

Snoop's Theatre Thoughts

Witty, Emotionally Charged “Lion in Winter” Takes the Rep by Storm

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The Lion In Winter
by James Goldman
Directed by Edward Stern
Repertory Theatre of St. Louis
January 8, 2016



Ryan Ward, Carol Schultz, Wilson Bridges, Kurt Hellerich, Jeffrey King
Photo by Jerry Naunheim, Jr.

[Repertory Theatre of St. Louis](#)

Who wants to be the King of England? The race for succession is something of a free-for-all in James Goldman’s *The Lion In Winter*, the first play of 2016 for the Rep. It’s an intrigue-filled, witty and dynamic historical dramatization that positively crackles with energy on stage.

The Lion In Winter is perhaps best remembered for the marvelous 1968 film starring Peter O’Toole, Katharine Hepburn, and a young Anthony Hopkins and Timothy Dalton. I had seen the movie years ago and remembered the strength of the performances, but it was so long ago that I had forgotten a lot of the details. This play, based somewhat loosely on the history of England’s King Henry II (Jeffrey King), is full of sharp dialogue, drama, and lots and lots of humor. That last part is what surprised me the most, actually. It’s a very sharply written script with extremely well-developed characters including Henry’s estranged wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (Carol Schultz), and the latest object of his affections, Alais (Angela Janas), who grew up in Henry’s court and was betrothed to his son Richard (Grayson DeJesus) at an early age, although she is now Henry’s mistress and is being used as something of a bargaining tool in the constant machinations concerning who is actually going to inherit the throne. There’s Richard, the eldest

surviving son and the obvious candidate, as he's a skilled soldier and charismatic leader. He's also Eleanor's choice to be the next king. Henry's choice, for whatever reason, is his petulant and immature youngest son, John (Kurt Hellerich), who Henry also wants to marry Alais in Richard's place, despite the objections of her brother Philip (Ryan Ward), the King of France, who is currently in attendance at Henry's palace for his Christmas court. In between these two candidates stands the crafty, well-educated and duplicitous middle son, Geoffrey (Wilson Bridges), who doesn't initially seem to want to be King very much, but as the plot develops, so do his and everyone else's ambitions. The center of the play is the combative, contentious, and oddly still affectionate relationship between Henry and Eleanor, who despite having been imprisoned by him for years, still loves him in her way.

It's the relationships, the incisive dialogue laced with cutting humor, and the strongly developed characterizations that make this play so intensely fascinating, and it's a brilliant showcase for the Rep's excellent cast. It's easy to see in King's boisterous, confrontational, and charming performance how his three very different sons all take after him in their own ways. Richard's bravado, Geoffrey's scheming wit, and John's almost childlike sense of entitlement are all reflected in King's vibrant portrayal. Schultz, as the proud Eleanor, matches King scene for scene, and it's their chemistry that drives the show. Schultz also does an excellent job of portraying Eleanor's underlying sense of loneliness and rejection without losing that stubborn determination that keeps her going. As the sons, DeJesus is memorable as the soldierly but conflicted Richard, Bridges is deliciously snide as Geoffrey, and Hellerich is convincing as the snippy, bratty youngest son John. There's also good work from Ward as the still fairly young King of France, Philip, who harbors a secret past with Richard and strives to be taken seriously as a monarch by Henry. Janas, as Alais, is also fine as a young woman who genuinely loves Henry, but is growing increasingly weary of being used as a pawn in his schemes.

Visually, the production has an authentic look with something of a modern twist. Mathew J. Lebevre's costumes are appropriately detailed, with rich, regal colors and textures, while Joseph P. Tilford's set is more suggestive than deliberately realistic. Flanked by giant statues enclosed in glass-covered pillars, the stage has somewhat of the feel of a medieval exhibit at a museum. The furniture and set pieces give the production the right historical atmosphere with a degree of artifice that works well for the tone of the play. **There's also excellent atmospheric lighting by Thomas C. Hase** and sound by Rusty Wandall, with an excellent use of scene-setting music.

This is a much funnier play than I had been expecting. Perhaps I need to see the movie again, but I didn't remember that tone from the film. As directed at the Rep by Edward Stern, the top-notch cast makes the most of every line of dialogue and every tense moment. Although it might not be entirely historically accurate, it's a bold, fascinating dramatization that's riveting from start to finish. It's an intelligent, highly energetic, first-rate production.

The Lion in Winter runs at The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis until January 31, 2016.