

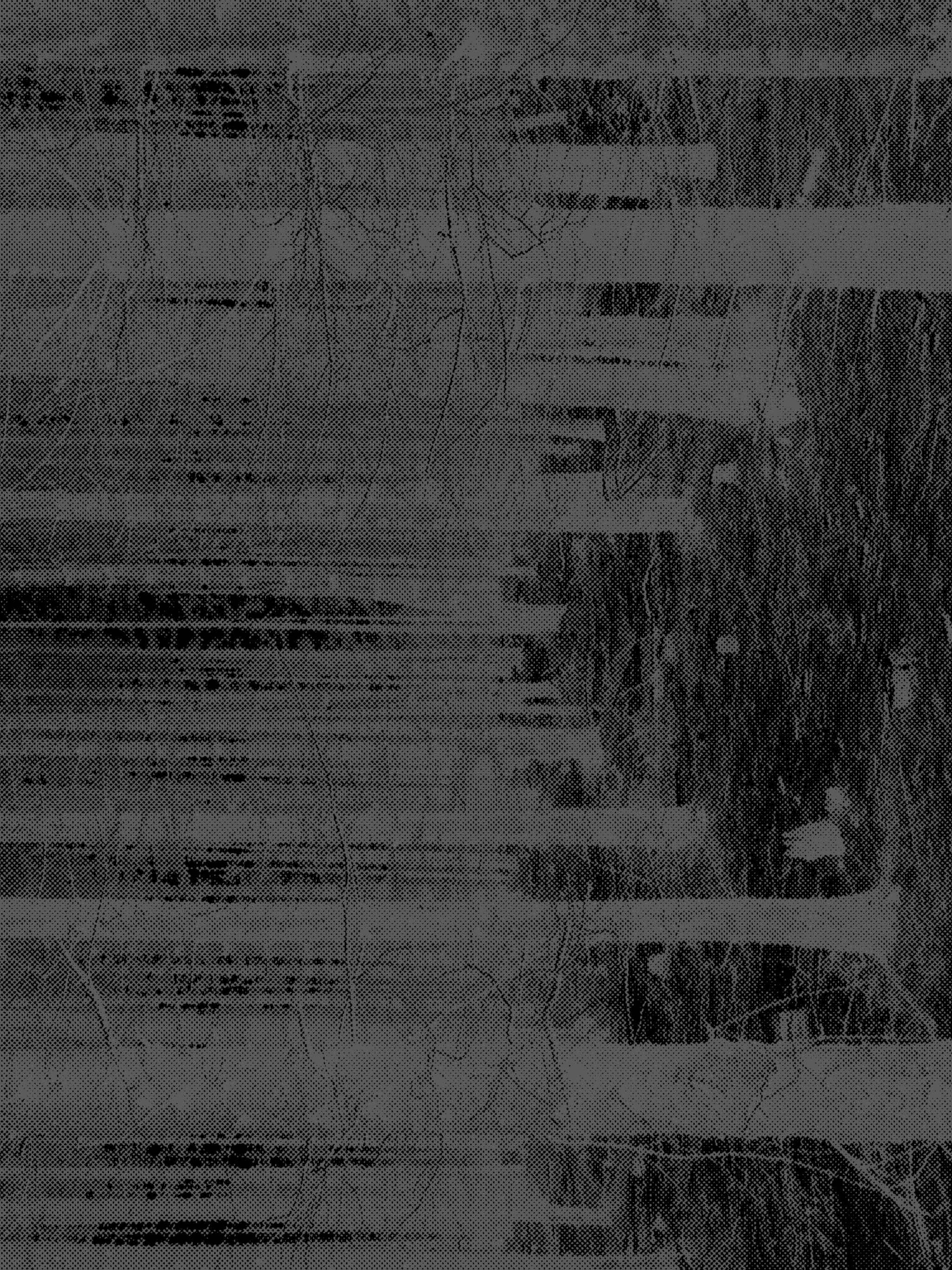
THE METHODOLOGY OF AN  
INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS PROJECT  
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTHS  
WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES AT  
THE JEDLIČKA INSTITUTE AND  
SCHOOLS IN PRAGUE

# CIRCUS AT JEDLE

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**CIRQUEON**







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## **INTRODUCTION**

Circus at Jedle<sup>1</sup> introduces a project by Cirqueon – A Center For Contemporary Circus which took place at the Jedlička Institute and schools in Prague in September 2015. The project was realized in cooperation with several European partners from the Social Educircation Network and received support from the Erasmus+ program.

In the European context, Cirqueon is a young circus center which makes up for its youth by its bold plans and ambitions. Cirqueon focuses on the support of and education in circus arts and its span of activities includes social projects. Since its foundation in 2009, Cirqueon has realized numerous social projects whose target groups included socially disadvantaged youths, ethnic minorities, psychiatric patients, people with impaired vision, abused women and other disadvantaged parts of the society.

In this respect, Cirqueon follows the international trend of the so-called social circus. Social circus is a professional, globally practiced educational approach which uses circus arts for social interventions. As a universal educational method, social circus can be effectively used with a broad range of target groups and adapt its methodology to specific needs and potentials of the clients.

Cirqueon also shares and acquires experience through international cooperation. The center is a member of several international networks, such as FEDEC, Cirkonet, Caravan Circus Network, ENCI and Social Educircation which is active in educating teachers in this field and served as the platform for the project at The Jedlička Institute and in Prague's schools.

The target group of the project were the students of this institute – people with physical and combined disabilities aged 7+. The workshop was to verify if circus was a suitable tool for working with people with physical disabilities and whether it offered attractive physical activities which helped develop personal and social skills.

Participants from these organizations took part in the project: Cirqueon – A Center For Contemporary Circus (CZ), Cascabel (CZ), Cirkus LeVitare (CZ),

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<sup>1</sup> Jedle is an informal name for The Jedlička Institute.

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Kids in Action (GR), Valencian Circus Association (ES), The Invisible Circus (UK), Hungarian Juggling Association (HU), Cirkus in Bewegung (BE).

### **GENERAL METHODOLOGY**

If a method is a way to achieve a goal, it is necessary to formulate this goal and decide which path towards it to take. In our case, our path is circus education and the goals are the generally known benefits that circus education brings.

With a degree of simplification, these goals can be divided into technical and social benefits. The technical goals include training of various circus skills such as juggling, floor acrobatics, pair acrobatics, aerial acrobatics, balancing but also clowning, acting or dance. This involves mastering a concrete skill: in juggling, it could be a specific trick; in floor acrobatics, it can be learning a forward roll or a somersault; in balancing, it could be riding the unicycle, etc. Obviously, none of this is fast or easy, which is why it is necessary for the lecturers to know the methods of teaching circus which lead to the desired goals.

The second category of goals of circus education is social benefits. These aren't bound to circus and circus techniques only. Examples of these are the feeling of success, increased self-confidence, the development of a positive self image, patience, learning how to learn, the ability to overcome obstacles, communication skills, respect for others, the ability to cooperate, assertiveness, creativity and many other skills, characteristics, abilities, emotions and attitudes which any system of education of children and youths strives to achieve.

The list of goals is long and it is important to always mix the right cocktail for the concrete group a circus lecturer works with. Obviously, there are differences between working with children, youths and adults. However, there are more factors influencing the choice of goals. Apart from the age and number of participants, we must also consider the environment, the duration of the project, the number and skills of the lecturers, available equipment, etc.

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## **THE METHODOLOGY OF CIRCUS AT JEDLE**

The target group for the workshop was rather heterogeneous. Beforehand, we only knew we would be working people with physical and combined disabilities aged 7+. The objective of the project was to verify whether circus was a suitable tool for working with this target group and whether it presented attractive physical activities which developed personal and social skills. The duration of the workshop was one work week (5 days, 2 hours a day), there were 20 lecturers and it took place in a large gymnasium with very good equipment (mats, silks, juggling props).

Based on this information, we can start creating the methodology of the project. We must realize this project falls in the social circus category. What does it mean in practice? Unlike ordinary circus classes, projects such as this one don't strive to primarily teach circus techniques but to use these as tools to achieve social objectives. Of course, the participants of a social circus workshop try a whole range of circus techniques but only to the extent and on the level that serves best to support the desired social goals.

The most important goal by far was to have fun and to create a supportive and emotionally safe environment full of challenges. Then we wanted to help the participants feel they are succeeding and thereby increase their self confidence and to shatter the barriers of language and physical abilities. Traditionally in its tents with colorful roofs, circus brought together different people who seemingly had very little in common: skilled jugglers with cat-like reflexes, powerful and flexible acrobats but also obese and clumsy clowns. Nevertheless in a performance, every participant is important, which is an idea we've adopted as the basis for our project. Everybody found their place, everybody was helped to find their technique or skill which helped them shine. We must point out that this ambitious plan was very much aided by the fact that the number of lecturers almost matched that of the participants. This meant that every lecturer could comfortably work with very small groups and devote enough attention to every student. Our team of lecturers was international and at first, we feared language barriers. However, it turned out these misgivings were unfounded. To the contrary, the language barriers often encouraged searching for other means of communication and stimulated interaction. If the situation required, we had enough lecturers capable of acting as interpreters.

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Apart from working in small groups, we also strived to create a shared identity of our whole group. This identity was contributed to by several factors including shared activities, rules and goals. Every day, we started with an activity everybody participated in, usually a name-refresher game, because everyday, a number of new participants joined us. At the beginning and end of everyday, we also had a song which also served as the call to assemble. Whenever the song was heard, everybody would stop all activities and gather in the center of the gymnasium. Our shared goal was a small show at the end of every day and a big show at the end of the week. The daily small shows turned out to be a great idea. The children gave each other a lot of support, they gained confidence standing in front of the others and confidence in performing their numbers. It was actually a challenge to get some of the participants off the stage.

### **METHODOLOGIES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL TECHNIQUES**

We tried to choose the circus techniques that could be learned with a minimum mistakes and minimum potential lack of success. This process can be applied not only to circus techniques but anything that is being learned. Ideally, a learning process should be “challenge, success, motivation, another challenge” as opposed to “challenge, failure, frustration”. The techniques that turned out very suitable were spinning plates, shuffleboard<sup>2</sup> juggling, flower stick<sup>3</sup> manipulation, aerial acrobatics on silks, balance board<sup>4</sup>, balance ball, pair acrobatics, clowning and magic.

We set up sites for juggling, balancing, floor and aerial acrobatics and we had clowns and magicians moving around and observing the participants. If a participant wasn't succeeding in learning circus techniques, they taught him a clown number or a magic trick.

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2 A shuffleboard is a special juggling prop developed by American juggler Craig Quat. It is a juggling training aid for people with special needs.

3 A popular juggling prop which consists of three stick with a wood core. Two of them are covered with silicon and are used to toss and spin the third stick around.

4 A traditional balancing equipment which consists of a board and a cylinder.

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We applied the aforementioned system of learning to every technique. There is a caveat in this learning process which is when the lecturer identifies something as a success while the student subjectively doesn't consider it one. This situation often occurs in any circus classes: Knowing that a feeling of success will motivate the student, the lecturer identifies something trivial as a success and the incoming wave of the lecturer's enthusiasm flushes and drowns the student rather than lifting him to surf on to more achievement.

## **JUGGLING**

The first juggling technique we chose was spinning plates. Spinning plates are something like the king of social circus as it falls in the instant success category. The participants don't need to learn how to make the plate spin. They only need to learn to take an already spinning plate with their stick and then pass it back or to someone else. Participants can also try to set records in how many spinning plates they can hold not only in their hands but also on sticks inserted in their clothes, in pockets, inside shoes or in parts of their wheelchairs.

Another popular technique is flower stick juggling. Again rather than using the traditional style, we used all kinds of rolling or manipulation.

A special place among our juggling inventory was reserved for the shuffleboard. The shuffleboard is an invention of American juggler Craig Quat<sup>5</sup> which facilitates a number of exercises with juggling balls. It is a set of five parallel rails the balls can be sent over. Just as in regular juggling, the user must pay attention to rhythm, be aware of timing, use time effectively and coordinate both hands. The shuffleboard develops the same motor skills as regular juggling without the frustration associated with dropping the balls over and over again.

The juggling exercises were positively received by the institute's physical therapists who noted many similarities between our activities and some of the exercises they use in physical therapy.

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Quat is an American juggler involved in innovative juggling techniques. His Juggling for the Masses project uses various tools and props for teaching juggling.

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In juggling exercise in general, there were absolutely no problems with limited functionality of the legs. Some of them actually had previous juggling experience. In case of students with limited functionality of arms and/or hands or with spastic symptoms<sup>6</sup>, we preferred plate spinning. Most of our students were able to grip objects and even when they weren't able to make the plate start spinning on their own, they could keep it in rotation. For these students, the shuffleboard proved very useful as well as even children with spastic symptoms could play with it.

## **BALANCING**

Balancing, or the art of keeping one's balance, is one of the most essential circus disciplines. It includes rope walking, balance board, balancing on balls, stilt walking but also parts of other circus arts such as handstands or pair acrobatics where two acrobats are seeking their shared balance. Balancing is not only a part of all circus disciplines but also a part of our daily life. Balancing means the ability to keep our body in a stable position and to return to it when we are set off balance or into motion. We learn to keep our balance through training since the earliest childhood and this ability is closely related to the correct body posture and the acquisition of motor skills.

Our balancing equipment was a balance ball and balance boards. The balance ball was mostly used for sitting or lying on. In several cases, we helped a child to get from a wheelchair onto the balance ball and to keep their balance there. We used the balance boards the standard way with assistance or next to a wall. The game that turned out the most popular was using several cylinders under one board and moving around by moving the cylinders in front of the board.

## **PAIR, FLOOR AND AERIAL ACROBATICS**

Acrobatics is a traditional circus and athletic field based on the ability to control one's own body. Acrobats seek to reach and expand their personal

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6 Spasticity is a condition marked by increased muscular tension.

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limits while discovering new movements and positions. We could also say that acrobatics is juggling and manipulation with one's own body.

An acrobat experiences the feelings of a juggler who must be able to imagine the projected trajectory of an object as precisely as possible but also the feelings of the actual object, the feeling of what is happening to the acrobat's body in the space.

Acrobatics offers motivation through mediating positive experiences with one's own body and its use. Often, acrobatics involves cooperation with others in addition to the individual achievement. This presents an opportunity to develop social skills and to enable mutual interaction. The need to trust the others opens doors for sharing the feelings of success.

At our workshop, pair acrobatics was a popular discipline during which the children very much enjoyed the role of the flyer<sup>7</sup> which meant an experienced acrobat was lifting a child in the air. Individual floor acrobatics were overshadowed by pair techniques, even though the final show included a number in which the children were jumping through a hoop into thick mats.

Pair acrobatics always required assistants. The children were often unable to stay firm enough to support another child. The help of an assistant enabled them to enjoy the exercise.

Aerial acrobatics is traditionally a popular and attractive discipline which was also the case during our project. We had a silk, a hoop and a trapeze. The silk was mostly used to sit somebody in a knot suspension and swing them around. The effect of this exercise was similar to letting children lie on the balance board – it was a pleasant experience for them. However, the challenge was to turn simple swinging in the knot into a circus number and we managed to do it in several beautiful ways.

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7 In pair acrobatics, the two roles are called the base and the flyer.

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## **CLOWNS AND MAGICIANS**

We used clowns and magicians as observers and “guardians of success”. They had several very important tasks. Their first mission was to contribute to the good atmosphere, to joke around and to entertain. Then they were assigned to observe the participants and if anybody couldn’t or didn’t want to try any circus techniques, the roaming entertainers would teach them a simple magic trick instead. This role of the clowns and magicians turned out very useful.

## **SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT METHODOLOGY**

Many of the examples described above can be applied to various social circus projects. Social circus doesn’t use circus as a mere tool as circus can create a fantastic atmosphere with specific rules. One of the most important benefits of circus is its integrating nature. Circus is for everybody which has also proven true when working with children with physical disabilities. Often, it took a certain amount of audacity and the ability to cast away prejudice and to simply ask questions. To pick up a child from a wheelchair and put them on a balance ball or into a knot on the silk – with the child’s permission, of course. Sometimes, the situation naturally showed us the way. For example, while we were playing a game in which you have to get through a hoop. When it was the turn of a child in a wheelchair, others helped them and pulled the child in the wheelchair through the hoop. In short, anything is possible in circus.

We based our methodology on success and we did everything to make sure everybody who entered our gymnasium would leave it with the feeling they had succeeded at something, learned something new and overcome the fear of the unknown. By concentrating on success, we achieved other objectives. The feeling of success stimulates self-confidence and positive perception of oneself. On the road to success, it is necessary to show patience and determination to overcome obstacles and to communicate and cooperate, which are important elements of social circus. In our project, technique and skill weren’t the most important aspects and the children who participated were unlikely to continue training any of the circus arts, get their own spinning plates, juggling balls or aerial silks. But we don’t really mind that.



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“Every session was concluded by a small performance. The children had a chance to show the tricks they had learned that day and be awarded with applause. It worked great! The children enjoyed it a lot. The most powerful moment of the whole week and the icing on the cake of the project was the final show for the parents, schoolmates, teachers and therapists of the participants. The children showed them what they had learned and what they were able to do. They were shining with pride over their achievements. You could see sparks in their eyes when the audience applauded them. It was a very powerful moment both for them and for us.”

**Hanne, Cirkus in Beweging (Belgium)**

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## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it is important to state whether the project has fulfilled its goals. Before the start of the project, we formulated this hypothesis:

“Circus is a suitable tool for working with people with physical disabilities. It is an attractive and accessible physical activity which develops personal and social skills. It give people with physical disabilities an opportunity to find their place in the community and to enrich the community with their talent.”

This hypothesis has been confirmed. Circus arts really have proven to be a suitable instrument for working with people with physical disabilities and it has a lot to offer. However, it is also necessary to state that this is nothing new. We know that projects for people with physical disabilities which use circus techniques have already taken place and succeeded elsewhere in the world. Therefore, our goal was to confirm this finding in the Czech environment. This was our first project of this type and we learned many things from it. Even though objectively, the project wasn't just success and benefits but rather than concentrate on failures, we should pay attention to limits and unrealized potential.

Projects such as this one often end with great success and bring large amounts of positive emotions and positive energy. It is a great luxury to have over 20 lecturers available for a project of this size. Such hurricane of energy instantly turns a space with children into a circus extravaganza. We should also point out this was a one-off and short-term project. It is important to sort out our emotions when it's over. Yes, there are ample positive ones: the satisfaction from a job well done, happy children, happy parents, staff admiring the abilities of their clients, new friendships and contacts, many broken down barriers, touching moments, etc. However, this huge pool of positive emotions can start growing murky with the sadness that the project is over, the new friendships are slowly dissolving and the transience of the undertaking becomes apparent.

These “commando operations” as our colleagues from the Greek Kids in Action organization fittingly call them can become the beginning of something and at the same time, an obligation. The obligation stems from the fact that it is necessary to continue the work after the initial project is over. Of course from the organization and financing viewpoint, it is impossible to

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sustain such “commando operation” with many lecturers for an extended period of time. Instead, it is necessary to find a way to set up a long-term project based on the enthusiasm and experience gained during the initial event.

For example after an initial “commando operation” which took place in 2011, Cirqueon set up a long-term project at the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital which lasted 4 years. It was being fine tuned throughout its duration as we were looking for the most effective ways of working and the institution. In the first two years, we visited the psychiatric hospital regularly every week and in the last two years, we switched to organizing three week-long seminars every semester (for a total of six seminars a year).

What is our plan for sustained cooperation with The Jedlička Institute? Based on the feedback from the lecturers, physical therapists, staff and especially the parents of the participating children, we have concluded that all involved parties are eager to continue. We have found out that many of the activities we have tried in the project week have a therapeutic potential and can actually enrich the work of the physical therapists. Our plan is to meet with the physical therapists and discuss what we could offer in a long-term, because it is the long-term cooperation that gives our project a higher meaning.

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