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An Ethnographic Analysis of ISU's Gamma Phi Circus

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## **Introduction**

Gamma Phi Circus of Illinois State University is the oldest collegiate circus in the United States, and one of only two still in existence. Founded in 1926 by Clifford “Pop” Horton, a gymnastics instructor, it began as a small group of men performing human pyramids and tumbling at sporting events. By 1931, it was an actively performing college circus troupe. Now, with a rich, 82 year performance history, Gamma Phi has roughly 70 performers and holds highly attended performances every April, in conjunction with a rigorous year-round practice schedule.

I chose to focus my research on Gamma Phi because they represent a strikingly visual and dynamic performance tradition. The performances that members create visually convey certain essential aspects of what it means to be a member of Gamma Phi. Members of the college circus share a set of goals, ethics, and characteristics which both create the culture of which they are a part, and qualify them as members. The information I gathered in collaboration with the members of Gamma Phi focused on the ways in which circus performance is learned and how that process helps Gamma Phi achieve its performance goals.

## **Assumptions and Early Hypothesis**

Before conducting my research, I assumed that as a college circus, Gamma Phi would perform only basic tumbling and balancing skills, and perform mainly for other students. I expected to see professional trainers and coaches with each act enforcing safety regulations, and tired students who were doing the bare minimum of physical work. From my background in cheerleading, I had a basic understanding of tumbling, group stunts, and the highly physical work and practice they require, and was skeptical that college students would devote the necessary time and energy to a high-quality performance. I obtained these preconceived notions from experiences with other college extracurricular groups and interactions with over-taxed college students, and from popular understanding of a litigious happy culture that would be uncomfortable with the idea of students flipping through the air.

The literature from which I began my research focuses on background information on circuses in general as well as on performance studies as a tradition. Melissa Gamble (2004) addresses questions surrounding the prevailing popularity of circus even in the age of television and internet entertainment when she says, “The answer seemed to be that the American circus had spun its own intriguing tradition of familiarity, fantasy, and believability, incorporating elements

of folktales, and literature, language and imagery, legends and customs handed down from generation to generation” (p 16). This view helped me to understand the performance tradition of circus and what audience members and performers expect it to look like. It paints a much grander and more prestigious view of circuses than I had previously held.

Much of the existing information on circuses is published in the form of photo-ethnographies that convey the highly visual nature of circus performance. The photo-ethnography that I used as background research, “Portrait of a Circus Girl”, by Julia Offen (2010), addresses the interpersonal relationships between performers and the highly dramatic personalities common to many entertainers. While it provided invaluable insights into the workings and hierarchies of a circus, the article studied a travelling circus with ethnically diverse performers who live as collectively as family groups, a dynamic which differs greatly from that of Gamma Phi, and so did not influence my expectations of Gamma Phi.

As circus is primarily a performance tradition, I consulted Richard Schechner’s *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002). In it, he draws from several sources to define seven functions of performance: to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince, and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic. Circus clearly entertains, and creates beauty, which made me wonder if it can also foster community.

The physicality and inherent danger in circus led to my use of an article entitled “The Business of Injury Prevention in Circus Performance” by Eric Lamme (2011). It uses Cirque du Soleil as a case study of the ways that injury surveillance can help performers minimize injury rates and maximize the length of their careers. It allowed me to better understand how circuses mitigate the tension between performance and safety inherent in their art, the frequency of injury, and the importance of training, trust, and dedication. The literary research I compiled gave me a strikingly different view of circus as a whole from what I had previously held in its portrayal of group, highlighting its rich tradition as a well-beloved form of entertainment and display of talent, strength, bravery, and grace.

## **Methodology**

Gamma Phi practices Thursday, Sunday, and Monday nights, with flying trapeze practice on Fridays at the Horton Field House. Several acts, including Wall Trampoline, which consists of

dual trampolines separated by a glass wall that performers incorporate into their act, and Russian Swing, a large swing that uses momentum to send a flier high into the air as they perform feats of gymnastics, begin practice an hour before the rest of the group. When practice begins, everyone gathers for conditioning and a group meeting, led by Marcus, the director of the circus. Marcus organizes and schedules each practice, manages the performers, and has final say and critique of the each performance. Formal practices are three hours long, and scheduled into rehearsal times for each act. When not practicing, performers head to the weight room. Additionally, open gyms are held every weekday afternoon. Over the next three weeks, I attended a total of five three-hour practices during which I moved around the gym talking to performers.

Dialogue and demonstration of techniques communicated much of what Gamma Phi had to teach me. After initial introduction of my project, I asked some basic prepared questions about participants' background and involvement in Gamma Phi. Then, I began asking more specific questions framed to identify the major themes and nature of the group so I could understand the club holistically. While I talked with a member of each of Gamma Phi's acts, I was encouraged by my consultants to focus the majority of my study on Wall Trampoline; Silks, in which an aerial performer wraps silk sheaths around his or her body in artistic and intricate ways while suspended high in the air; AcroSport, a combination of Acrobatics, and group stunts; and Tumbling.

During practice, I watched interactions to determine important leaders and performers. Gamma Phi has recently received considerable local and national news coverage, so performers are comfortable talking about their involvement in circus. However, this comfort presented certain challenges, as performers had already prepared answers to many of my questions. Because these answers were framed for the media, they tended to advertise Gamma Phi rather than portray it realistically. To overcome this, I worked primarily, though not exclusively, with members of the group who have not received much individualized media attention, but command respect within Gamma Phi. Brianna and Jenny, Silks performers, helped me to understand the artistic and athletic components of aerial performance. Tyler and Ted demonstrated the power and teamwork of Wall Trampoline. Mikki, a Tight Rope performer, and Phil, of AcroSport talked with me about inter-relationships and hierarchies in Gamma Phi and the creative process of act writing.

During interviews, I emphasized commonalities I shared with my consultants, including our status as college students and my limited background in cheerleading. I wore workout clothes to help me blend in and to enable me to attempt participation in certain acts. In conjunction with interviews, Silks and Wall Trampoline performers took time to teach me some very basic skills so I could understand the thrill and challenges of these acts as well as Gamma Phi's teaching method.

Before each practice, I wrote a list of goals to accomplish and questions to address, converted my preliminary field notes into layout form, and printed several photos which I brought and discussed with my contacts. I chose the subjects of my photographs based on suggestions from my consultants and by collaboratively identifying themes which we wanted to demonstrate visually. Through interviews, we developed captions for photos and selected the images that best represented Gamma Phi as a group. My consultants read my outlines and suggested revisions and pointed out strengths. By a week or two into my research, I had developed, with performers' help, several main points on which to focus my study. However, Gamma Phi's 70-person enrollment dictated that I could not interview all performers. To overcome this, I randomly distributed a survey concerning these points and received 43 responses. This survey helped me to gain broader perspective of what commonalities members of Gamma Phi share.



**Figure 1: After discussion of the principles of participant-observation, Brianna taught me the split hold on Silks so I could understand its challenges.**

## **Presentation of Data**

### *Learning Circus*

Gamma Phi represents a learned form of performance in which students collectively teach each other within a structured hierarchy set in place by Marcus, the director. Gamma Phi has no professional coaches, although a few ISU faculty members and alumni volunteer their help at practice. Marcus plays a crucial role in directing the show, managing its members, guiding Gamma Phi's outreach and serving as administrator, authority figure, and supervisor of the ways that students coach each other. Performers begin their circus careers with greatly varying

levels of experience and training. Survey respondents varied from having no experience to more than 15 years. At the beginning of the academic school year, the group holds open houses and recruitment sessions. Interested students are invited to attempt any act they wish and are given instruction from current performers. Bonding activities are held, and hopefuls practice until try-outs in October when they audition for specific acts. The skills they can perform at auditions are entirely taught by students. After selection, new members join act practices.



**Figure 2: Sally (left) attempts a new trick on the Silks while Jenny (right) critiques her form and suggests she twist out of the wrap to transition to her next move. Behind the Silks, Tumblers collaboratively discuss the lineup for their practice time.**

During act practices, performers of a certain medium gather around it to create, develop, and perfect skills and tricks that are eventually molded into sequences for the shows held in April. In acts like Silks and Wall Trampoline, all members of the act watch as one or a few of them work on specific tricks. They call out advice and motivation to one another and ensure that aesthetic

standards are met. One member says, “We can see things they can’t while they’re up there. If we don’t tell each other what we’re doing wrong, we won’t improve.”

Furthermore, skills are passed from experienced members to novices at practice. An example of this was demonstrated when seen in Spanish Webs, which is an act similar to Silks but with

a single, suspended rope that a spinner rotates so that the flier spins. The flyer yelled, “Let Matt do it, teach him to spin.” Matt watched as the spinner described and demonstrated her motions, then took the rope, and spun his dangling friend. By the end of my research he was spinning often and well.

The creativity of Gamma Phi’s performances is similarly student-generated. “We learn the coolest stuff by messing around and pushing each other’s skills,” says Phil. “Well, that and YouTube. Same answer for, ‘How do we get hurt the most?’” Many members agree that YouTube can be credited for many of their new tricks, coupled with a willingness to try acts they have only seen online. Other times, tricks are born when someone suggests combinations or development of new techniques.



**Figure 3: Anthony (right), Ellen (up), Phil (jumping), and Alex (left) perform a stunt in which Phil uses Ellen's body as a jump rope. The group found this stunt on YouTube and modified it to fit their particular skill set.**

Act Captains and Exec Board members, are. “Everyone has a move they want to get down, and everyone contributes while the Act

Captain keeps everything in line and keeps an eye on what the show needs as a whole,” says Mikki. Act captains, two per act, are upperclassmen who have experience in their act and know the performance expectations for it. They coordinate the performance, find music, conceptualize costume designs, and maintain order. The Exec Board consists of the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Correspondence Secretary and Social Chair. Members handle administrative tasks and maintain the group’s public image. Tyler, the President says he was chosen because Marcus thought he had “presidential qualities” and communication skills



that make him a good face for the group. Additionally, each performer chooses a committee on which to serve: costumes, programs, publicity or equipment. These committees undertake the non-performance aspects of the show that help make it a success. By the beginning of Spring Semester, the acts are roughly sketched out, and students work to perfect them. Groups perform Act Timings for Marcus, who offers his critical assessment, and revisions are made until it is show-ready.

### *Trust and Community*

Gamma Phi's dynamic of group learning and creation fosters a sense of deep trust and



**Figure 4: Matt (far right) works the spotting line as AcroSport works on a new trick in which Christian jumps off the hands of those holding him, and lands in a hand stand. Matt's careful vigilance on the rope stopped Christian before he hit the ground each time the stunt failed. After several attempts, the group could land the stunt without needing the spotting line, but they could not have learned it without trust in their spotter's skill**

community. When new or dangerous stunts are attempted, students spot each other and in group acts performers must execute their skills perfectly to ensure each other's safety, while trusting that others will do so as well. In this way, trust and respect between performers are necessary conditions for a successful circus performance. Members are trained through the collaboration of everyone's knowledge, and so, members are privy to a vast repository of information on circus performance, and each member intimately understands each other's skills and capabilities. "We've all been through the same things, we all learned the same way," says Jenny.

An amazing 90% of survey respondents reported that they see circus friends outside practice every day. "We're definitely a circus family," says a performer whose roommates are all in Gamma Phi, "We have to be. We

spend our entire lives in practice where we literally hold each others' lives in our hands." Silliness and teasing prevail in conditioning, the weight room and during formal practice, and while the atmosphere is structured, organized, and scheduled, friendships and chemistry are evident. When gathered as a group, members work to make each other laugh, yelling things like "Beach Season!" as motivation in conditioning.

Furthermore, the Exec Board includes a Social Chair who facilitates social activities for the group outside practice, for instance, their upcoming trip to the midnight premiere of *The Hunger Games*. This level of camaraderie is surprising as survey results demonstrate 24 different majors, widely varying previous experience, and family backgrounds. "I think it's because we're doers," says Brianna. "Other people plan, circus people do. We're all pretty carefree and willing to do something crazy too."

### *Dedication*

Circus performance requires extreme time and bodily commitment. Performers are required to attend three four-hour long practices per week, train several times a week in the weight room and make frequent appearances at the open gyms. Courses, homework, jobs, and social lives all must be negotiated around circus. Attendance is taken at each practice, allowing each performer only three excused and three unexcused absences a year, because, in many acts, if any performers are missing, no one in the act can rehearse. Along with this, circus is extremely physical and dangerous. Performers must push their bodies in each practice and performance. In order to throw a trick, performers must commit their bodies fully, and injuries come with the territory. "We're proud of our bruises and cuts and burns," says Mikki. "We show them off. They show how much we put into this."



**Figure 5: Gamma Phi performers like Mikki, and her teammates shown in the mirror, exercise in the weight room several times a week to ensure they are strong enough to perform their stunts. The cut on her leg is a souvenir of her Tight Rope act and will leave her a proud scar.**

When asked what they wished people knew about circus, survey respondents highlighted dedication and commitment. The most common response was, “How hard we work” (30%). However, this work is, placed in a context of high energy, laughter and fun. “If you have fun, the audience will have fun,” is part of Marcus’s performance and training strategy. Performers try to make each other laugh at each stage of practice, and even when arguments ensue, they are usually broken up by someone cracking a joke. “Every time you laugh you add a day to your life span,” said an Exec Board member. Tyler then interjected, “That’s why clowns live the longest.”

### *Getting Show-Ready*

Gamma Phi’s teaching methods emphasize community building and the formation of trust, both of which aim to form the necessary atmosphere to create a performance in accordance with the aesthetic ideals of circus. Practices are highly scheduled, dividing time in the gym between



**Figure 6: Wall Trampoline Triple performers must execute the rhythm or their falls perfectly. If any one of the six performers is off by even a second, their bounces will all collide. The trick will be ruined, and someone may get hurt.**

acts, and ensuring that all acts have ample time to create, develop and perfect their performances before shows begin. Although silliness is the dominant mood, extraneous talking is strongly discouraged and mutual respect is expected. A codified set of performance aesthetics exists that emphasize fluidity, synchronization and, “flash”.

When Marcus watches and critiques act timings, he frequently suggests smoother transitions or more ornamental details and flourishes. In multiple performer acts, like Wall Trampoline, one person yells “Hup” to signal the next move and maximize synchronization. Emphasis is placed

on correct execution of form. Aerial performers aim to create a line with their bodies, similar to the line that dancers create. “How tall do I look?” is frequently called from Silks performers dangling 50 feet in the air. Flipping acts require straight backs with arms up and hips in. Everyone strives for pointed toes, and to “make it look easy.”

A crucial part of Gamma Phi’s performance standards include the demonstration of nerve and boldness that will captivate the audience. Extreme heights, inverted performers, and high speed tricks are executed. One performer of the German Wheel, a large metal wheel inside which members spin and do tricks, mentioned that the straps at the base of the wheel are used in practice, but rarely in shows. When asked why the straps aren’t used, he shot a look and said, “Because It doesn’t look as deadly if you use the straps!”

Along with these standards of performance, costumes play a major role in the visual message that performers send to the audience. The Costume Committee is student-run, and usually self-selected by those with some experience in sewing, although, here too, students teach each other. Made of, “whatever we can bedazzle,” according to Jenny, the co-head of the Costume Committee, costumes span a spectrum of bright colors in materials tight enough to allow easy movement.

Act captains conceptualize a basic idea for costumes which they talk over with the Costume Committee. “If an act hasn’t had new costumes in a few years then we might buy their outfits. But if they just had new ones, we would most likely make them outfits or repurpose something



**Figure 7: Marcus (seated in blue shirt) told the Tumbling performers to work on smoother transitions and form to tighten their act before the show. To the left and right of the tumbler, spotters stand by, ready to catch her should she need him.**



**Figure 8: Jenny, co-head of the Costume Committee poses with a leotard she helped make, in the costume closet. Prices of costumes vary based on whether they are made or purchased. Six purchased costumes cost \$100-\$200 while six committee-made costumes cost about \$50.**

from another year,” says Jenny. Performers agree that it is when costumes and makeup are added to their routines during Show Week that according to Mikki, “It feels real, like we’re ready to perform.”

### **Analysis**

The information I collected in my work with Gamma Phi emphasized the professionalism, skills, and dedication of its performers and in that way that totally refutes my initial assumptions of amateur performances. The members of Gamma Phi are extremely passionate about circus. Rather than just another commitment to work into a busy schedule, Gamma Phi represents a focal point of daily life and other requirements are often scheduled around it. As a result of this dedication, high skill levels and impressive performance techniques are observable. With an enrollment of around 70 members, there is no single Gamma Phi identity that is representative of the group as a whole. However, a shared

system of ethics privileging circus ideals of creativity, strength and trust prevails throughout much of the group. The students I with whom I collaborated on this project represented this system of ethics and seemed typical of the group.

The literature I read pursued the themes of circus performance from angles of folklore and historical appeal, family, belonging, and performance identity as well as injury prevention. While Gamma Phi is part of the performance tradition of circus, and mitigates these themes in similar ways, it combines with the culture of college students rather than familial groups who live and travel as a unit. Furthermore, while circuses of the literature represent the employment and livelihood of their members, participation in Gamma Phi is optional, and so, dedication to and passion for it are necessary to create a successful performance. While the circuses in these readings teach new performers as they are raised within the circus society, Gamma Phi begins training members when they are young adults with widely varying backgrounds and abilities, united by their circus identity, the mindset necessary to enjoy circus, and the thrill of performance. As one of two college circuses in the country, Gamma Phi demonstrates an almost completely unique blending of the cultures of circus and college students. The system of ethics that emerges from these ideals and supports Gamma Phi are continued through a system of

collaborative student teaching and learning in an atmosphere that demands active use of the information learned.

## **Conclusions**

In my collaborative research with the members of Gamma Phi, I discovered that the group uses structured student teaching and learning dynamics to foster the trust necessary to overcome the inherent physicality and danger of circus performing and achieve the ultimate goal of a stellar and visually exhilarating performance. For Gamma Phi, circus is a collectively learned endeavor in which members work as a team to teach each other and strive to meet performance aesthetic goals. Each stunt and performance is both learned and created through student collaboration. However, this atmosphere of students teaching students is structured by a hierarchy set in place by Marcus, the director, who represents final authority and has final managerial control of the show. He delegates this authority through a system of volunteers and student leaders.

The objective of training, practice and show-development is the performance of a show that exemplifies the codified aesthetic ideals of circuses. Gamma Phi's execution of these ideals requires and demonstrates extremely high levels of commitment, dedication, and passion that I did not expect to see prior to this research. This visually-demonstrated dedication to both circus performance values and the group dynamic that members collectively form is a vital part of the ethics system that links Gamma Phi performers as a culture.

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