

Frog & Toad

Do Lunch

The adventures of two amphibious pals take center stage in *A Year With Frog and Toad*, a charming musical confection for all ages

by Harry Haur



The wiseass reporter arrives with his opening question already formed. "So," he says, sidling into a back booth at the West Bank Cafe, where his subjects have settled for a grilling on their Broadway show, "why did we want to do the interview in *this* dump?"

Mark Linn-Baker, co-owner of the "dump" and co-star of the show, grins from ear to ear—it's his eyebrow-lifting, fancy-that, guilty-as-charged look of sickly surrender—and Jay Goede, his partner in the play (if not the place), chortles out a bemused, muted ribbit.

These two have started putting in *A Year With Frog and Toad* at the Cort Theatre—hopefully longer, once audiences get hip that *The Lion King* isn't the only animal act in town safe and suitable for the kids—and it has not been an arduous journey getting here, requiring only two big leaps—from The Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis to the charming New Victory Theater on 42nd Street to its current Broadway home.

They play a pair of anthropomorphic amphibians who live next door to each other in the fanciful fantasy drawings of the late Arnold Lobel (reproduced for the stage with more than a little familial fidelity by his talented daughter, Adrienne). A study in contrasts, these two best friends—a la Felix and

Oscar, Crosby and Hope, Abbott and Costello. Goede suavely executes Frog, the unruffled, unflappable one who cuts quite a commanding figure in his Edwardian waistcoats; Toad is the tightly wound worrywart, played in a perpetual state of panic with hysterically darting eyes by Linn-Baker.

The "plot," such as it is, sees them through a season-long laundry list of activities from one hibernation to the next—swimming, sledding, making cookies, raking leaves, kite-flying, telling scary stories, picnicking, celebrating Christmas. And gluing all these mundane endeavors together is a bouncy, insidiously insistent score by The Brothers Reale, Robert and Willie. The latter stitched the piece from a dozen of Lobel's 20 stories in his four best-selling children's books (1970's *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, 1972's *Frog and Toad Together*, 1976's *Frog and Toad All Year* and 1979's *Days With Frog and Toad*), more or less stringing the story along to get from one song to the other. Every activity has its own song, and there's enough sophistication slipped into the proceedings to make the show parent-proof. Suggested no lesser light than Lawrence Van Gelder in *The New York Times*: "Anyone who cherishes musical theater and can beg or borrow a child from four up might be well advised to make a beeline for Times Square in search of tickets."

So, when you come right down to it, where better for Frog and Toad to meet the press than the West Bank? No frog legs or toadstools on the menu. Frog has the tuna, Toad the chicken salad, and a lunch with Frog and Toad gives way to *A Year With Frog and Toad*.

Four years is more like it. Adrienne Lobel has been commissioning components for the work that long. The prince she kissed turned into the Toad she needed for the show. She kissed Linn-Baker again, and *voilà!*—he was the producing director of New York Stage and Film at Vassar, where the piece workshoped before making its hops to Broadway.

Between kisses, the two got married and

"The books are great learn-to-read books," says Goede, "but I think they have made this huge impression on kids because it's about friends, two friends. There's a real gentleness to the stories. They're two friends with great respect for each other, who get into trouble. Mostly, it's Toad getting into trouble and Frog guiding him carefully out of situations. The books are about loyalty.

A Year With Frog and Toad is, first and last, a daughter's tribute to her father, says Linn-Baker. "My wife was the one who was driven to do this. For years, she was saying, 'There's a nice musical in those books,' and she made it happen. It was all her drive."



produced Ruby, who spent *her* year with Frog and Toad. "She has grown up watching the show," beams the proud papa. "So far, that's her life. She turns the CD on and dances up a storm. We all went to Minneapolis to put the show together. She was there in the rehearsal hall and lobby of every theatre that we've done this show in, hanging out, enjoying herself."

Lyricist-book writer Willie Reale is also a newly minted family man, with two boys—one 4 years, the other 3 months—and Linn-Baker believes this condition helps the creative process for this particular project, which is deliberately designed for the very young but leaves some slyly amusing air-openings for the parents who will be footing the bill.

And, beyond that, she was the inspiration who sparked the stories into creation before they were written. "When she was six years old, the family summered in Vermont," he says. "One day she returned from the woods and handed her father a toad. He said, 'Oh, what a beautiful frog.' She said, 'That's not a frog—it's a toad' and proceeded to explain to him the difference between frogs and toads. Two years later the books began appearing. She's involved in theatre today because he took her to the theatre when she was young, and this piece continues Arthur Lobel's legacy. It's a great opportunity to do something with the family and with the kids. I think that this is a great first show for kids to see." ◆