



ON THE WAR PATH

Hot on the heels of the release of Summer blockbuster, *The Adventures of Tintin*, director, producer and self-confessed idea machine, Steven Spielberg is at it again...

INTERVIEWED BY SARAH ILLINGWORTH

Based on the novel and play of the same name, Spielberg's latest film, *War Horse* is a tug at your heartstrings feature from DreamWorks, set against the backdrop of World War I. It follows the relationship between Albert (played by Hollywood newcomer, Jeremy Irvine) and his beloved horse, Joey, and their epic battle to find each other after Albert's father sells Joey to the British cavalry and he's shipped off to "serve" on the frontline.

"The wonderful thing about working on *War Horse* was that the horses were real," says the director. "They weren't effects, and they weren't puppets, they were 100 percent real. Every single day on the set, the horse did something that surprised me. And whenever the horse did something that surprised me, that was the take I used in the picture."

Inspired to make a film version of Michael Morpurgo's 1982 novel after reading the book and seeing its popular stage show in London, Spielberg set out to find a young actor who could carry the lead role. Irvine was selected via a rigorous process that saw him audition two or three times a week for a couple of months. Despite the young actor's limited experience (his previous role was as a tree in a Royal Shakespeare Company production), Spielberg chose him for the part.

"I was trying to find a lead who was very natural. I just wanted somebody who was authentic," recounts the filmmaker. "When I cast young people, I'm only looking for an authentic quality – meaning that I don't want the person to seem like they're an actor performing unrealistic, unnatural emotions but someone simply representing who they are in the real world."

Spielberg's willingness to take a chance on fresh talent has worked out for him (and the talent), time and time again. Notable examples include Drew Barrymore, whom he cast in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* at age seven, and *Lost* creator, J.J. Abrams. Spielberg gave a teenage Abrams his first film job, and the pair recently paid homage to their mutual childhood love of shooting 8mm films with the alien adventure, *Super 8*.

At 64, Spielberg has proven himself as a filmmaker many times over, although his apparent lack of ego has allowed him to thoroughly enjoy collaborating with powerhouses like Abrams and New Zealand director/producer, Peter Jackson, for whom he executive produced *The Lovely Bones*. Most recently, the pair worked together on *The Adventures of Tintin*, the first in a potential franchise of animated features based on the classic Belgian cartoon.

"If it weren't for technology, I would have lived in New Zealand over these last two years," exclaims Spielberg, almost begrudgingly.

"But Peter Jackson and I were having daily Polycoms, where we can see each other on television, and we did our creative work together – thousands of miles apart [physically] but very, very close together as creators. And it worked for the movie really well."

The list of titles Spielberg's had a hand in is impressively long – *E.T.*, *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*, *Back to the Future*, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* (the latter two of which, won him Best Director Academy Awards), are just some of the highlights of his catalogue, and the director says he's in no danger of running out of material for future projects.

"I just have an overactive imagination," he laughs, "and I just keep thinking of ideas, and stories that I want to tell. I've always done that, all my life. I have never been able to control it. I have many, many stories inside me I haven't told yet, and new stories I'm discovering every month."

"That's why I decided to start a studio – because I had too many ideas to be able to direct in my lifetime, so I started a studio so some of those ideas could be adopted by filmmakers, and they can make them their movies, and their stories."

This generosity with his ideas – something of a rarity in the typically highly competitive film world – has always set Spielberg apart as a filmmaker, though it's in his ability to connect with viewers no matter how fantastic his storylines that, perhaps, his true enigma lies. His knack for tapping into human emotion has meant his movies consistently resound with audiences, whether they're about a lost little alien or the brutal effects of war.

"The secret is the audience receiving the emotions," he counters when asked to explain his method. "It's the secret of doing it honestly, so the audience doesn't reject the emotions because

they feel they're being manipulated – but honestly, giving honest emotions to the audience, and letting the audience receive them without being suspicious of them. So it's really a two-way street.

"On films like *War Horse* and *E.T.*, I was in collaboration with the audience. I made them with an audience I hadn't even met yet."

Of course, Spielberg's penchant for tying up his films with a good old-fashioned Hollywood ending can also go a long way towards achieving the warm fuzzies, although he usually manages to do it in a way that doesn't feel overdone or disingenuous. Probably because the stories he chooses to tell are more likely to highlight the (oftentimes bittersweet) beauty of the human condition than to exploit it.

"A lot of my movies have had the message about 'hope abounds,'" he acknowledges. "But it's very important in this day and age to continue to think the glass is half full, and to hope for the best. Because we'll make no progress in the world if we think the glass is half empty, and we fear for the worst. That's always been my philosophy – I'm more of a cheery person. You can't tell from all my movies I'm a cheery person but I am." 

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