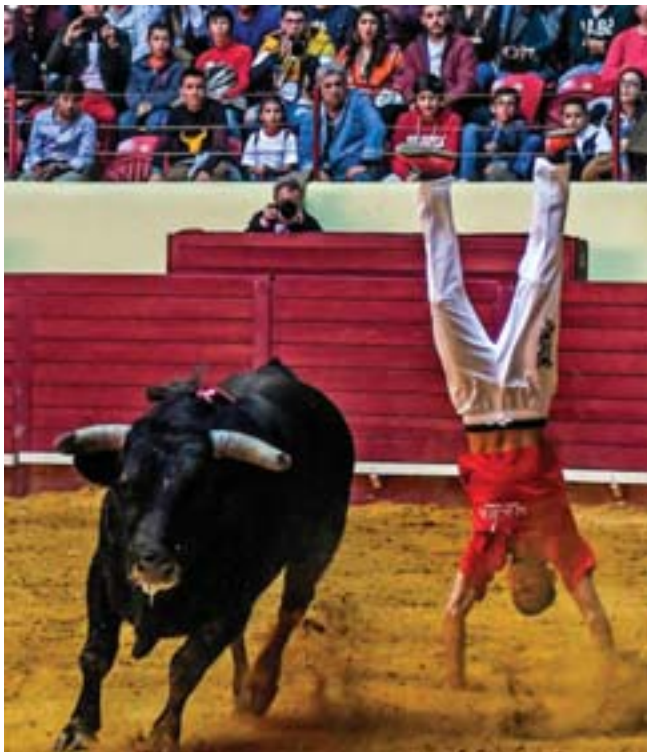




PORTUGAL'S BULLFIGHTING CULTURE WOOS KIDS TO BOOST ITS AUDIENCE



A man performs the bullfight of "Recortadores da Arte Lusa" during the Bullfighting Day at the Campo Pequeno bullfighting arena in Lisbon.

Portugal's bullfighting tradition is on its knees, having seen attendance fall nearly by half in the past decade. Now the stalwarts of the centuries-old practice are reaching out to children, hoping to turn them into future fans, to the dismay of animal rights advocates. Blood was conspicuously absent at a recent "Bullfighting Day" at the neo-Arabic Campo Pequeno arena in Lisbon, Portugal's premier bullfighting venue. It was a family affair, with children enjoying arena-shaped bouncy castles and demonstrations by apprentices of their bullfighting skills, stopping short of sticking the animals with lances called banderillas.

The event drew criticism from animal rights group Basta, which denounced the "exposure of children to the violence of bullfighting" as contravening a 2014 opinion by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Pedro Antunes, 34, a bank employee who brought his five-year-old son Tiago to the event, saw things differently. "I don't go to a bullfight very often but I wanted my son to see what it was like. As the program didn't include anything violent, I thought this would be a good occasion to do so," Antunes told AFP.

For Paulo Pessoa de Carvalho, president of Portugal's bullfighting federation ProToiro, the event was intended "to restore the tie between the bull and Portuguese culture-and increase our audience." He added that ProToiro wanted to "create careers". Last year, nearly 380,000 people attended 173 bullfights across Portugal, according to the culture ministry's General Inspection of Cultural Activities (IGAC).

Basta claims that organizers inflate the figures to hide the true scale of the decline in interest, and that the drop since 2009 is no doubt more than 42 percent. Campo Pequeno, a stunning

neo-Moorish building dating from 1892, underwent a six-year overhaul to become a multi-event venue, reopening in 2006 to host famous bands as well as bullfights, with an underground shopping centre, cinema and restaurants added to the mix. On "Bullfighting Day", however, spectators occupied hardly a third of the 7,000 seats.



A man performs the bullfight of "Recortadores da Arte Lusa".