

- **Kim Baston**
La Trobe University, Australia

‘New’ hippodrama, or ‘old’ circus?: legacy and innovation in contemporary equestrian performance

The hippodrama existed as a popular spectacle during the nineteenth century, an entertainment marrying the equestrian acts that were staples of the early modern circus with a grander narrative purpose. As such it was denigrated by the guardians of ‘legitimate drama,’ such as Leigh Hunt, as an example of the triumph of the taste of the masses over the claims of the intellect. Within circus, equestrian performances waned in importance during the twentieth century, ceding prominence to wild animal and spectacular aerial acts. While animal performance within circus has also declined, there has been a recent resurgence of equestrian companies. In the contemporary equestrian spectacle the relationship of horse with human is radically re-defined, based on an ‘equal’ or ‘reciprocal’ sharing of the theatrical space, emphasising non-human animal agency and de-emphasising suggestions of coercion. Yet these spectacles retain strong traces of the traditional divisions of equestrian acts within the circus, from the formal movements of Haute École to ‘liberty’ acts. This article investigates the shifting narratives surrounding - the contemporary equestrian spectacle. Kim Baston is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Drama at La Trobe University and she also lectures on circus history and culture at the National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA) in Melbourne, Australia.

Keywords: hippodrama, equestrian acts, Cavalia, Théâtre du Centaure, *TransHumance*, traditional circus, ‘new circus’

The hippodrama, a dramatic representation involving horses, was a popular spectacle during the nineteenth century. Hippodramas extended the equestrian acts that formed the basis of the early circuses, such as Astley’s Amphitheatre and the Royal Circus in London, into extravaganzas which included pantomimes, versions of Shakespeare and Walter Scott novels, grand military spectacles, and gothic and romantic melodramas, of which *Mazeppa*

(based on the poem by Byron) was possibly the most famous.¹ A. H. Saxon defines “[t]he true hippodrama” as “literally a play in which trained horses are considered as actors, with business, often leading actions, of their own to perform.”² In practice, as Saxon acknowledges, the term was given to entertainments involving narrative in which horses were prominent. Many of the actions performed by the trained circus horse were replicated within hippodrama, although these actions were repurposed for specific dramatic contexts.

Changing cultural attitudes towards human-animal relations and the rise of animal rights movements have challenged the use of both wild and domesticated animals in circus, and the ‘new circus’ as it has developed from the 1970s has been largely animal free. Equestrian performance within a popular frame, however, has endured in many different forms, within a skills based context of competitive equestrianism, such as dressage, and in dramatic spectacles, such as the Wild West shows popular in the early twentieth century, and their contemporary successors.³ Increasing academic attention is being given to animals within theatrical practice⁴ and it appears that the horse/human theatrical or circus performance is regaining currency, with a resurgence of equestrian troupes particularly evident in Francophone countries.⁵ These companies continue the legacy of equestrian acts familiar from the circus, but also, to varying degrees, develop theatrical narratives. It is, I argue, useful to revive the term ‘hippodrama’ as a category within which to conceive of the varied practices of these companies. To consider these performances in a historical relationship to both hippodrama and circus acknowledges the persistence of a set of familiar and highly codified equestrian acts, although these are reframed for contemporary sensibilities.

This article examines performances by two contemporary equestrian companies, *Cavalia* and *Théâtre du Centaure*. *Cavalia Inc.* was founded in 2003 by Normand Latourelle, one of the co-creators of *Cirque du Soleil*, and is based in Montreal.⁶ The company produces large scale, commercial spectacles, combining a focus on equestrian acts with other circus performances. *Théâtre du Centaure (TDC)* was founded in 1989 by two performers and equestrians, Camille and Manolo, and has been based in Marseilles since 1995. *Théâtre du Centaure* engages in a range of hybrid artistic practices with horses, including theatre, environmental art and film projects. On the surface, the two companies differ considerably in their aesthetics of presentation and in the economic conditions of production. There are, however, intriguing similarities.

In both companies a utopian narrative prevails, in which the horse/human performance is presented as an ideal of freedom, of nature, and the harmonious horse/human relationship stands in for a vision of the possibility of harmony between species. In both companies the relationship of horse with human presents an ideal of the ‘equal’ or ‘reciprocal’ sharing of theatrical space, a relationship in which the horse is seen to have agency and in which anything that might smack of coercion is downplayed.

While neither company describes themselves as ‘circus’, *Cavalia* slips easily into this definition: it presents many familiar acts of circus equestrianism,

intermingled with human acrobatic and aerial performances. These performances are placed within a loose theatrical narrative, a commonplace feature of 'new' circus. Théâtre du Centaure, though, defies such easy categorisation. While their performances also demonstrate a clear relation to traditional equestrian acts, other signifiers of circus are not present. There is no use of circus apparatus, for example, which, as Peta Tait identifies, is crucial in providing the frame for what an audience is prepared to see as circus.⁷ The equestrian performances are not surrounded by other circus style performances, nor segmented into the recognisable 'act' format that still underpins much 'new' circus. Their use of horses in narrative and theatrical performances, though, makes application of the term 'hippodrama' appropriate.

Equestrian acts in circus and hippodrama: a brief overview

The modern circus established in London in the late eighteenth century by Philip Astley instituted a vibrant performance form based around equestrian acts. An equestrian statue and rider adorned the early circus buildings, enshrining in visible form the centrality of animal performance to this new entertainment. The practicalities of equestrian performance determined the adoption of a standardised performing arena, the ring, which remains a defining feature of 'traditional' circus performance, even for acts not requiring horses. The early circus was a hybrid theatrical form, combining equestrian performances and acrobatics that took place in the ring, with theatrical entertainments performed on the adjoining stage. The constraints of the 1737 Licensing Act meant that circus, classed as a minor theatre, could not present spoken word drama, and this resulted in a proliferation of entertainments relying on physical and musical means to convey narrative, in the form of pantomimes, harlequinades, ballets and musical entertainments such as burlettas. In the nineteenth century the stage and the ring were often linked via a system of ramps, a development enabling the spectacular dramatic productions with horses that became known as 'hippodrama.'

A. H Saxon's detailed book, *Enter Foot and Horse*, documents the history of hippodrama and its links to circus, demonstrating how hippodrama extended the range of activities for both horse and human performers from demonstrations of skill into performance of narrative.⁸ Hippodramas had tremendous popular appeal, and the successes of productions at the London circuses inspired their replication at the 'legitimate' theatres. The irruption of horseflesh into the hallowed halls of Covent Garden attracted condemnation from proponents of the dramatic text. Complaining about a performance of George Colman's melodrama *Blue Beard*, an anonymous spectator thundered:

A novel and marked event occurred at this theatre on this evening (18th of February, 1811), which should be considered as a black epoch for ever [sic] by the loyal adherents to wit and the Muses. As the Mussulmen date their computation of years from the flight of Mahomet, so should the hordes of folly commence their triumphant register from the open flight of common-sense on this memorable night, when a whole troop of horses made their first appearance in character at Covent Garden.⁹

Leigh Hunt, the eloquent critic of the early nineteenth century, also wrote about this production. Hunt, while considering the enjoyment of these animal spectacles demonstrated evidence of a “corrupted” public taste, was at least able to entertain the possibility of an ‘animal actor,’ if only as an improvement in verisimilitude to a human actor in a ‘skin role,’ such as the pantomime horse.¹⁰

Joking apart, it is no doubt interesting to see of what so noble an animal as the horse is capable; and it is still more agreeable to be relieved from those miserable imitations of him, which come beating time on the Stage with human feet, and with their hind knees the wrong way. If it were possible to present the public with such exhibitions and at the same time to cherish a proper taste for the Drama, they might even be hailed as a genuine improvement in representation; for if men, and not puppets, act men, there seems to be no dramatic reason why horses should not act horses.¹¹

Writing at a time in which increasing attention was being given to the question of cruelty towards animals, Leigh Hunt was also concerned with what could be termed questions of ethical spectatorship, evincing qualms on account of the “poor beasts themselves” for the physical pain endured in the conditions of both performance and of training.

[I]t will take a great deal to persuade a rational spectator at the theatre that the closeness of a stage, the running round and round, the bending of knees, the driving up steep boards, and above all, the mimicry of absolute death, do not give the animal considerable pain and have not cost a hundred times as much in the training.¹²

Hunt’s writing reveals themes that continue to resonate through spectatorship of animal performance: firstly, a fascination with the animal body on stage (albeit with a certain disquiet at the core of this fascination) and, secondly, with whether an animal can ‘act.’

A horse would undertake a range of actions in these spectacles and might appear to act autonomously, although other actions were more obviously directed by human performers. As Saxon notes, the ‘autonomous’ horse generally acted for the benefit of a human:

Their activities were invariably directed toward serving or rescuing their human masters, and these activities were thought of not only as expressions of fidelity, but as manifestations of conscious human qualities possessed by the animals themselves.¹³

Dutton Cook, discussing the decline of hippodrama performance in the late nineteenth century, laments that the horse is “no longer required to evince the fidelity and devotion of his nature by knocking at street-doors, rescuing a prisoned master, defending oppressed innocence, or dying in the centre of the stage to slow music.”¹⁴

The 'faithful and devoted' horse can be seen in an early hippodrama produced at the Royal Circus: *The Magic Flute; or, Harlequin Champion* (1800) by J.C. Cross.¹⁵ According to Jacob Decastro, in this pantomime "Mr Davis, of the Royal Amphitheatre, taught the noble "Horse Turk" to rear up, seize hold of, and tear down a streaming banner from the rampart walls, at the representation of a grand tournament in the opening scene."¹⁶ While Turk is represented here as acting of his own volition, moved to anger at a perceived slight to the hero, Sir Huon,¹⁷ other horses were more obviously controlled. An illustration of the jousting during this tournament demonstrates the highly trained and formal manoeuvres of the *haute école* (high school).¹⁸

The horse within hippodramatic performance, then, enacted several roles simultaneously: an instrumental role that displayed high level physical training, and a narrative role that fulfilled certain cultural needs of the nineteenth century such as nobility, loyalty and willing subservience to a human master.

Hippodrama lost prominence with the decline in permanent circus buildings, buildings that could accommodate these performances within the ring. The introduction of the touring tent for circus performance during the nineteenth century enshrined the ring as the dominant arena for circus performance, and, in removing the stage and ramps, deemphasised theatrical performances. The influential circus historian, Anthony Hippisley Coxe, distinguishes circus as being an art of 'actuality,' while he considers theatre to be an art of 'illusion,' a distinction that leads him to the decision that narrative entertainments are not part of circus 'proper.' The early modern circus, with its hybrid architecture of ring and stage, was, for Coxe, a compromise, and one that "confused the basic principles of two completely different forms of entertainment."¹⁹

But, as Helen Stoddart notes, "Coxe relies on a very selective view of circus history which regards the 'Romantic age' of the circus in which [...] the stage was as important as the ring and detailed representational dramas predominated, as a temporary if lengthy blip in an entertainment otherwise dedicated to the pure display of effects."²⁰ The travelling 'traditional' circus never entirely dispensed with theatrical narrative, although it became more focussed on demonstrations of exceptional acrobatic skill, and following from this, the incorporation of narrative into 'new circus' is not a rupture, but a contemporary iteration of early practice.

The travelling circus institutionalised acts into replicable categories that included acts in which the horse has apparent agency, and acts in which the horses perform under human control. The former includes acts such as the 'learned' or 'sagacious' horse act, in which a horse demonstrates the apparent ability to count, or to select the prettiest girl in the audience. Comedy equestrian acts are often predicated on the non-compliance of a horse that, by 'choosing' not to perform, thwarts the rider.

Acts demonstrating more overt control of varying degrees include 'liberty acts' in which unriden horses undertake a variety of dance-like patterns, which, though cued in the ring by a trainer, gain their effect from the horses' apparent

effortless flow of movement. High levels of control are also evident in acts focusing on the human acrobatic performer (the horse functioning almost as a prop), such as voltige or jockey acts,²¹ and the complex *haute école* where the ridden horse performs complicated steps. The success of these acts depends on the skilful interplay between the rider as controller and the horse as willingly controlled. The acquiescence of the horse is an important meta-narrative here, in contrast, for example, to a rodeo-style performance in which the non-acquiescence of the animal is key to the narrative of danger and dominance that defines this style. All these genres of acts (with some exception for rodeo) require a considerable amount of training for both horse and human.

As Paul Bouissac makes clear, however, the highly trained circus act includes the reduction of visible signs of that training, such as cueing, to foster the impression that the horse appears to act autonomously and intelligently.²² This impression is vital to the reception of the 'learned horse' and liberty acts, but is a desirable aim in other acts. Equine agency is, therefore, carefully simulated.

As a 'rational spectator' Leigh Hunt was not fooled by any apparent autonomy of the horse. He knew that the human performers were in charge. As his writings above indicate, his reception of the performance of *Bluebeard* is shot through by qualms about the cruelty that had assumedly gone into their training. While the treatment of horse performers in Hunt's day was probably harsher than current practice, it is nevertheless impossible to ignore the potential of cruelty in any contemporary presentation of animals. As Michael Peterson points out, "even an ill-informed audience's construction of the meaning of animal acts will draw on spectators' knowledge of, and/or assumptions about, how those performances are produced: human audiences "read" the animal apparatus as well as the symbolic matrix."²³ In viewing the contemporary horse spectacle, the question inevitably arises whether the spectacle should be performed at all.

Within animal welfare discourse the question of what constitutes cruelty contains a number of elements, and often the terms 'cruel' and 'unnatural' become conflated when they are not identical.²⁴ If they are treated as identical, then all training situations are inherently cruel. For some animal rights groups, such as PETA, any use of animals within circus performance is condemned, and the organisation maintains a list of circus touring schedules (within the USA) so adherents can find and picket them. But PETA is more ambivalent about companion animals, including horse riding.²⁵

Scholars such as Donna Haraway and Vicky Hearn view training as a potentially reciprocal relationship between sentient creatures who can, and do, communicate their different needs.²⁶ As Donna Landry points out, this is a potentially paternalistic relationship, but, as the basis for ethical behaviour, could be seen as a good use of power.

Given that animal freedom from human intervention has become ever more a fantasy, it appears more ethically responsible to attend to human-animal relations, to attempt to understand them

in their full complexity, than to ban them or dismiss them by means of puritanical critique.²⁷

In light of the particular enmity of animal welfare societies towards circus performance, Cavalia is careful to divert potential accusations of cruelty or misuse. Promoting itself as an organisation in which the welfare of the horses is paramount it attempts to allay qualms about their participation. At the same time, the show *Cavalia* emphasises the 'natural' qualities of the horses and thus capitalises on the fascination with animal bodies on stage.

Cavalia: the harmonious horse and human relationship

*If humans behaved with each other the way man and beast relate in Cavalia, we would achieve harmony and peace, shared freedom, and wealth on Earth.*²⁸

According to Normand Latourelle, the idea for the eponymous spectacle *Cavalia: A Magical Encounter Between Human and Horse* came from a previous show in which the presence of one horse effortlessly upstaged everything else. *Les Legendes Fantastiques* "featured a brief scene during which a horse crosses the stage through 125 actors – just passing through. I noticed that at that precise moment, the eyes of the fifteen hundred spectators were totally riveted on that horse and they were neglecting the rest of the action."²⁹ And presumably they neglected the sheep and pigs that were also used in this production. The pigs were apparently funny, but the horse was fascinating.³⁰

Cavalia is designed to appeal to a broad demographic and the programme sold at the 2013 Melbourne season claims that 3.5 million people have seen the production in the USA, Canada, Mexico and Europe. The show is a large-scale spectacular, with an aesthetic approach that is highly reminiscent of Cirque du Soleil (even to the use of an on-stage singer).³¹ Staged primarily in an end-on configuration, a ring is also constructed for some acts within the large rectangular playing area. This presentation style certainly aids the complex lighting effects and projections, which create exquisite environments, including a giant hologram of a horse that appears periodically. There is a loose narrative theme, which deals with an idealised version of an evolving relationship between human and horse, beginning in prehistory. The emphasis throughout is upon the horse. During the interval pictures of horses and information about horses are projected and there are many, many opportunities to purchase horse-related merchandise, especially soft toys. Premium tickets can be purchased which include a tour round the stables.

The horses are displayed in a series of acts that replicate long-standing models familiar from circus performance, but the narrative surrounding the presentation of these acts has shifted. Equestrian acts, such as voltige, roman riding,³² *haute école* and liberty acts are combined on stage with other circus-style performances, such as rolling globe, aerial harness, and acrobatics. Unlike traditional circus performances, though, the emphasis is on the reciprocity of the horse/human interaction, and on animal agency. The humans 'play' with the horses, while the horses act like themselves. The show is described as "a dream of freedom, cooperation and harmony [...] a fairy tale setting filled with poetry

and emotion [...] the horses [...] express themselves in all their splendour, nobility and strength, often completely free.”³³ The “dream of freedom” encompasses, apparently, both horses and humans.

Cavalía also distances itself from the problematic concept of the ‘circus performing animal’ by seemingly distancing itself from the concept of ‘circus.’ The company describes the production instead as “an equestrian ballet”³⁴ or an “equestrian poem.”³⁵ Even the description of the performing arena within ‘The White Big Top’ contains the somewhat ingenuous statement that for the spectator “[t]he impression is that of a majestic white cathedral or a fabulous castle”³⁶(rather than a big white tent). Advertising for the spectacle includes obvious circus-style performances but nowhere in the programme does the word ‘circus’ appear.³⁷

But, just in case it might be mistaken for circus, *Cavalía* emphasises the care given to their ‘horse stars’ with a section of the programme dedicated to this topic. The language continues to be anthropomorphic: a “workshop” rather than a “training session,” an “outing” to a paddock rather than “being turned out” into the paddock.

The horses each have a stall, with enough space to stretch, lie down, sprawl out, roll and relax. They always have the same neighbour to ensure that their environment is familiar and comfortable in each city. ... [The] veterinary technician, grooms and farrier ... create a comfortable environment and provide daily health care, grooming and activity. ... Every day horses get their share of pampering, including a shower, grooming, massage, workshops with their riders, and outings to the paddocks.³⁸

The programme also explains that the performance duration for any horse is around 12 minutes and understudies are on hand if a horse does not want to perform on a particular day. Training methods are also mentioned

The *Cavalía* approach is based on training methods designed to make sure the horses enjoy training with us and performing on stage.³⁹

The driving force behind the equestrian training and performance ethos for *Cavalía* is the French husband and wife team, Frédéric Pignon and Magali Delgado, who use an approach that they term ‘ethological training.’⁴⁰ As Paul McGreevy and Andrew McLean note, this term is being increasingly used in equestrian training but there is a lack of clarity over its usage.⁴¹ ‘Ethology,’ by definition, is a study of animal behaviour, especially occurring in a natural environment, so the term seems to point to training that is based on the natural behaviour of a horse. In this sense it appears to be not dissimilar to the ‘gentle’ training popularised by Carl Hagenbeck in the late nineteenth century, which began to emphasise training based on the natural behaviour of the animal, to be achieved “without ever resorting to force.”⁴² The term, though, sounds reassuring and therefore bestows some publicity benefits: it sounds scientific, appropriately considered, and, possibly, similar enough to ‘ecological’ to gain some credits from that association.

Stress is laid on the cooperation of horse and human, particularly through the medium of play, with play portrayed as natural for both humans and horses.⁴³ One sequence in the DVD of the performance is that of Pignon apparently playing with a horse. He runs, the horse follows/pursues him, their interaction reminiscent of a game of 'chasey.'⁴⁴ Pignon has a charming presence, he smiles constantly and, as spectator, I am convinced by his enjoyment of this activity. He gives few overt signs of cueing. This 'act' of apparently high-spirited romping appears to be a signature act, as it is replicated in other performances given by Pignon.⁴⁵ While Pignon and Delgado left the show in 2009, this act remained virtually identical in the Melbourne performances, down to the costuming and hair styling of the current human performer. For this spectator at least, both the live act and the show recording effectively represent 'play' as a mutual source of enjoyment for both human and horse, the horse apparently a willing participant in the activity.



*Figure 1. Pignon and horses in Cavalia. Photo Michael Maloney.
Reproduced by permission of the San Francisco Chronicle*

But what is presented as enjoyable natural behaviour has many precedents within classic horse acts. A horse that chases a human is a staple of comedy equestrian acts, from the early circus onwards. "The Tailor Rides to Brentford," for example, was a comedy equestrian act pioneered by Astley. The popularity of this depiction of an inept horseman ensured its wide replication (under different guises) in other circuses during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An advertisement for this act performed by a Mr Humphreys for his benefit at the circus in Newcastle in 1791 depicts Humphreys being pursued by a horse in a way that is highly reminiscent of Pignon's contemporary performance.⁴⁶

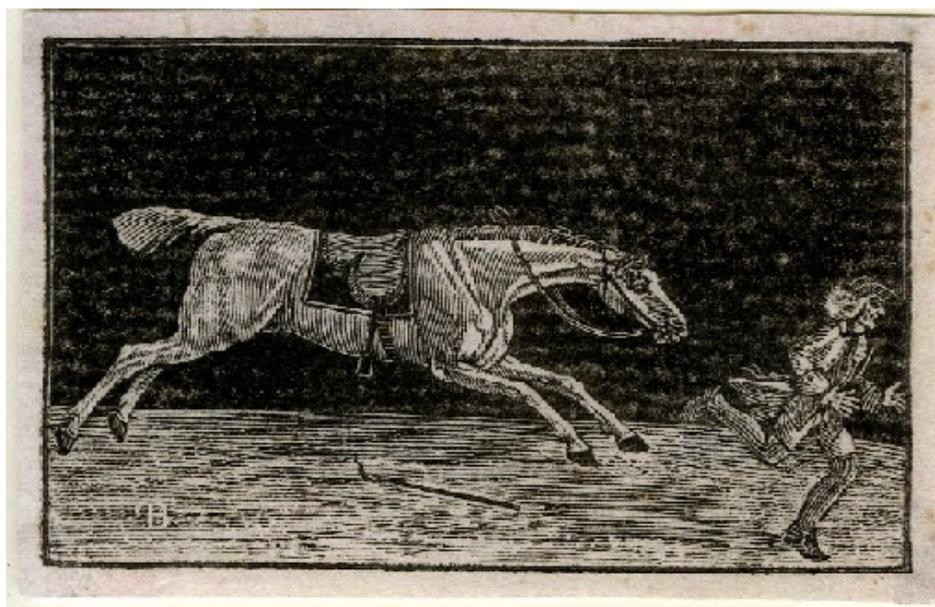


Figure 2. Mr Humphreys in *The Tailor Rides to Brentford*. Woodcut by Thomas Bewick. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Nicholas Ridout argues that “[a]nimals only ‘mean’ on stage when their ‘natural’ behaviours, whether trained or untrained, are framed within human contexts in which they become meaningful.”⁴⁷ The context for Pignon’s performance is ‘natural horseplay,’ while the context for Mr Humphreys was a comedy involving a horse with a certain malevolent intent. Within the unnaturalness of the stage environment, any ‘natural’ behaviour of the horse must be called into question. As Jean-Claude Barry notes, “for a horse the only totally normal environment is a harem structure in a large meadow.”⁴⁸

Bert States questions whether an animal on stage is anything other than a representation, or always inevitably subsumed into representation? “If an image, by definition, is a likeness or a representation of something, how can it be the thing itself?”⁴⁹ He uses the example of zoo animals as “vaguely oscillating between animals and images of signs of animals.”⁵⁰ Following States, the horses in *Cavalía* are images of a ‘natural’ horse.

For this representation of ‘the natural horse’ two elements are important: the cosmetics of display (such as costume and decoration), and the display of the means of control. In the illustration for Mr Humphrey’s benefit, the horse is saddled and bridled, a horse ‘dressed’ to be ridden, and which, comically, refuses to cooperate. In the new equestrian spectacle this is revised, made seemingly transparent. In *Cavalía* the horses are saddled and bridled for the acts that clearly demonstrate human control (such as the trick and roman riding), but wherever possible elsewhere are presented *au naturel*, unadorned, as in Pignon’s playful chasing act, and in the liberty acts he presents elsewhere in the program.⁵¹ Here there is no saddle or bridle. There are no plumes of feathers. Tail and mane are naturally loose. Pignon also has long flowing hair, and flowing hair, whether equine or human, male or female, predominates in the majority of the acts, and in all of the acts in which the horse is at liberty.⁵² Only in some of the obviously highly controlled *haute école* acts is the mane plaited or braided,

and this is not universal, as flowing hair distinguishes the quasi-medieval styling of the dressage act in the second half of the performance. But within this predominantly natural styling, the aesthetics are controlled in a similar fashion to more traditional presentations in that the horses are grouped according to their physical appearance, with a preference for similarity of colour and breed.

What is presented is an idealised horse, a horse that participates freely in the performance, although it could be argued that with the emphasis on 'play' the animal body is infantilised in this encounter. The harmonious horse/human relationship is suggested not only by the acts of human-equine cooperation, but also by the tightly controlled visual aesthetics. As the horses are selected for their similar appearance, so the 'corps de ballet' effect of the sumptuous costuming of the riders produces, arguably, a similar human 'conformation.' A utopian vision realised with the conjunction of horse and human is also evident in the work of Théâtre du Centaure, although the representation is more complex.

The 'new' hippodrama of Théâtre du Centaure

*C'est aussi un cri d'alliance : quand tu regardes un centaure,
tu vois une relation.*⁵³

At the time of writing, Théâtre du Centaure (which they prefer to term a 'family' rather than a company) consists of ten horses and ten people.⁵⁴ Camille and Manolo remain the main performers in the company. Their early work can be clearly considered as hippodrama, such as striking versions of *Macbeth* (2001) and Genet's *The Maids* (1998), performed with both horses and dramatic text. Their work has since diversified into a more hybrid practice combining visual art and dance, and, more recently, environmental art in *TransHumance* (2013). Part of this art practice also includes the making of short films related to their projects.⁵⁵ Their publicity and artist statements, although concerned with the horse/human relationship, do not address either questions of animal training or concerns with animal welfare.

While in *Cavalia* the utopian project is implied, for Théâtre du Centaure, utopia (or Foucault's 'heterotopia') is an explicit aim.

C'est exactement ce que Michel Foucault appelle une 'hétérotopie,' le lieu physique réel de réalisation d'une utopie. Un espace concret qui héberge l'imaginaire comme une cabane d'enfant, un espace à la fois mythique et réel.⁵⁶

Foucault uses 'heterotopia' to designate a place of otherness that has both physical existence and an imaginative resonance, and uses the term in conjunction with the concept of utopia, which he characterises as intrinsically unreal. Theatre is, for Foucault, essentially heterotopic in that the stage can juxtapose "in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."⁵⁷ In their on-going project to realise the 'actor-centaur,' Théâtre du Centaure aim to achieve a hybrid performer both real and

simultaneously mythologically resonant. This goes beyond 'ethological training' to a space of encounter.

The 'actor-centaur' is a composite of horse and human, indivisible and working in concert. In *TransHumance*, for example, the film footage features Camille dressed in a simple long black dress, her black hair loose, standing upright upon a black horse with flowing mane. While *Cavalia* focuses on the horse, continually drawing attention to the animal, in Théâtre du Centaure this is not overt. The centaur performer just *is*, presented without comment, leaving the spectator to decide the meaning of these oblique images. But while the utopia of *Cavalia* is constructed as play, as innocence, Théâtre du Centaure's utopia, while still a celebration of the 'natural', is more obviously dionysiac, fleshy and erotic.

Mark Griffith notes a long-standing erotic link between the display of both horse and women's hair in his study of ancient Greek culture, noting that for "aristocratic women and finely bred horses" the hair was both the crowning glory and "ostentatious sexual symbol."⁵⁸ The long hair of both male and female horses was admired. This equivalence can be seen in the continuing use of the same name for both human and horse hair (mane, pony-tail). He also notes the association in antiquity between horse riding and human sexual relations.⁵⁹ In the work of Théâtre du Centaure this attribute is particularly in evidence in *Macbeth* (2001) and in a short work, *Cantique des Cantiques* (Song of Songs) (2009). Camille and Manolo perform a stylised sexual encounter, accompanied by two black Frison horses, Graal and Darwin. The erotically charged encounter between the human performers is amplified and 'made strange' by the association with horseflesh. This theatrical encounter is re-envisioned and made more explicit in their film projects, such as *Bosphore* (2009).

The erotic association of horse and rider has more frequently been associated with the female equestrian. The nineteenth century hippodrama, *Mazeppa*, was popular at least in part for the juxtaposition of the seemingly nude protagonist (male in the narrative, but usually performed by a female in fleshings), with horseflesh. For Nichola Haxell, the *equyère*—along with the *dompteuse* (female lion tamer)—are two significant figures of the male desire (and gaze) "in that they correspond to distinct male desires and patterns of male response, despite the fact that both are associated with control, with animal passions, and are mistresses of the crop or whip."⁶⁰

But while Théâtre du Centaure's vision is less 'innocent' than the world of *Cavalia*, their performances still frame the horse as expressive of 'nature.' A recurring image is the juxtaposition of the centaur with industrial environments. In the short film *Petrochimie* (2009) the smoke and lights of a petrochemical works are intercut with images of the eye of a horse, an eye that weeps tears.

The company's most recent project, *TransHumance* (2013), was an environmental performance conducted in various stages that invited the 'audience' to "leave behind the television" and to "walk in the dust of the roads to the rhythm of the animals," led on the journey by a centaur (Camille).⁶¹ 'Transhumance' is the term for the seasonal migration of domestic animals and their keepers from summer to winter pastures. The journey taken by Théâtre du

Centaure and participants, documented through film and photography, followed the contours of the constellation Centaurus mapped on to the region of Bouches-du-Rhône in southern France. This migratory project included the production of ‘animaglyphs,’ arrangements of humans and animals in the landscape. Elements of the project took place in urban environments amid migrant communities; sometimes the human actors lead herds of horses through city streets, and sometimes through what the company calls “*surgissements*” (emergences), as when they put a centaur into a train station. Here the ‘real’ site of the train station is contested by the ‘mythic’ presence of the centaur-actor. Similarly, the final section of the film of *TransHumance* shows the entrance to a stairwell in a bleak housing estate, out of which comes a horse.⁶² These unexpected appearances heterotopically juxtapose incompatible spaces, both the housing/stabling of human and horse and the untethered, unriden horse loose within a dense urban area.



Figure 3. Gare Marseille Saint Charles © Théâtre du Centaure.
Reproduced by permission of Théâtre du Centaure.

TransHumance can be considered an exercise in flow, of people, horses and other domestic animals against a landscape. The ‘flowingness’ of the horse as movement and of hair can also be seen in the film accompanying the book of the project. The film of *TransHumance* exploits the long shot, often in slow-motion, and the flowing hair and long dress of Camille float blackly above the three black horses she rides. As in *Cavalia* both the visible means of control and the display of artificial decoration are downplayed. If harness is used it is camouflaged, black harness against the black horse.



Figure 4. *Centaure aux Salins de Giraud (Transhumance)*. Photo Lionel Roux.
Reproduced by permission of Théâtre du Centaure.

As in *Cavalia*, the display is of both the unadorned ‘natural’ horse and of a non-coercive performance. In some of the short films made by the company there is no evident use of harness. Manolo, a superb horseman, often rides seated bareback with arms outstretched, cueing the horse with his legs alone. And, as in *Cavalia*, the horses are evidently highly trained. In the filmed performance *Odessa* (2009), which features a horse and rider juxtaposed against an industrial wasteland, Manolo and Darwin execute a number of the more difficult *haute école* moves, including a capriole (in which the horse leaps while throwing out the back legs).⁶³

A crucial difference to *Cavalia* is that these highly skilled moves on the part of both rider and horse are not presented within the immediate legibility of a ‘traditional’ equestrian act. In Théâtre du Centaure’s work there is nothing resembling an ‘act.’ In *Odessa*, for example, the capriole appears within a sequence that takes place in a black pool of water. It is not signalled in advance and it is not produced within a standard circus act structure such as a climactic, or ‘glory’ trick following a series of tricks of increasing difficulty. It is an action that arises seemingly spontaneously within the narrative context, which Théâtre du Centaure summarise as “in a black pool as deep as the sea, a centaur drowns in the memory of a bride.”⁶⁴ I read the ‘spontaneous’ capriole, in context as an outburst of emotional despair that encompasses both horse and rider.

In an article that considers how humans might, ethically, ‘be with’ animals, Vinciane Despret argues that:

... talented riders behave and move like horses. They have learned to act in a horse-like fashion, which may explain how horses may be so well attuned to their humans, and how mere thought from one may simultaneously induce the other to move. Human bodies have been transformed by and into a horse’s body.⁶⁵

Despret’s starting place is what has become known as the ‘Clever Hans’ phenomenon. Clever Hans was a celebrated ‘learned’ horse, able to solve mathematical problems. A scientific investigation into the apparent intelligence

of this talented horse revealed that, as in other 'learned animal' acts, Hans was responding to cues. But what was intriguing was that Hans was not only able to respond to cues from his trainer, he also responded correctly to other humans who asked him the same questions, but who did not know the cues for his response. In the scientific study of this animal, Oskar Pfungst revealed that, unconsciously, the 'untrained' humans were still giving Hans cues. As the human thought of the correct answer, he made subtle unconscious movements that Hans recognised, and acted upon. While the investigation demonstrated that Hans was not intelligent in the sense of being able to count, the fact that the horse could pick up and act on unconscious cues made in response to a thought, demonstrated intelligence of quite a different order.⁶⁶

In April 2015 I attended a voltige training session given by Marie-Claude Bouillon, director of the Canadian equestrian company *La Luna Caballera*. The riders in training prepared themselves before mounting the horse by running alongside the horse, matching their steps to the particular rhythm of the horse they were working with. This repeated preparatory process becomes necessarily truncated and therefore easily overlooked in viewing a performance that focuses on the spectacular trick. But for the apprentice equestrians it was necessary for them, as Bouillon instructed, to move as the horse moved, to 'breathe with the horse.' To use Haraways' term, they had to 'become with' the horse.⁶⁷

The relationship between Manolo and Darwin in performances such as *Odessa* poses the question of who influences and who is influenced in this relationship. If Manolo's body is influencing the movements of the horse, could it also be argued that Darwin's body has influenced Manolo, that he might have taught Manolo the right movements in order to elicit their extraordinary dual performance? Could awareness of what Despret calls "this miracle of attunement"⁶⁸ allow us to move beyond the possible ethical concerns of witnessing equestrian performances?

It is, currently, probably impossible to view animal performance without some sense of unease about the ethics of this witnessing. The maintenance of traditional equestrian 'acts,' situated within the familiar act-based structure of circus performance and presented in a big top, suggests that *Cavalia* cannot escape the problematic association of 'animal' and 'circus.' It is, therefore, likely that the company will need to continue reassuring the contemporary spectator, whether this is overtly via advertisement of the conditions of care of its horses, or more obliquely via its 'natural' presentational style and utopian narrative.

While the hybrid artistry of Théâtre du Centaure, contains a similar legacy of equestrian acts, it cannot be defined narrowly within the designation 'circus' and is therefore less 'tainted' by that association. I suggest it is the practices of both companies, whether understood as circus or hippodrama, that offer new possibilities for the continued presentation of animal performance within the current cultural climate. While this might be considered as just 'new skin for the old ceremony'⁶⁹ (to use the words of Leonard Cohen), this 'new skin' offers novel and engaging ways to re-conceive the fascinating spectacle of horse and human 'becoming centaur.'

¹ Antony D. Hippisley Coxe, "Equestrian drama and the circus," in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, eds. David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 112-113. First performed at Astley's Amphitheatre in 1834, Mazeppa continued to be revived throughout the nineteenth century, most famously in the performances by Adah Isaacs Mencken.

² A. H. Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse: A History of Hippodrama in England and France* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968), 67.

³ Recent productions in Australia, for example, include the arena spectacular *The Man from Snowy River* (2002), a musical with horses, and the ongoing *Australian Outback Spectacular*, which combines equestrian and circus performances to tell 'Australian' stories and also includes dinner for patrons.

⁴ Recent scholarship includes Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes, eds., *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014); Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre & Animals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Peta Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals, Emotions, Circus* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Lourdes Orozco, eds. *Performing Animality: Animals in Performance Practices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Animals within performance art practices are also considered in Steve Baker *Artist/Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁵ Companies in France include Theatre Zingaro (who arguably forged the way for the reimagining of equestrian companies) and Baro Eval de Cirk. Quebec-based companies include La Luna Caballera, Les Ballets de Cheval and Cheval Opera.

⁶ Cavalia is the name of both the producing company and the show *Cavalia*.

⁷ Tait, *Wild and Dangerous*, 10.

⁸ Other useful discussions of hippodrama include Michael Gamer, "A Matter of Turf: Romanticism, Hippodrama, and Legitimate Satire," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 28:4 (2006): 305-334; Cassie Mayer and David Mayer, "Exit with Dead Horse," *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 39:1 (2012): 78-92. The technical apparatus used to stage hippodramas is discussed in Kimberly Poppiti, "Gallopings Horses: Treadmills and Other Theatre Appliances in Hippodrama," *TD&T (Theatre Design & Technology)* 41:4 (2005), 46-59.

⁹ Anon quoted in Dutton Cook, *A Book of the Play* 3rd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1881), 304-305.

¹⁰ A 'skin role' (or 'skin part') is a term used for a human actor who plays an animal. These roles were especially associated with popular forms like pantomime.

¹¹ Leigh Hunt, *Leigh Hunts Dramatic Criticism 1808-1831*, eds. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 47.

¹² *Ibid.* 48.

¹³ Saxon, *Foot and Horse*, 8.

¹⁴ Cook, *Book of the Play*, 37

¹⁵ Saxon considers the first hippodrama produced in England to be Quixote and Sancho; or Harlequin Warrior, produced by John Astley at Astley's Amphitheatre in the summer of 1800. The Royal Circus response followed three weeks later. Saxon attributes the idea of horses on the stage to France, with Franconi's horse troupe produced at the Théâtre de la Cité-Variétés in 1798-1799 (Saxon, *Foot and Horse*, 42).

¹⁶ J. Decastro, *The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian* (London: Sherwood, Jones & Co., 1824), 156.

¹⁷ Saxon, *Foot and Horse*, 40. An extensive description of this pantomime is given in an advert for the Royal Circus (*The Times*, 23 June 1800).

¹⁸ *Haute école* (high school) movements can be considered similar to contemporary dressage. The illustration appears to indicate a *pesade* (see *pesade* illustration in Philip Astley, *Astley's System of Equestrian Education: Exhibiting the Beauties and Defects of the Horse, with Serious and Important Observations on his General Excellence, Preserving Him in Health, Grooming, &c.* 8th ed. (Dublin: Thomas Burnside, 1802), 177.) The illustration of this scene in the hippodrama can be found at: British Library Online

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/kinggeorge/g/003ktop00000027u055b0000.html>

Accessed 12 November 2015. A good discussion of this style of act can be found in Anthony Hippisley Coxe, *A Seat at the Circus* (London: Evans Brothers, 1952), Chapter 11.

¹⁹ Coxe, *A Seat at the Circus*, 17.

²⁰ Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 81.

²¹ Voltige, or trick riding acts, are fast paced acts in which the equestrian vaults on and off the horse. In jockey acts, the rider spends more time in feats of balance on top of the horse and the act is usually slower. For a detailed discussion of these acts and of liberty horse acts see chapters 3 and 6 in Coxe, *A Seat at the Circus*.

²² Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976), 53-57.

²³ Michael Peterson, "The Animal Apparatus: From a Theory of Animal Acting to an Ethics of Animal Acts," *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007): 35.

²⁴ For example "The tricks that animals must perform – night after night – are unnatural, frightening, even painful," MSPCA, accessed 24 March 2015.

<http://www.mspca.org/programs/animal-protection-legislation/animal-welfare/circus/>

In the many websites dealing with animal cruelty in the circus, the proximity between the concept of 'unnatural' and the concept of 'cruelty' ensures a predominant message that anything unnatural is inherently cruel. This is more prevalently applied to the use of 'wild' animals in circus.

²⁵ "Where there is a respectful, loving bond between horse and human, then horseback riding *can be* as much an act of companionship and exercise as walking one's dog ... With domesticated horses, PETA supports humane, interactive training." PETA, "How does PETA feel about horseback riding?" accessed 14 April 2014. <http://peta.org/about-peta/faq/how-does-peta-feel-about-horseback-riding/>

²⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003); Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (London: Heinemann, 1987).

²⁷ Donna Landry, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 13.

²⁸ Raôul Duguay, in François Brousseau and Valérie Martin, *Cavalia: A Dream of Freedom*, trans. Waguih Khoury (Saint-Laurent: Éditions Fides, 2004), 47. Duguay is described in this text as a singer-song-writer, writer, poet, longtime friend of Latourelle and "inspired mind" behind the original project (44).

²⁹ Brousseau and Martin, *Cavalia: A Dream of Freedom*, 16. *Les Legendes Fantastiques* was created by Latourelle in Quebec in 1998.

³⁰ Peter Birnie, "Cavalia extravaganza started with one horse," *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 March 2011, accessed 21 March 2015.

<http://www.vancouversun.com/entertainment/Cavalia+extravaganza+started+with+horse/4426959/story.html>

³¹ Normand Latourelle, creator and artistic director, was one of the first members of Cirque du Soleil (Brousseau and Martin, *Cavalia*, 20).

³² Roman riding involves standing on two horses.

³³ *Cavalia* Programme, Melbourne Season, August 2013.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Brousseau and Martin, *Cavalia*, 10.

³⁶ *Cavalia* Programme.

³⁷ The human artists are described in the programme by their specialism—as acrobats, aerialists, dancers, riders, musicians and a singer. Although some of them have circus backgrounds, there is no indication of this in the biographical text.

³⁸ *Cavalia* Programme, 30-33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁰ Brousseau and Martin, *Cavalia*, 34.

⁴¹ Paul D. McGreevy and Andrew N. Mclean, "Roles of learning theory and ethology in equitation," *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 2 (2007): 109.

⁴² Carl Hagenbeck, *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's Experiences for Half a Century among Wild Animals* (London: Longmans, Green, 1912 [1909]), 31-32.

⁴³ The training program is also referred to as 'play' (Brousseau and Martin, *Cavalia*, 47).

⁴⁴ *Cavalia* (DVD), Cavalia International Entertainment LLC, 2005.

⁴⁵ Pignon performs regularly at other types of equestrian performance, for example at EQUESTRIA 2011.

⁴⁶ Nigel Tattersfield, "Caught in the Act: John Bill Ricketts as Glimpsed by Thomas Bewick," *Print Quarterly* XXX:4 (2013): 425.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Ridout, "Animal Labour in the Theatrical Economy," *Theatre Research International* 29:1 (2004): 60.

⁴⁸ Author's translation, "...pour un cheval, le seul environnement totalement normal, c'est une structure de harem dans une grand prairie," Jean-Claude Barrey, "Communication inter et intra espèces," in *Application au travail en liberté et au travail monté. Dans "L'Équitation, le cheval et l'éthologie" 3ème colloque de l'école nationale d'équitation* (Editions Belin, 1999), 7.

<http://www.cadrenoir.tm.fr/siteene/html/lesjournées.htm>. Accessed 18 February, 2015.

⁴⁹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵¹ Although it is unusual, there are examples of horse acts in the circus that have been presented without harness. Arthur Konyot, for example, presented a large group of heavyweight Percherons in 1944 at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus without check-rein, bridle or any other kind of harness (Charles Philip Fox, *A Pictorial History of Performing Horses* [Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1960], 90.) The unadorned horse is becoming more common within contemporary 'traditional' circus companies.

⁵² The tossing of both Pignon's hair and the horse's mane is emphasised in the video reproductions of this act, which continually feature the slow motion long shot so beloved of shampoo commercials.

⁵³ "It is also a shout of alliance: when you watch a centaur, you see a relationship" (author's translation). Théâtre du Centaure (TDC), accessed 18 February 2015.

<http://www.theatreducentaure.com>

⁵⁴ The horses are Tao, Grail, Darwin, Veloz, Bhima, Akira, Toshiro, Judishtira, Silence and Moogli. They also have a donkey, Koko Bottom. TDC website, accessed 18 February 2015.

<http://www.theatreducentaure.com/La-compagnie>

⁵⁵ All films referred to in this article can be found on the TDC website.

⁵⁶ "This is exactly what Michel Foucault calls a "heterotopia," the actual physical location of achieving a utopia. A concrete space that inhabits the imagination as a child does a cabin, a space that is both mythical and real" (author's translation), TDC website, accessed 23 March 2015.

<http://www.theatreducentaure.com/La-compagnie>

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16:1 (1986): 25.

⁵⁸ Mark Griffith, "Horsepower and Donkeywork: Equids and the Ancient Greek Imagination. Part Two," *Classical Philology* 101:4 (2006): 310.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁶⁰ Nichola Anne Haxell, "'Ces Dames du Cirque': A Taxonomy of Male Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Art," *MLN* 115:4 (2000): 793.

⁶¹ Actes Sud/Theâtre Du Centaure. *TransHumance* (Marseille: Actes Sud, 2013), 7 (author's translation).

⁶² *Transhumance*, accompanying DVD, Neon Productions, 2013. Section begins at 16:00.

⁶³ *Odessa*. TDC website.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Vinciane Despret, "The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-zoo-genesis," *Body and Society* 10:2-3 (2004): 115.

⁶⁶ For discussion of Clever Hans see Thomas A. Sebeok and Robert Rosenthal, eds. *The Clever Hans Phenomenon: Communication with Horses, Whales, Apes and People* (New York: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Volume 364, 1981). This phenomenon might explain the many accounts in circus histories of horses recognising the cue music for their act as evidence that they are able to recognise music. It is more likely that their trainer recognised the music, and they responded to some minute change in the body of the trainer at that point. Barrey calls this 'gestural homology' (Communication, 1). In thinking of galloping the rider makes the movements that spur the horse to gallop.

⁶⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

⁶⁸ Despret, *Body We Care For*, 125.

⁶⁹ The title to Cohen's 1974 album.