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THE INDEPENDENT

SLAPSTICK / Nick Lezard visited Wembley to watch hopefuls audition as 'Metal Clowns' for the avant-garde circus Archaos

**L**AST MONDAY afternoon, the police stopped a woman cycling up Ladbroke Grove with a traffic cone on her head. When she explained that she was on her way to an audition for Archaos, they dropped the idea of charging her with wearing council property and sent her on her way.

Archaos is the anarchic French circus company which stages shows that flout all the Safety at Work Acts they can think of. All very Mad Max: nutcases driving motorbikes through burning heaps of rubbish, JCBs instead of elephants. And one of Archaos's most endearing elements is its clowns.

The typical circus clown has refined his act to a point where every last drop of humour has been

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squeezed out — joke objects of pity or scorn. Archaos clowns, though, are the kind you look forward to seeing. Archaos clowns — the technical term is "Metal Clowns" — wear crash helmets, ragged leather armour, and huge squares of corrugated iron on their backs like mutant Icaruses. Their job is to bash each other up between acts. The harder they bash each other, the harder they laugh. Every so often one will turn on the other — or on the audience — with a fired-up chainsaw.

A few weeks ago, London's *Time Out* and *Evening Standard* carried adverts for Metal Clowns. Archaos hires its Metal Clowns from each town the show visits. Around 15 are chosen each time, by the artistic directors, Olivier and Reynald (Archaos's director, guru and founder, Pierrot Pillot-Bidon, is away). By two o'clock, about 70 people have turned up at a dank, cold Wembley Arena Car Park for the audition. They fall into three categories. Type One is the drama student from Hell. These have arrived in exotic costume: spray-painted asbestos suits, tutus, tin cans, NASA leotards.

Type Two is more conventionally

dressed, usually in just a leather jacket, jeans and DMs, but with a dangerous glint in the eye. Type Three is the anarcho-crusty. These are the people with the most rings through their noses, the weirdest dreadlocks, the biggest boots. They look as though they have the edge over types One and Two; they look like they're *already* Metal Clowns. King Mad (or Mud — he didn't seem to mind either) has knocked together a costume for himself that morning: a wire body

cage with the letters MENTAL CLONE welded to it and a headpiece which involves the suspension system from a large truck and the pistons from something larger.

"I do independent social services," he said. "I cook people meals, fix their cars, that kind of thing. I used to be a farmer for five years. Are you from the papers? Say hello to me Mum."

Reynald is a perfectly ordinary looking man with short, neat hair and a long

green Barbour. He stands out somewhat. I ask him what he's looking for in a Metal Clown. He thinks about this. "A violent, cruel, stupid poet," he says.

Olivier demonstrates with Fred, a long-serving Metal Clown.

"This is a Metal Clown," Olivier announces contemptuously. Fred is in costume: crash helmet, corrugated iron, and so on, and is about six feet three. "A Metal Clown is a stupid person who walks like a monkey." Fred walks like an

enormous monkey. "He laughs." Fred laughs on cue, like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. "He falls over." Fred falls over. "He is a stupid man." (Fred used to be a sociology student.) The audience looks collectively anxious.

"Don't you want to know how many O levels we've got?" asks King Mad.

The business of faking manic insanity begins. Two by two the hopeful start trying to laugh and fall over each other. People use different techniques. There

is the *Quest for Fire* school, which involves grunting, shrieking, and circling each other like primates. The second is a cross between rugby and pub chucking-out time: two men smash into each other and laugh. The third is the Making a Fool of Yourself School. On the whole, everyone thrashes around and shrieks with vim. It would have been nice to have seen them all hired as a single shrieking mob. The girl with the traffic cone gets a laugh out of Reynald when she hits herself on the head with her own bollard. Some people go over the top and spray the car park with fake vomit.

For some reason, London is the town with the highest turn-out for these auditions. The French, apparently, are uninterested, presumably because all the berserk

'This is a Metal Clown. A Metal Clown is a stupid person who walks like a monkey'

Frenchmen in the world have joined Archaos by now anyway. In Stockholm the audience was deathly silent but this, they were told afterwards, is a sign that your show has gone down a treat. In Dublin, nine people turned up and they had to hire them all. But London is the mad bastard capital of the world. Olivier, Reynald and Fred are impressed with the standard of the acts, most of whom, after their deliberations, will be going back to *Sleeping Beauty* in rep or their thin dogs on bits of string.

In the end, 13 are chosen. Two are women, a better ratio than in John Major's Cabinet, but this causes some outrage. For the next two months the lucky 13 will be earning £15 a night, being run over by motorbikes and bashing each other over the head with chainsaws and laughing like the damned. No one thinks the money is bad.

"Bollocks," says King Mad when his name is read out. "I've got a job." His mum should be proud of him.

Archaos opens at Wembley Stadium tonight and continues until 24 November, Tuesdays to Sundays at 8pm (Booking: 081-900 1234); and then moves to Battersea Wharf (dates to be confirmed).



Archaos metal clowns in the latest show, 'Metal Clown': they wear crash helmets, ragged leather armour, and huge squares of corrugated iron on their backs like mutant Icaruses

PERS MORTEN