

THEY nearly cancelled the matinee. The night before, the chainsaw clown misjudged the distance while cutting a man's cigarette in half and sawed right through his colleague's chin. Result: screams, blood, applause. The audience thought it was part of the act. In Archaos, anything is possible.

The following night, a young Brazilian boy ran crying out of the tent, blood pouring from his face. He'd quite literally received a poke in the eye from a sharp stick. You work in Archaos, you take your chances.

During the same performance, when a group of leather-clad clowns roared into the tent on a customised truck firing flame-throwers, several members of the audience were accidentally doused in kerosene. Nobody seemed unduly worried. This is Archaos; these things happen.

Circuses where the performers risk their lives every night are two a penny. Archaos is the only circus where the audience can take as many risks as the performers.

Nothing can equal the first encounter with Archaos. The most dangerous, the most exciting, the loudest, most abrasive, falling-apartest circus in the world. Employing chainsaws and violins, motorbikes and oxy-acetylene torches, they held up a mirror to traditional circus and smashed the glass.

That was four years ago. Since then, they've had their problems. Accidents, bad

Archaos, the wonderfully crazy circus of chainsaws and roaring motor cars, is finally growing up, says NEIL NORMAN. Is this a good idea, or have the men in suits taken over?

Adding method to their madness

press, a few bannings from local councils, a softening of approach — substituting erotic athletics for leather-clad danger — and recent shows which were a disappointment. Archaos were never perfect — that wasn't the point — but they seemed to have lost their edge.

The new show, which premiered in Stockholm earlier this year, is an attempt to regain that edge. A group of South American dancers adds a touch of exotic glamour, plus extremely dangerous sword dances. The theme of the show, Metal Clown, is of the conflict between the industrial world and the natural one.

None of which matters one jot. Nobody ever went to see Archaos for themes and issues. They went for the sheer thrill of witnessing a motorised circus that combined the mayhem of a Hell's Angels gathering with the futurist excitement of a Mad Max movie.

Now that Archaos is getting bigger, it has to become more organised. And

organisation does not come naturally to the Archaos troupe. There are murmurings among the old guard that the entrepreneurs are taking over, that the wild gypsy spirit of the circus is being crushed beneath the march of safety regulations, paperwork and boring administrative problems.

It is a surprise to step up into the press caravan in Langenholm to find a computer lodged among the posters, empty wine bottles and the detritus of a publicity department. Even stranger to find a smartly dressed woman attempting to organise press tickets and butter up visiting Stockholm dignitaries. In the old days, you paid your money and you took your chances.

"It's grown quite a bit," says administrator Corally Augier-Latife. "When I joined three years ago everyone was doing everything. Now it has become more compartmentalised. This year we are trying to plan, we're trying to work like a normal enterprise. It's a



Inside the Archaos big top: the most dangerous, the most exciting, the loudest, most abrasive, falling-apartest circus in the world

turning point for Archaos. All the years before, when we had money in the bank we spent it."

A normal enterprise? *Archaos?* You have to be kidding. But, with a compliment of 65 people plus 30 extras recruited in each town to be clowns or stewards plus children and wives and husbands, there is an increasing sense of responsibility.

"It's a pity the company changes so much," says Sarah Sankey, a stilt-walking electrician and three-year veteran of Archaos, which qualifies her as an "ancient".

SHE explains: "There are only five ancients left. I still haven't come to my senses. I'll have to one day.

You get very very pissed off about once a week then you turn around and look at the people you work with and realise you love them dearly. They're like a bunch of unruly brothers and sisters."

Six foot, strong-jawed and dressed in black leather, the punky blonde dancer and actress caused a stir in the press last year when she fell off a lighting rig and broke her back. "Being an electrician and breaking your back isn't that interesting, so suddenly I became a 'trapeze

artist' and then a 'tightrope walker'."

She is still the chief lighting designer ("it's simple, only they don't know it") and also performs on stilts, striding blindfolded and topless from one end of the big top to the other. "You've got to show them a bit of tit. But I might have to make a costume for England 'cos it's so bloody cold."

Sean Bridges is a relatively new addition. Born in Street, Somerset, he joined the circus last year in Edinburgh as a trick cyclist and juggler. He's 21, with a Mohawk hairstyle, and travels with his girlfriend Claire and their new baby. "I'll stay with the circus for about five years," he says in a curiously anachronistic West Country burr. "I'm gonna keep myself to myself, get my life together with Claire and my baby and have a life. It's my job."

In the lull between the matinee and the evening performance, all is quiet, save for the fizz of acetylene

torches and the sputtering of engines. A girl perches high on a mobile crane, repairing a sheet of black polythene. A bare-chested Mohican punk juggles clubs. A woman with bright red hair walks by carrying a sledgehammer. Inside the tent, voices are raised in argument. There is a post-mortem of sorts, about the show, about the future of Archaos. The Brazilians are restless.

Corally sighs. "From the outside it looks anarchistic. It appears an easy life, but it's a very hard life. There is no space for drug addicts and spaced-out people or lazies."

The spirit of Archaos refuses to be totally extinguished, however. When we climb into a car to drive back to my hotel, Corally sticks a spoon in the ignition. "Most of our cars don't have keys," she grins. "The French don't like that."

● Archaos's new London season from Friday 1 November at Wembley Stadium (Car Park 2).