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REVIEW: "The Wind in the Willows"

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By Edward Boroughs

"Curt Nielsen's performance as Toad is the shining centerpiece of the production"

Mr. Toad is the most engaging fellow to be found on a Westchester stage in some time. Words and observations pour out of him as if everyone's life depended on the sound of his voice. The thought of a new adventure finds him halfway to meeting it. And he sings with such honest self-centeredness that the only response can be a wide smile. And of course, Mr. Toad is in fact a toad.

Curt Nielsen's performance as Toad is the shining centerpiece of the Chappaqua Drama Group's ambitious production of the classic children's story, "The Wind in the Willows". Kenneth Grahame wrote the adventures of the English riverbank dwellers Toad, Rat, Mole and Badger in 1908 as a series of letters to his young son. The stories gained more fame years later when A. A. Milne adapted them for the stage. The version being presented by CDG is a musical adaptation by Douglas Post that is correctly billed as "a family musical." The show had a very short run on Broadway (with Nathan Lane) in 1985 but more recently was staged to great acclaim at the National Theatre in London.

The charm, for adults, of Grahame's storytelling, is two-fold - the wonderful words and the distillation of human character traits he puts into the mouths and actions of his "animal" characters that, through all, are yet very much recognizable as animals. When actors capture those qualities on stage, young and old can willingly sit back and enjoy. Which is exactly what everyone does when Mr. Nielsen becomes the irrepressible Toad. Even his walk makes one think there really are frog legs under his finely tailored green pants. The laughs of the kids at the reviewed performance confirm he makes every right connection.

But "The Wind in the Willow" is not all Mr. Toad, though his adventures literally drive the story to a rous-

ing finale. The first act centers on the shy, young Mole coming out of the ground to see the world. His tour guide is the natty Rat, Ratty to his

friends. Alison Burrows projects for Mole the outline of an eager but scared novice to the sometimes-dangerous surface world. With a little

more guidance from director David Auslander on how to convey more of a shy mole, she would easily be the show's guiding heart, reveling in the discovered warmth of friendship. There is less offered by Jim DeBlasi as Rat; he seems to concentrate more on perfecting a sing-song, irritating accent then getting the meaning of words across or being a character. However, he ably joins Ms. Burrows in doing a fine job singing the touching "My Home."

Mole's other found friends are more winning. Jay Williams makes a convincing older Badger who first provides shelter when Mole becomes lost in the woods and then attempts to drill common sense into the hyperactive Toad. Michael Timmons does fine in the smaller role of the family oriented Otter.

The rest of the very large cast plays, with great contagious enthusiasm, an assortment of roles from Hedgehogs to Field Mice and Ferrets to Ducks. In larger musical stagings, this chorus of the animal world is often presented in elaborate sets and choreography. Director Auslander keeps things simpler here and the show loses a touch of enchantment in the process. But as it is, the set demands are enormous and set designer T. Newell Kring has come up with many ingenious devices to move the action from riverbank to wild wood with stops at Badger's underground home and Toad Hall. He has even come up with a cute carriage and a train.

The most exciting musical numbers, "Down with the Toad" and "No Tears", are performed by the company as ferrets and weasels. As the Chief Weasel, Patricia Schneider brings a dash of sexy villainy and welcome energy. Chloe Sasson leads the four-piece orchestra.

"The Wind in the Willows" continues through March 28 with performances on Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$10-16. For reservations call 238-5003. The Chappaqua Library Theatre is at 195 S. Greeley Ave.

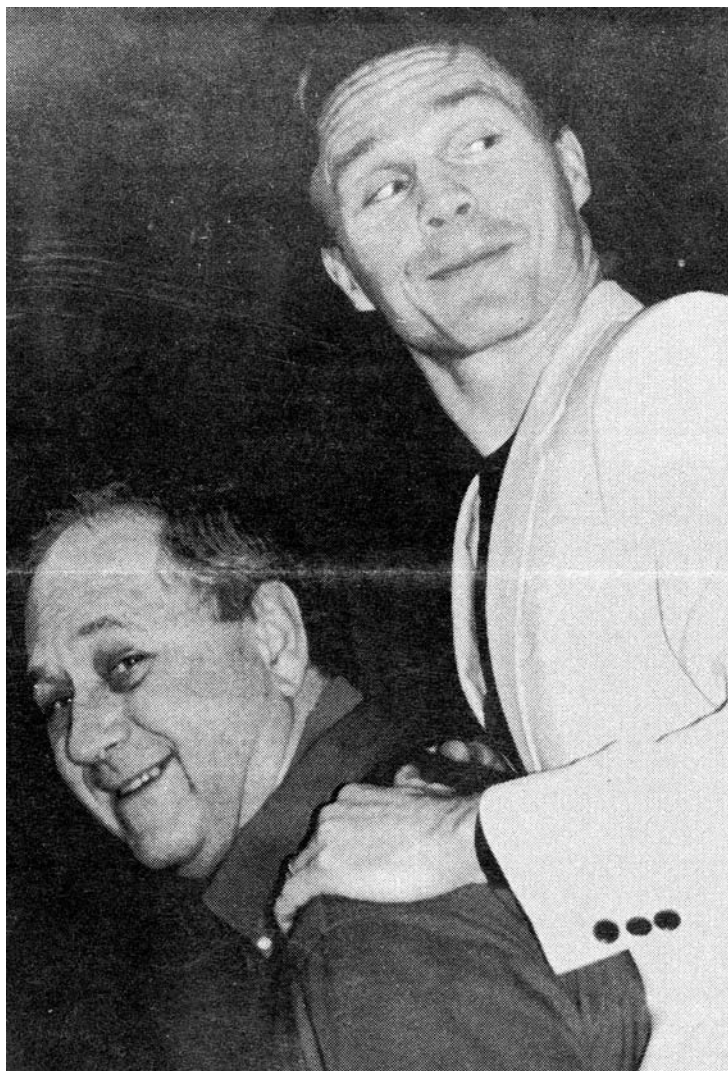


Photo Credit Andy Garrigue
 "Toad" (Curt Nielsen) escapes on the back of "William the Horse" (Art Poutre) in Chappaqua Drama Group's "Wind in the Willows."

Presented by the Chappaqua Drama Group
 at the Chappaqua Library, Chappaqua, NY