

'HORSE' SENSE



Seth Numrich and Jude Sandy in "War Horse"

How a trio of actors and a team of designers transform a puppet into a living, breathing animal

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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IN A BROADWAY SEASON studded with larger-than-life characters portrayed by the likes of Pacino and Rylance, Joey, the titular character of "War Horse," is a standout. Proof indeed that there is magic in the theater, a horse puppet made of cane, plywood, and mesh has captured the hearts of theatergoers, and its creators are being honored this year with a special Tony Award as well as similar citations from the Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and New York Drama Critics Circle.

To learn how the illusion of live horses at work, play, and in war is so thrillingly sustained in the Lincoln Center Theater and National Theatre of Great Britain production of "War Horse," Back Stage spoke with Alex Hoeffler, Jude Sandy, and Zach Villa, one of the three actor-puppeteer teams who animate Joey, and with Toby Sedgwick, director of movement and horse sequences.

"It's basically about making the puppets act and react like a real horse," says Sedgwick, who choreographed the horse sequences and is responsible for creating the actor-driven stage props such as mud and barbed wire on the battlefield, as well as for scenic transitions such as the spectacular moment when Joey the foal transforms into a fully grown horse. "If you can give the horse strength and weight and it looks real," Sedgwick continues, "then the audience's imagination takes prominence over the puppeteers that are inside." Sounds simple, but consider the puppet: Two actors are strapped inside the 70-pound-plus body structure, while a third stands outside

wielding the head and neck on a stick. "It's strange in that you actually have six extra legs that coincide in the movement," concedes Sedgwick. But as early as 2005, some two years before the play premiered at London's National Theatre, when they did a workshop he and the puppet designers discovered that if they got the look and behavior right, "the audience can create very powerful images for themselves."

STRUGGLING TO LIVE

"An actor struggles to die onstage, but a puppet has to struggle to live," is a credo articulated by Adrian Kohler, who, with his partner Basil Jones—together they are the South Africa-based Handspring Puppet Company—created the extraordinary puppets for the show. "You have to find the breath first," says Hoeffler, who occupies the front or "heart" position inside the horse. "Basil and Adrian from Handspring told us that it's the cornerstone of their work—that's what makes the puppet live." Sedgwick explains that Kohler had to make some modifications to the otherwise ana-

tomically correct horse puppets to simulate breathing. An actual horse breathes much like a human, by expanding and contracting the ribs. But onstage, the sideways expansion of the puppet didn't register well, so Kohler invented a system in which the person who is the heart of the horse gently lifts the puppet up and down by bending his knees slightly and then somewhat straightening his legs. The effect is remarkably like that of a live animal breathing.

"It's really exciting to communicate to the others in the horse with breath," Hoeffler says. Villa occupies the "hind" position behind Hoeffler inside the horse, while Sandy, standing outside, is the "head." The three have become so cohesive a unit that they often pick up on one another's thoughts during the conversation. "Jude [Sandy] will be able to tell if we are not breathing and that will signal to him that something's up," says Hoeffler.

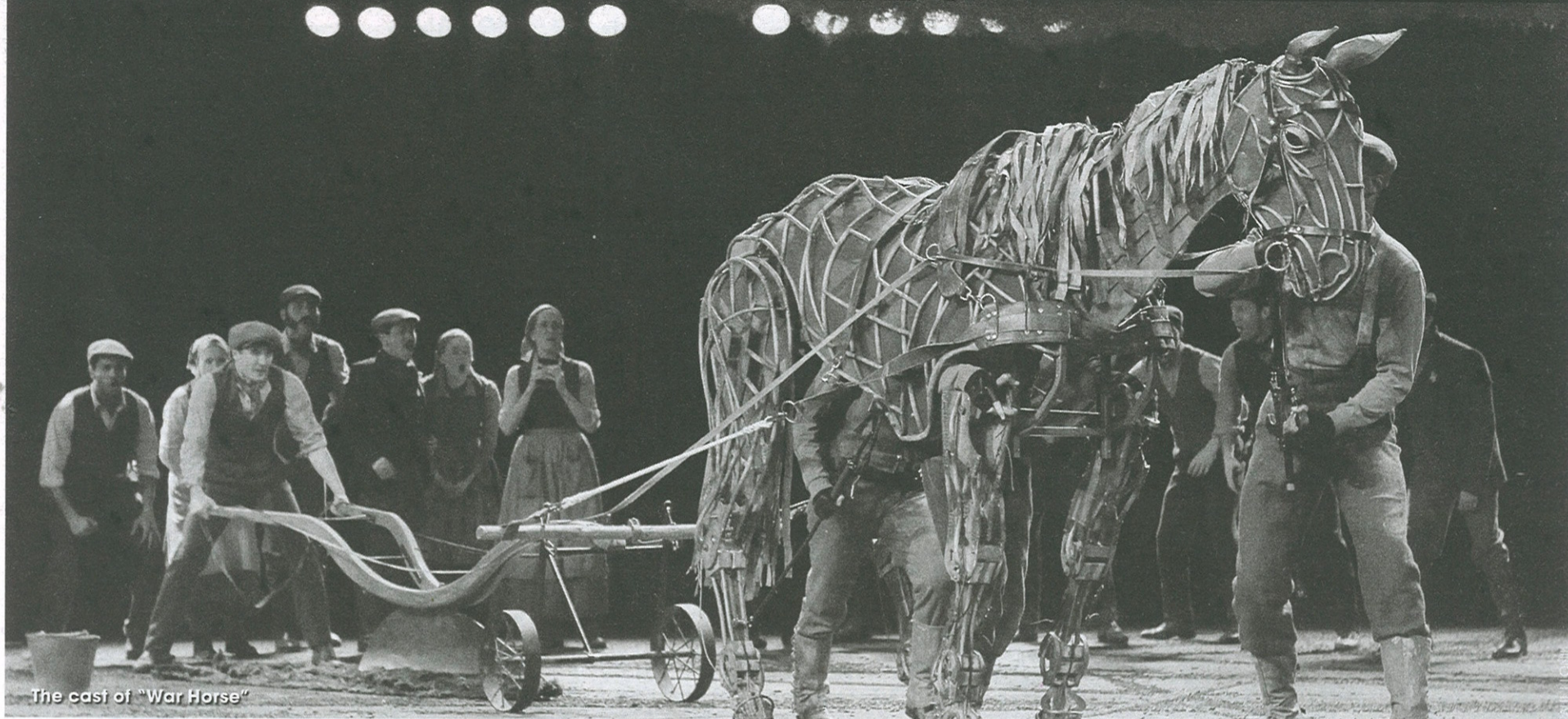
Sandy adds, "And that will mean stop and wait for the next signal, because he is doing something very specific." Explains Villa, "Typically the thought will ripple down from the brain and through the body." Hoeffler continues, "It's easy to forget when I'm in the heart position, that my eyes aren't the horse's eyes. I may be thinking something but then the question is, how do I communicate that to my head operator so that he can somehow make it manifest in the body?"

CLOSE BONDS

Because the members of a horse puppet team must have this close bond, the same three always work together onstage. There are four such teams in "War Horse," and two of them, including the Hoeffler-Sandy-Villa unit, alternate between animating Joey and bringing his companion on the battlefields, Topthorn, to life. "As an actor, the clearer your thought is, the clearer the people on stage can pick it up. It's the same within the horse," says Villa. "Every team develops their own secret way of communication and it's all nonverbal. Some people use breath cues or sound cues that literally mean go, stop, turn, whatever. Other people just kind of feel each other on a meta level." Says Hoeffler, "I don't think anyone in this cast has done anything like this before, but over time, we learn to trust our breath, breathing as we are one."

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SPOTLIGHT ON THE TONY AWARDS



The cast of "War Horse"

'HORSE'

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The three actors come from varied backgrounds. Hoeffler, born in San Antonio, is the son of actors. He received his BFA from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and moved to New York last summer. Sandy was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago. With no prior theater or performance background, he took up dance at Brown University at the late age of 26. Since then he has switched back and forth between theater and dance. Villa, a native of Iowa, started dancing at age 2 under the tutelage of his mom, a professional dance teacher. He majored in theater at Interlochen Arts Academy and graduated from Juilliard's acting division, starting his professional career in "Twelfth Night" in Central Park.

"I think it takes the physicality of a dancer or an acrobat, a true athlete, to do this show every night," says Villa. "If you are not in shape, forget it." According to Hoeffler, "Taking care of my body has been the most challenging part of this process. I sweat everything out and burn so many calories, so for me it's about drinking and eating." Sandy, who has to hold aloft the nearly 20-pound horse's head, adds, "It takes a lot of stamina. There's a section where Joey is on stage for about 20 minutes, and doing incredibly hard work; you are thinking with your whole body all the time." Villa says that he and Hoeffler are constantly in a knee-bend of some sort. "There is never any time where we stand straight up, otherwise the horse will just float away and the legs will not be touching the ground." Hoeffler points out that the horses also participate in battle. "We gallop at full pace with a rider on top swinging a saber above his head. So you have this weight of about 150 pounds above you that is rocking back and forth, as you are also trying to rock forward to simulate a gallop, while tossing legs forward."

But it's not only physical prowess that's required to bring Joey to life onstage. "I studied this white character mask when I was in school," Hoeffler recalls. "I think it is basically the same thing because I adorn myself with the horse. I become this horse and I have to communicate with this cane and mesh. What is truly liberating is the fact that I'm not actually there. No one can see me and it doesn't matter what I actually look like." Villa picks up that thought, "It takes the mindset of an actor, minus a couple of things, because you are not using your exterior and you don't use words to communicate. A lot of it has to do with the design of the puppet—it channels so much of what the three actors are bringing to the puppet. If you are tense as an actor,

you can sense that energy through the puppet."

LECOQ OF THE WALK

In training actors to adapt to the demands of a production like "War Horse," Sedgwick says he relies on techniques he learned firsthand from Jacques Lecoq, one of the great masters of physical theater. "He taught us how to 'become,' to identify with materials or elements, which is all about the actor identifying with a quality of movement, which can then be used to create a gesture that has that certain quality," Sedgwick explains that there are key scenes that are precisely choreographed—such as the one when the drunken farmer tries to put a collar on a reluctant Joey—where the angles have to be just right and the other actors need to know exactly where the horse will be. Beyond that, however, "I always stress to the puppeteers that they are portraying a horse, and a horse is always unpredictable," he says. "The actors working closely with the horses should never take a movement for granted. A horse can suddenly raise its head, and if the actor isn't careful he could get hit in the face. I like to keep that quality."

The three actor-puppeteers are also responsible for making Joey's sounds. When you hear the horse neigh, for instance, the sound is produced by all three actors together. "It starts again with a breath," says Hoeffler. "If we are all breathing together and someone proposes a sound, the other two will support it. We try to imagine the beginning, middle, and the end to a sound." Or, says Villa, "it's a quick snort or breath that we do simultaneously, but we have to be really in tune so that we know on the in-breath what that sound is gonna be. Sometimes it's a guess, and sometimes we are wrong," he continues. "You talk about the 'offer' in puppetry. It's the same thing with sound—you offer something and your group says yes or no."

"We are all three of us literally strapped into this one being, so we have no choice but to work together," notes Hoeffler. Villa adds, "In fact, two-thirds of the character that you are playing that night is not in your control, so we are actually dependent for action, breath, and thought on the other two teammates. It is the ultimate listening exercise." This can also become quite complicated, as Sandy explains: "We are monitoring so many different sources of stimulation simultaneously—what the apparatus is doing, what your partners are doing, what the specific characters are doing—that when someone proposes something, the others may be just busy dealing with the other four things going on around them at the same time."

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BACKSTAGE

Schwimmer returned a few times before landing "Friends" and performed in the company's first professional show, "Of One Blood," about the murders of three civil rights workers. It was produced at the Edge of the Lookingglass, a former late-night venue in Chicago's South Loop. Smashing Pumpkins played there before making it big, and Chicago contemporaries Jeremy Piven and John Cusack performed there with the New Criminals Theater Company (now the production company New Crime Productions, which produced the Chicago-set cult favorite "High Fidelity").

Schwimmer's success also helped Lookingglass gain recognition, according to Catlin, who says the actor's "Friends" fame was partially responsible for the company's ability to set up meetings with Chicago's mayor to secure a permanent performance space. As a result, the city selected Lookingglass for an \$8 million capital campaign, and in 2003 the company became the resident troupe at a 270-seat convertible theater in the historic Water Tower Water Works.

With the influx and outflow of company members, everyone has had to step up to keep Lookingglass going. "We established very early on the notion that anyone could be a leader," says White, who recalls a turning point at an artistic retreat in the early 1990s, when the female company members spoke up about feeling undermined by the male-dominated environment. At that point, the ensemble members decided to make a change.

"We created a system for any kind of major issue or important vote," Catlin explains. "We go around the table and everybody speaks and everybody has an opportunity to be heard."

"When you have an artistic home, you have a greater degree of self-determination," says White, "as well as artistic connections that excite you and challenge you that are hard to find as an individual actor trying to duke it out in L.A."

This feeling of community is shared by artists who come from outside the ensemble to work with it. "You automatically feel a sense of family, even if you're not one of the resident company members," says Gandhi, adding that she appreciates Lookingglass' commitment to diversity, both in the adaptations it chooses and its casting decisions, particularly as an actor of ethnicity. "People really listen to each other. It gives the actors an even stronger backbone than they already have and really makes them stretch farther than they might in another rehearsal process."

But the founders don't want to undersell the importance of luck. Good fortune combined with sometimes crippling perseverance—Catlin lived at the theater for nine months, subsisting on gas-station burritos—pulled the company from year to year.

"We've just kind of been blindly, stubbornly chugging ahead," says DiStasi. "I feel like that's why we've succeeded, because we didn't feel like it was an option to stop."



Jude Sandy, Madeleine Rose Yen, Pefer Hermann, and Cat Walleck in "War Horse"

'HORSE'

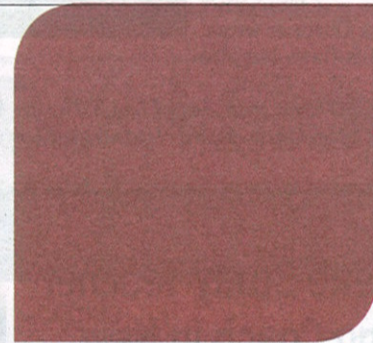
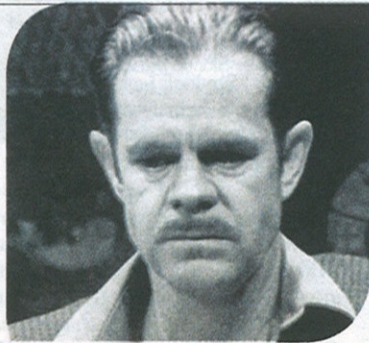
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Sedgwick uses the phrase "not being there" to describe how the actors must recede into the background in order for the audience to fully invest its imagination in the puppet. But for the actors, it seems that perfecting this art has served to heighten their acting skills. "Even though I had to remove certain elements of my acting or dance background in order to enter into the puppetry," Sandy says, "I'm learning that all of my faculties as an actor are being brought to bear on this task, because the vocal language, the breath, and gestural language of the horses are all so

specific." Villa adds, "To have that level of focus inside a horse puppet, that's something that I want to bring to any human role that I will be ever doing." Says Hoeffler, "I hope that in all my future roles I'm able to listen like an animal and be that simple. This has been the greatest acting lesson of my life."

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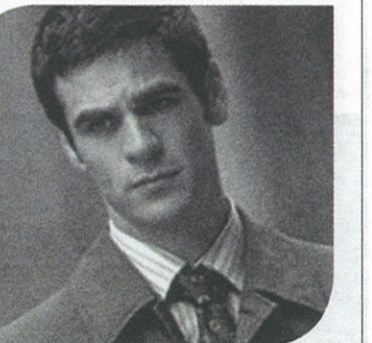
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