



Round Pen Scores Dances Informed by Natural Horsemanship

by JoAnna Mendl Shaw

JoAnna Mendl Shaw has been making site-specific performance works for dancers and horses for over fifteen years. During a guest artist residency at Mount Holyoke College in 1998, she produced a trilogy of works for fifty dancers and six equestrians and their horses. [See “In the Landscape: Dancing with Horses,” CQ Vol. 25 No.1 Winter/Spring 2000.] Shaw became fascinated by the dancers’ instinctive ability to join up with the horses. She invited a team of dancers and equestrians to experiment with her, and her company the Equus Projects was born. This journey has taken her into the worlds of dressage riders and circus trainers and has dramatically reshaped her notion of making dances. Here she explains how this choreographic rethinking came about. –Eds.

[above] Rebekah Morin in *Un/Stable Landscape*, choreography by JoAnna Mendl Shaw and Carl Flink, at Chance Encounter Farm in Pownal, ME, part of the Bates Dance Festival, August 2011.

Tory

It is a gorgeous fall day. I am in a round pen with Tory, a Morgan mare that I have played with many times. Being a mare, she is given to moods and is a bit unpredictable; she is not always up for play. I have had wonderful dances with her in the past, moving with her in an open arena where she is free to canter away from me and then come back when she is ready. She likes moving big, striding alongside me. This round pen is fifty feet in diameter, made with six-foot panels of high metal fencing. As round pens go, it is very open and airy, but sometimes the round pen feels confining to Tory. Knowing that she is prone to claustrophobia, I start with quiet, free-flowing movement, undemanding and somewhat contained in space.

I offer her my hand to sniff then stroke her, especially at her poll (behind the ears) and haunches. These are two of her favorite spots. Then I move to the opposite side of the round pen and focus on pulling some weeds that are growing up through the sandy footing. This activity takes my



photo © Jim Coleman

***Celebration*, by JoAnna Mendl Shaw, with dancers Caryle Eckert, Rebekah Morin, Marcel Dou, and Laurence Martin at the Eastern Regional Andalusian Horse Conference, Mount Holyoke College Equestrian Arena, South Hadley, MA, 1998.**

attention away from Tory and allows her an interlude of unpressured time—time when I am not waiting or asking for her attention. Even stroking is a form of asking for attention! Within a few seconds Tory comes to me, offering another itchy spot for rubbing. We repeat that sequence of events. The dance has already begun in this quiet sequence of stroking and scratching, leaving and returning.

Moving to the next stage of requesting in our nonverbal conversation, I direct my attention to her neck, behind the ears. Without touching her, I add some rhythmic pulsing with my hands directed toward her neck. She yields, stepping left leg across right in a perfect equine pirouette. I change my focus to her haunches and repeat the rhythmic motion, pressing toward her hindquarters, again through gesture, which yields another pirouette, this time with the haunches moving. We rest. She licks and chews. (Licking and chewing is an equine behavior that communicates acknowledgment and a state of willingness to engage.)

I step a few paces away and make a large, circular gesture with my leg, a *ronde de jambe* of sorts, that arcs toward her shoulders. Immediately I realize my intention has not been clear. I am moving with a dancer's sense of fluidity and grace, but far too indirect in space for the horse to decipher what I am asking for. I change my objective and ask Tory to walk forward. I circle away and come behind her, slightly to her left, and add the rhythmic pressure again, this time with an audible rhythmic slapping of my thigh. Tory walks, then trots forward. I come up alongside her, matching her legs and tempo. I accelerate just a bit. She accelerates with me. Then I back up toward the center of the round pen and draw her toward me, sidestepping just enough to send energy toward the right side of her neck, which sends her off at a trot in the other direction. I join her again. This time I back up, stop, and lower to a crouch. I slowly drop my focus down and soften my energy. Tory comes to me and rests her muzzle on my head. Just what I was asking for! Thus concludes a fairly successful Round Pen Score with an equine partner.

Natural Horsemanship Training and Round Pens

In the horse world, a round pen is used as a transitional holding area, sometimes in place of a stall. Often a round pen is used as an enclosure for training a horse “at liberty”—without a rider, not on a lead line, and free to move at will. In a rectangular pen, a horse can put his nose in a corner and present his haunches, which leaves no place for a human to maneuver out of the kick zone. However, the round shape offers no corners for the horse to hide in or avoid interaction. Round pens vary in size, depending on the desired outcome. A fifty-foot enclosure is used for close-proximity work. In this size space, a horse can trot, change direction, and canter—but cantering will be hard work in such a small pen, calling for the horse to curve its body and collect its stride. Round pens are usually constructed with six-foot-high metal panels, which look like a series of gates connected in a circle. However, we devised our own portable version using fiberglass rods, plastic toggles, and polypropylene rope. We have used this innovative round pen construction in numerous performances.

The dance I experienced with Tory calls for a combination of dance improvisation skills and Natural Horsemanship savvy. My dancers and I began studying the Parelli Natural Horsemanship (PNH) equine training system during the winter of 2003. In order to deepen our understanding of PNH ground skills and practice them without horses, we translated them into movement scores for the dance studio.

The first opportunity to make use of these studio investigations was in 2004, when we were commissioned by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to make a full-length work for dancers and horses using VCU dancers and local riders and their horses. We brought a Parelli-trained equestrian and her two horses on tour with us. For one section of the VCU project, we made a double duet using two round pens. In one round pen, our equestrian worked at liberty with her Arabian horse, Hamlet, and in the other round pen were two dancers. The choreography called for the two duets to work in tandem with simultaneous

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activities mirroring one another, like quiet touching moments, backing up, moving forward, and trotting in large circles. The double duet was set to a Bach Prelude.

After rehearsing for several weeks, Hamlet began skipping from the beginning of his choreography right to the final trotting circle! I called our trainer, David Lichman, in Sacramento. David said, “You aren’t rehearsing the piece in order, are you?” Clearly, Hamlet had learned the choreography and figured if he skipped to the end, his work would be over that much sooner. David informed us that the circus rarely rehearsed an equine act in order, as the horses would get bored, and their performance energy would dull. Circus trainers rehearsed skill sets and executed the full sequence only once, in performance. This single piece of information was immensely exciting to contemplate as a choreographic model.

We built movement modules, each with a beginning cue. Modules could be performed in a constantly shifting order, so dancers had to pay close attention. Movers had permission to ignore inaccurate cues. Making the score dependent on accurate movement cues installed a playful rigor. This structure created a basic “If...Then” game score.

Round Pen Scores Using Physical Listening and Horse Behavior

In 2006, we made *Seven Games* for the Bates Dance Festival, using the basic tenets of our PNH training as the conceptual foundation for the work. PNH training is codified into seven games or exercises that form the basic “how-to” for training a horse. During the year we were making *Seven Games*, we received scholarships to attend courses in horse behavior at the PNH Study Center in Reddick, Florida. At the center we learned strategies for engaging various temperaments of horses, or *horsenalities*. This material was a choreographic gold mine.

We began using the horsenality information to create If...Then game scores. We constructed round pens in the studio with chairs. One dancer would enter and develop movement motifs based on the behavior of a specific horsenality. For example, an introverted horse shrinks in the space, avoids eye contact, maintains a fairly high body tension, and breathes with held flow, whereas an extrovert scatters energy, needs lots of space to move, and is curious about its surroundings, though not necessarily fearless. Also, a left-brained, thinking horse is distinguished from a

right-brained, reactive one. Combine a right-brained horse with introversion, and one set of behavior patterns emerge; combine a left-brained horse with extroversion, and the vocabulary of kinetic choices shifts. Our exploration of movement steered clear of imitating equine behavior but investigated states of being, out of which movement motifs would develop. The movement choices that emerged were complex and nuanced.

Once the first dancer establishes a horsenality, the second dancer enters the space and tries to create a movement dialogue with the objective of interacting with the horsenality, gaining the first dancer’s attention and trust, and ultimately affecting a change in behavior. This behavior change signals the beginning of acknowledgment and an initial stage of communication. The strategy for *effectively* interfacing with an introvert is very different from that for interfacing with an extrovert. With a fearful, right-brained introvert, it is most effective to use indirect pathways, gentle use of weight, and approach and retreat. Slow. Patient. In contrast, the right-brained extrovert interface pattern would include lots of changes in direction to match the scattering energy. The horsenality information is dense and complex, presenting many different strategies for interacting.

These Round Pen Scores grew out of a real need to practice our horsemanship strategy. In the hands of adept dance improvisers, the scores became rich, intriguing choreographic material. For months, the Round Pen Scores became the mainstay of our studio practice. They yielded fresh material unfettered by formal dance choices. Use of space lost all its frontal orientation. Movement motifs developed from inside a set of behaviors and felt deeply congruent with the emerging material. We developed a choreographic process defined by the fundamental curiosity of a moving body—its playfulness or fearfulness, its survival instincts, and its comfort levels. Though we started by rehearsing a way of being with a horse, what evolved was a distinctive way of dancing with another human. By exploring rules of engagement, the horses were teaching us a lot about ourselves.

Being Effective and Accountable for Choices

Our studio practice made us much more *effective* partners, meaning that we paid much closer attention to our partner’s movement and were much more aware of the outcomes of our own movement decisions. We began to



Dancing in Real Time, Equus Projects' [left to right] Laurence Martin, Rebekah Morin, and Carlye Eckert with horses from Heart of the Horse Farm, Vashon Island, WA, August 2010.

think of choreography in terms of being effective—causing change in another’s movement or transforming our own in an organic manner—versus being interesting, clever, amusing, or entertaining. We developed a sense of accountability for our movement choices.

Each run of the score resulted in a body of movement vocabulary. Within that vocabulary we identified givens—choices that emerged organically from that lexicon of movement. We called these givens Choreographic Necessities. In order to remain within an established vocabulary, we began with *tracking*, simple kinetic mirroring, and then *logging*, consciously remembering that information. Choreographic Necessities determined how we interfaced with other moving bodies, handled objects, satisfied our curiosities, and contended with fear. Like an actor building a character, we realized that we were responsible for tracking all the minute details of the movement world we were creating.

Our rehearsals for *Seven Games* began months before we met the horses with which we would be performing. We constructed intricate scores in the studio and had become a bit seduced by our own choreographic invention! The reality of using this complicated dance material to communicate with three high-spirited Saddlebred horses was humbling. Being clever for the sake of clever, decorating, or flowing gracefully through a transition without spatial clarity was met with a toss of the head or indifference. The purpose of each movement *had* to be clear: Get the horse’s attention, engage the horse to *willingly* participate in a movement conversation, strategically maintain the conversation, and hopefully create a kinetic dialogue that transforms the negotiation of leadership into play. Though we accomplished our goals for the piece, we were aware of the depth of information we had yet to gain about horses and equine training.

For the next two years, we turned most of our attention toward improving our horsemanship. Like purist monks, we

stripped our vocabulary down to only movement that directly served the function of directing the horse. I lamented the shrinking of our movement vocabulary, but then, in 2010, circumstances made our weekly horse time impossible. This turned out to be a choreographic blessing in disguise. With more studio time, we focused on rebuilding our movement vocabulary. We opened up our studio practice to other dancers. We shaped each three-hour session into a choreographic journey that would explore just a single idea: tracking and sponging (vs. imitation); herding scores; shaping in space; alpha negotiations; logging material (doing and remembering); and, finally, shaping this logged material into phrase material. All that horse time spent in dusty arenas was teaching us how to merge attending and intending.

In January 2011, we returned to the Parelli ranch in Reddick, Florida, this time to do an intensive three-day training with Linda Parelli. Linda is a lifelong horsewoman and former corporate executive with extensive training in adult learning modalities. She helped Pat codify his instinctive brilliance with horses into an equine training system that organizes complex material into clear, simple systems. In our January 2011 session with Linda, she reminded us, “You can get the horse’s interest, but what do you do with this initial spark?” We learned just how important it is to have radically different strategies for different equine horsenalities.

The What Next Phase: Outcomes

Up until our 2011 sessions with Linda, we had depended on our dancer’s instinct and a bit of horsemanship to get the horse’s attention. Now we were learning what to do with that attention. When practicing Round Pen Scores in our studio, we had ended each improvisation by calling “black out” at the point when a change in behavior in the dance occurred. We realized that by calling the end here, we never challenged ourselves to explore the next step, which limited not only our horsemanship but our studio explorations as well.



photo © Nancy Halsey

Black Label dancer Eddie Oroyan [in front] with Cindar, Buck, and Harry in *Un/Stable Landscape*, Bates Dance Festival, August 2011.

We installed a What Next phase into the score, forcing us to push into new material. This next step was not without emotional consequences. In working with horses, it is best to leave emotions aside and treat emotional behavior simply as information. This is basically how we decided to handle whatever emotional information surfaced in the studio.

However, we found that What Next, without a plan or an objective, would fall into aimless improvisational wandering. The score needed outcomes to make it functional. Working from an identified outcome—what we wanted to happen for each Round Pen Score—added another layer of content. The What Next work pushed us beyond repetitive motif-driven choices and began to build and expand our movement choices into more fully developed phrases. At this point, we began experimenting with using music to give an external structure. We decided to have the full arc of a Round Pen Score last the duration of a Bach Prelude: horsenality behavior established, second dancer enters, join up, change or shape the behavior, and What Next. This proved to be very challenging. We upped the ante by requiring the second dancer to use a different strategy or explore a totally new objective with each iteration of the score.



photo © Susan Fino

JoAnna Mendl Shaw with co-creator Carl Flink [driving], and dancer Brian Godbot, during the making of *Un/Stable Landscape*, August 2011.

Dancer Defaults

Over the course of nine months and over a hundred Round Pen Scores, we realized we had stumbled across and identified numerous Dancer Defaults. We thought of Dancer Defaults as the things we as dancers do when we are falling back on information that has worked in the past. We developed a list of Dancer Defaults: Dancing in Memory Time (a comfort zone of functioning from remembered patterns), Moving Efficiently (this often meant moving quickly), Agreeing to Agree, Clever, Facing Front, Unison, Falling into Repetitive Durations, Being Watched, Find Fluid Transitions, and Stay in Flow.

I began to question where these Dancer Defaults came from. I made a second list of potential sources of Dancer Defaults: a code of behavior that teaches dancers to be obedient, dancers agreeing to agree in order to make the choreography work seamlessly, an aesthetic that seamless dancing is beautiful, and dancers yearning to be interesting.

In our studio exploration of horsenalties and Round Pen Scores, we wanted to get beyond agreements of any sort and get inside movement situations. We wanted to try Agreeing to Disagree and find out what kind of kinetic dialogue would emerge that was not simply confrontational. The high-energy, aggressive-for-no-reason duets that are the mainstay of some dance repertory began to seem fairly simplistic compared to the jagged and complex, often quite raw, and nuanced Round Pen interactions.

Making *Un/Stable Landscape*

Our years of Round Pen research were put to the test during July and August 2011 with the creation of *Un/Stable Landscape*, a work for ten dancers and five horses made for the paddocks and hillside pasture of a small farm in Pownal, Maine. Co-created with Minneapolis dancer Carl Flink and his company, Black Label Movement, *Un/Stable Landscape* was our second work commissioned by the Bates Dance Festival. →



Harry, Cindar, and Buck with Equus Projects and Black Label Movement dancers run up the hillside for the finale of *Un/Stable Landscape*, Bates Dance Festival, Chance Encounter Farm, Pownal, ME, August 2011.

Un/Stable Landscape presented us with the need to solve every thorny issue we had encountered in the studio: establishing and adhering to Choreographic Necessity, What Next, dancing in real time, accounting for horsenalties, and shaping content.

Carl and I wanted to make a work that would move people, create visual beauty, and honor the horses. Our goal was to entertain the spectators while taking the time to truly engage the horses. We were interested in framing equine behavior in ways that revealed its natural beauty rather than parroting rehearsed sequences. We also wanted to create situations that showed equine qualities of athleticism, speed, and even danger. In order to achieve these goals, we hired an equine director, 3-star Parelli instructor Farrah Green. Farrah worked with us during every step of the creative process. She devised a strategy for training the horses over the ten-day creation process of systematically working backwards from final performance goals so that the horses would not anticipate cues. The objective was for them to peak at performance time.

For the finale of the piece, Carl and I wanted all ten dancers and five horses to leave the paddock and run up the hillside. To rehearse this and ensure that the horses would move in tandem with the dancers rather than bolt out of the open gate, Farrah directed us to practice the final exit only once! Resisting our desire to practice till perfect and honoring our commitment to honest equine engagement truly paid off. In both performances, the horses waited patiently for the gate to be opened, then trotted alongside the dancers, moving in cadence with them, ears forward, relaxed, and happy to simply trot with their human herd up the hillside.



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