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The Equus Projects BY JOANNA MENDEL SHAW



Saturday, August 6, 2 p.m. More than 280 people have gathered in the garden and on the small lawn of Chance Encounter Farm, a tiny horse farm in Pownal, Maine. They have come to watch a unique performance created for a cast of dancers and horses. Part choreography, part movement theatre, part art installation, this work has been created specifically for the dusty horse paddock and the rocky pastures of this small farm forty minutes north of Portland. As the music

begins, fourteen women dressed in red evening gowns slowly ascend a distant hillside. They are all carrying rakes, their dresses rippling in the gentle wind. The image is surreal, dreamlike, as if watching a movie in slow motion. In the foreground, a dancer enters the paddock and is met at the gate by a chestnut pony. The dancer and pony begin to walk, then run, in tandem. Thus begins *UnStable Landscape*, a fifty-minute performance presented by the Bates Dance Festival.

The creation of *UnStable Landscape* was a collaboration with my close friend and dance colleague Carl Flink. It featured dancers from my company, [The Equus Projects](#), and Carl's Minneapolis-based [Black Label Movement](#). Our hillside cast of red evening gown-clad women was comprised of dancers from the Bates Dance Festival. Our equine cast included two horses belonging to the owner of Chance Encounter Farm: a Quarter Horse pony boarding at the farm and two ponies owned by a neighbor. These were horses we had met and played with in the past, but in order to accomplish our choreographic vision for this project, we had hired equestrian director Farrah Green, an extraordinary horsewoman and equine communicator. Our ten company dancers, all amazing athletes and accomplished professionals, had a range of equine ground skills, from a few weeks to several years of natural horsemanship training. The creation of *Unstable Landscape* – a two-week process preceded by months of planning – included daily equine training sessions with our cast of five horses.

The history of this unique project began in 1998 with a choreographic commission from Mount Holyoke College to create a performance that would celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Five-College Dance Department. With a cast of riders from the dressage team and more than forty dancers, I built a trilogy of site-specific performances – three different works for three sites on the Mount Holyoke campus. Two months of daily contact with horses taught me and the cast amazing things about performing and being present, about spatial awareness and choreographic decision making. I noticed the dancers intuitively absorbing the energetic state of a horse. They would notice the distance between their bodies and the horses' and seemed to understand the importance of shaping that space. Each dancer quickly learned exactly where on the horse's body to place a hand or visual focus and seemed to completely understand the importance of that exactitude. I watched my cast of young dancers learn to dance with greater depth, physicality and compelling immediacy. I had been totally seduced by the honesty that these animals asked of their human partners and came away from the project wanting to understand more about those physical listening skills that seemed to make dancers uniquely well-suited to communicating with horses.



Fast-forward twelve years: I assembled a company of dancers who were gutsy and athletic and who loved the idea of dancing with horses. Together, we entered the horse world and embarked on a steep learning curve, immersing ourselves in the elegant skill of dressage riding. In 2002, we were commissioned to make a large performance piece for the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, Vermont, a project with a cast of nine dressage riders and their horses and fourteen dancers. The piece was restaged for

several venues, including June 2003 performances in New York City. In 2004, we began focusing on natural horsemanship training and working with rider-less horses (horses-at-liberty). We met

amazing natural horsemanship trainers who coached us, performed with us and helped raise the level of our equine ground skills. Word of The Equus Projects spread, and we found ourselves choreographing performances with horses of all breeds and training all over the country, from Texas to Washington, Montana to Maine. In 2006, we premiered our first project at the Bates Dance Festival, the second largest summer dance festival in the United States. This was the third time The Equus Projects had performed at this prestigious event.

Our small herd of five horses for Unstable Landscape consisted of one 16-hand-plus Lipizzan, one Thoroughbred cross, a slightly grumpy Quarter Horse pony with lots of ground skills but questionable manners, and two lovely grey ponies that had been purchased as a tandem carriage team but were so mismatched in temperament that their owner had decided to let them spend most of their time in the pasture.

Our plan for the ponies was to use them on the hillside, walking in a slow tandem serpentine through the dancers, then leave them to graze in a small round pen at the bottom of the hill. The chestnut pony, Buckaroo, would be used in the opening duet with Equus dancer Rebekah and then would join the two big bays, Harry and Cinder, for a finale of highly animated dancing. Farrah's first task was to help us create trusting and effective partnerships with each of these equines to achieve our choreographic vision.



Carl and I wanted the dancing to take place inside the equine landscape, seamlessly interface with the horses' behavior and, in fact, serve to engage the horses.

The ponies' dance partners were Stephanie and her husband Steve. Their morning horse time consisted of hanging out, grazing and grooming. Stephanie hung out with Olifur (Ollie), who was brash and courageous, while Steve, who spent his childhood with horses, worked with the more timid and easily-spooked Lupin. Grazing. Stroking. Treats. Quiet conversation. That process could not be rushed.

Harry and Cinder were being saved for the finale. Farrah, Carl and I constructed a plan that would begin with a solo for Equus dancer, Carlye and her equine partners, Cinder, Harry and Buck; then, we would add dancers and increase the physicality until dancers and horses were moving together at close proximity and with maximum animation. Treats were very useful in

building the solo for Carlye, who had grown up with horses and felt confident around them. We wanted her large arcing movement to somehow create draw – a difficult feat, since normally such movement would drive a horse away. With practice and treats, Buck, Cinder and Harry learned that they could remain near Carlye despite the wind-milling arms and legs and be assured of a treat as a reward for their bravery, in part due to the fact that moments of stroking and treats were built directly into Carlye's choreography. Carl and I knew we wanted the end of the finale to feature the horses at full speed trot and canter, skidding direction changes, then decelerating into gentle grazing.

To accomplish this, we used four dancers to direct the horses. This maneuver, though simple, required constructing a progression of strategies to teach the choreography to both the humans and the horses. Each day, the horses were encouraged to circle a bit longer, with more energy.



Dancers were taught to sense when the horses chose to change direction and then support that change. Farrah's careful orchestration assured that the horses would remain interested and engaged throughout the two weeks of rehearsal. Her goal was to have the horses perform in animated, playful engagement, rather than obediently responding to commands.

In performance, the horses surprised us, vying for who got to lead and appearing eager to outdo one another. This kind of herd negotiation would not have been appropriate in a traditional circus performance but was perfect for our unconventional use of equine partners.

The making of Unstable Landscape was full of creative surprises, unexpected events that proposed new ideas. On our first day of rehearsal, the dancers raked hay and leveled the potholes on the hillside, a seemingly tedious task that yielded a fabulous idea: the dancers raked all the hay into a huge serpentine that extended from the crest of the hill to the bottom, which would totally engage the women in a real task, one that would



provide a gorgeous and continuous backdrop for the entire work. I am a great admirer of the environmental artist [Andy Goldsworthy](#), and his amazing site-specific art works have fascinated me for years. I have always wanted to create an "Andy Goldsworthy" as the backdrop to a performance, and this was the perfect opportunity. The women on the hillside provided the calm environment for our two slightly nervous white ponies, Ollie and Lupin, who were led by dancers Stephanie and Steve. They carved a slow serpentine down through the pattern of landscape and women and then moved into a small round pen at the bottom of the hill to observe the rest of the performance from that safe vantage point. An audience member might have glanced at the hillside anytime during the performance and noticed the two ponies watching the dance unfold.



Each rehearsal day began with breakfast at the Bates College cafeteria at 7a.m. and a 25-minute drive to Pownal, followed by time for the dancers to warm-up and finish chores – mucking, feeding, grooming, clearing copious amounts of brush and poison ivy from the natural stage. Then an hour of horse time: Rebekah began working with Buck on a 12-foot and then a 22-foot line, gradually gaining his trust by asserting her leadership. The most effective approach was to ask him to do

something, and, if he obeyed immediately, stop asking. The immediate release was the best reinforcement – that, and savvy strategizing. Before the mid-morning, 95-degree heat, Carl and I worked on developing movement phrases and solved choreographic problems with the dancers. One particularly athletic section took place on a 20-foot boulder that stood midway up the near pasture. The boulder work was immensely strenuous, with Eddie and Rebekah taking flying leaps off the rock into a net of human arms and athletic duets that tumbled down the pasture, away from the boulder. This was one portion of the choreography where we could showcase the dancing specifically and build more intricate choreography, as we did not have to direct the horses.

The final moments of the piece completely captured the bond that had been created between the dancers and horses. The choreography required the dancers to open the gates of the paddock in

the final moments of the piece so that the human and equine herds could exit together and disappear up over the crest of the hillside. With the exception of one practice run, Farrah wisely cautioned us to never actually open the gates or the horses would be conditioned to blast past the dancers, through the narrow gate and the hill. In the performance, the horses stayed right with the dancers, hovering at the gate and appearing to enjoy their company. Once the gate opened, horses and dancers moved totally in tandem, exiting together and disappearing over the crest of the hill.



At the time, Carl and I were teaching on the Bates Festival faculty, so we had to rush back to campus by noon to teach our afternoon classes. Many of the dancers stayed behind to spend time with the horses and take advantage of Farrah's knowledge to improve their equine ground skills. By performance time, every dancer had created a bond with our herd of five horses. In fact, the ponies' owner, so moved by the relationship between Farrah, the ponies and the dancers, offered to give Ollie and Lupin to Stephanie and Steve.

This project was successful in part because Carl and I had a cast of dancers who were not only athletic but also compassionate and thoughtful. Their ability to work with horses was due in large part to their capacity for physical listening, their patience and their willingness to make the performance be about the horses, not about themselves. This is a skill set not featured in any televised dance competition.

Both Carl and I believe that training a dancer to physically listen is a crucial part of becoming an artist. In the process of making this work, our dancers truly tested their ability to dance in real time and deepened their artistry. Those were lessons they learned from the horses. To see a beautiful video about the Equus Projects click [here](#).

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JoAnna Mendl Shaw teaches on the faculty at the Juilliard School and in the Ailey/Fordham BFA program in New York City. She is the Artistic Director of [The Equus Projects](#).

