

She didn’t actually run away to the circus but Rosie Bristow still unexpectedly found herself dressing up as a clown and learning the trapeze.

Having completed her English and theatre studies degree at Warwick University, Rosie was working in a bar. In her own words, she was “looking for something circusey to follow my interest in costume design”. She tried Google and hit upon a young people’s project just starting at the North East Circus Development Trust (Circus Central) supported by an HLF grant of £37,000.

Family La Bonche – Who Are We?

The Family La Bonche – Who Are We? project gave up to 90 young people the chance to research circus heritage in the North East, interview former artistes and use their discoveries to revive old circus acts. They also got to devise their own new acts which went on to wow audiences at venues in Newcastle and elsewhere.

Although signing up in a purely backstage role to design and produce costumes, 25-year-old Rosie, who is also a musician, found herself swept along on a new trajectory. “I was asked to play my accordion on stage for Family La Bonche and then to act as a clown in the show. It was a total baptism of fire,” she says, and adds: “I also took some trapeze classes!”

War Circus

Things have continued to grow from there and, as well as being the costume designer for many of Circus Centrals subsequent shows, Rosie has expanded her involvement in other ways. While researching for Family La Bonche she developed an interest in the wider heritage of the Big Top and discovered that the history of circus during the First World War was a neglected area demanding further study. This has led directly to a second HLF-supported project War Circus which Rosie is now busily exploring.

“I am particularly interested in this and have spent a lot of time on it, researching in the British Library for example,” she says. “Our goal is to make a show based on the stories.”

“Rosie has brought creative and research ideas to the table,” says Circus Central’s chief executive Helen Averley. “Her experience with the heritage projects means that she can draw in threads of stories referenced from the archives, enriching the contemporary performances.

“It’s thanks to National Lottery players that young people, like Rosie, are making the whole world of circus heritage become more tangible.”

In addition, Rosie's involvement in costume design continues unabated. Through Circus Central, she has run workshops and also been commissioned to produce costumes for several of Newcastle’s street performers linked with the organisation.



A Family La Bonche performer





Students enacting a performance piece

The Family La Bonche - who are we?