



Charley and Destiny

## Equine-imity

Photographer Valerie Shaff captures the dignity and personality of the horse.

By Michael Giltz

ARTIST VALERIE SHAFF is lying on her back while we talk. "I just came back from the barn *and* from yoga," she laughs. "And I'm just getting over a bout with Lyme disease. It's been very challenging."

Based in upstate New York's Germantown, Shaff has worked in every possible way as a photographer: she's done everything from wedding photography to advertising, celebrity portraits for national magazines, and private commissions.



Suzanna the Horse Whisperer

Shaff is probably best known for her witty, respectful focus on animals, which led to a series of best-selling books with humorist Roy Blunt Jr. that include *If Only You Knew How Much I Smell You: True Portraits of Dogs* to *Am I Pig Enough for You Yet: Voices of the Barnyard*.

Currently, amidst all her professional obligations, Shaff donates time to Puppies Behind Bars, an organization that brings prisoners and puppies together so that the puppies can be socialized and trained and, ultimately, work as service dogs and seeing-eye dogs for the blind. That volunteer work led Shaff to a current project where she does portraits of prisoners who have successfully transitioned back into society.

Still, from that first Kodak camera Shaff received when she was 8 years old to today, one constant has been her fascination with and love of horses.

"I wasn't the horsiest of little girls," recalls Shaff, who is 50. "There was always a group of girls who were referred to as 'the horses' and they galloped around at recess and had long pony-tails. I was not a 'horse,' per se, but I always certainly loved horses. I grew up in Hastings-on-Hudson, which is suburban, though pretty, so there weren't a lot of horses there. So whenever we went on vacation and any horse we crossed paths with, I had to shoot them."

Perhaps one reason Shaff finds horses so fascinating to pho-

tograph is the difficulty it presents.

"Horses are so challenging," states Shaff. "What I'm interested in when I photograph animals—besides wanting to make something that's formally beautiful—I like to monumentalize the specific animal and really capture its personality. You can manipulate dogs in many ways, for example; they're very responsive to people. Whereas horses are by and large not nearly as interested in people as dogs are. To get them to do something you want them to do—when you're not on their back—is very difficult."

Off course, getting horses to do what you want even when you're on their back isn't always so simple either!

"I ride at a wonderful, wonderful equestrian center called Southlands Foundation," Shaff describes. "It was established by a woman named Deborah Dows. When the family estate was being divided up, she asked for the south lands and created this equestrian center. The people who teach there were her original students. It's a beautiful land concern as well as being an equestrian center."

"I'm not such an equestrian that no matter where I live I would make a point of riding, but I ride here because Southlands exists. It's such a beautiful place, and the horses are so well-treated. We probably have some of the best school horses that any barn has ever had."