

Cast Interview: Jamie Ballard

Jamie Ballard played Major Nicholls in the original cast of War Horse at the National Theatre and gave this interview in October 2007.

Where and when did you train as an actor?

I trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School from 1999 to 2001.

Have you worked at the National Theatre before?

I was in Saint Joan [directed by Marianne Elliott], which was in the Olivier theatre prior to War Horse.

How did you come to be involved in the War Horse project?

I had worked with Marianne Elliott (one of the two directors) for a year at the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) on Much Ado About Nothing, which finished in January 2007; she asked me to be in War Horse at the end of that.

Have you worked with puppets before? What challenges did it present? Did acting with puppets change the way you worked in the room, or affect the way in which your character developed?

I played Flute in A Midsummer Night's Dream at the RSC in 2005 and puppets were used in the show as the changeling boy and as the fairies. I only encountered them briefly, in the scene where Puck and the fairies cause havoc in the mechanicals' forest rehearsal. Working with the horses on War Horse has been a completely different experience; I am interacting with them physically and developing a very personal relationship with them. It actually freed up the rehearsal process for me, as all the individual horses were so clearly such free spirits. No run of the scene is ever the same, as they respond differently to – for example – whether I stroke their nose, as opposed to their ear or their neck. In essence, the horse puppets are so good that I feel that I am working with a real animal rather than with a fellow actor: there is a sense that anything can happen. This has the effect of relieving the actor of the usual pressure to keep things fresh: being with an animal can't help but put you in the moment.

Have you had much experience of working with a living playwright before? What advantages/challenges does this present?

I have only worked with living playwrights in the development stage of projects, which usually consists of doing readings of their new plays and then taking part in the discussions about where the pieces might go. This is the first time I've worked on a production of a play by a living playwright. It was a completely

positive experience: if we felt uncomfortable with something, Nick was happy to change it to accommodate us, or if we didn't understand something he was on hand to explain it. It was a fantastic way of working, and very different to what I've been used to when working on classical pieces.

Has working with two directors rather than one affected your working process at all?

It affected me a bit at the beginning simply in that I had worked with Marianne before, so whenever Tom Morris (the other director) gave me a note or a bit of direction I would find myself unintentionally turning to Marianne to see if she agreed! Awful, I know, and I soon got a handle on that... Marianne and Tom had very clearly defined their roles in the production, and so it ended up being incredibly helpful having two directors dealing with different aspects of the rehearsal process. It was an amazing working practice, and helped me enormously. I still did what I would normally do with Marianne on the text-based side but Tom was able to work his magic on the movement/horse/more physical side. The partnership came off brilliantly.

What have you particularly enjoyed about the War Horse process so far?

I have found working with the puppets absolutely extraordinary. I never thought I would be riding a horse into a cavalry charge on the Olivier stage! The feeling of teamwork and support is immense: having three guys operating this animal beneath you, quite literally carrying you through the show, is something I have found both humbling and moving. I have also very much enjoyed working with Marianne, a director I love and respect, on a project very different to anything either of us have done before; and I have relished the chance to work with Tom and to experience his special brand of directing.

And conversely, is there anything that you have found particularly difficult?

There were a couple of brief moments when I was worried that the story of my character – and sometimes the story in general – was being compromised or lost in order to accommodate the bigger picture or concept. Those concerns were, however, quickly addressed, and both Marianne and Tom put my mind at ease. Apart from that, this is a breathtakingly amazing, extraordinary piece to have been a part of. I am well aware of how lucky I am.

War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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