

Giffords Circus

Dazzling acrobat displays, glittering sequins, majestic horses, calamitous clowns – it's difficult to describe Giffords Circus in one sentence, such is the show's amalgamation of theatrical and circus artistry and more than a light dusting of magic. One thing I am certain of, opening on Friday 4th May at Fennells Farm in Stroud, this year's show is set to be as enthralling, joyful and jaw-dropping as ever.

By Lorna Davies

Photography by Emilie Sandy



"We don't fit into any group. We're a weirdo amongst theatre people, we're a weirdo amongst circus people, we don't really fit in anywhere and I guess that is what works for us. Someone said to me recently, circus is the magic word, and it definitely is," Giffords founder Nell Gifford tells me as she sits in Josephs on Union Street, her blonde hair covered in dye.

It is early April when we meet at the hair salon, and Nell is in the midst of rehearsals for the inimitable, beautiful, bohemian celebration that is Giffords Circus. "I'm sorry, I'm so tired," she apologises throughout our chat, rubbing her head as she spins back and forth on the leather chair. I'm not surprised.

A riot of live music, horses, chickens, comedy, acrobatics and theatre, Giffords is a 1930s-style touring village-green circus, launched 18 years ago by Nell and her then-husband Toti. This year, Nell is leading a show including new additions of third generation Italian circus performers, The Curatola Brothers, with their hand-to-hand acrobatic act; Diana Vedashkina and her troupe of dachshunds; Lisandra Austin and her aerial silk act; and the Portuguese Dias

Family, a family of eight creating gymnastic and balancing acts. Alongside these new acts, many fan favourites will be returning to the tent including Nell herself with her stunning equestrienne act; Tweedy the Clown; Nancy Trotter Landry who originally joined the circus at the age of 19; Dany Reyes, with his juggling routines; expert horseman Dany Cesar; and Alfredo and the highly acclaimed Pozo the Strongman.

2018 marks 250 years since the circus was invented in London by Philip Astley, an 18th-century trick rider (although, as Nell points out, it's difficult to pin point a date, as circus itself is an alchemy of many art forms). To mark the milestone, Giffords new show, My Beautiful Circus, celebrates circus itself. "It's about seeing it through a child's eye and thinking about what makes it really special and beautiful," Nell explains.

Growing up in a creative household "full of books" in North Oxford (one of Nell's four siblings is famed pottery designer Emma Bridgewater) – "I was brought up with an arts background. My mum was really into home making, kind of homemade fun, and that is what is in the circus," she says – Nell's

first circus memory is of the Moscow State Circus when she was a young teen. "I fell in love with all the colour and the movement and the music."

She studied English at Oxford University, before travelling the world working for several circuses, including as a popcorn vendor at the Chinese State Circus and acting as ring-mistress for Santus Circus in France. It was this international experience that made Nell view British circus in a new light. "It is interesting because it is an English invention in a sense, but we ended up as a country not putting any value on circuses. People say, 'oh they're commercial' and everything, but I really think it's great that there is a travelling form of theatre that exists without having to be organised by a committee and have funding from the government. It's a folk art, and should really be celebrated. I think they have been judged really harshly and driven to the very fringes. I have always wanted to celebrate the circus."

The shows are themed each year, the inspiration for which can come from everywhere and anywhere, Nell says. From War and Peace to Treasure Island, references and influences have been broad and

far-reaching, but topical? That's something she is keen to keep away from. "I hate anything in the show that references anything contemporary, Brexit or anything. It's just like get in that tent and just forget about the year, everything, total escapism"

Giffords Circus began in 2000, with a small show at Hay-on-Wye Literature Festival. "I had been working in the circus for quite a few years and I wrote a book about it [Josser: The Secret Life of a Circus Girl]. They asked me to talk about the book, so I brought a circus along, and the rest is history," she remembers.

Toti, who runs a landscaping business, found the wagon in a hedge in Cheltenham, did it up, and that was the first of the now famous maroon and gold velvet-lined circus wagons that tour around the country each summer, from May until September. There were around 20 performers in the first show.

"My brother in law came along and he had a motorbike and rode that round the ring. My other brother in law Joe is an Irish folk musician, really good guitar and vocalist, he came along, so we've always had horses and live music." The circus

now has a cult following, and has since entertained more than 650,000 people.

Her advice to her younger self would be to "be more organised." – "I had to learn a lot of business skills along the way, which has been a steep learning curve. People don't really realise that." If you follow Giffords on Instagram (you should, its excellent wanderlust), you'll see that along with the beauty, fun and glamour, there's an awful lot of hard work involved. "Yeah, I mean it is," Nell agrees. "It's a lot of people and a lot of concentration. I think people enjoy seeing the process, it's fun to see something being made. This area seems to really celebrate that actually."

All the animals are trained by the team, sets are painted in the barns on the farm, the costumes are handmade and are so real looking that they once had complaints about using a "small bear" in the show. It was in fact, just a very good costume.

Since 2012, the show has been directed by comedy director Cal McCrystal, whose credits include Paddington and One Man Two Guvnors.

Horses are central to the show, with everything from the overall theme to the colour scheme designed with the four-legged friends in mind. It is truly astounding what these majestic animals can do in what is a relatively small space. "It can take 10 years to train a horse to that level," Nell explains. There's Full House and High Card, shire horses, Max and Percy, and not forgetting the dogs and chickens.

The circus moved from Bourton-on-the-Water to Fennells Farm in Stroud, in 2014. "It's just so nice and friendly round here," Nell smiles. "I grew up not far from here, so it definitely feels like home." Nell spends "a lot of time on Swifts Hill walking down to the Woolpack" and rates The Marshall Rooms. "I just think there's so much optimism in Stroud, people are determined to go at life in a really positive way, it's a really good-humoured place," she adds.

The tour ends in September, and I ask if Nell has time for a holiday. "Hopefully I'll have a break if I can afford it. I haven't had a holiday to be fair since 2014. I have had cancer twice, I've been having treatment on and off for three years, so you can't really travel."

Nell has been open about her treatment for breast cancer, updating Giffords fans on her blog. It is refreshing, I say, hearing someone talk openly about it. "Thank you. You'd be surprised, a few people have said, 'oh stop talking about



your cancer" I just think the more we talk about it, the better. It's different for everybody of course, but it is not always the end of the world, cancer, it isn't."

On top of all the above, Nell also has eight-year-old twins Cecil and Red. "They enjoy the circus, they get involved in practise and everything. My daughter is good at organising," she says. Would she encourage them to follow in her theatrical footsteps? "It often happens that when you've got the audience," Nell explains. "On the last night everything runs like clockwork, but the first night has this energy and innocence I think. It takes until the halfway point then you know the show you've got."

She says she can't pick a favourite location – "I love them all" – but does name Minchinhampton Common and "The London shows" as particular highlights. Her teaser for this year is that it will "be beautiful. There's red velvet, there's a new band in black tie, it is going to be really lovely."

Stratton Meadows in Cirencester, before returning to Fennells Farm. "The first few shows are previews in a way because it's a local audience. By the end of the first weekend you'll have done the show nine times in three days, we do a lot of fine tuning then. In fact, it all happens then. You rehearse and rehearse, then it all kind of locks together when you've got the audience," Nell explains. "On the last night everything runs like clockwork, but the first night has this energy and innocence I think. It takes until the halfway point then you know the show you've got."

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I can't wait.

My Beautiful Circus launches in Stroud at Fennells Farm from the 4th to the 14th May. You can also catch

them at Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe (17th – 21st May), Daylesford Organic Farm, Kington (24th May – 4th June), Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire (7th – 11th June), Oxford University Parks, Oxford (14th – 25th June), Chiswick House & Gardens, London (28th June – 9th July), Windsor Great Park (12th – 16th July), Stonor Park, Henley-on-Thames (19th – 23rd July), Barrington, Burford (26th July – 6th Aug), Frampton on Severn, Village Green (9th – 13th Aug), Minchinhampton Common (16th – 28th Aug), Marlborough Common (31st Aug – 10th Sept) and Stratton Meadows, Cirencester (13th – 24th Sept). The tour returns to Fennell Farm for the last shows from 27th – 30th Sept.

For further info and to purchase tickets across the tour visit giffordscircus.com

Lorna Davies is a journalist who lives in Stroud. She also paints and sells her work in Made in Stroud and on Etsy (search 'PaintingsbyLornaD'). Follow her on Twitter and Instagram: @lornadavies