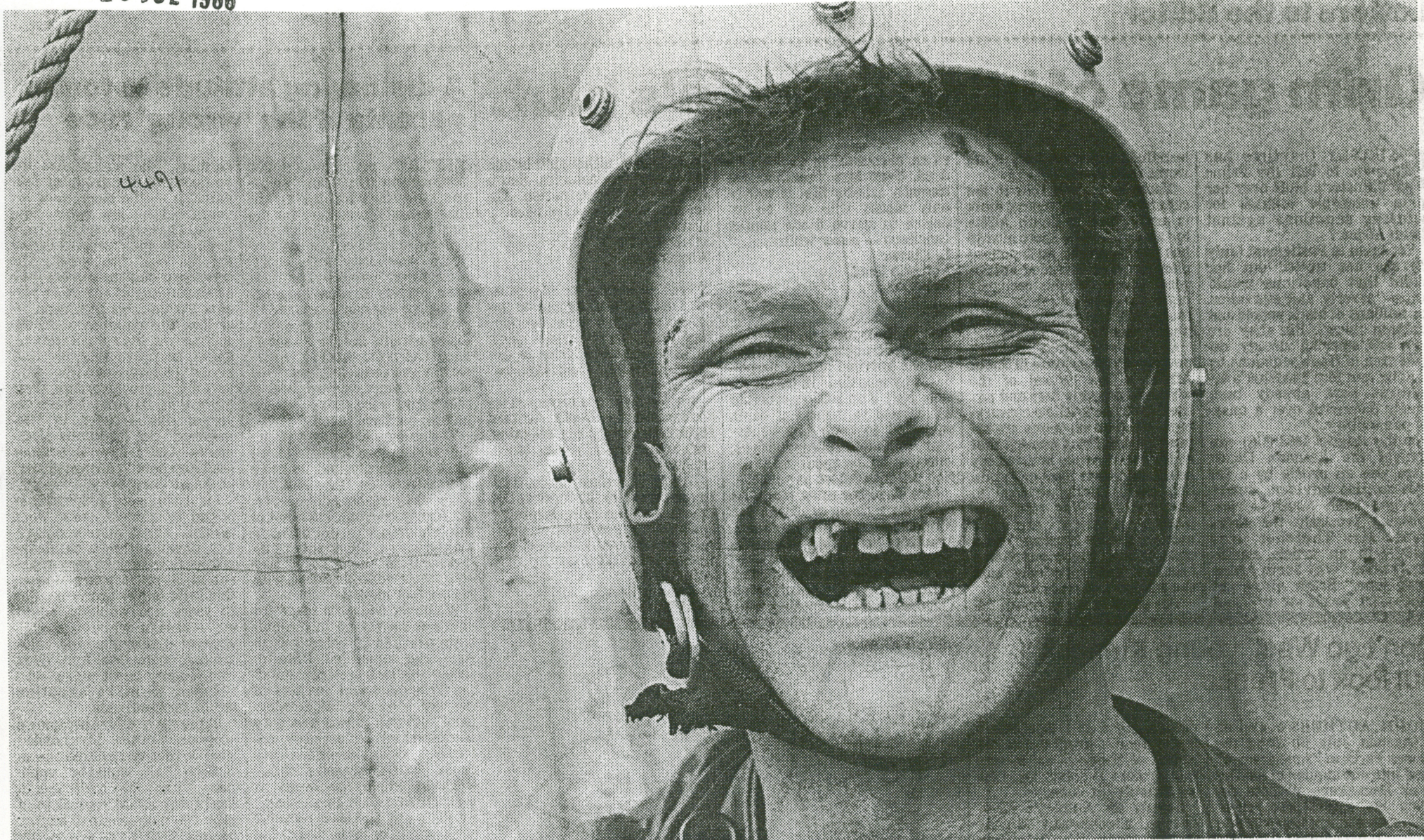


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Hell for leather . . . The anarchic French Archaos include motorbikes and chainsaws in their performance

PHOTOGRAPH: SIMON CORDER

The latest show on earth

Roll up, roll up — New Circus is coming to town! **John Vidal** reports on the revolution that is turning the Big Top inside out

IN 1769, a British soldier-turned-trick rider invented the modern circus. Sgt Major Philip Astley realised that if he galloped round in a tight circle while standing on his horse then centrifugal force would help him keep his balance. Others might have known this before, but Astley, out of the Army and looking for new ideas, promptly traced his 42ft ring (the optimum diameter), built the first auditorium on the south side of Westminster Bridge and employed a bizarre bunch of otherwise itinerant clowns, rope walkers and animal trainers. It was a wild success and the entertainment package was born.

It is more by accident than design that the Festival of New Circus in Jubilee Gardens next week should be held just a few trapeze swings from Astley's Halfpenny Hatch, as it was called. Astley himself, or Charles Hughes who set up a rival show and coined the Roman word circus, would hardly recognise some of the acts which are coming — motorcyclists circling above the audience, rock bands, storylines, clowns pulling hats out of rabbits — but they'd know that rough mix of spectacle, panache and skills combined to evoke a sense of wonder. They might question the absence of animals but they would both recognise that the spirit of circus hasn't changed.

So why New Circus? What is New Circus? It is really just a reaction against some of the

wholly predictable and fossilised large shows which have come to dominate the world rings and television screens with a series of acts which were much the same 20 or 40 years ago. These, say the critics, still rely on a desperate American-style razzmatazz to blind audiences to the fact that the art form, kept jealously within circus families, has not developed.

If traditional circus says "sit back and be amazed like your parents were before you," New Circus would say "here are traditional skills which can be used with poetry or theatricality, humour or imagination."

It's been a good year already to see the different faces of world circus in Britain. The Moscow State Circus has been storming its way around for three months with a show that has as little to do with Russia as popcorn. In a blaze of showbiz hype the fabulous Soviet skills have been submerged beneath tacky British direction. Faced with vast production, costs international circus tends to adopt an indistinguishability, confusing size for quality, noise for excitement and glamour for personality.

At the other end of the scale has come Jean-Baptiste Thierée and Victoria Chaplin's minimalist Cirque Imaginaire (still playing at the Mermaid), which achieves a sublime theatricality and spontaneity, a visual treat, parodying and satirising post-war concepts. Thierée's production — sadly, he says, the last — comes closest to New Circus in its spirit of adventure.

Between the great in size and the good in quality has developed a strong movement, especially in Australia and the States, adapting the traditional skills for community and educational purposes.

Circus Oz and the Flying Fruit Flies epitomise this new-style involvement which says that circus can be demystified to the point where the first time you see it you can take part. Competitive gymnasts are encouraged to become extrovert acrobats, delinquent teenagers are given a social focus and community self-respect can, it is said, be developed.

Here the skills are not as important as the discipline of learning them, suggests Reg Bolton, founder of the Suitcase Circus, and a man who has spent 20 years promoting low-tech circus in undernourished communities; "New Circus," he says, "is tapping a new audience, be it a street crowd, cabaret clientele or discriminating theatre audience. It incorporates a centuries-old fashion for popular entertainment with the current fashion for participation in anything."

Bolton, with many others in circus and now theatre, is an advocate of a national circus school in Britain. Where France has some 70 establishments offering circus training and is about to see the fruits of its Centre National des Arts du Cirque (which will be opening the London festival with its first public performances), Britain has one small, underfunded, if worthy enterprise in Bristol, Fool Time.

With sickening elan the French have poured millions of pounds into their operation, seeing circus not as an ossified popular art form but as a potential platform for nourishing the performing arts and developing a more physical theatre.

Eastern bloc countries, the Chinese, Australian and Brazilian governments, too, all heavily support circus schools as vocational training.

Even without a bedrock of accessible training for those outside the traditional circus families, small-scale British companies, eager to breathe fresh life into circus, come and go. Apart from random, spontaneous community initiatives which rarely last more than a few years, several young professional companies have set up. Ra Ra Zoo, Circus Senso and Circus Burlesque are three examples.

With little cash but a wealth of spirit they have developed their skills to a certain level and beefed up their shows with a combination of live music and semi-anarchic comedy, even magic. The tendency is towards an unfocused hotch potch of effervescent cabaret styles, but without fresh directorial vision or an influx of skills or money it is difficult to see where these companies will develop.

It was Circus Lumière almost 10 years ago who memorably tried to reinvest the British clown with unpredictability by emphasising the theatricality; Lumière and Son are now one of the most enterprising performance companies in Britain.

The organisers hope that the 17-day Jubilee Gardens extravaganza will stimulate discussion and a cross-fertilisation of ideas.

The 12 companies appearing — from northern China's Shenyang acrobatic troupe, who combine exquisite abstract movement with astonishing strength, to the anarchic French Archaos troupe, who use their open rope tent as a stage for racy aggression with chainsaws and motorbikes — are eager to share their skills (many will be giving classes)

and take circus into areas of style and content which 10 years ago would have been dismissed as fanciful.

Whereas the Americans have been mostly responsible for the current image of circus as over-the-top family entertainment it is the Chinese who are beginning to redress the balance between art and popular entertainment and whose influence is beginning to be seen.

Since the 1949 revolution when a conscious decision was made to develop the old acrobatic schools into centres of excellence, they have travelled the world as artistic missionaries in rather barren lands.

The Shenyang troupe — a chamber orchestra of 15 performers rather than the full company of 45 — comes to London aware that circus must reflect the changes in society and cannot remain calcified in its recent traditions.

"Circus is becoming more eclectic everywhere," says Mr Jia, their leader. "Western circus has begun to adopt Chinese acts into their repertoires and people, even in China, are demanding more and more complicated tableaux. We must move with the times, but at the same time not neglect the artistic quality. The difference between Chinese acrobatics and world circus is that the Chinese are judged not only on the difficulty of their acts but also on their aesthetic standards. Here, perhaps, has been our greatest influence."

Some of the traditional British circuses have begun to take an interest in the Eastern way. Peter Jay, who owns the only two permanent rings in Britain — the Blackpool Tower Circus and the Hippodrome at Great Yarmouth — has for the second year running brought over some of the Chongqing troupe of acrobats. They are, he thinks,

just what circus needs today — exciting, fresh and highly skilled.

But traditional circus is still mistrustful of the new wave. Battered by the animal protection lobby in the sixties and seventies, put on the defensive by falling revenue and escalating costs, they are wary of new initiatives.

When Gerry Cottle, who has done more than any other major UK circus owner to bridge the chasm between the new and the old, launched a company without animals some years back, other owners were furious and he was forced to leave the Circus Proprietors' Association.

"It began with animals and it will continue with them," says a spokeswoman from their Blackburn offices. Traditional circus, she says, is thriving in Britain, attracting more and more people after a sticky patch and is now seeing new companies coming in.

Pierrot, a founder of Archaos, one of the most radically different companies to be seen in Europe for years, a group hell-bent on dragging circus into the 20th century and making it relevant to today's kids, believes that New Circus is really the most traditional. "What has happened is that in the past each circus had a specific character; some were known for clowns, some for animals, others for aerial work.

"Then after the war, a new commercialism stepped in which had the effect of making so much circus very similar. New Circus goes back to roots by restoring the individuality."

Sergeant Major Astley, his idea ripped off and diluted over and over, would approve. ● The 17-day Festival Of New Circus opens on July 29 in the Jubilee Gardens, South Bank. Tel. 01 928 3191 for details.