

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Basil John Richard Jones and Adrian Peter Kohler.

As the show ends, the audience erupts into applause. The actors return to the stage to take their bows. The applause builds, louder and louder. A few audience members stand up. At last, the giant horses gallop on and the entire audience spontaneously rises for a standing ovation: a standing ovation for the puppets – the stars of the show. This happens nightly - in London, New York, Philadelphia and Montreal and is about to start happening in Australia. 4000 people every night are captivated by the drama and the magic of War Horse: the show – but particularly by the triumph of spirit of the puppets: the central characters and the stars.

The artists (actually the magicians) behind these puppets are Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of the Handspring Puppet Company, which is based in a little factory in Muizenburg. Their creativity and vision have not only astounded the world, but have also taken puppetry out of the v “puppetry ghetto^[1]” and onto centre stage.

From their early days at Michaelis in the late 1970s, where Adrian was interested in puppetry and Basil hated puppets but was interested in Adrian, they’ve been honing their craft. Early on, they worked on a production with both puppets and opera singers, and they noticed that, if the puppet took a breath at the same time as the singer, then the puppet and the singer were co-ordinated. But, more than this, the puppet – through breathing – became alive. Since then, all of their works have started from this central point – the puppet must breathe in order to live.

From this flowed the incredible attention to detail that is the hallmark of their work – ears that twitch, skin that shivers, multiple micromovements that communicate curiosity, fear, anger and joy using a language that we know, but don’t even know that we know.

Through each production and collaboration, from Episodes of an Easter Rising, to Woyzeck to Faustus in Africa, the puppets and the philosophy have been evolving. From string marionettes and manipulators dressed in black, Bunraku style, they’ve evolved to chimps that sign and horses that gallop with their manipulators fully visible and part of the emotion and the scene.

Their remarkable (42 year old) partnership itself, with its creative tension and yin-yang elements, has been essential to the success of Handspring. Adrian is the creative, technological, artist-puppetmaker, whilst Basil is the visionary, the negotiator, “let’s get out there and put our work on the world stage”. They’re two individuals, but sometimes asked if they’re twins^[2], they’re separate but partners, (and they receive two honorary doctorates, but only one citation).

Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler have developed their own distinctive theatre language. They’ve enabled art objects to live, and to live in the performance space. It’s their vision that has birthed something completely new and, in doing so; they have become an international phenomenon.

Their latest phenomenon, War Horse, with its life sized puppet horses, has won five Tony Awards, the Drama Desk Outstanding Play award and the Outstanding New Broadway Play award of 2011. War Horse has been called spellbinding, exhilarating and “the best theatre of the decade^[3]”. “Nothing can prepare one for the extremes of emotion that such awe-inspiring puppetry on such a huge scale can produce^[4]”.

As the show ends, the audience erupts into applause. The standing ovations are for the inanimate objects that have attained more life than the actors beside them. The standing ovations are for the Handspring hallmark. Night after night, all over the world, the standing ovations are for Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler.

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Basil John Richard Jones and Adrian Peter Kohler.

1. Taylor, J., 2009. *Handspring Puppet Company* David Krut Pub.
2. Jones, B., *Personal Communication, Handspring Puppet Company, 12 November 2012, 2012.*
3. Sunday Times UK, 2009. *The best theatre of the decade.* 13 December 2009.
4. Quarmby, K. 2009. *War Horse.* British Theatre Guide [cited 2012 3 December]; Available from: <http://britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/warhorsenewlondon-rev>.