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## MANE EVENT

Queensland's Zelig Bullen  
speaks exclusively about loss,  
love and the triumph of working  
with Steven Spielberg on his  
next Hollywood blockbuster



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# RIDING HIGH

War Horse, a Steven Spielberg movie, may rate as Zelig Bullen's greatest career triumph to date. It also shows the reign of a resilient spirit who has refused to let a series of tragedies shape her destiny

BY  
MIKE BRUCE

PHOTOGRAPHY  
LUKE MARSDEN

**D**innertime brings a little ritual in the Zelig Bullen household. She calls it grace. But her grace is not verse shaped in dusty old words and laced with religious fawning. It's chatty and simple. It's just about gratitude.

Her grace might be about the opportunities the day has brought, the weather, the meal or even that day's swimming lesson.

The Bullen family isn't religious. They don't even think themselves spiritual. They just know when life is good.

"I think we may be the only non-religious people in the world who say grace. And at the end of it, we all say 'amen,'" says Bullen, laughing at the strangeness of it all.

For Bullen's life wasn't always so shiny and bright. Life wasn't always the loving husband, the sweet brown-eyed boy at her feet, the gorgeous hinterland home and towering career. For a long time, Bullen's life was dark and awful. Death became her unwelcome companion, to a point where she, and some her friends, began to wonder if she carried a curse.

There were days where Bullen couldn't move for grief. When you hear her story, you begin to understand the whole grace thing.

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Bullen is folded into a wicker chair on a wide veranda licked by a welcome, cool breeze, muscular nut-brown arms wrapped around bare legs. Strong. Healthy. Happy.

In a week or two she'll fold herself into another chair, a comfy one in a cinema somewhere to catch a flick called *War Horse*, a sprawling epic set in WWI. It's by a chap called Steven Spielberg. She will watch it in the knowledge that the movie's magic rests not on the shoulders of the Hollywood genius alone, but on hers and husband Craig's.

And, no doubt, she will again feel grateful.

Bullen is an animal trainer. She is also a stuntwoman and a trick horserider, but for now let's just call Bullen an animal trainer. And based on a four-page list of TV, film and show credits, probably a pretty good one.

She trains animals big and small, in situations normal and not-so normal. *War Horse* was clearly not so normal. For that reason it may rate as her greatest triumph – a big-budget movie produced and directed by Hollywood's high prince, with a clutch of top-notch trainers and working with nine strange horses which she had to convince to run through explosions, extras, tanks, flashes and night-time gunfights. In between it all, Spielberg would calmly instruct her to make horses look this way and that, look happy, excited or affectionate. She's had easier jobs. (She and Craig only learned it was a Spielberg movie a day before they flew to England to shoot it.)

"He's a very quiet man, a genius – no doubt about it – and very pleasant." Bullen seems to be choosing her words carefully. "But, when things aren't going well he certainly lets people know pretty quickly. He expects things to happen quickly. I guess when you get to his level that's probably the norm."

Yet on her last day on set, the master reserved a special farewell for Bullen. This was his first movie with a live animal in the lead role, and pivotal to its success was portraying that special bond between horse and human.

She must have nailed it.

"He ran out, threw his arms out, I gave him a hug. He held me by the shoulders and looked into my face and said: 'All the love that you've put into these animals has come out on screen. It's on my screen and it will be there forever,'" she recounts. "I nearly started to cry. Then he said: 'We'll see you again.'"

The words were gold to Bullen who says she devotes much time to her horses, to work out their heads and their foibles and showers them with love – mostly tender, sometimes tough. When she was bullied as a kid at school, she would find solace in her horses. She loves animals because they are constant, real and present.

Animals don't lie.

"I love being with animals because what you see is



Running's a big part for Joey, one of the horses under Zelig Bullen's charge during the filming of *War Horse*.

what you get. People are so much more complicated than that. An animal won't look you in the eye and say 'I promise you I won't die'. I've had people do that . . . and then die."

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On a wall in the Bullens' home on the Gold Coast hinterland is a small hanging bearing one of those tired maxims for life: "Life is a journey, not a destination." The quote assumes the journey is there to be enjoyed, not endured, that the journey is bright and lovely. It's hard to imagine it when you see her today, but so much of Zelig Bullen's journey has had to be endured.

It became so dark and painful, she almost gave up on the journey altogether.

When Bullen was 19, her sister, Julie, was killed in a car accident by a drink-driver. Born only 18 months apart, the pair were extremely close. The death sent her reeling.

If one can ever find anything like a silver lining in a tragedy on that scale, it was that Julie's death brought their estranged father back into Bullen's life. (Bullen was only nine months old – "we think" – when he walked out, leaving their mother to care for three girls under five in small-town Western Australia.)

He'd had only sporadic contact with his girls until the funeral, but Bullen decided to see more of her father and rekindled the relationship after her sister's death. When he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer soon after that, Bullen ended up spending several months with her father in Sydney leading up to his death, which came only two years after Julie's.

Sudden or premature death of a loved one sparks a reassessment of life and priorities. It was no different for Bullen. When it's two deaths in quick succession, that recasting of life is only amplified. Bullen pushed aside all those structures and expectations she had built around herself and vowed to go out and devour life, to pursue only that which made her happy.

"I always had way more unpredictability and more instability than anyone I knew as a child . . . but I still went down that structured path of university and career and, and, and. I wanted to become a vet because that would allow me to work with animals. I had thought, 'What else could I possibly do to work with animals?'"

"But that all started to crumble when Dad died. I thought, 'I don't want to do that study any more, I just want to do what I want to do, which is play with animals'. I didn't know if I could ever even make any money at it."

When she saw a TV ad for the Gold Coast's recently opened Movie World featuring a majestic, rearing palomino horse, she was off.



**Horse friends** have always been an important part of Zelle Bullen's life, providing solace since school days.

## COVER

The horse was a fitting talisman for Bullen's brand new life – she got a job at Movie World which was the hothouse for a whole new, glorious path as a stunt woman, trick rider and animal trainer.

The horse also led her to Graham O'Connell, a "gorgeous" performer in the Police Academy stunt show with whom Bullen fell in love, planned to marry and have babies with.

"Because that's what you do."

The universe had other plans. In mid-1994, while partying with friends in a Surfers Paradise apartment, O'Connell fell to his death from a 13th-floor balcony.

Perhaps it was the loss of the hopes and dreams she'd had for a life with O'Connell or the cumulative effect of rolling tragedies, but this time Bullen went into a deep, dark hole. Looking back, Bullen talks about things getting "a bit funky", "fairly rough" or "pretty yucky".

Bullen was, in reality, deeply suicidal.

"I was definitely on that road... I didn't eat, I became very depressed. Things weren't working, I was very unhappy, very untrusting, very scared – scared to get close to anyone, untrusting of the world and I began to think, 'If I spend another night with my girlfriend would she die too?' I felt like death was following me. And people said that to me. Never in a malicious way,

I found the less I cared about what was happening next, the easier life became. I do think you get what you think about

**Zelie Bullen**

but I knew what they were thinking."

Friend Mark Eady says after the accident, Bullen stopped eating and began wasting away. "I was shocked when I saw her," Eady says. "She was always so athletic and strong but her muscles had just fallen off her. Friend Tamzin was having to force her out of bed, and force her into the shower."

Bullen's contempt for structure and indifference for the future swelled as she rejected from her life anything resembling a plan – she vowed never to love again and certainly never to have children. If this was the pain from losing a sister, a father and a lover, the pain of losing a child on top of it all would surely be insufferable.

But, Bullen says, "there was much, much more, that went on, a lot of yucky stuff". Eady confirms Bullen suffered even more sadness and further tragedies which she rarely talks about. She's prepared to recount at least one episode.

When Bullen was at her lowest, a friend from WA, Jean, came over to "babysit" her, nurse her through to the other side. By the time Bullen had recovered, Jean wound up loving Queensland and decided to stay, but she too was grappling with her own issues. Within a year of settling here, the "funky things" going on in Jean's life crashed over her – the woman who came to be the pillar for a vulnerable friend took her own life.

"She had moved over to be with me to grieve, to help me, and then she killed herself. And I thought, 'Right, thanks a lot'.

"I was so angry at her and yet so understanding because I had been in that place, too. But I thought, 'You know I had been in that place but you also know I had come out the other side'."

Ask Bullen precisely how she came out the other side and she talks only in vague, almost flippant, strains about "letting go", about not fretting about the future and doing only things that made her happy. There is no manufactured or pre-packaged hype about the Bullen recipe for recovery. It's about choices, paring life back to its bones and a refusal to ponder the future.

"I would tell myself, 'That makes me happy and that doesn't' and so I chose to do things that made me feel good... I found the less I cared about what was happening next, the easier life became. I do think you get what you think about, for sure, and since this time in my life when I went down down down, then started being happy, I thought there's a lot to be said for the more you worry, the more you fret, the worse it gets."

Friends say it's probably more about a remarkable strength of character, a determination and survival instinct, perhaps born of the "unpredictability and instability" of Bullen's childhood.

While Bullen was stubbornly ignoring the future and refusing to love or be loved, fate again crept up on her. On a film set she spied animal trainer Craig Bullen, of Bullens' family circuses and safari parks fame. He was, she says, "very cute".

Her head was forced to surrender to her heart. She reckons it may even have been love at first sight.

Craig strikes you as the yin to Bullen's yang – a laconic, slow-talking country type with a soft manner and easy vibe, the foil for his more, well, excitable wife. She married Craig in 2005 and in 2006 gave birth to a beautiful, brown-eyed boy, Colt – yes, named in honour of horses. She stresses to him the importance of happiness and, as you'd expect, arms him against the possibility of tragedy and sadness.

"I think just being happy is the most important goal in my life, and Craig and Colt bring so much love to my life," Bullen says. "This bubble of happiness is what it's all about, and I raise Colt telling him that he needs to do what makes him happy. But I also talk to him about his emotional response to loss."

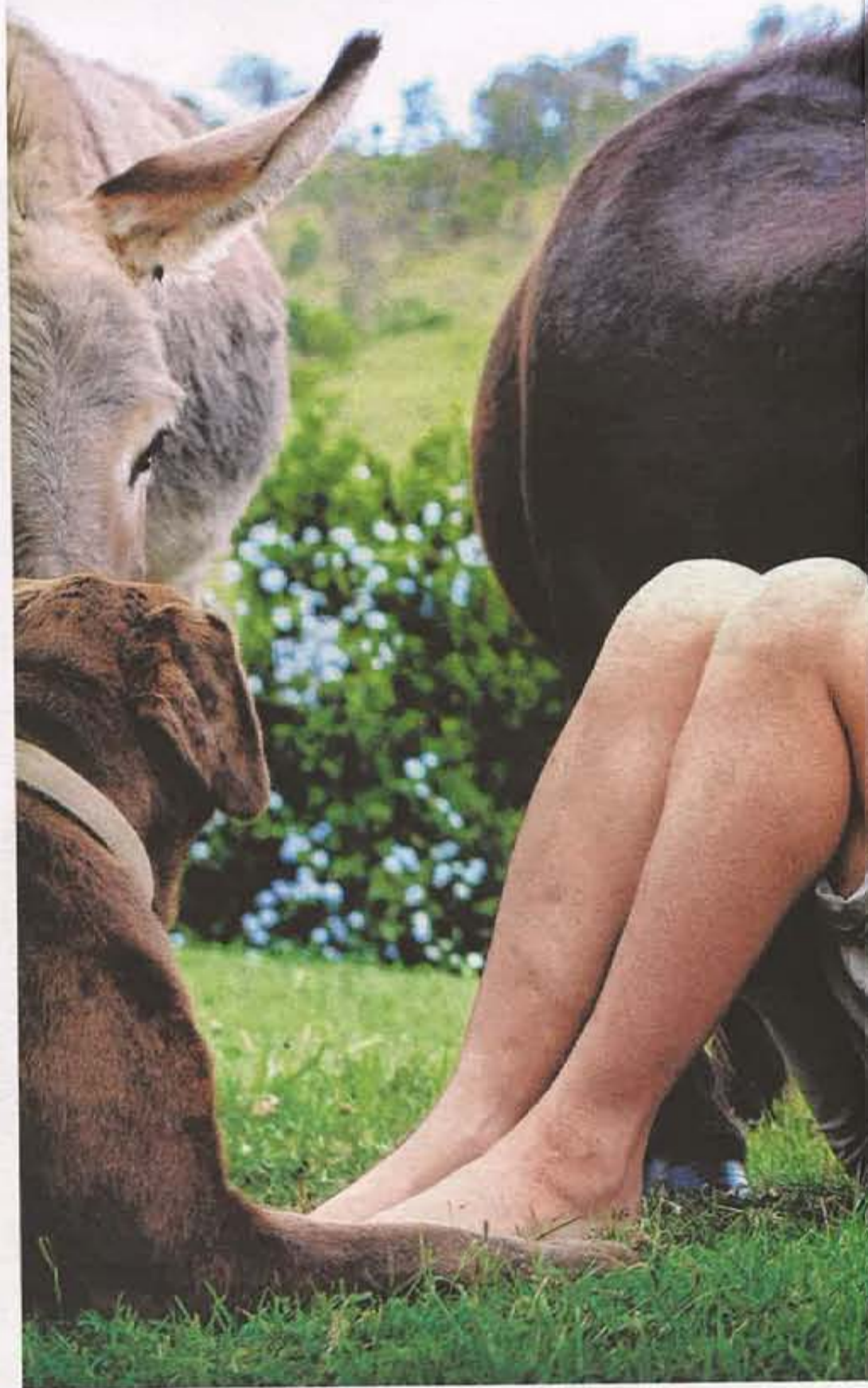
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Hollywood director Lloyd Phillips has worked with Bullen on two films and is in awe of her gift with animals. She truly loves them, he says, communicates with them on their level and is always mindful of not working them to ruination.

But he devotes more energy to extolling her personal qualities.

"How could you have such a wonderful disposition, such a wonderful view of life when you've been through all that?" Phillips ponders. "But I think she was always a survivor and another dozen tragedies could have hit her and she would still be the same, which puts her into that special category of leaders – people who face each day and put one foot in front of the other and with such an amazing disposition that she can seem unattached, but you know she's definitely not."

Phillips has summed it up in one – she seems so unattached. But clearly cannot be. She just refuses to dwell on tragedy,



refuses to make it her trademark. So why, then, is she seemingly so happy to discuss it? And in such bare terms?

Bullen says after an ABC *Australian Story* on her life, she was flooded with messages of support, people who saw courage and inspiration in her story. There were also messages from those who had suffered their own tragedies. She began to recognise the potency of her story. (Later, she admits to being a little baffled by her status as such an exemplar of strength and courage.)

"One man wrote me a letter – I cried in the first paragraph. He said his family had

been killed in a car accident and he didn't know how he would get through the day," she recounts. "And one day he switched the TV on and saw my story and told me he was ready to live again."

"There is not one part of me that wants to be famous or be on a pedestal or be recognised. But if I can help one person by doing these interviews then I will do them."

And, at the risk of sounding a little kooky, is part of that courage and strength coming from the other side – a world where loved ones are reassuring her?

"I believe there is something, and I don't



know if I think that because it's made my journey easier or because of the amazing things that have happened which make me think, 'That can only mean they are still watching and looking after me', she says through an uneasy smile.

"But I reckon I might be the only person with a reasonable amount of death in my life who has never been to a clairvoyant. There's just never been a point in my life where I've felt one person can help me get closer to people who have died."

Consulting a clairvoyant, you see, would interfere with Bullen's live-in-the-moment

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**Zelie Bullen**

mantra, her unflinching trust in the future, despite what fate has dumped on her. The less she thinks about where her next job is coming from, she explains, the more success she enjoys. (Incidentally, the Bullens are assessing nine job offers.)

And that hasn't come from pre-packaged and manufactured self-help courses, or worshipping at the altar of the laws of natural attraction – it's that strength of character, quiet confidence and what she calls a "blessed ability to be happy".

"That's how I live. I try to enjoy the present and not to worry too much about

what's coming next because every time I have worried about that, kabam! – something goes wrong."

And as the evening sun sighs its last on the brow of a hill in her stunning valley home, Bullen has a parting message.

"Hey, try not to worry so much. You just can't worry about the future."

Amen.

*War Horse opens in cinemas December 26.*

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