Research Grant – Spring 2009

**Title or Proposal:** Documentary Video of the evolution of Herd – an interdisciplinary performance project conducted by the Equus Projects (NYC) and Black Label Movement (Minneapolis)

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**Unit:** School of Theater and Dance

**Abstract**

I am requesting funds to complete a documentary video film of the creative process involved in the evolution of HERD, an interdisciplinary performance project conducted by the Equus Projects (NYC) and Black Label Movement (Minneapolis).

Equus is a company which creates performance works for dancers, horses and equestrians. Black Label Movement is a modern dance company. Herd will be performed in New York City and Minneapolis. This documentary will be used as community outreach introductory material for the performances.

**Project Description**

The goal of this project is to complete a documentary film based on the interaction between the world of modern dance and the equestrian world.

HERD is an interdisciplinary performance project conducted by The Equus Projects (NYC) and Black Label Movement (Minneapolis), led by choreographers Joanna Mendl Shaw, Carl Flink, and video artist Janet Biggs (NYC). Collaborating with highly trained equine behavior specialists, the creative team explores and models natural herd behavior and what it can communicate about interpersonal social dynamics. The merging of herd communities parallels the project’s structure - with seven dancers from Minneapolis being paired with five dancers from New York City, to create a dance "herd" of twelve.

Initially interested in what choreography for modern dancers and horses might look like, I went up to the Wenapeg farm in January 2009 to observe and shoot the first workshop that occurred between the 2 dance companies and the horses at Wenapeg farm. While there I began a discussion with Peg Finnerty, owner of the farm, which ended up as a filmed interview. The reactions of the equestrian world to the world of modern dance fascinated me, as did the movement communication that was established by the experienced dancer/equestrian members of Equus Project and the horses. The two companies did an hour-long public lecture demonstration as part of their first workshop so I had a chance to also film the reaction of local equestrians during those two days. Director Joanna Shaw was quite pleased with the initial draft of this documentary and said that it would be quite helpful as preliminary information and community outreach for the several installations and performances that they have planned for 2009 and 2010. I therefore need to have another shoot day so that I may interview several more of the equestrian/dancers as well as film some additional improvisation/choreography that will evolve between the horses and the dancers.

The College of the Arts and the University of South Florida has repeatedly expressed interest in interdisciplinary research. The very nature of HERD, the merging of two very different worlds is interdisciplinary at its’ core and is one feature that is fascinating about this particular project. The film will also explore a secondary aspect which is how the equestrian world views this merger and how the movement communication between dancer and horse can be adopted and adapted by equestrians to improve their horsemanship.

The film will be of particular interest to dancers in our division because Equus director Joanna Shaw developed her methods of horse/dancer communication from her study of the principles of Rudolph Laban and Laban Movement Analysis is a core course in our BFA program in Dance.