

Five Minute Interview

Katie Henry: Associate Director

I did a drama degree at St Marys in Twickenham and after I left university I went on to work in the Box Office at The Orange Tree theatre. I desperately wanted to be a director but I didn't know how. I don't have a theatrical background in my family so it was completely new - I had to start from scratch and learn it all from the very beginning.

I did a Masters in Directing and got offered the training director scheme at the Orange Tree where I learnt my craft for a year. I was invited to the National Theatre Studio to be part of their directors' course for two-weeks which was a great privilege. I stayed on at The Orange Tree for another year as the Education, Community and Literary Director where I programmed, directed, ran workshops, read plays and so on and since then I've assisted on 17 productions all over the UK over the last 7 years.

The scale of the work that I was involved in just got bigger and alongside assisting I was directing my own work including in Germany. Then I had 3 interviews for *War Horse* and got the job – that was 3 years ago now. Previously I was Resident Director on the New London Theatre version for 18-months.

The most significant change between the London production and the touring production is in Act Two: there's no French or German spoken. Everyone speaks English with an accent but they have to play the problem of not understanding each other – that can be quite strange for the first few rehearsals but soon, everyone understands that that's the convention and it's fine. It means audiences can understand much more clearly what's happening emotionally for the characters; some of the feedback I've had is that it allows you to care more for the characters because you can understand them.

A technical difference is that there's no revolve – a central piece that moves around in some of the big sequences – not having it doesn't lose anything, it's just different.

There are a couple of character differences and those changes in the script have a knock on effect to smaller choices for actors – it pushes the characterisations in slightly different ways.

I think this is a really good version of the show – we're a whole brand new company, everybody is pulling in the same direction, there's been an excitement about it which has meant we've had the best of everything and

that's quite unique especially for a show of this scale that has been done for the last five years in the West End.

I won't be touring with the production full-time – I assisted Alex (Sims), the director, in rehearsals supporting him with his vision of the show. I'll direct the understudies and work with them on their character choices and ensure they feel technically prepared to go on. Then I'll leave the show for a bit and go back and revisit and note it every now and then. I'll check that it is maintained to the high standard that we all want and expect it to be. That means giving notes to the actor, keeping them really clear on what the story beats are that we discussed in rehearsals – and after three or four months it can be hard to remember what they were.

The idea is to inspire their interest in wanting to keep those story beats alive so we don't go too far off on different tangents. We've got a lot of falls, fights and singing – those things can start to slip when people are tired, if someone has an injury, it has an impact on the other people in the show – creatively as well as technically – it's just being a liaison point for all of that – ensuring there's somebody taking an overview of all of it.

Because on tour the whole company takes their holiday at the same time we knew we wouldn't need to do cover sheets in the same way but say somebody was off sick in the morning - you have a couple of hours to work out what that means for the show and how to make sure everything else is covered by somebody else. Some of it is straight forward because there are certain tracks of activity, it tends to go in scale of part and everybody just moves up a track but then there's other things that you have to think about like door setting - it's important when you've got economical scenery. It's my job to make sure everybody knows what they have to do to fulfill all those little things and to ensure the Company Manager and Stage Manager can do that when I'm not there.

The most interesting thing about the *War Horse* rehearsal room is the puppetry – we talk about being 'in-horse' or 'out of horse' or being 'unadorned' and it's such strange terminology – it's remembering that it's very unusual and funny because you get used to using it as your everyday language. If you have an 'unadorned' horse you've basically got three people - there are eleven men and one woman who play the large horses Joey and Topthorn - and they put their hands on



War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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each other's shoulders and they jump about like a horse and make the noises of a horse and I've stopped finding it funny now but you just think that if somebody walked in to the middle of it, it is so ridiculous, they'd wonder what on earth we were doing!

The first time I became alerted to the fact that it was hard as a woman director was through a director called Sarah Eisdale – she's fifteen years ahead of me and her and her peers did a lot of kicking and struggling. I think there was something about the 80s and 90s that was happening all over where women had to take on masculine traits but by the time I got there it feels like that time had passed and we were onto something slightly different.

Marianne Elliot has been an inspiration for many emerging female directors - everything she does turns to gold and yet she's still very feminine. I think there's work to be done but people like Vicky Featherstone running The Royal Court are an amazing inspiration.

It can feel like an old boys club but it is changing. The hardest thing about being a young female working in theatre is not just about being female but about being young and inexperienced and it's to do with how the male actors see you. This show has 29 men – some of whom have been working in theatre for a long time – that can be a hard relationship to negotiate.

If you can understand that what you can offer is seeing something from a distance then there is nothing else more important. Doing *War Horse* has given me an amazing foundation and confidence for being able to talk to not just actors but lighting and sound producers; its epic in every way – you've got to be able to communicate with those people.

For anyone thinking about becoming a director, the only advice I can give is to be prepared to work a lot for free – it's about cutting your teeth and learning your craft initially. Do as much as you can, see as much as you can, you've got to really want it because it's hard but, when you get there, there's there is nothing more exciting in the world than creating something from nothing.

