Get Real
by Brooke Bessesen

Underwater ballet - part 1 of 3

Naturalist escapes desert for humpback whale research

Dawn broke soft and gray with a captivating hint of the Hawaiian bouquet—plumeria, ginger flower, naniuma, and orchids—swaying in my head like a slow, sensuous hula. White frothy curls hid adieu to the moonlight and disappeared into sand silky as powdered sugar.

I had come to cloudbanked Maui on invitation; the Center for Whale Studies was willing to grant me a glimpse into the world of cetacean research. Standing on the balcony of my waterfront rental, I sipped a steamy cup of tea and watched the deep blue; humpback whales annually migrate from the same Pacific waters when I was only four years old. It was during a summer visit with my father, who worked for one year as a doctor on Oahu. I still remember the first time I saw the ocean, the awesome enormity, the rolling waves of turquoise and white, the strum of some innate thing.

I was in those early years, watching television shows starring Jacques Cousteau from my Colorado living room that I learned about gigantic air-breathing mammals who sang heart-aching melodies from the depths of the deep blue; humpback whales, Megaptera novaeangliae, stretching up to 50 feet in length and famous for their long, fluid pectoral flippers and characteristic knobby-marked rostroms. I grew up to work with animals and enjoyed many unique experiences with them. However, from the moment I closed the back cover on Roger Payne’s poetic science chronicle, Among Whales, I longed to hear humpback music through a hydrophone. I imagined it dangling beneath me into the mystical abyss like a fishing line that would hook the songs and carry their vibrational notes to my headset above. The pace of the song is very grand and extended and appears to me to be set to the slow rhythm of the ocean swell—the rhythm of the sea.

I also wanted to see humpback whales, Megaptera novaeangliae, stretching up to 50 feet in length and famous for their long, fluid pectoral flippers and characteristic knobby-marked rostroms. I grew up to work with animals and enjoyed many unique experiences with them. However, from the moment I closed the back cover on Roger Payne’s poetic science chronicle, Among Whales, I longed to hear humpback music through a hydrophone. I imagined it dangling beneath me into the mystical abyss like a fishing line that would hook the songs and carry their vibrational notes to my headset above. The pace of the song is very grand and extended and appears to me to be set to the slow rhythm of the ocean swell—the rhythm of the sea.

Payne wrote. I also wanted to see humpback whales, Megaptera novaeangliae, stretching up to 50 feet in length and famous for their long, fluid pectoral flippers and characteristic knobby-marked rostroms. I grew up to work with animals and enjoyed many unique experiences with them. However, from the moment I closed the back cover on Roger Payne’s poetic science chronicle, Among Whales, I longed to hear humpback music through a hydrophone. I imagined it dangling beneath me into the mystical abyss like a fishing line that would hook the songs and carry their vibrational notes to my headset above. The pace of the song is very grand and extended and appears to me to be set to the slow rhythm of the ocean swell—the rhythm of the sea.

Payne wrote. I also wanted to see humpback whales, Megaptera novaeangliae, stretching up to 50 feet in length and famous for their long, fluid pectoral flippers and characteristic knobby-marked rostroms. I grew up to work with animals and enjoyed many unique experiences with them. However, from the moment I closed the back cover on Roger Payne’s poetic science chronicle, Among Whales, I longed to hear humpback music through a hydrophone. I imagined it dangling beneath me into the mystical abyss like a fishing line that would hook the songs and carry their vibrational notes to my headset above. The pace of the song is very grand and extended and appears to me to be set to the slow rhythm of the ocean swell—the rhythm of the sea.
Underwater ballet - part 2 of 3

Naturalist escapes desert for humpback whale research

As our boat bumped across ever-changing ripples that stretched as an aqueous desert between West Maui, Lanai and Molokai, I stabilized myself on the forward deck, leaning heavily against the windshield, and scanned the horizon as I do when piloting an airplane, looking for dark specks in a seemingly endless field of blue.

It wasn’t long before we spotted our first blow, a mist of crystalline droplets tossed skyward when a whale arrives at the surface and exhales massive lungfuls of held breath. Each species has a unique blow, a signature of sorts. A right whale’s is V-shaped, a sperm whale’s leans forward and to the left, and the strait narrow gasp of a blue whale can gain thirty feet of altitude and linger in the air.

A humpback whale creates a puffy, oblong cloud reminiscent of an umbrella dripping with dew. It usually surfaces several times in a row, taking easy breaths before lifting its head slightly higher to capture one last enormous inhale, and then diving down for several minutes. It is at this anticipated moment between the final draught of oxygen and the round “footprint” of smooth water left behind that our blow is particularly skookum, broad and bantam backs side-by-side.

Mark tried to stay upwind of their blows and called “snort alert” every time the dewy mist threatened to sneak across the bow, at which point all cameras were sent into momentary hiding. With time, sea water can be corrosive as battery acid and aside from causing marring artifacts on the lens, it can settle into the camera’s housing and begin a quiet campaign of destruction.

After getting enough surface footage and photos to identify the adults and logging the standard litany of details—time, date, number of whales in the group, direction of travel, observed behaviors, etc.—Mark tempered the throttle and made a grand U-turn, leaving the trio to their morning stroll.

Propelled by scientific interest and rewarded with morsels of understanding, the hours whizzed by as we documented humpbacks that dwarfed our 26-foot catamaran. When one escort made a terpsichorean breach—forty tons of baleen whale flung into full view and reclaimed by the ocean in a whirling mega-splash—we carefully netted brownish skin samples that lingered at the surface and processed them into salt-filled vials for DNA testing.

Mark, Randy and Kevin had been taking turns collecting underwater video and photographs while Jim and I shot images topside but as we spied a new cluster of blows and cut toward it, Mark barked, “Jim, Brooke, get ready to go in.”

The boat bounced and shimmered as Jim and I struggled to keep balance while quickly donning masks and fins. Then we prudently scrambled onto the narrow back platform where we positioned ourselves, sitting elbow to elbow, legs straight out, flipped feet held over the rushing sea wash. Everything happened so fast, the moment of my consummation arrived with no time for reverent contemplation.

The boat dipped and slipped into the sea.

“Go. Now,” Mark hollered, and we slipped into the sea.

Part 3 continues in the next edition of Take 5


Miss Saigon continues at Fountain Hills Community Theater

Place: Fountain Hills Community Theater, 11445 N. Saguaros Blvd.
Production: Miss Saigon by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, with lyrics by Boublil and Richard Maltby Jr.
Plot: Miss Saigon tells the tragic tale of a doomed romance involving an Asian woman abandoned by her American lover. The setting of the plot is relocated to 1970s Saigon during the Vietnam War, and Madame Butterfly’s American Lieutenant and Japanese geisha coupling is replaced by a romance between an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl.


Particulars: The show plays through May 25. Shows are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets cost $20 for adults and $15 for kids younger than 12. To order, call (480) 837-9661.

Michael Stewart and Kayte Zhang star in Miss Saigon
A chill scourged up my spine. The female’s tremendous pectoral flippers—first of all, refulgent in the air—was the thing my brain registered. Then the outline of her entire contour came clear against a backdrop of cerulean blue. A breath played hopscotch in my throat. She was utterly, fantastically beautiful.

This mother was resting roughly 10 meters beneath the surface with an escort nearby. And hovering under her chin was an elegantly diminutive version. The calf slipped under her protective wing and peered up at us, cautiously curious, not unlike a human child staring from behind his mother’s leg, and the sight of her wrapping her flipper over his small frame gave me an incisive maternal tug.

This was the trait Debbie most loved about humpbacks—their long pectoral flippers. They give them more grace than other whales, she would say, “And they use them for other head-to-toe.”

I was mesmerized by the sheer size of her, already outweighing me by over three tons. And what an awkward little creature I must have appeared, gangly and ill-equipped for this ocean habitat.

After countless seconds of relative stillness she made a leisurely arc around me before breaking our once-in-a-lifetime whale-human connection and resuming rank down near her mother. That unique encounter is eternally etched in my mind.

When the group waved goodbye with scalloped tail flukes and disappeared from view, I swam back to the boat and pulled myself aboard, reeling with exhilaration. Amazing was the only word that seemed able to leap the chasm from brain to mouth and I sputtered it over and over to the delight of the crew.

As the afternoon wind began to flutter our binini top in earnest and the sun stretched its golden arm across the glinting indigo, we headed back to the harbor. Cutting the engine, we turned in the ashen pier, motored past a long row of lanky masts that wambled on our wake and slinked into our slip nine hours after embarkation, waterlogged but rident, bantering about the day’s highlights.

“Your hit the jackpot,” Kevin later declared as we ferried items onto the dock and tied bulging orange floats around the perimeter of the boat to protect the hull overnight. “Today was definitely a ten!”

Familiar with the unpredictable nature of searching for wildlife, I was thankful we had an outing that ranked so high on the universal scale.

Although found nearly worldwide, humpbacks are an endangered species. Once traversing oceans by the hundreds of thousands, members were slashed by extensive commercial hunting in the 19th and 20th centuries, a time when whaling practices decimated entire populations.

At the end of my trip, I stopped by Mark and Debbie’s to say farewell and mahalo (Hawaiian for “thank you.”)

As we sat surrounded, covered by hefty plastic cases, computer equipment and research documents, I asked Debbie, “What is the most difficult part of doing your whale research?”

She thought for a moment and then replied, “Frying to adapt a family between two places.”

The Ferrari family would soon be making the long trek back to Louisiana, where they reside the other eight months of the year.

I glanced out the window; tides rolled in the bight and a buttery blue horizon stretched beyond. Only a few distant blows could be seen. April was marching by with decked out in its most fresh coat of the humpbacks were beginning their seasonal passage to the Gulf of Alaska—a long, perilous journey—one from which some of the whales, those too weak to endure the tribulations, would not return.

I thought about the calf who had winged through the gelatinous atmosphere approached me in those wild azure heavens. I envisioned her tucked next to her mother, facing the voyage across open ocean and considering the likeness of these humans and the whales they study.

Every year, both migrate great distances away from Hawaii and back again, pulled by something too profound and complex to fully understand or describe.

“Is it worth it?” I questioned Debbie further. She smiled and answered in just one word.

“Definitely.”

That afternoon, as fields of sugar cane broke away beneath us and our 757 folded its wheels over the green mountains of Maui, banking hard to cross the vast mainland, I peered down on a sliver of shifting earth and silently wished them all safe travels.


Fountain Hills Community Theater

Place: Fountain Hills Community Theater, 11445 N. Saguar Blvd.

Production: Miss Saigon by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil with lyrics by Boublil and Richard Maltby, Jr.

Plot: Miss Saigon tells the tragic tale of a doomed romance involving an Asian woman abandoned by her American lover. The setting is 1970s Saigon during the Vietnam War, and Madame Butterfly’s American Lieutenant and Japanese geisha coupling is replaced by a romance between an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl.


Particulars: The show plays through May 25. Shows are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets cost $20 for adults and $15 for kids younger than 12. To order, call (480) 837-9661.