



# Indecent

## Enrichment Guide

Created and compiled by Elliot Lazar; edited by Ksenia Broda-Milian for Royal MTC

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Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Anishininew, and Dakota people, and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. We are thankful for the benefits sharing this land has afforded us, acknowledge the responsibilities of the Treaties, and embrace the opportunity to partner with Indigenous communities in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

## The Role of the Audience

Theatre needs its audience! We are happy to have you here. Every staff person, actor, and crew member backstage plays an important part in your experience, and you also have a role in the experience of cast, crew and the people around you.

**Arrive Early:** Please make sure you give yourself enough time to find your seat before the performance starts. Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. We ask schools and other groups to arrive at least 20-30 minutes before the show.

**Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices:** Please **turn off** your cell phone/mp3 player /gaming system/camera/smart watch. Texting, surfing, and gaming during performances is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. Using cameras and recording devices during a performance is **never** allowed.

**Talking During the Performance:** Even when you whisper, you can be heard by performers and people around you. Unless it is a relaxed performance, disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait until after the performance to share your words with others.

**Food/Drinks:** Food and outside drinks are not allowed in the theatre. When there is an intermission, snacks and drinks may be available for purchase. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

**Dress:** There is no dress code at the Royal MTC, but we respectfully ask you not to wear hats in the theatre. We strive to be a scent-free environment and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

**Leaving During the Performance:** If you leave the theatre during a performance, you will be readmitted at the discretion of Front of House staff. If readmitted, you may be placed in an empty seat at the back of the auditorium instead of your original seat.

**Being Asked to Leave:** The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave if that person is being inappropriate or disruptive including (but not limited to): talking, using devices that produce light or sound, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

**Talkbacks:** A short question and answer period with the actors takes place after student matinees, first Tuesday evening shows, and some public matinees. While watching the show, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors about the production or life in the theatre. Our artists deserve to be treated with respect! It's okay to have a negative opinion, but this is your chance to ask questions and understand the performance or process, not to criticize. If you have a concern, see the house manager after the show and they will make sure your feedback gets to the appropriate Royal MTC staff.

**Enjoy the show:** Laugh, cry, gasp – responding to the performance is part of the nature of theatre! As you get involved in the story, try to balance your reactions with respecting the people around you. The curtain call is part of the performance too – it gives you a chance to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause, and for them to thank you for your attention. We all appreciate when you stay at your seat and join in the applause!

## Playwright Biographies

**Paula Vogel** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose plays include *Mother Play*, *Indecent*, *How I Learned to Drive*, *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, *The Mineola Twins*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *The Oldest Profession* and *A Civil War Christmas*. Awards include two Tony nominations, the American Theater Hall of Fame, two Obies, the Lily Award, the NY Drama Critics Circle Award, a Guggenheim, a Pew Charitable Trust Award, an Obie for Lifetime Achievement and the NY Drama Critics Lifetime Achievement Award.

In June 2020, she founded Paula Vogel's Bard at the Gate, a uniquely curated virtual reading series designed to become a widely accessible platform for powerful, overlooked plays by BIPOC, female, LGBTQIA+, and disabled artists.

From 1984 to 2008, she founded and ran the playwriting program at Brown University; during that time she started a theatre workshop for women in Maximum Security at the Adults Correction Institute in Cranston, Rhode Island. From 2008 to 2012, she was the O'Neill Chair at Yale School of Drama.

Her plays are published in six volumes by TCG Press and her memoir, *Travels Without Carl*, will be published by Penguin Press. She teaches playwriting throughout the United States and abroad.

**Sholem Asch, Playwright of *God of Vengeance***, was a Polish-American novelist and playwright, who remains one of the most widely known and controversial writers of modern Yiddish literature. Born into a Hasidic Jewish family in Kutno, Poland in 1880, Asch was a talented student who received a traditional Jewish religious education. While studying, he began teaching himself German and exploring the work of writers such as Schiller, Goethe, and Heine. His parents disapproved of these secular studies, so at seventeen Asch moved in with relatives in a nearby village. It was there that he first became familiar with the lives of Polish peasants, while working as a letter writer for the illiterate.

By the time he wrote his first play, he was already well-known as a Yiddish novelist. At 26, he wrote his third and most well known play, *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance). Dramatizing the dreams and dilemmas of the Jewish people, Asch became the first Yiddish writer to represent life in the small Jewish towns of Poland to a general audience. *Got fun nekome* premiered in German as *Gott der Rache* at Berlin's Deutsches Theater in 1907, and went on to be performed around the world in several languages.

*"Prolific and continually expanding the range of his themes, Asch brough Yiddish literature into the mainstream of European and American culture, while he himself remained deeply attached to the legacy of the Jewish past."* ([Asch, Sholem - YIVO Encyclopedia](#))

**Related Resource Links:** [Paula Vogel's website](#) goes into more detail about her life and career.

See the entire creative team and cast for Royal MTC's production, including their biographies, [on our website](#), where you can also download the Ovation program.

## Content Overview

Lesbian relationships depicted, with some characters labelling them as “wrong,” References to sex. *God of Vengeance* has a brothel and prostitutes and a scene with a man preparing to throw a Torah to the ground. Antisemitism and intolerance are depicted, and reference to death and destruction of Jewish people.

## Plot Summary

*Indecent* is a play with music inspired by true events that surrounded the Broadway debut of *God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch – “a play seen by some as a seminal work of Jewish culture, and by others as an act of traitorous libel” (Dramatists Play Service). In the original Yiddish, the play was a success across Europe, despite initial reactions to the lesbian storyline, and fears that the script would give people an excuse to be antisemitic. But in 1923 New York, the cast and producers struggle with cultural assimilation and language, and the English translation is received very differently: the entire team is arrested for obscenity. Against the backdrop of Europe's descent into the Holocaust, stage manager Lemml takes the script back home to where it was once celebrated. *Indecent* is a play about forbidden love, artistic censorship and the enduring power of theatre.

## Setting and Characters

Warsaw, Poland, 1906, to Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1950s, and everywhere in between.

Yiddish theatre, like many folk theatre traditions, was often performed by travelling troupes and repertory companies. Each member of the troupe had their place within the story. Vogel pays homage to this tradition by having her cast take the form of a dead Yiddish Theatre troupe, with each actor assuming roles according to their archetype.

**The Stage Manager**, Lemml.

**The Elders** “play all of the fathers, all of the mothers...”

**The Middles** “play all of the vamps and all of the vice, the scarred, and the schemers.”

**The Ingénues** play “All the brides, all the grooms, the writers, the socialists.”

MTC's production also features three onstage musicians as members of the troupe.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

Lemml, the stage manager, introduces the actors who will tell the story of a play that changed his life. As each performer appears, ash pours out of their clothing.

1906. Sholem Asch writes *God of Vengeance*, a Yiddish play about a brothel owner, Yekel, and his quest to protect the purity of his daughter, Rifkele, as she falls in love with a prostitute, Manke. Asch's wife is taken with the purity and spirituality of the love between the two women, especially as depicted in “the rain scene.”

In Warsaw, Asch brings the play to the salon of I.L. Peretz, where it is read aloud and receives mixed reactions. The young Lemml, a tailor at the time, is moved to tears. Peretz, on the other

hand, advises Asch to burn the play, which he feels is antisemitic. Another insists that it is a “play written by a Jew who hates Jews!”

1907. The play premieres in Berlin, with Lemml as stage manager. Rudolph Schildkraut, a famous Jewish actor, assumes the role of Yekel. The play is a massive success and is performed throughout Europe.

1920. Lemml arrives at Ellis Island to stage manage the New York premiere.

1922. Dorothee and Reina, the actresses playing Manke and Rifkele, are rehearsing for the first English language production. They are in a romantic relationship both onstage and off. Reina struggles with her English and is fired and replaced by a young American actress, Virginia.

The English production opens off-Broadway at the Provincetown Playhouse and the producer announces that it will transfer to Broadway. Dorothee objects to alterations made to the play for Broadway, cutting the rain scene and suggesting instead that Rifkele is seduced by Manke into a life of prostitution. The producer feels that the Broadway audience would be too scandalized by the lesbian content.

1923. Asch returns from a trip to Europe, depressed from having witnessed the sharp rise in antisemitism. He retreats to his home in Staten Island and becomes a recluse.

*God of Vengeance* opens on Broadway, and the entire cast is arrested by the vice squad for obscenity. Asch believes it to be an antisemitic plot until it is revealed that an American Rabbi is responsible for having the play closed down.

Asch refuses to testify at the obscenity trial, still depressed from his time in Europe. Instead, he writes a letter to be read in court. Nonetheless, the actors are found guilty of presenting an indecent, obscene and immoral play.

Lemml is heartbroken and confronts Asch, upset that he allowed the love between Rifkele and Manke to be cut from the play. Asch admits that he never checked the cuts. Feeling betrayed, Lemml tells Asch he is returning to Poland with the play’s Yiddish manuscript in hand.

Despite increasing restrictions on Jews, *God of Vengeance* is performed in Poland in cafes and basements.

1943. In an attic in the Łódź Ghetto, Lemml introduces the play’s second act. The rain scene is interrupted by the sound of boots. As the troupe is transported to Auschwitz, Lemml imagines that Rifkele and Manke have escaped.

1952. John Rosen, a Jewish-American theatre student (played by the same actor who played the young Asch) visits Asch (played by the same actor who played Peretz) at his home in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Asch, deeply traumatized by the Holocaust, is preparing to move to London to avoid persecution by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Rosen asks

permission to produce a new translation of *God of Vengeance* at Yale. Asch refuses, insisting the play's time is done. He echoes the advice Peretz gave him when he was young: "In the words of a much wiser man—if I was you, burn it!" Rosen insists he will one day produce the play and leaves. Alone, Asch gets ready to leave but is stopped by the ghost of Lemml. The dead troupe rises to join him. Manke and Rifkele appear and dance together in the rain, joined by Lemml and Asch.

## God of Vengeance Timeline

The following timeline was included in the [Playbill](#) for the original Broadway run of *Indecent*. It was compiled by Alisa Solomon.

**1907:** In Warsaw, Sholem Asch reads his new play, *Got fun Nekome* (*God of Vengeance*), for the founding father of modern Yiddish literature, I. L. Peretz. Disturbed by what he takes to be the play's misrepresentation of Jewish piety, Peretz counsels Asch to burn it.

*Got fun Nekome* opens in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where it is celebrated, and then in New York where the left-wing newspapers defend its gritty sophistication, while the Orthodox papers decry it for fanning anti-Semitic stereotypes.

**1914:** With the outbreak of World War I, Sholem Asch leaves Europe for New York. After the war, he visits Europe and is shaken by the destruction of Jewish communities.

**1921:** The Emergency Quota Act severely reduces the number of immigrants permitted into the US from Eastern and Southern Europe.

**1921–1922:** A movement to prevent lewdness on the stage gathers force against popular farces on Broadway.

**1922:** Isaac Goldberg's English translation of *God of Vengeance* opens at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City before moving to the larger Greenwich Village Theatre.

### 1923

**February 19—***God of Vengeance* opens on Broadway at the Apollo Theater. The passionate scene in the rain is cut from this production, changing the women's relationship from one of love to manipulation.

**March 6—**Mid-performance, a police detective informs the cast and producer that they are under indictment for obscenity. The next morning, the company posts bail and returns to the theatre in time for the matinee.

**March 8—**The company of *God of Vengeance* goes on trial and is found guilty. The verdict is overturned on appeal.

**1924:** The National Origins Act restricts immigration even further; the Asian Exclusion Act lives up to its name. The Society for Human Rights is founded as the first organization in the US that seeks equality for homosexuals. Police pressure soon shuts it down.

**1926:** New York State passes the Wales Padlock Law, prohibiting plays "dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or perversion." This law, not declared unconstitutional until 1976, leaves LGBTQ characters to be portrayed as symbols of vice, corruption, and evil.

**Early 1940s:** *Got fun Nekome* is performed in the Łodz Ghetto where an estimated 160,000 Jews are sealed off from the world.

**1942:** Nazi officials discuss the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” and the industrial genocide begins. With news of the murderous destruction of European Jewry, Sholem Asch forbids future performances of *Got fun Nekome*.

**1943:** Sholem Asch is the first Yiddish writer to be nominated for the Nobel Prize.

**1956:** Sholem Asch dies. His home in Bat Yam, Israel now houses the Sholem Asch Museum. Yale University holds his archive.

**1974:** Playwright Paula Vogel, then a 22-year-old graduate student at Cornell University, reads *God of Vengeance* at the suggestion of her professor.

**1997:** While a first-year student at the Yale School of Drama, Rebecca Taichman discovers *God of Vengeance* and writes her thesis on the obscenity trial.

**2010:** Rebecca Taichman calls Paula Vogel to collaborate on a play about that obscenity trial, which would later become *Indecent*.

**2013:** *Indecent* receives a developmental production at the Sundance Institute Theatre Program.

**2015–2016:** The World premiere of *Indecent* is staged at Yale Repertory Theatre, followed by a production at the La Jolla Playhouse. *Indecent* opens Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre.

**2017:** *Indecent* opens at the Cort Theatre on Broadway, 94 years after the Broadway premiere of *God of Vengeance*.

**Related Resource Links:** David Mazower, a descendent of Asch, wrote [“10 Things You Need to Know About \*God of Vengeance\*”](#) which offers easy-to-read context about the events in *Indecent*.

[Read an interview with Paula Vogel](#) about *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent*’s journey to the stage or [watch a video about her writing process and the Broadway production](#) (27 minutes, with key moments highlighted). [NPR has a 5-minute listen](#) about the Broadway show.

## Context and Related Resources

### Jewish Immigration from Europe to the USA

The 19th and 20th century saw multiple waves of Jewish migration from Europe to the United States. Initially, the Jewish communities of America were largely Sephardic (i.e. Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa). The mid-1800s saw a wave of Jewish immigration bringing mostly German-speaking Central European Jews. It wasn’t until the late 1800s that Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews began to arrive in droves. The characters we follow in *Indecent* are primarily from this wave of immigration.

European Jews fled to America for a number of reasons. Depending on where they came from, they may have had restrictions on their religious practice, where they could live, and which jobs they could have. They saw America as *di goldene medine* (“The Golden Land”), filled with the promise of religious freedom and economic prosperity. And of course, safety from pogroms.

Pogroms were violent riots that included rape, murder, and the looting and destruction of Jewish property. Though the first example of a pogrom occurred in Odessa in 1824, the term began being used more widely to refer to the anti-Jewish riots which spread throughout the southern and western provinces of the Russian Empire between 1881 and 1884, following the assassination of Czar Alexander II. Beginning in 1881, large numbers of Eastern European Jews fled the Pale of Settlement (the territory within the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to settle) and arrived as refugees in America. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, a second wave of pogroms occurred in Ukraine between 1918 and 1920. Sholem Asch learned about these events during his trip to Europe in 1923.

Like the characters in *Indecent*, many Jewish immigrants from this time would end up living in squalor in Manhattan's Lower East Side tenements. As Eastern European Jews poured into the country, the Lower East Side became a Yiddish-speaking Jewish hub. Through hard work despite difficult conditions, Jews established themselves in a number of industries, organized labour unions, and nourished a rich culture of Yiddish poetry, prose and drama.

## Assimilation

Many newly arrived Jewish immigrants prioritized assimilation, while trying to preserve their cultural and religious identity. It was common for Jews to take English classes at night and send their children to public schools in hopes that they would be able to blend into general American society. Language acquisition was very important. In *Indecent*, Esther confides in Lemml:

*"They was all American girls. Some of their words weren't so dainty, but their English was perfect. Lou, in my head, I can hear those English words so good . . . But then when I open my mouth, it's like the dust of Poland is in my throat."*

Esther longs to blend into English speaking society. While many shared her sentiment, some were against assimilation, choosing instead to live just as they did in the *shtetls* of Europe. Several of Brooklyn's Hasidic communities still live this way. Today, Jews have mostly assimilated into American life. It has come with many benefits, but also has contributed to the loss of culture - including the near-death of the Yiddish language.

**Related Resource Links:** [Read more about the lives of Jewish immigrants to America](#) from My Jewish Learning. [An article from the Jewish Women's Archive](#) explores in-depth the intersectional identities of female Jewish newcomers, and the National Humanities Centre has a [clear and concise article about 20<sup>th</sup> Century antisemitism and assimilation](#).

## Yiddish Theatre

Yiddish theatre emerged as a result of the *haskole*: an age of Jewish enlightenment which saw some Jews beginning to integrate more fully into European society and secular life. While there is evidence of the existence of amateur Yiddish theatre troupes as far back as the 1830's, the birth of professional Yiddish theatre is generally dated 1876 with the founding of Abraham Goldfaden's troupe in Iași, Romania. Early Yiddish theatre was mostly musical vaudeville and light comedy. Early pieces tended to use a standard, broad set of roles: the prima donna, the soubrette, the comic, the lover, the villain, the elder, etc. Yiddish theatre quickly spread



throughout Europe with many travelling troupes. As it spread to Russia, audience tastes impacted the material, which began to include more serious operettas and melodramas. By the early 20th century, much of this work was regarded as *shund* (trash). Prominent writer I.L. Peretz spearheaded the movement towards a more sophisticated Yiddish theatre. The movement included Jacob Gordin, S. Anksy, and of course, Sholem Asch.

America had its first taste of Yiddish theatre in 1882 and it only grew as more Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrant arrived at Ellis Island. Between 1890 and 1940, there were over 200 Yiddish theatres and touring troupes in the US. New York City became the world capital of Yiddish Theatre, with the East Village becoming home to the Yiddish Theatre District or the “Jewish Rialto.” With over 22 theatres, New York’s Yiddish theatre often rivaled Broadway in terms of scale and quality. The canon became incredibly diverse, including Yiddish language adaptations of works like *King Lear*, translations of Ibsen and Shaw, operettas, melodramas, musical comedy and modern Yiddish classics like *The Dybbuk* and *Tevye the Dairyman* (later adapted into *Fiddler on the Roof*).

The Yiddish theatre in America sought not only to entertain but to educate. Jewish immigrants saw their lives portrayed onstage and learned from the stories. Plays explored themes like assimilation, the plight of workers, adjusting to life in America, or offered a nostalgic look at life in Europe. Impoverished sweatshop workers longed for the relative simplicity of life in the *shtetl*.

After the Holocaust, Yiddish theatre never fully recovered. As American Jews continued to assimilate and move up in the world, Yiddish culture took a hit. For an overwhelming majority of North American Jews, Yiddish has been reduced to a few words or choice phrases. Oy vey. *Schvitz. Spiel.* As Asch says in *Indecent*,

“I too have lost audience members. Six million have left the theater.”

In recent years, Yiddish language and culture have undergone a renaissance with many young Jews showing renewed interest. New York’s National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene is still active after 110 years! They recently received acclaim for their Yiddish-language production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and their hand in developing the Broadway musical *Harmony*. The success of *Indecent* has also helped bring a new generation to the world of Yiddish theatre.

**Related Resource Links:** The [Museum of Yiddish Theatre](#) has a wealth of information.

## The Holocaust

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 6 million Jews during World War II from 1939–1945. This section aims to provide the essential context for understanding the parts of *Indecent* which refer to it. It is not a comprehensive guide. **Spoilers below.**

In the play, Lemml finds himself in the **Łodz ghetto**. Ghettos were enclosed districts where the Nazis forced Jewish people to live, isolating them from the non-Jewish population. Life in the ghetto was marked by extreme poverty, forced labor and widespread starvation. Over 245,000 Jews lived in the Łódź ghetto, with an average of 3.5 people per room. Some cultural events

were permitted in the ghetto. The group “Avangard” presented small theatrical works several times a week between 1940 and 1943. The play, however, depicts an example of secret performances held despite Nazi restrictions. They were an act of resistance, and a preservation of Jewish culture, artistry and dignity.

In *Indecent*, the performance of *God of Vengeance* is interrupted by a Nazi raid. They are transported to **Auschwitz**. They would have been part of the last deportation of Jews from Łódź in August 1944. Upon arrival, Jews at Auschwitz were lined up and sorted. Approximately 20% were selected to work in the camp—the rest were exterminated in gas chambers and subsequently burned in crematoriums. Paula Vogel paints this picture with titles:

*“an impossibly long line”*

*“The smell of smoke and ash is thick in the air.”*

*“ashes to ashes—the troupe returns to dust”*

**Related Resource Links:** [The Holocaust Explained](#) offers an overview followed by website sections to enhance your understanding, and the option to turn “advanced content” on or off.

Explore more ties to *Indecent*’s themes by [watching a video lecture about Yiddish Theatre as a Cultural Lifeline During the Holocaust](#) from the Yiddish Book Center (1 hour 2 minutes) and [read about the role of music and theatre under Nazi Germany](#) and the arts’ role in recovery and resilience.

Learning for Justice has several Holocaust-related resources: [read an address from survivor Elie Wiesel](#); the [One Survivor Remembers documentary film kit](#) (free account needed to view) also includes an interview, teachers guide and handouts, and a [webinar on media literacy and tools to combat hate](#) (1 hour, free account needed).

## Artistic Censorship

Censorship is the suppression or prohibition of speech, publication or other communication that is considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to society. While censorship is often associated with oppressive governments, it also occurs at the local level. Books are commonly targeted by lobby groups for what they deem “objectionable” content. This can include violence and mature themes, but also extends to Queer representation, gender ideology and the discussion of race and racism.

In *Indecent*, Peretz argues that with *The God of Vengeance*, Asch is “pouring petrol on the flames of anti-Semitism.” Rabbi Joseph Silverman led the charge in shutting down the play on Broadway. He worried that the representation of Jews as brothel owners, prostitutes and sexual deviants would contribute to antisemitism among the general public. Anti-Jewish sentiment was widespread and Jewish migration was already limited and being debated by politicians. Public opinion was of grave importance to American Jewry. Imagine if a play featuring flawed Muslim characters with questionable actions were produced today, in a time where Islamophobia is on the rise. Does a playwright’s right to free speech outweigh the damage their play might cause to a marginalized community?

**Related Resource Links:** [Sholem Asch wrote an open letter](#) in defense of his play, reproduced on the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project.

## Queer Representation

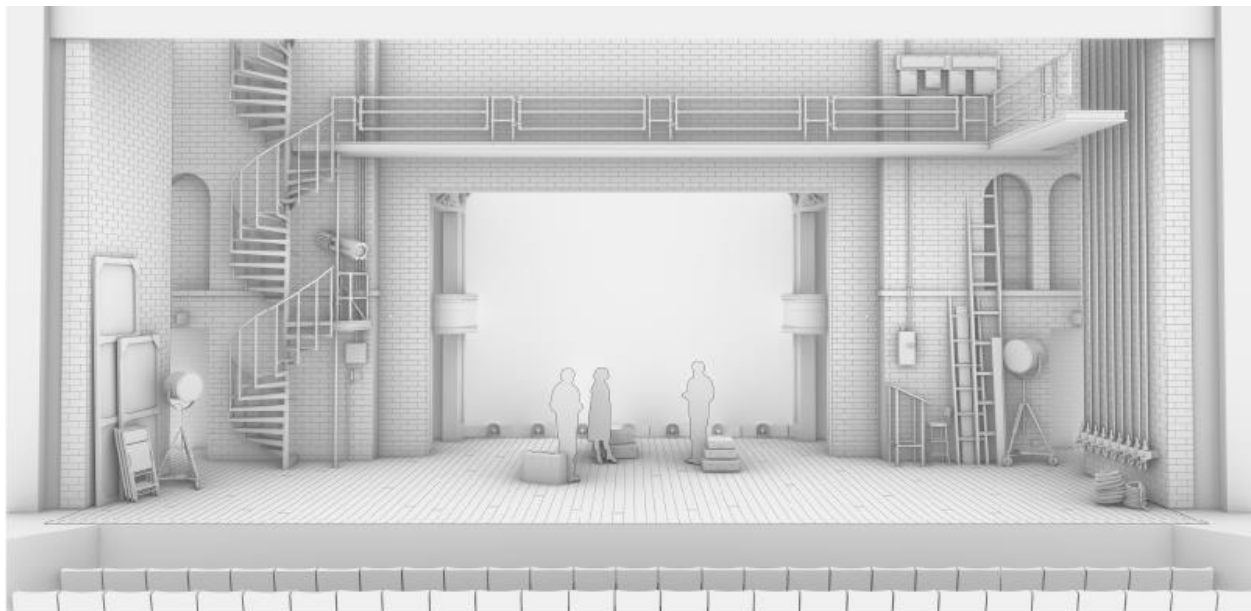
In 1923, *God of Vengeance* was the first play to feature a same-sex kiss on Broadway. Three years later, Édouard Bourdet's *The Captive* premiered on Broadway, whose protagonist is Irène, a lesbian struggling to leave her lover and marry Jacques, the man to whom she is engaged. Like *God of Vengeance*, the play was shut down. In 1927, Mae West wrote *The Drag* under the pen name Jane Mast. Inspired by gay men she knew who wished they could live more openly, West conceived it as a counter-piece to *The Captive*. It was produced in New Jersey and Connecticut, but was shut down before it could transfer to Broadway.

In the 1920s, New York City had thriving gay communities in Harlem and Greenwich Village. That being said, same-sex sexual activity was still criminalized and would remain so until the 1960s. It wasn't federally legalized until 2003. Queer life had to be discreet. For Canadians under 20, this may be difficult to imagine - same-sex marriage was legalized in Canada in 2005 - but it was not long ago that our laws discriminated against Queer individuals. In fact, they still do. For example, sexual orientation and gender identity are not included in the Employment Equity Act.

## Royal MTC's Production

Artistic director Kelly Thornton thinks of *Indecent* as a monument to the power of theatre and art. She and set designer Scott Penner wanted theatre to enwrap all the locations in the play, and for the audience to be immersed in the environment. To that end, the set imagines that we are seeing into an old abandoned theatre, looking through the wall at the back of the stage, across the stage floor.

This image is of a "white model" which allows the designer and director to visualize the set's spaces and textures. To see it in colour, you'll have to come to the show! The perspective is as if we are in the audience and looking at MTC's stage, which has been turned into a backstage!



## Explore More: Recommended Library Reading List

### Explore more stories about the power of the theatre

*Hag-seed: William Shakespeare's the Tempest retold* by Margaret Atwood. Delve into this witty, imaginative adaptation of *The Tempest* where theatre director Felix is fired from his job to teach at a prison theatre. Will their enactment of Shakespeare's play be enough to out those that betrayed him? FICTION ATWOOD

*The Playbook: A Story of Theater, Democracy, and the Making of a Culture War.* A bold account of a culture war over the place of theater in American democracy in the 1930s.  
792.0973 SHAPIRO 2024

*The Whalebone Theatre* by Joanna Quinn. In 1928, after a whale washes up on the shore of the English channel three young people create a theatre from its' rib cage. The passion for theatre follows them to World War II when one of them becomes a secret agent – a more dangerous type of play acting. FICTION QUINN

### Explore more Jewish stories

*The Lost Shtetl: a novel* by Max Gross. Set in a Jewish town that somehow enjoyed an isolated peace from Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Cold War, Kreskol is divided between those who will accept change and those who prefer their ancient ways. A story of adaptation vs. tradition in a tiny town that time forgot. FICTION GROSS

*Wandering Stars* by Sholem Aleichem. A classic novel about Yiddish theatre, the messy yet charming characters emphasize the importance of their journey and experiences not their destination with a very realistic take on life and coming to America. FICTION ALEICHEM

*Sadness is a White Bird* by Moriel Rothman-Zecher. Jonathan was raised in Pennsylvania but is about to be drafted into the Israeli army. He develops an intense drive to know more about the plight of displaced Palestinians and throughout a summer he develops a deep friendship with two Palestinian siblings. FICTION ROTHMAN-ZECHER

### Explore more stories about censorship

*Lula Dean's Little Library of Banned Books* A humorous story following the character Lula Dean whose mission is to rid public libraries of "pornographic" books. Lula starts her own lending library and her arch nemesis's daughter sneaks in every night and starts filling it with banned books disguised as wholesome ones. FICTION MILLER

*Banned Plays: Censorship Histories of 125 Stage Dramas* This comprehensive guide outlines the censorship histories of 125 classic plays from ancient times to the present. 782.09 SOV



There are 1.4 million books, movies, audiobooks, eBooks and more at the Winnipeg Public Library, and all you need to borrow them is your library card. There are 20 locations throughout the city and there's an online catalogue for requesting items for pick-up at your library of convenience. An e-Library has thousands of eBooks, eAudiobooks and more! All free with your card.  
Visit us at [Winnipeg.ca/library](http://Winnipeg.ca/library)

## Glossary and Mentions

**A shanda fur die goy!** Yiddish. Literally “a shame before the nations,” used to refer to embarrassing and shameful behaviour by a Jew or Jews which can be perceived by *goyim*.

**American Jewish Joint Committee.** This committee, also known as the JDC, was formed in order to respond to the increasing number of violent pogroms taking place in Europe.

**Antisemitism.** Hostility or prejudice against Jewish people. Coined by German journalist and antisemite Wilhelm Marr in 1879 to designate anti-Jewish campaigns.

**“Bei mir bist du schön.”** Perhaps the most famous song to emerge from the American Yiddish Theatre, translated to English by Sammy Cahn and made famous by The Andrews Sisters.

**Cossack.** A class of 17th-Century Ukrainian rebels who perpetrated brutal pogroms against Jews.

**Dybbuk.** A malevolent wandering spirit from Jewish folklore that possesses the body of a living person until they are exorcized.

**Ellis Island.** An island in upper New York Bay, formerly used as an immigrant examination station.

**Esn.** Yiddish. “Eat.”

**Evil Eye, The.** A Jewish superstition, a force of harmful negative energy believed to be the reason for sickness, tragedy and pain in the world.

**False piety.** When religious devotion is used to mask darker intentions.

**Farshtinkeneh.** Yiddish. “Stinking.”

**Gentiles.** Non-Jews.

**Gey avek. Yetst. Leml blayb.** Yiddish. “Leave. Now. Lemml stay.”

**Goy.** Yiddish term for a non-Jew. Often derogatory. Plural: *goyim*.

**Greenhorn.** An inexperienced, “green” person. Commonly used in early 20th-Century New York to describe new immigrants.

**Greenwich Village (or The Village).** Neighborhood on the west side of Lower Manhattan.

**House Un-American Activities (Committee), The.** Created in 1938 to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities among individuals and organizations suspected of having communist or fascist ties. Associated with McCarthyism and The Red Scare.

**Huppah.** A Jewish wedding canopy.

**In flagrante.** From the Latin, “in flagrante delicto,” (literally, “in blazing crime”), generally used as a euphemism for being caught in the midst of sexual misconduct.

**Intelligentsia.** The intellectual, highly educated elite.

**Ketubah.** The traditional Jewish marriage contract.

**Kike.** Derogatory term for a Jew.

**Kosher.** Fit and proper in accordance with Jewish law (especially regarding food).

**Litvak.** A Jewish from Lithuania.

***Merchant of Venice, The.*** A play by William Shakespeare. The villain is Shylock, a greedy and vengeful Jewish moneylender who demands a pound of flesh from Antonio as punishment for not repaying a loan.

**Minyan.** A quorum of at least ten Jews over the age of thirteen required for public worship.

**Off the boat.** A recent arrival to America. Often derogatory, not culturally assimilated.

**O'Neill, Eugene.** Considered one of the great American playwrights of the 20th Century, known especially for having written *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

**Oy vey iz mir.** A common Yiddish exclamation. Literally, "Oh, woe is me."

**Peretz, I.L.** One of the three great classical Yiddish writers, considered to be the most literary of the three.

**Peyes.** Long sidelocks/sideburns worn by religious, often Orthodox or Hasidic Jewish men.

**Pogrom.** An organized massacre or attack on a particular ethnic group, particularly the Jewish people of Russia and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

**Polack.** Derogatory term for a Polish person.

**Potchkying.** "Yinglish" from the Yiddish "potchky" meaning to mess around/fuss with.

**Provincetown Playhouse, The.** A theater in Greenwich Village, named for The Provincetown Players. NYU took ownership of the venue in 1984 and uses it to this day.

**Quotas.** The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 limited immigration from particular national and ethnic groups. This benefited Western European immigrants over Eastern and Southern European immigrants, disproportionately affecting Jews and Italians. Later, The Immigration Act of 1924 furthered limitations on the number of "undesirable" immigrants allowed to enter the United States. It excluded immigrants from Asia altogether.

**Rabbi.** A spiritual leader and teacher within the Jewish community.

**Salon.** A social gathering, usually of artists and writers, hosted by the elite.

**Schildkraut, Rudolph.** A prominent German actor who was a star in both Europe and the US.

**Seconal.** A now-obsolete sedative used to treat insomnia.

**Shikse (or Shiksa).** Yiddish term for a non-Jewish woman. Often derogatory.

**Shtetl.** A type of small Jewish village in Europe. Often insular, self-sufficient communities.

**Shvel.** Yiddish. "Threshold."

**Squelching.** Used like "welching" - avoiding something one has promised to do.

**Sukin syn.** Yiddish, borrowed from Russian. Son of a bitch.

**Torah (or Holy Scroll).** The Five Books of Moses (or, The Old Testament) written on parchment. A Torah must be painstakingly written by hand by a *sofer*, which usually takes about a year. Having a Torah in the home would have been a sign of considerable wealth, piety, and dedication to religious study. In the case of *God of Vengeance*, Yekel hopes it will attract a scholarly suitor for his daughter.

**Traif.** Not Kosher. (see “Kosher”)

**Veyn.** Yiddish. “Cry.”

**Yiddish –** The everyday language of Ashkenazi Jews. An amalgam of German and Hebrew, with elements of Aramaic, French, Russian and English mixed in. Today, Yiddish is primarily spoken within Hasidic and Haredi Jewish communities and university classrooms. Prior to the Holocaust, the global number of Yiddish speakers peaked at around 11 million, now less than 1 million remain.

**Zay moykhl** Yiddish. “Sorry.”

## Reflection Questions and Discussion Prompts

### Pre-Show

- What do you know about Yiddish language and culture? Are you familiar with any Yiddish songs, plays, Stories, etc.? Many Yiddish words have been absorbed into the English vernacular. Can you think of any?
- *Indecent* is the story of a play. *The God of Vengeance*. Can you think of any other works which follow the journey of a piece of art, rather than that of a person or group of people?
- Can you think of examples of art that has been censored? Why was it censored?
- Are there instances where censorship is appropriate in art?
- Paula Vogel stated: “Art matters when we’re in political danger; art matters when we’re in the middle of division.” What impact can theatre have during these times?
- Vogel has also said “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.” Have you ever had a piece of art (TV, film, music, theatre, dance visuals...) introduce you to a new perspective or viewpoint? Why do you think people might respond to art in this way?

### Post-Show:

- How was music used? How did it impact your experience of the play?
- Lemml says: “Excuse me, Mrs., but the play belongs to the people who labor in it! And the audience who put aside the time to be there in person!” Who owns a play? The playwright? The producer? The director? The players? The audience?
- Who should decide what is considered indecent?
- Could something like the events of the play happen today? Why or why not?
- Canada regards freedom of expression as a fundamental freedom, but there are limits on this freedom. For example, hate speech, obscenity and defamation are restricted

categories of speech in Canada. Based on this limitation, does *God of Vengeance* fit the bill? Why or why not?

- What will you take away from this play?
  - When asked what she hopes the audience takes away from this show, playwright Paula Vogel stated “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. Does this resonate with you?”

## Suggested Classroom Activities

Stage a mock trial for *The God of Vengeance* and decide whether or not its censorship was justified.

For further reference, this [God of Vengeance Resource Kit](#) includes two historical articles, presented in their original Yiddish and in English translation: “Filth and Vileness on the Yiddish Stage in New York” and “God of Vengeance Players Convicted.”

Paula Vogel describes music as “the heartbeat of the play.” The cultural context of the music composed for *Indecent* is an important connection to the community and this story. However, the themes of *Indecent* also have universality. Brainstorm, as a class or in small groups, some of the themes and topics of this play. Then as individuals or in small groups, create a playlist that reflects these themes. Make a deliberate decision as to whether the playlist will be made of songs from our contemporary time, a specific era, or throughout time.

The iconic image of *God of Vengeance* that the characters in *Indecent* keep referencing is the “dancing in the rain” sequence. Is this a central image of the play to you? What other images might exemplify the ideas of *Indecent*? Theatres use imagery to spread the word about a show to a potential audience. How would you visually represent *Indecent* in a way that would make people want to see it? Think about what target audience you will choose – even if this play wasn’t your favourite, who would enjoy it instead, and how could you entice them? Is there a particular character, event, theme, or message that you want to emphasize? How can you use colours, shape, and images to give the impression you are going for? Make sure to include the title of the play in your poster.

*Indecent*’s story spans space and time, and every production of the show will involve the creative team making deliberate choices to depict this.

Before the show: read the Plot Summary in this guide (or, if you’re okay with spoilers, the full plot synopsis). Have students, individually or in groups, consider what choices they would make in the above roles. This can be a discussion, in writing, or involve visual creation for the design aspects. What would your overall directing concept be – setting, time period, themes, etcetera – and how would you communicate that to the audience?

Before the show, consider:

- How could a set enable multiple locations needed in the play?
- As a designer, what kinds of colour palettes would you use for the set and lighting?



- What colours do you associate with the show? Use any media to create a colour palette for the set and characters. (Who blends in, who stands out? Who matches someone else, who contrasts?)
- What other features do you think the costumes could incorporate? For example, whose costume is simple vs elaborate, whose might be tight instead of loose, whose is well-maintained or ragged?

After the show, discuss whether the choices made were the same as yours.

- Can you identify the director's concept? What was emphasized about the themes and messages, and how?
- Why do you think the particular actors were chosen for these roles?
- Was the design realistic or more abstract?
- How did the set enable multiple locations?
- Did the lighting convey certain feelings or moods? How?
- How did the costumes enhance each?
- How did the costumes affect movement, and vice versa?
- What else did you notice about movement and choreography?

**Related Resource Links:** KlezCalifornia has several [lesson plans about Yiddish culture and music](#) available for teachers to download.

Learning for Justice has several Holocaust-related resources for teachers (free account may be needed to view): the [One Survivor Remembers documentary film kit](#) includes an interview, teachers guide and handouts, and a [webinar on media literacy and tools to combat hate](#) can help you to take these concepts further in your classroom.

You can also find resources and [lesson plans on the Montreal Holocaust Museum website](#).

## Curriculum Connections

Attending Royal MTC's production of *Indecent* and discussing it, or participating in some of the suggested or similar activities, will fit into the Manitoba curricula in the following ways.

### Manitoba English Curriculum

([https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/framework/full\\_doc.pdf](https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/framework/full_doc.pdf))

As the English Curriculum in Manitoba is in flux, we have not designated SLO numbers to these outcomes, but they all show up in both the 2000 curriculum and the most recent drafts of the new curriculum.

- research and study topics and ideas
- interpret and integrate information and ideas from multiple texts and sources
- manage information and ideas
- recognize and analyze inequities, viewpoints, and bias in texts and ideas
- investigate complex moral and ethical issues and conflicts

- Become aware of and articulate the ways that one engages with text
- recognize, apply and adapt rules and conventions

### **Manitoba Drama Curriculum**

DR-M2	The learner learns to use and is exposed to a variety of elements of drama and theatre
DR-M3	The learner learns to use and is exposed to dramatic forms and styles
DR-R2	The learner critically observes and describes drama/theatre experiences.
DR-R3	The learner analyzes and interprets drama/ theatre experiences.
DR-R4	The learner applies new understandings about drama/theatre to construct identity and to act in transformative ways.
DR-C1	The learner develops understandings about people and practices in the dramatic arts.
DR-C2	The learner develops understandings about the influence and impact of the dramatic arts.
DR-C3	The learner develops understandings about the roles, purposes, and meanings of the dramatic arts.

### **Manitoba Music Curriculum**

M-C1	The learner develops understandings about people and practices in music.
M-C2	The learner develops understandings about the influence and impact of music.
M-C3	The learner develops understandings about the roles, purposes, and meanings of music.
M-R1	The learner generates initial reactions to music experiences.
M-R2	The learner critically observes and describes music experiences.
M-R3	The learner analyzes and interprets music experiences.

Manitoba is in the process of integrating Holocaust education across all grades; as of yet this is not publicly accessible. For specific grades:

#### **Grade 9 Social Studies**

- 9-S-105 Recognize and take a stand against discriminatory practices and behaviours.
- 9-S-301 Analyze the context of events, accounts, ideas, and interpretations.
- 9-S-303 Reconsider personal assumptions based on new information and ideas.
- 9-S-400 Reconsider personal assumptions based on new information and ideas.
- 9-S-406 Debate differing points of view regarding an issue.
- 9.1.1 A Profile of Canada
- 9.1.2 Human Rights
- 9.1.4 Pluralism and Integration
- 9.3.1 Living in the Global Village

## **Grade 11 History**

4.3 Second World War

Core Concept of Citizenship

Enduring Understanding of Canada and the World

## **Grade 12 Global Issues**

Enduring Understandings: Individuals, groups, governments, and corporations have the power to effect change and the responsibility to contribute to a sustainable future; A just society respects human diversity and recognizes universal, equal, and inalienable human rights; There is no them or over there: we all belong to the human species, our concerns are interdependent, and we are part of the natural world.

## **Sources and Further Reading**

### **Paula Vogel**

<https://playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000151-7fec-d870-a9df-ffee5dd90000#carousel-cell20040126>

<http://PaulaVogelPlaywright.com>

### **Sholem Asch**

<https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/1044>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sholem-Asch>

### **Jewish Immigration from Europe to the USA**

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-immigration-to-america-three-waves/>

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

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pale-of-settlement>

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-lower-east-side-of-new-york-city/>

### **Assimilation**

<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/jewishexp.htm>

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/assimilation>

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/assimilation-in-united-states-twentieth-century>

### **Yiddish Theatre**

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

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/heft-notebook/new-york-yiddish-theater>

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/yiddish-theater-in-america>

### **The Holocaust**

<https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/what-was-the-holocaust/>

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

<https://culture.pl/en/article/jewish-theatre-in-poland-fragments-illustrious-history>

<https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-and-shoah/the-unloading-ramps-and-selections/>

### **Artistic Censorship**

<https://www.npr.org/2023/01/10/1148182892/indecent-paula-vogel-censorship>

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/educational-programs/resources-teachers/resource-kits-teachers/yiddish-theater/sholem-aschs-god>  
<https://www.freedomforum.org/art-censorship/>

### **Queer Representation**

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/broadways-first-lesbian-kiss>  
<https://theculturalcritic.com/the-captive-a-pioneering-play-about-a-lesbian/>

### **Enrichment Guide Creator**

**Elliot Lazar** is a theatre artist and musician born and raised on Treaty One Territory in Winnipeg. He is currently touring the US and Canada as Paul Simon in *The Simon and Garfunkel Story* which he has had the opportunity to perform throughout the US and Canada, and for one night in Glasgow! Other credits: *Fiddler on the Roof* (National Tour), *Jersey Boys* (Arts Club), *RENT* (Rainbow Stage), and *The Band's Visit* (Huntington/Speakeasy). Elliot is a graduate of the University of Manitoba Desautels Faculty of Music and The Boston Conservatory at Berklee. One play he saw and loved recently is *John Proctor is the Villain* by Kimberly Bellflower.