

## From the Case files

When France-based IH Recommended Trainer **Anne Lorraine Picard-Nizou** was asked if she could help tame an unruly donkey, she never thought she'd end up training a future street theatre star!

Donatien and Val are now the perfect team

# FROM ROUND PEN TO THEATRE!

**I** first met Donatien, and his donkey, Val, around two years ago, when a client asked me if I would be able to help a friend with his notoriously difficult donkey. Up until that point, I had never worked with a donkey and I was curious to take on a long-eared student. I tried to push aside all the clichés I'd heard about donkeys being stubborn and tricky, and approach this new challenge with an open mind.



Donatien and Val now have a strong bond

Our first meeting didn't go exactly to plan – I got lost en-route, barely made it on time, and arrived feeling more than a little anxious! But Val and Donatien were waiting for me in a charming apple blossom orchard and the beautiful view soon calmed me down.

Before we got to work, I asked Donatien to tell me a little about Val's history. He explained how he had owned Val since he was six months old and had started him himself. He had managed to ride him, but had been plagued by bolting issues, mostly due to fear of trucks and tractors passing. Val lived alone in a field and could be so aggressive towards anyone other than Donatien that it was becoming dangerous. He had recently badly injured Donatien's wife, who had been trying to bring him back to his shelter and feed him, hence his phone call asking for help.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

I asked Donatien to show me one of his working sessions with Val and watched as he led Val into another small field with poles and different groundwork obstacles.

The first thing I noticed was that Val was in bad spirits – from his pinned ears and 'grumpy' faces, it was clear that this 'work' was not something he wanted to do and he was constantly invading Donatien's space.

Donatien appeared to be oblivious to how Val was feeling. Instead, he concentrated on the tasks at hand – leading him over a series of poles, jumps and other obstacles.

After around five minutes, I couldn't stand it any more! I asked Donatien if I could give it a go and while he was happy to let me try, he continued to warn me about Val's aggressive behaviour with strangers. Having never worked with a donkey before, I decided to let Val show me the way. I introduced myself gradually, asking permission with some approach and retreat work, and holding the lead rope with a large 'smile' in the line. At first, Val acted very passively, as if he was waiting to figure out what was going on before responding. I stayed around a metre away from him and adopted the same passive attitude, keeping my eyes lowered and my body language very quiet and low energy.

After a few minutes, he faced me and decided to step very gently towards me. I raised my energy just enough to warn him he was not supposed to run into my face as an introduction and he gave me a nice stop in return. Working just with our body language, we started a 'conversation', each of us establishing very clearly what was acceptable and what wasn't. Within another five minutes, Val was happy to be rubbed all over his neck and face, and stayed in his own space, without trying to push or barge into me. His entire body changed from tense to relaxed, dropping his head down, and slowly allowing me to come in closer.



Clockwise from left: Anne-Lorraine put her horse whispering skills to the test on a different kind of equine!; Teaching Val to load calmly and confidently; Donatien and Val make their stage debut!; The flyer for the show "Anthelme l'âne des tranchées"



Soon, we began walking around the field with the same loose line. Val kept a positive attitude, walking over the poles, stopping, stepping forward again, turning away from me and towards me, following my body language and responding to my energy and breath. In no time at all, Val had convinced me that we could work together and showed me that he was happy to be led.

Donatien was amazed, telling me that he had never ever seen Val behave that way with a stranger. I tactfully explained to him that Val's problem was that he had never been clearly told what was a 'yes' and what was a 'no'. As I showed him how making small changes in his own attitude and body language could affect huge changes in Val's behaviour, he was quickly convinced and keen to learn more.

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Over the next few months, we worked together twice a month, either in his field, at my stables, or in other locations, so that we could slowly introduce Val to different environments.

I also worked with Donatien's wife, who spent some time perfecting her body language with one of my own horses before learning to handle Val. By the time we finished our sessions, Val had made huge improvements. He was now leading nicely in the arena and out on roads and trails, as well as long lining. My human students had also come on in leaps and bounds, and were now confidently

“ My human students had also come on in leaps and bounds, and were now confidently handling Val... ”

handling Val, having learnt the importance of their body language and controlling their breathing.

Donatien mentioned that he was a theatre actor and around a year ago, he told me of his dream to create a street spectacle with Val as the star. He'd always assumed that Val wouldn't be able to cope with the challenge, but he was now beginning to see it as a possibility and he asked me if I'd help him turn his dream into a reality. Of course, I accepted!

## A STAR IS BORN

Donatien had written the dialogue of a soldier (Donatien's grandfather) and a donkey (Val's grandfather) meeting in the trenches during WWI and forging a life-long bond.

My job was to help Val cope with the various challenges that would come up as he made his acting debut. Among the many things to master were: loading and unloading into a trailer or truck; staying calm when being tacked and un-tacked anywhere, even in a

busy or potentially unsafe area; being led by different people, including strangers; 'ground tying' (standing still in specific spots on the 'stage'); lunging on a circle; and stepping forward, backward and sideways to subtle cues. Not only that, but he needed to be comfortable doing all of this in a variety of locations, as the 'stage' might be a field, a street or a busy market square.

Not only did I put my newfound donkey training skills to the test, but I also worked with the theatre coach and helpers to ensure that everyone was able to work safely and consistently around Val. Last but not least, I tried to arm Donatien with enough skills that he could be confident and stay calm no matter what situation arose.

## A TRIUMPHANT DEBUT!

The result of all our efforts came on June 25th 2017, when the show "Anthelme l'âne des tranchées" opened to an audience of 65 people.

Not only did Val take his acting debut in his stride, but he stayed relaxed and happy, even when met with loud applause and surrounded by local children wanting to pet him. Val and Donatien even got their photo in the local newspaper, and I couldn't have been more proud of my part in it all! 