a year with frog and toad

photo by Chip Tomkins

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about the performance

Arnold Lobel’s beloved Frog and Toad stories have filled children’s chilly nights and warm summer days for over forty years. Frog is tall, green and gregarious compared to his stout and anxious best friend Toad. They are an inseparable pair, sharing life’s simplest adventures—the joys and frustrations of flying a kite, taking a dip in a summer swimming hole, raking up autumn leaves, or sharing a scary story by a warm, winter fire. First published in the 1970s, Lobel’s Frog and Toad stories are now classics among young children’s literature, winning a Caldecott Honor Book, a Newbery Honor, and a Christopher Award which recognizes media that “affirms the highest values of the human spirit” and encourages audiences “to use our best instincts on behalf of others.” In 2012, Frog and Toad Together was #15 among the “Top 100 Picture Books” ranked by School Library Journal.

The musical adaptation, A Year With Frog and Toad, was truly a work of love. Arnold Lobel’s daughter, Adrienne, commissioned the musical based on her father’s beloved characters. The show was written by two brothers, Robert and Willie Reale. Robert wrote the music and Willie wrote the book and lyrics. Ms. Lobel’s husband, actor Mark Linn-Baker, adapted the stories into a theatrical script and later played Toad when the show debuted on Broadway. Ms. Lobel, a professional set designer, created the stage sets using her father’s concepts as her guide. A Year With Frog and Toad premiered in the summer of 2002 at Minneapolis’ renowned Children’s Theatre Company and won a Tony Award for Regional Theatre in 2003. When the show moved to Broadway, where professional children’s theatre is rare, it drew a new audience of children 3-10 years old. In an interview in Playbill, producer-designer Adrienne Lobel said, “We had the cutest audience in town.”

With only five actors on stage, A Year With Frog and Toad is an intimate and touching adventure that celebrates the power of friendship through story and song. It follows Frog and Toad, along with a colorful assortment of crawling, hopping, and flying companions, through the course of a year with all its seasonal moods and mishaps.

Lobel believes in the importance of bringing young children to theatre. “People keep saying we are pioneers and we will see this will have an effect in the future,” Lobel said in the Playbill interview. “If we don’t do theatre for that age group, there won’t be theatre in the next 20 years or 30 years.”

This production of A Year With Frog and Toad is staged by Casa Mañana, a celebrated regional theatre in Fort Worth, Texas. Casa Mañana means “The House Of Tomorrow” and began in 1936 when founder Amon G. Carter invited famous Broadway producer Billy Rose to stage a production of the “Show of Shows” for Fort Worth as part of the Texas Centennial Celebration. To make room for the production, a nearby cow pasture was transformed into Casa Mañana, with a large outdoor amphitheatre, the world’s largest revolving stage, and seats for 4,000 patrons. It even had a moat surrounding the stage and fountains spouting a wall of water that doubled as the stage’s curtain.

Casa Mañana thrived for several years until World War II shifted the community’s focus to supporting the war effort. Then, in 1958, Casa Mañana rose again, this time in the form of an aluminum geodesic dome where productions of Broadway musicals graced the theatre-in-the-round—a stage where the audience sits on all sides and the performance takes place in the middle. Seats even in the very back row were only 36 feet from the stage, bringing audiences up close for a uniquely intimate theatrical experience.

Since then, Casa Mañana expanded to include the Children’s Playhouse, a professional theatre series that today brings in nearly 150,000 parents, children, teachers and students to its popular shows. Casa Mañana also established a Theatre School which is now one of the largest children’s acting programs in the United States.

Led by Executive Producer Wally Jones, Casa Mañana continues to fulfill its mission to “create, nurture, and advance live professional theatre unparalleled in artistic excellence for the enrichment and education of our diverse community and its future generations of artists and patrons.”

Why did you decide to stage A Year with Frog and Toad?
Before heading out on tour, Casa Mañana staged A Year with Frog and Toad on our stage for 3 weeks. Our mission for Children’s Theatre includes encouraging children to read, which drives our choices when choosing shows.

What skills do you need to become a professional actor?
Determination, persistence, and the drive to continue learning.

How do you adapt a book into a play? What decisions need to be made and why?
We didn’t adapt the musical Frog and Toad, so I can’t speak exactly for it, however, choices have to made for what stories to highlight, how the characters come to life, and so on and so forth. It’s quite a process.

Does working on a play with animal characters have different challenges than a play with human characters?
Not necessarily, however, you want the actors to personify the animals they are portraying, which includes movements and sounds.

Can you tell us about your approach to staging A Year with Frog and Toad? Was it different from the Broadway production? Was it ever performed in-the-round at Casa Mañana?
Our version is the TYA production, so it is shortened. Casa Mañana was converted from in-the-round to a modified thrust stage in 2003, but we did stage it here before we sent it on the road.

In the spotlight: an interview with Casa Mañana

What makes live theatre different from television, film and the internet?
You get to be a part of the action; it’s engaging. You can’t DVR or pause it. There’s something magical and real about the experience live theatre. Nothing is edited. When you watch TV, the scene has been edited and filmed several times; with theatre, you never know what you’re going to get—say someone forgets his lines? The action keeps going! It’s a dynamic process.

Why is live theatre important to modern audiences?
Societies’ legacies are inevitably determined by their advancement and procurement of art—whether its architecture, literature, visual art or performance art. Theatre brings together communities, provides education and encourages conversations.

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**TEACHER FOCUS**

**Prepare for the performance**
Prepare for the performance by reading several of Arnold Lobel’s Frog and Toad stories. Be sure to select stories from different books in the collection.

Can you predict which Frog and Toad stories will be included in the play? Which ones would you like to see? Take a vote and tally up which are your class’ favorites. Then wait to see if you’re right.

**Experience the performance**
Encourage your students to let the excitement and energy of the presentation sink in. Ask them to notice how the performers talk, sing, and move.

What do the actors do to make you believe they’re animals instead of people? What are your favorite elements of the performance: the songs? The acting? The sets? The story? Do you have a favorite moment in the play? Was the story you wanted to see included?

**Reflect, respond and read**
Ask your students to reflect on the experience of seeing a live stage performance. Discuss the difference between seeing a live show versus watching a movie, video or TV. Reread the stories from Frog and Toad that were in the play and see how the live version differed from the original.

Have you ever seen professional theatre before, or maybe even to a Broadway show? How did you feel knowing that the actors were right there in front of you and not behind a set? Did you recognize the stories you read in the stage production? Did the play change the story from the original? Why do you think they did or didn’t?

**Focus**
Ask students to come up with their own animal character. Discuss the different personalities that each animal might have and who might be their friends. Consider how an animal’s home or ecosystem might determine who their neighbors might be. Use examples of desert creatures, jungle creatures, or animals that are familiar from their own neighborhood.

Pick a favorite animal to create your own character. Think of animals that live nearby, or even a pet that lives in your house, as well as animals that live far away in other ecosystems. Give your animal character a personality that you think makes sense for their size, habitat, body shape, or behavior.

**Originate**
Pair or group students based on their animal characters and habitats, or try combining characters who don’t live in the same ecosystem. Encourage them to “get to know” their animal neighbors by interviewing each other. Encourage students to talk to each other in character and write down what their animal friends say.

Talk and behave like you’re the animal character you created. Think about what your character likes to eat, how it moves, and where it sleeps. Who is your character’s best friend or neighbor? Which nature games might they play together? What hopes or fears does your animal character have?

**Rehearse**
Create a presentation in which each student introduces their animal-best-friend in a round and tells something special about them.

Practice your animal introductions in character. Find a special behavior, voice, movement or sound that helps your portrayal who you are. Make sure to polish and improve your presentation by practicing it several times through.

**Make magic**
Set up your classroom for an animal-best-friend presentation and invite other classes, teachers and family to attend.

Celebrate friendship just the way Frog and Toad did by sharing what you feel is special about your animal friends in a presentation at the front of the classroom.

**NJ ARTS STANDARDS**

**NATIONAL ARTS STANDARDS**

**NJ Arts Standards**

11. The Creative Process
1.2 History of Arts & Culture
1.3 Performance
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

**National Arts Standards**

1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
5. Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.
6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
7. Perceive and analyze artistic work
8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding

**NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS**

**LANGUAGE ARTS**

SL 2–4.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions SL 2–4.2 Interpret information presented in diverse media
SL 2–3.4 Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

RL 2–4.2. Determine the key details in a story, drama or poem to identify the theme and to summarize the text.
RL 2–4.3. Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
RL 2–4.7. Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folklore, myth, poem).

**RESOURCES**

**WEBSITES**

Overview of A Year with Frog and Toad: The Musical: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Year_with_Frog_and_Toad
Casa Mañana Official Website: www.casanamanana.org/
Playbill articles about A Year with Frog and Toad on Broadway: www.playbill.com/article/a-year-with-frog-and-toad-a-musical-for-families-let-loose-bways-april-2-com-117299
Are Frogs and Toads the Same? wondersopedia.org/wonder/are-frogs-and-toads-the-same/

**VIDEOS**

Selections from the soundtrack from the Broadway production of A Year with Frog and Toad
Opening Number: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fbhs51zUMc “Get Loaded”
Full soundtrack: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fbhs51z2rUMc&list=PLFBSR4XSXno32IE2BvwXUG91mCRPvzdV

**BOOKS**


Book 1: Frog and Toad are Friends Ages 4-8. January 1, 1970
AR: 2.9 (0.5 Point, Quiz #616); GLE: 2.4 F&P/GRL; K; DRA: 18

Book 2: Frog and Toad Together Ages 4-8. April 26, 1972
AR: 2.9 (0.5 Point, Quiz #5467); GLE: 2.3 F&P/GRL; K; DRA: 18

Book 3: Frog and Toad All Year Ages 4-8. January 1, 1948
AR: 2.9 (0.5 Point, Quiz #5512); GLE: 2.2 F&P/GRL; K; DRA: 18

Book 4: Days With Frog and Toad Ages 4-8. January 1, 1979
AR: 2.9 (0.5 Point, Quiz #6061); GLE: 2.1 F&P/GRL; K; DRA: 18

All around the world, people celebrate the seasons with special activities and traditions that they share with family and friends. These traditions often aren’t religious, but cultural, rooted in the distant past or a more modern sense of fun. In spring when the first buds appear on the trees, many people take advantage of the windy days of March to fly kites just like Frog and Toad. And in autumn when the leaves begin to fall, grownups choir over the raking while children seize the opportunity to jump right into the great piles of leaves and have a ball. In summer, who doesn’t love to go to the beach? And in winter, as soon as the snow is deep enough, people rush out to build snow forts and snowmen.

In Fort Worth, Texas, home of Casa Mañana, the leaves don’t fall off the trees and the weather rarely gets cold enough for snow. But people still longing for winter magic can rent snow machines to produce real snow for birthday party entertainment. Meanwhile people in the far north, like Alaska, have so much snow that they hold igloo building contests. These community events are fun for all, but they also preserve the long-held Inuit knowledge of how to cut snow and stack the blocks to make sturdy shelters.

Other countries have favorite seasonal traditions, too. In Japan, spring is ushered in with annual Cherry Blossom festivals. People love to share spring picnics under the delicate pink blooms. In Tokyo, you can even rent boats to row under blossom laden boughs along the moat at the Chidorigafuchi Imperial Palace. And given the long winter months in Scandinavia when the sun barely reaches above the horizon, it’s not surprising that midsummer celebrations in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway feature huge outdoor fires to celebrate the summer solstice—the longest day of the year.

Autumn’s chill brings people out to enjoy the harvest bounty, including apple-picking or taking a hike under the canopy of multi-colored leaves. But imagine the excitement of a different fall tradition—the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Every October people come from far and wide to float high above the desert in gigantic, colorful hot-air balloons. Whether you’re brave enough to take a ride or prefer to watch safely from the ground, the Fiesta is full of surprises, including musical bands, children’s acts and roving entertainment.

In China, autumn is season of the Moon Festival when people gather to rejoice in the gigantic autumn moon. As with many fall traditions, the Moon Festival started as a harvest celebration. Today people eat moon cakes—round pastries filled with a sweet paste made from red bean or lotus seed—and enjoy the drama of lion and dragon dances.

Native American communities gather all through the year at powwows: social gatherings where people meet, dance, sing, socialize, and honor their cultures. The annual Spirit of Our Nations Pow Wow held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada is one of the largest, where people from Indian nations gather in a colorful celebration of traditional dance competitions, food and events that honor their heritage.

Some traditions are serious, but others are just plain fun, like Entrenennen, Germany’s annual Duck Race. Each year in early October, people gather to watch as thousands of rubber ducks are dumped into rivers and “raced” downstream. In this wacky folk-tradition, people “adopt” a duck for a small amount of money and win prizes if their duck wins the race. Whatever traditions the seasons bring, they are best celebrated with friends and family. Making memories together is what brings people together and makes our communities stronger.
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