

How metal madness makes for a corrugated clown

In her update on life with Archaos, the mutant circus, **Lucinda Alford** reveals more spills than thrills.

FIRST performance on Friday night. Until my cue to run across the circus arena dressed as a deranged *hausfrau* pushing a shopping trolley, stage fright doesn't come into it. Then, I feel sick.

Loads of people are out there watching me; I find it easier not to watch them. The most dreaded bit of Archaos's mutant circus show is our entrance as metal clowns. Ten of us, chosen from 'ordinary' members of the public to join the circus for its London run, are carrying corrugated metal sheets ('toles').

We have to make a shell, turtle-like, with our toles. It's not a manoeuvre that my normal job of fashion stylist at *The Observer* equips me to handle well.

It is ridiculously cramped and only the two people in the front of our 'shell' can see where we are going. Trying to keep us all together at the same speed so the shell stays complete is a nightmare. Measured steps — one, two; one, two — rapidly turns into one two one two: quickstep timing.

We have to stay in this position for what seems an age (five minutes). The tension is unbearable. We are on stage but not visible as people. It's hot, cramped, and I know that at any minute a huge explosion will go off in the drain over which we are crouched. And for this, I am being paid £15 a night.

We are warned that if we are not at least three feet away when the explosion goes off, our eardrums are in danger of giving up and going home without us.

For the first couple of nights, we had dry ice in there too, so our four inches of breathing space filled with smoke. Thankfully, this bright idea is dropped. When we are not on stage, we shiver outside the tent in the freezing cold, waiting for the next cue.

Before Archaos, my sole stage experience had been in a school play, so I had no preconceptions as to how I'd feel about performing in public. The show is exhausting, but my energy levels are so charged that at the end, when the band keeps playing and the audience is encouraged to join us dancing in the arena, I manage to drag a few people out of their seats. The applause doesn't affect me much, all I can think about is a cold beer — and where the party will be that night.

Archaos is alternative circus. This production tells the story of Brazil from the conquistadors to the killing of children by death squads earlier this year. Metal clowns (us) begin at 2.30pm each day. I'm still aching from the previous night's show and the first event is a blow-by-blow critique of our performance.

'Lulu, you must be in the right position when Boris comes to hit you.' 'Lulu, you must

keep your tole upright, it is most important.' Then it is tole maintenance time. Archaos is a do-it-yourself world of its own, tucked up in the most unlikely place in London: Wembley Arena Car Park.

Although the circus has a fully equipped workshop run by a Dutch guy who can cut a saloon car into a convertible in half a day, he's always busy, servicing the permanent company of more than 100. So, if your tole breaks, you mend it yourself. Toles are heavy and cumbersome. If you are lucky, yours has a couple of inches of damp foam strapped to it. I chose the smallest and lightest. **BIG MISTAKE No 1.**

This fell apart after a couple of performances, so in the freezing rain, I'm learning metal-work to fix another tole. It is Sunday, three performances after my debut and it's supposed to be a day of rest. It is raining, getting dark and the container truck in which we novice clowns 'live' has no lighting as yet. To say that I am very tired is the understatement of the year.

Frustration doesn't describe the feeling of trying to cut a huge piece of metal with cutters the size of a tin-opener. I get halfway through with about two fingers left that can function in the cold, and I'm rescued by another clown. New tole in place, rehearsals carry on.

It's still raining and we have to learn a new section of the

show. No problem, I'm willing, even in the rain, and the near dark. But the new scene involves us rolling over steel barrels. The ridges cut into all the parts women don't want big bits of metal cutting into.

'OK,' says artistic director, Olivier. 'We break for a while for the rain.' Tired and despondent, we file into our truck. Rumours of mutiny multiply when we realise that we are not to be paid any extra for rehearsals. 'It's not Club Méditerranée,' says Olivier.

No one is here for the money, but people have to eat. Every one of the novice clowns except me is unemployed. They, like me, had auditioned (and beaten more than 60 others) for the crack of belonging to Archaos. In spite of the discomfort, we are developing a camaraderie. We're beginning to understand that if we don't help ourselves, nobody else will.

Costume and make-up is also do-it-yourself. For the first night, some of us use my bike engine oil to black out our faces. **BIG MISTAKE No 2.** One of the clowns prefers mud — I wish I had. Dirty engine oil isn't the easiest substance to remove.

So here I am, working in the morning at *The Observer*, and spending the rest of the time until nearly midnight with Archaos. Then comes **BIG MISTAKE No 3** — a bigger-than-necessary BMW which suddenly stops in front of me as I'm riding my motorbike to my fifth performance of the show. I was only 10 minutes ride away from Archaos, so close and yet . . . in an ambulance.

I tell people who ask why I'm hobbling around on crutches that a funny thing happened to me on the way to the circus.



Braving explosions, smoke, anarchy and rain: Lucinda Alford./Photograph by Roger Hutchings.

Goodbye world, I'm off to join the circus

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Before **BIG MISTAKES** Nos 1, 2 and 3: Auditioning three weeks ago.