

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## My Family and Other Animals

Written by Gerald Durrell, adapted by Janys Chambers  
York Theatre Royal  
(2011)

*My Family and Other Animals*, the second instalment in York Theatre Royal's ensemble main house "in the round" season, showcases some strong performances, but fails really to take off and thrill.

A tale from a bygone age of a young boy's fascination with the animal world and his wry observations of the menagerie of adults that constitutes his family, Durrell's book recalls (and fictionalises) his progress through his early teen years on the island of Corfu.

In Janys Chambers's adaptation, the adult Gerald Durrell (Simeon Truby) narrates the tale on behalf of his younger self (a young actor who is almost constantly onstage but makes next to no sound throughout the entire production). This enables the show to capture the wry observations of the adult while allowing us glimpses of the younger Gerry's fascination and obsession with the flora and fauna that surround him. It's a device that makes unexpectedly heavy demands of the younger actor, which thankfully William Osborne, the performer on the night I saw it, manages to live up to.

Truby, too, is a lynchpin of this production, waltzing in and out of the action with an avuncular, fond smile on his face and narrating with passion and pleasure. He also voices the younger character's interactions with the adults he encounters, in a convention which seems slightly off-putting at first but which becomes natural as the production continues.

Other honourable mentions must go to Stephen Billington, who is utterly transformed from his previous role as John Proctor in [The Crucible](#), here playing Gerald's gun-obsessed brother Leslie with a winningly blank gaze, in a peach of a small-scale comedy performance. Julia Watson holds the family together as Mrs Durrell, always staying on the very likeable side of batty, as she indulges her youngest boy's conservationist instincts.

Jonathan Race, as Larry, gets to sound an enjoyable note of cynicism, though in one of the play's episodes we are reminded that pride comes before a fall. And Emily Python as Margo is harmlessly and humorously bonkers as well.

Furthermore, it's a delight to see Michael Lambourne return to the main stage as Roger the Dog, young Durrell's constant companion, and Lambourne's extremely physical portrayal of the dog is the most successful realisation of the animal kingdom onstage.

Other beasts and birds are represented by a mixture of masked actors and puppets. These are a mixed bag of styles, with most looking delightful but being somewhat inexpertly wielded, so that Achilles the tortoise, for instance, races round the stage (and into a hasty grave) in a most unseemly manner.

The song interludes as well, while attempting to conjure the mystical peasant natives encountered by Gerry on the island, feel forced and uncomfortable rather than magical. At moments the

impressive technicalities of the set are flawed, with the Rosebeetle Man's entrance, for instance, awkwardly pre-empted by clumsy staging involving the central trapdoor.

However, the possibilities of the set are elsewhere put to imaginative use, and there is much to delight the younger members of the audience. The aforementioned heavy bias towards narration also gives this the air of a children's show along the lines of those so delightfully staged by the tutti frutti theatre company in the Theatre Royal's Studio. But with a long first half and a lack of a focused narrative drive, *My Family and Other Animals* is not clearly a children's show, while many of the tricks and games of the staging will leave adults underwhelmed. Last year's [\*Wind in the Willows\*](#) explored similar territory, but that production was much more successful in weaving a consistent whole out of the similarly episodic source material, aided by its delightful live music and more coherent aesthetic. This is not a failure of an attempt to stage the book, just not quite a consistent or exciting enough realisation of a young boy's wonder at the animal kingdom.

**Reviewer:** [Mark Love-Smith](#)