

EIGHT DAYS: FACE TO FACE

CHAINS A W CIRCUS

ARCHAOS

If Motorhead's Lemmy had run off to join the circus, the result couldn't be stranger than Archaos: a bunch of chainsaw-wielding, motorbike-riding crazies who will revolutionise the London Festival of New Circus.

THERE'S A rapid series of deafening explosions followed by a cacophony of blaring horns. A thick pall of acrid-smelling smoke hangs in the air. Out of the darkness a figure swings on a long rope that seems to trail down from the sky, sweeping in huge arcs towards you, then away again, like some kind of macho comic book superhero. One hand is holding the rope. The other brandishes a chainsaw. The rattle of its blade can just be heard above the din of revving engines. Motorbikes dart in all directions like angry wasps. One is ridden up into the audience. The chainsaw king still loops athletically above their heads. The stench of petrol fumes, combined with the smoke and general din, mounts a massive assault upon the senses.

This is 'new circus' in the shape of a wild bunch of performers, bikers, clowns and 'crazies' who operate under the name Archaos. Its leader is a stocky, swarthy figure, clad in a battered leather jacket, called Pierrot Bidon. 'Crazies' is his word. He uses it as a term of approbation. For some ten or 11 years from 1975, Circus Bidon worked the villages and small towns of France and Italy. It was a traditional outfit — nine gypsy caravans and a couple of dozen horses — and it dished up traditional circus acts. Then came the transformation.

'We realised that circus had been asleep for 200 years,' says Bidon. 'We wanted to create once more the magic and excitement it possessed a long time ago. The only way was to forget the past and to use the resources of the '80s. So we use motor-bikes, trucks, synthesizers, lights, cinematography, chainsaws, pieces of metal. With Archaos we tried to create a new spirit for circus. It's a spirit which is crazy and absurd.'

So, no red-nosed clowns but two crazies in leather gear, wearing yellow

BY MALCOLM HAY

helmets, with huge sheets of corrugated iron strapped to their backs. One is Bidon. The other's an amiable rogue with an evil, gap-toothed grin. The clowning consists of banging the sheets together, being dragged behind a motorbike, being run over, strolling around with the corrugated iron on fire. It's like watching a couple of Hell's Angels indulging in a spot of horseplay. One of many climactic moments sees the Evil One perched high up in the tent, laughing maniacally, his arms outflung in the pose of Christ crucified, the metal sheet glinting in the lights, his helmet now encircled by a mock crown of thorns.

BUT IT'S NOT all heavy metal. There are images which, in a different context, one might call poetic. Given the brash, rough-hewn nature of the show, let's settle for quite extraordinarily effective. The juggler (who is more dynamic and entertaining than any other of his tribe that I've seen, though that's no great trick) enters in a vintage white Mercedes. Several other stylishly staged sequences are as carefully, and coolly, constructed as a pop video. And then there's the delicate network of white ropes strung below the tent roof — 3,000 metres in all — which has become another much discussed Archaos trademark.

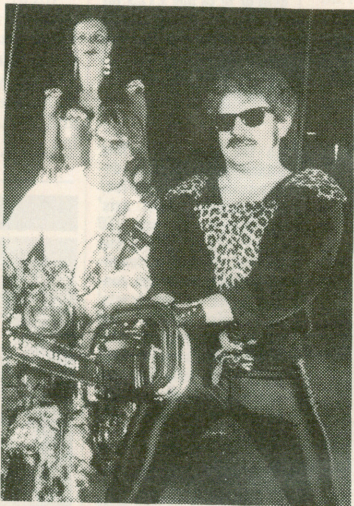
The 'Chapiteau des Cordes' originated, says Bidon, from 'our desire to work out in the open air, under the stars, when we performed in countries such as Spain and Italy. We have a big top to put up around it when we move further north.' When they're not in the ring, members of the troupe climb this spider's-web and sit there, looking down at the acts below. Some are dressed in regulation glitzy circus gear. Some wear long overalls. The faces peer through the mesh like so many trapped flies. It's an image straight out of a Fellini film.

BIDON IS insistent that the 'spirit of Archaos' should be accessible to everyone. He's particularly scornful of new circus groups who only appeal to 'aesthetes and intellectuals', and accompanies this observation with dismissive gestures resembling someone holding his nose, pulling a lavatory chain and simultaneously lobbing a hand-grenade down the pan. Bidon follows this up with the revealing story of the prostitutes of Saarbrücken.

'We were there for seven nights in May. On the last evening I met a beautiful girl in one of the bars. We started talking. There was a man with her but he didn't seem very concerned. I dis-

covered she was a lady of the night and the man was her pimp. She discovered that I was from Archaos. She said she'd seen the show and loved it. All her fellow-workers had seen it too. This had not been easy because the circus started at 9.30 and that's a busy time for them. So they talked to their men and organised a system for taking each other's clients for the couple of hours they were away watching us.'

This pleases Bidon more than anything that's happened since Archaos first sprang into life. Their aim, he adds, beaming at the idea, is for the



audience to be 'hot' by the time they reach the show's grand finale. Two weeks ago in Ulm (an hour's train ride from Munich towards Strasbourg and the French border), where I was taken for my first taste of the spirit of Archaos, even quite elderly and apparently respectable German ladies looked ready for anything long before the end. The wild atmosphere they create is infectious. It also seems to spill over into everything they do.

Stories of Archaos on tour feature regularly in French newspapers. As far as one can tell, these are less to do with any extravagant or absurdist behaviour, than a reflection of their high standing in their native country. In the coming year they're set to receive around 70 per cent of the generous subsidy the French government sets aside for circus troupes. They've more work than they can handle. The current tour started about nine weeks ago back at their base in a 300-year-old glass factory in Ales, a small town between Avignon and Montpellier. They travelled 8,000 kilometres in the first month. From Ales to Brittany. Thence to Livorno in Italy. Then Swit-

zerland and Germany. So far they've been forced to abandon one truck, one car and two caravans, all broken down beyond immediate repair and littering the villages and fields of western Europe.

THE ONLY WORRY Bidon has about their first trip to Britain for the London Festival of New Circus is the Channel crossing. It's not that the size of their convoy presents problems. He's more concerned about the culture gap between the Continent and our offshore island. 'This will be our first visit. It may be our last. There are differences, I suspect, between what excites audiences in England and elsewhere.' One possibly dodgy area, at least, is taken care of by the ban on bringing over animals. They'll be left at a place near Calais in the care of a young Arab boy. The equestrian act, or even the dog that does tricks, might not have grated overmuch on British sensibilities. I'm less sure about the routine which involves chickens riding a toy bicycle at high speed along a wire.

It may already have crossed your minds that one sensible precaution, prior to purchasing a ringside seat for Archaos, would be to take out a hefty personal accident insurance policy. Spare your pennies. Stop the cheques. There'll be no Ales Chainsaw Massacre. A Lambeth fire officer, no less, has long since made the trek to France to run his beady eyes over the likely dangers to life and limb. There are reliable reports that he ended up with one of the crazies sprawling across his lap. Undeterred, he came surprisingly close to giving them a clean bill of health. Only a few modifications and changes are needed for Archaos to be granted the circus licence for their South Bank shows.

You'll not have seen anything quite like them. Their distinctive outlook extends right down to the decoration of the bikes and lorries. Everywhere you look is thickly encrusted with chicken feathers. Archaos are crazy enough to warrant being taken entirely seriously. Just remember how the celebrated director Peter Brook defined the qualities of what he calls Rough Theatre. He said its glories lay in the way that, at its best, it's 'vulgar, comic, full of life'. That's Archaos. They'd be vulgar, lively, absurd, and slightly threatening, even without their chainsaws. □

Archaos appear in the London Festival of New Circus from Thursday to Sunday. See Cabaret or Theatre listings.