

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Circus and the European Year on Creativity and Innovation

7th Annual Circus Symposium. "Circus: Culture for the Millions"

Monaco, 16 January 2009

Speech

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank Mr Pilz for his kind invitation to participate in your symposium. I accepted it with glee both for personal and professional reasons.

The professional reason should be clear enough. The joint presence of Ms Pack and myself testifies that the European institutions recognise, respect and care for your form of art and entertainment.

As to the personal reason, maybe you've already guessed it. I am very happy to be with you today because I simply love circus—in all its varieties. And I am using this phrase—'in all its varieties'—quite deliberately.

I totally agree with the speakers that have come before me; the circus community has shown an amazing capacity to imagine, create and innovate—as our motto for 2009 goes.

In the past few decades, you have managed to bring totally new concepts to the traditional and always astonishing mix of acrobats, clowns and animals performing in a ring.

While classical circus has never lost its magic, contemporary circus—or *Cirque nouveau*, as is sometimes called—has expanded its expressive means.

A great deal of new material has been added to what we could once find under a big top. Today, we can expect to find theatre and dance. In some cases, the show would have a narrative line. These artists actually tell us a story; and to me this is an amazing development.

So, a lot has changed since Mr Astley's arena in London and I congratulate you for that. The world-wide circus community has earned the right to stand before us as a paragon of creativity and innovation.

For this reason, I welcome Mr Pilz's idea to link European Circus Day to the European Year on Creativity and Innovation next April.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There is no doubt in my mind that circus is part of Europe's—and the world's—cultural heritage. But as I say this, let me tell you that I am perfectly aware that there are different views on this issue.

As a 2005 European Parliament report pointed out—a report for which Ms Pack was rapporteur—some EU countries regard circus as a cultural activity, while others regard it as business.

I have the utmost respect for this legal diversity, which is another example of the many histories and traditions that we are patiently weaving together as we build our united Europe.

But from a purely intellectual point of view, I am convinced that, if we talk about business, then the circus community is in the business of making people dream. In this respect, you are not unlike other artists and performers, such as dancers, singers and painters.

I feel that I can make this statement with confidence, because very many artists and intellectuals have seen the elusive poetry of your trade.

There are countless examples of artists that have explored the poetics of the circus; and the generation of painters born in the Eighteen 80s and 90s is among my favourite.

I am thinking of the circus paintings of Fernand Léger and Norman Rockwell, on both sides of the Atlantic; I am also thinking of the dramatic works by Otto Dix.

And—of course— I am thinking of the long fascination with circus of Pablo Picasso, which started in his rose period at the turn of the 20th century and stayed with him for the rest of his life. A recent exhibition included more than 300 paintings, drawings, and other works by Picasso that were related to circus.

Why am I telling you all this? Because it is part of my job as European commissioner for education and culture to recognise, celebrate and support *all* forms of cultural and artistic expression.

Not everyone knows what the EU does to promote culture in Europe. Yet, our Culture programme has a budget of 400 million Euros for the period 2007–2013.

We use these funds to support hundreds of cultural operators and thousands of individuals as they take part in trans–national projects.

Among other things, these projects promote the mobility of artists and their works, increase access to our common cultural heritage, and support cultural education. Our projects cover all cultural and artistic forms, including circus. Let me give you a couple of examples.

In 2007, we funded Circostrada, a network for the promotion of street and circus arts across Europe. The Circostrada Network maintains a website with useful tools and information, promotes research and organises trade meetings.

Another project we supported was the Cirque Nouveau project. Among other things, the project organised a summer school for young people in disciplines such as trapeze acts, fire–eating, dance and music.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I started my speech commending the ability of the circus community to re–invent itself and expand its forms of expression. I described you as a splendid case of innovation. As you all know, 2009 has been declared the European Year of Creativity and Innovation, and I would like to spend a few minutes on this topic.

The original idea behind this European Year was to encourage the development of music and the arts in education, especially in our schools.

As often happens in these cases, when we began to discuss our project with a broader audience, it inspired fresh ideas. Many people suggested we should expand its scope to include every aspect of creativity—even beyond artistic expression.

Following this trend, we realised we should include innovation as well. In this way, our initiative could go beyond the personal and social fulfilment, which is normally associated with the arts, to embrace the economic domains.

And it was just as well. When we started planning the Year, no one could foresee the crisis that has hit Europe and the world. The current recession gives a new sense of urgency to our initiative, because the recovery will clearly depend on creative thinking.

When this crisis is over, those who will have invested in innovation will find themselves in better shape than the rest. Europe's economies will need more people who can create and more people who can turn creativity into innovation.

In 2009 we intend to raise public awareness about the role of creativity and innovation in the knowledge society and to stimulate a broad policy debate. Let me tell you about some of the issues we would like to put on the table.

First, there is the link between creativity and education. You will understand that I am deeply concerned about this relation, since I am responsible for education policies at European level:

The main assumption here is that creativity is not an innate gift; at least not exclusively. Everyone is creative in some way or another.

As a consequence, I believe that creativity and innovation *can* be fostered and learned. To do so, our schools and universities need to build an environment where creativity is stimulated, encouraged and rewarded.

Now, this is not going to be a simple task, because creative people often find it difficult to have their views recognised and accepted.

I also hope this European Year will give visibility to the many centres, companies and organisations across Europe that are already imagining our future.

Some of these organisations are large, famous and respected; others are smaller, little known and their work may go unrecognised.

I hope these teams and organisations will use their increased visibility to get to know each other better. That would be a first step towards stronger networks and new forms of cooperation.

In the best tradition of European Years, I finally hope that w2009 will be a catalyst for existing organisations and a source of inspiration for new ones.

I would be happy if over the next twelve months we will have helped Europe's creative sectors get greater recognition, because celebrating creativity is already a means to create a conducive environment.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There are many things we can do together for creativity and innovation in Europe. I am optimistic that we can renew in 2009 the traditional power European Years have to raise awareness on important issues and promote fresh solutions.

I am also optimistic this effort will not be limited to one year. By creating a broad sense of ownership among institutions, companies and civil–society organisation, we will establish a lasting basis for change.

Thank you