

HORSE OF KINGS

ANDALUSIAN

FRIESIAN

LIPIZZAN

LUSITANO

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BEHIND THE
SCENES AT
CAVALIA

THE ART OF
LONG REINING

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MARE ISSUE

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Behind the Scenes at *Cavalia*

By Kip Mistral

The French Canada-based *Cavalia* performance has been described variously as a “ballet between man and horse,” “a gentle, romantic dance,” “a civilized showcase of precision horsemanship and courtly behavior,” and “a constant yearning to be airborne.” It is indeed the “magical encounter between horse and man” that it is billed, opening to sold-out crowds and standing ovations at the engagements scheduled so far in Canada, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle.

The white nine-story tall touring tent is the largest

in North America, containing a 200-foot wide curving projection screen that backs a 150 foot, two-level dirt stage, six live musicians and vocalist, and the activities of more than 60 performers, including equestrians, aerialists, acrobats, trick riders, and 33 horses, of which 13 are magnificent Lusitano stallions. Forty people working at construction require three weeks to assemble the tent and its 1,800 seats, and the adjoining stable. *Cavalia* is clearly a huge undertaking to take from city to city.

“Horses have given mankind so much,” comments

Normand Latourelle, the co-founder of Quebec's famed Cirque du Soleil and the creator/director of the lavish *Cavalia* production. "They have fought in our wars and have given us our freedom. They gave us transportation, and they helped us with our agriculture." Though he has never ridden a horse, six years ago Latourelle became fascinated with the thought of doing a horse-oriented show after observing that a walk-on horse part in his current production enraptured the audience's attention. The people were looking only at the horse, not the human performers.

He says "I thought, something is going on here...and my dream began to take shape when I met the equestrian trainer and artist Frédéric Pignon and his partner (now wife) Magali Delgado. As equestrian co-directors of

Cavalia and performers as well, they bring a wonderfully gentle and magical way with horses to the heart and soul of the production. *Cavalia* is a chance to give freedom back to horses."

Frédéric Pignon grew up in the Loire Valley in a horse-loving family that kept horses for endurance riding. He ran and played tag with the family's horses, and rode them bareback up in the hills. "We were like little Indians. There were no rules," he says. He studied fine arts—an accomplished artist in his own right—and learned and began teaching vaulting (known as voltige in France). Pignon met Delgado when they both ended up teaching at an equestrian center—he taught voltige, she taught dressage. As Pignon and Delgado formed an alliance and Pignon began to work



closely with the Delgado horses from their birth, he found his gentle training methods and light touch brought out the best in them, particularly the young stallions.

The famous example of course is the luminous Templado. Now 18, *Cavalia*'s equine star Templado was Delgado-bred and sold as a colt. But the Delgados have a policy; if for any reason an owner is unhappy with the horse, the Delgados wish the horse to be returned. And several years after his purchase, Templado was returned, desperately fearful and suspicious of humans. He was violently rebellious, verging on dangerous, and resisted any attempts to train him or even overtures of friendship. It took years for Pignon to gain Templado's confidence. In the book "Templado: A Star at Liberty," Pignon explains.



Previous page:
Frédéric Pignon with
Lusitano stallions
Templado, Fausto,
and Aétès
Left: Frédéric,
Templado, and Fausto
Photos: Frederic Chehu

"We were still new to liberty training, believing that if we were simply kind to the horses, everything would be fine. But Templado's obvious distress under his rebellious exterior led us to think about new ways of working. We felt it was impossible to get through to his deep suffering by traditional teaching. Up to then, we had been too focused on a horse and rider relationship based on our own personal experience and on bits and pieces of systematized riding techniques. I don't mean this to reflect in any way on this sort of approach, which usually works well. A great number of top level riders have proved and are still proving that one can do good, efficient work based on both horse and rider knowing and remaining in their place."

"But with Templado, this wasn't enough," Pignon continues. "He was too rebellious. He saw his freedom as too important to be sacrificed in some codified, hierarchical relationship...he forgave me nothing. The slightest error, the slightest faux pas on my part, and I was made to pay dear. He immediately put up the barriers and made me understand that I had burnt my bridges."

"Templado made us think in a constructive way which never veered into an unhealthy fixation. I think that is what saved us. It has to be said that we didn't have the time. What with working our performance horses and organizing our tours, we had other things to do than get ourselves into a state over him. It is quite probable that, if we had worked with Templado with a definite objective in mind and within a specific time limit, the pressure and the need for a quick result would have made us take a different approach. We would have taken more risks, which would have made us make more mistakes. But in our case, we were happy just to follow the clues he gave us, to take the time to understand them and leave him enough time to accept us in his environment." In time, Templado (a name which Pignon and Delgado point out with amusement means "moderate") the former freedom-fighter, came to be the liberty star of the internationally-celebrated Pignon/Delgado performances, for love of his humans.

To this day, Templado dislikes being ridden but he does enjoy liberty work, so that is what he does. He clearly adores Pignon. "I don't demand, I request," Pignon says. "This is a collaboration of equals."

Magali Delgado will tell you proudly that her parents, Pierre and Joëlle Delgado, have dedicated their lives to raising these intelligent, sensitive Lusitano horses that show a rare willingness to connect with and engage with humans. At an early age she began training with some of Europe's finest riding masters, and distinguished herself in competition at the Grand Prix level and also in haute école. Having this impressive background provided preparation for Delgado to pursue her dream of

communicating with horses at an ever-higher level, as she and Pignon moved the performance horses from the family farm to create a stable of their own. Here they developed not only new shows but ever more perfect communication with horses, based on the language of horses themselves, and mutual trust and respect.

Latourelle has chosen well in his equestrian directors and their equine colleagues. This theme of freedom unites the different acts and weaves around and through the entire performance, allowing the ancient horse archetype that in the language of Jungian psychology symbolizes liberation, movement and emotion, to act on our unconscious mind. The image of the white horse, the color of the new moon, signifying victory and success, of good prevailing over evil, evokes a vague, distant memory. Even *Cavalia*-goers who don't know horses will find their gentleness, grace and power beautiful and compelling, and ultimately mysterious. When the glorious Templado makes his entrance, knee-length mane blowing around his body as he prances and cavorts with Pignon, the audience as a whole sighs at the lovely sight of this proud stallion eagerly running to his human friend, of free will.

The liberty acts in the production feature a number of the Delgado-Pignon Lusitano stallions; all the Delgado horses are full or half-brothers. Using only hand commands, body language and gentle words Pignon leads the three white liberty stallions, Templado, Fausto and Aétès in fanciful routines that look like play—and they are play. Horses and man chase each other in choreographed figures, the horses completely free of tack, Pignon occasionally holding a delicate strand of mane to subtly hint to a horse to stay close, or a slim wand to indicate direction or movement. Finally they all lie down together in an incredible display of serenity.

"We must follow the horses' time, though. It is different every performance," Pignon laughs. The horses enjoy their play, but in some performances they have their

own ideas, and it might take a little time for Pignon to pull an errant knight back into the fold. He makes it a part of the act, but this is why *Cavalia*'s music is performed live by the very talented musicians and vocalist who are prepared to extemporize. For artistic reasons, Latourelle installs them in a darkened booth above the back of the set, made



transparent from time to time and lit by projections of a forest so musicians and singer are silhouetted against trees. The effect of the music coming from almost nowhere is haunting.

The screen behind the stage provides the

dreamscapes, variously bearing ancient imagery of horses and their riders, or of a beautiful fall forest, or a centuries-old European town square, or the ruins of a coliseum. At one point, a very thin sheet of water begins to fall from the ceiling to the sanded floor of the stage, making a misty veil-between-the worlds to separate two riders who look through

sister Estelle and her stallion Penultimo, where they ride in complex patterns—every movement in opposite image.

In one of the most lyrical pieces, “La Vida,” two petite young women dressed in exotic and colorful gypsy costumes come out riding behind Pignon and another male rider, wearing flowing white shirts and black breeches, on their fairy-tale white steeds. The girls, attached discreetly to wires, dance with the men as they ride in circular forms, with the horses and each other in the air, swirling gently, slowly, ethereally, even upside down as in a Chagall painting. The eye contact between men and women is so direct that it is mesmerizing, providing the focus for the scene. The entire audience again gasps with one breath with the beauty of it, not because the girls are so high the prospect of their falling is a thrill, as in a circus, but because they are moving in the image of our most eloquent dreams.

Joseph Campbell, the great American scholar and mythologist, wrote “The goal of life is rapture. Art is the way we experience it.” Normand Latourelle—and the artists he has gathered to produce this work of art in tribute to the magical connection between horse and man—have combined the grace, beauty and sometimes raw power demonstrated by these horses of dreams, with synergistic elements of art, music and antiquity elements to birth a cross-cultural, truly numinous experience.

Be warned. You will wonder the next time you look at a horse...who is looking back?

“What I hope people to take away from this is a dream of horses,” muses Latourelle. After the show, I want them to dream about horses for a few days, and months later, be struck by a flash of memory from the show.”



Sister Act: Magali Delgado and sister Estelle with Lusitano stallions Dao and Penultimo

it toward each other. Daring roman riders race at devilish speeds, taunting and goading. Delgado rides her glorious white stallion Dao, who has a pan-European recognition as a Grand Prix horse as well as being a performer in *Cavalia*, in several acts. Especially fascinating is a “twin” act with her

Visit the Cavalia website at www.cavalia.net.
Visit the Delgado-Pignon breeding and performance stables website at www.delgado-pignon.com.
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