

Lifestyle



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THEATER

ASF production of 'Toad' overcomes flawed script

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

In "Toad of Toad Hall" playwright A. A. Milne, creator of enduring if somewhat sugary children's stories, extracted one story line — that concerned with the mad antics of the irrepressible and reckless Toad — from Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows," a magical and enchanting classic.

Devotees of "Wind in the Willows" will not find the adaptation totally satisfying.

What Milne sacrificed is the richness that makes the novel a classic. Whereas Grahame's characters have a three-dimensional roundness, a life, Milne's seem merely shadows of the originals. Where Grahame succeeds in making us believe, Milne is arch in his treatment and the characters stay flat.

They stay flat in the production which opened Friday night at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, despite superb acting and cleverly exe-

cuted songs. The production features beautiful staging by Charles Caldwell imaginative directing by Kent Thompson.

Toad is the shallow, impulsive, egotistic center of humor in "Wind in the Willows." So it is as an unlikely hero that he becomes the pivotal character in "Toad of Toad Hall." John Woodson brings an enviable and polished technique to creating the character, a technique which all but overcomes the inherent problems in Milne's

script. Watch the way Woodson's hands and feet become the instruments of characterization, that transmit a sense of toadness.

Such kinetic specificity is to be found throughout this outstanding cast, which includes the best of ASF. Greg Thornton, as Ratty, is equally successful through the witty manipulation of his tail. He points with it, warms it at a fire and even uses it to tie up an errant weasel.

David Heuvelman's gentle

- What "Toad of Toad Hall"
- When Through Dec. 31.
- Where Festival Stage of the Carolyn Blount Theatre

Mole is achieved more through facial expression but is still strongly supported by bodily movement.

"Toad" ultimately is a play for children, and children

REVIEW

- Admission Through Dec. 13, \$28. Dec. 15-30, \$30. Children ages 4-16 get in for \$16 for all performances.
- Information 271-5353 or (800) 841-4273

will delight in it. Their judgement will matter. That adults may cavil is beside the point.

Allan Swafford has reviewed plays for the Advertiser for 15 years.