

this ^{*}is (not) the end



FOCUS FRANCE IN RETROSPECT

© NOEMI DE CLERCQ



P. 7

**“Flemish artists have
impeccably high standards
and an extremely
professional attitude
to their work.”**

P. 23



P. 20

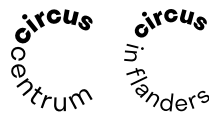
**“Focus broadened
my outlook to Belgium.”**

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this^{*} is (not) the end

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Translations by Jonathan Beaton and Caroline Lefour

INTRODUCTION

IN

2020, as subsidy applications were being written to avail of the new Circus Decree, the minister-president resolved to reinforce the international dynamic of the circus sector. This was achieved by making available 250,000 euro for a three-year collaboration with France. A steering committee comprised of industry representatives was set up from the outset to help shape and monitor the process. With few imposed rules and plenty of space to explore, it was time to roll up our sleeves.

It seemed only logical to focus on deepening our collaboration with a neighbouring country. Especially one with such a big circus tradition and such a far-reaching network in the field. Of course, back then, we didn't know how difficult it would soon become to cross the border to France. The start of the project was not made easy by the sudden onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. National borders became hard borders. Still, in this light it is all the more beautiful to reflect on how the collaboration did – slowly but surely – take shape in the subsequent years. Under the circumstances, progress was more often bumpy than smooth, but in the end it all led to a fine result.

After a short exploratory phase – during which we identified opportunities, needs and challenges with a sectoral survey – it became clear how we wanted to use our budget. The focus would be mainly on the creation of performance opportunities in France for Flemish companies. However, certain clear conditions would be attached to the collaboration. It was important to us that younger and lesser-known companies would also find their way onto French stages. And that with each collaboration, there would be some space to raise awareness of Flemish circus more generally.

We found reliable partners who were willing to go on this adventure with us: La Plateforme 2 Pôles Cirque en Normandie (SPRING festival), Le Prato in Lille and CIRCA, pôle national cirque in Auch-Gers-Occitanie (CIRCA festival). All three welcomed the Flemish circus into their hearts,

and their testimonies speak volumes. Through their generous collaboration, we have bolstered the reputation of Flemish circus in France as being refreshing and unique. Not only did we get the chance to present some of the best work we have to offer, we were also able to highlight the recent developments in Flemish circus.

Additionally, we decided to back the artist collective 'Cour des Belges' at Chalon dans la Rue. For this, we joined forces with our colleagues from Francophone Belgium. With the combined resources, those behind the initiative managed to make the 'Cour des Belges' the place to be in the summer of 2022. Or in Michelin terms, it was *vaut absolument le détour*. Over the course of the four festival days, the many French and foreign programmers were enchanted by the goings on there at the Belgian pavilion. Which resulted in extended performance periods in France for the companies in question.

In short, the resources from Focus France enabled us to put our home-grown circus even more prominently on the map in France. Despite the rocky start, we managed to boost the international profile of the Flemish circus sector in France and create opportunities for our companies. In the coming years, we aim to keep building on our relationships with programmers, as well as our connections with networks like Territoire de Cirque and ONDA.

Circuscentrum, in its coordinating role for Focus France, has seized the opportunity to strengthen ties between the French and Flemish circus sectors and will, in the years ahead, continue to build on the foundations that have been laid thanks to this short-term investment. ★

Noemi De Clercq

Director, Circuscentrum

Gab Bondewel

Coordinator, Focus France

Séverine Van der Stighelen

International relations, Circuscentrum



THE FRENCH COLLABORATION AT A GLANCE

2020

01/12/2020

Initial meeting of the steering committee Focus France.

2023

03/2022

The application for the 'Cour des Belges' is approved without Pol & Freddy. 15feet6 takes over the organisation from them, along with Collectif Malunés.

22-25/03/2022

Thirty French professionals come to Brussels for UP festival's Focus Pro days. Initial discussions with Circa take place.

13-15/05/2022

Yveline Rapeau comes to CIRKL in Leuven, the outline for the first Plateau flamand is sketched out.

20-24/07/2022

'La Cour des Belges' is the place to be at Chalon dans la Rue. It's a collaboration between Flemish and French-speaking companies, Circuscentrum, WBTD and Aires Libres.

24/02/2023

Pitching workshop, part 1: Wim Coessens explains how to best present your new project.

06/03/2023

Pitching workshop, part 2: Practice your presentation for real.

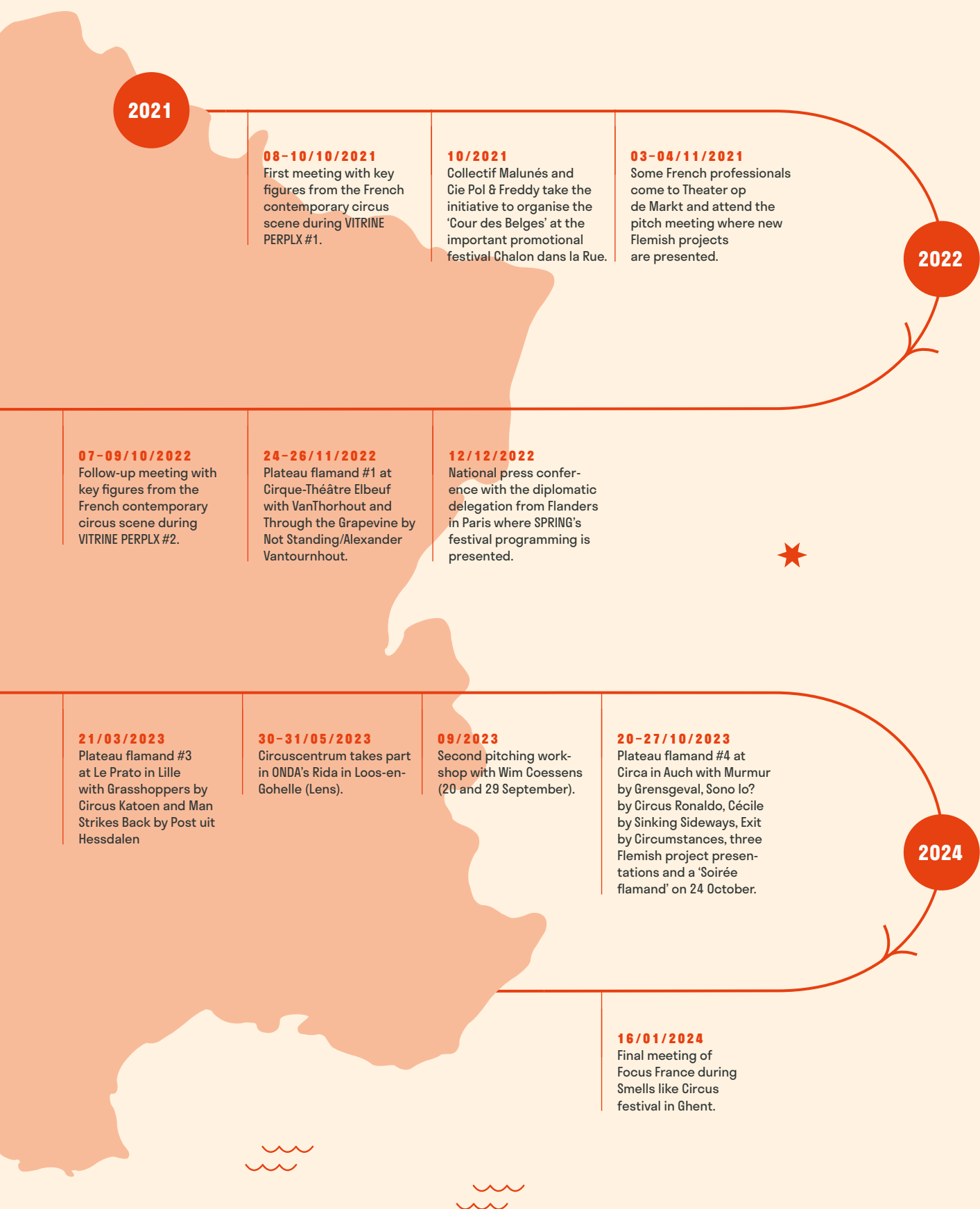
08-11/03/2023

Participation in Pro SPRING by Platforme 2 Pôles Cirque en Normandie, with a professional programme by Circuscentrum linked to four Flemish project presentations on 11/03/2023.

03/2023

Plateau flamand #2 at SPRING with René & Cécile by Sinking Sideways, BITBYBIT by MOVEDBYMATTER & Collectif Malunés and Grasshoppers by Circus Katoen.







The fundamentals and tools

During the initial research phase, key networks and players were identified. By means of a survey and discussions with the circus creation centres, festivals and artists, it was established which relationships were pre-existing, which Flemish companies were already touring and creating in France and what the principle needs were at the time. These surveys were important in gauging how we should best proceed.

A second important step was to invite a number of key figures from the French contemporary circus scene to have an initial meeting in October 2021 during Vitrine PERPLX#1 in Kortrijk. It was there where the outline was sketched for what would come to be called 'Plateau flamand'.

From the beginning of the project, we sought to maintain a long-term perspective. How do we invest the resources from Focus France so that we can keep forging ahead three years in the future? A crucial decision was the investment in a new website: www.cirque-en-flandre.be was launched in May 2022. It is a trilingual website where programmers from Belgium and abroad can find an overview of our Flemish companies and their (latest) shows. We also decided to create a French/English version of Circusmagazine as a calling card abroad. The first edition was ready just in time for us to take it to Chalon dans la Rue, and a second edition followed a year later. The focus of the magazine was not only promotion; it was also a way to make visible what is going on in our sector. And to encourage a dialogue.

It soon became clear that we would also need to come up with an appropriate way to entice the French to discover work from Flanders and Brussels. Indeed, the big challenge in collaborating with France is that there is already a lot happening in circus there, which reduces the need to look elsewhere. And so, from the beginning, we utilised visitor programmes as a means of receiving French professionals. This proved a great success. To realise this approach, we work with festivals and creation centres that have new and interesting work on their programmes. In the long term, we see these encounters as a way to create a network of French professionals, with a view to developing ongoing partnerships. In the short term, they are also a way to boost the visibility and renown of Flemish performers. Over the three years that the project lasted, over 60 French professionals accepted our invitations to festivals in Flanders and Brussels.

French professionals were featured on visitor programmes as part of:

- Vitrine PERPLX 2021
- Theater op de Markt 2021
- MAD Festival 2022 (was cancelled)
- UP festival 2022
- CIRKL 2022
- Vitrine PERPLX 2022
- MAD Festival 2023
- CIRKL 2023
- Vitrine PERPLX 2023
- Theater op de Markt 2023
- Smells like Circus 2024



★ THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

Over the project's three years, dialogues were opened up with many different partners, including:

- **Artcena** (Centre national des arts du cirque, de la rue et du théâtre)
- **ONDA** (Office national de diffusion artistique)
- **Territoir de Cirque**
- **Major festivals:** Circa, Spring, Festival d'Avignon, Chalon dans la Rue
- **Pôles National Cirque:** Le Prato – Lille, Plateforme 2 Pôles Cirque en Normandie (La Brèche – Cherbourg & Cirque-Théâtre d'Elbeuf), pôle national cirque Auch-Gers-Occitanie, Archaos pôle national cirque (BIAC Marseille) ...
- A number of **CNAREPs** (Centre National d'Art de la Rue et de l'Espace Public)
- Fabrique des arts du cirque & de l'itinérance, scène conventionnée d'intérêt national, pôle européen de production : La Grainerie – Toulouse

COUR DES BELGES



In 2021, a number of Flemish circus companies took the initiative to organise a Belgian pavilion at Chalon dans la Rue, one of the most important festivals in France for the promotion of circus and other arts in the public space. With the support of Focus France, they created a pavilion to remember, with seven Flemish companies and five francophone companies taking part. It was an unmissable part of the festival that year at Chalon.

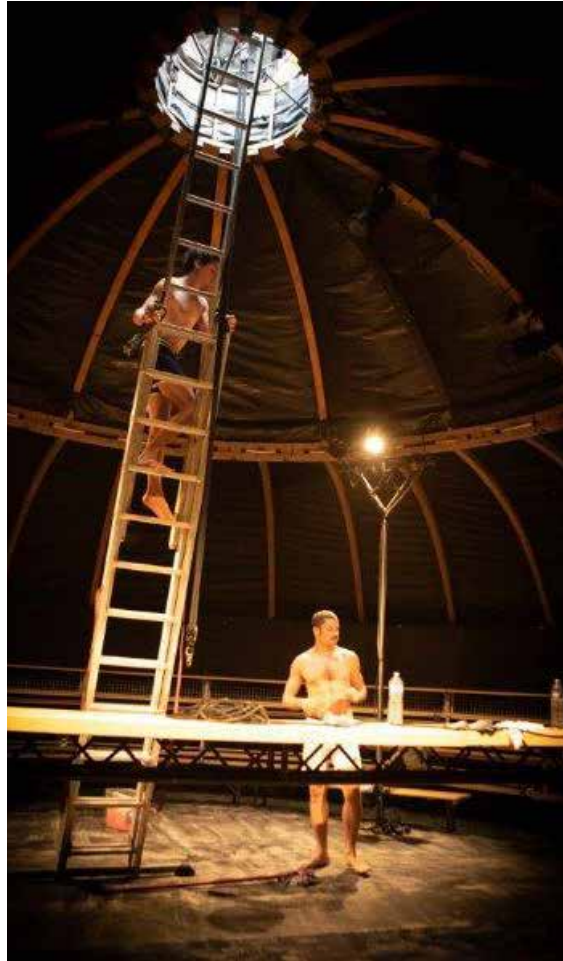


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Toutelaculture.com Mathieu Dochtermann ★ 03/08/2022

The Cour des Belges was the place to be at Chalon dans la Rue 2022. It was buzzing non-stop with a fabulous selection of Belgian troupes giving excellent, upbeat performances on Terrain Vannier.





Companies & performances

15feet6
League & Legend

Adm Vzw
À 2 Mètres

Circus Katoen
Grasshoppers

Collectif Malunés
We Agree To Disagree

De Machienerie
Carnivale

**MOVEDBYMATTER &
Collectif Malunés**
BITBYBIT

Sur Mesure
Barrière

**Carré Curieux,
Cirque Vivant!**
Connexio

Cie Lady Cocktail
To Bee Queen

Cie Vol À L'étalage
Pile Ou Caisse

**Le Cirque Du
Bout Du Mode**
Der Lauf

Tripote La Compagnie
Encore Une Fois

‘WHEN WE PERFORM ABR



ROAD, IT'S OFTEN A RELIEF

We're joined by **Simon Bruyninckx** and **Jasper D'Hondt**, who don't mince their words

It's fair to say they've more than earned their stripes at this point. Simon Bruyninckx as the founder of Collectif Malunés and creator of numerous successful shows (his latest feat: the majestic *BITBYBIT*), and Jasper D'Hondt, first as a performer (with Cirque du Soleil, among others), and later as the founder of 15ft6 and the creator of some wildly popular street theatre shows (most recently the comical roller-skating piece for two *Les Patineurs*). D'Hondt spends his winters in Germany, where he helps shape Palazzo's dinner shows. They were brought together in 2022 by the 'Cour des Belges' at Chalon.

IT'S

early December and we're speaking over Zoom. Jasper beams in from Stuttgart with sleepy eyes ('We're fully in an evening rhythm at the moment') and Simon from Brussels ('I'm just home for two days, then it's back on tour'). While both trained as teeterboard jumpers, the word 'teeterboard' never comes up in this interview. Over the years, these all-round artists have become shining lights in the circus scene of the Low Countries. Not only have they succeeded artistically, but they have also become old hands in the business and organisational side of things. They are well connected with colleagues, programmers, co-producers and subsidy providers. They make what they want, but never alienate their audiences. They dare to take risks, but not without the requisite forethought. In the beginning, the 'Cour des Belges' was one such risk.

SIMON The idea of a 'Cour des Belges' came from Bram [Dobbelaere]. It was when we were making *We agree to disagree* that we discussed the possibility and started writing applications, making calls ... To perform at Chalon, you can't just sign up, you have to bring your own 'funds'. By which I mean, you have to pay for everything yourself, preferably with the support of the country, region or city where your company is based. And then we heard about Focus France, which

made the picture complete. Though I must say, there were originally doubts from the steering group regarding the choice of this festival. Chalon dans la Rue was dismissed by some as being passé, but we were resolute about going there. And our application was rock solid: great shows, the technical specs, etc. We submitted it and soon received a phone call from Chalon to say that we had been selected.'

So, the Cour des Belges had the green light.

SIMON 'Yeah and the great thing was that we ended up being the biggest pavilion at the festival. Normally there are five or six smaller squares at Chalon. In 2022 there were just three, and, of those, we were the largest. We drew in massive crowds.'

JASPER 'It was also due to the timing: after the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation had decided to have fewer squares at the festival. One very large square was better for them. Us too, of course.'

SIMON 'Bram had to drop out as one of the organisers because Cie Pol & Freddy had already performed at Chalon the previous year. So we asked Jasper if he could step in. Jasper oversaw the programme and the budgets, and he did a great job. We hired people for technical and production support, an administrative assistant, ... We suddenly had to put on a pretty big festival out of nothing. It was really impressive.'

PHOTOS
Jakob Rosseel
Maarten Verhelst

Most programme coordinators stayed at our square all day.

Can you paint a picture of the Belgian square?

SIMON 'The Malunés tent served as the concert hall and bar. All around it, the companies had their stages. There were food trucks. The programme began at 10 a.m. and went on until 2 at night. Non-stop. It was amazing, but extremely exhausting.'

JASPER 'In retrospect, our square was actually the whole Chalon programme. *We were Chalon.*'

SIMON 'Most programmers stayed at our square all day. It really was a great success. But I never thought it would be so much work. There's an enormous amount of work involved.'

What was the funding situation?

SIMON 'We received 44,000 euro (+ transportation costs) from Flanders and 30,000 from Wallonia. A Belgian project with money from Flanders and Wallonia – hard to get off the ground, in the beginning. But eventually we had 74,000 euro to work with. That's actually very little. If we were to pay everyone involved properly, we would have easily had a budget of 400,000 euro.'

JASPER 'For a long time we thought we were going to make a loss.'

SIMON 'If we knew that so many people were going to show up, we would have hired a proper draught beer station, things like that. We were really overwhelmed by the crowds; sometimes there were 1,500 people dancing in our tent. It was really *quelque chose*.'

Did it all pay off in the end? Did it lead to bookings?

SIMON 'It's been incredible. I think that all the Flemings and Walloons who performed at our Cour have been performing constantly in France ever since.'

JASPER 'The person who once said that Chalon was passé deserves a kick up the bum. As for 15ft6: in the first year after Chalon, I think we recouped all our budget through sales. 70,000 from our company alone. Which just goes to show: that small investment from Flanders paid for itself twice over in no time. The return is

really huge.'

SIMON 'If we ask programmers, "where did you see us?", the answer is always Chalon. Sometimes Auch. We performed for 50 French programmers a day. That's 200 in total. Many of them want to book us but can't because we're fully booked up for now.'

JASPER 'Now the difficulty is *not performing* in France. We have to deliberately keep periods open in our tour so that we can also perform in countries like Germany and the UK; we don't want to lose our network there. Then there's also the fact that the Olympic Games are taking place in France in 2024. Two of our shows have a sports theme, so all the festivals want to book us.'

SIMON 'But Chalon really worked out well for the other companies, too.'

What's your advice for new companies looking to put together a proper tour?

And not only in Belgium, but in France, too?

Do you have any tips?

SIMON 'In Belgium, programmers are really accessible and down to earth. Don't hesitate to call them up, ask questions ... Involve them in your creative phase, see what they make of your show. Now, you don't want to censor yourself, of course, but you do want to ensure that the show is 'tourable'. Unless you're happy not playing anywhere – that's up to you. Every time we create a new show, I call a number of programmers and circus creation centres and present our plan to them. They will often share their feedback, which can really help us to move forward. Once your show is finished, you might 'get stuck' in the Flemish circuit. You have to try and break through, but that's not easy. French programmers won't go out of their way to see your show in Flanders. So you have to perform at a festival that has a good number of international programmers. The UP Festival in Brussels, for example. And that's it, really.'

JASPER 'Theater op de Markt, too, to some extent.'

SIMON 'Yes, the north of France is represented at Theater op de Markt – Amiens, Le Boulon – but then you play at that one French festival and that's where the buck stops, because no other

programmers go there. There's no snowball effect. In France, you have to be at CIRCA, SPRING, Sotteville, ...'

JASPER 'Gevleugelde Stad in Ypres can also lead places.'

SIMON 'The circumstances are far from ideal, but indeed: if you have a small, relatively cheap show, you can certainly get some performance dates there.'

How did 15t6 reach the international market?

JASPER 'Our international breakthrough came thanks to a sort of exchange project between Miramiro, FiraTarrega [in Spain] and Great Yarmouth in the UK.'

SIMON 'For us it was thanks to Gwendolien [Sabbe] when we were still a new company. She forced us into some European project or other and we wound up performing in various international locations all of a sudden. You really need that kind of help.'

That makes me wonder: is it actually enjoyable performing abroad?

JASPER 'I'm going to say something that people might not like to hear, but for us, Flemish audiences are the least preferable. I think a lot of artists feel that way. When we perform abroad, it's often a relief.'

SIMON 'You don't even have to go far: the Netherlands, Wallonia, ... and audiences are more lively.'

JASPER 'That might be one of the reasons that our shows end up being so strong: we test everything in Flanders. At the *League & Legend* try-outs, I really thought: this isn't going to work. I kept polishing it until we performed abroad and realised that the audience was totally on board with it.'

SIMON 'You get the feeling there's no culture in Flanders.'

JASPER 'Or indeed too much: that people are too spoilt in terms of culture.'

SIMON 'I don't know. If you look at France, culture is really a part of life there. Everyone goes to the theatre there. While in Flanders the theatres are emptying! There has been too little investment for years now.'

JASPER 'If you ask me, the best audiences are in



Simon



Jasper

Spain, Italy and Germany. There they are the most exuberant. For street performances in particular, that really makes a difference. You have to feel your audience. But in Flanders you don't get much back from the audience. I think that many artists experience this, but people don't talk about it much.'

And a big foreign tour: is it fun?

JASPER 'It's exhausting ...'

SIMON '... if you're 18, it's all hunky-dory.'

JASPER '... but after a while it begins to weigh you down. With *League & Legend*, we have adapted our summer rhythm: we work in blocks of 5 to 6 weeks of intensive touring, followed by 10 days, or 2 weeks, that we leave free. In the past we wouldn't have even taken weekends off.'

SIMON 'Recently, with Malunés, we have often been performing regularly at festivals we attended as young'uns. Back then we thought, 'wow, this is amazing!', but now we're less thrilled. We're less cool and more sensible than we used to be. Now you spend more time in your caravan or at a coffee bar than going partying until the wee hours.'

JASPER 'That's not a recent development in my case.' (laughs)

That's the crazy thing, though. Your goal as an artist is to perform a lot, but if you perform a lot, it starts to weigh you down.

SIMON 'Things are never perfect. You're either performing too much or too little.'

JASPER 'It's a constant search for balance.' ★

ADM VZW

« Chevaucher les turbulences »



Au cœur d'une cour des belges chaleureuse et pleine de douceur de vivre, Jesse Huygh et Rocio Gacete de la compagnie ADM VZW nous offrent une générique démonstration de complicité acrobatique. Mais plus qu'un simple exercice de mât chinois, leur spectacle à deux mètres nous invite à questionner les limites que la malice peut imposer au corps de l'artiste et à redécouvrir la force que l'on peut puiser dans l'acte. Au-delà de la performance physique, c'est une attendrissante progression que ce duo traverse : découvrir ses limites, les dépasser et apprendre à les apprécier. Jesse et Rocio s'approprisent progressivement, gravitent autour de ce lien de deux mètres qui les relie tout en étant qu'il les contraint, se cherchent et s'entraident jusqu'à arriver à une belle synchronisation. Une complicité qui se déploie pleinement sur le mât, mais aussi sur l'ensemble du dispositif scénique : la remorque défilée d'un camion qui devient entièrement sûre de jeu, qui permet de prendre de la hauteur en douceur, d'apprécier les pauses que la malice impose pour mieux retrouver le mât ensuite. Grâce à leur complicité fraternelle, ponctuée de chamailleries et d'entraide, ces deux acrobates réussiront à faire des limites respiratoires de l'un, une nouvelle forme d'équilibre. Un spectacle rythmé autant par les battements de cœur des deux acrobates que par les applaudissements d'un public charmé.

C.C.

PASTILLE 62 À deux mètres, jeudi 11 h 45, vendredi 16 h 40 et 19 h 50, samedi 10 h 50 et 19 h 50, dimanche 11 h 40.

À deux mètres, c'est la longueur du fil qui les relie... un spectacle tout en complicité, c'est la longueur du fil qui les relie... un spectacle tout en complicité. Photo JSL/JCC

C¹¹ LADY COCKTAIL

Quand la ruche vire à gauche

Elle ne manque pas d'air, la reine. Filée, sûre d'elle et parfaitement équilibrée, elle ne laisse planer aucun doute quant à qui est la patronne à la ruche. Sauf que du côté des petites ouvrières, la révolte gronde. Une rébellion syndicale d'urgence est convoquée dont l'issue est sans appel : les abeilles - comprendre les spectateurs, tout à fait partants pour la lutte et le dégoût de patrons - veulent leur part de gelée royale et se mettent en grève.

Évasion sur trapèze

Coup dur pour cette reine à la noblesse assez improbable, qui ne va néanmoins pas remettre en question ses pratiques managériales. Aidée de Boris, valet totalement asservi et bien malmené, la reine expose ses arguments fallacieux et provocateurs au gré d'acrobaties sur les alvéoles d'une ruche en cordage, et tente même une sorte d'évasion sur trapèze. Mais s'il faut savoir arrêter une grève, le vent du changement n'a-t-il pas soufflé trop fort pour que la reine reste indétrônée ?

Emilie BOUSSEAU

PASTILLE 62 30 Rue Queen, Promenade Sainte-Marie, jusqu'à dimanche à 14 h 30 et 17 h 30.



PRATIQUE

Tout le programme des spectacles in et off

PAGES 10 À 15

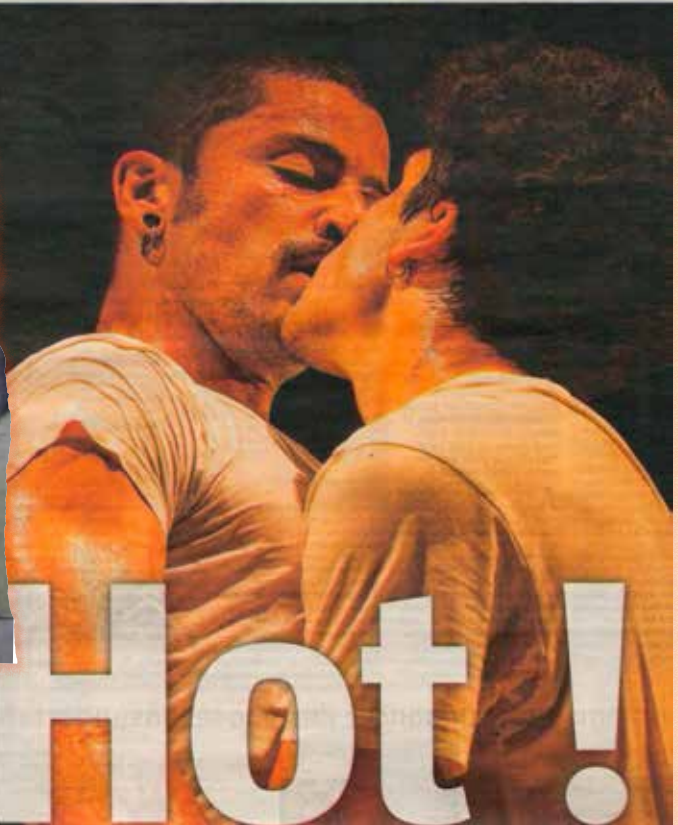
CHALON DANS LA RUE



PASTILLE 62 Théâtre 2, premier Vendredi et samedi à 12 h 50.



Les fesses à l'air dans la cour des Belges... Les frites, ça chauffe ! Photo JSL/Nicolas DESROCHES





The figures

A year after the 'Cour des Belges' at Chalon, Circuscentrum organised a little survey of the participating artists to form a picture of the effect of the Belgian pavilion on the festival. Thanks to the cooperation of the twelve participating companies, we are able to draw the following conclusions.

* * * * *

200

According to the participating companies, the visibility of their creations at Chalon dans la Rue led to 200 shows that were either performed in 2023 or are now planned for 2024. Half of these are from Flemish circus companies, the other half from Walloon companies.

600

Taking into account all the confirmed shows by these companies in 2023 and 2024, we're talking about more than 600 shows spread across Belgium (60), Canada (10), Switzerland (17), the Czech Republic (12), Germany (70), Denmark (5), Spain (30), France (313), Hungary (2), Italy (11), Luxembourg (1), the Netherlands (21), Portugal (7), Romania (4), Sweden (3), Slovenia (2) and the UK (38).

171

The 'Cour des Belges' provided performance opportunities mainly in France (accounting for 171 performances), but also in the UK (9), Spain (9), Switzerland (7) and Belgium (3).

350.000

Overall, it can be concluded that Chalons

raised more than €500,000 in buyouts for the companies present. Looking at the Flemish companies alone, we're talking about almost €350,000.



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**PERFORMING
IS THE BEST
ADVERTISEMENT**
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Circus Katoen and Sinking Sideways are two collectives that, thanks to Focus France, were able to cross the border and give their all to our neighbours down south. We sat down with Willem Balduyck of Circus Katoen to find out how things went for them. Dries Vanwalle of Sinking Sideways joins us via the internet.

Tom Permentier

Circus Katoen is the brainchild of Willem and his partner-in-everything Sophie van der Vuurst de Vries, who hails from Rotterdam. One remarkable aspect of this company is its ecological character, which is present in both the practical side of things as well as on stage. At Chalon-sur-Saône and at SPRING festival in Elbeuf and Lille, the duo presented their show *Grasshoppers* under the banner of Focus France. It's a unique show that starts with a tidy roll of turf and ends with clumps of grass flying in all directions. Sinking Sideways is a dance acrobatics trio in which Dries is accompanied by Raff Pringuet and the German performer Xenia Bannuscher. They were also present at SPRING in Elbeuf, where they presented the poetic René. In Rouen they shared their latest production Cécile before crossing over to Auch to present the latter show at the prestigious CIRCA festival.

France is often seen as the country to follow when it comes to circus policy. Rightly so, don't you think?

WILLEM 'I wouldn't necessarily go that far, or at least not anymore, but there are many festivals there and different performance opportunities. If you get into the circuit there, you're up and away. Emphasis on *if*: it's not so straightforward to get in there.'

Did Focus France change that for you?

DRIES 'For us, yes, I would say so. Many programmers saw our performance and we are now being booked more in France. I don't know if that was also the case for you, Willem ...'

WILLEM 'Only one performance opportunity arose out of our show at Elbeuf, but 'La Cour des Belges' in Chalon led to us receiving one request after another. About 20 so far, of which we have been able to accept about 10, and the requests are still coming in.'

DRIES 'We were unlucky that our time in Elbeuf coincided with a national public transport strike ...'

WILLEM '... which meant that there were practically no programmers who were able to attend.'

DRIES 'It was a great show for us, though. We were notified ahead of time that there would be no programmers present, so we were afraid we'd be performing for just a handful of people, but in the end the hall was packed with "normal" circus fans.'

Less stressful that way, I suppose?

DRIES 'I've never performed for an audience of only programmers, but I have heard that it's not nice at all.'

WILLEM 'It's true. I did that years ago when Circus Katoen was with CircusNext in Paris. We were also injured at the time, which meant the show had to be adjusted. We thought we might get our start in France at that time, but it was not to be.'

The fact that it's so difficult to break through in France ... does it have something to do with French chauvinism? 'First our circus?'

WILLEM 'I don't know if it's chauvinism necessarily, but the circus scene in France is already bursting at the seams. There are companies that create a lot but almost never perform. As a foreign artist, you can count yourself lucky if you are booked instead of a French company, even if you have made some contacts.'

DRIES 'Plus, there are a lot of circus colleges in France, and those who study there are a step ahead of the rest, because they come into contact with programmers very early on. I saw this in Auch: all the circus students from France are there – primarily to see shows, but also to start their networks.'

What was it like for you to perform in Auch as a humble Belgian?



↑ Willem (left) and Sophie (right), Circus Katoen
© Michiel Devijver

→ Dries (left) and Xenia (right), Sinking Sideways
© Michiel Devijver

DRIES 'It was a dream of mine to perform there one day, and I never expected that we would get there with the second show of our burgeoning company, which was only six months old at the time. Since October 2021, when we were still doing our first show, *René*, we had been sending emails to the organisation of CIRCA, but never heard back. Then, when we played SPRING festival in Normandy with Focus France, we suddenly did get a response from Auch. The programmer wanted to come and watch. That didn't work out due to the strike, but in the end we still ended up in the selection for CIRCA. It was a really wild experience to be able to perform there. I was walking around thinking: "what am I doing here?" Pretty stressful, but mostly totally insane. It was our coolest experience from Focus France.'

How would you describe the 'Cour des Belges', Willem?

WILLEM 'A kind of market square with gravel, on which there were two circus tents, and all around it areas for performing. Collectif Malunés headed up that project and ran a bar there, among other things. Sometimes they bit off more than they

could chew, but thanks to the energy they put into it, the Belgian artists who performed there are now reaping the benefits. We are really grateful to the whole Focus France organisation; it can't have been an easy undertaking!'

DRIES (*nods in agreement*) 'I wasn't there myself, but last weekend someone in Germany spoke to me about it and told me about the great atmosphere at 'La Cour des Belges'. In fact, I've only heard good things about that initiative.'

WILLEM 'The only thing was, the high temperatures weren't ideal for all performers.'

And what about the French audiences, how were they?

WILLEM 'Very good. French audiences are very respectful. We performed our show for young children in the schoolyard and they were quiet as mice. I can't imagine the same in the Netherlands!'

I do notice a cultural difference when it comes to French circus, though. I often find it a bit theatrical. Or is that just a cliché, perhaps?

WILLEM 'It used to be that when I went to a show and felt it was a bit "French", this carried the negative connotation of it being rather wordy. Since then I have come to realise that the French circus



landscape is so multifaceted that this judgement doesn't hold up for all productions. France has a rich circus tradition, but Belgium also has a strong reputation when it comes to dance and performance. In that area, France really looks up to Belgium. In that regard, I can imagine that a dance performance like that of *Sinking Sideways* might get into the French indoor circuit, while a show like ours might still be met with resistance.'

DRIES 'That's true, but I find it hard to say whether a show like ours would be experienced as really innovative in the French circus scene.'

When I speak about circus in Belgium, I still feel the urge to explain that it is no longer (just) red-nosed clowns and plumed ponies. I get the feeling that the modern image of the circus has only recently started to sink in here among the general populace. How is it in France?

WILLEM 'The French went through that stage 15 years ago. So they're much further ahead than us in that regard.'

DRIES 'France of course has the oldest circus college in Europe, and circus has been seen as

a fully-fledged artform there for a long time already. A silly example, perhaps, but in the streets there you see signs everywhere for circus schools and circus venues. You don't see that here yet.'

Is Focus France worth repeating with a new batch of Belgian artists, or would you like to focus on another European country?

DRIES 'I think it definitely warrants repeating, because gaining a foothold in France remains very difficult. At the same time, there are also many countries, for example in northern or eastern Europe, where I have absolutely no idea how I would get a foot in the door, let alone who I should write to.'

WILLEM 'Circus Katoen has been on the circuit for 10 years now, and until recently we had played everywhere in Europe except France. At the same time, I have also heard of companies that have been around as long as us who have only played in France, because that's where they studied. Some of those companies play more in France than we do in the rest of Europe. For that reason alone, I think it's important that French audiences see Belgian circus.' ★

If you get into the circuit there, you're up and away.



plateau **flamand**



Circuscentrum is expanding Plateau flamand together with a number of renowned partners from France. These French partners include la plateforme 2 pôles cirque en Normandie (La Brèche in Cherbourg & Cirque-Théâtre d'Elbeuf), Le Prato in Lille and Circa in Auch. In each case, Circuscentrum will organise a focus on Flemish work, linked to a professional programme. In this way, visibility is created for circus from Flanders. The idea is to pair young talent with more established artists and to connect with the DNA of the places we visit.

1

CIRQUE-THÉÂTRE D'ELBEUF





Yveline Rapeau

*Director, 2 Pôles Cirque en Normandie,
Pôle National des Arts du Cirque*

★ **How would you describe Flemish circus from an artistic viewpoint? What's different about it?**

Flemish artists have impeccably high standards and an extremely professional attitude to their work. That's the case for all their projects, ranging from Alexander Vantournhout to creations for a young audience. They are meticulously attentive to all the details needed to write a show, including the subject, physical requirements, and sound and light. Flemish artists are particularly mature regardless of their age, whether they're young like Sinking Sideways or more experienced. They can interpret their intention artistically, from the initial presentation of their project to the final result. They keep their promises every single time. I also appreciate the artistic quality of their writing and their radical style. For example, they use full nudity on stage. They use it when they need it and it's always justified by the subject. Their radical choices sometimes shock or disconcert, sometimes divide the audience, but they challenge everyone, each in their own category.

★ **How would you sum up this Focus for cooperation with Flemish circus?**

I was delighted to participate in a global movement for the development of Flemish circus creation and ensure their talents are showcased. In fact, my relations with Flemish artists go way back before this Focus and will continue into the future. Alexander Vantournhout and Grensgeval are just two examples of artists I've been working with for many years. The Focus project is fantastic because it makes funding available and gives more exposure to institutions and amplifies visibility for programme curators. But I would have preferred it to be longer and more regular. Circuscentrum had to concentrate their resources on this Focus, so the cooperation won't be extended. I'll be left to my own devices again in 2024 when I'm receiving several Flemish teams - and for tent circus too. I think it would have been fairer if there had been funding, perhaps less but guaranteed, given the ongoing and regular contributions our 2 Pôles de Cirque platform has made to support the creation and promotion of Flemish artists.

★ **What were the strengths of this Focus?**

The means of communication mobilised by Circuscentrum to promote the Focus and its artists were excellent. Their strategy is sound. The programme was launched with the two major events of the Normandy platform and wound up with CIRCa. Using the two festivals to showcase Focus ensures good exposure and wide media coverage. They are excellent project managers. They are also remarkably effective when evaluating the programme and reporting statistics. The team is readily available and supports their partners.

★ **You were already familiar with Flemish circus, but do you think the Focus project made it easier for other French programme curators to access Flemish circus creation?**

I'm well aware that this Flemish Focus was very useful and important for other programme curators. This programme showcasing Flemish circus was helpful for colleagues who were not yet scouting or in extended partnerships. I was already promoting them, but it wasn't enough to ensure the reach of Flemish artists all over France.

★ **What was the Normandy public's reaction to the Focus shows?**

Cécile by Sinking Sideways was an outstanding success. The audience at the Centre Dramatique National de Normandie-Rouen gave the performance a standing ovation. It was the same at the Cirque-Théâtre for *BITBYBIT*, despite some reservations in the audience at the beginning. The audience followed the performance and were completely convinced by the end. For more radical forms such as *René* by Sinking Sideways at the Cirque-Théâtre, the audience was much more divided.

★ **How do you see the future for Flemish circus after this Focus project?**

I'm delighted to see that this Focus project will stimulate creation in Flanders. There will be even more new talents to discover in the future. Support from national institutions is especially important for performance artists working in marginal artistic areas. It ensures their work is promoted and that they tour, which encourages them to carry on creating. And we'll keep booking them! ★

3

LE PRATO LILLE

Circus Katoen
Grasshoppers

Post uit
Hessdalen
Man Strikes
Back





Célia Deliau

Director, Le Prato, Pôle National Cirque de Lille

★ **How would you describe Flemish circus from an artistic viewpoint? What's different about it?**

I won't comment on the artistic aspect, because I've only seen a few Flemish circus performances so it's not a representative sample. On the other hand, I can say their companies produce differently. They have a broader outlook. Unlike their French counterparts where the creative director only contributes to the artistic aspect, the Flemish teams are more integrated, and the creative director is involved in various aspects including policy and administration. I also have the impression that Flemish circus companies try to make their shows accessible to all, without creating any complications for anyone involved. I met the Side-Show team as part of this Focus. They try to cater to people of varying capacities and cognitive aptitudes. In France, associations organise bringing groups to performances, but that's not the same as ensuring everyone can come to the performances from the creation stage.

★ **How would you sum up this Focus for cooperation with Flemish circus?**

I wouldn't call it a final report because we've only just begun to create a connection. I hope our relations with Circuscentrum continue. As a programme curator, I discovered shows I'd never seen before. It's true that Lille and Belgium are very close, but it makes scouting much easier when someone says: "There's a festival at such and such a place on that date. I know you have a young audience in mind, so check out such and such performance by that company." As a result, Lille audiences discovered companies they never would have otherwise. For example, following Circuscentrum's advice, I programmed *Man Strikes Back* by Post Uit Hessdalen at Le Prato theatre in March. I trusted them completely which indicates how useful the cooperation is for me. The funding also made it possible for Le Prato theatre to double the programme, which they couldn't afford alone. Having funding which contributes to part of the booking fee is important for me. Funding for travel costs for shows coming from

Belgium to Lille is not much use. I explained that in my discussions with Circuscentrum and they were very attentive to our needs. They were constantly open to our opinions and suggestions. Our thoughts were taken into account every time and when their response was negative, they always gave us a lucid explanation.

★ **What did the Focus project change for you?**

Focus broadened my outlook to Belgium. For example, when companies contact me to discuss playing at Le Prato theatre, and they mention organising a tour with Normandy and the Grand-Est regions, I suggest they check out what's available in Belgium. It's closer than Châlons-en-Champagne after all! In a way, it points to the lack of connection and networks between our two countries. The companies often say they would never have thought of it. There is a language barrier, which I hadn't fully anticipated: there are no French-speaking shows programmed in Flanders and vice versa!

★ **What is your ideal future for the Flemish Circus Focus? How would you like to see it develop?**

I'm frustrated it's over. I would like to see it renewed for another three years. We'd reached a stage where we could discuss shows and programming. If we had another three years, we could look at organising collaborative creative projects and supporting a mutual residency programme for example. It would be ideal to organise financial support for helping creative direction teams, with a panel choosing two teams – one French and one Flemish – and help them tour. The possibility to support creation together is lacking. The border's not tangible, but it's there.

★ **What tools do you suggest for making the cooperation more effective in the future?**

I made two suggestions. Firstly, display a list of performances on the Circuscentrum website. It's very helpful. A personalised recommendation is even more precious. Secondly, the fact that Circuscentrum organises the travel and accommodation and all we have to do is book them and pay our share makes our job very easy. It saves us a lot of time. ★

4

CIRCA FESTIVAL 2023

Grensgeval
Murmur

Circus Ronaldo
Sono lo?

Sinking Sideways
Cécile

Circumstances
Exit





Stéphanie Bulteau

Director, Circa, Pôle National des Arts du Cirque d'Auch

★ **How would you describe Flemish circus from an artistic viewpoint? What's different about it?**

Flemish artists use highly contemporary forms, which can't be said of all European circuses. And they're not only strong in the circus realm. Flemish dance and theatre are recognised for their excellent quality and have been for a long time. Their circus is finally being recognised and receiving the same acclaim. This is due to active public policy which is instrumental in providing support to allow unique experiences to develop.

★ **How would you sum up this Focus project for cooperation with Flemish circus?**

Firstly, I appreciated that the cooperation was over an extended period. We didn't have just two or three months. We were able to build our relationship with Circuscentrum over at least a year. It was a year of extraordinarily rich discussions about their priorities and how they want to showcase Flemish circus. We even discussed the choice of the shows in length, because I requested we work together and share the challenges. It was the only way to go about it. In a cooperative project, we had to be prepared to defend and promote the choices we made together. I'm delighted with the results of our collaboration for the CIRCa festival. We even managed to slip several future creations in the project presentations. The Flemish-themed event at the festival bar was a high point for meeting and sharing. It was a lot of work for the Circuscentrum team. I was impressed. They went the extra mile, even printing a special brochure for CIRCa for example. It was such a success that it has stimulated ideas in other countries!

★ **What did the Focus change for you?**

Most importantly, this Focus was a chance for me to discover artistic teams, both the teams we received for CIRCa and others I investigated and met. I wasn't very familiar with Flemish circus, apart from several big names that are already well-known in France. That's changed. I also learnt more about the cultural players in the region. I'm going to Ghent for the Smells Like Circus festival in January. I probably wouldn't have planned to go if we hadn't worked with Circuscentrum.

★ **Has participating in the Focus made it easier for you to follow what's happening in Flanders, and go there?**

Absolutely, and it works both ways. For a start, it will be easier for Flemish organisers to contact me about a project. Now that we've worked together, we have taken time to talk, and we understand each other's issues better, I will be more open to their recommendations, more so than from someone I don't know.

★ **What do you think the Focus changed for the Flemish teams?**

It's too early to say what effect it will have for the artistic teams that came here. We need a year or two to get some perspective. It's a long-term effect. In any case, the teams we hosted have already said they'd like to come back next year, even if they're not on the programme. They see the festival as an opportunity for fuelling their creativity and meeting people. As an attempt to create connections, it was a success! It established a connection with the Circuscentrum team too. French organisers see them as a potential partner now.

★ **What is your ideal future for the Flemish Circus Focus?**

First of all, I'm going to the Smells Like Circus festival to see what's happening over there. Then it depends if the Flemish authorities want to extend the cooperation. Renewing the collaboration is possible but I think we need to take time to assess first. Finally, a Focus every four years would be a promising idea, to allow for new forms and teams to develop. I don't think it would be pertinent to do it every year.

★ **What tools do you suggest for making the cooperation more effective in the future?**

I think it all went very well. The Circuscentrum team are very responsive. It might have been a good idea to organise a big videoconference before the festival with everyone involved, the artists, Circuscentrum and us. I think it would have created a team spirit, including between the companies. I know they meet a lot with the companies about the Focus, and with the cultural bodies to organise collaboration on the projects we choose. ★

plateau flamand

PLATEAU FLAMAND ❶ Cirque-Théâtre d'Elbeuf

	AUDIENCE	PERFORMANCES	DATE
VanThorhout – Not Standing / Alexander Vantournhout	84	1	25.11.2022
Through the Grapevine – Not Standing / Alexander Vantournhout	410	2	25 + 26.11.2022
TOTAL	494	3	

PLATEAU FLAMAND ❷ SPRING festival

BITBYBIT – MOVEDBYMATTER & Collectif Malunés	573	3	17 → 19.03.2023
René – Sinking Sideways	83	1	24.03.2023
Cécile – Sinking Sideways	381	2	17 + 18.03.2023
Grasshoppers – Circus Katoen	272	2	24 + 25.03.2023
TOTAL	1422	8	

PLATEAU FLAMAND ❸ Le Prato

DOUBLE BILL	Grasshoppers – Circus Katoen	88	1	21.03.2023
	Man Strikes Back – Post uit Hessdalen			
TOTAL		88	2	

PLATEAU FLAMAND ❹ Circa Festival

Sono io? – Circus Ronaldo	708	3	21 → 23.10.2023
Murmur– Grensgeval	688	6	20 → 22.10.2023
EXIT – Circumstances	1235	3	26 + 27.10.2023
Cécile – Sinking Sideways	1170	3	23 → 25.10.2023
TOTAL	3801	15	

« The Focus project is fantastic because it makes funding available and gives more exposure to institutions and amplifies visibility for programmers. »

YVELINE RAPEAU



FOCUS FRANCE

Tom Van Mele
Maarten Verhelst
PHOTOS

through the eyes of
Emma and Anne-Agathe,
two circus distributors



Flanders has very few distribution agencies that focus exclusively on circus. Two of them have been active for many years and recently moved to within a stone's throw of each other in Gentbrugge: Anne-Agathe Prin (Saki Productions) and Emma Ketels (JE BURO). Both of them also experienced the Focus France project first-hand.

Anne-Agathe moved into distribution quite naturally following her career as a performer, during which she juggled with Gandini Juggling, among others. Today, she works with Cie Ea Eo, Sinking Sideways and her husband, Guy Waerenburgh, who has a global hit under his belt with *Der Lauf*. Emma, who was involved with Cirkus in Beweging from a young age, had always been more drawn to the planning and organisational side of things. With her agency JE BURO, she has been distributing the performances of several circus companies since 2014, including Bert & Fred, Collectif Malunés and De Stijle, Want...

Are you both focused on distribution alone or do you do production, too?

EMMA 'On this topic it's worth noting that in France they say "production" when we would say "preproduction", i.e. the beginning-beginning of the project: finding money and partners, writing applications and so on. And what we call "production" – all the practical things once the project is up and running – they call *la logistique de tournée* [touring logistics].'

ANNE-AGATHE 'I do the entire pre-production and distribution of up to three companies. I don't know why, but I apparently can't permit myself to outsource to a *boîte de diffusion* that would sell more shows. Probably because I'm too committed to the companies I work with.'

EMMA 'I totally agree that you can't do this for too many companies; you want to offer commitment and quality. Despite the fact that JE BURO's focus is on distribution, it's still a tailored service every time. It's also necessary to be involved from the very beginning of a show. From the very

first idea, even. I also support other companies by providing advice and co-writing the applications for Circus Decree subsidies. I also see it as my role to keep people's feet on the ground during the creative phase. Certain dreams or ideas are wonderful but completely unmarketable. A show has to be "distributable", especially if they want to be able to tour it around a lot.'

ANNE-AGATHE 'I totally agree, but I must say there have been times when I've been flabbergasted. Some shows seem truly unfeasible and unrealistic during the creation phase but end up having a great tour. Take, for example, *We Agree to Disagree* by Collectif Malunés. During its creation, I really thought it had a poor chance of touring.'

'One premiere date is not enough.'

ANNE-AGATHE 'With *Der Lauf*, our goal was not to have a mega-tour, but we did have a *stratégie de fin de production*: we wanted the show to be at the UP festival in Brussels, we wanted to play at La Maison de Jonglage in the Paris region – that's where we invite ONDA [Office national de diffusion artistique, ed.] and all the important French programmers – and we wanted to play at some key promotional festivals. It's also crucial to realise that your pre-production is not over once you've finalised your creation budget. No, your pre-production phase is only over when you have 10 to 15 buyouts, or when you know you will be at important festivals, that there is enough visibility. You have to have enough preview dates for programmers. Having just one premiere date is really not enough.'

Let's talk a bit about Focus France. You experienced it first-hand?

ANNE-AGATHE 'Yes and I thought it was brilliant. I was aware of the project from its early beginnings. With Collectif Malunés, we wanted to organise a "Cour des Belges" at Chalon dans la Rue anyway, with or without external help. But Focus France was the ideal opportunity to really dare to dream and organise it to perfection – the extra funds were certainly welcome. Even Wallonia co-invested. And I have to say: it was a gigantic success. All the programmers – and



there are a lot of them in attendance at Chalon – they all really wanted to be there, many even for several days in a row. We were the talk of the town. And, in our case, it also led to a lot of new performance dates.’

EMMA ‘The “Cour des Belges” was indeed a great and successful project. We really had our own festival village within the larger festival, and it was packed every day.’

ANNE-AGATHE ‘The other initiatives within Focus France I followed less closely, but I found them really valuable too. I distinctly remember walking around Vitrine PERPLX with Guy; we had planned it as a holiday trip. Suddenly I saw 28 French programmers descending on the place; they had been invited as part of Focus. There went my holiday! *(laughs)* So, yes, I only have praise for the project.’

The last major activity in connection with Focus France was last October with a ‘Plateau flamand’ at CIRCA Festival in Auch, one of Europe’s leading circus festivals.

ANNE-AGATHE ‘That was a great success as well. *Sono Io?* by Circus Ronaldo was the hit of the festival. Many French programmers didn’t even know them prior to that – can you imagine? After all these years, they finally discovered them. But it was also a giant opportunity for Sinking Sideways, Grensgeval and Circumstances, being there. You knew that dozens of programmers were seeing your show – I hope that translates into a lot of performance dates for everyone.’

The big question now is: what comes next after this project?

EMMA ‘Now is just beginning.’

ANNE-AGATHE ‘Now we have to push on. That will require further resources, of course.’

EMMA ‘In the end, for me it is still primarily about

the artistic work of the companies and less about all the fuss around it. So, if choices have to be made, I would rather see the money go towards creation than promotion.’

ANNE-AGATHE ‘Yes, but you certainly shouldn’t underestimate the effect of something like Focus France. I think it really paid off for all the companies involved. I am very curious about the final report. After all, France is now the biggest market for contemporary circus.’

Breaking into that French market is very difficult for Flemish companies.

EMMA ‘French programmers are reluctant to go abroad with to scope out talent. We really need to go to them.’

ANNE-AGATHE ‘There is already so much for them to see at home that there is no need to look elsewhere. As a foreign company, you have to somehow get booked in France before the ball can get rolling.’

EMMA ‘It’s a long game. I’m always present at important French festivals, even if none of the companies I represent is performing there. I send out invitations to premieres long in advance, even though they don’t take place in France, and I know that the bulk of the programmers won’t come. But I keep doing it. Keep communicating – that’s what I say!’

But surely there’s no way to pull that off if you’re a company that’s new on the scene and you don’t have someone selling on your behalf? And distribution agencies with a focus on circus are few and far between.

EMMA ‘There are far too few of us.’

ANNE-AGATHE ‘A lot of them quit during and after corona, especially those who were self-employed.’

EMMA ‘It’s a great job, though. Come join us!’ ★

Now we have to push on.



echoes in the media



Le journal – Chalon dans la rue
Édouard Roussel ★ 21/07/2022

Carnivale

“This company’s taste for tinkering is amazing and their sense of absurdity simply delicious.”

LOEILDOLIVIER.FR
Marie-Céline Nivière ★ 24/10/2023

Murmur

“...this show by Grensgeval and Aifoon is a poetic gem.”

TOUTELACULTURE.COM
Mathieu Dochtermann ★ 03/08/2022

“*We Agree To Disagree* [is] a collective creation for the street, a festive, physical, participatory, explosive local circus show, which left the public anything but indifferent.”

“All done with an irresistibly friendly invitation, vibrant energy, and incredibly contagious glee.”

“Yet, every performance of *We Agree To Disagree* is inevitably unique, the result of the people and conditions on the day of the performance – which is fabulous.”

CULT.NEWS
Elegant and playful:
Cécile juggles bodies
Mathieu Dochtermann ★ 24.10.2023

“*Cécile*, however, is a work to be felt and experienced rather than a work to think about. The show is a bit disconcerting, but absolutely fantastic, and we hope it tours in France for a long time to come.”

CULT.NEWS
Dive into the heart of the world's *Murmur*
Mathieu Dochtermann ★ 22.10.2023

“This captivating performance by Hanne Vandersteene, Mahlu Mertens and Stijn Dickel is elegantly simple and an extremely playful production.”

lestroiscoups.fr
Léna Martinelli ★ 23/10/2023

Sono io?

“The talent is undeniable in this hilarious and sensitive face-to-face between two clowns. Acclaimed best theatre work in Belgium for 2022, it is our favourite in the current Circa circus festival.”

“The father-son duo works wonders. The first is as irresistible as ever, and the second should not to be overlooked. He has loads of talent. (Pepijn Ronaldo won the prize for best actor in Belgium). They’re amazing! They imagine outrageous gags together.”

“It’s eminently poetic from beginning to end. Art at its best!”

“These guys touch our hearts!”

Le journal – Chalon dans la rue
Christine Camus ★ 22/07/2022

Grasshoppers

“The piece of nature, detached from its matrix, is a joyful alibi of physical outbursts, acrobatics and poetry.”



Murmur ★ 24/10/2023

“This original performance showcases Camiel Corneille’s talent as a unique conductor. Acrobat and audience transport the sounds of the world together, resonating with a vibrant ecological message.”

“Murmur weaves sounds, confirming an original approach to young audiences which is too rare in circus performances.”

Le journal – Chalon dans la rue
Édouard Roussel ★ 22/07/2022

BITBYBIT

“This circus performance is a strange and delicious dance, sex perhaps, revisiting the figures of the Kamasutra”

Actu Challonnais ★ 22/07/2022

“On a warm and gentle Belgian platform, Jesse Huygh and Rocio Garrote from the ADM VZW company offer a generous demonstration of acrobatic complicity.”

aufildeslieux.fr
Katherine Hibbs ★ 25/10/2023

Cécile

“We enjoyed this very innovative experimental approach against a background of repetitive, almost aggravating music.”

CULT.NEWS
Sono io ? in the name of the father, the son and poetry
par Mathieu Dochtermann ★ 23.10.2023

“...these two talented artists are like Swiss knives, it’s backed by the rhythm of notes they draw from a myriad of instruments.”

“This funny show with bittersweet tones attracted a large audience, convinced by word of mouth, and the thunderous applause at the end of the performances indicates the audience generally enjoyed this experience of poetic laughter.”





FOCUS FRANCE THROUGH



Gab Bondewel

Noemi De Clercq

Séverine Van der Stighelen

THE EYES OF CIRCUSCENTRUM

The Flemish circus sector has helped to shape its own forward trajectory through two major bilateral initiatives: the Focus France project and the sector's various BAR-funded collaborations with the UK. It was Circuscentrum that outlined the UK collaboration projects and stepped up to keep everything on track (in as far as possible). Colleagues Noemi De Clercq (director), Gab Bondewel (Focus France project leader) and Séverine Van der Stighelen (internationalisation) reflect on what was achieved.

Two bilateral collaborations with a neighbouring country – twice the same?

SÉVERINE With Focus France, the main focus was on promoting Flemish talent, creating performance opportunities for Flemish companies and creating general visibility for the developments in Flemish circus. With Focus UK (funded through the Brexit Adjustment Reserve) we experimented with different types of collaborations and activities. In the latter case, the focus was also on knowledge exchange and the facilitation of networking opportunities.

France is a country with a big circus tradition. What impact did this have on the collaboration? Was this an advantage or a challenge?

GAB On the one hand, it's an advantage: France has a highly developed network of performance venues and circus is programmed in a lot of places. So, circus is already firmly rooted there. On the other hand, this fact does raise a challenge: when it comes to circus development, France is one step ahead of the game; there is a rich tradition there and they have a great number of circus companies of their own, so they're not really on the lookout for foreign acts so much. Getting a foot in the door of their robust network is the challenge.

Was it then more about presenting Flemish circus as being unique and distinct from French circus?

GAB Flemish circus does already have its own unique character. But, at the moment, circus in Flanders is undergoing an enormous development and this does pique the curiosity of the

French. Because, in France, circus artists and companies have somewhat gone beyond that phase of development and craziness.

NOEMI As some French professionals put it: 'Flemish circus does not shy away from experimentation and searching, and that's precisely what makes it interesting'.

What was it like meeting your foreign colleagues in the UK and France?

GAB Getting through to the French professionals was not always easy.

NOEMI That fact that it's more difficult to get them on side is also to do with the context: France has its own extensive circus offering. The project started during the COVID-19 pandemic, which got us off to a rocky start. Including when it came to actually setting foot on French soil. But, thanks to our investments, the many conversations with the French professionals and the invitations we extended to them, things did take a turn for the better at a certain point. Then we were finally able to reach the right people and the possibilities began to open up. As a result, the project really gained momentum in the last year.

Were things different with the UK partners?

NOEMI France was a deliberate and logical choice for us with a view to establishing a bilateral collaboration. Brexit was what prompted us to collaborate with the UK, which gave the project a different character. In France we sought to create performance opportunities, while in the UK we had the freedom to also work together and conceptualise things with them more, in terms of how it was all realised. In the UK, they have a lot of expertise when it comes to inclusion, for example. There were more themed discussions and projects there.

SÉVERINE With the UK collaboration, we were more in search of common ground. Various delegations of circus professionals headed to the UK, including programmers, people from the artistic field and from the youth circuses. We succeeded in bringing together around 100 Flemish and British professionals over the course of various different activities, which is a lot of people in relation to the number of people who are active in the sector. With the result that we have now established an

extensive network of partners: colleges, festivals, youth circuses, companies, festivals ...

The UK collaboration came about thanks to BAR funding. Were there times when, by contrast, Brexit caused a hindrance?

NOEMI The mountain of paperwork and the uncertainty of it all had a big impact, we noticed. There are still many things that are unclear about the legislation, so it was sometimes a case of 'fixing the plane while flying it'. For example, Compagnie KRAK received eye-watering fines in the mail on returning from the UK, because they had driven their van into a low-emission zone in London without registering. We ended up sharing this incident – and the best and worst ways to resolve it – with the sector, so that everyone can learn from it. We had a good partner in Cultuurloket, who also helped us in organising various info sessions.

What would have made these projects even better?

NOEMI If we had been able to reciprocate more. Companies from France and the UK requested performance opportunities and residencies here in Belgium but we were not allowed to use the budgets we had for such purposes.

What did you still want to do that you didn't get around to?

SÉVERINE In Great Yarmouth, I would have loved to test the real-life Hungry Hippo game in one of the amusement parks. (laughs) I didn't get around to it, so I'll have to go back at some point.

GAB It would have been nice to do Festival d'Avignon with some companies. It's a super important festival, but that wasn't possible, budget-wise.

How can the new relationships be extended into the future?

GAB The expanded network must be maintained. That's why we're lucky to have Séverine on the team now – someone at Circuscentrum who can work on internationalisation on a permanent basis. Keeping in contact with the professionals on a personal basis is an important factor.

NOEMI Now the question that remains is mostly: how frequently should such projects be arranged in order to keep that link and that attention? When can one say that there is enough new work? I think it's also important to embrace the French way of working in terms of how they promote their shows. Now we have that transparency.

GAB In my view, it would be very valuable to

continue collecting information. For example, the data we collected from the 'Cour des Belges' pavilion at Chalon is limited in scope. Perhaps, now that the project is just coming to an end, it's still too soon to assess its effects. But what if, in a few years, we would crunch the numbers on it all? By then it should be clear that the return on investment is enormous.

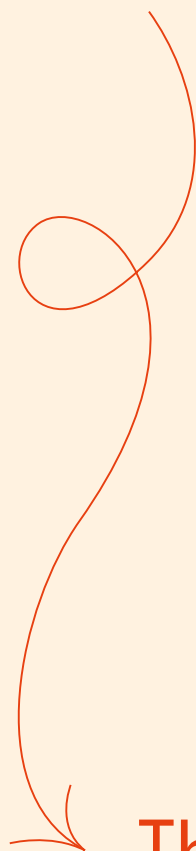
A personal question. Which moment has stuck with you the most?

SÉVERINE I started working at Circuscentrum just before the Focus France project was about to enter its third year, so unfortunately I missed the now-legendary 'Cour de Belges'. What stuck with me the most about the collaboration with the UK was my many pleasant encounters with Flemish circus professionals on the different visits. For me, as a newcomer to the sector, this was a unique chance to get to know many different players from the sector all at once. In addition to the smooth collaboration with the UK partners, I also remember a number of unique places there. Like 101 Outdoor Arts, located on a former air force base. And Great Yarmouth, with its Hippodrome Circus and a kilometre of flickering amusement parks along the seaside.

NOEMI For me, it's the conversations that, in retrospect, turned out to represent a turning point in the collaboration. Like when we negotiated the professional programme during SPRING with Yveline Rapeau in Leuven, or the walk with Joe Mackintosh along the Neman River in Kaunas, which would lead to the spotlight in Great Yarmouth. Then there was the meeting Stephanie Bulteau in Marseille to discuss a possible collaboration during CIRCA. These are moments when we clicked and laid the foundations for our continued collaboration. Another moment when we established important connections was the meeting with a delegation of British circus professionals at Flanders House in the beginning of July 2022.

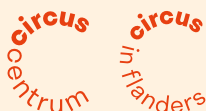
GAB Several things come to mind. The 'Cour des Belges' was fantastic. I remember that there were easily over a thousand people in attendance for the show *We agree to disagree* by Collectif Malunés. That was just huge. Another nice memory from the 'Cour' was tapping beer in the tent at 2am: there were so many people that the six taps were just constantly flowing. We were literally pouring beers in series. ★

As some French professionals put it: 'Flemish circus does not shy away from experimentation and searching, and that's precisely what makes it interesting.'



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