

Rag & Bone Puppet Theatre
Teacher's guide for

The Wind in the Willows

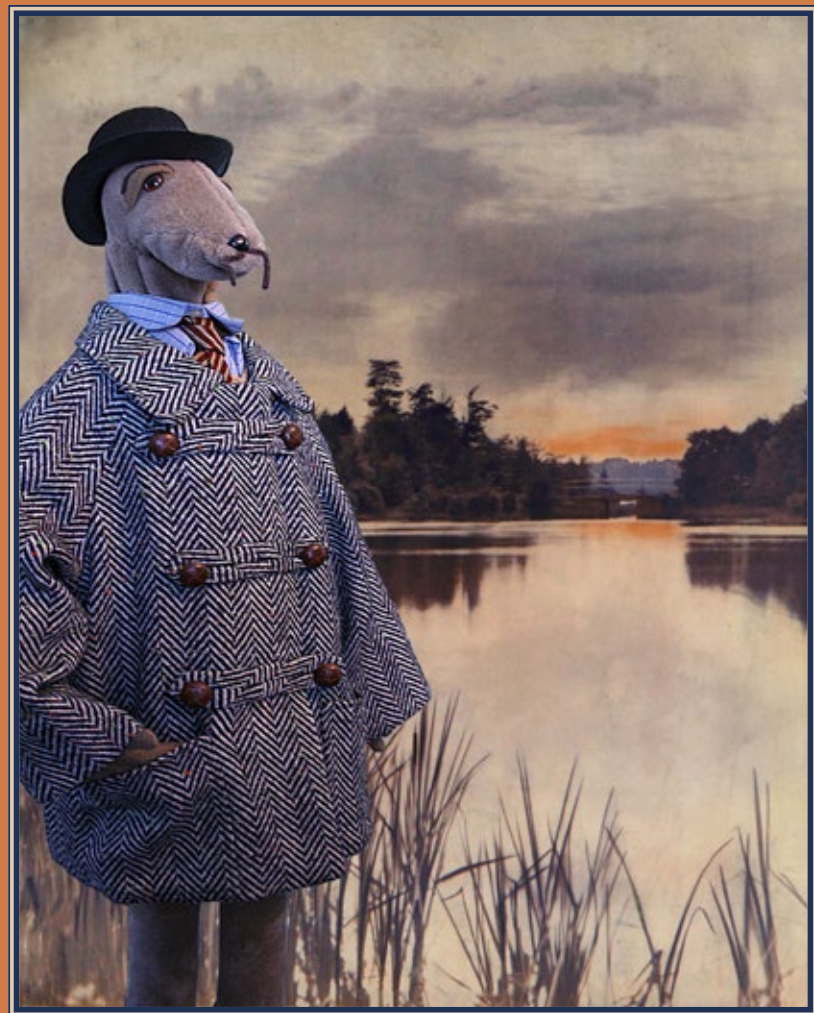


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Early morning on the Rideau River



Dear Teacher:

We're looking forward to presenting *The Wind in the Willows* for your students.

This study guide has a synopsis of the show, information about the production, and some background on Rag and Bone. If you'd like to know more about our company, or if you'd like to read the script of the play, visit our website at www.ragandbone.ca.

We hope your students and staff enjoy the show!

Yours truly,

Kathy MacLellan & John Nolan

The Company

Founded in 1978 by John Nolan and Kathy MacLellan, Rag & Bone's shows include *The Nightingale*, *A Promise is a Promise*, *The Story of Holly & Ivy*, *Felicity Falls*, *The Light Princess*, *Zoom at Sea*, *The Tempest*, *The Flying Canoe*, *The Last Polar Bears*, *Owl at Home* and *The Doll's House*. Rag & Bone has been awarded a Citation of Excellence in the Art of Puppetry from UNIMA-USA, the international puppetry association.

Kathy MacLellan is an award winning writer, performer and puppet-maker. Kathy has written over fifty television scripts, including episodes of *Under the Umbrella Tree*, *Theodore Tugboat*, and *Mr. Dressup*.

Actor, puppeteer, and designer John Nolan has built sets, props and puppets for stage and television, and has appeared on television and in many theatres, including GCTC, The National Arts Centre, Opera Lyra, Odyssey Theatre and Skeleton Key Theatre. He played Jackson on YTV's *Crazy Quilt*.

Kathy & John have also taught many puppet-making and drama workshops in schools across Ontario.

In the Ottawa area we are accompanied by musician Russell Levia. Russell is a popular Ottawa musician who appears frequently in clubs, folk festivals, and daycare centres. He has been working with Rag & Bone for 20 years.



The Last Polar Bears



Felicity Falls



A Promise is a Promise

Background of the Production

“The Mole had been working very hard all morning, spring-cleaning his little home... There’s nothing, absolutely nothing, like messing around in boats...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!... Glorious, stirring sight! The poetry of motion! The only way to travel! O bliss! O poop-poop! O my!... Then the faces began. One, then another and another then yes!—no!—yes, hundreds of faces all hard eyed and evil and sharp...This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me.”

These quotes from *The Wind the Willows* provide ample evidence of why the book is such an enduring classic and why it has inspired so many young people to become writers and life-long readers.

The Wind in the Willows was written in 1908 by Kenneth Grahame for his son, Alastair. The themes are no less relevant now, a hundred years later. In some ways the book is like a letter to his son, the kind of letter we’d all like to write to our children, describing the world and how to live in it. Take time to listen to the rivers and the trees. Respect and appreciate nature. See every day as a new adventure. Be enthusiastic about learning new things and meeting new people. Know that goodness in the world is like a magical power that cares, helps, protects and brings peace and joy. Value friendship above all.



The set for the play

Alastair, also known as “Mouse”, was born visually impaired (not unlike a mole) and had personality challenges (like Toad, whose character is said to be based on Mouse). In *The Wind in the Willows*, everyone is accepted as they are, a part of the community. Mole overcomes his shyness with a bold and clever plan to save Toad Hall. Toad’s wasteful obsession with cars disrupts the pastoral environment and leads to hilarious situations and serious consequences. Gentle reprimands from his loyal friends, Ratty and Badger, eventually convince him to mend his ways. Scholars have noted that Grahame has written about animals that are generally regarded as pests, unattractive and unwanted varmints. But in their world they are friends. They are loyal to each other, generous, kind-hearted, resourceful and polite. And they all need each other.

This vision of the world is a message that we’d like to share with young people. Childhood should include unstructured time, imaginative play, laughter, friendship, self-directed adventures, and good books. We’d like our production to celebrate and encourage all of these things.

Teachers can discuss these themes in class after a performance. They can also use the show to inspire reading, to talk about nature, animals, rivers, boats, the advent of cars, industrialization or bullies. They can also use our suggestions for drama activities and discussion topics.

The design is inspired by water, and living near the river, with lots of blue and green. We like to show things in lots of different ways, with small telling details, and changes of perspective. We find that this encourages the audience to use their imagination; if they have to work a little to put images together, they become more involved. This show uses a combination of live puppetry, actors, masks and video projections.

Music and sound effects are also key. Our musician Russell Levia plays old and new songs inspired by folk tunes, Percy Grainger and Beethoven, on a variety of instruments.



Otter

Making the Show



Mister Toad

We spent a lot of time developing ideas about the stories, the characters and the setting. Once we had an idea of what the show should be like, Kathy wrote the script. We workshopped the script with students at the School of Dance and the Ottawa School of Speech and Drama.

The longest part of the process was making the puppets and designing the show. What should the set look like? What should the puppets be like? What should they be made out of? How big should they be? How should the puppeteer hold them?

We decided to have soft-sculptured puppets, like bed-time toys.

Once we'd decided these things, we had to make everything: John made the props for the show and the video clips; Kathy set to work on the puppets.

The puppets that we use in *The Wind in the Willows* are sewn from fabric and stuffed. To make Rat, for example, Kathy began by looking at lots of photos and drawings of water rats. They have long, thin faces that come to a point at the nose. Kathy drew the face in profile, and that drawing became the basis for the first part of the paper pattern.

Then she had to draw other body parts: the small round ears, a long thin body and legs and arms.

She laid the paper pattern on the fabric. Then she cut out the fabric, sewed each body part together, turned it



Mr Rat

right side out and stuffed the head and body with polyester fibrefill.

Finally, Kathy sewed the various body parts to each other, added craft eyes and embroidered mouths, and made clothes for them.

The set for the play evokes an Edwardian stage, with brocade drapes of blue and green to give the sense of a lush riverbank.

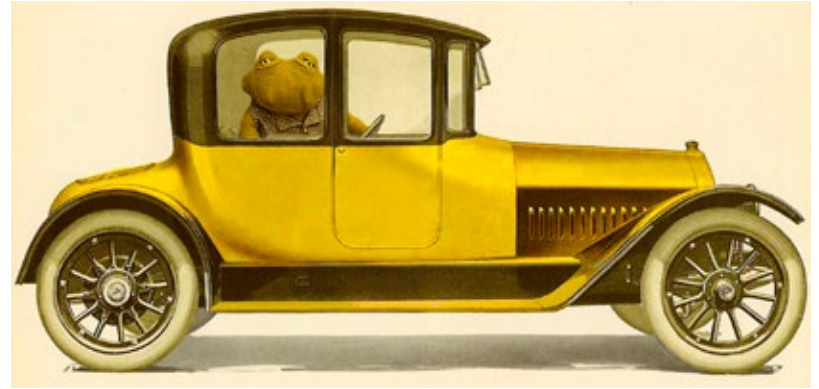
Then we rehearsed the show. In rehearsal, we had to decide how the puppets should talk, and what actions they should perform. We blocked the play: that is, we planned all the movements. Of course, we also had to learn our lines. We also decided what sound effects and musical instruments we'd use in the play.

The way that we work puppets in most of our shows is called open manipulation. The performers are more like storytellers than puppeteers, working the puppets and narrating the story in full view of the audience. We often describe it as “using puppets to tell stories in the same way that children play with toys”.

The music for *The Wind in the Willows* was created by Russell Levia. Russell plays accordion, banjo, harmonica, hornpipe, penny whistle, and a small zither in this show. He worked with John and Kathy for the first week so that musical ideas could be developed, John and Kathy rehearsed with the puppets for two weeks, and finally Russell came back for the fourth week of rehearsal.

More ideas develop and grow once the show is on the road, but those four weeks cement most of the action and sound effects.

The Story



The River Bank

Mole cleans his house, emerges into the sunshine and, to his great delight, meets Rat. The two have a wonderful picnic but on the way home, over-enthusiased Mole capsizes the boat. Rat graciously invites Mole to stay and live with him.

The Open Road

Mole and Rat visit Toad of Toad Hall who is generous but tends to be conceited and obsessive. He takes them on a trip in his horse drawn caravan but when it is driven off the road into a ditch by a motor car, Toad has found a new craze: cars.

The Wild Wood

Hoping to meet Badger, Mole ventures into the Wild Wood, where he is frightened by shadowy creatures and takes refuge in a hollow tree. By the time Rat finds him, it is snowing and the two are lost in a snowstorm until they stumble on the welcome mat of Badger's house.

Mr. Badger

Mole and Rat enjoy Mr. Badger's warm hospitality. The three of them decide to take Toad in hand come spring.

Mr. Toad

Badger, Rat and Mole move in with Toad to try to cure his now dangerous addiction to motor-cars but Toad escapes their vigilance through an upstairs window. He steals a car, drives recklessly, insults a police officer, and is sentenced to twenty years in jail.

Toad's Adventures

Toad, befriended by the jailor's daughter, dresses as a washerwoman to escape from jail. He shelters in a hollow tree.



Weasels in Toad Hall

In Toad's absence, Stoats and Weasels have moved into Toad Hall. When Toad returns, Badger, Mole and Rat hatch a plan to get it back.

The Weasel's Defeat

Mole spreads rumours among the Stoats that Toad has returned with a huge army. When the four friends storm the dining hall through a secret passageway, their sudden entrance causes such terror and confusion that the interlopers are easily defeated.

The End

Toad renounces motor cars and sends gifts and letters of apology to all those he has wronged. Everyone settles back into peaceful lives.



Discussion Topics



ELEMENTS OF DRAMA:

CHARACTERS

The Wind in the Willows is a good opportunity to fulfil some of the knowledge expectations outlined in the *Ontario Arts Curriculum*, such as the elements of drama, the use of music to create mood, and the impact of design elements.

There are seven characters in *The Wind in the Willows* (not counting the wild animals, ducks and birds). How many can you remember?

Who are the main characters? (*Rat, Mole, Toad and Badger*; secondary characters are *Portly, Polly and Pan*)

CONFLICT

Conflict arises when a character wants something but some problem or obstacle stands between him/her and what he/she wants.

What do Ratty and Mole want? (*Peaceful life by the river.*) Who stands in their way? Why?

What does Toad want? (*To drive too fast.*) Who stops him?

What do the Weasels want? (*To live in Toad Hall.*) How is their plan stopped?

STRUCTURE

All stories have a beginning, in which we find out who the characters are and what they want, a middle, in which a series of actions lead to problems and an end in which problems are solved and the characters' lives are somehow changed.



The Willow, Geo Poggenbeek, c. 1873 - c. 1903



The Hay Wain, John Constable

What action begins *The Wind in the Willows*? (*Mole leaves his underground home and finds the river*)

What happens in the middle?
(*Mole makes new friends, the friends try to stop Toad's recklessness, they restore him to Toad Hall.*)

How are people changed in the end?
(*Mole has learned about the riverbank, Toad has changed his ways, the Wild Wood is tame now.*)

A lot has already happened before Mole meets Toad. This is often called the backstory. What is the backstory? How does the audience hear about it?
(*Toad used to be crazy about sailing, punting, houseboats, and then rowboats.*)



MOOD

Suspense is a way of building interest and excitement by making the audience wait for the answer to a question. In *The Wind in the Willows*, music adds to the sense of mystery in the Wild Woods. Can you remember what the music was like at each of the following moments? Can you remember what were you wondering?

Ratty's poem about the ducks.

(Funny music, played on the hornpipe. What do the ducks say? Why to they pop their tails up?)

Toad steals a car and drives too fast.

(Loud, exciting music. What will happen to Toad? Will he get in trouble? Will he crash?)

Can you think of any other moments when the mood changed?

DIALOGUE

When two characters talk to each other in a play, that conversation is dialogue. Think of some bit of dialogue that:

- Tells us about the characters who are speaking.
- Tells us about what is happening.
- Tells us about other characters.

NARRATION

Can you remember a time when a storyteller or a character spoke directly to the audience?



Boat with a Pollard Willow, Matthijs Maris, 1863

ACTION

Something happens. What actions do you remember?
(Mole tips the boat. A motor-car causes the gypsy caravan cart to crash. Mole goes into the Wild Wood by himself.)
How did these actions move the story?

DESIGN

How does the way the puppets look contribute to their personality? For example Ratty is very elegant, with a long, slim body and he wears a shirt and tie. Badger wears a clown nose with a moustache on it.

How do all these elements of drama work together to create different effects on the audience?

For example: it's funny when Toad drives too fast, but how do we feel when the judge sentences him to twenty years in jail? Does he deserve it? Are we happy that he escaped? Why do we feel that way?

Compare your response with those of your peers. How did you like it? What was your favourite part? What did other people like best?

How could research help you to understand this play?
(Find out about the real animals: mole, rat (water vole), toad, badger, otter. Find out about Kenneth Graham and his son, "Mouse". Find out about when people started needing to get a licence to drive a car.)

Draw a picture of your favourite part of the play. Why did you like it best?

Do you wish you could live by a river and go for boat rides and picnics?

**FOR PRIMARY
STUDENTS**



Willow, John Robert Cozens, 1789

***MORE
RESOURCES***

What would you do if you had a friend like Toad who was always getting into trouble?

In what way are the weasels, stoats and foxes like bullies?

(They scare people who go into the Wild Wood, they steal Toad's food and make a mess in his house, they make fun of Toad, they run away when they are confronted.)

The full text of the book is available in several formats at the Open Library site [here](#).



Weeping Willow, John Robert Cozens, 1789

Staging a Poem

Try reading “Up Tails All” aloud.

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 by the river!

Slushy green undergrowth

Where the roach swim—

Here we keep our larder,

Cool and fresh and dim.

Everyone for what he likes!

We like to be

Heads down, tails up,

Dabbling free!

High in the blue above

Swifts whirl and call—

We are down a-dabbling

Up tails all!

A class of students could be divided in to groups of three or four, with each group in charge of four lines of the poem. Each group can come up with an interesting action to go with their lines, and an interesting way to say the lines.

Choral speaking is a way of highlighting text by having a group do some of the following ways:

- Say part of the text all together
- Say part of the text with one person saying each word in a phrase
- Have two or three people saying words or phrases together
- Add sound effects.
- Put the whole poem together and enjoy!

MORE RESOURCES

👉 Our PDF booklet of drama and puppet ideas is available [here](#). It has activities for primaries and juniors, and links to the language curriculum.



The Real Animals



The animals in *The Wind in the Willows* are the sort that walk, talk, and go on boat rides, but they were inspired by animals found in the English countryside that Kenneth Grahame loved so much. You might like to tell your class about the real animals. These descriptions are adapted from Wikipedia.

Water Rat

A semi-aquatic rodent, the European Water Vole or Northern Water Vole is often informally called the Water Rat or Ratty, although it only looks a bit like a true rat. Water voles have rounder noses than rats, deep brown fur, chubby faces and short fuzzy ears; unlike rats their tails, paws and ears are covered with hair. Water voles reach 140–220 millimetres (5.5–8.7 in) in length plus a tail of 55–70 millimetres (2.2–2.8 in) of this.

In Britain, water voles live in burrows in the banks of rivers, ditches, ponds, and streams. They seem to prefer slow moving, calm water. They also live in reed beds where they will weave ball shaped nests above ground if no suitable banks exist in which to burrow. They live under the snow during the winter.

Water voles eat grass and plants near the water and are expert swimmers and divers. They do not usually live in large groups.

The water vole is the UK's fastest declining mammal (95% were lost between 1960 and 1998!) This decline is

partly attributed to the American Mink (which is very like a weasel), an aggressive predator of the vole, and partly due to the destruction of the water vole's habitat.

People are now trying to protect the water vole and its habitat from further destruction. In some parts of England, the water vole is increasing in numbers in places where the European otter has come back because the otter preys on the American Mink.

Moles

Moles have cylindrical bodies covered in fur with invisible ears and small or covered eyes. They can probably tell night from day, but they are otherwise blind. Moles generally burrow, but some species are semi-aquatic.

A moles eat earthworms and other small invertebrates found in the soil, and also a variety of nuts. Because their saliva contains a toxin that can paralyze earthworms, moles are able to store their still living prey for later consumption. They construct special underground "larders" for just this purpose—researchers have discovered such larders with over a thousand earthworms in them.

Before eating earthworms, moles pull them between their squeezed paws to force the collected earth and dirt out of the worm's gut.

The Star-nosed Mole can detect, catch and eat food faster than the human eye can follow (under .3 seconds).





Toad

A toad is an amphibian with dry, leathery skin, brown coloration, and bumps that look like warts (but which help with camouflage). There's no real difference between frogs and toads, but some say toads are browner, and more adapted to dry environments. A group of toads is called a "Knot."

Toads cannot transmit warts to people through handling or skin contact.

Most frogs and toads have short bodies, webbed fingers and toes, protruding eyes and no tail. They are great jumpers, with long, powerful legs. They lay their eggs in puddles, ponds or lakes, and their larvae, called tadpoles, have gills and develop in water. Adult frogs eat mostly insects.

There are more than 5,000 species of frogs and toads but some species are declining significantly. They are very important to the ecology and the environment, are often featured in literature, symbolism and religion, and are also valued as food and as pets.



Otter

Otters are semi-aquatic mammals. They mainly eat fish and shellfish.

Baby Otters are taken care of by the mother, the father, and all the other offspring. After one month, the young otter can come out of the cave, and after two months, it is able to swim. It lives with its family for about one year so that it can learn and be kept safe until maturity. Otters live up to 16 years.

River otters have long, slim bodies and relatively short limbs, with webbed paws. Most have sharp claws on their feet, and have long muscular tails.

They have a very soft, insulated under fur, which is protected by their outer layer of long guard hair. This traps a layer of air, and keeps them dry and warm under water.

Otters are very active, chasing prey in the water or searching the beds of rivers, lakes or the seas. Most species live beside water, entering it mainly to hunt or travel, otherwise spending much of their time on land to avoid their fur becoming waterlogged.

They are playful animals who can live alone but often live with their families or large groups.



Badger

Badgers are short-legged, heavy-set omnivores. They live in burrows called setts, which may be very extensive. Some are solitary, moving from home to home, while others are known to form clans of 2 to 15 badgers. They can be fierce, and will protect themselves and their young at all costs. Badgers are capable of fighting off much larger animals such as wolves and bears. They can run or gallop at up to 25–30 kilometres per hour for short periods of time.

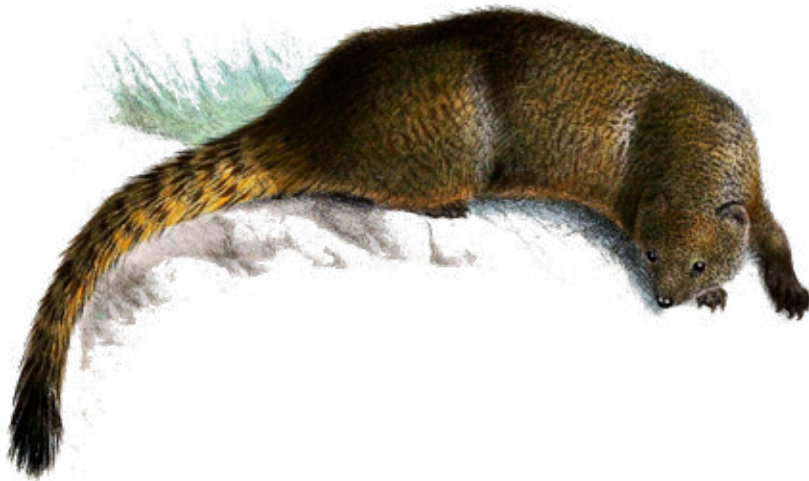
The Eurasian badger's diet consists largely of earthworms, insects, and grubs. They also eat small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds, roots and fruit. Badgers catch most of their food by digging. They can tunnel after ground-dwelling rodents with amazing speed.

Weasel

There are 67 different kinds of animals that belong to the weasel family, including mink, ferret, ermine, fisher, martin and wolverine. Weasels live all over the world, except Australia and Antarctica.

They have long, thin bodies, short feet, thick necks, and pointed heads with small, round ears. They often have dark brown upper bodies with white underparts; some northern species turn completely white in the winter.

Weasels are useful to farmers because they eat mice, but they do not make good pets.



The Music



Russell plays a variety of musical instruments in the show. Most of them were popular in era when *The Wind in the Willows* was written. In this picture Russell is playing a *tenor banjo*.

A lot of the music draws on themes for Percy Grainger, an English composer who was a contemporary of Kenneth Grahame. Grainger's most famous piece is his *Country Gardens*. We also use themes from his *Walking Tune* and his children's march: *Over the Hills and Far Away*.

Russell plays *Country Gardens* on the *harmonica* when we meet Toad.



You'll hear a couple of Beethoven themes played on the *accordion*: the Sixth, *The Pastoral*, is used as a river theme, and the famous Fifth is used when Toad steals the car!



A small *zither* is used for the sounds of the river.



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