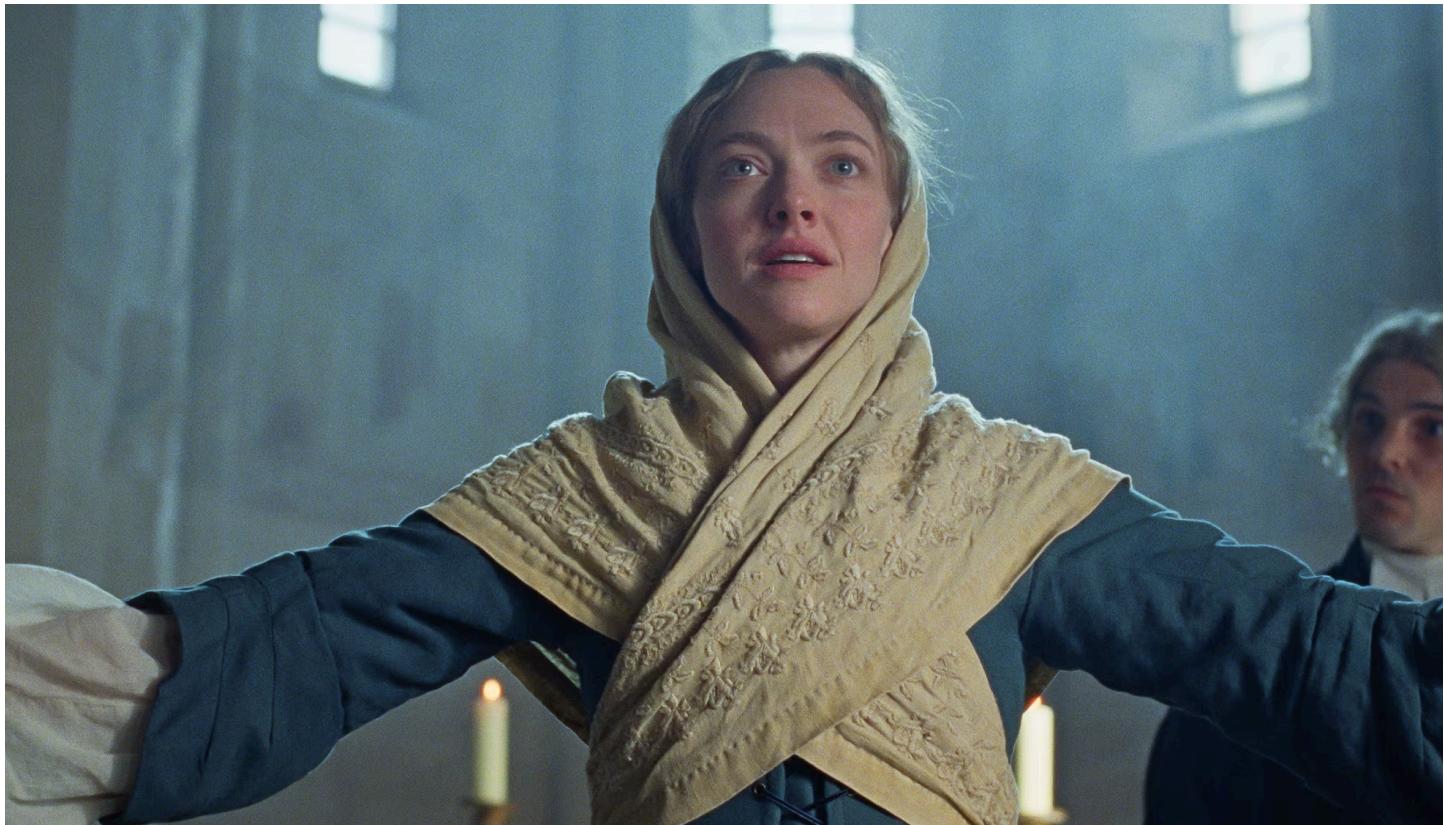


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Amanda Seyfried is our forgotten female prophet

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By Leah Dolan

"I do think this is the kind of character that every actor looks for, and we rarely ever get the ...



In "The Testament of Ann Lee," two young Shakers, disciples of revolutionary preacher Mother Ann's teachings, fail to obey their leader's primary command: Celibacy. Fresh-faced and newly in love, with not much else to look forward to in a dark, gloomy 18th century New York City, the pair sneak off into a wooden

outhouse and commit their religion's holy sin. Their prophet, the woman who brought Shakerism from Manchester, England all the way to the American colonies in 1774, played by Amanda Seyfried, learns of the insubordination. There is no flagellation, no words of fury or punishment. Just a calm instruction that the young couple must now leave her burgeoning church. "I'm very interested in that," said the film's director Mona Fastvold in a video call from Los Angeles. "Can you lead without ego? Can you lead without fear or intimidation?"

Ann Lee was born in 1736 and led the Shakers, a splinter Christian group that preached egalitarianism, communal living and celibacy, until her death in 1784 at age 48. The religious sect at one point had 6,000 followers. (Today, there are three registered Shakers in the US, with one person joining this summer).

They believed Lee was the second coming of Christ — a radical thought in the 1700s, not least because at that time in history "a lot of men valued their horse more than they valued their wife," Fastvold said. The Norwegian director stumbled upon Lee's story while working on her second film, the historical drama "The World to Come," a lesbian romance in the American frontier during the 19th century. Fastvold assumed lessons on Lee and the Shakers were taught in US schools as part of the curriculum — or at least common knowledge for most Americans — considering the rarity of a proto-feminist leader during that period. Once she realized no one around her had a clue who Lee was, she quickly set about planning how she could make the film.



The film is part musical, part historical epic — simultaneously mapping Ann Lee's life as well as the Shaker's journey from the UK to the US in the 18th century. (*Searchlight Pictures*)

Which is no small feat. Earlier this month, Kristen Stewart, who like Fastvold began her career as an actor but now also directs, told the New York Times she feels the industry is a “capitalist hell” with a penchant for sidelining female-centered stories in favor of big-budget studio movies. Did Fastvold agree with Stewart’s condemnation? “I did have a long conversation with her about it as well,” she said. “It is incredibly challenging to make these kinds of films.” Fastvold’s is an amorphous part musical, part historical epic that is a “cradle to grave” retelling of Lee’s life founding the off-shoot religious community, which also maps the journey of the Shakers from the UK to the US. It was entirely independently funded, and Fastvold, along with her partner, “The Brutalist” director Brady Corbet and producer Andrew Morrison, raised money incrementally — starting production as soon as they had enough people on board and building momentum from there. “Which is a very stressful way of doing it,” she said. “Plus, it’s a period piece and it’s a musical and it’s a biopic, which are the three things you’re not supposed to do in Hollywood.”

Speaking at a screening of the film in London, Seyfried admitted to “not understanding” what it was they were making at times. But “it’s impossible not to trust her,” she said of Fastvold. In terms of tackling Lee as a character, the technicality of an 18th century Mancunian accent, as well as playing someone who was born almost 300 years ago “was terrifying,” Seyfried said. “And that terror was attractive to me.”

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There were demands on Seyfried not just to sing live — her list of musical credits, from “Mama Mia” to “Les Misérables,” prove her abilities enough there — but scream, make “noises I didn’t think I could make,” and memorize huge, large-scale choreography for scenes of mass worship that had to look spontaneous and spiritually possessed. “It’s definitely the most obscure, abstract hole that I got to live in,” she said.

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Some might be inclined to label Lee as an early cult leader, with her extreme views on sexuality, somatic-style worshipping rituals rooted in dance and song as well as her desire to build a self-sufficient, utopian community outside of mainstream society. (She was beaten and accused of witchcraft during her lifetime, and arrested for treason in 1780 because she refused to sign the oath of allegiance during the American Revolution.) But Fastvold had in her mind the predatory stereotype of the male cult leader — a character we have arguably seen more on our screens this year than ever before, in films like “Opus,” “Honey Don’t!” “Blink Twice” and “Eddington” — and understood that Lee’s story was different. “For Ann it wasn’t really about her,” she said. “It was about creating this space, this community where everyone could feel safe and free to live in a different kind of way.”

She describes Lee's way of leading as "egoless" and "nurturing," a methodology Fastvold thinks about a lot in her own line of work. "I am the leader of my small community of 250, 300 people that worked on this film," she said. "The archetype of the director is absolutely male, right? It's this tough, domineering man who yells and shouts and everyone is so afraid of him... I don't look that way. I could never embody that role. I had to just approach it in a very different way." According to Seyfried, the cast and crew even referred to Fastvold as "Mother Mona."



Director Mona Fastvold on the set of "The Testament of Ann Lee," along with the film's cast and crew. (*Balázs Glódi/Searchlight Pictures*)

That isn't to say Lee was faultless. She preached strict celibacy, despite the fact she was already married. In the film her husband, a blacksmith named Abraham Standerin (played by Christopher Abbott), watches on in amusing horror as his sex life is sacrificed on the altar of piety. She lied to her community about being able to read and write for fear it would cast doubt on her authority, and was almost childlike in her black-and-white view of the world. But she was also a figure full of gray areas — something both Seyfried and Fastvold were keen to explore.

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"There are things that I definitely have a hard time identifying with or empathizing with," said Fastvold. "I was raised in a secular household. I don't have a relationship with religion in that way." In the film, it's suggested Lee's philosophy of abstinence comes from experiencing four traumatic childbirths in which, through a variety of stillbirths and infant deaths, no child survives. "I could understand how she landed at a place where she was like, 'You know what? I don't think this is for me.'"

The film never veers into parable, and Lee's reputation as a prophet is only interesting because of Fastvold's careful depiction of her as a human. "I love her in the end," Fastvold said. "But hopefully you are in dialogue with her ideas, instead of just signing up to Shakerism." If the registered members count rises any higher, we'll have our answer.

"The Testament of Ann Lee" releases December 25 in the US and February 20, 2026 in the UK.



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