

Tigers set to steal the show

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
SPECIAL WRITER

Sara Houcke's performance with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus gives a whole new meaning to "Beauty and the Beast."

The 5-foot-10 flaxen-haired stunner with a pierced tongue and navel looks more like a runway model than a tiger trainer. She steps into the cage that she shares with her tigers and the ferocious animals melt at her feet.

"The relationship, it's not the usual act you would see where the man comes into the ring, throws the chair, there's a lot of screaming and the cats are jumping everywhere," said Houcke, who appears with the circus at Joe Louis Arena Wednesday-Sunday, Oct. 3-7.

"I do a lot of petting. I feed the meat from my hands. There's one-on-one contact. You see the tigers and the lions jumping everywhere. Here it's a much smoother, easy-going act."

Her nickname, the Tiger Whisperer, a play on Robert Redford's character in the film *The Horse Whisperer*, comes from the way that she communicates with her tigers. Houcke whispers - or "whuffles" as she calls it - to the cats, cuddles and caresses them.

During this year's performances, Houcke works with four different kinds of tigers - standard, white with stripes, snow white and golden tabbies - all of whom stand at an average height of seven feet tall and weigh 400 pounds. Houcke's interest in tigers is a relatively recent one, although the circus has always been in her blood.

Houcke, born March 22, 1977, in Torquay, England, is a seventh-generation circus performer. Her father, Sacha Houcke, is a famed French animal trainer while her mother, Judith Benson, is a former English professional dancer, turned trapeze artist. Sacha Houcke and Sara's younger sister Kerin now also tour with Ringling Bros.

"I grew up with it," Houcke



Cat-lover: Sara The Tiger Whisperer "whuffles" to her cat.

said about the circus. "I love it. I wouldn't want it any different. It seems so normal to a person now. I've done it all my life. It's in me."

She began her circus career at age 2 as a clown in Switzerland's Circus Knie. At 17, she moved from her parents' home in Switzerland to Germany to work with another circus. By that time, Houcke already had experience performing with camels, elephants, horses, rhinos, hippos and zebras.

"It was harder than I thought it would be to leave home, to not have mom around you all the time. It's not a piece of cake."

Her job wasn't easy, either. Houcke was hired to run the animal department for the circus.

"I had to get the feed, find veterinarians in every city, set up and set down, everything that belonged to taking care of the animal," said Houcke, who speaks four languages.

At the age of 19, she found tigers fascinating and soon thereafter "realized that they weren't very many female tiger trainers. And there aren't all that many tiger acts going on, either."

Three years ago, she was able to bring that idea to fruition when she moved to the United States to work for Ringling Bros. The cat's owner, Josef Marcan, taught her how to work with the animals. Meanwhile, Houcke found it important to focus on creating a relationship with the

cats, whom she watered, cleaned and fed so she could get to know them.

She and the tigers know each other so well that they can read their moods, explained Houcke who enjoys clubbing in the towns in which she is performing.

"Sometimes it'll work good, sometimes it won't. I can't put my head into the head of the tigers to see what is going on that day. If I'm nervous, the cats will be nervous that one day. If I'm uptight about something, the cats will feel it and mess around with me."

"They totally feel my mood. I have to be happy about going in there."

Conversely, Houcke respects the tigers' ever-changing moods.

"They come up and you know that they want to be petted. We stay out of conflict that way, too. If he's in a bad mood, I won't push myself on him. If the tigers in a good mood, if they're doing all right, I'll go in and approach them. ... They're like human beings. If you're in a bad mood, you don't want someone nagging you about it."

Houcke remains close to the tigers outside of performances. She parks her "home," a 45-foot RV that she pulls from city to city, next to their cages.

Since Houcke joined the circus, she has become a media darling, the focal point of advertisements and commercials, as well as the topic of interviews with *The New York Times*, *People*, *Details*, *The Today Show*, *CNN Showbiz Today*, *Inside Edition* and other media outlets.

"It's been pretty amazing for me. It wasn't something that I was going to expect to come out of it."

See Sara, "The Tiger Whisperer," and the rest of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Wednesday-Sunday, Oct. 3-7 at Joe Louis Arena, 500 Civic Center Dr., Detroit. Tickets \$10, \$15, \$17.50 and a limited number of VIP tickets, call (248) 645-6666.



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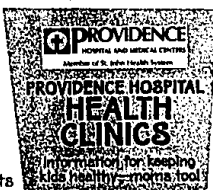
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