



Cody Fern as Albert with Joey

War Horse a moving epic

Stage role helps lead actor conquer fear of horses, writes Chris Herden

Landing the lead role in one of the most anticipated stage shows ever to tour Australia not only has propelled Western Australian actor Cody Fern into the limelight but also has helped the 24-year-old overcome his fear of horses.

"I don't think the producers were aware that I was petrified of horses when they cast me," he confesses. "*War Horse* has certainly helped me overcome that fear to a certain extent. I now have a huge appreciation of a horse's temperament but the fear is always going to be there."

Born and raised in a small remote town hundreds of kilometres east of Perth, Fern was often surrounded by cattle and farm animals but always wary of getting too close to horses. "It goes back to when I was about six - growing up in the country, I was continually exposed to horses and I've seen what they can do when they are crazy and unpredictable."

He even turned to a horse whisperer as he

prepared for his role as Albert. "I worked with a lady who takes in neglected racehorses. She paired me with a very wild colt and showed me how to work on an emotional level with the horse."

War Horse is based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo (a Steven Spielberg-directed film adaptation was released in 2011) and it has theatregoers worldwide sobbing in the aisles.

It's no secret that the big appeal of *War Horse* is the life-like horse puppets. The show's unbridled power to move people is an acknowledgment of the splendid artistry of South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company which has brought full-scale horses to life on the stage - their flanks, hides and sinews built of aluminium, flexible cane and mesh steel. The show gives a whole new meaning to the word 'puppetry'. So accomplished are the teams of three puppeteers in creating Joey's ear flicks, bows, canters and rhythmic breathing that their presence on stage is barely

noticeable. Scenes with Joey as a foal look more like the three puppet controllers are following the foal just like a foal would chase its mother.

"It's actually a very technical show and, as Joey's handler, I have to be highly attuned to what the puppeteers are doing at any stage - it would be so easy to cop a black eye," says Fern, who speaks from experience as he had to withdraw from a Sydney season preview when he injured his ankle while dismounting the Joey puppet.

Fern says he can't help but notice when audience members are choking back the tears in the show's most poignant moments, such as when baby Joey first appears, or later when the full-grown Joey is whinnying in distress when he becomes entangled in coils of barbed wire on the French battlefields.

War Horse from 6 to 28 July at Lyric Theatre, QPAC. Tickets from \$69.90 plus fee at www.qpac.com.au.

The National Theatre of Great Britain's production of *War Horse* is in full gallop, playing to packed houses across the globe. The drama is set during the outbreak of World War I. Kindly, hard-working Devonshire lad Albert Narracott is determined to journey to the frontline trenches of France so that he may find and bring home his beloved horse (and only friend) Joey. Although he's underage, Albert enlists to join the fight.

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