The Cambridge Companion to the Circus provides a complete guide for students, scholars, teachers, researchers, and practitioners who are seeking perspectives on the foundations and evolution of the modern circus, the contemporary extent of circus studies, and the specialised literature available to support further enquiries. The volume brings together an international group of established and emerging scholars working across the multidisciplinary domain of circus studies to present a clear overview of the specialised histories, aesthetics, and distinctive performances of the modern circus. In sixteen commissioned essays, it covers the circus’s origins in commercial equestrian performance during the late eighteenth century through to contemporary inflections of circus arts in major international festivals, educational environments, and social justice settings.

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The Cambridge Companions to Theatre and Performance collection publishes specially commissioned volumes of new essays designed for students at universities and drama schools and their teachers. Each volume focuses on a key topic, practitioner, or form and offers a balanced and wide-ranging overview of its subject. Content includes historical and political contexts, case studies, critical and theoretical approaches, afterlives, and guidance on further reading.

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  *Edited by Ric Knowles*
- The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science  
  *Edited by Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr*
- The Cambridge Companion to the Circus  
  *Edited by Gillian Arrighi and Jim Davis*

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE CIRCUS

EDITED BY

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Contributors

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Jim Davis is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick. His major research interest is in nineteenth-century British theatre and his most recent books are *Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), winner of the David Bradby Prize for international theatre research, *Theatre & Entertainment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and volume II of a two-volume edition of nineteenth-century dramatisations of Dickens (with Jacky Bratton) for Oxford University Press (2017). He is also joint author with Victor Emeljanow of a prize-winning study of London theatre audiences in the nineteenth century, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatre-going 1840–1880* (University of Iowa Press, 2001). He has edited a book on Victorian pantomime for Palgrave Macmillan and published several articles and book chapters on popular forms of entertainment such as pantomime and melodrama. He is an editor of *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* and is currently the principal investigator in a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project on theatre and visual culture in the long nineteenth century.

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Catherine M. Young studies the politics of representation in popular US entertainments including vaudeville, circus, and musicals. She is particularly interested in how interspecies performances shaped modern racial categories and gender normativity in the early twentieth century. Her manuscript on transatlantic animal performance during the vaudeville era is currently in preparation for the University of Michigan Press. She has contributed to several edited collections including Race and Performance after Repetition (Duke, 2020) and Performing Animality: Animals in Performance Practices (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Catherine researched and co-translated the German equestrian Therese Renz’s memoir, published in Early Popular Visual Culture 15, no. 3 (2017). She is currently a lecturer in the Princeton Writing Program, Princeton University, where she teaches the Captivating Animals seminar.
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During the early stages of planning this volume, numerous discussions took place between circus scholars and consequently there are a number of people we wish to acknowledge and thank for their generous and discerning suggestions about the scope of the book and potential chapter topics. Some of our informal meetings took place at those rare and enjoyable times when scholars and commissioning editors come together at conferences; at other times our communications criss-crossed the globe via phone and email. Professor Peta Tait and Dr Kim Baston, both from La Trobe University in Melbourne, Professor Patrick Louis Leroux from Concordia University in Montréal, and Professor Julieta Infantino from the University of Buenos Aires offered significant intellectual input during many months of scoping and planning for this volume and we wish to acknowledge and thank them. Dr Kate Brett at Cambridge University Press was an enthusiastic ‘sounding board’ and her support for this book project has been unwavering, with advice that is always prompt, practical, insightful, and (importantly) congenial. Our sincere thanks go to all the staff at Cambridge University Press who have supported this project at different phases of the book’s journey, in particular Eilidh Burrett, Emily Hockley, and Rachel Blaifeder, who have worked with us through the latter production stage.

We wish to acknowledge financial support from the Faculty of Education and Arts at the University of Newcastle, Australia (FEDUA). FEDUA’s annual internship scheme makes it possible for high-achieving undergraduate students to work on projects alongside faculty researchers so they can gain insight into research processes, make a genuine contribution to projects, and be paid for their time. As a result of this scheme, we were fortunate to welcome Erica Wright as a research assistant for several months in 2019. Erica was responsible for liaising with the contributing authors to develop and collate the timeline that appears at the front of the book. Erica managed this considerable task with confidence and
Acknowledgements

scholarliness, for which we commend her. We are grateful for her contribution and wish her the very best with her scholarly plans for the future.

Our thanks also go to Miranda Arrighi, who stepped in as our editorial assistant for the final six months of manuscript preparation. These have been challenging months. In Australia, unprecedented and catastrophic bushfires raged near our homes throughout the southern hemisphere’s summer, polluting the air we breathed and causing untold damage to animals, forests, ecosystems, and humans. Just when it seemed life was returning to ‘normal’, Covid-19 emerged and has altered the way academics teach and manage their institutional responsibilities for the foreseeable future. Throughout these times of great disruption, we nevertheless were bound to complete the book and we acknowledge Miranda’s editorial assistance. Her meticulous eye for detail on all points of grammar and style and her readerly good sense have been an invaluable contribution.

Lastly, we wish to acknowledge the authors who have contributed the sixteen chapters in this volume. Thank you for coming on board, for joining us on the circus train, as it were.
Timeline

1537 † A ‘rope dancer’, performing on the battlements of St Paul’s in London, appears before Edward VI as part of his coronation celebrations.

1637 First British trade with Canton. Brass-wire walking appears in Chinese shows.

1644–1911 Qing dynasty Chinese shows feature acts that include balancing objects on the head, feats on the horizontal bar, Guangdong lion puppet shows, juggling into each other’s hands, sporting with water, feats on bar-spinning, and suspending.

1738 A royal decree is issued in Danish theatre legislation that public displays of theatre or artistic feats are prohibited; however, exceptions could be made for those with a local permit or royal privilege.

1750s Thomas Johnston, popularly known as the Irish Tartar, presents displays of horsemanship on fields adjacent to taverns and pleasure gardens in and around London.

1750–1820 Rope walkers arrive in Argentina from Europe and perform their skills along with pantomimes, puppets, music, and dances. These artists also travelled to Brazil, Chile, and Peru.

1760s Jacob Bates tours in Europe performing displays of horsemanship in open areas.

1768 Philip Astley successfully presents trick-riding displays in London, from which emerges the modern circus. Mr Wolton and Mr Sampson present equestrian exhibitions that are similar to Astley’s.

1772 Astley first visits Paris with his portable amphitheatre.
Timeline

1779  Astley covers his equestrian ring with a roof, founding Astley’s Amphitheatre in London.

1782  Astley opens the Amphitheatre Anglais in Paris. Rivals of Astley, Hughes and Dibdin, build their Royal Circus and Equestrian Philharmonic Academy. The term ‘circus’ is adopted for this form of entertainment.

1787  Peter Prince gives circus-like performances including riding, rope dance, acrobatics, and feats of strength with his family and company in Stockholm, Sweden.

1788  An equestrian troupe led by George Jones and William Parker performs in Edinburgh. This troupe becomes the basis of the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus, the first circus established in Scotland.

1793  Establishment of the circus in north America by John Bill Ricketts.

1796–1820  Jiäqing-reign Chinese shows see the introduction of clowns, variety shows (including feats on leather straps and rope walking), and a blindfolded female gymnast.

1797–8  Rickett’s Circus heads to Albany in upstate New York and keeps moving north to Montréal, Canada. Once there, it settles for over a year in a constructed theatre, then moves to Québec City, and then back to Montréal.

1817–18  Baron Karl von Drais introduces the forerunner of the bicycle.

1820  Large foreign circus companies begin to arrive in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

1820–60  Too many travelling puppeteers in the Czech lands leads to the addition of acrobatics, rope walking, conjuring, and training of wild animals to performances. Consequently, development of the Czech circus begins.

1821  English equestrian James Hunter begins performing bareback, rather than using saddles and pads.

1824  The first Canadian circus, the Cirque West et Blanchard, is founded in Québec City.

1825  The first American travelling circus, owned by J. Purdy Brown, is taken on the road with a tent.
Timeline

1830
Chiarini’s Circus is the first ‘foreign’ circus to appear at the Parque Argentino in Buenos Aires (capacity 1,500).

1830–50s
First Czech travelling circus company travels to Central and Eastern Europe. The company of Josef Beranek and (from 1833) his son Leopold perform in Poland, Russia, Hungary, Serbia, and the Ottoman Empire with their primarily equestrian circus.

1831
French animal trainer and performer Henri Martin enters a cage with a tiger in Germany.

1840
The circus tent is modified for expansion, with rectangular pieces of canvas inserted between two semicircular ends. This crucial development enables tents to be adjusted to the expected size of the audience.

1840s
P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, with its exhibition of ‘freaks’, becomes popular.

1841
Equestrian Pablo Fanque (William Darby) becomes one of the first Black British circus proprietors after going into business with W. F. Wallett. One of his playbills inspired John Lennon and Paul McCartney to write ‘Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite’.

1843
The Theatre Regulation Act is introduced in Britain. Circus performances become increasingly policed as many cannot receive licences.

1846
The Hanlon-Lees debut in London as The Hanlons.

1847
The first recorded circus in the Australian colonies performs in Tasmania.

1850
The first record of a Chinese acrobat performing in a variety/circus-like show in Australia (Melbourne).

1851
Performances by equestrian James Ashton at the Royal Circus, Launceston, Tasmania. Ashton’s is the oldest circus in Australia and may be the longest running circus in the western world.

1853
Evidence of regular use of tents for circuses in Australia.

1857
Chinese acrobats perform in Ashton’s Circus (Australia).

1858
In Australia the first theatre licences for Chinese circus companies are issued, allowing Chinese circuses to perform on the goldfields of the colony of Victoria.
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Jules Léotard performs solo flying trapeze at the Cirque Napoléon in Paris, thereby becoming a celebrity and popularising aerial performance. He performs in a new, close-fitting bodysuit that is later called the leotard.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1860–80</td>
<td>Many significant metropolitan fairs in Britain close, including Bartholomew Fair and the Bow and Greenwich Fairs. This influences variety artists to pursue circus employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Antonin Kludsky founds his travelling menagerie. The world-famous monster circus Kludsky was developed from small travelling wild-animal shows. The Hanlon-Lees brothers perform the first flying act in the USA and subsequently invent stage machinery for gothic pantomime. French trapeze artist Jules Léotard performs at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties and Cremorne Pleasure Gardens in London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Barnum establishes P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan &amp; Hippodrome (with W. C. Coup), which was to become the largest circus in history (later as Barnum &amp; Bailey).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870s</td>
<td>The ‘auguste’ costume for clowns (clothes too big or too small and ludicrous wigs and make-up) comes into vogue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1871–81</td>
<td>American circuses introduce carnival stalls, exotic animals, and sideshow acts that line the path to the big top.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>In the USA, Coup and Costello increase the number of circus rings from one to two. The cabaret music hall in Paris, the Folies Trévise, becomes the Folies Bergère. Barnum’s circus commences travel via railroad (rather than horses and wagons), enabling greater distances to be covered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1874–6</td>
<td>Aerialist Stuart (also Stewart) Dare, one of a number of successful late-nineteenth-century disabled circus performers, appears in a solo act.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Carl Hagenbeck begins to exhibit animals in European and US cities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>Centennial Exposition (Philadelphia).</td>
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</table>
The Hanlon-Lees perform in Paris at the Folies Bergère and are lionised by the cultural luminaries of the time, including Zola and Huysmans, Exposition Universelle (Paris).

Joseph Swan (1878, Britain) and Thomas Edison (1879, USA) invent early light bulbs. Howe’s London Circus, Sanger’s Royal Menagerie, and Cooper, Bailey and Company’s International Allied Shows are selected for the first public displays of electric lighting.

Circus Renz moves into the former Berlin market hall. By 1888 it had 5,600 seats. Protective legislation for child performers is introduced in Britain thus restricting performances by children.

The advent of the three-ring circus.

Establishment of the Wirth Brothers’ Circus in Australia. The company ceased operations in 1963.

In Argentina, José Podestá debuts his character Pepino 88, a clown who sings rhyming songs that feature national themes and social criticism.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show becomes an international phenomenon following its success in the USA. The show re-enacts conflicts between the American military, its cowboy scouts, and Indian nations.

The Berlin Conference divides colonial African territories among European powers, providing more access to territories for hunting and shipping animals bound for zoos, menageries, and circuses. In Boston, Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin Keith introduces continuous entertainment at his dime museum. This will become the model for corporatised American vaudeville.

Inventor Karl Benz patents his Benz Patent-Motorwagen, making this the birth year of the modern car. In Argentina, José Podestá premieres the spoken version of ‘Juan Moreira’ in the second part of his show. This signals the beginning of a new style of circus show, the Creole Circus, with circus skills in the first part and a theatrical drama of the gaucho genre in the second part.

Establishment of the FitzGerald Brothers’ Circus in Australia.
Timeline

1889
The Moulin Rouge cabaret opens at the foot of Montmartre in Paris. Hagenbeck’s trained lions act appears, with three lions harnessed to a chariot and a lion riding on the back of a horse. The act has been made possible by the 1888 invention of the arena cage.

1893
World’s Columbian Exposition (Chicago).

1894
Edison Studios becomes the early leader in the film industry.

1895
Circus Busch moves into its own building in Berlin (Busch-Bau).

1897
Barnum & Bailey Circus begins its five-year tour of Europe. Lena Jordan performs the first (backward) triple somersault on flying trapeze to catch Lew Jordan in a flying trapeze act in Sydney, Australia. Ringling Brothers introduce the ‘Black Top’ tent, containing a cinematograph and film projector for screenings.

1899
Louis Cyr and Horace Barré found the first Canadian touring circus, the Cirque Louis Cyr–Horace Barré, which featured strong men and Cyr’s wife and daughter.

1900
Paris International (World Expo).

1907
Inspired by Paris’s Folies Bergère, American immigrant Florenz Ziegfeld produces his first Follies revue, which transforms popular entertainment by emphasising groups of white women in thematic spectacles.

1909
Ernie Clarke masters the triple somersault to a catcher for its regular performance. This mastery follows the Clarkes and the Jordans appearing in the same circus. Al G. Barnes’s Trained Wild Animal Circus is established.

1910
By this time, Black sideshow bands featured in every major touring circus in America.

1911
Chinese-Australian equestrian circus performer and star of the Hyland Vice Regal Circus, Agnes Emily Roberts, performs at the Coronation of King George V of the United Kingdom and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Prussia. She will tour Europe and the United States until 1913.

1913
The Palace Theatre, the premiere vaudeville venue in the United States, opens in New York City as part of the Keith Albee Circuit, which controls all of the northeastern United States.
Timeline

1914 World War I allies boycott German businesses, disrupting the trained animal trade.

1917 The October Revolution takes place in Russia.

1918 Experiments with motorised transport for circus travel are successful in America.

1919 Ringling management merge two of the biggest and most prestigious circuses in the world to create the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show.

1920 Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold uses circus in his theatre productions.

1921 Bertram Mills Circus takes advantage of a growing interest in circus to produce a Christmas circus at the Olympia Exhibition Hall in London.

1923 Barbette, née Vander Clyde, begins a European tour as a cross-dressing trapeze artist.

1925 The largest Czechoslovak circus, Kludsky, which consists of three manège chapiteaux, 135 circus carriages transported on 86 railway cars, and 400 trained animals, starts its European tour.

1926 Lou Jacobs, the well-known clown who invented the famous midget car trick, joins the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

1927 The Russian government establishes the State College for Circus and Variety Arts (Moscow Circus School).

1930 Bertram Mills Circus diversifies beyond its annual Olympia circus to begin tenting throughout the United Kingdom for the first time under its own name.

1931 Lillian Leitzel, the most significant aerial celebrity of her generation, dies as a result of an equipment failure at the Valencia Music Hall in Copenhagen.

1932 Tod Browning’s film Freaks is released.

1934 Downfall of the largest Czechoslovak circus, Cirkus Kludsky.

1939–45 During this period, more than 2,000 Czech citizens were employed in German circuses and varieties as acrobats, animal trainers, and musicians.