

Too Close for Comfort

Far Away holds up a mirror to our fearful souls.

Not much of *Far Away* makes sense on the surface. Bits of meaning, enough to tell you that something is horribly wrong, emerge as you watch. There is a war on, enemies could lurk anywhere, and each character accepts his or her part in rooting them out with resignation.

British playwright Caryl Churchill wrote *Far Away* before 9/11, but you will think an American wrote this play right in the middle of the war on terrorism.

The play opens with a young girl, Joan (Elena Stylos) unable to sleep at the house of her aunt Harper (Barbara Embree). Through Joan's persistent, wily questions about what she has inadvertently seen during a walk outside, Harper reluctantly unveils the secrets Harper's husband keeps locked in their barn. As Joan's description of what she saw gets more horrific, Harper doggedly continues to defend her husband and warns Joan to ask no more questions or she will be branded a traitor.

Churchill's three loosely connected scenes are a little bit like an abstract poem that leaves vivid impressions and images in your mind but doesn't quite follow a plot.

John Schmor, the play's director and a UO theater arts professor, says he hadn't read a script this powerful in a long time. "If you can keep people worrying about who's on the right side and who's on the wrong side, they won't worry about who's getting killed," says Schmor.

Only 50 minutes long, *Far Away* creates a sense of bleakness through its use of minimalist sets. The lighting is to be truly complimented — it makes remarkable use of Lord Leebrick's compact space by suggesting at things impossible to include in the set. And the militaristic sound effects don't just suggest at things unseen but create an atmosphere of fearful foreboding: military helicopters fly low overhead, a train whistles while bustling prisoners away, and industrial sounds indicate workers chugging away at their jobs.

All four actors put in rather deliberate performances, drawing each sentence out clearly and pausing often between lines. Their intentional slowness adds to the surreal quality of the play.

Far Away continues at Lord Leebrick through Jan. 24. **CW**

A Roaring Success

The Lion in Winter sparkles at the VLT.

The Very Little Theatre has a palpable hit on its hands with *The Lion in Winter*. It delights in every way, from its witty, passionate cast to its sumptuous period costumes.

James Goldman, the Chicago-born playwright, offers us a glimpse into a family squabbling over the holidays. Except in this case, the dysfunctional clan coming together for Christmas belongs to the philandering King of England, Henry II, in 1183.

Joining the bleak festivities is Henry's estranged wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine (Janet Steiger Carr) who Henry (William Campbell) keeps imprisoned in her castle and only lets out for the holidays. There is Henry's beautiful mistress, Alais of France (Cate Wolfenbarger), some 27 years Henry's junior and raised by Eleanor as her own daughter. Alais and Henry's romance clearly causes the aging Eleanor great pain, though she disguises her anguish through sweetly two-faced comments ("You'll make a beautiful bride. I

wonder if I'll cry?") and through her constant baiting of the couple (she goads them to kiss in front of her, so she can compare it to how she imagines them).

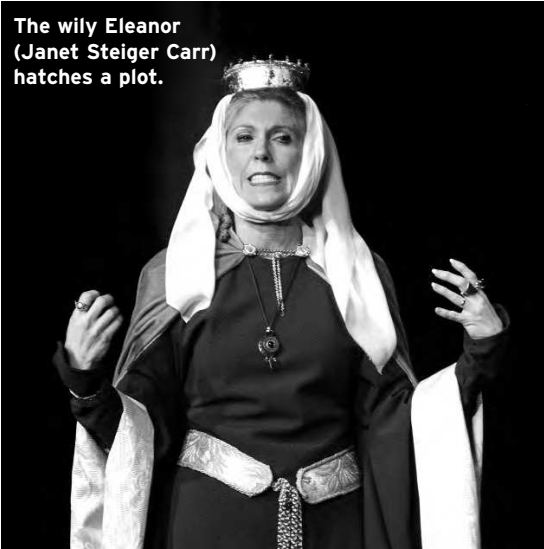
Adding to the holiday cheer are Henry and Eleanor's three sons, the warrior Richard Lionheart (Alexander Pawlowski), the scheming Geoffrey (Tadhg Simmons) and the whiny, demanding 16-year-old John (Nick Poublon), Daddy's favorite son. Eleanor calls them all "a greedy little trinity," for each covets Henry's crown.

Each member of the cast handles the parry-and-thrust quality of Goldman's sparkling dialogue with wonderful adroitness. Their comic timing never falters. In particular, Carr as Eleanor gleams on stage like one of her large ruby rings. Her beauty has a luminous but fragile quality, and one can sense that beneath her tough exterior she is ready to crumble. By turns sprightly, brutal, tender, wily, and aching-honestly honest, Carr makes Eleanor's wit bitingly funny and heartbreaking at the same time.

Campbell plays Henry as a charming but impatient monarch who is preoccupied by his land and power.

The VLT stage creates the vaulted interior of a medieval castle through metal arches suspended in the air. The royal costumes, whether draped, bejeweled, fur-trimmed or armored, give authenticity to the production without looking fussy. From cast to crew, this whole production is a pleasure to watch.

Directed by Reva Kaufman, *The Lion in Winter* runs at VLT through Jan. 31.—KJS **CW**



The wily Eleanor (Janet Steiger Carr) hatches a plot.

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