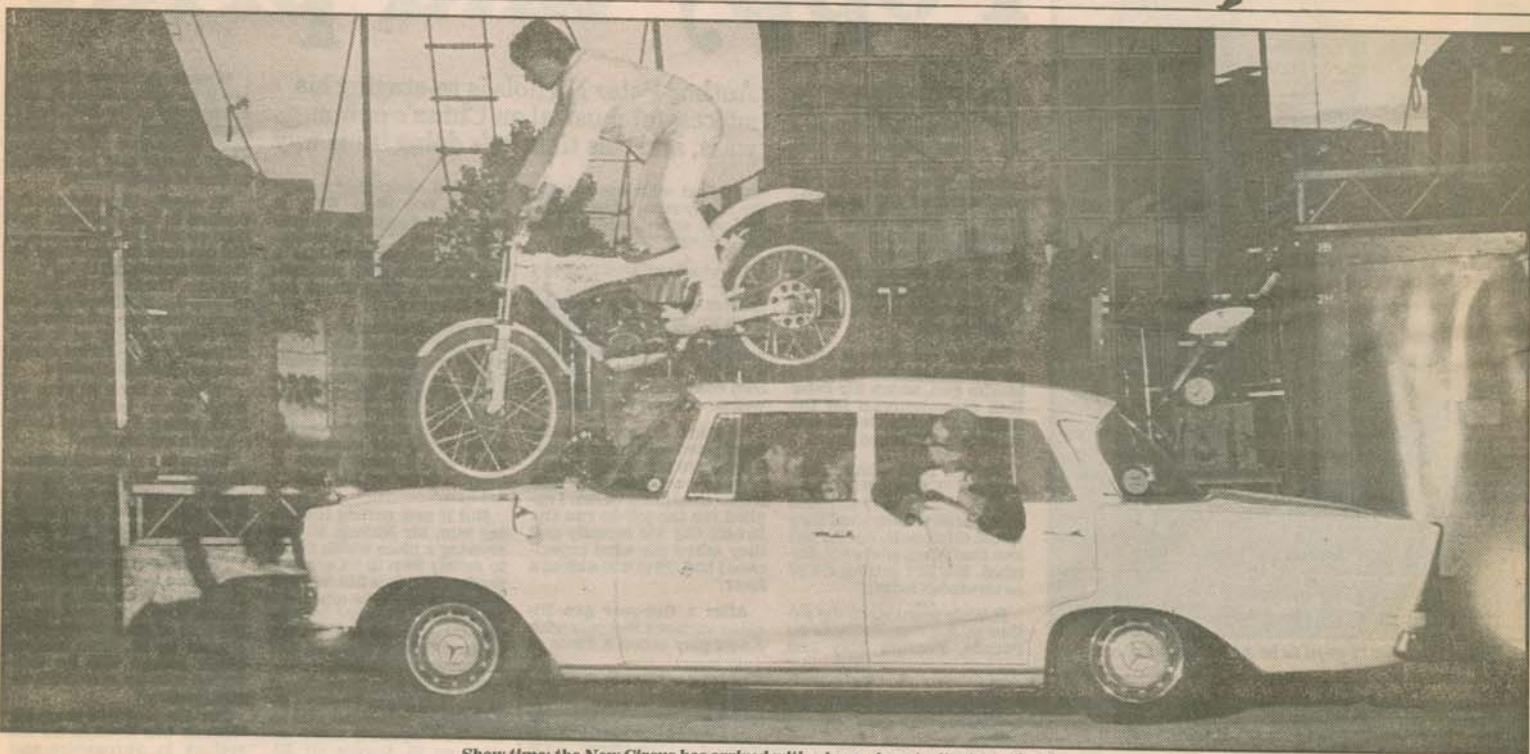


WEEKEND STANDARD



Show time: the New Circus has arrived with a bang; do not adjust your head

Send in the chainsaws

THE roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd. After a year or five in the hinterland of the ideologically unsound, the circus is back in town. In the last months, London has played host to The Moscow State Circus, The Flying Fruit Fly Circus and The Cirque Imaginaire—apart from all the traditional homegrown circuses that plant their big tops on the nearest available common.

Suddenly, the circus is hip again, fashionable entertainment. Traditional and contemporary in the same breath. As if to consolidate its restoration within the pantheon of popular entertainment, The London Festival of New Circus (Jubilee Gardens, South Bank, from today until 14 August) is a showcase for the best in international circuses.

Until very recently, my memories of the circus consisted of candyfloss and tatty tigers, and the worst orchestra I'd ever heard. But if you go down to Jubilee Gardens today you're in for a big surprise. The New Circus has arrived with a bang; do not adjust your head.

A sneak preview of France's contribution to the Festival proved not so much an eye-opener as an eye-popper. Archaos is the collective name for a wild and wonder-

Ladeez and Gennlemen . . . the passion is being put back into circus. But now the clowns have swapped their make-up for boilersuits and blowtorches. **NEIL NORMAN** reports

ful vagabond troupe of circus artists. Like a cross between Hell's Angels and Billy Smart's, they combine low-tech effects with high-octane performances.

In a domed tent which is hung with a lattice of white ropes, the troupe perform perilous and hilarious stunts involving oxy-acetylene torches and motorbikes, chainsaws and chickens.

Anarchy

The more traditional elements are also present, like jugglers, clowns and trapeze artists, but performers have radically altered the nature of their art to apply it to the concept of Archaos—literally, a fusion of art, anarchy and chaos. Mad Max in The Thunderdome was never so exciting.

Practically everything about Archaos is identifiably circus yet unarguably different. The clowns wear no make-up and dress in overalls and warehouse coats; the kids love them in the same way as they love the three DIY men in the Do-It-All commercial.

There is no ringmaster, in-

toning "Ladeez and Gennlemen"; the show starts with an explosion and its go go all the way from there. There are no caged animals and those that do appear usually take over the show.

The performing dog takes over from his master and gets him doing the tricks; there is one horse and a spectacular stunt-rider. There are no whips, except those used by an acrobat couple on each other—if nothing else, Archaos has put sex back into the circus.

The fun starts even before the show goes up. As we filed in to take our seats, a tall, skinny guy in a boiler suit picked me up bodily and sat me down in another seat, silently admonishing me not to move. Later, he sat on a fat man's lap and gave him a kiss. Audience participation is taken just so far to be amusing but never quite reaches the stage of threat.

From the moment a man on a motorbike roars into the ring, spinning and twisting the machine as if on a wild animal, the magic begins. Throughout the show, he makes frequent appearances riding up over the stands across the seats and over the

top of the battered Mercedes from which many of the performers disembark.

There are jugglers, acrobats and high wire artists; two gnarled and shaggy men step into the ring like modern Don Quixotes, dressed in

crash helmets and pieces of corrugated metal. They fight, fall over and laugh so infectiously that the walls shake with the crowd's reciprocal laughter.

A finale of sorts occurs when the lights dim and a display of pyrotechnics dazzles the eye as well as the ears; acetylene torches send sparks cascading into the ring, flaming brands weave strange elusive shapes in the dark and a man stands in the centre of the ring hammering

metal stakes into the ground with two enormous hammers. It is like a vision of some infernal factory. The man behind this madness is Pierrot Bidon, a former actor and circus luminary. "New Circus is more traditional than the other circus. Ordinary circus has become incorporated. It's dull. People are in it for the money and the spirit suffers. What we have tried to do is recapture the spirit and the passion of performing."