



‘The Lion in Winter’: Holiday reunion for family of predators

By: JAY LUSTIG | November 26, 2016



PHOTOS BY T. CHARLES ERICKSON

From left, Dee Hoty, Madeleine Rogers and Michael Cumpsty co-star in “The Lion in Winter,” which is at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Dec. 4.

“Would it be troublesome if I betrayed you?” asks Alais of her lover, Henry II, in James Goldman’s play “The Lion in Winter,” which is currently being presented at the Two River Theater in Red Bank.

Troublesome, maybe. But not surprising. Henry and the other characters in this play — including his wife Eleanor and their sons Richard, Geoffrey and John, who all want to be the next king — betray each other as casually as members of most families exchange pleasantries. At one point in the play, after Richard takes out a dagger and John exclaims “he’s got a knife!,” Eleanor makes a plea for peace, but not before offering a withering assessment of her clan:

Of course he has a knife, he always has a knife, we all have knives! It’s 1183 and we’re barbarians! How clear we make it. Oh, my piglets, we are the origins of war: not history’s forces, nor the times, nor justice, nor the lack of it, nor causes, nor religions, nor ideas, nor kinds of government, nor any other thing. We are the killers. We breed wars. We carry it like syphilis inside.

Yes, there is a certain timelessness to “The Lion in Winter,” which had a Tony-winning Broadway run in 1966 (with Robert Preston and Rosemary Harris) and was made into an Oscar-winning film in 1968 (with Peter O’Toole and Katharine Hepburn). More recently, it has provided the broad outline for the television series, “Empire.” You won’t have to stretch too hard to find parallels to modern politics in Henry’s vanity and ruthlessness.

The play is set during the Christmas season, but any cheerfulness that any character displays is fleeting and insincere. Michael Cumpsty and Dee Hoty play Henry and Eleanor here, and the best thing about the play is their banter: They smile and convey genuine affection for each other as they trade barbs.

“Give me a little peace,” says Henry at one point.

“A little? Why so modest?” Eleanor responds. “How about eternal peace?”



KeiLyn Durrel Jones, top, and Hubert Point-Du Jour, play Richard and Geoffrey, sons of Henry II, in “The Lion in Winter.”

Eleanor has conspired against Henry in the past, and he has imprisoned her. He’s allowing her to return to his castle to spend Christmas with him and their sons, though. Henry is middle-aged, by our standards, but few people made it past middle age in 1183, and so he is thinking about a successor. Henry and Eleanor’s oldest living son Richard (KeiLyn Durrel John), a fierce warrior with an imposing presence, would seem to be the logical candidate. But Henry is fixated on their youngest son, John (Noah Averbach-Katz), who still seems childish at 16, skipping around the palace and throwing temper tantrums. (Indeed, he seems a bit cartoonish, compared to the other characters.)

The middle son, Geoffrey (Hubert Point-Du Jour), is more cerebral than Richard, and seems to have some kingly potential as well. No one gives him serious consideration as a successor, though, and so he schemes, and lashes out in resentment.

Things are further complicated by the arrival of French king Philip II (Ronald Peet), who is a half-brother of Alais (Madeleine Rogers). For political reasons, she will have to marry the next King of England — something she’s dreading, especially if it’s John.

“He’s got pimples, and he smells of compost,” she says.

Philip and Alais are both young and seemingly innocent, compared to Henry. But Philip eventually shows some political savvy, and Alais proves that she that she can hold her own in this den of vipers.

As directed by Tyne Rafaeli, this is a handsome, straightforward and well-acted presentation of a play that is engaging but never quite absorbing. For all its royal trappings, it doesn’t come close to rising to a Shakespearean level of intensity.

We’re asked to believe that Henry and Eleanor, despite their ruthlessness, accept each other with an affectionate shrug. And though the deceits and betrayals intensify, with Henry even locking his sons in the cellar at one point (“the royal boys are aging with the royal port,” he cracks), the play ends with a kind of stalemate, and the future still uncertain.

That may be how stories often end in real life, but drama demands more of a payoff.

“The Lion in Winter” is at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Dec. 4; visit tworivertheater.org.