

War Horse on stage, the journey so far *Interviews with the creative team by Heather Neill, Arts Journalist and Theatre Critic (2011)*

The directors

"Directors", admits Marianne Elliott, "are by nature control freaks and most are probably not able to co-direct". Nevertheless, she and Tom Morris have been able to share the complicated staging of War Horse very successfully.

Marianne says that she had previously directed "big projects on big stages with big casts, but they were all classics. So my experience was text-based, while Tom came from an alternative theatre background and was experienced in developing theatre without a set script. War Horse required both disciplines.

Sharing in this way makes twice – not half – the work because you are both involved in everything, every question, every solution, every moment: how a line should be written or said, how a character develops, how to stage a battle scene."

Devising War Horse over a long period allowed for ideas to come from many members of the company. It was Toby Sedgwick (a choreographer who played Albert's father in the first production), for instance, who suggested that the young Joey could dissolve into the adult horse. Part of a director's job is to welcome ideas but also to be certain which to choose. "It was all hands on deck", Marianne says. "There were many round-table discussions, many hours watching videos of things we'd done and talking over every single minute."

She says that this concentrated method "can give rise to arguments and conflict, but also tremendous camaraderie. It is the most complicated thing any of us has been involved in and it is hard to know when the production is finished."

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that she and Tom are still working together on new productions of War Horse, including the one in New York, the one in Toronto and the United States tour. For this the staging has to be flexible to be suitable for different theatres and must do without the revolve, the moving circular part of the stage which allows scenes to change quickly. As the life of War Horse continues into the future, Marianne is still very much part of its story.

The puppeteers

Mervyn Millar, who wrote the book *The Horse's Mouth* and was an early member of the War

Horse team, says that casting the puppeteers isn't easy, because this is an unfamiliar experience for everyone. The people chosen are often actors new to puppetry. "At auditions we put the actors into a horse to have a go. Usually they are terrified at first, but the key skill is the ability to listen to each other, to find that the most exciting thing is sharing the mind of the character, the horse. It is a singular acting challenge, requiring calm, perfectionism and a non-egotistical approach, which is not what most actors necessarily offer."

Being one of the team of three, two each inside Joey and Topthorn and one outside guiding, is physically demanding. Toby Olié was one of the first to manipulate Joey's hind-quarters, the back legs and tail. He describes it as "like using cross-country ski poles as the hooves pick up and tendons flex and in each hand you have a bicycle brake."

He says that the team members work so closely together, "it's a bit like a three-person marriage. We think of the puppeteers as Head, Heart and Hind. The person in the centre, the Heart, is the rudder and steering wheel, the Hind the engine, the power-source. The Head is like the marketing department – ready to go at any time and making the moves look as if they are his own idea!" The "breathing" and snickering happen organically as the three puppeteers concentrate on responding to each other and give the impression of being one creature.

Mini bicycle brakes manipulate the ears, which are made of leather and are very important, like the tail, for expressing emotion. Toby says that he acquired a lump at the base of his index finger from manipulating the bicycle brakes so often. These days, the leading horse teams rotate, so that sometimes the horse puppeteers join the ensemble instead, but in the early days they took the same role for a sequence of many performances. There were often other injuries then too, such as tennis elbow and damaged backs. Nevertheless, Toby loves War Horse and is now a Puppetry Associate, overseeing the training of new Joey and Topthorn teams.

The designer and lighting designer

Designer Rae Smith describes how her torn strips of paper carrying background drawings came about almost by accident when she tried using a little of her sketchbook to make an illustration to be projected on screen. "And that", she says, "is how Captain Nicholls developed, as an amateur artist whose war



War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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landscapes could be used in a moving and purposeful way.” Animation of her designs by 59 Productions followed.

Rae Smith and Paule Constable have worked together for over 20 years so they already knew the importance of finding the “language” of the production. This time they collaborated in an open, experimental way with the rest of the team as well.

Paule describes her collaboration with Rae, “We’ve grown up together as artists. We spend lots of time together – watching rehearsals, having cups of tea, having meetings – and we talk and talk. Rae has very vivid ideas: she talks brilliantly about the world of the piece. I translate that into a lighting world. She doesn’t say ‘I want it to look like this’ but she talks about theatre language and style and story-telling and I bring that into the lighting. It is a relationship built on huge amounts of trust.”

They have often collaborated on devised work, without a script, “So we encourage each other to be fearless. She’ll push me to make things better – and being pushed to do the best you possibly can is very good for you. War Horse celebrates the nature of good collaboration. With the right conversations you can almost achieve anything....”

Paule says, “Working on War Horse was different from other projects because we were trying to make a piece of simple story-telling live in an epic space and we were trying to allow the audience to create most of the world of the piece themselves, in their imagination. To begin with, we had no idea if we could make this kind of simple theatre work on this scale.”

Some students and teachers have asked how the lighting can make settings seem very different from each other while keeping the horses as the focus. Paule says that the directors also know the importance of concentrating attention on the horses. “The lighting for the show is very directional – the direction of the light should help to push you towards the horses. For instance, if we use diagonals in the design or where characters are placed, then the horse should be at the point of the diagonal.

We rarely make anything very bright in War Horse. In fact, because it is a piece about suggestion rather than illustration we tend to under-light. That said, the horses are often slightly “hotter”: they are follow-spotted [a

spotlight follows their movement] from directly above the thrust stage rather than, as is more traditional, from the front. The follow spots run at about 50% of their strength, they are the same colour ‘temperature’ as the rest of the lights and they have soft edges, so they don’t become a show business device! The eyes, by the way, appear to have life because they are reflective. Having low angles for the light means they catch the light and glint.”

Students also ask how the horses are made to appear ghost-like. Paule says, “We do this in the trenches – by lighting the horses from low and behind – so you see their gauzy skin in silhouette and their structure as well. It makes them appear more vulnerable. In the war scenes you’ll notice lots of the light is low and from behind to create this effect. In the Devon scenes the palette [the colour choices of the lighting] is warm and nostalgic. In the war it is chemical and acidic.”

