

Across the Channel and over the big top

Lock up your daughters, barricade your doors — Archaos is coming to town. **John Vidal** on the revolutionary French circus that strikes (totally unjustified) fear in Anglo-Saxon hearts

TWO hundred snarling Frenchies wielding chainsaws, motorbike chains and crowbars, each with a bottle of Ricard in the belly and a license to attack every woman and animal in sight will pitch tent in Bristol and terrorise the city for three weeks with a rampant sex horror circus. So foul, violent and utterly corrupt is this event that the city has already set up roadblocks to repel these Euro-hooligans.

C'est pas vrai? Bah oui! The authorities are being pressed by parliament to stop them coming. They have smuggled in 4,000 cases of absinthe and will be joined by 50 more people next month but first they will burn down Manchester and Edinburgh.

These, the first predictable batch of insane Archaos stories, are already flying around and the circus company's 26 wagons filled with heaps of exploding cars, metal grinders and cranes have only just arrived in Britain for what will be the longest (five months) and largest (75 people building to more than 120) tour by a major foreign company in Britain.

The Sun fired the first canonballs with outrageous but hurtful accusations of rape on the trapeze wire with the result that Bristol council has been debating whether to let Archaos play. Last year Edinburgh and Islington councils got in a terrible muddle over the supposed danger that the company represented to audiences and themselves.

That few circus companies have managed to strike such incomprehension into the Anglo-Saxon official mind is understandable. Circus, according to *homo municipalis*, is known and just about loved; predictable family showbiz where the genuinely dangerous is made palatable and everything else is hyped into a dizzy confection of tease and emotionless thrills.

Along come Archaos defying circus rules like lion-tamers their charges. The company uses motorbikes, rock, stories, visual puns. Instead of saccharine smiles from prim-toed trapezists, the ring is filled with mechanics, businessmen, people who hurt and laugh. No ringmaster, no star turns but themes, stories and characters relevant to urban life.

In short Archaos has brought theatre to circus and theatre involves dangerous stuff like emotions, imagination and doubt. It also involves perceptions and the rapidly developing company has run into a wall of public expectation which is confusing and misleading.

Three years ago they used chainsaws and were billed as the most dangerous show in town and the image of tooth and claw anarchists running amok under the influence of carbon-monoxide has stuck.

What has been exciting France and Spain these last few months and is about to broadcast in Britain is the company's third show, Bouinax, a far more sophisticated model of the potential of circus. The grand set-pieces of urban disintegration and theatrical terrorism have been sharpened and scaled up from previous years (cars are wrenched to a great altar and hurled down, giant metal birds with broken wings screech and flap through the roof, bikers prowl, a crane lurches drunkenly around swinging acrobats) but the indulgence of the sideshows has been stripped back to reveal a wealth of human detail and visual puns.

A girl is threatened by mechanics, she escapes to a crane and then to a trapeze, her lover — another trapezist — rescues her. A high wire artist dances with a crow which flies away and returns, the clowns are certified mad and are wheeled off. Gymnasts fall in love and juggle half naked bodies, tumblers work furiously to attract the

attention of a girl only to find she is blind. If it must be defined it is a spectacle about urban loneliness, people fighting themselves, groups, the urban environment. If Man was almost alienated by his industrial inventions in the earlier shows then here there is more emphasis on the contrast between Man and the machine. By the end there is a sort of exhilaration and bleak optimism.

Well, it's not Bertram Mills or Barnums and it's far more coherent and directed than the company's earlier shows. But whatever the first impressions Archaos is firmly rooted in traditional circus and its reliance on human skills and sheer professionalism. Founder, performer, mentor and artistic director, Pierrot Pillot-Bidon comes from a long line of circus. His father was a tightrope artist and then a clown. "He came to see us last year," says Pierrot. "He thinks tusk, tusk and said 'it's not circus'. I said fuck off." And they laughed.

The traditional circuses are divided over the Archaos effect. Some, says Pierrot, love them (right on cue the phone rings in the converted abattoir they have been playing in Paris and the director of Italy's largest circus congratulates him for the previous evening's show). Some of the smaller ones fear and loathe him, saying, like his father, that Archaos isn't circus. "Of course they are jealous," says Pierrot. "But see it like this: We are making a new circus and finding a new audience. In 100 years this, too, will seem old and dead."

In three years, helped by enormous French government grants to travel overseas and buoyed by the renewal of interest in circus (70 schools in France etc) Archaos has grown into the largest and most popular circus in Europe with two full companies — one has just returned from Australia the two will appear together on the later stages of the British marathon. It has also spawned a tent business and a television company.

Pierrot has become something of a celebrity on chat shows. Success, he says simply, is "correct". Archaos's relationship with Britain is odd and defies most interpretations but the company's appeal is across



Forget painted smiles and prim-toed trapezists, for Archaos life is a bed of nails

the board. Sharp-suited yuppies ask them to play at weddings, bikers are attracted like honey, children adore their antics. Last year's three-month tour was a sell-out in Edinburgh and London. Pierrot finds the problems raised by the authorities rather silly. "They were small problems which could easily be resolved but they became bigger and bigger. I think it is because we give the impression of danger. Circus is always dangerous, though, but never to the audience. But I like the English. They are very excessive people really. The people who come to see us are our age (average of the company is 25);

it's our culture, too. England is so important for the music and fashions."

Even so five months in five cities (including three weeks as a highlight of the official Edinburgh International festival) is optimistic. It's nothing to plans already being discussed for 1991/2 where they are aiming to take over the shell of Battersea Power Station to present "Mechanique en suete", a show with 150 artists. The company has been asked to organise the opening ceremony for the 1992 Winter Olympics and Jean-Paul Goude, who designed France's bicentennial celebrations in Paris, is negotiating the rights

to Archaos — the Movie.

Last year — as this — the company played at Leith on the outskirts of Edinburgh and the Port of Leith pub became a second home. When they left there were tears in the eyes and two weeks later a coachload of their Scottish friends turned up in London to make them feel at home.

Don't worry, Bristol. ● Archaos open at the Glastonbury Festival (June 21-23) and tour to Manchester (June 26-July 15), Glasgow (July 24-August 5), Edinburgh (August 13-September 2), Bristol (September 11-23), London (October 2-November 18).