

Lion in Ben Lomond

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By Philip Pearce

THAT AN AREA tucked in between the redwoods and vacation cabins of the San Lorenzo Valley, upstream from Santa Cruz, could produce consistently worthwhile community theater sounds amazing if not miraculous. But Mountain Community Theater of Ben Lomond has been doing just that, come rain, drought or landslide, for 35 years. They have just marked the anniversary with a lucid, energetic production of James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter*.

It's ably directed by Wendy Edmonds. A script that is all about a 12th century royal family squabble over who will succeed Henry II to the English throne is bound to include a lot of historic political talk. But Edmonds keeps her seven-member cast moving—not for the sake of mere activity but in ways that forward action and clarify relationships. It's a carefully organized approach that brings unity to a range of different acting styles that might otherwise bump into each other.

Erik Gandolfi dominates the action as a blustering, exuberant, no-holds-barred King Henry. He brings to the role high energy, total concentration and a speaking voice that roars and soars in a way that would probably fill the Met, never mind Ben Lomond's Park Hall. It's possible he shouts and explodes a bit too much. There are times when a more subdued vocalizing might provide more depth and variety. But he's a treat to watch and listen to.

Lillian Bogovich plays his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, as a winsome, feminine tease, an interesting change from Katharine Hepburn jutting out her jaw in that boat. Bogovich deals skillfully with the Queen's one-liners and with a coy velvet glove approach to getting what she wants. But it's hard to detect the underlying iron hand demanded by the dark scene where

Eleanor urges her sons to rebel against their father by smuggling daggers into their prison cell hidden under a breakfast tray napkin.

The other woman in Henry's life is his mistress Alais Capet, acted with a lot of swift chameleon charm by Alie Mac. Gandolfi's Henry is a hard act to compete with but this lively brunette stands right up to his Majesty. Together, they move through the difficult opening exposition so artfully that you forget you are being fed big doses of political information about the other characters and their back stories.

Then there are the three Princes who spend the play snarling at each other like mastiffs battling for a haunch of venison as they wheel and deal to become heir to Henry's throne. Best known to modern audiences attuned to the Robin Hood movies is Prince Richard the Lionheart. At first Nat Robinson struck me as too short, compact and tentative for the role, but I was wrong. His second act showdown with his raging parent proved that energy and commitment always trump mere physique in any good characterization.

Shane Johnson, as the wry and bookish Prince Geoffrey and Scott Hawklyn as the visiting and youthful French King Philip II adopted mannerisms and attitudes that helped them illustrate their assigned characters but sometimes failed to fully embody them. It was quite a different matter with Wyatt Troxell, cast as Henry's spoiled brat favorite Prince John. He has an instinct for projecting emotion and knows how to time a line. But then the program bio tells us he's the veteran of 21 stage performances. Clearly still in his teens, this young man's brio and dash raised the excitement level by several notches every time he stepped on stage.

The Lion in Winter continues, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 and Sundays at 2 through April 2nd. But be wiser than I was: check whether flood-ridden Highway 9 is still closed to Ben Lomond bound traffic south of Felton, and if so take 17 onto the Mt Hermann Road turnoff.

(Editor's note: Graham Hill Road is a good alternative route from Santa Cruz.)

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