Keynote: connecting through content

David Carlin, Associate Professor – RMIT University on behalf of Circus Oz

Introduction

David Carlin is a writer and producer and currently Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communications at RMIT University, in Melbourne. He's worked extensively with Circus Oz including directing the Circus Oz show in Australia and on Broadway. He was the initiator and project leader of the Circus Oz Living Archive. He is going to talk about that today and give us some lessons about how historic creative assets that our organisations hold can be repurposed and help us develop both arts and audiences.

David Carlin

This is a story about a medium-sized performing arts company in Australia and how this company called Circus Oz has been working with us at RMIT University to develop a digital platform which is changing not only the company's operational business and artistic practices but its relationship with and conception of its audiences. This platform that we call the *Living Archive* uses digital technologies to enable an arts company to understand itself and its history in new ways and to tell its story in new ways. Crucially, it also invites others outside the company to share and contribute to that story and to those new understandings of the company and the art form.

The *Living Archive* is a response to a specific problem; how can arts organisations, particularly in the performing arts, which have amassed over the years large collections of video material documenting their work, make best use of this material in the digital age? How can they bring this video material to life as digital assets and use them both to further develop and enhance the artistic repertoire of their company and to engage with communities and audiences all around the world?

But, the story of the *Living Archive* and its development is also relevant to those of you without these old videos for two reasons: first, because increasingly all arts organisations are becoming digital media producers, and second because I believe that this model of the creative research

partnership and its methods and way of thinking are of great value for any arts company seeking to take advantage of the power of digital technologies. So today I want to share with you four of the key things that we've learnt that are important to the success of a project such as this. Along the way I'll take you on a quick tour of the *Living Archive* explaining how it works and what it does for Circus Oz before talking more generally about the impact of the project both for Circus Oz and beyond the company.

Before I start, I'll just explain a bit about who I am and how I became to be the lead of this *Living Archive* project. As Tim mentioned, I've come to academia with twenty years' of experience as a writer and director working in the arts particularly in theatre and film. I'm co-director of a research group at RMIT which is called the *Non Fiction Lab*. One of the things the *Non Fiction Lab* is particularly interested in is digital archives and how they offer new ways of thinking about and connecting with our shared cultural and social histories, our collective memories. My professional connection with Circus Oz goes back to 1997 when they first employed me, not as the Strong Man as you might have assumed (!), but as the director of their new show. I've done lots of other things with them since then; shot videos, made promos and show programmes. But I've been a fan of theirs even longer since I was 17 years old and I saw them in a little tent on the Swan River in Perth. I loved their unique combination of subversion, wit and silliness.

Allow yourself to ask; *what if …?*

The first thing we've learned; start by allowing yourself to ask: *what if…?* I was amazed to see there's a beautiful, huge poem on the side of a building here in Sheffield on the way up from the train station by Andrew Motion, calling upon us to speculate 'what if…?' What I mean by this is; how important it is to take the time to think through and articulate the precise nature of the problem you're addressing so that you can then turn it around into a potential opportunity. And how important too, that the vision for the project, its aims, grow directly out of the vision and values of your company. In this case – Circus Oz. The problem that we've been aiming to solve;

How to design a 'living archive' that:

  i)   Becomes a shared online space for creative dialogue
  ii) Preserves and makes accessible the archival video collection
  iii) Can be sustainably managed by Circus Oz into the future
  iv) Can be a model for other arts organisations

So, thinking about vision and values; who and what is Circus Oz? Circus Oz was founded as a collective in 1978, born out of the radical theatre movements of the1970s – strong women, graceful men – irreverent, anarchic and inclusive.

Circus Oz has always aimed to project a distinctly Australian voice combining serious circus skills, humour and original live music but only 'human animals'. Circus Oz was one of the international founders of contemporary circus and has been influential on the art form worldwide including here in the UK. Circus Oz has a deep history and a unique organisational culture.

Founded as a collective in 1978
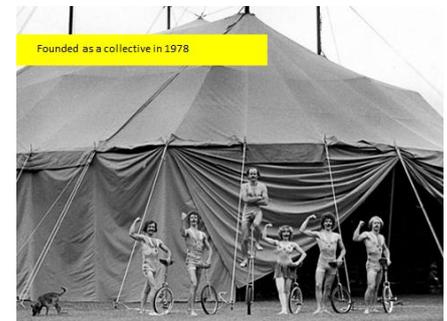
Something like 1,000 performers and technicians have worked with the company since it started. They've now toured to 26 countries across five continents and played to over 3 million people. In Australia they now have three generations of fans – people who remembered going to the Circus as a child are now bringing their own kids. I would say that, like many arts companies, in their different ways, like yours no doubt, Circus Oz has made and continues to make an important contribution to our culture more generally. The story of this company is very rich and is worth telling and listening to. But, like any arts company they have very limited resources including, needless to say, a very limited marketing budget. Circus Oz's creative philosophy is 'a celebration of multi-skilled team work'. The Circus Oz show is an expression of all the people who make it. Every night of every show they proudly say is different – created live as a shared experience with each audience whether it be on Broadway or in an outback community. As it happens, the start of this company coincided with the advent of easily available video technology so all the way along Circus Oz's history has been captured on video. The problem is that the videos have gradually been disintegrating. But, 'what if?' we asked, what if these videos could be put into a networked digital environment where they could be not only preserved from rotting away but also made accessible and put to work to help remember, collaboratively develop and share the living history of this company?

Remembering or sharing its history, recent or long ago, could be a powerful way for Circus Oz to connect with people, from those close by who already know and love the Circus to the far-flung, curious audiences it tours to in different corners of the globe, to those who've never come across it before but who might stumble upon it online. What if we could make, not just a digital archive, but a living archive that became an on-going, sustainable part of Circus Oz's operation? Not an archive of the circus but *for* the circus, owned and operated by the circus, performed by the circus, its community and audiences. A constantly developing archive that combined the machine

memories of the video recordings with human memories, human stories, behind-the-scene stories from within the circus and also the stories from any one past or future audience member who wanted to contribute. Remembering the circus's history, last week's show or the act they invented thirty years ago is also essential for the artistic development and the operations of the company. In circus, there's no script or score or standard notation. Video is an essential tool for show creation to see what has worked before creatively and technically so as to inspire new ideas from old. And since circus as an art form is made up of a set of discrete acts, a set of micro-narratives, as opposed to an over-arching story like in theatre, what if we could make a living archive in which people inside the circus or outside and for different purposes; fun or study, or artistic development, could collect different acts, reassemble shows, play and imagine different versions or highlight different aspects of this circus and all of these actions too, could become part of the shared history of this company. What if, in other words, you could take the core values of your company and make a living archive that truly reflects them and enables the company to further prosper.

Build a multi-skilled team which can both; *think and make*

This project fits into a relatively new area of research called 'digital humanities'. In digital humanities we discover new knowledge, not by doing surveys or sitting in our studies writing books, valuable although these things are, but by making things. In this case, working with Circus Oz on building and testing the prototypes for the *Living Archive* and sorting out all of the associated problems; digitisation, intellectual property issues, software design, meta data, video storage etc. The really exciting thing, the great beauty of this project is that it brings together people from such diverse backgrounds to work together in the context of the arts. On our project team we have; interaction designers, computer scientists, digital media experts, and performance studies scholars. All of whom provide valuable expertise and perspectives. We have many animated meetings and workshops. This creative research partnership has allowed us to continually question exactly what we are doing and why and for Circus Oz to question their own assumptions and existing practices whether it be in the artistic department, the marketing department, or wherever.

We've designed and made three prototypes of the *Living Archive* over the past eighteen months, each building on the previous one. We have two very talented PhD students – one, an interaction designer and the other a computer scientist – who've done most of the design and programming work. We soft-launched the public, beta version in February (2013).

This is what the public *Living Archive* looks like now: it contains 878 videos with 1,014 hours of footage – mostly performances but also promos, TVCs, documentaries, TV appearances and back-stage footage. Of this, the last time I looked, 44 videos had been released to the public with hundreds more in the pipeline.

You can explore it yourself: www.circusoz.com/living-archive.html and we'd love you to let us know what you think as we develop and improve it. The whole point of the way that it is made is that it is quite easy for us to add new functions and to radically change the look of it.

One scenario of how it works might be, imagine you are the Circus Oz artistic director and you are working with a performer on developing a new juggling act. You would go online to the *Living Archive* website, you would search on the 'acts' page for 'juggling' and you would look for 'other juggling' where you find that there are two acts currently existing. At this point, David played one of the videos of an act from a small Circus Oz show that was called the *Blue Show*. That particular act was only performed live three times and had been virtually forgotten but now, through the *Living Archive* has been rediscovered and can be shared with new audiences online.

While we're watching that we can create a 'collection', searching for and adding items, editing, reassembling, re-arranging and adding notes and comments. We can choose whether to make it public or private and then we can 'play' our collection as our own remix of the circus. We can also share it within the archive or on social media platforms.

Already, former performers and audience members have started to make collections.

Long-time costume designer;
Laurel Frank, has made a
collection called 'Fabulous Foam
Follies' about how she has used
foam padding over the years to
make weird and wonderful
costumes. Circus Oz Marketing
and Communications Coordinator
who is quite new in post; Erica
Heller- Wagner, has gone into the
archive and discovered a history
of Circus Oz that she's never
seen or even knew about.

She's curated a collection of 'group juggling acts' which she can feature on the archive's home page or push out to the company's 10,000 mates. An audience member who describes himself as 'a fan since 1998' has made his own collection of Circus Oz acts which he calls 'cool stuff'.

People can interact with the archive in the way that we've become accustomed to through social media online. You can 'love' or 'favourite' acts, you can add your own tags to acts to describe them in any way you like. These user-generated tags in turn become part of the archive and are searchable by others. You can also add 'stories' which we are deliberately calling stories rather than 'comments' to encourage something different to the often banal YouTube-style comments. As distinct from social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, on which the comments functions are designed to be ephemeral, and past comments soon get lost in the new activities, here the stories from audiences and performers alike, become part of the archive – part of the fabric of the living, shared history of this company. I find the behind-the-scenes stories in the arts fascinating and whether they are from performers, curators, visual artists or audience members, this to me is how you can deploy the rich content of video to generate more rich content from the users. We currently have two prompts you can choose from to respond to with your story; 'I was there and …' or 'I wasn't there but …' in order to link everything back to the original performance events. The *Living Archive* is designed by the same tools which will also allow Circus Oz director, performer or technician to help develop their show, can also be used by circus students and scholars and to engage audiences and the broader community.

Embrace the logic of the digital: *process, not product*

It's in the nature of digital technologies that nothing is ever definitively finished or stable. Everything is constantly being prototyped and tested and improved. We have learned how important this is to remember when you are working on digital innovation and I think for Circus Oz this has been both exciting and quite a big shift in thinking. What we are designing and building here with the *Living Archive* is not a product in terms of being a fixed thing or a place like an archive room. What we are actually designing and building is a robust platform for an on-going performance by the company itself and by its audiences – a 'side show' running alongside and supporting the live performances that remain the main event. We are developing a digital platform that enables other people to do things. As well as designing ways in which people can interact with the archive it has been crucial to design ways in which the circus itself can maintain and develop the archive. For example, we've developed a whole backstage administration area to the archive so that the circus staff themselves can, for instance, upload new videos potentially from anywhere in the world on tour as they shoot new performances. Also using this interface they can divide these videos into acts – they can put in a whole video show and divide it into the acts that make up the show so they can be searched for and looked at separately. Basic meta data can also be added such as venue and date, act names, act types and the names of performers so that all of this becomes searchable in the database.

The circus can also decide which of the videos the company is ready to make public and which videos should remain for the moment only available internally for artistic development purposes. This is the less glamorous side of the archive but is crucial to allow it to be sustainable. With digital, the only constant is change so we're bringing new skills and knowledge into Circus Oz to equip it to be a leader in thinking about digital opportunities in new ways – harnessing what is sometimes called 'design thinking' or 'strategic design' – designing for the future.

Build buy-in from the *inside out*

Finally, the fourth thing that we've learnt that I hope might be helpful in your own context; how important it is in this sort of project to bring your internal community with you as you develop such a platform. If you are an arts organisation wanting to engage the wider community in telling and sharing the bigger picture of your story above and beyond your latest show or exhibition, you first need to engage those closest to you who have most at stake in the story. If our *Living Archive* is embraced by the performers, ex performers and other staff who've made the show over 35 years and continue to make it, if they feel it's their story rather than their performances being misappropriated and misused on the internet, then not only can we resolve moral issues and

important rights but we can encourage those people to contribute their stories and other information which will be of interest to broader audiences. To do this, we conducted a series of workshops throughout the development of the *Living Archive* with performers and the wider Circus Oz community, past and present. These workshops have been opportunities for debate, reflection, celebration and contribution.

The impact of this project can already be seen even though it is really only the very beginning for Circus Oz. They now have their entire performance history at their fingertips which they are starting to draw upon in a myriad of ways – for technical and touring knowledge, to create courses for education programmes and for use in the rehearsal room and on tour. It is changing their rehearsal process, their administrative processes and their marketing strategies. It has opened up the possibility to create deeper and richer relationships with audiences who can now feed back into the company their own creative ideas about its work – by collecting and mixing together their favourite acts, their own 'best of' Circus Oz. This may over time change the nature of the show itself and the art form. Circus Oz has talked about it as a giant mirror held up to themselves in which, in a totally new way, they can view, understand and share their past, their current techniques and their audiences' experiences of the company. In the next six months we are looking at 'productisation' – working with a commercial partner to make available a 'vanilla' version of the *Living Archive* platform for adoption and use by other arts and cultural organisations – any organisation that wants to preserve and work with video online in a sophisticated way within their own specific context. If anyone is interested … I'd like to talk to you. This is neither our core business nor that of Circus Oz but ideally it will provide Circus Oz with on-going licensing income to help underwrite the continued experimental development of their own *Living Archive*. For instance, starting to link in other materials such as posters and costume designs, by proactively gathering more stories from performers and from audiences and many more ideas that we want to test and play with. I'm sure I don't have to convince any of you how much the arts contribute to the cultural fabric of our societies and what interesting stories we have to tell about what we do. Audiences are bombarded with messages in the digital age and I think, more than ever, we crave authentic stories beyond spin and hype. I believe that processes of innovation, such as the one that we're embarked upon, embracing the digital to help remember, collaboratively develop and share our living histories can offer all of us in the arts many opportunities.