

## Five Minute Interview

### *Craig Leo: Associate Puppetry Director*

My journey with this production started with Handspring when I was working on their show *Tall Horse*. I was initially cast as a member of the puppetry team as manipulator of Joey's head, I did the first and second run at the National and then I assisted with the transfer to the West End training new puppeteers in the roles. I rejoined the company as Assistant Puppetry Director on the Australia tour and then this tour as Associate.

I actually feel closer to the production now than I ever have. At the end of the NT runs I was physically exhausted; I felt I needed a break. In the last three years the show has grown and evolved so much, it's also changed for its placement on a proscenium arch stage. Coming back to it has been like a homecoming, the companies you work with are large but they're very close knit, they become like families, so every time you work with a group you form an incredible bond and that never goes away, every time the show happens that family grows. I have a very close bond with the show and the message that it strives to bring to the audience.

Going from Puppeteer to Puppetry Director has been an interesting process - we're working on very big stages with a lot of information going on at once - initially I worked on just the head but my job now is about being able to cast your eye and take in all that information and about how you can tell the story as clearly as possible. That shift has been a massive learning curve for me, I was very lucky to be able to work as an Assistant to Finn Caldwell on the Australia tour and to work my way to this position.

One of the most important things is not having too many preconceived ideas about what should happen. We know the end result - we know what it should look like - the danger is that you try and enforce that mould on a new company who are 34 individuals who have their own thoughts and feelings about what the story means for them and as actors how they would work. The biggest challenge is to constantly remain open and to be in the moment for each scene and each moment that you're creating on stage so that you're open to the needs of the actors and the needs of the characters in the story - so that the actors are allowed space to inhabit the show.

We normally allow time initially for play, we start off with a two-week period of puppetry rehearsal during which we get a good sense of the puppeteers. For example you have three puppeteers working one horse and that

automatically creates a unique personality and because the horses rotate every other night you've got another three puppeteers in the same role - you've really got to step back and allow them to develop their skills working alongside each other.

In those initial couple of weeks, you've got a lot of teaching to do but you've also got to get a sense of how they work, what their rhythms are like, what their personalities are like. Alex (Sims) has been very generous in allowing the actors the space to play and to not prescribe what should happen and how things should be done. It's great because it allows each production to have its own flavour - its own unique rhythm. With this production a lot of the actors are from out of London and that gives it a completely different rhythm and you have to allow for that because that's the exciting part. Otherwise we'd just be rehashing something and that would be really boring for us and the actors and that would translate onstage and probably not have the life that it needs when it's presented before an audience.

I am so thrilled that this production is going to go to South Africa! Working in theatre in SA, your work is often motivated by social-political themes and this story has a South African connection - they refer to the Boer War and SA as a country in the play. It's hard to tell what people will make of it over there. We don't have a massive theatre-going population, 5% can probably afford to go to the theatre, of that group there's a tiny percentage who actually do go to the theatre. My sense is that the connection with Handspring and the film having come out will make people familiar with the title and the story - it's exciting for me personally because it feels like it's coming home.

There aren't many places where you can study puppetry - in the last few years it has become more popular it's not such a strange word within the theatre language partly due to productions who have used puppetry. I didn't study puppetry, I studied architecture - not even theatre - how I ended up here is a very long and bizarre journey! It found its way to me and it's something I'm very passionate about and I love dearly - if you're passionate about something then you pursue it with every fibre of your being. Like with anything that you want to do, I believe that you get up and do it - you make the puppets and you just start somewhere and the natural course of things is that the universe pulls you in and things click and your path will gradually find its way.



War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by  
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