Tall Stories theatre company first adapted Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s popular picture book, *The Gruffalo’s Child* in 2006. Over a decade later, the show is still entertaining families with its mix of storytelling, fun characters and joyful songs.

Tall Stories’ co-Artistic Directors, Olivia Jacobs (OJ) and Toby Mitchell (TM) tell us about the show’s creation, their love for Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s work and what makes a good family show . . .

***The Gruffalo’s Child* was published in 2004, three years after your stage version of *The Gruffalo* had its first tour - did you know at that point that you wanted to adapt that book, too?**

**TM: “**Yes, but only afterwe were able to come up with ideas for how it might work on stage. There are a number of special effects at the end, when the Big Bad Mouse’s shadow appears – and that’s a tricky thing to do in a theatre, particularly when you have people sitting in the circle and stalls to consider. So we held workshops to try various ways of doing it, talked to our designers, and eventually came up with ideas that could make it work theatrically.”

**Reading *The Gruffalo’s Child* aloud, as many people do, takes a lot less time than your show. How did you go about expanding the story to create a full hour-long performance?**

**OJ**: “We worked in the same way we had with *The Gruffalo,* by taking the basic structure of the book and thinking where are the logical places to expand and have fun? So we looked at all the characters and explored what could happen in each scene with them. In the book, it’s very quick – you meet the Gruffalo and his child and then she heads off into the wood. But we wanted to get to know those two characters a little better and find out what happens between them in the cave before she goes out. How many times has the Gruffalo told her not to go into the deep dark wood? And what happens in each exchange she has with the Snake, the Owl and the Fox?”

**TM**: “We almost act like a grown-up reading the story to a child – you don’t just read it straight through. If you’ve got a bit more time you expand on it, point things out, look at the pictures – and that’s how we see our role on stage.”

**What is it about *The Gruffalo* and *The Gruffalo’s Child* that you think makes them so appealing, both in print and on stage?**

**OJ**: “*The Gruffalo* is a classic David and Goliath tale, where the little guy beats the big guy through brains and not brawn. It’s so easily identifiable for any child or grown-up reading it. They’re simple tales with beautiful illustrations - what’s not to like?”

**TM**: “With *The Gruffalo’s Child*, it’s the idea that this tiny mouse has scared the Gruffalo off, and over the years the Gruffalo has built the mouse up in his head into this enormous scary monster that he uses to frighten his child with and keep her safe at home. There’s something really lovely about the way this tiny mouse has grown in his imagination.”

**One of the most loveable aspects of Julia Donaldson’s stories, is her use of rhyme. How have you incorporated that in your show?**

**TM**: “We recognised early on that the rhymes had something special about them, so we made a decision to use every single rhyming couplet that’s in the book on the stage, and I think that gives families a real hook to hang on to. Also, if you leave the slightest pause in the dialogue, it gives audiences a chance to shout out the missing word, which is always good fun. It’s something we didn’t know at the start, but have built in over the years.”

**Axel Scheffler’s designs are also an important aspect of the picture books – were you inspired by them at all?**

**OJ**: “We definitely take our inspiration from Axel’s illustrations, because they’re so beautiful, but the costumes and set are not direct replicas of the book, they’re our interpretation of them. We work with our designers to see how we can make it more 3D for the stage, and also a bit more practical in order to tour the show.”

**Songs are always a big part of a Tall Stories show – how do you feel they add to the audience’s enjoyment?**

**OJ**: “The music is really joyful and just adds that extra dimension to the shows. I love working with Jon and Andy, who write the music and lyrics for us, because they always work alongside us in rehearsals to create songs that fit logically into the story, and either move the characters along or drive the plot forward. And often they bring opportunities for interaction, such as the Fox’s song in *The Gruffalo’s Child*, where there’s a lovely moment for the audience to join in – not in an awkward or embarrassing way, but in a very natural way.”

**TM**: “They feel like proper little pop songs, that wouldn’t be out of place in the Top 20 sometimes. The lyrics are great, the arrangements are very witty, and quite often they gently spoof well-known genres, which gives the grown-ups a bit extra to enjoy.”

**Many of the children in your audience will be attending the theatre for the first time – how do you make sure they have a good experience so they’ll want to come back?**

**OJ**: “Our primary activity is to look after our audience, because the whole point of us creating a show is for people to enjoy it and to go home wanting more, ready to come back. So we road-test all of our shows with an invited audience of schools and families, and hold feedback sessions with them afterwards to make sure it’s enjoyable and suitable for that age group. And just by watching that audience you can see if there are moments when something doesn’t quite work or they’ve become bored - and once we get that feedback, we go back into rehearsals and work on the show again.”

**What do you feel is the ideal age range for The Gruffalo’s Child?**

**TM**: “With most of our Julia Donaldson shows, we say it’s aimed at ages 3+, and we think there’s definitely enough fun in there for the 3-year-olds. But then those aged four and over get more of the plot and the humour. Quite often we’ll have a 7-year-old in the audience with a 3 or 4-year-old sibling, and it’s the younger child the family is coming for, but the older child really enjoys it as well.”

**Of course, sitting next to every child in the audience is an adult – how do you make sure they’re having a good time, too?**

**OJ**: “We always think about that, because the last time we checked, nearly 60% of our audience is grown-up – and they’re the people buying the tickets. I want to go to the theatre with my children and enjoy what I’m seeing, and I want them to enjoy it too – and that’s easily possible. Shows can work on lots of different levels, and as long as nobody feels excluded and everybody feels involved, then you’re on to a winner.”

**TM**: “Deep down, I think we all love being told a story - it’s a big part of human civilisation, listening to and telling stories. And one of the things about our shows is the way we talk to the audience directly, but not condescendingly, and say we’re all here to enjoy a story together.”

**You first staged *The Gruffalo’s Child* in 2006 – has the show changed much since then?**

**OJ**: “Yes, it has. We continually re-imagine, re-rehearse, change and update. We’ve recently re-worked the costumes, the puppets and how we frame the show, and we’ve also written a new song. So all our shows continue to evolve, and I hope they always will for as long as they’re running.”

**TM**: “Because some of our audience is now coming to see the show having watched the animation of *The Gruffalo’s Child*, rather than read the book, they’re expecting to see that on stage. So we’ve changed the beginning, and now have three narrators who talk to the audience, and then one of them turns into a character. It’s a way of gently saying ‘this is a show where you have to use your imaginations’, and we find that audiences are really going along with that and enjoying it.”

**In 2017 Tall Stories celebrated its 20th anniversary, and during those two decades digital entertainment has grown enormously. What do you think live theatre has to offer family audiences that they can’t get at home?**

**TM**: “I have a theory about recorded entertainment versus live entertainment, which is that young people actually put very little value in recorded entertainment, partly because it’s available at all times, mostly for free or very little. So I think that going out and seeing something live is seen as a treat, a special occasion, something different. I think that’s why we’re seeing a lot of the younger generation getting back into live music and certain forms of live theatre – and I think that young children are the same. They love their iPads and tablets and electronic games, but coming out and experiencing something live is a different and special event, especially if you’re doing it with your family.”

By Kelly Apter