

Five Minute Interview

Chris Harper: NTP Producer

I started as an intern at the age of 14 at Birmingham Rep – I did everything, I stuffed envelopes, I swept floors, I picked up people's lunch and dry-cleaning – I made myself so indispensable they gave me a job: As a result, I'm a big fan of people rolling up their sleeves and getting in there – I think work experience and internships are really valuable – because you need to demonstrate to yourself that you really want to do it! Then when I was 16, a job came up in the marketing department at the Rep and that's where I started. I worked at the Rep and at Birmingham Hippodrome and then I came to London to work for a commercial producer. I was exposed to all sorts of things - we did lots of West End musicals, lots of plays, we did Eddie Izzard's world tours; this tour is very similar to the kinds of tours we did then. I then went to work for an advertising agency who specialised in theatre, I worked for Disney and Cameron Macintosh and these things were preparing me for the role that I do now – although I didn't realise it at the time.

And then I was offered the job of Director of Marketing at the National Theatre – I thought I wouldn't fit in because I was so commercial and had never worked in subsidised theatre before but actually it was a perfect marriage – Nick Hytner had just joined and they wanted to do something different from what they'd done before - the challenge was the same though – how do we sell more tickets? How do we sell more tickets for great theatre? It was really exciting and I did that job for five years. A few years later, I got offered the job of producing *War Horse* for the international tour – my connection to *War Horse* was really quite deep because I'd been at the National when it was first commissioned.

In National Theatre Productions (NTP) we look after *War Horse*, *One Man Two Guvvors* and *The Curious Incident of a Dog in Night-time* in the

West End, on UK tour and on tour internationally – as well as some other special projects – other shows that we're constantly thinking about the possibilities for. My day to day job involves having a lot of balls in the air all at the same time – with cast changes - we've essentially opened five new shows this month. I have to ensure that each director is happy and they're getting what they need, we're coordinating the marketing and press effectively – making sure the finances are tip-top, we get involved in the casting, the logistics of when things are going to happen – it's about keeping the show fresh and vibrant and alive. The Producers role varies so dramatically from production to production and that's why it's so hard to define – I'm lucky to some extent because the producing aspect of the creation of *War Horse* has already been done – that play has already been produced by the National Theatre and so my role is more about how we roll that out, how do we continue to ensure that show remains a success in the West End? It's more of a business-orientated role rather than a creative one. That's not to say there's not a creative element to it, for example we're producing the German version of the show in Berlin – the first time the National Theatre has done a show in another language so there are changes that have been made to that script and that production and I'm massively involved in those decisions with the director.

The skills you need to have are a huge amount of energy – it's a very demanding job – it's pretty much non-stop - there's not a lot of time to turn off – I was still doing emails at midnight last night and I was in a meeting at 8 O' Clock this morning – it's full on - particularly when you're working internationally so the time differences demand that you must have the conversations when the local market needs them to happen. My role is often about getting the very best out of people and so a real knowledge of



War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

Resources © National Theatre

warhorseonstage.com
nationaltheatre.org.uk

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theatre helps as does empathy for people – you have to care about people and about the business and I think you have to be passionate about it. A real entrepreneurial skill and an understanding of how money and art can work together is helpful. A brain that can multi-task – you have to be comfortable with stress – I quite enjoy the deadlines: Rehearsals start on this day, the show opens on this day - if rehearsals haven't gone smoothly, you're not going to make the first preview and the 1,500 people who have bought tickets for that show will be disappointed. You have to be aware of those pressures and to take them seriously – I find that very motivating.

The thing that I'm most proud about with this national tour is that it allows the National Theatre to be genuinely national. We're going to theatres that have never had an NT show before, we cast many of the actors in Manchester - we really spread the net wide. Nick Hytner talks about how popular theatre can also be good theatre – War Horse is that perfect match of good, popular theatre and to be able to bring that to all the places that we're visiting can only be a good thing. We did an awful lot of research about how productions can transfer from a thrust stage to a proscenium arch stage, we did a great deal of workshops and learnt a lot from our international tours to make sure that we felt this could work – to make sure the UK tour is fantastic – and it is!

