

Cast Interview: Sarah Mardel

Sarah Mardel played a variety of roles in War Horse at the New London Theatre (2010-2011)

How much research into real-life horses' behaviour did the puppeteers do in rehearsal?

In rehearsal we had two weeks purely of horse puppetry technique and horse study. We watched videos of Monty Roberts and foal research on YouTube, as well as studying literature on horse psychology. I have to say that the horse research never really ends – all the way through our time on the production, cast members share things that we find on the internet, or film horses and foals that we come across in our daily lives. It sounds geeky but once you start you get a bit obsessed and always want to finesse your technique. When we were improvising to find new material in rehearsals, there were always puppetry associates on hand to tell us if we were acting 'out of character' for a real horse.

How did the actors begin rehearsing? With the puppets in the room from the beginning?

The puppets were in rehearsals from day one. After the read-through the horses were at every rehearsal call. When rehearsals are long and all the horse teams have learnt the scene, the puppeteers will often do scenes 'un-adorned', so without the actual puppet. They will stand with their hand on the shoulder of the person in front and do the movements and sounds of the horse, but without the cage. It would be physically impossible and dangerous for people to be in those puppets for hours at a time and repeating movements that are strenuous on the body. So this is how we get around that in rehearsals.

When we see the performance, what should we look out for in the puppets or puppeteers?

Look out for:

- the horses breathing: what this adds to the scene and what it tells you about how the horse feels at any moment in time
- the horse noises – all made by the three horse puppeteers. How do they add to the story of how the horse feels at any given time?
- how the three puppeteers work together to create the illusion of a single animal. How they must be aware of each other but you do not see them looking at each other.

As horse puppeteers we try to work so that the audience's attention is not drawn to us. If they are looking at us they are not looking at the horse, so we have not done our job properly. Hopefully after a few minutes the audience will not be looking at the puppeteers much at all

• the eyes of the puppets. People often think they can see them blink! (They are made with such special care that they look incredibly real on stage)

• do you think the horses are reacting in an appropriate manner to the people in the scene around them – especially in big group scenes? The horses should always be reacting to what is going on THAT night, so not everything is choreographed in fine detail. The horse has license to decide how he reacts to different members in the village each night.

How do the other actors relate to the puppets?

A few ground rules are set up and taught to all actors in the beginning – first about horse psychology and then on puppet technique. If you look at a horse, face on, you are saying you are powerful. You are exerting authority, and you may be seen as a threat. Showing your back or standing at an angle to the horse will put it at ease and, in some cases, the horse will take it as an invitation to 'join up' and will come closer to you. This is a way to gain trust. Once the actors know the simple rules they can decide how good they think their character is with horses. This is played out very simply between Albert and Baby Joey at the beginning of the play. Albert tries to feed Joey but is making a noise with the bucket and is also standing face on to him, staring straight at him. Though he is offering food he is being scary and domineering at the same time, which is confusing and difficult for Baby Joey. All of the actors are reminded in rehearsals (and all through their involvement in War Horse) that they cannot physically treat the puppets like real horses. They must not smack them on the rump because it will sound like someone hitting cane (and will most likely hurt their hand quite a bit!), and therefore ruin the illusion of the horse. They must not pull on the reins, because the 'Head' puppeteer has a hard job already, holding a very heavy puppet mostly above shoulder height, and will not appreciate having to pull against the actor too. They will simply not be as strong as a real horse. Both the puppeteer and the actor need to work together to create the illusion of a very strong and powerful animal, even though it is just a cane, metal and mesh being. The people riding the horses are also taught how to hold their weight responsibly when they are mounted on the horse and to not move around once they are on top: the slightest movement from the rider can throw the puppeteers off balance and result in serious injury because they are strapped in to the horse.

War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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When working with the puppets you also need to allow 'extra beats' in some actions in the story: a puppet held together by three people can never move as fast as a real horse, nor as fast as a single person without a puppet. Some moments are choreographed to ensure all puppeteers have time to see the actor, make a decision to move and then move all together. If the puppeteers can't see what is going on then the horse will not react. It will be no good having an actor jumping and waving behind Joey because the puppeteers can't see him, and so the horse will continue to graze even though the audience see the scary human jumping around not far away. And then, obviously, the illusion of a real horse is shattered.

Who does what within the horse? How do they work together as a team?

The 'Head' puppeteers operate the ears with their fingers, creates the eating motion and movement in the neck, and are in control of conveying the thoughts of the horse to the audience. Eye-line is very important.

The 'Heart' puppeteers operate the two front legs. They are not physically attached to the horse in any way and the cage of the horse's body simply rests on their wrists. They control the breathing by moving their wrists up and down, and also create the walking, trotting and galloping motions.

The 'Hind' puppeteers operate the two back legs and the tail. They will be helping to complete the walk, trot and gallop motion, and will also be conscious of the angles of the horse and sight-lines for the audience. The back legs are simply hooked under the cage so to move the tail the puppeteer must be sure the puppet is secure and the 'Heart' will not suddenly decide to move – otherwise the legs will fall from under the cage(!)

The Heart and Hind puppeteers need to think about how to add the illusion of muscle and weight to the horse in their movements.

Team work is all about peripheral vision: being aware of where the other puppeteers are, and what they are doing. Breathing together at times helps so you are all 'in tune' and the puppet is more likely to move together. The team need to be considerate of each other and aware of what is difficult and uncomfortable for each person. Then you can help when it's physically possible to do so. We also talk a lot about how we are finding things, what we want to improve on, what we find difficult, what we are enjoying, what we would like to change and what the other puppeteers are doing that might affect each of us doing our job.

How can we practise puppetry in school?

I didn't have formal puppet training so I only know exercises that are War Horse-related. But I do know you can puppeteer ANYTHING... So, pick up an object, get to know it: the weight, how it feels in your hand, the texture, the contours. How might it move? How might it breathe? What sort of sound would it make? If it meets the other objects in the room, how does it relate to them and interact? Your focus should always be on your puppet.

