National Theatre

War Horse

Based on the beloved novel by Michael Morpurgo • Adapted by Nick Stafford
In association with the award-winning Handspring Puppet Company

Learning Resource Pack

UK & Ireland Tour

WarHorse

Learning Resource Pack

This guide is intended to support students, teachers and young theatremakers in their engagement with *War Horse*. It supports students who are watching the production as a stimulus for their own devising or scripted work, others who may be writing evaluative answers in GCSE and A Level examinations, and those who might like to explore puppetry and other design elements such as music, sound, lighting, set and costume design.

The pack is written by English & Drama teacher and Creative Learning Facilitator, Susie Ferguson, with the support of the cast and creative team of *War Horse*.

Due to the nature of the activities in this Learning Guide, there are a number of plot spoilers throughout the resource. Teachers and activity leaders may wish to plan the use of this guide carefully to avoid revealing too much, too soon!

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Plot Summary

SPOILER ALERT: This section explains most of the plot so please don't read or share this information if you don't want to know!

The 2024-25 company of *War Horse* © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

5 August 1912

The production starts with **CAPTAIN NICHOLLS** sketching the countryside of Devon. In the village, an auction begins for a foal, conducted by **AUCTIONEER CHAPMAN CARTER** with his wife **SARAH CARTER**. The bidding quickly rises between **TED NARRACOTT** and his brother **ARTHUR NARRACOTT**. Ted, who has been drinking, finally makes the winning bid of 39 guineas.

Back at their farm, **ROSE NARRACOTT** is furious that her husband has wasted the mortgage money. She puts their son **ALBERT NARRACOTT** in charge of bringing the horse on so that when he's grown they can sell him. Albert feeds the foal, and names him **JOEY** and teaches Joey a special whistle call.

July 1914

Two years pass, and Albert and Joey have formed a strong bond. The villagers including Arthur and his son **BILLY NARRACOTT** observe Albert and Joey out riding every night.

One night, Ted tries to put a collar on Joey because he has bet his brother Arthur 39 guineas that Joey can plough a furrow in seven days time. If he loses, Arthur gets the horse. Albert starts to train Joey, introducing him to the collar, the bridle, the reins, and finally the plough and Joey finally pulls the plough to victory.

5 August 1914

A peal of church bells means the war has begun. In the village they are enlisting men including Carter, **ALLAN**, and **THOMAS BONE** who are seen off by their wives, Sarah, **NELL ALLAN** and **JENNY BONE** who are all confident that they will be home by Christmas. The army are offering to pay £100 for an officer's horse; Ted sees an opportunity to make money and sells Joey to newly-promoted Major Nicholls. Albert is desperate when he discovers what his father has done. He offers to join up, but at 16 is too young. Nicholls promises that Joey will be well cared for. Albert says goodbye to his horse and solemnly swears they will be together again. Arthur gives his son Billy a knife that his grandfather used in war. Billy is reluctant to go to war, but Arthur insists it is his turn to serve his country.

November 1914

Major Nicholls and Joey are posted to France along with **CAPTAIN STEWART** and his horse **TOPTHORN**, and other men from the village. Joey and Topthorn fight in the paddock, but soon become friends and understand that Topthorn is the more dominant horse.

When they arrive in France, the men see injured soldiers boarding the boats to travel back home.

They spot enemy infantry and mount the horses ready to charge. As they begin to charge, machine-gun fire breaks out and Nicholls is blown off his horse. Stewart takes charge and orders everyone to fall back.

Christmas Day 1914, Devon

Ted and Rose give Albert a bicycle for Christmas. Arthur brings a parcel for Albert that he has picked up at the post office. Arthur informs them that several men from the village have died, and in the background we see Jenny Bone, Nell Allan and Sarah Carter receive the news that their husbands were killed in action. Arthur reveals he hasn't heard from Billy for a few weeks, Rose and Ted reassure him that Billy will return home.

Albert unwraps the parcel and is at first thrilled to find Major Nicholls' sketchbook, with drawings of him and Joey; then Rose reads the letter telling him the Major has been killed in action and Albert realises Nicholls must have been riding Joey. He quickly tears a picture of Joey from the sketchbook and dashes off on his new bicycle to enlist.

March 1915

Captain Stewart tells Trooper Billy Narracott, who is shaking violently with nerves, to ride Joey into battle. Other horses run into barbed wire, but Joey and Topthorn keep going and jump over the wire.

INTERVAL

March 1915, Calais and the Somme Valley

Albert has joined the Yeomanry. **SERGEANT THUNDER** tells him the Yeomanry has been disbanded, so he's now in the infantry. Albert meets **PRIVATE DAVID TAYLOR** and they become friends.

PAULETTE's farm has been taken over against her wishes by German soldiers and is being used as a base to treat the wounded. After jumping the wire, Captain Stewart and Billy have been taken captive by German soldiers, they are searched and Billy's knife is found. When he struggles to retrieve it, **KLAUSEN** kills him with it. **CAPTAIN FRIEDRICH MÜLLER** calms the situation and speaks to the horses.

DOCTOR SCHWEYK asks Friedrich to attach Joey and Topthorn to the ambulance cart. At first Friedrich thinks it is impossible, given that both Joey and Topthorn are Cavalry horses and that they cannot be taught how to pull. Topthorn refuses the collar but Joey accepts – having been taught how to plough by Albert. Topthorn then follows suit and accepts the collar. Friedrich is asked to accompany the ambulance cart and gladly accepts, relieved to avoid returning to the front lines.

Following a surprise German attack, Albert and David are trapped in a shell hole. David writes a letter home and asks Albert to make sure it gets to them if anything happens to him. Albert thinks he hears a horse crying out in the distance and calls out for Joey. A German soldier hears him and

The 2024-25 company of *War Horse* © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

approaches, and Albert shoots him. They come under attack and escape.

Friedrich returns to Paulette's farm with the horses and finds it deserted, Doctor Schweyk and the ambulance orderly **PRIVATE SCHNABEL** have been killed. Friedrich introduces Paulette's young daughter **EMILIE** to the horses and decides to take Schnabel's uniform and disguise himself as an ambulance orderly therefore feigning his own death. He hopes one day to be able to return home to his wife and daughter.

June/September 1916

David helps Albert write a letter home to his mother. Reading the letter, Rose is distraught to find out that Albert is still looking for Joey.

In France, Friedrich remains at the farm with Paulette and Emilie. They are happy, Emilie teaches Friedrich French and they care for both Joey and Topthorn. Suddenly, Klausen leads on an exhausted horse pulling a huge gun. Klausen kills the horse when it's clear that it cannot carry on any further. Friedrich recognises Klausen and knows he is dangerous. Klausen realises the ambulance orderly is really Friedrich in disguise, and says Joey and Topthorn will have to help pull the gun. He threatens Friedrich to do as he says or he will turn him in. Friedrich, Joey and Topthorn leave the farm with Klausen and the gun.

July 1916

Albert and David go into battle and come under heavy fire. Around them, men fall one by one. There is a huge explosion and everyone is killed except for Albert and David.

SPOILER ALERT: If you don't want to know how it ends, stop reading here...


The 2024-25 company of *War Horse* © Brinkhoff Moegenburg

October 1918

Joey and Topthorn pull the gun through mud, it is pouring with rain and the mud is rising making it nearly impossible for the horses to keep pulling the gun. Friedrich pleads with Klausen to leave the gun behind, but he insists they keep going. Topthorn struggles to pull, falls to his knees and it is clear that he cannot carry on much longer, so Joey must pull the gun alone.

Albert, David and other British soldiers enter, led by **SERGEANT FINE**. They are tracking the gun cart and Klausen's team. They come under fire and tear gas is thrown at them. The rest of soldiers retreat as David tries to hand his gas mask to Albert and is shot. David dies, and Albert is blinded by the gas and lost alone in No Man's Land.

November 1918

Joey pulls the gun in, and Friedrich tells the horses to rest for a while. He questions why they must continue to pull the gun if they are retreating, and he and Klausen argue over the point of the war. Topthorn suddenly collapses and dies. Friedrich is devastated and both he and Klausen lament at the waste of the war. A British tank appears, the German soldiers flee but Joey refuses to leave Topthorn's side. While trying to halt the tank, Friedrich is killed by its gunfire. Joey attempts to face the tank but is finally forced to flee. He ends up in No Man's Land and tries to jump the barbed wire that is all around him, but becomes trapped.

GEORDIE, a sentry in the British trench, sees Joey trapped in the wire. **MANFRED**, a German in the opposite trench, also sees the horse and, waving a white flag, goes out to fetch him. Geordie doesn't want the Germans to take this prize, so he too goes out with a white flag. Together, they help free Joey from the barbed wire, and realising that he needs a vet, toss a coin for which side will take him. Geordie wins and takes Joey back to the British side.

11 November 1918

Albert has been blinded by the gas, but is told by **MATRON CALLAGHAN** he will recover his sight. Albert is heartbroken by the loss of David, Joey and the horrors of the war that he has survived – he is given into the care of **NURSE ANNIE GILBERT** who tries to comfort him. Geordie and Sergeant Thunder lead Joey in and he is inspected by **VETERINARY OFFICER MARTIN**. The Army have to make difficult decisions about which animals can return home: any horse that is sick or injured is likely to be put to sleep. Officer Martin prepares to end Joey's life, but Joey hears Albert as he speaks to Nurse Gilbert about his horse that he believes to be dead. The soldiers see that Joey is reacting to Albert and Thunder stops Martin from shooting Joey. Albert makes his special call and Joey reacts. Finally, the two are reunited.

Bells chime, signalling the war's end, and Albert and Joey finally return to Devon and the village where they are reunited with Rose and Ted.

Character List


Albert and Joey


Rose and Ted


Friedrich


Arthur and Billy


Nicholls


David


Goose

The Singer – guides us through the story and reflects on the action of the play through song

Albert Narracott - son of Rose and Ted Narracott, and proud owner of Joey

Joey - a horse raised from a foal by Albert, after being bought at auction by Ted. We see Joey in both foal and adult form

Ted and Rose Narracott - Albert's parents. They are farmers in rural Devon

Arthur Narracott - Ted's brother, with whom he is fiercely competitive

Billy Narracott - Arthur's son and Albert's cousin

David - a friend of Albert's with whom he fights in France

Lieutenant James Nicholls - a member of the British Army, later promoted to Major. Nicholls rides Joey when the Army first arrives in France

Captain Charles Stewart - a member of the British Army, later promoted to Captain. Stewart rides Topthorn in France until he and the horses are captured by the German Army. Later promoted to Major

Topthorn - an army horse with whom Joey spends much of the war in France

Paulette - a French farmer

Emilie - Paulette's daughter

Captain Friedrich Müller - a German soldier recently promoted to Captain in the German Cavalry

Private Klausen - a German soldier who works with Friedrich in the Cavalry and then is later promoted to Lance-Corporal in the Artillery

Doctor Schweyk – a German doctor

Private Schnabel – a German ambulance orderly who works with Doctor Schweyk

Private David Taylor - a friend of Albert's with whom he fights in France

Sergeant Thunder – a Sergeant in the British Army, later Sergeant-Major

Geordie - a sentry

Chapman Carter - village auctioneer, later a Sergeant in the British Army

Sarah Carter – married to Chapman

Allan – a man from the village, married to Nell. Later a Sergeant in the British Army.

Nell Allan – runs the village post office, married to Allan

Thomas Bone – another man from the village, married to Jenny, later a Trooper in the British Army

Jenny Bone – friends with Sarah and Nell, likes to make bets with her husband Thomas

Nurse Annie Gilbert - a nurse at a French clearing station

Matron Callaghan - matron at the French clearing station

Veterinary Officer Martin - a vet at the clearing station

Goose - a goose who lives on the Narracott farm

Timeline of Events

World War I and *War Horse*

The timeline includes the real events from World War I referred to in the play.
Fictional events from *War Horse* are in italics.

1912

Albert's father buys Joey in an auction

1914

28 June
Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated

July
Albert teaches Joey to plough

28 July
Austria declares war on Serbia

1 August
Germany declares war on Russia

3 August
Germany declares war on France and invades Belgium

4 August
Great Britain declares war on Germany
Albert's father sells Joey to the British Army. His cousin Billy and other village men enlist in the British Army

23 August
Germany invades France

6 September
First Battle of the Marne begins – the Germans advance to within 30 miles of Paris

November
Joey arrives in France with Major Nicholls

December
Albert runs away to enlist in the British Army and search for Joey

1915

March
Albert arrives in France as a British soldier. Joey and Topthorn meet Emilie on her farm and are eventually captured by the Germans

22 April
The Second Battle of Ypres begins – 5,000 French and Algerian troops are killed

1916

1 July
The First Battle of the Somme begins, nearly 20,000 British soldiers are killed in action, marking the single bloodiest day in the history of the British Army

15 September
Britain and France use tanks for the first time

December
Joey and Topthorn are forced to pull artillery guns

1917

6 April
The USA declares war on Germany

31 July
Britain launches a major offensive on the Western Front

20 November
British tanks win a victory at Cambrai

1918

8 August
Advance of the Allies is successful

4 October
Germany asks the Allies for an armistice

November
Joey wanders into 'No Man's Land'

9 November
Germany's leader, Kaiser William II, abdicates

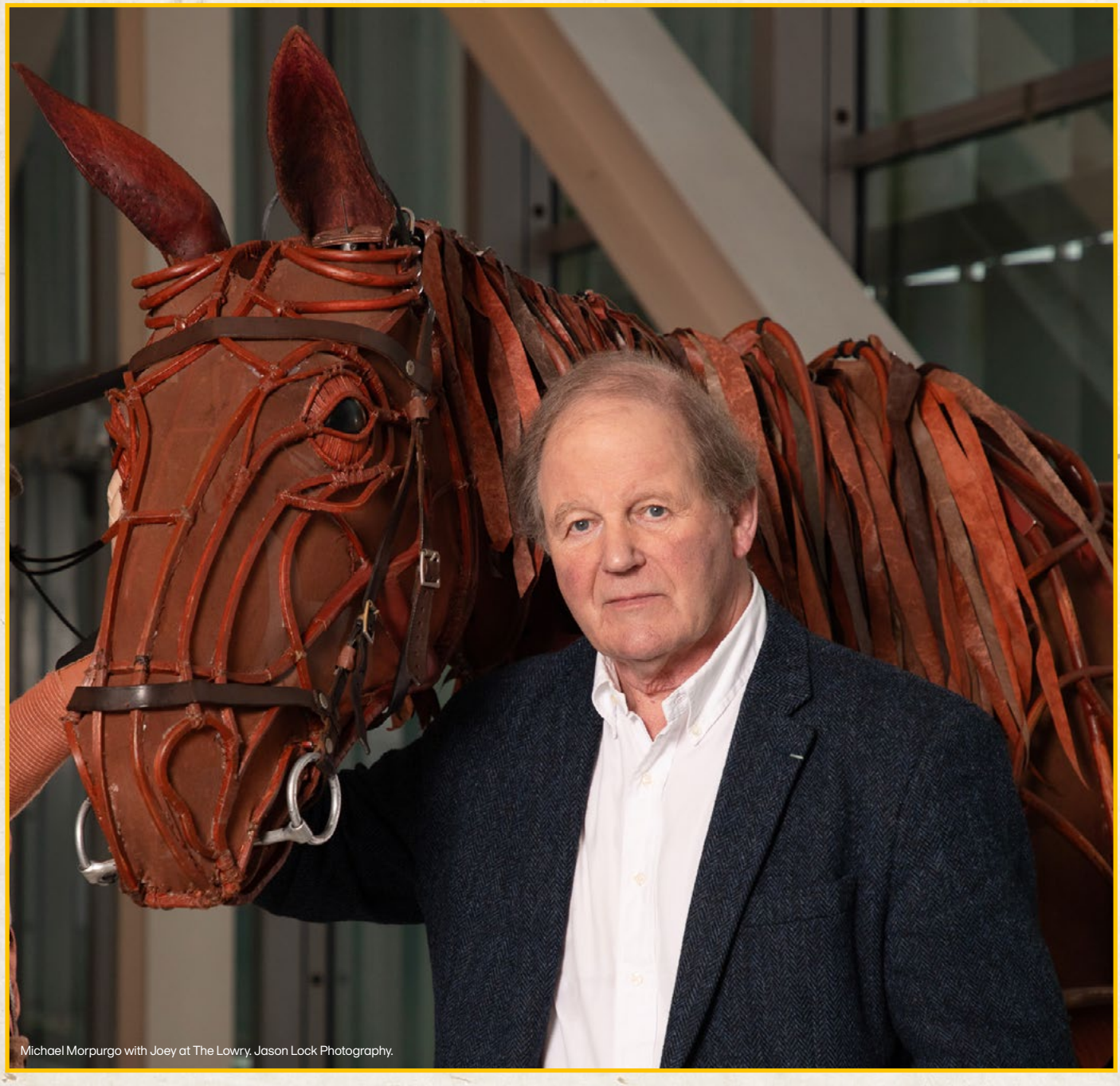
11 November
Germany signs an armistice ending World War I
Joey and Albert reunite and head home to the village

1919

28 June
Treaty of Versailles is signed between Germany and the Allies

Writing *War Horse*

by Michael Morpurgo



Michael Morpurgo with Joey at The Lowry. Jason Lock Photography.

The story of *War Horse* was first conceived in front of the log fire in The Duke of York pub in Iddesleigh in the winter of 1980, after (or was it during?) a conversation with an old solider from the First World War, Wilf Ellis, who told me how it was to find himself as a young man in the trenches of Flanders. He spoke as if he was seeing it all again in his mind's eye, as if he recalled the faces of friend and foe alike, the camaraderie, and the pity. I had read the great war poems, seen *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Oh! What A Lovely War*, but here was someone who had been there.

I told him that I'd come across an old painting of a cavalry charge in the First World War. The British cavalry were charging up a hill towards the German position, caught up on the barbed wire. 'I was there in 1916,' he told me, his eyes filling with tears, 'I was there with the horses too.' He talked on for hours about the horse he'd loved and left behind at the end of the war, how the old horse had been sold off to the French butchers for meat.

Other old men in the village – Captain Budgett, a cavalryman, and Albert Weeks – told me more. The more I heard, the more I felt that any story I might want to write about this war had to be written not from a British perspective, not even from a French or German or Belgian one. It had to be the story of the suffering and grieving on all sides, military and civilian too. I needed to tell a story that reflected the universal pity of war.

So I conceived the notion I might write the story of the First World War as seen through a horse's eye, a horse that would be reared on a Devon farm, by the forebears of the village people I knew, a horse that is sold off the farm to go to the front as a British cavalry horse, is captured by the Germans and used to pull ambulances and guns, winters on a French farm. It would be the horse's eye view of the universal suffering of that dreadful war in which ten million people died, and unknown millions of horses.

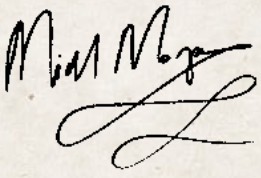
When *War Horse* was published in 1982, the book was liked well enough by those who read it, but sadly, not many did read it. The book was out to pasture on my backlist. Then one morning, some 25 years later, Tom Morris – an Associate Director from the National Theatre – rings me up saying he'd like to make a play of *War Horse*, with puppets! Absurd, I thought, but it's the National Theatre, for goodness sake. Maybe they know what they're doing. Then they showed me the work of Handspring Puppet Company. I heard the music of John Tams and Adrian Sutton, saw the set design of Rae Smith, read the scripts, saw the rehearsals. Yes, they did know what they were doing.

Over 8 million theatregoers have seen it now in London, on Broadway, in Australia, Canada and on tour all over the world. The play garnered awards by the dozen – unlike the book! It has been wonderful enough for all this to happen, but for the play to go to Berlin in 2014 was truly momentous, and timely too. A hundred years since German soldiers marched away to fight in France and Belgium, since British soldiers went across the Channel to confront them, a hundred years after the beginning of arguably the most terrible of all wars, 'the war to end all wars', in which over ten million soldiers on all sides perished, and ten million horses too. A British play about the First World War, performed in Berlin by German actors. A play which is, above all, about our universal longing for peace and reconciliation. It played in England and Germany at the same time.

And now in 2024, it's returning to the stage after five years, embarking on a major tour across the UK & Ireland; to so many places from which young men left all those years ago to go to war, so many of them never to return. Their descendants will see a play that has been called 'the greatest anthem to peace' ever performed.

I have lived all my life in a post-war world, post both World Wars, though many consider them to be in effect one war with a twenty-year interruption. My childhood was lived amongst the ruins of bombed-out London. As I grew up, I heard stories of pride, of heroism and cruelty, of grief and loss. I played war games in amongst the ruins, 'shot' Germans by the hundred, until I began to realise that in war there is suffering and loss on both sides, that anger lives on through grief, and that it is anger that leads so often to the next war. I learned also that it is rare for war to solve anything, and that we go to war because words and common sense and human kindness and mutual respect have failed us.

I often go to Ypres to research my stories, and whenever I do, I make a point of visiting the War Cemeteries. I am struck always by how many British people are there, Australians too, and Canadians, and New Zealanders, but how very few Germans are there. Yet their fathers and sons, their brothers and uncles, who left their homes a hundred years ago, died in even greater numbers than ours. Their boys went to war for much the same reasons ours did – patriotism, pride, adventure, because they were told to. Their deaths were as terrible, the sense of loss at home just as grievous. Yet it would seem that even now, the shadow of the Second World War does not allow them to remember, as we do, those who died in the First World War. The last of the old soldiers – theirs and ours – of the First World War are now all gone. There are fewer every year who knew and loved them. The hurt and anger, the grieving and the guilt is passing. In their place is a growing respect between the nations, and a determination to forge reconciliation and understanding. If the play of *War Horse*, and the book and the film too, can play a small part in this new beginning, then I shall be a happy man.



Bringing *War Horse* Back to the Stage

Interview with Tom Morris, Director

Director Tom Morris in rehearsals, August 2024

Pamela Raith Photography

Why do you think *War Horse* remains such a phenomenon?

I think there is something mythic about the book that Michael wrote. It was shortlisted for a prize but didn't win it, and apparently didn't sell huge numbers at first. It and in some ways, it lay there as an undiscovered myth for quite a long time after its publication, but Michael always loved it. The book presents a sort of irresistible demonstration of the absurdity of war by seeing the experience of war, first of all, through an animal's eyes, and secondly, through the emotional prism of a relationship between a boy and a horse. That's what makes it a brilliant book to start with, and that's what stops it going out of date.

Do you think people will react differently to *War Horse* in 2024 than they did in 2007?

When we made the show, first of all, the understanding of the way in which the First World War in particular was remembered was at a sort tipping point. At that time it felt as if we were moving away from the poppy being a symbol of militaristic patriotism (which I think it was for many people through much of the 20th century), to the poppy being a symbol of profound regret about war. This move was contextualised by the brutal and very raw realities of the war in Iraq which was fresh in the news cycle at the point we were thinking about the development of the piece. I don't think we'd processed that, although it was a very hot topic politically. Now, I think that we're more advanced in terms of the way that the First World War is remembered. In other words, there are fewer people now who would say that a poppy was a symbol of militaristic nationalism than there were, and our understanding of the contemporary wars that we're seeing is vivid, sceptical, and furnished by the brutal imagery available on the internet.

At the moment, we have the war in Ukraine, and the conflict in Gaza. Quite what all of those contemporary resonances will mean for an audience watching the play *War Horse* in 2024, I can't predict. You never can predict these things with a play. But I am fascinated to hear what audiences make of the show as it tours in this revival.

Our job in looking at the play again is to try to make the experience of war as truthful for the actors who are recreating it as we can and inevitably the tools that we have to do that are the history books we read and our own experiences of the world we're in now, so that will probably come out a bit different to how it came out before.

What the audience will make of it is the great and profound mystery of theatre making. In particular, we don't know what young people will make of it. That is because the sensibility of the young is prophetic. It's ahead of the game.

How did you begin the rehearsal process when reviving *War Horse*?

Just as when we first made the show, it was vital to have some time for exploration of the historical detail about the play. We're coming back to the story, we're not simply mechanically putting it back together. Therefore reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* is just as important as it was the first time round, and the recent film adaptation of that book is incredibly powerful too. We urged the cast to watch

that. Book and film offer two very direct ways to understand the visceral experience of being in a war, and in that particular war (World War I). *All Quiet on the Western Front* is written from the German side, so it's a very useful structural reminder about the humanity of everyone involved on both sides. We also took the cast to visit the Household Cavalry working with horses. We asked John Tams, who collected and reworked the songs from the original production, to tell them about the experience of singers, song makers and musicians who ended up in the army during the Great War.

Something that is new in the rehearsal room since the pandemic is that we also had a wonderful drama therapist called Samantha Adams (who I've worked with on a number of shows) in the room with us. She looks after the creative process in relation to some of the more traumatic elements of the story and the background. Particularly since Covid, that's an aspect of creative practice that I've found very helpful. I think the creative community is more alert to what is essential, what is necessary, or what is helpful in looking after the wellbeing of a group of people who are getting together to tell a story.

Did you also look at the poetry of the First World War? How did you decide which poems to explore?

There's a poem by Edward Thomas called *'As the Team's Head Brass'*, which is set in the time of war. Thomas' war poetry is still rooted in his sense of the English landscape, which is very useful for the parts of our story which are set in the agricultural community of Devon. The classic Wilfred Owen poems are great too. We invite people to bring in poetry they like. I think John Tams brought in Thomas Hardy, for example. And then there are books such as *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* by Max Thomas, which brings in direct experience from people who fought. I've also got my grandfather's diaries, which are, again, another important source in terms of sensibility, of what the stratagems were that people used to describe the experiences that they were going through. So from diary entries to the canon of poetry we had a range of sources, and it's important that we keep refreshing that. In one of the revivals, I got people to read some Keith Douglas, which is from the Second World War. And in another iteration, I brought in some Ivor Gurney poems. So there are different people that we would use to inform our work.

'Theatre is created by actors and puppeteers, by performers, and my job is kind of like a housekeeper. So it's always a good idea to ask people to find a poem and bring it in, rather than just telling them what to read. The actors and the puppeteers are the people who've got to create the characters. They create the characters from themselves and from what they find.'

The poems inform character and the understanding of a situation. For example, in *'Dulce et Decorum est'*, Wilfred Owen's description of a gas attack is useful for the scene in which there's a gas attack. Edward Thomas' poetry about the landscape is useful for the moments where Albert might be thinking about the landscape.

Can poetry be helpful even if we find it difficult?!

I think the idea of poetry as a present is sometimes a really nice way to unlock the understanding of it.

What's your directorial approach in the rehearsal room?

This is a revival. We're recreating the show, so we've got a blueprint that we can work from. Normally, I always try to have an idea of what I think a scene should be like before I go into a rehearsal. But it's a massive positive if a better idea comes out of the room.

'The most exciting theatre happens when the group make it, in my experience.'

I really respect directors who work differently. There are some directors who know everything that they want to happen from the starting point and you've got to admire that. I think the directors that really inspire me personally are people like Simon McBurney, Phelim McDermott and Emma Rice. They all proceed through a process of uncertainty to discover what the language of the show should be.

'Courage in the face of uncertainty is part of the creative process. That's the big challenge, but that's also the big excitement.'

The dates that are written on the sketches (in Rae Smith's set design and the projections) are historically accurate. Why was that important in the design?

There are actually two answers to that. One is that the sketches in my grandfather's notebook are dated like that, and people did date them, so there's a level of authenticity in it. However, one of the challenges with the show, which is actually quite light on language (in terms of the amount of text there is), is the communication of the passage of time. So it helps indicate the passage of time; it's an important storytelling device. Emotionally, it's not important - it's about the continuity of the experience of the boy and the horse - but it's a helpful narrative device.

Inside the Rehearsal Room

with Tom Morris (Director) and Katie Henry (Revival Director)

Matthew Forbes, Toby Sedgwick, Tom Morris and Katie Henry in rehearsals, August 2024

Pamela Raith Photography

What's a typical day in rehearsal for this tour of *War Horse?*

Katie: I think this particular version is quite unique, in that there's been such a long gap since there was a previous version of the show, so this very much feels like a fresh 'new' version.

That means the shape of each day involves working with Tom on his vision for it, and implementing a lot of the changes that we've already discussed and workshopped. We had two workshops before rehearsals started.

Day to day, the morning starts with checking in with all of the directing team, including the Puppetry Director, Matthew Forbes. Tom and I plan what we need to achieve that day, we decide what's important in each of the calls (scheduled rehearsals), where we can split our resources and time so that we can have the most impact and implement the most decisions. It's a big show, so there are often multiple elements of scenes where we want to get ahead.

Then we – the full company – do a warm up. The first thing is vocal training, which is about getting the vocal techniques that are needed for a big tour. Then comes physical training and warm up, which is about getting the actors' bodies ready. That happens first thing, whilst we're having our meeting, and then we launch into a complex mixture of calls that we normally break up into puppetry rehearsals so that Matt and his team can get ahead of some of the scenes that are coming up (like 'Joey's Night', for example), whilst Tom and I might be doing another scene elsewhere, which might be more focused on text. Then we'll put it all together. And then we'll move onto another scene.

At the end of the day, we will sit down again and plan the next day's call.

Can you give an example of how you work with the actors, for example in the scene between Friedrich and Klausen?

Tom: There's one game we played in the scene called 'Behind New German Lines' in which Friedrich is saying things which challenge the military authority of Klausen.

We did an improvisation in rehearsal, where the soldiers in the gun team were asked to point at the person who they would support if it came to a fight between these two – the protagonist (Friedrich) and the antagonist (Klausen) in the scene. It's really an exercise so that everyone is engaged in the story of the scene and it helps make a map of that.

The gun team might seem a sort of uncharacterised role, but it's good for us if they know who they are and what they're doing. This group of actors have decided they're a football team that already know each other from home – they're like a Pals regiment[1] – and that they used to play football together. They've signed up, and they're trying to get through the war.

We've often improvised around a scene, which is helpful, if it feels like we need a bit of context. We've certainly done that around some of the Narracott family – such as Billy and Arthur. It's helpful at any point where the characterisation might not be particularly clear solely from the text. It allows the actors to dig a bit deeper into that, before we put the scene on its feet.

There are some parts of the play where we've applied a convention, which we've done in versions of *War Horse* since the American production, that even though the characters are speaking German or French, their actors are speaking in English. That is quite tough on the actors, because it's very hard for them to remember that they're speaking a different language. We did a game where they were physicalising the language barriers if they were speaking a different language, and then physicalising the contact when they were speaking the same language as someone else, just to allow the company to be able to explore that obstacle as if it were real. Sometimes we just make up a game or task to dig into a scene, which is normally an analogy of some sort, or a physicalisation of what might be going on emotionally.


Sally Swanson (The Singer) in rehearsals, August 2024

Pamela Raith Photography

Katie: Another one that I find useful, and have used in the past on this show, is when we need to experience what the tension is under the scene or when the scenes aren't active enough. You might get one character who literally pushes the other person around the space, if that's what their intention is. Then we can go in and make that scene safe in terms of fights and falls, so that it can be replicated safely every time. We do lots of embodiment stuff – for example, there's a version of this activity with the horse teams and the characters where we get them to use pressure as it will push people over, but they can experience what it might feel like, what the pressure is. This is helpful, for example, for Albert, for Friedrich, so they know when they're imagining and embodying that moment, they have lived it within them somewhere.

What would you describe as the biggest changes that have happened to the production over the years?

Tom: The scenes are very often kind of woven together out of a combination of movements, music and text. Some of the changes are really tiny.

Sometimes we're slightly tweaking the text as we're exploring, but really what we're doing is thinking about what the story means now and finding out what it means for this company, who are mostly new to it, and seeing what it means to us, given what we're experiencing in the world and what we're thinking about.

We made *War Horse* before the centenary of the First World War, and I assumed that as that faded into history, it would somehow feel less relevant. But it doesn't. I think that's because war and conflict, and recently nationalism, are so present for us in our world now – so of course that is informing what we're thinking about when they're recreating the scenes. We're thinking about what lessons have or haven't been learned.

This is a story from a book written by a man, about a period of time when the political and military decision-making process was entirely male, and I think that's something that we're thinking about now, quite rightly. In our world, you can't change the story, but you can just slightly give more space and oxygen to the story of the women in the world.

Katie: Yes, there's something about gender in the play, which we're focusing on in this version. My feeling is that the female characters that we did originally have were there in an unnamed way – so they were sort of doing some of what we've got them doing now, but now they're named and have more agency.

'What we've done, I think, with the use of song in the show is also highlight through them what's left behind, when the men go to fight and don't come back.'

I think that will land, in this version, because of the way that we've spread it through the women, as this echo of The Singer, who's a woman. There have been versions in the past where we've had a female voice in that role, but I feel like that has just been more of a female version of the Song Man, whereas this feels much more effective because we're recreating quite a lot of the music language with Sally, who plays The Singer. It feels like that's more acute and present, in this version.

I think it will have a great impact on the audience. It'll be interesting to see what happens in the second half, where The Singer is less present in a way, because she isn't backed up by that village community until we get to the end of the play.

I was really keen to have more women in the company – previously in the West End and on tour, we had a company of about 36 performers, and 30 of those were male. This new production has probably been the highest number of women that we've ever had in *War Horse*. I think that feels really exciting. We've got more women in the puppetry teams as well. It does shift the balance of the show, and the feeling of the company.

Tom: We've also been trying to explore the key relationships in the play and make sure they're clearer. In particular, the relationship between Albert and David, how there are lots of echoes between the first and second half, which go right back to the book. I think the way Michael Morpurgo writes about landscape and agriculture is trying to say the fact that this war was fought in France and not in Devon is geographical accident, and the communities and the ways of life were very much the same. Therefore I think some of the structural similarities between the first and second acts can be made clearer. Reviving the production has just been an opportunity to look again at different ways to tell that story and make some decisions about how to show that.

Can you tell us more about casting *War Horse* for this tour?

Katie: One thing I've been conscious of whenever I've cast the show is that it should feel like a national production, and therefore be as representative of the nation as possible within the acting company. We auditioned in Manchester, and this time in Bristol too, so that actors in the South West – Wales and Devon and Cornwall – could come up. I've been conscious that when we tour, we have members of the company (onstage and off) that have connections with the places we are visiting - whether that is Manchester, Plymouth or Newcastle! With the company we've also talked a lot about identity and heritage, and I think that is more and more of a complicated question now.

Tom: There's no doubt that our village of Devon doesn't look identical to the way a typical village in Devon might have looked in 1915. What we've talked about in the company is that heritage is much more complex than that. There was a lot of diversity in any village in Devon or anywhere else – some of which would have been visible and some of which would have been invisible. There are all sorts of ways in which the complexities of our society and the prejudices we hold and are constrained by can be applied to this particular village in this particular period of history in an illuminating way.

'We're asking our 2024 company to tell the story that they find in the ways that they can, and we're trying to help them do that truthfully.'

Katie: When we were looking at casting, we were thinking about casting storytellers to tell this particular version of the story. When you're thinking about the whole team, it's looking at the diversity of that team, because they're going to be telling their version. These are the nuances which we are still exploring in rehearsals.

Tom: We talk about the characters having a toe in 2024. It's very clear that we're telling a story now about a specific period of time.

Does the ongoing success of *War Horse* surprise you?

Tom: Of course it does, but it also doesn't, because I always felt that Handspring has created a particular kind of magic with their puppetry, in how they'd found a way of getting the audience to create life on stage.

'I think that the imaginative invitation to the audience is its success.'

Katie: One thing I've learned is that it's all of the different elements within the production and the extraordinary people in each field that make it a success – design by Rae Smith, music by Adrian Sutton, Paule Constable's lighting, Christopher Shutt on sound, Toby Sedgwick on movement and so on.

'It's the combination of all of those elements, that if you just took one away I don't know if that would hold in the same way. That's its magic.'

[1] A Pals Battalions were volunteer battalions made up of men who knew each other from their local communities, and often included members of the same family. Whilst this initiative encouraged many men to sign up, these battalions suffered heavy losses which had an enormous impact on the communities who lost so many men during the war.

The Puppetry of *War Horse*

Rianna Ash, Chris Milford, Thomas Goodridge (Topthorn), Matthew Lawrence, Rafe Young, Felicity Donnelly (Joey) in *War Horse*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg.

War Horse took theatre audiences by storm in 2007, when the production first opened in the National Theatre's Olivier Theatre. The production returned to the National in 2008 and then transferred to the New London Theatre (now the Gillian Lynne Theatre) in the West End in 2009, where it played until 2016. The production has toured internationally, including to Broadway and a U.S Tour, Canada, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and China. It has been seen by over eight million people and has also gripped cinema audiences in its NT Live broadcasts in the UK and overseas. Film director Steven Spielberg was so moved by the production that he adapted the novel into a film in 2011.

The play has had a significant impact on the use of puppetry in mainstream theatre. Audiences may have seen Disney's *The Lion King*, which opened in London in 1999, but *War Horse* presented an important story about the futility and universal suffering of war, through the relationship between a farm boy and his horse.

It's not unusual to see puppetry in theatre performances now. One particularly successful production is the 2021 adaptation of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, which played in the West End, on Broadway and on tour, and the puppeteers won Olivier Awards for Best Supporting Actor - the first time in the Oliviers' history that this has happened.

Other productions that have used puppets include the National Theatre's acclaimed production of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, an adaptation of the Neil Gaiman novel of the same name, and adaptations of two Studio Ghibli movies: the RSC production of *My Neighbour Totoro*, and the international production of *Spirited Away*. Fans of these films have shown great enthusiasm for seeing their favourite characters interpreted in puppet form.

Matt Forbes, Puppetry Director, tells us that:

'War Horse really set the tone, and made puppetry a much more mainstream art form. It's no longer simply something that happens at the end of the pier, or something that's just for kids. Rather, it's a really wonderful and well-respected global art form.'

Joey has become an iconic image connected with both the National Theatre and with remembrance of the First World War. He has been seen at the annual Festival of Remembrance (often with Michael Morpurgo and/or John Tams), at the Tower of London seeing the Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red poppies installation in 2014. Joey also showed his own loyalty to Queen Elizabeth II during her Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 2012.

Joey at the Tower of London seeing the Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red poppies installation in 2014

Puppetry is also on the global stage, with two recent international events. The first is Walk with Amal, which centres on a 12-foot puppet named Little Amal - a 10-year-old Syrian refugee. You can follow her journey, The Walk, on the website link above. From Adelaide to Amsterdam, Turkey to Toronto, Little Amal has raised the profile of refugees and migrants across the planet in a way which combines the power of theatre and the power of community to create positive change. In 2025, The Herds will draw attention to climate disaster as "huge herds of life-size puppet animals will invade city centres on a 20,000km route from Central Africa to Norway, fleeing to escape climate disaster." The project involves the same team as Little Amal (The Walk Productions), and once again Handspring are overseeing the project. Wimbledon School of Art (part of University of the Arts, London) have been involved in building the puppets, out of recycled materials.

Puppetry involves a 'contract' between the audience and the puppeteer - the agreement that we will suspend our disbelief and join in the game of imagining that these are real, living and breathing animals or people. However, *War Horse* has proved that puppetry has the power to inspire such great emotion and commitment from the audience that it goes beyond the two-hour theatre performance. Instead, it has brought vital themes and issues to our attention that are as pertinent now as they were over 100 years ago.

The puppets in *War Horse* were designed and built by Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company. Adrian and Basil were involved from the very beginning of the creative process and were part of the research and development (R&D) before rehearsals started. You can find out more about Handspring here.

Pamela Raith Photography

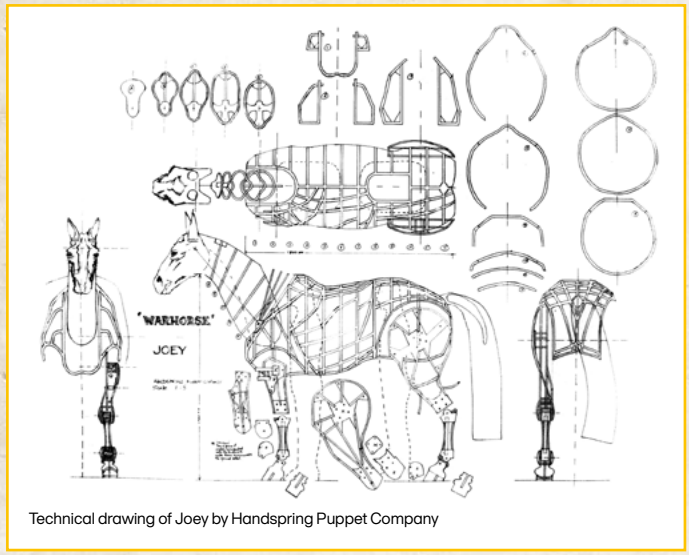
Pamela Raith Photography

The company of War Horse in rehearsals, August 2024

Pamela Raith Photography

There are 23 puppets in the production, including horses Joey, Topthorn and Joey as foal, a goose, swallows and crows. It takes 8 months to build a complete set of puppets – they are handmade by 14 craftspeople. The finished horse puppets weigh approximately 43 kilos for the body, including the puppeteers' backpacks, and another 7.7 kilos for the head. They are made of cane, leather and tyvec – a material used in book-binding – for the manes and tails. The torso is reinforced with aluminium and able to carry a rider on top.

Joey, Topthorn, and Joey as a foal are each operated by three puppeteers – the Head, the Heart and the Hind. The team of puppeteers work together to create the character of each horse and to produce the horse noises. Puppeteers train for 8 weeks before they begin performing – this includes 2 weeks of puppetry rehearsals before rehearsing with the full company. Working with the creative team, including Toby Sedgwick (Director of Movement and Horse Choreography) and Matthew Forbes (Puppetry Director), they are taught the basic principles of puppetry, shown how to operate the puppet smoothly and to coordinate their individual movements, how to mimic the characteristics of a horse and animate the horse with subtle gestures such as flicking the tail and ears, and how to create the appearance that the horse is breathing by making slight rhythmic movements that express life.



Technical drawing of Joey by Handspring Puppet Company

Pamela Raith Photography

Interview with Matthew Forbes, Puppetry Director


Matthew Forbes in rehearsals, August 2024

Pamela Raith Photography

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, and your journey with *War Horse*?

I am a trained actor. I trained at Central School of Speech and Drama on an acting course, but I was on a collaborative and devised theatre pathway. It was all about a much more physical approach. We did a lot of traditional training, but we also looked at a physical approach, using the inspiration from theatre companies like Complicité, DV8 and Frantic Assembly. We explored work that was a little bit more physical in its nature, as opposed to just text bound work. It was certainly a more outside-in approach, as opposed to an inside-out approach. I did lots of TV when I first graduated and then got an audition for *War Horse* to be in the show, and so joined it as a performer when it moved into the West End. I didn't do the original production at the National but as soon as it moved into town, that's when I joined. I was then with the show for about three years in the West End, did over 1000 performances, and had lots of different roles within the show. I spent 18 months doing Joey's head. I started on the baby horse, and then I went into the hind - the back legs of the big horse, and then did the head of the big horse and loved it. I had the best time on the show.

I left the show in 2012, which was when we were about to launch the first UK tour. I was approached by the National to join the tour as a Puppetry Associate, having known the show from the inside and understanding how the quick changes, puppetry and backstage plots worked. It was really helpful to have that knowledge moving into a touring setting, because suddenly, you're in Birmingham and the backstage area is different to Plymouth. Having somebody on the road that knew the show so well was really valuable for the company.

That role went very well, and then I was asked to start looking after the puppetry on the show internationally. We built the show from scratch in Holland, and then all over the world. My role included bringing the puppets to life, auditioning and rehearsing the actors, putting the show together, working through tech, and working with the company to build the show. I was with it right up until the last international tour, which was cut short because of Covid.

Since then, I have been back with the team, going back to the drawing board with quite a lot of the sections, and rediscovering some new things of in terms of technology, the new ways that we can present the show. But we've also gone back to the script and addressed some of the gender (im)balance in the show and made sure that it feels more appropriate now for the audience. Because, of course, the show was written a long time ago. We've been able to look at it with a contemporary eye, and readdress certain elements of the female stories through the war - what happens to the mothers, the sisters, the wives, the daughters and how did the war impact them? So it was less just a story of soldiers and a horse, but more a global story of what conflict is.

I'm really intrigued as to what you've said about the gender balance and increasing the exposure of the female stories in the show. Can you tell us more about that? Is it more female characters that we get?

We've got more females in the village, which has been a change of casting. Some people might think that this is not historically accurate, but we're telling a story: this isn't a documentary or a reenactment - it's a creative story. New female roles have been written for the show and have been put into the story.

We've also added some music, including a folk song that was sung by women at home, when the soldiers were at war. It's like a lament, and it's called *When Will I See Thee More?*.

The new characters offer a change of perspective, in terms of focusing a female story slightly more in some of the scenes. We have a female Singer in the show this time, as opposed to a male voice, which I think is a really interesting idea. It's not the first time we've done it in the show. One of the big things that you often read in soldiers' accounts is that when they were on the battlefield and they were dying, people say that they saw their mother, their wife, their partner, or they saw a female ghostly figure approach them. Sometimes they are reported as screaming out 'Mum!'. Having a female voice, and a singing voice, is something that I think is quite ethereal, and it certainly changes that dynamic. It feels otherworldly.

There are people who have been with the show right from the beginning, and it literally has been life changing. What do you think has made *War Horse* the phenomenon that it has been?

I think in the UK, we are a nation of animal lovers. So I think there is a huge connection to animals and horses. We have a huge empathy for horses. We're also a nation that is still very much connected to the First World War, and is still wanting to remember, to acknowledge and respect all of the things that happened, but I think it's useful that now we're able to look at that with a slightly modern lens.

I don't think the show would have been half as successful if it wasn't for the puppets that are in the show, because they allow a sense of emotional investment that you could never get if there was a real horse on stage or if we did something super clever with projection or video.

Having a visceral, 'living' puppet in front of you that is brought to life by the sheer determination of three people inside it and your imagination means that there is a real connection - a human connection - with an animal, and we're following that story in a way that's really unbiased. We spend time in the English world, in the German world and the French world, and there's no kind of 'these are goodies, these are baddies'. It's a universal story that's being told from a horse's perspective. That's the thing that's kept it alive, and kept people engaged with it. It is unlike the experience of watching the (2011) film, you don't get as emotional a response when you watch the film, because you know some of it is CGI. Whereas on stage, when you see it in front of you, and it's a puppet, and of course, it's all safely done and choreographed, but your imagination is able to fill in the blanks.

Puppetry is like Christmas in some ways - when you give a toy to a child and they spend more time playing with the cardboard box than the toy, because the cardboard box can be anything, and your imagination can run wild and you can go crazy, whereas the toy is a fixed thing that has a reality and is just what it is. And I think it's that engagement of the imagination and suspension of disbelief that really makes the show.

How do you, as the Puppetry Director, and the performers make sure that you've encouraged the audience to follow 'the rules of the game' that are involved in puppetry?

We start off by kind of cleansing the palate of the audience. They might have had a stressful time getting to the theatre, or whatever it might be. So we start with very little on stage. It's not a big musical where we start with a wonderfully epic opening number, but rather we pull it right down to a single person and a really simple opening. The Singer comes on, and we really focus in on that one person. And then they open the book, and the story begins. We then see one other character, Nicholls, and then we start to build the rest of the world around these two people. That's done beautifully by Rae Smith's designs on the screen. It feels like a picture book that you're slowly opening and investing in, all seen from the viewpoint of Nicholls and what he would have seen at that time.

So we start with the micro details, and then we introduce people to the puppets, and we start off with really rudimentary, basic puppetry. Two swallows fly through the sky, but the swallows are tiny in comparison to the size of the puppeteers who are operating them. So again, we're not overloading the audience with information. We're going softly and gently. Then the next puppet we see is the foal of Joey, who, again, is very rudimentary, almost Bambi-like in his operation. He has solid wooden legs that aren't articulated at all, but are rather just sort of wooden sticks underneath a body that is beautifully designed, but it doesn't have loads of tricks within it. It has some moving ears and a neck and then a head that looks like a horse attached to a very simple body. The foal Joey is constantly drawing us into the world more and more, so as an audience, you start off with that cleansed palate, and then it's through your own intrigue and engagement that you start to see more and more.

Eloise Beaumont-Wood, Diany Samba-Bandza, Jordan Paris (Baby Joey) in *War Horse*. © Brinkhoff-Moegenburg

Then eventually that baby horse becomes the big, and much more complex, puppet that has a lot more in terms of control and operation, moving legs, a moving head, ears that are independently operated left and right, and a tail that is independently operated. We do a lot of storytelling through breath and various techniques that mean that we aren't overloading our audience from the first 30 seconds, but rather, we're drip feeding the world and the aesthetic of everything, so that by the time we change from the foal to the big Joey, we've really got everyone on side, because we've taught them the rules. We've all signed up to the game of the show.

Can you tell me a little more about the mechanics of Joey as a foal?

He's actually one of the most complicated and hardest puppets to make look real on stage, because the legs aren't articulated. They are just sticks. Yes, they're carved and look pretty, but fundamentally they are simple pieces of wood. With the head, there are kind of movable ears that you can do slightly independently, but they're not on triggers, so they're kind of counterbalanced. You have somebody operating the head with one hand, and the neck with the other hand. And then you have somebody whose arm goes through the body of the horse to hold a front leg, and then another leg in their other hand, and then the person at the back stands behind them and holds the legs to the body.

The big difference between the baby horse and the big horse is that none of the legs are connected to the horse at all on Joey as a foal. They're all independent, and that's because of a sort of special magic trick that happens about 20 minutes in. We have to be quite strict with the puppeteers in terms of making sure that the legs stay connected to the body and don't fall off.

I think it comes down to that simplistic, slow worldbuilding in terms of the technology that we see on stage. We see that it is three people just holding something together, and the bravery of that means that as an audience, you're willing for it to succeed. You're willing for it to be alive. A human comes on stage and is automatically alive, whereas it's only through the willingness of the audience to invest and the sheer determination of the puppeteers to imbue the puppet with life that it works. Without that shared contract between puppeteer and audience, it just doesn't happen. It's amazing, the gaps that your brain will fill when you invest and you engage in the storytelling of a project.

What are three particular moments that are challenging, evoke an emotional response and that rely on strong ensemble work?

***** This section includes spoilers*****

I think one of the biggest moments is when Topthorn dies in the show. The emotional response from the audience is palpable. You can feel people on the edge of their seat. This is a puppet horse that's made out of wicker and cane and material that we've invested in. We've watched it and seen its journey for two hours, and then it dies in front of us, and that death is quite gruesome and dramatic. Then the three puppeteers exit and leave the puppet on the stage. There's something incredibly powerful, I think, about that moment, because not only are we sad that the horse is gone, but there is almost

a mourning of the end of that kind of sharing of talent and skill, and seeing the puppeteers leave is like seeing the soul leave. The puppeteers have a moment where they respectfully bow their heads towards the puppet and then leave the stage. I think that gets such a powerful emotional response from the audience.

The second moment that I think is particularly effective isn't a big sequence at all, but rather, is the horse just being a horse. I think sometimes we can get caught up with the show's big sequences, the choreography and the moments where horses are jumping and rearing, and the complex lighting states. However, I think there are moments where the simplicity of an ear flick, a single ear flick that 2000 people in the auditorium watch, brings the horse to life in a way that running around at crazy speeds, with flashing lights and smoke and all of the theatricality of a big sequence just never touches. I love the simplicity of that micro movement and that stillness.

We have had people in the auditorium after the show saying, "Oh, I loved it when the horse blinks", or "I loved it when the horse's skin quivered", or "when the hair kind of flicked". Well, of course, it doesn't happen - there's no hair on it. The eyes don't blink. A lot of that stuff doesn't happen! We can't physically make that happen - it's their imagination, which has been encouraged by a tail flick and an ear switch. Those small moments mean that there is such a hugely emotional engagement: these things are so minute and subtle, and yet it is the difference between the horse being a puppet and the horse being a horse.

I'd say that the key rule of Handspring Puppet Company (who designed the puppets) is to start with breath.

Breath tells us so much about character, about emotional state, about fitness, athleticism. It tells us about age, whether they're happy, sad, angry, excited, young, old..

And we try not to kind of 'demonstrate' the breath and be too overt but we want it so that somebody on row P in the circle, for example, might grab their partner and say, "oh my gosh, look", because that's the really special moment. It's the tiny, tiny details that hopefully really sell it.

Finally, there's the charge scene, which is the scene in the book that inspired Tom Morris to suggest *War Horse* to the National Theatre's Artistic Director at the time, Sir Nicholas Hytner. Thinking practically, you've got the majority of the company onstage working in the dark, with very loud music playing. So safety is obviously crucial. We spent a lot of time during rehearsals going through the nuts and bolts of the sequence, making sure everyone knew where they needed to stand on stage, putting marks down on stage to make sure that everyone knew what their pathway is through the space, making sure that all of the movement is under control and no one's going to get injured. Then there's the storytelling element of it, the emotional element, that we need to then tell to make sure that it's a believable story from the audience's point of view - a story arc that makes sense. It's therefore a very complicated sequence, and it takes a long time to build in rehearsals.

When we rehearse big sequences like that in the show, we start off doing something called unadorned puppetry, which is when we do the sequence without the puppets. We just use the people and get them to stand in a line pretending to be a horse, or moving around with the mustering horses or the puppet soldiers, or whatever it might be, so that we can make sure that everyone is happy with where they need to get to. Then we add the puppet, and we might do it without the legs or without the head, and build it up incrementally. When we get to tech, and we start adding in the light and the sound, we'll do it again in three stages, building it up slowly. By working slowly and incrementally like that, we've been able to kind of get people into a position where they feel safe on stage.

In the Nicholls lift section, there are three people in Joey, three people in Topthorn, and two people riding. You've got four mustering horses, four people operating the puppets that ride the horses. You've then got three additional people coming on to help manipulate, so you're looking at 25-30 people on stage all doing different bits. Everyone has their own responsibility and you want to make sure that people stay in their lane and do their bit, but it's a huge collaboration of teamwork.

War Horse was staged in Berlin. It was called _Comrades_ and Michael Morpurgo has talked quite a lot about the idea of reconciliation. Can you tell us more about staging this play in Germany, with a new German script?

It was incredible. Actually, audiences were incredibly receptive and really lovely. It was the very first time that the First World War had been discussed on stage in Germany. I spent a lot of time out there before we started rehearsals, doing a lot of promotional work. We took Joey to visit the Berlin Wall, and to some of the really iconic structures such as Brandenburg Gate and the Holocaust Memorial. Whilst obviously those are from the Second World War, we took Joey out around Berlin, and we spent time in different museums with him and engaging with audiences. There was a huge openness, a sense of learning and a sense of understanding. The show was received really, really well. It put that story front and centre on a stage in the middle of Berlin. It was a bold, brave move by everybody.

WarHorse

Activities for the Drama Studio

Creating Shadow Puppets

You will need:

- A large sheet
- Light sources placed behind the sheet - torches, electric lanterns or theatre lights are fine, as is any item that does not include a flame
- Paper, card and a variety of props that you might associate with conflict. The card or paper should be cut into clear, well-defined shapes with which to create the shadows. Take care not to place any items on lights that might get hot and cause a fire risk

Create your performance space by setting up your sheet vertically. It can be held in place on poles, or you may need two people to hold the sheet taut.

Place the light sources behind the sheet - you will need to experiment with where you place them to enable you to define the space in which you are creating shadow puppetry.

Decide on the scene that you wish to create. For example, you could show:

- Soldiers going over the top and walking towards the enemy (the audience would be the enemy towards whom the soldiers are walking
- Men forming long queues to sign up
- Poppies growing (you could create stopframe animation of this by taking photographs of different moments and editing it to create the effect of growth)

Explore different sound effects that you could use to accompany your puppetry sequence. Consider:

- Music from the original War Horse score by Adrian Sutton, which is available on Spotify
- Folk songs, including those written by War Horse Songmaker, John Tams, and sung by The Singer. These are also available on the War Horse soundtrack
- Instrumental music associated with World War I, including The Last Post, Nimrod (Elgar's Enigma Variations), the National Anthem, Mars by Gustav Holst, or Benjamin Britten's War Requiem (some of which includes text from Wilfred Owen's poetry)
- Spoken word, such as World War I poetry, the text from a local war memorial, the words 'We will remember them' etc.

Used carefully and skilfully, shadow puppetry can be a very successful way to create effects that might otherwise be impossible. Shadow puppetry was used in the first production of *War Horse* and although it has since been replaced with animation effects, its style is still very much apparent in the production.

Dialogue in *War Horse*

The script of *War Horse* is not as long as we might expect: much of the action comes through the interaction between the puppets and the humans. One of the main challenges, however, is to ensure that once Albert and Joey have been separated by the war, that the pace and tension of the play does not drop between that moment and their reunion and subsequent return to Devon at the end of the play.

In small groups, explore how you can use your physical, vocal and facial expression to convey the tense relationship between Albert, Ted and Rose.

Excerpt from Act 1 Scene 8

Ted whips Joey on his right side, Joey turns, Ted hits him on his left, and hits him again. On the third whip Joey advances on Ted, pushing Ted back and then Joey kicks him with his front leg, knocking Ted to the ground. Albert enters. Joey backs into the stable

Albert No! No ... Joey! [ad libs]

Albert comes between Joey and Ted and tries to calm Joey down

Ted Get out of my way!

Albert No!

Albert faces Ted down.

Don't you ever come near 'im again.

Enter Rose.

Rose What's going on?

Albert He was whippin' Joey!

He goes to Joey.

Ted I have to teach that horse to plough.

Rose What are you talkin' about?

Ted Plough, Rose, plough.

Rose How much have you had to drink?

Ted I've made a bet.

Rose What?

Ted A good bet.

Rose (realisation dawning) Oh, no...

Ted With Arthur, Rose, that's right.

Rose How much is at stake?

Ted Well, if I win –

Rose You won't!

Ted The price we paid for him – thirty-nine guineas!

Rose What if you lose?

Ted I'll win!

Rose Answer me, Ted – if we lose?

Ted The horse.

Albert (tears out of the stables) No! No! No, Father. That's not fair!

Ted That horse will plough.

Albert He can't.

Ted He's got a whole week to learn.

Albert & Rose A week?!

Rose He won't plough in a year! He's a riding horse, you've lost him, Ted, we've lost him!

Albert Stupid, stupid bet!

Ted Don't you dare talk to me like that.

He goes for Albert; Rose steps in between them. Joey is extremely agitated.

Rose Both of you, stop it!

Albert rushes back to calm Joey. But the horse, reading Albert's emotions, will not settle. Joey continues to respond to Albert as the scene continues.

Albert sings to comfort Joey.

Ted Albert, you 'ave to teach that horse to plough.

Albert I can't. It'll hurt him.

Ted No?

Albert No

Ted Then Arthur can have 'im with a bullet in his head.

Ted walks off

Rose Ted!

Albert You'll have to shoot me first, you coward.

Ted stops, back to Albert.

Albert That's what they call you! It's what everyone says, you drink 'cause you never was a soldier in South Africa 'cause you're a coward!!

Ted continues into the house. A moment

Rose Albert! Ted. Ted.

Ted continues into the house. This is Albert's last chance

Albert All right ... all right, I'll do it ...

Ted turns

Ted In one week?

Albert And if we win, we don't sell Joey. 'Cause then he'll earn his keep. Joey's mine, Father. You have to give me your word. Do you?

Beat

Rose Ted?

Ted Alright!!! (To Rose) So that's that then. The boy'll turn him in to a farm horse, and everythin' will be all right.

Rose You ain't goin' indoors till yer sober.

Ted grunts assent and exits into the darkness.

Rose Don't you ever call him coward again!

Albert But it's true. He shames us, ma!

Rose No it isn't and no he doesn't. The Narracott farm was going under and your father stayed to save it while his brother went off to win a row of medals in Africa. Uncle Arthur has a roof over his head because your Dad wouldn't give up on the family farm and that took courage, Albert.

Albert Ma?

Rose – and when Arthur came back like a hero and inherited the farm, Ted got nothing but twelve guineas to open a mortgage on this place. He might be a stupid goat sometimes, Albert, but he ain't no coward.

Albert Sorry.

Rose Good boy. Now how are you gonna teach a ridin' horse to plough in one bleedin' week?

Albert I dunno, Mother?

Rose Well you're just gonna have to find a way. 'Cause if you lose Joey, we lose everythin'. I can't go back to that bank again, Albert ... there's no more goodwill for us in the village, none.

Albert can't answer.

So ... I'll do your chores. You don't need to worry about no chickens. You just make sure this stupid ... stupid...hare-brained ... stupid, stupid —

Albert hugs her.

Albert I'll do it, Mother.

Perhaps she doesn't believe him, but grabs him.

Rose All right, then. So. Start early. Don't waste no time.

Albert I can do it Mother, do you believe me?

Rose *(nods)* Good lad. One more thing. Stop growin' up.

Albert half smiles. She exits indoors.

Creating a relationship between two human characters through design elements

In act two, Albert and David find themselves trapped in a shell hole. They share their thoughts and feelings with each other, including the way in which they deal with the fear of being killed. Using acting and design skills, explore ways in which to stage this scene to evoke sympathy from the audience. Consider facial expression, how you use your voice and the way that you use physical proximity. Shell holes are cramped and dangerous, and so you need to suggest a sense of danger as well as fear in this scene.

Excerpt from Act 2 Scene 3

A shallow crater in disputed territory. That night (March 1915).

Following a successful, surprise German attack.

Albert dives in, closely followed by David.

Overhead shelling throughout scene.

Albert Fritz your way?

David No. Yours?

Albert No. We're right in it.

David Where did they come from?

Albert First I knew, they were in our trench. The only English I heard was "Fall back! Fall back!"

David So what should we do now?

Albert Why are you asking me?

David I followed you 'cause I thought you knew what you were doing.

Albert I was just shitting myself, Private. Just shitting.

David Are we the only ones who made it?

Albert Can't be.

David Might be.

Albert Can't be.

David Shall we make a run for it?

Albert But we're lost so which way?

David ... Dunno.

Albert We could be running towards them.

David Come on, Albert, you're the country boy, you're the one who buggers about in fields at night.

Albert Nothin' to see is there? Nothin'. No stars, no moon ...

David Nothing. Oh no, we're buggered ain't we?

Albert No, no. We can't be the only ones who made it.

David ... I'm gonna finish a letter to my girl —

Albert — Now?

David Will you —

Albert Yes —

David See it gets —

Albert Yes —

David If anything happens to —

Albert Shut up! Nothing's going to happen.

David writes. Albert alone hears something: a horse screaming.

David What is it?

Albert Nothing.

They listen. They look. Nothing. Albert stares at his picture of Joey.

David You gonna write a letter to your horse?

Albert Très funny.

David Well, Can he read? ... Your silence reveals that the answer to my question is neeeeeigh.

Albert Is that your girl's picture?

David Yeah that's her. That's my Flossie.

Albert At least Joey's meant to like look a horse.

David If Flossie's got a long face it's because she's missing me giving her a rub down after a gallop. She's what keeps me going ... When I was climbing out of our trench I put my foot through something. I think it was a bit of a man, Albert.

Albert It might well have been, Private. Forget it.

David And I've got a little brother, Alfie. Promised I'd teach him to ride a bicycle.

Albert Has he got one?

David No.

Albert I've a spare bicycle. I left it in Exeter. If it's still there Alfie can have it.

David Thanks, Albert. That's bon.

Albert 'S all right.

David Albert ... I could help you write a letter, you know ... if you can't.

Albert I can. I just don't have no one to write to.

He alone hears another horse scream.

What was that?

David What was what?

Albert That ...

David What?

Albert Joey!

David Albert?

Albert I will find Joey, David. I will. I know he's somewhere in this mess and I know he's alive.

David Whatever keeps you going. I've got me girl. You've got your horse.

A German soldier falls into their crater, or approaches it.

German Soldier Here! Here!

Albert Is that Fritz? Christ!

He shoots the German before the German shoots him.

Jesus!

David Now we're for it.

They come under attack. It starts a battle.

Albert That way!

David Reckon?

Albert Whadda you think?

David I think so ...

Exit Albert and David.

Ideas for scripted exploration

War Horse is not the only play to deal with the narrative of World War I, and the experience of soldiers and non-combatants. R.C Sheriff's *Journey's End* is another play set in the trenches, and examines the relationships between different men who are fighting for their country.

The Sebastian Faulks novel *Birdsong* has been adapted into a play by Rachel Wagstaff, and has made significant adjustments to the structure of the narrative. You could explore the adaptive choices that Wagstaff has made, and evaluate the impact of those changes.

Ian Hislop and Nick Newman's play *The Wipers Times* adapts the newspapers of the same name, which were printed on a discovered printing press by soldiers fighting on the Western Front. You may wish to explore the way in which war is presented in this play.

David Haig's play *My Boy Jack* tells the true story of Rudyard Kipling's son John, who fought and was lost at the Battle of Loos. His grave was not identified until 1992, despite Kipling's significant efforts to discover his final resting place after the war had ended. Kipling played a significant role in the development of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and this story tells the story of the impact of loss on a whole family.

Oh! What a Lovely War by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop offers performers and designers wonderful creative opportunities in this anti-war production presented as an end-of-the-pier show. You can find a lot of information about this production online, and the British Library has Littlewood's archive. You can read more about that in this Guardian article.

Live Theatre Evaluation Traffic Light Checklist

This traffic light checklist will help you check your progress in being able to write about the main performance and design elements of *War Horse*.

Red: I cannot do this
Amber: I can do this with support
Green: I can do this well, and without support

During your revision, you can revisit the traffic lighting system, monitor your progress and identify key areas for improvement.

Performance

	Red	Amber	Green
I can describe, analyse and evaluate how the actor playing Albert conveyed his character in the Devon scenes			
I can describe, analyse and evaluate how the actor playing Albert conveyed his character in the France scenes			
I can explain and evaluate how two actors created a sense of a relationship between their characters during a scene set in Devon			
I can explain and evaluate how two actors created the relationship between their characters in a scene set in France			
I can describe and explain how at least one performer created comedy during the performance			
I am able to use technical terms to describe how an actor used their physical, vocal and facial expression to communicate their character's emotions in at least two moments in the play			

Puppetry

	Red	Amber	Green
I can describe and explain the foal Joey, and how he is operated			
I can describe and explain the adult Joey puppet, and evaluate how he first entered the stage			
I can explain and evaluate at least two moments where the puppets were used to evoke emotion for the audience			
I can describe how at least one puppet was used to create setting			
I can explain and analyse how at least one puppet helped create comic relief during the performance			
I can describe and analyse the use of the tank to create a sense of tension and suspense			

Lighting

	Red	Amber	Green
I can explain and evaluate how lighting was used to create the rural setting of Devon, using technical terminology			
I am able to describe at least three moments where lighting was used to create mood, atmosphere and tension in the scenes set in France			
I can explain the different light sources that were used to create different lighting states			
I can describe and explain how lighting was used to suggest at least three different locations during the production			

Projection

	Red	Amber	Green
I can describe and evaluate how projection supported the creation of the rural Devon setting			
I can explain how projection supported story-telling in the production			
I am able to refer to at least three different images that were projected that suggested the suffering of war, including imagery, colour and scale			
I can describe and analyse the differences between the style of projections during the scenes set in rural Devon, and those set in France			

Sound

	Red	Amber	Green
I am confident in my ability to explain and analyse the use of live music (singing and the playing of instruments) during the production			
I can describe how the opening of the production is enhanced by the sound design			
I can describe how music was used during the charge scenes, and the later war scenes to create mood and atmosphere			
I can explain and analyse the effect of The Singer as a storytelling device throughout the performance, and describe three key moments where this was effective			

Costume Design

	Red	Amber	Green
I can describe the costumes worn by Ted and Rose Narracott			
I can describe the costumes worn by Captain Nicholls, Captain Stewart and at least one other British soldier			
I can describe and evaluate the costumes of at least two German soldiers			
I am able to explain and analyse how the costumes for Emilie and her mother conveyed a sense of location and character			
I can describe the costumes worn by the puppeteers (for Joey, Topthorn and at least one other puppet) and evaluate how successful the designs were			

Set Design

	Red	Amber	Green
I can identify ways in which the set design enhanced the style of the production non-naturalistic, multiple locations and quick transitions, and evaluate the success of the design			
I can sketch and label the set clearly and accurately, at speed			
I can use technical terminology to describe the set, in both the Devon and France settings			
I can describe how the set was used to suggest at least two different locations			
I can explain and analyse how the set design enabled the successful use of puppets throughout the performance			

WarHorse

Activities for the English Classroom

War Poetry

Edward Thomas' 'As The Team's Head Brass'

Edward Thomas' poetry includes detailed observations of the landscape and countryside. Soldiers often recalled the landscape in their home towns and villages whilst stationed abroad during the conflict.

Read 'As the Team's Head Brass'. Once you have read it twice, one person in your group should read the poem aloud. As they read, roughly sketch the key images that stand out to you. Your drawing should be swift and confident (even if you think that sketching is not one of your strengths. You are simply trying to gain a sense of the impact of Thomas' imagery).

In small groups, research images of your local area during 1914-1918. This might be photographs, or it could also be drawings and paintings. Whether your local area is urban or rural, you will find some evocative imagery.

Looking carefully at those images, which may be in colour, sepia or monochrome format, imagine you are a soldier marching away from that location to train for combat. Using 'As the Team's Head Brass' as a model, write a poem exploring the sights and sounds of that day. You'll notice that Thomas includes imagined conversations between different people, and this is something that you could include.

Carol Ann Duffy's 'The Wound in Time' (1918) and 'Last Post' (2009)

'The Wound in Time' was commissioned by director Danny Boyle as part of the Armistice centenary commemorations. You can find out more about this event here.

Discussion: As *War Horse* begins its 2024-25 tour, it is six years since the centenary of the Armistice. How do you think we should remember the fallen of World War I in this new century? Do you think the nature of remembrance has changed? How do you mark Remembrance Sunday in your school, college or community groups? Does it feel relevant to the young people of the 21st century?

Once you've had this discussion, watch this conversation between Jeremy Paxman and Michael Morpurgo on Newsnight, considering patriotism and how we commemorate the First World War.

Vernon Scannell's 'The Great War'

Activity: Read 'The Great War', which can be found using the link above.

In the poem, Scannell reflects that even though he was not born until the Great War had ended, it is this war that comes to mind when war is spoken of.

Before you read the poem, write down or draw five images that you might associate with the First World War. Make sure that you know key information such as the dates of the conflict (1914-1918) so that you are thinking of the right conflict.

Read the poem several times, and highlight the five images that you think are the most striking. Make sure that you can justify your choices. How many of these images are the same as the ones that you wrote down?

Then...

After you have seen the production, discuss how the production either proves or disproves Scannell's point that the Great War has a series of tropes that we associate with the First World War.

If you have been studying poems of the First World War, or poems associated with power and conflict, consider the range of poems that you have read about them. What patterns do you notice? This may be the type of people who appeared to be writing the poems, when they were writing, how they describe the combatant or non-combatant experience, and whether war is presented as glorious or futile.

Persuasive Speech

When Captain Nicholls and his men arrive in Calais, Nicholls makes a speech to inspire his men, despite the fact that they are suddenly confronted with the sight of severely injured soldiers boarding ships to return to Britain. He encourages them to "Make the Kaiser rue the day! Let every man do himself, his King, his country, and his fallen comrades proud! Be brave! Fear God! Honour the King!"

Imagine that you are Captain Nicholls and you are planning what to say to the men. Write a full speech in which you might:

- Acknowledge that the men may be tired from their journey (fear would not normally be acknowledged to avoid it 'spreading' through the ranks)
- Remind the men of why they are fighting and what it means to win
- Encourage men to do their best and be loyal to each other
- Insist on patriotism and bravery at all times and at all costs.

Diary Entry

You could also write a diary entry from the point of view of another soldier, after hearing the speech. This could be someone who is persuaded and inspired by the speech, or someone who is sceptical. You might even write from the point of view of a soldier who is boarding a hospital ship who overhears the speech. Their experience might make them particularly critical of what Nicholls tells his men.

Share your work and the various different methods of persuasion and rhetoric that you have used.

Poetry to Inform Character

Tom Morris gave us the following ideas to explore in your drama studio or English classroom:

"In this revival, one of the things we're looking at is what the relationship between Albert and David, his best friend, feels like, because at different points in the different versions of the show that we've done, David has died at different points in the story. In the very first version, he didn't die at all. But hopefully Albert's relationship with David and the humanity of it, in any of the version of the play, is a very important ingredient in the story. I would be fascinated if I had the luxury of a class of students and we could say 'let's read that play, and let's get a book of poems and see if we can find a poem that we'd like to read to these characters'. We can ask ourselves, "What do we think those characters might recognise from any poem that we find, or what do we think might help them if we assume as a general principle that poetry is helpful?"

Using a printed or online anthology (or resources such as www.poetryfoundation.org), explore five poems which you might read to the characters in the play at key moments. You could consider:

- Albert, when he leaves Devon to travel to France
- Ted and Rose Narracott, as they await news from Albert
- The friends of Captain Nicholls, in France
- Müller, as he tries to survive in France
- Albert and David, as they experience the fighting in France
- Rose when she discovers that Albert has run away to France
- Joey, when he is lost in No Man's Land
- The unsympathetic nurse who asks Albert why he was so slow putting on his gas mask.

Further Research

- Watch *War Horse* author Michael Morpurgo talk about writing the novel *War Horse* | Interview with Michael Morpurgo
- Watch Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler from Handspring Puppet Company explain their puppetry in this TEDTalk, The genius puppetry behind *War Horse* | Handspring Puppet Company
- Watch puppeteer and puppetry director Finn Caldwell explain the puppetry behind Joey in Behind the Curtain: *War Horse* - Joey the Horse
- This film *War Horse*: The Final Farewell reunited the original creative team to explain the challenges of creating the production that became a worldwide theatrical phenomenon
- In 2022 Michael Morpurgo's book *War Horse* turned 40! Michael Morpurgo talked to Emily Drabble in this video
- Watch this video Horses In War by the National Theatre
- Puppetry Director Matthew Forbes demonstrates the Five Easy Steps to become Joey
- The cast and creative team all read *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque which tells the story of combat from a German perspective. You can read this book, or watch the recently released film (2022) which is available on some streaming platforms.
- Tom Morris was also influenced in his research by *Forgotten Voices: A New History of WWI in the Words of the Men and Women Who Were There* by Max Arthur. Many libraries have copies of this book. Read this book for firsthand accounts of what it was like for combatants and non-combatants during the war.

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