

The Wind In The Willows

By Kenneth Grahame

**A new adaptation for the stage
by Gill Morrell**

Spotlight Publications

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The Wind In The Willows

CAST (in order of appearance)

Mole, innocent, trusting, optimistic

Ratty, laid-back, intelligent, a university type

Badger, old-fashioned, suspicious, a great friend in a crisis

Toad, over-enthusiastic, naïve, pompous

Chief Weasel, sly, conniving, malicious

Weasel 1) similar but less intelligent

Weasel 2)

Children, variously hedgehogs, rabbits, mice and weasels

Adult chorus, again, rabbits and weasels, but also the other named parts (two men and three women are enough):

Alfred the horse

Chauffeur

Bertie

Elvira

Jailer's daughter

Aunt

Railway clerk

Train driver

Water rat

Barge woman

Gipsy

It should be noted that in the original production, the three weasels, the water rat and Mole were played by women.

Production Notes

Setting

An empty stage except for a grassy mound up centre, wide enough to be used as a seat, and sturdy enough to be trodden on. A hidden door in the cyclorama behind, if possible. The characters' houses are suggested by appropriately-painted screens, perhaps two metres square and probably hinged to fold into three, so that they are self-supporting. These are brought on and off as required, sometimes as a scene progresses, together with one or two simple chairs or stools. The river is entirely imaginary and can therefore flow wherever it seems best in each scene.

Vehicles

The adaptation uses one-dimensional hardboard vehicles, smaller and narrower than life-size, mounted either on wheels or on stands. They can then be carried or pushed across the stage. The punt in the first scene should be pulled across by invisible string. Meanwhile, the characters stand behind and move smoothly with the vehicle.

Characterisation

The main characters are envisaged as Edwardian types, with no particular emphasis on their animal qualities - Toad in tweedy plus fours, Ratty in blazer, flannels and boater, Badger in shabby dressing gown, Mole in a black smoking jacket, with changes where relevant. Animal ears on headbands are enough to differentiate between the various other animals, who can otherwise wear Edwardian "rural poor" costumes, even the horse. The chorus can thus double up as rabbits, weasels, etc. by simple ear changes. The weasels are gangsters, with long overcoats, trilbies and shades.

Music

A single keyboard is enough to play music between scenes, during some quieter action, and to accompany the songs.

ACT 1

Scene 1

Music continues through the first scene until Ratty appears. Spotlight DR where Mole is in his house, spring-cleaning. He has his back to us and is up a ladder dusting with a feather duster. He comes down & cleans, looking more and more weary. Around the mound are grouped several rabbits, busily shopping, gossiping, scolding children, etc.

Mole Bother! Oh blow! Hang spring cleaning!

He throws down the duster and plunges through the curtained hole at the back of his house. Meanwhile, the spotlight is killed and Mole's house is struck. The rabbits fall silent as Chief Weasel and two companions, gangster-like, stroll past from UR to DL

Rabbits Oh no! It's the weasels! Not the weasels!

As they watch the weasels disappear, Mole re-enters through a hidden door behind the mound and makes his way through the indignant rabbits

Mole Up we go, up we go! Scrape and scrabble, scrabble and scrooge! Ah! (*He rolls on his back, legs in air*) Now, this is fine! Sunshine and warm grass and birdsong! This is better than dusting and polishing and whitewashing! This is spring without the spring cleaning!

Rabbit (*barring Mole's way with a Toll sign*) Hold up! You can't go past here for nothing, you know. This 'ere's a toll path. It's sixpence for the privilege of passing by the private road.

Mole (*pushing him out of the way and leaping down the mound joyfully*) Rubbish! I'll go where I like when I like. And all I can say to you is - onion sauce to you! Sage and onion stuffing to you!

Rabbits Why didn't you say...?

Why didn't you tell him...?

Well, why didn't you...?

The rabbits retire sulkily and exit UL. Mole rolls down to the edge of the river, which at this stage we imagine to cross the width of the stage, so that he is DS of it, and stops, stunned. Ratty's head appears round the flat DR, US of the river

Mole Oh my! What is it? It's wet. It's definitely wet. Let's see .. Oh my, it's cold! I wonder ... is this what they call the sea? If I go along here, would I fall off the edge of the world? Oh!! (*He has seen Ratty*)

Rat Hello Mole.

Mole Hello Rat.

Rat Would you like to come over?

Mole Over what?

Rat The river, of course.

Mole Is this what they call a river, then?

Rat Well, yes. What else would you call it? The sea?

Mole No, no of course ... But it's all very well to talk - how do I get over?

Rat Wait.

He pulls his boat on stage from DR and crosses to Mole. This is best achieved by making the boat a punt, so that Ratty is always on his feet with the pole, and Mole can kneel, facing whichever way the boat is going. Two invisible lines to the wings mean the punt can cross move apparently effortlessly

Rat Lean on that. Now then, step lively!

Mole Oh my! I'm in a boat. This has been the most wonderful day. Do you know, I've never been in a boat before in the whole of my life?

Rat What! Never been in a - you never - well, I - what have you been doing then?

Mole Is it as nice as all that?

Rat Nice? It's the only thing. Believe me, young fellow, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, half so much worth doing as messing about in boats. Simply messing - about - in - boats; messing - (*he is so laid-back that he misses his stroke with the oars and falls backwards feet in air*) about in boats. In or out of 'em, it doesn't matter. Whether you go somewhere, or whether you don't, you're always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you've done it, there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not. Look here, if you've really nothing else on hand this morning, suppose we drop down the river together, and have a long day of it?

Mole What a day I'm having! Let's start at once.

They punt back to DR

Rat Hold hard a minute. (*He gets out, ties up, and collects from off-stage a wicker picnic hamper, and gets back in the boat and casts off*) Shove that under your feet.

Mole (*as they punt back to DL*) What's inside it?

Rat There's cold chicken inside it, cold tongue cold ham cold beef pickled gherkins Salad french rolls scress sandwiches spotted meat ginger beer lemonade sodawater...

Mole I didn't catch all that - can you say it again?

Rat Cold chicken cold tongue cold ham cold beef pickled gherkin salad french rolls scress sandwiches spotted meat ginger beer lemonade sodawater...

Mole Oh, stop, stop! It's too much!

Rat Do you really think so? It's only what I always take on these little excursions, and the other animals are always telling me I'm a mean beast and cut it very fine.

They tie up and get out with the picnic. During the next dialogue, they eat

I like your clothes awfully, old chap. I'm going to get a black velvet smoking suit myself some day, as soon as I can afford it.

Mole I beg your pardon; you must think me very rude, but this is all so new to me. So, this is a river.

Rat *The river.*

Mole And you really live by the river? What a jolly life.

Rat By it and with it and in it and on it. It's brother and sister to me, and aunts, and company, and food and drink and, naturally, washing. It's my world and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got isn't worth having and what it doesn't know isn't worth knowing. Lord, the times we have together! Whether it's winter or summer, spring or autumn, it's always got its fun and excitement. When the floods are on in February, and my cellar and basement are brimming with drink that's no good to me, and the brown water runs past my bedroom window; or again when it all drops away and shows patches of mud that smells like plum cake, and the rushes and weed clog the channels, and I can potter about dry-shod over most of the bed of it and find fresh food to eat, and things careless people have dropped out of boats.

Mole But isn't it a bit dull at times? Just you and the river and no one to pass a word with?

Rat No one else to ...? Well, I mustn't be hard on you. You're new and you don't know. Why, the river bank's so crowded now that many people are moving away altogether. Oh no, it isn't what it used to be at all. There's otters and dabchicks and kingfishers and moorhens, all of them about all day long and always wanting you to do something - as if a fellow has no business of his own to attend to.

Mole (*pointing US*) What lies over there?

Rat That? Oh that's just the Wild Wood. We don't go there very much, we Riverbankers.

Mole Aren't they very nice people in there?

During the next speeches, the lights drop slightly and weaselly heads pop out from behind the mound and UL and UR. A menacing hissing rises and falls

Rat Well, let me see. The rabbits and squirrels are all right, and so's Badger. Dear old Badger. No one interferes with him. They'd better not.

Mole Why, who should interfere with him?

Rat Well, of course, there are others. Weasels and stoats and foxes and so on. They break out sometimes, there's no denying it, and - well, you can't really trust them, and that's a fact.

The weasels disappear and the lights come back up

Mole And beyond the Wild Wood again? Where it's all blue and dim, and you see what may be hills or maybe not, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only cloud drift?

Rat Beyond the Wild Wood comes the wide world and that is something that doesn't matter to you or to me. I've never been there and I'm never going to, nor you either, if you've got any sense. Don't refer to it again, please!

Badger's face appears from behind the DR flat, inquiringly

It's Badger! Come along and join us.

Badger (*coming forward but keeping aloof*) That fool of a Toad's out in his new rowing boat. New clothes, new everything.

Rat I thought it was sailing he was mad about?

Badger It was. Then it was punting. Nothing would please him but to punt all day everyday and a nice mess he made of it. Last year it was house boating, d'you recall? We all had to go and stay in his houseboat and pretend we liked it. He was going to spend the rest of his life in a houseboat. But it's always the same. Whatever he takes up, he tires of it, and starts something fresh.

Rat He's a good fellow, though, you must admit. And talking of good fellows, you must meet my new friend here. Moley, this is - Badger? Where did he go? (*Badger, muttering "Company" has sloped off*) Oh well, that's Badger all over. The best of fellows but shy, very shy. Simply hates society. Now we shan't see any more of him for a few days. Had all you want to eat?

Mole Oh, yes thank you. It was absolutely splendid!

Rat Well, well, I suppose we ought to be moving. I wonder which of us had better start packing the picnic basket?

Mole Please, please let me!

Rat sits back while Mole works and notices a duck bobbing on the stream. He hums, then sings

Rat All along the backwater,
Through the rushes tall,
Ducks are a-dabbling,
Up tails all!

Ducks' tails, drakes' tails,
Yellow feet a-quiver,
Yellow bills all out of sight,
Busy in the river!

(Mole joins in)

Everyone for what he likes,
We like to be
Heads down, tails up,
Dabbling free!

Mole And now, can I possibly try punting please?

Rat Not yet, my young friend. Wait till you've had a few lessons. It's not as easy as it looks.

Mole waits till Rat's back is turned, jumps in the boat, grabs the pole, overbalances, and falls in. Rat jumps in and life-saves him

Mole Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean it, really I didn't!

Rat Mole, you silly ass! Now then, trot up and down the bank a bit to dry off, and then we'll be off.

Mole (*trotting hard*) Oh Ratty, my kind, generous friend. Can you ever forgive me?

Rat That's all right, bless you. What's a little wet to a water rat? I'm more in the water than out of it most days. Don't think any more about it. And look here, I really think you should come and stay with me for a

little time. It's very plain and rough, you know - not like Toad's splendid house - not that you've seen that yet - but I can make you comfortable. I'll teach you to row and to swim and you'll soon be as handy in the water as the rest of us.

Mole Oh Ratty! Can I really? I can't think of anything better!

As they go off DR, the weasels appear again, hissing and murmuring

The lights fade

Scene 2

The stage is empty except for a sun lounger and well-loaded drinks trolley DL

Toad is sunbathing, a copy of the Financial Times spread over his face

Rat and Mole appear DR and stop there

Mole (*whispering*) He won't mind our calling like this, uninvited?

Rat It's never the wrong time to call on Toad. Early or late, he's always the same fellow. Always good-tempered, always glad to see you, always sorry when you go.

Mole He must be a very nice animal.

Rat He is indeed the best of animals. So simple, so good-natured and so affectionate. Perhaps he's not very clever - we can't all be geniuses; and it may be he is both boastful and conceited. But he has some great qualities, has Toady. It's only -

Mole Only what?

Rat You'll see. (*They cross to Toad*) Good afternoon, Toad! I've brought Mole to meet you, my new friend Mole!

Toad (*jumping up*) Fire! Burglars! Ring 999! Get the police - oh, it's you Ratty. You gave me a shock. Not that I was asleep, you understand. Just examining my investments, studying the stock market.

Rat At very close quarters.

Toad Never mind about that. Now, Ratty, this is splendid; I've been meaning to call on you. I was just about to send a boat down the river for you, with strict orders that you were to be fetched up here at once, whatever you were doing. I want you badly - both of you. Now, what will you have to drink? (*He pours Pimms*) You just don't know how lucky it is, your turning up just now!

Mole (*shyly*) You've a lovely garden here, Mr Toad.

Toad You're right there. Loveliest garden in the county and finest house on the river. (*He sees Rat nudge Mole*) Oh very well, it's just my way of talking. And it's not such a bad house, is it? You know you'd rather like it yourself. Now look here. You're the very animals I wanted. You've got to help me; it's most important.

Rat It's about your rowing, I suppose. You're getting on fairly well, though you still splash a great deal. With a lot of patience, and any amount of coaching, you -

Toad Oh pooh! Boating! Silly childish amusement. I gave that up ages ago. Sheer waste of time. I'm sorry to see you fellows, who ought to know better, wasting your energies in that aimless manner. No, I've discovered the real thing, the only genuine occupation for a lifetime. I propose to devote the rest of my lifetime to it, and can only regret the wasted years that lie behind men squandered on trivialities. Look at this, Ratty - and your amiable friend too - just look at this.

He pulls from the wings DL the canary coloured cart

This is the life! The open road, the dusty highway, the heath, the common, the hedgerows, the rolling downs! Camps, villages, towns, cities! Here today, up and off to somewhere else tomorrow. And mind, this is beyond question the finest cart of its kind ever built - planned it all myself, I did. Come and look at the arrangements.

Mole How wonderful! Did you really? You are clever! Can I look inside?

Rat sniffs and looks bored

Toad All's complete. You see - biscuits, potted lobster, sardines, everything you could possibly want. There's soda water, tobacco, letter paper, bacon, jam, cards and dominoes. In fact, you'll find that nothing whatever has been forgotten, when we make our start this afternoon.

Rat I beg your pardon. Did I overhear you saying something about "our" and "start" and "this afternoon"?

Toad Now my good Ratty, don't start talking in that stiff and sniffy way. You know you've got to come. I can't manage without you, so consider it settled. You surely don't mean to stick to your dull, fusty old river all your life and just live in a hole in a bank, and boat! I want to show you the world! I'm going to make an animal of you, my boy!

Rat I don't care. I'm not coming and that's flat. And I am going to stick to my old river, and live in a hole, and boat, as I've always done. And what's more, Mole's going to stick to me and do the same as I do, aren't you, Mole?

Mole Of course I am. I'll always stick to you, Rat, and what you say is to be but - well - it does sound rather fun. I've never had any adventures till now and I'd love to see a bit more of the world.

Toad Well, of course, the last thing I want is to make anyone do anything he doesn't want. (*Taking Mole by the arm*) Have another Pimms, Moley, my good fellow? Good, good. Of course, I don't expect Ratty would enjoy life on the open road - travel, change, interest, excitement! The whole world before you and a horizon that's constantly changing! Oh no, you two wouldn't want to bother with anything like that.

Mole Oh Ratty, couldn't we?

Toad Cheese straws? We needn't decide anything in a hurry. Of course, I don't really care. I only want to give pleasure to you fellows. "Live for others" - that's my motto in life.

Rat For goodness sake, we'll go, just for a day or two.

Toad You won't regret it! Just wait while I get Alfred - oh, we'll have a wonderful time! Don't talk about your old river!

Toad exits DL

Rat I don't talk about my river. I just think about it - all the time.

Mole Shall we run away, Ratty, and go back to our dear old hole on the river?

Rat No, no, we'll see it out. Thanks awfully, but I ought to stick by Toad till the trip's ended. It wouldn't be safe for him to be left to himself. It won't take very long - his fads never do.

At this point they have to help catch Alfred the horse who is chased on by Toad

Alfred What's all this then? There's me, having a nice quiet kip, when I hears me name. Oh good, I thinks to meself, a bucket of oats. Humph, I should be so lucky. Hard labour more like. Who asked if I'd mind pulling you lot? It's a long dusty road out there and it's me wot's going to have all the work.

Toad Oh, do stop grumbling! This is adventure! This is excitement! This is our new life!

Alfred This is blasted hard work, if you ask me. Come the revolution, the oppressed masses will rise up and do you. Just you wait.

Toad Come on, now, giddy-up.

Alfred Giddy-up! Blimey, they must think I'm in a blasted nursery rhyme. Giddy-up indeed!

Alfred and Toad exit DR with the cart and very rapidly cross backstage to DL

Rat Come on, Mole, there's a way to go before we camp tonight, and ten to one Toad will have forgotten all the really necessary things like milk and eggs.

They exit DR

Meanwhile three weasels sidle on, watching them go. As they do, the sun lounge etc. are being struck

Chief Weasel That's Toad, my lads. The biggest fattest landowner for miles around. What wouldn't I give

for a chance to get a bit of his money.

Weasel 1 How will you do it, Chief?

Weasel 2 We're right behind you on this one, Chief. Just tell us what to do.

Chief Weasel We bides our time, that's what we do. We bides our time. Hush!

They duck behind the mound as Alfred appears DL 'pulling' the cart and accompanied by the others. They cross the stage very slowly

Alfred No chance of a rest, I suppose? No hope of getting me 'ead down for a snack of grass and a bit of kip? Come the revolution, it's us workers that'll get the privileges and you rich 'uns that'll work - don't you forget it. Throw off the proletarian chains! Up the workers!

Toad Oh, very well, we'll camp here.

They start to unload camping gear from behind the cart and set up a tripod and hanging kettle

Suddenly we hear from DL the noise of a motorcar and "poop-poop". They are transfixed

The noise draws nearer

A car with one (running) driver erupts from DL, whizzes past them, creating mayhem, and exits DR

Rat You villain! you scoundrel, you highwayman, you - you - road hog! I'll have the law on you!

Alfred Blimey, if that's the future, give me the past.

Mole There, there, never mind, we'll get you to some nice safe grass. Upsadaisy.

Alfred Whatever you says, sir, so long as you looks after me proper.

Toad (*sitting on ground gazing after the car*) Poop-poop. Poop-poop. Poop-poop.

Rat Are you coming to help us, Toad?

Toad Glorious, stirring sight! The poetry of motion, the only real way to travel! The only way to travel! Here today, in next week tomorrow! Villages skipped, towns and cities jumped - always somebody else's horizon. O bliss, O poop-poop. Oh my, oh my!

Mole Oh, stop being an ass, Toad.

Toad And to think I never knew! All those wasted years that lie behind me - I never knew, never even dreamt! O what a flowery track lies spread before me, henceforth! What dust clouds will spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way! What carts shall I fling carelessly into the ditch in the wake of my magnificent onset! Horrid little carts, common carts, canary coloured carts!

Mole What shall we do with him?

Rat Nothing at all. Because there is really nothing to be done. You see. I know him from old. He is now possessed. He'll continue like that for days now, quite useless for all practical purposes. Come on.

He and Mole assist Alfred and the cart off UR. Toad produces a mobile phone and dials

Toad Mayfair Motors? I want to order, for immediate delivery, the largest, the most powerful and the most expensive motorcar.

The Wind In The Willows

Gill Morrell's adaptation of Kenneth Graham's classic story is specially designed for the stage.

Plot Summary

The rural tranquillity of life on the river bank and its inhabitants - Mole, Ratty, Badger *et al.* - is shattered by the eccentric behaviour of Mr Toad of Toad Hall. Following an incident with a motor car, Toad is arrested by his arch enemies the weasels and sentenced to life in prison. But he escapes, and after a series of adventures returns to Toad Hall, to find it occupied by the weasels. An exciting conclusion is assured as his friends rally round in his hour of need.