

Zirkus ON: How the German creation programme has nourished the national circus sector.

— Valentina Barone

In November 2023, the German contemporary circus creation programme celebrated its five years of being in full swing with the Zirkus ONstage - Pro Festival, a three-day event in the capital. Showing ten productions from four years of creation accompaniment, the creative alliance gathered national and international guests in Berlin to participate in various activities. With its epicentre at Pfefferberg Theater and visits to partnering venues in Berlin such as ACUD and Q-Space, we dug into the recent artistic proposals of the German circus scene, attending shows and listening to themed roundtables and meetings with the artists. By examining its operations and talking with the protagonists behind the scenes, we uncover Zirkus ON's essence. By revealing its unique history and its past and future goals, we look at its achievements and welcome the German network's next steps and challenges.

Aftermovie Zirkus Onstage – Pro Festival:



The origin of Zirkus ON

We all know the emergent sensation accompanying the idea of impossible things happening. The motivation we suddenly find when we want to achieve something, but we are still determining what it will be. Most of the time, we want to talk with someone who listens to our thoughts and gives feedback, extracting the possibilities and ordering them inside our mind, helping us uncover previously hidden potential to make it happen. In the case of Zirkus ON, it all started from a conversation on a bus transfer during a Circostrada meeting. The Artistic Director of the German Creative Alliance for Contemporary Circus, Andree Wenzel, met the English Change Management Consultant and founder of Circus Futures, Verena Cornwall, chatting about ways to engage the national contemporary circus sector.

As an expert in networking activities from being part of the European label circusnext since its beginning, she captivated in the air the potential of realising a dream. To foster the occasions to spot relevant artistic projects of the country and offer them the chance to become fully developed shows. Back in Germany, Andree Wenzel shared the ideas with the active members of the German federation dedicated to the contemporary circus, BUZZ.



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Environmental conditions are extremely relevant for ideas to blossom. Zirkus ON would not have been born if not supported by the flourishing growth of the scene during the last ten years. From the Initiative Neuer Zirkus founded in 2014 to its re-organisation as BUZZ in 2019, the German contemporary circus field needed ideas to connect all the festivals and venues by emancipating the genre from traditional contexts. With the 2023 UNESCO Heritage recognition as an art form, there is no comparison between today's German contemporary circus scene and the sector at the beginning of the previous decade.

In 2019, with the help of the circus maker Kolja Huneck and other professionals interested in creating a vital program dedicated to circus creation in Germany, Zirkus ON started as a working group inside of BUZZ, and the idea of creating a supportive network and a subsidised residency program was just around the corner. In 2020, Alice Greenhill joined the group, starting to manage the structure. In 2022, the team was completed, with production manager Raphaëlle Polidor, Yala Pierenkemper as co-director, Paula Nicolau for cultural policy work and, as a freelance project manager, Marina Rieger, for the knowledge transfer formats and the open call proposals for the 2022 and 2023 editions.

By taking inspiration from other European networks, Zirkus ON started fostering relationships between German players and guiding them to create a virtuous circuit of support between professionals. Five years is the production development cycle for any artistic discourse, in and out of difficult times. Each program cycle lasts two years, so the organisation also came through the pandemic period unscathed. As the artistic director Andree Wenzel has underlined, artistic residencies are the most vital and fragile stage in making a creative process blossom. Since its beginning, Zirkus ON found a fundamental modality that provides a safe space to turn a strong idea into a relevant circus project, guaranteeing equal access and sheltering the projects from commercial constraints.



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The power of the creative alliance lies in its unique aggregation format: the capacity to find and connect players and locations at the service of circus creations at an early stage of the creation process. From a group of committed cultural workers without funding in 2021, Zirkus ON has accumulated partner structures and mentors, transforming itself into a large project and ultimately into today's well-funded, creative alliance under the umbrella of *Verbindungen fördern*.

The importance of the selection process

From the beginning, the working group began shaping the criteria for the selection. Each project must already be active, through exploring in rehearsals or starting the research on the proposed materials with one or two residencies. The programme asks the candidates to provide a video to get a feel for their aesthetics. Even if words are necessary to describe an idea, Zirkus ON wants a tangible sample of what is already baking, a glimpse into what they are interested in working on, where they want to go and importantly, what they want to achieve.

As there is still no circus university degree in the country, the first sensible aim was to attract professionals trained abroad to offer a made-in-Germany residency cluster, thus allowing these creators to grow artistic productions back home. From 2024, Zirkus ON will be stricter on these criteria, favouring the ensembles active inside the country or shows that are partially produced in Germany. Most of the time, the provenance of a circus company is naturally international. However, Zirkus ON's strategy is to be strict on this administrative side, whilst being open to more alternative creative directions.

Authorship is naturally a central mandatory aspect of the open call. The artists who typically apply are performers committed to realising their original ideas and are deeply passionate about developing them to final form. Zirkus ON reviews between 30 and 50 proposals each year. The

network is keen to underline that the trajectory encourages transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary artistic projects throughout Germany to broaden the spectrum of circus-related artistic creation. So far, all supported projects have followed the indoor stage format, and only once has an applicant proposed a visual art exhibition. However, the future possibilities are broader, and the alliance is open to formats such as site-specific performances or other cultural projects that link with circus.

The Zirkus ON jury provides a spectrum of thoughts and views towards future circus creations. Every year its members change, encapsulating the enlarged web of new partners and interests in Germany's cultural sector. It combines close to the sector's personalities with active external cultural workers, balancing the necessity of being circus-centred with an openness to other artistic fields and social avenues. Each of the five representatives embodies a different perspective. One represents the allied partner venues, one is a circus artist or mentor who knows the program or has already participated, one member is from allied partner festivals, one is an expert on circus dramaturgy, research and theory, while one is an external cultural worker bringing another understanding of arts and society.

As an example, Hanna Ma from United Networks was part of the jury as an external cultural worker in 2023. United Networks is a German alliance of six self-organised community-focused artist groups, committed to the promotion of marginalised artists, for a more equitable cultural landscape. Some of the positive values that can be found in circus are the inclusion and representation of minorities and people less visible in society and challenging the public perception of these groups, including women. As an organisation funded by the same structural program as Zirkus ON, United Networks has been chosen to create an exchange with external bodies and open the sector to other cultural role models.



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The essence of the programme

From 2019 to 2023, the format offered a two-year mentorship cycle with residencies, artistic and production management mentors, the possibility of presenting work in progress during festivals, networking events, knowledge transfer formats and support in creating a production budget. For its duration, the communication between the participants guaranteed a smooth circulation of values and resources. Companies and partners must get to know each other and remain in contact to update, share and foster mutual growth. During the early phase of the cycle, the first three residencies generated an active impulse to the artistic proposal. In the second year, the selected participants were further encouraged to continue the conversation with the partners autonomously and ask them what they needed to proceed in shaping their projects. The responsibility of sharing - from the partners' side - and the ability to ask for what is needed - from the artists - is fundamental to the matches in the Zirkus ON programme. They can then achieve authorship and reach the consequential next step in the supply chain: the distribution of the shows inside the country.

Each two-year support cycle starts with the selected project's presentation to all the partners. In previous years, the active role of Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen has been among others to facilitate this event. The ATOLL Festival hosts the first work-in-progress presentations to local audiences, with an active feedback format practice. To underline a necessary change in the dynamics around funding and to foster a collective view on responsibilities and cooperation, Zirkus ON started to refer to what is usually called 'co-production' as 'co-creation', shifting the attention from economics to the relational and resource-oriented aspects. Conceived as an introductory moment where selected participants can express their thoughts and seed their creativity, this starting point provides a safe place and its intimacy is more familiar than a pitching session.



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Making the right decision at the right moment is fundamental, and that's why the mentors of Zirkus ON are present from the first steps and work in pairs. Particularly in the first nine months, they provide the selected projects with consultancy around best practices and focus on production necessities. By creating technical riders, applying to open calls, or writing dossiers, the selected artists must be very attentive to the accessibility of their proposals.

The pragmatic mentor is counterbalanced with an artistic supporter, helping the project to find its trajectory. A mentor can also advise a project by questioning how they want to be seen or perceived. Thinking together about where they want to go, what goals to set, and mostly, what is the appropriate aesthetic vocabulary to talk about the work. By curating an image, the mentor provides an external eye on the trajectory of the artistic creation. Finally, a circus expert with a dramaturgical eye on the project contributes to shaping the project's creative integrity.

Future goals

Growing fast is a challenge that requires care and attention. If the Zirkus ONstage - Pro Festival in Berlin has been a celebration of achievement, the following months represented a vital pause to focus on the internal necessities of the network. Receiving structural funding expanded the spectrum of activities, and the team felt the need to rethink its structure. According to Executive Director Alice Greenhill, re-defining the selection criteria for the open call and re-designing the internal roles and functions of the team are significant steps for Zirkus ON, starting from the awareness that tailor-made decisions and adjustments are not only helpful for the supported artists but for the network itself.

The network is still growing, fostering relationships with partners, increasing the diversity of the players and generating an impact on the national contemporary circus sector. From theatres to cultural centres, to festivals, each member of Zirkus ON brings its unique addition to the service of the genre and provides specific benefits to circus. The future objective is to take a further step forward in the quality of the alliance's offer, looking for more clarity and transparency about the programme and concentrating its efforts on delivering tailor-made support, adaptable to each necessity. Flottmann-Hallen's new director, Janina Fenske, is committed to hosting artistic residencies and introducing circus show tryouts to a new audience. During the roundtable dedicated to networking perspectives hosted at Zirkus ONstage - Pro Festival, Joachim Mohr from the new partner Schloss Bröllin, explained the willingness to host tents and numerous companies. Bernd Belschner from the cultural centre Tollhaus underlined the pivotal role of the Atoll festival in providing the Zirkus ON's new productions constructive feedback, support and guidance at an early stage. Extending the view to the international perspective, Antonia Vuletić from the Croatian association Cirkus Kolektiv, dug more into the history of independent cultural spaces in Croatia and the fundamental necessity to share residency programmes with proactive partners to increase the circulation of circus from the national to the international dimension.



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The new open call for the 2024-25 cycle of Zirkus ON closed in February 2024. After a consistent expansion phase with six employees, the leading structure now consists of three people. Returning to a slim and essential team is a quality-oriented decision, to offer better conditions. Keeping the core structure efficient and small is balanced by the growing number of partners. After structuring the internal organisation, it is time to give attention and care to engaging with new partners and contributing to the spreading of contemporary circus to German audiences.

Exploring the current purpose of Zirkus ON, the emerging factors are the curiosity towards Circus and its capacity to reflect the world, giving back a language accessible to everybody and welcoming an intergenerational audience ready to play. In her opening speech at Pfefferberg Theater, Anke Politz, director of Chamäleon Theater and board member of BUZZ, reminded the audience of the magic abilities of circus. How socially essential it is as an art that can take on any form, be performed in any place, not having to speak any language and yet still able to communicate so that it is able to reach and respect everyone, thus building bridges and closing rifts.

Exchanging thoughts with the Executive Director Alice Greenhill, we summarised that the interests of the creative alliance for the next two years were to contribute to the innovation of the sector: developing accessibility and inclusivity - from identifying specific needs of the selected projects to producing inclusive performances - taking care of environmental impact, expanding the members, and encouraging them to become more active. Happy Birthday, Zirkus ON! We left Berlin with the sensation of seeing the platform in its best dress, photographing a moment in time of a network in great shape, ready to prepare its members for the next step.