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Photo: Nancy Moon

by Cindy Clarke

Dances With Horses

The Equus Project Rides Into Town

FOR THREE DECADES, in clinics all over the country, Buck “God had him in mind when he made a cowboy” Brannaman has taught that riding a horse is like dancing, a combination of wooing, leading and mutual respect.

For the last 15 years, JoAnna Mendl Shaw, a pint-size powerhouse athlete and noted dance choreographer for several elite universities, has taught dancers that two or more beings can move as one in harmony and grace... even if your partner is a horse.

The opportunity to see their vision come together with effortless synchronicity on a wind-swept Fairfield, Connecticut beach alive

with dancers, horses, skilled equestrians and, by rare chance, filmmaker Cindy Meehl, producer of the award-winning documentary of horse whisperer fame, *Buck*, was serendipitous to say the least.

The cast of performers that day impressed at every turn. They included handsome Giddion, a noble, jet black Friesian whose scene-stealing spirited personality and movie star good looks stole my heart at first glance... finely boned, elegantly honed Prince Calaf, a royal Andalusian who pranced, proudly, and danced, exquisitely, with a high stepping regal trot... Redding resident, equestrian extraordinaire

“Horses express themselves in a different, wonderful manner, according to their mood and personality. They may follow the choreographed program or they may take it upon themselves to steal the spotlight. Our job as riders and dancers is to interpret what the horse wants, and make it all work together, seamlessly.”

Emmanuelle Schneider, petite, pretty mom to these two amazing horses (and teenage twins), an accomplished trainer, rider, and an Equine Assisted Psychotherapist... dancers Brittany Beyer and Tal Adler Arieli, boasting a resume of company dance performances on stages around the world as well as in horse-friendly settings... and certified dressage instructor and actress, Patricia Norcia, of film, radio and Broadway fame, capable of commanding the respect of a single 1,200 lb. horse or an audience of hundreds by quietly but expressively stating her desires. Athletes all, they were there to dance under the indefatigable direction of JoAnna Mendl Shaw, artistic director, choreographer and founder of the Equus Project.

The Equus Project is a contemporary modern dance company based in New York City that integrates the artistry of dance with horsemanship, pairing professional dancers with equine partners. The performances are site-specific, choreographed for a natural live stage, rather than a manmade, in-house set design. Think a horse barn, dirt arena, pastoral farm, or our Connecticut beach – places where large, four-footed dancers have enough room to move about, perhaps deliver a perfectly executed *piaffe* or *passage*, and gracefully kick up their... hooves. As in traditional programs, the human performers are skilled in the technical aspects of the dance, rehearsing steps and movements that may be called into play during the performance. But if you have ever worked with or seen animal acts, you know that on-the-spot invention as a result of unpredictable behavior is key to their suc-



Photo: Nancy Halsey

cess. The Equus Projects dancers are trained to incorporate a blend of orchestrated steps and improvised interludes into their performance pieces. Each is a combination of choreographed sequences and think-on-your-toes sections that require “physical” listening and “real-time,” rather than “memory time,” footwork.

As JoAnna explains, “Creating choreography with horses requires a lot of mental agility. Dancers are trained to commit choreography to memory. With horses, the dance must be spontaneous. Moment-to-moment decisions, made in real time, *in horse time*, by the dancers are part of the choreography; some decisions are made to keep their equine partner engaged, some are made to keep the dancer safe. Real time, when dancing with horses, is about necessity.”

The Equus Projects dancers have all trained in Parelli Natural Horsemanship clinics to learn to communicate with the horse based on its natural behaviors. (Founded in 1981 by horse trainer, rodeo rider, cowboy and teacher Pat Parelli and his wife Linda, the Parelli Program focuses on teaching the human rather than training the horse). Only when they are

knowledgeable and comfortable around the horse are they ready to begin the dance.

THE EQUUS PROJECT often partners with equestrians and their horses who are trained in classical riding and dressage. If you’ve ever seen dressage competitions, you’ll agree just how elegantly in sync horse and rider seem as they perform, flawlessly, for the judges and the crowds. Riders like Tony Astmann, Equus board member and championship equestrian, make it look easy as he takes his specialized skills from the show ring and puts them all together in the dance performance. But, he admits, “there have been times that I have asked my horse to do one thing in the ring, and she decides to do another. It’s my job to go along with it as if we planned it” – which makes him the ideal dance partner for an Equus performance. “Horses express themselves in a different, wonderful manner, according to their mood and personality. They may follow the choreographed program or they may take it upon themselves to steal the spotlight. Our job as riders and dancers is to interpret what the horse wants, and make it all work

together, seamlessly.” What touches him most during Equus performances, unfailingly described by audiences as “incredibly poignant and uplifting,” are the expressions of joy he sees on faces awed and humbled by the beauty and honesty of the dance.

WATCHING PATRICIA and Emmanuelle put Prince and Gideon through their paces, it is readily apparent that these horses were born to dance. Surefooted and graceful, they move from walk to trot to canter effortlessly, hooves down in a rhythmic, eminently stylish, gait as they become one with the rider. Says Emmanuelle “Being herd animals, horses love to be in sync and relax beautifully in the harmony and shaping that rider and dancer offer” – and it shows. Later JoAnna dances with a horse “at liberty.” She glides into the ring with unbridled enthusiasm. The horses, free from rider and saddle, are equally attentive, engaging with the choreographer as if at play. My eyes are transfixed on the genuine interaction between them as they work from opposite ends of a 12-foot lead line. JoAnna draws the horse in, shaping the space, both responding in tandem to each other’s physical

PARTNERSHIP



Photo: Janet Biggs



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From top left clockwise: Equestrian, Bettina Drummond on her Lusitano, Mimi. On the beach with Cindy Meehl, JoAnna Mendl Shaw, Giddeon, Emmanuelle Schneider, Nancy Moon and Tony Astmann. Equestrian, Karen Rolf with Dancers, Blake Pearson & Gina Paolillo. On location at the Bates Dance Festival.

cues and suggestions. She leads, the horse follows. Then follower becomes the leader and the dance, fluid and harmonious, begins.

Nothing is ever forced during Equus performances. The bond between horse, rider and dancer is based on mutual trust and respect. There's an innate connection and understanding between them that transcends the ordinary, a goal that honors and celebrates the eloquent art form imaginatively brought to life by JoAnna Mendl Shaw.

"Everything is planned beforehand with our performances," says JoAnna, explaining that she carefully maps out the moves with model Breyer horses and rehearses steps with her dancers in her studio. "Our dances require a ton of coordination before we actually work with the horses."

JoAnna explains that while the dancers and the riders rehearse "a lot," the horses don't. "You can never rehearse a piece in order with a horse because if the horse doesn't want to do it, he won't." Her dancers need to sense what the horse is going to do and be prepared to do a different choreographed movement at the

drop of a hat... or hoof as it were. "Our dancers need to think and be intuitive in equal measures, and need to be able to adjust their moves in a *nano* second."

The horses do learn the choreography, a necessity for the dance, but they are not fond of over rehearsing. That said, it is exactly this kind of free spirit that keeps the dances fresh and exciting. A true teacher – JoAnna is on the faculty of The Julliard School and in the Ailey/Fordham BFA program in New York City – she says that she and her equestrian collaborators make learning fun for the horses. "We want them to view the dance as playing, not drilling" so that together they can transform the performance into an unequalled, animated art form.

Since her first equine performance debut at Mount Holyoke College in 1998 with a cast of dressage riders and over 40 dancers, JoAnna has crafted and performed over 25 on-site works for dancers and horses around the country. She has learned how herd animals negotiate space and what it means to perform in an environment that demands that one be truly present. She has witnessed her dancers perform with depth, phys-

icality and immediacy as they intuitively learned to absorb the horses' energy and listen with their bodies. And she has cultivated the kind of horse-human relationships espoused by the Parellis who taught her that "It's more than just about the horse. It really dips into the personal development side of things. You learn about yourself, you learn about communication, about leadership, about truthfulness, about consequence and responsibility. You learn about love and imagination." And, if you're lucky enough to become a part of the Equus Projects, you really learn how to *feel* the dance.

"Our work is about human expression and vulnerability and our ability to adjust to beautiful, unpredictable states of being. There is a visceral connection between the dancer and the horse as we interact in real time and perform in the present moment. The horses teach the dancers life lessons that showcase their capacity for physical listening, patience and compassion."

"By itself," she says, "contemporary dance is full of energy and ideas, responsive to the world we live in. When you dance with horses, the possibilities and revelations are limitless." □