

DRESSAGE PEOPLE

Baroque Exhibitions

Mexican trainer "Chon" Macedo works with PRE stallions in Chicago.

By Mary Daniels

Known simply as "Chon" to his fans, Asencion Macedo trains upper-level dressage horses for a purpose unique in the Mexican community and dressage at large. As a dressage rider and having been a journalist in Mexico for 10 years, I have an affinity for the Hispanic community in the Chicago area and am a big fan of Chon's horsemanship. He trains Andalusian, Friesian and Azteca stallions for Joan Sebastian, a three-time Grammy award winner and one of Mexico's leading musical artists.

A popular and growing trend in Mexico is for the singers of traditional *ranchera* songs (comparable to country music in the United States) to perform while riding

their horses around an arena. This mode of entertaining the horse-loving Mexican public was begun three decades ago by movie star, singer and great horseman Antonio Aguilar, but his style has only recently gained momentum with other singers. Referred to in Spanish as *artistas*, they dress in traditional *charro* costumes, sit on big-horned Mexican-style saddles trimmed in silver or embroidered with gold thread and worth as much as \$50,000. The horses are exquisitely groomed. Their manes and tails look like undulating waterfalls shimmering in the spotlight as they piaffe or passage in time to the music, causing the wildly appreciative public to give the name *baile* (dance) to what the horses do.



Chon Macedo does the Spanish trot on the PRE stallion Bandido de Amores.

Chon, at 33 years old, has trained horses for Sebastian for a long time, and he recently added "airs above the ground" to his horses' repertoires. Sebastian asked him to teach them to do levade and some of the "jumps," such as the courbette. Sebastian loves performing the movements on horseback, despite the fact that the singer has been battling bone cancer for years. "He is amazing," says Chon of his patron and idol. When time permits, Chon trailers his stallions to work on the airs with Mario Contreras, performance director at Medieval Times.

Chon comes from a long family line of trainers in his native Jalisco, and he still maintains a Mexican ranch, *Rodeo Jalisco*, outside Guadalajara. His first high-schooled equine was a burro he trained for his grandmother when he was 9 years old. He moved to Chicago two years ago after accompanying Sebastian on one of his tours there and recognizing the opportunities in the area's huge Hispanic population. Of late, he has become a star himself, with his exhibitions in demand.

On Memorial Day, he performed on his own PRE horses, El Foca and Bandido de Amores, before thousands of fans at the gigantic Plaza Garibaldi, a venue in downtown Chicago for Hispanic cultural events. He often exhibits in parks during community holiday celebrations and is a magnet for attention—the crowds forsaking other entertainment to surround his horses.

One of these performances caught the eye of Mexican television's Paso Productions. In April, a crew came to Chon's farm, RanChon, in Manhattan, Illinois, to interview and film him with six of his stallions performing in long lines and under saddle. I was invited to describe in Spanish (thankfully still fluent) and on camera what movements Chon was performing. These included elegant and correct piaffe, passage, Spanish walk and levade.

I was astonished and nearly rendered speechless when Chon spontaneously performed a brilliant Spanish trot. I had previously only seen this performed in Portugal by the legendary Nuno Oliveira. When I asked how he learned this long-forgotten movement, Chon shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Many [trainers] do not coordinate the front legs with the hind legs," he said. "I've known how to do that since I was little."

To teach such a masterfully coordinated Spanish trot, he said he first teaches the Spanish walk, next the passage, and then he slowly coordinates the two movements. But long before his horses are introduced to those, they are trained in basic dressage so they have the strength and flexibility to maintain a movement's quality. His horses are active behind and connected, maintain their rhythm and have suspension and elevation in the passage that could blow the doors off a judge's box in competition. They are a delight to watch. 🐾