

Watership Down

LYRIC, HAMMERSMITH

RUN rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run! In the Lyric's triumphant account of Richard Adams's classic story, those rabbits do an awful lot of running. They also do masses of bouncing around, scampering up walls and diving through hoops. Trampolines have been laid on for extra uplift, huge lettuces are commandeered as children's space-hoppers and giant carrots used as pogo sticks. This is a *Watership Down* fit for Russian gymnasts on holiday at Butlins.

The beauty of Melly Still's production, using a nifty adaptation by Rona Munro and music from Harvey Brough, is that it counterbalances a mood of darkness and omnipresent danger with a lightness of directorial touch and endorphin-raising levels of ensemble energy. Rare is the family show that takes its audience to such depths of pain and mortal loss, and yet leaves everyone with a spring in their step. In a formidable feat of compression, near on 500 paperback pages have been condensed to two hours of constant action that are as easy to follow as they are easy on the bladder.

The refugee band of bucks from Sandleford warren and the rabbits they encounter during their arduous journey to find a safe place to frolic aren't the sort to be picked up and stroked. We were forewarned that conventional furry costumes were out, but it still comes as a slight shock to see Joseph Traynor's fearful, psychic Fiver and friends bounding about on artificial grass in long shorts, knitted vests and bobble-hats.

The costumes have a wartime feel to them, and it's clear we can read the animals' adventures through the filter of 20th-century experience. What you can't anticipate, though, until you're watching the show, is just how swiftly you get swept up in the story, heedless of the explicit humanisation. To older children, Barry Aird's General Woundwort, leader of the oppressive Efrafa warren, might well have the unmistakable look of a fascist dictator; to younger kids, he'll probably just be a scary man in a long black trench coat and military cap.

The knives are out in this version: blades are wielded by masked, balaclava-wearing predators and even the grumpy-friendly seagull Kehaar (an excellent Richard Simons) wields an improvised spear. Yet most of the fighting takes the form of deliriously fast bouts of kung-fu kicking. How the cast of 10 are going to keep up such breathtaking work throughout the holiday season is anyone's guess – best to catch them before their joints give out.

Analogies can be drawn, for those who want to, with modern-day street culture, but Still and co's achievement is to get close to the mythic spirit of the original: the choice that faces us all, adults or children, as individuals or a society, is whether to hide away, safe but trapped, or to live freely with all the risk that that entails. A glorious eye-opener to the possibilities of theatre, this defiantly upbeat *Watership Down* is also an inspiring exhortation to come out fighting and have some fun, fun, fun.

Tickets: 0870 050 0511

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