



# The Snail and the Whale

Inspired by the book by  
Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler

**LIVE**  
ON STAGE

## EDUCATION PACK

**'Tall Stories sets the benchmark for children's theatre'**  
*Sunday Times*

**'An inventive and charming adaptation'**  
*The List*

**'An exquisite piece of theatre with plenty of lyricism...  
It's definitely a show that leaves you smiling'**  
*The Stage*

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## Notes for teachers

### Tall Stories

Tall Stories theatre company is a not-for-profit charitable organisation, which presents old, new and timeless stories in a physical, visual style, always acknowledging the presence of the audience. Our productions link original music with dynamic movement – and lots of laughs. The company was founded in 1997 by directors Olivia Jacobs and Toby Mitchell.

### Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler

Julia Donaldson, the award-winning children's author, and Axel Scheffler, the celebrated illustrator, first collaborated in 1993 when one of Julia's songs (*A Squash and a Squeeze*) was transformed into a book. Since then, the unstoppable duo has collaborated on over twenty books, amongst which emerged *The Snail and the Whale*, one of Julia's favourites.

Julia lives in Glasgow and Axel in London so they have to create and work separately. But he often sends her letters with funny pictures drawn on the envelopes...

Axel has achieved worldwide acclaim for his humorous illustrations, and his books have been translated into over 29 languages. In 2006 he was even called upon to design Gordon Brown's annual Christmas card!

Before publishing any books, Julia began her career in singing and song-writing and wrote many songs for children's television. Since then she has had 20 plays published and has written a grand total of 165 books (64 that can be bought in the shops and 101 specifically for schools).

In 2011 Julia became the Children's Laureate. She is using this role to inspire more children to read, to support libraries, to promote more stories for and about deaf children and to initiate projects linking music with storytelling, amongst many other things.

### The Show

The team at Tall Stories has loved *The Snail and the Whale* ever since its publication and in 2010 we began to think about how it could be possible to adapt the picture book for the stage. Tricky when your main characters are a tiny snail and a great big, grey-blue humpback whale...

Then co-director Toby Mitchell read a news story about **Storybook Soldiers**, an organisation which helps British military personnel serving abroad to record bedtime stories for their children to listen to while they are away. The thousands of families they have worked with have discovered that there is nothing that helps bridge the distance better than the sound of a parent's voice, reading.

We learnt that across Afghanistan and other countries where the British military are present, there are secret caches of *The Gruffalo* and *The Snail and the Whale*. While soldiers recover from their daily operations, army padres ask if anyone wants to record a bedtime story for their children, thousands of miles away...



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## The Show (cont)

One of the soldiers' favourite books to record was *The Snail and the Whale*, a story in which a small creature wants to go round the world with a big creature... Toby immediately saw the parallel between that story and a little girl at home and her father serving on a military ship abroad. He wondered whether the Tall Stories' production could look at how the story of *The Snail and the Whale* could connect a father and daughter who have to live apart.

Tall Stories contacted Storybook Soldiers and, as part of the devising of the show, worked with the scheme's founders, Kirsty Alderson and Rosemary Meeke, at the Army Education Centre in Tidworth. We asked lots of questions and listened to some of the recordings of stories that soldiers had made for their children.

Once this frame for the show was in place, one of the most challenging things we found during the devising was how to slip between the story of the Snail and the Whale and that of the little girl and her dad. We managed to incorporate all the lines from the book - as we like to do with all our adaptations - and used the narrator (the little girl when she was grown up) and music and props and lighting to make it clear which world we were in.

When working on the characters of the girl and her father, we looked a little bit at the nature of snails and whales – but more at the characteristics and personality of the animals in the book. So the character of the little girl became adventurous and risk-taking (like the snail) and the father was solid and brave (just like the whale).

## The Music

An important element of the show that make the performance so exciting is the use of live music.

The composer, Richard Heacock, came into many of the rehearsals and so the music became a mixture of tunes that he wrote specially and also that he gathered from the performer improvising. The use of a 'loop pedal' with the viola was also a wonderful thing to experiment and play around with, which meant that during the show the performer could record music and sounds that she was playing and repeat them and layer them live!

## The Set

Another very important element of the show is the set. Isla Shaw, the designer (of both the set and the costumes), was involved in the very early stages of the show and by the second stage of development had a pretty good idea of how to create the enormous whale on stage! All of the interactive bits of the set, such as the porthole window, the armchair and the nest of tables, had to be decided and designed quite early so that they could be used by the actors in rehearsals.



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## Snails and Whales – some facts

Humpback whales have a life expectancy of 45-50 years.

Snails can live up to 15-20 years.

Whales have incredible powers of endurance, travelling over 3,100 miles during each seasonal migration, with almost no rest along the way.

Snails cannot hear. To find food, they use their sense of smell.

Humpback whales are the noisiest and most imaginative whales when it comes to songs. They have long, complex and beautiful songs that include recognizable sequences of squeaks, grunts, and other sounds. Only males have been recorded singing.

Snails are one of the oldest-known animal species in the world. By most estimates, snails have been around for more than 600 million years.

Humpback whales breathe air at the surface of the water through 2 blowholes located near the top of the head. They spout (breathe) about 1-2 times per minute at rest, and 4-8 times per minutes after a deep dive. Their blow is a double stream of spray that rises 3-4 metres above the surface of the water.

A single garden snail can have up to 430 babies in a year.

Humpbacks have huge, mottled white flippers with rough edges that are up to one-third of their body length; these are the largest flippers of any whale. The humpback's genus, *Megaptera*, means "huge-wings," referring to its flippers.

Snails belong to a group of molluscs known as gastropods. The word gastropod comes from the Greek and means "stomach foot".

The heart alone of the average humpback whale weighs about 195 kg – about as much as three adult human beings.

The largest living snail species in the world is the *Syrinx Aruanus*, commonly called the Australian Trumpet. It lives on the sandy bottom of the sea around the north coast of Australia.

In the 20th century, some 200,000 humpback whales were killed in the Southern Hemisphere alone. With an estimated 95% of the population wiped out, humpback whales finally gained protection from whaling in the North Pacific in 1966.

Snail shells were widely used as money before metal coins.



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## Activities (4-6 year olds)

This production of *The Snail and the Whale* uses a variety of physical theatre techniques to create different environments and atmospheres with three actors, some music and a minimal set. The following ideas aim to encourage children to think imaginatively about the story that they have seen and explore some of the ideas behind the creation of the show.

### Secret Messages

In order to save the whale, the resourceful snail uses her snail trail to write a message on the school's blackboard. Draw a huge whale and a tiny snail beside it, write a secret message from the snail on the whale's back with glue. Reveal the snail's message by sprinkling glitter all over the whale's back. (No real whales should be harmed in the making of this picture...)

### Where in the World?

The snail had itchy feet (or an itchy foot) to see the world. Where in the world would you like to travel to and why? What would you do when you got there? Can you find any pictures of this place? Find it on a map and trace what route you could take to get there. How many imaginative ways can you think of to make that journey (apart from hitching a lift on the tail of a whale..).

You could also create a few of these journeys physically as a group – how could you show all of you on a ship, or a camel, or in a hot air balloon, or flung from a giant catapult? Once you have established 3 or 4 different types of journey – piece them all together to create an epic journey in just a short movement sequence.

### Show us your Wild Side

In the show, the snail and the whale come across all sorts of creatures on their travels. Ask the children to choose one of the animals – whether it is a penguin, crab, seagull or dolphin – and ask them to use their own body to make a statue of that creature. Then work from the very tips of their toes to the ends of their eyelashes to see how that creature would move. How do they sound? And how do all the penguins or all the snails behave in a group?

The characters in the show are often developed using techniques like these to find the physicality of a character – how a character moves is as important as what they say and how they say it!

### Have a Whale of a Time

The little girl and her father create the big blue humpback whale from bits of furniture in her room. What could you use to create this enormous creature? What would you use for his tail? And his eyes? Is there a way of creating him using all of your bodies? How would he then eat fish?! If you have time, can you create other animals? A giraffe? A gorilla? A gruffalo?!



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## Activities (7-10 year olds)

This production of *The Snail and the Whale* uses a variety of physical theatre techniques to create different environments and atmospheres with three actors, some music and a minimal set. The following ideas aim to encourage children to think imaginatively about the story that they have seen and explore some of the ideas behind the creation of the show.

### In Your Own Words

In a circle, go round and each tell a little bit about the story. Remember to describe the atmosphere and mood of each setting and any feelings that the little girl or her Dad (or the snail or the whale) might be experiencing. Which were your favourite bits?

### Soundscapes

Choose a scene from the play – it could be in the dock before the snail sets sail, or on the Dad's boat, or underwater – and use your voices, breath and anything that comes to hand (pencils, radiators, pads of paper) to gradually build up, one by one, the soundscape of that scene.

### Still Life

If the little girl in *The Snail and the Whale* were a colour, what colour would she be? If she were an item of clothing, what would she be? Collect some objects and pictures and textures and colours that you think could represent the character of the little girl. Position them as you think would suit her and then take a picture of them, creating a still life representation of her.

This is often a way that is useful for us when creating a show to find more details for characters and make them feel more real and three dimensional.

### Create the Fiery Mountain

In the show we have a volcano erupting live on stage (only a small one!) – here's how you can make your own:

1. First make the 'cone' of the volcano. Mix 6 cups flour, 2 cups salt, 4 tablespoons cooking oil, and 2 cups of water. The resulting mixture should be smooth and firm (more water may be added if needed).
2. Stand a plastic bottle on a baking tray and mould the dough around it into a volcano shape. (Don't cover the hole or drop dough into it)
3. Fill the bottle most of the way full with warm water and a bit of red food color (can be done before sculpting if you don't take so long that the water gets cold).
4. Add 6 drops of washing up liquid to the bottle contents. This helps trap the bubbles produced by the reaction so you get better lava.
5. Add 2 tablespoons of bicarbonate of soda to the liquid.
6. Slowly pour malt vinegar into the bottle. Watch out - eruption time!





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## Activities (7-10 year olds, continued)

### Wish you were here

As you saw in our adaptation of *The Snail and the Whale*, the character of the father is away from home for long periods of time and sends recordings of stories to his little girl. Which story would you most like to have recorded for you and why? Now choose one of the far-off lands shown in the book, pretend that you are exploring there and write a postcard to someone close to you (a member of your family or a friend), describing what you are seeing and doing and feeling. Perhaps you could make an audio recording of these postcards.

### Grammatical Statues

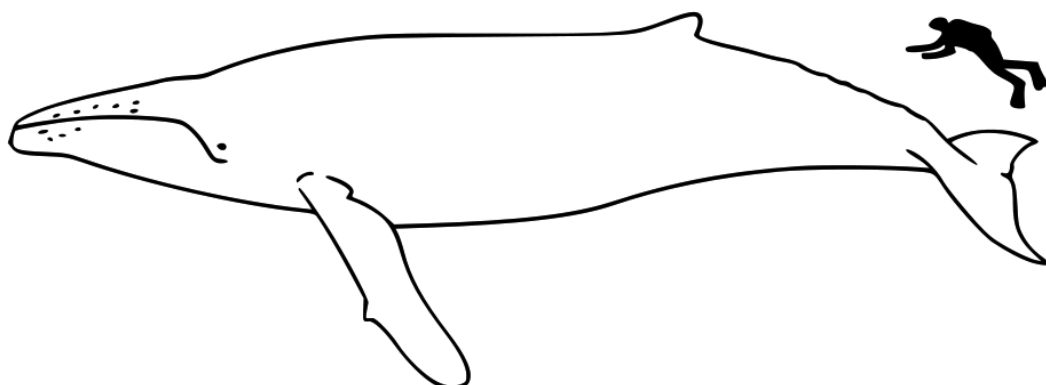
*The Snail and the Whale* is full of wonderfully descriptive verbs and adjectives – such as ‘shimmering’, ‘frail’, ‘arched’, ‘zooming’, ‘towering’, ‘fiery’, ‘frolicked’, ‘itchy’, ‘earsplitting’, ‘foamed’. Write out some of these words and pin them up around the room. All stand in a circle and on the count of 3 make a statue of one of the words. See if you can guess what other people’s statues represent. Then choose another word, without telling anyone what it is, and make a statue. And choose a third word and do the same thing. Now you have 3 contrasting statues – piece all of the poses together to make a sequence, making the transitions between the poses as smooth and interesting as possible. When you show these sequences to the rest of the group, can everyone guess all three words from your movement?

### Time to Rhyme

In the show, Dad pretends not to remember the name of *The Snail and the Whale*, coming up with “The Fish in the Dish” or “The Shark with a Bark” or “The Crab in the Minicab”. Choose one of these silly titles (or even better, make up one of your own) and write a short poem of only about 10 or 14 lines. Remember to use colourful language and imaginative adjectives and even try to make each couple of lines rhyme, as Julia Donaldson does.

### The Size of a Whale

Adult humpback whales are big – over 15m long. Chalk out a lifesize outline of the whale below in a playground and get a group of children to stand around the outside of it.





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## Resources

**[www.storybooksoldiers.co.uk](http://www.storybooksoldiers.co.uk)**

More information about Storybook Soldiers and the work they do.

**[www.bbc.co.uk/nature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature)**

The BBC Nature website is great for general information about snails and whales!

**[www.landsnails.weebly.com](http://www.landsnails.weebly.com)**

Snippets of snail information regarding Giant African Land Snails can be found at Snail Rescue UK's website.

**[www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/humpback-whale](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/humpback-whale)**

Interesting facts, images and sounds of humpback whales can be discovered at National Geographic's website.

**[www.juliadonaldson.co.uk](http://www.juliadonaldson.co.uk)**

You can read more information about the author, Julia Donaldson, on her own website.

**[www.tallstories.org.uk](http://www.tallstories.org.uk)**

Finally, anything else you need to know about Tall Stories and all our past and future shows can be found at on our website.

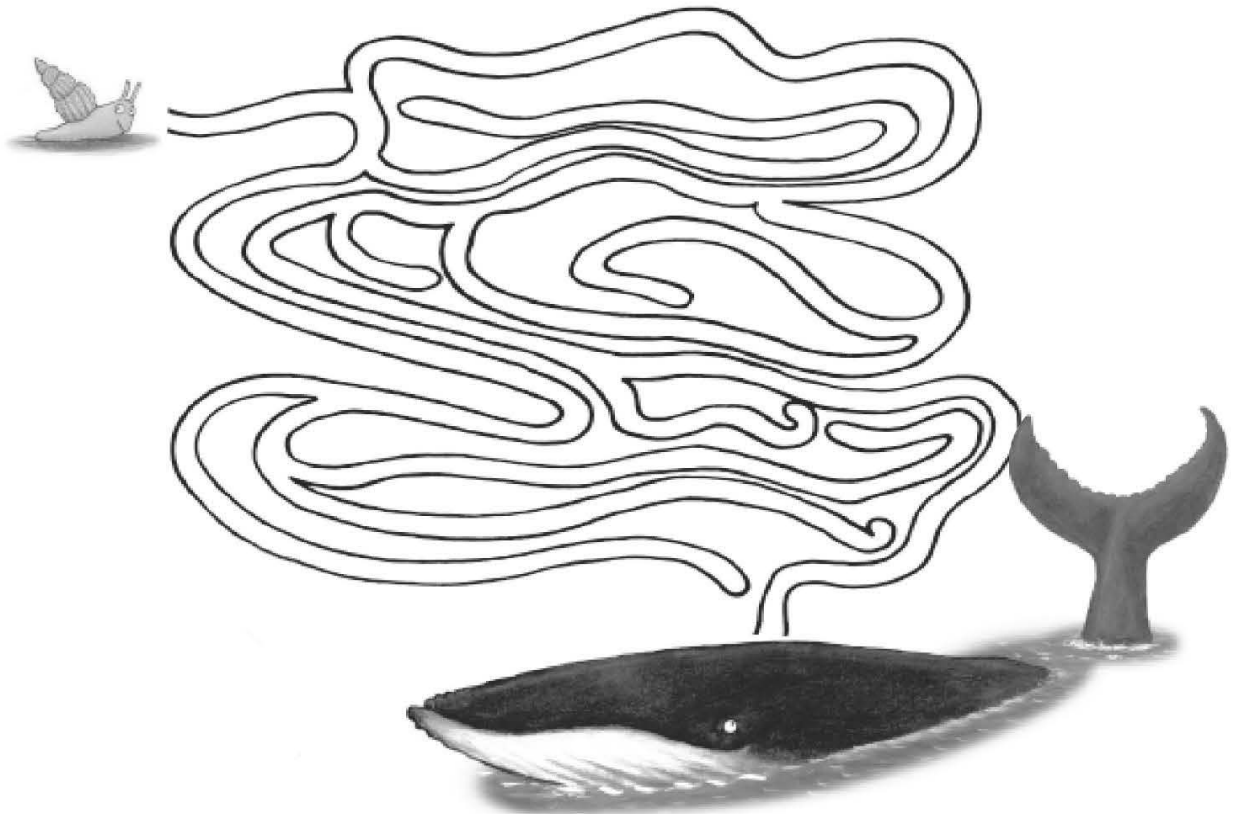


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The sea snail slithered all over the rock  
And gazed at the sea and the ships in the dock.  
And as she gazed she sniffed and sighed.  
"The sea is deep and the world is wide!  
How I long to sail!"  
Said the tiny snail.

Can you help the snail to find the whale?



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