

CITY LIMITS

MAGAZINE



FLY ME TO THE MOON

CIRCUS This week the biggest ever festival of New Circus opens in London. JOHN CONNOR goes to Paris to meet one of the world's leading exponents in the field and discovers post-punk clowns and high flying chainsaws.

Pierrot Bidon is a stocky weather beaten man who drives an old diesel Merc. It's Sunday morning and we're sitting in a circus tent erected in the southern suburb of Paris, Montpeller. Along with language difficulties and mutually induced hangovers, we're discussing the new movement in French circus.

'We are like the people at the start of circus two centuries ago who had to invent it. What we're doing doesn't stem from the traditional family system—we've come along and re-invented it,' says Bidon. 'Fifty years ago all the French companies had their own individual styles—specialising in clowns or lions or horses or whatever—but now all circus in France is the same. It's business and money. But no character. With New Circus each show has a spirit.'

In the case of this one, Archaos, the spirit has turned into the sort of adventurous cocktail that you dream of, but never expect to find. With welding gear, motorbikes, chainsaws and even Bidon's old Merc, it's a bit like catching 'Mad Max' scripted by the Python team.

The urban clown of Grimaldi has now been turned into the post-punk nutter with a crash helmet and corrugated iron slung across his back. Aerial work is no longer just what you can do with your body, but what you can do with your body and a chainsaw and even—though it was broken during my visit—your body and a motorbike. They literally fly one to the ceiling on a steel hauser—then do cartwheels with it. As Bidon says 'it only takes two minutes to teach but it takes two years to build the thing.'

The most interesting thing about Archaos will be their effect on British New Circus



Archaos with Bidon's Merc and... the motorbike: vive le cocktail!

for its flyers and this is still the most famous company of them all.

London has a terrible habit of presuming it's seen it all before, but there's never been a festival like this here. Getting the Chinese Shenyang Acrobatic Troupe to participate brings to this country the most respected such group in the world. From Spain, 'Os Paxoras' will be presenting a show with its roots in the Commedia dell'Arte of the 16th century; from England, Lumiere & Son have resurrected the first, and only, post-modernist clowning show in the world, 'Circus Lumiere', especially for the occasion.

At the moment it's a very exciting time for circus. Back in Paris, Bidon, who himself ran a horse-based circus for 15 years and only changed to the present new wave show two

years ago, puts it this way: 'The circus has a lot of problems. It's been sleeping for a long time. The same show has been going on—the public are a little bit tired. We wanted to find a new way of doing it.'

But the life they lead is similar to the old days. They eat communally and operate collectively, sleeping in caravans and tents with their show. Dogs and chickens abound. They call it 'The Factory'.

Struggling his shoulders, Bidon is phlegmatic to the last: 'It's the same—the life is always the life.'

'The London Festival of New Circus' runs from Friday to August 14. Archaos present four performances from August 4. See Theatre for details.