



DENVER CENTER  
FOR THE  
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# INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



**INDECENT**

## SYNOPSIS: *INDECENT*

Pulitzer-winning playwright Paula Vogel tells the emotional true story of Sholem Asch's groundbreaking play, *God of Vengeance*, and the passionate artists who risked everything to share it. Many European productions of the provocative Yiddish story were highly successful in the early 1900s – even with a same-sex romance at its center. But when its Broadway debut was deemed “indecent,” it begged the question of who gets to decide what is considered art and what deserves to be censored. Follow the explosive tale through scandals, war and rewrites as a defiant, dedicated few refused to let it be silenced.

## SYNOPSIS: *GOD OF VENGEANCE (GOT FUN NEKOME)*

Yekel Tshaptshovitsh and his wife, Sarah, run a brothel in the basement of their home in a typical Polish Jewish town. It's given them a good income. But the taint of the whorehouse has thwarted their dream of finding a respectable match for their teenage daughter Rivkele. Finally, Yekel's money has talked and the matchmaker has found a pious young groom. Yekel commissions a Torah scroll and puts it in his daughter's room to watch over her. It's time to close the brothel down. But will God forgive his sins and allow his daughter to live a decent life? The answer soon becomes clear as we see Rivkele sneaking downstairs into the arms of one of the prostitutes, unleashing a chain of events that brings Yekel's dream crashing down.

Source:  
<https://yiddishstage.org/10-things-you-need-to-know-aboutgod-of-vengeance>



## INSIDE OUT

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Lynde Rosario..... Editor  
Patrick Elkins-Zeglarski..... Contributing Writer  
David Saphier ..... Education Contributor

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### *INDECENT*

BY **PAULA VOGEL**

DIRECTED BY **NANCY KEYSTONE**

Presented by  
The Joan and Phill Berger Charitable Fund

**AUG 30 - OCT 6**  
SPACE THEATRE

# PLAYWRIGHT PAULA VOGEL

Paula Vogel has written *How I Learned to Drive* (Pulitzer Prize, New York Drama Critics Award, Obie Award, Lucille Lortel, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle and many more), *A Civil War Christmas*, *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, *The Mineola Twins*, *Hot 'N' Throbbin'*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, and *The Oldest Profession*.

Former *New York* theatre critic, John Simon, once remarked that Paula Vogel had more awards than a “black sofa collects lint.” Some of these include Induction into the Theatre Hall of Fame, Thornton Wilder Award, Lifetime

Achievement from the Dramatists Guild, the William Inge Award, the Elliott Norton Award, two Obies, a Susan Smith Blackburn Award, the PEN/Laura Pels Award, a TCG residency award, a Guggenheim, a Pew Charitable Trust Award, and fellowships and residencies at Sundance Theatre Lab, Hedgebrook, The Rockefeller Center’s Bellagio Center, Yaddo, MacDowell, and the Bunting.

Source:  
<http://paulavogelplaywright.com/about>

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

*In a 2016 conversation with Vineyard Theatre’s literary associate, Miriam Weine, playwright Paula Vogel reflected on her play.*

### **What was the seed of *Indecent*?**

I read Sholem Asch’s play *God Of Vengeance* [the play at the center of *Indecent*’s plot] when I was 23 years old, and I was astonished by it. In 1907, Sholem Asch was brave enough to write that Jews are no different than Catholics or Buddhists or people of any religion, in terms of having people in the tribe who may sell religion for a profit, or who are hypocrites. That’s a very hard thing for a man to do, especially in a time of burgeoning anti-Semitism. Then add in the play’s compassionate understanding of the powerlessness of women in that time and place — Asch is a young married man, in a very early work, writing the most astonishing love story between two women — and it makes a pretty compelling play to read and perform.

### **Why do you think *God of Vengeance* had such an impact in its time?**

*God of Vengeance* is set in a brothel run by a Jewish man who is attempting to raise his daughter piously, and it features a lesbian love story. When it was performed in New York in 1923, there was deep concern within the Jewish community about what Christians would think. “Do

you dare to say this in public? Do you dare to show this in public?” It did exactly what plays should do — it provoked people into talking. *God of Vengeance* traveled all over the world, and then it was closed down on Broadway. Today, nearly 100 years after it was shut down, it needs to be produced and talked about still — playwrights and new plays should bite the hand that feeds them, and that is what this play did.

### **What do you think Sholem Asch would make of *Indecent*?**

I’m not sure what he’d think. I think *Indecent* respects him and respects his work and, most of all, feels a great empathy with the kind of pain he felt as a Jewish, Yiddish writer born at the beginning of the 20th century and going through the hideous events of that time. *Indecent* asks, how do you write in a hideous time? How do you stay true to yourself? What happens if you censor the work that is telling the truth?

### **How do you see those questions in terms of the theatre today?**

So many times we reach for the “classics” to produce; and meanwhile, there are brilliant Americans of color, women and

political writers who, by and large, are kept off stage or out of the spotlight. This can only mean that our discourse will continue to break down. The isolation that America experienced before our world wars was very detrimental and we are at a point right now where we have politicians endorsing the same sort of isolation. I see it as a very dangerous time, the most divisive moment in politics in my lifetime.

I do think we have an astonishing generation of voices right now. In terms of younger artists, this is the best time to write, act, and direct. It's never been more important. Hopefully I've encouraged fellow writers and younger writers who will make people feel differently about the world we all inhabit.

**Music plays an important role in this play. Did you know from the beginning how important music would be to the piece?**

Every piece I write starts with music. I can't write until I have a specific soundtrack that correlates to the emotional journey of the play. Even plays like *Baltimore Waltz* and *How I Learned to Drive* have a complete score to them. So, right from the beginning, I had songs selected to write to, though not every song on my writing soundtrack makes it onto the page; sometimes, as the play changes, I spend hours finding a new song to match. As a writer, I don't think that anything I can write has the power that music does. I'm happiest in the rehearsal room when beautiful voices start singing.

*Additionally, in a production note to the published version of Indecent, Vogel notes:* The music composed and arranged by Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva is not just a score. It's an exquisite heartbeat of the show, so transportive, so much a spirit that it is indeed a member of the cast. I cannot imagine the play without this music that has haunted me from the start in our first New Haven rehearsal at Yale. It grows, it changes, as all great scene partners do, according to the ensemble, the audience, the company . . . the music allows [us] to dance, to celebrate, and to yearn. I am grateful.

**Ultimately, what do you hope the audience will take away from *Indecent*?**

I don't think of this as a grim play; I think about it as a love story in terrible times. If we love music and theatre and the arts, if we take solace in people sitting beside us in the theatre, if we do what is in our hearts, I think there is light for us. I think the power of us being together in a community gives us light through the darkness. I'm writing this play because, regardless of what I've witnessed in my life, I've never been sorry that I've spent my life in the theatre. I think the power of art is the power to wound our memory. I think the power of art is a way for us to change our world view. I think art is our spiritual bread that we break together.

Source:

<https://www.vineyardtheatre.org/interview/playwright-paula-vogel-indecent/>

*SILVERMAN: BUT NONE OF US CAN LIVE IN A CONSTANT VIGILANCE. AND SO PERHAPS WE GO TO THE THEATRE FOR A LITTLE RELIEF, TO BE A COMMUNITY . . . —INDECENT*

# LOCATIONS

## Apollo Theater

A Broadway theatre whose entrance was located at 223 West 42nd Street in Manhattan, New York City, while the theatre proper was on 43rd Street. (Note: this is not the famous Apollo Theatre in Harlem.)

## Bowery Theater

This New York City theater, nicknamed 'The Slaughterhouse' because it offered sentimental 'blood and guts' melodramas, was an example of a huge nineteenth-century theatre for lower-class audiences. In its first year of operation, 1826, the Bowery held 2,500 spectators and was the largest playhouse in New York. It expanded to 4,000 seats in 1845. Infamous for its 'Bowery Boys', street toughs who drank, ate, and threw the remnants of their food from the gallery to the orchestra pit, named three times and rebuilt after four of the five times it was consumed by fire, the Bowery Theatre brought in a wide variety of shows and audiences, including German, Jewish, Italian, and Chinese audiences in its 103-year run. The site is now a long-famous dim sum restaurant.

Source:  
Wilson, Edwin and Alvin Goldfarb. *History of the Theatre: Living Theatre*. 2008  
<https://theclio.com/web/entry?id=21656>

## Café Kranzler

The original Café Kranzler was opened in Berlin in 1834. Including a sun terrace, outside tables on the pavement, an ice-cream parlor and a smokers' room, it swiftly gained the reputation of being one of the city's finest cafés. Café Kranzler was particularly known for its New Year's Eve celebrations that were broadcast on national radio.

Café Kranzler was at the center of Berlin's thriving alternative culture even before World War II, a gathering place for painters, composers, and playwrights.

Sources:  
<https://www.berlin.de/ba-charlottenburg-wilmersdorf/ueber-den-bezirk/wirtschaft/gastronomie/artikel.180327.php>  
<https://www.revolvy.com/page/Caf%C3%A9-Kranzler>  
<https://thebarn.de/pages/k18>

## The Catskills

The Catskills, located just two hours north of New York City, are made up of four counties: Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, and Ulster. The Catskills are home to the Catskill Mountains, the 600,000 acre Catskill Park (a mix of private and public lands) as well as the vast Catskill Forest Preserve, a publicly protected area that lends way to outdoor recreation amid mountains, meadows, forests, lakes, and rivers.

What would become known as the Borscht Belt was the result of New York City summer heat. Before the advent of air-conditioning, New Yorkers wanted away from the asphalt, cement and concrete, so they traveled to the Catskills. This trend began as early as the 1890s. There were many hotels and places in the Catskills that restricted or did not allow Jewish guests, so Jewish investors created hotels serving Jewish families. In the 20th century, particularly from the 1920s on, the Borscht Belt was at its height with hundreds of hotels.

The two things all the resorts had in common were food and entertainment. One of the specialties, borscht in a glass, was served at a resort named Grossinger's. The post-World War II heyday of the Jewish Catskills, in retrospect, was destined to be brief, because it depended on what turned out to be temporary conditions: anti-Semitism in the mainstream hotel business and just enough but not too much economic success and cultural assimilation among the children and grandchildren of immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe.

Sources:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/books/review/the-catskills-its-history-and-how-it-changed-america.html>  
<https://www.visitthecatskills.com/about>  
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-vacations-the-catskills/>  
<https://time.com/5470834/marvelous-mrs-maisel-catskills-history/>

### **Ellis Island**

From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island was America's largest and most active immigration station, where over 12 million immigrants were processed. On average, the inspection process took approximately three to seven hours. For the vast majority of immigrants, Ellis Island truly was an "Island of Hope" — the first stop on their way to new opportunities and experiences in America. For the rest, it became the "Island of Tears" — a place where families were separated and individuals were denied entry into the United States.

Source:  
<https://www.nps.gov/elis/index.htm>

### **Galicia**

Formerly a province of Austria-Hungary and today divided between southeastern Poland and western Ukraine.

### **Greenwich Theater**

This playhouse which opened on November 15, 1917 in New York City's Sheridan Square was designed by Herman Lee Meader in a Dutch Colonial style. Actor Frank Conroy, who was integral in its development, ran the theatre when it first opened. By 1921 The Greenwich started showing films between play engagements and by 1928 was hosting more films than live shows. In 1930 it was demolished for an apartment complex that itself has since been replaced.

Source:  
<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/23974>

### **Hell Hole Bar**

This was a nickname for a tavern called The Golden Swan located in New York City's West Village. It was opened sometime in the 1870s by an Irish prize-fighter, Thomas Wallace. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the bohemian clientele of the Golden Swan made it legendary. Photographers, painters, writers — Eugene O'Neill was one of the more notable of these — and gadabouts slowly began frequenting the Golden Swan's backroom.

Source:  
<http://www.boweryboyshistory.com/2019/03/golden-swan-hell-hole-for-village.html>

### **Kiev**

Kiev, the chief city and capital of Ukraine, is a port on the Dnieper (Dnipro) River and also a large railroad junction. Kiev was severely damaged during World War II, but by the mid-1950s it had been restored.

In terms of a brief overview of Kiev's Jewish history, Jews were readmitted to Kiev after the ascension of Alexander II to the throne in 1855. Under his reforms, certain categories of Jews were permitted to settle outside the Pale, as well as in Kiev and other previously restricted cities. Kiev's Jewish population then grew from about 3,000 in 1863 to 14,000 in 1872; it reached 32,000 in 1897 (representing 13% of the total population). Most of the city's Jews engaged in trade, crafts, and carting.

Kiev's St. Vladimir University and other institutions of higher learning were attended by large numbers of Jews, many of whom settled in the city and formed the base of its small but significant Jewish middle class, composed of lawyers, doctors, engineers, and other professionals.

War and revolution in the early twentieth century heralded many changes for Kiev's Jews, as it did for East European Jewry as a whole. During this time span—which embraced World War I, the 1917 Revolution, and the ensuing civil war—Jews poured into Kiev, fleeing zones of conflict and pogrom-wracked towns and villages, even though the city was the site of some of the worst pogroms of the period.

Sources:  
<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kiev>  
Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 2018.

### **Lodz**

The city of Lodz is located about 75 miles southwest of Warsaw, Poland. The Jews of Lodz formed the second largest Jewish community in prewar Poland, after Warsaw. In early February 1940, the Germans established a ghetto in the

northeastern section of Lodz, in which 160,000 Jews, more than a third of the city's population, were forced to live.

Source:  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lodz>

### **Balut**

In the 1850s, Jewish entrepreneurs Isaac Bławat and Isaac Birnzwajg developed housing in the village of Baluty (Balut in Yiddish), beyond Lodz the city limits. Baluty grew haphazardly, without running water or sewer lines, creating a neighborhood for the masses of the poor. When Bałuty was annexed to Lodz in 1915, it was home to perhaps half the city's Jews, and its name became a byword for poverty.

Source:  
<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Łodz>

### **Lower East Side**

The Lower East Side, one of New York's first neighborhoods, has historically been a site of continual and often dramatic change. From its farming roots, the neighborhood's fluctuating immigrant populations, its role in organized crime and counter-culture, to today's gentrification, the area has a rich and diverse history.

In terms of Jewish history within the neighborhood, many Jews immigrated to the United States and settled on the Lower East Side in order to escape political and financial oppression in Europe. Jews who settled here in the late nineteenth-century faced discrimination and were victim to biased stereotypes. However, this population began to reform the Lower East Side. These effects are still in place as signs in Yiddish and Hebrew will attest.

Sources:  
<https://www.stuytown.com/guides/lower-east-side/history>  
<https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/libman2014lowereastside/history/>

### **Bratislava**

The Capital of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava is also referred to as the Beauty on the Danube. Respective of its rich

Jewish history, the Jews in Bratislava pioneered the textile trade in Hungary in the eighteenth-century.

Within the independent state of Slovakia set up under Nazi auspices in 1939, Bratislava was the seat of the Jewish central office. Even before the declaration of the independent state, attacks on the synagogues and yeshiva on Nov. 11, 1938, what would be known as Kristallnacht, inaugurated the regime of anti-Semitic terror. Subsequently, anti-Jewish terrorization, restrictive measures, and pogroms increased. Only a fraction of Bratislava's Jewish population survived the Holocaust.

Source:  
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bratislava>

### **Smith College**

Located in Northampton, Massachusetts, Smith College is a distinguished liberal arts college committed to "providing the highest quality undergraduate education for women to enable them to develop their intellects and talents and to participate effectively and fully in society." The college is named for Sophia Smith who bequeathed her inheritance to found the college.

Source:  
<https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/smith-history>

### **Staten Island**

Staten Island, New York is a bedroom community within one of the largest cities in the world. It is the least populated borough, and often considered a stepchild of its larger siblings such as Brooklyn or the Bronx. The Island is shaped like a triangle and is 13.9 miles long and 7.3 miles wide, a total of 60.9 square miles, the third largest borough. Physically, Staten Island is closer to New Jersey than New York, separated by the narrow Arthur Kill (The word kill is Dutch for river or channel). There are three bridges that connect Staten Island to New Jersey and only one connecting the Island to New York.

Source:  
<http://www.statenislandhistorian.com/history.html>

## Temple Emanu-el

Founded in 1845 in New York City, Congregation Emanu-El's early services on the Lower East Side were traditional, but the congregation soon made bold departures from Orthodox religious practice and in so doing, established the principles of Reform Judaism in America.

First, the congregation replaced Hebrew with German during service, and eventually English. In 1848, the temple installed an organ, and instrumental music (not allowed in Orthodox synagogues) became part of the worship experience. The tradition of calling congregants to the Torah was eliminated except for at bar mitzvahs, and holidays like Rosh Hashanah were celebrated for one day instead of two. But the most controversial reform — and the most influential one — was the elimination of the *mechitza*, the barrier separating men and women.

Source:  
<https://www.emanuelnyc.org/about-us/our-history/>

## The Provincetown Playhouse

The historic 88-seat Provincetown Playhouse in New York City is credited with launching the careers of Anne Bancroft, Julie Harris and Eugene O'Neill, who premiered many of his early plays at the Provincetown. The Playhouse is now a facility of NYU-Steinhardt's programs in vocal performance and educational theatre. It is named for the Provincetown Players, who converted a former bottling plant into a theater in 1918.

## Vilna

Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, was called Vilna by its Jewish population. Prior to the Holocaust, the Jewish community of Vilna was the spiritual center of Eastern

European Jewry. For more than five centuries, Vilna was a community bursting with cultural and religious life, political movements, educational institutions, libraries and theatres; a community of rabbis and gifted Talmudic scholars, intellectuals, poets, authors, artists, craftspeople and educators. In the Jewish world it was known as The Jerusalem of Lithuania.

Poland and Lithuania both claimed Vilna (Vilnius) after World War I. Polish forces occupied Vilna in 1920, and before the outbreak of World War II, the city of Vilna was part of northeastern Poland. Under the terms of the German-Soviet Pact, Vilna, along with the rest of eastern Poland, was occupied by Soviet forces in late September 1939. In October 1939, the Soviet Union transferred the Vilna region to Lithuania. The population of the city was 200,000 at this time, including over 55,000 Jews. In addition, some 12,000-15,000 Jewish refugees from German-occupied Poland found refuge in the city. Soviet forces occupied Lithuania in June 1940 and in August 1940 incorporated Vilna, along with the rest of Lithuania, into the Soviet Union.

In July 1941, the German military administration issued a series of anti-Jewish decrees. During the same month, German *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads) aided by Lithuanian auxiliaries killed 5,000 Jewish men at Ponary forest, eight miles outside Vilna. A German civilian administration took control of Vilna in August 1941. At the end of the month, Germans killed another 3,500 Jews at Ponary.

Sources:  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/vilna>  
<https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/overview.asp>



# THEMES

## Yiddish

Unlike most languages, which are spoken by the residents of a particular area or by members of a particular nationality, Yiddish — at the height of its usage - was spoken by millions of Jews of different nationalities all over the globe. The decimation of European Jewry during the Holocaust in the mid-twentieth century marked the end of Yiddish as a widely spoken language and of the unique culture the language generated. Today, select groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews continue to use Yiddish as their primary language. Yiddish language is now widely studied in the non-Jewish and academic worlds.

Over the course of the greater part of a millennium, Yiddish went from a Germanic dialect to a full-fledged language that incorporated elements of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic languages, and Romance languages.

Source:

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-development-of-yiddish>

## Yiddish Theatre

The Yiddish theatre was the great cultural passion of the immigrant Jewish community in the United States. It was the theatre, Harold Clurman noted in 1968, that *“even more than the synagogue or the lodge, became the meeting place and the forum of the Jewish community in America between 1888 and the early 1920s.”*

The Yiddish theater was a new phenomenon in Jewish life. It came into being in 1876 in Romania, and arrived in New York six years later. This novel form of entertainment quickly took hold; within less than a decade, New York turned into the undisputed world capital of the Yiddish stage. Supported by a constantly growing Yiddish-speaking immigrant population (nearly 3.5 million Jews settled in the United States between 1881 and 1925), the New York Yiddish rialto was brimming with energy. It produced celebrated stars, generated a wealth of dramatic material, and presented a rich spectrum

of productions ranging from sentimental melodramas and quasi-historical operettas to sophisticated experiments inspired by the latest trends of the European, particularly the Russian, stage.

Although always in the hands of private entrepreneurs the American Yiddish theatre was a genuine people’s institution insofar as its appeal was not limited to any one socioeconomic group. It was attended by rich and poor, educated and illiterate, observant and free-thinking. Statistical data attests to its popularity. In 1927, two years after mass immigration had reached a virtual halt, there were 24 Yiddish theaters across America, 11 of them in New York, 4 in Chicago, 3 in Philadelphia, and 1 each in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, and St. Louis. Some 10 years later, during the 1937-1938 season, when the Yiddish theater in America was well past its prime, it was estimated that 1.75 million tickets to Yiddish shows were sold in New York City alone. Such sales meant that every Yiddish-speaking adult in the city saw an average of more than three Yiddish shows per year, an impressive figure unmatched by any other ethnic group in America.

Source:

<http://www.museumofyiddishtheater.org/the-history-of-yiddish-theater.html>

## Klezmer Music

Klezmer takes its name from the instrumental music created by the Jewish musicians’ guild, beginning in sixteenth-century Prague, of Eastern Europe—the klezmerim.

The word klezmer comes from Hebrew *kli zemer* which means, *instrument of the singing*: “kley” (vessel) and “zemer” (melody). Klezmer also came to define a self-taught musician who played by ear. According to Polish native cantor Shalom Berlinski, “in the mid twentieth century, there were no definite words to call the instrumentalists playing at Jewish weddings so the word klezmer was adopted.”

Klezmer instruments include: violin, hammered dulcimer, accordion, clarinet, drums, oboe, bass clarinet, and contrabass player or upright bass.

Sources:

<https://www.iemj.org/en/onlinecontent/feature-articles/secular-music/klezmer-music-from-the-past-to-the-present.html>  
<https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/the-classical-klezmer/>  
<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190244514.001.0001/acprof-9780190244514>

### Holocaust

While not an outwardly dramatic response to the Holocaust, various moments in *Indecent* evoke the Nazi attempt to destroy European Jewry between the years 1939 and 1945. For instance, Vogel's stage directions at the beginning of the play include such imagery as, "[Lemml] lifts one arm; dust pours from his sleeves . . . he lifts the other arm; more dust" and at the end of the play she inserts the song "Wiegla" which was sung by children in line to the gas chambers.

In Hebrew the Holocaust is called Shoah (a great and terrible wind) and the term, holocaust, is from the Greek words holos (whole) and caustos (burn) used to describe a burnt offering.

### Repertory Theatre Companies

During the nineteenth century, the traditional repertory company – a troupe of actors performing together for a set period of time in a number of plays – gradually disappeared due to changes in theatre production. By the late 1800's the long run had begun to replace repertory production. The long run (a popular play might run for 100 consecutive performances) made hiring a repertory company impractical. By the close of the twentieth century – as in today's commercial Broadway theatre – a cast would be hired to perform a single play for the length of its run. Many critics suggest that the demise of the repertory company made the lives of actors and actresses [at the time and even today] more unstable because they were [are] no longer hired for a set time. Furthermore, in a repertory company young performers could be trained by actually performing, since beginners were hired to play minor roles.

Not all repertory troupes disbanded, and in many countries such troupes still play a significant role; but in commercial theatre they became the exception rather than the rule. The demise of the repertory company also led to the development of actor training schools and conservatories.

Source:

Wilson, Edwin and Alvin Goldfarb. *History of the Theatre: Living Theatre*. 2008

## LEMML: EVERY NIGHT WE TELL THIS STORY – BUT SOMEHOW I CAN NEVER REMEMBER THE END. –INDECENT

### Obscenity

What's an obscenity? The question is hard, partly because the answer keeps changing. In 1973, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Miller v. California* established the so-called "Miller test" for obscenity. According to the ruling, which is based on "the average person, applying contemporary adult community standards," any matter that "lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" and "taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests" is obscene,

and thus not protected by the First Amendment. *Miller v. California* was not the first time American courts had ruled on obscenity. In fact, it built directly on *Roth v. United States* (1957), which said had that obscene material was "utterly without redeeming social importance."

Boston College Professor, John Houchin notes, "attempts to censor performance erupt when the dominant culture construes its laws, rituals, and traditions to be in the process of significant change. Rarely

does the collective mind of a community encountering such transformations embrace them as a natural, evolutionary process. Rather, it attempts to halt or reverse these shifts by reverting to the rituals or philosophy of a purer, Golden Age. Such behavior is indicative of a conservative society, one whose energy is used to maintain its political, moral, and social infrastructure. This type of society resists economic innovation and the rapid reordering that accompany such transformations. Its teachers in its schools do not encourage originality or radically new ideas. Instead, they emphasize rote learning of established principles and theorems. Its ministers preach that the relationship between gods and humans is fixed, does not evolve, and is not open to interpretation. Salvation is obtained by strict adherence to established principles. Speculation and experimentation are apostasy and inevitably lead to the spiritual demise of individuals and the communities that support them.”

Sources:

<https://time.com/4373765/history-obscenity-united-states-films-miller-ulysses-roth/>  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/censorship-of-the-american-theatre-in-the-twentieth-century/introduction/>

**“The House of the Un-American Activities”**

From its inception in 1938 until it was dissolved in 1975, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) took a prominent role in the investigation of communist activity in the United States. Although its supporters claim that this committee of the U.S. House of Representatives performed an important function, its critics contend that its

abuse of power trampled important First Amendment rights, such as freedom of expression and freedom of association.

After World War II the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves on opposite sides of a “Cold War,” which pitted the democratic United States against the Communist Soviet Union. As the Cold War intensified, the frenzy over the perceived threat posed by Communists in the U.S. became known as the Red Scare. The United States government responded by creating HUAC, which was charged with identifying Communist threats to the United States. HUAC often pressured witnesses to surrender names and other information that could lead to the apprehension of Communists and Communist sympathizers. Committee members branded witnesses as “red” if they refused to comply or hesitated in answering committee questions.

During this time, Senator Joseph McCarthy began a campaign against alleged Communists in the U.S. government and other institutions. From 1950-1954 “McCarthyism” described the practice of accusing Federal Government employees of having affiliations with Communism and leaking information. Government employees could be blacklisted (viewed as untrustworthy or someone to avoid) and could lose their jobs. The threat of Communism was a driving force that created a wedge between society and the United States government.

Sources:

<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/815/house-un-american-activities-committee>  
<https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/huac.php>

## PEOPLE

**Sholem Asch**

Sholem Asch (1880–1957) was twenty-six and a rising star of Yiddish literature’s new wave when he wrote *God of Vengeance* (*Got fun nekome*) in the summer of 1906. The former yeshiva student had absorbed the latest trends in Polish, German, and

Russian modernism and was now a cosmopolitan European writer. In five years, he had published dozens of short stories in Hebrew and Yiddish, and an acclaimed lyrical novella *A shtetl* (*A Small Town*). Asch dramatized the dreams and dilemmas of his people, bringing them to an international audience. For many

Europeans, he was also the first Yiddish writer to reveal small-town Jewish life in Poland in all its variety — capturing its intense spirituality and romanticism as well as its wretchedness and poverty.

Source:  
<https://yiddishstage.org/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-god-of-vengeance>

### **Yitskhok Leybush Peretz,**

Also known as I. L. Peretz (1835–1917), Peretz was a Yiddish and Hebrew writer, known for introducing modernist trends into Yiddish literature. Born in the town of Zamość, Poland, he lived significant parts of his life in Warsaw, which he helped make a center of modern Jewish and Yiddish culture.

Peretz had been a Hebrew writer since the 1870s and was then known mostly as a Hebrew poet, although he was also capable of writing in Polish. He first expressed his ideas concerning Yiddish in his letters to Sholem Aleichem in the late 1880s. His Yiddish writing debut was the long poem *Monish* (1888), which is considered to be the first folk narrative to be employed in modern Yiddish literature, with a style and plot heavily influenced by Goethe's *Faust*.

His early Yiddish prose included a collection of stories titled *Bekante bilder* (1890). These texts embody psychological complexity, employing the form of internal monologues, and are considered to represent a significant development in modern Yiddish fiction.

Peretz dominated the Czernowitz Conference of 1908, convened to raise the national status of Yiddish. Boosting the idea of multinational countries, he defended the people over the state, and distinctive national cultures over political boundaries. He hailed the creativity of the Jewish masses whose language was Yiddish.

In attempts to develop a holistic Jewish culture, he undertook Yiddish translations of the biblical Megilot (scrolls), organized the Hazomir society in Warsaw for the performance and study of Jewish music,

and lectured to adults on Jewish history and heritage at the People's University, which he had helped to found. At the outbreak of World War I, Peretz threw himself into relief work. He helped establish a Jewish orphanage and wrote poems for children, one of which lay unfinished when he died of a heart attack on April 3, 1917.

Sources:  
<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/peretz-yitskhok-leybush-1835-1917>  
[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Peretz\\_Yitskhok\\_Leybush](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Peretz_Yitskhok_Leybush)

### **Eugene O'Neill**

Eugene O'Neill was born in New York City on October 16, 1888, the son of James O'Neill, an actor who, like other major stars of the time, spent his life on extended tours of the country. The young O'Neill spent his infancy in hotel rooms and the wings of theatres. As he grew older, Eugene was sent to private Catholic boarding schools and to Princeton University. His growing realization that his father's considerable talent had been cheapened by repeated performances of the melodrama *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and his shocked discovery that his mother was addicted to the morphine prescribed for her painful recovery from Eugene's birth, proved realities too great for the young man to endure. He ran from them, spending time in Honduras, England, and eventually back to the States.

In the summer of 1916, at Provincetown, Massachusetts, he joined a group of amateur actors who staged his short play about the sea, *Bound East for Cardiff*, with such success that his playwriting ambitions were affirmed. Critical and popular success followed rapidly. In 1920 he received the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes for the tragedy *Beyond the Horizon*, a play that combined the real and the poetic in a manner that Broadway playgoers had not seen before. In 1922, the tragic but comic *Anna Christie* won a second Pulitzer Prize. This is the era in which we meet O'Neill in *Indecent*, and of O'Neill's support of *God of Vegeance*.

The scope of his plays is wide: The expressionistic, *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Marco Millions* (1928), the story of Marco Polo's voyage to China; *The Great God Brown* (1926), a play of contemporary life, using masks in the Greek manner; *Strange Interlude* (1928), a nine-act drama for which he won his third Pulitzer Prize in which the characters speak their thoughts aloud; and *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), a gentle comedy about young love in turn-of-the-century New England. In 1936 O'Neill was

awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Later titles include *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1957), for which he received his fourth Pulitzer Prize. O'Neill died in Boston in 1953.

Source:  
<https://www.nps.gov/euon/learn/historyculture/people.htm>

## VOCABULARY

### **A shanda fur die goy**

Yiddish: A shame for the non-Jews. This expression referred to expressing through art aspects of Jewish culture that could be viewed by a wider audience in a negative light.

### **Ale Brider**

Yiddish: We are all brothers.

### **Cossack**

A member of a people of Southern Russia and Ukraine.

### **Dybbuk**

In Jewish mysticism and folklore, a dybbuk is an evil spirit which enters a person, takes over their personality, precipitates mental illness, speaks through their voice and generally causes trouble. The word dybbuk itself is from the Hebrew *davak* which means to "stick" or "cleave."

### **The evil eye**

The "evil eye," *ayin ha'ra* in Hebrew, is the idea that a person or supernatural being can bewitch or harm an individual merely by looking at them. The belief is not only a Jewish folk superstition but also is addressed in some rabbinic texts. The term is also used to describe evil inclinations or feelings of envy.

### **Farshtinkeneh**

Yiddish: stinking

### **Gelt**

Yiddish: money

### **Goyim**

Hebrew: A Jewish name for a non-Jews

### **Greenhorn**

A person who is new to, or inexperienced at, a particular activity.

### **Huppah**

Hebrew: a canopy beneath which Jewish marriage ceremonies are performed.

### **Kaddish**

Aramaic: an ancient Jewish prayer sequence regularly recited in the synagogue service, including thanksgiving and praise and concluding with a prayer for universal peace. As referenced in *Indecent*, it is a form of the Kaddish recited for the dead.

### **Katubah**

Hebrew: the Jewish marriage contract

### **Kike**

A derogatory slur for a Jewish person. The word's etymology is much debated but it has been in use since the early twentieth-century.

### **Kugel**

Kugel is a traditional Jewish dish similar to a casserole or pudding.

### **Litvak**

A Lithuanian Jew

### **Minyan**

Hebrew: a quorum of ten men (or in some synagogues, men and women) over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship.

**Pogroms**

From the Russian for ‘destroy by violence’, the word designates more particularly the attacks carried out by the Christian population against the Jews between 1881 and 1921 while the civil and military authorities remained neutral and occasionally provided their secret or open support.

**Polack**

Polish: of or from Poland. Considered derogatory if a non-Polish person calls a Polish person a polack.

**Rugelach**

Yiddish: a bite-size cookie made with cream-cheese dough rolled around a filling of nuts, poppy seed paste, chocolate, or jam.

**Seconal**

A brand name barbiturate. Barbiturates belong to the group of medicines called central nervous system depressants — medicines that cause drowsiness.

**Shtetl**

Yiddish: a small Jewish town or village in eastern Europe.

**Sukin syn**

Slovakian slang: son of a bitch

**Wiegala**

*Indecent* incorporates this song by Jewish Czech author and songwriter, Ilse Weber. Weber was sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp/ghetto that served as a transit camp for Czech Jews whom the Germans deported to killing centers, concentration camps, and forced-labor camps in German-occupied Poland, Belorussia, and the Baltic States. Weber worked in the children’s hospital in Theresienstadt and wrote and performed poems, songs and lullabies. Ilse Weber, along with her husband and youngest child, perished at Auschwitz in 1944.

*PERETZ: YIDDISH IS OUR MOTHER TONGUE. THE LANGUAGE OF OUR MYTHS, OUR SONGS. —INDECENT*

# STUDY QUESTIONS

## Pre-Performance Questions

1. What is your definition of obscene and decent? What contributes to the creation of society's definition of obscenity and decency? What influences our personal definitions and when do our personal definitions come into conflict with larger societal beliefs?
2. Why do censorship and obscenity continue to be debated in a culture that celebrates freedom of speech?

## Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the scenic elements of set design, costuming, lighting, and sound help tell the story? Which are the most effective and why?
2. Explain the symbolism of shaking off the dust at the beginning of play.
3. Why was the choice made to have the acting troupe play multiple roles? How does this choice enhance the story?
4. What do you believe is the main reason for *God of Vengeance* being labeled as obscene? Would it still be labeled that way today?
5. Why do you think *God of Vengeance* was received completely differently in the United States when it was such a success in Europe?
6. How is human sexuality portrayed in the play? In what way is it (or isn't it) controversial?
7. How is music used to complement or comment on the play's events and characters?
8. How does religion and/or religious belief inform the events and content of the play?
9. How do the different actors within the troupe react to performing the play? Do their reactions change with each new development of the play's reception?
10. How does Asch's view about his writing change? Does he feel he needs to continue to defend his writing?

# INDECENT

## ACTIVITIES

### Historic Timeline

1. Ask students to research significant events in Colorado, the United States and the world leading up to, during and following the play *Indecent* (1906-1952) and to place them in chronological order.
2. Create a timeline using the information gathered.
3. Discussion Questions: What changes or innovations were happening during these times? How was the world changing? What are the parallels of these significant United States events to global events? How are these historical events included in the play *Indecent*? What are additional historical events that you would have included within *Indecent* if you were the playwright?

### Musical Timeline

1. After the historic timeline has been created, find music that was created and performed during the years that correspond to the chronological dates.
2. After some musical pieces have been selected, play them for the class.
3. Discuss how music reflects the time and attitudes during which it is created. What feelings does it evoke? Are there contemporary musical choices that may fit better? Create the soundtrack.

**History PG:** Develop an understanding of how people view, construct, and interpret history.

**History PG:** Analyze key historical periods and patterns of change over time within and across nations and cultures.

**Music PG:** Develop criteria for making informed aesthetic (personal) judgments about music; Make and defend informed aesthetic (personal) judgments based on the criteria developed

### Persuasive Argument

The goal of this activity is to have students create a persuasive argument to support their decision. They can work individually or in small groups.

1. Establish the situation: the mayor is going to shut down a theatrical production that they have deemed obscene.  

The producers have called for a vote by the actors about whether to continue performing the production or closing it down. Students must decide if they are for or against keeping the production going.
2. Students now create a persuasive argument to either continue or stop – steps 3 through 6 below outline building a persuasive argument.
3. Create an opening statement. This statement should include the position for continuing to perform or for closing the production.
4. List three reasons that support the position. From these three reasons, find three facts to support each reason. Try to avoid opinionated personal conclusions.
5. Write a concluding statement. Include the original position statement and incorporate the strongest reason from the three to support the concluding statement.
6. Have students share their work with each other to the whole group, in pairs or in other small groups.
7. EXTENSION OPTION: If students have seen or read the play, have them select a character and make the argument from that character's perspective.

**Civics PG:** Research, formulate positions, and engage in appropriate civic participation to address local, state, or national issues or policies.

**Research and Reasoning PG:** Independent research designs articulate and defend information, conclusions, and solutions that address specific contexts and purposes.



*INDECENT*

# PERSPECTIVES

Make your time at the theatre unforgettable when you join us for one of these added experiences:

## Post-Show Community Discussions

**Sun, Sep. 15 at 1:30pm and Fri, Oct 4 at 7:30pm | Post-show**

There will be a discussion following these two performances of *Indecent* with Dr. David Schneer, Louis P. Singer Chair of Jewish History, Professor of History, Religious Studies and Jewish Studies at University of Colorado, Boulder, moderated by a DCPA staff member. All audience members are invited and encouraged to attend.

## Cast Perspective

**Thurs, Sep. 26 | Post-show**

Join a fun and engaging discussion with the actors after the 6:30pm performance.

## Accessible Performance

**Sun, Sep. 15 | 1:30pm**

We offer American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation and Audio Description services free with paid admission on select performance dates. Before selecting seats, use the appropriate code noted below for the services you require in the Promotional Code box when purchasing online. For optimal service, call the box office at 303.893.4100.

Sign Language Interpretation: **ASL**

Audio Description: **AUDIO**

# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Denver Public Library recommends these library resources to enhance your theatre experience.

## Read!

***Lost in translation: an illustrated compendium of untranslatable words from around the world*** by Ella Frances Sanders. (2014) Too often it is the case that meaning is lost in translation, language is after all rooted in culture and worldview, making it hard at times to take concepts from one tongue and press them into a new context. Some words resist translation altogether, representing nouns, verbs, and adjectives without parallel. Author and watercolor artist Ella Sanders takes her readers around the globe, cataloging beautiful words from Hawaiian, Arabic, Japanese, and Yiddish that have no counterpart in English. Each entry is beautifully illustrated and hand written, so you have no excuse to be a *luftmensch* or suffer from *trepverter* ever again!

## Watch!

***The Year We Thought About Love*** Dir. Ellen Brodsky (2014) Dorothee and Virginia could only imagine the U.S.'s largest acting troupe of LGBTQ young adults, called True Colors. Watch this documentary that goes behind the scenes of the Boston troupe as they transform their personal struggles into a play about love. While they create the play, they try to heal from the Boston marathon bombing, family rejection, and the result of challenging homophobia at a local church. Watch it on Kanopy, free to all Denver residents with your library card.

## Listen!

***Just say nu: Yiddish for every occasion (when English just won't do)*** by Alex Wex, read by the author. (2007) Did the importance of Yiddish in *Indecent* make you want to learn the language? *Just Say Nu* will give you phrases to use in everyday life, explaining the correct context for each phrase. The author also throws in a bit of history. Not all of it is serious, though; there's a whole chapter on Yiddish phrases for saying while driving and angry, which you can delightfully combine for when you're stuck in traffic on your way to your next play.

## Download!

When Paula Vogel sits down to write a play she already has the music in her head, with *Indecent* we burst onto the scene with a joyous round of traditional klezmer music. Use your Denver Public Library card to stream the Smithsonian Folkways recording of *European Klezmer Music* produced by Steve Greenman (2000) while you're there download the in-depth information guide to learn more about this fascinating historic Jewish music. Just go to [denverlibrary.org/downloads](http://denverlibrary.org/downloads) and log onto Music Online Database to begin your search.



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