

Shakespeare & Co., Lenox, MA

*The Contention (Henry VI, Part 2)* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Tina Packer.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

**“Small things make base men proud.”**

Tina Packer has staged one of William Shakespeare’s earliest plays and given it a first-class production that, in turn, gives the play a first-class interpretation by a group of actors, 10 of them, who are the finest in the company. Company stalwarts like Jonathan Epstein, Nigel Gore, and Allyn Burrows are in the play, each playing two roles, along with Bella Merlin (playing six roles), and Tamara Hickey as Princess Margaret, later the Queen of England and David Bertoldi as Henry and Bollingbrook. The show is an adventure with many memorable lines that you will know even if you don’t know the play, the most famous being “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” Though this history play is on the tragic side (aren’t they all) there is lots of comedy in it, so at just under three hours there is definitely something for everybody.



(Left to Right) Allyn Burrows, Kenneth Ransom, Austyn Williamson, Jonathan Epstein, David Bertoldi, Tamara Hickey, Bella Merlin, Nigel Gore, Jacob Ming-Trent and L. James; Photo: Nile Scott Studios

With its curious parallels to our political times in America this play has great relevance. It is easy to find stereotypes in the play that call to mind our own embattled leaders today, Jack Cade is a Trumpian blowhard while Suffolk is an intolerable Mike Pence (played by the same actor-Allyn Burrows) Th real-life Henry VI, (born December 6, 1421, Windsor, **Berkshire**, England—died May 21/22, 1471, London), was king of England from 1422 to 1461 and from 1470 to 1471. He was a pious and studious recluse whose incapacity for government was one of

the causes of the Wars of the Roses which Shakespeare addressed in later works. David Bertoldi plays the king with a softness and weakness that makes him both unappealing and sadly remote.



David Bertholdi as Henry VI;  
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

Henry has no capacity for romance and exhibits no joy at men in battle, physical or intellectual. Bertoldi plays him to perfection, peculiarly engaging our sympathy.

Tamara Hickey as his queen is another story entirely. Married at the age of 15, Margaret of Anjou was described as follows: *"This woman excelled all other, as well in beauty and favour, as in wit and policy, and was of stomach and courage, more like to a man, than a woman."* She was the perfect consort for a weak and scholarly king who later suffered from mental illness. Hickey brings all of this to bear in her performance, even wielding a broadsword and fighting the men who threaten Henry and their possession of the monarchy. She is also a passionate lover for the Duke of Suffolk, played by her real life husband, Allyn Burrows.

Burrows is romantic with Margaret, supplicant with Henry and dominant with other nobles, a varied role he handles very well. Nigel Gore brings grit and power to

the Duke of York. He lets anger overwhelm York at just the right moments and his ardency is a glorious thing to behold. In his second role as Dick, the Butcher he is both funny and little bit frightening. L. James gives a fine performance as Warwick.

Jonathan Epstein brings strength and reality to the role of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. This is a man who lives by convictions from which he cannot be swayed. Even at moments of great personal loss, he stays true to himself and his beliefs and understanding. Epstein gives one of his finest performances in this role. When he switches to Clifford he is equally sincere and genuine. As his wife, Eleanor, Bella Merliin gives one of her finest stellar performances. She is beautiful, emotionally moving and remarkably riveting as she descends the ladder of personal importance in her arena. Later she plays a sea captain, several rebels and a swordsman with equal effectiveness. This is a triumph for the actress.

Jacob Ming-Trent's Cardinal is appropriately smarmy, Kenneth Ransom does well with both of his roles, as does Austin Williamson. Considering their 23 different parts, being played in this production by a company of ten actors, a special round of applause goes out to Tina Packer for reducing the play from 44 roles and a chorus playing multiple parts in the original version. With such a talented company to carry the play, nothing seems to be lost in this transition.



Bella Merliin, Kenneth Ransom;  
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

The physical production is joyous; using so many of the possible playing areas in the Tina Packer Playhouse allows the theatre much needed flexibility. The gorgeous costumes designed by Kiki Smith flow and float and maneuver well. The scenic design by Sarah Edkins works and the lighting design by James McNamara was just right. Brendan F. Doyle's sound design captured voices, noises and sound effect choices very well. In addition Martin Jason Asprey's violence design rings true and Sheila Bandyopadhyay movement choreography looks good. The original song by Steve Deptula and Alexander Sovronsky is a nice one.

Tina Packer has given us a good show. It may not be a title that inspires thousands of people to go to the theater, but it should; it's that fine a work. Her attention to detail is exquisite and her character development is superb. Of course she has a great, talented cast to work with so I am not surprised.

+ 06/28/2023 +



A contemporary sketch of Henry VI



Jonathan Epstein, L. James;  
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

**The Contention (Henry VI, Part 2)** plays in the Tina Packer Playhouse at Shakespeare and Co., 70 Kemble Street, Lenox, Massachusetts through July 15. For information and tickets go to their website, [Shakespeare.org](http://Shakespeare.org) or call the box office at 413-637-3353.