

# War Horse—All heart and no head

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*Directed by Steven Spielberg; based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo.*

In the First World War, Britain lost approximately 887,000 men, nearly 2 percent of the population as a whole. For every eight soldiers who went to the front, one would not return home. Entire villages were decimated by the war and it was not uncommon for a family to lose all its sons. To this day, World War I remains Britain's costliest conflict, despite the country's entry into World War II and other colonial wars of the 20th century.

Given the enormous carnage of the war, which was unprecedented to this point in world history, the notion of a "Pax Britannica" was dealt a blow from which it has never recovered. Millions of people in Britain and internationally began to see the old order—of kings and queens, the church, the military—as irrational and unjust, something to be swept away by means of revolution.

Any serious artistic treatment of World War I has to take this basic truth into consideration. An artwork that merely uses imperialist war as a backdrop and accepts such a state of affairs as a given, and something that will not change, cannot offer any real insight or provide dramatic lessons to its audience.

Such is the case with director Steven Spielberg's latest film, *War Horse*. The story concerns a farmer and his family who reside in Devon, England before the start of the war. Ted Narracott (Peter Mullan) purchases a young thoroughbred horse for the purposes of plowsharing on his modest farm. His wife Rose (Emily Watson) does not approve, noting the horse's small size. The purchase is intended, in part, to spite Lyons (David Thewlis) the landlord of the farm, who earlier tried to outbid Ted for the horse.

Ted's son Albert (Jeremy Irvine) admires the horse,

which he has named Joey, and devotes his time to training him to plowshare their field of turnips. Eventually war comes, and every able-bodied man is conscripted, as well as horses for the war effort. Falling behind on the rent, Ted sells Joey to an officer named Captain Nicholls (Tom Hiddleston), who promises Albert he will take care of his horse and some day return him.

Captain Nicholls takes Joey to France, where he is part of a cavalry unit that will attack the Germans by surprise. The use of machineguns by the Germans in turn decimates the British and renders the cavalry charge obsolete. Joey falls into the hands of two German soldiers, and thus begins an odyssey that is overly sentimental and highly improbable.

Through a tragic turn of events, Joey is cared for by an elderly French man and his granddaughter before once again being discovered by the Germans and used to transport artillery. Eventually, the horse is lost in the bloody *mélange* of no-mans-land and both sides, German and British, declare a temporary truce to rescue the wounded animal.

*War Horse*, the novel, is a children's story created by Michael Morpurgo, who commented in an interview, "I had discovered that in the First World War a million horses had been killed—and that was only on our side. Up at the Duke of York I had met an old soldier who had been at the Front with the Devon Yeomanry, 'with 'orses,' he said. He told me how he used to confide his worst fears, his deepest feelings, to his horse as he fed him at night.

"I had been so moved by this. I knew almost as I was listening to him that I had to tell the story of a farm horse that leaves our village in 1914, bought as a cavalry horse by the British army, that is captured by the Germans and winters on a French farm. I wanted to write the story of the universal suffering of that dreadful war, seen through the eyes of a horse."

To the film's credit, an enormous amount of attention is paid to recreating historical events down to the last detail. It is a truly remarkable feature of contemporary cinema that events from nearly a century ago, or centuries ago, can be brought to life in a way that is astonishingly accurate.

The scenes of trench warfare, in particular, are well done and do bring the horror of the war to a modern audience. Before going "over the top" to charge the German barbed wire and machine gun nests, the British soldiers hand over all wallets and personal effects to an officer who assures them they will all be returned "if" they survive the assault.

One soldier is ordered to stay back in the trench and shoot anyone who retreats. The look on his face as more and more of his comrades slowly begin to make their way back to their trench after the disastrous attack—and still he cannot force himself to shoot them—is one of the film's more memorable images.

Spielberg is gifted in that he can make the most seemingly alien situations feel human. This is the case with his depiction of trench warfare, and in one particular scene where a British soldier and his German counterpart decide to put aside killing each other for a moment to rescue the horse. But unlike other films directed by Spielberg—*Munich*, *Schindler's List*, *Catch Me If You Can*—*War Horse* falls into the category of melodrama.

One critic called *War Horse* "shallow and manipulative," which might sound harsh, but in light of the film's weak story is somewhat justified. Spielberg no doubt wanted to create something of an "antiwar" movie. But this would include not just depicting gut-wrenching scenes of combat, but showing class differences between the officers and the enlisted men, and within other areas of society at the time, as part of the overall imperialist nature of the war.

To be sure, certain token concessions are made in this regard—the snobbery of some officers, the negative light cast on the landlord at the beginning of the film—but little else. The reasons for the war are never questioned, much like Spielberg's jingoistic *Saving Private Ryan*. Instead, all these questions are pushed aside and the audience is left with a banal "war is hell" message.

Moreover, what is it exactly about this story that makes it, as some reviewers have suggested, a "universal" meditation on war and suffering? If this

were truly a "timeless" story told through the eyes of a horse, why have it occur during World War I? Why not the Peloponnesian war, or the War of 1812? There has to be a definite reason why an artist would choose the first imperialist World War as the subject.

Neither the emotional score by John Williams, nor the picturesque cinematography of Janus Kaminski (which is clearly influenced by John Ford), can hide the fact that there is no real compelling drama at work here. Even if the viewer is moved by the plight of this horse and his owner, the question needs to be asked: are there not greater tragedies taking place in the world that should be explored?



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