

In 1985 the son of a circus boss exchanged horses for Hondas and juggling clubs for chainsaws. **John Vidal** profiles Pierrot Pillot-Bidon, the man who put anarchy in the ring

Archaos theory

MIDDAY in Wembley, north London. The tube has broken down, the road is up, the concrete acres below the twin towers bristle with litter and echo to jack-hammers. In car park two, fenced behind eight-foot barrier wire, the 14 nationalities that now make up the Archaos tribe struggle for polyglot life on the dull edge of another semi-derelict city.

The 17 Brazilian dancers laze away the long night in their caravans, the French are nowhere to be seen, a Moroccan — or is it a Colombian or a Greenlander? — stumbles to the restaurant car and a British technician roams hopelessly in search of "Le Flash" to clean something. The gaudy buses and trucks lie idle. For the brave young men and women who ran away to the circus it's come to this: the great adventure is holed up in an English car park.

Pierrot Pillot-Bidon, for one, is getting out. "Le patron", artistic director, and founder of what in five years has grown from a sprig of an idea to Europe's largest circus is off to Heathrow in the afternoon. He and his girl will clutch a wad of notes and take the first flight anywhere. Maybe the Med, perhaps Italy. "No day off since February is hard, hein?"

And why not two days off after your New York tour has been cancelled, your cathedral of a tent has been destroyed by Dublin gales, you're suing the festival that invited you for £75,000, a colleague has been killed and 20 police cars have just surrounded the troupe refusing to let it leave? And that's all in the last few weeks. If most directors deal in the theory of drama, 35-year-old Pierrot made it his life for five years.

Which is where the Archaos story becomes confusing. From the start, way back in 1985, when he and his brothers exchanged their father's horses to ride around his small provincial French circus ring on motorbikes and turned juggling clubs into chainsaws, Archaos has been disowned by authority.

First by Pierrot's father who didn't understand. Then by the old ringmasters, locked in the past, who ignored Pierrot and then fumed that these *zornistes* should be subvented when they themselves were strapped for cash and ideas. Poofters, complained one English diarch, lured to see what was being billed as "new circus".

Meanwhile the theatre mafia, equally disoriented, rejected the company's pretensions to drama. Circus don't have stories, they argued, and whings that visual symbols were their province. Besides, they implied, theatres are as clean as fresh sawdust and shouldn't smell of carbon monoxide.

At the same time the image grew, of an unruly, anarchic bunch of dangerous Euro-long-



DRAWING: PAUL HAMILTON

hairs running amok through Britain. A pack of gorillas riding into town on the backs of man-eating leopards would not have excited the tabloid press more. It's as boring as Basildon but the regular Archaos meetings would do credit to the UN. Every word is translated into three languages or more, there's a touching camaraderie, a rare intelligence and solidarity, and a deep respect for others' cultures. One is tempted to think of Peter Brook's holy, rarified international troupe. Only tempted.

Yet what were they doing, these hairy Frenchmen with corrugated tin strapped to their backs, when they first came to London in 1987, riding little Yamahas no more dangerously than everyone does in the streets of Cannes? Swinging from trapezes and juggling balls as in any other circus and not even, in those days, so very expertly? Playing popular music like in every dance hall across the land? Why the controversy? Was a car crash acceptable in a film but not in a tent? Was it not, in short, the image of modern culture that shocked rather than the substance? Pierrot still finds the response extraordinary.

Even stranger, he finds, is the reaction of British city authorities who have been regularly panicked into absurd decisions by the media hype: "Only in England," he told the Guardian in 1989, "is there censorship — by men in a town hall who know nothing about circus or theatre."

The threat never to return has now been lifted. But Metal Clown, in London until Christmas before finishing in Paris next year, is the last Britain will see of the troupe for two, even three years. And the next

show, the largest and last, is too big to play anywhere in the country but London.

The suspicion remains that these "crazies", denounced regularly as "perverts" and corrupt as sin, are as culturally innocuous and quite as moral as young Philip Astley when he took the idea of training daredevil men on thoroughbred horses away from the army and into the public arena, so inventing "modern circus" in 1784.

Pierrot, anyway, never set out to shock. What happened, he reckons five years on, is that a young country boy who had only once been to a city went to Paris in 1984. It stormed him: "The mix of people, the idea of a place where anything could happen, the celebration of life, the physical and mental dangers shook me."

HE LOVED it. He feared it. It was Dantean, and soon Pierrot was thinking operatically about cities. The vision has been developing since 1987, of the last, huge Archaos show. "The vision is of one man surrounded by machinery destroying everything around him. One man imprisoned in the middle of a vast space, so alone he smashes his creations. The show will play along a whole street before 10,000 people a night with hundreds in the cast." It will, he says, be everything he's ever felt about the culture of cities, their violence, the destruction of the spirit by the modern age and the vastness of technology.

He calls it *Mécanique En Subte* and it is planned for 1993. It will run for two years and then, Pierrot promises, he'll give Archaos up, throw away his bikes and, as far as a man

who has made the road his life can, he'll go home to Ales. In the meantime 2,500 people a night and 70 performers will do.

For Pierrot everything Archaos does has been leading to *Mécanique En Subte*, with a few diversions on the way to learn more about how technology can be used in confined spaces, how drama works, how stories can be told, how circus can be developed.

From the naked aggression of the first show came the toned down, more psychologically disruptive second, *Last Show On Earth*. From there came *Bouinax*, about alienation. This year's *Metal Clown* is painted in dark, visual symbols, loosely about the rape and development of Brazil and the rise of dictators and death squads. Pierrot is passionate about that country, the craziest, most sensual, most violent place on earth, he says.

He is stung by criticism that his act is no longer circus but a poor entertainment. All he's done, he says, is infiltrate the old images with the new. Why not use stuntmen, he asks, why not rock music, why not refer to films instead of fairy tales?

Theatre worries and bores him, he's scared about seeing it now because he believes he will pick up bad ideas. He was the first, brave man to walk out, after 10 minutes, from Ariane Mnouchkine's latest epic in Avignon. Give him *Terminator Two* any day.

Meanwhile he is sanguine about the growth of the company. Archaos now takes as much at the box office on a good day as it did in its first year. ("Impressive, non?"). Now he employs hundreds and the days of grants are all but over. He turns over 10 millions (£10 million) a year of old

francs, he says, and works out what that is in "new" (25-year-old) French currency, crossing off noughts and carrying back figures on the back of an envelope just as he always did when it came to finances.

The trouble nowadays, says one of his employees, loyalty, is that Archaos started with people when everything else of scale and vision today starts with an idea and tries to fit people into the plan. And then it grew, faster than anyone could believe. The possibility is that audiences always expect the last show.

In the end, though, not much changes: Pierrot puts down another black baccy roll-up and holds up his foot. After five years, the greatest circus impresario in Europe is still with-out socks. Now that is dangerous.