

## Extracts from Mervyn Millar's Book: The Horse's Mouth

### Extract 1

One of the most memorable passages in the book comes in the first cavalry action in France, when Nicholls is, shockingly, shot from his mount. Morpurgo's use of perspective is compelling – the horse's back is one of its few blind spots, and so Joey's sensation is of sound, and of the weight of Nicholls being lifted from his back – a beautifully understated sequence, elegant and minimal. On stage, the event of Nicholls being blown off the back of a horse has a very different effect – it's a spectacular set-piece. With something as visually extraordinary as this happening, it's impossible to keep the focus inside Joey's head, as Morpurgo is able to do on the page.

"The book is not easy to turn into a play," says [Adrian] Kohler [Handspring Puppets], "because it's a journey, the horse is meeting many different characters, and as the horse doesn't speak, how do you sustain the drama through the piece?" As National Theatre Director Nicholas Hytner warns, "The toughest thing that they've got to achieve is a theatre structure that is compelling, tense and involving from beginning to end. There is no getting around the fact that for a large-scale piece of populist theatre, which sets out to engage as many people as possible, a well-structured, tense, and involving narrative is an absolute necessity." And with this in mind, the team set about building a narrative structure around the events in the book. The first step of this, drawn up a full two years before the first performance, was a 13-page breakdown of the action created by Tom Morris, following the plotting of the book and proposing scenes suitable for dramatisation.

An essential part of Stafford's task in making any play is to populate the stage with characters. Morpurgo's Nicholls is only what Joey describes of him: the Olivier audience's version of him, to be played by an actor, needs to be more fully explored: "The humans," notes Stafford, "only exist via the horse in the book. They have to take on completely independent lives, and to be, more or less, created." Because Joey will not be explaining what's happening, as Marianne Elliott [co-director] says, "you have to fill out the story, because, if other characters are going to tell it, rather than the horse, then they have to live as three-dimensional characters, rather than impressions the horse has."

Morpurgo's restriction of perspective means he can make the characters instantly

memorable, and they stand out boldly on reading the book: Stewart and Nicholls, the contrasting officers Joey meets on the British side; drunken Ted Narracott; crazy Friedrich on the German side. "It's good for us," says Stafford, "that there are some really strong characters in the book." It's necessary for Stafford to build vivid prose vignettes into complex, lasting through-lines. He expands characters to give them more time in the eyes of the audience, so that they have their own developing stories in the background of Joey's journey. He adds a few of his own, like Sergeant Thunder, who guides the troops when they arrive at Calais. But "every major event and character originates from the book," he says.

One difficulty is to keep hold of Albert while we are simultaneously following Joey. In the book, Joey is able to remember Albert; but our puppet horse's thoughts aren't shared, and we find ourselves seeing the war from Albert's point of view too. This bond is one of the reasons for our strong feelings for both characters. As Morpurgo explains:

Affection for an animal can be very intense, for children growing up on a farm alone. This boy's affection for this foal, who he comes across and looks after – and let's remember, he was an only child – represents the kind of friendship and respect that develop between a country boy, a country girl, and the animals around.

In the novel, Marianne Elliott remembers, "the love story between Albert and Joey was really compelling." On stage, this side of Albert's story is combined with his own journey through the war – the character distinguished in both stories with what Stafford describes as "absolute single-minded loyalty and devotion".



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### Extract 2

At a read-through before the March 2007 workshop that runs to two-and-a-half hours, Marianne Elliott (one of the co-directors) estimates a length of four hours with all the visual sequences included. We're aiming for under three, including the interval. The pressure is on to find ways of compressing the action. (Nick) Stafford – the adapter, (Marianne) Elliott and (Tom) Morris – the co-directors – are aware of two essential needs: to find the threads of symbolism, character and mood that will lead the audience through the story; and to be unsentimental in the work of removing sections that hold up the pace or become redundant to a stage version of the story. The rehearsal draft is number 8.5 – and Stafford is still on hand during rehearsals, amending, adjusting, and providing rewrites as necessary.

From the middle of 2006, doubts are emerging about whether the French auction at the end of the war has enough to sustain an audience who have just watched the emotional reunion of Albert and Joey. It's the beginning of the discussion about whether to end the story sooner than Morpurgo does in the novel. This decision springs from a desire to make a satisfying shape for the end of the evening in the theatre, but it has ramifications backward in the story – if we don't have this event, then what is the purpose of the young girl, Emilie?

Morris and Handspring have always had an instinct that Emilie will be a human character played by a puppet. This suggests that her role in the stage production is more than narrative; she carries a symbolic charge, offers a shorthand to the audience that she and Joey share an innocence and simplicity that exists outside the difficult wartime social politics that affect her mother or the soldiers. Emilie is able to remind us what Albert was like before he entered the war. These changes develop the character of Emilie for the stage production; even more than other characters, her role in the stage version alters from that in the book – and her character grows and emerges to fit.

*Mervyn Millar is a puppeteer and a member of the War Horse original company. His book *The Horse's Mouth* is published by the National Theatre and Oberon Books and offers a unique perspective and gives an extraordinary insight into the way this stage version of Michael Morpurgo's novel takes audiences on a journey through history.*

