

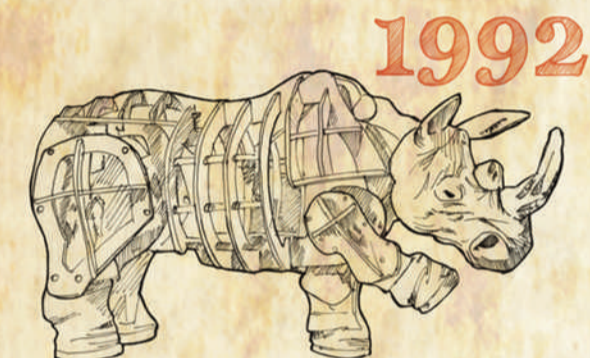
# The Illusion of Joey

BY BONNIE BERKOWITZ AND ALBERTO CUADRA

Hanging motionless backstage, the puppet star of "War Horse" looks only vaguely equine, like framework on which someone plans to build an animal. But the preening, snorting, galloping Joey that bursts onstage is, without question, a horse. The difference, says its creators, is the movement and the audience. "I think part of what's special about puppets is that you're working with a thing that is dead, and you have to struggle every second on the stage to make it live," said Basil Jones, executive producer of Handspring Puppet Co. in South Africa, which created all the show's puppets. "Once there is enough puppet pulling you in, you start filling in the rest," said Adrian Kohler, Handspring's artistic director and Jones's partner of 41 years. "But you've got to be convinced in the beginning, and that's the hard part." Here is a look at Joey and the puppeteers who bring him to life.

## A horse's evolution

Joey is the culmination of years of Kohler's experimentation in designing and refining puppets that move like animals.



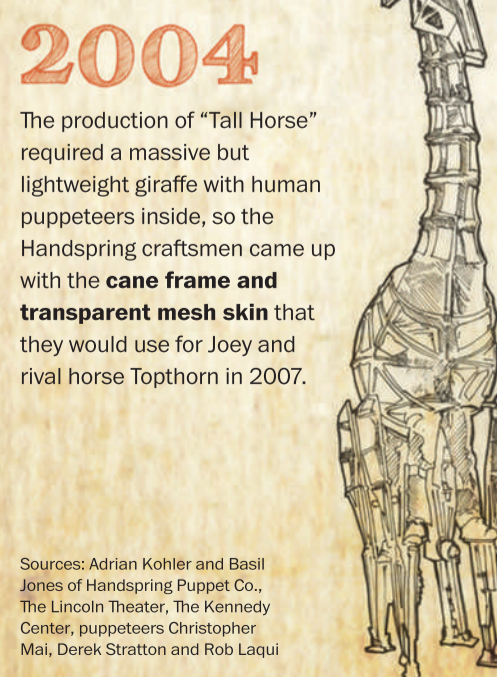
Joey's **leg mechanism** can be traced to the play "Woyzeck on the Highveld," in which a miniature rhinoceros needed to tap its front leg to pretend to count. The jointed leg was controlled from behind with a lever and pulleys.



Two years later, a cynical, anthropomorphic hyena in "Faustus in Africa" had to be able to play checkers, so a **more articulated paw** was created in which two movements were controlled by a single cable. It was this puppet that future "War Horse" co-director Tom Morris saw and kept in mind.

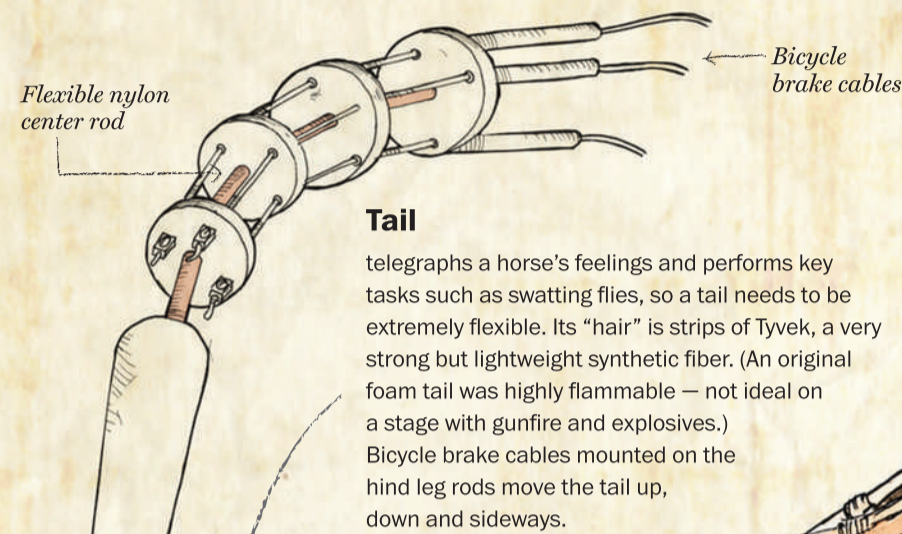


The lead character in "The Chimp Project" required extremely **flexible limbs and hands**, because in the story, a domesticated chimp teaches sign language to wild chimps. It also needed to be able to bare its teeth, so the **head control system** became more complex.



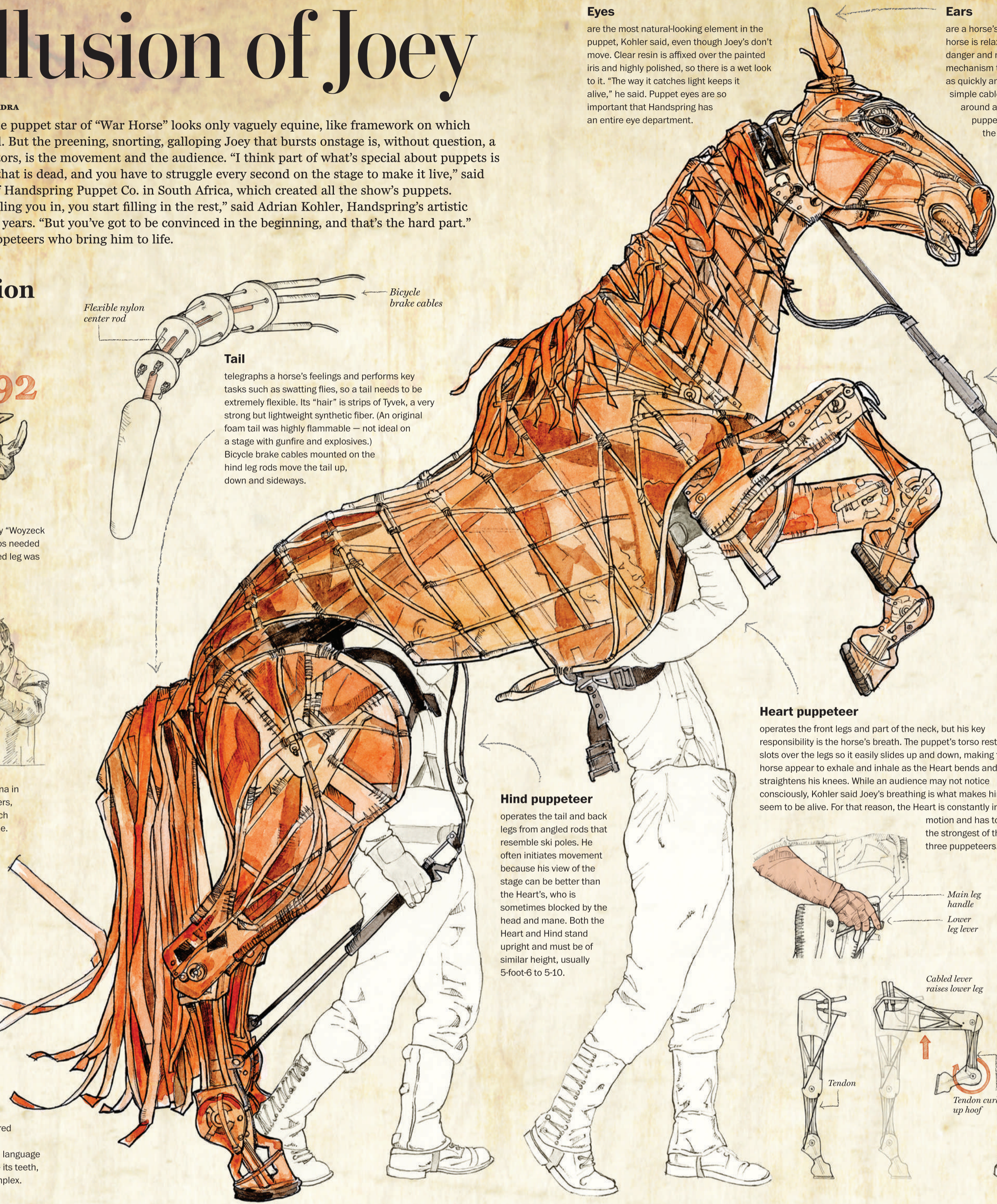
The production of "Tall Horse" required a massive but lightweight giraffe with human puppeteers inside, so the Handspring craftsmen came up with the **cane frame and transparent mesh skin** that they would use for Joey and rival horse Tophorn in 2007.

Sources: Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Co., The Lincoln Theater, The Kennedy Center, puppeteers Christopher Mai, Derek Stratton and Rob Laqui



### Tail

telegraphs a horse's feelings and performs key tasks such as swatting flies, so a tail needs to be extremely flexible. Its "hair" is strips of Tyvek, a very strong but lightweight synthetic fiber. (An original foam tail was highly flammable — not ideal on a stage with gunfire and explosives.) Bicycle brake cables mounted on the hind leg rods move the tail up, down and sideways.

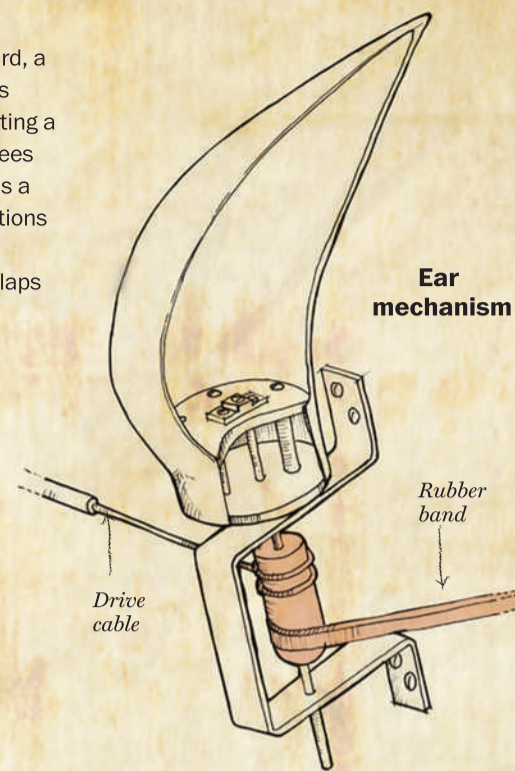


### Eyes

are the most natural-looking element in the puppet, Kohler said, even though Joey's don't move. Clear resin is affixed over the painted iris and highly polished, so there is a wet look to it. "The way it catches light keeps it alive," he said. Puppet eyes are so important that Handspring has an entire eye department.

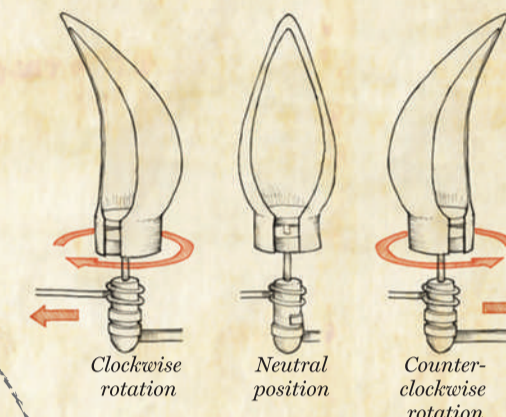
### Ears

are a horse's key emotional indicator. If its ears face forward, a horse is relaxed, or maybe interested. Backward? It senses danger and may run or fight. Kohler spent 25 years perfecting a mechanism that would make leather ears twitch 180 degrees as quickly and effortlessly as a horse's do. The solution was a simple cable and a rubber band, pulling in opposite directions around a dowel. With a flick of one finger, the Head puppeteer can move one or both ears. This system flaps the wings of the bird puppets in the play as well.



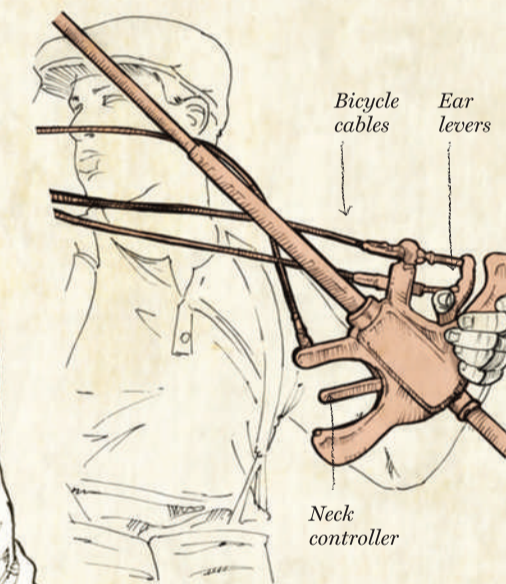
### Mouth

appears to nip and eat, ears appear to flatten and eyes seem to widen in fear. But none of these things actually happens. The eyes are fixed, the ears stay upright, and the mouth has no moving parts. "People come up to us and they say, 'How did you do that?'" said Jones. "And the answer is you did that! And that's what people find delightful, when they realize that they've actually been party to the creation."



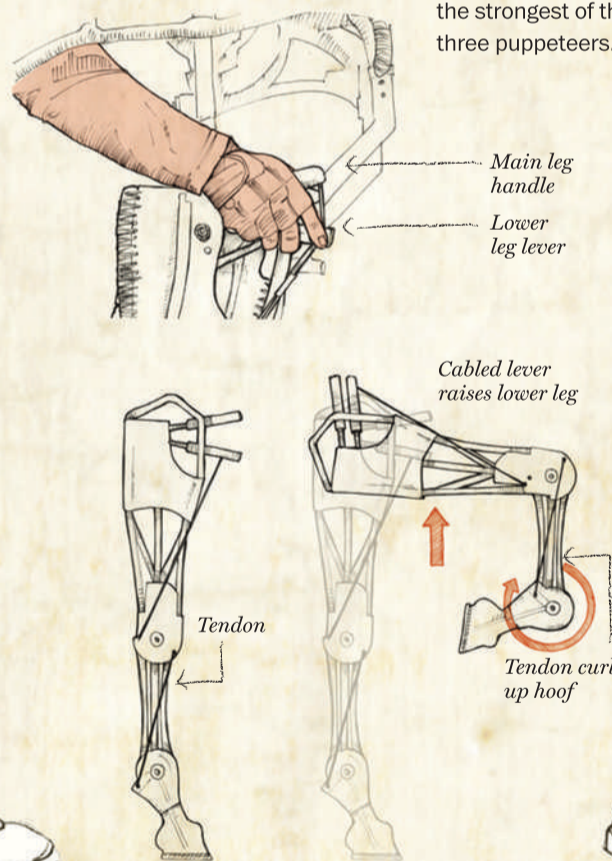
### Head puppeteer

stands outside the horse and operates the ears, head and neck. The control handle flips easily to either side so that the puppeteer doesn't get stuck between the horse and the audience. One of the Head's main responsibilities is using a fixed handle behind the puppet's eyes to make sure the head is oriented correctly, so the horse appears to be looking where it's supposed to be looking.



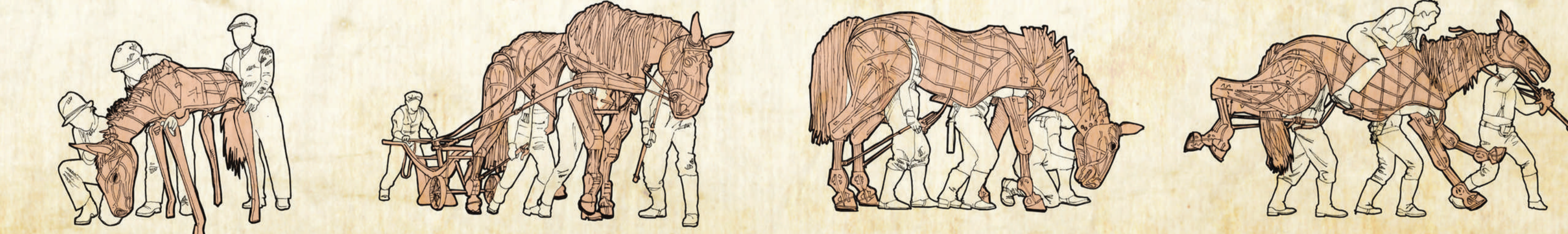
### Heart puppeteer

operates the front legs and part of the neck, but his key responsibility is the horse's breath. The puppet's torso rests in slots over the legs so it easily slides up and down, making the horse appear to exhale and inhale as the Heart bends and straightens his knees. While an audience may not notice consciously, Kohler said Joey's breathing is what makes him seem to be alive. For that reason, the Heart is constantly in motion and has to be the strongest of the three puppeteers.



### Hind puppeteer

operates the tail and back legs from angled rods that resemble ski poles. He often initiates movement because his view of the stage can be better than the Heart's, who is sometimes blocked by the head and mane. Both the Heart and Hind stand upright and must be of similar height, usually 5-foot-6 to 5-10.



### Character development

Joey begins as a foal, a cross between a thoroughbred and a draft horse. This puppet is less flexible than the adult version but still requires three puppeteers. No puppets in the show contain electronics or robotics (with the exception of a tank made by another company). Kohler prefers simple mechanisms operated by people, so that each performance is unique.

### Realistic gait

From early in training, puppeteers concentrate on walking, trotting, galloping, and even pulling a plow and limping as a horse would. Walking is a specific four-count pattern: Front right, back left; front left, back right. Trotting is two counts as hooves move in pairs. Galloping is six counts: One-two, three-four, with five-six being air time. Within weeks, the gait becomes automatic.

### Lightweight construction

The puppet's body is made primarily of cane, which is easily shaped when wet, but is strong — yet not rigid — when dry. The puppets are wired together first, then each wire is replaced with waxed twine for more flexibility. The wispy, transparent skin appears to change color with the lighting. Joey is about eight feet tall and weighs about 85 pounds.

### Rugged spine

Joey's spine is made of aluminum strong enough to support a rider. The puppet's legs bear no weight; the Heart and Hind carry it all using custom-tailored, backpack-style harnesses that slide into the torso. Because of the weight and the instability of a rider balanced above two puppeteers' heads, scenes with riders are limited to less than seven minutes.

# It behooves Head, Hind and Heart to act as one

Puppeteers learn to move, sound, even breathe like a horse

BY BONNIE BERKOWITZ

Let's get the basics out of the way first: No, it's not hot or claustrophobic in there. Yes, they can see most of what is going on. Sure, they stumble once in a while. And that joke you're dying to make about the back end? He has already heard it.

Life as the horse can be exhausting and unpredictable, but Joey's Head, Hind and Heart have become downright comfortable in his transparent skin.

"I actually love the anonymity of it," said Rob Laqui, a dancer from Minnesota who brings up the rear in one of three tries who will play Joey at the Kennedy Center. "I like being able to be this character and have this arc throughout the entire show, and yet not be seen. I have no qualms at all about being in the puppet. Even from the audition process, I was like, 'Oh, well this makes sense. I like it in here. I was made to be a horse's hind!'"

To successfully bring Joey to life, the three-person puppeteer team has to be the star of the show while being as inconspicuous as possible. Being "in horse," as they call it, is so demanding that horse teams alternate shows and play small roles such as birds or soldiers on their off days.

"I think the anonymity of the performer helps the puppet horse to live, because the actor is not screaming for attention," said Adrian Kohler, founder of Handspring Puppet Company.

When he and co-founder Basil Jones cast and train the show's puppeteers, they look specifically for men and women willing to handle the physical demands while sacrificing their egos. So ingrained is the all-for-Joey concept that if you want to interview one member of a horse team, you'd better bring three chairs. At the show's insistence, the Head, Heart and Hind are a package deal.

"It doesn't come alive unless all three of us are there," said the Head to Laqui's Hind, a.k.a. Christopher Mai of San Francisco, who is also the chief puppeteer in the traveling company.

"We have great team chemistry," said the Heart, Derek Stratton of Norwich, N.Y. "Each night there's a journey we're going to go on, both as individuals and as one character."

It takes at least two weeks of intensive training before the technical aspects of operating the puppet become second nature. Each role requires such different skills that there is no crossover: Once a Heart, always a Heart. During six weeks or more of rehearsal, performers' instincts take over, and they are ready to convince an audience that they are a horse.

"We have to believe with our full bodies, with our full souls, with our full heart that we are this character," said Laqui. "It's exhausting. ... After every show, I have to take a 15-minute decompression moment to be like, 'I am not a horse. I can speak English now!'"

Oh, yes — the language. Joey the horse narrates the novel by Michael Morpurgo from which this play is adapted. But in the play, Joey speaks only horse.

"Each team is responsible for their horse noises," said Mai. "Each team is quite different, and almost every single time, each horse noise is quite different."

It takes three to whinny, for instance, because horses can hold far more air in their lungs than humans. So the Head might start the whinny, the Heart might enter and pick up the middle and the Hind might jump in and finish it.

This is an effective yet imperfect system. "There are definitely times where I'll make a noise and I'll be like, 'That was like a chicken meets a turkey — I don't know what I just made,'" said Laqui. "But what's sort of cool is this openness and freedom that we're granted, we're allowed to fail and it's okay."

Actors relish that license to be spontaneous, not only in sound but in movement.

They are instructed not to behave, because animals often don't. They need to hit certain choreographed cues for safety, but there is room for improvisation. For instance, if Joey nuzzles a soldier near him on Friday, he might nip him Saturday and shy away from him Sunday.

"We respond differently because the actors deliver their lines differently," said Laqui. "They have different intents or intensity behind a line and we have to respond in kind."

The three agreed that the toughest scenes are the ones in which Joey stands still. It is then that they are unscripted and must use their own imaginations to keep the horse alive, flicking its tail, watching a bird — just being a horse. Most of all, Joey must keep breathing, his chest rising rhythmically up and down on the power of Stratton's quadriceps. Otherwise, they say, the spell is broken, and Joey is reduced to three guys and a puppet.

berkowitz@washpost.com

### WAR HORSE

Oct. 23-Nov. 11, in the Opera House, Kennedy Center. Tickets \$25-\$175, 800-444-1324 or 202-467-4600