

Cavalia

at 15

A look at Cavalia's groundbreaking role in equestrian entertainment, with founder Normand Latourelle.

BY ELIZABETH KAYE McCALL

Founded by Normand Latourelle, Cavalia continues to provide unforgettable equestrian entertainment.

I'll always remember the sight of Normand Latourelle on a tractor moving mounds of sand against the stable tent during a huge storm when Cavalia was at the beach in Santa Monica. The groundbreaking equestrian spectacle was still in its infancy at that point, little more than a year old.

Yet, since the company raised its first Big Top in Quebec, the extraordinary determination of a non-horseman and creative genius has brought more than seven million people the unforgettable experience of horses through two touring productions.

The company's namesake and original production, Cavalia, has traveled around the world and is now in China. Latourelle's second and even bolder spectacle, *Odysseo*, began touring North America in 2011 and is reportedly the largest touring production on the planet.

"My dream is that in 50 years, you're going to open the dictionary and read the definition of Cavalia," said Latourelle in 2003, the first time we spoke, when Cavalia was still in rehearsals before its debut. Fifteen years later, no dictionary is required. Scores of articles, video clips and social media of all forms team with facts, photos, and fans sharing experiences the world over.



COURTESY CAVALIA



LYNNE GLAZER



TOP: A virtual ambassador for the horse industry, the groundbreaking equestrian spectacle Cavalia has been experienced by more than 5 million people in 15 countries since its first performance in 2003.

RIGHT: Like a beacon in the night sky wherever it travels, Cavalia's white big top holds more than 2,000 spectators. The beach in Santa Monica was a memorable tour stop in 2004.



| From the Cirque to the Horse |

One of Cirque du Soleil's four original cofounders, Latourelle always had a gift for spotting exceptional talent and making things happen. The visionary behind many varied and memorable shows, Latourelle helped build Cirque du Soleil, serving as VP and general manager from 1985 to 1990. Known for innovative and adventurous productions, a large-scale multimedia summertime show he created in Quebec called "Légendes Fantastique" became the (then) non-horseman's greatest inspiration. A horse he put on stage stole the audience's attention. Latourelle's, too.

"What I learned through the years is that I'm very stubborn, which is an advantage and a disadvantage," says Latourelle, now 62. "An advantage, because I do what probably not everyone is doing, but a disadvantage, because when you decide to move forward—you kind of put your head down and say, 'OK let's go for it now!'"

"The other thing is, I'm both the producer and the creator," he continues. "Especially on *Odysseo*, most of the ideas are from me. It's very rare I think, to both create and produce what I create. If I relied on a third party to invest the money, to take the risk, my project would probably never happen."

"Even with Cavalia, it was difficult to explain how you could do a show with horses and be very artistic. And *Odysseo* is twice the size! When I look around and say, 'OK, who wants to share the risk?' No one wanted to share it. They said, 'You're crazy. This won't work, it's too expensive.' Probably, because I'm stubborn, I just set the goal and I do it."

His determination is paired with exceptional resourcefulness. "When Cavalia started in 2003, we were in Shawinigan, a small town about two hours north of Montreal. I made a deal with the mayor. She supplied the arena for us to rehearse for free

LYNNE GLAZER PHOTOS



The Lusitanos of Frédéric Pignon's star liberty act in 2004: Templado, Fasto and Aetés.



MAKING EQUESTRIAN MAGIC

Founder Normand Latourelle engaged the talents of Frédéric Pignon and Magali Delgado of France during Cavalia's development as the show's original equestrian co-directors and costars. Longtime Cavalia fans will remember the renowned couple from the show's inaugural tour in the United States and Canada, including a number of their Lusitano horses from the Delgado family farm in the South of France. Pignon's star liberty stallion, Templado, with his flowing knee-length mane, entranced all who saw him.



and the land for nothing,” remembers Latourelle. “She didn’t asked us to do anything, except to do three shows for the locals. Shawinigan is only 50,000 people. I put tickets on sale for three shows. Within 30 minutes, the mayor called panicking. She said, ‘Everybody is complaining, everybody wants to see the show, but you have no tickets!’ 6,000 tickets had sold within 30 minutes. I called her back and said, ‘We’re going to do three more shows.’ An hour after we put the tickets on sale, she called me again. ‘It’s not enough!’ We went like that for four weeks.” Latourelle finally told the mayor Cavalia had to leave.

“After Shawinigan was Toronto and then Montreal. When we got to Toronto, we thought we were going to stay for three weeks. We stayed for six.” Next, Cavalia opened in December 2003 in Montreal for a two-month run. “We had temperatures of minus 30 and we performed all the shows,” said Latourelle. “We didn’t make money because it cost more in fuel. We had a permanent fuel delivery truck on site to refuel the furnace to make sure everyone was heated up.”

Four years later, things had heated up for Cavalia indeed, as horse lovers and the mainstream public (many with no prior exposure to horses) experienced what happens when the horse-human bond and theatrical arts are combined with high-tech special effects inside a big top. Cavalia was still on its inaugural North American tour when Latourelle was awarded the Order National du Québec for his achievements.

Cavalia’s Odysseo blends the equestrian arts with imaginative stagecraft, amazing acrobatic feats, and cutting-edge technical effects.

THE HORSES OF CAVALIA

“We’re close to 170 or 160 right now,” says show creator Normand Latourelle, mentally adding the total number of stallions and geldings on tour with both Cavalia and Odysseo (there are no mares in either show). “Most of the horses retire now between 12 and 14 years old,” he notes. On average, the horses tour an average of six years or less.

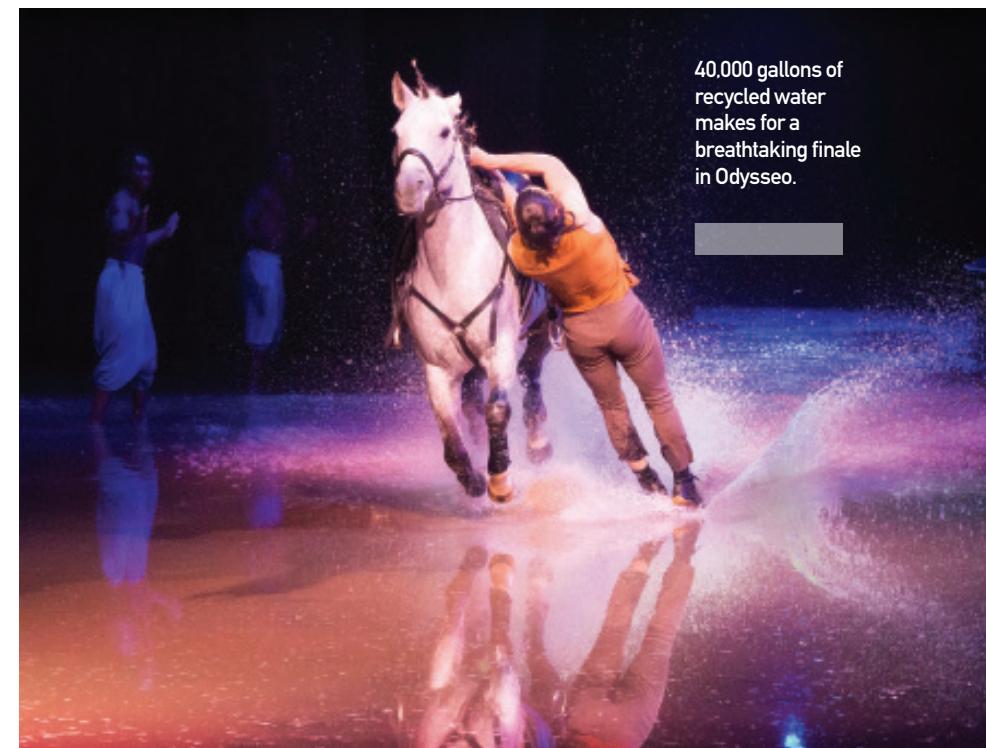
From its earliest years, Cavalia has operated a 72-acre farm in Quebec almost exclusively dedicated to the horses retiring from life in the spotlight. A new farm located in Kentucky was purchased in 2017 to allow retirees to enjoy milder winters and the world-famous bluegrass.

UPPER PHOTOS: COURTESY CAVALIA; RIGHT: LYNNE GLAZER

| Overcoming the Impossible |

“I started my first show when I was 13 years old; I always had my ideas,” says Latourelle. “I left school very young, but I didn’t leave because I was delinquent. I wanted to work first and I wanted to do it differently. At 13 years old, you’re not usually doing a show. At 16 years old, I bought an old school bus with my own money and traveled with a band. I drove the school bus, I did the sound and the lights, and we traveled across Canada. That’s who I’ve always been.”

Few can imagine how that translates to facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles with a touring equestrian spectacle. Cavalia was in Taiwan when Latourelle got bad news. “We wanted to go to Hong Kong. The dates were booked, we had a great agreement with the government. Taipei to Hong Kong is about a one-hour flight. We requested the permit in Hong Kong.



40,000 gallons of recycled water makes for a breathtaking finale in Odysseo.



Paddocks built at each tour stop are used for daily turnout. In the background, the arches that hold the weight of the big top can be seen.

INSIDE ODYSSEO

- A total of 110 semi-trucks are required to transport Odysseo, the world's largest touring production.
- A specially designed white big top was created in Europe, and allows the weight of the structure to be shifted from masts to three arches above the tent. Above the stage hangs an imposing technical grid capable of supporting 80 tons of equipment, including a full-sized merry-go-round! On stage, a lake emerges during the breathtaking finale of Odysseo, made possible by an underground drain system that releases 40,000 gallons of recycled water on stage. This logistical masterpiece is reconstructed at each tour stop.
- Odysseo features 70 horses representing 12 different breeds: Appaloosa, Arabian, Canadian Horse, warmblood, Lusitano, Paint Horse, Percheron/Hanoverian-cross, Quarter Horse, Selle Français, Thoroughbred, Andalusian (P.R.E.) and Warlander.
- Fifty artists—riders, acrobats, aerialists, dancers, and musicians—perform in Odysseo. They come from 11 countries around the world, including the United States, Canada, Brazil, France, Italy, Guinea, South Africa, Poland, Russia, Spain and Ukraine.
- A team of 20 people, including a stable manager, two veterinary technicians, a farrier, and several grooms care for the horses' well-being. In each city, horses are stabled next to the same neighbors to ensure a familiar environment—a practice followed by Cavalia's productions from the beginning.
- Paddocks built at each tour stop are used for daily turnout. Each year, the horses consume 15,000 bales of hay, 70,400 pounds of grain, and 1,750 pounds of carrots.
- Many horses are braided after the show to keep long, flowing manes from tangling or breaking. It takes 15 to 45 minutes per horse, depending on the length of the mane.
- Horses perform a maximum of seven shows per week and each has a stand-in. When the show moves from one city to the next, the horses go on "vacation."
- There are 350 costumes and 100 pairs of shoes and boots used in Odysseo. Artists may have up to seven different costumes.
- In no more than 30 seconds, an artist may need to do a quick costume change between numbers.

They said, 'We just found out the horses cannot go from Taipei to Hong Kong. The only way for that to happen is to ask for the Chinese government to issue permits, but even if the Chinese government allowed it, it would take so long, it wouldn't happen.'

So, Latourelle reimagined the possibilities. "What I decided to do was fly 35 horses from Taipei to the U.S. and switch the horses. Then we took 35 horses from Odysseo and brought them to Hong Kong. I stopped two shows for a month for rehearsals to acclimate the horses to what they have to do. Of course, the technique is similar, the environment is similar, but it's not the same."

"I had to do the same thing with some of the riders and the trainer. I switched part of the team of Cavalia to Odysseo and the other way around. Again, I'm very stubborn. I did not accept the 'no.' I said, 'I'm going to do it, whatever it costs.' At the end of the day, you can realize how much it costs—just to charter an airplane from Taipei to Los Angeles and then from Los Angeles to Hong Kong. And all the permits and all the tests we have to do on the horses.

"But we did it, and we opened in Hong Kong. It was the greatest success that ever happened in terms of attendance, ticket sales, and reputation. We had fabulous spot called Central [Harbourfront]. The big top was there like a trophy. When I look at the picture I say, 'We did it.'"

Currently, Latourelle is at work adapting Cavalia for an engagement in Nanjing, China. "The city wants us to make the show one hour because it's a very affluent tourist city," says Latourelle. "It's a big job to keep the best and transform a two-hour show in to one hour—it's almost a new creation." Latourelle's younger son, Mathieu, 37, who directs Cavalia's tour in China, has traveled with the show from the start. Back in Quebec, his son David, 43, works as the family-run company's vice president.

LYNNE GLAZER PHOTO



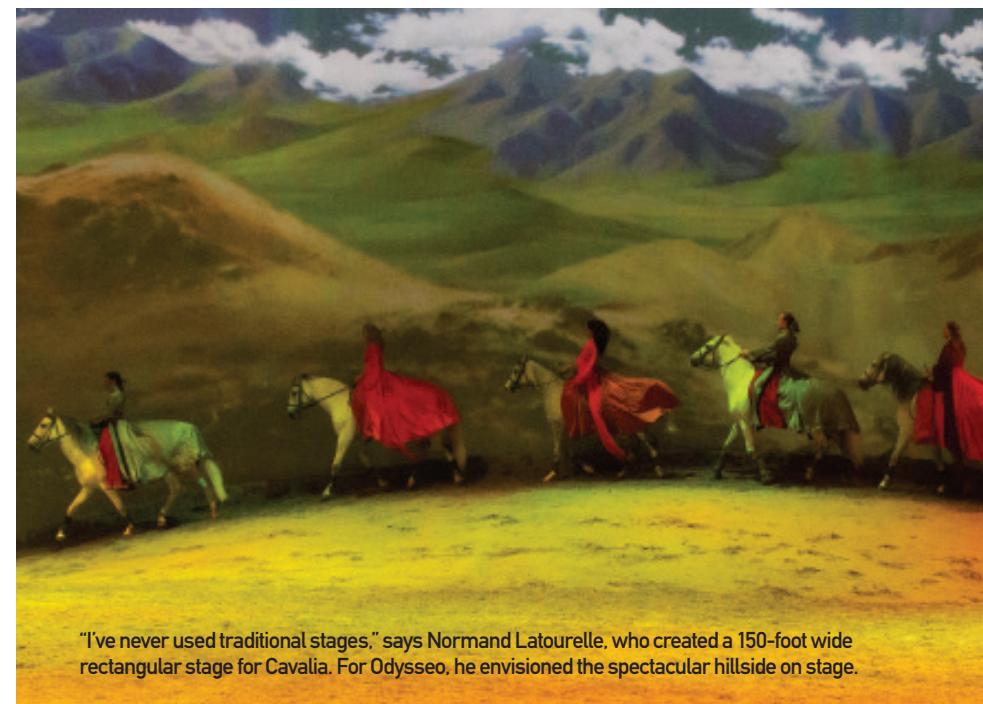
The lake that appears during Odysseo is a logistical masterpiece reconstructed at each tour stop.

A New Showcase |

Meanwhile Odysseo, seen by more than 2 million people since its 2011 debut, continues its North American tour with 70 horses that vacation between stops and can kick up their heels in outdoor paddocks in each city, a practice established by Cavalia 15 years ago. Odysseo has both indoor and outdoor warm-up areas.

What's next for Latourelle? "To tell you the truth, I don't know how I can surpass myself on Odysseo," he says of the \$30 million extravaganza that expands the definition of equestrian performance into an epic, soulful experience. "How much better can you do with horses? Every time I look at it, I don't see how I can do better. Not everybody is like that, but as the creator, I just want to do better. Odysseo is so beautiful, and also it's very different than Cavalia. I won't say it's better than Cavalia, but it's a totally different feeling. I still have room to grow with Odysseo. It's the result of 44 years of real work—or real fun—for me." 📌

LTOP PHOTO: COURTESY CAVALIA; BOTTOM: LYNNE GLAZER PHOTO



"I've never used traditional stages," says Normand Latourelle, who created a 150-foot wide rectangular stage for Cavalia. For Odysseo, he envisioned the spectacular hillside on stage.

An author, journalist and media consultant based in Southern California, ELIZABETH KAYE McCALL worked as the horse industry liaison for Cavalia during its inaugural North American tour. She first interviewed Normand Latourelle before Cavalia debuted, while writing her book *The Tao of Horses: Exploring How Horses Guide Us on Our Spiritual Path*, along with Cavalia's original co-stars and equestrian choreographers.