

Fringe circus: the art of hair-hanging

The quirky show *Capilotractées* at the Roundhouse's CircusFest brings back an old hair-raising artform – with playful and sometimes painful results



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New and weird sensations ... *Capilotractées* at CircusFest 2014. Photograph: Daniel Michelon

On the scale of physical pain, there are certain things that inflict a disproportionate amount of pain: paper cuts, a prang to the funny bone, hair pulling. But if a tug on tangled tresses is bad enough, now imagine what it would feel like to suspend your whole bodyweight from your ponytail. That's not a torture technique, that's entertainment. The hair hang is an old circus act, currently being revived by two Finnish artists, Sanja Kosonen and Elice Abonce Muhonen, in their show Capilotractées, coming to London as part of the Roundhouse's CircusFest.

Kosonen and Muhonen are part of a wave of contemporary circus artists reviving old circus tricks with knowing modernity (another Finnish act, Agit-Cirk, do their own take on the cannonball-to-the-stomach strongman routine). The hair hang is thought to have originated in China and involves tying up the hair with a metal ring and then dangling from it, preferably performing a few other feats – juggling, acrobatics, whatever you've got in your armoury – while you're up there.

It was originally practised by men and women. One early 20th-century circus poster shows a group of Chinese men swinging serenely with their legs crossed, drinking tea in mid-air. These days, it's rarely performed and when it is, it's usually by women, its secrets often handed down from mother to daughter. One performer, Mrs Sun, matriarch of a Chinese-German circus family, had an act that involved supporting the weight of her husband, son and daughter while hanging from her hair. (Some harried wives and mothers might feel an affinity there.)

Kosonen first saw hair hanging in a traditional circus in Finland when she was seven. "It's my first circus memory," she says. "It stayed in my mind as something amazing and powerful." But years later, trying to find out how to do it herself was another matter. The technicalities of hair hanging are a closely guarded secret, and Kosonen and Muhonen couldn't find anyone who would teach them. They managed to get a few hints online, but ended up having to learn through trial and – generally painful – error.

The first time they tried the act they couldn't do it. "There were so many new and weird sensations that we didn't dare to take all our weight on it," says Muhonen. "After we'd tried, we contacted one person by Facebook who does it and asked him all these questions: Is it normal that it makes these kinds of sounds, these kind of feelings?" Hang on, what kind of sounds? "Kind of like you can hear inside your head," says Muhonen. "A kind of cracking. Sometimes it cracks the neck."



The real secret is in the hairdo ... Capilotractées.

Photograph: Daniel Michelon

It took the women two years to master the act and, says Muhonen, it still hurts, except for when they're performing, when adrenaline takes over. In terms of tensile strength, human hair is as strong as aluminium or Kevlar, the material used to make bulletproof vests; a single strand can hold up to 100g, and the combined hair of a whole head can supposedly support 12 tonnes. But the strain that one scalp can take is another matter.

In terms of physical training, Kosonen and Muhonen mainly had to work to build up

their neck muscles, but the real secret is in the hairdo. Each performer ties and braids it differently, and never reveals their formula. Kosonen and Muhonen will spend two hours before the show getting it right, and there are certain tricks of the trade, like keeping the hair damp to make it more elastic.

Capilotractées is a warm, wry and quirky piece of theatre, playing on a whole range of hair-related imagery and symbolism – beauty, shame, fertility, virility, power – but the big draw is undoubtedly the chance to witness something squirm-inducingly unusual. Kosonen says that of all their acts, this is the one that has really got the audience curious. "They wonder if it's really possible," she says. "I think people feel that everything has already been seen. But most of the audience will never have seen this. It's something new – even though it's really, really old."

There are few things you can't ogle if you've got internet access, so in the age of all-seeing social media, Kosonen and Muhonen try to guard the secrets and surprises of their show. They don't reveal many images in advance because they want their audience to come without expectations. Instead they've been creating new promo pics for each show, by hanging from local landmarks or in well-known locations – from a lamppost in Brussels, a beautiful old building in Valparaiso, or in the middle of a forest. They haven't decided what they'll do in London yet, but if you see two girls swinging by their top-knots from Tower Bridge, you'll know who they are.

• *Capilotractées* is at *CircusFest*, at the Roundhouse, Camden, London 1-6 April

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