

# Performing Arts

## FEATURE

Neville Hadsley  
meets the  
mad chainsaw  
man of  
Marseilles...



**P**ierrot Pillot Bidon, director of Europe's most controversial circus Archaos, is willing to talk quite freely on violence, tradition, and fighting the Bristol ban...

Soft spoken, mild mannered, cigarette toling Pierrot seems more like your favourite uncle than the director of a circus which, if the tabloids are to be believed, threatens life, limb and morals. There's been a lot of nonsense written about Archaos recently, almost all of it by "journalists" who have never seen the now notorious French circus, egging on panicky councillors (who haven't seen it either) in the process.

I met Pierrot in Bristol where the council has tried to ban Archaos. They failed, thanks to "traditional" circus owner Gerry Cottle who found land for Archaos to perform on, but the shenanigans are enough to send a shiver down the spine of anyone who fears the kind of McCarthyite witch-hunts and censorship to which the arts are all too often victim.

It began - where else? - in the gutter tabloids, where a sensationalist and inaccurate story sent ruling Labour councillors into paroxysms of terror. As Pierrot explains, in his wonderfully accented English: "It's

crazy, because the politicians, they do not ban the show because of the show - they sent people to see the show and their report was good. They ban it because of the press that we generate, the scandal press, and so that's a bit frightening because that means the politicians are not free if they let the press make up their mind. What kind of politicians are they? It's dangerous for everybody.

"In a way though," he admits without prompting, "that gives us good publicity, a lot of publicity." So does he enjoy the notoriety? "We need notoriety, if you want people in the tent. We need to give information to excite curiosity."

Archaos are quite simply the most outrageous, visual and gripping group of performers you are ever likely to see in a circus tent. "We are the last real circus in the world!" says Bidon. "We work in the tradition that circuses used to. Fifty years ago, they weren't like they are now. Archaos is a most traditional circus, because we take a lot of risks, make a lot of stands, and tell a lot of stories - the way they built shows in old times. Today circuses, they do demonstration, exhibition only," he shrugs dismissively. "It's like the Olympics! It's only a demonstration. There's no interest. So in that way we are the most traditional circus."

Taking risks, Archaos-style, involves flaming motorbikes and juggling with "live" chain-saws. That last stunt cost one of their number a substantial part of his kneecap in Stockholm recently, but that, for Bidon, only serves to confirm his point.

"We have some injuries sometimes," he says, "but that's circus life, the same as any circus in the world. The artists take risks and try always to push their limits further. Of course it affects us because we are all a big gang of good chums, so when your friend's broken, we

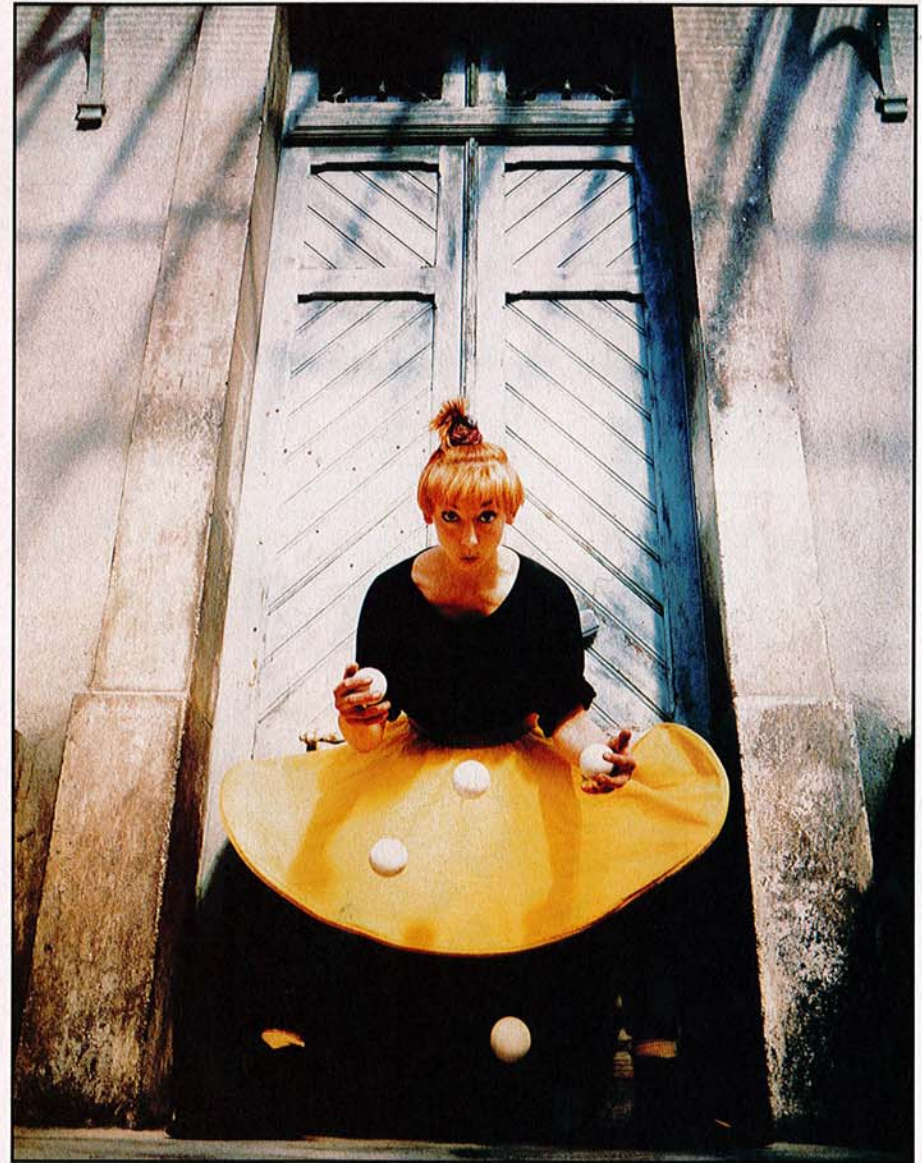
change the show. We cannot replace (that person) because I work with the character of my people, so it's impossible to substitute for someone who is broken."

To Bidon, there is only one aim: "We only want to be seen as people who make a fantastic show, and good entertainment for the audience. So I am trying to create a show that is like a dream. A dream with some nightmares, a lot of contrast. If we use violence sometimes, it is always to have a contrast between that and nice things - love, peace, beauty. That's important."

For Birmingham, Archaos are bringing back the show that caused a storm of acclaim in London and Edinburgh last year, and also the one that was marred by the incident in Stockholm. *The Last Show On Earth* is very much an aerial show, with much of the action taking place on high wires. "There are stories and many different characters," says Bidon, "like the metal clown. It's violent in a funny way. At times it's like a video clip." Like a pop video? "Yes, a pop video. It's got live music, and they play everything. They can play classical music, they can play rock music, they can play jazz music. It's like music for a movie."

To end, I couldn't help asking whether he likes being known as the "mad chainsaw man of Marseilles". "Me? I don't mind," he says, flashing a grin. "It's funny. In a way I have to push madness into the show, but in another way, I am also producer, responsible for finance. I have two heads. One head has the artistic thing, and another which is about management. And that is another story."

Archaos are in Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston Road, Birmingham from October 6 to 21. (No performance Mondays, 3pm matinees on Saturdays and Sundays). Box office: 021 440 3838.



# DISORDER

# OUT OF CHAOS