The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame

Adapted for the stage by Alan Bennett

Presented by Library Theatre, performed at The Lowry, directed by Chris Honer
Reviewed by Charlotte Starkey December 2011
Some people, who find animals endlessly fascinating, tend to be outward looking, always seem glad that they are still alive to enjoy the world, just like Mole; others, who do not have the same connection with animals, seem to believe the world should feel privileged that they are alive, just like Toad. This is a generalisation, of course; but I realised the limitation of imagination, when an English teacher whom I had admired, declared that ‘animal stories’ are ‘not sufficiently substantial’.

I never did grasp the meaning of that and promptly threw him into my trash bin, having just read *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Animal Farm* as well as having been brought up in the company of animals, wild and domesticated. After all, I had read *The Wind in the Willows* by the tender age of six months, or so it seems from this distance, and my love of the tale has never waned. This production is no place for the self-lover, the introvert, the t-ridden career seeker or anyone on a mission. It is for those who find something quite mad, amusing and mysterious about creation and understand that the unpredictability of animals comes largely from their having to share a planet with a rather weird race of beings - us.

One has to imagine a world where the family motor car was not an upholstered four by four lorry, where there were no motorways, no developers or planners, no wind turbines to ruin the view; where life flowed with the rhythms of a rural idyll; where the only sound in harmony with the chatter of the river and the creatures on its banks was that of the wind in the willows. That is where I was yesterday evening, basking - on the banks of the Manchester Ship Canal; or, more precisely, sitting in the Quays Theatre at The Lowry alongside the same canal. The theatre, like The Lowry in general, encased me in its warmth, glow and intimacy and I settled back to read the programme information on Squirrels, Otters, Toads, Water Rats, Badgers, Moles, Stoats and Weasels.
The Wind in the Willows by Library Theatre at The Lowry

This includes animals and comic bestiaries of medieval Europe where the creatures around us provide Badger’s home, Toad’s home. And we see them all here in wonderful colours. It suggests that On until 14th January 2012. Audio Described performances: 15th Dec 7pm, Touch Tour 6pm; 22nd Dec, 2.30pm Touch Tour 1.30pm.; Signed performances 17th Dec 2.30pm; 28th Dec with the task of spring cleaning, is yet another diversion from the essential task of being with the audience by reaching out towards the auditorium and a great deal of colour and production of a play to be enjoyed. This is a very entertaining production, very appropriate for this season of year, bringing a touch of the contemporary admiration of ‘multi-tasking’, so alien to Mole’s bothered involvement even comfortable, being at home in oneself. But that sounds so pompous. This is an engaging story of springtime changing into winter just as bleak midwinter arrives, with an appeal to children of all ages. It engages with the idea of home as a special place – Mole’s home, Rat’s home, Toad’s home, and other diverse homes. The Chief Weasel (Alun Saunders) lucidly, in many eyes, defines a politician Questioned by the Magistrate if he is a witness to the atrocities of Toad, the reply comes, ‘No, your honour. Just a property is theft’, we know that someone has been reading their Proudhon, which is really quite short shrift on these river banks. Then in Bennett’s text a ferret tells us that he ‘cares for justice’, followed by a stoat ‘who knows the difference between right and wrong.’ Here, Of course, if one wishes to see the play in a different light, the elements are there. When Albertinvades the property on a number of occasions. Equally when we hear the weasels describe their roles it momentarily, we just leave that idyllic world as the human and animal/animated orbits collide about it.

The play incorporates dialogue, song, choreographed dance and fight routines, engagement with the characters and Toad, wonderfully acted by Paul Barnhill, invited a rapport with the audience. It has, in this sense, as much appeal for the parents of children as for the children which he achieved with aplomb. The Lowry for this festivity is no place for a postmodernist discurs panic attack. For everyone in the auditorium it is important to leave the computer console, the play station, all that stuff behind. Toad, the Beatle, is a great example of Kenneth Grahame and Alan Bennett’s ability to have a fair share of fun, but with something else that comes with a sense of the groove. There are memories of old time radio. Toad is a glockenspielist. The inimitable style of Alan Bennett’s script reflects the acute observational detachment and invention with projections of filmed scenes for riverbank and rural roadsides. This is a mix of play, pantomime, Christmas festive fun and a wonderful story of some engaging characters. The Chief Weasel (Alun Saunders) lucidly, in many eyes, defines a politician Questioned by the Magistrate if he is a witness to the atrocities of Toad, the reply comes, ‘No, your honour. Just a property is theft’, we know that someone has been reading their Proudhon, which is really quite short shrift on these river banks. Then in Bennett’s text a ferret tells us that he ‘cares for justice’, followed by a stoat ‘who knows the difference between right and wrong.’ Here, Of course, if one wishes to see the play in a different light, the elements are there. When Albertinvades the property on a number of occasions. Equally when we hear the weasels describe their roles it momentarily, we just leave that idyllic world as the human and animal/animated orbits collide about it.

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