

FROM MICHAEL MEARS It's a Sunday morning in late March of this year. I am about to go to Quaker meeting for worship. Not in England. But in Old Chatham in upstate New York. I am in the States for 7 weeks to perform my play about WW1 conscientious objectors, THIS EVIL THING, at 17 venues, some hosted by Quakers, others by Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren (two of the other historic peace churches in the U.S.).

After meeting there will be a pot-luck lunch, and then I will give a performance of the play followed by a Q and A.

When Joseph, my host, and I set out from his home, we find ourselves in a snow-covered landscape bathed in glittering March sunshine. The Meeting House itself seems to be miles from any human habitation but looks quite magical.



The venue for Sunday afternoon's performance.

We have an hour or so to get the sound checked and set-up for the play before we make way for the 11am Meeting for Worship. Only we don't get it set up. Connectivity and compatibility issues. Absence of an important cable. Absence of anyone who can help us out. I am concerned.

But Joseph and I take our places in Meeting and spend a calming hour in near silence. I can't help running through the play in my head – but am also entranced by the sparkling light pouring in through the large windows of this recently built Meeting House – all beautiful wood and beams.

Afterwards, Joseph makes calls. Various people leave the warmth of their homes and get in their cars to come to the rescue. And finally the sound cable issue gets sorted.

Audience begin to arrive, it's not a large room, and maybe 50 or 60 are packed in – Bob Elmendorf who has helped organise today's event is introduced to me.

'Don't shake my hand!' he insists.

(What did I do wrong? I think to myself.)

He beams a smile. 'I've been sick. I really don't want to risk giving you what I've had.'

The intimacy of the space makes for an intense performance, and afterwards Bob enthuses about the play and its subject matter- and I am chuffed that he made the effort to be here, having been so sick recently. At the Q and A there are C.O.s who stand up and speak – Vietnam War-era C.O.s - and some war-tax resisters too. It's very inspiring.

Back home that evening Joseph and his wife Phoenix serve up supper. Two other friends of theirs arrive, who saw the play, and while tucking into a delicious meal we learn a great deal about each other. One person at the table lives in an 'Intentional Quaker Community' which I am very curious to hear more about.

And I discover that two people at the table have served prison sentences, and not short ones, for withholding tax in protest at the obscene amounts of military spending in the U.S. One of them has also had his license to practice his profession revoked for three years, and being 'on probation', is also under travel restrictions.

'If I want to go to New York City for example, I have to get permission'.

I am staggered. Bertrand Russell, one of the heroes of my play, was stripped of his lectureship at Cambridge University, and had a travel ban slapped on him, losing his passport so that he couldn't lecture in the U.S., and being unable to speak publicly in certain places in the UK. Simply because of an article he wrote about the mistreatment of a C.O., and for public speeches urging peace negotiations to bring the war's carnage to an immediate end.

100 years later, I am having supper with people who are equally willing to take risks with their careers and livelihoods for the sake of deeply held pacifist beliefs.

And myself? Well, here am I, touring this play – an intensely thought-provoking 80 minutes, many people have told me.

But I go to bed that night, stars twinkling outside the window, moonlight caressing the snow-white fields, asking myself, what am I actually risking? To provoke thought and debate has its worth, of course.

But what am I doing that comes anywhere near the quiet bravery of the people I've met in the States these last few days?

[[You can read all the instalments of Michael's US blog at michaelmears.org]]

There will be more performances of THIS EVIL THING in the UK this November, including Friends Meeting Houses in Kendal, Pickering, Great Ayton, Brighton and Andover. In London on Sunday November 4th at Jermyn St Theatre, Piccadilly Circus, and Weds. November 7th at Sands Films Studio Theatre, Rotherhithe, and on Friday Nov. 9th at Brentford and Isleworth Friends Meeting House.

