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THEATER IN REVIEW

Born to Hop, And Hop They Do

'A Year With Frog and Toad'
New Victory Theater

Another winner.

Yes, the New Victory Theater has done it again, and anyone who cherishes musical theater and can beg or borrow a child from 4 up might be well advised to make a beeline for Times Square in search of tickets for "A Year With Frog and Toad." This bright, bouncy, altogether lovable show, packed with talent on the stage and behind the scenes, will be dispensing its feast of entertainment till Dec. 1, through Thanksgiving and the start of Hanukkah.

Based on the acclaimed children's books by Arnold Lobel and first done by the Children's Theater Company of Minneapolis, the show is about the relationship and adventures of the lean, reasonably reasonable Frog (Jay Goede) and that sometimes-lazy but good-hearted worrywart, Toad (Mark Linn-Baker).

Through a year that begins and ends with hibernation, Toad becomes an impatient gardener; Frog sends him a letter delivered by a snail; the two go for a swim; Frog goes off to be alone on a rock and a concerned Toad takes him a picnic lunch; Toad bakes some irresistible cookies; the

friends go kite flying; they rake each other's autumn leaves; Frog tells a scary story; they go sledding; and they celebrate Christmas at Toad's place.

The list may sound mundane. But the treatment by the actors and the creative team makes the material magical. (By intermission, adults are singing the curtain number, "Cookies," on the way to the refreshment stand.)

Besides Mr. Goede and Mr. Linn-Baker, the cast is fleshed and feathered out with Danielle Ferland, Kate Reinders and Frank Vlastnik in a vast variety of animal roles.

Under the direction of David Petrarca, a resident director at the Goodman Theater Company in Chicago, the performers make the most of the already beguiling material. (Just watch the birds walk.) The charming set design, with its flowers and reeds and cattails, rocks and charming cottages, is by Adrienne Lobel, Arnold Lobel's daughter. The choreography is the creation of Daniel Pelzig. Credit for the book and the precise, lucid lyrics goes to Willie Reale, and for the music to Robert Reale, his brother. The painstakingly thoughtful costumes are attributable to Martin Pakledinaz, the 2002 Tony Award-winner for "Thoroughly Modern Millie."

LAWRENCE VAN GELDER



Richard Termine for The New York Times
Jay Goede, left, and Mark Linn-Baker are Frog and Toad.

VARIETY

SEPTEMBER 30 - OCTOBER 6, 2002

By PETER RITTER

As much an homage to the music of Cole Porter and the hoofing of Bing Crosby as it is to the beloved Arnold Lobel children's books upon which it's based, "A Year With Frog and Toad" makes a winning companion to Lobel's original. With a few months to find its feet before heading to the New Victory Theater in New York, this production already has a jazzy spring in its step.

"A Year With Frog and Toad" is, in many regards, a departure for the Children's Theater. Co-produced with the writer's daughter, Adrienne Lobel — who also designed the sets — this adaptation wears its broad commercial aspirations on its sleeve. Sanguine and breezy, without much of a plot to weigh it down, "Frog and Toad" is undeniably geared toward the younger set. Still, eager as this production may be to ingratiate itself, Willie Reale's book is never cloying, and parents likely will catch allusions to Porter, Sondheim and other great tunesmiths in Robert Reale's sophisticated, eminently hummable score.

Structured as a series of set pieces, "Frog and Toad" follows the seasonal routine of its titular amphibians, who are, as we know, friends. Frog (Jay Goede) is the abler of the two; dressed immaculately in a silken waistcoat, he cuts the figure of a jovial English gentleman. Toad (Mark Linn-Baker), meanwhile, is a bit of a goldbricker, a frumpy nebbish who would rather not be roused from hibernation. Linn-Baker has the weaker singing voice of the two, but he's well cast as the Oscar to Goede's Felix — or, in the case of their tap duet, perhaps Bob Hope to Goede's dapper Bing Crosby.

Aside from the adventures of Frog and Toad, the major comic business in this adaptation is given over to a snail (Frank Vlastnik) who has been enjoined to deliver a letter. Along with the obligatory "snail-mail" jokes, Vlastnik's periodic,



KID STUFF: Mark Linn-Baker, left, is Toad to Jay Goede's Frog at Minneapolis' Children's Theater.

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD

(CHILDREN'S THEATER; 750 SEATS; \$28 TOP)

MINNEAPOLIS A Children's Theater Co. presentation, by special arrangement with Adrienne Lobel and Bob Boyett, of a musical in two acts, with music by Robert Reale, book and lyrics by Willie Reale. Directed by David Petrarca. Choreography, Daniel Pelzig. Sets, Adrienne Lobel; costumes, Martin Pakledinaz; lighting, James F. Ingalls; sound, Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen; musical director, Wendy Bobbitt Cavett; stage manager, Stacy McIntosh. Opened, reviewed Aug. 23, 2002. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

Frog Jay Goede
Toad Mark Linn-Baker
With: Danielle Ferland, Kate Reinders, Frank Vlastnik.

scene-stealing appearances provide some of the production's musical peaks.

In one number, "I'm Coming Out of My Shell," Vlastnik goes from lowly gastropod — "a lot of shell, a little goo" — to big-dreaming Broadway Baby, with a spot-on parody of Ethel Merman's belting style.

Its own Broadway-sized ambitions notwithstanding, "Frog and Toad" is, both literally and figurative-

ly, a small-scale production. Giant flowers and reeds painted on the scrim in summery shades emphasize its miniaturized world. Elaborate special effects, for which Children's Theater is rightly known, are likewise kept simple: A bed of flowers sprouts from the stage; a field mouse pops out of a cupboard; pine trees careen about during Toad's calamitous sledding outing.

While never quite arresting, the production's visual scheme is effective: Lobel realizes she doesn't need to strafe children with sight and sound to engage them in the material.

It's perhaps not the greatest compliment to say "Frog and Toad" exercises the same restraint throughout. When contrasted with the bright, clamorous and empty standards of children's entertainment, though, this production's endearing charm seems no small achievement.

'Frog and Toad' jazzy, perky delight

Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN

Published: August 25, 2002

By Rohan Preston

Creating a new American musical is tricky, treacherous business with ample chances to fail, as evidenced by the remains of many musical projects that get swept from American theater stages annually.

So when something succeeds like, well, a song, you want to phone friends and neighbors about it. You want to tell people at the supermarket. You want to buy a ticket to expose a youngster to the theater.

So call up family members and colleagues and tell them to see "A Year with Frog and Toad." The spiffy, snazzy, clever little musical, which premiered Friday at the Children's Theatre, is delightful. It communicates wit and verve across generations, so grandparents can treat grandchildren. It even makes you hungry -- for cookies. And, of course, you want to see it again and again.

Culled from the whimsical children's books of Arnold Lobel, the show features a jazzy score by Robert Reale and clever lyrics by his brother, Willie Reale. It gets a perky staging from director David Petrarca, giving this musical springy frog's legs.

In musicals, the music is often preeminent -- as it should be. But sometimes creators lavish all their time on the music, giving the narrative, or book, short shrift. The "Frog and Toad" adaptors, including Lobel's daughter, Adrienne, weave Lobel's stories into a seasonlong adventure between the two amphibian friends. It hangs together well.

Frog, who has got his stuff together, and Toad, a scared wreck who has smashed his clock and cannot place himself in time, go swimming, kite-flying and sledding. They take tea together and think of fun things to do for each other.

Through their activities -- which become ordeals -- they work on becoming better friends.

The CTC show captures the whimsy of Lobel's books -- their caprice and inventiveness. Admittedly, "Frog and Toad" is very familiar. The score consists of a country-western thread and a finger-snappy, jazzy style that is a throwback to the satin-smooth era of Bing Crosby. In other words, it is not pushing theater into the future.

But it tells a story wonderfully. It is even visceral, making you hungry for cookies in a scene that leads up to intermission.

"Frog and Toad" is brightly and thematically designed by Adrienne Lobel (airy, open set pieces), Martin Pakledinaz (spotted costumes) and James Ingalls (lights).

None of that would matter if the performers did not come through as splendidly as they do. In his jowl, in his slightly put-upon mien and in his somewhat needy tenor, Mark Linn-Baker gives Toad a world of woe. He embodies the journey of Toad, showing how the clouds in the spotted amphibian's life gradually lift as the show goes on. Watching him in the role is akin to watching someone emerge from night into day.

Linn-Baker has an excellent complement in Jay Goede, who plays the dapper Frog. He has less of a journey -- he does not change as much -- but Goede reveals his character as a winning Frog.

Together, they suggest shades of other classic performing duos, including Abbott and Costello, even Bert and Ernie.

Danielle Ferland, Kate Reinders and Frank Vlastnik are the three performers who form the show's malleable chorus. They are versatile and excellent, playing creatures such as a turtle, a lizard, a mouse and, of course, three tweety, tightly harmonizing songbirds.

Vlastnik is especially fetching in the role of a snail that has to deliver a piece of mail from Frog to Toad -- that's his load. He does a terrific, bring-the-house-down number called "I'm Coming Out of My Shell": "I was nothing but goo/ Under the surface/ Then everything began to gel/ Holy cow/ Look at me now/ I'm coming out of my. . . shell."

"Frog and Toad" is a small show that seems bigger than just five cast members. This musical is a welcome success in the world of musical theater.


NEW YORK POST

ONLINE EDITION

'FROG' HAS LEGS

By CLIVE BARNES

THEATER REVIEW



Clive Barnes

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD ★★ 1/2

At the Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., between Sixth and Seventh avenues. Call (212) 239-6200.

April 14, 2003 -- I was not born yesterday - nor, come to think of it, were my children.

As a result, I approach a Broadway musical aimed at a young audience with the wariness of an archaeologist probing a dig.

Children and their tastes don't change much from generation to generation - witness the tenacious hold still exerted by such icons as Peter Pan, Winnie the Pooh and Dr. Seuss.

The late Arnold Lobel was a children's writer without the sensitivity of A.A. Milne or the divine craziness of Dr. Seuss. And, truth be told, he was more than a little twee.

But "A Year With Frog and Toad," a new musical based on his works, cuts down on the twee and loads up on the charm.

Having started life with the Children's Theater Company in Minneapolis, moved off-Broadway for a sold-out run at the New Victory Theater, and opened last night at the Cort Theatre, "Frog and Toad" looks good enough to eat - particularly if you have a sweet tooth.

This musical - with nicely semi-jazzy-kiddy music by Robert Reale and a neat book and very cute lyrics by Willie Reale - is a good deal closer to the generous sensibility of "Sesame Street" than the cookie-cutter mechanics of the Disney machine.

Lobel's daughter, Adrienne, a distinguished set designer, has absolutely excelled here with a soft blaze of childlike prettiness.

Martin Pakledinaz's adorable costumes, which are smartly more anthropomorphic than animal, let the nature of his amphibians, birds, squirrels and a particularly lovable snail glint through amusingly.

Director David Petrarca has staged the piece with just the right pacing and energy, while the dances by Daniel Pelzig prove attractive, particularly when they adopt a gentle vaudeville zip.

Of course, a show like this cannot be much better than its performers permit, and the five actors are all blissfully talented - Frog (Jay Goede), Toad (Mark Linn-Baker), and three others (Danielle Ferland, Jennifer Gambatese and Frank Vlastnik).

The off-handedly sincere Goede and the lovably diffident Linn-Baker (he's the husband of Adrienne Lobel, who is also one of the lead producers, but, hey, don't knock nepotism if it works) achieve wonders, with their convincing depiction of friendship between Frog and Toad that's never mawkish.

So will your children like it? It's worth a try - and at least you'll have a pretty good time, too.

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD

At the Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., between Sixth and Seventh avenues. Call (212) 239-6200.

Newsday

For Kind 'Frog,' It's Always Leap Year

By Linda Winer
STAFF WRITER

April 14, 2003

Niceness is not generally considered a goal for a Broadway musical. Gentleness and civility have seldom been the definition of boffo.

In other words, when we tell you that the nicest show in town is "A Year With Frog and Toad," you would not be wrong to put this in the context of a market where high-tech and the hard sell are practically moral imperatives.

But so it is with the sweet entertainment for the very young and grateful grownups who know how bad bad children's theater can be. The 90-minute charmer, which opened at the Cort Theatre last night, was a smash in a limited run at the New Victory Theater last November and first directed by David Petrarca at the admirable Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis.

Consider this the not-Disney idea of a small world, a story about amphibian kindness that, aside from a preposterous and alienating top ticket price of \$91.25, is family-friendly in the friendliest sort of ways. Adapted from the "Frog and Toad" books by Arnold Lobel, co-produced and lovingly designed by the late author's daughter, Adrienne Lobel, the show begins at the end of winter hibernation and ends when the zoological cycle begins again.

Mark Linn-Baker plays the Toad, a worrier who, among other insecurities, is self-conscious about how he looks in a bathing suit. Jay Goede is Frog, a tweedy and philosophical fellow who lives down the road. Despite their differences, these are loyal friends who linger in one another's dreams and soft-shoe through the long winter's sleep and share the mundane wonderment of daily life.

There are also three birds - Danielle Ferland, Jennifer Gambatase and Frank Vlastnik - who carry suitcases back and forth from the South and, in Daniel Pelzig's modest choreography, do the occasional birdlike twitch. Most adorably, there is Vlastnik as the Snail who very, very slowly delivers the mail - actually a letter that Frog wrote to Toad, who is sad because he never gets mail. Snail wears what appears to be a rolled backpack on his shoulders and sings about "coming out of my shell."

The songs - music by Robert Reale, book and lyrics by brother Willie Reale - have an understated sophistication. And the number about the compulsive eating of cookies is far more than a cue for parents to buy the show's own brand of cookies at intermission.

Ferland, fondly remembered as the little girl in the original "Sunday in the Park with George" and "Into the

Woods" in the 1980s, has grown into an equally endearing actress with a wicked subtext. Gambatase makes a nice mouse who appears from the cupboard to share the cookie feast.

And that's about the level of the special effects in Lobel's tribute to her father's books. The curtain is dominated by the benign smile of a pleasant frog and the furniture is often shaped by the outline of froggy ears. The scenes have scrim of flowers. Butterflies appear on poles. Frog and Toad are too dignified to wear silly costumes. We know who they are because they know who they are. And that's awfully nice, too.

BROADWAY REVIEW

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD. Music by Robert Reale, book and lyrics by Willie Reale, based on books by Arnold Lobel. Directed by David Petrarca, with sets by Adrienne Lobel, costumes by Martin Pakledinaz, lights by James F. Ingalls, choreography by Daniel Pelzig, music direction by Linda Twine. Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis production, Cort Theatre, 48th Street east of Broadway. Seen at Friday's preview.

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