BASIC TECHNIQUES IN
CIRCUS ARTS

ACTING

FONDACTION
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL.
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL
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FOREWORD

NATIONAL CIRCUS SCHOOL

Based in Montreal, the National Circus School is an institution for secondary and higher education whose primary mission is to train circus artists. It is the only institution in North America to offer a complete training cycle in circus arts, starting with the preparatory program, followed by the Circus and High School Studies program, and culminating in the higher education program (leading to the Diploma of Collegial Studies in Circus Arts). Since 1981, more than 400 artists have been trained at the School. A pioneer in the revival of circus arts in Canada and North America, the School has contributed to the emergence of Quebec’s great circuses, which were to become Cirque du Soleil, Cirque Éloize and The 7 Fingers, and has lent a helping hand to numerous foreign circus companies.

Today, the National Circus School enjoys a unique position in the world of circus arts instruction. With a team of more than 60 teachers providing a wealth of educational and artistic experience in circus arts, acrosports, performing arts and education, the School is regularly invited to share its expertise at educational exchanges, meetings and symposia in Canada and abroad, especially those organized by the International Network for Social Circus Training (INSCT), the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC), the European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO) and the American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO).

With the enthusiasm for social circus, the spread of circus arts as a recreational activity and the overwhelming demand for qualified personnel, the School believed it was essential to support the development of services providing high-quality, safe introductory courses and training programs in the circus arts. Since 2004, its Instructor and Trainer programs – leading to an Attestation of Collegial Studies and recognized by Quebec’s Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) – have trained some 100 teaching professionals. These teachers are actively involved in all areas of circus instruction, the education of young people, leisure activities, social circus and even the specialized training of professional artists.

In addition to the skills needed to introduce circus techniques, the role of a circus arts instructor – whether for recreational activities or social outreach purposes – requires particular knowledge of safety issues and of an individual’s stages of motor, psychological and social development as well as the ability to organize and manage a class. This manual is intended as a useful and relevant educational tool, but it certainly does not replace actual training for teaching the circus arts. Although these techniques are essential for performing circus arts, these disciplines also need creativity and poetry in order to be truly artistic and meaningful, and this is true at both the professional and amateur levels.

On behalf of the teachers and professionals who were so enthusiastic and thorough in putting together the content of this manual, I would like to thank Cirque du Soleil for its generous contribution to the development of an educational work of this magnitude. By taking part in circus arts and with the help of qualified personnel, it will certainly help a great number of young people to achieve their potential more easily.

Daniela Arendasova
Director of Studies
National Circus School
Montreal
INTRODUCTION

The practice of circus arts implies knowledge of and proficiency in one or several techniques, which usually requires progressive and ongoing learning. Use of these techniques opens up a wide range of possibilities intended to develop physical abilities, as well as creative potential and social skills.

Today, there is growing interest in using circus arts for purposes other than performance and shows. Professionals involved in the fields of leisure and recreation, humanitarian development, mental health and physical rehabilitation are watching the development of current initiatives with great interest.

As the learning of these techniques is set to develop in various areas, and with rising interest in circus arts as a recreational pursuit, it seems appropriate at this time to develop a document that fulfils the need for technical knowledge, while also ensuring that learning is done in safety and progressively, according to the basic techniques in the circus arts.

We also believe that this document will be useful to all those organizations involved in the teaching of circus techniques. Circus schools, recreational circus programs, acrobatic gymnastics federations and the educational sector in general can use the knowledge and information contained here to improve their own teaching.

Collaboration between National Circus School and Cirque du Soleil

This multimedia educational kit brings together 17 circus disciplines and 177 technical elements. Written with the help of teachers at the National Circus School, it recommends and outlines the principles of teaching basic circus arts techniques. Illustrated by NCS students, this work recommends gradual development of skills and the mastering of various basic circus techniques.

The work comprises two main parts: written documents and video documents.

Written documents: The written part of Basic Techniques in Circus Arts comprises 17 chapters, each corresponding to a colour-coded discipline. Every chapter is divided into two sections. The first section introduces the terminology specific to the discipline, the equipment required and, specific information, as well as advice about safety and the prevention of injury. The second section illustrates in detail the different technical elements that constitute the discipline. This section comprises a description of the technical elements, detailed explanations of the movement, educational enabling step-by-step learning of each component, tips for manual aids, corrections and corrective exercises addressing the most common mistake and variants of the movement.

Video documents: The video part of Basic Techniques in Circus Arts is intended to promote a better understanding of the written material and to provide a visual aid to learning. To make it easier to find information, the colours used for the disciplines in the written documents correspond to those on the video documents. Similarly, the photos shown alongside the explanations of the movement, the educational and the variants are taken from the video documents. When necessary, close-ups and slow motion are used to make it easier to understand more complex technical positions and quick sequences. When movements are displayed, extra information or warnings about safety or injury prevention will pop up onscreen.
For practical reasons, the section on "Common Mistakes" is not included on the DVDs so that the focus is on showing the correct way of performing the movements. The educational required for learning the various technical elements however, are presented in the video documents. In any case, the written document must be consulted to see the complete list of educational.

All the exercises contained in the written documents and videos are presented in such a way so as to ensure they are performed as safely as possible (ideally under the supervision of an instructor or coach), with proper preparation and using the right equipment.

The written and video documents included in Basic Techniques in Circus Arts are complementary: they were designed to be used together. The written documents contain information that is not available on the video documents. Likewise, the video documents allow a fuller understanding of the movements that is not possible from consulting the written documents alone.
Introduction

The first page of each chapter describes in general terms the specifics and characteristics of each discipline.

Each discipline is colour-coded. The different colours, corresponding to those used on the video documents, make it easier to find what the user is looking for.
Terminology

The technical terms essential to understanding the elements specific to each discipline.

In-depth terminology research was carried out in conjunction with teachers at the National Circus School in Montreal to determine the most commonly used expressions and terms in circus and acrobatic communities.

Equipment

The equipment needed to practise the different disciplines covered.

Specific Information

Specific information needed to practise the discipline and essential for performing the technical elements properly, bringing together such topics as identifying the dominant side when performing twists and body positions in aerial phases.

Safety

Essential information to consider when training with the aim of minimizing the risk of injury.

These points are specific to each discipline and are of the utmost importance. They concern both the instructor’s role and the work environment.
ACROBATICS
BENCHELLI

Technical Element Description
A concise description explaining the nature or the key movements of the technical element in question.

Prerequisites
Figures, body patterns and technical skills to master before starting to learn the element.

Explanation of the Movement
A detailed description of the different sequences of movements making up the element.

Safety Notice
In addition to the information provided in the first section, the safety notices set out essential aspects to consider when performing the movement in order to avoid injury.
**Educationals**

Step-by-step exercises and sequences of movements recommended to successfully perform the technical element. They make the principle of progressive learning easier, focusing on coordination and physical preparation as well as concentrating on the movements.

Identified by the icon **ED**

These educational are often illustrated by one or more photos. The use of numbers added to the letters **ED** allows the user to follow the sequences represented visually: **ED 1, ED 2, etc.**

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### Manual Aid

Assistance that the instructor or the spotter should provide when teaching the movements. The images allow the user to see the movements to make and the actions to take to ensure learning is carried out safely.

**Identified by the icon **MA****
Common Mistakes
The most common mistakes to avoid.

Corrections and Corrective Exercises
Modifications to make either by correcting movements or by corrective exercises.

The corrective exercises are identified by the icon EX

Variants
Images illustrating the technical elements give the user the opportunity to progress and to vary his learning.

Identified by the icon V
Elements Menu

Once a discipline has been selected, a second window allows the user to go from one technical element to another. The “play all” button, at the bottom of the window, provides the option to watch the elements one after the other.

Main Menu

After the opening sequence, a first window presents the disciplines covered on the DVD.
**Warnings**
Extra information or warnings about safety or prevention of injury pop up onscreen at key moments while the movements are being viewed.

**Icons**
When highlighted, the icon corresponding to the one in the written document indicates the technical element component being played.

**Close-ups**
In some cases, special attention is given to an image, part of the body or manual aid as a movement is being demonstrated by showing a close-up or by showing the movement from a different angle.

**Technical Notes**
The different parts of the element may be viewed out of sequence using the “Skip” function to select the icons at the bottom of the screen. The slow-motion function, available on most DVD players, also allows the user to watch each movement more closely.
INTRODUCTION TO ACTING

Acting consists in playing characters as part of a scene according to previously defined instructions. The participants adjust their performance according to the level of acting, the environment, the character features and the required interactions.

This discipline is a vital part of the process of creating circus shows. Circus artists are increasingly being asked to interpret characters and emotions. Like other disciplines, the basic techniques are essential in order to successfully act out an intention, an emotion or a situation in a clear and effective manner.
TERMINOLOGY

Break
Change in tone, going from comic to dramatic or vice versa.

Focus
Place to which one wishes to draw the spectator’s attention in order to make him fully understand the message, situation or emotions. This can mean a particular actor, an object or an area in the ring or on the stage. In film, the camera directs the spectator’s attention and gaze. In the circus and theatre, focus performs this task.

Focus is determined in two ways: the first, by the actor looking at a specific area, the second, more general, by the specific place or space on the stage at which the spectator must be looking at a precise moment. Normally, the director is the one who determines where the spectator’s gaze should be directed. The actors then act accordingly and work to improve the focus of attention by playing minor or major or by looking at the specific area determined by the director.

Lazzi
Improvisation without any impact on the main drama. Opportune moment to develop a little comic sequence. For example, a small cookie crumb on a table can move the participant to improvise for several minutes with this little crumb and then return to the main action.

Play minor
Making up part of the general tableau, the actor playing minor should be a secondary element allowing the spectator to have a more comprehensive understanding of the principal action. While still playing his character and acting in the situation, the actor should not be the main focus of the spectator. His acting should be discreet unless otherwise indicated.

Play major
To be the focus of the spectator’s attention.

Subtext
True intention or underlying emotion of a character that may be contrary to the text and that gives nuance to the actor’s work.
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## ACTING

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Explanation of the Movement

- The participants are divided into groups of two. They create a short text, each line of which will be repeated three times.
- They must then introduce and repeat the text in a given situation. For example, they pass chairs around as if they were helping to move out of a house.
- The objectives of the exercise are:
  - Learning several lines quickly;
  - Repeating the text three times as a comic process;
  - Achieving a rhythm for the text, hence the importance of using short lines;
  - Expressing subtext. In the example below, it is a question of trust/mistrust, lying and honesty of emotion.
- The lines below are said according to the levels of acting listed:
  - Where were you?
  - Where was I?
  - Where were you?
  - At hockey.
  - At hockey?
  - At hockey.
  - With whom?
  - With whom?
  - With whom?
  - Léonie.
  - Léonie?
  - Léonie.
  - It’s not true.
  - It’s true.
  - It’s not true.
  - You don’t believe me?
  - I don’t believe you.
  - You don’t believe me?
  - I saw you.
  - You saw me?
  - I saw you.
  - Ah...
  - Ah!
  - Ah...
Level 1 – Non-acting
Not doing anything. Not moving. In the centre of the stage, both participants say their lines, five or six each, then leave. Without acting (no text should be heard). The objective is to properly control the level. In this case, it is the non-acting level.

Level 2 – TV drama
Acting minimally, without a lot of expression on the face; everything is internal. Both participants go to the centre of the stage. They say their lines again, but with a minimal level of acting. They imagine that the camera is in close-up and that there is a microphone placed near the actors. Therefore, exaggerating the acting or projecting the lines forcefully is not necessary. Rather, focus is on subtle acting and searching for honesty of emotion. Once all their lines are said, the actors leave the stage. M1

Level 3 – Naturalistic theatre
Acting with more projection. Keeping the same intentions, the same subtext, the same honesty of emotions, but with more projection in the voice and more expression of the body.

Level 4 – Burlesque theatre
Acting with more projection and more expression of the body. M2

Level 5 – Clown
The most exaggerated level. All possible lazis are also permitted, being aware of what happens between two lines and stretching out the time and emotions. Keeping in mind the truth of the emotions and also making breaks. M3
Common Mistake
1. The participant has difficulty saying a line at the same time as he performs an action that has no relationship to the meaning of the line.

Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. Repeating the scene.
   Simplifying the movements or staging.
   Concentrating on the lines and the staging, or on the movements to be done.

Variant
1. Game with four or five lines.
Explanation of the Movement

• At the Olympic Games, at the famous 100-metre race. Each participant represents a country, and must make up a character. At the start signal provided by the instructor, the race begins in slow motion. The participants must cover the distance separating them from the finish line, running in slow motion while trying to trip the other participants and trying to avoid the traps set by them.

• The objective of the characters is to win the race. They must act out determination, will and effort, as well as a certain nastiness toward the other runners.

• The objective of the actor is to run in slow motion with the greatest precision possible. There are also secondary objectives, such as to clearly announce his intentions to the other participants.

  Example: if he wants to trip a competitor by hooking his leg, he must be certain that the other participant clearly sees his intention so that he may respond correctly and cooperate in performing the sequence. M 1

• Each participant pays attention to the others. So, if an opponent wants to tie the participant’s shoelaces together, he makes sure the gesture is clearly understood so that the other participant can let it happen successfully. Consequently, the participant will have to bring his feet closer together so that his opponent can tie them. He should also turn his head away and pretend to be busy doing something else, so that the scene is plausible, and then trip, still in slow motion.

• The exercise ends when all the participants reach the finish line or when all participants are lying scattered around the ring, hurt after falling. M 2
Common Mistakes
1. The participant forgets the concept of “urgency.”
2. The participant is not precise enough in his movements. For example, he tends to run with the left foot and the right hand in the air at the same time, when actually the limbs must move alternately.

Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. Stopping the race and starting over.
2. Understanding that the goal of the game is not to win the race. On the contrary, it is better to enjoy losing by falling into all the traps set by one’s opponents.
Explanation of the Movement

• With a group of about 10 participants, build a log cabin. Without prior consultation among the participants, each of them, representing a character, must find his place in the group, define his job and, with the others, build a fine log cabin. All construction trades are present. All the construction steps must be performed at the right time. M 1

• The instructor designates the important areas that the participants must consider during the exercise, such as the wood pile as well as the place where the cabin will be built, such as in the centre of the ring.

• There are multiple objectives to this exercise:
  1. To create a character and maintain it during the whole exercise.
  2. To remain very attentive to what the other characters are doing and respect what they have set up.
  3. To observe great precision in gestures and movements.
  4. To create harmony and synergy with the other participants.

• There is no speaking, but the participants may make sounds. They must find logs, cut them, set them in the right places, install windows and doors, and decorate the space.

• To be aware of and follow up what others have already done. For example, to install a first wooden log, then a second at the right height, to take into account when a wall has been built and enter by the door where it was placed.

• The participants should find their place in the group without consulting beforehand, propose situations and be open to the others’ proposals. M 2

Note: It is important to instruct the participants to build the cabin slowly, so that they can all easily follow the evolution.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Mistakes</th>
<th>Corrections and Corrective Exercises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The participant goes through a wall that has been built.</td>
<td>1–2–3–4. The instructor can talk to the participants and correct them as the action is unfolding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The participant does not take it into account that other participants have installed a log at a given height and installs one at the wrong height.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The participant does not stay in character.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The participant lacks precision in handling the construction elements.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**ACTING**

**CINEMA**

**Technical Element Description**

Representation of viewing film screenings.
Exercise focusing on awareness and honesty of emotions.

**Prerequisites**

- Warm-up exercises.
- Acting-level exercises. (See p. 6.)

**Explanation of the Movement**

- Place two rows of chairs. Divide the group into two so that half of the participants act as viewers; the remaining participants act as observers. Afterwards, the groups exchange roles.

- In a cinema, characters attend an evening of film screenings. Several types of films are shown. The characters react to the films, beginning with a realistic level of acting that becomes more and more exaggerated.

- The instructor gives the instructions, and, like an orchestra conductor, indicates the transitions and the types of films shown.

- Once the type of film has been indicated, the participants acting as viewers react and interact. For example, if it is a comedy or a horror movie, the participants must show emotions that are very slight and discreet at first and that become progressively more exaggerated. M 1, M 2

- The objectives of this exercise are:
  - To create a believable character.
  - To be open to ridiculous situations.
  - To be attentive and grasp where the group is in the progression in order to act appropriately and propose going to other levels of acting. To observe one’s neighbour in order to consider his actions and facilitate interaction.
  - To go from the slightest level of acting to the most pronounced.
  - To control the level of acting and the gestures so as to not slight the others, and to be open to their proposals.
Variant

1. Characters in a same environment or in a same situation. For example, movie stars attending an international film festival, children attending a movie at school, a group of bikers, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Mistake</th>
<th>Correction and Corrective Exercise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Participants have a tendency to create characters with low mobility and</td>
<td>1. Reminding the participants to choose characters that can follow the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsiveness.</td>
<td>acting progression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example, playing the elderly by exaggerating them as being centenarians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>becomes complicated when they must interact with other characters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Variant

1. The participants lie on the floor, alongside one another, the tops of their heads touching.
**Explanation of the Movement**

- The participants line up facing a wall. The instructor says a word designating an emotion, a topic or a situation. As soon as they hear the word, the participants turn around and express whatever it inspires in them.

- The participants have a great deal of freedom, but must precisely follow the instructor’s directions. The instructor may, for example, give certain constraints, such as:
  
  - “No talking”;
  - “Only with onomatopoeia”;
  - “Without touching the others”;
  - “Touching the others.”

- When the participant feels that he has no more inspiration about the word given by the instructor, he turns to face the wall and waits for the other participants to be finished and for the instructor to suggest another word.

---

**Technical Element Description**

Improvising from suggested words.

Exercise focusing on responsiveness and conciseness in the flow of action.

**Wedding**
Thank you

Funeral

Baby

Racism

Thank you
Explanation of the Movement

• The participants form a circle. The instructor gives an object to a participant. M 1

• The object represents something hot that the participant must handle while respecting the progression of the acting. The object goes from hand to hand and the instructor tells the participants how hot the object is. Both the size of the object and its temperature increase as it is passed along. The participants must act out this progression and quickly pass it to their neighbour before the object burns their fingers. At the end, the object must move rapidly from hand to hand without being dropped. M 2
Variants

1. Sweet potato.
2. Cold potato.
3. Spicy potato.
4. Fragile potato.

Common Mistakes

1. The participant lacks precision in his movements when he passes the object to his neighbour.
2. The participant is not aware of the degree of emotion that his neighbour previously expressed.

Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1-2. Returning the object to the previous participant and passing it correctly.
ACTING
THREE CHAIRS

Technical Element Description
Representation of various emotions, embodied by each of the chairs.
Exercise focusing on honesty of emotion, consistency of the dramatic situation and awareness.

Explanation of the Movement

• Three chairs are lined up, each representing an emotion. One chair represents joy, the second one anger and the third sadness. M 1

• One at a time, each participant creates a little scenario. As soon as he touches a chair, he must play the emotion that the chair represents and maintain this emotion until he touches another chair. The contact can be made in several ways. The participant is not obliged to sit on the chair, but only be in contact with it. He develops a coherent story with a dramatic narrative comprising a beginning, the introduction of his character, a progression and an end. M 2
Variant
1. Starting with two, then three, participants at once.

Common Mistakes
1. The story is inconsistent.
2. The participant lacks precision in constructing his character.

Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1-2. Reviewing the instructions, such as the consistency of the story and the precision of the characters, and paying special attention during a subsequent exercise.
**ACTING**

**MIME OBJECT**

Technical Element Description
Transforming the use of an object to suit the story.
Exercise focusing on precision of gestures, story consistency and imagination.

**Explanation of the Movement**

- The instructor gives an object to a participant. The participant must use it in various ways, such as transforming a simple stick into a gun, then into an oar, a bow and, to finish, a helicopter blade. The narrative must respect a consistent dramatic progression and the character must have depth and honesty of emotion. **M 1**

**Common Mistakes**

1. The story lacks consistency.
2. The object is overused and lacks dramatic value.

**Corrections and Corrective Exercises**

1-2. The instructor stops the action when he notices participant’s confusion, asking him to take it from the beginning.
ACTING STICKS

Technical Element Description
Creating a choreography by intermingling sticks held between the participants.
Exercise stimulating memory and increasing awareness of the importance of others in a choreography or in a group of movements.

Explanation of the Movement

• Each participant is connected to the other by a stick, each holding one end. The group can be positioned in several ways: in a circle, semicircle or line. M 1

• The music begins and the start is provided by the movement of the participant chosen by the instructor. The movements of the sticks always form lines and shapes, either in height or in length. A second movement is executed. Then a third one, and so on. M 2

• The participants must remember the course that they created, as well as the movements that they executed with the arms, or legs, etc., and without ever letting go of their stick. When several movements are repeated, take away the sticks and start over. This provides choreography with movements. M 3
Variant
1. Choreography with ropes held tight.

Common Mistake
1. The participant does not repeat the same movements and thus causes other participants to be off balance with erroneous movements.

Correction and Corrective Exercise
1. The instructor points out which movement or sequence of movements were done incorrectly.
The mission of Fondation Cirque du Soleil™ is to promote the circus arts as a development tool to help disadvantaged groups, especially at-risk youth, increase their creative potential, social skills and physical capacity. The foundation also ensures that all revenues from the distribution of Cirque du Soleil™ educational material will be reinvested in the company’s social and cultural programs.

Produced in collaboration with the National Circus School, and translated into multiple languages, Basic Techniques in Circus Arts aims to introduce the public to circus arts. As both a technical guide and an educational tool, this document illustrates 177 technical elements drawn from 17 basic circus arts disciplines. Accompanied by video documents, this work offers in-depth expertise and technical content that will enable the delivery of progressive and specialized instruction in a safe environment.