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‘Lion in Winter’ just in time for Yuletide at Two River

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT

Those of us who are staring down the prospect of some epically tense holiday get-togethers, in the wake of our polarizing plunge into a seemingly endless election cycle, can take comfort in knowing that at least one extended brood had it just as rough (if not more so), back in the Yuletide interlude of the year 1183.

It’s there in the 12th century court of King Henry II that the English monarch has assembled his immediate bloodline and special guest, with the intention of choosing a successor from among various factions of his highly competitive clan.

It’s also a fair assumption that — as detailed in “The Lion in Winter” — the tensions run deeper than a back-channel request to pass the Brussels sprouts, as a pride of next-generation candidates keeps their weapons (metaphorical and otherwise) honed for the holidays, while jockeying for favor with the old man who wears the crown.

First produced in 1966, in a Broadway staging that starred Robert “Music Man” Preston as Henry (with a frightfully young Christopher Walken in support), the script by the late James Goldman tackles some downright Shakespearean themes and settings with the snap and crackle of the best Pop Art-era American writing.

Best remembered from a 1968 screen version (for which Goldman earned an Adapted Screenplay Oscar nod) that starred Peter O’Toole and Katharine Hepburn, the ensemble show has since become a not-uncommon fixture on the community theater landscape.

Beginning with previews Saturday and continuing through the first weekend in December, “The Lion in Winter” is surveyed with fresh eyes, in a professional production from Red Bank-based Two River Theater Company.

As Michael Cumpsty is quick to clarify, “this is not technically a Christmas play, or our official holiday production.” An Obie winner (as no less melancholy a Dane than “Hamlet”), Tony nominee (“End of the Rainbow”) and frequently encountered player on the Two River stage, the Broadway veteran takes on the central role of King Henry with the observation that “we knew going in that this would be the election-season play...but as we got into a crazier and crazier space, it began to take on a whole other significance.”

“This play has the potential to be richer and deeper than the surface would suggest,” says the actor who was also featured in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” the previous production at Two

River. “It rewards a great deal of exploration, and our director Tyne Rafaeli is spectacularly smart and rigorous about investigating this text ... she’s discovering real meat in it; it’s not all glitter and charm.”

Neither is Cumpsty, the only Tony nominee on this stage. Co-starring as Eleanor of Aquitaine — Henry’s wife, imprisoned by the philandering monarch for 10 years and allowed back to the holiday hearth for the occasion — is Dee Hoty, whose three Tony nods (all of them for her work in musicals like “Footloose” and “Will Rogers Follies”) shouldn’t distract from the fact that she’s played Eleanor several times, going back to a college production. To say that the strong-willed Eleanor’s relationship with her husband and children is complicated would be an understatement, as the exiled queen proves that she has more than a few cards of her own to play.

Then there are Eleanor and Henry’s three sons — “impulsive, bloody minded” Richard the Lionheart (Keilyn Durrell Jones), competent but calculating middle child Geoffrey (Hubert Point-du-Jour), and the “completely unequipped” John (Noah Averbach-Katz).

With African-American actors cast in two of those three roles, the Two River team continues a multicultural exploration of the material that dates back to an early 1990s St. Louis staging (and includes a Broadway revival that starred Laurence Fishburne as Henry).

Presenting a disunited front; caught between their own machinations and the motives of their seasoned-schemer parents, the potential heirs must contend as well with the presence of Philip II (Ronald Peet), young King of France, manipulator in training, and a person with his own quite complicated ties to the family. Add in Madeleine Rogers as Alais, Philip’s half-sister (and Henry’s current mistress), and you’ve got a recipe for one violently boiled-over Christmas cauldron of smoking bishop.

That said, “Henry is seriously invested in the good of the kingdom going forward; he wants stability, and he takes responsibility for his legacy,” professes Cumpsty, with sympathy for the manipulative monarch. “It’s heart-wrenching when the man says ‘all my sons are dead,’ as if he’s lost a sense of connection to his children.”

“He holds himself to a high standard, but has huge blind spots, when we consider how he could be handing it all over to someone as unprepared as John,” the actor adds. “None of the candidates have really prepared for the job...but the question a lot of us have is why Geoffrey gets so overlooked? We’ve struggled to find the answer in the text.”

An awesomely accredited design team augments the work of the director and her cast, with Andrea Hood putting “a contemporary spin on medieval clothes that’s colorful but not distracting...no tights!” and Kristen Robinson conjuring “a basic stony castle setting with lots of added color; lit by one of the great lighting designers, Jennifer Tipton.”

THE LION IN WINTER

WHERE: Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

WHEN: Saturday through Nov. 17 (previews); Nov. 18 (opening night) through 20; then Wednesdays through Sundays until Dec. 4

TICKETS: \$20 to \$65, www.tworivertheater.org or 732-345-1400