

**ARCHAOS** have a rather neat new catchphrase. They are, they say, "as beautiful as a truck". Big, noisy, dangerous, ecologically unsound, definitely. But "beautiful"? Perhaps to their mothers, and I wouldn't bet on that.

The original Archaos hype was the brazen assertion that they "re-invented circus". The theory was that out went the horses, elephants, white-faced clowns and the other tired clichés of old-style circus and in came dodgy-looking types on motorbikes, chainsaws, sex and rock 'n' roll mayhem. This

was true, except that previous shows never quite lived up to the hype. Now "Metal Clown", their biggest-ever show, almost lives up to their anarchic, cyberpunk dream of presenting the wildest, biggest spectacular in the known universe. Performed in a mobile 2,500-seater tent, it features over 100 performers, assorted lorries, battered cars, explosive devices, cranes, a troupe of Brazilian dancers and martial artists, a rather fine rock band called The Thunderdogs and a telephone box which one of the performers appears to be crucified on (possibly some arcane metaphor for the modern over-dependence on communications technology and resultant alienation?).

The Brazilian element is what makes this show different from previous Archaos extravaganzas. The men do this astonishingly athletic kick boxing called Capoeira, while the women add an element of graceful eroticism and beauty which is another world away from the habitual Archaos greaser aesthetic. The martial arts, drumming and dancing are forms connected with the Brazilian religion Candomblé, which, like other similar Afro-Catholic religions, is gaining popularity in the Americas – a religion that is musical, magical, elemental and sexy – a great antidote to North European puritanism.

The Story of "Metal Clown" is the cultural clash between the Brazilians and the white man (the 'metal clowns') with idiosyncratic vignettes of slavery, oppression, dictatorship, revolt and freedom. The drummers provide the music for the Brazilians, while The Thunderdogs, who make a wonderful entrance on top of a giant truck, provide a slightly retro-Seventies rock backing for the nasty colonial exploiters. By the end, of course, they jam together because "We want to dance together on our small planet and enjoy ourselves like free men."

Various classic Archaos elements remain – the joys of trashing cars, bozos with corrugated iron strapped to their back, trick cycling and general bad taste and taboo-breaking (one guy appears to take a shit on stage). There's also a distinct surrealist undertone – a man turns into a metallic caterpillar, while another pushes a shopping trolley with headlights. A large slob in drag cycles through the action, while an utterly incongruous showbiz couple in spangly costumes look like your worst nightmare of a Euro-Variety show. Whoever thinks this stuff up must surely have done some reasonably in-depth research into the type of chemicals not usually available over the counter at Boots.

There are also technical gimmicks, such as the giant industrial fans which create a mini-Hurricane, a great theatrical effect which literally blows away the previous scene in the show.

There is more to Archaos than just a show – for once the cliché "it's a way of life" is accurate. There are performers from at least 10 different countries who are living out an updated version of the old escape route of desperados "running away with the circus". They even claim that two German MPs wanted to run away with them. There is a great camaraderie, based partly on living a gypsy life out of caravans and partly on danger – when I saw them they had five people with assorted breakages – it looks dangerous, and it is.

This is one reason for the dramatic impact – the voyeuristic possibility of someone getting hurt, but circus was always thus.

Archaos members will tell you assorted myths – for example, that the company all piss into the centre of the circus ring on opening night as "a ritual to celebrate their continuing success". Or that they worked out that they drink an average of one and a half litres of wine each per day. Or that they have initiation ceremonies involving "sex in any number of its more bizarre manifestations". They even swear blind Prince Charles came to see them in disguise.

For all their bikerish mystique, and nostalgic nods back to hippiedom, Archaos are breaking new ground as far as live performance goes. Post-MTV with everyone's attention span reducing by the minute, Archaos works partly because there is so much going on all the time. As director Pierre Bidon, the unlikely-looking evil genius behind the whole operation, puts it: "Circus has the most possibilities of any performance because you can use everything – theatre, acrobatics, pyrotechnics, music, lights, special effects. You can put it all together to create something new, and full of emotion."

A great night out for all the family? Hardly, unless you are the sort who plays your five year old cousin video nasties, but a great night out nonetheless.

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