



Thursday, 14 January 2016 16:00

# History roars to life in the gloriously human, frighteningly perceptive 'The Lion in Winter'

Written by [Tina Farmer](#)  
**The Details**

- **Venue:** [The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis](#)  
**Director:** Edward Stern  
**Dates:** January 6 - 31, 2016



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**The story of the first Plantagenet king comes to life in James Goldman's deeply researched historical drama, set in 1183 but scripted with contemporary dialogue and influences. The show peaks into the personal life of Henry the second, revealing the temperament, motivations and seemingly callous behavior of those in power.**

The king, who married Eleanor of Aquitaine and unified England under a single crown, is now in his fifties and feels compelled to choose a successor among his three living sons: John, his youngest and favorite; Geoffrey, the brainy, skillful manipulator; and Richard the bold, brash, and ambitious soldier. To complicate matters, the king and his queen are at odds. She spends the majority of her days locked in a prison, while he cavorts with his new love, Alais Capet, sister to the young king of France and pledged to marry Richard, or maybe John.

Goldman's delightfully articulate script seamlessly mixes history and personal fiction, inferring much about the characters from speculation and suggestion rooted in his research. The ensemble skillfully and artfully moves through the story, with a brisk pace and focus that wraps the audience with anticipation. The Rep's production, under the sure direction of Edward Stern, finds more humor in the script than I remember, and the subtle differences in inflection and emotion expertly counter the frequently ambiguous actions of the characters. The effect is mesmerizing, giving the well-known show a fresh, vibrant energy and suspenseful tone that propels the story.

Jeffrey King rises to his name and position in the role of Henry the second. He is brusque, calculating and, at times, childishly self-indulgent. His passion for Alais is as apparent as his enduring affection and delight in Eleanor, and his mixed emotions for his sons mirror his own character. Carol Schultz is on fire as the devilishly shrewd queen, skillfully employing emotion and covert negotiation to win the chess game of succession and see Richard on the throne. Both are ruthless, conniving, and determined to see their will and their preferred son prevail over the other.

Grayson Dejesus embodies the conflicted character of Richard with a hyper-aggressive masculinity that masks lingering questions about his sexuality. Wilson Bridges is physically straight, firm and purposeful to disguise his malleable allegiance, his Geoffrey has an immovable chip on his shoulder that fuels his anger. Kurt Hellerich is spoiled and petulant as the young John, striking with venomous intensity when threatened though he proves easily swayed. Angela Janas and Ryan Ward complete the cast as Alais Capet and her brother Philip, king of France. Each brings a certainty and purpose to their characters that encompasses full realization of their position as pawns in the Plantagenet family battle.

Director Stern shows strong direction and creates great tension both through the script and intentional movement, but there were a few moments when the show seemed to lag, mostly at the top of expository scenes. Additionally, the supporting characters are substantially less complicated than the leads, and their actions and reactions easily predicted. The show pivots on the machinations and sparring of the two leads however, and in this respect the more narrowly drawn characters play out to the story's advantage.

The simple but evocative set, by Joseph P. Tilford, feels more substantial than its easily moved pieces that ensures scene changes are smooth and swift. Tilford balances historical accuracy against scripted anachronisms including a Christmas tree and presents. Costumer Mathew J. LeFebvre shows restraint and a sense of the everyday in the majority of the costumes, successfully indicating a character's stature while suggesting their current status in relation to the king. Alais is more ornately costumed than Eleanor, for example, acknowledging her current status in the king's life. **Thomas C. Hase and Rusty Wandall complete the design team providing lighting and sound designs that accent and highlight the action and tone of each scene.**

[The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis](#) creates the sense of living history with its production of "The Lion in Winter," running through January 31, 2016. The show is filled with tension and intrigue as well as humor and affection, but it never forgets the historic significance of the tale ensuring a satisfying production that can be appreciated by fans of history, theater, and good storytelling.