

A traditional wedding house, or Beit Al Zehb, is on display at the Qasr Al Hosn Festival, which begins today in Abu Dhabi. **Visitors can watch performers prepare for an Emirati marriage with dancing, music and costumes.** Visit www.qasralhosnfestival.ae



A galloping success

Afshan Ahmed enjoys a sneak peek at *Cavalia*, the unique equestrian production that opens on Saturday and is the highlight of this year's Qasr Al Hosn Festival

The city of Abu Dhabi was created from the harsh desert, where a Bedouin's best friends were his beasts, the horse and camel.

Cavalia, which opens at the Qasr Al Hosn Festival on Saturday, explores this theme – and a special 30-minute preview held this week for the media opened with a sturdy rider in a kaffiyeh and white tunic guiding an elegant stallion. Against a video backdrop of dunes, the story of the capital is played out, with 43 stunning horses racing across a desert and galloping around an oasis created on stage, while acrobats recreate the origins of pearl diving.

History revisited

The show will begin with a historical parade, with men dressed in local garb travelling with their horses in a caravan and chanting.

"We have worked with various local musicians to get the chants that people travelling in the desert used to have," says Wayne Fowkes, the director for *Cavalia* at Qasr Al Hosn.

Other scenes inspired by Emirati culture include the Liberty Act, where eight unbridled Arabian

horses are let free on stage, and a carousel number in water. "The carousel act is new for *Cavalia*," says Fowkes. "We designed it around the theme of an oasis."

Commanded by a trainer with a dressage whip, a dozen horses, heads raised and tails swishing, obediently splash around in a special water feature created on stage in the Big Top at Qasr Al Hosn.

There is also a special pearl diving scene depicted by aerial acrobats. "We will show an underwater sequence with pearl divers," says Fowkes.

"We are trying to recreate the lifestyle of the first people to arrive in Abu Dhabi, with these divers arriving in boats, and the progression on how the relationship with horses was built."

A new cast of Guinean acrobats has joined the regular line-up of Moroccan artists and they perform between the equestrian acts, impressing the audience with dizzying somersaults and jumps.

Another newly introduced sequence has one of the performers manipulating an indoor kite to portray falconry.

Natural movements

Alain Gauthier, the show's choreographer, says he had to simplify some of the movements in this show and looked to birds of prey for inspiration. "Some of the acrobats will actually be 'flying' – we adapted their movements to reflect those of a falcon," he says. "But some moves had to be eliminated because they do not fit with the culture of the Emirates."

"And as far as the horses are concerned, we were able to retain what we do because their language is universal."

Gauthier says he looked at a lot of old video footage to develop the choreography. "I had to choreograph the act of pearl diving for this show," he says. "Obviously we do not have a basin of water, so I trained some of my ground acro-



Cavalia will depict Emirati culture as part of the Qasr Al Hosn Festival, which starts today. Sammy Dallal / The National

bats in the art of 'swimming in the air': mime and movement combined to depict being underwater."

As part of the illusion, the acrobats descend from a height of 10 metres to mime deep-sea diving.

A musical journey

A live band performs an eclectic mix of music rooted in Arabian melodies. The composer Michel Cusson has written four new

pieces for the Abu Dhabi show, merging local tunes.

"It isn't entirely traditional," says Fowkes, about the upbeat darbuka (goblet drum) tones being merged with the bashraf (an introductory instrumental piece in Arabian classical music). "It is fusion. We have been working with local artists on which instruments to add for an overlay," he says. "We have included an oud player, an Arab violinist and a percussionist."

■ *Cavalia* is at the Qasr Al Hosn Festival from Saturday to March 1. Tickets cost from Dh250 and can be bought from www.ticketmaster.ae or Virgin Megastores, or by calling 800 86823. Ticket holders can book a Horse Lovers Stable Tour directly after the show for an extra Dh100. Visit www.qasralhosnfestival.ae for show times and more information

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Wayne Fowkes director of *Cavalia*