

Institution: University of Sheffield		
Unit of Assessment: D-27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Recovering the hidden and global histories of circus		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1997–2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Vanessa Toulmin	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Director of City and Culture	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1997–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Toulmin's research on circus history had positive cultural, artistic, economic, and heritage impact. Her co-curation of 'Show of Shows' enriched museums' and archives' knowledge of their collections, enhancing the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage, improving visitor experience and numbers, and raising museums' profile and reputation. She brought circus to new audiences and venues (museums, a cathedral), co-producing and/or having input into new cultural artefacts (live performances, documentaries, a play). In particular, she recovered circus' diverse ethnic and gender history, increasing not only public understanding and appreciation of circus, but also that of circus practitioners, empowering BAME and female performers.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Toulmin's research recovers the history and cultural value of the circus, showground, and music hall: traditionally working-class forms of recreation and artistry which are generally marginalised by academic study, which tends to focus on more elite forms. As the founding Director of the National Fairground Archive at The University of Sheffield (1995-2016), she took an active role in the collection, preservation, management, interpretation, and dissemination of an archive which gives unique insight into the culture and history of travelling shows and entertainments (R1).</p> <p>Toulmin has published extensively on the history of fairs and freak shows; neo-variety, burlesque, and outdoor spectacular theatre; and early film. Work on the latter highlighted the commercial significance of appealing to local audiences (R2). Toulmin's most recent work has been focused on investigating the global history of circus, its evolving genre since its formation in 1768, when the Englishman Philip Astley opened the first modern circus in London, and the architectural spaces that housed it: far from being staged solely in 'big tents', nineteenth-century circus often performed in wooden amphitheatres or even in bespoke buildings, such as that designed by Frank Matcham in Blackpool (R3).</p> <p>As well as recuperating a critically neglected area of popular culture and social and performance history, Toulmin's work with primary archival material has also recovered the hitherto overlooked significance of women and of BAME circus performers and entrepreneurs to circus history, as the creators of innovative acts (including Astley's equestrienne wife, Patty, and Lena Jordan, inventor of the triple somersault, R4), and as circus proprietors (e.g. the equestrian Pablo Fanque, R4). As such, the research makes a significant contribution to the recovery and</p>		

understanding of the 'hidden' histories of women and ethnic minorities, and the important – but often overlooked – roles they played.

Toulmin's research also uncovers the ways in which circus was from its inception an international project: Astley toured extensively beyond the UK, and included artists from across Europe in his shows, and circus habitually incorporated the performance styles of the cultures to which it travelled. In the process, Toulmin's research situates circus as a portable and adaptable art form, as well as a mode of entertainment, and traces how it influenced other creative media (including cinema, dance, and fashion).

Toulmin's research is hands-on and collaborative. In addition to 'traditional' academic outputs (R2-4), her work has involved co-curating exhibitions (R5) and producing accessible, public-facing publications, based on primary archival work (R6).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Toulmin, V. (2003). The National Fairground Archive: its origins, development and holdings. *Local Historian*, 33, 74-82. Available at: <https://www.balh.org.uk/publication-tlh-the-local-historian-volume-33-number-2-may-2003>
- R2.** Toulmin, V. (2001). Local films for local people: Travelling showmen and the commissioning of local films in Great Britain, 1900-1902. *Film History*, 118-37. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815421>
- R3.** Toulmin, V. (2014). 'Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear': Frank Matcham in Blackpool (1889–1920). *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 12(1), 37–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2013.874537>
- R4.** Toulmin, V. (ed.) (2019). *Early Popular Visual Culture* 16(3). Special issue: includes (i) introduction Toulmin, 'Celebrating 250 years of circus' (231-4): (ii) Toulmin, 'Black circus performers in Victorian Britain' (267-89): (iii) Toulmin "My wife to conclude performs the rest" – Patty Astley the first lady of circus' (290-300) (REF2)
- R5.** 'Circus! Show of Shows' (2018): three parallel exhibitions at (i) Weston Park, Sheffield Museums (curated Toulmin & Theresa Whittaker); (ii) Discovery Museum, Newcastle (curated Toulmin, Alisdair Wilson, Rachel Gray); (iii) Tide and Tide Museum, Great Yarmouth (curated Toulmin and Philip Miles). Funded by £98K Heritage Lottery Fund grant.
- R6.** Toulmin, V. (2018) *What is Circus Today? Explorations through 250 Years of British Circus*, 24 pp. ('Show of Shows' exhibition catalogue) <https://www.museums-sheffield.org.uk/assets/PDFs/What%20is%20Circus%20Today.pdf>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

As historical adviser to Circus250, Toulmin was 'crucial' to shaping how circus was celebrated in its 250th anniversary year, highlighting circus as an international artform with a diverse ethnic and gender history; this enabled female and BAME performers to see themselves as part of circus history, 'empowering the future by knowing the past' [S1].

Diversity was at the core of 'Show of Shows' (2018): **three parallel exhibitions** co-curated by Toulmin at Time&Tide (Great Yarmouth), Discovery Museum (Newcastle), and Museums Sheffield [S2]. Toulmin instigated the idea, collaborated with curators on a successful Heritage

Lottery Fund application (£98K), and helped shape the exhibitions. Her recognition of the pull of the local (gained from research on early film) and knowledge of circus history enabled each museum to use local figures as focal points and tell 'hidden' histories of BAME and female performers. Without Toulmin, the exhibition 'would have been a non-starter' (Hamilton, Museums Sheffield); 'it would not have been of the [same] quality' (Wilson, Discovery Museum [S2, S3]).

Toulmin's impact on the exhibitions is exemplified by her discovery in Sheffield City Archives of the only known images of the black circus proprietor/equestrian Fanque (displayed for the first time in the Sheffield exhibition) and her curation of Degas' 1879 painting *Miss Lala*, owned by the National Gallery (NG). The NG's interpretation focused on Degas; Toulmin connected it to its subject: Miss Lala, a black aerialist celebrated for strength and skill. This knowledge – new to the NG – was 'crucial' in securing its loan to Museums Sheffield, a rare instance of the NG loaning to a non-art exhibition; Hamilton acknowledges the significance of Miss Lala's loan to enhancing Museum Sheffield's reputation and building an on-going relationship with the NG [S2]. Toulmin paired the portrait with footage of the 21st-century black aerialist Blaze Tarsha, 'allowing young black women to see themselves within cultural institutions where previously they had been invisible' [S1]. This video was posted on Facebook (900+ views).

'Show of Shows' attracted 261,944 visitors across the three museums, with Time&Tide experiencing a 21% increase in shop-sales [S2]. Museums Sheffield had a footfall of c.63K, a daily average (610) higher than any exhibition within the last 2 years [S4]. Footfall directly correlates with donations and commercial income, enabling future activities. The exhibitions and accompanying creative programme also engaged a wide, multi-generational demographic, including hard-to-reach groups (e.g. Roma, the homeless). 32% of Sheffield's visitors had not previously been to the museum. 92% agreed the exhibitions had increased their knowledge of circus history. 'Show of Shows Live Late' in Sheffield sold out in record time (350 tickets) and was live streamed on Youtube (the first time Museums Sheffield had done this: a change to institutional practice). Toulmin's media profile meant the exhibitions received unprecedented reach in press coverage, including the USA [S2]. Many press articles showcased the archival material and research provided by Toulmin (e.g. *Guardian*, readership 17 million).

Toulmin's research improved **museums and archives' understanding of their collections**. Since circuses travelled, many collections contain relevant material which has remained overlooked and undervalued. 'Show of Shows' led to the conservation of 200+ objects [S4]. Toulmin also identified the worldwide significance of Sheffield City Archives' uncatalogued playbill collection and highlighted Sheffield's historical significance as a circus venue. This ensured the collection's cataloguing and conservation, and put the archive 'in a much better position to raise awareness of Sheffield's history, one of our key aims' [S5]. At the Ringling Museum, Florida, Toulmin provided 'critically important' input, highlighting the diversity and dynamic nature of circus, as the museum was shifting the focus of its programming from circus business and logistics to more global perspectives on its artistry [S6].

In addition, Toulmin furthered **public understanding** of circus' diverse history through c.20 talks to capacity audiences in 2018. She appeared on high-profile media platforms, including *Women's Hour* (3.7million listeners weekly), and contributed to Birkett's film *Women in Circus* (4.2K Facebook views; c.3K via Vimeo) [S3]. Her research also shaped **new cultural artefacts**. She co-produced two 2018 shows: 'Sisterhood of the Ring' was performed to a capacity audience in an ethnically diverse, economically deprived area of Sheffield. Blending performance and historical narrative, it examined the role of race and gender in circus. 'Mirrors and Ribbons' explored the female form within circus. Held in Sheffield Cathedral, it

demonstrated the portability of circus. Feedback testifies to the positive impact on audience well-being ('I will think of myself as someone beautiful and inspire young girls to feel happy about their body') [S7]. Flintham's play *Astley's Astounding Adventures* (New Vic, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 2018; 8K+ audience over 3-week run) drew heavily on Toulmin's research about circus entrepreneur Philip Astley [S8]. Toulmin also had vital creative input into *Golden Age of Circus* (dir. Erlingsson). She co-produced the film, collaborated on choice of footage, and provided historical context. The film premiered at DocFest (2015), UK's leading documentary festival (third largest globally), and was screened at international film festivals (including Film Lab Palestine, San Sebastian, Sarajevo, Toronto, Tribeca), independent cinemas nationally, and as part of BBC4's 'Storyville' series (2016, 2018; av. viewing figure 10K) [S9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1.** Testimonial, Ringmaster and Co-ordinator, Circus250.
- S2.** Show of Shows testimonials and data (CEO & Director of Programmes testimonials, visitor numbers press and social media coverage, Museums Sheffield; Project Co-ordinator, Discovery Museum, Newcastle; Visitor numbers and show revenue, Time&Tide, Norwich).
- S3.** Evidence about *Women in Circus* documentary (viewing figures).
- S4.** Final report 'Show of Shows'.
- S5.** Statement from Archives and Heritage Manager, Sheffield City Archives.
- S6.** Statement from Tibbals Curator of Circus, Ringling Museums, Florida.
- S7.** Feedback and audience data from co-curated shows; testimonial provided by Circus performer and choreographer.
- S8.** Evidence about *Astley's Astounding Adventures* (testimonial - Artistic Director, New Vic Theatre and Creative Director, Circus250; reviews).
- S9.** Evidence about *Golden Age of Circus* (audience data).