

# THE VANISHING ELEPHANT

STUDY  
GUIDE



CAHOOTS



Cultúr Éireann  
Culture Ireland

Promoting Irish Arts Worldwide for 20 years

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## THE VANISHING ELEPHANT

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# WELCOME



THIS STUDY GUIDE PROVIDES INFORMATION ON HOW THE SHOW CAME TO LIFE AND OFFERS A RANGE OF SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO DIVE INTO BEFORE OR AFTER THE CURTAIN RISES.

WANT TO DIG DEEPER? TAKE A LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE FOR DETAILS ABOUT THE SHOW AND CAHOOTS NI.

[WWW.CAHOOTSNI.COM](http://WWW.CAHOOTSNI.COM)

# THE VANISHING ELEPHANT

## STORY

The Vanishing Elephant tells the story of an Asian Elephant called Janu. Janu was born in Bengal, India and like any young animal, is full of curiosity about the world around her. One day, Janu hears the sound of an elephant hunt, and she is captured and separated from her family. Her life changes dramatically; she must learn the ways of humans. She is to be trained to work on clearing the jungle so that railways can be built. The training is sometimes cruel, but she makes friends with a boy named Opu. It is this friendship that lies at the heart of The Vanishing Elephant.

Opu is an orphan who dreams of becoming a Mahout (an elephant trainer) but this dream is shattered when Janu is sold to a circus in America who change her name to 'Jenny'. Jenny makes the long journey across the sea until she reaches an entirely new world. She does not know if she will ever see Opu again, but carries his memory deep within her.

Jenny has many adventures as the circus travels across the United States. She escapes onto the Great Prairie, she saves a woman from an angry tiger and in 1918 she meets a famous escapologist called Harry Houdini. Houdini desires to be not only an escape artist but a great magician, and he plans to make Jenny magically disappear from the stage of the Hippodrome Theater in New York.

Meanwhile, far away in India, Opu is now an old man. He reads about the adventures of Jenny the Elephant, in a newspaper. He concludes that this elephant is indeed his old friend. Despite ill health, he makes the same difficult boat journey to New York that Jenny once made. There, on the stage of the Hippodrome, they meet again.



# WHO WE ARE

Cahoots is a Belfast based theatre company creating theatrical magic for children and their families. Our distinctive style combines magic and illusion, physical theatre and original music.

Cahoots tours to ever-growing audiences at home in Northern Ireland and across the world. Our work is acclaimed in Ireland, the UK, Asia, America and has been enjoyed in theatres, schools and healthcare settings since 2001.

Previous Cahoots productions include: the musicians of bremen, the sorcerer's apprentice, The University of Wonder & Imagination, Secrets of Space, Penguins, Nivelli's War, Shh! We Have A Plan and Egg.

## OUR VISION

We seek to become a world leader in theatre for young audiences with our brand recognised for delivering innovative, exciting and high quality experiences whilst always reaching more children and young people.

**CAHOOTS**

## OUR PURPOSE

Through our theatrical magic, we inspire a sense of wonder, unlock imagination and nurture a love of the arts in children. In doing so, we create lifelong memories and joint family experiences that make a difference to their lives.

**CAHOOTS**

## OUR MISSION

To protect and promote the right of all children to have access to high quality artistic experiences..

**CAHOOTS**

# CAST



Left to right

Katriona Brown, Adi Chugh, Terrence  
Fleming

James Grimm, David Morgan, Philippa  
O'Hara

Iris Schmid, Maeve Smyth, Madhav  
Vasantha.

# COMPANY AND CREATIVES

DIRECTOR

PAUL BOSCO MC ENEANEY

COMPOSER

AOIFE KAVANAGH

SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

SABINE DARGENT

WRITER

CHARLES WAY

COMPOSER

MD PALLAVI

PUPPET DESIGNER AND PUPPETRY DIRECTOR

HELEN FOAN

CHOREOGRAPHER

JAYACHANDRAN PALAZHY

LIGHTING DESIGNER

SIMON BOND

COMPANY MANAGER

STEVE BALL



THE  
VANISHING  
ELEPHANT



**INTERVIEW  
WITH  
PAUL BOSCO MCENEANEY  
(DIRECTOR)  
&  
CHARLES WAY  
(WRITER)**

**Steve:** I'm keen to get an insight into the play and find out more about *The Vanishing Elephant*. Paul, can you start by telling us how this amazing production came about in the first place.

**Paul:** Well, it was a bit of an accident if truth be told. We had a show on in New York and when we arrived at the New Victory Theatre in downtown Manhattan I was given a guided tour. Towards the end of the tour we were standing on the stage and the artistic director said to me "Do you know that on this very stage Harry Houdini vanished an elephant?" and I thought "Oh my goodness, there's a story there, not just about how Harry Houdini vanished an elephant, but how an elephant ended up on a stage in Times Square and how did the elephant feel. I came back from America and lifted the phone to Charles and maybe you could pick up the story from there."

**Charles:** So I got this incredible phone call from Paul saying "would you like to write a story about an elephant?" It sounded really fascinating and Paul came over to see me in my little writing shed in Abergavenny in Wales and I started researching about working elephants in India and how they were captured and trained. Then I started to look at elephants in circuses in America, and I realized it was a hugely productive business for those circuses because elephants would bring in a huge amount of audiences and money.

I looked deeply into the Indian culture and the spiritual aspect of watching an elephant be captured and trained. It's not easy watching in some ways, but it makes you understand something about that experience because the elephant can't express in words what it's a feeling and thinking, but we can see and we can project on to that elephant our emotions as well.

**Steve:** I've had the privilege of watching rehearsals for this amazing show which is an incredibly international production involving creatives and performers from across the world. Tell us a bit more Paul about how you've put the production together and recruited the team of creatives

**Paul:** It's really important to say that whilst the show is made and created in Belfast it's a global story so it's essential that it's told by a global cast. We have performers from America, India, Europe and Ireland who were asked to come from all over the world and join us here in Belfast.

The story is about displacement so when I'm directing this piece that's the word that comes to the fore. It's about the displacement of this elephant but also the displacement of people.

**Steve:** Paul, tel us about the book.

**Paul:** The book came out lockdown; we had a period of time when Charles, Sabine, (our designer) and I were able to really look at the story. I was very clear that I wanted the book to feel like it was created by theatre artists and not by illustrators and children's book writers. So Charles and Sabine worked tirelessly during lockdown to create this book that is a wonderful accompaniment to the show. It tells a similar story, it's not exactly the same, but it's certainly a real added bonus if you see the show and the plan is now for young people and teachers to use the book as a resource material.

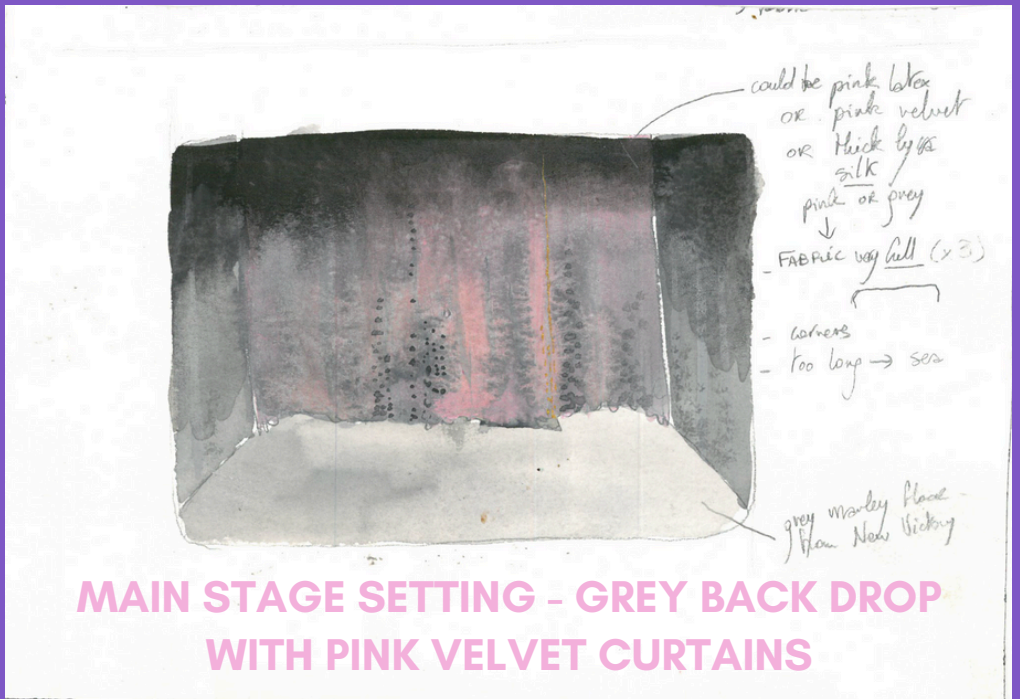
You get two bites at the story; you get your audience watching a show and being incredibly engaged by it. But then you do get the opportunity to discuss it in depth afterwards, which is not always the case if I go and see a play as sometimes life's just too busy and you don't have time. But usually when school groups come to see work, they take it back into the classroom, or if parents are taking children to a show they discuss it in the car.

The play has a real correlation with what's happening in the world. Imagine the elephant is not an elephant, and it's a person. Migration and immigration are key themes in the play which we are all grappling with.

**CLICK HERE FOR**  
**AUDIO**



# SET DESIGNS



**MAIN STAGE SETTING - GREY BACK DROP  
WITH PINK VELVET CURTAINS**

# COSTUME DESIGNS



**EXAMPLE COSTUMES - GREY WOOL MATERIAL  
WITH OPU IN INDIAN STYLE DRESS**

# COSTUME DESIGNS



**COSTUME FOR PUPPETEER AND MRS POWERS' CHARACTER - WAS CHANGED TO A GREEN COLOR RATHER THAN ORIGINAL PINK**

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

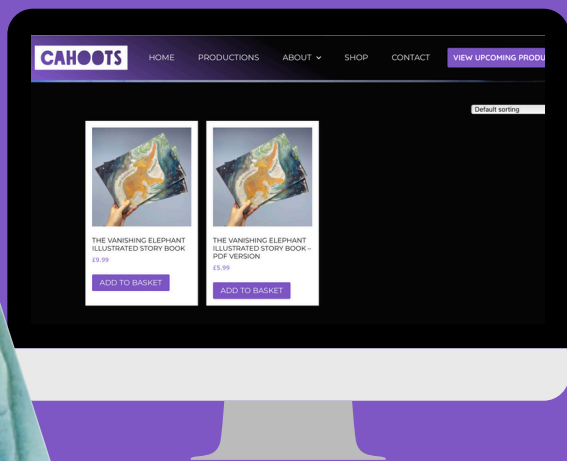
## READ ABOUT

### The Vanishing Elephant

A beautifully illustrated 56 page story book for children and families, based on Cahoots NI's theatrical production 'The Vanishing Elephant', written by its Playwright Charles Way and illustrated by its Set and Costume Designer Sabine Dargent.

Available to buy at the theatres we will be performing in or available to buy as a book or a PDF from the Cahoots NI website :

<https://cahootsni.com/shop/>



# WRITE ABOUT



## A Diary Entry

Imagine you are Opu and you are writing a diary entry describing a specific moment in the show.

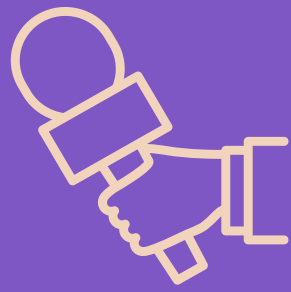
This could be when he is young and first meets Janu, or when he is older and reads about Harry Houdini in the newspaper. What might he be feeling? Describe his environment, what can he see and hear when he is writing?



## Design a Poster

Jenny the elephant becomes famous all over America when travelling with the circus. Design a poster the circus may have used for advertising her act. You can also write a short description of the show to entice audience members!

# Review



## A review of *The Vanishing Elephant*

Theatre critics write reviews of plays which often appear online and in newspapers.

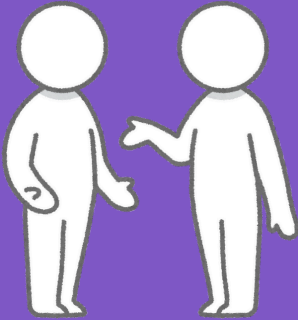
Write your review of *The Vanishing Elephant* which could include

- An introductory paragraph describing what you saw on stage, the name of the theatre company, the playwright and where the play was performed.
- Summarise the plot of the play.
- Write about the acting and directing and how you think the performers portrayed the characters
- Describe the design of the production, such as the lighting, sound, costumes,, puppets and the set
- Write about your thoughts on the play as a whole. Would you recommend the play to other people? You may want to include a star rating with 5 stars being excellent and highly recommended and 1 star



# TALK ABOUT

The *Vanishing Elephant* takes place in the 1900's, when things were very different to how they are now. What differences can you see between how we live now and the world of this story? Try to focus on how people may have seen the world and each other.



Why do you think Opu and Janu became such good friends? What are some similarities or shared experiences between these characters?

In what ways is the world different from how it was back then? Did the theater have electricity? Could audience members call their friends and family on the phone and tell them about the show? Do some research to compare and contrast the differences between how people lived back then and how we do now.

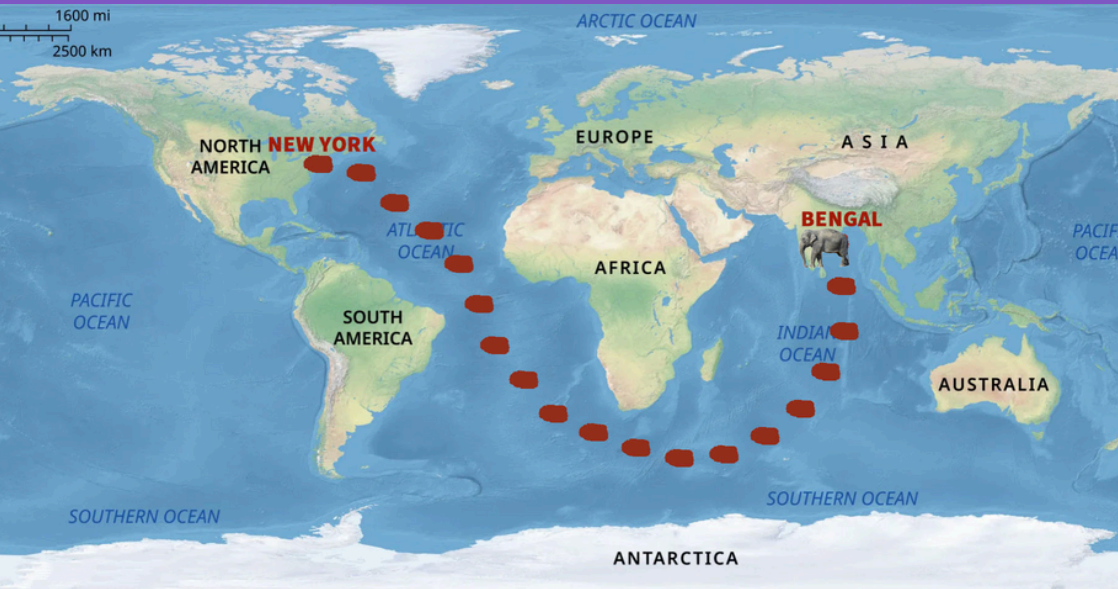
**What is your view on animals performing in circuses? How would you feel seeing a routine like the one Jenny performs?**

**One of the key themes of the play is displacement and migration. Why do people move from one country to another in search of a new life?**

**The Vanishing Elephant is based on the story of the real Harry Houdini who vanished an elephant named Jennie in the Hippodrome Theater in 1918. In this telling, we follow the perspective of the elephant.**

**Talk about the long journey Janu made by ship from Bengal in India to New York in the USA. How do you think Janu felt during the long voyage. How long do you think the journey took?**

# JANU'S JOURNEY



# LEARN ABOUT

## Elephants

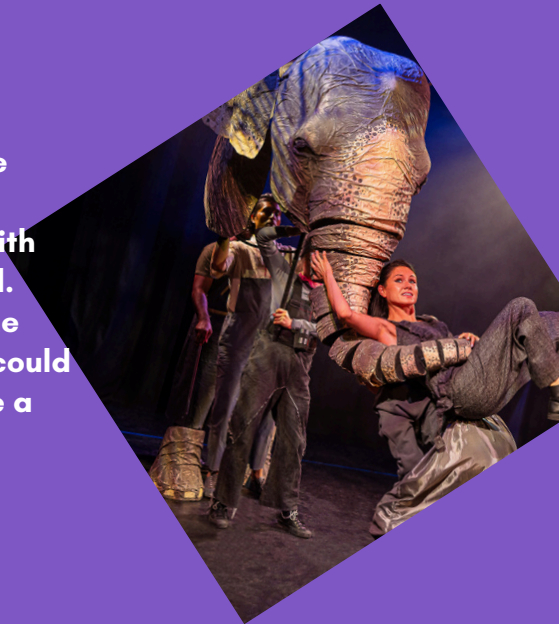


Janu is an Asian elephant born in India. See what you can find out about this and other species of elephant; Where are they from? How many species are there? What do they eat? Do they stay with their families when they grow up or do they live alone?

Once you are confident in your elephant knowledge, why not share it with a classmate? Present your work to them and try to answer any questions they may have.

## Puppets

The animals you see in the show are puppets made specially for this production. Each puppet is made with paper, paint and soft foam material. Try making your own puppet with the materials you have access to. You could use paper, cardboard or even make a sock puppet!



# British Colonialism in India

For much of the 17th and 18th centuries, Britain had its sights set on controlling the subcontinent of India for access to its spices, tea and indigo dye, among other goods and resources. Starting in 1757, Britain heavily influenced the Indian government with the East India Company by winning the support of local princes, simultaneously taking control of trade in the region and Indian leadership. After a failed rebellion and mutiny of Indian soldiers in 1857, Britain passed an act to officially consolidate power from the East India Company and directly rule over India as a colony. This marked the beginning of the British Raj, or British rule over India, which lasted until 1947. During this period, policy and increased taxation from the British led to several long famines that killed millions of Indians. These famines were met with minimal to no relief from the British government. The British also heavily Westernized Indian culture and industrialized Indian infrastructure. In order to build new railways, the British captured many elephants and put them to work clearing trees and roadways, as seen in **THE VANISHING ELEPHANT**.



# Elephants in the Circus

In 1881, elephants were first introduced to the circus by two rival circus impresarios, James A. Bailey and P.T. Barnum. The previous year, the pair had combined acts to launch one of the most historic traveling circuses, Barnum & Bailey. The employment of elephants in Barnum & Bailey's circus launched their careers, yet, in 2016, Barnum & Bailey announced they would retire elephant acts forever. What happened in the more than 130 years in between? While elephants were a major draw for circus goers, animal welfare experts have concluded that methods of capturing and domesticating elephants are inhumane. One example of a cruel practice seen onstage in *THE VANISHING ELEPHANT* is the use of a bullhook, a metal rod with a sharp tip used to jab the elephant's sensitive areas. The U.S. Department of Agriculture cited Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey over 150 times for failure to meet federal standards established in the Animal Welfare Act, including failure to provide animals with proper shelter, space and veterinary care. Their circus concluded its historic run in 2017.



# Harry Houdini

Harry Houdini was born in Hungary in 1874 and emigrated with his Jewish family to the United States. As a child he performed as a trapeze artist in circuses and moved to New York City in 1882, where he performed in vaudeville shows. He married Wilhelmina Rahner in 1894 who, as Beatrice Houdini, served as his stage assistant. Houdini quickly earned an international reputation for his daring feats of escape from shackles, ropes, and handcuffs and from various locked containers including milk cans, coffins and prison cells. In one of his acts he was shackled with chains and placed in a box that was locked, roped, and weighted. The box was submerged from a boat, to which Houdini returned after freeing himself underwater. In another outdoor spectacle he was suspended, head down, 23 metres above ground and freed himself from a straitjacket. Thousands of people watched Houdini's escapes and he showed off his extraordinary skills in many films from 1916 to 1923.

Later in life Houdini campaigned against mind readers, mediums, and psychics who claimed supernatural powers. He accused them of being charlatans who produced their effects through trickery. Houdini died of peritonitis caused by a stomach injury in 1926.



# The Vanishing Elephant

One of Houdini's most famous magic feats was vanishing a live elephant. Houdini performed the trick during a record-breaking 19 week run at the Hippodrome Theater in New York in 1918. He revived the act in 1922 at the Times Square Theater in New York.

In the act an elephant named "Jennie" was led into the back of a large box decorated as a circus wagon. The box was closed and the front turned to face the audience. On Houdini's command, the front and back doors were dropped open to reveal a round opening through which you could see the back of the stage. The elephant had disappeared and remains one of Houdini's great mysteries.



# VOCABULARY LIST

Term	Definition
Ankus	A hooked weapon used in India to control captive elephants.
Babu	In the Assamese language this term is used to describe a baby.
Baker	A city in the U.S. State of Oregon.
Batten Down	A phrase meaning to prepare for possible trouble or difficulty.
Bengal	Bengal is a region in the northeastern part of India. The region is now divided between Bangladesh and the Indian State of West Bengal.

Billings	The most populated city in the U.S. State of Montana.
Buffalo	The second largest city in the U.S. State of New York.
Calcutta	The capital city of India's West Bengal state.
Chicago	The most populated city in the U.S. State of Illinois.
Cleveland	A city in the U.S. State of Ohio.
Danby	A town in the State of New York.
Escapology	A performance of escaping from chains, boxes, etc. as a form of entertainment.
Hartford	The capital city of the U.S. State of Connecticut.
Hippodrome Theatre	The world's largest theater at the time of its opening in 1905, situated in New York. It was demolished in 1939.

Hot Springs	A city in the U.S. State of South Dakota.
Koomkie	A trained female elephant used as a decoy in the capture of wild male elephants.
Mahout	A person who works with, rides and tends to elephants.
Milwaukee	A city in the U.S. State of Wisconsin.
New Haven	A coastal city in the State of Connecticut.
Prairie	A large open area of grassland.
Rapid City	A city in the U.S. State of South Dakota.
Rupees	The Indian Rupee is the currency used in India. The symbol for this currency is ₹.
St. Paul	The capital city of the U.S. State of Minnesota.
Tamarind Tree	A tropical Evergreen tree which bears edible fruit that can be found in tropical Africa and Asia.
The Great Plains	A broad expanse of flat lands that span over ten of the states of the U.S.

# FURTHER RESOURCES

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HARRY HOUDINI:

[HTTPS://WWW.THEGREATHARRYHOUDINI.COM/VANISHINGELEPHANT.HTML](https://www.thegreatharryhoudini.com/vanishingelephant.html)

FOR MORE ON THE HIPPODROME THEATRE:

[HTTP://WWW.PERFORMINGARTSARCHIVE.COM/THEATRES/THEATRES-H/HIPPODROME\\_NYC/HIPPODROME\\_NYC.HTM](http://www.performingartsarchive.com/theatres/theatres-h/hippodrome_nyc/hippodrome_nyc.htm)

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ELEPHANTS:

[HTTPS://WWW.NATGEOKIDS.COM/UK/DISCOVER/ANIMALS/GENERAL-ANIMALS/ELEPHANT-FACTS/](https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/animals/general-animals/elephant-facts/)

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