

# War horse stage evaluation

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“ War Horse” is the adapted stage production of the famous children’s novel by Michael Morpurgo. The story is about a young boy and his relationship with his beloved horse, and the events that follow them both being thrown into the First World War. Adapting a novel where the title character is a horse into a theatre production presents unavoidable issues as, for obvious reasons, you cannot use a real horse in a live theatre performance. However, upon watching the performance I found that the issue had been handled creatively and realistically.

Intricate puppets were used to represent the horses in the story and were manipulated in the production by members of the Handspring Puppet Company. To ensure a life – like quality, the greatest care had been taken by the puppeteers over the movements and characteristics of the horses. The same care was also taken for the actual artistic design of the puppets themselves. With these combined qualities, I found myself forgetting there were puppeteers at all and believing I was watching the journey of a real horse.

The story line was always adventurous and exciting, being passionately portrayed by the actors. While the first half introduced the characters and story line, the second half was filled with many thrilling and emotional scenes with some even being either in German or French, giving the story further character development and making it culturally diverse. The puppetry in this production was handled expertly and all the models were splendidly manipulated by the extremely talented puppeteers from the Handspring Puppet Company.

The puppeteers were in control of their movements and the sounds that the animals made. The puppeteers controlled the horses with such careful detail that aside from walking, running and neighing, their chests would rise and fall with their breathing, their heads would turn inquisitively and their ears would prick with sound. I believe these qualities were executed with such care and precision that it made the whole performance outstanding. As well as the horses, there were birds and a comical goose.

The birds and the goose, I felt, although used for comic relief and as much care had been taken over them as with the other puppets, were one of the only unrealistic factors in this production. It seemed harder to manipulate the smaller puppets with the same precision that gave the other puppets their life-like quality. Additionally, the puppeteers seemed to be uncomfortable whilst manipulating their smaller puppets which took away the ability to view them as living animals. The set in "War Horse" was used in a Brechtian manner, being minimalist and taking care not to distract the audience's attention away from the acting on stage.

In Act One, the only set was a wooden door and frame indicating the farm house and a piece of rope held by actors to indicate Joey's stable. In Act Two there was a simple use of barbed wire to indicate the scene of the war and again a wooden door and frame to show the French family's home. In order to show a shift in time and place, throughout the production there was use of projection. The image of a blank canvas was projected onto the back of the stage, on which sketches of landscape, times and dates would scroll across.

I found this use of set simple but effective. It clearly showed the house without being over the top and allowed for easy set change. However, I was

disappointed with the actors holding the rope to signify Joey's stable as this distracted my attention from the acting and in fact had the adverse effect to what the directors were seemingly aiming for. This approach can be seen similarly in the lighting. Lighting in this production was minimal, changing only two or three times when an atmospheric shift was required.

In Act One, the lighting has a softer tone, using lots of browns, greens and blues to focus a more natural quality. There is also a warm tone that is used to convey Albert's love for Joey. There is a distinct difference in Act 2, where the lighting becomes very dark and atmospheric, using darker tones to create an intense climate for the audience to be drawn into. Although the minimalist approach is clearly Brechtian, there is also evidence of an Artaudian influence here, as Artaud wanted to put his audience in the middle of the spectacle so they would be 'engulfed and physically affected by it'.

I found the lighting to be very effective throughout this production, particularly in the second act where the drastic shift in lighting was very successful in creating a captivating mood. The music in "War Horse" was omnipresent throughout this production. The first musical aspect was the solo musician who sang acapella in the opening scene and throughout the performance. The director's intention for this musical aspect was to allow the audience to solely focus on lyrics and therefore gain a further understanding of the story.

As well as this, there was also the score by Adrian Sutton which was performed by a live woodwind quintet. The folk-like score was simplistic and was representative of Albert's home in Devon and was successful in determining a close-knitted family atmosphere. I found this production to be

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a thrilling experience that respectfully highlighted the atrocities caused by the First World War. It was an incredible adaption of the children's story and has subsequently been transformed into a heart warming story for all generations.

Every aspect of this production was crafted at an exceptional standard, with only a few minor disappointments that are easily excusable considering the share size of the project and outstanding nature of the overall production. The performance closed following a truly heart wrenching scene, concluding Albert and Joey's journey that had successfully managed to have nearly every member of the audience in tears. " War Horse" is a magnificent production that I would gladly recommend to anyone.