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By JONATHAN MARGOLIS

HOW many powerful, successful men are truly adored by the people who work for them?

Pierrot Bidon, a robust charismatic Frenchman with a poetic turn of phrase and the light of creative lunacy never far from his eyes, is worshipped by the performers in his circus, Archaos.

Never mind that Archaos's performers are all slightly mad, too.

For this is the circus that made circus hot — and has made 37-year-old Bidon the biggest circus impresario since Barnum.

Instead of tigers and elephants, Archaos has mechanical monsters — cranes, trucks, motorbikes and clowns with attitude, wielding chainsaws.

Bursting with rock music, explosions, screaming and tribal chants, the Big Top is how you would imagine a garden feté at Broadmoor.

Bidon is from a Le Mans circus family. His father quit the high wire to become a house painter when Pierrot was three. And the boy was juggling and swinging on a trapeze before he was ten.

Magic

'I was a turbulent boy, always living on the street,' Pierrot tells me in his caravan on a piece of waste ground in Manchester.

For 15 years he led a traditional circus around French villages. Then, six years ago, he decided it was boring.

'There was no poetry, no sensation, no dreams, no nightmares,' he says. 'Circus was supposed to be magic. So I decided to make a new kind of circus.'

Bidon is what the French existentialists call a man of action. He has ridiculous dreams — then makes them happen.

He wanted a circus of non-circus people, from clashing cultures, with clashing personalities, to create a huge shifting, loving, fighting family around him.

He insisted on having no trained animals. 'Circus people who say they have a great friendship with their lions usually get eaten by them,' he says. 'And I think this is a good thing.'

Most of all, he wanted a circus



CRAZY DREAMS: Archaos stars, left, and creator, Pierrot Bidon, below

Pictures: JOHN CARTER



and violence, while the ordinary punters come to enjoy them. Bidon's magnetic charm will be put to the test in the coming weeks when the less sensitive tabloids latch on to a rather iffy scene involving mock violence to a child in the latest show.

'I am happy to have anything in the show if it has meaning,' he says — and somehow you agree.

You might not if Bidon showed any interest in making money. True, he has been everywhere, done everything and is now selling the T-shirt. But Archaos's finances are still ridiculous.

The present show — now in Dublin and at Wembley Stadium from October 29 until Christmas — needs to sell a nightly 1,850 of the tent's 2,500 seats to break even.

Daring

'Money, power and glory are just tools to work with,' says Bidon. 'The point is not to make money.' And again, you empathise — even if you suspect he is quietly amassing a fortune.

The bigger the show gets, the grander Bidon's dreams grow.

A few years ago, he imagined a mobile trapeze rig, mounted on a truck, that could be erected quickly in any village square.

Last week it was delivered to Manchester and is already in the show, a great tangled oil derrick of a contraption, amidst whose wires and beams daring young men and women fly as if gravity were a mere inconvenience.

Now in development is a really big mobile trapeze, in which an articulated lorry will swing around the upper reaches of the big top, along with the acrobats and a flight of (untrained) crows.

'And after that, maybe I'll think of something new,' Pierrot Bidon says with a grin.

Booming back in the Big Top

Potty Pierrot makes the circus live again

that says something. As a result Archaos is more a modern dance happening than anything else.

The new show — though you don't have to know this to watch it — is a symbolic history of colonial exploitation in Brazil. No wonder intellectuals have taken Archaos to heart, violence and all.

In excitement terms, I found

the show somewhere between Morris Dancing (a Brazilian version of which it includes) and watching a skillfully applied top coat of Dulux dry — but that is not a view shared by anyone else I could find in the Manchester audience.

Bidon is lucky in that respect. French Culture Minister Jack

Lang has pumped funds into Archaos and promoted it as a flagship of French culture.

So while the popular papers are full of stories (a little exaggerated, actually) about danger and injuries, the heavy newspapers' reviews bring the little-round-spectacles brigade along in droves to think about the noise