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BELIEVING

Amanda Seyfried Had a 'Complete Spiritual Awakening'

She called on the experience to play a religious leader building a political utopia in "The Testament of Ann Lee," coming out Christmas Day.

By Lauren Jackson

The film is based on the history of the Shakers, an offshoot of Quakerism that began in the 18th century. Amanda Seyfried plays Lee, the founder of the movement, who possesses a consuming hunger for the divine. She finds it inside a British prison cell, where she has a vision in which God is female. Later, in the bowels of a boat heading to America, Lee sees the supernatural in a storm. Then, on New England's marshes, she builds a pacifist commune as the Revolutionary War rages around her.

In each instance, her belief allows her to skirt ruin. It enables her to transcend.

Lee was born as a blacksmith's daughter in Manchester, England in 1736. She had four children who all died in infancy. Sent to an asylum, she communed with God to cope. She came to believe the path to salvation, her own and others', was through total celibacy.

On this belief, she built a movement. Lee preached the equality of the sexes and races. She also taught that her followers could be cleansed from sin through chanting and dancing. They became known as the Shakers for their ecstatic worship.

Lee was jailed in England for her heretical views. She and her followers later became religious refugees in colonial America. They lived together in villages, called each other brother and sister and referred to Lee, who they believed was the second coming of God, as their Mother.

Lee died in 1784, but her followers welcomed Black Americans as early as 1790, sometimes purchasing freedom for enslaved members. The Shakers grew to number roughly 5,000; there are now two known adherents.

The Shakers built one of the longest-running utopian experiments in American history. In "The Testament of Ann Lee," the director, Mona Fastvold, frames that experiment as a road that runs through hell. The movie explores how readily sanity can slip into insanity, order into chaos and idyll into war. It does so with a cast wearing bonnets who sing their spiritual longing into existence, beating their chests in unison. (Yes, it's a musical.)

Alissa Wilkinson, one of The New York Times's film critics, ranked "The Testament of Ann Lee" No. 5 on her list of 2025's best movies. "I've never seen a movie like this one, and can't imagine I ever will," she wrote. "It's a tale of beauty, ecstasy and religious devotion, uncompromisingly committed to Ann Lee's vision of simplicity and divinity, stunning in every frame."

I spoke to Fastvold and Seyfried about what they were hoping to communicate with the film. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

From ”The Testament of Ann Lee.”Credit...Searchlight Pictures, via Associated Press

Lauren Jackson: This movie is about the pursuit of utopia in the 18th century. So I want to start with — why now? How did you come across the story of Ann Lee and why did you decide to tell it now?

Mona Fastvold: I was doing research on my last film, “The World to Come.” I was reading about different utopian societies and new religions in America at the time. I found Ann Lee and I thought, wow, she perhaps is America’s first feminist fighting for equality for others, which I think is worth discussing now.

LJ: And Amanda, what drew you to this script?

Amanda Seyfried: It wasn’t the script, it was Mona. I think her devotion to something so profound made me just want to dive in with her.

For Mona, filmmaking and telling the story is like a higher power you surrender to, and it became that for me as well.

LJ: Mona, so many of your films explore religion, including “The Brutalist,” which you co-wrote. What is your religious background, and did that inform what you brought to this film?

MF: I was raised in a secular household in Norway. My only relationship to organized religion was going to church at Christmas with my grandmother a few times.

But I was always very curious about faith and spirituality, and I would seek it out. I would go to my best friend's Catholic services with her, because I really loved the incense. There was also a Taiwanese, female choir that would sing, and it was just the ritual of it all that I found to be interesting and compelling.

Later on, I would go to the Krishna temple and get some great, free vegan food, and ask them a million questions. I would always seek out: Is there a place that I could fit in within any of this? Turns out, definitely not.

The search for communal grace and spirituality has always just been constantly ongoing, and the closest thing I have ever found to that is through art.

LJ: Amanda, what about you?

I went to church when I was a kid every Sunday, and as boring as it was for me, it was still nice to gather and make music. I didn't necessarily agree with everything, but it was nice to be with my family and my grandparents and friends and something to look forward to.

LJ: As I watched you in the film, Amanda, I thought, 'This is not someone for whom spiritual experience is foreign.' What experiences were you drawing on to be able to embody Ann's really fervent spirituality?

AS: I didn't connect any of it to my own spiritual experiences as a kid. My spirituality really comes from deep exploration in my 30s, and deep exploration that came from pain.

I also was just connecting to the sheer fact that I was so in love with this woman and the opportunity to embody her even briefly in my life. And I truly just tapped into how feverishly alive I feel when I'm moving.

Image

Amanda SeyfriedCredit...Searchlight Pictures, via Associated Press

LJ: Can you say more about the pain you mentioned in your 30s? You became a mother then. Did that experience help you connect with portraying Ann Lee's postpartum suffering?

AS: I had lost myself a bit. I want to tie that to relationships and men, but it was more than that. And it was right before I had kids. And so I had the freedom and the time and the space to explore my spirituality in a different way with Pema Chodron, the Buddhist teacher, and meditate, climb mountains and just sit with myself, which I had never done. That really opened up something for me, like a complete spiritual awakening, for sure.

Then I ended up getting pregnant probably like six months later. And then my whole purpose in life shifted. Becoming a mother is incredibly scary. I have suffered from O.C.D. So taking the very general unrelenting fear that comes with being a parent, and then adding some mental illness on top of that definitely helped instruct how I understood Ann's grief.

LJ: I want to pause on this idea of mental illness. I spent a lot of time thinking about your portrayal of the movie's asylum scenes, and the visions Ann had in them. Obviously it's a trope that religious people are crazy. How did you choose to portray this line between sanity and insanity — and how belief can exist in that space between them?

MF: We're with her, we're so close to her the whole time. I didn't want to judge her and I wanted there to be an opportunity for the audience to say, OK, this is a reaction to her postpartum depression and pain, or this is miracle. It's up to you in which direction you want to go with this: Is this a vision, or is this madness?

LJ: I also want to talk about your choice in the final scenes. You present an intimate look at Ann bloodied, then follow it with her expressing hope for the future. She states, "All tyrannical and oppressive governments shall be overthrown and destroyed." It seemed like you weren't just thinking about Ann's time.

MF: We were shooting that scene on a really hard day in the world. It was not a good day to read the news. I don't remember what was going on, but there's something every day, isn't there?

We were feeling kind of down, and we were shooting that scene and rehearsing those lines. It breaks my heart that Ann Lee supposedly said at the time, "It's going to be all right, things are going to change."

LJ: In a way it seems like you're offering a reminder that the country was founded by people who believed a better world was possible and devoted their lives to seeking it.

MF: I think we look at our American history and there's a lot of shame and pain there, because there's so many things that are really awful, but there are also the Ann Lees. Even though she's flawed and a complicated person, there is so much light and beauty to what she was trying to create.

I mean thousands of people gave up sex to be in the community. That is how strongly most human beings yearn for communal grace and a space where people are treated with love and respect and with equality.

There is something really special about a place that was built by immigrants and a place where all these different ideas, thoughts and beliefs can exist together. That is a very exciting place to be.

Lauren Jackson is an editor for The Morning and the host of Believing at The New York Times. Cover Photo Credit...Lila Barth for The New York Times.