

An Interview with MIGUEL TAVORA

Just as the political world was separated for so long by the great barrier of the Iron Curtain, so to the world of dressage is still perceived of as being split into two great ideological factions. On one side, hard, aggressive German competitive dressage marked by maximum impulsion and contact - on the other, the romantic French/Iberian tradition, artistic rather than competitive, imbued with lightness, grace and elegance.

It's a neat little dialectic and one greatly beloved by those equestrian commentators who seem to spend a great deal more time writing about horses than actually sitting on them.

When Major Miguel Tavora, formerly of the Portuguese Cavalry School arrived in Australia, he was seen as a ready recruit for the lightness camp. A pupil of the late Nuno Oliveira (the Portuguese riding master, held out by his disciples as the very epitome of artistic elegance), it was expected that Miguel would shun the competition arena. But just as Nicole Uphoff exists to confound the German stereotype, Miguel Tavora was soon in the business of producing horses capable of proving their worth in the competition arena. While the true believers of the Art not Competition school were still practising endless lateral variations in the privacy of their own arenas, Miguel was producing horses that could win at FEI level - and yet his pupils could still celebrate their master's quiet, light approach to the business of Equitation.

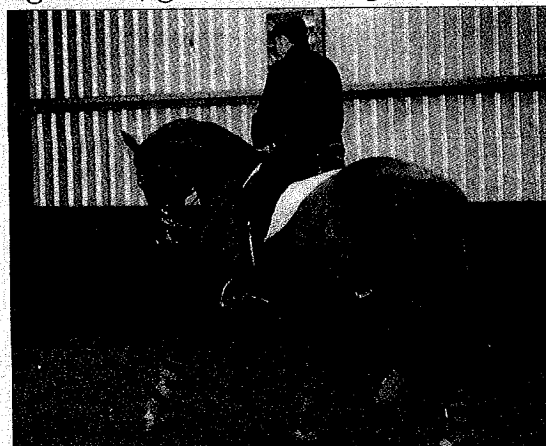
The truth, as it usually is, is very much more complex than the neat little contact/light paradigm would have us believe. Perhaps, heresy of heresies, there is only good dressage and bad dressage. There are ham fisted horse abusers in the lightness school and dilettante time wasters and endless theorists in the ranks of the

competitors. As Gertrude Stein was fond of saying, a good canter pirouette is a good canter pirouette. Certainly there is something very balletic about watching Miguel Tavora at work, there is a rhythm, a pattern to the session - a flow... advance/retreat, collect/expand... from trot shoulder in on the circle, to medium trot on the circle, canter/walk/canter/walk - the work has a gentle flow to it...

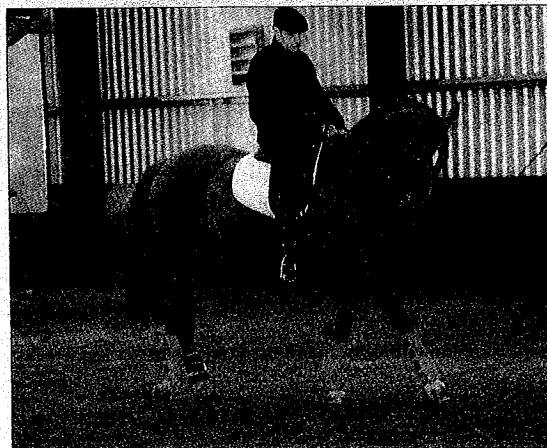
"The idea is to make the horse work like a concertina," Miguel told me as we relaxed at a day's lessons at Cherie Edmond's equestrian centre at Camperdown. "Collect, extend, collect, extend. Everything you do with the horse - dressage, eventing, showjumping - it is the same. When you are showjumping, collect for the vertical, after the vertical, expand to jump the water, and then collect for another vertical. The horse has to be elastic - going and coming, lengthen the frame, shorten the frame."

"What we need to do is make the horse strong in the back because he has to carry our weight - it is by making him go and come that you make the back stronger."

"I don't like to talk about the French School or the German School, because when you see Reiner Klimke riding a horse, I can't see what is very different from the French method - and I see some Frenchmen riding the horses



Quiet, calm, like dancing... Miguel Tavora works in Picasso at the school in Cobden.

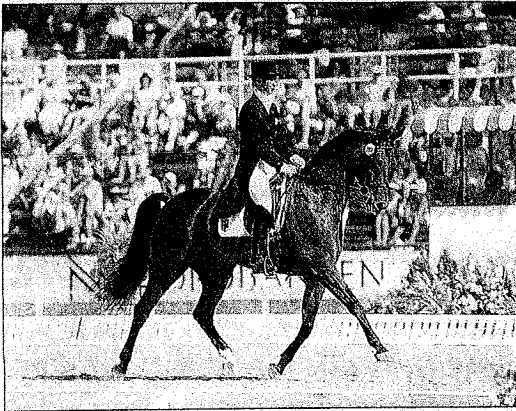


and it is dreadful. Of course, instead of just collecting on a straight line, if I can get the collection by the lateral work rather than blocking with the half halt, which the Germans might do - I get the same collection and I don't break the fluency of the forward movement. It is the position of the horse in the lateral work that is compressing the horse, rather than the hand of the rider. But of course, at times we make the transition from trot to walk on the straight

line. With a very young horse, we use those transitions on the straight line more to make the horse understand the half halt than to achieve the collection."

"When I go to collect, I collect one leg, engage one leg - and of course, when you engage one leg you engage the other legs at the same time. All the time I concentrate on making my horse supple to go forward, and because he is supple it is easier when he goes forward to collect again."

Miguel Tavora



Nicole Uphoff and Rembrandt - this is Art!



quickly...

"That's another myth - quickly or long. We can't say to make a horse Prix St Georges, takes six years. It might take six months. It depends on the horse, the temperament, and specially how mature he is. If you have a Thoroughbred, he is mature when he is four or five years old. A Warmblood can take until he is seven or eight years old."

"The chestnut horse, Ballykisteen Sedeeka, he took quite a while. When I started with him, he was already doing Medium tests. Unfortunately he hurt himself and we had to stop work with him for half a year. He was going quite quickly until he hurt himself - then when we started again, one phase was building him up again, recovering from the injury, and because the basics were all there, and he was a talented horse, then he went quite quickly. But it looked much quicker because he didn't appear for that year, and then came out at FEI."

"But for example, the Lippizaner that my wife Di has been competing on, took much longer, because the Lippizaner takes longer to mature. Normally once they have reached Advanced/Prix St Georges, then they can go quicker, but sometimes to reach that level takes a little longer. There is nothing wrong in going faster if the horse is ready for it because

the more work he does, the stronger he becomes."

"I don't believe in long and deep. I work my horses always a little bit long - not too long... deep, I hate the word, deep because to me, deep means deep on the forehead. Work the horse a little bit long and round - and that roundness I ask right from the time I start breaking in the horse. Round without collection right from the start. This business of waiting with the horse long and deep, long and deep - I go to so many clinics around Australia and the horses are so deep that it would take a crane to get them up again. They build the wrong muscles and a lot of them are ruined - if the horse is seven or eight then often it is quite impossible to change the muscle and the effect of the work that has gone before."

In your schools do you find the riders are more open to ideas?

"Much more open, much more receptive - much more free of taboos."

Certainly the riders at Cherie's school were more than receptive to Miguel's teaching, and as a school, it was a masterpiece of controlled concentration. Miguel would switch from refining the spectacular passage/piaffe tour of Marie Gahan's prodigiously talented, The Flying Dutchman to helping a group of novices improve their basic paces, maintaining the same concentrated focus on all the horses and riders he was working with. Hopefully the school at Cherie Edmond's Camperdown Cobden Equestrian Centre, will be the first of many - if only for the opportunity it gives to sample the warmth of Western District hospitality, (not to mention the superb cooking of Sue Louther who not only whipped up the most superb hot lunches but also turned on fresh scones and pikelets for afternoon tea!)

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People talk of light artistic dressage and hard competitive dressage - yet you have trained some of our most successful Grand Prix dressage horses, most recently with Dawn Mitchell's Ballykisteen Sedeeka who has won under top international judges - have you had to 'betray' your principles to produce a horse for the competition arena?

"That is the biggest rubbish of all. I have seen so many people who say 'I don't compete because it would ruin my classical principles' and they are real horse murderers - and I see people in the competition arena, much lighter, much better. You can turn your horse to competition in the correct way or the un-correct way... but the talk of not competing is rubbish... you see Rembrandt, you see

Ahlerich... did you see a fight? Did you see resistance? It is smooth, it is beautiful - it is art. Even someone who knows nothing of horses, they can look at Ahlerich, or Granat or Rembrandt, and they enjoy it, it is art. The people who talk about how bad competition is, that is because they are not able to compete, they are not good enough."

"You can do dressage in the correct way, or the in-correct way... if you want to win, you can only do it the correct way, that's for sure. Nowadays the way dressage is judged, it must be soft, has to be correct - because if it is not soft, not correct, you break the rhythm, you break the cadence, you spoil the good paces the horse has got."
You trained Dawn Mitchell's two horses really quite