

Artistic Review of Human Skills as an Expression of Performing Arts in Traditional and Modern Circus



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Abstract: *The present research aims to explore the concept of circus within the context of theatrical entertainment from its origin to evolution in Pakistan and West. The cardinal focus of this article is to observe and evaluate the contribution of Lucky Irani Circus being the most famous big top in Pakistan in the field of performing arts. Secondly, it also takes into account how Lucky Irani Circus in Pakistan is different from West in terms of various continuous and modified performances and human skills both in traditional and modern perspectives. A variety of the most significant and celebrated acts as human skills performed around the world and investigated in this research include riding a unicycle, human pyramid, iron jaw act, flying trapeze performance, rola bola act, tight wire walking, knife throwing, and majestic aerial dance. The article concludes Lucky Irani Circus is the best demonstration of performing arts through human skills both in traditional as well as modern types of circus. In the traditional forms of entertainment, Lucky Irani Circus is one of the few ones.*

Keywords: Circus Acts, Performing Arts, Human Skills, Lucky Irani Circus, Traditional And Modern Circus, Entertainment

Introduction

The word *circus* is very fascinating and enticing to the people of all the classes of society. The fundamental reasons behind this enthrallment are the performing arts and implausible human skills that help to mesmerize and captivate the audience. Jando (2020) in his article *Short History of the Circus* states that the roots of the word *circus* lie in 'circle' and 'circumference', which means curbed disc-shaped area (Jando, 2020, p. 2). It is the specific milieu where different performers demonstrate different acts in front of specific audience. Rings hold a great deal of significance in circus when they are circumscribed traditionally within the performance areas (Jando, 2020). Performers get involved in the demonstration of various performing acts in specific buildings or tents

surrounded by seats for the spectators.

The list of acts that performers perform in Lucky Irani Circus comprises human pyramid, unicycle, iron jaw act, flying trapeze performance, knife throwing, and majestic aerial dance. Moreover, these acts vary according to the local audience and ticket fee. The most significant demonstration in circus is the combination of human skills and the captive animals (Trussler and Barker, 2005). This joined performance is jaw breaking for the spectators and equally amusing for both the children and aged people. This is the reason due to which the use of captive animals is very common in Pakistan as well as European countries. In Pakistan, it is not prohibited to use animals in performing arts. As Ilyas in her thought-provoking article *Circus Appeal Marred by*

Captive Animal Performances claims that “Unfortunately, there’s no law to prohibit public exhibition of wild species in the country” (Ilyas, 2015, p. 1). Here, at this point, it is important to mention that some countries do not allow the use of animals for circus purposes. They have strict laws regarding animals that prohibit the use of animals. Different types of organization are also very much vigilant in terms of taking care of animal rights in these specific countries of the world.

According to Ilyas (2015), the list of various animals used for performing arts include fierce animals such as chimpanzee, monkeys, snakes, stallion, panda, tiger, lion, cats, dogs, elephants etc (Ilyas, 2015, p. 2). The human skills help the performers to make the animals act according to their desired intentions. Most of the times these kinds of performing acts go right, however, the opposite can also happen but very rare cases are witnessed in this regard. The combination of practice and human skills make these acts successful and receive applause from the spectators. However, the loss of both the human beings and animals is very much possible in performing acts. The lives of both of them are at stake. Numerous documented proof has shown the casualties inside as well as outside the rings.

Contextualizing Historical Perspective of Circus

Historical perspective of circus is necessary to comprehend in order to understand the difference between its present and traditional performing arts based upon human skills. History of circuses goes back to the ancient Rome and Greece. Culhane (1990) in his thought-provoking book *American Circus: An Illustrated History* articulates that circus in ancient Greece was known as "Hippodrome" and it was primarily used for horse riding events and chariot races (Culhane, 1990). The Hippodrome of Olympia was one of the most prominent hippodromes in ancient Greece. However, The Greeks also had acrobatics, juggling and many other forms of entertainment. On the other hand, In Rome circus was used as venues for animal races, combats and events of the Empire. Circus Maximus is said to be the earliest circuses that could hold up to 250,000

spectators.

In the late 1750s, Thomas Johnston started offering displays of horsemanship that were typically staged in and around London. He performed different feats such as riding multiple horses at the same time and standing on his head on a horse. Jacob Bates was another rider who, during the 1760s, performed a similar kind of stunts in the various parts of Europe. Both, Johnston and Bates, made equestrian events famous but these acts cannot be counted as the proper examples of circus.

Speaight (1980) believes that it was Philip Astley who trained horses as a cavalryman and in 1768 he opened a riding school in London where he gave lessons in the morning and presented equestrian displays in the afternoon (Speaight, 1980). In a very short period of time, he included his wife Patty who was a skilled rider herself. He also hired a clown for the comic relief of the audience between the equestrian acts. His move of adding clown to his team turned out to be successful as clown was an established part of British theatrical culture. He developed his first ring of about 62 feet (19 metres) in diameter, and he eventually adopted the more-accepted 42-foot (13-metre) standard that is still used in modern circuses. He eventually built a roof over his ring and added a stage for dramatic performances (Culhane, 1990). He established such model of circus that it incorporated elements of traditional popular entertainment into a new and commercial format. Due to the efforts and influence of Astley, he is now rightfully recognized as the founder of the modern circus (Arrighi, 2021).

Andrew Ducrow is the next big name after Astley who was equestrian performer. His role is quite significant in the development of circus. Circuses used to offer performances in specially constructed places in London. Wild animals and skillfully crafted props were introduced. Joseph Grimaldi was the first famous clown in the field of circus. Then, John Bill Ricketts established first modern circus in America. On 3 April 1793, He gave first complete circus performance there. Later, the tradition of travelling circus started there and it was a successful venture. But post World War II scenario changed the whole

entertainment industry. Not only the animal rights groups started criticizing the circus industry but new forms of entertainment such as television also emerged. The popularity of circus industry dropped so low that many circuses were closed in that era.

Though India had a history of street acts that goes back to ancient times but the structure of performing arts formed by Philip Astley was introduced in 1880s. Vishnupant Chatre formed first circus company in India called "Great Indian Circus". It paved path for many other circus companies to come into the business. These companies include Malabar Grand Circus, Great Royal Circus, Grand Bombay Circus and Great Rayman Circus. During pre-independence era, the circus remained a prominent form of entertainment. The circus industry also had to face a number of hurdles, such as competition from other entertainment industries and criticism from animal welfare associations over how circus animals were treated.

Literature Review

This section of the research takes into account the relevant data on performing arts and human skills within the domain of circus in Pakistan as well as in West. According to Sugarman (2009), Philip Astley (1742-1814), a six-foot-tall ex-cavalryman, is often regarded as the "Father of the Modern Circus." In 1768, he and his wife Patty founded Astley's Riding School in London, where Philip taught in the mornings and performed equestrian stunts in the afternoons (Sugarman, 2009, p. 62). Philip and Patty were both accomplished cyclists. Philip's most renowned act, and largely regarded as the first circus clown act, was 'The Tailor of Brentford', in which he acted out a hilarious excursion on horseback. As per Ilyas' (2015) analysis, Patty's popular trick had her speedily circling the arena on horseback as swarms of bees covered her hands and arms as if she were wearing a muff (Ilyas, 2015).

Canvas tenting is also another important concept in the field of circus. It was for outdoor shows that were initiated by America in the 1840s. Davis (2003) in his famous book *The Circus*

Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top states that when Hengler was establishing his circus in Liverpool, Howe's and Cushing's United States Circus advertised that "Tents now take precedence over Marble Halls" (Davis, 2003, p. 28). Circuses in America and the United Kingdom featured many of the aspects that we identify with them today by the 1850s. Before the Civil War (1861-1865), established American circuses included Dan Rice's Circus, Van Amburgh's Circus, Spalding & Rogers Circus, and Howe's and Cushing's American Circus. European and American circuses began to diverge in aesthetic and structure around the middle of the nineteenth century (Davis, 2003).

Gartner (2023) in his article entitled as *Up Side Down Circus and Space* mentions that circus space can be characterized by a concrete physical space, i.e. a stationary facility constructed of solid material, which will be studied extensively in this work (Gartner, 2023, p. 3). Circus space, on the other hand, can be of a transitional shape, a prefabricated building known as a circus tent. The third sort of circus setting is the outside, least specified type, and these acts are now commonly referred to as street performances (despite the fact that the majority of them are truly circus performances). This space shape can exist as urban tissue, such as squares or roadways (Divac et al., 2022, p. 2).

Arrighi's (2021) book *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* thoroughly takes into account the idea of modern circus. According to him, the contemporary circus emerged and evolved at a time when Western industrialising civilizations were undergoing socioeconomic modernization (Arrighi, 2021, p. 5). The contemporary circus can be traced back to Philip Astley's popular trick horse-riding displays at Astley's Riding School in London in 1768. Astley mixed his innovative equestrian exhibitions with a diverse range of performances including singing, dance, acrobatics, and juggling. Other companies quickly copied this new type of entertainment, which came to be known as circus. It quickly spread to France, Russia, North America, and, eventually, the British colony colonies (Gartner, 2023).

Khan (2017) in her promising article *The Death of One of the Oldest Shows on Earth* claims that the circus as we know it today dates back to 1768, when trick rider Philip Astley discovered that by galloping his horse in a circle, he could balance on its back due to centrifugal and centripetal forces (Khan, 2017, p. 2). He erected a ring and hired a clown, and so the modern circus was founded. Performing arts, which need the presence of a large number of people, where direct contact with the spectator, emotional unification, and the exchange of energy bursts that occurs between the artist and the public are extremely essential. Although these shows are popular with people of all ages, they are particularly popular with youngsters. However, animal training has recently emerged as one of the most important roadblocks, as it is coupled with a number of ethical and moral issues.

Bronner (2015) in his *Encyclopedia of American Folklife* depicts that in our present world the traditional circus considered "classical," with a variety of performances that must be included in a "line-up" deemed "essential" by its supporters: horseback acts, clown appearances, wild animal dressage, juggling, aerial acrobatics, and so on (Bronner, 2015, p. 8). It is understood that some of its followers are conservative: if a show does not follow a strict set of narrative and aesthetic (and sometimes even moral) norms, it is not circus.

Janet's (2017) article *America's Big Circus Spectacular* has a Long and Cherished History investigates the phenomenon of synthesis and mutual influence of cinematography and the circus (Janet, 2017, p. 2). He defines and compares fundamental differences in the means and methods of creating an artistic image, focusing research attention on the influence of cinematic images on the systematic renewal of the circus theme, as well as the special cross-impression that both make on the viewer spectacular types of art (Janet, 2017).

Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research designs to explore the social, cultural and economic dynamics of modern and traditional Lucky Irani circus in Pakistan. The

research employed the ethnographic methods to obtain a deeper and comprehensive understanding of performers, audience in circus and other key stakeholders in the district. The data were collected through visits the Lucky Irani circus in Chak Jhumra near Faisalabad city and interviews which were conducted in Urdu by researcher, recorded videos and photographs with of performers during act. Visits to circus were made observing their daily lives, skills, exercise, practice, living style, and interactions with the audience. Focus group discussions were made followed by researches from books, articles and published content on authorized sites written by people. The data were analyzed by using a thematic analysis approach. All the photographs of circus in this article pasted in discussion are captured by authors to interpret and analyze the data.

Interpretation/ Analysis

History of Circus in Pakistan

The brief history of circus in Pakistan is crucial in terms of understating its present state or performing arts in the form of different acts. Pakistan emerged as an independent state on 14th of August 1947 when it had very limited sources as well as resources in every field of life. Entertainment industry of that time was quite limited to rural areas. Industry was trying to make its mark in the early 50s and even 60s. Khushwant Singh (2001) in his book *Notes on the Great Indian Circus* reveals that the pioneer of circus industry in Pakistan is Mian Farzand Ali who collaborated with Iranian circus artists to establish Lucky Irani Circus (Singh, 2001). This particular company touched the heights of fame due to its quality of acts. Their travelling shows have increased their number of viewers even in the small towns and villages around the country.

According to Davis (2021), the performers of Lucky Irani Circus not only the traditional acts of circus industry but also infused the local forms of entertainment such as one-man shows, comedy and dance performances of local artists (Davis, 2021). Their contribution towards providing a low cost yet highly artistic entertainment is still unmatched in Pakistan.

Lucky Irani Circus received immense fan following not only in Pakistan but also in overseas countries (Arrighi, 2021). One of the most important factors behind their success is the diversity of their audience. People from all social classes ranging from daily wagers to elite class are the spectators of their acts (Singh, 2001).

Most appreciated and famous acts of Lucky Irani Circus are following:

1. Flying Trapeze

Jules Léotard, a Frenchman, created this kind of performance in 1859 in which a specific kind of Trapeze is used and a performer jumps from a platform while holding the trapeze, causing the trapeze to swing due to gravity. In Lucky Irani Circus, audiences have enjoyed it since its introduction. They have hired local as well as international artists to perform such skits. The most amazing factor about this act is its realistic display of craft by the performers and this is what Lucky Irani Circus is famous for in Pakistan.



Figure:1 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

2. Cycle Circus

Cycle Circus is one of the most demanded acts at Lucky Irani. Audience from all age groups have appreciated and enjoyed it since decades. Different kinds of cycles are used for the performance. Stunt cycles and bucking bikes are commonly used around the globe. Unicycle performance is the most appreciated act in this type of circus. Some bikes are extremely small that paddling them is quite similar to walking. Some bikes are designed in a way that they could be pedaled either forward or backwards.

3. CYR Wheel

In contemporary circus, CYR Wheel act has become so popular among the audiences in which the performer stands inside the wheel and performs a variety of acrobatic and gymnastic movements as the wheel rolls and rotates along the ground. Lucky Irani Circus has gained massive viewership across Pakistan due to the innovative acts in this particular kind of apparatus called CYR Wheel. As it requires a high level of skills, Lucky Irani Circus has hired internationally trained and experienced trainers and performers. Some of the common acts performed with the CYR Wheel include the cartwheel, the forward roll, the back roll, and the handstand.

4. Lion Show

Traditionally, Lion Show has been an integral part of circus performances all around the world. These performances typically involved lion jumping through rings, balancing on pedestals, and doing various other stunts. In the early days, Lucky Irani used to had Lion Show and it was a massive hit among the circus goers. But due to security concerns of performers and audiences have made the circus owners to stop performing such acts. Animal rights associations have been so vocal in this regard to stop circuses from using animals for any kind of entertainment skits.

5. Aerial Dancing

Aerial Dancing is a kind of circus act in which the performer executes acrobatic movements and dance choreography while being suspended in the air using various equipment. This performance requires flexibility, strength, coordination and control. It offers both visual and physical drama for the audiences. Lucky Irani Circus has performers who are physically strong enough to go through such intense performances.



Figure: 2 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus

6. Human Pyramid

Human Pyramid is a common performance to see in circuses. A group of performers standing on each other’s shoulders create a pyramid shape. This performance requires a team work to maintain balance and create stability. Since the early days of its establishment, Lucky Irani Circus has considered skillful local and international performers to perform such intense physical acts. To avoid any injury or inconvenience, all precautions are followed to execute the act perfectly. However, Human Pyramid is visually quite stunning and exciting act to see.



Figure: 3 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

7. Knife Throw

Knife Throw is a traditional act that is performed in Lucky Irani Circus also. It involves the performer throwing the knife at an object or human assistant. This particular act requires high skills and accuracy to perform. It is one the most intense and exciting acts in circuses. Audiences get involve into it as soon as it starts. Such acts can be thrilling to see for audiences of all ages but it requires precision from the performer.



Figure: 4 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

8. Iron Jaw Act

Iron Jaw Act is another traditional circus act in which a performer suspends himself high above the audience using his teeth. This performance is visually so painful yet exciting to watch that how a person can hold himself with his teeth while being hung from a height. It obviously requires a high skill set and excellent dental health. When it is performed in Lucky Irani Circus, it is quite impressive and captivating to watch highly skilled performer performing his art in front of large number of audience.



Figure: 5 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani

Circus

9. Tight Wire Walking

Tight Wire Walking is a kind of act which involves a performer walking, balancing and performing acrobatic movements on a thin flexible wire suspended high above the ground. Performers use long poles to maintain their balance at such height. To increase the difficulty level and intensity of the performance, performers at Lucky Irani Circus, use different types props such as chairs and hoops. No doubt it carries high level of risk but yet it is one of the most enjoyed act in the circuses all around the world.



Figure: 6 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

10. Museum Act

Museum act performed typically accompanied with music and other visuals to increase the drama and excitement of audience. It involves a performer mimicking famous works of art by wearing costume or body paint to resemble the artwork. High degree of artistry is required in this act. Lucky Irani Circus has been known for the artists having high levels of skill to execute this act. Dance or other acrobatic elements can also be incorporated into this performance.



Figure: 7 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

Circus”

11. Rola Bola Act

Rola Bola is a balancing act in which a performer balances himself on a board placed on a rolling object. Lucky Irani performers are quite accurate at balancing constantly on moving surface while performing acrobatics movements. Rola Bola is visually so thrilling that it has been consistently so popular among circus goers. A great deal of practice to achieve certain level accuracy is required. The performers have to go through regular drills to maintain their art.

12. Ladder Act

Ladder act is another traditional balancing act which involves a performer balancing and performing acrobatic movements on a freestanding ladder. The movements involve handstands, flips, and spins. Lucky Irani Circus got so many skilled artists to perform this particular act. A high degree of balance, strength and coordination is required to execute this act. Some of the artists, to increase the intensity and interest of the audience, also use different props such as hoops or ropes.



Figure: 8 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

13. Hula Hoop

Hula Hoop is an interesting act in which a performer spins one or more hoops around

various parts of the body such as legs, arms and waists while performing acrobatic stunts and tricks. Lucky Irani Circus has famous local artists on board to perform these visually pleasing acts. This particular act requires immense focus and balance to maintain the spin of the hoops. It provides a great display of coordination to the audiences of all ages.

14. Silk Contortion

Silk Contortion is an act that requires high degree of flexibility, balance, and strength as the performer has to hold his body in numerous contorted positions while being suspended in the air. This act is such a graceful and visually stunning part of circus performances that has been accepted by the audiences of all ages. Lucky Irani Circus introduced it and it gave boost to their popularity among masses all around the country. Performers also use different apparatus such as ropes or hoops to increase the level of difficulty of act and excitement of audience. Though it is a unique and entertaining act but it requires a disciplined training to perform it. This breathtaking act is highly risky and requires precision to perform.



Figure: 9 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

15. Limbo Dance

Limbo Dance is a traditional act that involves a performers dancing under a horizontal bar that is gradually lowered and requires the artist to bend backwards to avoid touching the bar. To avoid any contact with the bar, balance, coordination and flexibility is required to control the movement of the performer’s body. Lucky Irani Circus makes its artists to practice the necessary techniques and rhythm. Artists can also

incorporate other circus props such as fire or LED lights to add more excitement and visual appeal. Moreover, the performers also perform this act in combination with other acrobatic acts such as hand balancing or juggling.



Figure: 10 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

16. Traditional and Modern Circus

The exploration of the difference between traditional and modern circus is important discuss as it helps to understand the current performing arts and their importance in the past as well as contemporary era. According to Wensjoe (2019), starting from ancient Rome and Greece, Circus has gone through a constant wave of evolution . It has kept changing wherever it went in all ages (Davis, 2021). However, the difference between traditional and modern circus is quite apparent when it is analyzed in terms of performing arts and human skills (Wensjoe, 2019). Some of the major differences between traditional and modern circus are given below:

17. Emphasis on Presentation

Both modern and traditional circuses involve acrobats, clowns and performers but their presentation can be very different. Traditional circuses had larger than life visuals such as animal parades, dangerous stunts and aerial performances. Modern circuses, on the other hand, includes contemporary performance styles and multimedia elements such as electronic music and video projections.

18. Animal Acts

Traditional circuses used to have different animals such as lions, monkeys, horses, elephants and many others for the performing purposes, on the other hand, modern circuses do not include animals into their performances due to the concerns about animal welfare.



Figure: 11 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

19. Plotline

Traditional circuses used to have no storyline to follow. They used to perform unrelated acts in a go. They had no connection and audience was always confused about the happenings around them. While in modern circuses, now a proper plotline is firstly developed then the performers arrange their acts as according to the requirement of the narrative structure. It allows audience to absorb the whole scenario in a better way and make them understand the acts.

20. Diversity

Traditional circuses and performers were limited to narrow range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The acts they used to perform were also limited to specific ideas or themes. In short, traditional circuses did not had diversity. On the other hand, modern theatres are more welcoming to diversity. They invite performers from different backgrounds and explore more alien themes to perform in circus. Diversity and inclusivity create a huge impact upon the quality of content one creates.

21. Ambiance

Both traditional and modern circuses usually perform in large tents. In traditional setting, tents were arranged with elaborate decorations and

seating for audience. It was a central element. But in modern circuses, tents are used as according to the needs of the acts and performers. In other words, we can say, tents are the part of artistic props of circus.

22. Audience

Traditional circuses used to attract majority of families and children due to their colorful ambiance. They were more of an entertainment center for this specific kind of audience during that period of history. But with the passage of time, audience as well as circuses have evolved. In modern circuses, a wider range of audience is kept in mind and acts which are more sophisticated and diverse are produced to attract adults as well as children.

23. Technology

It is one the most significant difference between traditional and modern circuses. Traditional circuses did not have any technology. They simply relied on props, basic sound system and lightening. These circuses were more unsafe for the performers as they did not get any modern precautionary tools to wear or use. While modern circuses use all available technical resources of the day. They use best LED lights, high quality sound systems and props that are more advanced and long lasting.



Figure: 12 Farwah, 2023, “A view of lucky Irani Circus”

Conclusion

The current research concludes that circus industry has its roots in the ancient times of Rome and Greece when it was not only for amusing activities but also for social and state level gatherings and carried symbolic significance. Philip Astley is said to be the father

of modern circus. He not only used his skills to entertain people but he also understood the lucrative value of this particular business. He created the circus that was a collaborative place of different arts. He combined traditional and innovative ideas to build what we call modern theatre. Later, Andrew Ducrow did many innovations and gave boost to the circus industry. In America, it was John Bill Rickets who founded first modern circus. It kept evolving time to time. The industry suffered massive loss in post-World War II era when other forms of entertainment were introduced. People made a major shift from circuses to radio and television. Coming towards India, first modern theatre there was developed in 1880s. In Pakistan, Mian Farzand Ali is the pioneer of the circus called “Lucky Irani Circus”. It provided economical and quality entertainment to the masses of Pakistan. It reached out to the lesser explored regions of the country. Their most famous acts include Iron Jaw Act, Majestic Aerial Dance, riding a Unicycle, Flying Trapeze Performance etc. Circus has evolved over the time all around the world. There are many differences among traditional and modern circus such as use of animal acts, diversity of performers, audience, plotline, and the use of technology and ambiance. From all this discussion, it becomes evident that the exhibition of performing arts in the domain of circus is because of human skills that are quite different in their traditional and modern perspective.

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