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REVIEW: ‘Lion in Winter’ at Two River Theater

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In life as on the stage, could there be any more of an invitation to heightened dramatics, wounding wordplay and holiday-season agita than “Let’s go downstairs and meet the family”?

With that simple phrase as a keynote, “The Lion in Winter,” written in 1966 by the late James Goldman, presents a Yuletide reunion that’s as fraught with generational tensions, eggshell egos and casual head games as your most memorable domestic squabble.

The fact that the family in question resides in the stone-cold corridors of royal power and privilege should not deter you from making the play — onstage now at Red Bank’s Two River Theater — a centerpiece of your own family’s schedule this season.



Hubert Point-Du Jour (seated) and KeiLyn Durrel Jones in “The Lion in Winter.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

It’s the year 1183 in the court of Henry II (Michael Cumpsty), where the English monarch has gathered his surviving clan — including Eleanor of Aquitaine (Dee Hoty), the landed wife that he’s conveniently marginalized under house arrest for the past ten years — for a Christmas gathering with a dagger’s edge. It seems that the aging king, a man who’s passed the mortal milestone of 50 years, is consumed by thoughts of his legacy, and just exactly who will succeed him on the throne. This situation is not lost on his “greedy little trinity” of surviving sons: hot-blooded Richard (KeiLyn Durrel Jones), politically savvy Geoffrey (Hubert Point-Du Jour), and not-ready-for-primetime John (Noah Averbach-Katz).

Further clouding the goblet of mulled wine is the house-guest presence of Philip (Ronald Peet), the very young ruler of France, and a frenemy of the family with his own quite complicated history regarding several of its members. Then there’s Alais (Madeleine Rogers), a seeming innocent whose grooming as future betrothed to the bloodline heir hasn’t stood in the way of her becoming the mistress of the middle-aged Henry — and whose proximity to a household full of master manipulators and seasoned schemers is bound to rub off in some way.



Dee Hoty (left), Madeleine Rogers and Michael Cumpsty in “The Lion in Winter.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. Charles Erickson)

They’re all thrown together, under the snappy supervision of director Tyne Rafaeli, into a smoking Christmas bowl of petty vengeance, vitriol, bad-faith bargaining, promise breaking, scapegoating, backstabbing, butt-kissing, and a zero-sum power grab in which the ultimate takeaway is “well, that’s how deals are made.”

Draw whatever parallels you will from it — but don’t confuse “Lion” with a heavy holiday meal of Shakespeare, despite the 12th-century setting and themes. Henry readily draws comparisons between himself and King Lear — and just as quickly dispels the notion, in one of several moments during which the play slips slyly outside of itself (watch for the one in which Eleanor addresses the fact that Richard “has a knife”).



Noah Averbach-Katz in “The Lion in Winter.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Supercharged like a mid-century muscle car with high-octane dialogue, the Chicago-born Goldman’s sharply written ensemble piece put an American Sixties twist to the Masterpiece Theater template, and the cast (the British-born Cumpsty included) appropriately checks any affected regal accents at the castle door.

Returning for his seventh Two River project (and appearing in his second consecutive mainstage show), Tony nominated Cumpsty takes advantage of the script’s many opportunities for “master bastard” Henry to rule his dysfunctional pride with a well-played bit of sardonic dark humor; even as he invests the role with a good deal more tragic depth and gravitas than many of his predecessors in the part (originated on Broadway by none other than “The Music Man” himself, Robert Preston).



Dee Hoty and Michael Cumpsty in “The Lion in Winter” at Two River. (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

He’s exquisitely matched with a worthy ally and adversary in Hoty, here taking an encore turn as the exiled queen. Graced with some of the best lines in the play, the three-time Tony nominee expertly paints a woman who’s been stripped of her considerable power and freedom; whose legendary beauty has “turned to salt” — but who maintains considerable reserves of expertise in the darker arts of love, war, and people politics.

By the time that Eleanor and Henry muse about the possibility of their simply refusing to ever die, it’s long been evident that their talented young co-stars (and the highly competitive characters they portray) don’t stand a chance against these two.

Arriving just as our own kingdom’s roller-coaster relationship with power, privilege and the potholed path of transition faces an epic reboot, “The Lion in Winter” hits the spot as an amped-up “history” lesson for a weird new reality; one that puts forth its sound-bites of wisdom “cleverly and well,” in the words of poor Richard.

THE LION IN WINTER

WHEN: Through Dec. 4

WHERE: Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

TICKETS: \$20 to \$65

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org