

Keith Kessler (left) and Tony Rust in Cottage Theatre's production of *A Year with Frog and Toad*



Asking the Amphibians

Hopping along with Cottage Theatre's *A Year With Frog and Toad*

"I can read it!" proclaimed the sticker on the Level-2 reader my mother slid into my hands. A cover illustration of two pond-dwelling vertebrates donned in 1967 attire caught my imagination, and I cracked open the book. Arnold Lobel's classic children's tale of friendship, *Frog and Toad*, has been a part of my heart ever since.

A Year With Frog and Toad, the jazzy little musical commissioned by Arnold Lobel's daughter in 2000, opens Dec. 2 at Cottage Theatre. Perusing the press release, my expectations ballooned out the door, so to get a grip I sat down at the computer to e-interview Keith Kessler and Tony Rust (playing Toad and Frog, respectively) to get their take on the upcoming production.

First and foremost, my concerns were, "Is this gonna be like the book?" and "Do these actors love the books as much as they should?"

Kessler, a former grade school teacher, was introduced to the stories "over 20 years ago as an elementary teacher," he says. "Arnold Lobel was a wonderful author/illustrator, and kids loved his books."

Kessler says the script does justice to the stories. "I also am a playwright, so I enjoy seeing how someone else can take a beloved work and transfer it to the stage," he says. "There is literary license taken to make the storyline work, but I think that kids and adults who know the books will see that the playwright has tried to stay close to the originals, but with nice enhancements."

Rust was first wowed by the play when "my wife Janet (director of Cottage Theatre's production) and our son Glenn (who is running the light board) saw the original production in New York City. (We) fell in love with it and

the soundtrack became a must-have CD. Because of the show, we collected all the original books and they became an important part of bedtime reading," Rust adds.

Kessler and Rust appear unfazed by the iconic status of their characters. "Barring the fact that I'm not really an amphibian," Rust says, "I'm hopeful that Frog would approve of my interpretation."

Kessler echoes the sentiment. "I don't feel pressure because the play is very well written," he says.

A major part of the charm of Lobel's original characters is that, for amphibians, they're delightfully human. According



to Rust, "Frog sees things as they are pretty much, but with a glass-half-full sensibility. He enjoys the simple things in life, and revels in his friends' joy. I think everyone wants to be the friend that Frog is, and have the friend that Toad is."

Toad, on the other hand, is a bit of a curmudgeon. "He is grumpy," Kessler says, "the glass is half empty. Toad needs his friend Frog to show him that life can be fun and full of adventures, and that you must take risks to get all of the joy life has to offer."

Kessler says Toad has an authenticity that draws people in. "He doesn't like morning even if it is after hibernation," he explains, "(yet) he is willing to try things even if he doesn't think they will work. And he is willing to go out into the night and save his friend Frog from dangers, even though he is not very brave and the dangers are all imaginary. He has a good heart," Kessler concludes.

I wanted to know if the set and costumes are realistic or representational. Are guys going to dress up as frogs and toads that in turn act and dress like people? Sadly, no.

"We are playing the characters (as in the original Broadway production) as humans with animal characteristics rather than as people in animal suits," Rust says. "I think this allows us to connect directly with the characters, while still enjoying their animal traits. Frog and Toad in the books are fairly real looking amphibians but are in suits, so conversely, we are fairly real looking humans in amphibian colors."

Rust doubles as this production's set designer, and says he's having a great time with it. "I chose to design something that will hopefully evoke childhood pop-up books," he says. "The set is big and bright and colorful, all enfolded in the greenery of the woodland around our characters. The play bounces along from inside to outside quickly, so we keep Frog and Toad's house central."

Frog and Toad remain pretty special to all the kids who first got the hang of phonics reading Lobel's enchanting stories, and it appears Rust and Kessler feel similarly connected to the work.

"I believe that adults will take to (the characters) because of the truth of the stories — wanting to help someone who is sad, wanting to do a good deed without the other person knowing, wanting your friend to break out of his shell and live a little," Kessler says. "And I believe that kids will feel that they are right at home in a storybook world come alive."

"I really wanted to play Frog before my daughter Darcy got too old to really appreciate it at the child's level," Rust confides. "She's eight now, and hangs out at a lot of our rehearsals. She knows all the lyrics and lines, and Keith and I have commissioned her with the duty of making sure we do our soft-shoe choreography correctly."

Rust continues, pointing out that "it's also wonderful that this is a family affair, with my wife Janet directing, my son Glenn (age 13) running light board, Darcy at rehearsals and me designing and building the set. Oh, and playing Frog."

Kessler agrees that it's been a "hoot" building the show. "Fun around every corner," he says. **EW**

A Year With Frog and Toad plays at Dec 2-Dec. 18 at Cottage Theatre, 700 Village Dr., Cottage Grove; for info & tickets, visit cottage theatre.org or call 541-942-8001.

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