

Cavalía Showcases Human-Horse Bond

Discover the magic of the newest equestrian extravaganza to hit America, created by the Canadian co-founder of Cirque de Soleil. Written by Li Robbins for EquiSearch.

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Half a dozen Quarter Horses gallop across a huge stage with trick riders causing the audience to gasp and applaud. Minutes later, three Lusitano stallions perform "la liberté" with French trainer Frédéric Pignon. It is a ballet of silent communication -- no tack required. Then comes brilliant bareback riding, followed by a group precision. All the while live musicians play behind a shimmering screen, where projections of dreamy landscapes shift in time as acrobats leap from foot to horse, aerialists descending from above.

This is the tapestry of the richly diverse two-hour equestrian extravaganza called Cavalía: A Magical Encounter Between Man and Horse, which runs in San Francisco from February 20 to March 5. Cavalía is the brain child of Canadian impresario Normand Latourelle one of the founders of the enormously successful Cirque du Soleil. Cavalía opened in Toronto in October, with extra shows added when it sold out almost immediately. For Latourelle, it was the culmination of a long-held fantasy.

"I always dreamed about bringing horses to a big show," Latourelle says. "So about seven years ago I tried one horse in a show. There were 150 people on stage, about 1,500 people in the audience. I watched the audience -- they weren't looking at the performers, they were looking at the horse!"

Latourelle's dream was furthered upon meeting renowned French trainers, now co-equestrian directors of Cavalía, husband and wife team Frédéric Pignon and Magali Delgado.

"When I went to France and saw how gently they worked with the horses it was just incredible," Latourelle says. "I called it horse whispering, but Frédéric doesn't like it to be described that way -- he says the horses whisper to him!"

Watching Pignon backstage with his prize Lusitano stallion, Templado, this description is clearly more accurate. It's an ethological approach, born out of studying animal behavior in a natural habitat. Human action is limited to subtle finger and body gestures, creating routines based on a kind of elaborate game. And consummately gentle -- anyone caught using a crop on a horse in Cavalía would be dismissed. Pignon acknowledges the "horse whisperer" tag has its uses though, by giving audiences a starting point.

"I think people understand what a horse whisperer is because of the movie, so they know we can have a different kind of communication with the horses. But really it's about trying to understand horses," Pignon says. "The first thing is listening, respect, and getting to know what they are thinking. To do this it's important to make them very confident with me. Once they are, it's pretty easy to play, to have fun, to feel emotions between us. They laugh with me -- not as we do, but as horses do -- and the audience can see that."

There are 60 performers in Cavalía, 33 of them horses, 5 breeds including Percherons, Arabians and Belgians. Pignon is careful to select horses who are something of the equine equivalent to "a real ham."

"We choose them by personality. A horse that wants to play, who is relaxed, likes something new. We try them out and if we see they are too tense or scared about the noise, the music or the audience we wouldn't use them," Pignon says. "Some horses like playing with the audience. At first they are tense when the audience claps. But then they realize it is a positive reaction. They say, 'OK, so I try, I do something good, the audience is clapping and I'm happy' -- it's wonderful to see that."

Aside from the poetry of the horses, the sheer logistics of the traveling show are stunning. The Big Top is really four Big Tops, an entrance tent, stables, performance tent and canteen. It takes a 40-person crew 7 days to erect, 7 days to tear down. Some 40 bales of hay are consumed daily; carrot count is at a weekly 20 kilograms. Around 10 staff, a mix of full and part time, care for the horses in the barns. (Mane braiding on the Lusitanos can take up to 90 minutes per horse alone -- essential, otherwise their gorgeous long manes would break when lain upon.)

The name of the show, Cavalía, is strictly conceptual. Normand Latourelle smiles when asked.

"It's an invented name," he says. "Since there is nothing like this show in the world, we chose to invent the name to describe it."

It is true that Cavalía is unique -- with its complicated logistical set up, extensive technology and artistic vision. Most special of all though? The focus of the show, which Latourelle sums up: "The stars here are the horses."

For tickets and tour dates, call 1-866-999-8111 or visit www.cavalía.net. Cavalía Rendezvous (VIP) packages are also available, which include extra amenities such as a private refreshments tent and a special visit to the stables. For group sales contact Linda Graham at 415-346-7805.

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