

Harbinger Theatre, Albany, NY
Mrs. Packard, by Emily Mann. Directed by Chris Foster.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I am not ill, *Husband*, as you well know.”

On the same day that I learned about a woman being denied the right to save her own life by aborting a foetus that had little chance of surviving while also killing her I went to Albany to see a play about a woman committed to an insane asylum for contradicting her Calvinist minister husband. Both are true stories, one today in 2023, one set in 1864. Women have not held onto the rights they deserve and we’ve been set on a backward spiral that only good drama can eradicate.



Kerry Kazmierowicztrimm, John Scala, Kathleen Carey, J.J. Paul; Photo: David Quiñones Jr.

With what may be Emily Mann’s most relevant play, “Mrs. Packard,” Harbinger Theatre is showing us how little has changed in America since Civil War days. Director Chris Foster has cast this play with sixteen superior actors, many of whom play multiple roles, who gave us two hours of reality that may well have changed our attitudes about spousal abuse, medical misconduct and the reluctance of workers to stand up for what is right in this world. That’s a lot to cover in two hours and it is a devastating experience that must not be ignored. This play will only run for one more weekend and if you are reading this you need to make a reservation today and push them into an extended run of the play. Not only is the subject matter important, the cast is too good to miss.

Kathleen Carey, a Berkshire Theatre Critics Award winning actress, plays Elizabeth Packard. Carey has been wonderful before but here she is both dynamic and important, subtle and overt. She has created the impetus for other fine actresses to take on this role in the future. Perhaps it is that odd juxtaposition of history and politics combined with fine interpretive acting that makes her so very special in this part, but whatever and however it has happened she is delivering a real woman in a real situation on a small, community stage in a performance that

deserves Broadway exposure.

She has two men to play against, and I do mean against. Reverend Theophilus Packard, her husband, is played by Richard Michael Roe. If, seeing him, you have an impulse to boo that is exactly right. Roe has found the way play a cold man, an inhumane man who considers his wife to be more trouble than she is worth. With no remorse whatsoever he hands her over to the head of an asylum, Dr. MacFarland, expertly played by Kerry Kazmierowicztrimm who rivals Roe's chill with an emotional warmth that ultimately dissipates under her difficult attitudes. Both actors are ideal for their roles; you want to like them, but you can't.



John Quinan, Kerry Kazmierowicztrimm, John Scala, Richard Michael Roe, Kathleen Carey, Michael Schaefer; Photo: David Quiñones Jr.

Others in this cast of sixteen (I can't name them all) who give stand-out performances include J.J. Paul as Mrs. Bonner, a ward supervisor whose cruelty to other women is exceptional and Paul's performance is the same. Monet Thompson-Young is her absolute opposite as Mrs. Tenney, supervisor of the 8th floor ward for the impossible to treat patients. She is a sympathetic actress who should be lionized for her sincerity.

Publicly disagreeing with your husband's religious beliefs and the tenets through which he celebrates them is Mrs. Packard's crime. For this she is imprisoned in an impossible asylum and declared mad. Like the woman who recently sued for the right to abort her unborn child Mrs. Packard is put on trial to reclaim her sanity and the trial is played out during the course of the play. **Spoiler Alert:** The court in 1864 or 65 was a better one; the all-male jury declared her sane and agreed to her having been freed from the asylum imprisonment, though life took its toll on Mrs. Packard and her family. The play's use of trial testimony was well directed by Foster who kept his large cast moving and focused.

It is a revelation to discover, yet again, how history replays its errors. With women caught in the legal battle for their rights at this time, discovering this parallel through theater is just what we need to keep things in perspective. For their eleventh consecutive regional premiere Harbinger has brought us exactly what we need: a fresh look at a current issue through a dramatic perspective. This is what theatre is about and what it is for. Maybe if enough of you ask for tickets the company will be forced to extend the run of a play that needs to be seen by as many intelligent people as possible. And maybe as many dopes as well. We can all learn something if we try.



Kerry Kazmierowicz, Kathleen Carey;
Photo: David Quiñones Jr.

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Mrs. Packard plays at the Albany Barn, 56 Second Street, Albany, NY through December 16. Tickets are available at the door for cash or venmo or go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/mrs-packard-by-emily-mann-tickets-741096207707?aff=oddtcreator>.

