

METAL E BIG TOP

om Billy Smart's 'family'
 automotive entertainment
 otographs by Stan Papior

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circus, she left the door wide open for a revolution in big top entertainment. Gone are the days of a patronising ringmaster presiding over his spangles and sawdust. Now, in the '90s, the French troupe Archaos have chewed up and regurgitated the tradition, replacing glitz and glamour with ripped clothes and scuffed boots, lions and tigers with mutoid mechanicals, trucks and motorbikes.

Set amid the industrial landscape of muddy Manchester, the site itself is reminiscent of a *Mad Max* set. The big top rises from the puddles like some huge post-apocalyptic temple. Paying homage around it are various lorries, dilapidated buses and caravans, inhabited by an equally motley looking crew. Surely this derelict lot weren't capable of eliciting the obligatory 'oohs' and 'ahhs' from the thronging masses?

If I'd have had a hat, I'd have eaten it. Taking its inspiration from Roman Arenas, the Rio Carnival and American Monster Truck Shows, 'Metal Clown' is not just something you go to watch, it's a complete sensory experience. Ears pound from revving engines, nostrils quiver at petrochemical fumes, skin glows from heat of fire, and mouth hangs open at the sheer spectacle of it all.

From the moment a man on stilts strides into the arena, gas mask on face, skimpily dressed in rubber and swathed in polythene, it's obvious Archaos ain't no Billy Smart. The show aims to encapsulate both the delight and destruction of 20th-century urban life and does so by its bizarre, jarring juxtapositions. Rock rhythms are combined with ancient Brazilian beats and mutant machinery is pitted against the grace of human performance.

A crane stands ominously in the middle of the arena. Suddenly the stilt walker returns with four nubile young men on a leash. The crane opens out like a Meccano fan and the 'slaves' are climbing high, transformed into Adonis of the trapeze. End of act one. A lorry revs up and tows the crane out. But the petrochemical anarchy is just about to begin...

As soon as the door closes, another opens. A host of bizarre-looking cars controlled by equally deranged looking drivers whizz into the arena, career around and disappear. The audience has already reached the edge of their seats when stunt man Pierre Marie makes his entrance on his Suzuki 1000, freewheeling down the tarmac strip (this alone costs about £6000 and is specifically laid at each site).

es later he's back again, this time on the of a truck. The bike is stationary but the wheels are spinning while Marie casually cavorts over it — sitting backwards, lying, standing — one slip-up and he'd be under the wheels of those demented drivers, sniffing at the heels of the truck.

But it's all in a day's work to Marie. Later, after another poetic stunt by the Brazilians, he's back — this time in a beaten-up car with a massive dent in the bonnet and wooden platform on the roof.

Just as you're wondering what it's all about, a young guy on a BMX rides over the car. Impressive stuff. But for those still waiting to be wowed, Marie vanishes, returning to make another grand entrance (he's good at those). Again it's on two wheels, only this time it's a car and aimed at the Brazilians, who scatter without a moment's hesitation. For them, being in the wrong place at the wrong time could have serious consequences.

Archaos is definitely not a show for those of a nervous disposition. It's loud, dirty and provocative. Sparks fly as firecrackers explode and dancing Brazilians clash knives (and women in the audience notice their men are ogling the topless female stilt-walker). Skillfully contrasting calm with chaos, it offers a wild, weird and surreal reworking of the circus phenomenon that befits our motorised age. See it if you dare. ■

★ Archaos opens at Wembley Arena from 29 October to 24 November. Box office 081-900 1234. Tues-Sun 8pm-11pm. Adults £15, under-16 £8, OAP/UB40/student £12; £3 reduction on Sunday

Billy Smart goes BMX, and worse... on two wheels or four. It's a petrochemical extravaganza — but not for those of a nervous disposition

