

Report on The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Graham adapted for the stage by Alan Bennett

Performed by the Potters Bar Theatre Company at Wyllotts Theatre, Potters Bar

19th -23rd April 2011

Please be completely honest-If you were a set designer and a director asked you to build a set with 3 separate animal homes, (one of them under the stage), an underground passage, working versions of a boat, a gypsy caravan,a motorcar,a barge and a train (all of which have to be strong enough to be climbed on, ridden in and last a week without collapsing), a push on market stall, a folding magistrates bench and an arial platform to safely house an 8 piece orchestra and conductor, - what would you say? Might you be tempted to tell him to get lost? or invent an excuse? - "I am so sorry I am having all my teeth removed that week,- I'd rather"!!!!

Colin Smale and his intrepid team took on the challenge for Potters Bar Theatre Companys production of Alan Bennett's adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's "Wind in the Willows" performed at Wyllotts Theatre, Potters Bar over Easter this year. Not only did they take on the challenge. They managed to produce a stage set which was truly the star of the show. Mole End with its cosy bed and flap up front door set amongst the tree roots and reeds, the colourful gypsy caravan and realistic boat,barge,car and train enabled the audience to enter the world of the river bank with confidence realising that this was going to be something special.

It was a real world from the moment we entered the theatre. Rabbits and squirrels were busily going about their daily routines as we got to our seats. The cast were all in character fully engaged in their activities. The costumes were magnificent. Animal personalities were hinted at through ears, tails and appropriate colours and fabrics and clever movement. The Costume Store could not have a better advertisement and Suzanne Sieve and her team can be proud of themselves The make-up was subtle in most cases, and very effective. Some animals, such as Badger, recieved stronger definition and most wore black whiskers crafted from a redundant fibre optic lamp. It was thoughtfully done and I congratulate Babs Phillpot and co.

From the moment Mole popped up through his hole in the stage and made his first acquaintance with Ratty and the pleasures of "mucking about in boats" we were sure that we were in for an entertaining evening. **Adrian McManus** made a convincing and endearing mole in his black beret. He was young and shy, enthusiastic and easily put in his place by Ratty, who was confidently and effectively played by **Nick Reed**, in sea captain style. After an amusing scene with Otter,(**David Ranford**), and Portly, (**Charles Le Couilliard**) in striped swimwear and goggles, we were soon introduced to Toad, the loveable but unbearably big headed creature who rides roughshod over everyone whilst persuing his latest obsession. We were not dissapointed in **Richard Jackson**. He was loud, outrageous and completely in character. My only negative comment is that Richard did not have any padding. He is tall and slim and I think a small paunch would have made him more toad like. His facial expression, movement and diction were all excellent, however, and made up for his lack of girth. The last of the four friends, Badger, is introduced later when Ratty and Mole are lost in the wild wood and wake him up from his winter sleep. **John Bagley** played him in true Badger style, somewhat irrasible but kindly, ponderous but decisive when necessary- an elder statesman. It was a pleasing performance. The shifting pattern of their friendship was elegantly portrayed by Alan Bennett's clever script and brought out excellently by the actors and by Gary Colledge's direction.

During our first meeting with Toad we are also introduced to Albert, the horse, who has some of the funniest lines in the show. Wonderfully played, in a welsh accent by **Roger Huggins**, we sympathised with Albert, who gets slapped on the bottom incessantly and is expected to revel in it, although any other creature would recognise it as a form of punishment. He likes carrots, yes, but in a cream sauce, gently sauted, not raw and covered in mud! Incidentally, Alberts costume with its mop type mane and putees was so effective that it was a shock when he walked off and I was reminded that he only had two legs instead of the expected four.

We followed the riverside animals through the seasons and through Toad's obsessions with caravans and motor cars. We were given a treat in the scene where Toad, Ratty and Mole set out in a gypsy caravan followed by a stream of animal spectators. The sun sets and the sky turns to orange then subsides into the greens and blues of evening. Congratulations to lighting man, **Simon Payne** for giving us this and one or two other notable moments. The same too, to sound designer, **Cameron Biggs** for effective road smash up and gaol sound effects. These often overlooked skills drew us into the action and gave credibility to the whole dramatic experience. Props also were beautifully appropriate with the possible exception of a small metal bowl used in Rattys home which caught the light and drew too much attention to itself.

Nearing the end of the first act, the court scene,(which I found boring in the professional version at the National), was excellently executed by the unruly cast of stoats and weasels led by **Andrew Hull** as chief weasel and **George Bannister** as Weasel Norman and by a well paced and clear delivery by **Sharon Lottari** as Magistrate and **George Burton** as clerk of the court. Toad is eventually sent to gaol, not for stealing a motorcar,(penalty 12 months), but for

20 years- for saying that the magistrate had a big nose.

The first act culminates in a visit to Mole End and the field mice's charming Christmas song and "In the bleak Midwinter" sung by the company as snow falls, (beautifully lit in ultraviolet). The Music, directed by Jo Brady, was good throughout, but really seemed to get going at this point as if the cast had gained the confidence that was rather lacking in "the land of lost content". A small field mouse runs to collect Ratty from the front of the stage and leads him away making an elegant end to act one.

After the interval Toad escapes from prison dressed as a washerwoman, courtesy of **Christine Le Couilliard**, aided by **Christina Constantiou** as the gaolers daughter. The action romps farce-like through rides hitched on a train (driver - **Julian Tracey**) and a barge (bargewoman-**Debbie Oakes**), the re appearance of Albert the horse and to a meeting with a gypsy (**Claire Fisher**) to the eventual revelation that Toad Hall has been invaded by stoats and weasels and that Badger knows of a secret passage so the friends can take the intruders by surprise. It all seemed to get rather long winded by this time and I could have done with a little pruning of the script - but hey, who am I to question Alan Bennett?

After a fight, the victorious friends celebrate with a party where the vanquished stoats and weasels serve the drinks and do the chores. It ends with a charming dance by the young riverside folk and the wildwooders, (congratulations to Andrea Pollington and **Debra Constantinou** the choreographers), and a reprise of the ducks ditty.

The whole show was a pleasure. It was a rounded affair and from the main characters to the cameo role of fox by **Julie Cox** and the co-ordinated movements of the wildwooders, attention to detail was obvious. Congratulations to the whole company and to **Gary Colledge**, the director. He must have been thrilled to see his vision so beautifully fulfilled.