

## Steven Spielberg Casts a Golden Light Upon 'War Horse'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 23, 2011 - 8:50am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Opening on Christmas Day is a film about a boy, his horse and war, brought to the screen by America's most popular living director. "War Horse" is the most critic proof film ever realized. Kidding. This equine epic is Steven Spielberg's latest, taking advantage of precise filmmaking, emotion and cinematography to deliver a decent holiday package.

"War Horse" relies on the tugging of the heart strings, which depending on your mood will either bring out the handkerchiefs or get a nice cynical round of jokes going. But the film's emotional state is in the right place, looking to bridge the gap between the factions in World War One, and hoping like Spielberg's previous hero "E.T." to bring War Horse home where he belongs. If that's not the Holiday Spirit, then we all deserve to be visited by the three ghosts.

The film begins with a horse auction, attended by an English farmer named Ted (Peter Mullan), who needs a plow puller. He spies a spirited stallion named Joey, and despite the animal not being proper for the work, he is determined to buy it. He outbids Lyons (David Tewlis), who is the town rich guy and his landlord, and when he wins the horse Lyons threatens to foreclose on the farm. He sheepishly brings Joey back to his wife Rose (Emily Watson) and son Albert (Jeremy Irvine).



Jeremy Irvine as Albert and Joey in 'War Horse'  
Photo credit: Andrew Cooper for DreamWorks Pictures



The boy takes a shine to Joey, and when Lyons pressures the family to plow or leave the farm, actually teaches Joey how to be a work horse. But there are storm clouds on the horizon, in the form of England going to war against Germany. Father Ted leads the beloved Joey to town, and sells him to an available warrior, Captain Nicholls (Tom Hiddleston). Albert is heartbroken, and Joey begins an adventure that will see him participating in both sides of the world conflict, with a stop in between to give a sick girl named Emilie (Celine Buckens) some hope. Oh War Horse, is there anything you can't do?

This is a very sincere picture, and looks beautiful, with a combination of Spielberg's "golden glow" and an epic scope that echoes the classic direction of John Ford. "War Horse" is based on a children's novel, and has the type of innocence that makes it seem like a bedtime story. It's a good and evil tale, with the horse being the good, and the shades of gray occurring only when the good people – even if they are on the "bad" side of the war – connect with him. This simplicity can drive some people nuts, but here it works.

The film is also precisely cast. The sincerity that Spielberg is pumping out is filtered through the timing of the assembled players, especially Jeremy Levine as Albert, who is asked to interact with Joey in several difficult emotional places. Emily Watson is steady as the farmer's wife, she always adds a little more than the surface might dictate. Tom Hiddleston creates a nice transition for Joey as his first warrior officer, he emphasizes the British-style integrity without overdoing the heroics. And lest we forget, there were 14 horses used to play Joey.

The film is long, but doesn't feel that way. The story is adventurous, taking us from a small farm in Britain, to a neutral area in a war zone, to the battle itself, and the meticulous vision of Steven Spielberg allows that every location is historically accurate. There is a reason that Spielberg's films are so beloved. They position the hopeful stories in just the right place, at the right time. His filmmaking basks in this truth, and improves the nature of how it's presented, even in the case of this adaptation from a children's novel.



Celine Buckens as Emilie is Comforted by Joey in 'War Horse'  
Photo credit: David Appleby for DreamWorks Pictures

It's best to enjoy "War Horse" through the source of that child's level of storytelling, because it does have a bit of cloying sentiment to it. The horse magically transforms all he experiences, almost in a Christ-like way, so why not release it on Christmas? There are a few scenic and subjective shots that perhaps are over-indulgent, but people, it's a boy and his horse! It's impossible not to be indulgent in such a setting or rendering. What, we didn't all see "E.T."?

This will be a nice little escape on Christmas, and the sweet emotions will cleanse that sometimes overwrought day. And if this film becomes popular, in years hence the familiar greeting may evolve to "Warry Horsemas." Warry Horsemas, indeed.

*"War Horse" opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Jeremy Irvine, Emily Watson, Peter Mullan, Celine Buckens, David Thewlis and Benedict Cumberbatch. Screenplay adaptation by Lee Hall and Richard Curtis. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Rated "PG-13"*



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