

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

# 'The Lion in Winter' heats up local stage

By JOHANNA CROSBY  
STAFF WRITER

ORLEANS – Christmas get-togethers bring out the best and worst in families, and medieval royals were no exception.

James Goldman's intriguing historical drama "The Lion in Winter" presented by the Stages Theatre Company explores the interpersonal dynamics of a dysfunctional family played out in the political arena, where sibling rivalry, power struggles and marital strife can erupt into civil war, treason and even murder.

It's Christmas 1183 and England's King Henry II calls for a reunion that has the makings for an explosive yuletide considering the guest list: his wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, whom he imprisoned for 10 years for plotting against him; his young mistress, Princess Alais, whom he hopes to wed; his enemy, Alais' brother, King Philip of France; and his three power hungry sons, Richard, Geoffrey and John.

At 50, Henry is feeling his mortality and is obsessed with naming an heir to his throne. He favors his youngest son John, while Eleanor is partial toward their eldest, Richard. Geoffrey, the proverbial neglected middle child, isn't even a consideration, much to his chagrin.

Complicating matters is that each son has a major flaw. But the juiciest part of this compelling family drama is Henry and Eleanor's love-hate relationship. As two of the most powerful figures of their era, the tempestuous pair spar and bicker in verbal swordplay but under-

## On stage

- "The Lion in Winter"
- Written by: James Goldman
- Presented by: Stages Theatre Company
- When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3:30 p.m. Sundays through Dec. 16
- Where: Paraclete House of the Community of Jesus, Rock Harbor, Orleans
- Tickets: \$30, \$25 for seniors, free for ages 18 and under
- Box office: 508-240-2400 or [www.gdaf.org](http://www.gdaf.org)

lying their feuding is an undeniable love.

Goldman's 1966 Broadway play wasn't as well-received as his 1968 film adaptation, which starred Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn and won him an Academy Award, but the deliciously witty script is chockfull of clever dialogue and sparkling speeches written in a contemporary tone. The characters engage in double-dealing and deceit. Sometimes, it's hard to keep up with who's conspiring against whom.

Stages Theatre Company's taut, well-staged production is skillfully directed by Joanna Weir Ouston. The darkened theater, illuminated by large candles on pedestals and decorated with tapestries, is a perfect backdrop for the action. The authentic 11th century costumes and musical interludes performed by Gabriel V musicians and Glorae Dei Cantores choir members, add to the ambiance.

Goldman's 1966 Broadway play wasn't as well received as his 1968 film adaptation, which won him an Academy Award, but the deliciously written script is chockfull of clever dialogue and sparkling speeches written in a contemporary tone.

Danielle Dwyer is vibrant as the strong-willed, manipulative Eleanor. Although her character's famed beauty has faded, her sharp wit is intact. Dwyer delivers her lines with impeccable timing and marvelous expressions. Chris Kanaga gives a charismatic portrayal of Henry as a warlike, self-possessed leader who's mellowed in his middle years.

The two leads have a palpable chemistry. Their spirited exchanges and verbal sparring are a highlight of the show.

Luke Norman plays Richard with a bitter edge. Kyle Norman is humorous as the immature, whiny John.

Brad Lussier ably plays the duplicitous Geoffrey.

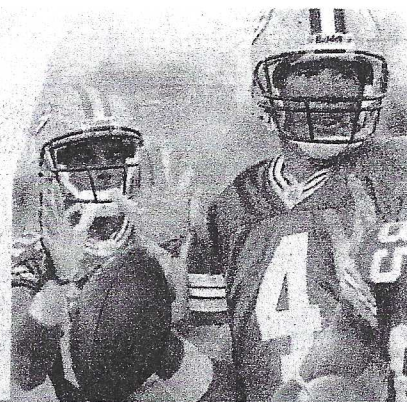
Rachel McKendree portrays Alais as a character who lets herself be used as a pawn. Stephen Velie plays the amiable but crafty Philip.



# THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 2008

[www.mlive.com/grpress](http://www.mlive.com/grpress)



## 'Lion' comes to January Series

Full-length production  
will be staged in Holland

BY SUE MERRELL  
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

As part of the Community of Jesus in Orleans, Mass., Stages Theatre Company is dedicated to offering hope and inspiration.

That mission may seem at odds with the company's latest production, "A Lion in Winter," James Goldman's biting comedy about one of history's most dysfunctional families. "Where there's truth, there's hope," said artistic director Danielle Dwyer, who portrays the leading female role, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine.

A one-hour adaptation will be presented Monday as part of Calvin College's free January Series with a full-length production Wednesday at Holland's Park Theatre.

The play, which was made into a 1968 movie starring Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn, tells of Christmas holidays with British King Henry II, the wife he had imprisoned for trying to overthrow him, and their three sons who are vying for the throne.

"There's truth here," Dwyer said. "It may be unpleasant, alarming, but these people live their lives so passionately, with such abandon, that it drives us to look at our own lives. How safe do



**"A Lion in Winter":**  
Christopher Kanaga plays King Henry II and Danielle Dwyer, the company's artistic director, portrays Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine.

### IF YOU GO

#### 'A Lion in Winter'

**When:** 12:30 p.m. Monday

**Where:** Fine Arts Center, Calvin College, 3210 Burton St. SE

**Admission:** Free

**Also:** 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Park Theatre, 248 S. River Ave., Holland. Tickets, \$16, 395-7890

we go into the world?

"The characters make you confront the truth of who they are and in turn the truth of yourself."

The biting dialogue is so irreverent it's funny, Dwyer said.

"In the end, Henry and Eleanor do accept each other," she said. "There is some kind of reconciliation. It's not a happy ending, but the audience can leave slightly relieved."

Stages is an amateur company with professional dedication, Dwyer said. Company members belong to the Community of Jesus, a monastic community in which the

members live and work in close proximity to their church. The community's Gloriam Dei Cantores Choir appeared last year at Calvin's January Series.

Joanna Weir Ouston, head of voice at England's Oxford School of Drama, was contracted to direct the show, Dwyer said. The actors come from various professions in Orleans, she said, including a lawyer, architect and chef.

Volunteers in the community embroidered detailed costumes for the show, which debuted at the company's Cape Cod theater in November.

"The costume team is extremely serious," Dwyer said, adding the women's costumes are so elaborate they cannot dress themselves. The costumes add to the understanding of who the characters are, she said.

"Richard (the Lionheart's) armor adds to who he is. And when King Philip enters in beautiful blue fleur de lis fabric, you automatically see him as the French King."

E-mail: [smerrell@grpress.com](mailto:smerrell@grpress.com)



PROVINCETOWN BANNER • WINNER OF 10 AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT — NEW ENGLAND PRESS ASSOCIATION

# Arts & Entertainment

## 'Lion' set to roar at Stages

By Melora B. North

BANNER STAFF

Stages Theatre Company at the Community of Jesus in Orleans inaugurates their new performance space in Paraclete House with a run of "The Lion in Winter" being performed Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 3:30 p.m. Dec. 7 through 16. Tickets are free for those under 18 and \$20 to \$25 for all others. To make reservations call (508) 240-2400.

In this production the cast takes the audience back to 1184 Chinon, France, where King Henry is heading up an uneasy empire, his wife and adversary El-

eanor at his side and at his throat, at least until he tosses her in jail to get her out of circulation, for 10 years. An unlikely pair, they are sparring partners on the battleground yet deeply in love. But love cannot always triumph and in this case it backfires in a family drama that involves the couple's nine children, five of whom are boys, three of them greedily vying for the family properties, castle and throne.

Playing Eleanor of Aquitaine is Sister Danielle Dwyer, company director for the last six years and a member for the past 15. "Eleanor was found worthy for Henry to have as a wife. She was full of life,

a survivor, schemer," says Dwyer. "She truly loved Henry but they were two dynamic personalities filled with tension." Playing Henry is Chris Kanaga, an Orleans attorney when not involved in theater.

Broken relationships, three sons fighting over the king's mistress, the boys' greed, you name it, this production touches on all the angles and perks that come with being leaders and people of property. But all is not doom and gloom; the play takes place at Christmas time when Henry decides to release Eleanor from prison so she can come home to help decide the fate of the couple's estate.



Chris Kanaga and Sister Danielle Dwyer star in the Community of Jesus's production of "The Lion in Winter."

"The play has a great script. There are funny moments, sad moments. It's about a family that loves to battle," says Dwyer. "The

dialogue is fabulous. The family has recognizable patterns we've

**STAGES** continued on page 29

**STAGES** continued from page 25

all seen. The writing is great. It's all about family relationships."

To help transition from scene to scene there will be live music provided by the Community's brass section as well as vocals provided by the choir.

And the sets are minimalist, asking the audience to engage their imagination.

"There's been a lot of team work on the set," says Dwyer. "Sister Helen Olsen and her brother Hans worked on it. The set is modeled after the castle in Chinon and the paint is the same color as the castle's."

What may be the most time-consuming endeavor on this project may just be the costumes, which have been in the works since the day the decision was made to mount this production. Costumer Gail Gibson, who has studied at the London College of Fashion, heads up the team of designers who have been sewing, cutting, fitting, embroidering and fussing for the last year. "We read the play, got background information and read about the period, the fabrics, ornamentation. The clothes the upper class wore, the silks, the woven linens, wools, cloth of gold," says Gibson. "We've added some modern elements but in a medieval way. They tended to use gold in ornamentation, beads, color and texture. We've even hand dyed some fabric for color tone authenticity."

Drawing up pattern ideas, the team presented the ideas to the director, Joanna Weir Ouston. Once they got the OK or had tweaked the designs, they set off to the garment district in New York City where they scoured the warehouses and stores. Collecting swatches, they again approached the director for a final nod, then made the fabric purchases and got out the sewing machines. "It was a discovery process, a treasure hunt," says Gibson. "All the costumes are custom-made with custom patterns," she says. "They help the actors make the characters feel like real people with real lives."

The team got so caught up in the costume process that members were embroidering at home on their own. One member, Treva Wrichard, even took some time off work to accomplish her task of applying embroidery to the costumes and the all-important neck pieces. Another labor of love was an imitation chain mail that was knitted for one of the characters who needs to appear as if dressed in metal armor. "It looks the most like metal," says Gibson. "And it doesn't weigh anything."

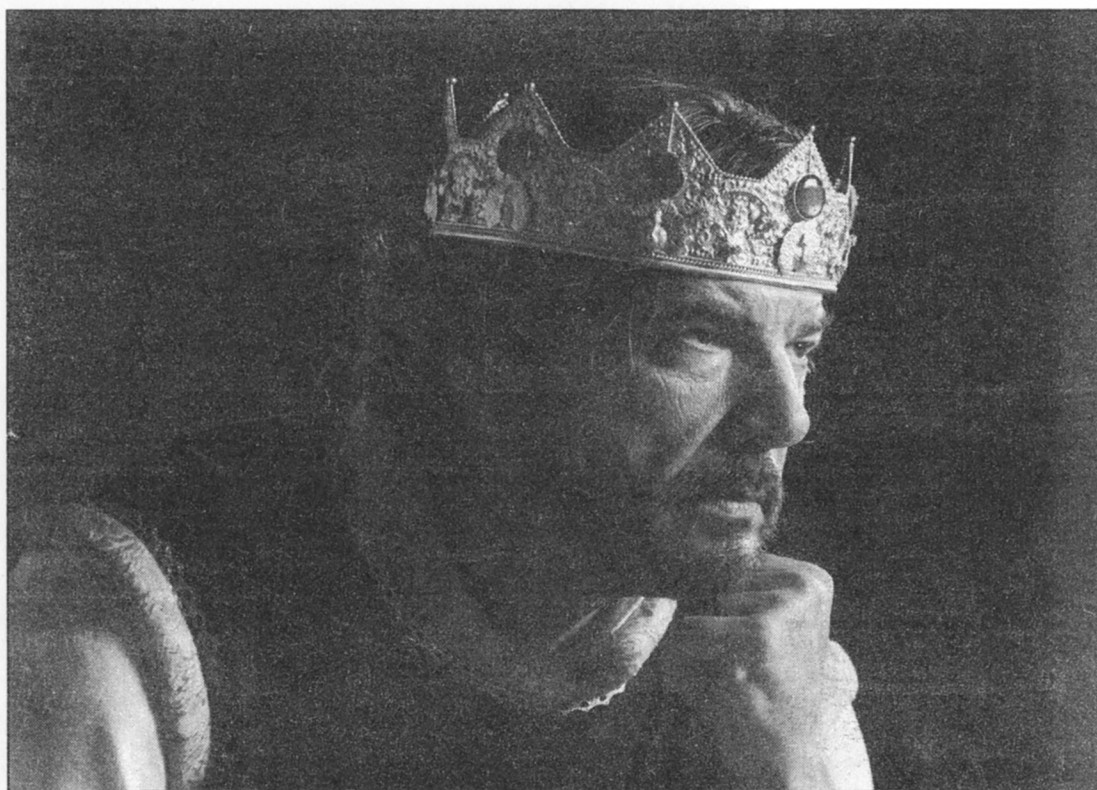
"The Lion in Winter" is based on fact, the historical figures real, but the dialogue is up to date and presented in contemporary language on a simple set decorated by verbal bantering and colorful costumes sure to please the eye.

*mnorth@provincetownbanner.com*



# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Cape Experience



Christopher Kanaga as Henry II in "The Lion in Winter"

## 'Lion in Winter': Meet the family

By John Tunney

Forget the Sopranos. If you want to meet the original dysfunctional mob family, then head over to the Community of Jesus in Rock Harbor for the Stages Theatre Company's first-class production of James Goldman's classic "The Lion in Winter."

Most people know the movie version of "the Lion," which starred Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn and was nominated for seven Academy Awards. It's a tough act to follow, but the Stages Theatre Company does it in style. Like most of what goes on in that little corner of Rock Harbor, everything about the production — the directing, acting, sets, lighting, costumes and music — has a polished shine to it.

The play takes place at the royal family's palace in Chinon, France, during the Christmas of 1184, and everyone is home for the holidays. It's the perfect setup for a family holiday romp — a family of unscrupulous, vainglorious, power-hungry schemers.

There's Dad, Henry II, the powerful but aging King of England and feudal lord over much of France. Henry has gathered his family together to name one of his three sons as his heir and to decide which of them will marry his teenage mistress Princess Alais. What a guy.

Mom is Eleanor of Aquitaine, Europe's leading lady of culture and politics, who has spent the last 10 years locked in a tower for trying to overthrow Henry. Eleanor is Henry's intellectual equal, and she's just as ruthless and cunning. Unfortunately for her, Henry is the king and the one with the real power.

Then there are the three boys, each one a mere fragment of a chip off the old block, and each one vying for parental approval, love and attention — and the throne. Richard the Lionheart, who eventually becomes King Richard I, is the favorite of Eleanor. He's big and strong, likes to fight and has a thing for King Philip of France. Next is Geoffrey. He's a clever conspirator, but not a real contender because neither parent backs him. John, who eventually becomes King John of Robin Hood and Magna Carta fame, is an uncouth lout, but he's Henry's choice to succeed him.

Also on hand are Henry's mistress, Princess Alais,

### THEATER Review

and her brother Philip, King of France, who is looking the turmoil to his advantage.

On one level, the play is a love story about Henry and Eleanor, two soul mates who seem unable to love anything but themselves and their own ambition. It's also a study of family dynamics writ large — who feels loved, used, abused, etc.

As Eleanor says while trying to justify her plotting and perhaps her approach to mothering, "It's 1184. We're barbarians."

Each role is well cast and all the actors handle the play's verbal jousting with aplomb.

Chris Kanaga as Henry, with his long hair, neatly trimmed beard and shiny crown, fits the model of the classic medieval king. He portrays Henry with a regal mix of strength, charm and narcissism.

Sr. Danielle Dwyer plays Eleanor of Aquitaine with dignity and a dash of glee as she tries to manipulate her family and prove that she still matters.

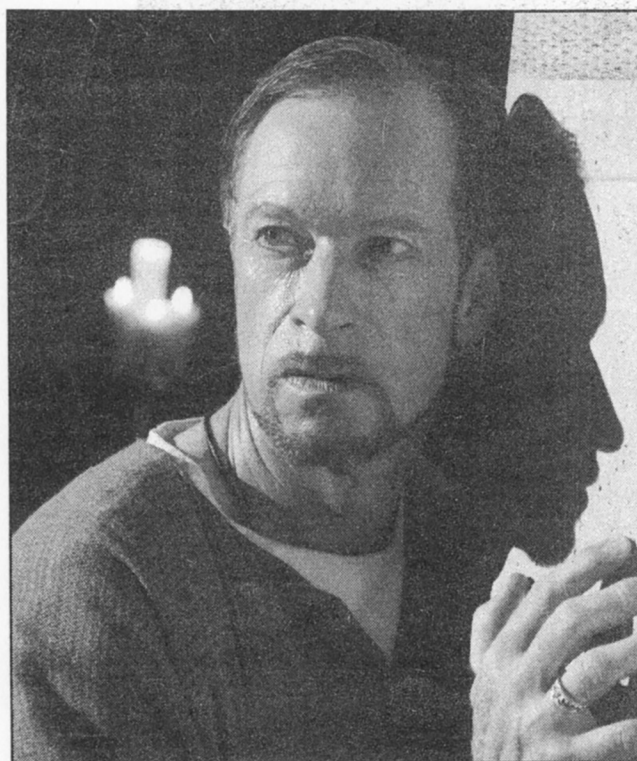
Brad Lussier, who plays Geoffrey, could make a career playing sinewy villains. He even manages to evoke a little sympathy for the cold and conniving Geoffrey.

Rachel McKendree is charming as Princess Alais, the pretty pawn in the match between king, queen and princes.

Rounding out the ensemble are Kyle Norman, who plays John as a cross between a buffoon and petulant dolt; Luke Norman as Richard puts the emphasis on brawn over brains; and Br. Stephen Velie plays the mild mannered King Philip of France, who bides his time and, according to history, eventually comes out on top.

Director Joanna Weir Ouston made a good call in forgoing phony British accents and allowing the actors to speak in their natural voices. In the program notes, she makes the point that although Henry was king of England, he and his family spoke French. Therefore, English accents are no more authentic than American accents.

Besides, it's the words of the playwright and the story they tell, not the accents of the actors, that give "the Lion" its enduring roar.



Brad Lussier as Geoffrey

### If you go...

**What:** "The Lion in Winter"

**Where:** Paraclete House, Community of Jesus, Rock Harbor, Orleans.

**When:** Dec. 14 and 15, 7:30 p.m. and Dec. 16, 3:30 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$30, \$25 for seniors (children under 18 are free). Call 508-240-2400.