
Ladue News

Dinner & A Show: "The Lion in Winter"

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Story: It's 1183, and King Henry II of England is celebrating Christmas at his castle in Chimon, France. He's not much of a Christian -- as the late Thomas Becket would have attested -- but he's in a charitable mood and thus temporarily frees his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, from the prison where's he's kept her for 10 years.

Eleanor was and remains a powerful figure, controlling the coveted land of Aquitaine, but unfortunately for her she sided with her son Henry in his unsuccessful quest to wrest control of the throne from his father. As there was no clear line of succession in the 12th century, many a feud developed in royal families, including the Plantagenets, over who would rule a kingdom.

Now, as Henry II and his queen briefly reunite, they debate which of their three surviving sons should eventually ascend to the throne. Henry favors young John, Eleanor sides with their oldest, Richard, and both disdain middle son Geoffrey. Henry dallies with Richard's betrothed, Alais Capet, while inviting her brother, King Philip of France, to his Christmas feast and then trying to outmaneuver him.

Alliances are formed and then broken and new ones spring up seemingly daily. And yet, Henry and Eleanor still revel in each other's vibrant personalities and the peculiar hold they have on each other. The 'lion' may be 50 years old, but neither he nor his bride intends to go gently into that good night.

Highlights: James Goldman's witty and historically-based play is full of clever dialogue and palace intrigue at the loftiest level. While its roar is more prevalent than its bite on stage -- talk trumps action -- this classy period piece is given a thoughtful rendering at The Rep by director Edward Stern and his carefully cast ensemble.

Other Info: Goldman's 1966 drama is better known by its 1968 incarnation as a film with Goldman's screenplay. That effort garnered an Academy Award for Best Actress for Katharine Hepburn, who appeared opposite Peter O'Toole as Henry, and a supporting cast that included a young Timothy Dalton and Anthony Hopkins in his screen debut.

The script is highbrow and literary, although it seems that Eleanor is given the lion's share, so to speak, of the really good lines. Carol Schultz makes the most of her theatrical opportunities as the legendary aristocrat who was 11 years her husband's senior with a performance that is amusing and scintillating throughout.

Schultz adroitly handles her share of glib dialogue, as when she matter-of-factly proclaims about the courtly machinations: "Of course we all have knives. It's 1183 and we're barbarians." That's also an example of the dialogue employed by Goldman that stylistically is modern in design and intent but uttered by these patricians of the Middle Ages.

While the script hints at murder and mayhem and points out the accomplished military histories of both Henry and Richard, essentially this is an erudite discussion that leisurely winds its way through two acts over two hours and 15 minutes. With *The Lion in Winter*, it's all about the journey, not the destination.

Jeffrey King brings an imposing physical presence to the ambitious Henry, who did move England forward in his own strong-willed way. Like Schultz as Eleanor, he vacillates between his love for his sons and his doubts about whether any of them has the right stuff for ruling a kingdom.

He also successfully conveys the king's dual romantic relationships with his aging wife, who after all did bear him eight children in addition to being the most powerful woman in Europe, and the beautiful sister Alais of France's youthful ruler, King Philip. Henry's lust can't abide giving up Alais Capet to Richard to ensure Eleanor's acquiescence for John to eventually assume the throne, which Eleanor uses to her advantage.

Serving admirably in supporting roles are Grayson DeJesus as Richard, proud of his bellicose prowess and just as fiery in his desire for King Philip, and Webster Conservatory graduate Kurt Hellerich as the unsightly and immature John, a mess of a pouting and puerile teenager. Both men depict the self-centered interests of the oldest and youngest sons with convincing portrayals.

Wilson Bridges shines as Geoffrey, described by his parents as more machine than man because of his cunning and superior intellect and seeming indifference to his family. Geoffrey is tops at manipulation, and Bridges also shows the middle son's resentment of his perceived inferior treatment by his parents compared to their more apparent love for Richard and John.

Angela Janas makes a most convincing Alais, a young woman of royalty who nonetheless realizes her only shot at success is selecting the right man to be king, while Ryan Ward shows the increasing maturity of France's teen monarch Philip, who is unimpressed with Henry's bullying ways.

Rusty Wandall's excellent sound design features moody music evocative of the times, filled with strings and a primitive drum beat. Joseph Tilford's scenic design is meant more to present a stylized impression of the era, complete with a background tapestry and sturdy furniture, **suitably lit by Thomas Hase**. Mathew LeFebvre adds costuming that shows the gentlemen and ladies in their gallantry.

The Lion in Winter is more a war of words than swordplay, but Stern's cast handles Goldman's cerebral conversations cleverly enough.