

Ballad of the Wild Horses



Market Development Manager

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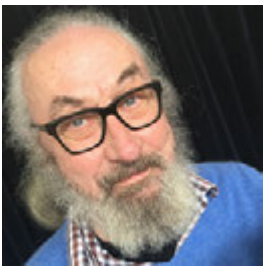
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Summary

Inspired by Eastern European fables and legends about horses and wolves, *Ballad of the Wild Horses* tells the story of a small horse on the eve of his first spring as he plays and discovers the colourful characters around him. From one season to the next, the little foal comes to understand the complex nature of the world he lives in through his encounters with different animals: a starving wolf fighting for survival, a playful and mischievous little rabbit, a devious, smart-aleck snake and a hawk who always asks the right questions. But in order to find his own way in the world, he will have to break away from the herd of wild horses led by his father, the Stallion.

A word from founder & former Artistic Director André Laliberté



When I was 14 years old, I entered the world of puppetry through the discovery of the long-string marionette. I learned this now seldom-used technique from Micheline Legendre and her company, Les Marionnettes de Montréal. Throughout the years, I remained deeply attached to this technique and was sorry that children today rarely get a chance to see it. So when Irina suggested that I revisit *Ballad of the Wild Horses* and adapt it to a Québec audience, I immediately understood that this would be a way to reconnect with my childhood love and fill a void in the cultural activities available. Of course, what also appeals to me about this project is its very simple, yet profound, story of learning about life and about personal independence from season to season. I am convinced that children will recognize themselves in this little foal on the road to becoming a grown-up.

The story behind the show

The story of the foal was born from a dream that I never forgot. When writing the script, I thought about the questions that children ask themselves, about their need to be loved without knowing how to go about it, about our first defining encounters, at an age when happiness and misery are huge and seem permanent.

I also thought of the adult world that we are part of, we who want to provide answers and impart values to the “little horses”, believing that in doing so we can protect them and make life easier for them. Does it really work? How can we give little horses their freedom and protect them at the same time?

I started developing the story a long time ago in Bucharest with a group of actors. We were very young and did a lot of research in the puppet theatre field. I didn't want to imitate real life, but rather to create a theatre of poetic suggestions, to stimulate the audience's imagination. The idea of building cloth marionettes came out of this research; it is an original and challenging idea, because it defies the laws of balance, the puppet-object's balance that corresponds with its existential balance.

The script follows the four seasons, which correspond to the foal's journey of discovery and the story's dramatic arc. Born in spring, the foal discovers the world and its complexity. In late spring, he leaves the prairie to find his own way. Over summer, he has a series of encounters which, little by little, help him find answers to his questions: he meets a starving wolf fighting for survival, a playful and mischievous little rabbit, a devious, smart-aleck snake and a hawk who always asks the right questions.

Irina Niculescu

Irina Niculescu, a great lady of puppetry

Irina Niculescu was born in 1951 in Bucharest, Romania, and grew up in the Țândărică Theatre, the country's national theatre founded in 1949 by her mother, Margareta Niculescu, who was also its first director. Margareta also co-founded the École nationale supérieure des arts de la marionnette (ESNAM) and the Institut International de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières in 1987.

Irina studied at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague before directing her first shows at the Țândărică Theatre. *Ballad of the Wild Horses* was among these. It premiered in 1977, with a text by Vladimir Simon. She then restaged it in 2003 at the Théâtre des Marionnettes de Genève, with scenography and music by John Lewandowsky.

She has directed shows in Namur, Warsaw and Montréal. In Boston, she staged *L'Histoire du soldat*, based on the writings of Charles Ferdinand Ramuz and set to the music of Igor Stravinsky. For Théâtre de l'Œil, she staged *Le Soldat et la mort*, an adaptation of a traditional Romanian tale, in 1984.

She integrated puppetry into various other art forms – actors' theatre, opera, classical music – in an effort to foster encounters between it and other arts. With this approach, she effectively “dismantled” the traditional puppet theatre set in order to emphasize the relationship between performer and object. She worked with both giant and tiny puppets, with video projections, with large orchestras, all the while maintaining what she believes is the very essence of puppet theatre: the ability to convey an emotion.

In 1985, *Le Chant des roseaux*, was the opening performance at the Théâtre des Marionnettes de Genève. From 1990 to 2002, she was an associate director and staged several shows, keeping up the Geneva tradition of string puppetry. A visionary puppeteer, she set up courses and workshops for manipulators to teach them to become actor-puppeteers. Notable among her remarkable productions: Igor Stravinsky's *L'Oiseau de feu*, in 1990, with string and bunraku-style puppets, or Horacio Quiroga's *Juan Darién* in 1993, where the performers are storytellers, puppeteers, singers and musicians, all at the same time.

In Norway, she created a puppetry training program for Oslo's Royal Theatre. She has taught in Seville, Bucharest, Oslo, Waterford, at the ESNAM in Charleville-Mézières, in Geneva, at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), in Argentina, in Taiwan... to name a few.

Irina Niculescu was Associate Director of MadCap Puppets in Cincinnati, USA during the 2000s, where she staged operas for puppets.



Ballad of the Wild Horses, 2003 © Carte Blanche (compagnie Irina Niculescu)

The long-string puppetry illusion

An interview with André Laliberté and Irina Niculescu

André Laliberté and Irina Niculescu met at the Festival mondial des théâtres de marionnettes à Charleville-Mézières where *Ballad of the Wild Horses* was being presented in 1979. Their shared love for puppetry and theatre for young audiences brought them together on a project, *Le Soldat et la mort*, directed by Irina Niculescu, in collaboration with Théâtre de l'Œil, in 1984. Subsequently, Irina taught stage direction at the graduate program in contemporary puppet theatre at UQAM's École supérieure de théâtre.

A fable to help children grow up

Ballad of the Wild Horses premiered in Bucharest at the Țândărică Theatre in 1977. It was then performed in 2003 at the Théâtre des Marionnettes de Genève. The scenography, puppets and music were reworked by puppeteer and composer John Lewandowski. The show was very successful and has toured extensively in Europe.

When Irina Niculescu left Geneva, she brought the show with her. This is how it was possible to restage it once more in Montréal:

“We decided to update it for Québec audiences,” says André Laliberté. “What made me want to restage this show is that we don’t tell these kinds of stories anymore to kids. It’s allegorical, a tale of rite of passage, where a foal discovers life, learns to grow up and control his strength, learns who he is, and ends up understanding that those who are weaker than ourselves deserve our respect. For children, it’s very gratifying to watch something or someone grow up. I’m sure they will identify with the foal.”

“I was interested,” says Irina Niculescu, “in creating a diverse society where everyone has their own truth. There’s the foal, the wolf, the young wolf, the rabbit... They all have their own identities, their own realities. It’s quite possible that one character’s truth may conflict with others because each character has different needs. That’s why this show still works! Then there’s the idea that parents want to help their kids by giving them ready-made formulas to protect them and secure their future, but life doesn’t work that way! The foal feels misunderstood because he follows his parents’ advice without really grasping why. So he goes off to discover his true self.”

The show’s aesthetic came out of a search for a poetic form that would evoke a world that is wild and free. The marionettes are unusual in that their heads are made of wood and their bodies out of cloth, with no articulated joints.

“They go against classical rules of puppetry because the weight is at the top and not at the bottom,” explains Irina Niculescu. “The string marionette is the most sophisticated type of puppet we have in the West. It takes a long time to learn to master both the technical aspects of the performance and how to convey emotions and moods, so that, as a performer, you can be free to express yourself as you wish.”

André Laliberté trained for 10 years with long-string marionette specialist Micheline Legendre and has always had a special soft spot for this type of puppetry:

“*Ballad of the Wild Horses* is a perfect show to reconnect with string marionettes. In a way, it will be my legacy, one that reflects my love for the string marionette, a technique that is, unfortunately, disappearing...”

A magical technique

Long-string marionettes require the use of a bridge two metres high and five metres wide as a basic structure. Puppeteers stand on the bridge, which is 1.5 metres above the stage, and animate the puppets using a system of long strings. The distance between the puppeteer and the marionette creates the illusion that the marionette is moving by itself in a large space. Long-string marionette theatre is considered the most difficult puppet technique to master. While it is very popular around the world, this puppetry form is rarely seen on Western stages.

Few puppeteers in Canada know how to manipulate string marionettes, apart from Ronnie Burkett and his short-string marionettes. Jean Cummings, Graham Soul and Myriame Larose, puppeteers for *The Star Keeper*, a Théâtre de l'Œil production that has been touring for over 20 years, have developed considerable skill and tenderness manipulating Daisy Bygone and Pierrot, two string-marionette characters in the show. With *Ballad of the Wild Horses*, they are building on what they have learned, this time using long-string marionettes.

André Laliberté adds: "This kind of manipulation is very indirect. The long strings react like a pendulum. You have to find a way of maintaining control, which isn't easy. People have all kinds of preconceived notions about the string marionette. And yet, this technique has proven itself over the years. For kids, it's truly magical. They don't think there's anyone above manipulating the puppets. They believe what they see."



Ballad of the Wild Horses 2019 - The Snake © Michel Pinault

Performers' bios



Jean Cummings

Jean Cummings has been making puppets since he was 14 years old, and has devoted himself to this art form his whole life. He has worked with Théâtre de l'Œil for over 30 years as a performer, designer, craftsman and trainer. He was part of the team behind the creation and development of the show *The Star Keeper*, with which he has been touring the world since 1997. He also collaborates with Théâtre Motus (*Bellybutton*, *Baobab*, etc.) and Théâtre Magasin (*Le temps des muffins*), and has worked with Emmanuelle Calvé, incorporating shadows and puppets into her choreographies (*Peau d'or*, *EMMAC Terre marine*). He has also been involved in film, participating in several short- and medium-length films as a manipulator (*La Cité entre les murs*, *OKO*, etc.). As a trainer, he leads workshops for the Association québécoise des marionnettistes (AQM—Québec Puppeteer Association) and for students at the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Montréal.



Myriame Larose

Myriame was part of the first cohort to graduate from the contemporary puppet theatre program at UQAM's École supérieure de théâtre, in 2009. She performs with a number of actors' theatre, dance and puppet theatre companies. She co-founded the theatre troupe Les Ironistes that produced two shows, *Ratatatarats!* and *Le cafard*. In 2010, she performed *Burials*, her first solo production, at the Festival de Casteliers in Montréal and joined the Théâtre de l'Œil team for their 24th production, *3-Legged Tale*. In 2011, she developed a second solo piece (*You Stick to My Skin*) with Noë Cropsal and joined the Théâtre de l'Œil team once again to perform in *The Star Keeper*. She has been working on *Schweinehund* with American puppeteer Andy Gaukel since 2013. She is also part of the cast of *Petits Pains Oubliés* (Québec version) presented by Les Sages Fous (Trois-Rivières) and Créatures compagnie (France), and has been working with Théâtre de l'Utopie on the show *Léonce et Léna*.



Pierre-Louis Renaud

A graduate of the Cégep de Saint-Hyacinthe Theatre School in 2010, Pierre-Louis Renaud discovered a passion for puppetry and object theatre very early on. He co-founded Théâtre Sous la Tuque with Cynthia Trudel and Carl Vincent in 2011. Their first creation, *Péckel et Roffel*, won the prize for the best Zoofest show (2012). He joined the Théâtre de la Dame de Cœur team with the show *Harmonie* and played in several Théâtre de l'Œil productions, including *Le Jardin de Babel*, *Raven* and *A Heart in Winter*. He also performed in *À quelle heure on meurt?*, a collage of texts by Réjean Ducharme, directed by Frédéric Dubois (2013). He has participated in a number of short films and independent web TV shows, including *Le fils de mon père* (presented at the Cannes Short Film Corner in 2013), *Les Êtres- Anges*, *Les Web-aventures* de Thierry Ricourt and *Les Jaunes*.



Graham Soul

Even as a child Graham Soul was crazy about puppets. He has been earning his living “pulling strings” for over 20 years. His talent as an acrobat, puppeteer and actor has been put to good use with such companies as Dynamo Théâtre (*Mur-Mur*), Théâtre Sans Fil (*The Hobbit*, *Dream Catchers*, etc.) and Théâtre de la Dame de Cœur (*Les dinosaures ne savent pas lire*, etc.), as well as in short films and commercials. He joined Théâtre de l'Œil in 1995, where he has been involved ever since as a craftsman and puppeteer on many of their shows, including *The Star Keeper* and *3-Legged Tale*, with which he regularly tours around the world. In 2012, the Association québécoise des marionnettistes (AQM– Québec Puppeteer Association) asked him to lead a workshop on the principles behind the manipulation of different kinds of puppets. His expertise earned him a grant from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec to work create a puppet show without words called *Coucou*, which premiered in December 2019.

Past performances

2021-2022

FESTIVAL PLEIN LA RUE - **VERDUN (Qc)**

MAISON DE LA CULTURE - **RIVIÈRE-DES-PRAIRIES (Qc)**

LES 4 SCÈNES - **DÉGELIS (Qc)**

SPECT'ART - **RIMOUSKI (Qc)**

CENTRE DE CRÉATION DIFFUSION - **GASPÉ (Qc)**

CENTRE CULTUREL ET COMMUNAUTAIRE - **MONTREAL-NORD (Qc)**

CENTRE CULTUREL HENRI-LEMIEUX - **LA SALLE (Qc)**

2020-2021

DIFFUSION MORDICUS - **AMQUI (Qc)**

CENTRE DES ARTS - **BAIE-COMEAU (Qc)**

SALLE ANDRÉ-GAGNON - **LA POCATIÈRE (Qc)**

2019-2020

MAISON THÉÂTRE - **MONTREAL (Qc)**

L'ARRIÈRE SCÈNE - **BELOEIL (Qc)**

2018-2019

FESTIVAL DE CASTELIERS 2019 - **MONTREAL (Qc)**

Up-to-date *Ballad of the Wild Horses* show schedules available on our website: <http://www.theatredeloeil.qc.ca/en/calendar>

Would you like a visit from our Foal ? Feel free to contact **Véronique**:

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Ballad of the Wild Horses

Age: For children 4 years and up

Running time: 45 minutes

Story and Adaptation: **Irina Niculescu**, based on **Vladimir Simon's** work

Stage Direction: **Irina Niculescu**

Artistic Advisor: **André Laliberté**

Puppet and Set Design: **Mioara Buescu** and **John Lewandowski**

Production Staff: **Ève-Lyne Dallaire**, **Alice Lepage**,

Éliane Fayad, **Jean Cummings**, **Myriame Larose**, **Graham Soul**, **Christian Hamel**, **Gilles Perron**
(technical director), **Richard Lacroix** (workshop supervisor)

Music: **John Lewandowski**

Lighting: **Gilles Perron**

Cast: **Jean Cummings**, **Myriame Larose**, **Pierre-Louis Renaud** and **Graham Soul**

A Théâtre de l'Œil and Carte Blanche (compagnie Irina Niculescu) coproduction



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