

## CONTORT TO FIT, CONTORT TO RESIST, WE ALL DO THAT

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By Alice Rende

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**F**ora means “outside” in many languages: Portuguese, Catalan, Occitan, Venetian, to name a few. *Fora* is also a contortion solo exploring themes of misfit, the longing for freedom, and the quest for acceptance. In this creation, struggling to fit in a small box is a metaphor for the lack of space in society. In *Fora*, I play with claustrophobia (fear of close spaces) and agoraphobia (fear of wide open spaces) and to do so, I engage two practices linked to the techniques of flexibility and illusionism: enterology - the boxing of individuals who makes themselves very small - and escapology - escaping from the moorings or traps. It is an indoor show that premiered in Aix-en-Provence (France), during the festival Entre-deux BIAc in February 2024.

This creation began with these questions: “How can we escape society’s constraints?” “Does fitting in bring happiness or submission—or both?” We are often pushed to conform to a success model that maintains the status quo, sometimes seeking success, other times simply desiring safety, acceptance, and love.

Can the contemporary circus become a tool for liberation, or does it perpetuate the pursuit of excellence and self-overcoming? These questions led me to a crisis in my circus practice, as acrobatic movements embody power, ability, and self-overcoming. Using such a powerful technique to address a fragile theme felt superficial. I needed to find the way—and the courage—

After studying performing arts at the National Circus School of Brazil of Rio de Janeiro, she helped create *Silenzio*, directed by Roberto Magro at Mercat de les Flors (Barcelona, Spain) in 2018. She then attended Esacto'Lido (Toulouse, France) and created her first solo, *Passages*, which toured across Europe. In 2020, she

collaborated with Julia Christ on *Le Moindre Geste*. She began working on her second solo, *Fora*, which became a circusnext laureate project in 2023. In 2022, she founded Compagnie Ar in Aix-en-Provence (France), to develop her projects.

to completely rethink my approach to circus arts.

### Contortion as a gesture

For me, the solution was to create a device that forces me to use contortion as a survival strategy rather than a display of prowess. I built a plexiglass box, 0.6 metres wide and 3.5 metres high. This structure frightened me, allowing me to abandon the euphoria and sense of power I previously felt in acrobatics. It wasn't easy, but it felt dramaturgically necessary. After three years and a broken arm, I began to feel it was the right choice.

This apparatus allowed me to approach contortion as a gesture, a strategy, and a necessity rather than merely a demonstration of extreme physical abilities. Thinking of contortion this way also allowed me to finally call myself a contortionist without hesitation. Previously, I didn't feel legitimate because I couldn't touch my head to my back anymore. However, exploring the full range of my joints is still contortion, regardless of how far one can go. I managed to shift my practice, moving beyond the traditional models and standards I was taught, and found my own path.

The evolution of my own style paralleled the development of the creation. In *Fora*, the driving force of the movements is the desire to escape and seek something different. Contortion in this show is ambivalent. Sometimes it appears as a result of inevitable oppression,

a passive reaction of the body collapsing under the lack of space. At other times, it becomes a reaction to imprisonment, a decision, an active statement, and an act of rebellion.

### Contortion as a rebellion

After seeing historical images of so-called hysterical patients, it became unavoidable to imbue my contortionist vocabulary with political meaning. In their contorted movements, I saw a desperate strategy against the power that tries to inscribe itself onto their bodies. They taught me to see contortion as a gesture, a scream, a rebellion.

I was deeply moved by an essay called *Invention of hysteria : Charcot and the photographic iconography of the Salpêtrière*<sup>1</sup> by the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman. He proposes that hysteria is not a disease but the result of exclusion and domination, used to separate, classify, and imprison women who did not fit the societal norms of that time. These women shared no common characteristic beyond their misfitting.

I like to observe how our values and needs inscribe themselves in our bodies and postures. Those who haven't managed to fit in—do they still care? Do they still try? Are they victims or heroes? Are they trapped outside, or do they possess more freedom than the others? Perhaps we have something to learn from them. In *Fora*, the twists and fragile positions of contortion become a strategy for resistance, relying on flexibility rather than strength. This mirrors the Brazilian colloquial expression “jogo de cintura,” which describes handling a difficult situation by “dancing with it” rather than using force, finding a sneaky solution. In *Fora*, this concept is literal: flexibility allows escape from the cage. The only aperture is at the top, requiring a climb up slippery walls, twisting the body to reach it. This makes *Fora* a highly physical performance. It is non-verbal, communicating through the universal language of screams, cries, and laughter.

### In the intimacy of the artistic process

During the creation process for FRESH 2023, I faced a critical choice: should I suspend the entire structure, or leave it fixed to the floor? This decision would significantly affect both the movements I could perform inside and the audience's interpretation. I chose to share my creative process from an intimate perspective rather than presenting a polished segment of the show. To illustrate this, I installed one box on the floor



*Fora*, Cie AR, Alice Rende ©Francis Aviet

and suspended another, inviting the audience into my 'atelier'. I explained that, ultimately, only one box would be on stage and that the scene wouldn't be circular as in the circus big top of Espace Périphérique<sup>2</sup>.

This choice felt more representative of my process and more enriching for the project's development. However, it also made me feel vulnerable, as it is safer to share a finished part of the show, which is more likely to be well-received. This made my participation in FRESH 2023 particularly significant. Many professionals witnessed an intimate moment of my creation, creating a pleasant atmosphere because the audience was aware of the challenges. Some professionals were accustomed to following artists during their processes, contributing to a supportive environment.

This experience helped me better understand the different interpretations depending on whether the apparatus was suspended or not. In the air, movements appeared liberating, as if evading everyday life and finding a secret place to hide and float. On the floor, however, the image was much darker, resembling a trap or a prison from which escape is necessary. These contrasting interpretations were crucial for me to recognise and informed the continuation of my work.

### Cultural context or personal taste?

As I immersed myself in creating my piece, I felt frustrated by not being able to participate more in seminar discussions. Most exchanges I had were centred around

1 Didi-Huberman, G. *Invention de l'hystérie : Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, Genève : Macula, 2012,

2 Espace Périphérique (Paris, France) is a space dedicated to contemporary circus, puppetry and outdoor arts.

my performance. It seemed that the feedback I received was influenced by personal preferences and the diverse contemporary circus contexts of each country.

The most contentious issue was the unpredictable ending I had chosen, which I tested for the first time and ultimately kept. I aimed for an ambiguous conclusion to provoke interpretations and post-show discussions among departing audience members. Some found this unsettling, especially those who believe circus shows should not evoke tragedy or darkness. I disagree — I believe contemporary circus can also evoke deep emotions and introspection.

Confronting different viewpoints, such as the desire for a more comforting ending, helped me find the courage to stand by my artistic choice. Receiving diverse feedback clarified my decisions, whether affirming or challenging them. Sharing a work in progress at FRESH 2023 was enriching, enabling me to develop my creation and expand my perspective on the varied possibilities, expectations, and projections within circus arts. This experience underscored the power of gathering around a shared passion, and I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to be part of it.



*Fora, Cie AR, Alice Rende ©Christophe Raynaud de Lage*