

War Horse

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

War Horse is ideal material for Steven Spielberg. His adaptation of the children's novel by Michael Morpurgo comes to the screen by way of the celebrated National Theatre stage version, which has been entrancing audiences of all ages on Broadway since last season. It's the story of a magnificent auburn stallion named Joey, trained by a Devon farm boy, Albert Narracott, and then sold by his father to the army at the outset of World War I.

In the early scenes, the conflict is between Albert (Jeremy Irvine) and his father Ted (Peter Mullan), a drunk who hobbles about on a game leg, a souvenir from the Boer Wars. Ted buys Joey at auction with money he can ill afford to spend: his farm is failing, and his landlord, Lyons (David Thewlis), would rather drive him off the land than see him make a success of it. Ted purchases the horse to hold his own against Lyons, who bids spitefully against him. Ted needs Joey to work the farm so that he can produce a sufficient crop to stave off his landlord, and when the yield is insufficient he uses the opportunity of the war to get a decent price for the horse.

The sequence in which Albert gets Joey to pull the plow—after a rainfall drives Lyons and the neighbors, watching from the sidelines, away—is rousing. You wish, though, that Spielberg hadn't lingered quite so long on the struggles of the boy and the horse—and on Lyons's delight in jeering at Albert and his father—and that he hadn't overworked John Williams's fine, melodic score.

Working with production designer Rick Carter and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, Spielberg finds the visual splendor in these Devon scenes, then matches it when the movie shifts to the war front. At first Joey is in the charge of Captain Jim Nicholls (Tom Hiddleston), whose best friend (Benedict Cumberbatch) puts the horse in friendly competition with his horse, a tall black stallion named Topthorn that becomes Joey's close companion. They're indisputably the prize specimens of the unit. But after a battle Joey and Topthorn become German pack horses, though they

get a respite when a young private goes AWOL with his 15-year-old brother and hides them both in a mill on a French farm. When a German unit appropriates the horses, the officer in charge explains brusquely, "The war takes everything."

War Horse is about what the war takes away and what, miraculously, survives. Spielberg handles the casualties of men and horses alike with gentle restraint—he's not out to remake *Saving Private Ryan*—but the images are remarkable: a horse buckling under the impossible physical demands placed on it, a young man vanishing in a white mist of poison gas, Joey frightened into a mesh of barbed wire by the first tank he's ever seen. This is an antiwar fable embedded in a fairy tale, and it's often masterfully directed and very affecting.