

CARI SWANSON OF
WINDROCK FARM
IN AMENIA, NY

Equine movie stars

By Christine Bates
christine@mainstreetmag.com

Movie and TV stars are hidden from view in our countryside, from Great Barrington, MA to Millbrook, NY to Kent, CT, but others can be found grazing in fields. Horse wrangler Cari Swanson of Windrock Farm in Amenia trains horses to appear in movies, TV shows, music videos, and special events. Main Street Magazine watched Cari as she put her star horses through their paces on a Sunday afternoon. The interview ended inside her kitchen with a horse practicing patience and good behavior.

When did you begin training horses?

Actually I started when I was a kid in Ohio teaching my horses to do tricks. I was very involved with riding and training horses in 4-H and pony club. When I moved to New York City I escaped to the country to ride on weekends. Finally in 1995, after a successful career in magazine publishing, I decided that horses made me the happiest and I moved to Windrock Farm full time to board and train horses.

I have competed in show jumping, eventing, and FEI dressage. I am a USDF Silver medalist and a judge for dressage. About seven years ago I expanded my work to train horses for movies and have spent the last three years working on the feature film, *Winter's Tale*, and Cinemax television series, *The Knick*. Right now I have eight horses in training.



Above: Movie star Listo, an Andalusian stallion owned by Ashley Waller, with his trainer Cari Swanson. Photo courtesy of Cari Swanson. Below left: Lily, a paint, at home in Cari's kitchen. Photo by Christine Bates.

How do you train a horse for film?

For film the horse has to have the right disposition. My favorites are stallions, then mares, and lastly geldings. Geldings always seem a little flat to me. Typically it takes nine to twelve weeks of "liberty training" to teach a horse for film. Using six-foot long whips and my voice and body language, I train a horse to react in a certain way by responding to a specific signal. Think of it as a horse on remote control. The horse must seem to be responding to the dialogue of the actor and the action on screen. For example, a horse will respond to a signal to look to the side, paw the ground, rear up, back up, kneel, kiss, shake his head yes or no. The trainer on the set, usually standing right behind the camera, communicates with the horse. Think of the whips as the baton of a conductor. The actor just has to look confident, stay relaxed, and say his lines while the horse responds to the commands of the trainer.

Do you give them treats?

No treats. Just a firm pat and a "Good boy." If you give horses treats they can get full and then not obey you. Treats also encourage biting, which can be detrimental if your actor is hurt. Safety is always my primary concern.

Do you train actors to sit on horses?

Most actors don't know how to ride. Usually it takes four to ten sessions on a well-trained horse to prepare an actor to appear to be riding while the trainer is actually guiding the horse's movements. For the movie *Winter's Tale* I worked with Colin Farrell. What a nice guy! And actors enjoy working with me. Sometimes they come up here to have riding training off the set. Ethan Hawke said I was the only trainer that ever explained the bio-dynamics of a horse and rider to him.

How do you manage a shoot?

You know that movie people say the worst things on a set are animals and children because they are so unpredictable. Horses have to be able to behave on a set. They can't be easily spooked when there is so much going on – cameras, lights, people, noise. Actually Listo knows the word "action" and moves into place for a shot all by himself. And they have to be patient. My mantra on set is hurry up and wait. This is the most important trick a horse must learn to be successful on set.

My first concern is to protect the horse and make sure he's safe. I always have at least two "wranglers" per horse on a set. I need time to scout the site, prepare, and prep. Recently I had to measure an elevator before the shoot to make sure that Listo would fit. You have to

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Above: Party animal Listo with a nude model and live hawk. Notice trainer Cari Swanson holding Listo. Photo courtesy Cari Swanson. Below: Wearing a top hat, Cari Swanson is dressed as a male carriage driver on the set of *The Knick*. Photo courtesy of Cari Swanson.

make sure the actor will be comfortable sitting or riding on the horse because horses respond to energy. Recently I had an hour to train a nude model to ride on Listo bareback while holding a white hawk. Initially she was terrified but after instruction she rode through the party bareback. Bond, a 20-year-old gelding, just made an E-trade commercial with Kevin Spacey on stage at a symphony hall. When Spacey mounted him booming, "Seize the day!" Bond didn't flinch.

The Cinemax cable show, *The Knick*, starring Clive Owen, is set in turn of the century New York before automobiles. On the set I'm called the Producer of Horses and Carriages. I manage 20 horse wranglers (two per horse on set), and 25 carriages. Those old carriages can be dangerous and pieces are always falling off. It is a challenge to keep

them all working properly. I've become a member of SAG, the Screen Actors Guild, because I'm often in the horse scenes dressed as a man driving a carriage, or in wardrobe to direct the horses.



What has made you succeed in this male dominated business?

It's true there are very few women. Communicating with producers, directors, cameramen, and actors is easy for me. You have to go with the flow, be prepared and always diplomatic. Organization is key. Someone called me General Patton. Leadership skills are important. When Ang Lee was filming *Taking Woodstock* he asked his cast, "Why can the horse hit his mark every time and you actors cannot?"

What's the best part and worst part of the film business?

The worst part is the human tempers on set. Everyone is under pressure with limited time and budgets. I've found that the most successful people are the easiest to work with. Collaboration and working together is the flip side and the best part. It's so exciting and satisfying to work with a team and see a project happen.

I love teaching and learning. Half of my family members are teachers and I guess I am too.

Do horses have understudies?

There were four white horses in *Winter's Tale*. The main horse, a stand in, and galloping horses.

Horses in the distance are usually doubles that are ridden by stunt people.

How do you find gigs? Is there a lot of competition?

Prop masters know me from my work and there are three talent agencies that specialize in animals. They call me whenever a horse is involved. There are more movie horses out west, but less competition here on the East Coast.

How do you charge?

Rates vary depending on the job, but a specialty horse can earn a day rate of \$1,000, plus the transportation, handlers, and trainer fees add another three to five thousand per day depending on the size of the job. Weekly and monthly rates would be less per day.

What are the other activities of your horse business at Windrock?

It's important to diversify. The film business is feast or famine so I also have my training clients, private riding classes, judging, and finding good matches between horses and people. I would never let a horse go to a bad home. And I do public appearances — meet and greets with Listo. Right now I'm working on a business plan.

What are your other interests and activities?

Horses are my passion. I'm the founder of the Horse Rescue, Rehab and Retirement Foundation for older horses. Also I am working on a documentary about women in their nineties called *Nine Decades*. These women have lived through an amazing time — the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Internet age. We have to finish up the film because we're losing subjects.

Besides all that, I love travel, nature, poetry, history, and film. I just went to Iceland to check out Icelandic sheep dogs. What an amazing place of waterfalls and beautiful scenery. •

To reach Cari Swanson, visit her website at www.cariswanson.com.