

# 'Toad of Toad Hall' brings family fun to ASF

## Theater Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

A.A. Milne's play with music "Toad of Toad Hall," which opened last week at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, should appeal to adults as well as children. It has been revived in London almost every Christmas since 1929. The book on which it is based is better known to British children than American ones, Kenneth Graham's "Wind in the Willows," (1908) — a celebration of the natural history of the Thames Valley, about an hour west of London.

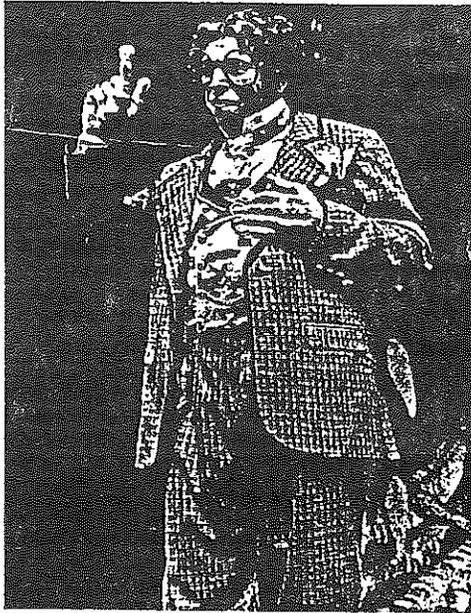
Graham lived literally on the river in a house on a weir, that is a backwater out of the main stream, due to accommodate a lock so as to raise or lower a barge. The lock system still operates, along with the toll bridge (at Pangbourne) mentioned in the book. Nearby is a stately home, Mapledurham House, the model for Toad Hall, which Graham describes in realtor's terms: "An eligible self-contained gentleman's residence, very unique, dating in part from the 14th century, but replete with every modern convenience. Up-to-date sanitation. Five minutes from church, post office, and golf links."

The book (and play) give a cross section of English society, only with all too human animals instead of people. At the top of the heap is Toad (John Woodson), with his aristocratic disregard for laws and propriety, and at the bottom, the "stoats and weasels" who occupy Toad Hall. In between are his river and woodland friends, Rat or Ratty (Greg Thornton, with wonderful whiskers and tail), Mole (ASF alum David Heuvelman, and Badger (Barry Boys). We are introduced to the snug middle class pleasures of these animals — hot supper, a fire in the hearth, a comfortable chair for napping — contrasted with the terror of the weather outside and especially the Wild Wood, "nature raw in tooth and claw," as Wordsworth put it.

Toad's mischievousness finally goes too far. After wrecking his own gypsy caravan (what the British still call a house trailer) and his new-fangled automobile, he then steals another car, sasses a policeman, and ends up in jail (motoring was all the rage in 1908). His escape involves him with a barge, a horse (outrageous Rodney Clark), a train, and disguise as a woman. A man in a skirt is an indispensable part of the Christmas pantomime tradition to which the play is indebted.

This is the first we've seen Mr. Woodson in a major comic role, which he plays up to the hilt in green saddle shoes and floppy green gloves. Toad is a very funny part, as he's the adult who gets away with childish behavior. Fine actor that he is, Woodson is endlessly inventive, and his high spir- its carry the show. The others, especially Mr. Thornton, succeed remarkably well in portraying animals and humans simultaneously.

Director Kent Thompson sets the play in an Edwardian music hall, complete with mock footlights. Designer Charles Caldwell, in what are surely some of his best sets, uses mostly painted flats with fool-the-eye furniture, but his atmospheric, man-like tree also suggests the Wild Wood. Beth Novak's animal costumes are stylishly all of a piece, especially the Fox, who is both hunter and hunt-



John Woodson does a fantastic job as Toad in "Toad of Toad Hall" now appearing at Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Photo courtesy of ASF

The music from the original London production comes from a small "orchestra" in a stage box. The movement and dance, designed by Colleen Kelly, have an unusual freshness, often ending up contrary to our expectation. Scattered throughout the large cast are cameo appearances by other principals in the AFS troupe. Regular theater goers will want to play Spot The Actor, although many faces are disguised. Note especially Paul Hebron, who doubles as the music hall manager and a very funny judge.

So a hearty recommendation to audiences of all ages for "Toad of Toad Hall." You won't want to miss John Woodson in his star turn as Toad or any of the rest of the fun.

- FOOD Fight / BRAWL