

Archaos are to circus what 'The Marathon Man' is to dentistry. Their new megashow includes Brazilian acrobats, juggling, and 15 utterly unbalanced volunteers in a 'canvas cathedral'. The excitement, as they say, is in tents . . .

THE CALL FOR volunteers to audition for 15 parts in the new Archaos show read like a bulletin announcing the end of civilisation: 'Director Pierrot Bidon invites the criminally insane, unbalanced, degenerate, depraved, manic and masochistic members of the 18- to 25-year-old age group to strap on costumes of corrugated iron, crash-helmets and lacerated leathers before running through the burned-out scrap-heaps and petro-chemical stews of our circus set.' Would-be recruits to the anarchic circus troupe were warned that selection would be by a process of annihilation.

This week, the 'lucky' 15 who came through the auditions will discover exactly what they've let themselves in for as they join the 80-strong Archaos troupe, a colourful and cra-

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zy assembly drawn from 13 different nationalities, in 'Metal Clown'. The arena for this apocalyptic spectacle is a vast 'canvas cathedral' pitched in the main car park outside Wembley Stadium. Banked seats on either side of a wide tarmac runway, stretching at least a hundred metres, hold an audience of 2,500. Stand alone at the centre of this immense space and nightmarish visions tumble through the brain. You've strayed inside an empty aircraft-hangar where something strange and terrible is about to happen. Or you've been swallowed by a whale. It's only when the two huge doors at either end are thrown back and light comes streaming through that bizarre connections with church architecture become apparent.

'Metal Clown', which arrives here via Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Manchester and Dublin, is by far the most elaborate and aggressive show that Archaos have created.

It's about the impact of colonialism on Brazil and the clash of two cultures: the European invaders and the indigenous people (together with the slaves brought there from Angola). An army of Metal Clowns represents the conquistadors. The slaves and Brazilians are played by Bahia Axe Bahia, a group of dancers, drummers and acrobats. Pierrot Bidon went to Brazil to research the project, saw them perform, brought them to France, and built 'Metal Clown' around them.

As the storyline speeds swiftly from the sixteenth century to the present day, scenes of conflict give way to surreal sequences of carnival and South American street-life. These turn ugly when a statuesque character on stilts, a pimp clad in a pink mac and wearing dark glasses, seizes power. A violent world unfolds in which children are murdered and individuals find intriguing new ways of oppressing and exploiting each other. Imagine a vivid Lat-

Above: the madness and mayhem of the 'criminally insane' Archaos, as directed by Pierrot Bidon.

in version of the horrors you can only glimpse in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. After all this there's one more shock to come: a happy ending. The dictator is overthrown. He's tumbled off his stilts and stripped. His balls are sliced off with a cutlass. A juggler uses them in his act.

Traditional circus routines are mixed with dark metaphors straight out of the Archaos textbook. A bunch of Moroccan acrobats have to be released from their cage by a metal clown with a chainsaw before they can parade their skills. Two aerialists flutter and gyrate on a huge frame, suspended from a crane and resembling a badly smashed iron mast, like shimmering ribbons caught in the wind. They represent Death. Crazy convoys of giant trucks, motorbikes, beat-up cars, and outlandish home-made vehicles constructed from su-

permarket trolleys and anything else that came to hand, race along the tarmac road from one end of the tent to the other. One car splits in half. Another makes the entire trip on two wheels. A crazed figure in a crash-helmet drinks petrol out of a doll's head. A transvestite cyclist pulls the pants off a female dwarf and rides off in triumph.

In the course of just two hours, hundreds of equivalent images spill over the performance space. In Copenhagen a capacity audience responded like a football crowd at Highbury or Anfield. There, the 'canvas cathedral' sprawled across a tract of wasteland alongside a disused army barracks which had been converted into an arts centre. Archaos built their own strip of road (£15,000 to lay it, complete with channels for the pyrotechnical effects, then another £5,000 to dig it up before they left town). Angry delegates from the nearby SAS Scandinavia Hotel arrived to complain that the sound of explosions and the driving music from Brixton-based band Thunderdogs were depriving airline pilots of their sleep. A compromise was reached: no more sound rehearsals and 'Metal Clown' would end promptly by 10pm. Pierrot Bidon smiled and shrugged his shoulders: 'There are problems with the noise everywhere we go.'

Bidon, founder of Archaos ('Circus is two centuries old — it had gone to sleep'), creator of scenarios and chief *metteur en scène*, had delivered a pep talk to the assembled company that afternoon. Unnamed individuals had been arriving late for work. 'Allow me to be a director,' he demanded. 'Don't make me into a policeman.' According to Rocky Robinson, 'it's Pierrot's amazing energy and imagination that have kept this whole enterprise together.' But every single performer, he added, had the freedom 'to develop their own ideas about what they do within the show'. Rocky, a 52-year-old ex-hippy, joined Archaos last year in Manchester. He spends most of the first half of 'Metal Clown' incarcerated in a plastic sack with Antoinette, the dwarf. Then he's mugged by a gang of Moroccans and crucified across a telephone box.

The 15 who won the right to become metal clowns for the London run will join relative newcomers like Rocky and *cascadeur* (so much more expressive than 'stuntman') Pierre Marie Baudras whose Wall of Death, outside the cathedral, sets the tone for the impending extravaganza as the audiences arrive. Despite the threatening tone of that audition notice, Bidon insists that the victors all share one prime quality: 'It is important they possess generosity. Working together here, we must admire and respect each other.'

The world of Archaos, he declares, is like Brazil itself. 'It is violent and beautiful at the same time.' But is there beauty to be found in the metal clowns who lumber around like drug-crazed denizens of a post-holocaust landscape? 'Of course. Metal clowns have been a part of Archaos since 1987. They are cruel but they are very human. They can survive with nothing. They are always laughing at other people's suffering. But they're masochists too. They're accustomed to pain. You can take a big knife and cut off an arm and the metal clown won't care.'

Bidon is already planning the show for 1993. It will be bigger still. He can see it now: 'A Roman army of metal clowns. Maybe a hundred. Maybe more.' He wants to create 'a spectacle for 10,000 people'. He's already held discussions about the prospect of using Edinburgh Castle after the Tattoo. ■

'Metal Clown' is at Wembley November 1-24 (box office: 081 900 1234). It then moves to Battersea Wharf (dates to be confirmed).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SISIE MARTIN