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Download War Horse

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It's amazing the way a good movie can humanize creatures—real creatures, not talking cartoon creations. In his epic "War Horse", Steven Spielberg manages to do just that, creating a wartime drama that features not only compelling human characters, but a horse at the center of the story that is one of the most endearing characters put on film this year, perhaps ever.

"War Horse" opens in pre-World War I England, where a country farmer named Ted Narracott (Pete Mullan) buys a horse he can barely afford. His son Albert (Jeremy Irvine) establishes a strong bond with the willful creature (who he names Joey), even training it to plow his family's fields. But when war breaks out, Ted sells Joey to the English cavalry to pay the rent, setting Joey on a journey that takes him through battle, into the care of German defectors, a little French girl (Celine Buckens) and her grandfather (Niels Arestrup), and back pulling heavy artillery for the German army. Meanwhile, Albert enlists in the army, hoping that he will reunite with Joey.

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There's no other word to describe "War Horse" but magical. John Williams's sweeping score is the most beautiful heard in a film in recent years, while the cinematography, from the sunny English countryside to the dingy trenches in the middle of a battlefield, even the emotional close-ups of various characters, is simply stunning. Throughout Joey's journey, we also get to see the war from different points of view: from the English army, the German army, and the civilians. And the Germans aren't the bad guys here; one of the most moving moments in the film is when an English soldier and a German soldier meet in no man's land to cut Joey free from some barbed wire; they are civil to each other, not enemies but people who are just doing what they need to in the given situation. These elements and more make it at times reminiscent of the epics from Hollywood's Golden Age, like "Gone with the Wind".

All of the actors in the film are wonderful. Irvine is a newcomer to the screen but is completely believable as the determined young protagonist. Emily Watson plays Albert's strong mother, while Tom Hiddleston and Patrick Kennedy play English soldiers who come in contact with Joey at various times in the war. And then there's Joey. It's amazing how Spielberg can point the camera at the horse's face, and it's immediately obvious what this animal is thinking and feeling. While we care about the people too, the most poignant moments in the film involve Joey. Don't misunderstand, "War Horse" is neither sad nor depressing, but it's emotionally charged throughout, and it will be hard for anyone to leave the theater after watching it without shedding at least one tear.

"War Horse" is one of the best movies of the year, an awe-inspiring experience crafted by one of film's greatest storytellers. Like any movie, it has its problems—some situations seem unrealistic, in particular the fact that every character, including the Germans and French, speak English. I think in this case though that is a technicality that can be overlooked. This movie is just that fantastic.

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