

THE SPECTATOR

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Entertainment

Big top perversion

Joanna Coles questions the ethics of an alternative French circus

The human blob, a limbless creature — merely a tiny head and torso — rides round and round in an electric wheelchair cackling horribly. Two clowns, dressed like Gothic hoboes, appear and start to taunt him. Steering his chair with his mouth, he drives towards them. They laugh and shout abuse in French. Then the first one picks him up and catapults him into the air. The other neatly catches him and tosses him into a nearby dustbin, which is wheeled off with the blob still cackling inside. The audience gasps. This is Archaos, the alternative French circus.

If it must be defined, Archaos claims, the above is not a scene from a Victorian freak show, it is a modern metaphor for the way society deals with its disabled. (It throws them away.) Archaos is keen on metaphors; it uses them a lot, especially those involving urban violence.

A man chainsaws a woman's head off, then presses her twitching face against his groin and writhes in pleasure. Another man, who has been digging a grave, suddenly lies down in it; a youth shovels soil on top of him. A woman bends down to pick flowers and is raped from behind. The

audience, aged from five to 85, snigger.

In the middle of the big top on Edinburgh's Leith Links, a transvestite trapeze artist called Roman, dressed in ripped fishnet stockings and a jock-strap, descends from his rope on to the lap of an unsuspecting Scottish lawyer. He thrusts his tongue down the tweeded man's throat and proceeds to French-kiss him until the spectator recovers sufficiently to push him away in disgust. Across the stage, a blind girl is jumped on by two jugglers who steal her white stick and mime a rape. The audience titter nervously and shrink in their seats.

In France, this act is met with a roar of approval as are most of the more violent 'metaphors'. Well-to-do young Parisians beg Archaos to perform at their weddings; even French children adore it. Mitterrand's government sees it as one of the country's most successful exports, plying it with enormous grants to travel overseas. Within four years, Archaos has become the biggest circus in Europe, is negotiating a film deal and has been asked to organise the opening ceremony for next year's Winter Olympics.

At a time when the traditional circus — unable to compete with the special effects at the local Odeon — has found itself up a cul-de-sac, Archaos claims to have redefined the art. Lions and tamers are substituted by motor-bikes and riders. Exploding cars replace traditional dancing horses. The friendly big top with its sequinned usherettes has completely disappeared. Instead, the inside of Archaos's tent is a huge industrial scrapyard, an urban nightmare where the popcorn sellers dress as tramps.

A female clown bites the heads off raw mackerel and spits them into the audience. Thunderbolts and fire-crackers go off without warning under spectators' seats. Pregnant women are warned that the show is so

unpredictable they may go into labour.

It's a spectacle, the performers declare, of urban loneliness, of people fighting each other and learning to live in an urban environment. It's done great box office on the continent and now it is touring Britain and selling out here too. 'Archaos mirrors real life,' explains their front-man, Mark Borkowski. 'You won't see anything in an Archaos show that you wouldn't see on a tube train if you don't hide your head in a newspaper.'

Its appeal, he adds, is the way it has tapped into the current sub-culture of urban violence. Take, for example, the latest show, Metal Clowns, which opened in Manchester last month and features joy-riding and simulated street riots. A man careers through the big top performing hand-brake turns which would put the joy-riders of the Blackbird Leys estate to shame. Clowns armed with alternative riot gear take on urchins with petrol bombs.

'Archaos has always reflected both the beauty and brutality of life,' Mr Borkowski continues. 'The show's electricity horrifies people and turns them on at the same time. It's sexy, it's real and it's dangerous.'

On the last point, at least, he is right. The clowns run amok, attacking each other with chainsaws. Some of this is choreographed, but not all. Last month one clown had his chin sawn off during a performance. Another lost a thumb.

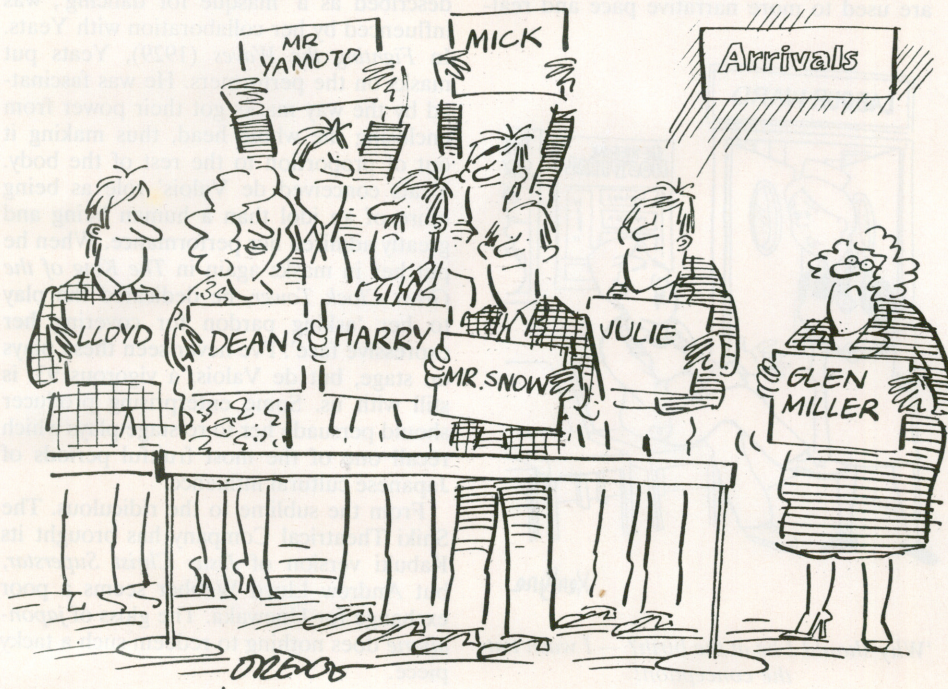
'You can't get more of a thrill than watching people really hurt themselves,' chuckles Mr Borkowski. 'When they hit each other with metal bars they really are hitting each other and feeling the pain. It's taking us back to the Roman circuses with gladiators.'

So who joins it? Who are the people filling the 16 huge trucks and the convoy of 45 caravans and who don't mind suffering for their art? 'A lot of them are street people, urchins or travellers who didn't have much of a life until they found the show,' says Mr Borkowski, citing one performer, a poacher, who was arrested last month for stealing sheep for his colleagues to eat.

But a lot of them are not. Antonia Beamish, a clown, is the daughter of a former British ambassador to Peru and worked at the Groucho Club before packing her bags. Cyril was a photographer for Paris *Vogue* until he arrived to take pictures of a show and stayed to perform with a singing dog.

And Rockin' Robin was 51 when he abandoned his job as a BBC piano-tuner and pitched up with his tent. Now he lives in a lorry cabin, and devised a scene in Metal Clown where a child bride is molested. Tripping around in a long white dress, she is picked up by a terrifying rocker who rips the child bride's knickers off and displays her tiny bottom to the audience. She is played by a dwarf actress aged 42. One imagines Billy Smart spinning in his grave.

The middle-class English audience laughs hesitantly. This is, they agree,



voyeuristic violence of a rather disturbing kind. But no one walks out.

So far only one council, Bristol, decided to ban the troupe two years ago, and then the neighbouring burghers of Bath promptly offered the circus another site. Needless to say, the bad publicity centring on an act performed by a topless woman, ensured yet another sell-out run.

Joanna Coles writes for the Guardian