

Just got home from another night at the theatre, this time *War Horse* at the New London Theatre. This is a popular ticket, partly due to being appropriate fare for families, but especially because of the spectacular use of sophisticated puppetry in many aspects of the production. If you haven't done so already, check out this video to get an impression of what I mean:

The story line is simple enough; a young Englishman raises a horse but it gets pressed into service in World War I. He ends up going to the continent to find his horse, and both the lad and his horse have trials and tribulations on the Western Front.

The problem facing this company was how to cast a show with horses as major characters? Their solution, puppets, was brilliant. Made more so by their choice of puppeteers, Handspring Puppets (Adrian Kohler, lead designer), a South African group. Here is another video showing more details:

The effect of these horses is amazing, you simultaneously grow to accept them as simply horses, and to marvel at the quality of the puppetry. Job well done, all round.

The horses are not the only puppets; there is a barnyard goose which is full of character, as well as crows who show up at the worst of times. For that matter, right from the very first you know this is no normal production, as a pair of puppeteers come sweeping onto the stage wielding twenty foot wands with articulated birds at the ends, their wings flapping with grace, swooping around the stage.

The story is both a raw war tale and one of family struggles and clashes. Based on the best selling novel by Michael Morpurgo, this show is popular with families and adult audiences. To be honest, take away the fine puppetry and this show most likely would not make it, but such speculation misses the point – the show is what it is, and that is what makes it a success.

The other technical aspects of the show are marvelous, the set, especially, integrating animation, projections and atmospheric effects with a fine lighting hang and some other special effects. This all integrates quite well with the soundscaping and the score. A special treat is the period songs, often played and sung by a strolling minstrel with his accordion. I give it four stars.

One note, the New London Theatre is a fairly modern space, and has a spacious feel to it common of theatres built in the 1980s, with a thrust stage, wrap-around steeply raked seating, and, most grievous, no centre aisle. The centre section in stalls is 38 seats wide, and God forbid you have a seat in the middle and need to get in or out! I was third seat from the aisle, and simply gave up on sitting until the row was filled.

Ta!