

The New York Times

Celebrating Horses, Humans and Their Bond



Frédéric Chéhu

Élise Verdoncq, left, and Tatiana Daviaud in "Cavalia," a celebration of the equine-human bond now playing in the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, N.J.

By **CLAUDIA LA ROCCO**

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EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — What would you call a show that brashly proclaims none of its 60 stars are female? Sexist, right? Definitely. Except that 34 of those main attractions are neutered.

“[Cavalia](#),” the horse-centric spectacular created by Normand Latourelle (a founder of [Cirque du Soleil](#)), has taken up residence at the Meadowlands here, occupying an eight-

tent colony featuring a 26,264 square-foot big top. It's the first stop in the New York region for this briskly paced two-and-a-half-hour show, which has toured Europe and North America since its inception in 2003. Geldings rule.

Like Cirque, "Cavalia" is big on the atmospheric, including a heavy-breathing score by Michel Cusson, a sweeping theme celebrating the human-equine bond, and romantic posturing by its heavily made up and flowingly costumed cast of acrobats, aerialists and riders. Many of the men's manes rival those of their steeds.

But this is all window dressing, running the gamut from tedious to harmless. The real draws here are the animals: [Criollos](#), [Belgians](#), [quarter horses](#) and more. And they are beauties, whether stepping through tightly choreographed dressage routines, patiently accommodating the flips, balances and comedic high jinks of their flexible riders or tearing unbridled around the oval dirt track that constitutes most of the stage.

For many people, animal shows conjure wince-inducing images of rigidly controlled, poorly treated beasts. "Cavalia," mercifully, is no such thing; in one of the most endearing sections Sylvia Zerbini gently orchestrates a chorus of nine high-spirited Arabians through a kaleidoscope of patterns. For animal lovers it's pure porn.

And while some of the numbers, like a treachy bit in which a woman lures a proud white brute to drink from her palm, are mere conceits, the obvious care and pleasure with which the trainers treat their glorious charges (and vice versa) is lovely to see. Hugs, nuzzles and pats abound, and rarely do they seem forced.

Equally engaging is the fierce inward concentration that riders radiate while guiding their partners through complicated maneuvers. (There's even an equine Rockette routine.) Of course you'd be concentrating too if your head were just inches from the rapidly pumping legs of a racing horse. Those hooves mean business. "Breathtaking" is an overused word, but the sheer acceleration of these animals is a heady thing indeed. Humans, "Cavalia" reminds, are just along for the ride, whether they choreographed it or not.

"Cavalia" runs through June 27 at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, N.J., (866) 999-8111, cavalia.net.

NEW YORK POST

Show of horse power

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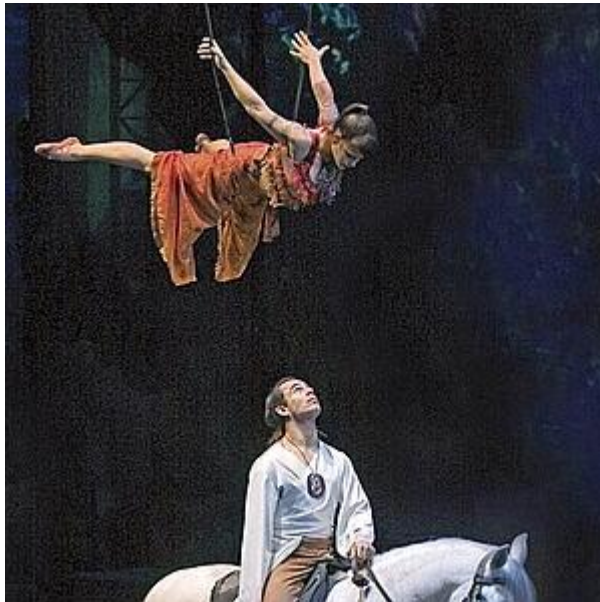
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Frank Scheck

THEATER REVIEW

CAVALIA White Big Top at the Meadowlands; East Rutherford, NJ; 866-999-8111.
Through June 27.



Even if your only equine encounter was a childhood pony ride, you're bound to be enthralled by "Cavalia." This dreamlike spectacle exploring the relationship between man and horse showcases the latter in its high-spirited glory.

Arriving in the Meadowlands Sports Complex after touring the world for six years, it will probably spike a demand at riding academies throughout the tri-state area.

Unlike conventional circuses, "Cavalia" isn't performed in the round, but on a sandy stage as wide as a football field, with a 210-foot-wide screen featuring projections

complementing the action. It features 35 acrobats, dancers and riders, and some 40 horses of different breeds -- Arabian, Appaloosa and Lusitano among them.

The opening -- a short film depicting the birth of a foal who immediately struggles to stand on all four feet, with the crowd wildly cheering when he succeeds -- beautifully establishes what's to come: a 2½-hour production that's most haunting when the horses are alone onstage, going through their showy paces.

The human performers are no slouches, either -- whether racing the horses furiously across the stage, engaging in a dazzling series of jumps or interacting with their steeds almost telepathically.

The highlights include "Boule," an intimate duet for dancers that ends with an equine kiss; "La Vida," in which two female acrobats literally fly around galloping steeds; and "Carousel," in which a team of horses engage in beautifully synchronized formations.

Directed by Erick Villeneuve and choreographed by equestrians Frédéric Pignon and Magali Delgado, the spectacle is accompanied by New Age-style music performed by an onstage band and a female vocalist.

It's a rare show that evokes a sense of wonder. "Cavalia" does it in spades.