

BLT's Season Finale, "The Lion in Winter" Snarls Into Your Heart

By John D. Adams

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Kai Elijah Hamilton as Henry II and Jennifer Memolo as Eleanor bring emotional depth to their battle royale in BLT's "The Lion in Winter."
(photo by Steve Rose)

I think it is fair to surmise that if a theatre group is going to mount a production of "The Lion In Winter," they must know that for better or worse, they must compete with the specter of that iconic 1968 Oscar-winning film starring Peter O'Toole as the aged King Henry II and Katherine Hepburn as his long-imprisoned viper, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. Set during Christmas 1183, the James Goldman play follows the mental and political gamesmanship between Henry II, Eleanor, their three children, Henry's mistress, and the King of France. With tongues sharper than swords the group hacks their way to a devastating conclusion.

Even though it has probably been 20 years since I have seen the movie, I went into Brevard Little Theatre's production with some set notions of how the characters should act and react. Open-minded? I try to be. But I believe we all go into well-known play/film adaptations like "Lion," or "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," "Glengarry, Glen Ross," etc. with at least a hint of impartiality.

It only took a few minutes watching BLT's version of "The Lion in Winter" for me to throw away those old impressions and settle in to enjoy this wickedly amusing, surprisingly poignant production. Kai Elijah Hamilton's Henry II has an appearance that seems immediately correct -- the graying beard, a cunning sneer, the bear-like robe, crown... But Hamilton takes a surprising turn, imbuing Henry with far more sympathy and regret. He pulls from a deeper well of emotions than I had remembered seeing in the role before. Yes, the pitiless anger and booming commands are still there. But I was truly moved. And the play, I believe, is the better for this interpretation.

Jennifer Memolo's Eleanor of Aquitaine is a revelation. From her opening scene, Memolo's Eleanor is a master of physical and vocal gymnastics. She transforms every motherly embrace into a viper's constriction; every gentle caress is a slap; a kiss is a scorpion's sting. And her laugh? I can't say enough about Memolo's laugh. She masterly conveys every ounce of love and malice in Eleanor through the tenor and resonance of her frequent giggles and laughs.

Rounding out a powerhouse triumvirate is Rachel Adams' interpretation of Henry's concubine, Alais. Here again, we are treated to a greater mélange of emotions which particularly in Alais' case, help to illuminate her deeper motivations. Through Adams, we see that she truly does love Henry. And that she has also mastered the art of the deal from her feral mother Eleanor.

Playing Henry and Eleanor's conniving brood are three actors who also dig a little deeper into their characters. Garren Orr, Alex Guazzo, and Mika Parks transform the somewhat stereotypical trio (the brat, the conniver, the brute) into more than what is often portrayed. Each takes advantage of script cues to bring real dimension to Richard, Geoffrey, and John.

Complementing the rest of the cast, Miles Rice imbues his Phillip II, King of France, with a deliciously sinister demeanor. His eyes never stop reacting to onstage activity. You see his devious machinations turn until he delivers a final, devastating confession.

Director Jonathan Forrester's adventurous staging makes the most of BLT's limited space. There are several moments when the actors almost interact with the audience as they strut down an aisle or plot within a cellar. These choices enhancing the play's tension and sorrow to great effect.

This production deserves to be a second success in a row for producer George Ferencz. The first being last month's highly-praised "Deathtrap" for which he was assistant producer.

As I left the theatre, I realized I now have a new mental yardstick if and when I encounter "The Lion in Winter" again. Everyone involved in this production should be proud of a job well done; it is a powerhouse finale for the 2018 Season at Brevard Little Theatre. Don't miss it.

Performances will take place Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and on Sundays at 3 p.m., Nov. 30 through Dec. 16 at Brevard Little Theatre, located at 55 E. Jordan St. in downtown Brevard.

To purchase tickets online, visit TheBrevardLittleTheatre.org or buy them in person at the theatre box office one hour prior to each performance. Reservations for flex pass holders and tickets not purchased online may be made by calling (828) 884-2587.

For additional questions, email TheBrevardLittleTheatre@gmail.com.