



Hubert Point-Du Jour (Geoffrey), KeiLyn Durrel Jones (Richard), Ronald Peet (Philip), Dee Hoty (Eleanor of Aquitaine) and Michael Cumpsty (Henry II) in *The Lion in Winter* at Two River Theater.

THE LION IN WINTER AT RED BANK'S TWO RIVER THEATER

By Julie Markoff

RED BANK - In memory, the *Lion in Winter* by James Goldman was a cutting edge play (and movie) that married palace intrigue, harsh medieval politics with on-point humor and modern family dynamics.

When it was written and first performed in 1966 the play was ahead of its time mixing disparate elements—at one moment it was deeply dramatic, at the next blithe and witty. That mix of tones is now very familiar, particularly on television.

Maybe that is why this straightforward production, although well-performed, is something of a disappointment. This is especially true given the very real family and political drama that has been going on, on the national stage for the past year and a half. As it stands this is a charming, well-acted version of venerable, but somewhat dated modern classic.

The cast of *Lion in Winter*, headed by Broadway veteran and Two River regular Michael Cumpsty is uniformly strong. Cumpsty is at turns charming, witty, vulnerable and authoritarian as the historic English king. He is always a magnetic presence, a true lion of the stage. He is well-matched by his long-time opponent in love and war, Eleanor of Aquitaine, played by three-time Tony nominee Dee Hoty. Hoty is a commanding presence as the regal, aging, complicated and manipulative queen who gives as good as she gets, and then some. She has palpable chemistry with Henry and all of her children on stage.

But outside of the (not inconsiderable) pleasures of watching these two actors at the top of their respective games interact, I couldn't help

but wish for something more. As an audience member I wanted to understand and feel more deeply the real stakes involved, the relevance of all this intrigue.

Why should we care about the fate of these characters and which son will or won't become king? Will Eleanor or Henry prevail? What will become of this family? The characters as written, in particular Henry and Eleanor's three sons Richard, Philip and John as well as Henry's ward and mistress Alais often come across as little more than one note – the strong one, the clever one, the weak one. I think this is a fault of the play itself and not the very capable and lively actors portraying them, KeiLyn Durrel Jones, Ronald Peet, Noah Averbach-Katz, and Madeleine Rogers, respectively.

In addition to the main characters, there is some impressive acting going on here among the supporting cast, in particular Hubert Point-Du Jour as the young French King Geoffrey is a stand out. We are drawn in by his clever and humorous cunning which serves to mask his strongly held anger at Henry on behalf of his ill-used father, Louis. The other characters' motivations might have come across and resonated with a modern audience, through a deeper interrogation of the text and a more imaginative staging.

Although this production is conservative in its approach to the text, the capable cast and witty interplay between Henry and Eleanor may just be enough for a welcome and warming dose of theater in this holiday season. *The Lion in Winter* is playing through December 4 at the Two River Theater in Red Bank.