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A Horse, Of Course ... and a Summer of Dancing Outdoors

By LUKE WILEY

DRIVING past a crystal-clear lake under the mountain sky of California, I wondered to myself if there were horses with blue eyes. I had spent the last week with 20 riders and twice that many horses. I met horses of every size, breed, affinity, and color—blonde, chestnut, alabaster, midnight black; horses with maroon shine in the sun; horses with mottled, textured hair like metamorphic rock. I wondered if their eye color could have as much variety. Past the prairies and fields of agriculture we drove, deep into the foothills, and visited a horse ranch. It was there that I met Dave, a blue-eyed horse. And Dave and I danced.

For more than a year now since I graduated in 2005, I have been dancing with choreographer and Juilliard faculty member JoAnna Mendl Shaw in her company, the Equus Projects/Dancing With Horses. When I tell people this, they do a double take and ask, "Wow—really? You dance with horses?" and then inevitably, "Isn't that dangerous?" Sometimes I'll be running backwards directly in front of a galloping horse and think, if I trip and fall, I'll be run over and killed. But JoAnna and the riders we have worked with have all assured me that the horses, with their lightning-quick reflexes, would nimbly run around and past me. This is in part because we use Parelli Natural Horsemanship, a technique of interaction based on

the same physical language that horses use with each other. Developed by longtime cowboy Pat Parelli and his Australian wife Linda after decades of working with and studying horse behavior, the Parelli technique (or P.N.H., as it is known) has given our company many of the tools to work intimately with horses as dancers.

Early on, I was kicked once myself for not reading a horse's signals, which made me realize the powerful necessity of being physically and mentally present while dancing with them. The assertiveness and clarity of your own body language is paramount while asking the horses to be guided by you, with or without a rider. Horses can easily be spooked by anything from police sirens and crinkling plastic bags to the barely perceptible movement of trees and bushes. Using P.N.H., we are able to reassure them of their continued safety and maintain their trust in our leadership. We safeguard our process with the

with each other, facilitating greater sensitivity and movement clarity. The seven games of P.N.H. reflect the games horses play with each other, both for fun and to enforce the hierarchical structure of their herds. We use these same games to play with the horses, constructing movement "scores" and exploring larger themes of power and play, fight or flight, freedom and captivity, interaction and animal curiosity.

This summer in Hayfork, Calif., we taught alongside acclaimed Parelli instructor David Lichman. Also drawing from elements of movement systems such as Pilates, Alexander Technique, Gyrokinesis, and Laban Analysis, we worked with dedicated horse riders on everything from body placement to dynamic imagery while riding. In New Hampshire at the Heifetz Institute, we worked with a passionate group of young string musicians on many of the same movement principles, and how they might apply to music playing. We continued to rehearse with the horses and shared a work-in-progress with everyone at the Institute. Our focus then shifted to teaching dancers at the Bates Dance Festival in Maine, and constructing our new piece *Seven Games*.

Working intimately and intensely with rider Sandy Dimick and her three breathtaking horses, we rigorously explored the parameters of this new piece centered in the themes of ritual, task, and seduction. We rehearsed

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daily on a hilly polo field, and were fortunate enough to be working at the site of the performance—a lush, grassy quad dotted with trees on the campus of Bates College. The music of renowned electric cellist Jami Sieber,

On that afternoon in California, I was running as fast as I could, jumping into cartwheels, then leaps, then rapid turns, twisting my arms into space-shaping spirals. As I carved the air between Dave the blue-eyed horse and me, he looked me in the eye, intense-

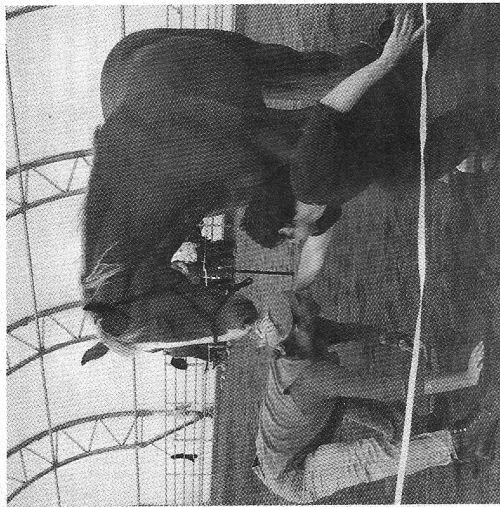
We approach the horses with great humility as collaborators and friends.

our fellow collaborator, created a rushing, sonic atmosphere of boundless horizon and rhythmic momentum, which was matched by the verve of our horses and the rapt attention of the audiences we performed for. *Seven Games* was a hit, and we're excited about touring with it around the country in the future.

As the child of an environmental conservationist and a wildlife-rehabilitation expert—and a dancer who has spent most of his education and career inside dance studios—I am especially gratified to be outside, in the woods and the fields, dancing with these magnificent animals.

ly obedient and truly curious—following along, trotting, cantering, and tossing his head. He wanted to know what I was doing and where we were going, and how much fun could be had as we played together. Simultaneously, we came to a halt and looked at each other, panting. I just smiled, marveling at the bizarre joy in front of me. Sharing no verbal language, Dave the blue-eyed horse and I had come to understand each other and communicate in those moments through the language of dance. □

Luke Wiley graduated in 2005 with a B.A. in dance.



Company members Luke Wiley (left) and Luke Gutzwill dancing with Scotty the horse at a clinic for riders in Hayfork, Calif.