

NODA review of Barton Players production of The Adventures of Mr Toad  
on 27<sup>th</sup> Oct 2016  
by Richard Fitt

My first visit to Barton Players as a NODA representative and what a pleasure it was!

Kenneth Grahame's iconic and timeless children's masterpiece, The Wind In The Willows has been adapted from the later play (1908), Toad Of Toad Hall by A.A. Milne and turned into a musical by Piers Chater Robinson and tells the light-hearted story of the wayward Mr Toad's addiction to the new-fangled Motor Car, his brush with the law, his escape from prison dressed as a washerwoman and the recapture of Toad Hall which had been taken over by the evil Weasels!

What a pleasure to find a village hall which provides a proper raised stage, good visibility and acoustics for the audience. And what an excellent job Barton Players had done with the scenery to adorn it. Even before the appropriately green curtain had opened the proscenium had been well decorated with cut out trees and foliage setting a wooded scene by a riverbank. And once the curtain opened we equally impressed with the excellent job Set Builder Keith Bowie and his team had done. Gloriously painted by Kirsty Badham it transported you straight into Kenneth Grahame's world. The small touches such as Mole appearing from a hole to side of the stage and little container hanging over the front of the apron so Mole could dip his hand in the river were very well thought out and cleverly done.

The makeup by Julia Wright and Debbie Radcliffe was equally impressive, the four main characters, Toad, Badger, Ratty and Mole and not to forget The Chief Weasel must have spent hours in the makeup chair easily equalling the best I'm seen for a production of Toad. If I may make a small criticism I felt some of the minor characters could have done with a little more make-up, as the contrast between the extremely well and heavily made up major parts was a little too stark. The weasels particularly needed to look a little bit more like their leader.

Costumes by Ann Holloway, Viv Smith, Christine Ayres and Tracey McNevin didn't let the side down either. All the characters were carefully thought out and perfectly attired.

With an excellent array of props by Ann Osborne, a special mention must be made of the two main props, the horse drawn cart and the absolutely splendid motor car itself complete with working headlights designed and

build by Keith Bowie. a man obviously of immense talent whom I note was also responsible for the excellent lighting (remind me to get his phone number!). Perhaps little over the top with health and safety over the choice of swords, but hey, who cares, it was all great fun

Directed by (it tells us in the programme) by Barton Players youngest ever director, Rachael Bowie (the talent obviously runs deep in that family), her eye for detail was top notch and the whole play cracked along at a pace and with great enthusiasm.

The sound by Matt Atkinson didn't let the side down either, with microphones that actually produced a clarity of sound without feedback. One or two other societies could learn a thing or two from that. Only once did the clarity drop when Mole's face mic dropped below his chin, soon resolved.

The main Characters were very well cast with good singing voices to match, An innocent Mole (John Murphy) kicked us off with 'Hang Spring Cleaning' and was soon joined on stage by Ratty (Gill George) in resplendent blazer and boater together with the enthusiastic chorus for a rousing rendition of 'Messing About On The River.' The entrance of Badger (Ian Bass) was impressively stern and then the whirlwind that is Keith Badham as Toad added a new dimension. He just owned the stage, as of course his larger than life character demands, and he certainly did that. Not far behind him was Mick George as Chief Weasel, another larger than life character with a beautiful voice who with his band of young weasels gave us some wonderful renditions of 'Weasels Reign' and 'Toad Has Gone To Prison.'

The Horse, played by Sophie Bryant and George Horn was almost the star of the show, and certainly made a stab of stealing the scene with some deft and humorous choreography by Becca Pountney during 'Lets Jump Aboard' not to mention an excellent chase scene after the cart had been run off the road. It was well planned and well executed with aplomb and great humour.

Of the minor characters, I loved the knitting scene in the court room by the magistrate played by Debbie Radcliffe, who can obviously not only knit but also had a splendidly powerful singing voice. Clare Coffee was a very foxy clerk of the court and Philip Hargreaves the archetypical red-faced policeman given the run around by Toad who also played a splendid fishing hedgehog.

Clearly all involved had put in a great deal of hard work and thought into this production and were enjoying every minute of it, which gave us the

audience a splendid evening entertainment from the wonderful opening safety notice, involving threats to throw mobile phones into the river right up to the curtain call. This was village hall amateur theatre as it should be, great fun and thoroughly entertaining. Rachael and her team can be proud. Poop! Poop!