

# Review: Alberta Theatre Projects production of *The Last Wife* earns five stars

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**Myla Southward and Lorne Cardinal star as Katherine Parr and Henry VIII in ATP's *The Last Wife*.**

I must preface my review of Alberta Theatre Projects production of Kate Hennig's *The Last Wife* by saying James Goldman's 1966 drama *The Lion in Winter* is my favourite historical play.

Plays like *Murder in the Cathedral*, *A Man for All Seasons*, Beckett and Ann Bolyne, powerful as they are, always seem like costume dramas or history lessons.

For me, the genius of Goldman's play about Henry II, Elinor of Aquitaine and their three sons is more about real flesh-and-blood people than it is about towering historical figures, and that's what Hennig has crafted with *The Last Wife*.

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Her subjects don't get much loftier than

Henry VIII, his sixth wife Catherine Parr and his children Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, but in Hennig's hands they don't seem like wax figures in Madame Tussauds museum, or any museum for that matter.

They're not historical figures, but rather a contemporary family albeit a family with great power.

Hennig has set her play in modern dress and her characters speak in contemporary language and, as with *The Lion in Winter*, the play overflows with wit, humour and sarcasm.

It is also rife with political and familial intrigue and genuine riveting conflict.

The play opens as Catherine Parr (Mylas Southward) welcomes two guests to her home.

The first is her lover Thomas Seymour (Haysam Kadri), brother of Henry's third wife Jane Seymour, and the second is Henry (Lorne Cardinal) himself.



Katherine's second husband is on his deathbed so she and Thomas are excited about finally not having to hide their passion, but Henry throws a wrench into those plans by asking Catherine to become his sixth wife when second hubby John Neville dies.

Kadri is hilarious as his poor Thomas tries to process the news, especially when Henry tells Thomas he's being assigned to a post in Holland and can only return to England every three months with updates.

Henry knows Thomas is his rival so this is pure taunting.

Equally hilarious is Southward's attempts to lay out the terms of the royal union as she sees them.

Cardinal is wickedly playful because Henry knows Catherine knows what happens to people who try to manipulate Henry.

This whole preamble to the actual marriage could have played like a dull prologue, but Hennig uses it to let the audience know just how human these characters are going to be.

The fun is ramped up when Henry's children, his heir Edward (Lucian-River Chauhan), Mary (Helen Knight) his elder daughter by Catherine of Aragon and Elizabeth (Emma Houghton), his daughter by Ann Boleyn, arrive at the castle.

The power games between Henry and Parr, as he prefers to call her to wipe out the memory of his first wife, are replaced by all the intrigue the children bring to the regal relationship.

Henry has all but denounced Mary and Elizabeth now that he has a son, but Parr is determined to bring the women back into Henry and England's lives.

For this production, Southward is a force to be reckoned with.

She's spirited, determined, clever and sensual, but she can also be frightened, as when Henry wrangles with the idea of accusing her of high treason.

Cardinal's performance is remarkable in the way he shows the many sides of Henry.

The man was a serpentine politician, a blowhard, fierce, arrogant and stubborn, but he also had a great capacity for love as Cardinal and Southward show in what is best described as the play's beautiful seduction scene.

Like the mouse in Aesop's fable, Parr tames her lion of a husband by tending to the wound in his leg caused by the treatments he receives for his gout.

When she realizes he is just a big cat, her affections for him are not feigned, and the moment shows that *The Last Wife* is very much a beautiful love story, albeit a most complicated one.

Cardinal also shows us Henry's physical decline, as he seems to age before our eyes.

As the action progresses, Kadri's Thomas gets to be a bit of cad as he tries to play a kind of relationship chess game with Parr. We know this is another political chess game because there is even a chess board on set and Parr is teaching the young Edward how to play her version of it.

One can hardly call the pint-sized Chauhan a child actor because he holds his own in every scene with the seasoned cast.

It is a remarkably natural performance and one the other actors play off with ease and assurance.

Knight is all rigid demeanour, scours, icy looks and her dialogue drips with venomous sarcasm.

Houghton's Elizabeth, by contrast, is giddy, flirtatious, petulant and even precocious, and the rivalry between the sisters that would only intensify as they grew older is decidedly evident.

Glynis Leyshon's direction allows Hennig's script to soar as she moves her actors around the set carefully, but unobtrusively, and she handles the intimate scenes with appropriate sensuality.

This is a play about adults for adults.

Scott Reid's set is deceptively simple and austere and, like Leyshon's direction, its purpose is to showcase the actors and allow them to shine.

Heather Moore's costumes place us in a contemporary setting without being specific.

It may be now, but we're not certain where now or when now.

Chad Blain's sound design and David Fraser's lighting put the finishing touches on the production.

Wherever Hennig's *The Last Wife* has played, and it has become an instant must-do play in North America, audiences have rightfully embraced it and applauded it.

Like *The Last Wife*, its sequel *The Virgin Trial* was an instant success at the Stratford Festival earlier this year where it played, like *The Last Wife*, to turn-away crowds.

To miss this stellar Calgary production of *The Last Wife* would be foolish.

It's great fun and it will probably send you off to the Internet to learn more about Catherine Parr and her fated and fateful marriage to Henry VIII.

*The Last Wife* runs in the Arts Commons Martha Cohen Theatre until Sept. 30.

THE LAST WIFE

By Kate Hennig

Directed by Glynis Leyshon

Starring Myla Southward and Lorne Cardinal

At the Martha Cohen Theatre until Sept 30

FIVE STARS