

MEETING ALEXIS GRUSS:

MASTER-RIDER

By Laurence Boccard



Alexis and his Arabian Stallion Itrann at the Pegasus & Icarus show

THERE ARE SOME ENCOUNTERS THAT CAN BECOME INSPIRATIONAL, BOTH ABOUT HORSES AND ABOUT LIFE ITSELF. THIS IS ONE OF THEM. ALEXIS GRUSS! THE WORLD FAMOUS MASTER-RIDER. HIS VERY NAME EVOKES THE SOUND OF HOOF BEATS AND THE TINKLING OF THE BRIDLE'S BITS.

Aged 27, he became the director of a circus. In 1974, he created the Old Fashion Circus (cirque à l'ancienne, in French) together with the French comedian Sylvia Montfort in order to celebrate the bicentenary of the introduction of the circus ring in France, by Philip Astley. The latter lived at the rue des Tuileries, in the Marais area of Paris, within the walls of the indoor school of the Duke of Razade.

In 1981, the Alexis Gruss Circus received the high distinction of National Circus. An equestrian acrobat, a master-rider and a ringmaster, Alexis Gruss is also a multi-talented artist: he is an excellent musician and had already mastered many of the circus arts from the age of eight. A passionate man, he also enjoys the art of photography and some fishing time.

As a master-rider, Alexis Gruss has been granted many honours: he was made a Knight of Arts and Letters, a Knight of the Legion of Honour and Knight of the Order of Agricultural Merit. He also received the National Circus Grand Prize, The Oscar Carré Prize of the Circus of Amsterdam, the Golden Epona Prize and the Golden Clown of the International Circus Festival of Monaco.

Alexis Gruss and the Arabian horse - a life-changing encounter. Two grey Arabian horses with Russian bloodlines once took the stage, under the Big Top, for a free display. The first one is no longer with us. However, the second one, the 11-year-old Itrann, still captivates the public's attention. The lively stallion bounces through the ring with his elastic trot, approaches his master and rears up in front of him.

For Alexis, if the Arabian horse, like the Barb horse, is indeed instrumental in the improvement of many breeds, it is highly possible that the Akhal Tekké horse is actually the founder of all breeds. The first records about taller horses (about 1.50 meters to the withers, approximately 14.5 hands) date from the 5th century B.C. and locate these in Central Asia. Bones that belonged to horses similar to the current Akhal Tekké have been found in Scythian tombs.

The Scythians were nomads and warriors, and according to Herodotus, they owned and raised the best horses of their era.

"The meeting of these two breeds founded our current society. The horse powered all the different civilisations (the Arabian horse took a crucial part indeed in the epic Moorish wars of the 7th and 8th centuries!!) and is at the origin of many innovations such as the wheel, the carriage, and of many constructions," stresses the Master.

The circus ring is one of these "constructions". During the 18th and 19th centuries, the horse and these constructions were closely linked. In London in 1768, Philip Astley, a former military rider, created an arena specifically designed for the public displays of his equestrian exercises: the ring. This was so successful that he christened the Astley Amphitheater in 1782 dedicated to the equestrian arts, with a stage placed next to the ring. In the same year, the word "circus" was used for the first time.

Philip Astley was a guest of the French Royal Court, and often presented his shows in Paris. In 1783, he opened up an Equestrian Theater on the Faubourg du Temple, together with his son John. While the father was celebrated in England for his many equestrian essays and memoirs, Paris celebrated his son's skills.

"The circus is first a location. This 13 meter wide ring, in order to match the length of a lunging whip, was created for the horse," says Alexis. "It is perfect to condition the horse's body and to instill a sense of showmanship in the animal. In this place, thoughts meet intelligence. Its ground is made of topsoil and saw dust, thus it is a fertile living space in perpetual motion. The ring is like infinity, where nothing ever ends."

About the horses' training Alexis Gruss reveals, "As all that is natural is instinctive, education is unnatural, in my opinion. Therefore, I believe in educating horses with love and trust, and not to break him in, with submission. To transcend what is natural

in Nature," there lies the Art!

"Ask often, obtain a little and praise much." Alexis Gruss has made this maxim of Mr Baucher his own, in the three different disciplines practiced by his family: the Haute Ecole, the Equestrian Acrobatics and the free-horses displays. This is a quest for a permanent balance, like that of the tightrope walker, where the stallions rise with pride in front of their Master.

The Master teaches and passes on his knowledge and his technique with respect, patience and love. The circle comes back around, and the inter-generation loop is set.

Three generations of the Gruss family meet up on stage: they canter, they vault, they help each other and they laugh in the face of unsteadiness, repeating the same gestures, the same movements over and over again. At that very moment, there are a spark and a twinkle in the eye of Alexis Gruss! Family: there may lie the secret of this undying will to push the limits to improve oneself.

Some say that, in knowledge, there is first a happening that implies certain togetherness *"the great encounters come from a happening, a birth, in essence."* This idea describes precisely the magical link between horse and man, between the Master Rider and his steeds.

Yves Saint Laurent used to say *"If there is no elegance of the heart, there is no elegance at all."* There is no doubt that these words take their full meaning in this family's repertoire and know-how. The family's Pegase & Icare show will take place in Paris, France from the 17th of October 2015 to the 6th of March 2016. Then, the show will tour the following towns (at the Zénith Exhibition Centers): Saint Etienne, Limoges, Nantes, Lille, Rouen, Caen, Orleans, Nancy, Dijon, and Montpellier. 🇫🇷

For more information, go to

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