

# The Wind in the Willows

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

### *Purpose of the project*

When the Ottawa Citizen asked celebrated author Alan Cumyn to name a book that made him a lifelong reader, this was his reply:

*Well, lots of books blew my socks off in the early days, but one that has stayed with me is Kenneth Grahame's brilliant The Wind in the Willows. When I first read it, at a tender age, I was completely engrossed in Mr. Toad's wonderfully improbable addiction to motorcars.*

*Now when I read it, I am slack-jawed with delight at Grahame's descriptions, as when Mole trots beside the river "as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spell-bound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."*

Tim Wynne-Jones, one of Canada's best known authors, has said that Ratty, from *The Wind in the Willows*, is his "all time favourite children's book character."

It's important to introduce young people to the classic books that have inspired so many people to become writers and life-long readers. One great book can lead to so many more books, and change a person's life.

Kids who see themselves as unpopular because they come from different places, because they are differently-abled (moles are visually impaired as was Grahame's young son "Mouse"), or because they lack social skills will identify with this story of four outcasts (unwanted pests by most human standards) who become friends, rescue a baby otter, then outsmart and overcome bullies to establish peace and justice in a scary part of their world.

Teachers can discuss these themes in class after a performance. They can also use the show to inspire reading, exploring nature, animals, rivers, boats, early 1900's music, design style, and history—or as the kick-off to one of our drama and puppet workshops!

We would like to create and tour a 45-minute adaptation of *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame, for schools and family audiences. This project involves creating a new script and workshopping it with groups of young people. We will also build puppets, props, and sets, add film and video clips, commission original music, rehearse and present the show to more than 22,000 young people. We'll open it at the Shenkman Arts Centre, then tour it around Ottawa, across Ontario and beyond.

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*Who is being targeted?*

Our primary audience will be K to 6, and family audiences. We love to create shows that are accessible and enjoyable for young people, regardless of age, culture, first language, disability or economic situation. Our production of *The Tempest*, amazingly, plays happily to K to 8 audiences. *A Promise is a Promise* has toured across Canada and the Arctic several times. Special Ed and ESL teachers are routinely thrilled that even their kids were engaged. We do this by combining great music, visual effects, and words for maximum clarity and understandability without patronizing or “talking down” to anyone. We want to create an entertaining show that highlights the poetry of the language, the profound appreciation of nature, and the life-altering themes of tolerance, respect and simple joys.

*The structure of the project, the content and the process*

We received a grant from the City of Ottawa in June 2009. Since that time, we have written a first draft and worked on it for two weeks with drama students at The School of Dance, aged six to ten. We were encouraged by their delight in the characters, the plot, and the language. A few read, or were reading the book. We added more of the original prose into our narrations as a result of the kids’ input. In the fall, we will work on the second half of the script with another group.

We also made the Mole this summer, and planned the design for several other puppets. We shot videos of the Rideau River, capturing water, willows and waterfowl at many different times of day. And we bought sequined taffeta for the set and backdrop, in shades of green, blue and brown to represent the river, the meadow and the Wild Wood.

The next phase involves constructing the show, recording more video, finding and commissioning music, and rehearsal.

The design is inspired by water, and living near the river. We like to show things in lots of different ways, with small telling details, and changes of perspective. The characters will be represented in many ways: by actors, as puppets, masks, stuffed toys, flat cut-outs on a screen, on film, or as shadows. The “battle” with the stoats and weasels at the end of the story, with its elements of deliberate confusion, is perfect for a combination of shadow puppetry, hand shadows, and video projections.

Music and sound effects are also key. Russell Levia will be working with us throughout rehearsals and performances. Music adds an extra layer of expressiveness and will be an important element in this show.

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We plan to open the show with public performances at the Shenkman Arts Centre in Orléans, then tour to other public venues and elementary schools in the Ottawa area and across Canada. We present an average of 100 performances a year in schools, theatres, libraries and at children's festivals. Most of our shows have toured extensively to major centres nationally and internationally. Performance fees make up about 71% of the budget.

*How will we evaluate the project to determine success?*

Our first and most important indicator is the reaction of the students, during the performance and in the question period. Are they engaged, interested, attentive, moved and laughing in the right spots? The teachers' immediate reactions are just as crucial. Teachers also follow up with helpful comments after a presentation and in teacher-evaluation forms. We will improve and refine the show as we tour. The real test of the show's success will be how many bookings we get for it, and how many new opportunities it gives us to engage with young people.

We will market the show with brochures, our website, and personal contacts. We are also represented by both Prologue to the Performing Arts in Toronto and MASC in Ottawa. We will perform one of our other shows at the Vancouver children's festival in the spring, and will promote *The Wind in the Willows* to them then. Ninety performances will reach over 22,000 young people.

*What secured resources and contingency plans do we have?*

We have already received \$5,000 from the City of Ottawa, which has helped to get this project well underway. The Ottawa School of Dance has partnered with us in workshopping the script this summer, and will continue to do so in the fall. Prologue and MASC are both looking forward to representing us in their marketing efforts. If we don't secure all of the funding we've requested from the OAC and the Canada Council, we will add more performances to our touring schedule. We generally keep a show that we like in the repertoire for a long time. We have performed each of our most recent shows, *The Flying Canoe* and *The Tempest* over 100 times.

Thank you for your consideration of this project. *The Wind in the Willows* has a good heart and lots of opportunities for innovative visual effects. We think it will be a great addition to our repertoire—popular, fun and thought provoking. We hope it will also encourage reading, creativity, playing with toys, and the power of the imagination.