

# MCT's 'Lion in Winter' a carnival of familial intrigue



Erik Gandolfi (left) and Lillian Bogovich star as King Henry and Queen Eleanor in MCT's 'The Lion in Winter.' Photo by Lyle Troxell.

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There are loads of dysfunctional families in the history of the theater, but no one holds a candle to the backstabbing, traitorous, quixotic family of King Henry II, England's first Plantagenet king, and his long-suffering wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

So why is it so darned funny??

The answer lies both in James Goldman's wondrous, almost totally fictional 1966 play as well as in director Wendy Edmonds's steady direction and the plethora of fine actors now lying and conniving their way through their roles in Mountain Community Theater's magnificent production of "The Lion in Winter."

It runs weekends through April 2 and you'd be well advised to get thee to Ben Lomond between now and then to witness it for yourself.

Front and center of the play is, of course, the raging couple, Henry and Eleanor, so how fortunate for MCT that the conniving king is played by the splendid Erik Gandolfi with all the swagger, stamina and suaveness required of that role. He commands the stage from the moment he opens a door.

## 'The Lion in Winter'

Produced by: Mountain Community Theater

Directed by: Wendy Edmonds

When: Through April 2

Where: Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$20 general; \$17 senior/student; two tickets for \$20 on March 17

Details: 831-336-4777 or [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org).

Except, perhaps, some of the time when that scene-stealing sprite Lillian Bogovich is sharing it with him. Then the two chew the scenery together, twisting and turning their allegiances and intrigues to suit the moment. They're the true embodiment of a couple who can't live with or without each other.

The key to enjoying this play is to not trust anyone to say what they mean. It's absolutely disorienting to decide who is in alliance with whom only to discover a moment later that it was all a ruse. Just go with the flow.

Besides the two royal figures, several other actors cast long shadows of intrigue and deception. Henry's three sons all behave badly and shift their allegiance more often than they change costumes. Nat Robinson as Prince Richard, now the eldest son since his brother Henry died, is sometimes convincing as Eleanor's favorite and a proven warrior who expects to inherit Henry's crown. But his performance sometimes lacks shades of gray that would make him a three-dimensional character. It doesn't work to be all manly bluster, then abruptly show warmth toward France's Prince Philip (a wooden, too smarmy-smiley Scott Hawklyn).

As the youngest son, John, whom Henry favors to succeed him, the youthful Wyatt Troxell is an adorable revelation. He has the ability to come across as totally innocent and eager to secure favor, only to ruthlessly turn on anyone who he decides stands in his way. It's a skillful strategy.

Shane Johnson as the middle, mostly forgotten, son Prince Geoffrey, seems just right for his role. Handsomely charming, he yearns to be loved by either parent but is spurned time and again. Johnson plays Geoffrey as shrewd, sometimes scheming to pit John against one parent or the other, but, in the end, forlornly recognizes that he'll always be the odd brother out.

How else could a child feel when there are exchanges like this between Geoffrey and his father: Geoffrey: "You don't think much of me." King Henry: "I don't think of you at all."

Alie Mac gets a mixed review for her portrayal of Alais Capet, Henry's long-time mistress (despite the fact she's been betrothed to his son Richard since she was eight). She's at her best when teasing and cajoling Henry with her feminine wiles, but seems less genuine when she sheds her femininity in her scenes with Robinson and Bogovich. By the end of the play, sadly, even Alais seems to have taken on the demanding persona of a haughty ruler.

As essential and stimulating as the acting cast is, it's supported by a vast behind-the-scenes crew who created the majestic setting (the King's castle in France in 1183) in which all three acts take place. Ricardo Botelho's set design was adapted by Larry Cuprys and the result is a commanding concrete block castle with heraldry tapestries on the walls, a large, wood-burning hearth at the rear, and various doors leading to elevated side rooms that mimic dressing rooms, bedrooms, etc. Act 3 is held in the castle dungeon which is understandably sparse with a large back wall of textured green. (Mark Hoagland deserves credit as master carpenter as do scenic artists Kate Longini Pratt, Andrea Marie and Will Northcutt.)

But because the set is so newly constructed, one audience member was heard to observe that it needed to be "dirtied up" a bit because castles were rarely pristine.

Susan McKay's historically accurate costumes work well, often needing only a few touches to give the effect of a completely different outfit. Cuprys did double duty as lighting designer, and Steve Edmonds's sound was spot on.

Nothing really gets resolved by play's end other than the easily recognized fact that Henry, Eleanor and all three of their boys are as ready to cut each other's throats as they are to share a cup of spiced wine.

Or, as Eleanor says rather girlishly at the end of Act 2, "Well, what family doesn't have its ups and downs?"

One note to MCT: With a long play like "The Lion in Winter," it's a good idea to keep the two intermissions to their announced times. The 15-minute one lasted nearly a half hour, and the 10-minute one extended far beyond that time.

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