

TOUGHS AT THE TOP

Stephanie Billen steps right up to take her place at the Big Top in Copenhagen with the motorcycle-riding circus, Archaos. Photos by Jonathan Littlejohn.

Co-ordinating the affair in England, the normally irrepressibly optimistic PR, Mark Borowski, fires warnings at me like bullets. 'I'm telling you, it'll be rough. Take your jeans. Take your flea powder. Take your rape alarm. The last person who came back from there said Vietnam had nothing on Archaos.' He is joking, but there is an edge to it.

Archaos is renowned for its edge. The sense of danger in the show is not a sense at all, it is danger pure and simple. Pierrot Sidon and his crew are not the types to claim that the circus is all in the best possible taste, or performed to the highest safety standards. Nor are they the types to hiss 'that's off the record' when you translate their swear-words or learn about yet another disaster of near death proportions.

My first experience of Archaos was at Copenhagen airport where I am met by Pierrot, puppy-eyed but tough-looking with extravagant side-burns. We walk to a car with unfathomable seat belts and the kind of unique character that only a circus car could develop. In the days

villain in a G-string

following I will learn that four years ago when Archaos was in its infancy, cars and motorbikes were merely functional replacements for the 25 horses which toured with Pierrot's former *Cirque Bidon*. Just as the horses were performers, so the bikes, lorries et al soon invited themselves on stage.

After a short drive circus-style into the city, we arrive at the big top, a greyside dome resembling an irregular white cabbage. The piece of wasteland we have just lurched over, looks like a battleground, strewn with motorbike spare parts, lighting cable and on-offs like the washing machine, the engineless Archaos car and, buried in the grass, a toy gun. I am grateful not to have uncovered an ear.

All is quiet. I await the meeting that Pierrot told me about, the one where I am introduced to the circus. In the event I spend one second exploring my caravan and two hours reading my book in it. An unruly wind slaps my door open and shut. I peer cautiously through the window, looking for signs of life. On a kind of mobile platform (the kitchen Pierrot called it), a woman with pink and blue hair and a tie-dye T-shirt rocks to and fro on a plastic chair. A few half-naked children run seriously close to the edge. A man walks into my caravan. 'Hello', he says. Then, by way of explanation, 'nothing here.' After that I prop the door open with a spade, but receive no more visitors.

Finally at 2.30pm, the circus springs into life. Across the way, the platform quivers with noise, feet and food. This being a circus, everyone jumps up there. I do my best with some rickety steps missing essential planks. Nobody questions my presence as I help myself to undercooked sausages from the cab of the lorry (for so it is) and try to attune my ears to Gallic babble and

the cook's burps. Finally I say something in French. 'Saxy the hedgehog' turns his spiky-haired elphine face towards me and questions my presence. I breathe a sigh of relief. At last - I'm in!

Hours and strenuous conversations later, I realise this is the lifestyle that the performers in Archaos love. If it's Monday, it must be Berlin, if it's Tuesday, Copenhagen. A nightly cathartic release of energy with the show, followed by a meal at midnight, then hungover tranquillity the next morning. Most showed no great desire to leave the site. 'You cannot be in Archaos and be lazy,' says Pierrot.

Picture this. The lights have not yet dimmed but above us a woman working on the lights is hanging by her ankle from a rope. Four men are lying on the ground. A small blonde child, later identified as Ole Steinhausen, who wants to be in the circus on a motorbike when he grows up, sits in the front row telling his neighbours that his daddy is in the ring. A Roman with a large foot on his head walks over Ole's daddy carrying a pillar. Another man crawls out of the side of the ring. The lighting woman walks across the stage carrying a ladder, and bashes a light. On a stage at the back, spangly curtains part with difficulty to reveal a Roman orgy and three women with fans across their nether regions. Every now and again they shout 'oooh' and part the fans, while the lace skirt of a roman centurian lifts up in excitement. A woman walks in with a cockerel and appears to be about to balance its beak on her nose. Instead she puts its head in her mouth. A man puts a cymbal on his head and the cockerel is put on the cymbal. It flies off and is nearly run over by the

baby-sitter was a contortionist

villain in a G-string who has just roared in on his motorbike.

The adventure is just beginning. It is not just the cockerel that has to watch out. The performers are frequently shooed off stage by the villain and assorted motorbikes. The baddie in turn suffers the indignity of being hung from his knees from a fork-lift truck in order to catch a pair of exuberant lovers on a trapeze. As part of the spectacular finale his impressive bulk is required for the 'cloud swing', flying alarmingly fast through the air on a rope against a hellish inferno of smoke. Pascualito Boinet explains philosophically: 'For me it is the only possibility to fly, because nobody would want the responsibility of catching him. He is unperturbed by the recent accident which gave him the chance when the former female cloud-swinger fell to the ground breaking one of her vertebrae. His own health problems have been extensive. 'I broke all my body. With the flying rope I fell down two years ago and exposed the knee. With the high-flying trapeze I fell twelve metres and broke two legs, two arms and a vertebra. And if it's not in acrobatics, I still break my ankles, my fingers, my feet as well.' Pascualito was introduced to

showbiz at an early age. 'When I was a baby my baby-sitter was a contortionist. He took me on the street and made his number while I sucked on a bottle. At the age of seven he was on the pavements himself practising fire-eating and 'the dancing rope'. After years of successful street entertaining, he worked for over six years as a trainer for the touring theatre show, Freaks, in which handicapped people perform dare-devil circus acts. The experience reminded him what is was like to work with others, and shortly afterwards he joined Archaos. 'When you work alone, you build around you a sort of wall. There came a moment in my life when it was like I was in jail with my own character. It was necessary to explode that.' And still dressed in black leathers and more than a hint of sinister black make-up, he smiles: 'I begin to understand that I am not a bear, I begin to be *sociable*'.

Clearly he has had some success as a human. Jason, a fire-eater, clown and explosions expert from Brixton, calls him 'the sex symbol of Archaos after Pierrot'.

hellish inferno of smoke

Everyone gets their turn in the circus; a saxophonist hangs from his foot from the ceiling at one stage, the huge stoic cook crushes a baked potato in his hand, and (except in places like Edinburgh where animals are not allowed), takes command over a pig which uses its snout to roll the potatoey mess into a carpet. This is part of Pierrot's 'real-life-in-the-circus' policy but he is also sensitive to his employees as people, and he knows when to stop. Chainsaw juggling and an ascending motorbike are no longer staple parts of the show.

On our last night when Jonathan and I had taken more pictures and asked more questions than is seemly, Saxy the saxophonist hedgehog asks us to a party in Copenhagen's *cartier deliberte*. 'You mean where there were the riots?' asks Jonathan. We go anyway. Christiansen is an otherworldly hippy commune, filled with Germans for some reason. Our party hosts live in a boomerang shaped tree-house affair called the Banana House. Jason eats cake with me and sways at the table as he waxes Tolkeinesque about the crooked doors and windows. Later I sit round the bonfire outside wondering how Ole and the other young children there are managing to stay awake. Feeling as mellow now as I was tense when I first arrived, I embark on a slower than usual conversation with a red-haired German with a ponytail and death-white skin. 'In the science of journalism I think there is not much room for dreaming,' he murmurs questioningly. This depresses me momentarily. Then I look round the fire at the people I have met. What does he know - I get to see the circus don't I?

The Last Show on Earth (Fringe) Archaos, Leith Links (Venue 121). 11 Aug-2 Sept, 8.30pm. £8 (£4, side seating).

