

MAKING THE LEAP: An Interview with *946* & *War Horse* Writer **MICHAEL MORPURGO**

Michael Morpurgo talks to Daniel Hahn about the origins of *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips* and the process of turning a book for children into a play for everyone.

DH: WHERE DID THE STORY OF *946* COME FROM?

MM: Like most if not all of my stories, its roots are from historical events, from happenings. This one was something I came across by complete accident, when I went down to a funeral in a place called Slapton in south Devon. I discovered that in 1943 this whole area had been evacuated very speedily because the Americans were going to come and use that part of the Devon coastline for practicing their Normandy landings. Then I came across this remarkable story of a farming family who were moving out on the last day, and the little girl couldn't find her cat; that evening the perimeter wire was going to be drawn all around everything and they had to leave without it. So they went away to a relative's farm and spent the next ten months while the Americans practiced their landings. But there was this massive cock-up, this tragedy, which war is made up of. It

was called Exercise Tiger. They were doing an exercise out in the Channel, it was huge: the soldiers would climb down from their bigger boats onto the landing craft and then come in onto the beach as they usually did, and always escorted with Royal Navy cruisers, destroyers, to be sure they weren't surprised. But there was a cock-up, messages didn't get there, and they had no cover, and by pure happenstance the Germans sent out E-boats who came in and torpedoed them. *946* soldiers died in the waters of the English Channel that night.

DH: IT'S ALSO A STORY ABOUT TWO CULTURES MEETING...

MM: What was really evident was the Americans made a huge impression on the local population. And they were so, so different from the British army people; they played different music, they spoke differently, they were sort of very friendly, very warm, immediate;

and there were also some black soldiers amongst them – most of these people in Slapton had never seen black people before. And many of these black soldiers made very strong relationships with English farming families. I thought all that was an interesting backdrop and I'd focus on that. The story grew out of that.

DH: WHAT WAS IT LIKE REVISITING THE BOOK A DECADE ON?

MM: I suppose what I discovered pretty quickly were its faults, what I could have done better. Two things really gave me a lot of encouragement though. First of all, I realised as I was rereading it in preparation for working with Kneehigh that it had suddenly by accident become much more relevant. Everyone in this story, everyone – the American, the local population – is displaced, they're all basically refugees from their own places, and feeling alone and bereft and under threat. So that somehow linked it up to today, and I therefore came to it with renewed vigour, I would say. So I wasn't just rehashing an old idea, it was something had become more real to me and I knew that it had a possibility of being powerful on the stage because of that.

DH: YOU GOT BACK INTO THE MARROW OF IT...

MM: Exactly, rather than just tinkering it into a drama. And the other thing was this: I discovered I was working with I think the most collaborative people I've ever worked with. I went down for a week to live with the proposed cast of this play in the cottages where they do this sort of working-up time. We – all of us, directed by Emma Rice and Mike Shepherd – began to weave this story together in little snippets. A song here, an idea there. Hardly anything was written down, but you'd be given tasks to do. I felt about twelve years old – it was wonderful. So Emma would say, alright, would you and Stu (the composer) go and write a song around this? See what you can do... Suddenly I found myself at this ridiculously ancient age sitting in a shed with a musician who had a guitar, singing away, and I was making up this song – and it was all done in this terrific spirit of spontaneity, we were responding to the story, chucking ideas back and forth. It was really hard work – I don't think I'd ever worked so hard in my mind; and they were all young, and I fed off their energy and their enthusiasm for this new story.

DH: EVENTUALLY IT WENT INTO REHEARSAL – QUITE SOME TIME LATER – WITH THE FINAL CAST...

MM: I then discovered that Emma had somehow picked out so many things that I remembered from those early days in the converted cattle-shed in Cornwall, and all these things have been woven now into something which has got some kind of cohesion. And bit by bit you suddenly realised this cast, these people, each of them was taking hold of these characters and making them their own. And there was Emma, very quietly but massively enthusiastically conducting the whole thing.

By this time I was taking a back seat, just watching how this amazing lady puts a show together. Some of it I thought was just completely crazy. And part of it was because she brings into it a huge amount of joy, through music and dance; that was already to some extent there, but it's very much part of the show, so the exuberance of these two black soldiers from America infects the whole family; and there's this teacher who's a refugee from Europe as well, so there's this most extraordinary gathering of lives, which she understood pretty instinctively. But what she's done is to widen it, and bring massive appeal to it across the generations.

DH: AND HOW DID AUDIENCES RESPOND?

MM: Down in Cornwall you know they have this huge tent, almost like a circus tent – they call it the Asylum, and there it is, in the middle of a Cornish field. It was a new show, you don't really expect lots of people to turn up, but they did, it was simply packed for the entire month of August. I saw it in thunderstorms and I saw it on beautiful summer evenings, and you'd look around the five hundred or so people in this great circus tent and it was all generations; there were six and seven-year-olds, living through great sadness and great joys and enjoying the exuberance of the whole thing and the fun of it – then there were the parents, and there were the grandparents. No matter how much or how little the children knew of the Second World War it didn't matter, what really mattered

was the power of the story on stage. That's what I'm really looking forward to seeing again at the Globe. And what's lovely about the Globe is that there isn't a theatre in London more akin to a tent in a Cornish field...

DH: SO THE BOOK IS NOW A PLAY. HOW DO YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE OF THE IMAGINATIVE EXPERIENCE OF A READER/ AUDIENCE ENGAGING WITH THESE TWO FORMS OF STORYTELLING?

MM: For me, the purest form of, if you like, 'word communication' is poetry, because it leaves so much, so much, to the reader of the listener. Words are scant, extraordinarily well-chosen and well-placed if it's good, there is a music in it, there's very often a story in it, but the reader, the listener, brings to the poem a huge effort of imagination to bring it to life. Next is the writing of novels, where again you write the thing down on a piece of paper in your code, but the rest is left to the reader, to bring her or his imagination, intelligence, insight, life experience to what you've written. It's the deepest form of intellectual and emotional collaboration, I think. When it comes to theatre, much more is suggested, you are telling the story now, not just in words, you are make-believing in characters on the stage in costume with a set, everything is there, if you like, but – and this is wonderful – you are still leaving massive respect to the audience to make of it what they will. So for instance in *War Horse*, this puppet was there – everyone could see it was a puppet, no question about it, there were three people working it. The genius of the thing was that those puppets were made so extraordinarily, the intensity and the integrity of the whole thing was so strong that the audience could not but imagine this thing as a sentient creature.

DH: "THINK WHEN WE SPEAK OF HORSES THAT YOU SEE THEM..." – THE GLOBE PARTICULARLY RELISHES THOSE DEMANDS ON THE AUDIENCES IMAGINATION.

MM: And in the book the horse speaks for goodness' sake, he writes the story – absurd! Equally absurd to put a puppet on stage and have intelligent people look at it and

somehow follow a story without giggling. Amazing achievement. When it comes to *946*, you have to make this great leap into the story and take it for what it is. The cat is a little puppet. The little girl is very evidently an actor in her thirties. Does it matter? No, because she plays it with this extraordinary sense of being a twelve-year-old, and the joy is in that creation. There's one particular moment where a grandma rides a motorbike. Well, I thought they were going to get an old motorbike, and, you know, roar around the stage – not a bit of it, they get the handlebars of an old something-or-other and make the noises of a motorbike. That's what I find wonderful about theatre: you make the leap.

Interview by Daniel Hahn. This interview first appeared in issue 63 of Around the Globe, the membership magazine for Shakespeare's Globe.