

# THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

adapted by  
*Todd Espeland*  
from  
*Kenneth Grahame*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

*The Wind in the Willows* is a theatrical adaptation of the original novel by Kenneth Grahame. The story follows a group of animal friends through several adventures.

## Background

This adaptation of *The Wind in the Willows* was written for and premiered at the Fort Wayne Youtheatre in Fort Wayne Indiana.

## Playwright Bio

TODD ESPELAND is the executive/artistic director of the Fort Wayne Youtheatre. He is the former artistic director of Commedia Zuppa Mask Company, The Kalamazoo Civic Theatre and a graduate of the world renowned Dell'Arte International. While at Dell'Arte, Todd did extensive post-graduate work in mask, clown, circus techniques, commedia dell'arte and physical theatre. He holds an MFA in directing from the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

## Synopsis

When spring arrives, Mole climbs up out of his hole and wanders his way to the river. There he meets new friends, Rat, Otter, and the grumbly Badger. They are especially helpful when Mole is confronted by Fox and the Weasels. Mole also meets loudmouthed Toad who is self-centred, impatient and never satisfied. Toad always wants to follow a new craze, and the new craze that does him in is a motor car. He drives carelessly, crashes, has to pay numerous fines and finally ends up in jail for his recklessness. When Toad escapes, he finds out that Fox and the Weasels have taken over his home, Toad Hall, and refuse to leave. But despite all his failings, Toad's friends stand by him and stand up to Fox. Because you stand by your friends and help them be the best they can be. Even if they aren't perfect.

## Characters

**TOAD:** Loud, obnoxious and self-important. Will lie and put on a show if it means he doesn't have to do any work.

**RAT:** Down to earth, grounded, sensible. Looks out for Mole like a parent.

**MOLE:** Innocent and eager. Is amazed by the big wonderful world.

**BADGER:** Bold, commanding and imposing. Of the four friends Badger is the real leader.

**OTTER:** Overly friendly and eager. Speaks their mind.

**JAILER:** Hates Toad.

**HORSE:** Stubborn and hard to convince.

**LAW CLERK:** A bold by-the-book lawyer.

**FOX:** Can be sly and sneaky or tough as nails. Suckers their victims in by acting nice.

**WEASELS 1-5/POLICE:** All the Weasels kiss up to Fox and are extra mean to their victims. They can put on an act to sucker in their victims.

**JUDGE:** Stuffy and stern.

**RABBIT:** Excited and scared.

**JAILER'S DAUGHTER:** Tries to be sweet to Toad but eventually loses patience and is prone to yell at him.

**WASHER WOMAN:** Bold and brash and hates Toad.

**TRAIN CONDUCTOR:** Kind and clever. Always wants to help.

**BARGE WOMAN:** Smart and doesn't fall for Toad's lies.

**HEDGEHOG 1:** Innocent and loves to tease Hedgehog 2.

**HEDGEHOG 2:** Innocent and hates being teased by Hedgehog.

## Themes

Friendship, community, acceptance, loyalty, relationships

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What does home mean to you?
- ★ How do you define friendship?
- ★ Do you value loyalty in a friendship? Why or why not?
- ★ How are you different from your friends?
- ★ What makes a good person?
- ★ Are you an accepting person?
- ★ How do you deal with bullies?

## Pre-Read Activities

### Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a poem as their source material, something short. The point is to have students work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
  - » Adaptation Definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to specifically use the words of the poem, but the scene does have to be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
  - » What characters can be derived from the poem?

- » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
- » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

### *The Wind in the Willows* Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a section from the original *The Wind in the Willows*. It is suggested that you read Chapter Seven: Toad's Adventures, as there is a direct connection between the original text and a scene that happens in the theatrical adaptation (Toad in Jail).
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
  - » Adaptation Definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section. Their first task is to identify characters, locations and possible lines of dialogue.
- ★ Next, groups are to discuss, decide, rehearse and come up with a one-minute section of a scene. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges?
- ★ After groups present, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

## Research Project

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original novel, Kenneth Grahame.
  - » Who is Kenneth Grahame?
  - » What is his background?
  - » When did he write *The Wind in the Willows*?
  - » Did he write any other novels?
  - » Was he a “successful” writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? Will you create a quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they learned.

## Animal Characteristics

- ★ Share with students the names of the animals in the play. For example: Badger, Mole, Toad, Otter, Rat, Fox.
- ★ Based just on the name of the animal themselves, and student pre-knowledge or inference, have students create a physicality and character for the animal.
- ★ For example, ask students to think of a mole. What comes to mind when they think of a mole? What is a mole’s physicality? How do they move? How does their movement suggest personality traits? Have students create a character of a mole and interact with each other.
- ★ If students have no idea about certain animals, you can also do this exercise by giving students a short description of the animal and have them create their characters based on your description. For example:
  - » Moles are small mammals who burrow and live underground. They are covered in fur with small ears and eyes. They have very bad eyesight. They have large front paws that they use for digging. Their rear paws are small. They are considered pests.

## Character Characteristics Original Scene

- ★ Before you read the play, give students the characteristics of some of the characters in the play, without identifying the specific character. For example:
  - » Down to earth, grounded, sensible. Looks out for others like a parent.
  - » Loud, obnoxious and self-important.
  - » Innocent and eager.
  - » Can be sly and sneaky or tough as nails. Suckers their victims in by acting nice.
- ★ Divide students into small groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene in which they each play a character that exhibits specific characteristics from the list.
- ★ Afterward, ask students if they can guess which animal is connected to the characteristics.

## Friendship Reflection

- ★ Write a reflection about the friends in your life. Consider the following questions:
  - » Are friends important to you? Why or why not?
  - » Who are your friends? Why are you friends?
  - » Do you have a friend who is difficult to be friends with? Why?

## Friendship Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of friendship. For example:
  - » How would you demonstrate what it means to be friends?
  - » How would you demonstrate what it means to have a friend who is hard to be friends with?

## Friendship Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss three words that demonstrate how they feel about the word “Friendship.”
  - » Alternatively, you could have a class discussion to come up with a vocabulary list of words, and then groups can choose three words from the list.
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau for each of those words.
  - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the words each group chooses to visualize.

## **Close Reading Analysis Questions**

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it’s being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can’t highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *The Wind in the Willows*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.



## **Read One: What is happening?**

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Where does Toad live?
3. Who is the first animal that Mole meets?
4. Who does Mole want to visit because he's heard so much about them?
5. When Rat says "We can't abandon a friend," who is the friend?
6. When Toad talks about the "real way to travel," what is this referring to?
7. What ruins Fox's plans to invade Toad Hall?
8. Where does Badger live?
9. What's the password Fox asks for?
10. Who does Toad ask Mole to fetch for him?
11. How many years is Toad sentenced to jail?
12. How does Toad escape jail?
13. Does the Engine Driver turn Toad over to the police?
14. At the end of the play, who owns Toad Hall?
15. What is the key idea of the play?

## **Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. In the introduction, the author states that "Fox is an unreliable narrator." How does Fox's language and word choice demonstrate the character's unreliability? Cite the text to support your answer.
2. Toad is described as loud, obnoxious and self-important. How does his language verbally demonstrate these character traits?
3. How is the word "friend" used in the play?

4. Based on Badger's language, how would you costume this character?
5. What is the significance of the line, "You have conquered with kindness"?
6. What is the significance of the line, "You silly Toad. You almost ruined everything"?
7. In the original production, some of the characters who were identified male in the original text were played by female actors for this reason: "We discussed how the behaviours of the characters were universal and could be done by any gender." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? What makes behaviour universal?
8. Large scenic elements in the play, such as the train, were created by actors rather than set pieces. What effect would this have in a production of the play?
9. What is the main conflict in the play?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *The Wind in the Willows*?
2. In your opinion, why did the original author of the novel choose to tell the story using animals?
3. What is the playwright trying to say about friendship? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is going to happen next to Toad? Are his changes permanent? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with friendship with what happens in the play.
6. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

### **Post-Read Questions**

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?

- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

## **Post-Read Activities**

### **Adaptation Compare and Contrast**

- ★ In the pre-read section, you adapted a section of the original text into an original scene. Now, compare and contrast your adaptation to how the playwright adapted the same moment.
  - » What are the similarities and differences?
  - » Infer why the playwright made some of the choices he did with his version of the scene.

### **Animal Characteristics Compare and Contrast**

- ★ In the pre-read section, you created characters based on animal characteristics.
- ★ Compare and contrast your characterization with the characters in the play.
  - » How are the animals portrayed in the play?
  - » What are the similarities and differences?

### **Character Costume Design**

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

## Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
  - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
  - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
  - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

## Character Physical Action

- ★ In the pre-read section, a similar exercise was done without knowing the specific characters. This exercise asks students to connect the personality traits to the specific play character.
- ★ As a class, discuss the personality traits of each character. Create a list of traits for each character.
- ★ Ask students: How do we physicalize personality? Use one character as a model.
- ★ For example, Badger is described as bold, commanding and imposing. How do bold people stand? How do they move? How do they gesture?
- ★ Divide students into groups and give each group a character, without letting the other groups know.
- ★ Each group, using the personality trait list for their character, must discuss and decide upon a stance, a walk, and a gesture for this character.
- ★ Each group will present. Each person in the group will enter the space with their walk, take a stance, gesture, and then walk off.

- ★ Those watching must guess the character simply by looking at the physical action.
- ★ Ask students: Why do we need to give characters a specific physical action?

## **Playwright Process**

Playwright Todd Espeland talks about his process writing and adapting *The Wind in the Willows*. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

### **Why did you choose to adapt this novel?**

Fort Wayne Youtheatre has a history of adapting classics for the stage and I was looking for a story that was a comedy that used archetypal characters to drive the story/comedy. I have a strong background in commedia dell'arte and mask performance and love work that deals with archetypal characters and how their appetites (needs) create comedy. I also wanted to find a show that focused on kindness and friendship. Children's Theatre of Charlotte created a program called "The Kindness Project." The focus of it was to create shows that highlighted the idea of kindness and being kind to those you share the world with. They saw it as a response to a lot of the divisiveness that has been growing in our world today. That idea touched me. So I wanted to find a story that had that in it too. *The Wind in the Willows* seemed like a good choice.

### **Is there anything you cut that you wished could have stayed in the play?**

For my adaptations I try to include as much of the original language as possible. I love text and the way text and language reveals character. Kenneth Grahame has written some great passages and gives his characters a turn of phrase that points up who they are by how they say things. Unfortunately, sometimes the dialogue he created for his characters is easy to read but impossible to say. I wanted this to be an actor friendly script, so I had to adapt some of his great lines.

## **What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?**

One challenge I faced was making the language genderless. With my last adaptation, *Treasure Island*, we cast a woman as Long John Silver in the original production. It was a great experience for the actor who played that role. I loved seeing her embrace the male behaviors and characteristics and not being relegated to being a mom, or a girl in distress. The characters in *The Wind in the Willows* and the comedy they get to play is so much fun so I decided to make it so that the leading characters could be done by any gender. It was a lot of work to adapt the references to gender neutral. Our brains are wired to not notice them, or to gender a character based on their behaviors. This construct is really strong. It took many passes over the script to take them all out. I still think there are a couple lurking in the text.

## **What changes, if any, were made during rehearsals?**

Aside from tinkering with the text, the most significant change was made prior to rehearsals. Originally the script was linear and did not start with the four friends confronting the Fox and Weasels after they took over Toad Hall. The switch was made to begin at the ending and tell the story back to that point, with the Fox as narrator. The original story is a series of events, but they don't feel like they are building to anything, such as the invasion of Toad Hall. I moved the narrative order around to give the audience the expectation of wondering how the story will lead to the invasion of Toad Hall.

## **What was it like to see the play performed?**

In addition to writing the show I was also the director on the first production of it. The parts I enjoyed working on in rehearsal and seeing in production in front of an audience, were the parts where the cast made environments and objects, like the train, out of their bodies. They were fun to devise in collaboration with the cast. In performance, it was pure theatre to see the empty stage suddenly transform into a spooky forest of tangled trees or a river barge. It was also fun to take everyday objects to help give life to those environments. My stage manager had a great idea for the train which we used. We put a tall top hat on the tallest actor and then added puffs of cotton rising up out of the top of the hat, to become the smoke stack on the train engine.