

A horse is a horse, of course, of course ...

By **Union-Tribune**

MAY 23, 2010, 12:03 AM

Jonno Roberts: Theater diary

Jonno Roberts is writing weekly about his experiences rehearsing and performing in the Old Globe's Summer Shakespeare Festival for the Union-Tribune's Sunday Arts section. Roberts is playing Petruchio in "The Taming of the Shrew" and Edmund in "King Lear."

Read his entries here:

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Learn more about Jonno Roberts at jonnoroberts.com.

Learn more about The Old Globe Theater at oldglobe.org.

I received my horse today, and I am thrilled with it.

One of the big events in "Shrew" is the arrival of Petruchio at his wedding on a horse, which is described in horrific and entertainingly obscure detail by the servant Biondello — "full of windgalls, sped with spavins, rayed with the yellows, past cure of the fives, stark spoiled with the staggers, begnawn with the bots" and on and on. It is a bravura piece of writing by a young actor who was still new to playwriting; it sweats with the sheer joy of language; even the original audience probably had no idea what half of it meant — and that doesn't matter a bit.

Well, in our production the arrival on the horse also becomes a skimmington ride, a traditional punishment for a man who is cowed by a shrewish wife. Petruchio is mocking himself, arriving at his wedding already playing the part of the terrorized husband everyone expects him to become, and mocking the very society that entertains such torments. It's a fun bit.

Anyway, I got my horse today! And when an actor gets a new toy, all the angels in heaven rejoice (far more than, say, some poor orphan getting a toy. Angels don't give a toss about that rot).

You see, we get some ridiculously cool toys. I definitely like playing with my toy sword in "King Lear," for example. Toy swords come with pretend sword fights, only the sword fights are choreographed so that we get to look really cool doing them. Sometimes, the toys are simple objects — a giant wooden cable spool, say, that you have to play on until you can roll about on it onstage like a logrolling circus clown.

Sometimes toys can get you in trouble: Perhaps a director commands you to spend several weeks living in a wheelchair to become super-facile with using it. Imagine the wrath incurred when the good samaritan who rushes to your aid after you have a silly spill gets a giggled excuse of "It's OK — I'm an actor". (By the way, my wheelchair-wheelie is wicked good now.)

On film and TV sets, our toys can be real horses. Or wagons. Or Batmobiles. Often, they are guns. Pistols. Rifles. AK-47s. Blowing up a truck with a rocket-propelled grenade? Serious toy fun. Explosive squibs? Sure, sometimes they leave a nice bruise, but being shot with a toy machine-gun is so much more fun when fake blood explodes from your chest. Acting toys are the coolest.

But, as with my horse, sometimes the coolness comes from the sheer genius of the artist who has welded a frame, soaked and bent rattan and sculpted the head, designed a whole array of puppetlike controls, all from scratch, all invented on the spot, in the workshop, just for a few brief seconds on stage. And now you get to take this glorious work of art and craft, and bring it to life? It's a professional requirement! How cool is that?!

Sometimes the toys are words, like Biondello's speech ("begnawn with the bots!"). Sometimes they are costumes: 6-inch platforms, or a sweeping canvas duster coat. Sometimes they're my horse.

What a wonderful, wonderful gift, to have that built into the fabric of your working life.

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