

O.K.— The Musical (Just Another Day at Mount Lebanon)
by Christopher Kline

O.K.

In 2014 I began working on *O.K.*, an ongoing project based around the history and lore of my hometown of Kinderhook in New York State. Kinderhook is a rural township about 220km north of New York City which is composed of mostly forest, farmland, and a few villages, with a total population of around 8,500 residents. The town is not especially known, even in the region, but is host to a variety of (often forgotten) stories and people which connect it, sometimes tenuously, to the broader history of the US and the world.

The most notable of these anecdotes is that the 8th US President Martin Van Buren (in office from 1837-1841) was born and raised there, leading to his nickname “Old Kinderhook”. During a language fad in the late 1830s in which misspelled abbreviations became popular, the word “O.K.” (a comic misspelling of “all correct”) came into use along with a slew of others. The trend and the abbreviations it brought with it would've all faded into obscurity, except that Van Buren's re-election campaign had tried to capitalize on the trend with slogans like “O.K. is O.K.!” and various “O.K. Clubs” of supporters sprung up around the country, bringing nation-wide popularity to the term. Though Van Buren is a largely forgotten figure, the term “O.K.” went on to become the most universally used and understood word in the world.

Oriented around the propagation of “O.K.” as a metaphor for the subtle permeation of small-town American idiosyncrasies into broader cultural forms, my project explores early cultural exports and anomalies originating in Kinderhook, as well as recent local developments there since post-industrialization. *O.K.* synthesizes and expands on the region's lore and attempts to construct a fresh overview of local history through the exposition of historical documents, videos, replicas, interpretive research, and collaborations with local students, craftspeople, filmmakers, and other community members.

Through the process of working on the project, I began searching for a centralized format which was flexible, inclusive, and relevant to the community of Kinderhook itself. While the project often manifests as installations, artworks or texts, the linchpin has become the creation of an expansive community theatre musical, developed slowly scene by scene over several years. In contrast to a history book written from a singular voice, the musical is participatory, developed with people from many different countries, bringing in widely varied understandings and visions. It is my intention that this method yields a musical that is well-rounded and informed, historically relevant and also entertaining, so that it may at once be reabsorbed into Kinderhook's own history while spreading its story to much wider audiences, thereby “completing the loop” in utilizing the metaphor of the propagation of “O.K.” itself.

Stories

The stories covered within the musical are wide-ranging, tracing the area's history back from the Mahican Indians and their first interactions with explorer Henry Hudson to post-colonial tales like Washington Irving's “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”, featuring the Headless Horseman. In addition to Martin Van Buren (O.K.), later notable locals to the area such as artist Ellsworth Kelly and police corruption whistle-blower Frank Serpico are appended to the story arc, as are more obscure creatures, crimes and haunted sites.

For the latest iteration of *O.K. – The Musical*, the scene takes place at Mount Lebanon, a nearby village which was once home to the central ministry of The Shakers.

The Shakers

The Shakers are a religious sect which had their central ministry at Mount Lebanon, New York during their height in the mid-late 1800s. Formally known as **The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing**, they were founded in 18th century England as an off-shoot of the Quakers and were moved to America following a vision from their leader Mother Ann Lee. Originally known for their transcendent and wild worship services which featured energetic convulsing, the Shakers later toned down their meetings after much public scrutiny and curiosity.

The Shakers lived communally, though separated by gender, living in women's and men's buildings and even entering their Meeting Halls through separate paired doors. Women and men were considered equals, in leadership and daily life, in line with their belief that God had created man and woman, and was embodied by the biblical Christ and later by his second coming in the form of Mother Ann. She was the first to instate a strict code of celibacy for all Shakers, believing that sexual intercourse was the greatest sin and what led to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Shakers grew throughout the 1800s solely by way of conversion and adoption. Many single mothers converted in that period due to having few other options for sustenance.

Shakers are known largely for their furniture which was finely made and simple yet elegant. In every task a Shaker does they see it as a labor for God and the greater good, and so craftsmanship and perfection was heavily emphasized. This also carried over to their architecture which was similarly well-crafted and practical. A popular misconception is that the Shakers, like the Amish, forbid the use of new technology. In fact, although the Shakers championed 'simple living', they were very innovative and industrious, supposedly claiming over 100 patents for their inventions. Historians credit them with inventing the circular saw, clothes pins, a commercial oven, and chair tilting joints, among others. Current Shakers use cellphones and other technology.

The Shakers found great prosperity in their farms, seed business and manufacturing of furniture. Yet competing with the Industrial Revolution proved difficult, and as their wealth diminished toward the end of the century, conversion became more rare. Adoption also became more difficult due to a new nation-wide awareness of child welfare, and membership decreased rapidly as older Shakers died out and child converts often left the community when they turned eighteen. The Shaker Village at Mount Lebanon was sold in the 1940s, and today the last four remaining Shakers live and work at another village in Sabbathday Lake in Maine. New novitiates are still welcome if they can manage to make it through a lengthy trial period.

The Shakers were ahead of their time in regards to their ideology surrounding the equality of men and women, as well as towards race. They accepted people from any demographic, adopting or converting many former slaves as well as American Indians. Similar to the Quakers, Shakers were also vehement pacifists, believing it wrong to kill other human beings even in times of war and were first pardoned from conscription in the US Civil War by Abraham Lincoln.

From 1837 to the mid-1850s the Shakers experienced a spiritual revival called The Era of Manifestations with numerous accounts of revelations and "gifts" which manifested as music, dance and drawings. It was also known as the "period of Mother's work", for they believed the revelations were delivered from the spirit of their deceased leader Mother Ann Lee. Despite their noble ideals and the

beautiful drawings and furniture produced at this time, British author Charles Dickens visited Mount Lebanon in this period and wrote the following:

“We walked into a grim room, where several grim hats were hanging on grim pegs, and the time was grimly told by a grim clock, which uttered every tick with a kind of struggle, as if it broke the grim silence reluctantly, and under protest. Ranged against the wall were six or eight stiff high-backed chairs, and they partook so strongly of the general grimness, that one would much rather have sat on the floor than incurred the smallest obligation to any of them.”

Worship services were focused on communal experience with men and women facing each other in rows or circles, lacking a central preacher. Their beliefs focused on communion with God, and early services were unstructured and chaotic, later developing into tightly choreographed dances and songs. Ecstatic worship could be seen as a way of dealing with unfulfilled sexual yearnings, their flailing and jerking motions exhausting them in trance. At Mount Lebanon they sometimes conducted “Mountain Meetings” at night in the forest. The focal point was a “visionary fountain whose waters could be seen rising to the very heaven of heavens by those with spiritual eyes.”

Musically the early Shakers forbid harmonization as they found it vain. Later songs include four part harmonies, but remained void of musical instruments. Instead songs are often characterized by clapping and stomping.

The song performed here at CCA Warsaw is a traditional monodic Shaker hymn called “Come Life, Shaker Life”:

*Come life, Shaker life,
Come life Eternal,
Shake, shake out of me,
All that is carnal.*

*I'll take nimble steps,
I'll be a David,
I'll show Michael twice,
How he behaved.*