



WOW! WHAT STORIES WE TELL

20 years
of women's
circus in the
Illawarra

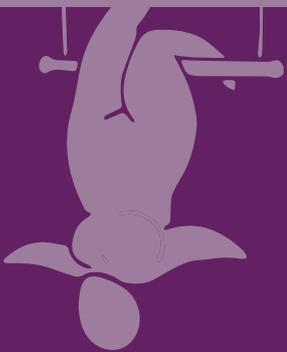




Image: Wendy Regan, Linda Meyns, *The Aviators*, 2006, Darling Harbour, Sydney, costumes by Imogen Ross.



Image: Gabrielle Quigley, *No Planet B*, Eco Arts Australis Conference, 2019.



Image: Wendy Regan as Desdomena, *Shakespeare Fantasia*, 2012. Photography by Bernie Fischer.

'WOW won the hearts of our community and received support from so many individuals, professionals and organisations including IPAC, Merrigong Theatre and New Theatre South.'

Penny Lowther

Cover Image: Cast in the finale of the *Portraits of WOW* show, 2018.

FOREWORD

Women of Wollongong - Ordinary Women doing the Extraordinary is a perfect epithet for *Circus WOW!* Established in 2001 by then local artist Penny Lowther as a platform where women of all ages can have fun, play, learn, work and create within a supportive community. WOW celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Finding professional support in its early years from Circus Monoxide, WOW soon established its own unique identity and niche in the region, and has been a beacon for women wishing to develop skills and express their creativity through exciting performative works that embrace the gamut of arts practice.

Beyond its role as a group of local creatives developing and delivering Circus performance projects throughout the community, *Circus WOW* has also had a major impact as a social enterprise focussing on women's issues, providing support and increasing the profile of women performers, particularly older and diverse groups of women.

Wollongong Art Gallery is proud to present *WOW! What Stories We Tell* an exhibition celebrating this important 20th anniversary milestone for *Circus WOW*. It is a timely opportunity to showcase not only WOW's important contribution to the cultural landscape of the region over the past 20 years but also the indelible mark it has made on the broader community.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the dedication, passion and commitment of the members of the *Circus WOW* 20th Anniversary organising committee who have worked closely with Gallery staff to bring this exhibition to you. The flexibility of the committee members has been particularly appreciated given the obstacles that COVID has thrown up over the development period of this project.

WOW! What Stories We Tell is a unique opportunity to view and immerse ourselves not only in the colour and spectacle of *Circus WOW*'s story but perhaps more importantly in the human dimension they have brought to the community through their work.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

John Monteleone
Gallery Program Director



Image: Aquired Taste Choir, the act is Finding the Balance from the *Portraits of WOW* show. Photography by Nina Kourea.

Circus WOW 20 years strong!

WOW Women's Circus of Wollongong started in 2001. A small but enthusiastic group of ten women responded to Penny Lowther's vision of creating a women's community circus that challenged women to take risks, be creative and have fun. As word spread more women turned up aged from 18 to 60 years with little or no experience but a desire to push their own personal boundaries and explore their creativity.

WOW was an instant hit! Within weeks, WOW was interviewed in the papers and asked to perform at community events. WOW never said no and created acts with circus skills just learnt. Women designed and sewed costumes, shared skills and encouraged each other. It was a real community! In no time at all, WOW was performing dynamic, difficult tricks in creative, funny and entertaining ways.

As the first director of WOW, Penny Lowther, surrounded by a supportive team brought her vision, passion, and a 'let's wing it' attitude. The women of WOW brought their skills, energy and enthusiasm that created an incredibly rich and creative environment. It was a huge learning curve as they strove to work together, learn whole new skill sets and create meaningful moments for themselves and their audiences as *Circus WOW* developed and grew. Many members were performing in front of others for the first time and taking on new roles on committees and in groups working on costume making, set design, choreography and back stage.

Key people in those early years included Jean Taylor from the Melbourne Older Women's Circus who inspired Penny to run away to the circus and Donna Jackson, former artistic director of Melbourne Older Women's Circus who visited and helped WOW structure the organisation.

Amanda Buckland, the Cultural officer at Wollongong City Council played an important role in building the Community Arts in the region which included offering Circus Monoxide a professional circus residency which led to many wonderful collaborations with WOW as we shared space and resources.

Alicia Battestini, Monoxide's Creative Director, was a mentor and a key influence in WOW's artistic training and direction. Alicia introduced WOW to the art of comic performance and clowning, through her own work and some amazing international Clown teachers, like Angela De Castro, Sue Broadway and Tom Greder. Wollongong became a destination for professional circus trainers of all modalities and WOW benefited greatly from these opportunities. This culminated in the Fabulous Risk National Circus conference being held at Wollongong University in 2006.

The very essence of *Circus WOW* is to provide opportunities for women of all ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds to acquire physical and technical circus skills while working in a safe, non-competitive and supportive environment. Women came together to learn, develop fitness, create and perform and find expression through *Circus WOW*.



Image: *Golden Gaytimes*: (left to right) Emma Khourey, Nat Harris, Wendy Regan, Chantelle Pickett, Maree Alwert, Jem Lewendowski Porter, Portraits of WOW show, Circus Monoxide Venue, 2018. Costumes by each performer. Photography by Nina Kourea.

Image: Aerial performance by Jane Davis, 2006. Photography by David Kemmery.



'The stand out was simply the privilege of being a part of this incredible community of women. Happy 20th birthday Circus WOW. You Rock!'

Cheryle Moore



Image: Shona Connacher as Shona Hooplova, from *Portraits of WOW*. Photography by Nina Kourea.



Image: Kobie Clifton and Emma Khourey dancing at the *Most Wuthering Heights Day Ever*, Wollongong Mall 2018.

'Have a go, it doesn't have to be perfect, have fun, everyone is different. That's what's great about WOW: the acceptance of difference, of women as they are, each individual exploring and developing in herself, in a safe place.' **Fiona McKay**

From 2008 – 2011, Cheryle Moore was WOW's Artistic Director. Bringing her professional circus experience and sense of fun to WOW, she also understood how important it was for women to have access, locally, to creative training and expression. Cheryle was blown away by the body of work developed by WOW and the absolute commitment to creating work around ideas of feminism and social change. 'It was incredibly exciting developing work, running workshops and collaborating with Circus Monoxide in this period. The absolute joy of so many women in one place creating work, learning new skills, conquering fears and running amok was thrilling.' It was an extraordinarily vibrant space that inevitably came to an end with the loss of the Bellambi site, now Northern Stars Swim School.

WOW embarked on the huge process of finding a new home, a place to meet, create, share and continue the great ethos of a women's circus in the Illawarra. The search took some time and with the help of Wollongong City Council, we found a temporary home underneath Coledale Senior Citizens Centre which provided storage and office areas. For a time we hired class space and development areas from the new Circus Monoxide space in Fairy Meadow.

'My hopes for WOW's future include more collaborative opportunities, increasing the diversity in our membership, and re-establishing outreach programs.'

Ellen Curtis

While all of this was happening *Circus WOW* continued to create amazing, inclusive work about, by and for the women of the Illawarra. Many wonderful, insightful characters, acts and costumes were created by the membership. Some excellent collaborations with visiting trainers and local professionals led to some powerful performances. Many WOW performances were tried out at the popular Vault Cabaret in Port Kembla, pioneered by Anne Louise Rentell.

The home base was the membership, the Wow women. It was the community of women that made up *Circus WOW*, the volunteers who made everything happen, the management committee who worked tirelessly to keep everything operating in the months without an actual physical base and all of the amazing women participating, creating, performing and exploring.

Since 2011, the direction of *Circus WOW* has been managed collaboratively by a committee of volunteers as well as by WOW's trainers and directors of performances, including Wendy Regan, Jane Davis, Heidi Hillier, Neisha Murphy and Emma Khourey. There have been many hard working and long serving committee members doing many different jobs, memorable amongst these is Fiona McKay, who chaired the WOW committee and took on many roles, often several at the same time, as well as Ellen Dunn, who held the WOW volunteer committee together through some challenging times and took on the big job of archiving much of WOW's gathered material, allowing for this exhibition to come together as it has.

Image: Nat Harris, Ellen Curtis, Jem Lewandowski Porter, Maree Alwert, Christine Canaille, Chantelle Pickett, Anthea Gostt, Kobie Clifton. *The Silence we Carry*, 2016, Portraits of WOW, Wollongong. Costumes by performers. Photography by Nina Kourea



In 2012, Ellen Curtis took on the voluntary role of Chair of the *Circus WOW* Committee and has held that position on and off since then. Managing the company in the face of decreasing capacity for volunteerism was a challenge as was the continuing search for a suitable and stable training space. It was a very difficult task to find somewhere that met all the various requirements of circus classes such as stilts, aerials, hoops and acro-balance.

In the meantime, classes and rehearsals were run from a range of venues including local schools and community halls. At this time, WOW established circus classes at Helensburgh Fitness Centre. This stretched the role of the training coordinator and provides an example of the challenges of volunteering and the potential for burnout. However, this was also a significant achievement for WOW, as, when handed over to be operated by Helensburgh Fitness Hub, this has led to a new circus being created in the Illawarra, the Burgh Circus.

It was a fortuitous day when, with the work of committee member Angela James, *Circus WOW* made the connection with Switchfit Gym in Fairy Meadow. Terri and Tom Bowen's commitment to their community has provided *Circus WOW* with a home and an ability to provide a safe training space for women, as well as store equipment and costumes. We offer our immense thanks to Terri, Tom and Ange. A new direction was taken in 2017, when WOW started the Acquired Taste Choir. This is a choir like no other and drew many new faces to the women's circus, becoming our largest class and creating a new level of accessibility to the class timetable.

WOW has continued to provide a safe and non-competitive environment for women to explore physical and creative expression and to have opportunities to participate in performances. Audiences and the community have been witness to a wonderful diversity in women's expression and stories through *Circus WOW's* performances. The primary highlight has been the commitment and endurance of women who volunteer for *Circus WOW* and have continued this organisation, which remains an essential one for women and for the arts community.

As you delve into the story of 20 years of *Circus WOW*, as depicted in these show books, photos, costumes, memorabilia and props, we hope that the WOW spirit of courage, creativity and fun shines through. Women brought their own interests and skills to their performance pieces creating many iconic and unforgettable performances. The Bathing Belles, the South Coast Scrubbers and the Aviators are examples of these iconic acts that have endured down through the years making repeat performances. Shelter, The Silence We Carry and What's Her Story?, tackling issues of gender and domestic abuse, are examples of the powerful voice that *Circus WOW* gave women. So many more creations all attest to WOW's commitment to make the ordinary extraordinary.



Image: Gabrielle Quigley, Fiona Mackay, Angela James, Sharon Pusell, Ella Hogan and Libby Bloxham. 'Cracked' from *Portraits of WOW*. Photography by Nina Kourea.



Image: Kate Clarkson, Jen Marshall, Penny Lowther, Soraya Del Castillo. *The South Coast Scrubbers*, 2003, Tasmanian Circus Festival, costumes by performers. Photography by Jane Davis.

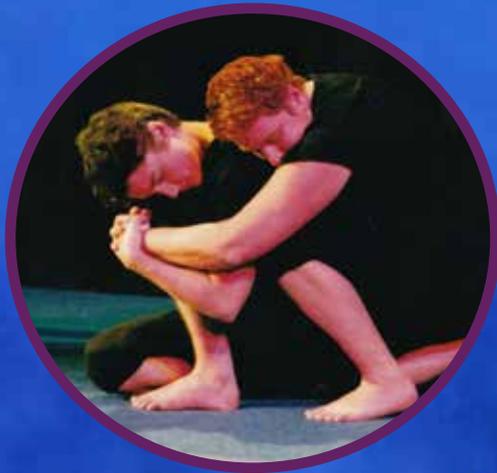


Image: Jane Davis, Penny Lowther. *Shelter*, 2005, Fabulous Risk Circus Conference Wollongong University. Costume by Jane Davis. Photography by David Kemmery.



Image: Libby Bloxham, Lynda Willson, Fiona McKay, Gabrielle Quigley, Fox Lee. *What's her Story?* 2018, International Women's Day Luncheon, Wollongong. Costumes by the performers. Photography by Sylvia Liber.



Image: Desiree Fowler, Sophie Counsell, Emma Khourey, Jem Lewendowski Porter and Alicia Rodden, *The Bathing Belles* (left to right). *One Really Big Circus Show*, Circus Monoxide Venue, 2016. Costumes by Jane Davis and Ella Hogan. Photography by Nina Kourea.

Exhibition curator: Libby Bloxham

Exhibition team: Ella Hogan, Kate Clarkson, Fox Lee, Helen Richards, Gabrielle Quigley, Angela James, Ellen Curtis, Linda Meyns, Honora Jenkins, Kobie Clifton.

PI -Janys Hayes



WOW! WHAT STORIES WE TELL Wollongong Art Gallery, 6 March to 6 June 2021



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