

# Joint staff training at Cabuwazi Circus

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#CIRCE project



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The focus of the Joint Staff Training in Berlin was for me, Veronika from Hungarian Juggling Association, to observe and assist the schools programme of the Cabuwazi circus, get to know the teachers better, and exchange teaching knowledge and experience with them.

Cabuwazi have been running their in-school programmes for nearly a decade alongside many other extra-curricular circus programmes.

Since the concept is both relevant and interesting, I was eager to learn more about it.

## **Why is it relevant?**

School education today tends to be more and more academic than ever before. The students have vast amounts of information to memorize, and less and less hours to experiment and learn about their own body and mind. Circus is a medicine for this illness, and much more.

Circus at Cabuwazi gives school students an opportunity to spend one week together in a very different context to their usual daily curriculum. During the week the physical work and closeness generates a new ambience for their relationships to grow. Body contact during partner-acrobatics builds teamwork, positive body awareness, physical closeness, and as a consequence, emotional connections are built as well. They learn to trust in each other, work together, and help each other to achieve.

Circus is an opportunity for students who are struggling academically to shine physically, and to find a new position in the 'hierarchy' of the class. This helps to build confidence and an opportunity to be proud of their achievements. Circus also gives students the ability to be creative, spontaneous, and learn how to improvise. Often the students who struggle academically are known as the 'bad boys or girls' in the class. They have a lot of energy, and circus provides an opportunity to channel these



energies: they can “show off” their newly acquired skills, so they get the attention they seek in a positive manner.

The aim of the week is for the students to create a performance and present it to their schoolmates and family members. The performance creates a motivation to practise their circus skills, and helps to build many social skills as well. The students need to cooperate with each other, to express their opinions, present their ideas, find solutions together, and debate. They have to be able to front their own ideas, and leave space for fellow students to do the same. This is about learning assertiveness alongside modest social skills, something they will constantly need in real life. Having a common body of work in place, a creation process and presentation, is a fantastic tool for encouraging this learning. The tool for this is to create a show, and the language is the circus.



## Structure of the week

During the week the students attend Cabuwazi every day instead of going to school. They are there from 9am-1pm.

The structure of the week is very clear for the tutors, but is not visible for the students. Everything is planned for every single minute, but the students only feel like they are playing. They are not worried about creating the show, they are throwing ideas around or learning tricks and the teachers lead them clearly in the direction of the final show.

Indeed the focus is more to create a final show than to learn the skills, even though they learn a lot of new skills, the point is not that they master a juggling prop, aerial skills or acrobatics, it is more about the process they go through as a group.

Circles – sharing – cooperation are important ideas of this week. They are not led by the teachers, as is usual in formal school education, the students often share their ideas in the circle instead – for example they propose the topic of the show themselves, which was the class-journey during my

week – they often sit down together where the tutors are explaining what is going to happen and why, and students can ask their questions.

Cabuwazi has such a great infrastructure which can serve all that is needed in performing arts: circus tent, stage technics, lights, sound system, decoration and different set dressings, costumes, and make-up.

Being on a circus stage is by itself is a great feeling- imagine that you have your costumes, make-up on, the lights are spotting you and you can show your skills in front of a live audience, anybody would have the feeling of being a real circus artist! And this is the exact point during the process that the youth can shine, they get attention, they feel strong. This is what they can achieve by the end of the week: to empower the youth, to give them a new and different kind of confidence and trust in themselves.



### **Combination of circus tutors, integrated teacher development programme**

The combination of different levels of circus tutors reflects the strong institutional background of Cabuwazi.

There were 5 tutors to lead the students through this process. Each of them had different backgrounds, thus they had different objectives during the week. Two of the tutors were professionals who had already been working in the programme for several years and also had strong circus skills in their disciplines, and performance experience. They supplied a strong background for the week. It is important that a good circus instructor knows how to master circus disciplines, be confident on stage, have performing experience and skills, and be strong in pedagogy, so as to be able to identify when, how, and what to teach.

One of the tutors has been working in the programme for 2 years, was an ex-European volunteer and his objective was to get to a higher level in leading the group and running a school week, so for the first time he was the main leader of the week-long programme. There were also two European volunteers, who are at the very beginning of their circus teaching careers with less skills and experience, but with a lot of energy and enthusiasm to assist the teachers.

The European Voluntary Service has another advantage too, so that the students can meet people from other nations, different cultural backgrounds, and they can practice speaking English with them. This gives them the opportunity to see the cooperation between different cultures, which will help to normalise this for them. Circus in general, just as the inclusion of volunteers shows, teaches cross-cultural solidarity to the learners.

This combination of old and emerging teachers is very favourable for the programme. It provides a good combination of energy and experience and a good number of leaders to create a safe ambience for the students.

Five instructors are needed as the safety has to be created in different ways :

- physical safety and assistance for trying out and practicing circus skills: when students learn saltos, aerial, or rope-walking from the very beginning they need a teacher on both sides of them to provide a safe learning environment, otherwise there is a high risk of injury.
- emotional safety: to stand next to the student, to encourage them, and give confidence to them, see where their limits are, and assist them in conquering their fears.
- social safety: to assist them to integrate into the group and really become a part of it.

This number of teachers make it possible to have the students in groups of 8, so they each get enough attention.

The sessions run for 25-45 minutes, changing one after the other, these sessions are well combined and tailored to the capacity of attention and physical limitation of the kids. The sessions are:

- learning their main discipline : they can choose between 3 main disciplines, which on my week was globe ball, acrobatics, and pantomime
- learning their secondary discipline which was juggling this week
- creating parts of the show: brainstorming and practicing
- playing games: games in circus education are always the most important tool for learning new skills
- look for the quality of the final performance by choosing costumes, movements, characters, music and other tools.

The students never got bored or overwhelmed, their energy was used well throughout the days.

The professionalism and the routine of the crew was visible, the week was really coherent. The final show was a great success and the youth definitely gained experiences they will remember for life!

### **Small receipt for school weeks:**

- do not put the stress on youngsters about creating the show, make them feel as if they are playing
- have professional crew
- have enough preparation before the classes with all of the teachers, so each session can run fluidly
- have great infrastructure and logistics
- have a strong organisational background as the programme does not work by itself, need elements from other departments of the institutions.



## How to apply it in Hungary?

I raised this question many times during my week in Berlin. Naturally I saw that what I experienced is the result of many years work from Cabuwazi, and it can not be created instantly in Hungary.

The steps which lead there are:

- have a group of 6-8 teachers to ensure the continuity of the programme. They need to understand the concept and the objectives, plus they each have to be at as high a level in the 3 above mentioned skills as possible: circus techniques, pedagogy, performing skills
- have a well equipped space which gives the circus artists a feeling for the youth
- create a network with local schools
- create the recognition of circus pedagogy

This is a huge amount of work which will take years, but we embrace and look forward to it. And what is more important is that we have to create our own programme tailored to our culture and educational system.

As a first step, we created new cooperations between Cabuwazi and Hungarian Juggling Association:

- we have two young tutors who are going on a 1 year programme to Cabuwazi to become volunteers in the school programme there from next month onwards
- we will apply for a 1 week youth project together which will focus on creating a performance with socially excluded youngsters