

## Activity

# Well, THAT'S Debatable...

Use this activity to engage your students in a debate centered on various story elements of *The Vanishing Elephant*.\*

**Materials Needed:** Four pieces of chart paper, each placed in a different corner of the space, with these words written on them: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree

1. State the following aloud:
  - a. The company chose to tell this story because they wanted to bring awareness to animal cruelty.
  - b. Jenny was happy with her life in the circus and appreciated her handler.
  - c. Jenny was unhappy with her circus life and longed to be home.
  - d. Real magic was used in the show, and Jenny and Opu actually disappeared.

**Note:** Feel welcome to add your own set of questions!
2. For each statement, have students move to the corner that best matches their position (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree).
3. Each group will have two minutes to discuss and solidify their reasoning for why they chose that corner.
4. Each group selects a spokesperson to express the group's position, while the other groups listen closely. That person has 20 seconds to express the group's thoughts clearly and persuade their classmates that their stance is right.
5. Direct each group to present their position in turn. Allow students to move to a different corner if they have changed their minds. If anyone moves to a new position, ask what made them change their mind.
6. To culminate, have a group discussion about the story of Jenny's journey from life in the wild to life in the circus, with a focus on the themes of conservation, empathy and friendship.

### Reflection Questions:

*What were some of your favorite discussion points from today's debate?*

*What was it like to think about the show in this way?*

### NOTE FOR TEACHERS:

*\*This activity can be adapted to any text, lesson or unit to explore and express critical thought.*

# The Vanishing Elephant Synopsis: Jenny's Journey

The *Vanishing Elephant* tells the story of an Asian Elephant called **Janu**.

Janu is born in Bengal, India, and lives among a large herd of elephants, exploring the jungle. She plays amongst the endless trees and deep, dark pools in which she can clearly see her image reflected. One day, Janu hears the sound of an elephant hunt, and she is captured and taken to a village. Her life changes dramatically—Janu will never see her family again.

Once in the village, Janu must learn the ways of humans. She is trained through cruel, inhumane means to clear the jungle so that railways can be built, turning India into a modern nation. Janu befriends an Indian boy named Opu. Opu is an orphan, just like Janu now, who dreams of becoming a **mahout**, or elephant trainer.

Unfortunately, their worlds are turned upside down when Janu is sold to a circus in America and renamed Jenny. She makes the strange and arduous journey across the sea until she reaches her new home. She does not know if she will ever see Opu again, but she carries his memory deep within her. Her new trainer Jarrett forces Jenny to learn and perform difficult, and often painful, tricks. Jarrett frequently uses a bullhook, or **ankus**, and violent methods to control Jenny, much to the dismay of Carole, the circus manager.

Jenny has many adventures as the circus travels across the United States, escaping to the great prairie, saving Carole from an angry tiger and, in 1918, meeting a famous escapologist named Harry Houdini. Houdini wants to be known not only as an escape artist, but a great magician, and to this end he plans to make an elephant magically disappear live on stage in New York City. He chooses Jenny for the great vanishing elephant trick.

Meanwhile, far away in India, Opu is now a grown man who has made a life for himself studying these great and mysterious creatures. He reads in a newspaper about the exploits of Jenny the Elephant, who is now famous in her own right, and 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 stage, Jenny and Opu meet again, and together are part of an amazing and moving theatrical vanishing.

## Words to Know:

**Janu:** Hindi name for soul or life force

**Mahout:** Elephant keeper, trainer or rider

**Ankus:** A metal rod with a sharp spike and hook used as an elephant goad

**Koomkie:** Trained female elephant used as decoy in capturing other wild elephants

