

**The circus is a tool of education and social transformation.**

**The Ateneu Popular 9Barris experience.**

Key words, Social Circus, education, co-operative administration

**SUMMARY:**

The Ateneu Popular 9 Barris was an asphalt plant which was occupied by its neighbours in the late seventies. Currently it is a sociocultural team managed in a cooperative way by a non-profit association called Bidó de Nou Barris. The association is formed by neighbours living in the area and people interested in the project. Its principal educational tool and way of creating communion dynamics is the circus. There is also an infantile and juvenile circus school where children from the town hall cultural centres and handicapped children among others participate. You can also find circus productions and circus shows. The main organizers are the neighbours who through participating in different commissions take decisions and produce the program, the magazine, the productions or the pedagogical project. The steering elements of all activities are based upon autonomy, transparency and independence. There is a global budget of aprox. one million euros, half of it generated through its own project.

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## **THE ATENEU PROJECT**

The Ateneu Popular 9 Barris was an old asphalt plant which was occupied by its neighbours in the late seventies. It is a social-cultural centre which understands cultural activities as a tool of social transformation from its beginnings. Cultural activities have a bearing on the environment where they take place. This is reached through cultural proposals and qualified training interacting with associations and groups sharing the same cultural concepts

### **Managing the Ateneo**

The Ateneu Popular Nou Barris has been functioning since 1978 and is managed by an association, The Bidó Nou Barris, a non profit association. Bidó puts its main emphasis on culture understood as a means of social transformation. It also integrates its territory reaching participation in the project. The Bidó is based upon a council association elected by an assembly of members and different work teams, where everybody interested is invited to participate. In fact this kind of participation reflects the true sense of the word "popular" and it is the main column of the Ateneu project. The different commissions reflect different concerns, forms and needs of the project. They become shape in the area of programming, communication, artistic criteria and training, etc.

### **The Circus**

#### **Artistic axis, educational and developing the community**

Since its origin the Circus has always been an element of identification for the Ateneu so in Barcelona and in all Catalunya. The Ateneu has produced a good number of artists and Catalan groups. Under its guidance initiatives as the Circus Association of Catalunya and the Circus School Rogelio Rivel have been created. Currently promotional programs and the creation of circus activities are:

- Production of own shows:
  - The Winter Circus, a big circus show adequate for all ages performed during christmas time. The Circus Mix: experimental laboratories expanding new proposals in the area of circus.

- Expanding proposals nationally and internationally presenting a specific circus program.
- The social circus , a tool of education and values transforming society.
  - The infantile and juvenile School of Circus with about 100 students at the age from 6 to 17, 16 teachers and 12 technicians.
  - Circ Éxit, circus within the school syllabus in co-ordination with the consort of education where pupils graduate after passing circus schooling.
  - Circus training with town hall child centres and adolescents from the neighbourhood. Around 90 children and adolescents are participating.
  - Circus training for mentally retarded people and handicapped people.
  - The Popular Theater School, Percussion Groups, Juvenile Exchange groups with the circus.
  - Teachers Training for Social Circus



## **Early days**

Artistic and social training have always been of major concern for Ateneu Popular 9 Barris along its history. The circus workshops came up spontaneously. At the beginning the youngsters of the area simply were interested in what was going on in the asphalt plant and slowly started participating. During the period of reforming of today's building flexible workshops were arranged in different spaces of Nou Barris in order not to interrupt construction works. Thanks to generated benefits through other workshops in Catalunya, repairs and recycling the first materials for the circus workshops were brought together. Once a new space provided, the project kept growing and evolving constantly adapting to given needs and necessities. It has also become an educational proposal bearing in mind a global character.

The Circus as a transverse axis, has been present in the training projects of the Ateneu in form of its infantile circus school (created in 1984) and continued to have its influence through its juvenile circus school since 2003. The Ateneu also presents workshops in cooperation with different events and entities from the neighbourhood. There are also teacher training activities in social circus and other projects which do not fit into conventional associations. There is a growing interest in circus or in getting further training as well as simply having fun. An idea which sometimes seems to be underestimated by certain groups. Participation in such a circus activity often means being able to benefit from physical, psychological and social values. This becomes specially relevant when referring to circus workshops for handicapped people, infantile centres of the area, adolescent circus activities, workshops for highschools and schools in the neighbourhood during class hours and freetime.

The association Circo Rogelio Rivel was created to cover the needs of a professional project in circus training which so far didn't exist in Spain. A circus tent was installed next to the Ateneu which in return provided infrastructure and hereby facilitating the opening of the circus school Rogelio Rivel. The school offers a two year training and regular Workshops.

Though putting stress on the circus the Ateneu has always been more than just a strong supporter of circus activities. Training in other artistic areas not only for professional artists but also for non professional groups and users contributed to

the creation of a solid social structure. The Ateneu Popular 9 Barris is a school of true participation. It's a space for people living together organizing work in a horizontal structure. In fact working and collaborating with the Ateneu means sharing values as mutual support, solidarity, autonomy, creativity and the capacity of mastering difficulties. The Ateneu has become a school of participation and is different from the World which usually surrounds us. It's a new reality called Social Circus

### **The pedagogical framework**

The pedagogical proposal of social circus stimulates the creativity of participants and promotes a social aptitude. A circus and which allows true participation of its participating children and youngsters turns into an integrator offer where participants are able to develop and improve their skills in performing and interpreting, motor skills, creativity and fantasy, cooperation and communication. The main emphasis of this kind of circus lies in artistic challenges in which girls and boys take part equally. They interact when cooperating with each other and helping each other in accordance to their common goal which is presenting a good show.

The joined training sessions support the concept of cooperation and empathy within a group. At the same time the participant experiences that through team work one achieves more than through a series of individual activities.

Training and preparing for a circus performance create an atmosphere of shared responsibility. Preparing and presenting what one has learned help to develop organization and circus discipline.

An intuitive learning process takes place when participants experience the meaning of planning and preparation, a common vision and the distribution of tasks.

Through the experience participants overcome stage fright, insecurity when having to perform in front of an audience. Girls and boys experience an increase in self-confidence in their skills and find courage to perform. This has become true especially for foreign youngsters where the circus gives them the opportunity

to go behind well known limits, increase their self-esteem, to show their own projection, tumble and restructure social hierarchies which are present in the minds of their class mates, teachers and even their own parents.

Although it is sometimes true that certain circus disciplines seem to be suited for a specific gender but generally boys and girls are mixed spontaneously.

The challenge of cooperating in groups and overcome marginalization according to age or the development within adolescence becomes a major issue when preparing circus numbers. On the one hand, physical contact is inevitable in the majority of acrobatic disciplines in order to finish the performance. On the other hand, communication and cooperation is necessary for the well functioning of the performance.

Through training, elaboration and performing of the circus numbers skills and physical mobility are trained and a team spirit evolves as well as the capacity to perform. In conclusion, once leaving the stage after performing one feels stronger more self-confident and with high self-esteem.

Within this margin, teachers training becomes necessary in order to assure continuity of the projects and therefore maintaining adequate training quality within the boundaries of transforming a person amidst educational values of circus disciplines (Alcantára: 2010).

Juan Pablo Bonetti (2009) suggests different work areas in reference to a pedagogical proposal related to circus and other artistic disciplines.

- Body and game as a methodological and pedagogical background
- Performing the circus show is full of symbolical value which permits the adolescent to leave every day life (the neighbourhood and being exposed to the daily public eye) and enter a distinct world, the stage.
- The experience of getting academic knowledge.

Adolescents experience vertigo, they express through their physical energy and get knowledge. Knowing how to use your body is directly related to the environment when playing.

They are part of the rural and city areas areas where climbing trees and metallic structures, balancing on wood pieces, skating, rollerskating and other games are very typical. All these forms can be included into the circus skills. They are integrated in musical rhythm, drums, dances and coreographies, "batucadas" and street parades...

We have to bear in mind that games play an essential role in setting the individual free and integrates at the same time. That is why a discernment of activities take place. By promoting these activities self and group awareness are formed, liberation takes place and above all individual and collective creativity takes over where competition and elimination came first.

Physical skills understood as a ludic element allow us to play with material (traditional circus or taken from everyday life), play with your own body and the bodies of others, theatrical playing, based on everyday activities and the false among other tools. In reference to the social community we envisage how the creation of a circus show permits adolescents and children to find their place (on the stage) different from their everyday life. This also changes the way how adults look at youngsters from the neighbourhood. The performance receive approbation and applause and occupies areas of the city increasing self esteem and creating different realities. Learning and experiencing through doing comes first. "Doing" incorporates a life experience which challenges the senses, makes you reflect and generates a learning experience which are undeletable. "Doing" as a game where the place you learn is your own body becomes a source of knowledge.

Marcelo Perez (2008) in his thesis upon social circus defines social circus as a potential element of prevention and empowerment. Social Circus and other artistic disciplines are ideal when working during free time in public spaces (parks, squares and streets) in order to develop skills which generate preventive factors not only on an individual but also on a group level.

Adolescents and children receive their social practicals in the streets and squares in the neighbourhood. The way these public places, established

methods of communication and common values ,which serve as a framework are experienced make the individual feel part of the community. The view of children and adolescents of their environment determines their behaviour and how they relate to their environment. For this reason public space has become an important area to form living together in a community. Using the social circus and other street arts suggest an alternative use of public space. Children and youngsters as well as all neighbours use public spaces to perform balancing acts on a ball and juggling as members of the community appreciating public space.

Taking the circus to squares where children spend their free time is a powerful job creating a space which makes one feel comfortable, responsible and participative. It's an educational job transforming society through the arts which transform public space into a place of respect, membership, dialogue and being seen as part of the social community.

Social circus occupying public space brings the arts closer to people who passing by normally use this space in their habitual activities often causing these places to become stigmatized and degenerated. Under a new Light these public places now become a place of artistic creation in the community.

The circus proposal reaches a transcendent social-cultural value which promotes participation of youngsters and adolescents, create social inclusion and gets to a profound political level. Spaces of social interrelation are created where projects, social agents of the community join forces. The following aspects are dealt with in the proposal:

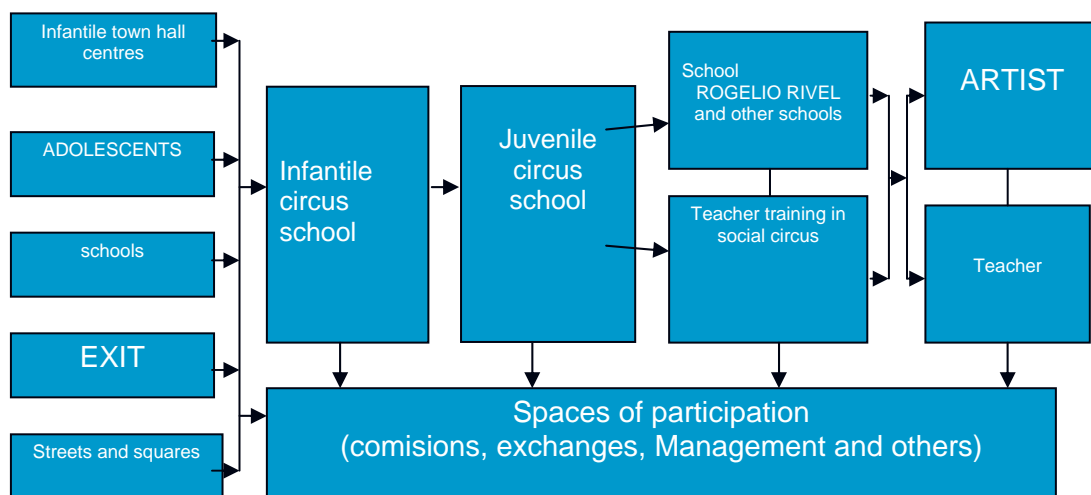
- Relating social reality to Concepts of identity , culture and genre.
- Relating economical reality to the concepts of job insecurity and the economical system.
- Relating political reality to Concepts of immigration, housing, direct democracy.

Through the circus the student puts himself into the position of an actor, protagonist modifying his selfperception and improving his relation to the community.



### The paths of education

The work based on global training as proposed by the Ateneu show different paths of educational and vital importance as represented in the following graph.



These connections are supported by a system of grants, follow-up meetings and evaluations in order to present different ways to be taken by each person. For example, a six year old girl gets to know about the circus starting with a Workshops of Discovery which is presented by young people from the Ateneu on a square in the neighbourhood. The same girl starts liking the circus and registers for an activity organized by the town hall infantile centres. Taking part in the course regularly the girl shows talent and likes the activity. With the help of the educative council she decides to continue at the infantile circus school. At the age of 13 she registers for the juvenile school.

She now combines her high school education and the circus school with Exchange programs. Turning 18 she registers for a teacher training course in Social Circus and later joins the circus school Rogelio Rivel. Later she becomes a teacher or actress participating in one of the Ateneu Circus production. Now being a full member managing with the team of Bidó Nou Barris

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