

PERFORMANCE

One of the more unsettling aspects of contemporary life is the way in which archaic institutions fade away, seemingly forever, but then suddenly flop back into pseudo-relevance. The last circus I attended was in Nottingham, four years ago. It was a cold night, empty of promise or pleasure, and shortly before the dismal show began I was introduced to the bear trainer. As we talked he released a largish black bear from its cage, allowing it to roam around at our feet. My concentration evaporated. I like dangerous animals, but draw the line at gambolling in the grass with them or paying to see them ride scooters and wear frilly pinafores.

I never wanted to run off and join a circus, but there has always been some residual fascination mixed with the distaste. In childhood, a taste of the exotic fuses with atavistic desires to see scantily-clad Christians eaten by lions, clowns crushed by elephants, jugglers beaten to a pulp with their own Indian clubs and airborne athletes crash to their deaths from the trapeze.

The reality falls short. Why, then, does the circus pop up everywhere I look? Admittedly, much of this circus stuff seems to be coming from French-speaking countries, where the retrogressive notion of taming a lion still has some meaning. Britain's only circus school, a Bristol church hall full of people dropping juggling accoutrements, is about to shut up shop for lack of funds. Frankly, I'm not surprised. I have always been under the impression that circus skills were best taught by weatherbeaten, mysterious Romanians under the light of the stars.

The biker circus, Archaos, seemed to be the only real sensation of this year's Edinburgh Festival. If the sight of somebody riding a motorbike in circles is sensational then the pickings must have been thin. Archaos appeared to be your basic *Mad Max* extravaganza with its mixture of chain saws, post-punk haircuts and post-holocaust costumes.

What I think people will do after the apocalypse is try and find some food and comfort, rather than leap about on the flying trapeze. Performance art, of which Archaos seems a last vestige, has all but vanished. Perhaps its stock of images is spent, or perhaps there is no fun in it anymore, now that the Arts Council has decided to opt out of funding the arts. I suspect the truth of it is that performance art has worked subtle magic on the behaviour of citizens who otherwise lack artistic motive in their actions. This is what Frank Bruno calls, "ordinary people doing amazing fings".

Dutch streets were once full of performers engaged in incomprehensible pursuits. As a consequence, the Dutch are now unable to distinguish between performance-art and the real. In Nijmegen recently, people cheered when a murderer shot his victim five times. They were under the impression that they were witnessing street theatre. In a sense, they were right.

Perhaps it was legitimisation within a Robert Redford film, that performance art

scene in *Legal Eagles*, that signalled the end. Performance art has now been annexed by the general public, many of whom act under the guidance of deep-seated needs and obsessions, rather than an engulfing desire to win the Perrier award. How, otherwise, do we explain the behaviour of the blind man who walked into a San Francisco bank in August and said, "This is a robbery. Put the 100s, 50s and 20s in my hand"?

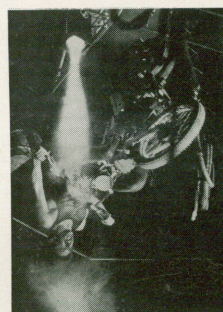
How, also, can we fathom the decision of the Norfolk Constabulary to blacken the faces of two detectives, put them in curly wigs and have them reconstruct a robbery for the benefit of Anglia Television's *Crimestoppers*? I did not witness this particular crime in Norfolk; if I had I doubt if I would have been prompted to recall facial details of the two black robbers by *Crimestoppers'* little drama. A newspaper photograph reminded me, instead, of the late Sir Laurence Olivier and his cinema portrayal of *Othello*.

Many crimes now include elements of performance art in their tragedy. Some months ago a Holloway man, Brian Cooper, took his dog for a walk in a north London park. When the mutt got into a fight with a pit bull terrier, the pit bull's owner became so angry that he went to a friend's house for assistance and some weaponry. He and his friend returned to the park carrying three-foot-long Japanese swords, with which they killed Mr Cooper.

This convergence of pride, slighted manhood and violent fantasies is striking. Most striking of all for Mr Cooper, of course, whose demise came from confronting a fantastical, elaborated armoury with old-fashioned bodily aggression and an equally old-fashioned mongrel. The Holloway samurai who despatched Cooper was was jailed for seven years, obviously lacking the inspiration to carry his phantasms through into the courtroom.

He could have learned a trick or two from Jim Bakker, the television evangelist. Charged with fraud in Charlotte, North Carolina, his method for delaying punishment on earth was to become inflicted by a vision. Seeing himself surrounded by wild animals, he hid under the furniture. Having tried this myself on my first day of school, I would like to warn Mr Bakker that furniture is not the best defence in the long run. Better to follow the example of baroness Susan de Stempel, on trial, in July and August, for the *Cluedo*-style murder of her ex-husband, Mr Simon Dale. Mr Dale, who refused to budge from a 25-room mansion owned by the baroness because he believed it was built from the stones of a fourth-century city constructed by displaced Armenians and was the seat of the King Arthur Legend, was cooking toad-in-the-hole when hit over the head with a crowbar. Under duress in cross-examination, the baroness resorted not to performance art but to a single word. "Bollocks," she said. She was acquitted. •

BY DAVID TOOP



**Archaos (photo) do
 it indoors, others do it
 in the street — this is
 what Frank Bruno calls,
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 amazing fings"**