

THEATRE

More than a bag of tricks

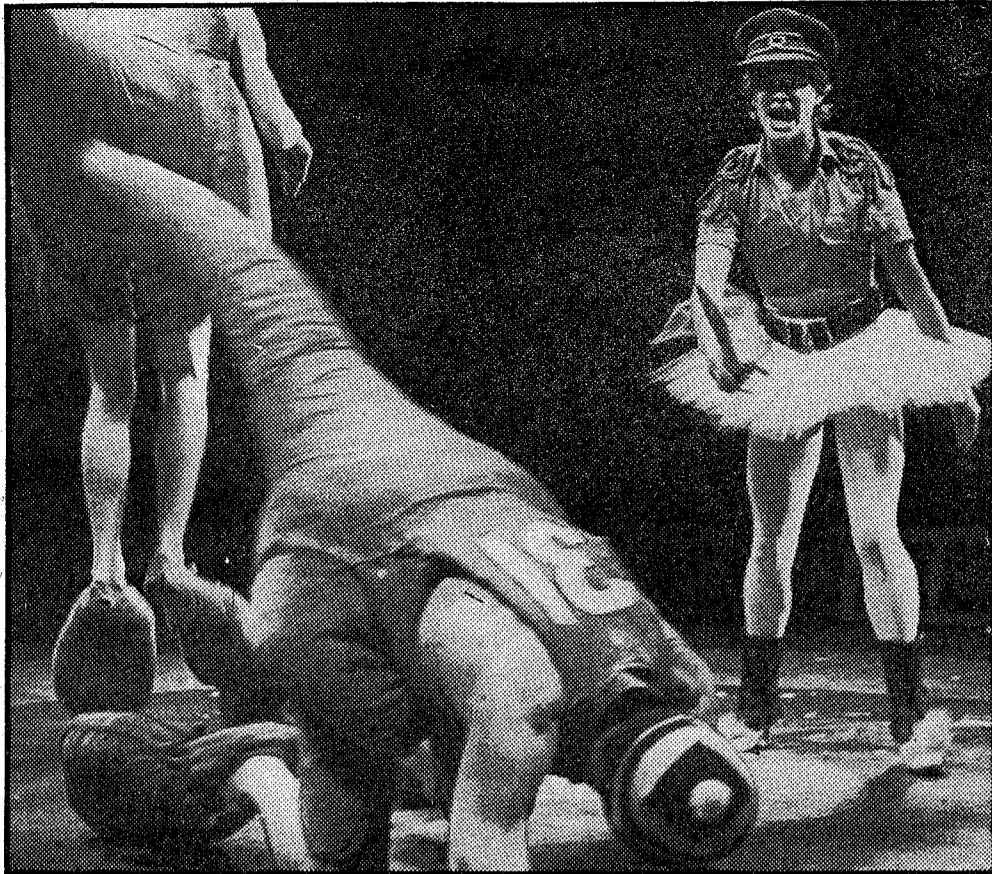
CIRCUS OZ, the world's number one contemporary circus, is more than a sawdust ring full of tricks.

It is amazing herds of randy kangaroos quailing under the sadistic whips of their trainers; agitprop dishwashers radicalising dishes by smashing them, racks of running-dog cops hunting down aluminium-plated Ned Kelly letterboxes and their pet joeys; aerialists who walk blindfolded and casually jog and unicycle their way across the Big Top high-wire; and teetering towers of human flesh in punk-pop costumes reminiscent of Martin Sharp's work.

Circus Oz is like no other circus you've seen before (unless you've seen them before), with its spectacular Spagonni Family sleight of hand.

It's an exuberant, glittering, inspired blend of rock and roll, comedy, traditional circus and contemporary theatre, and it's a tribute to the artistry and nerves of the people who have made this group-devised and directed show a success.

It is a moving and emotionally charged event, because it is sad, funny and frightening, and it makes you sit up on the edge of your portable Circus Oz seat (they



Circus Oz, under the big top again at Sydney's Wentworth Park.

built them specially for the ring) and sigh with relief every time one of them makes it back to earth in one piece after a dizzying and perilous flight over audience heads.

Circus Oz is everything a circus should be. It is also a zany mixture of politics and satire. It raises a fist for Australian flag rights, Aboriginal rights, no nukes, no more dams and audience hissing rights.

The fast, rollicking acts are interspersed with the incredible sounds of the instrument, a junk-created drum kit made from the steel bowl of a Hoovermatic washing machine, and an upside-down kitchen sink with car springs, pots and pans and three steel trays. Most of the music was written by Stephen Kent, the show's token nasty pommy bastard.

The other drum kit is posi-

tioned upside-down in the roof of the Big Top tent. It's played by Geoff Toll who strolls, upside-down, across the roof, sits himself down (or up) and lets fly with the drumsticks.

Toll is also responsible for writing the Dalek sketches for the dishwasher, which brings an inspired Betty Sydney touch to the modern post-holocaust kitchen, and answers back its creator with: "The experiment is only just beginning. Your technology will destroy you."

Says Toll: "I was influenced by anti-nuclear group therapy sessions."

Don't miss the fantastic Web Rope Lady, Sue Broadway, assisted by Robin Laurie. See her snake her way up a dangling rope until she becomes a blur of spinning colour in the ceiling, throwing rainbow shades around the tent top.

Don't miss Sue Broadway, a pants, knickers, cardie and frock-tugging, toothy ingénue of vinyl emotions, the matriarch of the plastic family tree and string shopping bag, who has the most sensational pair of ice-cream cone breasts, and yet she isn't afraid of mega-spiders. Her equal-opportunity ladder act is hilarious, even though she does tend to climb up rungs which lead nowhere, literally.

The show is packed with post-holocaust commercials from the Dirty Dozen — big-achiever mining companies — and the stage is populated with bugs, mutants, vaguely familiar two-headed ape dogs, fairies, space-cadet fruit loops in hippy outfits, and a nouveau Norman Ross Isadora Duncan who gets shot in the foot when she tries to dance.

There's a stunning trapeze performance by Stephen Champion and Jane Mullett, and there's the inimitable Lance Corporal Joannie Spagonni and Alfonso, the psychic Kung Phoo King who chops himself in half.

And there's a more serious side to Circus Oz.

"We were invited to Brisbane for the Commonwealth Games, but we refused," said Jane Mullett after the show, in the tent where the cast lives with most mod cons, including telephone and TV. "It would have been supporting the status quo. We'd have accepted if we could have produced an event as shocking and powerful as the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic Games."

"We oppose the land rights legislation, the inability to protest in the street, and we oppose the Petersen sell-out. We're not going for humanitarian reasons, and we urge all Australians to boycott the Commonwealth Games and write to Petersen," said Geoff Toll.

"Going there would have meant getting the show banned and getting into a fight. All our property, equipment and our livelihood would have been at stake. So, even though it's a passive form of resistance, we are not going."

Circus Oz is here to stay. Don't miss them in The Big Top, Wentworth Park, Glebe, until August 8. You don't have to be adult to love it: take the kids, too.

— BERWYN LEWIS