

A High-Wire Act: Bringing Circus and More to New York's Public Spaces

The Down to Earth festival answers a pandemic-era call for changes in the performing arts, offering free events in city parks and urban spaces.



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By **Brian Seibert**

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The story of Modou Fata Touré is one of art as rescue. When he was 7, he was sent to a Koranic school in Gambia run by his family. There, he said, he was abused and saw his brothers restrained with chains after they tried to escape. At 13, he ran away to Dakar in nearby Senegal. Living on the streets and begging for food, he was afraid of both being found by his family and not being found.

Touré took refuge in a home for street children called Empire des Enfants, and when a group from Sweden visited the home, he discovered his vocation. The group was Circus Cirkör, and the art they introduced was circus.

“Circus allowed me to move beyond my fears and open up my creativity,” Touré said in French on a recent video call. On Sept. 3, he will make his United States debut with the troupe he eventually founded, Compagnie SenCirk, as part of Down to Earth, a new festival of multidisciplinary performance in public spaces in New York City (Aug. 29-Sept. 7).



Getting to this point was far from easy for Touré. After Circus Cirkör left Dakar, he constructed a unicycle out of junk and kept practicing. When the troupe returned the next year, he told them he wanted a career in circus. They responded that he needed permission from his family — a seemingly impassable barrier.

One day, while rollerblading, Touré latched onto the back of a car. The driver turned out to be one of his brothers, who recognized him in the rearview mirror before Touré darted off. The brother tracked him to Empire des Enfants and told him their father was dead, which was liberating news. Touré's mother helped him with the arrangements to study circus in Sweden.



Compagnie Basinga performing its show “Soka Tira Osoa” (“Pulling the Rope”), which will be put on at South Street Seaport Museum Plaza. Pierre Planchenault

Twice, he attended courses there. (Once, he had to explain his plans to immigration agents by juggling the rubber stamps on their desk.) Each time, people told him to stay in Sweden. But thinking of everyone who had helped him in Senegal, he was determined to succeed there. In 2010 he founded SenCirk. And now, in 2025, comes a New York festival made for his kind of work.

Down to Earth is the brainchild of two founder directors. One is Elena Siyanko, who recently stepped down as artistic director of PS 21 in the Hudson Valley town of Chatham, having transformed a rural outpost into a home for avant-garde performance. The other is Frank Hentschker, the longtime program director of the Martin E. Segal Theater Center at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

During the coronavirus pandemic, many voices called for changes in the performing arts. For Hentschker and Siyanko, Down to Earth is a response to those calls.

Siyanko said the festival was “an antidote to an increasingly expensive, unsustainable paradigm in the field” — more and more costly buildings, higher and higher ticket prices, diminished offerings. Down to Earth seeks to serve audiences she described as abandoned.

The festival’s events, all free, are spread out across New York City, in parks and urban spaces from Inwood at the top of Manhattan to Rockaway Beach in Queens. SenCirk is performing at LaGuardia Community College in the Long Island City section of Queens, both outside and inside, and at Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem, where the company will also present classes for children.

“In public space work, you’re constantly seeing and sensing the reactions of everybody else,” Siyanko said. “It’s a way of being together, and it meets a pent-up demand for that.”



SenCirk's "Ancrage" ("Anchoring"). Modou Fata Touré, the troupe's leader, said it is "an identity quest," mixing the circus culture he learned in Europe with African culture and material creativity.

SenCirk also aligns with another goal of the festival: connecting to a global movement of performance in public spaces. In Europe, there is a robust network supporting the creation of such work, including the organization In Situ and festivals like Chalon dans la Rue and Fira Tarrega.

“In some countries, the public and the government support the idea of public space as the infrastructure of democracy,” Siyanko said. “We don’t have this in the United States.” A daylong symposium on Sept. 3 is a start in that direction, and includes performances by SenCirk.

SenCirk, like Circus Cirkör, is invested in the idea of “social circus,” the use of circus arts in social justice and the education of at-risk youth. Part of Touré’s mission has been to find vulnerable children, especially those trapped in madrassas that force them to beg, and teach them confidence and creativity.

“Because they have a right to play, to laugh, to dream,” Touré said. “And circus is the tool to give them a sense of well-being and possibility.”

“Ancrage” (“Anchoring”), the two-person work he is bringing to New York, is “an identity quest,” he said, mixing the circus culture he learned in Europe with African culture and material creativity.

“I grew up with handmade toys,” he said, “so I’m very good at making things.” The show’s materials are mostly straw and wood. “My circus art is not about spectacle but is grounded in nature and humanity,” Touré said. “African artists have trained barefoot on sand and can make things with our hands. These are strengths.”

Siyanko said she was attracted to SenCirk because of its social-circus side. That’s also part of what she likes about Compagnie Basinga, a French high-wire company that often performs for audiences on the outskirts of French cities, in rural areas and in Africa. But she also noted the group’s “de-heroization of the high-wire act.”

While Basinga’s high-wire artist, Tatiana-Mosio Bongonga, has made daring walks of great length at great heights, the show “Soka Tira Osoa” (“Pulling the Rope”), which Basinga will perform Sept. 4 at the South Street Seaport Museum Plaza, is

purposely modest. The assembly of the rigging is part of the performance, and audience members join the process.

“When you see someone on the wire, you see one person,” Bongonga said on a video call from France. “But behind this person are many people. It is very important for us to make all the jobs in the company visible.”



Siyanko and Hentschker in Harlem. “In some countries, the public and the government support the idea of public space as the infrastructure of democracy,”

Siyanko said. "We don't have this in the United States." Paola Chapdelaine for The New York Times

The company name means "ropes" in Lingala, the language of Bongonga's Congolese father. Jan Naets, who founded the company with Bongonga and mostly handles the technical side, said that the name alludes not only to wire, but also to vocal cords and guitar strings and the connections made with audiences.

Bongonga doesn't just walk on the wire. "I dance," she said. As live music plays, she bounces through crossover steps, lies on the wire, hangs below it, stands on her head. For her, wire walking is like meditation. "My heart is not beating fast," she said. "It's very quiet, calm. I know no one will come and bother me up there, and I feel free."

She discovered wire-walking at 7, when a female walker performed in Bongonga's town in the north of France. "She had a big smile," Bongonga said. "I felt bad down on the floor and that I needed to be up there on the wire." She started taking classes and eventually attended circus school.

At the beginning of her career, she said, she didn't think about being a role model. But gradually she became more conscious of what her walking meant to others.

"Black girls come up to her after shows," Naets said, "and they say, 'You look like me and you can walk on the wire. Can we do it too?'"

Down to Earth isn't all circus. "Arch," by the British group Kaleider, will get at the impact of humans on the environment by building an arch of concrete and ice in Green-Wood Cemetery, accompanied the Master Voices choir. In "Poetic Consultations," adapted from a series at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, artists have one-on-one conversations with members of the public (in English, Spanish, French, Wolof or Chinese) and then offer them a personalized poem or song in response.

Getting so many international artists through the harder-than-ever visa process was a fingers-crossed affair. "We were lucky," Siyanko said, adding that she was ambivalent about whether to put artists through the ordeal. These concerns were

outweighed, though, by the chance to introduce and encourage a kind of art that gets little support in the United States.

For now, Down to Earth is a gamble for the Segal Center, which is underwriting it with surplus funds gathered in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, when the center's events were all virtual. "I decided to put it all in for this festival," Hentschker said, "because I really think this is what the city needs."

"Down to Earth is the biggest thing we've ever done," he added. "Everybody told me it's not going to work. That if it was possible, it would already exist. That transportation is too complicated and the financial resources unavailable. So the idea is that we have to show them."

If Down to Earth is to happen again, the Segal Center will need partners. Hentschker said he hoped that other organizations would get on board and help it grow.

"New York is a great city, a global city," he said. "Why shouldn't we have something like the Festival D'Automne in Paris or the Edinburgh Festival?"