



circus from *hell*

Archaos are a bizarre mixture of the big top and Mad Max III.

REPORT PETER CULSHAW

In the middle of Archaos's show, Stephan, their leading motorbike trickster, is doing a wheelie on a platform. He launches himself off into midair, lands at an impossible angle and roars across the ring on one wheel to make his exit, narrowly avoiding Franz, Archaos's resident trombonist. No one, you think, could do that without getting damaged. Unfortunately, you are right. Stephan, you find out later, has broken his foot. Their last bike wizard was, by cosmic coincidence, also called Stephan, and was last heard of embarking on a solo sailing voyage around the world because he wanted an easy life for a while.

Archaos currently have five people with assorted breakages. "It's not good. Every day someone else gets broken," says Pierrot Pillot-Bidon, also known as Pierrot Le Fou. "They really should be more careful." He shrugs his shoulders. Gallically, Pierrot is a woolly rogue with an amiable, if slightly sinister grin. He is Archaos's director, founder and father superior, and clearly he has some difficulty controlling his wayward children. He's put a stop to some of the really dangerous tricks, like riding a bike fifty feet up a central pole of the circus tent without a safety net, and tries to forbid the use of drink or other intoxicants — at least before a show. Pierrot doesn't deny the report just mentioned that Archaos had imported 400 litres of wine into England for their show last year at Clapham Common. "It's not a lot, really. We eat a lot so it doesn't affect us." He's been on the road twenty years and his lived-in face crinkles up as he laughs, coughs and wheezes in a genially demented manner. "I am mad," he grins, "and I like stupidity."

Archaos are a circus from hell. In truth, however, they hail from a town called Alès near Montpellier in Southern France. Archaos spend a couple of months each year there living in a factory and conducting circus workshops. The rest of the time they spend touring. They were founded four years ago, when Pierrot decided to give up the more conventional circus he had, and each year sees a new show, although on each night the show changes.

Circus used to be one of the great popular art forms and it still is in some parts of the world, particularly the Soviet Union. But it was a form that had become stale and decadent. Over the last couple of years festivals of 'New Circus' have been springing up (such as one last year on the South Bank) with Archaos at the forefront. Archaos incorporate 19th-

century traditions into sci-fi cyberpunk nightmares. "Our project was to make circus more like life — violent, cruel but with love and tenderness as well," explains Pierrot. "Circus has the most possibilities of any performance because you can use everything — theatre, acrobatics, pyrotechnics, music, lights, special effects. You can put it all together to create something really new, and full of emotion."

Technically, Archaos's performers are not a patch on the slick brilliance of the more conventional circuses — the Chinese, for example, or the Moscow State Circus, who drill their performers from childhood into sometimes soulless perfection. But as Pierrot puts it, "The big difference is that traditional circus is without life, spirit and energy. And with our show, the public becomes attached to the characters who are performing — they fall in love with them."

Archaos's ability to keep you guessing about what is accidental and what really is dangerous and close to the edge is one of the things which gives the show its power. A double backflip performed by a blue-coated technician with a fag in his mouth is more impressive because it is less expected. It's more exciting to watch a circus feat achieved with difficulty because it seems constantly about to go wrong. This perhaps raises a small ethical problem — which is the fact that much of the attraction of circus is a voyeuristic thrill which comes from the real possibility of injury or worse. But the performers clearly have an addiction to danger which verges on the psychotic. Maybe Freud understood it in his maxim, "Where danger is, there is salvation."

At present, the thirty-eight members of Archaos, plus assorted geese, chickens, dogs and a pig called Aurora, have set up their menagerie in a Berlin park near the Wall. The venue for Archaos is the Tempodrom, immediately dubbed the Thunderdome. West Berlin has a high concentration of deviants per capita, most of whom seem to be in the audience. But the current Berlin deviant aesthetic seems to have elements of discipline, control, politeness even. Witness the tidy rows of Hell's Angel bikes parked near the Zoo Station in perfect symmetry. But the Archaos aesthetic is wilder. Even their name is art mutating with chaos.

In fact the shambolic nature of their performance is at least partly an illusion. There is split-second method in their madness. How much everything is precisely choreographed you only realise when you see

