



# War Horse

TO NAIL THE EQUINE ACTION IN HIS NEW WAR MOVIE ABOUT A BOY'S QUEST TO SAVE HIS HORSE FROM THE FRONT LINES, STEVEN SPIELBERG TURNED TO TRAINER BOBBY LOVGREN.



*By Elizabeth Kaye McCall*

**W**AR HORSE GALLOPED STRAIGHT TO HOLLYWOOD after producers Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy saw the mega-hit play in London. But unlike the stage production, in which actor-puppeteers work theater magic with lifelike horse puppet creations, the film required real horses. And that required a real horse trainer.

It was training on a scale never before attempted by Bobby Lovgren, horse master and head trainer on *War Horse*.

"I had never worked with Steven Spielberg before, so working for someone of his status and the movies he's made, I was a little nervous. But he was very approachable." That was good, but the timetable was another matter. Compared with the many films Lovgren has worked on for six months or longer, the three months or so allotted to principal production for *War Horse* made for a formidable assignment. "It was a seven-day-a-week project for me, so it was constant, always working and getting ready for the next week."









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Director Steven Spielberg and actor Jeremy Irvine on the set of *War Horse*.

But the grueling schedule was nothing the veteran Hollywood trainer couldn't handle. The final protégé of the legendary Glenn Randall Sr.—who trained Roy Rogers' horses—Lovgren had his plate full, arriving in England straight from *Cowboys & Aliens* only a month before *War Horse* started production. Meanwhile, Lovgren's star trick horse, Finder, took a transatlantic flight direct from California to reach the set in England. A first-time flier, the bay Thoroughbred gelding traveled like an old pro. "It's more comfortable than being in a horse trailer, less bumpy," Lovgren says.

As soon as the Hollywood master trainer and his favorite trick actor horse arrived in England, hard work on the epic tale began.

**S**ET AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF RURAL ENGLAND AND CONTINENTAL Europe during World War I, *War Horse* unfolds as a young horse bought at auction becomes the cherished companion of Albert, a farmer's son. The boy names the horse Joey and trains him, and the two bond deeply. When Albert's father sells the horse to the British cavalry, Joey is sent off to war. Too young to enlist, Albert vows to find his horse and bring him home. Ultimately Joey serves the British, the Germans, and even a French farmer and his granddaughter before ending up in no man's land.

Through the horse's harrowing battlefield ordeals, the audience sees the suffering of both sides—and of the millions of horses literally caught (and killed) in the crossfire. But in the midst of the darkness of wartime, the spirit-renewing devotion of the boy and his horse shines.

The ability of the screenplay, written by Lee Hall and Richard Curtis, to so effectively tug at the heartstrings of viewers could not have been achieved without the believability of the horses on-screen. For that, much of the credit goes to Lovgren. The South African native was a multi-tasking fixture on set. As horse master, or head wrangler, he oversaw the complex animal logistics central to the film. "Obviously, I was there controlling everything. Everything that happened with any of the animals went through me first: setting it up for the other trainers, making it work, setting it up so the horses could get their jobs done."

Lovgren, in turn, is quick to credit the directors (he especially singles out first





Actors Benedict Cumberbatch, Patrick Kennedy, and Tom Hiddleston.

assistant director Adam Somner, whom he'd worked with on *Seabiscuit*), producers, and of course the horses. And one special horse in particular: Of the dozen who played the role of Joey, it was Finder, the four-legged thespian, who got the job as Lovgren's utility stunt horse. "He was kind of the double," Lovgren explains. "Whenever there was something difficult, we would use him to 'cheat.' He has a really fine, smaller face." Which made Finder perfect for Hollywood magic.

Lovgren met and trained Finder on *Seabiscuit*; after the film, Lovgren bought him. A grandson of noted racehorse Key to the Mint, Lovgren's 12-year-old equine actor is registered with The Jockey Club as Finders Key, even though his talents seem more suited to SAG. "He is the best horse I've ever had," Lovgren says. "He's truly amazing. The wilder looking things he's so very good at—the fast things that make you believe the horse is scared or panicked. Those kinds of situations are very hard to train—the emotions—and he's very good and believable at portraying them. He has so much animation and personality. It just brings much more to the table. He's very confident."

But the horse actor isn't without certain weaknesses. Take the lush green grass in an English field where Joey was supposed to stand, but not eat. "Being from California, Finder had never seen such grass in his life!" says Lovgren, who has a ranch on the outskirts of Los Angeles. "Several things like that were very difficult."

Ditto the daunting logistics. "They would set up temporary stables for us every location we went to," Lovgren says. "They had a complete crew that would go and set up our stables and some training areas for us. It was a huge deal, getting everything done from location to location. We'd have to take the horses with us even if they weren't working with a particular sequence, so we were able to train them for the next week's work. Basically, the facility went with us wherever we went!"

The 15-plus crew of people working under Lovgren included four trainers for different disciplines—from riding to driving to liberty work (where a horse is trained to work in an open environment, free of tack, to respond to its handler's voice and body language). To be historically accurate, the horses had to pull cannons and carriages and generally re-enact World War I. "Obviously, there was a way that Steven [Spielberg] would want it," Lovgren says. "I needed to be able to say, 'This is my best option. I can do this.' And, if he didn't like that, then having some other

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## War Horse, The Play

THE LIFELIKE PUPPETS LEAP ACROSS  
THE POND FOR A U.S. RUN.

**A**da Gates Patton couldn't wait for the five-time Tony Award-winning play *War Horse* to launch its national U.S. tour in 2012 and come to the West Coast. After getting video clips of the hit play from horse friends all over the country, Patton hopped a plane from her home in Los Angeles to the Big Apple to see the production that swept the 2011 theater awards.

"It was well worth the trip to New York to see *War Horse*," says Patton, who isn't just anybody when it comes to horse-related topics. The first woman farrier licensed to shoe Thoroughbred racehorses in the United States and Canada, Patton is the official horseshoe inspector for the Rose Parade and was inducted into the International Horseshoeing Hall of Fame in 2011.

Set at the outbreak of World War I, *War Horse* is based on the children's novel by British author Michael Morpurgo and was adapted for the stage by playwright Nick Stafford. It tells the tale of young Albert, whose horse, Joey, is sold to the British cavalry and shipped to France. Soon caught in enemy crossfire, the horse must serve on both sides in the war, eventually ending up in no man's land. Too young to enlist, Albert vows to find his horse and bring him home to England.

"It wasn't an opera, but it was like an opera," says Patton. "The characters are so real, I felt like the boy—I hated the father for selling Joey." No small feat, considering that Joey, along with the other horses, is portrayed by a puppet.

Life-size horse puppets are, in fact, the heart of the play. Not just any puppets, but the unique and astonishing puppets of Cape Town, South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company, whose creations so inspired Tom Morris, who was then associate director of London's National Theatre, that he sought out stories where a Handspring puppet might portray the leading role. When Morris' mother suggested he consider Morpurgo's *War Horse*, the book narrated by a horse was on its way to becoming a lauded theatrical production with life-size equine puppets.

The horses, which are the work of puppeteer partners Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones of the 30-year-old Handspring, earned the duo a special Tony





**W**ar Horse opened at the Lincoln Center Theater in New York on April 14, 2011, and continues playing there in an open-ended engagement. The production begins a 20-city national tour during the 2012–13 season, debuting at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, June 13–July 22; other stops include San Francisco, Dallas, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. [www.warhorseonbroadway.com](http://www.warhorseonbroadway.com)

Award for outstanding creative artistry. According to the Tony Awards website, the “galloping, charging horses...strong enough for men to ride, their flanks, hides, and sinews built of steel, leather, and aircraft cables” aren’t just life-size, they’re lifelike. “The horse puppets were astounding—the bend in the legs, the tilt of the head, the ears,” says Patton. “It was a microcosm of the equine spirit, courage, and selflessness.”

Since the National Theatre’s epic production made its world premiere in London in 2007, more than 1 million people in the United Kingdom alone have seen it. The numbers are powered by word of mouth and glowing reviews. Sam Marlowe raved in a 2007 review for *The Times*: “So exhilarating that it makes you rejoice to be alive.... [A] sweeping drama of extraordinary power.... Its sheer skill and invention are simply awe-inspiring,” calling the puppetry “nothing short of miraculous.” In April 2011, *The Hollywood Reporter*’s David Rooney exclaimed, “This spell-binding London hit deserves every superlative thrown its way, and should earn an equally ecstatic reception on Broadway.”

Directed by Morris and Marianne Elliott, the play continues an open-ended run at London’s West End. On this side of the pond, *War Horse* has racked up mountains of acclaim, winning best play awards from Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and The Drama League, as well as the American Theatre Wing’s Tony Award. With such achievement onstage, how will *War Horse* the movie—which, as Marilyn Stasio in a review for *Variety* points out, will have “real, live animals to represent the 8 million horses that were killed in World War I or sold to French butchers at the end”—appeal to someone who loved the stage production?

Patton takes a moment to consider. “I will see the film, but there’s something about the stage....” — E.K.M.

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ways to do it. I never say no, unless it's something unsafe for the horse or the actors."

To manage logistics and switch gears to training when horses were acting, Lovgren drew on decades of experience. He initially gained note among Hollywood's elite horse-training ranks while working for Randall Sr.'s son, the late Corky Randall (*The Black Stallion*), on films like *The Mask of Zorro*. And he drew on a little real cowboy action from his own background. After growing up in Johannesburg, where his parents own one of South Africa's largest riding establishments, Lovgren came to California in the late 1980s to work for Randall Sr. and competed at times in the National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity before becoming one of the busiest trainers in Hollywood.

Normal horse training, the 46-year-old Tinseltown veteran says, is "very, very different" from training for the movie business. "You have to be able to know how to communicate with the director, have him understand what you can do, and what the animals can do. If you can't get it on film, I don't care how good a trainer you are. And you have to understand where the camera would be. Or, that just around the camera there's going to be 30 people, lights, and shiny boards and all those things. When you train, you have to train under those circumstances."

### C&I Online

To learn how equine makeup makes the carnage look real while the American Humane Association keeps the horses safe on the set, go to [www.cowboysindians.com](http://www.cowboysindians.com).

**A** VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN YOUNG ACTOR BEFORE SPIELBERG DISCOVERED him during a cold reading, Jeremy Irvine was working in the chorus of the Royal Shakespeare Company playing a tree before his film debut in *War Horse*. Within months of joining the film, the young man who plays Albert became quite a horseman.

"I assigned people to give him lessons and work with him," Lovgren says. "He would come by while we were doing prep and I would basically use him as one of my wranglers or assistants. We really didn't treat him as an actor. He would muck out stalls, he would saddle, all of that himself, and I really think that shows."

While Spielberg directed Irvine's acting, Lovgren and the equine contingent brought an authenticity to his performance with horses. "Every day he would work with someone else, do something different, help some of my other trainers. Jeremy had to work with the horses to be familiar with them. He had to be comfortable with a lot of the things we did with Finder, when he was rearing and appearing obnoxious. You can only be comfortable with that if you have some knowledge about it."

And having that knowledge came from a dedication to the horse sequences that Lovgren says isn't typical for Hollywood. "A lot of times, if the actor comes out and rides once or twice they think it's good enough," he says. "On *War Horse*, they were out there three, four times a week, and they were there all day. It really made a difference when we went to film and were on camera because they were *good* at what they were doing. You can't make it believable if it's not real. They were really doing their job well."

Lovgren thinks the devotion came from the top. "[Producer] Kathleen Kennedy's daughters ride. She understood the horse stuff." And then there's Somner: "I can't say enough about our first [assistant director]. He understood the little things that it took to make the horses work. ... Adam went out of his way to take the time to set things up and see what everyone's needs were."

As for his own needs? Lovgren recently returned home with favorite horse Finder from yet another production out of the country (an untitled *Snow White* project starring Julia Roberts) and is looking forward to some motocross outings with his three sons and wife—and of course to the December 2011 release of *War Horse*. "Who I worked for, the things we needed to do with the horses—this film was honestly the biggest and best thing that's ever happened to me."