

# In the Spotlight

by MaryAnne Leighton

Steven Spielberg and Joseph Ashton are fans, so are Antonio Banderas and his pig.

The people these men – and the pig – admire are Zelig and Craig Bullen, internationally acclaimed animal trainers

who not only work on big budget movies such as *War Horse*, *Zebra Stripes* and *Charlotte's Web* but who are equally happy to train animal acts for TV commercials, live shows and the more intimate stage of the circus.

Zelig and Craig received a significant amount of publicity when they trained liberty horses for the Spielberg blockbuster *War Horse*. However, no matter how famous the client nor how small the show, their approach is the same – to enter the minds of the animals they are training, discover what makes them tick and always ensure they are happy in their work.

If there is a secret to the Bullens' phenomenal success, it is the love and respect they have for the animals in their care. How else could they establish a deep bond with an animal, gain its trust, persuade it to behave in ways that, invariably, are contrary to its nature and well out of its comfort zone, and have it enjoy the experience so much that it is willing to do more? Zelig says, "The key to gaining that trust is getting into the horse's mind, working out what they are thinking and what they're willing to do, and learning what they like and what they're comfortable with. Once the trainer has achieved that, all that's left is to combine it with an acute sense of timing to get the behaviour they want."



Zelig and five relaxed buckskins  
Photo: El Hogan

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Zelig and Craig were two of four animal trainers who trained the adult horses that played the lead role of Joey in *War Horse*.



Zelie and Craig were two of the four professionals who trained the nine adult horses that played the lead character of Joey in *War Horse* and Zelie says the pressure of working on that movie was intense. "It was our job to get the horses to be actors; to show emotion. We had to know every single element of each horse's personality and work within its boundaries so we could bring out whatever the director wanted on any particular day or for any particular sequence." If a scene called for Joey to be brave and proud, the trainers used the horse that could handle pressure and liked to show off. If Spielberg

wanted Joey to act scared, they used the horse that was more cautious. By leading his mate away from him (out of shot), the cautious horse's nostrils would flare, his eyes widen and, if they were lucky, he might even call out.

An added challenge was that Spielberg had never worked with a live animal in the lead role before, let alone a sensitive animal like a horse in a simulated war zone. Conditioning the horses to the noise and terror of war began with little puffs of dust bursting near them then slowly built to massive simulated mortar explosions and machinegun fire.



Keeping the circus horses happy in Perth's Swan River

Zelie and Abraham rehearse with stuntman, Pete Miles



Zelie says, "Providing they trust their trainer, when horses learn they won't be injured, they stop being intimidated." She and Craig are justifiably proud of what they achieved with those nine horses, as was Steven Spielberg who gave Zelie a hug at the end of filming. "He held me by the shoulders, looked me in the eyes 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.' Then he said, 'We'll see you again.'"

From the heady atmosphere of filming *War Horse*, Zelie and Craig went back to the circus. Since the beginning of 2012, they have been working on three acts for Perth's Circus Joseph Ashton, a process that could take anything up to two years. Surprisingly, Joseph Ashton did not want to know anything about the acts until the horses had their moves down pat, telling Zelie and Craig, "You're the people who know what you're doing, surprise me!" Zelie says, "Joseph wasn't interested in micro-managing; it was more important to him that the horses should look as though they're having a good time."



Craig teaches Trojan that it is safe to work under Tank's belly

Zelie, who is an internationally recognised trick rider, stunt rider and stunt double, is using her trick-riding skills with Traveller, a 17hh Percheron, conditioning him to accept the antics of circus acrobats. It will take several more months before this horse is fully trained, partly because there are acrobatic moves that are not in Zelie's repertoire but also because the acrobats themselves have not worked with horses before and need time to learn to be respectful and light on Traveller's back.

Additionally, Zelie is teaching a team of four buckskins a beautifully choreographed dance where each gelding has to understand and remember his own dance steps as well as his position in the complex routine.

Zelie says, "There are times when two are going in one direction and two in the other direction. Then one pair turns around so all four are going in the same direction, then they go four abreast so the horse on the inside of the circle is walking and the one on the outside is doing an extended trot."



Learning some tricky dance steps with the help of Craig and Zelie

It took six months of hard work before the buckskins were ready for a delighted Joseph Ashton to see them in action. Each horse learned at his own pace, with two geldings knowing the act eight weeks before the other two. Zelie says, "You have to allow them the time it takes to cotton on to what you're asking and to actually remember their routines." Like people, there are horses that are born leaders and others that are born followers. "Typically in a routine like this, the born followers are fine because you don't always have to let them think for themselves. However, when you come to do a crossover and horse number four who is a born follower has to suddenly become a leader and turn around with number three following so you have two going one way and two going the other way, it took number four a long time to go, 'What? You mean me? I've got to change?'"

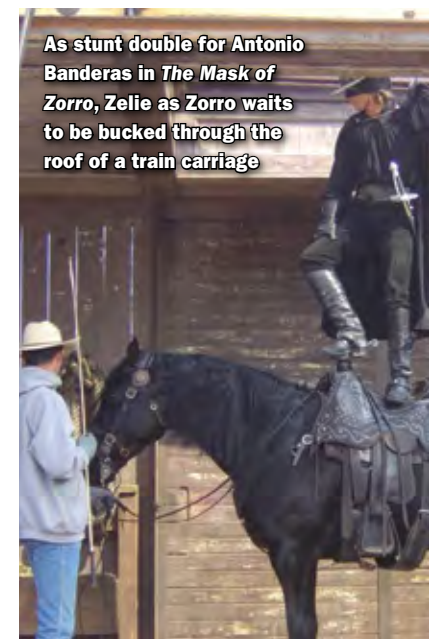
Meanwhile Craig, who is a third-generation circus animal trainer, works on a comedy liberty act with a matched pair of very good friends – a 17hh flighty steel-grey Clydesdale-Warmblood cross and a 7hh steel-grey mini. Tank, the bigger of the two, commands attention as, to classical music and wearing no harness, he enters the ring at an athletic trot before transitioning to a gorgeous collected canter. Once he has completed his routine of serpentines and transitions, he moves to the centre of the ring and stands with his front feet on a two-foot-high pedestal.



After six months intensive training at their home in the Gold Coast hinterland, Zelie and Craig Bullen were ready to take Circus Joseph Ashton's three new acts, plus their young son and family pets, to Perth for the next phase of the training programme.



Zelie and Abraham as Joey, with Steven Spielberg on the set of War Horse



As stunt double for Antonio Banderas in *The Mask of Zorro*, Zelie as Zorro waits to be bucked through the roof of a train carriage

The music changes to a quick skippy tempo as Trojan the misleadingly named mini enters the ring and repeats Tank's routine, completing his serpentines by changing direction under Tank's belly, and waltzing around the pedestal before parking himself underneath his mate.

Training Tank in the next part of the routine took time and patience as the big horse likes to ad lib. Instead of stepping demurely from his pedestal to jog sedately with Trojan beside him, often he would want to play. Showing the patience for which he is renowned, Craig would laugh off these antics, wait for Tank to settle down and trot around the ring according to plan, and reward him with a treat. The highlight of this delightful and entertaining double act is at the end where Tank lies on his side in the centre of the ring and Trojan stands proudly on top of him.





Zelie and Craig with the comedy act of Trojan and Tank



Craig patiently - and bravely - assists Zelie to train Stella the pig to kiss a pretty face

The overriding principle behind Zelie and Craig's business is that every animal they train must be happy and willing to work. Zelie says, "We want every animal we come in contact with to have a beautiful life and we go out of our way to ensure that." This means Joseph Ashton's horses must not only be relaxed enough to work in and around his circus tent but also comfortable enough to camp next to a shopping centre or train station. "We don't like to take the animals to their new home until we feel they are ready to digest the next level of

learning, which is their life on the road, and this can take anything from three months to a year, depending how they cope." It can also take up to a year to train the presenters for these new acts because often the presenter is not an animal trainer.

And the pig? Zelie was not only Antonio Banderas's stunt double in *The Mask of Zorro*; she was the animal trainer who had to teach Stella the pig to lick Banderas's face. "That was one of the most intimidating jobs I've ever had. Obviously, if you have a face that's worth as much as Antonio's,

you don't want the pig getting over-excited and thinking 'I might just have a little bite.'" While it is not a big deal to teach a pig to lick a pretty face, it is more difficult to control her reaction when the trainer cannot reward her instantly because she is on camera. "If the reward doesn't come when the animal is expecting it, often the animal will offer up several other behaviours in case the first wasn't what the trainer wanted, so maybe the pig should bite instead? It was a really anxious time but fortunately the pig was fantastic and so was Antonio!"

