

Watership Down

Time Out – 6 December 2006

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Rabbits on the warpath *Matthew Burgess*

★★★★★

Lyric Hammersmith O-WE

Throat-slitting stoats, fascist-style bunny-bullies, enforced baby-eating – no, there's no question director-designer Melly Still has come up with anything as anodyne as a traditional children's Christmas show. Abandon all hope of the aaah-factor, and instead focus on the image of an abundantly energetic, emotionally honest, and visually ingenious production that makes as much of a virtue out of the nightmarish aspects of Richard Adams' novel as of its dreams of a snuffly nosed utopia.

Still's set looks like a cross between an assault course and a playground. From the outset the actors bounce on trampolines, hop backwards and forwards through Hula-Hoops, and shake their bunny booty to the funky drum beats of the percussive score. The dominant colours are earthy browns and grass greens – suddenly thrown into relief by bright orange pogo-stick carrots, accompanied by space-hopper cabbages. Jamie

Oliver take heed – vegetables have never seemed such fun.

Despite how much time the characters spend airborne, it's a while till proceedings take off. Still and adapter Rona Munro have stayed faithful to the sense of a novel inspired by Adams' experiences of fighting in the Second World War – although bunnyish ears make an occasional appearance, the actors are mostly dressed like children from the '40s, complete with woollen caps and tank tops. As looming danger forces Hazel and Fiver out of their old home to found a new one with female rabbits rescued from totalitarian warren Efrafa, you can clearly discern the echoes of mid-twentieth century history. A feral sense of evil constantly lurks amid the playful chaos.

There are issues with narrative clarity, but Still well understands how to conjure stage magic. Richard Simons' fabulous javelin-bearing seagull is just one delight. A bracing outing for those who want to escape tawdry tinsel-style Christmas fare. *Rachel Halliburton*