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Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals, Emotions and Circus. 2012. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

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Abstract

The circus had come to town, a small coastal backwater in 1960s South Africa. I was ecstatic but my beloved, visiting grandmother declined the invitation to attend, condemning the cruelty that was the daily experience of the animal performers. The circus, subsequently, was a glum event for me, the spectacle was tawdry, the trainers sadistic, the animals only victims. What a pity that my grandmother did not have access to Tait's analysis of circus, for it keeps in balance the tension between the glamour of the show and what goes on behind the scenes – the trainers and their different tactics, the performing big cats and elephants with their potential agency and complicity, and how impossible it is to generalise about circus.

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Reviewed by Wendy Woodward

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Peta Tait, with her expertise in performance studies, is well-placed to consider the embodied emotions of trainers and performers, as well as audiences, in an engrossing, substantial volume, which is part history of animal performances, part description of their acts, part cultural and historical analysis. Throughout Tait shows how emotions were 'theatricalised' (2) and how animals were made to perform emotions. The cover has Alfred Court with tiger Maouzi draped around his neck. It is a disturbing image, the animal always already fur, a trans-species embodied connection undermined by the submission of a large feline to human will. On the other hand, the tiger has made a choice, coerced though it could be, and the human has made himself (in this case) extraordinarily vulnerable to attack

The first chapter proffers a history of the development of circuses from travelling menageries and shows how the modes of training changed from cruel to more humane. A racy narrative of encounters between trainers and animal performers is situated contemporaneously, so we read of current debates on, for example, the fabrications of 'happy families' in performance. Distressingly however, some performance conventions with big cats demanded at

least the appearance of aggression so that the act seemed more dangerous, the trainer more heroic. Since the late twentieth century though, the emotional tone of the performances has reflected cross-species communication.

Tait brings in a riveting gender analysis of trainers, with male trainers ranging from the hyper-masculine to the exotic other. Although Tait could find no differences between the tactics of male and female trainers, the latter bucked convention merely by working with large numbers of big cats or elephants. My favourite was the diminutive Muriel Stark whose outfits covered her from neck to ankle in order to conceal scars got in the course of training. Yet these scars functioned for her as signs of ‘emotional closeness’ (117) with tigers, not as signs of (masculinised) power over her fellow performers. She was certain some tigers liked to perform and claimed “‘Tigers can talk if there’s a trained ear to hear their language’” (119). Tait shows more generally too that circus trainers thought of their animals as individuals with opinions and moods, long before the recognition of animal emotions was accepted culturally.

On the other hand, putting elephants into skirts in circus meant that their intelligence and dignity were undermined as they were humanised, a pervasive performance strategy in many acts – no matter that elephant ballets were choreographed by George Balanchine with music by Igor Stravinsky. Tait asks provocative, sometimes unanswerable questions: did animals enjoy performing? Did they perform for each other? Sometimes Tait wisely draws back from making a judgement across time, space and species; for example, she feels that ‘Human affection for elephants may or may not have been reciprocated’ even when some trainers believed adamantly in such mutuality. Her reading of trainer memoirs is cautious, sceptical of anecdotes exaggerated or even constructed to promote circus.

The chapter *Born Free Again* addresses why so much of the history of circus is located in the first half of the twentieth century: film, TV documentaries and shows challenged and supplanted the drama and spectacle of the circus, but trainers from circus have been centrally involved in training animals for screen. Tait shows how circus has served as the origin of representations of ‘wild’ animals on our screens as it segues into further animal performances. Tait also locates circus within broader purviews, one being the critiques of animal activists. While she gives such critiques their due, for example the outrage at ‘human-like’ movements

animals are trained to perform, Tait does not support facile solutions and is also sympathetic to the imperative for the mostly caged animals to be exercised.

My only criticism of this volume is that, in most chapters, often provocative and far-ranging theorising tends to come at the end, instead of being interspersed throughout; for example, the concluding discussion at the end of Chapter Five on ‘spectator discomfort’ and ‘feelings between species’. Yet the concluding Chapter Six, Sensing Emotion, rounds off many of the issues raised earlier as it engages with ‘sensory phenomenology’. Tait raises fascinating issues: the reciprocity of human and animal in the training process and how trainers themselves may be ‘bodily and sensorily trained’. The discussion of what actually makes animal performance appealing – and off-putting – on a visceral level is a high point, as is the book’s engagement with current debates about embodiment.

While Tait is critical of circus practices and acknowledges the violence and destructiveness of animal capture for early circuses, she always gives animal performers their due, representing their life histories where possible. For Tait ‘the sensory reception of circus offers insights into animal-human relations’. *Wild and dangerous performances* deftly shows this in so many ways, thus challenging the reader to shift from a sedimented criticism of circus as cruel and hence dismissible. This complex and potentially controversial transdisciplinary volume makes an impressive, substantial contribution to Animal Studies debate.

