

Knights of Cavalia

Inside The Big Tent of a Theatrical Spectacle that celebrates the history and contradictions of mankind's love affair with the horse.



THE HORSE IS GOD'S GIFT TO MAN

— Arabian Proverb

Nearly a decade ago, Normand Latourelle, producer and Cirque du Soleil co-founder, watched his audiences fall in love when horses appeared on the stage of one of his productions. While others lamented the fact that the horses were stealing the show, the moment gave birth to an idea that fascinated Latourelle. He decided to create a first-class, large-scale equestrian show in which four-legged artists played the leading roles – not as beasts of burden in a circus ring, but as the free-spirited, playful stallions that they are.

Six years and \$27 million later, *Cavalía*, pronounced 'ka-VA-lia', opened in Quebec. It moved on to tour the United States and now the 120-crew production will remain in Europe for two to three years, along with its 65 equine stars. The two-and-a-half hour show tells the centuries-old love story of horse and man, alluding to the tough times but winding up with a happy ending of mutual respect.

The show is a true love story. It begins slowly with the two species gradually getting to know each other, coming ever closer and building trust. They communicate with words and body language every step of the way. It's no wonder that the list of actors who have attended the show include some of Hollywood's top romantics: Meryl Streep, Michelle Pfeiffer, Antonio Banderas, Demi Moore and Richard Gere.

I suspect that the stars in the audience, just like the children and octogenarians, enjoyed the reprieve from the traditional Hollywood fare that emphasizes "more," "bigger," "better" and "faster." Sure, *Cavalía* offers its share of musical and artistic high points, but it does not leave the audience feeling as if it has been riding a bucking bronco or chasing a wild band of outlaws.

After a show in Düsseldorf, Germany, master rider and trainer Magali Delgado said the show helps audiences forget their cares. In a lovely French accent, Delgado repeated what viewers have told her: "It's so poetic. After 10 minutes, we forget all the other ideas. We are in the show, and we don't want to leave. We are just here and we want that moment forever." The therapeutic effects may linger, too. Weeks after the fact, Delgado has received letters from people who profess that *Cavalía* has changed their lives and has made them more peaceful.

Horse Harmony

The show starts with projections of notable quotes about horses and a video of a colt's birth and first steps. The opening scene then strikes a balanced tone, giving the audience the message that they should sit back,

relax and lose themselves in the depths of a sensual fairy tale. Two frolicking young horses slowly venture on stage and begin to nuzzle sculptures of wooden horses and other memorabilia while a flutist fingers a New Age melody. Artists then join their equine partners in playful discovery of the props and each other.

It was exactly this type of loving interaction that convinced Latourelle to team up with Delgado and her husband, Frédéric Pignon. On his search for the right partners for his horse ballet, Latourelle, the president and artistic director of the show, visited Delgado and Pignon on their farm near Avignon, in southern France. Instead of mounting a horse and parading in front of Latourelle, the long-haired Frenchman took one of his favorite stallions and began to play with the Lusitano, a breed native to Iberia that can be 15 to 16 hands tall and can weigh more than 1,000 pounds. The two frolicked like 3-year-olds. Pignon played with the stallion, chasing, stopping, tickling, and teasing him with words and eye movements.

Latourelle was sold.

The three began to talk about a show that would demonstrate respect for the animals and show off the horses' personalities and true beauty. Latourelle offered his expertise in multimedia production while Pignon and Delgado were to be in charge of training and riding the horse showpieces. Latourelle, like Pignon and Delgado, wanted to provide the utmost care for the horses while they toured.

(Latourelle later made headlines in Southern California for planting sod on the beach so the horses could graze properly within the show's complex, near the Santa Monica Pier.)

In late 2003, Pignon and Delgado, together since they were teen-agers but newly married, starred in the first performance of *Cavalía*. They received standing ovations and treated 70,000 spectators to the extravaganza within the first six weeks.

A History of Horse and Man

Each scene lasts about 10 minutes and builds on the previous one to tell the history of man's relationship with one of his favorite animals. A horse circles a dancer whose flowing costume blows in the wind. The dancer moves forward and retreats tentatively. In the next scene, long-haired men chase five unbridled and unsaddled horses to bring audiences back to the times when wild horses roamed steppes and plains. Keeping pace with the slow beat of history, the first rider mounts



a horse only after the show has been rolling for a full 30 minutes. Costumes, music and scenery in the first act evoke the Arabian and Asian origins of today's domesticated horses; the second act takes viewers to the more recent days of cowboys, Indians, outlaws and rodeos.

Each epoch, each season, and, in fact, many of the natural elements get a showing as well, taking viewers on a wistful back-to-nature journey. Using 10 projectors, Latourelle frequently changed the background that was beamed onto a screen the same size as two IMAX screens. The audience saw an autumn scene in the woods as leaves began to drift to the ground from the top of the tent, landing in spectators' laps. A few minutes later, horses were dancing and prancing in front of a snow-covered background while foam that looked deceptively like snowflakes fell on the audience. Toward the end of the first act, Delgado and her sister, Estelle, who look almost like twins, performed a reflection duet in which a wide sheet of water flowing on stage assumed the role of the mirror.

The projection screen covered the background of the performance space, a giant half-circle covered in sand with a small raised platform. The front edge of the

space is 150-feet long and, when cut off from the rest of the circle by a curtain, forms a pass-through wide enough and long enough for stallions to run through at full speed as trick riders perform aerial stunts at break-neck speeds.

Horsemanship, Skill and Improvisation

Both horse lovers and those who have yet to become horse lovers will find the show intriguing. Expert riders can marvel at world-class dressage, maneuvers of a horse in response to minimal cues from the rider. The pursuit of dressage, which means "training" in French, is an Olympic sport that dates back to the Renaissance. At one point, six riders dance their Lusitanos in unison.

Trick riders in the show hail from Canada, the United States and Kyrgyzstan, and they have clearly mastered the art of vaulting and horseback gymnastics. In one scene set to a backdrop of the Coliseum, riders gallop around the ring, each foot astride on the bare backs of two horses. A bit later, a rider in the same position jumps over a post and manages to land on the backs of his two horses that sped underneath the same post.





Improvisation - as a skill and a theme - serves as a thread woven throughout the show. On first viewing, the audience won't necessarily know what a particular Quarter Horse or Appaloosa was supposed to be doing, but one quickly understands that the horses lead the shows and actors adapt their routines to horses' extemporaneous moves. For me, this became clear when I realized the band played the concluding notes of a particular score just as a horse struck an end pose by plopping himself on his buttocks in the ring. Such adaptation must be half the fun for the artists involved.

The musical score was composed by Michel Cusson, and the gifted singer Marie-Soleil Dion has been with Cavalia since the beginning. Half of her songs are vocals without lyrics.

"I sing the feeling of what is happening in front of me," she said.

The band is perched a story above stage level behind the giant screen in the main tent, and musicians are revealed occasionally when lights illuminate the compartments in which they sit. The soundtrack from the show, as well as a DVD about the making of Cavalia, are on sale in gift shops in the tents. It takes four 48-foot long semi trucks to move the horses short distances, or one Boeing 747 to move them longer distances; the horses eat 17,500 bales of hay and 36,500 pounds of grain per year.

So how do the trainers and riders get the horses to do all those tricks?

"This show is special because we really want to show and play around with the relationship with the horse," said Pignon. "It's not easy to do this every night... because then it can get like real work for the horses. You don't want them to be against what they do. You really want them enjoying what they do. So, this is a big challenge. That's why we have so many horses. When the horse gets tired or they have no interest anymore, then the horse can take a rest.

"We have a farm in France where we have lots of pastures and a real life for horses. This is good for the mental balance. It's very important for the horse to have a good physique and be in good shape, but I think the mind is more important," he added.

Pignon summed up the essence of Cavalia: "The show is natural and simple. People need a link to nature. More and more we are speaking about respecting the Earth - the environment - because we know that this is the future...It's about how we can communicate with animals so we can communicate with humans."

For more information: www.cavalia.net