

ROPES SWING, machines roar, a PA booms and a man on a motorbike rides into the circus ring. A clown attaches a rope to his rear wheel, and, engine revving crazily, bike and rider are both hoiked 50 feet into the air and sent spinning.

What ought to happen next is: he falls 40 feet at a breakneck speed, is dragged at the last moment up to the top of the tent, then bounced slowly to the floor before cutting his bike free with a chainsaw and roaring away. Instead, he falls too quickly and hits the matting with his cheeks and arms. Every spectator's stomach turns to wax. Bones unbroken, but bleeding profusely from the burn, Franz dusts himself down and walks out. 'It's OK,' he croaks. 'It's only a rehearsal. It'll be good tonight.'

Pierrot Bidon, MC, organiser and ringmaster of Archaos, lights up a cigarette. 'I hate this f---ing act,' he says bitterly. 'Last year in London I promised myself that would be the last time Franz would have to do it. But now that our stunt biker is in hospital in Berlin, we have to fill his spot with *something*.' He lowers his voice, talking more to himself than anyone else. 'This is the last week - the very last week - Franz will ever have to do the flying motorbike stunt.' 'Unless something else happens in Edinburgh,' a member of the cast adds, ruefully. Bidon doesn't answer.

He's a torn man. On one hand, without the stunt cyclist there isn't enough danger in the show and the audience will feel cheated if they aren't given a ferocious finale. On the other, the deeply sensitive and humane Bidon feels terrible about exploiting Franz's almost suicidal indifference to danger. The last time the motorbike fell too quickly (in Berlin), Franz crashed so heavily the handlebars cracked under the weight of his chest.

'We've got three broken legs this week,' Sankey, the Amazonian lighting technician from south London, says cheerfully. 'The annoying thing is that the fools always cut off their plasters the moment they come back. Pierrot broke his leg a couple of years ago and didn't give it a chance to set. Now he wonders why it sometimes hurts.' Sankey herself was in hospital a few weeks before this trip to Copenhagen. A light box exploded causing second degree burns across her arms. It looks appalling. 'At least it's hard,' she grunts dismissively. 'It was jelly for weeks.'

The catalogue of injuries continues. The night before the opening show in Denmark, Rosa, Sankey's assistant, impaled her foot on a tent peg, while doing some final rewiring at four in the morning. The next day, she was back at work, hobbling painfully from one end of the tent to the other on crutches.

But no one wastes much time worrying about the accidents they might or might not incur - they simply pull together, the healthy tending the sick. 'We are a community of idealists who



Chef's special: Jean-Pierre in his working clothes. Why the pork chops? 'I am a chef. Why not?' answers the man whose closest companion is a pig with an artistic temperament

love life,' explains Bidon. 'And loving life means living dangerously and taking risks at all times. If we lived safe, bourgeois lives in a safe, bourgeois town, how could we push our imagination to the limit and create the acts we do?'

Bidon, despite his torn jeans and battered leather jacket, has the eloquence and the sentimental roguishness of a Dickensian bit part. After half a bottle of Glenmorangie with the photographer he admits to having children, but when further pressed simply flashes a dazzlingly apologetic grin. 'As artists, we live on the hoof. Anyway, my performers are my children.'

It's true - he is shown an extraordinary degree of commitment. In an industry where it's normal for artists to switch their loyalties with the seasons, only five people have left Bidon's company in three and a half years. Many of them hail from the time when he ran the Circus Bidon (for some ten years, from 1975), working the villages and small towns of France and Italy. It was a traditional travelling circus with 25 horses and exquisite gypsy caravans.

'Then we saw the light. We live in an industrial world which is just as wild and just as glamorous as all the nostalgic tinsel and tatty tigers. So we decided not to reject but to

embrace it.' Changing their name from Circus Bidon to Archaos (which means 'beginning'), they set about facing up to the industrial world. Instead of sawdust and sequins, the ring has the air of a factory floor; instead of wild animals, there is the roar of motorbikes; while the crack of whips gives way to oxyacetylene torches. Even traditional trapeze acts leap from fork-lift trucks, and the clowns have sheets of corrugated iron attached to their backs. Using today's mechanical resources, Archaos bring the spirit of a mad, paranoid and punch-drunk industrial society to the ring, and appeal as much to children and imbeciles as hair-splitting intellectuals and minimalist aesthetes.

'But the soldering iron when it is used at night,' says Bidon, 'it is a very beautiful thing, is it not? Why not use it in a circus? Indeed why not use it in a couture fashion show? And yet, despite all these mechanics, Archaos is the most traditional of all circuses because it resembles circus as it was first performed 200 years ago.'

'What is now thought of as traditional circus, complete with ringmaster and set routines, started just 30 years ago. Before that, everything was rough and new - the whole point was to have new influences and ideas evolving ▶

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◀ all the time. Now that has been forgotten and the central preoccupation is business.'

He waves his hand at the wasteland on which the tent is being erected, dotted around with caravans. No one could accuse the troupe of living in a cushy mod-cons civilisation - their lives are probably closer to their counterparts' 100 years ago than their Las Vegas peers'.

The tiny caravans in which they live have no washing or toilet facilities. Weird cross-breed dogs sniff around for food or affection; a string of geese follow looking for similar titbits. In the afternoon when the adults are taking their siesta, a small child can be seen flat on his back with his legs in the air, ritually rolling himself around in the dust with an unwilling chicken.

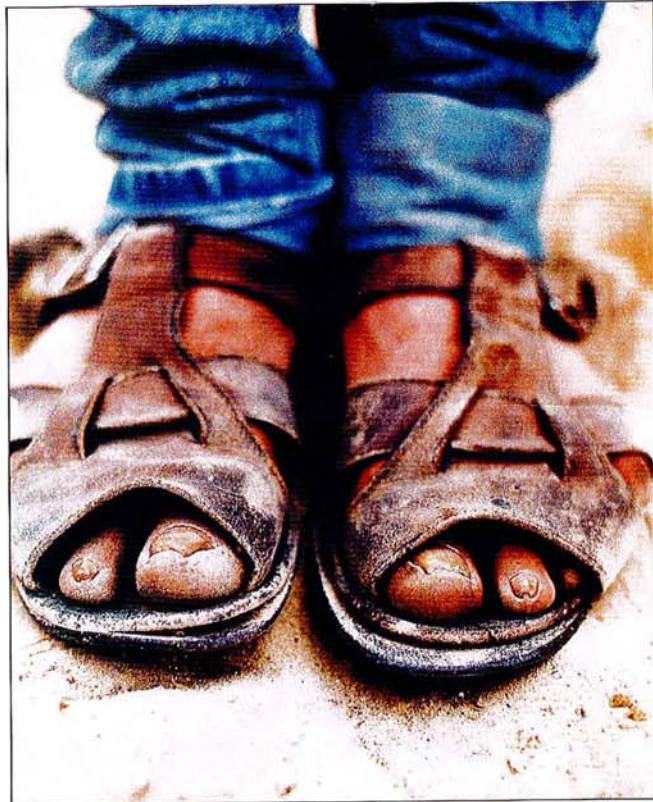
And the dust gets everywhere. Deep chestnut tans are artificially lightened by the salty powder. After a hard day with the dust you seriously believe nothing will ever take the taste away.

'The only answer to the dryness is alcohol,' Jean-Pierre, the chef, informs us solemnly as he pours out a glass of red wine. Last autumn the company stunned Dover customs officials by bringing over 400 litres of plonk to raise their spirits and take away the dryness. In the open-top kitchen van, he sourly pins pork chops to his apron, watched by a gaggle of lascivious-looking hands. 'Why?' asks the photographer, genuinely interested. Jean-Pierre stares back blankly. 'I am a chef. Why not?'

When not on duty in the kitchen, he likes to take a stroll with his pet pig. But due to an outbreak of pig disease in Germany where the troupe performed last, the animal has been forced into quarantine. A new pig, drafted in from a local farmer, was to have performed in the show but, according to Jean-Pierre, 'it has no artistic temperament.' He snuffles, outraged. 'This is a stupid country. My pig is clean. It does not catch diseases from German pigs.' So porker number two sits in a pen by itself, lonely and alone, waiting for the farmer to take it home. Its plaintive squeaks can be heard by the diners.

Everyone eats together. 'It's important for us,' explains Isabelle, the rope artist. 'Because it's only really at mealtimes that we can discuss our ideas as a team. We respect the rights of everybody, from the truck driver to the aerialist, so no one is ever told to shut up.'

'Hat' growls a young man with a Viking helmet and a Just William grudge. 'You'd like to think so.' He imitates her French voice. 'No one is ever told to shut up', it's just that some people are listened to more than others.' Isabelle sticks out a pink tongue and flourishes off. The man proffers a hand. 'Hi, I'm Jason. I'm from Paddington and I hate the British and



Footsore: the feet of Pierrot Bidon, MC, organiser and ringmaster of Archaos, reflect his hard, outdoor life. Every kilometre Archaos travel costs them more than just petrol

the British Press.' Then he smiles suddenly. 'I'm the professional moaner here. Pierrot likes people to be continually aware there's a hierarchy in the circus and that it's good for the collective imagination to rebel against it.'

Jason met the company when they were performing on Clapham Common in London, last October. He was one of the eight punks from the environmentalist Mutoid Waste Company employed to deal with security after £1,000-worth of equipment was stolen. 'I was into the whole idea of the circus and when Pierrot found out I could eat fire, he asked me to stay,' says Jason. 'It's OK here, I'm learning French, I'll stick around for a bit.'

The circus is based in a 300-year-old glass factory in Ales, a small town between Avignon and Montpellier in the South of France. They make all their equipment there, even the *chapeau de cordes* - the delicate spider's network of white ropes, strung below the tent roof (3,000 metres in all). 'The idea originates from our desire to work outside,' says Sophie, the trapeze artist. 'In Spain and Italy we perform in the open air, under the stars. When we move further north we put a big top around it.'

Little anecdotes about 'Archaos - Cirque

Revolutionaire' continually appear in French newspapers. This is less to do with the humorous qualities of the group than the respect they command in their own country. This year, they received 70 per cent of the subsidy the French Ministry of Culture set aside for circus troupes. 'And we need it,' a technician says feigningly. 'Every kilometre we travel costs us £7 in petrol.'

Members of the ensemble come from all walks of life. 'No one here was born in a circus,' says Bidon. 'But we all grew up in the street.' A lank young man fills a dogger car with petrol. 'Philippe,' explains Bidon, 'is an intellectual. But still he is a very good clown.'

'I studied sociology and psychology at the Sorbonne,' Philippe says quietly. 'After my studies, I knew I would not make a good sociologist or a psychologist. So I trained to be a trapeze artist. But that was not my thing either. Then I met Pierrot and I liked what Archaos stood for. So now I set myself on fire every night. Compared to the hoops management men have to jump through to earn a living, it's cool.' ■

Archaos are at Leith Links, Leith from 11 August - 2 September (not Mondays). Tel 031-226 5138 for tickets