



Demolition derby: Archaos's show involves a convoy of clapped-out vehicles, blow torches, chain-saws and a flying trapeze, but the troupe emerges in one piece

An exhilarating trip to hell and back

Charles Spencer braves the icy wastes of Wembley for the latest show from the subversive circus troupe Archaos

THEATRE critics are often accused of being sadists, cruel tormentors of hapless playwrights, directors and actors. But I suspect there is a strong streak of masochism involved as well.

What else could have brought me to a god-forsaken car-park outside Wembley Stadium on a bitterly cold night to see *Metal Clown*, the latest show from Archaos, those outrageous subverters of the traditional circus?

Their last production in Edinburgh made me bridle like Mary Whitehouse, largely because its violent and explicit sexual content seemed entirely unsuitable for the many children in the matinee audience. The new one is marginally less offensive, but unless you are the kind of parent who actively encourages your children to watch video nasties before breakfast, it's certainly not a show for all the family. Castration, rampaging transvestism and mindless, malevolent violence all feature prominently.

There's no doubt, however, that Archaos refreshes the parts other circuses cannot reach. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," wrote Yeats in his great poem *The Second Coming*, and Archaos seems dementedly determined to prove the truth of his apocalyptic vision. This is entertainment that constantly hovers on the edge of disaster, and it proves powerfully addictive. There is a hideous, decadent attraction in witnessing so much ugliness and destruction.

The action takes place in a tent the size of an aircraft hangar, with the audience (there is room for 3,500 people) seated on two sides of a long runway on which the company's convoy of clapped-out vehicles career up and down. There are 80 performers from 15 countries, and even a narrative of sorts.

The action is set in Brazil. A superb Brazilian dance company, Bahia Axe Bahia, represents the indigenous population. Archaos's familiar retinue of freaks, a grotesque stilt-walker and "metal clowns" — giggling, grunting sub-humans with sheets of corrugated iron strapped to

their backs — symbolise the conquistadors and the malign forces of colonialism. All pretty predictable really, but it makes for an explosive clash of cultures between the dignity and grace of the Brazilians and the sleazy menace of the rest of the troupe.

As always in Archaos, intense excitement competes with longish passages of sheer tedium. The company's director, Pierrot Pillot-Bidon,

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is full of bright ideas but hopeless at pacing a show. There are great yawning gaps when almost nothing happens.

It takes ages, for instance, to raise the outlandish machine that serves as a flying trapeze, and when it's up, the performers prove terrifyingly incompetent, constantly crashing into the safety net.

After this accident-prone display, one nervously wonders what the final body count will be when the company get to work with their trademark blow torches and chain-saws. Amazingly, all the performers were still in one piece by the end of the night.

The show's attempts at coarse humour are as dismaying as ever, consisting largely of a gross transvestite who strips women of their knickers and exposes his bum. But it is hard to resist the sheer spectacle of the stunt driving and sudden explosions, the grinding heavy metal of the excellent rock band the Thunder Dogs and the exhilarating dancing of the Brazilians. Look out especially for the *capoeiristas*, who whirl around in a style that owes more to martial arts than the ballroom, constantly threatening each other with potentially lethal kicks.

Like poor old Ken Barlow, you feel you've been to hell and back by the end of this fiery, smoke-filled show, but there is no denying the intermittent exhilaration of the trip.