

**Out of Order:
Cirkus Cirkör**
An Interview
with Tilde
Bjölfors

Tessa Overbeek



When I first read the sentence, ‘Cirkus Cirkör, contemporary circus from Sweden’, I was a little surprised by this combination of words. Although I would have no trouble naming novels or films from this country, I had never associated it with circus before. The exuberance, boldness and eccentricity of circus seemed incompatible with the Swedish national character, which is often thought of as restrained, down to earth and preoccupied with safety. However, half-way through their show ‘Inside Out’, the artists of Cirkus Cirkör had convinced me that Sweden and circus could be a fantastic and fruitful combination. Judging by the thundering applause they received, the other members of the audience felt the same way. This represented another battle won in the fight to prove that Swedish circus could be a success, a fight that was started fifteen years ago by Cirkus Cirkör’s founder and artistic director, Tilde Björfors.

‘When I first came into contact with contemporary circus, I thought: “If this is needed anywhere in the world, it is in stiff and cold and clean Sweden!”’ Björfors said in the conversation I had with her in Alby, a suburb south of Stockholm, where the circus’s offices and training hall have been situated since 2000. By the time she first had this thought, in the early 1990s, the afore-mentioned stereotypes about Sweden and the Swedish were rapidly becoming less and less true to reality, a development that will be discussed later.

Since she founded Cirkus Cirkör with a small group of like-minded spirits in 1995, Björfors has devoted large portions of time and energy to her mission, which is to ‘establish contemporary circus as an art form in Sweden, artistically and pedagogically, [to] develop and increase the possibilities of contemporary circus culture, [to] put Sweden on the world map of contemporary circus, and to inspire and be inspired by young people and street culture’.¹ Björfors, who was only in her mid twenties at the time, started a quest for support, which meant contacting all the institutions, officials and politicians who could possibly help her realize the young organization’s goals. In the end, nobody was willing to invest in contemporary circus.

Undeterred, the *Cirkörers* started their project themselves, using their own resources. This decision turned out to be well worth the risk as, in 1996, their show, ‘Ur kaos föds allt’ (Out of chaos everything is born), toured the country and performances sold out quickly. That same year, requests started coming in from companies who wanted the circus artists to perform on special occasions, and the summer training programme that Cirkus Cirkör had set up drew 40,000 visitors.² Apparently, Björfors’ intuition was right, and con-

temporary circus was indeed needed in Sweden. Cirkus Cirkör has been growing and expanding ever since. The fact that the company has engaged in different types of activities almost from the start makes the people behind it, and Tilde Björfors in particular, true ‘trespassers’. They have staked their claim not only in the artistic and educational domains, but also in the business world and the public sector. There is almost nothing the *Cirkörers* have *not* done with contemporary circus, since even scientific research has been added to their practices in the past decade.

In the artistic domain, Cirkus Cirkör has had great successes, both in Sweden and internationally, with shows like ‘99% Unknown’, ‘Inside Out’ and ‘Wear it Like a Crown’. In the educational domain, the company has organized numerous training programmes for almost anyone who wants to practice circus, from the very young to the very old (the book *Inside a Circus Heart* mentions a tightrope walking 99-year-old)³ and from professionals to amateurs. The circus training for people with disabilities also deserves to be mentioned. Notably, Björfors and her colleagues have also succeeded in offering opportunities to young people who aspire to be professional circus artists. After much lobbying and struggle, they have managed to realize a three-year contemporary circus programme at St. Botvid’s Upper Secondary School, and a tertiary programme at the University College of Dance in Stockholm (which, after some strife, is now called the University College of Dance and Circus). In 2005, Tilde Björfors became the first professor in contemporary circus at this institution and the first person to hold this position in Sweden.

In 2007, she received a research grant from the Swedish Research Council for her project ‘Contemporary Circus — Transcending boundaries in arts and society’. One of the questions she is trying to answer is what circus can teach us about dealing with risk and chaos. As the first part of this interview shows, this is a skill that both circus artists and directors have to master in order to be able to do what they do. The ‘embodied knowledge’ that Björfors and her artists have gained through experience is part of the material that is studied in her research project, as will become clear from the last part of this interview.

One of the reasons Björfors thought contemporary circus was needed in Sweden was because, in her opinion, dealing with risk and

1 Tilde Björfors and Kajsa Lind, *Inuti ett Cirkus Hjärta/Inside a Circus Heart* (Norsborg: Cirkus Cirkör, 2009), p. 105.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Idem*, p. 117.

chaos is not something the Swedish are particularly good at. When Sweden was still the prosperous, secure, clean and orderly welfare state that the stereotypes reflect, this was not as problematic as it has become in the past few decades. The nation has since been shaken by the murder of Prime Minister, Olof Palme, in 1986, economic crises, a rise in unemployment, a considerable increase in immigration and other external factors like the EU membership, which have brought about change and uncertainty.

As a result, the values and concepts with which the nation identified have been challenged. When Björfors was discovering contemporary circus in France in the early 1990s, the question as to what kind of nation Sweden was going to be was becoming increasingly urgent. After a long reign by the Social Democrats, the election was won by the centre-right party of the Moderates, empathy with refugees coming into the country had turned into concern and there was rising racism and increased activity by extreme right groups. As has been known to occur in countries where people feel threatened by external factors, many Swedes started to cling to the values that define the idealized version of their nation. These values are represented in common words like 'lagom', 'jantelagen' and 'trygghet', which any reader interested in Swedish culture almost inevitably comes across.⁴

The first two words are related to the Swedish word for law, which does not seem to be a coincidence. The word *lagom* has no exact equivalent in English, but it means something like 'enough', 'fitting' or 'appropriate'. It is connected to the idea that it is best to strive for moderation, which, in turn, is related to the egalitarian principles that were the basis of the Swedish state.⁵ As Björfors states in interview, it is also important to *be lagom*, or normal, for the Swedish. This is where the concept of *Jantelagen* comes in, which is about modesty, not putting yourself above others or standing out from the crowd. One can imagine that these values could help a society to run more smoothly, but they can also have a down side, which is illustrated by Don Belt in an article about Swedish society: '[...]Swedes fear that the lagom ethic, combined with an educational system that stresses uniformity, discourages the best and the brightest — the smartest kid in class, the entrepreneur, the risk-taker, the artist, the inventor — in short, the very kinds of people Sweden needs now, more than ever, to succeed'.⁶ This is a fear that Björfors addresses in everything she does, both in the way she expresses herself and in the way she leads her life, as a person who is obviously not afraid to stand out, occupying at least three of the roles that are mentioned in the quotation above.

Trygghet, which means something like 'safety' or 'security', is also an important Swedish value that Björfors tries to challenge. In the booklet that came with the show, 'Inside Out', she included several quotations from psychiatrist David Eberhard. In his book, *In the Land of Security Junkies*,⁷ he tries to show how Swedish society is cushioned by the state, which tries to control danger, while many people in the country act 'as if the slightest setback was lethal'. It is ideas like these that Björfors addresses in her research, but also in her shows, though often in a less concrete fashion.

Since meeting brain scientists from the Karolinska Institute during the Nobel banquet of 2002, at which Cirkus Cirkör was invited to perform, Björfors has been fascinated with the workings of the human brain and the way circus can be related to this. She and a few of Cirkus Cirkör's artists have collaborated with these scientists, and the subject also plays a major role in her own thinking, research and performances. One topic she is currently working on is the dynamic between the left and right cerebral hemispheres and the types of information processing that characterize each of them. In most people, the left hemisphere is concerned with processes like speech, language, reasoning and analysis, while the right hemisphere is associated with sensory inputs, auditory and visual awareness, spatio-temporal awareness, creative abilities and humour. While there is much interaction between the two hemispheres, they each have their own way of processing information from the outside world. The right side is supposedly more open to its environment, more oriented towards the general context, while the left side experiences the world around it in a more indirect, ordered, categorized, abstract and 'distant' fashion. One could also say that the left side is more orderly and logical, while the right is more chaotic, but also more creative.

4 **Whether it be Fishing in Utopia (London: Granta Publications, 2008), a memoir by the English journalist Andrew Brown, who spent many years in Sweden; Dennis Sven Nordin's A Swedish Dilemma: A Liberal European Nation's Struggle with Racism and Xenophobia, 1990–2000 (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005); Modern-Day Vikings: A Practical Guide to Interacting with the Swedes (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press Inc., 2001) by Christina Johansson Robinowitz and Lisa Werner Carr; The Seven Cultures of Capitalism (London: Judy Piatkus Ltd., 1993) by Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars about the Swedish economy; or the article, 'Sweden' by Don Belt in National Geographic, Vol. 184, No. 2, 1993, pp. 8–36.**

5 Christina Johansson Robinowitz and Lisa Werner Carr, *op cit.*, p. 71.

6 Belt, *op cit.*, p. 22.

7 Original title: I trygghetsnarkomanernas land: om Sverige och det nationella paniksyndromet (Stockholm: Prisma, 2006). More than the English title, the Swedish title reflects Eberhard's belief that Sweden is in a state of national panic.

In the leaflet that came with the show, 'Wear it Like a Crown', Björfors is quoted as saying: 'Our society, in everything from child rearing to professional life, is structured in the more logical order and systems of the left side of the brain. I see this as a social problem. It is vital that the right side of the brain is given more room.' In this interview, Björfors explains how Cirkus Cirkör has tried to contribute to creating this room, for instance in the projects it has done in communities.

When Cirkus Cirkör moved to the municipality of Botkyrka in 2000, its community work quickly expanded. In the suburb of Alby, with its multicultural shopping centre near the subway station, the changes that Swedish society has gone through are immediately visible. Botkyrka is one of the most international municipalities of Sweden, with residents originating from over one hundred different countries. Because many of these residents are young, the area provides Cirkus Cirkör with many opportunities to interact with the community.

Upon arriving there, the circus artists almost immediately started invading (in the most constructive way possible) local schools and meeting people at youth centres, schools, clubs and in the streets and squares, which also resulted in many collaborations with others who did community work. This approach was repeated all over Sweden, under the name 'Cirkör on tour'. In seven municipalities, training programmes and workshops were organized, not only involving youth, but also local politicians, civil servants and teachers. Afterwards, common goals for cooperation could often be set. In 2006, a few *Cirkörers* even used this approach in Durban, South Africa.⁸

That same year, the show 'Momo or the Battle for Time' was performed with a large number of amateurs from the municipalities of Botkyrka and Skärholmen, who contributed to different parts of the performance. The following year, a deeper collaboration was formed with the municipalities of Järfälla and Landskrona, in which circus artists were sent to interact artistically and pedagogically with people from the local area, taking inspiration from their surroundings. Their performances are created through an open process, address themes such as trust, loneliness and friendship, and are also included in general cultural and school activities in these municipalities.⁹ As we shall see, these co-operations often had a positive impact on the people taking part in them. Although Cirkus Cirkör's efforts have led to impressive results, this interview also shows that breaking boundaries is not always easy: trying to make structural and durable changes in

municipalities provided many challenges, for instance when it came to working with those making the policies on a local level. At the same time, the co-operations were often a learning experience for all those involved.

In a text she wrote as an introduction to the show 'Inside Out', Tilde Björfors states that her own circus training has mostly been of the mind. That must be true, because somehow she manages to leap between seemingly disparate subjects like circus, society, leadership, the human brain and politics, while at the same time juggling themes like order and chaos, fear and love, having control and letting go of it. But when she finally catches them, opens her hand and lets them unfold, it is revealed that she has been talking about the topic that fascinates her most all along: the relationship between risk and possibility.

⁸ Björfors and Lind, op cit, 113.

⁹ Ibid.

Tessa Overbeek

I saw your most recent show, 'Wear it Like a Crown', in May, quite soon after the premiere. Now that it has been performed over a longer period of time, can you tell whether or not it is a success?

Tilde Björfors

It is doing very well. Whether or not it can be called a success depends on how you look at it. The artists really love performing the show. I don't think I have ever been involved in a performance in which the artists felt so proud of it from the beginning and owned every detail. It is a feeling I have been longing for, because one of my goals when I create is that *we* create, that we are all growing through the process; that is more important than the result. I think this show is, in that sense, the best process I have had. This is not true all the time, but I think it is my job as a leader to look at my artists and students as if I were in love. People say that love is blind, but I think it is the other way around. When you are in love, you see someone's highest capacity and you may be blind to everything that is destroying that potential. None of us live to our full capacity; we are all destroying it in different ways. When seeing my artists' highest capacity, I am also challenging them to be more than what they are today. If you talk to the

artists of 'Wear it Like a Crown', they will say that they have been challenged to take quite a big step from who they used to be.

Audience-wise, we have also had really positive results, with sold out houses and standing ovations. We are booked one year ahead, but there was also a moment of risk. When we had our premiere at the Södra Teatern [Södra Theatre, a well-known cultural venue in Stockholm], where we are performing now, the pole artist broke her wrist. Finding someone to replace her was difficult, especially in this show, because it is built around who the artists are as people. It is like a composition of their different problems and what they wear in their crowns¹⁰ [their worries and fears]. When you work so deeply with the artists, and use so much of who they are in the performance, it is very hard to replace anyone. It may be stupid to do this, but it is how I want to work. It is very different from working in theatre, which is my background. There you can so easily replace a person, because they are acting in their role. Here, it is much more connected to who the artists are in real life, not only because they are not schooled actors, but also because choosing to work in circus is choosing a lifestyle.

T.O.

In an interview with you in Sideshow Circus Magazine, I read that something similar happened with one of the artists in your previous show, 'Inside Out'.

T.B.

Yes, that was on the actual premiere! In the final part, the artist who was playing the lead role was jumping on the teeter board [a type of see-saw, via which acrobats can launch each other high up into the air] and she landed on her neck. It was very dramatic; we were all crying while we waited for answers from the hospital but, in the end, it turned out not to be that bad. I have always thought that risk is an important part of life — that it is important to dare, to challenge your space. To be alive is to grow as much as possible, and when you grow, you take risks. I think it is strange that the word 'risk' has such negative connotations when so much good can come from it. However, after that premiere, I thought: 'shit, who am I? I am trying to present risk as a good thing, while I am actually playing with life and death!' I started to question my outlook on life.

When I first came into

contact with contemporary circus, I thought: 'here they show me how much we can do as human beings; they are constantly challenging the laws of gravity and the world.' For me, it was the physical image of what I thought was the meaning of life. That is why I started working with circus. It was like I had found my voice in the world, which said: 'Everything is possible, don't be afraid of being afraid', and so on. When this accident happened, I started to see the fragility of life; I started to doubt whether it was worth taking the risk. Of course, we have to take into consideration how fragile life is. To live is to balance life and death. If we don't dare to stretch [our limits], then we are not living. But we have to be aware that we are human beings and not superheroes or gods. I think that is what 'Wear it Like a Crown' is about for me. It is about dealing with fragility and doubt, with personal problems that you have. If you let them stay in your heart, you allow them to hold a grip over you. But if you put them up in your 'crown', then you are free in your heart and you can do anything. This question about the relationship between

¹⁰ This metaphor refers to the idea of not trying to ignore or suppress fear completely but allowing it to have its place and not being blocked by it. The title of 'Wear it Like a Crown' is the same as a song by the Swedish singer, Rebekka Karijord. Music from her album, *The Noble Art of Letting Go*, also accompanies the show.

risk and possibility has followed me for fifteen years now. I have been working on it, researching it, talking to brain scientists about it, and I still continue to deal with that question. For every performance and everything else I do, I have other questions as well, but when you break them down, you find this question about possibilities and risks.

T.O.

In the booklet that came with 'Inside Out', you have included this part by the psychiatrist David Eberhard, who says that the welfare state in Sweden tries to cushion society and to reduce risk. It does seem like a place where everything is quite orderly and clean and people are seen as somewhat contained. Maybe a country like this could use an outlet of some kind. Do you see that kind of role for the circus?

T.B.

Absolutely. When we started, we were really crazy. We thought we were doing circus for young people, but the age of the audience ranged from five to ninety-nine. It felt as though the Swedish audience had been longing for this kind of madness, where boundaries were broken, including the boundary between the audience and the stage. A circus performance is like direct communication, there is no 'fourth wall', and for me that is im-

portant. It is not only the physical way it challenges boundaries. If you look at traditional circus, it is a society outside of society, and as a contemporary circus, we still have that outsider perspective. We are always challenging the world around us; we are walking where we are not allowed to walk. When society says: 'This is how it is and this is how it is going to be', we are always questioning it, saying: 'But you can also walk here, or you can jump, you don't have to stay there.' Circus has a very anarchistic way of questioning things. You can think about an acrobat. If there is a big wall that cannot be climbed, he will immediately think: 'Can I jump over it? Or can I take three people and they jump onto something and then they propel me, or can I...?' When I visited other contemporary circuses, I started to see similarities in their ways of working. When I learnt more about circus history, I found out that, before what we call 'traditional' circus, with a tent, came about, there was a time of a wild, strange, anarchistic way of working. If there was no stage, they just found a new way to do what they wanted. This older type of circus is more similar to what we are doing than the 'traditional' circus is.

T.O.

So, would you say that your circus is about creating chaos in the order of society?

T.B.

For me, the chaos is so important. Without it, you cannot learn or understand something new. Everyone I have talked to, including brain scientists, says learning involves a moment that feels like chaos. Our first show was called 'Out of Chaos Everything is Born'. At the time, I was very intuitive, and I hadn't thought about the role of chaos that much, but I experienced clashes between artists with very different opinions, backgrounds and cultures. In an intuitive way, I felt our work was about making a platform where chaos was actually happening. And that is how I continue to create. I think most people in Sweden are trying to avoid chaos. You can see it in the schools; it is like we are going back to the 1950s, to blackboards and strict rules and punishments, which is very strange. Like David Eberhard said: We are in a new world. The world that we are in now is so much more unsafe. Children do not go to school to get an education for a job for life. No one can count on lifelong employment anymore; some people, of course, but not many. We have to find out how to feel *trygg*, safe, even when the world around us is constantly changing and nothing is certain. This requires learning how to work with your right brain at school and not having more rules. That is what

I am fighting for. I think I am quite political in that way.

In our society, people have to deal with risks all the time, and the best way to do this is to work with your right brain. The best example is in art, or fantasy, when you are imagining what can happen. When children are playing they are also getting an important education about the order of the right brain. The more we learn about that, the better we can deal with risk and chaos, because that is where we have the capacity. When we focus too much on teaching them to use the left brain, when they start to read and write so early, and when we teach them about the order of the system and right and wrong, children forget how to deal with chaos. Of course, it is important to also learn about those things, but we should not work only with that part of the brain. What David Eberhard was trying to say, is that when something happens that is not in the logical order, we get shocked and paralysed.

T.O.

Would you say that the circus is one of the places in which people learn to think with the right side of their brain?

T.B.

In circus, both sides need to work at a high level. The traditional circus, for instance in

Russia or China, was a lot about teaching artists how it had to be done; it was only about the discipline part, about learning things exactly as they had always been. But that is not the kind of circus that interests me. What interests me is what happens when people have knowledge of the traditional, but they also try to change small things, to carry out a constant research in gravity for example. But a circus artist always needs to have discipline. If you want to be a wire walker, you cannot want it one day and want something else the next day. You have to be on that wire every day for five years to reach a certain level, and you have to do a lot of other things as well, like stretching and working with safety, so a large part of it is about having control. But to be in balance is to always move in and out of balance, and you can never control whether you will stay on the wire. Of course, you can train harder and harder and become better and better, but you could always fall, even if you are the best wire walker in the world. You have to deal with that moment as well, and that is why I think circus artists have such specialized knowledge about life. In some circus disciplines, it really is about life and death. You can train and prepare and try to avoid every risk, but if you are on the teeter board, for instance, at some point you have to let go and

when you do, you have to deal with the consequences.

We are taught about control very early in life, and it takes adults a lot of time to learn what it is like not to have control, which is what life is actually about. We don't have control; with death, that is more the case than with anything else. We cannot control it, however hard we try. To live is to not have control. And I think it is wrong to put all our efforts into trying to have control without learning to deal with the fact that we do not. I think that is why so many people in Sweden are on anti-depressants, and I think we could avoid that. Look at society now: companies with strong leaders are crashing, and even the media are starting to lose control. At the same time, in the social media, groups create themselves. People are taking control in completely different ways, and leaders lose control if they try to prevent that. I try to be a strong leader here, but I do that by trying to find the tools to use what is coming from the students in the circus hall, from the artists, from the people in the office. When you have trust in a student, or a person working under you, they can do so much more than when you try to control them. I have seen so much evidence of that, but sometimes I still get into the position where I want to control everything. It

is hard not to, especially when people have failed around you. But it is so important, also in an artistic process. If I try to control it, I lose the possibility of getting something more out of it and it ends with where I am. It is interesting to make it go further. That is also taking the risk that it will be a big failure, because I won't know if I can handle the chaos that arises, but to dare to do that is my biggest goal as a leader. So the role of control is different now, and I want to push that a little, with the shows that we do, and also in our community and political work.

T.O.

I read about your community projects in which people from the circus go into schools, and how the circus artists put the teachers on a bed of nails. Could you explain that sentence?

T.B.

We don't want to make it uncomfortable for the teachers, it is done with love. The project is called *Cirkusliv* [circus life], and we have been doing it since 2000. When we go into a school, usually only one person there knows we are coming. In the morning, we move into the school yard with our circus wagons, put up our tents and let students help to find electricity and put up posters. During the day, the artists come into the lessons and put the teach-

ers somewhere, sometimes on a nail mat, and create chaos. At the end of the day, we have a show to which all the students and teachers come. We want to make chaos to show that not everything has to be scheduled and that the teacher can be in a different role. We are literally putting everything upside down. And what we also do is demonstrate something about being normal. I don't know what it is like in other countries, but in Sweden, we are all trying to be normal. It is important from very early on in life. None of us feel that way, but it is important to seem normal. These artists are so not normal, but they are really good at something, so the children are all impressed with these very extraordinary people. What it means to be normal is one of the questions we leave behind at the schools.

T.O.

Speaking of your community work, I read about the prizes Botkyrka has won since you moved here, like the 'Child and Youth Municipality of the Year award', the 'Highest Quality Municipality award' and the 'Cultural Municipality of the Year award', but also about the friction that arose in your cooperation with the municipality...

T.B.

When we came here, we worked very closely with polit-

icians; they were very open to our chaotic and creative energy. They said, 'We have stability and you have creativity and madness and we want to support that.' It was like an explosion, everything went so quickly. This suburb was known as one of the worst in Sweden, but after about two or three years, it started to get all these prizes and the media image of this community changed. The north of Botkyrka used to be the bad part compared to the south, the richer part. The people who live there did not want to call their area part of Botkyrka because they were ashamed of it; they wanted to say that they were from Tullinge [a smaller area within the municipality]. That has changed in the past few years. The people in the south of the municipality are now also proud to be part of it. It is a small thing, but it is about identity. All the municipalities have a line below their name, and before it used to be something like: 'Botkyrka, close to Stockholm'. Now it is 'Botkyrka, långt ifrån lagom', which means something like 'Botkyrka, far from normal'. The word *lagom* is typically Swedish; it means something like 'in between'. It is quite powerful. In Sweden, we all try to be 'in between' — we are not black, we are not white, we are not happy, we are not sad, but we are controlled. For the

most part, the municipality has been a dream to work with; it was almost like a love affair. But now, the politicians and other officials want to take back control in the traditional way, instead of using what they are offered and supporting that. Some of the key people we worked with from the start in Botkyrka are no longer here, and with them some of the trust and magical collaboration has disappeared. Now, the political climate is more traditional, with decisions being made at the top. They don't like the feeling of not having control; neither did the people we worked with before, but at least they were not afraid of new thoughts and ideas. The relationship between Cirkus Cirkör and the municipality had such a strong foundation that we could be critical, and so could they. The new politicians and officials have big ideas and plans, but the problem is that they are no longer involving us and other circus and film groups which are supposed to fill these ideas with content and meaning. By doing things without telling us, they think they can control what will happen. If they make the decisions in a small room, without involving the people working or living here, the process does not take as much time. Like with the *Hangaren*,¹¹ they want to make it a stage for circus and film and everything, but they did it

totally over our heads. If they were working with the type of leadership that I was proposing earlier, they would have started with a dialogue; they would see whether or not the people here needed that stage. If they had invited people to take part in a democratic decision-making process, they would probably have the circus and film communities enthusiastically working toward the project, but that kind of process is much slower. Perhaps, in three years, I will have to say that their faster process was a success...

T.O.

So, if you are critical and you want to do something against the people who do things over your head or over the heads of the people who live here, would you include the people who live here in your protest, so to speak?

T.B.

It depends on what we are doing. Some parts of our work need that, but we have been through a long process. In the beginning, our goal was to establish the art form in Sweden and for kids to have the possibility to train, so they could have that physical experience. Be-

cause there were hardly any fans of contemporary circus in Sweden, we had to start everything from scratch. And you could say that we worked fifty percent for the art form and fifty percent for Cirkus Cirkör. Now there are many more companies and an organization that we contributed to, together with other circus companies and schools, called Manegen [Centre for circus, variety and street performance — a trade organization that was founded in 2008 by eighty people who represent different aspects of the art form and industry in Sweden], people are booking performances, there is the university-level circus programme, and a lot of students who have been through our education programme are starting up circus schools all over the country. So it is leading its own life.

There was a slightly problematic phase, when people knew about Cirkus Cirkör as the first to introduce contemporary circus here, but they didn't know that [contemporary circus] is an art form with many different modes of expression. So we worked hard to help other contemporary circus groups grow. When that started to happen, we realized that we also had

¹¹ 'The hangar' is a large, multifunctional arena that is to be used for circus, film productions and other cultural events. It is intended to house thousands of spectators. In late August of 2010, it was being prepared for its inauguration during Subtopiafestivalen in early September 2010.

to define our unique artistic mode of expression within the contemporary circus community, because Cirkus Cirkör was now one among many groups. Then we decided that what we could do for the art form was to make really good performances and to go international and show the government that the art form has the possibility to fly. So we are now in a phase where we have been developing our art and also our pedagogy. You can go to circus schools almost everywhere, but we want to give something more than just the training. We have the goal of making everyone grow, so we no longer only bring circus to gym classes, because we want to give more space to the artistic and creative aspects of it and not only to the physical part. We also apply it to mathematics and other subjects and do more experimental work. We are not taking the perspective of the people in the community into account as much, because it feels like that is not what we need to be doing at this moment. We feel like we need to develop our tools and our artistic heart and who we are. That way, we go out into the world stronger, knowing more about what we are giving. We have been teaching and doing so much, but we have not been thinking about what was happening and why. Why did so many processes grow out of what

we did, through working with politicians and people in different municipalities? So much has been put in motion, but we wonder, 'What did we actually do?' So, of course, we are working with a lot of people around us, but we are not working with the kids from the municipality in our performances right now. Also because we think it is the municipality's job. It is written in their vision that they want to do that and they have funding for it, but they are not doing it. So that is one of the things about which we disagree.

T.O.

In the beginning of your book, Inside a Circus Heart, you thank the Municipality of Botkyrka, but also the Swedish Arts Council, the Stockholm County Council and the City of Stockholm, because they provide your financial basis. Don't you feel limited in how critical and autonomous you can be, since you are, in a way, dependent on these institutions?

T.B.

We are not so dependent. We have support, but it is quite a small amount from each one, compared to what we have in total. I feel that we have had phases during which we were totally working to please all the supporters, and that was a hard time. The first seven years were like being on a highway; we were totally

following our hearts and our vision. We had so much to do and to create, and we were unstoppable; if there was no way to go, we created one. It all happened very quickly, and we didn't really think about it. After a while, we got different kinds of support and moved here, but we didn't have enough money to make our own creations; we always had to work together with different institutions, like the Royal Dramatic Theatre.¹²

I kind of liked it, because it was also a way of getting out into the world, influencing it with circus. But somewhere we got lost and I felt like we were living to please all these others. We were given some money to tour all over Sweden, some money to do a lot of work here in the municipality, some money to do work in Stockholm and, at that moment, I wondered, 'why am I doing this?' It was quite hard. After a while, that started the process that led to 'Inside Out'. When we made that show, we used all of the money, even though we didn't know whether it would be a success or not, because we needed to have a performance without any collaborations. We wanted to create circus, not theatre circus or anything. So we said, 'OK, we will risk that they take back their funding.' We did that because we

needed to show what we wanted to do, and that was to create a circus performance, which has a different rhythm. We got funding from the state, but we had to create a performance every year, and perform in certain places in Sweden. But we knew that if we put everything into 'Inside Out', we would have to perform it for many years. We also wanted to go international. Luckily, nobody took back their funding. Now 'Inside Out' is touring the world and Sweden is proud, but we took a big risk.

T.O.

And now that you are also successful as a company, do you feel you can be more critical and autonomous?

T.B.

Yes, since then, we have done what we want. Why I sometimes say bad things about the politicians is because I think they are doing things the wrong way, although some of them think we are right. Introducing a new art form in Sweden wouldn't have been possible without some friction and conflicts with politicians and officials. For example, there is an education minister who wants to go back to the 1950s, taking away all the aesthetic learning processes in school, and I have

¹² The result was the very successful production *Romeo and Juliet* (2002).

been explicitly critical, writing an opinion piece that got a lot of support from aesthetics teachers. I am not afraid of authority. It is more like the opposite. I have worked with state television and I was being very positive, but the only person I was fighting was my boss. That is typical me. I am not good at being strategic. If I have a goal and I think something is necessary, I can fight as much as is needed. The people who hated me while I was doing that, sort of respected me after a while. It is not about me being rich, but about more kids having the possibility to train in the circus or for more audiences to see it.

T.O.

In your book, there is a quotation from someone who compared your circus to a jester in medieval times, who was invited to amuse the ruler, but who was also the person who could criticize him, who had permission to do so in a light way. I think that is an interesting comparison. Do you also study this role in your research about circus as a way to transcend boundaries in art and society; is that an aspect of it?

T.B.

Yes, it is one aspect of it, but I wish we could study it more. I really think [being a circus company] is a good camouflage. We have really made advanced changes in the municipalities because

we don't seem dangerous: for example in the north of Sweden, which ended up with two gymnasium programmes, but also in the south, and here in Botkyrka. Kajsa [Lind, vice president of Cirkus Cirkör,] used to be a consultant for big companies before she came here, but most people don't know that. So we can come in and make quite big changes with the leaders and the ruling politicians and make them see things in a new light, make them realize that investments in young people's creativity are investments in growth, for example.

T.O.

So people thinking you were harmless and funny helped when you were trying to make changes. Has it happened in more places than just Botkyrka that, once they found out that you are not so harmless, they 'stepped on the brakes'?

T.B.

I don't know if it's as simple as that. When you undertake processes like this, you need to find people to play with. In all the places where we have been, there has been at least one person who was really interested and doing a lot of good work in their surroundings. One thing that we give as a criterion for coming into a municipality at all was that they find out what kinds of activities young people in their

municipalities do and want to do. So the people who want to bring us into their municipality start an investigation, because often they don't even know this. We don't want them to bring us in to force their young people to do circus when they actually want to do something else. We also want the people to see what they already have in their community. Is there someone who is interested in cooperation, or someone we can support? That is because we want the project to continue, even when we move away. This approach is why we have succeeded in some places — because the local people have created something themselves. Young skiers and snowboarders in the north of the country, for instance, were inspired by our Young Cirkör ensemble and started their own ensemble, called Winter Street. They perform all over the region and are still growing. But sometimes we might have been somewhere for three years, giving energy, knowledge and support and things that were in flow suddenly stop because people say, 'This project is over.'

We have also been in the midst of internal fights between political departments. Sometimes, departments were not talking to each other, and we were trying to make them see that they were both doing the same thing and that maybe

they should collaborate, when they had been working side by side for ten years without seeing it. Sometimes, these processes are a lot about power play and you can be in the middle. One of the things we have learned is that it is heavy stuff to be involved in. I am so happy that we have done it and I believe we will continue doing it, but there could be an easier way to make changes than having us driving these big processes, because they are very heavy. There is a never-ending row of obstacles; there are always things that need a push. It's never just about starting up a new education programme, for instance. We dive into national economics, school politics, the way accountants measure buildings (as investments) and teachers (as costs) in schools, and so on. If we are making performances that can make things happen, then that is where we have to put our energy. So we haven't stopped doing it, but we are trying to do it in other ways.

T.O.

So now you are reflecting on what you have been doing and why things have or have not been working. Do you now believe that you can possibly have more effect through the art itself, did I understand that correctly?

T.B.

Yes, and also through the pedagogical processes. I am at the

end of three years of research, and finishing and presenting that will be the next thing for me to focus on. We will know more about methods and tools. For dance and theatre, there are many theories and concepts, but we have nothing to describe circus. That was also the reason why I started my research project, and started visiting circus colleagues around the world. I have been one of several researchers from different scientific fields who are working on the same research project, so it's hard for me to say what the final result of the project will be. In part, it will be about what circus can teach us about risk and control and letting go of control, and how you can transfer this knowledge to other fields. For instance, circus artists and teachers have been working with Masters students in economics and management. The students and artists created workshops for each other, and the result was surprising for the economists, but not for me. The management students had a lot more to learn from the artists about risks, markets and communication than the other way around.

T.O.

And when it comes to the performances, do you think you would ever make a performance that is more explicit when it comes to how you see the world? I think your per-

formances can definitely transfer a certain attitude that everything is possible, and they give audiences a very positive feeling, but would you ever make your message more concrete or rational?

T.B.

I don't know! That is the difficult part when you try to let yourself be guided by your intuition — then I am not deciding myself. Well, of course I am deciding myself, but it's not like I think, 'Oh, this would be clever to do...' When I do something for Cirkör, I am honest and true and everything I do comes out of my question about the relationship between risk and possibilities. It is never just for entertainment; everything comes back to answering that question. I think I have something that is very 'Cirkörish' that I want to communicate with a big audience, or with a normal audience. And then it cannot be too narrow. So, even when I create it and I think I am being clear and serious, it comes out abstract and funny. And the artists I work with also like to have a laugh. You can see that clearly in 'Wear it Like a Crown', for example. My father saw it at the premiere and when he saw it again a couple of months later, he said, 'It is so much lighter now!' And that is not me, but the artists. I think I could find ways to transfer what I am thinking

to the stage, but I am not sure. Sometimes I get long letters from people who have seen 'Inside Out' or 'Wear it Like a Crown'. The show they have seen did not always change their lives, but it changed their way of thinking, or it helped them to do something they had to do. So I don't know if I need to be more precise...

T.O.

Do you mean that you are happy when people take their own meaning out of the shows and apply them to their own lives, and that, if you were more precise, you would rob them of that possibility?

T.B.

Yes, it was obvious with 'Inside Out'. When we got the first reviews, every critic had seen different things and different parts, but they were all things I had worked on. They had seen different layers and that was very interesting, but none of them had seen them all. There are few people who actually follow my thoughts. I want to make art, and it is important for me that the audience is able to enjoy a performance without needing an explanation. It should talk to people in one way or another, talking through itself, so that it is the viewer who finds out what it says. It is how I have been taught about art, and how I think about it. However, with 'Wear it Like

a Crown', I had a talk with the audience after the performance, and people said: 'it was so good to hear about your thoughts, I saw so many more layers and I have to go and see it again!' So I am no longer sure that it is wrong to describe what you have been doing, but you have to find a way for everyone to see and understand it. I don't know how to do that yet.

T.O.

So, for now, you leave it a little bit open, and, by getting all those letters, you know that it is working somehow, that everybody takes something out of it?

T.B.

Yes, but also with artistic research — not research about art in a university context, but research in art. In Sweden, this is still quite new and developing. I think that this kind of research may be the platform for thinking about questions like this. I miss that a little. While creating 'Inside Out', I thought I could discuss the process and everything behind it, and I was longing to have people to talk to. But, as soon as a show was being performed, I found out that nobody was interested in talking about the struggle to get there; they just wanted to know whether it worked or not. I think that art investigates real stuff, the same way scientific research investigates things, but there is no

way to find out what is actually happening. There are more people doing research on us than with us. This becomes clear from my interviews with artists about their art. A researcher I work with who specializes in theatre was a little embarrassed because she was trying to describe the art, but the artists were describing it with much more flesh and blood, from eight years of daily experience. Of course, what they say is deeper in some way, but it is still 'funny'. I think it is also something about the right and the left side of the brain. Fifty years from now, artistic research may be on the same level as scientific research. Right now, we think of scientific knowledge as the truth, and artistic knowledge as cute and enjoyable and good for people who are rich enough to have it, but I think it's important.

Björfors remains convinced that circus can offer a specific kind of knowledge, and she might very well be right. To conclude this article, it seems important to think about what a society can learn from circus as an art form.

Apart from the mind-, mood- and maybe even life-altering artistic experience and amazement at human potential that shows can offer, contemporary circus can possibly offer a critical, yet light, perspective on society and everything that is thought to be 'normal' within it. It can be thought of as a 'dismeasure', against the 'measure' of society,¹³ a place in which chaos can arise, and it can function as a counterbalance to all the order that is enforced by society. The *Cirkusliv* example illustrates how circus can be used to bring about 'symbolic inversion' in the Bakhtinian sense, in which existing hierarchies of power are temporarily turned upside down. Although the order is usually restored afterwards, it can make people more aware of a status quo that is not normally called into question.

But, more importantly, thanks to the opportunities to 'try it yourself' that have resulted from Cirkus Cirkör's initiatives, any member of Swedish society can benefit from the 'embodied knowledge' that is gained through the stretching of one's own limits, or the breaking down of one's own boundaries, not only through the ideas of professionals that are currently being gathered in Tilde Björfors' research, but also at first hand. Could it be that experiencing the effort, the risks, the fear and the failures, or the elation that comes with finally mastering something that used to be beyond your reach, actually makes more of an impact than when you are being told or shown what it is like? This question remains unanswered for now, but maybe Björfors and her co-researchers can change that.

Björfors makes a convincing case for the ability of circus to offer lessons on how to deal with chaos, risk, fear and letting go of control; lessons that seem very valuable, not only in Sweden, but also in other nations that are coping with a rapidly changing society (including the Netherlands). The necessity to adapt to changing conditions is relevant for both the autochthonous inhabitants of a country and those who are moving into it. A place where standing out from the crowd and being far from normal is encouraged, rather than being frowned upon, could be beneficial for both these groups of people.

Whether circus can actually achieve these results remains to be

¹³ See the interview with the Italian philosopher, Paolo Virno, in Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009).

seen. What seems already proven, judging by the way in which Cirkus Cirkör has succeeded in establishing the art form in Sweden, is that determination, enthusiasm and boldness can be infectious. Although the road to success has not been without bumps, this circus company has been welcomed with open arms by audiences almost from the start. Again, one can question whether it was the circus performances themselves or the attitude of the performers that caused this reaction, but it reminded me of this quote, which also appears in a shorter version elsewhere in this book:

We still don't know, Spinoza says, what a body can do and a mind can think. And we will never know the limits of their powers. The path of joy is constantly to open new possibilities, to expand our field of imagination, our abilities to feel and be affected, our capacities for action and passion. In Spinoza's thought, in fact, there is a correspondence between our power to affect [...] and our power to be affected. The greater our mind's ability to think, the greater its capacity to be affected by the ideas of others; the greater our body's ability to act, the greater its capacity to be affected by other bodies. And we have greater power to think and to act, Spinoza explains, the more we interact and create common relations with others.¹⁴

To me, that is exactly what Cirkus Cirkör is about: using their amazing abilities to act to reach out to the world around them, and trying to affect it to such an extent that everybody grows in the process. Björfors clearly believes that the body's ability to act and the mind's ability to think are also connected. So the question is: could it be possible that experiencing the type of circus for which Cirkus Cirkör is famous is beneficial not only for physical, but also for mental flexibility? Could it also affect the way people see the world? So far, Björfors's performances have not been explicitly subversive, but they do convey a very contagious belief in what human beings are capable of, and they have resulted in some strong reactions from audience members.

It may not be possible to express a stronger or more explicit message through the performances themselves, since it could conflict

with the way Björfors wants to work with her artists — using their own personalities and input — which could dilute any message she tries to convey. Doing so may not even be necessary, since people already transfer the belief in human potential to their own lives, as evinced in the letters and other reactions Björfors has mentioned, or they may feel compelled to try circus themselves, in order to explore their own possibilities.

The idea that one's ability to act also increases one's ability to be affected is very compelling. In order for the answer to the question I posed earlier to be affirmative, 'bodily' knowledge might have to be translated into mental knowledge somehow, to become useful in everyday life, or the knowledge might need to be transferred from the stage or circus hall to society. Or could the mere *feeling* of being capable, in a more general sense, be enough to deal with the challenges life poses? To consciously try to improve one's ability to be affected may seem counter-intuitive in a day and age filled with threats and uncertainties. It would seem logical to close oneself off, to put up walls and try to avoid any change.

Although this strategy may appeal to some, it seems quite difficult to maintain. Apart from that, as Björfors tries to make clear, it also limits all possibility for growth. The alternative is not to be reckless, nor to try to suppress the fear that comes from being exposed, but to be open, to be affected, to be afraid and to accept it. What seems necessary for this kind of attitude, both in individuals and in communities, is faith in human potential, in the qualities that one has to offer and those that others can offer in return. Only then can the fear of being overwhelmed, uprooted or flushed away be overcome, and only then can something be achieved that surpasses the capacities of one entity. This is maybe easier said than done. It might require a lot of practice and it may even be risky but, as Cirkus Cirkör has proven many times, sometimes you have to take risks to prove that something is possible.

¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 379.