

See you down the road: Episode 3: Léah Wolff & Others

Book Kennison: You're listening to the Circus Voices podcast, from circustalk.com. I'm Book Kennison.

Today's episode is going to be different. In the circus world we're facing an unprecedented crisis. Nearly all of us are without work, and even that problem could come to seem small in the weeks or months ahead. And although no one is completely safe from this virus, our thoughts are foremost with our elders and our friends and family members with compromised immune systems. It's for their sake we're staying home.

Zoë: That's right. Hi, I'm Zoë Kennison, co-producer for this series. Unfortunately, Book and I can't get together to work on this episode. I have asthma, so I'm staying home, but I just want to say, the response to our first two episodes has been great, and we look forward to bringing you more in this trying time.

Book: Hey Zoë.

Zoë: Hi Book.

Book: So today's episode has a theme: not working, as a circus artist. Being a circus artist involves training, research, creation, and performing for money. Out of all of those, performing for money is most synonymous with working. And for many of us, when we're not working is when we feel the most lost. Although, I have to say, like everything in circus you get better at it with practice.

Zoë: This episode has two parts. We've received audio snapshots from around the world from artists who are not working, because they're in quarantine, or their shows have been cancelled, or they're otherwise waiting, as we all are, to find out what happens next.

Book: That's coming in part two. But first: part one. Léah Wolff, on unemployment. We recorded this interview before the pandemic hit, but we thought it was still very relevant, since, as circus artists, we're all going through unemployment together right now.

Zoë: I was lucky enough to interview Léah while she was in Chicago this February. She's an amazing artist who specializes in aerial hoop and contemporary dance. She's worked for Seven Fingers, and Strut & Fret, and in this interview she talks about a topic she says is not openly discussed in our community—although, maybe that's starting to change.

Book: Here's Léah Wolff.

Léah Wolff: I haven't worked for the past six, almost seven months now, so...yeah, seven months. Yeah, still in it.

So I was on the show Bosch Dreams. All in all with Bosch Dreams I did two years. We all knew the show was coming to an end. We knew that they were going to close the show at the Montréal circus festival, so we knew it was coming to an end—there was no surprise there. But it was exciting, because we had never played in Montréal. The show had never played in Canada, I had never played the show close enough to home that my parents could come watch, so leading up to the show was exciting because we all had our eyes on Montréal, we all knew everyone was going to show up. There's something glorious about being the cast that closes a show, and that kind of settles it, and closes the book. But then there's kind of an emptiness because you don't know what's coming next, or what you're doing, and the show you were just on just closed and that's kind of it. So you're left kind of hanging. You're just kind of floating.

It's hard to be unemployed, because we do live contract-to-contract, and sometimes you go for a while without one, and you judge yourself, and it somehow affects your sense of self-worth, to be like, oh well, I don't have a contract...is that wrong? Is it because of me? People are always asking you *oh what are you doing now, what are you doing next, oh what's after that, what are you doing now what are you doing next?* There's no right answer. It's part of the business, and we all go through it, and we all do it, but there's something that feels like it's shameful, even though it's not, and something that feels like it's sad, even though it's not.

Because we are contract-based and because every contract has an end date, everyone's working to always line up the next thing, and so there is kind of a stigma of not having something lined up, or not working—*oh you didn't line up a contract, is that a reflection of how good of an artist you are? Or is it a reflection on if you're good at the hustle or not, or are you working hard enough or not?*

I think it's something that most people keep hidden. I don't think many people feel comfortable, and I know I don't feel comfortable, talking about it so openly, and definitely not with producers or directors. It's definitely something that you can talk about one-on-one with other circus artists, and that's what makes you realize, yes, everyone goes through it, or everyone has a hard time, or a lull in work.

You always feel like there's a little bit of judgement, from not anyone specific, but just like the circus world in general. And you always make yourself look like you're busy—and I think that's also, I guess, the beauty and the curse of social media, where you can post training videos, or like, old show photos, where you always look busy, you always look like you have something to do—the more you work the more people want to hire you, the busier you look the busier you get. So there is kind of a game in pretending that you're always busy, even though you might just be in your hometown training and working a 9-5 job to pay your rent. And a lot of us do it, and a lot of us go through it, but we all pretend we don't.

We do work contract-to-contract, so when you do have that break in work and you kind of fall back down, all of those doubts come back up. All of a sudden, even though you have been working and you have been making it, people are like *can you really live from that job? Can you really make it?* And it makes you doubt too, even though you have been, all of a sudden you're like, can I get back up, can I get another contract, am I going to get another contract?

After my contract was over, I went back to solo aerial hoop training. On the show I was doing duo hoop and Chinese pole mostly. It had been two years of touring that I hadn't done a solo aerial hoop act, which is my discipline, that's my specialty, that's where I feel the most free on stage, and I hadn't done a solo act in just about two years.

I think unemployment is a chance for renewal, and I think the time it takes to create a new act, or to find something new to inspire yourself is a very special time. I know I just went through it the past six months, and there were lots of highs and lows; the lows being the moments you compare yourself to others, or you're like, *am I going to find another job?* But I have realized that if I didn't have this time, I wouldn't have created a new solo act, I wouldn't have had the chance to spend time in Montréal with my boyfriend, I wouldn't have had time to see my family, I wouldn't have had time to reach out to new hoop coaches, and people I had been wanting to work with for years that helped me with my act. It never would have been possible if I had been *go go go* and found a new job, and I don't know what that job would have been, or if I even would have had a solo act to do, or if I would have gone on to do something else.

I have finally lined something up. I will be going back to a contract I've done before, on a cruise ship. And it's a lot of fun. It's probably the most fun I've ever had on stage. Now I see a light at the end of the tunnel. It's been kind of a blessing in disguise, to have that time, and sometimes the most beautiful things we create come from a time of hardship, or sadness, or lows; we create our best work because we have the time, or we're in a state of mind that's pushing us to make new things. It's hard to see the opportunity we have in the time off, or in the unemployment, and eventually you break into the space where you can take your time and be creative and use it as an opportunity.

Book: Thanks to Léah Wolff for talking to us. And now, messages from our circus family from around the world.

Kevin Beverley: So, this is Kevin Beverley, and I'm talking from Adelaide, Australia. And I'm a bit... stuck here. It's been a really weird last week and a half, because here in Australia, it's very behind on the amount of cases. I've been seeing what's happening in Europe and America through friends, social media; meanwhile I'm attending one of the biggest fringe festivals in the world, seeing shows every night, partying every night; it's a very weird social feeling. Like, guilty almost, but then, you know, I keep checking the news and Australia wasn't ever going above 200 cases. And then everything kind of changed over the last couple of days. The government, the Australian government just announced no gatherings over 100 people. I'm working with the Australian company Gravity And Other Myths, and our two-month Australian tour was cancelled this morning. Like many, many others in our industry, we are without a job, and I'm also stuck in a position where—do I do I fly home to Chicago and move in back in with my father, who is, you know, up there, almost 70 years old—do I risk infecting him, or do I stay here in Adelaide and wait it out? It's a hard decision, because I feel pretty isolated and anxious. Which I'm sure a lot of people are feeling; it's a really weird time.

Book: This one is from Nina Gershy.

Nina Gershy: I'm the business manager, as well as a performer, for Cirque Us, which is a small, New England-based circus company. We decided to embark on a new show called Ragtag. Got everything together, organized a cast, got a director. Then the news came out. Meanwhile, this entire cast has been in Lake Placid, building this show, pouring their hearts and souls into it—we've been working 12-hour days, and just like that we had to announce that the tour was cancelled. And it affects me as a performer, since I'm in the show, and affects me as the business manager because now, without ticket sales, we have limited resources for paying artists, and that's our objective right now, is how we can hand artists a check. It's really scary because I'm looking at a future where I'm probably not gonna have work for three months and I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

Eric Allen: I'm Eric Allen. I've been performing on a cruise ship in the Canary Islands for the past three and half months. My contract is supposed to be over in two weeks, but now I don't know if any of us will be able to leave at that time. We're currently docked in Tenerife, but not sure if we're allowed to get off the ship. All the passengers are being sent home, so it'll just be crew for however long this takes. That being said, we are some of the lucky ones. We have food, and friends, and as long as we're on the ship, we will still get paid. Best case scenario, we spend the next two weeks in Tenerife without passengers, and doing some shows for the crew, worst case we get quarantined, and can't get off the ship, and we can't fly home. But things are fine now and we'll see what happens.

Danielle Saulnier: My name's Danielle, I'm from Canada. I'm currently in Germany, came here contracted to work for GOP on the show *Bang Bang*. I arrived last week to do rehearsals for the premiere this past Thursday. We worked all the way up until Saturday, until they told us our shows were gonna be cancelled. So I'm kind of stuck in limbo with that, and also hearing the Canadian government telling all Canadian travelers to come home immediately. I'm kind of sitting here like, I don't really know what to do, I'm out of income, I don't know for how long, I don't know whether to stay, I don't know how long this is going to last, or whether to find a way home, and I don't know if it's going to be too late for me to go home if there's no more commercial flights. Weighing my options, seeing if there's an opportunity to be rescued? I really don't know what's going on. Yeah. Stay safe everyone.

Saul Meishar: My name is Saul Mesihar, I am a circus-and-theatre artist based in Bristol, UK and NYC, USA. Right now I'm in Bristol; I was supposed to do a few performances here this month with my show *The Escape Act*. And those have all been cancelled. My show is a pretty big project; it's based on a true story of a Jewish circus family that survived the Holocaust hiding in a German circus; so the project has shows, and a lot of educational content around it. Basically everything's been cancelled through at least May; my shows in the UK, a tour; I was supposed to take the show and the lecture to Israel in April, which is the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Day; this has been cancelled, obviously. I'm also a bit worried because I was hoping to be able to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with an indoor show for the very first time ever, and we got offered a slot with the producer I wanted, at the venue I wanted, and

it's not entirely certain if artists that have already made deposits, or paid their venues the guarantees would be refunded if the festival had to be cancelled this year. And so, taking the risk that if the festival gets cancelled this year, there's a fair chance that a lot of my money would be going down the drain, never to be seen again, at a time when money is already pretty tight and uncertain. So yeah, it's a very strange time to be an artist, and a freelancer, a person who thrives on work that requires other people with them in the room, usually touching. Sending everybody well wishes.

Léah Wolff: Hi, my name is Léah Wolff, and I am currently stuck on a cruise ship off the coast of Australia. On March 14th, the Australian government decided to put a ban on cruise ships for 30 days, and so our cruise line, in compliance with that, has ceased operations on all of their ships for 30 days. That leaves us in a weird kind of limbo.

Since March 14th we've come back to Sydney, let off all the passengers, and now it's only crew on board at this point; no one's allowed on, no one's allowed off. There's no passengers, so all work is suspended except for, obviously, the cooks, the cleaning staff; but all the entertainment department, the dancers, the circus artists, we're all in a weird limbo as we wait to see what happens. We've been in touch with the company, there was tons of back-and-forth about what they're doing with us—are they going to send us home? Are they going to keep us here? Why are we being kept here? What is going on? And after about a week of back-and-forth, and very vague answers, and them having no idea, it's become clear that they do intend to just keep us on board for the next 30 days.

It's a very weird place to be and it leaves you feeling weird, because it does feel kind of like prison; we are trapped, quote-unquote; the only way we're allowed to leave (because they legally can't hold us here)—the only way we're allowed to leave is by resigning, signing a paper that says we resign at will and then flying ourselves home at our own cost. The company will not be sending us home. A lot of the circus artists in my show have taken that decision and have flown home. I have decided it's most logical for me, I would be most productive in my self-quarantining here rather than at home, but it does leave me feeling very anxious and uneasy; I don't like the feeling of being trapped onboard, even though of course I have access to the gym, I have access to the rest of the ship, I can walk around, I have liberties in that sense, but we're not allowed off. We are docked in Sydney now, we can see the city, but we're not allowed off and no one's allowed on, so we're trapped in this floating hotel, waiting to see what happens to us.

Book: Thank you to everyone who sent us a message. We wish you a safe journey home.

Zoë: If you'd like to share your story with the podcast, send us a voice memo at circusmemos@gmail.com. We'd love to hear your voice.

Book: *see u down the road* is produced by Zoë and I.

Our executive producer is CircusTalk. CircusTalk is committed to helping artists during this time of crisis. On their site they've started a Covid-19 page with resources for artists, up-to-date circus-related cancellations and postponements, and information about health in your region.

Visit circustalk.com and look for the Covid-19 response tab in red at the top of the page to use this feature. Lastly, CircusTalk is giving two free months of the pro feature to all members to get full access to employment, audition, and residency information. This feature will be coming soon, so stay tuned and use the promo code COVID19 (with no hyphen) to access the pro membership for free.

I'm Book kennison.

Zoë: And I'm Zoë Kennison

Book: We'll see you down the road