

THEATRE

Pulling the strings

He breathes life into pieces of cane and scraps of wool for the West End. Puppet master Toby Olié has come a long way from making toilet roll animals as Tamzin Lewis discovers

In 2006 Toby Olié was one of three puppeteers trotting around with bits of cardboard and broomsticks pretending to be a horse. Six years later he is associate puppetry director of *War Horse*, the international hit play based on Michael Morpurgo's beloved novel.

In addition to 'being' Joey, *War Horse*'s equine hero, Toby has also designed the puppets for an acclaimed new stage production of Michelle Magorian's modern classic *Goodnight Mister Tom*.

"Due to the dominance of CGI in film I think that people take far more pleasure now from seeing simpler effects," says Toby, who grew up in Northumberland.

"It is a brilliant backlash to film and in some ways it means that theatre is getting simpler as technology around us gets more complicated.

"The fact that people can be in tears over a cane horse or a woollen dog is very satisfying. Everyone has a mobile phone now which can tell them the weather in different countries, but actually a piece of wood on the stage can make them cry."

For *Goodnight Mister Tom*, Toby created the crucial character of Sammy the border collie, alongside wildlife such as a squirrel, sparrow and crow.

Toby, 27, says: "The big

challenge was that there would only be one puppeteer for Sammy and therefore only two hands are animating a four-legged creature.

"The dog has four trailing, scraggly bits of fabric which are animated by the puppeteer, who has to learn to control the puppet and that is quite a strange skill."

He adds: "The first thing the puppeteer has to do is convince an audience that the puppet is alive. You have to encourage the audience to suspend their disbelief and there are so many ways of getting people to play along."

As a young boy Toby says he 'religiously watched' *Sesame Street* before nursery and cites Jim Henson and *The Muppets* as a major inspiration.

"The Muppets always had equal status to the Hollywood actors so the bit of green felt was just as important as Sylvester Stallone or whoever was starring on the show that week," Toby says.

He also remembers discovering a book in his primary school library which sparked his 'making' craze.

"I was obsessed with dinosaurs and this book had a dinosaur puppet on the front," he says. "It had an egg box head and was covered in a knitted sleeve. I remember wanting to make the puppet."

He adds: "I was of those

annoying children who would ask for the cereal box to make something before the cereal had been eaten. I was a proper Blue Peter kid.

"I would make sets for Action Men figures and I remember aged about seven I was inspired by the puppet routine in *The Sound of Music*. I made all the goats out of toilet rolls and performed *The Lonely Goatherd* on my grandparents' dining room table. It was a defining moment."

Toby grew up in Hexham and attended Queen Elizabeth High School, where his 'strange obsession' was supported by both art and drama teachers. "It has always been a halfway point between making things and performing," he says.

Seeing the stage show of *The Lion King* while at High School made him realise that 'he was in the right game' and he studied Puppetry at the London's Central School of Speech and Drama, where he was the only person on his course.

Three months before he graduated, Toby attended his first workshop for *War Horse* with South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company, which created Joey the horse.

Toby, who lives in London, says: "I was a human guinea pig and was involved in road testing the prototype war horse. We had to test whether it could gallop, trot



Goodnight Mr Tom, features a puppet border collie, called Sammy

and rear: all the things which a real horse can do."

Toby auditioned to be one of the three puppeteers to road test the full-sized prototype horse in June 2006 and started off as the back legs of the horse at the National Theatre. He was promoted to the front of Joey for the West End run of *War Horse* which is now touring the world.

Toby has also designed puppets for *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and for a new stage version of *The Little Mermaid*.

Later this year he will be working on the singer Tori Amos's new fairytale West End musical, called *The Light Princess*.

Toby says: "Puppetry is really popular

but as someone who is very passionate about puppetry I feel I have to keep challenging myself and people around me. Otherwise puppetry could keep ticking along and be a pretty and decorative thing.

"The good thing about *War Horse* and *Goodnight Mister Tom* is that you have puppet characters at the middle of the action, driving the story and carrying emotional weight. If theatre people keep being brave, puppetry will continue to develop."

Goodnight Mister Tom is at Sunderland Empire from February 5-9, for tickets visit www.ATGtickets.com/Sunderland

The cast of *Goodnight Mister Tom*, top, the impressive *War Horse*, where Toby's career took off, *The Little Mermaid*, above, and Toby Olié

