

# NEW JERSEY Stage

## Two River's "The Lion in Winter" Offers a Historical Reflection of 2016 Themes

By Brent Johnson, [JerseyArts.com](http://JerseyArts.com)



The way Tyne Rafaeli sees it, the fall of 2016 is the perfect time to go back 833 years and visit the court of England's King Henry II.

That's the setting of *The Lion In Winter*, the classic play that Rafaeli has revived at Two River Theater through December. 4.

And maybe, the director says, the story about the intersection of political gamesmanship and family drama in 1183 will provide some perspective for those still processing the grueling presidential election that America just experience. You know, the one that ended last week with Donald Trump's stunning upset of Hillary Clinton.

"Is this play a direct response to the American elections of 2016? Perhaps not," Rafaeli explains. "But it is a very deep and very interesting conversation about power and about the responsibilities of power. And some parts of the language of the play have new resonance in our current climate."

"It's very sexy and very funny and very human," she adds. "And at this moment in time, no matter what your political affiliation, we should be coming together and hearing stories like this, so we can build a better future for our children."

Despite the British backdrop, *The Lion In Winter* was actually written by American playwright James Goldman 50 years ago. It debuted on Broadway in 1966 — with a young Christopher Walken in a supporting role.

But more people probably know the 1968 film adaptation, starring Peter O'Toole and Katherine Hepburn, whose performance yielded her third of four Oscars.

The dialogue and plot are fictional, but the characters and historical context are real. The play takes place in Christmas of 1183, when King Henry II and his wife, wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, welcome home their three sons and their guests. Eleanor is returning from prison, where Henry had incarcerated her for 10 years. And what follows is a battle of political and family warfare as they fight over who will rule after Henry dies.



John Dias, the artistic director of Two River Theater, said there were a few reasons the venue decided to tackle the play. First, there was the often-bruising Trump-Clinton battle.

“We anticipated this election season would be a complicated one,” Dias explains. “And wanted to give something to our audience to advance that conversation.”

Second, he notes, it’s an “extraordinary play.” — one that’s “often overlooked as one of great plays of the 20th century.”

And its yuletide setting, Dias adds, is fitting for the upcoming holiday season. “It’s a good time to remind people about what it means to come together as families,” he says.

Dias approached Rafaeli, a London-born director who trained at the city’s Guildhall School of Music & Drama and New York’s Columbia University, to helm the revival.

The challenge with a period piece like this, she says, was finding “the very sweet spot where it’s not so far away from us that it’s dismissible as the ‘olden times’ but also the displacement, putting it in a different era, that makes us look at it differently.”

Rafaeli didn’t modernize the staging. The costumes and set are loyal to the period.

“But we call it 1183 on steroids,” she notes. “We’ve stolen a lot from the past but also taken artistic license to make it truthful and honest and visceral and real.”

An for anyone dismissing it all as a stuffy historical drama, Rafaeli argues that the play is actually quite funny.



“These people are very witty and articulate,” she says. “But the underbelly of it is: These people are really fighting for their lives.”

And that, Rafaeli explains, is why having a cast she describes as “phenomenal” is so key.

At the top of the bill is a pair of Tony nominees. Playing Henry is Michael Cumpsty, a British actor who was nominated in 2012 for his performance in the play *End Of The Rainbow*. And playing Eleanor is Dee Hoty, who has scored three nods, for her work in *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991), *The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public* (1994), and *Footloose* (1999).

The rest of the cast includes Noah Averbach-Katz (John), KeiLyn Durrel Jones (Richard), Ronald Peet (Philip), Hubert Point-Du Jour (Geoffrey), and Madeleine Rogers (Alais).

“I’m just so struck by their level of intelligence,” Rafaeli says.

Plus, she notes, all of them are “politically engaged” in some way. “They are political animals,” Rafaeli says, “and they are bringing that kind of investment and that intelligence onto stage with them. So it’s a very powerful time to be building this show.”

As for Rafaeli, she didn’t gravitate toward the theater until her teens. She says she was a “very serious athlete as a kid” — a gymnast — but an injury ended that dream.

“When I got injured, theater filled the void gymnastics had in my life,” she recalls. “I just got bitten by the bug. I acted, I directed, I wrote, I designed — I did everything. And then slowly but surely, I realized directing is the only thing I should be doing.”

Rafaeli called it a “very organic transition” from the world of gymnastics.

“My work tends to be very physical,” she says.

Like the play — a tale about Britain, written by an American — Rafaeli refers to herself as a “beautiful mixture” of the two countries. Though she grew up in London, her parents are from the States.

“I’m actually the only one in my family with a British accent,” Rafaeli says. “I have a very transatlantic background and a very transatlantic conversation inside myself.”

So what’s the difference between British and American theater? British training, she says, is more “technique-driven,” while American acting is more “emotional and spiritual and physical.”

“What I just said is a huge generalization because there are many British actors who are incredibly emotional and physical, and there are a lot of American actors who are incredible with text,” Rafaeli explains.



Still, she notes, “theater sits in a different place in the culture” of each country.

“And that really is a financial and an economical thing more than anything,” Rafaeli explains. “In England, there’s a system in place where theater is cheaper, and therefore it goes out to more people and is more a part of everyday life.”

“But there’s so much to learn from one another, and I just feel lucky to be able to learn from each,” she says. “And I’m very lucky to have found a home in the American theater.”

For those who have seen only the film version of *The Lion In Winter*, Rafaeli says the difference between that script and the play is subtle.

“But when you experience the play, you realize there’s only one place this could unfold in, and that is the theater,” she explains. “It is an incredibly theatrical piece and a very poetic piece.”

“And there’s something very powerful about us all gathering around the campfire and hearing this particular story,” Rafaeli adds. “Because of the period it’s set in and because it feels so ancient, in a way it does feel like we’re gathering around the campfire.”

**See *The Lion in Winter* now through December 4 at Two River Theater in Red Bank. [Click here](#) for details.**