

War Horse review from 2007

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Review by:

Peter Brown

Every stage production is unique. Even plays or musicals that are produced frequently all have their own individuality and bring something fresh to the theatre if only because each has a different cast and a different director with a different vision. Comparing productions often seems grossly unfair when such a great deal of skill and sweat goes into staging any work. But every now and then something really different pops up to charm, delight and truly amaze. The National's new play, 'War Horse' at the Olivier Theatre fits perfectly into that category. Even if you're the kind of person who would usually need 'wild horses' to drag you to the theatre, just give this play a chance to work its magic - you couldn't possibly be disappointed.



Based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo, and adapted by Nick Stafford, 'War Horse' is a collaborative venture between the National and Handspring Puppet Company. Since I've mentioned the word 'puppet', you're probably thinking along the lines of Punch and Judy - those funny, but ugly looking monstrosities made out of papier mache. That's more or less what I was thinking before the show too. But the puppets here are are not much like anything I've ever seen before.

'War Horse' is the story of a boy, Albert, and his horse, Joey. The two first meet at a horse sale where Albert's farmer father recklessly outbids a rival for a young horse. Fortunately for Albert and his new four-legged friend, Albert's mother has more common sense and financial acumen than her husband and decides to allow Albert to train Joey in the hope that they may be able to sell him later to recoup the rash investment.

So what about the puppets? Well, Joey is a puppet horse made from wood and metal. At the beginning of the play, Joey is a relatively small puppet, but as time passes and Albert trains the horse, it grows. And how it grows! In a sudden, amazing transformation, young Joey becomes a full-sized adult horse which is again a 'puppet' with two manipulators inside it and another moving the head and providing the sound effects. Adult Joey is not just a 'puppet'. Thanks to the immense skill of the manipulators, Joey and the other 'puppet' horses we see later in the play become living things. And just like the real thing, these horses are never truly 'at rest' - they are in perpetual motion: breathing, adjusting their position, and constantly responding to their environment and the action going on around

them. By the end of the show, it's almost impossible not to view Joey and the other horses as being 'real'.

The story continues with the onset of the First World War, and Joey is bought by the army to serve on the battlefields of war-torn Europe. Here we witness the horrific brutality of war. Enormous 'puppet' horses, complete with riders, make reckless cavalry charges against a blaze of machine gun fire. Horses are entangled in barbed wire, men are gassed and an enormous tank trundles across the huge Olivier stage. The under-age Albert enlists with the army to find his horse, and the remainder of the play follows Albert's quest, and Joey's experiences of war.

Rae Smith's brilliant design rightly leaves a good deal to our imaginations, but there's enough in the set and props to fill in the gaps that our minds can't readily realise for us. Stretched across the back of the stage is a huge strip of what looks like torn paper. On to this, Smith projects images of the unfolding war using video and puppet projections of warships, cranes, and men in battle.

The 'puppet' creators, Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, have not just built extremely clever and complex working models. The puppet horses really are works of art that wouldn't go amiss in any gallery because their creators have managed to capture the magnificence and the delicate and powerful beauty of the horse. It's an awe-inspiring achievement.

Though the horse 'puppets' rightly dominate the production, the minor 'puppets' almost steal the show. An inquisitive and angry goose (propelled by a small cycle wheel) provides some much-needed, endearing humour, and there's a scary crow that pecks at a dead soldier's eye with unnerving realism. And a captivating young French girl appears on the fringes of the battlefield and finds chocolate in a dead soldier's pocket.

Directors Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris have orchestrated an exemplary production, and their achievement is all the more astonishing considering the complexity of the piece. The cast is universally superb, with Luke Treadaway giving a compelling performance as Albert culminating in his immensely moving and emotional return home from the war that left few dry eyes in the house.

There can't be many companies that could even attempt a play of this kind or theatres that could stage work on this epic kind of scale. In a sense, that gives the National an onerous responsibility that I for one don't envy. But the result here is simply stunning and I don't think I've ever witnessed such a terrific reception for a production at the Olivier. All age groups in the audience seemed enchanted and mesmerised by this endearing and imaginative piece, won over by the sheer skill and endurance of the manipulators and the overwhelming scale of the play. Two curtain calls could easily have gone on to 20 such was the enthusiasm, particularly from the younger members of the audience.

More than 8 million horses died in the Great War – almost as many as the 10 million humans whose lives were lost in the futile stalemate of trench warfare. 'War horse' not only reminds us of the horrors of war, and the ghastly horrors of the First World War in particular, it also highlights our responsibilities towards the other inhabitants of our planet. It's hard not to leave this play without feeling more than a little ashamed.

I don't usually give scores in my reviews, but if I had to do it for this one it would be petty in the extreme not to award this incredible play a perfect score - 10/10. 'War Horse' is a

brilliant and unique production. I've never seen anything like this before, and I don't expect I ever will again.

What the critics had to say.....

NICHOLAS DE JONGH for THE EVENING STANDARD says, "Spectacular production...well acted by a huge cast." PAUL TAYLOR for THE INDEPENDENT says, "Extraordinarily fresh and moving production." MICHAEL BILLINGTON for THE GUARDIAN says, "Elliott and Morris recreate the kaleidoscopic horror of war through bold imagery." CHARLES SPENCER for THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says, "It is one of the most powerfully moving and imaginative productions of the year, whatever age you happen to be." SAM MARLOWE for THE TIMES says, "What makes the piece so elating is its expression of how, in the worst circumstances imaginable, love and compassion can endure. It's heartbreakingly beautiful."