

DANCING WITH HORSES

JoAnna
Mendl Shaw

Photographs of Ellipse © Janet Biggs

Ellipse was created in 2005 by The Equus Projects for the opening of the River to River Festival in New York. The venue was the Oval Garden, one of the few grassy spots in Lower Manhattan. The requirements were that the horse be under 1000 lbs, he could only walk or trot and the company could only use the periphery of the oval space. So they made a choreographic spirograph.



The Equus Projects is an American dance company that partners dancers with horses, ridden or at liberty, merging the artistry of dance and horsemanship to create unique performances.

Dressage riders have accustomed their horses to move with dancers in tandem. These are fairly advanced riders who perform complex dressage movements. The dancers move in harmony with the horses, sometimes mirroring them and at other times creating a human landscape through which the horses move. For the horses, dancing with a human is like moving with a herd and difficult dressage movements can become play.

In 1997, choreographer JoAnna Mendl Shaw

engineered a unique collaboration between a US college dance department and their equestrian programme, which resulted in a trilogy of performance works for dancers and horses. During the three month process of creating this body of work, JoAnna became fascinated by the visceral connection that developed between the dancers and horses. Following completion of the project, she initiated a series of research and performance projects to further explore the language of communication between human and equestrian collaborators.

The company performs throughout the United States and for each project they gather together a cast of equestrians and their horses from the locality of the



Bates Dance Festival © Nancy Halsey

performance. They often work through the Parelli network but are about to start a project with a group of dressage riders in Virginia, none of whom are Parelli students.

The choreography is a blend of set steps and improvisation. Dressage pieces are usually totally choreographed with careful attention to synchronising the music to the tempo of the horse's gait. The steps are recognisable from a dressage test but with more fluidity and allowance for improvisation at transitions.

The works created for liberty horses call for greater improvisation. Markers, music cues or points in the performance space, are established to create a structure within which the performers play. The dancers make decisions moment by moment within that structure using their horsemanship skills, taking into account the reality of working with live animals and the fact that they

too have their 'off days'.

Dancers learn to improvise and work with the horse wherever he's at. The work presents specific challenges to the dancers to be present in every moment and to engage with a non-verbal creature and trains the humans to be accountable for every movement choice. The more extrovert horses love it.

"We start with a set of goals for the horses in each piece and plan the training so that they are still excited and interested to be with us during the performance. The horses come first in all that we do" explains JoAnna. "The work is, by nature, unpredictable. We know reasonably well that the human dancers will do their part, based on weeks of rehearsals. Whether the horses do their part will dictate the outcome of the piece!"



For performance information
www.dancingwithhorses.org



JoAnna is a choreographer and says, "In 2003 I was contacted by David Lichman, a Parelli 5 star instructor, who is also a musician. He invited me to attend one of his clinics and I was smitten!

We have trained with David as well as many other amazing trainers including Karen Rohlf. Linda Parelli has also worked with the Equus dancers. Our early work was all with ridden horses but now we also dance with horses on line and at liberty."