

Ace Amphibians

by David Anthony Fox

Critic's admission: I don't believe in "family entertainment." Oh, go on—tell me what show appeals to cynical 48-year-olds (i.e., me) and to sparkly eyed preschoolers (them)? *The Wizard Of Oz*, you say? Maybe, but even then I think it wise to keep Dakota and Tyler's birthday party and the tearful Judy queens in separate venues.

Well, knock me off my lily pad. The Arden Theatre's holiday musical *A Year With Frog And Toad* brims with so much talent and merrymaking I doubt anyone could resist its charms. Sure, the kids love it—but *Frog* offers enough to entertain the world-weariest of adults. (Aside to the latter group: If you leave the theater still wishing for *Sweeney Todd*, that's coming to the Arden in May.)

Frog is based on a beloved series of children's books by Arnold Lobel, and as is often the case in that genre, there's not a lot of plot. We follow the pair from spring awakening—the two have, of course, hibernated away the winter—through the following autumn. Frog and Toad go swimming and (near-disastrously) sledding, bake cookies, rake leaves, tell ghost stories.

They are, you see, the dearest of friends. Friendship is a major theme of the show, which is rooted in character exploration. Frog, the perpetual optimist, lovingly bolsters Toad, the worrier.

I'm not much for anthropomorphized animals (Disney gave me a permanent aversion) and was greatly relieved to discover that *Frog* cleverly treats the characters as people. Dressed nattily in 1920s style, bow ties and vests in place, you might think of Frog and Toad as suitors in *The Boyfriend* -- or, if you're more inclined to subtext, as Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway. The musical score, by brothers Robert and Willie Reale, compounds a Jazz Age flair, including a couple of snappy Charlestons.

I simply can't imagine a better production of the show—a Tony nominee last year, by the way—than the Arden's. Whit MacLaughlin's direction is pitch-perfect and fills the stage with imagination and wonder. Costumes (by Richard St. Clair) and scenery (Donald Eastman) are scrumptious. (There's also terrific lighting by Troy Martin O'Shia.)

Jeffrey Coon (Frog) and Ben Dibble (Toad) are adorable in every way and sing superbly. For these two, it's easy being green. The ensemble (Keara Hailey, Maggie Lakis and Joshua Lamon, who all take multiple roles) is also marvelous; in fact, as the snail, Lamon very nearly, er, runs away with the show.

For families searching for a holiday treat, I offer an unhesitating recommendation and also a paraphrase from a musical theater legend: "When other friendships have been forgit/ Frog and Toad's will still be it."

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD Through Jan. 23, Arden Theatre, 40 N. Second St., 215-922-1122