

Review by Jennifer Ruby

Having astonished audiences at London's National Theatre, Michael Morpurgo's children's book *War Horse* has effortlessly transferred location to The New London Theatre. Visually astonishing it may be, but the continued success of Nick Stafford's stage adaptation also lies in the superb cast and the subtle mix of humour and heart-breaking poignancy

The story is a simple one. The relationship between a young boy from rural Devon and his beloved horse Joey is destroyed when the horse is shipped off to France to serve in the First World War. Albert, longing for his horse and too young to fight, secretly joins the army and heads to France with the sole purpose of finding Joey.

However, the seemingly simplistic plot throws up far more issues than those of friendship through adversity. The provincial setting of rural Devonshire life, coupled with intervals of the romantic yet naïve songs of John Tam are harrowingly juxtaposed with horrific battle scenes where young boys and horses fall to the sound of machine guns.

It is not just the futility of war that is dealt with. Joey and his fellow horse Topthorn, as they are transferred from the English to the Germans and then back again, show us that humanity can be present on both sides of the war, a relevant message for today.

As the dialogue switches between English and German and drifts, at times, into French, Joey remains as the constant link, revealing that compassion and kindness can be present on both sides, even if it is only for a horse.

Although it is the plight of the horses that takes centre stage, the loss of human life is the most distressing undercurrent as Albert's mother, played by Bronagh Gallagher, puts her sons' grief for his horse into perspective: "Half the boys in the village are dead, and all you care about is your bleeding horse?"

The stars of the play are undoubtedly the magnificent horse puppets. It is easy to forget that you are watching three handlers manipulating the creations of the Handspring Puppet Company, as life-sized horses bound effortlessly around the stage.

The puppetry is not the only hauntingly believable aspect of the play. The role of Albert, consumed with loneliness and grief is harrowingly yet humorously played by Kit Harington and the compassion of the German soldier, played by Patrick O'Kane is poignant.

Although the iconic children's book seems to translate better to an adult audience on stage and at times verges a little too far into sentimentality, it is impossible not to get caught up in the innate humanity of the story and be blown away by those amazing puppets.