

# **WRITING THE CIRCUS**

**ISSUE #1 - LIMINALITY + TERROR AT  
THE CIRCUS**

---

The Japanese-Columbian Icarian Games duo, the Martinez Brothers, are standing atop the curb of the circus ring with their arms outstretched, waves of applause tumbling down the tiered seating towards them. They've just completed the first part of their act, with older brother Alan David as the porter (base) and younger brother Arashi as the flyer, moving through a series of increasingly impossible Icarian Games tricks with panache and – seemingly – effortlessness.



Icarian Games – for the uninitiated – is an ancient circus art discipline that is essentially high-risk, high-difficulty human foot-juggling. The porter propels the flyer momentarily into the air with a powerful *push* from their legs, sending them end over end over end in a feat of partner acrobatics unlike much else in the world of circus.

Flyers execute movements that are difficult enough to achieve on solid ground, let alone the small and unstable surface of the soles of the porter's shoes. The porter has to be *so* strong, and *so* precisely tuned to the timing of the flyer in order to 'catch' them when they're coming out of a front tuck or back tuck. When it's a *double* tuck, the momentum and rotational forces at work in the

flyer's movement are immense – and must be met and matched by the porter. Not only do the Martinez Brothers have the double back tuck in their act – they have the double back tuck in their act *at least 8 times in a row*.

It's the kind of mind-boggling bizarre that makes you laugh with sheer delight at two humans thumbing their noses at gravity so spectacularly.

It fills you with an effervescent warmth to witness. Everything in your body lightens and lifts to watch two simple humans perform such impossible, playful things.

It is, frankly, superhuman.

Their costumes – elegant black pants and jackets with black and gold trim - sparkle. Pure joy radiates from their faces. Clearly in their element. The joyful, triumphant trumpet music of their act swings into another round as a massive **golden** scissor-lift is driven out onto the floor.

But this isn't your average scissor lift.

Besides the fact that scissor-lifts are more commonly painted in safety-orange and the grey of accumulated construction-site dust, this one is emblazoned with *Martinez Brothers* and lacking the safety barriers that normally enclose the upper platform.

I've worked on scissor-lifts before, on stunt rigging gigs. The higher up you go, the less stable the platform is. The Martinez Bros have clearly never had to take a brain-meltingly boring 12 hour 'safety at heights' course for working with such machinery, because if they had, they'd be (a) clipped in, (b) definitely not have uninstalled the railings that are designed to keep you from falling out or off, and (c) wouldn't be hopping lightly back into the starting position for another round of Icarian Games tricks.

The two brothers leap onto the machinery, standing side by side, hands on hips, chest puffed forward proudly. They're invincible. Untouchable. Their energy and confidence spills over and out into the audience.

Slowly, the accordioned metal stacked between the base of the scissor-lift and the upper platform begins to expand toward the ceiling.

Up

Up

Up.



The scissor lift sways distressingly; my stomach follows suit.  
My palms start to sweat.  
I'm feeling uncomfortably hot, even in the light t-shirt I'm wearing.

In some shows, when a performer goes above a certain height you might catch a brief, slick moment where they attach a thin lifeline to a belt hidden in their costume; things like handstand acts where the artist has created a stack of furniture for themselves that is high, high above the ground which they proceed to climb up and balance on. Any acts at height that I've witnessed in Canada or the United States use such measures, but they are often considered a 'new' addition to the traditional world of circus, scoffed at by purists as removing the thrill of it all, removing what makes it *circus* in the first place.

But not here.

No safety line (it's simply not possible with the tricks they're doing – the twists that they incorporate into some of their rotational movements make it mechanically non-viable).  
There's no safety barrier on the platform.  
There's no nets or mat beneath them.

My chest moves shallowly as it runs through these realizations.

*I feel sick*, I think.

*I don't want to watch a twelve-year-old kid die today*, comes unbidden into my head.  
[*It's hardly the same thing*], another voice in my head chides. [*It's not like this 12-year-old is like an average 12-year-old. He's grown up doing this*].

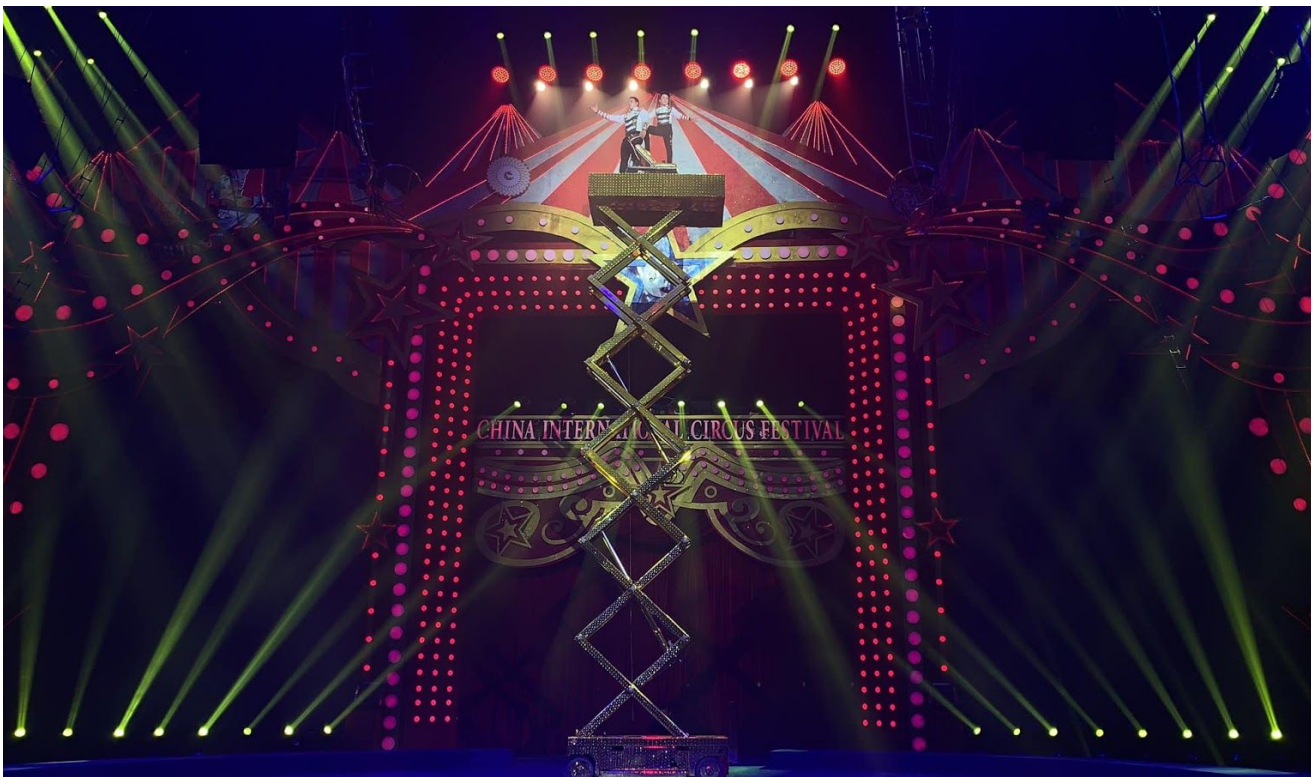
My traitorous mind repeats its initial sentiment.

I continue watching.

They're 30 feet (10m) in the air now. The scissor lift has stopped moving. Alan David tips backwards into position on his chair and Arashi hops up. A brief pause – a breath– and Alan David juggles the small frame of his younger brother forward in space, catching his shoulders on the soft soles of his shoes, popping him up again, catching him back in the seated position several times. The scissor-lift continues to bounce and sway. Next is three full back tucks, neatly one after the other. *Push, push, push* go Alan David's feet - and Arashi lands standing tall, foot to foot with his brother below him.

They stand and acknowledge the audience once more, beaming bright white smiles.  
My heart is racing. *What is this? Am I excited? Am I relieved?*  
I may be in shock.  
*Please be done please be done please be done*, I beg silently.

And then – the scissor-lift begins to creep higher again.  
Up.  
Up.  
Up.



They're forty feet (12m) in the air now. Alan David lays back, Arashi hops up. They begin the rapid backflip series that is often employed as the closing spectacle in an Icarian Games act: a blur of seamless backwards rotations by the flyer. It suddenly occurs to me that if anything happens at this point in the act, it's Arashi's neck on the line – not Alan David's.

My fingers creep up to my eyes, ready to block them if a small body begins to fly off the top of the scissor-lift and out into space. *Should you really be doing that?* my traitorous

brain hisses. *Do them at least the service of watching.*

But I don't want to watch.

The last thing I want to do right now is watch the end of this act.

I'm amazed, I'm gobstruck, I'm impressed, I'm disbelieving, I'm excited, I'm anxious – I want them back down on solid ground, blowing our minds in a way that demonstrates their prodigious technique with less of the neck-snapping possibilities that a forty-foot-high stage presents.

A bright spark flickers at each corner of the elevated scissor-lift. My attention briefly flickers over to the lights – and then fountains of sparks gush forth.

Pyrotechnics.

At forty feet.

On a bouncing, jostling, open platform.

The brothers continue their rapid movement, unfazed by the hot points of fire sizzling through the air next to them. The audience begins to clap and I count the rotations, as much in awe as in a vain attempt to give my brain immediate, short term goals to make it to without shutting down in nauseating, paralyzing fear.

Five .... Eight ... Twelve ... Sixteen ...

They hold this intensity at full height for one – two – three – of my shallow breaths, and then finally (**finally**) the scissor-lift begins to descend ... slowly ... back to earth.

Twenty-three .... Twenty-seven ... Thirty-four ...

The Martinez Bros continue their nonstop backflip-foot-juggling until their golden machinery has brought them safely back down. The upper platform of the scissor lift settles itself onto the base, metal struts neatly folded in on top of themselves. They continue the flip sequence.

Fifty-two ... Fifty-six ... Fifty-eight --

Fifty-eight.

They complete a final rotation, leap up to a standing position, and throw their arms up for the thunderous applause that begins to crash down from the stands.

I'm on my feet, clapping as loud and hard as I can, along with the rest of the theatre. I don't know if we're clapping harder for their amazing technique and nerves of steel, or if it is hard relief and appreciation that we're signalling out through the percussion of our hands and feet.

---

# LIMINALITY + TERROR AT THE CIRCUS

‘**Liminal**’ is a delightful word that stems from the Latin *limen*, or threshold. It denotes spaces and experiences that are transitional, transformative. ‘Liminal experiences’ are those in which we transition from one place to another. Liminal persons are those that do not exist tidily in one particular space, and instead straddle the boundaries between two or more ways of being in the world. Liminal spaces are the space ‘in between’, in which profound change occurs. Liminality is powerful, mysterious, ever-shifting, and brimming with both promise and threat.

Whether it is a tent, a theatre, or a street corner; a massive production, a small show, or a single act – liminality abounds in circus. While the **circus**, in general, is one such liminal space, it contains within itself many more liminalities. In this in-between space, there is room for our imaginations to be lit on fire with joy, delight, and disbelief. It also creates a space in which the terror inherent in the human condition plays out before us in a form far more tolerable than actually *thinking* about such things.

“Terror?” I hear you say, disbelievingly.  
Oh, the circus is full of terror, my friend.

Sitting politely (for the moment) beside wonder, delight, and happiness—terror is, in part, what draws us to witness these acts that transform the performer before us into someone more-than-human, and transforms *us* along with it. This terror is a different kind of terror, though, from what we might normally imagine. It is not an obvious, overt, adrenaline-spiking terror; it is a subtle kind of terror. One that waits to be called on. One that we have conditioned ourselves to either ignore in favour of entertainment, or one that we wilfully misinterpret as *excitement*. With these unseen guests accompanying us, we enter the tent or theatre as one kind of person, and exit as another, having witnessed the impossible.

We wait, expectantly, in the darkness of the audience, anticipation building. We know that we’re about to watch something incredible. Something that can’t be done. Something that will be done. Our skepticism, our hope, our excitement, sit there with us, jostling elbows slightly.



**Then** – the lights come up, the sound creeps in, or swells, or hits us with a *bang* – and there are bodies before us performing impossible things: flying through the air, stacking tall on one another’s shoulders, flipping and tumbling themselves into an impressionistic blur of body parts. These superhumans – who do *more* than humans let themselves imagine is possible – make our hearts swell with their perceived bravery, courageousness, fearlessness in the face of ... well, in the face of what, exactly?

Acrobatic bodies enchant, entertain, and shock. They make us fearful. They make us pause. They make us consider what we remember about the basic laws of physics. Acrobatic bodies do the impossible. Acrobatic bodies *embody* the impossible. They do *more* than the ‘normal’ bodies filling the seats in the audience.

The body of an acrobat – a tumbler, an aerialist, a contortionist – is a highly trained and incredibly disciplined one. Moreover, it is a body that is trained specifically for **risk** performances. Acrobats accomplish things that untrained, ‘normal’ bodies could never do without seriously injuring themselves. Risk is mitigated through training, repetition, discipline, focus. Recreational acrobatics are more popular than they’ve ever been thanks to coaching methods and safety devices that reduce the risks inherent in the performance of certain movements and skills. However, many disciplines within circus arts remain, at their core, performance art forms designed to create joy even as they terrify us with the danger we perceive as being woven into every moment under the spotlights.

When our hearts are in our mouths while we watch the wire walker edge her first slippered foot out over the yawning abyss of thin air high above us, or witness the strength and poise of the aerialist perform daring feats, our bodies fill with nervous energy. We hold our breath without realizing. Our palms sweat. We cover our eyes with our hands, and then peek back out through the gaps in our fingers.

These sickening-entertaining physiological responses are **terror**, sugar coated in cotton-candy costumes, lights, and all the trappings of the ‘show’ we are observing.

But *why* are we terrified when we watch the highwire walker? The trapeze artist? Or, in the case of the story I opened with in the above: what, exactly, is terrifying about watching two young men perform risky movements forty feet high in the air – with no safety lines?

*Well, the answer is quite simple, I hear you say.*

We are terrified of the fall.

Terrified *for* them, maybe, is more accurate to say.

Terrified that a twelve-year-old boy, an eighteen-year-old boy, might fall.

The fearfulness inspired by witnessing such feats is not, of course, solely located in the body of the performer, but rather in what surrounds them.

Air.

Open space.

The air and open space that separates those superhuman, heroic performers high above us from the mundane ground below where we observe them from is not a neutral space. It's highly charged. It contains all the electrifying possibilities of terror and tragedy that sits next to us when we watch the circus. It is a space loaded with transformative potential. It is considerably more electrifying and alarming to witness two young men performing risky acrobatics when surrounded above, to the sides, **and below** by great amounts of open space.

If a performer passes through this space unscathed, our wonder and terror as audience members resolve into a liberating, satisfying 'high' of having witnessed a body that looks-like-us, but is-not-us, perform the impossible. If a performer passes through it but fails, stumbles, or makes a mistake – this **space** takes on an entirely different transformative potential. In the case of the Martinez Brothers, they passed through this gauntlet unscathed, relieving us of our fear even as we scream in amazement and appreciation that they did us the great favour of not dying in front of us while they entertained us.

But then, we might remember that this is not a one-off 'daredevil' show. This is an act that the Martinez Bros performed every day of the week of the festival, sometimes twice a day. It's not a single roll of the dice that they are up against. They roll the dice again and again for us. There is no reassurance that these acrobats will go through this liminal space once and 'call it a day', having been profoundly transformed by this experience. They enter, and exit, this liminal space over and over again.

And so, our fear can never quite leave us. Awe-filled memory of the performance given by acts like the Martinez Bros are heightened by an underpinning of uneasiness that these magnificent beings might cease to be magnificent, should the worst happen.

We're not just terrified that the acrobat might fall.

We are terrified of what happens *after* the fall.

We are terrified that we may witness the *fall* through space, a rapid descent from the superhuman through the liminal, transformative space of terror and gravity, to the hard ground of the no-longer-superhuman, no-longer-normal, subhuman sawdust floor.

Now, of course, if a performer *dies* at the end of a passage through the 'liminal', transformative space of falling – the conversation is over.

But what if that's *not* what happens?

Our terror is not solely founded in the fear of death, the fear of the end.

Our terror finds much stronger roots in feeding off of our fear of *not dying*. Of an end that does not mercifully or quickly come. We are terrified BECAUSE the superhuman above us may become less-than-human in front of our very eyes: broken, shattered, irreparable damage to the bone and flesh and blood of the all-too-fallible human body.

The impossible may plummet back down to the mundanity of the 'normal' world with a horrifying *crunch*.

The acrobat does their best not to think of such things as they perform for us – indeed, they could *not* perform if this was foremost in their minds. Training, discipline, experience, mitigates both risk *and* fear. The audience, similarly, enters this silent agreement: we do not hope for it, we do not wish it, but the possibility is ever-present and thrilling in the most sickening way (that's why we bought our ticket)

*'Less than human?!'* I hear you cry. *That's not what we think when we see someone broken, injured, disabled ...*

Oh, but it is.

The body of the acrobat contains the potential for the impossible, even as it contains the

potential to be something capable of impossible things, rendered *impossible*. Disabled and impaired bodies aren't seen as *desirable* - hell, they aren't even seen as human. If that sounds outlandish (and problematic to you), let's think about the following:

Do *you* want to be disabled?

Do you aspire to be one, one day?

Does even asking these questions make you uncomfortable?

Of course you don't, and of course it does.

For many of us watching in the audience, death is considered a more merciful outcome than paralysis.

And yet – we watch.

We watch, and watch, and watch. Because these acts *also* let us dream of performing such superhuman feats as those the Martinez Bros undoubtedly execute before their morning coffee. They open a narrow window of realizing the possibility of the human body to achieve a particular kind of greatness.

It's too tempting. We cannot turn down our fear of the monstrous, terrifying entity of disability or impairment (or death) when we might also witness the impossible be made possible. We crave the thrill of playing with this razor's edge of the terrifying potential inherent in our physical existence. We are horrified, but we cannot look away.

This moment comes for all of us. Disability. Impairment. Chronic illness.

What matters to us is *when* it happens. When it comes for us in old age, we don't call it 'impairment' or 'disability', we call it 'life'. But when it comes for us 'early' ... what then?

The notion of 'earliness' in terms of our bodies weakening, failing, leaking, breaking, and so on, is a fallacy fed to us by the 'strawman' of normalcy. *All* of us aspire to a shadowy outline of 'normalcy' as we go about our day-to-day lives, an outline that many of us never really realize has been drawn. We often make our way through the world without ever thinking about the ways in which we've framed certain ways of moving, speaking, and being in the world as acceptable or ideal, vs. unacceptable and tragic. Case in point, if disability or impairment shows up 'early', if the ways that we move, speak, or exist in the world are irreparably or suddenly changed (i.e. through disability and impairment) the narrative we frame it in is always as a tragedy, a loss, undesirable and even *unimaginable* future.

This is **also** why it is terrifying to watch acts such as the Martinez Brothers Icarian Games performance: it is not just the preemptive horror of witnessing death, destruction, or disability. It is that death, destruction, or disability might be coming for these *young* bodies. For these superhumanly healthy, strong, adept bodies.

The circus doesn't just let us imagine the impossible, as we watch those heroic figures fly through the air before us. The circus forces us to entertain the *unimaginable*. Do we have fear and empathy for the performer we watch? Or ... are we horrified for ourselves?

Even as those acrobats present a possibility of more-than-human action, they remind us of our own fragility. There are three things that live inside the body of an acrobat, paradoxically, but simultaneously, co-existing: disability, non-disability, and something else that's neither. It is not a binary state of existence. The acrobat's body is liminal, too – full of all the threat and promise of open space, of air, of the act, of the show. The circus is a site of joy and wonder, yes – but this joy and wonder is created on the underpinnings of something far more unsettling. And whatever it is ... we cannot get enough of it.