

Tour Horse

After the initial successes of *War Horse* on the 1200-seat Olivier stage, director Marianne Elliott said that she “[couldn’t] imagine doing *War Horse* in a space any smaller than the Olivier, because it’s such a huge visual story” (Qtd. in Millar, 72). The 2009 transfer to the slightly smaller, 1040-seat New London Theatre was managed with minimal adjustments, but after that, Elliott’s fears proved unfounded, as *War Horse* expanded to ever-larger venues, capped out at the enormous 5455-seat Broward Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. To this day, the Olivier and New London remain the smallest venues to ever host *War Horse*.

War Horse’s popular success was an opportunity, quickly seized. By 2011 and 2012, satellite productions were staged: “sit-down”¹ versions

in New York City and Toronto, and from 2012 onward, different *War Horse* companies toured the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK, Europe, and Asia. The proliferation of *War Horse* into a touring show proved that neither the play text nor the production were the start nor end of this piece. Rather, these became points of return, which reciprocally perpetuate and extend a particular kind of experience of Joey as a live, responsive individual. It is, therefore, important to attend to them as such while we consider changes made to this text and production throughout its trajectory across the world.

Our preoccupation at this point, of course, remains the audience and the way in which choices impact them. The very fact that the script and production were malleable enough to shift considerably over the course of the play's life signposts a strong consideration of the audience, and in particular, what does and does not work for them. On the vast Greek Amphitheatre-style Olivier stage—a space specifically designed to “emphasise speech and epic performance” (Millar 2007, 71)—the production was staged with the audience in mind, as Tom Morris recounts:

[The Olivier is] a space where you can't hide the audience. I really like theatre that doesn't pretend the audience isn't there, that acknowledges the audience is there, and openly invites them to imagine more than they're seeing. ... You can't deny the presence of the audience, or the imaginative game in the Olivier, so it becomes an exciting space for me. (qtd. in Millar 2007, 74)

So, we return to Morris's “imaginative game” to acknowledge the audience as fundamental to *War Horse* from the outset. Spectators' closeness on the deep thrust of the Olivier stage was incorporated into the intimate production, which served to bring the audience closer to its emotional pulse. It proved fortuitous that a similarly styled theatre was available in the New London when the production upgraded to the West End. The smaller theatre had similarities to the Olivier stage, but given the fact that the original *War Horse* was meticulously planned on an Olivier stage maquette (Millar 2007, 78), alterations were required for moments when the production did not easily fit. The New London also featured the added bonus of vomitories through the audience, previously extensively used for the original production of *Cats* in the same venue (Millar 2015b). The ability to retain that intimacy and to extend even further into the audience was crucial to the aesthetic experience crafted for the original production. The use of the auditorium space in many subsequent and tour productions as a means

to bridge large gaps, vast stage spaces, and distances between stage and seats became a standard tactic where possible (as related by Millar 2015b; Wall; Booth; Murray 2015; Babb). The uniqueness of the amphitheatre-style Olivier and New London layouts meant such tactics were important to adapt to spaces with small aprons or proscenium arches, and on tour, large set pieces like the stage revolve were not possible. Touring, of course, is familiar to both the National and Handspring companies, as both had undertaken lengthy and varied tours through a variety of stage spaces. In note of the very real specificity of the amphitheatre-style stage to the production itself, however, meant it was clear that if *War Horse* were to tour, it would need to adapt.

It is at this point that the story of the *War Horse* franchise diverges from many large-scale tour properties. Lloyd-Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, developed in 1985–86, saw a successful premiere on the West End at Her Majesty's Theatre and then on Broadway, where both still run, some 30 years later. Harold Prince directed both productions, along with several more *Phantoms* immediately afterward (Ilson 361); and with the replicated theatre fittings and design concept, the “look” of the production was more or less standardised.² Ever since, all major subsequent productions of *Phantom* are based on the Harold Prince original, with some more recent “tweaks” to modernise. There is, of course, spectatorial comfort in the familiarity of the franchise that will be essentially the same no matter where in the world it is staged—a theatrical McDonald's franchise, perhaps?³ Prince has overseen the production the world over, and still rehearses the musical four times a year in New York City (Hetrick). It is a franchise, recognisable by the once-ubiquitous Phantom-mask shirts and coffee cups. In terms of design, all productions use the original concepts from designer Maria Björnson, and each host playhouse is retrofit to resemble the original fittings at Her Majesty's Theatre, which itself stands in for the Palais Garnier Opera House. The actors behind the masks may change, but the product itself is essentially identical.

Similarly to *Phantom*, *War Horse* possesses an iconic lead figure, incrementally recognisable the world over. Joey is the touchstone for the *War Horse* brand, but significantly and importantly, the production itself is *rendered malleable around the puppet creations*. Successes in London forced consideration of what *War Horse* would look like in less specialised spaces: the original Amphitheatre mise en scène would not easily translate to differently designed regional playhouses. Rae Smith's design, too, presented a challenge: Smith specifically developed her vision with the broad Olivier

stage in mind, described as “an environment in which theatre occurs rather than a set on which a play occurs” (Qtd. in Millar 2007, 74), which obviously required adjustments to become “tourable.” Even from the time of the first production at the Olivier, the play was continually adjusted, which included “significant changes to the script between the first and second Olivier Theatre productions, [although] the second production script is still largely what is running in London today” (Millar 2015a). As we have discussed, characters were omitted, recast, or added out of awareness for what worked in performance. The published Nick Stafford script, then—which itself was so open to interpretation with stage directions like “they bond. They fall in love” or, of course, “we get to know him”—only partly reflects the play on stage today. The several rehearsal scripts we have had access to differ incrementally from Stafford’s original, with new dialogue, scenes, and adjustments based on the space.

Such adjustments became more significant as the 2011 Broadway production opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre housed within the Lincoln Centre in New York City. As Millar notes:

When we made the New York production there was an appetite to develop some aspects of the script further. My perception was that a new emphasis of the show was needed in order to make a version that had the widest potential for future audiences—including ones who did not have the same cultural associations with the Great War as the British public does. One change that provoked a lot of debate is the use of more than one language—in London, the German characters speak to each other in German. (2015a)

Ultimately, New York producers decided theirs should be the first production in which all characters speak accented English alongside “other markers to delineate the nationality of the speaker, [which required] some script changes to emphasise to an audience where one character cannot understand the other. This version does not assume any knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of German or French from the audience (which is in any case variable within any audience)” (Millar 2015a).⁴ Broadway marked *War Horse*’s first concurrent production, a feat later replicated with up to four *War Horse* properties on tour or in residency at any given time. The Vivian Beaumont is a 1200-seat proscenium stage with a removable thrust apron to replace the seats on the orchestra floor. Such a configuration approximated the amphitheatre-style Olivier and New London stages, and put audiences on three sides of the action to heighten contact with the

puppets (Millar 2015b). This stage configuration also worked to anticipate issues that would later arise in subsequent tours to venues that were either true proscenium stages or which featured only a small apron. The new space required some adjustment, and new opportunities like the addition of puppet entrances down the house aisle were later replicated in Toronto and some tour venues (Millar 2015b). The Broadway production was a mainstream success, ran for close to two years, and won five Tony Awards, including Best Play.

As a brand, *War Horse* had become a global phenomenon. In September 2011, Canadian theatre producers Mirvish Productions announced an independent Canadian “sit-down” production to play at Toronto’s 2000-seat Princess of Wales Theatre, from February 2012. This production is significant as the first time *War Horse* had played on a true proscenium stage, with a small artificial apron built over the theatre’s orchestra pit. Adapted dramaturgy preserved the immersive nature of the production; yet the larger stage space came with a larger backstage area for the addition of set pieces, like a full-size landing pontoon (represented by poles and stanchions in other productions), and the ability to add the no-man’s land “Nashscape” with girders from the fly tower (as opposed to floor traps) (Wall; Babb). The flexibility of the production to adapt to this new stage style was a positive test run for future tour productions, as the Toronto stage best represented many of the larger North American theatre spaces designed to host Broadway-style tours.

Before the Canadian production premiered, a separate American tour was announced, which marked four separate *War Horse* companies to play simultaneously. *War Horse*’s Tony Awards success equated to a great deal of television exposure and interest in the production, and the Broadway producers (collectively “War Horse LP,” but including Jane Bergère, Debbie Bisno, and Bob Boyett) were keen to capitalise on the moment. An initial 20-city tour was announced in early 2012, to preview (a “test run” for the pared-back logistics, like the impossibility of a stage revolve [Millar 2015b]) in Boise, Idaho, and it toured most major American centres over the course of two years. Stops in individual areas ranged from the brief (three days in Albuquerque in May 2014) to the lengthy (six weeks in Los Angeles in June–July 2012), almost exclusively included primarily proscenium-style theatre spaces (some with small aprons or pit covers) that ranged between 1400 (Greenville, North Carolina) and 5455 (Ft Lauderdale) seats. None of the road theatre spaces worked in the amphitheatre style established at the Olivier, as this more inclusive

effect was not practicable on the road, particularly as short stops prevented alterations to spaces (Millar 2015b). The tour worked with a standard set footprint capable of quick installation and no tech rehearsal beyond pre-show sound check, which meant performers had to become accustomed to the space and sightlines on the fly. Performers changed in an upstage “gondola” area with boxed dressing stations, and had to negotiate the often-cramped backstage areas in many of the older venues (Murray 2015; Babb; Reid). The tour presented unexpected challenges (an American disassociation with WWI discourses, compared to much warmer receptions in Canadian stops; stopped shows due to broken puppets damaged with climate changes; spaces with large gaps between performer and audience) as well as rewards (the near-universally rapturous response to the puppets; a Japanese audience entirely keyed in despite a language barrier) (Babb; Murray 2015).

In all, this first tour took in 63 American cities, crossed the border into Canada for four stops, and included a surtitled residency at Tokyo’s Tokyu Theatre Orb. In total, the tour spanned 749 performances over more than two years, now holds the record for “the highest grossing and most attended play ever to tour the US and Canada” (“*War Horse* now seen”), and contributed largely to *War Horse*’s declaration of having entertained over four million spectators.

Subsequent tours included separate *War Horse* companies in Australia (a three-city tour of Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane from December 2012 to August 2013); South Africa (residencies in Johannesburg and Cape Town billed as a homecoming for the Handspring puppets [see, e.g., Turkington]); and several stops in Europe (which includes Amsterdam and Antwerp). As we will discuss below, in late 2015, the Mandarin-language version premiered in Beijing, ahead of a Chinese tour to Shanghai and Guangzhou. This Chinese production represents *War Horse*’s second translation stop, after the 2014 production in Berlin that saw the play reimagined for a German audience.

Over the course of the work’s life, the malleability of the *War Horse* material was proven over and again, exemplified by the fact that so long as Joey existed at its centre, the parts around him—script, cast, language, staging—were altered and tweaked. In Millar’s words,

Each production is intended [...] for its audience. The script has not changed significantly between New York, Toronto, the US tour, the Australian and Netherlands productions. Some adjustment is made by the director in close contact with the original creative team and dramaturgs at the National

Theatre. The adjustments are most often to do with staging solutions that are required to fit the demands of the theatres that are being performed in (Millar 2015a).

Some organic adjustments were made for the sake of clarity, or to reflect the production team's determination that the product be as effective as possible for that current audience. Adam Booth, Captain Stewart in the Australian tour cast, remembers such a shift:

Up until a day or two before opening (10 weeks rehearsal and 10 previews) the play's text began with a heavily expositional scene establishing the Narracott brothers, their sons, Nicholls, and most importantly, their interest in this little foal—Joey. This was set in a quiet moment before the auction. This scene was never used in London—I believe was written for the Lincoln Center production. [We realised] the scene wasn't working out the front, so we actually tried a few different ways to stage it, until finally it was cut. Which was an excellent decision—the rhythm was enhanced greatly—we went from the beautiful opening scene where the foal gently explores his surroundings and his own physicality, to BANG, he's enclosed, an auctioneer is yelling, people are laughing and essentially we ask the audience to hang on and try and keep up with us—to discover who's who through action, not exposition.

Such narrative changes reflect the flexibility of the production to respond to what does and does not work, but this was also necessary due to logistical challenges. A major consideration for the tour productions, for example, was the lack of a stage revolve, which helped depict distance and give perspective in a zoom-like effect. Booth remembers their tour's solution:

Nor did we have a revolve. So that required some big changes, particularly in the second act. For example, there is a "Gun Team" scene where Joey pulls the German gun with Tophorn and the "death horses." Done on a revolve, that scene spins to show distance travelled, time and the never-ending "circular" nature of the task. However, I've got to say, our solution was much more physically dynamic. We basically re-blocked the scene so that it moved very quickly in the space, made rapid turns with these huge puppets and tried to create a sense of weight, gradient and mud. So, in one move, the horses turn, a chain "snaps", the gun "slides downhill" toward the audience and stops on the edge of stage. People literally thought it was going to fall in their lap. In a wonderful way, the challenge of working with less forced us to devise a far more engaging solution.

War Horse on tour, however, was not only by necessity adapted to different spaces and physical sets but reflexively worked to adopt effective practices discovered on tour or in performance. As Millar reflected: “It’s unusual to be given the opportunity to revisit a theatre show, especially one that was in such active development in rehearsal and through previews. You’re never ‘finished,’ and many directors are enthusiastic about the idea of further ‘fine-tuning’ or adjustment to a show” (2015a). Such “fine tuning” returns us to the “make fit” concept around the adaptive process, where sets, characters, text, and approaches will change: everything, that is, but the horses. Joey is the constant throughout *War Horse*: he appears in the first and last scenes of the play, is never seen without his puppeteers, and is a reliable avatar for the play as a whole, which fosters an emotional reaction from both cast and audience members alike.⁵ The original creative team fosters and encourages such a sense of personal ownership over the production, because

more than most productions, the spirit of the show relies on the co-operation and unity of the cast. The three puppeteers being one character in Joey is an emblem of that, but it’s true right through the ensemble—as the crowd in the auction, or the German Gun Team, in any scene or set piece, the tension is created more than anything through the company working together. (Millar 2015a)

Such flexibility is written into the fabric of *War Horse* and ensures that even with new actors, audiences, or even languages, the pivotal figure of Joey as the structural vision for the piece. As Millar observes,

The rhythm and timing of the show as a whole is very consistent, and Marianne [Elliott], for example, will visit a production in previews and make absolutely sure that the tempo, immediacy and clarity is not compromised. For a creative working on the show it’s very enjoyable to watch a new Albert find his own version of the character, and marvellous to see how the text is elastic enough to accommodate it. It’s not true in a lot of classic theatre writing, where the tempo of the character can be tightly controlled by the cadence of the lines—but it’s a definite virtue in this story. (2015)

With Joey as its pivot, *War Horse* remains a play developed in relation to the world around it, regardless of venue, space, or audience. Joey’s puppeteers are conditioned to react to external stimuli when it occurs, and because of the way the heart and hind operators are bound into the

puppet, there are clear knock-on effects from each reaction, which means no part of the puppet reacts entirely independently of the rest of the body (Wall; Babb). Interestingly, this extends to the *War Horse* franchise worldwide, and often (but not always) features experienced directors, creatives, puppeteers, and cast members who both train new artists and help reincorporate elements found “on the road” into the flagship London production. As noted in Chap. 1, *War Horse* is a compiled chronology of work that gradually builds on itself, which is evidenced nowhere more clearly than in the way it continues to adapt to the world around it, to maintain the “fit.”

GEEFÄHRTEN: NEW GROUND

Nowhere was the necessity for “fit” more apparent than in the first attempt to adapt the franchise to appeal to an old enemy. Indeed, while many *War Horse* productions helped develop the stage play’s presence and the work itself, the 2014 German adaptation was likely the most important version yet. Staged in Berlin, fully translated into German,⁶ and significantly rescripted, the new version, renamed *Gefährten*, was only partially coincidentally scheduled to premiere in time for the centenary observations for WWI. Producers worked for over two years to negotiate a *War Horse* for Berlin (Cavendish), but beyond the language barrier, they had to deal with a general German antipathy towards war commemoration. The German army is obviously the play’s antagonists; the announcement was decision was met with some trepidation, particularly given Germany’s reluctance to mark the centenary at all (Cavendish).

Gefährten roughly translates to *Comrades* or *Fellowship*—also the German-language release title for Spielberg’s *War Horse*—and was a critical success. A German *War Horse* fulfilled Morpurgo’s long-held dream of his story told simultaneously in the capitals of the two former enemies (Morpurgo 2013); incredibly, *Gefährten* represents the first time that WWI had been depicted on a German stage.⁷ The now-overtly pacifist nation held a collective “guilt issue [over] the war that no one talks about,” and *Gefährten* represented an opportunity to salve ancient wounds (Cavendish). *Gefährten* was translated into German and recalibrated dramaturgically by playwright John von Düffel to ensure German “villains” did not alienate audiences. German characters were expanded, humanised, and softened, with emphasis on their sympathetic natures to highlight the fact that they, like Joey, innocently acted on orders. This, of course, speaks

to Morpurgo's novel and Joey's non-nationalist narrative, where he treats English, French, and German characters as indistinguishable in anything but their various states of human kindness.

Gefährten is not, in most senses, *War Horse*—they are distinctive works whose primary linking touchstone is Joey, although they maintain an artistic through-line in the puppetry work and the presence of director Polly Findlay, who assisted on the original production. Effectively, Joey was adapted—made fit—to a new context, and proved through the production's one-year run that impactful artistic achievements like Handspring puppets transcend cultural and political borders. The audience's affective relationship with *Gefährten*'s Joey develops in the same manner as in *War Horse* until he arrives on the front line. From that point, von Düffel extends the narrative to help German soldiers Friedrich and Karl (renamed Klausen) “become new friends of the audience” (Cavendish). The sense of Teutonic enmity, easily accepted for *War Horse*'s English audiences, was problematic for von Düffel, who inserted a new sense that “on the German side many people were misled at the beginning,” and placed new emphasis on Friedrich's love for horses (Cavendish 2013). The thinly sketched Germans of the English production resulted in black-and-white, good (Friedrich)-and-bad (Klausen) characters, and others so brief that they had little character at all (Dr Schweyk). In von Düffel's words, the challenge was “turning the German characters, not from baddies into goodies, but into complex, rounded characters who can be brutal and tender, threatening and vulnerable, victims of a situation into which they to some extent brought themselves” (10). A clear problem, however, was nationality. As Millar remembers,

You don't meet a German until the second scene after the interval—so there would, one imagined, have been some build-up of anticipation as to how they would be portrayed. So we knew that we had to be sensitive, and wanted to deal intelligently with an intelligent audience. The best way to do this seemed to be to bring a German perspective—which was John von Düffel, who has excellent English and had also straddled the divide between ‘artistic’ and ‘commercial’ theatre in Germany. John worked with Polly Findlay, taking input also from Marianne and Tom, Nick Stafford, Ben Power at the NT, and of course Michael Morpurgo, on how to give Friedrich and Klausen's story a resonance that would allow a German audience to feel that there was as much depth of character in the Act 2 story as in Albert's. For me, the new relationship in the script opened up a whole new side to the show and how it talked about the war and the German experience. There are a lot of things to think about—the meaning of the tank for example, is

different to a German audience. We also had to make sure the show didn't feel like it was haranguing the German side—the spirit of Morpurgo's vision is very much that the soldiers on each side are equally human—vulnerable, some misguided, some brutalised, some gentle, some noble. When Emilie disappears into the chaos of war in the British or English-language versions, I think we just see a tragedy, without explicitly blaming the German side. In Berlin it had to be very clear that the German soldiers were not being portrayed as being unconcerned as to her well-being—it's an extra beat in the story that has to have its time to be seen.

From my point of view the preparation of the horse characters was very much the same. As in Michael's original intention, the horses respond the same to Germans or British, and the process of training the puppeteers is to allow them to be responsive in a horse's terms to the action around them. So it was fun for us to see the new colours and flavours in the German Army scenes and how they gave Joey and Tophorn different moments to play.

I enjoy the parallel versions of *War Horse* existing. I like the Friedrich/Klausen relationship in *Gefährten*; they come in like Macbeth and Banquo and we watch their trust and relationship dissolve and twist as the circumstances press them. But I also loved watching Angus Wright play Friedrich as a distinguished cavalry Reiter transplanted into a twentieth century machine war. Both contrast with Joey's innocence. Both say something interesting about the war and where it stood in our history. (2015a)

Furthermore, in a reversal of the American production's Anglicisation of Stafford's three-language script, the all-German language *Gefährten* established the potential in how to reverse *War Horse*'s new Anglo centrism. To ask all of *Gefährten*'s characters—German, French, and English—to converse in German is a point of frisson for this non-nationalistic approach to the war discourse. Some critics complained this was difficult for audiences (see, e.g., Walter), but to reverse the polarity heightens the concept of humanity as a unified force. Arguably, this concept is explicitly embedded in the text itself in its presentation of the traditional war narrative but from the perspective of the naturalisation of the individual under a common humanism. Indeed, the very title of *Gefährten* pries the production from titular emphasis on the horses and focuses on relationships between all characters—if we interpret “comrades” to include interactions between men as well as those between man and beast—but also heightens the text's implicit zoocentrism, and implies that these horses are more than just beasts of burden, but are equals, or comrades, to the human characters.

Most striking was the experience of Ryan Reid, a Topthorn heart from the Toronto company who was asked to join *Gefährten* after the Canadian run had completed. Reid was taken aback by how the shift in environment changed the tenor of the production for both the performers and the audiences:

It was an interesting thing to be in Canada, to recognise how we approach [WW1 observances] from a place of celebration that we do, we give the reverence and respect to the fallen soldiers, which is great, but doing it in Berlin really made me recognise again how important it is that it's all just *people*, just the reverence of remembering the fallen isn't just *our* fallen comrades, it's every person around the world who fought that war on behalf of a nationalist decision. That really shone through for me, to be on the other side of it, to be amongst the people who *don't* celebrate it, or talk about the First World War, first, because the Second World War was so much a bigger part of it for Berlin, but also because their connection to war isn't like the British: it's not a 'we were conquerors, we were doing this for good,' it's just 'this was a terrible thing.' Their thoughts on war are so different.

Each question Reid fielded on cultural difficulties the German audiences might have felt was gently rebuffed in favour of how to depict a culture where glorification of war is not part of the vocabulary, which meant the wartime themes offered an opportunity to glorify humanity, much as Morpurgo had hoped for when the Berlin production was announced. To Reid's mind, the only people who objected to *Gefährten* were those subscribers used to light comedic fare at the theatre (one frustrated exiting patron shouted out "What's next, *Chernobyl: The Musical?*"), far beyond the feared compunction over German war guilt. *Gefährten* built bridges, to be sure, but what proved unexpected was that the chasms between cultures were more imaginary than anyone believed. *Gefährten* is a touchstone production because it forces pause to consider the essential gesture of *War Horse*. The central story, first from Morpurgo and later Stafford, translates across productions to retain a central, consistent narrative structure, despite in-rehearsal revision and adaptation. Without the textual touchstone of Stafford's adaptation, Morpurgo's novel survives in relief to the unquestionably central figure of Joey. Removed textual and interpretive signifiers thus emphasise Joey as our key interpretive point of reference, and pose means to explore the *War Horse* "experience," particularly when the story meets a point of cultural resistance. *Gefährten*'s strategic redeployment suggests Joey's role is far greater than a simple protagonist or narrative device, but is subsumed into the position of

avatar, representative of not only the production but also the entire franchise: indeed, all *War Horse*-related materials.

MAKING STRANGE

Gefährten, then, offers an excellent point of departure from which to consider the “strangeness” inherent in export art across cultural borders. The hugely ambitious, year-long development process to adapt *War Horse* (战马 in Mandarin) for the 2015 National Theatre Company of China premiere in Beijing speaks volumes to the potential reach of this property. The challenge that faced director Alex Sims and his Chinese counterpart Li Dong was how to communicate European wartime concerns through a boy’s relationship with a horse in the Asian market (Chen), which meant even greater investment in the heart of the work, which could no longer rely on nationalistic sentiment, European dialects, and embedded WWI memories (“Chinese Version”). Neutral China really did not have a horse in that race, so to speak.

The Chinese adaptation was critically acclaimed, with any disjunction over the Englishness of the subject matter (and the trouble of how to depict English and German soldiers, all of whom speak Mandarin) mitigated by clever local wordplay to appeal to the local audience.⁸ Ryan Reid spoke of a similar experience in Berlin, as the English characters all spoke German, but in the cases of the Berlin and Beijing productions, these moments of cultural alienation were overcome by the visual achievement of the puppets. Importantly, 战马, like all of its predecessors, revolves around the physical object of Joey. To return to *The Phantom of the Opera*, priority lies with aesthetic packages, sets, costumes, and masks as representative of the production. For *War Horse*, Joey and the puppets (as characters more than objects) are the integral tent-pole elements that distinguish this franchise, along with the adaptability of materials at the heart of the work’s characteristic “making strange” element. This emerges not in the play’s construction, its direction, or negotiation from a production standpoint, but estrangement through Joey, which results in a kind of mechanical, non-Brechtian sense of *estrangement by endearment*. As we have shown, Joey thrives away from the playhouse, and it is the constant adaptation of an impressive piece into new environments that allows it to be continually renewed for audiences. The “make fit” for Joey is effortless because he requires only three puppeteers to react environmentally, even in strange cultures, different spaces, and for different audiences.

This “make fit” effect, of course, not only extends to foreign-language adaptations: the touring Anglophone *War Horse* links to a specific production aesthetic where a differently sized auditorium or stage space impacts performers from night to night. In-progress changes over the course of previews or single-tour dates speak to a desire to preserve, and even enhance, interplay between the performers and the audience. The “test run” that Mervyn Millar identified in the Boise tour kick-off was instructive because it took into account a number of foreign attributes: a different stage, a lack of customised technology, and a regional audience, who may approach a theatrical event with a different attitude to the more seasoned New Yorkers. This is not to suggest one is preferable to another: many American cities regularly enjoy the “National Tour” casts of major Broadway franchises, but the general scarcity of the events makes a tour production “appointment viewing.” Generally, a tour production is in town for a short time, promoted to emphasise the brief nature of the production: do not miss out! By its nature, the transience of tours means there is little local investment: most of the cast are from elsewhere, and there is little lost in negative reviews, since it is just on to the next stop. The fact that *War Horse* creatives adjusted the production in process to enhance the efficacy of the chosen effects, then, denotes clear consciousness of audience experience. On each tour date, the company must acquaint an entirely new, perhaps predominantly unknowing audience with the “game of Joey” based on only a short period to complete their engagement.

Through this process, the puppet’s universality in its animal familiarity and adaptive flexibility necessitates adaptation to the world around it to remove obstacles from the spectacle. Changes between venues include revision of text, staging, marketing, the physical spaces, and some of the other puppet characters, but Joey remains fundamental: each of these elements revolves like planets around Joey’s sun. As spaces shift and experiences mount, the tour company’s investment in the “game” complexifies as it adapts to shifted conditions. The company invests in the game insofar as the game is Joey, in a dynamic, evolutionary approach to the material. Aside from the fulcrum of Joey, the text is a malleable score to which the live actor may dance. On tour, adaptation is not change for change’s sake, but rather pitched towards the audience’s sustained investment in the puppet’s performance of liveness as it shifts between locales. This form of responsive adaptation keeps the production fresh and essential, with the one constant of Joey, perfect in his imperfection.

AFTERWORD: LEVELS OF IMMERSION

As a sustained investment, *War Horse* is remarkable as audience engagement: oscillatory processes of immersion and acknowledgement, achieved solely by artistry and shared conviction. *War Horse* can hardly be defined as “immersive theatre,” and nor can it be classified as “interactive theatre,” yet, as we have seen, the production crucially activates elements from both subcategories.

By definition, immersive theatre makes the audience part of the show: “In an immersive theatre production, the audience in some way plays a role, whether that is the role of witness or the role of an actual character. They may be allowed to roam and explore the performance space as the performance happens around them, allowing them to decide what they see and what they skip” (“What is Immersive Theatre?”). Unlike the very successful immersive *Macbeth-cum-Vertigo* adaptation *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk and Emursive 2003–present), however, in which masked spectators explore an ornately decorated warehouse space and interact with performers, *War Horse* is oscillatory in its immersive experience. For audience members at *Sleep No More*, there is no “opt out,” aside from physical extraction from the space or morose refusal. To be inside the performance space is to participate in *Sleep No More*, and it is statistically extremely unlikely for two participants to share the same experience. Punchdrunk “aims to erase the fourth wall as much as possible” (Piepenberg 2011, AR4) and achieves immersion through meticulous verisimilitude. In contrast, the abstracted nature of the *War Horse* puppets, whose manipulation suggests life to the extent that belief emerges organically, is immersion without an overt signal that the audience must plunge in, as in *Sleep No More*.

War Horse can hardly be defined as interactive theatre either, despite Joey’s many public appearances and forays into some spectator spaces, yet it is a production whose activation requires the interaction of a credulous group of spectators. Technically, of course, *War Horse* is not true interactive theatre: we might look to Rupert Holmes’s 1985 Tony Award winner *Drood* (an adaptation of Dickens’s unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*), wherein the audience votes on the outcome of the mystery, as a more traditional example of interactive theatre. Adrian Bunting’s *Kemble’s Riot* (2011) uses audience interaction by casting them as a riotous crowd encouraged to heckle performers in a manner designed to replicate the 1809 Old Price Riots. Similarly, Ryan Dixon and R.B. Ripley’s *American Standard* (2005) equips the audience with headsets and a switch called

a “thought box,” used throughout the course of the performance to listen to characters’ inner thoughts on demand. In each of these three cases, an unresponsive audience undermines the production’s efficacy: if a group chooses en masse to refuse to vote, heckle, or use their headsets, the fullness of the production is lessened. For *War Horse*, several actors interviewed identified difficult tour stops wherein the audience (for any number of reasons) “refused to buy in” to the puppetry concept, which undermined the performance’s impact (Babb; Murray 2015), yet as this was a surprisingly rare occasion, when it did occur it was remarkable. Indeed, interactivity is a factor to *War Horse*, but, as we have discussed, its “buy-in” is so often unconscious that even the most cynical of audiences are eventually won over.

The ways in which an audience is collectively moved are vital. “Intra-audience relationships are a crucial component of reception. In a traditional auditorium, despite individual interpretations it is easy to feel the crackle of collective response” (Grunfeld), which, as we have seen, is crucial to the efficacy of a play like *War Horse*, where a group of a thousand adults may be caught up in the illusion of a puppet horse. In comparison to these other examples, *War Horse* is immersion and interaction of a different stripe: one that relies upon the oscillatory forgetting-in-viewing of gameplay rather than *Sleep No More*’s exhaustive immersion or *Kemble’s Riot*’s heckler alienation. As a game played in an auditorium, *War Horse* offers simple rules and gentle interaction, in contrast to *Sleep No More*’s convoluted, difficult, and extraordinarily elusive game rules (see Flaherty 140–145), and *Drood*’s (literally) show-stopping voter process. A game without easy-to-parse rules is far less fun to play, and the many rules in these overtly immersive and interactive examples promise fun but deliver tasks. *War Horse*’s true achievement is the way its constituent parts deliver an immersive, interactive experience without specific onus on its audience. *War Horse* audiences are not asked to don headsets or masks; instead, the puppets make the immersive, interactive gesture, which only works to deepen the impact of the production, through an invitation to play. Indeed, as North American tour “puppetry captain” Mairi Babb relates,

I feel that the use of the puppets and asking the audience to play make believe gives every audience member a sense of ownership over it: it becomes intrinsically linked to their choices and their commitment, and so I think that’s partially why it’s such an emotional experience for people, because

they have created it, and so it's theirs. They've had to work, instead of the usual experience of going to the theatre, when you sit and watch, and you'd told a story. I don't think you can watch *War Horse* without putting your own baggage into it.

There is precious little space for such oscillation, distance, or investment of baggage in interactive and immersive productions that require adherence to a set of rules that undermines a production's sense of fun.

And, after all, "fun" is the entire reason we play.

NOTES

1. A "sit-down" production is an open-ended, non-touring run, which will remain open as long as interest dictates.
2. In 2011 the Really Useful Group released the amateur rights to *Phantom* ("The *Phantom of the Opera* Released"), which essentially relinquished the aesthetic stipulations on how new productions should resemble Prince's original staging, yet official, major versions worldwide are based on Prince.
3. When *Phantom* opened in a 2006 abridged Las Vegas version, critic Steve Friess prefaced his feature article with "It's *The Phantom of the Opera*, so you know what to expect. Young Christine will sing with melancholy about her romantic interest in both a handsome aristocrat and a masked opera house squatter. And, of course, a large light fixture will crash"—all features of the text as much as the production, features this critic has elided, so confident is he of the sameness of the experience.
4. Other changes to premiere in the New York production was the onstage death of Albert's friend David in battle, a dramaturgical change requested by the American producers for greater martial realism. This detail was also enfolded into the North American tour (Babb).
5. Canadian and West End company member Brendan Wall recounted touching anecdotes about the emotional, tearful love he and his cast members felt for Joey, including goodbyes with the inanimate puppet in a quiet moment after sneaking away from the cast party. Touring company members Brendan Murray and Mairi Babb spoke with wonder about the emotional, loving response from a highly respectful Japanese audience in a memorable month-long tour stop in Tokyo. Ryan Reid spoke of a nightly *Gefährten* highlight in a post-show photo opportunity onstage where audience members could mingle with, photograph, and interact with the horses. Every company member interviewed identified strikingly different, yet always very personal highlights from their experiences.

6. *Gefährten* was the first version of *War Horse* performed in a non-Anglophone country in the local language, a feat later replicated for the Netherlands and Chinese markets. *Gefährten* was also the first National Theatre production to ever be translated and exported (see Cavendish).
7. England had a similar reluctance to staging depictions of WW1, too; it was not until R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1929) that this drought was broken. Arguably, as the vanquished side, Germany had even less to commemorate, which explains the larger gap.
8. Detailed critiques from inside China are difficult to source online, but through English-language newspaper *Beijing Today* (<https://beijingtonday.com.cn/2015/09/britains-war-horse-steps-onto-eastern-stage/>), foreign correspondents like Chen Jie (2015), and blog reactions (see, e.g., <https://clairesbeijing.wordpress.com/2015/09/01/review-war-horse/>), we can piece together positive reaction to the production.