

Putting the production together

by Polly Findlay, Staff Director on the original 2007 production of *War Horse*

My involvement with *War Horse* began in March 2007 when we workshopped an early version of the script over a month at the National Theatre's Studio. We took over two rehearsal rooms and the tea-machine, and for weeks on end the Studio rang to the sounds of wooden hooves as we started to work out the mechanics of cavalry charges, gun carriages and puppet tanks.

Seven months and what seem like hundreds of rehearsals, meetings, script changes and cups of coffee later, we had a one-in-a-million production on our hands.

Although I've only been working in the professional theatre for a few years, I have never heard of, let alone been involved in, a production that has had as much work put into it as this one. The whole process had begun over two years before, when Nicholas Hytner (the director of the National Theatre) together with two of the NT's associate directors, Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris, began talks with the internationally renowned South African puppet company Handspring about whether it might be possible to bring such an epic story to the Olivier stage.

The novel *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo has been long established as a children's classic: featuring huge numbers of characters, crossing an astonishing number of locations, taking place over a period of six years, set in the last century and narrated by a horse to boot, it seemed like an impossible story to try and render dramatically. It wasn't until Basil and Adrian (the Handspring team) came up with the first, astonishing design proposals for the Joey puppet that excitement about the project really started to run through the theatre: it seemed like the impossible might be about to happen.

The script

Nick Stafford came on board as adapter together with Rae Smith as designer, and things really began to get going. From the very beginning everybody knew this was going to be a huge project; early on the decision was taken to not make Joey the narrator, as he is in the book, but to turn the narrative inside-out and tell the story as a straight play. This entailed a huge amount of work for Nick, and we went through several drafts of the play before settling on what we eventually took into rehearsal. (We began rehearsing with draft nine, and were on something like draft 12 by Press Night!)

The major challenge with turning a book into a play tends to be structural. The kind of story that lends itself well to being told in a novel will often be reliant on a kind of narrative slow-burn, made up of several vignettes or episodes, moving from location to location and character to character at a relatively relaxed pace.

The author is able to take the time he or she wants to describe something at his or her leisure. This is, of course, because the reader is free to put down the book whenever they like, taking a break whilst knowing that they can pick up the story again later; we don't, as a rule, expect to read a book in one sitting.

The job of the playwright, however, is almost completely the opposite: his audience is captive – they need to be entertained every step of the way, and to feel that the story is progressing with every dramatic beat that unfolds before them. The narrative muscle of a play needs to keep it going at all costs, and works successfully when every event on the stage seems to have come inexorably out of the one before: a good play is more like a game of consequences, when each scene could not have happened without the scene before it having unravelled in exactly the way that it did. Resolving the tension between the novelistic structure already underpinning the story we were trying to tell, and the dramatic structure that we needed to draw out in order to make that story a successful play, was a huge issue in rehearsal, and accounted for many of the drafts that we went through.

Research

Outside of working on the script, early rehearsals consisted of a huge amount of group research. Everybody involved felt that, given the subject matter of the piece, we had a real responsibility to get the historical detail right. Nick had, of course, already done a lot of the work on the script, but we had to come up with all kinds of seemingly obscure historical facts and details in order to ensure that our dramatic recreation of Devon in 1912 or the Marne Valley in 1915 was a faithful representation of what might have happened. The sort of things we found ourselves trying to investigate were, at times, absolutely bizarre; I was researching the intricacies of an early twentieth-century Cornish farmer's diary at one point ('Carting dung... Sent two pigs to Redruth factory' etc) and, at another, trying desperately to find out the exact pattern of First World War bugle calls to make sure that the cavalry charges were accurate.



War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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Because so much of the action revolved around the German soldiers, and one of our heroes was a German cavalry captain, it was very important to us to make sure that the research on the German side was as accurate as the work we'd done on the British army, even though it was harder for us to access this information. Most of our research came from the Imperial War Museum, though we also made use of local county councils, lots of books and websites, and even first-hand information from various cast members' grandparents etc. A real-life sergeant came in from a nearby barracks to teach us all basic army drill; for several mornings, the huge Rehearsal Room One at the bottom of the National Theatre building became an army training ground as the entire cast were bellowed at for not standing straight, picking up the wrong foot or not having their arms at the uniform angle.

Puppet and character work

Because so much of the story was reliant on believing and caring about the horses, a huge amount of rehearsal time was devoted to researching the behaviour of the real-life animals and working out how best we might translate that into our puppet work. Tom Morris, one of the directors, was particularly adamant that we avoid any traces of sentimentality or anthropomorphism ('humanising' or reading human traits into animal behaviour) when dealing with the horses: we were going to portray them as if they were absolutely real. That's why, at times during the show, you might see the horses whinnying or making noise at seemingly dramatically inappropriate or sensitive moments; like real horses, our puppets give the sense that they are pursuing their own agenda rather than tuning too unnaturally into what is going on in the human world. That said, we were still keen to make sure that our horses had their own distinct character, and much time was spent with the Joey and Topthorn puppeteers drawing up lists of characteristics and tendencies that they felt were manifested in their respective horses. These lists were displayed in the room to remind us of the kind of customers we were dealing with in the horse scenes.

Basil and Adrian from Handspring were on hand throughout the rehearsal process to ensure that the way the actors were dealing with the puppets helped to make them seem like real horses. We were all astonished to discover quite how much of a puppet's

authenticity is dependent not on the puppeteer inside but on how the other actors in the space behave around the puppet; the next page shows one of the lists we drew up to show actors how to help out with the believability of the horse puppets.

Puppet rules...

1. Horses don't like it if you look them in the eye. Either avoid doing it, or expect a definite reaction away from you if you do!
2. Remember to relate to the whole body of the horse – not just the chest and the head.
3. If you're in direct contact with a horse puppet, you automatically become to some degree responsible for manipulating it. You therefore need to keep random movements with the puppet to a minimum. Everything reads when you're relating to a puppet – keep in mind a clear intention.
4. Keep in mind that the huge mass/immobility of a horse will affect most of the direct contact you have with the puppet. E.g. Grooming will end up being quite a vigorous action – there's a real exchange of weight as the horse leans into the brush. It's up to you to puppeteer the horse's weight in a situation like this – use the cane, reverse energy etc. Keep conversing with the puppeteer to make sure you both know who's meant to be bearing what weight, when.
5. If the puppeteer's intention as the horse is to be giving you problems – not wanting you to shoe or clean them – it'll more often than not be up to you to puppeteer the more minute specifics of how that'll work, eg the difficulty of raising a hoof
6. If you're giving a horse a treat, manipulate the force of the head down into your palm.
7. If you're manipulating the neck be careful not to make it bend back unnaturally: the puppet is physically capable of things that a real horse wouldn't be...
8. If you're directly holding the puppet (particularly the horses' heads around the mouth area) make sure you hold as much of it as possible – to stop it from breaking.
9. If you're playing an intention to get the horse to do something, it's helpful to keep talking, cajoling etc – as puppeteers often can't see you to read exactly what it is that you're trying to do physically.

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