World's biggest circus folds up its tent after descent into chaos

Joanna Coles
Arts Correspondent

FOR SALE: world's biggest tent with seating for 5,000, plus 15 cars which explode if you press the horn. For hire: 100 naked chainsaw jugglers guaranteed to appal. Roll up, roll up for the final performance. Archaos, the world's biggest circus, has gone bankrupt owing hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Yesterday its English producer, Adrian Evans, was said to be too depressed to talk. But Mark Borkowski, the show's PR, said the collapse was due to over-expansion and a run of bad luck.

Not least of which was a disaster at the Dublin Festival last year when the 60-ft tall Big Top — in which "urban clowns" did hand-brake turns in exploding cars — blew away. The three week run was ruined, leaving the troupe a fearsome legal battle with Dublin council.

"It is like a chainsaw blow to the goolies," Mr Borkowski said yesterday. "But you can't keep a company like Archaos together for long. It was as if there was a time bomb waiting to go off."

Everything about Archaos, which started horrifying Britain's councils four years ago, was dangerous. (Bristol banned it outright after hearing there was a naked woman in the show.) One clown chainsawed his chin off last summer, another his thumb. There were problems with fire and security regulations, and last August insurance premiums shot up by 1,500 per cent.

Yet its influence was enormous. Traditional circuses, increasingly criticised for using animals, were given a new direction.

Taking its name from anarchy and chaos, Archaos was set up in France by Pierrot Pillot-Bidon. Within months it had established itself as the wildest entertainment, featuring mock rapes, flashers and decapitations. Trapeze artists would descend from the skies and stick their tongues down spectators' throats, a clown would spit mackerel heads into the audience.

Every year Edinburgh council tried to ban it from the festival and every year it failed. Councillors across Britain will sigh with relief. Their battle has ended.