



News & Features



NEWS

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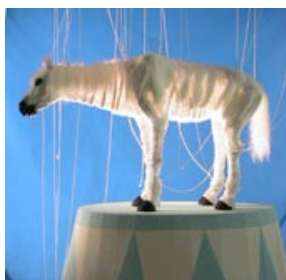
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FEATURES

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Horsing About – Forkbeard Fantasy spends a day at the races



by Penny Saunders
[reproduced from BrUNIMA Puppet Notebook.]

This little horse – I call her the White Mare – is about three feet high, suspended from a frame by ropes to three points on her back and neck. Pulling the ropes from her feet, knees, neck and head will make her move.

She is based on the memory of my experience of horses when I was 12. At that age, a child's relationship with animals is very interesting. Usually a child is told what to do by adults, but while riding, the child tells the horse what to do.

I tried to make the skeleton and muscles as anatomically correct as possible, covering them with a semi-transparent skin so that when the horse is operated the movement inside can be enjoyed. [see picture below]

For research, I used an anatomical book published for vets, with photos showing the horse stripped down: the layers of muscle, bone and tendon, the extraordinary way the tendon is connected to the bone structure. It did make me think about Darwin and the survival of the fittest: the horse is a fantastic piece of engineering.

My work connects with puppetry in the sense of trying to capture movement. I am fascinated by how many choices are involved in making a puppet and by how the movement is affected by decisions about which parts should be stiff and which loose.

The White Mare will be placed at the entrance of Cheltenham Museum. At the moment I'm deciding whether to label the control ropes or to let people work out for themselves which rope pulls which limb. If you have got no idea what is going to happen, you will spend longer working it out, which is good. I was afraid that people might find the internal workings laid bare quite disturbing, so I have decided to use two layers of the transparent covering fabric as a compromise.

The Cheltenham exhibition will partly present old Forkbeard puppets and props, partly specially-made horse-based displays. Everyone in Forkbeard is making something. Tim Britton is making a rotating film to demonstrate horse movements, which will be projected travelling around the walls. Chris Britton is making a mechanical country ride peep-show, 'Ed Jobling Horse Flies'. Characters from old shows have 'gone to the races': 'Miss Moody' has been re-dressed and now looks like the Queen Mother, and Anthony has turned into a bookie.

Anthony and Miss Moody come from a show called Hypochondria from about 20 years ago. Anthony has been on exhibition for about six years in total since then. A local dentist gave me a bucketful of plaster moulds of teeth, and Anthony's now got a pair of those, so his mouth hangs open in an exhausted gleeful expression. He's also wearing a false nose and a moustache. I love the fact that he isn't real but he's still trying to disguise himself. In a sense, the White Mare is a maquette for a full-scale mechanical horse for a show we're planning for next year. In the show, the horse and saddle will hang from a frame that can be rolled around the stage, and a rider will be able to sit on it.

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We've got a DEFRA grant to do a show about climate change. The show will be about the history of humanity's love affair with carbon. The horse – as a way to get around, a working horse, the origin of the term horsepower – is a symbol of a period of clean existence on earth, before we started to depend on carbon.

The lifesize White Mare will make an appearance before the carbon show, in Rough Magyck, a Forkbeard Fantasy commission for the RSC's Complete Works festival.

[Penny Saunders is a designer and inventor of performance engineering who has worked with Forkbeard Fantasy for over 20 years. In the process of working on Horsing About she has become the UK expert on sourcing extremely small pulleys.]

'Horsing About' is at the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, 22 July - 16 September

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