

# The Star-Ledger

## Two River's new take 'The Lion in Winter': King Henry II by way of Donald Trump



(Amanda Crommett)

By Natalie Pompilio | For NJ Advance Media

Here's a familiar story: Two candidates vying for a top leadership position make disparaging marks about each other while their ardent supporters stand by and growl.

But in the classic play "The Lion in Winter," which is now being revived and runs through Dec. 4 at [Two River Theater](#), a divided family replaces a divided nation.

It's Christmas 1138 and Henry II and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine come together to argue which of their three sons will succeed the king. Henry II wants John, Eleanor supports Richard, and Geoffrey won't go down without a fight.

Drawing parallels to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are not exact or easy, but [Michael Cumpsty](#), the Tony-nominated actor who plays Henry II, used his feelings about the 2016 election in his interpretation of the king.

"Henry ... is someone who is not ignorant, who understands the kingship and the need to draw people together, and yet he wants the guy who, to my mind, is unqualified. That challenge of how to play it was matched for me in the election," Cumpsty said.

"I'm an actor. I'm a Democrat. And the size of Trump's support and the fact he won at all has been sobering.... There were people who voted for him — racists — I know I could never like and there were also clearly millions of decent American people who decided he was the right choice. I'm befuddled by it, but I'm trying to learn why that is."

The production takes its cues from the 1966 play by James Goldman and the 1968 film starring Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn. In the latter, Henry II memorably reflects, "Well, what should we hang? The holly or each other?" New viewers of the modern era can turn to Fox's ["Empire"](#) for a [pre-show primer](#). The drama bears distinct story similarities — not to mention the fact that the show's ruling family has the last name Lyon.

"The Lion in Winter" is set in a time before the British adopted the custom of primogeniture, which decreed a legitimate first-born son will inherit his parent's estate and title. The story blends historic events and creative license. For example, Henry II did not have a Christmas court in France, as the show depicts, but he did imprison his wife at one point during their marriage after she attempted to organize a coup against him.

The underlying story is a dark one, Cumpsty said, "an insightful look at how really dysfunctional families might work." But the clever dialogue infused with humor betrays that, he said.

"These characters are so witty and charming and sort of mythic .. it makes them palatable," said Cumpsty, a British-born TV, film and stage actor who was nominated for a Tony in 2012 for "End of the Rainbow." "It steers you away from the horror. At the end, it doesn't leave you feeling that you've seen a group of people truly shattered. You've seen the possibility of that."

Cumpsty believes audience members will leave the show feeling invigorated.

"Why is the world so endowed with love for these great plays where everybody dies? It's mayhem and catastrophe, but you come away feeling you've had a regenerative experience of some kind," he said. "No matter how horrible the story is, it's a story. You're sitting around the fire, listening, and there's a great comfort in that."

### **The Lion in Winter**

Two River Theater, Red Bank

**Tickets:** [\\$45-55](#); through December 4. For more information, call 732-345-1400.