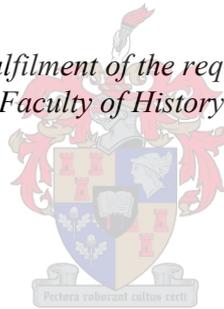


**Animals, acrobats and amusement: A
history of performance in South Africa's
circus industry, c.1882–1963.**

by
Mia Uys

*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Faculty of History at Stellenbosch University*



Supervisor: Professor Sandra S. Swart

March 2021

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Abstract

In South Africa, the circus industry became an important leisure industry in the 1800s and remained a popular form of entertainment until the turn of the twenty-first century, attracting diverse audiences across the country. Yet this industry is a neglected area of historical research. This thesis uses a rich variety of primary sources to debunk the myth of the ‘timeless circus act’, static and uniform. Instead, it demonstrates that this industry has gone through several transformations throughout the history of its existence. It analyses these changes, with particular focus on animal and gender history, by comparing performances between three circus companies that toured South Africa between 1882 and 1963: Fillis’s Circus, Pagel’s Circus and Boswell’s Circus. In doing so, this thesis explores the international influence on performances. This thesis argues that animals were integral to the circus industry, but their roles were mutable and affected by changes in human society. It traces their shifting role in performances across the companies, while also considering their shifting and subjective experiences in captivity. It contends that we can conceive of animals as ‘political performers’ and even as political agents with the ability to exert their agency and effect change. Throughout this thesis, the notion of ‘performing gender’ is analysed by comparing routines, as well as the various audience reactions to examine the ideals of masculinity and femininity reflected in society at the time. Overall, it argues that the significant changes that occurred within animal and gendered performances were a response to the shifting localised public mindsets and political climates, affected in turn by broader global forces.

Keywords: South Africa, history, circus, leisure, entertainment, animals, gender, performance

Opsomming

In Suid-Afrika was die sirkusbedryf vanaf die 1800s 'n gesogte vermaaksvorm en dit was nog steeds gewild tot in die begin van die 21ste eeu, met diverse gehore dwarsdeur die land. Ten spyte van die gewildheid van die sirkus is daar egter minimale geskiedkundige navorsing beskikbaar oor dié bedryf. Hierdie tesis maak gebruik van 'n wye verskeidenheid primêre bronne om die mite van 'n 'tydlose sirkusbedryf' as staties en eenvormig te weerlê. In plaas daarvan word daar in hierdie tesis uitgewys dat die sirkusbedryf verskeie veranderinge deur die jare van hul bestaan ondergaan het. Hierdie veranderinge word ontleed deur die vertonings van drie sirkusgroepe met mekaar te vergelyk, met 'n spesifieke fokus op die geskiedenis van die gebruik van sirkusdiere en die rol wat die geslag van sirkustoneelspelers gespeel het. Die drie sirkusgroepe wat deur Suid-Afrika getoer het tussen 1882 en 1963 was die Fillis-, Pagel- en Boswellsirkusgroepe. Hierdie tesis verken die invloed vanaf die buiteland op die vertonings van die sirkusgroepe. Dit word in hierdie tesis geargumenteer dat diere 'n integrale deel van die sirkus industrie gevorm het, maar hul rol was afhanklik van en beïnvloed deur veranderinge in die menslike samelewing. Die tesis ondersoek die veranderlike rol van diere in sirkusvertonings en oorweeg ook diere se verskuiwende en subjektiewe ondervinding tydens aanhouding en voer aan dat diere selfs beskou kan word as 'politieke toneelspelers' en agente van politieke verandering. Deurgaans in die tesis word die idee van 'geslag in toneelspel' ook ge-analiseer deur verskeie sirkustoertjies met mekaar te vergelyk asook die reaksie van gehore as maatstaf te gebruik om die persepsie en ideale van manlikheid en vroulikheid wat gedurende hierdie era geheers het, te openbaar. Oorsigtelik dui die tesis aan dat die aansienlike verandering in die gebruik van diere en die rol van geslag in sirkustonele te wyte was aan die verskuiwing in plaaslike sienings en oortuigings rakende die ideale man en vrou, asook die politieke klimaatsverandering wat op sy beurt weer beïnvloed was deur breër wêreldwye druk.

Sleutelwoorde/Terme: Suid Afrika, geskiedenis, sirkus, vermaak, diere, geslag, toneelspel.

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Abbreviations Used

ACP: Association of Circus Proprietors

BCE: Before the Common Era

CE: Common Era

PAPA: Performing Animals Protection Act

RSPCA: Royal Society for the Prevention for Cruelty to Animals

SPCA: Society for the Prevention for Cruelty to Animals

UK: United Kingdom

USA: United States of America

VOC: Vereenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie – The Dutch East India Company

ZAR: Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek – The South African Republic

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CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review and Methodology

Introduction

An outing to the circus in late nineteenth-century South Africa was an occasion of considerable excitement.¹ Attendees anticipated an evening of equestrian acts, acrobats, amusement and, sometimes, a thrilling wild animal performance.² In stark contrast to this, in recent decades, the news of a travelling circus has been met often with public disapproval, protest or private disdain. Animal rights activists often protest with placards that read, ‘Not born to perform’ or ‘Your fun, misery for animals’, and have sometimes even caused circuses to lay charges of intimidation and trespassing against those who threaten to set their lions and tigers free.³ In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, what was left of South Africa’s circus industry has come to a standstill.⁴ Now more than ever, there is a sense of urgency to capture the history of this declining industry, one that for two centuries won the hearts of audiences throughout southern Africa.

The history of the circus is often described lazily as something ‘lost in the mists of time’. The word ‘circus’ is derived from Latin, itself a metathesis (the swapping of syllables in a word) of the Homeric Greek word ‘κρίκος’ (*krikos*), meaning ‘circle’ or ‘ring’.⁵ Some argue that it can be traced back to the Roman arena where gladiatorial shows were held, but others, such as Anthony Hippisley Coxe, contend that there is little point in tracing it back to Greece or Rome, for the classical amphitheatres were designed for a wholly different style of entertainment.⁶ Today, the circus is understood to be a cultural institution or even, as argued by Paul Bouissac, ‘a language’ that communicates through codes like those used in society.⁷ Katie Lavers argues that trying to define the circus is a futile process, as it is an art that actively resists containment

¹ ‘South Africa’ per se did not exist in the nineteenth century; it was a term loosely used to encompass the various geographic regions (which would later become consolidated as the country South Africa in 1910).

² The term ‘animal’ is used throughout for non-human animals and ‘human’ to refer to human animals. The names of species follow common usage. Finally, ‘wild’ refers to non-domesticated animals.

³ S. Ndlazi. ‘Animal activists protest at circus,’ *Pretoria News*, 7 June 2015, p. 2.

⁴ The McLaren Circus (the only remaining traditional circus with animal acts in South Africa) was shut down temporarily on 19 March 2020 in line with the state regulations to combat the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic in South Africa. C. Cloete. ‘McLaren Circus bathed in red light to highlight plight of entertainment industry,’ *Vaal Weekblad*, 5 August 2020.

⁵ C. T. Lewis and C. Short. *A Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879) and H. G. Liddell and R. Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2015).

⁶ A. D. Hippisley Coxe. ‘The History of the Circus,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, (104), (4975), 1956, pp. 414–417.

⁷ P. Bouissac. *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach*, (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1976), pp. 5–8.

through its essential process of change.⁸ The making of the ‘modern-day circus’ as we know it goes back to England in the sixteenth century, where Philip Astley, an ex-army sergeant, discovered that by galloping in a circle while standing on a horse’s back, he could utilise the centrifugal force to keep him balanced upright. Through this, the dramatic demonstration of equestrian skill and human dominance was born, and with it, the secret of circus ring entertainment.⁹

The birth of the circus industry in South Africa proves harder to trace. According to George Speaight and Carel Birkby, the British-owned Bell’s Circus was the first to perform in South Africa, the earliest advertisement dating back to 19 April 1879 in Cape Town.¹⁰ However, Floris van der Merwe, a South African sports historian, argues that circuses had been performing and touring since the early 1800s. This thesis concurs that in colonial Africa, drawing on the metropolitan example, amusement based on parades of trained animals and human tricks have been presented since the second occupation of the Cape in 1806. Archival documentation reveals that the first event of this kind appears to date back to 1810, when an application was submitted to the Cape Town Council to present a ‘circus’.¹¹ There were several other circus companies that toured South Africa in the 1800s. An Italian circus, managed by ‘Signor Severo’ and ‘Signor Della Case’, toured during the mid-1840s, consisting of mainly tight-rope dancers and equestrian performances.¹² While the Italian circus managers parted ways in February 1848, Severo continued with that which he called the ‘African Circus’, which toured in Cape Town and Stellenbosch until October, when he left for Rio de Janeiro.¹³ In the 1850s, the ‘Olympic Circus’, run by Mr Fouraux, toured with gymnasts, clowns and equestrian performances.¹⁴ Later in 1854, ‘The Royal Standard Circus’ of England performed in South Africa with proprietor F. Honerlo, consisting of riders, valuator, pantomimists and tight-rope walkers.¹⁵ However, none of these circuses remained for an extended period of time in the country, nor did they incorporate a large variety of animals. This rendered them impractical

⁸ P. Tait and K. Lavers (eds). *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 2–3.

⁹ There is an extensive amount of historical research done on Astley and the birth of the modern circus. Arguably, what remain one of the earliest influential works is R. Croft-Cooke and P. Cotes. *Circus: A World History*, (London: Macmillan, 1976) and G. Speaight. *History of the Circus*, (London: Tantivy Press, 1980).

¹⁰ C. Birkby. *The Pagel Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), pp. 1–2.

¹¹ F. J. G. van der Merwe. *Frank Fillis: The story of a circus legend*, (Stellenbosch: FIG Publikasies, 2007), p. 73.

¹² ‘Italian Circus,’ *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, 11 November 1847, p. 3.

¹³ ‘African Circus at Stellenbosch,’ *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, 4 September 1848, p. 3. See also F. C. L. Bosman, *Drama en toneel in Suid-Afrika*, (Cape Town: J. Dusseau and Co, 1928), pp. 434–435.

¹⁴ ‘Olympic Circus,’ *The Graham’s Town Journal*, 16 February 1850, p. 4.

¹⁵ ‘Royal Standard Circus,’ *The Mercantile Advertiser*, 25 February 1854, p. 4.

candidates for an in-depth historical analysis, particularly when attempting to write animals into circus history – a key ambition of this thesis.

While the use of domesticated animals (such as dogs and horses) can be traced back to the days of Astley's circus performances, the rise of travelling wild animal menageries was established at the turn of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the appearance of zoological gardens across Europe and North America, which were mainly being used as animal exhibitions that charged an entrance fee.¹⁶ By the 1830s, these wild animals were incorporated into circus and theatre acts;¹⁷ by mid-century, these acts had expanded across North America; and finally, by the turn of the century, they had reached the British colonies of South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.¹⁸ In South Africa, the rise of travelling menageries can be traced to Bell's Circus, whose programme initially consisted of trapeze artists, clowns and equestrian performances by proprietor Richard Bell and his daughters, Emma and Rose.¹⁹ In April 1880, the following notice was put out by Bell in several newspapers, in the hopes of expanding his troupe to include wild animals:

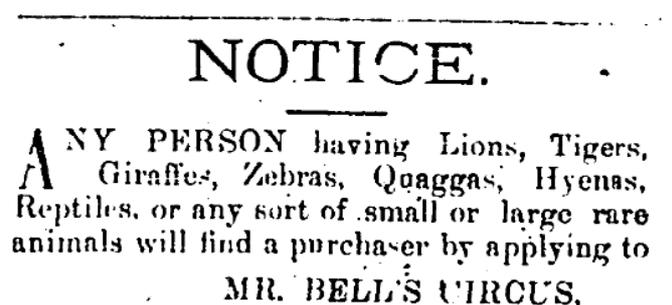


Figure 1: Notice put out by Richard Bell in 1880²⁰

By late June, Bell was exhibiting a menagerie along with his circus; although, no other animals were mentioned besides a 'rare curiosity, a canary coloured buck', and it remains unclear whether he managed to introduce any circus animal acts before his death from typhoid fever in 1881.²¹ The use of animals in the circus industry was an indispensable part of the show's

¹⁶ H. Cowie. 'Exhibiting Animals: Zoos, menageries and circuses,' in H. Kean and P. Howell (eds). *The Routledge Companion of Animal-Human History*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 300.

¹⁷ P. Tait. *Fighting Nature: Travelling menageries, animal acts and war shows*, (Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016), p. 11.

¹⁸ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. xiii.

¹⁹ 'Bell's Circus,' *Cape Times*, 3 May 1879, p. 3.

²⁰ 'Notice,' *The Natal Witness*, 29 April 1880, p. 6.

²¹ 'Bell's Great Circus,' *Cape Times*, 4 April 1879, p. 4, and 'Menagerie: Bell's Circus,' *Cape Times*, 26 June 1880, p. 2. His death was reported on in *The Cape Times*, 4 October 1881, p. 7.

attraction, which adapted in response to shifts in public perception over time. In Philip Loring's research on travelling circuses in North America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he described the circus as 'the most resilient show on earth' with the ability to transform itself significantly over the years, discarding attractions that were once their main features.²² This resilience is the tent pole of this study. Through describing the transformations of the circus industry, with a focus on animal performances and performing gender, it will explore how circuses adapted in response to the changing social context in what may be loosely termed 'South Africa' from 1882 until 1963. It will do so by comparing three of the most prominent circuses that toured the country: Frank Fillis's Circus (1882–1911), William Pagel's Circus (1905–1956) and the Boswell Brothers' Circus (1912–1963).²³ There is yet to be a body of work that moves beyond the proverbial 'dog and pony show' to critically analyse performances in South Africa's circus industry across these specific companies to note trends and disparities that existed and changed over time, while also considering the international elements that crossed continents.

In this thesis, the period between 1882 and 1963 was examined, as it encompasses the rise and fall of all three companies, keeping in mind that distinct breaks are simply narrative devices of control. When beginning to analyse circuses in 1882, the geographical entity that would become South Africa twenty-eight years later was an amalgamation of two British colonies (in the form of the Cape and Natal) and two Boer republics (namely the Orange Free State and the South African Republic/Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR)), as well as a number of indigenous African chiefdoms that were slowly losing their independence. Due to their travelling nature, circuses crossed borders into neighbouring countries, allowing them to reach big tent audiences; thus, this comparative historical analysis stretches to encompass southern Africa. This chapter will first outline the methodology incorporated in this thesis, and will then move on to locate this study within the body of secondary literature available on the circus and its various subgenres. Then, it will briefly introduce the key themes covered in this thesis before expanding on them in subsequent chapters.

²² P. A. Loring. 'The Most Resilient Show on Earth: The Circus as a Model for Viewing Identity and Chaos,' *Ecology and Society*, (12), (1), 2007, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol12/iss1/art9/> (Accessed 2 March 2019).

²³ From here onwards, these circus names will be abbreviated to Fillis's Circus, Pagel's Circus and Boswell's Circus, which corresponds to the nomenclature adopted in the press and other secondary sources.

Methodological considerations

The study of any circus company comes with considerable methodological challenges, particularly concerning companies that toured in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the enormous amount of printed advertising material that was generated by circuses during this time, very few pieces have survived in the public archives. In the special collections at the National Library of South Africa, a photograph album donated by Pagel's family and an array of faded circus posters have been kept.²⁴ At the Cape Town Archives (KAB), one can find reports outlining the lease to perform on certain grounds and site approvals by city engineers, as well as letters sent from chief veterinary surgeons to circus management detailing the appropriate movements of animals from one province to another.²⁵ However, even if an abundance of posters, letters and permits had survived, they reveal little information other than the fact that a wide variety of acts were presented across southern Africa along with a large and regularly shifting group of performers. The concern with these artefacts is that they reveal very little about the action of the performances, or the social experiences of the audiences attending the circus. The scarcity of traditional primary sources of scripted records was deplored by one of the earliest historians of the circus, Hippisley Coxe, who stated:

The exaggerations of circus publicity are more irksome to the historian than anyone else. There are so few ways in which statements made a hundred years or so ago can be checked. When the circus moves on, what does it leave behind apart from its own rain-washed posters and a few crumple throw-aways?²⁶

To overcome such obstacles, newspaper articles constitute the primary source of information for this study. The newspapers incorporated in this thesis date back to 1800 until the present day, and include, but are not limited to, the *Cape Times*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *Mafeking Mail*, *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, *De Zuid Afrikaan*, *The Friend of the Free State*, and even *The Bulawayo Chronicle* and *Rhodesian Herald* due to the circus's ability to cross borders. Newspaper reports were the circus's primary organ of communication with the public. Overall, the evidence gathered from the press across southern Africa allows various stakeholders to be

²⁴ NLSA. UNCAT Pagel Circus Album, c.1905-1950. Donated by Rory Birkby, January 1996 and the posters located in Circus Collection, 1848, OCLC: 1046076959.

²⁵ Two permits can be found in the Cape Archive Repository. For Pagel's Circus: KAB LC 1219 UCI12042 Limited Companies Act of 46 of 1926: Pagel's Olympic Circus; and for Boswell's Circus: KAB 1/MTO 8/1/34 60/16/2 Refund License: Boswell's Circus 1916. Letters sent allowing the travel with circus animals between colonies can be found at KAB CVS 1/81 758.

²⁶ A. D. Hippisley Coxe. *Overtures in A Seat at the Circus*, (London: Evans Bros 1951), p. 15.

heard. The voice of circus management is evident through the advertising of new acts and other changes they deemed most important. Entertainment columns also provided circus management with an opportunity to address responses and complaints, or issue an apology. From the 1930s onwards, when anti-circus activists become vocal in their opposition, it is possible to trace a dialogue between circus proprietors and the public through ‘letters to the editor’. Interviews by journalists give a voice to the agents and proprietors, as well as performers, who discuss the various operation systems, training methods and incidents. Newspapers are also the sole source of phenomenological description of circus performances in action. In reviews, journalists detail the turns they enjoyed, the audiences’ responses, and even the element of danger present within the acts. Owing to the accessible digitised public archives of Australia and New Zealand, it is possible to trace these conversations abroad, and assess the various public responses to South African circuses performing for different population groups.²⁷ Along with the aid of a dense variety of global newspapers, this study makes use of other primary sources, in particular: autobiographies, unpublished manuscripts, letters and government legislation. It also draws from the three local literary works on each of the three circuses under study.

The existing literature on South Africa’s circus industry is scanty. It consists of only four books, of which three of them each focus only on one specific circus: *Frank Fillis: The story of a circus legend* (2007) by Floris van der Merwe, half of which contains Fillis’s autobiography;²⁸ *The Pagel Story* (1948) by Carel Birkby; and lastly, *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus* (2003) written by Charles Ricketts (a former employee of Boswell’s Circus).²⁹ These texts all pose serious challenges for historians; as with most of the early writings on circus history, citational authenticity is scarce and, in some cases, non-existent. While Fillis’s autobiography (1901) provides insight into his career, it is a scattered and confusing account of his life and travels, often spanning several sections without mentioning any dates. A critical reading of Van der Merwe’s biography on Fillis reveals its potential to fall into a hagiography, as can be seen by his dedicated sections on Fillis’s ‘compassion’ and ‘popularity’, while also alluding to him being a ‘creative genius’ and a ‘very humble person’.³⁰

²⁷ Trove, a collaboration between the National Library of Australia and hundreds of partner organisations, was an invaluable source for this study, as it provides access to over 200 newspapers from the State Library of NSW. See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>

²⁸ See F.E. Fillis. *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa: 20 Years Experience in South Africa: Life and Adventures of Frank E. Fillis*, (London: Stafford, 1901).

²⁹ Birkby, *The Pagel Story* and C. Ricketts. *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus*, (Johannesburg: Self Published, 2003).

³⁰ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, pp. 170–180.

Van der Merwe acknowledges that another shortcoming of his study was his acute focus on Fillis, without attempting to draft a comprehensive history on his other family members, nor to follow the development of his wife, Eliza.³¹ Alternatively, Birkby travelled with Pagel's company for over three months in 1948 while writing his book, and does document some imperative occurrences that the press failed to report. However, at times, he too becomes biased about his subject, leaving the text riddled with emotive language. Finally, Ricketts, a former member of Boswell's Circus, makes his book more akin to a piece of publicity than an objective source of historical inquiry. Thus, this thesis aims to fill the deep lacuna in South African social history, especially leisure and entertainment history. It does not seek to offer a comprehensive history of each of the companies, but rather focuses on the nature of performances and compares them, in order to consider trends and disparities of animal and gendered performances, noting how these transformed over time in response to a changing social and political climate.

Secondary literature on the circus industry internationally is far more extensive and assisted in contextualising this study into the broader global scope. Due to the multidisciplinary nature of animal studies, this thesis expands outside the humanities, and draws upon several scientific articles concerned with the welfare of captive wild animals, incorporating novel theories about neural and captivity-related stress. While objectivity, or telling history 'as it really was' (as in the Rankean conception), remains difficult for historians, this proves to be more challenging when selecting animals as research subjects.³² By 2020, however, animal history is a well-established field of historical inquiry, and the 'animal lens' has been widely used to illuminate issues of power, class, race and sex in a new light.

Why look at animals? The 'animal turn' in history

One of the defining characteristics of the modern age is the radical breakdown of the human–animal distinction, which was so clearly drawn in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. Some naturalists go as far as denying the fact that animals could possess any mental qualities besides instincts.³³ Today, we have come to accept that various behaviours and capacities – once widely believed to be unique to humans – exist in various forms and degrees

³¹ F. J. G. van der Merwe. 'Frank Fillis: Nuwe Feite Rakende Hierdie Sirkuslegende,' *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation*, (24), (2), 2002, p. 97.

³² M. Bunzi. *Real History: Reflections on Historical Practice*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 23.

³³ M. Calarco. *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction*, (Stanford: Stanford Briefs, 2015), p. 6.

among a wide number of animal species.³⁴ While animal history remained a marginal field in the 1990s, from 2010 onwards, there has been a spate of scholarly monographs, books, conferences, articles, journals and special issues all contributing to the ‘animal turn’ in social sciences.³⁵ Of course, the study of animals is far from new, and stretches back throughout most histories of science. However, this qualitative shift to human–animal studies started from a genuine interest in animals as potential subjects as opposed to mere objects of observation, study and protection.³⁶ Human–animal scholarship originated in the field of philosophy, which was focused largely on questions regarding how and why we value animals. This was forced into public view by the release of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975), which was read widely in both social and legal practice and transformed the fields of animal experimentation and farming.³⁷ Another landmark essay that contributed to the shifting public zeitgeist was art critic John Berger’s ‘Why look at animals?’ (1980), which sparked new ways of thinking about animals in modernity.³⁸

The impetus for this heightened attention to animals (or as we have now learned to say: *the other animals*) is varied and complex. However, it can be argued that it has been accelerated by the current climate crisis that sits on the forefront of public discourse.³⁹ Una Chaudhuri, a leading scholar in performance studies involving animal imagery, argues that this new ecological realisation has allowed for the break-down of the ancient binaries which divided ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ (which was so evidently distinct during lion-taming acts in the late nineteenth-century circuses).⁴⁰ Audience members can no longer watch these acts and fully believe that man can control the fate of nature, as current evidence demonstrates how the human influence on the imminent rise in global temperatures is deleteriously affecting all life on Earth. Similarly, Dan Vandermers states that animals have been ‘herded’ towards the

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ This phrase was coined by Harriet Ritvo, whose seminal *Animal Estate* (1987) was one of the first works of animal history. This term has come to refer to the increasingly scholarly interest in animals, the relationships between humans and other animals, and the role and status of animals in society. See H. Ritvo, ‘On the Animal Turn,’ *Daedalus*, (136), 2007, pp. 118–112.

³⁶ A. Peters. ‘The Animal Turn – what is it and why now?’ *VerfBlog*, 2014, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-animal-turn-what-is-it-and-why-now/>. (Accessed 1 October 2020).

³⁷ Not only did Singer expose the horrific realities of these experiments that resulted in major changes in the meat industry, but he also inspired a wave of activism that would change human–animal relationships indefinitely. See P. Singer. *Animal Liberation*, (New York: Random House, 1975).

³⁸ J. Berger. *About Looking*, (London: Writers and Readers, 1980).

³⁹ U. Chaudhuri and H. Hughes (eds). *Animal Acts Performing Species Today*, (United States of America: University of Michigan, 2014), p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

historical profession, due to the desire for a sustainable future that is rid of overconsumption, exploitation and environmental destruction.⁴¹

While the discipline has made great strides in becoming a mainstream field of historical inquiry, up until the early 2000s, much of scholarly animal history remained almost entirely Western and Eurocentric. The animal lens has proven most fruitful when used to consider the processes of colonisation and imperialism, such as John McNeill's and Virginia Anderson's retelling of American imperialism and colonisation through the influence of the mosquito and European livestock, respectively.⁴² Academics working on zoo history have highlighted a series of similar themes. Harriet Ritvo's writings reveal animal displays as functions of 'imperialist spectacles', Helen Cowie demonstrates that animal exhibitions were influenced by ideals of colonial possession of the natural landscape, and Nigel Rothfel's detailed account in *Savages and Beasts* of 'the Hagenbeck revolution' shows the progression of zoo-keeping and animal training.⁴³

In a southern African context, wildlife has long received a great deal of historiographic attention, following John Mackenzie's analysis of British imperialism and its hunting network, and Jane Carruthers' intervention that corrected public myths on wildlife protection.⁴⁴ Most recently, the future of sentient nature conservation in southern Africa has been underscored in Jan-Bart Gewald, Maria Spierenburg and Harry Wels' collection of edited essays.⁴⁵ However, historical writings about animals as sole subjects which take animals themselves seriously as foci of analysis has only gained traction in the last decade, most notably with the 2010 publication of Sandra Swart's *Riding High*, her edited collection with Lance van Sittert titled *Canis Africanis: A Dog History of South Africa*, as well as Dan Wylie's study on elephants in

⁴¹ D. Vandersommers. 'The "Animal Turn" in History,' *American Historical Association Today*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2016/the-animal-turn-in-history> (Accessed 20 July 2019).

⁴² See J. R. McNeill. *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and V. D. J. Anderson. *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴³ See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, H. Cowie. *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth Century Britain: Empathy, Education, Entertainment*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and N. Rothfels. *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ J. M. McKenzie. *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), and J. Carruthers. *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995).

⁴⁵ See J. Gewald, M. Spierenburg and H. Wells (eds). *Nature Conservation in Southern Africa: Morality and Marginality: Towards Sentient Conservation?* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

southern Africa.⁴⁶ In a recent special collection, ‘Writing animals into African history’, novel case studies explore interspecies communications, the economics of human–animal relations, the ‘identity’ of national animals in contrast to ‘alien animals’, and the politics of ‘belonging’.⁴⁷ This collection indicates the fresh self-awareness of the significant existence of animals in the telling of Africa’s past. While the animal turn can still be viewed as a relatively new direction of historical inquiry, particularly in the global South, studying performances through the animal lens is even more recent, and in a South African context, largely underexplored.

Studies on equestrian circus performances and their relations to masculinity in Britain has been analysed by Monica Mattfeld, and in France by Kari Weil, but it remains unaddressed in the animal historiography of South Africa.⁴⁸ In more recent work, the collection of essays in *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity* explores the role and representation of horses in human culture from 1700 to the present, but remains focused on Europe, Australia and America.⁴⁹ In addition to equestrian performances, studies on wild animal circus acts are neglected in local literature, though it has been thoroughly addressed by historians of other countries and contexts. Lourdes Orozco and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck point out the neglect of animal studies within performance studies. They call for the need to recognise animals in wider societal contexts, especially the key role animals have played in performances throughout history.⁵⁰

Peta Tait, author of *Wild and Dangerous Performances* and *Fighting Nature*, is a pioneer in the field of animal-performance studies. She has investigated twentieth-century circus performances by elephants and big cats, as well as analysed the historical legacy of nineteenth-century war, animal acquisition and colonialism by investigating animal circus and theatre acts.⁵¹ Renowned circus semiotician, Paul Bouissac, has demonstrated the various symbols

⁴⁶ S. Swart. *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), and L. van Sittert and S. Swart (eds). *Canis Africanis: A Dog History of Southern Africa*, (Leiden: Brill, 2008) and D. Wylie. *Elephant*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

⁴⁷ S. Swart (ed). ‘Writing animals into African history,’ *Critical African Studies*, (8), (2), 2016, pp. 95–216.

⁴⁸ M. Mattfeld. *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), and K. Weil. ‘Circus Studs and Equestrian Sports in Turn-of-the-Century France,’ in K. Guest and M. Mattfeld (eds). *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁴⁹ Guest and Mattfeld, *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity*.

⁵⁰ L. Orozco and J. Parker-Starbuck (eds). *Performing Animality: Animals in Performing Practices*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

⁵¹ See P. Tait. *Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals, Emotions, Circus*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

present within animal performances, and how these have changed over time.⁵² Lion taming as a form of illusion, and one that denotes ideals of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, has been analysed by several theatre and circus historians. This thesis draws heavily on the insight of John Stokes, David Wilson and Yoram Carmeli when considering the ethnographic differences in these acts as performed in South Africa.⁵³ It acknowledges the need to shift away from the question of ‘Is animal history possible?’, as its potential as a discipline has been proven by countless historians in the past decade. In addition, this chapter steers away from any debate surrounding the firmly accepted concept of ‘animal agency’. Rather, it aims to contribute to a new area of focus in animal history in southern Africa – that of performing animals in the circus industry.

This thesis explores and engages in the conversations surrounding ‘performing animals’ and ‘political animals’, both concepts which have caused considerable debate and deliberation. Shelly Scott investigates the possibility of performing animals in *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*. She argues that animals respond to cues much like their human counterparts, but that the difference lies in their choice of performing. Although they cannot be viewed as choosing to perform (being coerced is different to active choice), animals still have a choice on how to exert their agency within their performance, and even afterwards.⁵⁴ Circus animal agency can be viewed in their disobedience and rebellion. Political theorist, Aylon Cohen, is arguably the leading figure in this field of thought, while other historians such as Jason Hibril and Sandra Swart have shown how small instances of animal disobedience can be influential forms of everyday resistance.⁵⁵ Recent work in political philosophy has drawn insight from political participation of marginalised groups, and argues that animals exercise political agency too. Animals should be seen as subjects with their own perspective on life, yet they stand in different relations to human political communities.⁵⁶ Thus, this thesis aims to

⁵² See P. Bouissac. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁵³ J. Stokes. “‘Lion Grieffs’: The Wild Animal Act as Theatre,’ *New Theatre Quarterly*, (20), (2), 2004, pp. 139–140, D. A. H. Wilson. ‘Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,’ *Early Popular Visual Culture*, (15), (3), 2017, pp. 350–366, and Y. S. Carmeli. ‘Lion on Display: Culture, Nature, and Totality in a Circus Performance,’ *Poetics Today*, (24), (1), 2003, pp. 65–90.

⁵⁴ S. Scott. ‘The Racehorse as Protagonist: Agency, Independence and Improvisation,’ in S. E. McFarland & R. Hediger (eds). *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, (Leiden: IDC Publishers, 2009), p. 52.

⁵⁵ A. Cohen. “‘We Support Circus Animals Who Kill Their Captors’: Nonhuman Resistance, Animal Subjectivity, and the Politics of Democracy,’ in R. Spanring, R. Heuberger, G. K. Gufler, A. Oberprantacher, K. Schachinger & Al. Boucabeille (eds). *Tiere, Texte, Transformationen: Kritische Perspektiven der Human-Animal Studies*, (Germany: Transcript, 2015), pp. 277–295, Swart, *Riding High*, p. 202 and J. Hibril. *Fear of the Animal Planet*, (Petrolia: CounterPunch, 2011).

⁵⁶ E. Meijer. ‘Animal Activism and Interspecies Change,’ in G. Garmendia da Trindade and A. Woodhall (eds). *Invention or Protest Acting for Nonhuman Animals*, (United States of America: Vernon Press, 2020), p. 106.

highlight these instances, and attempts to move beyond the question of ‘animal agency’, with specific reference to big cat attacks in Chapter Five.

Historicising agency

Amongst historians, questions on agency gained significant attention through debates that were initiated by the rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s. These studies examined the lives of those who were formally excluded from mainstream history and proceeded to include women, the working class and black people. However, over time, as argued by Lynn Thomas, ‘moving beyond agency as argument will enable more compelling, less predictable histories and aid in distinguishing agency from political resistance.’⁵⁷ When it comes to agency in historical studies today – particularly in animal history – historians are challenged to incorporate agency at the start of analysis, rather than in the conclusion to any arguments. Walter Johnson, for example, urges animal historians to ‘lay aside the jargon of agency’ and rather focus on demonstrating the ways in which animals operate in the constraints of their surrounding structures – in this case, the circus ring.⁵⁸ Swart shows that in order to take animal agency seriously, historians need to perhaps reconsider the idea of agency itself, and look further to discover forms that are not presented in the typical manner.⁵⁹ In concurrence with Susan Nance, who rejects the notion that the elephants comprehended, endorsed or opposed the world of circus show business, this thesis argues that animals showed their ‘agency’ by rejecting the conditions of their experience and through their interactions with humans.⁶⁰

In doing so, this thesis acknowledges that the notion of agency has been tightly linked to the notion of liberal selfhood, a concept that emerged from the recognition of the unequal distribution of social, political and economic power in the wake of late capitalism. Amanda Rees argues that living as we do now, within the Anthropocene (when the impact of human activity on the environment has allowed for a heightened awareness of animal existence), obliges historians to ensure that animal agency does not obscure the examination of power

⁵⁷ L. M. Thomas. ‘Historicising Agency,’ *Gender & History*, (28), (2), 2016, p. 339.

⁵⁸ J. Specht. ‘Animal History after Its Triumph: Unexpected Animals, Evolutionary Approaches and the Animal Lens,’ *History Compass*, (14), (7), p 332.

⁵⁹ S. Swart. ‘Review of D. Brantz (ed) *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans and the Study of History*,’ *H-Environment H-Net Reviews*, 2011, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31301> (Accessed 2 September 2020).

⁶⁰ For more reading, see S. Nance. *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013).

distributions along the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality in human communities.⁶¹ This thesis aims to reimagine and reconstruct circus history in South Africa by incorporating animals as subjects; however, it also aims to study relevant ulterior notions within the circus industry, such as gender.

Performing gender

In consideration of the development of women's history, it can be noted that, at least until the 1960s, the history of women was overlooked in all national historiographies, and prior to this, women were almost entirely absent in the historical record. The post-1960 feminist historians were inevitably writing 'compensatory' history due to these historiographical gaps – they tended to be interdisciplinary, they proposed new questions, and in doing so, they widened the boundaries of history in order to make women visible.⁶² In South Africa, scholars working on women's history began in the 1970s, much later than in many other 'industrialised' countries. With the rise of the revisionist and Marxist schools of historiography, along with the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, a heightened attention focused on women's history emerged.⁶³ Robert Morrell was an influential figure in initiating masculinity studies in southern African historiography from the late 1990s, bringing the concept to the foreground of studies in imperial and colonial societies. This constructed imperial masculinity and the associated masculinities of the colonial settler society were demarcated by the shifting perceptions of gender, class and race.⁶⁴ Other explorations of gender have been covered in Cheryl Walker's landmark volume of essays, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, which focuses mainly on writing the history of black women.⁶⁵ Still, women performing in the entertainment industry remains a neglected field of gender studies in South Africa.

Early writings on gender and colonialism mainly focus on studying white women in the colonies, in the hopes of showing that previous historical narratives – centred on their diminished capacity as the 'weaker sex' – had been far too narrow.⁶⁶ More recent scholarship

⁶¹ A. Rees. 'Animal agents? Historiography, theory and the history of science in the Anthropocene,' *BJHS: Themes*, (2), (1-10), 2017, p. 9.

⁶² See P. Hetherington. 'Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, (26), (2), 1993, p. 242.

⁶³ S. E. Duff. 'Head, Heart and Hand: The Huguenot Seminary and College and the Construction of Middle-Class Afrikaner Femininity, 1873–1910,' (University of Stellenbosch: MA thesis, 2006), pp. 14–15.

⁶⁴ R. Morrell. 'Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* (24), (4), 1998, pp. 605–630.

⁶⁵ C. Walker (ed). *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Claremont: David Phillip Publishers, 1990).

⁶⁶ See M. Stobe and N. Chaudhuri (eds). *Western women and imperialism: complicity and resistance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

in the field of ‘new imperial history’ has begun to examine the relationship between gender, colonialism and the connection between the metropole and the colony.⁶⁷ The strong linkages between the southern colonies and the metropole was examined in Kristen Mackenzie’s *Scandal in the Colonies*. She showed that the routine circulation of metropolitan and colonial newspapers throughout the entire imperial network meant that news in Cape Town (and other British colonies) had a surprisingly global reach and impact.⁶⁸ Angela Woollacot argues in her seminal book, *Gender and Empire* (2006), that studying gender obliges us to examine changing ideological and cultural classification of masculinity and femininity. It allows historians to further explore such definitions as sites of cultural encounters and of the political contests that have remained central to colonialism.⁶⁹ Patriarchy was reinvented in the colonies and applied not simply to relations between men and women, but to relations between coloniser and colonised.⁷⁰ The meaning of ‘women’ was not the same pre-colonially as it was in the twentieth century in southern Africa. While gender relations were undergoing major refashioning in southern Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, female subordination to men persisted, and can be examined in various contexts and cultural institutions – the circus being one of them.⁷¹ This thesis recognises the need to explore the relations between masculinity and femininity, as they are expressed through sport or other forms of cultural entertainment, such as the circus.

Sport and leisure have only recently come into the mainstream of social and scientific production. In the early 1990s, Grant Jarvie and Joseph Maguire contended that, ‘analytically speaking, there has been a sociological debate about sport and leisure only for a quarter of a century, maybe longer’.⁷² The 1960s was a turning point in encouraging novel forms of critical thought about sport and leisure, as well as other realms of social and cultural practices.⁷³ The development of a ‘gender lens’ is even more recent, and has greatly impacted new understandings of the historical processes involved in shaping bodies and culture, as well as

⁶⁷ This new imperial history explicitly puts cultural history and an emphasis on questions on race, gender, class and sexuality at the centre of colonial history. For a further analysis on this new line of scholarship, see D. Ghosh. ‘Gender and Colonialism? Expansion or Marginalization?’ *The Historical Journal* (47), (3), 2004, pp. 737–755.

⁶⁸ She argues that what was gossip in Cape Town could quickly become gossip in Calcutta, Sydney or London. K. McKenzie. *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town 1820–1850*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 7.

⁶⁹ A. Woollacot. *Gender and Empire*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1–2.

⁷⁰ Walker (ed), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, p. 12.

⁷¹ Walker (ed), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, p. 26.

⁷² G. Jarvie and J. Maguire. *Sport and Leisure in Social Thought*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 3.

other modern sporting institutions.⁷⁴ This thesis draws on literature that has globally examined ideals of gender in the circus, such as Helen Stoddart's *Rings of desire*, Peta Tait's *Circus Bodies*, and Katherine Adams and Michael Keene's *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*.⁷⁵ Stoddart's analysis of female trapeze artists – through philosopher Judith Butler's concept of 'gender performativity' – is a particularly useful framework to examine equestrian artists and lion tamers in the South African context.⁷⁶ By gender performativity, Butler argues that the 'acts, gestures, enactments generally construed are *performative* in the sense that the essence of identity that they are otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.'⁷⁷ In her ground-breaking book, *Gender Trouble*, she asserts that gender must be understood as 'the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self'.⁷⁸ This thesis examines female performances using this framework, to consider if they erased, blurred or transcended any visibly recognisable gender norms.

A comparative analysis of circus performances

Why use the circus as tool for a comparative historical analysis? As stated by proprietor Brian Boswell, 'The real circus is a fascinating microcosm. It is international and multinational; it is interracial and multiracial. It is a non-political, non-sexist and non-violent entertainment that appeals to all ages.'⁷⁹ Studying the circus brings to light many critical perspectives that have not been considered, while being the confluence of three bodies of knowledge: social (entertainment/leisure) history, animal history and gender history. Given the gaps that exist in South African circus historiography, the following questions arise: What continuities and breaks are evident across the circus industry between 1882 and 1963? How were animals (both wild and domesticated) deployed in the circus, and how did this change over time? How did ideals of masculinity and femininity affect circus performances? What was unique and idiosyncratic about circus performances in South Africa? This thesis aims to debunk the notion

⁷⁴ M. Adelman and J. Knijnik (eds). *Gender and Equestrian Sport: Riding Around the World*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), p. 2.

⁷⁵ H. Stoddart. *Rings of desire: Circus, history and representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), P. Tait. *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Ariel Performances*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), and K. H. Adams and M. L. Keene. *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012).

⁷⁶ This thesis also draws from the analysis in: S. Hedenberg & G. Pfister. 'Ecuyères and "doing gender" Presenting Femininity in a Male Domain – Female Circus Riders, 1800–1920,' *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum*, (3), 2012, pp. 24–45.

⁷⁷ J. Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 140.

⁷⁹ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. iii.

of the ‘timeless’ circus acts and show that, rather, this ring of sawdust has undergone several significant changes – a series of revolutions – throughout history. These changes have often taken place on an international scale, but there are distinct, ethnographic differences that this thesis reconstructs and analyses.

To begin this detailed historical comparison, Chapter Two focuses on the circus’s first quadruped performers, and examines equestrian performances across the three companies between 1882 and 1916. It introduces and examines the notion of performing gender, and notes the monumental shift that occurred after the introduction of wild animals into the ring.

Chapter Three examines the rise of lion taming in South Africa, from the late nineteenth century. These acts were presented by European men as a re-imagining of Roman masculinity at the height of imperial expansion, when the Pax Britannica was imagined as kind of modern Pax Romana, and manhood was also a symbol of the ‘great white hunter’.⁸⁰ This chapter continues to demonstrate the idiosyncratic differences between local performances and those in Europe, by focusing on the gendered and racial elements of the performances.

Chapter Four traces the beginning of the ‘Hagenbeck revolution’ of circus animal acts in South Africa, one which saw a movement away from dominating animal acts towards ‘civilised’ performances that were taught through methods of kindness. This chapter shows the influence of Darwinian studies of emotions in breaking down human–animal distinctions, as well as the rise and impact of anti-cruelty campaigning in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter Five adds to the growing conversation on ‘political animals’, and argues that big cat attacks were an influential form of resistance in transforming the way circuses operated in South Africa. These elements of resistance contributed to a shifting public zeitgeist about wild animals in captivity. It outlines the triumphs and limitations of both human and animal protest to cruelty in the terminal years of the 1950s.

Finally, the arguments of these chapters are drawn together to show change over time in Chapter Six. This final chapter draws broader conclusions about the use of animals in the entertainment industry, reflects on the core conclusions and the limitations of this thesis, and

⁸⁰ The ‘great white hunter’ became a literary and cinematic trope in the mid-twentieth century, which had its roots in the trophy-hunting of Europeans who visited southern Africa in the 1900s.

discusses the potential for future research on the circus industry in contemporary southern Africa.

The circus industry functioned as a travelling microcosm where no societal order or norms could hold fast. It was a space that blurred the lines between normal and abnormal, animal and human. It demonstrated feats believed to be impossible and stretched the imagination of the diverse audiences who attended. While this phenomenon has received much attention globally, this thesis aims to provide the historical inquiry that it deserves in South Africa.

CHAPTER TWO

A horse and human dyad: The making of the ‘modern-day’ circus and equestrian performances in South Africa, c. 1882–1916

Introduction

The ‘modern-day’¹ circus dates back to a field in Lambeth, London, in April 1768 where ex-army sergeant major Phillip Astley taught a horse to canter in a tight circle, while he stood on its back – a feat which created a dramatic demonstration of mastery of the horse and his own body.² From its inception, the core of the modern circus performance has been equestrian acts, including bareback trick riding and dressage displays interspersed with vaulting, acrobatics, balancing and juggling acts. Only from the mid-nineteenth century did this circle of sawdust bring acts of strongmen, gymnasts and wild animal trainers to the centre stage.³ Prior to this, the circus was the domain of horse and human dyad.

This chapter aims to analyse the role animals have played in the circus industry right from its origins, focusing on its first quadruped performer. It will begin by providing a brief historiography of the ‘circus horse’, while taking note of the unique space equestrian performances provided for both class and gender. It will then discuss the various ways in which horses were deployed in all three South African circus companies (Fillis’s Circus, Pagel’s Circus and Boswell’s Circus) between 1882 and 1916 – a time period that encapsulates equestrian performances in all three of the circus companies, as well as demarcates the high point of British imperialism. This chapter notes the differences between them, and offers a broader contextualisation by comparing the acts with the international circus ring. It then focuses on a little-discussed phenomenon: the women riders, asking if their performances erased, blurred or transcended visibly recognisable gender codes. Lastly, it will consider the end of the horse as a central animal by looking at the shift to a new kind of animal star – the introduction of wild and exotic animals, a theme that will be discussed further in following

¹ The use of the term ‘modern circus’ is used in this chapter to describe the circus invented by Astley in 1768, consisting primarily of trick riding in the ring. See D. Jando. *Philip Astley and the Horseman who invented the Circus*, (Circopedia Books: E-book, 2018), M. St Leon. ‘Yankee Circus to the Fabled Land: The Australian-American Circus Connection,’ *Journal of Popular Culture*, (33), (1), 1991, pp. 77–89 and A. D. Hippisley Coxe. ‘The History of the Circus,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, (104), (4975), 1956, p. 414.

² K. H. Adams and M. L. Keene. *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), p. 5.

³ Hippisley Coxe, ‘The History of the Circus,’ p. 414.

chapters. In essence, this chapter argues that circus horses were utilised in various ways in the arena, sometimes for dangerous and daring acts, occasionally even to reinforce gender roles, and other times, as political animals used during war re-enactments to symbolise the might of the British Empire. But was there something distinct and idiographic about South African equestrian performances? What about the wild horse – or at least, Africa’s version, the zebra? This chapter thus aims to add to the growing literature on human–horse relationships in southern Africa, as it remains an unexplored area of research in the fields of animal and social history.

Horse historiography

Horses and humans have a long-shared history; since the first domestication from perhaps as early as 4000 BCE in western Asia and eastern Europe, these animals have performed shifting roles for their human masters.⁴ Initially hunted for their flesh, horses were later used as means of mobility to cover vast ground at speed, especially useful as a fearsome mode of colonial conquest. Their strength later provided a useful way of tilling the soil, and their graceful appearance allowed them to join troupes of performers in circus rings and theatre halls. More recently, horses have even become assistants to healthcare professionals through the means of equine-assisted therapy.⁵ Horses have held a powerful place in the emotional and spiritual minds of humans, as can be seen by their depiction (first in Palaeolithic cave paintings in 30 000 BCE)⁶ in religion, poetry, art, myth, literature and film – often in a philosophical context. However, writing the history of horses is still a relatively new venture, occurring only after the ‘animal turn’ of historical inquiry.

While still recent, historical research on horse–human relationships has quickly gained traction, producing studies on a global history, such as Pita Kelenkna’s *The Horse in Human History* and Susannah Forrest’s *The Age of the Horse*, as well as horsemanship practices in the West by historians such as Monica Mattfeld and Kristen Guest among others.⁷ Scholars writing about

⁴ Scholarly research into the process of equine domestication remains a hot topic with new discoveries and theories continually emerging. Recent evidence suggests that this was not a singular event, but rather a series of domestications in different places and times from a number of separate wild populations. C. Johns. *Horses: History, Myth, Art*, (China: The British Museum Press, 2006), p. 12.

⁵ See L. Hallberg. *The Clinical Practice of Equine Assisted Therapy: Including Horses in Human Healthcare*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁶ S. Swart. *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), p. 9.

⁷ S. Forrest. *The Age of the Horse: An Equine Journey through Human History*, (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2016), P. Kelekna. *The Horse in Human History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and K. Guest

Astley's early equestrian show, such as Dominique Jando and Marius Kwint, have been essential for this chapter in understanding the importance of horses for this business venture and for the people of Britain.⁸ The analysis of horsemanship as a military practice has been thoroughly examined by Peta Tait, and was drawn from for the sections on Fillis's war re-enactments.⁹ Semioticians such as Paul Bouissac have shown the various symbols present within circus horse performances across time.¹⁰ When discussing the aspects of 'performing gender' in equestrian performances, the article by Susanna Hedenberg and Getrud Pfister on 'Écuyères' and 'doing gender' in France has been a particularly useful tool for analysis.¹¹ While horses on the African continent had been discussed in the work of Law, Fischer and Web,¹² it was only with Sandra Swart's publication of *Riding High* in 2010 that a guild historian attempted a monograph devoted entirely to the horse (*Equus caballus*) in a South African context. While the 'circus horse' is not focused on in Swart's book as such, her motivation to correct the invisibility of horses in historical understandings and to prove that 'horses mattered', even as their use in transportation, agriculture and war declined, is what this chapter aims to contribute to.¹³ It seeks to demonstrate that just as horses mattered in the birthplace of the modern-day circus, so they did in the South African circus industry.

Horses as both colonisers and circus performers: A brief equine history, c. 1768

Despite their significant role in southern Africa's history, horses were not indigenous to the region. Although other species of the genus *Equus* (the now extinct quagga, the zebra and the wild ass) were present in wide areas of Africa since the beginning of the Holocene period,¹⁴ horses arrived alongside the European colonisers only from the mid-seventeenth century as

and M. Mattfeld (eds). *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁸ Jando, *Philip Astley and the Horseman who invented the Circus*, M. Mattfeld. *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), and M. Kwint. 'Astley, Phillip – 1742–1814,' <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ez.sun.ac.za/view/> (Accessed 18 August 2019).

⁹ P. Tait. 'Acrobatic Circus Horses: Military Training to Natural Wildness,' in L. Orozco and J. Parker-Starbuck (eds). *Performing animality: Animals in Performing Practices*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 97–117.

¹⁰ See P. Bouissac. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

¹¹ S. Hedenberg and G. Pfister. 'Écuyères and "doing gender" Presenting Femininity in a Male Domain – Female Circus Riders, 1800–1920,' *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum*, (3), 2012, pp. 24–45.

¹² See R. Law. *The Horse in West African History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), H. J. Fisher, "'He Swalloweth the Ground with Fierceness and Rage": The Horse in Central Sudan,' *Journal of African History*, (14), (3), 1973, pp. 355–379, and J. Webb. 'The Horse and Slave Trade between the Western Sahara and Senegambia,' *The Journal of African History*, (34), (2), 1993, pp. 221–246.

¹³ See also: S. Swart. "'But where's the bloody horse?": Textuality and corporeality in the "animal turn",' *Journal of Literary Studies*, (23), (3), pp. 271–292.

¹⁴ Kelekna, *The Horse in Human History*, pp. 13–21.

part of the technology of conquest.¹⁵ The VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie) established a re-provisioning station at the Cape in 1652 – a suitable half-way point between Europe and the Far East.¹⁶ Horses were needed for inland travel and ploughing of the lands, and also to instil fear into the indigenous Khoisan people (drawing from the entrenched Western European tradition of seeing riders as symbols of dominance).¹⁷ While the Dutch were initially interested in domesticating wild horses (zebra and quagga), they found they could not even catch them.¹⁸ Swart notes that establishing a settler equine stock was not an easy task. Due to the long journey from Holland, the VOC resorted to sending stock from their base in Java, probably from Sumbawa, known as ‘South East Asia Ponies’.¹⁹ These imported horses were integral in colonial conquest: ‘[the use] of horses and guns was at the very heart of South Africa’s colonial history.’²⁰ But the horses themselves remained vulnerable to predation and pathogen. No substantial feral population ever arose, and horses were commodities that were eagerly traded across racial and ethnic boundaries by the nineteenth century as valuable possessions, especially in times of war.²¹

While colonisation on horseback continued over the eighteenth century in southern Africa, back in Britain, Astley had discovered that equestrian demonstrations in the ring were a potential business venture. He erected a permanent structure in 1769 in Islington, a popular rural resort area, and established a riding school with his wife, Patty.²² Astley’s famous equestrian acts included vaulting, snatching a handkerchief from the ground at a gallop, standing on multiple horses while jumping over obstacles, and even standing on his head and firing a pistol.²³ Another rider, Charles Hugh, started a competing arena in 1782 and used the word ‘circus’²⁴ to describe it. Of course, as argued by Forrest and Mattfeld, among other equestrian historians, Astley was not the first trick rider in London. Equestrian acts had been popular since the classical period, but combining trick riding with jugglers, dancers and

¹⁵ Swart in *Riding High* explains that African horse sickness posed a ‘pathogenic barrier’ to horses wanting to reach the Cape overland, p. 18.

¹⁶ S. Pooley. ‘Jan van Riebeeck as Pioneering Explorer and Conservator of Natural Resources at the Cape of Good Hope (1652–62),’ *Environment and History*, (15), (1), 2009, p. 9.

¹⁷ S. Swart. ‘Riding high – horses, power and settler society c. 1654–1840,’ *Kronos*, (29), 2003, p. 52.

¹⁸ Swart claims that evidence suggests that the now extinct quagga were more tameable than the zebra, p. 51. Also see Pooley, ‘Jan van Riebeeck as Pioneering Explorer and Conservator,’ p. 17.

¹⁹ Swart, *Riding High – horses, power and settler society c. 1654–1840*, p. 38.

²⁰ Swart, *Riding High*, p. 19.

²¹ S. Swart. ‘Horses in the South African War, c. 1899–1902,’ *Society & Animals*, (18), (4), 2010.

²² Sometimes also referred to as Petsy or Patti. See J. McConnell. *A Ring, a Horse and a Clown: An Eight Generation History of the Hannefords*, (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1992), p. 1.

²³ Forrest, *The Age of the Horse*, p. 121, Mattfeld. *Becoming Centaur*, p. 131, and Kwint, Astley, Phillip – 1742–1814, 2004, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ez.sun.ac.za/view/> (Accessed 20 March 2020).

²⁴ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*, p. 5.

performing clowns, as both Astley and Hughes did, was novel.²⁵ Astley was the first rider to take a cordoned-off area suitable for riding and fence it in such a way that only paying spectators could enjoy the performance. While he was of course a horseman, Astley was, first and foremost, a businessman.²⁶



Figure 2: A sketch of P. Astley (1742–1814)²⁷

While initially founded on displaying equestrian tricks, these acts changed in response to an increasingly militarised society in the early nineteenth century. This led to the beginning of battle spectacles with as many as thirty horses, which set the precedent for increasingly large-scale war re-enactments with nationalist sentiments, with horses being integral performers of this genre.²⁸

What was unique about horses was their shifting and overlapping identities in the metropole – mapped onto their human owners’ identities or the labour the horses provided. Crowds who flocked to the early modern circuses consisted of both rich and poor, each with their own relationship with horses. In the working-class world, horses worked alongside people, pulling trams and delivery vans (as depicted in Figure 3), but they were also aristocratic, as the king and the lady’s mount and racehorse. Circus horses, (along with other horses in Western society)

²⁵ Forrest, *The Age of the Horse* and Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur*.

²⁶ Astley’s original ring was about 62 feet (18.89 metres) in diameter. Its size was eventually settled at a diameter of 42 feet (12.8 metres), which has since become the international standard for all circus rings. Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur*, pp. 124–125.

²⁷ <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw12500/Philip-Astley> (Accessed 2 July 2019).

²⁸ Most notably after Jon Astley’s (Philip Astley’s son) 1807 hippodrama about Russian Cossack riders. See P. Tait, *Fighting Nature: Travelling menageries, animal acts and war shows*, (Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016), p. 107.

fell within Shukin's broad concept of 'animal capital',²⁹ as they functioned as the main economic investment and an integral part of the profit-making business of the circus industry.³⁰ Some circus historians have suggested that the ubiquity of the horse in pre-automotive society heightened the audience's astonishment at what the riders could do. Kwint argues that much of the wonder over horse performances seems to have stemmed from their transfigured quality. For working-class audiences, they had escaped their stereotypical roles as beasts of burden (pulling carts, public transport or going down the mines), and were seen as able to fly along with their riders in 'acts of gleeful freedom and transcendence'.³¹



Figure 3: A horse pulling a heavy-loaded coal cart in Boston, America, in the 1870s³²

So, horses helped make the circus a peculiar space of coming together for social classes and genders – as was the case at early horse races in South Africa, which became a diverse space that was mixed in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and race. Some of these early meetings (the first of which, according to Swart, was held in Cape Town in 1797) were held on an open commonage, with no fence or entrance fee.³³ Similarly, in the circus ring, no member of society was turned away from attending. However, similar to what occurred later in the stands of horse racing and the halls of theatre, seat pricing was used to create separate seating areas and social

²⁹ See N. Shukin. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, (London: University Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 7. See also: M. Chrulw and D. J. Wadiwel (eds). *Foucault and animals*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2017).

³⁰ Other species of wild animals also became part of circus capital, once they joined at a later stage. See. P. Tait. 'Replacing injured horses, cross-dressing and dust: modernist circus technologies in Asia,' *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, (38), (2) p. 151.

³¹ M. Kwint. 'Circus and Nature in Late Georgian England,' in R. Koshar. (ed). *Histories of Leisure*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 48.

³² *Our Dumb Animals*, Boston, June 1874, Volume 7, p. 5.

³³ Swart, 'Riding high – horses, power and settler society c. 1654–1840,' p. 58.

exclusivity as was in the metropole.³⁴ The so-called ‘Native Gallery’ was the section of the circus ring stand with the lowest price, yet this only seemed to be used in adverts from the early 1900s onwards.³⁵ While all could attend, segregation along class and racial lines was set in place by price – as seen in the images below. In the early days of Fillis’s performances in the Cape, he claimed that his audiences were made up predominantly of ‘Malays’ (a term used in the 1850s to designate mainly Muslims from other people of mixed-race descent)³⁶ who were ‘keen appreciators of horsemanship and horse training’.³⁷ While the circus welcomed a racially diverse audience, it should be noted that equestrian riders were predominantly of European descent in contrast to the ‘native assistants’ (or ‘ring boys’), who were employed by all three circuses, and the ‘African transport riders’, who were employed mainly by Fillis to advise the best possible routes to travel via ox wagon, before the implementation of large-scale railway systems in the late 1880s.³⁸

— — — — —
 Prices .— Boxes 10/6 per seat ;
 Stalls, 7/6 ; Pit, 5/6 ;
 Gallery, 3/- ; Native
 Gallery, 2/6.

Figure 4: Prices at Fillis’s Circus, 1907³⁹

³⁴ See V. Bickford-Smith. ‘Leisure and Social Identity in Cape Town, British Cape Colony, 1838–1910,’ *Kronos*, 1998/1999, pp. 114–116.

³⁵ This distinction by prices is evident in all three of the circus companies and can be seen in advertisements in *The Rand Daily Mail*, *The Mafeking Mail* and *The Cape Times*, among others.

³⁶ The term ‘Malay’ became a term that distinguished Muslims from other so-called coloured people. While popularly associated with a slave past, the Malay identity was dependent on the participation of free blacks who could assert their personal freedom to maintain a distinct cultural lifestyle. Today, the term continues to be a contested term, with a number of voices in support of and against it. See A. Gaulier & D. Martin. *Cape Town Harmonies: Memory, Humour and Resilience*, (Cape Town: African Minds, 2017), p. xxvi, and M. Adhikari. “‘God Made the White Man, God Made the Black Man...’: Popular Racial Stereotyping of Coloured People in Apartheid south Africa,” *South African Historical Journal*, (55), 2006, p. 160.

³⁷ F. E. Fillis. *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa: 20 Years experience in South Africa: Life and Adventures of Frank E. Fillis*, (London: Stafford, 1901), p. 11.

³⁸ See Fillis, *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa*, p. 39, C. Ricketts. *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus*, (Johannesburg: Self Published, 2003), p. 84, and C. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), p. 20.

³⁹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Mafeking Mail*, p. 1. 18 July 1907

**ADMISSION—Box Seats 7/6, Reserved
Chairs 6/-. Dress Circle 5/-. Circle 4/-.
Gallery 3/-. Separate Native Gallery,
2/-. Children half-price.**

Figure 5: Prices at Pagel's Circus, 1908⁴⁰

An interesting point to consider, given that circus horses brought not only classes and races together in witnessing a shared spectacle (albeit from separate stands), is whether it also drew men and women together.⁴¹ Moreover, one could ask whether circus equestrian acts broke down gender binaries due to the fact that they were conducted by both male and female performers. In the early days of the circus, mastery over the horse required the quintessential man: horsemanship was headlined as 'manly'. However, exceptional women could be used for some circus activities to break free of tradition – Astley's wife, Patty, being the first.⁴² She was famous for riding around the ring on horseback 'with swarms of bees covering her hands and arms like a muff'.⁴³ While it remains difficult to pinpoint the first woman to ride the *haute école* dressage in the circus, it is known that Philippine Tourniare, whose husband had worked for Astley, was performing dressage by 1801.⁴⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, the *haute école* was popular worldwide in the circus ring, and many of the celebrated riders were women, with the first in history being granted the opportunity to make displays of virtuoso professional dressage.⁴⁵ However, this chapter argues (in agreement with Hedenberg and Pfinster) that putting female equestrian performers on as the 'show stoppers' actually created a spectacle out of their act, rather than providing equal footing between male and female riders. This will be demonstrated in subsequent sections by analysing female equestrian acts in South Africa's circus ring.

Tait argues that, for the first 100 years after Astley invented the circus, the programme remained centred around a display of 'equestrian prowess with the rider's mastery and

⁴⁰ 'Menagerie and Circus,' *The Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1908, p. 7

⁴¹ Historically, horse races were mainly watched by men, but no law excluded women from attending, and many did come to watch.

⁴² Kwint, 'Circus and Nature in Late Georgian England,' p. 53.

⁴³ This performance was accomplished by a method called caging the queen. The queen bee was confined by a fine thread tied around her thorax that controlled her movements, and the other bees would follow their queen as she moved around the ring. K. Lavers. 'Horses in Modern, New and Contemporary Circus,' *Animal Studies Journal*, (4), (2), 2015, p. 148.

⁴⁴ The *haute école* was a highly stylised form of classical riding advanced dressage. S. Forrest, 'The Horsewomen of the Belle Époque,' *The Paris Review*, 9 January 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/01/09/the-horsewomen-of-the-belle-epoque/> (Accessed 2 April 2019).

⁴⁵ Forrest, *The Age of the Horse*, p. 128.

acrobatic skills impressing spectators accustomed to horses and horse riding'.⁴⁶ *Haute école* was still performed in the circus at the turn of the twentieth century, but its popularity was already diminishing as new acts began to proliferate, like acrobatics and performances which included exotic animals (most notably, big cats).⁴⁷ Some early British and European circus programmes did include other domesticated animals, such as dogs, geese, rams or goats.⁴⁸ The 'learned pig'⁴⁹ was already presented by Astley in 1784. However, as traveling menageries expanded in size and species, the once-dominant equestrian acts became relegated to only one or two acts as wild animals became the main attractions during large twentieth-century circuses.⁵⁰ The rise in capital, trade networks and the public demand to see demonstrations of 'man against exotic beasts' meant that, by the mid-twentieth century, the traditional equestrian-only circus in Europe was something of the past.⁵¹ While the rise of wild animal performances, most notably lion taming shows, will be discussed in the following chapter, this chapter is devoted to equestrian circus acts performed to South African audiences (in both the British colonies and Boer republics) to consider how they resembled or diverted from traditional acts performed overseas. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, Swart showed that two unique horse cultures emerged in South Africa: 'one embracing the British-led racing industry, the other a more utilitarian use of horses'.⁵² Hence, this chapter includes a neglected aspect of the use of horses in the British-led circus industry.

Fillis's equestrian acts: Military and masculinity, 1882–1910

Frank Fillis came from an old English circus family. His uncle, James Fillis, is remembered as, 'the greatest high school rider of all time'⁵³ with an individual technique of breaking in and riding horses. Fillis began his career as a jockey and horse trainer, with his first performance in South Africa in Bell's Circus on 6 September 1880 in Cape Town. The *Cape Times* described

⁴⁶ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, acrobatic acts also started on horseback. John H. Glenroy, an American equestrian, accomplished the first somersault on horseback in 1846. See J. H. Glenroy and S. S. Stanford. *Ins and Outs of Circus Life Or, Forty-two Years of Travel of John. H. Glenroy: Bareback rider through United States, Canada, South America and Cuba*. (Boston: M.M Wing & Company, 1885).

⁴⁸ Forrest, *The Age of the Horse*, p. 129.

⁴⁹ The learned pig could read, write and cast accounts by means of typographical cards, and was able to 'solve questions in the four rules of Arithmetic,' See M. Mattfeld. "'Genus Porcus Sophisticus": The Learned Pig and the Theatrics of National Identity in Late Eighteenth-Century London,' in L. Orozco and J. Parker-Starbuck (eds). *Performing animality: animals in performance practices*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 57–76.

⁵⁰ Tait, 'Replacing injured horses, cross-dressing and dust: modernist circus technologies in Asia,' p. 150.

⁵¹ D. Jando. 'Short History of the Circus,' *Circopedia*, <http://www.circopedia.org> (Accessed 2 August 2019).

⁵² Swart, *Riding High*, p. 37.

⁵³ The term 'high school riding' here means dressage or *haute école*. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 92. James Fillis's book, *Breaking and Riding: With Military Commentaries* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1902), is still seen as one of the most important works ever written on dressage.

him as the ‘great equestrian from Hengler’s Circus in London’.⁵⁴ By 1882, he had taken over the travelling Bell’s Circus to start his own.⁵⁵ Fillis’s equestrian skills and often dangerous attempts were integral to his career, but this chapter will argue that his style wasn’t uniquely South African, but rather was inspired by his early workings in England and at the British Bell’s Circus. What was unique, however, was the way in which he adapted the military symbolism often portrayed in metropolitan spectacles to fit within distinctly southern African settings and themes. This section will discuss some of Fillis’s equestrian performances to demonstrate the ways in which he borrowed and deviated from his British roots.

Fillis’s equestrian acts mimicked Astley’s demonstrations of trick riding and skill (leaping onto horses, balancing, picking a handkerchief from the ground while at a gallop), as well as the dangerous and exciting elements of his performances. His first ever act for Bell’s Circus in front of a South African audience consisted of him leaping over twenty soldiers armed with guns. He ran down an incline plank, struck the springboard, and jumped over them as they fired their pistols.⁵⁶ Fillis struck off on his own in early 1882, after purchasing some of Bell’s Circus, which was auctioned off in November 1881. A most notable purchase was Bell’s horse called Black Bess, who had already been trained to perform several hippodramas (spectacles of equestrianised melodramas).⁵⁷ In popular hippodramas, the horses themselves appeared as the ‘stars’ of the show (rescuing heroines or playing dead).⁵⁸ A practical example of this was Black Bess’s performance in the drama of ‘Dick Turpin’s Ride to York’, a popular circus act based on the legendary highwayman Richard Turpin, who supposedly fled from authorities 320 kilometres overnight from London to York on his horse Black Bess (which was popularised by the success of Harris Ainsworth’s 1834 novel, *Rookwood*).⁵⁹ Fillis claimed to have been the first performer to bring this act to the smaller towns of South Africa, describing them as a ‘veritable gold mine’.⁶⁰ The cause of this success was supposedly the skill of Black Bess, especially the extremely realistic final death scene, which caused the Boer audience to be

⁵⁴ ‘Bell’s National Amphitheatre,’ *Cape Times*, 6 September 1880, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 75.

⁵⁶ Fillis, *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa*, p. 12. In 1883, he added a ‘hazardous jump on horseback through a hoop bristling with daggers’. ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 30 July 1883, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Saxon states that: ‘The true hippodrama is play in which trained horses are considered actors, with business, often leading actions, of their own to perform.’ A. H. Saxon. *Enter Foot and Horse: A History of Hippodrama in England and France*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 1968), and Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ A. H. Saxon, ‘Circus as Theatre: Astley’s and its Actors in the Age of Romanticism,’ *Educational Theatre Journal*, (27), (3), 1975, p. 301.

⁵⁹ J. Richards. *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York*, (New York: Routledge, 1977), p. 222.

⁶⁰ Fillis, *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa*, p. 36.

‘completely carried away by this spectacle’.⁶¹ Fillis declared the success among the Boer audiences was due to their personal connection to the final scene – they often had to ride long journeys and it was not uncommon for a horse to strike dead or give up entirely underneath them.⁶²



Figure 6: Sketch of the ‘legend’ Dick Turpin riding his horse Black Bess⁶³

While horses could attract audiences by reflecting their lived realities and quotidian experiences, quite the opposite could be true too. Bouissac explains that certain breeds of horse could be used to bring exotic or exciting elements to circus performances. For example, common farm horses from Norway were popular circus horses in England and Southern Europe because their colour and shape (light beige coat, blackish mane and tail, and short rounded body) are strikingly different from the common horses that roam these countries. In this same vein, Bouissac states that Belgian horses were often featured in Brazilian circuses.⁶⁴ Thoroughbreds were the breed of choice for Fillis’s Circus, as he argued that ‘they do everything with more grace and style than any other breed’.⁶⁵ As stated earlier, Swart argues that the enthusiasm for horse racing was a culture brought in by British administration from 1795, and through this, the Thoroughbred came into being in South Africa – a breed that is, both in terms of physique and disposition, ideal for galloping at high speeds. The first English Thoroughbreds were imported to the Cape in 1792 immediately prior to the British occupation

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ National Archives UK, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=25. (Accessed 19 August 2019).

⁶⁴ P. Bouissac. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning, and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 20.

⁶⁵ ‘The training of circus horses: A chat with Mr. Fillis,’ *Morning Bulletin*, 5 September 1893, p. 10.

and the institution of racing.⁶⁶ Besides Thoroughbreds, Fillis's other equine performers consisted of Shetland and so-called Basuto ponies. The most well-known Basuto pony was called Billy, who first performed in January 1883.⁶⁷ A reviewer from *The Natal Witness* stated that: 'This little creature is the charm of the whole show: it dances, leaps chases Tony [another performer] around the ring to command.'⁶⁸ Performances by trick ponies can be traced back to Astley, who often presented acts combining clowns and ponies, such as 'Darby & Joan Supping with the Clown', which was presented by the clown John Ducrow in 1827 (not to be confused with his brother, Andrew, the celebrated equestrian) who sat 'perversely stirring his tea' with one toe, while the ponies (bonneted and with napkins around their necks) politely supped at their separate table.⁶⁹

Expanding from 'Dick Turpin', Fillis put on other famous equestrian dramas, such as 'Mazeppa' or 'The Wild Horse of Tartary' – an extremely popular act in the metropole, adapted from Voltaire's *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (1731) and later Lord Byron's lengthy poem published in June 1819. The title character was inspired by a real-life figure, Ivan Stepanovich Mazepa-Koledinsky⁷⁰, a young Polish courtier who was discovered to be in a romantic affair with a married woman and was punished by being bound naked to the back of a wild horse. The horse finally died from exhaustion with Mazeppa still tied to it, having fainted from pain and exposure. This basic story line had numerous adaptations and the label of 'Mazeppa' in a circus advert came to indicate little more than a wild horse ride.⁷¹ The earliest known equestrian production was advertised in *The Times* of London on 3 November 1823 to premiere at the Royal Colburg Theatre. From there, versions of this type of equestrian play were produced in other major cities, like at Paris's Cirque Olympique in 1825, and in New York in 1833 where it was a successful production for decades.⁷² While Van der Merwe claims Fillis first performed this on 8 June 1885 with a horse named Charlie, there is evidence that it was already being performed by January 1884, as can be seen by an advert in *The Port*

⁶⁶ The year the British initiated the First Occupation of the Cape another importation took place. Swart, *Riding High*, pp. 56–59.

⁶⁷ 'Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 23 January 1883, p. 6.

⁶⁸ 'Fillis' Circus,' *The Natal Witness*, 12 June 1883, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Saxon, 'Circus as Theatre: Astley's and its Actors in the Age of Romanticism,' 307.

⁷⁰ Sometimes also spelt 'Mazeppa'. See R. F. Weigley. *The Ages of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 111.

⁷¹ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*, p. 90.

⁷² K. Poppiti. *A History of Equestrian Drama in the United States: Hippodrama's Pure Air*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 39.

Elizabeth Telegraph titled: ‘Mazeppa or the Wild Horse of Tartary’.⁷³ While Bell’s Circus also advertised an act titled ‘Mazeppa’ in 1880, this seemed to resemble a ‘trick horse’ act rather than a hippodrama, which was presented by his daughter, Rose Bell.⁷⁴ In Fillis’s performance, he held the title role and it was clearly more of a production based on ‘Lord Byron’s celebrated Poem’.⁷⁵ While both ‘Dick Turpin’s Ride to York’ and ‘Mazeppa’ were popular in Europe and America, Fillis’s hippodramas became increasingly British in nature, drawing from long-standing traditions of hunting and war re-enactments as signs of Victorian masculinity.

For example, in July 1883, Fillis introduced a staging of English hunting titled: ‘Stag Hunt: A Sketch of Rural Life’, which consisted of a stud of leaping horses chasing after a stag, with sometimes up to 100 people in the ring at one time.⁷⁶ This was probably inspired by a similar act presented by Hengler’s Circus (where Fillis worked previously) in 1857.⁷⁷ These stags were, of course, not actually hunted, but formed part of the performance of English life. This performance of a stag hunt could be described as a ‘ritual of domination’ over nature, horses being integral partners to humans during this act (and, of course, during actual hunts). As argued by Yates, hunting is an overtly masculine demonstration that ultimate power over life and death can be exerted over someone else.⁷⁸ In Fillis’s stag hunt performance, the portrayal of masculinity is evident in the invite for ‘other gentleman’ to bring their horses and join the show, in what would arguably be a romanticised, nostalgic connection to their own primitive history of Man-the-Hunter.⁷⁹ Marvin argues that foxhunting, another popular English sporting event, is also somewhat performative – the English countryside becomes the ‘natural arena’ and the animals (hounds, horses and foxes) are themselves transformed by the attention paid to them, and by the demands made of them, into the performers of this event, which generates a deep emotional response in the humans both partaking and watching.⁸⁰

⁷³ ‘Fillis’s Circus Troupe,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 3 January 1884, p. 2, and ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Cape Mercantile Advertiser*, 25 March 1884, p. 3.

⁷⁴ ‘Bell’s National Amphitheatre,’ *Cape Times*, 7 December 1880, p. 2, and ‘Bell’s Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 6 May 1880, p. 2.

⁷⁵ ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Cape Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 March 1884, p. 3.

⁷⁶ ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 14 July 1883, p. 8. This had also appeared first in Bell’s Circus from 6 October in Cape Town, 1880. ‘Bell’s National Amphitheatre,’ *Cape Times*, 6 October 1880, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Van der Merwe claims that this was introduced by Fillis only in 1885, but through tracking newspaper reports, it was clear that he had been performing this skit from as early as July 1883.

⁷⁸ R. Yates. ‘Rituals of Dominionism in Human-Nonhuman Relations: Bullfighting, Hunting, Circuses to Petting,’ *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, (VII), (1), 2009, p. 142.

⁷⁹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 19 April 1884, p. 2

⁸⁰ G. Marvin. ‘Natural Instincts and Cultural Passions, Transformations and Performances in Foxhunting,’ *Performance Research*, (5), (2), pp. 108–109.

To prove how horses had shifting and mutable roles within circus performances, one only needs to consider the fact that they could act as both part of the predator and the prey; for example, the beloved trick pony Billy who performed as the stag during a performance in Natal in 1883.⁸¹ The following year, Billy was swapped out for a ‘real stag’ – a specimen of Creole game presented to Mr Fillis by a farmer of Rose Hill (from the island of Mauritius).⁸² Another act with strong pro-British sentiments was performed in November 1884, titled: ‘Shaw, the Life Guardsman or the Hero of Waterloo’, which was advertised as a performance of a military episode that illustrated the ‘high sense of duty, national feeling and self-sacrifice of England’s Military Organization’.⁸³ While these seemed strongly tied to British ideals, Fillis maintained that he still had a strong Afrikaans-speaking audience. When performing in Pretoria in August 1886, Fillis claimed that it had been fifteen years since any amusement had visited and ‘the Boer men and women went simply frantic over his show’.⁸⁴ He said, ‘My horsemanship sent them crazy.’⁸⁵ While hunting and other military performances were already being presented by Fillis in the first few years of his show, he began planning large-scale war re-enactments to be presented in the 1890s. Horses provided an element of authenticity to war re-enactments by creating a realistic, visible depiction of the war zone in the pre-technological era. These war re-enactments increased in popularity in the late nineteenth century, as society became increasingly militarised parallel to the rise of jingoist imperialism between the outbreak of the South African [Anglo-Boer] War in 1899 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914.⁸⁶ Through this, horses became political performers.

The first of such performances was advertised in Cape Town on 4 December 1895 as the, ‘Grand Military Spectacle: taken from the late Matabele War’, and was stated to be a scale never before attempted in South Africa with 200 people and over fifty horses in a single act.⁸⁷ This grand allegorical tableau represented the last moments of Major Alan Wilson’s life (Fillis playing Wilson), titled ‘Major Wilson’s Last Stand’.⁸⁸ This act depicted the night of 3 December 1893 during the Matabele War, when thirty-three young men under the command of Major Wilson who were trying to capture King Lobengula were surrounded and killed by

⁸¹ ‘Fillis’ Great Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 14 July 1883, p. 8.

⁸² ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 19 April 1884, p. 2

⁸³ ‘Fillis’ Great Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 27 November 1884, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Fillis, *Frank E Fillis’s Savage South Africa*, p. 57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ See R. J. Reid. *Warfare in African History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 145.

⁸⁷ ‘Fillis’s Mammoth Circus & Menagerie,’ *Cape Times*, 4 December 1895, p. 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Ndebele warriors close to the Shangani River.⁸⁹ Wilson and his comrades, who supposedly resisted the Matabele's vastly superior numbers until they ran out of ammunition, captured the imagination of British jingoists who celebrated the heroism of 'the Shangani Patrol'.⁹⁰ Van der Merwe argues that: 'It was this supreme sacrifice in the Victorian tradition of honour and heroism that Fillis wanted to capture in his show.'⁹¹ As a cultural signifier, dying heroically for Queen and country transformed Wilson's last stand into a powerful image of imperial sacrifice of both horse and human life.⁹²

Horses were essential components of this performance in order for it to be a realistic demonstration of the wars, and so they became politicised in this setting, part of a symbol of the might (and, in this case, sacrifice) of the British Empire. This spectacle proved so popular during the Christmas season in Cape Town that hundreds of spectators were turned away every night.⁹³ 'Major Wilson's Last Stand' formed the basis for Fillis's touring tableaux titled 'Savage South Africa', which he took to Earls Court in London in 1899.⁹⁴ These types of war re-enactments had been extremely popular in the metropole since the 1800s, but as imperialism gained momentum, the public embraced the enactment of this spectacle of British control over exotic 'natives' amid the rising imperial fervour of the late Victorian age.⁹⁵ Fillis would later travel to America with an altogether different troupe of performers to present spectacles of the South African War in 1904 at the St. Louis World Fair (again here, horses were used as political animals).⁹⁶ Thus, horses were an essential part to complete Fillis's masculine demonstrations of dangerous trick riding and military spectacles. However, away from the masculine sphere equine performances were far more complex and encompassed several other symbols and elements. For example, female equestrian riders performing dressage and other classical-styled

⁸⁹ See C. Peers. *The African Wars: Warriors and Soldiers of the Colonial Campaigns*, (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Books, 2010), p. 36.

⁹⁰ S. Barczewski. *Heroic Failure and the British*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 133.

⁹¹ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 91.

⁹² See R. H. MacDonald. *The Language of the Empire: Myths and Metaphors of Popular Imperialism, 1880–1913*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 24.

⁹³ 'Fillis's Circus and Menagerie,' *Cape Times*, 7 December 1895, p. 4.

⁹⁴ See B. Shephard. 'Showbiz Imperialism' in J. M. MacKenzie (ed). *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 98.

⁹⁵ One of the most successful acts was 'The Battle of Waterloo' by J. H. Amherst, first presented in 1824. The battles included limelight and flames, as well as loud sounds to create canon fire and exploding wagon effects. B. Assael. *The circus and Victorian society*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 51–53.

⁹⁶ The politics of this performance was not as simple as the others, because Fillis actually presented the Boers in a sympathetic light to American audiences. This is thoroughly addressed (although not from an animal history perspective) by J. Sutton. "'Transvaal Spectacles': South African Visions at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair,' *The Journal of South African and American Studies*, (8), (3), pp. 271–287.

circus acts elicited different emotional responses from the audience in comparison to their daring male counterparts.

Performing gender in South African equestrian shows

It can be argued that ‘doing gender’ was an indispensable part of the circus show. We have already seen how militarised masculinity was performed in jingoistic displays of imperial heroism and power. Similarly, while women on horseback in the circus exuded a kind of strength and power that other women in society might have appeared not to possess, they ultimately functioned within the well-defined parameters of a patriarchal colonial structure. As noted earlier, the desire to define masculinity in the nineteenth century gave way to a greater anxiety about the need to display femininity. This manifested in the commentary on female equestrian performers, which often stressed their prettiness, elegance and desirability to men.⁹⁷ In this way, the very outré nature of their act actually served not to destabilise, as it first appears, but rather, to further reinforce gender binaries. After all, the spectacle is deepened by a woman performing the dangerous or skilful act. Here, one is reminded of an altogether different Boswell who recorded Samuel Johnson’s words: ‘Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.’⁹⁸ Hence, at the heart of the circus riders’ performances were not only equestrianism, but also the notion of gender.

While female equestrian riders could be the ‘stars’ of their own performances, there remained a degree of ‘doing gender’ through a presentation of seemingly incompatible features during female equestrian performances: beauty, grace and femininity, as well as mastery of an art that was a traditionally male dominated.⁹⁹ This can be traced by comparing the style of performances, as well as the responses from the public of Fillis’s female equestrians. (The same comparison can be drawn with female lion tamers – which will be discussed in the following chapter.) In comparison to the descriptions of danger of Fillis’s trick acts, the female performers were described in a distinctly different manner. Rose Bell was claimed to have had ‘a perfect seat on horse-back’,¹⁰⁰ and her sister Emma was described as ‘light and graceful’ in all her movements.¹⁰¹ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph* stated in 1889 that: ‘People never tire of

⁹⁷ Kwint, ‘Circus and Nature in Late Georgian England,’ p. 53.

⁹⁸ J. Boswell. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1799), p. 327.

⁹⁹ Hedenberg & Pfister, ‘Ecuyères and “doing gender,”’ pp. 25–47.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 22 December 1887, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 24 December 1887, p. 5.

admiring a skilled lady horse rider's agility and grace.'¹⁰² Fillis's second wife, Eliza, performed ladylike riding, such as dressage and 'the cake walk', and was frequently described as a 'graceful equestrienne' who portrayed 'splendid' exhibitions.¹⁰³ When performing in Australia in the late 1890s, Van der Merwe claims that 'she was enthusiastically received' as female equestrians rarely performed there.¹⁰⁴ However, again here, it is clear to see the audiences perceptions of gender. Performing in New South Wales, a reviewer stated that Fillis's 'daring' jockey act was 'excellent', while a 'very pretty performance' was given by 'Madame Fillis' and the two other women in the troupe'.¹⁰⁵

While clearly being described in language attributed to females in late nineteenth-century society, women performing in male-dominated roles like jockey acts were added occasionally to the programme to create even more of a thrill. For example, Fillis's 1884 grand jockey act (jumping from the centre of the arena onto the back of his galloping horse without the assistance of his hands)¹⁰⁶ was later taken up by Emma Bell in 1887. Here, the *Cape Times* claimed her to be 'the only lady jockey rider in the world' attempting a feat 'rarely performed by gentleman riders'.¹⁰⁷ Another example can be drawn from the re-introduction of the hippodrama 'Mazeppa' in 1895, this time with a female lead role, taken up by Madeline Wirth.¹⁰⁸ This apparently proved to be an especially popular drama in the United States and Europe when portrayed by an actress who sensationalised the performance by wearing an outfit that simulated nakedness and displayed every contour of her body.¹⁰⁹ It seems that might have also been the case for Fillis's show; as described by *The Johannesburg Times*, the audience was 'electrified by the sight of Miss Madeline Wirth lashed to the wild horse of Tartary as he plunged through the air'.¹¹⁰ Two years later, another female named Lucy Carr took over this role.¹¹¹ Was this title role providing women with equal footing? It seems that, rather than

¹⁰² 'Fillis's Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 11 May 1889, p. 5.

¹⁰³ 'Fillis's Circus,' *Port Elizabeth and Eastern Province Standard*, 6 April 1895, p. 6. 'Fillis' Circus: An Excellent Entertainment,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 April 1907, p. 9. Over the next few years, she alternated between performing on her Thoroughbred, Dublin, as well as her Basuto pony, Charlie. 'Fillis' Circus Return Visit,' *Mafeking Mail*, 5 July 1909, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁵ 'Fillis's Circus,' *Barrier Miner*, 16 August 1894, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ 'Mr Frank Fillis,' *Cape Times*, 6 February 1884, p. 2

¹⁰⁷ 'Fillis' Amphitheatre,' *Cape Times*, 22 January 1887, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ 'Fillis's great Circus and Menagerie,' *The Johannesburg Times*, 26 January 1895, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ W. L. Slout. *En Route to the Great Eastern Circus and Other Essays on Circus History*, (England: Wildside Press, 2016), p. 53.

¹¹⁰ 'Fillis's great Circus and Menagerie,' *The Johannesburg Times*, 26 January 1895, p. 2.

¹¹¹ 'Fillis's Great Circus and Menagerie,' *Cape Times*, 15 January 1897, p. 4.

highlighting her talent, using a female lead in a role that portrayed her in a semi-nude manner emphasised her ‘femaleness’ and constructed her sexuality as the real attraction of the show.

Another point that militates against these acts breaking down sexist stereotypes was that female riders were usually ridden side-saddle in contrast to men who rode astride. Often, their costumes also complied with the feminine ideas of the time (fitted tops and long skirts in dark colours).¹¹² Objection to side saddle in Britain only came from 1885 onwards, when women began arguing that it caused ‘crookedness in [young girls] youthful figures’.¹¹³ *The Cape Daily Telegraph* reported in 1904 that there was a ‘quiet but steady growth among British equestriennes of using the man’s saddle’, as could be seen by the adverts in *The Ladies Tailor* for ‘ride-astride costumes’.¹¹⁴ However, in an Olympia Horse Show in London in 1913, the King required all the ladies to ride side-saddle in the parade, as he stated that this was the ‘proper way’.¹¹⁵ The correspondent for the *Cape Times* agreed by stating that in order ‘to establish a new practice we will have to wait until a wholly new kind of woman has been created’.¹¹⁶ If one considers this fact, equestrian performances exemplified the different styles and qualities expected from male and female riders, rather than shattered any gender norms. Overall, it is clear that Fillis’s equestrian acts ‘performed’ conventional masculinity and femininity through their styles and intended reception. But what about the other circuses in South Africa performing at the turn of the twentieth century? While Fillis was influenced by British ideals, Pagel used horses in a distinctly different manner in his circus, and was influenced by another British colony in the global South – Australia.

Pagel the strongman performer, 1905–1913

¹¹² Hedenberg and Pfister, ‘Ecuyères and “doing gender,”’ p. 40.

¹¹³ ‘How should ladies ride?’ *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 19 October 1907, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ ‘British Amazons,’ *The Cape Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 1904, p. 6.

¹¹⁵ ‘Side Saddle or Cross Saddle,’ *Cape Times*, 1 August 1913, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

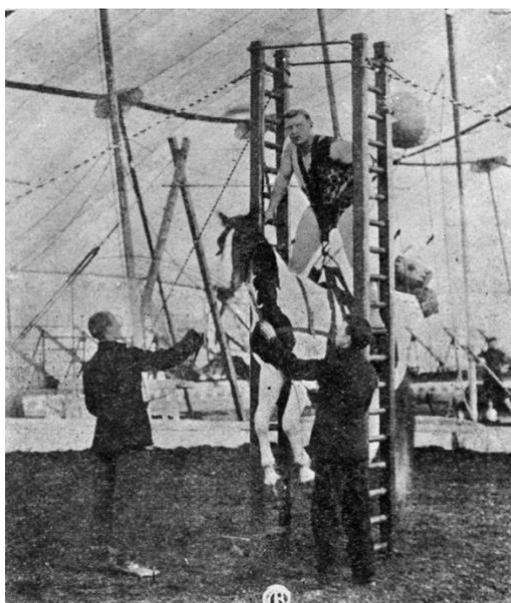


Figure 7: Pagel performing a strongman act with a horse in Brisbane, May 1903¹¹⁷

On arrival in South Africa in 1905, twenty years after Fillis started his acts, William Pagel rejoiced in the title as ‘the world’s champion strong man’ by attracting South African crowds to see him carrying a horse weighing up to over 400 kilograms up a 6-metre-long ladder, and lifting a dumbbell at arm’s length weighing over 140 kilograms.¹¹⁸ In Sydney, before the start of his circus career, he was employed to demonstrate his strength outside the restaurant where he worked as a sculler. With a rubber mouthpiece hooked onto a harness, Pagel clasped a rope behind his back and pulled the horse as it was encouraged to haul away.¹¹⁹ From there, his fame as a strongman grew and he began performing at Wirth’s Circus and Fitzgerald’s Circus in Australia from 1902.¹²⁰ South Africa and Australia have long been described as ‘sisters of the south’ due to their imperial links and dependence on the same seaborne transport networks.¹²¹ Gray, who studied the connections of South African and Australian theatre, explains that mail-boats from Southampton to Sydney inevitably docked at Cape Town, among other South African ports en route, so that, for over a century, products and personnel were exported from their common metropole to these interlinked colonies.¹²² The circus connection between the two colonies existed most starkly with Pagel, the German strongman and lion tamer, who made

¹¹⁷ Image courtesy of M. Sinnamon. ‘The Circus comes to Brisbane, May 1903 Blog,’ *John Oxley Library*, 20 May 2014.

¹¹⁸ ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Mafeking Mail*, 13 December 1905, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 65.

¹²⁰ D. P. Webster. ‘The European Corner William Pagel: Circus Strongman,’ *Iron Game History*, 1995, p. 11.

¹²¹ As described by R. G. Howarth upon becoming a professor of English at UCT in the 1950s. See S. Gray. ‘Notes on South Africa and Australian Theatre,’ *South African Theatre Journal*, (12), (1), 1998, p. 174.

¹²² Gray, ‘Notes on South Africa and Australian Theatre,’ p. 174.

his reputation in fair-grounds in his youth in Tasmania and Queensland before moving to South Africa with his wife, Mary Dinsdale, in 1905.¹²³ Arriving in the aftermath of the South African War (1899–1902), in a war-torn country trying to get on its feet, he started his circus. Pagel used horses in his circus performances for different reasons, and as this chapter will explain, concomitantly in a different way to Fillis.

Pagel performed this same strongman horse act on his tours to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Beira on the east coast of Mozambique in 1906, and each were met with enormous enthusiasm from the diverse crowds.¹²⁴ While different to Fillis's, these acts were not unique to South Africa; strongman performances were popular in the metropole and can be dated back to ancient Greece, which had plenty of legendary heroes, like Milo of Croton who won ten Olympic wrestling titles.¹²⁵ The so-called golden age of professional strongmen began in the late seventeenth century and consisted of performers using a combination of heavy weights and wild animals to display their strength.¹²⁶ Another act that drew crowds to Pagel's shows in the early 1900s was his 'chain-breaking contest' between himself and two horses, whereby he was hooked between them using strong chains.¹²⁷ The *Rand Daily Mail* stated that this performance resembled the 'ancient form of punishment of tearing men to pieces by horses'.¹²⁸ Pagel's physique enabled him to withstand the pulling, creating a dramatic demonstration of masculine strength. In Johannesburg in 1909, the crowd was extremely excited over this performance and many ran into the ring to congratulate him afterward.¹²⁹ In 1913, he bought forty-six 'beautifully trained horses' and, after that, more traditional types of equestrian acts were performed in his show.¹³⁰ However, later that same year, Pagel increased his strongman acts to include supporting a bridge with his shoulders and allowing horses, ponies and several men to walk over it – the weight being over 136 kilograms.¹³¹ His 'strongman–horse'

¹²³ He employed Australians like Kiddo and other members of the Balcombe family and the Warrens, and imported intact specialist acts like the Seven Marinettis, the Pedrinis, the Locanas, and Carlisle and Mundy. *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ 'The strongest man on earth to visit Beira,' *The Beira Post*, 10 January 1906, p. 4.

¹²⁵ E. Blackemore. 'Strongest Men in History Hoisted Cattle and Crushed Stones to Show their might,' *History Stories*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/worlds-strongest-men-ancient-greece-rome> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

¹²⁶ The strongest man in the world on 2 November 1889 was a man called Charles Aloysius Sampson, born in Alsace-Lorraine, who lifted heavy dumbbells and other apparatus on a stage in London. He also used wild animals in his performances. He supposedly wrestled with polar bears and lifted an elephant off the ground (using a powerful harness), similar to some of Pagel's strongman acts. See G. Kent. *The Strongest Men on Earth: When the Muscle Men Ruled Show Business*, (London: The Robson Press, 2012).

¹²⁷ 'Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 December 1909, p. 9 and 'Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 January 1910, p. 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Their breed was not mentioned. 'Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 March 1913, p. 9.

¹³¹ 'Amusements: Pagel's Circus,' *The Rhodesia Herald*, p. 3. 4 September 1913.

performances were a unique attraction to his show, and he steered away from displaying any type of imperial or military spectacles, perhaps to create a distinction between him and Fillis's show, and also perhaps due to the lack of any British connection. After all, Fillis had held a visual monopoly over travelling entertainment in South Africa and Pagel needed market differentiation, which he created through his display of physical strength. In contrast to Fillis's skilled equestrian performances like dressage and *haute école*, Pagel's strongman acts were the main attraction to his show. To end this detailed historical comparison, this chapter turns to the last circus under study, the Boswell's Circus (another British family), to consider the roles that horses played in their circus company.

The tradition of the educated horse: Boswell's 'clever' ponies, 1912

The Boswell Brothers' Circus dates back to December 1911, when James Clements Boswell, his wife Louisa and his five sons (Walter, James, Alfred, Sydney and Claude) arrived at Table Bay from England with a menagerie of performing animals.¹³² Their family circus had been performing since January 1882 in Yorkshire, where their show consisted of equestrian acts, a troupe of performing dogs, ponies, clowns and acrobats, as well as a brass and string band.¹³³ They arrived in South Africa after being contracted by Madame Fillis, who had seen them perform in London while looking for acts to bring back for her own show.¹³⁴ In Madame Fillis's Circus in 1911, the Boswell troupe appeared in front of a South African audience for the first time.¹³⁵ In 1912, Madame Fillis struck hard times and decided to disband her show. The Boswells approached Pagel's Circus who had no openings for them, and stuck without work, they decided to try and go off on their own. They presented their act (known as the miniature Boswell's Circus) at 'The Hall by the Sea' in Durban, which was met with such great success that their contract was extended.¹³⁶ In comparison to Fillis and Pagel's equine performances that attracted audiences through masculine demonstrations (daring jockey tricks and strongman acts), displays of femininity and grace during dressage acts, and romantic re-imaginings of the military, Boswell's Circus modelled their equestrian performance to appeal to their audiences' psyche. In September 1912, an advert for the *Cape Times* stated that Boswell's Circus would be opening shortly, introducing the 'smallest ponies in the world'.¹³⁷ These ponies (Silverdale

¹³² 'Boswell's Circus to Assist "Mail" Christmas Fund,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 December 1955, p. 7.

¹³³ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 6

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 14.

¹³⁵ *The Star*, 23 December 1911.

¹³⁶ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 19.

¹³⁷ 'Opening Shortly,' *Cape Times*, 5 September 1912, p. 6.

and Nightlight) were described as ‘educated’ and ‘comical,’ most renowned for their wrestling act with clowns (both winning best out of three).¹³⁸ These two ponies also see-sawed, box-danced and ‘did almost everything except talk’.¹³⁹ Here, the Boswell troupe was drawing from the longstanding attraction of the ‘educated horse’, which can be traced back for centuries, even millennia, to the streets of London and Paris between 1595 and 1600, where Moraco the performing horse of William Banks captured the imagination of those who witnessed him fetch thrown objects like a dog, jump like a monkey and walk on his hind legs.¹⁴⁰

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the nostalgic dream of an intellectual animal came true with the celebrated *Kluge Hans* (Clever Hans), the German horse trained by Wilhelm von Osten (a mathematics teacher), who drew worldwide attention in the first decade of the 1900s with his remarkable feats of arithmetic and other unlikely intellectual capabilities.¹⁴¹ He solved calculations by tapping numbers or letters with his hoof in order to answer questions. The educated horse act was a profitable act in circus tradition. However, within Boswell’s Circus, these ‘clever’ ponies were more comical than educated, and entertained rather than astounded their audiences with any truly numerical or intellectual abilities. After all, Clever Hans had been debunked after an investigation by psychologist Oskar Pfungst in 1907, when it became clear that Hans was not really accomplishing these cerebral achievements, but simply closely watching the reactions of his trainer – but the public was harder to convince of this.¹⁴²

In 1915, the company introduced Shamrock the singing donkey to their collection of ‘educated’ animal acts.¹⁴³ He ended off their show by singing the well-known song ‘Tipperary’.¹⁴⁴ However, a reviewer from the *Natal Advertiser* on June 1915 stated that, while Shamrock did his best, it was a wide stretch of imagination to say he really did sing the song, even with the volume of sound and changes of ‘notes’ heard. It was stated that, overall, it was a weird performance.¹⁴⁵ That year, the troupe also featured a Wild West trope, with a performer named Bronco Bill who introduced a bucking pony named Karo and offered anyone in the audience a

¹³⁸ ‘Boswell’s Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 18 September 1912, p. 5.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Bouissac, *Circus as Multimodal Discourse*, p. 59.

¹⁴¹ L. Samhita and H. J. Gross. ‘The “Clever Hans Phenomenon” revisited,’ *Communicate & Integrative Biology*, (6), (6), 2013, p. 271.

¹⁴² N. Dershowitz and E. Nissan (eds). *Language, Culture, Computation: Computing for the Humanities, Law and Narratives*, (New York: Springer, 2014), p. 234.

¹⁴³ ‘Coming Soon,’ *The Mafeking Mail*, 7 August 1915, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Boswell’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 March 1915, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 28.

prize to be able to ride him (although no one during that tour succeeded).¹⁴⁶ Compared to Pagel, the Boswells' equestrian acts were closer to those presented by Fillis in Britain; although, being much smaller, they focussed on comical trick ponies, rather than large-scale war re-enactments. Later, Boswell's Circus would become famous for their wild animal performances as these acts increased in popularity.¹⁴⁷ By 1916, they responded to the need for wild animals in their performances and began making additions to their menagerie (which was already incorporated in Pagel's Circus from 1905, their biggest competition).

Considering these three circuses, it is clear that there were various equestrian acts presented, some resembling those practised in the metropole (the educated horse, hippodramas and war re-enactments), and others resembling closely to American Wild West shows. Equine performances were also adapted to suit the particular gender of the rider, the audience being presented to, and the context of the show – shifting towards becoming social and political symbols over time. But the American West was not the only 'wild' trope to become popular. The next section of this chapter will focus on the rising use of wild animals, which would have dramatic effects on the circus equine act, beginning with the tracing of performances of the local striped wild horse – the zebra.

What about wild horses? The circus zebra

In the eyes of the 1820s settlers, the stocky, striped wild horse was at once exceptionally exotic and curiously common.¹⁴⁸ It resembles a donkey or pony, whose presence in a circus ring would attract little attention; but in place of a drab coat, zebras offer something truly spectacular in the form of their stripes.¹⁴⁹ English naturalist, William Burchell, (after whom the subspecies Burchell's zebra, *Equus burchelli*, is named) described them as 'the most beautiful marked animals [he] had ever seen'.¹⁵⁰ Zebras can be classified into three main species (within which a number of subspecies have been recognised): the Grévy's zebra (*Equus grevyi*), the mountain zebra (*Equus zebra*) and the plains zebra (*Equus quagga*).¹⁵¹ However, it is not just the stripes

¹⁴⁶ 'Boswell's Royal Circus,' *Rhodesia Herald*, 17 September 1915, p. 21.

¹⁴⁷ At the start of WWI (1914), James returned to England with Claude, leaving his other four sons to continue Boswell's Circus.

¹⁴⁸ Between April and June 1820, about 4000 immigrants from Britain arrived in the Cape. They were encouraged to settle in the frontier area of what is now the Eastern Cape. See P. Maylam. *South Africa's Racial Past*, (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), p. 35.

¹⁴⁹ It is widely believed that the earliest horse was in fact the zebra. See C. Plumb and S. Shaw. *Zebra*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), pp. 7–8.

¹⁵⁰ R. Jameson. *Narrative of Discovery and Adventure in Africa*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), p. 314.

¹⁵¹ Plumb and Shaw, *Zebra*, p. 200.

that differentiate the zebra from the rest of the horse family. The zebra is notoriously ‘untameable’. Although throughout history there are those that have proven otherwise – the four Burchell zebras who were broken in to harness and pulled the carriage of Walter Rothschild, of the famous banking family, around London – the species as a whole has not proven amenable to domestication.¹⁵² They would have been a useful alternative as draught animals, due to their immunity to horse sickness carried by the tsetse fly, for instance, which had proven fatal to so many horses in the early days of colonising South Africa, but as described by R. J. Gordon, zebras were ‘tough good pullers but kicked and bit too much’.¹⁵³ Kolbe speculated in 1727 that if domestic stock of horses had not been introduced so rapidly, a more determined effort would have been sustained at attempting to tame zebras.¹⁵⁴

Despite, or as this chapter will show, perhaps *because* they were so difficult to train, exhibiting a zebra remained a spectacle presented by circuses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Zebras were first exhibited in a circus arena in 1832, as part of Atkin’s Menagerie at Astley’s Circus. By this time, Astley was under the management of Andrew Ducrow, a renowned equestrian. He displayed a ‘zebra hunt’ in which he pursued four of them on horseback as a demonstration of imperial dominance over nature.¹⁵⁵ According to Nance, the circus zebras were usually relegated to being led in a parade or displayed in a pen, while the few performing zebras that did appear often turned out to be white ponies striped with boot polish.¹⁵⁶ In South Africa in 1841, an advert in *De Zuid Afrikaan* makes mention of an auction of a ‘very tame’ zebra.¹⁵⁷ However, in Fillis’s Circus, the first zebra was only exhibited in 1887 after being purchased by his manager, Mr Buonamici, in Grahamstown, but it remained untrained and was only paraded around in the ring.¹⁵⁸ In 1888, however, Fillis presented an act by ‘Master Arthur Peacock’ who rode the zebra around the ring. An advertising stunt in the papers (falsely) deemed this act as unprecedented and unparalleled, claiming it to be: ‘The only zebra ever trained in the universe.’¹⁵⁹

¹⁵² J. Ryder (eds). *The Carriage Journal*, (38), (3), 2000, p. 124.

¹⁵³ R. C. Sturgis. *The Mammals that Moved Mankind: A History of Beasts of Burden*, (United Kingdom: Bloomington, 2015), p. 20.

¹⁵⁴ Swart, *Riding High*, p. 51, quoting P. Kolbe. *Beschrywing van die Jaap de G. Hoop*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁵ S. Ward. *Beneath the Big Top: A Social History of the Circus in Britain*, (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Books, 2014), p. 65.

¹⁵⁶ See: S. Nance. *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 85.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Advertisement,’ *De Zuid Afrikaan*, 9 July 1841, p. 4.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Fillis’s Menagerie,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 20 December 1887, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Fillis’ Great Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 22 December 1888, p. 2.

While white colonists had long lamented that zebras were untrainable animals, famous horse trainer and military veterinarian, Captain Horace Hayes, proved otherwise on his tour of South Africa from 1891 to 1892.¹⁶⁰ After already building an international reputation through his books on horsemanship, Hayes came to tour South Africa to exhibit a ‘horse breaking class’ where he called forth anyone to bring him ‘unbroken’ or ‘vicious’ horses and offered specific demonstrations of ‘breaking in’ and training the animals in an impressively short space of time.¹⁶¹ It also included giving lectures with reference to various breeds of horses and cattle, as well as practical instructions to training.¹⁶² A notable tool used to draw people to his show was his much-vaunted feat of already having tamed a wild mountain zebra in Calcutta, India, the year before, as depicted in Figure 8 below.



Figure 8: Mrs Alice Hayes riding a mountain zebra in 1891¹⁶³

Again, here the notion of performing gender is clear as Horace used his wife riding the zebra to demonstrate not *her* skill, but *his* – implying that he had made it so tame even a woman could ride it. Commenting on this occasion, he stated that, ‘this was certainly the first occasion a lady ever rode this variety of zebra which has the reputation all over the world of being

¹⁶⁰ Hayes was promoted to Lieutenant in 1867, and then left on the *Dilbhur* to India in charge of a group of Royal Artillery recruits. He resigned his commission in 1879 to return to Britain. See M. H. Hayes. *Indian racing reminiscences*, (London: W. Thacker & Co, 1883). Also see M. H. Hayes. *Among Men and Horses*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894) for a detailed account of his South African tour.

¹⁶¹ M. Adelman and K. Thompson (eds). *Equestrian Cultures in Global and Local Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2017), p. 261.

¹⁶² ‘Theatre Royal,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 February 1892, p. 6.

¹⁶³ A. Hayes. *The Horsewomen: A practical guide to Side-saddle riding*, (London: W. Thacker & Co, 1893), p. 239.

untrainable.’¹⁶⁴ His wife, Alice Hayes, stated that the breaking ‘was very hard work’ and her husband’s hands were cut to pieces.¹⁶⁵ The photograph was eventually published in the *The Queen* magazine, a British high society women’s magazine established in 1861. On noting the importance of this photo, Alice stated: ‘I believe I am the only woman who has ridden a mountain zebra, this photograph is probably unique.’¹⁶⁶ In the ring, Horace claimed he could make this zebra do what he wanted, but if he rode it outside, he said: ‘it took me wherever it liked. I had not the slightest power to either stop or guide it.’¹⁶⁷ He gave that same zebra to Fillis, who at that time was performing in Calcutta, and it was ridden by an Australian rough rider, Steve Margaret.¹⁶⁸

On Horace’s tour of South Africa, he trained the infamous zebra on numerous occasions.¹⁶⁹ The zebra was showcased in February 1892 in Port Elizabeth and again in May of the same year at the Pretoria Agricultural show – on both occasions ridden by his wife.¹⁷⁰ Horace claimed the mountain zebra to be the most difficult to tame as: ‘he is sulky, stupid and has an almost immovable neck’.¹⁷¹ He claimed the Burchell’s zebra to be a much easier task, and that was the species of zebra he presented on his tour of South Africa, using some of Fillis’s circus arenas to perform his demonstrations. A few years later in 1896, Fillis, possibly inspired by Horace’s tour, began presenting his own lectures on horse training, as well as a live exhibition where he also presented a ‘taming zebra’ act.¹⁷² (In contrast to ‘training’ an animal to be ridden or to perform a trick, ‘taming’ a wild animal could mean something as simple as proving that they were not frightened off by people.) However, on several occasions, this act could not be performed as planned – as described by a reviewer of *The Johannesburg Times* in September of 1896:

¹⁶⁴ M. H. Hayes. *Points of a Horse: A Familiar Treatise on Equine Conformation*, (London: W. Thacker & Co, 1897), p. 147.

¹⁶⁵ Hayes, *The Horsewomen*, p. 238.

¹⁶⁶ Hayes, *The Horsewomen*, p. 238.

¹⁶⁷ Hayes, *Points of a Horse*, p. 155.

¹⁶⁸ Hayes, *Among Men and Horses*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Captain Hayes,’ *The Journal*, 4 February 1892, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Horse-breaking,’ *The Journal*, 13 February 1892, p. 2, and ‘Training a Zebra,’ *The Journal*, 12 May 1892, p. 3.

¹⁷¹ Hayes, *Among Men and Horses*, p. 284.

¹⁷² ‘Fillis’ Great Circus,’ *Johannesburg Times*, 25 June 1896, p. 3.

The animal was most violent, knocked down one of the lights, got over the fence and severely bit Mr. Fillis' arm. While rearing, it struck the groom with one of its hoofs, and he had to be carried out unconscious.¹⁷³

Zebras remained at least a feature of both Pagel's and Boswell's menageries in the early 1900s, but there is little to no mention of their participation in performances.¹⁷⁴ What the use of zebras does go to show is that even just displaying wild animals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a form of entertainment in itself. This knowledge of public fascination with exotic species was later utilised by the birth of lion-taming performances and other wild animal shows, which began with Fillis in 1888, but only increased in size and stature by the early nineteenth century. Even the wild horse would not prove as exciting as the carnivores and larger exotic beasts.

A new animal star?

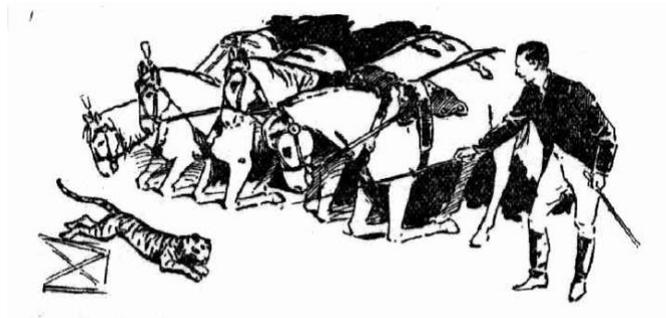


Figure 9: Illustration of Captain Russell (Fillis's trainer) performing in Australia, 1893¹⁷⁵

While pistol shots on galloping horses across the ring could excite the crowd for a season, the circus needed to keep the public constantly entertained, and with competition from other leisure activities like cinema (which started in South Africa in May 1896),¹⁷⁶ excitement was sought out from an introduction of other wild animals into the circus ring. Aside from his horses, some of the other domestic animals used in Fillis's performances consisted of a group of dogs (their

¹⁷³ 'An untameable zebra,' *Johannesburg Times*, 1 September 1896, p. 4.

¹⁷⁴ 'Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 October 1914, p. 7. The Boswells had a zebra in their menagerie by December of 1917. 'Boswell's Circus and Menagerie,' *The Eastern Province Herald*, 24 December 1917, p. 6.

¹⁷⁵ *The Daily Telegraph Sydney*, 15 July 1893, p. 4.

¹⁷⁶ 'History of Cinema in South Africa,' *National Archives and Record Service in South Africa*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.za/node/16156> (Accessed 10 August 2020).

breed unknown) who jumped, skipped and stood on their hind legs.¹⁷⁷ The use of wild animals, and specifically lions and other big cats, were already added to his show in 1888 (and, of course, formed part of the spectacle he brought with him to London as part of ‘Savage South Africa’). While it is true that big cat acts and other wild animal performances became increasingly popular during the early twentieth century, horses remained central to Fillis’s show even once he left South Africa in 1910 to continue touring abroad.¹⁷⁸ At his funeral in Bangkok in 1922, his hearse was carried by six of his circus staff, and following closely behind was his beloved horse, Prince.¹⁷⁹

However, the other two circuses (Pagel and Boswell’s circuses) – which continued performing in South Africa in the twentieth century – shifted their attention away from equestrian-based acts to ones that displayed a dramatic demonstration of man’s domination over nature (mainly through the use of big cats). In South Africa, the first big cat performances began in Fillis’s show in 1888, followed by the arrival of Pagel in 1905 and Boswell’s Circus in 1916.¹⁸⁰ While the introduction of wild animals transformed the circus arena into a travelling zoo, equestrian performances nevertheless still remained part of the programme in all three circuses under study. While it may be true that watching dangerous and wild animal acts captured the audience in a novel way, horses still endured as mainstay acts, even alongside lions and other wild animals. This chapter has sought to keep its focus on the *Equus* breed, but the rise of big cat performances in South Africa as an important change within the entertainment industry will be examined in the subsequent chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the integral role that horses have played from the inception of the ‘modern-day’ circus, and how this changed over time in response to an ever-changing social and political climate. Philip Astley’s trick riding in 1768 gave birth to a circular ring of entertainment focused on equestrian skill, which later developed to include large-scale war re-enactments in response to a rising militarised climate of British imperialism. While this was an industry originating in Britain, it retained many of its same themes in South Africa.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Rhodesia Herald*, 9 August 1907, p. 5.

¹⁷⁸ Fillis left in September 1910 to continue touring abroad due to accumulating an overwhelming amount of debt and suffering from other financial difficulties. Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 102.

¹⁷⁹ *Rhodesia Herald*, 3 February 1922, p. 12.

¹⁸⁰ See Chapter Three.

Firstly, this chapter has argued that circus horses were used to attract all members of society (seeing as though they were encountered daily by all classes), as was the case in Britain, allowing for a racially diverse audience, still separated by ticket prices. In addition, the point was made that, while the circus was a space where men and women could seemingly mingle, gender was actually rigidly performed. Indeed, instead of gender roles being broken down, female equestrian performances helped display expected feminine qualities of nineteenth-century colonial society. Moreover, when women were finally given lead roles in a hippodrama, it was done to create a spectacle, or even a sexual attraction, for the audience, rather than to provide any equal footing.

Then, this chapter turned its focus to comparing the three circus companies under study to the trends of equestrian performances in the international arena. Firstly, it argued that Fillis's equestrian performances in the late nineteenth century mimicked those most closely related to metropolitan-style acts, which focussed on vaulting, jumping, hippodramas and war re-enactments. Horses were utilised for performing masculinity through displays of hunting and military spectacles, set in a southern African setting, in works such as 'Major Wilson's Last Stand', and of course, 'Savage South Africa'. Here, horses were transformed into political animals, helping to bring across the message of imperial sacrifice to British audiences. Alternatively, Pagel's equestrian acts differed greatly from Fillis's, and were centred on displays of individual physical strength (whereby horses were utilised as mere tools to demonstrate his athletic ability). Only later did Pagel obtain a larger group of horses that performed more traditional acts. Lastly, Boswell's Circus also used horses right from its inception and was based more on traditional European acts, as they were a British family much like Fillis's. Their early equine performances focused on 'clever ponies', drawing from the longstanding tradition of human fascination with educated animals.

Finally, this chapter has presented the case of wild horses, like zebras, in the area of entertainment, but instead of being used in the skilful presentations or large-scale hippodramas performed by the other equine troupe members, the ability to 'tame' and ride a zebra was seen as a spectacle in itself (due to its widely known stubborn nature). This common fact was utilised by Captain M. H. Hayes in the 1890s, who toured South Africa with his horse training shows. Again here, this chapter has shown that these were masculine-fuelled displays. While zebras were included in all three of the circus companies, they formed merely part of the wild animal menagerie that travelled alongside the circus and provided income through charging an

entrance fee. This chapter thus argues that the increasing popularity of wild animal performances was a turning point in the circus history, marking a movement away from equestrian-only circuses, towards ones which capitalised on dramatic demonstrations of man's domination over nature (mainly using big cats). Horses were not perceived in the same category as wild animals; as argued by Swart, in South Africa (unlike in American settler communities), 'the horse was not a symbol of wildness but rather of tameness, of civilisation and of white settlement.'¹⁸¹ Thus, it is clear that the zebra was used to add an exotic element to circus acts in contrast to the longstanding history of traditional equestrian performances – a history which was altered irreversibly with the increase of wild animal circus acts, as will be discussed further in the subsequent chapter.

¹⁸¹ Swart, *Riding High*, p. 63.

CHAPTER THREE

Big cat acts and big men: Performing power and gender in southern Africa, c.1888–1916

Introduction

Africa has long been identified with fearsome carnivores – most iconic of all, the lion, ‘king of beasts’. While the lion (*Panthera leo*) once existed in parts of southern Europe, today, with the exception of a small population in Asia, the species remains scattered across the African continent.¹ Despite their decrease in numbers, the lion remains a widely recognised animal symbol in human culture, adopted by various leaders and countries, and accruing new meanings over time. In biblical episodes, like ‘Samson and the lion’ or ‘Daniel in the lion’s den’, the animal’s strength and ferocity was portrayed as the ultimate formidable obstacle.² The Assyrian royal, Ashurbanipal II (645 BCE), had lions brought in a cage to be killed by him in front of spectators as a sign of his great leadership.³ Since medieval time in Europe, the lion was adopted as a symbol of England and its monarch, and over time it came to represent the power and prestige of the British empire.⁴ In Africa, too, Ethiopian King, Haile Selassie I, was titled as the ‘conquering lion of Judah’, creating his identity as the messiah for the Rastafarian religious movement.⁵

Along with adopting leonine attributes to describe oneself, performances of killing or dominating a lion have a long history too. The origin of lion shows dates back to the ancient Roman arena in the first century, when a new event, *damnatio ad bestias* (execution by the beasts), was added to public games consisting of the unique experience of watching gladiators (*venatores*) fight lions, leopards and panthers.⁶ A decline due to disapproval from the Christian Church and the increasing cost of capturing wild animals led to the demise of this event by 523

¹ A small population of around 523 Asiatic lions are protected in India’s Gir Forest National Park. See M. Rangarajan. ‘Animals with rich histories: The case of the lions of Gir Forest, Gujarat, India,’ *History and Theory*, (52), 2013, pp. 109–127.

² M. Haist. ‘The Lion, Bloodline and Kingship,’ in D. Hassig (ed). *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life and Literature*, (New York: Garland Publishing), 1999, p. 8.

³ D. G. Kyle. *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 32.

⁴ D. Crouch. *Medieval Britain c. 1000–1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 107. Also B. E. Conekin. *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 94.

⁵ See A-W. Asserate. *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia*, (London: Haus Publishing, 2015).

⁶ The event had been added into the ring by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior by as early as 186 BCE. See S. Evans in *When the Last Lion Roars: The Rise and Fall of the King of the Beasts*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 101–102.

CE.⁷ The rise of ‘modern’ lion tamers from the 1830s came about in the form of a Victorian re-imagining of Roman masculinity (which can be seen in the gladiator outfits and the names given to their lions, such as Nero, Brutus and Caesar), and also the dramatisation of the changing ways in which Westerners understood their relationship with the natural world.⁸ However, this fierceness that spectators flocked to see formed part of a deceptive illusion created by the tamers, who often had to use fear or provocation to elicit this ‘wildness’ from animals who had been brutally trained into submission.⁹

While the previous chapter focused on equestrian performances, this chapter aims to trace the rise of modern lion-taming performances in the three South African circuses under study: Fillis’s Circus, Pagel’s Circus and Boswell’s Circus from 1888 to 1916, a time period which captures big cat performances in all three companies. This chapter will begin by providing a brief historiography of the rise of lion tamers in global networks in Europe, America and Australia, before analysing the local South African shows in their vernacular context. It explores whether these European men were re-enacting imperial mastery similar to other colonial contexts, or if there was something unique about lion taming in South Africa. This chapter then investigates the gendered nature of these performances, including various local public responses. It asks, if there were differences based on gender, then what does this tell us about societal views in the late nineteenth century? Essentially, this chapter argues that while these lion shows were metropolitan-inspired acts that were played out in a broad imperial context, there were colonial differences, most evident when considering the gendered and racialised nature of the performances.

Lion-taming historiography

As discussed in the first chapter, the past decade has seen scholars working in the fields of drama, theatre and performance studies embracing the ‘animal turn’ in contemporary thought, which has led to the formation of a new intersectional discipline called ‘animal performance studies’.¹⁰ Una Chaudhuri, a professor of English, drama and environmental studies, has even theorised a new term, ‘zooësis’, for this intersectional discipline, which she defines as: ‘the

⁷ Evans, *When the Last Lion Roars*, pp. 105–106.

⁸ J. Smith. *The Thrill Makers: Celebrity, Masculinity and Stunt Performance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 82–83.

⁹ D. A. H. Wilson. ‘Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,’ *Early Popular Visual Culture*, (15), (3), 2017, p. 350.

¹⁰ See T. Grant, I. Ramos-Gray and C. A. Recarte (eds). *Real Animals on Stage*, (New York: Routledge, 2020).

discourse and representation of animals in contemporary culture and performance'.¹¹ The study of lion-taming acts falls within this interdisciplinary field, and also offers a contribution to Chaudhuri's term of zooësis. Despite the prominence of circus within animal activism, studies on captive animals have tended to focus on menageries and zoo histories.¹² While historians have long been captivated by the circus as a topic of social history and even gender studies, researching circus animal acts has, until recently, largely been neglected, and in South Africa, it remains to be an unexplored area of historical research.

Peta Tait is arguably the pioneer of this field, who has published extensively on wild animal circus performances both globally and in Australia, and whose book, *Fighting Nature*, touches briefly on lion taming in South Africa.¹³ Helen Cowie's book, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, was essential reading for comparing South Africa with the practice of presenting exotic animals in the metropole.¹⁴ Other studies that inform this chapter include the work done by circus semioticians, Yoram Carmeli and Paul Bouissac, who thoroughly analyse the symbols of 'nature' and 'culture' within lion-taming performances.¹⁵ John Stokes and David Wilson both make essential historical contributions to the rise of lion taming as a practice, while also providing necessary insight into the first lion tamer, Isaac van Amburgh.¹⁶ Gillian Arrighi's paper on political circus animals provides a useful framework to consider the politics behind big cat acts in South Africa.¹⁷ Finally, the analysis of masculinity and gendered roles within wild animal performances has been explored by various historians in other countries and contexts, which includes, but is not limited to, Keene, Adams and Davis in America, Cowie in Europe, and of course, Arrighi and Tait in Australia and New Zealand. The concept of 'gender performativity' as used in the previous chapter on equestrian acts is drawn from the enormously impactful work of philosopher Judith Butler, who called upon society to

¹¹ Inspired by the term *gyensis* proposed by the 1970s feminist theorist Alice Jardine, Chaudhuri's term aims to encompass: 'the ways the animal is put into discourse: constructed, represented, understood, and misunderstood'. See U. Chaudhuri. *The Stage Lives of animals: Zooësis and Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 5.

¹² For a detailed and global history of zoos and menageries, see V. N. Kislring (ed). *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens*, (London: CRC Press, 2000).

¹³ P. Tait. *Fighting Nature: Travelling menageries, animal acts and war shows*, (Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016), p. 5.

¹⁴ H. Cowie. *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Empathy, Education, Entertainment*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 180.

¹⁵ See P. Bouissac. 'Poetics in the Lion's Den: The Circus Act as Text,' in *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), and Y. S. Carmeli. 'Lion on Display: Culture, Nature, and Totality in a Circus Performance,' *Poetics Today*, (24), (1), 2003, p. 74.

¹⁶ J. Stokes. "'Lion Grieffs": The Wild Animal Act as Theatre,' *New Theatre Quarterly*, (20), (2), 2004, pp. 139–140, and Wilson, 'Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,' p. 353

¹⁷ G. Arrighi, 'Political Animals: Engagements with Imperial and Gender Discourses in Late-Colonial Australian Circuses,' *Theatre Journal*, (60), (4), 2008, pp. 609–629.

dismantle a binary view of sex, gender and sexuality three decades ago.¹⁸ This chapter locates itself within the wealth of secondary literature, and draws from a variety of primary sources, such as newspaper articles, reviews, interviews and government legislation, from both local sources and abroad. It aims to add to the growing literature on both wild animal performances and gender history by demonstrating the differences in circus lion acts presented in South Africa,¹⁹ the homeland of the maned and ‘manned’ beast.

The illusion of wildness: A brief global history of the King (and Queen) of the beasts



Figure 10: Advertisement for Carlo Popper’s debut ‘big cat’ performance at Fillis’s Circus, 1899²⁰

Most conventional accounts of the rise of ‘modern’ lion trainers begin with one man: Isaac van Amburgh, an American who travelled as a wild animal dealer in the early nineteenth century.²¹ His debut act took place in New York in 1833, in the play, *The Lion Lord*, at the Bowery Theatre. This drama was written to capitalise on his dramatic performance with the lions in a cage, and here, the Roman resemblance is clear when considering his attire: a gladiator’s chest plate and a toga.²² While Cowie argues that he was certainly not the first keeper to train wild animals (they had already been incorporated into circuses and theatre acts by the 1830s), he

¹⁸ J. Butler. ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist theory,’ *Theatre Journal*, (40), (4), 1988, p. 528.

¹⁹ The term ‘South Africa’ in the late nineteenth century consisted of two British colonies, Natal and the Cape; two Boer republics, the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the Orange Free State; as well as a number of indigenous African chiefdoms, which were in the process of losing their independence. From 31 May 1910, however, the term refers to the Union of South Africa.

²⁰ ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 18 April 1889, p. 2.

²¹ Stokes, “‘Lion Griefs’: The Wild Animal Act as Theatre,” pp. 139–140, and Wilson, ‘Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,’ p. 353.

²² B. Mizelle. ‘Horses and Cat Acts in the Early American Circus,’ in S. Weber, K. L. Ames and M. Wittman (eds). *The American Circus* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 15.

popularised the practice in Europe.²³ In 1838, he was hired by the celebrated British equestrian Andrew Ducrow and he made his first London appearance at Astley's. He later transferred to Drury Lane, where Queen Victoria supposedly went to see him at least six times.²⁴ His performances emphasised the savagery of the lions, tigers and leopards that he performed with, and his exhibitions were marked by violence towards them, as can be seen by this reviewer in 1843, who stated that Van Amburgh 'cuffed and struck at the lion and tiger, pinched their ears and slapped them right and left'.²⁵

As noted by Wilson, the success of lion-taming acts in the first half of the nineteenth century lay in their ability to persuade the audience that the tamer was in real danger, while at the same time ensuring the act had minimal risk.²⁶ This illusion of wildness stretches back all the way to the gladiator fights in ancient Rome, where the lions and leopards had to be specially trained, or starved, to become 'man-eaters' in the arena.²⁷ Both Carmeli and Bouissac thoroughly address the analysis of performances by lions and tigers, among other exotic animals, as signs denoting wildness and nature, within binary systems that set culture against nature, and wildness against civilisation.²⁸ According to Bouissac, the circus lion act consists of a system of relationships between 'the trainer, the animals, the props, musical accompaniment, the lights and circus program'.²⁹ Together, these elements defined an epic narrative between the 'hero' and a 'hostile force'.³⁰ Circus big cat acts take place within the context of displaying wildness. Their appearance (size, teeth and colour) and their behaviour (agility, occasional roaring and fierceness) become a display of their innate 'nature,' familiar to and expected by the audience.³¹ Carmeli explains further that this 'nature,' as invoked by and embodied in lion-taming acts, was caged in and dominated by 'culture'.³² Of course, both 'nature' and 'culture' meant something quite specific to nineteenth-century Europeans, especially members of what was becoming the British Empire. The audience was aware that the natural habitat of these wild animals was Africa, which represented the empire's domination, with the lion symbolising the head of the animal kingdom making this all the more significant. The 'hero' in almost all lion-

²³ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth Century Britain*, p. 180.

²⁴ Stokes, "'Lion Griefs': The Wild Animal Act as Theatre," p. 139.

²⁵ *Aberdeen Journal* 1843, Issue 4989, 23 August, np (BLN).

²⁶ Wilson, 'Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,' p. 358.

²⁷ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, p. 186.

²⁸ Bouissac, *Circus and Culture*, p. 97, and Carmeli, 'Lion on Display,' p. 74.

²⁹ Bouissac, *Circus and Culture*, p. 97.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Carmeli, 'Lion on Display,' p. 74.

³² *Ibid.*

taming acts (besides female lion tamers, who entered the ring slightly later on in the 1840s) were white males who single-handedly faced the beasts, signifying the masculine dominating ideals of the coloniser.

Van Amburgh's performances spawned many imitators in Europe, and lion taming soon emerged as a common feature in travelling circuses. This expansion of wild animal touring troupes was aided by an influential German family, the Hagenbecks – a name that is deeply imbedded in the history of animal trade, menageries, zoos and circuses – who organised expeditions to bring large numbers of exotic animals to Europe.³³ The Hagenbeck company traces its origins to a humble Hamburg fishmonger. Hamburg was a major European port where many sailors traded their exotic animals in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1848, a group of fishermen brought Hagenbeck six seals that had become tangled in their nets. He put the seals on display for a small fee for curious onlookers, marking the beginning of what would become a highly successful business venture.³⁴ Over the next few decades, the Hagenbeck family changed animal dealing from an erratic dockside affair into a systematic approach with organised expeditions and designated animal-capturing agents.³⁵ Their successful business venture was essential for the rise of lion taming and other wild animal menageries in the late nineteenth century, which was an industry that constantly adopted new trends and adapted to keep the public interested in attending shows.

According to Cowie, in 1845 a new trend swept across wild animal menageries in the global North: the phenomenon of the 'Lion Queens'.³⁶ This novel addition was arguably a response to the competitive nature of these acts, and a way to further the attraction of heightened excitement and danger that accompanied big cat acts. The first-ever female lion tamer was Miss Hilton, a niece of one of the earliest English proprietors, who was persuaded by her uncle to enter the 'den'³⁷ of lions during a performance in 1839.³⁸ The trend was quickly taken up by rival female tamers in Britain, extending eventually to the USA and continental Europe. Adams

³³ N. Rothfels. *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 49–50.

³⁴ S. R. Elliot and A. G. Thacker (trans). *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's experiences for half a century among wild animals*, (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1912), p. 30.

³⁵ E. Hanson. *Animal Attractions, Nature on Display in American Zoos*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 76.

³⁶ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 186.

³⁷ 'Den' was a widely used nineteenth-century word for 'cage' in the menagerie, providing direct biblical associations with the early Christian era in Rome. Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 187, C. Birkby. *The Pagel Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), p. 30, and see also 'Lion Taming,' *The Journal Graham's Town*, 11 September 1884, p. 3.

and Keene argue that in America, when women first entered the cage along with men, they appeared there merely as decoration.³⁹ The attraction of these ‘Lion Queens’ lay in the gender of the performers who embodied, and at the same time, challenged certain cultural stereotypes. Tait argues that the idea of a woman (society’s symbol of civilisation and progress) handling dangerous, wild animals, rather than domesticated species like horses, confronted ideals around expected gendered behaviours in a tantalising and titillating manner.⁴⁰ So, as these females engaged in the ultimate macho performance, dominating the king of beasts, this allowed them to transgress the societal boundaries of their sex. Yet, they simultaneously needed to persuade the public that they still maintained a feminine elegance along with the same courage as their male counterparts. For example, upon detailing the antics of British lion tamer Miss Chapman at St Giles Fair in 1846, the *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* averred that, ‘we certainly never saw one of the softer sexes display such power over animals as she does.’⁴¹ This emphasis on gender was to illustrate these feats as something rare and exceptional, and therefore, even more thrilling. Lion Queens, although wildly popular, were met with controversy. While murmurings against female lion tamers existed from their first appearance in 1845, the incident that galvanised elite public opinion against it was when Ellen Bright, a young British performer, was killed in the ring by a tiger in Chatham in 1849.⁴² Audience reactions and the rise of female performers as a new adaption to conventional masculine lion-taming performances in South Africa is a lacuna in the history of entertainment – and in gender history too.

Certainly, by mid-nineteenth century, these trained wild animal acts had changed the once equestrian-centric circus irreversibly. As stated earlier, wild animals began to be incorporated into circus and theatre acts by the 1830s.⁴³ By mid-century, these acts had expanded across the USA, and by the turn of the century, they had reached the British colonies of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁴ It was big cats like lions, tigers and leopards, along with elephants, that began to dominate the ring, evoking fear, fascination and awe.⁴⁵ This chapter

³⁹ K. H. Adams and M. L. Keene. *Women of the American Circus, 1880–1940*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), p. 160.

⁴⁰ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 208.

⁴¹ *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 27 November 1847, Issue 4935.

⁴² Famous proprietor Wombwell’s own niece, Ellen Bright, was killed after she flicked a tiger with a whip on his nose during the performance. *Daily News*, 14 January 1850, Issue 1135, found in S. Everett. ‘The British Lion Queens: A History,’ 2013, p. 11. <http://www.georgewombwell.com/articles/TheLionQueens.pdf> (Accessed 2 July 2020), p. 11.

⁴³ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. xiii.

⁴⁵ P. Tait. ‘Animal Performers in Action and Sensory Perception,’ in J. Bull (ed). *Animal Movements: Moving animals: Essays on Direction, Velocity and Agency in Humanimal Encounter*, (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2011), p. 197.

now turns to focus on South Africa, firstly to consider human–lion relationships, before then investigating the beginning of these acts in the late nineteenth century.

Human–lion relationships in the African homeland

While conflicts between lions and humans existed in pre-colonial southern Africa, these were limited due to the low density of the human population and the abundance of natural prey.⁴⁶ The arrival of armed colonial forces from the mid-seventeenth century onwards marked a new dawn in human–animal relationships. As argued by Van Sittert, European settlement in southern Africa can be read as a process of ‘bringing in the wild’, which involved their conversion from *res nullius* (a thing which has no owner) into private property through the act of capture or enclosure.⁴⁷ Lions, along with other exotic animals, were first ‘collected’ in the Cape in 1700 by Governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel, (son of former Dutch Governor of the Cape Simon van der Stel), who established a menagerie of local animals, as well as a small zoological museum at the upper end of the Company Gardens, near to the *Tuynhuys*.⁴⁸ In Leigh Bregman’s thesis on scientific societies in early nineteenth-century Cape Town, he claims that both these establishments slipped into disrepair after the British arrived in 1795; however, other evidence suggests they existed for much longer.⁴⁹ In the drawing below, the menagerie was allocated in the top right corner of the gardens, and evidence suggests that it was only shut down in 1838 in order to use the site to build the South African College (which would later become the University of Cape Town).⁵⁰ Ritvo argues that imperialistic desires of possession, domination and display were the Victorian attitudes that influenced collections of wild animals.⁵¹ Besides collecting animals, imperialistic desires also influenced much more deadly human–animal interactions in southern Africa – like the imperial sport of big game hunting.

⁴⁶ K. Somerville. *Humans and Lions: Conflict, Conservation and Coexistence*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 23.

⁴⁷ L. van Sittert. ‘Bringing in the Wild: The Commodification of Wild Animals in the Cape Colony c. 1850–1950,’ *The Journal of African History*, (46), (2), 2005, p. 272.

⁴⁸ The term meaning ‘Garden House’. M. Boonzaaier, W. K. Florence and M. E. Spencer Jones. ‘Historical review of South African bryozoology: a legacy of European endeavour,’ *Annals of Bryozoology* 4, 2014, p. 8.

⁴⁹ L. D. Bregman. ‘Snug Little Coteries’: A History of Scientific Societies in Early Nineteenth Century Cape Town, 1824–1835,’ (University of College London: PhD thesis, 2014) p. 11.

⁵⁰ N. Worden, E. van Heyningen & V. Bickford-Smith. *Cape Town: The Making of a City*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), p. 131.

⁵¹ H. Ritvo. *The Animal Estate*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 5.

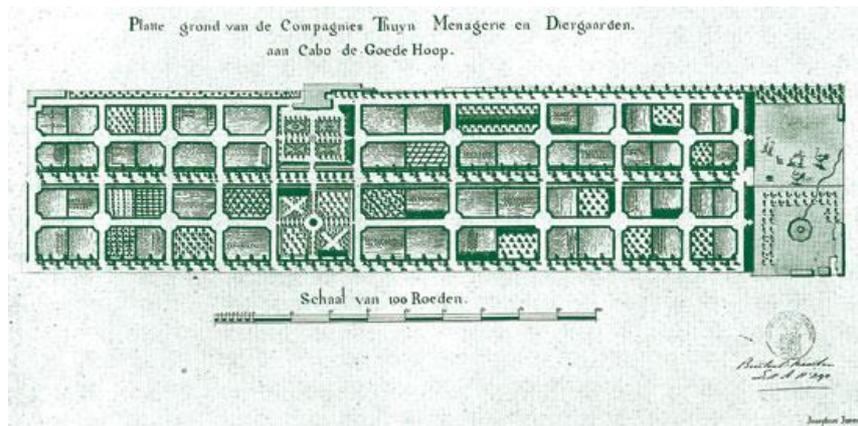


Figure 11: A sketch of the Company Gardens drawn by Josephus Jones in 1791⁵²

Trophy hunting formed part of the imperial identity for both the Dutch and the British settlers, and was further rendered popular by the sheer accessibility of African game. There was also a need felt by Boer farmers and indigenous tribes to protect livestock at all costs, which had a severe impact on some local lion species.⁵³ In addition, there were African hunters who engaged in traditional hunting or in wage labour to assist in the success of Boer commercial hunting.⁵⁴ The Cape lion (*Panthera leo melanochaita*) was a species hunted by all these above-mentioned groups. General John Bisset, a British Army officer, outlined in his memoir *Sport and War* (1875) how sometimes as many as twenty-five men would go after a single male lion.⁵⁵ It was Bisset himself who shot the world's last Cape lion in Natal in 1865, marking the end of the 'real-life relationship' between humans and the local beasts.⁵⁶ Lions were effectively extinct in the two British colonies. Did this effect the popularity of lion-taming acts? Were tamers re-enacting a scene of imperial dominance that could no longer take place in the wild? Or were these acts simply replicas of those presented in the global ring?

Metropolitan-/European-style big cat acts in South Africa from 1888

While lion taming rose in the international arena from the 1830s onwards, it was not an act displayed in South Africa until the late nineteenth century. While Van der Merwe claims that

⁵² J. Jones assisted Lieutenant J.C. Frederici in surveying and mapping the coastal region between Cape Agulhas and Algoa Bay between 1789–1790. He also drew plans of various DEIC posts. Van de Graaf Collection 1971, No. 286.

⁵³ W. Beinart. 'Empire, Hunting and Ecological Change in Southern and Central Africa,' *Past & Present*, (128), 1990, p. 163.

⁵⁴ D. W. Gess. 'Hunting and Power: Class, Race and Privilege in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal Lowveld, c. 1880–1905,' (University of Stellenbosch: MA thesis, 2014), p. 177.

⁵⁵ Evans, *When the Last Lion Roars*, pp. 113–115.

⁵⁶ M. Hallet and J. Harris. *On the Prowl: In Search of Big Cat Origins*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 166.

Signor Della Case, a proprietor who toured with his Italian circus along with his partner Signor Severo, ‘had been performing with his lions and a hyena since 1848,’⁵⁷ other adverts make no mention to wild animals in his show, highlighting only: tightrope walkers, dancers on stilts, gymnastic exercises and equestrian evolutions on horseback.⁵⁸ Other descriptions of his performances, such as one in Natal in 1852, listed: ‘Italian comic duets, Spanish dances, tight rope acrobatics and circus pieces with animals.’⁵⁹ No other evidence suggests this was a lion-taming show, and all other evidence of Della Case’s circus performances are vacant after 1852. This chapter argues that lion taming only arrived in South Africa in the late 1880s, beginning with Fillis’s Circus, and that when it did, it embraced the metropolitan model that displayed the style of masculine domination, as well as the illusion of fierce ‘wildness’, in the ring.

For the first few years of Fillis’s Circus (1882 onwards), it remained predominantly a ‘horse and human’ show. But, from 1885 onwards, it is possible to trace the beginning of Fillis’s menagerie and inclusion of wild animals into his show. In April 1885, for example, during a performance in Bloemfontein, it was noted that ‘three monkeys rode on the backs of three ponies’, and that Fillis had a menagerie attached to his marquee where a lioness and a hyena could be viewed.⁶⁰ The lion was not used in his performances, and it was stated later in May that the ‘principal part of the programme was the splendid horsemanship’.⁶¹ In December 1885, when performing in Port Elizabeth, Fillis’s menagerie had expanded exponentially to include: two tigers, wildebeest, an African eagle and silver-backed jackals. During this performance, two hyenas conducted an ‘exciting performance to the sound of native music’.⁶² A few evenings later, the first appearance of ‘two clever performing monkeys’ were added to his show.⁶³ However, throughout December, the main headline used to advertise Fillis’s show (Figure 12) indicates that as 1885 drew to a close, the main attraction of the show remained centred on human and equestrian performances.

⁵⁷ F. J. G. van der Merwe. *Frank Fillis: The story of a circus legend*, (Stellenbosch: FJG Publikasies, 2007), p. 73.

⁵⁸ ‘Italian Circus,’ *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, 2 March 1848, p. 3.

⁵⁹ A. Hattersley. *Portrait of a colony: The story of Natal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 139.

⁶⁰ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Friend of the Free State*, 9 April 1885, p. 3.

⁶¹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Friend of the Free State*, 7 May 1885

⁶² ‘Menagerie now on view,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 15 December 1885, p. 6.

⁶³ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 22 December 1885, p. 6.


**ALL THE ARTISTES! THE LADIES! THE
HORSES AND PONIES!**

Figure 12: Advertisement for Fillis's Circus in the *Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 1885⁶⁴

In 1887, Fillis's menagerie expanded again after he travelled to Europe to find new acts for his troupe; ironically, he purchased many of his African animals in Europe, either from William Cross in Liverpool, Jamrach in London, or Hagenbeck through his long-time animal trading port in Hamburg. His purchases included an elephant named 'Little Jumbo' who he bought from Mr Menier, a well-known chocolate manufacturer in Paris.⁶⁵ The timing could arguably be linked to an increase in capital after touring for five years across the country, allowing Fillis to travel abroad to make purchases and expand his troupe.⁶⁶ Brenda Assael argues similarly that in America during the late nineteenth century, the expansion of wild animal circuses was directly linked to companies having the available funds to make large investments in lions, tigers, elephants and other wild animals from faraway countries.⁶⁷ The rise of travelling wild animal menageries reveals the changes that were brought about by mass consumerism, larger bureaucracies, technological advances and increasing trade networks characteristic of the age.⁶⁸ Hagenbeck's business would not have been possible without the explosion in railway networks, or the increase in leisure time and disposable income that allowed average Europeans to visit the zoo, circus and menagerie displays.⁶⁹

Fillis's first lion tamer was a man named Salvator Bugeja, who arrived in January 1888 after working at Folies Bergère in Paris and Alexandra Palace in London.⁷⁰ His first performance took place in Cape Town on 28 January with one lion and two lionesses, who he had brought with him from Europe. Fillis explained in an interview during his 1891–1894 Australian tour that 'you cannot get live lions in Africa; all the best of the catch is sent away to the metropolis'.⁷¹ Although hunted to extinction in both the British colonies, lions were still roaming freely in the Transvaal and other regions, and Fillis put out adverts for two years

⁶⁴ 'Fillis's Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 31 December 1885, p. 4.

⁶⁵ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 20 December 1887, p. 4.

⁶⁶ By April 1888, his troupe included lions, leopards, bush tigers, hyenas, jackals, wolves, apes, baboons, birds and crocodiles. 'Fillis's Menagerie,' *The Journal*, 7 April 1888, p. 2.

⁶⁷ B. Assael. *Circus and Victorian Society*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 5.

⁶⁸ G. Bruce. *Through the Lion Gate: A History of The Berlin Zoo*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p 10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 87.

⁷¹ *South Australian Express*, 18 February 1893.

calling to ‘farmers, hunters, & c., of all South Africa’ to provide him with a full-grown male lion (older than five years old), which he would pay 100 pounds sterling for.⁷² He did not once receive an offer. Bugeja performed with them in a ‘very strong’ cage that was ‘intended to prevent its occupants from escaping and to preserve the public from all apprehension’.⁷³ The use of a small cage was essential in these early lion-taming acts when the attraction was the dangerously close proximity of the human and lion, as it added to the illusion of the show. While physically close, the cage actually provided a quick escape for the trainer and little room for the lion to attack. While Bugeja’s routine was basic enough, mainly forcing lions to jump over barriers and through flaming hoops, what most attracted the audience to see his performances was the dangerous element of his show (an example of the illusion of fierce ‘wildness’ used to attract a crowd).⁷⁴ During the first five months of his performances in South Africa, there were several ‘narrow escapes’ and ‘alarming incidents’ that resulted in Bugeja’s falling and being wounded.⁷⁵ These recurring narrow escapes may have been entirely invented as they suspiciously occurred just as the circus was about to leave one town for another, and constituted useful free advertising for Fillis’s Circus.⁷⁶ A reporter from *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph* went as far as asking: ‘How can the floor always be slippery? Surely this is just part of another performance?’⁷⁷ Apparently, audience members sat nervously during his act, fearing that ‘the bleeding corpse of Salvator mangled by the lions’ could be seen at any moment.⁷⁸ In addition to increasing dramatic effect, the mobile nature of circuses allowed for Bugeja’s acts to be presented beyond the British colonies. It seems that Fillis’s show was just as popular in the Transvaal Republic, as was stated in a local newspaper *The Friend of the Free State* in 1888: ‘The circus still maintains its hold on popular favour, no less than 12,000 persons having entered since opening show.’⁷⁹

While these narrow escapes and even actual slight injuries may have been an element of Bugeja’s performance, there were times when these became seriously dangerous. His first serious mishap occurred during a performance in Klerksdorp in September 1888. The reviewer stated that the lioness became increasingly agitated during the show and on two occasions lunged at him. Before the act finished, she succeeded in knocking him to the ground where she

⁷² ‘To Farmers, Hunters, & C.,’ *The Friend of the Free State*, 1 August 1888, p. 6.

⁷³ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 28 January 1888, p. 2.

⁷⁴ ‘The Lions at the Circus,’ *The Eastern Province Herald*, 20 February 1888, p. 4.

⁷⁵ ‘A Narrow Escape,’ *Cape Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 May 1888, p. 3.

⁷⁶ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 4 September 1888, p. 3.

⁷⁷ ‘Weekly Notes,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 29 May 1888, p. 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Friend of the Free State*, 29 February 1888, p. 6.

held him down and ‘inflicted serious wounds’.⁸⁰ In October of the same year, Bugeja had another incident, this time when he slipped and fell in the cage, a lioness grabbed at him with her paw and bit into the flesh just above his knee. He drove the lioness off by banging on her nose with the butt of his whip.⁸¹ The fact that his performance resembled the symbols of man’s dominance over the beast is echoed by a *Port Elizabeth Telegraph* reviewer who argued that there was ‘no skill in the performance’, but rather ‘an exhibition of the force of human nerve over brute instincts’.⁸² Bugeja left for Europe in April 1889 after being seriously wounded yet again in Kimberly, and eight months later was killed by a lioness during a performance at Wombwell’s Menagerie in England.⁸³ While Fillis was certainly aware of the risks involved in big cat performances, he also knew that they were a good money-making proposition, and so, they remained a feature in his show.

Tait argues that there was a high turnover of big cat handlers in Fillis’s Circus; this is especially evident in the quick replacement of Bugeja’s act. German animal trainer, Mr Carlo Popper, and his wife, Idola, arrived in South Africa on 21 March 1889, after finishing a highly successful tour of Russia in Salomonsky’s Circus.⁸⁴ He performed his debut in Fillis’s show a few weeks after Bugeja had left for Europe (see an advert of his show in Figure 13 below). He, too, performed in a cage, this time with four Nubian lions.⁸⁵ This species of lion (*Panthera leo leo*), known as the Barbary lion or Atlas lion, roamed the regions of northern Africa and were admired for their size and dark manes. This species had already been killed by the thousands in the Roman arena, and by the late nineteenth century were at the brink of extinction, threatened by European hunters (who had already wiped out their cousin at the Cape in 1865).⁸⁶ These lions had accompanied the couple in their performances ‘in every capital and town of importance in Europe’.⁸⁷ This, again, indicated that these were not uniquely South African acts, but performances seen by various populations abroad.

⁸⁰ ‘Salvator and the Lions,’ *Cape Times*, 3 September 1888, p. 3.

⁸¹ ‘Salvator and the Lions,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 25 October 1888, p. 3.

⁸² ‘Foolhardy exhibitions,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 October 1889, p. 3.

⁸³ ‘Benefit of M. Salvator,’ *Cape Times*, 11 April 1889, p. 2, and *The Journal*, 24 December 1889, p. 2. Wombwell bred and raised several wild animals, including the first lion to be bred in captivity in Britain named William, honouring William Wallace, the Scottish Knight.

⁸⁴ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 87.

⁸⁵ ‘Debut of the Lions,’ *Cape Times*, 18 April 1889, p. 2.

⁸⁶ While some evidence suggests that they might have survived in the wilds of Algeria and Morocco, and until much later in the 1900s, most conventional accounts believe the last lion was killed in Morocco in 1922 by a French colonial hunter. See J. R. Platt. ‘When did the Barbary Lion Really Go extinct?’ *Extinction Countdown*. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/extinction-countdown/when-did-the-barbary-lion-really-go-extinct/> (Accessed 2 July 2020).

⁸⁷ ‘Fillis’ Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 15 April 1889, p. 3.

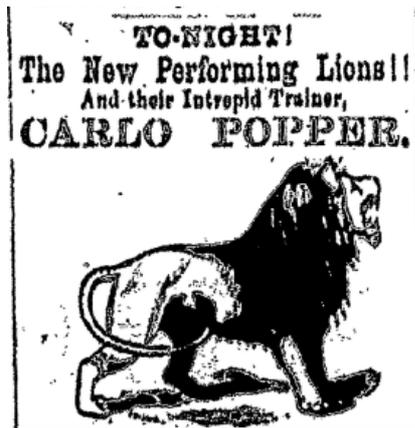


Figure 13: Advertisement for the lion tamer Carlo Popper in the *Eastern Province Herald*, 1889⁸⁸

Popper's routine consisted of making the lions jump through flaming hoops and fire a pistol, and concluded with one of the lions opening their mouth for insertion of his head.⁸⁹ The use of a pistol shot during a performance enhanced the promotion of danger, also theatrically confirming the preconception that big cats were innately aggressive. The act where Popper places his head within the animal's mouth resembled a trademark routine of the original lion king, Isaac van Amburgh.⁹⁰ While these acts were not unique to South Africa, they do differ from other colonies in the global South, like Australia and New Zealand, who did not use lions in their local circus performances until inspired by Fillis's Circus during his extensive 1891–1894 tour.⁹¹ During this tour, the high turnover of big cat handlers was again especially evident (the employment of Captain Russell and Herr Winschermann among others).⁹² However, what is notable is Fillis's employment of the first South African lion tamer, originally from Cape Town – a man named John Cox, who joined Fillis's Circus in 1885 initially working as an animal feeder before taking charge of the big cat acts from the early 1890s.⁹³ Besides Cox, most of Fillis's trainers kept to the standard metropolitan show and failed to add any local flavour to their performance. Although, even Cox presented a similar routine of domination, as well as stand-up wrestling acts with a tiger.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ 'Fillis's Circus,' *Eastern Province Herald*, 10 May 1889, p. 2.

⁸⁹ 'Fillis's Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 May 1889, p. 4

⁹⁰ Smith, *The Thrill Makers*, p. 84.

⁹¹ The Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus responded to Fillis's novelty by producing their own lion-taming act from 1893, with 'Captain Humphrey' mimicking Fillis's programme. 'Sensational Scene at a Circus,' *The Colac Herald*, 25 July 1893.

⁹² See Chapter Four for more details on these trainers.

⁹³ 'Wild beasts and their training: An interview with Mr. John Cox,' *Adelaide Observer*, 15 April 1893, p. 41-42.

⁹⁴ This will be discussed further in the following chapter, which investigates the Hagenbeck revolution.

In contrast to Fillis, who never entered the lion cage himself, Pagel was the star of his first lion-taming performances. As discussed in the previous chapter, Pagel arrived in Durban with his troupe in April 1905, after having years of experience performing in Wirth's Circus and Fitzgerald's Circus in Australia.⁹⁵ Besides his strong-man acts (including lifting a kettlebell weighing over 140 kilograms and carrying a horse up a 6-metre-long ladder), his shows included wire walkers, jugglers, clowns, trapeze artists and trick cyclists.⁹⁶ He had been performing a lion-taming act in the early 1900s to Australian audiences before arriving in South Africa.⁹⁷ This act consisted of him wrestling with a full-grown 'savage lion'⁹⁸ named Hopetoun (after the then Governor General of Australia), who he had bought from Melbourne Zoo in 1902 and had trained himself (in contrast to Fillis who hired trainers and purchased tame lions).⁹⁹ As can be seen in the photograph below, this act resembled the re-imagining of Rome, clearly outlined in Pagel's costume closely resembling a gladiator with his high laced sandals.¹⁰⁰



Figure 14: Herr Pagel ready to tackle Hopetoun the lion at Wirth's Circus in Brisbane, 1903¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ D. P. Webster. 'The European Corner William Pagel: Circus Strongman,' *Iron Game History*, 1995, p. 11.

⁹⁶ In the Melbourne Zoo, Pagel stopped in front of a cage and told his wife: 'I must buy him and teach him to wrestle. It will be a wonderful act.' Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 74.

⁹⁷ As early as May 1903, he performed in Australia in the ring with Hopetoun in both Wirth's and Fitzgerald's circuses. On several occasions, these wrestling acts turned violent. 'Pagel and the Lion,' *Leader*, 21 May 1903, p. 2, and 'Herr Pagel Strong,' *Wodonga and Towong Sentinel*, 17 April 1903, p. 4.

⁹⁸ 'The strongest man on earth to visit Mafeking,' *The Mafeking Mail*, 12 December 1905, p. 3.

⁹⁹ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁰ Pagel bought Hopetoun from Melbourne Zoo in 1903 and named him after the then Governor General of Australia. See 'Death of Mr. William Pagel, Circus Founder,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 October 1948, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ Copied and digitised from *The Queenslander*, 30 May 1903, p. 30. Accessed online through John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

This wrestling act consisted of Pagel entering the lion cage and then flinging himself onto the lion's back while twisting him sideways. The lion would kick and struggle, but Pagel would keep him pinned down while he patted him.¹⁰² In explaining his wrestling method to a reporter in Melbourne, Pagel stated he aimed to get hold of the lion first, and then watched out for the paw. He claimed that he did not think he was stronger than the lion, but rather that Hopetoun could not spring on him because the cage was too small.¹⁰³ The use of small cages was essential in these early acts of dominance to ensure that the trainers were as safe as possible, while simultaneously creating an illusion of real danger. That did not mean there were not any accidents in the cage; during a performance in Cape Town in October 1905, Hopetoun 'became very angry and sprang on his trainer, mauling his left arm so that blood flowed.'¹⁰⁴ In an interview with *The Cape Daily Telegraph*, Pagel defended the lion by stating that he had become restless due to having to wait so long for his performance.¹⁰⁵ While different in execution, Pagel's early lion-taming acts resembled the dramatic 'man versus beast' display that Fillis employed. However, his acts quickly changed as he incorporated a larger variety of wild animals to his show, which will be discussed in a later section.

Boswell's Circus only arrived in South Africa in 1911, but their early lion-taming acts still resembled closely the masculine dramatic demonstrations practised by both Fillis and Pagel; however, a difference can be noted in the lions they purchased to perform. The Boswell troupe first appeared before a South African audience in 1911 with equestrian acts, such as bareback riding, vaulting and jockey acts, as well as pony and dog performers.¹⁰⁶ By 1916, the miniature Boswell's Circus responded to the public demand to see wild animal acts in their show, and perhaps also the need to keep up with their local competition. Jim Boswell travelled to Pretoria Zoo where he bought a lion for thirty pounds from curator Mr Combrinck. He purchased another lion from an unnamed farmer for ten pounds.¹⁰⁷ These first two lions, Noble and Ginger, were the first two local African lions trained to perform in a lion-taming show, in contrast to Fillis and Pagel whose lions were imported from abroad. They were placed in a purpose-built (5 metre by 2 metre) mobile cage to form the basis for the popular 'untameable lion act', which was presented by another South African trainer, Carl van Rooyen, and

¹⁰² Birkby, *The Pagel Story* p. 95.

¹⁰³ 'A Circus sensation,' *Weekly Times*, 6 December 1902, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ 'Mauled by a Lion: Pagel's Narrow Escape,' *The Eastern Province Herald*, 17 October 1905, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ 'Man, and Lion: Pagel Attacked,' *The Cape Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1905, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ 'Madame Fillis' Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 December 1911, p. 11 & 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 29.

occasionally James Boswell, from 1916 onwards.¹⁰⁸ This act also resembled the ‘hero’ versus ‘hostile beast’ type act. It involved a small cage that was driven into the ring by a van, and on several occasions, what was most noted about the act was the ‘ferocity of the animal’¹⁰⁹ and the ‘great difficulty’ the tamer faced when entering the den.¹¹⁰ The entrance itself proved most exciting as ‘the fearful growls of the animals could be heard before exposed to view’.¹¹¹ This dangerous element proved to be highly popular (as was the case for the other two circuses), as the claim was made that the ‘untameable lion was billed as the star turn’ of the show when performing in Bulawayo in 1917.¹¹²

This section of the chapter has focused on the similarities between these big cat acts in South Africa and those displayed in Europe and America, which consisted of a reimagining of Roman masculinity, the illusion of wildness and danger in the ring, and the dominance of the ‘hero’ over the ‘hostile force’. While these acts were not unique to South Africa, this ritual of dominance was not re-enacted in the same way throughout the imperial network, and there were differences between all three circuses under study. The next section of the chapter aims to demonstrate further differences between South Africa and the metropole, as well as between other colonies in the global South (like Australia, New Zealand and India). These differences are best seen in the racialised and gendered components of the performances.

Colonial differences: Were there African lion tamers?

Throughout Europe from the 1860s, while the craze for Lion Queens was temporarily abandoned, a new trend swept across the continent: circuses and menageries sought to add ‘exotic glamour’ to their exhibition by hiring African or Asian men to perform in the lion’s den.¹¹³ Examples of this include Manders’ Royal Menagerie, who employed the Angolan Martini Maccomo in 1857, sometimes described as the ‘African lion hunter’.¹¹⁴ Wombwell’s Circus hired the ‘black African lion tamer’ Andoko Sandallah in 1862, and Edmond’s

¹⁰⁸ This act was said to have been performed until 1922. *Ibid.* p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Boswell’s Circus,’ *The Beira News*, 22 June 1920.

¹¹⁰ ‘Boswell’s Circus Arrived,’ *The Eastern Province Herald*, 3 January 1922, p. 8.

¹¹¹ ‘Boswell’s Circus,’ *The Eastern Province Herald*, 27 December 1919, p. 4.

¹¹² ‘The Boswell Brothers’ Circus,’ *The Bulawayo Chronicle Weekly Edition*, 24 July 1920, p. 6.

¹¹³ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 193.

¹¹⁴ J. Green. ‘Maccomo, Martini (1835/1836–1871),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, September 2012.

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-104535> (Accessed 2 September 2020).

Menagerie hired Ledger Delmonico, an African American, in 1865 (an advert for his performance in Germany is depicted in Figure 15 below).¹¹⁵



Figure 15: A poster for Edmond’s Menagerie advertising Ledger Delmonico in Germany, 1875¹¹⁶

There is evidence that this trend existed up until the 1890s, where it was reported that the ‘celebrated native lion tamer’¹¹⁷ at Wombwell’s was killed in the ring, and a ‘coloured man named Beaumont’¹¹⁸ performed in 1896. This trend towards choosing racially diverse tamers coincided with a growing interest in overseas exploration and an increased desire to see scenes from ‘the Orient’ and images of the ‘exotic Other’ re-enacted on British shores.¹¹⁹ As outlined by Edward Said in his ground-breaking critical work *Orientalism* (1978), the West not only socially constructed and produced ‘the Orient’, but it also controlled and managed it through a hegemony of power relations, working through the tropes, images and representations in literature, art, visual media and film – including, of course, circus performances.¹²⁰ On the one hand, the employment of Africans in these roles could be seen as a reinforcement of colonial stereotypes through displaying exotic beings, similar to the indigenous people from various countries who were taken from their homes (by the Hagenbeck trading company among others) to be presented in highly profitable spectacles for European scientists and the general public.¹²¹ On the other hand, unlike the native people exhibited as intriguing ethnological specimens, indigenous lion tamers were active agents who in many cases (like Maccomo who performed

¹¹⁵ Black lion tamers in Hull and East Yorkshire,’ *African Stories in Hull & East Yorkshire*, <https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/black-lion-tamers.html> (Accessed 2 July 2020).

¹¹⁶ <http://broadkillblogger.org/people/joseph-ledger/> (Accessed 2 July 2020).

¹¹⁷ *The Journal*, 21 April 1892, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 28 January 1896. p. 5.

¹¹⁹ He distinguishes between the Orient (The Other or the East) and the Occident (the West, mainly Britain and France, because of their massive colonial empires). See E. W. Said. *Orientalism*, (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 1–4.

¹²⁰ See also S. Burney. ‘Orientalism: The Making of the Other,’ *Counterpoints*, (417), 2012, pp. 23–24.

¹²¹ Hanson, *Animal Attractions*, p. 76.

until his death in 1879) forged successful and independent careers as entertainers.¹²² Similar to Lion Queens, African lion tamers were both liberated and constrained in their role as part of the ‘wild’ and ‘exotic’ element of the show.

Yet, within the three South African circuses under study, there is no record of an indigenous African lion tamer ever performing. Ironically, through the limited archival material available, it is possible to trace a man called Sambuze, who hailed from the Tugela region in Natal and performed as a lion tamer in Britain. His performance was noted by a London correspondent reporting for *The Journal* in 1892. He reached England via a sailing ship where he worked as an assistant for the cook, and he began performing with a lioness under the stage name of ‘Sambuze the great African Lion Tamer’.¹²³ In other British colonies, such as India, it was not uncommon for members of the local populace to take part in acts of animal training. Performers like Bhim Bhavani, for example, toured with various circuses throughout colonial India, most well-known for lifting elephants off his chest. Anirban Ghosh, in her dissertation on colonial Indian circuses, argues that Bhavani was documented in a distinct manner in the press; for example: ‘this faint-hearted Bengali stood against all the odds and became the Mighty Hercules’.¹²⁴ She argues that this construction reflected the contemporary trend of using the circus trope to entrench the notion of the physical weakness of the Bengali people.

In South Africa, the only people of colour employed to perform were those that accompanied Fillis in 1899 on his ‘Savage South Africa’ tour to England, an act described in the previous chapter which analysed the use of horses in circus war re-enactments. This re-enactment of the Matabele (Rhodesia/Zimbabwe) Wars of 1893 and 1896 included: ‘200 natives, ten Malays, 20 Boers and 50 coloured men and women’.¹²⁵ Here, these men and women formed part of the ‘exotic Other’ display during the performance. Fillis transformed the grounds at Earl’s Court with decorated walls to depict the African landscape and set up numerous huts to illustrate a view of the ‘savages’ at home.¹²⁶ Their presence in London formed part of parading British imperialism in an image of white supremacy and the iconic white saviour. A popular item of ‘Savage South Africa’ was a lion-hunting scene, where two armed Boers appeared in the arena. Spectators could see a large lion in the tall grass as it gradually made its way through the

¹²² Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 193–194.

¹²³ *The Journal*, 13 March 1892.

¹²⁴ A. Ghosh. ‘The Tropic Trapeze: Circus in Colonial India,’ (University of München: PhD thesis, 2014), p. 62.

¹²⁵ ‘Fillis sails with his natives,’ *The Beira Post*, 18 April 1899, p. 3.

¹²⁶ ‘Savage South Africa,’ *The Times of Swaziland*, 26 August 1899, p. 5.

display of rocks to the top of a small ‘koppie’ [hill].¹²⁷ Here, the lion was ‘shot’ and fell down (the spectators could not see the cable around its neck that was fastened to its cage below).¹²⁸ This visual representation of the ‘great white hunter’ who could conquer the wilderness cast upon him was one that reaffirmed the racial hierarchies of the imperial network.

Why were there no African lion tamers in South Africa? This arguably has to do with the various symbols present within lion-taming shows. Lion-taming is also a form of conquering. The lion itself represents much more than an individual beast, but rather the entire kingdom of wild animals native to South Africa. Phillipa Levine explains that the British colonies in the late nineteenth century celebrated a very particular vision of white masculinity – qualities such as ‘physical, responsible, productive’ – which were denied to women and indigenous people.¹²⁹ Watching a white European man overcoming nature through taming the wild beast justified control of the colonial natural landscape. After all, the killing of the man-eating lions, like the two male lions that roamed the railway lines at the Tsavo River in the late 1890s and claimed an estimated 135 victims before being shot by John Henry Patterson, was also an important part of justifying colonial rule.¹³⁰ As was the case in British India, where the killing of man-eating predators especially cemented the role of imperial hunters as rulers and protectors of the indigenous population.¹³¹ As for watching indigenous people overcoming nature, that would symbolise the rise of the ‘native’ to the same physical status as the white coloniser, and in doing so would undermine the power of colonial rule. However, this lack of racial diversity in the tamers was not the only difference that can be noted. The next section of this chapter will address the rise of the first female lion tamers in the southern hemisphere, which was unique in its timing when compared to the global context.

Fearless women: Colonial differences rooted in gendered performances

After the much-publicised violent death of Ellen Bright, who was killed by her tiger during a performance in 1849, it seems that the craze for female lion tamers was abandoned temporarily in Britain. Several British newspapers wrote that they hoped the ‘horrible termination to her

¹²⁷ Translated from Afrikaans, koppie is defined as ‘a small hill in a generally flat area’.

¹²⁸ Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 125.

¹²⁹ P. Levine (ed). *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

¹³⁰ See B. D. Patterson. *The Lions of Tsavo: Exploring the Legacy of Africa’s Notorious Man-Eaters*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 6.

¹³¹ See V. R. Mandala. *Shooting a Tiger: Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India*, (India: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 1–4.

career may have the effect of preventing such performances for the future'.¹³² Although it was alluded to in several newspaper entries, there is no concrete evidence to establish if an official order of prohibition was administered, but there certainly was a decline.¹³³ Both Arrighi and Van der Merwe claim that the first female lion tamer to appear in the southern hemisphere was a French woman, Jasia Scherazade, in December 1892, who was appointed by Fillis to perform during his extensive Australasian tour.¹³⁴ However, this chapter argues that other evidence proves this event took place three years earlier in the Cape Colony.

The first female lion tamer to appear in the southern hemisphere was Idola Popper (the wife of Fillis's second lion trainer, Carlo Popper) who entered the ring in 1889 and was described as a 'well-proportioned, strongly-set brunette, full of determination, perseverance and general go'.¹³⁵ As touched on earlier, female lion tamers were both liberated and limited by their role. Idola, while putting the lions through their act, still only entered the ring alongside her husband. In describing her act during an interview, she claimed that 'for the "wild" part' of her performance, she would make the lions dash about in a furious manner, then make them do tricks like a well-trained dog afterwards.¹³⁶ In contrast to her husband, she never put her head inside the lion's mouth, nor did she force any of the lions to fire off a pistol. Here, it is clear that she was performing the ideal qualities of her gender to the audience. The gender of both female equestrian riders and female lion tamers is, in Judith Butler's terms, *performative*. According to Butler, gender is an 'act' that is performative according to a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one's gender 'wrongly' initiates a set of punishments, both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all.¹³⁷ In the case of female lion tamers, these performative gestures included a highly exaggerated mask of feminine actions within the performance.¹³⁸

The public's responses to her performances also indicate this concept of 'performing gender'. Idola's performance with the lions was noted on several occasions as 'wonderful' – this

¹³² *Daily News*, 14 January 1850. A similar report was repeated almost word for word in the *Derby Mercury* and *Bristol Mercury*. See Everett, 'The British Lion Queens: A History,' 2013, p. 11.

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 13, and 'Lions and Lion-Taming – The Daily News,' *Every Saturday A journal of choice reading*, (1), January–June 1872, p. 173.

¹³⁴ Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 618, and Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 76.

¹³⁵ 'A chat with the Lion Queen,' *Cape Mercantile Advertiser*, 18 April 1889, p. 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,' p. 528.

¹³⁸ These performative gestures extend further to costume and props, which surround the performance; unfortunately, none of these are traceable in archival material.

language emphasised the feminine aspects of her performance, which was needed to convince the public that she maintained her elegance.¹³⁹ In contrast, Popper was described as ‘intrepid’ and ‘daring’, and his acts were noted to be ‘thrilling’.¹⁴⁰ Another reviewer claimed that Idola ‘doesn’t know what fear means’,¹⁴¹ and that ‘surprisingly’ the lions were ‘just as willing to obey her’,¹⁴² perpetuating the idea that Idola was unique and far from the norm of female society, but also that it was still surprising to see a female take on this male-dominated role. While similar responses took place for other Lion Queens abroad, what is unique about this occasion was the period. In England in the late nineteenth century, women were prohibited from performing with wild animals after the imposition of the Dangerous Performances Bill of 1879, which denied participation of children and women in performances that threatened any life or limb.¹⁴³ This bill, however, did not extend to British colonies in the global South. Tait argues that it seems that ‘...a female tamer or a woman entering the cage of a big cat was more acceptable in the African homeland of the lion.’¹⁴⁴ Why would it have been different in South Africa at this time?

In England, this bill became questioned in British parliament after a female rope walker, Selina Powel (who happened to be pregnant at the time), was killed in a fall at Aston Park in 1863.¹⁴⁵ The South African public had not witnessed something as shocking, which might have elicited negative responses, and Idola’s actual performances were not as dangerous as her male counterpart. Perhaps, if Idola inserted her head in the lion’s mouth, it might have produced different responses from the public. As argued by Cheryl Walker in her research on the women’s suffrage movement in South Africa, when compared to England, frontier life could create favourable conditions for abandoning gender stereotypes about women’s capabilities and exclusively domestic preoccupations.¹⁴⁶ Lastly, the differences between individual proprietors is another plausible reason. As echoed by Arrighi, Fillis was quite forward-thinking in his decision to allow a female to control and conduct a big cat act. It is clear that this was

¹³⁹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 May 1889, p. 4

¹⁴⁰ ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 9 May 1889, p. 2.

¹⁴¹ ‘Fillis’s Circus,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 18 May 1889, p. 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ The bill set forth eight different classes of dangerous performances. The last class comprises of exhibitions in which women and children perform feats with wild and dangerous animals or enter cages in which they are confined. ‘A bill to regulate Acrobatic Performances,’ *The Singleton Argus and Upper Hunter General Advocate*, 26 May 1880, p. 1, and Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, p. 95.

¹⁴⁴ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁵ ‘A bill to regulate Acrobatic Performances,’ *The Singleton Argus and Upper Hunter General Advocate*, 26 May 1880, p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ C. Walker (ed). *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Claremont: David Phillip Publishers, 1990), p. 318.

something unique, because when Fillis took his troupe to Australia, his female tamers were removed, emphasising the differences between colonial contexts even in the same imperial network at the time.

During Fillis's tour of Australia, New Zealand, India and Singapore (1891–1894), which has been covered in great detail by Tait and Arrighi, controversy arose after his appointment of the female lion tamer Scherazade two weeks into his season in Australia.¹⁴⁷ Her performance with the lions was said to have been the most exciting part of the whole programme.¹⁴⁸ However, the attention of Australian Colonial Secretary, Sir George Dibbs, was called to the subject and her act was stopped before she could perform in Sydney. It was stated that this decision was because 'of the danger to the life involved in the performance and on grounds of public morality'. Moreover, he declared that he 'did not want blood on his back'.¹⁴⁹ Arrighi claims that this prohibition was due to the fact that she took over from Captain Russell and proceeded to do the identical routine: forcing the lions to jump through hoops and driving them to the corner of the cage with pistol shots.¹⁵⁰ The *Launceston Examiner* stated the lions were irritated by the cracks of the whips and one of them made repeated blows at her with its paw.¹⁵¹ Due to her conducting the same dangerous routine, Arrighi argues that 'her embodied performance as a woman opened up a whole range of interpretations that pressed the margins of acceptability' in the 1890s.¹⁵² Similarly, in Christchurch in 1894, another unnamed female big cat tamer was prohibited from performing after public concern was expressed to the local authority over her safety.¹⁵³

However, upon returning to perform in South Africa, Fillis continued introducing female lion tamers into the ring. Miss Victoria Gilbert danced amongst the 'caged monsters' in 1896 in Johannesburg, and was supposedly 'the biggest draw Frank Fillis ever put before the Johannesburg public'.¹⁵⁴ Miss Teannie Hearn drove two tigers in a chariot, and also performed a skirt dance in the lions' cage.¹⁵⁵ Tait argues that a plausible reason for the prohibition was the fact that no aggressive animals like lions or other big cats existed in Australia and New

¹⁴⁷ Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 618.

¹⁴⁸ 'The lady of lions: An official interdict,' *Evening News Sydney*, 13 December 1892, p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ 'Sir George Dibbs and the Den of Lions,' *Launceston Examiner*, 3 January 1893, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 618.

¹⁵³ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 173.

¹⁵⁴ 'A celebrated Lion Tamer,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 17 January 1895, p. 6.

¹⁵⁵ 'Sensational Scene at a Circus,' *The Colac Herald*, 25 July 1893.

Zealand, which caused these female presenters to disturb the gendered premise within a fledgling colonial society. Compared to domesticated species like horses, wild animal acts directly confronted social propriety in Australia and New Zealand.¹⁵⁶ It is also important to note that during Fillis's 1891–1894 tour, lion-taming shows were a novelty to Australian and New Zealand audiences, which initially caused controversy and concern, especially due to several accidents that took place in the ring.¹⁵⁷ However, after lion taming was taken up by other local Australian circuses, like the Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus from 1893, it seems that the audience became more interested in seeing daring performances. By 1902, the prohibition in New Zealand was overturned, and female spectators undertook dares to appear in the big cat cage or to drive chariots pulled by trained lions.¹⁵⁸

While Boswell's Circus did not include female lion tamers until the 1940s, Fillis was not the only circus proprietor to employ female lion tamers in the early twentieth century. Pagel's wife, Mary Tinsdale, also performed with his lion Hopetoun in the ring under the stage name 'Madame Pagel'. She did not perform a wrestling act, but she put him through some 'startling tricks'.¹⁵⁹ Here is another clear example of 'performing gender', as her act matched ideals of femininity (as a resemblance of civilisation and progress) in comparison to Pagel's masculine and often bloody wrestling act. For a further example of this contrast, consider the following performance in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1906. Pagel first entered the lion den to perform his wrestling act, which also consisted of Pagel 'opening the lion's mouth to bare his gums at the audience'.¹⁶⁰ Afterwards, his wife entered the cage and 'kissed the dear old brute on the nose', giving him what she called 'a real smacker'.¹⁶¹ The reviewer stated that the audience gaped in amazement at an association of a woman and a lion, 'which to them must have passed all understanding'.¹⁶²

The excitement of this act, as argued by the circus historian, Janet Davis, is related to the construction of sexual arousal and tension at the image of a gentle woman handling an exotic beast – an act that combined woman and animal could take the sexual attraction further than

¹⁵⁶ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 176.

¹⁵⁷ 'The lions and the tamer: The accident of Saturday how it occurred: Statement of Captain Russell,' *The Herald Melbourne*, 24 January 1893, p. 2 and *New Zealand Mail*, 19 January 1894, p. 27.

¹⁵⁸ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 173.

¹⁵⁹ 'The Strongest Man on Earth to visit Mafeking,' *The Mafeking Mail*, 12 December 1905, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ 'Pagel's Circus,' *The Rhodesia Herald*, 4 January 1906, p. 7

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

equestrian or elephant riding.¹⁶³ According to Ricketts, Madame Pagel was a famous figure throughout South Africa, known for traveling through each town the circus visited in an open car, dressed in formal attire, with her favourite pet lion next to her on a leash (as depicted in the photograph below).¹⁶⁴ She served as both an element of attraction within the performance, and during the tour, as her boldness as a female lion tamer, yet also for her elegance and grace, were qualities that were admired and aspired to for females in early twentieth-century South Africa.



Figure 16: Madame Pagel travelling in a car next to their lion Hopetoun, c. early 1900s¹⁶⁵

However, upon returning to South Africa in 1907 from collecting various animals abroad, Pagel's Circus had expanded in size and changed in style. This new troupe now included lions, Royal Bengal tigers, panthers, leopards and bears, and most importantly, these animals were put through their routine by Madame Pagel.¹⁶⁶ A review of her performance in Cape Town in November 1907 with a group of lions, tigers and leopards, stated that she demonstrated 'rare courage' and a contempt of danger, which would be 'admirable in a man and for a woman is much more amazing'.¹⁶⁷ In America, Davis argues that circus owners would often present women with an odd array of felines and animals, thus adding the shock of the sole woman's appearance within a cage of cats; for example, Olga Celeste learned to present several combination animal acts: elephant and pony, wolf and collie, baby bear and two dogs, as well

¹⁶³ J. M. Davis. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 100.

¹⁶⁴ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁵ NLSA. UNCAT Pagel Circus Album, c.1905–1950. Donated by Rory Birkby January 1996 to South Africa's National Library.

¹⁶⁶ 'Madame Pagel, and her troupe of trained wild animals,' *The Rhodesia Herald*, 24 May 1907, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ 'Pagel's Mammoth Circus,' *The Cape Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1907, p. 8.

as a bear with lions, pumas, and leopards.¹⁶⁸ Madame Pagel was the first female performer in South Africa to attempt a performance with a combination of big cats.

While South Africa seemed to digress from the metropolitan law of prohibiting dangerous female performances due to the unique conditions of frontier life, along with the fact that no accidents had yet occurred in the ring and the added element of attraction needed for a public with a localised connection to lions, it is still clear that colonial ideas around gender roles and respectable female behaviours were entrenched in at least some of the local spectators. This section of the chapter has outlined colonial differences in the circus industry by indicating that female big cat performers in South Africa took off in the late nineteenth century, despite the prohibition in Britain and policing of female performers in Australia and New Zealand.

Conclusion

Wild animals have long been the ultimate collectibles. Alive and active, exotic animals have proved to be far more fascinating and exciting to humans than museum specimens, plants or cultural artefacts. This same level of emotion can be traced to the spectators who flocked to the sawdust ring in anticipation of the dramatic demonstration of lion taming and other big cat acts. Upon joining the predominantly horse and human circus – lions and other wild animals became the star, baring their teeth on the posters and attracting the crowds with their roars. This chapter has traced the history of lion-taming shows – one that stems back to the Roman arena in the first century. The rise of ‘modern’ lion tamers, beginning with Van Amburgh, the American pioneer in 1830, resembled a re-imagining of Roman ideals of masculinity as can be seen by the violent domination over animals and also the tamer’s gladiator-styled attire. This chapter has also noted the rise of Lion Queens from the 1840s, and has outlined the way these acts both liberated and constrained females based on the basis of gender expectations.

In addition, this chapter focussed on examining lion-taming performances in South Africa, which only commenced in the late 1880s. Essentially, it argues that while each company had various executions, their *male* lion-taming acts all consisted of dominating and potentially violent performances, beginning with Fillis’s trainer Salvator Bugeja in 1888. These acts displayed a domination of wildness – something that could no longer be enacted in the natural arena since the Cape lion had been hunted to extinction by 1865. However, these types of acts were not unique to South Africa and closely resembled the ones presented internationally. The

¹⁶⁸ Davis, *The Circus Age*, p. 161.

tamers themselves were often European men who had been contracted for a season of entertainment in the lion's homeland. Often, they even brought their lions with them from Europe, as the African lions in the wild were notoriously much harder to catch and train. What was unique about South Africa's lion-taming performances? This chapter has outlined two elements – the lack of African tamers and the acceptance of female tamers in the ring.

Firstly, this chapter argues that the lack of indigenous lion tamers, in contrast to the rise in their appearance in Europe, has to do with the fact that lion-taming performances displayed a form of conquering, and even expressed issues such as protection of the colonial society. Allowing an indigenous performer to master control over the local beast would have elevated the native to the same level of the white coloniser, and in doing so would undermine colonial order. Secondly, this chapter has argued that the first lion female tamer ever to be presented in the southern hemisphere was Idola Popper in South Africa in 1889. While Lion Queens had already been presented in Europe since the 1840s, this was an exceptional event due to the fact that females in Britain had been prohibited from performing in dangerous roles since 1879. While touring to Australia and New Zealand, Fillis was forced to remove his female lion tamers from his show, which proves that there were differences among the southern British colonies. It appears that in South Africa in the late nineteenth century, it was indeed more acceptable for females to enter the ring alongside lions and other wild animals.

Finally, this chapter has argued that while it was unusual (and appears at first sight to be gender non-conformist) that these female tamers could perform at all, there was still a strong element of 'performing gender' within their acts; their routines involved much tamer styles in comparison to the violent acts performed by their male counterparts. In the press, they were either remarked to be extraordinary (not relating to other females in society) or described using terms like 'wonderful' or 'skilled' to maintain that these performers still exemplified elegant feminine qualities.¹⁶⁹ While South Africa could divert from strict metropolitan female policing, attitudes on the expectations of gender were still deeply rooted in colonial ideologies. Over time, however, as the following chapters will demonstrate, similar to all supposedly 'timeless' circus acts, the style of lion-taming performances would change in response to new ideals of 'civilisation', studies on animal emotion, and to the growling concerns of a new star – the

¹⁶⁹ 'Fillis's Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 May 1889, p. 4

animal welfare activist. An attempt to trace this new *style* of wild animal performances in the early twentieth century will be investigated in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hagenbeck in Africa? South African circus animal acts in the global context, c.1896–1935

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, a fundamental shift in the human–animal relationship occurred. This transformation, although affected by broader forces, was perhaps most vividly illustrated in the small arenas of circuses, which witnessed a move away from animal exhibits of violent subjugation, to performances of apparent ‘humane’ training systems based on skill, patience and kindness.¹ These acts ostensibly showcased a new kind of relationship to and with animals, as well as a fresh understanding of animal cognition influenced by Charles Darwin’s 1872 study on animal emotions.² With this new understanding, trainers carefully selected individual animals who showed the temperament for the training of active feats or stationary poses in pyramid formation, for example.³ This change was heavily influenced by organised groups in Britain that had been fighting against animal cruelty from the start of the nineteenth century. After all, the first Animal Protection Act had already been passed in 1822 (even before cruelty to children or slavery became public issues),⁴ closely followed by similar groups in America.⁵ This transformation of the circus animal act was labelled the ‘Hagenbeck revolution’ by later historians because of the influence German animal merchant and trainer Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913) had on both training methods and the style of circus animal performances.

This chapter seeks to explore whether the influence of this revolution was evident in South Africa’s circus industry. Did South Africa align itself to self-consciously ‘civilised’ imperial ideologies in the circus ring, or follow a different path? To investigate this, the chapter will begin by providing a brief historiography of the Hagenbeck revolution. It will then examine if the new paradigm was evident in the three South African circuses – Fillis’s Circus, Pagel’s

¹ This was exemplified by the publication by UK trainer F. Bostock. *The training of wild animals*, (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1903), as well as C. Hagenbeck’s publications of *Beasts and Men, Being Carl Hagenbeck’s Experiences for Half a Century among Wild Animals*, (London: Longmans, 1909).

² See C. Darwin. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, (London: John Murray, 1872).

³ See the seminal work of P. Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances, Animals, Emotions, Circus*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴ The Emancipation Act established a plan to free all slaves in its West Indian colonies and was passed in 1833, a decade after the Animal Protection Act. See S. Swart. ‘It Is As Bad To Be a Black Man’s Animal As It Is To Be a Black Man – The Politics of Species in Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa*,’ *Journal Of Southern African Studies*, (40), (4), p. 700.

⁵ See H. Kean. *Animal rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1998).

Circus and Boswell's Circus – to discover if features of this trend can be traced in South Africa, and if so, when, why and how they were adopted, or why they were eschewed. It will do so by considering two key aspects of circus performances: the style of wild animal performances and the training methods used (with the attempt to cover both real and reported). This chapter draws on primary sources, such as newspaper articles, reviews and advertisements found both in local newspapers and abroad. Lastly, it traces the rise of anti-animal cruelty groups in South Africa to consider the changes incorporated by the circus industry in response to this movement, as well as the adoption of the first performing animal legislation. Thus, this chapter attempts to fill this gap in South African historiography and extend our broader understanding of the ever-mutable human–animal relationship.

A historiography on Hagenbeck

It is widely claimed by theatre historians that Hagenbeck was one of the most significant driving forces behind the transformation of the circus animal act, one away from training methods of force and punishment, towards what became known as ‘gentling’.⁶ Of course, he was not a lone voice in the wilderness. He was, perhaps, simply the most vocal (aided by his worldwide wild animal trading business and the attention given to him by the popular press). He was a practical proponent of a general trend towards rethinking what animals meant for human entertainment.⁷ However, historians such as Rothfels and Tait argue that crediting Hagenbeck alone for this revolutionary departure from previous training methods is certainly an exaggeration.⁸ Firstly, there were others who had already started using more humane methods in training, seeing as it was such an effective method. Rothfels proves this by providing an extract from a training manual titled *Haney's art of Training Animals*, published as early as 1869. This manual stated that, ‘when [an animal] knows what you want him to do he will in almost all cases comply with your wishes promptly and cheerfully... It is both cruel and unwise to inflict needless pain.’⁹ By 1890, there were several trainers employing such methods; for example, British proprietors, Frank Bostock and brothers Francis and Joseph

⁶ See N. Rothfels. *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), P. Tait. *Fighting Nature: Travelling menageries, animal acts and war shows*, (Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016), G. Arrighi. ‘Political Animals: Engagements with Imperial and Gender Discourses in Late-Colonial Australian Circuses,’ *Theatre Journal*, (60), (4), 2008, pp. 609–629, and J. Stokes. “‘Lion Grieffs’: The Wild Animal Act as Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, (20), (2), 2004, p. 144.

⁷ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, pp. 156–157.

⁸ P. Tait. ‘Controversy about a human-animal big cat stunt in Fillis's circus,’ *Early Popular Visual Culture*, (7), (2), 2009, p. 200.

⁹ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 156. The extract from J. Haney. *Haney's Art of Training Animals: A practical Guide for Amateur or Professional Trainers* (New York: Jesse Haney 1869).

Ferrari.¹⁰ Secondly, Johnson argues that there were also other trainers who used Hagenbeck's 'gentling' techniques as a convenient alibi, while neither having the wits nor the patience to adopt such methods.¹¹ For example, William Philadelphia, who had learned Hagenbeck's techniques in Hamburg, openly argued that intimidation and force were still needed and used in his animal training.¹² Stokes concurs, stating that while Hagenbeck's methods were venerated by trainers, they were not universally adopted.¹³ This chapter agrees with this lack of universality, and will demonstrate this by revealing his influence in South Africa. However, it also agrees with Rothfels' claim that Hagenbeck's biggest influence was not on animal training, but on the style of circus animal acts.¹⁴

This chapter draws from a wealth of secondary literature on Hagenbeck's career, such as Rothfels' book *Savages and Beasts*, which is the first serious full-length body of work written about Hagenbeck's career and influence in English. Its importance lies not only in the rich historical account of Hagenbeck's life, but more so in Rothfels' sharp analysis and ability to reveal the myths around his eventful career. This chapter also draws from the work of Tait, most notably her chapter 'Calm Patience and Pyramid Poses' in her book *Wild and Dangerous Performances*, as well as Arrighi, who analyses Hagenbeck-styled acts in local Australian circuses in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Lastly, Wilson's book *The Welfare of Performing Animals* has been particularly useful in comparing the rise of anti-cruelty campaigning in South Africa to lobbying groups in the UK that gained momentum after 1914.¹⁶ As for primary sources, both Bostock's and Hagenbeck's autobiographies provide rich insight into their training methods and thoughts about animal characteristics and emotions.¹⁷ This chapter aims to fill the glaring gap in local historiography by tracing this revolution in the local travelling circuses around South Africa (which initially consisted of British colonies and two Boer republics until the 1910 union).¹⁸

¹⁰ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 156.

¹¹ W. Johnson. *The rose-tinted menagerie*, (London: Heretic Books, 1990), p. 14.

¹² Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 157.

¹³ Stokes, "'Lion Griefs": The wild animal act as theatre,' p. 140.

¹⁴ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 157.

¹⁵ Tait, 'Calm Patience and Pyramid Poses' in *Wild and Dangerous Performances*, and Arrighi, 'Political Animals'.

¹⁶ See D. A. H. Wilson. *The Welfare of Performing Animals: A Historical Perspective*, (Berlin: Springer, 2015).

¹⁷ Bostock, *The training of wild animals*, and H. S. R. Elliot and A. G. Thacker (trans). *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's experiences for half a century among wild animals*, (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1912).

¹⁸ The Selborne Memorandum of 1907 and the Conference of 1908 opened the way for the National Convention, and by 31 May 1910 the Union of South Africa was established. See Union of South Africa House of Assembly, *Reports of the Select Committees*, 1915, (SC) 1, p. 295.

What drove the movement towards ‘civilised’ circus animal acts?

As discussed in the previous chapter, wild animal acts displayed in Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century, in the realm of the menagerie and the circus, were centred around a dramatic representation of ‘man versus beast’, mainly using big cats. These acts were meant to display the snarling, roaring feline to an audience who had very little contact with these exotic creatures. The trainer’s brave domination of these ‘unpredictable representatives of wild nature’¹⁹ was what drew the crowds to witness these performances, and often the brutality behind the training was evident – even desirable and integral to the act – on stage. Why was the visible violence applied by some of the early tamers (like Van Amburgh) tolerated at that time? Joys observes that this was an era in which discipline via corporal punishment was part of socialisation and the educational system, and Van Amburgh would have been expected to discipline his wild animals, if need be.²⁰

However, while it is clear that Van Amburgh was an influential pioneer, by the 1890s, he was regarded as part of ‘a bygone era’ and a new type of lion-taming act emerged.²¹ These acts consisted of bigger cages, which could allow for a greater number of animals and a completely different spectacle to be performed – one that focused less on domination by brute force, and more on demonstrating skilled animal acts, like tightrope walking and chariot riding.²² This trend towards ‘tamed acts’ emerged parallel with the late nineteenth-century belief held by colonial imperialists in European cultural and moral superiority, who sought to establish and lay claim to a more ‘civilised society’ than those from their colonies.²³ In late nineteenth-century Britain, as Swart points out, ‘kindness to animals’ and the ‘prevention of cruelty’ had become perceived (and valued) as a distinctly middle-class characteristic, and one that was categorised as a ‘civilised’ and increasingly ‘British’ emotion.²⁴ Changing circus acts to fit this

¹⁹ H. Loxton. *The Golden Age of the Circus*, (London: Grange Books, 1997), p. 86.

²⁰ J. C. Joys. ‘The Wild Things,’ (Bowling Green University: PhD thesis, 2011), p. 151.

²¹ J. Smith. *The Thrill Makers: Celebrity, Masculinity and Stunt Performance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 80.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 85–90.

²³ The concept of ‘civilisation’ (as distinct from the civilised–barbarian dichotomy) was coined by Victor Mirabeau in 1757, and became incorporated into the self-concept of a European-centred international society. See A. Heraclides and A. Dialla. *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century: Setting the Precedent*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015). p. 31.

²⁴ Swart, ‘It Is As Bad To Be a Black Man’s Animal As It Is To Be a Black Man,’ p. 699.

trend is evident in the types of ‘civilised’ and ‘humanely trained’ acts that were performed from late nineteenth century onwards. Arguably, the control of wild animals also fitted well within the concern for a religiously endorsed elevation of human status in the natural world.²⁵ Because, after all, the humanely trained act still demonstrated how the trainer could control a wild animal’s movement on command, therefore maintaining a display of human dominance.

Smith argues that the rise of anti-cruelty movements in England and the United States in the nineteenth century was driven by experiencing the urbanised modern city, rather than an agrarian society that shifted human–animal relationships to a closer distance and caused humans to have more affection for animals. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) was formed in Britain in 1824, America in 1866, Australia in 1871, India in 1876, and in South Africa in 1872.²⁶ The rise of this movement was also driven by the post-Darwinian recognition that humans were not living in isolation from animals. Hagenbeck himself was quite aware of his role in this revolution, which drew from this change in public perception. Due to his approach to training, he argued that ‘the trainer is no longer the taskmaster, or the beast a slave. There subsists between them a wholesome and happy relation of teacher and pupil.’²⁷

Besides performing ‘civilised’ behaviour in the metropole, wild animal acts also symbolised political control over the colonies from which they were taken. Through this, ideals of human mastery over animals aided in legitimising the colonisation of natural areas.²⁸ Social Darwinism linked to human progress, coupled with a desire to spread so-called ‘civilisation’, provided European imperialists in the late nineteenth century with justification for their global expansions.²⁹ The popularity of circus animal acts lay largely in the excitement of European society to witness wildlife exhibits in the metropole, equipped with the knowledge that these animals had been procured from their colonies during this period of ‘high imperialism’.³⁰ Moreover, the mostly invented ‘histories’ of these exotic animals also added to their symbolic value, and converted them into living embodiments of the empire and vehicles for imperial propaganda. However, while the movement towards skilled acts was driven by a change in

²⁵ Wilson, ‘Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,’ p. 354.

²⁶ Smith, *The Thrill Makers*, p. 95.

²⁷ Elliot and Thacker (trans), *Beasts and Men*, p. 74.

²⁸ T. Schwalm. ‘No Circus without Animals? Animal Acts and Ideology in the Virtual Circus,’ in L. Simmons and P. Armstrong (eds). *Knowing Animals*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 82.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 32.

³⁰ The age of ‘high imperialism’ started with the partition of Africa from 1878. see C.A. Bayly. ‘The first age of global imperialism, c. 1760-1830,’ *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, (26), (2), p. 28.

mindsets, as well as the shifting socio-political climate, it was also significantly aided – on a more individual level – by the large-scale animal trading businesses dominated by the Hagenbeck family.³¹

A brief history of Hagenbeck

As discussed in the previous chapter, Carl Hagenbeck was a renowned exotic animal dealer from Hamburg. At the height of his career, he employed fifty animal catchers and operated five holding stations for animals in Asia, several in Europe and two in the United States.³² While making a name for himself in the trade, he later became known for two major changes in animal exhibitions: innovative designs for physical spaces in zoos and the export of more acceptable animal training methods known as ‘gentling’.³³ Hagenbeck revolutionised zoo exhibition techniques through his instalment of large zoological gardens, which were intended to closely resemble the natural environment of the wild animal.³⁴ He challenged notions of what he saw as ‘animal enslavement’³⁵ by providing these seemingly suitable spaces for the wild animals to inhabit. Zoos that adopted his ‘cages without bars’ style of exhibition aimed to convince the European public that animals felt safe and even enjoyed their time in confinement, as it purportedly felt like their natural habitat.³⁶ In circuses, Hagenbeck replaced the menagerie beast wagons that used to be wheeled into the circus arena with a large ‘cage arena’, allowing for the use of pedestals and ladders, as well as a large group of various species performing together in the same space.³⁷ While the term ‘Hagenbeck revolution’ was only coined later, his contemporaries were aware of this shift as is evident by the manner in which it was embraced or imitated.

When it came to animal training, Hagenbeck despised the methods (which included the use of whips and burned hot irons) that were vogue in the mid-nineteenth century. He claimed that these examples of brutal training techniques were not only cruel, but also – importantly – senseless and ineffectual.³⁸ He started developing his methods of training that focussed on

³¹ H. Cowie. ‘Exhibiting Animals: Zoos, menageries and circuses,’ in H. Kean, P. Howell (eds). *The Routledge Companion of Animal-Human History*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 301.

³² Hanson, *Animal Attractions*, p. 78.

³³ Elliot and Thacker (trans), *Beasts and Men*, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 30.

³⁵ N. Rothfels. ‘Immersed in animals’ in N Rothfels (ed). *Representing Animals*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). p. 216 and B. Mills. *The Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-Human*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 116.

³⁶ See L. Kalof. *Looking at Animals in Human History*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 155

³⁷ Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals*, p. 21.

³⁸ Elliot and Thacker (trans), *Beasts and Men*, p. 30.

rewards instead of force from 1884 onwards, which some argue was spurred on after his brother-in-law Charles Rice was mauled to death by a tiger in 1879.³⁹ Hagenbeck's training instigated patient methods based on reading the animal's personality (echoing Darwin's 1872 publication), by stating that '[animals'] minds are formed on the same plan as our minds, the differences are differences of degree only, not of kind. They will repay cruelty with hatred, and kindness with trust.'⁴⁰ Tait points out that Hagenbeck's sympathetic training coincided, for example, with other moves towards humanitarianism, like Henry Salt's publication of *Animal Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (1894), in which he outlines that through accepting Darwin's continuum of humans as animals, it becomes humanity's responsibility to protect the vulnerable and less-advanced species.⁴¹ Hagenbeck's British counterpart, Frank Bostock, also disapproved of cruelty in training by arguing that now 'kindness is the whip used to lead wild animals to obey'.⁴²

As stated earlier, Hagenbeck's training ideas were not novel, but the Hagenbeck revolution was not strictly tied to animal *training* methods. As Rothfels argues, what Hagenbeck truly revolutionised was the *style* of animal performances. The abolition of the ancient trope of the gladiator conquering the exotic wild beasts led to a new kind of performance – that of a master among his calm and disciplined pupils.⁴³ This is evident in Hagenbeck's popular act in the 1890s known as 'Drive of the Lion Prince' (see Figure 17), which consisted of a leonine 'monarch' sporting a dashing crown in a chariot being pulled by two tigers and pushed by two canine footmen around the ring.⁴⁴ Hagenbeck's trained animal acts reached London's Crystal Palace in 1891 and the World's Columbian Exposition in the USA in 1893, with the accompanying rhetoric that these animals had been patiently trained with a system of reward, rather than forced into submission.⁴⁵ Hagenbeck's performance in Chicago in 1893 in front of one million visitors in the Hagenbeck Pavilion, as well as the other performances in New York in 1894, established his name internationally as a great figure in the art of animal training.⁴⁶

³⁹ C. B. Davis. 'Cultural Evolution and Performance Genres: Memetics in Theatre History and Performance Studies,' *Theatre Journal* (59), (4), 2007, p. 608 and E. Reichardt. 'Health, Race and Empire: Popular-Scientific and National Identity in Imperial Germany, 1871-1914,' (Stony Brook University: PhD Thesis, 2006), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Elliot and Thacker (trans), *Beasts and Men*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Tait, 'Controversy about a human-animal big cat stunt in Fillis's circus,' p. 200.

⁴² Bostock, *The training of wild animals*, p. 30.

⁴³ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 161.

⁴⁴ Tait, *Fighting Nature*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Tait, 'Controversy about a human-animal big cat stunt in Fillis's circus,' p. 200.

⁴⁶ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, p. 155.



Figure 17: Hagenbeck's famous act of 'Drive of the Lion Prince', early 1890s⁴⁷

Today, there is an agreed-upon distinction between the older type of training and performances termed *en ferocité* (dominance over aggressive animals), compared to *en douceur* or *en pelotage* (quieter acts with apparently docile animals) as practised by Hagenbeck and others.⁴⁸ In practice, this distinction is often hard to assess, and the line between the two can be blurred. Even Van Amburgh was not *always* 'merciless' or beat his subjects into submission. Some reviewers in his later shows stated that he maintained 'perfect mastery' over the most ferocious animals by using 'a single glance of his eye'.⁴⁹ While Hagenbeck's influence was certainly felt across Europe and America (even if not always adopted), this was not a universal shift. Loxton, a British theatre critic, noted that American wild animal acts tended to emphasise power of the animal in attack (the American Clyde Beatty, for example, exemplified performances of *en ferocité* in his great 'fighting act' in the early twentieth century), while in Europe (the likes of Hagenbeck and Bostock), greater emphasis was placed on the 'skill' of the trainer.⁵⁰ However, other American circuses – for instance, the Ringling Bros Circuses – described their animal performances as a 'partnership between human and animals'.⁵¹ But what about Hagenbeck's influence in the British colonies of the imperial network, like Australia, India and South Africa? This chapter first focuses on finding elements of this transition in Fillis's Circus in the late nineteenth century, and in doing so, aims to compare it to the other British colonies in this era.

⁴⁷ L. Jobey. 'The disturbing story behind Hagenbeck's circus,' *Financial Times Magazine*, 6 January 2017.

⁴⁸ B. Mizelle. 'Horses and Cat Acts in the Early American Circus,' in S. Weber, K. L. Ames and M. Wittman (eds). *The American Circus*, (New York: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Loxton, *The Golden Age of the Circus*, p. 86.

⁵¹ See Schwalm, 'No Circus without Animals? Animal Acts and Ideology in the Virtual Circus,' p. 87.

Fillis and his ‘ferocious animals’:⁵² The first sign of the revolution in South Africa

While this significant change in human–animal relations was occurring, Fillis continued performing his big cat acts in Australia and New Zealand (during his 1891–1894 tours) and later back in South Africa, somewhat unaffected by the international paradigm shift.⁵³ This chapter will show that, while there was a moment where he contemplated more humane training methods, force ultimately remained a method he turned to in need. This is echoed in his statement in 1893:

I arrive at most of my results by kindness and by teaching the animals that I do not mean to hurt them. Of course – like refractory children they require firmness and a little whip occasionally.⁵⁴

This chapter argues that Fillis’s *style* of acts, however, were somewhat influenced by Hagenbeck, particularly after he made a purchase from him in 1895. Although, as with most historical processes, this was not a straightforward transition, and Fillis’s Circus continued performing other acts that maintained a theme of animal domination.

Both Arrighi and Tait have written extensively about Fillis’s Australian and New Zealand 1891–1894 tours. Arrighi argues that until recently, Fillis’s influence on Australia’s circus industry – specifically the changes made in the local Fitzgerald Circus in response to his competitor – had gone unnoticed.⁵⁵ Australian circuses had been influenced in the latter years of the nineteenth century by the influx of American circuses into the region, which often accompanied extravagant menageries of exotic species, many never seen before by Australians.⁵⁶ However, Fillis’s lion-taming acts were a novelty to the Australian and New Zealand audiences, which caused the sparks of ‘annoyance’ and ‘anxious’⁵⁷ controversy that surrounded his tour. Fillis’s performances during this tour were modelled on the older (pre-

⁵² ‘Tomorrow Debut of Mr. Fillis: new array of talent,’ *Cape Times*, 18 November 1885, p. 4.

⁵³ Tait, ‘Controversy about a human–animal big cat stunt in Fillis’s circus,’ p. 199.

⁵⁴ ‘The training of circus horses: A chat with Mr. Fillis,’ *Morning Bulletin*, 5 September 1893, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Numerous other acts first introduced to Australia by Fillis were copied by Fitzgerald’s Circus, including acts with elephants, lions and tigers; a monkey and pony steeplechase; the water pantomime scenario; and a military drama titled ‘Dying to Save The Colours’. See Arrighi, ‘Political Animals,’ p. 614.

⁵⁶ The Sells Brothers’ Circus in 1891, for example. See G. Arrighi. ‘Synthesising circus aesthetics and science: Australian circus and variety theatre at the twentieth century,’ *Early Popular Visual Culture*, (16), (3), 2019, p. 241.

⁵⁷ ‘The “Lion Act” at Fillis’s Circus,’ *Mount Alexander Mail*, 26 January 1893, p. 2.

Hagenbeck) type of display of showcasing man's dominance over wild animals. For example, in Sydney in 1892, the big cat act was performed by trainer 'Captain'⁵⁸ Russell, and consisted of him making lions walk around in a circle, before driving them into corners of the cage. After making them jump over hurdles and through flaming hoops, he drove them again into the corners. A spectacular finish consisted of one of the lions, Pasha, firing a pistol before Russell exited the ring.⁵⁹ Similar types of routines (including the insertion of the trainer's head into the wild animal's mouth, and stand-up wrestling acts)⁶⁰ were performed during the duration of his tours.



Figure 18: Sketch titled 'In the Lions' Den at Fillis's' in the Sydney Bulletin, 1893⁶¹

Fillis's acts caused surprise and often shock among Australian and New Zealand audiences who had never before been exposed to these types of dangerous performances, but who also witnessed several serious accidents with the big cats in the ring. Two accidents that precipitated considerable discontent among the audiences included a performance in Melbourne in 1893, where Captain Russell was knocked down and injured by a lion, and another where the Bengal tiger Scindia closed her jaws around the head of Cape Town trainer John Cox⁶² during a

⁵⁸ The appellation of 'Captain' in his stage name relates somewhat to his fighting in the Zulu war, as Russell explained in an interview, but there is little evidence to suggest that this was his rank as a soldier. Arrighi states that this name has more to do with the reinforcement of an image of a colonial mercenary from darkest Africa, which strengthened the stage persona of a 'hero'. Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 621. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 and 26 November 1892.

⁵⁹ Pasha would place his forepaws on a chair and bite a tassel attached to the trigger of a pistol, causing the weapon to discharge. Arrighi, 'Political animals,' p. 621.

⁶⁰ 'Wild beasts and their training: An interview with Mr. John Cox,' *Adelaide Observer*, 15 April 1893, pp. 41–42.

⁶¹ Displayed in the *Sydney Bulletin*, (14), (735), 17 March 1893, p. 20.

⁶² Originally from Cape Town, Cox joined Fillis's Circus in 1885, initially working as an animal feeder before he took charge of the big cat acts from the early 1890s.

performance in New Zealand in 1894.⁶³ This did not put audiences off, however, as a *Sydney News* journalist claimed to have heard men declare that they were constant visitors at Fillis's Circus to ensure that when a lion tamer was killed (which they were certain would happen), they 'didn't miss out on the fun'.⁶⁴ While witnessing the obvious dangers of big cat performances, the local Australian Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus responded to Fillis's novelty by producing their own lion-taming act from 1893, with 'Captain Humphrey' mimicking Fillis's programme of a 'man versus beast' display.⁶⁵ He, too, endured a variety of serious mishaps in the ring, and often came off much worse than the lions he was forcing to perform.⁶⁶ It is clear that Fillis left Australia having made a serious impact on local circuses and audiences with his dominating wild animal shows.

Upon returning to South Africa in 1894, the style of Fillis's big cat acts remained the same, but after he made a purchase from Hagenbeck in November 1895, the first trace of this revolution could be found in South African entertainment history. Hagenbeck had developed an extremely successful business strategy of selling a complete act (animals that had already been trained), sometimes together with a trainer, to circuses in Europe and the USA.⁶⁷ Fillis was the first to purchase such an act to be performed in South Africa; his wife, Eliza, handled the purchase in Europe in October 1895 with Hagenbeck directly. The purchase consisted of two tigers, Kitty and Charles, as well as a goat and a dog costing altogether 1600 pounds.⁶⁸ These animals had already been trained to master certain tricks; for example, the tigers could roll balls down inclined planks, and another act consisted of the two tigers being harnessed to a cart that was pulled around the ring, while the goat acted as the driver.⁶⁹ This act echoed closely to Hagenbeck's famous performance of 'Drive of the Lion Prince.' Fillis's act, which was advertised as the 'The Tiger, the Goat and The Dog', was one of the greatest attractions for the 1895 December season due to the audience witnessing the wild animals be 'subdued in their ferocious, self-preserving and nervously timed instinct by the influence of the greatest of all

⁶³ See 'The lions and the tamer: The accident of Saturday how it occurred: Statement of Captain Russell,' *The Herald Melbourne*, 24 January 1893, p. 2, and *New Zealand Mail*, 19 January 1894, p. 27.

⁶⁴ 'Sawdust and Spangles,' *Illustrated Sydney News*, 21 January 1893, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 620.

⁶⁶ Humphrey's arm was severely wounded after being bitten by one of the lions during a performance in Colac (a small city in the West of Victoria) on 24 July 1893. See 'Sensational Scene at a Circus,' *The Colac Herald*, 25 July 1893. A similar accident occurred in Bathurst on 26 September 1893. See 'Attacked by a Lion,' *National Advocate*, 29 September 1893.

⁶⁷ Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances*, p. 15.

⁶⁸ 'Fillis's Circus,' *Johannesburg Times*, 1 October 1895, p. 5.

⁶⁹ 'Fillis up to date – new artist and arrivals,' *Cape Times*, 16 November 1895, p. 5.

tiger trainers – Mr Fritz Heitman'.⁷⁰ According to the *Cape Times*, this performance was said to be one that children and women of South Africa would 'flock to see', growing with the popular trend of how ferocious animals could be brought to such docility by the 'kindness of a human being'.⁷¹ Ironically, along with these styled acts, Herr Winschermann (the German animal trainer who first performed for Fillis in Sydney in 1894)⁷² continued performing dominating acts like 'The Wrestling Tiger'.⁷³ In the Transvaal Republic, for instance, the wrestling act was labelled 'the sensation of the evening' and the Wrestling Tiger was named the 'attraction of the week' during his performances in December 1894.⁷⁴ Winschermann's other performances consisted of a similar routine of the lions jumping through flaming hoops, as well as Pasha firing off a pistol to conclude the evening.⁷⁵ This was later performed by Lieutenant R. H. Staines in the early 1900s.⁷⁶ So, while there was indeed some influence in style (seen most clearly with the tiger and goat act), it is clear that this was not a complete transition. But what about Hagenbeck's strong promotion of kind training methods?



Figure 19: The 'stand-up wrestle match' performed by John Cox and the Bengal tigress Scindia in Sydney in 1893⁷⁷

While it remains entirely impossible to know exactly what went on behind the scenes, what is known about Fillis's training methods (or other trainers employed by him) does not reflect

⁷⁰ 'Fillis's Mammoth Circus,' *Cape Times*, 18 November 1895, p. 4.

⁷¹ 'Fillis's Mammoth Circus,' *Cape Times*, 18 November 1895, p. 4.

⁷² *Evening News Sydney*, 24 April 1894, p. 3

⁷³ 'Frank Fillis's Mammoth Circus,' *Cape Times*, 2 October 1895, p. 4.

⁷⁴ 'Fillis's Great Circus & Menagerie,' *Transvaal Argus*, 19 December 1894, p. 2.

⁷⁵ 'An Exciting Scene,' *Port Elizabeth Telegraph and Eastern Province Standard*, 8 February 1896, p. 3.

⁷⁶ This was later performed by Lieutenant R. H. Staines in the early 1900s. See 'A Change of Programme: Fillis's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 September 1904, p. 4. And 'Fillis' Circus,' *The Cape Daily Telegraph*, 24 November 1904, p. 5.

⁷⁷ Image courtesy of *The Daily Telegraph Sydney*, 15 July 1893, p. 4.

Hagenbeck's promotion of 'humane' training practices. Although, one could argue that there had been a moment where Fillis did consider it. For example, in 1889, Fillis bought an elephant calf, named Bob, from a trainer in England.⁷⁸ Before buying Bob, Fillis watched his owner put him through his paces without coercion, but when he tried to execute the same routine once back in South Africa, Bob was unwilling. Fillis tried 'kind' means, not because of an ideological shift, but because the previous trainer had ostensibly accustomed the elephant to such methods; so, he coaxed him, rewarded him with sugar and carrots, and gently chastised him – but with no success. He then went back to methods he trusted – striking Bob with a whip, at which he 'let out a huge roar loud enough to raise the roof of the building'.⁷⁹ Desperate, he revisited the instructions given to him from the previous owner, which stated that 'Master Bob' was very stubborn and would do nothing unless compelled, and that Fillis would have to show absolute power over him in order to achieve any results in the training ring. It was further advised that 'on no account give in until he has accomplished what you want him to do.'⁸⁰ Fillis and another unnamed assistant prepared chains and attached a small pulley block with a rope attached to the elephant's forelegs. Fillis stated that 'twice this extraordinary punishment was administered and then the little rascal went through his performance like an angel, greatly to my satisfaction, and I rewarded him with an abundant supply of carrots.'⁸¹

Although Hagenbeck stated repeatedly that inhumane training methods simply were not effective, it seems that Fillis's harsh punishment 'worked' on Bob. During the year of 1907, Bob's performances in Johannesburg and in the city of Bulawayo in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)⁸² impressed the public. *The Bulawayo Chronicle* claimed Bob to have been a 'highly trained elephant'⁸³ who seemed to enjoy the music he made (he played several instruments), and then displayed remarkable intelligence when he called for a drink, which was then brought to him by a monkey. Later that same year, the *Rand Daily Mail* review noted especially Fillis's power to make a 'brute subject' like the elephant subject to human will, which was evident in the way he made the elephant perform his tricks.⁸⁴ These tricks were said

⁷⁸ F. E. Fillis. *Frank E. Fillis's Savage South Africa: 20 Years Experience in South Africa: Life and Adventures of Frank E. Fillis*, (London: Stafford, 1901), p. 62.

⁷⁹ Fillis, *Frank E. Fillis's Savage South Africa*, p. 62.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 63.

⁸² First, it was 'South Zambezia' until the name 'Rhodesia' came into use from 1895 (after Cecil John Rhodes, the British empire-builder).

⁸³ 'Fillis' Circus,' *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 26 July 1907, p. 3.

⁸⁴ 'Fillis' Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 November 1907, p. 8

to be hardly imaginable in so ‘ponderous an animal’.⁸⁵ While Fillis’s ability to dominate Bob was what astounded the audiences, the violence he used in order to train him was never brought on to the stage.

Fillis’s other animal trainers also did not shy away from force, as can be seen by Russell’s training explanation: ‘I make the animals fear me at first, then I think they begin to care for me in their own rough way.’⁸⁶ In fact, most reviews during Fillis’s Australian tours emphasised Russell’s primary method to be force and persistence.⁸⁷ Similarly, his other cat trainer, John Cox, described his training methods as follows:

The secret of training animals, whether they be horses, dogs or lions and tigers is to make them recognise that you are the master. Firmness with a liberal supply of kindness and patience is the necessary qualification. Although, I won’t deny that when an animal shows disposition to attack you, chastisement is often resorted to. If an animal was unwilling to do a trick, or has a temper in the ring, the whip must be used in order to get the animal to do the trick before he leaves the ring.⁸⁸

Cox ‘freely used his whip’ in the ring, and it was clear that this was his tool of instruction along with his rifle, which was fired at the end to finish off the performance.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Winschermann claimed in an 1896 interview with *Johannesburg Times* that the use of ‘red hot irons and other cruel methods’ as training methods were a thing of the past, and that trainers now rely entirely over their own power over the animals.⁹⁰ However, he still used his whip during all his acts, and during a performance in Port Elizabeth in February 1896, Fillis requested Winschermann to leave the whip (which was not working as a means of coercion for the lions that evening) and exit the ring.⁹¹ What do all these competing narratives tell us when attempting to trace examples of this ‘revolution’? This was not a straightforward transition. Was this the case in the other colonies?

⁸⁵ According to Van der Merwe, towards the end of 1908, Bob also learned to play a mouth organ, stand on his head, walk on his hind legs and even do a step dance in a small tub. See Van der Merwe, *Frank Fillis*, p. 84.

⁸⁶ ‘A celebrated lion tamer: How lions are tamed,’ *Port Elizabeth Telegraph and Eastern Province Standard*, 17 January 1895, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Arrighi, ‘Political Animals,’ p. 618.

⁸⁸ ‘Wild beasts and their training: An interview with Mr. John Cox,’ *Adelaide Observer*, 15 April 1893, p. 4.

⁸⁹ ‘A lion tamer and his duties,’ *The Kyneton Observer*, 12 September 1893. Also see ‘Fillis’s circus,’ *The Bendigo Independent*, 10 November 1883, p. 7.

⁹⁰ ‘A Lion Tamer’s Recital: Some interesting details: Herr Winschermann Interviewed,’ *Johannesburg Times*, 2 April 1896, p. 5.

⁹¹ ‘An Exciting Scene,’ *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 8 February 1896, p. 3.

Interestingly, the local Australian circus followed a similar pattern to Fillis with regards to transforming their wild animal acts. The first signs of any ‘revolution’ in style is only evident after the Fitzgerald Brothers’ Circus purchased a performing animal act from Hagenbeck in late 1897 and again in 1899.⁹² The circus then replaced cramped cages with spacious enclosures and restructured animal routines from showcasing their dangerous abilities, to teaching them to perform skilful tricks, such as ‘lions riding elephants, tigers riding ponies and elephants riding bicycles’, as can be seen by the sketch below.⁹³ The Hagenbeck-trained acts were recognised by the Australian public (as noted in the press) as ‘extraordinary’ and as setting a ‘gold standard’⁹⁴ of a more modern method. Another advertisement went as far as to say that due to ‘new developments in training’, all elements of danger had been eliminated.⁹⁵



Figure 20: An advertisement for the Fitzgerald Brothers’ Circus accompanied by a novel wild animal act purchased from Hagenbeck, c.1898⁹⁶

The Australian press used similar rhetoric to the South African news outlets when describing the appeal of these types of acts; for example, ‘timid women and children will no longer be frightened by roaring and infuriated beasts goaded by force, but the beautiful animals obey their trainers as willingly as dogs.’⁹⁷ As analysed in the previous few chapters, gender played a central role in British imperial enterprise, both as one of the forces driving and shaping the empire, and as a set of ideologies produced at once in the colonies and the metropole that

⁹² ‘Fitzgerald Bros Circus and Menagerie,’ *The Horsham Times*, 12 December 1899, p. 2.

⁹³ In 1897, Mr Dan Fitzgerald purchased two troupes of performing animals from Hagenbeck. First, an elephant, pony and monkey act. The other was an elephant, lion and dog act. ‘The Drama,’ *The Daily Telegraph Sydney*, 4 September 1897 and ‘Fitzgerald’s Circus,’ *The Herald Melbourne*, 21 October 1899.

⁹⁴ Arrighi, ‘Synthesising circus aesthetics and science,’ p. 248.

⁹⁵ National Library of Australia (NLA). PIC P842/26 LOC VW 79 Collection.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

constituted shifting and pervasive imperial culture.⁹⁸ Tait argues that movement away from these types of acts as seen in Australia had to do with social insecurities in the colonies – arising from the geographical remoteness from European centres of culture. She further states that these older types of animal stunts would be considered degrading, reinforcing the status of the colonial world as ‘less civilised’.⁹⁹ But perhaps the element of gender was also a contributing factor? What is clear is that this was not a trend taken up in all British colonies, nor was it a trend adopted fully. In India, for example, according to Ghosh, the standard procedures of animal training closely followed the Hagenbeck model through careful doses of vocal threats and occasional treats as used by ‘Professor Basu’ of The Great Bengali Circus, who claimed that ‘only with love, show of absolutely no fear, and courage can conquer the beasts’.¹⁰⁰ However, there were of course others who used more brutal methods, like Ali, an animal trainer from the South of India, who was known to torture his elephants.¹⁰¹ While there was no clear-cut transformation in any colony in the late nineteenth century, what about later in the early twentieth century, and within the other circuses examined in this study?

Hagenbeck’s influence on the *style* of circus animal acts, c.1907 onwards

While certain elements of Hagenbeck’s style can already be discerned in Fillis’s Circus from 1896, this chapter argues that a complete adaption of the ‘modern’ style of circus animal acts can be seen most clearly in Pagel’s Circus from 1907 onwards. Fillis never fully transformed his style of wild animal performances; after immigrating to India in September 1910, he continued performing a combination of both new- and old-school animal acts until his death in Bangkok in 1922.¹⁰² While Pagel spent most of his first year touring southern Africa in 1905 with his lion-wrestling act with his lion Hopetoun and other strong-man performances, his acts changed dramatically after he spent most of 1906 purchasing groups of wild animals in the East. He first went to India, where he was unsuccessful in his search for elephants, but managed to purchase two tigers in Bharatpur, a city in the state of Rajasthan.¹⁰³ In Burma, he found that the elephant trade was a thriving business and bought three cow elephants, who were transported back to South Africa via ship.¹⁰⁴ When arriving back in South Africa, this was the

⁹⁸ A. Woollacot, *Gender and Empire*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 1.

⁹⁹ Tait, ‘Controversy about a human-animal big cat stunt in Fillis’s circus,’ p. 202.

¹⁰⁰ A. Ghosh, ‘The Tropic Trapeze: Circus in Colonial India,’ (University of München: PhD thesis, 2014), p. 137.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Van der Merwe states that this move was largely due to financial reasons. *Frank Fillis*, p. 171, also *Rhodesia Herald*, 3 February 1922.

¹⁰³ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, pp. 108–109.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

birth of his ‘Mammoth Circus’ with an impressive array of artist and animals.¹⁰⁵ From early 1907, Pagel had done away with his previous ‘man versus beast’ wrestling acts, and incorporated a larger group of big cats (lions, Royal Bengal tigers, panthers, leopards and bears) into one performance. His new acts were advertised as ‘Prince, the only Jockey Tiger in the world’ and ‘Princess, the only Tigress in the world who walks a tightrope’.¹⁰⁶ His three elephants performed on a tricycle, rolled barrels with their trunks and stood on their heads and hind legs. Most fascinating about this shift was that these ‘skilled’ acts were performed by his wife, ‘Madame Pagel’. He still presented his strong-man acts, including a new feat where he pulled against two elephants by holding leather straps around his biceps.¹⁰⁷

Performing in southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Madame Pagel’s act was advertised as ‘a thrilling performance never before realised’ where animals played ‘seesaw’, posed as groups of statuary, jumped barriers, ran hurdles and conducted chariot races – all mimicking closely the types of styled acts Hagenbeck and other European trainers conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰⁸ Drawing from the other chapters in this thesis, Madame Pagel’s acts display yet another clear sign of ‘performing gender’.¹⁰⁹ As a female trainer, she performed acts of a gentler nature instead of a violent domination, one where the wild animals were docile and tame. The element of danger, however, was still present within these performances, as can be seen in 1908 in Johannesburg, when the animals become refractory and the manager had to appeal to the audience to remain quiet out of fear for Madame Pagel’s safety.¹¹⁰ It seems that after 1914, Madame Pagel stepped down from presenting the big cats acts and her husband took over the role.¹¹¹ While this could have been due to a number of personal reasons, it was not a decision to bring back more acts displaying domination. In fact, Pagel’s wild animal acts remained focussed on skill throughout the 1920s.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ While Fillis’s was still occasionally described as a ‘mammoth circus,’ Pagel adopted this title from mid-1907 onwards in his advertising to indicate his increase in size of wild animals. ‘Pagel’s Mammoth Circus and Performing Menagerie,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 September 1907, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Pagel’s Great Circus and Performing Menagerie,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 February 1907, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ ‘The elephants tug and strain with all their power in opposite directions while Pagel stands like a granite statue, immovable as a rock.’ ‘Pagel’s Great Circus,’ *The Mafeking Mail*, 1 May 1907, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Madame Pagel and her Troupe of Trained wild animals,’ *The Rhodesia Herald*, 24 May 1907, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ As discussed in detail in the previous two chapters, the concept of ‘performing gender’ in this thesis is drawn from Judith Butler’s argument that gender is an ‘act’ that is performative according to a social policy of gender regulation and control. See Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,’ p. 528.

¹¹⁰ ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 May 1908, p. 4.

¹¹¹ ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 November 1914, p. 6.

¹¹² ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 March 1913, p. 9.

The South African public seemed to be increasingly impressed by these types of acts as stated by *The Rand Daily Mail* in 1920: ‘never in any part of the world have these ferocious animals been brought to such a perfect state of control.’¹¹³ Again, in 1922, a reviewer stated that Pagel’s ‘dominancy over these animals, and the performances which they go through – wire rope, walking and perching like statues on pedestals, to mention only a couple are marvellous.’¹¹⁴ While the majority of the South African public were still impressed by the trainer’s ‘dominance’, this was in stark contrast to the physical dominance displayed in Pagel’s earlier lion-wrestling act. This dominance was now a visible demonstration of humanity’s intellectual and cognitive dominance over wild animals, as argued by Mason. In contrast to the man–beast contests of the Roman era, contemporary circuses’ dominion rituals involve the deliberate degradation and humiliation of the nonhuman world dressed up as entertainment and education. These rituals of humiliation ‘tend to reinforce myths of animal stupidity, inferiority and the willingness to submit to human dominion.’¹¹⁵ Performances by animals still contain powerful messages about the place of human beings in relation to other animals in the world. These offer a dual socialising effect: teaching children and reminding adults that human beings are the dominant ‘masters’ of nature.¹¹⁶

Boswell’s Circus, in comparison to Pagel’s, was late to adopt this changing trend in animal performances. This might be due to the fact that the circus only bought their first lions Noble and Ginger in 1916, and initially decided to formulate an act based on the old-school display. These lions formed the basis for the popular ‘untameable lion act’,¹¹⁷ which was presented in a mobile cage by trainer Carl van Rooyen until 1922, and still centred on a dramatic demonstration of ‘man versus beast’ (as discussed in detail in the previous chapter).¹¹⁸ However, by the late 1920s, a public shift in perception of animal cruelty was taking place in a small group of society.

This chapter contends that this sea change led to the start of anti-circus protesting, and along with the need to respond to the changes already made in Pagel’s Circus (the local competition), both these factors spurred Boswell’s Circus on. In fact, the most significant reason for the

¹¹³ ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 May 1920.

¹¹⁴ ‘Pagel’s Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 July 1922.

¹¹⁵ J. Mason. *An Unnatural Order. The Roots of Our Destruction of Nature*, (New York: Lantern, 2005), p. 254.

¹¹⁶ R. Yates. ‘Rituals of Dominionism in Human-Nonhuman Relations: Bullfighting, Hunting, Circuses to Petting,’ *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, (VII), (1), 2009, p. 162.

¹¹⁷ ‘Boswell’s Bro Circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 30 November 1920, p. 8.

¹¹⁸ C. Ricketts, *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus*, (Johannesburg: Self Published, 2003), p. 31.

changes noted above in both these circuses was arguably due to the growth of a nascent appreciation of animal well-being.

A paradigm shift in public perception (late 1920s – early 1930s)

Audiences of the early twentieth-century circuses in South Africa had a feast of performing animal acts to enjoy. Although the untameable lion act had died down by the 1920s, audiences were captured by animal sagacity, a wild animal's ability to be trained to perform skilled tricks, and the astonishment of a large number of different species (big cats, elephants, polar bears and baboons) all performing together in the same act.¹¹⁹ This can be seen in a review in the *Cape Times* in 1925, which stated: 'The endless number of variety of performing animals was to say the least – astounding.'¹²⁰ But what about concerns about 'animal welfare',¹²¹ especially the fact that wild animals in the circus were confined to small cages and forced to travel large distances to perform to human audiences? Through contextualising the beginning of these animal welfare concerns in South Africa with the already growing movements in Britain and the USA, this section of the chapter aims to show the influences these movements had on South Africa's circus industry. As Davis argues, 'perhaps the strongest of selection pressures on the animal act has been public opinion.'¹²² How did this change in public opinion affect circus animal acts in South Africa?

In Britain and America, controversy surrounding the welfare of performing animals had increased since the end of World War I in 1918. Britain's Performing Animal's Defence League (founded already in 1914) was increasingly concerned with the problems of confinement.¹²³ Wilson argues that the occurrence of major animal performance controversy in Britain could be compared with the over vivisection that occurred fifty years previously. In 1918, a new pressure group formed in America called the International Jack London, started by Francis Rowley of the Massachusetts SPCA.¹²⁴ The name was inspired by Jack London, himself, the renowned American writer who stepped forward to fight for circus animals' rights

¹¹⁹ Ryder notes that the boom in animal training and performing in the nineteenth century was largely due to a growing public interest in the sagacity of animals. Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals*, p. 29.

¹²⁰ 'Boswell Circus,' *Cape Times*, 4 November 1925.

¹²¹ Please note that 'animal welfare' (how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives) is an anachronistic term if used in this earlier period. This term was only first widely used in the 1970s and early 1980s, but even then, it was not adopted widely by academics. Only by the 1990s was it agreed upon that animal welfare is measurable and, hence, a scientific concept. See D. M. Broom. *Sentience and Animal Welfare*, (Oxfordshire: CABI, 2014), pp. 24–28.

¹²² Davis, 'Cultural Evolution and Performance Genres,' p. 608.

¹²³ Wilson, 'Circus animals and the illusion of wildness,' p. 357.

¹²⁴ Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals*, p. 33.

in 1917, calling for temporary walkouts from circus programmes when animal acts appeared. He famously wrote: ‘cruelty as a fine art, had attained its perfect flower in the trained animal world’¹²⁵ in the foreword of his novel, *Michael, Brother of Jerry*. According to Wilson, copies of this book were carried and distributed as propaganda by protestors (similar to Singer’s *Animal Liberation* in the late 1970s).¹²⁶

A select committee was formed to investigate the welfare of performing animals between 1921 and 1922 in Britain, but Wilson argues that due to the context of professional secrecy, the committee was unable to reveal any conclusive evidence, and this resulted in the half-hearted legislation (the Performing Animals Bill) to be passed in 1925.¹²⁷ It seems that this bill extended to regulate exhibition and training in Australia’s circus industry.¹²⁸ This act prohibited anyone from exhibiting or performing with an animal, unless such a person had registered that animal. Applications for registration had to contain the particulars of the animal, such as the nature of the performance or exhibition, as well as the training methods used. It prohibited the use of any mechanical appliances involving cruelty in the execution of tricks.¹²⁹

In South Africa, a growing movement against the use of wild animals in performances as aligned to those already formed in Britain and the USA began developing in the late 1920s. The first local Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) was founded in the Cape in 1872, before it spread to other areas.¹³⁰ The first legislation on cruelty to animals had been passed in 1897, but there was no act yet policing the welfare of performing animals in South Africa.¹³¹ In 1927, Frida Hartley, a social worker and ‘animal welfare’ campaigner,¹³² addressed the annual assembly of the Girl Guides who met in the Town Hall of Pretoria. Her speech focused on the work of the SPCA and wished particularly to get young people interested in the movement. She spoke of the improvements to the conditions under which animals lived, especially regarding transporting animals and trapping birds – but she emphasised that much

¹²⁵ His novel followed the story of a dog who loses his ‘master’, and is adopted into the world of the circus and bears witness to different kinds of cruelty relating to animal training. J. London. *Michael, Brother of Jerry*, (England: Nabu Press, 2010,) p. vi.

¹²⁶ Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals*, p. 33.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 267.

¹²⁸ ‘Performing Animals,’ *The Register Adelaide*, 24 April 1923, p. 5.

¹²⁹ ‘Performing Animals,’ *The Register Adelaide*, 24 April 1923, p. 5.

¹³⁰ KAB 3/ELN, 988, 1810, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. 1879–1949. Also L. Adams. ‘Animal Welfare in South Africa: A Multi-Component Programme Design,’ (University of Cape Town, MA thesis, 2014), p. 9.

¹³¹ Pre-Union Statute of Law South Africa, 1897: Cruelty to Animals Act, Proclamation number 3 of 1897.

¹³² Please note again that ‘animal welfare’ is an anachronistic term used to describe Hartley who was employed as a social worker, but was an active campaigner for animal rights in Johannesburg.

work needed to be done. She turned her focus to the conditions of wild animals, especially those kept in small cages for circuses and menageries. She was hoping to get a ‘monster petition’¹³³ to the owner when next a circus came around. She stated that, in England, through the efforts of the SPCA, two acts had been passed: The Protection of Animals Act (1911) and the Wild Animals in Captivity Protection Act (1900).¹³⁴ She hoped South Africa would follow suit.

By 1932, the rise in concerns of animal rights culminated in Johannesburg hosting its first ever ‘Animal Week’ (an idea that stems from animal welfare campaigning in Britain and the USA). It hosted a full week of poster displays, lectures and animal exhibits to solicit the support of the public on behalf of the work done by the animal welfare societies.¹³⁵ The mayor of Johannesburg at the time, Mr D. F. Corlett, was a strong campaigner for animal welfare, and opened the exhibition of Animal Week during March 1932 by stating that ‘every person should have the welfare of animals at heart’, and that it should even ‘become part of the ordinary school curriculum’.¹³⁶

The following year in April, a number of distinguished animal rights campaigners (including Hartley) organised a public protest (through a signed petition) against the inclusion of wild animals in circus menageries and programmes, headed by the bishop of Johannesburg.¹³⁷ This was not a stand-alone effort, but was in line with the large-scale protest of 1932 to push for the passing of the Humane Slaughter Bill, as well as campaigning against dental experiments on dogs. The 1933 protest was against the whole system of using wild animal performances, which included the fact that the animals were caught (a procedure involving terror and often pain), as well as the fact that they were transported in small cages, and after that, taught unnatural tricks while living in a confined space.¹³⁸ The group, as can be seen by the signatures in Figure 21, consisted mainly of middle-class white citizens. In late Victorian and Edwardian periods, animal protection was also seen by ordinary working-class people as a preoccupation of the sentimental rich.¹³⁹ This group of middle-class South Africans was made up of relatively

¹³³ ‘Girl Guides Protection of Animals: Miss Frida Hartley’s Address,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 September 1927, p. 4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ ‘Animal Week,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 March 1932, p. 6.

¹³⁶ ‘S.P.C.A War on Cruelty,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 March 1932, p. 5.

¹³⁷ ‘Wild Animals in Circuses: Performances that should not take place – To the Editor,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 April 1933, p. 10.

¹³⁸ M. F. Hartley. ‘Animal acts in circuses: Hardships they must involve,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 May 1933, p. 13.

¹³⁹ R. D. Ryder. *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism*, (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 132 and p. 141.

distinguished members of society, the bishop of Johannesburg, for example, as well as the principal of Pretoria Boys High School. In the early formation of the London and Provincial Anti-Vivisection Society, an involvement of prominent members of society was used to provide legitimacy and dignity to their contested aims.¹⁴⁰ In Britain, animal protection also became associated in the public mind with the campaigns of women rather than men; out of the 1800 separate RSPCA branches in Britain, at least nine-tenths of the members were women.¹⁴¹ This was also the case in South Africa; as recorded by a journalist from the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1934, it was only ‘through women’s work’ that welfare for animals in South Africa had achieved such success.¹⁴²

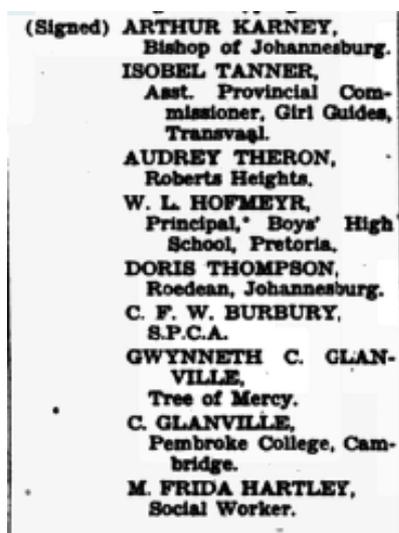


Figure 21: The signatures of the welfare workers who condemned the practice of using wild animals in performances, 1933¹⁴³

Pagel wrote a letter to the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, in response to the signatures, stating that he had sympathy for those who signed because he too deplored all animal cruelty.¹⁴⁴ However, he argued that more importance should be placed on protesting against the slaughter of wild game that takes place yearly. Pagel disputed their claim that the animals in his menagerie would be enjoying their natural environment if not in his possession.¹⁴⁵ He stated that the alternative to his menagerie would be destruction to these animals. He argued further

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals*, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Royal patronage was given by Queen Victoria in 1840 making it the RSPCA, as is known worldwide today.

¹⁴² ‘Women in the capital,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 June 1934, p. 9.

¹⁴³ ‘Wild Animals in Circuses: Performances that should not take place – To the Editor,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 April 1933, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ W. Pagel. ‘I deplore all cruelty: Mr. Pagel on circus animals,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 April 1933, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

against the point that circus performances do not have educational value. Here, it is important to note the language that Pagel uses, in which he clearly advocates his method of kind training practices):

How can it be claimed that the child has nothing to learn from the exhibition of a man's control over a wild animal that has been won from tyranny of its savage instincts through love, kindness and understanding?¹⁴⁶

Despite responses from circus proprietors, the protests by the animal welfare activists had certainly made an impact on the state, as can be seen by the first legislation passed to control the training and upkeep of performing animals – the Performing Animals Protection Act of 1935.¹⁴⁷ This act was modelled on Britain's Performing Animals Bill of 1925, which stated that trainers and training establishments needed to be registered. It also gave the right for local authorities and the RSPCA to have access at all times, and introduced stiff penalties for instances of cruelty.¹⁴⁸ This 1935 act stipulated that all animals in performance roles needed to be licensed, which would only be granted after a detailed inspection and proof of an updated record of animal health register. The act also ensured that the animals were trained and looked after by experienced staff, and were trained using 'appropriate humane methods'.¹⁴⁹ The inspector had to approve the accommodation plan and facilities, ensuring they have adequate space that is suitable and a stimulating environment to enhance their wellbeing. The facility also needed to be free of hazards, be applicable to a pest control programme, and able to provide and isolate sick and vulnerable animals. The company wanting to obtain licenses also needed to have a veterinarian responsible for the healthcare of animals, as well as appropriate transportation methods and equipment.¹⁵⁰

The 1930s saw a rise in public protest, and the response by the state of adopting legislation shows the dramatic effect of the paradigm shift in public perception, albeit a relatively small group of campaigners. As will be discussed in the next section, both Pagel and the Boswell family were quick to take up acts that followed this trend and were also more vocal in advocating for the use of 'kind' animal training methods.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Statute Law of South Africa, 1935: The Performing Animals Protection Act, Proclamation number 25 of 1935.

¹⁴⁸ See D. A. H. Wilson. 'Politics Press and Performing Animals Controversy in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,' *Anthrozoos*, (21), (4), p. 328.

¹⁴⁹ Statute Law of South Africa, 1935: The Performing Animals Protection Act, Proclamation number 25 of 1935.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The revolution will be dramatised: Pagel's and Boswell's circus acts in the 1930s

In response to the animal welfare campaigners who advocated that keeping wild animals captive was a practice of cruelty, Pagel emphasised that animal welfare, comfort and health was always his first and last consideration. He announced to the press that his animals 'only receive love and kindness'.¹⁵¹ Even during his performances in the 1930s, it is clear that he was trying to emphasise this idea. In 1933, during a performance with a lion, tiger and leopard in the ring, a *Rand Daily Mail* reviewer noted that Pagel whistled to his animals and called them each by their names.¹⁵² He caressed them and fed them pieces of sugar and sweets.¹⁵³ In another act in 1939, the *Rand Daily Mail* reviewer stated that Pagel's animal act substantiated the impression that kindness played a prominent part in the animals' training; in fact, the animals appeared to enjoy doing their acts.¹⁵⁴ This indicates that Pagel understood that the public's needs has changed and they wanted to see that circus animals were being treated and cared for correctly.

Boswell's Circus also responded to this change, and by the 1930s, their animal acts had grown in size, including a large group of lions, several elephants and an appearance of Jock the riding baboon, who performed on the back of one of their piebald ponies.¹⁵⁵ Their circus also incorporated acts that were focused on skilled performances. For example, in 1931, Jim Boswell presented a group of twelve trained lions in the ring who walked over tightropes, jumped hurdles and 'waltzed' around the ring.¹⁵⁶ Rudolph Millar, a well-known animal trainer during the 1930s who alternated between Pagel's and the Boswell's circuses (depending on whoever would give him higher pay), managed to train three Indian elephants to play cricket for the 1934 and 1935 season of the Boswell's Circus tours.¹⁵⁷ The *Rand Daily Mail* stated that the elephants were unaware of the arcane subtleties of leg theory, but they were able to bowl and hit the ball, albeit a trifle wildly.¹⁵⁸ They came into the ring sporting cricket caps, bats, pads and stumps. The bowler lobbed with a fine sweep of his trunk and the batsman hit it well outside the ring, instantly heaving off to the other side of the pitch to score a run, to the excited

¹⁵¹ W. Pagel. 'I deplore all cruelty: Mr. Pagel on circus animals,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 April 1933.

¹⁵² 'Circus comes to town: Big crowd enjoys a great show,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 April 1933.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ 'Fine Animal Performers in Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 December 1939.

¹⁵⁵ 'Clever Baboon on Horseback, Wonderful circus that opens to-day,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 December 1932.

¹⁵⁶ '12 Lions take Part in Circus Act: Boswell's Menagerie in City on Wednesday,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 September 1931, p. 8.

¹⁵⁷ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁸ 'Golden City Fair: Elephants Play Cricket, Lions that walk tight-rope,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 December 1934, p. 11.

applause of the crowd. Equally amusing was the wicket-keeper, who seemed enervated by ennui and did nothing besides remembering to draw stumps at the end of the game.¹⁵⁹

In contrast to Fillis, both Pagel's and Boswell's circuses were hailed for having trainers who used humane methods with their animals and openly advocated for a Hagenbeck-type programme. Upon explaining his training methods to Carel Birkby (author of *The Pagel Story*), Pagel emphasised his motto of 'gently does it',¹⁶⁰ and stated that the only force he administered was the force of the mind. He insisted that 'tricks are taught to animals only by the exercise of endless patience and kindness and that one could never expect obedience from lions, tigers and leopards through methods of cruelty.'¹⁶¹ In echoing Hagenbeck, Pagel argued that 'animals are creatures like us, and their intelligence is different from ours only in degree and strength, but not in type. They react to meanness with meanness and to friendship with friendship.'¹⁶² The Hagenbeck style of training is evident in the way Pagel managed to train both his elephant Tempest, as well as his tiger Rajah, to walk across a tight rope that was raised from the ground. In both cases, he allowed the animals to get used to the rope before he gently coaxed them over it. He would reward them if they were successful and as they grew more confident, he would raise it slightly higher off the ground.¹⁶³ Rajah's performance of this act can be seen in the picture below.

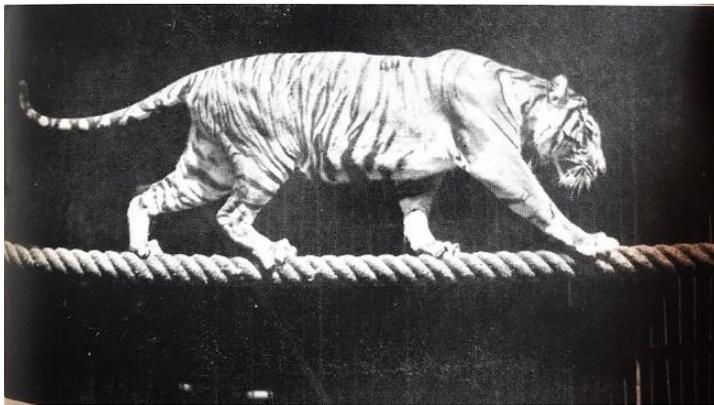


Figure 22: Rajah the Tiger performing on a tightrope, c. 1930s¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ 'Unusual Circus Turn,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 December 1935, p. 16 and *The Star*, 17 December 1935, p. 5

¹⁶⁰ C. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), p. 149.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp. 207–208.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* p. 149.

¹⁶³ Birkby, *The Pagel Story* p. 153, and 'They eat 240 lb. a day: Circus elephants big food bill,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 January 1937.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The Boswells' animal training methods were also closely linked to Hagenbeck's style. Jim, one of the four Boswell brothers who took over the lion acts in the 1930s, stated that his training methods were very simple – he believed in gaining the animal's confidence by keeping his voice low but authoritative, and argued that once confidence was won, they were amenable to learning even the most complicated routines. According to Ricketts, ex-circus employee and author of *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus*, Jim could often be seen talking quietly to his animals.¹⁶⁵ Stanley Boswell, Jim's son, who worked with the lions from 1936 onwards, claimed that his methods include getting acquainted with the lions by spending as much time with them as possible. He stated that scratching an animal's ears and giving it that psychological feeling that it is 'wanted' is essential.¹⁶⁶ After that, he stated that there is almost nothing that the animal will not do for you. He further argued that 'all animals appreciate the company of humans. Maybe they are a bit flattered by the attention you give them. The wildest of them love to be stroked.'¹⁶⁷ On commenting about the public outcry of cruelty upon seeing an animal act, he argued: '...what tosh. I have never ill-treated an animal in my life, and I can do anything with them.'¹⁶⁸

In comparison to Fillis's Circus, both Pagel's and the Boswells' training styles leaned towards the Hagenbeck method, which they emphasised during the 1930s and onwards as they attempted to align themselves with the shift in public perception, as well as the new legislation that was passed in 1935. While it is not possible to know for sure if these methods were followed precisely behind the scenes, it is clear that the ideals of Hagenbeck's revolution had arrived in South Africa, both in the changing style of performances and the promotion of kind training, and the older menagerie display of brutal domination was something of the past.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Hagenbeck revolution of the late nineteenth century to explore its impact on South African circuses. This revolution firstly transformed the style of animal performance to match international paradigm shifts that sought to see so-called civilised

¹⁶⁵ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 46.

¹⁶⁶ 'First catch your lion: Stanley Boswell's way to turn kings into kittens,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 September 1963, p. 7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ 'First catch your lion: Stanley Boswell's way to turn kings into kittens,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 September 1963, p. 7.

behaviour by both the animals and the trainer in the ring. This led to circus performances that demonstrated skill and discipline of both the trainer and his pupils, rather than a ‘man versus beast’ spectacle. Secondly, it showcased the success of animal training methods based on patience and kindness, rather than force. In order to examine this revolution’s impact, this chapter focussed on investigating trends in Fillis’s Circus, as well as Pagel’s and Boswell’s circuses. Through this, this chapter has shown how elements of the revolution were adopted – at least partially – by some circus companies, but has also demonstrated that this shift was neither universal, nor straightforward.

Fillis’s wild animal performances (centred on domination in a ‘man versus beast’ display) were a novelty to the Australian and New Zealand colonies during his 1891–1894 tours, and influenced their local circuses to adopt his style of performance. However, after purchasing a trained act from Hagenbeck in 1896, the first trace (albeit small) of this revolution can be found in South Africa’s circus history. This performance called ‘The Tiger, the Goat and The Dog’ was a visible demonstration of Hagenbeck’s training method and style. However, other elements of Fillis’s Circus remained centred on acts of domination (like stand-up wrestling acts with his tigers), which continued to be performed all the way into the early twentieth century. In addition, Fillis openly confirmed that the use of force and punishment was a method used by him and his other animal trainers, again proving the lack of Hagenbeck influence.

However, the effect of the Hagenbeck revolution can be seen later in South Africa within Pagel’s Circus in the early twentieth century, through his emphasis on humane training methods, as well as the style of his performances. Most notable were the acts performed by his wife, Madame Pagel, in which a collection of big cats (varying in species) performed together in the ring, mimicking closely several acts performed by Hagenbeck during the 1890s. Lastly, while Boswell’s Circus caught on to this transformation later than Pagel’s, they also adjusted their wild animal acts by the 1930s to showcase the wild animals’ skills, rather than their trainer’s domination. Boswell’s trainers also outlined that their methods focussed on patiently building trust with the animals, rather than using force of any kind.

The reason for this shift in the 1930s was largely due to the rise of animal rights activism and protest action (mainly in the form of petitions) against the use of wild animals in circus performances. Most notable was the response by the state to these pleas with the implementation of the Performing Animals Protection Act of 1935, which sought to regulate the welfare of these animals by monitoring the trainers, training methods and the animal

enclosures through regular inspections.¹⁶⁹ While there was indeed a notable change in the performances, the majority of the South African audience still read Pagel's and Boswell's acts in the same light. What most impressed them was the 'dominance' of the trainer over the animals.¹⁷⁰ Excluding the group of liberal animal welfare enthusiasts protesting against the inclusion of wild animal performances, the public still saw the acts in the same vein as before, and the circuses still continued using wild animals in their all of their performances. While the 1930s witnessed a greater public outcry against wild animal performances, it only increased over time, causing further changes in the South African circus industry, which will be addressed in the following chapter. Overall, what this chapter has contended is that the Hagenbeck revolution was not a linear process, nor was it a comprehensive shift, but rather that it took idiographic contours, filtering gradually and progressively down to South Africa to eventually transform wild animal circus acts.

¹⁶⁹ Statute Law of South Africa, 1935: The Performing Animals Protection Act, Proclamation number 25 of 1935.

¹⁷⁰ 'Pagel's Circus,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 July 1922, p. 8.

CHAPTER FIVE

The agency of attack: ‘Political animals’ and public discontent, c.1940–1959

Introduction

Throughout the motley history of philosophical definitions of humankind, Aristotle’s characterisation of ‘man is by nature a political animal’ is one that has survived perhaps longest.¹ By this, he characterises humans as animals with language, a self-consciousness and a capacity for life under the law, with the added capability of recognising and acting upon general principles – all factors that exclude *Homo sapiens* from the rest of the animal kingdom.² However, in the last few decades, several scholars of philosophy,³ political theory,⁴ ecology,⁵ and animal history have begun to re-examine this exclusionary framework. Kersty Hobson contends that animals are already subjects of, and subject to, political practices through humanity’s substantial consumption and regulation of animal trading networks.⁶ Sandra Swart has shown how animals exhibit what James Scott termed ‘weapons of the weak’ through deploying conspicuous acts of resistance that can easily be overlooked.⁷ Similarly, Aylon Cohen argues that non-human animal resistance (escapes, attacks and refusal to work or perform) not only makes the oppression of animals an object of political deliberations, but also transforms animals into ‘*subjects of politics*’.⁸ Should ‘political animals’⁹ be taken seriously, considering their incapacity for speech? Are circus animals ‘performing’ in a way analogous to their human counterparts? This chapter aims to contribute to the conversation on political animals grounded in history, through the lens of big cat attacks (specifically lions and tigers), and other instances of animal disobedience in South Africa’s circus industry.

¹ H. Rackham. *Aristotle: The Nicomachean ethics*, (21), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

² S. R. L. Clark. *The Political Animal: Biology, Ethics and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

³ See J. Hadley. ‘Wild Animals as Political Subjects’ in B. Fisher (ed). *Routledge Handbook of Animal Ethics*, (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁴ A. Cohen. “‘We Support Circus Animals Who Kill Their Captors’: Nonhuman Resistance, Animal Subjectivity, and the Politics of Democracy,’ in R. Spannring, R. Heuberger, G. K. Gufler, A. Oberprantacher, K. Schachinger & Al. Boucabeille. (eds). *Tiere, Texte, Transformationen: Kritische Perspektiven der Human-Animal Studies*, (Germany: Transcript, 2015), pp. 277–295.

⁵ See. K. Hobson. ‘Political animals? On animals as subjects in an enlarged political geography,’ *Political Geography*, (26), 2007, pp. 250–267.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 251.

⁷ Here, examples include something as quotidian as a horse flattening its ears as its saddle girth is done up. S. Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), p. 202 and J. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁸ Cohen, “‘We Support Circus Animals Who Kill Their Captors,’” p. 278.

⁹ A political subject is to have a certain status within a nation state, something akin to a citizen, or at least a legitimate stakeholder, something denied to animals in South Africa’s constitution.

This chapter will begin by providing a brief historiography on the longstanding debates surrounding ‘animal agency’, ‘performing animals’ and the writing of a ‘new political history’ that aims to take animals seriously. The chapter will then move on to the core focus: finding spaces of animal agency within the confined constraints of the circus ring. This will be effected by examining episodes of escape, rebellion and attacks, which stem back from the introduction of wild animals in 1885, but increase drastically over the periods of the late 1930s–1940s. It is through tracing newspaper reports, interviews and other primary evidence that this analysis is possible. However, as with all history, there are potentially unreported or erroneously recorded occurrences. In spite of this, and through using what is available on big cat attacks, this chapter demonstrates the influence of animals on society. It will highlight the measures carried out by the circus industry (Pagel’s Circus, Boswell’s Circus and the newly established Wilkie’s Circus) to accommodate the increase in violence and public discontent between 1940 and 1959.¹⁰ It will explore the possibilities and limitations of both animal and human resistance in the struggle for animal welfare, historically.¹¹ Through this, the chapter aims to contribute to the important conversation about re-imagining animals as political subjects in their own right.

Performing animals? A historiography on agency, politics and performance

As discussed in Chapter One, ‘animal agency’ can be broadly defined as non-human animals’ ability to propagate change by their own volition, and through this, shape both their histories and the history of humankind. Erica Fudge states that putting animals into history is part of a larger post-humanist project, which reconsiders the human subject and their ‘special status’, similar to political theorists reconsidering animals into the political sphere.¹² Dorothee Brantz argues that the term ‘agency’ has been re-examined to include animals within this notion. In the last century, historians have moved away from the ancient concept of the word (which focused primarily on white males) to include marginalised groups in society who displayed agency in history in ways yet to be investigated.¹³ Over the past decade, historians have challenged academics working in the field of animal studies to move beyond scholarly debates

¹⁰ Wilkie’s Circus (originally from England) arrived in South Africa in 1953 after years of experience in the amusement park, cinema and circus business, due to the high rate of British taxes. ‘Taxes,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 October 1957, p. 7.

¹¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘animal welfare’ was only adopted as a scientific term in the 1960s and refers to the quality and quantity of an animal’s experience in contrast to animal rights – man’s duty to exercise morally correct behaviour in relation to animals. C. Phillips. *The Welfare of Animals: The Silent Majority*, (Queensland: Springer, 2009), p. 63.

¹² E. Fudge. ‘Milking other Men’s Beasts,’ *History and Theory*, (52), (4), 2013, p. 21.

¹³ D. Brantz (ed). *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans and the Study of History*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p. 2.

regarding agency.¹⁴ Certainly, animals exert their influence on society by their very presence, as well as by our consideration to their needs and capacities?¹⁵ Instead of using animal agency as a tool for debate, it should already be considered as a formality in discussion. This chapter aims to consider animals both as performative agents and possibly as political agents, with the ability to encourage members of society to reconsider the longstanding history of animal entertainment.

Scholarly debates about the capabilities of animals to be ‘performers’ centre around two arguments: One side contends that animals respond to cues automatically, by basic instinct and reflex. The other side states that performing animals are thoughtful and wilfully execute their actions.¹⁶ Shelly Scott points out that humans also respond to cues, and in doing so, are rewarded with applause during performance. To argue that ‘animal activity is only reflexive’ ignores the sophistication of animal performers.¹⁷ In agreement, Laura Cull states that animals do possess characteristics that are said to be essential to performance, such as the capacity for self-conscious behaviour and intention, as well as certain competency for improvisation.¹⁸ Acknowledging their ability to improvise gives these animal performers agency.¹⁹ In concurrence, circus semiotician, Paul Bouissac, argues that circus animals do perform in the sense that they negotiate social situations by relying on the repertory of ritualised behaviour, which characterises its species.²⁰ In the ‘wild’, tigers learn patterned behaviour to their particular environment from their mothers – a condition necessary for their survival. In the circus, this ritualisation may have been slightly modified by human input during training, but Bouissac argues that this is far less than what is usually thought.²¹ In contrast, John Stokes criticises the performative inadequacy of the wild animal act, by arguing that while applause has meaning for trainers, it does little for wild animals. They simply ‘return to their cages alone and still feared. There is no reconciliation, no return home.’²² In contrast to domestic animals

¹⁴ S. Swart. ‘Review of D. Brantz (ed) *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans and the Study of History*,’ *H-Environment H-Net Reviews*, 2011 <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31301> (Accessed 2 September 2020) and J. Specht. ‘Animal History after Its Triumph: Unexpected Animals, Evolutionary Approaches and the Animal Lens,’ *History Compass*, (14), (7), pp. 326–336.

¹⁵ See S. Pearson, M. Weismantel. ‘Does “The Animal” Exist?’ in Brantz (ed), *Beastly Natures*, pp. 18–32.

¹⁶ S. Scott. ‘The Racehorse as Protagonist: Agency, Independence and Improvisation,’ in S. E. McFarland & R. Hediger (eds). *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, (Leiden: IDC Publishers, 2009), p. 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 50–51.

¹⁸ L. Cull. ‘From *Homo Performans* to Interspecies Collaboration: Expanding the Concept of Performance to Include Animals,’ in L. Orozco and J. Parker-Starbuck. (eds). *Performing Animality: Animals in Performance Practices*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 21.

¹⁹ Scott, ‘The Racehorse as Protagonist: Agency, Independence and Improvisation,’ pp. 50–51.

²⁰ P. Bouissac. *Semiotics at the Circus*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), p. 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² J. Stokes. “‘Lion Grieffs’: The Wild Animal Act as Theatre,’ *New Theatre Quarterly*, (20), (2), 2004. 139.

(like dogs and horses) who occupy the off-stage world alongside their human performers, wild animals have co-existed with but have never shared their world – the jungle, desert or savannah – with humans as close companions or friends.

However, Scott argues that when seeing typical animal performances, she does not perceive them as making choices to participate. Being compelled to perform is not choosing to perform. Even being coerced, in which the animal chooses between performing or not (expecting punishment), is still not choosing to perform. While these animals may not consciously choose to perform, Scott argues that they may still choose when and how to exert their agency within a performance.²³ Animal agency is exercised in similar ways to that of colonised people, within domains not by their own choice. Both oppressed people and animals have to deal with limitations imposed on their capacity for agency, by rebelliously or subversively exerting their own wills.²⁴ The aforementioned arguments consider animals as performative agents, but the notions of potential capacity of ‘political animals’ remains a field of contestation and deliberation.

Mieke Roscher argues that including animals as subjects of political interaction is influenced by what has been called a ‘new political history’, or the ‘cultural history of the political’.²⁵ Writing a political history of animals needs to not only focus on framework, but also processes and institutions; it needs to consider structures as well as agents. Roscher attempts to document the political history of animals in the Third Reich, by arguing that political order is constructed through symbolic action and performances. These actions are repeatedly exercised on animals’ bodies, but are also shared performatively by the animals themselves.²⁶ James Epstein adds that the meaning of animals and their symbolism is bound up with their place both in political rhetoric and practice.²⁷ Some animal historians, like Swart, compel us to consider even bolder

²³ Scott, ‘The Racehorse as Protagonist: Agency, Independence and Improvisation,’ p. 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 47.

²⁵ While ‘new political history’ as a search for ‘total history’ and a movement away from ‘great men’ and ‘events’ has been taken up in unique ways by various national schools of thought, this field still allows for the inclusion of ‘agents of an entirely different kind’ than human actors into their historiographical framework. W. Steinmetz and H-G. Haupt. ‘The political as communicative space in history: the Bielefeld approach,’ in W. Steinmetz, I. Gilcher-Hotley, and H-G. Haupt (eds). *Writing Political History Today*, (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2013), pp. 11–36.

²⁶ See M. Roscher. ‘New Political History and the Writing of Animal Lives,’ in H. Kean and P. Howell (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

²⁷ J. Epstein. ‘Introduction: a new direction in political history,’ *Journal of British Studies*, (41), (3), 2002, pp. 255–258.

questions about animals in society; for example, ‘Can animals be nationalists?’.²⁸ In addition to their influence in the political realm, Swart demonstrates that animals play a very lively role in a nation’s foundation and edifice, both materially and, particularly, symbolically.

Literature exploring animal rebellion (as forms of agency and political resistance) has been thoroughly addressed by political theorists such as Cohen, as well as historians such as Jason Hibrall in his ground-breaking book *Fear of the Animal Planet*. This takes a radical step beyond the landmark work of Singer (1975), to tell the story of animal liberation from the animal’s point of view.²⁹ He demonstrates that there is a long history of violent resistances to abusers of captive animals, and argues that many of these attacks are denied agency by calling them ‘accidents’ or using the words ‘wild’ and ‘instinct’ to normalise these instances.³⁰ He argues that through often brutal lessons of reward and punishment, circus animals learn that if they refuse to perform or attack their trainer, they will be punished (beaten, rationed or placed in confinement). Captive animals know this, and yet they still carry out these actions, often with a profound sense of determination.³¹ In contrast to the above, Susan Nance argues that the confusion about the term animal agency comes from the lack of clarity regarding the difference between ‘individual agency’ and ‘human social and political power’.³² Focussing on the elephants in America’s circus industry, Nance states that these animals had no understanding of the human culture that created their captivity, and could therefore not possess any social or political power. She disputes the notion that elephants ever understood the world of show business or human capital, but rather they rejected the conditions of their experiences.³³

Creating a hybrid of both debated concepts, scholars have shown how animals can even become *political performers*. Gillian Arrighi, for example, has shown that with the outbreak of the South African War in 1899, the circus’s use of animals was remodelled to suit the political climate. In Australia, the ‘Great Lion and Elephant Act’ (a lion riding on the back of an elephant) began to resemble a community show of patriotism.³⁴ Rather than receiving the lion

²⁸ Swart uses the ‘Gombe Chimpanzee War’ 1974–1978, observed by Jane Goodall, as a case study to debate the possibility of ‘animal nationalists’. See S. Swart. ‘The Other Citizens: Nationalism and animals,’ in H. Kean and P. Howell (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 33.

²⁹ See also his article, J. Hibrall. ‘Animals are part of the working class: A challenge to labor history,’ *Labor History*, (44), (4), 2003, pp. 435–453.

³⁰ J. Hibrall. *Fear of the Animal Planet*, (Petrolia: CounterPunch, 2011), pp. 3–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² S. Nance. *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ G. Arrighi. ‘Political Animals: Engagements with Imperial and Gender Discourses in Late-Colonial Australian Circuses,’ *Theatre Journal*, (60), (4), 2008, p. 628.

as the iconic animal of the wild, it was slowly perceived as a symbol of Britain's power and colonial force. The elephant was interpreted as Paul Kruger (the then president of the Transvaal) leading the Boer forces in South Africa. Overall, the act symbolised the hopeful triumph of Britain in South Africa.³⁵ This thesis has shown other instances of political animals; in Chapter Two, for example, it showed how horses, who formed part of military re-enactments, were perceived as symbols of the conquering might of the British empire. However, this chapter aims to consider circus animals as political agents (and not only political performers), in the sense that their individual acts of resistance had political significance and contributed to a shift in human mindset, practices and even policy in society. In light of this, this chapter also considers the limits of animal resistance and draws from Jason Specht's challenge for animal historians to move beyond merely cataloguing instances of agency, towards focusing on developing nuanced understandings of how autonomous actions operate within and are constrained by surrounding structures.³⁶ While drawing from the wealth of secondary literature, this chapter uses a variety of primary sources, such as reports, reviews, newspaper articles, letters and legislation, to trace these instances of animal rebellion in the South African context and to investigate the human response.

What is it like to be a circus animal? The challenges of human subjectivity

Unless one indulges in the whimsical task of asking circus animals whether they enjoy doing their tricks and then replying for them, no satisfactory method has yet been devised to find out whether they are in fact happy in their work.³⁷

As pointed out in this quote (above) from the *Rand Daily Mail* review of Pagel's Circus in 1954, there is yet to be a satisfactory method of understanding an animal's subjective experiences. A problem which is further explored in Thomas Nagel's landmark essay, 'What is it like to be a bat?'.³⁸ This question leads us to a multidimensional challenge, which exists when we write multispecies history. As outlined by Susan Pearson and Mary Weismantel, this challenge is threefold. Firstly, it is an epistemological challenge due to our inability to communicate verbally with animals. Secondly, it is an ontological challenge, as historians must question our own imagining of animal existence. Lastly, it is a methodological challenge

³⁵ Arrighi, 'Political Animals,' p. 628.

³⁶ Specht, 'Animal History after Its Triumph,' p. 332.

³⁷ 'Lion who could not face the music,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 January 1954, p. 9.

³⁸ T. Nagel. 'What is it like to be a bat?' *Philosophical Review*, (83), (4), 1974, pp. 435–450.

constituted by the difficulty in tracing history constructed by the animals themselves.³⁹ In historical research on our own species, we are met with these same challenges; however, it is accepting these constraints on history as a discipline that allows new patterns of thinking to emerge. As Fudge writes: ‘it is not so much that animal history proposes that there is new data to be found (although that may sometimes be the case), as that there are new ways of thinking about the data that we have.’⁴⁰

While these challenges still exist for animal historians today, there is mounting scientific evidence that blurs the distinction between humans and animals, by proving that the differences between them are only in degree and not of kind.⁴¹ Contemporary literature confirms that the experience of circus life is unique and subjective to each individual animal, who in turn has a distinct character of its own. Bouissac states that in the circus, ‘there are bullies and wimps, loud mouths and gentle souls. They show various degrees of self-confidence and shyness.’⁴² Pagel claimed that his animals even had their preferences to certain colours. Jubilee, an African lion, had a distinct dislike for grey. If Pagel wore a grey suit during his performance with Jubilee, the lion would sulk and refuse to perform, but the moment the suit was changed he would once again become ‘his good-tempered self’.⁴³ The concept of unique animal personalities began gaining traction in some sections of the scientific community as recently as the early twenty-first century, although of course, it was accepted popularly long before, by pet owners and farmers, among other animal lovers.⁴⁴ The vast majority of this research was conducted on captive animals, due to the availability of longitudinal observations of the same individuals in a variety of settings and situations. It is now recognised that animals not only have different personalities, but these personalities play a role in structuring animal interactions and communities; they can even be unpredictable in their choice of actions, a trait previously only thought to be found in humans.⁴⁵

³⁹ Pearson and Wesimantel, ‘Does “The Animal” Exist?’, p. 18. For this very task, see J. Bonnel and S. Kheraj (eds). *Traces of the Animal Past: Methodological Challenges in Animal History*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2021).

⁴⁰ Fudge, ‘Milking other Men’s Beasts,’ p. 17.

⁴¹ See. M. Bekoff. *The emotional lives of animals: A leading scientist explores animal joy, empathy and why they matter*, (California: New World Library, 2007).

⁴² P. Bouissac. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning, and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 117.

⁴³ ‘Circus animals like applause,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 January 1936, p. 19.

⁴⁴ J. Watters and D. M. Powell. ‘Measuring Animal Personality for Use in Population Management in Zoos: Suggested Methods and Rationale,’ *Zoo Biology*, (31), 2012, p. 2. See also ‘Animal personalities are more like humans than first thought: Deakin University,’ ScienceDaily, 31 October 2013, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/10/131031092311.htm (Accessed 26 September 2020).

⁴⁵ Watters and Powel, ‘Measuring Animal Personality for Use in Population Management in Zoos,’ p. 2.

However, as argued by Nadia Frijia, performing animals are rarely ever only themselves, but rather ‘are a function of years of culturally determined and ascribed meanings based on human–animal relationships’.⁴⁶ Performing animals become a site of multiple shifting signifiers, most of which relate more strongly to human perceptions on that particular animal than they do to the biological, cultural or emotive realities of the animal itself. For example, when a person views a performing lion in a circus, what they are seeing is not exclusively a lion, but an animal highly trained to perform skilled actions, the body upon which the success of a circus act is asserted, an emblem of a wild animal (the king of beasts), and a signifier of various countries depending on the context.

Furthermore, the lion carries the weight of history, operating as a symbol of colonisation, of domination and of human civilisation, capturing animals within a hierarchical structure, with humans on top. This chapter argues that while it might never be possible to bridge the gap in understanding the lived experiences of circus animals (through their actions and instances of agency), it is possible to construct a historiographical understanding that takes animals seriously. In order to begin this process, instances of escape and resistance will be traced in South Africa’s entertainment history as a means of showing practical examples of their activism and agency.

Escape and resistance: Exploring case studies of ‘animal activism’

Instances of animals escaping from the circus can be traced back centuries in South Africa’s entertainment history. While touring in Natal in 1887, one of Fillis’s largest monkeys, a Cape baboon named ‘Mr Jacko’, escaped on a Sunday morning and walked into a church service. Upon arriving at the church, Fillis found the congregation in a state, ladies standing on pews holding their skirts while Mr Jacko sat happily in the middle of the aisle chattering. Later in the early 1900s, one of Fillis’s bears broke into a confectionary shop and cleared the counter and window display of the daily treats.⁴⁷ One of Pagel’s elephants, Mary, got loose one night in Witbank during his tour in the late 1940s. She broke into a bakery room and splattered fresh dough all over the floor before finding and finishing off the stock of cream cakes and pastries. The commotion woke the baker up and Mary was frightened off by his screams, leaving a trail

⁴⁶ N. N. Frijia. ‘Performing Animals: Analyzing live Animals in the Arts and their Impacts On Our Environmental Perceptions Of The Animal Other,’ (University of Toronto: PhD thesis, 2018), p. 6.

⁴⁷ No mention of the town, but the shop was run by a ‘Master Bruin.’ F. E. Fillis. *Frank E. Fillis’s Savage South Africa: 20 Years experience in South Africa: Life and Adventures of Frank E. Fillis*, (London: Stafford, 1901). p. 70.

of flour dough back to the circus tent, an excursion that cost Pagel close to fifty pounds.⁴⁸ In 1943, when the elephants from Boswell's Circus were being unloaded at Bulawayo station, a female cow called Mary took flight and ran about 12 kilometres out of town. Upon tracking her down, Jim Boswell managed to pass a rope around her foreleg and tie her to a tree. She was later towed back to the circus behind a tractor using a chain.⁴⁹ Lastly, consider the case of Susan (Figure 23) the five-year-old brown bear who escaped from Wilkie's Circus in 1955 on her motorcycle, only to be pulled off by Inspector Sauerman before she could make her great escape.



Figure 23: Susan, a bear from Wilkie's Circus, being pulled off by Inspector Sauerman, 1955⁵⁰

These stories of escape may seem to be isolated cases, but they can be viewed as animal acts of resistance to human displays of power. Moreover, other examples of this include animals refusing to do work for humans, or non-domesticated animals in circuses and aquaria attacking the humans that exploit them.⁵¹ Heini Hediger, known as the 'father of zoo biology',⁵² notes that some motives for escape are caused by the presence of other animals, either of the same

⁴⁸ C. Birkby. *The Pagel Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), p. 119. Also C. Birkby. 'An elephant never forgets to eat,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 September 1958, p. 5.

⁴⁹ C. Ricketts. *The Boswells*, (Johannesburg: Self Published, 2013), p. 63.

⁵⁰ Ricketts, *The Boswells*, p. 63.

⁵¹ E. Meijer. 'Animal Activism and Interspecies Change,' in G. Garmendia da Trindade and A. Woodhall (eds). *Invention or Protest Acting for Nonhuman Animals*, (United States: Vernon Press, 2020), p. 106.

⁵² His publication of *Wildtiere in Gefangenschaft* (Wild Animals in Captivity) in 1942 was one of the first scientific handbooks to engage with keeping non-domestic animals in zoos.

or different species.⁵³ Other causes can include biologically poor conditions (too much light or too little shelter), or a startling experience, driving the animal away from humans and the artificial surroundings. Animal resistance to their captive state is sometimes cultural, such as orangutans held in zoos who cooperate to escape and share their knowledge with others in their group (sometimes forcing zoos to separate and relocate them),⁵⁴ or elephants who teach their calves which houses to break into to steal food and how to avoid humans.⁵⁵ Resistance can even be traced in domesticated animals like cattle, observed by the eighteenth-century botanist Peter Kalm, who admitted that there were always a few that were ‘very unruly’ and would break through even the strongest enclosures. When these cows fled, he argued that ‘all the tame cattle followed them’.⁵⁶ Hibrál argues that owners and managers of labouring animals fully admit to the presence of resistance; for example, horses bucking, cows kicking, pigs biting, and chickens pecking.⁵⁷ Swart has shown that human instruments designed for animal control – reins, collars, leads, bits, whips – indicate a human *need* for control. Expanding on Scott’s concept of ‘weapons of the weak’, Swart states that everyday acts of animal rebellion, like a horse flattening its ears while being saddled up, or farm animals refusing to work, or least work hard, are private animal protests that are often neglected by historians.⁵⁸ Examples of wild animal resistance in southern Africa include elephants and lions attacking and killing poachers in the Kruger National Park.⁵⁹ Stephen Eisenman shows that what stimulates aggressive resistance in animals is analogous to the aggressors in human groups who use violence to resist oppression.⁶⁰

While escapes are one type of animal activism, refusal to perform is another. For example, during one of the big cat performances in Pagel’s Circus in 1946, Rudolph Miller (the lion trainer who worked between both Boswell’s and Pagel’s circuses during that time) struggled to get the lions to appear for their act. According to a reviewer from the *Rand Daily Mail*, Miller cracked his whip continuously to no avail. Eventually, after an extended period of time he simply gave up, stating that ‘the lions were simply not interested in giving the audience a

⁵³ G. Sircom (trans). *Wild Animals in Captivity*, (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1950), p. 63.

⁵⁴ Hibrál, *Fear of the animal planet*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ B. Maan. ‘Bio-geography: Landscape, Dwelling, and the Political Ecology of Human-Elephant Relations,’ *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, (32), 2014, pp. 915–934.

⁵⁶ J. Forster (trans). *Travels into North America*, (Barre: The Imprint Society, 1972), p. 110.

⁵⁷ Hibrál, ‘Animals are part of the working class: A challenge to labor history,’ p. 449.

⁵⁸ Swart, *Riding High*, p. 202.

⁵⁹ ‘Poacher killed by elephants, eaten by lions at Kruger,’ *Citizen*, 4 August 2019, p. 3.

⁶⁰ S. Eisenman. ‘The Real Swinish Multitude,’ *Critical Inquiry*, (42), (2), 2015, p. 340.

thrill that evening'.⁶¹ Pagel later explained that the lions hated getting their feet wet, and the runway had been flooded before the show.⁶² Similarly, during a lion performance (presented by trainer Carl Fischer) in Boswell's Circus in 1954, one of the lions, 'Xosa', simply refused to leave his cage. He had a sensitive temperament and displayed a dislike for the loud noise made by the orchestra. He remained whimpering in his cage while he waited for the other lions to return.⁶³

These instances of escapes and refusal to perform – although infrequent – are examples of animal rebellion, which in turn has an effect on human actions and responses. It also clearly demonstrates that animals are complex, sensitive creatures with varying personalities, who (even within the same species) respond to various external factors individually. These cases challenge the view that animals cannot be political actors without the capacity of human language. That is not to say that 'non-human' animal resistance is similar to human resistance. Rather, the concept of 'resistance' is used to describe a variety of practices that resemble each other, and differ in other ways, not having one character that defines them all.⁶⁴ How can adopting this notion of animal resistance add to our historical understanding of human–animal entertainment? Dinesh Wadiwel argues that resistance is a useful lens for thinking about animal advocacy, because it allows one to recognise and foster animal creativity, and it forces us view them in new light. By turning the focus away from animal suffering, it allows us to view resistance in a new way, as a form of political agency that does need to be grounded in any intrinsic competency.⁶⁵

However, escapes or refusal to perform by circus animals were not the forms of 'resistance' that created a lasting impact in the public eyes, nor were they the main concern of anti-cruelty lobbyists, which had risen in number in South Africa since the late 1930s. Attacks (encompassing any violent action inflicted by an animal upon a human) by big cats were the main form of animal resistance. The following section will investigate some of these incidents, specifically those that occurred during the late 1940s and 1950s. How do we explain episodes of escape, rebellion and revenge? Cohen argues that it is these exact episodes through which animals challenge their place in institutions (zoos, circuses and slaughterhouses).⁶⁶ These

⁶¹ 'Circus Lions go on strike,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 December 1946, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ 'Lion who could not face the music,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 January 1954, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Cohen, "'We Support Circus Animals Who Kill Their Captors,'" p. 285.

⁶⁵ D. J. Wadiwel. 'Do fish resist?' *Critical Studies Review*, (22), 2016, p. 108.

⁶⁶ Cohen, "'We Support Circus Animals Who Kill Their Captors,'" p. 285.

animals bring to the light the assumed ‘naturalness of their oppression’.⁶⁷ However, one must also be aware that occasionally fake attacks were sometimes part of the performance as a means of attracting audiences. For example, consider Fillis’s first lion tamer, Severo Bugeja, who slipped in the ring in the late 1880s on multiple occasions – a stunt discussed in Chapter Three.⁶⁸ While keeping this in mind, this chapter argues that through their resistance, circus animals caused humans to see the power relations with new perspective and allowed for a re-evaluation of their shared relations.

The 1940s: Violent circus animals amidst violent nationalism

The 1940s were a turbulent decade in South Africa. As outlined by Dubow, it opened with parliament’s narrow and bitterly contested decision to enter the war, with the nation rocked by political turmoil and the fear of Nazi expansion. The country then experienced a phase of growing optimism, fuelled by rapid economic expansion and encouraged by the country’s notable role in defeating fascism. Finally, the decade closed as the forces of Afrikaner nationalism eclipsed Jan Smut’s United Party and set about implementing the doctrine of apartheid.⁶⁹ This turbulence was reflected in the circus ring during this decade, as it witnessed the most attacks by circus big cats in South Africa’s entertainment history (Figure 24). Animal attacks in the circus arena were not uncommon since the involvement of lion taming from the 1830s. Even Van Amburgh, the original lion tamer, was rumoured to have died several times during his performances in the 1840s. In most cases, he was seriously injured and escaped with his life.⁷⁰ Others were not as lucky. Helen Bright, the Lion Queen, was killed by a tiger in the ring in 1840. Massarti, the Irish lion tamer, was mauled by five male lions in front of hundreds of spectators during his performance in Lancashire in 1872.⁷¹ Ultimately, the thrill of the circus has always involved the element of risk and danger, which extends to trick-riding and acrobatic

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ A reporter from *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph* went as far as asking: ‘How can the floor always be slippery?’ See Chapter 3 p. 42.

⁶⁹ S. Dubow and A. Jeeves (eds). *South Africa’s 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Both places referred to in the rumours: in Paris and a performance somewhere in Rhode Island, he was seriously injured. B. Mizelle. ‘Horses and Cat Acts in the Early American Circus,’ in S. Weber, K. L. Ames and M. Wittman (eds). *The American Circus*, (New York: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 21.

⁷¹ His real name was Thomas McCarthy. *The Annual Register: World Events, 1872-1873*, (London: Longmans & Co, 1873), p. 1.

performers, who too have suffered from a range of fatal accidents throughout history.⁷² However, the increase in the number of big cat attacks in the 1940s had a drastic impact on the (albeit small) world of animal welfare activists, constituted mainly by middle-class white citizens.

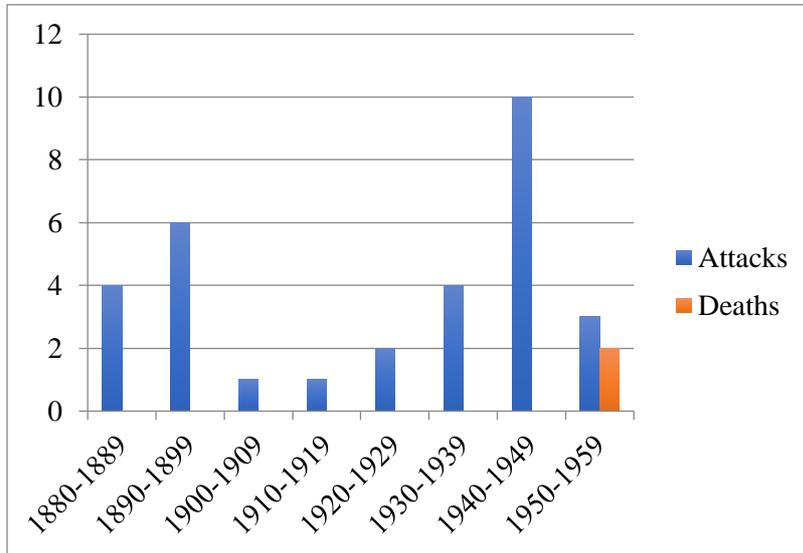


Figure 24: Attacks by circus big cats (lions and tigers) c.1880–1959⁷³

In South Africa, Salvator Bugeja, the first lion tamer who performed in Fillis's Circus from 1888, was involved in a number of serious big cat attacks, one so severe that he returned to Europe to receive medical treatment.⁷⁴ However, as the figure above illustrates, there was a sharp decrease in attacks during the early 1900s, followed by an increase from the 1920s onwards, finally culminating in the most attacks ever witnessed in one decade during the 1940s. While there was a notable decline in attacks during the 1950s, two lion trainers from the circus industry were killed, causing far-reaching repercussions on the use of big cats in entertainment. Although statistically, this can be viewed as a relatively small increase, it had large-scale consequences for the entertainment industry. This chapter will show that these well-publicised attacks during the 1940s may have affected a tipping point for anti-cruelty campaigners. This

⁷² Arguably the most shocking fatal accident was the fall of acrobat Selina Powell titled 'Female Blondin' in 1863 at Aston Park, who was rumoured to be pregnant and died instantly from the impact. See B. Assael. *Circus and Victorian Society*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 132–133.

⁷³ Compiled from reports from *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, the *Cape Times*, the *Rhodesian Herald*, the *Rand Daily Mail* from 1880–1959. Fact checked from Birkby. *The Pagel Story*, pp. 147–150, Fillis. *Frank E Fillis's Savage South Africa*, and Ricketts, *The Boswells: The Story of a South African Circus*. It must be noted that there may have been attacks that went unreported.

⁷⁴ His first performance took place in Cape Town on 28 January 1888. See Chapter Three pp. 11–13.

next section focuses on the nature of these attacks and incorporates recent evidence about captivity-related stress and other potential causal factors.

The majority of the attacks that took place in the 1940s occurred during performances in Pagel's Circus, while the others occurred randomly between spectators and big cats after hours. The first attack occurred during a performance in Bellville in 1941, where Pagel was bitten by his tiger Rajah (a similar incident had occurred before during training in 1927).⁷⁵ Rajah had developed 'a bad habit' of biting the hind legs of the lions with whom he performed. Pagel stated that he had 'attempted to dominate him out' of this habit by taking his gaze away as Rajah emerged into the ring. However, one night, instead of biting the lions, he ended up loping around Pagel and biting two deep gashes in his left calf.⁷⁶ In Pretoria in 1942, a similar incident occurred after the combined lion and tiger act, where Rajah clawed (and scratched) him on his leg.⁷⁷ Pagel stated to the press that he did not intend to get rid of Rajah and argued that it: 'was not ferocity on Rajah's part that caused him to attack me'.⁷⁸ He explained that Rajah liked to follow Marie, a tigress, out of the ring and give her a playful smack with his paw as he followed her out.⁷⁹ Rajah clawed Miller (another big cat trainer of Pagel's Circus) again later that year using the same technique.⁸⁰

Arguably, the above three incidents may relate to the tension present between big cats (varying in species) that are trained and expected to perform together in the ring. This type of combination big cat act was first presented by Fillis in the late nineteenth century, then later by Pagel in 1907, and the act increased in size and species (by both Pagel and Boswell) during the early 1900s. Hediger argued that even species with widely varying characteristics may become connected through interweaving habitual networks, but not all species (even those free to roam as they please) are able to get on together.⁸¹ The famous British animal trainer Frank Bostock stated that many fatal fights occurred in his menagerie between lions and tigers in the early 1900s. These two species, he claimed, 'generally have an instinctive hatred for each other' (although the existence of ligers and tigons seems to belie this statement).⁸² Another clear

⁷⁵ 'Does not blame the tiger, Mr Pagel forgives his assailant,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 January 1927, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, pp. 147–148.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 148.

⁷⁸ 'Tiger attacks Circus owner in the ring,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 May 1942, p. 8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ She earned her living for a few years more until she died in 1947 to an unusual affliction of cancer of the ovaries. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 149.

⁸¹ Sircom (trans), *Wild Animals in Captivity*, p. 18.

⁸² 'Wild animals break their prison bars. Fierce struggles in menageries are described by Frank Bostock,' *The World's Fair*, 30 September 1911, p. 6.

example of their animosity occurred during Fillis's tour of then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1907. Two African lions and a Bengal tiger were caged together in order to get accustomed to one another, before they could be presented together in the ring. The following morning after the show, however, the dead body of the tiger was found in the cage. Its throat had been torn out and both the front paws had been bitten off.⁸³

While the tension between species is one possible explanation, the next two attacks that occurred took place during big cat performances with a group of six lionesses. In 1943, during Pagel's performance, the audience noted that the lionesses appeared more boisterous than usual. Pagel was knocked to the ground, and then a furious game ensued; he was bitten by two lionesses (Bogansky and Suzie), who then also turned on each other, causing tension between the rest of the group who then joined in on the fight. A group of women in the audience began screaming before other artists rushed into the ring and scared the lionesses off with anything they could carry. Pagel spent ten days in hospital recovering from his injuries.⁸⁴ In October 1944, Fischer was clawed by a lioness during his act (with the same group of lionesses), causing him to bleed profusely from a gash to his throat and chest.⁸⁵ While not differing in species, it is clear that tension could also manifest within a group of lionesses. Notably, despite (or possibly because of) the increase in animal violence in the ring, a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter stated in December 1945 that, 'Pagel's circus is as popular as ever' and 'as usual, what attracted the most attention was that of the performing lions.'⁸⁶

The last four attacks that took place in the 1940s consisted of a number of spectator–animal interactions. In 1948 in Dundee, a town in KwaZulu-Natal, a passing visitor, Mrs Goodes, was walking past a lion's cage from Boswell's Circus, when the lion put a paw through the bars and touched her on the hip. She turned around and the lion clawed her right arm, penetrating through the flesh, and she was later taken to hospital.⁸⁷ Later in 1948, seven-year-old Conrad Beneck was admitted to hospital after an incident at Luipaardsvlei Station, where a lion darted its paw out from the train and 'grabbed Conrad's school bag', ultimately inflicting serious wounds on his head and body.⁸⁸ Notably, the company to which the lion belonged was not

⁸³ The tiger was claimed to be the only Royal Bengal tiger in Africa, who Fillis bought from India at a cost of 250 pounds (one of the largest to ever be exported). 'Tiger slain by lions: Exciting incident at Fillis's Circus,' *The Rhodesia Herald*, 11 October 1907, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, pp. 154–156.

⁸⁵ 'Lion claws trainer,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 October 1944, p. 3.

⁸⁶ 'Pagel's circus as popular as ever,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 December 1945, p. 4.

⁸⁷ 'Circus Lion Claws Woman Visitor,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 August 1948, p. 7.

⁸⁸ 'Child clawed by circus lion,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 February 1948, p. 7.

specified in the article. In March 1949, two children were mauled by a lion who stuck a paw through the bars at the circus one night in Bellville (again, no specification of which company owned the lion was mentioned).⁸⁹ During April of the same year, a young boy called Toya Matthews was mauled by a circus lion in Wynberg. He was watching the lion in its cage, when it suddenly put its paw through and caught Matthews by the arm, pulling him against the cage and mauling his face. A keeper arrived and patted the lion on the head until he released Matthews.⁹⁰ Lastly, in 1949, a worker from Pagel's Circus, Mr Bianchi, was badly mauled while petting one of the lions. He apparently pulled at the lion's whiskers before the lion caught hold of his left thumb and pulled his arm through the bars. The other lions immediately jumped and began to maul his arm. Circus employees came to the rescue and scattered the lions with hot iron rods (a method the circus claimed to have had abandoned already in the 1930s).⁹¹ Were these merely random individual cases? Perhaps, the cause of a higher flux of curious spectators (increasingly urbanised and alienated from 'natural' animal behaviour) who ventured too close to the cages? What are some of the other plausible reason for these attacks? The next section aims to consider the various factors relating to an increase in aggressive behaviour in captive wild animals.

'Going bad'?

While some of the big cat attacks that took place could have been caused by interspecies tension, there are a range of other causal factors that could prompt aggressive behaviour from wild captive animals. Firstly, when considering a specific animal that becomes a problem within a group, like Rajah, the inexplicable change in temperament of a wild animal has historically been referred to as a condition of 'going bad' by some wild animal trainers.⁹² Bostock, for example, claimed in his guide *The Training of Wild Animals* (1903) that this condition could manifest in a lion's tenth year of life, while for tigers he claimed it occurred slightly earlier. 'Going bad' could result in a sudden attack, or it might be a condition that develops slowly over time. For some animals, this 'bad temper' could last for a short period of time, but for others, this was a permanent state. Elephants, too, could 'go bad' and Bostock claimed due to their size and strength, this posed even more danger.⁹³ Both Pagel's and

⁸⁹ 'Circus Elephant Hurts Man, Lion Mauls Children,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 March 1949, p. 7.

⁹⁰ 'Boy mauled by circus lion,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 April 1949, p. 7

⁹¹ 'Mauled after pulling lion's whiskers,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 May 1949, p. 7.

⁹² Bostock, *The training of wild animals*, p. 97.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 100.

Boswell's circuses have instances of a 'rogue'⁹⁴ elephant, who had to be shot after numerous instances of aggressive behaviour.⁹⁵ While 'going bad' was something described by trainers, Bouissac argues that the 'semiotic overlap fallacy' is the root cause of most serious animal accidents.⁹⁶ He explains that trainers are sometimes unaware of the discrepancies between their actions during performance and that of their charges. While there might be an illusion that this context is fully shared between trainer and animal, there is a high possibility of prompts being misinterpreted.⁹⁷ Trainers might unknowingly be signalling cues that frighten animals into a 'fight-or-flight' response, causing them to lash out and attack.⁹⁸ Other trainers, like the American Roman Proske, believe that 'prolonged, unnatural confinement produces increasing frustration in a big cat, until there is an opportunity to express its pent-up explosive force in one murderous onslaught'.⁹⁹

Arguments about the well-being of animals in captivity is a longstanding plea of circus and zoo owners. Upon researching Pagel's Circus, Birkby argued that animals in captivity were 'provided with good food', allowing them to grow sleek coats.¹⁰⁰ John Clarke, a British wild animal trainer, defended wild animal acts in his book *Circus Parade* (1936) on the grounds that animals get 'enjoyment out of the performance' and 'much needed exercise out of training'.¹⁰¹ He stated that it is due to the aforementioned two reasons that circus animals actually live longer than animals in the zoo.¹⁰² The famous American lion tamer of the 1930s, Clyde Beatty, argued that, 'my lions and tigers are better cared for in captivity, than they could possibly be in their native jungle.'¹⁰³ However, in contrast to these claims, scientific research published in the early 2000s has shown that wild animals, despite being brought up in captivity

⁹⁴ 'Rogue' is a term used to describe (typically old male) elephants who become dangerously and unpredictably violent. G. A. Bradshaw and A. N. Schore. 'How Elephants are Opening Doors: Developmental Neuroethology, Attachment and Social Context,' *Ethology*, (113), (5), 2007, p. 432.

⁹⁵ For instance, Pagel's elephant named 'Wankie' was shot by Pagel after he had crushed two individuals to death. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, pp. 126–127. The Boswell's Circus elephant, 'Dodo', nearly crushed Jim Boswell underfoot during his period of 'musth' (bellicose behaviour associated with increased reproductive hormones) and was later shot by hunter Major Pretorius when he was sixteen years old. Ricketts, *The Boswells*, pp. 46–48.

⁹⁶ P. Bouissac. *Semiotics at the Circus*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010) p. 53.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ First described by American psychologist Walter Cannon in 1920, by definition, this is a physiological reaction (not under conscious control) that occurs when an animal or a human feel threatened. For a detailed list of sources of stress that can cause these types of responses in captive animals, see K. N. Morgans and C. T. Tromberg. 'Sources of stress in captivity,' *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, (102), 2007, pp. 262–302.

⁹⁹ R. Proske. *My Turn Next*, (London: Museum Press Limited, 1957), p.175.

¹⁰⁰ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 157.

¹⁰¹ 'Glamour and Glory of the Sawdust Ring: Hazardous Lives of Animal Trainers,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 March 1937, p. 12.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Here is a 'dog-whistle' reference to the inferiority of the 'native jungle'. C. Beatty and E. Anthony. *The Big Cage*, (New York: The Century Company, 1933), p. 130.

for several generations, still show a will to perform specific actions observed in their wild counterparts. The heavy restrictions that captivity imposes on an animal's natural motivation and behaviour has become increasingly recognised to be detrimental for an animal's cognitive function and development, their social interactions, and eventually, their reproductive and physical health.¹⁰⁴ Other recent neuroscientific research has shown that living in an impoverished and stressful captive environment can physically damage the animal's brain and compromise brain function.¹⁰⁵ The first study on the welfare of wild animals in circuses (in contrast to zoos and other sites of captivity) was conducted in 2009. It concluded that circuses – due to their mobile nature – fail to provide some of the most basic spatial, social and feeding requirements for wild animals.¹⁰⁶ Besides the living conditions, and lack of social contact and space, the physical performances may cause severe stress. Loud noises, for example, which often accompany circuses, are a well-known stressor in captive animals.¹⁰⁷ It was also found that the presence of human crowds can cause 'huddling, aversive behaviour and escape', which would be exacerbated by the animals having to endure crowds both during and after the performance.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, another plausible contributor to the animal attacks could be 'retaliation', not only to their captive situation, but also to potentially cruel treatment. Consider the following examples: Wankie, Mary and Tatiana. Wankie, one of Pagel's elephants, was teased endlessly by an intoxicated man (offering him bananas and then taking them away) after his performance at Louis Trichardt in 1943. The man shoved his hand inside the elephant's mouth, resulting in Wankie clamping down and hurling him to the ground. The man was crushed under the weight of the elephant, and died later that evening.¹⁰⁹ Mary was a five-year-old circus elephant from Wilkie's Circus, who after being teased and pestered by young children all afternoon in Murray Park, Johannesburg, in 1961, she pinned eleven-year-old Terry Phillips (who had been trying

¹⁰⁴ See G. Mason, J. Cooper and C. Clarebrough. 'Frustrations of fur-farmed mink,' *Nature*, (410), 2001, pp. 35–36. Also, I. M. Jegstrup, R. Vestergaard, W. Vach and M. Ritskes-Hoitinga. 'Nest-building behaviour in male rats from three inbred strains,' *Animal Welfare*, (14), pp. 149–156.

¹⁰⁵ This is seen particularly in large captive mammals. See. L. Marino. 'The neural cruelty of captivity: Keeping large mammals in zoos and aquariums damages their brains,' *The Conversation*, 24 September 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-neural-cruelty-of-captivity-keeping-large-mammals-in-zoos-and-aquariums-damages-their-brains> (Accessed 25 September 2020).

¹⁰⁶ G. Iossa, C. D Soulsbury and S. Harris. 'Are wild animals suited to travelling circus life?' *Animal Welfare*, (18), 2009, p. 136–137.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 132.

¹⁰⁸ See M. A. Owen, R. R. Swaisgood, N. M. Czekala, K. Steinman & D. G. Lindburg. 'Monitoring stress in captive giant pandas (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*): behavioural and hormonal responses to ambient noise,' *Zoo Biology*, (23), 2004, pp. 147–164.

¹⁰⁹ Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, pp. 126–127.

to force-feed her grass) to a fence.¹¹⁰ In other well-known examples, consider Tatiana the Siberian tigress, who had been living in captivity for years at the San Francisco Zoo. Finally reaching her limit after being tormented by three teenage boys on Christmas Day in 2007, she leapt the 3.6-metre-high wall and mauled one of the boys, while the other two ran for their lives.¹¹¹ She stalked the zoo grounds for the next half an hour (passing other visitors and wild animals), until she found the other two boys, who she mauled, before being gunned down by the police.¹¹² These instances have now been widely declared to have been a result of captivity-related stress, and scientists believe that many captive wild animals are at their mental and physical breaking point.¹¹³ Historians are renowned for emphasising the wide range of causal factors that lead up to any event, and the same can be said for each of the aforementioned attacks, particularly considering the fact that many of these animals had been touring with Pagel's and Boswell's circuses for many decades, and potentially dealing with numerous instances of accumulating captivity-related stress over time. What affect did this have on groups concerned about animal welfare? How did the contemporary period view these attacks? This next section aims to consider the responses by anti-cruelty groups in South Africa.

'Why the ominously cracking whip?':¹¹⁴ Anti-cruelty campaigns lead to action

While the 1940s was a tempestuous time, it was also a time of possibilities and re-imagining the world afresh after global conflict, allowing for competing visions for a future South Africa to culminate.¹¹⁵ The beginning of a new decade brought even more contestation to the circus ring, particularly in Pagel's Circus. In May 1948, while travelling through the Free State, Pagel suffered a stroke. Five months later, on 13 October 1948, he died due to cardiac failure at Knysna Hospital and was buried on his farm in Pretoria North.¹¹⁶ In 1950, a group of creditors met to liquidate Pagel's assets. The estimated value of his circus, complete with the animal cages and props, was 10 000 pounds. His second wife, Mrs Cecil Pagel,¹¹⁷ claimed that the

¹¹⁰ 'Elephant turns on tormentors, butt's boy,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1961, p. 13.

¹¹¹ While the boys denied having provoked the tiger, Laurie Gage, a tiger expert stated, 'with my knowledge of tiger behaviour I cannot imagine a tiger trying to jump out of its enclosure unless it was provoked'. See 'Victims "taunted tiger" before it killed zoo visitor,' *The Guardian*, 18 January 2008.

¹¹² Hibril, *Fear of the Animal Planet*, pp. 21–31.

¹¹³ M. Hawthorne. *Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering*, (Alresford: Changemakers Books, 2013), pp. 64–66.

¹¹⁴ 'Circus better without lion acts,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 July 1954, p. 8.

¹¹⁵ Dubow and Jeeves (eds), *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Earlier that year, on Pagel's seventieth birthday, he appeared in the ring with his lions for the last time during a performance at Wakkerstroom. 'Death of Mr. William Pagel, Circus Founder,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 October 1948, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ The first Madame Pagel (Mary Dinsdale) died in December 1939 at the age of seventy-four. 'Death of Mme. Pagel,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 December 1939, p. 8. During the last few years of her life, she was nursed by a

circus would continue to operate as usual, under the management of J. N. Turnbull, and a newly appointed ringmaster, Dennis Wood.¹¹⁸ The new management faced unremitting pressure from anti-cruelty groups, and was forced to make a series of difficult decisions in the first few years following the takeover.

As argued in the previous chapter, the rise of anti-circus campaigning had been steadily increasing since the passing of the Performing Animal Protection Act in 1935.¹¹⁹ According to the director of the Animal Law Reform South Africa, Amy Wilson, the act then (and still now) is mainly concerned with regulating the issuing of licenses, rather than prohibiting cruel training methods or protecting the welfare of animals.¹²⁰ By the late 1940s, the anti-circus campaigns were pressuring circuses to respond to allegations of cruelty. The campaigns had gained such traction that Stanley Boswell sent a letter to the Johannesburg City Council in 1949 to protest against the allegations of cruelty made by the Johannesburg branch of the SPCA.¹²¹ The SPCA had asked the council to place a ban on entertainment that included performing animals, and in doing so, ‘put an end to one of our most barbarous customs’.¹²² Boswell stated that the SPCA was prosecuting and penalising innocent people who were merely trying to earn an honest living. His argument found basis in the fact that his father, Jim Boswell, who had trained and managed circus animals for more than thirty years, was the founder and owner of the Sandown Veterinary Hospital. In addition to this, his brother, Dr J. G. Boswell, had been an honorary veterinarian to the SPCA for the past fifteen years and helped organise the Bantu Welfare Animal Society, established in 1940.¹²³ This society, founded in the years leading up to implementation of apartheid (1948) consisted of caring for animals owned by the ‘Bantu’.¹²⁴

woman named Cecil Schulz, who Pagel asked to stay on at the farm and handle his interests. In 1940, he proposed to her and they ran the circus and the farm together. Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 69 & 243.

¹¹⁸ ‘Pagel’s Circus for Sale at £10, 000,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 June 1950, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Statute Law of South Africa, 1935: The Performing Animals Protection Act, Proclamation number 25 of 1935.

¹²⁰ A. Wilson. Founder of the Animal Law Reform South Africa, 20 October 2020, interviewed by Mia Uys. See her publication: A. P. Wilson. ‘Animal Law in South Africa: “Until the lions have their own lawyers, the law will continue to protect the hunter,”’ *Forum of Animal Law Studies*, (10), (1), 2019, p. 41.

¹²¹ ‘Circus Chief Denies SPCA’s Cruelty Allegations,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 March 1949, p. 11

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ This society operated by a band of voluntary workers who devoted five days a week to visit the townships in the Johannesburg area. The animals were given free treatment and care, and further instructions of hygiene and welfare were passed on to the owners. Document Drafted by Chairman, E Longden. <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/?collections/U/Collections> (Accessed 28 September 2020).

¹²⁴ ‘Bantu’ is a term which refers to over four hundred ethnic groups in Africa. In the terms of Bantu Education, which was implemented under apartheid, this term contained derogatory connotations towards black South Africans and consisted of a segregated school system for low-skilled occupation. See I. R. Wills. ‘The History of Bantu Education: 1948–1994,’ (Australian Catholic University: PhD thesis, 2011).

Boswell concluded by stating: ‘I doubt whether there is another family in South Africa that has done more for the care and welfare of animals in the country.’¹²⁵

In September 1950, the secretary of the Johannesburg SPCA, A. C. Willemse, put out a statement demonstrating their intent to keep a strict watch on the treatment of performing animals in circuses that visited the city.¹²⁶ They had been in contact with I. Gray, head of the Animal Welfare Society of Cape Town, who had written to the *Rand Daily Mail* in the hopes that the Johannesburg City Council would ban all performing animal shows. Together, they were concerned about the smaller, less-reputable circuses that were performing for the poorer communities in-and-around the city, and forcing animals to ‘do their tricks for half the night’.¹²⁷ While no ban was put in place, anti-circus campaigners continued writing to the press. Martin Hind wrote to the *Rand Daily Mail* editor in 1950, in response to a photo that was published depicting a circus tiger leaping ‘easily’ and ‘effortlessly’ through a hoop.¹²⁸ He argued that such a form of entertainment was a ‘shame and a stain on the entire human race’, and that ‘almost every animal welfare society in the world have deplored and condemned performing practices, yet they continue for private gain and public entertainment’.¹²⁹ Other members of the public felt differently. Gordon Gilbert, for example, sent a letter to the editor in response to Hind’s sentiment. He argued that Hind had not spent enough time with ‘circus people’, if he was under the ‘illusion’ that it was a ‘dangerous or miserable trade’. Gilbert further argued, ‘Can Mr Hind prove that animals are forced to perform? ... There is a vast difference to being forced to perform than the skilful co-operation of master and pupil that we see in any circus.’¹³⁰ While audience members were divided, the attacks became more violent and circus managers were forced to reconsider their response to the allegations, showing the influence animals had on their human colleagues.

In 1953, members of the audience at New Brighton ‘screamed with horror’ when 30-year-old Ray Walker (billed as ‘South Africa’s Lady of the Lions’) was attacked and severely mauled during a performance.¹³¹ Walker began working in Pagel’s Circus as the first female animal trainer in 1947, just a year before Pagel died.¹³² He was initially reluctant to employ a female

¹²⁵ Circus Chief Denies SPCA’s Cruelty Allegations,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 March 1949, p. 11

¹²⁶ ‘SPCA Keeps a Strict Watch for Circus Cruelty,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 September 1950, p 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ M. Hind. ‘Circus Tiger,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 May 1950, p. 10.

¹²⁹ M. Hind. ‘Circus Tiger,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 May 1950, p. 10.

¹³⁰ ‘Co-operation with the animals,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 September 1950, p. 10.

¹³¹ ‘Lion mauls girl star in circus: Attendants rescue her from cage,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 July 1953, p. 1.

¹³² Birkby, *The Pagel Story*, p. 31.

trainer, and first spent many hours watching her interact with his group of lionesses and their litter of cubs before making his decision to allow her to begin training (see Figure 25).¹³³ She had been performing for seven years prior to the devastating attack. There seemed to be tension amongst the lions (one male, Daniel, and four lionesses) during her performance. Walker was struggling to make Daniel jump from one perch to another. Instead of following her instructions, he turned and jumped straight at her, knocking her to the ground. Attendants rushed into the caged ring to rescue her from the arena. She was left with severe lacerations to the face and shoulders, as well as other injuries that were later operated on.¹³⁴ While Walker had years of experience, the appointment of two new trainers to the circus led to further violent human–animal interactions.



Figure 25: Ray Walker with a group of lions dated sometime after 1947¹³⁵

The following year, in 1954, William Coetzee, a newly appointed big cat trainer in ‘Pagel’s Circus’,¹³⁶ was mauled by a group of six male lions during a performance in Johannesburg. As he lay helpless on the ground, another circus employee Drodsky leapt into the cage and fought the lions off with a chair.¹³⁷ He was then joined by the ringmaster, Wood, who grabbed a *knobkerrie* [cudgel] and drove the lions away from Coetzee’s body. They managed to drag Coetzee out of the cage, but both men sustained their own injuries: a lion had clawed Drodsky’s leg, and Wood was left with a gaping wound down the back of his hand. Coetzee was rushed

¹³³ NLSA. Special Collections. C. Birkby. Manuscript. ‘Ray Walker: English girl immigrant tell how she becomes South Africa’s Lady of the Lions,’ addressed to 11 North Street Melrose Johannesburg, dated after 1947.

¹³⁴ ‘Lion mauls girl star in circus: Attendants rescue her from cage,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 July 1953, p. 1.

¹³⁵ NLSA. UNCAT Pagel Circus Album, c.1905-1950. Donated by Rory Birkby January 1996.

¹³⁶ Even after Pagel’s death, even though the circus was taken over, it remained advertised as ‘Pagel’s Circus’ until about 1956 where all adverts seem to cease.

¹³⁷ ‘Lions kill tamer at Pagel’s Circus: Juggler, Best friend leaps to rescue,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 July 1954, p. 1

off to hospital, where he died as a result of the extent of his wounds. Wood claimed that a plausible reason for the outburst was that Coetzee had been playing with the lionesses before his performance, and their scent had caused the male lions to attack. A witness of this event claimed that ‘the lions seemed restless’ when they arrived at the circus.¹³⁸ She initially thought that the mauling was all part of the act, but realised that something unusual had taken place when Coetzee remained unmoved on the arena floor, prompting her to leave the ring.¹³⁹

Two months later, in Bredasdorp, another death occurred in the ring. Elsabie Bronkhorst was training four lions in the arena alongside another unnamed male trainer. She had not previously worked with the lions, but had been part of Pagel’s Circus troupe for over a year. One of the lions rushed at her and knocked her to the ground, while another pounced, severely mauling her around the neck. The trainer fired his revolver at the lion, who retreated, wounded. They were able to retrieve her body from the arena, but she had died almost immediately.¹⁴⁰ The performance for that evening was cancelled, leaving the manager, Turnbull, with yet another loss and a decision to make. Very little action had been taken to accommodate the pleas of the anti-cruelty campaigners until Turnbull’s decision in July 1954. He announced that he was abandoning all big cat acts in his shows. He stated that this decision was based on the fact that two lion tamers (Coetzee and Bronkhorst) had been mauled to death in the previous ten months. The thirteen big cats were sent to retire on Pagel’s farm, and were to be used for special purposes, such as animal roles in films.¹⁴¹ Turnbull stated that, ‘these cats are too dangerous, and I am not risking any more lives.’¹⁴² A letter to the editor was sent by an anonymous ‘animal lover’ to thank Turnbull for doing away with big cat acts. The letter stated that the death of both trainers had been a shock to many citizens. Turnbull’s move was praised as holding wild animals captive was a ‘great sin’ and the lion’s lack of freedom was never pondered during mauling incidents.¹⁴³ The letter concluded, stating:

Whether born in captivity or not, a lion remains a lion and no matter how well his trainer knows him, sooner or later he will be mauled and perhaps killed. Perhaps the

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ ‘Lions Kills Woman Trainer at Cape during circus rehearsal,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 September 1953, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ ‘Lion acts stopped by circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 July 1954, p. 9.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ ‘Circus better without lion acts,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 July 1954, p. 8.

king of beasts does not like to be bossed by anyone, least of all a human with an ominously cracking whip.¹⁴⁴

While, certainly, the public had stimulated press interest in getting big cat acts banned – are the animals themselves not ultimately responsible for this decision? The attacks by the big cats in Pagel’s Circus can be viewed as a form of animal resistance against their captive state, their coercion to perform, and the heightened level of stress that these conditions place on wild animals whose natural habitat consists of a vastly different arena. Due to these instances of resistance, rather than activism by humane society or public outrage, for the first time in South Africa’s entertainment history, a circus had decided to abandon lion taming acts forever. What did this mean for the future of big cat acts in the circus?

1954 and beyond: The show must go on for circus animals?

While Turnbull had decided to abandon big cat acts, the fight against the use of wild animals in the circus industry was far from over for the SPCA and other animal welfare activists. In 1955, the NSPCA (National Council for Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) was founded as a Federation of (the ninety-two) SPCAs in South Africa to provide a forum and bring uniformity to welfare legislation and standards.¹⁴⁵ The following year, on 28 February 1956, the Anti-Cruelty League was formed in Johannesburg, initially to oppose the practice of rodeos, as well as to assist in the rescue of abused animals in the townships of Soweto and Alexandra.¹⁴⁶ Soon after the formation, they began focussing their efforts on the welfare of performing animals, and fostering dialogue between the public and animal trainers. For example, Ginger Dickson, a dog trainer from Wilkie’s Circus, wrote a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail* in response to Hind’s offer.¹⁴⁷ Hind stated that he would pay 100 pounds to witness a dog being trained to walk a tightrope and do a back somersault with only kindness. Dickson claimed that Hind harboured a grudge against animal trainers, who were only ‘bringing the public good, clean entertainment’.¹⁴⁸ In 1958, a member of the public wrote an opinion piece, claiming that the work of the Anti-Cruelty League (run by Hind, at the time) was not doing enough. He

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ N. Urinus, F. Schepers, E. Bokkers, M. Bracke and H. Spoolder. ‘General overview of animal welfare a global perspective,’ *Report 240*, 2009, pp. 6–7.

¹⁴⁶ H. Cowie. ‘Animal Anti-Cruelty League Johannesburg,’ *Happy Tails Magazine*, 27 November 2017, <https://www.happytailsmagazine.co.za/news-articles/animal-anti-cruelty-league-johannesburg/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

¹⁴⁷ ‘Animal Trainer Answers Challenge,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 April 1956, p. 8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

claimed that a ‘much wider field of fight is imperative if anything is to be achieved in the prevention of cruelty to animals’.¹⁴⁹ Another piece written by ‘just another lover of animals’ claimed that rather than writing about circus cruelty, Hind needed to be doing something constructive in preventing cruelty. This piece further argued that he needed to ‘leave his comfortable desk and home and get busy’.¹⁵⁰ In contrast, there were other members of the public who argued that it was ‘encouraging to have a person like Martin Hind in South Africa’, and that his inspirational letters summed up the opinions of all animal lovers in the country.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile, Boswell’s Circus and the newly established Wilkie’s Circus continued performing with big cats and a wide variety of other wild animals. In 1957, for instance, Boswell’s Circus hired a new big cat trainer, Trevor Bale, who had previously worked at Barnum and Bailey’s Circus in America, to open for their Christmas season with a group of Barbary lions.¹⁵² The following year, they hired a French lion tamer called Jack Rex, who was first seen in the Transvaal in December 1958.¹⁵³ It seems that the circus still could hold its place in entertainment among the cinema, stereo and anti-cruelty promoters, as was noted in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1958: ‘The magic of the sawdust ring never seems to wane, through childhood and deep into adult-hood.’¹⁵⁴ In 1959, Dennis Craig, the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, published several opinion pieces on his thoughts regarding anti-circus campaigning and what he described as the ‘vocal’ Anti-Cruelty League.¹⁵⁵ He stated that, in principle, he did not like to see animals caged, either in the circus or the zoo. However, Craig conducted an investigation in 1958 with Mr G. Ellis, the secretary of the SPCA. They paid a surprise visit in the middle of a training session (the company that they visited was not specified) and saw a trainer putting the cats through their acts. According to Craig, the trainer used nothing but his voice and pieces of meat while grasping a ‘tiny twig’. Craig stated that ‘campaigns can be carried only so far. Those who write about circus cruelty must support their claims with facts.’¹⁵⁶

In response, Hind argued that a visit in the middle of a training session was not ‘a proper investigation’. He stated that in 1921 and 1922, a select committee of the House of Commons (in Britain) made two thorough investigations into the matter, and scores of first-hand witnesses

¹⁴⁹ R. Gans. ‘Preventing Cruelty,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 April 1958, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ ‘The Fight Against Cruelty,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 April 1958, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ ‘Enough cruelty,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 April 1959, p. 4.

¹⁵² ‘Circus trainer turns from tigers to lions,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 December 1957, p. 14.

¹⁵³ ‘One way to earn a living,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 Dec 1958, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ ‘Circus is still tops,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 September 1958, p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ D. Craig. ‘My answer to vocal anti-cruelty brigade,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 October 1959, p. 8.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

were called. The accounts of cruelty, he argued, were too barbaric to mention in his letter. He enquired further as to why, in Craig's description of the training, the trainer was holding a tiny twig: 'Was this not merely a symbol of something to be used in training methods, where the public were not admitted to? Why during every public performance is there an ever present and ominously cracking whip?'.¹⁵⁷ Craig replied to say that 'friendly persuasion methods' were customary in the circus, and historically barbaric methods of spikes and shocks were no longer employed. He argued that the session he watched was not open to the public, and showed the trainer with young unbroken animals in the early days of their training. He then closed any further correspondence between the two.¹⁵⁸

Despite their setbacks, the Anti-Cruelty League continued with their efforts to get wild animals banned from circus performances. According to Hind, the city council of Pietermaritzburg had taken the lead in fighting animal cruelty and had banned circuses from performing with caged animals in the early 1950s. The Anti-Cruelty League launched an appeal to all the towns to follow suit, emphasising the fact that several towns in Britain and more than forty in Holland had already imposed similar restrictions, but Fish Hoek was the only town that responded.¹⁵⁹ In December 1959, a petition was taken to the mayor of Johannesburg, Alec Gorshel, for his consideration. It called for the 'granting of licenses to performing animal shows to be refused in the Johannesburg municipal area because of the undoubted suffering and distress suffered by the animals in the course of their training'.¹⁶⁰ It took McCann and Hind two years to collect almost 9000 signatures by hand in their spare time (Figure 25).¹⁶¹ Hind claimed that the mayor had signed it himself. Gorshel claimed not to have remembered doing so, but reassured that the town clerk would look into the matter. No such bill was passed that year, and by the close of the 1950s, wild animals were still a prominent feature in the two remaining circus companies.

¹⁵⁷ 'Why the ominously cracking whip? asks Martin Hind,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 30 October 1959, p. 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ '10, 000 say: Ban circus in Johannesburg,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 November 1959, p. 15.

¹⁶⁰ '8700 ask mayor to ban circuses,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 December 1959, p. 19.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 26: The Mayor of Johannesburg, Alec Gorshel (centre), looks at the petition with Wendy McCann (right) and Martin Hind (left), c.1959¹⁶²

Despite this, the attacks had still caused a noticeable change both within the circus industry and the public domain. Prior to this, proprietors had never considered abandoning big cat acts, even though attacks had been prominent and devastating. This means that these incidents had not only made people rethink performances with dangerous elements, but also the issues of confinement and use of wild animals in the circus. Why would this time period have seen a heightened awareness for animal rights? Clive Phillips argues that by the latter part of the twentieth century, following the atrocities committed by totalitarian governments, there was a marked change towards a more democratic government. This also brought the opportunity for more social responsibility and for people to demonstrate their concern for the less fortunate members of society, including animals.¹⁶³ In America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an increase in organisations introducing proposed legislation and regulation of standards of care for all dealers and laboratories that housed or used animals. This was greatly influenced by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which had a profound impact on the general public's concern for environmental destruction and the suffering of animals.¹⁶⁴ Films were an especially useful medium in evoking sympathy in Western audiences about wild animals in captivity, like the Academy Award-winning German documentary *Serengeti Shall Not Die* (1959) by Bernhard Grzimek, and Joy Adamson's multi-million copy book *Born Free*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ C. Phillips. *The Welfare of Animals: The Silent Majority*, (Queensland: Springer, 2009), p. 68.

¹⁶⁴ D. L. Beers. *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States*, (Ohio: Swallow Press, 2006), pp. 180–182.

(1960), which was made into a film by David Attenborough.¹⁶⁵ In the newly independent India, the Protection of Cruelty to Animals Act was passed in 1960.¹⁶⁶ In 1965, British circuses and managers formed under the organisation of the Association of Circus Proprietors (ACP) to preempt public suspicion on animal cruelty and declared themselves open to RSPCA inspection at any given time.¹⁶⁷ Helen Stoddard states that in both Europe and the United States, circuses were forced to negotiate and find ways to reinvent themselves, in order to maintain commercial success and avoid public protests. Marius Kwint argues that the core of the circus's appeal – the romantic celebration of man's mastery over nature, symbolised by his skilful horsemanship, as well as disciplined animal performances – seemed to no longer hold fast in the contemporary imaginations of the dominant public.¹⁶⁸ The dominant public discourse was centred on environmental protection against human exploitation, rather than its antithesis – the celebration of human domination.¹⁶⁹ This paradigm shift in public perception was a key force behind the reconsideration of wild animal acts.

In 1962, the Animal Protection Act was passed in South Africa, which replaced the previous animal protection law: The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1914. It encompasses 'domestic animals such as horses and cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, fowls, ostriches, dogs and cats, as well as any wild animals, bird or reptiles that are in captivity or under the control of humans.'¹⁷⁰ This act contains a detailed list of prohibited acts of cruelty including overloading, causing 'unnecessary suffering' due to confinement, chaining or tethering, abandonment, unnecessarily denying food or water, keeping in a dirty or parasitic condition, or failing to provide veterinary assistance.¹⁷¹ However, problematic provisions exist within the act, such as the references throughout to circus acts that cause only 'unnecessary suffering' as being

¹⁶⁵ For a further examination of the impact of both these films, see T. Boes. 'Political Animals: "Serengeti Shall Not Die" and the Cultural Heritage of Mankind,' *German Studies Review*, (36), (1), 2013, pp. 41–59, and W. Bienart. 'The Renaturing of African Animals: Film and Literature in the 1950s and 1960s,' *Kronos*, (27), 2001, pp. 201–226.

¹⁶⁶ W. Beg. 'Animal Protection Laws in India,' *Pleaders*, <https://blog.ipleaders.in/animal-protection-laws-in-india/> (Accessed 10 August 2020).

¹⁶⁷ H. Stoddard. *Rings of Desire: Circus, history and representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 75.

¹⁶⁸ M. Kwint. 'The Legitimization of the Circus in Late Georgian England,' *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*, 2002, pp. 72–105.

¹⁶⁹ Stoddard, *Rings of Desire*, p. 76.

¹⁷⁰ Animals that are 'naturally' found in the 'wild' enjoy none of these protective measures. Statute Law of South Africa, 1962: The Animal Protection Act, Proclamation number 71 of 1962.

¹⁷¹ The act makes all such actions of cruelty a criminal offence subject to a fine/imprisonment. Statute Law of South Africa, 1962: The Animal Protection Act, Proclamation number 71 of 1962.

unlawful.¹⁷² Despite the term being unclear (what might *necessary* suffering be?), it places the onus of proof on the person alleging cruelty.¹⁷³ This has caused numerous difficulties when dealing with cases of cruelty in the courts. What this act also failed to do is completely ban the use of wild animals in the circus industry.

In 1963, a letter was sent to the *Rand Daily Mail* to remind the public that four years previously, a petition was signed to ban performing animal acts in circuses, which was presented to the City Council without avail.¹⁷⁴ The following year, a similar letter was sent in, protesting the fact that the circus was still allowed to travel into town with no opposition by the City Council.¹⁷⁵ It seems that while the political animals had some influence over public opinion, and had effected a ground-breaking shift in one circus industry, the demand to see wild animals in the circus was still strong and remained a feature in the early 1960s. The limits to both animal resistance and animal welfare campaigning is evinced by the lack of legislation implemented.

In common law in South Africa today, animals are still regarded as corporeal property in which rights of ownership may be exercised. They do not enjoy any legal recognised right to life or to humane treatment or use.¹⁷⁶ There are many legal theorists who criticise the current legislation; David Bilchitz, for example, a pioneer in the field on the subject of animals and law in South Africa, states that:

...it cannot be argued that we deny animals the rights as subjects because they do not have a voice, because what about young children who cannot speak for themselves, or claim their rights yet are still regarded as subjects with rights of their own?¹⁷⁷

He proposes that animal rights should be explicitly protected through the constitution, a route that had been followed in Switzerland in 2000, and Germany in 2002. A recent publication in 2019 by Wilson argues for the need to rectify the lack of ‘animal law’ in South Africa.¹⁷⁸ She

¹⁷² For a detailed analysis of the inadequacy of the APA in regulating welfare of animals contained in research laboratories, see C. Lombard. ‘Animal Welfare and The Law: Towards Legal Regulation of the Welfare of Laboratory Animals in South Africa,’ (North-West University: LLM thesis, 2012).

¹⁷³ See Bilchitz’s detailed discussion on this ambiguity. D. Bilchitz. ‘When is Animal Suffering Necessary?’, *Southern African Public Law*, (27), 2012, pp. 3–27.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Petition to ban animal acts,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 September 1963, p. 4.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Animal acts in circuses,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 October 1964, p. 18.

¹⁷⁶ Although, from 2001, K. Youens provides a detailed analysis on the standing of animals in South African law. See K. Youens. ‘Animal Rights: A Moral and Legal Discussion On The Standing of Animals In South African Law,’ (North West University: LLM thesis, 2001).

¹⁷⁷ See D. Bilchitz. ‘Moving beyond arbitrariness: The legal personhood and dignity of non-human animals,’ *South African Journal of Human Rights*, (25), 2009, pp. 38–72.

¹⁷⁸ A. Wilson. Founder of the Animal Law Reform South Africa, 20 October 2020, interviewed by Mia Uys.

agrees with Bilchitz, stating that the traditional classification of animals cannot withstand scrutiny, that excluding them is essentially arbitrary, and the existing constitutional and common law can be interpreted to recognise legal personhood for non-human animals.¹⁷⁹ Within our own law – as expressed by a minority judgement by Cameron JA in the *NSCPA v Openshaw 2008* – the Animal Protection Act is meant to protect the welfare of animals directly, but it does not seek to confer rights on animals.¹⁸⁰ He argues that: ‘like slaves under Roman law, they are objects of the law, without beings its subjects’.¹⁸¹

Conclusion

This chapter has added to the growing literature that considers the possibility of ‘political animals’ through re-examining the term ‘resistance’ to include animal disobedience under this subheading. It has argued that by tracing the various forms of resistance within the circus industry (escapes, refusal to perform and attacks), it is possible to see the impact that animal agency has had in shifting public perception and encouraging protest groups. While doing so, this chapter also fully acknowledges the limitations historians face when attempting to write animals and their agency into history, and when trying to consider the lived experience of captive wild animals whose ‘welfare’ has only become a focus in scientific research since the early 2000s.

This chapter argued that the attacks by big cats during the 1940s were the most influential form of resistance against their confinement and their coercion to perform. It analysed these attacks, which occurred in the ring during performance, and afterwards, with spectators. This chapter has also explored theories as to why big cats (among other wild animals in captivity) attacked, attempted to escape or refused to perform. It has argued that the initial impact generated by big cat attacks was propagated and augmented by protests of the Anti-Cruelty League, formed in 1951. The league actively tried to change public perception regarding the welfare of circus animals through passive forms of protest, including petitions and letters to the press. On the one hand, these ‘political animals’ were successful in their endeavours, as can be seen by the abandonment of big cat acts in Pagel’s Circus in 1954.¹⁸² However, there were severe

¹⁷⁹ Wilson, ‘Animal Law in South Africa,’ p. 37.

¹⁸⁰ 2008 5 SA 339 (SCA). For a detailed analysis of this judgment, see A. van Coller. ‘The Minority Defending the Interest of the Vulnerable [An Evaluation of the Minority Judgment in *NSCPCA V OPENSHAW 2008 5 SA 339 (SCA)*],’ *Stellenbosch Law Review*, (306), 2011, pp. 306–313.

¹⁸¹ 2008 5 SA 339 (SCA).

¹⁸² ‘Lion acts stopped by circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 July 1954, p. 9.

limitations to animal resistance and even to human resistance to animal cruelty, as can be seen by the lack of legislative implementation. Despite the high number of violent incidents during big cat performances and the rise in concern of captivity as a sign of cruelty, by the end of the 1950s, nothing had been done to implement a ban of wild animal performances across South Africa's circus industry. A demand to see wild animals perform remained a sentiment consistently expressed amongst most of the general public, until as recently as the early twenty-first century. It seems that while animal liberation actions could force humans to see animals as objects of dispute, the political stage remained the same. However, turning back to Aristotle for a closer reading of one of his oldest biological works, *History of animals*, there might still be hope.¹⁸³ In this book, he defines political animals as *any* species that engage in essential work together in the pursuit of a common goal, such as survival or reproduction. Of this broad category, he includes only: 'man, bee, wasp and crane'.¹⁸⁴ However, was retaliation against their state of captivity not a common goal amongst all big cats discussed in this chapter? Perhaps, as with the term agency which has been revised to include other marginalised members of society – this category might, too, become re-examined to include all animals.

¹⁸³ For an in-depth analysis on this specific work, see C. E. Abbate. "“Higher” and “Lower” Political animals: A Critical Analysis of Aristotle's Account of the Political Animal,' *Journal of Animal Ethics*, (6), (1), 2016, pp. 54–66.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 56. Quoted from A. L. Peck (trans). *Historia animalium*, (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1955), 1.1 487 b33ff.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: Committed to a kinder world?

Introduction

In December 2016, The Great Moscow Circus announced during their tour of South Africa that they were ‘committed to a kinder world’, and would no longer be showcasing any animal acts.¹ In 2019, the German-based Circus Roncalli decided to transform their show to support the fight against animal cruelty in the industry. Circus Roncalli made use of eleven projectors and a crew of fifteen designers and software engineers to create 3D holograms of horses, elephants and fish, instead of incorporating live wild animals into their show (see Figure 27).² In May 2019, under the Wild Animals in Circuses Act of 2019, the United Kingdom prohibited the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in England.³ In October 2020, France’s environmental minister Barbara Pompili announced that a ban on the use of wild animals in traveling circuses would form part of new regulations that are set to take effect in coming years. She argued that it is time for humans to open a ‘new era in our relationship with animals’.⁴



Figure 27: A 3D hologram of an elephant at Circus Roncalli, 2019⁵

What these above incidents indicate is that the circus industry has yet again adapted to the changing public zeitgeist, and has decided to discard one of its previous main features – wild

¹ ‘Committed to A Kinder World, The Great Moscow Circus Contains No Animal Acts,’ *NSPCA*, 2 November 2016, <https://nspca.co.za/lifestyle/support-ethical-entertainment/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

² ‘A German circus uses holograms instead of animals and it looks amazing!’ *BBC News*, 6 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/48543263> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

³ UK Public General Acts, Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019, Chapter 24 of 2019.

⁴ ‘France to ban wild animals in travelling circuses and dolphins, whales in marine parks,’ *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/france-to-ban-wild-animals-in-traveling-circuses-and-dolphins-whales-in-marine-parks> (Accessed 5 October 2020).

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/48543263> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

animal acts – in order to survive and continue performances in the present day. In South Africa, the future of wild animal circus acts remains a contested debate. According to Amy Wilson, the founder of Animal Law Forum South Africa, an amendment memo was drafted in 2017 for the Animal Protection Act that included banning animals in circuses; however, this bill was never written into the law.⁶ She states that in September 2020, this bill was brought back into parliament and is currently in the process of being looked at. While wild animals in the circus industry might be on the decline, perhaps entirely new forms of animal entertainment will take centre stage. One may consider how the rise of ‘big cat experiences’ offered across South Africa, which include picnics with cheetahs and wild cat petting, often accompanies rhetoric that these animals have been rescued from poor captive conditions.⁷ These new types of entertainment are claimed to be in aid of conservation, and in stark contrast to the circus, attempt to showcase these animals in their ‘natural environments’. What remains constant, however, is the rich attraction that these big cats offer for the human audience.

This thesis has demonstrated that the circus industry has undergone several transformations throughout history, and has demonstrated the various ways in which animals have been agents for change within this ring of entertainment. It has shown, given the context of their performances, how animals have become political symbols, how they have contributed to elements of gendered performances, and how they have functioned as part of ‘animal capital’. This thesis has attempted to challenge anthropocentrism by taking into account the unique nature of animal agency, subjectivity and resistance. It argues that by providing this space for animals in social and leisure history, it can bring to light fresh perspectives on our shared relations, and even assist in imagining new ways of co-existing, and in this case, co-performing.

While there is value in studying circus animals in their own right, writing long-term history on the circus industry is an essential practice in itself. Jo Guldi and David Armitage argue in their seminal *The History Manifesto* that big data now available to historians can shed new light on what has given rise to our conflicted present.⁸ In order to move beyond the danger of ‘short-terminism’ as a rather desperate way to understand modernity, this thesis has adopted the long

⁶ A. Wilson. Founder of the Animal Law Reform South Africa, 20 October 2020, interviewed by Mia Uys. The APA was amended in 2016, but did not include any aspects of the memo. ‘Performing Animals Protection Amendment Act, 2016, Act No. 4 of 2016, number 40555, volume 619, *Government Gazette*, 19 January 2017, pp. 2–17.

⁷ See for example: <https://bigcatexperiences.co.za/>, <https://tenikwa.com/the-wild-cat-experience/> and <https://pantherafrica.com/visits/> (Accessed 21 October).

⁸ See J. Guldi and D. Armitage. *The History Manifesto*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

view with a specific focus on the circus industry.⁹ It has attempted to ask new questions and find better answers to explain the changes that have taken place over time. As argued by Sandra Swart, the long view can reveal unconventional and surprising strategies from past eras that can be useful tools for current crises and global challenges.¹⁰ Now more than ever, historians are called upon to use their ability to help illuminate the past through new facts (or to look at old facts with fresh perspective) to show that things were not as we always believed them to be. In doing so, historians can assist in finding new ways of understanding present social order, and even further, can help adopt new ways of being. The usefulness of this thesis lies in its demonstration of a shifting entertainment industry in parallel with a shifting public mindset and political society. Circus performances can be viewed as signifiers of larger social and political forces, and societal ideals. Hence, this thesis has shown that the way we thought about animals, about gender and about race in a performance space, has changed over time, and can change again.

Future circus research: The unexplored next

This thesis has explored circus performances across three prominent companies (Fillis's Circus, Pagel's Circus and Boswell's Circus) from 1882 until 1963, highlighting a variety of performance trends and themes that have changed over time. This was the first attempt at a comparative historical analysis across this industry, as well as the first study that has aimed to incorporate both animal and gender history into the social realm of circus historiography. Thus, this thesis has raised many questions that warrant further academic investigation. Firstly, a history of the Boswell-Wilkie's Circus (1963–2002) remains unexplored. This amalgamation of Wilkie and Boswell's Circus in 1963 was described as a 'quiet revolution' in the industry.¹¹ The original Boswell's Circus was sold out to African Consolidated Theatres Ltd, of which Mr Wilkie became the manager. There was significant rivalry that rose up between Boswell-Wilkie and Brian Boswell's Circus, which formed again in 1980, specifically due to their name similarities and the attraction it could draw.¹² In a court judgement in October 1983, Brian was

⁹ A term used to describe the lack of long-range perspective in our current modern culture. See Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, p. 2.

¹⁰ S. Swart. "'Dangerous People' or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love being an Historian," *South African Historical Journal*, (68), (3), 2016, p. 253.

¹¹ 'Big changes under the Big Top,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 October 1963, p. 8.

¹² 'It's Boswell vs Boswell,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 November 1983, p. 12.

compelled to change the name of his circus from Brian Boswell's Circus to simply Brian's Circus to avoid confusion.¹³

Secondly, a study on the circus industry during this time period could bring a fresh perspective on the social and political climate, specifically focusing on the political turmoil that arose during the last few decades of the apartheid regime. While Van der Merwe made the claim that the circus remained to be 'the sole democratic phenomenon in the country' at that time, more research on circus operations during this era might prove otherwise.¹⁴ For example, Maurice Carre, the Boswell-Wilkie circus spokesman, claimed in 1983 that the circus had phased out segregation about three or four years prior. However, she stated that in small towns such as Bloemfontein, they had to hold four separate shows for whites, blacks, coloureds and Indians (to use the nomenclature of the time). Carre claimed that without separating the shows, they 'would lose a lot of money and it would not work'.¹⁵ Novel research on the circus industry could determine how, and indeed if, it operated as a space that could defy the laws of racial segregation. Was it affected by petty apartheid? If so, did it resist?

Lastly, further research in this field could investigate the circus industry in the twenty-first century. Today, only the McLaren Circus tours throughout South Africa, which was founded by two brothers David and Duncan McLaren in April 2005.¹⁶ The Boswell-Wilkie Circus closed in 2002 due to financial difficulties and a decline in public support.¹⁷ Of course, the increase in animal rights activists resulted in a decrease in contemporary circus company attendance. In 2019, the McLaren Circus displayed an array of wild animals including Bengal tigers, lions, Arabian camels, miniature horses, donkeys, goats, Burmese pythons and poodles.¹⁸ However, during their travels of South Africa, they were met with anti-circus protesters from groups such as Beauty Without Cruelty and Ban Animal Trading at virtually

¹³ This judgement was reported in *Boswell-Wilkie Circus (Pty) Ltd v Brian Boswell Circus (Pty) Ltd and Another* 1984 (1) SA 734 (N). See also 'Entertainment is still in the name of the game,' *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 December 1983, p. 3. This court ruling was appealed and dismissed in 1985. See 1985 (4) SA 466 (A).

¹⁴ F. J. G. van der Merwe. *Frank Fillis: The story of a circus legend*, (Stellenbosch: FJG Publikasies, 2007), pp. 182–183.

¹⁵ S. Makagabatiane. 'Boswell-Wilkie denies racism charges,' *The Star*, 26 October 1983, p. 27.

¹⁶ 'McLaren Circus,' *Encyclopaedia of South African Theatre, Film, Media and Performance*, 6 August 2012, https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/McLaren_Circus (Accessed 13 October 2020).

¹⁷ 'Boswell-Wilkie Circus folds up tent,' *Independent Online*, 18 September 2001, <https://www.iol.co.za/travel/south-africa/boswell-wilkie-circus-folds-up-the-tent-70226> (Accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁸ <http://www.mclarencircus.co.za/history-3/> (Accessed 2 March 2019).

every stop.¹⁹ In December 2019, a petition was circulated on social media calling for an end to the McLaren Circus, despite their claims that the welfare of their animals were a top priority.²⁰ Today, due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the possibility of restrictive legislation, the future of this industry is uncertain. Thus, this thesis has attempted to capture the history of this once prominent and immensely popular trade.

Concluding remarks

This thesis has shown the vital role animals have played in the circus industry, which began as a predominantly horse and human show. It highlighted that similar to British circus productions, South African shows used horses to attract all members of society allowing for a racially diverse audience separated by ticket prices. In Chapter Two, the argument was made that while this space allowed for both sexes to perform, there was a strong sense of performing gender during female equestrian acts, whose qualities – femininity, grace and elegance – were used to create a spectacle, rather than provide equal footing. In the detailed comparison of the three companies, Chapter Two demonstrated that Fillis’s equestrian performances most closely mimicked metropolitan-style acts such as vaulting, trick jumping, hippodramas and large-scale war re-enactments. Not only did equestrian performances highlight the feminine qualities of female riders, they also functioned as part of masculine displays, most specifically during military and hunting spectacles, such as the ‘Stag Hunt’ and ‘Major Wilson’s Last Stand’.²¹ During these acts, horses were transformed into political animals, with the purpose of promoting the message of imperial sacrifices to British audiences.

Chapter Two further argued that there was differentiation among the three companies. Pagel’s equestrian acts were unique, featuring displays of athletic ability and the use of horses as a tool to demonstrate his individual strength. Boswell’s equestrian performances mimicked those performed in Britain (an ode to their British roots), and their show included trick ponies, vaulting, dressage and most notably, ‘clever ponies’, which drew from the spectators growing desire to witness animal sagacity.²² This chapter clearly outlined changing themes in equestrian

¹⁹ See for example: ‘Protesters want circus to stop using animals,’ *Star*, 19 July 2018, p. 6. M. Basson. ‘Animal activists growl at circus,’ *Netwerk24*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.netwerk24.com/ZA/Kouga-Express/animal-activists-growl-at-circus-20190116-3> (Accessed 13 October 2020).

²⁰ S. Naik. ‘Calls for local circus to stop using wild animals,’ *Independent Online*, 17 December 2019, <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/calls-for-local-circus-to-stop-using-wild-animals-39364896> (Accessed 13 October 2020).

²¹ ‘Fillis’s Mammoth Circus & Menagerie,’ *Cape Times*, 4 December 1895, p. 4 and ‘Fillis’s Great Circus,’ *The Natal Witness*, 14 July 1883, p. 8.

²² ‘Boswell’s Circus,’ *Cape Times*, 18 September 1912, p. 5.

performances over time, which started out with vaulting and trick riding, to later encompass dangerous feats, as well as large-scale battle spectacles. This change took place in parallel with the rise of militarisation in the late nineteenth century. A further change occurred in the early twentieth century, when wild animals became the new stars of the ring, transforming the industry away from the once equestrian-based show, to one that showcased animals from across the globe. In South Africa, the ‘wild horse’ (zebra) was used to add an exotic flair to the show by 1886, despite (or rather because) of their much-vaunted refusal to accept taming. However, other wild animals like big cats proved to be the most attractive, novel and ‘exotic’ addition to circuses, allowing lion taming to take centre stage.

Chapter Three examined lion-taming performances in South Africa across the three companies from 1888 to 1916. Essentially, it argued that while each company had various executions, their *male* lion-taming acts all consisted of dominating and potentially violent performances, beginning with Fillis’s trainer Salvator Bugeja in 1888. These acts were not distinctly South African, but rather closely resembled those presented internationally. Similar to the acts presented abroad, these lion-taming acts displayed a domination of wildness – something that could no longer take place in the natural arena, since the Cape lion had been hunted to extinction by 1865. The tamers that performed in South Africa were often European men who brought their big cats with them, because the majority of African game was exported to European circuses. What Chapter Three brought to light was the two vernacular differences in South Africa’s lion-taming acts: the lack of indigenous African lion tamers and the acceptance of female lion tamers in the ring.

Why were these two elements unique? This chapter firstly discussed the trend that swept across European menageries in the 1860s – the employ of African and Asian lion tamers – as a means of adding exotic flair to their show. In South Africa, however, no lion-taming acts by indigenous African tamers ever took place. This chapter argues that a reason for this was due to the various symbols present within lion-taming acts, such as protection of the colony and domination of the wild. Allowing an indigenous performer to master control over the local beast in the late nineteenth century would have elevated the native to the same level of the white coloniser, and in doing so, would have undermined colonial order. Secondly, this chapter presented fresh research to show that the first female lion tamer in the southern hemisphere was not, as previously thought, Jasia Scherazade in Australia, but Idola Popper in South Africa

in 1889. While Lion Queens had already been presented in Europe since the 1840s, this event in South Africa was unique in its timing. Since the passing of the Dangerous Performances Bill in 1879, females were prohibited from performing in these types of acts in Britain. Furthermore, South Africa also differed from other colonies in the global South, namely Australia and New Zealand, who also prohibited female lion tamers from performing during Fillis's 1891–1894 Australasia tour. Finally, Chapter Three noted that while it was unique that these female tamers could perform, their acts maintained a strong element of 'performing gender'. This is clearly noticeable in their less violent style, as well as in their press reception. Female lion tamers were either described in terms like 'skilled' and 'wonderful' to emphasise their feminine qualities, or their acts were claimed to be something surprising and extraordinary (and therefore not relating to other females in society).²³ Therefore, this chapter demonstrated South Africa's deviation from the strict policing of 'femaleness' that was evinced in the metropole, but also indicated that certain members of society remained entrenched in colonial expectations of gender.

In Chapter Four, it was argued that transformation away from an equestrian-based show was not the only monumental shift that occurred in circus history. It focused on discussing the changing style of wild animal performances at the turn of the twentieth century – a change that is now widely referred to by historians as the Hagenbeck revolution of the circus animal act, due to the influence of the German animal trainer and merchant Carl Hagenbeck. This change was two-fold. Firstly, it transformed the style of animal performance away from a dominating spectacle of man conquering beast, to acts that displayed the skill and discipline of both the trainer and his animal pupils. Secondly, it showcased the success of animal training methods based on patience and kindness, rather than coercion or brutal punishment. This change was arguably a response to new ideals of 'civilisation' in the global North, new insight into animal emotions after Darwin's publication in 1872, and pressure mounting from the rise of animal welfare groups.²⁴

The chapter started its analysis with the European and American context in the late nineteenth century before tracing the effects of this revolution across the three South African companies. It showed that elements of the revolution were adopted (at least in part) by some circus companies; however, this was not a straightforward or unanimous shift. The first (albeit tiny)

²³ 'Fillis's Circus,' *The Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 2 May 1889, p. 4

²⁴ See C. Darwin. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, (London: John Murray, 1872).

trace of this revolution can be found in Fillis's Circus after he purchased a trained act from Hagenbeck in 1896. This performance, titled 'The Tiger, the Goat and The Dog', was a visible demonstration of Hagenbeck's training method and style. However, other elements of Fillis's Circus remained centred on acts of domination (such as wrestling acts with his tigers), which continued to be performed all the way into the early twentieth century. In addition, Fillis openly confirmed that methods of force and punishment were still employed by him and his animal trainers, again proving a lack of Hagenbeck's influence. Nonetheless, the true effects of the Hagenbeck revolution can be seen later in South Africa within Pagel's Circus in the early twentieth century, through his emphasis on humane training methods, as well as the style of his animal performances (especially the diverse group of big cat performers). Finally, while Boswell's Circus caught on to this transformation later than Pagel's, they also adjusted their wild animal acts by the 1930s to showcase the wild animals' skills, rather than their trainer's domination. Boswell's trainers also outlined that their methods involved patience and kindness, echoing Hagenbeck's training ethos.

The reason for this shift in the 1930s was largely due to the rise of animal rights activism and protest action (mainly in the form of petitions) against the use of wild animals in circus performances. Most notable was the response by the state to these pleas with the implementation of the Performing Animals Protection Act of 1935, which sought to regulate the welfare of these animals by enforcing licenses and monitoring training methods, and the captive environment through regular inspections.²⁵ Overall, what this chapter contended is that the Hagenbeck revolution did eventually transform the style of wild animal circus acts in South Africa, but that this was not a direct process, nor was it a complete global shift.

Chapter Five added to the growing conversation that considers the possibility of 'political animals' in human society. The chapter traced the various forms of resistance within the circus industry (escapes, refusals to perform and attacks) to demonstrate the significant impact that animal agency had in both shifting public perception and encouraging anti-circus protest groups. This chapter argued that the attacks by big cats during the 1940s were the most influential form of resistance against these animals' confinement and their coercion to perform. While providing details of these acts of resistance, this chapter has also explored theories as to why big cats (among other wild animals in captivity) take part in aggressive behaviour. It contended that the initial impact generated by big cat attacks was supplemented by the protests

²⁵ Statute Law of South Africa, 1935: The Performing Animals Protection Act, Proclamation number 25 of 1935.

of the Anti-Cruelty League, formed in 1951. Through using passive forms of protest, like letters and petitions, this league attempted to shift public perception on the welfare of captive animals. On the one hand, these ‘political animals’ were successful in their endeavours, as can be seen by the abandonment of big cat acts in Pagel’s Circus in 1954.²⁶ However, on the other hand, this chapter noted the limitations of animal resistance, and even human resistance, to animal cruelty. This can be seen by the lack of legislative implementation, as well as the ongoing demand to attend big cat shows. Despite these setbacks, this chapter argued that animals can influence the political sector of society, and animal liberation can force humans to re-examine their role in the animal’s plight.

Finally, in conclusion, this thesis notes the significant challenges historians face when undertaking animal history, a field that can often be framed as humans speaking for other animals. As pointed out by Eva Meinger, historians need to find out what political notions could mean in interspecies contexts, because often concepts like freedom, democracy and civil disobedience can be useful theoretical tools, but their meanings cannot always be applied to animals.²⁷ Historians also need to consider the signifiers that can be observed during nonlinguistic communication between humans and animals.²⁸ This study has attempted to pay close attention to what animals do and say in circus captivity, while also being aware of their unique subjective experience. It has considered circus animals’ roles as agents of resistance and as performers for human audiences. It has attempted to forge a new path of multispecies history in South Africa within the interdisciplinary field of ‘animal performance studies’.²⁹ In doing so, this thesis acknowledges the need to move beyond studying animals in isolation. It has examined other elements of human society at play in circus performances, such as gender, class, race and colonial power. Overall, this thesis has debunked the notion of the ‘timeless circus act’ by illustrating several revisions and reforms that have taken place over the *longue durée*. It has shed new light on the historic industry of circus entertainment and in doing so, it has opened up doors for future research.

²⁶ ‘Lion acts stopped by circus,’ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 July 1954, p. 9.

²⁷ E. Meijer. ‘Animal Activism and Interspecies Change,’ in G. Garmendia da Trindade, and A. Woodhall (eds). *Invention or Protest Acting for Nonhuman Animals*, (United States: Vernon Press, 2020), pp. 118–119.

²⁸ S. Nance. ‘Animal History,’ *History and Theory*, (56), (2), 2017, p. 285.

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