

Dance

Journeying Through New England to Discover Equine Virtuosity and Spiritual Flights

Eight horses and their maroon-vested riders trace curlicues on a green lawn at the Shelburne Museum's 45 acres of historic buildings, gardens, and exhibits. They're warming up—not for a competition but for a dance, *Kalliope*. Dancer-choreographer JoAnna Mendl Shaw (the leader, with "equestrian director" Kate Selby, of Equus Projects/Dancing

With Horses) improvises among the hooves—placing a hand on a steed's shoulder, curving into backward steps that accommodate to its path, falling in with another horse, going nose to nose with a third, and retreating calmly as its rider guides it forward.

Equus Projects offers its creators a challenge. The complicated maneuvers of equine choreography are a strain for a horse, and Selby and Mendl Shaw have only eight animals to spell one another. Dancers on the ground have to keep things moving for chunks of time, and however good they may be, our eyes stray to the sidelines, hoping an equestrian partner will prance in.

Kalliope, performed at Riverdale Equestrian Center in the Bronx this past June, was commissioned for the Shelburne site, in front of the museum's merry-go-round. At the start of the ingratiating show, a child (Sarah Selby) is left alone when her two playmates rush away. Magically, the carousel starts to turn and emit music. As it spins, seven colorfully garbed figures appear, leaning out from it to welcome the child into a carnival world. They, and four additional dancers dressed like clowns, cavort on and around red cable spools, or perch atop them when horses trace crisscrossing loops on the grass.

Sometimes there's too much going on. If a horse is doing flying lead changes (repeatedly switching the leading foot in a canter), you want to see that. *Kalliope* is finest when horses and dancers echo one another or unite: Four horses circling a still group become a living carousel; rider Ellen Miller makes her mount Sagitta sidestep, and their action is framed by two sidestepping dancers. (If the horses are dancers, I want the dancers sometimes to be horses.)

It's delightful to see Alberto Denis swing up behind Patricia Norcia on Valiente at the

THE EQUUS PROJECTS/DANCING WITH HORSES
Shelburne, Vermont
ROBERT WILSON/14 STATIONS
North Adams, Massachusetts

WHEN NOT-A-DANCE BECOMES DANCE

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Photograph by Jerry Reilley

conclusion of their playful trio, or little Sarah Selby go head-to-head with a bay. Naomi Wimberly-Hartman's tango with Indius (ridden by Miller) is not only deliriously sensual, it trumpets a moving irony: Wimberly-Hartman—slipping under the horse's neck as it slows, running beside it, seeming to entice—looks free as a wild horse, while her partner's moves are controlled by a rider who becomes, in some sense, invisible. The humans dance their guts out, but it's the horses that make your eyes fill up.

Horses go round: Equus Projects in Vermont.