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## Year With Frog and Toad is a charming tribute to friendship

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It is a very good thing that Allen MacInnis can sing and dance. The artistic director of Toronto's Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People is currently on stage in the role of Frog in the musical *A Year With Frog and Toad*. MacInnis is the last-minute replacement for the late Denis Simpson who died suddenly just before the start of rehearsals.

Originally, MacInnis was only going to direct the show, but he blends seamlessly into the performing ensemble. Simpson was a beloved member of the arts community, and it must be very poignant for the cast to be on stage without him.

*A Year With Frog and Toad* is based on the popular children's series written and illustrated by Arnold Lobel. The first book appeared in 1970 and even though Lobel died in 1987, *Frog and Toad* remains standard kids' lit fare. At the matinee I attended, the theatre was awash with five- and six-year-olds.

Every children's story has a moral, and these gentle books are about friendship. The musical portrays Frog as calm, collected and cool, while Toad (Louise Pitre) is more impulsive, mercurial and emotional. Together, they are good foils for one another.

There is very little dialogue: The various adventures of Frog and Toad are told mostly through song. The

melodies are delightful and the lyrics sophisticated. Adults won't find it a hardship to sit through the hour-long show.

In fact, perhaps the lyrics are almost too adult for the very young. There was a certain restlessness in the audience. The long number *Shivers*, when Frog tells Toad and the other animals a scary story, goes on for too long, and one could sense the loss of interest.

Nonetheless, Robin Fisher's set design is eye-catching. The stage is lush with green bulrushes and tall grasses as befits a pondscape. The fanciful houses of Frog and Toad look cozy. The whimsical costumes mirror Lobel's illustrations, and so will be familiar to children.

If the great chanteuse Louise Pitre does not get nominated for a Dora Award for her performance, there is no justice. Her Toad is enchanting. With a skip and a hop, she conjures up the worrywart Toad, be he wistful or excited. She absolutely captures Toad's obsessive if endearing personality, particularly his constant emotional roller coaster which swings from enthusiasm to despair in seconds.

MacInnis is slim, elegant and unruffled. His soft-spoken wisdom anchors both the show and his warm, nurturing relationship with Toad. Cara Hunter (Bird and Turtle), Jennifer Villaverde (Bird and Mole), and Kevin Dennis (Bird and Snail) are wonderful as the other animals. Dennis, in particular, gets to shine with his country-and-western influenced song *The Letter* ("I'm a snail with the mail").

The messages that come out of this show are all good. When Frog finds out that Toad is sad around mail time because he never gets a letter, Frog writes one to his dear friend (although Snail takes forever to deliver it). Frog gives Toad a clock for Christmas because Toad broke his and is forever asking the time. The two can, however, be naughty. They eat all the cookies that were meant to be for after supper.

This charming little show is truly a paean to friendship in the best sense of the word.

*A Year With Frog and Toad* runs until Dec. 30.

### **A Year With Frog and Toad**

Music by Robert Reale

Book and lyrics by Willie Reale

Directed by Allen MacInnis

Starring Louise Pitre, Kevin Dennis, Cara Hunter, Jennifer Villaverde and Allen MacInnis

At Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People in Toronto

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