

Horse Dancers.

As dancers it is important to know ourselves when we have to express ourselves through the body. Horses can teach us something about ourselves. Something about how body and mind are connected when we work with *being present*. As dancers we become aware of ourselves through the body of the horse.

Thoughts and notes from a summer camp in the South of France, arranged by Anita Saij, and the German dancer and teacher Nien Marie Chattz.

By Anita Saij (head of Nordic School of Butoh).

I have two passions in my life: one is horses, who I have experienced nature through since being a child; the other is dancing. Working with the body is a great challenge, and acknowledgement of life, which is also about nature in me.

High up in the mountains where the clouds sail by like heavenly oceans, we start our day in deep peace with our breath, in the open dance hall which smells of hay and morning air. We sit in meditation, making the body transparent, while the sun slowly rises and the colours silently explode outside.

Here lives hundreds of calm, black horses, whose ancestors have grazed and developed in this rough and ancient landscape, now scheduled as an open space, in the Pyrenees. They live naturally after an old tradition, their race is pure, and like the Icelandic horses they are strong both in body and mind.

Nature's magnificent greatness fills you with both joy, fear, and wonder, artistically as well as practically, when these horses balance on the outmost verge, totally present right where the hoof is put down, relaxed and steady, and still aware and ready to react. Everything makes an impression from day one to the last, seventh day. As dancers we become aware of ourselves through the body of the animal. Nature outside crawls under our skin. All the way into our hearts in our feeling of being present.

We work in the border between the outer and inner world, according to good Butoh practice. We experience how nature in the body can work with and against us, and how we can work with and against the body and the expression, if we do not know enough about ourselves. As dancers it is important to know ourselves when we have to express ourselves through the body, deeply united with and inspired by nature outside.

We have come to learn something about ourselves from the horses. Something about how body and mind are connected, when working with being present.

Why it is interesting to work with horses as a dancer.

The purpose of the camp was to give the dancers greater knowledge and awareness of their own body, and thereby enable them to use themselves better while training or creating.

We used horses as partners, as we would have used a partner on the dance floor. These are not circus or dressage horses but natural, harmonic animals, resting well in themselves. They are four-legged dancers with a special ability to listen deeply to what we do. Maybe similar to an audience, who have naturally come because of simple curiosity, and a wish to meet themselves. The

horses are as an audience especially attentive towards what happens right here and now. They feel and sense everything you do also on an unconscious level.

We can catch the interest of the horses, and make them listen to what we do. One could say that the separation between animal and human, body and body, cease to exist, and in this way, you meet your own mirror in action.

The horses notice fear and expectation. They are unique animals who relate in quite a straightforward manner to what you do on their backs. These are special horses, very harmonic and good for this type of work. The amazing thing is that the horses actually register you intentions before they are expressed through you actions. And we, as body artists, then have to accept that intention and thought should be give priority behind body and action.

When working on the horse, it feels when we are present in what we do. And when fear, insecurity, personal emotions, or unclear thoughts are interfering with our actions, the horse reacts immediately by loosing concentration about what you do. On the other hand, we have experienced how it lets us work very intensively for more than an hour, with weight, balance, improvisation, and more complicated cooperation like bodily interaction between two dancers.

The Camp.

The camp was focused on the dancer's way of working with breath, body, thought, and paying attention in great detail to energy and mental movements in the body. A neutralization of the personal emotions through consciousness and breathing, through contact to the animal and contact to one's own spine and the spine of the horse, working as a whole. The dancers learn to feel the earth under their feet and the sky above their heads, and generally elongate their way of experiencing their own body. This makes the body reach further out both ways, and expand; Ki, Japanese for energy, is set free and put into movement

We work with a dynamic and organic perception of movement in several directions, in order not to slide off the back of the horse, and not merely be aimed towards one goal, one direction. This gives a spatial experience of movement as a journey between more that two destinations, just like dance. And it demands your full presence here and now because of the unpredictability.

On the horse you must relax, be open and transparent, but also active and moving, working with balance, coordination, practical bodily problems such as weight, rhythm, and shifting directions – very difficult and yet easy. However, the purpose is the contact between the horse and yourself – the cooperation, and it is the bodywork on the horse, rather than a specific technique. It has nothing to do with riding or the wish for a certain result; it is research and examination, improvisation and dialogue between outer and inner, between you and your partner: in the afternoon it is the horse in nature, and in the evening or morning the other dancers in the open studio above the stables, or outside in the magnificent landscape.

The horse is our audience also in a second sense. We work towards transmitting a material in a way where we can listen while we talk. We practice in the dance studio, and try out our practice with the horses. Scenically, we know the worth of being able to improvise without loosing ourselves; to give ourselves inspiration through intuitive openness and active will, at the same time as being receptive and experience our performance as if it was the first, where everything is fresh and new, even though we know it all well.

(Further information about next camp: www.nordicbutoh.dk)

Theatre is a Lie.

Theatre is a lie, or a fiction which has to become reality to you and your audience. As audience we notice what you are aware of inside yourself, in other words, the way you relate to your body, and to what you are doing right here and now. That is the only thing you truly own every moment.

If you are not aware of anything, which can often be the case in modern dance because the focus is on movement from the outside and not from the inside, well, then we who look at you do not notice anything either – and neither will a horse. To be aware is to experience with the body, a kind of expanded sense experience which also brings alive our intuition and instinct. The breath, completely together with your thoughts, manifest into a bodily awareness which reaches far beyond movement and words.

We cannot express something if we are thinking of something else. You cannot hide this connection, and your movements will never receive the weight of time in space, nor a deep value to yourself or others. A horse feels this presence. It reacts willingly and patiently if your expression is clear. What is not important to you, also when you work with your body in movement on the horse, becomes unclear and vague to the horse, and it quickly loses interest and concentration in the cooperation.

The inner world is in such close contact to the outer that being creative really demands your presence in an active and special way. And for some it can be really difficult to be authentic with their bodies and themselves in this process. Theatre is a lie after all, sometimes impossible to pass on in a truthful way, since it is an illusion which has to pass through you, and in this process be given weight, reality, gestalt.

The Inner Emotion in the Expression.

In the theatre, more work is done than in dance on inner emotions in the expression. Therefore you pay much more attention, also technically, to how you use yourself in relation to the material. In Butoh dancing, we work closer this way to theatre than to dance. The focus is from the inside and out, and not so much on how we look.

The experience is very important – simply to create experience inside and outside the body, which is also seen in some types of modern theatre training. But also dancers of modern dance need content and inspiration from the inside and are becoming very interested in working with the body on deeper levels, something which puts the ego and the personality to the test.

To be able to use ourselves in a more rich and versatile way when creating, we have to examine and have knowledge about how we work with ourselves, and rediscover what we have forgotten: the authentic body. When we think that we express something, we can often be misunderstood or understood wrongly if we do not respect the authentic body, where thought and emotion is strongly connected to will and action. Even a dancer, working with the body every day, can have the best intention, but the action does not correspond, it is not truthful; we are not convinced by her. This is because the dancer can have a problem with what dance terminology calls gestalting the action into space, with all of her, all of her body

Thought comes before movement. Intention before action. We have to feel with every cell, and be present in all of our breathing. It sounds easy, but it is difficult. It is often like that with what is straightforward and natural; when we have difficulty to be present in the natural as human beings, it is often because we actually forget ourselves, or that we impose our expectation or fear on the body.

Facts:

In 2005, a group of 12 dancers from Europe participates and research a very special body work at the horse farm of Cavalus, in the middle of the French Pyrenees. The organiser and leading teacher was Anita Saij from Copenhagen with the dancer Nien Marie Chatz from Germany, a collaboration on cross **Contact Improvisation, Body work and the Butoh approach to movement**, including « meeting the horses ».

Anita Saij is one of the avant-garde and experimental dancer and choreographer of Denmark. She founded the priced new circus Acid Cirq of Europe bringing contemporary dance and circus artist together at a highly level. Through more than 15 years A.S. been the director of the international renowned dance theatre Dance Lab with its base in Copenhagen. Since 2003 A.S. had been the director Nordic School of Butoh in Denmark a new international dance performance education with focus at experimental and alternative work with the body and modern stage art. (please see Anita Saij at www.nordicbutoh.dk).

Notes of Nien Marie Chatz:

Far from the ambitious performance work of Bartabas from the Zingaro Compagnie in Paris, here in the remote nature of the mountains, horses and movers meet almost inevitably, as the animals are living here in their natural environment, having conserved their natural behaviour as herd animals. Trained to take riders on treks though the mountains, but living outside all year long, they were around on the plateau where the dance workshops happened and seemed to be curious in certain situations, coming closer as if wanting to join the game.

To touch and move with a 400 kg animal without fixed rules, to find the level of contact, dialogue and, hopefully, communion with a semi-wild animal is an ongoing adventure and surprise.

It seems to work best if the dancer can access the deepest, intuitive sources of movement:

Breathing, touch, giving weight, waiting, listening...

Generally, a highly sensitive body awareness, together with patience and delicacy of action seems to allow the horses to stay in tune with a human being through body language, even without a codified « sign giving ».

In some situations, the horses can be agreeing to stay in open movement communication with a dancer for about 30 minutes.

The interest for the dancer lies in that quality of listening and observation which resembles in an intensified way the attitude an improviser and performer cultivates on stage.

The dancers' ability to adapt, to feel their own bodies, and to explore their intuitive choice-making - crucial in improvisational performance - gets highly challenged...

« To meet our animalistic spirit in dancing »... Seeing horses run together, mares call for their foals, to meet the ever present oscillation between curiosity and shyness of a flight animal, the tenderness, independence, force, and elegance of the horses, is intensely moving, bringing back the forces of healthy nature and life power into our city lives, like a reminder from where we come and where we all are at home, as dancers and human beings...

Neither dancing nor riding experience is necessary for this work, although often, the participants do have experience in both fields.

« NOMADANCE at Cavalus »: This year's program is available on www.cavalus.com, and on www.nordicbutoh.dk