

# **Casting in the Circus and Variety Industry**

A short, qualitative research project

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# Team Acknowledgement

This document was researched and produced by CircusTalk in collaboration with Stacy Clark in 2021 and published in January 2022.

The project team included:

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- Alex Mecklenburg, Strategic Digital Tech Consultant



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# **1. Project Overview and Methodology**



As the rise of a new era in circus began after WWII, its business model also started to branch out from the traditional family structure. Despite the tremendous growth and development in the industry over the last 70 years, the casting process of today still resembles the family structure: an exclusive, “within our network” approach to casting.

CircusTalk’s first research effort, conducted before launching the platform's beta version in 2015, revealed that the current recruitment and employment selection process tends to present barriers and can produce feelings of inequality from the performers’ perspective. “Jobs are not always posted and announced publicly,” “We have to know someone who knows about a job opening,” “It is all about who you know,” “I have to be on 10-15 different Facebook groups to learn about some job opportunities.”

In response to these findings, in 2017 CircusTalk created and launched a platform with a vision to provide access to information and set the stage for a level playing field in the industry.



In this brief, qualitative research project, CircusTalk wanted to explore the casting process from the perspective of talent seekers and find out more about their methodology, tools and resources. The project focused on:

- exploring the employment and casting infrastructures in the circus and variety entertainment industry,
- exploring opportunities to innovate the process and make it more inclusive, and
- finding ways to make circus arts casting accessible to the broader markets of entertainment and performing arts.

The timing of this research coincides with our industry's hit by —and ongoing recovery from— the biggest setback in its history, the COVID-19 pandemic. This impactful event allows us to reimagine a structure that in recent years has demonstrated limited transformation and innovation.

We recognize that this piece of research only provides an entry point into a larger conversation. This narrative spotlights the shifts that are already happening within the circus industry (and indeed, in a digital world) and acknowledges that global social issues can and must contribute to casting processes innovation.



## **2. Project Setup**



The CircusTalk Casting Research Project 2021 was a qualitative piece of action research. We spoke to casting professionals who volunteered to participate in the project during the spring and summer of 2021. Our interviews were loosely structured expert interviews, listening deeply to our interviewees and their experiences.

We looked to cover a number of different vantage points across the circus and variety casting market, including casting experts with different needs and geographical backgrounds. We included into the research the perspective of casting professionals who operate inside and outside the circus and multidisciplinary performing arts, such as casting on Broadway, and for theater, film or television. Although we are aware that nonprofit presenters and programmers represent a distinctly different market within casting and programming for circus arts, we wanted to include both the not-for-profit and the for-profit sector in this research. Our sampling is indicative of, but does not represent, the complete range of views. While designing the interview subject representation, we endeavoured but did not fully succeed in bringing racial diversity into the research.

We did a thematic analysis to focus on patterns and consistencies, defining a pattern as something referenced by three or more different interviewees.





## **3. Interviewee Scheme**



# Involvement in the Casting Process

We interviewed 17 people who are decision-makers at different stages of the casting process.

## **RECRUIT - EVALUATE - RECOMMEND - HIRE**



50% of the interviewees participate in the entire casting process



50% of the interviewees  
participate in only the recruiting,  
evaluating, and recommending phases of  
the process



# Demographics

## Geography

27% Europe

61% North America

6% Australia

6% South America

## Art Form /Genre

44% contemporary circus

39% traditional circus

17% non-circus casting

## Industry Verticals

Cruise Line

Theme Park

Small, medium, and large scale company

TV, commercial

Theatrical

Presenting Organization

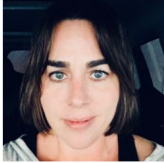
Agency

## Sector

25% non-profit

75% for-profit

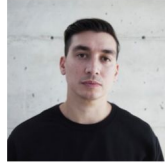
# Acknowledgement of interviewees who shared their experiences and expertise



Carolyn Blair, Client Success Manager with Talent Systems



Charlie Burrows, Founder of International Casting Agency



Francisco Cruz, Associate Artistic Director at Les 7 Digits



Chris Houston, Doctoral Fellow, Columbia University, Teachers College



Chris Lashua, Founder & Creative Director, Cirque Mechanics



Kristoff (Althoff Ramos Rodogell) Estefano, Talent Agent, Founder of The.I.A.A. Kristoff Estefano Agency



Louanne Madorma, Producer, Director, Casting, Founder of 4C Production Services/ Madorma Casting



Malú Ansaldo, Programming Director, Cultural Consultant, Programming and Producing



Matthew Jessner, Artistic Director and Producer



Roger Paul, Talent Agent, Founder of Roger Paul Inc.



Renee Massie, Casting Director & Talent Producer, America's Got Talent



Rob Tannion, Producer, Cluster Arts



Ryan Saab, Senior Vice President, Talent, Casting and recruitment, RWS Entertainment Group



Stephanie Jansen, Sr. Manager, Theatrical Production, Celebrity Cruises



Thomas Lenglar, Circus Programming at TOHU



Veneta Stefanova, Art Manager and Artistic Director, Stefani Art Stars Agency



Vicki Amedume, Artistic Director and CEO at Upswing, Associate Director at The New Vic, Staffordshire and The Albany, Deptford.



## **4. Findings**



# Executive Summary

Circus is undeniably an art form, yet it is not always recognized as such, and it is still not integrated fully into the broader performing arts. Barriers include circus' specialized technical acumen, higher production costs, and high safety standards.

As of 2021, circus casting is still primarily built on personal networks and referrals, and lacks the practice of formal casting breakdowns. This process perpetuates exclusivity in the system and does not support the creation of a level playing field within the industry.

Television, film, and theater casting has traditionally worked based on a structure that identifies clear roles for managers and agents in the process, and has been integrating independent online casting databases into the process for over two decades to broaden the selection and filtering process and render it more efficient and inclusive.

The need for multidisciplinary talent is growing in the performing arts, theater, film and television. While the research pointed out that circus has tremendous potential and momentum to grow within the performing arts, it also shed light on the fact that we as an industry have some work to do if we want to integrate the circus and variety arts into the “business” of performing arts.



# Structure

In interviews with casting professionals, we noted recurring observations, experiences, and themes.

We organised this presentation into five sections that reveals our learnings and creates a narrative about the trends, insights, and wisdom shared throughout these expert conversations.

1. TOOLS
2. TECHNOLOGY
3. MULTIDISCIPLINARY
4. INNOVATION IN CASTING
5. CIRCUS AND THE PERFORMING ARTS



## 4.1. TOOLS

Talent Seekers listed the following tools used during the casting process:

### **Personal network**

#1 tool for all interviewees. 100% of interviewees consider their personal network the biggest asset to their job, while they acknowledge that their personal network often keeps them moving and operating within the same circles.

### **Travel and IRL attendance at industry events**

Only 25% of interviewees consider traveling an important tool in casting. They pointed out that travel is more an element of their networking process and experience.

### **Personal/company database vs. outside/external database**

The value of any database was unanimously agreed to be its ability to streamline the casting process and help to speed up the initial selection process. 100% of interviewees use some sort of personal or company database. Only 40% of interviewees use external databases to support their work. This 40% referred primarily to acting databases and pointed out the lack of, and need for, an independent talent database for circus and multidisciplinary art.





### **Agency / casting specialist or casting service**

Not counting the agent participants, 50% of interviewees occasionally use agents and/or casting services.

Participants stated that the agency model mainly works for traditional circus productions or variety shows. In contemporary circus, the agency model doesn't work due to the more personalized and artistically driven, multidisciplinary nature of casting.

Participants pointed out that the agency model is changing. Agencies traditionally worked with a "plug and play model" wherein they received a request for a circus act, made a selection according to their client's need, and offered the artist a contract. In this model, agents had a "symbiotic relationship" with the clients/directors/producers, with primary goals of satisfying client needs and earning money. A few participants transparently noted that the occasional double commissioning practice by some small agencies or agents has led to a lack of trust towards agencies in the industry.

The traditional agency model has been challenged by social media opening up more direct connections between artists and employers.



In the new agency model, agents are not passive intermediaries anymore, but become producers themselves. The new agency model prioritizes exclusive representation (see sports representation), where the agent advocates for better artist recognition. In the majority of the current production practices, circus artists rarely have names; they are an anonymous member of the ensemble. Exclusive representation is not only beneficial for the artists, but it also provides a higher remuneration pattern for the agent.

### **Post a casting call, casting breakdown, or use of job boards**

Our research revealed that this is a tool that is not utilized to its fullest potential. A more thorough and consistent use of this tool would serve talent seekers and, most importantly, talent.



Fours years later, our research reveals that over 60% of talent seekers still use social media as their main form of reach when it comes to publicizing and posting a job or audition because “it’s free and easily accessible.” Talent seekers from the circus and variety arts vertical rarely use detailed, structured casting calls and casting breakdowns to announce their search process publicly. Casting calls and casting breakdowns are the building block of the film, television, and theater casting infrastructures. Comprehensive casting calls and casting breakdowns support transparent industry practice and level the playing field.

### **Referral and recommendation**

100% of interviewees use referrals and personal recommendations during the casting process. 90% heavily rely on these recommendations, and only 10% pointed out that they use recommendations “with a grain of salt.” The conversation around referrals and recommendations revealed that “soft skills” are as important in the hiring decision as technical skills and artistry. Talents' interpersonal, communication, listening, and collaboration skills; time management; and empathy scored high on talent seekers' final hiring decisions.



### **Social media as casting tool**

Social media was cited unanimously as the biggest innovation in the casting process in the past two decades. Participants also unanimously agreed that although social media is a good research tool, it is not sufficient on its own for the initial filtering process, due to its deceptive nature. Social media doesn't always represent the full context of the material being shared, nor can it address consistency and sustainability.



## 4.2. TECHNOLOGY

100% of interviewees stated that they were very comfortable with the use of technology in their work and 100% acknowledged that technology played a significant part in the casting process.

A few participants pointed out that the older generation of casting directors have a strong resistance to technology. Their lack of flexibility can slow down the process, but technology as tool and trend in casting is so strong that no one who wants to work in this field can resist adopting it.

In this conversation the word “technology” was introduced in a broader sense that includes the internet, social media, computer and software use, video recording and media storage..

Participants unanimously agreed that technology makes the casting process more efficient. Technology (the internet and social media) offers casting directors a broader reach and deepens their research; technology (data software) streamlines the workflow; and technology (messaging, communication software and apps) speeds up the referral and recommendations process and allows talent seekers to communicate directly with talent without an intermediary.



## 4.3. MULTIDISCIPLINARY

100% of interviewees cast multidisciplinary talent. About 50% of the productions they cast require multidisciplinary talent.

Participants pointed out that the need for multidisciplinary talent has grown in recent years across the wider performing arts. Theater productions (including Broadway) employ more specialty skill artists, and we see more circus disciplines appearing in the artistic vision of theatrical productions.

Multidisciplinary talent opens up creative opportunities for productions and the employment of these profiles translates to budgetary benefits. Multidisciplinary artists save production costs because their varied skill sets reduce the cast headcount.

Talent seekers pointed out that artists are still expected to have at least one strong (“outstanding”) skill even with a multidisciplinary search set.

Talent seekers revealed that multidisciplinary casting requires a deeper vetting process that usually takes longer than the single-focused casting process, requiring numerous and varied skill evaluations.



In response to the growing interest in multidisciplinary casting, interviewees mentioned the following trends:

- Developing multidisciplinary talent has to start in education. Does current circus education emphasize, nurture and value secondary skills?
- Multidisciplinary talent has a hunger to start their own companies. Hybrid performance may become more of a commodity as the industry moves away from the mega-production concept due to financial implications, sustainability, audience appetite, and other reasons.



## 4.4. INNOVATION IN CASTING

Besides the impact of technology and social media, participants mentioned that COVID-inspired online festivals, conferences, auditions, and self-tapes are the types of innovation that will most likely have staying power in the industry.

Talent seekers expressed a need to develop and cultivate the audition space in the manner that provides the most natural and least stressful environment for the talent.

Measuring the success of casting is still an untouched and unsolved area. Process effectiveness, process efficiency, resource productivity, ROI (return on investment) — these are all alienated business terms for the creative mind, but would it help to work in a system that provides quantifiable feedback for efficiency?





## 4.5. CIRCUS & THE PERFORMING ARTS

### **Does circus fit into the performing arts?**

All talent seekers agreed that circus is an art form and a part of the performing arts, and that it should be recognized as such in every country.

They pointed out that although circus has distinct hallmarks to offer the wider performing arts scene, circus arts are still not integrated enough internationally. Most of the talent seekers observed that this trend is changing and indicated that they see growth potential. Interviewees almost unanimously agreed that circus is going through a significant paradigm shift right now.

Participants emphasized that circus pushes boundaries more so than does any other performing art, and that, while traditional performing arts genres live strongly in their own categories, circus pulls many of them together. Talent seekers also pointed out a trend in other genres to incorporate more circus artists and elements. Circus is slowly becoming more mainstream.

One participant called circus the “wow” factor in many productions. As creators are under constant pressure to innovate, circus has great potential to provide the “new” element, or the “wow” factor in theatrical productions.



## Barriers to integration

When we asked talent seekers about the barriers that prevent or slow down circus' integration into the performing arts, the following ideas and talking points surfaced:

- Circus is a niche and still fairly **unknown art form** even for many performing arts creators. Producers and creators tend to work with ingredients that are familiar and that are within their comfort zone. Circus is not, due to the **specialized technical acumen** it requires.
- **Safety** was noted as an obvious barrier— a risk that productions are not always willing to take.
- Bringing the circus arts into productions may face **financial barriers**, as well. Circus shows represent extra costs, insurance, rigging, apparatuses, etc.
- **Audience development** for the circus arts still has a ways to go. Circus is not widely known and can be misunderstood by audiences. Accessibility on the recreational level is still low internationally, as compared to dance, music, or even theater: forms that are a part of art education curricula.
- **Circus education** still focuses predominantly on skills, and less on the holistic development of an artist who feels comfortable and is able to thrive in a performing arts setting. (See previous talking points under the “Multidisciplinary” section.)



## **We thank all the participants!**

CircusTalk will keep this conversation open and we invite you to reach out to us if you want to add to this shared knowledge.

We consider ourselves conduits for the international circus and variety industry to connect, build bridges, and initiate conversations. Together we can ensure the prosperity of the circus arts.

