



▶ the show a second time. As the audience filters in, electrician Sarah Sankey (one of the two Brits with the troupe) is dangling twenty feet up desperately trying to fix the lighting, which gives the impression of last-minute panic. Exactly the same thing happened the next night. But then on one night the lights did fail during a particularly dangerous moment during an impressive rope trapeze act, so perhaps it wasn't in the script. On both nights a Brazilian acrobat called Raquel 'accidentally' loses her top during a routine. So convincing was her mishap that a Berlin radio station ran a report about Raquel's embarrassing moment of public exposure. After some fairly searching questions about her clothing arrangements after the show, I discovered the secret of accidentally going topless in midair. Just the sort of practical information which may come in useful one day.

The inevitable Mad Max comparisons drawn by Archaos are actually more appropriate for the show they brought to Britain last year. "That show was very dark, this one has a different colour," says Pierrot. The bike stunts and chainsaw madness are still in evidence, but the current show, which comes to the Edinburgh Festival in August and to London in September, is much more ambitious theatrically. Preposterously so, in fact, as they claim it tells "the story of the world, from beginning to end" and is entitled 'The Last Show On Earth', although it would be fair to say that any narrative sequence that may imply is haphazard, to say the least.

The show features a dizzying sequence of tableaux, starting in ancient Rome with concubines squealing and a senator purring. A man crawls around the ring chased by a Heath Robinesque motorised contraption and sprayed with water. A girl puts a cockatoo's head in her mouth. Two gormless grinning grebos with motorbike helmets have corrugated iron sheets attached to their backs - they attack each other with iron bars, baked beans and chainsaws, and are dragged around and run over by a motorbike. Geese wander about while Aurora the pig unrolls a carpet. A man wearing a tutu with a flowerpot on his head looks understandably sheepish. The structure of the tent itself is attacked rhythmically with anvils (this, I'm told, represents the Industrial Revolution). All this and send-ups of magicians' clichés, juggling, pyrotechnics, dancing, acrobatics and, of course, the famous mad motorbike tricks. The music varies from kitsch cabaret tunes and rosy

disco to sub-metal pop played by Archaos's house band, whose musical competence may well be hampered by the fact that they spend much of their time trying to avoid being knocked down by crazed bikers. Actually, the musical highlight may well be the clarinet solo performed upside-down while dangling from the top of the tent.

The show is partly held together by a baldheaded dancer/acrobat: Martin, who is a cross between Michael Clark and Joel Gray. *Cabaret*. The structure of the show is provided less by a story than by the clever balancing of opposing forces - the elegance of Stephan, who looks like an angel on his Honda, versus the demonic greasers on the big bikes covered in chicken feathers, the contrast between the delicate acrobats and the antics of Aurora and the boorish grebos. The whole show, although patchy, aspires to and sometimes achieves a kind of equality of a battle between light and dark forces.

Archaos have been hyped up like crazy in Europe for the 'revolutionary circus'. It makes them a little nervous. "People expect too much. We have a good show, but not revolutionary," says Marti. Archaos's achievement in at least partially re-inventing circus has been rewarded with a large grant (unheard of for a circus) from the French cultural ministry. It has enabled Pierrot to plan an even bigger show for next year called 'Mechanique En Sweat'. "It will be a funny, violent show using big machines like cranes to contrast with the efforts of the performers." They claim they are currently negotiating to buy a farm - Switzerland is apparently the best place for picking up army surplus military hardware.

Does Pierrot ever wish in the middle of the night for a more normal life, a nice house, a garden, a job, a mortgage? He looks a little perplexed. "I admit I'm a little mad," he says, "but this life is less crazy for me than to live, how you say, normal." He has one regret about the forthcoming British tour. Regulations mean he can't bring his highwire-walking chickens, the dogs, the geese or his beloved Aurora. "I think it is a little ridiculous. I have known Aurora since he was a very small pig. He is free and happy. I think he has a better life than most pigs, don't you?" Instead of the animals Pierrot is working up a vignette featuring a *fukir* on bed of nails. "It will be very stupid," he promises, flashing his charming gap-toothed grin.