

# The Star-Ledger

## 'The Lion in Winter' at Two River Theater: This royal affair shows its age



Dee Hoty (Eleanor of Aquitaine), Madeleine Rogers (Alais) and Michael Cumpsty (Henry II) star in Two River Theater's new production of the 1966 play "The Lion in Winter" (Photo by T. Charles Erickson)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media  
on November 29, 2016

The 12th-century court of England's King Henry II was full of plots, lust, conspiracy and betrayal. James Goldman's 1966 play, "The Lion in Winter," which dramatizes the exploits of Henry and his family at one particularly contentious Christmas gathering, is much less compelling.

As the holiday offering by Red Bank's Two River Theater, under the direction of Tyne Rafaeli, the play offers some occasional light charm. But this is deeply flawed material, and the director doesn't succeed in locating the complex and interesting people at the heart of all the intrigue. Instead, this "Lion in Winter" asks the twists and turns of court scheming to carry its drama.

Henry (Michael Cumpsty, a Two River regular), a successful and arrogant king, is growing old and worries about his succession, his legacy, and of course his bedroom affairs. Eleanor (Dee Hoty), his long-estranged queen in town for the holidays, favors their eldest son, the warlike Richard (KeiLyn Durrel Jones), as the heir apparent, but Henry prefers the weaker, younger John (Noah Averbach-Katz).

A marriage to Alais (Madeleine Rogers), sister to Philip (Ronald Peet), the new king of France, would bolster the claim of either son, but Henry fancies the much younger Alais his own consort. He's willing to marry her off to one of his sons for political purposes, but by no means is he willing to forego his own relationship with her. The play unfolds as various alliances form and shatter, and nearly everybody at one point or another is convinced that he or she has won the day.

The indelible lesson of the best royal drama, from Shakespeare to "Game of Thrones," is that what we really care about is devious, flawed, and viciously ambitious characters. Goldman's characters are flatly drawn vehicles for a plot that ties itself in myriad knots it never bothers to unravel.

And while Goldman seems to have been interested in emulating Shakespeare's great chronicle histories, he does so in a cheeky, self-conscious way that breeds snappy one-liners. ("Well, what family doesn't have its ups and downs," quips Eleanor in the immediate wake of a particularly bitter scrap.)

Happily, the rivalry between Cumpsty and Hoty provides some excitement to the proceedings. Both are excellent actors, and so the banter between king and queen makes for a welcome few highpoints in a long production. Cumpsty's Henry is smug and aloof, but Hoty's confident Eleanor knows which of his buttons need pushing, and proves a consistent match for her king.

## **The Lion in Winter**

Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, through December 4

**Tickets:** \$20-\$70 available online at <http://www.tworivertheater.org>