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One Lucky Elephant

(Docu)

By [John Anderson](#)

A Sandbar Pictures presentation of a Crossover production. Produced by Christina Colissimo, Jordana Glick-Franzheim. Executive producers, Elizabeth Zox Friedman, Greg Little. Co-producer, Miriam Cutler. Directed by Lisa Leeman. Written by Leeman, Colissimo.

With: David Balding, Laura Balding, Carol Buckley, Willie Theison, Raul Gomez, Scott Blais.

A parable of pachydermish proportions, "One Lucky Elephant" is a bittersweet story of man, beast and a very real relationship that makes helmer Lisa Leeman's docu the thinking person's "Dumbo" -- and, coincidentally, one of the better kids' movies on the fest circuit. Subject, characters and a tender tone seem destined to give this "Elephant" broad exposure both in the specialty market and across the savanna-like expanse of nature programming.

No one involved could have expected that the story of circus owner David Balding and his main attraction, Flora -- whom he adopted as a baby after her mother was killed in Africa -- would take 10 years to make, but the benefit of time is a consequent depth of both narrative and feeling.

As Balding knew back in 2000, Flora was no longer the enthusiastic performer she had been at the outset of her career 16 years before, and he wants her to have a comfortable retirement. Botswana, apparently the Miami of elephants, is chosen for Flora's senior years, and the film might have ended with the star

attraction of Circus Flora being reintroduced to the wild and the kind of life she'd never known.

Four years later, politics have derailed the Botswana plan and Balding is faced with the quandary of placing thousands of pounds of increasingly cranky and unpredictable elephant in a place where she'll be cared for and nurtured, and where such a social animal could live among her own kind. It isn't easy. In fact, it turns out to be fraught with problems; Flora, beset with separation anxiety and an elephantine case of what's diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder, is suddenly put in a world that looks less kindly on bad behavior than do her equally traumatized "parents." For Balding, it's like leaving his ADD kid at the door of a day-care center.

Relying on a certain amount of news footage and a large quantity of her own very intimate interviews, Leeman follows Flora's odyssey and Balding's increasingly nettlesome dilemma. Balding and his wife, Laura, are childless; Flora is their daughter, for all intents and purposes. And like any parents who have to cut the cord, they're torn between their own needs and those of their dependent.

In its very real and sensitive approach to the story's conflicts, "One Lucky Elephant" is a profoundly anti-Disney type of animal story, one that forsakes romance for tough reality: Despite her affectionate relationship with Balding, Flora is a wild thing. Her "luck" is in being loved; throughout the film, the viewer never loses sight of the fact that Flora might easily have been euthanized, put in a zoo or otherwise abandoned to 40 or so years of loneliness and neglect. Balding, who turns 65 over the course of the film and is beset by physical ailments, knows Flora will outlive him (an elephant's life expectancy being 50-60 years). Balding is a sympathetic figure who might not always see matters with an unbiased eye, but he's honest -- as is the film, whose lessons are about the reality of not only wild animals, but relationships in general.

Tech credits are fine. A mix of photographic formats makes for less-than-pristine visuals, but **Miriam Cutler's score is tops, always moving and emotionally precise.**

Camera (color, HD, Beta SP/mini-DV-to-HD), Sandra Chandler; editors, Kate Amend, Tchavdar Georgiev; music, Miriam Cutler; supervising sound editor, Joe Milner; re-recording mixer, Milner. Reviewed at Los Angeles Film Festival (competing), June 19, 2010. Running time: 84 MIN.