



Roll up! Roll up!

The circus only stays in a town or city for a short time, so it has to work quickly to encourage people to buy tickets. Circuses promote their performances with poster campaigns, with posters announcing shows at specific dates and times.

Circus posters are put up in places where they are sure to be noticed, often turning up as placards around trees and traffic signs. In PR jargon they are referred to as 'Barnum publicity', after the campaigns of the US businessman Phineas Taylor Barnum of *Barnum & Bailey's Circus*. He was the first to roll out large-scale advertising campaigns.

These days circus performances are announced in advance in the programme schedules of festivals and cultural centres. Besides posters, the eye-catching circus vehicle is another classic advertising tool. *Roll up! Roll up!*



On the road with a circus tent

In the first half of the 20th century Belgian circuses travelled mainly with a spiegeltent (Mirror tent). These had wooden sides and a canvas roof, and around the entrance there was usually a facade with painted scenes or sculptures. Some facades also had a stage, and here the circus artists would perform a 'parade', a glimpse of the show intended to entice people to attend. Inside the tent the ring was lined with sand and sawdust. Bleachers surrounded the ring, with the orchestra situated above the entrance. Setting up such a big tent was physically demanding work and took two days.

From the 1940s on more and more Belgian circuses have travelled with a chapiteau, or big top. This is also labour-intensive to set up but because it is faster, a circus can ramp up its touring schedule as well as offering more seating space. A big top consists fully of canvas set up around a number of poles. Smaller circuses have a tent with two poles, while larger ones have one with four poles arranged in a row or a square. Wagons set up around the entrance to the tent serve as ticket office, candy shop or toilet facility. The animal wagons are placed behind the tent.



Florimonds

Digital photo album

Florimond, Henri and Louis Vercammen were three brothers from Brussels. Starting in 1910 they appeared as the Florimonds, performing tightrope and balancing acts. Bertha joined the group when she married Florimond, and together they all toured Europe and North and South America as the 'Four Florimonds', playing in Vaudeville theatres on the east and west coasts.

On 1 April 1914 they arrived in New York as the 'Five Florimonds', having gained another member when Rosa married Henri. Bertha had her camera with her, and later pasted her pictures in a photo album along with her notes.

Swipe through the photo album and follow the route that the Florimonds took in 1914, which spanned two seasons with the *Ringling Brothers Circus* and three months in Cuba with *Circo Pubillones*.

CIRCUS ON THE ROAD
11.07.2020 – 31.08.2021



Polly Bentos

Digital timeline

Scroll through the timeline and discover the exciting life of circus artist Polly Bentos, illustrated with photos, posters, quotes and video. The timeline was created by Gwendolien Sabbe, based on her historical research project 'Belgian circus artists in America (1900-1940)'. See all of her stories at www.circusnomads.com and on Facebook and Instagram at 'Circus Nomads'.



Danny Vrijzen

Digital timeline

Acrobat Danny Vrijzen graduated from the *Ecole Supérieure des Arts du Cirque* (ESAC) in Brussels in 2011. His specialism is bascule, a type of teeterboard. After a few years performing with Maza Loco, Trio DAC and Balagans he was spotted by Cirque du Soleil, going on to tour with them for over five years – in 33 cities and 15 countries – in their show Amaluna. In July 2020 Cirque du Soleil declared bankruptcy and was forced to fire all of its artists, including Danny. He is currently working with a few other artists to develop a new act to tour independently.

Scroll through the timeline on the tablet to see quotes and social media posts as well as photos and video showing how Danny Vrijzen became a top international circus artist. Find out what the touring life involves both in the ring and behind the scenes, and see what Danny is doing now that 2020 has kept him in his home country. This timeline was created by Gwendolien Sabbe, whose focus is on contemporary circus artists and their life on the road. See all of her stories at www.circusnomads.com and on Facebook and Instagram at 'Circus Nomads'.



'Avec le cirque au Congo belge', 1952

(With the circus in Belgian Congo, 1952)

The Belgian filmmaker Pierre Levie shot this film at the request of Maurice Huisman. As the director of the *Centre belge des échanges culturels internationaux*, Huisman was part of an initiative to send circus De Jonghe to what was then Belgian Congo. The film records the circus's first tour of the colony from May to September 1952, focusing on the enormous scale of the project. Footage shows an impressive convoy of trucks driving through the bush, the construction and dismantling of the ring and seating and the successful shows.

The film also highlights the great enthusiasm with which the circus was received by local people, who crowded around whenever the artists from circus De Jonghe paraded through the streets. These crowds consisted of Congolese, including plenty of school-age children, as well as Belgian families. The Belgians and the Congolese sat separately, with white Belgians filling the front rows. The film does not focus on segregation, which was the norm in Congo in 1952, but rather on the response of the Congolese audiences to the shows as they admired the skills of the circus artists in the ring. A Congolese clown duo also performed during the show – the only African artists to take part.

In this film the exuberance of the circus is central: everyone looks happy. The film promotes an image of Congo as a model colony to which Belgium has brought enlightened civilization, and it is thus an element in a broader, deliberate colonial strategy. To this end, it shows representatives of the colonial government attending a circus performance in Leopoldville and approving what they see.



Circus De Jonghe tours Belgian Congo (1952-1959)

The De Jonghe circus family was a well-known phenomenon in the first half of the 20th century. After years of success this circus fell on hard times in the 1950s, a situation that prompted the four De Jonghe brothers to seek out a new challenge. In 1952 they took their circus to the Belgian colony for the first time, with a few family members preparing things on the spot. They arranged dates and locations for performances along a 3,000km route, recruiting local musicians, maintenance personnel and drivers. The bleachers, ring, trucks, props, animals and artists set off by boat from Antwerp, docking three weeks later at the port of Matadi, from where the circus caravan made its way to Leopoldville. The circus made a total of 30 stops, ending the tour in Elisabethville.

The circus travelled with a large number of vehicles and two diesel motors to provide electric lighting and run the refrigerators. During its first journey the circus was surprised by the rainy season, which caused problems by rendering some roads impassable. The heat was also a challenge, limiting performances to evenings and the open air. While there was no shortage of audiences, the travelling was difficult and exhausting.

Circus De Jonghe toured Belgian Congo a total of seven times, presenting a new programme each season and bringing in different artists and animals from Europe. From posters, it is clear that Congolese artists were barely represented in its programmes. Attention was focused mainly on acts involving animals such as apes, an elephant and a crocodile. The Congolese were represented as stereotype figures. Victor De Jonghe made a few more tours through Belgium in the 1960s with his own Cirque Congo, a reference to his earlier tours in the former colony.



A different classroom every week

Constant touring had a major impact on the educations of circus children. Some temporarily attended local schools in every town or city where the circus set up its tent, which meant that some children found themselves at a new school virtually every week. In a notebook belonging to Gaston Minnaert junior, the director of each school he attended signed a confirmation of attendance. Recalling this in 2004 Gaston said, "Every week I went to a different school. All the children in the class looked forward to the circus, and the schoolwork was organized with it in mind. Each week I had to write an essay about the circus." Bill Kartoum also remembers being asked to perform tricks in the classroom to amuse the other children – and promote the circus at the same time. This experience is less common today, when home schooling offers a range of new possibilities.



Advertising in and around the circus tent

Hanging up posters was one of the tasks of circus staff. Besides posters around town, advertising at the entrance to the circus tent itself was also important. Programmes were made to look as exciting as possible in the hope of enticing people to buy tickets. Framed photos of the circus artists were also displayed. Many artists organized their own publicity photos and posters, taking them along to the circus or the theatre where they performed.

Some circuses had their own particular strategies for attracting audiences, adapting their programmes according to the location. The popular clowns of Circus Minnaert drew huge crowds through the 1950s. Wherever they went the clown duo would address people in the local dialect, incorporating local gossip into their act. They drew their inspiration from conversations in local cafés and from local tradesmen. When a circus stayed at one spot for a week or more, audiences sometimes returned several times, since the Minnaert clowns had something new in store every day.



Birth rituals in the lion cage

Important traditions and rituals were celebrated in the circus ring and even in the animal enclosures. The photo albums of many circus families illustrate the important role that animals played at key moments such as baptisms. In the 1950s, the son of lion tamer Manzano was baptized by the circus chaplain in the presence of lioness Lisa, as well as his godfather Gustaaf Demuynck and godmother Mariette De Coninck. Jim Roose of circus Alex Libot also had his child baptized in the lion cage in 1949. Babe in arms, the lion tamer gives his lion the 'kiss of death'.



Solidarity

A travelling circus company is a tight network of people, and solidarity is deeply important. This not only creates a convivial atmosphere, but also ensures support and protection in the face of the accidents and disasters that are part of the adventurous circus life. For example, when Circus Demuynck was confronted with a flood in Eupen in 1952, facing major water damage, its colleagues provided the support it needed to survive and the circus community rallied to provide funds. A more recent example of this support is the WhatsApp group *Panne et dépannage*, organized by Collectif Malunés to provide first aid for companies that encounter problems on the road.