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# *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice and the Quakers*

*A Late Twentieth Century Perspective*

MICHAEL P. GRAVES

Quakers are remembered generally for their historical efforts to end slavery, reform prisons, improve the plight of the mentally ill, and other humanitarian goals. They are also recognized for their contributions to science, the industrial revolution, reform of banking and insistence on ethical business practices. However, they are not noted for their contributions to the arts, which are in fact minimal. With regard to the theatre, early Quakers would probably be numbered among Jonas Barish's "legions of hard-shelled, mole-eyed fanatics" who occasionally have filled the ranks of theatre-bashers (*The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, 2). Seventeenth-century Quakers were, after all, characteristic radical Puritans in this regard.

Today's Quakers are considerably less "hard-shelled" and "mole-eyed" and there are signs on both sides of the Atlantic that the Society of Friends has made progress toward making peace with the theatre. Indeed, one could argue that the situation has changed radically in the last three hundred fifty years, but there remains an ambiguity at best, an antipathy at worst, between Quaker thought and the theatre. This topic is too broad to be encompassed within the limits of this essay, which can merely open doors slightly to a subject that should be treated in more depth at another time and place. Accordingly, this essay will only survey and illustrate the changes in Quaker position toward the theatre and suggest some of their implications. Specifically, it will attempt two things: (1) to sketch historically the

development of Quaker attitudes toward the theatre prior to the 1960's, and (2) to document some of the changes in attitude since 1960.

## I

*The Early Quaker Experience.* Frederick Nicholson has written an excellent brief history of the gradual change of attitude toward the arts, including the theatre, among British Quakers (*Quakers and the Arts*). Unfortunately, there is no equivalent study of American Quaker attitudes,<sup>1</sup> but the history of American Quaker "liberalization" of attitudes toward the arts during the first two hundred years essentially parallels—although lags behind—that of our British counterparts. Developing on the fringes of mid seventeenth century radical Puritanism, Quakerism became for a period of time the fastest growing English sect. The essential Quaker message was that the Inward Light of Christ enlightens every person and that all can attend to that Light—manifested directly to individuals—and thus attain salvation without recourse to church tradition, creed, sacrament, clergy or even the Bible. They believed they were experiencing a revival of "primitive Christianity."<sup>2</sup> In their zeal to effect their apocalyptic vision they "cleaned house," so to speak, and reduced the Christian experience to what they saw as its essence. Nicholson observed: "...they announced the immanence of the Kingdom of Heaven and the immanence of the Day of the Lord... . Time was short; all energy, all faculties, had to be concentrated on this mission; nothing that seemed to stand in the way of Righteousness could be tolerated. 'I was moved,' said [George] Fox, 'to cry out against all sorts of music, and against the mountebanks playing tricks on their stages; for *they burthened the pure life*, and stirred up the people's vanity'" (*Quakers and the Arts*, 2, emphasis Nicholson's). Fox's view captured two of the early Quakers' objections to theatre: (1) that it was not truthful—it played tricks, and (2) that it represented at best a means of diversion from attaining the "pure life" of ethical and moral behavior and at worst, an inducement to corrupt behavior.

Fox's view was not unique. Space does not permit an extensive review of early Quaker writings on the subject, but in passing let me note that Robert Barclay, the most important early Quaker intellectual, roundly condemned the theatre in his influential *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, first published in English in 1678. In Proposition Fifteen, he asserted: "...these games, sports, plays, dancing, comedies, &c. do naturally tend to draw men from God's fear, to make them forget heaven, death, and judgment, to foster

1. Bacon (*The Quiet Rebels*) devotes seven pages of a chapter to "Quakers and the Arts," 162-168.

2. For an excellent scholarly treatment of the earliest years, which situates Quakerism in the ranks of radical Puritanism, see Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964. See also items by Barbour and Roberts, Bauman, Braithwaite, and Creasey in the "List of Works Consulted."

lust, vanity, and wantonness..." (343). Even the sophisticated and courtly, William Penn, queried: "How many plays did Jesus Christ and His Apostles recreate themselves at? What poets, romances, comedies, and the like did the Apostles and Saints make, or use to pass away their time withal? I know, they did all redeem their time, to avoid foolish talking, vain jesting, profane babblings, and fabulous stories."<sup>3</sup> Barclay and Penn, of course, were writing in the notorious era of Restoration drama, and their views do not necessitate a rejection of all theatrical endeavor, but that is precisely how they were interpreted by their contemporaries and later Quakers, and the influence of these writers was enormous.

*Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Quaker Attitudes.* The earliest Quakers' eighteenth century successors largely relinquished efforts to evangelize and reform the world, turning instead quietly inward in an epoch characterized by the development of "testimonies" that marked Quakers as "peculiar" people. A part of their "peculiarity," in addition to the well-known plain speech and Quaker gray, included rejection of games, sport, theatre and, in general, anything undertaken for the purpose of pleasure alone.<sup>4</sup>

There are numerous examples of Quaker writings that reflect the anti-theatrical prejudice throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on both sides of the Atlantic. An interesting instance not noted in the secondary literature is the *Remonstrance...against the Erection of a Theatre* by Bristol Monthly Meeting (England) in 1764. The document presents the standard Quaker objections to the theatre: promotion of vanity, disorder, lewdness, folly, intemperance, and debauchery; encouragement of wildness and idleness; injury to the light of religion; authority of magistrates weakened by a corruption of manners; and the influence of actors held as generally injurious to youth. What appears to be a new argument surfaces in the document tying the traditional Quaker position against theatre—that it is a time-wasting diversion—to the new concerns of the rising industrial revolution, Bristol being a major commercial city. The *Remonstrance* counsels: "It is well known that Commerce, under the Divine Blessings, is the great Support of this City. The chief Sinews of Commerce are Frugality and Industry. How much then does it behove [sic] to check the Growth of Profusion and Idleness, by discouraging dissolute Recreations, of which the Performers are a dead Weight on the Industry of the Community" (1).

Another illustration of the persistent negative teaching against theatre among eighteenth and nineteenth century Quakers, together with threat of "disownment" (the Quaker equivalent of excommunication) for theatre attendees, is discovered in perusal of books of discipline, also published as "Faith and Practice," or sometimes edited, collected and published in part

3. *No Cross, No Crown*, 1682. Quoted in Nicholson, 7.

4. See the works by Bauman and Braithwaite in the "List of Works Consulted" for good descriptions of the progression of Quakers toward "quietism."

as "Christian Advices." For example, the 1866 *Discipline* of Western Yearly Meeting (Indiana) advised:

...to watch carefully over the youth...to prevent them by affectionate counsel and brotherly admonition, from frequenting stage-plays, horse-races, music, dancing, and other vain sports and amusements...it being abundantly obvious, that those practices have a tendency to alienate the mind from the counsel of divine wisdom—and to foster those impure dispositions which lead to debauchery and wickedness. If, therefore, any of our members fall into any of these practices, and cannot be prevailed with by private labor to decline them, the Monthly Meetings to which they belong should be informed thereof, and if they cannot be reclaimed by further labor, should proceed to disown them (66-67).

*Changes in British Quaker Attitudes.* Even as the Western Yearly Meeting document found print, a movement was gaining ground that would call into question the attitude of blanket rejection of the fine and performing arts among Friends. Nicholson credits two essays published in 1859 with initiating the turn-around among English Quakers. Both John Stephenson Rowntree and Thomas Hancock endeavored to account for the decline in influence and numbers of nineteenth century Quakers, and both laid some of the blame on the old Quaker antagonism toward the arts. Nicholson noted that the "two essays, with their keen criticism of Quaker deficiencies, initiated a grand debate within the Society of Friends" (91). Matters generally move slowly among Friends, and it was not until 1895—thirty-six years later—after decades of grass roots Quaker accommodation to changes in contemporary British culture (e.g., the influence of the Adult School Movement, the relaxation of Quaker antipathy toward music, and the virtual disappearance of the Quaker distinct pattern of speech and costume), that English Quakers finally held a conference where the place of the arts became the essential part of the agenda. Nicholson points out that eventually, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Quakers eliminated their objections to acting, partly due to the effective work of a Birmingham Quaker, Wilfred F. Southall, who toured and lectured about Palestine accompanied by twenty-four amateur actors posing as Biblical characters (99).

At length, the 1925 *Discipline* of the London Yearly Meeting gave "official" recognition to the creative arts (105). Nicholson compares the 1925 *Discipline* with the image of an early nineteenth century Quaker found in Thomas Clarkson's famous book of 1806, *A Portraiture of Quakerism*:

To the Quaker of 1806 the drama is unacceptable because it "occasions an extraordinary excitement of the mind," and stage-plays "hold out false morals." In 1925 dramatic art is "one by which performers and spectators alike may gain a truer insight into human life, a deeper appreciation of its

meaning, and wider sympathy with mankind." In 1806 acting was an accomplishment of the Prince of Darkness. Friends of 1925, however, are advised to exercise "due discrimination," perform or watch drama in "appropriate conditions" and "make a careful choice to support good plays." There is also repeated the warning of the danger of "personating the character of others," for even in 1925 "we need to remember the possibilities of injury to the actor's personality which may arise from constantly representing the character of other persons" (108-109).

*Changes in American Quaker Attitudes.* On the other side of the Atlantic, American Quakers, although partially influenced by the writings and events of London Yearly Meeting, faced somewhat different circumstances and their narrative of change differs from the British account. We must bear in mind that in America, Quakerism was rent by schism for both doctrinal and socio-economic reasons, and that the very vastness of the geography mitigated against frequent contact.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, American Quakerism is not characterized by one voice, one Yearly Meeting, one chain of events. To further complicate the tale, the holiness revivals of the late nineteenth century, which swept through the Midwest, had a profound effect on American Quakerism, but virtually no effect on English Friends. The revivals produced, if anything, a stricter emphasis on self-examination and holy living, but also held out hope to many unchurched and non-Quaker seekers for salvation. As a result the ranks of Quakers in the Midwest swelled to the point where the traditional nonpastoral elder system could not meet the needs of the new converts. Thus several yearly meetings adopted a system of full time paid (or "released") pastors.<sup>6</sup>

Another circumstance that distinguished American from British Quakerism during the nineteenth century related to their differing systems of education. In both England and America, Quakers established their own primary and secondary schools. However, in America, Quakers went further and established colleges. Eventually, these centers of intellectual ferment and cultural scrutiny would play a role in the story of American Quakerism's accommodation to theatre.<sup>7</sup>

I noted above that there is no equivalent to Nicholson's study with respect to American Quakers' relationship to the arts, and this essay can do

5. A brief description of the results of schism on the face of Quakerism in North America can be found in Bronner, *American Quakers Today*, 11-31. See also Frost and Barbour, 169-182, and 234-36. The latter includes a chart of the "separations," including yearly meeting membership figures through 1982. For a reasonably contemporary description of typical worship patterns among the various Friends groups in North America, see Hall, *Quaker Worship in North America*.

6. For an account of the effects of revivalism on nineteenth century Quakerism see Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 192-201. See also Frost and Barbour, 203-218.

7. Frost and Barbour, 241-42.

little more than indicate the preliminary results of some potentially fruitful avenues of investigation, one of which is a perusal of books of discipline issued by yearly meetings in America. The *Christian Advices Issued by The Yearly Meeting of Friends Held in Philadelphia*, published in 1859, the same year as the Rowntree and Hancock lectures in England, repeats a section published in the earlier 1808 discipline, which had included this caution:

As our time passeth swiftly away, and our delight ought to be in the law of the Lord, it is advised that a watchful care be exercised over our youth and others in membership, to prevent their going to stage-plays, horse-races, music, dancing, or any such vain sports and pasttimes... . And as we are not only accountable for our substance, but also for our time, let them be employed in fulfilling our respective religious and social duties, remembering the injunction, "Work while it is called today, for the night cometh wherein no man can work" (45).

The situation had not changed appreciably by 1908—one hundred years later—when Friends in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware issued *Principles of Quakerism*, which included the following passage:

Friends believe that Christians should not go to see theatrical performances, first, because acting is essentially demoralizing to the actors. The fact that some men and women of the stage accept and follow the ordinary laws of morality, in no way weakens this objection. The demoralizing effect of the whole atmosphere and surroundings of stage life is recognized by many of those engaged in it... . Secondly, Friends are opposed to theatre-going because of its effect on those who go. Everybody condemns bad plays, but who shall say where the line shall be drawn? Most of the plays patronized by the better class of people contain passages which are objectionable from the point of view of strict morality. Add to this the unwholesome artificial mental excitement produced by watching plays, and the questionable associations into which play-going leads, and it becomes sufficiently evident that the practice is adverse to spiritual growth (194-195).

My own survey of American Quaker disciplines published prior to 1900 indicates that the majority of them either carried warnings about the theatre or strong admonitions to lead a circumspect life that excluded sports, wagers, tobacco, strong drink and stage plays, all of these activities linked in the same passage. The 1895 *Discipline* of the newly-formed Oregon Yearly Meeting is typical: "Guard watchfully against...such companionship, indulgences and recreations as will interfere with your growth in grace. Avoid such places as are low and demoralizing in their tendency, and all gambling, lotteries, theaters, the use of tobacco, intoxicating liquors, and all other practices of a hurtful or sinful tendency" (59). However, when the *Discipline* was revised in 1924, it included no direct mention of "theatre," but did

include, in another section, the following Query 5: "Are you careful to avoid all places and amusements inconsistent with a Christian character; and do you observe true moderation in all things?" (81). Clearly, there was a modification of outlook toward theatre which had moved from blanket condemnation to an emphasis on individual judgment based upon a moral framework and upon moderation. By 1931 D. Elton Trueblood could write: "At one time Friends went so far as to oppose the arts in private life, but that time is happily past. Friends now go freely to concerts and theater performances..." (*Problems of Quakerism*, 62).

## II

It is one thing to allow attendance at the theatre, according to the dictates of one's conscience; it is quite another to *encourage* attendance or *develop* within Quaker circles people who will serve the theatre and/or the church as playwrights, actors or directors. In other words, there is a marked difference between guardedly partaking as spectators and participating as artists. Yet this is what has begun to occur among English and American Friends since about 1960. In 1969, Margaret Bacon wrote somewhat enthusiastically regarding the Quaker anti-theatrical bias: "...this prejudice has disappeared as completely as snow in summer" (*The Quiet Rebels*, 168).

There are four substantial signs of the process of change with respect to theatre among Quakers. One sign is the development of a philosophical and theological dialogue among Friends about the arts sparked by the presentation of three notable Swarthmore Lectures among British Friends and continued with the publication of several other essays. Another sign is a list of practical theatre endeavors which Quakers have initiated on both sides of the Atlantic. A third sign is the emergence of Quaker playwrights and performers. The final sign is the beginning of substantial attitudinal change in the approach of Yearly Meetings and local meetings and churches toward the arts in general and theatre in particular.

*The Intellectual Dialogue.* The intellectual dialogue began with Kenneth C. Barnes' 1960 Swarthmore Lecture, *The Creative Imagination*, in which he explored the act of creativity in both science and poetry and argued implicitly against didacticism in art. He observed: "...in any activity that is in the nature of a discovery we cannot know in advance what the discovery will be, for this would be to make an absurdity of the whole process" (26). Later he asserted: "If we have faith in the unity of God and Truth we should have the courage to follow where truth leads" (27). Fifteen years later Barnes wrote with regard to Friends and the arts: "What should be said to Friends in particular? Certainly that they should release themselves finally and completely from the mistaken view that gaiety in living, in form and colour and conduct, is touched with sin. Also from any thought that the arts are on the circumference of the activity of the spirit. They are at the centre" (*A Vast*

*Bundle of Opportunities*, 118). Here was a respected Quaker scientist and artist joining the argument about the arts at its very core. Barnes continued his thinking and writing on the arts with the publication of *Integrity and the Arts* in 1984.

In 1978 J. Ormerod Greenwood presented a Swarthmore Lecture published as *Signs of Life*, in which he argued essentially that denying the range of experience found in the arts involves a denial of part of oneself. He also presented a positive image of “ephemeral art,” thus implying a concept of “art” and “artist” that is intentionally not elitist and more inclusive in scope. His view tended to move toward what might be called a Quaker view of the arts, which for theatre would mean a concept incorporating more reliance on improvisation and the widespread involvement of non-professionals. Greenwood’s wholesale affirmation of the arts has caused Quakers in England to dialogue seriously about the “dark side” of art, a topic which moves full circle to some of the core objections voiced by the seventeenth century Quaker writers (Benner, “Art and so on,” 233).

Laurence Lerner’s 1984 Swarthmore Lecture, *The Two Cinnas*, a sophisticatedly beautiful piece of writing dealing with the impulse to achieve political objectives counterpoised with the artistic impulse, argued that the artist is a kind of prophet: “What the poet can do for us here is to warn, to warn much more vividly and unforgettably than any of us can” (36). Lerner’s view of the artist was more limiting than Greenwood’s and seemed to call for a special recognition of the artist as prophet among Friends.

The Swarthmore Lectures by Barnes, Greenwood and Lerner, and a number of articles in *The Friends’ Quarterly* and *Quaker Monthly*, indicate a healthy acceptance of art, including theatre, by British Quakers as well as an attempt to dialogue about and come to grips with the relationship of the arts to Quaker belief.

In America the output of learned essays and presentations is not as great or as well known among Friends. A survey of the major American Quaker periodicals—*Evangelical Friend*, *Quaker Life*, and *Friends Journal*—revealed no recent articles addressing the issues raised by British Quakers. One issue of the American intellectual journal, *Quaker Religious Thought*, did address the subject of Friends and the arts. It included essays by Candida Palmer and Chris Downing that spoke to some of the issues raised by the British writers, such as Downing’s consideration of didacticism and its place (“Friends’ Relation to the Arts,” 28, ff.). Palmer made a strong case for the need for community among Friends with respect for the arts, a community that would make “Quaker art” possible, an art that not only universally reflects human aspiration, achievement and failure, but also reflects the unique Quaker vision. Downing, on the other hand, argued for an art that “doesn’t simply confirm us in our prior prejudices” (Downing, 29). This is not a frivolous issue among Quakers, who have been intensely practical and

occasionally didactic in their practice of spirituality. It is not surprising that many of the Quaker efforts at indigenous theatre have tended to manifest a distinctly practical and didactic hue. We turn now to a sampling of these experiments.

*Quaker Strides in Theatrical Performance and Experiment.* As interesting and provocative as the new dialogue on the arts has been among Friends, it is perhaps not as visible as the strides actually made by Quakers in theatrical performance. In Britain, 1978 saw the beginnings of "The Leavers," a London Yearly Meeting sanctioned youth theatre that employs street theatre, music, masks, dance, clowning, processional, improvisation, etc., to put together shows that are performed during the summer and are sometimes taken on tours. The eighteen year history of the venture has been evaluated with generally glowing praise for its accomplishments (Marsh, "The Leavers—An Appraisal").

Another British Quaker project, The Peace Action Caravan, launched in 1979, a year after The Leavers, developed a street theatre program that was taken to schools and colleges in order to raise consciousness about world peace issues, particularly concerning nuclear disarmament (Pyper, "Witnessing for Peace," 596-597). British Quakers have also developed programs such as "Questabout" and "Dramaquest," that use dramatic techniques such as involving young people in role-playing about Quaker history, thought and current social problems.<sup>8</sup>

In America, one of the most visible signs of a Quaker rapprochement with theatre is seen in the curricula and outreach of the Quaker Colleges. Most of the colleges have drama or theatre departments, and some have traveling theatre troupes.<sup>9</sup> Let me note programs at three of the most conservative colleges on the list of eleven, institutions most closely tied to their regional yearly meetings, places where one might expect the appearance of vestigial traditional Quaker objections toward theatre. Barclay College, Havilland, Kansas, maintains a drama troupe that has "provided a unique ministry to the churches through the dramatization of Biblical and ethical themes" (*Barclay College Catalog*, 1992-94, 28). The *Catalog* describes the troupe as "A performance group that employs plays, skits, readings, and

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8. See articles by Davison and Anderson on these topics in the List of Works Consulted. See also Darlene R. Graves, "User-Friendly Theatre," for a detailed description of the British Quaker Theatrical experience considered against a backdrop of the implications of Quaker spirituality on the nature of theatre.

9. A look at the catalogs of several Quaker colleges reveals that there are theatre majors, minors, traveling troupes and/or extra-curricular programs in theatre at Barclay College, Earlham College, Friends University, George Fox College, Guilford College, Haverford College, Malone College, Swarthmore College, Whittier College, William Penn College, and Wilmington College. Earlham College (Richmond, Indiana) offers twenty-three courses combining theatre or dance while Guilford College (Greensboro, North Carolina) lists twenty-eight theatre courses taught by three full time faculty members.

other dramatic forms to share God's love" (60). And yes, Barclay College takes its name from Robert Barclay, the early Quaker writer who had asserted that theatre "naturally tend[s] to draw men from God's fear"!

In Newberg, Oregon, George Fox College has for nearly three decades fielded a theatre troupe variously known as "Friendship Seven," "Inter-Mission," and "George Fox College Players," that has toured regionally and nationally with programs that included set plays, music and improvised drama. During the period 1973-1987, the George Fox College drama group, then known as "Inter-Mission," employed improvisational drama rather than set plays as the bulk of their touring material. Today, George Fox University continues the tradition of touring drama and maintains a rich offering of traditional on-campus theatre performances in addition to regular music theatre productions. The 1995-96 *George Fox College Catalog* includes a course called "Theatre As Ministry," the description of which calls to mind some early Quaker concerns about theatre and refocuses them within the context of ministry: "A consideration of theatre skills as tools for meeting human needs in essentially nontheatrical environments. Focus on drama as a service medium rather than as strictly an entertainment vehicle" (92). Fox, Penn and Barclay would be pleased.

Similarly, Malone College, Canton, Ohio, has also developed a respectable program in drama and was, until recent years, the location each summer of the Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA) conference. Malone College's *Academic Catalog 1995-96* lists a Theatre Concentration within the Communication Arts major and describes among its six theatre courses, an offering called "Christian Drama," a part of which deals with a concern that students "understand the unique problems of producing religious dramas in non-theatrical environments" (78).

Clearly, these conservative Quaker colleges, representing geographically diverse yearly meetings, have discovered ways to develop curriculum and activities in theatre that blend evangelical Quaker concerns with the performing arts.

*The Emergence of Quaker Playwrights and Performers.* Quakers have also begun to witness the emergence of a small number of writers and performers who have experimented with a variety of theatrical forms and performances styles. The improvisational theatre work of Leaveners and Inter-Mission have already been noted. In addition to these innovations, I should like to focus briefly on the contributions of four additional Quaker theatrical innovators.

Arthur O. Roberts, Professor-at-Large at George Fox College, teamed with composer David Miller, to produce two musical dramas. The first, *Children of the Light*, a moving and lively depiction of the earliest years of the Quaker movement, was performed initially to enthusiastic audiences at Bauman Auditorium, George Fox College, February 12 and 13, 1983, and

at the sessions of Northwest Yearly Meeting July 24, 1983. Between two and three thousand people attended these performances.<sup>10</sup> Roberts and Miller combined their talents again six years later to write and produce a sophisticated and prophetic musical drama on the life of Jonah, *Jonah ben Amittai*, which premiered at Reedwood Friends Church, Portland, Oregon, February 25 and 26, 1989.<sup>11</sup>

On the “representational” end of the theatrical scale, William C. Kashatus, a teacher at William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, has been performing “living history” for more than a decade. His Quaker Living History Series includes a choice of three twenty minute one-person performances based upon an interweaving of journal entries and other surviving primary source materials from the lives of George Fox (*Walking in the Light with George Fox*), Nathaniel Wetherill (*Nathaniel Wetherill's Conflict of Conviction*) and Levi Coffin (*President of the Underground Railroad*). As a professional historian as well as an accomplished actor, Kashatus strives to “present the people and events of the past as honestly and as accurately as possible. This involves integrating *their* own words and *their* own experiences, taken from letters, diaries, journals, or speeches, into the performance itself.”<sup>12</sup>

Another Quaker innovator, Rich Swingle, has been performing one-person shows with Quaker themes. His *A Clear Leading*, based on incidents in John Woolman's life, has delighted audiences across America and was featured at the John Woolman Forum sponsored by the Center for Peace Learning of George Fox College, and will be performed at The Lamb's Little Theatre in New York City in 1996. Swingle is a serious playwright and actor whose latest program features the characters Gideon, Lazarus, Jeremiah, St. Patrick, and Jonah—all “people that heard God's voice and responded in different ways” (Swingle. E-mail to the author. 5 April, 1996). Swingle adds: “I talk about what that process is all about, bringing these folk to the stage to show what it was like for them.” Swingle also employs a form of “sociodrama” in his performances which reaches back into the roots of

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10. David Miller was also the musical director; Richard Benham the stage director; and Joseph Gilmore acted as production supervisor. Lee Whitcomb played the lead role of George Fox in each of these performances. A number of audio tapes were subsequently sold, and the little song, “The People not the Steeple is the Church,” has been used at Quaker youth gatherings. *Children of the Light* was also performed in readers theatre style before a gathering of the Friends Association for Higher Education, at Friends University, Wichita, Kansas, in June, 1984.

11. Benjamin Dobbeck directed the production and Richard Zeller played the title role.

12. Taken from Kashatus' descriptive brochure, *Dr. K's Living History Programs*. Emphasis in original. William Kashatus also performs an American Living History Series, which includes such characters as Tom Paine and Abraham Lincoln, and conducts National Historical Park Tours. He may be contacted at Dr. K's Living History Programs, 3461 West Queen Lane, Philadelphia, PA19129.

Quaker thought and culture. On this topic he remarks: "I believe this process of bringing people up on stage to experience issues, rather than being lectured, is particularly valuable in dealing with issues of conflict resolution."<sup>13</sup>

These recent examples of Quakers who have experimented with various theatrical forms hopefully hint at a growing edge of involvement by Quakers in theatre beyond the threshold of mere attendance.

*The Beginnings of Change in Yearly Meeting Attitude.* There are other signs of Quaker rapprochement with theatre, but none so dramatic as the recent developments in Northwest Yearly Meeting, formerly Oregon Yearly Meeting. We noted earlier that Oregon Yearly Meeting changed from a blanket rejection of theatre in its 1895 *Discipline* as "low and demoralizing," to a position in the 1924 *Discipline* for the individual to take responsibility to observe "true moderation." New language was added to the 1970 *Discipline* to "encourage wholesome recreation and discourage those amusements which debase or foster the debasement of the body as the temple of God" (12). By 1975, a novel organizational scheme was adopted that created a new yearly meeting committee dealing with music and the arts operating under the Spiritual Life Board. The new committee was "responsible in the realm of both vocal and instrumental music, their composition, drama, radio and television, arts and crafts, and other creative activities by and for the church" (*Constitution and Discipline*, 46). Here, at last, was a proactive and organized effort to make the arts, including theatre, an active feature of the life of local Quaker meetings in the Pacific Northwest. There has since been no repudiation of the effort. On the contrary, the 1987 *Discipline*, now known as *Faith and Practice*, reported yet another organizational change that further enhanced the position of the arts. The change involved inaugurating a list of "commissions" at the yearly meeting level, including a "Commission of Fine Arts" with the following responsibilities: to offer "guidance to the local churches in vocal and instrumental music, in poetry and drama, in the visual arts and crafts, and in other creative activities by and for the church" (70).

With such an open policy toward the arts, it is not surprising that local meetings in the Pacific Northwest have begun to experiment with theatrical performance as a part of worship. For example, 2<sup>nd</sup> Street Community Church, an extension ministry of Newberg Friends Church (Oregon), is an example of a local meeting that habitually and intentionally incorporates

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13. Swingle has also written a play, *I Come and Go at His Command*, about Mary Dyer, one of four Quakers hanged by Puritans on Boston Common (1660). Another of his plays, *Big Fish Little Worm*, is a twenty minute one-person drama that tells the story of Jonah. Swingle often follows this play by a "hot seat," where he as author/performer answers questions from the audience in character. Swingle may be contacted at 130 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036-4078.

drama into the worship life of the meeting. A drama ministry team regularly meets to develop and rehearse dramatic vignettes to be presented in meeting for worship and to provide a dramatic *entré* for the pastor's sermon topic.<sup>14</sup>

Apparently, at least in Northwest Yearly Meeting, theatre no longer "burthen[s] the pure life, and stirr[s] up the people's vanity" as had so troubled George Fox in the seventeenth century, or perhaps this is a sign that Quaker ranks are being thinned of the more vocal "hard-shelled, mole-eyed fanatics" whose thin skin refuses to tolerate greasepaint.

### *Conclusion*

I trust this survey of the changes in Quaker attitudes toward theatre has indicated something of the sea change accomplished by Quakers over the past three and one half centuries. However, the history of the anti-theatrical prejudice among Quakers is still being written. Although the blanket condemnation of theatre is no longer present among Quakers to any appreciable degree, there persists a core of distrust despite the changes.

I mentioned at the outset of this essay that there remains an ambiguity at best, an antipathy at worst, between Quaker thought and the theatre. The ambiguity or antipathy surface from time to time in print and in rump sessions at Quaker colleges and at yearly meeting sessions. The points of tension, for example, revolve around the basic question about whether art is possible without conflict, and to what extent a sect that has placed considerable emphasis on peacemaking and achieving decision by consensus can participate in and employ a medium where conflict is the stuff of plot. Another perennial topic involves an updated phrasing of the "work for the night is coming" argument of three centuries past: whether Christians should work directly in the arena of social action or indirectly in the arena of the arts, or both. In other words, is the theatre a waste of time that might be better spent in missions or social work? Should Quakers' main theatrical concern be with "theatre as ministry" or "theatre in nontheatrical environments"? A related question is: if a Quaker decides to work in the arts, to what extent should the art be didactic? This type of question is still seriously posed, and, given Quaker roots, is entirely appropriate.

Another interesting topic that is beginning to surface among Quakers is the idea that Friends may have a particular, perhaps unique, gateway to theatre implied by the Quaker approach to Christian spirituality, which stresses the immediate revelation of God. For example, it may be that a theology of immediate revelation naturally leads to improvisational theatre just as it naturally led early Quakers to impromptu preaching. The Leaveners in

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14. For more information on this drama ministry program, contact Pastor David Conant, 2nd Street Community Church, 2nd & College Streets, Newberg, OR 97132.

England, and Inter-Mission in the United States, have to an extent operated on this principle. However, if each actor is a potential playwright under direct inspiration, what place would a director hold in such a system? How would consensus operate on stage?<sup>15</sup>

These are among the serious and significant questions that are suggested by this survey. Space does not permit their discussion here. For now, I will conclude with this observation: the Quakers have made remarkable progress in accommodating themselves to the theatre. If the next thirty years produces as much growth in the employment of theatre among Quakers as the last thirty, Friends will be hard pressed not to come to grips, self-consciously and forcefully, with the tensions that arise from the interrelationships among their history, their theological assumptions, and their current practice with regard to theatre.

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15. Some of the implications of Quaker theology relevant to theatre have been addressed in a provocative and entertaining way by Darlene R. Graves in "User-Friendly Theatre."

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