



### The Creative Journey of APOSTATES, PA

As a creative person, it's a great feeling when an idea for a new project grabs you with force. That's how it began with my latest play which we'll present a developmental reading of at the Packing House in late September. I began the project now titled *Apostates, PA* in January of 2022. My husband had given me a graphic novel about the life of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Quaker abolitionist Benjamin Lay for Christmas and being a Quaker and a theater artist, I was immediately fascinated by the story of this unique man who created what we would now call performance art pieces. These performances all had one message directed specifically at Lay's fellow Quakers: owning slaves is a sin. Lay was one of the earliest abolitionist voices among Quakers. At the time, the most powerful Quaker leaders in Pennsylvania were all slave owners. By the very end of his life, a decision was made by the Friends Yearly Meeting to forbid Quakers from selling slaves. Lay was able to die knowing that he had made a difference.

At the time I read this graphic novel about Lay's life, I was looking for a social justice themed script for a one-act play to direct at my university, Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA), in the spring. As a playwright, between my enthusiasm for Lay's story and my need for a one-act play, I decided to take a leap and write a one-act biographical play of Lay's life.

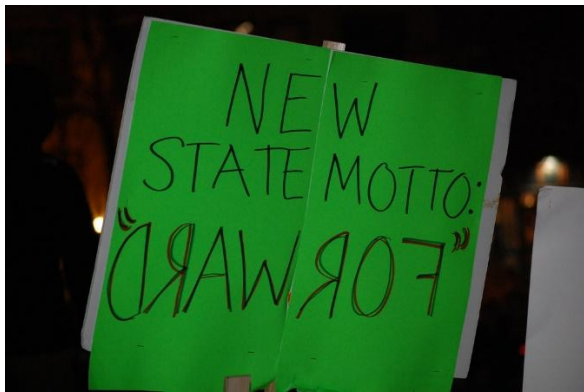


I subsequently read the longer biography of Lay by historian Marcus Reddiker as I began the process of writing the one-act. I finished the one-act in March of 2022 and we immediately began rehearsing for the staged reading at MMA. A fellow Quaker based in Providence, Bob Watt, joined a cast of MMA students to play Ben Lay. Our Humanities Department partnered with our Office of Intercultural Engagement to host the event and a talkback afterwards. The play offered up ideas for how and why people stick up for their beliefs and serve as allies for the disempowered.

After the reading, I knew that I wanted to scale the play up to a full-length piece. But I learned that Marcus Reddiker was actually co-authoring a play about Lay himself with a wonderful playwright named Naomi Wallace. Not wanting to compete with them, I imagined writing a modern day story intertwined with the story of Lay's life in some way. As an educator myself, I was very disturbed by the trend of states passing legislature to ban so-called "critical race theory" from schools. It felt like a not-so-subtle attempt to suppress the truth of America's deeply racist history and one part of larger agenda to defend white supremacy in the US.

When I was granted the artist residency with Eastern CT Center for History, Art and Performance, I saw a fantastic opportunity to focus on writing the play I'd envisioned. I started some research and preliminary drafting in spring 2023 but began writing in earnest in the summer of 2023 after my spring classes were completed. As a mother of three, including a one-year-old, it was not easy to find time to write. But having the residency and the expectation of a finished product helped so much in driving my focus and sense of purpose in bringing my ideas to life.

In the final play, the life of Benjamin Lay and the scenes I wrote for the initial one act play a back seat to the modern day story. Lay serves as a catalyst and inspiration for two teachers with very different backgrounds and levels of experience who come together with a common purpose: to push back against newly passed anti-CRT legislation in Pennsylvania (This is hypothetical. PA state legislature has had such a bill proposed, but not passed.).



Just recently, I learned that in our own state of Connecticut, some progressive teachers have come together to write a Educators' Bill of Rights that calls for "learning spaces for students and working spaces for educators that are free from harassment and intimidation," and emphasized the right "to teach in accurate and complex ways without censure or punishment." You can hear a recent interview from "Where We Live" on WNPR about this work [here](#).

I am so excited to share my work-in-progress with a live audience on September 30th. After the reading, we'll have a talkback where I'll invite audience members to respond to the play, ask questions and offer constructive feedback to assist in my further development of the script this fall. The work will culminate in a staged reading of the finished play in January. See you at the show!

*Sarah Moon is an Artist-In-Residence (Theater discipline) at EC-CHAP; Director of the Dye & Bleach House Community Gallery; and Assistant Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. Sarah can be reached at: [communitygallery@ec-chap.org](mailto:communitygallery@ec-chap.org).*