

WIMBORNE COMMUNITY THEATRE

Confluence Project

Lutra Lutra: Otter on the Stour

Wimborne Minster 2001

(an early version with spoken narrative)



Lutra Lutra

Man (over Lutra Lutra):

Otter! This is the story of otter, and river, and man, a story that flows down the last hundred years.

Tape:

Otter cries ...

Otter World

A journey to the other world,
otter world, water world.

Beast lopes down riverbank
runs on webbed feet
puts her seal on the mud
but entering the water
she enters her name
she becomes water
becomes other,
becomes otter, fleet
in the pool and flow of river
the whirlpooling spooling
unravelling river
the purling, rushing
roaring, flushing,
stilling, hushing river

When she enters her name
otter becomes water
becomes other

becomes truly otter.
A journey to the other world,
otter world, water world.

Tape: Otter cries and snuffles

Stour Litany

This is the way the otter goes
falls and pools and flooded meadows,
flowing in secret as the river flows

STURMINSTER MARSHALL, FIDDLEFORD MILL, MANSTON BROOK, FONTMELL
BROOK, HAYWARD BRIDGE, FOX DITCH COPPICE, PRESS MEADOW, DURWESTON
BRIDGE, BLANDFORD BRIDGE, KEYNSTONE MILL, THE TARRANT, OAKBED,
CRAWFORD BRIDGE, WINTERBORNE, WHITE MILL BRIDGE, CHAW MEADOW, EYE
MEAD, NETHERWOOD MEAD, JULIAN'S BRIDGE,
FOUNDER HOLE, CUDBURGH POLE, BARROW POOL SHALLOW, DEAD POOL, PAPER
MILL FIELD, BRIDGE MILL, LAKE GATES, TOWN MILL, DUBBLES BRIDGE,
EASTBROOK BRIDGE, BRIMMING MEADOW, DAWSON'S HOLE, CANFORD BRIDGE,
BIG LEAZE HOLE, HATCH HOLE, TRUNK HOLE, BARTLETTS CLIFF, LONGHAM
BRIDGE, ENSBURY BRIDGE, LEADEN STOUR, NEW BRIDGE, MOORS RIVER, IFORD
BRIDGE, TUCKTON BRIDGE, CLAYPOOL, CHRISTCHURCH HARBOUR!

Caesar

Down by the reed bed
Breaking the surface
Leaving no trace
From his earthly departure
Fluid in movement
One with the water
Twisting then turning
His kingdom submerging
Emperor, Caesar, Hunter, Killer
Lord of the river, he bows to no master
Domain from each bank to the gravel below him
King of the river 'til breath makes keen calling
How peaceful and still his empire appears
Masking, reflecting, so man cannot see
But there's no place of sanctuary, no place to hide
While there's air in his lungs and a glint in his eye

Aristotle: The otter will bite a man, and it is said that whenever it bites it will never let go until it hears a bone crack.

Voice of Woman

We lived by a stream
and you could hear them splash

I followed one home
to the bridge at Pottern.

I thought it was a rat
but it was bigger than that!

I looked it in the eye
and it looked me back.

Once a girl glimpsed

Once a girl glimpsed an otter
on the reedy bank downstream
from Julian's Bridge.

It slipped in to her memory,
out of sight, out of mind,
slept dryly, shyly, like a fond toy.
soft and lost, seventy years past
Woke when someone said...

Man: Otter.

Young Woman: Otter.

Herodotus: Otters are also found in the Nile, and are considered sacred.

Man: Otter! Heu-gaze!

Dotty and Betty and Hilda and Me

Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me,
We're running through Wimborne fast as we can,
Though the air is cold and the sky's all grey,
We're off to catch an otter today!

Our hair's gone tumbling down our backs,
Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me,
We've hitched our skirts around our knees
And we don't even care if anyone sees!

Otter! Otter! We're coming, you rotter!
Over Julian's Bridge and down through the woods.
Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me,
You won't escape us, just wait and see!

We can hear them hounds not so far ahead,
Howling like ghouls to frazzle his fur,
Hot on the tail of the snub-nosed beastie

With Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me.

As we follow the river that twists like an eel
Across the water meadows, past Cowgrove,
Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me
Hurrying, hurrying, hurrying to see

The men all stooped in the lea by the river
Their berry-red waistcoats signalling stop
And we do and we stretch up like cranes to see,
Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me.

Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me,
Hear them beat their sticks fit to wake the dead
And we look around and we pick up stones
To bang out ourselves 'till we ache in our bones

Bang, crash, bang, and "Look! They've caught him!"
Dotty and Betty and Hilda and me
See Abram Warren fish him high up in the air
And sling him around like a ride at the fair.

Man: Whoo whoop!

From 'Otter Hunting': Public recognition of the undoubted fact that otter hunting is not only the oldest form of the chase with packs of hounds hunting by scent, but also the most genuine and unartificial of field sports, has also contributed to its popularity. Thanks to the educative influence of the British Field Sports Society, and to the fact that attacks upon the sport by anti-sport fanatics in the columns of the less well-informed newspapers have invariably been met by an array of irrefutable arguments based on actual knowledge of the natural history of the otter and of the system of hunting it, attempts to have the sport suppressed are foredoomed to failure.

First Blood

In the distance growing louder
Men with sticks and their hunting dogs
All aboard this loose linked train
As it rolled down the valley like the Pines Express
Of one direction, on rails of purpose
Pursue the quarry to the bitter end
Bowler hatted in red jackets
A criss-cross track, their footfalls led.
These mad dog days, these ancient ways,
What now is pleasure, was a shilling from the Parish
And I shouted and cheered as the cavalcade drew near
I saw the sunlight caught on the well-honed spear.

Broadside on I saw the passing
Hounds tails high, and red faced men
A frenzied chase, no thirst was sated
Fired by blood lust, lunging on
The air was rank with keen excitement
The train careered towards the kill
A cornered beast, a flash of iron
A sudden silence, all was still
Conscience stirred, when the huntsmen cheered
As I saw dark blood on the well-honed spear.

From 'Otter Hunting': As the only sport with hounds that may be pursued during the summer months when the cry of other hounds is silenced, a sport that is followed during the best days of the year and the best hours of the day, which takes its devotees into the most picturesque parts of the country and affords them the finest and most health-giving of exercise, besides, in the most humane manner, contributing to keep otters within due bounds in the interest of fresh-water fisheries, otter hunting is assured of a longer future than probably any other field sport.

Caesar (*continued*)
Crossing the stream
Up past the millpond
Counting the landmarks
While seeking his prey
The river seems sterile
Like moonscape or dustbowl
Morals diluted
Lifeblood polluted
Emperor, Caesar, Hunter, Killer
Lord of the Earth, no creature his master
Domain from the clouds to the floor of the ocean
Unworthy, ungrateful for all that surrounds him
How quiet and empty his empire appears
Stripping it bare, ignoring his fears
But there's no place of sanctuary, nowhere to hide
While there's air in his lungs and greed in his eye.

Hunting horns ... Reveille

Things My Father Told Me
Blue, bone-crack cold of dawn.
Ash, grey and silver in the blackened grate.
My father, strangely khaki clad,
Led me gently to the river bank
Where mist lay patchy on the oily water

Waiting for first sun to peek, then glint and glimmer
Expectant for night traveller on his way traversing
Far from distant guns.

My father hard and tanned
Weathered, but not beaten by the land
Stood planted in the soil
We kept vigil and we lingered,
He grasped a tiny hand.
In whisper breath he told me of his ways
The whistles, calls and ghostly cries
Of thoroughfares across this watery land
Far from sound of guns.

Faint movement on the water
I would not comprehend
But for the words of father
Interpreter of this foreign land
Liquid movement in transition
From river to the earth
Powerful khaki coloured creature
And the man, familiar, yet a stranger
Hastened by the distant drums.

Drums

Scientist: The otter population increased during both world wars. The reason is simple. Men who controlled and hunted the otter were away killing men.

Letter

Dearest Emm,
Not long after my last letter to you I was on sniper duty in No Man's Land, hiding in the rubble of a canal bridge. It was the evening of a quiet day – I hadn't clocked up even one Hun – when I saw an otter swimming in the canal with its head above water. I thought of all the otters on the estate, lording it without me to keep them under control – cheeky pests – so I shot at it. But do you know, I missed. After all the vermin I've shot, how dare this French one get away? So I shot it again. I don't know if I hit it, but the second shot was a fritz needed to find his game. The surgeon tidied up my right leg by amputating what was left. Now I've got gas gangrene in the wound in the other one. Well. At least I won't get caught in my own gin traps again! The lads tease me, say I've copped a blighty so I can go shooting at home. Don't worry, dear, I'm just glad to be out of this war.
Your loving husband,
Tommy

Prayer

- 1) Oh Lord, who made heaven and earth,
The seas and the dr-y land,
- 2) The birds that fly in the air
and the creatures that walk up-on the earth.
- 3) Have mercy upon us poor men,
whom thou didst make in thine own likeness.
- 4) For we have sinned a-gai-nst thy cre-ation.
- 5) In thy great wis-dom, Lord, thou gavest each its right-ful place.
- 6) Angels and archan-gels in heaven and here on earth,
Thou gavest dominion over all o-ther creatures.
- 7) To be masters and custodians of all the animals
And the pla-nts of the field.
- 8) Lord, mercifully teach us the goodness of thy ways, lest, like the otter,
stomach full of eel, its slippery prey,
Then itself becoming prey to the hu-nter's spear,
We should suff-er the vengeance of the kingdoms
and do-minions in heaven a-bove us.
- 9) We ask this through our Lord Je-sus Christ
who liv-eth and rei-gn-eth
- 10) With God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and e-ver, A-men

INTERVAL

Voice of Older Woman

I've forgotten your name
but I remember the otter's
which brings the river with him
back into my mind. And woods, too,
brings woods and the spent hours
beneath Julian's bridge back into my mind.
hours spent waiting to catch
a glimpse of it, catching
a breath of air

*Names I remember,
otter water river
dissolve in the blood stream
losing their sense.*

I remember a girl
on a wooden bridge

who saw an otter
on a reedy bank downstream
when she was ten,
she saw it dive
out of sight, out of mind

*Names I remember,
otter water river
dissolve in the blood stream
losing their sense.*

In red chalybeate waters
in the crux of an oak
roots make a couch
where the swimmer
plots a secret route.
the river soothes its fear
at the sight of the girl
on the wooden bridge.

*Names I remember,
otter water river
dissolve in the blood stream
losing their sense.*

Man: Otter!

Tape: Otter cries

Young Woman: Otter

Scientist: Like drugs in the mind, agrochemicals in fields have drastic side-effects. Pesticides – the chlorinated hydrocarbons – began to be widely used in the mid-1950s. They ran off into streams and rivers. They accumulated in the tissues of fish and small mammals causing death and sterility in birds of prey. One world's fertility is another world's barrenness.

Farmers: We want productivity to feed the people cheap
Our natural aspirations are surely not a sin
Hexachlorobenzene DDT and Aldrin
We want pest and weed control to keep the country neat
Pentachlorophenol Isodrin Dieldrin
Hexachlorocyclohexane Malathion Endrin
We want money in the bank (oh, and crops and milk and meat)
Herbicides Pesticides Triphenyltin Permethrin
Our natural aspirations are surely not a sin
We're the last to want alarm ... Down on Cold Comfort Farm

Scientist: Dieldrin was almost certainly responsible for the otter's initial decline. It was finally banned in 1981. But then water authorities engineered the rivers. They straightened and dredged. Scrub was cleared from banks so fields could be pushed to the water's edge. Lakes and rivers were redesigned for leisure, not nature: Water sports without a thought for the world beneath.

Stour Litany reprise

In the Name of Progress

No cover
No secret places
No curves, meanders, islands
No tree-lined banks and streams
No bramble thickets, reed-beds
No tangled roots of alder and white willow
No shallow pools

But

Straight lines
Bare banks
Neat and tidy landscape
In the name of progress
of productivity
of ignorance
Destruction of our landscape
Of our nature, and her inhabitants
They decline
They disappear

What we lose we mourn too late

Secret Lives

No bed sheet shyness of a blushing bride
No false modesty, just a secret life
The only choice to flee and hide
Lie up by day and hunt by night

Refugees in an occupied land
Pushed to the margins by human hands
Run the tap, consume the earth
Aware of price, but not of worth

Though hunting horn no longer sounds
Safe in holts preserved from hounds
Attrition of his kind remains

By chemical and subtle ways

Allotted space in theme park strips
In artifice where man permits
It's from our shame that we should hide
Not this hunter of the night

Activist: By the sixties, even before mink became a major concern, it was hard for otter hunters to find their prey. But attempts to protect otters were fiercely resisted. Many conservationists, especially landowners who hunted, wouldn't accept that the otter was in danger.

Woman: Wake up! Unless you want to wake to a silent spring
Take a hard look at the state the world's in
The death of otters is just one index of decline

Banners: Silent Spring; Ban Pesticides; Save the World, etc.

Woman: Wake up! Get out and do something about it
Your silence is the silence that kills the planet

Man (melodramatic): And then the mink escaped ...

Mink Gangsters

We are the mink
We really stink
Looking for strife
Watch out for your life

Sneaking, Scratching, Snapping, Smashing
Brutal, Biting, Bullying, Bloodied
Feasting, Fighting, Fractious, Frenzied

We eat anything
We kill everything
Eel, rabbit, vole
Fish by the shoal

We're piranha-like
Stalking day and night
Now we've got the knack
Don't end up on your back
We're saving our skins
So forgive us our sins.

The one that we fear
We sense is near

Strong, wet and brown
The otter's in town

Scientist: A recent report has highlighted a nationwide decline in the wild mink population, linked with the successful recovery of its larger relative – the otter.

Activist: Mink shit stinks, but otter spraint is fragrant stuff – it has an aroma like snuff, or a cross between fish past and jasmine tea.

No Sighting

Walking, watching, waiting, crouching, listening
Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years
Still no sighting except for prints and spraint
No sighting but concentric circles on the water

Scientist: Last year, six otters were killed on Dorset roads.

Activist: Tarmac and concrete resistant to his seal. A sudden meteor of light then sound, faster than flashing pike or eel. Two layers of fur, impervious to the elements, scant protection against steel. Impact crushing flesh and bone to paste. Twist and turn in space, twist and turn, a splintered acrobat.

Scientist: Otters, it seems, need help crossing the road.

Icy coffin at the Environment Agency for a dead otter

Silent and rudderless
Still life in icy rime
Blood still, will course hot no more
Body stiff, no sinuous languid movement, he'll vent no more,
Crystals in his eye,
Frozen in time.

Activist: Ironically, the increase in otter deaths on the road is a good sign. It shows the population is growing. The otter is back in our minds.

Man: Otter.

Young Woman: Otter.

Old Woman: Just now, when you said that word, otter, it was as if I woke up and remembered it, there sure enough, that otter I saw when I was ten.

Otter

High in the dusk
I stand on a bridge,
bats like shuttles
throwing invisible

nets beneath arches.

Something pops
the river's membrane:
black snout, a head,
fluted fur streaming,
a disappearance.

The surface heals
and slides downstream,
my eyes alert
for the place, the next
door out of the deep.

As long as I search
it will not open;
my ears straining
at thin air for a plop,
a chirp, a whistle.

Nothing breaks
surface or silence;
still, I am drawn into
its element, that last-light
luminescence,

the web and flux
of worlds contained
in jet eyes, waiting
for a skinful of gold
a naked whisker.

Scientist and Activist: Now, at the turn of a new millennium, otters are breeding once more and the population is growing.

Otter Returns

Otter returns now, almost unnoticed,
beds down in holts, roots of trees or man-made,
reclaims its own liquid world – all the fast
sunlit currents, slow meanders in shade,
redundant mill-races, still pools, misplaced
rivulets – homes for a species mislaid.

Otter returns now, almost unsung, so
we sing the otter, back to the otter world,
water world, other world where shy beasts go,
where wild beasts hunt. Where all the waters meld

we join our song with the Stour river's flow
sing otters back to their waters of old.

Otter returns, almost unnoticed, so
we join our song with the Stour river's flow,
we sing the otter, back to the otter world,
sing otters back to their waters of old.