life, performed by the likes of Thomas Hanlon. He would swing from a trapeze bar by his knees, arch backwards, release his legs and fly across varying stretches of space (most usually performed in a theatre and sometimes above the audience's heads) before grasping the awaiting rope and descending undramatically, to the floor (Cosdon 7).

In the big touring circus shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dozens of women would often be seen swirling on web-ropes in synchronised aerial ballets, spun by web-sitters holding onto their lines, but they used hand or foot loops close to the top of the cord to assist them. Clyde Vander, famed for his cross-dressing trapeze act as Barbette, was the choreographer of such aerial ballets in the three ring circus of RBBBC between 1944 and 1948 that were celebrated in films like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Tait asserts that these 'plentiful, but anonymous, aerial ballets receive only a passing mention in commentaries' (*Circus* 55) even though 'most large circus programmes' did in fact incorporate

them (56). She believes this was because such acts were often considered the 'easier mode of [aerial] performance' and often proved the starting point in a female aerialist's career (ibid). Nevertheless, there were some aerialists who used the rope to demonstrate their phenomenal strength and stamina in solo slots even at the height of the flying trapeze's aerial dominance.

In March of 1875 Blanche [Foucarte] would receive a great deal of notoriety for challenging ten amateur and professional male gymnasts to a rope climbing competition at the Albion Theatre in London. Even after completing her regular routine Blanche was able to win the competition easily. (*The Era*, qtd. in Gossard 23)

Such competitions were certainly familiar in the mid-twentieth century being a part of the Olympic Games until 1932 and they continued at school and college level beyond the Games, as Loken and Willoughby demonstrate in *The Complete Book of Gymnastics*. Even today there are international competitions for rope climbing (see John Gill), but such displays might appear strange in a present-day aerial performance.

More familiar to today's audiences would be the rope work of Leitzel, mentioned previously, who is described by Kline as astonishing those who witnessed her antics on the rope in the late 1920s. She wrote, '[h]aving ascended to the vicinity of the crane-bar, she went through a short routine of poses on the web – using no loop for hand or foot'; she continues, that '[e]ven the performers were astounded at her ability to hang on freehanded' (Janet Davis *Circus Queen* 208). At a time when the flying trapeze was still enjoying its hey-day, the rope acts were generally considered 'cover-up acts' (Carmeli *Performing* 201) that took place between the larger circus turns or while ring-staff cleared the performing arenas for the following act. Perhaps taking the lead from Leitzel, who demonstrated in the early twentieth century that the rope could be used for much more than 'travel by hemp', aerialists in the twenty-first century are demonstrating their preference to work vertically.

In my interview with Bryan Donaldson, co-founder of the UK's prominent High Performance Rigging team, he told me that, 'generally speaking, the majority of my work is still rigging silks for the events industry'. The popularity of rope and to a greater extent the aerial fabric (also known as silks or *tissu*) has exploded since its purported invention in the early 1990s. Simard, former aerial tutor at Le Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC) and later aerial coach and choreographer at Cirque du Soleil, is hailed as 'the man to whom the new circus arts owe the "aerial silks" discipline' ("André Simard"). As a global circus entity, Cirque du Soleil has had a great influence on many suspension artists and the introduction of aerial fabric into their performances sparked increased interest in the form. In the early 2000s the BBC also ran a regular short film known as an 'ident' in between television programmes that

featured three aerialists performing on silks (BBC1). Although perhaps incomparable to the marketing force of Soleil, this could also be considered partly responsible for its increased awareness and popularity in the UK. By way of example, many of my own aerial students over the past decade have commented on this 'ident' as being something that inspired them to take part in my classes. This contrasts with those attending my trapeze sessions, where many admitted to never having seen a trapeze act before or were inspired to take part by a vague childhood memory of what it might be. The internationally attended Aerial Dance Festival run annually by Frequent Flyers in Boston, USA, my own The Space Between aerial festival in 2002, and EADF partnership events mentioned earlier, have all had a particularly vertical bias with none offering the flying trapeze for example, as a course option. In the last five years, pole dance studios have increasingly offered entry-level aerial fabric courses that have also increased participation. Furthermore, the wealth of video clips on YouTube, the increasing number of instruction manuals on the discipline appearing in both book and digital formats, aided by the increased ease of purchasing the equipment and access to spaces to suspend it, can all be seen to have contributed to its rise in popularity.

Simpler in design than the trapeze, the rope and silks are nevertheless more demanding in their most basic of aerial actions as they immediately require an aerialist to carry her own body weight. The trapeze presents the aerialist with the opportunity to rest by simply sitting upon it but such an opportunity has to be created by the aerialist working on these vertical props through wrapping her body in particular ways to form a secure hold. Excluding any additional technical device such as a winch or pulley system to raise the aerialist into the air, she must at some point climb. Swedish aerialist Leo Hedman is collating a list of different climbs, which currently includes over fifty, with perhaps the most recognisable ascent being what he calls the 'French climb'. As with most aerial actions, climbs often have numerous names: I call this the 'standard' climb, for Challande this is the 'Montée Classique' (*Corde*), while for Rebekah Leach, Michele Lafortune and Davis it is the 'basic' climb. In his *Teaching Manual* and accompanied by a series of five photographs, Davis instructs the student how to employ this preliminary ascent.

- The base foot should be kept square and not syckled (sic)
- Push the base leg slightly forwards as you climb
- Use the ball of the upper foot to push the rope against the base foot
- Depress the shoulders and open the chest as you climb to use core strength (36)

The language used by Davis and others is not dissimilar to that which I employ when training new aerialists, and the images presented by Davis, as well as those by Challande, Leach and

Lafortune echo those shared by Spencer in his instruction guide of 1866 (121). Nineteenth century aerialists are also clearly depicted in the static climb position on their promotional bills. Tait offers Miss Leona Dare advertising her performances at the Folies Bergère in 1877 standing with one leg wrapped on the rope whilst waving two flags (47). One of The Beautiful Florences can be seen suspended on what appears to be green fabric in the same stance (tantalisingly suggestive that it predates Simard's claimed invention), simultaneously supporting her aerial partner from a 'teeth-spinning' prop, dated 1890 (Hail 66). Gossard also presents 'a young Spanish web performer' Maggie Claire again in the standard climb position dated from the same period (24). A part of today's beginner training programmes, this particular method of ascending a vertical line has no named inventor or pioneer and yet it has persisted as a means of climbing from *at least* the middle of the nineteenth century, with rope climbing itself dating back to the ancient world (McIntosh).



2. Airhedz Performer, Guy Hawkins, Ascending in Russian Climb. Author's Collection.

A more advanced climb, again familiar to present day aerialists and often depicted in historical gymnastic manuals, is that of the 'pike' climb where the legs are suspended out at a ninety-degree angle from the body, thus requiring the aerialist only to use her arms to move up the rope. Stoll, writing in the late nineteenth century, whose book is entitled *How to become a Gymnast and Rope Climber*, curiously only offers minimal advice in training in the latter. 'The secret of rope climbing' he avows, 'is quick work on the recovery' (56). The only

further explanation offered is that 'a steady long reach is necessary. One hand is passed over the other, without using the legs' (ibid).

Stoll and Spencer only offer the standard climb and the hand-over-hand pike ascents in their manuals, suggesting that this was perhaps the limit of knowledge at that time. Hedman's list of climbs is preceded by the manuals so far mentioned with instructions from Jeff Davis on the 'Russian Climb', 'Toe Climb', 'Hocks Climb' and a version of the 'Straddle/Pike Climb' (36); Challande on the 'Montée à l'Envers' (upside down or 'monkey' climb), the 'Montée Pieds Ecartés' (the bicycle climb), two versions of the 'Montée Balancée' (straddle release climb), and concludes with the 'Montée sur les Bras' (climbing on top of the arms) (*Corde* 7-16). Perhaps one of the most astonishing ascents of the early twentieth century, and making a significant return in recent years, through performers like Hedman, was that featured by the aforementioned Leitzel. According to Kline,

[Leitzel] took hold of the web, turned upside down and into a plange, and held the pose for a few seconds so the audience could appreciate the picture; then relaxing, she again placed the free hand high above the other, holding the rope, and turned upside down, repeating this until she reached the top – about sixty feet in the air. (Janet Davis *Circus Queen* 208)

Kline commented that 'even the performers were astounded at her ability' not only to climb in such a powerful manner but also 'to hang on [the rope] freehanded' (ibid) (i.e. without the use of the hand or foot loop described earlier in the aerial ballets). Kline implies that if the performers, rather than the audience members, were impressed with this then it was certainly worthy of praise, as they were viewing it from a knowledgeable and perhaps experiential perspective that was not necessarily shared by an audience. According to Leitzel's husband, Codona, aforementioned star of the flying trapeze,

[This act] requires muscle – a great deal of it. Of course it requires endurance, and a certain sense of fatalism [...] But more than this, it requires a knowledge of breathing as expert as that of any opera star. (qtd. in Tait "Circus Performers" 41).

Despite gymnastic historians like Spencer acknowledging that 'climbing the rope is a very useful exercise, which should be practised by everyone' (120), his and Stoll's minimalist treatment of it suggests that the explorations of the form happened after their time. Even the ancient art of Rope Mallakhamb, which is 'a unique embodiment of [...] wrestling, yoga and British colonial gymnastics' (Burt 29) originating at least the twelfth century, appears to offer only one 'unique' climb. Jon Burt describes it as a 'toe grip' which 'is used for climbing and

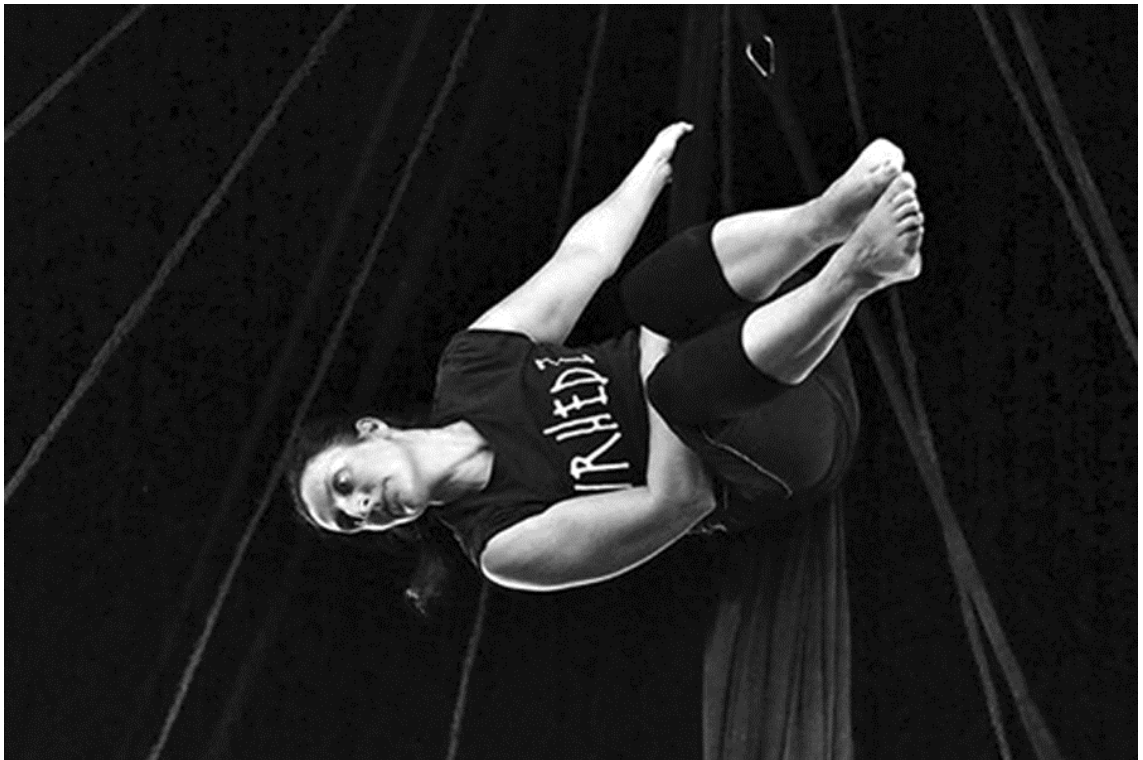
holding the rope [...] because the sole of the foot is forbidden to touch the rope at any time' (31). This is now prevalent within the aerial climbing canon, even if its religious connotations have been abandoned. The extraordinary diversity of ascents can therefore be dated from the mid-twentieth century, with the greatest developments perhaps happening in the last few decades.

Moving from one of the simplest climbs of the nineteenth century to one of the most complex vertical ascents still employed today, a shared history of aerial actions can be seen traversing the centuries, moving from aerialist to aerialist and witnessed by a broad spectrum of audiences across those years and across international borders. Climbing a rope, in whatever manner then is a canonical activity in and of itself and the manner in which an aerialist climbs accesses something from the recognisable international climbing language.

As with the static trapeze, the vertical rope and fabric also have a multitude of static poses and shapes that involve varying degrees of complex manipulation of the equipment in relation to the body; these enable the aerialist to remain in the air. Some of the simplest poses occur by way of foot-locks that enable the aerialist to bind a foot in the rope or silk, forming a tight platform on which to rest and to create series of actions: 'star', 'mermaid', 'candlestick', 'washing line', 'back balance' and 'catchers' for example can all occur with one foot wrapped in the 'figure-of-eight-foot-lock'. When working with the fabric split into its two distinct strands (which is what most crucially differentiates it from the rope), there is the potential to form even more actions such as 'splits', 'teardrop', 'figurehead', 'cocoon' etc. using the same foot-lock. As the descriptions of the 'splits' variations demonstrated, the strength and flexibility of the individual aerialist will offer different variations of these shapes. There are of course different forms of foot-lock, including the foot-hangs that as the name suggests wrap the aerialist's feet so she can then suspend underneath the lock making inverted postures and poses. However, it is not only the feet that can be 'locked', with one of the most versatile wraps being the 'hip-lock', 'key-of-stomach' or what Lafortune calls the 'hip key' (*Rope* 10). In his guide for rope and silks he writes,

- In the start position, pull up with the arms, with the rope along the right side of the body. Using the left leg, move the lower part of the rope under the right leg.
- In order to slide the rope toward the upper part of the left thigh, bring the left leg into a split and higher than horizontal. The rope will go under the right thigh and over the left groin.
- Make a quarter turn to the right to put the hips on the upper part of the rope and get into tuck position.
- One can cross the left leg over the right leg in order to help maintain the position. (ibid)

There are in fact several different ways to reach this position, but having done so it offers a useful resting place, it can lead to a wide range of additional wraps to form an increasing number of complex poses, and can also provide the basis for some of the more challenging tumbles and drops. It is therefore a familiar transitory position for many rope and silks artists, forming part of the artist's basic skills vocabulary.



3: Author in 'Hip Lock' on Silks. Author's Collection.

Despite Leitzel's extraordinarily technical proficiency in a single climb, and because of Stoll and Spencer's limited analysis on climbing, it appears that the vertical developments are perhaps more recent. Certainly it has proved difficult to discover any significant historical details of inverted aerial action but Gossard offers a snippet of an aerialist who 'suspended by one leg only on a single rope' (Rendel qtd. Gossard 10), which was perhaps the same as that performed by Millie Turnour, whose 'descent from the trapeze was considered remarkable' because it was done 'head downwards, holding the rope by one leg only' (13). This might have been the same action as that performed by Ruth Budd, which involved 'that breath-catching swoop at full speed, darting head first down the thread-like cable' (Kibler 167). This manoeuvre is probably what I know as the 'upside-down-descent', or what Challande calls a 'Descente Sirène Glissée' (*Corde* 142), where one leg is bent over the rope and the tail is held behind the back and released gradually (or quickly) in the hand. A variation, which would perhaps look as if the aerialist is only holding with her leg, is what Challande calls the

‘Descente Marchée’ (143), where the tail of the rope is controlled under the arm pit, rather than with the hand. For today’s aerialists this particular manoeuvre would be considered rather simple, opening the canon to the next category of actions, the descents.

Descents can be slides either upright or head downwards and can be performed at speed or with controlled deliberation. The more dramatic descents however involve ‘drops’. Exploration in such manoeuvres continues to expand with ever more varied wraps around the body propelling an aerialist forwards, backwards, to the side as well as down. Certainly in the past ten years I have become increasingly aware of dramatic tumbles that I had never seen before, that are and will undoubtedly remain outside my own personal repertoire. Although most new instruction manuals offer readers systematic guides to the simpler aerial actions, several have started to venture into explaining the more complex, with the advent of video sharing sites making this progressively available. An example of a familiar drop, tumble or descent is what I call the ‘Big Mama’, taught to me by Cathy Gauche when attending her aerial class in Boulder, Colorado in 2000. She acknowledged learning it from a trainer at the ENC, Montréal but whose name she had forgotten. Here are the notes I made at the time.

I had only been working on fabric (as opposed to rope) for a few years, and this was one of the most impressive drops I’d seen, and I was terrified when I first did it! You need to begin quite high, six metres is good. Invert with the fabric on the right hand side, and bend the right leg over the fabric; take the tail over the left leg into ‘catchers’. Holding the upright fabric drop the legs to the right, allowing the tail to move on top of the right leg and return the leg to the original position. The fabric should now be over the waist. Carry the tail around the back, over the left leg, across the stomach and then hold the tail. Keeping the body tight, and the tail in front of you, release the right leg and allow gravity to do its work! So long as you maintain tension in the body, and keep hold of the tail, you eventually stop, suspended a few metres below your original position. Wow! I remember the rush I had when I first did it. I had to go and do it again to make sure it really did work. (T. Carter *Journal*)

The ‘Big Mama’, ‘Big Drop’ (Jeff Davis 42), ‘Grand Chute’ (Challande *Corde* 13) or ‘Frog Wrap with Half-Twist’ (Lafortune *Rope* 15), was arguably *the* fabric trick of the early 2000s, with double and triple versions possible with enough height. I certainly performed it in most of my corporate routines as well as in some of the more theatrical pieces of that time as it was new, fresh, dynamic and exciting though relatively safe. Unsuspecting audiences often received it with a vocal ‘wow’, and fellow practitioners who had not seen it before were all keen to learn it for themselves. It quickly pervaded the fabric canon and by 2004 it had become a signature fabric action at least in the UK, having featured on the aforementioned BBC Ident for a few years, performed by Viva Aerial Dance.

As Lancaster's trapeze solo demonstrated the complex mix of canonical aerial actions, so it is possible to analyse Matilda Leyser's vertical piece, *Lifeline*, in the same vein. Leyser was one of the UK's most renowned contemporary rope artists of the mid-2000s and her triptych, *Line-Point-Plane* was inspirational to many aerialists seeking to work in more theatrical ways. Leyser described *Lifeline* (later reduced to *Line*) as being 'a devastatingly simple idea [...] which can't really get much more basic than life as journey' (Interview). The simplicity of the idea, she confessed, 'is what I then later encountered were some of the problems of the piece', but she refuted critics like Judith Mackrell who dismissed the work as being 'only a few tricks' ("Line" 34 my emphasis). Clearly bewildered by the criticism she commented,

Even though there's that thing of you don't need to pay attention to reviews I think that review stuck with me, and I found it difficult because it wasn't unfamiliar in terms of sometimes how people received what I was doing. It was like that kind of thing of, this is such hard work physically, emotionally, psychically and I've kind of gone out of my way to try and present these things in a way that people don't see a trick and they still do. (ibid)

Accepting that everyone appreciates work from a personal perspective such reductionist critique has provoked circus artists to appeal for critics to understand the circus genre they are witnessing rather than observe (and often condemn) it for example from dance perspectives.²⁰ Acknowledging the artistry and performance skills intertwined with *Lifeline*, and not wishing to give credence to Mackrell's comments, I do aim to demonstrate that the form is necessitated by the very actions she dismissed. By stripping bare the aesthetics and meaning from *Lifeline*, it is possible to expose the canonical actions within it.

I witnessed this particular piece over several years in its varying incarnations between 2002 and 2006, but the following analysis comes from re-viewing the work on a DVD filmed by Mark Morreau. I listed the aerial actions Leyser performed and compared them to several training manuals, and to what I regularly teach at Airhedz in Kent. A table of the actions, matched to these sources appears in Appendix 1. There is no guarantee that the books' authors (all of which appeared after *Lifeline*) or I have not been influenced by this piece, but the exercise demonstrates a persistent connection to today's vertical aerial actions, temporally either way. I found that only a few actions do not correspond to another compilation of movements: the 'pole climb' is in Loken & Willoughby's under the guidance notes '11. Climb upward, using the stirrup method' (284) and the 'square position' is a standing variation of the 'foetal wrap' with which she opens the piece. Not only are the shapes, postures and tricks familiar within today's known aerial language, the piece is itself made up of the recognisable

²⁰ See Tiago Bartolomeu Costa for a discussion on educating critics to understand circus.

subsets of the vertical canon: the climbs, drops, poses and descents. Similar to the trapeze piece presented by Lancaster, Leyser proffers a contemporary twist on how her movements were presented which I refer to in Chapter 2, but so too does it demonstrate an undeniable connection to the aerial canon.²¹

Finally, there are types of apparatus that blend the horizontal of the trapeze with the vertical of the rope and silks thus sharing aspects of both vocabularies as well as offering new opportunities for movement discoveries. The fabric cocoon, the industrial stop and the aerial net all share such lineage. The cocoon (or hammock) has certainly become more popular in the last few years with aerial yoga²² becoming more widespread in circus, pole dance and more conventional fitness centres. It has also been my prop of choice for working with students with mobility limitations, students who struggle to bear their own weight from their arms, and for people who have conditions that are exacerbated by pain – the trapeze bar and ropes can exacerbate the pain. This equipment offers great versatility as both a starting apparatus and a creative tool for elite performers; like the trapeze it can be worked well from the ground or suspended up high, and it can be opened out like a hammock, or kept closed like the industrial stop.

Cocoons, Hammocks and Industrial Slings

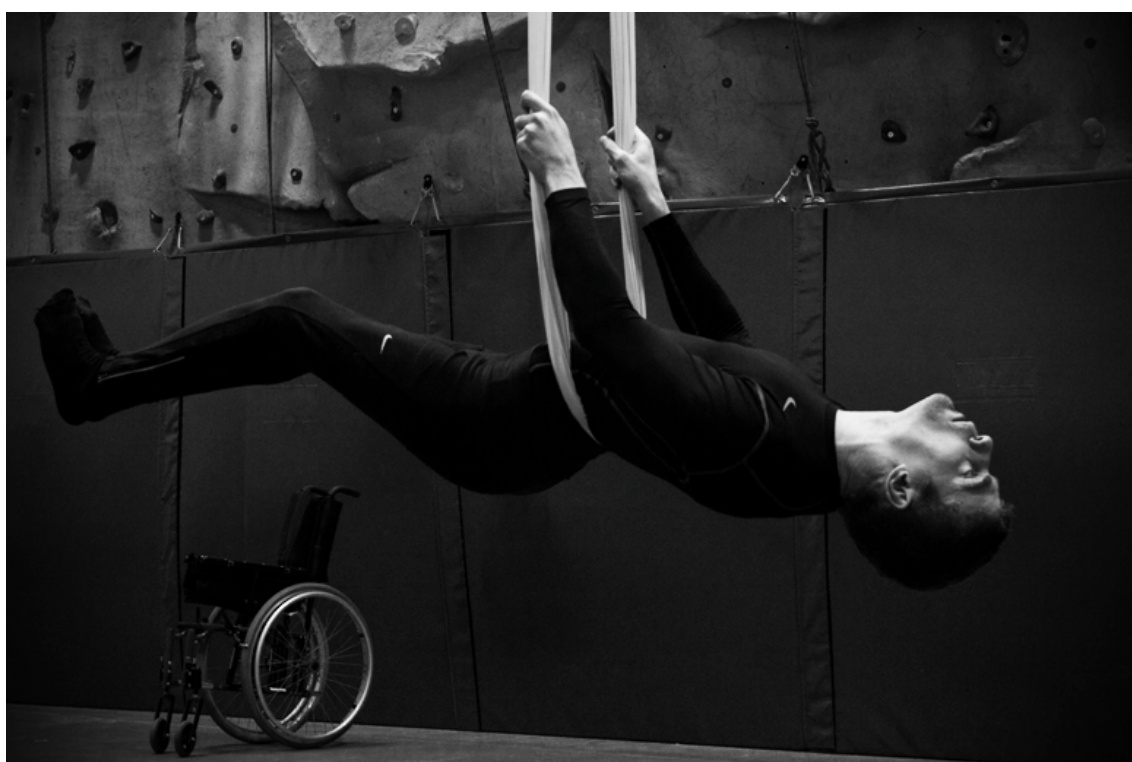
The fabric cocoon or hammock is a relatively new piece of aerial equipment that is usually constructed of the same material as the silks but is suspended with both ends linked together. Acts utilising industrial stops, (continuous loops of industrial strength fabric and made in various lengths) were favoured by several aerialists including me in the late 1990s working with one in isolation or two connected to the same point. It also has a close affinity to the cloudswing, a rope suspended at both ends but three or four metres apart, which itself draws much of its early vocabulary from the slack-rope. The aerial net is a later modification of the cocoon, familiar in its ability to remain closed or open, whilst the net's mesh provides its difference for holds, texture and visibility; as the cocoons are usually finely woven fabric, the body can only be seen through it in silhouette, whereas the net enables the body to be seen more clearly.

The aerial net may have made its first appearance in Cirque du Soleil's production, *Varekai*, originally performed by Anton Tchelnokov in 2003 (Cirque "Varekai") and this piece of equipment also appeared in the *POC*. Undertaking a similar task to that mentioned for Leyser,

²¹ Releases are also becoming more familiar in vertical aerial choreography. As I have yet to see this performed live, I am omitting them from this canonical section for now. However, they are appearing on internet sites where aerialists are sharing their latest discoveries. See Jukka Juntti for more details.

²² Aerial yoga is the fusion of the two forms that usually uses cocoons or similar devices to aid and extend yoga stretches and poses.

I compiled a list of cocoon actions that I often teach on recreational courses, and compared them to other aerial apparatuses. The list was not exhaustive, but once again demonstrated the interconnectivity of canonical actions to aerialists (this time the aerialist being me) and the wider canon of interdisciplinary aerial actions. Appendix 1 includes the detailed comparisons with the cocoon used in both 'open' and 'closed' formations. All the 'closed' actions have an association with other aerial apparatus, and often with several: the strops, the verticals and even the trapeze. The actions performed on the open fabric, however, are more bespoke owing to this facility providing the most significant difference to the others; there are however still significant correlations.



4. POC performer, Dan Edge, training on the Cocoon at Airhedz. Author's Collection.

Dissecting Tchelnokov's recorded performance in the official rendition of *Varekai*²³ the piece demonstrates a clear association with this canon. In addition it also includes aspects of ground-based acts such as hand-balancing. Such phenomenon does appear in the air, but most usually on a variation of the swinging trapeze known as Trapeze Washington, accredited to Keyes Washington in the late 1800s (Tait *Circus* 15). Once again a full table of actions appears in Appendix 1. The majority of actions performed by Tchelnokov are associated with the cocoon, which is itself interconnected to ancient forms of apparatus. Like Leyser, it is

²³ A version of this act is available on Youtube. See Chelnovok (his name is spelled variously with and without the T).

difficult to know how influential he and this particular act have been in developing the form, but it is likely that he has had a much greater impact than Leyser owing to the popularity and international standing of Cirque du Soleil. Once again however, its situation in time is not as important here as its reflection of the aerial canon, forwards or backwards. He furthers his association with the greater movement canon by rearranging the rigging, releasing one end to form a vertical prop where he can hold perfect splits with his toes pressed into the net's holes exposing the full diamond shape of the extended net. Furthermore, he delivers a variation of the familiar 'big mama' drop explored earlier, and finally rotates his body in a series of 'one arm planges' for which Leitzel herself became so famed (see Tait, Gossard, R. Taylor).²⁴

This short aerial sequence is performed by a highly trained aerialist in a performance by one of the world's most recognised twenty-first century circuses. It demonstrates the versatility of this particular aerialist, but also shows how aerial actions are interconnected not only to the apparatus on which the individual is working, but to aerial actions on all types of equipment. Accepting that the nuances of the flying trapeze might have waned in popularity in the twenty-first century, becoming less influential on today's disabled and non-disabled aerialists, the prominence and accessibility of these single-point devices are bound to have an impact on how the 'disabled aerialist' is understood.

Exploring the 'Kinetic Museum'

I have demonstrated how aerial actions continuously transfer between different types of equipment and aerialists across time and countries, forming what I have called the aerial movement canon. The actions may be constantly evolving, but they directly connect to the equipment explored and to previous movements undertaken on them, but how do they evolve, and how does this knowledge aid in appreciating the work of 'disabled aerialists'?

Aerialists and rock climbers have become regular creative partners sharing equipment, expertise and even performance sites.²⁵ Climbing analyst, Johnny Dawes, offers a useful way of considering where and how rock climbing movements come into existence, and in *Best Forgotten Art*, he offers an explanation that resonates well with all aerial actions. He describes how potential movements exist in our environment and rather than inventing them we discover what is already latent within them.

We cannot walk down today's streets and experience life as it was. Though city life has changed, rock has remained largely unchanged. Movement embodied in a rock, has similarly remained unchanged. To repeat the climbs of the early pioneers is to

²⁴ Footage of Leitzel performing is available on Youtube. See "Leitzel, Lillian...".

²⁵ See Bandaloop (a.k.a. Project Bandaloop) for international examples of such work. In the UK exponents of the form include Kate Lawrence, Gravity & Levity, Scarabeus and Wired Aerial Theatre.

experience what attracted them to the cracks in the first place through an archive of past exploits, to experience a kinetic museum. To enjoy these climbs is to share a choreographed feeling for gritstone with the early pioneers. (Dawes)

This is perhaps a romanticised view, climbing in the exact footsteps of ‘the early pioneers’, as people of different heights, strengths and climbing abilities will find nuanced ways of climbing that may or may not exactly echo those that went before. There is however a generosity of spirit here that continues with an interview of legendary climber, Joe Brown, ‘whose gritty exploits earned him the title of “The Baron”’ (ibid). He comments,

A lot of people have credited me with almost inventing the hand-jam which is absolute baloney, as any climber knows. No one actually invented the hand-jam, it just sort of evolved, but Pete Harding was the first person who actually wrote and explained what a hand-jam was. (ibid)

The hand-jam is not a device but ‘the art of using a clenched fist, or a bunch of fingers, in a crack, and flexing muscles to jam the hand against the sides and form a secure hold’ (Wells n.pag.). In addition, ‘the hand-jam, which seems so intuitively obvious to climbers today, was a concept of such simple sophistication that it took the type of analytical mind that Harding possessed to perfect it’ (ibid). The equipment discussed above, (the trapeze, rope and fabric cocoon), are all relatively simple designs of equipment, unlike rock faces, but they too carry complexities that not all aerialists will be able to achieve. Yet if the climbers discovered that there were logical (or particularly illogical) ways of clambering up different surfaces, it is not difficult to imagine that the same will become evident when working with aerial equipment. The equipment itself, I suggest, houses its own ‘kinetic museum’ and the aerialists (re)discover the actions through their individual bodies and imaginations.

According to Hardy-Donaldson, ‘there are a few core tricks associated with each apparatus’ which she believes are housed within the very equipment itself. ‘The actual tricks themselves are usually dictated by the apparatus,’ she continues, ‘and up to a point the apparatus has its own limits’. Thus, the individual aerialist has the opportunity to ‘explore those limits and to establish where the limits really are – at least for them in relation to the apparatus’ (ibid). This is reiterated by Leyser, who believes aerial equipment is paradoxical in its potential, for ‘within the limit of a rope,’ she believes, ‘of course you can do infinite things with it’ (Interview). Most of the artists I interviewed agreed that improvisation, private research or task-based explorations opened up movement vocabulary present within the equipment, but that much of this experimentation was framed within the training and knowledge of aerial. Certainly my own experience as an aerial tutor supports the idea of a

‘kinetic museum’. I am no longer surprised when a student invites me to witness one of their ‘aerial inventions’, only to (sensitively) inform them that although new to them, the movement or trick has in fact been ‘invented’ before – often many times. Not meaning to undermine their innovation, this merely suggests that there is an element of logical investigation and encounter to some of the actions and that the equipment guides us towards some ways of being with and on it.

On Friday 9th December, 2011, when training with my Airhedz in Whitstable, I discovered a slow, but ‘new’ way of ascending that I shared with my students. I call this the ‘sitting climb’. You can approach this ascent in several ways, either by way of the standard climb, tipping upside down to allow the rope on the wrapped leg to fall further towards the groin, or alternatively you can enter the position through straddling upside down (keeping the rope behind you), wrapping one leg from the back to the front, again placing it high into the groin. Either way, by placing the unwrapped leg on top or close to the wrapped leg as you turn upright again, you come to a simple sitting position. To ascend, you simply reach the arms high, release the wrap on the leg and repeat (varying sides if you wish), returning to the place of sitting for a useful rest at the end of each wrap.

Although this was a ‘new’ climb for me and for my students, I cannot claim its invention as it is hard to imagine that no one else previously attempted to invert the standard climb. This example demonstrates how new actions can emerge from historically established ones, that even after twenty years of professional performance and experimentation it is still possible to discover things for the first time, simply by setting oneself questions or tasks – what happens if I take something that I know, invert it, or attempt to enter it in a different way?

As several of those interviewed trained in dance before entering the aerial arts, like Paterson, they draw on ‘dance choreographic principles’ to generate and discover actions and sequences. For example she might set herself ‘a task’ that could result in utilising ‘movement habits’ but through improvisation enables new ‘series of movements’ or ‘movement phrases’ to emerge (Interview). She might ask, ‘what happens if I go like that, or here or up or if I just take the rope over there? So there’s constant play and exploration’, she says (ibid). Unlike Leyser, however, she believes that there are fewer ‘possibilities movement vocabulary wise than you have on the floor, just because of the gravity and having to hang on’, stressing that there are therefore ‘going to be similarities’ (ibid) between aerialists. Nevertheless, she and many others admit that it is much harder to discover things than to be taught them, or to copy from someone else. Paterson spoke to me about a ‘corporate silks act’ that she and fellow aerialist Lucy Deacon were devising and admitted to being reluctant to immediately sharing their findings.

We spent a long time researching it, whereas it could take someone ten or fifteen minutes to pick it up. [Similarly], Fred Deb's been teaching us a little bit that we're going to add into *Madam Silk* [a Fidget Feet production 2010] and she's said, "well I'm going to teach you this but please don't share it with anyone else". (ibid)

The question of how movements come into existence and how they are transferred has started to cause ethical concern amongst aerialists. Those who seek not only to express themselves through their art form but also aim to earn a living from it need to find ways of demonstrating and preserving their uniqueness. At a time when aerial has (in the main) become more accessible, no longer confined to traditional circus families or even the circus schools, this is becoming increasingly challenging. In March 2010, I presented a paper, *The Ethics of Appropriation in Aerial Choreography*, at the University of Surrey, in which I incorporated a short sequence of aerial movement. The movement phrase was part of *Return Journey*, a piece I created in 2006. It was a personal, emotional piece that had been created as an abstract, aerial discussion with my Palestinian family. Deconstructing it however I was able to demonstrate, that no matter how individual it was, it was founded on all those aspects I have been discussing so far. The conventional physical fundamentals of aerial were present in everything I did.

I begin sitting in the fabric. A pose I found by accidentally falling out of another position, and then reworking it until it became stable. I play with the second fabric strand; twisting it and caressing it, adjusting my fingers just as my aunt had done during my stay. Releasing myself I extend the fabric to form a shroud; then lock my hands in a gesture of oppression, pleading or binding. Freed, I ascend the silks in the Russian climb. I forget who taught me this originally, but its name at least suggests its origin – rightly or wrongly. I was taught the basic ascent then modified the pace, rhythm, style, adding in rest positions; but in essence I ascend in someone else's relived action.

I split the silks and suspend for a moment, allowing my body to deliberately break the rules of aerial technique, sinking my shoulders down, straining my arms and the grip on my hands much more than is necessary; but the pedestrian aesthetics of the piece demand this. Is this mine? I have certainly seen other people hang from objects, with and without technical efficiency; but within a silks routine? Perhaps not exactly the same; but still this is by no means unique. This we could call absorption.

My legs rise and trap the fabric between them; I slide momentarily before the grip holds tight and I'm in a position known [...] as the hip-lock. Once again I allow the tension in my body to relax as much as possible without risking my untimely fall; again aesthetics demand that my body is more prosaic: gone are the pointed toes, extended arms and beaming corporate smile. This has to be harder than normal; the story dictates it; so my body has to relearn the functions of entering into these familiar places. Perhaps the movements are not mine, but the manner in which I approach them is? The aesthetic or narrative choices I have made were certainly not commonplace within the aerial community at that time.

After pulling myself through the split silks I arrive at the point of elevated superiority. This was my discovery, to sit here without gripping on. I had not seen anyone locate themselves in this precise position before, but who is to say they hadn't? I can easily look down on you all from here, and I have the opportunity to release the hand-grip allowing my legs and the fabric to keep me in situ. This is the place my director and I wanted the early gestures of grief to be most evident. I lean back against the fabric, looking up, then quite violently take hold of the front strand and nod my head, then my body, backwards and forwards in anguish. These are not my gestures of grief; these came from Doris Humphrey's *The Art of Making Dances* who in turn borrowed them from observed behaviour. What seemed new to us was the utilisation of emotional semiotic gesture in the air.

The final section of the movement that incorporates the tumbling sequence was also found movement. Through experimentation and play, logically and emotionally driven, I discovered the falls that were new physical sensations to my own body, and new visual sensations for those that saw them – at least in the early encounters. Finally, through careful timing and accurate manipulation of the fabric I find I can return quite easily to another sitting position thus ending this sequence from *Return Journey*. (Carter "Ethics" 7-9)



5. POC performer, Amelia Cavallo, using the 'Tina Wheel' in performance. Author's Collection.

The tumbling sequence that started with the elevated sitting position, now called the 'Tina Wheel', which I described as a phrase I had discovered, now appears in other aerialists' works. Removed from its original context it falls into the abstract territory of most aerial actions and as I demonstrated how much of *Return Journey* itself included shared actions, logically I should feel no offence in its utilisation by others. The human ego is, however, more

sensitive than that. Viewing others embody these actions, stripped of their original meaning and emotional impetus, was at first difficult, even though I had formally taught it to many of them (such as Cavallo shown above). Similarly, Leyser also shared her conflicting emotions over the 'starting image in *Lifeline*, where [she's] in a little foetal ball and then [rolls] down the rope' (Leyser Interview). She disclosed,

From my point of view, I made that up on my own and so I didn't copy anyone else, and then I've seen people copying me. Although it's that thing of how do you know whether somebody's copied you or whether they've been on the same journey that you did where they invented it for themselves. (ibid)

Paterson, Deb, Leyser and I are not isolated in our concern for the extensive repetition of actions. Aerial Facebook groups started discussing the potential to copyright aerial actions (Williams), which in turn are reminiscent of the warnings to copy-cats posted by the Hanlon Brothers in the nineteenth century. According to Cosdon, they were particularly 'litigious [...] placing notices in *The Era* and the *New York Clipper* warning other acts against stealing their routines' (42).



6. Andrea Meneses in the start of the 'Foetal Roll' position. Author's Collection.

Even Kline, who learned her aerial actions with the assistance of Leitzel and others, had concerns when training a new act.

Occasionally I'd put on practice clothes between shows, hang my rings under a ladder, and go through a routine, carefully omitting whatever tricks I had of genuine value, with all the performers constantly working out new acts and always on the lookout for something original. Well, there is little honor (sic) when it comes to material. Almost anybody is a potential suspect in the eyes of one who has conceived an idea, only to find it has been copied. It is impossible to protect new tricks. (Davis *Queen* 281)

All of us involved in the aerial arts have to accept that the equipment and the evolving aerial vocabularies are not ours to own but to share and to contribute to others. Jukka Juntti, who shares many of his (occasionally extreme) aerial experiments online, believes that aerialists have a *duty* to share their new tricks, and to continue generating more, otherwise the 'discipline [will] stop developing'. He trusts that if he teaches 'all his knowledge' to someone then ultimately it will be 'boredom' that will drive them to discover new things for themselves (ibid).

Thus, the utilisation of familiar equipment that stems at least from the nineteenth century, has developed an evolving movement canon that exists essentially through a combination of aerial imagination and the 'kinetic museum' housed within the props. The canonical actions are transferred from aerialist to aerialist maintaining the essence of a 'living history'. Aerial is therefore recognisable through all these elements. Many of those discussed in this chapter continue to teach, perform or choreograph aerial, but Leyser has now moved away from it, 'working instead as a writer, mother and an Associate Director with Improbable' (Improbable). Nonetheless, her main concern about aerial work was not the challenges over vocabulary, but of how audiences engaged with the work being produced. Despite her belief that everyone has the potential to 'make it their own and reinvent [it for] themselves', she thinks that the challenge comes in whether 'it's you, and not what you're doing or the trick that you do that people are watching' (Interview). Ultimately her concern lay in whether aerialists were being observed as 'subjective people or spectacular objects' (ibid).

This chapter focused specifically on the *physical* fundamentals of aerial, but perhaps the most crucial physical aspect not discussed here is that of the aerialist's body. Helen Stoddart describes the aerialist as 'inspiring the noblest [...] of human achievement' because 'the body of the aerialist is weighed down by no regulation and is governed only by its singular self-discipline and strength' (*Rings* 7). I have already demonstrated how the equipment and movement canon interlink all aerialists, so these could be argued to be types of 'regulation', and the 'disabled aerialists' will also show how self-discipline and strength (in terms of aerial)

can also be unpicked in some instances (most notably in *Hang-ups!*). As Tait also argues, Stoddard continues

The fantasies of liberation immanent in these performances are overset with further significance when they are gendered female since the acts clearly involve both a display of the female form and a spectacular announcement of physical power and self-reliance which has, literally and metaphorically, flown in the face of social convention. (*Rings* 7)

As female aerialists flew in the face of social convention of previous centuries, reinventing the 'norms' of aerial bodies by dominating aspects of the art form in more recent times, so the 'disabled aerialist' is arguably further challenging those corporeal conventions. I had originally intended to include the conventional aerial physique here as the third 'physical fundamental'. I have however, demonstrated how not all aerialists *did* have such a physique then, and many more aerialists today are demonstrating that it is not in fact essential. The aerialist's body is therefore discussed in the following chapter as one of the sustaining *aesthetics* of aerial instead.

Chapter 2: The Conventional Aerial Aesthetics

Muscularity and athleticism, the mythical defiance of gravity, the performance of risk and the portrayal of pain-free control are some of the aesthetic qualities that have continued to be associated with aerial at least since its 'reckless era'. Different sub-genres of the form, and of course individual performers and performances might stress or negate different aspects, but each quality has the tendency to linger. This chapter therefore examines these aesthetics by returning to the three professional performers from the previous chapter, Lancaster, Leyser and Tchelnokov as well as drawing from my own performance practice and other contemporaries in the field. Analysis of the aesthetics combined with the previous chapter's consideration of the physical fundamentals of aerial provide tools for understanding how diverse 'disabled aerialists' interact with the dominating conventions of the form. They provide ways of analysing the work from an *aerial* perspective and the following chapter will offer a specifically *disability* perspective.

Muscular Athleticism

Crucially, then, aerial acts are created by trained, muscular bodies. These deliver a unique aesthetic that blends athleticism and artistic expression. [...] An aerialist is like an athlete who trains with exercises for upper-body strength, and often for competition. (Tait *Circus 2*)

The previous chapter demonstrated how physical attributes of equipment and movement are integral to the art of aerial, but so too is the body; the aerial body has also adhered to particular conventions, most notably by being non-disabled. However, the very presence of 'disabled aerialists' disproves the convention of the non-disabled body being absolutely necessary. In addition, Tait's description above does not specify such a body, and training for upper-body strength and competition could equally refer to Paralympic athletes. The aerial body is therefore considered here in terms of aesthetics, rather than physical fundamentals.

You're not naturally the build one associates with the acrobatic side of circus because you're tall; you're fit but you're tall. Tall people don't tend to do those [things] do they? (BBCR4)

Jean-Marie Akkerman, Artistic Director of former integrated circus company Cirque Nova, is over six foot tall. This is not particularly unusual for a Caucasian male in the 21st Century (see Carvel), nor is it, in my experience, that unusual for a male aerialist. Libby Purves, Radio 4's long established radio presenter for the *Today* programme and *Midweek*, made this

comment as an introductory question for Akkerman on his work with disabled people and circus. Her understanding of what an aerialist *should* look like perhaps rests within the cultural (or personal) memories discussed in the Introduction. Purves might be recalling the petite, female, web-rope artists of the aforementioned aerial ballets, or international solo star, Lillian Leitzel. Established as one of the world's most famous aerialists, Leitzel's short stature was often mentioned in articles, biographical histories and promotional literature. Robert Lewis Taylor describes her as a 'tiny woman, standing four feet, nine inches high and weighing ninety-five pounds' (215); in her RBBBC posters she was 'billed as 'dainty'' (Tait *Circus* 86), and according to Liz Sonneborn, Leitzel always expected to be 'escorted on stage by a large man to emphasize her own tiny 4'9" frame' (127).

According to Arnold Jackson writing in the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* in 1937 the flyers (those that performed the release tricks to the catchers on flying trapeze) were historically viewed as requiring particular physiques. In his view, they should all be small with the males being between '5 feet 6 inches to 6 feet, and females should be between 5 feet 2 inches and 5 feet 6 inches' (qtd. Tait *Circus* 94). Jackson, Taylor and Purves supported by assertions of Leitzel suggest therefore that the bodies of aerialists, if merely in terms of height, influence perceptions of who embodies aerial potential and who does not.

In *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* Helen Thomas provides a valuable overview of the sociological debates of scholars who have investigated the body, distinguishing between the 'social constructionists' who believe the body is formed through and by society and the 'naturalists' who believe the body to be 'a pre-social, biological entity' upon which society is built (12). Constructionists proffer that 'analysing the body as a biological or natural phenomenon cannot generate adequate explanations' (ibid) alone and therefore such analysis requires social considerations. Meanwhile, the naturalists determine that 'observable differences' between peoples 'are biologically determined and not socially constructed' (ibid). Biological and social constructions have already been addressed in the Introduction in relation to the body, impairment and disability, and these are important here if considering the aerial body in terms of aesthetics *and* physical fundamentals. The relationship between aerialist and her aerial body is necessarily one that straddles the natural and constructionist divide. The aerialist requires particular corporeal prerequisites to begin training her body in aerial action (biology), but it is by undertaking those very actions that the aerial physique is developed (construction). Furthermore, it is the 'extreme repetition' of aerial actions that enables the development of 'fine aerial artistry' (Tait *Circus* 93), therefore the biology of the body aids in determining that aerial is possible and that it can be sustained and performed well (physical fundamentals). The body is then transformed by the aerial actions to become the recognisable aerial body (aesthetics). However, if the choice of actions to be performed is changed, so the

impacting results on the body will also be affected. Nevertheless, if the main apparatus or tool of the aerialist is first and foremost her body, that body needs to be able to function in particular ways for the aerial to be present. So what does the conventional aerial body look like, how does it function and how is it read?

As I have already demonstrated, there have been and continue to be prominent aerialists whose names are known and whose performances are clearly identified with them: Leitzel, Codona, Barbette for example. The specific individuals who performed the aerial ballets, however, have largely disappeared into the annals of time leaving but trace elements of what they looked like and what they did. Information on *who* they actually were has also been forgotten.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is perhaps because they *could* merge into a sense of uniformity that enabled them to appear in those ballets in the first instance, as their physicalities enabled a particular aerial aesthetic to be presented.

The aerial ballets of the magnitude witnessed at RBBBC in the early twentieth century are no longer regularly seen in traditional circuses, but remnants of them continue in today's spectacle shows and corporate events. Aerialists often present their bodies anonymously, and silently, with group performances often homogenising the appearance of performers. Jane Osborne spoke of her first aerial performance at Zippo's Circus in the mid-1990s in which four female aerialists performed synchronised actions, in similar costumes on aerial fabric (Laine & Osborne). This conformity continued in her partnership with Michele Laine when they formed Viva Aerial Dance in 1999. Their physicalities and technical abilities enhanced by matching costumes even enabled them to present *as twins*²⁷ and continues through many of the company's performances regardless of who the performers are.²⁸

The aesthetic of conformity is also evident in the global performances of the aforementioned Cirque du Soleil. Tait writes that 'Cirque did not reinvent circus, as is often claimed, [but they] did reinvent its capacity to deliver a beautiful visual aesthetic with muscular action' (*Circus* 126). She continues that their particular aesthetic is presented 'through the androgynous body identity of acrobats and aerialists' whose 'artistically imaginative worlds are inhabited by bodies that stretch across human, animal, reptilian and even alien shapes' (*ibid*). Some of the artists are recognisable through their individual acts²⁹, but the chorus of acrobats and aerialists blend together, indistinguishable from one another as

²⁶Some programmes for example of RBBBC do include lists of all the aerialists who performed, but not all of them did. It is not clear, however, which name belongs to which aerialist in the performance.

²⁷Laine and Osborne auditioned for Cirque du Soleil as twin aerial performers. They were shortlisted but ultimately not selected.

²⁸See Viva Aerial Dance for pictorial examples of the aesthetics of conformity that I have been discussing. The company's photographs clearly depict beautiful women dressed identically in the different performances.

²⁹The individuality of these acts is also questionable, as different performers will re-live acts created by others if they leave the show.

their '[f]antastic identities are created with incandescent lycra bodysuits and sculptured headwear, masks and face make-up' (ibid). Former gymnastics coach for Soleil, Bernard Petiot, told John Fleming that the performers are 'not the star of the show. The show is the star', continuing that '[a]s an individual, you kind of disappear within the group' (Fleming).

Most pertinent here and with particular relevance to the second case study, is how this aesthetic of conformity perpetuated through some of the spectacular events of London 2012. For example, twenty-one women dressed identically and performed synchronised aerial and grounded choreographies as Mary Poppins in Danny Boyle's *Olympic Opening Ceremony* (OOC).³⁰ Female and male aerialists were clad in gender-neutralising costumes as the Dementors in the same performance.³¹ Finally, nineteen women performed uniformly as the Fireflies in the *Paralympic Closing Ceremony* (PCC).



7. PCC Firefly Performers during a night-time rehearsal. Author's Collection.

I performed as one of the ground-based Dementors in the *Olympic Opening Ceremony* (OOC), but also as one of the Fireflies in this last ceremonial performance, and was not alone in struggling to determine which one of us it was that appeared in the few public photographs

³⁰ See Daily Mail Online for a photograph of the flying Mary Poppins.

³¹ See Totally Cool Pix (pic 32) for an image of a 'Dementor'. The tag-line describes a 'man dressed as a goblin', but the same image appears on Abigail Nénuphar's website, as she too was a 'Dementor', suggesting that the actual identity of the performer is unknown.

after the event. We were almost identical on the aerial hoops with our extensive head-pieces and disguising make-up, similar physicalities and choreographed aerial actions. The best way to determine who was who was to inspect the background, determining where the performer was situated in the arena, rather than looking at her less than distinguishing features. The photograph above shows seven of the performers in headdresses without make-up and costume, but a sense of 'conformity' is still present. Our individualism might have affected the rehearsal process and even our success at the auditions, but it was after all our bodies, in partnership with the aerial equipment that created the movements sought by the choreographer; the overarching image was one of conformity. The casting of the *PCC* in this manner and the desire to create such choreography for this particular event, proved controversial amongst the *POC* performers who believed the Paralympic event should have celebrated diversity rather than conformity; a point I return to in the second case study.

As the canonical investigations demonstrated in the previous chapter, the aerial language is conventionally associated with particular actions; these actions aid in building the conventional aerial physique that can then perform uniformly if required. The majority of professional, performing aerialists in the UK today can therefore be seen to conform to a set of particular physiological aesthetics, and diverse 'disabled aerialists' might offer radical alternative aesthetics essentially through what the body *does* as well as how it *appears*.

Many professional aerialists working in the UK today have conventional four-limbed physiques; they have developed athletic physiques especially in their upper bodies with toned or even bulging biceps, as well as a sculpted muscular backs and ribbed stomachs. Although height no longer seems to play as important a determining role, for Hardy-Donaldson three fundamental qualities are essential for the physiological construction of an aerialist: core strength, flexibility and good extension. She believes that with 'core strength, you can extend your limbs' which subsequently enables the aerialist to 'move with fluidity and have a certain ability to control the quality of movement'. She is a firm believer that 'even if you do an act that doesn't actually show that you can do splits or backbends,' for example, 'what you will have is that elasticity of movement and that complete control over your body'. The aerialist's physique can therefore be seen to blend with a particular set of anticipated aesthetic criteria, those of 'fluidity' and 'control'. Hardy-Donaldson can be seen to share Tait's assertion that fundamentally aerialists have (or indeed *are*) 'trained, muscular bodies' (*Circus* 2) developed to undertake aerodynamic actions that demonstrate strength, power, agility, flexibility and durability. The physiology of the aerialist and the aerial feats they present are symbiotically interconnected. The aerial actions are perceived not to be able to take place without the developed musculature of the aerialist's body, and the aerialist's body is made by undertaking those diverse aerial actions.

Aerialists are not only conventional in build and manner of movement, but many professionals are aged in their twenties or early thirties, with perhaps a small number now continuing into their forties and fifties. There is a mix of male and female, though there appears to be a clear disciplinary split with flying trapeze still dominated by men, aerial fabric and harness dominated by women, and the static trapeze and rope each being more mixed. Overall, it seems that the aerial arts are however, more populated by women in the UK at this moment in time. Furthermore, in the UK there is a continued predominance of white aerialists³², though this is slowly changing through companies such as Upswing pro-actively seeking to train more black and minority ethnic aerialists through various targeted training programmes (Amedume). The social, economic and cultural reasons for such predominance are beyond the scope of this research³³, but it appears that its roots are historical as Gossard discovered only two trapeze acts 'employing black performers in the 1800s' (*Reckless* 15), and Tait wrote that 'black aerialists are [still] under-represented' in the twenty-first century.

A glance at the promotional pages for professional aerial acts on any corporate agency website demonstrates the strength of these conventional traits that influence the aerial aesthetic. For example, promotional pages for aerialists on the Circus Malabarista website show thumbnail photographs of thirty-five acts pictured on familiar equipment including soloists, duets and small troupes. All look trained, fit and flexible. The majority are female. All those that are clearly depicted are white, and no one demonstrates a visibly alternate physiology. The same is true of the Circus Space graduation pages for 2010 and is echoed in a group photograph of students from Circomedia in Bristol. Furthermore, the training manuals referenced in the previous chapter also presented images of aerialists adhering to these dominating physiological characteristics.

It can therefore be argued that the more usual aerialist seen in the UK (and abroad) in the early part of the twenty-first century has a body that demonstrates a keen sense of discipline and training, being slight but athletic in build. She is predominantly female, is most often categorised as white, is relatively youthful, and most particularly for this research usually has no discernible (or visible) physical impairment.³⁴ The ubiquity of these physiological traits

³² Stephens makes the same claim in her research, 'Both the aerialist and clown performance community in Toronto (and I think in Canada) are largely perceived as white, although they are heterogeneous in other features of identification like country of birth' (36).

³³ Ilaria Bessone is in the early stages of her PhD research that focuses 'on 'circus bodies' as sites of knowledge, political struggle and cultural identification, and [will] critically analyse the potential of this embodied practice to transform encounters, perceptions and discourses of difference and "otherness"' (Bessone). The 'otherness' of most concern for her, is in relation to race.

³⁴ Stephens comments that a Canadian male aerialist, told her of his 'uphill battle as a man in the aerial world' (186) and how '[s]everal female aerialists also spoke of the hyper-sexualization of aerial work' (187). Lydia Wilding-Smith informed me that almost half the NCCA student cohort also declare a disability though this is predominantly for dyslexia; I discuss this in the Conclusion.

demonstrates a conventional appearance that in turn anticipates an agile and even athletic movement potential with an inherent aesthetic of control. It would seem therefore that depending upon the specific physiological traits of any 'disabled aerialist', their physicality will immediately influence the conventional aesthetics of the form. If they *look* different to the conventional aerialist (e.g. by being an amputee or of small stature), the actions they undertake might also be anticipated as being different. Of course, if their impairments are not visible or known to those watching, then no such shift in anticipation would be expected.

The Myth of Defying Gravity

[Aerialists] have conventionally been surrounded by a rhetoric which has precisely emphasised 'winged lightness' and physical gracefulness and which has served to fuel the fantasy that they are endowed with the facility of defying or resisting gravity. (Stoddart *Rings* 100)

Gossard demonstrated how the flying trapeze once dominated the aerial arts, forging this notion of weightlessness and an evolutionary image of human flight despite gravity's pull. He argued that it symbolised the era of innovation, and that the developments in flying trapeze paralleled the engineering developments in flight. Swinging action offers a few seconds at the top of each arc where the body does in fact become momentarily weightless. It is at these key points that the aerialist can begin to manoeuvre herself in myriad twists, tumbles and turns before then necessarily falling to complete them. Once Jules Léotard introduced the world to flying trapeze³⁵, ambitious aerialists sought to increase their moments of 'flight' by swinging ever higher. The higher they could go, the longer it took them to descend, therefore presenting opportunities for more aerobatic endeavours – the triple somersault being the most legendary of all. Although now surpassed by the quadruple with efforts being made to perform the quintuple, the flying trapeze (and the Triple) was symbolic of its time. Not only did the physical actions defy what had previously been considered impossible, but also the aerialists undertaking such stunts embodied the cultural ideas and ideals of their time through successfully flying.

The sensations of flight however were mirrored by the increased potential to fall. If the Hanlon brothers had not invented and then encouraged other flyers to make use of their safety net it is possible that such acts would have been made illegal owing to the increasing number of deaths and serious accidents (Cosdon; Tait; Stoddart). The potential for disaster, however, and indeed the desire to witness such an incident, was considered almost intoxicating for some audiences. Cosdon recounts the story of one 'coffin chaser' who 'knew

³⁵ Léotard did in fact release from his first swings just after the bottom of the arc using the momentum to carry him upwards to his next swing; later on this changed to releasing at the top of the swing to utilise the downward momentum to generate more complex aerial tricks (Stoddart *Rings* 169).

one day that William [Hanlon] would ‘break his neck’ and he intended to be present for the event’ (20). At its heyday the complex blend of aspirational flight with a fear, or at least an awareness, of the propensity for disaster provided audiences of all ‘flying’ acts with an ambiguous compulsion for viewing. Exploiting the myth of anti-gravity in performances can therefore be considered elemental in the aesthetics of the early aerial arts.

In the twenty-first century, when aerialists are more prominently working in partnership with the verticals, their relationship with gravity is more one of acknowledged omnipresence. Society no longer dreams of flight, as flight is an everyday occurrence, but falling perhaps holds greater symbolic resonance, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and the highly publicised deathly spectacle of falling bodies. Instead of demonstrating a defiance of gravity, the defiance comes in the aerialists’ clear subjugation to it. In a time ‘suffused with a desperate anxiety caused by falling bodies’ they arguably represent a different type of hope, a hope that not all falls end in death (Gardner “9/11”). The spectacular drops discussed in the previous chapter are the actions that particularly embody this.

Part of the appeal of aerial is therefore the apparent dismissal of, or interplay with, gravity’s pull. Most circus aerialists work high in the air – usually between 6-10 metres but oftentimes much higher – whilst aerial-dancers often work much lower to the ground as it is the utilisation of aerial equipment with the floor that generates much of their choreography. The gravitational play is therefore arguably dependent upon the type of aerial being performed. A particular action (simple or complex) will have differing affects on those watching *and* performing, dependent on how far away from the ground it is undertaken. The potential for corporeal damage is generally exacerbated the higher the performer goes, therefore the aesthetics associated with defying gravity, risk and danger, will also be affected by this. Additionally, the type of equipment used and the utilisation of safety devises will also affect both the reality and perception of risk that the aerialist is encountering.

Devoid of the highly visible safety net and often performed without any form of safety device, the vertical aerialist’s performance no longer represents flight but controlled falling. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the vertical aerial arts are comprised of three elements, the ‘ascent’, the ‘being in the air’ and the ‘descent’, that is often done in spectacular fashion. It is this overt *dance macabre* that can therefore be seen to intermingle with, and indeed enhance, perceptions of their fearlessness towards risk and danger, perhaps contradictorily feeding a belief that ‘it must be safe’ owing to its distinct lack of safety equipment.

The Reality of Risk

Bernasconi and Smith were shown in the Introduction to question circus aerial as 'art'; Antony Hippisley Coxe also proposed this decades earlier, but from a different perspective. According to Stoddart,

It should be pointed out that Coxe is clearly a passionate devotee of the circus and its history; when he describes it as 'simply a craft' next to the 'art' of the theatre he bestows greater value on the 'craft' since for him this term connotes the associated virtues of authenticity, integrity, vitality and honesty as opposed to art's implied artifice and effeteness. (*Rings* 81-82)

Stoddart explains that the difference between the two forms lies in the 'space between something assumed to be 'reality' or 'actuality' on the one hand and the artistic rendering of some aspect of that world within representation' on the other (82). I will discuss the representational potential of aerial later on, but in the aerial arts (as well as other circus-related disciplines) this notion of 'reality' is also complicated, particularly in terms of risk and danger.

Traditionally, '[p]hysical risk-taking has always been at [the] heart' (Stoddart *Rings* 4) of circus and although Stoddart is talking about the circus as a whole, aerial acts 'became synonymous with circus during the twentieth century,' (Tait *Circus* 5) and alongside animal acts, were considered amongst its most dangerous. Writing in *Social Drama and Risk Evaluation*, Ingar Palmlund defines risk 'as essential uncertainty' (199). This sense of uncertainty is inherent within the work of the aerialist (the equipment may fail or she may fall through error of judgement), and this risk is intrinsically linked to her play with gravity. There are however, differences between 'real' risks and 'perceived' risks that feed into the performance and appreciation of the aerial being witnessed.

The traditional circus for example, with its propensity for spectacle framed within short diverse acts can still be seen to present the 'fake fall', especially if 'the public might think it's not dangerous enough' (Carmeli "Danger"). I remember cruelly placing my family directly in front of my cloudswing's trajectory so that when I came to do the 'throw-out', which I knew they wouldn't be expecting, they'd think I'd fallen, only to see me skilfully return to sitting on the cloudswing after unwrapping my ankles from the rope's stern grip. This dramatic (and highly recognisable) fake fall would be accompanied by a loud scream. This often resulted in the (uninitiated) audience flinching and even screaming as they believed I really was falling. The first time my father saw it certainly provoked the anticipated effect and in retrospect was a horribly cruel thing to have done. At that time I was unaware of working my way through the various historical manipulations of audience fears and expectations. This particular aerial

action is relatively safe. The feet are both wrapped into the rope, before apparently freefalling out in a swan-dive to the audience below. There is of course always the danger that the aerialist wraps incorrectly, or throws at the wrong time resulting in the ropes becoming temporarily slack and much greater impact being taken on the knees.

One night, when I was performing this act with another cloudswinger and a swinging trapeze artist, the circus boss requested that the latter join us in screaming as he performed his 'step-off' – literally stepping off the bar at the height of the swing, to drop down and catch the bar with the hands just before it swings back in the other direction. Neither my fellow cloudswinger nor I wore a safety lunge during this act but the trapezist did; this particular night he did scream, and as I looked across to congratulate him for producing such a 'blood-curdler' I realised that he was no longer in the air. He had failed to catch the bar. Worse still, his lunge belt had broken. He fell landing motionless on the sawdust floor. Fortunately he survived the fall that resulted in a broken arm and leg, and returned to the air the following season. The wearing of a safety lunge was supposed to both *be* and *represent* a safety device: it enabled the aerialist to engage in more 'risky' action; it signified to the audience that there was this potential to fall, and it also meant to curtail such a fall through the wearing of the device. In this instance both the actuality and the representation failed.

In this personal example, the greater physical risk was undertaken by the trapezist, not that the trick itself was particularly dangerous, though it did require a complete release of the bar, but that the specific aerialist rarely undertook the manoeuvre successfully. He usually mistimed his release, missing the bar that ultimately put much greater emphasis on the safety line. The perception of that risk however was reduced as the trick was taken at the back of the swing away from the audience and the trick was a feet-first fall, so was potentially less visible as a risky action. By contrast, the 'throw-out' performed by the cloudswingers was always successful, but looked much more dangerous as we threw ourselves head-first towards the audience. Despite accidents being 'an ever-present threat' (Tait *Circus* 4) only a 'few spectators have actually witnessed an [aerialist's] fall' (Carmeli "Performing" 204) and consequently the general perception of risky action is undoubtedly confused by the *performance* of risk as one of the conventional aerial aesthetics. Carmeli and others do insist however that 'real danger [...] constitutes a *necessary* part' of the actual performance (ibid my emphasis). Combined with twenty-first century obsessions with Health and Safety (H & S), aerial can be seen as Bouissac's cultural mirror as it simultaneously reflects, condenses and transcends (*Circus* 9) fears and expectations of danger particularly in relation to the UK's Working-at-Height legislation. Some of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) specific rules do not and cannot apply to aerialists, but the knowledge of such rules being in existence might affect the wider public's understanding of the risks being undertaken by those working at height.

There was a rumour in the early 2000s that aerialists would be forced to wear hard hats or be compulsorily tethered to aerial equipment in their performances. This was however, just one of the myths surrounding such legislation and cannily employed by circus proprietors and their marketing teams while being vehemently denied by the HSE (HSE ; Sapsted). Rules that apply to the construction industry whose significant employee injuries and deaths led to the HSE's tightening of the legislation were acknowledged to be inappropriate for circus performers despite aerialists and wire walkers being in perceptibly far more vulnerable situations on a daily basis. Thus, such performers sit outside the established rules laid out in UK law. This is not to suggest that circus artists or proprietors are negligent in the provision of health and safety, and significant safety precautions *are* taken in the practice and delivery of aerial acts, but it demonstrates how as Bouissac wrote in the 1970s, certain aspects of social life continue to be tested to extremes in these performances. The conjunction of risk and safety appearing in the aerial acts *reflect* those concerns of health and safety in society. They are *condensed* through the succinct display of actions within the aerial acts, and are *transcended* by the manipulation of those concerns through the aerialist's (usually) successful return to the ground unharmed.

In *Concepts of Risk: A Classification*, Ortwin Renn writes that it is not the 'relative frequencies or other (scientific) forms of defining probabilities' that impact on general perceptions of risk, but rather is based on the 'strength of belief that people have about the likelihood that any undesirable effect will occur' (66). The risks in aerial performance are therefore perceived as such dependent upon the audience members' own knowledge of aerial and their 'belief' that something 'undesirable' may indeed happen. Despite some of the more dangerous acts like the 'leap for life' or the 'iron jaw' mentioned earlier being less commonplace in today's aerial repertoire, the level of aerial skill has increased and so too has the potential danger. The canonical aerial actions therefore perpetuate the aesthetic of and potential for corporeal damage. The risk being undertaken, however, might be interpreted differently based upon the specifics of the person taking the risk. Palmlund argues that if the risk is seen to impact particularly on 'children and women of childbearing age – the risk issue carries a deep emotional appeal with roots in survival instincts' (201) much more so than if associated with men. According to Tait, despite 'imitating male flying, female aerialists were perceived to be at greater risk' owing to the 'observers conflating the dangers of physical risk-taking with those of a seductive sexual identity' (*Circus* 21). This may suggest why the Dangerous Performances Act of 1897 'raised the age limit to 18 for female acrobats and 16 for males' (53) and why in today's society of 'risk management' real risks are more difficult to distinguish from perceived risks. Furthermore, it will aid in understanding how the 'disabled

aerialist' might also be perceived to be in a different category of risk to the conventional aerialist.

As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, there are numerous ways that aerial is now utilised across the performing arts, and each genre or performance style manages its relationship with danger and risk according to its creative tenets. In the three performances previously explored, none accented their aerial actions with overt gestures to the audience known as the "ta-dah" moments (Bernasconi & Smith 6), yet each certainly engaged in risky action. Leyser and Tchelnokov worked high at times but neither wore safety lines, and none worked above a safety net or mat. Leyser's piece opened with her 'foetal roll' that brought her from the top of the rope to the bottom in a slow, controlled forward roll and Tchelnokov's final tumble brought him to the very bottom of his roped net leaving no room for error. If either of them had misjudged their wraps or the manner in which they rolled, they would have ended up falling to the hard floor. Although Lancaster worked low to the floor, her release to toe-hang (rather than placing her feet on the bar and slowly letting-go) could have resulted in her falling heavily on her head *especially* because she was low; there would have been no time for her to react to the miss and right her body before hitting the ground.

Regardless of how aerialists intend an audience to view their work, aerial is connected to potential disaster. Success at defying such disaster has had the potential to propel aerialists into the realms of 'superhumanism' whilst their failure continues to resonate equally loudly as a repellent reminder of every human's own frailty and mortality. It is this propensity to maintain diverse (and even contradictory) identities at any given time that result in the aerialist being seen simultaneously as superhuman and social misfit. Identities that also echo in disabled performers.

The Superhumans or Social Misfits

Since the Industrial Revolution aerialists have been associated with ideas of the superhuman through their demonstration of actions far beyond the everyday. Tait suggests that they were 'spatially symbolic of birds yet metaphoric of gods' (*Circus* 3), a notion shared by Keen who poetically espoused that 'angels [are] but flyers given feathers and wings by our imaginations, inspirited bodies not bound by the constraints of time, space, or gravity' (26). Put more prosaically, Bouissac suggests it is 'our deep evolutionary past' that makes aerialists so irresistible, advocating they draw upon a 'set of actions that can be assumed to have been essential for human survival' most notably the skills of 'grasping hanging supports that prevent[ed] deadly falls' ("Timeless" n.pag.). This hints to the very beginnings of Tait's 'living history'. For Bouissac, aerialists are 'true icons of survival' (ibid) because although 'walking on a sidewalk and balancing on one's head on the bar of a trapeze' both require balance, the

differences are so marked that success at the latter demonstrates 'biological superiority' (*Circus* 45). This superiority however, he continues, is 'limited to the duration of the act' (48). The aerialist only *represents* or *symbolises* the superhuman through her successful performance; she is not *actually* considered superhuman at any other time. Her social status inside the circus arena entitled her to move beyond the usual rules (and space) of social etiquette and physical construction, yet outside the performance space and returned to the ground she was seen as a social anathema or even threat.

While the physical risks that [the female aerialist] took in performance were admired, she was looked at when she walked in the street because her muscular shape and movement made her stand out in the 1920s and 1930s. In everyday spaces, her muscular appearance was even socially risky. (Tait *Circus* 77)

The aerialist demonstrated physical superiority with her propensity for survival in the air. This physical superiority necessitated a strong, muscular body particularly for the high-level and endurance aerial manoeuvres discussed in the previous chapter that were prominent in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the muscular body was a sign of authenticity (that Coxe particularly valued), especially when developments in aerial props provided performers with the opportunity to fake actions. Tait writes of a 'revolving trapeze bar' that provided the aerialist the opportunity to present the 'muscle grind', a particularly strenuous aerial action favoured by Luisita Leers amongst others. It entails throwing the legs over the bar towards the head, leaning backwards onto the bar and holding on with bent arms (*Circus* 80). Tait implies that it was possible to undertake this manoeuvre by being 'passively turned by the apparatus, rather than turning [by her] own strength' (ibid).³⁶ Owing to audiences not necessarily noticing this 'fakery' of actions, she argues the aerialist's 'muscularity provides proof of authentic action in aerial performance' (ibid).

The 'authentic' aerialist required the muscles to undertake the aerial actions but away from the aerial action the remaining muscularity seemed socially out of place. Despite the physical-culture movement growing in popularity in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (see Todd) muscular women seemed at least to suggest what Tait calls 'gender slippage' (84). Leers is described as having been 'robbed [...] of those feminine traits that women jealously guard and men look for in the ladies' through her aerial actions, but simultaneously journalists highlighted her femininity by testifying to her 'sensitivity, education and good character' in order to allay any fears audiences had about her 'genuine' female status (*Times* qtd. in Tait

³⁶ I witnessed a similar device being used in America in 2013, but the aerialist still had to work hard to keep her body in the correct position. The device seemed to minimise the abrasions on hands or elbows where the weight is held, but the work was still undertaken by the aerialist.

81). The suggestion is that Leers' body-shape might have led to audiences presuming her to be homosexual. 'It is probable' Tait continues, 'that behind this protestation is a rebuttal of an insidious social fear that an overly developed muscularity equates with masculine urges' (*Circus* 81). The presumption being that 'sexual desire is assumed to mean only desire for the female body' (ibid).

Similarly, writing on Ruth Budd (who performed the reversed conventional aerial role as the catcher for her flying brother), Alison Kibler argues it was the combination of her 'athleticism and support for suffrage' that 'indicated she was a New Woman' (143). She described her as someone 'who sought a broader public role, demanded greater political power, and experimented with romance and sex' (ibid), thus provocatively threatening the traditional male roles in society. Such issues were certainly never in question for Leitzel, whom Taylor considered to be 'the greatest star ever produced by her medium' (215) as she determinedly *performed* her 'diminutive height' and exaggerated her femininity in order to downplay her muscularity.

Leitzel performed one-arm planges with her hand in a loop which was (and still is) an astonishing feat of strength and stamina but placed phenomenal stress on her arm. At a time when her wrist was in constant pain from these famed one-arm-swing-overs, she was asked why she did not retrain her act on her other side. Leitzel responded '[m]y right arm is already ruined, but my left arm is pretty, and I'm a woman' (219). Her sexuality is also less likely to have come into question because of her very public romance with famed flying trapeze artist Codona. Therefore, at least for some muscular aerial women, their physicality was celebrated in the circus ring but questioned or even feared outside it because it destabilised the social conventions of femininity. The likes of Budd demonstrated that women could successfully undertake the traditional supporting and protecting roles of men, thus negating the perceived 'natural' divisions of the sexes. Contrastingly, Leitzel demonstrated the pressure of social demands of remaining feminine, if only on a part of the body.³⁷

I remember how Weaver and I were walking along a street in Boulder, Colorado when attending Frequent Flyers' Aerial Dance Festival in 2000. Minding our own business a number of women openly commented on our physiques as they passed. "They must be the aerialists then", they said motioning to our shoulders and arms with a giggle. Furthermore, I continue to have female students who are excited about undertaking the aerial actions, but who are nervous of the muscular impact this might have upon their bodies. "I don't mind being toned" is often followed by, "but I don't want to look like a man". Owing to today's popularity of

³⁷ Tait also provides examples of how male aerialists were feminised through their balletic actions, and how gender and sexuality were further complicated through cross-dressing by men and women. It was the women however that seemed to have the most socially complex blend of identities at this time.

regular gym training for both men and women, it is perhaps curious that such physicality can still be considered unusual and 'masculine' if not necessarily threatening. Subsequently even in the twenty-first century there is still a 'marking out' from the conventional female form that can occur through engaging in aerial action.

In addition to the 'gender slippage' perceived through such muscular bodies, the question of sex was still prevalent within the actions presented to the viewing public. Bram Dijkstra suggests that female aerialists were considered to be of the lowly classes, 'sexually available' and could even to be considered 'temptresses' (qtd. in Tait *Circus* 21). Moreover connotations of prostitution haunted aerialists as they 'were perceived to take risks for money' (Tait *Circus* 14). Coxe provides an interesting analogy to sculpture, describing circus in three-dimensional terms. 'You can walk around it. It can be seen from all sides. There can be no illusion, for there are eyes all round to prove that there is no deception' (qtd. Stoddart 79). As aerial was generally witnessed from below and the performers wore tight-fitting clothing to aid the fluidity of their actions, it also proffered audiences a titillating view of the body in ways not seen before. Catherine Haill includes two posters of female aerialists in her *Fun without Vulgarity* collection (plates 66 and 67). The women are shown to wear figure-hugging, ornate costumes, cut low at the chest whilst not being overtly revealing; their arms are naked and their legs are clothed in tights that expose their shapes, but all flesh is kept hidden. For Gossard, the actions, the symbolism and indeed the 'dress of female acrobats' all heralded it as 'definitely [...] an adult form or entertainment' (88).

Though less culturally radical than in earlier times, connotations of sex acts do still perpetuate in aerial actions as this personal anecdote reveals.

I remember training alone on a rope in the Whitstable Sports Centre a number of years ago, when the footballers who played in the court next to me entered the space to await their session. For some reason that night they began making vulgar comments about me, loudly so that I could hear, but not directed to me. "I wish she'd do that to me" I heard one man say, followed by "I wish I was that rope" by another. No doubt well humoured, this made me feel incredibly uncomfortable, and on display in a way that I had never felt before. For the first time I realised that what I did in the air could be seen very differently to how I had always imagined it. (Author's recollection c. 2006)

This reminiscence refers to a regular training session in which I was practicing my aerial skills as I did every Friday night. I was wearing close-fitting trousers and top (similar to dance or yoga clothing) to ensure they did not burden my actions, but that they also protected me from burning through the slides, drops and postures. I was not costumed as the women above were, nor was I performing to an audience (in the theatrical sense), people just happened to be in

the same place in which I was training. The vocal commentary, however, demonstrated that such sexuality continues to be inherent within some of the actions. Additionally, aerialists, choreographers and directors do continue to profile sexuality in some performances.

Two Montréal based aerialists, Noe (male) and Sarah (female), both described a belief among aerialists that if you are a young attractive female you will get work as an aerialist regardless of your skill level, since much of the show is seen to be about female sexuality and attractiveness. (Stephens 187)

Corporate entertainment agencies such as Circus Malabarista supply aerialists who perform beauty and sexuality in the air. Their website describes them as 'beautiful', 'graceful', 'elegant', 'amazing' and 'sexy'. Viva Aerial Dance (who performed in the BBC ident) appear on this and other such sites, and during my interview with Laine and Osborne they admitted their performances were sexy but never lewd. They stated that a high level of aerial skill and choreography was maintained to distinguish them from any other definition of 'high-class female entertainment' (ibid). Their costuming (discussed earlier in relation to the aesthetic of conformity) continues to model the aerial leotard that hugs the body's curves as well as enabling freedom of movement in the air, and they are often associated with corporate images of sexuality and beauty: advertising and promotional events for Wella hair products for example, award ceremonies for film, theatre and television and so on. Viva's performances are often incorporated into a glamorous event with overt expressions of sexuality and beauty, but Lancaster, Leyser and Tchelnokov can also be seen to reference these ideas.

Tchelnokov's was perhaps the closest in form to that of Viva, in his close-fitting costume that enhanced his physique and body's lines. Included as one of the feature acts in a theatrical circus production, there were additional frames to which his actions referred. He was an aerialist, but was also *representing* the character, Icarus. Leyser's costume was a simple two-piece that could have been pyjamas. They were not particularly close-fitting, not hugging the body as Tchelnokov and Viva's did, but still enabled freedom of movement. She was not beautified with make-up and her hair was simply hanging down or tied up in bunches. She was not presenting a sexualised woman in the air until the moments the character chose to. When the teenager and young woman emerged along her narrative lifeline, familiar gestures of coyness, playfulness and the start of sexual awareness became apparent. Leyser herself was not *being* sexual but *performing* sexuality, thus manipulating familiar aerial aesthetics within a theatrical context. She was therefore blending the 'authentic' aerialist with the 'representational' performance that Coxe, Bernasconi and Smith each seemed to consider

not present in circus aerial; perhaps this is why her producer, Simon Chatterton, referred to the work as 'aerial theatre'.

Lancaster also inverted the sex-appeal aesthetic. She performed almost naked in large, plain white pants that might have been men's y-fronts, offering perhaps the least overtly 'sexy' of them all. The presentation was skilful but performed in a prosaic, matter-of-fact manner that, befitting the show's political sentiments, stripped everything bare. It was both fascinating and uncomfortable to witness her; in the dark auditorium it felt like I too had been exposed – as a voyeur – through her nakedness.

Although today's aerialists may not be considered socially and culturally 'nonconformist' as their predecessors were in terms of 'dress codes, social behaviour and comparative morality' (Tait *Circus* 24) – even if Lancaster's semi-nudity might still have shocked some people – the aesthetic association with the superhuman and misfit continues. If the non-disabled aerialist no longer appears to be superhuman but still performs the extraordinary, how will 'disabled aerialists' be considered? Will they share the later century's human considerations or will they be viewed as the twenty-first century superhumans alongside the Paralympians?³⁸ Will their potential 'supercripisation' (Howe *Cultural* 106) renew the debate on the social and political positioning of aerialists?

Pain-free Performances of Control

Trapeze is *not* primarily about defying death, courting danger, or taking risks. It is about creating beauty. (Keen 75)

As suggested in the previous chapter, the aerialist's demonstrations of strength, stamina and flexibility are intrinsically connected to the conventional aesthetics of aerial, that Hardy-Donaldson referred to as 'elasticity', 'fluidity' and most particularly 'control'. Despite Stoddart and others defining circus (and therefore aerial) as 'a vehicle for the demonstration and taunting of danger', that ultimately has 'physical risk-taking [...] at its heart' the method and aesthetic performance qualities are undertaken by a 'body [that] is utterly self-reliant' (Stoddart *Rings* 4). The aerialist *shows* control over gravity's power thus preventing a deathly fall which can therefore be considered an *aesthetic* quality that Keen calls 'beauty'. Such control will be particularly challenging for some 'disabled aerialists', even appearing to be *out* of control, as will be explored in Chapter 4. It is therefore how the aerialist chooses to display his or her actions and what s/he disguises that feeds into the conventions of the way aerial artists *appear*.

³⁸ Channel 4 television in the UK frequently referred to the Paralympic athletes as the superhumans during the coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

The convention for live performance is that an aerialist must endure rather than show physical discomfort. A mystique arises with artistry of seamless fluid action when it falsely looks easy and painless [...]. The aerial body's discomfort remains hidden behind expansive gestures and smiling delivery; he (or she) performs enjoyment. (Tait *Circus* 108)

This performance style is particularly familiar within the traditional circus, where expansive gestures continue to be deployed through salutes to the audience on completing a trick to generate their applause. It is also closely embedded within the structural mechanisms of a traditional act. Even without such gestures, Bouissac suggests there is a code or narrative projection within each act that 'closely resemble[s] the pattern of successive transformations that occur in folktales' (*Circus* 25). The structure of a traditional circus act, including aerial, follows (or deliberately contravenes) a particular set of aesthetic principles that are bound up with a narrative trajectory. He defines the progressive stages as beginning with the 'Identification of the hero', followed by the 'Qualifying test, which the artist considers a warm-up exercise', that proceeds to the 'Main test, which can consist of several tests presented in a variety of sequences' (ibid). These ultimately conclude with the 'Glorifying test' or most spectacular aerial trick leading to the 'Public acknowledgement of the fulfilment of the task' (ibid). Tchelnokov's act is a good example of this still appearing in today's circuses.

Although Cirque du Soleil's performance aesthetics of costumes, lighting, sound and introduction of artists to the circus ring differ from those of the classical circus, the structure of presentations and indeed many of the acts have continuing similarities. Tchelnokov appears as Icarus, immediately venturing into the symbolism of gods and birds. His aerial manoeuvres begin with the simpler, cocoon actions where he demonstrates perfect control, flexibility and extension, and throughout the duration of the performance he presents his strength and stamina. At no time do I notice his pain when watching the act. The actions develop in complexity and risk concluding with the transformation of the prop to a vertical structure with which he demonstrates the 'glorifying test' of the dramatic tumble, successfully using the full length of the net but leaving very little room for error. Icarus, the character, is seen to fall, but Tchelnokov remains in full control.

Bouissac acknowledges that this structure relates particularly to 'any basic act' and that 'more-sophisticated patterns' are used for group numbers and those that involve some form of character 'transformation' (ibid), for example where the act is announced but instead of the declared artist appearing another enters in their stead. He proffers the example of a 'drunken sailor' appearing instead of 'a female acrobat', but although the entrance alters the original set-up, the performance ultimately evolves 'according to the usual pattern' (ibid). The

drunk demonstrates brilliant control, transforms his costume to that of a traditional aerialist or acrobat and continues to perform as in the first example.

Keeping to the traditional circus sector a moment longer, there are however exceptions to the *performance* of control as a familiar aesthetic. Such exception was cleverly exerted by the aforementioned Leitzel. Potentially to downplay her muscularity or to re-affirm her femininity, the “Queen of the air” would *perform* elements of lost control, pain and exhaustion. In a detailed description of her act Taylor writes of how her ‘thick mass of golden hair’ would be pinned on top of her head in the style of the times, only to be dramatically loosened ‘as she spun in the tent top’ giving the impression that ‘she was flying apart at the seams’ (220). Increasing the display of tension and ‘strain’ and having learnt that audiences responded very well to a ‘faint’, on completing her act she ‘placed herself on a permanently wobbly footing’, often being ‘saved’ by her awaiting hand-maiden, Miss Clemings (ibid).

Leitzel was undoubtedly an extraordinary aerialist with the physique that demonstrated her actions were ‘authentic’, but her stylistic choices arguably contravened the conventions of the time. Despite *performing* loss of control in her act, and knowledge of the pain in her wrist being widely publicised, the latter appears to be one aspect in which she did not manipulate audiences’ sympathies. Her skills as an aerialist were never in doubt (as will be demonstrated again in the next chapter when I discuss a performance she gave after falling thirty-feet to the floor) but she sought to present what she believed the audiences would appreciate most. The effect of her aerial antics resulted in a *performed* loss of control on the ground, thereby resurrecting her conventional femininity.

Leitzel’s wrist was known to cause her pain, and in 1928 she was diagnosed with ‘phlebitis, an infection of the vessels in her arm’, which physicians warned was so dangerous it could eventually kill her (Jensen 214). The physical exertions undertaken by all circus artists are embodied as scars, injuries and discomfort if not excruciating pain that are endured without reference. Similar to Tait’s comment earlier, Bouissac suggests that where ‘[u]sually, a smile of ease and pleasure would be a sign of normality’ when presented in relation to a performance of such physical extremes such as aerial and acrobatics, ‘it must be considered a sign of the superhuman, one who is insensitive to exertion and pain’ (*Circus* 49). Furthermore, he argues that in ‘relation to normality, the exercise performed is equivalent to physical torture’ (ibid). It is unclear whether Bouissac ever experienced such actions himself to make these claims, but as a practicing aerialist I can assert that some of the physical actions cause significant amounts of pain or discomfort regardless of how proficient one becomes at them, simply through the stresses they place on the body. Although twenty-first century aerialists engage in diverse presentational formats pain is still hidden within most performances.

In *Return Journey* discussed in the previous chapter, I explored a simple repeated action of ascending and descending the silks. I sought to create a movement metaphor for what I saw as the persistent futility of actions deployed by both sides of the Middle Eastern conflict. Conventionally an aerialist would ascend quickly or in a dramatic climbing style to demonstrate her physical skills when opening a traditional or corporate aerial act. As Taylor stated, the climb could be seen as the aerialist's trip to the office, as it was the means rather than the end. I therefore started to train to see how long I could take to climb the aerial fabric. How slowly could I move my hands, my feet, change the grip and shift my weight to labour the action as much as possible? Eventually I was able to ascend, slide and re-climb without returning to the floor for almost ten minutes.

I climb as slowly as I can, taking my time to move my hands, one after the other up the fabric concentrating on my fingers, applying pressure slowly but surely so they can hold my weight. Under tensed muscles my legs rise to rewrap the fabric, taking me higher up its length. I rest a moment then allow myself to slide back down, trying not to burn hands or feet. I climb again. No rest here. I slide again, this time tantalisingly close to the floor where rest is possible; but I resist. Back up I go, only to slide, to rest, to climb, to slide. I must have been climbing my whole life; my forearms are hardening under the strain of my own weight. I'm getting too close to the top of the silk but there's still time to fill. I have to descend some more, take a breath. I hug the fabric to myself, bending my arms around it so that I can grip with my elbows allowing my hands a moment of reprieve. I want to cry. My body is filled with adrenalin, lactic acid, anxiety and pain. (*Journal*)

Despite Leyser and Lancaster presenting their aerial sequences in very different ways to one another, and differing to how I presented *Return Journey*, similar elements of control and pain-free aesthetics were clearly evident. As with most aerial pieces, the emphasis was on the presentation of shapes, movements and sequences using extension, flexibility, strength and stamina to tell stories, explore concepts or present moments of physical imagery to be enjoyed by the observing public, with the performers appearing to be insensitive to pain.

Leyser's *Lifeline* depicted the journey of a woman from life to death, and through it she hoped to 'demonstrate how aerial work can dramatize many of the metaphors through which we describe our life on the ground' (Interview). Leyser first appears six metres in the air, encased in a pulsing loop of soft-cotton rope in a clear foetal position that slowly tumbles her down to be born on the ground. The baby becomes the toddler, the teenager, young woman and finally the old woman perpetually ascending, hovering and descending in clear canonical gestures supported by technically proficient aerial skill triggering giggles or gasps from the audience. The character is playful, sullen, excited or pained but throughout the piece Leyser demonstrates absolute control of her body in relation to the rope. Never do I witness

her *real* pain even when her body is wrapped tightly in the rope, or when she takes all her weight on one arm wrapped in a loop that must put incredible stress on the wrist.

Similarly Lancaster's performance of highly skilled aerial actions *must* have caused considerable pain at times – at least in rehearsal if not also in performance. Sliding from the back-balance to hocks to heels would necessitate the body being scraped over the trapeze bar and hanging from the heels puts incredible stress on the Achilles' tendons. The front-balance barrel-rolls usually bruise the hip-bones and forearms where significant pressure is placed to generate the turn, and a beat to toe-hang that results in the full weight of the body suspended from the top of the foot can also result in great pressure pushing down on thin skin, nerves and blood vessels. Furthermore, her costume offered very little protection and the impact of her actions could be seen through pressure marks on her body – grazes, redness, sores. Even when Lancaster fell during her swinging act, caught by the lunge system, she did not demonstrate that her body was in pain. Similarly, when my trapeze partner fell in our aerial act, he was quickly removed from the circus floor. The show continued as if nothing had happened and when audience members asked at the end of the performance if he was 'okay', the formal response of 'yes, he's fine' was aimed at putting them all at ease to forget the pain that might have been endured.

The aesthetics of aerial are therefore heavily embedded within the physicality of aerial itself. Aerial is conventionally presented through bodies that are trained, athletic and muscular with the capacity for strength, flexibility and stamina. The form plays with gravity, *performing* the defiance of, or conversely celebrating, its power. Its spatial connection with flight maintains symbolic associations with birds, gods or superhumans as the performers undergo actions beyond the mundane; simultaneously the manipulations of the body in intimate conjunction with equipment (and other aerialists) are also highly (and humanly) sexualised, potentially very painful, but often delivered with a disregard to both. If these aesthetics continue to sustain through aerial across different sub-genres, how will they impact on the 'disabled aerialist' when issues of sexuality, beauty, falling, pain and control might also have other connotations?

Reactions to Aerial

Although specific scientific studies have not yet been undertaken in observations of aerial performances, research has taken place between neuroscientists, dance artists and dance researchers to analyse responses to the art form by expert and non-expert observers. Its pertinence to this research is that aerial analysts have all commented upon the various physiological and psychological responses to aerial being intertwined in the engagement

process, and such responses also appear in disability discourses on the different ways of looking.

[C]ircus is so special and so involving because it reaches out to the deepest part of our body, that is, our brain, and activates an ancestral visuomotor memory which is inscribed in our genome and is at the very basis of our sociality in as much as it sustains dynamic empathy. (Bouissac "Timeless" n.pag.)

Mark Schreiber describes how he wept when first seeing a swinging trapeze artist in the Cirque du Soleil production *Saltimbanco*. He 'gaze[d] at her with admiration and sudden agony' (41) as 'all the unmeetable extremes in life – competition and cooperation, recklessness and caution, holding on and letting go – converge[d] in the tiny person of Olga Sidorova' (103-4). It is perhaps Bouissac's 'dynamic empathy' that explains why 'the embodied reception of aerial performance is ever-present and, at times, even explicit' through 'tangible, sensory reactions' like 'jumps and flickers' encountered by those watching (Tait *Circus* 141-2). This might be understandable for a newcomer to the aerial arts as Schreiber admitted to being, but Coxe was an experienced witness of circus. He described his physical reactions to watching the 'prolonged preparation for a cannon act' as producing in him 'an almost unbearable feeling of tension' (ibid 142). Furthermore, he 'experienced the same empty drag at the bottom of [his] stomach, the same constriction of the throat' that he had experienced in the Second World War (ibid).

Tait suggests that Coxe's reactions come from a previous experience of 'seeing a body in potential peril' (ibid), but his and Schreiber's reactions are not unique as histories of circus and aerial often comment on such physiological and psychological reactions. Moreover, recent interdisciplinary research between neuroscientists and dance scholars suggests that there are indeed calculable links between the 'lived' experience and the 'watched' experience, and although studies are still relatively limited (in scope and movement types), many of the researchers agree that there is a visual and motor connection between the watcher and the watched. According to dance scholar Judith Lynne Hanna,

Kinesthetic sympathy occurs when we see in a human body movement that we experience vicariously in our nerves and muscles; the movement evokes associations we would have had if the original movement had been ours. (qtd. in Reynolds, Jola & Pollick 262)

This suggests that the observer can empathise with any movements witnessed by imagining (consciously or not) through the 'nerves and muscles', however Calvo-Merino and partners

discovered that the degree to which kinaesthetic (or 'dynamic') empathy is evoked depends upon the lived experience of the person watching as they found it was specifically influenced by 'an individual's personal motor repertoire' (1243).

I am increasingly aware of my own physical reactions to aerial: I hold my breath, my palms sweat, I jolt and jump and at times involuntarily leave my seat when witnessing aerialists perform. This happens especially when seeing aerial novices engage with advanced actions when my belief in their level of skill is not necessarily matched by the difficulty of actions they are performing, thus I anticipate disaster. It also occurs when more experienced aerialists undertake potentially dangerous manoeuvres as I physically imagine myself in their place, excited and terrified in equal measure. I have certainly become more fearful as I have grown older, but I have also witnessed close friends fall and have fallen myself. Perhaps the lived experience, combined with the very close analysis of aerial this research has enforced, in addition to or irrespective of Bouissac's suggested 'ancestral visuomotor memory', has furthered my own visceral reactions to the form. My body remembers the physical actions I did and that lived experience now enables a vivid imagination of new (and potentially failing) actions to manifest in physical responses to that which I witness.

My personal experience helps me to understand Tait's assertion that '[p]rior kinaesthetic experience also makes an image of motion meaningful' (*Circus* 144). Calvo-Merino and colleagues demonstrated how '[a]ctions that appear meaningless to inexperienced subjects may appear more meaningful to experts' (1248), concluding that '[w]hile all the subjects in our study saw the same actions, the mirror areas of the brains responded quite differently according to whether they could *do* the actions or not' (ibid). Nevertheless, expertise can also be developed through extensive observation of actions, rather than simply being able to *do* them. Seon Hee Jang and Frank E. Pollick studied how dance affected observers through 'extensive visual experience alone' (352), using similar techniques (and acknowledging the research by) Calvo-Merino et al. They compared 'the neural processing of dance actions in 3 groups: a) 14 ballet dancers, b) 10 experienced viewers, c) 12 novices without any extensive dance or viewing experience' (ibid). They concluded that 'dancers have an enhanced embodied representation of viewing [...], while experienced viewers have an enhanced disembodied representation of imagining performing a movement' (373). The technical aspects of the science are beyond the scope of this research, but what they demonstrate is that experience (in doing and watching) enhances understanding of movement, but in different ways.

Applying such considerations to aerial, it appears that the different types and frequency of engagement with aerial (as with dance) will determine *how* the individual responds to the aerial being witnessed. Those used to *doing* the actions, or 'motor experts'

(Reynolds et al 266) such as me, will potentially experience observing aerial in a kinaesthetic manner; the 'visual experts' (ibid) such as Coxe, Gossard and Tait will experience it through imagination and cognition. Nevertheless, the examples given by Bouissac and Tait, and my own personal experience of watching audiences, do seem to suggest otherwise. Watching aerial seems to induce a kinaesthetic response in those without motor memories of aerial as well as in those that have them. Does witnessing aerial therefore invoke memories from when our early ancestors climbed trees as Bouissac suggests? Are the (e)motions evoked through closer memories of playing on swings as children? Or is it a combination of these, blended with the complex aesthetics discussed earlier in terms of risk and danger that force us to react in such ways? Perhaps by watching someone else take physical (and cultural) risks for our entertainment potentially puts a responsibility upon us as viewers; if they fall we are in part to blame? The answers will remain unclear until research into observing specifically aerial action is undertaken, but aerial researchers do agree that there is an element of kinaesthetic or dynamic empathy invoked through witnessing aerialists at work.

Interrelated to this, Tait poses a further question: 'in what ways, if at all, might a spectator become bodily, viscerally, desensitized' (*Circus* 142)? Once again a study in *Dance Research* suggested that there was a 'decrease of cortical excitability over time' (Reynolds et al 276) when observing witnesses of a full two-and-a-half hour performance (rather than the short few second frames used in the previously mentioned studies). The researchers admitted that such observations 'could either indicate subjects' adaptation to the procedure [...] or changes in their emotional and cognitive engagement when watching dance' (ibid my emphasis). Nevertheless they do conclude that whatever the cause, their 'study shows that time is a relevant factor in measuring spectators' responses to watching dance' (ibid). Certainly the experience of the Vasquez brothers in Las Vegas and Mackrell's dismissal of Leyser's performance as little more than a few tricks suggest that audience 'desensitization' for aerial action has already occurred at least in some instances. More specifically still, fatigue is evident amongst aerialists through the perpetual repetition of some actions, as a Liz Cooper's comment on Facebook demonstrates: 'Hands up,' she writes, 'how many aerialists out there are getting tired of seeing every act include the Foot Lock to Half Moon roll or is it just me?' (qtd. in A. Williams). This in itself is not surprising as in 1881, a circus writer commented,

In travelling over the records of sawdust performances, we are frequently reminded of the saying of the wise monarch of Israel, that there is no new thing under the sun. The bills of Astley's, the advertisements of the Royal Circus and the Olympic Pavilion, the traditions of travelling circuses, present us with the originals of almost every feat that the acrobats and posturers of the present day have ever attempted. (Frost 60)

Perhaps owing to aerial being more widely accessible (as both participant and observer) more contemporary performers are exploring alternative ways of presenting the form to counteract this potential fatigue. Tait suggests that '[i]n new circus in particular, aerial feats are often secondary to the theatricality and its emotional impact' (*Circus* 119), but this was also the case in the nineteenth century. Gossard noted that people strove to make the increasingly popular trapeze performances 'novel presentation[s]', citing possibly the first 'disabled aerialists' as being of particular novel value. He also presented examples of animals being incorporated into performances but admitted that 'it stretches the imagination to visualize the kinds of trapeze performances which might have been done by these animals' (such as a monkey, a dog and a pony) (20).

Desire to continue injecting fresh ideas into the art form in the twenty-first century continues that of earlier times, to stave off potential 'boredom' for the aerialists themselves as well as their audiences (Juntti). What is evident, however, is *how* audiences engage with aerial (the kinaesthetic, dynamic empathy or cognitive appreciation) is closely connected to *why* it is engaging (the innovation, risk, beauty and danger), and each suggests a direct link to the observer's own knowledge and experience. Projecting forwards to the following chapter, the freak shows of the past were also said to produce physical and psychological reactions in those watching them. So much so that women were often warned not to witness such performances if they were pregnant for fear of re-producing a 'freak' or losing the child through the physical shock.³⁹ Where aerial performances of control, sexuality and the defiance of or deliberate play with gravity have continued to perpetuate into this century, how are the same aesthetic qualities presented and/or denied through 'disabled aerialists'? What other aesthetic qualities and emotional affects will they produce, and how do they impact on the understanding and appreciation of the aerial they present?

³⁹ Robert Bogdan writes that in the 'nineteenth century the question of what caused the [freakish] condition if raised, was most frequently addressed with the theory of "maternal impression". Lecturers and "true life" booklets attributed traumatic significant events experienced by a pregnant woman as an important teratogenic factor' (*Freak* 110).

Chapter 3: Re-Situating the ‘Disabled Aerialist’

Expressive Feat Productions presented the research and development project, *One Blind Eye* (described in Appendix 2) in an old Lloyd’s Bank in Margate, Kent in 2000. I directed and performed the piece in collaboration with Chris Pavia and Vicki Balaam of StopGAP Dance Company, and independent video and sound artist Deveril. The aim had been to ‘explore the relationship between the *Watcher* and the *Watched*’ (T. Carter “Preview”) through the spatially parallel relationship of a conventional, non-disabled aerialist and a disabled dancer. The project ambitiously set out to challenge an audience’s perceptions of what this partnership could offer, but the process resulted in challenging *my* understanding of disability and aerial. I discovered that I embodied much of what I had hoped to confront: the preconceptions, misunderstandings, fears and biases concerning disability *and* a belief that aerial was the sole domain of the non-disabled. In hindsight, my interest in the ‘disabled aerialist’ traces back to this particular project.

One Blind Eye was born out of a perhaps morbid pondering on my own disabling potential. The witnessing of accidents by close friends and minor but temporarily disabling accidents of my own started to impact on my relationship with aerial as I contemplated the possibility of being more seriously injured. My original plan for the piece had been to work alongside a wheelchair dancer, so the relationship between aerial and disability, perceived through a fall, could be clearly visible: the aerialist would work in the air, the dancer on the ground in his or her wheelchair. Retrospectively problematic for several reasons, not least the objectification of a disabled person as a manifestation of my own fear, I was looking at the relationship from one particular perspective: the aerialist could fall and become disabled resulting in her dis-aerialisation. I had not initially considered that the performance could demonstrate its opposite: that those considered (by themselves or society) to be disabled could rise from the ground and become aerialists. In the performance that was ultimately created, the original sense of visual and (fictional) narrative interconnectivity between non-disabled aerialist and wheelchair dancer was eliminated. Working with Pavia, a dancer with one more chromosome than me (most commonly known as Down’s syndrome) presented us with a different relationship. If I fell, I would not gain another chromosome, but Pavia’s genetic addition did not prevent him from becoming (if momentarily) airborne. Despite it being dangerous to ‘attribute purity of origin to any performance’ (Roach 286), the experience did unwittingly lay the foundations for this much later research. In 2000 I simply had not envisaged the aerial and the disability colliding so readily within the singular body of my co-performer, because I carried the fear that were I to become disabled, I would also become dis-

aerialised, losing my ability of and identity as an aerialist. Pavia taught me that there was an alternative way of looking.

The previous two chapters offered an overview of aerial's complex history setting out the perpetuating physical and aesthetic elements with which all aerialists, non-disabled and disabled, will be associated. Accepting that there is a prominent focus on non-disabled aerialists, the defence lies in the majority of work, past and present, being undertaken by such artists in this field. To appreciate the work of the 'disabled aerialist', it is necessary to have an understanding of aerial. Nevertheless, as the Introduction demonstrated, the 'disabled aerialist' has a second heritage, one of disability performance, culture and politics. Before undertaking close examination of the two case studies, this chapter therefore aims to re-situate the 'disabled aerialist' within this second context.

Divided into four sub-sections I examine some of the complexities surrounding observing disabled performers. Drawing particularly on Thomson's *Staring* and Goffman's *Stigma*, in *Permission to Look* I examine the different ways of looking *at* disabled people, and the discourse surrounding such terms as the 'gaze' and the 'stare'. I also address the political interplay of controlling that 'look' by the disabled person, as performer, on his or her own terms, even if that might include 'passing' as non-disabled or becoming 'hypervisible' through an extended display *of* impairment/disability. Interconnecting how and why audiences engage with aerial (through looking), and how and why audiences have and do engage with disabled performers will aid in understanding some of the challenges and opportunities facing the 'disabled aerialist'. This leads into an overview of Disability Arts and Culture, where I look at the UK's most established Deaf/disability led theatre company, Graeae. I examine how freak shows perpetuate in different ways in disability performance and the lingering pursuit or presence of narratives associated with disability.

As the first case study is a short film, the next section *The Circus of Isolation*, draws on Norden's *Cinema of Isolation* to examine how disabled people have been perpetually portrayed in stereotypical ways, particularly in film. It then returns to the circus to consider the most familiar role played by disabled people inside the circus arena, that of the 'dwarf clown'. Referencing in particular Carmeli's close reading of Wee Pea, who was performing in Brown's Circus in the mid-1970s, it aims to highlight further complexities for people with discernible impairments who reconnect to the circus genre – because of their extensive association with it in the past. Acknowledging that the example draws away from aerial at this juncture, it demonstrates that even within familiar territory, the disabled artist has had to face challenging situations specifically because of their impairments. Additionally, the clown and

the aerialist do have interesting correlations that Stephens considers in her thesis, that resonate between disabled and non-disabled performers.

The clown and the aerial acrobat have been central to the circus through most of its history. They are present in almost every circus troupe, and often symbolically represent the circus in posters and stories. They are also counterpoints to each other, with the aerialist evoking tension and demonstrating the epitome of human achievement (Tait 2005) while the clown releases laughter and revels in human foibles (Little 1991). (Stephens 18)

The final sub-section, Heterogeneous 'Disabled Aerialists', offers examples from film, literature and the circus, of people who could embody the polysemous term beginning with that I feared most, the fallen aerialist. Most importantly, it exposes how history (or rather the historian) has been complicit in erasing historical 'disabled aerialists' from the archive, forcing us to imagine that them as a twenty-first century phenomenon. Gossard's brief acknowledgement of a few amputee aerialists in his extensive study on trapeze, which prompted my trip to the Milner Gallery Archive in 2013, is particularly useful here in demonstrating both the existence and virtual eradication of such performers. This section also demonstrates how aerial, or at least all aerialists, are in a constant suspended dance with disability and death. Rather than disability or impairment being the end of an aerial journey – where the aerialist falls, becomes disabled and loses his or her aerial ability – it could in fact be the beginning. The performer happens to be disabled, but this does not prevent him or her from engaging in aerial performance.

Concluding this chapter, I focus on a twenty-first century 'disabled aerialist', Penny Clapcott, who paves the way towards a close examination of the two case studies. Clapcott shares a similar physiological condition to Partridge who performed in *Hang-ups!* She was one of the aerial performers in the *POC*, examined in the second case study, and has continued to train and perform as an aerialist ever since. Looking in particular at a single aerial action that Clapcott performs – a 'front plange' – I demonstrate some of the unique opportunities that 'disabled aerialists' can exploit in the aerial arts.

Permission to Look

The old fear of strangeness breathes
here – how can I say to them
we're different and the same: the riddle,
almost a joke? (Aleshire 115)

In his seminal and oft-cited text *Stigma*, Goffman defines 'normals' as 'those who do not depart negatively from [...] particular expectations' (15) and anyone who does depart

negatively from these are considered burdened by 'stigma', which he initially defines as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' (13). Although he demonstrates how the 'normal' is a constructed, fantastical minority, that Thomson later calls a 'phantom "majority"' he argues that this perceived ideal, and the pursuit to *be* 'normal', perpetuates through social interactions and consequently reinforces what Thomson calls the 'illusory "minority"' – the stigmatized who do not or cannot adhere to these social norms (*Extraordinary* 32).

Goffman's 'normals' or Thomson's 'normates', have 'an illusory, ideological nature' (*Extraordinary* 32) of which the 'only one complete unblushing male in America' is 'young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height and a recent record in sports' (Goffman 153). Thomson argues that this idea/I 'dominates without material substance' as so few people wholly conform to this image, and yet it is from this very perspective that Goffman suggests at least American men of his time (who were the ones with influence and dominant control) were thought to be viewing the world. Goffman and Thomson argue that although social constructions, it is against these ideas that all judge and are judged (if subconsciously), and those who deviate most are stigmatised, considered 'abnormal' (Thomson *Staring* 32) or even 'not quite human' (Goffman 15).

Goffman explains that stigma is more complicated than a mere attribute, as borne by different people at different times, in different places and in different circumstances, a particular condition or behaviour may be more or less stigmatizing. He offers the example of a criminal who nervously looks over his shoulders before entering a library to see if he is being watched and compares him to a middle class man who would not consider his own access to a library anything but socially acceptable. Therefore, it is really a 'language of relationships' (13), where the 'normals' and the 'stigmatized' only exist through their relationship to one another. Acknowledging that these distinctions occur only through interactions, Goffman does however proffer a list of 'grossly different types of stigma' in which he includes those with 'abominations of the body – the various physical deformities' and people with 'blemishes of individual character' such as 'mental disorder' (14). Thus, particularly pertinent to this discussion, is his implication that those with physical and/or cognitive impairments are different to the 'norm', and that they embody social stigmas; later on, he also includes those with sensory impairments.

Goffman admits that the 'normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives' clarifying that 'every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life' (163). This is similar to Lennard Davis's contemplation that all 'able-bodied' are only 'temporarily able-bodied', for if people live long enough, the

majority will become ill or disabled (7). Thus rather than being actual identifiable individuals who are always normal or stigmatized, the 'normals' and 'stigmatized' only become apparent when in association with one another. The interactions between those considered (or who consider themselves to be) normal, and those perceived as stigmatized become entangled in a complex web of expectations of themselves and of those they meet.

Thomson argues that the relationships may occur in the meeting of two people, but are actually 'part of a communal acculturation process' established and maintained by 'the dominant group' that determines what attributes or 'differences are inferior', thereby 'reinforc[ing] that group's idealized self-description as neutral, normal [and] legitimate' (*Extraordinary* 31). Davis suggests that when individuals do not meet this majority view, there is 'a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field' (129). This is when Goffman's 'civil inattention', that ability to 'notice [people] as little as possible' being surrounded in (if illusory) 'shields of privacy', disintegrates into 'uncivil attention' (Thomson *Staring* 35). It is at this point when staring can occur.

Because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviors (sic), stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations. (ibid 6)

Goffman and Thomson present examples of people who have provocatively sought uncivil attention for cultural and political reasons (hippies, feminists, Hell's Angels etc.), but people with discernible impairments often have little choice over their conspicuousness. If, as Goffman suggests, people with physical, sensory or cognitive impairments are amongst the most socially stigmatized, it is therefore not surprising that when witnessed by those who do not (or at least who do not *appear* to) have such impairments, the result might be uncivil attention being afforded them. Engaging in uncivil attention, however, might also result in the previously 'normal' person behaving in ways that then draw unwarranted attention to themselves so a process of self-management begins to occur interconnected to the process of staring.

Goffman and Thomson each present detailed explorations of the complexities of self-management undertaken by the 'stigmatised' individuals in various encounters, and those who pay them significant attention, but most pertinent here are the diverse modes of management relating to disabled people, and specifically in how they are seen. To understand the intricacies of engaging in and with disability arts and culture, and specifically in observing 'disabled aerialists', this two-way observation process needs to be further explored: from the

perspective of the one being observed, and from the viewpoint of the observer. Thomson writes,

To be the object of the stare is to be exposed to judgment, appropriation, or abrupt dismissal. Yet the visual embrace of a stare is validation of our being, the relational registering that we matter to another, even if it perhaps exposes our deepest vulnerabilities. (*Staring* 59)

In the first instance, the stare is generated by the unexpected, therefore the person being stared at, whom Thomson calls the 'staree', is disclosed as being different from the 'norm'. Tom Shakespeare acknowledged that owing to his 'abnormal embodiment' and despite being 'happy and successful as an individual' (*Rights* 63) he would always be stared at. Acknowledging and accepting this are not however, the same. He writes that being observed in this way 'is not pleasant, even if people are not actually hostile' (ibid), and Thomson writes that the 'work demanded of ultra-noticeable people to deal with [staring encounters] can be taxing, tedious, or even tormenting' (*Staring* 86). Different people engage different coping strategies or 'staring management routines' (87) to deflect, disarm or ignore their starers. Some might return the stare with 'eye contact or a slight nod, a faint smile, or other gesture' (88); others use direct communication, saying "How you doing?" for example, or talk with children who have not been 'fully socialized' into the etiquette of watching others (ibid). Aggressive rebuttals or dark humour have also been cited as coping strategies, as too has the turning of tables on those that stare by becoming starers themselves and Thomson focuses on photographer Kevin Connolly as an example of this (89-94). By becoming a photographer and capturing his view of those around him, he transfers or absorbs the gaze often inflicted on him onto those around him.

We may all be 'caught off guard' by the unexpected, but Thomson suggests that it is 'curiosity [that] sustains [the stare]'. The prolonged look becomes an expedition into unknown territory' (*Staring* 49) with 'gaping-mouthed, unapologetic staring' becoming the less acceptable, affronting 'baroque' stare (50) generated by a desire 'for unauthorised knowledge' that she calls 'a presumptuous overreaching' (63). Curiosity, in itself, is not necessarily bad (Stephen Hawking implores us 'to be curious' in the *POC*), but Thomson argues it does have power to affect that on which it focuses. The 'force of curiosity makes something into a curiosity' (64) – a term that has significance for disabled performers particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the freak shows that I address later on. The 'norms', confronted by 'stareable bodies' (192), therefore have to contain their curiosity to

avoid 'baroque staring' in order to maintain civil inattention towards others and towards themselves.

Thomson offers details of how civil inattention proliferated at least in the USA in the nineteenth century, through mothers sharply warning their children 'not to stare', who were themselves guided by 'conduct manuals' provided by privileged and powerful men including President George Washington who warned 'gaze not on the marks or blemishes of others and ask not how they came' (*Staring* 66). Thomson suggests that the transformation of society from agricultural bias to that of industry impacted on how people behaved with one another, as the majority of workers no longer remained in the societies in which they were born, but travelled further afield and encountered increasing numbers of strangers. She suggests that 'this modern world demanded a new urgency of looking that allowed us to recognise and respond appropriately to one another' (ibid). Managing ways of looking seems to have become a necessary social art, where men's eyes had to 'simultaneously affirm and assert' their own status yet also 'acknowled[ging] without challenge' the status of others (68). Meanwhile for women, or rather 'ladies' of the nineteenth century, staring could be a 'signal of unsavory (sic) qualities' or 'ill-breeding' and could even be seen to dangerously open themselves up to 'loss of ladyhood' (70-71) by attracting unwanted attention from male strangers in particular. This reinforces the discussion from the previous chapter, on why female aerialists of that time might have been considered anti-social, because they deliberately situated themselves to be stared at, and in purportedly sexually-oriented positions. Although these ideas are now dated, the precedence of controlling the stare continues, and 'drenches natural curiosity and the human urge toward visual outreach in mutual embarrassment' (71).

Despite our natural propensity to stare then, social decorum encourages (or indeed forces) us not to, with the "ugly laws" in America even putting onto the statute books the prohibition of 'improper ogling' (*Staring* 72). Thomson asserts that the 'first of these American ugly laws [was] enacted in San Francisco in 1867' and it 'prohibited street begging by specifically preventing certain people from appearing in public spaces' (ibid).

Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of fine of \$1 (about £20 today) for each offense. (The Chicago City Code of 1881. Schweik 2009, 1-2; qtd. in Thomson *Staring* 72)

Thomson therefore argues that the 'rules of courtesy' and the 'rules of law' enforced on the (American) society a prohibition of staring, not to protect those that might be injured, embarrassed or rebuked by such stares, but to safeguard those that might do the staring. Nevertheless, she argues that a paradox occurred in this desire to control the gaze as the aforementioned freak shows, exhibitions and 'Great American Spectacles' (*Staring* 76) began to emerge at the same time. People were encouraged to 'stare at the new and changing worlds we live in' (ibid), but instructed not to engage in the intrusive, personal 'baroque staring' towards one another. 'The result', she argues, 'was a contradictory cultural edict that Americans should always see a spectacle but never be a spectacle' (ibid).

If being stared at on a regular basis requires constant assessment and management of oneself and others, and if the stare has the interminable power to subordinate the recipient staree to objectified 'other', then unsurprisingly many people might choose to avoid it where possible, through disguising their distinguishing 'marks' or even themselves (Goffman 42). Writing in 1863 on the benefit of prostheses, Oliver Holmes noted:

In higher social positions, and at an age when appearances are realities [...] it becomes important to provide the cripple with a limb which shall be presentable in polite society, where misfortunes of a certain obtrusiveness may be pitied, but are never tolerated under the chandeliers. (qtd. in Hasegawa 4)

This process of disguising or hiding (the 'marks' rather than oneself) is what Goffman calls 'passing' (92), and '[b]ecause of the great rewards in being considered normal' he argues that 'almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent' (95). The reward is to be considered, and therefore treated, as a member of the 'dominant group' where civil inattention is automatically granted (42).

Thomson advocates that people who cannot 'pass' or who choose not to, for example those with discernible impairments, may incur the staring of those who are surprised by them, but by so doing they enhance 'our shared understanding of the human variations' (*Staring* 195). Refusing to pass as a member of the non-disabled 'phantom majority', indeed celebrating ones differentness and stridently demanding people take notice, is what Thomson calls 'visual activism' (ibid). This process inverts the power of the stare from starrer to staree, with the ultimate goal of demanding that notice is not only visual but also political and social, leading optimistically to greater mutual understanding and equality. She explains its three-step approach.

First, [the Visual Activists] use the human urge to look at new things to make people look at them. Second, they [...] ask the public to think differently about people like them. [Thirdly ...] they [hope to encourage people to] act in new ways: to vote differently, to spend money differently, to build the world differently, to treat people differently, and to look at people differently. (*Staring* 193)

Although she admits that danger lies in the process not reaching its designed conclusion, that it will not necessarily 'leap from intent to effect' (ibid), by remaining hidden (through passing or being absent from the social domain entirely) no sense of difference in humanity can be known or acted upon. 'To be recognized', she writes, 'one needs literally to be seen' (195).

Thus, disabled performers in general, and the 'disabled aerialist' in particular, situate (consciously or not) within a complex web of expectations and looking encounters. As a disabled person with discernible impairments the performer might seek to avoid the daily stares of those unused to her appearance or behaviour. In performance, however, she positions herself in the public domain specifically so that people do look at her – inspired or not by 'visual activism'. Intentionally or not, as an aerialist, she also forces her audiences to challenge their understanding of the conventions of the aerial form by presenting visual, physical and aesthetic alterations to its established history. If the presence of and work by 'disabled aerialists' is currently relatively unknown, perhaps their work can be situated within a broader disability arts and performance culture. How do disabled performers manage the complexity of looks and stares? Do performers address disability issues and/or their own impairments directly or ignore them, leaving viewers to manage the intertextual layers of information unaided?

Disability Arts & Culture

Despite this thesis focusing more on circus than on theatre, the work of the aerialist interconnects with both, particularly in the twenty-first century, and today's 'disabled aerialist' can also be seen to cross into both genres. An appreciation of disability theatre – not least through a more formalised process of 'visual activism' – is important to situate the 'disabled aerialist' within a contemporary performance frame.

In *Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theater through Disability Theater* Joan Lipkin and Ann M. Fox question what 'disability theatre' really is, suggesting that even in 2002 (the year of publication) it was yet to have a clear definition. They questioned whether it should include for example: 'any work by a disabled playwright [...] regardless of subject matter'; any work that 'include[d] images of disability'; Deaf theatre or work 'that particularly emphasizes the therapeutic or cathartic effects' of its performers (81). Ultimately, they determined that it is 'a self-conscious artistic movement' in which 'writers and performers within disability culture

have moved to create art as multifaceted as the community from which it emerges' (ibid). They cite disability scholar Victoria Ann Lewis who proposes there are two particular trends associated with disability theatre: firstly, work that 'focuses on exposing disability as a social construction', and secondly work that 'celebrates the difference of the disability experience' (ibid). The first uses theatre to 'advocate for disability rights' through 'contraven[ing] stereotypes' and 'question[ing] definitions of bodily normalcy', whilst the 'latter direction emphasises the experience of disability and disability culture' (ibid). Kathleen Toleen, however, suggests that some artists have a much greater 'interest in artistic and aesthetic exploration and expression' than in tackling 'disability issues' and their work might not be directly connected to disability or impairment (qtd. in Lipkin and Fox 82). Of course, there will be works that fall discreetly into one or other of these categories, and then works that harmonise all of them.

Presenting in 2013 at the Dusseldorf Dance Congress, Kaite O'Reilly asserted:

Disability arts and culture can be defined as work made by, for and about those with physical, sensory or intellectual impairments informed by the experience of living in a disabling world. It is work created by and led by disabled practitioners. It's the opposite of 'arts and disability', where in the UK and Ireland at least, creative expression is something provided for the disabled and led and ultimately controlled by the non-disabled practitioner. ("Border")

The writer and dramaturg echoes Lipkin and Fox, stating the work within disability culture is primarily 'disability led'. Most importantly, 'disabled people are in control and take the lead, direct the gaze, create the content, aspire to or own the means of production as well as the product' (ibid). Although the subject matter might be as varied as the artists making it, she cites Colin Cameron when saying such work necessarily 'embodies resistance to hegemonic discourses of normality and abnormality', and presents 'physical difference as something to be expected and respected, valued on its own terms as part of ordinary human existence' (ibid).

Acknowledging the breadth of disability related performance work and consciously attempting to 'negotiate these divisions between art and activism in a more synthesized fashion', Lipkin and Fox therefore propose 'a disability aesthetic' that in general terms harnesses both the method, '*how* we say things', and the content '*what* we say', interlinking the 'artistic and activist strains of disability theater' ("Res(Crip)ting" 82). Particularly relevant to the 'disabled aerialist', Lipkin and Fox propose that in essence the 'disability aesthetic' provokes audiences to 'consider new ways to perceive space, time, and the body, while not denying the materiality of those same bodily experiences as lived by disabled people' (87).

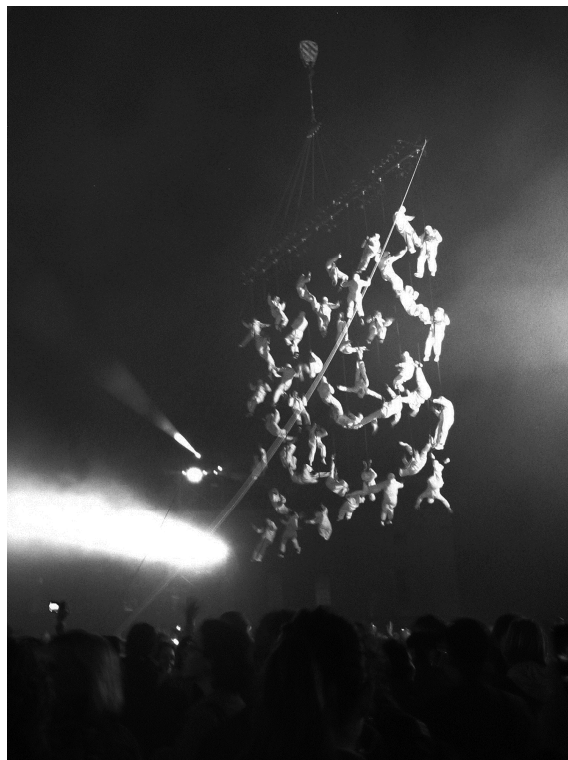
The two case studies will demonstrate a combination of several of these definitions, whilst also working against them at times. Both studies intentionally set out to challenge presumptions and provoke thought. They each aimed to celebrate the multiplicity of 'disabled aerialists', but the aspect of 'control' that O'Reilly emphasizes is (necessarily due to the scale of the *POC*) not always in the hands of the disabled performers. Each can certainly be seen to present the 'disabled aerialist' in ways that might challenge audiences to reconsider who *can* be an aerialist and what movements can be considered *as* aerial, and *Hang-ups!* also maintains a close connection to the performer, Partridge, and the 'materiality' of her 'lived experience'. Despite both projects being 'disability led', a dilemma nevertheless becomes apparent in the *POC*, when the performers' 'lived experiences' become subsumed within the event itself resulting in some of them losing their visibility *as* disabled people altogether that proves to be of concern to some of them.

Graeae Theatre Company

Graeae is 'the UK's leading disability theatre company', supported by the Arts Council of England with more than half a million pounds of annual funding at least since 2008 (ACE Graeae np). The company specialises in making work by Deaf and disabled people in traditional theatres and more recently in outdoor environments and has been working with circus elements in some of their shows for almost ten years. Artistic Director, Jenny Sealey, also co-directed the *POC* in London 2012, and the company is therefore useful to discuss in terms of gauging understanding and appreciation of diverse work by leading Deaf/disabled artists in the UK. Some of Graeae's productions have been overtly political in relation to disability, such as O'Reilly's commissioned play *Peeling* where the lives of the disabled characters, set backstage of the 'show within a show', discussed very real issues concerning disabled actors. The company also makes outdoor works with a less overt political message, but that still focus on access and inclusion. Their 2012 production of *Prometheus Awakes* that incorporated more than fifty people in the air at one time was such an event where the disabled performers' impairments were at times highly visible, but by no means formed the central narrative of the production.

A significant feature of much of Graeae's work is the integration of access into the performances themselves to ensure that disabled audiences in particular will be able to engage fully with the productions. This includes the use of BSL, audio description and the employment of diverse disabled performers. These 'aesthetics of access' (Sealey & Lynch) will be addressed in detail in the chapter on the *POC* but, critiquing one of their outdoor shows, *Against the Tide*, Kate Larsen wrote it was a show 'without compromises and with access completely and perfectly integrated into the performance' (n.pag.). She explains that '[e]ach

of the actors [took] their turn to describe or sign, facilitating one another's access and creating a seamless performance' (ibid). The focus on access is integral to Graeae's work and has become a working methodology as well as an aesthetic construction appearing in their shows regardless of whether the production's content is directly dealing with disability issues. This clearly demonstrates that the company carries the social (or indeed interactional) model of disability at its core, but it also provokes audiences into noticing the explicit diversity, not only of the bodies and behaviours of the actors but also of the diverse communication and language forms present within the company. Graeae's working definition of the 'aesthetics of access' therefore encompasses fully Cameron and O'Reilly's assertions above, most notably that physical and language differences are 'to be expected and respected as a part of human existence'.



8. Human 'net' in *Prometheus Awakes*. Author's Collection.

Although often celebrated, this 'disability aesthetic' has attracted some interesting criticism. Reviewing *Peeling*, Rhoda Koenig found little in the production to be of relevance to her, clearly separating out two potential audiences:

Whatever value *Peeling* may have for audiences of disabled people is not for me to say. But, as a critic for a general audience, I did not find it engaging. *Peeling* is not so much a play as a vehicle for presenting the feelings of handicapped people and discussing their place in society [...]. (n.pag.)

Omitting a discussion on the purpose of plays here, she sees this production falling into Lewis's first category of 'disability theatre'. It certainly was about 'exposing disability as a social construction' (Lipkin & Fox "Res(Crip)ting" 81), but Koenig concludes her review stating that '[b]etween symbolism on one hand and banality on the other, the lives of real people have got lost in the middle' (n.pag.). Confusingly, she argues that it presents both 'the feelings of handicapped people' (using an outdated term) while simultaneously stating that the 'lives of real people have got lost' (ibid). Although it is perhaps tempting to suggest that the 'real people' belong to the 'general audience' (of non-disabled people) rather than the 'audiences of disabled people', her review does imply that *she* was unable to discern anything meaningful beyond the exposure of 'disability' itself. She *saw* disabled people, acting *as* disabled people, with relevance only *to* disabled people, and by so doing, placed herself firmly outside the same 'society' in which 'they' lived – or rather placed 'them' outside the world she inhabited. Curiously, she presents her argument distinguishing between 'types' of people that could be considered in Goffman's terms the 'norms' and the 'stigmatized', but does not appear to be at all curious or indeed sympathetic to those that differ from her. Nor does she acknowledge that disability/impairment might reach more widely into the 'general audience'. Perhaps this is what Thomson warned against, that the final stage of 'visual activism' might struggle to come to fruition, as the distinction between disabled performer/non-disabled critic appears, at least to Koenig, so great as to have no bearing at all on her or her own place in society.

In *Prometheus Awakes*, a collaborative performance between Graeae and the internationally renowned Catalanian circus company, La Fura dels Baus, Welly O'Brien, who has a lower limb amputation, was the central dancer. Numerous other performers working alongside her also had discernible (and invisible) impairments, but the theatrical narrative was not about nor significantly related to amputation or disability. Writing in the British Theatre Guide, Howard Loxton concluded that 'Graeae has once again shown that disability doesn't stop you doing amazing things' (n.pag.), such as flying high from a crane or being suspended one-hundred feet in the air as part of a human 'net'. As a self-professed 'long admir[er]' of Graeae's work, a more positive perspective might be understandable, however, it also suggests that familiarity helps to acknowledge, appreciate and understand both disability *and* the story. I do not want to imply that familiarity enables viewing *beyond* the disability, as this in itself would negate its very politics and returns humanity to a homogenised, uniform being, but when those engaged in the watching are familiar with impairments and indeed disability theatre, the interaction of the gazes is potentially less problematic. There is an acceptance that humans come in all forms, and that there is a place for all of us within the performing arts. If relatively new to the experience, the observers may find it difficult to engage fully in the

performance, perhaps preoccupied by the impairments themselves, though exactly how each person is looking and engaging is of course impossible to know.

The Haunting Power of Freak Shows

The relationship between performer and audience might become further complicated when the disabled performers engage with practices that have (at least retrospectively) unsavoury historical associations, most notably the freak show and the circus. In her introduction to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Thomson shows how 'born freaks', those people whose potential for exhibition *as* freaks, presented through their distinguishing visible marks (often relating to physical impairment or diverse cultural origin), were both revered and feared. She argues that the 'freak' was an indicator for audiences of what was 'normal' by demonstrating what was 'abnormal'. Thomson and Davis have both argued that disability shaped normalcy in the industrial age and performance 'freaks' enabled audiences to be reassured of their own sense of like-normal identity. A clear differentiation here between contemporary disability performances and these earlier ones can therefore be seen in the interpretation. In earlier times exhibiting performers potentially exaggerated their differences to forge greater separation between audience and performer, but in the twenty-first century performances, the interpretation seems much more about kinship with one another no matter how different.

There are of course 'performers who juggle knives, eat fire, escape from straight-jackets, and wrap themselves with snakes' (Adams *Sideshow* 215) who call themselves 'freaks'; indeed for J. Dee Hill writing in *Freaks and Fire*, the term

Freak has come to mean something slightly different than its original definition. Freak implies both a larger community in which the individual is shunned, or at least regarded with vague suspicions, for his or her peculiarities, and a smaller community in which those peculiarities are embraced. It's about relationships, not just physical anomalies. (xi)

Hill's definition of 'freak' is very similar to Goffman's 'stigma' where he too argues it is predominantly concerning relationships rather than anomalies and that in different groupings individual peculiarities will be more or less accepted. Nevertheless, for disabled performers to engage with the freak show in the twenty-first century might be more troubling than for non-disabled performers.

Writing in 2001, Adams recalls her personal experience of witnessing the 'rotund, developmentally disabled dwarf, Koko [the Killer Clown]' performing at the Coney Island Side Show.

My response, shared by other audience members, was distinct discomfort. We could not laugh, for despite Koko's concerted efforts, there was nothing funny about what we were seeing and the very act of looking, of being there at all, suddenly made us feel complicit in his degradation. (*Sideshow* 216)

For Adams it was this reference to 'the aspects of past freak shows' that made her feel so uncomfortable, as she believed a 'line between individual agency and exploitation had been crossed' (ibid). This exploitation and lack of agency, she argued, occurred because the performer 'seems so unaware of how he is perceived by the audience' (ibid). She believes that because the audience did not laugh at the clown's jokes it must be because he is a 'disabled dwarf', however, something she does not consider is that it might also be that he was a bad clown, and simply not funny. Nevertheless, to suggest that he was ignorant of his audience's perception is difficult to believe considering all that has been said so far. As a person of small stature, he might well have spent his life being 'stared' at for simply being small as Shakespeare shared of his own experience earlier.⁴⁰ Furthermore, performing in the Coney Island Side Show gives a very clear indication that both audience and performer alike at least *should* have understood its relation to freak shows (see Denney; Bogdan).

Whether Koko deliberately referenced past freak shows in his act is unclear, but other artists with distinguishable impairments have certainly returned to the form in their works. Established UK disability rights advocate and performer Mat Fraser created two shows directly echoing the earlier centuries' phenomenon: *The Freak & the Showgirl* and *Sealboy: Freak* (Fraser). Similar to Graeae's *Peeling*, however, he used the form to ask questions. In the programme notes for the latter show Fraser asks: '[c]an a disabled performer ever be seen as anything other than a freak, irrespective of the 'liberal' and 'postmodern' attitudes of today's sophisticated audiences?' (qtd. in Kupperts *Bodies* 32). Regardless of whether or not the performer is cleverly manipulating the genre or repeating it willingly, there is a danger that the performance becomes reified as freak show, rather than necessarily subverting it.

Fraser doesn't embrace disability politics from the polite, liberal, rational, civil rights end, but utilizes freak tactics, disruption, destabilization and irrationality as his weapons to punch through assorted stereotypes and to establish his presence. (44)

⁴⁰ Tom Shakespeare writes about his own experience of being stared at, which supports my supposition that Koko might have had a similar experience. 'I have restricted growth. This is a very visible impairment, but is comparatively minor. The main effect in daily life is that many people stare at me. This is because the vast majority of people do not have restricted growth and are unfamiliar with people with restricted growth. For them, and particularly for children, dwarfs are fascinating. Education can reduce but will never eliminate this natural curiosity. Therefore, I will always be stared at.' (*Rights* 63)

Fraser may have been successful in his destabilization of stereotypes through aggressively re-harnessing the freak identity for his own purposes, but Richard Butchins' film *The Last American Freak Show* suggests there is in fact a real danger in the subversion becoming the thing it sets out to subvert. As a self-disclosed 'disabled film maker' Butchins sought to question his own opinions on the matter by following the USA 'freak' phenomenon, the 999 Eyes. This small morphing collective was started and managed by two 'self-made' (non-disabled) 'freaks' who somewhat haphazardly employed disabled people who did not necessarily have any performance experience or indeed skill. They were employed solely on their potential 'freakishness' that was evident in their bodies, and they formed a dysfunctional unit close to Hill's redefinition above. In Butchins opinion, 'basically they're a bunch of people having a good time. It's a freak show. It really is a freak show'. Conclusively, however, he states '[e]ven with their permission it's the most exploitative thing I've ever seen' (ibid).

Acknowledging that a serious amount of editing was required in the making of the film and it may well be biased towards Butchins' conclusions, the film nevertheless makes somewhat distressing viewing not least because the performers appear at times to be treated badly and seldom as 'a bunch of people having a good time'. Moreover, the control seems to be solely in the hands of the non-disabled managers rather than the disabled performers themselves, but Butchins does admit that at least 'it gives people like Ken and Jason the chance to be stared at on their own terms' (ibid). Irrespective of skill (in the case of the 999 Eyes), the salvaging of agency and returning the gaze through a reversed stare is a recurring theme in work by disabled artists, and will therefore be important when viewing the work of 'disabled aerialists'.⁴¹

These particular examples demonstrate that disabled performers utilise their power of controlling the gaze in diverse ways, either putting their audiences at ease or disrupting the social order of staring and 'staring back'. Of course, at other times they simply present themselves within the context of fictional performances, as do their non-disabled acting counterparts. Audience reactions will obviously vary. *Prometheus Awakes* excited one reviewer who saw it as further vindication of demonstrable ability in the performers. Contrastingly, another reviewer was left cold and disconnected by the focus on disability as a

⁴¹ Kenny Fries states in the opening paragraph of his book entitled *Staring Back*, that 'in these pages [...] writers with disabilities affirm our lives by putting the world on notice that that we are staring back' (1). He argues the need for such an anthology, first published in 1997, was founded in the warped history of 'those who live with disabilities hav[ing] been defined by the gaze and the needs of the nondisabled world' (ibid) with often detrimental and even fatal consequences to the disabled individuals themselves.

social phenomenon in *Peeling*; meanwhile Koko, Fraser and the 999 Eyes showed that audiences could be repulsed, concerned or anxious by the resurrection of freak shows.⁴²

Regardless of methodological approach or creative reasoning, each commentary on the performances mentioned above did nevertheless reference impairment or disability. Audiences are arguably always aware of the performers' (visible) impairments, and the performers are always aware of this awareness, whether they reference it directly or not. Whether that awareness becomes imposing, awkward, 'baroque staring' will no doubt vary between productions, performers and audiences. Unlike other areas of professionalism (most notably Stephen Hawking in science) where disability and impairment may not be wholly interlinked with the work taking place, performances by disabled people do (and perhaps always will) have an association with disability and impairment – via method, content and/or aesthetic – and might always have a complex relationship to looking.

Perhaps 'Madame Miniature the Dancing Dwarf' in Butchins' film understood it most succinctly when she commented that if she was going to be stared at anyway, she might as well get paid for it, even if it was not always a positive experience? Will the same apply to 'disabled aerialists'? Will audiences scrutinise their aerial performances, or will they stare more keenly owing to the suspension of their unusual aerial bodies? Will increasing opportunities for disabled people to engage in aerial and circus affect the nature of the gaze, and does it matter if the performers *choose* (to be paid) to perform?

Inherent Disability Narratives

Thomson has shown how staring is exacerbated by curiosity and Davis asserts that '[w]hen one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in a narrative. A person became deaf, became blind, was born blind, became quadriplegic' (3). Kenny Fries attests that 'at some point in our lives, each and every one of us, sooner or later, will be, whether for short term or long, in some way disabled' and is not alone in suggesting that disabled people are therefore 'treated as unwelcome reminders of the mortality that is the fate of us all' (8). As Elaine Scarry believed beauty forced observers to confront their own *extant* 'errors' (48), so observing disabled people might generate a similar nervousness in the witness, only this time about their *future* demise. Such considerations are thought therefore to generate the need to know and understand more about the specifics of the individual's impairment beginning a process of generating narrative and moral judgement alongside the impairments.

⁴² Mat Fraser is currently appearing in the latest American Horror Story series *Freak Show*, by FXNetworks. Some of the performers have discernible impairments (like Fraser) and others are non-disabled actors performing disabled and 'freak' performers. It is too early to comment on how this will be received.

[D]isabilities always create curiosity on the part of the observer. What is the disability? How profound is it? Can I see it, touch, know it? How did it happen? What does it interfere with? What would life be like if I had that impairment? (L. Davis xvi)

This is not only true of non-disabled observers of disabled people, but is commonplace amongst disabled people themselves. Sharing experiences of accidents, treatment, pain and recoveries has certainly dominated discussion between amputees I have worked with over the last few years. An additional concern however, raised by several writers, is that some disabled performers provoke a sense of fear in their non-disabled audiences ostensibly instigated by these (possibly unconsciously asked) questions, as the performers visibly present the burgeoning possibility that the audience members too could become disabled at any time. We are all inherently disabled-in-waiting.

Everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are “intrinsically impossible to embody” fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough. (McRuer 30)

Many writers argue that disability narratives (often based on questions not dissimilar to those above) impact on the interpretation, understanding and appreciation of the lives of and indeed performances by disabled people.⁴³ Not only are narratives sought or imagined for the disabled performer (regardless of the character or role they are performing), but a ‘welter of powerful emotional responses’ is engendered through these narratives that include ‘horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance’ (ibid 12). Although narratives of amputation are perhaps more generally understandable – due to any domestic or work related incident that can occur to disabled and non-disabled people alike – other narratives emerge through other means.

The sight of living people with unusual bodies invites us to remap fantastic stories of giants, dwarfs, and monsters onto these people. People who look like dwarfs, giants, and monsters draw stares because they are unfamiliar as flesh and too familiar as narrative. Often lost in this exchange is a sense of the particular lives and looks of the people whose shapes have across history given rise to these stories. (Thomson *Staring* 167)

⁴³ The anthologies of Kenny Fries, Lois Keith, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, as well as Martin Norden to whom I refer later on, are some of the examples of such writings.

Disability performance therefore seems to present a number of challenges, particularly if the performers' impairments are discernible – rather than impairments that can be or are 'hidden' – as an observer might struggle to separate actor from character. The narrative surrounding the actor and his/her impairment might perpetuate through the reading of the character they perform. Watching some disabled performers therefore involves negotiating visible, aesthetic and functional diversity as well as intrinsic narratives that do not necessarily relate directly to the specifics of the performance. Alternatively, the narratives of characters might be dictated by the impairments of the performers, leading to the (re)creation of stereotypes and myths as Thomson implies above. Such complexity is arguably exacerbated when the art-form chosen for the presentations also has a challenging relationship with disabled artists.

The Circus of Isolation

In *The Cinema of Isolation* Norden demonstrates how the film industry has had a particularly problematic relationship with the idea and presentation of physical disability. Although potentially marginalised by mainstream society, disabled people were 'not marginal to popular culture' (Kuppers 107) but 'exerted a strong grip on the form, as well as the content' (Adams *Sideshow* 3). Leslie A. Fiedler wrote that 'the strangely formed body has represented absolute Otherness in all times and places since human history began' (xiii), and it is this sense of Otherness, that the film industry seems to have harnessed when using disability narratives, whilst not necessarily presenting the stories of disabled people themselves.

Norden asserts that disability was a significant theme projecting through the first hundred years of film but rather than enhance the understanding of disabled people and their lives it further branded disabled characters (and perhaps the disabled actors as well) within particular stereotypes whose names suggest their interlinked narrative trajectories. He proffers the following examples throughout his book that are also discussed by other writers: 'The Falsely Disabled', 'The Tragic Victim', 'The Vengeful Cripple' or 'The Obsessive Avenger', 'The Hero' (that merges with a more modern nomenclature of 'The Super Crip'), 'The Evil One', 'The Sweet Innocent', 'The Charity Cripple', 'The Curable Romantic' and 'The Noble Warrior'. Not only are these characters, themes and ideas frequented in film but as Kuppers and others attest, they also appear in 'live' performance, literature and visual art as well as in discussions on sport, especially the Paralympics. Although disabled characters are populous in these fictional genres, they were predominantly used as devices.

[D]isabled characters are corporealized metaphors for a problem to be resolved within the narrative, most often symbolically by the character's cure, death, revaluation, or "rescue from censure." (Sandahl *Black* 584)

Thus the disabled characters provided a short-hand narrative objective to be read by a majority non-disabled viewing public where impairment or performed disability always meant something *more* than the impairment itself. Furthermore, the 'problem of disability' had to be and would be 'solved' (ibid). Returning the focus to the circus, this broad genre has also had a troubled relationship with disabled performers.

The travelling circus represented the new experience of nature and of social and cosmic order which had become dominant within the rising industrial order. Freaks and animals were not only exhibited but gathered in a ring, under a tent, playing and being played by rules of performance. (Carmeli "Wee Pea" 128)

As a disabled person, to be a performer arguably meant having to perform in 'the sideshow, the freak display [...] and the medical theatre' rather than on the 'aesthetic stage' of the theatre (Kuppers 31). Thus, regardless of career potential, fame or fortune that disabled performers might receive for their performances, they were limited to being associated with performance genres that highlighted their physical, mental or behavioural *differentness* to the social 'norms', through which familiar narratives were exposed or played out. In her article, "Dwarfs: The Changing Lives of Archetypal 'Curiosities' - and Echoes of the Past", Adelson writes that '[a]mong all persons with physical anomalies', it is people of small stature, often referred to as 'dwarfs', 'whose destiny, in every era, has been so ineluctably shaped by their extraordinary bodies' (1). She provides a 'brief history' demonstrating how 'they are highlighted in the legends and myths of every nation' but were usually 'assigned to wait upon or amuse others' (2). In the circus, people of small stature have most usually performed as clowns, and this, she writes, is an 'example of an occupation that tends to be regarded as demeaning' (6).

Preceding Adams' review of Koko the Killer clown discussed earlier, in his essay, *Wee Pea: The Total Play of the Dwarf in the Circus*, Carmeli demonstrates how one circus clown performed his 'deformity' willingly inside the circus arena but unwillingly outside it. JS, whose name is always in this abbreviated form (perhaps with aggravated diminishment), was exiled by his family to a 'boarding school ("because I was different")' and then exiled himself by joining the circus as 'a circus midget' because he 'could not face the world around him' (129). Echoing some of the stereotypes listed above, Carmeli demonstrates that the only place 'suitable' for JS in the circus was with the clowns who were 'the most openly criticized and

mocked performers in the circus' (131).⁴⁴ JS, as his character Wee Pea, was 'defined as an entity outside the ordinary human world' (139); he was either clever or mischievous. As the character he was the 'scapegoat' who was 'rooted in the confrontation or antagonism between him and the others' (136). He always occupied a status that was not quite human, even dressing up as a monkey. Where the other clowns could remove their makeup and return to being 'themselves' after the shows, JS continued to be marginalised because he became 'reduced as a human being to just being his small size. Midgetness became a total performance for the dwarf, constituting both his show and his central existential condition' (143). Describing some of the humiliations that JS underwent on a regular basis Carmeli recounts,

Children would [ask] their mothers if he was a "real man". Mothers would sometimes allow their children to draw nearer and touch the circus midget and JS could only murmur to a circus man standing nearby: "Get them little bastards away from me". (ibid)

JS had chosen the circus as a relatively safe place to live and work, where he had sought to have an element of control over the voyeuristic public gaze. Carmeli shows, however, that the circus boss had the greatest control over the clown routines, JS's involvement and performance. His (fictional) clown routines were all based around (factual) small stature. The character's antics were generated by the actor's physiological condition. JS found that even in the circus he was not a welcome addition to the performance world. Echoing Adams' opinion earlier in relation to Koko, Carmeli states that

The manipulation of JS's deformity and the exploitation of his exposure was (sic) considered by circus professionals not only degrading to JS himself, but to some extent a threat to other performers too. What they were trying to dramatize and sell as enigmatic play was turned by the midget into a "cheap" solution of displayed freakishness. (143)

Curiously, this reflects the discussion in the previous chapter on authenticity of actions and the propensity for circus acts to be representational. The clown is possibly the circus artist that was most prominently able to play with the artifice that Coxe mentioned, as they would often

⁴⁴ The reduction of all clowns, in all circuses, to this status is certainly debatable, (not least that the clown was often *the* most important character in Russian circuses pre-Glasnost) but as Carmeli is drawing from his own experience in witnessing events at the specific Brown's circus it is at least pertinent to the specificity of the example.

play with reality and absurdity for comic effect. In this instance, it appears that the lack of artifice in the clown's stature is what makes his performance problematic for some people.

Thus, despite the struggle by disabled people to have disability recognised in social terms (see B. Hughes "Disability" 64), and contrary to Bogdan's argument that 'being a freak is not a personal matter' (*Freak* 3), some people still classified disabled performers as 'freaks'. At least in this instance, it appears that even his fellow performers struggled to distinguish between JS as a person and his performance character Wee Pea, between his physical difference and his *playing* of difference. Bogdan cites Diane Arbus and Susan Sontag, both writing in the 1970s, stating that "'freak" has become a metaphor for estrangement, alienation, marginality, the dark side of the human experience' (2). JS was marginalised by his family, banished from conventional education and even ostracised from, yet integral to, the potentially most peripheral of performance genres at the time – the circus. Despite *not* playing a 'freak persona' in Bogdan's terms, he was enfreaked by his isolation and marginality as defined by Arbus and Sontag. Admittedly, this is just one example of one researcher/audience member's view of one small-statured clown, but it demonstrates the complexity of observation, particularly when associated with the circus. JS was in essence (perhaps the only) member of that particular circus of isolation.

JS and his ancestral 'freak' performers were situated to the margins of the circus spectacle; meanwhile the aerialist was superseding the equestrians to being the climactic acts of the circus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed aerialists were even thought to have 'embodied a scientific future in demonstrating superior mind and body control' (Tait *Circus* 35). Nonetheless, as the previous chapter showed, aerialists simultaneously performed these aspects of superhumanness with social abnormality owing to their developed musculatures and exposed vibrant bodies. '[E]ighteen years on the high trapeze' impacted on Luisita Leers' body with the result that people would 'stare at her arms hardly believing their eyes when they see the bulging muscles and the dark burns inside her elbows' (Tait *Circus* 87). She could have covered her arms, hiding her perceptively unusual physique if she had felt so inclined, but JS and other performers with bodies less difficult to pass as socially normal did not have such choices.

Traditional circus is the domain of bodies and physicalities that are out of the ordinary, and its hyperbole exploited ideas of extraordinariness. [...] Furthermore, as twentieth-century ideals of superior physical prowess became the prerogative of competitive sports, abnormality was allocated to the circus. (Tait *Circus* 138)

Spanning several centuries, disabled performers and aerialists therefore shared interconnected, if separate, territories. Each had a close affinity with the circus. Each was considered freakish or marginal to her wider society. Each was potentially born in the revolutionary times of growing industry, but each was situated at opposite ends of the evolutionary spectrum from the other. The aerialist was high, physically and metaphorically, elevated to superhuman ranking in performance. The disabled performer was low to the ground and diminished to comic sidekick or freak. Despite their significantly different social and geographical statuses within the circus, the disabled performer and the aerialist were united by their extraordinariness, presenting bodies that did not conform to conventions of appearance or function constructed by their own societies.

The histories of performers with physical impairments in circus might suggest that in the twenty-first century, disabled performers would choose other genres with which to engage. Certainly, Partridge (who appears in the first case study) admitted to having to defend her connection to it when questioned by friends. However, if the aerialists were also considered freakish (by the society beyond the circus) *and* central to the circus genre, perhaps if the disabled performers moved away from the show's periphery and towards its core this might be seen as progressive? The danger of course would lie in whether the two freakish identities erased one another, or whether combined they further complicated and exaggerated the freak identity.

Heterogeneous 'Disabled Aerialists'

Three of us decided to do a simultaneous 'Montréal Drop'. We clambered the silks in unison, wrapped the fabric through 'catchers', and into the 'Big Mama' position, before pulling into the 'meat hook' with the fabric starting to constrict around our stomachs. Holding the tails out in front of us we softly called: GO! Two of us took a beat, and allowed our bodies to twist and fall into the final suspended position. OUCH! That really tweaked my left thigh! The third had bottled it catching herself before 'falling', resulting in her having to unwind herself slowly from the wrapped silks. We came down, two of us bubbling from the adrenalin, the third accepting of her decision to leave it until next time. We all exclaimed at the constricting sensation we had felt first around our stomachs and then our thighs. All par-for-the-course! If I spent my energies pondering the possible disasters that could befall me or seriously grumbled at every little pain I inflicted on myself, I am sure I would never venture up a rope again. (Author's recollection: Airhedz training session 14th September 2011)

The Fallen Aerialist

This aerial action, that the three of us continue to refer to as the 'Montréal Drop', was taught to us by fellow aerialist Emma Insley, several years ago. We all remember it as a fun and exciting day. Sadly, Insley died in 2008, when the equipment she was connected to fell from a crane during a rehearsal with Fidget Feet in Ireland. Her death ricocheted around the

aerial world as a 'freak accident' (Williams, S. n.pg). Kate March, the aerialist who decided not to complete the drop at that time, had also experienced a traumatic fall several years before.

I didn't flex my foot doing the [front balance roll to] mermaid [...] and it went past the rope. [...] So I had a completely ripped tendon from that in my right knee, and I remember hearing it rip as well. I [also] chipped the elbow bone but that was it. It was the leg really, that was the problem. (March)

March took almost a year to recover, but gradually returned to training with the tendon permanently reattached by wire (ibid). Desperate to go back into the air because she 'missed it so much', she decided to concentrate on rope and silks because the trapeze still made her feel 'really vulnerable' (ibid).

[Working on trapeze means] you have got that big space between you, the trapeze and the floor, but the rope goes all the way to the floor. I don't know, psychologically that was the big thing for me. By having the accident I was more aware of having that space and the fact that there's nothing in that space to grab between the trapeze and the floor. (ibid)

The Montréal Drop, amongst other aerial actions, therefore permanently carried a mix of excitement, joy, anticipation and a haunting, deathly reminder of failure.

Leaping and diving actions no doubt induced psychic fears of maimed if not fatally injured bodies, in accord with what Freud (1986) outlines in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', as a darkly disturbing psychic underside to what is outwardly cheerful and reassuring. (Tait *Circus* 25)

As the previous chapter highlighted, risk and danger (and the different perceptions of them) are an integral part of an aerialist's work and, even with twenty-first century technology, all aerialists undertake a calculated risk to defy our disabling potential every time we engage in aerial. Every climb of a rope, swing on a trapeze or dramatic drop on aerial fabric carries this danger to varying degrees. The aerialist has to accept (consciously or not) that one day she may fall, that fall may kill her, injure her temporarily, or transform her body and her life more permanently, and the audiences must accept this (consciously or not) as well. Hardy-Donaldson believed that '[i]t's the balance of the potential to fall [...]; it's that *risk* that people want to see. They don't want to see you fall though. [...] They don't want to see accidents'.

Speaking to me after Insley's death in 2008, Hardy-Donaldson commented that there had not 'been that many accidents in the UK for decades. It's been a long time since there

were loads of people dropping off things because we've put in so many safety measures' (ibid).⁴⁵ Gallagher and Culhane wrote however, that '[f]lyers, including women, suffered major injuries such as broken backs in attempting the triple' somersault on the flying trapeze (qtd. in Tait *Circus* 116). Gossard, in *A Reckless Era...* and Garrett Soden, in *Falling: How our Greatest Fear Became our Greatest Thrill*, also present numerous examples of disastrous accidents that occurred from the very early years of aerial exploration. Most of us who have trained extensively in aerial have carried at least some minor ailment such as the callusing of hands and backs of knees for trapeze artists and blisters, burns and abrasions for rope and silks artists. Not insignificant numbers have suffered more serious injury, such as twisted ankles, bruised ribs, dislocated shoulders or broken bones. For those of us who have so far escaped anything more serious, we still have colleagues, friends or family who have been permanently scarred, disfigured or disabled by their aerial actions. Some of us will know someone who paid the ultimate price.

I never think of it... a delay of even a tenth of a second can make a difference between a successful catch and a faulty one... 'Keep your head up... half turn... now GRAB... It helps you to concentrate'... People who've got nerves should leave trapeze work severely alone. But I guess every artiste gets a 'kick' out of the danger, it gives him a feeling of accomplishment. (Antoinette Concello qtd. Tait *Circus* 103)

I am regularly asked by non-aerialists if I have ever fallen, yet I do not recall ever discussing this inherent possibility in detail with other working aerialists. March also admitted that prior to her accident she did not seriously consider the dangers of aerial.

I knew it was dangerous, but I thought I was doing everything correctly so I didn't think it would happen to me. Stupidly enough, I had got it into my head that the most dangerous time is when you're doing a show, and not when you're practising, I don't know why.

Perhaps Antoinette Concello of the 'Flying Concellos, one of the most highly regarded aerial troupes during the 1930s and 1940s' (Tait *Circus* 101), is usual amongst aerialists, in not thinking about it, at least not whilst still engaging in the form; her comments nevertheless demonstrate a deep awareness of it. The aerial 'uncanny' is perhaps more prominent in the minds of those watching than those participating at the moment of action – not least through the aforementioned 'performance' of risk as well as 'perceived' and 'real' risks. Accidents are

⁴⁵ There was a serious accident in May 2014 that involved nine aerialists falling in the RBBBC, again through equipment failure. See "Nine US circus acrobats..."

nevertheless prominent, if not prolific, within aerial culture, and of those injured some recover and return unabashed to the air whilst others remain grounded thereafter. Therefore, the first definition of the 'disabled aerialist' is someone who has lost her aerial ability through an acquired impairment.

This particular example of a 'disabled aerialist' proliferates in fiction. Stoddart proffers that all fictional aerialists, both male and female are predominantly metaphorical enabling an 'exploration of a broader issue' (*Rings* 177). It is falling and the characters' relationship to it, however, that perpetuate through fictional narratives, not dissimilar to the previously exposed uses of disability/impairment in (non-circus) film. Fictional aerialists that fall (literally and metaphorically) are either forcibly removed from the aerial domain or (even on recovery) they have an altered relationship to it. If they do return, they do so in an apparently reduced, inferior or transformed manner.

Few artistic renderings of the aerialist in film and literature centre on male figures and those that do, such as *Trapeze* (Carol Reed, 1956) and Franz Kafka's short story 'First Sorrow' (1922), feature damaged men who are injured and hysterical respectively. (ibid)

Perhaps one of the most well-known of circus and aerial films is *Trapeze*, based on Max Catto's novel *The Killing Frost*, in which the 'ex-star' (Buford 150), Mike Ribble, falls in the opening sequences attempting the triple-somersault. His leg is damaged and his 'once-graceful body walks with a cane, its tensile frustration bristling off the screen' (ibid). He continues to demonstrate aerial potential but he does not return as a flyer. Instead, he becomes first a rigger, then teacher and catcher supporting the younger and keener Tino Orsini who seeks the triple-somersault for himself. Interestingly, both Stoddart and Tait comment on the 'damage' or 'flawing' of his male body, suggesting that his acquired impairment also affected his virility, masculinity and aerial worth. Stoddart dismisses both examples suggesting that owing to their 'damage' they are of no interest, but Tait, who considers the catcher as the embodiment of 1950s masculinity (compared to male flyers whom she argues are often feminised through their actions), commented that Ribble was 'ironically the more masculine figure' (*Circus* 107). Does the irony lie in a suggested de-masculinisation through impairment, conjoined with his re-masculinisation in shifting roles from flyer to catcher? Feminisation seems to echo in her reading of Kafka's *First Sorrow* too as she interprets his use of 'trapezists to mean feminized unconscious action in life' (36). This might suggest that impairment and disability (that do not affect the sexual organs) are emasculating,

even de-sexing – at least from a non-disabled observer’s perspective as Nancy Mairs discovered when her body started to transform.

No more sex, either, if society had its way. The sexuality of the disabled so repulses most people that you can hardly get a doctor, let alone a member of the general population, to consider the issues it raises. Cripples simply aren’t supposed to Want It, much less Do It. (Mairs 56)

The male ‘disabled aerialist’ is already beginning to demonstrate a complex blend of identities and possible contradictory meanings. He is symbolic of the superhuman yet carries the uncanny burden of potential disaster. If he manages to return to the air, still carrying a noticeable impairment (Ribble’s limp), then his sexuality and machismo are in question despite his demonstrable aerial proficiency.

Stoddart’s second example, known only as ‘the trapeze artist’ in Kafka’s short story, also has a disabling relationship with aerial. Starting ‘from a desire to perfect his skill, but later because custom was too strong for him’ the character ‘had so arranged his life that, as long as he kept working in the same building, he never came down from his trapeze by night or day’ (Muir & Muir). Potentially taking the social model of disability to an extreme, the aerialist’s ‘manager’ made significant alterations to the work, travel and domestic environments affecting the aerialist in order to accommodate his changing relationship to the ground. Although there is no mention of the aerial actions he undertakes, a presumption is made of his ability as translators Willa and Edwin Muir credit him as ‘an extraordinary and unique artist’ (ibid). Despite the trapeze artist’s unusual requirements, such modifications enabled him to ‘keep himself in constant practice and his art at the pitch of its perfection’ (ibid). Thus, in contrast to Ribble, his perceived impairments ostensibly enhanced his aerial capacity and were therefore worth the sacrifices others had to make in order to support him.

Aerial is shown, at least in these examples, to have the potential to injure aerialists physically, mentally and emotionally, but those injuries do not necessarily negatively impact on the aerial itself. The interpretation and appreciation of their work, however, is dependent upon the observer, as Stoddart and Tait were dismissive of the two male ‘disabled aerialists’, whilst characters within the respective narratives were not. Despite their own works refocusing history on forgotten aerialists, the historians present what Davis termed ‘ableist’ notions by ignoring or dismissing aspects of disability.

Two more established fictional works that focus on male aerialists who have an injurious relationship with aerial could also be considered here. Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Greatest Show on Earth*, relays the story of the Great Sebastian who falls and loses the competition for

the prime solo spot in the circus arena, and, perhaps more painfully still, he loses his identity as an aerialist owing to his resultant impairments. Additionally, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Catch Trap* interweaves the challenges of male homosexuality and disability within her aerial narrative. In all of them, as Stoddart asserts, the male aerialists present an injury that is either life altering or aerial affecting. Curiously, however, this is not, as she might be implying, unique to male aerialists. Fictional stories based on or including female aerialists also have falling, death or disablement as fundamental 'narrative prostheses' (Mitchell & Snyder qtd. Sandahl "Tyranny" 255). The male aerialists might in some cases return to the air despite their injuries, but oftentimes, fictional female aerialists remain grounded. Katherine Dunn's Lil Binewski in *Geek Love* removes herself completely from the performance arena after her fall and aerial disappears from the book as a result. In Tod Browning's *Freaks*, Clio falls (metaphorically) from aerialist to 'freak' never to fly again despite being turned into a bird and Lola Montes, the character in Max Ophuls's film of the same title (1955) falls (or perhaps dives) from her platform with equally enfreaking results.

Lola then is seen for the last time as a sideshow, behind bars, in the menagerie with the animals, extending her "extraordinary and piquant favors" to the masses of men willing to buy cheap tickets. Her identity is reduced to precisely what earlier as an "attractive woman" she denied: "I am not a fairground freak." (Russo 46)

Even the most prominent of fictional aerialists, Fevvers, in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, embodies disability, impairment and even 'freak' identities throughout the tale, also relinquishing her aerial career at the end of the narrative. As the reporter and Fevvers' eventual confidante, Jack Walser, watches her aerial display, he comments that she 'went no further than any other trapeze artiste. She neither attempted nor achieved anything a wingless biped could not have performed, although she did it in a different way' (17). He defends her choice suggesting that 'in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world' (ibid), later accepting that

If she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then – she was no longer a wonder. She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but – a freak. (161).

Fevvers' paradox lies in her combined and ambiguous interplay with freak and aerial identities. If she is indeed a *real* bird she should be able to do even more extraordinary aerial stunts than those she displays, but Walser believes this would simultaneously diminish her from 'Greatest *Aerialiste*' to 'freak' as she would lose her status as woman and indeed human. Her natural

abilities are therefore shrouded within mundane aerial actions to maintain her ambiguity, thus enabling her to remain as woman and human in observers' eyes.

Her physical appearance also seems less conventional than usual as – even discounting her wings – Walser describes her as 'more like a dray mare than an angel' (12). She was 'six feet two in her stockings' with a 'face, broad and oval as a meat dish' which 'had been thrown on a common wheel out of course clay' resulting in their being 'nothing subtle about her appeal' (ibid). For Mary Russo, Fevvers is 'an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque' (159) that in turn Russo defines as 'protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing' and 'identified with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation' (8).

Disaster does not escape this aerialist either, however, as the magical tale involves a train crash in which she breaks her right wing, though she can still use her right arm (A. Carter 205). This suggests she could continue to perform as an aerialist, but the narrative does not return her to the air. Her adoptive mother, Lizzie, tells her

Every little accident has taken you one step down the road away from singularity. You're fading away, as if it was only always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim. (280)

The book ends as it begins in a confusion of fact and fiction, but the aerialist and the writer are now normalised through their marriage. Fevvers, 'who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage' concludes it in laughter at her husband's continuous pondering over her persuading him she was the 'only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world', to which she responds, 'Gawd, I fooled you then' (206). Consequently, her entire story and indeed her complex blend of identities are again upturned for questioning: who and what was she, really?

These select but established fictional aerialists all encountered some kind of disabling impairment that ultimately affected their aerial, and all were propelled through their narratives by falling or its potential (or disguised potential in Fevvers' case) in diverse ways. Koppers argued that '[d]isability and its companion, prostheses, are indeed not marginal to popular culture, but are often central to it, and to the fantasies of storytelling' (*Disability* 107). So too, disability, impairment and indeed the 'disabled aerialist' were present within all these narratives, discreet at times and blatant at others. If the 'disabled aerialist' perpetuates as a possibility through circus literature – even if only to be dismissed or grounded – how does she fare in circus reality, and what other definitions are possible within the term 'disabled aerialist'?

Returning to lived examples, Gossard references a number of men who could be considered as 'disabled aerialists', although he does not use that term. He writes of Alfred Silbon who 'fell forty feet and was crippled up', according to his brother's wife, and having become 'disabled after his fall', he 'never performed with the trapeze act again' (qtd. Gossard 113). Gossard also mentioned the more positive tale of Charlie Siegrist who, when working for RBBBC in 1931, fell and broke his neck.

The doctors told him that he would never work on the trapeze again. But by 1933 he *was* working again, making what must go down in the history books as the most incredible comeback in circus history after an accident of this sort. (163)

These two examples show the disability and aerial as separate from one another. The performers either recover and return as aerialists, or are grounded no longer willing or able to venture into the air in their altered states. Thomas Hanlon was perhaps an extreme example of this. He was one of the famed Hanlon Brothers who in the late 1860s invented the safety net that ultimately saved many lives, and that ironically also adding to the death toll as people bounced out of it or missed it altogether (Cosdon 32). One night in August 1865, Hanlon missed the rope that he swung for, in a free-fall descent at the end of his trapeze routine. Although he survived, Cosdon suggests that he never fully healed.

Over the next several years, he tried repeatedly to return to his aerial demonstrations but never really recovered his former abilities, perhaps due to shattered nerves, double vision, or other physical impairments brought on as a result of the fall. (22)

According to Gossard, citing the New York Clipper of the time, being 'forced to observe [the] new developments in the aerial arts from the side-lines' (qtd. in Cosdon 49) resulted in Hanlon taking his own life. He and Cosdon agree that there was a form of 'insanity' or 'psychological' disturbance in Hanlon that was perhaps exacerbated (or indeed caused) by his restricted aerial ability after that fall. He was an aerialist whose aerial ability had become reduced. He was a less able, even *dis*-abled aerialist; here the term is one of reduction and loss, which may well be seen to echo across the other definitions of this moniker. Despite Hanlon's own possible frustrations at not being able to recover 'his former abilities', he is purported to have killed himself in a very dramatic and acrobatic manner.

On the floor were iron heating pipes, with a large brass nut projecting at a jointure. When left alone in this cell he attempted to commit suicide, by a method of which none but a gymnast would think. He sprang into the air, about five feet, and, turning came down with his head upon the brass projection. He repeated his terrible feat several times, and when assistance arrived the floor was covered with blood. (Harrisburg n.pag.)

Another male aerialist famed both for his consistent performance of the triple somersault and for his world-famous marriage to Leitzel, ended his life in dramatic circumstances with an alternative reasoning to Hanlon.

An explanation for Alfredo [Codona]'s subsequent violence was more readily found in the emotional pain of losing an idealized lover like Leitzel rather than losing an aerial act through injury. (Tait *Circus* 98)

Leitzel died after a fall in 1931, and Codona had 'snapped two shoulder muscles in a shoulder dislocation in 1933'; the 'subsequent violence' refers to his 'murder-suicide, in which he shot his third wife [...] Vera Bruce' (97) and then himself in 1937. Tait is less convinced that Codona was mourning his second wife however being more inclined to blame 'depression from compounded disappointment, and possibly also physical pain, a legacy from the injury' (97-98); Jensen's recent extensive study of Leitzel and Codona suggests that it was a combination of both. 'The sorrow he must have suffered after losing Leitzel and then becoming a cripple, unable ever to fly again, must have been bottomless. Surely,' he surmises 'this all drove him to madness' (285).

The Temporarily or Invisibly Disabled Aerialist

As a counterpoint to these examples, Taylor describes a time when Leitzel returned to the air soon after falling an incredible 'thirty feet to a hard floor, landing on both knees' (R. Taylor 226). Leitzel is considered the quintessential aerialist of the early twentieth century and is recorded as having made a grand entrance on crutches after this accident early in her solo career. It happened on the second night of a performance in front of potential future employers; having fallen such a distance, she was lucky not to have died, but 'her legs were sprained and terribly bruised' (ibid). Taylor explains that 'from a hospital bed, she made arrangements for a helper, and when her moment came, the spotlight picked her up at the entrance, standing on crutches' (ibid).

Leitzel was only temporarily in need of crutches but was determined not to miss her hard-earned centre-ring position on the RBBBC. As seen in the previous chapter, she would manipulate her audiences' sympathies by exaggerating the effect of her strenuous act on her

appearance – the loosening of her golden hair from tight bun during her spins – and arguably furthered this by using the crutches all the way into the ring. After demonstrating her extraordinary aerial skills, she feigned a swoon as she reached the ground and was lifted and carried out of the ring by a strong man. Regardless of the pain Leitzel must have been in, and her inability to walk unaided, she demonstrated (unlike Hanlon) that she was still capable and willing to perform her incredible aerial feats. Perhaps even more than those previously highlighted, Leitzel's performance really validates the propensity for 'disabled aerialists' to be adept in the air, and so straddles the two definitions proposed here. Firstly, she was an aerialist who had fallen and become temporarily disabled. Secondly, she demonstrated that an aerialist with a physical impairment *could* nevertheless embody aerial proficiency.

Curiously, I too had a time when I needed to use crutches prior to my aerial act. I had landed badly in the net during a flying trapeze act, and I felt my foot give way making a horrendous snap. After two weeks away from the show I was informed that if I did not return to the act, I would lose my job. I therefore used the crutches throughout my day until I entered the circus arena. My foot was tightly strapped for support; I had to walk with a slight limp for a while and I was nervous of landing in the net. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, I adhered to the conventional aesthetics of aerial and smiled and performed my way through the pain.

As well as suffering from a severe neck injury, Siegrist, mentioned above, also had a severe 'speech impediment' that today would be considered an invisible or hidden impairment. Gossard suggests this was perhaps what 'made him feel that he had to prove to the world that he was without equal' and that his stubborn determination or 'big chip on his shoulder' forced his 'miraculous recovery' (164). Perhaps, like me however, he was passionate about being an aerialist and would do anything to return. Despite this familiar disability narrative, suggested for example through Norden's 'Curable Romantic' or 'Hero', that may or may not have been the case, Gossard also wrote of Charles Noble who similarly could be said to have had a hidden impairment.

It was said that Charles [Noble] had been forced to quit the telegraph trade because of severe asthma problems. Of all professions for an asthmatic to take up one would think trapeze would be the last. (135)

Neither aerialist deterred from aerial activity, nor chose to work on the easier apparatus of the time, the static trapeze. Noble toured with the Flying Fishers at the turn of the twentieth century. The aerialists' impairments would not necessarily have been known by their audiences, neither would they appreciate how such conditions would (or would not) have

impacted upon their aerial practice. This suggests that the particularities of impairment embodied by an aerialist will affect how their aerial actions are appreciated and understood. If, for example, their impairments are hidden – no matter how severely they impact on their aerial training and presentation – this might not be readily understood by their audiences. Such particularities also suggest potential challenges for audiences to fully appreciate work of different 'disabled aerialists', and issues of the disclosure and even the performance of impairment will be addressed in the second case study.

Recalling Taylor's excited descriptions of Leitzel, he suggested that the reason she managed to complete her 'act without hindrance' was that 'her legs, in the air, were used chiefly for leverage' (R. Taylor 226). This supports my assertions already made that the aerialist's most fundamental physiological tools lie in her upper body, and most prominently in her arms and hands; to date I have yet to discover earlier aerialists with upper body amputations.

Amputee Aerialists

Gossard mentions a number of trapeze artists who had lower-limb amputations that did not appear to hinder their professional aerial status. In particular, he mentions Ray Melzora,

He was involved in a rigging accident which caused him to lose a leg. He became the only trapeze performer at the time to work with an artificial leg. Ray was a gifted comedian with the act, and he was known for spinning his foot at the end of his artificial leg as he swung from the pedestal board. (147)

Melzora was performing in the early decades of the twentieth century, but Gossard briefly mentions two other aerialists with leg amputations offering presentations in the 1870s.

In 1871 William W. Quillins presented a private performance on the trapeze at Richmond, Virginia. The unusual feature of this act was that Quillins had lost both legs in an accident a few years earlier. In 1877 another performer, named Frank Melrose, performing at the Boylston Museum in Boston, was said to be a "one-legged trapeze performer". (20)



9. Frank Melrose, courtesy of the Milner Gallery.

Melrose, pictured above standing on his one leg with the trapeze lying coiled at his foot, apparently joined Thomas Hall of the Brothers Dare, when his brother Stuart Hall, was injured. The latter was also a 'unipedal or one-legged gymnast' (ibid), Stuart Dare, whom I discussed in the Introduction. Recent research I undertook at the Milner Gallery in Bloomington, revealed more one-legged male aerialists of the late nineteenth century, with eighty articles listed for 'one-legged gymnasts' on the Fulton History Search showing for the years 1860-1919. This suggests that they were not as rare as I had first imagined. There was also a 'trio of one-legged trapeze artists' called the 'flying zenos' whose act concluded 'with daring feats and astonished the audience with their clever work' ("Circus at the..." 5), leading their performance to be considered 'one of the most marvellous ever seen' ("Menagerie" 8).

Although further research is required in this area, the high number of amputee aerialists might relate to two major conflicts from which the performers may have been veterans. In the American Civil War that ran from 1861-1865 '[n]ew military technology combined with old-fashioned tactical doctrine to produce a scale of battle casualties unprecedented in American history' (civilwar.org). This apparently produced 476,000 wounded casualties out of an 'estimated 1.5 million' overall (Hasegawa 3). According to Hasegawa, there were some '45,000 survivors of amputation' including those who had 'undergone removal of fingers or toes or part of a hand or foot', as well as people who had lost

complete arms and legs (ibid). The other conflict was the First World War. Although this produced far fewer American casualties (116,516 American deaths compared to 620,000 of the earlier conflict) (civilwar.org), it may still have produced enough wounded veterans to suggest amputations were a common occurrence. Although details are yet to be found on most of the unipedal performers, there was one double act, Large & Morgner, who toured as 'Two men and Two Feet' ("Sherwoods"), who were described by the Billboard as having 'only one pair of legs between them,' stating 'one having lost his right leg and the other his left in the war' ("Elks"). Familiarity with amputation might explain the advertisement in RBBBC's official *Magazine & Daily Review* for its 1919 circus tour for:

<p>NEARLY HUMAN</p> <p>ARTIFICIAL LEGS AND ARMS</p> <p>Our PATENTED BALL BEARING ankle joint limbs perfectly duplicate the human movements. The LIGHTEST, more DURABLE and COMFORTABLE. Chafing and irritation eliminated. We also manufacture the latest improved arms.</p> <p><i>Call, write or phone for catalog.</i></p> <p>THE NEW YORK ARTIFICIAL LIMB CO.</p>	
27 UNION SQ., N. Y.	Tel. Connections

The advertisement was situated prominently in the top left hand corner of a page of adverts that also included promotions for 'beautiful hair' chemicals, 'motion picture acting' classes for beginners as well as 'The Little Gem Ear Phone' to help 'you hear perfectly'. Having tracked through the many RBBBC programmes and *Daily Reviews* of that time, as well as those for other major touring circus (such as the Sells Floto Circus), this was the only such advertisement to appear, suggesting that at this particular moment in time the need for such devices was relatively common.

Perhaps a more extreme example of an amputee aerialist was Johnny Eck, a travelling circus and side-show performer, who was most famed for his portrayal of the 'Half-Boy' in Tod Browning's controversial film *Freaks*. Born 'with more than half of [his body] seemingly missing [and] almost nothing below his rib cage' Eck (né John Eckhardt) described himself in an 'unpublished biography' as 'a performer, [who] walked a tight rope, worked on trapeze, juggled – I did everything' (Shapiro n.pag.). His trapeze work is also listed on a pamphlet entitled *Facts concerning Johnny Eck/the only living half boy/Nature's Greatest Mistake* held at the John and Mable Ringling Museum in Sarasota. Despite attempts to discover more about Eck's aerial performances and images of him on the trapeze, no such findings have yet emerged.

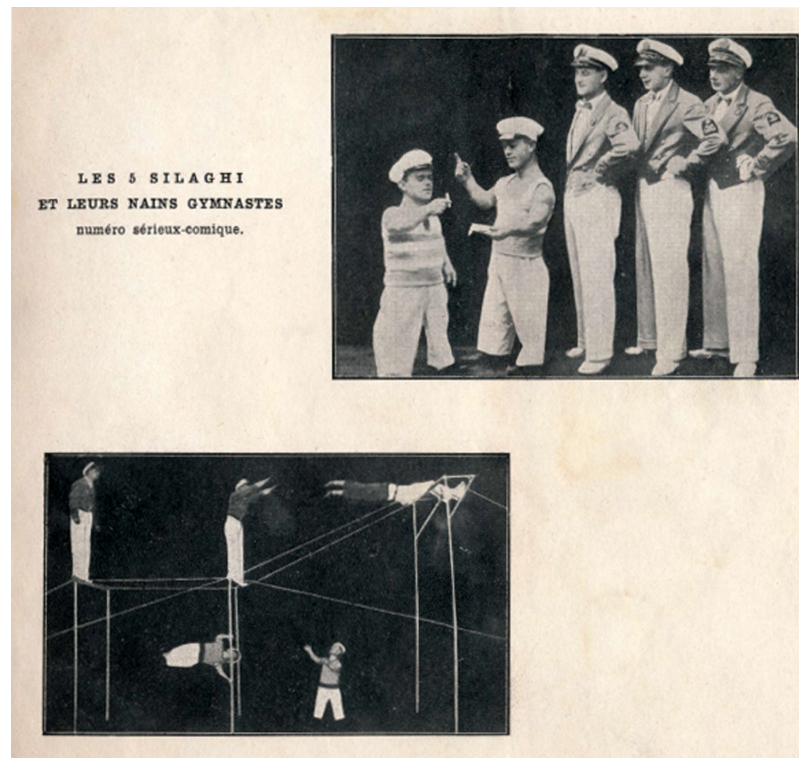
Unfortunately, substantive information on any of these acts or performers has so far proved elusive though Gossard discovered two images of Large & Morgner posing in their conventional tight-fitting leggings with the Beckman and Shepherd Troupe in 1923. An exciting discovery was however made recently in one Major Don Ward who featured with the 'Midget Follies' according to the New York Clipper performing as a 'strong man' as well performing an 'acrobatic act' and 'trapeze work' ("Midget Follies"). He was also described in the Morning Oregonian as a 'midget strong man [who would] offer a clever exhibition on the Roman rings' (7). More pertinently, however, he appears with the Sells Floto Circus, second in size to the RBBBC at that time, not as a side-show or 'freak' performer, but as an aerialist alongside other aerialists in the show's fourth display sharing the programme's title of 'a variety of exceptional performers in a series of high up exhibitions of aerial gymnastics'. His own listed box advertised 'Tiny Major Don Ward' as providing 'a balancing and equilibristic act of unusual skill and daring' (ibid). As this listing appeared in the *Official Season Route Book and Itinerary* for 1921, this implies he was performing his aerial act regularly throughout the season inside the circus big top. He also appears in the following year's *Official Programme* for the season's opening performance in Chicago, this time (apparently) working in partnership with the established Nelson Duo aerialists. He does not, however, appear in that season's *Route Book*, therefore suggesting he was only present for the opening – as would be the case for other artists.⁴⁶

Finding Ward in the circus arena alongside other conventional aerialists was an exciting and pertinent discovery, as despite the lack of detail on him, or the one-legged aerialists, it is at least possible to state that the 'disabled aerialist', most particularly following the latter definition above (having an impairment *and* being an aerialist), was not born specifically to the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Ward demonstrated how small-statured artists might also have performed in the circus arena in roles other than the aforementioned clowns. Without detailed information of *what* Ward did however, it is impossible to state whether he was appreciated and treated as an aerialist alongside his fellow conventional aerialists, or as a comic side-kick.

Doubt is nevertheless cast over the seriousness of his role as I recently discovered a photograph of 'Les 5 Silaghi et leur Nains gymnastes' who performed a 'numero serieux-comique' in the Cirque Bureau in 1934. Alongside this heading were two photographs showing two small-statured men and three taller men. In one the latter are in the air, one shorter man is standing beneath them in a stance of 'spotting' while the other is doing a horizontal handstand on one of the upright support poles. The other photograph has all five performers

⁴⁶ Thanks to Gossard for his explanation of how route books and programmes worked together.

standing, the three taller men all costumed the same and standing in the same gesture, depicting the aesthetic of conformity discussed earlier, looking towards their shorter colleagues. The two shorter men are wearing similar hats and trousers to these three, but only t-shirts instead of shirts and jackets; their bare arms are muscular and demonstrate the 'authenticity' of aerial Tait described. They were obviously aerially proficient, but being listed as 'leurs Nains' (their Dwarfs) suggests that the circus was presenting them with a different status to the aerially conventional three.



10. Cirque Bureau 1934, courtesy of ENC.

There were therefore 'disabled aerialists' performing in the centre, rather than side-show of the circus arena even in the nineteenth century, even if small-statured aerialists were playing the potentially troubling role of aerialised 'dwarf clown'. Unipedal aerialists appear to have performed as conventional aerialist in the music halls and vaudevillian theatres as well as in circus performances. The lack of information in general however, makes it difficult to say with any certainty how the other artists were presented and received. Eck was certainly well-known for his side-show appearances, and despite advertising that he also performed on the trapeze, perhaps this was one of the skills he occasionally utilised in his side-show act.

In *Re/membering Muscular Bodies*, Tait argued that 'culture's capacity to remember seems to be attuned to beliefs about gender and body identity since muscular female bodies

have been more easily overlooked with the passing of time' (1). Furthermore, she acknowledges that circus history has been 'selective because the recognition accorded to some aerial performances also entailed forgetting other acts' (ibid). Whilst she (and Stoddart) therefore concentrated their research on female aerialists, they too continued to ignore 'disabled aerialists'.

History doesn't do justice to the lives of disabled people. All too often we are *hidden from history* because our lives aren't considered worthwhile and when we do appear the accounts are shaped by the views of others within stereotyped presentations of who and what we are. Rarely do disabled people get the opportunity to speak for ourselves and in so doing leave our imprint within history. (DPAC "Disabled")

History and the historians have contributed to 'hiding' disabled people, including 'disabled aerialists', so here I want to start redressing the balance. Prior to analysing the two case studies and by way of *redemonstrating* the aerial, rather than comic, potential of small statured aerialists, I draw this chapter to a close with a contemporary practitioner. Accepting that the aerial equipment and movement canon have evolved as previously discussed, and that social, political and cultural times have changed, contemporary artists might offer a glimpse into a forgotten history. Reversing the 'living history', looking at the actions of 'disabled aerialists' from today, it is possible to offer suggestions of what the artists might have done in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A 'Disabled Aerialist' of the Twenty-first Century

Penny wheels on stage in the latest Cirque Nova production. She stretches her slightly bent arms out to the side signalling she wishes to be lifted up to the aerial hoop that hovers a metre or so above her head. Two fellow performers, M— who has Asperger's Syndrome, and visually impaired A—, bend down to lift her up, supporting her by her arms, back and legs until she is able to take hold of the aerial hoop. Once she is holding securely they release her and she begins climbing her way up its curving length, hand over hand with a little support from her legs, until she can move one, then the other, to sit upon the hoop's base. M— stands nearby to spin the hoop gently as she works her way through her new routine of static poses that will be familiar to most hoop artists: the star; 'man in the moon'; one-arm-hang (or amazon) and the like. There are of course modified postures owing to her particular size and strength that work better for her than the conventional actions, like the 'staggered hock'. She shows off her front plange too, that most of us non-disabled aerialists would love to be able to do! M—'s on hand to assist her should she want or need it because she has recently had her medication, which can affect her stamina as well as her strength and has only recently recovered from another couple of broken bones. The piece lasts two minutes, and at the end, M— carries her back to her chair and she wheels forwards a foot to take her independent call. (T. Carter *Journal*).

Penny Clapcott is almost two foot tall. She is usually sitting as her legs are not strong enough to support her for long periods of time and she often uses a wheelchair for mobility. She has a condition called OI (Osteogenesis Imperfecta), more commonly known as Brittle Bones, which continually shifts her body's shape, development and functionality. Clapcott has broken various bones throughout her life and has long scars where surgeons have had to reconfigure her limbs and her spine. She often tells of injuries that she has sustained from minor, almost insignificant provocations, then survival tales of falls when she believes she really should have broken something. She has to undertake treatment and take medication to improve her bone density that upsets her energy levels, and which in turn affects her enthusiasm and ability to be in the air. Irregardless, Clapcott is an aerialist.



11. Penny Clapcott's 'front plange', training at Airhedz. **Author's Collection.**

In an email correspondence with Clapcott, I asked why she had been interested in aerial. She replied, 'I was initially interested in training in aerial because, honestly, it was crazy and looked like fun. It was unusual and I liked a challenge' ("RE: Bit of help"). She continued, 'I have always liked training and seeing how far I can push my body within its own limitations' (ibid). Clapcott started her circus training under the guidance of Akkerman, artistic director of the now discontinued Cirque Nova. She progressed to perform in the *POC* of 2012; spent several months training and performing with Nathalie Gauthier Productions Inc. in the USA, before returning to the UK to perform in the *Spirit in Motion* Paralympic Legacy event that I

choreographed in Aylesbury 2014. She still trains and performs whenever she can and harbours dreams of one day joining Cirque du Soleil as an aerialist.

I first met Clapcott in the summer of 2008 when she performed after having had just a few days training. Working a simple silks duet with Akkerman, I was asked to operate Clapcott's safety line. The following year I became a regular aerial trainer for the Cirque Nova, working extensively with Clapcott and others. My pedagogical methodology had typically drawn from the knowledge attained by working on and through my own body, transferring that knowledge to new aerialists. Our working partnership perpetuated this exchange in the early days. Our bodies are very different in shape and size, but with slight modifications, Clapcott was able to do many of the same posture-based actions. A surprising addition to her routine came in the form of a 'front plange'. This is a demonstration of strength as it requires the aerialist to suspend her body horizontally with her back facing the floor, holding only with her hands. It is a recognised position in both traditional aerial performance and competitive gymnastics (Olympic male ring gymnasts have this within their repertoire) but is something that I, and many of my fellow professional aerial colleagues, have failed to achieve even once! Discovering her aptitude for this, Clapcott commented, 'I feel a little bit smug that I can do some things some people can't because the way my body is built (and modified!) to make it easier for me to do those tricks' (Facebook).

Clapcott's ability to do the 'front plange' could be explained by her body measurements and supportive, functional, internal implants but the fact remains that her unique body enables her to find movements and positions both within and outside of the recognised aerial vocabulary. All aerialists work with and build on the bodies and abilities they have – contortionists are often more flexible than the majority of people – and this is the same for Clapcott. On the one hand, she is restricted by her size, bodily proportions and medical condition, so cannot undertake some of the preliminary, classical aerial actions, and dynamic tricks are impossible as she could break her bones. Yet because of the very body she possesses she discovers other ways of moving that are specific to her, thus opening up new aerial movement potential.

Clapcott demonstrates how physical impairments do not immediately exclude individuals from the art of aerial. Indeed, she shows how her specific physiology has enhanced her aerial potential. Like her 'disabled aerialist' predecessors, Clapcott works within and outside of the conventional aerial aesthetic. Instead of presenting in the aesthetic of conformity, she presents an aesthetic of diversity which offers both opportunities and potential threats. For dance artist Claire Cunningham, whose piece *Mobile* is discussed in the Conclusion, there is a danger that the 'disabled aerialist' can be confusing for audiences.

[Aerialists] are in an environment that is creating an extreme contrast - a person of perceived 'fragility', 'instability', 'weakness' as a presence in a (perceived) high risk environment. This situation doubles the level of ignorance in the audience - by this I mean the audiences lack of awareness of

1. disabled people genuine situation (e.g. their ability/physical capabilities)
2. the audience's lack of awareness of the skills of aerial. ("Re: Disability")

If the audience is unfamiliar with aerial and with the 'genuine situation' of the artists, it might be difficult for them to appreciate the work they observe, but contradictorily, it might also offer them a new perspective on both. Similarly, if the observers are familiar with one or the other, that knowledge will undoubtedly influence their appreciation of the work. Cunningham stresses that it is the 'frames of reference' for each performance that are essential in understanding and appreciating any given work. It is important that audiences

[D]o not think that one young man with Down Syndrome doing some cocoon work that has done once a week workshops for 3 months is being presented in the same light as a young man with Down Syndrome who has been working on cocoon for 3 years and has genuine skill and potential to perform (or is performing) at a professional level. (ibid)

The intertextual knowledge of aerial and disability, alongside awareness of the particulars of a performance or performer become important therefore in the reading of the work, but how such knowledge transpires can itself cause challenges. Should work be promoted *as* disability aerial? Should 'disabled aerialists' reveal their biological histories for audiences to understand them? Should there be clear visual clues to *represent* hidden impairments? How are the 'frames of reference' determined and understood if conducted in environments where such information is difficult to share? If caveats are presented alongside performances, is there not the danger that the work might be construed as being acceptable 'in spite of' the various conditions people live with? These and related issues are discussed in the case studies, where two different projects offered opportunities to examine different challenges and opportunities available to the diverse disabled performers engaged in them.

Chapter 4: *Hang-Ups!* or Here's to the No-Can-Dos

The previous chapter established disability perspectives from which to consider the 'disabled aerialist' and proffered various fictional and lived examples of those that could carry the polysemous term. These next two chapters focus on two twenty-first century projects of varying size, duration and audience engagement, to investigate specific challenges that occurred in the creation and presentation of the works. In this chapter, I look at a short film, which was created over a few days, involved three artists and had a small international audience. The following chapter examines a live performance and the preparatory training for it that included more than forty artists, spanned several months and was performed to a global audience of millions.⁴⁷ In each case study, the 'disabled aerialist' refers to someone who has sensory, physical or cognitive impairment(s), who considers themselves to be disabled and who has found access to aerial training limited. I analyse practical, aesthetic and political aspects of their engagement with aerial, from both aerial and disability perspectives, necessarily working through an 'interactional model' of disability as described in the Introduction. Together, the two case studies begin to answer in *real terms* who the 'disabled aerialist' is, what s/he does and what impact s/he has on established aesthetics and methodologies associated with aerial to date.

This chapter examines aerial in its most minimal forms. It questions the role of non-disabled assistants working with the 'disabled aerialist' and how the work might be admired for its presumed therapeutic and participatory affects rather than for the performance itself. Before drawing some initial conclusions that lead towards the second case study, I also look at the (necessary) integration of additional performance texts such as spoken word and how risk is presented and witnessed. As a DVD of *Hang-ups!* is attached, a detailed description of the completed project is not included.

***Hang-ups!* The Movie**

Hang-ups! is a short film, designed and created by film maker, Anton French; performer and writer, Sophie Partridge, and me. As the project instigator, producer and aerial director I invited French and Partridge to participate. I had worked with French on numerous film projects over the past decade, but met Partridge much later when she participated in a few aerial sessions with me at Cirque Nova in 2010. She told me 'I asked various people whether they thought I'd be able to do [aerial] because I didn't [...] actually have enough knowledge to know that for myself' (Interview). She continued, 'it was the idea that possibly I could, I think, that was what was kind of enticing about it' (ibid). I was interested in working

⁴⁷ More than 11 million people watched the *POC*, it being Channel 4's 'biggest audience of a decade' (Paralympic.org "Great")

with Partridge on *Hang-ups!* in order to build on our brief aerial endeavours together, to see what was possible, but I was also interested in her as a professional performer and writer. What could her honed, professional skills bring to these early aerial investigations? Partridge had worked extensively with Graeae Theatre Company and started her professional acting career with the David Glass Ensemble in *The Unheimlich Spine* (Interview). Furthermore, she had been writing short performance pieces since 2002, and was well-versed in disability politics and culture, writing regularly for *Disability Arts Online* and *Able Magazine*. I therefore believed she would usefully help guide me and the project both creatively and in a disability-sensitive manner.

Hang-ups! was a meta-reflexive project that set out to document a creative process, simultaneously being the process that it documented. It aimed to explore in a studio setting how one person's unconventional aerial body could work with and against the conventions of aerial. The process involved devising a physical duet between a disabled performer, Partridge, who became suspended, and a conventional aerialist, me. Movement ideas were experimented practically, with short sections then agreed upon, practiced and filmed from different angles. The addition of theatrical lighting and simple costumes helped to distinguish these sections from the rehearsal footage used in the documentary segments. Interviews with both performers, undertaken by French, provided ways of linking the documentary and choreographic elements together.



12. Author and Partridge in *Hang-ups!*. Author's Collection.

The result was a short film drawing together the images, movements, texts and ideas that the three of us felt best demonstrated what we had explored and created. The editing process itself also provided the opportunity to exclude material as desired and increased choreographic choices in post-production such as repeating or altering the time of sequences and blending one moment to the next that did not happen in real time. Importantly, presenting the work on film (rather than live) enabled us to disseminate the work more widely, reaching beyond a specific geographic terrain or time. It also provided the opportunity to formally gather audience reactions to the piece. After watching the short film online, viewers were invited to complete a questionnaire sharing their reflections on the project. We were particularly interested in whether *Hang-ups!* had affected their experiences and knowledge of disability and/or aerial and if it subsequently raised any particular questions or concerns for them. Internet software, Survey Monkey, also enabled us to calculate how many had viewed the film via the direct link, and what percentage therefore completed the survey, in the given timeframe.

Before venturing into a close reading of the project, it is important to establish that the analysis follows the conventions currently set out in the preceding chapters. Although the analysis is of a film, a detailed Film Studies perspective falls outside the remit of the research, with the focus continuing to be on the use and inclusion of aerial within it. Furthermore, owing to the nature of the case study itself, the analysis will move between performance and rehearsal, between the making of the film (parts of which are hidden from viewers) and the final product that is shared, drawing on different voices to feed into the scrutinising process. Finally, it does not claim to be an exemplary examination of the relationship between disability and aerial, but is *an* examination of a specific union. It is therefore pertinent to acknowledge the necessary limitations of *Hang-ups!*

Beyond the parameters explored through the work, other restrictions influenced the project. As a professional venture, funding confined the time and resources allocated to it. The budget of £2600 (£2000 Commission by Canterbury City Council 'Creative Fund' and £600 from the Circus Space 'Lab:Time') determined that only three days of physical explorations were affordable, so the amount of live examination was necessarily constrained. The work took place in a sports hall with very limited control over lighting or sound, and as there were no funds for an additional rigger during the actual investigations, this meant that only one of us could be in the air at any time – as I was necessarily both rigger and performer. Furthermore, the final product always intended to be a short film, so by necessity, more material was omitted than included, and French predominantly determined what remained.

There were however, on-going discussions between the three of us and elements did change throughout.

I have to accept that we are now in Anton's territory, artistically and technically and I have to bow to his choices along the way as well as ensuring that the ideas of the project are maintained. There were sections of interviews Anton wanted to include, such as discussions of Sophie at school and struggles she had growing up with OI. For me, though of course interesting to hear of someone's life, especially when different to my own, this is not what the film is about; it's about our making a duet. The 'disability narrative' is for my part solely in relation to the aerial, and vice versa. (T. Carter *Journal*)

Although the three artists involved each had unique roles and responsibilities, all agreed that the film should reflect individual wishes where possible with everyone having power of veto over sections desired to be excluded. Therefore there were a number of drafts before all finally agreed on what was eventually broadcast. French agreed to remove the sections mentioned above, but another sequence that Partridge and I particularly wanted to keep (as it showed the necessarily arduous process of her getting into the aerial cocoon) we eventually agreed to abandon. We thought this was 'possibly the most 'interesting' or at least [most] mobile she actually [was] in the film' but as French had found it exceptionally difficult to film it in a way that he felt would be 'suitably engaging' (ibid), we eventually all agreed to remove most of it.

The final edit was therefore a necessary compromise between the three of us. I wanted it to present a combination of documentation and performance that would be useful to share with an audience in order to garner a discussion on disability and aerial. French wanted to create a piece that functioned well as a short film in its own right, and which therefore required diversity of narrative, personal story and exciting visuals. Partridge wanted to ensure that the piece would not provoke pity, nor would it be sentimental in any way. She also determined that the personal elements of her life only be used to support the specific area of enquiry. Finally, French thought it useful to bind the whole film together musically and so voluntarily composed and performed the music, adding it on completion (rather than it being used in rehearsals as might be presumed), and we all agreed, as did many observers, that it provided a complementary layer to the finished piece.

This analysis of *Hang-ups!* uses the previous chapters as its backdrop, accessing different personal reflections and the finished film itself. It draws on the audience responses to the survey that were given in predominantly first person narratives that are useful for objective opinion on the project, whilst also provoking questions for broader consideration.

My interview with Partridge prior to the project offers some background information on her motivations, and our interviews with French during it offer a more synchronic perspective. I also continue to intersperse some of my own recollections on the piece throughout the text.

Here's to the Aerial No-Can-Dos

As the previous chapters have advocated, aerial traditionally involves a conventional aerialist with a trained and athletic physique. Her movement blends postures and poses with often high-risk stunts from a growing but distinctive movement canon interconnected with the equipment's 'kinetic museum'. Furthermore, the aerialist has a strong historical link to her aerial predecessors as an embodiment of Tait's 'living history'. Despite her cultural significance and signifiers shifting over time, she also continues to embody some of society's fears and aspirations regarding the human relationship to gravity.

In *Hang-ups!* two people venture into the air. I arguably fit the established image of a conventional (if aging) aerialist and Partridge presents a more unique aerial physique. We work with a familiar piece of aerial equipment, the fabric cocoon, but the movement language we present is extremely limited appearing to draw from the very early stages of the cocoon canon where the postures are static and there are no transitions from one aerial action to another. Partridge's suspended positions are restricted to sitting or lying, though she does rise (via a pulley system) high above the ground, spinning. I remain low to the ground again in a sitting or lying position with the addition of suspending by my arms in a 'crucifix' formation with toes still touching the ground. What aerial is present therefore to analyse?

Perhaps the piece could be viewed as minimalist, as a deliberate negation of aerial actions and established aerial technique in order to question whether it is necessary in all forms of aerial expression. Leyser, discussed earlier, aimed to remove demonstrative trickery from her rope piece focusing instead on delivering a metaphorical and physical linear narrative. As I showed in my analysis, it utilised numerous aerial actions from across the vertical canon and Mackrell accused it of being nothing but aerial stunts, so the minimalism was perhaps in her stylistic presentation and costuming rather than in her physical actions.

Ockham's Razor, mentioned in Chapter 1, are arguably one of the UK's most popular and successful contemporary aerial companies at present. They too explore this stripped-down approach in several of their pieces, with *The Mill* seeking in particular to demonstrate the 'effort and work and sweat and grind' of 'the aerialist [and] not [the] superhuman' (Mooney). Similar to Leyser all Razor's artists had the familiar 'authentic' aerial physique and demonstrated their physical capabilities through their various actions, but *The Mill* was also complemented for showing 'restraint' when it could have been all too 'tempting [...] to play up their aerialist skills' (Jennings n.pag.). Critic Luke Jennings believed this approach was 'more

effective' as it ensured it was the 'narrative line which carries you through' (ibid). There is therefore some precedent to removing demonstrative aerial action from aerial performances, but perhaps not to the extent as seen in our film. The significant difference between Leyser, Razor and *Hang-ups!* is that the former still drew quite heavily upon aerial movement, and even when that was limited the bodies presenting the actions still carried the authenticity of aerial possibilities within them. *Hang-ups!* provided very little aerial movement and only one of the aerial bodies hinted towards aerial potential.

Aerialists have been shown to challenge the conventions of their form (Barbette, Budd, Lancaster, Leyser, etc.) whilst still being recognisably connected to it suggesting that further challenges are still possible, but if many of the fundamental physicalities and aesthetics of aerial are eradicated, what remains? Partridge does not inhabit the authentic aerial body and neither does she demonstrate any conventional control over her aerial actions. She is however suspended in a familiar apparatus, shown on the film to be much higher than the conventional aerialist (in this instance), and will be shown to be in a position of 'risk and danger' owing to her very lack of physical control and her biological condition. Is an aerial interpretation then still possible, or is it more constructive to analyse the work from a disability perspective?

Disabled people continue to face challenges in everyday life to live as freely and independently as possible regardless of the impairments they may have. Environmental barriers are an everyday occurrence – travelling by public transport, entering buildings or accessing information for example – and entering the arts as a professional practitioner is still arguably less accessible than for their non-disabled counterparts (see ACE *Graeae*). In *Here's to the no-can-dos* Partridge vehemently opposes the pressure placed on disabled people for being impaired and asks, 'Why is it not enough purely to be human?' (n.pag.). She writes with particular reference to the Independent Living Fund that, amongst other social and welfare benefits, is threatened with closure. Perhaps by just *being* in the air Partridge makes a significant political statement (in disability terms) as she stakes a claim on a geographic and performance space historically excluded to her. Consciously or not, by venturing into the air and being almost motionless, she suggests that aerial can be different to what has previously defined it. Recalling Kibler's suggestion that Budd's 'athleticism and support for suffrage' invoked her as a 'New Woman' (143) and indeed an alternative female aerialist, perhaps Partridge could be similarly interpreted, as an alternative to this century's idea of aerial and aerialist by the combination of inaction and political assertion?

This stillness does, however, carry an enfreaking potential for Partridge, as her immobile suspension has the danger of offering 'audiences the opportunity to gaze at disabled

bodies [...] voyeuristically and metaphorically' (Lipkin and Fox "disability" 120). To further this idea of 'doing nothing', the next section explores audience reactions to this 'unaerialness' in the film, which then leads to a close reading of how the inaction can be considered in terms of agency and control.

The Minimisation of Movement

Partridge and I delicately manipulated one another in the *Hang-ups!* duet. The *manipulator* worked from the ground and the *manipulated* was airborne. The aerial actions were necessarily limited for Partridge and were minimised for me by choice, but how did this minimisation of aerial action affect our audience members? The following draws on responses to the project's Survey Monkey, and as each response was anonymous they will be shown as quotations without names.

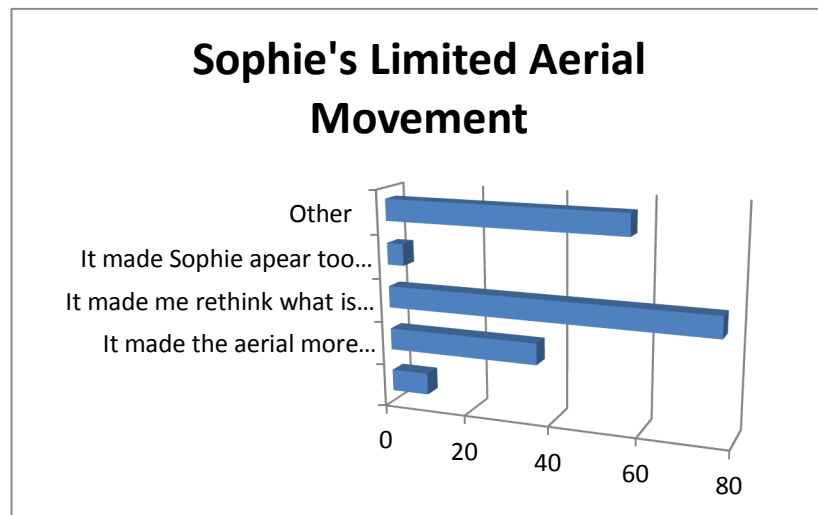
The online film and connected survey were promoted to targeted groups with an interest and/or experience in aerial, disability or both so we might gauge an understanding of any shifts in expectation and appreciation from either viewpoint. The film was (and continues to be) free to access via a number of different websites and although all viewers were invited to participate, not all did complete the survey. Of those that did view the short film, 121 people completed the online questionnaire. It was viewed and responded to internationally, but the majority of respondents were based in the UK. Answering the question about their involvement in aerial, 31 said they were 'actively involved in the arts but not an aerialist'; 10 were 'professional aerialists'; 14 were 'training aerialists (student, hobby, amateur)'; 54 were 'not involved in aerial and had very little knowledge of aerial', and 12 were 'not involved in aerial but [had] seen a lot of aerial before' (Survey Monkey). Therefore, 36/121 viewed the film with some previous knowledge of aerial.

In response to their relationship to disability 34 considered themselves 'disabled'; 59 were 'non-disabled'; 24 'had seen a lot of Disability Arts before'; 48 had 'not seen much Disability Arts before'; 17 responded with 'other' (ibid), therefore, 58/121 had some previous knowledge of or interest in disability/Disability Arts. 14/121 had a close association with both aerial and disability and is therefore the most knowledgeable group of respondents; 22/121 had a close association with aerial but not disability; 45/121 had knowledge or experience of disability but not aerial; 40/121 had no particular knowledge or experience of either aerial or disability. Although a significant proportion of respondents declared no particular expertise or familiarity with aerial or disability, the majority of those answering the survey did. This is not a scientifically structured analysis, but it serves as a guide through which to contextualise some of the opinions offered.

We asked two questions specifically relating to the minimisation of aerial. Firstly,

Owing to Sophie's physicality, her aerial movement vocabulary will always be limited.
What is the impact of this on your appreciation of the work? (ibid)

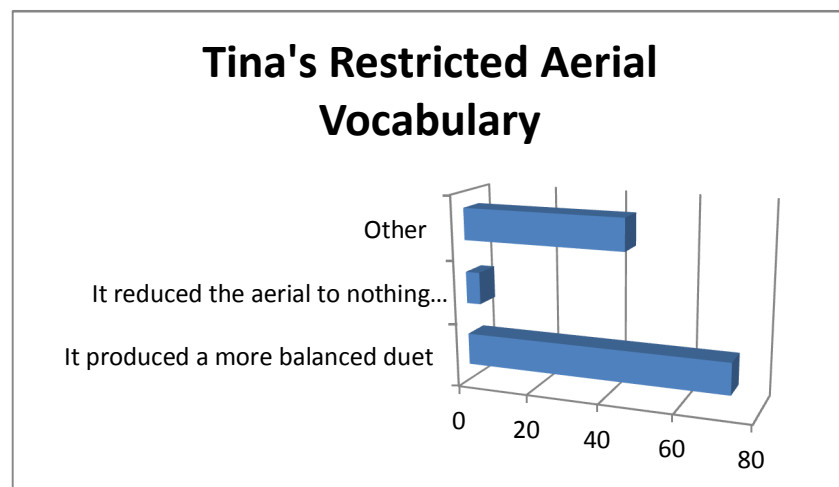
To which the following responses were captured:



Secondly, we asked

Tina's aerial vocabulary was limited in this film. In your opinion what effect did this have? (ibid)

The responses captured were:



For each graph, the numbers correspond to actual 'votes' rather than percentages. In the first question, respondents could choose more than one category whilst in the second they could choose only one. Similarly the number of respondents is offered as a real number rather than a percentage because they could tick more than one box, relating to their knowledge of disability.

A corresponding number of respondents voted that Partridge appeared too vulnerable, that her lack of aerial 'minimised the exciting aspects of aerial too much', and that my restricted aerial 'reduced the aerial to nothing which was disappointing' (ibid). This was however the minority. Discounting the 'other' elements in each case for the time being, the majority opined that it made them 'rethink the possibilities for people with limited mobility' and produced 'a more balanced duet'. Furthermore, a significant number also considered it to have made the 'aerial more interesting' (ibid).

If viewed in terms of supporting a defiance of the non-disabled conventions, staking political claim over terrain previously considered inaccessible, and taking into account the greater number of respondents associated with disability over aerial then these responses are perhaps unsurprising. However, one respondent admitted to having no opinion either way as 'it [was] too new in [her] experience' and another simply stated she 'hadn't known what was possible' (ibid). Thus, if this is the first encounter with either aerial or disabled artists for viewers it will be difficult to know if anything is potentially 'missing' or 'surpassed' in conventional terms. Indeed one respondent wrote, 'I don't know what you can do if you're non-disabled' (ibid).

Of those that marked the 'other' option, several suggested that it was not 'a piece about aerial' or that it was a 'different form of aerial' but certainly suggestive of 'aerial's potential' (ibid). One was relieved that 'Tina wasn't a whirling dervish', and another stated the limited aerial movement 'wasn't disappointing [as it] simply slowed down the experience, giving it more weight' (ibid). Moreover, others found that it helped push the 'focus from artistic to political', that it presented 'an exciting new art form for expression in the disabled community' whilst an aerialist said it made her 'rethink what is needed for impact as an able bodied aerialist' but did not explain this point further (ibid). Already it appears that regardless of the minimisation of aerial actions, a significant number of those viewing the film did not find this adversely affected their appreciation of the film. Instead, they placed a greater emphasis on its progressive potential within the field of disability – a point to which I will return.

Admittedly far fewer than I had anticipated, there were of course those who saw difficulties in the lack of aerial action. One even suggested I had been 'unrespectful [sic] and disgraceful', that it showed 'a very ego centred [side]' of me – though with no further

explanation – but perhaps they were suggesting that by reducing my actions I was patronising Partridge in some way? Somebody questioned ‘why limit Tina?’ whilst someone else declared she was ‘bored’ continuing that she also felt ‘cheated’ and ‘disappointed’ (ibid). Another pondered, ‘I would have liked to see more but at the same time I wanted Sophie to have an equal place in the duet’, mirroring my own feelings of *needing* to reduce my actions in order to enable equity between us and that I analyse in the next section. Contradictorily though a respondent wrote ‘I wondered what else Sophie could achieve inside the cocoon’ (ibid), perhaps not fully understanding that there was very little else, she *could* do. Looking ahead a respondent surmised that ‘It’s a great idea but I’m not sure if there’s enough variation to keep an audience entertained for a full performance’ (ibid). Perhaps the blend of opinions can be summarised in the response of one audience member who wrote, ‘It didn’t necessarily make the physicality of the aerial work more interesting, it did add [a] different layer, a cerebral, different point of view, [and a] newness of perspective’ (ibid).

The majority of respondents suggested that there was definitely something worthwhile in the aerial presented by both Partridge and me. Appearing in the responses to these two questions is already an acknowledgement that there are significant limitations to the aerial but that a pursuit and demonstration of equity between the performers was also important, thus leading to most accepting the reduction in my own aerial actions. The majority opinion was that the film was engaging, thought provoking and challenging. Viewers described it as political as well as artistic, but perhaps that was only from a disability perspective. For those who said it was a different form of aerial, were they implying that the positivity was only in one direction, from disability to aerial rather than aerial enveloping disability? For its losses and gains, it appears that the observations and therefore appreciations of the film differed to that of conventional aerial.

Continuing this investigation of the minimisation of movement, I now turn to the question of control, already seen to be of paramount importance in aerial, but that is also of prime concern in terms of disability politics. Viewing this from a disability perspective may provide greater understanding of why Partridge’s *inactions* can be interpreted as politically proactive, rather than aerially passive, but it also has a troubling impact on my own agency.

The Professional Assistant

Control is a fundamental functional and aesthetic trait of the conventional aerialist. Her body speaks of her controlling *potentiality* even before she moves. Her (successful) movements demonstrate her controlling *ability* to choose how she falls without disaster, working with and against gravity’s pull. Disabled people often interpret control, expressed as independence, in markedly different ways. In her interview with French, Partridge says that

‘being independent does not mean for me that I have to physically be able to do everything myself’ giving the example that ‘I can’t lift my head up, so when I’m flat I can’t sit myself up’. Yet she does feel in control of her life, not least through having the means to pay for the services she cannot physically do herself. Through the Independent Living Fund, formerly the British Direct Payments scheme, which is currently under threat from the UK government, Partridge and others have been able to live life as independent employers of services, provided by Personal Assistants (PAs), instead of as passive objects of care. Such specifically paid roles emerged from

a new consensus politics in favour of welfare state retrenchment and consumerism, operating in conjunction with a politics of disability in favour of ‘independent living’ and against professional and bureaucratic hegemony in the assessment of need and allocation of services. (Oliver qtd. in Ungerson 584)

Owing to her specific needs, Partridge has several PAs who assist in her daily life. This assistance can appear to be a complex relationship that demonstrates power and submission for each person. The disabled client is the employer who pays for the professional services of the usually non-disabled PA, whose role Clare Ungerson suggests, evolved from domestic servants and who can still appear subservient at times. For the duration of her contracted hours, she fulfils the requirements of her employer, oftentimes remaining silent and removed from the other activities taking place, even if she is still physically present. Ungerson suggests that the PA becomes the metaphorical ‘arms, the legs, the eyes etc.’ of the disabled client who is the ‘brain’, deciding what and when things happen (ibid). The disabled person submits to the physical labours undertaken by the PA on her behalf, but the PA is subject to the dictates of the client. Though a crude analogy, it does help demonstrate the complexity of the relationship.

Continuing her conversation with French, and based on our previous working relationship, Partridge anticipated how she and I would collaborate in the studio.

I’m [...] up for doing a duet that’s going to increase what I can do. [...] Just me getting in the cocoon, I still have to have my head lifted and from part way I can then get up, but I can’t do that without someone’s support [...] So what I envisage about the duet, is that if I’m working with Tina up there, she will [...] be able to assist my movement.

Partridge knew she would need assistance in the air, and I was aware of some of the support she would require. However, there were moments during our three days of aerial investigation that complicated the relationship between Partridge, her PA and me (at least

from my perspective), by problematising who had control at any given time. Her first PA, V—, was interested in aerial herself and was keen to be as involved as necessary. She pre-empted the required assistance Partridge needed when transferring from her chair to the cocoon, or she remained in the background, ever vigilant but awaiting instruction. By stark contrast, Partridge's PA for the final day R—, responded very differently.

She paid no attention to the proceedings unless directly invited or asked to by Sophie, and sat reading a book or newspaper throughout the day. In fact, I had to ask her several times to be vigilant when we were recording sound as her turning of the pages, or shuffling on the bench were likely to be picked up on the tape. (T. Carter *Journal*)

The relationship between Partridge and her PAs is not specifically of interest here, but the way that relationship fed into the creative process offers alternative readings of the project in terms of agency, control and freedom of expression. It is important to reaffirm that from the outset the project aimed to be a 'duet' with mutual responsibility to and for the project shared by Partridge and me. Each of us brought different experiences and knowledge to the project, with aerial being my specific area of expertise. Alongside Partridge's writing and performance experience, she also brought another person, and careful negotiation of that relationship was required. When meeting Partridge outside of the project, the relationship with the PA was relatively clear, she was there to support Partridge with functional needs, but having so assisted would move to the background so that we could have our discussions in private. In the physically challenging environment of the studio, there were times when roles and responsibilities seemed awkwardly blurred.

Moving sometimes on her own and at others with V—'s assistance, there are constant verbal instructions from Sophie and questions from her PA. Sophie cannot always see where the fabric is in relation to her body (particularly her legs) nor can she always feel it, so she questions where it is from time to time. [...] Throughout this process of getting into the cocoon, I can't help but feel from an observer's perspective that Sophie shifts between full autonomy over her own movements to full reliance on her PA. It makes me uneasy not knowing if I should assist, not knowing how to be helpful. I hover physically and mentally on the verges aware that I will be called upon if needed, aware that there is an established relationship and hierarchy of instruction between Sophie and her PA. Yet I am anxious, because it is me that has established this extra-ordinary scenario and I am therefore responsible for it. (T. Carter *Journal*)

The film sometimes shows two of us supporting Partridge to enter the cocoon, almost anonymous body parts guiding the aerialist into her equipment (not dissimilar in retrospect to Ungerson's description above: we are the limbs, Partridge the brain). At other times I am

shown pulling the rigging lines that carry her into the air, constantly asking if she is okay as I take my time to ensure there are no jerking movements that could distress her. The lengthiest actions involved ensuring Partridge settled in the cocoon comfortably and safely, either sitting or lying, before anything else could happen. In such circumstances, who has control?

Partridge's interpretation of independence means having the ability to determine what it is she does no matter how much external assistance that might require. She wants to be airborne so has developed the appropriate partnerships and systems to enable that to happen – which has predominantly been through my involvement. Her process of accessing the aerial equipment and indeed later moving aerially significantly challenged the aerial conventions. Partridge could not undertake the aerial actions herself, but owing to the PA/Client relationship, this process involved 'independent agency' in disability terms. Deciding *how* she did that, guiding her assistants to manoeuvre her into whatever position she desired, *was* her taking control and demonstrating agency especially when those relationships were on a professional basis. Partridge *employed* V— to undertake specific tasks and there was a clear hierarchy determined through informational and fiscal exchange. By contrast, I engaged Partridge as a professional artist in the project and as producer and director I was the official employer with Partridge my employee, despite the equal creative terms we agreed. Nevertheless, the hierarchy of supporting actions was not the same.

Partridge could not enter the equipment herself so required practical assistance. The PA in attendance did not necessarily have the required aerial skills, knowledge of the equipment, or understanding of the potential risks involved to manage this herself. Not wishing to interfere with the very specific employer/employee relationship, while needing to ensure Partridge was safe, caused me significant unease. I did not wish to instruct the PA as she was not my assistant, but nor did I wish to venture into her role that might appear interfering or inappropriate, as it might even have undermined the mutuality of our creative relationship. I was however, the most experienced aerialist there. Thus, hovering on the verges I felt my own agency begin to disappear.

Throughout the project, I was completely focused on Sophie, on her well-being, on her aerial adventure. When it came to me being in the air, I became almost shy of my movement capacity feeling compelled to strip it right back to the bare essentials even though we were working on a piece of equipment I was very familiar with. This led to my aerial sequence mirroring that of Sophie. When she was in the cocoon, I swung her, turned her, danced with her whilst I stood on the ground, and the sequence ended with her sitting on my shoulder. When I was in the cocoon, this time hanging in a crucifix position with the fabric holding me under my arms, Sophie turned me, wheeling me around from her motorised chair whilst holding my hand. We danced a similar refrain moving towards and away from one another, and we finished with me perched at her shoulder, sitting on the edge of her chair. My aerial actions had been

reduced in order to find a dance of equity between us. Each of us was quite stationary in the air, manipulated by the other who had a greater freedom of movement on the floor. (T. Carter *Journal*)

The aerial movements that fed into the final screened sequences were both empowering and reducing in agency. The very particular reality of utilising others to garner independence is a reality of Partridge's life and appeared in the rehearsal and performance aspects of the duet. Her agency however was elevated as she ventured into a new spatial terrain through guiding her assistants in what and how she desired throughout. She was very much in control of what, how much and indeed how high she ventured. Although I certainly had agency within the piece as I made particular artistic and directorial choices and physically moved independently, I also became a Professional Assistant, blurring the lines between duet partner and professional access worker. The *personal* boundaries were of course maintained, but within our professional relationship they blurred.

One survey respondent commented, 'I didn't feel it read as equal as the able bodied dancer could stand and hold Sophie in a way that always felt a supporting role' (Survey Monkey). My aerial movement was curtailed or reduced in order to present a more equitable duet. By throwing the focus onto Partridge, my role was inadvertently reduced from equal partner to supporting cast.⁴⁸ Ironically, where Partridge could be seen to echo the likes of Budd who appeared as an aerial suffragette, my reduced role echoed the opposite, the female aerialists demoted in the mid-twentieth century by their male counterparts. Having proven their worth and capability throughout the nineteenth century, many women were later subjugated to supporting the men.

There were few female catchers by the 1950s and seemingly no female flyers doing the most difficult tricks. As a business, aerial performance appeared to comply with wider society's expectations of male dominance and female decorativeness. (Tait *Circus* 5)

Consequently, through finding ways to work together in the air there was a curious if temporary impact on our mutual considerations of control. Partridge, as the 'disabled aerialist' was in control regardless of her reliance on others, therefore she adhered to one of the essential criteria of aerial defined earlier, as well as maintaining her stance as being independent in disability terms. As the conventional aerialist, I was reduced in agency, curtailing my physical abilities to enable another to be seen. Considerations of control, mixed

⁴⁸This type of relationship was echoed in a workshop run at TaPRA (Glasgow 2013) by Jo Ronan and Alyson Woodhouse when the majority of 'sighted' partners subjugated their opinions and removing their voices from the debates for the 'unsighted' (i.e. those blindfolded).

with the political concerns of access, also raise a dichotomy of artistic value, particularly with regard to disability in terms of participation and excellence. If the aerial continues to be minimised but access and agency are heightened, does this potentially manoeuvre the work into that of community participation rather than professional artistry?

Participation and/or Excellence

It seems to me that one of the problems with disability arts [...] is we don't criticise, we are not honest as to whether something is good or not. We buy into the traditional idea of, oh isn't it marvellous someone has done something. We need to be much more rigorous about how we judge. (Shakespeare "Interview")

As the previous chapter demonstrated, disability theatre often incorporates both 'art and activism' (Lipkin & Fox "Res(Crip)ting" 82) and yet as Shakespeare stated above it is not always critiqued for its artistic merit (by disabled and non-disabled people) but on the basis that disabled people are involved. Kathleen Tolan argues that 'the minute we fail to delight, surprise, move or mystify in *how* we say things as well as *what* we say, we've lost our focus' (qtd. *ibid*). This section therefore examines the perceived dichotomy between participation and excellence in disability arts, echoing my examination of disability inclusion in social circus in the Introduction, in order to understand how *Hang-ups!* and other like projects may be interpreted.

The Paralympic Games feature prominently in the following chapter, but they do offer a useful parallel when considering the discursive territory of access to and participation in artistic (and sporting) activities. The history of the Paralympic Games, depicted by former Paralympic athlete P. David Howe, presents an interesting trajectory from one to the other.

In the past sixty years sport for the disabled has gone from being a platform for the rehabilitation of war-wounded to the point where the Paralympic Games is the most recognised sporting festival for people with impairments. [It] has gone from providing athletes with the opportunity of participation to adopting a high-performance model of sporting practice that attracts a large amount of media attention.
(Howe *Cultural 2*)⁴⁹

Despite this rise from rehabilitative participation to the pursuit of excellence, the sporting event still embodies participation in how it is received. Interviewing sports journalists from the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, A. Golden found that many of them believed the

⁴⁹ The Invictus Games returned to these roots of the Paralympics, where the goals included using 'the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation, and generate a wider understanding and respect of those who serve their country'. For the competitors it aimed to 'offer a memorable, inspiring and energising experience in their journey of recovery' (invictusgames.org).

Paralympians 'can't compete on the same level as the Olympic athletes, so it's a bone they throw to them to make them feel better' (qtd. in Hardin & Hardin 4).

This condescending, but perhaps widely held, attitude foreshadows Howe's own concerns on whether the Paralympic Movement has in effect empowered or *disempowered* disabled athletes. Exploring this very question, Howe's answer is necessarily complex but he does suggest that there is an omnipresent hierarchy of acceptance that plays a significant role in how disabled athletes are perceived (*Cultural*). He argues that the greater the degree of impairment the harder it is for audiences to appreciate the level of expertise demonstrated by these athletes. Failing to appreciate such expertise therefore affects the ability to interpret the skills and the successes achieved, supporting the potential to view such work through a participatory lens. Participants and projects are judged on experiential or therapeutic terms, rather than for the quality of sportsmanship produced (72).

Similarly in disability arts and culture, and in part because disabled performers were often omitted from (even if metaphorically central to) mainstream culture, those that were involved 'struggle[d] [in the early days] just to get [their] work taken seriously' (ACE "Celebrating" 6). Furthermore, 'there was a strong tendency to assume that any artwork by disabled people must, by definition, be therapy' (ibid). Just as Howe's argument that the Paralympic Games have not always been empowering for disabled people, not least because they were traditionally organised *for* disabled people *by* non-disabled people, so disability arts have been governed in a similar fashion with an arguably equal consequence of disempowerment.

Quality issues became more prominent, equally linked to questions of control. Dr Linda Moss, the Arts Council's Arts and Disability Officer, pointed out that many 'integrated' companies made very dubious use of disabled performers: "The inclusion of disabled performers has a very convenient double advantage to such companies: it provides their apology for not reaching the highest standards; and it opens up additional sources of funding from social services, charities concerned with disabled people, etc. Ultimately, companies of this type can only bring disability culture into disrepute". (qtd. in ACE "Celebrating" 8)

Moss's statement echoes comments by Lyn Gardner, who, writing shortly before the *POC* of London 2012 commented that, 'for years now, this kind of work has been emerging out of a tick box culture that pays lip service to diversity, but values neither that diversity nor the art it produces' ("Paralympics" n.pag.). Additionally, she wrote that, 'because artists are disabled doesn't mean their performances are less good' (ibid) than non-disabled artists, implying that disabled artists *are* oftentimes considered 'less good' *because* they are disabled. The organisation of disabled activities by the non-disabled, whether within the medical

profession, sport or the arts, has arguably had a lingering impact on the way they are still perceived, heightened by the challenges of understanding the skills and expertise demonstrated by the disabled artists themselves. Although the arts can and do play a significant role in therapy, and participatory activities are certainly not being condemned here, it is the perception that *all* arts involving disabled people are forms of therapy that is the issue, and the effect of such consideration therefore negates them being critiqued in artistic terms.

I'm not a big fan of dance and or acrobatics normally. I find the human form in movement quite awkward to behold (possibly because of my own limitations). I also often find disabled dance etc. rather embarrassing and wish they wouldn't / or at least wish I didn't watch (shameful but true). However the style and substance of this piece dissolved any of my usual hang-ups. (Survey Monkey)

Perhaps at the heart of this lie the arguments surrounding the socially conceived notions of 'normalcy' discussed in the previous chapter that state we all measure others and ourselves to an arguably unattainable corporeal standard. Disability occurs when the body disrupts this sense of normalcy particularly in terms of 'function' and 'appearance' (L. Davis 11). Furthering this point, Kupperts argues that 'when disabled people perform they are often not primarily seen as performers, but as disabled people' (48). The 'disabled body' she continues is '*naturally* about disability' (49), thus reflecting concerns I raised earlier about the interpretation of work by Wee Pea, Koko and other small statured clowns. If aerial conventionally produces a high expectation of corporeal functionality, when that very corporeality disturbs onlookers' expectations it is perhaps understandable that the appreciation of it also has to shift. The aerial 'normalcy' is erased by the perceived *disability*, and this can have the effect of altering the reception from seeing an aerialist/performer, to seeing only the suspended disabled person.

The issues of 'performing' versus 'being' are central to the public evaluation of disabled performers. [...] On the one side, disabled performance is seen as therapeutic – the relationship between body and performance is unproblematic, performance is an 'opportunity' for disabled people to discover themselves as 'whole' and 'able'. The focus is inwards: aimed at the disabled person doing the performing, not the wider community. [...] On the other side, disabled performance can be seen *as* performance: challenging dominant notions about 'suitable bodies', challenging ideas about the hierarchy between (led) disabled people and (leading) non-disabled people. Here, disabled performance is seen as a political intervention, aimed at the whole community. (Kupperts 56)

Acutely aware of the potential for such considerations projecting onto *Hang-ups!* both Partridge and I were adamant that only a limited personal narrative around Partridge's life as a disabled person should be reflected in the film. Furthermore although French was interested in the question of artistic therapy as an issue himself, this was vetoed as having no place in this particular project. Thinking at least retrospectively, that the piece *could* be critiqued on participatory rather than artistic terms, this might also have influenced our physical exchanges, and in particular the confinement of *my* physical actions. Borrowing Kuppers' phrase, the project had been about 'challenging the hierarchy between (led) disabled people and (leading) non-disabled people' (ibid) in the air, and conscious of my own non-disabled status in an investigation on disability, I was conscious of not wishing to force too great a movement comparison between the two of us.

To determine whether something *should* be assessed as a work of 'art' or rather be considered in therapeutic or participatory terms requires several things to be established. Firstly, what did those involved intend it to be? According to Larry Lavender, the debate between *intentionalism* and *anti-intentionalism* has been underway since the mid-1940s. The debate questions whether knowledge of an artist's 'intention' behind a work is essential to interpret and appreciate the creation, or whether 'art' should be considered 'autonomous entities whose meanings are carried entirely by their internal structures' (23). Where work by *all* disabled artists has the propensity and even the probability to be judged as therapeutic or participatory simply by being created in connection with disability, I believe having knowledge of the particular intentions behind the work are useful to include. Ideally, the work *should* be considered solely on its merits, but if the premise is that all such work is therapy, then understanding the impetus or intention behind the work might at least begin the process of dispelling that myth.

From the outset this project was always a professional arts project that brought three artists with established portfolios of professional work, together to explore a particular idea – if at the research and development stages. In their recorded discussion, French stated to Partridge, 'sometimes therapeutic work is beneficial to the disabled' to which she responded, 'I think that's fine so long as that's what's said on the tin'. She continued, 'I think it depends what people think they're [doing it] for' stressing that in this instance, she wanted 'to produce good artistic work'. To ensure we maintained that professional standing we were all paid for our engagement, and though as is often the case with such projects we all did more than was initially budgeted for, our *intention* was clear. Receiving funding for the project from arts based organisations (rather than for example charities supporting inclusive activities) also supports this status. How successful that 'art' proves to be is not the question at this moment.

Nevertheless, whether the audiences considered it art or therapy is under consideration. So how did viewers react to the piece?

Perhaps surprisingly, only one Survey Monkey respondent mentioned 'therapy' specifically, suggesting the film provoked 'possibilities for therapeutic uses of the aerial'. However, the 'opportunity' awarded to Partridge did affect a number of respondents, with one viewer apologising that 'it seemed a very personal journey for Sophie and I felt almost that I was intruding'. Another 'felt happy that disabled people get a chance to get a new perspective on their situation', whilst one more was simply 'very happy and very pleased for Sophie'. In fact, there were significant comments by viewers demonstrating that participation was of significant importance to their interpretation of the film. A woman whose 'daughter has the same form of Osteogenesis Imperfecta' as Partridge said she 'was excited that, besides water, the air and aerial allowed her freedom to explore new movements', continuing that '[a]lthough somewhat limited in the air, it made a profound effect on her'. This is echoed in another respondent's statement that 'the limitations were offset by Sophie's joy and personality'. In fact several were 'grateful' that such an opportunity had been offered to Partridge, with one saying it was now "'normal" to make space if possible for people to try to do everything they want' and that it was 'exciting' that 'Sophie's ambitions [...] should be addressed and that she should be given the opportunity to achieve them'. Interestingly most of the commentary focused on Partridge, on her aerial, her relationship with me, and her writing. Such comments were not on Partridge as a performer in the piece so much as being a 'disabled person', suggesting that *Hang-ups!* was being seen as a piece of participatory work where Partridge became *hypervisible* and I became *invisible*.

The physically impaired performer has [...] to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization as passive consumer and victim in much of the popular imagination. (Kuppers 48)

If read in this way, it might suggest that the *equitable* duet somehow failed, but perhaps more fundamentally, by placing the focus on Partridge in this manner her agency as a performer was reduced. She was seen as the passive recipient of others' actions as she was 'allowed', 'permitted', 'enabled' to do something that in turn implies that she should be 'grateful', 'happy' and subservient. Admittedly, such opinions were in the minority, but they demonstrate a perpetuating experience of disabled performers whose work is never 'taken seriously' or is critiqued only as an extension of opportunity. Pushed further this can be seen as even more politically adverse. If Partridge is the recipient of the dominating will of the non-

disabled, and her agency is questioned, it therefore carries the distasteful connotations of exhibitionism and freak shows. Partridge herself admitted,

I think some people are a bit like, ooh that's not a good thing for disabled artists associating with circus, but actually [...] if it's there and we are in control of it as it were, then what's the big deal? (Interview with Author)

I have already shown how disabled artists have manipulated and reinvented freak shows with varying degrees of success in the twenty-first century, and how the historical relationship with circus is at least uncomfortable. Partridge's point above is fundamental here however, that for it *not* to be interpreted as a freak show, she would have to be 'in control'. The process presents our mutual agency to a certain extent, so *we know* we are not making a freak show, but that is not to prevent onlookers from seeing it as such. We did perhaps situate ourselves on a delicate set of scales as one observer astutely commented: '[t]here is [...] a fine balance between helping a disabled person to achieve a goal of becoming an aerial performer, and using that performance in an exploitative way' (Survey Monkey). So how do we determine whether the piece was 'art' or 'participation'? What standards should be used to judge the work?

The journalists quoted above who condemned Paralympic sport as being 'a bone' thrown to disabled people to be involved, were obviously comparing the Paralympians to the Olympians but each had a very different ontogenesis and therefore by using the specific standards of one to judge the value of another was perhaps bound to fail. I have already demonstrated how aerial is often judged in terms of its physical actions and its emotional and kinaesthetic affects, and if *Hang-ups!* is assessed solely on its aerial content, judged on how it sits within the aerial canon in relation to the conventional aerialist, then it too is bound to appear failing in that regard. As the majority of integrated circus and aerial practice with disabled people is also housed within participatory or therapeutic projects, as I demonstrated in the 'Introduction', this might also explain the propensity to view the work through this frame. To prevent any suggestion of voyeurism or freak show connection, to eliminate any supposition of exploitation and to enhance our actions working together in a form of aerial dancing, the film employed additional tools such as 'spoken word', lighting and music demonstrating that it was no longer *just* about the aerial actions themselves.

Of course, it is impossible to set out the parameters for which the work *should* be judged, other than by us, the makers. Observers will bring their own intertextual interpretations and aerial/disability biases to the work in order to make their own judgements. The following section therefore seeks to offer alternative standards by which to view the work,

looking into the additional creative tools, or ‘texts’ that were used by us to present our work being conscious that if solely judged from an aerial perspective, the piece could fall into exhibitionist performance territory.

Performance Texts

I started this analysis stating that the film was a meta-reflexive project and as such, it set out to be part documentary. This enabled us to intersect the ‘real people’ with the ‘performed’ action as well as offering useful aides to linking those performed sections. We hoped that by interspersing the images with voiced documentation of our *intentions* we could guide the audience into seeing the work within our chosen parameters. The use of ‘spoken word’ within the performance sections was therefore also a significant element to ensure the audience was not simply *looking at*, and objectifying our bodies in space.

Traditionally aerialists are ‘primarily non-verbal, physical performers’ (Stephens 10) and although there are individuals making works that incorporate different types of speech within their performances, many continue this tradition maintaining an element of anonymity, concentrating audiences on the corporeal action no matter how conceptually or theatrically framed. Similarly, disabled people have often felt silenced, pigeonholed into playing impairment specific characters or have been used metaphorically for something *beyond* themselves, as shown by Norden in *The Cinema of Isolation*. Partridge and I were especially clear that such symbolism was not being explored or utilised in *Hang-ups!*

As a creative writer and performer Partridge’s spoken texts were a pre-determined essential layer that gave voice to both silenced aerialists and silenced disabled people. In essence her words can be interpreted as empowering her ‘disabled’ and ‘aerial’, her ‘real’ and ‘performed’ selves through being heard. By contrast, my silence (in performance rather than in the documentary sections) had not in fact been predetermined, and we did record sections of me speaking. Returning to my journal notes however, I wrote that ‘even when we performed the spoken text as dialogue rather than monologue, something didn’t *feel* right’ (*Journal*). I do however pose the question ‘But why? It’s not that I feel I have nothing to say, quite the opposite’ (ibid).

As the audience responses demonstrated in the previous section, the film ended up being much more *about* Partridge and I admitted that

It is perhaps that I am more interested in learning what Sophie has to say; to see if her experience is one that she feels was worthwhile – personally, artistically, politically, and professionally. (ibid)

Continuing the meta-reflexive theme, I also knew that I would have the opportunity to reflect upon the project in these pages, and so perhaps by pre-empting them here, I ended up removing my voice (as well as my aerial actions) from the project itself. Nevertheless, there is something uncomfortable in this acknowledgement. By removing myself from the project in this way, I might have inadvertently thrown the focus even more heavily upon Partridge thus undermining the very essence of generating an *equitable* duet and potentially returning the focus onto a disabled person. Furthermore, there is also a segregation of our two written 'texts' with potential political resonance.

Partridge wrote of her experiences, her thoughts and feelings in poetic, rhythmical form that reflected her embodied experience and emotion. The aim was to perform the writing and it therefore became an integral part of the film. My 'text', written away from the project, reflects aspects of the process in prose that are governed under a different set of rules. It is not to be performed or read as a part of the project per se and the project is subsumed *within* it. Although I do not suggest there is a hierarchical relationship between the texts – how we compare poetry to academic writing when each has a different set of functions, structures and forms is beyond the scope of this particular analysis – there is certainly a dissonance present. This reflects back to the Introduction where I discussed Diana Taylor's ethical warning that those being analysed (particularly in ethnographic studies) are not usually in control of the research findings and commentaries thus presenting an imbalance of power. When the power is in the hands of the non-disabled rather than the disabled person this can of course be politically sensitive, not least from what I have been demonstrated above in terms of disability sports and arts. I had an element of control over how and what aspects of Partridge's text were used within the film, but I have autonomy over what is written here. Partridge was offered and accepted the opportunity to read and comment on this text.

Owing to the potential uniqueness of this type of interactional aerial work, the complex nature of analysing both aerial and disability performance, as well as further layers of analysis proffered by it being a film, the aims and results of a project like *Hang-ups!* can be interpreted from different perspectives resulting in quite oppositional outcomes. Before drawing conclusions however, the risk in the piece also needs to be examined as it significantly affects perceptions of both aerial and disability. The risk Partridge embodies and that which audiences perceive may be markedly different from each other, once more affecting the appreciation of her aerial encounters both physically and politically.

Risky Performance

Where's my leg?
Is it there? Is it ok?
Other leg.
Head, in or out?
Will it fall off with its own weight?
Brain about to fall out!
Should I be doing this?
(Partridge in *Hang-ups!*)

Stoddart declared that 'physical risk-taking has always been at [the] heart' (*Rings* 4) of circus and aerial performance, and I have shown how there is often a complex mix of 'real' and 'performed' risk in aerial. This is further complicated by the observer's *perception* of risk based on their own understandings of what they are witnessing. When the aerialist has a physical condition such as OI and there is an acknowledged minimisation of aerial actions, the clarity of signals is blurred further unless received by viewers with specific understandings of both aerial and the physiological condition. Claire Cunningham suggested there are also emotive and political associations with risk that might also influence the disabled participant *and* her onlookers.

I also think that risk creates a double edge for an audience based on society viewing [the] disabled individual as being 'dependent' on society – e.g. the health system, benefit system... and therefore exposing the disabled self to perceived excessive risk is irresponsible/ungrateful. ("RE: Disability")

This was certainly reflected in an informal conversation I had with an orthopaedic surgeon who interpreted the *real* risks undertaken by people with OI in the air as being irresponsible, even more so than the anticipated risks of the conventional aerialists. Being especially involved in the surgical care of diverse patients, his perspective is perhaps understandable. Acknowledging that she was indeed 'scared [owing to the] very real risks involved in [her] impairment' and that she and others with OI are 'really fragile', Partridge did nevertheless relish the opportunity to 'have a go' admitting she was also influenced by 'all this stuff about challenging yourself' (Interview with Author). This certainly returns her early aerial ventures (that took place with me at Cirque Nova the previous year), to that of participation rather than artistic exploration, but also troubles the risk-taking for people with diverse impairments. On the one hand disabled people are encouraged to actively participate in activities that potentially 'challenge' them, but that participation may well be framed within structures of 'appropriateness' outlined by the non-disabled.

Returning to the specifics of the project, any time Partridge was in the air during the making of *Hang-ups!* I would ask her if she wanted to go higher (or lower) but she would simply reiterate her casual “I don’t mind”. She said, ‘It doesn’t bother me how high up I go’ stating frankly that, ‘if I fall from up there or if I fall from just here it’s still going to be the same’ (Interview with French). The risks and danger of conventional aerial performance therefore become completely absorbed by Partridge’s ‘fragile’ physiology; simply venturing into the air at all arguably puts Partridge in much more danger than the conventional aerialist.

I think non-disabled people get a bit hung up on all that actually, you know about taking risks [...]. And it’s like well they’re in a way, higher up the tree so they’re able to do that, but as a disabled person you kind of take risks everyday really, just as part of life. (ibid)

To put this into a more practical context, as a non-disabled, conventional aerialist I have the ability to alter my body’s position with relative ease. If I feel myself falling, I can at least reach out my arms to catch hold of the piece of equipment, or attempt to manoeuvre myself to land more safely. Although I *knew* that Partridge was as safe as she could be high in the studio, and that she would in essence *do* nothing, there was still a lingering anxiety. I was constantly questioning whether I had done everything necessary to ensure she would not inadvertently fall out of the cocoon as, unlike me, she would not have the strength or mobility to catch the fabric to halt her descent. Nor did she have the facility to manipulate her falling body’s posture so would land as gravity demanded. Partridge of course always stated when she was ready and felt secure in her suspended position, but just as she questioned in her poetic text, I was constantly asking myself, should we be doing this?

The physical risk was taken by Partridge, but the emotion of that risk appeared to be felt most prominently by me. As the instigator of the project and the rigger, I was responsible for elevating Partridge into the air. Partridge’s knowledge of her own body and my knowledge of aerial had to work in union but neither of us could realistically determine how ‘at risk’ she really was. Reinforcing this point from an audience perspective, the mother cited earlier, whose daughter shared the same form of OI as Partridge, was ‘torn between being thrilled of the possibility that my daughter would ever do this, to being frightened’ because she knew that ‘one, even slight, wrong move’ could have disastrous consequences (Survey Monkey).

Although we did not ask the film’s audience to comment specifically on their perception of risk within the piece, several (with knowledge or experience of OI or related conditions) did so stating it had a profound impact on *them*, that they were ‘frightened’ or ‘apprehensive’ or ‘fearful’ for Partridge’s safety, but also excited at the possibilities it

presented. One non-disabled experienced aerial observer even commented that the piece 'seems to turn on its head who takes risk in aerial work' as it is 'not always those who are super-humanly fit doing extraordinary things' but as Partridge had stated, 'those who have to live with risk in their bodies every day because they are disabled' (ibid). Partridge, suspending in the air and *doing nothing* compared to a non-disabled aerialist *doing something*, actually 'heightened the risks in aerial work' for some observers, but as the majority of respondents did not mention anything to do with risk and danger, it remains unclear whether or not they imagined there was any serious risk present.

Initial Conclusions

We never set out to create a circus piece, nor a dance piece, but sought to create a short film based on the movements and words that were inspired by our mutual desire to be airborne. (T. Carter *Journal*)

Hang-ups! aimed to investigate the aerial potential for a performer with significantly limited mobility in partnership with a conventional aerialist through the experimentation and filming of a duet. Through examination of some of its aims and processes in addition to the finished product, I have attempted to analyse whether *one particular* 'disabled aerialist' was in the process of suspending any of its conventions and the impact of so doing.

In the first instance, there was a significant dislocation from the conventional physical elements of aerial. The performance utilised a recognisable piece of aerial equipment but there was no discernible aerial movement owing to the specific physiological restrictions extant within Partridge's non-conventional aerial body, a body that neither suggested nor demonstrated training, muscularity or athleticism (Tait *Circus 2*). Additionally, I have shown that even my conventional aerial movements were necessarily curtailed by our sharing of the space. I suggested that this could be considered a minimalistic manipulation of the conventions familiar within other aerial displays, but when examined more closely, such minimisation still incorporated conventional aerial action within its work and so did not make for like comparison. Admitting that our grounded movements are themselves limited in design, they do propose that other such dance actions (perhaps more akin to that explored by Sendgraff and her 'motivity' projects) could be developed and there are certainly possibilities for future practical research, not least through the partnering of diverse 'disabled aerialists' together.

In *Aesthetics of Aerial Dance and Aerial Circus*, that echoes much of the opinion of Bernasconi and Smith in *Aerial Dance*, Sonya Smith attempts to distinguish the aesthetics between these two forms. She highlights three aspects particularly pertinent to *Hang-ups!* that could arguably place the film and its aerial content into an 'aerial dance' aesthetic.

Primarily she argues that there is ‘an emphasis on transitional movement and a corresponding lack of emphasis on any specific trick’, and that ‘the choreographer’s intention and dance-like “crafting” of the work’ (3) is of paramount differentiating importance. There is the ‘incorporation of movement on the floor’ which often includes ‘transition[s] between the floor and apparatus’ and finally, there is the ‘downplay [of] traditionally gendered interactions’ (ibid).

In terms of our film, the ‘transitions’ are smooth if in physical reality they were not so possible, and there are no discernible aerial tricks at all. These support our ‘intention’ and potential ‘crafting’ to make the work ‘dance-like’. The majority of our actions, and all those that bring us physically close together, involve using the floor and the equipment. By ‘traditionally gendered interactions’ she means heterosexual interplay with the male more dominant than the female in the performances, so here by two women working together, we further adhere to her ‘aerial dance’ aesthetics. A discrepancy does exist, however, that also mars her argument, as many aerial ‘dancers’ still ‘seek aerial training in many places including from aerial circus’ (21). Despite there being no purported ‘trick’ based emphasis, or ‘ta-dah’ moments, the tricks themselves are increasingly present in such works often with little to differentiate them (particularly in rope or silks based pieces) from what she would term ‘aerial circus’. Therefore, only by following her specific definitions of the aerial dance aesthetic can our film be defined in these terms.

In addition to challenging the practicalities of aerial, the concept of control that I showed to be a foundational aesthetic of conventional aerial was also disrupted. Instead of demonstrating control over gravity, for Partridge never portrayed physical control in the air, she exerted agency from a disability perspective displaying this in her relationships between her PA and me. This may not then be an aesthetic but functional aspect, but as it influenced both what and how she moved, even if others physicalised this, I believe it is still relevant as an aesthetic consideration.

Partridge’s undertaking can also be seen as harmonious within aerial and disability discourses. By entering into geographic and performance space that previously excluded her, she echoes the early history of aerial, when aerial itself flirted with the perceptibly impossible. Predominantly non-disabled men and women exploited social beliefs that gravity could not be defied and Partridge takes this a step further for disabled people. Paradoxically from an aerial perspective my subjugation to professional assistant potentially demoted my aerial position to one of a supporting role similar to the women whose physical abilities were erased to support their male counterparts, or even as reminiscent of Leitzel’s ‘handmaiden’ who supported her at the end of her act.

Instead of viewing the aerial as reduced it can be seen as having been re-focused, demonstrating that, 'aerial work doesn't have to be about tricks and ego' as one survey respondent wrote. Similarly, the aspects of risk and danger, whether 'real' or 'perceived', were still present, but in different ways. Conventional aspects of danger may have appeared removed, and the perception of danger was often dependent upon specific knowledge of OI, but real risk was still present. Nevertheless, the focus on the physical, corporeal subject dictated by the aerial form also had political concerns when the focus turned on a disabled person. The project still had the propensity to produce voyeuristic conditions through which to view disability as one commentator wrote, 'ghoulish as it may seem, the USP and attraction of many integrated projects is the "extra-ordinary" nature of the performers' (ibid). Observing more crudely, another wrote,

I would have liked to see more of Sophie's body as the piece is after all largely about it. We never seem to see her legs properly, one clear shot of her on her chair would have been good. (ibid)

Concluding is therefore challenging, as our short film demonstrates that there is a blend of convention and alteration in both physical exploration and cultural embodiment. Perhaps a project that incorporates aerial and disability at this time will necessarily be forced to acknowledge that 'it is hard NOT to look at the disability first and the art second' (ibid) but its strength exists in forcing audiences and artists to engage with the work in different ways. Perhaps by making this work, by more disabled people taking to the air and by them examining what it means for *them* to be aerialists, it will enable the form to challenge its current position as predominantly for the non-disabled. Instead of 'really lag[ging] behind other performance styles in its emphasis on the 'correct' body' as a viewer commented, such developments will perhaps enhance aerial as a creative form.

Chapter 5: The Paralympic Ceremonies

I was accepted onto the training course at Circus Space to train in aerial performance in preparation for the Paralympic opening ceremony. And so the love affair began. As I learnt about my body and the tasks I could ask it to perform, I began to feel an overwhelming sense of access. Now I appreciate that sounds crazy, but prior to falling ill, I used to do quite a lot of movement and performing, but I had stopped because my body would no longer allow me to move as I wanted or I 'thought' looked nice. Using the equipment such as the Trapeze, Strop or Harness to support my body, I was free to let other parts of my body move freely, and which, in my mind didn't look too bad at all. (Mortley "Questionnaire")

The *Paralympic Opening Ceremony (POC)* of London 2012 united disability and aerial in contrasting ways to those presented in *Hang-ups!*. Most prominently, the *POC* aerialists had more recognisably conventional functionality in aerial terms, making them more 'can do' than 'no can do' aerialists. There were however, issues of access – in practical and aesthetic terms – that forced further reconsiderations of how disabled people can be fully integrated into the aerial arts. Firstly, access to information demanded a process of translation that impacted on the speed of exchange and safety of participants at times. Secondly, the pursuit of the 'aesthetics of access' (addressed in Chapter 3) unwittingly clashed with some of the practical concerns of access for some participants, especially in the preparatory training programme. Additionally, considerations of what and how to display and acknowledge impairment was not always determined by the individual performer, resulting in some discomfort over explicit control of their disability identities. In Chapter 3, I referred to Cunningham's comments regarding understanding the 'frames of reference' for any work, where an artist who had undertaken limited training or exposure to the art form should not be judged under the same criteria as someone who had distinctly different access to such preparation. The inclusion of aerial novices in the *POC* project therefore does need to be considered in terms of its ambition and limited time-scale.

As academic comment on the ceremonies is still limited⁵⁰ I draw in particular on Garcia's *Secrets of the Olympic Ceremonies* and Howe's *The Cultural Politics of the Paralympic Movement* who both offer useful statistics on viewing figures, organisation of the Paralympics and its history in relation to the Olympics, that help demonstrate the evolution of the movement, its growing popularity and therefore importance to disability culture and politics. As I was actively involved in the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies, I continue to utilise my personal and professional experience as source material, with additional information provided

⁵⁰ *Contemporary Theatre Review* published a special issue (2013: Vol.23, No.4) on the 'Cultural Politics of London 2012' with a few writers critiquing aspects of the *POC*, that are cited later on. Nevertheless, no critique was offered of the aerialists or the aerial work in particular.

through completed questionnaires from: Phil Hayes (Aerial Consultant for all four ceremonies), Jenny Sealey (Artistic Director for the *POC*) and Katharine Arnold (Aerial Choreographer for the *PCC*). Furthermore, I include my interview with Sealey conducted prior to her appointment on the *POC*, and several email correspondences from *POC* participants.

The Paralympic Movement

Dr Ludwig Guttman, the acknowledged founder of the Paralympic Movement, organised the first Stoke Mandeville Games at the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. He deliberately coincided this event with the start of the 1948 Olympic Games held in London, 'as a demonstration of potential' that sport, he believed, could 'help even severely disabled people to live a healthier, happier life, to gain confidence and self-esteem and to achieve a degree of independence' (Gold & Gold 134). His first event involved just sixteen men with spinal injuries competing in 'an archery competition that took place on the front lawns of the hospital', but he had ambitions for it to become internationally recognised, and evolve to equal the Olympic Games for men and women (*ibid*). It is this event that marks the beginning of the Paralympic Movement though the first actual Paralympic Games are said to have taken place in Rome in 1960, and 'the term 'Paralympic' was not used until 1964 in Tokyo' (Howe *Cultural* 16).

Since their inception, the Paralympics have been a powerful advocate for inclusion and equality, but throughout their history, they have also proven problematic as they continually provoke questions about standards, elitism, excellence and acceptance as well as how such things should be measured. The Paralympics transformed from 'one sport and 16 competitors' to becoming 'a multinational elite sporting event' (P. Carter "Paralympics" n.pag.) that was opened to all disabled athletes and not just those with spinal injuries. This ultimately led to the highly 'complex and detailed classification systems' (Howe and Parker 270)⁵¹ that analysed not only the individual athlete's sporting potential, but focused on an individual's specific impairment/s in order to be as fair to competing athletes as possible. The increasing diversity has led to an increase in the number of races for each discipline,⁵² ultimately creating a 'hierarchy of acceptance' where those athletes 'from the less impaired classes of any given sport' are given, or receive a higher profile than those with more complex impairments (Howe & Parker 274). Furthermore, Howe and Parker argue that with the growing success of the

⁵¹ In addition see Conroy "Paralympic Cultures" and *ITU Paratriathlon Classification Rules and Regulations* for more details.

⁵² 'There were fifteen 100m final races for men and eleven for women in the sport of athletics in the 2000 Paralympic Games, compared with one final per sex for the 100m at the Olympic Games' (Howe 76)

Paralympic Games, and its close connections to the Olympic Games, this diversity is now under threat.

The IPC are conspiring with the IOC to repackage, re-market, refresh, modernise and essentially commodify the Paralympics. The 'product', however, needs revising to stimulate demand. The Paralympic Games need to be quicker, slicker, shorter, with fewer events, fewer but higher-profile champions, and more established stars. (ibid)

Fernand Landry asserts that ““olympism” and “paralympism”” share the founder of the modern Olympics ‘Pierre de Coubertin's core values’ (8) that lie in ‘the *spirit* with which an athlete, as a whole human being, acts and achieves, often *in spite of apparently unsurmountable (sic) obstacles*’ (4) and not simply through the quantifiable act of winning. Even so, their divergent ontologies arguably problematize general understanding and appreciation of the latter. According to John and Margaret Gold, the term Paralympic ‘was originally a pun combining ‘paraplegic’ and ‘Olympic’” (Gold & Gold 134). They argue this had the effect of ‘confronting Olympian traditions of celebrating excellence and the perfectly formed body with the realities of disability’ (ibid). Thus the two were linked but through difference. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) now state that ‘the approved etymology [is that] the first syllable of ‘Paralympics’ derives from the Greek preposition ‘para’, meaning ‘beside’ or ‘alongside’” (ibid), thus removing the apparent negative comparisons to bring them parallel with one another. The etymology may therefore have changed, but their histories arguably still influence how each is received (and indeed financially supported).

The Olympic Games had the pursuit of sporting excellence as its foundation, as well as the philosophy of achieving this in an appropriate ‘manner’ or ‘spirit’, but Howe and others demonstrate that this was not always the case for disability sport that ultimately evolved into the Paralympics. Though disabled athletes have successfully competed in the Olympics⁵³ he argues that the main thrust of disability sport started with ‘rehabilitation’, progressed towards ‘participation’ and finally culminated in the pursuit of ‘high performance’ sporting achievement (Howe *Cultural* 16). He explains that

The aim of the rehabilitation was not the pursuit of physical excellence that is the hallmark of the Paralympic Games today, but rather a desire to get these men back into work and paying taxes. (ibid)

⁵³ George Eyser ‘won 6 medals at St. Louis 1904 [...] despite wearing a wooden prosthesis for his left leg which was lost as a youth in a railway accident.’ (Garcia 923). ‘[T]he disabled South African swimmer Natalie du Toit, [...] competed with distinction in both disabled and mainstream events, won the David Dixon Award as the most outstanding athlete of the entire Games’ (Gold & Gold 140). Oscar Pistorius also notably ran in the Olympics in London 2012.

This rehabilitative, participatory history alongside the existence of other impairment specific sport (such as the Special Olympics or the Deaflympics), is reminiscent of the participatory or therapeutic arts practice discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, Howe argues that sports coverage, particularly by 'print journalists' is often 'devoid of cultural understanding of Paralympic sport' ("Newsroom" 135) and Gold & Gold decry that '[m]edia coverage tends to portray athletes with disability as being courageous or brave and frequently Other; a style of representation that irks many such athletes' (141). Once again, this form of commentary returns disabled people into narratives or potential stereotypes as discussed earlier.

Thus, despite the relative longevity of disability sport and the drawing together of the Olympic and Paralympic events (with both appearing in the same countries at least since Seoul 1988), there do still appear to be difficulties in discerning their purpose and their worth as well as how to analyse them. The developing closeness of the two events has also been problematic in suggesting they are 'supposedly separate-but-equal' a political and emotive 'concept that is as uncomfortable here as in other realms of public life' (Gold & Gold 141). The discrepancy of equality not only lies in the media representation of the two sets of events, but more crucially in the marked differences in finance and time dedicated to the organisation of them and, most pertinently here, to their opening and closing ceremonies (see Richards on such discrepancies relating to the Ceremonies in Sydney).

Garcia plots the history of the various ceremonies associated with these global events and although he pays little attention to the Paralympics, the scant information he shares demonstrates that the ceremonies are an essential part of the ritual of both games. Just as the Games and indeed the athletes competing in them are compared to one another, so the ceremonies that bookend them have had significant association, sometimes being the same show repeated in the Paralympics as performed in the Olympics, or being organised by the same creative teams.

According to Garcia, '[t]he ceremony served as an introduction to the Games' and 'its staging influenced the total style of the following Olympic days' (402). Howe shares this sense of importance stating that the opening and closing ceremonies (at least in 2008) were 'the best attended events during the Paralympic Games' (*Cultural* 21). A tentative look at the budgets for ceremonies gives an idea of just how important the host countries considered the events to be, demonstrating the trend to invest far more heavily in the Olympics than the Paralympics. The Innsbruck Games of 1976, that Garcia claims offers the 'earliest publicly available report strictly for ceremonies', had a final budget of \$76,000, whilst the 2008 Beijing ceremonies totalled nearer to \$160 Million (Garcia 541). Commenting on the Atlanta games he writes,

When the last banner was folded and the last 'glowing' catfish auctioned off, the 1996 Opening cost \$15,000,000 (est.), Closing was \$4,100,000 for a total of \$26,600,000 (including the Awards unit, Paralympic ceremonies, and part of the Torch Relay). (1702)

This clearly demonstrates Garcia's focus on the Olympics rather than the Paralympics, as he does not separate the budgets for the latter. However, by deduction the figures allow \$7,500,000 to cover the 'Awards unit, Paralympic Ceremonies and part of the Torch Relay', showing that certainly in 1996 there was a significant difference between the budgets of both Opening Ceremonies. The Paralympics budget for both would have come close to that of just the closing for the Olympics.

Karen Richards, Paralympic Games Director of Ceremonies at Sydney, shows how the trend continued in 2000: the *IOC* budget was 'in excess of \$50m', with the *POC* budget a mere ten per cent of this at five million Australian dollars. Despite this, she stated 'both ceremonies really had the same goals – to launch their respective Games towards a successful outcome' (19), thus poignantly suggesting that the Paralympics required less spectacle to make them successful, or as Richards acknowledges herself, that they were less popular and so attracted less financial backing. More recently, although the budgets have increased, the same precedent continued for the London 2012 ceremonies.

Some £27 million was spent on Danny Boyle's spectacular Olympic curtain-raiser, while the remaining £53m was divided between the Paralympics opener and the closing ceremonies for both Games. (Mercer n.pag.)

Despite these marked differences in historic budgets and Garcia's clear bias towards the Olympics, he admits that the Paralympic Ceremonies in Athens 'had more heart and soul than the regular ceremonies' (2559). He states that the 'more recent Paralympic ceremonies are models of imagination and innovation' (4294), and occasionally dismisses some of the Olympic ceremonies as becoming 'contrived' or 'heavy-handed' (2154). Although a dedicated follower and fan of the four-yearly spectacles, he also acknowledges that it was not the Olympics but the 'Salt Lake '02 Winter Paralympics which won a Daytime Emmy for Directing Special Events' (2409). Thus, despite their less than equal financing, the *POCs* appear to have been more than equally well received.

The *POC* for London 2012 also attracted positive accolades being described as 'passionate, smart, moving and original' (Higgins 4) and a 'triumphant celebration of humankind's ability to overcome seemingly impossible odds' (J. Taylor "Hawking" 3), not least by featuring 'everything from athletes 'flying' on golden wheelchairs to amputees performing

gravity-defying acrobatics' (Rayner 2). For Anita Singh the event 'treated disability with dignity, humour and a touch of defiance' (3) which helped achieve the artistic directors' goal of a ceremony that would 'alter the world's perception of disability' (J. Taylor "Hawking" 2). Certainly the UK press appeared united in opinion that, despite its budget being less than one-third of that allocated to Boyle's event, the *POC* was indeed a successful and evocative celebration for the home-coming of the Paralympic Games.

As well as demonstrating that the *POCs* have a history of celebrated success, the role of disabled artists, sportsmen and war veterans has also been widely celebrated within them. Garcia proffers that the 'handicapped archer' who 'launched a flaming arrow halfway across the stadium into the air' to light the cauldron in Barcelona 1992 was one of that ceremony's most 'magical moments' and indeed one of the best 'lighting' events he had witnessed (3036). Writing about the same event, Landry declared

[The ceremonies] stood as a vibrant tribute to courage and creativity, culminating in powerful inspirational messages from dignitaries (Maragall, Arroyo, Cabezas, and Hawking) passionately delivered to the handicapped athletes present, yet also sent to all the citizens of the world, handicapped or not: *The Triumph of Light*. (Landry 9)

The Beijing ceremonies similarly celebrated disability and difference where '[a]ctors with a disability performed together with able-bodied actors' such as 'the singer with a visual impairment', or 'the dancing girl with an amputated left leg' or 'a pianist with a visual impairment' (Beijing... "Directors"). Beijing's *PCC* continued the theme of celebration with its director Zhang Jigang informing readers that '[a]ll the songs and dances delivered a message that the disabled people will never give up and will go for their most beautiful dreams along with the able-bodied' (ibid "Closing"); the performance was also headlined by a company of '126 hearing-impaired dancers' (China.org). The Beijing Games were also hailed as a landmark in Chinese attitudes towards disability. According to Gold & Gold, the Chinese did not take part in the Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960, as 'the official statement declared there were no disabled in China'. In 1983 they had 'establish[ed] the Chinese Sports Association for Disabled Athletes' and in 2004 they had reached first place in the medal table (139). The Closing Ceremony for the Paralympics in Beijing concluded with a letter that demonstrated their historic transition. It 'conveyed sincere wishes from the Chinese people for people living with disabilities: strive to be stronger and harvest happiness' (Beijing Paralympic Games "Closing"). Despite their sometimes romanticised narratives and sentiments to and about disabled people, the ceremonies have clearly profiled disabled performers.

Possibly the first disabled director of such ceremonies was ‘disabled actress Glòria Rognoni, director of the [Barcelona] Paralympic Ceremonies’ (Landry 3) in 1992. The following games in Atlanta, 1996, also saw the start of what would now be called the Cultural Olympiad (and in the UK, the Unlimited programme funded by the Arts Council of England).

For the first time in Paralympics history, a series of formal cultural events will celebrate the work of disabled artists of international renown, increase public awareness for the Paralympic Games and promote greater understanding between people *with* and *without* disabilities. (Landry 9)

This clear focus and concerted effort to ensure disabled artists are prominent within Paralympic ceremonies and events seems to stem from the movement’s Strategic Plan that states, ‘[t]he Paralympic brand is a bridge which links sport with social awareness to challenge stereotypes and ultimately leads to equality’ (IPC “Strategic”). Not only are the Paralympics about sporting excellence by disabled athletes, they also have a very clear socio-political agenda that they hope impacts globally beyond the timeframe of the actual games themselves. The message is clear, that disabled people are supremely capable of many things in sport, in the arts, in life. However, as the writing by many commentators demonstrates, familiar themes exposed by Norden in his *Cinema of Isolation* do abound. Terms such as heroism, courage, bravery, and inspiration proliferate in journalistic articles, resulting in the further categorising of Paralympic athletes (and potentially the ‘disabled aerialist’) as ‘Super Crips’. Diane Bryen defines this stereotype as ‘the disabled person who pulls himself up by his bootstraps to become an Inspiration to us All’ (qtd. in Lukin 313). The IPC’s message and overt expression of social inclusion, the exposition of elite athletes, alongside the stereotypical manner in which many are portrayed have therefore made the events controversial. Partridge congratulated the Paralympians for their achievements, but questioned how the Games shone an uneasy light on disabled people who could not (and desired not) to be elite athletes. She wrote,

I feel very strongly that our society needs to avoid awarding only those whose achievements rate higher on the superNorm scale; those who are stronger, faster, Abler – while penalising those of us at the lower end and ultimately, choosing who is deserving of quality life and indeed, life itself. (“Here’s”)

She argues for the continuation of the Independent Living Fund mentioned in the previous chapter, and she reiterates how ‘unable’ is not the same as ‘unwilling’ (ibid), warning how the focus on the elite can-dos can have a detrimental effect on the no-can-do majority. Will the ‘disabled aerialists’ in the *POC* further this controversy?

Before looking at the London ceremonies in detail, it is worth noting how aerial has also played a significant part in opening and closing ceremonies for both Olympic and Paralympic events. Although little detailed information is given, Garcia does provide some sense of its importance. 'Occasionally', he writes, 'there were elements that went up into the sky to fill that great empty void—the balloons, the pigeons and jet fly-bys', but since 1984 he suggests that 'flying elements' can be subdivided into the following groups:

- a. Stratospheric. These would be the usual fly-bys (by the host country's air force); or in the case of Seoul 1988, [...] 56 skydivers [...]
- b. 'Sustained' – LA's Rocketman, airlifted of his 'own' power; or the "flying" athlete in Torino's closing suspended by compressed air, with no visible harnesses.
- c. Helium-powered – e.g. [...] the giant inflatable five Olympic rings (Mexico 1968), Misha (Moscow 1980) [...]
- d. 'Tethered for show' or Harnessed – The aerial acrobats of Albertville, Salt Lake, Athens, Torino and Beijing... the one-man over-the-prairies ballet of Tomas Saulgrain in Vancouver... and one of the two greatest tethered Olympic ceremony stunts of all time: the Cycladic head in Athens and the LA 1984 U.F.O. (Garcia 4023-4042)

He mentions 'aerial ballets' or tethered acrobats with both awe and frustration, describing the aerial action in Torino, 2006, as acrobatic 'gyrations and almost unnatural behavior (sic)' that was followed by '28 more white-clad tethered gymnasts [that] looked too cumbersome and contrived' (2154). He revelled, however, in 'an aerial ballet of one acrobat who gracefully and effortlessly floated above ever-changing images of the wheat fields and prairies of the Canadian heartland' (2203) in Vancouver's opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in 2010. Regardless of his personal opinions, he demonstrates that aerial has been an essential element in most ceremonies for decades, but he only mentions one 'disabled aerialist' who appeared in the Atlanta opening of the Paralympics. He writes, 'the final lighter was a true paraplegic who hoisted himself up to the cauldron by a rope, and then lit the pommes frites cauldron' (3098).

Disabled performers have played significant roles at least in the ceremonies of the past decade or two of the Paralympic games and aerial has had perhaps an even greater role throughout the Olympic and Paralympic events. It is therefore not surprising to find that the Paralympic ceremonies of London 2012 also involved both aspects. It does however appear that no other event has made a significant effort to incorporate the two together through 'disabled aerialists', other than through the occasional climbing, or suspended torchbearer. Aerial Consultant Phil Hayes was not aware of any disabled aerialists being present in the ceremonies he had worked on reflecting, 'I certainly haven't had any on my team before and never before had any present for audition', although he asserts that 'there have been other disabled performers in Ceremonies but not aerialists'. The provision of aerial training has been

incorporated into other ceremonies according to Hayes who worked on the 2004 Athens Olympic Ceremonies, 2008 Beijing-London handover ceremonies, as well as Vancouver's Winter Olympic Ceremonies in 2010 in various capacities as 'performer, choreographer, aerial trainer, director and consultant' (ibid). In response to my questionnaire, he wrote:

My team or myself (sic) usually carry out the training. Performers usually have little or no aerial experience and if they have then it's not usually harness specific and more often than not it doesn't include the harnesses we use. It's not to my knowledge been a specific training as we enabled with Circus Space. It's been very much the Ceremonies Aerial team [who] lead and not been outsourced to another organisation. (ibid)

Establishing a training programme specifically for disabled performers to undertake the aerial roles within the *POC* is therefore unique, but is built on the precedent of training artists for particular roles and working with disabled performers in previous ceremonies.

The Paralympic Aerial Training Programme

TC: Why did you want to include disabled aerialists in the *POC*?

JS: Having started the work with Graeae, Circus Space, Tina Carter, Lindsay Butcher and Grant Mouldey (of Strange Fruit) it was essential that this work should be included in the *POC*.

TC: What were the specific aims of the Circus Space training programme?

JS: The core aim was to provide a solid training in rope and aerial work to a diverse group of Deaf and disabled people to maximise the visibility of skill and excellence. (Sealey Questionnaire)

Artistic directors, Sealey and Bradley Hemmings, were the creative minds behind London's *POC* entitled *Enlightenment*. Their aim had been to place disability and impairment at the centre of their ceremony utilising the 'aesthetics of access'. Their event would present the world with a clear picture of the existing and potential excellence of Deaf and disabled artists, thus paving the way for a clear demonstration of distinction by the elite disabled athletes who would follow in the Paralympic Games themselves.

I think inclusivity was part of the overall bid for the games (I do not think every country has a commitment to this) but for Bradley and I (sic) it was paramount and we took it very seriously. I felt like I was on my soapbox for 12-18 months banging on about it day after day like a worn record. (ibid)

Paralympic.org celebrated Sealey's specific commitment to Deaf and disabled performing arts declaring that her 'entire career has been dedicated to theatre and

performance that challenges what seems possible' ("Artistic"). Her determination to develop aerial training and performance opportunities for Deaf and disabled performers can therefore be seen as an extension of her practice, and it began half a decade ago.

It was at Liberty Festival [a few years ago] and I was watching the audience, watching, and I saw a Deaf woman sign to her friend, why are there no Deaf up there [on the sway-poles]?⁵⁴ And I thought, absolutely, why are there no Deaf people up there. (Sealey Interview)

Graeae, of which Sealey is the Artistic Director, worked in partnership with Australian sway-pole Company Strange Fruit in a show called *The Garden*, to which the above comment relates. Although there were disabled performers in the show, all the performers working on the poles were non-disabled. On witnessing the above comment, she discussed the possibility of getting 'some Deaf and disabled people up the poles' (ibid) with Strange Fruit. Admitting that the initial stages were challenging, disabled artists have performed on sway-poles in several of Graeae's shows since. Alongside this training, Sealey also provided experimental aerial training for disabled performers known to her company to begin exploring what was possible, for which I was one of the trainers. Partnered with London's Circus Space, these then led to weekly sessions for a handful of disabled artists on their community training programmes.

Training disabled artists in circus and aerial skills was not unique in the UK. Companies such as Cirque Nova (discussed earlier) had been providing similar training for several years. Circus Eruption in Wales arguably has the longest running inclusive community-circus programme in the UK, and other companies such as Blue Eyed Soul, Expressive Feat Productions and Scarabeus had also worked with disabled performers in the air. Sealey was conscious, however, that the numbers of experienced and highly trained 'disabled aerialists' present in the UK was likely to be minimal owing to the lack of suitably accessible training resources (in terms of space, staff and finance) and that most events incorporating disabled artists into the air had been very time-limited.

Lafortune states that the 'practice of circus arts implies knowledge of and proficiency in one or several techniques, which usually requires progressive and ongoing learning' (*Rope v*). Sealey's belief that such sustained training had not significantly taken place with and for

⁵⁴ A sway-pole is a carbon-fibre pole set on a wide base on which a performer usually stands, strapped to the top; she manoeuvres the pole backwards and forwards bending it low to the ground and can rotate it slowly or quickly. The structure has been used in circus and street performances for decades, predominantly by non-disabled athletic performers often with acrobatic training.

disabled people in the air was supported by LOCOG⁵⁵ and ACE. They commissioned the Circus Space to establish a bespoke intensive training programme for a maximum of sixty disabled people in the spring/summer of 2012 to be ready to participate aerially in the *POC*. The event was therefore founded on the politics of access, to provide a service (access to aerial training) that had hitherto been potentially denied Deaf and disabled individuals, whilst also being interconnected to previous practices and aspirations of prior *POCs*. Despite the intensity of the programme, however, it was fractional compared to the several years' intensive training most professional circus artists endure, often building on many years of gymnastics and/or dance training. The reality of such limitations is discussed particularly in relation to the casting of only established professional aerialists in the *PCC* later in this chapter.

In constructionist terms (discussed in Chapter 2) potential aerialists had been disabled by a system that had not provided access to them owing at least in part to their impairments. By providing a space, staffing and the finances for disabled people to train as aerialists, one element of social disability was removed. Breaking down some social barriers however did not necessarily mean 'access to all'. Just as the Paralympic Movement has a required element of elitism in its structure, so the *POC* adhered to standard practices of auditioning to engage its participants. The process sought to choose those most likely to gain the necessary skills, regardless of the specific impairments they embodied; only those who could meet specific physical (and performance) criteria would be offered a place on the training programme. Thus those like Partridge who would consider themselves 'no can dos' in conventional aerial terms, would be excluded.

The Audition Process

Asking Sealey how the trainees were contacted, she wrote that it was through '[d]irect communication with people we had worked for, [and through] Visible Agency, BLESMA⁵⁶, Amputees in Action, [and] Disability Arts on Line' (Questionnaire). In the auditions, the 'main criteria was strong upper body strength, understanding of own body, and willingness to engage in new challenges and take risk. Age was 18-65' (ibid). Hayes offered further details on how the auditionees were assessed which is worth presenting in full.

As head of the aerial department it was my decision, in discussion with Alex [Poulter, his other Aerial Associate], who was ultimately cast and put on the Circus Space programme. We established criteria, based generally on criteria that we had already used for the Olympic Aerial auditions.

⁵⁵ London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games.

⁵⁶ The British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association

We also had a week of workshops where we invited people with a variety of disabilities and spent a half-day working with each of them to inform how we should approach our auditions. The idea was to look at the issues getting each of them into a harness and flying them on our small system in the Gin Still [Studio in Three Mills, London]. A document was produced of our findings that ultimately was used when making our application to ACE for funding for the Circus Space / Legacy programme. (Sorry I don't have a copy; it's a LOCOG thing). Some of the disabilities looked at included amputees, paralysis, blindness, small stature and the differing issues that each individual brought to us.

We did discuss the issue of learning difficulties and other mental health issues and the viability of including these disabilities in the programme. It was decided that it would need to be a case-by-case assessment and probably because of our focussed casting we were only presented with one person with learning difficulties.

Enquiring more specifically about the criteria used to decide who would be suitable for the training programme and ultimately the *POC*, again Hayes offered a comprehensive response asserting that although he and Poulter had 'the final say' they were offered pertinent input from the 'aerial technicians working with us, primarily Nick Porter and Steve Colley'. He wrote that their 'selection criteria' were:

- Harness ability. Everyone was flown in a harness of some kind whatever the presenting disability, even if this was just a boson's chair type⁵⁷, we had them all in the air and addressed their ability and presence in the air. We also looked at this stage the possibility of harness adaptations that would need to be made to make their use of the harness easier [for] them, i.e. backboards for those with paralysis, smaller versions for those of small stature, reducing belt width or other structural adaptations because of differing body shapes and physical restrictions. We knew that this would become a costing issue but that we could address this later.
- Upper body strength. We gave [them] all a basic assessment of their ability to do pull-ups on a static trapeze bar.
- Ability to play and try new things in the air.
- Capacity to learn and take on instruction.
- Attitude.
- Personality traits that could be assessed. As with any audition one makes some assessment of how they may or may not work in a space and if one would want to spend the next 4 months working with these people.
- If they were already a performing aerial artist then they presented work they already [had], demonstrating existing ability.
- Suitability for already existing roles. There was also talk with Jenny about creating new roles for those not obviously suitable for CS [Circus Space] but we felt should be included in the Ceremony.
- Availability – particularly what non-availability we could accommodate.

⁵⁷ A 'boson's chair' is a seat connected to the harness to minimise the weight taken by the waist. They also reduce the impact on the legs as they can be held in an angular position rather than left hanging straight down. There are restrictions to these however, most particularly in the limited movement available to them and not being able to invert.

- If we as a body of people liked them and thought that the experience should be offered to them.
- If they were known to the industry and for some reason we thought that this programme wasn't suitable for them.

The audition process was therefore clearly meticulous in assessing an individual's performance and aerial potential for the tasks ahead. Those chosen to participate in the training programme had undergone a rigorous but equitable process as would be expected of any such audition and already planning was being made for accommodating physical difference through consideration of alternate equipment. The only fundamental difference between this and other auditions for the ceremonies was that the participants *had* to be Deaf or disabled.

According to Conroy, who interviewed Sealey after the events,

In keeping with disability cultural politics, these individuals self-identified, and the grid of impairment or external classification therefore has no relevance to their appearance as disabled people. They were engaged in a performance of disability politics, juxtaposed with the regulatory system of Paralympic impairment profiles. ("...Paradigm" 525)

The participants may have 'self-identified' as disabled, and general inclusion within the ceremonies did not adhere to the Paralympic 'regulatory system', but as has been shown above, criteria were set for inclusion in the aerial that related in some ways to impairment and functionality; key proponents of determining inclusion and class of inclusion in para-activities.⁵⁸ The participants involved in the aerial training and performances therefore mirrored both open-access to disability arts *and* the increasingly familiar profiling of Paralympic athletes.

It is also pertinent to comment upon who delivered the *POC* training programme as ACE funding was aimed not only at developing the skills of the aerial trainees, but also of the team that would provide that training. None of those involved in this process declared themselves as disabled, and no matter how positive, there is an echo of former integrated sport and arts that is designed and delivered *by* non-disabled people *for* disabled recipients. Additionally, Daisy Drury (one of the main Circus Space management staff involved in the training project) informed the trainers that *we* were the legacy of the *POC* training programme (rather than the trainees, as I had anticipated). A perceived outcome was that *our* skills and knowledge in developing an inclusive practice would live beyond the specific event through

⁵⁸ For example, in *ITU Paratriathlon Classification Rules and Regulations*, it states, 'The impairment is assessed and the resulting functional profile is combined with other profiles that should have similar ability when taking part in paratriathlon events and the paratriathlete is assigned a competition class' (9).

our own professional development which would then be passed on to other trainers, particularly based at the Circus Space.

Circus Space staff already teaching on community and degree courses therefore dominated the training personnel, with three of the full-time and all but one of the part-time trainers so connected. Lindsey Butcher and I were the only two not formally connected to the Circus Space but we were both closely associated with Graeae, as one or other of us has worked on all of their projects involving aerial to date. In addition, the interviewing teams knew my own research, and Butcher's company is involved in the European Aerial Dance Festival that she hoped to make more inclusive, both of which possibly demonstrated further extensions of a living legacy beyond the Circus Space.

Training the Trainers

Prior to the training programme commencing for the disabled participants, the non-disabled trainers, ancillary and support staff were invited to attend a Disability Confidence Training day led by writer and disability rights advocate Lois Keith. The aim of this session was to develop our confidence in working with disabled people.

In the packed library at the Circus Space to my surprise many present were nervous of the project we were about to begin. All except Keith were (at least visibly) non-disabled with many admitting they had little experience of working with, or indeed knowing, any disabled people. Not only were there concerns over general practicalities (accessing the various spaces, offering assistance, communicating with the Deaf via interpreters and understanding the complexity of the various personal assistants that might be present), there was also significant concern over language: what can you say? And how should you say it? (T. Carter *Journal*)

Keith managed everyone's concerns with generosity, humour and personal anecdotes, and perhaps presented the most useful piece of advice for us as the aerial trainers. Where possible, she suggested, we should provide clear aims and objectives rather than be prescriptive about practical approaches. For example, rather than instruct the group to 'run on the spot' which would challenge those who could not stand or only had one leg, we could state the aim was to 'raise the pulse' or 'to work cardiovascularly' (ibid). This certainly proved useful in developing the warm up and conditioning exercises for the groups where we all soon devised ways of raising our body temperatures in sitting positions in which all could participate. This methodology would however be more challenging when sharing aerial vocabulary that had much more specific requirements, which I address later in this chapter.

As our students would present a diverse range of impairments we also wanted to know how best to address them in terms of health and safety as well as aerial development. Once again, Keith was pragmatic stating that most disabled people were more aware of their

bodies' capabilities and weaknesses than most non-disabled people, having no doubt spent much time in hospital where their bodies would have received much attention, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of new doctors observing the various ward rounds.⁵⁹ Our students lived in a world that was often inaccessible, which would no doubt provide them with profound awareness of how their bodies worked, or oftentimes did not, in their surroundings. Their coping strategies forged by living such lives may, Keith suggested, prove useful when facing the additional challenges of the alien aerial terrain. She suggested that reference to someone's impairment should be made only when necessary, but that communication was of paramount importance. If the aims and objectives of the training exercises were clear, then together trainers and trainees would find ways to achieve them. She reminded us that our most important tools were already within us: we were professional circus trainers and should be confident in our specialist knowledge and experience. As for language, if we were ever in any doubt, then she suggested we could ask or would find that someone would no doubt tell us if we 'got it wrong'!

The provision of this 'confidence' day, the significant lack of disabled people present, and the evidence of concern held by many, all demonstrate that such an undertaking as this training programme was unusual and therefore important. It was a landmark in challenging circus-training provision, not only for this specific ceremony but for that run in top institutions in the UK (and potentially throughout the circus world). Although a three-hour session would do little overall to assuage nagging worries it did provide a basis upon which to build. The real course would however come in the eight-weeks that followed.

Accessible Practice

I made another faux pas today, only this time it was a really bad one...

L- "Can you lower the trapeze for me Tina?"

TC "Can't you use it at that height, as you have been doing?"

I was hectically running around the space trying to manage all the artists, and constantly lowering and raising the trapeze bars added time and broke the fluidity of the rehearsal.

L- "M- has to lift me on and off each time."

TC "If that's what you've been doing all along isn't that okay?"

L- "I don't want to be constantly picked up and carried by people!" (T. Carter *Journal*)

It is not unusual for equipment to be set higher than aerialists can reach from the floor, with access to it being via a rope, or if relatively close to the floor, then with the assistance of another person guiding a jump to reach it. However, when the person in

⁵⁹ Much fiction and nonfiction concerning medical intervention refers to this often impersonal objectification of disabled peoples' bodies during ward rounds. Fries' anthology of disability writings, *Staring Back*, and Keith's *Mustn't Grumble* offer such examples.

question is of small stature this can exacerbate a feeling that the world is generally too big for them. Despite support being offered and accepted by the individuals concerned, at this particular point in time (during the second stage of rehearsals) a request was made to remove such need, which was possible, but that impacted on other elements of the rehearsal. The politics of independence and physical access overrode the creative aesthetics in this instance, but this was not always possible or desirable.

Disability politics demand we see the person first and not the impairment or disability, and of course the training programme aimed to maintain that premise. The different physicalities and impairments embodied by the students were nevertheless, what *enabled* them to participate in the training in the first instance and were significant in challenging our teaching methods. It is therefore pertinent to consider the impact of specific forms of impairments in this instance. We had forty-two students of varying ages and nationalities, some of whom were professional performers, some had a little aerial knowledge, others were ex-military, and several had nothing to do with the performing arts or the forces. As with any group, there were those with big egos and loud voices as well as the shy, the quiet and the anxious. Some of the forty-two already knew one another and others had come alone. In addition, there were single and double leg amputees, congenital and surgical arm, hand or finger amputees. Deaf participants had differing degrees of hearing, some of whom used BSL as their main form of communication through an interpreter, others who favoured lip-reading, as well as a few who used hearing aids. There were visually impaired trainees working with or without Audio Describers (AD), and participants who had different degrees of Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida or paralysis affecting all or parts of their bodies. There were students with Brittle Bones, nerve damage, mild autism or difficulties with speech, and there were students of small stature. Many students had a singular impairment, but others had a combination. Similarly, the impairments for many were visible and clearly defined but for a few, their impairments would only become evident during particular activities. The training space was a tent scattered with prosthetic legs, wheelchairs and crutches, inhabited by access and support workers, BSL interpreters (BSLI), ADs as well as trainees and trainers. It was a very unconventional circus training space that required constant vigilance and careful management to ensure that everyone was receiving the training and support needed. Perhaps it is understandable that many (trainers and participants) were anxious about how such a diverse training space could be made accessible to all.

The original aim of the training programme was to ensure that each trainee developed core stability, strength and stamina to ensure they were physically prepared to work in an aerial harness. The original creative team (Sealey, Hemmings and Hayes) believed this piece of

aerial equipment to be the most accessible to the group given the particular time constraints and diverse physiologies, but also because they already had an idea of how the harnesses would be used in the ceremony (although this fundamentally changed in the rehearsal period). As Hayes explained, he often trained non-aerialists to work in harnesses for such ceremonies so the time-frame was considered adequate, even generous, in this particular instance.

The harnesses would only be used much later in the process, having concluded the Circus Space phase, while ropes, silks, trapezes and cocoons were the primary training tools to develop the overall fitness, strength and aerial awareness of the students. There were several reasons for this. Some people required bespoke harnesses and as the casting of the show would only take place after the training programme these were unavailable at this stage. To work in harnesses is time-consuming as it can require two riggers to suspend one person. Even if it were possible, to work solely in harnesses could prove physically negating as they can have adverse effects on the body if used too much too often. There was also hope that through this rigorous training, some students would develop the capacity to climb the sway-poles that would appear in several of the show's scenes, but again this would happen after the two-month training programme had concluded.

When the trainers finally knew what the aims of the programme were and who would be participating in it there were some specific concerns relating to access and equality that the teachers began to voice. How should we run a single class with a broad range of physicalities? How could we ensure everyone was appropriately warmed-up? What was the best way to assist those with paralysis to 'engage their core' if they would be unable to feel it? Was it acceptable to demand students 'point and flex' their feet if there were people present who had none? Should we aim to work to the 'lowest common denominator' in the name of equality thereby forcing a form of reductionism on those who could potentially 'do more'? Alternatively, did we push everyone to work to their own limits, and by so doing risk stressing those who struggled more owing to their weight, lack of strength, or specific physical impairment? How far should we push the students when they told us they were in pain? How could they (or we) determine whether this pain was detrimental to their wellbeing or whether it was simply what all aerialists suffer through vigorous training? Furthermore, if we were instructed by medical staff to prevent a student working on a particular body part (e.g. taking weight on an arm), and yet they insisted on doing so, what was our ethical responsibility?

Many of these questions relate to any group of students training in aerial at any stage. Certainly, my regular classes at Airhedz and East 15 Acting School always produce students who demonstrate a greater ability to climb, invert themselves on equipment and generally hold their own bodies in space much more quickly than others, which provokes excitement in

some and frustration in others, and this would be the case on the Paralympic Training Programme. Just as the predominantly non-disabled students had to face the reality of the (im)muscularity of their bodies at that time so the *POC* trainees had to face similar realities for themselves.

Bearing these concerns in mind the trainers discussed how best to divide the forty-two trainees into three smaller groups. We questioned whether we should divide them according to communication or impairment similarity such as all the Deaf working together in one group, the visually impaired together or the amputees together. This may have been efficient in terms of trainer/trainee support and for the sharing of processes between students, but there was understandably nervousness in doing this. We, the non-disabled trainers, would be segregating the disabled participants according to impairment, and that had too great a political resonance reflective of 'special schools'. It also implied that those sharing similar impairments would share similar aerial development strategies and that was not necessarily the case.

Although we did not divide the three groups in such a way, we did discover that it was useful to split the larger groups into aerial related sub-groups that did at times also reflect similar impairments. For example, the Deaf trainees often worked together as communication between them and the limited number of signers was beneficial. All Deaf trainees had full use of both arms and legs and so could work alongside other similarly physicalised learners such as the visually impaired and the learning disabled. Those of small stature often worked together to access the same equipment such as trapezes rigged lower to the ground, and students with reduced mobility, particularly in their lower bodies worked together on the cocoons that proved more accessible in the early stages than for example the ropes.

Regardless of our teaching strategies, what began to emerge was a link between impairment and aerial progression. If students had strong upper bodies, if they could use both hands and arms and if they had an element of mobility in their lower half, they could progress on most equipment as quickly and effectively as their non-disabled compatriots of similar strength. Those with reduced upper body strength or with only one weight-bearing arm found it more challenging to tackle the ropes but could access more movement on the trapeze or cocoon. It was therefore evident that some students would progress more quickly and more consistently on different apparatus than others and some of this was owing to the nature of their impairments.

Therefore, those with the physiologies closest to the conventional aerialist could achieve the canonical actions of the form more readily than those whose bodies were less aerially conventional. Curiously, however, the different impairments present in the space

implied different degrees of *disability* depending from what viewpoint one was observing. I noted in my journal on 12th June,

It's interesting to see that within a space where so many differences, often described as disabilities, are present, everyone has a different view on what physiological difference is more or less disabling [...] [F]or example early on J– said that if he still had his legs he'd be able to do so much more; or recently D– mused that if he could just point his foot he'd be able to do certain moves in the cocoon more easily or fluidly. Where J– seemed at that time frustrated and even angry, D– seems to take it all in his stride and made the comment almost as an indifferent aside. Perhaps this difference also lies in the fact that J– lost his legs owing to an incident, whereas D– has had his condition since birth. (T. Carter *Journal*)

Double leg amputee J– jibed another single-leg amputee for having a 'mere flesh wound' and fellow double leg amputee B– thought the Deaf participants had a much greater disadvantage to him, 'because they can't hear a word' of what is being said! Training in aerial is by no means easy and punishes the body whether you have an impairment or not. Nevertheless, trainees' impairments did affect them in different ways, at different stages of their aerial development. They sometimes determined which equipment they preferred or found more accessible, what they could do on or with that equipment in relation to the aerial canon, and at what pace they could develop their aerial skills. Furthermore, the specific impairment could also affect how we as trainers worked with them.

Although each student had their own individual challenges, I wish to look at two specific forms of translation that relate to different impairments. These have been chosen because they resonated beyond a single individual, were felt most profoundly in this early phase, and because they posed difficulties for accessing the 'disabled identity' in performance owing to their 'hidden' nature, that will be addressed later on. Firstly, linguistic or communicational translation occurred with three groups of people: Deaf artists working through interpreters, blind artists assisted by ADs and those with learning difficulties working with personal assistants (PAs). As these artists' impairments are 'invisible' defining them as 'disabled aerialists' can be challenging for audiences to understand. Secondly, a form of physical translation occurred for many of the students with paralysis, restricted mobility, amputations or for those of small stature, when the aerial actions moved *from* a non-disabled body *to* a disabled body. Although some of the issues transferred between these latter groups, and I have already written on working with people of small stature (see *Dis'abling...*), this section focuses on amputees, as functional and aesthetic considerations again feed into the debate about disabled identities.

Three-way Conversations

Communicating with Deaf, blind and learning disabled trainees often resulted in a form of translation occurring between trainer and student via the supporting intermediary (BSLI, AD or PA), which was both invaluable and at times confusing as the majority of those fulfilling these roles had little or no experience of aerial. Oftentimes the student received the information in a repeated and private description but the worst-case scenario was where an error occurred in the translation causing (fortunately never catastrophic) mistakes.

The blind students were perhaps surprisingly the easiest of this translational grouping with whom to communicate, as clear description was the best way to guide them. They also happened to be amongst the more experienced aerialists of the *POC* trainees, already having a strong sense of aerial awareness and physical capability. In addition, we shared a familiar aerial language as at least three of the programme's trainers had taught them, and a further advantage presented itself when a trainee aerialist occasionally supported them as their AD, as she could draw upon her own aerial knowledge to enhance her communication. Although there was a three-way conversation occurring at times, this was generally to enhance the information already given, rather than to translate it technically. It was clear that when the form of direct communication was associated with direct knowledge of aerial, there was little confusion or misunderstanding in the passing on of information.

Working with the trainees who had mild learning difficulties had a similar triangulated communication system. As the students were able to see and hear, and also had full use of their limbs, the PA offered more practical (and indeed emotional) support, rather than purely linguistic, often becoming additional one-to-one support trainers despite their lack of aerial experience. Working alongside the PA, the trainer would combine her direction toward the student in the aerial action and toward the PA, suggesting how best he could guide the student, as it was not possible to have a professional trainer dedicated one-to-one with each trainee. There were of course failings in this system: the PA might pass on misunderstood details of the aerial manoeuvres or indeed might put himself at physical risk of injury through increased physical contact. This process gradually became more and more refined as all our experiences grew and during the later rehearsal period the graduated students developed enough aerial awareness and trust in themselves and me as the remaining trainer/choreographer to be able to work without the PA present the majority of the time.

Communicating with the Deaf students differed from the former two groups, in that it did require constant linguistic translation (as none of the trainers was experienced in BSL); there were always three people involved in the trainer/trainee relationship. Perhaps trainee B— was correct when he said that they had a harder time than anyone else did, by not hearing

a word. This particular tripartite conversation significantly affected parts of our teaching methodologies, at times provoking serious concern in both trainers and trainees alike.

Our general teaching methodology involved describing the action we were going to teach, demonstrating it whilst talking through the action, and then repeating it again if needed. The students would then attempt the actions under supervision of the trainers who would give additional details to each working student as required. Those with visual impairments often sat close to the demonstrator with their AD whispering additional relevant information. A similar relationship developed between those with learning difficulties and their PAs. For Deaf students, however, this proved more challenging, as unless they were adept lip-readers (and they could see our faces) they had to watch two people at the same time: the aerial demonstrator and the BSLI. An alternative teaching methodology was needed to enable Deaf trainees to witness both trainers and interpreters but at different and clearly stated times.

The students themselves suggested that the trainers describe the action on the ground first, so they could watch the signer; the action should follow, presented in silence so the trainees could just watch the aerial demonstration. If people needed it to be shown again, the action could be repeated, more slowly where possible, talking if necessary, but allowing translation to occur before moving on. This was certainly possible for most of the early stage aerial actions and so it became our prime method of passing on the information wherever possible, which actually proved beneficial for most Deaf and hearing students. Communication between staff and Deaf students did become more complex when the student was in the air, and the trainer needed to pass on more information, or to correct them when on the equipment. Once again, students were required to shift their gaze between two people, sometimes whilst hanging upside down and at other times when slowly rotating. Despite the occasional comedies that occurred with Deaf student, trainer and signer all chasing each other around a rotating rope to undertake a form of conversation, the process was fraught with difficulty. In addition to this confusion, the teaching and 'spotting' of aerial is often tactile having further adverse implications for the Deaf novices.

As aerial students (Deaf or hearing) are often disoriented in the air in the early stages, trainers generally tap a part of the body or hold a student to ensure they are not going to fall. When this supportive approach is combined with speech the students know what they must do with that specific body part, or they are aware they are simply being supported to prevent them falling. When the verbal communication requires an intermediary, the speed at which information is received is much slower, and therefore sometimes students reacted to the teacher's touch in a manner that was contrary to that required, putting both student and

teacher at risk of injury. Further confusion occurred when attempts were made to untangle Deaf students from equipment (especially rope or silks) when they had made a mistake. Beginners often run out of energy and panic when entangled, but this is exacerbated when there is a delay in information being sent and received, and when either interpreter or student does not easily understand that information. Although all the Deaf students had full use of their limbs and did not necessarily define themselves as disabled, they were amongst the most challenging students to teach, and perhaps found it the most challenging to learn, because of the complexities of communication – at least in the early stages of training. Had the trainers been proficient in communicating directly with the Deaf students, these difficulties might have been less pronounced, but if the trainer needs to spot the student (generally by using their hands), the communicating tools are also immediately disabled.

Despite their conventional aerial physiologies the complexities of communication with the Deaf trainees provoked one of the greatest methodological challenges in the teaching phase. Together with the visually impaired and those with learning difficulties, they demanded we reconsider the conventions of passing on information, and by making small changes for one or other group we discovered that communication with most people improved. Once familiar with the aerial actions and the performance routines such challenges were greatly reduced, and as their impairments were hidden, they would at least appear indistinguishable from conventional aerialists in the vast Olympic stadium. These students' most significant influence on the development of the *POC* aerial sequences therefore occurred at this stage, through the enforcement of alternative communication systems, rather than necessarily affecting the movements and sequences that evolved later on.

Physical Translations for Amputees

The training programme introduced many of us to the world of amputations and prosthetic legs for the first time. There were students who had lost one leg or two, who had amputations above or below the knee, and who wore prostheses of different styles, functionality and height. There were also people who preferred to use wheelchairs or crutches rather than any form of prosthesis in the training environment. Some amputees had lived with their loss for many years compared to others who were still adjusting to their new physicalities. It was clear that aerial was a new experience for all of them, and so each had to find ways of managing their various artificial limbs in this new geographical space. Understanding how their live and prosthetic legs would work together in the air, and whether there would be any specific issues relating to the wearing or not wearing of different prosthetic limbs would be a trial and error process for all concerned. I noted early in the training the choice one particular student made.

R— talked to us about his prostheses, and the different types he has. After the warm-up he found that the prosthetic ‘legs’ would be in the way, and potentially come off if he used them going into the air as they are kept on via suction and if the pressure from the ground is released too long air returns and makes them more painful, but also harder to keep on. He therefore changed them for ‘stumps’, thus reducing his height dramatically but making him feel more secure. (T. Carter *Journal*)

There were two distinctly different types of prosthetic legs that amputees wore during training: the ‘legs’ resembled the ‘missing’ part of the human leg i.e. the calf and foot if below the knee amputation, as well as a replacement thigh and working knee if the amputation was above the knee. The prostheses were sometimes covered with socks and/or shoes, but others were like the blades worn by Paralympic athletes. The ‘stumps’ had wide, solid, circular rubber bases and thus did not replicate much of the lower leg, nor did they give the wearer the foot shape. As R—’s comment above demonstrates, some had different types of ‘leg’ for different occasions and so tested them in the different activities to see what suited them best. Others were less fortunate however, having only one ‘set’ to work with so their choices were limited to wearing them or going without.

There seemed to be a bit of ‘prosthetic envy’ in the space this afternoon [...] As B—’s operation/s took place under the NHS (rather than with the army) he said he only had a very limited choice of ‘legs’. There are certainly some quite different prostheses in the space. B—’s have no flex in them, and join under the knee. They look quite basic compared to A—’s for example which reminds me of the Bionic man. (ibid)

The functionality of the prosthetic limbs appeared to be the dominating factor for wearing or not wearing them in the air, though one artist admitted to me later that he felt ‘naked’ and nervous of developing a ‘freakish’ identity if he removed them. Although as trainers we were asked whether or not they should be worn, we had to defer the decision to the students themselves because we had the *aerial* knowledge while they had the *prosthetic* knowledge. Furthermore, as my example suggests, the prostheses formed part of the individual’s identity, and the decision to hide or expose (if presented with a choice) had to be undertaken by them. In practical terms, if legs became dislodged risking danger of them flying off into the training space then we suggested they should either be attached more securely if possible or removed – and some did resort to taping them tightly in place rather than relying on suction power, or taking them off. There was however a relatively even split between those who chose to continue wearing their artificial limbs and those who preferred to go without. Navigating the aerial actions on the diverse equipment with such a wide variety of amputees required a different form of translation to that described earlier. This time the

translation was between body-types, transferring the action generated by a two-legged aerial instructor to a student with different degrees of amputation.

Early trapeze sessions required the students to find ways to stand up on the bar, which usually involves moving from under the bar, to sitting on the bar and up to standing. For those with two mobile and flexible legs this is a relatively simple set of manoeuvres. Assuming the bar is set just above head-height one such process involves the following: the aerialist holds the bar with both hands; s/he brings the legs under the bar and between the hands into a position called 'pike' before bending the legs over the trapeze. Keeping the legs tightly pushing down in 'hocks' s/he can either swing the body under the bar using momentum to reach the ropes above it, or can climb up without swinging below. The aerialist can then pull up to standing, or move up one leg at a time taking some of the weight on a foot pressing onto the bar.

Without the facility to bend their legs and push down in this manner the double-leg amputees could not hang in 'hocks' as this requires the lower half of the leg to function both as a hook and a counterweight. It was possible for some of the single leg amputees with below the knee amputation but it did place a lot of stress on their remaining legs. Instead of using the 'hocks' swing, the amputees would resort to arm power to lift themselves into a sitting position. Having successfully managed to sit on the bar, it was then advantageous if the student had enough strength to pull themselves up to standing, rather than trying to move one leg at a time. Even sliding slightly backwards from sitting to make space to raise one leg onto the bar could be impossible for double-leg amputees as they could not always bend their legs enough to place them onto the trapeze. The join from prosthetic to flesh leg could also make this awkward, potentially dislodging the prosthesis.

Having the strength to pull himself up from sitting to 'standing', I remember seeing double-leg amputee P– struggle to position his 'feet' onto the bar despite his ability to lift and hold his full weight; this was owing to the lack of flexibility and control over the lower 'limbs'. He discovered, however, that if he knocked the bar backwards with his 'legs' whilst holding onto the ropes, the trapeze would then swing forwards enough for him to place his 'feet' on it. This was a simple piece of beginner aerial action but had required strength and determined exploration by the double-leg amputee to achieve it. As trainers with no previous experience of amputations, we were ill-equipped to know what amendments would be required prior to the different students attempting the different aerial tricks. On seeing their attempts and understanding how much (or how little) the prostheses could be manipulated, the trainers were then more able to translate other aerial actions with the students. As P– demonstrated however, it was from the aerial novices' experiential understanding of their own bodies that

would significantly aid in the development of such findings, in the process adding diverse choreographic potential to the aerial form, not only for amputees but for all aerialists.

Gradually, the translating of postures and movements from the trapeze canon for amputees with or without artificial limbs began to be more straight-forward, however those with the 'stumps' struggled more owing to the reduced weight and length in their lower halves causing for example some of the balances to be more challenging. Where those with 'limbs' could usually free balance (such as in a front or back balance or in a 'stag' or 'gazelle' position) those without such 'limbs' might be required to continue holding onto the equipment or their own bodies to ensure they would not fall. Nonetheless, the amputees quickly demonstrated that their impairments might require them to investigate alternative methods of physical approach, but that ultimately much of the early-stage trapeze repertoire was in fact accessible – provided the aerialist had the physical strength, something with which many non-disabled trainees also have to contend. The biggest difference between the leg amputee aerialists and aerialists with more conventional physiologies would therefore be in some of the stylistic mannerisms they were *required* (rather than creatively chose) to utilise owing to their impairments and more prominently in their appearance. The vertical props like rope and silks, however, were much more physically challenging.

Working again with a double-leg amputee I recalled,

I worked a fair bit with B– who is getting frustrated at not being able to climb. He has both legs amputated below the knees, but only has a small amount of lower leg left [...]. We tried working the standard climb with his prosthetic legs but he has such limited control over [them] that this wasn't working so well. Although he is reasonably strong he struggles to do the hand-over-hand climb at the moment too. Later on we therefore tried the straddle climb, where he hooks one knee in between his supporting hands (rather than above the top hand as I would do), and he managed to pull himself up above his knee. He just needs to develop strength, power and stamina and this will be possible. (T. Carter *Journal*)

The trapeze offers a clear advantage over the rope to the aerial beginner because it provides a stable place to sit, stand or rest. To rest on the rope however requires the aerialist to manipulate the body and the equipment forcing it into positions that become stable. Those with the use of both legs have an advantage of being able to wrap them in the rope to find solid restful positions that can relieve the arms for a time. Regardless of an aerialist's strength, if s/he can only manipulate the rope with the arms, s/he will soon tire and only be able to remain airborne for short periods. Translating aerial actions on rope for the amputees was therefore more challenging as the above example demonstrates. When the prostheses are held on by suction, and the pressure is released from being in the air, there is a distinct loss of

control over the replacement limbs. B– found he could not push down on his ‘legs’ enough to climb in these particular ways, but by removing the ‘legs’ and working with his remaining stumps, he found that he could adapt a more advanced inverted ascent.

As explored in Chapter 1, the vertical aerial disciplines are physically demanding for any aerialist, but the double-leg amputees in this training programme found it even more challenging. Not only did they have restricted control over their ‘legs’ through lack of suction, when it came to the more advanced manoeuvres, the drops, the lack of weight in their legs also caused some concern. Many of the vertical drops involve a form of salto or somersault, where the body rotates forwards, head followed by feet; usually the legs have to be held taught to ensure they do in fact follow the body or the aerialist may only complete half a rotation. This is precisely what happened to P– when he attempted his first salto. His ‘legs’ failed to follow his body in the circular motion, leading to the weight of his body pulling him down headfirst towards the ground, forcing the rope to wrap tightly around his ‘legs’. There was a moment when he was stuck, suspended, by his prostheses. Uninjured, he found the best way to release himself from the knot was to remove his legs, resulting in a comic image of the ‘legs caught up in a rope, whilst [their] user was down on the mat looking up at them’ (ibid). Despite the humour of the moment I noted,

This provoked an element of fear that we don’t really know all the answers of what will happen if things go wrong. We can surmise to the best of our ability, but had P–’s legs actually been ripped off in his descent then I don’t know if anyone would be laughing. What could that have done to his flesh legs? He could have plummeted to the floor head first too, if they had wrenched out. (ibid)

Fortunately, P– was unharmed in this incident and he did manage to do the full rotation by forcing his legs wide to prevent the rope from sliding down to his prostheses. He needed to wear the ‘legs’ for this drop, as the rotation required the additional weight and length that they offered. We anticipated that working only with his remaining stumps would not provide the balance to complete the full rotation and were he to complete only half a somersault he would end up head down with only his remaining flesh stumps to catch him in the rope’s knot, and there may not have been enough leg to prevent him from falling.

Translating such actions for the unipedal aerialists required consideration of the potential to be thrown to one side as one half of the body was significantly heavier than the other side – especially if the aerialist was not wearing a prosthesis. In addition, the amount of remaining leg on the amputated side had a distinct impact on what actions could and could not be achieved. Attempting the same ‘looped salto’ drop as P–, uniped J– found that despite

entering into the position easily, the limited stump on his amputated side meant he always fell through the looped rope resulting in him being trapped at the chest rather than ending in the sitting position. Fellow uniped A- had a few inches more stump and so despite falling slightly to one side, managed to complete the rotation and stop in the sitting position successfully. Despite the differing degrees of difficulty our leg amputees faced, all of them could access equipment and the aerial canon at varying levels of expertise. Additionally, the trainers learned significant details about the aerial manoeuvres and how they impacted on different bodies, thus enhancing not only ways of supporting those individuals present, but feeding into the 'knowledge-bank' that Drury hoped would form part of the project' legacy.



13. *POC* aerialists in training. Author's Collection.

Upper body strength and the ability to hold one's own weight are essential to opening up the advanced aerial repertoire (with fitness and flexibility offering further opportunities). If an aerialist cannot hold her own weight with two arms, she can find herself struggling in the first instance, but for those who only have one arm this becomes even more challenging. It soon became apparent that with even a small amount of assistance from a second arm, whether from the wrist, elbow or even close to the shoulder, the student was at a distinct advantage over one who had no such benefit.

The primary difficulty for all our one-armed aerialists was getting onto the equipment in the first place. If the equipment were hung low to the ground, then supporting themselves

on one leg and one arm, the student could potentially lift the other leg over the bar for example to enter a sitting position. Once there, they discovered more canonical movements, which took advantage of their legs and other single arm. Each student in such a position discovered unique ways for themselves. One used small slings to extend her shorter arm to match that of her longer one. Another used his back and shoulders to push into ropes to move from standing to sitting rather than pulling with his remaining arm. A further trainee found ways of using her legs much more to provide hooks and holds to aid in moving from one position to the next. The trapeze and the cocoon (and later the harness and nets) were reasonably accessible to these students, though the verticals were particularly onerous if not impossible. Attempting some of the actions myself using only one arm, I discovered that despite my aerial experience, much of my familiar vertical action was no longer possible. No doubt, this could come with significant training, but for those with restricted upper bodies, they focused their aerial research and training on the other equipment.

The teaching and sharing of aerial actions always requires a form of translation from one aerial body to the next as the two people will no doubt differ in some physical way regardless of impairment whether in strength, fitness, flexibility, height or weight. The levels of experience, knowledge and confidence also play important roles in the speed and success of that knowledge transference. In these two sections, I have demonstrated that the *POC* training programme forced additional types of translation to occur that related to the particular impairments the students embodied, either through linguistic support or physical adaptation. The manoeuvres being shared were drawn from the aerial canon, but the manner in which they were translated or undertaken pushed (rather than totally suspended) the conventions of aerial transference beyond the experience of all the tutors. As trainers, we had to reconsider how we demonstrated our actions, and when we spoke and when we remained silent. We reviewed how and when we made physical contact with the students to ensure the messages were interpreted correctly. We had to examine precisely what we were doing in each action, where the weight was being placed and transferred in order to pass on as much pertinent information as possible. Ultimately, we had to become familiar with the different structures and functionality of the aerialists' bodies whether through amputation, paralysis or limited mobility, in order to find different ways of guiding and supporting their own unique aerial adventures.

At this early stage, 'access' related to individuals being able to actively engage with the training; whatever barriers could be removed were removed to ensure this was possible. Our Deaf, blind and learning disabled students required additional or modified forms of language to receive the information and through their various intermediaries, this was accomplished.

The amputees and those with limited mobility could draw on the traditional forms of communication but working in partnership with the trainers established ways of adapting the aerial canon to suit their physiologies, and generally focused on equipment suitable to them. In social constructionist terms then, the training programme was generally successful in removing the disabilities faced by the students in providing resources and practical alternatives to ensure access to the training. That focus on access also meant we could no longer simply rely on conventional processes, forging a questioning culture that potentially enhanced our practices.

The following stage saw access relate more prominently to aesthetics than practicalities. The first group's impairments and divergent approach to aerial was 'invisible' to anyone not privy to the training or rehearsals; the second group's impairments were potentially highly visible and so could have a direct impact on the viewer without any private knowledge of the aerialist or working methodologies. Moving on to explore the rehearsal phase and final performance of the *POC*, the 'aesthetics of access' become as important (if not more so in some instances) than the former definition of access that created complex contradictions for some students.

Enlightenment and the 'Aesthetics of Access'

Access is a word often used when discussing disability as it is the lack of access to places and services that defines disability in social, rather than medical, terms. However, according to Graeae's website, it can also relate to a 'new dramatic language' that aims 'to create experiences that excite all the senses for the widest audiences' (Graeae). This is referred to as the 'aesthetics of access'.

This is about taking the techniques used to provide access and weaving them into the very performances they themselves support. In these instances, what begins from the roots of access (to support the involvement of disabled people within audiences or disabled performers on stage), quickly becomes something more complex and more vibrant – impacting on both the audience and the performance team and forming an essential part of the aesthetics of the work as a whole. (Verrent n.pag.)

For Sealey, the 'aesthetics of access' include the integration of BSL and AD as well as the visible (and invisible) inclusion of disabled performers in her shows. Not only are diverse forms of communication used in conjunction with speech to make the performances more widely accessible in practical terms, but these and the broader signs of impairment are celebrated to counteract the predominance of conventional physicalities and forms of communication in mainstream theatre. As Verrent declares, the 'aesthetics of access' have 'moved on from being simply about access, to something that is much more central, more

vital, more theatrical', as they 'provide opportunities to extend the impact of both visual and auditory elements on stage in a multitude of ways' (ibid).

The training programme demonstrated how the teaching and learning practice was modified to ensure access to the students in terms of function by constantly asking how best to communicate with them, and how the movements could be adapted for their different bodies. On leaving the training programme and entering into the rehearsal phase access also became an issue of aesthetics. The aerial and sway-pole displays would be a highly visible way of celebrating diversity by situating 'disabled artists [...] right at the heart of the cultural celebrations' (Graeae). Attempting to create a performance centring on such a definition however did prove challenging in the casting, in the use of equipment and in the generation of choreography that curiously became inaccessible at different times to different people. The pursuit of access in practical and aesthetic terms did not therefore always work harmoniously together.

Casting and Equipment

Every POC trainee who passed the stringent LOCOG accreditation was offered a role as an aerialist or sway-poler in *Enlightenment* with two performers taking on both physical tasks. Although there was some concern that the more 'able' trainees had been cast to work on the sway-poles suggesting that the aerial work might be potentially 'easier', a look at the overall casting shows this not to be the case. In terms of 'aesthetics of access' relating specifically to the nature of impairment presented by the performers there was a relatively even split with Deaf artists, amputees, wheelchair users and those with other mobility restrictions being divided between the two groups. All those of small stature did however join the aerial troupe as, even if they managed to climb the poles, they were too light to manoeuvre them sufficiently (even with weights added to the poles). The two remaining visually impaired performers joined the sway-pole team, but there was a diverse mix of aerial abilities and physical or sensory impairments in both teams. Although BSL and AD were less significant in terms of 'aesthetics' for the aerial group, BSL signs were incorporated into the sway-pole and ground based choreography that were often performed simultaneously with the aerial. In terms of 'aesthetics of access' specifically for the aerial work, this can therefore be seen explicitly in the diversity of individuals and the equally diverse range of impairments embodied by them within those sequences.

On completing the broad-based casting, further casting within the performing aerial team was still necessary. Sealey comically confessed on various occasions that the aerialists had 'made her life hell', as they had been 'too successful' in developing their aerial skills and she and Hemmings were desperate to find ways of including as much of these as possible in

the performance. The performance had after all been designed to include harnesses and the poles rather than the circus equipment. The sway-poles had a less complicated transition from training to rehearsals because the details of their roles had been known from the start of the process, the equipment had already been delivered, and adjustments for those using them were underway.⁶⁰ The aerial roles were still very much in flux. Even the original harness section had been significantly changed to allow for the circus skills to be present, resulting in those rehearsals being training-based rather than choreographically led in the first few weeks. Several questions therefore persisted throughout the early weeks of the rehearsals: if the show were to include more aerial disciplines, what would they be and who would perform them? Furthermore, once decided upon, how long would the group wait for the delivery of the required equipment?

By the first week of rehearsals the design and budget had yet to be confirmed with regard to these new aerial sections and on 28th June I noted in my journal a real sense of frustration pervading the sessions that was also impacting on me as the rehearsal director.

As NOTHING has been confirmed – and I do mean nothing in terms of aerial – and yet I still have more than 20 people to ‘rehearse’ in aerial each day, then I am going with the ideas that are being discussed for the latest version, i.e. the rope and trapeze ‘wings’; the cocoon Newton’s Cradle; and the harnessed birds and splash scenes.

On 8th July I wrote that it had all ‘changed again’, and throughout my scribed memories this theme continued almost until the show itself. The training programme had provided a sanctuary of learning and experimentation that placed the trainees at the very centre of all activity; access had been both practical and aesthetic. Shifting access to a predominantly aesthetic perspective in this later stage ironically negatively affected the very practical elements of access for the performers owing to the lack of available and suitable equipment for some of them to use. Curiously, it was with the harnesses, whose use had been envisaged from the very start, where this was felt the most.

I had a sticky moment with J– yesterday that actually brought her to tears of frustration and anger. I said that those who have not currently worked in a harness would work in one this morning, but that she probably wouldn’t be going in the harness. She asked whether this was for aesthetic or physiological reasons. I was nervous to reply on either of these but thought best to go with the truth as I understood it; and the reason was physiological. She found this to be horrific and

⁶⁰ There were a few exceptions where ambitious attempts to enable two paralysed aerialists to work in sitting positions atop the poles also proved highly problematic, but were in the end successful. As I do not define sway-pole as aerial under my early definition, this is not examined here.

insulting but how else could I have responded? Her body did not fit the harnesses we had available. I wonder what her reaction would have been had I said it was on 'aesthetic' grounds? This certainly wasn't the case but would it have been more acceptable to her if her exclusion was based upon the way she 'looked' instead of on how she could be suspended safely in the air? (ibid)

It was eventually established that *all* aerial performers being 'flown' into the stadium and working at significant height would be required to wear some kind of harness – either as the main flying system in the Umbrella scene, or as a safety device on the trapezes and nets in the Bird Gerhl sequences.⁶¹ As the details of the aerial scenes were constantly shifting, no bespoke harnesses (mentioned by Hayes as a distinct possibility) were ever designed or ordered. This nearly resulted in some aerialists, like J– above, being totally recast and excluded from the aerial performances altogether.

Consequently, the final casting of the Umbrella piece (featured on the front pages of many UK newspapers) was based upon those who were able to wear the existing harnesses and those working in the nets were drawn from the Umbrella cast. The four rope artists were chosen for their developed aerial skills, as very few people had the physical capacity to perform rope at the level required. The four trapeze roles were cast on trapeze ability and aesthetic diversity, and the Newton's Cradle provided a further aerial opportunity for three artists to explore working closely with the floor. The harness work was therefore only accessible to those whose bodies fitted the 'normal' harnesses. Anyone whose body was unable to be supported in such a system was excluded from that sequence thus suggesting that the environment disabled them from inclusion once more.

Despite all performers progressing in at least some aerial actions in the training phase, advancement and development of aerial ability was by no means equal, as is in non-disabled environments. Some people were more adept at learning; some had bodies they could manipulate with greater ease than others; some had previous experience on which to draw, and some had to manage the impact of fatigue and fear more than their fellow trainees. Thus, the casting team (of which I was a part in this later stage) decided who would be suited to the various roles for practical and aesthetic reasons. As there were only four trapeze roles, and many (if not all) the cast *could* have performed the final choreography, there were some performers who were disappointed. In an emailed correspondence with a number of *POC* aerialists after the event, one commented that

⁶¹ Named after the track by Antony and the Johnsons. The piece was performed to a version by singer Birdy.

I always said I liked trapeze yet ended up performing on the net knowing full well I could easily do the trapeze routine as no one gave me the opportunity to demonstrate. (L—)

Professional casting auditions often result in those who are not chosen (for whatever usually undisclosed reasons) having to cope with their rejection. Regardless of the amount of physical and emotional investment any of the performers may make, the decision-making process usually involves much more than the desires and concerns of a few performers. As the entire *POC* was arguably founded on a much more inclusive political agenda, however, the casting process was therefore quite unusual. The performers' personal involvement, investment and sense of inclusion were held as vitally important to the immediate creative team, and being instigated and run on a more inclusive basis might explain how some individuals felt disillusioned by the final casting decisions. It is possible that our determination to be as inclusive as possible (not forgetting the very uniqueness of this project and therefore its inherent unknowns) is precisely why the decision-making process ended up being so onerous, time-consuming and frustrating whilst being acknowledged as well-meaning. If tough decisions had been made much earlier on, then perhaps the bespoke equipment could have been designed and ordered. The training could have been more specific to the final roles with knowledge of them made available to cast members sooner, and rehearsal time could have been more targeted. If aerialists were cut for whatever reason, they would have had to cope with disappointment just as their non-disabled colleagues had had to do in the other ceremonies.⁶²

Further equipment-based challenges were eventually abated, but once again with very little rehearsal time remaining. The three women of small stature required equipment suited to their smaller physiques. Although this would be less challenging to deliver than bespoke harnesses, owing to the enormity and complexity of LOCOG and the pressure on the rigging teams who were working on all four ceremonies, it took weeks for the equipment to arrive. This lack of specifically suitable equipment for the professional cast did affect them individually (see Carter "Dis'abling"). Rehearsing much of the time on apparatus that was far too big for them meant they perpetually struggled with the choreography in terms of movements and timing resulting in frustration and anxiety for those performers and me as the choreographer. Although the artists were eventually provided with the necessary equipment and managed to

⁶² Several aerialists were cut from the *OOC* due to lack of rehearsal time in the stadium and difficulties with some of the bespoke equipment, most notably two long ladders that proved to be too bendy and therefore dangerous. The aerialists were given the choice to perform ground-based roles, one who agreed, the other decided not to. Thus, a spare costume meant I was asked to fill the role as a net-wielding Dementor (from Harry Potter) chasing the Child Catcher!

perform the sequences in the performance, there was much greater pressure on them through no fault of their own. The lack of accessible structures resulted in those (admittedly few) artists being (temporarily) disabled by the very process that had sought to enable them.

Despite the determination to cast on the basis of aerial credit, we had to concede that in reality some of the later casting decisions were made based upon the aerialists' physiologies and most specifically because their unique bodies did not 'fit' the pre-existing harnesses designed for the perceived 'standard' or conventional aerialist. Ju Gosling argues that society's 'body dysphoria', the effect on our relationship with our bodies bound to a process of aspiring (and failing) for perfection, relates in part to the industrial standardization of clothing, suggesting that 'our ideas about what is normal are becoming increasingly separated from reality' (309-10). So, the design and manufacture of harnesses and other aerial equipment are based on similar constructed beliefs. This is more understandable in the latter however, as the majority of aerialists have been shown to be of a particular conventional physiology. The lack of bespoke equipment resulted in some aerialists blaming their bodies for not 'fitting' the equipment, suggesting individual 'body dysphoria'; others fought against such notions demanding they be provided with the appropriate equipment to fit their bodies.

Ambitious attempts to redesign the production in order to emphasise the aesthetics of access in aerial, resulted in having to use standardized equipment and therefore removed or limited the possibility for some to participate owing to their non-standard physiologies. If *Enlightenment* had followed its initial plan and the necessary bespoke harnesses had been ordered in time for the rehearsals, access to equipment would not necessarily have been an issue. Consequently, that would also have meant that none of the new aerial skills developed in the training programme would have been shared with the wider world, potentially misrepresenting their true capabilities. The decision to change the creative direction in order to celebrate one definition of access therefore came at the cost of another form of access.

Projecting forwards, what should happen first? Should equipment be designed and built in response to the creative vision, with performers then cast based on their potential to 'fit' and 'fill' those roles? Or should the performers be cast first and the equipment designed and constructed specifically for them? Provisional answers are found when examining the *Paralympic Closing Ceremony (PCC)*, where the Firefly props were constructed and the choreography established prior to the aerialists being auditioned. Remaining with the *POC* however, had the training programme taken place in October 2011 as originally desired by Sealey, the team would have been aware of the aerial potential of their cast and therefore may have had the time to design and construct the show around their skills and physiques. A production with fewer levels of bureaucracy and international accountability may also have

found it simpler to obtain the necessary equipment more speedily than was possible in this instance. I certainly applaud the ambition of the creative team to celebrate the new aerial abilities of the (brief) training programme's graduates and admit complicity in this desire for more aerial inclusion. Ultimately, we were successful in designing and delivering aerial pieces on five different forms of equipment in three of the *POC* scenes, and all those cast as aerialists did perform in at least one aerial section. It is pertinent to look at those different scenes now however, and examine what challenges had to be confronted in terms of access – in practical and aesthetic terms – when devising and performing the aerial choreography.

Choreographing Access

The process of devising, rehearsing and ultimately choreographing the different aerial sections became my responsibility in liaison with the Artistic Directors and the Aerial Consultant, and this phase furthered considerations of access in functional and aesthetic terms that would later impact on some performers' visibility *as* disabled. An advantage of the choreography not being pre-set meant that the early rehearsal weeks enabled experimentation with harness-specific actions that the aerialists had yet to encounter. They maintained their levels of fitness and became familiar with the freedoms and limitations inherent within the equipment itself, and choreographically I was able to determine which actions proved accessible to the majority of the cast and which were inaccessible.

As we worked with double-side-pick-up harnesses, the variety of big movements available to us was relatively limited: forwards and backwards somersaults, holding positions 'around the clock' and sideways twists were the main sets of actions, with choreographic detail built on top of these and enhanced by the manipulation of brightly coloured umbrellas. Although some performers struggled to manoeuvre themselves easily owing to both physiological imbalance and core stability, all those cast in the Umbrella scene could eventually do all the actions. As water can be an equalising aid to people with diverse bodies, as Jill Le Clair discusses in *Transformed identity: from disabled person to global Paralympian*, so harnesses can present equalising aerial opportunities (and pain).

When the actual umbrella props arrived, the mechanics of opening and closing them became problematic for those with the use of only one arm. Although research was undertaken to find 'button-closing' props these proved unwieldy in the air and so each aerialist adapted the sequences to suit their needs such as keeping the umbrellas closed when the others had theirs open, or doing half somersaults dipping forwards and backwards maintaining an open umbrella instead of going all the way around. Should I not therefore have altered the choreography to suit everyone? The opening and closing of the umbrellas was a highly visual element in the choreography, which complemented that performed by Kevin Finnan's ground-

based dancers and without it the aerialists would have been visually lost in such a vast space. There were three artists with similar umbrella-opening difficulties and each was positioned on a different cruciform;⁶³ there were also three small statured performers who used smaller umbrellas to suit their needs. Thus, the visual and choreographic differences further highlighted diversity within the sequence and reiterated the celebration of 'aesthetics of access', whilst the main movements themselves remained uniform.

In addition to the functionality of movements were also aesthetic issues of conformity that tentatively raised political concerns for some performers of 'passing' as non-disabled. The opening section of the Umbrella sequence required the aerialists to 'walk' in the air to give a human action to the mechanics that would pull them into the centre of the stadium. The 'steps' and exaggerated gestures with the umbrella props were choreographed to the beat of the music and echoed some of the actions performed by those on the ground below. A wheelchair user suggested that instead of 'walking' in the air, he should 'wheel' as that was his mode of action on the ground. The unipeds who chose not to wear their prostheses similarly would be unable to 'walk' in this fashion (on the ground) and those of small stature or the 'stump-wearing' amputees walked at a different pace to those with longer legs. Although a brief discussion was had, the aerial piece was not a realistic representation of people moving on the ground but was a performance of suspended movement that demonstrated different aerial actions one of which was 'walking' in the air. All those who could do this action, therefore did this action, in their own physiological styles but to the timed structure set within the choreography. Furthermore, there were aerial sections when wheelchair users were indeed raised into the air with their wheelchairs, so this imagery had not been omitted but seriously considered within the overall production's celebration of disability. Nikki Wildin, who played the main character Miranda, flew in her wheelchair at the start of the show, and Paralympians Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson and Kay Forshaw 'flew' in their sports-specific wheelchairs. It is however important to examine this potentially enforced 'passing' in terms of disability identity.

⁶³ The four-point rigging structures were used for the Umbrella scene and 'redressed' as birdcages for this scene. A trapeze was rigged in the centre with three nets on the outside edges.



14. Testing Wildin's chair in the Olympic Stadium. Author's Collection.

In *"One of Us" Identity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*, Sara Hosey states that 'it is only in relationship to others that our bodies have significance' (43). As a member of a disability aerial performing troupe participating in a global performance celebrating the abilities of disabled athletes and performers, it is understandable that the wheelchair user sought to have his identity as a disabled man understood by the observing audience. Unquestionably, all the amputee aerialists chose to expose their amputations either by not wearing prostheses or by exposing them with amended costumes, making clear their disabled identities. By suspending as *invisibly* disabled the wheelchair user's body bore a greater 'relationship' to the conventional aerialists that had appeared in the *OOC* and his physiological reality of restricted lower limb mobility (at least on the ground) was hidden. Similarly, those whose impairments or disability were visible were made *hypervisible* in relationship to his perceptibly conventional physique. Le Clair suggests that 'a great deal of energy is put into 'passing'' in everyday life as 'a response to prejudicial attitudes' (1124). In this circumstance, the environment had been made to celebrate disability and impairment with many athletes and performers eager to be acknowledged as part of that global, heterogeneous community. By no longer having access to the visible signifiers of his impairment (most notably his wheelchair) this potentially negated his disability identity.

Returning to choreographing access into the aerial scenes, the Deaf aerialists (already seen to have had specific challenges in the learning environment) whose impairments were also invisible, faced further choreographic and safety concerns once suspended high in the performance arena. The hearing aerialists could rely on the music to establish the timing of the movements, but Deaf artists needed to learn the pattern of sequences and find their own methods of establishing the timing. I wrote out the sequence in terms of ‘eight counts’ which helped some artists (Deaf and hearing) remember the sequence, a section of which is shown below.

Time	8s	Lyrics	Aerial Choreography
	1		Brolly is open and you're walking
	2	Ella (lots)	
	3		
	4		
	5	Synthesizer & drums	Hand out; hand in
	6		Brolly out; brolly in
	7		Hand out; hand in
	8		Brolly out - close brolly
00:31	9	You had my heart, And we'll never be worlds apart	Holding brolly horizontally in front and walking
	10	Maybe in magazines, But you'll still be my star	
	11	Baby 'cause in the dark, You can't see shiny cars	
	12	And that's when you need me there, With you, I'll always share	
	13	Because when the sun shines, we'll shine together, Told you I'll be here forever,	On BECAUSE: Sweep brolly down and place under the arm and walk
	14	Said I'll always be your friend, Took an oach, I'm a stick it out to the end	
	15	Now that it's raining more than ever, Know that well still have each other	
	16	You can stand under my umbrella, You can stand under my umbrella	Bring brolly horizontally to the front in preparation for somersaults
	17	Ella, ella, ella, ella etc.	1st Forward somersault
	18	Ella, ella, ella, ella etc. Under my umbrella	2nd Forward somersault
	19	Ella, ella, ella, ella etc.	3rd Forward somersault
	20	Ella, ella, ella, ella etc.	4th somersault, ending with brolly in front of stingers and opening for
01:18	21	Everything will never come in between	Hand out; hand in
	22	You're a part of my entity, Here for infinity	Brolly out brolly in
	23	When the war hast took its part, When the world has dealt its cards	Hand out; hand in
	24	If the hand is hard, together we'll mend your heart	Brolly out - close brolly

One Deaf artist recalled it so well that he proved to be the most reliable timekeeper of all the aerialists even providing a verbal count for the hearing aerialists in his team in the early stages. During the stadium rehearsals and actual performance, the hearing artists had ‘in-ear’ listening devices through which Hayes relayed information and additional instructions including the choreography, such as “Open Umbrellas 3-4; Close Umbrellas 7-8”, to which none

of the Deaf artists had access. On the ground, the Deaf performers had signers to maintain the flow of information, but in the air, this was no longer possible. If any changes were made when airborne, the Deaf had to rely on their co-performers to pass on that information. There was one incident in rehearsals when a technical problem resulted in some of the aerialists being left suspended instead of returning to the ground. As they were so high up it was difficult to relay details to them via BSL and so it was left to their fellow performers to inform them as best they could. Despite having a few aerialists who could sign, if the Deaf were unable to see them owing to the position of their moving rigging points, the information would simply get lost. Thus, the onus was heavily upon the individual Deaf artists to be very familiar with the choreography, with the safety procedures explained in rehearsals and maintain contact with their co-performers wherever possible. To assist them, Deaf artists were positioned behind hearing performers or close to someone with signing abilities. The aerial positioning was therefore determined by both functional and aesthetic concerns of access. The four cruciform groups that each suspended four performers were organised to celebrate visible diversity, but within those groups the functional aspects of access determined who would be placed in front of whom. There were however, other concerns of access that were much more related to risk.

Perhaps the most high-risk access considerations related to the pain and potential injury that some aerialists experienced. Owing to the length of time it required to prepare the aerialists in their harnesses, those who were checked first ended up wearing them for a relatively long time. As this was a new experience for many the affect was unknown, but it soon became apparent that for some, especially those with forms of paralysis, this could be detrimental to their wellbeing. Wearing a harness places pressure on the hips, bladder, legs and even ribs (if wearing a full-body system), but if the aerialist cannot feel the pressure, they may be unaware of the potential damage being caused. On discovering that the blood pressure in some could rise significantly, systems were established to ensure those who could only wear the harnesses for a short time, were set up last. During stadium rehearsals and the performance however, this meant having riggers and physiotherapists allocated to the individual aerialists to tighten their harnesses and check blood pressure respectively at the very last moment. Concern was raised over the health and safety of such performers continuing to participate and ostensibly, it became a battle of access: individual aerialists fought to continue working on the production but it necessitated additional support; there was a financial implication as well as serious concern for the participants' health.⁶⁴ These were extreme and rare cases, and because the artists were highly capable in the air, and acutely

⁶⁴ Despite having already spent their budgets, the physiotherapists decided to support the aerialists voluntarily to enable them to participate.

aware of their own bodies, all efforts were made to ensure they did participate so long as the established margins of health were maintained. Owing to access and diversity being fundamental to *this POC* it is perhaps understandable why such allowances were made but I wonder whether this would (and indeed should) be general practice beyond this very particular event.

Thus, access affected the participation in and choreography of the aerial in *Enlightenment*. Access was provided in functional and geographical terms to enable the inclusion of 'disabled aerialists' in the *POC* through the training programme, but *how* those aerialists were presented was determined by a combination of practical, artistic and *political* reasons defined as the 'aesthetics of access'. Although the blend of accesses proved to be problematic at times in the *POC*, further questions arose over the casting of the *PCC's* Firefly act. Some *POC* aerialists believed they had been unjustly excluded, implying that it should even have been their *right* to be involved.

The Paralympic Closing Ceremony (PCC)

Different creative teams led the two performance events that sandwiched the Paralympic Games of London 2012, but aerial consultants Hayes and Poulter were involved with both. There was therefore an element of knowledge transfer from the *POC* to the *PCC* with regard to the potential of the newly trained aerialists. Disability and impairment were still well re/presented in the final ceremony, and three of the *POC* aerial cast were also seconded to it. Lyndsay Care performed a straps duet with a male professional aerialist that featured well on the televised event as they performed close to the band Coldplay; Cassie Harris had rehearsed the piece as Care's understudy, but did not appear in the final performance. More prominently still, Lyndsay Adams performed on a trapeze under a motorbike that raced across a high wire in the stadium towards the cauldron to light the torch that would transfer the fire to the next Paralympic Games. However, despite their significant roles, it was the main aerial number, the Firefly scene, which caused controversy because no *POC* cast were included.

Historically, *PCCs* have less time to rehearse than the *POCs* do, owing to the Games taking place in the stadia during the day and this was of particular concern when casting. The Fireflies had less than a week of rehearsals with only two overnight sessions in the Stadium. Initially, according to Hayes, the Firefly roles were to have included *POC* aerialists, stating that 'half [would] be filled by people with disability and the other half for those without disability'. He believed this would have been 'a great use of the resources and further use of [the Circus Space] training', but the main reason for not following through with this plan was due to the 'scheduling of rehearsals and the conflict that this had with the *POC*'.

There were also artistic demands that made working with some of the *POC* aerialists perhaps more challenging. Aerial choreographer of the scene, Katharine Arnold told me that

Having spoken to the director of the show [Kim Gavin], I realised that he wanted a routine that was quite technical and which involved coming in from the roof at 60m. So we needed to make sure that the aerialists we used were reasonably experienced, strong technically, and good with heights. Because we knew the choreography needed to look tight, we also needed to make sure that people were capable of picking up and learning routines to time, could count to music and had good movement quality, so that it looked like a dance in the air. A good level of strength and flexibility was important too. So the casting decisions were made mostly on general all-round ability. ("Questionnaire")

Five *POC* aerialists auditioned for the roles, but none was eventually cast, the twenty roles ultimately filled by professional (non-disabled) aerialists including me. Although in retrospect there were certainly members of the original training programme who could have undertaken the choreography with enough time, even those of us cast had some difficulties with the tight schedule. The fact that 'disabled aerialists' were not present in the Firefly scene was disappointing to the *POC* cast but there does not appear to be any form of discrimination.

As Arnold states above, she was seeking specific aerial qualities that were already present within the aerialists, and those she saw in audition did not yet meet those requirements. Particularly pertinent perhaps was the nature of the equipment. The aerial prop was a large aerial hoop with pyrotechnics that would need to fire during the performance. Those of small stature would struggle with the size of the props, and none had experience of working significantly on a hoop. In addition, the choreography was indeed challenging, demanding some fast spinning that again would be new to most of the *POC* aerialists. Furthermore, the Fireflies entered the stadium 'in flight' which meant being able to access the roof of the stadium via narrow ladders and walkways that were certainly inaccessible for wheelchairs and anyone of limited mobility, though this certainly would not have been problematic for all *POC* aerialists.

Each of these issues could, at least theoretically, have been managed had more time and access to the stadium been available. Smaller hoops could have been manufactured for those of small stature; spinning could have been achieved again over time and the sequence could perhaps have been modified to suit all the aerialists' experience and abilities. Although access to the roof would still have been impossible for some, the piece could have started on the ground as in the *POC*. Therefore, the teams could have adjusted everything, but there would have been artistic costs to the *POC* aerialists' inclusion.

[Katharine] had developed a complex Hoop routine and the casting decision was based on the ability to achieve this. I believe had we stuck with the decision to use half / half cast then the material / vocab for this sequence would have reflected this. Ultimately Kim Gavin, Creative Director of the PCC pushed for the most technically adept and creative sequence he could get. (Hayes)

Owing to the peculiarities of this event casting was, in my opinion, appropriately undertaken. I was privileged to have been involved but admittedly struggled at times with the technical requirements; knowing the POC cast as I did, I believed that many would not have been able to fulfil the demands of the roles at that time. The POC aerialists were specifically concerned that *disabled* aerialists were not included in this *disability* event; this is therefore a political rather than necessarily aesthetic issue and poses additional questions. Should employers, for example, only engage disabled performers in such disability-focused events? Were there more highly experienced 'disabled aerialists' who could have undertaken these roles, then I believe the roles should have been awarded to them, but at that precise moment, that was not the case. Therefore, should Gavin have compromised his creative vision to be politically inclusive?

Hayes admitted that integrating POC aerialists into the PCC would have had an aesthetic impact on the movement material and choreography. Despite the intensive training of the POC aerial cast, they were still relative newcomers to the aerial profession and both Hayes and Arnold admitted that such inclusion would have meant reducing the aerial content to fit their present aerial expertise. If the scene's purpose were specifically political then of course the POC aerialists should have been included. If, however, the purpose were to create an aerial spectacle that complemented the other aspects of movement (and aerial) within the overall show, then aesthetics were no doubt of primary concern and the casting was appropriate. Of course, there was a further alternative. Half the Firefly cast could have been the professional aerialists presenting the aspired choreographed sequence, with the other half drawn from POC aerialists as had been the original plan. A complementary choreography could perhaps have been designed for them accepting all the aforementioned constraints. This would still have affected the overall design, but more importantly could have drawn difficult comparisons between the two teams; the 'disabled aerialists' may have been exposed as less able than the highly capable non-disabled aerialists and Gavin might have been accused of tokenism through such casting. Perhaps what these quandaries demonstrate is that there are no clear answers and that opinion will necessarily vary depending on one's perspective.

The ceremonies surrounding the Paralympic Games demonstrated that no matter how substantial, well financed and disability sensitive an event, the combination of disability and aerial can be laden with practical, aesthetic and political tensions. The POC training programme sought to redress the lack of access to aerial training by offering places to those

who demonstrated the physical and mental aptitude under audition proceedings. Nevertheless, equality did not mean that everyone who wanted to take part could take part; it was aerial potential that framed equality. Everyone who participated in the eight-week intensive training programme was successful in engaging with some aerial actions, but as would occur with such an event for non-disabled aerial novices, there were those who excelled and those who struggled. Regardless of barrier-removal in social terms, there were still members of the *POC* who found much of the aerial canon inaccessible. More surprising however, was the extent to which some of the trainees progressed to a high standard of aerial action in such a short time-frame. Furthermore, the participants aided in educating the aerial trainers in how aerial could become more diverse through questioning established modes of communication and addressing individual concerns of access and agency. Accessible provision for one trainee often had beneficial outcomes beyond that individual as shown through delicate shifts in demonstrating actions for Deaf aerialists. Owing to the ambitions to include diverse 'disabled aerialists' in these Paralympic events being so extensive, significant challenges were faced by participants and facilitators alike; some of those challenges were successfully managed, some exceeded and others fell short. Perhaps having laid the foundations for such a programme to exist however, future events might positively develop, learning from the experiences of all those involved.

Conclusions

In conclusion I offer an overview of how diverse ‘disabled aerialists’ have challenged and sustained aesthetic and methodological conventions of aerial. I return to members of the *POC* to see how their aerial careers have continued in the aftermath of London 2012 and examine some of the challenges still facing disabled people who wish to be aerialists. Finally, I examine a pre-*POC* performance by dance artist Claire Cunningham who employs an innovative aerial prop that resonates with the form’s earliest apparatus. Her autobiographical work reinstates the individual to the form, presenting uniqueness rather than uniformity; it directly connects to aerial’s strong historical lineage and demonstrates the wealth of opportunity available to the form through engaging with disabled artists.

Aesthetic and Methodological Challenges

I think what I’m frustrated by is that basically what makes [aerial] infinite is the infinite variety of people; so what I want to see is that person on that piece of equipment and I want to see [...] why they’ve chosen that. That’s what excites and inspires me. [...] I have a huge respect for skill, but I’m not interested in it. I want to see *Tina* doing that move. (Leyser Interview)

Aerial acts have been dominated by non-disabled performers with Tait asserting they have ‘crucially’ been ‘created by trained muscular bodies’ (*Circus* 2). She argued that the conventional aerialist ‘deliver[ed] a unique aesthetic that blend[ed] athleticism and artistic expression’ (ibid), which Bouissac proposed was delivered through a structural code, easily interpreted by regular circus audiences. Whilst their analyses referred predominantly to traditional circus acts, their relevance has been shown to echo through the diverse aerial genres particularly through the use of equipment and canonical actions, interconnecting all aerialists through a ‘living history’. Despite Tait’s suggestion that the form offered uniqueness, Gossard demonstrated the proliferation of similar acts by the late nineteenth century and the aesthetics of conformity were also present, particularly in the aerial ballets of the 1900s. The London 2012 ceremonies provided more recent examples of this uniformity as aerialists who had performed in the events found it impossible to determine who was depicted in published photographs. Furthermore, professional artists were shown to be bored and frustrated with the repetition of particular actions with copyright being suggested as a means of preventing this (A. Williams). In her circus-related PhD thesis, Lindsey Stephens also discussed ‘the saturation point of the market for certain [aerial] acts’, quoting a Montréal-based aerialist who told her, ‘there are 50 silk acts in the market in Montréal’ (161). Stoddart’s assertion that ‘the body of the aerialist is weighed down by no regulation and is governed only by its singular self-discipline and strength’ (*Rings* 7) therefore appears to be incorrect. Aerialists have continued

to be associated with perpetuating conventions of physicality, coded structures and aesthetics. 'Disabled aerialists' could therefore offer diversity to the form through their physicalities in the first instance.

Novelty rather than normalcy, and uniqueness rather than typicality, are artistic desiderata. That singularity emancipates imagination and frees the exceptional individual from the expectations to which the group is held is an artistic commonplace. (Silers 238)

Gossard provided examples of unipedal aerialists performing in the 1800s, whom, he asserted, offered greater novelty to the form that had become so popular by that time. Newspaper articles demonstrated that the presence of amputee aerialists were not simply novel, however, but their skills were considered exceptional in aerial terms like the trio of unipedal aerialists, the Flying Zenos, noted as 'one of the most marvellous [acts] ever seen' ("Menagerie" 8). Compellingly, gymnast Paulinetti described the feats performed by Stuart Dare as being considered 'impossible by all the leading gymnasts of Europe and America' (52) for someone with two legs. He set out to prove them wrong by betting one thousand pounds that he could accomplish the tricks even 'add[ing] a few more, even more difficult than [...] Mr. Dare is performing' (ibid). Paulinetti wrote that 'I accomplished the impossibilities in eight weeks, with more of them thrown in' (55) that impressed Dare's brother resulting in the two of them forming a partnership lasting several seasons. Paulinetti's ability to accomplish 'the so-called impossible feats', gave him 'a very high rating among all the great gymnasts of the period' (ibid). The non-disabled aerialist affords himself credit here, but the actions were initiated by one of the more established 'disabled aerialists' of the nineteenth century. It was Dare who ostensibly enhanced the movement form by inspiring others to experiment with his actions. Dare might now be forgotten, but his aerial skills continue through his advanced actions now being a part of the aerial canon.

Such a re-creation of aerial actions and enhancement of the movement repertoire continues through today's disabled aerial practitioners, arguably re-establishing aspects of uniqueness that enable the individual rather than an anonymous body to be seen in performance. *POC* and Graeae performer Tiiu Mortley worked alongside me at a week's workshop in London in the summer of 2014. I asked her to devise a short sequence on the low single-point trapeze which would be suitable for beginners. As she works dominantly with one side of her body, she utilises her back and neck in ways that I have neither needed nor thought to do, as I have facility in my other arm. The actions included familiar canonical movements (such as the 'mermaid' and 'stag') but her way of entering into and transitioning between the movements stemmed from her particular physiology. These included shifts in balance,



15. Tiiu Mortley rehearsing for *Spirit in Motion*. Author's Collection.

moments of complete release and placing pressure on different parts of her body to ensure security. When the students followed her lead, they learned *her* actions and I saw again how I (and the art form) could learn from greater diversity. The 'singularity' of disabled artists enables emancipation from the conventions through physical necessity and artistic exploration. The Zenos, Dare, Mortley and others offered greater opportunities to explore the human body's aerial potential in all its diversity. They forced a re-consideration of what actions were possible and how they could be undertaken whilst maintaining direct connections to the recognisable aerial form.

After London 2012

As training continued and my skill level progressed, I became adamant about continuing [to] develop the skills further [and to use them] within performance where possible. [...] I love it, it makes me happy and most of all, there is so much more to learn. The possibilities are infinite. With more time and training, I am positive that I can be so much better on these pieces of equipment and others and they will not only help to keep me fit, but also [help me] to use muscles that in other circumstances, I am unable to use. (Mortley Questionnaire)

'Disabled aerialists' undoubtedly have positive contributions to make to the aerial arts and as Mortley shows above, individuals are also benefiting from aerial in a variety of ways. As with all arts practices, training and experimentation are of paramount importance to sustain and develop engagement with it, but accessing regular training with appropriate support and equipment, has proved challenging.

[A]erial training is popular but finding somewhere to train is difficult, especially as I have special needs [... and the] teachers rarely have the time in groups to give you the support required. They often tend to move faster and are not fully aware of your capabilities so cannot advise on adaptations. [...] People are scared to ask what you can do, or suggest things for fear of insulting you or asking you to do things you are uncomfortable with. The upshot of this is that you end up not getting pushed and you and your development can suffer. (Mortley)

Lyndsay Adams (*POC*, *PCC* and Graeae performer) told me that ‘I’m lucky to have my own trapeze to train on. Without that my interest may have waned since 2012’ as living in Yorkshire she struggled to find somewhere to train. Similarly, Clapcott who is based in West Sussex found it challenging.

Access for me is physical as well as physiological. I need my trapeze a lot lower than most people and I use my own one as it’s smaller, so finding [someone] who doesn’t mind and has the space to put mine up can sometimes be a barrier [...]. [Also] new teachers aren’t experienced in teaching aerial to someone like me so sometimes they can be a bit too gentle and not push me enough. [...] I trust a teacher if they take the time for me to tell them about my disability and how fragile I can be but without them being put off by this. (Clapcott “RE: a bit”)



16. Adams, Mortley & Clapcott in *Spirit in Motion*. Author’s Collection.

As the majority of aerial training facilities are privately run and funded by participant contributions, these comments are not surprising, though some trainers are finding ways of making their facilities more accessible.⁶⁵ Despite such access being challenging, several *POC* members have performed aerial since London 2012, arguably maintaining a profile for ‘disabled aerialists’. Several of the former cast have performed with Graeae that included aerial training in the creative process in *The Limbless Knight* (2013) and *Belonging* (2014). The latter also included an exchange programme with Circo Crescer e Viver in Rio, a social circus organisation that was interested in developing its programme to include disabled people. The show launched at the ‘UK’s foremost festival of international contemporary circus, CircusFest 2014’, which Sarah Lawrence believed was the ‘ideal platform to premiere a brand new collaboration’. Importantly, it was the first time such a disability-focused event had been presented at the annual festival; similarly it was the first such presentation in two further circus festivals in Rio and São Paulo. Featuring on the front pages of some Brazilian newspapers, it potentially raised the profile of these companies but also of the potential for disabled artists engaging in circus beyond the UK (see Biderman).

Former *POC* members Milton Lopes, David Toole and Karina Jones took part in *Weighting* (2013), the first production of a new company, Extraordinary Bodies, that ACE described as ‘the UK’s only professional integrated circus company’ (“South”).⁶⁶ Jones also performed aerial in the development phase of PrefaceMorn’s new production, *What Is It?*, which delves ‘deep into the sideshows and freak shows that became popular in Victorian Britain’ (PrefaceMorn). Clapcott spent several months training with Nathalie Gauthier’s Le Petit Cirque in Los Angeles in 2013, culminating in the performance *A Journey of You*. Adams, Clapcott and Mortley all appeared in the *Spirit in Motion* celebrations of the Paralympic Legacy in Aylesbury this year for which I choreographed a single-point trapeze trio (see Carter “Diversity”). Clapcott and Johnny Whitwell also recently appeared in the closing ceremony for a series of events in Tottenham assisted by former Cirque Nova’s Akkerman, and Lopes is currently investigating a solo show that he hopes will include aerial in it.

Despite some of the *POC* aerialists continuing to perform in the air, the majority do so occasionally rather than regularly, and limited access to training facilities means their development has been reliant on the companies that hire them for specific performances (Adams; Clapcott; Mortley). Interestingly, the UK’s newly appointed National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA) that was instrumental in providing the *POC* training in 2012, does have a

⁶⁵ Former members of the *POC* emailed me with details of where they have been training. Facilities and support have varied across the country with the majority struggling to find significant spaces on a regular basis. Airhedz in Kent does have a pulley system in place to enable different apparatus to be suspended and both Mortley and Clapcott have taken advantage of this.

⁶⁶ See Billy Alwen for more details on this.

significant number of students on its vocational degree programme who have declared a disability, suggesting things are changing. Lydia Wilding-Smith confirmed that of their current student cohort, '29 are considered to have a disability (45%)' and '25 [...] are eligible to apply for Disabled Student Allowances [...] (39%)' ("RE: disabled"). Their statistics, however, echoed the findings of the Conservatoire of Dance and Drama (CDD), of which NCCA is a member. The CDD reported that the majority of students disclosing 'a specific learning difficulty e.g. dyslexia' accounted for 65% of disabled students, but only one student across the partnership disclosed as a 'wheelchair user' or having 'mobility issues' in 2013 (*Review 50*).

We have many students who apply with a Specific Learning Difficulty and this is the most common disability that we encounter, however, that is not to say that applicants with a physical condition don't apply. Applicants with a physical impairment often do disclose on their application form and there is no reason that this would be an issue for them throughout the audition. The audition is designed to assess certain areas but that is not to say that the audition format could not be altered to suit someone else whilst still assessing the basic requirements of the course. I can't recall an occasion where someone's disability has impacted their application or their likelihood of being offered a place. (Wilding-Smith)

Drury reiterated that 'a high proportion of students engaging in circus training [...] had struggled in conventional education' (Conversation) and the NCCA had responded to this by investing in 'one staff member having the responsibility of offering support to students with dyslexia and other learning or mental health conditions' (ibid). She believed the school would need to further 'invest in a similar person/people for students presenting more complex conditions' (ibid) and to date that had not seemed necessary. However, Wilding-Smith informed me that if such students were to present themselves for audition and to be offered a place they would be assisted in applying for financial support to pay for their additional needs. Nevertheless, at a time of continued austerity with significant cuts to the Independent Living Fund and Access to Work benefits, such support might be more challenging to attain.⁶⁷ As the majority of those who took part in the *POC* aerial training programme disclosed disabilities that would fall into Drury's category of 'more complex conditions', it seems that diversely disabled people desiring to participate professionally in aerial will need to continue to find private means to do so.

⁶⁷ See John Pring for how Jenny Sealey's ATW support 'has been cut by more than half'.

Mobile

She jumps, she swings, she lifts herself into the air, catching her feet into a 'mermaid' releasing one arm. She finds ways to move in and through the triangle of crutches in her own private dance. She's fluid, strong, elegant, exploratory. For a moment she rests lying in the triangular space looking up before straddling back down to the ground... she returns to hocks, hanging by her knees and swings upside down. (Author's description of *Mobile*)⁶⁹

Aerial dance has been shown to draw heavily upon its dance heritage that blends with the circus aerial offering alternative aesthetic and methodological approaches that diversify the aerial arts. Disabled artists also offer another heritage, that of disability arts and culture with a wealth of alternative aesthetics and narratives that can also enhance the form. Regardless of the lack of training opportunities, disabled artists are taking advantage of the aerial form and re-inventing it to tell their own stories. One such artist is Claire Cunningham.

My real concern is that aerial can pander to an ingrained notion in (non-disabled) society that aerial represents 'freedom' & that disabled individuals all aspire to be free of their bodies/ free of mobility equipment/ that they are suffering & burdened individuals... hence my own need to extend the functionality of my crutches into the air – to not leave them behind. (Cunningham "RE: Disability")

Cunningham was writing here about her solo performance *Mobile* (2008), during which she rigged an aerial triangle made from several of her crutches. As she connected the prop to a pulley system she talked to the audience, 'So I got this made', she says; 'Jonathan [Campbell] made it. It just seemed like the next logical step to me. I seem to be always trying to get off the ground. Sometimes I don't even notice that I'm doing it' (*Mobile*). She wanted to be airborne, seeking to 'climb' rather than 'fly', but importantly, she wanted to take her crutches with her. Cunningham's piece interestingly engaged in conventional aspects of aerial, but her artistry and specific relationship with the form, altered it.

The equipment itself is based on one of the oldest forms of trapeze, discussed in the Introduction, but it is made from real crutches. This provides her with a prop on which she can present canonical aerial actions, whilst maintaining a direct connection with her disability identity that for her is of paramount importance. She seeks to dispel some of the myths of aerial (freedom, flight, anti-gravity, non-disabled) even when demonstrating conventional aerial actions, but does not allow stereotypical disability narratives (suffering, burdensome, desire to be free or overcome disability) to take their place.

⁶⁹ For images of *Mobile* visit: <http://www.clairecunningham.co.uk/index.php?id=7>

Cunningham uses her triangle for a few moments before returning to the ground and embellishing the equipment by attaching increasing numbers of crutches until it forms the ‘mobile’ of the title. The aerial story has shifted from her body to her mobility props at this point. Importantly, the piece evolved from Cunningham’s combined experiences: her impairment, her mobility prop, her training in aerial. The depiction of her unique story, enhanced with direct address to the audience, enables her to *be* ‘Claire doing that move’ rather than an anonymous aerialist offering a series of familiar aerial actions. Nevertheless, she interconnects with the aerial tenets through the choice of equipment and movements, guided by aerial choreographer Mish Weaver and aerial coach Emily Leap.⁷⁰ She also echoes Leitzel’s crutch-enhanced performance, but extends it by taking the props with her into the air, even allowing them to remain as she descends back to the ground. She masterfully blends her aerial and disability journeys together in a thoughtful and personal autobiographical dance.

I hope very much that audiences do not take away a notion that I want to be free of my crutches, or that I feel that I am suffering or burdened, but that I have thought about what I present to them and expect them to do the same. I hope that they see the strength and virtuosity that my use of crutches and my specific physicality has given me and the possibilities it offers. (Cunningham “RE: Disability”)

Critics Lyn Gardner and Donald Hutera were certainly captivated by Cunningham’s performances. Gardner commended her ability to transform ‘something utilitarian [her crutches] into a thing of beauty’, praising the work as ‘a quietly effective piece that makes you look at difference differently’ (“Review” 34). Hutera concluded that the ‘result is an unfamiliar yet intriguing aesthetic’ (12/13). Interestingly, both critics compared Cunningham’s work to *Raw* by Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Company that presented at the same festival. Echoing Leyser’s comments above, each applauded Fidget’s aerial technique and skill, with Hutera accepting there were ‘edgy, diverting moments’ (ibid), but each was left unimpressed overall. Gardner wrote that despite ‘swooping through the air like exotic birds, [the performers] seem to be having a better time than us’ (“Review” 34). The critics seem to suggest that regardless of technical proficiency, it is the engagement with the individual, as Leyser had implored, that made Cunningham’s work resonate with them.

I don’t know if non/disabled audiences engage in a dramatically different way with my work. I believe disabled audiences may feel a degree of satisfaction that I use my mobility equipment in imaginative ways – I have certainly had that feedback from some disabled audience members. That using the equipment in this way and seeing a

⁷⁰ For details visit: <http://www.stumbledancecircus.com/company/mish-weaver-cv/> and <http://www.emilyleap.itv2.de/> respectively.

real ownership of the equipment is satisfying to disabled audiences and makes them reflect on their own unique knowledge, strength and abilities. I believe the fact that it is a solo piece – by a disabled creator and performer affects disabled audiences' view of the work too. (Cunningham "RE: Disability")

Cunningham suggests here that disabled audiences might respond differently to non-disabled audiences. I have shown how knowledge and indeed experience of disability and impairment might offer audiences different ways of reading such work, including the aerial, though it also resonated with her two critics. Introducing aerial to audiences more familiar with disability arts than aerial arts (that Cunningham suggests of her audiences) even in a modest way, might enable more people to begin seeing what is possible for diverse aerialists and the art form.

As some audience members of *Hang-ups!* stated, they did not necessarily know what was possible for non-disabled aerialists, and others were less interested in the form *because* it was predominantly created by supremely able-bodied individuals (Survey Monkey). POC participant Lauren Barrand also admitted, 'I never thought I could go on a trapeze. You never think that you can. Because I've never seen a disabled person on a trapeze before' (qtd. in *All Eyes on Us*). If disabled people are unable to witness 'disabled aerialists' who demonstrate the forms potential accessibility, and training facilities can only facilitate a 'smaller range' of disclosed impairments (CDD Review 51), then these corporeal arts will struggle to explore the 'infinite' possibilities that both Leyser and Mortley believe it to possess.



17. Stephen Bunce & Paul Burns rehearsing *The Limbless Knight*. Author's Collection.

The aerial equipment has been shown to vary incrementally over time but the movement vocabulary has evolved in extraordinary ways. The aerialist has shifted from representing the superhuman in the circus, to being much more commonplace in today's society, and aerialists with diverse physicalities have been shown to have existed even during the art form's reckless era. The 'disabled aerialist' has been a fundamental part of aerial as metaphor and reality, in fiction and in life, with significant contributions being made to the canon by the likes of Stuart Dare. In the twenty-first century disabled people are returning to the air in increasingly diverse ways bringing new movements and stories in spite of the challenges its conventions have produced. Such artists are arguably reclaiming their place in aerial's 'living history'.

I'd rather be called Penny the circus artist and leave out my disability, because when you see me it's obvious. But I do have a skill, I am an artist. This is what I can do. (Clapcott on BBC "Young")

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Appendix 1

Movements from Matilda Leyser's *Lifeline* sequence, matched to other sources

<i>Lifeline</i>	Challande	Davis	Leach	Airhedz
• Foetal Loop	✓			
• Sitting Loop	✓	✓		✓
• Figure 8 Foot-lock	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Figure 8 Foot-lock: star	✓			✓
• Figure 8 Foot-lock: washing line	✓		✓	✓
• Toe Climb	✓	✓		✓
• Pole Climb (or Upright Monkey Climb)				
• Flag	✓	✓		✓
• Front Balance	✓	✓		✓
• Hip Lock	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Hip Lock Sitting	✓			✓
• Hip Lock Salto		✓		✓
• Plank (Supported Back Balance or Coffin)	✓			✓
• Hocks Climb (or Straddle Climb)	✓	✓		✓
• Tourniquet or 'Kevin'				✓
• Square (Standing Variation on Foetal Loop)				
• Catchers	✓	✓		✓
• Candlestick (or Perroquet)	✓			✓
• Willy Drop (Planche Oiseau to Chute Roulade)	✓			✓
• Sitting on one hand	✓			✓
• Twisted Toe Climb (Variation on Toe Climb)				
• Topless Square (variation on Centurion and/or Foetal Loop)	✓			✓
• Loop Roll Down (or Hands-free Cartwheel)	✓	✓		✓
• Russian Climb	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Standard Climb	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Strap's Hand hold			✓	✓

Movements associated with different pieces of equipment

Open Cocoon Actions:	Cloudswing	Strops	Trapeze	Verticals
Back Balance	√	√	√	√
Back Balance Rolls				
Front Balance	√	√	√	√
Front Balance Rolls	√	√	√	
Dolphin (on side not same as Dolphin in trapeze)				
Catchers	√	√	√	√
Toe-supported Back Plange		√		
Bat wings				
Bat legs				
Candlestick (From Bat Legs)				
Nappy Sit				
Plank/Coffin	√	√	√	√
Splits		√	√	√

Closed Cocoon Actions:	Cloudswing	Strops	Trapeze	Verticals
Front mount with one leg	√	√	√	
Front mount with two legs	√	√	√	
Pike to hocks	√	√	√	
Hocks hang	√	√	√	√
One hock hang	√	√	√	
Double ankle hang	√	√	√	√
Ankle hang	√	√	√	√
Crucifix hang	√	√	√	√
High Crucifix	√	√	√	√
Front balance	√	√	√	√
Wrapped front balance	√	√	√	√
Back balance	√	√	√	√
Back arch (holding legs behind)	√	√	√	
Straddle	√	√	√	√
Teardrop	√	√	√	√
Hammock	√	√	√	√
Cradle	√	√	√	
Star	√	√	√	√
And Tuck	√	√	√	√
Hip Hang	√	√	√	√
Salto to Crucifix	√	√		√
Neck Hang	√	√	√	√
Figurehead		√	√	√
Hocks on upright fabric – slide down	√	√	√	√
Right-angled sitting	√	√	√	√
Backward roll single hock	√	√	√	
Backward roll double hocks	√	√	√	
Forward roll to hocks	√	√	√	
Front balance to back balance to front balance	√	√		√
Mermaid	√	√	√	√
High Angel		√	√	

Movements from Anton Tchelnokov's aerial act in *Varekai* matched to other apparatus

Anton Tchelnokov's Net Act	Cocoon	Verticals	Other
Forward rolls – open fabric	√		
Backward rolls – open fabric	√		
Dolphin (cocoon rather than trapeze)	√		
Spinning – lowered on winch	√	√	√
Splits	√	√	√
Nappy sit	√		
Handstand - using net as a hand-balancing prop			√
Handstand back arch			√
Upside down descent position (as if on a rope or silks)		√	
Crucifix with fabric open under arms; and in closed formation	√	√	√
Neck hang	√	√	√
Front balance to back balance	√	√	√
Catchers – wrapping three times to do Crucifix drop x3	√		√
Ankle hang	√	√	√
Cloudswing throw-out	√	√	√

Appendix 2



An Expressive Feat Productions Event

Aerialist: Tina Carter

Dancer: Chris Pavia

Choreographer: Vicki Balaam

Video & Sound: Deveril

Artistic Director/Producer: Tina Carter

Sponsored by

South East Arts

Thanet District Council

Island Scaffolding Sheerness

One Blind Eye: description and recollections

Two detective stilt-walkers stand outside the Old Lloyds Bank in Margate on a sunny day in October 2000 to guide the invited guests into the building. They observe the visitors from an unnatural height; their observations enhanced by the use of large magnifying glasses. The video shows a woman walking passed one of the extra-tall men. She doesn't look up. She doesn't acknowledge him. She just crosses the road moving out of his path and goes on her way.

Once inside the audience stand where the former bank customers would have stood. They are separated from the performing space by the large panelling and glass used to safeguard the bank's staff and money. Chris Pavia enters, wearing a mauve shirt and black trousers. His head is covered with a black woollen cap that conceals a spy-camera. As the audience talk amongst themselves, he approaches the glass but does not acknowledge the people that see him. He closes the counter windows, shutting them out; enclosing himself inside. He looks around the old office space and begins to turn on the lights and the television sets of different shapes and sizes that are placed on the floor at the back of the room. He moves with a pedestrian but purposeful gait. The audience continue to mutter indistinguishably amongst themselves until the screens start to flicker with images. The last button Chris presses sets the soundtrack playing. He moves towards a high backed swivel chair, and sits, facing away from the audience and a quiet descends – an anticipatory suspension of conversation.

Ominous, Jaws-esque "Dahr-dumm! Dahr-dumm!" tones draw me out of the back office to walk through the audience. I wear a costume that complements Chris's with black trousers and a black hat that hides my camera. I also wear a mauve top, but my arms are exposed to show off the muscles of which I am as proud as any aerialist, but more functionally to expose the transmitter that's strapped to my arm sending messages from the camera to the hidden receiver in the back room where Deveril manipulates the images of both cameras that finally appear on the television sets. I look through the windows at the old office, that has been prepared as the performing space, before taking a long walk through the observers, smiling at friends and acquaintances to find my way to the far end of the room where a window remains open. I climb through and leap towards the scaffolding that dominates the playing area. Dusty, paint stained and weathered the structure comprises two pyramidal towers supporting a ladder beam from which various lifting slings are suspended.

The piece has started, and I spend the first few moments clearly looking out at the audience, this time in the performing space. I want them to feel uncomfortable by my gaze at first, then cross my arms, stand coquettishly with one leg slightly bent and my arms folded in front of me and smile – acknowledging the awkwardness of the staring contest. The video,

that is guiding these memories, clearly picks up slight giggles from the audience; there's a hint of nervousness in those sounds. I turn, standing with my back to the onlookers and see Chris still seated on the chair. He's not looking in my direction. I turn my gaze to the aerial prop: a pair of black and white velvet covered lifting-slugs suspended from the scaffolding. I can see that the camera set up is slightly out of kilter with my own gaze; but there's nothing I can do about that now. I move slowly and deliberately to the slugs raising my arms up signalling that I will take hold of them and begin some aerial action. Instead I run back to the audience, jump onto the long worker's counter and sit directly in front of someone trying deliberately but playfully to block their view. I return to the slugs and slowly retreat into myself and rise up into the air, suspending first from my stomach and then standing to begin a simple piece of aerial action: twisting and turning; stretching and contracting.

The soundtrack picks up in pace and becomes more aggressive in tone. Chris comes up from his chair and approaches as I suspend from my neck, and he turns with me, his hand placed on the small of my back. I remember working on this section even though it's over ten years ago. A simple action in many ways, but my turning made it awkward for Chris to time his approach and there was also an element of shyness and nervousness for both of us being so physically close to one another. Spinning from the neck is an advanced aerial action. It was meant to be visually engaging, to be both curious and awkward even terrible for some people to watch. The movement necessitated I had my head back and looking up at the ceiling dictated that I could not look at Chris when he approached me, thus enabling him to embody a sense of fascination that could be acted upon through touch without reprisal.

The moment I descend from the slugs, I deliberately stare and respond aggressively towards him, and we begin to move around the space using the various slugs, scaffolding and each other. The actions are not complicated but we find places to perch, to swing and to be close together as well as seeking places and times to be far apart. The actions provide constant explorations of where and how we can observe one another whilst also being fully aware of the audience's sometimes penetrating gaze. I am predominantly in the air; Chris takes command of the floor and even retreats to a corner on the banker's counter to hide and observe at the same time. There is also a moment when he too ascends to the slugs, retracing my earlier aerial steps. He twists and turns, but gets his feet caught.

I remember having a minor panic as I watched him from my suspended position, knowing that there was very little I could do to help him, other than to stop the show and help him down. In rehearsals he had attempted to copy my movements without any assistance and had become badly trapped in the slugs. He had struggled, stressed and fretted obviously scared and unable to get down. Since then we had practiced the movements together and he demonstrated to my surprise just how capable he was, not only of holding his own body

weight but also of remembering the actions as he would a dance. Seeing him become twisted and trapped in the performance was disappointing and unnerving as I feared he would panic and struggle again. In fact he was calm, patient and removed himself carefully before carrying on as if there had been no choreographic hiccup at all.

The final image shows me suspended directly above Chris who lies on the floor below me. We repeat simple hand choreography that Chris introduced earlier in the piece and our cameras are meant to focus on one another; the connected television screens supposedly filling with those images as we see one another through the others' eyes. In fact the cameras are poorly aligned so the televisions display pictures we ourselves do not share. Perhaps, in retrospect this is just as it should have been. We were interested in investigating how we look and what it is we see when observing aerial and disability in the same space. The camera picked up a warped perspective, somewhat out of kilter with our expectations, a portentous accident in light of this current research.