



Fefe (Fredrik Deijfen), *Inside out*

A person in a white suit is performing a handstand against a blue background. The person's right hand is on the ground, and their legs are extended upwards. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of the suit.

Inside out

BY SUSANNA KUMLIEN
PHOTO © MATTIAS EDWALL

Beauty and art upheaving cultural and social conventions, operated and performed by extreme experts yet sensitive mortals, in an unwinding spiral of creativity and unfolding spirit. Welcome to the flowering culture of contemporary circus, Sweden's Cirkus Cirkör, now launching a world-tour of their latest production, *Inside out*.



Breathtaking moments of intense suspension, flamboyant trials of human capacity versus the laws of Gravity, equilibristic motion in time and space, combining physical ability with emotional expression – there is a lot to be said about a performance given by Cirkus Cirkör. The artists are co-creators and each performance has a different expression.

After two weeks this autumn at the Peacock Theatre in London, *Inside out* will move on to New York and France. There will be performances in Stockholm too at Annexet – a part of the Globe – at the end of December. There are requests from Asia, New Zealand and Australia and a US-tour is planned during 2010-11. Two separate sets with all the props and technical equipment will be shipped overseas.

Cirkus Cirkör conveys a story or a theme through traditional circus arts in their performances. In *Inside out*, the main character Saga finds her heart is outside her body. As the show continues, her heart grows in size. She learns to risk more than she really dares. She learns to trust her abilities.

The performance pursues a theme of fear and risk. “As the world becomes safer, it seems as if a lot of what we normally encounter in our society frightens us more and more,” writes psychiatrist David Eberhard in the programme leaflet. “There is always risk. At the opening, the main character fell and the light went off,” says Tilde Björfors, Cirkör’s artistic director. The origin of the idea came out of the previous production, *99 percent unknown*. “We were travelling within the body, performing artists representing and portraying cells and DNA. This in turn was a result of the inspiration I got from collaborating with scientific researchers. After doing *99 percent* the question arose: where is the soul actually situated? There are concepts from Antiquity and onwards about it, and it is something we will keep asking since science doesn’t have the answer.”

Linda Beijer, who liaises with Cirkör’s international contacts, has received many letters from people in the audience. They describe their backgrounds and say that after they’ve seen the show they have reached decisions on how to move on in their lives.

The music is composed and performed by Irya’s Playground, a band consisting of five musicians. Irya Gmeyner is one of the people who started Cirkus Cirkör way back in the mid-1990’s. In Swedish media – as innumerable articles show – Cirkus Cirkör is often associated with its leader Tilde Björfors. Not only is she the director of the touring production, she is also founder and director of Circus Cirkör and professor of New Circus at Sweden’s University College of Dance, currently pursuing a research project involving several academic disciplines such as Economic Organization, Pedagogy, Drama History and Theory and History of Ideas.

“She’s done an amazing job,” says photographer Mattias Edwall, whose innovative pictures have been a crucial asset for Cirkus Cirkör and a contributing factor towards its success. “When we first met in the mid-90’s, the whole office of Cirkus Cirkör was in a kitchen drawer in her flat. And look at it now!”

Growing with an almost explosive force out of that kitchen drawer, the Cirkus Cirkör of today involves a number of activities, key-words being ‘quality madness’ and ‘collective individualism’. There is an educational and an artistic branch, including a lab for artistic research and the production of commissioned contemporary circus, training for staff and leaders. All of this, as well as the foreign tours, emerging out of the constant desire to broaden audiences and reach out to people, children as well as senior executives. For the same reason, the *Inside out*-tour will not only involve regular performances but will also offer seminars and workshops, open for anyone to try their abilities in circus art.

Cirkus Cirkör is based in the suburb of Alby, some 20 kilometres southwest of central Stockholm. Here, you can breathe country air, and even smell the manure on a farm nearby. The offices are partially situated in hundred-year-old buildings, once used by Ericsson for experimental work and applied research. Which seems quite suitable, since everything around is boiling, the whole place stewing and simmering with creativity.

The municipality of Botkyrka has named the area Subtopia, and besides Cirkus Cirkör’s offices there are handicraft workshops, premises for various small businesses in the creative field, training facilities and subsidiary premises for the College of Dance and St Botvid’s Upper Secondary School. In co-operation with these institutions, Cirkus Cirkör offers a contemporary circus programme for teenagers as well as education at university level. Similar programmes can be found in Canada, France, New York and London and many of the students here are from abroad, just like the team of teachers. The contemporary circus community truly is an international crowd.

During my visit, lessons are being held in the Circus Hall, with students tumbling about in somersaults on the floor or hanging from trapezes. “Today is unusually quiet,” says Tilde Björfors, showing me around the various buildings, “normally there are more people.” Tilde has had her moments of doubt. In a leaflet produced by Cirkus Cirkör, she writes: “Yet another sleepless night. Entangled both in sheets and crucial problems such as sprained feet and too thin balloons. The protective line between vision and reality is being strained to its breaking point. For the last fifteen years I have been working day and night in the firm conviction that I am changing the world.....with what? People putting forks in their noses and swinging in sheets? How naive can you get? Who is really the illusionist?” At such moments, Tilde writes, she sits down in a corner of the Circus Hall, watching the artists in training, reflecting on their tireless efforts, enduring pain and blisters – why do they do it? “And then, from somewhere, a spark of passion is lit. As in my first meeting with the circus.”





“The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera” stated American photographer Dorothea Lange (1895–1965). This certainly applies to Mattias Edwall’s pictures. Ever since the mid-90’s, he has been portraying the artists of Cirkus Cirkör.

When Mattias Edwall together with his team in June, 1995, was arranging a photo session for a fashion label in Österlen – an attractive coastal area in the south-east of Sweden – he didn’t anticipate the consequences. They had been working hard from early morning, building up a set with poles and ropes. The rain was pouring down. He needed a jester, a fire-eater, and he got Janne Unestam. A circus artist he was later to portray many times over.

“Janne proved to be a real cool guy to work with. We were busy non-stop for almost 30 hours. He didn’t complain, wasn’t whining, and we got a great shot when the rain stopped just after sunset. It was in June, so the white night was short. This particular shot was later distributed as a postcard.”

Tilde Björfors saw the postcard on display in a stand, and decided to give Mattias a call. “She asked if I wanted to take photographs for their next performance. Neither of us knew that this was the beginning of a continuous working relationship. I think it was a surprise to everyone involved.”

The benefits were obvious on the part of Cirkus Cirkör. Thanks to Mattias’ photos, they immediately got attention. His pictures were an advantage in selling performances for the then relatively unknown circus group which was still trying to make its name. “For some reason we started out doing three different posters. And we went on doing it that way. So for every performance I had to do three good pictures – and taking three good photos is more difficult than taking only one.”

By the mid-1990’s, Mattias Edwall was already a well-established photographer, renowned for having raised fashion photography to a new, artistic level as well as for his excellent portraits. He had also been active in doing commercials and videos. How come he agreed to photograph circus artists for no money?

“It wasn’t a smart career move. My agent still refuses to distribute any circus pictures and I didn’t get paid at all in the beginning. But then again, you never know what you get out of things. I am curious. I like to try and do things I’ve never done before. I like to be a visitor in other people’s existence. What is it like to be a clown?”

Mattias describes the collaboration with Cirkus Cirkör as driven by inclination. “I can do it my way. To interpret and portray these artists is a privilege. They are so specialized and just like athletes, they work and

Mirja Jauhiainen and
Sanna Kopra, *Inside out*



train very hard for a brief performance in the limelight. For a still photo, there is nothing more than a second that can be used and I would ask the artist to do their act and pick the second we can use for the picture.”

He appreciates the creative aspects: “There is no ready script. When we’re working on the photo sessions, costumes and sets aren’t usually settled so this is done in the studio. The costumes I use for the photo can

appear in the show. We’ve invented some tricks during photo sessions as well. After I have seen the show, I often come up with new ideas, which lead to more photo sessions...”

Mattias Edwall’s Cirkus Cirkör pictures have been praised and exhibited a number of times, most recently at an outdoor exhibition in Stockholm last summer. □



Siri Hamari, *Inside out*