

## Cast Interview: Al Nedjari

*Al Nedjari performed at the National Theatre and in the West End as Joey and Topthorn Heart, the Goose, Geordie and Thomas Bone. He has also designed and run workshops on puppetry for groups seeing War Horse.*

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

If anyone has had drama school training, they'll have had the experience of 'animal study', which is often used as a precursor to character study. Alongside our puppetry skills training, *War Horse* rehearsals included very in-depth animal study and this required a lot of research. Some of this research was organised and some of it was informal.

The two most illuminating bits of research involved visiting The King's Troop, part of the Royal Horse Artillery. We stayed overnight and got up at the crack of dawn to clear out the stables. We then joined the troop as they did exercises at Wormwood Scrubs. We even had a chance to ride the horses as they pulled ceremonial guns. It was an incredible insight into the behaviour of military trained horses and the personnel around them.

The other research opportunity that made an enormous impact was the visit of Monty Roberts. He is the horse trainer, upon whom the film *The Horse Whisperer* is based. He spent a day with us and effectively 'trained' the puppet horses. Again, it was an incredible insight into the nuances of horse behaviour from somebody who has spent their entire life interacting with them.

In addition to the organised research opportunities, there was a huge amount of informal research that went on. Members of the team regularly offered You Tube clips, pictures and films they had discovered, to illustrate a particular bit of horse behaviour that we would add to our growing cache of possibilities on which to draw.

### **When we see the show, what should we look out for in the puppets or puppeteers?**

For me, the life of the puppets is the most amazing thing about *War Horse*. And so, I'd observe very closely how the puppets are brought to life. The puppets themselves, though beautifully designed, are of course inanimate objects until manipulated by the puppeteers.

Notice the effect that breathing has, both as a means of bringing the creatures to life and manifesting their emotional state, and as a means of communication between the puppeteers themselves.

Notice also the use of stillness within the puppets. We imagine that the puppets look life-like because their movements are accurate. But it's stillness that invites an audience to become absorbed into the creature's inner world.

### **How do the actors relate to the puppets?**

The actors are affected by the puppets in exactly the same way that the audience is. Like an audience, the actors forget that puppeteers are present and see a real horse with its own personality. The biggest issue for an actor is determining how their particular character might deal with the creatures, given his/her experience and expertise at handling them.

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

A very complex relationship exists between the three puppeteers in a single horse team. And the nature of this relationship is unique to each team.

By the time the team of which I was part had performed perhaps 100 times, we had established a very highly developed understanding of each other and a means of unspoken communication. Only at that stage were we able to react truly spontaneously to stimuli as if part of a single entity.

It's difficult to describe precisely how this communication works. It certainly wasn't a case of a single puppeteer leading, with the other two following. Leadership would often change depending on the nature of the stimulus. And often it would feel as though there was no leader at all.

This certainly involved us breathing on behalf of the creature, as a means of binding us to the emotional state of the horse and, in doing so, binding our emotional states as operators.



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Over time one begins to recognise the tiniest of signals from one's fellow puppeteers; how, for example, a change in their breath often coincides with an impulse to do a certain thing; or how a slight change in their body position often occurs before they move in a certain way. A very rich network of these (often unconscious) sensitivities meant that it was possible to behave in a spontaneous but cohesive way.

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

It's impossible for the actors to be in relationship with invisible horses! So the puppet horses needed to be present from the beginning of rehearsals. Before this therefore the puppeteers had a fortnight with the directors of Handspring dedicated to mastering the basics of horse operation.

