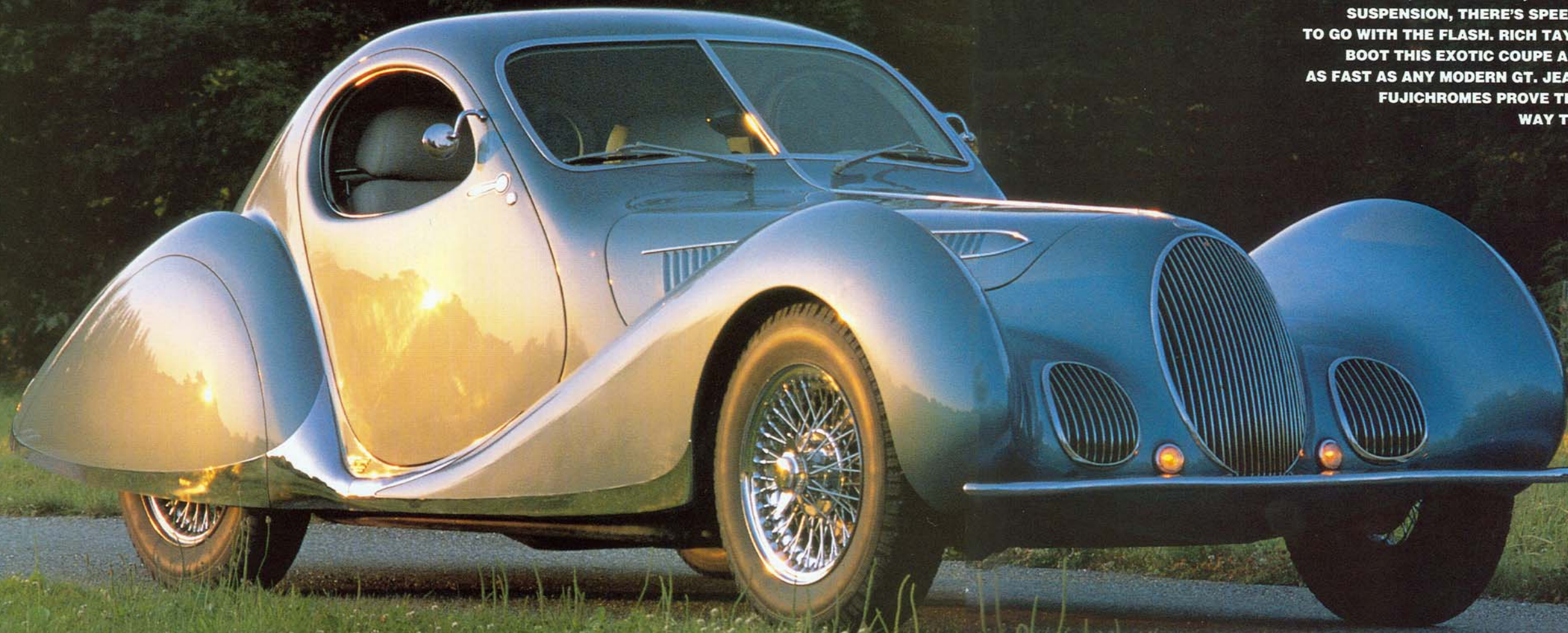


Odalisque

GEORGE BALASCHAK SPENT FIVE YEARS SCRATCH-BUILDING A SUPERB COPY OF A FIGONI ET FALASCHI-BODIED 1939 TALBOT-LAGO, SURELY ONE OF THE MOST LUSCIOUS SCULPTURES EVER TO GRACE FOUR WHEELS. THANKS TO A MUSTANG V8, DISC BRAKES, AND ALL-INDEPENDENT SUSPENSION, THERE'S SPEED AND CORNERING TO GO WITH THE FLASH. RICH TAYLOR WAS ABLE TO BOOT THIS EXOTIC COUPE AROUND LIME ROCK AS FAST AS ANY MODERN GT. JEAN CONSTANTINE'S FUJICHROMES PROVE THERE IS NO SEXIER WAY TO SPEND \$100,000.



Nobody is immune. We drove it up the street and neighbors ran out of their houses. We pulled into Lime Rock and the office emptied. We took it down to the track, and the Skip Barber School came to a screeching halt. We begged Chief Instructor Bruce MacInness to give us his high-speed opinion, and instead he thanked us for allowing him to experience pure sex on wheels. As one anonymous student put it, "If you can't get laid with this thing, you can't get laid."

The sexual reference is entirely appropriate. Giuseppe Figoni and Ovidio Falaschi regarded an automobile chassis in the same way a couturier appreciated the shape of a voluptuous woman. Both dressed the object to suggest powerful sensuality. In fact, Falaschi referred to the chassis-coachwork ensemble in the same way Yves St. Laurent refers to an ensemble of dress, purse, and shoes.

In the thirties, the distinctive Figoni et Falaschi look was called odalisque. Precisely. As with the inviting concubines Ingres painted in the 19th century, voluptuous curves give these Figoni et Falaschi cars a steamy, almost decadent lasciviousness. Yet like the curves of a woman's body, they never seem to go out of style.

Starting with comparatively conservative designs in the late twenties, Figoni et Falaschi became increasingly flamboyant until, by the early



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fifties, they were creating extravagant parodies of themselves. But at their best, between 1937 and 1939, Figoni et Falaschi produced the most sensual cars in the world, cars to die for. Most are on Delage, Delahaye, and Talbot-Lago chassis, but probably the most voluptuous of all is the 1939 4.5-liter Talbot-Lago T-150 C competition coupe that has been in the collection of stylist Brooks Stevens for several decades.

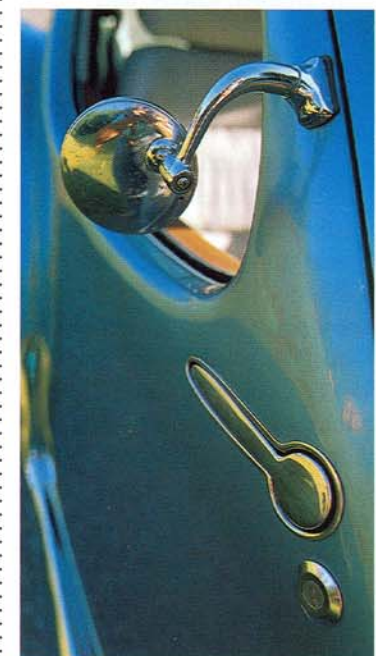
George Balaschak is not a stylist. Neither is he a Talbot nut. He's a 53-year-old mechanical engineer who worked for Pratt & Whitney for two decades designing top secret stuff like high-energy lasers. After he got lucky in Florida real estate, he was able to retire. Since then, he's been working on his ultimate car, a copy of Brooks Stevens' Talbot. It's not quite a copy, and definitely not a Talbot, but very much for sale: a small production run is planned and the car shown here is the prototype. The name, Talbo, is just different enough to avoid any conflicts.

To copy the Stevens' Talbot, Balaschak used skills gained in another hobby, boats. He's built half-dozen boats from scratch and he used nautical construction techniques to create his automotive odalisque. He spent a lot of time at the Stevens museum, measuring and drawing the original car. Then he made wooden body templates, which he connected with thin wooden stringers. Over this went layers of fiberglass bulked up with micro-balloons to form a body buck. From this, Balaschak made a female mold and ultimately the fiberglass body for his car.

Stevens' Talbot has a wheelbase of 104 inches; in contrast, Balaschak's Talbo has a wheelbase of 100 inches. Just why he bothered to

shorten it he doesn't say, but his decision ultimately meant that every panel on the new car had a slightly different proportion than the original. In the process of re-proportioning the car to retain its voluptuous curves, George found that Figoni et Falaschi, as any sculptor, used incredibly complex surfaces. The hood is the only panel that does not have a compound curve in it and most panels curve in several planes. As a result, even a small change means that nothing relates the way it used to. As it turned out, George had to restyle every detail of his car in order to make it look like it hadn't been restyled.

The most difficult problem was getting the doors to fit flush and still open and close. Oval in profile, with an oval window, the doors also curve horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. They hinge from the rear, and though the rear edge of the door is curved, the hinge pivots must be in a straight line. In comparison to fitting the doors properly, hand-making dozens of fiberglass louvers in the hood — each a different size, following the curve of the hood — was a snap.



George's extensive boat-building skills paid off and the body construction is flawless, with not a gap, a wave, or a blemish anywhere. In addition to the bodywork, George mixed and sprayed his own metallic blue-green paint, similar but not identical to the French Blue of Stevens' Talbot. Of course the paint carries a protective clear coat. All the hardware on

Balaschak's Talbo is fabricated stainless steel, including the headers, the exhaust system, and the wild stone chip protectors on the leading edges of the rear fenders. Every surface of the interior is swathed in light gray leather and carpet. The interior retains the spirit of the late thirties in spite of amenities like modern bucket seats, a Ford steering wheel with column-mounted stalks, modern Ford pedals, and a high-tech sound system. In addition, this car offers electric windows, power steering and brakes, air-conditioning, power seats and door locks, and an AM/FM/CD player. It's incongruous, but not out of character with the accessories Fioni et Falaschi would have fitted had they been available in the late 1930s. But the instruments, knobs, and shifter are all reminiscent of the original Talbot. George promises to give the other controls a more traditional look on his production cars.

Under that sexy — and well equipped — body is a pragmatic chassis. Rather than use a straightforward tube frame as most constructors would do, George fabricates his own boxed perimeter frame from sheet steel. The front suspension consists of upper and lower A-arms, fabricated of thick-wall tubing. Corvette spindles are used up front, while the independent rear uses a Thunderbird center section with H-shaped lower

control arms and single upper control arms. Both front and rear carry Corvette disc brakes and Corvette-style transverse fiberglass monoleaf springs. Under the hood is a box-stock 1992 Mustang 302 V8 with 225 bhp mated to a four-speed automatic. This old war horse provides more than enough zip for a 2,900 lb. Grand Tourer.

The pre-production prototype I drove had just completed a shakedown cruise from Florida to Detroit to Vermont to Connecticut, but it was still admirably tight. It looks like an antique, but it drives better than a brand-new Mustang GT. On his first try, George Balaschak has engineered a car that has perfect 50/50 weight distribution, totally neutral handling, and an amazingly comfortable ride.

Real Fioni et Falaschi cars are so rare as to be essentially unobtainable, but George Balaschak's odalisque can be added to any prince's automotive harem; that is, any prince with \$100,000 to spend. George plans to offer one a month. Subtle it's not, but the Balaschak Talbo is a surprisingly good car, one you could drive every day without a qualm. You'd just better be ready for an onslaught of spectators. We stopped by a friend's office, and as he said, "That's the first time I've ever seen the secretaries literally climb out of a window to look at a car in the parking lot." There's not a hotel, restaurant, or resort in the world that wouldn't be proud to have you park your Talbo on the sidewalk in front of the door. Haute couture of this quality never goes out of style. And, when it's from Fioni et Falaschi, nobody is immune.

The Talbo is available from TLC Carrossiers, 14272 Leeward Way, Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410. 407-622-9279. **sci**

