

Archaos

DURRANT'S

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## OPEN HOUSE

# A victim of the media circus

**The recent decision by Bristol Downs committee to ban the French circus Archaos from performing on Durdham Down prompts freelance writer Katy Noakes to ask is this democracy?**

THE decision of a few could make a whole company bankrupt, putting 110 jobs on the block with outsiders wielding the axe. No management say in the matter, no court of appeal, little communication and many crossed wires.

If this were a corporate company the Department of Trade and Industry would be in uproar. But we are talking about fire-eating foreigners whose business is art. If Archaos does not play Bristol, it will go under.

It is not even as if its product is faulty. To quote a correspondent from the Downs committee meeting, it "received largely glowing reports" from the three committee members who had seen it — but the marketing was all wrong.

Such is the power of advertising. Image counts and reality is a second-rate, discount bargain. Circus Archaos, talented as its performers unquestionably are, breached advertising etiquette by going straight for the guts.

The mistake Archaos made was mixing real life with art. Talk of gay sex and simulated rape does not sit well alongside English notions of art. Rather, it does not sit well alongside the Downs committee's notion of art. Archaos sent the same publicity to each of its English venues, but only the Downs committee reacted with a bang and a ban.

### TABLOIDS

The Downs themselves are owned by a few but paid for by thousands. The Society of Merchant Venturers, which makes up half of the Downs committee, owns the land which Bristol City Council maintains at our expense. Democracy is such that it can decide what its 500,000 paymasters (ie, the population of Bristol) can watch on the land which the decision makers pay not a penny to keep.

The Downs committee claims that Archaos would tarnish the image of the land. On the contrary, to host such a spectacle would enhance the Downs' image as a safe, public area. By advertising itself as sexy, seamy and cruel, Archaos gave people exactly what they wanted. Archaos took the language of tabloids, lapped up by millions, and made it its own. No messing.

Men have become millionaires by printing the very same words on the covers of their dailies. Tabloidese is the lowest common denominator and one of the most powerful influences of our age. Archaos turned it into pastiche, a joke.

The shame of it all is that now it does not look like we will get the chance to tell fact from the fiction. The joke backfired when Archaos was banned from the Downs.

### DIPLOMACY

It looked like a childish case of hurt pride. The three committee members who saw Archaos' two-hour show in Manchester were not offended. One even dared to say she enjoyed it. But the publicity had embarrassed them, so ya boo sucks to Archaos, you're not going to play in our playground.

If they had chosen to do so, Archaos could have appealed to the masses on pure snob value. Just look at its track record: Edinburgh Festival two years running, invitations to open the next Olympics, funding from the French government, in whose heart it is held dear.

Archaos is the French Ministry of Culture's pride