

# From Caravans to Chainsaws

MARY HARPER INTERVIEWS  
ARCHAOS

**C**hainsaws and hammers, motorbikes and Mercedes – not exactly conventional circus ingredients, but then again, Archaos is not circus as we know it. It is explosive and dangerous, more like a factory gone mad than a ring-full of razzmatazz. The senses are bombarded with dazzling arcs of light, and blaring horns blast as the air fills with fumes and smoke. Archaos brings circus into the twentieth, or perhaps the twenty-first century, drawing from the world of industry and machines for inspiration. I spoke to Pierre Bidon, a bear-like man with a wild, wicked and wonderful laugh, about the past, present and future of Archaos.

"From 1975-1986, we were 'Circus Bidon', a travelling circus troupe with 25 horses and nine splendid gypsy caravans. Because we live in an industrial world, we gave up the horses and started to use lorries instead. By doing this, we discovered the engine and fell in love with mechanical things."

And so Archaos was born, the name being chosen because "we wanted a short and attractive name that could be easily remembered, a name that started with an 'A' so that it would come first on performance listings!"

"Archaos has a central motto which reflects our general philosophy, not just for the show but for our whole way of life:

*Everything we say, we do  
Everything we want, we find.*

*Everything is important, but  
we don't give a damn."*

"We are people who love to dream, who love to laugh, and who love life. Loving life means living dangerously and taking risks at all times. By living like this, our ideas change extremely quickly – one idea leads to another, which leads to another, and so on. Things happen so fast that it's only after we've seen what we've done, that we realise how wonderful it is."

Ideas certainly do change rapidly. In the space of two years Archaos have re-invented and revolutionised circus. Raw energy rather than tinsel-tiredness, is the name of the game. Glitter and glamour have been replaced by aggressive displays and



perilous stunts. Instead of a Big Top there is a 'Chapiteau de Cordes', a massive rope structure that looks more like a giant spider's web than a tent.

Gone are the sequined costumes – performers wear overalls and warehouse coats, giving Archaos the air of a factory floor rather than showbiz. Lion tamer's whips give way to oxy-acetylene torches; plumed horses to roaring motorbikes. Some traditional elements such as the trapeze are retained, but this time the artist brandishes a chainsaw as he swings through the air. Unlike most circuses which rely on flights of fantasy into unreal worlds, Archaos uses today's industrial resources to create its own special form of madness.

"Whenever we create a new show, we draw our ideas and material from real life. As we are living in an industrial world, we have created an industrial circus. For us it is an everyday reality to use chainsaws and corrugated iron. Anyway, when you see a soldering iron being used at night-time, it is a very beautiful thing, so why not use it in the circus?"

Although Archaos recently performed at the Festival of New Circus held on London's South Bank, Pierrot Bidon has a rather scathing attitude towards the whole idea of 'New Circus':

"New Circus doesn't exist. Archaos is the most traditional of all circuses because it resembles circus as it was first performed 200 years ago. What is now thought of as traditional

circus, complete with ring-master and set routines, only started 30 years ago. Before that, the whole point of circus was to invent new acts constantly, to have new ideas evolving at all times. Now all that has been forgotten, and the central preoccupation is business."

Archaos always looks outwards and into the future. None of its members come from traditional circus families so, rather than keeping to old secrets and moth-eaten lions, they are always breaking new boundaries, stretching circus beyond its limits. Their commitment to constant change has certainly paid off. By forever expanding their horizons, they have been hugely successful throughout Europe, and are now making quite a name for themselves in London.

They have now fixed their sights on North America which they will undoubtedly take by storm. No longer satisfied with live performances, they have thrown themselves into the world of film. They have already completed two films for French television, and have several others planned, including one for Channel 4.

Although the Archaos team spends a lot of its time up in the air, be it swinging madly from a trapeze or soaring over Bidon's Mercedes on a motorbike, as far as organisation is concerned, they have their feet firmly on the ground.

"We are real dreamers but, in order to live out our dreams, we have to be realistic. Just as good realists

have to be dreamers. We are in no way anarchic. We retain our collective spirit but are very well organised. Our way of working is traditional and therefore modern. We have a base in the South of France which is an old factory where we make all our equipment, even the 'Chapiteau de Cordes'. Archaos is an industry, a 'human industry', which works in the same way as any modern business does.

"Circus is intimately linked with travelling. We are always on the move. All 40 of us live together in Caravans, boys with girls – or rather," (deep chuckle), "girls with boys. We have two cooks and eat collectively. This is very important because it is often during meal times, when everybody is together, that ideas are born. Everybody in Archaos is bursting with ideas, and as we respect the rights of everybody, from the accountant to the aerialist, we never tell anybody to shut-up."

One gets the feeling that this risk-loving group of industrial nomads have a collective imagination that knows no bounds. Like Archaos itself, Bidon is full of surprises and contradictions, reflecting the chaos and confusion of the modern industrial world.

Archaos will be performing on Clapham Common (by Rookery Road) from 20 September to 2 October at 8.30pm every day (no performance on Monday 26 September). Tickets available from (01) 586 1176. (See Fringe).