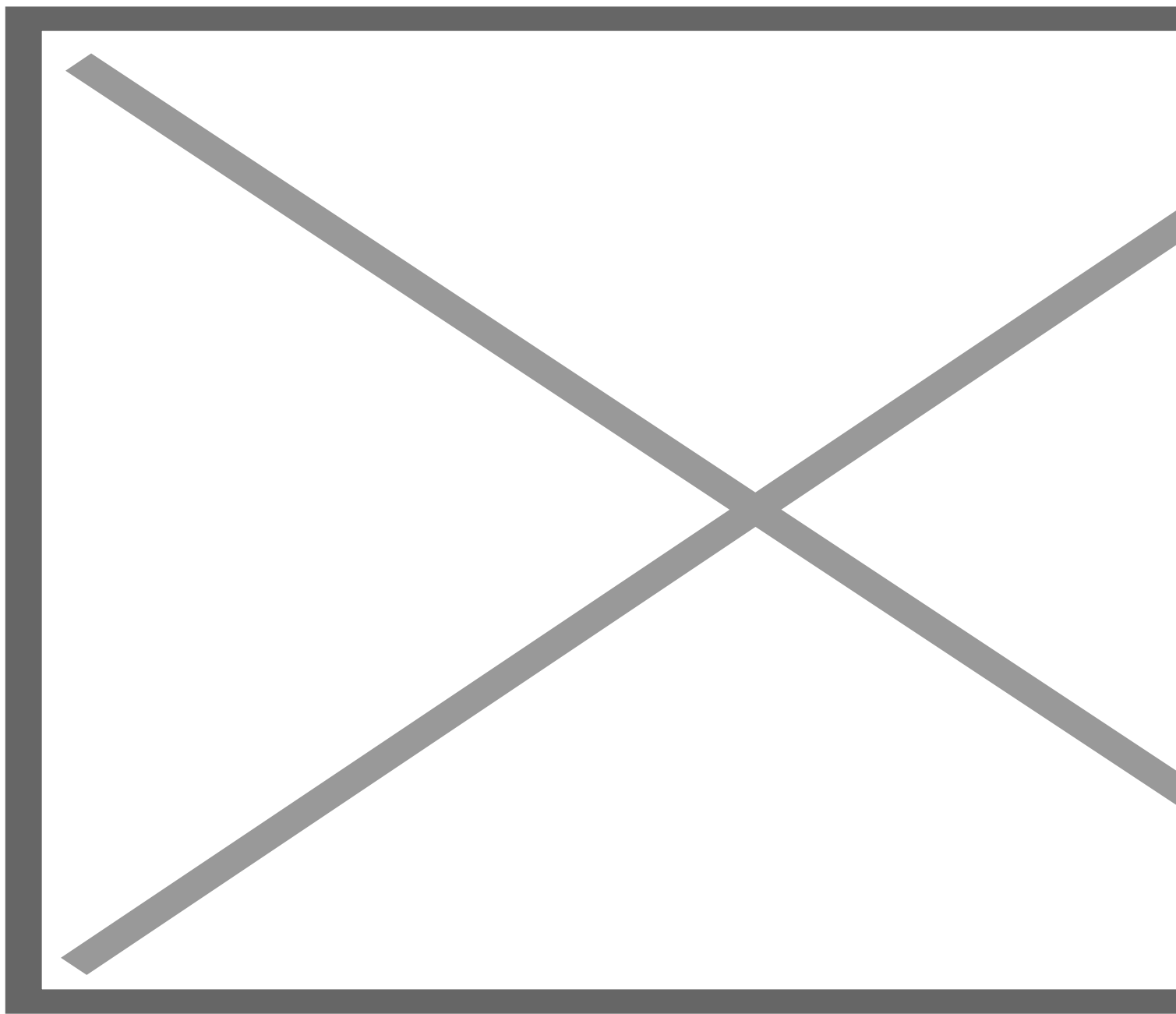


The heaving, howling, rolling, jumping ecstasy of Ann Lee

**I know “Shaker musical” sounds like a prompt at a bad improv class.
But Mona Fastvold’s new film is wild and wondrous.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Amanda Seyfried in *The Testament of Ann Lee* (Photo by William Rexer. © 2025 Searchlight Pictures.)

From the very first scenes of the wild, wondrous film *The Testament of Ann Lee* (directed by Mona Fastvold), I was not entirely sure what I was watching, but I was enraptured. Ostensibly a biopic about Ann Lee (Amanda Seyfried), the 18th-century leader of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (or the Shakers, as we commonly know them), the film might be better understood as an experimental musical, so tightly knit is its entire structure to song and dance. In the opening scene, and throughout the film, bodies convulse and shake; they move in improvisational rhythms that merge into patterns and repetitions; they heave and roll and jump and skip in forms that move fluidly between modern dance and old English country dancing. And they sing fluidly, improvisationally, in harmony and solo, endless hymns in love of God. The song and dance form a constant kinetic rhythm holding the film together, uniting the believers to each other and buoying their faith in the divine love that fills them.

This is not to say there is no plot to hold together the arc of Ann's life. The film relies primarily on early testimonies recorded by Ann's earliest followers, which are full of miracles, visions, and spiritual power. One of Ann's closest followers and friends, Sister Mary (Thomasin McKenzie), narrates Ann's life, often quoting directly from these early documents. Ann has been seeking and preparing for spiritual insight her whole life, most earnestly in the small home church of "shaking Quakers" run by Jane Wardley (Stacy Martin) and her husband, James (Scott Handy). Through ecstatic dance and song, she has opened her body and soul to whatever truth God will impart. In turn, her small community has been eagerly expecting a second coming of revelation, this time in the body of a woman, to complete the work of God in Christ.

During the first of her many imprisonments, weakened by lack of food and drink, Ann receives the full revelation of God. Her body is covered in feathery down, she experiences herself levitating off the prison floor, and she reports later that it was as though "the whole spiritual world was revealed to me." The spiritual truth that opens to her is this: The root of all sin lies in sex, and the only path to true union with God is complete celibacy, the public confession of sin, and communal life.

This could all turn to caricature, so balanced on the edge of ridiculousness is religious ecstasy for those outside it. Early detractors wrote of howling and deranged noise that could be heard up to two miles away. Scandalous stories were told of nudity and sexual impropriety as bodies moved in ecstatic frenzy in the close quarters of living rooms or through the woods in the dead of night. Mother Ann and many of her followers were arrested or beaten for blasphemy and anarchy. In the theater next to me, several people laughed nervously when Mother Ann began to speak of celibacy. How, in the 18th century or today, are we supposed to take this seriously?

The film understands how desperately those of us who do not share this spiritual fervor want to explain it away. Ann resisted marriage for as long as she could and then lost four children in rapid succession, none living to their first birthday. No wonder, we might muse from our psychological perch, she decided sex was the root of all evil. Once they found solid footing, her communities provided reliable food and shelter, and the ranks of the early Shaker houses were swelled by women fleeing domestic abuse and families unable to feed their children. *Who wouldn't be tempted to trade sex for food and shelter?* we ask with sympathetic distance. The Shakers preached gender and racial equality in a colonial system that was doubling down on patriarchy, slavery, and White supremacy. This, surely, was enough to attract those fleeing oppression.

All of these realities are woven subtly into the fabric of the film, and they are offered as part of the reality that made the Shaker world. But they are not offered as explanations for the miraculous impossibility of Shakerism itself: that dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands of people forsook the norms of their society to live in radical community and obedience to God's revelation at the word of an illiterate blacksmith's daughter. To understand this, the film insists, you must accept that all that talk of union with God meant something very real to those who felt it. In other words, you have to understand the dancing.

The phrase “Shaker musical” sounds like a prompt you might get at a bad improvisational acting class. But in a way that can only be seen to be believed, the dancing and singing are the beating heart of the film, and the deepest expression of Shaker spirituality. By the end of the film, I found myself wondering if there could be any other way to convey the ecstasy of the love of God that Shakers professed. How else do you show what it is to give your whole self over to communal prayer?

Time and irrelevance work wonders to soften the edges of prophetic fervor. Shakers themselves abandoned dance in worship by the late 19th century. Most Americans today, if they know anything about the Shakers, think about furniture. “Shaker style is having a moment” read a recent issue of *Architectural Digest*, detailing how you too can renovate your kitchen to follow the clean lines and timeless beauty of the Shaker aesthetic. *The Testament of Ann Lee* allows us to place the furniture and design within the larger scope of the religious faith of those who made it. “A place for everything, and everything in its place,” Mother Ann says throughout the film. This film helps us put Shakers back in the place of their own early history and deepest convictions.