

Two pals, Two Rivers, one family-friendly show

BY TOM CHESEK • CORRESPONDENT • DECEMBER 16, 2008

Little things mean a lot in the friendships we keep — after all, little things are often the reason that friends get together in the first place, or even argue and fight.

For the small woodland creatures who populate Arnold Lobel's "Frog and Toad" series of books for young readers, the days are interludes in which some seemingly minor matters — trying to get a kite off the ground, feeling self-conscious about the way one looks in a swimsuit, wanting to be alone for a few moments — loom large in the context of what it means to be a good and true friend.

The seasons-spanning friendship of next-door neighbors Frog and Toad is one that's "defined and tested by small, seemingly unimportant obstacles," according to director Jackson Gay, who's returned to Red Bank as the woman in charge of "A Year with Frog and Toad," the family-friendly musical on stage now at Two River Theater.

Lobel's daughter Adrienne adapted 10 of her late father's whimsical little stories, collaborating with her husband, actor Mark Linn-Baker of TV's "Perfect Strangers," as well as the songwriting brother act Robert and Willie Reale. The "Frog and Toad" musical leapfrogged all the way to Broadway, even netting three Tony nominations on its way to a productive life as a favorite children's theater offering.

The Two River company has scheduled its "Frog and Toad" as a "holiday" production which, apart from a heartwarming little scene set on Christmas Eve, presents a refreshing alternative to the candy-cane clichés of the season — using the cycle of seasons in the forest as a broader canvas for its gentle (and entirely non-preachy) lessons.

The best part is that it's a bright and funny show, performed by a cast of five pros in a way that disdains the overly in-your-face histrionics of a lot of kid-skewed entertainment. The raised stage of the Two River auditorium keeps things at a comfortable remove, allowing Gay and the actors to explore the more deliberately paced rhythms of this material without having to run chase scenes up and down the aisles.

Jaunty songs

With a live musical quartet playing invisibly within the room's under-the-stage orchestra pit, Frog, Toad and company stretch out on a jaunty, old-fashioned set of songs that stand in service to the story, without degenerating into showstopper solos.

While we're at it, give kids credit, as costume designer Jessica Ford has, to picture the actors as their respective animal characters without forcing them to perform in full-head masks and other burdensome paraphernalia.

As the dapper Frog — both the practical thinker and the adventuresome one of this pair — Terence Archie makes a fine foil for the comic gifts of Richard Ruiz, whose Toad is a bit more fearful, a little more a creature of habit, and as faithful a friend as a frog is likely to find. If the two seem almost something of a mismatch at times, that's part of the point — these particular pals live their year to the fullest by accepting each other's quirks, trying new things, laughing off life's little setbacks.

The two leads are joined by Tara Giordano, Josh Lamon and Meg Steedle as a variety of supporting characters — birds, squirrels, snails, mice, lizards, moles, turtles and members of Frog's immediate family. While each of these singing, dancing, joking ensemble players have their moments in the spotlight, it's Lamon — here reprising his award-winning turn as dedicated messenger Snail from the Philadelphia production — who very nearly creeps away with the show.

Presented with intermission — actually a built-in cookie break that's preceded by the show's wackiest interlude — "A Year with Frog and Toad" continues through Jan. 11.

A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD

Through Jan. 11 — Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank — \$24-\$48

(732) 345-1400 or www.trtc.org