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Cover photo by
Bexx Francois
For The Times

DANOLIA AKINTUNDE / FOR THE TIMES; IAN SPANIER / FOR THE TIMES; JASON ARMOND / LOS ANGELES TIMES



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Photograph
of Amanda
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by Ian Spanier
For The Times

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The Contenders
Actor, Director

How ‘The Testament of Ann Lee’ got the Shakers moving

Story by
Ashley Lee

Photograph by
Ian Spanier
For The Times

The film, starring **Amanda Seyfried** and directed by **Mona Fastvold**, depicts the religious sect’s evolution through song and dance

THE TESTAMENT OF ANN Lee” stars Amanda Seyfried as the founder of the Shakers, a religious sect formed in the 18th century and known for both its pursuit of full social equality and its chants and dances designed to rid the body of sin. Using songs based on real Shaker hymns, the movie’s most technically ambitious and narratively gratifying scenes depict these vigorous motions as communal expressions of hunger, obedience, grief, devotion and ecstasy.

SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES



The Testament of Ann Lee



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

"You can't tell the story of Ann Lee without showing their worship, and we put a lot of thought into interpreting and creating that onscreen," said director Mona Fastvold. "We had lots of challenges — dancing in the woods with roots and holes, in a tiny room with hundreds of candles, on a ship with a real storm — and we only really had a half-day to shoot each one. But it was exciting to see how the constraints informed the movement."

The film's Shaker dances are rooted in historical materials like Baroque and religious artwork, written descriptions from

early believers and statements from various detractors. "Their critics described their 'wild' worship in detail — how they'd dance for days at a time and make all these crazy sounds — and we definitely used that," said Fastvold. "The most important thing was that all of the movements have meaning. It couldn't just be cool moves; it's prayer."

Celia Rowilson-Hall, who worked with Fastvold on 2018's "Vox Lux," created choreography that charts the Shakers' evolution. In scenes recounting their origins in Manchester, England, the believers reach upward with hunger in their eyes, lean on each other in collective caress and hit their chests hard, "almost like pounding the answers out of your body," she said. "These people needed to believe in something other than what they'd been given, so I wanted it to feel like a rave of excitement, youth and fervor. It looks 'sinful,' but it's actually very earnest, honest movement."

In later scenes, when the Shakers are established and actively recruiting in America, the worshipers march in straight lines and concentric circles, all while lightly tapping their shoulders, crossing their arms and looking straight ahead. "It's prayer through action, the thing they're going to do every day for their relationship to God," said Rowilson-Hall. "The movement doesn't have to be so big anymore, because the work has been done and there's a certain understanding now. Instead of searching for the fire, it's more like tending to the fire."

Illustrating these feelings of faith meant giving gestural directions to more than a hundred extras on set in addition to choreographing dozens of actors and dancers. Not to mention meticulously planning the movements of the camera, which at times plays the wallflower, observing the crowd from a distance, and at others moves to the center of the action, panning wildly as if it too is dancing.

"We wanted to show off the beautiful shapes Celia made, but we also wanted to make the camera one of the believers," said cinematographer William Rexer. "I took my iPhone to rehearsals, Celia pointed out moments in the dance that were important to capture, and we mapped out specific shots. It was that process, over and over again, of looking at how the camera could become an active participant."

One standout sequence — interspersing the Shakers' steadfast praise through the seasons of their arduous voyage from England to the U.S. — was filmed on the Götheborg of Sweden, a fully operational replica of an 18th century ship. The actors danced on its tight deck, chanting while leaning left and right to mimic the ocean waves; between takes, they changed cos-

tumes to repeat the choreography through wind, rain and snow.

"My plan for that day was to start dry and work our way into the wet," said Fastvold. "There was a real storm coming in, so we started with lovely blue skies that actually grew dark, with real rain mixing with our rain towers. We only shot in the rain once — the actors' costumes got so heavy when wet, but it had an effect as if they had steadied their sea legs in the storm."

At the center of these musical moments is Seyfried, executing the varied choreography with a visible, unwavering



↑ Actor Amanda Seyfried stars in "The Testament of Ann Lee," above. Seyfried with director Mona Fastvold, opposite.

conviction. "I was on the high school dance team because I enjoyed it once I learned it, but getting there has always taken so long, and it's frustrating when you can't remember a move," she said. "But the moves are so instinctual, grounded and human, so it's freeing to perform. And when it was time to teach the dances to the other actors, I was the person in the room who already knew them! That's the first time that's ever happened to me. It put me in a bit of a leadership role, which was fitting."

Between the spectacular group numbers are emotional solos, in which Seyfried depicts Ann's life-altering incarceration and heartbreaking motherhood journey. "The Shakers' existence is 100% from these experiences," said Seyfried, who sang live in most of the film. "When I was struggling because [the notes are] so high up in the register, that push was perfect for the work. It was satisfying as an artist to find a way to channel that discomfort as just another way I could honor her." 📺

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