



Thousands of Jews are forcibly relocated to the ghetto, bringing only what they can carry.

## THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

Near the end of the play, some of the troupe perform *The God of Vengeance* in an attic in the Łódź (pronounced “Woodge”) ghetto in Poland.

Ghettos were enclosed districts where the Nazis forced Jewish people to live in order to isolate them from the non-Jewish population. This ghettoization was a key step in the Nazi process of separating, persecuting and ultimately mass murdering 6 million European Jews.

Life in the ghetto was marked by extreme poverty, forced labor and widespread starvation. Over 245,000 Jews lived in Łódź ghetto, with an average of 3.5 people per room. In ghettos, Jewish people were stripped of their right to do business with those outside the ghetto. As a result, they were completely dependent on the hostile German regime. Other ghettos included those in Krakow, Kovno, Minsk and the Warsaw ghetto, which was the largest ghetto in Poland.

Over time, the Nazis deported Jewish people from the ghettos to death camps, like Auschwitz, or to internment and labor camps, where they suffered starvation, rampant disease and, in many cases, death.

## THE TORAH

Judaism is a monotheistic (belief in one god) religion. It is practiced by 14 million people worldwide. The Torah, or “the Law,” is its sacred text. In *The God of Vengeance*, the father has paid to have a copy of this holy scroll made to keep his daughter pure. When he throws it down the stairs, it is blasphemy — an act against God.



## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What role does theater play in society?

2

How do we decide if something is “indecent?”

3

Where do you see anti-Semitism today?

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

## RESOURCES

- “An Interview with the Playwright: Paula Vogel on *Indecent*,” Vineyard Theatre, 2016.
- Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel. “With Her Eerily Timed ‘Indecent’...” *The New Yorker*, 2017.
- “Yiddish.” About World Languages. [www.aboutworldlanguages.com](http://www.aboutworldlanguages.com)
- “Yiddish Literature in the 20th Century.” My Jewish Learning. [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)
- “Introduction to the Holocaust.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)
- “Klezmer Music.” Encyclopedia Britannica. [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com).
- “The Brothel-Owner and the Milkman.” *Jewish Currents*. [www.jewishcurrents.org](http://www.jewishcurrents.org)
- “History and Overview of the Łódź Ghetto.” Jewish Virtual Library. [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)



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## THE PLAY

First Setting: 1906, Warsaw, Poland

**Sholem Asch**, a young Jewish playwright, has just had his first play, *The God of Vengeance*, read aloud for the first time. Midway through, one reader calls it “garbage” and refuses to continue. Another tells him to burn it.

One objection is a love scene between two women, kissing in the rain. Another is that the play's characters, including prostitutes and a brothel owner, are Jewish. The readers, all Jewish men, fear the world seeing Jewish people in an unfavorable way. Hatred toward Jews is already rampant. They don't want to fuel the fire.

Another person, **Lemml**, loves the play. He is a tailor from the country and theater immediately changes his life.

Thus begins “the true story of a little Jewish play.”

As *The God of Vengeance* tours Europe, a devoted troupe of actors performs for sold-out crowds. However, when it transfers to Broadway in 1923, trouble begins.

The play is translated from Yiddish to English. Obscenity laws (see article) threaten the play's performances. Meanwhile, in Europe, Jewish people are being killed in **pogroms** and the Holocaust is beginning.

Inspired by these true events, *Indecent* is a story of the power of theater, censorship, identity, courage and love.

**pogroms** — a mob attack, sometimes condoned by authorities, against a specific group of people

TIMELESS MASTERPIECE

# INDECENT



BY PAULA VOGEL

DIRECTED BY ERIC ROSEN

CO-PRODUCTION WITH KANSAS CITY REPERTORY THEATRE AND BALTIMORE CENTER STAGE

KREEGER THEATER | NOVEMBER 23 – DECEMBER 30, 2018

“Listen to me: about your manuscript — BURN IT.”

— Peretz, *Indecent*

Anonymous support for *Indecent* has been provided by a life-long Washingtonian and friend of Arena Stage

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## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

“The purpose of theater is to bring into public that which is kept offstage.”



Paula Vogel

Born on November 16, 1951, Paula Vogel has always been a playwright with an interest in the wide breadth of humanity.

In 1992, she came to national prominence with her play *The Baltimore Waltz*, a play about AIDS. Five years later, she won a Pulitzer Prize for her play *How I Learned to Drive*, which examined the impact of sexual abuse.

She spent the bulk of her academic career at Brown University, where she oversaw the playwriting program and mentored future Pulitzer Prize winners. From 2008 to 2012, Vogel was the Eugene O'Neill Professor of Playwriting and the department chair at Yale School of Drama.

When she was a graduate student at Cornell, her professor handed her a copy of *The God of Vengeance*. An out, feminist playwright with a Jewish father, the play had special meaning. Her collaborator on this piece, Rebecca Taichman, also discovered the story of *The God of Vengeance* when she was working on her thesis at Yale. The project took them seven years and over 40 drafts.

## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

It is important to remember that *Indecent* is not about people from olden days or people who are different from the people in the audience. Ensuring this understanding is part of director Eric Rosen's mission.

“We're living in a time which many of us feel a kind of uncertainty about where we will be safe as LGBT people, where will we be safe as people of color, where will we be safe as immigrants — and despite that, the characters in this world are fiercely and passionately committed to making plays. And, if we frame it as a Holocaust play, we make it a sad story about some people who died. If we frame it as a real incarnation of a real culture that was as vibrant and interesting and challenging and fraught and scary and fun and sexy as ours — then, we win.”



Photo of the cast of *Indecent* by Tony Powell.

## MEET THE THEATER TROUPE

*Indecent* is told by a dead theater troupe that rises from the ashes at the beginning of the play. In the tradition of early theater troupes, they are accompanied by a trio of musicians. These performers are the actors in *The God of Vengeance* and also act out its true story.

Two actors, “The Elders,” portray all the real and fictional characters that are older and sometimes wiser. Two actors, “The Middles,” are the scarred, scheming characters in their prime. Finally, two actors, “The Ingénues,” play all the young people. Then, there is Lemml, who is the stage manager and narrator.

## YIDDISH: THE LANGUAGE OF INDECENT

**Peretz:** Yiddish is our mother tongue. The language of our myths, our songs...

**Asch:** Our streets. Our gutters. Our desire.

Yiddish is an international language steeped in the culture of the eastern and central European Jews who created it. It is a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic and Romance languages and has been spoken since the 11th century.

It is also a literary language, used by Jewish writers like Sholem Asch, often telling stories of Jewish people. In the early 1900s I. L. Peretz encouraged Yiddish writers and made his home a place for them to gather and share work. He is called the father of modern Yiddish literature. There is also a fine tradition of professional Yiddish theater.

When Yiddish is and is not spoken is an important part of *Indecent*. Although the characters often perform *The God of Vengeance* and speak to each other in Yiddish, most of the play is written in English so the audience can understand it. The dramatic convention of the play is that when characters speak English without accents, they are speaking Yiddish. When they speak with accents, they are speaking in English.

**SIDE BAR:** Prior to the Holocaust, there were about 11 million Yiddish speakers among 17 million Jewish people worldwide. The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 6 million Jews from 1939–1945. The 6 million European Jews killed in the Holocaust compromised most of the world's Yiddish speakers. Their death dealt the language a near mortal blow. Today, Yiddish is spoken mostly in Israel, the U.S. and Russia by about 860,000 people.

## OBSCENITY LAWS & THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Before the 1923 Broadway premiere, performers and producers of *The God of Vengeance* knew the show could be stopped for being immoral under New York State's obscenity laws.

“Obscenity” is a legal term that can refer to offensive sexual, religious or treasonous material. Writing or art that is deemed “obscene” is outlawed and not protected by the First Amendment. One difficulty of obscenity laws is that the definition of obscenity differs from person to person.

The campaign against *The God of Vengeance* was led by Rabbi Joseph Silverman. Silverman objected to the characters — all Jewish — being brothel owners, hypocrites and prostitutes. Jews were already victims of anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish prejudice and discrimination). Silverman and others did not want a mainstream, Broadway audience to see Jewish people in the worst possible light or to affirm negative stereotypes.

In an article in *Jewish Currents*, Susan Reimer-Torn gives this context: “This was during a time when the fate of Jewish immigration to the U.S. was being debated in Washington...The Jewish opposition to the play might best be understood in contemporary terms by recasting the setting and characters: Imagine the effect today of a well-crafted play about Muslims that featured honor killings, just as the travel ban and immigration quotas are being debated on Capitol Hill. Does the right to free speech and artistic expression override the damage such a portrayal might inadvertently cause?”



The original Broadway cast of *The God of Vengeance*



Klezmer musicians

## A PLAY WITH MUSIC

“Every piece I write starts with music,” playwright Paula Vogel said in an interview with Vineyard Theatre.

*Indecent* is a play with music. It includes traditional Yiddish folk songs and original arrangements written for the production. Songs that were popular in the different time periods of the play are also featured.

Vogel said, “There's an unfolding of time that feels effortless...The music takes us by the hand and hurtles us through time.”

*Indecent's* music director at Arena Stage, Alexander Sovronsky, said, “The music is a cultural touchstone and a theatrical convention. It serves both functions.”

A trio of Klezmer musicians help create the atmosphere, tell the story and celebrate music in Jewish and theater traditions. Klezmer means “vessel of music” and is a genre of Jewish music. It usually features violin backed by a bass or cello and sometimes clarinet, flute or other instruments.

In early theater, musicians traveled with actors as part of the troupe. *Indecent's* live music, supported by the actors, is in keeping with this tradition.



### Listen

Listen to a sample of Klezmer music via “The Soul of Jewish Music.”

<https://goo.gl/LXmQ6d>



### READ

Sholem Asch was finally compelled to write an open letter defending his play. Read the complete letter here: <https://goo.gl/GEVpvM>