Resource and Reference Guide
2024-2025
Minty Fresh Circus

Minty Fresh Circus is a journey through time and space, using circus and dance as the forms with which to explore themes of liberation when it exists only through the imagination. In past and future realities, bodies transmit codes of protection, adornment, healing, joy, and spiritual communion. Through Minty Fresh Circus, we (re)discover music as medicine, find murmuration and flocking as survival, and summon oasis spaces through ritual. Minty Fresh takes us beyond struggle and below the surface to the places where Black joy takes practice born from blood and becomes birthed as power. A raucous, playful reimagination of circus and story through movement, visual design, and sound, Minty Fresh evokes and reflects the dignity, resilience, and transcendence of the Black American experience.

About the Show

Conceived by Monique Martin, *Minty Fresh Circus* is a U.S.-based circus show performed by an all-Black cast, with a majority-Black creative team celebrating the healing power of Black music and movement. The show is infused with the joy and resilience of those who traversed the transatlantic slave trade.

Grounded in **Sankofa** (a Ghanaian word encouraging one to learn from the past to inform the future) with an **Afro-futuristic vibe**, *Minty Fresh Circus* features movement, music, and circus arts in a time-bending journey of redemption. With **choreography and movement by Adesola Osakalumi and Traci Bartlow**, the acrobats perform a range of movement sourced from the African Diaspora, including percussive dance, ritual movement, Lindy, hip-hop, poppin' & lockin', jukin', hand games, and physical theater.

The **driving score** is recorded and features a combination of mixes by Corey Action with compositions from Soul Science Lab and the Ajanku Brothers.

Central Theme

Inspired by abolitionist **Harriet Tubman** and the survival of generations of African Americans, *Minty Fresh Circus* poses the question:

> *What does freedom feel and sound like if your only access to it is through your imagination?*

The show explores **liberation spaces, oasis spaces, and joy spaces** where Black and brown bodies have found sovereignty. It celebrates the power of **Black music as a healing, alchemical transformative force**, a ritual, and a portal to joy.

Structured in **eight rituals**, this **all-ages, 60-minute show** tours with **seven circus and dance artists** plus two staff/crew. *Minty Fresh Circus* premiered at the **Annenberg Center** in Philadelphia with 3 performances presented by Penn Live Arts on January 31 & February 1, 2025. It will be presented by The Kennedy Center for 2 performances on May 8, 2025; at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT) on Sat & Sun, June 14 &15, 2025; and as part of the Breckenridge International Festival of the Arts (BIFA, Breckenridge, CO) on Sat, August 23, 2025.

Defined Artistic Structure

Themes

- Liberation
- Imagination
- Ritual
- Sovereignty
- Black Joy

Five Elements

- Healing
- Protection
- Fun
- Adornment
- Spiritual Life

Foundational Movement

- Murmuration
- Dap

Opening Visual Landscape

The Middle Passage is reimagined as a **birth canal for a new identity**—subverted, vertical, cocooned, and transformational.

Central Structure

Five Elements & Eight Ritual Spaces

Working with the **five elements**, the show creates **eight expressions of "oasis spaces"**—celebrations of Black American life, joy, and resilience as rituals.

> **Oasis Space**: A fertile refuge to release and recalibrate from labor.

Healing Methods:

- Weightlessness
- Vibration
- Surrender
- Empowerment
- Singing/Vocalizing

Protective Forms:

- Ritual
- Armour
- Body Percussion as Drum
- Marching/Stepping

Release of Fun:

- Rhythm
- Beatbox
- Heartbeat
- Play

Adornment Applications:

- Masking
- Beauty Salon/Barbershop
- Creative individualism within community identity

Spiritual Life:

- Music/The Black Church
- Nap Ministry
- Breath
- Visioning/Time Traveling

Reference Music:

- *How I Got Over* – Mahalia Jackson
- *Resting on and For the Earth*
- *Minty Fresh Spotify Playlist*

Key Terms and Concepts

Sankofa

Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The phrase means **"it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind."** It emphasizes the importance of using the past to shape the future.

The **Sankofa symbol** has two representations:

1. A **bird reaching backward to retrieve an egg**, symbolizing the importance of learning from the past.
2. A **stylized heart shape**, representing balance and connection between past and present.

Body Percussion

African dance incorporates **percussive movement** as a key form of cultural expression. When enslaved Africans in the Americas were banned from using drums, they turned to their bodies—using **hand clapping, stomping, and finger snapping** to create rhythms. These traditions evolved into modern percussive dance forms, such as **stepping, hambone, and tap dance**.

Beatboxing

Beatboxing is a form of **vocal percussion**, where sounds mimic drums. Emerging from **hip-hop culture in the 1980s**, it was an affordable alternative for musicians who couldn't access expensive equipment.

Lindy Hop

A **social dance** that emerged in the **late 1920s and early 1930s in Harlem**, New York City. It developed in African American communities, particularly at the Savoy Ballroom, a legendary dance hall where dancers of different backgrounds and styles came together to create a dynamic new form of movement. This dance is rooted in African rhythms, fused with

Willa Mae Ricker and Leon James, original Lindy Hop dancers in iconic Life magazine photograph, 1943

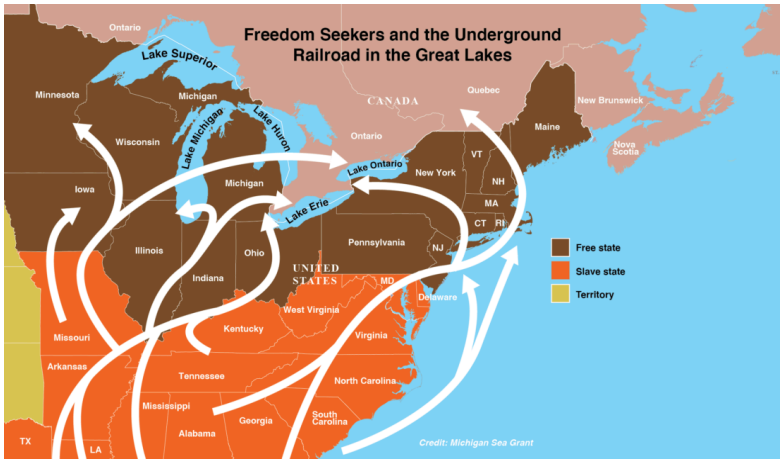
European partner dance traditions. It blends **Charleston, tap dance, and jazz rhythms**.

Stick Pounding

Developed by enslaved people in the **Gullah Islands** of the U.S., stick pounding was a form of **covert communication**. Since plantation owners deliberately mixed people from different African nations to prevent them from speaking their native languages, enslaved people used **drumming and rhythmic pounding** to communicate—until drums were banned. They then turned to **pounding corn sticks** to maintain their rhythms and messages.

Underground Railroad

A network of secret routes and safe houses that helped enslaved African Americans escape to free states and Canada during the 19th century.



Ritual

A ceremony or action performed in a customary way, often linked to spiritual, cultural, or community traditions.

Afrofuturism

A cultural movement blending science fiction, history, and African heritage to reimagine Black futures.

Afrofuturism explores themes of liberation, identity, and resilience, using speculative storytelling, visual arts, music, and performance to challenge dominant historical narratives and envision new possibilities for Black existence. We see our muse, Hariett Tubman, as the original Afrofuturist. Using her imagination, will, and her faith, her condition of bondage transcended the physical limitations of enslavement. She saw herself free and was determined to achieve it for herself and her family.

Non-linear Time

A concept rejecting the traditional chronological view of time, embracing cyclical, layered, and fluid experiences of past, present, and future. The lunar cycles, planting, and harvesting inform time as much as the man-made calendar.

Great Northern Migration

The early 20th-century movement of Black Americans from the rural South to Northern cities seeking economic and social opportunities.

Hula Hoop

A circular toy used in rhythmic movement and dance, often symbolizing play and communal engagement.

Hand Games

Interactive clapping and rhythm games, passed down as a cultural tradition.

Ham Bone

A body percussion technique using slaps, pats, and rhythmic vocalizations.

Preening

A performative act of self-adornment and confidence, often seen in Black dance and fashion culture.

Gullah Stick Pounding

A rhythmic form of communication among enslaved people using sticks as percussion instruments.

Jook Joint

Informal bars, dance halls, and social spaces that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during and after Reconstruction. They were often located on the outskirts of towns, in the backwoods, or on plantations, providing a vital gathering place for Black workers, especially sharecroppers and laborers, to unwind after long hours of grueling work.

Oasis Spaces

A sanctuary space —a refuge from the demands of labor, grind culture, capitalism, and systemic exhaustion. It is a place where rest is not only permitted but revered as an act of resistance and restoration. A portal to liberation—a place where the weary can lay down their burdens, dream

freely, and reclaim time for themselves. It is both an act of resistance and a vision of a world where rest is sacred and abundance is not dictated by labor.

Hush Arbor

A Plantation Burial (c. 1860) by John Antrobus

Hush Arbor was a place where enslaved African Americans would gather in secret to practice religious traditions. These sacred spaces served as the location where the enslaved could celebrate births, deaths and practice their African traditions with Christianity. It was safe to blend the components of each religion in these meetings freely. The enslaved release their hardships and express their emotions under cover of the woods. Here is where Negro spirituals originated; the creation of these songs contained a double meaning, revealing the ideas of religious salvation and freedom from slavery. The meetings would also include practices such as dance. African shouts and rhythms were also included.

Cypher

A circular gathering of dancers, poets, or musicians engaging in improvisational exchange of rhythmic ideas and performance.

Soul Train and the Soul Train Line

Soul Train was a groundbreaking American music and dance television show that aired from 1971 to 2006. Created by Don Cornelius, it was one of the longest-running syndicated programs in television history and played a crucial role in showcasing Black music, fashion, and culture to a national audience.

The Soul Train Line, where dancers formed two lines and took turns freestyling down the middle, became an iconic segment. This formation continues to be a highlight of dance parties where individuals showcase their unique moves.

<u>Social & Cultural Impact</u>
Platform for Black Artists – At a time when mainstream media rarely showcased Black musicians, Soul Train became a vital space for artists like Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson to reach wider audiences.

Maroonage

The act of escaping slavery to form independent communities known as maroon societies.

Clowning

A street dance style emphasizing exaggerated movements, playfulness, and storytelling.

Audience Experience and Interactive Constructs

- **Call and Response**
- **Joy as Transgressive**
- **Imagination as Portal**
- **Music as Narrator**
- **Liberation as Agency**
- **Fun as Love Amplifier**

> “Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.” – *James Baldwin*

> “Something about Black exile, about Black refusal, gestures at a generosity stranger than ‘truth’ can accommodate… For Black exile, facts vibrate at the speed of mystery.” – *Bayo Akomolafe*

HISTORIC CONTEXT

ON THE HISTORY OF CIRCUS

The modern circus was founded in 1768 by Philip Astley, an English cavalryman who opened a riding school in London and began showcasing equestrian tricks. To enhance his performances, he incorporated acrobats, rope-dancers, jugglers, and clowns, establishing the circus as a blend of horsemanship and theatrical entertainment. The term "circus" originated from Charles Hughes’ Royal Circus and Equestrian Philharmonic Academy, opened in 1782. The circus quickly spread across Europe and North America, with John Bill Ricketts bringing it to the U.S. in 1793 and later to Canada. While European circuses were traditionally housed in permanent buildings, American circuses evolved into traveling shows with large tents, shaping the format most commonly recognized today.

Circus in America

In the early 19th century, the American circus adapted to the country's expanding frontier by becoming a traveling enterprise. In 1825, Joshuah Purdy Brown introduced the use of canvas tents, making mobility easier. Around the same time, Hachaliah Bailey’s successful traveling menagerie inspired others to combine animal exhibitions with circus acts. By 1835, the Zoological Institute controlled much of the traveling circus and menagerie business. In 1871,

P.T. Barnum, alongside William Cameron Coup, revolutionized the industry by incorporating sideshows and using railroads for transportation. Coup also introduced multiple rings—eventually up to seven—shifting the focus toward spectacle over artistry. These innovations defined the uniquely American traveling circus.

In the 21st century, traditional circuses faced challenges, particularly due to animal rights concerns. Many circuses adapted by eliminating animal acts, following the example of Cirque du Soleil. However, animal acts are still common in places like Eastern Europe and Russia, where they remain audience favorites. Despite challenges, the circus industry continues to evolve and remains a universal form of entertainment, with new forms of performance emerging globally.

BLACK CIRCUS IN AMERICA

Resource: **The Black Circus and the Multiplicity of Gazes - News - Illinois State**

Ephraim Williams, a pioneering African American circus owner in the 19th and early 20th centuries, faced many barriers as a Black entrepreneur in a deeply segregated America. Born in the early 1800s, Williams started his career performing with animals, especially horses, eventually gaining recognition for his impressive feats. By the 1880s, after gaining experience in the circus world, he sought ownership and control, founding multiple circuses, such as the Ferguson & Williams Monster Show and the Professor Ephraim Williams Great Northern Circus.

Williams faced resistance, particularly from white competitors and audiences, who were not accustomed to seeing a Black man in a leadership role. Despite this, Williams remained determined, growing his business to perform in Northern Wisconsin, often showcasing to lumberjacks and other workers. His success, however, was met with white resistance and declining popularity by the early 1900s. Nevertheless, Williams was undeterred and shifted his focus to Europe, where his talent as a circus proprietor was better received.

By 1910, Williams had re-entered the circus scene with the “Silas Green from New Orleans” show, **an all-Black tent circus**. This became one of the longest-running tent shows in American history, emphasizing Williams' legacy as a leader in a deeply segregated industry. Despite his successes, Black circus performers faced immense challenges—many were relegated to subservient roles and faced racial stereotyping, with few ever making it to the front of the tent.

The legacy of Williams and his contemporaries has since been revisited in modern times, especially with the rise of Black-owned circuses like UniverSOUL Circus, which highlights Black talent in more prominent roles. In 1999, Margo Porter, an elephant trainer with UniverSOUL Circus, reflected on the difference it made to perform in an all-Black environment, contrasting it with the historically white-dominated circus world. This shift also inspired others to revisit and honor Williams' contributions, with efforts to educate people about his pioneering role in American circus history.

In summary, Ephraim Williams was a trailblazer who carved out a space for Black performers in a racially segregated circus industry, facing prejudice and adversity while achieving remarkable

success. His influence continues to inspire and inform the modern-day legacy of Black circus ownership and performance.

Circus In the World


THE GREATEST
Natural & National
CURIOSITY
IN THE WORLD.
JOICE HETH
Nurse to Gen. GEORGE WASHINGTON, (the Father of our Country.)
WILL BE SEEN AT
Barnum's Hotel, Bridgeport,
On FRIDAY, and SATURDAY, the 11th, & 12th days of December, DAY and EVENING.
JOICE HETH is unquestionably the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the World! She was the slave of Augustine Washington, (the father of Gen. Washington,) and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant, who, in after days, led our heroic fathers on to glory, to victory, and freedom. To use her own language when speaking of the illustrious Father of his Country, "she raised him." JOICE HETH was born in the year 1674, and has, consequently, now arrived at the astonishing
AGE OF 161 YEARS.
She Weighs but FORTY-SIX POUNDS, and yet is very cheerful and interesting. She retains her faculties in an unparalleled degree, converses freely, sings numerous hymns, relates many interesting anecdotes of the boy Washington, and often laughs heartily at her own remarks, or those of the spectators. Her teeth is in perfect good, and her appearance very neat. She is a baptist and takes great pleasure in conversing with ministers and religious persons. The appearance of this marvellous relic of antiquity strikes the beholder with amazement, and convinces him that his eyes are resting on the oldest specimen of mortality they ever before beheld. Original, authentic, and indisputable documents accompanying her proves, however astonishing the fact may appear, that JOICE HETH is in every respect the person she is represented.
The most eminent physicians and intelligent men in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New-York, Boston, and other places, have examined this living skeleton and the documents accompanying her, and all, unanimously, pronounce her to be, as represented, 161 years of age!
A female is in constant attendance, and will give every attention to the ladies who visit this relic of by-gone ages.
She has been visited in Philadelphia, New-York, Boston, &c., by more than TWENTY THOUSAND Ladies and Gentlemen, within the last three months.
Hours of Exhibition, from 9 A. M. to 1 P. M. and from 2 to 5, and 6½ to 10 P. M.
ADMITTANCE 25 Cents. CHILDREN HALF-PRICE.
Printed by J. BOOTH & SON, 147, Fulton-st N. Y.
Remains Monday the 14th

The Greatest Natural & National Curiosity in the World Joice Heth printed handbill, circa 1835. Somers Historical Society.

The circus, as a visual art form, transcended language barriers, making it highly exportable. In the 19th century, European equestrians like Giuseppe Chiarini, Louis Soullier, and Jacques Tourniaire played key roles in bringing circus performances to regions such as Japan, China, Russia, and South America. Innovations like the traveling-circus tent, introduced in Britain in the 1830s, further enhanced the circus's global mobility. P.T. Barnum and James Anthony Bailey expanded the circus internationally, with Barnum introducing the American three-ring format to Europe. By the early 20th century, European circuses, especially in Germany and Italy, reached their peak, while the Ringling Brothers absorbed Barnum & Bailey in 1919 to consolidate American circus dominance. As a result, the circus became a global spectacle shaped by both American showmanship and European innovation.

By the early 20th century, circus performances evolved beyond their commercial origins. Initially focused on equestrian acts and pantomime, the circus gradually saw the rise of acrobats, clowns, and aerial acts, with the invention of the flying trapeze by Jules Léotard in 1859. The circus also shifted from horses to exotic animals, especially in Germany, where menageries became prominent. By the late 19th century, gymnastics and physical performance arts gained popularity, leading to more diversified circus acts.

Post-World War I, traditional equestrian performances faded in favor of new acts, including the triple-somersaulter Alfredo Codona and flying trapeze artist Con Colleano. The Russian nationalization of circuses in 1919 led to the creation of the Moscow Circus School in 1927, which revolutionized circus training with a focus on gymnastics and new techniques.

The 20th century saw further transformations, including the rise of "New Circus" in the 1970s, led by innovators like **Cirque du Soleil**, which redefined circus as a contemporary performing art and influenced traditional circuses to evolve.

HARRIET ARAMINTA TUBMAN

Minty Fresh Circus is inspired by the life and courage of Harriet Tubman as well as the survival of generations of African Americans and pays tribute to them through their work.

Harriet Arminta Tubman, born Araminta Ross in March of 1822, was an American abolitionist and social activist. She was born on a plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland, alongside eight brothers and sisters. Her parents, Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, tried their best to keep the family together, but the realities of slavery eventually forced many of them apart.

Tubman had a deep desire for justice, which became apparent around age 12 when she intervened in a physical altercation between an overseer and an enslaved person. This event affected her physical state for the rest of her life, by being constantly in pain and having uncontrollable seizures, which Tubman used to call “sleeping spells”. Nowadays, it is accurate to say that she had narcolepsy, a “chronic neurological disorder" that affects the brain's ability to control sleep-wake cycles (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke n.d.).

What, by the time, looked like a weakness, Tubman transformed it into a powerful fuel for her need and seek for freedom and justice, thinking about the “visions” she had during her episodes, as predictions for the future. In those visions, often associated with her religiosity, she saw herself as a free woman determined to seek liberation for the enslaved people.

As a result of her health condition, and a fee she had to pay to her enslaver, Harriet could make an arrangement that allowed her to select her assignments, which, by choice, started to be in the fields instead of at the household. Those assignments required her to explore the geographical areas surrounding the plantation and to meet Black sailors who, as regular travelers along the East Coast, were well connected; later, all of this would become a great advantage in her seek for freedom.

In 1844, Tubman married John Tubman, a free Black man, and changed her name from Araminta “Minty” Ross to Harriet Tubman. The fact that their relationship was not good and that two of her brothers were going to be sold made her plan an escape.

On September 17, 1849, Tubman and her two brothers escaped the Maryland plantation, but shortly after, her brothers changed their minds, out of fear of the retaliations they would have in case someone found them and returned to the plantation. She persevered and made it to Pennsylvania with the help of the Underground Railroad.

That 90-mile journey led Tubman to freedom and to continue her vocation seeking for justice. With her first successful trip to the North (bringing her family and friends to freedom) Tubman became a conductor, joining the Underground Railroad, meeting allies along the way, supporting

anti-slavery ideals, and using her geographical expertise to increase the efforts for freedom and justice.

By the mid-1800s, a Fugitive Slave Act (a federal law), encouraged citizens to capture runways (enslave people who have escaped); making Tubman's labor harder and forcing her to lead enslaved people further north to Canada. Even with all the new dangers, she never lost a passenger, counting multiple lives saved.

Later on, during the Civil War, Tubman played an important role in the North winning over the Confederate Army (South), first as a nurse and cook, and then as part of the espionage efforts, providing information she had collected during her slave years and her time as a conductor.

After that, Harriet moved to the north of the state of New York, got married again, adopted a daughter, supported the efforts of the women's suffrage movement, and kept her home's doors open to those in need, founding the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Colored People.

https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-tubman
https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/harriet-tubman

This guide is designed to help schools engage with the themes of *Minty Fresh Circus* through history, movement, and discussion.

Proposed Lesson Plan

Objectives:

1. To educate students & participants about circus history and the significance of contributions from Black circus artists
2. To educate students & participants about Minty Fresh Circus and its development
3. To inspire participants to tap into imagination and discover themes of liberty, freedom, and advocacy
4. To encourage participants to develop skills for regulation and grounding
5. To encourage participants to utilize play and creativity to develop inner resources and build a toolbox to increase resilience
6. To encourage participants to use their gifts & strengths towards civic movements

Activities:

0-5 minutes - Introduction

1. Prompt Question: What is circus?
2. History of Circus (what is circus and how it came to be, the lack of diversity in circus)
3. The Origin of Minty Fresh (The development, the intent, & the importance)

5-10 minutes - Grounding/Warm UP (To address #3 & 4)

1. Prompt Question: What does freedom look like if you tap into your imagination?
2. Activity: "Oasis Spaces" Students will be prompted by Facilitator to find their place of comfort in the existing space. Students will be encouraged to seek out positions, places, and textures that remind them of comfort as the Facilitator guides them through the activity. Facilitator will incorporate humming into the grounding. Once completed students will return to the circle or starting position
3. Reflection: What were the qualities of comfort? How can we take those qualities to create our definition of freedom?

10-20 minutes - Activity #1 Flocking (To address #6)

1. Invitation to lead: Students will make their way into a circle and be led through percussive call and response movements. Facilitator will call in individuals to lead the class through a movement with everyone following.
2. Building Trust: Students will be prompted to come together into a clump facing one direction with Facilitator in the front leading with a movement to song. Participants will be prompted to continuously turn slowly to the right allowing whoever is now in the front to lead with new movement. This will continue twice around with students building trust to allow one another to lead
3. Building Connection: Facilitator will prompt students to break away from the flock at their own pace and continue the exercise as they walk by choosing moments to connect with someone by borrowing their movements as they pass one another.

20-25 minutes - Invite to Ground (“Oasis Spaces”)

25-35 minutes - Activity #2 Weight Sharing/Partner Work

1. Simple ground level weight sharing to build trust
2. Increasing with one person leaving the ground at a time
3. Increasing to groups of 3s if possible

35-40 minutes - - Invite to Ground (“Oasis Spaces”)

40-50 minutes - Activity #3 Juggling (need to purchase scarves)

1. Starting with one throw and catch
2. Increasing to two and catch
3. Increasing to three
4. Adding pairs into juggling

50-55 minutes - Reflections

1. Prompt Question: What does freedom look like if you tap into your imagination?
2. Reflective Question: How did the music impact your mood throughout the workshop?
3. Reflective Question: What happened when you visited your “Oasis Space?”

55-60 minutes - Questions or Comments

Researched and Authored by Monique Martin, Kim Cook, and Alyssa Bigbee