

# **Report of circus project at “Centre Empire des Enfants” in Dakar, Senegal May 2009**

## **Introduction**

First of all I would like to start with a draft of my personal diary from the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009. By that day we had already worked 6 days with intensive circus training and development of the new material for the show to become.

*“This time round our stay in Senegal is on a different level all together. It feels more like we are part of their team instead of us trying to make a team ☺.*

*It is absolutely wonderful how “Centre Empire des Enfants” has developed over the last four years, and to see the big, great work Modou Touray has invested together with his companions! The circus training is now part of their lives here at the children centre in Dakar, they have a clear arrangement of who trains when, and all of the kids have developed their skills a lot. They even have daily visitors from the neighbourhood, the children and youngsters from Dakar come to C.E des E to train.*

*Next to the circus training they also have other daily activities like Tae Kwando, Karate and different hand crafts. I was participating in the tae Kwando evening class and had a superb physical training....*

*We are working on two little parts for their production/show they are working on this year; one part will be with the little more advanced people including Modou Touray, and the other will be with the whole circus gang.”*

I hope, by reading this little piece of my diary, you’ve understood that I have been so positively surprised of how much the children and the whole organisation at the centre have developed. I was very happy to see Modou Touray’s input into getting everyone to work and train together on the things he had learned over the four years training with us. I could also see that he was directly applying the things and experiences he had picked up during his visit in Sweden, he had much clearer teaching tactics and a bigger sense of discipline in the class/group; which are vital skills as a circus trainer/teacher. Basically he had grown up to a young man who can take responsibility!

I feel very privileged and proud to have the position of being the coach/teacher of Modou and of course as well all the children at “Empire des Enfants” over the last four years, I feel like we have gotten a very strong bond, very much so during my last visit. It was also great to see that the organisation at Empire let Modou take the responsibility and the space to build up something bigger with the children and youngsters from the centre and from the neighbourhood.

## **Production time “Le M.E.C”, May 2009**

I will now lead you through the two weeks process of our production period, 28<sup>th</sup> April-9<sup>th</sup> May.

The production was divided in two different parts, “La Formation” and “Repetition/Entrainment”.

The “La Formation” part was led by Ida Burén-Sene, Djef Djel, in the lessons we discussed how to build up a show and how to collect our ideas, discuss them and keep them documented in our note books to then use those notes in the practical work later on. We also started to discuss how to get a company started, how to get a name, to get known with that name by performing and spreading the word to finally perform on the street or on different events professionally. Before I arrived they already had chosen a name they want to work under so

the production and training work we did in those two weeks in May were towards the first big show under the name “Le M.E.C” (Le Modou Empire Circus).

The “Repetition/Entrainment” part was led by me, Anja Duchko-Zuber, Fan-atticks, where we worked hard on developing all the participants’ different skills on which ever level they were and where we started devising acts and scenes for the show “Le M.E.C”. I want to mention here that I had very good support in the leading of the circus training classes from Modou Touray and Alassane Mbaou? (Alassane is one of the adults at the centre helping out with the organising of the circus training).

### **Day 1, 28<sup>th</sup> April:**

It was wonderful to enter “Empire de Enfants” and see all the children again! Modou was ready to work and so excited, I could feel it when I hugged him hello 😊

He introduced me to his new helpers/companions Alassane and Domou, it felt good to have a couple of people which could help me out, keeping the circus training in order. There were also quite a lot of new children which I haven’t met before, they were all quite small and I was told on the first day that most of them are not part of the circus group yet and that they will not participate this year; in a way I thought it was a shame that not all can take part, but then later on I felt it was a good system they had developed, to first let them watch a bit how things work, to discipline them in other activities first, and then let them take part if they were interested later on.

The circus troupe had arranged for a welcome performance for Ida and me; we were sat down on two chairs at the front of the Empire stage and Modou was running around fixing the sound system looking for a electricity source that worked...It works! Modou presses play and the music, which he received when he was performing with Ung Cirkör in December, blasted out of the speaker...I was so touched and impressed, the show had begun!

Domou and a bunch of smaller children entered the stage carrying a heavy suit case...they lead us through a 30 minute performance filled with acrobatics juggling unicycle, a little bit of story telling and lots of gags, the end was a pyramid including everyone...it was wonderful to see! This was the first “brick” we could use to build a new show. I was very happy!

Following that happy welcoming, the “leaders” of the circus project, Ida, Modou, Alassane and me had our first “Formation” meeting, we talked about a structure for the two weeks and planned a little bit how to fit the circus workshops into the days so it fits next to the other activities which are happening at the centre, we also made two groups of all the children and youngsters which wanted to be part of the circus project, the “noyaux” group which was a group of 6 boys/young men selected by Alassane and Modou., and the “circus troupe” group which was everyone else.

It felt very good to have such clear frames from the beginning to work from, it felt more productive because we all worked towards the same aim.

### **Days 2, 3, 4 and 5, 29<sup>th</sup> April - 2<sup>nd</sup> May.**

I arrived every morning short before 10am, I got the key to Modou’s private room, which he happily shared with me when I was at the centre, and got changed into my training cloth.

(Modou only had his own room since about 1 year and he was very happy to show me it and to let me into his private space when I wanted to relax between the lessons).

**The first circus training lesson** was every day from 10am to 1pm, every morning I worked with the “noyaux” group, these 6 kids all were on a different level with their circus skills but what made them all be chosen for the advanced group were mainly their attitude and potential; I very fast could see they all had great potential and will to learn. It was a wonderful focus in those morning classes the class was rather small and therefore we had lots of time to go through all the different skills carefully.

The first three training days we worked all together in one group on handstands, acrobatics, trapeze, juggling, unicycle and rope; they also learn from me how to support each other physically/practically as well as mentally which is very important in a group which works so often by themselves!

On the last training day of that week I gave them the possibility to start focusing more on the specific skill they were interested in, I worked one to one with each artist/student to start finding material for their individual acts which were to be woven into the show the following week. They all worked very hard and took the training very seriously, you could feel that they felt they will not have enough time and that they got a little stressed when I started talking about the show.

I also felt that we don't have much time, but out of experience I managed to tell them that we can achieve very much in one more week of training and that if we turn up in time and support each other we will manage to be ready for the presentation; those "lectures", when I sat them down and talked to them, were very important and I think very helpful for Modou's job as a teacher/choach which continued after I left!

**The second session of the day** was from 4pm-7pm.

On the second day we had "La Formation" with Ida from 4pm-7pm, we had a really nice introduction in how we can collect all our ideas and inspirations for the show "Le M.E.C" by playing a game, we discussed them with each other and noted them down on big papers which we then hang on the wall in the class room at the centre; we could go back to them here and there during the weeks to see what we had in our minds when we had the big "brainstorm session". It was very inspiring to see how Modou enjoyed this sort of "brainstorm" and how he almost could not stop producing more and more ideas!

On the third, fourth and fifth day from 4pm -7pm Modou and me with the help of Alassane and Domou were training with the whole circus troupe. The lessons with the whole group normally started with playing a game, I thought them concentration games like "mothers foot steps" or sending around a clap in a circle and reaction games like "Who is it?" or "The Princess and the Monster". We further developed each their skills in juggling, acrobatics, trapeze and pyramid building and we also worked a little further on the group acts they already had created with the plan to also weave those into the presentation the week after. The work with the troupe is always a little less unfocused than when you work in a small group of kids, and of course you can notice that they develop slower and that it is a lot of playing and running around, also not always the same people turn up which can make the training program a little frustrating at times.

Modou is struggling with this since he wants everyone to be as serious about the circus training as him...I understand him but I also talked to him that it is only natural for children to behave like that and we agreed that the important thing is to find a good balance between playing and working.

### **Day 6, 3<sup>rd</sup> May:**

As part of "La Formation" we also had a very good and interesting meeting with the owner of the zoological/botanical garden...yes you might think how come this is interesting to a new to be born circus group in Senegal? (with this group I mean Modou Touray's circus group called" MEC "as in" Modou Empire Circus"). Well this man might be open and interested to find a permanent area in his big piece of land where we can build up a circus "Chapiteau", a place where eventually we/they could run a circus training space and maybe even a circus school...no decisions have been made and we have to take it slowly but it was a positive and super inspiring meeting! In the end of the meeting I offered him that Modou and me could do a little event in his park the following weekend, he agreed!

**After one day off comes....**

**The second week**, we focused more and more on the show. We had a very good process creating the show, and I felt privileged that my first directing 'job' was together with this wonderful, energy full and talented group of young people in Senegal. They had so many ideas and so many things they wanted to try, so I got inspired and tried to link everything they already worked on and the material we developed in the last two weeks together into a one-hour 'spéctacle'.

#### **Day 8, 5<sup>th</sup> May:**

We met at 10am with the “noyaux” group, we started to make decisions about what should go in the presentation and what not, and we rehearsed hard on our individual numbers. One method I found worked very well, was to work towards the aim to show the work in progress of the numbers to each other in the end of the session, also that I documented the work on our video camera here and there was an extra motivation for us to push ourselves to get ready for the presentation in such a short time.

After lunch the circus troupe met at 4pm, we worked on the trapeze and group acrobatics numbers and also we started to repeat their little show which we had developed further in the first week.

It was hot and hard to focus and also many people failed to turn up. Modou and I were disappointed and because of all those matters it was a difficult atmosphere.

We had a good talk where I told them directly that we have a hard task and therefore we needed to concentrate more and work harder; they were listening to me, Alassane and Modou and we promised to each other to give all we have to make the show a good experience.

#### **Day 9, 6<sup>th</sup> May:**

In the morning we worked in the “noyaux” group and Modou and me chose music for all the numbers in the show; we deliberately left spaces in the show where we planned to work with a live percussionist. After lunch as part of “La Formation” we went to visit a dance group “Korakunda”; we were invited to a rehearsal, it was about 1 Hour away from Dakar by car. We watched their rehearsal, a powerful couple of hours of African dance, theatre and percussion.

To meet them was a good connection for Modou and Empire des Enfants to build on in the future, to maybe play in their space or even host a performance by them in the centre.

#### **Day 10, 7<sup>th</sup> May:**

We had the last day of rehearsal before the “repetition general”. We worked with the “noyaux” group in the morning and with the circus troupe in the afternoon.

Everyone turned up and the energy was higher again...it felt like the talk the day before was a good thing to have. The aim was to run through everyone's numbers and pieces with music, it felt good and we were ready for the dress rehearsal the next day.

#### **Day 11, 8<sup>th</sup> May:**

In the morning the “noyaux” group met for a couple of hours to finish of the last adjustments and to get the material and equipment ready for the dress rehearsal. At 12 o'clock Modou and I had to go to Par Hanne, the zoo, to check out the rigging of the rope and the set up of the acrobatics equipment, in order to do the event performance there the following day. We were picked up by one of their drivers and helped by the care takers and gardeners of the zoo to rig up the rope 12 meters up on a Baobab tree branch; even though it all took a bit long in the blazing heat it went really well and we were ready to do our gig the next day.

At 5pm we all met again at Empire to do “La repetition generale”. Everybody came and we were ready to run the show at 6pm with the percussionist. It went ok, people gave all their energy and we all saw that it will be possible to do the presentation the next day. The

transitions still took too long and the numbers were not all totally ready but we knew also that it is a work in progress presentation and that we just will do our best.

**The last day, day 12, 9<sup>th</sup> May:**

Modou and I met at 8:30am to go and get rigged up at the park before all the zoo visitors arrived at 10am. At 11am the show begun, Modou Touray did his unicycle-and juggling act and impressed the crowd with his floor acrobatics down the walkways between the Camels and Chimpanzees and I did a rope act hanging from a beautiful, so kind and enormous Baobab tree...it was a success!). We were watched by hundreds of school children, they were so exited and surprised because they never saw something like this before and it felt like these kind of events definitely should be developed and arranged further.

After the show we went to “Empire des Enfants”, to get ready for the first presentation of “Le M.E.C”.

The show started at 7pm and finished at 8pm. The show went well and fluid, it was better than I ever seen The “Empire” showing anything before! It was more professional!

**Final words**

To work with Modou as a companion and not “only” a student was a wonderful experience and I was so impressed how he had learned how to handle “His” circus troupe!

To be there together with Ida, and to work towards production and idea development at the same time I was training the kids, was very good and I felt I had much more support than when I was there with “only” one other teacher; it was a big difference because I felt I could focus much more on the artistic and physical development of the children/youngsters and I could face the challenge properly this time, to choreograph and direct the show which we presented on the last day of the project weeks. Ida took care of the organisational and production part around the project, which saved me a lot of energy and nerves!

I think I managed quite well and I was so happy and proud with the show they performed. We produced a foundation for the future on which they can build, in which they can further develop their talents and skills!

After this trip I am jet again richer with experience and I feel that I learned a lot in my profession as a circus artist and teacher/coach and director, but also in life.

I want to thank Svenska Institutet for supporting us in this work.

Anja Duchko-Zuber, August 2009.