

PRODUCTION PROPOSAL

# THE RETURN OF BENJAMIN LAY

BY NAOMI WALLACE  
& MARCUS REDIKER

DIRECTED BY RON DANIELS

STARRING MARK POVINELLI



**“A COMPLEX AND  
FASCINATING PLAY.”**  
BROADWAY WORLD

**“A POTENT PIECE OF  
POLITICAL THEATRE.”**  
MICHAEL BILLINGTON

PRESENT DAY.

BENJAMIN LAY – SHEPHERD, SAILOR, PROPHET, AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE'S FIRST REVOLUTIONARY ABOLITIONIST – RETURNS FROM THE GRAVE ALMOST 300 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, AS FEISTY AND UNPREDICTABLE AS EVER.

A 4FT TALL “LITTLE DAVID” CONFRONTS THE “GOLIATH” OF SLAVERY ONCE AGAIN AS HE PLEADS TO BE READMITTED INTO THE QUAKER COMMUNITY THAT HAS DISOWNED HIM AND WHO STILL BELIEVE HIM TO BE DANGEROUS.

NOW, “TREMBLING AT THE EDGE OF PLAYING GOD HIMSELF”, HOW FAR WILL BENJAMIN GO AS HE STARES DOWN HIS ACCUSERS?

**Drama Desk**  
**AWARDS**  
OUTSTANDING SOLO  
PERFORMANCE NOMINEE



**WELCOME** AND THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING THE RETURN OF BENJAMIN LAY, A FIERCE NEW PLAY BY ACCLAIMED PLAYWRIGHT NAOMI WALLACE AND AWARD-WINNING HISTORIAN MARCUS REDIKER, DIRECTED BY RSC HONORARY ASSOCIATE RON DANIELS, STARRING THE INCOMPARABLE MARK POVINELLI.

BENJAMIN LAY, SHEPHERD, SAILOR, AND REVOLUTIONARY ABOLITIONIST, RETURNS FROM THE GRAVE 300 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH TO CONFRONT THE COMMUNITY THAT ONCE DISOWNED HIM AFTER AN ACT OF SHOCKINGLY MODERN GUERRILLA THEATRE. THE PLAY IS CENTRED AROUND A HIGHLY SKILLED DWARF ACTOR IN A COMMANDING ROLE UNPRECEDENTED IN BRITISH THEATRE, SUPPORTED BY AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF SEASONED AND EMERGING CREATIVES.

THE PRODUCTION IS INFORMED BY YEARS OF EXTENSIVE RESEARCH AND HAS ALREADY FOSTERED PARTNERSHIPS WITH ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AS WELL AS ACTIVISTS IN THE LITTLE PEOPLE AND QUAKER COMMUNITIES. WITH AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AT ITS CORE AND ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES INCLUDING TALKS AND A BROAD PR CAMPAIGN, WE WILL BUILD ON THE IMPACT OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL, WHILE SETTING BENCHMARKS IN SUSTAINABLE DESIGN AND PRODUCING A WORLD-CLASS THEATRE PRODUCTION.

THE TEAM IS COMPLETED WITH SET CONCEPT BY TONY AND OLIVIER AWARD-WINNER RICCARDO HERNANDEZ; SET AND COSTUME BY ISOBEL NICOLSON; LIGHTING BY ANTHONY DORAN, SOUND DESIGN BY JOHN LEONARD, AND MOVEMENT CONSULTANCY BY TONY WINNER BILL IRWIN. THE PRODUCTION WAS PRODUCED BY ARSALAN SATTARI PRODUCTIONS.

THE SHOW HAS GONE FURTHER IN DEVELOPMENT AND WE ARE EAGER TO REVIVE THE SHOW FOR WIDER AUDIENCES.

JOIN US ON THIS JOURNEY AS WE PRESENT THE LIFE OF A MAN CENTURIES AHEAD OF HIS TIME.

**WORLD  
PREMIERE**

THE PRODUCTION HAD ITS **SOLD-OUT** AND **CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED** PREMIERE RUN AT THE FINBOROUGH THEATRE FROM 13 JUNE - 8 JULY 2023.



# “MARK POVINELLI IS AMAZING”

MICHAEL BILLINGTON



ADVENTURES IN THEATRELAND



PLAYS TO SEE



BROADWAY WORLD



CLOSEUP CULTURE



NORTH WEST END



REVIEWSGATE



LOUREVIEWS



PAUL IN LONDON

"LAY ... WAS NOT ALONE IN CHALLENGING A SYSTEM MANY REGARDED AS INELUCTABLE, BUT HIS TACTICS WERE RADICAL AND SHOCKING. TODAY'S ACTIVISTS CAMPAIGNING ON EVERYTHING FROM CLIMATE CHANGE TO HUMANE MIGRATION POLICIES HAVE MUCH TO LEARN FROM HIS LIFE, WHILE THE "QUAKER COMET" WOULD RECOGNISE THEIR DISRUPTIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WHAT REDIKER TERMS "GUERRILLA THEATRE". FROM THE SUFFRAGETTES TO MAHATMA GANDHI, THOSE WHO TAKE UP A GREAT CAUSE ARE LATER REMEMBERED AS SAINTS OR TREASURES, DIVESTED NOT ONLY OF THEIR BLOOD AND SUFFERING, BUT OF CONTROVERSY. LAY'S EXAMPLE IS A SHARP REMINDER THAT YESTERDAY'S IMPOSSIBLE CAUSES CAN BECOME TODAY'S INEVITABLE PRINCIPLES – BUT THAT THE JOURNEY IS OFTEN MADE THROUGH SHOCKING CONFRONTATION AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE."

## The Guardian

FROM THE GUARDIAN VIEW ON RADICAL PROTEST:  
A LONELY VOICE AGAINST SLAVERY



Seamlessly merging history with a daring poetic imagination, Marcus Rediker and Naomi Wallace's **THE RETURN OF BENJAMIN LAY** sweeps across the centuries: embodying in his own way of life the radical democratic ideas that flourished in the English Revolution in the 1650s, confronting the covetous and hypocritical slave owning Quaker elders in 1738, and inspired by the character of Bussa, the legendary Igbo leader who was killed during the slave rebellion in Barbados in 1816, Benjamin Lay returns from the grave, as passionate and as eloquent as ever. Much like James Nayler, one of the founding Quakers, who rode into Bristol on Palm Sunday in imitation of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, knowing that he would be imprisoned and tortured for this supposedly blasphemous act, Benjamin Lay comes ready to perform once again the "extravagant act" for which he was damned by the Quaker community.

Much as the nameless young man who stood in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, or Thich Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who set himself alight on the street in Saigon, or Sinead O'Connor who tore the photograph of the Pope in front of millions of viewers on SNL in 1992, knowing that the price she would have to pay for that "extravagant act" would be the end of her career, put themselves and their lives on the line for what they believed in - or, indeed, as do the idealistic young men and women today who glue themselves to the Speaker's chair or to the stands at the US Tennis Open in protest against climate change and the use of carbon fossil fuels - Benjamin Lay, "trembling at the edge of playing God himself", enjoins us to ask ourselves how do we protest against intolerance and injustice? To warn us that we may be facing the Apocalypse, and to joyfully invite us to fulfil the Biblical prophecy of the Jubilee.

**RON DANIELS**





**Q&A WITH CO-WRITER AND HISTORIAN  
MARCUS REDIKER**

**What drew you to researching and writing about Ben Lay?**

I first encountered Benjamin Lay while working on a book I wrote with Peter Linebaugh entitled *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Verso, 2000). The more I learned about him, the clearer it became to me that he deserved a book of his own. I published *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* in 2017 and around the same time began working with Naomi Wallace on *The Return of Benjamin Lay*.

**What are the key themes of the play?**

This play is about the one of the most fascinating historical figures no one has ever heard of. Benjamin Lay denounced slavery at a time when his fellow Quakers owned slaves and got himself disowned from the Quaker community for his efforts. The play explores how Benjamin imagined a new world in the midst of slavery, racism, violence, and inequality.

**Why is this play/ story relevant/ important now?**

Benjamin Lay is truly a radical for our times. He was a race-conscious, class-conscious, gender-conscious, and environmentally-conscious thinker and activist. The world has yet to catch up to the radicalism of Benjamin Lay, as I explained in this op-ed in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/opinion/sunday/youll-never-be-as-radical-as-this-18th-century-quaker-dwarf.html>

In a time of extreme violence, inequality, and planetary destruction, we need Benjamin Lay more than ever.

**Tell us more about your research and development process and the source material.**

Naomi Wallace and I began to work on the play in 2017, determined to bring this prophet back to public memory. Our labors were informed by the desire to create for a dwarf actor a role the likes of which the theatre world has never seen. We held readings in London, Paris, and New York as we developed the play.



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Tell us about your collaboration with the Quaker and little people community.

My work on Benjamin Lay unfolded in dialogue with the Quaker community. I am proud to say that my book played a part in the decisions by four meetings to re-embrace his radical spirit. Some of this history is recovered by Nic Rigby of the BBC:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-46334955>

I was also in regular touch with activists in the Little People community as I did research and writing for the book and the play, asking advice and getting feedback. It is a matter of pride to Naomi and to me that the actor who portrays Benjamin in our play, Mark Povinelli, is currently President of the organization Little People of America, the world's leading advocacy group on behalf of people with dwarfism.

Here is a review of *The Fearless Benjamin Lay* by Eugene Grant, a writer and activist in the UK dwarfism community:

<https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/04/the-fearless-benjamin-layactivist-abolitionist-dwarf-person.html>



**“AN INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL  
JOURNEY ALONG WITH AN  
AMAZING ACTOR”**

NORTH WEST END



**“A STORYTELLING  
MASTERCLASS”**

ADVENTURES IN THEATRELAND



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