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The Lion in Winter

presented by The Psych Drama Company
hosted by Theatre Company of Saugus

June 10 - 19, 2022

Co-directed by Wendy Lippe and Larry Segel



**The Psych Drama Company's Production
of 'The Lion In Winter': A Literal Dream
Come True
by Kilian Melloy**



Wendy Lippe, founding artistic director of The Psych Drama Company (Source: Courtesy of Wendy Lippe)

The Psych Drama Company's production of "The Lion in Winter" is a dream come true for co-director Wendy Lippe. Literally.

The play is a natural for The Psych Drama Company, which, under Lippe — a clinical psychologist and the company's founding artistic director — specializes in work that's character-driven, emotionally intense, and psychologically complex.

Written by James Goldman, the 1966 play (a hit on Broadway that was adapted into a movie starring Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn in 1968) is set during Christmas in the year 1183. England's King Henry II has allowed his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, to leave prison, where he's had her confined for years following a plot to overthrow him, and join himself, their three sons, and France's King Philip II for the holiday as he tries to decide whom among his sons he will designate as his successor — a tricky proposition, given that all three of the young men have an ambition to rule.

Lippe has previously played Eleanor herself and found that she had what she calls an "immediate resonance" with the character, which she finds isn't always present when auditioning for a role or delving into a character once cast.

"I loved Eleanor from the moment I auditioned [for the role] with [Roundabout Productions](#) [in Attleboro]," Lippe said. "The first time I read one of the sides at the audition, I just said, 'Oh my god, I have to read the other sides.' Eleanor of Aquitaine, a medieval woman, unapologetically defies gender stereotypes; she owns her iron-like strength, femininity, power, sexuality, cunning, vulnerability, cruelty, joy, capacity for love, her mistakes and her regrets. Playing all those facets of a woman living in 1183 is a dream come true for this woman living in 2022."

The audition readings only confirmed Lippe's impression of the character and the play, "and thankfully they kept calling me up to read with other Henrys. I was ultimately cast in the show."

But when the production's run was finished and the curtain came down for the final time, the play wasn't yet over in Lippe's imagination.

"Within two months," Lippe related, "I had a dream of this production of 'The Lion in Winter' done in an immersive context." In the dream, each character had his or her own uniquely furnished room in the castle — a space reflecting the mind and point of view of that character — in which audience members would also be seated. The play's dialogue would thus become both a process of internal debate and a fourth-wall-breaking interaction with the audience, as the characters sought to justify their claims and convince the onlookers.

In Lippe's dream, the play's dynamics would be enhanced by the physical act of audience members turning in their seats to see the other characters as they spoke their lines in turn — a subtle, but powerful, means of investing the audience in the play's story beats. What comes across as a verbal tennis match in the proscenium stage would thus become an immediately involving experience, because, Lippe explained, "the entire audience can see everything that's going on in every room. It's all about twisting, turning" — much like Lippe and co-director Larry Segel's ultimate execution of the play itself, which is at times comic, at times dramatic, built on a cascade of manipulation and one-upmanship.

The dream was so vivid and specific in its production details that Lippe immediately called upon Segel, a frequent collaborator, to co-direct. They agreed that the immersive "Lion in Winter" would soon become a Psych Drama production. So, when would Lippe's dream be realized?

The Psych Drama Company had its first full season scheduled in 2020,

after years of what Lippe called "plodding along" with a production or two every year or so. The season began with a critically acclaimed production of Edward Albee's ["At Home at the Zoo,"](#) but then COVID struck, leading to the cancellation of the rest of the season, including "God of Carnage" and "Stage Kiss." Now what?

The early rumblings of the immersive "Lion in Winter" enter stage left: The dream of the immersive production was too powerful to surrender completely. Rather than attempt a production through a video format like Zoom — which Lippe says she finds "deadening" — she opted for a medium less modern but more conducive to imagination: Audio drama.

"I really have fallen in love with audio dramas," Lippe disclosed. "I think it's a wonderful medium because of what it stimulates in terms of fantasy and imagination."

The [audio drama of "The Lion in Winter"](#) premiered in 2020, and two more Psych Drama audio productions followed in 2021: ["MacBeth"](#) and ["Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."](#) In addition to receiving coverage in the Boston Globe, Croatian National Radio, and other press outlets, the audio dramas were critically acclaimed with reviews in the Harvard Crimson, Motif Magazine, METRMAG, and, in full disclosure, this correspondent was one such reviewer for EDGE.





Zachary D McConnell as Geoffrey in Psych Drama Company's 'The Lion in Winter'
(Source: Will Stofega)

"Color Conscious" Casting

Even after the "Lion in Winter" audio production concluded, the dream of the in-person, immersive experience still had a grip on Lippe, who was only waiting for theaters to reopen to make that dream a reality. In the meantime, the nation's reckoning with racial injustice presented other creative potentials for her vision.

"We were interested and invested in doing color conscious casting — not colorblind casting," Lippe recalled. "We had the opportunity to cast a wonderfully gifted Black actor, Zachary D McConnell, as Geoffrey," the middle son, who takes after his parents by being a clever, and ruthless, manipulator. "But we didn't want to negate the actor's identity as a Black man by doing colorblind casting that ignored his race; rather, we preferred to acknowledge and celebrate his race by making it part of the character." Moreover, Lippe noted, "To make one of the sons Black was to make the explicit statement that one of Henry and Eleanor's sons was a literal bastard; and of course, in the play, both Henry and Eleanor have had extramarital affairs."

It turned out to be an inspiration that tied in well with subtleties that existed already in the script.

"If you follow Geoffrey's dialogue with other characters in the script, his dialogue actually works beautifully with this narrative that he's a bastard," Lippe explained, "as much as the dialogue between the other characters when they're referring to Geoffrey."

But could this be made an integral part of the play's historical fabric, and not just be a matter of poetic license? "Goldman's play is purposely peppered with anachronisms," Lippe noted, but "we did want to understand if the text could really support a mixed-race narrative."



Richie DeJesus and Norman Dubois as Richard and King Philip in Psych Drama Company's 'The Lion in Winter' (Source: Will Stofega)

A "Beautifully Gay" Connection

Upon researching the question, Lippe and Segel discovered that in the early medieval years, being a "bastard" did not necessarily preclude a person from claiming an inheritance. What mattered more was the status of the parents, not whether they were married. And just as the case is today, in medieval Western Europe, Black people existed at all levels of social strata, including nobility. Therefore, if Geoffrey was a child that Eleanor or Henry conceived with a Black noble person, then he too could indeed have a claim to Henry's crown.

"With this historical information," Lippe said, "Larry and I were so psyched, because we didn't have to ask for a suspension of disbelief with regard to skin color. We could go with this color conscious casting, with a Black man as Geoffrey, and introduce a really exciting element to our production that we had certainly never seen before in other productions of 'The Lion in Winter.'"

"This changes the subtext of some of the lines between Eleanor and Henry when they're talking about their extramarital affairs and their sons," Lippe added. "There are some marvelous moments now between Henry and Eleanor that relate to this issue. At one point Eleanor has just accused Henry of cheating on her with 'countless others.' Henry then says, 'What's your count? Let's have a tally of the bedspreads you've spread out on.' Eleanor suggests that there has only been one, and says that it was 'Thomas Becket's.' Henry pauses and then says with gravity, 'That's a lie.' Eleanor looks down, ashamed, and says, 'I know it.'"

Adding to the family complexities is the fact that King Philip II of France (played by Norman Dubois) is also Eleanor's stepson from a former marriage — and, in keeping with some historians' thesis that one of Henry and Eleanor's sons, Richard (Richie DeJesus), might have been gay, there's a hint of something sexual between the two young men.

"Our understanding is absolutely that Richard is gay and that he and Philip had a romantic relationship in the past," Lippe affirmed. "And we've really worked with the actors to create this beautiful, erotic scene where there's so much sexual tension."

"What I love about Richard is that he is this warrior, you know, this traditionally masculine presence," Lippe continued, pausing for a moment to note, and laugh at, her use of standard social gender conventions. But her descriptions convey Richard's strapping physical strength and aggression — "and yet," Lippe added, "there are these moments of tenderness where he becomes a little boy wrapped in Eleanor's arms, and then these moments where he's with Philip and a tender, beautiful sexuality emerges between them. It's just so erotic and incredible. And so, yes, we understand him to be beautifully sexual," Lippe said, "and beautifully gay."

Kilian Melloy

The Boston Theater Critics Association's Elliot Norton Awards Committee,

the Boston Online Film Critics Association, Edge Media Network's Associate Arts Editor and Staff Contributor, National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association, and The Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association.

[Read this article on Edge Media Network >](#)

While rehearsing the *Lion in Winter* when theaters were closed, an audio radio-play version was recorded, and that was streamed in December 2020. [Click here to read rave press reviews of the radio play](#), and an exclusive press interview including discussion of the journey of the show from radio drama to fully realized production.

[Visit the Theatre Company of Saugus page for more details >](#)

The Lion in Winter Performances:

- Friday, June 10 at 8:00 PM
- Saturday, June 11 at 8:00 PM
- Sunday, June 12 at 3:00 PM (matinee)
- Friday, June 17 at 8:00 PM
- Saturday, June 18 at 8:00 PM
- Sunday, June 19 at 3:00 PM (matinee)

ALL TICKETS = \$25

How to Purchase Tickets:

Advance online sales, using any major credit card, are open until four hours before the curtain time. If available, seats can be purchased at the door for the same price, using cash, check, Venmo, or PayPal, but no credit cards. Ticket prices are the same for all patrons.

[Advanced Ticket Sales >](#)



The Psych Drama Company's mission is to examine theatrical works through a psychological lens. We produce emotionally powerful, immersive, thought-provoking theater. With our world being as fast-paced and technology-driven as it is, the company seeks to hold space for the public to meaningfully reflect on their lives and relationships in new ways. Psych Drama's unique integration of theater and psychology facilitates the creation of that space.

"In particular, our approach to immersive theater activates strong feelings and physical reactions in audience members because they are no longer merely spectators. And the psychologists who lead post-show discussions are trained to hold space in ways that facilitate reflection and processing of those reactions; the result can be transformative. Immersive theater and psychology – a marriage that has the power to activate, hold, metabolize and transform."

– Wendy Lippe , Ph.D., Producing Artistic Director

[More About The Psych Drama Company >](#)

COVID Safety Policy Update

Although policies about wearing masks and providing proof of vaccination have been loosening up in many places, in theaters we still must ensure the safety of our patrons, members, actors, and crew, by

minimizing the risk of contagion. Our home at the Saugus American Legion is not large and social distancing is not possible.

Therefore we will continue to require our audience to wear masks inside (unless actively eating or drinking), and to be vaccinated. All the cast members of our shows are vaccinated, will be masked during rehearsals, and will be tested prior to performances.

This is especially important for this production as there will be immersive seating and audience and cast will be VERY close to each other.

THE PSYCH DRAMA COMPANY
PRESENTS

THE
LION
IN
WINTER

BY
JAMES
GOLDMAN

DIRECTED BY
LARRY SEGEL &
WENDY LIPPE



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The Psych Drama Company, Inc. is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to stimulating and fostering reflection and psychological mindedness through the performing arts. The Psych Drama Company provides education on a wide range of topics in psychology by combining immersive, experiential performances with post-show discussions led by mental health professionals.



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