

**ASTLEY'S AMPHITHEATRE AND THE
EARLY CIRCUS IN ENGLAND,
1768 - 1830**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Board of the Faculty of Modern History

University of Oxford

Marius Kwint

Magdalen College

Oxford

Michaelmas Term 1994

*Philip Astley, c. 1795. From a watercolour in
the John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library.*



For Jemma.

*Without your love, money, personal strength and keen doctoral eye,
this work would have been inconceivable.*

CONTENTS

Locations of Figures and Tables	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Short Abstract	vii
Long Abstract	viii
Abbreviations	xiv
INTRODUCTION: THE CIRCUS AND HISTORY	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ASTLEY'S	13
I. The First Three Years: 1768-1770.....	13
II. The Formation of a Genre, 1771-1782.....	28
III. The Challenge of the Stage, 1782-1810.....	40
IV. The Age of Hippodrama: 1810-1830, and Beyond.....	63
CHAPTER TWO: ASTLEY'S AS AN INSTITUTION	71
I. Building an Audience.....	73
II. Public Relations and Business Practice.....	87
III. Circus People.....	104
CHAPTER THREE: THE LEGITIMATION OF THE CIRCUS	121
I. Innocent Amusement ?.....	121
II. The Outlaw Circus, 1768-1783.....	124
III. Petitioners and Patentees, 1786-1832.....	142
IV. The Respectability of the Circus.	152
CHAPTER FOUR: DESIGNING THE CIRCUS	169
I. First Impressions: The Circus and Print Publicity.....	173
II. Circus Architecture.....	191
i. Commodiousness (1768-1794)	202
ii. Elegance (1795-1827)	207
iii. Gorgeousness (1828-43)	213
III. Staging the Circus.....	216

CHAPTER FIVE: AESTHETIC INGREDIENTS.....	233
I. Here novelty o'er all presides.....	234
II. The Elements of Performance.....	245
III. Seeing the Circus.....	261
IV. The Aesthetics of Lightness.....	268
CHAPTER SIX: THE WORLD ACCORDING TO THE CIRCUS.....	273
I. Frontiers of the Circus.....	273
II. Astley's and the French Revolution.....	284
III. The Circus and Nature	309
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	333
I. Bills, Press Cuttings, Manuscripts etc.	333
II. Published Sources	335
i. 'Primary'	335
ii. 'Secondary'	341
III. Unpublished Theses and Papers etc.	351

LOCATIONS OF FIGURES AND TABLES

	Previous page
Fig. 1.1	13
Fig. 1.2	13
Fig. 1.3	33
Fig. 1.4	46
Fig. 1.5	55
Fig. 1.6	60
Fig. 2.1	108
Fig. 3.1.....	141
Fig. 3.2.....	168
Fig. 4.1.....	169
Fig. 4.2.....	169
Fig. 4.3.....	170
Fig. 4.4.....	174
Fig. 4.5.....	180
Fig. 4.6.....	180
Fig. 4.7.....	184
Fig. 4.8.....	185
Fig. 4.9.....	185
Fig. 4.10.....	186
Fig. 4.11.....	187
Fig. 4.12.....	189
Fig. 4.13.....	197
Fig. 4.14.....	201
Fig. 4.15.....	207
Fig. 4.16.....	209
Fig. 4.17.....	210

Fig. 4.18.....	211
Fig. 4.19.....	212
Fig. 4.20.....	230
Fig. 5.1.....	238
Fig. 5.2.....	246
Fig. 5.3.....	264
Fig. 6.1.....	277
Fig. 6.2.....	277
Fig. 6.3.....	321
Fig. 6.4.....	326
Fig. 6.5.....	329
Table 3.1	121
Table 6.1	284
Table 6.2	300

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My prime thanks go to my supervisor, Joanna Innes, for her willingness to take me on as a wriggling and uncertain first-year graduate, despite the fact that she was already busy. Quite apart from her stamina and conscientious scrutiny combined with many good meals and parties, she has alerted me to new depths and complexities in the world at large. Secondly, to my college supervisor, Angus Macintyre, who was killed in a car crash shortly before the completion of this thesis. His interpretations and sympathetic support, administration and advice were equally vital, and with him Oxford students have lost a true democrat and advocate. He would have enjoyed seeing this thesis submitted: after negotiating hard to secure my early change of topic, he asked me how my tardy qualifying paper was going. When I made excuses he fixed me with a glare: "It really has to be done, you know. Less of the *fête champêtre*, dear boy." He later helped me to obtain a grant from the College's Tavella-Stewart Fund. Thirdly to Francis Haskell, whose kind and magnanimous help after I had unjustly spurned the study which I had initially agreed with him was also essential.

This thesis contains the contributions of many more besides those mentioned in the footnotes. Michael Gilsenan initially pointed me to the scarce anthropological literature on the circus, and made encouraging readings of my drafts. Anthony Smith also made early recommendations, and provided friendship, hospitality and much-needed discussion of wider issues. The astonishing expertise of David Ibbetson helped me untangle some of the thornier points of eighteenth-century law, and Michael John, David Cram, Joan Pittock-Wesson and Cindy McCreery gave time and advice. Gareth Burr introduced me to archaic symbolism, and my friend Leon Jackson's enthusiasm finally convinced me to do the study in the first place. George Speaight offered erudite discussion and source material (I know he won't mind my engagement with his rhetorical stance in the introduction: my subsequent debt to his research is obvious). John M. Turner offered ongoing kindness and kept me in touch with his equally fertile field. Paul Dukes arranged a free conference, Kelly Boyd was my seminar 'agent': she and Rohan MacWilliam have both been good colleagues and friends, as have all the 'crowd' at the Institute of Historical Research in London. Beaumont Stevenson provided guidance, stimulating exegeses and several quenching pints while I was working at the Star.

In the archives, Julie Ann Wilson, curator of the John Johnson Collection in the Bodleian, went well beyond the call of duty in bringing material to my attention, as did her successor Sarah, whose surname I forget. Cathy Haile and Claire Hudson of the Theatre Museum were similarly inspired guardians of the national treasures, along with seemingly all the staff there. Catherine Porter and Michael Heseltine of Sotheby's destroyed most of my prejudices about such an establishment. Myrtle Anderson-Smith of Aberdeen University Library was quietly exceptional. Cecilia Hurley, former librarian of the History of Art Department in Oxford flagged the presence of the Hope Collection. The Surrey Record Office, the PRO and some among the Bodleian staff, notably Mary Sheldon-Williams, were also very helpful.

Collective bodies to thank include the Society for Theatre Research, whose research award was welcome and I hope well spent, and the History Faculty in Oxford. While in early days they should, as a whole, have offered more of an institutional framework for graduates (a situation which has happily begun to change), their grant from the Arnold, Bryce and Read Funds was a necessary stop-gap. The Physiology Department in Oxford let me share its marvellous social life. Magdalen College furnished preferential loans, employment and what must have been the finest flat in Oxford--indeed anywhere--for which we were grateful, given our tiny income. Notwithstanding the difficulties, students there are without doubt privileged, especially with such considerate pastoral fellows as Andrew Smith, and an outstanding team of often underpaid support staff to cook, clean their rooms and scrub their toilets.

Finally, there are my dear friends, fellow skiers, runners and rowers, and all my family (they all know who they are!) who believed in me and variously provided material and emotional support for an arduous and impecunious task. It was appreciated. Here it is.

SHORT ABSTRACT

ASTLEY'S AMPHITHEATRE AND THE EARLY CIRCUS

IN ENGLAND, 1768-1830

Marius Kwint, Magdalen College, D. Phil. Thesis, Michaelmas Term 1994

Founded in Lambeth in 1768 by the ex-cavalry sergeant Philip Astley (1742-1814), Astley's was one of the first entertainments to mix traditional acrobatic feats with the new trick-riding in a ring, thus founding the modern circus. As the leading example of the artform, the permanent Amphitheatre just south of Westminster Bridge went on to be immortalised by Dickens and parodied by *Punch*, before closure in 1893. This thesis charts the formative years of the institution and its contribution to an important yet distinctly arcane popular genre whose story has hitherto chiefly been the province of specialists and dilettanti, rather than the object of systematic historical, cultural and aesthetic analysis.

The chapters introduce the main artistic and organisational developments at Astley's and its rivalry with the neighbouring Royal Circus. This brought a stage into the formula and resulted in the grand 'hippodramas,' or equestrian plays, of the nineteenth century. Subsequent investigations are made into a social and economic life which is belied by the circus' later image of separatism; and Astley's early struggles with the law and, to a lesser extent, respectability. The second half is devoted to Astleian spectacle: firstly the key rôle of its overall presentation and marketing in the development of graphic design, theatre architecture and stagecraft; secondly its various ingredients from 'high,' 'low' and possibly archaic cultures; and thirdly the generally conservative and imperialistic view of the geographical, political and natural world that Astley's communicated with its socially wide-ranging audiences.

LONG ABSTRACT

ASTLEY'S AMPHITHEATRE AND THE EARLY CIRCUS

IN ENGLAND, 1768-1830

Marius Kwint, Magdalen College, D. Phil. Thesis, Michaelmas Term 1994

Founded in Lambeth in 1768 by the ex-cavalry sergeant Philip Astley (1742-1814), Astley's was one of the first entertainments to mix traditional acrobatic feats with the new trick-riding in a ring, thus founding the modern circus. As the leading example of the artform, his Amphitheatre went on to be immortalised by Dickens and parodied by *Punch*, before eventual closure in 1893. This thesis charts the formative years of the institution and its contribution to an important yet distinctly arcane popular genre whose story has hitherto chiefly been the province of specialists and dilettanti, rather than the object of systematic historical, cultural and aesthetic analysis.

Philip Astley was only the most successful of several trick-riders who plied the pubs and pleasure-gardens of an increasingly consumerist London. Setting up his own show in 1768 in an open fenced-off field near the present Waterloo station, named Halfpenny Hatch, Astley charged a shilling for a seat and a relatively moderate sixpence for standing-room. The next year he began to improvise his permanent Amphitheatre at a new site just south of Westminster Bridge. It gradually gained a roof and the now standard ring size of 13 metres. It would, however, be burnt down and rebuilt three times.

Theatrical entertainments were illegal without a royal patent, but in 1782 the unemployed Covent Garden dramatist Charles Dibdin (1745-1814) colluded with Astley's rival equestrian Charles

Hughes (c. 1750-1797) in the establishment of the Royal Circus, which included a dramatic stage as well as a ring, nearby. Astley followed suit with his own stage, and so the circus was split between the boards and the ring until partly reconciled by the development of hippodrama, or equestrian melodrama, in the early nineteenth century. Even the patent theatres were forced to emulate the resulting successes like *The Blood-Red Knight* of 1810, by Philip Astley's son John, which netted seasonal profits of £18,000. In 1831 there came *Mazeppa: Or the Wild Horse of Tartary*, based on Byron's poem in which a youth who dared to love above his station was lashed naked to the back of a horse and sent galloping across the steppes. Meanwhile the great equestrian and manager of Astley's Andrew Ducrow had brought Romantic, expressive mime to the ring, and Astley's touring had helped to spread sedentary and nomadic circuses not only to almost every provincial borough, but also as far as America and Russia.

The circus later developed into a form whose social character simultaneously epitomised the accessible 'popular,' and the mysterious 'other.' Some historians have assumed that Astley's was conceived for the working classes, yet its marketing, and testimonies from eminently respectable visitors, show a strong middle-class contingent in the audience, spiced with patronage from nobility and royalty. Neither was it aimed primarily at young families. Besides such publicity stunts as early ballooning events and rowing-races, the customary 'benefit' performance for charity or the emolument of senior staff was an important social binding which both tied the circus to its host community and cemented industrial relations within. Circus society was just as exploitative as the one outside, but its activities redefined notions of cultural achievement in a way which allowed remarkable success to, for instance, some Blacks and women.

During the 1770s Astley was repeatedly prosecuted as a "Rogue and a vagabond," not only for allegedly presenting theatrical entertainments without a royal patent, but also for keeping a "Disorderly House" of entertainment without a licence from the local magistrates. The magistrates' attempts to trap him grew into a feud until Dibdin's flagrant setting-up of a stage in 1782 brought about a showdown which the circus men effectively won, as they could not be convicted for horsemanship. Having achieved partial recognition, yet fearing for their futures, Astley's and the Royal Circus, together with Sadler's Wells (the old non-patent or 'minor' theatre in Islington), petitioned parliament in 1788 to have pantomimes and burlesques exempted by statute. They were unsuccessful with regard to the metropolis, but Astley had by then received a royal patent for Dublin via his loyal military connections. Moreover, throughout the legal struggles the circus had managed to maintain a respectable public face, thanks partly to its relatively orderly presentation of popular entertainments, and the support of the advertising press, which allowed it to survive in a semi-legal state without further molestation until full recognition came with the Theatres Act of 1843.

Astleian spectacle depended on the primacy of visible truth and visual qualities, and its overall presentation was crucial in this respect. The pioneering Astley was a major cause of pictorial advertising in the newspapers of the 1770s, and later the Amphitheatre helped to extend our visual culture by demanding for its posters the latest non-Roman and decorated typefaces that were invented after 1815. The architecture was unusual, if not revolutionary, too: in the 1786 a *trompe l'oeil* forest was painted in the interior of Astley's and entitled the Royal Grove. Astley's also managed to include a ring within the auditorium while allowing all sectors an unrestricted view of the stage. By the 1790s

touring circuses were at the forefront of rapid, lightweight (and sometimes disastrous) building technology. For its stage design departments the Amphitheatre employed such talented scene painters as Clarkson Stanfield, RA (1793-1867), and its firework displays, both indoors and upon Westminster Bridge on the King's birthday, were second to none. Costume design for the medievalist hippodramas accentuated the early nineteenth-century trend towards antiquarian accuracy, although interpretations were sometimes idiosyncratic.

A sense of novelty and fashion was manufactured for what were basically familiar entertainments by often pretending that an act was about to be withdrawn. The repetitive aspect was, moreover, absorbed into a ritualistic framework--Astley's became a part of metropolitan and later family "custom"--which disguised its very sameness and heightened relative newness. The heroic negotiation of danger, for instance in ropedancing, was a fundamental part this ritual nature, as was its burlesqueing by the clown. Other attractive elements included the celebration of abundant food in imagery and rhetoric, and both bawdy and idealized eroticism. The programme itself typically comprised a "hodge-podge" of artistic elements, including ballet, popular ballads, gleees and borrowings from Mozart, and by the end of the eighteenth century all was being presented in a dream-like, spectacular mode. Interestingly, the circus' governing emphasis on lightness and flying (early acts were, to cite just one example, called the "Flying Mercury"), has strong analogies in the archaic rites of shamanistic ecstasy.

The circus played with the margins of physical experience, while its actual geographical patterns of travelling gave it further exotic appeal. It circus came into being in a Britain on the brink of

unprecedented imperial expansion, and developed theatre's established rôle of communicating details of foreign lands to the populace. Astley's quickly became a conduit of cultural trade, bringing back performers and artefacts from overseas, particularly France, as in the case of the famous rope-dancing monkey General Jackoo in 1785. In some cases it fabricated foreignness, as with the so-called Monstrous Craws of 1787, who were displayed as a sub-human species from "South America" although they were in fact goitre-sufferers from the Italian Alps. Owning a second amphitheatre in Paris, Astley also helped to export a distinctly English style of riding and circus to France, especially with the help of his manual *Astley's System of Equestrian Education* of 1801.

The French Revolution became the subject of Astley's treatment from moment of the storming of the Bastille. Topographic details of the tumult were presented on Astley's stage within a fortnight of its occurrence. Within weeks these were overshadowed by the Royal Circus' highly dramatised version, which was formative for melodrama and in conveying a sense of the historic magnitude of contemporary events. But the Amphitheatre regained the upper hand when in 1793 Philip Astley re-enlisted in the cavalry to fight in the revolutionary wars, seeing action at the siege of Valenciennes, and publishing books and sending back research for a highly successful series of stage re-enactments of this and other news. Battles with France for dominions in Martinique and elsewhere provided the basis for the Amphitheatre's nineteenth-century pre-eminence in imperialist theatre, and launched the careers of such popular stereotypes as Jack Tar and the loyal Irish sergeant. The French Revolution continued in an attenuated form at the Amphitheatre, with the place alternating between Francophilia and **Francophobia**, until its endgame in the Battle of Waterloo, which was eventually brought out at Astley's in 1825.

The generally conservative outlook of the circus was also exemplified by its view of the cosmos, which habitually placed the gentleman on horseback at the centre of the natural world. However, this normative scheme was played upon, and during the 1780s several anthropomorphic and cross-species acts with the Learned Pig, Dancing Dogs and the beloved and economically vital horse stirred debates about the treatment of animals and had the effect of questioning assumptions of human supremacy and its exclusive claim to language and intelligence. Such acts were taken as an optimistic sign that modern man could transform what had always appeared to be natural.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations have been made plural with an 's,' and given an uppercase if they begin a footnote. The common abbreviation 'jnl.' (journal) has been imposed on first references in the footnotes. Where the date of an item is obvious in the text, duplication in the footnote is generally avoided.

ad.	press advertisement
BL	British Library
Bod.	Bodleian Library
colln.	collection
ct.	press cutting
f.	folio number
h.d.	hand dated
n.d.	not dated
n.p.	no place/publisher given
PRO	Public Record Office, Chancery Lane
QS	Quarter Sessions
repr.	reprinted/reproduced
rpt.	report
SRO	Surrey Record Office
TM	Theatre Museum, Covent Garden
trs.	transcript
ts.	typescript

INTRODUCTION

THE CIRCUS AND HISTORY

The circus has been conspicuously neglected in the growing corpus of work by cultural historians on the carnivalesque elements in popular culture, despite the fact that it was principally in this form that the carnivalesque tradition persisted into the urban industrial world.¹

How, then, should we begin to assess this gaudy and strange artform which has shaped so many childhood memories, and continues to fascinate novelists, journalists and filmmakers, yet whose traditional manifestations are now in decline because they are seen as relics of a naïve, tasteless and exploitative age?² The ample literature that certainly exists on the circus poses an immediate problem for those seeking to conceptualize it, since its ambiguities have allowed it to be depicted both as revolutionary and as reactionary. In his 1854 novel *Hard Times* Charles Dickens contrasted the sense of community and creativity that he perceived in the circus with the gloomy backdrop of industrial

¹ This trend was stimulated by the 1968 translation, by Helene Iswolsky, of Mikhail Bakhtin's 1940 Russian classic *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). Valuable recent contributions include Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: the Market and Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986); Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilisation: the Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century Culture and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1986); and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986). For a critique of the field see Peter Burke, "Bakhtin for Historians," *Social History* 13.1 (1988): 85-90.

² E.g. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984); John Irving, *A Son of the Circus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994); Jonathan Sale, "Lords and Ladies of the Ring," *The Guardian* 9 Nov. 1994, "Society" suppl.: 8-9; *The Miracle*, film, dir. Neil Jordan, 1991.

working life. In recent years, a widespread interest in the theories of the 1930s and 40s Soviet writer Mikhail Bakhtin has led critics to characterise the whole of the carnivalesque as an exuberant challenge to authority.³ On the other hand, we use the word "circus" in a pejorative sense--as in "media circus"--as if it was the archetype of the kind of inane activity which, for the 'Frankfurt school' of the 1940s and 50s, epitomised the distracting and therefore politically suspect nature of 'mass' culture.⁴ The Roman adage "bread and circuses" still seems applicable, even though it was originally used in the context of a markedly different spectacle (mainly chariot races).⁵

Fortunately, more recent critics have argued that both 'revolutionary' and 'reactionary' accounts of popular culture depend on critical stereotypes which neglect both the complexity and ambiguity of mass media.⁶ Indeed in North America, circus studies have lately become something of a growth industry for anthropologists and sociologists who espouse this approach. They characteristically see the circus as at once a form of play and a kind of rite whose political value is not intrinsic. Pioneering work in this field was done by the semiotician and circus owner Paul Bouissac, in his 1976 book *Circus and Culture*.⁷

³ For worries about this tendency see Gerald Strauss, "The Dilemma of Popular History," *Past and Present* 132 (1991): 130-149, p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.* 140-2.

⁵ Roland Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilisation: The Roman Games* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972) ch. 5.

⁶ In particular, see Janice Radway, "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading," *Daedalus* 117 (1984): 49-73.

⁷ Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: a Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976).

Besides its interest to theorists of popular culture, the circus has occasionally been used by social historians to fuel their arguments about the transformation of that culture by industrial capitalism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hugh Cunningham, in his book *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (1980), for example, cites the circus chiefly to illustrate relentless commercialisation.⁸ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue (1984), by contrast, see it as mixed phenomenon, not necessarily any more 'commercial' than the old plebeian culture, but tailored to a class-ridden urban society.⁹ All these accounts, however, see the circus as a harbinger of the new order, albeit one that carried remnants of the old.

The invitations to further research presented by these debates remain unanswered, although there exists nearly two hundred years of specialist historiography on the circus. Circus *afficionados* developed a remarkable historical consciousness from an early date. Newspapers began recounting the story of its origins during the 1780s.¹⁰ Since this story was incorporated in detail in the memoirs of the performer Jacob Decastro in 1824, and in Edward Brayley's survey of London theatres in 1827, it has seldom been out of print,¹¹ and it continues to be announced to circus audiences today.¹²

⁸ (London: Croom Helm.)

⁹ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900* (London: Batsford, 1984) 68, 195.

¹⁰ Ct., biography of Thomas Johnston, the founder of trick riding, *The Freeman's Journal*, 13 Dec. 1785, BL, Daniel Lysons, "Collectanea," (C.103.k.11) vol. 4, f. 20.

¹¹ Jacob Decastro, *The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian*, ed. R. Humphries (London, 1824); Edward Wedlake Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts of the Theatres of London* (London, 1827) 58-66. For a recent example, see Peter Watson, "Bread and Circuses," *The Observer* 2 Dec. 1990: 40.

As the story goes: an ex-sergeant of the 15th Light Dragoons, Philip Astley, using a fine white charger presented by his commander, General Elliott, first combined equestrian and acrobatic feats in an open arena in a field called Halfpenny Hatch in Lambeth in 1768. On Westminster Bridge one day he found a diamond ring worth £60, with which he bought high fencing to exclude non-paying spectators. The idea caught on, and although luck turned against him in the course of several adventures, his steadfast shrewdness ensured that the Amphitheatre, soon equipped with a stage for the presentation of spectacular equestrian dramas, grew to become a cherished institution of Victorian Britain and to be celebrated by Charles Dickens and lampooned by *Punch*.¹³

It seems plain from this account that the form we know today was decisively born of modern commerce, although most chroniclers of the circus have also been keen to mention the tradition and antiquity of the elements it contained. For example, in the first comprehensive book on the subject, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (1875), the former Chartist journalist Thomas Frost wrote:

From the Anglo-Saxon period to about the mid-seventeenth century, the nearest approximation to circus was the performance by "glee-men" and the exhibitors of bears that travestied a dance, and horses that beat a kettle-drum with their fore-feet . . . Some glee-men were tumblers and jugglers.¹⁴

¹² David Hibling, ringmaster's address, Austen Brother's Circus, Battersea Park, London, Jan. 1991.

¹³ See Jacqueline Bratton and Jane Traies, "Astley's in Victorian Literature and Life," *Astley's Amphitheatre* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1980) 15, 60; Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

¹⁴ Thomas Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (London, 1875) 2.

Other predecessors cited in Frost's "classic" study include the man who greeted Edward VI in 1546 by sliding all the way down a rope tied from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral, head first with his limbs outstretched.¹⁵ Frost's disciples were, however, equally keen to distance the modern circus from the cruel decadence of its Roman namesake.¹⁶

This essentially antiquarian approach has encouraged a general vagueness about what actually constituted the circus. Archivists, for instance, often follow Frost in categorising performances as "circus" which antedate it, or, if contemporary with the circus, actually took place in the street, fairground, theatre or music-hall. The circus is widely perceived as a clearing-house for curiosities.

Moreover, because most circus literature after Frost was cheaply written for fans, it was unreliably nostalgic, anecdotal and hagiographic. The main twentieth-century work devoted to Astley's, *Greatest Show on Earth* (1937), by the *Evening Standard* theatre critic and fringe Bloomsburyite Maurice Willson-Disher, has these features: although it involved much original research and was considered "serious" by the usual standards, it contains many inaccuracies.¹⁷ The aim of the book was to evoke the atmosphere of "romance that tumbles and smells strongly of oranges" for middle-aged and elderly readers who would then have just remembered the final days of Astley's.¹⁸

¹⁵ Raymond Toole Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography* vol. 1 (Derby: Harpur, 1958) 51.

¹⁶ Samuel McKechnie, *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages* (London: Sampson Low, 1931) 195.

¹⁷ Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 4 (1974) 291.

¹⁸ Maurice Willson-Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth: Astley's (Afterwards Sanger's) Royal Amphitheatre of Arts* (London: G. Bell, 1937) 6.

It was not until after the second world war that circus experts joined forces with new champions of scholarship in theatre history. The 1950s and 60s were the heyday of a surprisingly numerous and well organised community of circus historians. Partly inspired by Henry Thetard's *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque* of 1947,¹⁹ Tristan Rémy formed the *Union des Historiens du Cirque* (UHC) which, with its own journal, circulated a total of 85 papers by 21 contributors across Europe and the USA between 1957 and 1967 (since published).²⁰ Within the huge American field, the Circus Historical Society, founded in 1939, has sponsored annual conferences and two major circus museums.²¹

Among the fruits of this broad tradition since the 1960s have been some meticulously researched chronicles of the English circus, notably a study of equestrian drama, *Enter Foot and Horse* (1968) by the Yale Professor of Theatre History, A. H. Saxon, followed by his biography of the great performer and manager of Astley's, Andrew Ducrow (1978); and a 1972 thesis on Astley's London rival, the Royal Circus.²² In 1980, the distinguished expert on popular theatre George Speaight wrote

¹⁹ 2 vols. (Paris: Prisma).

²⁰ Giancarlo Pretini, ed., *Thesaurus Circensis*, 2 vols. (Udine, It.: Trapezio, 1990).

²¹ Richard W. Flint, "A Selected Guide to Source Material on the American Circus," *Jnl. of Popular Culture* 6.3 (in-depth on circuses and carnivals in America, 1972): 615-9.

²² Arthur H. Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse: a History of Hippodrama in England and France* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968); *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow and the Romantic Age of the English Circus* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978); George Palliser Tuttle, "The History of the Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy, 1782-1816, St. George's Fields, Surrey, England," PhD thesis, Tufts U, 1972.

his *History of the Circus*.²³ This remains the best introduction to the topic and includes valuable research on the early English scene. More recently, the retired scientist and librarian of the Circus Friends Association in Liverpool, John M. Turner, has written a four-volume history of one company as well as a biographical dictionary of nineteenth-century performers.²⁴

There has been no major study of Astley's, however. In fact, as part of the reaction against past myth-making, Astley's place in the circus pantheon, and therefore his worthiness as a topic for further study, have been questioned. According to Speaight, his "reputation rests not so much on what he originated as on how he developed the elements of entertainment he had inherited."²⁵ He concludes that "Astley's importance in purely circus terms has been greatly exaggerated: he did not invent anything. . . ."²⁶ Speaight's scepticism has been directly influenced by the journalist Antony Hippisley-Coxe's attempt to advocate the artistic seriousness of the modern circus by defining its essence. "The circus," wrote Coxe in 1951,

is a spectacle of actuality and a craft; the theatre is a spectacle of illusion and an art . . .
²⁷ Just as the theatre has a parallel in painting, so does the circus in sculpture. You can walk round it . . . There can be no illusion . . . The performers actually do exactly what they appear to do. Their feats of dexterity and balance and strength must never be confused with the make-believe world of the actor.²⁸

²³ George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: Tantivy P, 1980).

²⁴ John M. Turner, *Historical Hengler's Circus* (Formby: Lingdales P, 1990); *Victorian Arena--the Performers: a Dictionary of British Circus Biography*, vol. 1 (Formby: Lingdales P, 1993).

²⁵ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 15.

²⁶ Speaight, letter to the author, 23 Sept. 1990.

²⁷ Antony Hippisley Coxe, "Astleys Amphitheatre and the Bicentenary of the Circus," conference paper, TM General Colln., 23 Oct. 1968, 1.

²⁸ Coxe, *A Seat at the Circus*, (London: Macmillan, 1951) 25.

So when Astley added a stage he "confused the basic principles of two completely different forms of entertainment," creating, Speaight agrees, a hybrid or "bastard kind of entertainment . . . which devalued both art forms."²⁹ Speaight then takes into account the already detailed coverage of Astley's by Saxon and Willson-Disher, and the plethora of Astleian material in the archives, and asks, "What is there left to add?"³⁰

Postwar theatre research has achieved a vast increase in erudition, but by and large it has remained trapped within the narrow celebratory and descriptive precepts of its antiquarian forebears. What is left to add is a study which, firstly, asks standard, systematic historical questions about the socio-economic significance of this important form of entertainment, and, secondly, seeks the more hermeneutic insights of the cultural historian, applying some of the analytical techniques of symbolic anthropology and structuralism. After all, the enigmatic yet once popular quality of the circus first inspired this enquiry, and its guiding question since has simply been "what did circus mean?" The work that follows concentrates upon Astley's for three main reasons.

Firstly, far from being a distraction, the heterogeneity of Astley's is, it is argued here, central to an appreciation of the nature of early circus. The circus aesthetic was more determinedly eclectic than Coxe's positivist approach allows. "Never has actor pushed so far the magic of illusion," one journal declared of Ducrow when he performed affecting mimes perched on a cantering horse in the ring in

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Speaight, letter to the author, 23 Sept. 1990.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

1821.³¹ Conversely, actors and animals displayed emphatically real feats of training and strength during plays on stage. As the circus proprietor Raymond Toole Stott soon reminded Coxe:

Almost anything is grist to the circus and if it is rightly presented as spectacle, it can swallow anything The old circus showmen, from Astley onwards, were never slow to exploit topicality, and it is mainly because of this ability to absorb the present as well as the past, that the circus has been able to maintain its appeal in the face of tremendous competition.³²

While compiling his monumental four-volume bibliography on the topic, Stott realised that "the circus and its allied arts so closely overlapped that it was often quite impossible to discern the boundary."³³ Not only has the circus itself often been dismembered, but also the culture from which it came. Viewing events from the bridge of academia, Cunningham has rightly castigated the historians of circus, drama and sport for their "insatiable compulsion to compartmentalise" the elements of "one close-knit popular culture."³⁴ Perhaps Richard Altick, by portraying Astley as merely another opportunist showman among the multitude in his book *The Shows of London*, has shown the early circus in the most faithful light so far, although it is only a glimpse.³⁵

Secondly, for a thesis such as this, which attempts to bring an artform into the mainstream of historical understanding, the original and most famous example of that art is surely the first choice.

³¹ *Journal de Marseille*, qtd. *Courrier des Spectacles* 22 Aug. 1821, qtd. Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 113.

³² Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 1 (1958): 19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (London: Croom-Helm, 1980) 35.

³⁵ (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978.)

Philip Astley is, moreover, considered to be the mainstay of "a whole raft of brilliant entrepreneurs" (including Hogarth for the print) who commercialised leisure during the eighteenth century.³⁶ In view of the fact that the circus none the less displayed ancient elements, Astley's seems to be a prime case for exploring the tension between tradition on the one hand, and commercialisation on the other. The dichotomy promises to be more problematic than has hitherto been acknowledged by historians.

This dissertation will, however, draw upon circuses other than Astley's for comparison and to illustrate the breadth of the genre. Comparison is feasible because, when all due deference has been paid to the fact that circus was situated amongst a *melée* of related forms, it was, of course, a recognisable institution and type of entertainment.

Thirdly, there is in fact still more to be found out about the early Astley's. Saxon's close attention is given only to aspects of the nineteenth-century Amphitheatre. Therefore the basic task of unearthing and reassembling an intriguing past remains.³⁷ For the circus, newspapers are the resource *par excellence*, followed by bills and prints (which were fortunately collected by contemporary antiquaries like the clergyman Daniel Lysons),³⁸ and published memoirs. Primary research is assisted by Stott's bibliography *Circus and Allied Arts*, written between 1954 and 1974, which contains many of the British Library (BL) and Bibliothèque National shelfmarks.

³⁶ John Jefferson Looney, "Advertising and Society in England, 1720-1820: a Statistical Analysis of Yorkshire Newspaper Advertisements," PhD thesis, Princeton U, 1983, 8. Looney builds on the research of J. H. Plumb.

³⁷ See Turner, "The Excitement and Romance of Circus History," *King Pole* (jnl. of the Circus Friends Assoc.) c. 1989.

³⁸ See fn. 6.

The main basis for this thesis is an anonymous three-volume scrapbook in the BL containing some 4,000 press cuttings between 1768 and 1856 (as well as a lock of hair from Astley's daughter-in-law, Hannah), entitled "Astley's Cuttings from Newspapers" (Th. Cts. 35-7). Received in 1882, it was evidently compiled partly from the collection of the libertine theatrical diarist and impresario James Winston (fl. 1819-27), since it includes his signed notes and draft history of Astley's, which he probably contributed to Brayley's *Theatres of London*. A second major source has been the bills in the Astley's file of the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden (TM). These provide an almost week-by-week record of Astley's London programmes from the 1820s onwards and comprise 17 box files; material is ordered strictly by date, unless otherwise indicated by the footnotes. Other important sources include the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bod.), and, for legal history, the Surrey Record Office in Kingston upon Thames (SRO).

This material has its problems, not least of which is the problematic character of apparent reportage. Students of all Georgian theatre have learned to treat their sources as potentially spurious. The professional theatre critic had not yet emerged in the press, so newspaper comments were overwhelmingly 'puffs,' or advertisements masquerading as news or reviews (the equivalent of today's 'hype'). Circuses exploited even the legal system to gain the limelight; and few unselfconscious accounts, such as business records might provide, have survived. Neither were circus people prone to making the sort of articulate, analytical statements about their art which have helped historians of élite culture. Because this is what the sources make possible, the following dissertation is primarily a study of the presentation, marketing and public life of the circus. Since the existing scholarship on the

nineteenth-century Astley's is fairly plentiful, and the Amphitheatre itself became much more prolific after 1810, the later years of the study are, in general, treated more cursorily than the earlier ones.

Chapter one sets the scene, and therefore reconstructs the genesis of Astley's and other key circuses in detail. Chapter two deals with the Amphitheatre as a social institution and the ideology which helped to maintain it--the subject that has most interested anthropologists and sociologists studying today's circus. Chapter three takes up, among other issues, the debate of the social historians mentioned above by studying the circus' rôle amid changing laws on, and attitudes towards, consumption and public entertainment. Chapter four then opens a three-part investigation into circus art by examining its physical presentation and design. This is continued in chapter five, which analyses the basic elements of the show. Finally, chapter six samples the political and cosmological thinking behind the circus. It is hoped that that together they will do justice to the multifarious nature of the entertainment.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ASTLEY'S

I. The First Three Years: 1768-1770

Headed "ACTIVITY ON HOESEBACK," (*sic*) the first advertisement by the founder of the modern circus appeared in the London *Gazetteer* on Monday 4 April 1768, announcing that "Mr Astley, late Serjean [*sic*] Major in his Majesty's Royal Regiment of Light Dragoons" would perform:

Near twenty different attitudes...on one, two and three horses every evening during the summer season, excepting Sundays, at his Riding School next the Wright's Horse, or Halfpenny Hatch, Lambeth Marsh, not the DOG and DUCK.¹

Readers, assumed to be from north of the river, were directed to turn left as soon as they had crossed Westminster Bridge. Halfpenny Hatch was conveniently situated by the shortcut between Lambeth and the new Blackfriars Bridge (the place was so called because of a window in the fence for collecting tolls), and near the pleasure-haunt of Cuper's Gardens (figs. 1.1 and 1.2). The doors would be opened at four, with the show beginning at five. Seats were one shilling, and standing room was sixpence.

By this token alone, Astley's would have been merely the fifth trick-riding display to have appeared since Thomas Johnston, alias "the Tartar," introduced his "dexterity in riding" to London ten

¹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 3.

Fig. 1.1. Astley's territory in 1768: an area with strategic potential. The northernmost diagonal roads were never built. Note the Dog and Duck on Lambeth Road to the south and Cuper's (Cupid's) Gardens to the north-west. The White Hart pub in Cornwall Road, near Waterloo Station, now stands on the site of Halfpenny Hatch, possibly having replaced the Wright's Horse which Astley mentions. St. Thomas' Hospital occupies his second and permanent location. (Bodleian Library.)

Key

1. Halfpenny Hatch (1768)
2. Westminster Bridge site (1769-)

B.7.1.72*

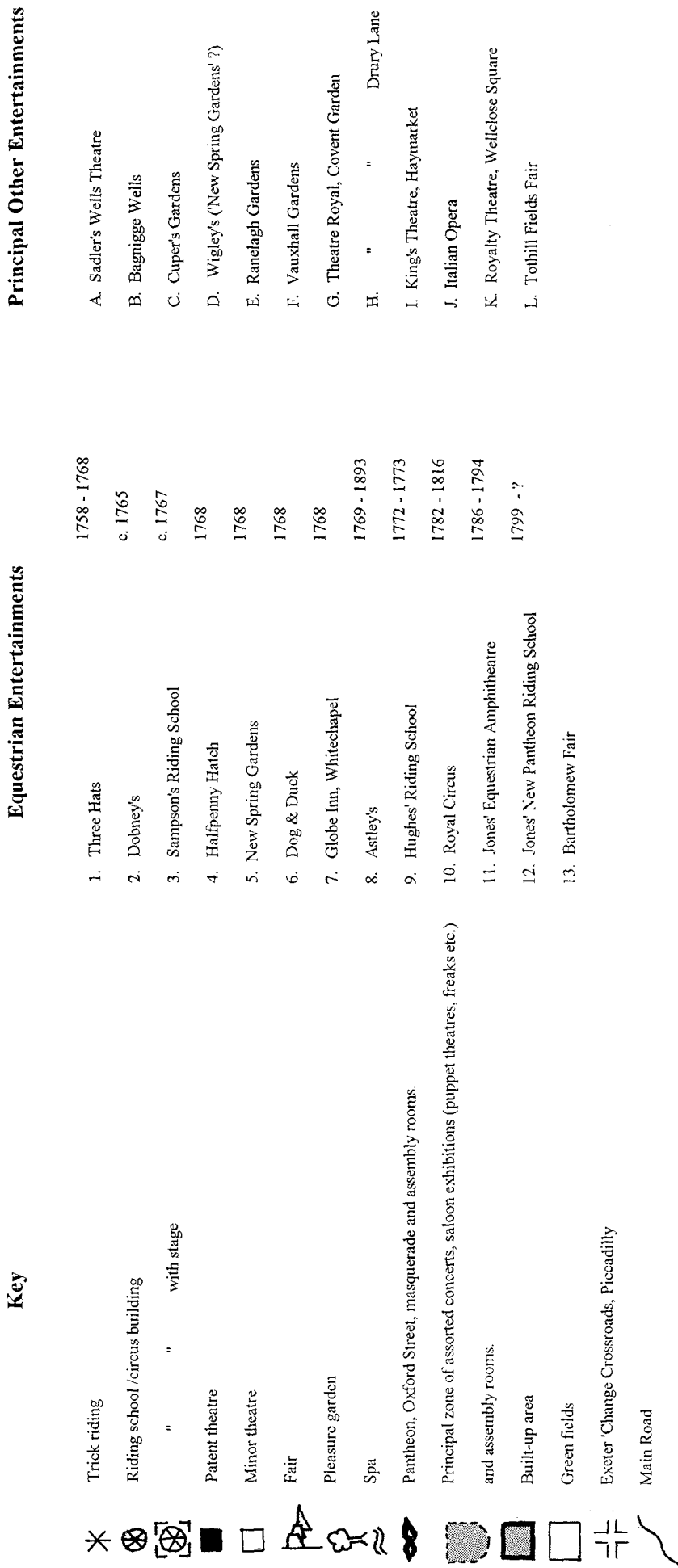


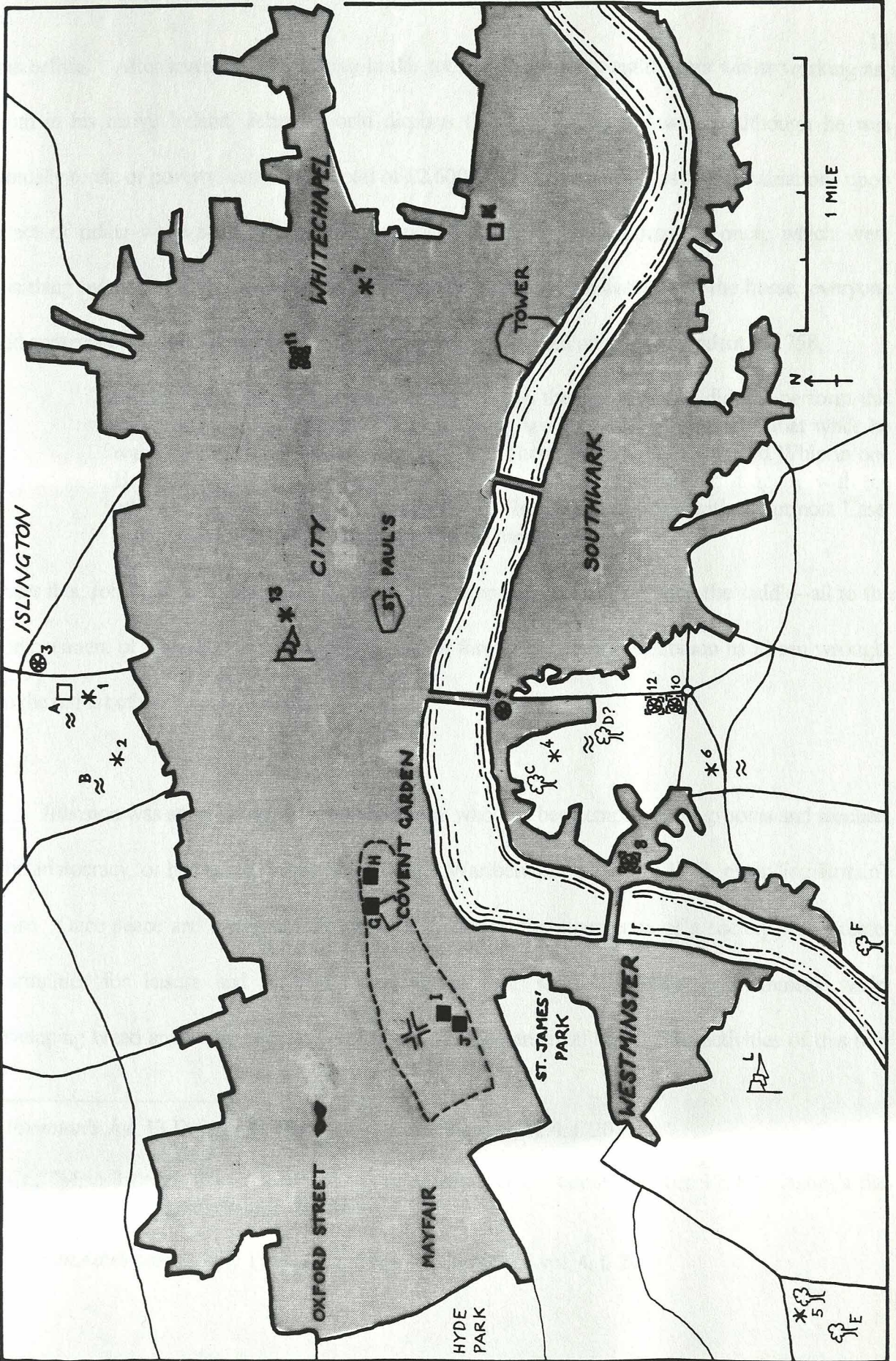
A PLAN
 OF STREETS, ROADS, &c.,
 BETWEEN BLACK PETERS BRIDGE,
 LONDON BRIDGE,
 WESTMINSTER BRIDGE,
 LANDETHNEWTON BUTTES,
 & ST MARGARET'S HILL,
 AS THEY NOW ARE,
 TOGETHER WITH THE NEW IMPROVED
 STREETS, ROADS & COMMUNICATIONS,
 IN SAYING BLACK LINES.
 MDCCXXVII.



2

Fig. 1.2 The distribution of entertainment in late eighteenth-century London. Based on *The London Directory, or a New & Improved Plan of London, Westminster, & Southwark ...* (London, 1775).





years before. After inventing and training in this technique for some eight years whilst working as a groom in his native Ireland, Johnston held displays throughout England which, although he was eventually to die of poverty, earned him a total of £2,600.² These basically consisted of variations upon the act of riding while standing up, often astride as many as three horses at once, which were astonishing by the standards of the time. By virtue of everyday familiarity with the horse, everyone could appreciate the difficulty involved. "It has been said," reported one correspondent in 1758,

that he could shift himself from one [horse] to the other; but he did not perform this Part when we saw him ride. But one Thing we thought extraordinary, that while he was standing on the Outside Horses of the Three, with all the Reins and Whip in one Hand, he threw up his Cap several Times in the Air, and caught it again, with the other, while the horses were in full Speed. He seemed to stand with the utmost Ease, and in such a manner, as to give no Pain to the Spectators.³

Besides this, Johnston could also ride a hundred yards standing on his head upon the saddle--all to the accompaniment of Irish Jacobite song tunes.⁴ A new form of gymnastic exhibition had been wrought from the old art of gentlemanly control.

Johnston was soon emulated by several others who had been employed as grooms and teachers by the aristocracy, or had served in the Seven Years' War between 1756 and 1763, extending Britain's Empire. Once peace and increasing prosperity had allowed the emergence of a society with greater opportunities for leisure and pleasure, they turned their skills to public entertainment whilst redeveloping bread and butter teaching work on a more commercial basis. The activities of this new

² *Freeman's Jnl.* 13 Dec. 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20.

³ Ct., "Miscellaneous Correspondence, In Prose and Verse. For November 1758." Astley's file, Mander and Mitchenson Collection, Beckenham.

⁴ *Publick Advertiser* 25 July 1758, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20.

breed of "riding-master" flourished in the spas, pub yards and tea-gardens which had colonised the semi-rural fringe of the rapidly expanding metropolis (fig. 1.2). The principal site was the northern resort complex of Sadler's and Bagnigge Wells in Islington, where Johnston had first performed at the Three Hats pub, soon to be followed there by a certain Mr Sampson. Later, in 1767, Thomas Price rode at the nearby Dobney's (properly D'Aubigny's) pub.⁵

The equestrian talents of Philip Astley, the son of a "respectable" veneer-cutter from Newcastle-under-Lyme, were first noticed by Lord Pembroke's riding master Domenico Angelo during an attempt to introduce the new "Light" cavalry regiment to which Astley belonged to the training value of trick-riding.⁶ Angelo described him as "the devil in disguise."⁷ Astley went on to specialise as a horse-breaker and be honoured by the King for exceptional acts of gallantry in the field.⁸ Willson-Disher relates that whilst in billets at Derby in 1766 the twenty-four year old sergeant was inspired by the fact that the new owner of the local inn had made his money from trick-riding.⁹ He was certainly

⁵ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 21-2.

⁶ H. C. Wylly, *XVth (The King's) Hussars 1759-1913* (1913) qtd. with recent biographical research in Paul Bemrose, *Circus Genius: A Tribute to Philip Astley*, (Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough Council, 1992) 9. Astley was b. 8 Jan. 1742.

⁷ Qtd. Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 21.

⁸ His "peculiar power" over horses was demonstrated in rescuing several horses and men when a boat overturned; he also captured a standard at the Battle of Emsdorf after his horse was shot under him, later laying it before Geo. III in Hyde Park; and rescued the wounded Prince of Brunswick from behind enemy lines at Freiburg. Wylly, *XVth (The King's) Hussars*, qtd. Bemrose, *Circus Genius* 9; newspaper repr. of "CERTIFICATE of . . . Service," 25 June 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 786.

⁹ Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 21.

discharged there on 21 June that year and moved to London where, according to Speaight, he found employment in 1767 as a groom and advertiser at the riding-school of Mr Sampson and his wife in Islington.¹⁰ By 1768, interest in trick-riding had also taken root on the south side of the river, as well as in the east. In the former area, Mr and Mrs Wolton were performing opposite the well established Dog and Duck spa and waystation in St. George's Fields. In the latter, Astley's former employers Mr and Mrs Sampson were now riding at the Globe Inn, Whitechapel.

By consensus, it is the setting-up of Astley's own show in 1768 that marks the beginning of the modern circus. Was Astley's, however, really a significant event in terms of the origins the genre, when it was so evidently a mere splinter enterprise? He was certainly not, as is commonly supposed, the first to present his show in a ring. Speaight has pointed out that Dobney's, at least, already had one with surrounding seats, and pictorial evidence indicates that for *ad hoc* performances too, riding-masters habitually roped off a large circular area, much as they would for teaching and horse-breaking.¹¹ What does seem to have distinguished Astley's was its convenient surround of sheds and fencing to exclude the gaze of non-payers, whereas his precursors had mostly passed round a hat to their casually assembled audiences. The recollections of one octogenarian in 1829 also indicate that much note was taken of the impressive way in which Astley publicised and directed people to his shows by handing out bills at the end of Pedlar's Acre (the lane to Halfpenny Hatch). He would, it was recalled, stand there mounted in regimental uniform on his white charger, while his similarly accomplished wife sounded a

¹⁰ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 22.

¹¹ E.g. Jacob Bates, *the Famous English Horse Rider*, engraving, 1766, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20.

drum and a trumpet.¹² By the end of the first year, moreover, he was employing a small company of approximately four non-equestrian staff--something for which there is no evidence amongst his rivals. Astley's enterprise was therefore comparatively highly commercialised from the start.

In content however, the show was not at first a remarkable innovation, despite the fact that its number of equestrian tricks, or "attitudes," was quickly trebled to give a total duration of over two hours. The riding-masters had developed a panoply of bizarre-sounding tricks since Johnston's pioneering days, and Philip and Mrs Astley were fairly typical in presenting, *inter alia*, the following feats: balancing oneself standing with one foot on the saddle; standing on the saddle without the bridle; sweeping both hands and one elbow on the ground (the above acts covering a total distance of half a mile); picking up three handkerchiefs placed at intervals along the ground; springing from the ground to the saddle and back again; jumping over the horses; leaping the horse over a bar whilst putting one's leg in one's mouth; another leap on two horses, without the bridle, with one foot on each saddle; and lastly, playing a tune on the pipe in this position.¹³ Until now competition had demanded only technical novelties of this sort, which continued to be described in detail on riding-masters' bills and pamphlets into the mid-1770's. Astley was typically swashbuckling, as well, in styling himself "The English Hussar."¹⁴

¹² See Winston's notes, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 19 (n.d.). A biography c. 1805 identifies "Mrs. Astley" as the yet unmarried Charlotte Taylor, although Bemrose has recently cited a marriage with Patty Jones at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, 8 July 1765. Cf., "Biographical Sketch of the Celebrated Philip Astley, Esq.," Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Circus" box 1; Bemrose, *Circus Genius* 14.

¹³ Trs. of ads., *Gazetteer* 25 May-24 June 1769, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Then, in late May, Astley introduced a representational note into what had been a mere exhibition of skill, with the modest reconstruction of "the manner of Elliott's charging the French Troops in Germany in the year 1761." Having heard the story of a tailor who had ridden inexpertly to vote for the radical John Wilkes in the Middlesex elections in March that year, he remarked that "it was said that regiment were all Taylors, notwithstanding [which] they gained a complete victory."¹⁵ In a successful routine which lasted a few seasons, Astley would then demonstrate the battle-charges of the Prussian and Russian Hussars, including all the precise moves with the sword ("N.B. . . , " warned his handbill, "*to be displayed with the greatest warlike appearance . . .*").¹⁶

Some days later Astley further augmented the story-telling aspect of his show by presenting his one other horse Billy (recently purchased at Smithfield market) in "A Prologue on the Death of the Horse"--an interlude related to a familiar fairground trick in which a monkey refused to leap a rope for an enemy (usually the Pope) but eagerly complied when asked to do so for the King of England. While his "learned" horse was lying down, Astley would act the magic healer, declaiming:

My horse lies dead, apparent at your sight,
 But I'm the man can set this thing to right;
 Speak when you please, I'm ready to obey--
 My faithful horse knows what I want to say
 But first pray give me leave to move his foot
 That he is dead, is quite beyond dispute.

(The Horse appears quite Dead)

This shows how brutes by heaven were design'd
 To be in full subjection to mankind,

¹⁵ Trs. of ad., *Gazetteer* 28 May 1768, *ibid.* item 13.

¹⁶ Handbill, 1770 (probably the earliest existing from Astley's), BL "Miscellanea Colln." (1879 c.13).

Rise, young Bill, & be a little Handy
 To serve that warlike Hero, Granby...
*(The Horse of his own accord rises).*¹⁷

The clear, albeit sentimental, demonstration of control over other creatures thus took its place in the circus alongside human bodily skill at an early stage. Successful equestrianism of course entailed this: the "modern rider," in Astley's gnomic words, knew that "if he [the horse] is made obedient to the hand and spur it is the chief thing that is aimed at."¹⁸ Such interludes by Astley were effectively promotional stunts to convey his mastery of all things equestrian, most particularly his prowess as a teacher. He would, for half a guinea, impart the method of this one.¹⁹

In July, Astley made his most enduring move in the dramatic direction, newly combining low comedy with horsemanship in a burlesque finale based on the story of the Wilkesite clothier entitled *The Taylor Riding to Brentford*.²⁰ Set to become, in its several versions, a favourite for eighty years, this first essay in circus clowning involved a certain "Billy Button" being thwarted by his cleverer horse. Foppishly-dressed Billy was so inept that he could not even mount the steed. When he finally managed to do so, the horse would not at first move. It then bolted so fast that he was thrown off, only to end up with the horse chasing him around the ring.

¹⁷ Trs. of ad., *Gazetteer* 11 June 1768, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 14.

¹⁸ Trss. of ads., *Gazetteer*, *ibid.* item 16 (26 July) and item 11 (17 May 1768).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The stereotyping of the tailor seems to have varied origins. For an inspired piece of research which first linked *The Taylor to Brentford* with the Wilksite episode see Speaight, "Some Comic Circus Entrées," *Theatre Notebook* 32 (1978): 24-27. For other factors, and for a full account of the seminal rôle of *The Taylor* in circus clowning see John Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring: the Evolution of the Circus Clown (1770-1975)," PhD thesis, New York U, 1976, 1-26. See also trs. of ads., *Gazetteer* 25 May-24 June 1769, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 20.

Although for Astley the act may have been implicit with affection for many members his old regiment, it set the robustly loyalist tone of the establishment, and suggests an entertainment, like the main theatres, somewhat distanced from the Wilkesite leaven and the feared seditiousness of "popular" London.²¹ Both the tailor's superiors and inferiors, as well as those who, like Astley and the members of his regiment, were of a similar class but knew their place, could laugh together at radical artisan pretensions to politics, status and hence horsemanship. The tailor may also have been resented as a slippery character who manufactured social identities. Subsequent developments of the act reveal some gratuitous pillorying. In 1785 for example, Astley's showed *Nine Tailors at a Fox Hunt* in which, to "paroxysms of laughter and applause," the excited novices attempt to leap a gate on their old nags. "Nothing can be more whimsical," declared one newspaper,

than to see Mr. Shears fall upon Mr. Goose, Mr. Goose upon Mr. Thimble, Mr. Thimble upon Mr. Needle, Mr. Needle upon Mr. Yard, Mr. Yard upon Mr. Shop-board, Mr. Cabbage upon Mr. Measure, and Mr. Measure upon Mr. Button; until nine *fag-ends* of man-hood form an Egyptian Pyramid to the eternal disgrace of a Taylor's horsemanship.²²

A later variation of the act was, furthermore, known as *The Hunted Tailor*.²³

²¹ On the position of the theatre in the Wilkesite disturbances, see Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 130-2.

²² 16 May 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 658. "Yard" was early modern slang for 'penis,' while the final comment refers to the contemporary comedian Samuel Foote's adage "it takes nine tailors to make a man" (from his *Tailors, a Tragedy for Warm Weather*, qtd. Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring" 11).

²³ Bill, 7 June 1808, TM Astley's file. This version lasted until the mid-1820s.

With the continued success of his first season, Astley was able by late August to provide "proper music"--namely a couple of French Horns--to supplement the drummer who had hitherto lent martial rhythm from his station on top of the pigeon house that stood in the middle of the field.²⁴ The most formative move in this rapidly evolving genre, however, was to be made by Astley's nearby competitors the Woltons, in association with a Mr Wilkinson and his pupils, on the tenth of September. In a show in aid of a burnt-out Southwark resident they interspersed "Horsemanship Incomparable" with rope-dancing, tumbling and pistol-shooting, thereby for the first time introducing the circus' characteristic variety of entertainments into the ring. And, incidentally, they allowed everyone to pay "according to their circumstances and generosity"--a gesture to which Astley would never stoop.²⁵

Astley had then already embarked on a tour of the provinces, having finished the home season on the third of September. But with his keen awareness of rivalry, he soon emulated the Woltons upon his return for a brief period of Christmas entertainment, when he added tumbling, as well as a horse-riding monkey that allowed yet another joke at the tailor's expense. Astley notified his audience that he "must beg they will excuse the monkey's feats of activity, being but a bad horseman, though he rides the taylor to Brentford extremely well."²⁶ With respect to those who did not present direct competition, Astley showed an early alertness, too, to the tactics of mutual sales promotion: that Christmas, his audiences could, it was suggested, warm themselves with cut-price punch from his neighbour, the landlord of the Wright's Horse pub. Throughout the preceding summer season,

²⁴ Trs. of ad., *Gazetteer* 27 Aug. 1768, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 17.

²⁵ *Gazetteer* 10 Sept. 1768, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

²⁶ Ad., *Gazetteer* 27 Dec. 1768, *ibid.*

similarly, Astley had also regularly performed at the New Spring Gardens, Chelsea, drawing in crowds on their way to the greater pleasures of Ranelagh Gardens and helping the proprietor Jason Longchamp to profit from his new landscaping and sell the "best of Wines, Coffee, Tea & hot loaves a good larder & every requisite to delight the Eye and regale the Taste..."²⁷

It was reported that at one point early in his first year, Astley was clearing forty guineas per day.²⁸ Rumour and exaggeration notwithstanding, Astley's evidently good profits were almost immediately invested in infrastructural developments. At first, in August 1768, craftsmen were employed to make such modest improvements as setting up chain-link fencing around the ring, while, it seems, running a supplementary cabinet-making business.²⁹ By next May he had secured a more advantageous site on Westminster Bridge Road, just as the New Roads that it would feed were being started.³⁰ According to Brayley, Astley acquired the place, a timber-yard, for only £200 by taking over the mortgage in exchange for a loan of that amount to the proprietor, who wanted to leave the country hastily. Upon his failure to return, the ground landlords, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, foreclosed the mortgage and gave Astley the lease until 1839.³¹ Astley thus became the first riding-master to own his place of performance, in respectable contrast to the anchorless tradition of popular entertainment.

²⁷ Trs. of ad., *Gazetteer* 15 Apr. 1768, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 8.

²⁸ Puff, *ibid.* item 7.

²⁹ Trs. of ads., *Gazetteer* 9-13 Aug. 1768, *ibid.* item 16.

³⁰ Howard Roberts, gen. ed., *Survey of London*, vol. 25 (London: London County Council, 1955) 42-3.

³¹ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 60; Roberts, *Survey of London* vol. 23 (1951): 71.

Later, when he had built his own grandiose abode and two streets of staff housing adjacent to it, his enterprise would become a firmly established feature of the London cityscape.

Astley first built a high fence around his new site and then surrounded most of the ring, or "ride" as it was then called, with three rows of seats covered by canvas penthouse roofing.³² The price of the seats remained one shilling as previously, but there were now no standing-places available. Within another year Astley provided "a commodious Room apart for Nobility" situated on the side of the ring next to the road, to which admission was two shillings. Lightly constructed of whitewashed boards over a timber frame, it measured forty metres long.³³ Two years after that, its top was converted into a similarly exclusive gallery.

The new facilities enabled Astley to tap the flow of fashionable visitors to Vauxhall Gardens, which lay a mile south along the river. Astley ensured that his performances, which commenced no later than six, fitted their itinerary, and the Riding school duly proved a favoured aperitif to an evening among the arbours, much as New Spring Gardens did to Ranelagh on the north bank.³⁴ This continued to be the case until the final years of the century: in 1793 it was still noteworthy that Astley and Barrett, the then licensee of Vauxhall, "play into each other's hands as prettily as any two Managers we have the pleasure to know."³⁵

³² Winston, ms. notes, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 987.

³³ Trss. of ads., *ibid.* items 27 (10 Apr.) and 35 (19 June 1770).

³⁴ Trs. of ad., 4 June 1770, *ibid.* item 31.

³⁵ Puff, 20 Apr. 1793, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 74 B.

A man of undeniable property by his second season, then, Astley, like the owner of the Dog and Duck, was able to extend to the letting of local residential and commercial premises.³⁶ He had already ventured the publication of the first of his several manuals, *The Complete Swordsman on Horseback* (1769), which, like many of his early ventures, he hoped would be of use to the army.³⁷ In a later pamphlet of 1773, for instance, introducing his . . . *Proposal of a New Inexpugnable Mode of Charging* . . . , Astley declared "here is a Balsam for the point of the Sword, and such a One as must strike every Gallic Heart with Terror."³⁸ During 1769, Astley was patronised by the King, accompanied by the Dukes of Cumberland and Gloucester and several generals, in a semi-military review on Wimbledon Common. They were particularly impressed, it was reported, by his Learned Horse, who could now sit, kneel and lie down like a dog.³⁹ Such unsophistication aside, no other riding masters so assiduously attempted to lay the material and social foundations of a lasting enterprise.

The variety formula was not immediately developed by Astley, and the 1769 season at the new site remained a wholly equestrian affair. Within these constraints it did, however, see a couple of

³⁶ Roberts, *Survey of London* vol. 25: 53; trs. of ad., 4 June 1770, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 31.

³⁷ Trs of ad., 8 Aug. 1769, *ibid.* item 24. The pamphlet or book itself has not been found.

³⁸ Astley, *A Short Description of the Various Feats of Activity Exhibited at Astley's British Riding School, Every Evening, at Six o'Clock precisely. Also an Introductory Proposal of a New Inexpugnable Mode of Charging, Designed for the Light Dragoons in general* (London, 1773) 2, Fenwick Colln., Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, ref. 944/150.

³⁹ *St. James' Chronicle* 26 Apr. 1769, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

significant developments. In a slightly different tradition from *The Taylor* was the "grand match of the complete Broadsword," in which the mounted combatants fenced with blackened sticks and wore white jackets to record the number of cuts made, ostensibly for the prize of a silver watch donated by a gentleman.⁴⁰ As such, it was a more savoury version of the swordfighting contests whose object was the drawing of blood (although sufficiently fixed that serious injury was rare), against which carousing Londoners had been betting for almost a century. By way of contrast, Astley gave the assurance that his brand of pugilism did "not extend to a broken head," and typically purported it to "be of great service to King and country."⁴¹

Another spectacle upon which Astley often relied at this time was the "droll Invention" of a sack race three times round the arena, again for the prize of a silver watch.⁴² The sight of the four performers jostling each other (as expressly forbidden) and struggling up after negotiating a two-foot high bar was appropriate to the shoe-string quality of Astley's at this time, and exemplified, moreover, the utilisation of everyday materials which today remains an aspect of circus performance. It also indicates how simple much pre-industrial commercial entertainment could be, even in the city.

Although Astley initially depended solely on horsemanship, he saw himself as an entertainer who was part of, and in competition with, the broader world of the London shows. In the other new act of 1769 he claimed to be able to emulate the card tricks of the well-known conjuror Jonas whilst on

⁴⁰ Trs. of ad., 26 Aug. 1769, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 25.

⁴¹ Ad., *Gazetteer* 1 Jan. 1770, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

⁴² Ad., 16 June 1771, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 39 and trs. of ad., 7 May 1770, item 30.

horseback, challenging anyone in England for 100 guineas to do the same.⁴³ The intense rivalry facing Astley on all fronts put such a price on distinction, and the circus thus began to be more concerned with professional competition between establishments than spectacles of competition within. The broadsword match was dropped after one season, and only revived for another in 1795.⁴⁴ And, although they briefly reappeared in 1786, the sack races only lasted until 1772. Thereafter, ostensible contest ceased to be a usual feature of the circus.

In November 1769, after the season had ended, Astley advertised for "a facetious gentleman to entertain the company"--in other words, a clown-figure.⁴⁵ Following another brief run during the Christmas week (when the warmth of a fire had been provided for those in the "Room apart"), Astley's was therefore, after two years of operation, suitably staffed for establishing a mixture of entertainments in April 1770. The first of his crop of pupils, the 14 year-old "Master Griffiths," was now proficient enough to join the public performances, too. Adopting a format closer to the conventions of theatre, these were now arranged in four "acts," or sets of equestrian feats, interspersed by the "postures," (i.e. imitative contortions) and tumbling of a certain "Signor Don Diego."⁴⁶ For the latter a large carpet would have been laid down on the sawdust, or a temporary stage erected in a few minutes on trestles in the centre of the ring.⁴⁷

⁴³ Trs. of ads., 8-30 Aug. 1769, *ibid.* item 24.

⁴⁴ 16 May 1795, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 110 B.

⁴⁵ *St. James' Chronicle*, 7 Nov. 1769, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

⁴⁶ Trs. of ad., 10 Apr. 1770, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 27.

⁴⁷ Anon. ms attached to copy of picture of Astley's in 1770s by Wm. Capon, qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 19.

Something of a hierarchy of entertainments was therefore delineated, with horsemanship prevailing as the backbone of the show. Yet, viewed comprehensively, these were all mere feats of physical skill; hitherto the disorganised stuff of theatrical interludes. Although Astley's itself would later diverge from this particular remit, the fact remained that lowly diversions--the "inexplicable dumb-shows and noise"--now had their own institution in the circus.⁴⁸ Sadler's Wells Theatre, dating from 1683, had long prided itself on many of these entertainments, but theirs had always appeared beside at least a token of drama. Moreover, Sadler's Wells had no horses.

Evidently Astley was now, in 1770, in such a secure financial position that he could happily pass up the opportunity of being the only equestrian display in London that year. As he had constantly threatened to do since April, he curtailed his third season there in July to venture on the first of his regular engagements in Paris, where he and his growing company were to perform at the great Saint Laurent and Saint Germain fairs.⁴⁹ Eventually Paris would become the second city of his jerrybuilt empire.

Astley was not the first riding-master to venture to the continent. Several other circus pioneers had in fact devoted their greatest energies to travelling abroad. Their appetite for distance was extraordinary, and approached only by the most successful of their contemporary fairground performers. The trail had been blazed by the indefatigable Jacob Bates, from Newmarket, who had

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2.12.

⁴⁹ Trss. of ads., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 27 (10 Apr.) and 34 (23 July 1770).

toured extensively on the continent since the mid-1760s. His especial fame in Germany was attested by a large luxury engraving of his performance published there, with annotations in German, French and English, in 1766.⁵⁰ By the early 1770's British riding-masters had thrown a network of patronage as far as the court of Vienna and, for Bates in 1772, the citizens of Philadelphia.⁵¹

Astley, meanwhile, first concentrated on building a concrete base for public patronage at home, which allowed him the flexibility to reach beyond simple equestrian displays as they passed out of fashion. Judging by the disappearance of rival names from the British newspapers over the next decade, it meant he had effectively survived the first generation of itinerant riding-masters by the end of his first three years.

II. The Formation of a Genre, 1771-1782

A. H. Saxon has reasonably divided the history of circus in England into four broad stylistic periods. The first of these covers the very early years prior to 1782. The second, "Romantic Age," with its emphasis on drama, lasted until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when it was superseded by the so-called "pure" style under the influence of the American travelling shows. It is this long third phase that has given us the typical modern circus; only since the late 1980s has it begun to give way to the radical and animal-free "New Circus" movement which has sought to revitalise the element of

⁵⁰ *Jacob Bates, the Famous English Horse Rider*, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20.

⁵¹ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 23.

theatre. Although it is notable that the style of both the first and the third of these periods is chiefly non-mimetic, one of Astley's early shows would scarcely look like a circus to a visitor from today. Rather, it would appear as a loosely grouped succession of riding-tricks embellished with a few naïve games. This would not have been the case by the end of this period--in 1782--however. Astley's tentative experiments in what might appeal to the public--or, in his own words, "take"--had by then yielded a formula which would be more familiar to modern eyes.⁵²

In 1771, still commanding a metropolitan monopoly, Astley recruited the glamorous riding-masters Mr and Mrs Hughes, who had recently returned from touring abroad.⁵³ Their arrival enhanced the company's repertoire and helped it to earn command performances that year for King George at Richmond Gardens and the French court at Fontainebleau. Having let the younger and fitter Charles Hughes take the lead in the trick-riding, where he made the technical advance of increasing the number of horses ridden at once from three to four, Astley was free to concentrate on the more comic acts. To relieve the four sections of horsemanship on the programme he introduced the successful "Little Learned Military Horse," which performed card tricks and answered questions by writing in the sawdust with its hoof, and made the first of many reworkings of *The Taylor*, featuring a drunken English sailor riding from Portsmouth--something which proved easily exportable to Paris.⁵⁴ National characters were also invoked that season with the opening piece, "Military Exercises in the Style of

⁵² Astley, letter to Mr Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786 (copied by Winston 16 May 1829), TM Astley's file.

⁵³ Charles Hughes claimed to have exhibited before "Indian nations in Africa & America" the previous year, although this is doubtful. Ct., h.d. 1773, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 40.

⁵⁴ Ads., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 40 (h.d. June 1771), 42 (trs., 2 July 1771) and 78 (h.d. 1772).

England, Ireland and Scotland."⁵⁵ There were now sufficient such interludes to be rotated on and off the programme in weekly or fortnightly cycles.

By the following year (1772) Mr and Mrs Hughes had set up independently as rivals of their former employer, challenging his renamed "British Riding School" with their "British Horse Academy" located just south of Blackfriars Bridge. Despite their greater equestrian prowess, though, and their hiring of the ropedancer Miss Huntley from Sadler's Wells (the earliest formal link with minor theatre), their enterprise did little more than model itself on Astley's.⁵⁶

Fresh rivalry grew into enmity when Hughes and his confederate, the conjuror Breslaw, made a well publicised point of having charitably employed Astley's estranged father Edward. Allegedly, Astley Senior had arrived in London to benefit from his son's success, only to be driven away by his violent abuse.⁵⁷ After a truce had been agreed, thanks to Mr Sampson's mediation by performing for both establishments, Astley resumed the commercial battle. It now demanded intensive and sometimes brash advertising, since there was also a flurry of renewed competition from the pub-garden arenas. By way of promotion, the Little Military Horse was also sent to appear at the menagerie and amusement complex of Exeter Change in Piccadilly. Many novelties were obtained for the ring, and not simply by improvising upon the standard repertoire. These included a display of decorative automata while the spectators were assembling; and child "prodigies," most importantly Astley's son John, who was

⁵⁵ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 25.

⁵⁶ See fig. 4.4.

⁵⁷ H.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 69 and 89.

supposed to ride two horses at once, depicted on bills exclaiming "I am only five years old."⁵⁸ Charles Hughes responded to the latter move by employing his eight-year old sister, Sobieska Clementina, but Astley's was additionally able to boast a strong-man-cum-equilibrist who could balance holding a nine-year old girl, as well as the trained bees of Daniel Wildman, a well-known leader in the current fad for feats of apiary on horseback.⁵⁹ Consequently the press saw fit to comment, with probably a little truth, on "the Numbers of the first Nobility that flock to Westminster-bridge."⁶⁰

Throughout this period, the genre grew by the accumulation of successful elements year by year; comparatively few devices were taken on board which were not maintained. In 1773, Astley's began to incorporate acrobatics and vaulting, which were both distinctly above the nadir of taste that tumbling had come to epitomise. "A *Spanish Gentleman*," it was claimed, amongst other feats:

throws himself into the Air a considerable Height, turns round, and...like a Tennis Ball, which rebounds, throws himself back again without touching the Ground with his Hands.⁶¹

The evening's overture was "Polandrics," which combined acrobatics with equilibrium in the perching on ladders and chairs. This was currently a favourite at Sadler's Wells and the fairs and was to remain so in the circus until the 1820s. Horsemanship remained the staple, though, and involved six of Astley's adolescent pupils, with such obscure vignettes as "the Manner of the Light Troops, going to Bed in

⁵⁸ Bill, h.d. 1772, TM Astley's file. For a similar type of bill see fig. 4.4.

⁵⁹ Ads., h.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 85, 62 and 73.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* item 53.

⁶¹ Astley, *A Short Description of the Various Feats of Activity Exhibited at Astley's*, Fenwick Colln., Tyne and Wear Archives, sect. 3.

High Germany.⁶² Meanwhile Hughes nudged his riding-display towards a greater degree of heterogeneity by joining forces with the trick musicians and conjuring of Breslaw's "Italian" company.⁶³

According to the law, all places of public entertainment had to be licensed either by a royal patent for stage-drama like Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres, or by the magistrates for music and dancing. In July 1773, for the first time in what would prove to be a decade of conflict, the Surrey authorities noticed that Astley had neither of these permits and put an end to the season. Pending trial, the riding-school remained closed for 1774 too.⁶⁴ Astley continued actively consolidating his position, however. Having secured the lease for his site, he published a simple riding-manual ostensibly based on his training-methods, much as Hughes had done in a more comprehensive but equally plagiarised attempt two years before.⁶⁵ Entitled *The Modern Riding-Master*, it sold successfully.⁶⁶ And while Hughes evaded the grasp of the magistrates by going to the continent in search of noble patronage, Astley went on to tour provincial cities and boroughs as far as Dublin and Carlisle, where his show happened to be flooded out by an upsurge of the River Eden.⁶⁷ Riding masters on tour at this time

⁶² *Ibid.* sect. 8.

⁶³ See Speaight, *History of the Circus* 28; handbill repr. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 4, pl. 9.

⁶⁴ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 100 (trs., *Morning Post* 14 July 1773) and 104 (h.d. 1774).

⁶⁵ Charles Hughes, *The Compleat Horseman; or, the Art of Riding Made Easy . . .* (London, 1772). Hughes borrowed from two well known riding books of the previous decade; Astley in turn lifted some of his from Hughes. See Stott, "In Search of Circus History," in Pretini, ed., *Thesaurus Circensis* vol. 2, 1097-1108: 1100-5.

⁶⁶ Astley, *The Modern Riding Master: or, a Key to the Knowledge of the Horse and Horsemanship, with Several Necessary Rules for Young Horsemen* (London, 1775).

⁶⁷ H.d. 1774, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 103.

were still performing in convenient fields, much as Johnston had done in 1758. As late as 1784 there was a fatal accident when two spectators fell out of a tree while straining to watch Astley's troupe near Port Meadow in Oxford.⁶⁸

The case proved inconclusive, so Astley was finally able to reopen free from Hughes, or any other serious competitors in London, in 1775. The legal action, far from damaging Astley, had gained him greater notoriety. Nor would the law again achieve such an interruption. The seating at the renamed "Astley's Riding School" was completely roofed over (fig. 1.3), and the shows resumed as they had been before.⁶⁹ Over the next four years, the range of types of entertainment continued to broaden steadily. Recommencing with Astley's 1776 introduction of slack-rope tricks and human (or "Egyptian") pyramids, it then extended to the exhibition of "several large serpents" by a "Madame Rosi Bonnecourse," followed by vaulting from ropes by 1778.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Astley's began to embrace the visual luxury of fireworks and fantastic tableau-machinery as a prelude or finale: in 1777 it featured, in addition to a "curious . . . sympathetical clock," a number of automaton figures playing "on GERMAN FLUTES."⁷¹ "Many are the Mechanic powers," eulogised a handbill for the "Temple of Minerva" in 1776,

that cause the little Figures in the Temple to find out the Strings, as they friendly contend with each other which shall the most Pleasure [give] to the Hearer...it seems as

⁶⁸ Ms. note, "Astley at Oxford," 11 Sept. 1784, TM Astley's file, env. "1794."

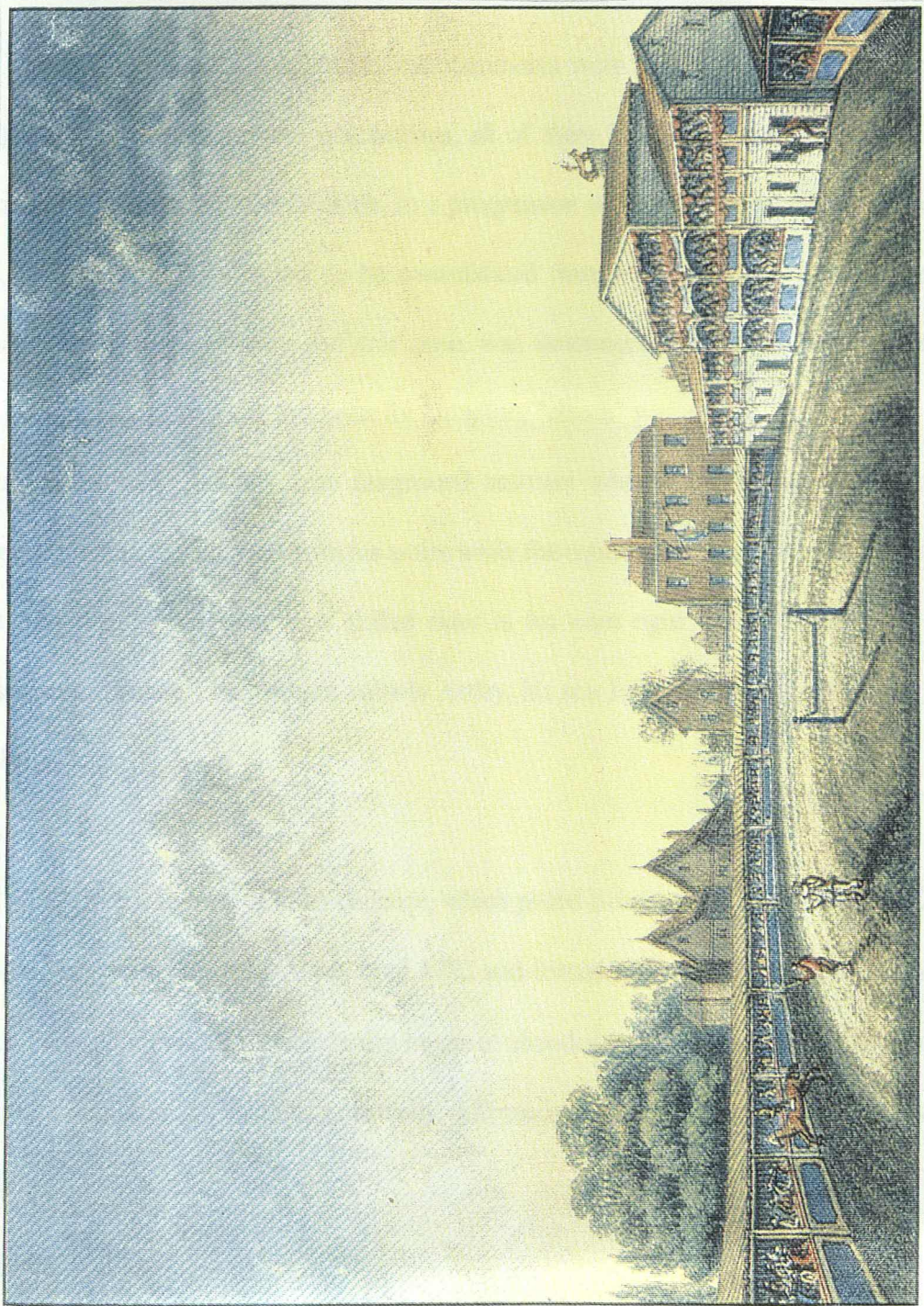
⁶⁹ H.d. 1775, *ibid.* item 106.

⁷⁰ Ads., *ibid.* items 118, 112 (h.d. 1776) and 127 (h.d. 24 Sept. 1776).

⁷¹ Astley's handbill, 1777, Bod. Douce Prints a.49, f. 175.

✓

Fig. 1.3. Astley's Riding School in 1777. Gouache (?) by William Capon (1757-1827). Note the clown on the right. (Private collection, in Bemrose, *Circus Genius* 18.)



if the Goddess had taken the Artist by the hand, and enabled him to charm the curious Eye, and please the admiring Fancy.⁷²

By this time the non-equestrian entertainments were receiving equal weighting (though not status) with horsemanship in the proceedings, all of them being presented as self-contained entrees performed by small teams or individuals, in a programme structure very similar to that of the modern circus. Another perennial aspect to be consolidated then was "the Clown," who, dressed in loose pyjamas with a long *Commedia dell'Arte* nose, was announced as such for the first time in 1777.⁷³ Once a common early modern synonym for bumpkin, "clown" was already a generic term for the stock buffoon of the stage and the zany fairground assistant who would burlesque the ropedancers.⁷⁴ Besides distracting the audience with his antics while the equestrians caught their breath, Astley's clown would, however, also appear as a skilled rider in his own right. On this occasion he was listed alongside approximately four others; namely Astley; his son John or a young apprentice; and a Mr and Mrs Griffin.

The American War of Independence, which pitted Britain against France from 1778, prevented any more Parisian ventures by Astley until 1782 and forced him to concentrate on a wave of business developments at home. His establishment began to abandon its shoe-string quality in favour of catering for a more sophisticated market, constantly differentiating its products to keep up with plural and

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.* This may also contain the first extant bill illustration of a circus clown.

⁷⁴ On the etymology of the word see Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring" 7-10.

competing tastes on the one hand, while struggling to standardise production on the other. Genres evolved rapidly under such a dynamic tension. Overall there was a gradual, if punctuated, decrease in entrepreneurial diversification over the next four years, as a successful artform emerged along with a building in which to house it.

During the late 1770s riding-lessons became available at the standard price of 2s. 6d. instead of by private arrangement, and it was advertised that horses could now be broken and kept for the winter.⁷⁵ A greater refinement of statuses within the newly-extended seating, including the addition of boxes, was instituted, accompanied by a wider price-range, in the course of 1778 and 1779.⁷⁶ Utilising the river, an annual rowing-race for the prize of a wherry was inaugurated to celebrate the King's birthday in 1780. No doubt prompted by the bathing facilities at the Dog and Duck, Astley also installed a "Floating-bath" attached to Westminster Bridge that summer; according to Willson-Disher he had also already opened a bathing-machine at Vauxhall in 1772.⁷⁷ Measuring 25 m long by 5½ m wide, the bath was fed by the throughflow of the Thames. It was "fitted up with neatness and simplicity," as befitted its sanitary function, and had separate baths and changing-rooms for either sex. A boat waiting at the foot of the Surrey side of the bridge ferried customers, paying one shilling each, to and fro, and to entice subscribers at up to half a guinea per month, an "entertaining treatise" on the bath was available for sixpence. Although eventual benefits were thought to amount to:

⁷⁵ Ad., h.d. 1776 (item 122), and ms. notes, headed "1778" (item 139), BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1.

⁷⁶ 1779, *ibid.* item 119.

⁷⁷ Roberts, *Survey of London*, vol. 25: 53; ms. notes, headed "1780," BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 158; and Disher, *Greatest Shown on Earth* 32.

"AUGMENTING THE VIGOR, HEIGHTENING THE BEAUTY AND PROLONGING the life of the Individual," the contraption itself lasted only two seasons, despite the considerable investment it represented.⁷⁸ At its relatively low price for such a pleasure it was consistent with a popularizing thrust which Astley would later develop, but for the time being it was aimed at too narrow a middle-class market in a way that was at odds with his latest direction.

More successful, and of great influence in the artistic history of the circus, were the structural improvements made to the Riding-School between 1778 and 1780. Until then, the performing area had been open to the sky, with shows (and hence profits) subject to the weather and daylight hours. The ride was then at least sixty feet in diameter; a dimension that was successively reduced with this and each subsequent stage in Astley's building until, by the time of his third London amphitheatre in 1804, what has remained as the circus' standard diameter of thirteen metres was reached--this being the smallest practical distance around which a horse could canter with a rider standing on top.⁷⁹

A partial covering, leaving an aperture directly above the ride, was built, along with other facilities, in the winter of 1778-79.⁸⁰ For materials, Astley reputedly used hustings-boards from the recent Covent Garden election, having paid "the mob . . . a mere trifle" to bring them in after they had purloined them for firewood.⁸¹ The improvements, which included a stage nestling between two

⁷⁸ H.d. 12 July 1781, BL "Astley's Cuttings" vol. 1, item 198.

⁷⁹ This is the most plausible explanation of the standard dimension. See Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 6.

⁸⁰ Trs. of *Morning Post* 13 Mar. 1779, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 148.

⁸¹ Winston, ms. notes, *ibid.* item 786.

stables, were celebrated in a new name--"Astley's New Amphitheatre Riding School"--and the title "amphitheatre" was thus adopted for the first time.⁸² With these developments, the serious training and trading sides of Astley's business received their greatest emphasis; he had, after all, recently been prosecuted again for exhibiting without a licence. Besides being for non-equestrian feats, the stage (or "shape"), it was announced, was also for the purpose of auctioning horses on Saturday afternoons.⁸³ This activity was not seriously sustained, however, and hardly lasted the year.

Next winter (1779-1780) the roof was completed, allowing the place reasonably to be called "a theatre" and be noted, albeit glibly, for its "most beautiful effect." The conversion had cost Astley "a considerable sum," despite his economies, but he now had architecture in place of a simple site.⁸⁴ The entire venue was subject to artifice: light could now be controlled creatively. More prosaically, it could host regular winter audiences in comfort, too. By candlelight, on 13 March 1779, Astley inaugurated a three-year series of "Winter Evening's Amusements," which, more than incidentally, infringed the Patent theatres' effective monopoly for that part of the year.⁸⁵ The aesthetic potential of such a setting was quickly exploited: shadow plays (known as "Ombres Chinoises") were first tried in 1780, and for twenty years afterwards continued to provide dependable overtures to the evening. Like the modern cinema, the "Ombres" (depicting, for example, sunrise over General Elliott's garrison in Gibraltar and an eruption of Mount Vesuvius) were given in darkened house, after which all would be illuminated for

⁸² Trs. of *Morning Post* 13 Mar. 1779, *ibid.* item 148.

⁸³ *Ibid.* item 149.

⁸⁴ "Riding-House Intelligence," h.d. 27 Nov. 1780, *ibid.* item 194.

⁸⁵ Ms. notes from *Morning Post* 13 Mar. 1779, *ibid.* item 148.

the noise and excitement of the horsemanship.⁸⁶ And in a similar prelude, on December evenings in 1782 audiences could delight in a machine with "upwards of 400 variegated Lamps, moving different ways."⁸⁷ All of this was in addition to the increasing use of firework finales.

The most obvious effect of the new facilities was to increase both the scope and the number of different acts in the typical programme. The increased intimacy of the venue afforded a new degree of finesse, seen in acts ranging from bird imitations (which became a regular feature), to John Astley's novel combination, in 1781, of dancing with horsemanship. The latter became the new mode in horsemanship--the first such stylistic transition. Trick-riding--a fiddling pursuit by comparison--was superannuated, and later became known as the "Old English" style.⁸⁸ Signalling Young Astley's emergence as an independent artistic force, his 1781 performances involved both "serious and comic dancing" (mainly minuets and hornpipes); "demi-caricatures"; flag-waving; and playing a violin standing on horseback. It was boasted that John Astley surpassed on horseback what the famous dancer Vestris achieved on stage.⁸⁹

Besides this particular invocation of the more canonical theatre arts, Astley's was also venturing a measure of drama. In February 1781, for a period of a few days, a burletta or "musical piece" entitled

⁸⁶ Ad., 22 Jan. 1781, *ibid.* item 180.

⁸⁷ Ad., h.d. 13 Dec. 1782, *ibid.* item 437.

⁸⁸ Pablo Paddington, 1840, in Speaight, *History of the Circus* 53.

⁸⁹ Puff, h.d. 13 Dec. 1781, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 232. Gaetano Vestris (1729-1808) was the founder of a family of Parisian ballet dancers.

Britain in Arms; Or, Who's Afraid in Jersey was presented on the stage.⁹⁰ (Burlettas were brief plays often--though not here--adapted from well-known pieces at the Theatres Royal. Mainly in song and recitative, they were attempts to circumvent the law which effectively restricted prose dialogue to the patent stage.) In May the next year the same subject culminated in the performance of ballad-singing to celebrate Admiral Rodney's recent victory against the French in the Battle of the Saints.⁹¹

A reliable formula for the shows had nonetheless been properly evolved by 1782. Like the typical twentieth-century circus, it comprised between ten and fifteen entrées accompanied by music, each of which lasted approximately ten minutes. Horsemanship alternated with the other entertainments, finishing with the most prized piece--usually John Astley's equestrian dancing.⁹² Largely the same programme would be maintained for the duration of the season. Historically, a degree of equilibrium had therefore been reached. In practice, though, Astley's programming was as fortuitous as it was customary or planned. Novelty, availability and the law determined the contents of a show more than formality.

Astley's peculiar combination of entertainments lay somewhere between three main points on the current map of recognised cultural activities: the definitive sport of equestrianism; vulgar entertainment; and the art of the theatre. His reputation had helped to exclude virtually all direct

⁹⁰ Ms. notes, *ibid.* item 158.

⁹¹ Ct., h.d. 23 May 1782, *ibid.* item 376.

⁹² E.g. ad., "A Plot of the Winter Amusements," h.d. 14 Dec. 1781, *ibid.* item 229. Trampolining was now also included.

competition from Britain since 1775, so the form was not being replicated by parallel producers in the manner of a widespread popular "genre." But the year 1782 was to bring a stimulating upheaval.

III. The Challenge of the Stage, 1782-1810

It was Charles Hughes who helped to usher in the second era of English circus history, by retaliating against the Astleian monopoly. Upon his return from entertaining continental monarchs in 1781, he was approached by the actor, dramatist and songwriter Charles Dibdin, who had recently quarrelled with his Covent Garden employer.⁹³ Dibdin proposed a partnership to found a new place of equestrian entertainment half a mile east of Astley's, at the fiveways in the new roads known as St. George's Circus. Inspired by this location, as well the riding track known as "the circus" in Hyde Park (alluding to the glories of ancient Rome), Dibdin decided to call it the "Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy." Thereby he coined the name "circus," which caught on instantly as the main generic term for both this type of venue and the entertainment as a whole.⁹⁴ Unlike its modern counterpart, however, a full dramatic stage with proscenium was to dominate the ring in order to carry Dibdin's prolific output of plays and burlettas, which would be varied with Hughes' equestrian

⁹³ Apart from his arguments with Garrick, the fractious and paranoid Dibdin (1745-1814) is best known for the sea-ballad *Tom Bowling*, and was pensioned by Pitt because of its propaganda value in the suppression of the Nore Mutiny of 1797. He wrote of his experiences in a pamphlet, *Royal Circus Epitomised* (London, 1784), and his memoirs, *The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself*, 4 vols. (London, 1803).

⁹⁴ A newspaper verse of 1786 satirizing adults at play in "the Circus, Play, or midnight ball. . . ." suggests the early use of the word for the genre (*Universal Register* 9 Aug. 1786, BL "Lysons Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 116). Throughout its history Astley's, as a minor theatre, however, was liable to be classed on its own, by its proper name, or by such categories as "equestrian performances," while the Royal Circus itself was known simply as "The Circus."

arrangements. Thus, at a stroke, the circus became part of the world of minor, or illicit, theatre. The collaboration between Hughes the equestrian and Dibdin the dramatist brought about a hybrid form that characterised the London circus world for the next century.

Whilst Dibdin's plans for the Royal Circus were taking shape in the summer of 1782, the Astleys were emulating Hughes with their most ambitious tour to date, taking in Brussels, Belgrade, and the imperial court at Vienna. They returned via a now fashionably Anglophile Paris, in their first attempt on the city independent of the fairs. There the physical beauty of fifteen year-old John and his new dancing was likened to the *Apollo Belvedere*, attracted thousands and earned him the sobriquet "The English Rose" (alluding to Vestris, who was known in London as "The French Rose").⁹⁵ Showing "as much taste," according to Horace Walpole, "as Caligula," Queen Marie Antoinette extended exceptional patronage including a piece of ground to build a new riding school in the rue Faubourg-du-Temple, where work started immediately.⁹⁶ And at the same time King George in England gave Philip Astley a fourteen-year patent for his method of horsebreaking.⁹⁷ This was all fortunate, because in September they returned to thin houses and, as Astley was clearly aware, the prospect of fatal competition. Astley began to saturate the sympathetic *Public Advertiser* and *Morning Post* with puffs of his recent successes and truculent, exaggerated claims that his patent gave him "sole

⁹⁵ "Extract of a Letter from Paris, dated July 29," 10 Aug. 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 390. This puff claims Young Astley was called "the Paris Rose," contrary to later accounts (e.g. Decastro, *Memoirs* 46), but this seems an unlikely name for Parisians to use.

⁹⁶ Qtd. Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 50; 21 Sept. 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 407. The site was at No. 16.

⁹⁷ 1 Aug. 1782, PRO, Patent Rolls, IND:16806, Geo. III 19-43, p. 64.

inventor's" rights to the whole art of "agility on horseback" (indeed he reputedly said it was his "birthright.")⁹⁸

The opening of the Royal Circus was indeed near-fatal to Astley's; less through competition, though, than the renewed legal onslaught that its publicity precipitated upon both their heads. On account of their flagrant use of unlicensed stages, both Hughes and Astley were imprisoned, and their establishments forced to close during New Year 1783. Only Astley, however, had to undertake to dismantle his modest platform in order to gain release: the prosecution could not make the charges stick against Hughes because he was only responsible for the Royal Circus' horses. Both quickly resumed, but the Royal Circus had thus emerged on top. Eventually, however, Astley would draw advantage from the fact that it was for him a legal watershed and his last *débâcle* with the Surrey authorities. As Dibdin later said, this was an artform "begot at Newmarket, born in St. George's Fields, and nursed in the Bridewell. . . ." ⁹⁹

In the meantime Astley's immediate strategy, in early 1783, was to improvise, and then to fight back beyond his former position. Fireworks especially were promoted, and dancing, along with such other "stage" entertainments as bird imitations, was confined to horseback or to a suspended rope.¹⁰⁰ Thus the tight-rope, which had been popular at Sadler's Wells and the fairs since the seventeenth

⁹⁸ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 386 (28 Aug. 1782) and 401 (5 Oct. 1782); Brayley, *Theatres of London* 63.

⁹⁹ Dibdin, *Royal Circus Epitomised* B2.

¹⁰⁰ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 454 (27 Jan. 1783) and 509 (9 Aug. 1783).

century, first became prominent at Astley's, from where it eventually evolved into the high-wire intrinsic to the modern circus. Partly to compensate for the lack of a stage, John Astley took his equestrian dancing beyond mere elegant movements and the striking of statuesque attitudes, and began to incorporate stronger narrative elements like "the celebrated Ballet of the Double Jealousy."¹⁰¹ In the hands of Ducrow this activity was to become one of Astley's great and distinctive products.

Aside from the historic results of enforced discipline, the most obvious effect of the adversity at the time was reduction to a meagre programme of eight entrées, which remained the same from January to April 1783. Their sole attraction, the Young Astley, was desperately vaunted, to the extent that in July 1783 he issued a challenge, implicitly addressed to Hughes, for "any horseman to exhibit, even holding the reins, what he does without them, for any sum not exceeding five thousand pounds." Anxiously--though correctly--asserting that he stood "confessedly unrivalled," John Astley was thus resorting to the obsolescent mores of the days of the independent riding-masters.¹⁰² His competitors were beginning to see themselves as professionals who were above making such wagers.

Astley's other strategy at this point was to consolidate his forces elsewhere, being free to do so since Young Astley, having apparently proved his capabilities by stepping into the breach whilst his father was in prison, could now take charge in London.¹⁰³ (Within three years he was taking a near-equal share of the overall management). The company was split into English and French divisions

¹⁰¹ 14 July 1783, *ibid.* item 493.

¹⁰² 17 July 1783, *ibid.* item 494.

¹⁰³ 30 Dec. 1782, *ibid.* item 447.

under the separate management of father and son, to be rotated roughly seasonally thereafter.¹⁰⁴ At the end of the 1783 season, however, John Astley left teaching and administration in the hands of assistants, and went to Paris with his father for the December inauguration of their Amphithéâtre Astley (or "Anglois").¹⁰⁵ The fare, which included *The Taylor*, was to be virtually the same stock-in-trade as shown in London.

* * *

So began both a period of expansion for Astley and the first comparatively gentle wave of proliferation for the circus as a whole. Following in the wake of the pioneers, the Astleys became instrumental in the swift export of the circus; not, now, merely in the form of trick riding, but as a rounded and flourishing genre of entertainment. In April 1786, it was reported, John Astley inspired the French royal family to commission a temporary arena for his performances at Versailles.¹⁰⁶ The fashion evidently grew, since the following year the Cirque du Palais Royal was built in Paris.¹⁰⁷ In 1791, in the course of the Revolution, Astley's Paris amphitheatre was commandeered by the impresario Antonio Franconi, and thereby provided the foothold from which his subsequent dynasty led the development of the circus across Western Europe. In Paris alone, Franconi went on to build the Theatre de l'Equitation in 1802 and the famous Cirque Olympique in 1807.

¹⁰⁴ This was boasted of since 1782, but, it seems, only in anticipation. See ad., 16 Oct. 1782, *ibid.* item 418.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* items 521 (6 Sept. 1783) and 545 (8 Dec. 1783).

¹⁰⁶ Puff, "Letter from Versailles," 25 Apr. 1786, *ibid.* item 892.

¹⁰⁷ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 196.

The circus went on to colonise most of the explored world within the lifetime of its chief inventor, especially since there were a few lightweight companies travelling in the wake of the Imperial bandwagon by the time of Astley's death in 1814.¹⁰⁸ The American circus had been properly established as early as 1792 by John Bill Ricketts, an English-born apprentice of Charles Hughes, in Philadelphia.¹⁰⁹ Thirty years later English-style pantomimes were being presented in Texas and Mexico by Carlos E. Green's Circus, which had originated in the northeastern states.¹¹⁰ Indeed such expeditions were formative for the American, and thus the eventually dominant, circus. The tent and accommodation wagons were invented for gruelling distances as the circus plied the furthest extent of available territory, relieving the dullness of frontier towns with the vestiges of civilisation. Russia's great circus tradition had been prompted by Charles Hughes, who performed and taught there in 1793 after being commissioned to buy bloodstock for the imperial stables by a visiting Count (with Astley's father accompanying the horses as an ostler). Under the patronage of the Empress Catherine, amphitheatres were then erected in St. Petersburg and Moscow expressly for Hughes' use.¹¹¹

The spread of the circus within the British Isles reflected in microcosm its patterns abroad. Other metropolitan establishments first began to appear like satellites around the twin nuclei of Astley's

¹⁰⁸ See J. E. Varey, "Notes on English Theatrical Performers in Spain: Part II (1583-1868)," *Theatre Notebook* 10 (1955-6): 74-9.

¹⁰⁹ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 112.

¹¹⁰ Nicolas Kanellos, "A Brief Overview of the Mexican-American Circus in the Southwest," *Jnl. of Popular Culture* 18.2 (Fall 1984): 77.

¹¹¹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 185.

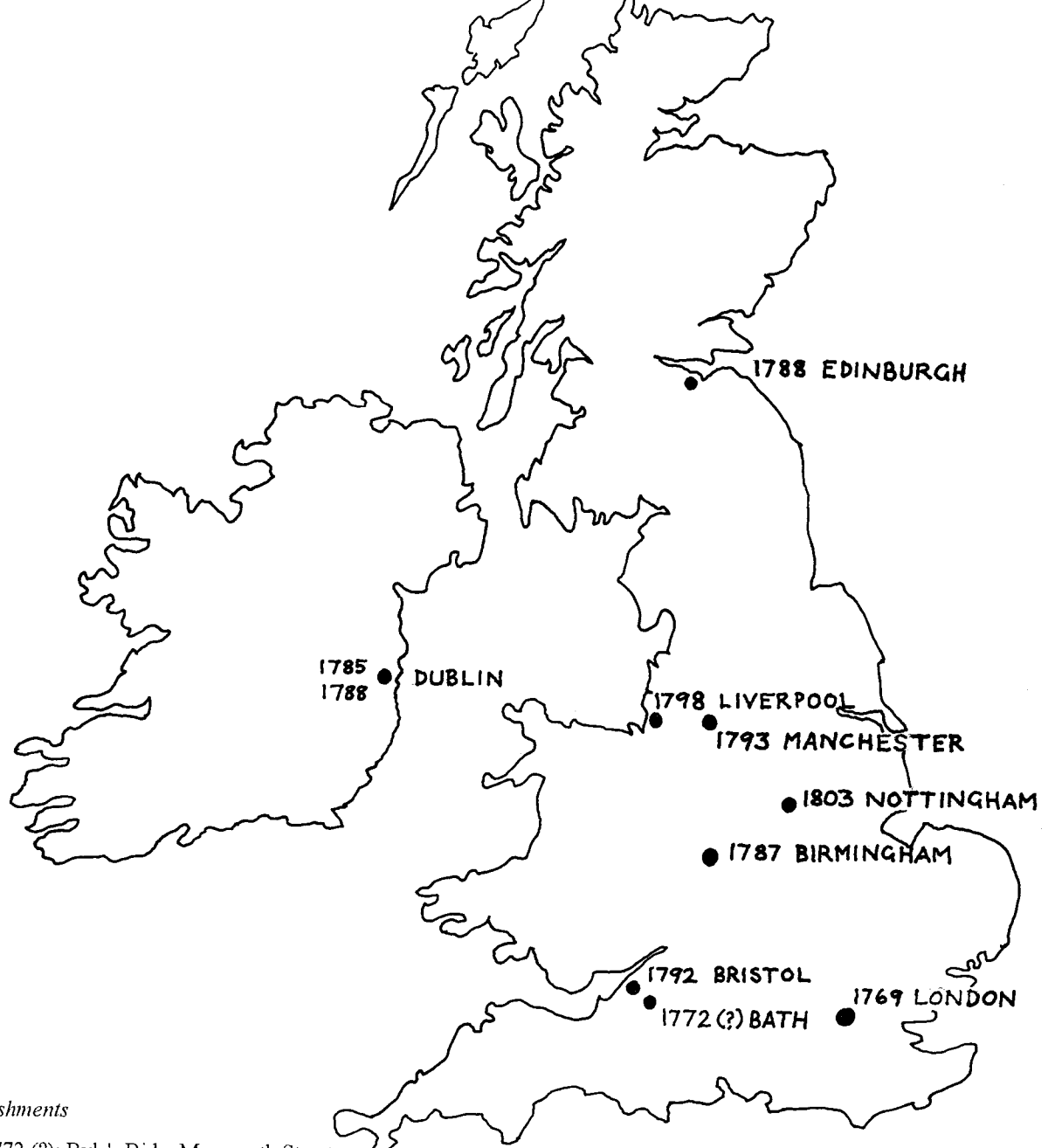
and the Royal Circus, in a pattern that was later seen in New York, and, to a lesser extent, Paris.¹¹² In 1786, one James Jones (an erstwhile equestrian at Astley's and later a manager of the Royal Circus) and his brother George opened Jones' Equestrian Amphitheatre in Whitechapel, on the northeast fringe of London (fig. 1.2).¹¹³ Roughly in time with their appearance in national capitals on the continent, or state capitals in North America, circus buildings also began proliferating onto the backstreets and wastegrounds of provincial cities outwards across Britain (fig. 1.4). Bath was first, with Ryles' Ride (later "Amphitheatre") owned by Samuel Ryles next to a pub as early as 1772, followed most probably by the "Circus" of another Mr. Jones in Dublin in 1785.¹¹⁴ Like many English performers, Astley had relied on the Irish metropolis since his early years, so in 1788 he erected his third major establishment, The Equestrian Theatre Royal, in the shell of the old Bishop's Mansion there. At this time "amphitheatre," "circus," and the other names were interchangeable terms, and bore no indication as to whether the place had a stage in addition to the ring. Over half of them did not: there was a resurgence of the stageless circus as small provincial and suburban houses branched off below the main London houses.

At least nine of Britain's principal cities thus had permanent circus buildings by the early 1800s, and nearly as many had been set up in London alone by the early years of the Regency. The capital's fourth, and Astley's next circus--The Olympic Pavilion--was opened in September 1806 in Wych

¹¹² For a map of Parisian circuses see Christian Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque Des Origines à Nos Jours* (Paris: Ed. du Moniteur, 1982) 54.

¹¹³ See cts., BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 55; ad., n.d. (1782), TM Astley's file.

¹¹⁴ Colin Johnston, Bath City Archivist, letter to the author, 18 Dec. 1991; *Hibernian Jnl.* 25 May 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 55.



Establishments

Bath 1772 (?): Ryle's Ride, Monmouth Street

Dublin 1785: Jones' Circus, Marlborough Street

Birmingham 1787: Swann's Amphitheatre, Livery Street

Edinburgh 1788: Broughton Street

Dublin 1788: Astley's Equestrian Theatre Royal, Peter Street

Bristol 1792: Circus/Riding School, Limekiln Lane

Manchester 1793: New Circus, Oldham Street

Liverpool 1798: Olympic Circus

Fig. 1.4. The first wave of permanent circuses in the British Isles, 1768-1803.

Street, near the Strand, and in 1811 it was joined by The Equestrian Theatre of Astley's associate William Davis.¹¹⁵ Of the above cities, Bath, Birmingham and Liverpool would become secondary centres of circus activity in England during the ensuing two decades.

The Astleys' grasp extended during the late 1800s as they jerrybuilt, then leased and revisited, circus buildings in many of the cities and towns to which they now toured. It was reputed Astley died with nineteen circus buildings to his name. Where there was none, companies would perform in ordinary riding schools, or on the stages of theatres, as Astley's had done at the Theatre Royal in Liverpool *en route* from Dublin in March 1792, and as remained common until the introduction of large tents into Britain by American circuses in the 1840s.¹¹⁶ Sometimes the pit would be converted into a ring. Otherwise, for engagements of a week or more, companies (especially Davis') from around the 1790s onwards might assemble their own temporary wooden building on open ground in two or three days.¹¹⁷ Touring was the prime means of disseminating both the idea and prompting the creation of material settings for this novel form of entertainment, as, indeed, the founding of Liverpool's own circus in the wake of Astley's involvement in the city suggests.

We should avoid, however, exaggerating the importance of circus buildings as evidence and creating an image of circuses being sown on hitherto barren ground. Rather, the world of popular

¹¹⁵ George Raymond, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston, Comedian*, 2 vols. (London, 1844) 77-80.

¹¹⁶ 6 Mar. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 48 E.

¹¹⁷ See Speaight, *History of the Circus* 36.

sport and entertainment was a rich field--rapidly becoming a jungle--of forms constantly mutating in order to survive. In many respects, circuses did little more than follow in the footsteps of the famously adaptable strolling players.¹¹⁸ At all times, a fleeting, and hence often undocumented, band of performers was what really constituted a circus. Thanks to its mobile, ephemeral and often makeshift nature about two dozen proprietors were able to serve much of the population by the early nineteenth century, with little need for permanent quarters. For this and no doubt other reasons circuses as physical sites never proliferated as fast as, say, the Victorian music halls, nor to a fiftieth of the numbers.¹¹⁹

* * *

Returning to Astley, in the London of the early 1780s: it was not until the end of the 1783 season, nine months after his New Year's imprisonment, that the magistrates allowed him to re-establish his stage and rise to the challenge presented by the opening of the Royal Circus in late 1782. During the winter, Parisian craftsmen were employed in redecorating and extending the existing facilities, stretching his finances to an extent that he would later regret.¹²⁰ The opening steps in the new direction were taken on Easter Monday, 19 April 1784, in the form of a comic ballet entitled *The*

¹¹⁸ See Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Theatre of the London Fairs in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1960); her *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces, 1660-1765* (Cambridge: CUP, 1939) 21-2 and *passim*.

¹¹⁹ There were approximately 1,000 music halls recorded in London, but only 20 circuses. Source: Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850-1950* (London: Library Assoc., 1970).

¹²⁰ 16 Dec. 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 526; Astley, letter to Mr. Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786, TM Astley's file.

Peasants of the Alps. This would later become a familiar Astley's theme. The ensuing programme included burlettas and a violin concerto: music, a newly commercialized performance art in the eighteenth-century city, was now underscoring circus entertainment. To conclude the evening was a pantomime, *Jupiter in Disguise; Or, the Rape of Europa*, which promised, with the typical eclecticism of minor theatre, to be at once "Tragi-Heroic" and "Comic."¹²¹ Consistent with such an agenda, the amphitheatre was given the additional name "Ambigu-Comic," after Audinot's *Ambigu-Comique* marionette theatre on the boulevard du Temple in Paris.¹²² For the first two months, in order to accommodate the new entertainments, the usual "Exercises of the Amphitheatre" (that is, acrobatic and equestrian feats) were relegated to the first half of the evening.¹²³ After that, they became interspersed with the stage material, as at the Royal Circus, and remained so for some twenty-five years. Both the opening piece and the final pantomime were the preserve of the stage.

The transition to the stage had been a necessary move, despite its cost; in fighting-weight at least, Astley's had now achieved some parity with its contestant. The Royal Circus had suffered from preposterous management disputes virtually from the day of its inception, and this also allowed Astley to steal back to a viable position.¹²⁴ The relative sophistication and scale of Astley's operations continued to be extended. In the early autumn of 1784 a peripatetic troop of equestrians was detailed

¹²¹ Bill, 19 Apr. 1784, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 533.

¹²² 26 May 1784, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 550.

¹²³ Bill, 19 Apr. 1784, *ibid.* item 533.

¹²⁴ In 1784, after having been ejected by the proprietors, Dibdin and Hughes stormed the Royal Circus with a mob. See Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 92.

to tour boroughs throughout England, before merging again under the financial need to go to Paris for the winter of 1784-85.¹²⁵ This became a regular engagement until the Revolution, and signalled the end of any more winter seasons in London until 1819.

The season of 1785 brought an unprecedented artistic *coup* for Astley when he returned with fresh material from the Paris fairs. The public's extraordinary enthusiasm for his trained animals in particular precipitated a nationwide craze that year. Conjuring, entitled *Philosophical Amusements; or, The Magical Table*, was revived under heavy promotion, and the stage flourished, too, with such delights as promised by the burletta *Cupid Pilgrim; or, Ten Minutes Frolic Among the Nuns at Boulogne*.¹²⁶ Yet the waves of public caprice over one summer could not immediately rebuild the precarious capital foundations which, unlike the Royal Circus (a group speculation) drew on Astley's pocket alone. Persistent competition demanded that any returns from the season were ploughed back in by next Spring. For 1786 the Amphitheatre's interior was elaborately transformed into the "Royal Grove," in the culmination of a popular classicism--common to both pantomime and pleasure-garden--that Astley's had been building for itself since 1783. The new name, like that of the Royal Circus, belied any real royal connection.¹²⁷

In spite of a redoubled effort by Hughes and Dibdin to outshine their rival with talented new performers, the novel surroundings at Astley's in 1786 brought another successful season, if little

¹²⁵ 4 Oct. 1784, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 615.

¹²⁶ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 633 (28 Mar.) and 667 (23 May 1785).

¹²⁷ It retained the subtitle "and Astley's Amphitheatre" for the first year.

improvement in the climate of his business.¹²⁸ That would be a more gradual process, achieved only by the steady accumulation of safe successes from 1788 onwards. In any case, the conditions of even these relatively high echelons of popular entertainment were characteristically those of ostentation and brinkmanship, with Astley lurching between solvency, privation and profligacy throughout his career.

Under the distraction of the fresh decor, the pennywise Astley economised by opening the season with the same programme that had ended the last.¹²⁹ This was exceptional by now; normally, new material would be presented for the first month or two, after which the house would fall back on its stock of reliable stage-pieces gathered over the past few seasons, including, for example, the burletta *The Diamond Ring; Or, The Jew Outwitted*.¹³⁰ These could be rotated between the opening and final slots of the evening, with weekly, fortnightly, or occasionally monthly changes of programme, depending on finances and the popularity of the pieces concerned. By the mid-1790s revivals from two or three years before regularly constituted up to a quarter of the stage offerings. Overriding these were occasional productions of pure topicality; instantaneous responses across all the minor theatres to subjects which had hooked the public imagination, which no competitor could afford to ignore. In one famous instance in 1786, Astley's contributed a version of "The Peckham Gardener," an urban myth (like *The Taylor*) about the vindication of a confidence trickster.¹³¹ This, above all, affirmed that

¹²⁸ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 847 (4 July) and 861 (10 Aug. 1786). The Royal Circus employed the Italian acrobatic family The Charinis, exciting much wonder.

¹²⁹ 17 Apr. 1786, *ibid.* item 792.

¹³⁰ 8 May 1786, *ibid.* item 812.

¹³¹ *The Origin of the Peckham Gardener; or, the Cunning Gypsy*: 29 May 1786, *ibid.* item 875. A version was shown at Drury Lane, as well as at the Royal Circus: see Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 105. The story was based on an allegedly real incident in which a man appeared in Camberwell

Astley's had arrived firmly within the burgeoning cultural system of London's minor theatres, the fair booths, and even, to an ever-increasing degree, the patent theatres. Indeed the four minors--Astley's, the Royal Circus, Sadler's Wells and the new Royalty Theatre in Whitechapel--became so confident of their equalization with the patent theatres that in 1788 they presented a petition to the House of Lords for their "Entertainments of the Stage" to be sanctioned.

The first three of these minor theatres had never ceased their vulgar parade of human and animal feats, however. By keeping one foot firmly in this camp whilst at the same time encroaching on the drama monopoly of the patent theatres, they therefore straddled the very genre divides that were effectively enshrined by the existing theatrical legislation.¹³² This was a more concerted challenge to the hierarchy and exclusiveness of genres than had previously been offered by the fairground booths and Sadler's Wells alone. The contrasts contained within Astley's and the Royal Circus' programmes seemed all the more heightened with their solid backgrounds of vulgar equestrianism. Both places encapsulated all but the very polarities of the entertainment spectrum. "The Royal Grove," observed one puff-writer in 1787, prudently omitting to mention the presence of drama,

may, with propriety, be stiled a hodge-podge, for here you have rope-dancing, singing, pantomime, wire-dancing, the warbling of birds, horsemanship, women vaulting on the slack-rope, imitations of hounds, organs, and dying wild boars, stage-dancing, buffoonery, mimicry, and agility of all kinds; in short, the eye and ear are amused by incessant variety, and we wonder how, in the name of fortune, Astley contrives to procure such an assembly of strange things.¹³³

posing as a gardener in order to borrow some money. He himself became the victim of false benefactors who intended to defraud him, but he successfully double-crossed them.

¹³² The Theatre Licensing Act of 1737 covered "any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce, or other Entertainment of the Stage. . . ."

¹³³ 20 Apr. 1787, BL "Astley's Cuttings", vol. 1, item 936.

It was during the late 1780s that Astley's in particular--since it was always happier with the idea than the more pretentious Royal Circus--came to value the aesthetics of variety. This aspect of both houses was very much a symptom of their current situation within the history of genres. This was a period of transition and readjustment for the circus; a generic interregnum before it synthesised an entertainment which fully fitted the presence of the stage. The burlettas, for instance, as the most important single component, had no elements which linked them with the doings of the ring. With the plenitude of material characteristic of this period, shows were now lasting over three hours, reaching five and a half by the 1820s.¹³⁴

After a hard winter of 1786-7 in Paris, with Astley suffering constant harassment from the authorities, the summer of 1787 saw an upturn in his situation. While the Royal Circus degenerated into a drinking saloon under the management of a disaffected Hughes, the Amphitheatre attracted greater gentility and became a thriving node of cosmopolitanism and lately fashionable francophilia.¹³⁵ John Astley was at the height of his equestrian powers, and was also showing an interest in stage acting, which coincided with that year's marked strengthening of the theatrical side of the business. Five new stage pieces were presented during the early season, as the Amphitheatre at last wholeheartedly embraced the conditions of minor theatre. Astley's 1788 London season opened on Whit Monday, several weeks later than normal because of an extended stay in their one-off experimental "Royal Tent" in Liverpool, where they attempted to recoup the very poor returns of

¹³⁴ An ad. for 22 Sept. 1788 states that the performance will end at 9.30 (*ibid.* item 914), while in Ducrow's era they frequently ended at midnight or even 1 a.m. (Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 21).

¹³⁵ See Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 116.

another severe winter in both Dublin and Paris.¹³⁶ The summer's returns were again good, however, perhaps partly due to the publicity aroused by the minor theatres' petition to the Lords.

Astley went on in 1789 to capitalise triumphantly on two events: firstly, the French Revolution; and secondly, a rather smaller but still ignominious riot at the restored Royal Circus in mid-April which resulted in its brief closure. On hearing of the latter Astley hurried back to Lambeth from Dublin and duly "Reaped a golden harvest," according to the Royal Circus' unfortunate manager.¹³⁷ With Astley gaining a firm foothold in Dublin and Liverpool, the years 1788 and 1789 marked a period of success and extension within the British Isles. The Royal Circus had recovered from its discomfiture by the end of the summer of 1789, however, and by November 1790 was providing a rivalry worthy of mention in Astley's propaganda.¹³⁸ Indeed despite its chronic administrative difficulties, the Royal Circus was, as Tuttle has said, "an efficient machine as far as public entertainment was concerned."¹³⁹ It continued to inhibit Astley's business until the disbanding of its ring and stud in 1816, when it became the "Surrey Theatre" specialising in nautical melodramas. Melodramatic influences, for their part, first become apparent at Astley's during the time of the French Revolution, simultaneous with a renewed interest in martial topics inspired throughout the minor theatres by this dramatic period of conflict. If 1785 was a key year for animal acts and the ring, 1789 was formative for Astley's stage.

¹³⁶ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 43; 12 May 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1067.

¹³⁷ Thomas Read, Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 140.

¹³⁸ E.g. 7 Nov. 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 21 D, describing "the CIRCUS" as "bad neighbours."

¹³⁹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 369.

When Britain eventually declared war with revolutionary France in early 1793, Astley re-enlisted with his regiment under the Duke of York, leasing the London amphitheatre--which had newly undergone rebuilding and had its stage enlarged--to his son for seven years.¹⁴⁰ He could now, it seemed, safely abdicate his life's work: the Amphitheatre was becoming universally recognised as a permanent fixture of London. Before the end of the century it would be recorded on handy city maps (fig. 1.5), and listed by the guidebooks, where it ranked fourth or fifth amongst the theatres, alongside Sadler's Wells and the Royal Circus.¹⁴¹ Astley's nonetheless surprising decision to serve at this point lent impetus to what was now positive wartime militarism at the Amphitheatre; it also provided a source of research (some of it relayed back by correspondence) for the reconstructions of recent battles in which this militarism was constantly expressed. Under a similar agenda in early 1794, Astley published another brief manual entitled *Remarks on the Profession and Duty of a Soldier*, and the topographical *Description and Historical Account of the Places now the Theatre of War in the Low Countries*, which was spiced with reportage.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Its official name was changed to: "The Royal Saloon and New Amphitheatre": 17 Mar. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 51 C.

¹⁴¹ E.g. *The Picture of London for 1818; Being a Correct Guide to All the Curiosities, Amusements, Exhibits, Public Establishments, and Remarkable Objects in and Near London*. 19th ed. (London, 1818) 294.

¹⁴² Astley, *Remarks on the Profession and Duty of a Soldier; with Other Observations Relative to the Army, at this Time in Actual Service on the Continent* (London, 1794); *A Description and Historical Account of the Places now the Theatre of War*, 4th ed., (London, 1794).

Fig. 1.5. Astley's hinterland up to 1806. From *A New Pocket Plan of London, Westminster and Southwark . . .* (London, 1799).

Key to buildings owned by Philip Astley

1. Hercules Buildings (pre-1775)
2. Hercules Hall (1788)
York Place (1790)
3. Olympic Pavilion (1806)
4. Astley's Punch-House (probably owned by Philip Astley's father, Edward, c. 1772)¹

¹ Ad., n.d., BL "Astley's Cuttings" vol. 1, item 444.

The artistic mode which had thus been achieved was affected surprisingly little by the disaster which occurred later that year. In the early hours of 17 August 1794, the London amphitheatre burned down, warranting Astley's hasty release from the army. Although the property was only insured to a tenth of its £30,000 value, and the fire had also consumed several houses on the adjacent two roads, there were at least on this occasion no injuries thanks to the prompt action of some nearby performers in raising the alarm and rescuing the horses. As with the London Bridge fire of 1632, which was traced to a maid who left hot coals under stairs, and even the Great Fire of 1666 (rumoured to have begun in a baker's shop), a humble scapegoat was found.¹⁴³ Reports blamed the "carelessness of a watchman" for the conflagration.¹⁴⁴

Astley retook the helm, and for the remainder of the season part of the company was housed under his son's direction at the Lyceum Theatre in the Strand, which, as "Astley's New Circus," had its pit made into a ring for the showing of purely equestrian programmes. Work commenced immediately on the rapid rebuilding of the Amphitheatre after Astley had laid the foundation stone with an impassioned speech, attended by 100 spectators (a "vast concourse"), on 10 September 1794.¹⁴⁵ Receipts from a supportive public at the Lyceum were especially good, helping Astley to complete "The New Amphitheatre of Arts and Sciences" within seven months, in time for opening the next Easter Monday, 1795. The new name was intended to fit the measure of benevolent patronage

¹⁴³ For the former see Bod. Gough Maps 21, f. 48.

¹⁴⁴ 19 Aug. 1794, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 169 B.

¹⁴⁵ *Morning Chronicle* 11 Sept. 1794, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 55.

provided by the Duke of York.¹⁴⁶ Several public subscription nights were then also held towards the costs.

The only detectable consequence of this catastrophe on the Amphitheatre's artistic constitution was that Astley concentrated further upon theatrical representation at the expense of the traditional equestrian core. In 1795 company efforts were channelled towards producing the lavish scenery and decorative storylines of such pieces as *Baron Munchausen; Or, Harlequin's Travels*, or the onetime fairground droll, *The Siege of Troy; Or Famous Trojan Horse*, which was duly equipped with a wooden version of the original.¹⁴⁷ By the late 1790s the amphitheatre had reached a plateau of productivity in this respect: output of new stage-pieces had increased from an average of one and a half per month in 1787 to more than three per month in 1797. This standard in both quantity and elaborateness was maintained until around 1815, when output was again approximately doubled to a level approaching its peak in Victorian times. Astley's had become a reflecting and researching consumer of ideas for its literary-based enterprises, demanding the creative talents, for instance, of Charles Dibdin The Younger (son of the Royal Circus' founder) as house author between 1797 and 1799 and again in 1822, and the scene-painter John Henderson Grieve, later of Covent Garden Theatre, for more than a decade spanning the turn of the century.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ 6 Apr. 1795, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 107 A.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* vol. 1, items 114 A (10 July) and 120 B (31 Aug. 1795).

¹⁴⁸ Dibdin the Younger (1767-1833) became a proprietor of Sadler's Wells. His experiences are recorded in *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger, Dramatist and Upward Thirty Years Manager of Minor Theatres*, ed. George Speaight (London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1956), a major source on Astley's.

Despite the inevitable setbacks, which included having to spend the winter of 1798-9 at the Royalty Theatre in Whitechapel because of the rebellion in Dublin, John Astley was therefore able to buy a half-share of the Amphitheatre and resume full management upon the expiry of his lease in 1799.¹⁴⁹ His regency over the establishment appeared a great success: in 1801, the interior was reconstructed, and the name "Astley's Royal Amphitheatre" finally settled upon in order to boast the recently added patronage of the Prince of Wales.¹⁵⁰ The stage manager, John Fox, reputedly said of the Young Astley: "If he goes on so, he'll buy his father out of the theatre."¹⁵¹ Yet his father, notwithstanding press announcements that he had "retired" in 1799, never abandoned his duties.¹⁵² In 1801 he had his greatest publishing success--a second, much more comprehensive riding manual entitled *Astley's System of Equestrian Education*--which ran to eight editions within a year.¹⁵³ In Europe it became nearly as influential an ambassador for the 'rational' English school of riding (as opposed to the dominant Neapolitan and French styles) as William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle's classic *General System of Horsemanship* of 1658.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 30. Philip Astley remained the official licensee until 1801, however: Surrey Records Office, Quarter Sessions Order Books, QS 2/1/31-2 (1799-1804).

¹⁵⁰ Ct., 10 July 1801, TM Astley's file.

¹⁵¹ Qtd. Decastro, *Memoirs* 92.

¹⁵² Ct., h.d. 1799, TM Astley's file, box 1, sect. "Early Years: gen. Philip & John Astley": "ASTLEY'S Newspaper cuttings misc."

¹⁵³ *Astley's System of Equestrian Education, Exhibiting the Beauties and Defects of the Horse; with Serious and Important Observations on his General Excellence, Preserving it in Health, Grooming, etc.* (London, 1801).

¹⁵⁴ Cavendish's *System* was first published in France as *La Méthode Nouvelle*; the English version appeared in 1743. See Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*, vol. 1: 140-1; vol. 2: 85.

When the short-lived Peace of Amiens was achieved with France in 1802, Astley, at the age of sixty, embarked for the continent to reclaim his Paris property that had been seized by the Jacobins ten years before. When hostilities recommenced in May 1803, however, he was interned as an enemy alien.¹⁵⁵ Then the London amphitheatre was again struck by fire, late at night on 1 September 1803. This time, the watchman had responded quickly; it was the lamplighters who were to blame for leaving their lights near firework-materials in the store-room. "Nothing is left," lamented one newspaper report, "of that beautiful little building but a heap of black and smoaking ruins." Another correspondent saw significant curiosities amongst the debris:

The music was legible yesterday on the black flakes of the consumed paper.... Here were swords, the barrels of muskets, tin armour, and all the paraphernalia of kings and warriors, which the flames could not devour.

Although the horses had again been saved, it had been a greater disaster than the previous one. The fire had consumed nearly forty houses of poor families nearby, and left John Astley's mother-in-law "a mangled corpse" in the family's adjoining apartment. "The father too," commiserated the press, "of Mr Astley is now a prisoner of war in France. What a scene of accumulated misery and horror!"¹⁵⁶

But Astley had already managed to escape from the French, and returned from his seventeen-month adventure some weeks later--not only to confront this disaster, which, once again, his son had allowed to happen with inadequate insurance, but also to learn that his wife had died a week before the

¹⁵⁵ Decastro, *Memoirs* 85.

¹⁵⁶ Cts., 1803, TM Astley's file.

fire.¹⁵⁷ He nonetheless set about rebuilding the third amphitheatre, whilst John took the company to winter in Dublin. It was ready, as before, for the next Easter Monday, 1804 (fig. 1.6).¹⁵⁸ Coincidentally, the Royal Circus suffered the same fate of burning and rebuilding in August the next year.¹⁵⁹

Promising to "keep the whip hand," Astley decided to spread the burden of the new Amphitheatre by selling his half to a syndicate of four younger circus *impresarii*, including Robert Handy and William Davis, whose touring companies had been occasionally combining with Astley's or renting his venues since the previous fire.¹⁶⁰ He then hastily prepared an abridged version of the *System*, and by 1805 one could also buy *Astley's New Pocket Map of Europe* and his *Map of Germany* at "notable" booksellers, including S. Creed's next door to the Amphitheatre.¹⁶¹ And in a desperate seven-year foray into more genteel theatrical territory, in order to "extricate" himself, he said, from "a very unpleasant situation," he set up the Olympic Pavilion north of the river.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Press notice, 25 Aug. 1803, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 251 C.

¹⁵⁸ Ad., 2 Apr. 1804, *ibid.* item 257 C.

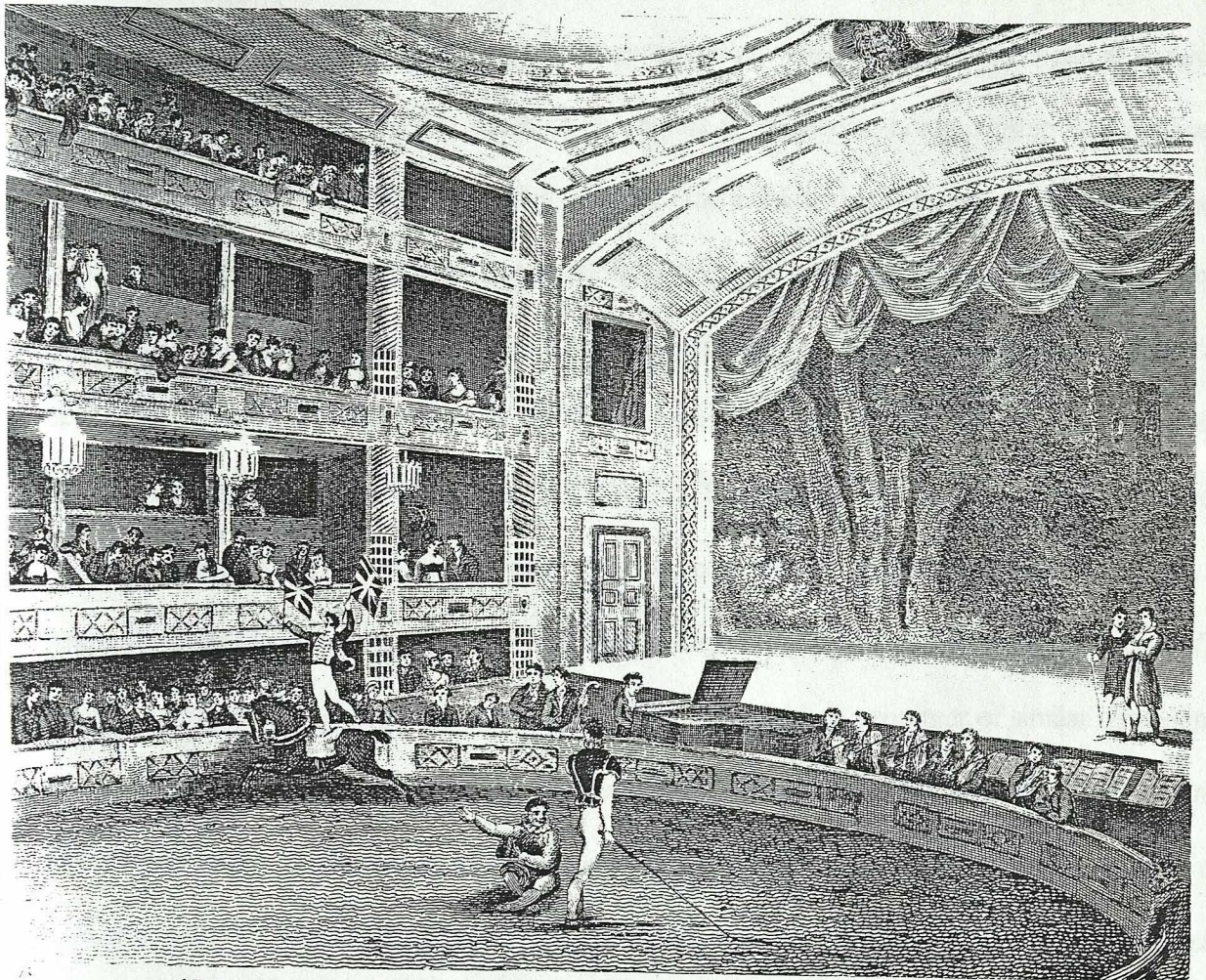
¹⁵⁹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 215.

¹⁶⁰ Decastro, *Memoirs* 80, 100; reprs. of "letters of contract," 27 June 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 B.

¹⁶¹ *Astley's Projects in his Management of the Horse, an Abridgement of his Book of Equestrian Education* (London, 1804); cts., TM Astley's file.

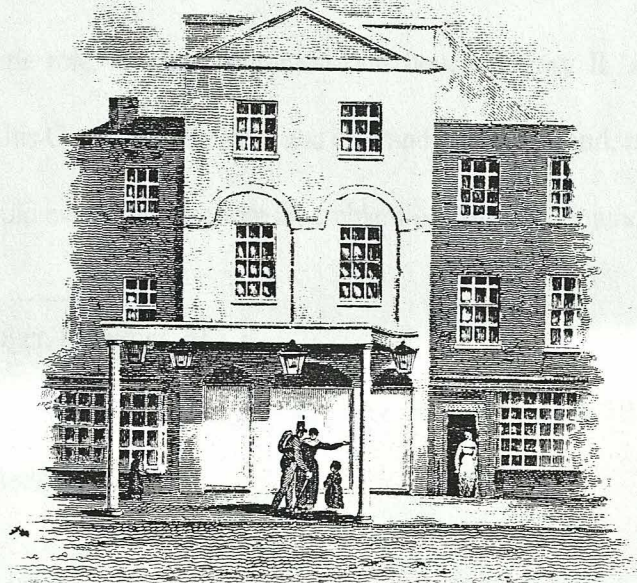
¹⁶² Astley, letter to the the Lord Chamberlain, the Earl of Dartmouth, requesting a licence for the Olympic Pavilion, 3 December 1804, *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth*, vol. 3 (London: Historical Mss. Commission, 1896) 288.

Fig. 1.6. Engraving, after George Jones, of the third Astley's in 1815. Note the figures outside: possibly a family shopping trip (the building on the right was in fact a bookshop), or an act of soliciting. From Robert Wilkinson, *Londina Illustrata* (London, 1815). (Mander and Mitchenson Collection.)



ARENA OF ASTLEY'S AMPHITHEATRE, SURREY ROAD.

Wise sculp.



* * *

Around the turn of the century, a phase of generic readjustment to the stage began at Astley's and at the Royal Circus. Having lost much of its original preeminence, horsemanship was deposed from its pivotal role as the opening and closing feature of the evening, in favour of any available stage-material; whether "serious" pantomime, harlequinade, burletta, or both folk and quasi-balletic dancing (currently at their apogee in the minor theatres). Ballad-singing was also highly popular at Astley's, thanks largely to the performing talents of its Mr. Johannot.¹⁶³ At the same time, horses, however, began to be utilised as dramatic accessories on the stage. This practice had originated in pantomimes on the French stage in 1790; in Britain, it was led by the currently more stylistically innovative Royal Circus, with Astley's in close pursuit. The Royal Circus' stage first admitted performing horses in J. C. Cross' pantomime version of *The Magic Flute* in 1800, bringing with it a summer of similar competing equestrian productions between those two established rivals.¹⁶⁴ Here the horses were employed to lend visual effect on stage. Next year, however, under the direction of John Astley in the "Spectacle" of *Fair Rosamund; Or, Woodstock Bower*, they were used to create the impression of historical authenticity. Besides Hannah Astley (John's wife, who was then embarking on a heavily-promoted stage career) in the title role, its chief attraction was hence "Henry II...and his triumphal Entry into London, preceded by his Courtiers, Heralds, and a Grand Military Band, mounted on real Horses..."¹⁶⁵ Such processions would eventually become an emblem of Astley's conjunction of stage and horse.

¹⁶³ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 20.

¹⁶⁴ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 38; Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 39.

¹⁶⁵ Ct., 1801, TM Astley's file.

Melodrama, having been smuggled in from France, was only then being named as alternative to pantomime and burletta in the minor theatres.¹⁶⁶ The novelty lay more in its excessive style than in its musical format. Its sentimentality and elementary Romanticism certainly offered greater scope for the use of the horse as a central *subject* of the drama than did the trickery of pantomime. Coupled with an existing Astleian preoccupation with imperial and oriental topics, melodrama carried the fashion for stage equestrianism to its highest form--the hippodrama, in which horses are integral to the play's action. In 1806, another vehicle for Mrs Astley, entitled *The Fair Slave*, first boasted mounted battle scenes.¹⁶⁷ These were outshone the next year by those contained in *The Brave Cossack; Or, Perfidy Punished*, written by the versatile John Astley, which *The Times* approved in suitably Romantic terms as "one of the most grand, energetic, and, in short, sublime productions ever witnessed on any stage."¹⁶⁸ Certainly its extraordinary popularity gave Astley's final ascendancy over the Royal Circus. Subsequent Astleian victories in this field included *The Arab; Or, The Freebooters of the Desert* of 1809, which typically concluded with "A General Attack of the Freebooters, Caravan Guards, &c. *On Real Horses*, with the Fall of the Arab Chief."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ For the origins of melodrama at Astley's see ch. 6.II. The first piece to be labelled as such in England was Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), based on Pixérécourt's *Coelina; ou l'Enfant de Mystère* (1800). The prefix 'melo...' comes from 'melody.'

¹⁶⁷ "The FAIR SLAVE; or, The Moors and Africans." Celebrating the victory of the latter over the former "The Subject chiefly taken from Mungo Parke's Travels into Africa." 3 Apr. 1806, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 14.

¹⁶⁸ 26 May 1806, qtd. Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 46.

¹⁶⁹ Bill, 26 June 1809, TM Astley's file.

The Arab also finally established the standard three-part programme that had been gradually taking shape since around 1801. In amphitheatres for the remainder of the century, a section of equestrian and acrobatic feats--the "Scenes in the Circle"--was invariably sandwiched between two stage-productions: usually a grand hippodrama to start, with a harlequinade finale. In any case, the most novel, lavish and popular piece currently on offer nearly always came first. Horsemanship in the ring was only revitalised at Astley's under the histrionic talents of Andrew Ducrow from around 1812 onwards, and never quite regained its overall supremacy there. Within the ring, though, and in all the stageless circuses, horsemanship of course remained the basis of the whole activity.

With the advent of the hippodrama, Dibdin's stated objective in setting up the Royal Circus in 1782--that "the business of the stage and the ring might be united"--was finally realised after more than twenty years, and in a manner not too distant from the chivalric displays which he then had in mind.¹⁷⁰ As it was the circus' own adaptation of melodrama, hippodrama was the only thing on Astley's and the Royal Circus' stage that was unique to their particular design of theatre. It offered a generic *via media* after the circus had stood for more than twenty years at the fork between stage and ring.

IV. The Age of Hippodrama: 1810-1830, and Beyond

Comparatively little change in the style and format of Astley's and other types of circus took place within the next thirty years, although the choice of subject-matter and design naturally fluctuated

¹⁷⁰ Dibdin, *Professional Life* vol. 2, 106.

somewhat with fashion. The viability of the hippodramatic form--sealed in 1810 by the monumental £18,000 profits of John Astley's *The Blood-Red Knight; Or, the Fatal Bridge*--brought with it a state of maturity for the circus as a whole.¹⁷¹ What Saxon has described as this "freakish" variety of drama even invaded the patent theatres: conceding to its competition, Covent Garden employed Astley's stud in their own "oriental" hippodramas, *Blue Beard*, *Timour the Tartar* and *The Secret Mine*, in 1811 and 1812.¹⁷² This triumphant period has been well trodden by theatre historians, so the remaining paragraphs of this chapter will discuss it in a more compressed fashion.

Once hippodrama had become the mainstay of Astley's it formed its own tradition within the broader melodramatic *oeuvre* of the minor theatres; a tradition with which Astley's became synonymous as it rose to leadership over the circus and its nexus with theatre during the ensuing decade. These developments were closely echoed in Paris by Antonio Franconi's Cirque Olympique, in its various locations (including the old Amphithéâtre Astley from 1816 to 1826) between 1807 and 1847.¹⁷³ The only substantial change within this overall pattern in Britain came with Ducrow's innovation of costume mimes on horseback, most famously *The Courier of St. Petersburg* of 1827, in which a dashing messenger gathered, harnessed and bestrode up to five horses, with four more in the reins, as he traversed the countries of Europe.¹⁷⁴ Ducrow's acts became standard circus fare until the 1850s and recurrent thereafter, with *The Courier* even revived occasionally in modern-day circuses.

¹⁷¹ Decastro, *Memoirs* 101.

¹⁷² Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 33.

¹⁷³ For full details see Speaight, *History of the Circus* 196.

¹⁷⁴ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 141.

Besides this, there were, especially latterly, periodic variations upon the hippodrama using such other animals as dogs, elephants or big cats.¹⁷⁵

The ordinary melodrama, which at Astley's was now a poor relation of hippodrama, flourished in greatest numbers there around 1817. At one point that year five of them--sporting such titles as *The Black Dwarf* and *The Fatal Snow Storm*--were shown during the course of a week.¹⁷⁶ This immediately preceded the high decade of popular Romanticism, which at Astley's was especially manifested in tales of southern European outlaws. Astley's first famous hippodrama on this theme was *Gil Blas de Santillane; Or, the Horse Banditti* of 1821. The opening scene of a similar story following year, with its "ROMANTIC PASS" set for the "Sudden and imposing Irruption of Fillebrande and her Bandits," summarises much of their style.¹⁷⁷ Nine years later, on horseback in the ring, Ducrow could still fashionably mime the fatal adventures of *The Brigand*, based on the recently engraved "banditti" pictures by Charles Lock Eastlake.¹⁷⁸ Harlequinade pantomimes continued as a versatile and favourite element at Astley's until the final years of the century. The burletta tradition, however, was fully absorbed into melodrama and hippodrama by 1830, after a decade of appearing in the form of occasional light *hors d'oeuvres* to the evening, based on miscellaneous topics of the moment.

¹⁷⁵ See especially *ibid.* 67, 216 and 239.

¹⁷⁶ Bill, 1817, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷⁷ Bill for Dibdin the Younger's *Fillebrande; Or, the Female Bandit*, 4 Nov. 1822, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 221.

The cult of hippodrama in its own right reached its greatest intensity in *The High Mettled Racer* by Thomas Dibdin (Charles Dibdin's second son), first presented at Astley's in 1815.¹⁷⁹ This story of the decline and ignoble death of a once fine thoroughbred raised the horse to the position of sole subject and principal actor. According to Saxon, it is this actual acting by the horse that denotes the "true" hippodrama.¹⁸⁰ Subsequent classic hippodramas of the age at Astley's were J. H. Amherst's reconstruction of *The Battle of Waterloo* in 1824, and Henry M. Milner's *Mazeppa; Or, the Wild Horse of Tartary* of 1831, based on Byron's poem of the same name in which a youth who dared to love above his station was lashed naked to the back of a steed and sent galloping across eastern Europe.¹⁸¹ All of these lucrative pieces underwent frequent revivals into the 1850s, and, in the latter case, into the 1860s. The rather more grandiose French counterparts to *Waterloo*--the Napoleonic *Gloires Militaires*, mainly at the Cirque Olympique--correspondingly reached their zenith in the early 1830s, amid often tearful scenes of public nostalgia and enthusiasm. From 1845 two huge outdoor hippodromes were built in Paris, where they attained casts of several hundreds during the early Second Empire. After that the *Gloires* dwindled along with chauvinist pride in the 1860s, and were finally extinguished in the reformist climate of the Third Republic from 1870 onwards.¹⁸²

Institutional developments in the British circus between 1810 and the mid-century form a protracted series. Early on, a second wave of provincial expansion, stimulated by tours by big-city

¹⁷⁹ Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 73.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* ch. 7.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* ch. 5.

companies with new technical resources, saw single-family-based circuses established as far afield as Aberdeen, at the approximate density of one (or perhaps two) for each such regional centre.¹⁸³ Some thirteen circuses of comparable size then emerged in London's expanding neighbourhoods between the 1830s and 1850s; one well-known example of 1843 was The Yorkshire Stingo in New Road, Marylebone.¹⁸⁴ In several cases (like the Cookes' Rotunda Circus, 1827, in Blackfriars Bridge Road) these were fledgling ventures by members of families that had grown up under the wing of larger companies.

At Astley's level, where circus had grown to meet the grandest of minor theatre, this was the first notable period of change in organisational structures. The pattern of business became an increasingly braided one of mergers and secessions--although never did it match the voracious agglomeration seen in the American "Flatfoot" syndicates from the 1820s onwards. So called because of their promise to put their "foot down flat" on any competition in their territories, these resulted in such many-headed monsters as the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey show of the 1890s.¹⁸⁵ The earlier abundance of such autonomous owner-managers as Astley or Mr. and Mrs. Sampson had given way to a period marked by collaboration and mini-cartels, as these individuals (or couples) began to parcel off their increasingly unwieldy business interests, and as the minor theatres came to present more organised fronts against the constraints of theatrical law. Companies had in any case always been

¹⁸³ E.g. Ord's Olympic Circus, 1818, etc., Arthur Morice Playbills Colln., Aberdeen U Lib.

¹⁸⁴ For a nearly complete list of circuses in London, Paris and New York see Speaight, *History of the Circus* appendix.

¹⁸⁵ See *ibid.* 125.

interconnected as personnel moved from one to another from season to season; underneath the formal umbrella of commercial identity, they offered shifting permutations of the same human pool. To the researcher, each prominent member of the circus thus seems to have been associated with nearly every other at one time or another. Performers could also move between minor theatre, fairgrounds and circus, either presenting similar acts in each or adapting themselves like chameleons.¹⁸⁶

Astley's in particular steepened the trend towards greater institutional complexity which had begun, despite reversals, with the ownership syndicate of the late 1790s between Handy, Davis *et al.* and John Astley. Towards the ends of both Astleys' careers, change and diversification resulted from financial difficulties, not empire-building. Unable to manage properly due to declining health, Philip Astley eventually sold his Olympic Pavilion in 1813 to the new patentee of the Royal Circus for the poor price of £2,800 (at a reputed loss of £10,000) after rumours that together they were attempting to establish a third theatre in London.¹⁸⁷ Signing with a trembling hand, he wrote to the Lord Chamberlain of his "very unpleasant circumstances," praying for the licence to be transferred so that he could "be releived [*sic*] from" his "present Anxiety of Mind: Which if Neglected, may be attended with serious Consequences and Exposure!"¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ A protectionist system of agents each covering circus, theatre and music hall was set up in the later nineteenth century. Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* 225.

¹⁸⁷ Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 2, 80; ct., Astley, letter to *The Morning Herald* 21 Mar. 1810, TM Astley's file; Brayley, *Theatres of London* 63.

¹⁸⁸ Astley, letter to the Marquis of Hertford, 21 Jan. 1813, PRO, LC7.4--1767-1852--(Papers unbound) Pt. II, no number, trs. in Caroline Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque en France: Spectacles et Sociabilités du XVIIIème Siècle," *memoire de Maîtrise*, Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 1992, 58 and *passim*. My thanks to Caroline Hodak for this reference.

When Astley died in Paris on 20 October the following year, his dominions in France were then sold off to pay accumulated debts, according to his will. The remaining proceeds, together with the property and profits of the London Amphitheatre, were bequeathed to John Astley, but any prospect of a dynastic chain was broken when he died of a "liver complaint," without issue, in the same room exactly seven years later.¹⁸⁹ By the terms of Philip Astley's will the property was divided into sixteenths amongst eight relatives; this favoured above all his four nieces, three of whom were also made trustees, while John's widow Hannah received only two shares.¹⁹⁰ The former syndic William Davis then took over the licence, and renamed the place "Davis' Royal Amphitheatre" in 1822. This resulted in acrimonious exchanges with the proprietors and successful litigation by Hannah Astley to regain a controlling stake in the licence, before Ducrow and an experienced circus impresario took over the management and reverted to the Astley's trademark in 1825.¹⁹¹

There followed more than a quarter-century of relative stability and celebrated success fostered by Ducrow's authoritarian but creative hand. The London company, which had never been broken up since 1768, survived both nationwide theatrical recession and, in 1841, another catastrophic fire that precipitated Ducrow's own mental breakdown and death the following year.¹⁹² Circus families who

¹⁸⁹ Decastro, *Memoirs* 110.

¹⁹⁰ Astley, Will, PRO (PROB 11/1562).

¹⁹¹ 14-18 Oct. 1822, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, items 864-92; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 120-9.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* 342.

had grown up under the shadow of the Amphitheatre were still queuing to take on its valuable mantle, so there was something of a resurgence of the independent dynast, armed with the skills of the theatrical owner-manager. The neighbouring proprietor William Batty built a lavish fourth Amphitheatre and later leased it to William Cooke, whose tenting circus had netted him £50,000.¹⁹³ Only in 1860, after Cooke's heavy losses with experiments in equestrian Shakespeare, did Batty intervene to disband the troop, sell the stud and turn the place into a conventional auditorium.¹⁹⁴ A twenty-year Indian Summer came in 1871 when the travelling showmen 'Lord' George Sanger and his brother John reconverted Astley's with 4,000 seats, but in 1893, with the market giving way to music hall, the building condemned by the new Metropolitan Board of Works, and pressure from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners who owned the site, the founding chapter of English circus history was closed.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Turner, "'£50,000 In Hand': the Story of William Cooke's Royal Circus Immediately Before Taking a Lease on Astley's in 1853," unpublished paper, 1990.

¹⁹⁴ Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 207.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 209; Roberts, *Survey of London* vol. 23: 70-2.

CHAPTER TWO

ASTLEY'S AS AN INSTITUTION

Since the time that Astley helped to found the circus, its observers have attached perhaps more significance to its social implications than to its art *per se*. Because the circus has appeared as something separate and different from ordinary society, it has been condemned by those who have seen it as threatening, and, largely since Victorian times, romanticised by others who have been fascinated and attracted by its wandering and apparent non-conformism.¹ The latter tendency is embodied in the modern myth of 'running away' with the circus like the errant Sergeant Troy in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874).

Anthropologists and sociologists who have spent time with modern circuses have confirmed that the themes of secession, alterity and escape are not only the fantasies of laypeople. In the early 1970s Robert Sweet, for example, noted the imperviousness of the American circus to external change;² while Marcello Truzzi recorded the language and folklore devised by its people to keep

¹ E.g. the German myth of "Kunstlerleben," which spawned popular paintings and engravings showing gypsies and their ilk enjoying a simple, indolent life with the circus. Engravings, 1870s and 80s, Sotheby's Auctioneers, London, sale of illustrated books etc., 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 224 (catalogue p. 73).

² Robert C. Sweet and Robert W. Habenstein, "Some Perspectives on the Circus in Transition," *Jnl. of Popular Culture* 6.3, *In-Depth on Circuses, Carnivals and Fairs in America* (1972): 583-90.

themselves separate from the public,³ and others examined its traditions of criminality.⁴ In short, circuses have been noted both for the archaic conservatism of their family-based organisation, and for their anarchic tendencies.⁵ Cross-cultural studies, meanwhile, have pointed out that social deviancy in artists is widespread, and may be due to social pressures as much as individual propensity, since in general artists would only continue to behave in such a manner if it was in their interests to do so.⁶

The strong and distinctive social identity that the circus undoubtedly developed invites comparison with the case of the first ever circus: not primarily to find out the origins of that identity, but rather as a way in to an exploration of the rôle that circus and minor theatre played in late Georgian society. Like all institutions, Astley's was predicated on a distinction between the outsider and the insider. This chapter will therefore consider aspects of the social organisation of the circus by examining how both audience and personnel were constructed. It will also discuss the business management of the circus, and other ways in which relations both between and within these two categories of people were mediated.

³ Marcello Truzzi, "The American Circus as a Source of Folklore: An Introduction," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 30.4 (1966): 289-300; Patrick C. Easto and Truzzi, "Towards an Ethnography of the Carnival Social System," *Jnl. of Popular Culture* 6.3 (1972): 550-566.

⁴ James A. Inciardi and David M. Petersen, "Gaff Joints and Shell Games: A Century of Circus Grift," *ibid.* 591-606. For a recent, comparable look at fairground fugitives see Ally Dingle, "It's No Fun and It's Not Fair," *The Big Issue* 93 (23-29 Aug. 1994): 10-12.

⁵ Yoram S. Carmeli, "Family and Economics in an English Circus, 1975-1979," PhD thesis, U of London, 1985; see also Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 16 for an informative discussion of circus society.

⁶ E. P. Merriam, "The Arts and Anthropology," in S. Tax, ed., *Horizons of Anthropology* (Chicago: Aldine, 1964) 224-36.

I. Building an Audience

Circus is usually seen as the quintessential popular entertainment, accessible to all--a reputation which is supported by Saxon's opening assertion in *Enter Foot and Horse* that Astley's, along with the other minor theatres, was designed to cater expressly for the "new playgoer from the working classes."⁷ However, in 1768 Astley's basic price of sixpence would have excluded many unskilled workers and poor, even if he did--as one authority maintains--have an unadvertised price of threepence for servants and children.⁸ The circus' universally accessible image is largely the product of later, nineteenth and twentieth-century marketing, which capitalized on the readily understandable nature of circus art. Early policy was more experimental, and resulted in an audience profile more complex than Saxon assumes.

The social character of the early trick-riding displays was similar to the horse racing and pleasure gardens with which they were associated, in their tendency to bring together fashion and low life. "I was highly diverted" wrote James Boswell when he saw the original trick-rider Thomas Johnston at Chelsea in 1763, and met a prostitute he once knew who was now married to an army officer. "It was a true English entertainment."⁹

⁷ Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 2.

⁸ Brayley, *Theatres of London* (1827) 60. I have found no evidence to substantiate this, and Brayley is not always reliable.

⁹ 10 June 1763, *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Futura, 1982) 296.

The initial effect of intensive commercial development under Astley and his competitors was, however, to tease apart and segregate the components of this relatively informal nexus. The fact that several of the riding masters had been employed by the aristocracy meant that they preserved elements of that orientation while also needing to court the patronage of the crowd, who qualified for admission only by their cash entrance-fee. Thus, during his first fifteen years, Astley effectively catered for two sets of patrons: that of the "Nobility and Gentry" on the one hand (though rank was often exaggerated in showground rhetoric), and the "Others," or the cash-paying crowd, on the other.¹⁰ In 1771 Astley even started to differentiate his shows, announcing performances, containing only horsemanship, that had been "solicited" by the former, and "general nights" with the full programme of acrobatics and low comedy for the latter.¹¹ The general pattern of audience organisation in the 1770s was bipartite, reflecting these split loyalties.

Even by the effusive standards of the day, Astley couched his early publicity in ingratiating terms. His first newspaper advertisement in 1768, for instance, promised that he would "be much obliged to those Ladies and Gentlemen who will honour him with their company, and will do everything in his power to gain their favour."¹² Astley knew, however, that pricing was the main instrument for cultivating an audience, and proved adept in its use.

¹⁰ Trs. of ad., 2 July 1771, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 42.

¹¹ Trs. of bill, *ibid.* item 41 (1771) and ad., item 42 (2 July 1771).

¹² 4 Apr. 1768 *ibid.* item 4.

When Astley set his first tariff in April 1768, there were two main factors affecting his decision. First, he had to compete with other riding masters; and second, he had to consider how his show would fit into the broader entertainment market. The first objective was straightforward: the standing price of sixpence that Astley chose undercut his rival Mr. Sampson at the Three Hats by half, while the shilling for a seat at least suggested equivalent quality and a desire to cater for the respectable. Those who paid the extra had the added bonus of exclusiveness, whereas at the Three Hats a shilling was the only price.¹³

Seen against the backdrop of popular entertainment in general, Astley's prices were on a level with the pleasure-gardens where trick-riding had begun, and where he sometimes exhibited.¹⁴ But his show also impinged upon the market for exhibitions and interludes, which was physically polarised along class lines. The two distinct market sectors were distinguished by fashion and price, and hence by greater or lesser exclusiveness, more than by the fundamental character of their wares. Similar freaks, for instance, could be seen in a saloon in Panton Street in Mayfair for two shillings or at Bartholomew Fair for a penny.¹⁵ By providing a single source for such fare, Astley's new institution threatened to disturb his customers' habits. So he encapsulated the existing polarities *within* his institution, distinguishing different classes of clientèle by pricing policy and accommodation, and aiming to be accessible from both above and below the middle class floor of 1s. Thus he replicated existing theatrical practice, but in a new context.

¹³ *Gazetteer* 10 Sept. 1768, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20.

¹⁴ Vauxhall cost 1s. 6d, or 1s. for late entrance: see William Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London*, vol. 1 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1901) ch. 2.

¹⁵ See Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Human Freaks" boxes.

By his second year, 1769, probably impelled by the need to secure his reputation, Astley was in a position to raise his basic price to a shilling, in line with Hughes and other competitors. It remained there for a decade. For the "Nobility," admission to the new "Room apart" was 2s. (or "as usual"), and Astley would personally secure the places of those who "bespoke" them by sending their servants along beforehand.¹⁶ Probably 40% of the audience occupied this category (fig. 1.3). Private matinées for 10 guineas were advertised in 1773.¹⁷ None the less, the circus was very much cheaper than some other public entertainments. A winter concert at the Italian Opera, Haymarket, for instance, cost 10s. 6d. per ticket, while masquerades ranged between 5s. and a guinea (the latter being more than a week's good wage for the skilled manual worker).¹⁸

Whatever the exact target audience of Astley's early shows, his riding manuals, teaching activities and equestrian services were clearly aimed not only at the young but also to newcomers to the world of equestrianism, as opposed to those who would have been familiar with horses through work, or could have afforded to keep their own riding master. Astley's lessons cost 2s. 6d. each (with the recommendation that twenty, costing a total of £5. 10s., were needed to make a competent rider), and winter stabling was 12s. 6d. per week.¹⁹ These prices would have been affordable to the prosperous

¹⁶ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 35 (19 June 1770), 74 (h.d. 1772) and 875 (8 May 1786); bill, h.d. 1772, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷ *Morning Post* 28 May 1773, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 97.

¹⁸ "Account of all PUBLIC DIVERSIONS," c. 1775, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 1; Castle, *Masquerade and Civilisation*; L. D. Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and Living Conditions, 1700-1850* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 233.

¹⁹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 122 (h.d. 1776) and 139 (ms. notes of ads., 1778).

middling classes of the late eighteenth-century city. Thus Astley's was consistent with developments in luxury consumerism around this period.²⁰ Indeed, when its cheaper products are also taken into account, the whole style of the Riding School and Amphitheatre might be described as 'populuxe.'

The circus' theatrical turn in the 1780s caused an upheaval that was to prove permanent, the audience being reorganised within a new architecture. Astley's prices were reset to compete directly with Sadler's Wells, resembling the cheaper half of the tariff at the London patent theatres or the prices of a provincial playhouse.²¹ They also set the "moderate" standards for the major travelling circuses until the end of the nineteenth century.²² The strength of the big theatres was their price range. Drury Lane, for example, enjoyed a maximum price (6s. for box seat) which was twelve times the sixpence minimum.²³ By 1779 Astley had reinstated the sixpence admission for good in the form of places in a "side gallery," and raised the price of the recently added boxes to 2s. 6d. The Amphitheatre now had four, not two, grades of accommodation, including upper boxes at 1s. 6d. and a pit at a shilling, and could probably hold over 1000 people, which was over half the capacity of Drury Lane.²⁴

²⁰ See Neil McKendrick, ed., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982).

²¹ See Brayley, *Theatres of London* 32; Anthony Denning, *Theatre in the Cotswolds: the Boles Watson Family and the Cirencester Theatre*, ed. Paul Ranger (London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1993) 40.

²² Bill, Cooke's "Provincial Tour," c. 1850, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 250 (catalogue p. 84).

²³ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 12.

²⁴ H.d. 1778, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 119. Drury Lane housed approx. 1,800 after Robert Adam's renovation in 1775. After rebuilding in 1811 it held 2,800, and by 1827, 3,110. Iain Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse*, exhibition catalogue, Hayward Gall., London (London: Arts Council, 1975) items 218-9; *Picture of London for 1818* (London, 1818) 286; Brayley, *Theatres of London* 14.

Judging by the price-class relationships in the London patent theatres, Astley's pricing would have resulted in a gallery containing uncommissioned soldiers, manual workers and apprentices; a pit and upper boxes within reach of skilled artisans and small tradesmen; and boxes for lawyers, merchants, professionals, and all those above.²⁵ The proportions of these categories were roughly equal, except the pit which had about a third more than the rest. Pictorial evidence suggests that the mix of sexes was also roughly even.²⁶ Thus, with pricing policy making more than two-thirds of the house accessible to sectors of the working population, the Amphitheatre was perhaps more representative of society at large than the auditorium of the patent theatre, where a different price structure ensured that the genteel cohorts dominated.

The less biased contemporary sources (as opposed to those attempting to defame or aggrandise) were reluctant to describe Astley's as the cultural property of a particular rank, or to provide a precise breakdown of the audience, however: they simply characterised it in terms of noticeable or predominant social types--notably "John Bull and his progeny" in 1793.²⁷ Certainly, from the time of the first recorded royal visit--that of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland in 1782--records of the range of people who enjoyed Astley's testify that it appealed to all strata who could afford the

²⁵ Ranger/Denning, *Theatre in the Cotswolds* 40.

²⁶ The nineteenth-century American audience was strongly male-dominated. See Mark Irwin West, "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America," *Jnl. of Social History* 15 (1981): 265-70.

²⁷ 24 Aug. 1793, BL Astley's Cuttings, vol. 2, item 132 D.

sixpence.²⁸ On the basis of that qualification, it was open and pluralist. Yet a broad assessment of pricing, audience descriptions, neighbouring artforms, and the main protagonists of the stage and ring (tailors, sailors, sergeants and cobblers), suggests that Astley's was primarily and most consistently the province of the artisan and yeoman classes.²⁹

Part of Astley's appeal, of course, was that each group could enjoy a higher category of accommodation than they would have got for the same money at patent theatres: at Drury Lane, for example, skilled craftspeople would normally have been restricted to one of the galleries. Relative to incomes, standard circus and theatre prices were in any case about half as expensive as they are today. They were more the equivalent of our local cinemas. The cheapest ticket cost roughly the same as a large glass of wine in a pub at the time.³⁰ Stability at the lower end of the price range was maintained by an overall decline in real wage rates during the last half of the eighteenth century.³¹

After 1779 the sixpence minimum was generally maintained at Astley's either through the cheap side gallery or, as in the Royal Circus, through a half-price policy (already an established custom in the patent theatres).³² The half-price agreement allowed people into the pit or gallery at a discount later in

²⁸ 25 Oct. 1782 *ibid.* vol. 1, item 127; see p. 159.

²⁹ For a typically vague audience description see Rudolph Ackermann, "Astley's Amphitheatre," *Microcosm of London; or, London in Miniature*, vol. 1 (London, 1808) 22: this merely notes their "eager attention" and refers the reader to Pugin and Rowlandson's lithograph (fig. 4.16), which in fact appears quite mixed.

³⁰ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 53.

³¹ Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation* 173.

³² [William Clarke], *The Every Night Book; or, Life After Dark* (London, 1827) 110.

the evening: at first this took place an hour into the programme, at 7.30 or 8.00 p.m.³³ In the circus it often resulted in an overspill of audience from the pit, who therefore had to stand in the ring during stage-pieces, and move onto the stage during the scenes in the circle. Understandably, the influx could create friction with the existing members of the audience. Astley used half-pricing only tentatively before 1795, when he finally instituted it permanently with the building of the second Amphitheatre.³⁴ Perhaps the half-price policy proved preferable to a side gallery in the end because it did not tie seats to a 'rock-bottom' price in times of buoyant demand. The seating capacity of both Astley's and the Royal Circus had by then reached around 2,000, comparable to Sadler's Wells, where it remained, although according to puffs the management did not worry about squeezing in up to three times that capacity during popular productions.³⁵

The prices for pit and boxes, like the pockets of those who patronised them, were more elastic and might fluctuate according to costs, yet prices were always tempered by Astley's abiding concern for cheapness. He always boasted value-for-money, and in defiance of the over-ambitious opening prices of 4s. for a box advertised at the Royal Circus in 1782, promised "never to advance the prices of admission."³⁶ (The planners of the Royal Circus had conceived of it as on a par with the patent

³³ 10 Nov. 1781, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 224.

³⁴ 28 Apr. 1795, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 108 B.

³⁵ 21 Aug. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 31; 15 Sept. 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 21 F. More common puffs of Astley's crowds range between 1,000 (1804) and 4,000, e.g. 14 June 1790, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 36 E. I have found no official figures other than for the Royal Circus after its ring was converted to a pit as the Surrey Theatre in 1816 ("over 2,000" with 1000 in the gallery, 900 in the pit). Sadler's Wells held 2,200 (Brayley, *Theatres of London* 88, 57).

³⁶ Trs. of ad., 5 Oct. 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 339.

theatres, though wisely they lowered the prices just before opening.)³⁷ In 1785, nonetheless--to cite only one instance--Astley raised the ceiling to 3s., reflecting not only recent building costs but also the swelling demand for his acts.³⁸ Indeed Astley felt able to suspend the sixpence minimum for a while in 1788.³⁹ Prices were lowered again in July that year, however, when Astley was trying to capitalize on the fact that John Astley was about to leave the country.⁴⁰ Throughout the 1780s the Amphitheatre seems to have been torn between the expediency of cheapness, and an overriding pressure to present a more politic semblance of gentility and desirability. It did not yet have the established identity that would enable it comfortably to embrace the full range of social distinctions within the market.

Overall the top price continued to climb: in the new Amphitheatre of 1795 the boxes reached 4s., with the pit 2s. and the gallery 1s. Thus prices remained for 47 years as Astley's arrived at a state of market equilibrium. An insight into audience distribution under this latest regime is perhaps provided by an 1823 report of an unsupervised boy in the gallery who, amid the hurry for seats, accidentally dropped a stone bottle into the pit, where it injured a resident of the Strand who was out with her daughter and some friends.⁴¹ The issue of 100 "silver" tickets, giving unrestricted admission for the season at £2. 12s. 6d. each, meanwhile, indicates the lump sums that at least 5% of its patrons

³⁷ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus," 36.

³⁸ H.d. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 622.

³⁹ 29 Aug. 1788, *ibid.* item 965.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* item 746.

⁴¹ 7 Sept. 1823, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 886.

were able and prepared to pay.⁴² During the previous decade Astley's riding lessons had also doubled to 5s. each (half the price of his manual), and advertising rhetoric began to emphasise expense and conspicuous consumption rather than discreet private arrangements.⁴³

The actual diversity of Astley's audiences, and hence the social ambiguity of the Amphitheatre, was reflected in the range of advertising techniques and portrayals. On the one hand, there were at least enough regular visits by the glamorous, cosmopolitan and affluent to be exaggerated in the many puffs which accompanied the increase in rivalry with the Royal Circus in the 1780s. Columns of "Amphitheatre Intelligence" typically praised the boxes for their "rank and fashion" and "fine display of star, ribbons and female charms."⁴⁴ Sporting readers of the London press may have noticed a regular item entitled "Small Talk; or Chat on the Turf," featuring "Lord Gallop" and his well informed groom:

LORD GALLOP. The two horses which dance the minuet at Astley's are really clever.
...

GROOM. Yes, my Lord, he has great variety, and changes his performances every week.

LORD GALLOP. Well, then go, and take places for twelve in the boxes on every Thursday for six weeks to come.

GROOM. Very Well, my Lord. [Exit.⁴⁵

⁴² Ad., 29 Apr. 1795, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 108 B.

⁴³ Ad., h.d. 1802, *ibid.* 236 A; ct., ad. for various equestrian services c. 1780, Mander and Mitchenson Colln. Astley's file.

⁴⁴ *World* 26 Aug. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 47.

⁴⁵ 9 Aug. 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 863.

Yet at the same time, Astley's adherence to the sixpenny minimum, as well as his habits of street-hawking and hanging fairground-style show-cloths outside the venue, disclosed the fact that his business was founded on a bedrock of watermen, workers and small tradesmen who populated the south bank, whose background he shared.⁴⁶ One newspaper in 1790 noted that Astley's pre-season return was "to the no small joy of the whole neighbourhood."⁴⁷ Naturally, Astley's was attended by many in between these two categories, but according to rival opinion, Lambeth became either "the *Promenade* for the *Beau Monde*" or for the "holiday folks" and "servants" (and worse).⁴⁸

For 80 years, Astley's, like most circuses, never dropped below the crucial sixpence mark into the nether world of the Penny Gaff. There is little evidence of circuses ever having inhabited this under-researched area, which mushroomed after the 1830s, although much of their inspiration undoubtedly sprang from it.⁴⁹ An anonymous circus at Camberwell Fair in 1832 managed to offer a box for 1s. 6d., a pit for a shilling and the gallery for sixpence; and Cornwall's Royal Stingo in Paddington went from two shillings for a box down to only threepence in the gods in the 1840s.⁵⁰ Only the Britannia Circus, Ratcliffe Highway, Whitechapel, seems to have left any trace of existence at

⁴⁶ The Surrey Theatre (née Royal Circus) became known for its waterman clientèle in the nineteenth century.

⁴⁷ 15 Mar. 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 12 B.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* vol. 2, item [?] (20 Apr. 1793) and vol. 3, item 787 (h.d. 1819); anon. letter to press, Nov. 1782, qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 48.

⁴⁹ There is later evidence, however: see Henry Mayhew, "The Penny Circus Jester, the Strong Man," *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), qtd. Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 16.

⁵⁰ Bills (Yorkshire Stingo: 25 May 1843), Guildhall Lib. Print Rm., "Circus" file.

the nadir, clinging onto discrimination with prices of threepence for a box, twopence for the pit and a penny for the gallery, and offering a programme which, while including a "Comic Pantomime," consisted of only five items mainly led by the japes of the clown.⁵¹ It was not until 1848, after the building of the fourth Amphitheatre, that Astley's subjected its sixpenny gallery to the half-price scheme. This was, however, counterbalanced by the raising of the top seats, which were now the stalls, to 6s.--a multiple, therefore, of 24 between the highest and lowest prices.⁵²

Thus over more than a century Astley's gradually broadened its range of prices, with a long period of stability in the first half of the nineteenth century. Its institutional history over this period is a story of development from tentative early years, to fiscal emulation of the patent theatres and indeed the extension of tentacles into the market beneath them. But Astley's approach to organizing the audience also fitted the demands of a changing society around it. The six subdivisions finally introduced in the new Amphitheatre in 1844 expressed new intricacies of status and wealth in a city vastly expanded with varying degrees of prosperity. (By comparison, travelling companies, including Astley's, maintained the old three shilling to sixpence range in the provinces.⁵³) Changing social self-perceptions made it acceptable for Astley's itself to boast, in the words of an 1829 poster, a "Theatre . . . crowded from base to summit, by every class of Spectators from the Prince to the Plebeian."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Bill, h.d. 2 Mar. [18]18, BL "Circus Programmes etc." (Th. Cts. 50), vol. 1, item 11.

⁵² Bill, 10 Jan. 1848, TM Astley's file.

⁵³ The population, mainly in the parishes of outer London, had expanded from 0.5 million in 1800 to 1.9 million in 1851. Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation* 8. For provincial prices of Astley's (then under Batty) see, for example, bill, "Oxford, During the Fair . . . Batty's," c. 1843, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Misc. Posters" portfolio.

⁵⁴ 15 June, TM Astley's file.

Private box prices--£2. 2s.--were advertised in a list alongside all the others. Richard Altick has taken such proud comprehensiveness as a sign of "the slowly evolving social democracy of the Victorian period." In most theatrical cases, however, "curiosity" was not, contrary to his claims, "a great leveller."⁵⁵

The Amphitheatre also catered to newly evolving categories of audience. Respectable people had taken young adolescents and teenagers along as part of the round of London sights since at least the 1780s.⁵⁶ But the first production explicitly directed at children was not offered until 1800, in the form of a pantomime of Little Red Riding Hood intended "to please the some of the prettiest little Masters and Misses in the Kingdom."⁵⁷ As a young journalist, Dickens remembered the childhood Christmas ritual of being taken to the Regency Astley's.⁵⁸ Half-price tickets for children under twelve, at 2s. to the boxes only, were first advertised in 1826; "Family and Private Boxes" in 1828; and child reductions were extended to other parts of the house, except the gallery, during the 1830s.⁵⁹ By 1827 a puff could commend "the rationality of its amusements" and the early curtain "(generally before eleven)" as particularly suitable "to the junior branches of the metropolis, throngs of whose happy faces are nightly seen in the boxes."⁶⁰ (Prints of the time suggest that in fact the proportion of children

⁵⁵ Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* 3.

⁵⁶ See p. 169.

⁵⁷ 28 Sept, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 201 B.

⁵⁸ Charles Dickens, "Astley's," *Sketches by "Boz"*, vol. 1 (London, 1836) 300-13.

⁵⁹ Qtd. from bill, Astley's, 16 June 1828, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Theatres A-C" portfolio: for other details see bills in TM Astley's file.

⁶⁰ Ct., TM Astley's file.

remained at around 10%.)⁶¹ The view of the circus as an enjoyable form of extra-curricular education had taken root sufficiently by 1830 for Ducrow to request that "Schools must be early."⁶² Charity schools were subsequently admitted free by some travelling shows. Although the circus was not yet seen as almost *exclusively* family entertainment, "Nobility and Gentry" was no longer the mantra of advertising.

The history of the fluctuating social character of entertainment institutions suggests that pricing policy was in the long term a blunt and partial instrument for controlling the audience, and in any case was always constrained by the managers' need to pay their way.⁶³ And as the 'Old Price' riots at Covent Garden in 1809 had amply demonstrated, the public did not take kindly to vagaries in price.⁶⁴ Circus managers could not hope entirely to construct the audience: the notion of public demand itself was a force shaping the circus. The circus had to adapt--which it did with varying success--to socio-economic circumstance. Often there were contradictory pressures. The change in dining hours from late afternoon to between seven and nine in the evening which accompanied the rise of an industrious middle class, for example, came at the same time as a more popular hunger for lengthy programmes. This produced something of a crisis for the theatres. Astley's attempted to answer it not only by a later

⁶¹ American audiences showed a greater adult bias: see West, "A Spectrum of Spectators" 266.

⁶² Bill, Oct. 1830, "Ducrow's Royal Amphitheatre," Aberdeen, Arthur Morice Colln., Aberdeen U Lib.

⁶³ The decline of Vauxhall Gardens despite the best efforts of the proprietors is a famous example: Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London*, vol. 1, 74.

⁶⁴ The pretext for the revolt was a sixpence rise in prices at the rebuilt theatre. See Baer, *Theatre and Disorder*. Baer is heavily influenced by E. P. Thompson's idea of the "moral economy" of the English crowd.

start of seven (instead of the customary 6.30) in the 1830s, and through moving the half-price time forwards to 8.30 p.m., but also--by inevitable consequence--by finishing often as late as one in the morning, which was inconvenient to some theatre-goers. One of the alleged causes of the post-Napoleonic decline in theatrical fortunes was that many busy people were prepared to forego their evenings at the theatre.⁶⁵ At all times, as Dibdin said of the Royal Circus, managers had to "steal into the public favour. . . ."⁶⁶

II. Public Relations and Business Practice

As the circus moved from *ad hoc* entertainment into the world of theatre, it passed from a characteristically amoral and anarchic environment which, thanks to travelling, honoured few obligations to the host community, into one which had a strong tradition of duty. Throughout the eighteenth century provincial theatres had been raised through public subscription by local luminaries, who then helped to ensure that the establishment was run according to their taste and what they perceived to be the interests of the community. The lingering idea that pleasure should have some moral recompense shaped a concept of theatre and entertainment as a communal resource: indeed the purpose of the law for rogue entertainers was to lock them back into this ethical equation by making

⁶⁵ See *Report from the Parliamentary Select Committee on the State of the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature* (London, 1832) 3; *The Picture of London for 1818*, 284.

⁶⁶ Dibdin, *Professional Life* vol. 2: 107.

them pay fines to the poor or the sick.⁶⁷ Although his was a purely private enterprise, Astley was obliged to work within such a code. The highly idealised self-portrait which the circus business therefore developed (itinerancy notwithstanding) can be compared with less biased accounts to gain a picture of its actual operation, to throw some light on contemporary ideas about the function of business in the community in general, and to develop a case study in the relationship between business and culture.⁶⁸

It was clearly hoped that any respectable visitor to Astley's would immediately have gained a gratifying impression of integration into a *gemeinschaft*. After the 1780s Mrs. Astley herself no longer sat in the ticket office at the entrance to the Riding School, but the personal touch remained.⁶⁹ Tickets for the boxes were to be had of Mrs. Connell, ("No. 38, *Stangate Street*, at the back of the Amphitheatre,") whose husband was stage manager and sometime performer.⁷⁰ Several such stalwarts of the Amphitheatre kept their jobs for 30 years, and their deaths were often specially noted in the

⁶⁷ E.g. the act of 1786 whereby any unlicensed actors were to be fined £300, "one moiety to be paid to the governors or guardians of the Lying-in-hospital." 26 Geo. III ch. 57, "An Act for Regulating the Stage in the City and County of Dublin," Irish statutes.

⁶⁸ Business practices and circus life are covered in rich detail, though with little analysis, by Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*; Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus"; and Turner, *Historical Hengler's Circus*.

⁶⁹ Anon. ms. notes of Astley's in 1770s, qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 19.

⁷⁰ Bill, 14 Sept. 1791, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Theatres A-C" portfolio. For the later patterns of the theatrical profession in Lambeth see Tracy C. Davis, "Theatrical Employees of Victorian Britain: Demography of an Industry," *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 18.1-2 (1990): 5-34. She notes that in 1861 Lambeth held about 10% of London's population, but 26% of London's adult performers (a total of 114).

London press.⁷¹ Astley's could be seen as the sponsor of a southbank community and an engine of the local economy. Apart from the "many houses in Lambeth" that Astley had built, he supported satellite businesses such as a printer, saddler and pubs (the performers who rescued the horses in the fire of 1794 had been drinking in one nearby).⁷² The Royal Circus had the "Equestrian Coffee-House," later known as the "Circus Coffee-house," next door, where one could buy tickets at the bar.⁷³ For these, as well as more sentimental reasons, the highly destructive fire in 1803 was felt to hit hard, generating long newspaper reports over several days.⁷⁴

On the other hand, people knew that both establishments provided rich pickings for the nefarious, and some perceived all theatres as dangerous sinks for hard-earned local wages (they would have noticed that Astley's abutted small, poor houses).⁷⁵ By 1817 the neighbouring Parish of St. George's Southwark had an estimated two to three hundred brothels. Objecting to plans for another theatre in the area in the belief that the two existing circuses had contributed to this, a local churchwarden told the Commons Police Committee that the Royal Circus had particularly "great tendency to corrupt the public morals." "It is principally resorted to, is it not," he was asked finally, "by

⁷¹ E.g. Case of "Old Stephen Smith," 15 May 1853, BL "Astley's Cuttings, vol. 3; obituary for Mrs. Mackett, former equestrian performer, *Gentleman's Magazine* Oct. 1807: 981.

⁷² Ct., obituary of Astley, 28 Oct. 1814, TM Astley's file, box 1, env. "Philip Astley"; BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 164 C (20 Aug. 1794) and vol. 3, item 596 (9 Dec. 1814).

⁷³ Ct., h.d. "Daily Advertiser Oracle and True Briton" 7 Aug. 1804, TM Astley's file, box 1, "Early Years," env. "ASTLEY'S Newspaper cuttings misc."

⁷⁴ Cts., *ibid.* env. "... 1803: Fire at Theatre 1 Sept. ..."

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

young persons ?--I should say, by thieves and prostitutes."⁷⁶ In all its public postures the circus was continually aware that people might perceive it to have a darker side.⁷⁷

As well as functioning to a greater or lesser degree as an island of social stability in a bustling international city, as a static circus Astley's needed to project an image of itself as a kaleidoscope of change and exoticism. A central part of Astley's battery of advertising techniques was the puff, which not only provided a refreshing change from naked advertisement (about which there was still a stigma), but had the added advantage of making the daily business of running the Amphitheatre appear as news fit for coffee-house gossip.⁷⁸ Astley's puff-machine was stoked almost single-handedly by the house author, who wrote about eight or nine of them, in addition to bills, every morning, under the watchful eye of Astley Senior. Dibdin the Younger recalled this task in his memoirs: "By the Bye," he remarked,

the Astleys had in their employ an *author* who used to write their paragraphs (*Puffs*) and advertisements and carry them round to the Newspaper offices, and was also a sort of call boy or runner to the Theatre--he really had some Genius, and had produced for them some of the best pieces they were then in the habit of performing This Author is dead, as well as his Masters.--Query--Was he "*starved* out"?⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Minutes, 14 May 1817, from *The Second Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons into the State of the Police of the Metropolis* (London, 1817) 465-71. I am indebted to Tony Henderson for this source.

⁷⁷ See p. **165**.

⁷⁸ See Looney, "Advertising and Society in England, 1720-1820" 219 and *passim*; 12 Apr. 1795, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 180 A.

⁷⁹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 19.

It was this author, whose name is not certain because Astley himself claimed authorship of most of his plays, who no doubt produced most of the prodigious output of puffs during the 1780s and early 90s.⁸⁰

All of them show remarkable style and a coherence of metaphor and image. Although the newspapers used only an estimated tenth of the total that Dibdin suggested he wrote, theatrical advertising was so much valued as copy in its own right that editors were prepared to pay managers to send in their advertisements and puffs. Still, it was important to keep journalists on one's side: in the words of one letter of advice to young John Astley, they were the main connection with "all the gay, polite, learned, and distinguished."⁸¹

Certain publicity stunts also projected a particularly strong institutional image, and these will now be considered in some detail. Astley liked his enterprise to appear multidimensional long after it had in fact begun to rely on a single product. On 12 March 1784, five months after the Montgolfiers first flew in their balloon at Lyons, Astley mounted an epochal series of unmanned "Aerostatic Experiments" from the front of the new Hercules Hall.⁸² This was only the fifth or sixth launching in Britain (none was manned until September), drawing unprecedented crowds of "all ranks, degrees, kindred, nations and tongues" to the adjoining St. George's Fields, and 300 visitors paying 2s. 6d. each to Astley's own apartments in order to witness the inflation at close quarters.⁸³ Astley had collected the

⁸⁰ He may have been Mr Upton (BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 171 A), or perhaps the bibulous Mr Oakman (Decastro, *Memoirs* 36).

⁸¹ "Thousands," open letter to John Astley, 11 Apr. 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 56 D.

⁸² 11 Mar. 1784, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 527.

⁸³ Tickets were on sale in coffee houses. *Ayre's Sunday Gazette* 14 Mar. 1784, BL Lyons "Collectanea," vol. 3, f. 61.

apparatus from Paris, but these emblems of progress were to be launched under a Union flag hoisted among the trees. Two small bladders were set off as a taster, followed by a larger red and white taffeta balloon (more than 2.5 m in diameter) with a triumphal car, intended to release fireworks at successive heights. The car broke off, but the balloon undulated successfully away: "The sky was remarkably clear," reported the *Morning Post*, "and the balloon being relieved by a large and beautiful light coloured cloud, its progress was distinctly observed, until it seemed diminished into nothing, through the immensity of space."⁸⁴ A silver tankard was awarded to the finder where it eventually settled, 47 miles away at Faversham in Kent.

It is difficult to overestimate the excitement offered by this coup: crowds subsequently rioted at unsuccessful launches elsewhere or wrecked equipment in their impatience; and a fad extending to air balloon gingerbread, side curls, ear rings, hats, ribbons, pins and sauce flooded the ephemera market for the next two years. St. George's Fields became quite a centre for ballooning.⁸⁵ Besides, there was an aesthetic pay-off: balloons, like the parachutes which were sometimes used to jump from them, were symbols simultaneously of science and of vacuous pleasure, with visual qualities which continued to be used inside as well as outside circuses and theatres.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ 13 Mar. 1784, *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Subsequent escapades included the preposterous near-disaster by Messrs. Arnold and Appleby from a special rotunda near the Obelisk in 1785 (although they later enjoyed a benefit and the Royal Circus), and the first flight of a woman the same year. See *ibid.* f. 62.

⁸⁶ E.g. Astley's burletta *The Cobbler's Aversion to Air Balloons*, and *Harlequin's Exhibition of the Times* (with a parachute), both in 1785: BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 651 (25 Apr.) and 678 (12 July 1785). For later stunts involving balloons see Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 69, 71. A ct. in Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 3, f. 62, cites "the most *beautiful balloon* in nature--the head of a pretty woman!"

Dressed in traditional strips ranging through lilac, scarlet and yellow, the competitors in Astley's "Prize Wherry" boat race helped to make up a recognised event in the London diary that had equal colour but also an obvious social purpose.⁸⁷ At first a sailing match designed to rival the traditional race for 'Doggets Badge' and then, after 1792, a rowing contest from Westminster Bridge to Vauxhall Stairs and back (a distance of three miles), the event was also an important passage in the history of competitive sport. In the early days it was held in aid of "that useful body of people the Watermen," on which the Amphitheatre conspicuously depended (one evening in 1786, for instance, some 92 boats were reported waiting at Westminster Bridge to ferry the audience home).⁸⁸ Each of the six rivals had to be in the last six months of his apprenticeship, since the "substantial boat" which formed the prize was "to enable him to earn his livelihood."⁸⁹ As the race was often held on the royal birthday on 6 June, it linked king and "poor watermen" under Astley's munificent auspices: an ideal later consummated when John Astley was rowed at the event by His Majesty's watermen in uniform (reports also noted that, at his firework displays, the local watermen applauded Astley for the work that he gave them).⁹⁰ In 1805 there were reported to be several bands, bridges "thronged" and a river dotted with more than 200 boats full of spectators, all providing a good opportunity for nobility-spotting and giving

⁸⁷ See *The Picture of London for 1818* (London, 1818) 356.

⁸⁸ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 191 B (10 June 1800) and 136 B (20 July 1796); vol. 1, item 845 (22 July 1786).

⁸⁹ 17 June 1812, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 491.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* items 1542 (c. 1780) and 769 (h.d. 1819).

rise to at least one massed nautical fight following supporters' interference with the race.⁹¹ By 1820 this "annual regatta" involved the new amateur rowing clubs, and many column inches were devoted to stroke-by-stroke accounts of the contest.⁹² As a festival it highlighted the Amphitheatre as the focal point of a bankside community. Moreover, the victory celebrations at the Amphitheatre afterwards, when the winner was sometimes borne round the stage to the strains of *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, usually yielded a profit.⁹³

The key to social relations in and around the circus was, however, the benefit system. Circus managers followed theatrical custom in allowing principal employees (including themselves) to use the house and company in performances for their own emolument; and were also, especially while visiting a town, expected to put the same resources at the disposal of local charities. In his biography of Ducrow, Saxon has described the charity benefit in impressive detail and shown that scandal could erupt if it were thought that managers were shirking their duty or milking the system.⁹⁴ Some managers took the initiative in intervening directly in aid of the victims of events: in 1826, for example, Ducrow and his colleague James West gave a heavily publicised benefit at the Amphitheatre, under the patronage of the Duke of York, for the distressed Spitalfields weavers.⁹⁵ Such benefits not only expressed the moral obligation of the circus proprietor: they also conventionally required pillars of the

⁹¹ 19 June, *ibid.* item 270 B.

⁹² *Ibid.* items 374 (6 July 1810), 769 (h.d. 1819) and 769 B (12 Aug. 1819).

⁹³ 20 July 1796, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 136 B.

⁹⁴ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 255-64.

⁹⁵ Bill, 21 Apr. 1826, TM Astley's file.

local community, as well as representatives of the recipients, to be visibly present in the audience. Although charity benefits were, according to Dibdin the Younger, attended "very slenderly," typically yielding between £10 and £30 (perhaps because of a more stilted atmosphere), they helped perpetuate the fundamental rationale that entertainment was a necessary public "service," and that the manager and audience were engaged in a contract for its provision.⁹⁶

In order to be charitable and, like Astley, a "faithful servant to the public," one first had to achieve wealth.⁹⁷ The demands of respectability had not prevented eighteenth-century Astley's from presenting itself as big business in surprisingly vulgar terms: in fact, respectability demanded that Astley's distinguish itself from a tradition of ragged and hungry itinerants. In the publicity of the 1780s and 90s there was constant hinting at, and occasional citation of, the Amphitheatre's profitability (the place was even characterised as a "Golden Orchard").⁹⁸ Some were quite barefaced: "It is said Mr. Astley cleared 4,000 louis d'ors in Paris," reported one correspondent in 1782,

by thirty exhibitions, which with 500 l. he received at Versailles, and 150 l. from their Majesties and the Court, amount to 4,650 louis d'ors or pounds sterling in four months; besides a number of presents to Master Astley of considerable value from several of the Nobility.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 36; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 257. The O.P. Riots at Covent Garden were an expression of this notion of contract: see Baer, *Theatre and Disorder*.

⁹⁷ Ct., retirement announcement, h.d. 1799, TM Astley's file, box 1, env. "Early Years."

⁹⁸ 22 June 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 847.

⁹⁹ 21 Sept. 1782, *ibid.* item 407.

An imaginary country visitor in a puff for Astley's in 1790 asked the waiter of a London coffee-house for the best exhibition in town, and was bluntly told to go to "that which gets the most money."¹⁰⁰ Supposed letters of contract were sometimes published in the press, revealing in 1796, for instance, that Benjamin Handy's troop could command 150 guineas, "or one clear Benefit," for six nights, or that Astley had lured Smith and Crossman's troop from the Royal Circus with 60 g. per week.¹⁰¹ Handy himself stood to take 20 g. of the fee, while such other stars as Richer the rope dancer reputedly cost "at least fifty pounds" per week (while a supernumerary might get no more than 15 shillings).¹⁰² By such means, by 1798 Astley's claimed to have reversed the drain of talent to the continent.

Sums of several hundred pounds were commonly cited as comprising the profits of a single night (the largest provincial theatres were known "to contain £300").¹⁰³ One figure frequently plucked from the air was the "neat five hundred" that the Amphitheatre's firework display in honour of the marriage of the Duke of York in October 1791 helped to "put . . . in Astley's pocket."¹⁰⁴ Puffs claimed that similar amounts were regularly invested in single productions, which was impressive by patent theatre standards: with its aquatic effects, the burletta *Love from the Heart* in 1786, for example, "could not have been got up at a less expense than three hundred pounds."¹⁰⁵ Money was taken to

¹⁰⁰ 15 Apr. 1790 *ibid.* vol. 2, item 9 B.

¹⁰¹ 10 July 1798, *ibid.* item 166 E.

¹⁰² 12 Sept. 1804, *ibid.* item 263 E.

¹⁰³ Richard Daly, *The Life and Adventures of Richard Daly, Esq.* (London 1792) 34.

¹⁰⁴ 10 Oct. 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 38 D.

¹⁰⁵ 5 Sept. 1786, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 880. For details of Drury Lane's costs see Brayley, *Theatres of London* 12.

imply quality. The new spectacular commercial theatre was an alchemical laboratory for capital; and purportedly lucre thrown in always pleased the public and made a good return, "fairly won."¹⁰⁶ Production costs were certainly heightened by a love for lavish scenery. But Astley's approach was to deny the very possibility of the low-budget marvels which persisted in the lower echelons of the emerging circus world, and on which he, in fact, sometimes relied.¹⁰⁷

While Philip Astley, therefore, does not quite compare to Barnum, whose posters in 1885 emblazoned the "£300,000 Capital" involved, he was a worthy predecessor.¹⁰⁸ Like Barnum he was presented and remembered as an exemplary self-helping, shrewd and enterprising businessman (even "genius"), whose entertainments were both "frugal" and "rational."¹⁰⁹ Perhaps following in his footsteps, Ducrow cheerfully wrote that "Business must be minded before Pleasure" when forced to cancel a social outing with his close friends.¹¹⁰

Less publicised evidence reveals that in reality the metropolitan circuses absorbed sums of money at which even a financially voyeuristic audience might have balked. Astley declared that in the

¹⁰⁶ 18 Oct. 1789, BL, "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1162.

¹⁰⁷ See p. **231**.

¹⁰⁸ Poster, "Barnum's American Museum," London, 1885, Bod. John Johnson Colln. "Circus" box 1; Saxon, *P. T. Barnum : The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

¹⁰⁹ Cts., "P. T. Barnum's Rules for Success in Business," 1925, and "Biographical Sketch of the Celebrated Philip Astley, Esq.," c. 1805, John Johnson Colln., "Circus" box 1; 28 May 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 15 D; ad., h.d. Sept. 1780, BL Th. Cts. 60.

¹¹⁰ Ducrow, letter to Charles Westmacott, 6 August 1835, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 221.

first three years alone he had expended over £5,000, while the proprietors of the Royal Circus claimed they had ploughed in £12,000 in five.¹¹¹ Recent research has suggested that the Victorian proprietors of Astley's were prepared to lose money in their London flagship in order to secure the reputation necessary for the more lucrative provincial tours.¹¹² The sums produced by good seasons and productions, however, outstripped the puffs: Tuttle has shown that receipts from the first season of the Royal Circus were £9,500, of which £3,400 was clear profit, split between Dibdin and Hughes (£850 each) and the four proprietors.¹¹³ Such figures represented more than four times what was normally considered a "respectable" yield on an investment.¹¹⁴ In five months Dibdin and Hughes had made nearly the equivalent of a comfortable middle-class estate.¹¹⁵ The onetime star equestrian and lessee of Astley's, John Crossman, left £9,000 when he died in 1813.¹¹⁶ Following the doubling of these amounts by single runs of the great hippodramas, the mid-nineteenth-century proprietor of Astley's, William Batty, was reputedly able to bequeath a half a million pounds when he died.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ 25 June 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 815; Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 122. Tuttle furnishes many statistics for the Royal Circus. He does not make their precise sources clear, but they are probably thanks to the greater number of contemporary biographies, memoirs and pamphlets that are available for that institution.

¹¹² Turner, "'£50,000 In Hand.'"

¹¹³ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 74.

¹¹⁴ C. W. Chalklin, "Capital Expenditure on Building for Cultural Purposes in Provincial England, 1730-1830," *Jnl. of Business History* 22.1 (Jan. 1980) 62.

¹¹⁵ Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation*, 168, cites estates of between £500 and £1,000 left by "successful artisans" as "approaching comfortable middle-class status."

¹¹⁶ Decastro, *Memoirs* 106.

¹¹⁷ Ms. notes for a history of Astley's, C19th, Fenwick Colln., Tyne and Wear Archives, ref. 944/150.

The circus was, however, a notoriously risky business, as Astley's keenness to branch into housing--an investment against which one could fairly readily raise capital--suggests. The costs of maintaining top status were high: for example, the rent for the Royal Circus reached more than £2,000 per annum, while total weekly outgoings could be more than £400.¹¹⁸ High proportions of infrastructural reinvestment were required--even in the provinces, the simple cost of repeatedly erecting wooden venues might swallow hundreds every few weeks (in 1786, for instance, the press reported that the Astleys' temporary arena at Versailles cost £500 to build).¹¹⁹ During the mid-1780s Astley suggested that the more modest size of the business in the early years had been optimal for efficiency and convenience.¹²⁰ The costs entailed in getting the genre up and running contributed to the fact that Astley, contrary to speculation, bequeathed little more than the Amphitheatre when he died.¹²¹

The large stakes were put at risk by the accident-prone nature of theatrical activity: in 1794 Astley announced that he had lost a total of £42,000 from the first fire and confiscation of his property in France alone.¹²² The travelling circus encountered added dangers outside the ring, as the future licensee of Astley's, William Davis, found out when a common circus nightmare came true and the

¹¹⁸ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 230, 75. The fortunes of the place fluctuated so much that the rent also declined to £210 (p.185).

¹¹⁹ "Letter from Versailles," 25 Apr., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 862.

¹²⁰ Astley, letter to Mr. Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786, TM Astley's file.

¹²¹ Cts., obituary for Astley, 28 Oct. 1814, and "Recollections of Philip Astley," TM Astley's file, box. 1, env. "Philip Astley."

¹²² *Morning Chronicle* Sept. 11, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 37.

packet *Viceroy*, carrying his wife, child, company and stud, sank with all hands on the way home from Dublin in 1798. Possibly due to poor insurance, he lost £2,600, not to mention "the struggling Produce of several Years indefatigable hard Labour."¹²³ Fire, shipwreck and collapsing buildings were endemic to the circus world.¹²⁴

Patent theatres had extra insurance in the form of reliable and popular classics in their repertoires, whereas the circus' market was ephemeral by nature. A letter by Astley to a friend from Paris in the winter of 1786 reveals a man despondent at the fact that "we had a poor house on Tuesday" and "we dont take but 14. 16 & 18 Pounds a night only on the Sundays," fully expecting "that grim looking Gentl^m Death" on account of penury, arduousness, illness and the weather.¹²⁵ Publicity, treading the tightrope between news and promotion, was forced to admit some of the losses and declines behind the bravado.¹²⁶ As the circus had risen, so could its masters fall into sad and obscure deaths, as did Thomas Johnston or the royal favourite Abraham Saunders, who, after losing out to both fire and the Irish Sea, was last seen, aged 90, arriving at magistrate's court in a "sort of little box on wheels, drawn by a Shetland pony, himself enclosed in a bear-skin dress," to answer charges of

¹²³ Anon., qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 206; ms. note from *Morning Post* 12 Jan. 1798, BL Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 160 A.

¹²⁴ Examples are legion. Theatre fires were in any case common: Drury Lane and Covent Garden had burnt down 1810 and 1808. See *The Picture of London for 1818* 284-9. Press reports expressed relief at Astley's safe arrival or alarm at their delay, and there were many near-wrecks: e.g. 21 Nov. 1789, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 986; Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 33. For collapsing buildings see p. **194**.

¹²⁵ Astley, letter to Mr. Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786, TM Astley's file.

¹²⁶ See, for example, a puff promising an improvement from an exhibition "very much on the decline," 14 June 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 348.

running a penny-theatre.¹²⁷ Circus people had to become speculators, but were not of a class which had financial reserves. Part of a new breed of highly entrepreneurial theatrical managers, they were in the front line: having to think and act in big terms, but without the special state sanction and customary public loyalty of the patent theatres. Hence Astley's publicity tried to encourage the notion that the Amphitheatre had both.

Tuttle's account of the Royal Circus is a catalogue of the outrageous fraud and infighting that erupted when thespians and semi-literate equestrians first joined with the forces of pure speculation in 1782. In 1784, for example, only two years after the opening, the proprietors persuaded the troublesome Dibdin to turn himself in for £450 debt, promising that they would provide written guarantees to prevent him going to jail. They instantly reneged, leaving Dibdin to write his crazed pamphlet *Royal Circus Epitomised* from the King's Bench Prison, and recall at his leisure such "amiable colleague[s]" as Hughes, "the horse-rider, with the dark mind, and dastardly heart of a Portuguese-bravo."¹²⁸ Six years later a successor, Thomas Read, suffered the same fate, and wrote of it similarly.¹²⁹ Indeed it became a joke in the theatre world that, for the convenience of its audience and managers, the Royal Circus was deliberately located within the "rules" of the King's Bench, where

¹²⁷ Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 2: 85.

¹²⁸ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 80; Dibdin, *Royal Circus Epitomised*, and *Professional Life* 109, 116.

¹²⁹ Thomas Read, *The History of the Royal Circus* (1790): see Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 173.

certain prisoners were allowed to live and work normally as long as they stayed within the bounds.¹³⁰

Astley's puffer was keen to point out that the Amphitheatre was not so located.¹³¹

Astley's self-righteousness was hardly justified, however. Even press accounts of life at the Amphitheatre provided glimpses of some surprising business practices. The whiff of arson often lingered around theatre fires.¹³² There is little evidence to suggest that those suffered by Astley were to cut losses and gain sympathetic new patrons, as may have been the case with Drury Lane in 1809.¹³³ But fact that the Amphitheatre was significantly under-insured twice (in 1804 the sum quoted was £1,700 from a value of £30,000) perhaps gives the truest picture of the health of the business and the money available to pay a full annual premium of approximately £250.¹³⁴ After the Royal Circus' fire it emerged that they too had cut corners.¹³⁵ Both managers preferred to trust that they would "find relief in a British Public."¹³⁶ Thus, in a very direct sense, the charitable and benefit tradition enabled

¹³⁰ *The Plan of the Rules Belonging to the King's Bench Prison Extending from the Black Bull Alehouse . . . to Newington Almshouses* (London, 1750). The rules were changed in 1790s to exclude all pubs and places of entertainment.

¹³¹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 15 D (7 May) and 16 C (28 May 1790).

¹³² Brayley, *Theatres of London* 73.

¹³³ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 226, notes that Elliston applied for tenancy of the Royal Circus one day before Drury Lane, where he had been performing under contract, burnt down.

¹³⁴ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 254 A; Brayley, *Theatres of London* 87.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 73. Their sum insured was £3,000: a sixth of the cost of rebuilding alone.

¹³⁶ Ct., "THE FIRE AT ASTLEY'S THEATRE: FURTHER PARTICULARS," 3 Sept. 1803, TM Astley's file.

commerce to continue by softening its conditions. It perpetuated a myth of fortune justly administered by a British audience (whom theatrical rhetoric often treated as a jury).

Rivalry between circuses was none the less acted out with self-conscious excess. Eighteenth-century mores tended to dramatise rather than minimise conflict.¹³⁷ Consequently, riding masters and managers into the 1790s baited and lambasted each other in the press. Perhaps the most dastardly accusation was in November 1782, when Astley published an affidavit to deny that he had poisoned Hughes' horses.¹³⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, touring companies, where competition was most intense, were resorting to more subtle spoiling tactics, including anticipating the routes of rivals in order to scoop local demand.¹³⁹ None the less, circus proprietors always displayed magnanimity and trade solidarity in the face of spectacular disasters, especially when they could show concern for the personnel. Characteristically, the company of the Royal Circus were offered benefits at the Amphitheatre after they were burnt out (perhaps because of suspicions that Astley had been the culprit).¹⁴⁰ The staff were said by Dibdin to have been usually happy to give up their night's salary in such circumstances.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ On the useful idea of the "theatricality" of eighteenth-century culture see Baer, *Theatre and Disorder*, ch. 1.

¹³⁸ 13 Nov., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 435.

¹³⁹ Turner, "'£50,000 in Hand'," 1.

¹⁴⁰ *Morning Herald* 13 Aug. 1805, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 52; Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 217.

¹⁴¹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 96. He also mentions that Sadler's Wells gave the Astley's company a benefit after they were burnt out in 1803.

Although Astley worked within, and benefited from, the traditional values of the theatre system, the roots of the circus lay in a different set of motives from those which impelled the municipal theatres and patent houses, where the hope was to unite high cultural ambition with profit.¹⁴² The first generation of riding masters had exhibited little more than the desire to make a living--albeit a potentially handsome one--by selling their own and others' talents with and love for horses. They were soon seized upon by rational speculators: the proprietors of the Royal Circus had held the managers to a 10% return on their money, and the ground landlord had been similarly intransigent--in marked contrast to the lenience of most provincial theatre subscribers.¹⁴³ The resulting product was sufficiently commercially successful for Astley, his followers and their horses to be viewed *within* the nineteenth-century theatre world as insurgent pests.¹⁴⁴ How Astley contributed to this image is not hard to determine.

III. Circus People

During the legal dispute over the title to the Amphitheatre in 1822, William Davis' counsel conceded that it was still called 'Astley's,' despite having been financially supported by his client for the

¹⁴² For a clear expression of these dual objectives in the case of Drury Lane, see *The Picture of London for 1818* 286.

¹⁴³ The Birmingham Theatre Royal, erected in 1773-4, did not pay any dividend until 1792. Chalklin concludes that the "prime interest" of subscribers "was in contributing to the establishment of a cultural activity. . . .," "Building for Cultural Purposes" 63, 66.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 1: 401, and vol. 2: 47.

past 20 years, because "the public . . . had been convinced that there was a kind of magic in his name."¹⁴⁵ From the days of competing individual riding-masters, circus has been headed by patriarchs.

The name was the trademark of a fairly standard product, distinguished and apparently held together by force of personality. By comparison, the theatre was more of a civic space, inhabited by a variety of actorly identities.

Styled in his own publicity "the father of all equestrian performers", by 1796, Philip Astley had engineered the most powerful personality cult before Barnum.¹⁴⁶ Anecdotes of his demotic gruffness abounded during his life. At least one was disseminated in the form of a puff, and so may have been produced under his supervision.¹⁴⁷ But after his death such snippets gained singular value in a world of theatrical anecdotes.¹⁴⁸ Remarks attributed to him seemed to contain the populist philosophical secret of the circus, and were passed down by those working in the business. One reported by Charles Dibdin the Younger was typical:

It was always a maxim with Old Astley, that the Public, never thought for themselves, in the instance of Play Bills etc. "John Bull, Sir," said he to me, one morning when I was making out the Bill of the weekly Entertainment . . . and had begun it with "On Monday, and five successive evenings"--"John Bull, Sir, won't understand that"--I stared--"John Bull, Sir, never thinks for himself, as you and I may do: therefore if we want to catch him, we must think for him. He won't know what 5 successive evenings means, . . . nor will he trouble his head about it--Here, Tom Lamp!";--bawling to his

¹⁴⁵ Report, 17 Oct. 1822, BL Th. Cts. 60.

¹⁴⁶ 27 June 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 B.

¹⁴⁷ For an unlikely account of Astley barking out a quotation from Voltaire, see 3 Aug. 1790, *ibid.* item 17 F.

¹⁴⁸ Decastro's *Memoirs*, like Dibdin the Younger's, were written partly to capitalize on Astley's gems; these and others provided newspaper trivia into the 1870s: see TM Astley's file, box 1, env. "Early Years general."

Lamp Lighter--"Sir",--"Tom, let the new Lamps I told you of, be lit up, five successive evenings",--(Tom) "Vat Evenins, are them 'ere, Sir ?"--(Astley to me) "There! didnt I tell you so ? Tom Lamp's one of John Bull's family, and the family's all alike--No Sir--if you want John Bull to understand you you must say "*Monday next, with the day of the Month, the next day, Tuesday, and the day after, Wednesday,* and do on, or you won't catch John Bull, Sir." . . .¹⁴⁹

At first Dibdin, as house writer, had been "disgusted" by his "bear-like manner," but once he had worked with him admitted that "He was a perfect original; shrewd and of strong natural parts; but as illiterate as he was conceited; and in his disposition strongly combined brutality and fooling: and might have been called a humane Hog."¹⁵⁰ For some "Philip the Big" demonstrated the happy liberalism of the English system, which could benefit such a patent know-nothing and allow his institution to flourish; for others, like Dibdin, the anecdotes suppressed their anxieties about and frustrations caused by the triumph of English Philistinism.¹⁵¹

Hughes, John Astley and Ducrow were variants on the model: Hughes was more of a performer; Young Astley more creative; and Ducrow the most talented in both respects. But all contained the Old Astleian element to some degree: Hughes was "a fine, stalwart fellow, who could have carried an ox away on his shoulders, and eaten him for supper"; John could be violent; and the mercurial Ducrow was notorious for his foul mouth and malapropisms.¹⁵² They were all, therefore, "circus people." The Dibdins, by contrast, with their literary hearts, were essentially theatre people.

¹⁴⁹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 99.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 18, 26.

¹⁵¹ *Times* 17 Aug. 1795, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 51.

¹⁵² Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 2: 41. In 1791 there was a reported duel between John Astley and "a lad of family" over a "nymph." In 1804 he was prosecuted for threatening to horsewhip the comedian Rees for impersonating his father on stage, then causing a riot at the performance, and

Vis-à-vis the outside world, circus proprietors enjoyed unparalleled social mobility. In addition to pronouncing himself a "Professeur d'Equitation" and professional, Philip Astley drew upon the ancient nominal link between the riding master (*écurie* or *ecuyer* in French) and the office of equerry. He proudly displayed the arms of the King and Queen of France on his tunic after winning that right by royal ordinance in 1782, and implied he had the confidence of members of the English royalty and nobility.¹⁵³ When he was injured by falling fireworks due to a "careless . . . Carpenter" in 1788, press gossip mentioned that "Two eminent surgeons" attended him.¹⁵⁴ Besides claiming to have translated the French plays at the Amphitheatre, Astley underscored his official dilettantism by presenting the British Museum with 74 letters by Henry IV of France to his Chancellor, the sole relics of the Bastille record-room, when he returned from France in 1803.¹⁵⁵

Although performers were too dissembling, peripheral and varied to be classifiable satisfactorily as a group, most recruits to the non-acting arts were clearly from the lower orders. Yet by climbing the circus ladder, they could approximate urban and ultimately rural gentility. The original trick rider Thomas Johnston became an improving farmer (although his subsequent failure was a salutary lesson in

the next year he was forced to pay damages for assaulting the Jewish clothier of the Royal Circus in the Amphitheatre. See rpts., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 47 E (1791), 262 D (30 Aug. 1804) and 274 B (16 Aug. 1805). For Ducrow's behaviour see Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 174, 178 etc.

¹⁵³ 21 Sept. 1782, *ibid.* item 406.

¹⁵⁴ 23 Apr. 1788, *ibid.* item 901.

¹⁵⁵ Ct., h.d. 12 Dec. 1803, TM Astley's file, box 1, env. "1770-1779 and Early Years general."

the difficulties of that pursuit); the equestrian and lessee of the Amphitheatre Robert Handy "Esqr. . . . retired to the environs of Bath" and became "a Magistrate of the County"; while Astley's composer and pianist of the 1790s, George Broad, became "comfortably settled in a farm in the County of Mayo," teaching music countrywide.¹⁵⁶ Many circus managers consolidated their mercantile status by Freemasonry: Astley emphatically used the term "supreme Deity" and started up his own "Royal Grove Lodge" along with his son in 1787, while the Royal Circus held a charitable benefit for a Masonic School in 1789.¹⁵⁷ Smaller circus men would decorate their bills with fraternal symbols (fig. 2.1).

As the circus became established, the second generation started from a higher rung: John Astley, notably, "always had the manners of a Gentleman" which his father conspicuously lacked.¹⁵⁸ In 1800 he married his co-star of the stage Hannah Waldo Smith, whose uncle was the economist Adam Smith and whose mother, a singer at Covent Garden, had been a protégée of the composer Dr. Arne.¹⁵⁹ The glamorous couple moved to a country house over an hour away at East Sheen.¹⁶⁰ But success in the shadow of such a personality as Old Astley held its dangers: John Astley's public record

¹⁵⁶ *Freeman's Jnl.* 13 Dec. 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 20; Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 20, 34.

¹⁵⁷ Astley, *Remarks on the Profession and Duty of a Soldier* iii; 5 July 1805, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 260 B; *World* 9 Nov. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 50.

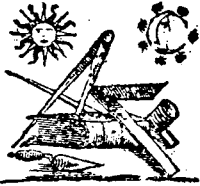
¹⁵⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 18.

¹⁵⁹ Obituary to mother, Mrs. Woodman, Sept. 1803, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 254 C; ct., TM Astley's file, 1800.

¹⁶⁰ Ct., "THE FIRE AT ASTLEY'S . . .," 3 Sept. 1803, TM Astley's file. I have found no trace of the place, but the approximate distance is indicated by the time that he took to arrive after being informed of the fire.

Fig. 2.1. Handbill, Mr. Cimex's Circus, Hull, 1803, showing Masonic symbols. (Courtesy of George Speaight.)

LAST NIGHT BUT ONE.



BY DESIRE OF
William Osbourne, Esq.
For the Benefit of Mr. CIMEX,

This present FRIDAY Evening, June 17th, 1803.

Mr. CIMEX, begs leave to return his sincere Thanks to the Inhabitants of this Town and Neighbourhood, for the very liberal Encouragement given to the Performances at the CIRCUS, since their Commencement, and to inform them, that as his BENEFIT is fixed for the above Evening, no Expence or Pains shall be spared, to bring forward a greater Variety of NEW ENTERTAINMENTS, than have hitherto been seen, chiefly consisting of

Grand Equestrian Exercises ; Or HORSEMANSHIP.

The METAMORPHOSE of the SACK, or the Clown deceived by a Woman on Horseback, with the much-admired FRICASSEE DANCE.

The GEOMETRICAL LADDER.

EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS, or HUMAN MOUNTAINS.

STILL VAULTING,—A Trial of SKILL on Horseback, by the whole Troop.

Grand Trampoline, or Surprising Leaps.

A Variety of the most astonishing Feats of Agility

On the TIGHT ROPE, by Mr. WOOLFORD,

(As on his own Benefit)

Equilibriums on the MOVING LADDER.

The Comic Humours of the Clown on Horseback.

The SAILOR's Voyage a FOX Hunting.

WITH

The TAILOR Riding to BRENTFORD.

To which will be added a GRAND BURLETTA, called

Jockey and Jenny ;

Or Part 'em who Can.

Tickets to be had of Mr. CIMEX, at Mr. Holder's, and of Mr. Ferraby, in the Butchery, Mr. Peck, Scale-Lane, at the principal Inns, and at the Circus, where Places for the Boxes may be taken from Eleven till Two.

J. Ferraby, Printer, Butchery, Hull.

implies that he became a complacent, alcoholic and unusually anti-semitic spendthrift.¹⁶¹ "I fully expected some cash on a legacy lately left [to] Mrs. Astley of Five Hundred Pounds . . . ," he wrote rather anxiously to his solicitors in 1806.¹⁶² He was neither as popular nor as highly regarded as his father. Philip Astley was known as an indomitable businessman with a healthy disdain for parvenus, famous actors and accountants alike, whereas his son could be sneering and vindictive.¹⁶³ A real need for patronage and influence meant neither could be as blustering and dismissive of the ruling classes, however, as they were of professionals inside the Amphitheatre.

Internal authority was lampooned by the clown pitting himself against the ringmaster, but behind the scenes Astley and his successors secured their positions with the firm hand of labour discipline. "Why do my performers act so much better than yours ?" he demanded Mr. Harris of Covent Garden. "Because mine know if they don't indeed work like horses, I give them no *coin*"

¹⁶⁴ John Astley erected a bill backstage to say that misdemeanours including bad language, fighting, "Gentlemen in liquor" on stage and "that GROSS and *unbecoming behaviour* entitled "SKYLARKING" . . . which only *tends to promote DISCORD*," would be met with specific fines up to £10.

¹⁶¹ For debts incurred see p. 212.

¹⁶² John Astley, letter to Messrs. Robins, 19 Nov. 1806, Fenwick Colln., Tyne and Wear Archives Service, 944/150.

¹⁶³ See Decastro, *Memoirs* 69-70, especially for his treatment of the tragedian and patentee John Philip Kemble.

¹⁶⁴ Frederick Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, vol. 1 (London, 1826) 264.

10s. (ten weeks pay for the average subordinate).¹⁶⁵ "They were mainly a rough and outspoken breed," claims Saxon in justifying Ducrow's "peremptory" treatment of "his" artistes.¹⁶⁶

For many staff the Amphitheatre was either the first port of call in the ascent through the respectable London theatres, or the last one before the descent into destitution. In 1819 the Assize Courts revealed the example of a "dashing young Cyprian" who was to be transported for the normally capital offence of possessing a forged banknote. "We understand that this unhappy creature," lamented the press correspondent,

was the daughter of respectable parents at Horsham; that during the residence of the military in the neighbourhood she had been seduced, and taken up to London, where she lived a state of concubinage with her seducer, by whose means she acquired a knowledge of music; and after she had been abandoned, she had got an engagement as a singer at Astley's Amphitheatre, where she performed for a considerable time with applause. Since then she had fallen into a more discreditable mode of livelihood. . . .¹⁶⁷

Even as part of a highly fluid theatrical workforce, and a minor theatre system notorious for its low pay, Dibdin the Younger dreaded Astley's particular "Slavery" when he signed up in his first regular job as deputy manager in 1797.¹⁶⁸ All 70 or so regular staff were indentured for the season, often with only a verbal agreement, and were liable to be dismissed instantly, with no power of giving notice

¹⁶⁵ Bill, c. 1805, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1.

¹⁶⁶ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 179.

¹⁶⁷ "Cyprian" was a euphemism for prostitute. Rpt., 4 Apr., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 741.

¹⁶⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 21. In 1833, the radical tailor Francis Place refused to let his wife, a former Covent Garden actress, "work herself into ill health for the low pay she would receive at a Minor." Mary Thale, ed., *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771-1854)* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972) 273.

themselves.¹⁶⁹ The case of Astley versus Welden in 1801, when John Astley sued an actress for £200 after she broke her contract to join the Royal Circus, still stands as an important precedent in damages law.¹⁷⁰ Fortunately the court decided that this amount was an arbitrary penalty and upheld more realistic damages of £20, but not before she had left the country.¹⁷¹ "The woman's a fool," raged John Astley, "and you (meaning the Attorney) *an ass*."¹⁷² In 1853 an "Old retainer" and character actor challenged the manager of the Amphitheatre for dismissing him mid-season, and won his week's salary of two guineas.¹⁷³

In order to present lavish spectacles to the public Astley had, of course, to be "frugal," giving the Amphitheatre a lasting reputation for ruinous and often tardy pay among all ranks of the theatrical profession.¹⁷⁴ In fact, pay was competitive, since the undisputed prestige of performing under Astley's name enabled him to get away with it. Around the turn of the eighteenth century the company, though only about two-thirds the size of a patent house, was twice as large as an average modern circus. It consisted of approximately 15 equestrians, 20 actors and chorus, 10 musicians, 8 carpenters, 5 grooms,

¹⁶⁹ Dibdin, *Memoirs* 21; 15 May 1853, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1471.

¹⁷⁰ *The Digest: Annotated British and Commonwealth and European Cases*, vol. 17 (2), "Damages" (London: Butterworths, 1994) 24.

¹⁷¹ 28 Jan. 1801, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 204 C.

¹⁷² Rpt., 24 June 1800, *ibid.* item 193 C.

¹⁷³ See *Smith v. Cooke*, 15 May 1853, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 1471.

¹⁷⁴ Even penny circus people disdained Astley's for its low pay: see Henry Mayhew, "The Penny Circus Jester," qtd. Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 16.

4 costumiers, 4 scene painters, and 4 box keepers and ticket staff.¹⁷⁵ Most of these were paid between 12s. and 1½g. per week (a bass player, for example, received £1. 5s.), whereas for less well known enterprises the minimum wage was 1g.¹⁷⁶ Wages for these, as well as the fees of up to a dozen short-term visiting stars, were the largest single cost.¹⁷⁷ So when the carpenters struck for more just before a pantomime in 1798, John Astley risked all and used equestrian staff to operate the machinery until they sheepishly returned. The young Dibdin successfully carried this lesson in strike-breaking to other theatres.¹⁷⁸

By the mid-nineteenth century managerial thrift and workforce flexibility were the known conditions of running a lean and successful circus--and Astley's was successful, having survived a post-Regency recession which many theatres had not, and challenging the dominance of the patent theatres on their own territory. In 1790 the Amphitheatre celebrated the work of the house staff with a pantomime entitled *Jack of All Trades*: in the participatory, relaxed atmosphere of their own benefits

¹⁷⁵ For equestrian details see alleged letters of engagement, 27 June 1798, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 B. The remaining figures, which naturally varied, were compiled from various sources, particularly bills.

¹⁷⁶ Ann Beedell, *The Decline of the English Musician: A Family of English Musicians in Ireland, England, Mauritius and Australia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 188. With thanks to Ann Beedell for her help.

¹⁷⁷ See Dibdin the Younger's account of the wages and costs of his own ill-fated theatrical venture in Dublin, 1805, in his *Memoirs* ch. 8.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 77-9.

staff versatility could be parodied, with ordinary actors welcome to write their own plays or ditties, or help with Napoleon's most famous impersonator Gomersal's "First Appearance as an Equestrian."¹⁷⁹

The benefit system was the cornerstone of internal as well as external relations. Staff benefits, taken at the end of a season or visit and with programmes dictated by the beneficiary, were an important form of income for the dozen principal performers and house staff who were accorded them each season. A matter for negotiation, they helped reduce the manager's pay bill.¹⁸⁰ According to the favour in which the employee was held, the beneficiary either had to split a percentage of the profits with the manager, or to cover the costs of the production. Hence he or she could lose, or gain as little as 18d.¹⁸¹ Staff competition was encouraged by the knowledge that star performers might receive a "clear" benefit with all costs paid. Astley's fortunes depended heavily on the audience's favourite, the singer Johannot, so he was put in a position to receive up to £600 by such means each year, plus payment of all his travelling expenses and a horse which Astley kept for his recreation.¹⁸² The personal fortunes of circus people depended on the twin backing of audience and management.

Yet because stars rose substantially on their individual merits, performers under the emerging star system could break through the normal obstacles of gender, race or age. In the theatre in general,

¹⁷⁹ Ad., Sept. 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 145 F; bills, 21 Sept. 1829 and 9 Sept. 1828, TM Astley's file.

¹⁸⁰ See 27 June 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 B.

¹⁸¹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 19.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* 29, 31.

certain actresses or children were regularly paid as much or more than the men; whereas many female workers in other trades earned only a quarter as much.¹⁸³ The majority of women in the theatre earned around two-thirds as much as their male counterparts. To the traditional liberalism of the theatrical and entertainment professions, the circus added standards of physical skill that helped to redefine notions of cultural achievement. The elite category of performers in the circus were the riders, but in the heady early days nothing more than athletic qualifications were needed: mixed teams were normal, and a certain Mrs. Mackett was remembered as "the principal equestrian performer" in Astley's company in 1773.¹⁸⁴ Within twenty years, however, gender relations seem to have altered: in 1792, the novelist Fanny Burney grumbled about Astley's "Horse *manship*, as usual," and in 1822 Davis argued that Hannah Astley's sex made her incapable "of properly conducting" the management of the Amphitheatre.¹⁸⁵

The English theatre had long enjoyed many French and Italian singers and dancers, though they suffered periodic outbursts of xenophobia from the audience. At Astley's the principal singer next to Johannot, Jacob Decastro, was from a recently immigrated Portuguese Jewish family.¹⁸⁶ From the beginning, Astley also capitalised on the tradition of apparently exotic races in popular entertainment:

¹⁸³ E.g. Dibdin the Younger's breakdown of wages for his company, *ibid.* 70; Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation* 168.

¹⁸⁴ Obituary to Mrs. Mackett, *Gentleman's Magazine* Oct. 1807: 981.

¹⁸⁵ Fanny Burney, *The Letters and Journals of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*, vol. 1: 1791-2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 213 (with thanks to Joanna Innes); press court rpt., 17 Oct. 1822, BL Th. Cts. 60.

¹⁸⁶ Decastro, *Memoirs* 8.

"Wanted," he advertised in the *St. James' Chronicle* on 7 November 1769, ". . . two men to blow the French Horn; no objection to Blacks."¹⁸⁷ A painting by Heinrich Freudweiler of the English riding master Balp performing in Zürich in 1783 indeed shows a Black musician in this rôle, which echoes that of the Black servant in the eighteenth-century portrait.¹⁸⁸ Yet despite plenty of what we would call racist imagery in the circus (sometimes perpetuated by minority performers themselves), several Blacks, notably Ducrow's protégé and the subsequent equestrian manager of Astley's, Joseph Hillier, and "one of the greatest of all" nineteenth-century circus proprietors, Pablo Fanque, found the circus a corridor of opportunity and heterogeneity, and were widely respected for it.¹⁸⁹ The circus was not a class-free utopia; rather, it contained an exceptional form of class system.

Despite Astley's insistence on calling the heads of his "Littery" and musical departments "Doctor," the conventional arts came comparatively cheap within such a system, even by the standards of a time of no effective copyright provision.¹⁹⁰ "*FIVE GUINEAS!*" was Dibdin the Younger's appalled recollection of the purchase price of his labour in his first pantomime and set of model scenes--the product of six weeks' hard work--in 1797.¹⁹¹ But this was more than double what his predecessor

¹⁸⁷ BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

¹⁸⁸ Heinrich Freudweiler, *The Riding Master and Public in Zürich*, 1783, private colln., repr. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 46.

¹⁸⁹ *The World's Fair*, 22 March 1913. See Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 117 etc; Turner, "Pablo Fanque: 'An Artiste of Colour'," *King Pole* 89 (Dec. 1990): 5-9, and 90 (1991): 3-5; Marius Kwint, "'Dark Subjects': Race and Performance in the Early Circus in England, 1768-1850," paper, History Workshop 25 Conference, Ruskin College, Oxford, Nov. 1991.

¹⁹⁰ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 27.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* 19.

had been paid; and his brother Thomas was to receive only £50 for *The High-Mettled Racer* in 1812, against the £10,000 which Astley's netted from it.¹⁹² As deputy manager Dibdin was subsequently bound, for 1½ guineas per week, to produce annually 36 such pieces and many song lyrics, as well as the daily diet of eight or nine long puffs plus regular advertisements.¹⁹³ In running the Amphitheatre, meanwhile, he frequently exceeded the standard 14-hour working day. The fact that he went on to make £9 per week touring with Parker and Davis' circus company and become a proprietor of Sadler's Wells did not alter his perception of an altogether "fagging life" when he came to look back on it.¹⁹⁴ Even more arduous and ill-rewarded were the various subordinate trades: "Can you explain what it is not to enter a bed *four* successive nights and attend to the hardest drudgery of an orchestra (Astley's)?" wrote the mother of one musician who, with three people to keep, was obliged to moonlight at quadrille parties in 1829.¹⁹⁵

Besides setting an example by his own "Industry, perseverance and enterprise," Astley counteracted the exploitation of his employees through a strong paternalism, heavily marked by the themes of kinship, loyalty and tradition.¹⁹⁶ Much of this was inherited from his military years. "Now, girls and boys," Decastro remembered him saying after the first fire in 1794, "we must begin again--no

¹⁹² Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 264.

¹⁹³ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 20.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 36.

¹⁹⁵ Susannah Castell, mother of Augustine Humble, to his errant father, William Castell (then in France), 13 Jan. 1829, qtd. Beedell, *Decline of the English Musician* 203.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

deserters among you, I hope--stick by me, I'll give you all half salaries till we commence one more; and if any of you wish to take benefits, I'll do what I can for you." As he said in 1797 when Johannot left the company, "the mill must go."¹⁹⁷ He promised that the members who paid a guinea each to travel with the company to Dublin, rather than going with the mail like the actresses, would be kept like "Sons of Kings" on their journey, and kept a float in case they ran out of money while waiting for a wind at Holyhead.¹⁹⁸ John Astley was usually happy to give an advance on wages too.¹⁹⁹ In 1825, the newspapers reported that Ducrow had immediately sent £10 to the wife of an equestrian who had broken his back in a somersault, with a note promising to continue his salary to the end of the season whether he survived or not (he did not, and was borne by his fellow equestrians to his grave).²⁰⁰

This policy seems to have worked to a large extent. The various memoirs of at least the more senior members of the company betray a strong loyalty to the institution, and particularly towards Astley. Records of middle and higher-ranking staff show that they typically spent either between two and five years with the company, or a whole career. There are few data on the subordinates' no doubt different sentiments and patterns of movement, but some loyalty must have been enforced by the fact that work was at least difficult to find mid-season, as the continued success of calling the bluff of

¹⁹⁷ Decastro, *Memoirs* 67, 95.

¹⁹⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 21, 31.

¹⁹⁹ 24 June 1800, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 193 C.

²⁰⁰ 7 May 1825, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 916.

strikers, and the seriousness with which the courts took the dismissal of employees, suggests.²⁰¹ Circus people and audience alike were supposed to feel privileged to be part of a "Golden Orchard."

In all circuses, the experience of being on the road strengthened the need for solidarity and the ethos of "*putting a Shoulder to the Wheel*." With all the men who could riding the stud of horses, and many of the rest travelling in Baggage Waggons, "Old Astley's Cavalcade" seemed to prove that every element must be functional and versatile. "We kept no more Cats than would catch mice" stressed Dibdin the Younger when he joined Parker, Davis and Co. touring with temporary wooden circuses in 1799.²⁰² For the circus did not travel on account of some heartfelt wanderlust, but to obtain the maximum distribution points for a standard product. Hence the circus' characteristic lifestyle aestheticized an economic imperative. The comparatively lightweight travelling detachment honed itself as the cutting edge of the circus and popular entertainment business.

Astley's rôle as a capitalist *paterfamilias* of entertainment was not in itself new: through his comparative fame he merely accentuated patterns which had already been present with the strolling players. But the circus began to reinterpret these patterns significantly: the theatre, like many trades, tended to run in families and indeed dynasties, but in the circus the family became part of the presentational mode for acts: one of the Royal Circus' greatest successes in 1786 was the Italian acrobats called The Charinis. The aesthetics of the circus suited the presentation of acts as cellular

²⁰¹ Davis, "The Theatrical Employees of Victorian Britain" 32, describes the comparatively prolific mid-nineteenth century stage as "overcrowded."

²⁰² Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 34, 21. The actresses, however, travelled by mail coach at their own expense.

units, the organisation as a whole could be seen as an extended family, while the performers' peculiar lifestyle helped to sustain the conviction that it was really 'in the blood.'

There is little evidence, however, that circus people compensated for their own hardships with the defiant sense of separatism and élitism seen in the twentieth-century circus and other glamorous but insecure professions. As George Speaight has pointed out, the benefit custom is a "further indication that the world of the circus and its artistes in nineteenth-century England was not quite the self-contained community into which it has later developed."²⁰³ The obligations of the benefit, from which the principal performers stood to gain the most, tended to tie them into the community. In order to make their benefits successful, performers were obliged to write dozens of letters asking local luminaries to patronise them, and to make tickets available through local pubs and indeed at their own houses and those of their colleagues.²⁰⁴ Moreover, nineteenth-century artistes often stayed in billets and lodgings, rather than the caravans and tents of later years. As George Speaight has also said, "It is tempting to dismiss the entire body of minor thespians of the Regency as a set of dissolute, drunken, delightful bohemians," yet their various testimonies show an earnestness to strengthen the values of their host communities.²⁰⁵ Astley's had its share of the scandals of drunkenness, violence, adultery, fornication and buggery which seemed increasingly to attend the theatre by the early nineteenth

²⁰³ Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 16.

²⁰⁴ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 72; see also R. Herring, letter to Mrs. Coutts, 3 Nov. 1826, and various benefit posters, TM Astley's file.

²⁰⁵ Speaight, Postscript, Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 164.

century, but these reveal nothing more than a more censorious public eye: performers caught in these scandals were in fact participating with the rest of society.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ E.g. see rpt. of Miss Welden and Mr. Wallack staying "jointly" in hotel, 24 June 1800, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 193 C; rpt. of a drunken Widdicombe, the famous ringmaster, and a prostitute in a pub, 10 Apr. 1853, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 1448; Speaight on the "unnatural" relationship of a leading ropedancer with the novelist William Beckford: "Master Saunders," in Pretini, ed., *Thesaurus Circensis* vol. 2: 1091-7; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, etc.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LEGITIMATION OF THE CIRCUS

I. Innocent Amusement ?

When Astley founded his show it was legally dubious and he was occasionally prosecuted for it, yet by the second half of the nineteenth century the circus had been publically endorsed by some of the most respectable people in the kingdom, including Queen Victoria and her family.¹ Because the circus has since been seen as essentially 'family' entertainment, legal experts have considered it self-regulating, and therefore largely exempt from censorship and licensing.² According to the pioneering 1931 writer on popular pastimes Samuel McKechnie, the English should be proud of Astley because his invention was "the cleanest form of entertainment that has ever been popular."³

Existing historiographies offer two possible explanations to this apparent legal and moral deliverance. Firstly, it can be viewed as part of the broader transformation of 'popular culture' during the industrial revolution. Critics and social historians of a broadly Marxist persuasion have traditionally

¹ Ian Bevan, *Royal Performance: The Story of Royal Theatregoing* (London: Hutchinson, 1954) 153, 185; Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 19; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 339.

² E. R. Hardy Ivamy, "Circuses and the Law," *The Law Journal* 102 (Feb. 1952): 115-6.

³ McKechnie, *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages* 195.

Table 3.1. Legal Chronology of the English Circus

(Court cases in bold)

Year	Event	Result
1737	Theatre Licensing Act	No plays etc. outside Patent Theatres. Censorship.
1744	Vagrancy Act	Unauthorised entertainers still to be jailed as "Rogues and Vagabonds."
1752	Disorderly Houses Act	All places of public entertainment around London to be licensed by magistrates annually.
1768	Astley sets up without licence.	
1773	Astley and Hughes prosecuted under Vagrancy Act.	Closure of Amphitheatre until 1775. Astley and Hughes threaten to sue magistrates, but inconsequential.
1776	Suppression Order against Astley's.	Insufficient evidence (?). Order repeated 1777.
1777	Astley indicted under Disorderly Houses Act.	Acquitted.
1779	Astley opens in winter.	
1782/3	Royal Circus opens without licence. Astley and Hughes arrested by Justice Hyde under Vagrancy Act, and appeal.	They win. Astley has to dismantle stage, but licences granted months later.
1786	Astley granted patent for Dublin.	Opens Equestrian Theatre Royal in city.

1788	Minors' petition to Lords. 60-day Act passed.	60-day stage licences available outside London area.
1789	Riot at Royal Circus.	Brief closure.
1789/90	Barratt, then Palmer of Royal Circus arrested by Hyde for speaking prose, and appeal.	They win. Minors deemed no longer covered by legislation, and end of official suppression.
1798	Daly sues Astley in Dublin for infringement of patent.	Astley pays £300 damages.
1807	Sadler's Wells Horror (false fire alarm: 20 people crushed to death).	Public safety becomes issue.
1817	Commons police committee notes vice at Astley's and Royal Circus.	Objection to building new theatre in area.
1824	Vagrancy Act. Most entertainers no longer included.	
1828	Police regulations for traffic outside Astley's.	Parking and crowd control.
1843	Theatres Act.	Recognised minors. All playhouses to be licensed. Building regulations.
1859	Drink licence granted to Astley's.	Bars in lobbies.
1879	Children's Dangerous Performances Act.	No employment of under-14s. £10 penalty.
1893	Metropolitan Board of Works condemns Astley's as unsafe.	Sold and demolished.
1925	Performing Animals Act.	Exhibitors to register with local authority. Police powers to inspect premises.

regretted that during this period a boisterous, assertive and participatory pre-industrial plebeian culture was finally brought to heel.⁴ In the first of the modern social histories to concentrate solely on popular recreations in the period, Robert Malcolmson (1972) even concluded that the efforts of the late Georgian magistrates and reformers of manners to stamp out village wakes, urban bull-running and so on left a "vacuum" in the people's calendar until 1850, when it was remoulded into commercial forms more suited to the disciplines of industrial production.⁵ Subsequent debates have centred on severity and totality of this change: Hugh Cunningham (1980) saw the circus as part of a new "hegemony" which ensured at least a gradual transition by absorbing and mediating conflict.⁶ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue (1984) dispensed with such Marxian notions of ideology altogether, stressing the complexity of the British class system, attacking the myth of a pre-industrial 'golden age,' and pointing out that many working-class organisations also were interested in reform.⁷ For Golby and Purdue, people were happy to elect the broader, if clouded, horizons of the new order. Others, particularly Eileen and Stephen Yeo (1975), have reasserted the importance of popular resistance to interference.⁸

⁴ The theme of "The World We Have Lost" is of course inherent in the Marxist critique, and is developed in scores of works, not least Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, and E. P. Thompson's recent *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991).

⁵ Robert Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973) 170. Peter Bailey bases his (still excellent) study of subsequent developments on the similarly extreme premise that "During the industrial revolution, leisure disappeared under an avalanche of work." Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian Britain: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control* 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1987).

⁶ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* 32. A useful textbook covering these issues (though at this stage I disagree with its slant) is Susan Easton *et al.*, *Disorder and Discipline: Popular Culture from 1550 to the Present* (London: Temple Smith, 1988).

⁷ Golby and Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd*.

⁸ Eileen and Stephen Yeo, eds., *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).

Few social and cultural historians would doubt, however, that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries represent a watershed in the condition of popular leisure, and one whose influence runs to the present day. In such a historiography Astley's seems to come off badly in each of two periods: suffering the depredations of the moral reformers in the first, and epitomising the triumph of a supine and consumerist 'mass' culture in the second.

In contrast to social historians, historians of drama and theatre, ever conscious of the profound artistic effects of theatrical law, have seen the experience of the circus in rather Whiggish terms of a struggle for the emancipation of the stage (which ended in Britain only with the abolition of censorship in 1968).⁹ This chapter will attempt to reconcile these two histories by viewing them as part of a single process. It is divided into sections which reflect not only the stages through which the circus passed, but also the threefold strategy which it had to adopt in order to succeed. It is hoped that the story may also throw some incidental light on the nature of Hanoverian government, the operation of its law, and its relationship with at least one vociferous section of the yeoman and middling classes: namely those who operated the circus.¹⁰

⁹ Watson Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage in London* (London: Constable, 1906) 135, 283; Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984); L. W. Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Lib., 1976).

¹⁰ See Joanna Innes and John Styles, "The Crime Wave: Recent Writings on Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century England," *Jnl. of British Studies* 25.4 (Oct. 1986): 380-435.

II. *The Outlaw Circus, 1768-1783*

Antitheatrical prejudice has a long history, dating back at least as far as Plato's strictures against illusion and the vindictive Roman laws depriving their actors (*infamia*) of rights.¹¹ In early modern England, legislation on performance was mostly prompted by fears of the crime and disruption associated with it, and, since entertainers were traditionally itinerant, was embodied in vagrancy law. With increasing degrees of specification, nearly all types of performer lacking a patron or a local household were classed as vagrants by over a score of acts between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, and therefore were liable to summary imprisonment or whipping.¹² Hence the root of Astley's predicament--the notorious so-called Theatre Licensing Act of 1737--was simply presented as an amendment of the existing vagrancy statute ("as relates to common Players of Interludes") when Walpole found his Cabinet lampooned on the stage of the Little Theatre in the Haymarket.¹³ The act banned all "Entertainment of the Stage" except in the London patented theatres of Drury Lane, Covent Garden, The King's Theatre, Haymarket and half a dozen provincial Theatres Royal, which now had to submit their plays to censorship by the Lord Chamberlain. Offenders were to be treated as "Rogues and Vagabonds," and in 1744 the statute was bolstered and partly reiterated by a draconian new

¹¹ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: California UP, 1981) chs. 1 and 2.

¹² For a list of these acts see Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* 160-163.

¹³ 10 Geo. II ch. 28, "An Act to explain and amend so much of an Act made in the twelfth year of the Reign of Queen Anne, intituled, *An Act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, sturdy Beggars and Vagrants into one Act of Parliament . . . and sending them whither they ought to be sent*, as relates to common Players of Interludes."

Vagrancy Act, which continued the catch-all category "Minstrels."¹⁴ An unpopular government aimed to have to have the powers to stem all channels of potential disorder and sedition.¹⁵

As with most apparatuses of suppression and censorship, however, a constant stream of shifting genres would always find ways to escape the letter of the law.¹⁶ Neither did the law's officers always have the time, the sense of priority, nor often the inclination, to implement it fully. In London there persisted many forms of commercialized leisure, from pleasure gardens to pub yards and sub-dramatic entertainments, including the new equestrian performers, which studiously avoided prose dialogue on stage, or were otherwise taken to fall outside the Vagrancy or Theatre Licensing acts. (No law actually allowed a proseless stage--it was simply a matter of working interpretation.) As part of a mid-century 'moral panic' about crime, the 'Disorderly Houses Act' was therefore passed in 1752 to regulate, rather than attempt to eradicate, "the Multitude of Places of Entertainment for the lower sort of People." These places were considered to be "another great Cause of Thefts and Robberies, as they [the lower sort] are thereby tempted to spend their small Substance in riotous Pleasures, and in Consequence are put on unlawful Methods of supplying their Want..."¹⁷ On pain of a £100 fine, all

¹⁴ 17 Geo. II ch. 5, "An act to amend and make more effectual the laws relating to rogues, vagabonds, and other idle and disorderly persons, and to houses of correction." For its implementation see Richard Burn, *The Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer*, 17th ed., vol. 4 (London, 1793) 378.

¹⁵ See Liesenfeld, *The Theatre Licensing Act of 1737* ch. 3.

¹⁶ See Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage* ch. 3.

¹⁷ 25 Geo. II ch. 36, "An Act for the better preventing Thefts and Robberies, and for regulating Places of publick Entertainment, and punishing Persons keeping disorderly Houses." Lambeth's Dog and Duck was at least a starting-point for highwaymen: J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 161.

proprietors of such establishments within 20 miles of London were required to obtain a license from their local magistrates, with a £10 reward payable to informers. Negligent constables were to forfeit £20. So while Astley had been exempt from the law as a roving trick-rider, these three loosely interlocking statutes formed a legal maze as soon as he opened his own establishment, containing more recognised types of performer, in 1769.

Much of the reason that Astley and Hughes chose the south bank for their sites was that it was generally considered safe from the vigilance of the patentees, whose monopoly in Westminster was considered absolute.¹⁸ On the northern periphery Sadler's Wells had, after all, continued unmolested for years, presenting plays and burlettas on the flimsy basis of a licence under the Disorderly Houses Act for "publick Dancing, Musick, or other publick Entertainment of the like Kind."¹⁹ The reason why both Astley and Hughes failed to obtain the same licence themselves is, however, less clear, since there are no official records of the applications procedures--only of the licences that were eventually granted to established venues, with their often strict conditions such as closing before 11 p.m. In Surrey at that time only Vauxhall Gardens and the Long Room at Epsom had permits, from an estimated total of more than a dozen eligible sites.²⁰ Astley and Hughes were probably turned down. The zealous chairman of the Surrey bench, politician, and friend of Wilkes, Sir Joseph Mawbey, was currently leading a purge of local vagrants, prostitutes and fairs, having received complaints that the county had

¹⁸ 10 Geo. II ch. 28, sects. I and II.

¹⁹ 25 Geo. II ch. 36, sect. II; *Jnl. of the House of Commons*, vol. 43 (1787-8): 299.

²⁰ Surrey Record Office (SRO), Quarter Sessions (QS) Order Books, QS 2/1/22 (1767-71):167, and QS 2/1/23 (1771-3): 215.

become "infested" with "loose and disorderly persons, to the great encouragement of Idleness and Vice and the discountenance of honest and virtuous industry."²¹ Idleness and vice had become a priority for the Quarter Sessions, besides the usual burden of prison management and cases of bastardy, felony and assault.²²

It was not until 1773 that Mawbey's men turned their attention to the increasingly popular Riding Schools. On 13 July both Hughes' and Astley's seasons were brought to an abrupt end when several members of their companies were arrested and thrown in the local bridewell as rogues and vagabonds, while Astley himself was bailed.²³ From his regular slot in the *Public Advertiser* (which happened to be close to a notice from the Surrey Quarter Sessions announcing the suppression of Mitcham Fair), Astley informed his patrons that he had been called to "answer as to the legality of his performance," and that he hoped soon "to have the Honour of the Public's Encouragement of his several Feats of Horsemanship as usual."²⁴ Four days later the *London Chronicle* intimated that Astley and Hughes intended to sue Mawbey *et al* for malicious abuse of process, since, it had transpired, those who had been imprisoned were in fact local householders, and therefore not vagrants. The paper noted that the comedian Harper had recovered "considerable damages" on similar grounds some forty years

²¹ 6 Oct. 1772, *ibid.* 209. Mawbey (1730-98; chairman for 27 years) brought many prosecutions to the Assizes: see indictment rolls, PRO, Great Docket Books, IND1/6661 and 6662.

²² Special measures in 1772-3 included the distribution of "Vagrant Books," detailing the relevant laws, to local justices, the setting up of a committee on the matter, and tightening penalties on slack constables. See SRO QS Order Books, 2/1/23 and 24 (1775-9).

²³ *The London Chronicle* 17 July 1773; memoir in Astley, *Natural Magic; Or, Physical Amusements Revealed* (London, 1785) 9.

²⁴ *Public Advertiser* 14 July 1773.

before.²⁵ But since then the Theatre Licensing and 1744 Vagrancy Acts had been passed, which were not clear on the issue, and a new precedent was due. Before Astley could be tried for lacking a licence under the Disorderly Houses Act, however, he and his now free company absconded to southern France on 21 July. The next day *The St. James' Chronicle* and *The London Packet* reported the departure as perfectly legitimate, informing the public that "it is supposed, on a moderate computation, they have cleared this season four thousand pounds," while the *Public Advertiser* reassured readers that "Mr. Astley will certainly exhibit his usual Feats of Horsemanship next Summer. . . ."²⁶ Charles Hughes was left to be "Respited" (discharged) as a "nuisance" at the Summer Assizes in Guildford on 3 August, and followed Astley to the Continent, never to reopen his British Riding Academy.²⁷ The following year at least one paper reminded its readers that the case between Astley and Mawbey was due to be heard at Westminster Hall, and the successful young star had laid his damages at £10,000.²⁸ But I have found no evidence that it ever came to court.²⁹ Astley also thought better of fulfilling his promise to return to London that summer.

Although Astley braved the return next year, 1775, with an undamaged programme, he was unable to relax for more than a few seasons. The Surrey magistrates issued an order to suppress his

²⁵ *London Chronicle* 17 July 1773.

²⁶ *Public Advertiser* 20 July 1773.

²⁷ PRO Assizes records, Process Book (Criminal Proc.) ASSI 34/69, Surrey Summer Ass. 1773.

²⁸ H.d. 1774, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 104.

²⁹ The King's Bench, Common Pleas and Exchequer Records in the PRO have yielded nothing; neither have the newspapers, where any result would probably have been reported.

establishment at their Quarter Sessions on 8 October 1776, after hearing one of Astley's newspaper advertisements read out as evidence. Voicing some of the standard complaints of the time, the court noted:

the very great Mischief arising to Society in general from such exhibitions, by the debauching of Servants and Apprentices, the encouraging Vice and Prophaneness, by the unlawfully assembling of Persons of both Sexes together, and the very great Danger arising to Persons travelling either on Horseback or otherwise by the said Place, immediately before or during the Performance, by the blowing of Trumpets, beating of Drums, and the Mob of idle, dissolute Persons generally surrounding the Doors.³⁰

But the season had already ended and Astley was away on tour. Next year, a few days after his season had recommenced, the motion was reaffirmed at the Easter Sessions at Reigate on 8 April.³¹ This time the *Public Advertiser* (11 April 1777) stepped in to defend one of its best clients, gladly reporting that, for some reason, the informers had still been unable to secure an indictment: "should another attempt of this kind be made," it warned, "there is not Doubt but Mr. Astley would recover considerable Damages, as it is both cruel and oppressive to prevent a man from living by a manly and innocent amusement."

On 15 July 1777, thanks to the information of an agent who had sat in the boxes for two nights, the court finally indicted Astley on six counts under the Disorderly Houses Act.³² These included keeping a "common illgoverned and disorderly Place" for "publick Musick," "Tumbling," "Interludes

³⁰ "Order to suppress the various Exhibitions at Astley's riding School Westminster Bridge," SRO QS Order Book, 2/1/24: 272 [my punctuation].

³¹ "Order relative to Philip Astley," *ibid.* 373.

³² SRO, QS Bundles, "The King Ag^t Philip Astley," expenses sheet for John Fanton, QS 2/6/78 Ep. 31.

and Farces" without a licence, causing "Men and Women of evil Name and Fame and of dishonest Conversation to frequent and come together" and providing a "common Nuisance" to local residents and an "evil Example" to other offenders.³³ He could, however, only be bound over to await trial, and continued his performances without interruption.³⁴

Astley was tried for his "misdemeanour" at the Michaelmas Quarter Sessions at Kingston on 9 October, under Sir Joseph Mawbey.³⁵ The few records--full accounts of the Quarter Sessions were not yet kept--suggest that the prosecution were unable to prove Astley's responsibility for any "Entertainment" under the terms of the Disorderly Houses Act. Witnesses swore that Astley's horse, not he, had played at cards, while the automaton of the "*little Turk*" was, according to Astley's deft counsels Messrs. Howarth and Lade, innocently borrowed from figures at St. Dunstan's Church. These arguments, Astley recalled, "threw the whole Court into great good Humour," and after a hearing of more than three hours, he was "honourably acquitted."³⁶

A few months later Mawbey received a couple of rather cryptic letters from two separate correspondents, signed only with initials and, in one case, the name of a London inn. They alleged that

³³ SRO Indictment Files, QS 2/7, no. 59.

³⁴ 25 Geo. II ch. 36, sect. VI. Newspaper advertisements continued as normal throughout this period.

³⁵ List of prisoners coming up for trial, SRO QS Process Book, QS 3/5/9 (1767-86).

³⁶ Astley, *Natural Magic* 10; *Public Advertiser* 11 Oct. 1777: the same report appeared simultaneously in *Lloyd's Evening Post*, *The London Chronicle* and *St. James' Chronicle*.

Astley had, with "a Considerable som," bribed the witnesses "in Order to baffol the prosecution."³⁷ He had used the keeper of the Southwark Bridewell in St. George's Fields, near the Amphitheatre, who had been appointed by the magistrates to procure the witnesses in the first place, as an intermediary. "Sir Joseph," confided one correspondent,

as you should not be kep in the darke and besolid [be sold] by a southwark bridewell Keeper[,] if you send a Line to H. ffloyde in Blue Maid Court Southwark for Stephen Stratford and William Livey the[y] will discover what the[y] and other rec^d. of the said keeper, to swair Ashleys Horse Pleade [played] at Cards in stead of ashley. . . .

"This is only a hint," the writer concluded, "of the way the trouth is to be found out. . . ."³⁸ Mawbey took no apparent action against Astley, however: no retrial for the same offence was possible in any case. The magistrates could only lie in wait again.

In a fanciful memoir which elided details of his several scrapes with the law, Astley the eternal self-publicist later claimed (in 1785) that he had been tried at Kingston Assizes Court, rather than the Quarter Sessions, for "dealing with the Devil" on account of his tricks.³⁹ Perhaps he had in mind the fame of the Scotsman Bankes and his "learned" horse Marocco, who were reportedly burnt for witchcraft at Rome in the late 1630s, and were recorded in the pages of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.⁴⁰ He may also have wished to confuse memories of his conviction at Kingston in 1776, where

³⁷ SRO QS bundles, "E A. M. ...TALL Trout Inn London," letter to "Sir Joseph Mawbey, Grovener Squair," 10 Jan. 1778, SRO QS 2/6/78 Ep 30; "J. S.," letter to Mawbey, 14 Jan. 1778, QS 2/6/78 Ep 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Astley, *Natural Magic* 9-10.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well* 2.3, Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, 4.6, qtd. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*, vol. 1: 30.

he confessed and was fined a shilling for assaulting a certain Mary Richardson, which was his only recorded appearance at the Assizes.⁴¹

Probably emboldened by his victory in 1777, Astley opened the amphitheatre during the winter for the first time in 1779. Although winter was the sacrosanct season of the patent theatres, it did not provoke a reaction until two and a half years later, when, in October 1781, the court issued another order to suppress Astley's on the straightforward grounds that the exhibitions were "unlawful" because the place was unlicensed.⁴² A new Sabbatarian act that year had prompted another clampdown, although Astley's itself held no shows on Sundays.⁴³ By 8 October the next year they had managed to summon Astley to answer the Quarter Sessions at Kingston, but again without any apparent outcome, or effect on his performances.⁴⁴

In the meantime, the building of the Royal Circus had precipitated a flurry of opposition, not least from the evangelical preacher Rowland Hill, who saw the Circus rising faster than his own rotunda chapel in nearby Charlotte Street (fig. 1.5). With the traditional fervour of the evangelicals

⁴¹ PRO, Process Book (Criminal Proc.), ASSI 34/69, "Home Circuit Sum^r. Ass. . . . 1775" and "continued"; Record of Felonies and Misdemeanours, ASSI 34/75, "Surrey Lent Ass. . . . 1776."

⁴² "Order to suppress the unlawful exhibitions at Astley's Amphitheatre Riding Ho.," Michaelmas Sess., 2 Oct. 1781, SRO QS Order Book 2/1/25 (1779-83).

⁴³ 21 Geo. III ch. 49, "An Act for preventing certain Abuses and Profanations on the Lord's Day, called *Sunday*."

⁴⁴ List of defendants, Michaelmas Sess., 8 Oct. 1782, SRO QS Order Book 2/1/25 (1779-83), 542.

against all things theatrical, his sermons likened this unfortunate symmetry to "two ships . . . within sight of a spice island":

One is manned by the elect of heaven, and freighted with good works--the other, directed by the devil's crew, and laded with sinfulness. The object of both craft, is to reach the spicy port as soon as possible; but the devil's ship, if not a better vessel, is more actively manned, --for to do Satan justice he is always industrious.⁴⁵

In the press, an anonymous letter was published, demanding that the magistrates do something about establishments such as Astley's, "calculated for the lower classes of the people, and which tend only to the gratification of curiosity, without conveying the smallest degree of instruction."⁴⁶ It was not, however, until the opening of the Royal Circus in November that the magistrates Thomas Parker, John Croft and their ringleader William Hyde, whom Brayley later called "our worshipful supporter of managerial monopoly," saw a chance to take up the challenge, and make a clean sweep of this encroaching evil.⁴⁷

A major problem for the magistrates in the past had been the securing of reliable witnesses and informers who would testify to the nature of the entertainments. Evidence suggests that, in view of this fact, Hyde intended to exploit Philip Astley's resistance to the Royal Circus by using him as a witness and *agent provocateur* against it, and then double-crossing him. The Royal Circus had gone ahead and

⁴⁵ Qtd. Raymond, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston* vol. 1: 389-90. See also Rowland Hill, *A Warning to Professors, Containing Aphoristic Observations of the Nature and Tendency of Public Amusements* (London, 1833).

⁴⁶ Ct., h.d. Nov. 1782, TM colln., qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 48.

⁴⁷ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 72. See Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 52-66 for another account of the following events, which is revised here using additional evidence.

opened despite the failure of its licence application under the Disorderly Houses Act, with Dibdin hoping that a licence would be granted once the magistrates had seen that the entertainment was harmless.⁴⁸

(Whitewashing measures included using only adolescent actors on stage, and attaching a school to the Circus, on the pretext that it was essentially a training-academy.)⁴⁹ Four days after the opening, on 8 November 1782, seven parishioners duly complained to the constable that the Royal Circus was a disorderly house.⁵⁰ Whatever immediate action took place is not clear--both Astley's and the Royal Circus evidently continued to function--but on 13 November, shortly after the close of the Amphitheatre's season, Astley placed a signed and witnessed affidavit in the press. He strenuously denied that he had poisoned Hughes' horses, or that he had

likewise attended the representations at the Royal Circus, for the sole purpose of giving information upon oath, before Mr. Justice Hyde, in consequence of which a warrant is said to be issued yesterday evening, for the purpose of apprehending the performers there. . . .

He protested "That I neither directly, or indirectly was the cause of the prosecution, and was totally ignorant of it, till Mr. Hyde waited upon me on Tuesday the 5th instant, in order to stop my performances. . . ."⁵¹ The Disorderly Houses Act certainly provided for the arrest of the inhabitants of such places, so that they may "be dealt with according to Law,"⁵² although the records of the Surrey

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 31.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 22.

⁵⁰ SRO QS Bundles: "Notice of Inhabitants of Saint George to the Constable against the keepers of the Royal Circus keeping a disorderly place," QS 2/6/1783 Ep 76; "Informations agst Messrs Hughes Dibdin & Co.," QS 2/6/1783/Ep 66; "Informations agst Cha^s Hughes & others for a Disorderly House," QS 2/6/1783/Ep/69.

⁵¹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 435.

⁵² 25 Geo. II ch. 36, sect. II.

magistrates provide no corroboration to these alleged events. But the rumour stuck: in 1822 the leading scene-painter Lupino told James Winston "that Astley caused info to be laid against himself & Hughes."⁵³ The pressure on Astley showed in his chaste advertisements for "New Horsemanship and Exercise of the Menage, &c. Accompanied by Music, By His Majesty's Royal Letters Patent. . . ." ⁵⁴ His patent, of course, was for horsebreaking, not exhibitions.⁵⁵

Faced with several failures at catching the slippery circus men with the limited powers of the Disorderly Houses Act, Hyde noticed that now they both had stages--Astley had only added his, plus a roof, three years before--and resorted back to the Vagrancy Act of 1744. Like the Theatre Licensing Act, it specifically forbade all unauthorized "Entertainments of the Stage."⁵⁶ But the Vagrancy Act allowed a summary prison sentence and was therefore a way of holding both managers and forcing decisive action on their lack of any licence. On Christmas Eve two informers--a "Yeoman" and a hairdresser--made the appropriate statement that at Astley's they had seen "Certain Entertainments of the Stage," including Ombres Chinoises, tightrope dancing, horsemanship, tumbling, "two Images playing on the flute," and "Whistling Imitating of Birds."⁵⁷ At the Royal Circus two others--one of them a lawyer--had witnessed the more sophisticated spectacle of Dibdin's *Georgium Sidus; or, the*

⁵³ Ms., 23 Dec. 1822, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 449.

⁵⁴ 13 Dec. 1782, *ibid.* item 437.

⁵⁵ PRO Patent Rolls, IND:16806, p.64.

⁵⁶ 17 Geo. II ch. 5, sect. II; 10 Geo. II ch. 28.

⁵⁷ SRO QS Bundles, "Informations of John Seymour and John Taylor," 24 Dec. 1782, QS 2/6/1783/Ep/72.

Dumb Orators, which involved "a boy Called Master Russell" making a "long speech" and describing some "transparent Paintings," and "a great Number of Children Marching like Soldiers. . . ." ⁵⁸ All was seen to be performed "for Hire Gain and Reward." ⁵⁹

The *Public Advertiser* recounts that three days later, on 27 December 1782, Hyde and his accomplices burst into the pit of the Royal Circus in the middle of the programme and strode into the Stable, where he served Hughes with a warrant and demanded that he stop the performances. Hughes went to inform the audience from the stage, promising their money would be returned. People began to leave, but when Hyde reappeared, they began chanting, "the Warrant, the Warrant; produce the Warrant." According to the *Advertiser*, "some of the more respectable part of the Spectators" came close to attacking Hyde and his accomplices. After beating a "very precipitate" retreat, the posse then proceeded to arrest Astley at the Amphitheatre. ⁶⁰

At the nearby Bridewell, Astley stated that he was an honourable ex-soldier who had no other means to support his family, and swore that he had never exhibited anything other than feats of agility on foot and horseback (he had in fact staged his first burletta the previous season). ⁶¹ He offered to pay

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, "Informations of Peter Gough and Thomas Shirley," 24 Dec. 1782, QS 2/6/1783/Ep./73.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; 10 Geo. II ch. 28; 17 Geo. II ch. 5, sect. II.

⁶⁰ *Public Advertiser* 30 Dec. 1782.

⁶¹ SRO QS Bundles, "The Examination of Philip Astley of Bridge Row Lambeth Riding Master and Professor of Agility on Horseback . . . taken upon oath this 27th day December 1782," QS 2/6/1783/Ep 49.

the £50 penalty under the Theatre Licensing Act, but was refused.⁶² Hughes, meanwhile, denied that he was ever engaged at the Royal Circus, "nor hath he once received . . . Gain or reward for performing" there.⁶³ He was none the less denied bail unless he promised not to ride in public again. Refusing to do so, he was locked up with Astley.⁶⁴

"The late Commitment of Messrs. Astley and Hughes having been much the Topick of Conversation," pronounced the *Public Advertiser* as they languished in jail more than a fortnight later, "it may gratify the Curiosity of the Public to lay before them the following Presentment to the Grand Jury, in the Year 1744." Of course the complaint, made against Sadler's Wells, merely seemed ridiculous, with its condemnation of "extravagant luxury" and "illegal pleasures."⁶⁵ The proprietors of the Royal Circus, meanwhile, wrote to *The Gazetteer* defending Hughes' integrity and character under the pseudonym "Humanus."⁶⁶ As a leader in the undermining of hundreds of years of repression and monopoly, Astley's artform had gathered some articulate lobbyists.

⁶² *Public Advertiser* 30 Dec. 1782; 10 Geo. II ch. 28, sect. II.

⁶³ SRO QS Bundles, "The Examination of Charles Hughes of Saint George Place in the Parish of Christ Church Riding Master taken upon oath this 27th December 1782," QS 2/6/1783/Ep/70.

⁶⁴ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 53. I have found only evidence contradicting Tuttle's assertion that Astley was released on favour. A notice in *The Public Advertiser* 13 Jan. 1783, for example, diverted business to his son during his "absence."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 12 Jan. 1783, 4.

⁶⁶ See Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 56.

With their establishments closed, Astley and Hughes appealed under the provisions of the Vagrancy Act, and their case came up at the next Quarter Sessions in mid-January.⁶⁷ The day before the hearing Hughes, as well as Dibdin, James Thompson and Joseph Grimaldi (the dancing-master and father of the famous pantomime clown) of the Royal Circus were also called before the bench on the matter of the Disorderly Houses Act, but any decision was presumably postponed pending the outcome of the appeal.⁶⁸ As Hyde had no doubt hoped, therefore, one issue had precipitated the other.

The trial was held in a packed courtroom at St. Margaret's Hill on 15 January 1783. Sir Joseph Mawbey was chairman of the bench, and a Mr Bearcroft was prosecuting, although extraordinarily he denied this and claimed to be a mediator. Hughes' case was first. Bearcroft began by reading the relevant passage from the Vagrancy Act, "wherein," the *Public Advertiser* reported, "all persons acting or performing for gain or reward, or causing it to be done, upon the stage, are declared to be rogues or vagrants." Furthermore, he added, "it would be madness for Mr. Hughes to contend against the law," which, even if the Circus had been licensed under the Disorderly Houses Act, "would not permit such exhibitions as had been there given. . . ." Crucially, however, "He had nothing to say against the introduction of horses. . . ." Mingay, the clever counsel for the defence, soon exploited this. The prosecution's evidence hinged on Dibdin's *Georgium Sidus; or, the Dumb Orators*, for which Hughes, as riding-master, had no responsibility, so Mingay simply explained that "Mr. Hughes was not indictable for the dumb oratory exhibition; indeed, he had heard of none, except the horses were the dumb orators." Mingay conceded that Hughes might be indictable under the Disorderly Houses Act

⁶⁷ 17 Geo. II ch. 5, sect. XXVI.

⁶⁸ SRO: QS Order Books, 2/1/25: 603; Indictment Files, QS 2/7, 1783, No. 36.

governing musical performances, but pointed out that "Hyde, Parker and Croft had acted as Constable, Informers, Witnesses, Justices, Judges and Executioners." He also mentioned that he himself had proposed the original licence application for the Circus' proprietors, "who," he confirmed, "were some of the most respectable men in the kingdom."⁶⁹

On the verdict of the magistrates rested a milestone in theatrical emancipation. Eleven voted for the appeal, and seven against, so "amid the acclamations of upwards of fifteen hundred persons," Hughes ". . . was publicly declared to be NEITHER ROGUE, NOR VAGRANT."⁷⁰ All a somewhat embarrassed Mawbey could do in summing up was compliment Hughes on his respectability, before, Lupino later recalled, he "was borne home with Hurras."⁷¹

By then it was late in the day and Astley was about to be sent back to prison until the next session, so he petitioned the court to release him if he promised, as the one responsible, to dismantle his modest stage.⁷² He was successful. That evening, aware that England and France were currently negotiating for peace, he attempted to shame the English authorities by placing a notice in the press reminding the public that the chief magistrate of Paris, far from prosecuting him, had recently awarded Astley a three-ounce gold medal, while the city's Lieutenant of Police had granted an eight-year permit

⁶⁹ *Public Advertiser* 17 Jan. 1783, 3. For the passage that Bearcroft read out see 17 Geo. II ch. 5, sec. II.

⁷⁰ *Public Advertiser* 17 Jan. 1783.

⁷¹ 23 Dec. 1822, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 449.

⁷² SRO QS Order Book, "County Gaol Calendar," 14 Jan. 1783, QS 2/1/25: 603.

to perform feats of agility on horseback.⁷³ Back at the Royal Circus, Hughes, by contrast, wrote an open letter thanking Mawbey for his vindication, and "thereby declaring to the World, that the Liberty of the Subjects of this Country will, and shall, be always safe in the Hands of that Honourable Bench."⁷⁴ Thus Hughes began a triumphantly sycophantic relationship with Mawbey and co., which sickened his rivals, but which would later prove useful to Astley as well.⁷⁵

In the meantime, both Astley's and the Royal Circus received licences under the Disorderly Houses Act at the next appropriate session nine months later.⁷⁶ This brought them into line with Sadler's Wells, whereupon Astley felt it safe to start reinstating his stage. Following the defeat of their attempt to suppress the circus, the magistrates had no option but to fall back on an inappropriate and strictly illegal form of regulation.

The horses were used as to create a loophole once more, in Paris in 1786, where Astley had exceeded the purely equestrian terms of his permit by showing a variety of acts. Jean-Baptiste Nicolet, the acrobat and puppeteer who had set up the first ever booth on the Boulevard du Temple, complained to the Lieutenant of Police, as only one theatre of each kind was allowed in the city.⁷⁷ "M^r

⁷³ *Public Advertiser* 17 Jan. 1783; rpt. from Paris, 21 Sept. 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 407.

⁷⁴ *Public Advertiser* 17 Jan. 1783, 1.

⁷⁵ See Dibdin, *Professional Life* vol. 2: 109; Decastro, *Memoirs* 137; letter from Hughes in *The World* 4 Oct 1787, boasting that, unlike Vauxhall Gardens, his licence was renewed "with no altercation whatsoever": BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 48.

⁷⁶ 7 Oct. 1783, SRO QS 2/1/26: 69.

⁷⁷ Decastro, *Memoirs* 43. The Boulevard was Paris' great centre of popular entertainment.

Nicolee has done all he can to hurt us," Astley complained in his letter to Pownall that winter, "he has got our tumbling taken away which makes it lay very hard on poor John as he does his Peasant & 2 horses every night & his Knee very bad wears him out. . . ." Sundry entertainments had become indispensable. Astley had a plan, however. John, he wrote, "has made a stage to be supported by 8 horses for them to tumble on but it is not finished yet; but we are in hopes we shall in spite of Nicoley obtain our old permission. . . ." ⁷⁸ As figure 3.1 suggests, this temporary measure was successful. Horses were, moreover, a safe link between the circus and the powerful. In 1796 Benjamin Handy and his troop of equestrians were able to perform "before the whole University of Oxford" despite a law which banned all theatre or interludes from the precincts of both the English seats of learning. ⁷⁹

In London, thanks partly to Astley's ability to deflect a complex and obsolescent law which was haphazardly and often incompetently enforced, the authorities were eventually obliged to bring the circus into the legal fold, albeit illegally. The circus could now begin in earnest to press for reform and favour. As Willson-Disher has said, "law-breakers" were about to become "law-makers." ⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Astley, letter to Mr. Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786, TM Astley's file.

⁷⁹ Pub. contract letter, 27 June 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 B; 10 Geo. II ch. 24, "An Act for the more effectual preventing the unlawful playing of Interludes within the Precincts of the two Universities. . . ." This was passed alongside the Theatre Licensing Act of 1737.

⁸⁰ Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 55.

Fig. 3.1. Handbill for Astley's *Pont Equestre*, 1786. (Facsimile in Decastro, *Memoirs*, slightly reduced.)

Par Permission du ROI, & de Monseigneur le Lieutenant-Général de Police.

EXERCICES

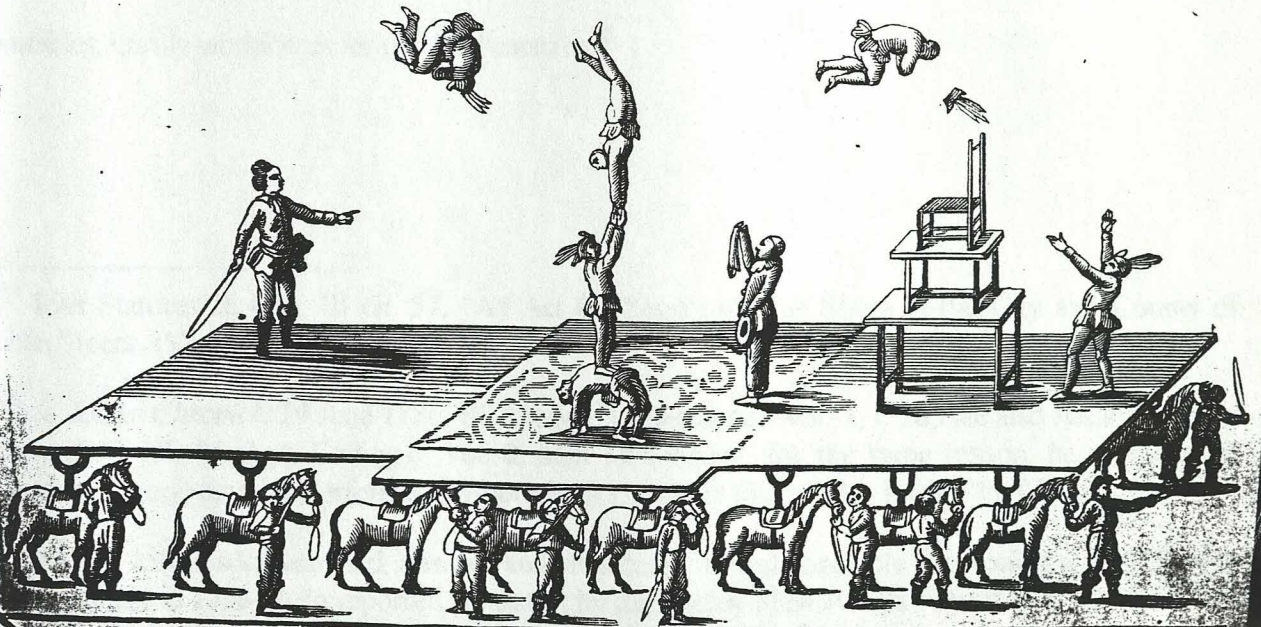
S U R P R E N A N S

DES SIEURS

A S T L E Y,

RUE ET FAUXBOURG DU TEMPLE,

Aujourd'hui MERCREDI 27 Décembre 1786.



[To face p. 22]

III. Petitioners and Patentees, 1786-1832

Whereas in the capital the government had seen it as necessary to maintain the theatrical monopoly and keep all home-grown amusements in check, the same Old English entertainments were encouraged in acts of cultural imperialism overseas, where markets were to be penetrated. Astley and his fellow equestrians received their first statutory recognition in 1786, four years after the decisive dispute with the Surrey bench, in an act which allowed the king to grant theatrical patents for Dublin. In stark contrast to mainland legislation, the act was expressly intended *not* "to prevent the exhibition of any feats of horsemanship, puppet-shew, or such like species of entertainment."⁸¹ King George's special regard for Astley's skills may have helped in securing this clause. Astley displayed his newfound confidence by threatening to prosecute some provincial "impostors" who had hijacked his name, warning readers that they "strictly come under the Denomination of Vagrants, deceiving the Publick. . . ."⁸² Past brushes with the law did not inhibit circus men from wielding it against competitors, errant constables, unruly workforces, or personal enemies.⁸³

⁸¹ Irish Statutes 26 Geo. III ch. 57, "An Act for Regulating the Stage in the City and County of Dublin," (sect. IV).

⁸² *St. James Chronicle* 29 June 1786, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 28; see also Astley's notice, 8 May 1797, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 149, where, for the same reason, he threatens to prosecute "several itinerant Performers, Mountebanks, and the like" under 10 and 11 Wm. ch. 10.

⁸³ In 1792 John Astley searched, arrested and prosecuted a local constable for stealing a cable from a river barge and in 1798 Philip reported an assault by the Surrey New Roads Patrol: SRO QS Bundles, QS 2/6/92 Mids 63; ad. requesting witnesses, 12 Aug. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 363 E.

An opportunity for proper legal recognition in London came with the so-called "Interlude Bill" two years later. The issue broke when the impresario John Palmer, in an attempt to emulate Astley's and the Royal Circus, pushed the current system too far by presenting regular drama at his new Royalty Theatre in Whitechapel.⁸⁴ In February 1788, in the wake of the King's Proclamation Against Vice the previous year, the successful prosecution of Palmer in the Court of the King's Bench threatened to take the law out of the hands of soft-hearted and hamstrung magistrates.⁸⁵ This frightened Sadler's Wells into petitioning Parliament for the prerogative to continue as it had done since 1683 (and even, it claimed, since Elizabethan times).⁸⁶ The other minor theatres--Astley's, the Royal Circus, and a desperate Royalty--followed suit, prompting a complex series of manoeuvres in which the Foxite Whigs, rallied by Fox's ally, the patentee Richard Brinsley Sheridan, argued for the need to maintain the moral and cultural floodgates against the murky tide of pure commerce, and some Pittites and Lords emerged as the supporters of the populace's entitlement to entertainment and the performer's right to earn a living.⁸⁷ Exasperated by the system of favour, precedent and regional and class bias that had thus been exposed, the Lord Chancellor, Lord Thurlow (whose daughters had been taught to ride by Astley), reputedly exclaimed of Sadler's Wells: "Is it because they are the oldest offenders that they should claim this ? No,--all or none!"⁸⁸

⁸⁴ For copious coverage of this episode see Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage* 112 and ch. 6.

⁸⁵ *London Chronicle* 8 Feb. 1788; "LAW INTELLIGENCE," h.d. May 1789, BL Th. Cts. 60.

⁸⁶ *Jnl. Ho. Commons* vol. 43: 299 (7 Mar. 1788).

⁸⁷ See, for example, *Hansard*, 1816, vol. 27: 158-63 [11 Mar. 1788].

⁸⁸ Decastro, *Memoirs* 40.

The MP whom Sadler's Wells asked to present its bill, Mr. Mainwaring, was also the chairman of the Middlesex Bench, and a member of the Proclamation Society (a predecessor to the Society for the Suppression of Vice).⁸⁹ In order to reconcile these conflicting demands, he framed the "Interlude Bill" which, in the name of "restraining" an illegal species of amusement, proposed that licensees under the Disorderly Houses Act enter into a bond which precisely specified the types of activities they were allowed, so that there could be no misinterpretation.⁹⁰ This would rationalize the law which he was obliged to apply in his magisterial rôle. The four minor theatres could then apply to Parliament for special clauses to continue their present entertainments, and each case would be judged on its merits.

After their old foe Sir Joseph Mawbey had unsuccessfully argued the cases of both the Amphitheatre and the Royal Circus in the Commons, Astley petitioned through an attorney once the bill had passed to the Lords.⁹¹ In the newspapers he published his "CASE," together with a "CERTIFICATE" of his military service, stating that he had originally merely employed tumblers and rope-dancers to save his health from the exigencies of horsemanship, and that he had, he believed, been vindicated by the granting of his licence under the 1752 act by "at least, forty Magistrates. . . ." "Mr. Astley has not the effrontery," he said,

to ask from Parliament Letters Patent, or any thing, exclusively; he only asks, and that most humbly, that he may save a property earned by the sweat of the brow, and share

⁸⁹ See Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England," in E. Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: Late Eighteenth Century England and Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 57-118.

⁹⁰ *London Chronicle* 8 Apr. 1788.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 6 May 1788; *Jnl. of the House of Lords* vol. 38: 161 (28 Apr. 1788).

in common, with others, those indulgencies, as to the wisdom of Parliament shall seem meet.⁹²

At the same time company handbills claimed that "it has always been their aim to keep within Bounds. . ."⁹³ John Astley appeared with his able counsel, Mr. Erskine, before a Lords committee on 5 May to protest against the unfairness of indulging Sadler's Wells alone, and to testify that his father (currently in Dublin) had spent £15,000 in the five years since he had been licensed.⁹⁴ His case was admitted, along with that of the Royal Circus and Sadler's Wells (but not the Royalty) on condition that they did not sell drink, and the amended bill was sent back to the Commons on 23 June.⁹⁵ There, after months of Parliamentary work, Sheridan had the Interlude Bill thrown out unanimously, citing the spectre of vice, and the threat to the property rights of the patentees, whose interests were still well represented in the lower house.⁹⁶ Throughout, however, Astley's and the Royal Circus' characters and right to exist had not, in themselves, been seriously questioned, whereas the whole principle of the monopoly had been, not least in the new advertising press.⁹⁷

⁹² H.d. 25 June 1788 BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 968.

⁹³ 12 May 1788, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 31.

⁹⁴ *London Chronicle* 6 May 1788.

⁹⁵ *Jnl. Ho. Commons* vol. 43: 639-40 (25 June 1788).

⁹⁶ See *Parliamentary Register* vol. 24 (1788): 116-7; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Suppl. for 1788: 1146; *London Chronicle* 25 June 1788. To be precise, Sheridan moved that the amendments be reconsidered in three months, knowing that the bill would fall through lack of time.

⁹⁷ See *Parliamentary Register* vol. 23: 458 (15 Apr. 1788); the stone-eater's complaint, *Morning Herald* 7 Mar. 1788.

All that remained of this episode was an offshoot, shorn of anything to which the patentees could object and hence passed without controversy, which effectively revoked the ban on theatre in the provinces.⁹⁸ Known as the "Theatrical Representations" or "Sixty-Day Act" of 1788, it empowered local magistrates to license performances for up to sixty days, whereas previously they had given customary but illegal permission in return for charity performances.⁹⁹ It had been introduced by Lord Thurlow and Earl Radnor (another member of the Proclamation Society) when, conscious of the demands already being made in respect of the London theatres, they were asked to deal with yet another bill to establish a provincial playhouse, after seven had been passed in the past twenty years.¹⁰⁰ The proposal of such bills by members of the Proclamation Society suggests that during the 1780s that containment and regulation--of theatrical activity at least--was seen by dedicated campaigners as the most prudent way of curbing vice and excess. But in practice the act gave more security to travelling circus proprietors and provincial theatre managers alike, and, despite its stated intentions to the contrary, triggered the late-Georgian wave of building on both fronts.¹⁰¹

For Astley the Sixty-Day Act was, however, probably less important than the patent he received on the 23 April 1788, under the act of 1786, for regular drama in Dublin.¹⁰² The business of

⁹⁸ 28 Geo. III ch. 30, "An Act to enable Justices of the Peace to license Theatrical Representations occasionally. . . ."

⁹⁹ Ranger, prologue, Denning, *Theatre in the Cotswolds* 4.

¹⁰⁰ *London Chronicle* 5 May 1788; Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973) ch. 4. The bill was for a second theatre in Brighton, or "Brighthelmstone." This act replaced it.

¹⁰¹ 28 Geo. III ch. 30, sect. I; Ranger/Denning, *Theatre in the Cotswolds* 4.

¹⁰² Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 26.

obtaining it had kept him away at the time of the Lords' hearing. The court influence of Sir Capel Molyneux, from whom Astley bought the site, had been helpful in securing the patent, while Lord Thurlow, as Lord Chancellor, had presided over the initial legal challenge by the city's existing patentee, Richard Daly.¹⁰³ The licence stretched from 9 November to 14 February each year, so Dublin was able to supersede revolutionary Paris as a winter quarters when the Equestrian Theatre Royal opened in November 1789.¹⁰⁴ It promised to be an unusually popular outpost of loyalism. There were also rumours that Astley was a government spy.

Patentee status, however, only enhanced the litigiousness that regulation tended to induce between competitors at all levels. Dublin's gentry had already deprived Daly of custom by setting up their own subscription-theatre.¹⁰⁵ Daly, who was an attorney, therefore redoubled his campaign against Astley's patent in a series of long and pedantic law suits.¹⁰⁶ In 1798, he had Astley fined £300 for infringing the Theatre Royal's repertoire, and in 1801, £900.¹⁰⁷ The local judges only renewed Astley's patent after he pledged £100 a year to the local lying-in hospital.¹⁰⁸ To add to his troubles,

¹⁰³ *Dublin Morning Post* 17 Apr. 1788, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 30; Decastro, *Memoirs* 50.

¹⁰⁴ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 26.

¹⁰⁵ For the other side of the story see Daly, *Life and Adventures* 34. He confirmed that Astley's "miserable, mumming group attracts both numbers and fashion," reducing his receipts to "less than 20 shillings." My thanks to Kimberley Crouch.

¹⁰⁶ Decastro, *Memoirs* 53, 60.

¹⁰⁷ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 160 B, h.d. 7 Mar. 1798 and vol. 3, item 1565, n.d. [1801]; "THEATRE-ROYAL, CROW STREET. v. *EQUESTRIAN THEATRE-ROYAL*, PETER-STREET," pamphlet, insert to Bod. copy of *Astley's System of Equestrian Education*, 7th ed. (Dublin, 1802) 3.

¹⁰⁸ Decastro, *Memoirs* 64, 81.

Astley's crass exhibitions of loyalty meant that his theatre became the site of serious rioting during the insurrections of 1798. Dibdin the Younger recalled a clasp knife being thrown at Astley in the auditorium, narrowly missing "the few brains he had," and being nearly bayoneted himself by the militia which his employer had so provocatively requisitioned.¹⁰⁹

By 1803 Astley decided that his Dublin patent had become untenable, and sold it for £6,000.¹¹⁰ It was widely understood that the government compensated him for his loss of at least £4,000.¹¹¹ In his battle with Daly, however, Astley (who always made sure that his own attorney was welcome at his table) had the eventual satisfaction of rebutting his rival's offer to cut expenses and agree out of court.¹¹² Outraged at having been "*misrepresented*," not only "*as an itinerant leader of a strolling company*" but also as a spy, he roared, "I am no man of straw [informer], Sir! I have fought and bled for my country, and my King has rewarded me for it."¹¹³

The London patentees had meanwhile intervened quite brazenly against the Royal Circus when the talented Palmer moved there as an actor in 1789, following his prosecution at the Royalty. From an account left by the then manager, Tuttle has shown how Justice Hyde twice virtually kidnapped

¹⁰⁹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 23-5.

¹¹⁰ Decastro, *Memoirs* 81.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 64; "Biographical Sketch," Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Circus" box 1.

¹¹² Decastro, *Memoirs* 63.

¹¹³ "THEATRE-ROYAL . . . v. *EQUESTRIAN THEATRE-ROYAL*," in Astley, *System of Equestrian Education*, 3; Decastro, *Memoirs* 64.

Palmer, and another ex-patent-theatre actor, on the pretext that they had spoken prose on stage, and demanded that the Circus stop infringing the patentees' market.¹¹⁴ When Palmer and his accomplice appealed under the Vagrancy Act in July 1790, however, they were acquitted. The Chairman of the Bench, Lord Onslow, rebuked his predecessors for ever having misled Astley's and the Royal Circus by granting them licences under the Disorderly Houses Act. He declared it a "cruelty" that the act had not been repealed, and promised his support for any bill "to relieve those aggrieved persons."¹¹⁵ Although the patentees continued to instigate further prosecutions north of the river, the two circuses would no longer be troubled by the Surrey justices over the nature of their performances.¹¹⁶ By 1803 John Astley could proudly announce that his annual licence had been renewed by a vote of 26 to 3 among the magistrates, and that they were now "highly in his favour."¹¹⁷

The theatrical *status quo* was widely seen as unworkable, yet Philip Astley had to wait until 1804 for a chance to realise his plans for a circus of classical horsemanship north of the river, when the relatively liberal Lord Dartmouth became Lord Chamberlain.¹¹⁸ On the basis of an ambiguous clause in the Theatre Licensing Act which could be interpreted to say that the Lord Chamberlain was allowed to

¹¹⁴ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 157-62. Tuttle uses Read's pamphlet *History of the Royal Circus* (1790).

¹¹⁵ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 164.

¹¹⁶ For details of later prosecutions see minute, *Rpt. Parl. Sel. Cttee. Dram. Lit.*, 187-205.

¹¹⁷ 4 Oct., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 286 E.

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage* 164.

grant dramatic licences in the City of Westminster,¹¹⁹ Astley wrote to solicit a winter permit "for music to accompany various new equestrian entertainments" to be performed by his "pupils,"

and which, my Lord, are intended to exhibited on horses, perfectly calm to every object; their action in pure cadence; strictly conformable to musical expression.

Astley pleaded that he had been forced to diversify by the recent calamities of fire and French Revolution that had befallen properties "acquired by forty-two years study and labour."¹²⁰ Assisted by the influence of his former Commander, the Duke of York, upon Queen Charlotte, and the probable endorsement of the landlord Lord Craven (who stood to gain an annual £100 ground rent), the Olympic Pavilion was able to open with a year-round licence extending to burlettas two years later.¹²¹ Dartmouth's evident friendliness to the minor theatres released a flood of applications for the same indulgence that was now seen as being traditionally afforded to Astley's.¹²²

By the end of the eighteenth century, official attitudes to theatrical initiatives had moved from defensiveness and hostility to the view that theatre could be moral organ of society if controlled.¹²³

¹¹⁹ 10 Geo. II ch. 28, sect. V: ". . . no Person or Persons shall be authorized by virtue of any Letters Patent from his Majesty, his Heirs, Successors or Predecessors, or by the Licence of the Lord Chamberlain of his Majesty's Houshold [sic] for the time being, to act, represent or perform for Hire, Gain or Reward, any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce or other Entertainment of the Stage, or any Part or Parts therein, in any Part of *Great Britain*, except in the City of *Westminster*, and within the Liberties thereof. . . ."

¹²⁰ Astley, letter to the Earl of Dartmouth.

¹²¹ Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 2: 78-9; Astley, letter to the Marquis of Hertford, trs. Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque" 58.

¹²² Nicholson, *The Struggle for a Free Stage* 164.

¹²³ E.g. the Dublin Patent Act of 1786 (Irish Statute 26 Geo. III ch. 62) begins: "Whereas the establishing a well regulated theatre in the city of Dublin, being the residence of the chief governor or

Through constant struggle and confrontation supported by petitioning, patronage, hospitality, charity and publicity, Astley and the Royal Circus had been instrumental in forcing this change. In 1824 a new vagrancy act was passed which, for the first time in six centuries, no longer classed performers as vagabonds, and the same year Astley's was granted its licence without opposition.¹²⁴ Equally, the minor theatres now "promised obedience": "Their word was always Law with us," said Dibdin the Younger of the Middlesex Justices when he was manager of Sadler's Wells in 1808.¹²⁵ In 1830 Astley's had its licence for "public dancing and music," extended to include "other public entertainments of the like kind," which had been possible under the Act of 1751 but not previously given.¹²⁶

By 1832, under the recommendations of the Parliamentary Select Committee which had been appointed to enquire into the "decline of the drama," the government's protectionist line had been replaced by one which in theory encouraged a free trade in entertainment, but in practice gave the veto on all licence applications to local householders of £10 or more.¹²⁷ Popular theatrical needs were none the less being reconceived in more 'consumerist' terms: entertainment was defined less by customary entitlement, and more by what the entrepreneurs could supply. In 1843 the Theatres Act was

governors of Ireland, will be productive of publick advantage, and tend to improve the morals of the people. . . ."

¹²⁴ 5 Geo. IV ch. 83, The Vagrancy Act of 1824; 21 Oct. 1834, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 903. It is not clear whether this was the first unopposed application.

¹²⁵ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 97.

¹²⁶ 10 Nov. 1830, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 1217.

¹²⁷ See Jane Moody, "Aspects of Cultural Politics in the London Minor Theatres of the Early Nineteenth Century," D. Phil. thesis, U of Oxford, 1993: 132 and *passim*; *Rpt. Parl. Sel. Cttee. Dram. Lit.* 3-6.

eventually passed which, while retaining licensing and censorship, abolished the patentees' monopoly on prose drama and all its associated legislation.¹²⁸

IV. The Respectability of the Circus.

In their attempt to anatomise society, social historians have tended to concentrate on the flashpoints in popular culture. They have mostly studied such 'disorderly' plebeian pastimes as football or bull-running, delighting in the blatant class bias of edicts about them, and perceiving their suppression as instances of class war, or at least class-bound ideological conflict. The circus, however, was not such a case. As we have seen from the passage of the Interlude bill, it was, despite its outlaw history, able to call on the qualified support of many MPs. Most of them saw no harm in the circus itself. The advertising press saw the application of the law as "oppressive" and inappropriate.¹²⁹ Many of society's greatest luminaries patronised the circus while its legality was still uncertain. Overall, there was a remarkable inconsistency between the circus' legal and moral statuses. To go to Astley's or the Royal Circus was, in the public opinion, surprisingly uncontroversial. How did the early circus develop this veneer of respectability?

The circus did not have a promising lineage. Indeed the authorities' concerns about the entertainments from which the circus sprang were shared by many of the middle classes, and Astley had

¹²⁸ 6 & 7 Vict. ch. 68, "An Act for Regulating Theatres."

¹²⁹ *Public Advertiser* 11 April 1777: see p.129.

a major task of reassurance on his hands if he was to attract the kind of broad support which seemed essential to survival. By choosing to advertise in newspapers like the *Public Advertiser* and the *Morning Post*, however, Astley and other trick riders immediately placed their institution within the public sphere, automatically conferring a degree of respectability which most other popular entertainments did not share. Only the leaders in popular entertainment now tended to place their advertisements in major newspapers: notices for such "savage" pursuits as bear baiting and cudgelling had, in recent years, rarely been seen in these journals.¹³⁰ The fact that Astley and co. appeared in newsprint distinguished them still further from London's virtual underworld of petty pub-yard, street and fairground entertainers, who advertised solely via the crude print of the bill.

Astley's main strategy in this context was to stress the circus' social responsibility, and its positive contribution to society in general. Reiterating an age-old apology for sporting diversions, the eighteenth-century Amphitheatre most frequently advertised the military utility of its various exercises.¹³¹ Astley's was especially commendable because it promoted specific martial skills, in particular the noble and "manly science" of horsemanship, as well as basic strength and fitness.¹³² As Britain was preparing for war with France in 1791, one reviewer was pleased to see the revival of Astley's "Broad Sword as in Real Action":

¹³⁰ *Morning Post* 4 Jan. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 92.

¹³¹ E.g. Joseph Strutt, *Glig-Gamena Angel-Deod; or, The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London, 1801) i.

¹³² Puff, 27 May 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 471.

If any part of the public entertainment should be encouraged in preference to another, it should certainly be this, which the most rigid disciplinarian cannot but allow to be perfectly innocent, very useful, and rationally entertaining.¹³³

On these grounds the Amphitheatre took the opportunity to argue for the whole idea of entertainment and diversion. Another puff of 1791 claimed that, unlike other rebellious, disorderly nations, "the subjects of this happy country . . . relax themselves from the toil of business with different pleasures, as fancy directs. . . ."¹³⁴ Astley attempted to justify leisure as a reasonable and physically necessary accompaniment to middle-class industry, not just a prerogative of the rich.¹³⁵

Like many theatres, however, the Amphitheatre felt obliged to show its adherence to both the letter and the spirit of the law. In 1787, for example, with its legal status still parlous, Astley's advertised its new genre of "speaking musick (musique parlante)"--a variety of burletta that used well known opera arias--by pointedly mentioning that it was adopted from "those theatres which have not the liberty of Dialogue" in France.¹³⁶ The Amphitheatre's actual dependence on often bawdy demotic traditions led to some rather contorted caveats when they were revealed in the press. The lyrics to the ballad of *Bon Geneve*, sung on Astley's stage by a lusty she-male gin-seller and published as a newspaper advertisement in 1793 were, for example, accompanied by a health warning claiming that

¹³³ 25 Oct. 1791, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 233 C.

¹³⁴ 27 July 1791, *ibid.* item 167 B.

¹³⁵ On the problem of justifying middle and working-class consumption and leisure see Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 9-35; Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* 12-15.

¹³⁶ *Morning Chronicle* 12 Sept. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 30.

"The view of the author" was "not to extol the virtue of spirits. . . ." ¹³⁷ In 1785, a French import entitled *Cupid Pilgrim; or, Ten Minutes Frolic Among the Nuns at Boulogne* prompted the implausible report that it was:

a most excellent burletta, never hurting by any ill-timed satire, or indecent joke, the feelings of anyone; an observation that holds equally good with respect to the other various amusements, which at the same time that they are perfectly inoffensive, are too spirited, novel, and various not to continue this theatre the first place of fashionable resort. ¹³⁸

In the early 1770s, one British newspaper noted that several Cardinals in Rome--where women were not allowed on stage--had approved the performance of Charles Hughes and his wife after finding there was "nothing indecent" in it. ¹³⁹ Although, as illicit establishments, circuses in Britain were beyond state censorship, consensus demanded that the circus be seen to censor itself.

In total, however, the early circus seldom advocated its own morality, especially when compared to the constant earnest claims of its nineteenth-century American counterpart, where the artform encountered much more concerted religious and legal opposition. ¹⁴⁰ Rather, Astley relied on the largely self-evident qualities of his product. Charles Dibdin claimed these as his own when he recounted his hopes for the Royal Circus many years later. "Horsemanship was at that time much admired;" he said,

¹³⁷ Ct., h.d. 1793, TM Astley's file. See also the press controversy when a clown blew out a candle "not with his mouth" in 1833: Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 268.

¹³⁸ 25 May 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 668.

¹³⁹ Ct., n.d. (c. 1773), BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 40.

¹⁴⁰ See Mark Irwin West, "A Spectrum of Spectators" 266.

and I conceived that if I could divest it of its blackguardism, it might be made an object of public consequence. I proposed, therefore, that it should embrace all the dexterity and reputation of ancient chivalry . . . and that a classical and elegant turn should be given to exercises of this description. . . .

("I had determined not to introduce any fifes or drums, or any other vulgar Bartholomew-fair tricks," he claimed, in defiance of what had actually happened under Hughes' co-management.)¹⁴¹ But Dibdin was only developing an ethos that had already been instituted by Astley. The neat white building originally conceived by the young trick-rider, with its "commodious Room apart" and simple box-office, agreed with polite notions of commercial rationalization as well as more popular concerns with value-for-money.¹⁴² Most classes saw serious worth in acrobatic skill, and the Riding School allowed it to be enjoyed in a relatively peaceful, ordered and specialised environment, as opposed to the hurly-burly of the fairground, street, booth or yard.¹⁴³ This was no doubt welcomed by the performers too. Puffs and reports began to emphasise not only technical achievement, but also suggested unprecedented possibilities for aesthetic interpretation.

The law, as the indictment of Astley in 1777 shows, may have tarred the early circus with the same brush of chaos and immorality as other popular entertainments. But to a middle-class increasingly anxious about the disorderliness of Bartholomew Fair and the like, Astley's did offer a

¹⁴¹ Dibdin, *Professional Life* vol. 2: 104-6.

¹⁴² Trss. of ads., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 27 (10 Apr.) and 35 (19 June 1770).

¹⁴³ E.g. see Pepys comments on the rope dancer Jacob Hall, *Diary* 29 Sept. 1668. Such serious consideration continued into the nineteenth century: see the theatrical connoisseur Prince Puckler-Muskau on juggling: E. M. Butler, ed., *A Regency Visitor; the English Tour of Prince Pückler-Muskau Described in his Letters 1826-1828*, trans. Sarah Austin (London: Collins, 1957) 298.

distinctly preferable alternative.¹⁴⁴ The marketing of the circus explicitly developed this theme: "to the Circus we went" remarked a puff-writer after having visited Bartholomew Fair in 1787, "Now a new scene took place: for instead of noise, confusion, blasphemy, vice and folly, sound sense, rational entertainment, and pleasant recreation took place. . . ." ¹⁴⁵ The abuse--of animals and children as well as language--which had been all too obvious among fairground entertainers could be kept backstage in this new professional setting.¹⁴⁶ Astley could hardly be called a mountebank. Thus, to emphasise respectability was in the circus' competitive, as well as its political, interests.¹⁴⁷ The "great revolution in our manners" which the *Morning Post* noticed in 1787 was achieved perhaps as much by market forces as by force alone.

So Astley was apparently able to refine and perfect Old English Entertainment--to separate good tradition from bad--in the laboratory-space of his circus. On the one hand, for example, he

¹⁴⁴ See Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society* chs. 5 and 6; Stallybrass and White, *Poetics and Politics of Transgression* ch. 1.

¹⁴⁵ *Morning Chronicle* h.d. Sept. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 47. A puff for Astley's, 6 Sept. 1800, made the same point: BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 199 B.

¹⁴⁶ E.g. see Pepys' distress at the beating of a dancing mare at the fair, *Diary* 7 Sept. 1668; Peter Ducrow's treatment of his son Andrew in Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 39-41; on the language "offensive to ears polite" of a learned horse act at Bartholomew, William Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book* (London, 1825) 1174. Astley's was included in criticism of trained animal and child acts, but the circus did not become a named target of anti-cruelty campaigners until the late nineteenth and, in the case of animals, well into the twentieth centuries (table 3.1), probably because it was the least of the horrors daily witnessed. Even then music hall was seen as the greater offender. My thanks to Rita Mayer of the RSPCA for her outstanding help with its archive.

¹⁴⁷ *Morning Post* 4 Jan. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 92. The provision of diversions to Bartholomew was not, however, new: Pepys, *Diary* vol. 2:93, notes how the Lord Mayor arranged wrestling, shooting and hunting for that purpose in 1663.

showed his dedication to progress by censuring the "curious practice" of selling wives, which, as E. P. Thompson has argued, was still used as an unofficial plebeian means of divorce.¹⁴⁸ The musical piece *No Sales at Smithfield; or, the Reasonable Wife*, at Astley's in 1797 contained the words:

Learn then, ye Fair, if ye would conquer man,
To act like Woman, as in truth ye can,
And you, ye Husbands, who wish happy lives,
Act too like men, nor think of selling wives.¹⁴⁹

On the other hand, circuses championed John Bull's right to watch, if not join in, the sports of true manliness, including pugilism and pedestrianism (i.e. long-distance race-walking). A 1789 pantomime at the Royal Circus, for instance, included a sparring match by the champions Mendoza and Crab--an item imitated by Astley's in 1823.¹⁵⁰ In 1790 the Amphitheatre staged the "Theatrical Crowning of Mr. POWELL, the celebrated Pedestrian," likening the event not only to the "Couronnement" of Voltaire by the Comédie Française, but also to the "Ceremony of the Roman Victors."¹⁵¹ The reformed virility demonstrated by such pastimes was cause for self-congratulation in this time of expanding empire: "if the comparison of the British nation to ancient Rome be founded in any truth," opined a puff-writer for Jones' Amphitheatre in 1786, "our attachment to athletic exercises is no inconsiderable instance of the justness of it. . . . wrestling and cudgelling have had their day. . . ."¹⁵² Perhaps the ultimate accolade in this field came in 1801, when, though no friend of Rome, the antiquarian Joseph Strutt linked Astley's

¹⁴⁸ *Times* [?] Aug. 1797, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 38; Thompson, "The Sale of Wives," *Customs in Common* ch. 7.

¹⁴⁹ *Times* [?] Aug. 1797, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 38.

¹⁵⁰ *World* 9 July 1789, *ibid.* f. 47; bill, 4 June 1823, TM Astley's file.

¹⁵¹ Ct., 1790, *ibid.*, env. "1832 gen."

¹⁵² 15 May, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 815.

with the most laudable yet robust Anglo-Saxon traditions in his classic survey of *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*.¹⁵³ Strutt was a conservative, but wholesome sport and theatre appealed to some radicals too, two of whom were the Chartist William Hone, who wrote the entertainment diary *The Every-Day Book* (1825), and the small tailoring entrepreneur Francis Place.¹⁵⁴

The most effective endorsement of any establishment was, however, the audience that was seen to attend. Astley's was naturally associated with both the best and the worst of its patrons, and the Royal Circus was predictably derogatory in its characterisations. A puff from the Circus in 1789, commending the decency of its own hours, advised that certain other establishments,

would have more audience if they closed at eleven, or even half past ten, for your sober people would then surely go; and as to your *Bloods, Rakes and Bucks*, they would be sure to attend; for the play not being any object of entertainment to them, it would be totally indifferent whether they came at nine or eleven to gaze at the company, pick their teeth, and sneeze in the door-keeper's face.¹⁵⁵

Yet throughout its history Astley's was able to count on the presence of the reputable élite, including, as a matter of course, eminent merchants and professionals visiting London (among them the Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel), MPs and novelists such as Horace Walpole; foreign ambassadors and princes; and quiet local citizens like Mr. Thomas Montolieu, "brother-in-law to the Right Hon.

¹⁵³ Strutt, "Origin of the Exhibitions at Astley's and at the Circus," *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* 185-6. Another serious scholar, Thomas Pennant, *Some Account of London* 5th edn. (London, 1813) 50, swallowed Astley's message, but in neither case can we be sure that the authors were not paid for their favours.

¹⁵⁴ Hone, *Every-Day Book*, Thale, ed., *The Autobiography of Francis Place*.

¹⁵⁵ *Gazetteer* 27 Oct. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 50.

Lord ELIBANK".¹⁵⁶ Most notably, in 1792 the chief theatrical censor's wife, Anna Larpent, spent a happy evening there with the famous expurgator of Shakespeare and member of the Proclamation Society, Dr. Bowdler, and his equally righteous spouse.¹⁵⁷

The worthiest elements of the audience provided a kind of libel insurance, just as their charity could be relied upon in case of fire or disaster. In 1820, for example, the Amphitheatre invited smears from *The Courier* for allowing the alleged adulteress Queen Caroline to visit and enjoy the vociferous support of the crowd.¹⁵⁸ A letter to the editor, though sharing the distaste for the Queen herself, immediately leapt to the defence of Astley's. The writer objected to the statement "that no person of rank attends those [minor] theatres":

Being an inhabitant near Astley's Theatre, I am enabled to state, from actual observation, that people of *rank* and *consequence* are in the *habit with their families* of visiting this Theatre almost *every evening*"¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ E.g. see Florence and Kenneth Wood, eds., *A Lancashire Gentleman: The Letters and Journals of Richard Hodgkinson 1763-1847* (London: Alan Sutton, n.d., c. 1988) 101, 23 Aug. 1796; Walpole's comments qtd. Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* 27; Karl Friedrich Schinkel, "The English Journey": *Journal of a Visit to France and Britain in 1826*, ed. David Bindman and Gottfried Riemann, trans. F. Ganya Walls (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 85, 2 June 1826; Butler, *A Regency Visitor*, 233; for the Turkish and Algerian Ambassadors, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 211 B (8 May 1801) and 154 C (14 July 1797); for Thomas Montolieu, 9 Aug. 1805, *ibid.* item 272 D. Most of these records show a condescending enjoyment, especially of the horsemanship.

¹⁵⁷ Anna Larpent, diary, 29 May 1792, Huntington Lib., San Marino, CA., HM 31201, qtd. John Brewer, letter to the author, n.d. Jan. 1992. Like Anna Larpent, Mrs. Bowdler probably performed much (indeed most) of the censorship attributed to her husband.

¹⁵⁸ 21 June 1821, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, items 836 and 837; Thomas Laqueur, "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV," *Jnl. of Modern History* 54 (Sept. 1982): 417-66.

¹⁵⁹ 13 July 1821, *ibid.* item 848.

Like most other guides to the city, *The Every-Night Book; or, Life After Dark* (1827), aimed at the unaccompanied young man but keen to ensure that "his morals will not be impeached," was content to recommend Astley's, if only for its horsemanship.¹⁶⁰ And although the *National Register* in 1809 typically warned that one had to condescend, both socially and intellectually, in venturing beyond the boxes of the "transpontine" theatres, it characterised the atmosphere as essentially benign:

To enter Sadler's Wells, or Astley's Amphitheatre, or the Royal Circus, especially on what are called holidays, is to enter into the temple of English Pastime; and he who repairs thither, go when he may, should make up his mind to be for one night an Englishman. Full of the old good-humour of his forefathers, he must laugh with those who laugh, chuckle at many a rough joke, pleasantly overhear the observations made around him, and put up with occasional elbowings, together with some few treads to his toes.¹⁶¹

By 1854, a box at Astley's seemed the obvious place for William Makepeace Thackeray to send the eponymous Colonel and his offspring in the novel *The Newcomes: Memoirs of a Most Respectable Family*.¹⁶²

During the 1780s both the London circuses had not only called into question the savouriness of each other, but also played on the tension set up within each establishment by the diversity of their audiences. Fresh rivalry meant that glamour took precedence, and for a few years the circus danced on the tightrope of respectability. Since it was well known that in a public place the presence of "the

¹⁶⁰ Clarke, *The Every Night Book* 22.

¹⁶¹ "Thespis," *National Register* 9 Apr. 1809, qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 230. For further elite sentiments towards Astley's' social and intellectual status; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* chs. 5-8; *Enter Foot and Horse* ch. 4; Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 14-7; Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 94.

¹⁶² (London, 1854) ch. 16.

Circle of Fashion" would inevitably attract the criminal community, puffs ostentatiously complained that "More . . . constables should attend, as the pickpockets are becoming very numerous."¹⁶³ The hazards of a fashionable resort could be exciting, whether they were from the crush of crowds, the obstruction caused by between "200" and "86" carriages parked on the street outside (one report was published on the pretext that an "ingenious wag" had swapped the crests on the carriage doors during the evening), or prostitutes.¹⁶⁴ In 1792, one Astley's puff-writer observed that:

The genteeler a place of public amusement is, the greater is the number of *frail fair* who visit it--In the boxes of the *Royal Saloon*, we discovered last night, no less than *sixteen* all *French*; who, though their appearance did not altogether indicate their profession, every one was paired previous to the conclusion [of the current pantomime]. . . . the *Rights of Man* were their chief objects in view, since they took some little pains to shew it.¹⁶⁵

The Royal Circus, moreover, was located next door to the Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes, causing one puff to intone that "gentlemen's carriages" be forbidden to "range themselves along the front of the Magdalen."¹⁶⁶ The Royal Circus also purported to offer the exquisite dangers of adultery and scandal. After witnessing a "real or a fashionable fit of fainting in the Boxes" during one particularly sublime production in 1789, its correspondent warned against jealous spouses, "pretty" though it may be "to be carried out in a Gentleman's arms to a Coach with coronets, and in that state of

¹⁶³ *World* 22 Aug. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 48.

¹⁶⁴ *World* 14, 22 Aug. 1789 and *Globe* 25 Sept. 1789, *ibid.* f. 48, 50.

¹⁶⁵ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 51 D.

¹⁶⁶ *Globe* 25 Sept. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 50.

insensibility to receive the gentle pressure of a love-sick admirer."¹⁶⁷ "Damn me, keep it up--I love fun," summarised one similarly racy puff the same year.¹⁶⁸

The violence and outright disorder endemic in the theatre world (usually a result of audience factions and anti-managerial protest) were beyond the official pale, however: "no riot among the carriages," assured the puff-writer of an overflowing Royal Circus in 1789, a few months after its first major disturbance ". . . and, what is more, no riot within."¹⁶⁹ Unlike the Royal Circus, which had another riot in 1811, Astley's avoided any such outrages during its long career.¹⁷⁰ But, as a general rule, no publicity was bad publicity.¹⁷¹

In this rather frivolous climate, moral opprobrium sprang more from commercial rivalry than broad-based opinion. In 1788, for example, when the Interlude bill was uniting the new minor theatres against Sadler's Wells, a newspaper article claimed that "A pint of liquor is included in the price of admittance" at the Wells,

¹⁶⁷ *World* 25 Sept. 1789, *ibid.* f. 49.

¹⁶⁸ *World* 30 July, *ibid.* f. 48.

¹⁶⁹ *World* 14 Aug. 1789, *ibid.*; Baer, *Theatre and Disorder*; Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 136-8. On 14 April 1789, following a managerial dispute which had led to the suspension of Hughes and his horsemanship for the first time, Hughes' supporters threw candles onto the stage and dragged a harpsichord into the ring, while the performers attacked members of the audience with bludgeons and a sword.

¹⁷⁰ The "Columbine Riots" at the then renamed and ringless Surrey Theatre were between the factions of rival actresses, one of whom was accused of being a Jewess: Tuttle, *ibid.* 251.

¹⁷¹ The clemency of Elliston, the manager of the Royal Circus in 1811, towards the ringleaders suggested that he had conspired with them: *ibid.*

but as much may be had as any person chooses to call for. The heat of the place is a great inducement, and we believe that many *females* have from that cause drank more than has let them depart in their sober senses, the consequences of which are obvious. This is not permitted at Astley's, the Circus, or the Royalty.¹⁷²

From his chapel in St. George's Fields, Rowland Hill had a similarly competitive motive for denouncing the new Royal Circus. Other evangelicals rarely singled out the circus; indeed later evidence suggests that by Victorian times it was welcomed as an alternative to the stage, and that, as with freemasonry, evangelism could be perfectly compatible with the circus profession.¹⁷³ Some evangelicals may even have eyed the circus as a vehicle for spreading the gospel.¹⁷⁴

There was one particularly vehement fulminator against the Amphitheatre in the early 1830s, Gilbert Abbott à Beckett of *The Figaro of London*, who found the pit "strewed with ["filthy"] drunken men, and orange peel, while the performances in the ring comprised the torture of some half dozen little children," but Saxon has revealed him as a crazed individual with a personal grudge against the place, enraged by having been refused the normal reviewer's free entry.¹⁷⁵ While the similar, if more sober,

¹⁷² Qtd. Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* 36. The subordination of alcohol in theatrical entertainment was at this stage exceptional, and here partly cosmetic, as both London circuses supported adjacent 'coffee' houses either indirectly or directly. See also Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (London: Faber, 1971) 49, 324, 331-4.

¹⁷³ The evangelical *Record* newspaper, 1828-1835, reveals nothing on the circus, though plenty on the theatre.

¹⁷⁴ See John M. Turner's fascinating "Frowde the Proud: The Clown Evangelist," *Gloucestershire History* (Summer 1994): 9-11.

¹⁷⁵ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 265-8.

views of local churchwardens and Proclamationists *en masse* were certainly taken into account by the authorities, they no longer represented the thrust of policy.¹⁷⁶

In an artform whose market necessarily encompassed the lower orders, however, legitimacy required not only the presence of the respectable themselves, but also the forces that would vouchsafe their enjoyment. In the words of an 1830 bill for Ducrow, "The Police and proper persons will be in attendance to prevent any impropriety of conduct."¹⁷⁷ Soldiers and private or police constables were regularly installed at the entrances of many forms of entertainment, notably theatre, throughout the eighteenth century: the Royal Circus evidently acquired its own constables, as well as a mounted escort to protect patrons from footpads as they made their way to Blackfriars bridge, by 1789, and made play of the fact, probably because Astley's was tardy in the matter.¹⁷⁸ In 1826 Astley's was castigated by the chief constable for hiring cheap but ineffective private security, which allegedly permitted the occasional scuffles and robberies in the auditorium, and ended in Ducrow employing the local brothel-keeper as a constable, so that the promenade at the back of Astley's pit became a rendezvous for those who "spread their lures for the experienced and unwary."¹⁷⁹ Travelling and provincial circuses began

¹⁷⁶ See minutes, 14 May 1817, *Rpt. Commons Police Cttee.* 465-71; Table 3.1 above. In 1795, the Proclamation Society had opposed the rebuilding of the Royal Circus, but to no avail: Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 218. There is an obvious tension between this and the attendance of Dr. Bowdler, who was a member, at Astley's. The Royal Circus certainly had a more chequered history and problematic reputation, but it also suggests that the Proclamation Society took a public stance tougher than that of its individual members.

¹⁷⁷ "Ducrow's Royal Amphitheatre. . . ." 20 Oct. 1830, Arthur Morice Colln., Aberdeen U Lib.

¹⁷⁸ E.g. see *World* 26 Aug. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 48; Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 37.

¹⁷⁹ *The Weekly Dramatic Register* 16 Sept. 1826, qtd. Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 245; BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, items 1021 (h.d. Oct. 1826) and 1367 ("Violent Assault on the Box-

advertising their officer presence on a regular basis in the 1840s and 50s, and continued to do so until the last quarter of the century.¹⁸⁰

As Hugh Cunningham has shown, however, by the reformist second half of the nineteenth century even the fairs had been exonerated, and reasonable festivities were being supported by the same authorities who had previously sought their extinction.¹⁸¹ An altogether more liberal and indeed functionalist view of entertainment as a necessary safety valve had prevailed over the ideology of unrelenting labour. Perhaps in this as in many other areas, the revolutionary crises of the mid-nineteenth century had convinced the authorities of the importance of keeping the populace happy. They certainly perceived the controllable environment of the circus as one of the least among many evils spawned by industrial society. In 1868, for instance, a bill for W. & G. Pinder's Circus in Stafford included a signed testimony from the Mayor, eight Borough Magistrates, the Town Clerk and Superintendent of Police. "During the stay of the Circus in Town," they concluded,

Drunkenness and other disorderly conduct has materially diminished, and we attribute this in a considerable degree to the fact of the Circus, attracting so large a number of the working class to it.¹⁸²

Keeper at Astley's Theatre," h.d. May 1834). Private security cost 20s. each per week, police officers 30s.

¹⁸⁰ E.g. bills, Powell's Circus, Brentford Fair, 17 May (c. 1842), Bod. John Johnson Colln.; Moffat's Equestrian Troupe, Wale's Gardens, Bayswater, 23-5 May 1853.

¹⁸¹ Cunningham, "The Metropolitan Fairs: A Case Study in the Social Control of Leisure," in A. P. Donajdgradzki, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977) 163-184.

¹⁸² Qtd. (n.d.) in Coxe, "Some Notes on the Content and Typography of English Circus Bills During the Nineteenth Century" (1964), in Pretini, ed., *Thesaurus Circensis*, pt. 2: 671-9.

The forces of law and order officially recognised what the circuses themselves had been pleading for so long. By 1859 the Surrey magistrates felt able to grant Astley's its first alcohol licence, and bars were set up in the lobbies. The main legal deliberations over the circus were now civil cases, brought by individuals, rather than the authorities, or bills that concerned the welfare of children and animals rather than public order as such (table 3.1). In one 1869 case, the plaintiff's allegation that a circus would draw a crowd of disorderly persons was, typically for this new era, not upheld.¹⁸³ It is no coincidence that during this period we see the crystallising of socialist critiques against "bread and circuses".¹⁸⁴

The circus was set up in the face of old legislation against unlicensed theatre, and in a climate of increasing repression against traditional forms of popular entertainment, yet it survived and was eventually accepted through a combination of three strategies. Firstly, it flouted an obviously obsolescent theatrical law; secondly, it agitated and petitioned for reform; and thirdly, it maintained a respectable image in order to stay on the right side of the new vigilance. The last strategy was assisted by the fact that the circus modified, selected and *re*presented, rather than allowed participation in, many traditions from which the middle classes had become distinctly alienated. (It should be noted that Astley's innumerable portrayals of Merrie English festivities came as genuine wakes were being vigorously harassed from the villages.)¹⁸⁵ Thanks also to a common interest in the horse (and here the circus may be likened to the racecourse), influential sections of the ruling and middle classes were

¹⁸³ *Inchbald v. Barrington* (1869), G. W. Hemmings, ed., *The Law Reports: Chancery Appeal Cases* vol. 4 (London, 1973) 388-97.

¹⁸⁴ E.g. see Golby and Purdue, *Civilisation of the Crowd* 185-6.

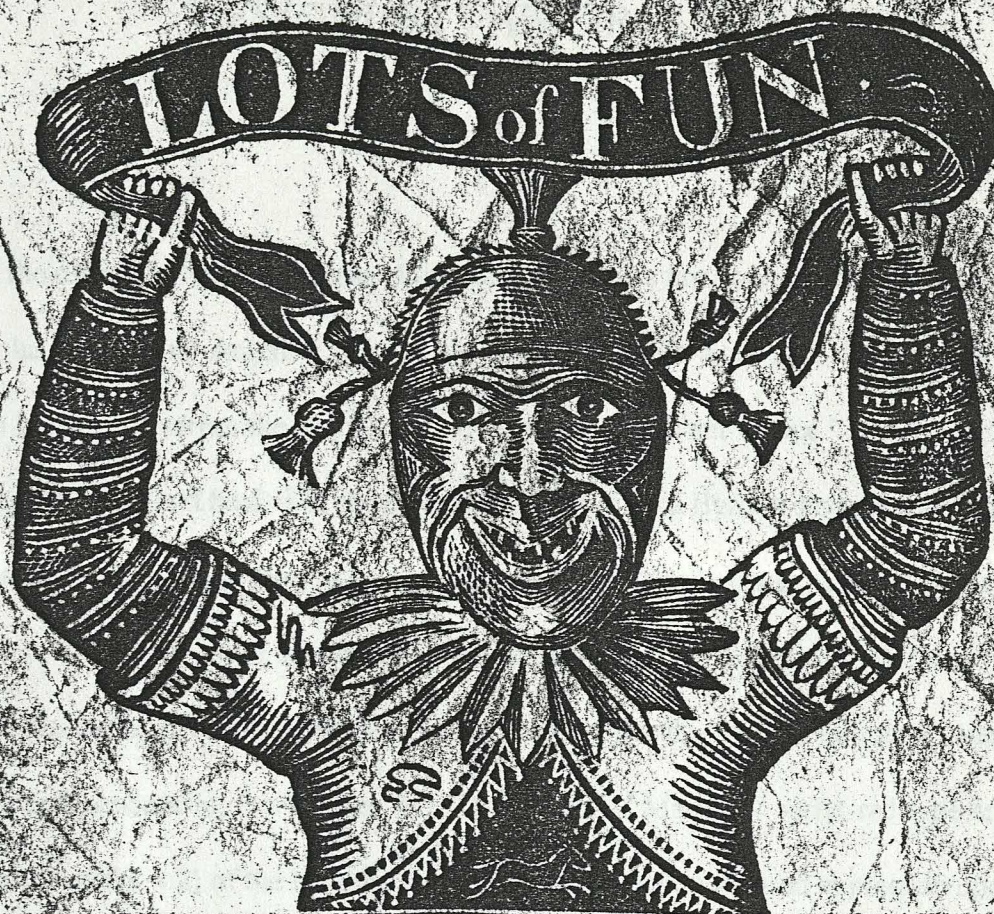
¹⁸⁵ E.g. 4 Apr. 1801, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 205 A.

therefore prepared to go against the legal grain to support and patronise it, along with a solid base of lower-class custom.¹⁸⁶ Thus the circus played an important rôle in the transformation of popular culture into shapes more suited to an orderly urban, commercial and industrial society. It is doubtful whether this could have been achieved without an enticing bridge to ease the passage.

¹⁸⁶ Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians* 331, sees both circus and racecourse as "transitional phenomena" and the sole repositories of "the ancient sporting spirit."

Fig. 3.2. Detail, wood-engraved benefit bill, Bridgenorth Circus, Shropshire, 1819 (actual size). The word "fun" has become a positive selling-point. Note also the distinctly sinister appearance of the clown. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson "Bridgenorth" Collection.)

LAST NIGHT BELIEVE
WHAT'S THIS?



HAYS-NIGHT.
CLOWN.

Mr. HAYS most respectfully begs leave to inform the Public in general of BRIDGEMONT and its Vicinity, that his BENEFIT is fixed for

Tuesday, November 9th,

When every Performance within the range of the Circus, will be brought forward.

THE PERFORMANCE WILL COMMENCE WITH
HORSEMANSHIP,
BY SIX CELEBRATED EQUESTRIANS.

SLACK ROPE VAULTING,

By the Inimitable Master PADDINGTON,

The TURKISH PARADE, by all the beautiful Horses,
After which, the Three Arabians will dance to the tune of "Paddy Carey."

THE SICILIAN PONY,

Will go through the whole of his astonishing Tricks.

Metamorphose of the Sack; or, The Clown deceived by a

CHAPTER FOUR

DESIGNING THE CIRCUS

When the successful Surrey publisher John Bowyer Nichols first took his family to Astley's on 25 July 1827, his 14 year-old daughter Mary noted in her diary that night that she had seen "a real elephant and a horse walk across the stage," (fig. 4.1) as well as a "Pant Omime." On 2 August four years later, after their third and final visit, she recorded: "We saw Lord Byron's story of Mazeppa acted for the 104th time."¹ These two short entries are testimony to Astley's visual strategy. On stage all animals--exotic or otherwise--were wondrous. The house's scenic and mechanical resources were displayed in the ingenious spectacle of the pantomime. Most evidently, Astley's posters for the weeks that Nichols visited, announcing for instance the "104th Night of Mazeppa" in fat red type around a lurid wood engraving (fig. 4.2) of the hero pursued by wolves, made the desired impression upon their adolescent reader.²

The presentation of the place she visited was markedly different from that which greeted James Oakes forty-two years before. Oakes was a prosperous Suffolk yarn manufacturer and banker who recorded taking his 16 year-old son James and 15 year-old daughter Charlotte to "Asshley's" (as it was

¹ Mary Nichols (1813-70), diary, 25 July 1827, 14 July 1829 and 2 Aug. 1831. I am indebted to its editor Julian Pooley, archivist at SRO, for this source.

² Bill, 1 Aug. 1831, TM Astley's file. The famous engraving itself, by A. Bowen, is repr. in Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 235.

Fig. 4.1. Bill for the "real elephant," as recalled by Mary Nichols on her first visit. 60 x 40 cm. (Theatre Museum, Astley's file.)

ASTLEY'S ROYAL AMPHITHEATRE.

The Elephant at a Quarter-past Six o'Clock.

The most intense Curiosity continues to be excited by the Nightly Appearance of that unwieldy but stately Beast, the LIVING ELEPHANT, whose Engagement is limited to a few Nights.—No circumstance could better or more appropriately answer the purpose for his introduction, than the Pageant and Grand Equestrian Ballet of Action, called, The 100 ARABIAN STEEDS, wherein the Costume, Scenery, and general display is in perfect keeping, gives local effect and animation to the whole Picture, which is fraught with the most interesting and pleasing examples of Docility & Obedience on the part of the Animals to the Commands of their Master.—The Elephant is attended by his familiar Cornac, which gives perfect security to those around him. The present attractive Entertainments will be further varied by the Exercises of the Stately LIVING ELEPHANT;

THE SCENES IN THE CIRCLE,

And the whole of the Equestrian Department will be supported by the Artists of this Establishment, it were useless to assert the superiority of their abilities, and the excellence of this part of the Entertainments, the chasteness, beauty and variety, the pomp and marvel of them have stood the test of Public Approbation and Favor; and are generally too advantageously known to need encomium.

THIS PRESENT MONDAY, JULY 23d, 1827,

Mr. Ducrow will Perform **6 Characters**

On One Horse, in full Gallop, without quitting his Courser,

The **TWO DWARF PONIES** will go through some **EXTRAORDINARY FEATS,**
And will conclude their Performance as DARBY & JOAN, SUPPING with the CLOWN.

At a Quarter-past Six, the Grand HIPPODRAMATIC ACTION and CAVALCADE of the 100 ARABIAN HORSES, Mr. DUCROW will Ride and Exercise

The REAL ELEPHANT,

And will shew the obedience of the STAG, COCO,

He will likewise make his **ARABIAN PACK HORSE**

Fetch the Wild Fowl which he destroys in the Chase, and Climb the Side of a Tree for Coco Nuts. The Horse will likewise form a Resting Place a Chair for his Master, share his Meal with him, place himself as a Couch for his Master's Repose. The DOG, NEPTUNE, will represent a TIGER in the first Scene.—Also the

TURKISH MARE, BEDA,

Will WALK on her HIND LEGS, which was never Performed by any other Horse in England. And the whole of the Feats of these superior and chosen Collection of Horses defie Comparison, for NOVELTY, DOCILITY, and SAGACITY.

Mr. DUCROW'S LITTLE PUPIL,

Nine Years of Age, will Ride, Manœuvre and Conduct

Twelve Horses at One Time, in the Circle, &c. &c. &c.

On TUESDAY, Mr. DUCROW's admired Equestrian Scene in the Circle, on ONE HORSE, of the SAILOR'S RETURN; or,

A TALE OF THE SEA.

On WEDNESDAY he will appear on his RAPID COURSER, in the Characters of the

Roman Gladiator and Flight of Mercury,

With the IRISH JIG, and the Boy with TWELVE HORSES!

On THURSDAY, as

PADDY O'RAFFERTY; or, ST. PATRICK'S DAY!

With the Death of a Greek on his Courser.

AND THE BOY WITH HIS TWELVE HORSES.

On FRIDAY, Mr. DUCROW will Perform, on his RAPID COURSER, his Rustic Equestrian Ballet of the REAPER, or

HARVEST HOME!

With Master BROWN and TWELVE HORSES.

On SATURDAY, Mr. DUCROW will Perform, on a SINGLE HORSE,

The Carnival of Venice; or, a Masquerade on Horseback.

WITH THE OTHER EQUESTRIAN SCENES IN THE CIRCLE.

The Extraordinary and Elegant Evolutions of the celebrated

HERR CLINE ON THE TIGHT ROPE,

Engaged for a few Nights more, on account of the great Attraction of his precedent unrivalled Performances.

Previous to these Equestrian Novelties, the National Spectacle, founded on Events Incident to the present State of the Peninsula, Called,

SPAIN AND PORTUGAL,

Concluding with the **BATTLE OF THE THREE BRIDGES.**

HERR BENJAMIN, THE GERMAN SAMPSON,

Will astonish by Balancing several light & heavy Weights; and bearing ponderous objects in Equilibrium on his Chin, Arms, Shoulders, &c. This Performer is supposed to be one of the ablest bodied and dexterous Athletes that has hitherto exhibited in Public.

The Evening's Entertainments to continue with the last New Popular Harlequinade of

THE FLYING DUTCHWOMAN!

In the last Scene of the Pantomime, A GRAND DISCHARGE OF FIRE-WORKS.

A Grand Display of Horsemanship, by 16 Female Equestrians will shortly be produced in the Circle. With a Cavalcade of all Nations, in which will appear the High Trained Horses of this Establishment.

BOXES 4s. PIT 2s. GAL. 1s. Half-price at half-past Eight.

STAGE-MANAGER, Mr. W. BARRYMORE.

Places taken of Mr. BUTLER at the Box Office from 11 o'Clock till 4.

Children under 12 Years of Age will henceforth be admitted to the Boxes only for

The Police Regulations of the Amphitheatre require that Carriages shall set down with the Horses Heads towards the Marsh Gate.

Places for the Boxes cannot possibly be kept later than Seven. Family and Private Boxes to be had Nightly.

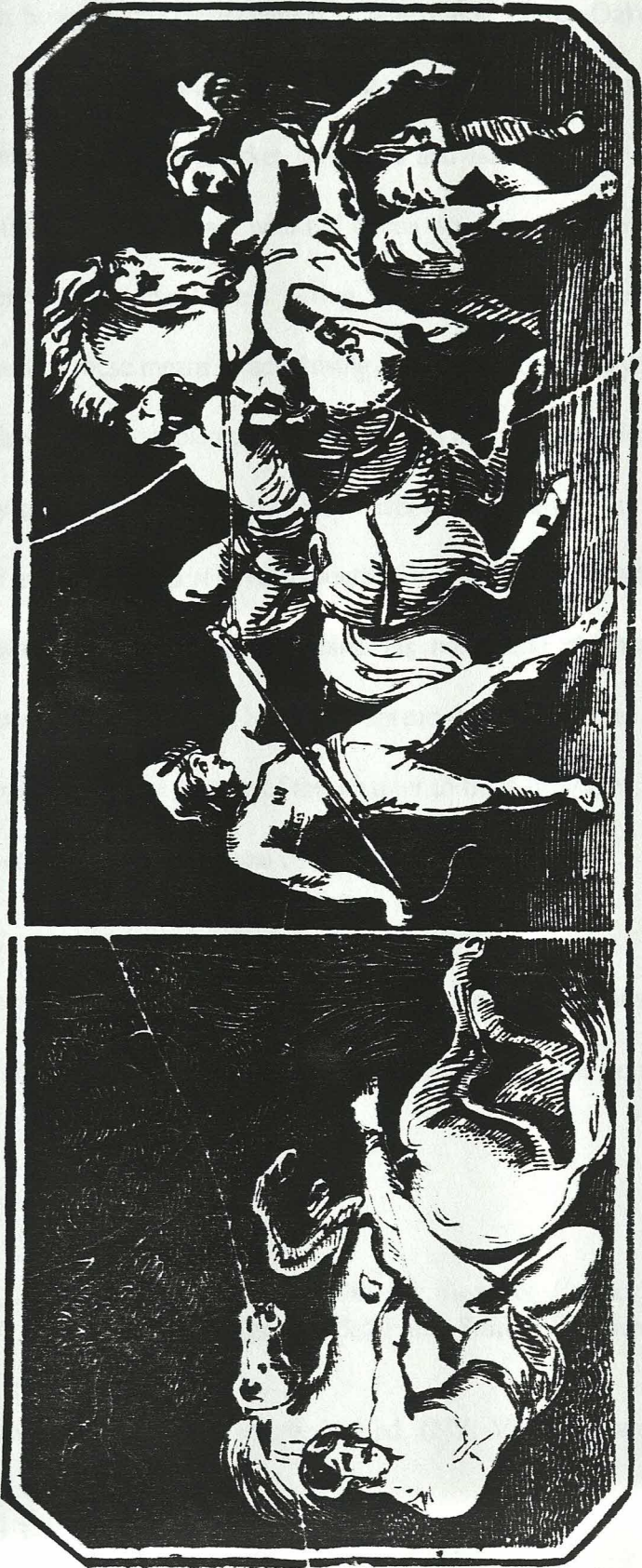
Tuition in the Art of Riding given in the School of the Theatre Daily, and Horses broke for the Field or Road. T. Romney, Pr. Lambeth.

Visitors from Greenwich, Deptford, &c. are informed that Mr. MATSON'S Coach is Nightly in attendance to convey Passengers to & from the Theatre.

The Public is apprized against the purchase of incorrect Bills, purporting to be the Performances of the Evening, sold in the Vicinity of the Theatre and about the Doors.

Fig. 4.2. Wood engraving for a bill advertising *Mazeppa*, c. 1835, similar to the one cited by Mary Nichols in her diary (actual size).

(Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 1.)



often known) while on a part business trip to the capital in June 1785.³ What Oakes saw at Astley's had been listed on the front page of the previous day's *Morning Post* (fig. 4.3): a half-page column second only to the advertisement for the Haymarket, where he and James junior went the following night. In both periods, the first point of contact with the circus was naturally the advertisement, via either the handbill or poster, the provincial press during a winter tour, or the London papers. However, the form and content of these means of advertising changed more in the years between these two encounters than would have been possible at any other point in the history of design. The verbose posters with their cacophony of typefaces quoted by Mary Nichols were part of the graphic explosion that sounded the commercial and technological developments of the industrial revolution.⁴ (Indeed as a sign of the times, earthenware figures of Astley training his horse and characters from famous hippodramas had been produced in Staffordshire, helping to spread the image rather like today's movie merchandising.⁵) It is the object of the first section of this chapter to trace how the circus, in exploiting the new graphic design, helped to develop our visual culture.

Other notable aspects of Astley's presentation changed too. To those arriving at the Amphitheatre in 1785, its makeshift architecture offered a broad façade set back from the road within a

³ Entry for 30 June 1785, Jane Fiske, ed., *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St. Edmunds, 1778-1827*, vol. 1 (Woodbridge: Boydell P and Suffolk Records Soc., 1990) 237. I am grateful to Joanna Innes for this reference.

⁴ See Philip Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. (NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992) 132-42.

⁵ Bemrose, *Circus Genius* 34.

Fig. 4.3. The programme witnessed by James Oakes, first column, second down.

NOT ACTED THESE SEVEN YEARS. THEATRE-DYAL, HAYMARKET. THE THEATRE ROYAL, COVENT-GARDEN. THIS EVENING, will be performed, COME AS YOU ARE CALLED. THE LADY OF THE SPIN. THE LADY OF THE SPIN. THE LADY OF THE SPIN.

REGARD HONORABLE DRAMATIC PROVERB. THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS BY MISS WILKINSON, MISS BURTON, MISS MADDELEY, MR. PALMER, MR. FARSONS, MR. FRANCIS, AND MISS WEBB.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON. THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON.

INTELLIGENCE TO THE LADIES. AMONGST the various Curiosities that have been introduced into the Fair, we must be considered for its innocent and efficacious qualities, and celebrated for its...

ANY Gentleman or Lady going to furnish a House, may be fitted with some very large and handsome polished grates, with fire-irons, and furniture...

BOARD and Lodging, or Lodging only, is wanted, in an elderly person's house, where not less than five persons are to be accommodated...

TO be Sold, a large new-built Brick Dwelling, near the Surrey End of Blackfriars' Bridge, being an excellent town and country house...

ANECDOTES of the late SAMUEL JOHNSON, L.L.D. during the last Twenty Years of his life, which will be published in a Collection of Letters, &c.

A Sudden and most dreadful fire broke out about Eleven o'clock last night, in Old Compton Street and Creek-Street, where in a few hours destroyed...

BUUGS TO THE PUBLIC IN GENERAL. In Town or Country, by THOMAS WILSON, who from forty years practice is universally known to have been successful in his art of destroying them...

THE EMANUEL SOCIETY for the Relief of the INDIGENT BLIND, at the Anniversary Meeting held at the First-Fruits Office in the Temple, June 27th, 1851.

READINGS. LISLE STREET, LEICESTER-FIELDS. THIS EVENING, by special desire, and the last time this Season, will be performed, THE MARRIAGE OF JULIE.

LE SOIRÉE DES BOULEVARDS. Interfered with new France, never read before. The readings begin precisely at Eight o'clock.

THE PATRIOTICS OF EAST INDIA STOCK. LONDON AND GENEVA. COMPANY, in the room of RICHARD ATKINSON Esq. deceased, being appointed for this Day, the 29th inst.

MARSHARDI most respectfully informs his Friends, and the Public in general, that he proposes to attend into the Amphitheatre this Day, precisely at twelve o'clock, a most interesting and extraordinary exhibition...

MADAME MARA begs to allure the Public, to her new exhibition, which she has opened at her residence, in the Strand, where she has been successful in her endeavours to improve the human mind...

TO MERCHANTS and WHOLESALE TRADERS. To be Let, within a minute's walk of the City, a most desirable and profitable situation, for a Warehouse adjoining the same; the situation unobtainable.

TO be Let, a Farm in the County of Middlesex, containing near 300 acres, arable and meadow, and a large quantity of wood.

TO be Let, a Three-story Stable and Coach-house, with a Hay Loft and Lodging-room over them. And to be sold, a Whisky, with head, travelling trunk, and harness complete.

WANTED to purchase a Perpetual Annuity, from Three to Four Hundred Pounds a year clear of deduction. Any person who has a life or death annuity, may hear of a purchaser, by addressing a line to C. B. New Exchange Colledge-house, Strand.

THE Inhabitants of the Parish of St. Martin in the Fields, adjacent, are respectfully acquainted, that an Office is preparing in Spring Garden, Chiswick-Croft, where the Business of the Company will be conducted under the Direction of Mr. Walter.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

THE Penitents from the 14th, 24th, and 34th Regiments of Foot Guards, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Dragoon Guards, are hereby notified, that they are to be quartered in the Barracks at Chiswick, from the 1st of July to the 31st of August.

sparse apron of trees.⁶ After it had been rebuilt and surrounded by houses over the next twenty years, however, only a narrow portico remained visible. But this more modest exterior concealed greater delights within: as with several London theatres, a cramped entrance opened almost magically into a four-tiered auditorium in green and gold with classical mouldings. Partly inspired by such splendours, section two will attempt to cover the architectural development of the Amphitheatre in relation to other circuses and theatres.

Finally, with regard to the show itself, James Oakes' evening in 1785 was based in burlesque comedy and pantomime (the highlight provided by Signor Maisa's Dancing Dogs), while Mary Nichols' first visit in 1827 centred on drama and grandiose spectacle. The real elephant that she witnessed was, for instance, accompanied by a hippodrama and one of Ducrow's famous mounted mimes of the *Roman Gladiator* (fig. 4.1). Both programmes none the less ended with fireworks. The third section of this chapter will discuss some of the stagecraft--the machinery, costume, special effects and so on--which helped to shape these productions, before chapter five goes on to explore their more general aesthetic principles. Owing to the availability and quality of the evidence, this chapter will sometimes venture a little beyond the normal timespan of the thesis.

The Oakes and the Nichols encountered the English Circus as it was shaped by Astley and Ducrow respectively. How much it is possible to talk of individual artistic influence in the early circus is, however, debatable: apart from working under the restrictions of the law and with performers often

⁶ See C. J. Smith, aquatint based on Capon's painting of Astley's exterior in 1777, repr. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 1; Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 45 etc.

recruited by chance, London circuses had to follow the whims of fashion. The pantomime and one of the burlettas seen by the Oakes at Astley's were, for example, in the same mould as such skits on family relations as *The Jealous Wife* and the opera *The Son-in-Law* that they saw the following evening at the Haymarket (fig. 4.3).⁷ Still, by the time of their visit John Astley had evolved a unique style in the ring, and by the 1820s Ducrow had, in Dickens' words, personally "shed the light of classic taste" over the whole Amphitheatre.⁸ As Saxon has shown, he had a remarkably direct and creative input into many aspects of production, by choreographing, sketching out staging, scenery and costume, and even writing.⁹ Less multi-talented figures, notably Philip Astley, relied more on control: not only, as we have seen in chapter two, in the case of marketing, but also by supervising the building and decoration of buildings. By such means managers attempted to lend some consistency to the circus' typical "hodge-podge." It is therefore possible to pick up at least a thread of intention, or *design*, running through the circus.

Critical evidence shows that Astley's was appreciated as at least partly visual art. In 1807, for instance, Lady Bessborough wrote that she found the lighting effects of *The Brave Cossack* "quite beautiful and like one of Bourginon's picture's animated."¹⁰ At the other end of the critical spectrum, one unhelpful witness for the prosecution at the 1783 trial of Hughes and Astley could recall nothing of

⁷ *Oakes Diaries* 238. *The Son-in-Law* was by John O'Keefe.

⁸ Dickens, "Astley's," *Sketches by "Boz"* 301.

⁹ E.g. Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 54, 146, 167.

¹⁰ Qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 14.

the Circus other than it was "a very pretty sight."¹¹ Visual qualities were crucial to popular entertainment in general. The masquerade--the other key 'carnavalesque' phenomenon of the time--invested great significance in the pure superficiality of appearance.¹² To Georgian circus and theatre-goers, the increasingly lavish presentation of the performance was more than mere ornament.

I. First Impressions: The Circus and Print Publicity

"This is the Advertising Age," lamented one ironic copywriter for the *Public Advertiser* in 1785,

. . . . Look at the London papers--what is the sum total ?--Ladies heads--masquerade dresses--giants--pigs--and patent snuffers.

When we consider the language and artful manner of these advertisements, the lures they throw out, and the success they have, we may say, *Lead us not into temptation.*¹³

By "pigs" the writer was referring to the craze for 'learned pigs' precipitated by Astley's. The two main London circuses had few qualms about exploiting this burgeoning medium, nor did they shrink from appearing on the front pages as though they were patent theatres.¹⁴ Often amusing and generous in their layout and typography, the early advertisements soon became curiosities in their own right and were reproduced whole in memoirs and histories which touched on the circus. An 1844 theatrical

¹¹ *Public Advertiser* 17 Jan. 1783

¹² Castle, *Masquerade and Civilisation*.

¹³ *Public Advertiser* 13 Apr.

¹⁴ Looney, "Advertising and Society" 25, 123, 157-203. Between 1760 and 1784 he calculates an increase of 200% in ads for "leisure" in the northern press, being 7% of all carried. There was a fourfold increase in total numbers of ads from 1741 to 1784.

biographer, for example, thought that one by Hughes in 1772 exemplified "that bitterness of spirit so peculiar to dramatic rivalry":

Hughes humbly thanks the Nobility, &c. for the Honour of their Support, and also acquaints them his Antagonist has caught a bad cold so near to Westminster-bridge, and for his Recovery is gone to a warmer Climate, which is Bath in Somersetshire. He boasts, poor Fellow, no more of activity, and is now turned Conjuror, in the character of 'Sieur the Great.'¹⁵

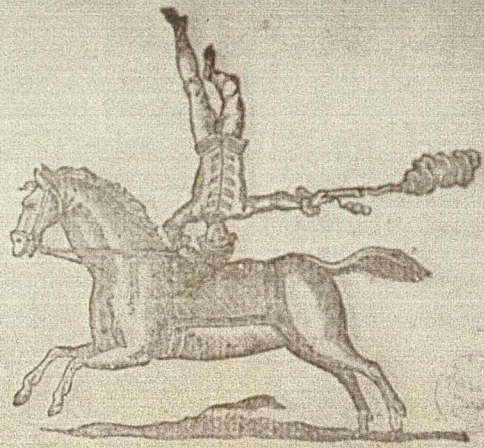
Circus advertising copy was always expansive; not simply because of a deliberate 'mountebank' style, but also because it was obliged to explain the obscure merits of many acts. Moreover, like bills, newspaper advertisements were so detailed that they were clearly intended to be referred to in the auditorium if necessary. Programme leaflets were not developed until the 1880s.

Provincial newspaper readers also enjoyed small wood-engraved illustrations heralding Astley's winter tours to the area, since there was generally more space available in the non-metropolitan press. One newspaper historian of Bristol has noted that Philip Astley was the most frequent cause of illustration in that city's papers before 1800.¹⁶ Astley forced the pace in pictorial advertising over that period. He was not the first to use images in the press--before the 1770s such general signs as horses marked advertisements for horse-sales--but he was innovative in making specific illustrations of the things he listed. From around 1771 onwards, Astley, closely followed by his competitors, would lend his own set of engravings to a single printer in each area visited, who would then use them on pamphlets and handbills (fig. 4.4) as well as papers, since publicity material was currently a sideline of

¹⁵ Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 1: 40-44.

¹⁶ D. F. Gallop, "Chapters in the History of the Provincial Newspaper Press, 1700-1855," MA diss., U of Reading, 1969, 146. Travelling shows in general dominated pictorial newspaper advertising. Thanks to Hannah Barker for this reference.

Fig. 4.4. Handbill for Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, 1772. The wood engravings are very similar to those also employed by Astley in newspapers. Many of these were numbered. (Bodleian Library.)



HUGHES'S Riding-School, Black-Friars Bridge.

Mr. and Mrs. HUGHES.

With the celebrated SOBIESKA CLEMENTINA Sister to Mr. HUGHES, Miss HUNTLEY from Sadler's-Wells, and a young Gentleman,

Will display their unparelled Feats, on one, two, three, and four Horses, this and every Evening during the Summer Season; as he (Hughes) had the Honour of exhibiting before

Their Majesties, the Princes of Wales, Meclenburgh, Hesse, &c. in Richmond Gardens;

Also in AFRICA and AMERICA, with uncommon Applause.

Mr. HUGHES springs from the Ground, with his feet on the Saddle of a single Horse, while the Horse is on full Speed. Rides a single Horse full Speed, with one Foot on the Horse's Head. Rides a single Horse on one Foot; in that position he takes a Hop a considerable Height, returning with only one Foot on the Saddle.

Also rides a single Horse full speed without holding the bridle, or any Thing else. Rides full Speed with his Back to the Horses Head, standing on the Saddles; not like a Woman, in the Stirrups.

Leaps over a single Horse Backwards and Forwards twenty Times, without stepping between the Springs, the Horse on full Speed. Leaps over two Horses as they leap a Bar, three Feet high. Leaps over three Horses as they are on full Speed.

Leaps from the Saddles of two Horses between them to the Ground; springs up again on the Saddles, and then into the Air, three Feet above the Horses, as they are on full Speed. Not one of the above Feats was ever performed by any Horseman in this Kingdom but Mr. Hughes.

SOBIESKA CLEMENTINA rides standing upright on the Saddles full Speed.

Any Horseman who can equal Hughes's Activity, or only three of his capital Feats, let him make his Appearance at Hughes's Riding-School, and perform them, and he shall receive a Premium of £. 100, Doors open at Five o'Clock; mounts at Six. Admittance in the Rooms 2s. in the School 1s.

Mrs. HUGHES take a flying Leap, and fires a Pistol. A young Lady, eight Years old, rides two Horses standing upright on the Saddles, full Gallop.

Mr. HUGHES, standing on two Horses, carries the above Lady on his Head, after which, he rides on his Head, with his Feet up in the Air. Rides two Horses, standing on two Pint Pots. Also rides two Horses without holding; drinks a Glass of Wine, and fires a Pistol as the Horses are on full Gallop.

Leaps the Bar, standing, sitting, rolling, &c. on two and three Horses. Also rides four Horses, standing and rolling on them, full Speed. Picks up a Shilling blindfolded, &c.

To conclude with the original active Sailor; the droll Position of the Taylor; a grand Deception on the Cards, and the different Indian Guards, imitating real Action.

N. B. HUGHES neither confines his Horses Heads with Straps, or Martingales. His Horse lays down; fits up; strikes the Hour of the Day, Month, &c. fetches and carries; lets off a Cannon and Pistol, when ordered; he also gives his Master a Whip, from the Ground, as he is standing on his Back, with upwards of Fifty other Feats, too tedious to insert.

the newspaper press. Near-diagrammatic pictures were the most arresting way of describing the unprecedented acts, especially to the less cognisant shire readers, and like many consumer products, the circus was often cloaked in pseudo-science. As one circus copywriter of 1785 put it, "Words can convey but a confused idea."¹⁷

The lengthy front-page newspaper advertisements declined with the increase in news volume associated with mass circulation into the nineteenth century; a greater call on advertising space; and the rise of the regular critical review, whose epicentre was the dramatic periodical press which flourished from around 1810. Reviews in particular helped to make both the explanatory advertisement and the puff redundant. The circus-cum-theatre gradually came "within the sphere of dramatic criticism."¹⁸ Before 1820 Astley's advertisements shrunk from eight or nine centimetres on the front page to a terse itemisation of two or three in a theatrical section at the back of the paper, crowded in with half a dozen new "minors."¹⁹ No longer the conspicuous vanguard of the advertising age, Astley's now had to fight alongside all the other cries of a developed consumer society.²⁰

¹⁷ Astley's bill for General Jackoo etc., c. 1785, private colln., qtd. Coxe, "Some Notes on the Content and Typography of English Circus Bills During the Nineteenth Century" (1964), in Pretini, ed., *Thesaurus Circensis* vol. 2: 671-9.

¹⁸ Periodical review, 12 June 1813, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 345.

¹⁹ E.g. "The Drama" sect., *The Era* 30 Sept. 1838: 7. Additional minors were The Queen's and The New Strand Theatres. Covent Garden and Drury Lane were also beginning to extend their seasons, with similar programmes to the minors in the summer.

²⁰ See McKendrick, ed., *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

By this time, however, circus bills had flourished, and with their strong images stood out from the mass of competing notices pasted in layers on walls and special posts (from which we get the name 'poster' and the long thin shape of the original broadside) around the city, with a heavy concentration around the venue itself.²¹ Circus bills might also be seen in shop windows during tours to other towns.²² When Astley started out, the standard broadside (up to 75 x 25 cm) and its compact version, the handbill, were the common currency of all theatre and entertainment. But few had any visual interest other than a variation in the size of their near-uniform Roman type, or perhaps the royal coat of arms at the top, whereas for Astley *et al* such outdoor media gave full vent to the urge to portray which was cramped by the newspaper. The result was some unusual early publicity ranging from the six engravings at the base of a 1771 Astley's handbill noticed by James Winston (perhaps the earliest record of a circus bill) to the two-metre high murals and 'show cloths' hung outside the riding schools, boldly painted with the acrobatic highlights of the day.²³ The accuracy of this material was a point of honour for Astley. "It being at present a Practice of Pretenders to Horsemanship," he claimed, hinting at Hughes, in a newspaper of 1772,

to insert in their Bills, and represent on their Shew Cloths a Number of Feats they cannot do . . . Mr. Astley, therefore, begs the Nobility, Gentry and others will ask for a Bill at the Door, and see that the Number of 50 different Feats are exhibited, without Repetitions; and it is well known Mr. Astley's Horses go on full speed, not a gentle

²¹ For existing work on this form see Coxe, "English Circus Bills"; in France: Caroline Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque en France" 94-106 (and forthcoming PhD thesis); Ségolène Le Men, "French Circus Posters," *Print Quarterly* 4.8 (1991): 363-387.

²² Bill, with request for tradesmen and shops to display it, Powell's Circus Royal, Dover, 7 Aug. 1843, Guildhall Lib. Prints Rm., London, playbill boxes, "Circus" file.

²³ Winston, ms. note, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 41.

Amble; neither is he tied fast to the Horse by a Strap, when he sweeps both Hands on the Ground.²⁴

The use of the engravings drew on the mid-eighteenth century fashion for prints of acrobatic stars and riding masters, while the cloths were based on the naïve signs which traditionally enticed fairground visitors to enter the booths. Both strands would meet as the circus bill evolved and became the acknowledged prototype, along with the printed book-plate, of the modern image-based poster, where design depends on a tension between the pictorial and the verbal.²⁵

Besides newspaper advertisements, I have only found handbills from the circus of the 1770s. Street handbilling was relied upon by all popular entertainment, and indeed had execrable associations for which Astley was sometimes criticised.²⁶ Large, summarising bills or posters were, however, undoubtedly also used for sticking up. Nearly a century before the accredited introduction of the fully visual poster to Britain in 1871, the Birmingham Amphitheatre in 1787 was covering more than half of its 1m² benefit bill with a woodcut of Mr Franklin performing the *Flying Mercury* on horseback,

²⁴ *Ibid.* item 75.

²⁵ See John Barnicoat, *A Concise History of Posters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972) 16.

²⁶ In 1773 Astley announced that he "never more intends that abominable practice" of parading the streets, but in 1787 he was still distributing "his handbills with a lift of his horses, to the booted bucks and mounted jackadandies of Rotten Row, every Lord's Day." In 1792 John Astley received an open letter from "Thousands," pleading that handbilling, unlike newspaper advertising, was inappropriate to "the present respectability of your Theatre": "A hand bill in the street, may be given to a porter, barber, shoe-black, scavenger, or nightman, but how few ladies and gentlemen will deign to receive them, lest their sight should be offended by some disgusting nostrum of quackery!" BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 985 (ms. notes by Winston, n.d.), vol. 2, items 186 D (4 June 1787) and 204 A (11 Apr. 1792).

captioned with the quotation "We ne'er shall see his like again" from *Hamlet*.²⁷ On a similar scale, Astley also had an advertising cart with painted notices either side which drove around residential streets.²⁸ The circus specialised in the grand gesture well before Barnum's consummate marketing of the 1870s and 80s: Dibdin the Younger recalled Astley's bills almost 4m long in 1797, which was over three times larger than, for example, those commissioned by the manager of the Adelphi Theatre in the 1860s and thought to be remarkable examples of recent technological developments in large-scale printing.²⁹ At least one fairly large Astley's poster (175 x 40 cm), from 1834, with a simple list of acts printed in red and black, survives in private hands.³⁰ Evidence from thirty years later suggests that as many as eighty of these may have been placed in prime sites around London each week.³¹ Another later source points to advertising costs that amounted to a heavy 12% of weekly outgoings.³²

The standard broadside format (up to 75 x 25 cm), meanwhile, could combine both display and the partly reference function of the handbill, and became the dominant format for all circuses, with or

²⁷ Fred Walker's 1871 poster for *The Woman in White* at the Olympic Theatre is generally considered the first example of a modern 'visual' poster. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 163; Barnicoat, *Concise History of Posters* 46; BL Lysons, "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 54.

²⁸ For a print of this see Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 40.

²⁹ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 17; Michael Twyman, *Printing 1770-1970: An Illustrated History of its Development and uses in England* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970) 72.

³⁰ Poster, "Waterloo!," 27 July 1834, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 224.

³¹ William Cooke (then manager of Astley's), completed order for the Metropolitan Permanent Advertising Co., 27 Mar. 1868, Tyne and Wear Archives, ref. 944/1243.

³² Account sheet, Adelphi Theatre, w/e 12 July 1867, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Theatres A-C" portfolio.

without a stage, and most popular entertainments for the first half of the nineteenth century. At Astley's it was given an extra boost by the longer programmes from around 1810 onwards. When posted, digesting such a document would have involved a lengthy act of public reading. As Astley's began to attract the attentions of a capacious print world hungry for a market, patrons in the 1820s were warned against buying pirate copies hawked in the vicinity of the amphitheatre (fig. 4.1, bottom).

Inside they proved helpful in interpreting the equestrian mimes of Ducrow and his followers. A lithograph of the interior of Cooke's Rotunda, Blackfriars Road, around 1827, for example, shows a man in spectacles using one to explain the *Death of the Moor* being performed in the ring to those behind him.³³ Besides acting as programme and poster, the circus bill was also a souvenir. Lyrics of popular songs sung in the circus and pictures of acts designed for hanging were sometimes printed on the back (fig. 6.4), or, as in the theatre, one could buy bills from special performances, often charity benefits, printed on silk.³⁴ At Astley's, illustrations from bills were also pinned up backstage.³⁵ No texts embody the mentality of the circus more than its busy yet striking broadsides.³⁶

³³ *M. Dupont Riding 6 Horses at Cooke's Circus, Rotunda, Blackfriars Road*, hand coloured litho., BL Th. Cts. 50, vol. 1, item 26.

³⁴ E.g. the "Celebrated Song" of *The High-Mettled Racer*, bill, 10 Apr. 1820, TM Astley's file; illustrated silk bill, Olympic Circus (Hull ?), c.1817, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Circuses, Freaks" folio case.

³⁵ See *Behind the Scenes at Astley's*, oil on canvas (anon.), c. 1840, TM, repr. Geoffrey Ashton, *Catalogue of Paintings in the Theatre Museum, London* (London: V & A Museum, 1992) 48.

³⁶ They are now valued items: a set of eight early Astley's bills fetched £2,860 at a recent auction. Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 243 (cat. p.79).

The circus played a leading part in the development of typefaces during the the nineteenth century. A whole style of design is commemorated in the American font 'Barnum' of the 1870s (fig. 4.5). Yet the stereotypical image of extravagant showmanship did not properly emerge until it had the typography of an industrial age to give it shape. It is absent from the public face of the eighteenth-century circus, when printers had no option but the calm reserve of Roman fonts. Astley's was quick to utilise the new display typefaces--such as Egyptian (slab-serifed), outline, shadowed, reversed and Tuscan--that were invented in England from 1815 onwards.³⁷ The most recent ones tended to be used most prominently on the bills: the 'fat face' type for the main title of the *Gil Blas* bill of 5 July 1821 (fig. 4.6), for example, had only been released that year. Circuses were thus highly fashionable in their graphics, unlike today. Even the more modest of the other kinds of travelling show aspired to such standards.³⁸ In contrast, the regular theatres' publicity material looked more conservative: being reluctant to move away from the august Roman types, it was often ten or fifteen years behind the circus in applying new fonts or colour.³⁹ The new variety of fonts elaborated the cultural hierarchy.

Alongside the state lottery, circuses in the early nineteenth century served as the enlightened patrons of the new 'jobbing' printers who specialised in advertising contracts. This was especially true in London, where most of the creative developments took place. Circuses positively *required*

³⁷ Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 133-7; Nicolette Gray and Ray Nash, *Nineteenth-Century Ornamented Typefaces* (London: Faber, 1976). I am grateful to Marcus Wood and Don Mackenzie for their suggestions on this topic.

³⁸ See bills Hope Collection, History of Art Dept. Lib., U of Oxford.

³⁹ Covent Garden began using outline shadowed in 1837, twenty years after Astley's. Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Covent Garden" folder and "Provincial" theatre folio case.

Fig. 4.5. 'Barnum,' American wood type, 1870s. (Courtesy of Michael Heseltine, Sotheby's Auctioneers, London.)

BARRIUTIN

Fig. 4.6. Early in the typeface revolution. Note the decorated, sign-like "INN AT PENNAFLOR." 50 x 20 cm. (Theatre Museum, Astley's file.)

Royal Amphitheatre (ASTLEY'S,) Westminster-Bridge.

4th Night of Gil Blas's New Adventures!

THURSDAY, JULY the 5th, 1821,
FRIDAY 6th, and SATURDAY 7th,

The Evening's Entertainments will commence with, (2d Time,) an entirely New & Splendid Equestrian Melo-Dramatic Spectacle, in Two Acts, with New Music & Picturesque Scenery; Machinery, Dresses, and Decorations; Songs, Duets, Chorusses, and Combats; aided by the Introduction of
The Whole of the Beautiful Stud of Horses,

GIL BLAS DE SANTILLANE, OR The Horse Banditti.

The Scenery Painted by Mr. STANFIELD & Assistants.—The Machinery by Mr. NALL.—The Dresses by Mr. HOWARD.
The Properties, Banners, &c. by Mr. COLLEY.—The Overture and New Music composed by Mr. MONTAGUE CORRIE.

The Melo-Drama Written and Produced by Mr. W. BARRYMORE.

Gil Blas, Mr. COWELL. Gil Peres, his Uncle, Mr. HENDERSON. Don Lilia de Lara, Mr. MONTAGUE.
Don Alvaro, Mr. M. CORRIE. Gabriello, Mr. HENNESSY. Father Ignacio, Mr. EVANS.
Andrew Corcuello, Mr. DARNLEY. Thomas, Mr. VIZMAN. Hugo Pablo, Mr. FILLINGHAM.

Captain Rolando, Mr. GOMEZAL. Henriquez, his Lieutenant, Mr. HOWEL, Jun. Domingo, Mr. HERRING.
Gonzalez, Mr. LEWIS. Cozner, Mr. BROWN. Horse Banditti, Messrs. Blythe, Avery, O. Brown, Yates,
First Officer of the Holy Brotherhood, Mr. FRASER. Second ditto, Mr. SMITH.

Equestrian Leaders of the Holy Brotherhood, Messrs. Southby, Duckley, Williams, Lightfoot, Hawthorn, &c.
Donna Mencía of Masquera, Mrs. BENTHAMTON. Juanna, a Christian Singing Girl, Mrs. SLADE.
Deme Leonardo, the Cavalry Cook, Mrs. BUCKINGHAM.

PROGRESSIVE SCENERY AND INCIDENTS. DWELLING OF GIL PERES.

Introduction of Captain Rolando & Band, lying wait for the Chariots from Astorga.—their Arrival with Mules, Horses, &c.
dressed according to the fashion of the Country.—Gil Blas asked leave of his Uncle, and sets forth on his Mile.

VIEW NEAR OVIEDO.

Gil Blas Advertiser with the Old Soldier.

IN AN APPOINTED FLOWER.

Gil Blas Advertiser with the Cavalier.

SECRET ENTRANCE TO THE BANDIT'S CAVE.

Arrival of Banditti.—Horses Descend into the Cave.—Gil Blas made Prisoner.

KITCHEN OF THE CAVE.

Introduction of Domingo and Deme Leonardo.—Blas made Servant to the Banditti.

EXTENSIVE CAVERN.

Banditti at Supper.—Gil Blas attempts to make his Escape.—Vigilance of Domingo.—Gil's Flight Prevented.
GRAND FINALE TO THE FIRST ACT.

ACT 2. OUTSIDE OF CAVE.

Gil Blas admitted as one of the Banditti.—his Coup d'Essai on the Highway.—Adventure with the Dominican Friar.
EXTENSIVE FOREST.

Introduction of Don Alvaro and Donna Mencía, in their Coach Drawn by Mules.

Attack by the Banditti of Don Alvaro's Coach, drawn by 4 Mules,

And its subsequent Situation after the Conflict.

With the Reflection of the Moon's Rays on the Killed Coach, Dead Robbers, Mules and Horses.

ROADSIDE.

Spirited Combat between Lieutenant Henriquez and Don Alvaro.—Donna Mencía borne off by the Banditti.

THE FOREST BY MOON-LIGHT.

Showing the Fate of Don Alvaro and his Followers, Horses, Hounds, Robbers, and Servants lying Dead.—Introduction of
the Soldiers belonging to the Holy Brotherhood.

STABLES OF THE CAVERN.

Departure of the Banditti to dispose of their Booty.—Gil Blas contemplates his Escape with Donna Mencía.
DORMITORY OF THE CAVERN.

Gil Blas Effects his Escape.

SPANISH VILLAGE.

Gil Blas and Donna Mencía apprehended by the Holy Brotherhood.

RUINS OF THE CASTLE AND DRAWBRIDGE.

In which Scene the Author takes the liberty of bringing his Piece to a close, by introducing an Encounter between the
Troops of the Holy Brotherhood and the Banditti, with the Capture of the Main Body.

Also, the UNRIVALLED TROOP of VOLTIGEURS.

HORSEMANSHIP by Mr. AVERY.

Clown, Mr. O. BROWN.

And a COMIC SONG by Mr. HERRING.

The Whole to conclude with, 4th TIME, a New Musical Burletta, with Duets, New Scenery and Dresses,
under the Title of

Donna Aurora OR Adventures at Salamanca!

The New Music composed by Mr. M. Corrie.—The Dresses by Mrs. J. Jones.
The great Success which attended the First Part of GIL BLAS, induced the Manager to announce a
Continuation. A Musical Burletta has, therefore, been prepared from that part of the Book which
introduces Gil Blas into the service of Donna Aurora as her Waiting Man.—The Adventures he meets
with, arise from Aurora quitting Madrid in male attire, and assuming the name of her Brother, Don Felix
de Mendosa, thus getting introduced to Don Lewis (with whom she is secretly enamoured,) she contrives,
by first appearing as Don Felix, to win his friendship, then as Aurora, his love; while Gil Blas in a
counterplot, is employed to rid his mistress of a formidable rival in the person of Isabella, the execution
of which, exposes him to many Adventures, endeavoured to be rendered as amusing on the Stage as in
the Closet.

Don Lewis Pacheco, Mr. GOMEZAL. Don Felix de Mendosa, Brother to Aurora, Mr. JONES.
Don Gabriel de Pedros, Mr. MONTAGUE. Gil Blas, Servant to Aurora, Mr. COWELL.
Pedro, Servant to Don Felix, Mr. BUCKINGHAM. Hebecho, Servant to Don Lewis, Mr. SMITH.
Aurora, in love with Don Lewis, disguised as her Brother, Don Felix de Mendosa, Mrs. WARRING.
Laura, Aurora's Waiting Woman, disguised as Lopez, Mrs. DE METZRIEDER.
Isabella, a Coquette, favorite of Don Lewis, Mrs. SEADLER. Henrinda, a Lodging Housekeeper, Mrs. DARNLEY.
Bestizze, Isabella's Maid, Miss ENSCOE.

In the Course of the Piece a FETE CHAMPETRE,

Principal Dancers, Mr. J. JONES, Miss M. CURRI, and Miss JANE SIMPSON.

Doors open at Half-past 5, and begin at Half-past 6 o'Clock precisely. Half-price at Half-past 8.
BOXES 4s. PIT 2s. GAL. 1s.

Places for the Boxes to be taken of Mr. KIRKLOCH, at the Box Office of the Theatre, from 10 till 4.
EQUESTRIAN EXHIBITION by Mr. BLYTHE, from Nine to Three.

A New Broad Farceical Burletta will be Produced in a few Days.

innovation. Astley's helped two Lambeth printers to earn a place in the textbooks of print history: before the 1830s Romney's and thereafter J. W. Peel in nearby New Cut.⁴⁰ Benefit performances were even held for Peel at the Amphitheatre, and the shop went on to be the specialists in circus printing, collaborating with the American invasion by printing for the first transatlantic proprietor Richard Sands in 1842.⁴¹ Indeed leading historians of printing see the wood-type (i.e. post-1828) jobbing press--and hence an entire era of graphic design--as coterminous with nineteenth-century travelling entertainment.⁴²

In the eighteenth century, prior to this Golden Age, the layout of the bills was little different from those of the legitimate theatre, apart perhaps from the indentation of columns with asterisks and dagger marks to make it clear that it was a multi-part performance.⁴³ From around 1809, however, with the search for a broader market prompted by the advent of melodrama, their language became more joky, grandiloquent and mock-oratorical, and the typesetting sought to highlight this with loosely-used punctuation and capitals in a way that anticipated the typographic resources to come.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Twyman, *Printing 1770-1970* 45; Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 137.

⁴¹ Bill, 27 Oct. 1845, "Benefit for J. W. Peel, 24 years Printer to the . . . Establishment, " BL Playbills, qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 52; poster, 1842, Guildhall Lib. "Circus" file.

⁴² Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 137; Twyman, *Printing 1770-1970* 45.

⁴³ Bill, h.d. 1772, TM Astley's file.

⁴⁴ See Marina Warner's insubstantial but interesting discussion of the influence of showground adjectives, "Fighting Talk," in *The State of the Language: 1990 Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels (London: Faber, 1990) 100-9.

The new fonts brought a dynamic relationship between word and type. Rhetoric became led by typography; it was an excuse for printers to show off their variety of ornate and striking letters.

"*Abra-kakaidronoketrononaia*," exclaimed the title of an Astley's bill of 1822,

is a strange Word, and hard to be decyphered; but as such Words, in Bills of Public Entertainment, are fashionable and *imposing*, (though all may be in the dark as to their meaning,--but there's nothing in that,) it becomes necessary to use them. . . ."⁴⁵

There also emerged a rhetoric peculiar to the circus: for example, "Mr COOKE will Appear in a LOFTY ACT of HORSEMANSHIP".⁴⁶ Words--particularly "Circus" or the company's name--could arrest the passer-by from some distance. By 1820 verbiage on the bills had more than doubled, with scene-by-scene synopses in blocks of small print. The overall typographic emphasis was on the structure of the show: scenery changes were usually marked out by larger capitals, the generally inconsistent effect corresponding with the new dramaturgy which saw theatre as a barely linked series of images, or "turns," "each part," in the words of the cultural historian Martin Meisel, "too full of itself to spare a thought for the whole."⁴⁷ A literal sense of value for money--in terms of the number of sights--was also conveyed. Appropriate, often figurative fonts were chosen for each phrase in hand, as Charles Dibdin, working at Sadler's Wells, remembered from as early as 1807:

The Subject which I chose for my Easter Harlequinade was an oriental Tale, called *Jan Ben Jan, or the Forty Virgins*; which was pointed out to me by the late Reverend and learned Mr. Maurice, of the British Museum; a Gentleman whose researches into, and knowledge of, oriental literature and antiquities, were almost unparalleled . . . We opened on March 30, with *Jan Ben Jan*, which I announced in the *Affiche* (which is the new word--though perhaps *Bill* may be as well understood) in *Oriental Characters* (furnished me by Mr. M.) for the same reason that I had announced the first Aquatic

⁴⁵ Bill, 13/14 Dec. 1822, TM Astley's file.

⁴⁶ Bill, Astley's, 16 Apr. 1825, qtd. Coxe, "English Circus Bills" 2, in Pretini, *Thesaurus Circensis*.

⁴⁷ Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 38 and *passim*.

Exhibition in Greek Characters, viz. to excite curiosity; which, once considerably excited, is seldom to be allayed, but by being gratified; and the Bait took, for the House was completely filled. . . ."⁴⁸

Above all, the scene-by-scene accounts were typeset to lend the intonation of a storyteller. The feats in the ring, however, were parcelled by dividing lines because there was no real sequence, although the weight of type made clear the relative importance of each act.

By the 1840s the rule of the horizontal line had been abandoned, with portions of text even running diagonally. This was partly forced by illustration: in the previous decade (as in the *Mazeppa* poster seen by Nichols), words were placed vertically around engravings. The arrangement itself could be figurative: in one 1843 Amphitheatre bill for the "Morocco Arabs" the type was set in the shape of the human pyramid in the illustration.⁴⁹ Typography became playful. A handbill for the Royal Circus in York the same year, for example, used alternating large and small type to present a double message (a device rediscovered in a campaign for Haägen-Däzs ice cream in 1991-2) so that the large words read at first as a wanted criminal poster.⁵⁰ Accordingly, language broke from the rough prose of earlier bills. As the Yorkshire Stingo, Marylebone, put it, in a format resembling concrete poetry:

Crowded ! Crowded !! Crowded !!!

The Boxes nightly adorned with Rank &
Fashion

Overflowing PIT and GALLERY crammed
to the ceiling!⁵¹

⁴⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 90.

⁴⁹ Bill, 25 Sept. 1843, Sotheby's, 6 Dec. 1990, lot 246 (cat. p.80).

⁵⁰ Handbill, 15 Feb. 1843, BL Th. Cts. 50, vol. 1, item 47.

⁵¹ Bill, 1840s, qtd. Coxe, "English Circus Bills" 3, in Pretini, *Thesaurus Circensis*.

This approached the freedom of the word in space of the modern poster or page advertisement.

As the circus bill shed the heritage of the Roman typeface from the 1820s onwards, it helped express a commercial aesthetic of magpie borrowing and the sampling of styles, geared to the production and consumption of apparently constant change. It became a spectacle of virtuosity and detail in itself. Much of the eclectic spirit of the nineteenth century is encapsulated in its words alone.

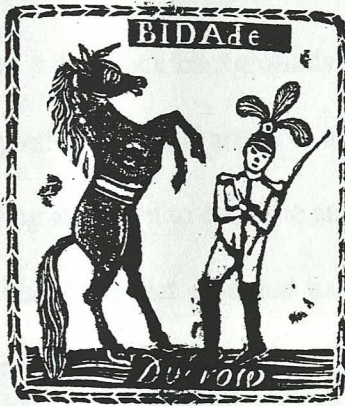
The full flowering of colour, size and illustration did not occur until the 1830s--the first two because of technological developments in ink and cheaper, more lightweight and hence bigger and more varied wood type (as opposed to metal). Wood type was invented in 1827.⁵² As for illustration: before the 1830s it occurred on less than 10% of total material and mainly in the first ten years, when the circus had an **immediate** novelty value. In London, Astley's and the Royal Circus seem to have been embarrassed to use pictures at all when they were searching for a respectable identity in relation to regular theatre during the 1780s and 90s. Around 1814, however, with the new power that typography was beginning to invest in the bill, crude woodcut illustrations (fig. 4.7) appeared more frequently on circus broadsides.⁵³ These resembled the catchpenny prints that adorned the broadsides of murders and sentiments traditionally sold to the populace, and had a similar sensationalising

⁵² Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 137.

⁵³ See various mounted woodcuts and engravings, TM Astley's file, box 1.

Fig. 4.7. Handbills with woodcuts, Davis' (Astley's), 1825. Approximately half actual size.

Note the star billing of Ducrow's horse 'Beda.' (Bodleian Library, Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 4.)



The Battle
 OF
WATERLOO!
 WITH
Monsieur Ducrow's
 EXTRAORDINARY
 Equestrian Performances!
 IN
THE CIRCLE!

Must be Seen to be Believed!!!

Overflowing Houses
EVERY NIGHT,
 At Davis's Amphitheatre.

T. Romney, Printer, Bridge-Road, Lambeth.



The Battle
 OF
WATERLOO!
 WITH
Monsieur Ducrow's
 EXTRAORDINARY
 Equestrian Performances!
 IN
THE CIRCLE!

Must be Seen to be Believed!!!

Overflowing Houses
EVERY NIGHT,
 At Davis's Amphitheatre.

T. Romney, Printer, Bridge Road, Lambeth.

function.⁵⁴ Indeed Jacqueline Bratton and Jane Traies see the catchpenny tradition as "closely cognate" with Astleian narrative.⁵⁵

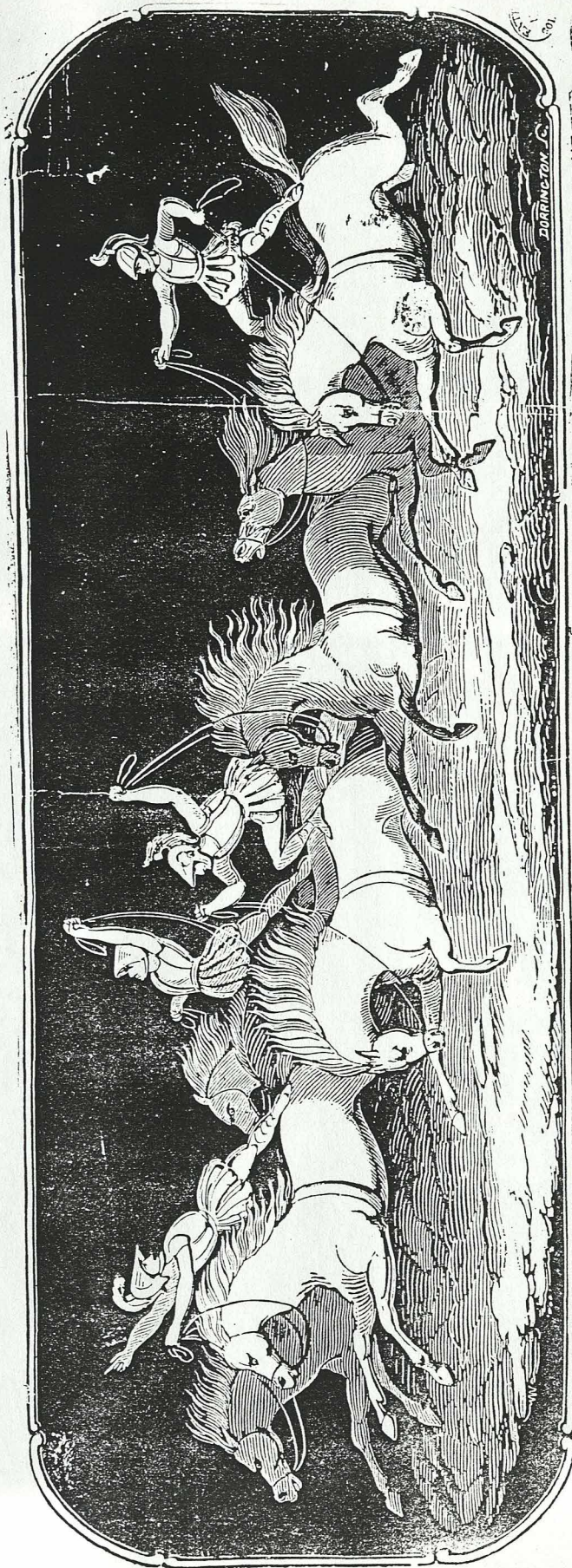
By the 1820s wood *engraving* (which was finer since it was made on the endgrain, rather than the sidegrain like the woodcut) was skilfully adopted for large broadsides too, by setting off its greater detail against solid black backgrounds (fig. 4.8). Ducrow's mimetic inventions during the subsequent years prompted commercial artists to attempt to capture expression and excitement, as well as technical fact, by paying attention to costume and attitude.⁵⁶ Such work was the foundation for a virtual school of circus illustration that emerged as, ever larger but with more dramatic composition, engravings became a regular feature instead of an occasional treat on Astley's bills of the 1830s. Different companies used the same artists who knew the circus and became experts in translating the sort of fiery Romantic horses painted by Delacroix to the bold simplicity of commercial wood engraving (fig. 4.9). The period's most important firm of wood engravers, the Dalziel Brothers, did much circus work towards the mid-century, and Astley's in particular helped to start the freelance George Dorrington on his career in 1838 (fig. 4.8). During the 1840s and 50s there was a system of hundreds of circus images in circulation. Successful designs carried about the country and to the continent by a particular company were copied or adapted by the local printer and then held as stock images for the next client. Lesser circuses especially might then end up with, say, jousting knights on their bills although they had

⁵⁴ See Tom Gretton, *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints 1800-1860* (London: Colonnade Books, 1980).

⁵⁵ Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 28.

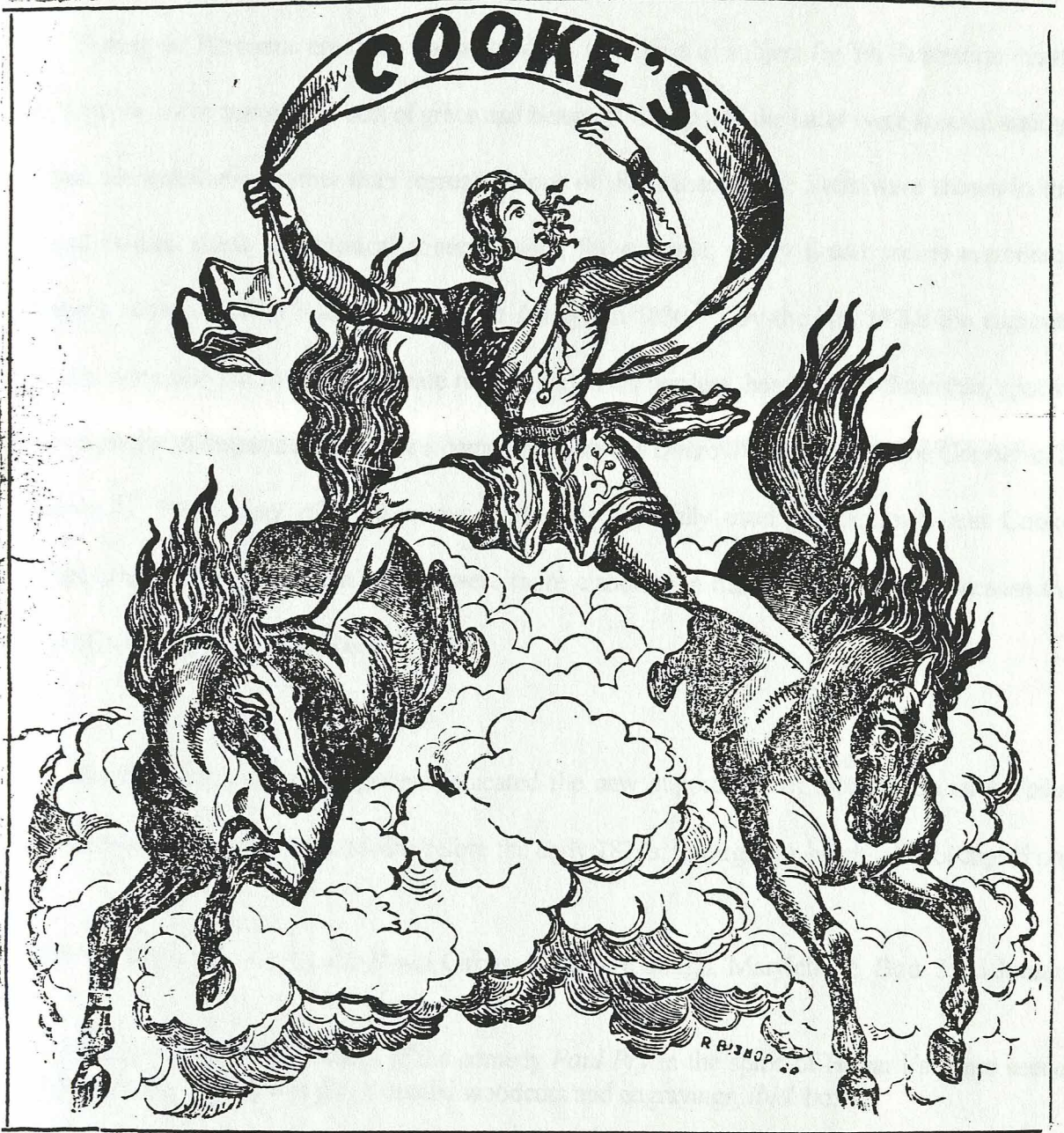
⁵⁶ See mounted engravings, TM Astley's file, box 1.

Fig. 4.8. Wood engraving by George Dorrington, a frequent circus bill illustrator, c. 1839 (two-thirds actual size). (Theatre Museum, Astley's file, box 1.)



There will be no more of this occasion, an entirely new and unprecedented striking, from Scapa-shure, the...

Fig. 4.9. R. Bishop, wood engraving for bill, 1840s (two-thirds actual size). Cooke's later took over Astley's. The name in the banner was easily changed, and this generic image was used by several circuses in the mid-nineteenth century. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 3.)



nothing to do with the programme.⁵⁷ Designs for the circus had none the less become the slickest of their kind (fig. 4.10).

During the Romantic era there was a choice of two types of subject for bill illustration: bizarre comic turns or, more commonly, acts of grace and beauty.⁵⁸ Images of the latter were fanciful attempts to trigger the imagination rather than representations of the actual show. Acts were shown in their supposed original exotic or historical contexts, with, for example, palmy desert scenes surrounding illustrations of the so-called "Bedouin Arabs" at Astley's in 1836.⁵⁹ By the late 1820s the engraver's techniques were also put to making ornate rococo and floral borders, headers and flourishes, sporting perhaps a chariot, a Pegasus rampant, or a commemoration of Ducrow's invention of the *Courier of St. Petersburg*.⁶⁰ These were often in colour, and were especially used on Ducrow's and Cooke's provincial tours. Stock images in general were more elaborate in the provinces, partly because they underwent a less rapid turnover there.

The decoration of text in general indicated the new importance of artwork on circus bills. Illustration had grown from vignette size before the early 1820s; through the blocks that occupied one-

⁵⁷ Bill, 25 May 1843, Cornwall's Royal Circus, Yorkshire Stingo, Marylebone, Bod. John Johnson Colln.

⁵⁸ For the former see 6 engravings of the comedy *Paul Pry* in the spirit of Hogarth's genre scenes: bill, 12 June 1826, TM Astley's file; mounted woodcuts and engravings, *ibid.* box 1.

⁵⁹ Bill, Astley's, 30 Jan. 1837, Sotheby's, 6 Dec. 1990, lot 247 (cat. p. 82); mounted engravings, TM Astley's file, box 1.

⁶⁰ The last has a frame of flower-decked pillars, saying the act was invented 15 Feb. 1827. Bill, 21 May 1827, *ibid.*

Fig. 4.10. Bill for the "Royal" Circus, Greenwich, showing *The Salamander* act.

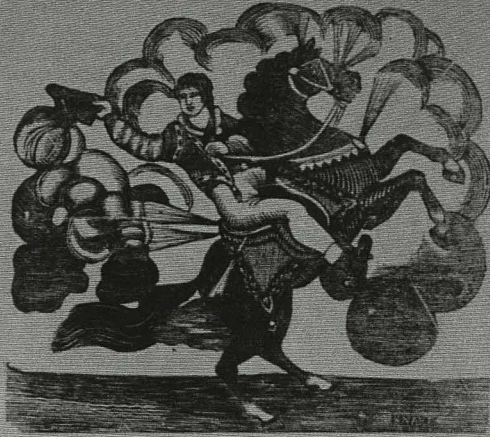
Approximately 85 x 30 cm. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, Misc. Ents. 8.)

Royal Circus,

BRIDGE-STREET, GREENWICH.

CHANGE OF PERFORMANCE!

On **MONDAY** Evening, 11th of **APRIL**, 1825.
And every Evening during the week, Saturday excepted.



In consequence of the Company's short stay, and the limited and crowded House they have entered, the Proprietors have been obliged to select the Public, and therefore, will be confined to the present Week's Entertainment, and leave for a short period of that distinguished Entertainment to our successors.

THE PERFORMANCE WILL COMMENCE WITH THE COME SLEDE OF

The Merry Millers:

Or My Grandfather and Grandmother.

SPANISH PARADE.

By the REAL SPANISH HORSES, in which they will be seen, set up, also represent themselves in style and dash.

GRAND TRAMPOLINE,

(CONSISTING OF WONDERFUL SOMERSITS,

By Mr. EDWIN, the FLYING PHENOMENON,

Who will LEAP over a GATE, TEN FEET HIGH, then be THROUGH a RAILWAY or FIRE, & body a FLIGHT OVER

SIX HORSES,

HORSEMANSHIP IN ALL ITS DEPARTMENTS.

Master H. COOKE, will appear as CUPID!

Who, for grace and vigour, stands rated the FIRST JUVENILE HORSEMAN in the present age.

MR. WILLIAMS,

the FOLIOUR and FLYING MERCHANT, will be shown the highest PERFORMANCE in the

CORDE VOLANTE.

Mr. AVERY,

Will introduce the Elegant and Dashing Action in the Beautiful Hesperus Spanish Horse WARDS

MISS COOKE

Will make her first appearance, and display her grand and surprising Performances.

ON THE TIGHT ROPE.

MONSIEUR HENGLER,

Will be the exhibitor, the whole of his singular Performances.

On the Tight Rope.

SICILIAN PO.V.V.,

Will be through his singular Performances.

Detailing on Quits, by the Younger Branches of the Company.

Under whose skill he performed, the singular feat of

The LANDLORD, or the Young ones in their Glory,

Landed Mr. HENGLER, Who Mr. EDWIN,

MR. AND MISS HENGLER WILL DANCE AN ALLEMANDE

ON TWO ROPES.

MR. TAPIN, THE WONDERFUL FLYING HORSEMAN,

It is reported that Tapin's Performance in the Horse, TAPIN, in particular, has attracted the most extensive FLEET OF THE

country, and is a great attraction. He will give several more Acts on the 11th, and will receive the

at the same time, the Horse going full speed, long over Water, through which, one has to take a Course will, who is

Peasant's Frolic, or Flying Wardrobe & Ladies' fashions in Paris

EQUESTRIAN CLOWN, Mr. EDWIN,

THE EVENING'S ENTERTAINMENT TO CONCLUDE WITH THE

WAR HORSE,

ENVELOPED in a brilliant display of FIRE WORKS!!!

Which introduced the exhibition of every variety, and will be concluded every evening with FLYING HORSE.

Friday 20th - 10th - 11th - 12th - 13th - 14th - 15th - 16th - 17th - 18th - 19th - 20th - 21st - 22nd - 23rd - 24th - 25th - 26th - 27th - 28th - 29th - 30th - 31st

Do not open at half past six and Performances to commence at eight o'clock, and conclude a quarter before ten.

Private to be had at the CIRCUS, where Papers for the Boxes may be had.

Admission Children directed to the entrance in the Art of Riding, will properly manage the Horse, in every Department, by

Mr. TAPIN, Riding Master, Horse Break, or excellent Teacher, & Co. Terms of Performance for Riding at Home, and

to be had at the Circus. See Rules, Papers, and other Books, Green's.

fifth or more of the total paper space by the time of Nichols' visit in 1827; to the giant 1833 engraving of the Trojan Horse at Astley's (fig. 4.11), which took the traditional playbill form into the realm of the visual poster. Astley's was extending further into a proletarian market during these years, and, although not of course the only reason for illustration, needed to communicate with illiterate or semi-literate consumers. The pictures were unmistakable, usually thanks to their equestrian contents.

Colour had of course long been important to the appeal of the circus, and this aspect of the artform (among others) later attracted impressionist, post-impressionist and expressionist painters to the ring.⁶¹ It was as a colourful interlude that the circus was intended to endure in the memory, and Astley's publicity played its part by experimenting with colour woodblock printing in 1826, over ten years before synthetic printing inks became widely available and commonly used. J. W. Peel became a leading exponent of two and three-colour printing through his work for Astley's under Ducrow.⁶² By 1830 black or coloured lettering was appearing on paper overprinted with near-flourescent green, yellow or orange.⁶³ Within the next few years the colour combinations became less astringent, corresponding with the more opulent tone of the mid-century Astley's. Orange was almost Astley's signature-colour, conjuring up, no doubt, the sight and smell of the oranges that were an inevitable part of popular theatre-going. Engravings were usually in black, though there were some two-colour

⁶¹ E.g. Edgar Degas, *La La at the Cirque Fernando, Paris* (1879), oil on canvas, National Gallery, London. See also Roland Berger and Dietmar Winkler, *Zirkusbilder* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1983); Ségolène Le Men, *Seurat et Chéret, le Peintre, le Cirque et l'Affiche* (Paris: CNRS Eds., 1994).

⁶² Twyman, *Printing 1770-1970* 45.

⁶³ See TM Astley's file.

Fig. 4.11. Bill of the Trojan Horse at Astley's, 1833: Astley's most ambitious wood-engraved bill. Approximately 80 cm tall. (Theatre Museum, Astley's file.)

combinations. But clearly the latter detracted from the focal weight provided by the picture, and forestalled the work of the imagination.

Colour printing was another asset of the jobbing press in which the circus invested; as with typography, the Americans found it a well-established resource when they arrived in the second half of the century to revolutionize and redouble circus marketing.⁶⁴ Circus had piloted the folk art of the fairground and broadside into the sophisticated mass medium of the advertising poster; art that is highly accomplished yet necessarily accessible. In this way at least, it made a major contribution to what we see in twentieth-century culture.

Circus and hippodrama also sustained commercial art that was not directly involved in advertising it. Gaudy and full of action, Astley's was ideal material for the very first pre-Victorian toy theatre prints. A haberdasher from a theatrical family, William West (1783-1854) invented this profitable by-product in 1811, inspired by the success of children's halfpenny lottery prints. He began with cheap copper engravings of characters in Thomas Dibdin's famous pantomime *Mother Goose* at Covent Garden. John Astley, however, quickly joined in. In an interview with Henry Mayhew in 1850, West recalled the trouble he was having with the engravers of the first few runs who could only make poor copies of existing quality prints,

... when Mr. Hashley, of the Hamphitheayter, sent young _____ with a drawing to show me. It was uncommon well done; oh, such a beautiful picture! he got on to be

⁶⁴ For subsequent American and European developments see Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* 163; Barnicoat, *Concise History of Posters* 206; Speaight, *History of the Circus* 128; Charles Philip Fox, ed., *American Circus Posters* (NY: Dover, 1978); BL Th. Cts. 50.

on the of the first-rate artists afterwards . . . Well I gave him an order directly for the whole of the characters in the *The Blood-Red Knight*, wot Hashley was performing at that time. I can show you the print on it--you must see it, for it was a great advance in my purfession, sir.⁶⁵

Opening up this area was in Astley's interest, since the circus seldom featured in the luxury, Ackermann-type theatre prints costing up to 5s. each. In 1813 West developed wood and card model theatres, and hence had to provide the scenery, complete sets of characters, accessories and text necessary for miniature productions. These remain the best records of the staging of many plays.⁶⁶ Hippodramas were among the best sellers: nearly 10,000 of the *Battle of Waterloo* were printed, and Covent Garden's *Blue Beard* (1811) was the second most popular ever. Although West preferred the prestige of patent theatre productions, Astley's had a monopoly on the "blue fire" effects and "murderous looking" swordsmen which most appealed to his young customers.

West also produced 'penny plain, twopence coloured' single theatrical portraits, and remembered how around 1820 a "Royal Academician" prepared one of Ducrow as the *Wild Indian Hunter* (fig. 4.12): "Mr. Ducrow paid for it being done by my man," West said, "and guv it away on his benefit night, and I had the plate of him afterwards."⁶⁷ Ducrow's horsemanship was a variation from the usual mannered theatrical poses, as were the fight scenes that were the trademark of Astley's stage.

Skelts, one of several competitors, went on to produce a whole series of "Favourite Horse

⁶⁵ Henry Mayhew, "Letter XXXVIII," *Morning Chronicle* 25 Feb. 1850, repr. Gerald Morice and Speaight, "New Light on the Juvenile Drama," *Theatre Notebook* 26 (1971-2) 115-21; 117. The artist may have been Henry or William Heath, who drew many horse combats.

⁶⁶ See TM Stone Coll., Astley's boxes.

⁶⁷ The "Academician" may have been Denis Dighton who was a frequent RA exhibitor but not a fellow. Morice and Speaight, "New Light on the Juvenile Drama."

Fig. 4.12. Theatrical portrait print of Ducrow, c. 1820, possibly for one of his benefit nights, as mentioned by William West. The small, cut-out printed figures for toy theatres were in a very similar style. Both were available hand-coloured. (British Museum, in Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 91.)

M. DUGROW'S EQUESTRIAN SCENE OF THE INDIAN & WILD HORSES.



Combats."⁶⁸ Best of all were those in chariots. The allegiance of either combatant was denoted by a cross or abundant crescents on their costumes (whether Muslim or 'Hindoo'), for, as the literary scholar Peter Brooks has observed, the "ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists [or "moral entities"] and the expulsion of one of them."⁶⁹ There is little individual portrait value to these sheets, since they were primarily designed for tinselling by children, but the original drawings were deft studies of the contemporary dramatic art, capturing the sense of action that was overworked by the finished engravings.⁷⁰ Certainly capable draughtsmen contributed before the trade was undermined by still cheaper competition in the 1830s.

The circus also contributed some of its performances and a few freaks to the established market for theatrical prints and prints of curiosities: the results included not only fine copperplate engravings but also the occasional lithograph.⁷¹ Before the impressionists' conscious break with academicism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, few 'fine' artists thought the circus a fit object for serious study, although such major figures as Goya and Watteau had made use of its carnivalesque ancestors.⁷² The transient scenes of even the legitimate theatre were seldom captured by an art whose highest task was the perpetuation of the monumental. That, after all, was the job of ephemera.

⁶⁸ TM Stone Coll., ref. Ast. 98.

⁶⁹ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 17.

⁷⁰ Tinsel, shaped by a punch also sold at West's shop, was stuck onto the costumes. For original drawings see TM Stone Coll., ref. Ast. 98.

⁷¹ W. Hincks, *Astley Fils/Young Astley*, lithograph, c. 1785, photo, TM Astley's file, box 1.

⁷² E.g. see Berger and Winkler, *Zirkusbilder*.

II. Circus Architecture

Like posters, architecture formed part of the spectacle and exotic experience of going to the theatre. Audiences appreciated it: on the Royal Circus' opening night in 1782 they gave three cheers for the interior.⁷³ Advertisements always boasted its comfort and cost, and it was noted by theatrical commentators. Theatres were in every respect the showpieces of the country. An educated Italian visitor to London, Giovanni Antonio Selva, sketched and wrote of the "*Teatro d'Astley*" that he saw in 1780:

The Theatre is of good construction since it is round. The one half serves to contain the two tiers of *gradinate* [raked benches] in the form of an Amphitheatre, and the other half is occupied by the stage and by two lateral decorations. . . . The roof seems as if made of sugar and has linked ribs but among us they are called *alla Vincentina*; and this sugar loaf is sustained by a drum-like structure which contains various windows. It is a good theatre and could inspire good ideas for a small theatre for tragic and comic representations.⁷⁴

The design was a rare departure in modern theatre architecture, and reintroduced the concept of the theatrical spectacle without perspective. "If the road partly determines the theatre," writes the architectural historian Christian Dupavillon, "the public place determines the circus."⁷⁵ There were at the time fresh ideas of urban space: squares, and recently nearby St. George's Circus for the Surrey New Roads, had been built as part of the Neoclassical movement literally to enlighten the city.

⁷³ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 38.

⁷⁴ Tr. Edward Gordon Craig, *The Mask* 15 (1929): 144, qtd. Speaight, "Astley's Amphitheatre," *Theatre Notebook* 42 (1988):75-8. Parentheses and some further translation are mine.

⁷⁵ Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 30. This appears to be the sole specific survey of the form, and is the most comprehensive visual source.

In the circus the artiste entered a structure representing a small universe, not an illusion of the world. The action was taken off the deep stage and re-entered the *theatre*, within the assembly, like Elizabethan actors on their plain, projecting stage. The only vestiges of this convention in the Georgian theatre were the proscenium doors still used by the actors.⁷⁶ Thus the theatre seen by Selva appeared primitive and repurifying. It was not without precursors and comparisons, however: Selva would have known of the huge seventeenth-century *Teatro Farnèse* in Parma, an amphitheatre for formal equestrianism with a stage at one end;⁷⁷ and Astley himself probably had in mind the famous Spanish Riding School which he had visited on his tour to Vienna, as well as Figg's Amphitheatre, a longstanding venue for pugilism in the Oxford Road, when he named and redesigned his own.⁷⁸ But hitherto the development of design had been piecemeal, in spite of Astley's assurances during the 1770s that the amphitheatre was "the completest in Europe."⁷⁹ Selva caught the beginning of comprehensive approach that was crystallised when Astley added a roof and a stage in 1779-80, and named as a specific architectural form by the Royal Circus in 1782. Thereafter the Astleian model became the standard for permanent circuses in major European cities until 1830.

⁷⁶ See Richard Southern, *The Georgian Playhouse* (London: Pleiades Books, 1948) 24.

⁷⁷ Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 17-18.

⁷⁸ See Richard Southern, "The Arena Theatre in English History," *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1948-9): 75.

⁷⁹ Astley, *A Short Description of the Various Feats of Activity*, Fenwick Colln., Tyne and Wear Archives, final sec.

The main problem in building a circus, as identified by the famous Parisian architect Jaques-Ignace Hittorf in 1821, was covering a large circular space without obstructing the view with strong supports around the ring. "In that case it has become essential," he reasoned, "to include under the same span the arena and the amphitheatre that surrounds it."⁸⁰ He finally achieved this with the Cirque National in the Champs-Élysées in 1843--a delicately calculated structure with an iron framework--and hence realised the form's ideal simplicity.

Hittorf was one of the few well known professionals to have designed a circus. Without the help of his intellect and cast-iron engineering, the previous approach had been simply to put pillars round the ring and bring tiers of boxes and galleries flush up to them, staying close to the traditional theatre model. Even so, the results were often precarious: the evidently lightweight construction of Astley's first roof was surpassed by that of the second amphitheatre, which, like his entire Olympic Pavilion a few years later, was improvised from ships' timbers and canvas. In France, too, one critic thought the construction of the second Cirque Olympique (1807) "excessively light."⁸¹ Circus proprietors needed to build quickly to stay solvent: the architect of the second Royal Circus in 1796 reputedly died from the exertion of driving two gangs of workmen day and night in order to complete.⁸² Moreover, the temporary wooden circuses assembled by companies on tour inherited the

⁸⁰ Qtd. A. Donnet, *Architectonographie des théâtres ou parallèle historique et critique de ces édifices considérés sous le rapport de l'architecture et de la décoration* (Paris, 1821), in Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 37.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 61.

⁸² James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; Or London in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1829) 134.

notorious record of the fairground booths that was graphically illustrated by Hogarth's famous engraving of a collapsing balcony at Southwark Fair.⁸³ "It is necessary . . . to state," Ducrow told his patrons in Aberdeen in 1830, "that this is not a temporary erection of slight or perishable materials, but a substantial Building, securely tiled, and perfectly impervious to the weather."⁸⁴ He assured them it was to be inspected by an architect. Despite such precautions, there were disasters with wooden circuses in 1799, 1836 and 1848.⁸⁵ In the last, 600 people fell through the sloping floor of the pit, killing the wife of the proprietor.⁸⁶

Some were impressed, none the less, by the apparently miraculous materialisation of the larger examples. Seeing the seven-month rebuilding of Astley's in 1795, Decastro eulogised that it "cost an immense sum of money, and it was the astonishment of every one who knew it, how he could have realised such a sum, or obtained the credit to accomplish such an arduous undertaking."⁸⁷ The amphitheatre was valued at £30,000, of which approximately two-thirds were building costs.⁸⁸ The bill

⁸³ William Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1733, British Museum.

⁸⁴ Bill, "Ducrow's Royal Amph. and Olympic Arena" Oct. 1830, Arthur Morice Coll., U of Aberdeen Lib.

⁸⁵ In the first, at Bristol, a collapsing gallery killed one; and in 1836 a wooden building in Norwich blew down. Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 35-6; Speaight, *History of the Circus* 38.

⁸⁶ Pablo Fanque had bought the building from Hengler's, who had begun to dismantle it. This was missed by Fanque's architect. For full details see "Pablo Fanque, 'an Artiste of Colour'," *King Pole* 89 (Dec. 1990) 5-9.

⁸⁷ Decastro, *Memoirs* 68.

⁸⁸ This is the figure most consistently quoted after both fires. Cts., 17 Aug. 1794, BL Lysons "Collectanea", vol. 4, f. 37; "THE FIRE AT ASTLEY'S THEATRE: FURTHER PARTICULARS," 3 Sept. 1803, TM Astley's file.

for the rebuilding of the Royal Circus was £14,500,⁸⁹ which was as much as the two largest provincial theatres--Manchester and Bath--and much more than most provincial playhouses of a few hundred capacity, which cost between £1,000 and £6,000.⁹⁰ Astley's and the Royal Circus were on a grander scale than previous London minors. Considering their attempt at a respectable interior and their capacity approaching 2000, however, they were built cheaply compared to the big Patents: Drury Lane, which held only 810 more, cost £112,000 when it was rebuilt in 1811.⁹¹ The biggest of the temporary wooden circuses were feats of low-cost mass accommodation that presaged the tent: "2015 Persons" visited Ducrow's arena in Aberdeen one night in 1830.⁹² Meanwhile the tiny shows frequenting the fairgrounds or obscure city neighbourhoods, like the Britannia Circus, Ratcliffe Highway, in London, blurred the distinction between 'temporary' and 'permanent' quarters.

Despite their capacity, one of Hittorf's objections in 1821 was that the current arrangements could not seat in a single sweep the amount of audience appropriate to "this genre of entertainment, made more for the masses than for people of refined taste."⁹³ The circus was the potential successor to the egalitarian ideal of the Round Table. Hierarchy does not sit easily in a circle: it needs a focus--a stage--which in the conventional theatre was dominated by a principal box. If one removed the stage,

⁸⁹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 219.

⁹⁰ Chalklin, "Building for Cultural Purposes."

⁹¹ This figure is without furnishing and scenery, bringing it to £150,000. *The Picture of London for 1818*, 286.

⁹² Bill, "Ducrow's Royal Amph." 20 Oct. 1830, Arthur Morice Colln., U of Aberdeen Lib.

⁹³ Qtd. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 37.

one could remove the tiers for the boxes. In 1791 Parisian Revolutionaries, rejecting the *ancien régime* theatre's neat expression of social rank, planned a huge Roman-style circus for the Champ de Mars, recalling the theatres of the ancient republics in its single slope of open benches known as *gradins*.⁹⁴ Again, however, true amphitheatre seating was only realised in Hittorf's Cirque National. Regardless of its stage the Astleian model, beginning with his "Room apart" in 1770, had always hankered after the theatre and its cellular, ranked structure. His customers were accustomed to looking for boxes, pit and gallery, so they were installed in 1780. In Britain even the cheapest temporary penny circuses clung to these divisions--usually with separate entrances--until the twentieth century. The third Astley's was built with special boxes for the proprietors either side of the stage, and a "Queens Box" had been designated by 1836.⁹⁵ The fourth Amphitheatre of 1843, built at the same time as Hittorf's Cirque National, had five sectors, including a dress circle, and stalls instead of a pit. The all-*gradins* model was alien to England, where an egalitarianism that was sympathetic to the theatre had never taken over the public domain.

As the circus ring was in the centre of the audience it could not, with technology available in the eighteenth century, be lighted separately as easily as the stage. Side lighting got in the way, and footlights, despite their magical effect, offended those on the other side. The whole assembly therefore had to be lit, producing an immediate, communal atmosphere to which not even Georgian small theatre-goers were accustomed. The initial architectural solution was the roof seen by Selva, similar to

⁹⁴ Étienne-Louis Boullée, the architectural hero of the Revolution, also planned a Coliseum-type circus in 1783. See *ibid.* 28-9.

⁹⁵ Ticket for Mr. Cross, 4 Oct. 1836, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 1389.

the famous Lantern Tower above the transept at Ely Cathedral. This innovation in theatre design enabled Astley's to take advantage of the long summer evenings, proudly advancing its claim to special qualities as a "summer" theatre. Young Astley's performances were moved earlier so they could be seen by its light.⁹⁶ A wagon wheel chandelier designed by Philip Astley was installed in 1785 to "render the illuminations less incommodious to the audience" (fig. 4.13), but it was evidently supplemented because later that year there was a press discussion on how best to light the antics of General Jackoo, and a complaint that the lights on the pillars around of the side of the ring still obstructed the view.⁹⁷ Glare was an old problem in the theatre.⁹⁸ Four years later, however, a puff commended the "good lighting" at the Royal Grove: compact chimney oil lamps had probably replaced many of the candles.⁹⁹

The circus was quick in using gas: Astley's installed it while refurbishing in 1818, directly after Covent Garden and Drury Lane, in the days when it required a private gas generator. The conversion, including a retractable chandelier, brought greater control as well as a characteristic "atmosphere of gas and sawdust."¹⁰⁰ London competitors followed within the decade, and some portable circuses had it by

⁹⁶ H.d. 25 May 1784, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 550.

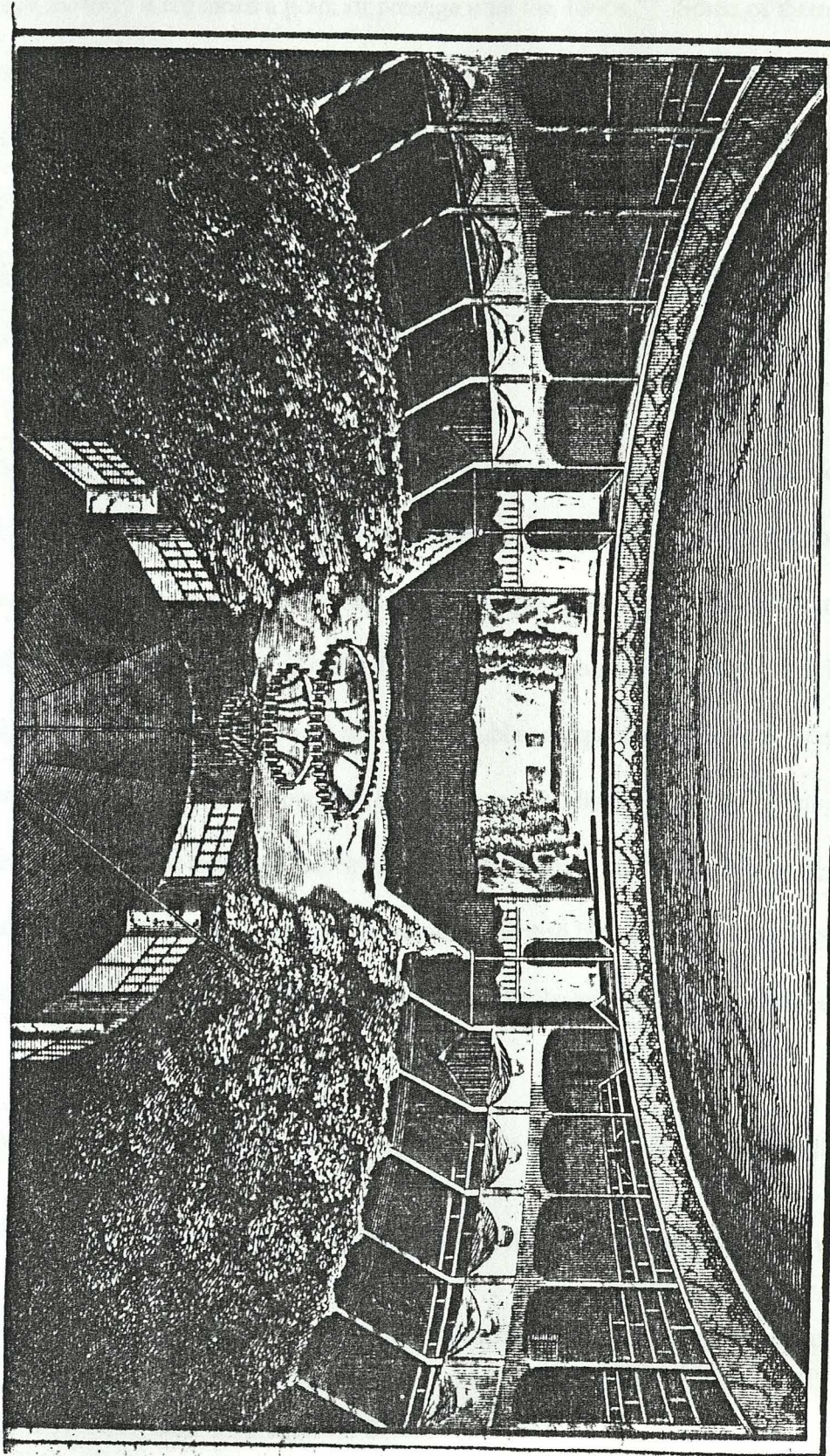
⁹⁷ *Ibid.* vol. 1, items 366 (h.d. 22 Mar. 1785) and 647 (16 Apr. 1785); vol. 3, item 1555 (n.d.).

⁹⁸ Samuel Pepys had complained about it in 1669: *Diary*, qtd. Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: OUP, 1987) 306.

⁹⁹ 26 Sept. 1789, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 988.

¹⁰⁰ *The Clown of London* 5 (1845): 4.

Fig. 4.13. Engraving of Astley's Royal Grove conversion, c. 1786. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 2.)



Astley's ROYAL GROVE & AMPHITHEATRE RIDING HOUSE,
Westminster Bridge.

1825, though for them it remained a point of prestige until the 1840s.¹⁰¹ Some of them used its bright attractiveness on the outside of the venue too, just as the front of the Amphitheatre had been illuminated for the king's birthday in 1801.¹⁰² Effects were no longer confined to the stage: the entire site could be transformed by night.¹⁰³ Gas brought out the full gaudy potential of the circus. The Astleian stage, meanwhile, was lit conventionally, that is, by footlights and sidelights concealed behind the wings, using the current fuel.

The industrial age shaped the circus in other ways. Because of its tight financial and design conditions, it pushed the boundaries of lightweight building technology: not only with the tent, but also in permanent circuses. Apart from the example of the Cirque National's iron skeleton ten years before the Crystal Palace, the Franconis developed an iron safety curtain in 1839; and in 1844 Batty unabashedly promoted the manufacturers of his new rubber stage covering which was intended "To give a general effect to this Grand Spectacle and more powerfully embody the Hunting, Leaping and Racing Scenes. . . ."¹⁰⁴ The history of the circus was built on developments in transport, exemplified by the blossoming of the US circus around the rail network. British circuses were usually on the periphery of towns; served for some by Hansom Cabs (Astley's and the Royal Circus were included on every tour

¹⁰¹ See bill, Powell's Circus Royal, Wood's Meadow, Dover, 7 Aug. 1843, Guildhall Lib., "Circus" file.

¹⁰² See Hone, *The Every-Day Book* 1185; h.d. 5 June 1801, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol 2., item 215 D.

¹⁰³ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 38, quotes a description of a Birmingham circus in the 1850s which, by contrast, looked dull and coarse by day.

¹⁰⁴ Bill, 25 Nov. 1844, Bod. John Johnson Colln., Folio Theatres A-C.

guide's list of standard fares) and for others by omnibus. From 1820 onwards the modest inhabitants of Greenwich and Deptford were ferried to Astley's by Matson's specially arranged "New Patent Coach," and this was joined by a company going to Paddington in the 1840s.¹⁰⁵ Obvious architectural manifestations of such arrangements included, from 1790, two unique lights outside the main box entrance of the Amphitheatre: "this prevents confusion," Astley advertised, "as every coachman is able to see his situation."¹⁰⁶ They were good advertisements in themselves. The third and fourth amphitheatres added a portico extending to the kerb for those alighting the "quadruple rows of carriages" to be seen there during a successful production.¹⁰⁷

Although strictly irrelevant to the performance, decoration was the aspect of architecture that most concerned theatre-goers. As a review of a crowded Royal Circus noted in 1786, the "neatness of the house, and the pretty effect, altogether seemed to be highly delicious to the company. . . ."¹⁰⁸ Astley's was repainted at least once every three years, and often annually during the busy decades around the turn of the century. This was made necessary not only by soot from candles and gas, or by contemporary paint: retail commerce had begun to introduce the regular image-change regardless of whether the existing livery had become superannuated.¹⁰⁹ Managers trusted it to boost attendance. In

¹⁰⁵ See above bill and one for 25 July 1820, TM Astley's file.

¹⁰⁶ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 13 D.

¹⁰⁷ C. 1820, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 1551.

¹⁰⁸ 16 Apr. 1786, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 786.

¹⁰⁹ Eighteenth-century shops were redecorated as frequently as theatres, and had complete refits every four or five years. John Styles, conversation with the author, 12 June 1992.

an end-of-season address in 1801, one of the performers gave the customary thanks to the audience on John Astley's behalf:

And for such patronage, he can declare,
 No pains, exertion, nor expense he'll spare;
 For when again this scene we come before,
 To hold your favour he will yet do more;
 The House, which now your presence deigns to grace,
 He hopes to show to you with a newer face. . . .¹¹⁰

On tour, Ducrow's artistes had to help redecorate some of the buildings they visited, as most ordinary circuses were in fact remarkably shabby.¹¹¹

Astley's underwent three broad modes of decoration. At first, the approach was that of the signpainter: the straightforward filling of space with images. The mural of the human pyramids or *Force d'Hercule* on the side 1770s Riding School (as shown by Capon's picture of the exterior); the show cloths; the equestrian carvings along the guttering--all had their stylistic parallels in the scenes from Shakespeare painted on the refreshment boxes surrounding the arena at Jubilee Gardens where Price performed in the 1760s, or even in Hayman's paintings in the booths at Vauxhall.¹¹² More importantly, they made clear the function of these curious new buildings. From the 1780s until the Regency the ethos of the *trompe l'oeil* took over, with painted effects progressing from foliage to mouldings. At the time George Saunders wrote in *A Treatise on Theatres* that "No carved work,

¹¹⁰ H.d. 17 Oct. 1800, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 203 E.

¹¹¹ See bill, "Ducrow's National Olympic Arena of Art! Leicester," 26 Oct. 1840, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot. 248 (cat. p.82).

¹¹² Smith/Capon, *Exterior of Astley's in 1777*, repr. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 1; Decastro, *Memoirs* 28; Hayman's paintings are now to be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

projecting ornaments, moldings, dentils, etc., of any kind should have place; the painter may here exert his talents."¹¹³ Protruberances distracted from the drama. From 1810 onwards, however, once theatre was resigned to opulent spectacle, there were genuine mouldings and the beginning of a greater play with materials.

Corresponding with this was a development in the imagery used. Initial designs were more or less relevant, or descriptive of the events inside: the front of the stables sported a painting of Mt. Cassel in Flanders, which was the location of a battle in which Astley had fought, while the apex was crowned by the carving of a standing equestrian.¹¹⁴ The Royal Circus--the first fresh, serious architectural essay on the genre--put a statue of Pegasus in the same place (fig. 4.14), beginning the refinement of such decorations into a series of mythological emblems. The horse became the dominant motif for European circuses, seen on painted ceilings, carved capitals, corbels and in the form of statues. Accompanying it were classical references, often to the Olympic Games, or chivalric or modern military motifs.¹¹⁵ (Into the nineteenth century the last often took the shape of elaborate imperial allegories). These represented the supposed roots of the modern circus, and reappeared in all its public imagery.

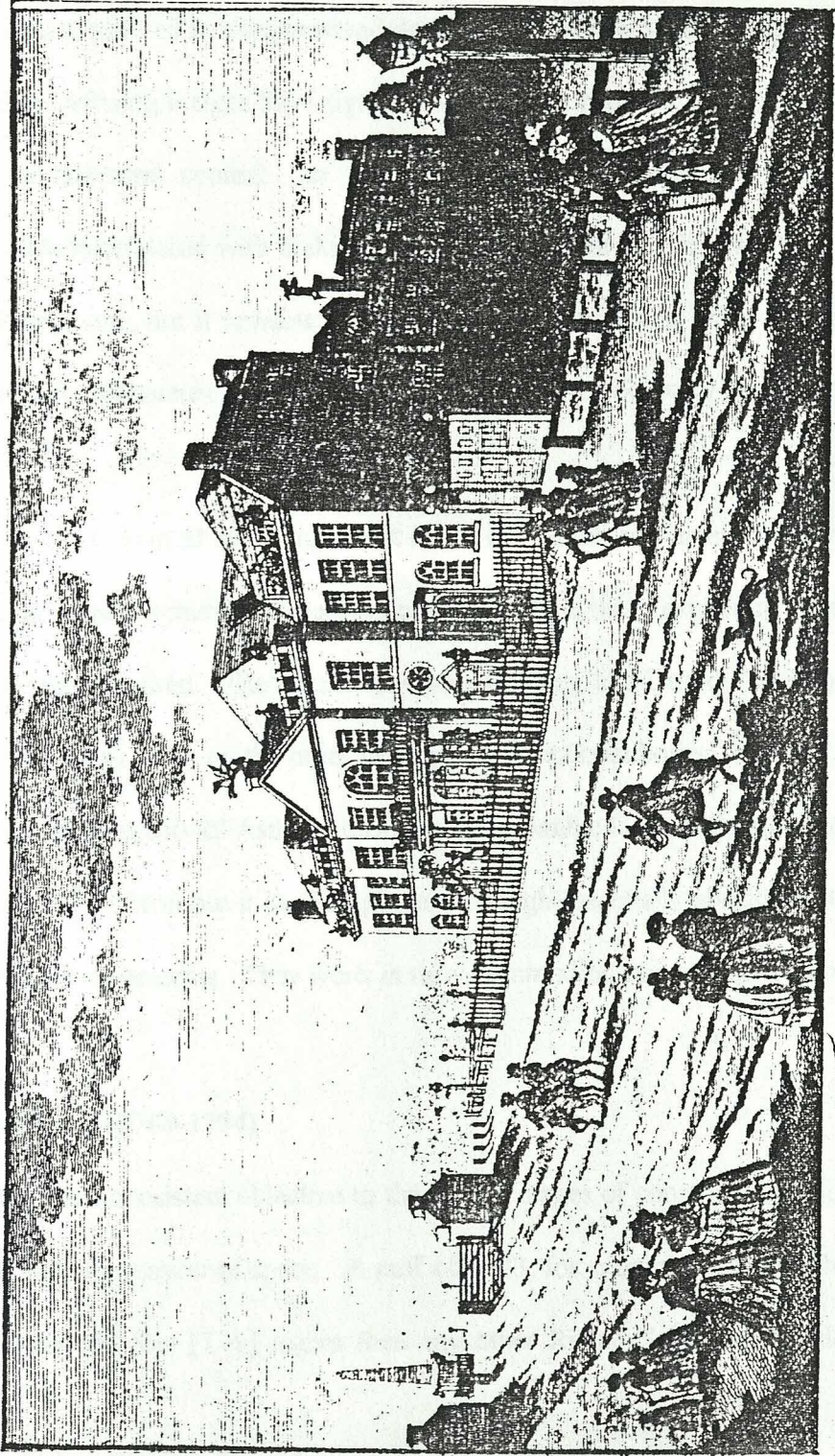
¹¹³ Qtd. Southern, *The Georgian Playhouse* 25.

¹¹⁴ *Morning Post* 20 March 1779, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 149; Smith/Capon, *Exterior of Astley's*. repr. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*.

¹¹⁵ This was the case with temporary structures too: Batty's at Dorset Gardens, Brighton announced that "The Amphitheatre and Circle will be decorated after the manner of the ancient Olympians." Bill, 19 Feb. 1844, Guildhall Lib., "Circus" file.

✓

*Fig. 4.14. Novosielski's (?) Royal Circus, c. 1782. Engraving (From Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*, vol. 1.)*



The ROYAL CIRCUS in St. Georges Fields.

Circuses had little coherent strategy for developing an architectural form; rather, their form was an advertising image, tailored to the perceived demands of the time while trying to overcome practical problems. Still, advertising images have significant long-term patterns, and these ones had to work in an established architectural context. In the early circus it is therefore possible to see how new consumer demands interrelated with building style. The structure of the very early riding school was discussed in chapter one, but it remains necessary to make something of an archaeological survey of subsequent Astleian architecture, on which research has hitherto been very patchy.

Once the genre started spreading, most major eighteenth and nineteenth-century circuses were loosely cast in the standard municipal-classical mould, if a little more exuberant in their decoration than strict municipal taste required. The innumerable smaller ones, like Ducrow's National Olympic Arena in Whitechapel (c.1834) were, on the other hand, purely functional boxes, rotundas or cones to contain a ring.¹¹⁶ For the long history of Astley's, however, it is possible to identify three successive styles from the key words used to promote it in each phase. Though essentially aboriginal, they reflected more formal architectural movements. They were, in turn: commodiousness; elegance; and gorgeousness.

i. Commodiousness (1768-1794)

If there was a consistent objective to the several stages of construction before the fire of 1794, it was to create an impression of space. A puff of 1783, for example, declared that Astley's was "36 feet [12 m] wider, 27 feet [7 m] higher than any other Riding School in London, which with the

¹¹⁶ See watercolour, Museum of London, repr. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 52.

addition of windows round the lanthorn at the top, renders it the most airy place of public exhibition in London."¹¹⁷ Climate control was important, but coolness was an especial asset in a summer theatre, so "the airiness of construction" was constantly reiterated.¹¹⁸ This reassured those apprehensive about the well-known problem of sweating plebs while sounding progressive, since recent ideas of healthy design for prisons and asylums stressed the values of light and ventilation.¹¹⁹

The puff of 1783 added that Astley has "built another in Paris, on the same plan, which is much admired by all the connoisseurs in architecture." This was the city's first circus. The *lettrist* Louis Petit de Bachaumont noted its "spacious riding area, the circumference furnished with several tiers of boxes," and, rather like Selva, thought that the "distinctiveness of the layout and decoration of this place, which does not begin to resemble any other, is itself enough to stimulate curiosity." He also described "Thirty candelabras" giving "around twelve hundred lights."¹²⁰ Later commentators recalled the "sixteen very slender columns, with Corinthian capitals, which supported a lightly concave ceiling, 11.3 metres high," of stretched canvas pinned at the edges by "trophies and lances."¹²¹ Although the

¹¹⁷ H.d. 2 July 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 483.

¹¹⁸ One puff said it was "to be rendered warm or cold at pleasure." H.d. 16 Apr. 1793, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 136 E.

¹¹⁹ E.g. see Edward Nickson, *The Actors Remonstrance, or Complaint: for the Silencing of their Profession . . .* (London, 1643); Joanna Innes, conversation with the author, 15 Apr. 1992.

¹²⁰ Entry for 3 Nov. 1783, Louis Petit de Bachaumont, *Mémoires Secrets, pour servir à l'histoire de la République des lettres en France depuis 1762 à nos jours (1789)* (London, 1789), qtd. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 54.

¹²¹ A. Donnet, *Architectonographie des Théâtres* 223, Robert Mallet-Stevens, "L'Architecture au Théâtre: Le Cirque Franconi," *Comoedia Illustré* 1 Sept. 1910, qtd. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 56. The Corinthian columns were probably derived from the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Paris amphitheatre was later deemed constricting and inadequate, Astley, who was also a cabinet-maker by trade, produced and commissioned architecture with its own idiosyncratic qualities. "Somebody taking notice of Astley's strange *Country House* on the other side of Westminster Bridge, with the *wooden superstructure*," wrote one newspaper in 1785 of his residence, Hercules Hall, "said it was like *Capt. Epilogue's* coat, and would *fit* nobody but him it was made for."¹²² Throughout its history the first London amphitheatre was acknowledged even by his enemies. "A fine cage without singing birds is of little use" jibed Hughes in 1790.¹²³ It attempted to embody consensus taste: after the refurbishment in 1792, a puff claimed "the beauties of the building leave an impression on all ranks."¹²⁴

The finest hour for the first amphitheatre was its conversion to the Royal Grove (1786-91: fig. 4.13). This was novel because it included the whole audience space in the stage illusion. "We are totally in the dark concerning Astley calling his place the Royal Grove;" teased a newspaper in April 1786, "some venture to say he has taken off the Flower Garden; others that he has planted trees in the Riding School, and some say it is a foreign Vauxhall."¹²⁵ A correspondent who "stole a peep" was "struck with surprise at being encircled with a most beautiful wood, behind which clouds rising discovered day break." The entire effect was achieved by *trompe l'oeil*, and there was praise for the artist, whose name was "Young, from the Academy at Dusseldorf."¹²⁶ Although this late efflorescence

¹²² H.d. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 740. Apparently a watercolour drawing of Hercules Hall exists in the Library Colln. of the Greater London Records Office.

¹²³ 7 May 1790, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 25 E.

¹²⁴ H.d. 17 Mar. 1792, *ibid.* item 178 C.

¹²⁵ 12 Apr. 1786, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 786.

¹²⁶ 13 Apr. 1786, *ibid.* item 780.

of Rococo may have first been tried in Paris, and pictorial evidence suggests it was still there in a reduced form in 1816, it related strongly to recent English picturesque landscaping under Humphrey Repton and 'Capability' Brown, with their fantasy-corners in country house gardens.¹²⁷ It also reflected the traditional pastoral and mythological setting of the pantomime. Ironically, as Capon's watercolours of the 1770s show, the Riding School was once set in a *natural* grove, but that landscape was now being lost as the vicinity was built up. The Royal Grove gave a rural dress to entertainments whose consumers were now primarily urban; a nostalgia soon also expressed in the programme by country dances, fêtes and pastoral dramatic themes. Within the circus' own tradition, too, the Grove's imitation of the sky recalled the original performances "under no roof but the canopy of heaven," while at the same time trying to reduce the susceptibility of the entertainments to the vagaries of nature and create an civilised, sacrosanct space.¹²⁸ It was not new, architecturally, to have the dome as the sky, but the major London circuses made express use of the idea. The Royal Circus, for instance, was rebuilt in 1806 with a ceiling painted with *putti* in a clouded firmament that was similar to the third Astley's.¹²⁹ All circuses were gathering-places: here they echoed some mythological and wooded past.

In 1782 the probable architect of the Royal Circus, the eminent Roman-born Michael Novosielski, added Palladian classicism to the formula.¹³⁰ Like Astley's his work was described as

¹²⁷ Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 47; J. D. Dugourc, "Vue du Cirque Olympique de M. M. Franconi," aquatint, in Mme. B . . . , née de V . . . L, *Les Animaux Savants, ou Exercices des Chevaux de M. M. Franconi, du Cerf Coco . . .* (Paris, 1816) 36.

¹²⁸ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 60.

¹²⁹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 220.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 20. Shortly afterwards Novosielski designed the alterations of the Italian Opera House, Haymarket: *Public Advertiser* 10 Oct. 1782.

"commodious," but it clearly emulated the patent theatres, whose prices the Royal Circus had of course originally intended to charge.¹³¹ The auditorium had thick Corinthian columns, and was straw-coloured, heightened with silver ballustrades and ornaments to reflect the lights: a common theatrical device which the circuses particularly liked. With its heavy portico, this scheme strongly influenced the remodelling of Astley's into the Royal Saloon in the winter of 1792-3. (The only apparent picture of the place at this time shows a squat building with a conical roof and a crudely classical, rectilinear façade.)¹³² Astley now wanted the status of a proper theatre.

There is little other evidence of the Royal Saloon conversions, except that "strength and accommodation seem[ed] to be the great objects," and that they were on a plan "totally different from any other place of public amusement in this kingdom."¹³³ This may have been--or have approached--the elliptical auditorium remarked upon in the second amphitheatre, and certainly perfected in the much-noted "egg" shape of the third, which looked circular from the inside.¹³⁴ Here the fatter two-thirds comprised the auditorium and circle, while the smaller third formed the orchestra and stage, thus solving the problem of accommodating a ring within an audience who also needed to see the stage beyond it. All now had a complete view of both performing areas, so the design was retained for the fourth amphitheatre, with the then greater importance of the stage reflected in the bigger bulge of

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 34-6.

¹³² Pack and Gavit, engraving (c. 1792 ?), Harvard Theatre Colln., repr. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 48.

¹³³ 17 Mar. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," item 140 C.

¹³⁴ Ackermann, *Microcosm of London* 19. Brayley, *Theatres of London* 65, described it as an "elongated lyre."

seating facing it. Both Covent Garden (1809) and Drury Lane (1818) were rebuilt elliptically after 1792, although the nearest example--Covent Garden--had a horseshoe shape that, in contradistinction to Astley's, was widest near the stage.¹³⁵

The pictorial evidence suggests that the Royal Saloon also incorporated the 'tepee' roof made from timber poles which Astley's employed in its next two rebuildings and the Olympic Pavilion of 1806.¹³⁶ This was simultaneously (1792) used by John Bill Ricketts for the circus that he exported to Philadelphia, and may have been developed by some early temporary circuses in Britain.¹³⁷

ii. Elegance (1795-1827)

The fire of 1794 and the building of the second amphitheatre (1795-1803) under Astley's close supervision gave him a chance to take up an urbane, sophisticated public face, expressed in such details as the Queen Anne windows and the curvilinear wrought iron lightstand (fig. 4.15). Houses now encompassed the Amphitheatre, yet it stood "much higher" than them.¹³⁸ It was probably a bigger building than before, near its ultimate size, with a remarkably deep stage. The interior had two ranks of boxes, with horse designs on the front, as well as a gallery.¹³⁹ Fashionably, it was wallpapered, and a puff promised "other ornaments." Price increases for the majority reflected the new level of quality and

¹³⁵ *Picture of London for 1818* 290.

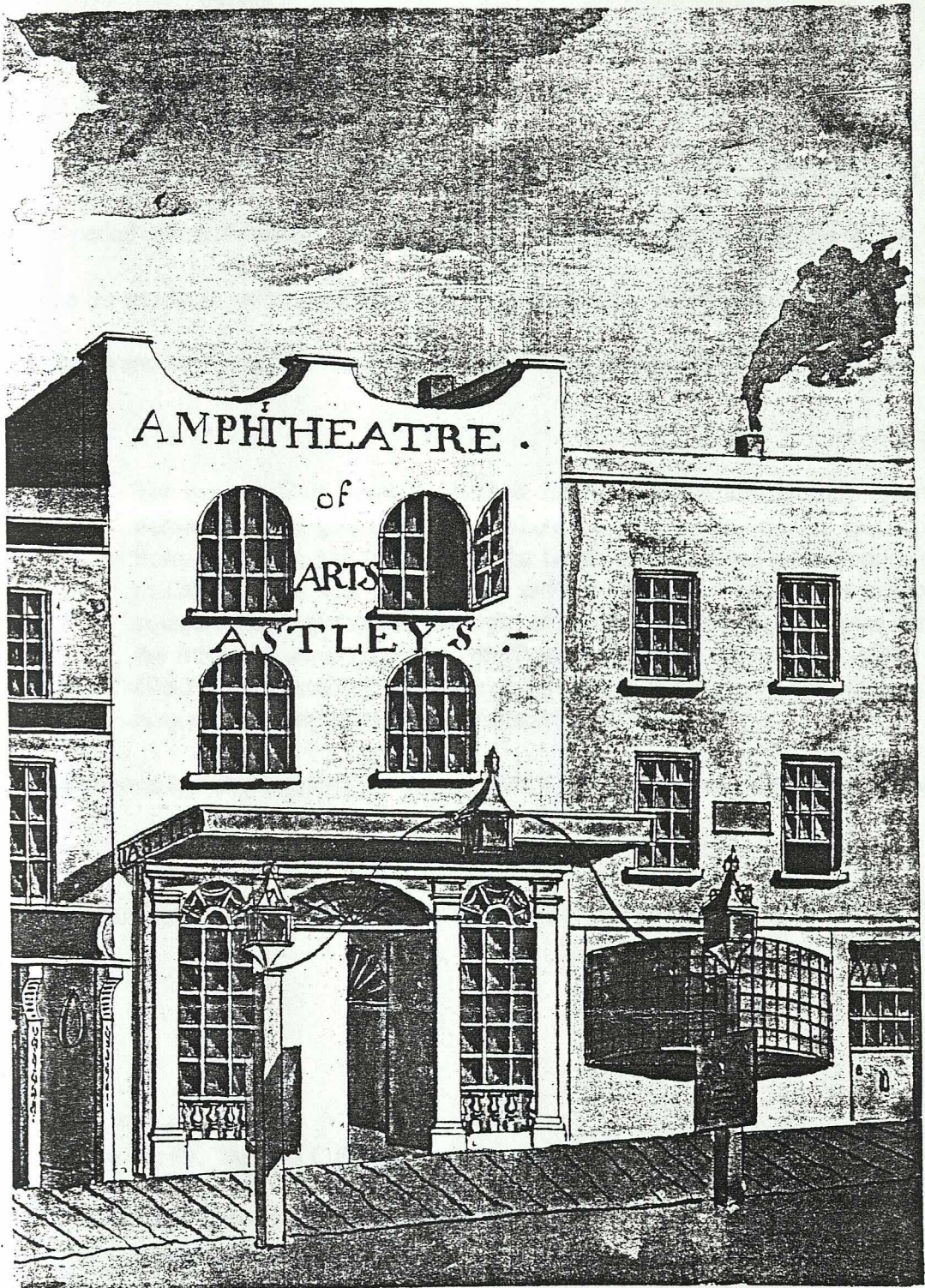
¹³⁶ Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 48.

¹³⁷ See illustration in Speaigt, *History of the Circus* 97.

¹³⁸ Ct., 2 Sept. 1803, TM Astley's File, env. "Fire at Theatre 1 September."

¹³⁹ See engraving, "Poney Race at Astley's Amphitheatre," c. 1795, Mander and Mitchenson Colln.

Fig. 4.15. Watercolour, possibly by John Henderson Grieve, of Astley's second Amphitheatre, c. 1795, actual size. One of three on Astleian topics, including the frontispiece to this thesis, in the John John Collection, Bodleian Library ("Circus" box 4.)



the cost of employing such specialists as "Mons. Dagotty and Family, Painters & Decorators to the King of Sardinia."¹⁴⁰

"Mr. Astley, jun. has made an entire new theatre," announced a review only six years later, during a period of reintensified competition when the Royal Circus was stealing the initiative in decoration as much as in its performances.¹⁴¹ The results, which began to rival the Circus in grandiosity, were evidence both of John Astley's flamboyant artistic management and his ruinous extravagance:

The new circle of boxes is enlarged, the fluted pillars are elegantly ornamented with mirror glass and gold alternately. There are eight or ten beautiful chandeliers pendant from the pillars; and the parts of the boxes are decorated with groupes of cupids in medallions on a light blue ground and gold borders. The roof is painted in twelve compartments representing the signs of the Zodiac. The seasons in the corners, and in the front Britannia, receiving contributions from the four corners of the earth. The effect is heightened by the blaze of light which is thrown on the whole. This theatre now presents one of the finest spectacles in Europe. . . .¹⁴²

The detailed coverage also suggests the interest that was always commanded by the goings-on across the water. When the place burnt down in 1803 it was remembered in more than one obituary as Astley's "elegant little theatre," though "little" was more because of its status than its size.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ 4 May 1795, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 109 A.

¹⁴¹ The Circus had recently introduced equestrian pantomimes, and in 1799 had been redecorated "in a style completely *nouvelle*" (*ibid.* item 174 C).

¹⁴² 7 Apr. 1801, *ibid.* item 207 A.

¹⁴³ See cts., 1803, TM Astley's file, env. "Fire at Theatre 1 September."

John Astley took over the "fanciful" design of the third amphitheatre (1804-1842) and the scenic director, John Henderson Grieve, did the decorations. In both structure and the latter it was universally reckoned to surpass its predecessors, although in 1805, only a year after it was opened, it was redecorated to compete with the rebuilding of the Royal Circus. As a hint, perhaps, of a desire for new sensations, it was then puffed as "an umbrageous retreat."¹⁴⁴ This was Astley's best-documented amphitheatre, which was coterminous with Ducrow's life and career (its burning in 1842 supposedly causing his madness and death).¹⁴⁵ Ackermann commended it as "the most airy, and in some respects the most beautiful of any in this great metropolis" (fig. 4.16). At 130 ft. (39.6 m) wide behind the proscenium, the stage was the largest in England, and as it contained a ring the auditorium--up to 65 ft. (19.8 m) in diameter--was bigger than that of any other minor, or indeed Covent Garden.¹⁴⁶ Its early colour-scheme, mainly cool green trimmed with gold and crimson, was customary for the theatre and currently similar to the above house.¹⁴⁷ (Green was a colour much associated with the theatre: viz the Green Room where audience and performers would mingle.) Unlike the patent houses, though, it was built to no obvious classical architectural order. The lights were the chief glory of the place: a "magnificent" central glass chandelier containing fifty oil lamps--a gift from the Duke of York--was assisted by sixteen smaller ones, each with six candles.¹⁴⁸ The front (fig. 1.6) was "plain," of stuccoed

¹⁴⁴ 15 Apr. 1805, BL "Astley' Cuttings," vol. 3, item 1079.

¹⁴⁵ In fact the breakdown was probably due to accumulated illness and bereavements. See Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 347.

¹⁴⁶ Ackermann, *Microcosm of London* 19.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 212.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 20.

Fig. 4.16. Pugin and Rowlandson's well known lithograph of the third Astley's in 1808, in Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (4°, Bodleian Library.)

... with the portico of wood, in front of which was later added the royal coat of arms.



brick with the portico of wood, in front of which was later added the royal coat of arms.¹⁴⁹ "Astley's" in raised letters stood out from the pediment. While this served the pit and boxes, the gallery entrance was, typically, 30 yards (27 m) past some houses down the road.¹⁵⁰

The contemporaneous rebuilding of the Royal Circus was also well received.¹⁵¹ "The front," wrote one magisterial architect in a later survey of London, ". . . is more theatrical and scene-painter-like than architectural; but it is appropriate, and does not offend the canons of taste." (The ring inside did, however, and the writer was glad that it had recently been removed.) The ill-fated man in charge had been Rudolph Cabanell, "an Italian artist of great knowledge of theatrical buildings," alongside his more celebrated son Rudolph junior.¹⁵² They had been Astley's machinists and probable scene designers between 1781 and 1791, before moving to the Haymarket.¹⁵³ Its plan was more modern in having a dress circle and two galleries, although the auditorium remained circular and hence the view from the boxes was poor (fig. 4.17). Decorations included classical motifs in relief, and lattice work on the boxes as at Drury Lane.

¹⁴⁹ For prints of these features in the 1820s see Brayley, *Theatres of London* 58; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 214.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Allen, *History of the Counties of Surrey and Sussex* (London, 1829) 351.

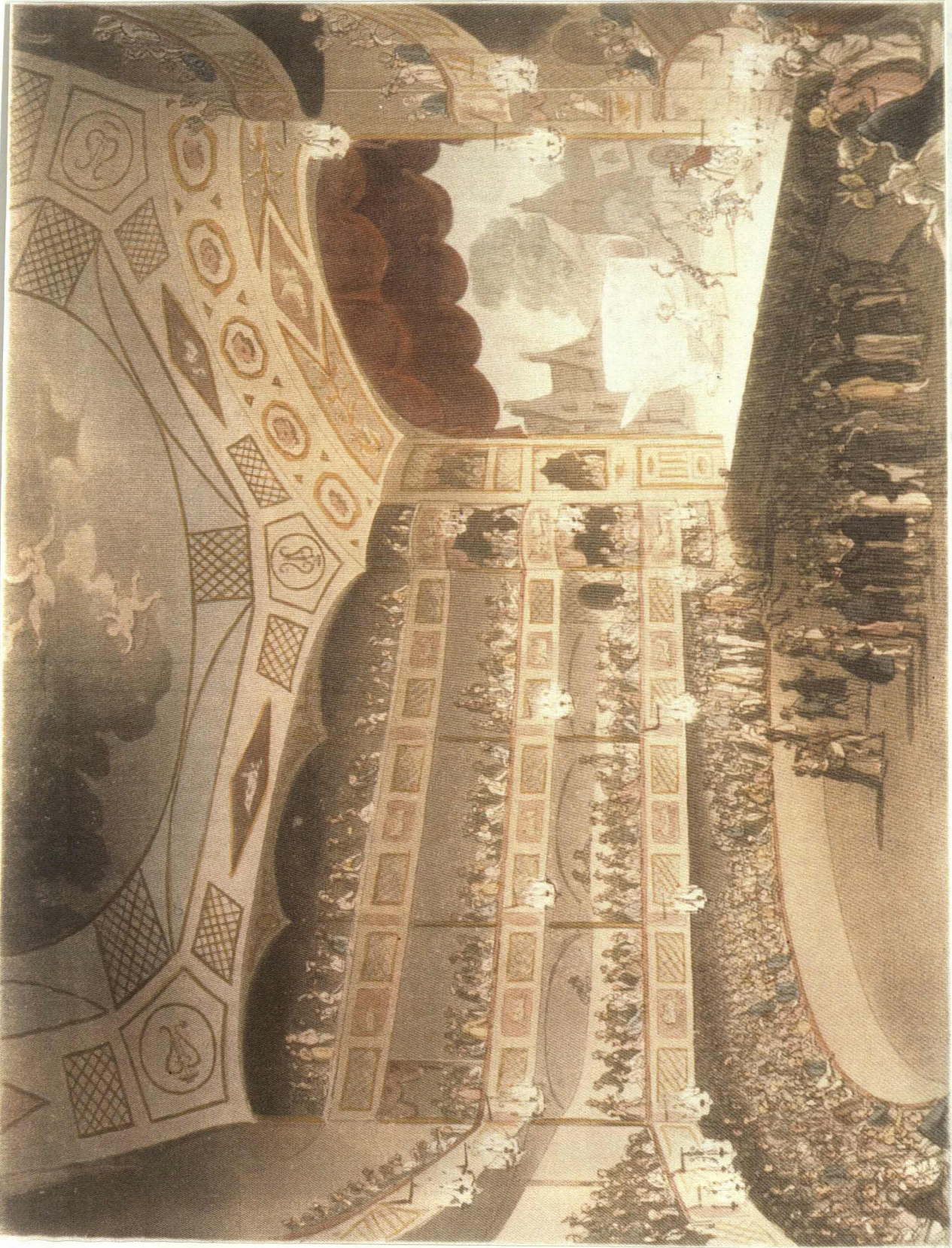
¹⁵¹ For an aquatint of the exterior see Brayley, *Theatres of London* 67.

¹⁵² Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements* 134-5. Dibdin the Younger notes that Cabanell junior, part of a theatrical family, also designed the Coburg (Old Vic) in 1816, and the renovations of Sadler's Wells in 1801: *Memoirs* 44.

¹⁵³ "Extract from a letter from Dublin," 10 Feb. 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 85 C.

Fig. 4.17. Pugin and Rowlandson: the second Royal Circus in 1808. Note the audience in the ring, who would have moved onto the stage during the horsemanship. (From Ackermann, *Microcosm of London*.)

Another product of these years (Fig. 17) had a tin roof as



As another product of these years, Astley's Olympic Pavilion (1806: fig. 4.18) had a tin roof as a token precaution against fire.¹⁵⁴ Between 1790 and 1810 nearly all the London playhouses had burnt down, bringing a constant twitchiness to audiences. (Some years before the fatal stampede of the Sadler's Wells Horror in 1807, a crowd at the Amphitheatre had been "thrown into a consternation for three or four minutes" when there was a small fire at a slaughterhouse next door.)¹⁵⁵ The rest of the Olympic Pavilion, however, was wooden; a masterpiece of improvisation built from the timbers of the *Ville de Paris* (or "Wheel de Parry," as Astley reputedly called it), a recent naval prize. Any brickwork was "very trifling."¹⁵⁶ Resources were stretched by recent events, but Astley, who directed the builders recruited from a nearby pub, was determined to outdo the winter houses and ensured a strengthened stage which could bear the weight of 100 horses if necessary. It was, however, less than half the size of the Amphitheatre's, while the capacity of the house was probably less than two-thirds that of its sister.¹⁵⁷ The gallery was merely a space at the back of the pit, only slightly elevated, and contained by an iron cage. In words which reveal a partial intention of theatre architecture, Decastro noted that this was "a mode of classing an audience new to the metropolis."¹⁵⁸ The tiers of boxes were slotted into the joints that once carried the tiers of guns. In spite of the supposed acoustic properties of the conical tin roof, there "was no orchestra, but a small, divided band of musicians [who] occupied the

¹⁵⁴ For an aquatint of the curiously low, makeshift-looking exterior on a corner site with its tented, pavilion-like entrance see Daniel Havell, aquatint, Brayley, *Theatres of London* 88.

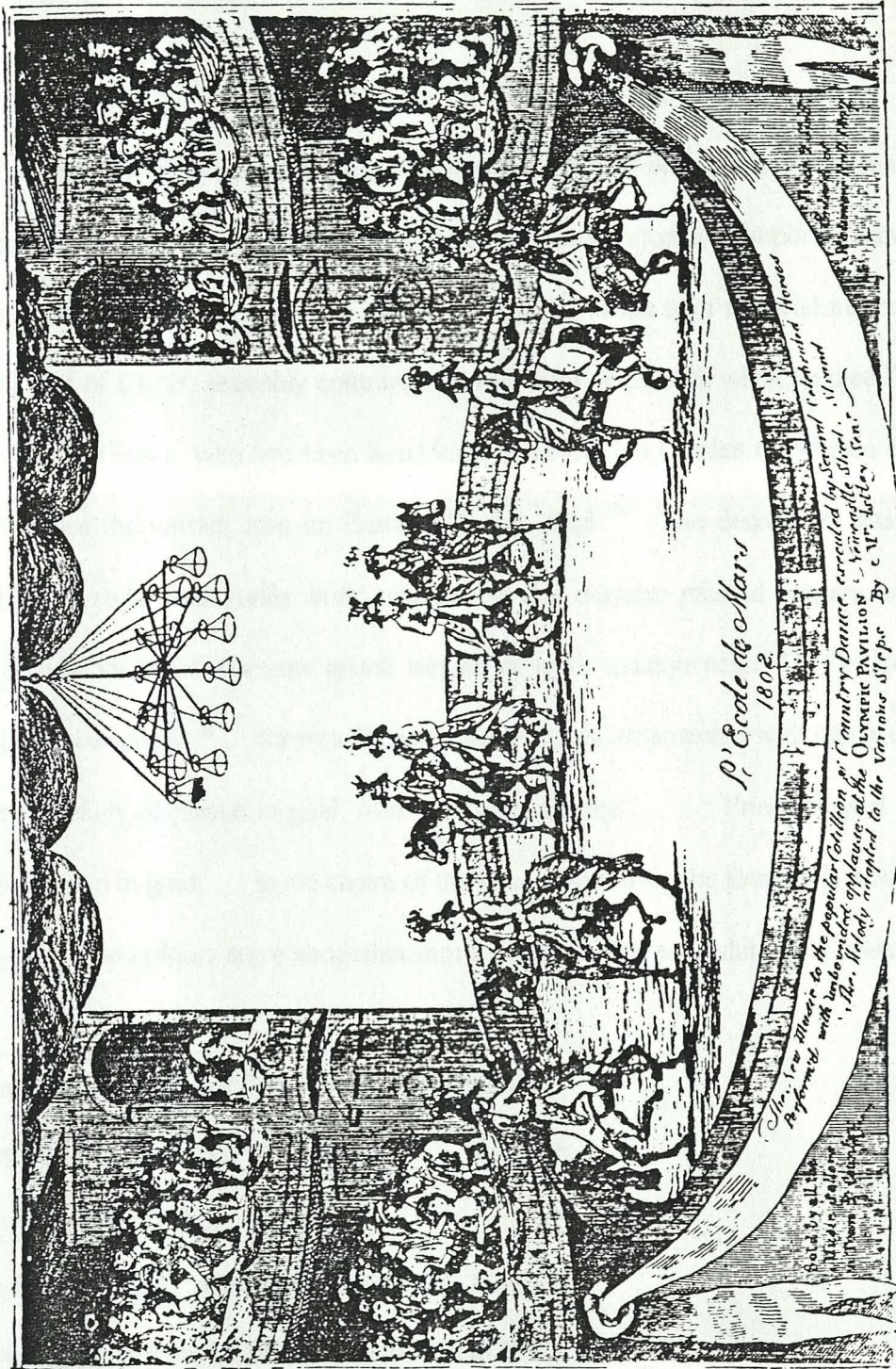
¹⁵⁵ C. 1800, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 1547.

¹⁵⁶ Raymond, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston* 77-80.

¹⁵⁷ BL Th. Cts. 60, c. 1812.

¹⁵⁸ Decastro, *Memoirs* 103.

Fig. 4.18. Engraved frontispiece to sheet music from Astley's Olympic Pavilion, showing the interior. (From Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*, vol. 1.)



L'ÉCOLE DE MARS, 1802

The new music to the popular Cotillon and Country Dance executed by several celebrated horses, performed with unbounded applause at the Olympic Pavilion, Newcastle Street, Strand. The melody adapted to the various steps by Mr. Philip Astley, senr.

stage-boxes, on each side of the house, and appeared very like one royal party fiddling at the other."¹⁵⁹

Having flopped immediately, the Olympic Pavilion was also redecorated after a year.¹⁶⁰

Signs of a more exuberant Regency taste came to the Amphitheatre in 1810, when the proscenium was "tastefully enriched" and the boxes given gilded ornaments on a green ground.¹⁶¹ The major refit of 1817-18, which included a widening of the auditorium and important new stage facilities, was then an attempt by John Astley to spend his way out of his own financial mismanagement. The huge total cost of £4,000 probably contributed to his debt of £8,000 when he died.¹⁶² Nevertheless, John Henderson Grieve, who had been hired back from Covent Garden to oversee the job, was duly applauded when the curtain rose on Easter Monday 1818.¹⁶³ The decoration was now in a finely moulded Adam style, with trellis work, and laurels and crimson painted drapery on the boxes (fig. 4.19). Vertical 'loftiness' was now prized instead of mere spaciousness.¹⁶⁴ "The new Proscenium," enthused one newspaper, ". . . forms a *Picture Frame*, richly ornamented with oak leaves, rosetts [*sic*], reeds &c. tastefully displayed in gold; over the tablet are the . . . Prince Regent and the Duke of York's Arms, also in gold; . . . in the centre of the Proscenium over the foot lights is Apollo's head, with rays in gold." The colours were altogether more varied: lemon and white now prevailed, relieved by,

¹⁵⁹ Raymond, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston* 80.

¹⁶⁰ Sept. 1807, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 145.

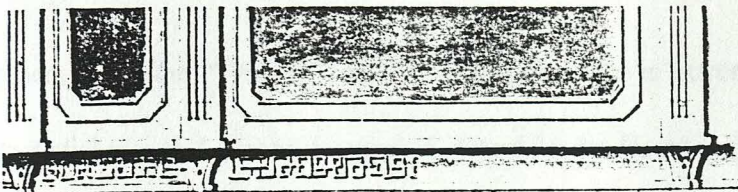
¹⁶¹ *Morning Post* 24 Apr. 1810.

¹⁶² 14 Oct. 1823, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 888.

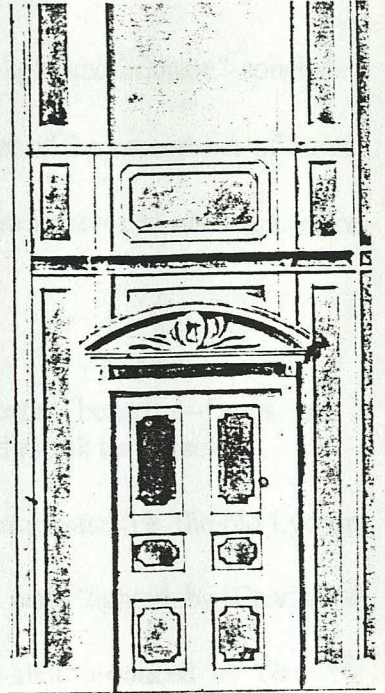
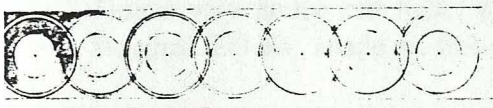
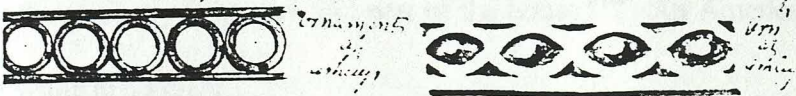
¹⁶³ See full description, 24 Mar. 1818, *ibid.* item 698.

¹⁶⁴ See annotations, *ibid.*

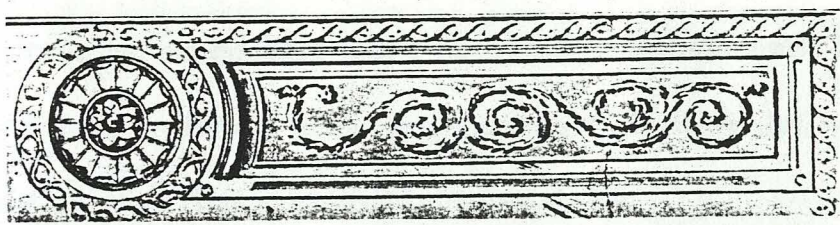
Fig. 4.19. Drawings and notes on Astley's interior decoration, c. 1820. Possibly made by James Winston, whose signature appears in the bottom right-hand corner, as part of a refit. The notes praise the scroll work on the pilasters as "the best executed thing I ever saw-- and [it] has a rich & noble appearance." (Museum of London, in Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 50.)



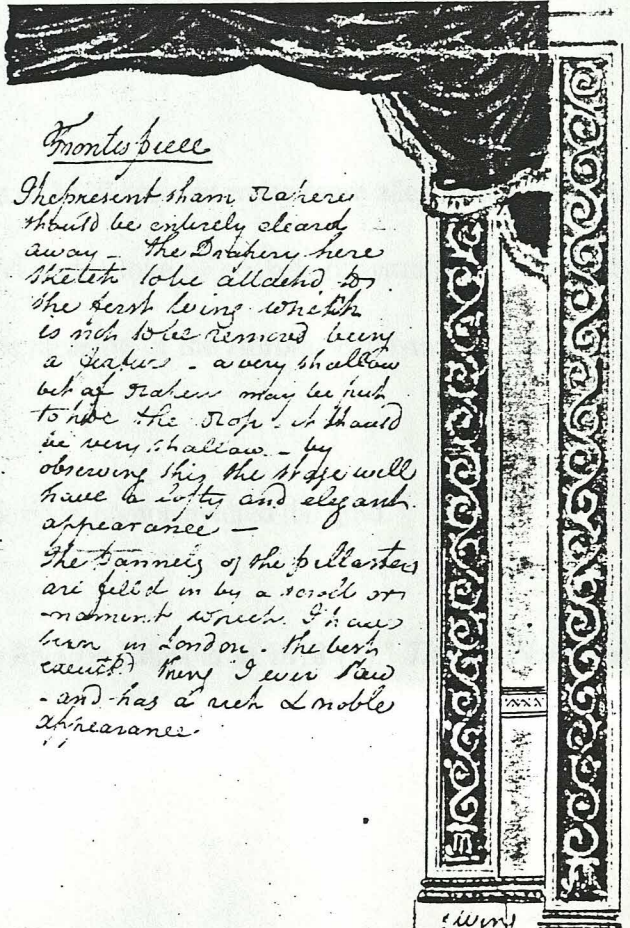
The front of ceiling boxes at the main theatre



These doors are at
theater



In the other sketch
 No 1. Order to go all round send
 one the exact length I should
 think about - 52 feet
 No 2. A pair of very handsome
 cut lustres - which I did
 not know till lately was
 in the purchase



Fronts piece

The present sham facade
 should be entirely cleared
 away - The Dorsum here
 should be altered to
 the best living which
 is rich to be removed being
 a facade - a very shallow
 but of facade may be put
 to rise the steps - it should
 be very shallow - by
 observing this the steps will
 have a lofty and elegant
 appearance -
 The banners of the pillars
 are filled in by a scroll or
 ornament which I have
 seen in London - the best
 executed thing I ever saw
 - and has a rich & noble
 appearance

among others, azure and "Prince's" blue.¹⁶⁵ "Its appearance is extremely light and brilliant," concluded a more impartial report, ". . . and a range of *Patent Moon Lustres*, in front of the second tier of boxes, shed a soft and silvery light over that part of the house."¹⁶⁶ An American impresario visiting London that year wrote in his diary:

House very pretty and lights by gas--Chandelier in Center, beautiful--Davis said it weighed 500 lbs. Made me free of the House and showed me all his horses.

Astley's compared favourably with the others, especially the English Opera House (i.e. the old Lyceum Theatre). He noted that the Surrey (previously the Royal Circus) was "lighted by Candles & Chandeliers--no comparison between the effect produced by them & that produced by Gas."¹⁶⁷ Astley's conversion corresponded with a more opulent aesthetic visible in the entertainments, the graphics and the prolificness of the programme itself; an image that was to be expected of an established institution. Thus it remained for the next decade.

iii. Gorgeousness (1828-43)

Rudolph Cabanell junior's winter decorations of 1828 brought many more allegorical figures to suit the still growing taste for ornament and a pre-Victorian love of pockets of narrative.¹⁶⁸ As with Ducrow's acts in the ring, a bill proudly explained the meaning of the Aurora, Zephyrs and others that

¹⁶⁵ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 698. Much silver complemented the gold.

¹⁶⁶ 27 Oct. 1819, *ibid.* item 779.

¹⁶⁷ Philip H. Highfill, "Edmund Simpson's Talent Raid on England in 1818 (3)," *Theatre Notebook* 13 (1958-9): 7-14.

¹⁶⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 44.

were added to the proscenium. The lobbies and corridors were crowded with "Niches occupied by the Muses" too, though the overall style remained one of "freshness." Ducrow and West intended to give the impression of luxury: "By these measures it is the object of the Proprietors to prove themselves worthy of the unbounded Patronage which has ever been conferred on them," they declared, adding that Astley's was esteemed not only throughout the capital but also Europe.¹⁶⁹

These developments were crowned in 1832 when they spent "an immense sum of Money" on a still richer but necessary refurbishment, with marble pilasters, satin, mirror work, arabesques and Herculean imagery all around the house.¹⁷⁰ The second tier of boxes was "*Ornamented with Danson's Beautiful Hippodramatic PANORAMA OF ALEXANDER's TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO BABYLON !*" while the ceiling, "in the most Highly Finished Style," bore "a Series of Paintings, representing the **Birth, Training, Passions and Death** of the **Horse**, with Mythological Attributes." Especially for lighting the horsemanship there was a "NEW DOUBLE VARIEGATED REVOLVING CRYSTAL EXPANDING CHANDELIER, . . . bearing **80 Glittering Jets**; . . . enclosed in a **Medium emblematic of the Nations**, which Ascending and Descending, produces a Novel and Brilliant Illusion." Serious reviewers gave due praise, if not for the drama.¹⁷¹

In the circus in general this taste was also expressed in the attempt to recreate medieval splendour, and the manufacture of a chivalric heritage for the circus. In 1827 one commentator

¹⁶⁹ Bill, 7 Apr. 1828, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷⁰ Bill, 23 Apr. 1832, *ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Ct., 28 Apr. 1832, *ibid.*

thought the auditorium of the Cirque National in Paris resembled "the interior of a rich and vast draped tent, brocaded with gold and silver, as one would have seen in times of chivalry at fêtes and tournaments."¹⁷² The contemporary Rotunda circus in Blackfriars Road had a similar ceiling of flounced crimson.¹⁷³ More often, however, gorgeousness was expressed in Roman classicism; the other of the two main historical options for nineteenth-century public architecture, and indeed for the whole packaging of the current circus. By the 1840s many of the entertainments too were labelled as "Classical" (a trend carried to its height by Batty's Hippodrome for chariots in 1851).¹⁷⁴

Astley's fourth amphitheatre of 1843, "built by Mr. Buckwell, jun., of Brighton," from plans and models by Dicky Usher, the clown, was 148 ft. (45 m) long and included "an area larger than any other theatre in London."¹⁷⁵ It was an essay in Victorian Baroque, though incorporating much of the "lofty and elegant appearance" of its predecessor. The same year, Cornwall's Yorkshire Stingo in Paddington was elaborately refurbished in a very similar style; in flat contradiction of the concerns of the 1780s, and with the Victorian fear of draughts, the interior was "thoroughly lined with drapery, to prevent the admission of air."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Anon., qtd. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 62.

¹⁷³ See *M. Dupont Riding 6 Horses at Cooke's . . .*, litho, c. 1827, BL Th. Cts. 50, vol. 1, item 26.

¹⁷⁴ E.g. bill, 15 May 1843, Guildhall Lib., "Astley's" file.

¹⁷⁵ Ct. (and see illn.), *Illustrated London News* 1 Apr. 1843, TM Stone Colln., "Astley's" box.

¹⁷⁶ Bill, with full description of interior, "Cornwall's Royal National Arena of Arts," 17 Apr. 1843, Guildhall Lib., "Circus" file. The style had, however, not changed much since the 1832 refurbishment of Astley's.

III. Staging the Circus

For aesthetic reasons that will be discussed in the next chapter, painted scenery was also considered important enough to be specially applauded.¹⁷⁷ There was a different way of appreciation, in which one would sit, watch and discuss the achievements of painters wherever they appeared, rather than privately register them. Although relatively poorly paid and of a low status amongst other artists, scene painting was not a subordinate theatrical art, but valued almost as a performance itself.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, it was thought especially valuable to the less cerebral classes at Astley's.

Once it gained a dramatic stage, Astley's joined the Royal Circus and other minors in offering a standard of painting little different to the patent houses; in fact there was a noticeable circulation of artists across the usual divide, and their efforts were criticised under the same criteria.¹⁷⁹ The Amphitheatre proved a stepping stone for some well known painters.¹⁸⁰ Early scene design (1781-91)

¹⁷⁷ For applause of Grieve's scenery, see Decastro, *Memoirs* 92.

¹⁷⁸ The leading painter Lupino was paid 2½ g. per week in 1805, which, though twice the wage of the average skilled worker, was less than a quarter that of the current leading actor. Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 69. For further details on conditions, etc., and sections on each London theatre, see Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981); for background see her *Short History of Scene Design in Great Britain* (London, 1976); Richard Southern, *Changeable Scenery: Its Origin and Development in the British Theatre* (London: Faber, 1952).

¹⁷⁹ E.g. one 1784 reviewer of the Royal Circus thought some scenery was not quite "agreeable to the doctrine of perspective." *Morning Chronicle* 28 June 1784, TM Astley's file.

¹⁸⁰ For some of those in circulation see Rosenfeld and Edward Croft-Murray, "A Checklist of Scene Painters working in Great Britain and Ireland in the Eighteenth Century," *Theatre Notebook* vol. 19 (1964-5): 6-20, 49-64, 102-13, 133-45; vol. 20 (1965-6): 36-44, 69-72, 113-18. Determining Astley's early painters is, however, difficult, because they were not credited on bills before 1820.

was probably carried out by the machinists, "Messrs. Cabanell, Father & Son."¹⁸¹ Evidence of John Astley's greater attention to the craft comes from 1794, when he advertised for "a good scene painter, who will punctually attend the usual and ordinary hours of work," to add to his likely team of two.¹⁸² In the words of one puff, the recent wartime wave of realistic battle re-enactments "evidently afford[ed] a fine field for a display of those scenic abilities which Astley and the Artists which he employs. . . unquestionably possess."¹⁸³ The new recruit was John Henderson Grieve (1770-1845), who was noted in a serious review of 1802 as "an artist of very superior abilities," before he moved on to Covent Garden in 1807 following his achievements in *The Brave Cossack*.¹⁸⁴ His were the only designs known to have survived from Astley's.¹⁸⁵ Around the same time John Astley scouted out the talents of the young David Cox (1783-1859), who later became a highly popular painter of Turner-esque landscapes. But having been drawn to Lambeth from the slums of his native Birmingham, Cox found Astley's vacancies already filled and was forced to seek solace with his future wife, the daughter of his landlady, in his lodgings behind the Amphitheatre.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ 10 Feb. 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 85 C.

¹⁸² 19 Apr. 1794, *ibid.* item 92 C.

¹⁸³ Notice of *The Fall of Landrecy*, 1794, BL Th. Cts. 60. By 1796 the Amphitheatre was being specifically puffed as the resort of "those who have a relish for scenic exhibitions" (26 Apr. 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 128 C).

¹⁸⁴ Ct. from dramatic periodical, 1802, *ibid.* item 232 C. One of his sons, William (1800-44), succeeded Stanfield (below) as *doyen* of English scene painting, and the other, Thomas (1799-1882), painted at Astley's in the 1870s.

¹⁸⁵ Mainly in the BM Print Room, "Twenty-five Designs for Stage Scenery, some for Covent Garden, others for Astley's," 200 + C7, cited Paul Ranger, *"Terror and Pity reign in every Breast": Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres, 1750-1820* (London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1991) 173.

¹⁸⁶ N. Neal Solly, *Memoir of the Life of David Cox* (London, 1873) 12.

By far the most famous, however, was Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867), who worked there from 1819 to 1821 and went on to be scenic director at Drury Lane and accredited master of his profession in the early 1830s, before leaving it to concentrate on his marine paintings and become a fellow of the Royal Academy.¹⁸⁷ His grandest work at Astley's was for *Hippolyta Queen of the Amazons* in 1819.¹⁸⁸ Subsequent scenic successes under Ducrow's management included *Napoleon Buonaparte's Invasion of Russia* (1825); *Spain and Portugal*, witnessed by Mary Nichols in 1827; and *The Storming of Seringapatam* in 1829 with 37 scenes. By 1832 most critics were forced to admit that Astley's was always "superb in its spectacle" in general.¹⁸⁹ Apart from some early years under William Capon,¹⁹⁰ however (including those of the hit production of *The Destruction of the Bastille*),¹⁹¹ the Royal Circus "never," in Rosenfeld's words, "reached the scenic heights of Astley's," although a couple of reputable painters¹⁹² figured among its staff and £2,000 was spent on the scenery of one

¹⁸⁷ See Pieter van der Merwe and Roger Took, *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield* (London, 1979). His half-brother William (?1804-27) also worked at Astley's in 1826, and the two have mostly been confused: Van der Merwe, "The Stanfield Brothers," *Theatre Notebook* 30 (1976): 9-12.

¹⁸⁸ See bill, 19 Apr. 1819, TM Astley's file.

¹⁸⁹ Review, (*The Times* ?) 28 Apr. 1832, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Capon (1757-1827: Circus 1788-90), a painstaking antiquarian, was appointed scenic director of the new Drury Lane under John Philip Kemble in 1791.

¹⁹¹ See Saxon, "Capon, The Royal Circus and *The Destruction of the Bastille*," *Theatre Notebook* 28 (1974): 133-5.

¹⁹² Namely Thomas Greenwood, jr., and W. Marchbanks, intermittently between 1798 and 1814.

production.¹⁹³ During rival representations of the *Bastille* in 1789, *The World* newspaper felt obliged to speak out on behalf of the Circus, saying that Astley's scenery appeared better only because it "has been painted by *Michael Angelo, Raphael, Sir Godfrey Kneller and Vannecc*; and the Battlements by *Inigo Jones*. . . ." ¹⁹⁴

In the nineteenth century the turnover of painters in the minor theatres quickened (few stayed more than two years) as pressures increased, both in terms of the number of productions and the number of scenes required for each. Output had leaped with the minors' specialisation in melodrama and the incipient hippodrama around the turn of the century: much of the fierceness of the fire at Astley's in 1803 was because of the "immense quantity" of scenery, "chiefly painted in oil."¹⁹⁵

Scenery was not, however, exclusive to stage action: at Astley's in 1813, moving "Panoramic Views" illustrated *The Tailor's Journey to Brentford* enacted in the ring (an earlier pantomime claimed "twelve miles" worth of such vistas); and the scenic impulse spread to circuses without a stage for such embellishments.¹⁹⁶ In 1828 the New Olympic Circus, Hull, was showing a diorama, or painting with the illusion of depth, of the Battle of Navarino, with which it claimed to have toured the continent for

¹⁹³ This was for *The Magic Flute; Or, Harlequin Champion* in 1802 (Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 40).

¹⁹⁴ *The World* 10 Sept. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 49.

¹⁹⁵ Ct., TM Astley's file, env. "Fire at Theatre 1 September."

¹⁹⁶ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, items 525 (June 1813) and 185 (9 July 1808).

the past four years. "Each view" was "accompanied by a MILITARY BAND."¹⁹⁷ Several years later the ring at the Yorkshire Stingo was used for a fantastic pantomime set.¹⁹⁸

Besides its painters, Astley's shared with the patent theatres a debt to Phillippe Jaques de Loucherbourg and the dominant Romantic style.¹⁹⁹ Loucherbourg, Drury Lane's scenic designer under Garrick and Sheridan in the 1770s, was the single greatest influence on English scene design of the period and remained the inspiration at Astley's for nearly 50 years. His 'Eidosphusikon' of 1782, a miniature theatre of scenic effects near Leicester Square, fostered much of the nineteenth-century cult of the panorama. Scenes from it--a pastoral landscape, Niagara Falls, Milton's Satan arraying his troops by the fiery lake--were all taken up by Astley's as visual motifs.²⁰⁰ The "dragons and animals in conflict by the fiery lake, breathing fiery torrents," in a 1790 pantomime allowed some impressive pyrotechnics, for instance, while Niagara, later joined by other waterfalls, provided the peg for a whole play.²⁰¹ Scenes were acknowledged as "*à la Loucherbourg*" until 1798.²⁰² Spin-off devices which were well received at Astley's included the transparent painting of the late 1780s and early 90s (one

¹⁹⁷ Handbill, Aug. 1828, Guildhall Lib., "Circus" file.

¹⁹⁸ Bill, "Cornwall's Royal Circus," 27 Apr. 1843, Guildhall Lib., "Circus" file.

¹⁹⁹ See Ralph G. Allen, "The Stage Spectacles of Philip James de Loucherbourg," PhD diss., Yale U, 1960.

²⁰⁰ *Morning Post* 10 Apr. 1782.

²⁰¹ Scene from the *The Rival Sorcerers*, 16 Aug. 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 57 D. 1829 saw both *The Falls of Niagara* and Moncrieff's *The Cataract of the Ganges* played, the latter having already appeared at Drury Lane. See TM Astley's file.

²⁰² 13 Aug. 1798, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 167 F.

puff of a 1790 pantomime noted "the charming effect" of "The pile of building, illuminated with beautiful transparent paintings, and laid out in the Chinese taste"),²⁰³ and much later the unaccompanied "Drop Scene." One, painted by F. C. Turner, entitled *Damon Returning to Pythias*, served as a suitably melodramatic finale when hung on Astley's stage in 1830. It showed the "celebrated Pythagonian Philosopher" Damon, who had been condemned by his tyrant but allowed home to say farewell on the guarantee of his friend Pythias. Arriving back late "at full speed," he shouts to delay the execution when he sees Pythias already on the scaffold. Meanwhile Pythias, the bill informed the viewer, pronounces: "The Gods are propitious, my prayers have been heard. Damon could not conquer impossibilities, he will be here tomorrow, when my life shall have ransomed his." "The subject," explained the bill, ". . . is admirably chosen . . . being in perfect union with the equestrian tenor of this establishment."²⁰⁴

Although by the 1820s Astley's was paying homage to Romanticism for its scenic potential (billing its painters' work, for instance, as a "Romantic View in France: Ruins and a Stupendous Mountain Pass. Extraordinary Effects of Moonlight."), its subject-matter was peculiar to the establishment.²⁰⁵ Surviving evidence betrays an urge to convey exotic lushness regardless of the actual location, with, for example, palm forests in Tartary or in rugged mountain passes; geographical anomalies which are far from the detailed, empirical sublime for which which Stanfield's paintings

²⁰³ Scene in *Harlequin's Choice; Or, The Redoute Chinoise*, 5 Apr. 1790, *ibid.* item 49 C.

²⁰⁴ Bill, 12 Apr. 1830, TM Astley's file. This was part of a five-year theatrical fashion for dioramas etc., particularly those by Stanfield.

²⁰⁵ Bill, for *Maurice; or, the Mysterious Host*, 13/14 Dec. 1822, *ibid.*

became known.²⁰⁶ There was of course a preponderance of dark but not especially gothic-looking castles. Grieve's early design for *The Black Castle* at the Amphitheatre in 1799 shows a childlike, looming round tower and ornate battlements.²⁰⁷ Although the castle was set in appropriately hoary Romantic vegetation, this seems to have been a popularised version of Romanticism with echoes of Baroque eclecticism. Grieve's work for Astley's shows nothing of the refined Claudian landscape tradition which dictated scene-painting in general and his dynasty's other work in particular.²⁰⁸ It is direct and graphic.

Beneath the obvious parallels with the scene design of official drama, the circus' popular entertainment heritage was always visible in its gimmicky side. Before painted scenery there was animated tableau-machinery of the kind mentioned in chapter two; this was manufactured by outside craftsmen, like the jewelled "Chronoscope" automaton at Astley's in 1772 by "that ingenious Artist Mr. Martinet, of Clerkenwell," which had been displayed for the past six months at a goldsmith's in St. James'.²⁰⁹ Pantomime--which brought the art of transformation rather than animation--required a house machinist and two or three carpenters to engineer what were in effect commercial successors to the Jacobean court masque. One spectacle in honour of the Royal Wedding in 1794, for example, boasted much "curious machinery," ending with:

²⁰⁶ Reasonably accurate evidence is in the form of toy theatre and portraits, e.g. Skelt's *The Brigand and Mazeppa*, TM Stone Colln., boxes 164-5. For examples of Stanfield's approach see Van der Merwe, "Sketches for Scenery by Clarkson Stanfield: New Finds, 1980-84," *Theatre Notebook* 40 (1986): 22-9.

²⁰⁷ TM, Set Design Fiche 9/DG E1325-1924. Unfortunately this is not available for reproduction.

²⁰⁸ For examples of such work see *ibid.* and *passim*.

²⁰⁹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 79 and 80.

"The ENTRY of JOVE, with a Transformation of the BANQUET to JOVE'S AERIAL CAR, prior to his ascending, surrounded by Zephyr's . . . making in whole, near 200 square feet of MOVING CLOUDS, with beautiful TRANSPARENCIES, the Gift of the Deities, &c. &c."²¹⁰

Much of the machinery was highly experimental: not unusually, Astley's in 1811 apologised for a production delay "In consequence of an unforeseen accident having happened to the apparatus which conveys the flying harlequin round the dome of the theatre."²¹¹ On an opening night in 1796 a balance weight fell, bringing down the scenery of local landmarks: "Two arches of London-bridge, with the water-works," observed one reviewer, "were carried away upon a man's back; this circumstance set the house in a roar of laughter."²¹² For their hard-won successes, however, the machinist and carpenters were sometimes allowed benefits--normally the privilege of principal performers and management.

Although their basic techniques and features were the same as those of the patent theatres, special effects at Astley's received a unique boost with John Astley's conversion of the stage for *The Brave Cossack* in 1807, and the big hippodramas that followed. Sturdy aerial platforms running the width of the stage were installed, which could be dismantled by machinery and hand. "During exhibitions," noted Brayley, "they are masked by romantic scenery, bridges, forts, mountains, and other objects," so that approaching or skirmishing horsemen were integrated into the landscape.²¹³ By means of two columns and a drape, the size of the proscenium could also be adjusted. This was made more

²¹⁰ *England's Joy; Or, Hymen's Banquet*, 24 May 1794, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 76 B.

²¹¹ *Harlequin's Amour*, ct., 24 July 1811, TM Astley's file.

²¹² *The Marriage by Comedy; or, the Fashionable Playfolks* ("translated from the French of Mons. Beaumarchais") 17 May 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 113 D.

²¹³ Brayley, *Theatres of London* 66.

substantial by Grieve in 1818 so that, along with the stage doors and front boxes, it could be widened from 40 to 60 ft. (12.2 m to 18.3 m) in in the sight of the audience; a pioneering piece of large-scale ingenuity which was only equalled in 1842 when Joseph Hillier (formerly of Astley's) occupied Sadler's Wells and fitted a stage that disappeared "by mechanical means," revealing a "Grand and Extensive Amphitheatre."²¹⁴

The hippodramas provided plenty of scenes like the inevitable "burning of the castle with falling timbers &c. &c.," which, as some bemused critics observed, was always the most loudly applauded.²¹⁵ Scenic tricks invented in these circumstances included "Real falling snow" in *Lowina of Tobolskoi; Or, the Fatal Snowstorm* in 1817,²¹⁶ and a light-emitting moon in 1822 that could cast real, not painted, shadows through a window.²¹⁷ Not everybody was convinced by the special effects at Astley's, though: John Tenniel's backstage drawing of a performance *Mazeppa* in *Punch* in 1851, showing chatting supernumeraries, pasteboard wolves and a bedraggled model "bird of prey" surrounding an actor lying on an old nag, provides a disillusioning contrast to the exciting bill engraving of the same scene cited by Mary Nichols.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Bill, 8 Aug. 1842, BL Th. Cts. 50, item 137.

²¹⁵ Review ct., Easter Mon. 1813, TM Astley's file.

²¹⁶ Bill, 12 June 1817, *ibid.*

²¹⁷ For an account of the perceived dramatic importance of this see Dibdin, *Memoirs* 135.

²¹⁸ John Tenniel, cartoon, *Punch* vol. 21 (1851): 201. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 48, point out that this scene contained one of the most famously bathetic lines in melodrama: "Yon horrid bird of prey, now hovering over its destined victim, forewarns me that my torments soon shall end. - It brings me too, the sacred consolation that I have reached my native Tartary, to which its form and plumage are peculiar."

Fireworks had a strong ritual as well as spectacular value, and Astley specialised in them to lend him the image of provider of momentous entertainment for the city. The eighteenth century saw a great increase in pyrotechnic activity as it became a customary part of public popular entertainment, notably pleasure gardens, having once been banned under William III as a seditious spark to tumult as well as a nuisance. (In fact it remained restricted until the Gunpowder Act of 1860.)²¹⁹ As traditional signs of the sponsor's largesse, firework displays bore much commercial rivalry, and were hitched throughout the calendar to any suitable festivity: often military victories.

To demonstrate his loyalty Astley chose mainly royal events: his usual slot was the king's birthday on 4 June, which he began celebrating in 1783, moving outdoors onto Westminster Bridge with fireworks made by his machinists, the ubiquitous Cabanells, next year.²²⁰ (This was concomitant with Astley's interest in ballooning events.) In the assumption that the clientèle would be returning home over the bridge, the display was held after the evening's performance. Like equestrianism, however, fireworks did not only appeal to the classes north of the river, and in subsequent years the display was held beforehand to draw crowds into the Amphitheatre. At its peak in 1786, the show cost £100, and attracted a supposed 200,000 spectators.²²¹ Typically, it was on a large scale, recalling royal displays on the Thames in the earlier half of the century: one sun-wheel was 40 ft. (12 m) in diameter,

²¹⁹ Alan St. Hill Brock, *Pyrotechnics: The History and Art of Firework Making* (London: Daniel O'Connor, 1922).

²²⁰ "La Fête du Roy . . . By Signor Hangler [Hengler]" BL "Astley's Cuttings, vol. 1, items 475 (4 June 1783) and 554 (1784). "Messrs. Carbonell" were not acknowledged until 1788.

²²¹ 7 June 1786, *ibid.* item 825.

and an illuminated balustrade 78 ft. (23.8 m) long.²²² The devices, reflected in the river, were pictorial and allegorical, centering on such royal emblems as the king's arms changing five times into the English rose, or the Prince of Wales' feathers, and supplemented by fancies like the Animated Statue and the "Grotto changing to a superb *Visto, Parterre, and Cascade*," the scenes forming the "most delightful perspective."²²³ The assembled "multitude," reported *The Gazetteer* in 1788, responded with "repeated shouts and huzzas."²²⁴ The display was replaced by a regatta in 1793, since an "experiment" the previous year had blown up Astley's "Laboratory"--part of the notorious backstreet fireworks industry--of fourteen staff near the Magdalen asylum. The head carpenter, who had been "imprudently endeavouring to escape through a window," was killed under the rubble.²²⁵ Astley himself had been burnt on the site of an old leg-wound by collapsing fireworks in Dublin in 1788.²²⁶ Fireworks were also factors in two major circus fires: a danger not lessened by Astley's habit of laying out the gunpowder on cartridge paper all over Amphitheatre floor.²²⁷

Displays could in any case be regularly seen indoors at Astley's, where the unregulated state of pyrotechnics meant they could be used freely and be presented in several imaginative ways. "Philosophical fireworks" (simply gas jets coloured by the addition of chemicals), which were said to

²²² 4 June 1788, *ibid.* item 767.

²²³ In 1783, 1786, and 1791 (29 June, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 57 F) respectively.

²²⁴ 5 June, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 43.

²²⁵ 2 June 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 69 A.

²²⁶ 12 May 1788, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 812.

²²⁷ Decastro, *Memoirs* 61.

bring "out different colours, curiously representing nature" and to be "inoffensive" because they were smokeless, were shown in 1788 and again in 1796.²²⁸ The prevailing aesthetic was, however, one of delight in changing images and animation (in 1784, for instance, Astley was particularly proud of his "beautiful Piece representing a *Salamander* moving with great velocity in pursuit of a diamond"), and this opened up the possibility of storytelling with fireworks.²²⁹ In 1798 press releases claimed that John Astley "concieved the idea . . . of exhibiting Sir Sydney Smith's escape from France through the means of a body of fireworks."²³⁰ Scenes of this news event included "the Prison of the Temple at Paris . . . the Mob and confusion which favoured his Escape" and "Sir Sydney Smith making the Signal to the Argo Frigate. . . ."²³¹ Improved by recent gains in chemical knowledge, fireworks were treated as an artistic medium as much as objects of wonder.

More peculiar to this insouciant age was the dressing of living performers in fireworks, both indoors and outdoors. At the royal birthday show in 1788 Astley had given the orders for firing "mounted on a beautiful Arabian"--a charger ridden by Lord Heathfield at the Siege of Gibraltar and presented to him a few days before. The horse "indeed . . . seemed accustomed to stand heavy fire, for sometimes, though he was quite covered with the fireworks, yet he stood as firm as the Rock of

²²⁸ BL Lysons, "Collectanea" vol. 2, f. 64. The inventor, a Dutch physician who supposedly received accolades from Oxford University for it, branded Astley an impostor for his plagiarism: July 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 796. For technical details see Brock, *Pyrotechnics* 37.

²²⁹ 19 Apr. 1784, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 534.

²³⁰ 25 May 1798, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 166 F.

²³¹ 24 May 1798, *ibid.* item 163 A.

Gibraltar itself."²³² *The Siege of Gibraltar* became a popular piece for pyrotechnic representation at Astley's and elsewhere, while the *Gibraltar Charger* and its rider, with fireworks actually attached to them, went on to a career as the first of an act known as the "Salamander," alluding to the mythological fire-lizard.²³³ Such rites did not only demonstrate the training of horses. Elderly viewers might have recalled the visible torment of a bull when it was "turned loose with fireworks all over him" at the baiting ring of Hockley-in-the-Hole in Clerkenwell.²³⁴ In 1816, on the other hand, the famous rope-dancer Madame Saqui appeared enveloped in fireworks at Vauxhall Gardens.²³⁵ The bull--the sacrificial victim--was decorated with light, while the analogous figure of the heroic performer was transfigured by it. Taking on such patently dangerous costume was itself an act of bravado which elevated the status of the wearer.

The Amphitheatre became known for stage pyrotechnics that were enthusiastic rather than judicious. The techniques and their deployment were much the same throughout the theatres, but the minors were thought to rely on the thrill alone rather than its contribution to the realism of the play.²³⁶ Nonetheless, because of their often martial subject-matter they prided themselves on their convincing mastery of the craft. In the flurry of publicity that surrounded rival portrayals of the storming of the

²³² 5 June 1788, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 982.

²³³ E.g. ct. "Mlle. Le Hericher" etc., 1799, TM Astley's file.

²³⁴ Press ad., 1710, qtd. Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London* 23.

²³⁵ Allen, *History of Surrey and Sussex* 370. Saqui also appeared at Astley's: ct., 16 Oct. 1816, TM Astley's file.

²³⁶ For techniques see Ranger, *Terror and Pity* 44-9.

Bastille in 1789, Astley, presiding over a weaker drama than the Royal Circus, asserted that in his version "no unmilitary-like combustibles, such as Roman candles, Squibs, or Skyrocket-Stars were made use of. The idea of subduing a Fortress by such amusement for children is absurd."²³⁷ Always wary of critical whim, the Amphitheatre then changed its tune in the wake of what followed. "It has not unjustly been observed by many," remarked one puff in 1794, "that, in Stage representations of *Sieges, Naval Engagements, &c.* the *female* part of creation have too frequently been alarmed by the unnecessary discharge of too many *small arms, cannons* [etc.]. . . ." Astley's *Surrender of Landrecy* however, was "displayed in such a manner as not to disturb even an *infant* from *sleep*."²³⁸

Despite such arguments about dramatic appropriateness, the underlying appeal of fireworks remained simple. After a night at the Royal Circus in honour of the Prince of Wales' birthday in 1787, one newspaper recorded that "the Bengal lights, were lights indeed, . . . and the spectators expressed their astonishment at seeing each other as plain as when the Sun was in its Meridian. . . ."²³⁹ People remained sufficiently fascinated for them to continue as an everyday feature of popular entertainment until the end of the nineteenth century. As a form of spectacle, and hence rightful part of the circus genre, they were unsurpassed.

Circus costume at first entailed little specialisation. The earliest riding masters wore the costume of the established equestrian disciplines that they wanted to stress as their heritage--either

²³⁷ 30 Sept. 1789, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol 1, item 908.

²³⁸ 30 May 1794, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 95 C.

²³⁹ *Morning Herald* 14 Aug. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 46.

those of the jockey, like Johnston, or those of the cavalryman, like Astley. In the 1790s the hunting squire was added by the downmarket proprietor Abraham Saunders; in his trademark pastiche of the gentry he served as a model, along with the now similarly-dressed Astley, for many post-1860s ringmasters (others might wear military or evening dress, or a silk dressing-gown).²⁴⁰ Early prints suggest that women equestrians wore conventional recreational riding costumes, and after 1800 those adapted from the ballerina.²⁴¹

From the 1770s some men, however, wore practical, close-fitting predecessors of the leotard from devised from undergarments.²⁴² Tudor-style hose and other accoutrements were then added in the early nineteenth century, creating a distinctive acrobatic circus performer's costume. Other more fanciful costumes, notably the clown's, were borrowed directly from the theatre. The original military and jockey garb was in any case always a theatrical, rather than an authentic, version.

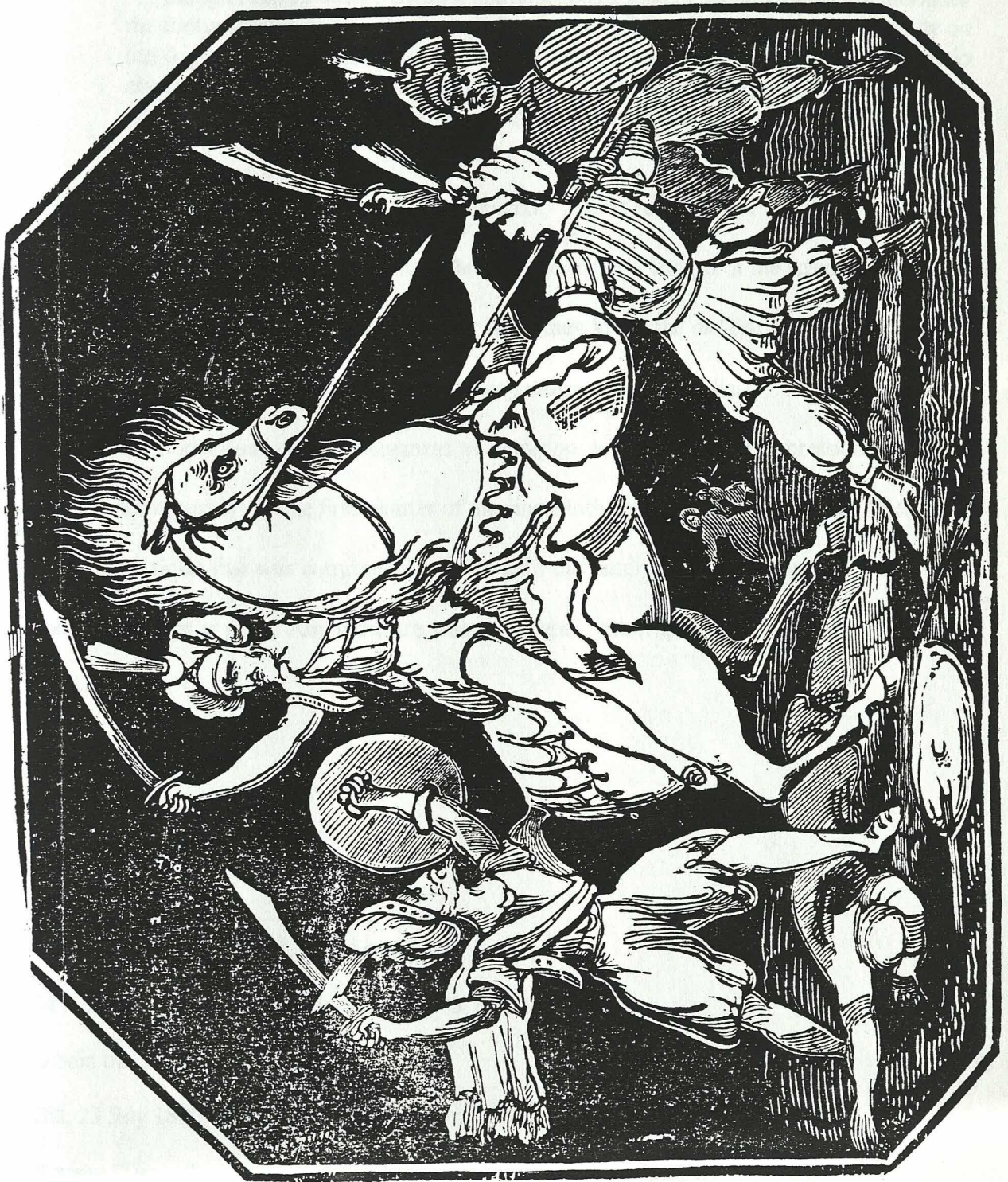
Thanks to the typical subjects of hippodrama, turbans, Tartar dress and knights' armour were especially prevalent in the Amphitheatre's stage wardrobe (fig. 4.20). Although the nineteenth-century Astley's duly claimed to portray "the exact Costume and Manners" of a particular time and place, it

²⁴⁰ See Speaight, *History of the Circus* ch. 16.

²⁴¹ E.g. see frontispiece to Hughes, *The Compleat Horseman*, repr. Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts* vol. 2: pl. 5.

²⁴² See Heinrich Freudweiler, *The Riding-Master and the Public in Zürich*, oils, 1783, private colln., repr. Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque* 46.

Fig. 4.20. Bill illustration (wood engraving) for a typically orientalist hippodrama at Astley's, c. 1840. Slightly reduced. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 2.)



could not escape the pedantry of those who thought that antiquarian accuracy was essential for the theatrical illusion.²⁴³ During a production of *The Secret Mine* in 1821, *The Times* smirked:

. . . though Russian duck trowsers, and short black gaiters, are an orthodox uniform for the footguards, they do not seem at all at home in Persian scenery--more especially on the legs of the Persian spahi. . . . Another odd peculiarity was the inverse ratio observed in the length of the beards and swords of the same soldiers. The swords were all on the peace establishment; the beards, of dimensions which were extravagant. . .

²⁴⁴

With Astley's such gaffes were, however, mostly indulged. "Never mind, Charles," Johannot reassured a furious Dibdin in 1797, when Astley's costume budget had made a farrago of the splendid procession he had planned. "[T]he audience know it isn't your fault; they know the *old one* pretty well . . . I told you your Neptunes and Knights of the Garter and *fine fellows* wouldn't do here."²⁴⁵ The main idea, at least in such lauded later costume extravaganzas as *Mazeppa*, was to create an impression of richness and realism, if not accuracy. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century Astley's was using "Real Steel Armour," not the tinsel that was common elsewhere until the latter half of the century.²⁴⁶ Still, what struck one commentator at the Amphitheatre was the overall "tinsel gorgeousness of the dresses and scenery."²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Ct., *Fair Rosamund*, 1801, TM Astley's file.

²⁴⁴ 24 Apr. 1821, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 895.

²⁴⁵ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 27.

²⁴⁶ Bill, 23 July 1805, TM Astley's file.

²⁴⁷ Review (*Times* ?), 1 Apr. 1817, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 670.

What was the contribution of the various sundry arts described above? In his 1952 book on the history of scene design, Richard Southern wondered why one should bother studying "craft so cribbed." "One reason," he thought, "is that our theatrical past shows how another attitude towards scenery, and another valuation of it, exists in the theatre": the view that painting was as much of a theatrical tool as the dramatic text. Those who held it were "not by any means all designers--there is also a vast proportion of the showmen; of the Astleys, the Cochrans, the Riches, the Irvings, the Davenants," all of whom "embraced the whole art of the theatre, envisaged a new voice for the art--conceivers of dramatic spectacle."²⁴⁸

Although circus design drew level with much of the patent theatre, its popular roots . . . ensured that its net effect was insurgent. Within the theatre world, the stress Astley laid upon visual stimulation, and the small industry he set up to supply it, helped to force the spectacular revolution. Moreover, in wider cultural terms the circus lent a loud commercial voice to many popular images, idioms and styles hitherto condemned to littleness and obscurity. Doing this while aping the temples of national culture led to a repertoire based on a curious though widespread mixture of folk and formal aesthetics, which it is part of the next chapter's aim to explore.

²⁴⁸ Southern, *Changeable Scenery* 92.

CHAPTER FIVE

AESTHETIC INGREDIENTS

By the time that the Suffolk merchant James Oakes took his children to the Amphitheatre in June 1785, the circus had developed a successful formula of core values for the attractive presentation of its various items. Despite changes in the overall style of circus art, circus publicity into the mid-nineteenth century stressed the virtues of novelty, variety and exoticism most of all, followed, roughly in order of priority, by the joys of topicality; familiar genres; spectacle; realism; narrative; taste; virtuosity; heroism; suspense; eroticism and humour. Nearly every programme at Astley's and its competitors would boast the same ingredients.

Yet these values were of course subject to the fashionable arrangements and interpretations of the moment. Days before the Oakes' visit, a verse "addressed to Mr. Astley by a lady, on seeing his performances" was published in one of the London papers. Undoubtedly by one of Astley's prolific puff-writers, it provides a surprisingly comprehensive account of the Amphitheatre's current aesthetic scheme:

Here taste and fancy blend to please,
 The heart from care to give release.
 Here novelty o'er all presides,
 While excellence each action guides.

.....
 You've something ev'ry sense to charm,
 And ev'ry breast with transport warm.
 In fair assemblage you excell;

For ev'ry part is rang'd so well.
 As your amusements are display'd,
 Like paintings that from light and shade
 Receive the charm which forms their grace,
 The same in all your acts we trace.
 Your exquisite display of art
 Must to each sense new joys impart.
 While you some wond'rous skill display
 In admiration lost we stray. . . .

The poem goes on to describe many of the current acts and how they fill the senses, reveal the "animating soul," and constantly wake "the mind to new delight."¹ In exploring the artistic jamboree that made up the circus, this chapter will attempt to account for the recurrence of these themes, and show the significance of such (largely official) interpretations. It will also describe some of the main practical elements of circus performance. The final section will venture its own interpretation of eighteenth and early nineteenth century circus art.

I. Here novelty o'er all presides

Consumer society engenders forms which embody both continuity and rapid change, valuing novelty in order to create demand.² In the circus there was a particularly pressing need to survive in an unscrupulously competitive world by somehow constructing a fascinating newness to ensure a constant flow of audiences. As one typical puff observed in 1796, "Mr. Astley . . . seems aware, that the fount of Novelty must ever prove the source of attraction. . . ."³ The term also embraced what we would call

¹ 19 June, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 673.

² See in particular Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* 89, 158.

³ 20 July, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 136 B.

exoticism, and as imperialism increasingly found its way into the theatres during the nineteenth century, novelty became more geographical than temporal in emphasis. These aspects will be explored more in the following chapter.

The demand for novelty helped split the circus into its two characteristic modes. On the one hand, it forced the smaller, less capital-intensive shows to adopt nomadism in order to tap new markets, enabling them to retain the same programmes. The arrival of the circus substituted for a relative lack of innovation in the performance. Travelling became part of the performance and the constant claims of 'for the first time seen' were, for the sedentary audience, quite consistent. By contrast, the more permanent amphitheatres, largely relying on indigenous urban populations, had to fabricate novelty by desperately sensationalising and as well as varying their programmes. Dr. Johnson commented on the appeal of such gimmickry in 1775: "Were Astley to preach a sermon standing on his head, or on a horse's back, he would collect a multitude to hear him, but no wise man would say he had made a better sermon for that."⁴ Advertisements perfunctorily introduced the main items as "new," including the many productions that were plagiarised or revived from the patent theatres and therefore at least a fortnight old. Constrained by its reputation by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the touring division of Astley's eventually had to combine sophisticated urban spectacle with itinerancy. "Mr Ducrow pledges himself," announced a bill in Aberdeen in 1830, "to produce his Equestrian Entertainments in the same brilliant and finished manner of the London establishment. . . ."⁵ (This

⁴ Qtd. Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* 29.

⁵ Bill, "Ducrow's Royal Amphitheatre and Olympic Arena" Oct. 1830, Arthur Morice Colln., U of Aberdeen Lib.

required the transport of much hardware. As early as 1790, Astley's winter trip to Dublin took three shiploads.)⁶

For a circus playing on the theme of its own transience, departure was a more versatile instrument than arrival. In late July 1772, for example, Astley staged an elaborate ritual of public indecision on the matter. Having already postponed his departure to France, he informed his London audience that it was "positively the last night," at which they were dismayed, some vogueishly crying "*Encore une autre Semaine*" and others "Astley perform again." They would not let him continue, it was reported, until he had answered "I will." He then continued: "Gentlemen and Ladies, the generous Encouragement I have met with in this my native Country, for whom I have three Times bled, and am ready to bleed again in its Defence . . . therefore will postpone my Journey, and [I] exhibit Tomorrow and every Evening after till Monday the 3d of August, which, I hope, you will accept as the last Day." This "was received with loud clapping of Hands, and the Cry of Bravo, Bravo."⁷ In the end it seems that he had no intention of leaving until late September. Once the London season had become customary by the end of the decade, wholesale arrival and departure was not an option, so similar threats were made on behalf of successful productions or visiting acts. Publicity also explained that travelling was, moreover, literally a renewal because it allowed the circus to gather fresh material, especially once imperial circuits were opened up.

⁶ The return took four shiploads. 20 Oct. 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 126 B.

⁷ H.d. 1772, *ibid.* vol. 1, item 60.

In its holiday and seasonal rhythms the circus was also regenerative. Naturally associated with the upsurge of festivity, it harnessed the traditional calendar and slotted into a metropolitan diary of which people were very aware.⁸ As an airy, Dionysiac summer theatre with fare to match, Astley's always returned and opened on Easter Monday. Just as in 1786 the name of the Royal Grove was deemed "a good thought for a summer place of amusement,"⁹ a critic in 1821 welcomed the news that: "This beautiful summer theatre was last night opened for the season, under all the favourable auspices which the celebration of the modern Saturnalia never fails to furnish. The house presented a series of light but elegant decorations, exceedingly in accordance with the time of year. . . ."¹⁰ By the 1830s children reputedly looked forward to the event from Christmas.¹¹ Astley's was a part of the summer round of pleasure gardens, ridottos and taverns, and, on a less elegant level, served only to heighten boisterousness during such seasonal pulses of festivity as Whitsun.¹² Its rôle here was somewhat different from that of the regular theatres: "the holiday folks" saved up to go, and Astley obliged them by changing items up to twice a week at peak times.¹³ Astley also promoted the Amphitheatre as a Christmas treat during his London winter seasons of the early 1780s, although the programmes showed no special arrangements for the festivities. It was, unsurprisingly, the family market of the Victorian era

⁸ Guide books to the city always contained a detailed diary which usually included Astley's opening and annual boat race: e.g. see *The Picture of London for 1818*, 352-7.

⁹ 22 Apr., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 901.

¹⁰ 24 Apr., *ibid.* vol. 3, item 749.

¹¹ Ct., Mar. 1831, TM Astley's file.

¹² Accusing Astley's of coarseness, the *Figaro of London*, 16 June 1832, for example, said that "being Whit-Monday, may have accounted for the drolleries from time to time indulged in." Ct., *ibid.*

¹³ It was not, apparently, customary to go to other theatres on Whitsun. See review, 17 May 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 113 D.

that prompted the first real extravaganza: the "Grand Christmas Holiday Entertainments" of 1844, offering matinees for young children.¹⁴ Even without such a seasonal stamp, going out to the permanent London amphitheatres was of course a recreational occasion, while the excitement of a travelling circus arriving in a small town brought its own unofficial near-holiday.¹⁵

Like much popular festivity, the circus associated itself with the restorative power of food, both literally and metaphorically. From its origins in the tea and pleasure-gardens studded with refreshment booths, to the orange and lemonade bars in the lobbies of the amphitheatres, it aimed to gratify public *gourmandise*.¹⁶ Abundant food was still fantasy for many, so it was as imagery that its presence was more powerful. Pantomimes contained banquet scenes and were liberally sprinkled with visual and verbal jokes about sausages and fish ("cod" being another term for phallus); and the clown typically had his pockets stuffed full of both (fig. 5.1), with, perhaps, the neck of a dead goose drooping out. Here, remains of the "Prandial Libertinism" of Medieval popular culture¹⁷ were fused with the newer vocabulary of John Bull's beef and sporting revelry. One Astley's bill in 1826, for example, summarised the plot of *Paul Pry* using the kind of puns about food that the music hall generation made more directly about sex: "Old English Sir Loin and glass of Love-age--opposition--oil & vinegar, chalk for

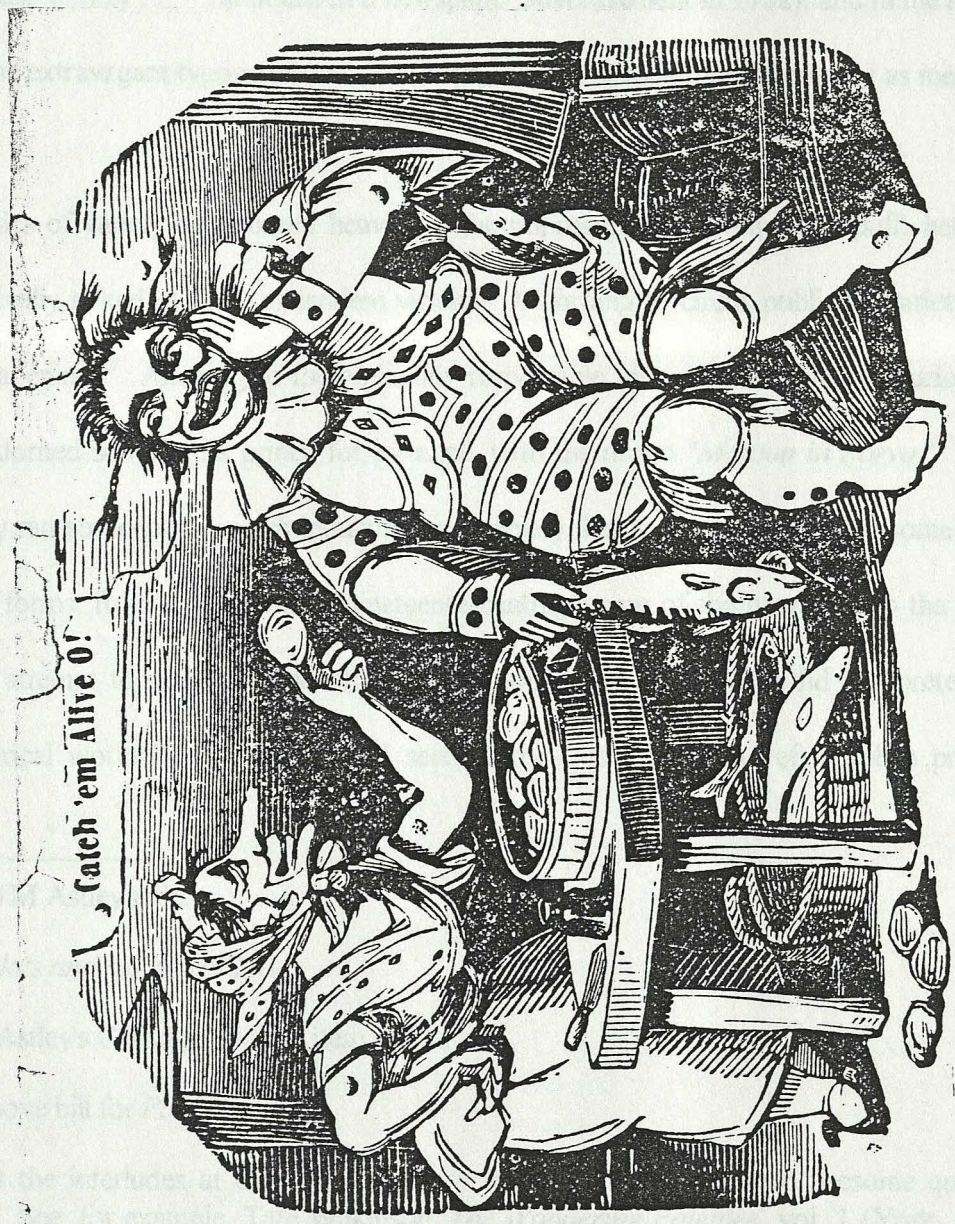
¹⁴ Bill, 30 Dec. 1844, Bod. John Johnson Colln., folio "Theatres A-C."

¹⁵ See, for example, the truanting children at Sleary's Circus in Dickens, *Hard Times* ch. 3. Dickens was deliberately empirical in his portrayal of popular entertainment.

¹⁶ Oranges had strong carnivalesque as well as theatrical associations, used by Prokofiev in his grotesque opera *The Love for Three Oranges* (1919).

¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 295.

Fig. 5.1. Wood engraving from a bill advertising a circus pantomime, c. 1825. The same phallic and vaginal symbols were used in catchpenny prints of the period. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Circus" box 3.)



Catch 'em Alive O!

Cheese--game--chops en papillote . . . bullock's liver, bread &c."¹⁸ For the urban audience this both locked the circus in contrast with the sterility of the workplace, and equated it with the fruit of that work: the circus was, in other words, something to be consumed.¹⁹ In particular, the programme structure seemed to offer itself as a meal of many courses ("Mr. Astley is purposely preparing his annual Christmas Dish Variety . . ."²⁰ announced a newspaper advertisement in 1782), and in the search for new tricks for the extravagant typography of the 1820s, bills were sometimes presented as menus.²¹

The aesthetics of variety contributed heavily to the impression of novelty, and puffs between 1780 and 1810 typically talked of them as tandem virtues. According to circus publicity, variety was not necessarily cheapening.²² Alluding to the eminently respectable idea of the cabinet of curiosities, the Royal Circus adorned some of its prints, for instance, with the motto "*Multum in Parvo*."²³ The collector's mentality ran so deeply through industrialising society that it eventually shaped some of its most characteristic forms, from the ascendant nineteenth-century genre of the magazine to the Great Exhibition's heroic attempt to make the industrial world intelligible. The circus did not pretend to represent the empirical world by its variety, and seemed more interested in defying than proving

¹⁸ Bill, 29 May, TM Astley's file.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 281.

²⁰ 20 Dec., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 441.

²¹ Notably the above bill for *Paul Pry*.

²² Some thought the interludes at the Wells, Astley's and the Circus produced tiresome quantity rather than quality. See, for example, Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee*, vol. 1 (York, 1795) 118 (with thanks to Kimberley Crouch for this reference).

²³ I.e. "a lot in a little." GLC Print Coll., repr. in Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque*.

classification, but it shared the same acquisitive impulse. Astley was constantly declaring his attempts to procure new items for the show. In fact in the circus, variety was precisely the product of the capitalised institution: it represented good value for money. Astley was a master entrepreneur in his ability to reduce prices and an important selling-point was that acts at the Amphitheatre had often appeared alone elsewhere for the same admission.²⁴ Overheads could be cut under a single roof. As early as 1771 he had pointed out the shilling charged was "not a tenth part of the value of such an exhibition."²⁵

Variety also indicates different approaches to theatre-going than today. Firstly, it fitted the short attention spans of casually socialising audiences. The show aimed to bombard the senses with changes and leave no time for boredom: "in a constant succession," described one advertisement in 1780, "the horses have been instructed to perform their Comic and tragic parts in a manner beyond conception."²⁶ Secondly, as with newspapers and magazines, the audience was expected to be a little selective when faced by a multi-part programme. Recognising that the emotional appeal of genre is its reassuring continuity, the circus therefore purported to offer something for everyone in its extraordinary range of styles, from "high performance," to "low performance."²⁷ The contrast of

²⁴ E.g. in 1784 the Monstrous Craws (fig. 6.2) had appeared on their own for 2s. before they were shown as part of Astley's programme for as little as 6d. 'Non-circus' exhibits had, however, often lost their novelty and hence market value before they graced at Astley's.

²⁵ H.w. notes, 2 July 1771, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 42.

²⁶ 6 Oct., *ibid.* item 171.

²⁷ Puff, 25 May 1790, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 121 C.

"*Brutus* speaking, and *Foote* chattering" was, moreover, thought to add "relief" to each.²⁸ Advertisers were aware that acts were in fact fortuitously recruited, and so during the first two decades spoke earnestly of the 'completeness' of a select exhibition.²⁹

Finally "the whole" was festooned with topicality and fashion.³⁰ "The truth is," reckoned one newspaper in 1793, "the Royal Saloon [Amphitheatre] aims always at the whim of the moment, and is, therefore, sure to hit it. Light subjects taken from recent events prove the most solid in the end, for they can catch the eye, and strike the fancy. . . ."³¹ This was when Astley's was striding into a rôle comparable to Pathé News in the modern picture-house, and many of its reconstructions from the French Wars were hardly "light." Pantomime sweetened the topicality with a traditional narrative, however, and scenes and scenery based on the news could be freely inserted into its matrix and dropped if they became tired.³² (In any case, the whole production lasted a month or two at the most.)

With the notable exception of the *The Taylor to Brentford's* immediate satirical success, topical references in the ring were less common because acts there were seen as either pure virtuosity or timeless comedy. These were washed by the more pervasive tides of fashion that affected all theatrical

²⁸ Samuel Foote (1720-77), a diminutive comedian nicknamed 'The English Aristophanes,' never lived to appear at the Royal Circus to which the puff is referring. *World* 30 July 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 48; ct., 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 637.

²⁹ E.g. ad., h.d. 1771, *ibid.* item 39.

³⁰ Ad., 1772, *ibid.* item 61.

³¹ 15 Sept., *ibid.* vol. 2, item 206 D.

³² Only rarely did the news provide the whole theme, e.g. John Astley's *The Egyptian Oracle; or, Harlequin Criminal* of 1798 was revived and modified later that year following Nelson's Victory in the Battle of the Nile in August. In 1785 there was *Harlequin's Exhibition of the Times*.

genres. The oriental passion of the mid-1780s, for example, brought the Turkish equilibrist Mahomed Caratha to Covent Garden and the Haymarket and such burlettas on the *Seraglio* theme as *A Sale of English Beauties at Grand Cairo; Or, The Caravan Attacked by the Banditti* to Astley's.³³ But the popularity of types of act in the ring did not ebb and flow broadly in decades as did genres on the stage; they formed a more timeless group, affected mainly by new introductions or seasonal crazes at the detailed and gimmicky level, notably for certain species of animals. No influence was total, however: declaredly "Proteus-like," the circus was always replacing components in different places, each one fashioned by pressures of different durations.³⁴

Despite the much-vaunted changes, those looking for challenging artistic innovation at Astley's were, at least until Ducrow's time, not likely to find it. "Again and Again, Mr. Astley," complained one professedly disinterested critic in 1798,

when you have announced an entire change of performances, have we visited the Royal Grove, with the expectation of meeting some novelty or other entitled to our commendation. In every instance we have been disappointed. To particularise defects would be endless. . . . It is our opinion, however, that a corrupt taste, a total want of genius, and an error of judgment, pervade the motley exhibitions at the *Amphitheatre of Arts*.³⁵

Unofficial accounts of course tarnished the image presented by the puffs. Some reviewers scoffed at Astley's **quirky**, unpolished and bathetic genres, particularly hippodrama, while the *Figaro of London*

³³ Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* was produced in Vienna in 1782; Astley's *Sale* in 1786.

³⁴ End-of-season address "by Mr. Upton, spoken by Mr. Connell," 17 Oct. 1800, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 203 E, and *passim*.

³⁵ Periodical review, June, *ibid.* item 165 E.

predictably berated the clown's "facetiae of twenty years standing . . ." in 1832.³⁶ Yet other contemporaries noted how these jokes and catchphrases--some hackneyed, others new--were played to the gallery and rapturously received, for example the clown's "How's your mother" in 1837.³⁷ To a few writers, such affirmations of common understanding were the most obvious joy of the circus, and showed up the inhibitions of class or age. "A good many of us are children," wrote a later spectator of a clown act at the New Holborn Amphitheatre,

and throw ourselves back in our seats and actually scream with delight . . . what side splitting jokes he makes, not all of them new, perhaps, but still given heartily; and, at a circus, nobody expects much in the way of novelty . . . when the indignant ring-master threatens to break the fool's head, how vigorously we cheer the time-honoured answer that "it won't matter much, for it's cracked already."³⁸

Dibdin the Younger's memoirs recall that the singer Johannot had established a similar rapport with the so-called "Boys" in Astley's gallery by the end of the eighteenth century. In this sense the circus prefigured a major characteristic of the music hall.

Astley's was able to maintain its own appeal until the late nineteenth century because only superficial changes were needed to refresh a highly ritualistic form that had successfully marked the stages and cycles of many people's lives. As a national institution, Astley's had become a seemingly inevitable part of growing up and getting old. For Dickens, observing "a regular Astley's party" around

³⁶ E.g. review, h.d. Aug. 1832, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 1331; Ct., *Figaro of London* 21 Apr. 1832, TM Astley's file.

³⁷ Ct., periodical review, h.d. 1837, TM Stone Colln., ref. Ast. 63.

³⁸ Anon., 1867, qtd. McKechnie, *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages* 213.

Christmas in 1836, there was "no place which recalls so strongly our recollections of childhood as Astley's." His fond reminiscences summarised the overall balance of new to old:

It was not a "Royal Amphitheatre" in those days: nor had Ducrow arisen to shed the light of classic taste and portable gas over the sawdust of the circus; but the whole character of the place was the same--the pieces were the same--the clown's jokes were the same--the riding-masters were equally grand--the comic performers equally witty--the tragedians equally hoarse--and the "highly-trained" chargers equally spirited.³⁹

By commercializing ritual and ritualizing commerce, Astley had created an ideal consumer form. In such a familiar and enduring institution, detailed, even repetitive and obsessional adjustments which actually strengthened its ritual nature seemed gratifyingly novel. "This enterprising establishment never slumbers;" said a review in June 1829, putting the paradox rather neatly, "the most perfect success has never the effect of keeping back the novelties that custom has led us to expect at certain seasons. . . ."⁴⁰

Modernity has purported to allow our creations only the choice of either reversion to precedent or feverish innovation. In the circus, however, newness and nostalgia were particularly cleverly synthesised. Many of the tantalising performances were, in the words of an 1822 poster, no more than "Old Friends with New Faces."⁴¹ The fact that during the nineteenth century owners clamoured to distinguish their shows from the rest implies that there was a given similarity between them all: circus was so extravagantly promoted as innovative precisely because it was not. The public may have taken the claims of the showmen with a pinch of salt, but they continued to attend. By doing so they helped to create modern popular culture's characteristically short and selective memory.

³⁹ Dickens, *Sketches By "Boz"* 301.

⁴⁰ Ct., 7 June, TM Astley's file.

⁴¹ 13 and 14 Dec., *ibid.* Similarly, a bill from 25 Sept. that year commends "Music entirely *old*, but the arrangement entirely *new*. . . ."

II. *The Elements of Performance*

Exceptional talent in the ring was the circus' chief product, and Astley's success in this branch of the exotic was seldom disputed. "This is the only theatre in town where equestrian exercises are to be seen in perfection;" recommended *The Every Night Book* in 1827, "the performances in the ring are generally excellent--those on the stage frequently wretched. . . ." ⁴² The object of most serious ring acts was the demonstration of control, and standards of merit therefore often simply reflected ideals of deportment and physical beauty, or the current pictorial acting conventions. For John Astley "neatness and delicacy" were important criteria, as they were on the stage. ⁴³ "To that ease, activity and elegance which he has always so eminently possessed," eulogised a puff for the Young Astley in 1784, "nature has now so much encreased his strength that he has derived that manly dignity which could only be wanting to give his performance the perfection he now displays." ⁴⁴ According to contemporary ideals of masculinity, brute strength was to be tempered with the courtly deftness shown by the circus' *ancien regime* patrons. In the age of high Romanticism, Ducrow added convincing and naturalistic portrayals of emotion and narrative "meaning" in spite of (or rather, as Dr. Johnson had observed of Astley, *because of*) his "perilous" position on horseback. ⁴⁵

⁴² Clarke, *Every Night Book* 22.

⁴³ Puff, 23 May 85, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 668; review, Apr. 1800, item 187 E.

⁴⁴ 28 May, *ibid.* item 551.

⁴⁵ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 204.

More generally, artistes proved their superhuman status by performing banal acts in such positions: in 1785 John Astley, for example, specialised in "drinking a glass of wine on full gallop" (fig. 5.2), and some of his successors would eat a meal with table and chair on the tightrope.⁴⁶ Obvious difficulty was sometimes heightened by strange handicaps. The same year *La Belle Espagnola* danced the Fandango, with castanets, on the rope with eggs tied to the soles of her feet, while the *Little Devil* somehow did much the same with two boys and two men tied to his feet. As one later poster declared, the circus combined "Effective incidents of Grandeur, and intricacy of Action."⁴⁷

Competition also encouraged the measurement of feats: Young Astley was viewed "jumping over his whip backwards and forwards near six feet high" and riding "6 miles per hour" swifter than his any of his rivals, and by 1798 one of his successors claimed "a most surprising Leap" from horseback through a paper-covered hoop "suspended in the air 15 Feet high. . . ."⁴⁸ Contemporaries also perceived technical progress in the evolution of equestrian styles, from the 'Old English' of the early years through John Astley's classicism, and peaking with Ducrow, whose acts circus performers still find difficult.⁴⁹ In the absence of organised rivals, circus performers were at the forefront of the gymnastic and physical arts. Early publicists felt justified in explaining that the exercises, despite their effortless appearance, were "of so powerful and exhausting nature, as to require intervals of rest both

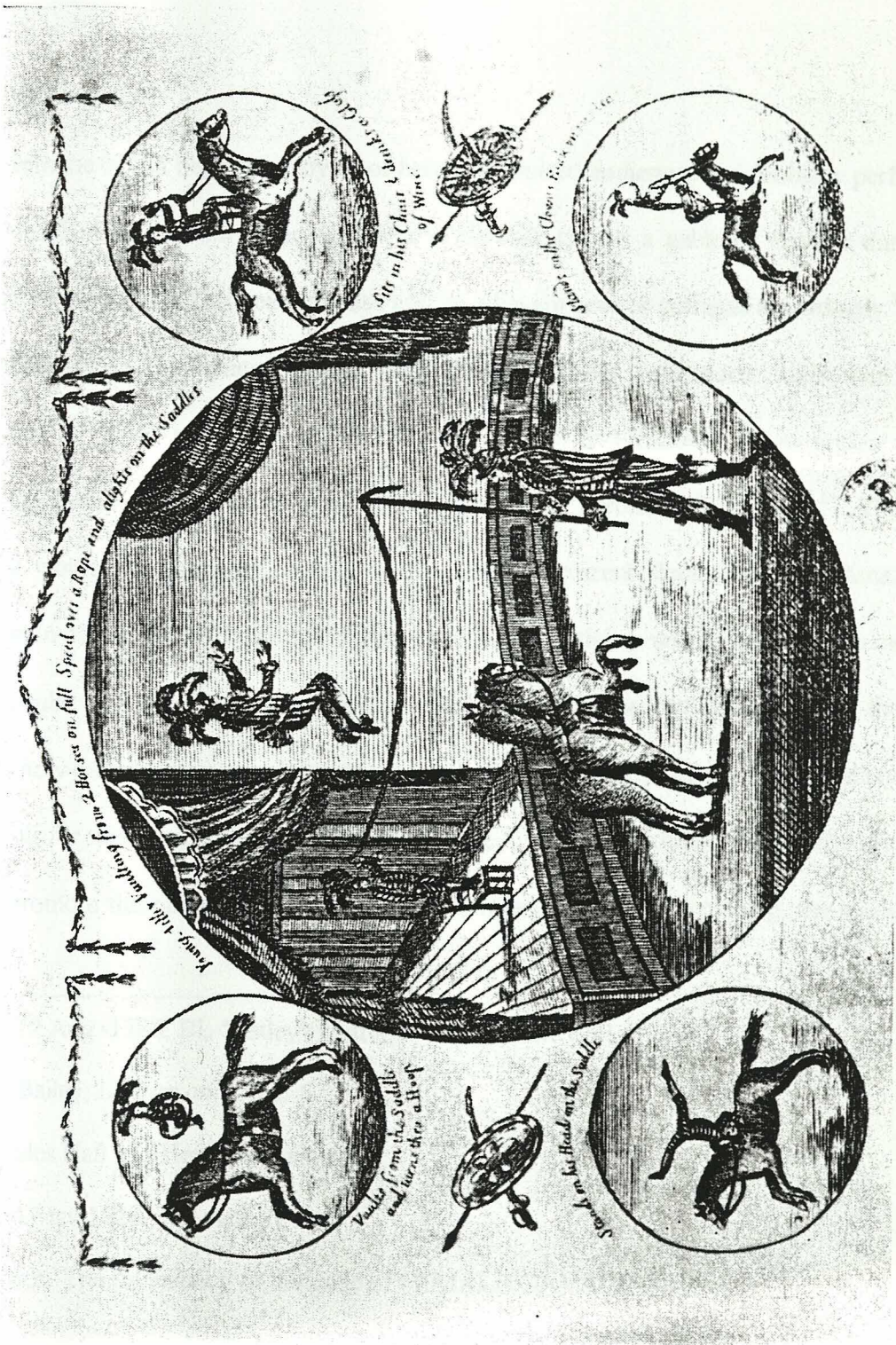
⁴⁶ Puff, 16 Apr., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 648.

⁴⁷ 28 June 1836, Guildhall Lib. Prints Rm., "Astley's" file.

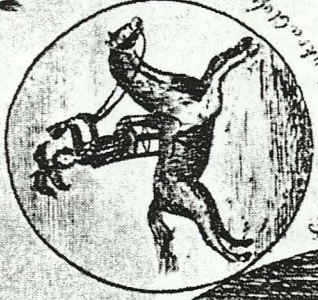
⁴⁸ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 501 (18 July 1783) and vol. 2, item 168 C (29 Aug. 1798).

⁴⁹ At Austen Bros. Circus, London, 6 Jan. 1991, for example, I witnessed one of Europe's foremost performers fail in a simplified re-enactment of Ducrow's *Courier of St. Petersburg*.

Fig. 5.2. Engraving of the young John Astley, possibly the reverse of a handbill, c. 1785. In the top right-hand corner, he drinks a glass of wine sitting in a chair. Note also the flamboyant costumes, and the depth of the stage. (British Museum, in Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts*, vol. 2, pl. 27.)



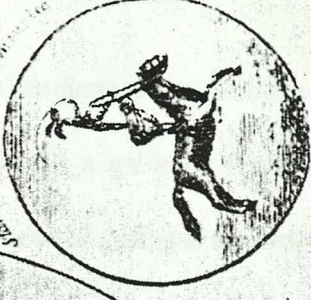
Two horses on full speed over a rope and alight on the saddle



Sits in his Chair & drinks a Glass of Wine



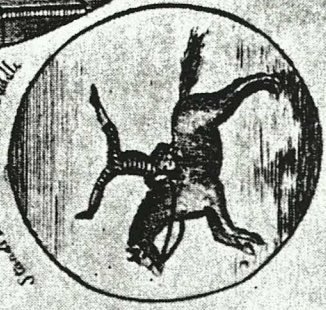
Stands on the Crown & back on his feet



Vaults from the Saddle and lands on a Hoop



Stands on his Head on the Saddle



to man and horse. . . ."⁵⁰ In these respects the circus may be linked development of an epochal "culture of performance" characterised, according to the critic of modernity Georg Simmel, by the individual "exploit."⁵¹

From the circus' beginning, myths of heroism inspired audiences and probably performers too: a mural of the human pyramid called *Le Force d'Hercule* graced a gable of Astley's during the early 1770s, and he named both his nearby house and an adjacent row of cottages accordingly.⁵² During the 1820s especially, programmes became littered with similar references; with men of "Almost Supernatural Strength" being compared to Achilles as well as Hercules, and struggling with lions or dying as gladiators--quite apart from all the hippodramatic heroism of the stage.⁵³ There were also occasional women counterparts, usually styled after the current fascination with Amazons.⁵⁴ This concentration during the 1820s reflected a new popular athleticism which redefined the masculine ideal along muscular classical lines, partly thanks, in the words of one Astley's poster, to the "Gymnastic Exercises now happily daily growing more common in this country, by the Establishment of Lyceums and Schools for their Free and Commodious Practice."⁵⁵ But the athletic die had already been cast: in order to promote the riding lessons that it too had offered from the beginning, the circus had always

⁵⁰ Ad., 29 Aug. 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 840.

⁵¹ Qtd. Bailey, *Leisure and Class* 62.

⁵² Hercules Hall and Hercules Buildings.

⁵³ Bill, 4 May 1829, TM Astley's file.

⁵⁴ E.g. see "The Invincibles; or, Brigade of FEMALE CAVALRY," *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

ascribed the spectacle to individual merit, won by hard training wedded to exceptional ability, rather than, say, simple talent or the innate superiority of rank.⁵⁶

Equestrianism remained fairly élitist both inside and outside the circus company, but most circus arts were indeed popular and 'class-neutral,' requiring little formal education or property either to perform or understand. The circus therefore offered a prototype of the heroism of modern mass sport: it was theoretically accessible to all, yet retained its cult appeal. The male (and often female) performer was something of a champion in both its traditional mythological sense of an invincible who fought for the good of the community against foreignness and evil, and its modern sporting sense.

Exceptional figures, however, tended to be ambiguous: some performers enlisted the help of Satan to compete with so many heroes. In 1786 the rope-dancing Little Devil had moved on from Astley's and started a trend: "It is remarked by a correspondent that most places of public amusement have several Devils to their aid," said one newspaper, "while Astley refuses all such diabolical assistance and is playing the Devil by relying upon Terrestrial excellence."⁵⁷ Tumblers in particular seemed manically demonic in their ceaseless bouncing, while some clowns displayed an almost sinister virtuosity when they challenged the 'serious' performers at their skills.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ An ad. of July 1781 stresses how "the Performers and Horses" have "been kept constantly to practice." Cf., *ibid.*

⁵⁷ 2 July 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 912.

⁵⁸ On the diabolical origins of clown-figures see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 265 etc.

The presence of real danger in circus acts no doubt concentrated the minds of performers and audience alike and heightened the trance-like experience of performance.⁵⁹ Near-death experiences are, it has often been observed, life-enhancing. Danger was the 'liminal' core of circus ritual: the tightrope artiste, for instance (whose act came to serve as both the quintessence of the circus and a metaphor for limbo and predicament), acquitted himself only by negotiating the threat of oblivion.⁶⁰ Perhaps such performers were symbolically flouting ancient beliefs that the control of death by the community demanded the sacrifice of one. Toying with and going beyond the extremes of human capacity was certainly seen as a way of literally experimenting with the world. In a time when science was hardly institutionalised, there was little to discourage showmen and circus performers from claiming actual scientific value in their "equilibres" and so on.⁶¹

Regardless of its cosmological implications, apparent danger was the chief dramatic tool of the ring: it was the lever of the sympathetic emotions which the eighteenth-century sensibility so valued, although its terrifying effects were politely played down in the early advertisements, partly because the routines were also meant to promote the riding-masters' safe new systems of horsemanship. Feats were

⁵⁹ See the discussion of 'flow' in performance in Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (NY: Performing Arts Jnl. Publications, 1982) 55-9.

⁶⁰ The concept of 'liminality' (Latin *limen* = threshold) derives from Arnold Van Gennep's 1909 study of various rites of passage, where, he noticed, initiands always underwent a redefining phase between two statuses. His work highlighted the significance of boundaries, which symbolically contain the threat of chaos, in the creation of meaning and order. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960).

⁶¹ E.g. puff, 27 May 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 471.

said to be "satisfying," "pleasing," "diverting" or at the most "surprising"⁶² until a growing taste for sensation, assisted by competition and possibly enhanced by a diet of terror in the Gothic Drama, encouraged showmen to heighten the danger involved and stress it as the reason that the spectators were "electrified."⁶³ In 1822, for example, Astley's claimed that its tightropes were at the improbable "Altitude of near 100 Feet."⁶⁴

The degree of risk may frequently have been exaggerated, but suspenseful acts played on the anticipation of disaster and therefore had to make it a genuine prospect. The occasional accident could, however, benefit the circus if judiciously managed. The first ever newspaper report of Astley's in April 1768 concerned a bad fall by an equestrian,

which frightened all the company, and particularly some ladies into fits. The ladies and the horseman disappeared, and the company suspected he had broke his leg, or, at least, had bruised himself very much; but in a few minutes the ladies and the performer appeared, when he sprung on his horse, and went through the remainder of the his performance seemingly unheard [sic].⁶⁵

His miraculous recovery underscored the general extraordinariness of circus people--the master myth of institutional folklore--as well as invoking notions of heroic indestructibility and mind over matter. Later, journalistic realism presented more distressing pictures: in 1828, for example, the victim was a young tightrope artiste who, while performing a somersault, "fell with considerable violence from a

⁶² E.g. ct., 24 Nov. 1780, TM Astley's file; trs. of ad., 10 Apr. 1770, BL "Astley's Cuttings, vol. 1, item 27.

⁶³ Review of Ducrow in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* 30 Mar. 1816, qtd. Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 70.

⁶⁴ Bill for *Alexander the Great* etc., n.d., 1822, TM Astley's file.

⁶⁵ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 6.

height of nearly ten feet, where she lay for some seconds in a state of total insensibility."⁶⁶ Such cases strengthened the constant whiff of danger which enveloped the whole theatrical world, and which was also perpetuated by repeated catastrophes to its buildings and its reputation for dissipation. By the late nineteenth century this was specifically concentrated around the circus, which with stories of collapsing tents and disasters in the ring had become a metaphor for the precarious futility of human activity in a decadent age.⁶⁷

The perhaps surprising lack of physical inhibition seen in the early circus had long been profitable in the theatre and fairground alike. Typical interlude eroticism employed symbolic tactics, like Mme. Rosi Bonnacourse and her serpents at Astley's in 1778. Girls as young as eleven were fair game for dramatic innuendo and the eye of the crowd,⁶⁸ so the Royal Circus in 1782 suffered no compunction in employing adolescents who, while young enough to pass as 'pupils' and thus escape the law, would be a titillating sight in such productions as *Venus' Girdle*, regardless of their acting skills. Astley responded simply by emphasising the "TWO LADIES" (presumably horsewomen) in his programme the following year; but in 1789, he too advertised "A beautiful young female, of about thirteen or fourteen" who "performs the most difficult steps on horseback, with elegance and ease."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Aug., *ibid.* vol. 3, item 1125. Some did not recover: see rpt. of death from spinal injuries of William Smith, 7 May 1825, *ibid.* item 916.

⁶⁷ E.g. covers of *Le Petit Journal* c. 1895-1903, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 254.

⁶⁸ At Sadler's Wells in the 1690s, Ned Ward had shared in the admiration of a young sword dancer at Sadler's Wells whose "petticoats gathers [sic] such wind, That it fans and it cools her before and behind." Qtd. Brayley, *Theatres of London* 51.

⁶⁹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 475 (4 June 1783 etc.) and 1114 ("Diary," 10 June 1789). 'Elegant' became a code-word for sexually appealing during the 1790s.

Legs were the great prize of watching the female performer: the circus equivalent of the breeches part could be seen, for example, at Samwell's sixpenny circus at Bartholomew Fair in 1827, which advertised "a horse mounted by a female in trowsers."⁷⁰ Vice versa, female admiration of John Astley in the 1780s was legendary and provided a useful point for promotion. Commenting on his trick of leaping the ribbon or 'garter,' one newspaper in 1786 said: "the ladies have installed him unanimously as *their Knight of the Garter*, . . . when he is *above the garter*, they say he seems an angel flying into the seats of Paradise."⁷¹ In the nineteenth century, Ducrow's imitations of classical statuary--the *Poses Plastiques*--became a notorious variety of semi-nude vaudeville show.⁷²

Despite predictable accusations of "ribaldry" as early as 1782, eroticism at Astley's and in the circus was visually omnipresent rather than verbally frank, as befitted a world in which the word was censored.⁷³ In pre-mass production material culture, as expressed by the cult of exhibitions in late Georgian London, the power of the exhibit suffused its immediate space, and viewing was tantamount to physical contact. For that reason ladies were sometimes obliged to view prize bulls through a window, just as Ducrow's nudity was protected by virtually invisible fleshings.⁷⁴ Consequently, the main impact of circus eroticism did not lie in its traditional baggage of fecund symbols or its suggestive song-lyrics, but in its concentration on trained and idealized bodies.

⁷⁰ Qtd. Hone, *Every-Day Book* 1185.

⁷¹ 17 June, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 794.

⁷² See Bailey, *Leisure and Class* 163.

⁷³ Tirade in press at prospect of Royal Circus, 29 Aug., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 399. Astley's scripts were not themselves censored, however.

⁷⁴ Ct., 1790, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 30; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 95.

Although the latter aesthetic was regularly shattered by the grotesque clowning and comic acts, the object of both buffoons and heroes was to escape the base confines of the average body. For example, 'The Grimacer' at Astley's in 1790 was reported to have "kept the whole house in one continual roar for near twenty minutes . . . by the amazing command of his body in comic attitudes."⁷⁵

As we have seen in the case of *The Taylor Riding to Brentford*, the meaning of the early circus clown was primarily social ("It is not fit," James I had spoken of hunting and riding, "that clowns [peasants] should have these sports.")⁷⁶ But the clown had an ancient and seemingly archetypal family tree including Greek and Roman mimes, traditional fools, jesters, the Commedia dell'Arte's *Zanni* and *Polichinelle*, and distant cousins in the humourous demons in the dramas of many other cultures.⁷⁷ Clown comedy fell into two main types: visual (physical) and verbal. Physical clowning in the circus continued along the lines of the often violent equestrian burlesques originated by *The Taylor* in 1768. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, the patent theatre pantomime clown Joe Grimaldi founded a "New School" in the art, with his trademark eccentricities and excessively gaudy make-up and costume.⁷⁸ The two influences were married in the ring by Astley's famous equestrian

⁷⁵ 26 July, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 86.

⁷⁶ *Proceedings in Parliament, 1610*, ed. Elizabeth Read Foster (1966) i.51, qtd. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London: Penguin, 1984) 49.

⁷⁷ Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring," 1-3.

⁷⁸ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 47; Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring" 82-4.

clown John Ducrow (Andrew's brother). His routines included "The Comic Act of the Fairy Steeds" (c. 1825), in which he showed his uncanny mastery of not one but two horses.⁷⁹

Astley's was credited with formative influence in verbal clowning too, in France as well as in England.⁸⁰ The earliest routine of which we have a record drew on Shakespearean traditions of foolish wit, the old charivari practice of riding back to front, and the more recent vocabulary of patriotism. It is a dialogue between Astley and "Mr. Merryman," jotted down by the stage-designer Henry Angelo after a particularly enjoyable evening at the Amphitheatre in the mid-1790s. In it, Astley boasted of his literary enterprises and of "our brave countrymen" who "will prevent the French from coming to eat up all our roast beef and pudding. . . ." Angelo could not help but notice that Astley:

seemed so confident and pleased with every word he uttered, bawled so loud, smiling at his own wit, and the superiority which he *must* convince the audience his eloquence displayed over the clown's. . . . Those that have seen him, cannot forget what Astley's erudition was. . . .

It was, however, a dangerous opportunity for self-promotion:

Astley Come, Sir, mind as how you sit upright on that there horse, Sir. What are you about ?
M. Why, master, I am only combing his wig.
A. Combing his wig, Sir; did you ever hear of a horse wearing a wig ?
M. Yes, master; and an ass too. . . .⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 24-6; Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 281.

⁸⁰ See Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring" 18-22, including the case of Billy Saunders, whose abuse of the French tongue delighted Astley's Parisian audiences from 1785.

⁸¹ Qtd. Percy Fitzgerald, *The Book of Theatrical Anecdotes* (London, 1875) 76-7, qtd. Towsen, "The Clown to the Ring" 105.

Later rumour had it that the clown's standard jokes were originally coined by the Westminster scholars, and brought out at Astley's as a kind of experiment.⁸²

An altogether blunter humour, which observed minimal decorum, becomes apparent when we look beyond the canon of Astleiana and beneath the veneer of "innocent laughter" which Astley himself was keen to preserve.⁸³ Peg Juniper was a camp-following, gin-selling dame played by Johannot in 1793. In ballad and prose she recounted her encounter with, among others, a British sergeant:

"What lovely, is it you ?" [he said] "--come here you little devil, a word with you; what you have--"Geneve, your honour" says I, "would you please to taste it ?"--"Dam your ginnave," says he, "kiss me prettily, and I'll give you something."---"Lord: sir," says I, "how can you talk so profane ?" Would you ruin my character?---"Curse your character, replies he; what's that to me." "Thank you, sir," says I, its only

*Lira, Lira la! Lira, Lira la!
With a jolly soldier.*⁸⁴

The piece continued in the same vein for at least two more verses.

Other arts helped to complete the Astley's package. Ropedancers, John Astley's minuets on horseback, and the general emphasis on body-language in the ring were complimented by dancing on stage, which featured as starter-pieces and interludes in almost every Astleian programme between the mid-1780s and 1800. French ballets with narrative themes and solo ballerinas were the first to become popular: an early co-star of John Astley was Mlle. Constance, "principal Dancer of the Theatre-Royal,

⁸² *Bentley's Miscellany* (1838), qtd. *ibid.* 107.

⁸³ Ad., 9 Aug. 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 509.

⁸⁴ Ct., "BON GENEVE," ad. for *The Siege of Valenciennes*, h.d. 1793, TM Astley's file.

Paris," who performed a *Pas Seul* to "expressive music," entitled *The Force of Love*.⁸⁵ Many of the pieces had enigmatic colloquial titles, like the typical "Pastoral Ballet" of 1785, "taken from the French Opera," called *Why Not ?*⁸⁶ In the following decade the pastoral tone of the stage was strengthened by the more indigenous currents of folk-dancing. Astley's, like all the London theatres, made free interpretations of English country dances, which reached a peak of popularity around 1800. At the same time, the rediscovery of rustic tradition by the courts of Europe was reflected in such portraits of continental peasant life as *The Drunken Swiss* of 1796. Astley's drew upon a wide range of high and low genres and ethnographic samples from around the world: in 1790, for example, John Astley's "Heroic, and Historical Pantomime," *The Siege of Quebec*, included "A KEVA, or FETE of the INDIAN, shewing their Manners, and Customs of Dancing. . . ." ⁸⁷

Dance had, of course, always ornamented the stage spectacle: a reviewer of an Astley's pantomime of 1785, for instance, was struck by the choreography of "Opera" furies issuing from a cavern, "who dance in a very awful and sublime manner in a torch dance."⁸⁸ With the domination of drama following the turn of the century, dances were incorporated as the highlights of many plays, especially after the Napoleonic Wars when the reconciliation with Paris prompted a new craze for the art. In this way the pastoral theme, now abounding with the stage portrayals of *fêtes champêtre* and dances at country fairs, remained strong until the 1830s.

⁸⁵ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 548 (24 May 1784) and 579 (27 July 1784).

⁸⁶ Ad., 23 May 1785, *ibid.* item 667.

⁸⁷ 26 Apr., *ibid.* vol. 2, item 28.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* vol. 1, items 815 (12 July) and 820 (review, 12 Aug.).

Dance became a mainstay of minor theatre. Like spectacle and music, it was accessible and legal (magistrates licences, of course, allowed "music and dancing"). Fully narrative dance with miming had been imported in the form of the *Ballet d'Action* from France in the 1790s, remaining a successful device for 20 years, though the term became something of a euphemism for a play.⁸⁹ In the restricted circumstances of the minor theatres, generic distinctions became fairly nominal, and so-called dances blended easily with the burlettas, musical pieces, and "Serio-Comic Pantomimical Ballet" compounds thereof, which all told stories by a mixture of song, dance, recitative and dialogue.⁹⁰

Owing to the ubiquity and free use of music in the minor theatres, Augustan-minded critics came to blame it for the decline of the drama. "[I]n private society the taste for vocal harmony is classical and refined," opined a review of Edmund Kean's *Hamlet* in 1814, "yet nothing will go down but operas and burlettas on stage. It is this love of music that encourages so many new Theatres upon license for music and dancing."⁹¹ Theoretically, symphonies and concert forms were rational because they adhered to an intrinsic structure, but operas were not because their music merely served the effusion and manipulation of feeling; they were, in the terminology of the time, devoted to the art of "effect."⁹²

⁸⁹ *Ballet d'Action* was developed in the 1770s, although the term was not used at Astley's until 1799 (for the melodrama *Rolla and Cora*, with the prefix "Operatic"). *Ibid.* vol. 2, item 178 I.

⁹⁰ E.g. ad., 26 May 1795, *ibid.* item 111 E.

⁹¹ 22 Mar., BL Th. Cts. 60, f. 54.

⁹² See Meisel, "The Art of Effect," *Realizations* 69-87.

Music at Astley's did not only lend incidental colour to all the other performances: there were frequent interludes of ballads and topical songs devised by the company's singers (notably Mr. Johannot) as well as the occasional novelty concert. Philip Astley fancied himself as something of a music expert, and for a while insisted on using the word 'cadence' with great abandon.⁹³ In 1780 the Amphitheatre had a quartet comprising a violin, German Flute, harp or harpsichord and a bass (a level maintained by the typical stageless circus), but as it became a full-scale minor theatre it accrued up to a dozen musicians plus a similar number of singers and a house musical director-cum-composer.⁹⁴ The accumulated sheets of music destroyed in the fire of 1803 had, it was reported, cost £15,000.⁹⁵ Although an unlikely figure, it suggests the importance that was attached to this department.

Some twenty-two years after the visit of the young Mozart to London, the allegedly three-year old "Musical Child, from Newcastle upon Tyne" appeared in the ring at Astley's during the prolific year of 1785 to play "several known Airs, &c." on the piano.⁹⁶ After receiving the gift of a saddle embroidered with Orpheus and Eurydice from some ladies in the audience, he was, the press reported, engaged in Paris for 200 guineas plus expenses. Apart from such examples of "Nature's productions," however, instrumental recitals were rare, though they were by no means alien to plebeian venues

⁹³ Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 26.

⁹⁴ Cts., Sept. 1780 and "Recollections of Philip Astley" etc., c. 1830, "Astley's 1770" env., TM Astley's file.

⁹⁵ Ct., 3 Sept., *ibid.*

⁹⁶ 4 June, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 677.

(Bagnigge Wells, for instance, specialised in them).⁹⁷ Astley tended to avoid these hints of the salon; nor would he pay for the necessary talent. In the wake of the *Musical Child* there was only a mandoline player the following year, whose "execution and taste," one optimistic puff thought, ". . . prove[d] a high treat to the amateurs of musick."⁹⁸

Song, however, was the chief musical commodity: not only did the amphitheatre feed the popular hunger for ballads, selling its own broadsides and hence competing with the street-vendors; but pantomimes and burlettas--where the action unfolded in song--would also popularise the tunes whistled on the streets for the next month or so.⁹⁹ Attempting to assist this process, Astley's around the turn of the century published the lyrics in newspapers.¹⁰⁰ It was the job of the house composers to write the "Airs" which the Amphitheatre had been selling in the form of sheet music for sixpence since 1780 (fig. 5.3).¹⁰¹ Ballads, often celebrating outlaws, were adapted to standard tunes and thus liable to be included in plays quite gratuitously: the part of Parena in *Alexander the Great and Thalestris the Amazon* in 1822, for example, was played by "Miss Poole, who will Introduce a Popular Ballad, and accompany herself on the PEDAL HARP."¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Puff, 1 Oct. 1785, *ibid.* item 728.

⁹⁸ 20 June, *ibid.* item 844.

⁹⁹ Percy A. Scholes, "Pantomime," *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. John Owen Ward, 10th ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 758.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. "Duet by Mrs. Saunders and Mrs. DeCastro," from *The Besiegers Beseiged; or, The Present State of the West India Islands*, 18 June 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 133 A.

¹⁰¹ Ct., Sept. 1780, TM Astley's file.

¹⁰² Bill, 14 Oct., *ibid.*

The musical style at Astley's echoed the light, Handel-influenced Baroque of the London pleasure gardens, although the popular composers whose works were most often borrowed, bastardised and put into productions were mostly British.¹⁰³ Their genius was Thomas Arne (1710-78), the original composer of *Rule Britannia*, who was also famous for his Shakespeare tunes and the ballad-opera *Love in a Village* (1762), which Astley's imitated.¹⁰⁴ Astley's celebrated Dr. Arne with a memorial saloon and a "beautiful" chorus in the opening scene of a pantomime in 1785.¹⁰⁵ To be precise, the heart of the Amphitheatre's music was the English 'glee,' or male-voice chorale, which had lately spawned several fashionable clubs (one of them graced by royalty).¹⁰⁶ Astley's was presented as the chief torch-bearer of this supposedly national pastime: antiquarian scholarship showed that glees had, after all, begun in the merging of music with popular entertainment, when Anglo-Saxon 'gleemen' accompanied their singing with feats of juggling and acrobatics.¹⁰⁷ As a bill from 1822 explained, "Music entirely *old*, but the arrangement entirely *new*. . . ."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Of the five composers who, for example, were cited for providing choruses to the avowedly oriental hippodrama based on Moore's poem of *Lallah Rookh* in 1820, Stephen Storace (1763-96) was known for ballads; Richard Stevens (1757-1837) for Shakespeare tunes; and Samuel Arnold (1740-1802), composer to Marylebone Gardens, for his pantomime music and oratorios. Bill, 25 July 1820, *ibid.*; entries on the above in Scholes, *Oxford Companion to Music*.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. *Love from the Heart, A Trial of Skill for a Wife; or, Theodore the Heart of a Lion*, Sept. 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings, vol. 1, item 915.

¹⁰⁵ Review, 12 Aug., *ibid.* item 847.

¹⁰⁶ Scholes, "Glee," *Oxford Companion to Music* 406.

¹⁰⁷ Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes the People of England* 185-6.

¹⁰⁸ 25 Sept., TM Astley's file.

Bold naval songs modelled on sea-shanties were also popular at Astley's, such as the still-sung *Arethusa* by William Shield (1748-1829), and the many efforts of Charles Dibdin the Elder.¹⁰⁹ Astley's was, however, as eclectic in music as in all else, so Haydn and Mozart could certainly be taken in digestible amounts: the former in a minuet danced by two horses in 1808; the latter with his famous aria from *Don Giovanni*, *La Ci Darem*, sung in English in 1823 during a period when the opera was attracting overflowing audiences elsewhere.¹¹⁰ They merely had to contribute to the production of novelty, fashion and tuneful songs which, as Dibdin the Younger remembered, Mr. Johannot would begin "with a knowingly significant look" to the gallery.

III. Seeing the Circus

Astleian spectacle was tied up with the same loose knot sensationalist ideas that caused a typical 1790s magic show to be called "The *Power of Imagination*; Or, the Senses deceived, In a variety of the most *Interesting Effects*. . . ."¹¹¹ Wisdom that had percolated out from Locke, and had been Romanticised by Rousseau, held that all that was worth knowing flowed from the senses. So the object of the arts was simply to trick those senses, transporting the audience, and literally making the experience immediate. In 1789, for instance, scenery painted by William Capon in the Royal Circus'

¹⁰⁹ Bill, 4 June 1837, *ibid*.

¹¹⁰ Ct., 1808; and bill, 17 Apr. 1823, *ibid*. The latter was featured with an opera by Thomas Dibdin (1771-1841, brother of Charles the Younger) entitled *The Cabinet*.

¹¹¹ BL, Lysons "Collectanea", vol. 3, f. 110.

portrayal of the Plymouth Naval Review was said to "deceive the eye into an actual belief of real animated nature."¹¹² A bill for the first performance of *St. George and the Dragon* at Astley's in 1829, complete with a mechanical beast, explained the idea more fully:

the DRAGON, as a factitious Work of Art, . . . possessing enough of verisimilitude to convey [the] Illusion of ideal nature, and to identify it with the looker-on, as the Fabulous Animal itself; its Mechanism and Autonomous Serpentine Movements . . . stamp the Action-Scene with the character of TRUTH . . . [and provide] the principal merit of the whole performance.¹¹³

Under Ducrow, similar effects were, it was claimed, brought into the equestrian ring via "the Dumb language of the MIME."¹¹⁴ No longer, it was implied, should the imagination be restricted by form. In an art where effect was a priority, and genres were liberally combined into fantastic compounds, Astleian spectacle comprised colour, fire, strident action, transformation, animation, noise, music and of course, in Dickens' words, "the vague smell of horses suggestive of coming wonders. . . ."¹¹⁵ Eclecticism was the sole essence of spectacle.

Sight was the most obvious sense, and spectacle's truth lay primarily with the eyes, rather than in the word and the mind. This was a challenge to established intellectual orders which, at least since the time of Plato, had warned against, not celebrated, the deceptiveness of appearances. Astley's therefore became a prime suspect in the trial between the guardians of culture and those attempting to

¹¹² *The World* 7 Sept., *ibid.* vol. 4, f. 55.

¹¹³ 7 Sept., TM Astley's file.

¹¹⁴ Bill, 3 Oct. 1829, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) ch. 34, qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 60.

sell it to a wider and semi-literate audience, especially once horses had invaded the stage of Covent Garden in 1811 and again in 1823.¹¹⁶ "It is perhaps difficult to decide what the legitimate drama should allow for the purposes of effect," began a comparatively restrained *Oxbery's Dramatic Biography* of Ducrow in 1827.¹¹⁷ Spectacle *per se* was not, in fact, at issue; just its supremacy. Earlier qualms included a review of John Philip Kemble's *Lodoiska* at Drury Lane in 1794 which took a swipe at the Amphitheatre by noting that "splendid processions seem to suit the Public much more than dramatic excellence"; and *The Times*, on 18 July 1795, characterising the "Poney Races" currently being staged by the Amphitheatre and Royal Circus as "a race against reason and common sense."¹¹⁸ Since the feats of the ring were also visually verifiable, they too contributed to the deleterious triumph of "Physical over mental energies."¹¹⁹ Despite these admonitions, the word "spectacle," like "melodrama," was used freely in minor theatre advertising from the 1790s onwards. By the second half of the nineteenth century, a happy medium had been reached, and the greatest dramas at the great theatres were being presented in a 'spectacular' mode.¹²⁰ An 1812 review of Astley's Olympic Pavilion had spoken presciently of "this age of spectacles."¹²¹

¹¹⁶ On the controversy see *ibid.* 23; Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* ch. 4.

¹¹⁷ Leman Thomas Rede, "Memoir of Andrew Ducrow," *Oxbery's Dramatic Biography and Green Room Spy* 4 Aug. 1827, ct., env. 1812, TM Astley's file.

¹¹⁸ N.d., BL Th. Cts. 60, f. 2.

¹¹⁹ Leman Thomas Rede, "Memoir of Andrew Ducrow," *Oxbery's Dramatic Biography and Green Room Spy* 4 Aug. 1827, ct., env. 1812, TM Astley's file.

¹²⁰ See Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (London: Routledge, 1981).

¹²¹ Review of *Baghvan-Ho!*, *Morning Chronicle* 21 Jan., BL Th. Cts. 60, f. 23.

The personal taste of Philip Astley was known to encourage the spirit of the age. After having successfully sold Astley a pantomime with a model stage-design in 1797, Dibdin the Younger recalled:

while I was *making* the Pantomime, a friend . . . who happened to be somewhat versed in the politics of the Amphitheatre, advised me to make as many Tricks for it as I could, and paint the models very *captivatingly*; as well as design all the scenes, paint and gild them: for--he observed--that the *Astleyian* fancy was apt to be fascinated by such an Exhibition, and they might, probably, be induced to buy the Pantomime for the sake of the Tricks, if not the Tricks for the sake of the Pantomime.¹²²

Astley's publicists none the less sometimes pretended to observe the proprieties of form. "No heterogenous jumble of abused transitions merely to satisfy the power of hinges without any necessity in the plot to require them . . ." noted one favourable critic after a pantomime in 1784.¹²³

Astley's publicity for the ring had always played upon the contentiousness of reality: his early mottos "*Vide et Crede*" and "*Inspicia et Judica*" (fig. 5.3) backed up the constant reiteration that words alone could not describe the acts.¹²⁴ The reconstruction of actual events on stage, however, called for the assertion that seeing was definitely believing: the Amphitheatre's portrayal of Louis XVI's flight to Varennes in 1791, for instance, evinced "that all verbal accounts of it were weak, indeed, to convey any adequate idea of this remarkable event, Astley has, to a demonstration, proved that it could only be justly represented by the aid of scenes, characters, and stage decorations."¹²⁵ Astley's apologists reinforced their argument with the factual claims of topographical realism. A newspaper

¹²² Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 18.

¹²³ 9 Aug., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 583.

¹²⁴ "See and Believe" and "Inspect and Judge." See also ad., h.d. 1772, *ibid.* item 75.

¹²⁵ 29 July, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 89 B.

✓
Fig. 5.3. Frontispiece to Astley's *Natural Magic*, 1785, in the Bodleian Library (actual size). The Little Conjuring Horse was also, apparently, a talking horse.

NATURAL MAGIC:

O R,

PHYSICAL AMUSEMENTS

R E V E A L E D,

By *PHILIP ASTLEY,*

RIDING-MASTER,

WESTMINSTER-BRIDGE,

L O N D O N;

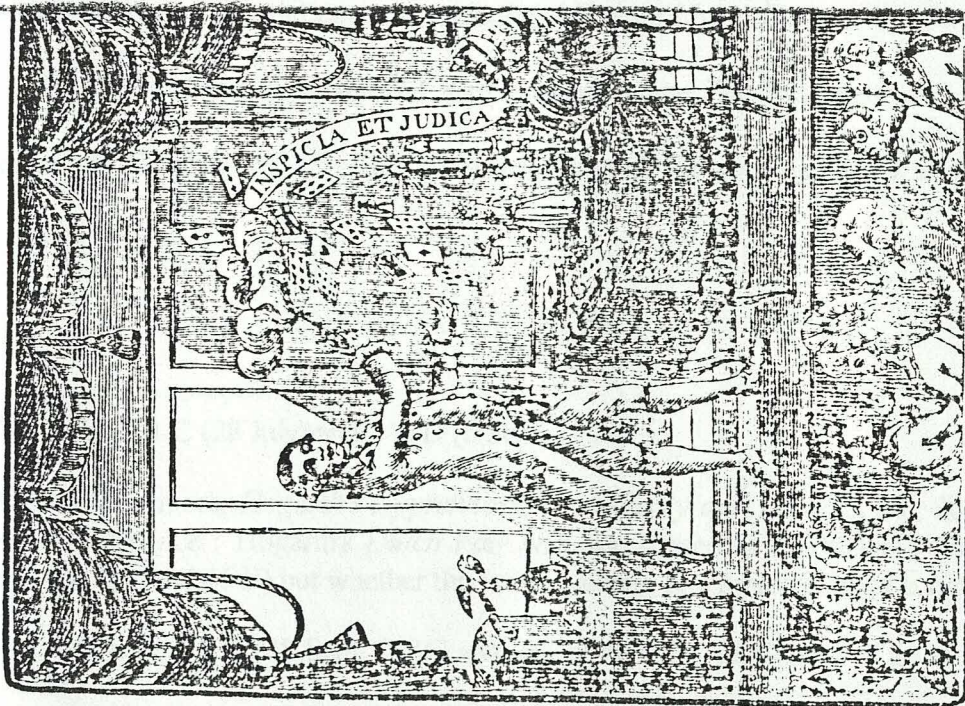
Great Part of which are intended to be
added to the several Entertainments of
the above Place, for the Year 1785, *only.*

L O N D O N:

Printed for the Author, and sold by all the Bookellers
in ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, and IRELAND.

MDCCLXXXV.

Price 2s. 6d.



two years later elaborated on Philip Astley's "on the spot" research for *The Siege of Valenciennes*: "though fancy may often please by the brilliancy of ideas, the lustre of truth excels it, and every scene . . . conveys such indelible facts, enriched with the beauties of . . . scenery."¹²⁶

Painting and the theatre had become especially reciprocal arts during the eighteenth century, with the gradual development of the proscenium as a carved frame for the stage. The links were also strengthened indirectly: through his engravings, for instance, Hogarth's picture-stories had found their way into contemporary folklore and thus into the circus. His *Industrious and Idle Apprentices* were adapted into an Astley's pantomime in 1821.¹²⁷ Nor did these influences stop short of the ring: correspondents around the 1780s thought that the subtleties of John Astley's attitudes on horseback "would better become the pencil than the pen," and were "such as any painter might copy by."¹²⁸ Ducrow developed this pictorial essence, presenting his mute *Living Pictures* of military history in the ring in 1826.¹²⁹ Similarly, he advertised his equestrian mime *The Vicissitudes of a Tar* as "a real specimen of the Graphic Art."¹³⁰ The accolades *Coup de Théâtre* and *Coup d'Oeil* became puff-

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* items 201 C (28 July) and 240 D (6 Sept. 1793).

¹²⁷ William Barrymore, *Hogarth's Apprentices; or, Industry and Idleness*, bill, 26 Apr., Tyne and Wear Archives Service. Hogarth's *Dutch Fair* was also presented in 1804 (15 Oct., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 266 B) but whether this was a painting or a *tableau vivant* is not clear.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* vol. 1, item 897 (28 Sept. 1786) and vol. 2, item 76 A ("Extract of a Letter from Dublin," 10 Feb. 1791).

¹²⁹ Bill, 10 Apr., TM Astley's file.

¹³⁰ Bill, 3 Oct. 1829, *ibid.*

writers shorthand for a painterly composition, usually in the case of such epic pageants as the 300 people in an opening "Grand Review of Horse and Foot" at Astley's in 1828.¹³¹

The chief task of spectacle in the early years of the circus was to ensure, in the words of an advertisement for a jewelled automaton at Astley's in 1772, "that the Eye and Ear are delighted at the same time."¹³² Perhaps this soothed the enervations of the city. But by 1810 baroque fancy and the delight in ingenuity were largely relegated to the pantomime and the pleasure-garden. Astley's stage had made way for emotionally stirring subjects to please "That portion of the play-going public who delight in storms, sieges, . . . battles" and scenes of "dreadful confusion."¹³³ Such representations were, however, still leavened by a straightforward visual pleasure, seen most notably in the "gorgeous" brass cannon in the finale of *The Storming of Seringapatam* at Astley's in 1829, or in what Charles Dibdin called "plenty of glitter among the gloom."¹³⁴

"Brilliance" remained a key word in theatrical vocabulary: it was at once a literal description of a prized aesthetic quality and a metaphor for excellence. Until the end of the Regency, Astley's audiences were puffed as "crowded and brilliant," since they supposedly wore enough shimmering

¹³¹ Bill, 14 Apr., *ibid.*

¹³² H.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 79.

¹³³ Reviews, *ibid.* vol. 3, items 940 (20 Mar. 1826) and 670 (1 Apr. 1817).

¹³⁴ Review, "Astley's" box 1, TM Stone Colln.; Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 131.

finery to form part of the spectacle.¹³⁵ As late as 1851, *Knight's Cyclopædia of London* recorded Astley's as "renowned for the brilliancy of its spectacles, perhaps more than for their good taste."¹³⁶

The ultimate ideals of the different genres were sometimes revealed. One notice in 1787 greeted a harlequinade at Jones' Amphitheatre in Whitechapel with the exclamation "Paradise is come again!"¹³⁷ Yet fact could be easily blended with fantasy on the *carte blanche* of the pantomime. Thus recognisable scenes (most often London landmarks to give a warm glow of familiarity, and, if they showed shops, to provide advertising revenue) were frequently encountered in magic kingdoms.¹³⁸ The pantomime of the *Golden Dream* at Astley's in 1798 included the typically gratuitous military detail of "a view of the PROSERPINE FRIGATE (commanded by Captain Wallis) at the Mouth of the Elbe, when surrounded by immense mountains of Ice. . . ." ¹³⁹ Neither, of course, did romance preclude disturbing realism: illustrations of the martial melodramas of the nineteenth century clearly show the mutual disembowelling with bayonets. These were scenes, one 1810 reviewer thought, from which "a young poet might have caught some vivid ideas towards describing the horrors of battle, and the

¹³⁵ Ct., *Morning Chronicle* 28 June 1784, env. "ASTLEY'S newspaper cuttings misc.," box 1, TM Astley's file.

¹³⁶ Charles Knight, *Knight's Cyclopædia of London* (London, 1851).

¹³⁷ *Globe* 9 Mar., BL "Lysons Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 55.

¹³⁸ E.g. *Harlequin's Proof of the Four Elements; or, the Vauxhall Jubilee, What is it ?*, 20 June 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 841; see Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs* 101.

¹³⁹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 174 B. Visual luxury for its own sake fell off during wartime in any case, and was made to serve the excitingly realistic gloss of news spectacles and patriotic celebrations.

destruction of cities."¹⁴⁰ Nor is it likely that the nightmarish potential of the clown and pantomime grotesquerie went unnoticed.¹⁴¹ In many ways what happened at the circus seemed more real than reality and, because it was palpable, more fantastic than fantasy.

The trick was indeed to marry the real and fantastic to produce incredible spectacle, rather than pure imaginings. Seeing was never quite believing: the presentation of the circus was deceptive because its aim was to weave the picture-language and indeterminacy of the dream into the seam of the waking hours, thus exciting perpetual curiosity, pleasure and interpretation on the part of the viewer.¹⁴² By the 1840s Batty's Circus realised this, promising "Evening Dreams of Wonder" on its bills.¹⁴³

IV. The Aesthetics of Lightness

Were there any consistencies of meaning in the mixed spectacle of the circus? One vague but recurrent quality was 'lightness.' Of course, the circus was designed to appear 'light' in contrast to the *gravitas* of the winter theatres: summer dictated that the architecture had to be airy and the

¹⁴⁰ 19 Apr., *ibid.* vol. 3, item 334.

¹⁴¹ See review commenting on "the protrusion of his [the clown's] rubicund nose and vulgar grimace, amid magic bowers and golden fountains," *ibid.*; comments on frightening "ugly toys," George Augustus Sala, *Twice Round the Clock* (1858), qtd. Anthony Burton, "On Toy-Shops and Toy Sellers," *The V & A Album* 3 (London: De Montfort, 1984) 123.

¹⁴² See Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* ch. 5.

¹⁴³ Handbill, Batty's, Bath, 2 Jan. 1843, Guildhall Lib. Prints Rm., "Circus" file.

entertainments likewise.¹⁴⁴ Transparent paintings, pastoralism, pantomime fantasy and gossamer air balloons all contributed to this impression. It was generally consistent with the 'frothy' Rococo style of the 1780s, which left its mark in Regency elegance. Moreover, such delicate qualities were brought out by the newspaper puffs, sugaring the pill of popular entertainments for middle-class consumption. Similar strategies have been observed the case of the London pleasure-gardens, where Fielding in 1742 perceived an "enchanted Palace" offering "elegant Retreats," as opposed to the "social, sensual, unpolished . . ." entertainments of the fair.¹⁴⁵

Lightness, however, may have had a deeper significance. Much joy was derived from circus performers' gleeful, almost childlike leaping and defiance of gravity, and the metaphors used to describe their feats most frequently concerned flying: "they seem to fly over the horses with as much ease as a bird from twig to twig" (1784); "He caught the living Manners As he flew" (1787); or, in 1843, "She literally floats in the air."¹⁴⁶ Speaking of John Astley's dancing on horseback, one puff-writer in 1784 said that, in contrast to other stage-bound theatres, "Mr. Astley is obliged to engage two elements in

¹⁴⁴ Bakhtin also notes that "light characterises folk grotesque. It is a festival of spring, of sunrise, of morning." *Rabelais and His World* 41.

¹⁴⁵ Henry Fielding (attr.), "*Of the Luxury of the English; and a Description of Ranelagh Gardens and Vauxhall, in a letter from a Foreigner to his Friend at Paris* - London 1st July o.s. 1742," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 12 (Aug. 1742), 418-20, qtd. David Solkin, *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1993) 116-7. With thanks to Joanna Innes for this reference.

¹⁴⁶ Puff, 26 May 1784, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 550; bill, Birmingham Amphitheatre, 31 Dec. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 54; review of Mme. Lejars, Batty's, 4 Aug. 1843, TM Stone Coll., "Astley's" box. The above are equestrians, although the list of evidence across many acts is endless.

his service--the earth and the air. . . ."147 Acts were named *The Flying Mercury* or the *Corde Volante*, to be followed in the late nineteenth century by the flying trapeze and high wire. Above all, the febrile horses encapsulated this spirit: "One of his horses--a short tailed bay," wrote one commentator of Ducrow, "is a beautiful creature--"a beast for Perseus; he is pure air and fire; and the dull elements of the earth and water never appear in him. . . ."148

According to the comparative symbologist Mircea Eliade, flight and its parallel symbolism of light (in the realm of the sky, as opposed to the elements of the body, darkness, and the earth) express an archetypal urge for absolute freedom, intelligence and transcendence.¹⁴⁹ It is especially apparent in the shamanism, or visionary ecstasy, that is still practised by archaic peoples in many parts of the world, including the horse-borne tribes of central Asia. Eliade considers shamanism to be the universal "prehistory of dramatic spectacles."¹⁵⁰ Another scholar has noted that shamanistic rituals contain several similarities to modern popular entertainment, including demonstrations of tightrope walking, fire eating, puppet shows and conjuring.¹⁵¹ In the shaman's hallucinatory mythology, "lightness" or "swiftness"--often via horseback--is required to cross the thread-like passage between

¹⁴⁷ 22 June, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 561.

¹⁴⁸ Clarke, *The Every Night Book* 24.

¹⁴⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos Cappeladonna (NY: Continuum, 1992) 3-15.

¹⁵⁰ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 511.

¹⁵¹ E. T. Kirby, "The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainment," *The Drama Review* 18.1 (1974): 5-16. The author, however, merely infers the "origins" by comparing.

heaven and earth, lest he or she fall prey to waiting demons.¹⁵² The shaman's objective is momentarily to regain a prelapsarian paradise in which all humans could once communicate with animals and perform such feats in everyday reality. More recently, Carlo Ginzburg has argued for ecstatic and shamanistic influences in Western European witchcraft.¹⁵³ Certainly, popular entertainment drew upon notions of the occult, and an English satirical tract of 1595 based on the famous 'talking' horse who was later allegedly burnt with his master for sorcery, *Maroccus Extaticus; or, Bankes' Bay Horse in a Trance*, assumes its readership would have been aware of a link between ecstasy and certain forms of entertainment.¹⁵⁴

Although one should be sceptical of the argument that drama and entertainment had a "prehistory" or "origins" in archaic Indo-European ritual (such a view presupposes that the past was somehow simpler than the present), it is clear that the circus focused on highly transcendental and ecstatic forms of play, and may have shared a fundamentally similar symbolism.¹⁵⁵ In movement and dance, John Astley and his colleagues seem to have been attempting to make the body behave like a spirit and escape corporeal ties. Earlier clowns and tumblers had prefigured this. Indeed, in 1801 Joseph Strutt quoted an Elizabethan who was so impressed by a tumbler that he "began to doubt

¹⁵² Eliade, *Shamanism* 485.

¹⁵³ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London: Penguin, 1992).

¹⁵⁴ John Dando and Harrie Runt, *Maroccus Extaticus; or, Bankes' Bay Horse in a Trance* (London, 1595).

¹⁵⁵ See George Kernodle, *The Theatre in History* (Fayetteville, London: U of Arkansas P, 1989) 18 and *passim*, which takes to task Gilbert Murray's idea that Greek Drama began in Dionysiac ritual.

whether he was a man, or a spirit. . . ."¹⁵⁶ It should, in passing, also be noted that agility has often served as a metaphor for intelligence.

At Astley's one can at least confidently point to the symbolism of the stage, where the early Romantic generation, guided by the great solar myth of the French Revolution, expressed aspirations for freedom in terms of epic struggles between light and dark; in the burning of massive, tyrannous castles; prisoners emerging into the light; and storms followed by daybreak.¹⁵⁷ These were the keynotes of both the Gothic drama and its successor, the melodrama. The next chapter will explore in greater detail the various messages that were composed.

¹⁵⁶ Laneham's letter on the sports at Kenilworth, qtd. Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* 164.

¹⁵⁷ See Ranger, "*Terror and Pity reign in every Breast*" chs. 1-3.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO THE CIRCUS

I. Frontiers of the Circus

If a frontier is the limit of what is known, then the circus has always purported to be its artform. "*Ne plus ultra*" was already a well worn slogan among the circus' eighteenth-century forbears, but Astley took a step further, promising horsemanship which was, according to his catchphrase of 1772, "really beyond Conception."¹ Indeed of all the cultural forms of the time, the circus became the most exclusively devoted to the sensation of the exotic and anomalous. As a purveyor and later emblem of the extraordinary, it played upon, and profited from, the collective horizons of its audiences' mental and physical worlds. "The Indian Triumph, expounded one puff in 1797, "brings to our view the customs and manners of a very remote nation, and embraces much information, highly entertaining, to those who never breathe any other air than this."²

¹ E.g. see engraving, *Théâtre d'Exercices* (c. 1760), Bod. John Johnson Colln., Misc. Ents 8; h.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 57.

² 11 Sept., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 158 B.

The circus came into being in a Britain on the brink of an unprecedented expansion in imperial influence and hence popular knowledge of the rest of the globe.³ Theatre, the exponent of civilisation, was important in introducing this information into the popular consciousness, alongside such other factors as newspapers, migration, and--directly facilitating the circus--developments in international transport.⁴ At the same time the idea of Europe, originally an élite concept deriving from religious and administrative blocks and monarchical relations, had gained currency in media discourse, thanks partly to the efforts of the *Philosophes*.⁵ The circus therefore helped Britons who were also Europeans to define themselves against others. Projections onto 'the other' inevitably reveal most about those who made them.

This chapter will attempt to trace the way that Astley's presented the world, firstly by outlining how this related to the actual geography of the circus. The second and third sections will discuss, in greater detail, Astley's portrayal of the French Revolution and contemporary developments in the British Empire. Finally, the fourth section will consider the attitudes towards nature upon which the circus was based.

³ See C. A. Bayley, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (Harlow: Longman, 1989).

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1991) 60; Stuart Woolf, "The Construction of a European World-View in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Years," *Past and Present* 137 (Nov. 1992: special edn. on "The Cultural and Political Construction of Europe"): 76.

⁵ Karl Leyser, "Concepts of Europe in the Early and High Middle Ages," J. H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," and M. E. Yapp, "Europe in the Turkish Mirror," *ibid.* 25-71, 134-55.

As we have seen in chapter two, section three, the circus' expansion into France and the rest of western and central Europe was immediate, and consolidated during the 1770s and 80s. This was followed by the colonisation of America and Russia in the 1790s, and other parts of the imperial world, including Australia, by the Regency.⁶ Thus the circus as a whole was co-extensive with the territories it portrayed, and had invested deeply in the spoils of empire. How did its dominion affect its content?

Firstly, travelling was made a strong part of the circus' identity. During the 1770s and 80s the Astleys assiduously dressed their product with cosmopolitan glamour, pointedly mentioning in advertisements that, for example, they "intend setting off for France and Spain," and adding details that they were "to embark at Brighthelmstone [Brighton], and disembark at Dieppe in Normandy."⁷ Sometimes letters from an anonymous correspondent in Paris, Brussels or Dublin would be printed in the London papers, giving news of the Astleys' successes in those cities, or heralding their imminent return.⁸

Not only did the circus export itself, but, as was noted in chapter five, it also imported foreign artistes, animals and occasionally other goods. There was much to be gained (though sometimes much to be lost) by the emphasis on foreignness in the circus, as Ducrow, who styled himself "Monsieur," despite being very obviously cockney, was aware.⁹ Although during the first decade most of the

⁶ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 112. John Ashton's circus had established itself in Australia by the 1800s.

⁷ H.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 76.

⁸ E.g. "Extract of a letter from Paris, dated July 29," h.d. 10 Aug. 1782, *ibid.* item 390.

⁹ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 89-90.

English circus' performers were English, there were, for example, notable contributors from Spain, Poland, the Low Countries, and "Vienna, in High Germany."¹⁰ There was, moreover, already a well-established tradition of Italian performers in the English theatrical world, so there would have been little new in the appearance of a "Signor Bouzalarico" or "Mr. Zanetta."¹¹ Italian dynastic troupes, still associated with the circus, appeared only a few years later when the acrobatic *Charinis* appeared as the highly successful centrepiece of the Royal Circus in 1786.¹²

The most influential links, however, both in Astley's case and in terms of the eventual character of the circus, were with France.¹³ Philip Astley used his trips to Paris to procure many of his most successful acts from its great wells of popular culture, the notorious Boulevard du Temple and the St. Lawrence and St. Germain fairs, where Europe's best jugglers, rope dancers and mime artists converged.¹⁴ These, he advertised, when "added . . . to those of London, must give him the superiority over other genteel places of public resort"--their gentility no doubt assisted by the fact that they did not come from Bartholomew Fair.¹⁵ From St. Germain in 1784 Astley obtained his most popular single

¹⁰ 11 Oct. 1780, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 191, and e.g. items 54 (h.d. 1772) and 197 (10 July 1781).

¹¹ Bill, c. 1786, Sotheby's, 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 243; e.g. 10 Apr. 1770, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 27.

¹² Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 114.

¹³ On the Anglo-French Astley's see Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque en France."

¹⁴ See Frederick Brown, *Theater and Revolution: the Culture of the French Stage* (NY: Viking, 1980) ch. 2.

¹⁵ 5 Apr. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 631.

attraction: a mischievous rope-dancing monkey called General Jackoo, who, most famously, dressed in military uniform and rode an English bulldog.¹⁶ Samuel Collings showed Jackoo leading a grotesque Astleian rabble to rout the muses of Augustan civilisation in his cartoon *The Downfall of Taste and Genius* of 1785 (fig. 6.1). As the next section will show, Astley was also instrumental in introducing melodrama, which was fomented in the Paris theatres around the time of the revolution.¹⁷

The geographical range of sources for circus novelties correlated with the general expansion of the circus and the wider cementing of trade and imperial links during the nineteenth century. American Indians--"Catabaw [Catawba] Chiefs"--were exhibited by Astley in 1796, although they were followed by only a trickle of other Americans until the rush of the 1840s (a complete British troupe had, meanwhile, first travelled to the United States in 1816).¹⁸ There were, however, few African representatives before the 1850s: at Astley's, only a troupe of fake "Bedouin Arabs" in 1836 in response to the genuine article elsewhere (against which Astley's, incredibly, mounted a campaign of racial prejudice).¹⁹

Circus history is littered with preposterous and rival constructions of nationality and ethnic origin. One of the most notorious examples was the Monstrous Craws (fig. 6.2), who arrived in

¹⁶ See puff, 5 Apr. 1785, *ibid.* item 641.

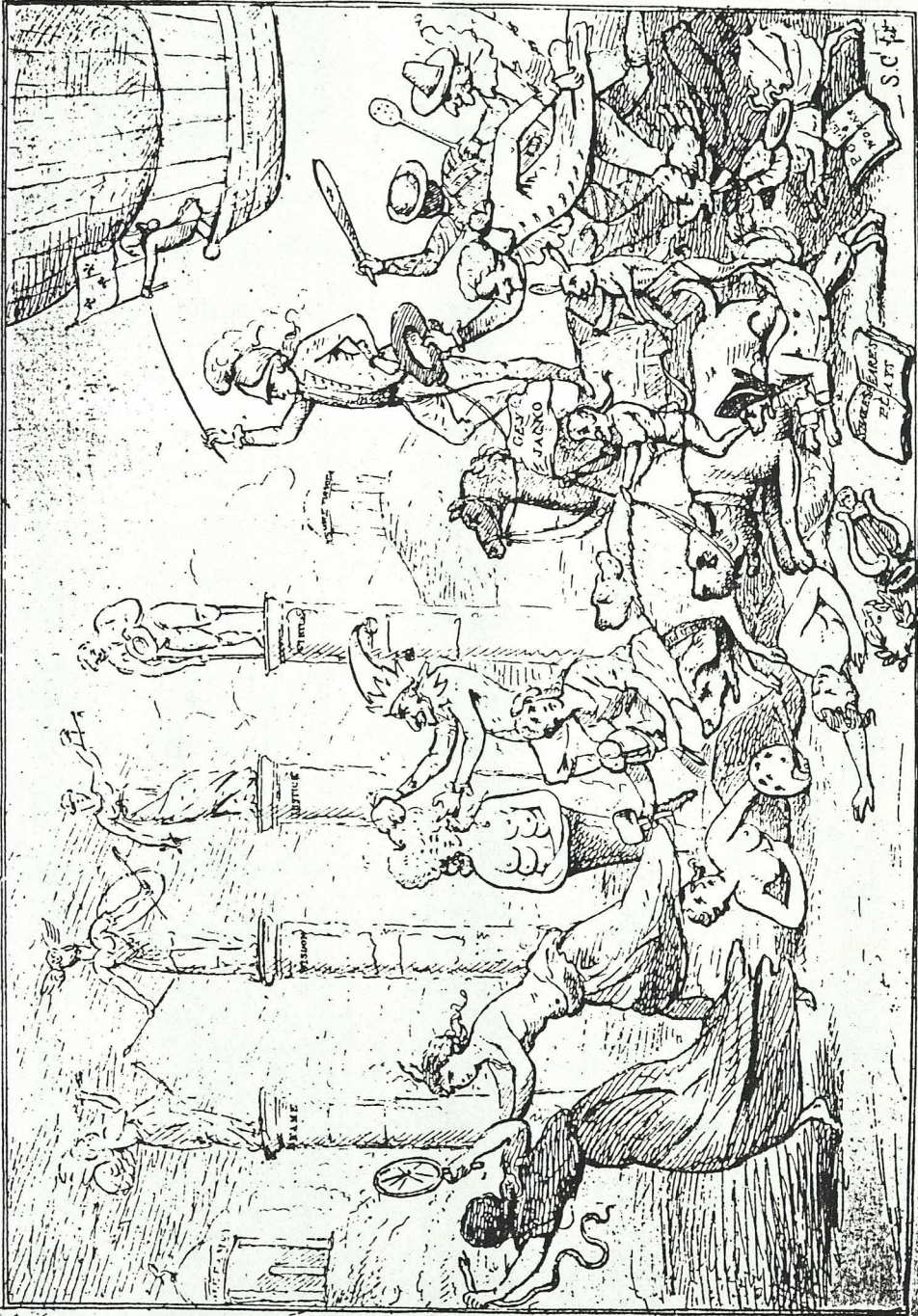
¹⁷ For melodrama's revolutionary credentials see Frederick Brown, *Theater and Revolution* ch. 3; Mark Olsen, ed., *The Repertory of the Parisian Stage During the French Revolution* (U. of Chicago: forthcoming 1994/5).

¹⁸ 19 Apr. 1796, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 128 B; Speaight, *History of the Circus* 118.

¹⁹ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 293-5.

Fig. 6.1. Samuel Collings, *The Downfall of Taste and Genius; or, The World as it Goes*, 1785. Note General Jackoo, the Learned Pig, and the Dancing Dogs, all of whom appeared at Astley's. Hughes (mounted) and Astley himself (running in with his riding crop) also appear to be depicted. The balloonist is probably the Italian pioneer in England Lunardi, carrying the French flag for the Montgolfier's invention. (British Museum.)

The Downfall of TASTE & GENIUS



The WORLD as it goes.
Pub. An. by Thompson & Strand.

Fig. 6.2. The Monstrous Craws, according to a handbill of 1784. Astley procured them in 1787. (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Human Freaks" box 2.)



To the Nobility, Gentry, and the Curious for inspecting most
Extraordinary Human Beings, of the wild Species born.

Just Arrived from Abroad,

And to be Seen at Mr. Becket's, *Trunk Maker*, No. 31;
HAY-MARKET,

From Ten o'Clock in the Morning, till Nine in the Evening,

Three Wonderful Phœnomena,

Wild Born, of the Human Species :

THESE are Two Females and a Male, of a very SMALL STATURE,
being little less or more than *Four Feet High*;

Each with a Monstrous C R A W

under the Throat, containing within, some Three, some Four, some Five
BALLS or GLANDS, more or less big than an Egg each of them, and which
play upwards and downwards, and all ways in their *Craws*, according as incited
and forced, either by their Speaking, or Laughing. These Three

Most wonderful wild born Human Beings,

whose Country, Language, and Native Customs are yet unknown to all Man-
kind, it is supposed started in some Canoes from their Native Place (believed
to be some still unknown remote Land of South America and being after
Wrecked, were picked up by a Spanish Vessel, which in a violent Storm,
was also lost off Trieste, in Italy, when these Three People; and another of the
same kind, since Dead, were providentially saved from perishing; though, it
is imagined, there were more on board of their Species.—At that period they
were of a dark Olive Complexion, but which has astonishingly, by degrees,
changed to the colour of that of Europeans.

These Three *truly-surprising* Beings, have attracted to themselves the most
minute Attention, and great Admiration of all the Princes, celebrated Ana-
tomists, and Naturalists, to whom they have been presented in Europe, for
their Rare, and yet Unknown Species; and not less indeed, for their most
apparent and surprising Happiness, and Content among themselves; most
endearing Tractableness and respectful demeanour towards all Strangers, as
well for their unparallel'd and natural; cheerful, lively, and merry Disposition,
Singing and Dancing (in their most extraordinary Way,) at the will and
pleasure of the Company.

Admittance, Two Shillings Each:--Children Half pr te.

Britain in 1784 and whom Astley was finally able to hire and display on a lighted platform three years later. Despite assurances that only after their arrival had their complexion "astonishingly changed by degrees to the colour of Europeans," the truth of their origins in Valdustria, in the Italian Alps, where goitres were common due to the local diet, eventually seeped out.²⁰ After the younger "female" died of consumption in August 1787, amid accusations against her proprietor of cruelty, her spectre spoke through the pages of the *Universal Register* to admonish him: "from Imbreca to Valdustria," she claimed, "and even as far as the mountains of St. Bernard, near the frontiers of Savoy, . . . a traveller sees no other kind of people almost, . . . though no wilder than any other Italian mountaineers." Since she spoke a patois of Italian as well "as any Savoyards;" her "Ta, ta, ta! . . . Hew, hew, hew! . . . Ba, ba, ba!" &c. &c." had been "a mockery, and a bare-faced imposition on the credulity of the public."²¹ When Hughes in turn acquired the remaining pair for the Royal Circus in October 1787, it was admitted that, though still billed as "Wild Born," they originated "ten Leagues from the City of Corne, where Hannibal lost part of his army . . . Hughes having lived and performed in the above country, speaks the language, and will converse with them every evening in presence of the audience."²² Subsequent appearances the next year, and in the provinces into the mid-1790s, set about re-establishing "the mountains" as a remote and primeval region.²³

²⁰ Ct., h.d. 22 Sept. 1784, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 92.

²¹ 29 Aug. 1787, *ibid.*

²² *Morning Herald*, 21 Sept. 1787, *ibid.*

²³ See *Morning Post* 12 Dec. 1788, *Lincoln Paper* 15 Mar. 1793 and *Gloucester Journal* 2 Sept. 1795, *ibid.*

Exotic animals, hitherto reserved chiefly as trophies, diplomatic gifts, and ornaments of extreme wealth and power, did not become a predominant feature of the circus until it integrated with travelling menageries in the 1860s. Within the circus there was, however, periodic interest in foreign beasts according to fashion, or, since showmen also acted as animal traders, availability. Astley first walked a zebra round the ring in 1780, eighteen years after one was first introduced to Britain, and offered to sell it, without initial success, for 400 guineas.²⁴ In 1782 the clown attempted to ride the "Camel or Dromedary from Grand Cairo, and the Elk from Bombay."²⁵ In 1812, with India well-established as the chief preoccupation of imperial endeavour, and in response to the acting of the famous Chunees in a pantomime at Covent Garden, Astley introduced an elephant in a spoof Eastern hippodrama, *Bagvhan-Ho*, on the reinforced stage of the Olympic Pavilion.²⁶ Despite the fact that Chunees had to be shot by the militia when seized by a fit of 'must' in 1826, elephants became revered in the popular theatre of high imperialism. Lions and tigers did not catch on until the 1830s (Astley first presented them in 1832), after the success of a keeper at Atkins' Menagerie in entering a cage and performing tricks with them in 1825.²⁷ Under such handlers as Henri Martin from the Boulevard and the famous American Van Amburgh, who appeared in tenuous storylines in all kinds of theatres (including Astley's), these "savage kings of the jungle" reached their peak of popularity in the late 1830s.²⁸ A few years later they

²⁴ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 194 (24 Nov. 1780) and 195 (22 Jan. 1781).

²⁵ Ct., 10 Sept. 1782, TM Astley's file.

²⁶ See Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 216; Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 39.

²⁷ Bill, 25 Sept. 1822, TM Astley's file; Speaight, *History of the Circus* 125.

²⁸ Saxon *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow* 242.

were appearing in smaller travelling circuses.²⁹ Although with its exploitative history 'the exotic' is now seen as problematic, postmodern minds should understand the impact of seeing such an animal in an age with few public zoos and, most of all, no television and hence no widespread concept of habitat. There was little to combat the perception that animals, like so much else, were commodities.³⁰

Lastly, Astley also brought artefacts from overseas. As early as November 1769 he exhibited a "curious" self-powered carriage "from Hambro" in Germany, which was supposed to carry eight passengers at an average of four to five miles per hour "up any hill between London and York."³¹ Although Astley often missed the first fruits of foreign ingenuity, he was usually its most successful popularizer. Besides the early ballooning events following the Montgolfiers in 1784, he took the French inventor Vaucanson's automata out of the Haymarket theatre and the parlours of St. James' by showing the German Flute-Players in 1777; and made adaptations of Chinese shadow-puppets and the Javanese *wai yan* available in the shape of his *Ombres Chinoises*.³² He did not introduce the *Ombres* to London, but he was their main developer after they had faltered elsewhere in the capital, and it is

²⁹ Speaight, *History of the Circus* 82. The modern non-narrative "lion taming" act was not developed until the 1870s.

³⁰ See Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (London: Penguin, 1990) pt. 3 and *passim*.

³¹ Ct., h.d. 7 Nov. 1769, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 21.

³² See Jean de Vaucanson, *An Account of the Mechanism of an Automaton, or Image playing on the German Flute; As it was presented in a memoire . . .* (London, 1742).

likely he saw their potential while in Paris, and perhaps at the special Court theatre for them at Versailles. Certainly he used the stories--notably *The Broken Bridge*--favoured by the Parisians.³³

Thus circuses quickly became far-reaching conduits of cultural trade. They were at once ambassadors of their original cultures and merchants of foreign ones: each carried forth a distinct national style yet brought home people and packages from abroad. Around the same time that Astley brought back the *The Broken Bridge*, for instance, he was exporting *The Taylor to Brentford* to Paris under the title *Le Combat de Tailleur Anglais de son Cheval*.³⁴ Diversity and unity were therefore celebrated together. Contrary to what some fans claim, the circus did not so much transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, as mediate and portray them.

How, then, did the circus map out the world, momentarily expanding the consciousness of its spectators? What was the scope of its subject-matter? Before the mid-1780s, Astley's perspective was almost exclusively fixed on the Continent. As the stress put on travel suggested, the circus envisaged Europe as a place of genteel pleasures, all to be sampled within relatively easy reach. No more need be boasted of Astley's in the 1770s than "There never was an Exhibition of this kind in one place in Europe," and that he was Europe's best horseman.³⁵ As a cell within the broad European system, his establishment was emphatically entitled the *British Riding School*.³⁶ Astley's purportedly

³³ Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*, 2nd ed. (London: Robert Hale, 1990) 142-3.

³⁴ Bill, winter 1783, repr. in Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque en France" pt. 2, ch. 1, fig. I.

³⁵ E.g. h.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 66 and 76.

³⁶ E.g. 6 May 1773, *ibid.* item 96.

humane, rational and unaffected method of equestrianism contrasted the classically precise style of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, or the elegant prowess of the French *Haute École* taught to English youths on the Grand Tour. The different styles of the *manège* were thought to display clearly the manners of the nations from which they came. Other activities displayed the rituals and even the architecture of the various European peoples. With its famous carnival traditions, Venice was a perennial source for the circus well into the nineteenth century: Astley's early favourite, the human pyramids, mimicked those performed at the annual Festivals of the Doge, as painted by Canaletto in 1763.³⁷ In a similar show of "Men pil'd on Men" at Astley's 1776, entitled *Le Spectacle incomparable de la Place St. Mark*, "The different Towers, Domes, Arches, Pedestals, and other Attic Buildings" of the city were, it was claimed, "most Astonishingly imitated."³⁸

The overall Europhilia of the early circus did not prevent bouts of the xenophobia endemic in London audiences.³⁹ France was generally acknowledged to dominate the world of popular entertainments. But the circus was naturally content to play the patriotic card in cases of foreign competition, taking the side of the English stage, or "Brightest Genius" of the country.⁴⁰ In 1785, one paper said of the "English Devil" at Astley's: "we know not of any foreign Devil whose feats can equal them."⁴¹ Untroubled by the fact that most British material had in fact been inspired by or taken from

³⁷ Antonio Canaletto, *Festivals of the Doge: The Piazzetta, c. 1763*, pen and wash, Ratjen Foundation, Vaduz, in *The Independent Magazine* 10 Sept. 1994: 27.

³⁸ H.d. 1776, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 114.

³⁹ See Baer, *Theatre and Disorder* ch. 9.

⁴⁰ Ct., c. 1710, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 117.

⁴¹ Ct., 26 Apr. 1785, *ibid.* vol 4, f. 26.

Paris, a correspondent to the *Morning Herald* in 1784 intoned: "No more ye sons of Gallia, may ye boast, / The wonders ye have brought to Britain's coast; . . ." ⁴²

The Amphitheatre was at best ambivalent about France in general during the pre-Revolutionary period. Astley's target audiences evidently continued to hold French language and culture in high regard, since many of his advertisements in the London press in the 1770s were ostentatiously accompanied by French translations or sprinkled with French phrases, well before Astley established his permanent base in Paris. ⁴³ In 1777 he even presented, alongside the Little Conjuring Horse, *Ombres Chinoises* "in the French language" in a room in Panton Street. ⁴⁴ The patronage of continental nobility was at all times eagerly sought, so much was made of the Duc de Chartres' pioneering and munificent visit in 1785. ⁴⁵ Such considerations did not, however, prevent the regular pillorying of French stereotypes: a puff in 1772 typically commended "the Drollness" of seeing "a Frenchman [not necessarily a tailor] mounted on an English Horse," and indeed the act was itself advertised in French. ⁴⁶ But when national conflicts demanded the tone could be more serious. A song celebrating the Battle of the Saints at Astley's in 1782 prefigured all the spirit, rhythm and bluntness of the "Jingo" songs a hundred years later:

Come my lads with souls befitting
Let us never be dismay'd

⁴² Verses from "An Admirer of Curiosities," *Morning Herald* 6 Apr. 1784, *ibid.* vol. 2, f. 70.

⁴³ E.g. h.d. 1772, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 78.

⁴⁴ *Morning Post* 21 Apr. 1777, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 80.

⁴⁵ 28 Apr. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 653.

⁴⁶ H.d. 1772, *ibid.* items 72 and 78.

But avenge the wrongs of Britain
And support her injur'd trade

Five French ships with all their treasure,
Now my boys submit to fate; . . .⁴⁷

During the Revolution the political expediency of Astley's images became particularly noticeable, though not, perhaps, predictable. The following section will discuss the Amphitheatre's coverage of events which, through Philip Astley's personal involvement, were brought unusually close to home.

II. Astley's and the French Revolution

The first hint of Revolution at the Amphitheatre was a simple dance by two French performers entitled *Love and Liberty*, introduced on the 20 July 1789, six days after the fall of the Bastille.⁴⁸ John Astley had been in Paris to witness the event, however, and quickly sent back visual data. Ten days later, two scenes--interior and exterior views--of the fortress, painted from etchings "taken on the spot a few days ago," were inserted into the current pantomime, a European travelogue entitled *Harlequin's Choice of the Beauties of the World*.⁴⁹ Amid "overflowing" houses of up to "6,000" people, Astley was thus able to boast that his was the only theatre in London to represent the topic.⁵⁰ "It is lucky for

⁴⁷ 23 May 1782, *ibid.* item 376; on the Jingo songs see Penny Summerfield, "Patriotism and Empire: Music-Hall Entertainment, 1870-1914," in John Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986) ch. 2.

⁴⁸ 20 July 1789, BL "Astley' Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1121.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* items 1133 (30 July) and 1134 (31 July 1789). In the pantomime, Harlequin has to choose to receive his magic powers from one of "four Women dressed in the characters of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America": after hearing descriptions of each, he plumps for Europe.

⁵⁰ Ct., 31 Aug. 1789, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 35.

Table 6.1. The French Revolution at Astley's

(* = end of season)

Year	Date of Event	Dates of Production	Title
1789		20 July-3 Aug.(?)	<i>Love and Liberty</i> (dance)
	14 July	30 July-17 Aug.	Two scenes of the Bastille in <i>Harlequin's Choice of the Beauties of the World</i>
	14 July	17 Aug.-29 Oct.*	<i>Paris in an Uproar; or, The Destruction of the Bastille</i>
1790	14 July	25 July-10 Nov.*	<i>The Champ de Mars; or, the Federation Exhibition</i>
1791	21 June	18 July-25 Oct.*	<i>The Royal Fugitives; or, France in an Uproar</i>
1792		6 Aug.-12 Oct.*	<i>Bagshot-Heath Camp</i>
1793	Apr.	6 May-30 June	<i>The Disembarkation of the Light Horse at Ostend</i>
	10 July	28 July-31 Aug.	<i>The Surrender of Condé</i>
	25 July	2 Sept.-29 Nov.*	<i>The Siege of Valenciennes</i>
	27 Oct.	12-29 Nov.*	<i>The Carmagnols Routed</i> ("near Lannoy")
1794		21 Apr.-2 May	<i>The Ensuing Campaign</i>
	25 March	4-25 May	<i>The Fall of Martinico</i>
	26 Apr.	27 May-7 June	<i>The Fall of Landrecy; or, a Peep at the French Frontiers</i>
	30 Apr.	9 June-12 July	<i>The Brussels Ridotto</i> ("on the Night of the Inauguration of the Emperor of Germany")

1794 cont.	1, 13-15 June	19 June-12 July(?)	<i>Old England for Ever! or, Earl Howe and the Glorious First of June</i>
		14 July-16 Aug.*	<i>The Seige of Valenciennes</i> (revival)
1795		16-22 May	<i>The Provincial Sailors</i> (song)
		31 Aug.-5 Sept.(?)	<i>Returned from the Continent; or, the Milliner's Shop</i>
		31 Aug.-21 Oct.*	<i>England's Glory; or, Britain's Best Bulwarks are her Wooden Walls</i>
1796	11 June	14-28 June; 23 Aug.-27 Oct.*	<i>The Beseigers Beseiged; or, the Present State of the West India Islands ("the late attack upon the Island of Grenada")</i>
1797		8-29 May	<i>A Pull at the Roast Beef; or, John Bull More Than a Match for the French</i> (song)
1798		7 Apr.-3 May	<i>The Contrast; the French Rafts and England's Navy; or, a Peep into Dunkirk Bason</i>
	8 May	21 May-16 June	<i>The Escape of Sir Sydney Smith from Paris</i> (fireworks)
	1 Aug.	4 Sept.-24 Oct.*	<i>Nelson's Triumph; or, Buonaparte in the Dumps</i> (fireworks of the Battle of the Nile)
	1 Aug.	8-24 Oct.	<i>The Egyptian Oracle; or, Harlequin Criminal</i> (revival, with added topographic scenes)
1799	Battle of Nile (1798)	Easter Monday - late Apr.	<i>The Four Engagements; or, the Heroes of the Sea</i>
		11-28 Sept.	<i>The Philanthropic Female; or, the British Army in Holland</i>

1800

1801

2 Apr.

24 Apr.-15 May(?)

Harlequin Victor (with scenes from
the Battle of Copenhagen)

1802

Peace of
Amiens in
March

26 July-22 Oct.*

Visit by "extensive company of
French Performers"

--oOo--

Astley the [patent] theatres were not open," remarked one newspaper on 5 August, "or tis supposed they would have had a finger in the pye in bringing forward the Bastile."⁵¹ But judging by their repertoires over the next few years, the regular theatres would have had little interest in portraying such an event.⁵² The Bastille gave the minor theatres a chance to develop a speciality in reportage and topical settings.

By 17 August 1789 Astley's became the first theatre to present an entire spectacle devoted to the subject. *Paris in an Uproar; or, the Destruction of the Bastile* added four more scenes by his painters Lupino and co., including the "Strong Tower, comprising the Dark Dungeon, Remote Cells, &c." as well as views of the Tuileries Gardens and the interior of the Palais Royal. It was the Amphitheatre's first major essay in topographic realist scene design. To stress that the show was "*GROUNDED on AUTHENTIC FACTS*," it was supplemented by a 50 x 84-foot (15 x 26 m) model of central Paris covering the floor of the amphitheatre, which could be inspected at leisure beforehand, and contained accurate uniforms, French music, "Emblems of Liberty &c.", as well as, according to a puff, at least one "moving scene" where the actress displayed "much science in her manner of acting on the tender feelings of the audience" by attempting to prevent her father, an officer, from joining the battle.⁵³

⁵¹ 1798, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1139.

⁵² Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 149, claims that Covent Garden and Drury Lane also produced Bastille spectacles, though heavily censored under the request of the French Ambassador, but I have found no evidence for this in the lists of their productions. Certainly topicality was unusual for them during this period.

⁵³ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 1148 (17 Aug.) and 1153 (21 Aug. 1789).

Yet *Paris in an Uproar* seems to have been little more than a partly dramatised exhibition, designed to illustrate the news. Willson-Disher alleges that it was so makeshift that a scene-shifter was obliged to stand with a sign saying "This is a Draw-Bridge."⁵⁴ By contrast *The Triumph of Liberty; or, the Destruction of the Bastile* by John Dent, which, as Astley had been aware, was due to open at the Royal Circus on 18 August, had a hero, Henry Dubois, who led the assault in order to rescue the father of Matilda, his betrothed ("Doubly arm'd I'll head the corps of Grenadiers--A parent soon shall wipe away those tears").⁵⁵ "Astley's is a pretty little painting of *Pont neuf* and one or two other bridges," condescended one newspaper diarist some days later,

--but the real scene is at the Circus, where the eye perceives above 150 disciplined troops all in motion on the stage, charging with bayonets, firing their musquetry, and storming the fort with all the enthusiasm of an army determined to conquer or die.⁵⁶

Once in the grisly dungeons, wrote one reviewer, the "effect is still heightened by the clinkings of the liberating hammer, the crashings of the falling chains, and the released objects sinking beneath sufferings. . . ."⁵⁷ "O! Happy England," cried Dubois, trampling on the committal book full of concocted crimes, "be thy courts rever'd, / Where no man's punish'd till he first is heard / Where *Magna Charta* checks despotic fury, / And every crime's determined by a jury."⁵⁸ *The Triumph of Liberty* was the Royal Circus' first smash hit, which enraptured fashion and plebs alike. Never in the "histrionic

⁵⁴ Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 62.

⁵⁵ Qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 144; see Saxon, "Capon, the Royal Circus.

⁵⁶ 27 Aug 1789, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1157.

⁵⁷ Qtd. Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus," 148.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 146.

annals of this country," remarked Decastro, had there been a piece "so congenial to the lovers of liberty, and so strongly conducive to express the heart-felt emotions and inspiring tones of a Briton."⁵⁹

All Astley could do was attempt to justify his initial approach. The Royal Circus' "unmilitary-like combustibles," he pointed out, were "of a piece with the rest of the business of the Love Story, &c., which never existed but in the author's brain in London," while the cockades worn by their "fine parade of soldiery" were allegedly "one shade lighter" than they should have been.⁶⁰ On 28 September John Astley returned with a uniform of the National Guards, obtained when they used the Paris Amphithéâtre as billets, and "finely executed" wax casts of the heads of the Bastille Governor and the *Prévot Marechal*, which were duly paraded on pikes "in the same manner as they were by the Bourgeoisie. . . ."⁶¹ Despite the fact that he had been eclipsed, Astley still made sufficient profits from the production to build the houses of York Place nearby (fig. 1.5), which was known as "Bastille-row" until the 1830s.⁶² The Royal Circus, meanwhile, having established its advantage in drama, did not attempt any further military verisimilitude until 1797.⁶³

⁵⁹ Decastro, *Memoirs* 123-4.

⁶⁰ 1 Oct., BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 908.

⁶¹ 30 Sept 1789, *ibid.* item 1171. For the provenance of the heads see Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 61.

⁶² 9 Aug. 1830, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 1196.

⁶³ *Cork in an Uproar; or, the French Fleet in a Fog on the Irish Coast*: see *ibid.* item 149 C, 10 Apr. 1797.

A major implication of the Royal Circus' *Bastille* was its development of themes that would later be seen as melodramatic, but which were in fact already anticipated in the so-called Gothic genre.⁶⁴ Palmer, the current manager, had sensed that the subject was ideal, involving patriotism, heroism, action, gruesomeness: all that had to be added was the vital ingredient of filial virtue.⁶⁵ The fiery destruction of the oppressive fortress became a *leitmotif* of the age and the typical climax of minor theatre productions.⁶⁶ Gone were the Baroque conceits of Charles Dibdin. Thus melodrama and its associated spectacle were forged by the English minor theatres from the heat of the French Revolution, and not simply imported from the *Boulevard* following the tumult.

Moreover, the dramatisation of contemporary events heightened historical (if not class) consciousness: ordinary people now felt they were witnessing and participating in the making of history, and that history was dramatic.⁶⁷ (Indeed to add to sense of immediacy, the Royal Circus' production had been attended by Lord Mazareen, one of those liberated from the Bastille.)⁶⁸ It was an awareness that depended on information. Like much painting at the time, theatre brought verbal reports to life, yet in a literally poetic form, as opposed to the more prosaic media of the twentieth century. But for the moment Astley had to make up for his less sublime stage by trumpeting the fact

⁶⁴ See Ranger's useful "*Terror and Pity reign in every Breast*".

⁶⁵ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus" 143.

⁶⁶ On the general symbolism see in particular Jean Starobinski, "The Solar Myth of the Revolution," *1789: The Emblems of Reason* (Geneva: Skira, 1968) ch. 2.

⁶⁷ E.g. see Woolf, "The Construction of a European World-View" 96.

⁶⁸ *World* 10 Aug. 1789, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1142.

that he personally was swept up in the events of the Revolution, which seemed to have immediate implications for all Europeans and, as Philip Astley was eventually to prove--and John Astley had already suggested by his apparently fearless gathering of evidence--called for individual acts of heroism.

Commentators welcomed these initial celebrations: "The earnestness and interest," explained one Astleian puff, "which are expressed by all ranks of people in this country, on the subject of the French Revolution, evinces how strong the principle of liberty is implanted in the breasts of Englishmen."⁶⁹ But they typically intoned that, "by the bye," the French would "never arrive to that perfection" of the English constitution.⁷⁰ The Royal Circus' *Bastile* had even ended with the *citoyens* crying "Hail Britannia, 'tis to thee / We owe our Liberty," and sounding a call to empire as she entered on a chariot bearing transparent portraits of the British king and queen:

Ev'ry clime and ev'ry zone
Ever must they impulse own.
May you ever hold controul
And bless us from pole to pole.⁷¹

For good measure, Astley later in the 1789 season chose to represent "*The Royal Naval Review* at Plymouth; or, DEVONSHIRE AND CORNWALL LOYALTY" in his attempt to win back the initiative. This relegated the *Bastile*, which had previously ousted even the horsemanship, to an afterpiece on 5 September. The *Bastile* had, however, already raised the priority of reportage in the theatre: advertisements for the *Review* took the form of published letters from "a friend"

⁶⁹ 3 Aug. 1790, *ibid.* vol. 2, item 12 E.

⁷⁰ *Review*, 17 July 1790, *ibid.* item 14 A.

⁷¹ Tuttle, "History of the Royal Circus," 147.

communicating the details at Astley's request. Attractions included an "Amazonian Crew" of singing rowers ("seven of the most beautiful women Plymouth and Dock could produce") like those who had escorted the king in the event, and machinery which showed even the feathering of the oars and men of war "not in profile, but as in reality, with all their sails and rigging compleat."⁷²

As with all such spectacles during the following decade, equal detail was lavished on next year's representation of the Feast of the Federation, which had been held in Paris on 14 July 1790. Theatres on both sides of the channel were now helping to slake a thirst for new and massive civic rites.⁷³ Other houses, too, "it seems," noted one newspaper, "had their deputies in Paris, and their journey back was a kind of theatrical contest. . . ."⁷⁴ Astley naturally won, despatching the details himself in 37 hours, and *The Champ de Mars; or, the Federation Exhibition* opened nine days later with all the genuine songs, parades, and accurate scenes of Paris "as they really appeared."⁷⁵ In the meantime he had made a quick £500 by selling stones from the ruins of the Bastille to the French government for the building of the Franklin Memorial.⁷⁶

⁷² BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 1161 ("letter," dated 22 Aug., pub. 3 Sept. 1789) and 1164 (6 Sept. 1789).

⁷³ See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (London, Methuen) 1984; D. L. Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David* (London, 1948).

⁷⁴ 25 July 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 16 B.

⁷⁵ Bill, 27 July 1790, Sotheby's 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 243.

⁷⁶ *World* 3 July 1790, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 37.

Arriving on the crest of the Francophilia which complemented the *Anglomanie* of the twilight of the *ancien regime* (there was a noticeable resurgence of bilingual advertisements in 1788, often offering to take Louis d'Ors for admission), the early years of the Revolution evidently made Frenchness especially fashionable.⁷⁷ But the mood changed at Astley's with the growth of republicanism in 1791. When Astley (now on secondment in Paris as events gathered pace) sent news that an attempted escape by the royal family had been foiled at Varennes on 21 June, the Amphitheatre took time to prepare a proper drama which boasted eleven scenes and plenty of action.⁷⁸ *The Royal Fugitives* was presented on 18 July 1791. "[S]ympathetic tears bedew the cheeks of the spectators" observed one newspaper:

The writer of this paragraph (a cosmopolitan) desires Mr. Astley to prolong the scenes where the French King embraces his children: the feelings of parents in this scene are greatly affected, and on the objects (the cause of it) being so suddenly removed, there is scarcely time enough for the mind to be relieved.⁷⁹

This moment later became a royalist icon in France too.⁸⁰ Here, however, the sense of tragic injustice was sharpened by the knowledge that it was current. Many Londoners watched the French Revolution unfold in very vivid terms.

⁷⁷ E.g. 8 June 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 945; on *Anglomanie* see Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque" 61.

⁷⁸ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 64 A (18 July) and 65 D (20 July 1791).

⁷⁹ H.d. July 1791, *ibid.* item 66 B.

⁸⁰ See engraving after P. Bouillon, *Louis XVI Separated from his Family*, in David Herbert, *David: Brutus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

The lack of a happy ending may have been compensated by the salutary defeat of the French forces shown in a revival of *The Siege of Quebec; or, The Death of General Wolfe*, which was neatly placed next in the programme. More significant, though, was the inauspicious entry the same evening of a character destined to become the prime representative of British imperialism on the stage: in the title rôle of a trifling musical piece *The Blunt Tar; or, True Love Rewarded*, he "displayed," one newspaper observed, ". . . the true British stile of honest frankness, so peculiar to that generous and hardy race of mankind."⁸¹ It contrasted nicely with the overblown proclamations of the *Assemblée Nationale* seen earlier in the *Fugitives*. Jack Tar expressed an anti-intellectual "national psychology" welcomed by squirearchy and proletarians alike, and which Astley's itself came to epitomise.⁸²

The republican turn of the Revolution therefore saw the gestation of this character, partly as a break from John Bull, who still often appeared as a "vulgar radical."⁸³ It was also a moment when Britain began to define itself *against* continental Europe and indeed the rest of the world. The subsequent reconstruction of European identity and institutions in the Napoleonic period would further mark this rift.⁸⁴ In this isolationist climate, the twin stereotypes of Jack Tar and John Bull seeped

⁸¹ 29 June 1791, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 53 C.

⁸² On the later development of Jack Tar see Bratton *et. al.*, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1800-1920* (Manchester: Manchester UP) ch. 2; see also Cunningham, "The Language of Patriotism," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1989) ch. 7.

⁸³ Miles Taylor, "John Bull and the Iconography of Public Opinion in England, c. 1712-1929," *Past and Present* 134 (Feb. 1992): 104. See also Jeannine Surel (trans. Kathy Hodgkin), "John Bull," in Samuel, ed., *Patriotism* vol. 3: ch. 1.

⁸⁴ Woolf, "The Construction of a European Worldview" 75, 95.

indelibly into the popular culture of the next hundred years. Jack Tar was particularly potent because as a sailor he maintained the paradox of an island retreating behind its "wooden walls"--much mentioned in the minor theatres--but also engaged in imperial adventure facilitated by the same seas. Beyond catering for the rise in nautical melodrama, the Amphitheatre also attempted to recruit the Tar's terrestrial counterpart to its reactionary cause. Jeremy Bentham described Astley's as "the only theatre in which John Bull honestly takes delight."⁸⁵ Most obviously Philip Astley himself seemed to fit the part, with his renowned bluff personality and dress. So too, consequently, did the standard ringmaster.

Preparations for war were seen in *Bagshot-Heath Camp* in 1792, which typically promoted the rumbustious joys of military life: "Oh Lord, What a place is a Camp! / What wonderful doings are here!" sang Johannot in the character of a pieman.⁸⁶ Next year's account of *The Disembarkation of the Light Horse at Ostend*--which, as Astley was in charge of the horses, took time to show his method of landing them in slings--began the Amphitheatre's unique blow-by-blow account of the four-year campaign.⁸⁷ "While OLD ASTLEY is fighting in the cause of liberty and our allies," observed one puff, ". . . his son is no less assiduous in his operations at the Royal Saloon."⁸⁸ The obviously flexible terms of his enlistment (Astley was now 50, and would be allowed generous leave and time to take sketches and details), suggest that it was agreed he should be there partly as a kind of war correspondent, in official recognition of the amphitheatre's propaganda value. Certainly he set himself

⁸⁵ Qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 15.

⁸⁶ 6 Aug. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 70 F.

⁸⁷ 6 May 1793, *ibid.* item 79 C.

⁸⁸ 13 July 1793, *ibid.* item 81 A.

up as a celebrity morale-booster by taking a tea-chest full of useful equipment for the camp plus 500 flannel jackets made by the women of the amphitheatre with a shilling, donated by the staff, sewn in the corner of each, and by buying drinks for his comrades from the sale of four of his horses.⁸⁹

In the case of Astley's, therefore, the hegemonic stance of a minor theatre had a demonstrable institutional base. The early stress on the martial utility of his circus activities; his ingratiating attempts to devise new equestrian tactics; his patent for horsebreaking; and lately his proposal of a field hospital for horses were all consistent with a contemporary penchant for amateur statebuilding.⁹⁰ In the present controversy, it had become necessary to declare one's position: songs from the shows published in the press and praising the British constitution had asterisked footnotes explaining that "the author is one among the many of the most loyal of its votaries" and that "Mr. Astley, senior, is, we understand, the author."⁹¹ What remains none the less striking is the shrillness and enthusiasm of the minor theatres' "loyalties" (as these spectacles were known), apparently felt on all sides and in all ranks, especially in comparison to the more aloof patent theatres.⁹²

Philip Astley also had a direct interest in the progress of the war, as his Paris amphitheatre and surrounding houses had been requisitioned as barracks in 1792 (after having been adopted by the

⁸⁹ Decastro, *Memoirs* 72, 74.

⁹⁰ Astley, *Profession and Duty of a Soldier* v.

⁹¹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 88 C (6 Sept. 1793) and 92 A (18 Apr. 1794).

⁹² E.g. see report on Sadler's Wells, 10 July 1794, *ibid.* item 102 C.

mother of his former associate, Antonio Franconi) and was now obliged to stage Jacobin pageants.⁹³ Reputedly, on one occasion Franconi had been forced to defend himself in the foyer against an angry mob after he had allegedly given shelter to a nobleman.⁹⁴

Despite a London Amphitheatre now bristling with patriotism, Astley's retained its French performers. Presumably they, like the French king, were afforded the sympathy of the audience. Even as the allies and Astley himself were landing in northern France in 1793, the Amphitheatre was introducing a new kind of play from Paris "(as now performed at Audinot's theatre. . .)" entitled *Maternal Affection; or, the Dark Forest*.⁹⁵ Four years later, alongside Johannot's song "A PULL at the ROAST BEEF; or, JOHN BULL a MATCH for the FRENCH", Astley's advertised one piece "Composed by M. Gardel" and "performed . . . at Paris" and another "Translated from the French."⁹⁶ Prior to Napoleon's resurgence of 1803, war did not interrupt the market for French culture, especially in the form of melodrama. Indeed demand may have been stimulated by a relative dearth of home creativity in this dark period for the allies. Neither did it, before the 1820s, detract from the use of French phrases in advertising.

⁹³ Decastro, *Memoirs* 67.

⁹⁴ Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 163.

⁹⁵ H.d. 1793, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 83 B.

⁹⁶ 8 May 1797, *ibid.* item 150 D.

On 28 July 1793, eighteen days after the first obstacle on the Northern Frontier had collapsed under a three-month siege, Astley's presented *The Surrender of Condé*.⁹⁷ The now regular presence of emigrés in the audience poignantly confirmed that the Revolution had betrayed its once noble principles. One newspaper reported that a "native of Condé" during this piece insisted on verifying and explaining it to those around who could understand him. "The marching out of the Garrison &c. put a stop to his declaration," however, "and took off the attention of his hearers, who all shouted as with one voice when the Ox and Cow arrived as presents for the Sick."⁹⁸

The Siege of Valenciennes that followed a month later was a greater victory for both allies and amphitheatre.⁹⁹ Celebrations of this early bridgehead had included coloured lamps and designs at tradesmen's premises and shops, and the portico of Covent Garden made into a crown and triumphal arch with festoons, coloured lamps, and the words "VALENCIENNES" in transparency. The whole front of Astley's was illuminated, centred by a transparent painting of Duke of York "treading on the ruins" of the city.¹⁰⁰ "Old Astley" returned on an eleven-month leave around 15 August, bearing "Views" and, according to one puff, giving "new life to everything, at the Royal Saloon."¹⁰¹ *The Siege*, which was relatively long in preparation, and featured splendid staged battle scenes, was the most

⁹⁷ 28 July 1793, *ibid.* item 83 E.

⁹⁸ 30 July 1793, *ibid.* item 84 B.

⁹⁹ 2 Sept. 1793, *ibid.* item 87 F.

¹⁰⁰ 17 Aug. 1793, *ibid.* item 86 D.

¹⁰¹ 15 Aug. 1793, *ibid.* item 86 A.

successful military spectacle at Astley's until *The Battle of Waterloo* 32 years later.¹⁰² The Prince of Wales and Marquis of Hastings were reported to be frequent visitors.¹⁰³

Peddling the official line that this was a war for French national redemption, *The Siege of Valenciennes* made clear the sufferings of the inhabitants. Like Philip Astley's soon-to-be published book on this region, which claimed that "half the world is interested in its welfare," the spectacle was keen to show the "much regretted" "effect of Cannon on several public buildings," and "the most deplorable Situation of Men, Women and Children" with "their Habitations in Ruins. . . ."¹⁰⁴ But of course it made clear who was to blame. A French cook supposedly exemplifying these "horrors" fretted about the state of his utensils and sang:

Those people that they call
L'Assemblée Nationale,
They make such great deal bother
About von thing or t'other, I feel my very brother
Will cut my throat von day.¹⁰⁵

According to Astley's, a working man should not have had to trouble his head about politics.

¹⁰² 3 Sept. 1793, *ibid.* item 88 A.

¹⁰³ Decastro, *Memoirs* 81.

¹⁰⁴ Astley, *Places now the Theatre of War*, 4th ed., iv; 2 Sept. 1793, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 87 E.

¹⁰⁵ The eight or so sets of lyrics, written by Astley "father and son" and published in newspapers and sixpenny books sold on site, had notes explaining what each character singing them exemplified. 6 Sept. 1793, *ibid.* item 80 D.

Such caricatures may have been humorously sympathetic. When speaking of the defenders of Valenciennes, however, the English saboteur miners vowed to "blow them, and blow them, to atoms in the air!" which, according to reports, was approximately what happened.¹⁰⁶ Decastro's song attributed to Astley's own 15th Light Dragoons spoke equally darkly of "fair-taken booty, / The right of a soldier, and true spoil of war." This particular lyric elicited the reassuring footnote in the polite press--a medium which normally stressed only the 'factual' interest in these spectacles--that "the duty of the good soldier is not the pursuit of plunder, but such spoil as may fall to their lot by chance of war, and fairly won in the field by the point of the sword."¹⁰⁷ Thus the tough but merciful British serviceman was called upon to reconcile the dual agenda of salvation and destruction. Similarly, the Astleian sailor was, according to another footnote, "uninfluenced by hatred or ambition[;] . . . honour, and a love for his country, are his only motives."¹⁰⁸ "Damme, but the French shall see," he cried the following year, "What is English Liberty, ". . . Martinique shall soon declare, / Britons conquer but to spare."¹⁰⁹ The most vehement loyalist of all, however, was usually an Irish sergeant, reflecting a reality of increasing recruitment and promotion among the Celtic fringe during these years.¹¹⁰ In Valenciennes, he was

¹⁰⁶ 5 Sept. 1793, *ibid.* item 73 F; see *The Annual Register; or, a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1793* (London, 1806) 375. The siege was won because breaches large enough to admit cavalry were blown in the walls.

¹⁰⁷ 5 Sept. 1793, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 74 C.

¹⁰⁸ 4 May 1794, *ibid.* item 93 F.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Bayley, *Imperial Meridian* 120.

shown confronting a cowardly fop from Tavistock Street, Covent Garden, in a duet to the tune of *Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?*¹¹¹

Like nearly every utterance at Astley's, military representations were steeped in a blend of patriotism, tradition and often suggestive humour. The songs attributed to Philip Astley dwelled particularly on food, drink, sport and women--the great pleasures of Old England for which the "lads" were fighting. Indeed the Amphitheatre itself seemed epitomise those pleasures, adding what was being enjoyed here and now to a common list of emotional attachments.

Efforts to explain the politics behind the violence were also conspicuous. *The Carmagnols Routed* (12-29 November 1793) was a "Ballet of Action" celebrating October's gain at Lannoy where the allies recorded only 20 casualties, as opposed to 300 French.¹¹² The press featured a ballad from the play, sung by "a poor harmless French Cobler" who none the less exhibited "a thorough Knowledge of the French National Conjurers." He "very prudently" deserted the Jacobin army because, among other reasons, "5 Sols [2½ d.] per Day is given to buy Bread, notwithstanding that article is Three Times that Sum per Pound." Britain was seen as a haven of reason and stability ("Where Law is respected, and that is the Ting, / What makes the Poor happy, the Rich, and the King") contrasted with the empty rhetoric, chaos and assassination of France. Moreover, the ballad elided the home radicals and democrats with the Jacobin extremists: "Le Diable tear par Pieces the Democrats all" cries the

¹¹¹ 1794, *ibid.* item 98 B.

¹¹² *Annual Register* 375.

cobbler.¹¹³ Astley was unequivocal. "The Profession And Duty Of A Soldier," he wrote the following year, was simply to defend the British constitution "from innovation. . . ." ¹¹⁴

Reverses on the Northern Frontier in 1794 caused the focus to swing to maritime successes and the struggle for imperial dominions further afield.¹¹⁵ "[E]very Occurrence which takes place on either Continent is here *Re-acted*" noted one puff that greeted Astley's portrayal, on the 4 May, of the fall of Martinique--a production which preceded one on the same topic at Covent Garden by some twenty days.¹¹⁶ The French Revolution allowed Astley's to emphasise that these distant battles were struggles for Britain's very survival against French-inspired insurrection in the colonies (fig. 6.2). It was therefore the moment that the rhetoric against subject races was sharpened. The next colonial feature, *The Beseigers Beseiged, Or, The Present State of the West India Islands* of 1796, representing a British attack on French Republican troops in Grenada. Lyrics, vaunted as newspaper advertisements, again called upon the straight-talking Irish soldier, in a duet with a cowering "*Negro Revolter*":

Pray Massa, Massa, save my life!
 Oh sure me was a ninny
 To take up arms 'gainst Englishman,
 Don't kill poor Black from Guinea

Irishman

Well take your life--in future mind
 Your sugar-canes, my honey,
 By that you'll save your brains, in troth,
 And likewise touch the money.

¹¹³ Ct., h.d. 1793, TM Astley's file.

¹¹⁴ Astley, *Profession and Duty of a Soldier* iii.

¹¹⁵ 1794, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 92 A.

¹¹⁶ 20 May 1794, *ibid.* item 94 C.

Table 6.2. Principal Productions on Imperial and Oriental Topics at Astley's

1788	<i>English Bravery; or, British Sailors Landing on a Savage Island</i>
1790	<i>The Siege of Quebec; or, the Death of General Wolfe</i> (by John Astley)
1792	<i>An East India Military Divertisement</i>
1794	<i>The Fall of Martinico</i> (see Table 6.1)
1796	<i>The Beseigers Beseiged; or, the Present State of the West India Island</i> (Table 6.1)
1799	<i>The Death of Tippoo Sahib; or, the Storming of Seringapatam</i>
1800	<i>British Valour and Indian Tomahawks</i>
1801	<i>The British Glory in Egypt</i>
1808	<i>The Honest Criminal</i> <i>The Boys of Britain</i>
1809	<i>The Arab; or, the Freebooters of the Desert</i>
1820	<i>The Siege of Londonderry and the Battle of the Boyne</i>
1822	<i>Frozen Regions; or, the Treacherous Esquimaux</i>
1826	<i>The Burmese War; or, Our Victories in the East</i> (by J. H. Amherst)
1827	<i>The British Artist; or, the Hundred Arabian Steeds</i>
1830	<i>The Elephant of Siam</i>

Main Post-1830 productions:

1838	<i>The Passage of the Desert; or, the French in Egypt and the Siege of Acre</i>
1843	<i>The Afghanistan War</i> <i>Victories of Murat, The Soldier of France</i>

- 1846 *The Rajah of Nagpore*
- 1853 *Amakosa! or, Scenes of Kaffir Warfare*
- 1854 *The Battle of the Alma*
- 1857 *The Storming and Capture of Delhi*
- 1858 *The Bombardment and Capture of Canton*
- 1868 *The Conquest of Magdala and the Fall of Theodore*
- 1885 *The Fall of Khartoum*

--oOo--

So put your gun and sword away,
You black son of a Devil . . .

Negro

Me tank you much--me fight no more,
Me now vil run away Sir

Irishman

Blood and sons! now don't be teasing,
For if you do attempt to run
I'll give you a squeezing.

Negro

For if me do attempt to run,
He'll give to me a squeezing.¹¹⁷

On balance, explicit 'racism' at Astley's was casual and opportunist rather than constant, but on the controversy of the slave trade the Amphitheatre maintained a fairly deafening silence.¹¹⁸

The Fall of Martinico was soon upstaged by the defeat of the French fleet off Land's End on the first of June. With an advertisement headed "Victory! Victory! Victory!," *Old England for Ever; Or, Earl Howe and the Glorious First of June* was presented only four days after the fleet had returned to Portsmouth, on 19 June 1794. *Old England for Ever* represented the peak of journalistic values at Astley's: "the only thing which surprises," one newspaper feigned to ask, "is how he acquires his information."¹¹⁹ On this occasion Astley had made the trip to Portsmouth, supposedly making sketches, gathering gossip and ballads, and taking reports "from the mouths" of officers and ratings in

¹¹⁷ 19 June 1796, *ibid.* item 132 D.

¹¹⁸ See Kwint, "Dark Subjects."

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* items 93 C (4 May 1794) and 96 F (19 June 1794).

order to outstrip the newspapers.¹²⁰ Five scenes were then hastily produced (though the paintings had probably been prepared in advance) including a picture of the battle and an "exact view" of the French prizes lying at anchor.¹²¹

By 1795, retreat from a fruitless continental campaign had dampened the Amphitheatre's martial ardour to one nautical song and a review of recent naval action which admitted that "Britain's Best Bulwarks are her Wooden Walls."¹²² The aftermath of the fire had also kept the main military newshound, Philip Astley, in London. Astley still managed to profit directly from events, however: with the endorsement of the Duke of York, who had visited last July, as well as the King, he entertained all the returning troops free of charge in ringside seats in the new Amphitheatre throughout the summer. This drew accompanying crowds and, in the words of Decastro, "made him more popular than ever with the government and the military."¹²³ Spirits were further lifted by the revival of mounted broadsword contests between the veterans, the display in the ring of a gun which Astley had heroically captured, and a musical piece entitled *Returned from the Continent; or, The Milliner's Shop*.¹²⁴

The rising careers of Nelson and Napoleon rekindled a few more seasons of enthusiasm for the wars in the shape of pantomime scenes and "analogous" fireworks at both Astley's and the Royal

¹²⁰ 21 June 1794, *ibid.* item 97 C.

¹²¹ 19 June, *ibid.* item 96 F.

¹²² 31 Aug. 1795, *ibid.* item 120 B.

¹²³ Decastro, *Memoirs* 74.

¹²⁴ 31 Aug. 1795, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 120 B.

Circus.¹²⁵ In 1801 Nelson even honoured the amphitheatre with a visit to watch a rendition of his recent victory in the Battle of Copenhagen.¹²⁶ But the full-blown re-enactments and 'loyalties' now fell away (table 6.1), not only because the novelty of war was wearing thin, but also as Philip Astley's influence at his London base declined. In 1800, with the second coalition of allies disintegrating, the Amphitheatre ignored the French War altogether, while showing at least one play from Paris.¹²⁷

The French connection was fully rehabilitated upon the Peace of Amiens in March 1802, despite the treaty's apparent unpopularity in London.¹²⁸ In July, John Astley paid an "extensive company of French Performers"--eighteen men and six women--from the *Theatre de la Cité* in Paris a reported total of 200 guineas per week for three months to satisfy the audience with authentic melodramas and "new French Music."¹²⁹ Their initial production, *The Knights of the Sun; or Love and Danger* ("as performed at the grand Fete given in consequence of the happy return of Peace, in Paris") attracted a crowd so overflowing into the ring that the evening's horsemanship had to be omitted.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ 4 Sept. 1798, *Nelson's Triumph; or, Bonaparte in the Dumps*, *ibid.* item 171 C.

¹²⁶ 8 May 1801, *ibid.* item 211 B.

¹²⁷ *The Fatal Pile; or, Virtue Revenged*, 2 June 1800, *ibid.* item 190 D; *The American Heroine; or, Spanish Ingratitude*, 27 Aug. 1800, *ibid.* item 198 B.

¹²⁸ Alan Palmer, *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern History 1789-1945*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1983) 25.

¹²⁹ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, items 285 C (21 July) and 235 D (19 July 1802).

¹³⁰ 23 Aug. 1802, *ibid.* 236 C.

Mutual thanks between Britons and French were expressed at the end of the season in a benefit for their manager.¹³¹

With the resumption of war in May 1803 a couple of stranded French stars continued to be patronised, but by July the Amphitheatre had reasserted itself with a musical piece, *The Invasion; or, All for our Country*.¹³² And one pantomime contained "a new loyal and local effusion, by Mr. Johannot, called the Corsican Fairy, or England's Defiance."¹³³ On 16 September *The Mirror* announced that Napoleon had taken Philip Astley prisoner, after the latter had made a successful personal appeal, with the backing of King George, for the return of approximately £10,000 of property in Paris and fourteen years of back rent.¹³⁴ Astley had now effectively lost both outposts to perfidious revolutionaries, since later that year, of course, he was obliged to sell his Dublin theatre by the current political climate. Astley then staged his spectacular escape by shamming illness to receive a doctor's permission and passport to visit the spa at Montpellier, then hijacking a postilion to the border with Germany, descending the Rhine, and crossing over on a German packet, to meet fire and bereavements at home.¹³⁵ This crowned his legendary status and his personal entanglement with the French Revolution.

¹³¹ 20 Sept. 1802, *ibid.* item 141 A.

¹³² 11 July 1803, *ibid.* item 249 C.

¹³³ 1 July 1803, *ibid.* item 249 D.

¹³⁴ 16 Sept. 1803, *ibid.* item 249 A; Decastro, *Memoirs* 86. The evaluations differed over time: see *Morning Chronicle* 11 Sept. 1794; Astley, letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, 3 Dec. 1804; Astley, letter to the Marquis of Hertford, 21 Jan. 1813, trs. Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque" 58.

¹³⁵ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 254 D; Decastro, *Memoirs* 86.

The Amphitheatre's interest in its Napoleonic phase was, however, by no means over: Astley's now scavenged the battlefields of Europe and its peripheries for backdrops to its melodramas. *The Brave Cossack* in May 1807, for example, came at a time when Russia was Britain's sole remaining ally in the Third Coalition. Further insight into the Amphitheatre's information channels comes from October 1812, when Parker, the house riding-master, wrote to John Astley from Newcastle with the first news of the Battle of Borodino, three weeks after the event. The London press published it *verbatim*: "A cutter arrived this evening at Sunderland, with dispatches from the Baltic, to land a messenger at the first British port he could make. There has been another dreadful battle fought close to Moscow on the 15th, 16th, 17th. . . ." ¹³⁶ For once it was not dramatised by Astley's. The many incipient nationalisms provoked by Napoleon's expansionism were none the less ideal subjects for melodramatic sympathy towards the underdog. The Spanish Campaign, heralded by *The Spanish Patriots; or, a Nation in Arms* in 1808 and ending with *The Battle of Salamanca* of 1812, prompted Astley's prolific and sustained interest in the region and its South American colonies. ¹³⁷ Similar sentiments were later taken up by Philhellenist dramas, notably *The Siege of Missolonghi; or, the Massacre of the Greeks*, in accordance with majority opinion, in the mid-1820s. ¹³⁸ Astley's took a clear stance on Romantic nationalism abroad, but steadfastly ignored the controversies--for instance Chartism--it had helped to inspire at home, unless it was to deride them. The language of patriotism

¹³⁶ 9 Oct. 1812, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 3, item 519.

¹³⁷ See, e.g. *The Honest Criminal*, "Delineating the Manners and Customs of the Portugese in that Part of South America called, The BRAZILS," bill, 7 June 1808, TM Astley's file.

¹³⁸ See also Ducrow's scene in the circle, *The Grecian Cataphract; or, Armed Horseman!*, bill, 10 Apr. 1826, *ibid*.

and liberty were restricted to foreign exploits. Surprisingly enough, there were no contemporary representations, however, of the final crushing defeats for Napoleon in Russia and at Waterloo in 1815.

The dramatisation of contemporary history therefore continued to charge the present with the feeling of grand struggle, albeit one that was protracted and often more incidental to the storyline than the early years of the French Revolution. Martin Meisel has brilliantly argued that Astley's particular "simultaneity of stage and ring--slow to be exploited--allowed both the spectacular deployment of masses and a heroic focus," helping to develop a consciousness of "the masses," who were the historic force to which the individual was subjected.¹³⁹ Romanticism also brought with it a stronger consciousness of the past. National history served briefly as war propaganda at Astley's in May 1804, with *1588; or, the Spanish Armada*. Like Lawrence Olivier in his 1944 film *Henry V*, Hannah Astley as Queen Elizabeth made an "Address, while seated on her *Courser*," which was thought "a most masterly appeal to the *Patriotism of the Country*."¹⁴⁰ Antiquarian, rather than contemporary, fact (a trend which at Astley's had begun, oddly enough, with a chivalric melodrama imported from France in 1793) took over responsibility for the emphasis of insularity from the continent.¹⁴¹

By the mid-1820s Astley's started to write its own more recent military history. As history it was more durable than contemporary re-enactments: hippodramas of Napoleon's final exploits reached

¹³⁹ See Meisel, *Realizations* 214. Stage and ring were not frequently used together until ramps between them were provided in the 1840s.

¹⁴⁰ H.d. 1804, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 266 F.

¹⁴¹ *Dorothee; or, the Treacherous Governor*, 20 May 1793, *ibid.* item 79 E.

the stage some ten years after the events, but were able to serve later imperialism: "It is a good thing to recall these great events," said the *Illustrated London News* upon a revival of J. H. Amherst's *Battle of Waterloo* in 1853. "They stir up national ardour. They keep alive the flame of patriotism."¹⁴² Yet at the time they were written, the real French spectre had receded, so both *The Battle of Waterloo* and *Bonaparte's Invasion of Russia* at Astley's admired, even celebrated, the Emperor's sympathetic virtues and the valour of the French fighting man in victory or defeat.¹⁴³ Both proved worthy enemies, and French patriotic speeches in these plays were at least as noble as the English ones. Under the extraordinary likeness of the actor Edward Gomersal, Bonaparte became a virtual cult figure at Astley's--something for which the amphitheatre did not escape criticism--and in his memoirs, Decastro even devoted a eulogising footnote to the great rationalizer.¹⁴⁴ By the mid-1820s it had become safe to sympathise with the defeated in what, as Louis James has suggested with *The Battle of Waterloo*, was something of a critique of military triumphalism.¹⁴⁵ Although occasional British warmth towards Napoleon has complex roots (and the continued prevalence of Britannia should not be downplayed), the attitudes expressed at Astley's suggest something more than Britain's traditional ambivalence towards the continent. Astley's, which had begun partly thanks to continental touring, viewed Britain as part of Europe unless conflicts interfered. Isolation from the continent probably constrained profits.

¹⁴² 26 June 1853, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 1498.

¹⁴³ J. H. Amherst, *The Battle of Waterloo*, Duncombe's ed., (London, 1824), TM Astley's file; see Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* ch. 5.

¹⁴⁴ See comment by *The Times* 1825, qtd. Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 28; Decastro, *Memoirs* 85.

¹⁴⁵ Louis James, "Inverted Emblems for Albion: Wellington and Napoleon on Stage," in Samuel, ed., *Patriotism* vol. 3, ch. 16.

Stuart Woolf has rightly noted that "the construction of . . . European identity through the Napoleonic experience accentuated the already marked difference between Britain and continental Europe," but the distinction does not seem to have been a lasting one at Astley's.¹⁴⁶ Ducrow's most famous act, *The Courier of St. Petersburg* of 1827, in which the hero gathered flags of all the countries on his tour, was a pan-European celebration of plural nationalities. Even during war, consciousness of the area (although not altogether kind) was kept high on the agenda: a typical pantomime in 1801 contained "An immense Map of Europe . . . rolled into View, with a personification of several Countries of the Continent."¹⁴⁷

During the nineteenth century, however, the world according to the circus changed. With the loss of the *ancien regime* patronage upon which Philip Astley's own vision had depended, imperial frontiers were superceding Europe as the new, more factitious location for fantasy and adventure. This field has already received ample attention from historians of theatre and popular culture.¹⁴⁸ The Amphitheatre's future pre-eminence in imperialist theatre is best suggested by a review of 1837, cited by Jacqueline Bratton and Jane Traies in their handbook *Astley's Amphitheatre* (1980). Observing a

¹⁴⁶ Woolf, "The Construction of a European World-View," *Past and Present* 137: 97.

¹⁴⁷ Ad. for *Puss in Boots; or Harlequin and the Ogre!*, 25 May 1801, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 213 B.

¹⁴⁸ E.g. Bratton *et al.*, *Acts of Imperialism*; Bratton, "Theatre of War," in David Bratby *et al.* eds., *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980); Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* ch. 5; Brenda Assael, "Patriotism in the Circus from the Death of Nelson to the Death of Wellington," seminar paper, 4 Oct. 1994, Institute of Historical Research, London. Assael significantly mentions the abuse suffered and recorded by two Indian merchants in the pit in 1838, although similar experiences were by no means exclusive to the non-white middle classes.

British sailor triumphantly waving the Union Jack over the ruins of St. Sebastian at the climax to Astley's *Wars in Spain*, the critic predicted that the Tar,

not only is destined with his single arm to settle the storm that has long agitated Spain, but purposes in addition, to make it a sort of English colony, but entirely subjecting that country to the Union-Jack, and all the other symbols of British sovereignty. Such an arrangement seemed to give the most complete satisfaction to a crowded house, and the curtain fell amid universal shouts of patriotism and contentment.[p.29]¹⁴⁹

We now leave geopolitics to describe the circus' view of the biological order.

III. The Circus and Nature

*You at command make brutes obey,
Walk, work, or dance, with movement gay.
Your horses far excel report,
Whose minuet might grace a Court;
Their hornpipe quick to music true,
They seem as if each step they knew,
But all the art and skill's with you.
The monkey, though of race despis'd
Unequall'd must by all be priz'd
His excellence excites surprise;
For e'en with man for fame he vies.
The dancing dogs, where Lady Flaunt
In chariot plac'd to take a jaunt
With flirting airs so perfect seen,
She seems to move a fairy queen.
The hunting, where the taylor's chace,
A fox with mirth o'er spreads each face.*

"lines. . . addressed to Mr. Astley by a Lady, on seeing his performances" (1785)¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ See also original, ct., 1837, "Astley's" box 1, TM Stone Colln.

¹⁵⁰ 19 June 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 673.

As far as we know, Philip Astley rarely intellectualized his artform, except in his early "Prologue on the Death of the Horse" of June 1768, when, as chapter two has shown, his steed played dead to show ". . . how brutes by heaven were design'd / To be in full subjection to mankind." These themes resurfaced more fully in *The Life, Death and Restoration of the High Mettled Racer* of 1822, where the equine actor expired not through playful obligation to its master, but as a hero in his own right, reduced to pulling a cart.¹⁵¹ In both cases, unusual comment on the lot of the beasts was expressed by staging the death of a horse. Equestrian performers had founded the circus, and remained its nucleus. So the relationship between human and horse is likely to be the first key to the logic of the genre.¹⁵²

It is generally accepted that the natural world is fundamental to human identity by allowing awareness of ourselves as a species.¹⁵³ Animals in the human environment are instrumental in categorical thought: they are, in the words of the structuralist Claude Lèvi-Strauss, "things to think with."¹⁵⁴ Onto them we project our vision of human difference, as well as our emotions.

¹⁵¹ Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 73-6; bill, 10 Apr. 1820, TM Astley's file.

¹⁵² See also Hodak, "L'Introduction du Cirque" 73.

¹⁵³ See, e.g., Edmund Leach, *Humanity and Animality*, 54th Conway Memorial Lecture (London: South Place Ethical Soc., 1972); Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 30-40.

¹⁵⁴ Qtd. Edmund Leach, *Lèvi-Strauss* (London: Fontana Modern Masters, 1985) 43; Claude Lèvi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 2 vols. (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1968).

It is, none the less, perhaps perplexing that a whole genre of mass urban entertainment--not simply for enthusiasts--should be sustained by an equestrian cult, unspiced by competition or gambling. Suggestions by previous historians that the ubiquity of the horse heightened astonishment at what they could do explain much of the content (which, after all had appeared in other ages) but do not account for the circus' particular rise at the time.¹⁵⁵ In the case of the Romantic circus, and in particular *Mazeppa*, Martin Meisel rightly observes that the "image of the horse apparently spoke to this age with a special eloquence," and claims: "Both the mastery of embodied passion and energy, and the pure passion and energy itself, ready to shake off or run away with the presumptuous human will, were part of the fascination with the horse and its drama . . ." ¹⁵⁶ Meisel sees the steed as a metaphor for the restless forces of history that had been unleashed by revolution. The horse as mystery, symbol and sacred animal is certainly important, and points to broad avenues of further study.¹⁵⁷

But by demonstrating the subjection of the beasts to the extent of commanding their deaths (less valuable animals were actually killed in magic acts), Astley was making a fairly straightforward ideological point.¹⁵⁸ As Keith Thomas has shown, such an orthodox view of man's place in creation was by no means taken for granted by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Science had also set its

¹⁵⁵ Bratton and Traies, *Astley's Amphitheatre* 11.

¹⁵⁶ Meisel, *Realizations* 216.

¹⁵⁷ See, e.g., Stephen Deuchar, *Sporting Art in Eighteenth-Century England: a Social and Political History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).

¹⁵⁸ See "Of the BIRD'S DEATH, and RESURRECTION" (in which the victim was simply throttled and secretly replaced) and "THEOPHRASTUS PARACELSUS; or The Pigeon [actually] killed, by the thrust of the sword, given to its Shade or Image," in Astley, *Natural Magic* 27, 36.

face against the symbolic appreciation of animals.¹⁵⁹ In this context the domestication of the horse stood for traditional (if adaptable) attitudes.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, as living proof of nurture controlling nature, the horseman served not only as an emblem of conquest but also of civilisation itself. The horse was the principal muscular force on which commercial and industrial society was built, and circus publicity remained scattered with reminders of the utility of the creature ("that noble and useful Animal"), and thus by extension the usefulness of the circus too.¹⁶¹ This was underscored by the offering of tuition: "There is no creature which yields so much profit & pleasure as the Horse;" advertised Astley in May 1768, "and if he is made obedient to the hand & spur it is the chief thing that is aimed at."¹⁶² If culture was conceived in terms of training and tractability, so feats of horse-breaking were wondrous and gratifying experiments in the cultural process.

Early publicity was matter-of-fact, if enthusiastic, about "the Management of Horses," but by the later 1780s, putative Romantics credited the beasts with a sympathetic intelligence.¹⁶³ Paradoxically, however, such speculation on the inner qualities of animals heightened awareness of the narrowness of man's triumph over a still treacherous natural world. The horse's "obedience to man," wrote one thoughtful puff-writer in 1787,

¹⁵⁹ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*.

¹⁶⁰ Deuchar, *Sporting Art*.

¹⁶¹ See F. M. L. Thompson, *Victorian England: the Horse-Drawn Society*, inaugural lecture (London: Bedford College, U of London, 1970); 28 June 1798, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 134 D, and e.g. vol. 1, item 221, 1781.

¹⁶² *Gazetteer* 17 May 1768, *ibid.* item 11.

¹⁶³ 1781, *ibid.* item 221.

notwithstanding its strength and power, almost exceeds credibility, as may be seen by visiting JONES' AMPHITHEATRE, WHITECHAPEL; where, by the desire of its Master, this domestic animal . . . walks with the greatest submission upon his knees, to implore forgiveness. These incontestible proofs of rational sense and passive obedience, man, were his faculties thus limited, could not possibly exceed.¹⁶⁴

Astley's and his colleagues' achievements actually contributed to the shift in perceptions during this decade. "Though the horse has ever been looked upon as the most useful of animals," remarked, as we shall see, a not entirely spurious puff in 1792, "it is but lately that the world has formed a just conception of its wonderful sagacity, a discovery for which we are indebted to the wonderful abilities of Young Astley."¹⁶⁵ Conventions of horse-breaking had themselves been modified by humanitarianism since the later seventeenth century,¹⁶⁶ and Astley strongly advocated the newer wisdom: choose a horse, he advised in *The Modern Riding-Master* of 1775, "with Eyes bright, lively, resolute and impudent; that will look at an Object with a Kind of Disdain. We may discover by the Eye his Inclination, Passion, Malice, Health and Indisposition; the Eye is the most tender Part of the Frame . . ." Any obedience was to be valued, "therefore if somewhat tractable the first Morning, take him into the Stable, and caress him; for observe this as a golden Rule, *mad Men and mad Horses never will agree together*."¹⁶⁷ The calm of a good horse spoke well of its owner.

¹⁶⁴ *Globe* 29 Jan. 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 55.

¹⁶⁵ As we shall confirm, this was not entirely spurious. 9 Apr. 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 68 D.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 101.

¹⁶⁷ Astley, *The Modern Riding-Master* intro.

The reciprocal nature of animal behaviour was acknowledged, but transgressors of their species-essence could expect savage retribution, unless they were redeemed by the circus' exceptional trainers. The "wild horse Chilliby," well known among the gentry for needing sixteen men to control him, was going to be baited by dogs until Jones rendered him "docile and obsequious" in 1786. Wildness conferred heroic status on the trainer: Jones was compared to Hercules with the Nemean lion, which had been "not less predatory upon the lives of Mankind."¹⁶⁸ (Horses could, in fact, be a real danger--the purpose of Astley's riding manuals was to prevent "DREADFUL ACCIDENTS".)¹⁶⁹ Conversely, wildness could be inculcated for the purposes of mockery or sublime spectacle. Two rebellious horses in a version of *The Taylor to Brentford* in 1786 alternated between "obedience and vice," "one moment wild and ungovernable, tearing the Taylor's coat, and repelling by force his corrections;" and the other displaying calm "reflection."¹⁷⁰ In 1827 Ducrow staged a combat of "Ferret Horses" in the ring, seizing and flinging each other "as when in a Wild Ungovernable State of Nature," and exemplifying "the descriptions given by Southey in the Combat of the Wild Andalusians."¹⁷¹

"Sagacity and Docility" became the twin compliments applied to horses from the early 1780s throughout the nineteenth century (although "Sagacity" in the Taylor's horses entailed knowing that they should revolt against him).¹⁷² By Ducrow's time the regime at Astley's had become positively

¹⁶⁸ *Universal Register* 8 Aug. 1786, *Morning Post* 15 and 17 May 1786, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, ff. 41, 55.

¹⁶⁹ Ad., 7 Oct. 1801, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷⁰ 15 June 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 687.

¹⁷¹ Bill, 27 July 1829, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷² See ad., 10 Oct. 1782, *ibid.*

horse-centred, with the steeds treated rhetorically, and trained to appear, as individual actors. "People do not care much about fine acting at Astley's," wrote the author of one city guide in 1827, "the horses are esteemed to be the principal performers, and if they do their parts well, the whole house--"pit, boxes and gallery, egad"--is content."¹⁷³ Once their sagacity had been widely appreciated, they were, under the primacy of spectacle, aestheticised. The word "HORSES" was usually one of the biggest on the bills, where they were described as "beautiful," "Handsome," a "fine stud of black horses" and given such evocative epithets as "Rapid courser."¹⁷⁴ A poster of 1829 gave a virtual manifesto of the equestrian programme:

. . . THIRDLY, ever variable demonstrations of HORSEMANSHIP and HORSE-TUTORION. This . . . affords contribution towards the Amusement and Instruction of Holiday Folks and Juveniles to a degree ever-remembered after a first visit, as the vivid emotions of surprise and delight arising from their exhibition . . . inculcate a love for that noble Animal, the Horse, and a kindly feeling for his welfare, which we are taught to interest ourselves in next to our own on account of his sagacity, usefulness, strength & beauty. The Art of Tutoring and Managing him is here converted to the object of recreation, & proves a . . . source of pleasurable contemplation, as it is one of powerful & undiminished attraction.¹⁷⁵

The sight of "45 Highly Trained Horses"--the fruits of a rational culture--remained a satisfying spectacle in itself.¹⁷⁶ With the notable exception of the hippodrama, with its acting parts for animals, what altered was the interpretation, rather than what the circus basically did with the animals. The feats of the ring provided a peg on which to hang changing ideologies.

¹⁷³ Clarke, *The Every-Night Book* 22-3; Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 8.

¹⁷⁴ Bills, Sotheby's 6-7 Dec. 1990, lots 244 (14 Sept. 1835) and 246 (22 Jan. 1838); Ct., *Theatrical Jnl.* 20 Apr. 1829 and bill, 2 Aug. 1824, TM Astley's file.

¹⁷⁵ Bill, 8 June 1829, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Bill, 29 Apr. 1833, for *The Siege of Troy*, Guildhall Lib., "Astley's" file.

Horses entailed strong social, as well as cosmological and aesthetic, messages. The supreme arbiter of equestrian culture was the gentleman on horseback, so the expertise of the riding-master (originally his servant) was partly a lesson in stewardship--contrasting the vicious attacks sometimes made by proletarians on the prized horses of the rich.¹⁷⁷ "When mounted on his beautiful grey, in the centre of the Olympic Pavilion," eulogised the *Morning Post* in 1807,

. . . the veteran ASTLEY, apparently in the flower of his age, still conserves the extraordinary management of the horse. . . . What a noble example to the heads of families, civil and military, and to the rising generation in general, is to be witnessed every evening!¹⁷⁸

Quite apart from its tactical implications, "the astonishing skill and domination over the brute creation" alone of such "unrivalled English" heroes was agreed to have "greatly surprised Foreign Nations" and was seen as testimony to a new Alexandrian age.¹⁷⁹

As with cars today, there was a horse for almost every status and occupation, and the circus displayed a full range, from the "high-bred racers" ridden by Young Astley, through sturdier Hunters, horses "for Ladies," "Forest Racers" for children ("only 39 ins high"), to the broad-backed Hanoverian Creams used in the ring.¹⁸⁰ But unlike cars, the order seemed as natural as the human one which it fitted. Equestrian culture tended to treat the products of its own breeding as given. When dramatised,

¹⁷⁷ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 184.

¹⁷⁸ BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 5, f. 64.

¹⁷⁹ 6 June 1798, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 164 H.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* vol. 2, item 56 D (15 Sept. 1791), and vol. 1, item 27 (10 Apr. 1770); *Morning Post* 27 Nov. 1810, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 5, f. 64.

however, as in *The High-Mettled Racer*, it could serve to expose the artificiality and injustice of the class system, albeit in a displaced fashion. Not only did the different uses of the horse serve as metaphors of social class, but the horse-ride also made a narrative: "The spectacle," in the words of one Astley's poster, "embodies Life as it Gallops."¹⁸¹ In its variety and ceaseless activity, equestrianism in general was therefore an apt and versatile way of describing the social world, from the lowly and quotidian realities of horse-traffic in *Peregrine Pickle; or, Hawser Trunnion on Horseback*, to its more noble tasks in most hippodramas.¹⁸² The horse represented all the estates and states of man.

Mastery of the horse highlighted the norms of gender and nationality as much as those of social relations. The essential horse required the quintessential man: in the early years circus horsemanship was headlined as "manly" (and hence English) in reaction to the worrying influence of French foppishness.¹⁸³ "Oh no, my Lord," said the groom of the *Small Talk* column as John Astley began to experiment in 1786, "he [Hughes, Astley's rival] is too fond of manly exercises to dance a minuet like a great HE SHE GIRL."¹⁸⁴ As the *Taylor* showed, horsemanship was the ultimate test of integrity, so for the early riding master Dingley in 1766, the feats of an equestrienne were proof that "The fair sex were by no means inferior to the male, either in Courage or Ability."¹⁸⁵ Despite the fact that

¹⁸¹ Bill, 25 Nov. 1844, for W. T. Moncrieff's *The Royal Fox Hunt and the Race Horse, and Life's Course of Man and Steed!*, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Theatres A-C" portfolio.

¹⁸² See ct., 30 Aug. 1818, TM Astley's file.

¹⁸³ E.g. ad., c. 1782, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ "Small Talk; or, Chat on the Turf," *Universal Register* 10 Aug. 1786, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 46.

¹⁸⁵ Qtd. Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth* 13.

horsemanship was a "science"--reason controlling passion--and therefore problematic for females, Mrs. Astley's feats were presented without qualification in the early 1770s.¹⁸⁶ But while the spotlight was on masculinity, exceptional women could use such activities to break free of tradition--there were swordswomen, female pugilists and occasional jockeys into the Napoleonic period.¹⁸⁷ Towards and during the nineteenth century, however, the need to define masculinity gave way to a greater need to define femininity. The Romantic aestheticization of the horse and horsemanship had extended the legitimate possibilities of manhood while shrinking those of womanhood. In daily life, of course, women had always been given a reduced, ladylike form of horse-management, but during the nineteenth century feminine style began to be stressed in the ring, and received much greater emphasis in the circus' tuition services. Setting the tone at Astley's in 1790, a "Young Lady" was advertised for her "gracefulness, ease, and elegance" on horseback.¹⁸⁸ In 1818, a handbill for lessons (now segregated by sex) assured readers that "The most timid Lady need not be under the least Apprehension in Learning this most useful and necessary Art. . . ." ¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ For the "manly science" see 27 May 1786, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 471; handbill, Astley's, 1770, BL "Miscellanea Colln."

¹⁸⁷ See portrait of Mrs. Wybrow, a swordswoman who played Columbine at Astley's, in Disher, *Greatest Show on Earth*. In 1817 Mme Saqui, a famous ropedancer who exceeded male achievement, visited Astley's: see ct., h.d. 1816, TM Astley's file, and for a well known portrait, Brown, *Theatre and Revolution* 63. On female jockeys and pugilists: Adrian Harvey, "Sport in Napoleonic Britain," seminar, Merton Coll., Oxford, Nov. 1993.

¹⁸⁸ 10 Nov. 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 21 B.

¹⁸⁹ 2 Nov. 1818, *ibid.* vol. 3, item 738.

For demonstrations of foreign nationality, one could look at an increasing range of imported styles during the nineteenth century; not only the classical *Haute École* and Viennese, but also more Romantic choices: "The kind of companionship and attachment between Greeks, Arabs, and their Horses," claimed a bill for Ducrow during the period of Ottoman war in 1826, ". . . furnish [sic] full scope for the managed Horses. . . ." ¹⁹⁰ On the stage, a horse conferred worthiness on a foreign character, whether Cossack friend or Saracen foe, whereas the irredeemable savage always fought on foot. ¹⁹¹ In the circus, the horse was a vehicle for the expression of a seemingly endless range of ideas.

The proximity of different animals in circus publicity reveals how other species or varieties were used to think in similar ways. The horse as a mirror of humanity could be reflected back on certain grades of human: apart from the rope-dancer described as "a beautiful young female" in 1789, a play of 1785, for example, was about a cobbler's attempt "to bring his Wife to Proper Submission." ¹⁹² As the Monstrous Craws proved, humans could be "Wild" as well as domesticated, while, in the same category, presentational myths could be transferred across species--in one case to its proper place, when, in a favourite mode for big cat acts, "Mr Cooke" was shown "struggling with the Nemean Lion." ¹⁹³ The importance of training a recalcitrant body applied equally to oneself as a performer.

¹⁹⁰ Bill, 10 Apr. 1826, TM Astley's file.

¹⁹¹ E.g. see toy theatre portraits, TM Stone Colln.

¹⁹² BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 1112 (10 June 1789) and 692 (1 Oct. 1785).

¹⁹³ Bill, Cooke's Circus Royal, 23 Feb. 1846, Sotheby's 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 249.

The species was the ultimate parameter of judgment in the circus: as one newspaper wrote in 1785, Astley's "endeavours" had been "to procure . . . various . . . phænomena both from the human and animal species."¹⁹⁴ This was the basis of the constant nineteenth-century jokes comparing the actors unfavourably with their "quadruped" counterparts, but the interest in species was seen most clearly in the presentation of natural anomalies, notably freaks.¹⁹⁵ Since the late seventeenth century, these were taken to be clues to the grand puzzle of the cosmos, rather than divine portents: errant or playful nature produces, said a fairground advertisement for a hermaphrodite in 1818, "a Magnet of Irresistible and Universal Attraction" for the simply curious and scientifically inquisitive alike.¹⁹⁶ According to a kind of popular Aristotelianism, such phenomena were composed of components from different species, indicating the units by which nature worked and had assembled us. Freaks, necessarily described as "creatures" to enhance their strangeness, thus threatened the orthodox divide between humans and the brute creation, while at the same time often reassuring viewers of their relative normality. Their presentation was complex, oscillating between the emphasis of either message.

Although freaks were generally avoided by the English circus, probably because of their lowly fairground associations, Astley had a couple of successes with them in the eighteenth century. The century sustained much popular and middlebrow interest in "the Wonderful" in general, which,

¹⁹⁴ 20 Oct. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 698.

¹⁹⁵ See Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 56.

¹⁹⁶ Ad. for Mlle. Lefort, with a beard, h.d. 1818, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 75. During the 18th C. scientific orthodoxy moved from the theory of 'sports of nature' (*lusus naturae*) induced by God for our puzzlement and edification, to a more secular view of natural error. See, e.g., Joseph Levine, *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science and Satire in Augustan England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977) ch. 1.

according to aestheticians, was "a little way beyond the Sublime," and encompassed all revelations--exotic beasts, animal freaks, contortionists and acrobats, murder mysteries, fantastic literature and occasional moral anecdotes.¹⁹⁷ So, although they were often thought "disgusting" and were controversial, freaks were properly part of the circus remit, and were in fact distilled reflections of its presentational logic (and the circus presented its freaks more actively than the fairground exhibitions).¹⁹⁸ All the performers--from the Spanish acrobat to the infant John Astley--were in some way treated as freaks. But most performers had achieved their phenomenal state by training, so their extraordinariness was emphasised, whereas freaks were born that way, so the reverse image was employed and their contrasting "normality," *despite* their deformity, was commonly stressed ('despite' is a key word for the circus). Wybrand Lolkes, "The Friesland Dwarf" was successfully exhibited in this manner in 1790 (fig. 6.3).¹⁹⁹ If, however, they were beyond the domestic pale, they could be presented as ultra-exotic and wild.

With the Monstrous Craws, who were originally "Wild Born" but were eventually exposed as being European, we see a transition between these two poles, which became the standard alternative modes for the rest of freakshow history.²⁰⁰ Between 1784 and 1787 the Craws were exhibited on the

¹⁹⁷ *Mist's Jnl.*, 6 Nov. 1725, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 172; and see, e.g., *The New Wonderful Magazine and Marvellous Chronicle*, vol. 1 (London: 1793).

¹⁹⁸ Handbill for "Nyactolopes" (human albinos), Brookes' Menagerie, c. 1800, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 100; "Thousands," open letter to John Astley, 6 April 1792, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 84 D; and on the controversy over "The Hottentot Venus," displayed "like a Prize ox or a rattle-snake" in 1810, see Altick, *The Shows of London*.

¹⁹⁹ 12 July 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 15 A.

²⁰⁰ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 206, ch. 4 etc.

Fig. 6.3. Mynheer Wybrand Lolkes, "The Friesland Dwarf" and spouse. Engraving sold at the Amphitheatre, 1790. Note the 'normalizing' mode of presentation, in contrast to the Monstrous Craws (fig. 6.2). (Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, "Human Freaks" box 1.)



A. Mequignon delin. ad Vivum.

MYNHEER WYBRAND LOLKES

The celebrated Man in Miniature

from Jelst, in West Friesland 60 Years of Age 27 Inches high, weighing 56^{lb} who was exhibited in the Year 1790 at Astley's riding School, Westminster Bridge, with great applause. Also Madame Lolkes, his Wife 50 Years of Age, by whom he has had three children, one of which a Son, lived to the Age of 23, and was 5 feet 7 Inches high.

Printed Sept. 1st 1790 by J. Caulfield N^o 13 Castle Street Leicester Fields, and to be had at the Riding School

Haymarket and salon circuit as endearing "Savage" innocents, and ladies (especially attracted to such quaintnesses, despite initial concerns that "The fair with safety may see the hideous forms") went with their husbands to "regale them with a dram, which they seem as fond of . . . as . . . any of their guardians," feed them with food available "from the most nice and cheap Italian Warehouse, in Poland-street" and, "with an enthusiastic-like eagerness, handle and admire their craws full of moving glands."²⁰¹ By August 1787 Astley had managed to hire them, and led them round the ring, each holding a candle for visibility, though some wished that he had led them twice round, instead of once, so as to allow a "more complete . . . observance of such uncommon beings."²⁰² But as their secret became known, and their ordinary humanity became more apparent under Hughes subsequent care (especially when, following their 'kidnapping' from him in October 1787, he rounded on the suspects for having been able "to treat and confine rational human Beings like mere brute beasts"), the Craws began to do such simple equestrian tricks as bestriding the stirrups between two horses, and even appearing as Harlequin and Columbine in a pantomime ("N.B. The Female Craw will imitate the Spanish frill used and worn by the nobility . . .").²⁰³ In other words, as the Craws became normal, their act had to appear extraordinary. And although their value as exhibits perhaps declined, they went on to stimulate some serious medical discussion which tried to account for their condition.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Cts., 1784-7, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 1, f. 93.

²⁰² *Morning Post* 18 Aug. 1787, *ibid.* f. 94.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* (ct., 20 Oct. 1787) and vol. 4, f. 47 (ct., 1787).

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* f. 92.

Although in their presentation, and in order to convey their ambiguity, nature and nurture were at first confused (their wildness was only an accident of birth but found physical expression) their supposed nature, in terms of their original status as a species, remained the determining factor. To crown the 1780s as a decade of wonders, Astley's--and indeed the English circus'--only subsequent freaks were tasteful and of determinate origins. In July 1790, alongside the Friesland Dwarf, Astley showed Mlle. Maria Theresa De St. Orbe, "from Paris" with her "beautiful" hair which was nine feet long.²⁰⁵ After that, such phenomena were eclipsed by the martial interest of the Revolutionary years.

More characteristically, the circus displayed artificial anomalies. Sufficient training could not only demonstrate the natural order through control, but could actually transcend and contradict it. In what became a staple circus act, for example, Astley's "Little Learned Military Horse," would simply fire "a pistol at the word of command."²⁰⁶ As we have seen, assessments of this horse could not be made independently of its culturally determined status. By firing the pistol itself, not just withstanding one being fired nearby, this horse actively contravened common knowledge about the nervousness of its species. At the same time the act vindicated Astley's patent "solely to exercise and train horses in a particular manner, to stand the noise of drums, trumpets, music, explosions of large ordnance, and small arms. . . ." ²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Bill, 27 July 1790, Sotheby's 6-7 Dec. 1990, lot 243; 1790, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 16 C.

²⁰⁶ Bill, 1770, BL 1879 c. 13.

²⁰⁷ 28 Aug. 1782, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 386.

Much of the circus aesthetic was based on such simple transgression of seemingly natural laws. In 1829, horses were shown eating despite the fact that their "Dishes" were "composed of eatables foreign to the food of Horses" (incidentally, human food taboos were invoked at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, when Phillipine 'savages' were shown eating dogs).²⁰⁸ Wildman's bees, arriving at Astley's in 1772, in which their keeper "brought six . . . swarms united upon his face, breast, arms, &c.-
-Drank a glass of wine, and then mounted a Horse, and rode gently two or three turns," was originally intended to demonstrate the improving possibility of "managing" them and harvesting the honey without killing the bees, but still made "a most formidable appearance."²⁰⁹ As these creatures formed the eighteenth century's greatest natural analogies of society--monarchy or commonwealth, according to taste--it was reassuring to know that the "Ladies and Nobility" had not been stung by the stray bees flying around.²¹⁰

During the mid-1780s a wave of pigs, dogs and monkeys momentarily upstaged Billy's equine conjuring and other tricks, with a more sensational impact upon the perceived gap between humankind and animals. The Learned Pig, the only really new admission to the ranks of the sapient, enchanted the salons of a credulous London between 1784 and 1788 with his apparent and crucial ability to speak with the aid of letter cards, as well as mind-reading and card tricks.²¹¹ Writing in 1788, the year after

²⁰⁸ Bill, 3 Aug. 1829, TM Astley's file; Bogdan, *Freak Show* 52.

²⁰⁹ *London Chronicle* 30 Sept. 1766, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 23.

²¹⁰ *London Chronicle* 4 Oct. 1766, *ibid.*; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 62.

²¹¹ See Gerald Stanley Eames, "The Freaks of Learning: Learned Pigs, Musical Hares, and the Romantics," lecture to the Friends of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collns., Toronto Public Library, 4 Feb. 1980, ts., Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Animals on Show," box 2; Altick, *The Shows of London*; Ricky Jay, *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (London: Robert Hale, 1986) 8-21.

Astley had shown his version,²¹² the children's moralist Sarah Trimmer credited the act with real influence in the gradual dethronement of man:

"I have," said a lady who was present, "been for a long time accustomed to consider animals as mere machines, actuated by the unerring hand of Providence, to do those things which are necessary for the preservation of themselves and their offspring; but the sight of the Learned Pig, which has lately been shown in London, has deranged these ideas and I know not what to think."²¹³

Even a trainer, writing in 1805, was amazed by the animal's abilities. One could eventually abandon the subtle cueing signals, "for the animal is so sagacious, that he will appear to read your thoughts."²¹⁴ The pig, hitherto a byword for the bestial, touched a raw nerve in human-animal relations, sparking concerns and controversy about training methods, and becoming an attractively subversive emblem for Romantics including Wordsworth and Burns.²¹⁵ Being home-grown, he provoked some predictably invidious comparisons when some foreign performers apparently left Sadler's Wells for Astley's in disgust at having to perform on the same stage as a boar.²¹⁶

Animal acts therefore sought to imply that the creatures had human-like motivations and reasoning: in 1770, the Little Learned Military Horse behaved "as if he understood" his instructions

²¹² See handbill and woodcut illn. of the pig at Astley's, 1787, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 90.

²¹³ Sarah Trimmer, *Fabulous Histories Designed for the Instruction of Children, Respecting their Treatment of Animals*, 3rd edn. (1788) 71, qtd. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 92.

²¹⁴ William Pinchbeck, *The Expositor; or Many Mysteries Unravell'd . . . comprising The Learned Pig, . . . Invisible Lady [etc.]* (Boston, 1805) 26, qtd. Eames, "The Freaks of Learning" 14, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Animals on Show," box 2.

²¹⁵ Eames, "The Freaks of Learning," Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Animals on Show," box 2; *Morning Post* 17 Apr. 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 127.

²¹⁶ BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, items 690 (12 July 1785) and 691 (1 Aug. 1785).

"word for word," and by 1799 Astley had developed the "LITTLE SPEAKING HORSE."²¹⁷ Billy was the precursor of the now standard circus "Liberty Act" (an Astley's dog was first described as "at Liberty" in 1786): such a notion of freedom had, of course, been definitively human aspiration.²¹⁸ The *Morning Herald* in 1785 was not alone in saying that "The encrease of *learned animals* of the *brute species*, as horses, dogs, pigs, &c. must touch the feelings of every humane heart, when it is known that the tricks they perform are taught by the most excruciating torture. . . ."²¹⁹ Trainers warned the public that results were to be obtained by encouragement only, but it became known that Dancing Dogs at Astley's (fig. 6.4) were kept hungry, and stormed the castle with such alacrity only because food was placed on the other side, and Astley himself publicised how to dispose of pigeons on stage.²²⁰ The acts played upon, as well as contributed to, an emerging bourgeois sensitivity towards the brute creation.²²¹ The restoration of Edenic harmony was a powerful optional subtext for animal acts throughout the history of the circus, and was mentioned in the case of the Learned Pig, though it was

²¹⁷ Bill, 1770, BL 1879 c. 13; 2 May 1799, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 2, item 176 C.

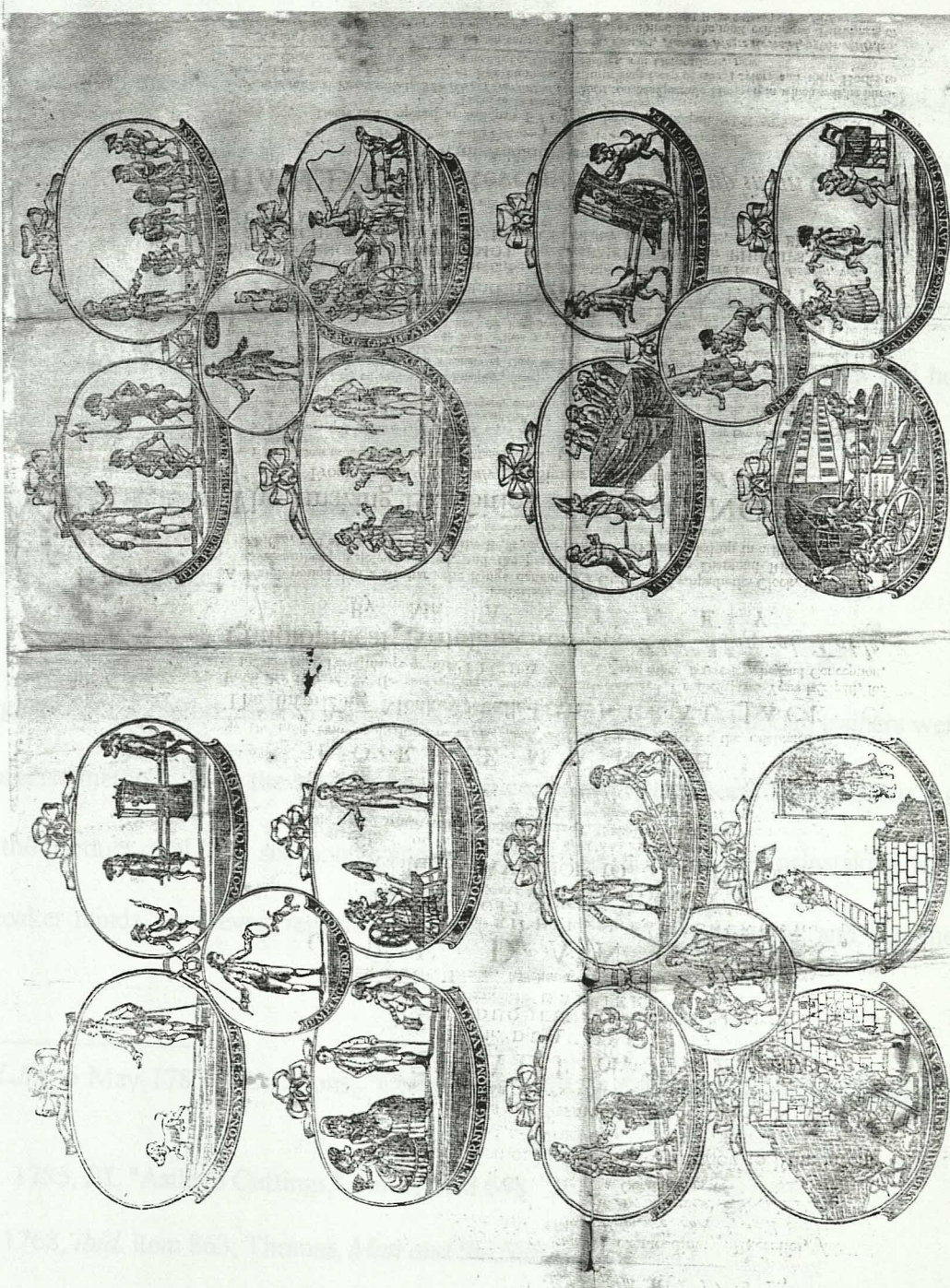
²¹⁸ Ct., 20 Aug. 1786, TM Astley's file.

²¹⁹ *Morning Post* 17 Apr., and *Morning Herald* 5 Sept. 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 127.

²²⁰ Eames, "The Freaks of Learning," Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Animals on Show," box 2; Astley, *Natural Magic* 27, 36; and for details of the alleged training methods of basic circus acts (such as Billy's), see *Report from the Select Committee on Performing Animals, Together with the Proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence* (London: HMSO, 1921) 22, min. 641.

²²¹ See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* 27, chs. 2 and 3; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* ch. 4; Brian Harrison, "Animals and the State in Nineteenth-Century England," *Peacable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford: OUP 1982) ch. 2.

Fig. 6.4. Wood engraving on the reverse of an Astley's handbill for Signor Maisa's Dancing Dogs, c. 1785. Immensely successful, there were two rival troupes of dogs, who, together with monkey accomplices, appeared at the minor theatres and in the salons. There was also the "English Bull-Dog, Chilliby," who would allow himself to be drawn 30 feet (10 m) in the air on a rope, hanging only by his teeth. (Victoria and Albert Museum, with thanks to Ann Beedell.)



The original and amazing Troop of DANCING DOGS, from *Italy and France*, added to the Entertainments at ASTLEY'S, Westminster-Bridge, which will be continued every Evening, during the Summer Season, by the much celebrated Signora and Signora MAISIA.
 Published at the 118 Strand.

not explicitly represented until the heartwarming 'happy families' acts, showing predators and normal prey lovingly relaxing together, of the later nineteenth century.²²²

Some rounded the effect by emulating human movement as well as intellect: General Jackoo, for instance, used his balance-pole "with as much caution and propriety as any human being can possibly do. . . ." ²²³ The significance of Astley's "really clever" dancing horses was that dance--an extension of manners--was seen as another crucially human attribute.²²⁴ Altogether, as one eulogy the same year pronounced, the skill of General Jackoo "and the present exhibitions of dogs and horse at this Theatre, it is supposed Mr. Astley is determined to put Human Nature out of countenance by convincing them that he can produce animals capable of performing their most boasted feats of agility and prescience."²²⁵

The glory was, therefore, deliberately reflected back on the trainer. Although trainers were coy about their precise methods while the act was novel, the cognoscentii had been informed that Astleian horses were the product of at least six months and sometimes two or three years painstaking work.²²⁶ Those "of weaker minds," however, reportedly imagined them "to be supernatural, and that they are

²²² *Oxford Jnl.* 6 May 1786, BL Lysons, "Collectanea," vol. 2, f. 89; see Speaight, *History of the Circus* 78.

²²³ 16 Apr. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 648.

²²⁴ 9 Aug. 1768, *ibid.* item 863; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 37.

²²⁵ 'Review,' h.d. 1785, TM Astley's file.

²²⁶ Report from Paris, 8 Dec. 1783, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 525.

really assisted by a little magic" (a dichotomy that Astley, who claimed that fifty letters a week were sent by credulous admirers, was keen to straddle when he "revealed" some of his methods in *Natural Magic* of 1785)²²⁷ But if animals could somehow be taught to display human capacities ("Even instructions in the art de manege," were "deeply inculcated" in the Dancing Dogs, and they themselves would teach a canary to sing), nurture took on the properties of nature, effacing the fundamental divide between the two.²²⁸ What had appeared natural might not be. In reverse, the same logic extended to the whole stage aesthetic of spectacle and deception: man was so powerful as to make the artificial seem natural.

Since under this scheme outward appearance signified inner character, clothing was an elementary tool of manipulation. Blatant anthropomorphism was therefore made a fine art during the 1780s: the Dancing Dogs were the most concerted effort in this direction, their appeal resting on their ability to act out dramas on their own. General Jackoo, miming his own little interlude, needed only "the gift of speech" to make his appearance complete and, "while he is so laughably brandishing his sword, cry--"Who's afraid ?""²²⁹ One observer thought "the animal undressing himself produces an effect as whimsical as surprising," though he recommended him "not to be quite so unmannerly, at the instant particularly when he is pulling off his *small cloaths*, as to turn his back to the boxes."²³⁰ In a

²²⁷ "Extract of a letter from the Brussels Gazette," 6 Mar. 1787, *ibid.* item 951; Astley, *Natural Magic* 6.

²²⁸ Ad., *Morning Post* 6 Jan. 1784, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 3, f. 24.

²²⁹ 'Review,' 16 Apr. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," item 648.

²³⁰ H.d. 1785, *ibid.* item 769.

genteel precedent to the chimps' tea party, Jackoo took an elaborate public breakfast with a canine Mme de Pompadour, which included a glimpse of a world truly upside down when they were waited on by humans.²³¹ A more arresting inversion had taken place in 1777, when the Little Military Horse formed a surreal spectacle by travelling in a coach to its other venue in Panton Street.²³² The thought of it looking out of the window particularly struck James Winston.²³³ In similarly grotesque fashion in 1829, two successors would sit down to eat at the table, dressed as Darby and Joan (fig. 6.5). Such acts provided antidotes to the adoration of the horse as an object of beauty.

Anthropomorphism naturally went hand in hand with public and professional affection for the chosen beasts. There were several anecdotes about Astley's favourite horses, and the extraordinary depth of their training and trust in humans, whether it was the £5 Billy, who was accidentally sold but reclaimed when he danced after being recognised by some passing staff three years later, or the charger originally presented by General Elliott, who was famous for ungyring his own saddle and graciously preparing tea.²³⁴ The skin of this animal, who outlived his master and was given loaves of bread when his teeth wore out, was eventually turned into a thunder-drum: "when its rumbling sounds die on the ear of those who know the circumstance," waxed Decastro, "it serves to their recollection as his

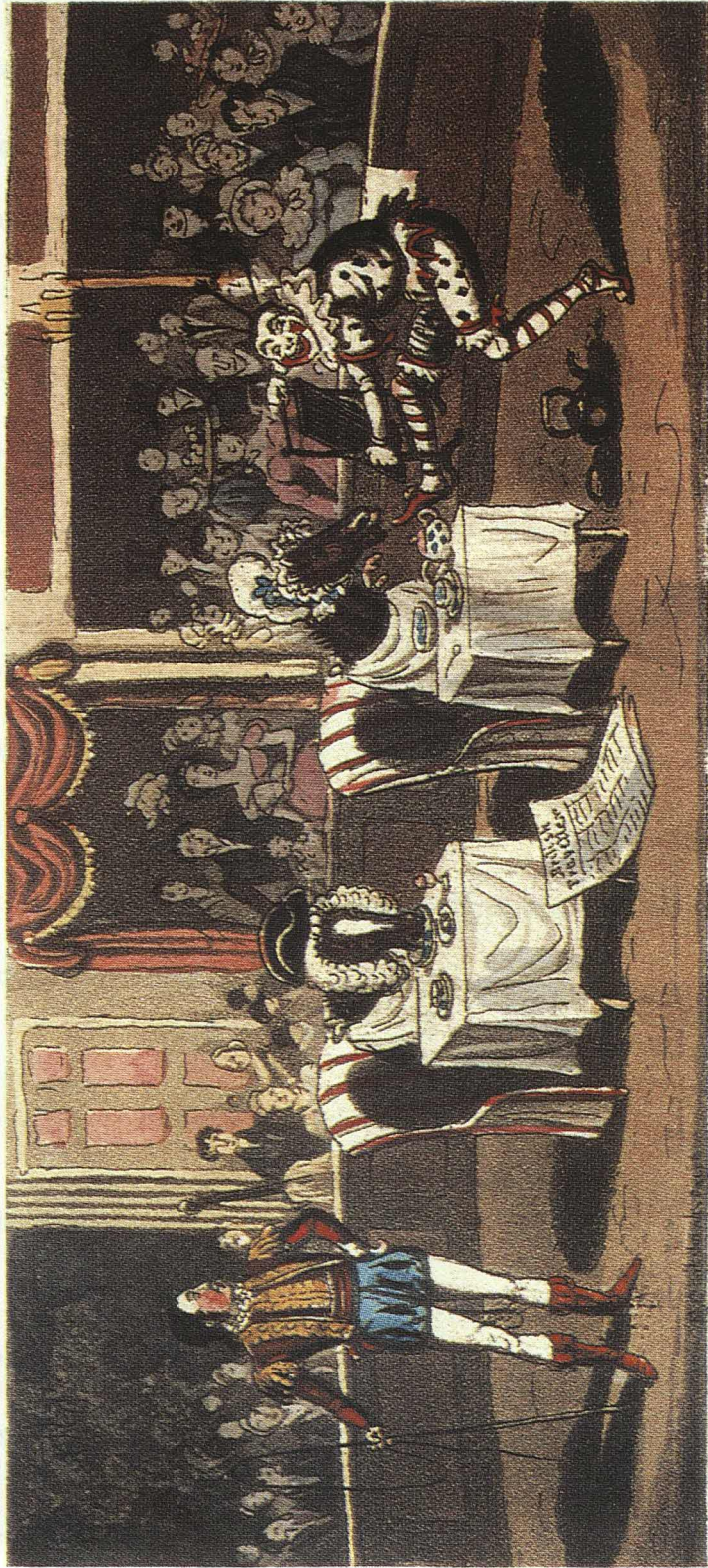
²³¹ Engraving, 1785, TM Astley's file.

²³² *Morning Post* 21 Apr. 1777, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 80.

²³³ Winston, ms. biography of Astley, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 1023; *Morning Post* 21 Apr. 1777, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 80.

²³⁴ Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol 2: 81-3; see also Reynolds, *Life and Times* vol. 2: 168, for an account of a similar ex-Astley's mount which curvetted every time it saw a scarlet uniform; and the anthropomorphic tones of the travelling theatre manager discussing the circus rôles of his draft-pony's parents in Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) ch. 23.

Fig. 6.5. Robert Cruikshank, *Ducrow's Ponies at Breakfast*, hand coloured lithograph, c. 1830. Ducrow stands on the left and his brother John, on the right, is about to stir the tea with his toe. (David Drummond Collection.)



Ducrow's Pentos at Breakfast.

parting knell."²³⁵ General Jackoo was even offered a pioneering balloon trip, he was considered such a star: in a private letter Astley referred to him like a person, while seeming to express more than financial concern at the death of another of the same species ("the little Black faced one") the following winter.²³⁶ None the less, one newspaper noted that observers were able to watch Jackoo's tricks "without the attendant fear of seeing a human being exposed to the danger of such exhibits."²³⁷

As well as animals stepping into human shoes (and sometimes vice versa), there were more complex exchanges between species. In 1785, Astley travestied the horse with a "large" and "richly caparisoned" dog, ridden by General Jackoo rode in his trademark "Triumphal Entry" of 1785.²³⁸ In 1788 he used "a surprising Real Gigantic Spanish Pig, Measuring from head to tail 12 feet, and 12 hands high, weighing 12 cwt. Which," again, was "rode by a MONKEY."²³⁹ Proof that the highly ambiguous hog was also elided with the human comes in the form of the strange *Ceremony of the Roasted Pig*, a standard slack-rope trick of the 1780s in which performers wound themselves in the rope as if on a spit. Thus General Jackoo effectively performed a double charade when he performed the same exercise by the same name.²⁴⁰ Anthropomorphism tended to suppress the usual differences

²³⁵ Decastro, *Memoirs* 30, 36; Raymond, *Memoirs of Elliston* vol. 2: 82.

²³⁶ 13 Apr. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 646; Astley, letter to Mr. Pownall, 4 Dec. 1786, TM Astley's file.

²³⁷ *Morning Post* 5 Apr. 1785, BL Lysons "Collectanea, vol. 2, f. 71.

²³⁸ 6 Oct. 1785, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 750.

²³⁹ Qtd. Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* 33; 28 July 1788, BL "Astley's Cuttings," vol. 1, item 964.

²⁴⁰ E.g. see 28 Sept. 1786, *ibid.* item 862.

between species, choosing instead to stress their common abilities as actors. In the Dancing Dogs, for instance, dogs and monkeys played humans together in the same scenes: mongrels carried monkeys to masquerades in sedan chairs, and simian executioners despatched canine deserters. Illustrations made it hard to distinguish them. Other categories of human figured in the formula too: the child jockeys of the 1795 pony races at Astley's were, by 1848, supplanted by "5 Highly-Trained Monkeys. . . ." ²⁴¹ In the circus, the *category* of the species became so important that *actual* species frequently was not.

What always mattered, however, was the mental map of the natural world which defined the roles which animals could take. Animals (including people) were generally categorised by their apparent closeness to, or distance from, the gentlemanly norm. Horses or dogs, for example, qualified for the former class by merit of their domesticity, while monkeys obviously did so on the basis of their anthropoid appearance. With its naked, pink skin, the pig conformed on both counts. The closest animals were given the most versatile roles: familiarity (as well as actual easiness to train) bred complexity of character. Indeed whole spectrum--from domestic to wild--could be encapsulated *within* a single species in the case of horses and dogs. Horses, most of all, could be pedestals, jumping blocks, "devils" or heroes; actors who could portray emotions from "distorted fury" to "calm obedience." ²⁴² By contrast exotic animals--"the beautiful zebra"; the "elegant" camel--tended to be typecast as aesthetic objects or irredeemable, if beautiful, monsters. ²⁴³

²⁴¹ Bill, 10 Jan. 1848, Bod. John Johnson Colln., "Theatres Lond. A-C" portfolio.

²⁴² Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse* 212; bills, 14 Sept. 1829, and "*Third Week! . . . Oscar & Malvina*," 1812, TM Astley's file.

²⁴³ Ct., h.d. 24 Nov. 1780, and bill, 25 Sept. 1822, *ibid.*

Here the strategies have been separated for the purpose of analysis, but in reality they followed in quick and random succession. The circus was the sequential version of the same fairground aesthetic which struck William Wordsworth, in his famous passage on "Bartholomew Fair" in *The Prelude* (1816), as the perceptual disorder at the heart of modernity ("The Horse of Knowledge, and the learned Pig All jumbled up together, to compose, / A Parliament of Monsters. . . .").²⁴⁴ These were "All," he said, the products of a single "Promethean" impetus; a panoply of infinite possibilities. Wordsworth was by no means the first to notice this. "What cannot man," demanded a press poet upon visiting Astley's in Dublin,

. . . --the wonder of whose hand,
 The well-earned plaudits of this night command ?
 When brutes the works of reason seem to find
 Glow into thought, and nearly change their kind;
 When the fleet courser proves obedient skill,
 And moves conformant to the master's will ?
 Thus from instruction can perfection flow,
 And ev'ry grace of polished pleasure show,
 Admiring circles ever justly draw,
 And raise e'vn brutes beyond the brutal law.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 8.11. 685-723.

²⁴⁵ *Dublin Morning Post* 15 Mar. 1788, BL Lysons "Collectanea," vol. 4, f. 30.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Bills, Press Cuttings, Manuscripts etc.

Aberdeen University Library

Arthur Morice Playbills Collection.

Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bod.)

Astley, Philip, *et al.* Handbills. 1772-7. Douce Prints a.49. Folios 173-7.

John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera.

John Johnson "Bridgenorth" Collection.

British Library, London (BL)

Astley, Philip. Handbill. 1770. "Miscellanea Collection." 1879, c.13.

"Astley's Cuttings from Newspapers." 1768-1856. Scrapbook. 3 vols. Th. Cts. 35-7.

Lysons, Daniel. "Collectanea." 1660-1840. Scrapbook. 5 vols. C. 103. k. 11.

Th. Cts. 50. "A Collection of Programmes, Cuttings from Newspapers Relating to Performances in Various Circuses from 1772-1858." Scrapbook. 2 vols.

Th. Cts. 60. Scrapbook of press cuttings on London theatres. c. 1780-1825. Possibly compiled by James Winston.

Guildhall Library Prints Room, London

Playbill boxes. "Circus" and "Astley's" files.

History of Art Department Library, University of Oxford

Hope Collection. Bills and prints.

Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Beckenham

Astley's file. Engravings and cuttings.

Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London (PRO)

Astley, Philip. Last Will and Testament. PROB 11/1562.

Great Docket Books. List of indictments, chiefly Assizes. 1772-78. IND1/6661-2.

Patent Rolls, Geo. III 19-43. 1781-2. IND: 16806. p. 14.

Process Book, (Criminal Proc.). ASSI 34/69.

Record of Felonies and Misdemeanours. ASSI 34/75.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Horsham

RSPCA Records. Vols. 1-3. 1800-1830.

SPCA Management Committee Minutes. 1824-1832.

Sotheby's Auctioneers, London

Sale of illustrated books etc. 6-7 Dec. 1990. Lots 221-55.

Surrey Record Office, County Hall, Kingston upon Thames (SRO)

Nichols, Mary. Diary. Vol. 4. 1823-34.

Quarter Sessions (QS) Bundles. Miscellaneous papers. 1778-92. QS 2/6/78 Ep 13-92 Mids 63.

QS Indictment Files. QS 2/7.

QS Order Books. 1767-1807. QS 2/1/22-33.

QS Process Book. Lists of prisoners and charges. 1767-86. QS 3/5/9.

Theatre Museum, London (TM)

Astley's file. 17 boxes of bills with some cuttings and manuscripts. 1780-1889.

General collection. Books, paper and photographs. Author and subject indexed.

Grieve, John Henderson. Scenery for *The Black Castle*, Astley's, 1799. Set Design Fiche 9/DG E 1325-1924.

Stone Collection. Toy theatre, press cuttings and prints. At National Archive of Art and Design. Astley's boxes.

Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Blandford House, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Fenwick Collection. Letters, books and bills. Ref. 944.

II. Published Sources

i. 'PRIMARY'

Ackermann, Rudolph. *Microcosm of London; Or, London in Miniature*. London, 1808.

Acts of Parliament (listed chronologically)

10 Geo. II ch. 24 (1737). "An Act for the more effectual preventing the unlawful playing of Interludes within the Precincts of the two Universities. . . ."

10 Geo. II ch. 28 (1737). "An Act to explain and amend so much of an Act made in the twelfth year of the Reign of Queen Anne, intituled, *An Act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, sturdy Beggars and Vagrants into one Act of Parliament . . . and sending them*

whither they ought to be sent, as relates to common Players of Interludes." 'Theatre Licensing Act.'

17 Geo. II ch. 5 (1744). "An act to amend and make more effectual the laws relating to rogues, vagabonds, and other idle and disorderly persons, and to houses of correction." 'Vagrancy Act of 1744.'

25 Geo. II ch. 36 (1752). "An Act for the better preventing Thefts and Robberies, and for regulating Places of publick Entertainment, and punishing Persons keeping disorderly Houses." 'Disorderly Houses Act.'

21 Geo. III ch. 49 (1781). "An Act for preventing certain Abuses and Profanations on the Lord's Day, called *Sunday*."

26 Geo. III ch. 57 (1786). Irish Statutes. "An Act for Regulating the Stage in the City and County of Dublin."

28 Geo. III ch. 30 (1788). "An Act to enable Justices of the Peace to license Theatrical Representations occasionally. . . ." 'Sixty-Day' or 'Theatrical Representations' Act.

5 Geo. IV ch. 83 (1824). 'Vagrancy Act of 1824.'

6 & 7 Vict. ch. 68 (1843). "An Act for Regulating Theatres. . . ." 'Theatres Act of 1843.'

Allen, Thomas. *History of the Counties of Surrey and Sussex*. London, 1829.

The Annual Register; Or, A View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1793. London, 1806.

Astley, [John] v. Welden (1801). In *The Digest: Annotated British, Commonwealth and European Cases*. Vol. 17 (2). Damages. London: Butterworths, 1994. 24.

Astley, Philip. *The Modern Riding Master; Or, A Key to the Knowledge of the Horse and Horsemanship, with Several Necessary Rules for Young Horsemen*. London, 1775.

---. *Natural Magic; Or, Physical Amusements Revealed*. London, 1785.

- . *Remarks on the Profession and Duty of a Soldier; With Other Observations Relative to the Army, at this Time in Actual Service on the Continent*. London, 1794.
- . *Astley's System of Equestrian Education, Exhibiting the Beauties and Defects of the Horse; With Serious and Important Observations on his General Excellence, Preserving it in Health, Grooming, etc.* London, 1801.
- . ---. 7th ed. Dublin, 1802.
- . *Astley's Projects in his Management of the Horse, an Abridgement of his Book of Equestrian Education*. London, 1804.
- . *A Description and Historical Account of the Places now the Theatre of War*. 4th ed. London, 1794.
- . Letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, 3 Dec. 1804. *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth*. Vol. 3 (London: Historical Mss. Commission, 1896) 288.
- B . . . , née de V . . . L, *Les Animaux Savants, ou Exercices des Chevaux de M. M. Franconi, du Cerf Coco . . .* Paris, 1816.
- Boswell, James. *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763*. Ed. Frederick A. Pottle. London: Futura, 1982.
- Bouillon, P. *Louis XVI Separated from his Family*. Engraving, 1795. Repr. David Herbert. *David: Brutus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Brayley, Edward Wedlake. *Historical and Descriptive Accounts of the Theatres of London*. London, 1827.
- Burn, Richard. *The Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer*. 17th ed. Vol. 4. London, 1793.
- Burney, Fanny. *The Letters and Journals of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972.
- Butler, E. M., ed. *A Regency Visitor: The English Tour of Prince Pückler-Muskau Described in his Letters 1826-1828*. Trans. Sarah Austin. London: Collins, 1957.

- Canaletto, Antonio. *Festivals of the Doge: The Piazzetta, c. 1763*. Pen and wash drawing, c. 1763. Ratjen Foundation, Vaduz. Repr. *The Independent Magazine* 10 Sept. 1994: 27.
- [Clarke, William.] *The Every Night Book; Or, Life After Dark*. London, 1827.
- Daly, Richard. *The Life and Adventures of Richard Daly, Esq.* London, 1792.
- Dando, John, and Harrie Runt. *Maroccus Extaticus; Or, Bankes' Bay Horse in a Trance*. London, 1595.
- Decastro, Jacob. *The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian*. Ed. R. Humphries. London, 1824.
- Degas, Edgar. *La La at the Cirque Fernando, Paris*. Oil on canvas, 1879. National Gallery, London. Repr. Keith Roberts, *Degas*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1982.
- Dibdin, Charles. *Royal Circus Epitomised*. London, 1784.
- . *The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself*. 4 vols. London, 1803.
- Dibdin, Charles, The Younger. *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger, Dramatist and Upward Thirty Years Manager of Minor Theatres*. Ed. George Speaight. London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1956.
- Dickens, Charles. "Astley's." *Sketches by "Boz"*. Vol. 1. London, 1836.
- . *Nicholas Nickleby*. 1839.
- . *Hard Times*. 1854.
- Elmes, James. *Metropolitan Improvements; Or London in the Nineteenth Century*. London, 1829.
- The Era* 1838.
- Fiske, Jane, ed. *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St. Edmunds, 1778-1827*. Vol. 1. Woodbridge: Boydell P and Suffolk Records Society, 1990.

Fox, Charles Philip, ed. *American Circus Posters*. NY: Dover, 1978.

Frost, Thomas. *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*. London, 1875.

Gentleman's Magazine 1788, 1807.

Hansard. 1816. Vol. 27.

Hill, Rowland. *A Warning to Professors, Containing Aphoristic Observations of the Nature and Tendency of Public Amusements*. London, 1833.

Hogarth, William. *Southwark Fair*. Etching and engraving, 1733. British Museum, London.

Hone, William. *The Every Day Book and Table Book*. London, 1825.

Hughes, Charles. *The Compleat Horseman; or, the Art of Riding Made Easy . . .* London, 1772.

Inchbald v. Barrington (1869). In G. W. Hemmings, ed. *The Law Reports: Chancery Appeal Cases*. Vol. 4. London, Butterworths 1973.

St. James' Chronicle; Or, British Evening-Post 11 Oct. 1777.

Journal of the House of Commons. Vol. 43 (1787-8).

Journal of the House of Lords. Vol. 38. 1788.

Knight, Charles. *Knight's Cyclopædia of London*. London, 1851.

The London Chronicle 1773-88.

The Morning Post, and Daily Advertiser 1785.

Morning Herald 1788.

A New Pocket Plan of London, Westminster and Southwark. . . . London, 1799.

The New Wonderful Magazine and Marvellous Chronicle. Vol. 1 (1793).

Lloyd's Evening Post, and British Chronicle 11 Oct. 1777.

Nickson, Edward. *The Actors Remonstrance, or Complaint: for the Silencing of their Profession*. . . .
London, 1643.

The Parliamentary Register; Or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons.
Vol. 23 (1788).

Parliamentary Reports (listed chronologically)

*The Second Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons into the State of the Police
in the Metropolis*. With minutes. London, 1817.

Report from the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature.
With minutes. London, 1832.

*Report from the Select Committee on Performing Animals, Together with the Proceedings of the
Committee and Minutes of Evidence*. London: HMSO, 1921.

Public Advertiser 1773-85.

Pennant, Thomas. *Some Account of London*. 5th ed. London, 1813.

Pepys, Samuel. *Diary*. 1663-8.

*The Picture of London for 1818; Being a Correct Guide to All the Curiosities, Amusements, Exhibits,
Public Establishments, and Remarkable Objects in and Near London*. 19th ed. London, 1818.

*A Plan of Streets, Roads, &c., Between Black Fryers Bridge, London Bridge, Westminster Bridge,
Lambeth . . . As They Now Are, Together with the New Intended Streets, Roads &
Communications, in Strong Black Lines*. N.p., 1768.

*The Plan of the Rules Belonging to the King's Bench Prison Extending from the Black Bull Alehouse .
. . . to Newington Almshouses*. N.p., 1750.

Raymond, George. *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston, Comedian*. 2 vols. London, 1844.

The Record 1830-8.

Reynolds, Frederick. *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*. Vol. 1. London, 1826.

Schinkel, Karl Friedrich. *"The English Journey": Journal of a Visit to France and Britain in 1826*.
Ed. David Bindman, and Gottfried Riemann. Trans. F. Ganya Walls. New Haven: Yale UP,
1993.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

Solly, N. Neal. *Memoir of the Life of David Cox*. London, 1873.

Strutt, Joseph. *Glig-Gamena Angel-Deod; The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*.
London, 1801.

Thale, Mary, ed. *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771-1854)*. Cambridge: CUP, 1972.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The Newcomes: Memoirs of a Most Respectable Family*. London,
1854.

Vaucanson, Jean de. *An Account of the Mechanism of an Automaton, or Image playing on the
German Flute; As it was presented in a memoire . . .* London, 1742.

Wilkinson, Tate. *The Wandering Patentee*. Vol. 1. York, 1795.

Wood, Florence and Kenneth, eds. *A Lancashire Gentleman: The Letters and Journals of Richard
Hodgkinson 1763-1847*. London: Alan Sutton, n.d (c. 1988).

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude*. 1805 (pub. 1850).

ii. 'SECONDARY'

Agnew, Jean-Christophe. *Worlds Apart: The Market and Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-
1750*. Cambridge: CUP, 1986.

- Altick, Richard. *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1978.
- Ashton, Geoffrey. *Catalogue of Paintings in the Theatre Museum, London*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992.
- Auguet, Roland. *Cruelty and Civilisation: The Roman Games*. London: Allen, 1972.
- Baer, Marc. *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.
- Bailey, Peter. *Leisure and Class in Victorian Britain: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control*. 2nd ed. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1968.
- Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: California UP, 1981.
- Barnicoat, John. *A Concise History of Posters*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1972.
- Bayley, C. A. *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*. Harlow: Longman, 1989.
- Beattie, J. M. *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1986.
- Beedell, Ann. *The Decline of the English Musician: A Family of English Musicians in Ireland, England, Mauritius and Australia*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.
- Bemrose, Paul. *Circus Genius: A Tribute to Philip Astley*. Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough Council, 1992.
- Berger, Roland, and Dietmar Winkler. *Zirkusbilder*. Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1983.
- Bevan, Ian. *Royal Performance: The Story of Royal Theatregoing*. London: Hutchinson, 1954.
- Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988.
- Booth, Michael. *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910*. London: Routledge, 1981.

- Bouissac, Paul. *Circus and Culture: a Semiotic Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976.
- Boulton, William. *The Amusements of Old London*. Vol. 1. London: Nimmo, 1901.
- Bratton, Jacqueline, and Jane Traies. *Astley's Amphitheatre*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1980.
- Bratton, Jacqueline, et. al. *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1800-1920*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991.
- Bratton, Jacqueline. "Theatre of War." In David Bratby, et al., eds. *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*. Cambridge: CUP, 1980.
- Brock, Alan St. Hill. *Pyrotechnics: The History and Art of Firework Making*. London: O'Connor, 1922.
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.
- Brown, Frederick. *Theater and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage*. NY: Viking, 1980.
- Burke, Peter. "Bakhtin for Historians." *Social History*. 13.1 (1988): 85-90.
- Burton, Anthony. "On Toy-Shops and Toy Sellers." *The V & A Album* 3. London: De Montfort, 1984.
- Campbell, Colin. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Carter, Angela. *Nights at the Circus*. London: Chatto, 1984.
- Castle, Terry. *Masquerade and Civilisation: the Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century Culture and Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Chalklin, C. W. "Capital Expenditure on Building for Cultural Purposes in Provincial England, 1730-1830." *Journal of Business History* 22.1 (Jan. 1980): 51-70.

- Conolly, L. W. *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Lib., 1976.
- Coxe, Antony Hippisley. *A Seat at the Circus*. London: Macmillan, 1951.
- Cunningham, Hugh. *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*. London: Croom-Helm, 1980.
- . "The Metropolitan Fairs: A Case Study in the Social Control of Leisure." In A. P. Donajdgradzki, ed. *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. London, 1977.
- Davis, Tracy C. "Theatrical Employees of Victorian Britain: Demography of an Industry." *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 18.1-2 (1990): 5-34.
- Denning, Anthony. *Theatre in the Cotswolds: The Boles Watson Family and the Cirencester Theatre*. Ed. Paul Ranger. London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1993.
- Deuchar, Stephen. *Sporting Art in Eighteenth-Century England: A Social and Political History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- Dingle, Ally. "It's No Fun and It's Not Fair," *The Big Issue* 93 (23-29 Aug. 1994): 10-12.
- Disher, Maurice Willson-. *Greatest Show on Earth: Astley's (Afterwards Sanger's) Royal Amphitheatre of Arts*. London: Bell, 1937.
- Dowd, D. L. *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David*. London: n.p., 1948.
- Dupavillon, Christian. *Architectures du Cirque Des Origines à Nos Jours*. Paris: Ed. du Moniteur, 1982.
- Easton, Susan, et al. *Disorder and Discipline: Popular Culture from 1550 to the Present*. London: Smith, 1988.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*. Ed. Diane Apostolos Cappadonna. NY: Continuum, 1992.
- . *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974.

- Genep, Arnold Van. *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. M. B. Vizedom, and G. L. Caffee. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Golby, J. M., and A. W. Purdue. *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900*. London: Batsford, 1984.
- Gretton, Tom. *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints 1800-1860*. London: Colonnade, 1980.
- Gray, Nicolette, and Ray Nash. *Nineteenth-Century Ornamented Typefaces*. London: Faber, 1976.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Far From the Madding Crowd*. 1874.
- Harrison, Brian. *Drink and the Victorians: the Temperance Question in England 1815-1872*. London: Faber, 1971.
- . "Animals and the State in Nineteenth-Century England." *Peacable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain*. Oxford: OUP, 1982.
- Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed. *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. Oxford: OUP, 1987.
- Highfill, Philip H. "Edmund Simpson's Talent Raid on England in 1818 (3)," *Theatre Notebook* 13 (1958-9): 7-14.
- Howard, Diana. *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850-1950*. London: Library Assoc., 1970.
- Hunt, Lynn. *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Innes, Joanna. "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England." In E. Hellmuth, ed. *The Transformation of Political Culture: Late Eighteenth-Century England and Germany*. Oxford: OUP, 1990. 57-118.
- , and John Styles. "The Crime Wave: Recent Writings on Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century England." *Journal of British Studies* 25.4 (Oct. 1986): 380-435.

- Irving, John. *A Son of the Circus*. London: Bloomsbury, 1994.
- Ivamy, E. R. Hardy. "Circuses and the Law." *The Law Journal* 102 (Feb. 1952): 115-6.
- Jay, Ricky. *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women*. London: Hale, 1986.
- Jordan, Neil, dir. *The Miracle*. Film. 1991.
- Journal of Popular Culture* 6.3. In-Depth on Circuses, Carnivals and Fairs in America (Winter 1972).
- Kanellos, Nicolas. "A Brief Overview of the Mexican-American Circus in the Southwest." *Journal of Popular Culture* 18.2 (fall 1984): 77.
- Kirby, E. T. "The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainment." *The Drama Review* 18.1 (1974): 5-16.
- Kernodle, George. *The Theatre in History*. Fayetteville, London: U of Arkansas P, 1989.
- Laqueur, Thomas. "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV." *Journal of Modern History* 54 (Sept. 1982): 417-66.
- Leach, Edmund. *Humanity and Animality*. 54th Conway Memorial Lecture (London: South Place Ethical Soc., 1972).
- . *Lèvi-Strauss* (London: Fontana, 1985) 43.
- Levine, Joseph. *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science and Satire in Augustan England*. Berkeley: California UP, 1977.
- Lèvi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. 2 vols. London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1968.
- Liesenfeld, Vincent J. *The Licensing Act of 1737*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984.
- Mackintosh, Iain. *The Georgian Playhouse*. Exhibition catalogue, Hayward Gallery. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1975.

- Malcolmson, Robert. *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850*. Cambridge: CUP, 1973.
- McKechnie, Samuel. *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages*. London: Low, 1935.
- McKendrick, Neil, ed. *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982.
- Meggs, Philip. *A History of Graphic Design*. 2nd ed. NY: Reinhold, 1992.
- Meisel, Martin. *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.
- Men, Ségolène Le. *Seurat et Chéret, le Peintre, le Cirque et l'Affiche*. Paris: CNRS Eds., 1994.
- Merriam, E. P. "The Arts and Anthropology." In S. Tax, ed. *Horizons of Anthropology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1964.
- Merwe, Pieter van der, and Roger Took. *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield*. London, 1979.
- Merwe, Pieter van der. "The Stanfield Brothers." *Theatre Notebook* 30 (1976): 9-12.
- . "Sketches for Scenery by Clarkson Stanfield: New Finds, 1980-84," *Theatre Notebook* 40 (1986): 22-9.
- Morice, Gerald, and George Speaight. "New Light on the Juvenile Drama." *Theatre Notebook* 26 (1971-2): 115-21.
- Nicholson, Watson. *The Struggle for a Free Stage in London*. London: Constable, 1906.
- Palmer, Alan. *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern History 1789-1945*. 2nd ed. London: Penguin, 1983.
- Past and Present* 137. Ed. Paul Slack and Joanna Innes. Special Edition on The Cultural and Political Construction of Europe (Nov. 1992): 72-102.
- Pretini, Giancarlo, ed. *Thesaurus Circensis*. 2 vols. Udine, It.: Trapezio, 1990.

- Price, Cecil. *Theatre in the Age of Garrick*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1973.
- Prokofiev, Sergei. *The Love for Three Oranges*. Comic opera. 1919.
- Radway, Janice. "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading." *Daedalus* 117 (1984): 49-73.
- Ranger, Paul. *"Terror and Pity reign in every Breast": Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres, 1750-1820*. London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1991.
- Ritvo, Harriet. *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Roberts, Howard, ed. *Survey of London*. Vol. 25. London: London County Council, 1955.
- Rosenfeld, Sybil, and Edward Croft-Murray. "A Checklist of Scene Painters working in Great Britain and Ireland in the Eighteenth Century," *Theatre Notebook* vol. 19 (1964-5): 6-20, 49-64, 102-13, 133-45; vol. 20 (1965-6): 36-44, 69-72, 113-18.
- Rosenfeld, Sybil. *The Theatre of the London Fairs in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: CUP, 1960.
- . *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces, 1660-1765*. Cambridge: CUP, 1939.
- . *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- . *A Short History of Scene Design in Great Britain*. London: n.p., 1976.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 2nd ed. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Sale, Jonathan. "Lords and Ladies of the Ring." *The Guardian* 9 Nov. 1994, "Society" suppl.: 8-9.
- Samuel, Raphael, ed. *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*. Vols. 1 and 3. London: Routledge, 1989.

- Saxon, Arthur H. *Enter Foot and Horse: a History of Hippodrama in England and France*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1968.
- . *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow and the Romantic Age of the English Circus*. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978.
- . *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*. NY: Columbia UP, 1978.
- . "Capon, The Royal Circus and The Destruction of the Bastille." *Theatre Notebook* 28 (1974): 133-5.
- Schlicke, Paul. *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*. London: Allen, 1985.
- Scholes, Percy A. *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. John Owen Ward. 10th ed. Oxford: OUP, 1991.
- Schwartz, L. D. *London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and Living Conditions, 1700-1850*. Cambridge: CUP, 1992.
- Solkin, David. *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1993.
- Southern, Richard. *The Georgian Playhouse*. London: Pleiades, 1948.
- . *Changeable Scenery: Its Origin and Development in the British Theatre*. London: Faber, 1952.
- . "The Arena Theatre in English History," *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1948-9) 75.
- Speaight, George. *A History of the Circus*. London: Tantivy P, 1980.
- . *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*. 2nd ed. London: Hale, 1990.
- . "Some Comic Circus Entrées," *Theatre Notebook* 32 (1978): 24-7.
- . "Astley's Amphitheatre," *Theatre Notebook* 42 (1988): 75-8.

- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Starobinski, Jean. "The Solar Myth of the Revolution." *1789: The Emblems of Reason*. Geneva: Skira, 1968.
- Stott, Raymond Toole. *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography*. 4 vols. Derby: Harpur, 1958-71.
- Strauss, Gerald. "The Dilemma of Popular History." *Past and Present* 132 (1991): 130-149.
- Summerfield, Penny. "Patriotism and Empire: Music-Hall Entertainment, 1870-1914." In John Mackenzie, ed. *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986.
- Taylor, Miles. "John Bull and the Iconography of Public Opinion in England, c. 1712-1929." *Past and Present* 134 (Feb. 1992): 104.
- Thetard, Henry. *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*. 2 vols. Paris: Prisma, 1947.
- Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800*. London: Penguin, 1984.
- Thompson, E. P. *Customs in Common*. London: Merlin, 1991.
- Thompson, F. M. L. *Victorian England: the Horse-Drawn Society*. Inaugural lecture. London: Bedford College, U of London, 1970.
- Truzzi, Marcello. "The American Circus as a Source of Folklore: An Introduction." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 30.4 (1966): 289-300.
- Turner, John M. *Historical Hengler's Circus*. Formby: Lingdales P, 1990.
- . *Victorian Arena--the Performers: a Dictionary of British Circus Biography*. Vol. 1. Formby: Lingdales P, 1993.
- . "Pablo Fanque: 'An Artiste of Colour'." *King Pole* (Journal of the Circus Friends Association) 89 (Dec. 1990): 5-9; 90 (1991): 3-5.

- . "The Excitement and Romance of Circus History." *King Pole* (n.d., c. 1989).
- . "Frowde the Proud: The Clown Evangelist." *Gloucestershire History* (Summer 1994): 9-11.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*. NY: Performing Arts Jnl. Publications, 1982.
- Twyman, Michael. *Printing 1770-1970: An Illustrated History of its Development and uses in England*. London: Eyre, 1970.
- Varey, J. E. "Notes on English Theatrical Performers in Spain: Part II (1583-1868)," *Theatre Notebook* 10 (1955-6): 74-9.
- Warner, Marina. "Fighting Talk." *The State of the Language*. Eds. Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels. London: Faber, 1990.
- Watson, Peter. "Bread and Circuses." *The Observer* 2 Dec. 1990: 40.
- West, Mark Irwin. "A Spectrum of Spectators," *Journal of Social History* 15 (1981): 265-70.
- Yeo, Eileen and Stephen, eds. *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure*. Brighton: Harvester, 1981.

III. Unpublished Theses and Papers etc.

- Allen, Ralph G. "The Stage Spectacles of Philip James de Louthembourg." Diss. Yale U, 1960.
- Assael, Brenda. "Patriotism in the Circus from the Death of Nelson to the Death of Wellington." Seminar paper. Institute of Historical Research, London, 4 Oct. 1994.
- Brewer, John. Letter to the author. N.d., January 1993.
- Carmeli, Yoram S. "Family and Economics in an English Circus, 1975-1979." PhD thesis. U of London, 1985.

- Harvey, Adrian. "Sport in Napoleonic Britain." Seminar. Merton Coll., Oxford, Nov. 1993.
- Hodak, Caroline. "L'Introduction du Cirque en France: Spectacles et Sociabilités du XVIIIème Siècle." Mémoire de Maîtrise. Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 1992.
- Gallop, D. F. "Chapters in the History of the Provincial Newspaper Press, 1700-1855." MA diss. U of Reading, 1969.
- Johnston, Colin. Bath City Archivist. Letter to the author. 18 Dec. 1991.
- Kwint, Marius. "'Dark Subjects': Race and Performance in the Early Circus in England, 1768-1850." Paper. History Workshop 25 Conference. Ruskin College, Oxford, Nov. 1991.
- Looney, John Jefferson. "Advertising and Society in England, 1720-1820: a Statistical Analysis of Yorkshire Newspaper Advertisements." PhD thesis. Princeton U, 1983.
- Moody, Jane. "Aspects of Cultural Politics in the London Minor Theatres of the Early Nineteenth Century." D. Phil. thesis. Oxford U, 1993.
- Olsen, Mark, ed. *The Repertory of the Parisian Stage During the French Revolution*. Chicago U: forthcoming 1994/5.
- Speaight, George. Letter to the author. 23 Sept. 1990.
- Turner, John, M. "'£50,000 In Hand': the Story of William Cooke's Royal Circus Immediately Before Taking a Lease on Astley's in 1853." Paper. 1990.
- Tuttle, George Palliser. "The History of the Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy, 1782-1816, St. George's Fields, Surrey, England." PhD thesis. Tufts U, 1972.
- Towsen, John. "The Clown to the Ring: the Evolution of the Circus Clown (1770-1975)." PhD thesis. New York U, 1976.