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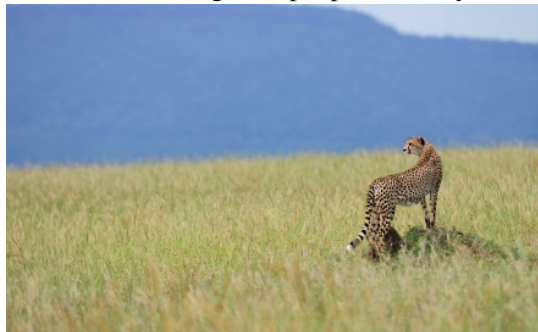
From The Black Stallion to Fly Away Home, Director Carroll Ballard Works His Filmmaking Magic

By Jordan R. Young

Who would have thought that a tale of survival about a boy and a horse would be one of the most memorable experiences of a moviegoer's life? But I hadn't reckoned with the artistry of one of modern cinema's most gifted and iconoclastic directors: namely, Carroll Ballard.

Few films have equaled the lyrical beauty of *The Black Stallion* in the three decades since its 1979 release - yet one that did was the poetic *Never Cry Wolf*. So it's probably no coincidence that the same man also directed the offbeat 1983 film about a science nerd studying wolves in the Arctic. And that's not to mention *Fly Away Home* (1996) with its breathtaking imagery of geese in flight, or *Duma* (2005), the fact-based story of a boy returning a pet cheetah to its natural African habitat.

When I asked Ballard to comment on his affinity for animals in a recent phone interview, the director gave me a pragmatic, no-nonsense reply: "It's a lot easier to deal with animals than it is with people," he reflected. "I made a lot of short films with cats, dogs and pigs when I was starting out because they were a lot easier to make than working with people, where you're dealing with egos and political things."



According to arts and culture blogger Walter Biggins, Ballard is the overlooked hero of the maverick filmmakers who sprang forth in the 1970s, "in part because he makes kid-friendly dramas, mostly about children and animals, that take on mythological undertones. Any director who can create such a cinematic glow and a powerfully mythic vision of humans encountering nature... should be far better loved than he is."

A Los Angeles native and UCLA Film School grad, Ballard is a true original, whose films have continually confounded studio executives. So it seems apropos that as the son of a carpenter and boatwright, he would start out by buying a Nikon and

contemplating “inexpensive films with just sound and stills,” thinking he could “create a stronger reality.” Not exactly the typical Hollywood path to success.

At the behest of fellow UCLA student Francis Ford Coppola, Ballard took on what he deems the improbable story of *The Black Stallion* (which he didn’t especially like) about a kid and a wild stallion with extraordinary results. As a follow-up, he cast newly-hatched goslings for another feature with no script in hand and “no idea what the rest of the movie was going to be like,” and the result was the heart-tugging film *Fly Away Home* with *True Blood*’s Anna Paquin in one of her best juvenile roles.

“Carroll works in a totally unconventional way; he directs by the seat of his pants,” stated cinematographer Caleb Deschanel, who has teamed with Ballard to stunning results on *The Black Stallion* and *Fly Away Home*. In an interview for the magazine *Millimeter*, Deschanel told me that Coppola gave Ballard “all the rope he needed. I don’t think it’s any secret that if he had made the film for a studio, they probably would’ve dumped him and me after the first couple weeks of the film; they would’ve gone nuts trying to figure out how we were putting the film together... a lot of what the film became was in Carroll’s head, and he wasn’t going to tell anybody.”

Even though Ballard began by making documentaries for the United States Information Agency in the ‘60s, (one of which, *Harvest*, garnered an Oscar nomination), he scored the best reviews of his career for *Duma*. Not unlike *The Black Stallion* and *Fly Away Home*, the film “makes a fiercely impassioned case for treating wild animals as friends and allies, but not as pets,” declared Ella Taylor of *LA Weekly*, who called it “a drama of uncommon beauty and emotional resonance.” Sadly, she reported the picture was yet another casualty “of risk-averse corporate movie marketing, or of a crass new generation of young audiences... for whom live wild animals are sissy stuff.” Hence, the film never really found solid footing amongst the moviegoing public.



“Maybe the world has changed so much I can’t comprehend it anymore,” notes Ballard. “There have been so many children’s animal pictures over the years that have followed the same formula, and the audience is sick and tired of it. The hot subject now is being ‘cool’ - whatever that means - and kind of cynical.”

Ballard, who now spends most of his time growing grapes in Napa Valley, recently asserted to Brian Miller of *Seattle Weekly* that “Kids today live mainly in a virtual world. The big outdoors doesn’t mean that much...right now. The coming-of-age-with-an-animal movie has come to an end. It looks like my career has hit the wall.”

But for those of us who still remember the emotional connection we shared with ‘the Black,’ or have yearned to hear the cry of a lone wolf in the wild, Carroll Ballard will forever hold a place in our moviegoing memories as the man who brought to life what it feels like - if only for a cinematic moment - to have a connection to wild animals that defies explanation.

A CAMERAMAN’S POV

The Follies and Foibles of Filming a Movie

Cinematographer Caleb Deschanel became a cause célèbre when his remarkable work on *The Black Stallion* (his feature film debut) was overlooked for Oscar consideration. The now veteran cameraman (and father of actress Zooey Deschanel) also photographed Carroll Ballard's *Fly Away Home* - where he discovered that working with geese wasn't that much different than working with people.

"They have a community personality," he told Anne Bergman of *The Los Angeles Times*, noting that "they're much less trainable than horses or dogs, so there are aspects that are frustrating. There were definitely times that they weren't cooperative."

Working with equine actors on *The Black Stallion* was equally problematic, however. "We couldn't get any of the horses we were using into the water to swim; they'd go crazy," Deschanel told me in an interview for *Millimeter*. "We had heard about these horses in France that swim, so producer Tom Sternberg went and bought a couple of these horses and brought them back... they had pot bellies and incredibly ugly faces, and they were white." So they were sent to Rome to be dyed black.

"When I went down with the Aquaflex to shoot the underwater stuff, the horses came into the water and started swimming, and they looked unbelievably graceful," reflects Deschanel. "They were the ugliest animals you've ever seen, but underwater...they were like Nijinsky."

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