

Lynda Birke

War Horse

War Horse, a play produced by the National Theatre, U.K., in conjunction with Handspring Puppet Company.¹ Performed at the New London Theatre.

“Vous êtes en Picardie,” reads the signpost as we drive through northern France. Every time I pass it, I think about the wars which savaged the Europe I later grew up in. They cost millions of lives: but not all of those lives were human. Untold numbers of horses, dogs, and pigeons were sent off to “take part” in these wars of human making. One estimate for the number of horses killed in the Great War of 1914-1918 is eight million, approximately a million from Britain alone. My thoughts about the agony and death of these animals is made more poignant because my usual reason for driving in France is to transport my own much-loved horses to competitions.

Being a horse-lover, however, meant that as a child, I tried to avoid seeing pictures illustrating the carnage of the fields of Flanders and the Somme during the Great War. I had seen enough bomb sites when I was growing up in London after the second war, and could not bear to think of the misery of the animals forced into battlefields. So it was with a little trepidation that I went, the evening before Remembrance Day, to see *War Horse* performing in that same city. “You must go”, advised horsey colleagues — “but take plenty of handkerchiefs.” I did. And I needed them.

The children’s novel on which the play is based is a story told through the eyes of a horse, who finds himself facing the horrors of 1914 Europe. Narration as though through the eyes of an animal is not new — think of *Black Beauty*, for example. But converting that story into a production for the theatre is a much bigger challenge. Although a number of “equestrian dramas,” featuring real horses, were staged in the early nineteenth century (Hartnell and Found, 1996), real animals are rarely used on the stage now. How, then, to tell the story, when the main protagonists are equine? And how to tell the story through the horse’s eyes?

War Horse brings the horses to life through puppets — and not only horses, but also crows, a goose, and flying songbirds, as well as some of the soldiers. The Handspring Puppet Company², from South Africa, had been involved in producing lifesize animal puppets before, starting with a depiction of the rehabilitation of a chimpanzee to the

wild, and moving on to a giraffe, before they took on horses. To depict animals with some accuracy is no mean feat, especially when the basic structure of the puppet is made of cane, plywood, and light fabric (yet strong enough and large enough to bear the weight of a rider), while the puppeteers operate some of them from outside. Yet accuracy — in the sense that the audience believes in the life of the animal depicted — is just what they have achieved. The novel's author, Michael Morpurgo, pointed out that having the horse actually speak would not have worked (interview), but horses express themselves through bodily movement, particularly ears and tails, and there is indeed something of the spirit of the horse in the way the puppets move. Such bodily expressions tell the story.

War Horse is partly a tale of a horse sent off to war, and partly a love story, centered on the relationship between Joey and the boy Albert, who is so distraught when Joey is taken away, that he lies about his age and follows his horse to the front. The tale begins in the quiet village of Iddesleigh, in rural Devon, where the Narracott family manage their farm. "My earliest memories are a confusion of hilly fields and dark, damp stables," says Joey in the novel, "But I remember well enough the day of the horse sale. The terror of it stayed with me all my life" (2007: 3). The foal is pushed into the sale ring, while the auctioneer shouts the virtues of the "red-bay" thoroughbred/ draught horse cross. Albert's father bids for him, and brings him home, where Albert tries to befriend the terrified colt.

For the next three years, Albert deepens his relationship with Joey, and they spend hours galloping around the Devonshire countryside. Their playfulness is interrupted only when Albert is forced to attempt training Joey to pull a plough, as a result of a drunken bet placed by his father. But their peaceful idyll comes to an end with the outbreak of war, and officers come to the village in search of horses for the war effort. No longer cantering around the gentle hills of the west country, instead Joey must face disciplined military training, where he meets Topthorn, the spirited mount of another officer (Fig. One). To begin with, the two horses are mistrustful and threaten each other, but this sparring is soon replaced by friendship, and side by side they face the arduous and terrifying sea journey to Belgium, and the noise and horror of the battlefield. Joey's rider in these early stages of his military career is Captain Nicholls, a gentle man who takes his sketch book everywhere and draws pictures of the horses and his surroundings. This motif of the sketchbook inspires the artwork which forms the backdrop to the play, imagined through the eyes of the set designers; thus, part of the backdrop is a torn fragment from the imaginary sketches (Butler, 2008).



Figure One: Joey and Tophorn meet for the first time³

Soon, they find themselves in the thick of battle, and Nicholls leads the charge. But the mounted cavalry stood little chance against machine guns, and Nicholls — along with many horses — is killed. “We had won, I heard it said; but horses lay dead and dying everywhere,” recalls Joey in the novel (52). He gets another rider, Trooper Warren, who looks after Joey and “lifts his spirits” through some harsh winter weather. Later, they go once again into battle. But this time there is yet another weapon to face — barbed wire — and many of his equine comrades are caught up in it, to face lingering deaths.

Joey and Tophorn, however, are bred to be hunters and succeed in jumping the wire, only to land up in the middle of enemy lines. Here, near the field hospital, they encounter Herr Hauptmann, who demands that they be treated as heroes. Hauptmann treats them kindly, and recognises that they are fine horses. Later, he has to use them in harness, to pull a field ambulance. Seeing that Joey is already familiar with such work, he is mystified — using such animals as cart-horses is proof to him that the British truly are mad: “That’s what this war is about, my friend,” he tells Joey, “It’s about which of us is the madder. And clearly you British started with an advantage. You were mad beforehand” (76).

In the meantime, Albert has received a parcel from the front; he opens the parcel, containing the sketchbooks of Captain Nicholls, and including drawings of his beloved Joey. Despite being too young, Albert runs off to enlist and manages to persuade the officer that he is really nineteen. The play then shifts between Albert's experiences in the trenches (and constant search for his horse), and Joey's continuing experiences alongside his friend Topthorn.

For a while, the horses' lives are a little easier, as they find themselves housed at a French farm, where the young daughter, Emilie, befriends them. Even this brief respite comes to an end, though, and Emilie is distraught when the farm's horses are requisitioned by the German forces and must go off again, this time having to pull gun carriages. Now, they no longer have dedicated riders, and do not get the same level of care; they must flounder through thick mud, in freezing rain, and put up with multiple injuries. Such conditions facilitate illness, and Topthorn develops a respiratory infection and weakens; eventually, and inevitably, he cannot go on, his heart gives up and he collapses besides Joey. For a moment, "he lay where he was, breathing heavily and lifted his head once to look at me. It was an appeal for help — I could see it in his eyes. Then he slumped forward on his face, rolled over and was quite still.... I knew instinctively that he was already dead, that I had lost my best and dearest friend" (2007: 114).

As if that is not enough horror for Joey to face as he stands forlornly alongside the body of his friend, there is a distant rumble. Tanks appear. Terrified, he runs — and gallops straight into barbed wire. Exhausted, distressed, he tried in vain to extricate himself, only to find it tightening and ripping into his legs, already injured and sore. Finally, he sinks to his knees, and realizes that he is in no-man's land, between the lines. After a while, however, he hears voices, and is found by two soldiers, one German and one Welsh, from each side of the strip. Trying to communicate across language barriers, they toss a coin to decide who will take Joey over to his side — the Welshman wins, and Joey is led off and taken care of at the veterinary field hospital.

In Morpurgo's novel, Albert has found his way to this hospital and is working in the stables, where his colleague scrapes mud off and recognises Joey from the description. The play, however, dramatizes this scene further as we find Albert with a mask on his face, suffering from the effects of tear gas (Figure Two). He faintly hears mention that there is a horse nearby. Completely unbelieving, he makes the whistle to which he had

trained Joey years before — and Joey comes, hobbling and tentative, toward him. Reunited, they return once more to the countryside of Devon, now changed forever.



Figure Two: after tear gas and barbed wire, Albert and Joey are finally reunited.

The story thus has a happy ending. But it is about the awfulness of war, and we encounter much of that along the way. Not only are people and horses brutally killed, but the horror is reinforced by the puppet crows who land quickly on the bodies of those killed, including that of the badly injured mare whom Albert puts out of her misery with his knife. The ghastly scenes are, however, lightened occasionally with humor; there is the goose chasing people, and repeatedly slamming its beak into the farmhouse door as a result. There is the banter between soldiers as the British army men try to speak French (poorly, and with Cockney accents).

Perhaps, as some theatre critics have claimed, the plot of the story is overly sentimental; some also suggest that the human characters are a little wooden (see Billington, 2009). But reviewers agree that the stars of the show are undoubtedly the horses — and audiences concur: the play has been a huge success, regularly selling out, and regularly reducing audiences to tears.

I am not an expert in theater studies, nor a historian of war, but I am passionate about horses, and have lived with them all my life. I too cried my eyes out throughout the production. If experts in stage production can criticize aspects of this dramatization, I simply focussed on the characters of the horses. These are brilliantly done, making them believable — so believable that I had to look away and whimper when Albert ends the mare's suffering, and so believable that I too grieved for Tophorn.

The audience can always see the puppeteers; you can see how they work the mechanisms that move the horses' legs, and you can watch how they manipulate the horses' ears. At times, I knew I was observing large puppets, so I did not flinch (too much) when the horses jumped the wire directly towards us. But what is fascinating to me is how easily my mind shifted, and I no longer saw the puppeteers: at that moment, the puppet *became* a horse, an animal just like the ones with whom I share my life. The leg movements were similar enough, while the emotional expression was indeed the language of horses.

We cannot know how real animals interpret our representations of them. Joey and his friends have done performances with live horses — both at Cheltenham race meetings, and on the London stage. For one horse, meeting the puppet Joey was (predictably) terrifying, and he had to be coaxed past. But he did not terrify everyone. Kelly Marks, a British horsewoman trained by the well-known American horseman Monty Roberts, went to London for a “platform performance.” Usually, this entails famous actors or celebrities appearing in a performance: in this case, Kelly took part — along with her horse, American Pie. Marks recalls how easily Pie dealt with the whole thing, trusting her completely, and coping with going in the elevator as well as the peculiar contraption that is Joey. Acknowledging that we do not know what Pie was thinking, the horse was “looking, sniffing at Joey as though he were real,” said Marks (pers.comm.). Pie may well know that Joey is not really a horse — but is prepared to greet him as though he is (Fig Three),⁴ just as I was prepared to believe in these horses and all that represent.



Figure Three: Do I know you? Pie meets Joey (Photo: Simon Palmer)

The story of *War Horse* draws on the many meanings we attach to horses — nobility, strength, courage, stoicism, for example. “Where in this wide world can man find/ Nobility without pride/ Friendship without envy/ Or beauty without vanity?” asks Ronald Duncan in his poem to the horse.⁵ The poem goes on to say that: “England’s past has been borne on his back/All our history is his industry;/ We are his heirs/ He our inheritance” (Duncan, 1994). More accurately (and English nationalism aside), it is most of *human* history that is borne on the backs — and blood — of horses. And it is that fact that *War Horse* underlines. In his preface to the novel, Morpurgo writes that there is an old painting in the village hall in Iddesleigh. The painting, by Captain Nicholls, is of Joey in the autumn of 1914. The picture is faded now, but when Morpurgo wrote the novel, there were a few in the village who still remembered Joey as he was. The story was written, the author tells us, “so that neither he nor those who knew him, nor the war they lived and died in, will be forgotten” (2).

Bonds between people and animals have often been used to depict humanity and compassion, even in the face of the horrors of war. Kean (1998) points out the contemporary popularity of Fortunino Matania’s 1916 picture of a man saying goodbye to his dead horse while the line of action moves away in the background. The image was used by the Blue Cross to raise money for animal hospitals, published alongside a poem: “Goodbye old man; goodbye my dear old comrade!/ At last our true and tender love must cease/And I, alone and sad, go forth to battle/ While here your war-torn body lies in peace” (Laurence, cited in Kean, *ibid.* p.173). Horses (or dogs) elicited sympathy and caring, despite the surrounding carnage, while being portrayed as just as heroic as their human counterparts — a double theme threading throughout *War Horse*.

The tragedy for nonhumans at the end of war is that few return — even those who survived the killing fields were simply sold on, despite their poor condition. Many dogs and horses were simply put down at the end of the war, because it was easier and cheaper than trying to rehabilitate and rehome large numbers of war-weary animals (Kean, 1998:176: the same happened after the Second World War). This was not, I should emphasize, unusual: animal charities at the beginning of the 20th century had been much concerned about the export of old, worn-out horses to continental Europe (and they continue to campaign against long-distance transport today: see for example World Horse Welfare.⁶). The satirical magazine, *Punch*, carried a cartoon at the time, in which a thin and exhausted horse looks at the customs official on arrival in Antwerp from Britain. Asked if he has anything to declare, the horse replies: “Only this, that I’m ashamed of my country” (reproduced in Brown, 1974).

Themes of nationhood intertwine with how we think about other animals. In contrast to the shame epitomized in the cartoon, it is a commonplace in the U.K. to think of ourselves as a nation of “animal lovers” (as well as being the “mad British” to which the German officer referred). Liking animals seems to be tied into the British psyche — or at least it seems so until we confront the daily abuses of animals which happen here as elsewhere. Throughout the Victorian period, there had been growing concern for animal suffering, alongside the expansion of empire which in many ways facilitated such abuse. *War Horse* makes reference to justifications for Britain’s entry into that war, particularly appeals to defending the British Empire. But although Joey originates from Devon, in the west of England, his relationships with humans cut across mere national boundaries, and his very presence seems to facilitate communication between humans across language barriers.⁷ Those who fall under the spell of this beautiful horse come from different countries (and different countries within the U.K), and different backgrounds; but they are united in seeking to care for him. Joey’s positioning across national borders is clear in the narrative as the fog clears to find him in the slick mud of no-man’s land: here, he moves uncertainly from one side to the other until the two humans, from different sides, can communicate with each other.

Europe was never to be the same again, after WWI. The pastoral peace evoked in Joey’s youthful gallops across rolling hillsides began to disappear; the era of the horse as transport came to a close, agriculture and rural social life began to change dramatically, while over the next few years, Thomas Hardy’s enduring image of the “man harrowing clods ... with an old horse that stumbles and nods” (“In time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’”) began to fade from the British countryside. The story of *War Horse* reminds us of those changing rural landscapes, but at the same time resonates, just like Hardy’s poem, with a sense of eternal values — in particular, the bond between human and horse.

That is, in part, the appeal of *War Horse*, and is no doubt a factor in its huge success. This is not, however, the only factor in its popularity as a stage production. Morpurgo commented, in an interview, that when he first wrote the novel, it was assumed that young people were not very interested in history, especially the First World War. But, he says, Britons have since “... become used to seeing coffins coming home draped in the Union Jack and suddenly the whole business of what happens when you go to war has come home. Maybe that is also part of what has struck a chord in *War Horse*, maybe the suffering that we know goes on and we know perfectly well went on in the First

World War is relevant now and not passé. Sadly war seems to be this endemic situation that human beings live through" (interview).

That immediate sense of the horror of war — the noise, the chaos, the carnage — comes across in the National Theatre's production of *War Horse* — one reason, perhaps, why the play is becoming used by many schools to teach early twentieth century history. To me, however, what the story underlines forcibly is our complex relationship to the animals we humans use. We understand them as comrades in battle, expecting them to have courage, to show heroism; yet we subsequently send them off to be slaughtered for meat when they are surplus to our requirements. We routinely subject them to atrocities of all kinds, and yet we can have close and passionate bonds with them.

And it is just those bonds that *War Horse* evokes, which drew tears from me and so many others in the audience. It is the tragedy of war that so many lives, of so many species, are lost; but it is the joy of realizing interconnections with other animals which inspires so many of us. All my life, I have been fortunate enough to experience bonds with horses; these are often large animals, which could be classed as hunters — just like Joey. I think of this when I gaze at those fields in eastern France; I think of those horses with whom I have relationships and think of their kindred, buried in the soil. They have no graves, and few memorials. That is why *War Horse* matters.

Notes

I am very grateful to Kelly Marks for taking the time in her busy schedule to talk to me about Pie's encounter with Joey, and for sharing the photograph of the two meeting (Fig Three).

1. The play is based on the novel, *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo, adapted by Nick Stafford and directed by Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris; set designs by Rae Smith. It is currently playing at the New London Theatre, Drury Lane, London, until October 2010. It may subsequently be produced in New York in 2011. A DVD, "Making War Horse," telling the story of how the play came about, is available from the National Theatre website.

2. See <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za> for background to the company.

3. Illustrations for Figs 1 and 2 are from the programme photographs for the New

London Theatre.

4. Marks also notes that the puppeteers had had little or nothing to do with horses before the production, but that they “went with their feelings” after spending some time observing horses and going on courses. American Pie was a “problem pony” before Marks trained him, regularly bucking off the rider; now, however, he is a highly successful winner in various competitions in the UK.

5. This poem is regularly read aloud at the end of the Horse of the Year Show in the U.K and is thus well known to many British horse people.

6. In the novel, being sold on is indeed the fate of Joey’s comrades, although the production of the story for theatre does not include this. For information about the World Horse Welfare campaign, see: <http://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/help-tomorrow/long-distance-transportation>

7. Though perhaps the presence of the horses does not transcend social class in quite the same way. The two leading horses are themselves part-thoroughbred, so élite among horses, and are the mounts of officers, while Albert – from the rural working class – is a foot soldier in the trenches and later in the veterinary hospital. Still, the beauty of the horses does seem to appeal in the play to a variety of soldiers, from varying social backgrounds.

Works Cited

Billington, Michael. Review of *War Horse* for the *Guardian*, April 6th 2009 (p.32, Review section).

Butler, Robert. “Rae Smith and the art of War Horse.” Article reproduced for programme, New London Theatre. 2008

Brown, Antony. *Who Cares for Animals? 150 Years of the RSPCA*. London: Heinemann, 1974.

Duncan, R. “The Horse.” *The Poetry of Horses*. Ed. Olwen Way. London: J.A.Allen, 1994.

Hartnoll, Phyllis, and Peter Found. "Equestrian Drama." *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. 1996, Encyclopedia.com. 16 Nov. 2009.

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O79-EquestrianDrama.html>

Kean, Hilda. *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800*. London: Reaktion, 1998.

Making War Horse, DVD. National Theatre and Seventh Art Production, 2009.

Morpurgo, Michael. Interview for the *Official London Theatre Guide*, November 9th, from website (www.officallondontheatre.co.uk) 2009.

Morpurgo, Michael. *War Horse*. London: Egmont (originally published 1982 by Kaye and Ward), 2007.