

Archaos

DURRANT'S

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## ARTS

# Roll up for the chainsaw circus

Claire Armitstead on the new wave under the Big Top — Cirque du Soleil and Archaos

**L**IKE IT or loathe it, most people will find it hard this summer to ignore the fact that the circus has come to town. The Jubilee Garden on London's South Bank has already sprouted the 2,000-seat Big Top that houses Canada's contribution, Montreal's glamorous Cirque du Soleil, making its first visit to the UK from Tuesday to August 26.

A week later, France's fabled chainsaw circus, Archaos, rolls up in Edinburgh for its second consecutive festival. This is not the traditional circus of pretty routines on prettier ponies, but its *enfant terrible*, wired up and plugged in to a technological age that this year requires a crane and an eight-piece rock and roll band.

Archaos arrived in Britain this summer in a characteristic flurry of publicity, culminating in the Bristol City Council banning it from the city — a decision it is characteristically defying by hunting around for a private site on which to set up camp. Archaos proudly points out that it will take pride of place at the opening ceremony for next year's winter Olympics in France: a ministerial initiative which makes the good burgomasters of Bristol look pretty parochial.

So what, for those who do not know, is this New Age of the circus? Pierrot Pillot-Bidon, founder-manager of Archaos, who these days saves his

stage appearances for an occasional finale, will assure you over his juggler's kit of Gitanes and whisky that his troupe is a direct descendant of the first modern circuses, actually founded on the South Bank in about 1769 by an English cavalry officer turned trick rider, one Sergeant Major Philip Astley. He discovered that the centrifugal forces of a ring 42ft in diameter could keep a man upright on the rump of a cantering horse.

The nature and shape of the Big Top was the direct result of that discovery, as, less directly, was Bidon's own mechanised menagerie. The motorcycle, he explains, is merely doing today what the horse did in the past. This therefore puts his crane into the elephant category. Real animals are out of favour these days, except for comically untrained domestic ones, or, in the case of Britain's own Ra-Ra Zoo, touring the country with the show *Fabulous Beasts*, giant puppets masquerading as the real thing.

What Bidon, Ra-Ra Zoo and Sgt Major Astley undoubtedly share is a command of spectacle, coupled with a willingness to push the boundaries of performance ever farther forward. Danger, comedy and illusion are used to make often satirical points about art, life and society. Circus Oz, an Australian troupe flown in by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) three years

ago, is a good example of this: it made a typically simple but effective joke about its national identity out of an upside down tightrope walker.

The inclusion of New Circus in a theatre festival programme makes an interesting point about its identity. No-one who saw Victoire Chaplin and Jean-Baptiste Thierrey's exquisitely whimsical Cirque Imaginaire could deny its theatricality, or its ability to establish and develop theatrical themes and images. (It honoured a conventional theatre, the Mermaid, with its last British visit.)

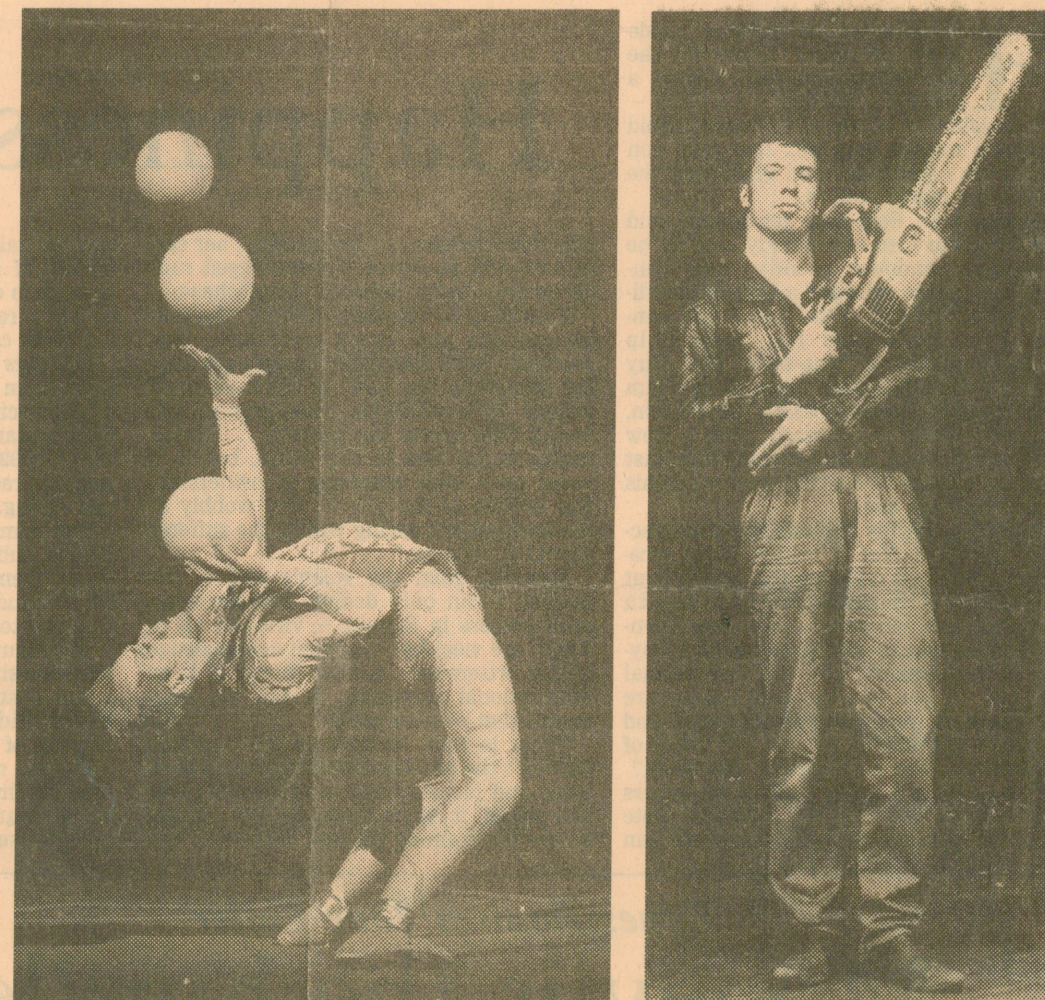
For Rose Fenton, co-founder of LIFT, the appeal of New Circus lies in its combination of daring, anarchy and spectacle with a certain poetic intensity and a firm root in popular culture. Film noir is a recurrent reference point, as is the excitement of the televised car chase or the cliff-hanger ending to an episode. "It plugs in immediately with youth and television culture: it's very fast-moving and doesn't demand a concentration span of more than a few minutes, because it's always moving on," she says.

As such, it ties in with developments in the theatre itself: the fierce post-industrialism of Barcelona's Fura Dels Baus, demolishers of warehouses and audiences alike, or the baroque imaginations of Royal de Luxe, seen this month at Avignon in a history of

France involving a history book with eight-ton pop-up pages, winched over by crane, and a full-sized hot air balloon.

Fundamental to New Circus is the cultivation of ever more awe-inspiring skills — whether discovered, as many of Archaos' members are, on the trottoirs of Paris, or acquired through more conventional training. And although Archaos and the Cirque du Soleil vie furiously for the tag of biggest and best, the scale does not have to be grand — as is proved by Reg Bolton, one of England's own New Circus pundits, whose own brand comes suitcase-sized.

In general, however, Britain lags far behind Europe and the Americas, dragged down by the same forces that drove Bertram Mills out of the country years ago — lack of money and an absence of the sort of official recognition that founds and finances circus schools. Also there's the sort of prosaic response that made Bristol ban Archaos for being just a little too anarchic, despite its attempts to pre-empt its critics. In Europe, for instance, the crane was used to swing a performer around within feet of the audience: a thrilling finale which has been abandoned for its British performances (Glasgow next week, Edinburgh August 11 to September 2, London September 29 to November 11). Safety officers here will no doubt sleep more soundly, but how much less vivid will be their dreams?



A Cirque du Soleil juggler; right — Phillipe Rey, the (toy) chainsaw juggler with Archaos