



# IS THIS A PUPPET I SEE BEFORE ME?

The director behind the global stage hit *War Horse* takes on Shakespeare – no strings attached

Above: members of the Bristol Old Vic company with their *A Midsummer Night's Dream* puppets. From left, David Ricardo Pearce as Oberon, Saskia Portway as Titania, Colin Michael Carmichael as Peaseblossom and Jon Trenchard with the puppet of Cobweb. Inset, director Tom Morris and, right, the hit stage production of *War Horse*



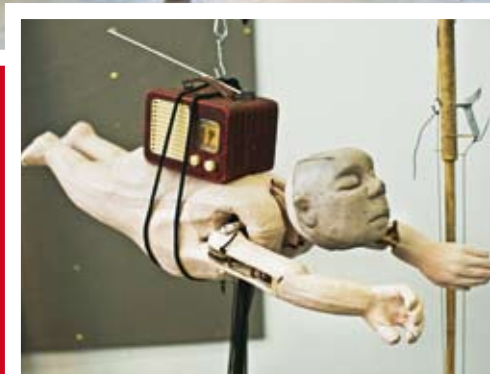
Where's my head?' asks a perplexed actor when he finds the face of his puppet has morphed overnight into a giant pair of pliers. It's not quite the sort of scenario you're likely to witness during a theatre rehearsal, but then again what the actor is preparing for is no ordinary production of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's February and at the Bristol Old Vic acclaimed director Tom Morris, whose puppet-based adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* has to date grossed more than £50 million worldwide, is counting down to the unveiling of his latest collaboration with Adrian Kohler's pioneering Handspring Puppet Company. 'I suppose it is something of a crazy experiment,' says Morris of his audacious plan to bring puppetry to a staging of the 400-year-old comedy. 'But then again, so was *War Horse*. The genius of that play was in using life-

sized puppets to bring horses to life. Since opening in 2007, the story of a horse called Joey and the ordeal he endured through World War I has attracted more than three million theatregoers worldwide. Still packing the punters into the New London Theatre, it won five Tony awards on Broadway and is now touring internationally. 'I'm hugely grateful for *War Horse*,' says the tousle-haired 48-year-old who became artistic director of the Bristol Old Vic in 2009 after a five-year stint as associate director at the National Theatre. 'At the same time I hope that its precedent doesn't overshadow my new production,' says Morris. 'When a play catches fire like that it's really a once-in-a-lifetime thing. However, none of us anticipated that it would go on to have anything like that kind of success. If we'd consciously looked for that kind of success it probably wouldn't have worked.' Sipping a cappuccino during a rushed break in rehearsals, Morris explains that working on *War Horse*

taught him about Adrian Kohler's 'extraordinary gifts' as a puppet designer. 'What *War Horse* has done is make people think about the possibilities of using different kinds of theatrical language, such as puppetry, in telling a serious story.' It was while working on *War Horse* that Kohler, the artistic director of the Cape Town-based Handspring Puppet Company, first discussed collaborating on the Shakespearean comedy with Morris. So why the fascination with this particular play, about the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and a group of amateur actors who are manipulated by forest fairies. 'After *War Horse* I was asked if I wanted to make a puppet-based play about all sorts of animals,' says Morris, with a smile that recalls his older brother, the satirist Chris Morris. 'But the idea of putting on a puppet version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* wasn't just a challenge – there's something at the core of the play that lends itself to the use of puppetry. ▶

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From left: Kyle Lima and Naomi Cranston as Demetrius and Helena; Alex Selton playing Lysander; Adam Kohler, head of the Handspring Puppet Company; Akiya Henry as Hermia with Fionn Gill, Saikat Ahamed and David Emmings, who all play Puck; the puppet representing the Indian boy changeling. Below: David Emmings with Mustardseed

► 'Themes of change are at the heart of the story: for instance, people change shape and fall in love with people they weren't in love with before. It's also a comedy, of course – and I think the puppets help bring out the humour in the story.'

Putting on a play incorporating both actors and puppets has inevitably made the project much more complicated. Step one involved Kohler and Handspring co-founder Basil Jones making a number of prototype puppets, initially from cardboard, over a period of 18 months.

'Coming up with the initial designs involved a certain amount of brain-crackery,' says Kohler in the temporary studio he and Jones have set up in a corner of the Bristol Old Vic's paint shop. 'While I was given a lot of latitude when it came to designing the puppets, there were times when I startled Tom with what I proposed. Even if he didn't entirely understand why I'd done what I'd done, he'd usually say: "OK, Adrian, I'm going to trust your instincts".'

When the size and shape of the play's 20-odd puppets had been agreed, Kohler and his team got to work making the puppets in wood, his preferred medium.

Some of the puppets, such as the brightly painted Scary Fairy, operated by the fairy Cobweb – which changes from a sweet-looking creature into a scary one at the pull of a lever – are inspired by traditional Japanese puppets with 'transforming heads'. 'That puppet alone took two months to make,' explains Kohler. Others, such as the table-top puppet-lovers, have friction joints with weighted lead feet which can be walked around the stage by the actors.

The puppets were then flown to Bristol to be 'finished' and 'fitted'. Meanwhile, Morris had the challenge of finding actors prepared to work alongside puppets.

**'The beauty of puppetry is its simplicity – one action can say so many things'**



'The show was extremely difficult to cast because not only do the actors have to be adept at speaking Shakespearean verse, they suddenly have to put their soul into a bit of wood and believe that it's alive – and that's a rare combination,' he says.

'I needed people to do things that seemed stupid, and who had the patience and aptitude to learn new skills. There's no doubt that for some actors working with a puppet would be an absolute nightmare, but those were the ones who probably told me: "I'm not available".'

Finally, with the actors in place and the puppets finished, the rehearsals could begin in earnest. Cut to the Bristol Old Vic where actors are going through their lines, their puppets hanging incongruously from hooks on a wall behind them. Morris watches, at his side Kohler, who is as integral to the play's success as the director himself. After the actors have run through the scene alone, they then repeat it with the puppets.

The actors grab their 'dolls' – a mixture of head puppets and table-top puppets – and go through the scene again. Every now and again, Kohler points out to an actor how better to 'breathe life' into a puppet at the required moment.

During a break in rehearsals, Akiya Henry, who plays Hermia, one of the play's lovers, explains there was a lot of anxiety at first among the cast. 'We were thinking, "Gosh, we've got to operate a puppet while bringing the text to life" and it was just such a challenge. It involved having to reorganise your brain as an actor.'

In some scenes, the petite actress from London has to operate a 2ft-high, scaled-down puppet of herself, and walk it across the stage. 'When I first tried doing it, I found myself manipulating my puppet and not being able to talk. I had little moments of hyperventilating,' she says with an embarrassed laugh. 'At times like those, Adrian [Kohler] would say: "It's all right Akiya, you can breathe – the puppet can breathe on your breath!"'

'The secret is to realise that your puppet is not an extension of you – it is you. And it's all about transferring your emotions as an actor to the puppet.' Now something of a convert to working with puppets, she says: 'The beauty of puppetry is its simplicity – one action can say so many things.'

Another actor who initially struggled with his puppet was Jon Trenchard, who plays Cobweb. The puppet version of his fairy character is one of the play's most memorable, he explains.

'My puppet has a feminine face with nice ruby lips, so we'll probably give her a high voice,' he says. 'But on the other hand it may be funnier to give her a deeper, masculine voice. Mine's one of the lighter puppets but there are still moments when we have to hold our puppets above our heads and that involves a lot of different muscles you don't normally use. It can be quite tiring.'

Throughout a two-month workshoping of the production, Kohler and Jones have been tweaking the puppets. 'We are constantly innovating,' he says, before dashing off to increase the lead weights in a puppet's feet to improve its stability. 'Sometimes you can just see a way to make a puppet work better.'

Curiously, Morris reckons there isn't that much difference between directing actors and puppets. 'That might sound strange but there are a surprising number of similarities between them,' he says. 'You're essentially trying to get an actor who's working a puppet to be truthful and clear about what the character is trying to do as if they were acting the part themselves.'

Have any of the actors lost patience at working with wooden models and flung aside their puppets in frustration? 'We haven't had any tantrums yet!' grins Morris.

If staging a Shakespeare play with puppets makes

'big demands of the actors', as Morris says, it also makes big demands of the audience.

'If we can get the audience emotionally involved with a bit of wood, that's great – but it involves them having first to make the necessary emotional leap,' he says.

'They need to use their imagination to fall in love with the puppet – and, yes, the success of the play depends in part on the audience giving life to what they see on stage. It's very exciting but it's also very scary because if you take a risk with a well-known play it might not come off,' he says. 'For me that's the most interesting kind of work. It is a bit of a journey into the unknown.'

'The whole point of making the play this way is to explore where the language of puppetry might take us with this story,' he says. 'It's also a sign of how rapidly growing theatre is as an art form. These days there are all sorts of different things being integrated into theatre in new ways, which is helping to keep it so exciting.'

As the theatrical juggernaut that is *War Horse* prepares to conquer new territories, the director is keen to emphasise that his latest project is not, in effect, *War Horse II*. 'Look, if you want to see a big emotional story with an animal in a leading role, go and see *War Horse*,' he says. 'But if you want to see what we have brought to this Shakespearean tale of love, magic and transformation, then come and see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.'

The production will be transferring to the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, Carolina, in May before almost certainly heading to London's West End.

As Morris is called away, one last question. What does he think Laurence Olivier would have made of working with puppets? 'That's a very good question,' chuckles Morris. 'As it happens, I think Olivier would have been great acting with puppets.'

'*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is at the Bristol Old Vic until May 4. Visit [bristololdvic.org.uk/dream](http://bristololdvic.org.uk/dream) or call 0117 9877 877

**Russell HOWARD**



## Ball of confusion

The comedian tries out Pure's new entertainment system: but first he's got to set it up...

I'm a bit of a gadget guy and was pretty excited when the Pure Sensia 200D portable music streaming and radio system turned up on my doorstep. First impressions? Well, it's a sleek-looking product but feels solid and robust. It reminded me of the space-helmet TVs from the Seventies or a rugby ball.

Mind you, I had a lot of problems setting it up. It seems to need a very strong Wi-Fi signal to function and I found the instructions pretty opaque, to be honest. After about three days and a conversation with the makers I finally managed to get the speakers to work, but not without blood, sweat and tears.

Once it's up and running, the controls are fairly easy to navigate. The touch-screen isn't as responsive as an iPhone's but you can choose what you listen to from a list of digital radio stations, or stream music direct from your smartphone.

I really liked the option to play out a number of sounds – 'gentle stream', 'steady heartbeat', 'dogs barking in the wind' and even 'snoring man'. The Pure Tag feature was pretty cool, too. You can press the 'Tag' button on internet radio and the Sensia tells you the name of the song and its artist and you can buy the download, however obscure the radio station.

Another thing I liked is the way that you can use your smartphone as a remote control to play music through a pair of great speakers. I can imagine lots of musical one-upmanship at parties if all your friends downloaded the app to play out their own libraries.

The Pure Music function is a bit like Spotify but cheaper. It has a less extensive library but allows you to access some bands you can't find on Spotify.

Final thoughts? It's worth the money if you learn all the functions. But, if you want a digital radio that also plays music from your smartphone, there are cheaper, easier to navigate products available. ■



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