

# Gladius

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Bianca McCarty**

## TAKING HORSE PERFORMANCE ART TO A NEW LEVEL

WELCOME TO THE WORLD THAT IS GLADIUS—a planet within itself as a higher entity. Conscious, alive, and supreme, Gladius has been on the path of enlightenment for tens of thousands of years, yet nothing comes easy, especially the enlightenment of an entire planet. Rough and calloused are the Lokidian gods of Gladius, who are the defenders of combat, strength, and change. Their lighter counterpart gods, the Eluminitis, are the guardians of love, law, and virtue. It is in awe that Gladius survives on the edge of existence. After all, one does not understand light without dark and vice versa. It is this edge that makes all things possible.



From Left: Erik Martonovich, Nicole Czyzewski, Monnya Silver,  
Alethea Shelton, and Lisa Varmbo Martonovich.  
Photo by Felix GF Photography



Laura Amandis with her Andalusian stallion, Acierto.



Big Horse Productions' newest creation, *Gladius*, features original acts that have never been seen before, new twists in flying aerialist displays, world-class vaulting stunts, the art of Roman riding and theatrical Liberty performances. This is an equestrian performance show you will not want to miss!

Co-producer and director, Erik Martonovich, originally from Golden, Colorado, was born into an equestrian family known as the "Golden Gate Vaulters." Representing the U.S. in several World Equestrian Games, Martonovich has also performed with *Cavalía* and now presents his latest production from Las Vegas, *Gladius*, which opened in Denver and runs through April 20th, 2014.

This grass-roots production has been financed by the performers themselves through devotion and many long nights of hard work, along with a few generous private donations and a Kickstarter campaign.

Stars of the show include Erik Martonovich, Lisa Varmbo Martonovich, Alethea Shelton, Nicole Czesenski and Laura Amandis. Martonovich, Shelton and Czyzewski grew up in Colorado, and Varmbo Martonovich is a Norwegian native.

With original music by Kevin Curry, *Gladius* will take you into a magical world accompanied by 15 performers and 20 horses, including several draft horses 18.2 hands tall. The powerful music is accentuated by the pounding of giant hooves while spinning aerialists dangle and dance from mere strings over the galloping steeds. Beautiful young ladies control the great horses with voice and delicate rein as they dangerously leap and twirl on the

*Top:* Alethea Shelton and Jerome Schwab perform an aerial straps duet after being lifted off an Andalusian gelding in the act *Capture*, creating a love story.

*Bottom:* Rearing flawlessly, the Andalusian stallion Acierto is one of the stars of the show.





After the show, everyone gets to meet the 18-hand-tall stars of the evening.



Laura Amandis and her Andalusian stallion Acierto, performing the Spanish walk during the *Liberty* act.



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Gladius performers hold 24 national titles in two countries. Lisa Varmbo Martonovich and Erik Martonovich have represented Norway and the USA at the World Equestrian Games on six occasions.

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Lisa Varmbo Martonovich, Norwegian gold medalist in vaulting, earned her first gold medal when she was only 15 years old, and was one of the pioneers who brought attention to the sport in her country. Lisa has represented Norway in the WEG several times and left her homeland to perform with Big Horse Productions in 2010.







Aerialist Michelle McGlone, also in silks, doing a hip key spin during her solo aerial piece in *Bellator*, the final act of the show, which features the characters from all tribes coming together.



Claire Beer, an aerialist from Detroit, Michigan, performs in *Bellator*.



Sparky, the miniature gelding is also one of the performers of *Gladius*. A generous donor built him a custom-made stall door so he can see the action during his travels.



Erik Martonovich Roman-rides a four-up team of Belgian draft horses while vaulters Nicole Czyzewski (top), Lisa Varbo Martonovich (left), and Alethea Shelton (right) form a pyramid on the front team of horses in *Bellator*.

horses' broad backs, drawing gasps from the crowd. The wide-eyed audience's senses are heightened with an adrenaline rush at the spectacle of this demonstration of superb horsemanship skills.

Not just a performing artist, Laura Amandis is also the head trainer of the equestrian production, and is known for her devoted Liberty performances with her stallion Acierito. Amandis, a Chicago native, has starred in numerous international equestrian exhibitions featuring her performing Andalusians. She was also chosen to be Ambassador of the Andalusian breed. Amandis and Acierito will steal hearts with their breathtaking High School Dressage and Garrocha acts.

The blood, sweat and tears that have gone into creating this show are what

make it such a riveting performance. Big Horse Productions' goal in the 2014 tour is to showcase their equestrian performance art to the country, while offering an affordable experience that all families can enjoy. As a thank you to each community *Gladius* touches, they also wish to give back by offering "Hoofprints," their unique program designed to give back to at-risk youth in each city through horses and movement.

"Hoofprints" is designed to inspire underprivileged children to follow their dreams and to foster self-confidence. In this setting, children have the

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*"Our horses mean everything to us! They are also our teachers and we have gained so much from each and every one of our equine family members."* —Erik Martonovich

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opportunity to try something new, like equestrian vaulting or aerial circus arts. BHP's performers hope to change the lives of children through equestrian art by holding a "Hoofprints" session in every city they perform. For more information contact "Hoofprints" coordinator Monnya Silver at [monk\\_e\\_monnya@yahoo.com](mailto:monk_e_monnya@yahoo.com).

*Gladius* will perform every Friday, Saturday and Sunday until April 20th in the Westenaires Arena at the Jefferson County, Colorado, Fairgrounds. Tickets start at \$15. For more information about additional performances in 2014, visit [www.gladiusheshow.com](http://www.gladiusheshow.com)