

Archaos
DURRANT'S TEL: 071-588-3671
 103 WHITECROSS STREET, LONDON EC1Y 8QT

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Firebreathing for beginners

Bold KEITH BRUCE
 savours the taste of
 danger (and paraffin)
 with Circus Archaos.

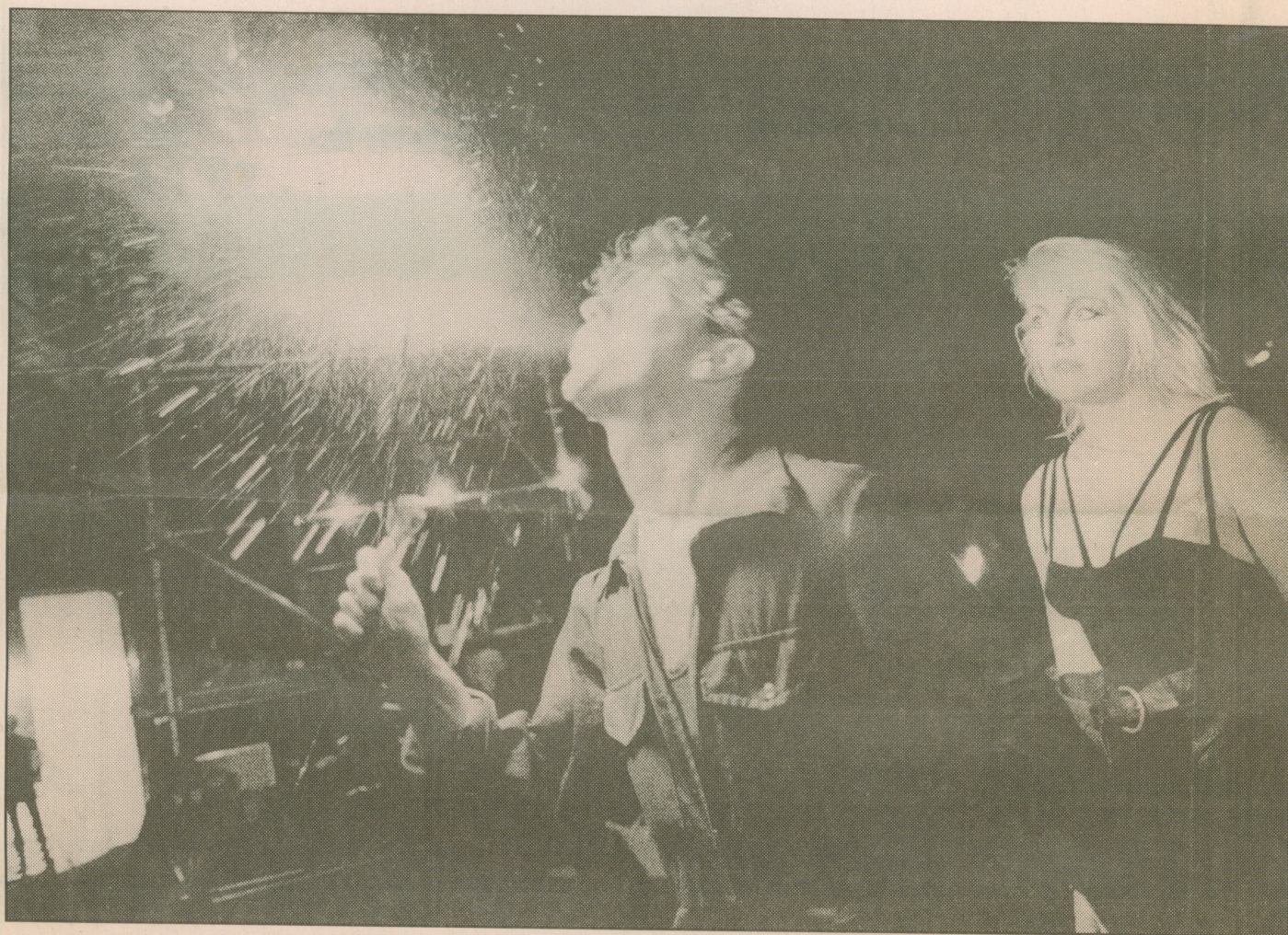
HOW much do you need to know about paraffin? It is a powerful laxative. If you breathe it in it gives you instant pleurisy. It's not very good for your skin and recedes your gums. It also, unsurprisingly, rots your teeth. It is surprisingly difficult to set fire to unless you reduce it to a fine spray. These things are important.

Sartorially I thought I had it just about right. A green boiler suit and a shave of my usual incompetence persuaded the girl at the merchandise stall to think I was actually part of the company. My teacher, Suzie, was in an orange boiler suit, bent over the radiator of a ridiculous three-wheeled motorbike that had been made, with the troupe's usual inventiveness, from the remains of a Reliant three-wheeler.

The boiler suit, of course, turned out to be her mechanic's outfit, and I wasn't there to learn how to fix engine cooling systems. When it came to the paraffin, Suzie donned her stage gear of tight black shorts and bustier, items that do not feature in my wardrobe, no matter what anybody says.

Suzie thought it was a bad idea and I was going off it rapidly. Clearly the Arts Editor was trying to kill me. As far as the Glasgow Herald is concerned, it seems that an anarchic French circus troupe that performs daredevil feats in the context of a show that is about sex and the environment is remarkable enough to warrant an unconventional review. We have to be right in there, taking part, experiencing it, breathing... um... fire.

Instead of reviewing the new Archaos show — BX-91: Beau comme la Guerre — it was de-



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cided that an intrepid arts reporter should join the company. I am, it had quickly become clear, about as intrepid as a Romney Marsh/Blackface cross. I suspect that Suzie, who is a blonde Amazon surfer girl from Sydney, may well have me down as a lesser species.

She looked me up and down and suggested I go and buy some milk and a bottle of water. Even asking why seemed like a bad move, so I trotted off to the shops. I bought a disposable

lighter as well, thinking it might come in handy.

The trick is to reduce the mouthful of liquid stored under your tongue to a fine spray as you expel it into the air. It will then ignite easily with the taper, or firestick, waved from your right hand. To master this technique you practise with the water. It won't burst into flames but it will soak the Canadian television crew who have decided that this rite of passage is worth recording for City TV of Toronto.

Believe me, it is not that easy. Great lumps of water are propelled from my gob down my chin. Suzie demonstrates with the lungpower of Jessye Norman. I've got wet shoes.

She leaves me to practise and goes off to grind a camshaft or something. Various other Archaos bods show up to laugh at me. Gemma breaks off from chasing a man on stilts with a chainsaw to explain what it means to be a Bouinax — the group of artisans I have to join

for tonight's performance. I don't understand a word of it.

Anat, the troupe's masseuse, says that only two people in the company have taken advantage of her services since she joined Archaos when they visited Israel. This is because the members of the company don't care about their bodies. They're great performers, but they burn themselves out very quickly (so to speak). Some of them don't live long. This was not what I wanted to hear.

It's all very enticing, though. I keep remembering the dogman Cyrille, who has now left Archaos to form his own company, but who was once a journalist. He turned up to do a story on the company and never went back to his desk. Suzie, it transpires, was the publicist for the Adelaide festival before Archaos hit town. Now she's the leading lady.

She introduces me to the paraffin. It is possible to buy special firewater for firebreathing, but Archaos use ordinary clear industrial paraffin because it is used for other effects anyway. It is, of course, more lethal. She just thought I should know.

Milk lining the stomach, paraffin in mouth, firestick in hand, she demonstrates the technique, throwing herself forward and rocking back after the flame is lit so that it doesn't run back into her mouth. It's like rubbing your stomach and patting your head. Impossible.

Two hours later everything I have on is soaked in paraffin and I'm sensibly smoking a cigarette to combat my first-night nerves. Before my debut — in the climactic factory scene, no less — I'm standing backstage trying to light my firestick with the disposable lighter, oblivious to the fact that the place is so awash with flame that a chap with a fire extinguisher is running about dousing.

At the front of the arena I manage one impressive burst of flame for the benefit of the cameraman from City TV. It's probably more impressive that I'm standing in front of Suzie, who is spouting fire like a dragon, and to the side of a chap who is juggling torches past my nose. I don't flinch only because I'm concentrating too much on my own trick.

In the bar outside, one of my fellow Bouinax, Mischa, tells me why he gave up firebreathing. On the company's last visit to Edinburgh he choked and spent months in hospital with pneumonia and a shrunk lung. *Merde pour ce soir*, says someone, before explaining again about the laxative properties of paraffin.