



MUSIC THEATRE OF MADISON

INDECENT

A play with music by Paula Vogel

Original music by Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva

PRODUCTION STUDY GUIDE



From the Director

Indecent is a veritable treasure trove of meaning, history, social analysis, questions, and representation of marginalized voices. These are the guideposts we use at Music Theatre of Madison when choosing the pieces we wish to bring to our audiences. While *Indecent* isn't technically a musical, its musical components bring us far outside of the realm of a traditional play.

Working on this play is an exciting and engrossing challenge for any artist, as each time you look back, there are more layers to peel. This study guide attempts to provide as much context as possible while also asking questions of audiences and, hopefully, provoking additional discussion. Within this guide you will find information on a variety of topics addressed in *Indecent* as well as links to further resources.

To perform *Indecent* for Madison-area audiences is a great privilege. We look forward to making it an emotional, enlightening, thought-provoking experience for everyone. Thank you!

-Meghan Randolph
Music Theatre of Madison Founder and Executive Director
Director, *Indecent*

ABOUT MUSIC THEATRE OF MADISON

Music Theatre of Madison is a fourteen year-old professional theatre company focused on the new and different in musical theatre. The company's roster includes local, state, and regional premieres. Music Theatre of Madison debuted its first world premiere, *Hephaestus*, in summer of 2019, and is in the process of creating its second world premiere, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, written by Madison authors. The company also works frequently with community organizations for educational purposes in order to expand its own capacity and provide well-rounded and intriguing experiences for audiences. This occurs through outreach, low-cost performances, performances in unconventional venues, and constantly keeping an eye out for new pieces that will excite and intrigue local audiences. Learn more about our work and our history at www.mtmadison.com.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Playwright	3
The History of INDECENT	3
Important Terms and Places	4
Sholem Asch	5
<i>God of Vengeance</i> plot summary	5
Yiddish-A Brief Overview	6
"Vot Ken You Makh?"-Assimilation	7
Yiddish Theatre	8
Theatre in Holocaust ghettos	8
Klezmer and the music of INDECENT	9
Gender and Lesbianism in the 1920s	10
Study and Reflection Questions	11

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Paula Vogel (Playwright) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose plays are produced throughout the world. *Indecent* opened on Broadway in April 2017 and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play. *How I Learned To Drive* received the Pulitzer Prize, Lortel Prize, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and New York Drama Critics awards for Best Play, and her second OBIE Award. Other plays include *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, *The Mineola Twins*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Hot 'N Throbbing*, *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *The Oldest Profession*, *A Civil War Christmas*, and *Don Juan Comes Home From Iraq*. Most recent

awards include the American Theater Hall of Fame Award, the Dramatists Guild Lifetime Achievement Award, the Lillys, the Thornton Wilder Prize, the OBIE Award for Lifetime Achievement, and the NY Drama Critics' Circle Award. She is honored to have three awards dedicated to emerging playwrights in her name: the American College Theater Festival, the Paula Vogel Award given annually by the Vineyard Theatre, and the recent Paula Vogel mentor's award by Young Playwrights of Philadelphia. Her plays are published in six volumes by TCG Press and she teaches playwriting workshops throughout the United States and abroad. For more, please visit www.paulavogelplaywright.com

THE HISTORY OF *INDECENT*

Playwright Paula Vogel and Director of the original production Rebecca Taichman had both been touched by Sholem Asch's seminal play *God of Vengeance* as they were pursuing their educations: Vogel as a 22-year-old graduate student at Cornell, and Taichman as a first year student at the Yale School of Drama. Taichman drew from trial transcripts to create a play that would become her thesis: *The People vs. The God of Vengeance*. Unsatisfied with the work, she began seeking a collaborator, whom she finally found in the celebrated Ms. Vogel in 2010. Together, they created a piece that they felt told all of the stories they wanted to tell about the play that had so influenced both of them.

The play was commissioned by Yale Repertory Theatre and American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. *Indecent* had its world premiere as a co-production between Yale Repertory Theatre and La Jolla Playhouse. The play had its New York premiere Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, opening on May 17, 2016, following previews from April 27. It played a limited engagement to June 12, 2016. It was directed by Rebecca Taichman, choreographed by David Dorfman and featured music by Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva. The production transferred to Broadway where it opened at the Cort Theatre, marking the first time one of Vogel's plays had been produced on Broadway. Taichman received the Tony Award for Best Director of a Play. The play was initially announced shortly after the Tony Awards to be closing on June 25, but on June 23 the Producers extended the run to August 6.



Writer Paula Vogel (L) and Director Rebecca Taichman

Further Reading:

["For Paula Vogel, a once-banned beautiful love story..." -NY Times](#)

["An interview with the playwright..."-Vineyard Theatre Company](#)

["INDECENT: Behind The Curtain." -PBS Great Performances](#)

IMPORTANT TERMS AND PLACES

Ashkenazism: Ashkenazi Jews, the subset of Jewish people portrayed in *Indecent*, are one of two significant Jewish populations with roots going back at least 1,000 years. The other group is known as Sephardim. The unique aspects of Ashkenazim within the broader Jewish community include their traditional spoken language (Yiddish), foods (e.g. kugel, rugelach), music (e.g. klezmer) and clothing (e.g. black hats). [Read details about the histories and differences of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews here.](#)

Ellis Island: As the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island processed approximately 12 million immigrants to the United States through the Port of New York and New Jersey. Over 3 million Jewish people came through in that time, accounting for 25% of American immigrants. [Learn more here.](#)



Jews moving into the Lodz ghetto, March 1940

Immigration Act of 1924: This act limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota. The quota provided immigration visas to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 national census. This act intentionally reduced the number of Jewish immigrants and other “undesirable” ethnic groups, “to preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity.” It completely excluded immigrants from Asia. [Learn more here.](#)

Kaddish: A hymn of praises to God found in Jewish prayer services. The term "Kaddish" is often used to refer specifically to "The Mourner's Kaddish", said as part of the mourning rituals in Judaism in all prayer services, as well as at funerals and memorials, and for 11 months after the death of a close relative. When mention is made of "saying Kaddish", this unambiguously refers to the rituals of mourning. Mourners say Kaddish to show that despite the loss they still praise God. [Learn more here.](#) *In the stage directions of Indecent after the song "Wiegala," Paula Vogel writes, "We have come to our Kaddish."*

Kosher: Hebrew for “fit” or “appropriate.” Describes the food that is suitable for a Jew to eat. With its roots in the Hebrew Bible, the system of defining which foods are kosher was developed by the rabbis of late antiquity. [Learn more here.](#)

Lodz Ghetto: 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. About 160,000 Jews, more than a third of the city's population, were forced into a small area. [Learn more here.](#) *In Indecent the troupe performs Act II of 'God of Vengeance' in the Lodz ghetto.*

Pogrom is a word used in many languages to describe the attacks accompanied by looting and bloodshed against Jews in Russia. [Learn more here.](#) *In Indecent, Sholem Asch is devastated by pogroms he witnesses in Vilna, Lithuania.*

Treif: (also written trayf, treyf or traif) is the Yiddish word that means “unkosher.” It is an adaptation of the Hebrew word treifah, which describes something that has been mangled or torn asunder. [Learn more here.](#)

Torah Scroll: A handwritten copy of the Torah, which includes the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses. It is mainly used in the ritual of the Torah reading during Jewish prayers. One of the 613 commandments a Jew is meant to follow is to handwrite or pay a scribe to handwrite a new Torah scroll. [Learn more here.](#) *In "God of Vengeance," Yekel has a Torah scroll written for his daughter, then hurls it to the ground when he finds out she is no longer pure.*

SHOLEM ASCH: "LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR."



The author of *God of Vengeance*, [Sholem Asch](#), was a celebrated playwright, essayist, and novelist. Born into a Hasidic family, Sholem Asch received a traditional Jewish education. Considered the designated scholar of his siblings, his parents dreamed of him becoming a rabbi and sent him to the town's best religious school (or *cheder*), where the wealthy families sent their children. After being sent to live with relatives, he began his more liberal education at Włocławek, where he supported himself as a letter writer for the illiterate townspeople. It is in Włocławek where he became enamored with the work of prominent Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz (depicted in *Indecent*). It is also where he began writing. He attempted to master the short story and wrote in Hebrew. What he wrote there would later be revised, translated into Yiddish, and ultimately, launch his career. In 1904, Asch released one of his most well-known works, "A Shtetl", an idyllic

portrait of traditional Polish-Jewish life. In January 1905, he released the first play of his incredibly successful play-writing career, *Tsurikgekumen* (Coming Back).

Asch wrote *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance) in 1906. Orthodox papers referred to *God of Vengeance* as "filthy," "immoral," and "indecent," while radical papers described it as "moral," "artistic," and "beautiful". In 1923, *God of Vengeance* was translated into English and staged on Broadway at the Apollo Theatre on West 42nd Street with a cast that included the acclaimed Jewish immigrant actor [Rudolph Schildkraut](#). Its run was cut short after six weeks when the entire cast, producer Harry Weinberger, and one of the owners of the theater were indicted – and later convicted – on charges of obscenity; Weinberger, who was also a prominent attorney, represented the group at the trial. The chief witness against the play was Rabbi Joseph Silverman, who declared in an interview with *Forverts*: "This play libels the Jewish religion. Even the greatest anti-Semite could not have written such a thing". (The controversy and arrest of the actors is a key plot point in *Indecent*.) Though he did not testify at the obscenity trial, Sholem Asch wrote a letter in defense of his play. [Read it here.](#)

GOD OF VENGEANCE: PLOT SUMMARY

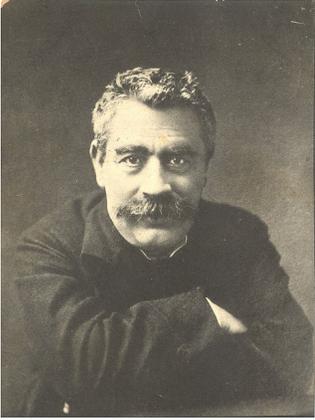
GOD OF VENGEANCE, written in 1906 by Sholem Asch, has appeared in various English translations since its debut, but the story remains essentially the same. The play tells the story of a Jewish brothel owner named Yekel and his wife, Sarah, a former whore in his brothel. The family lives above the whorehouse. They are adamant that their daughter, Rifkele, be a pure and pious Jew. He goes so far as to purchase a Torah scroll to keep in Rifkele's room to protect her, and arranges a marriage to a local Jewish scholar. Unbeknownst to the family, Rifkele has fallen in love with Manke, one of the prostitutes that works in the brothel. The culmination of their love is a beautiful scene in Act II of the play, set in the rain, which is referred to in *Indecent* as "The Rain Scene." When the play was translated into English, the scene was cut, eliminating the beauty and nuance of Rifkele and Manke's love. Upon learning that his daughter is no longer pure, Yekel becomes so enraged that he hurls down the treasured Torah scroll at the end of the play, also insisting that Rifkele and her mother go down to the whorehouse to live. This end scene of the play is re-enacted many times in *Indecent*.



The 1923 Broadway company of *God of Vengeance*

God of Vengeance opened in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1907, then briefly came to New York where it ignited controversy. The play returned to Europe for over ten years, then came back to New York for a run in Yiddish at the Bowery Theater. It was performed in English at the Provincetown Players, then retranslated for a Broadway run in 1923. After a few months, the production was shut down and the actors found guilty on charges of obscenity. [Read a more detailed production history here.](#)

YIDDISH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW



Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz

Literally, the word Yiddish means "Jewish," and refers to the language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews, who lived in Central and Eastern Europe. Derived from German, Yiddish incorporates elements of many languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic languages, and Romance languages. Yiddish likely developed sometime around the 10th century, as Jews migrated from France and Italy into the German Rhine Valley.

In early Ashkenazi societies, Hebrew was the language of prayer, Aramaic was the language of learning, and Yiddish was the language of everyday life. All three languages used the same alphabet.

Yiddish publishing became widespread in the 1540s, nearly a century after the invention of the printing press. Books were published in a more accessible Yiddish, without the characteristics of any particular Yiddish dialect. In the 1590s, the *Tsenen-rene* (also called *Tzenah Urenah*) was published for the first time. The book, which retells the weekly Torah portions, became known as "the women's Bible," because it was read in particular by women on the Sabbath and holidays.

As the use of Yiddish accelerated in the 1800s, so did the desire by many for it to be replaced by German languages. Some referred to Yiddish as "barbaric jargon," and stated that it was the language of the ignorant and uneducated.

Yiddish literature, which rose to prominence in the early 1900s, helped to expand the use of the language further. Famous writers in Yiddish included Sholom Aleichem, whose stories about Tevye the Dairyman would later become the famous musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, and I.L. Peretz, a humorist who is dramatized in *Indecent*.

In the early days of the Soviet Union (1922 until the mid-1930s), the communist government supported Yiddish schools, theater, research and literature — as long as these were strictly cultural expressions without Jewish religious content. However, the government soon began to censor Yiddish works, and eventually closed down most Yiddish institutions. During the purges of 1937, many Yiddish writers and leaders were arrested and executed at the increasingly paranoid orders of Joseph Stalin, who viewed Yiddish as anti-Soviet. In 1952, the remaining great Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union were brutally murdered in what is known today as the Night of the Murdered Poets (though not all of those executed were writers).

Before the Holocaust (1938-1945), there were roughly 11 million Yiddish speakers in the world. Many died in the Nazis' mass genocide, and those who survived hesitated to speak Yiddish in public or even to teach it to their children. In America, Yiddish was again thought of as low-brow and a sign of inability to make one's way in the world. Luckily, in the 1970s, a cultural revival of the language began with a new appreciation for the literature, plays, and music associated with it. Even so, today there are less than one million people who use Yiddish in their daily lives.

Source: The History of Yiddish, MyJewishLearning.com

Further reading:

- [Basic facts about Yiddish \(YIVO\)](#)
- [The Best 22 Yiddish words to know \(My Jewish Learning\)](#)
- [Origins of Yiddish Are Anything But Understood \(The Forward\)](#)
- [Effort to Preserve Yiddish Works Not 'Bupkes' \(NPR\)](#)



A 1920s Yiddish newspaper

“VOT KEN YOU MAKH? S’IZ AMERIKE!”-ASSIMILATION

Though Jewish Americans emigrated from many nations, once they were in the United States, there was a concerted effort to negotiate their place without sacrificing their Jewish identity. Many went to English classes at night, adopting American dress and customs. Ultimately, they were learning to fit in, to think like Americans, and to be American. One famous example of this is Israel Isidore Beilin, son of a cantor (synagogue music leader), who changed his name to Irving Berlin and wrote many popular American musicals and songs, including “White Christmas” and “God Bless America.” Contrastingly, some Jews resisted, feeling as though they should not have to abandon their own customs to fit in in America; they expected they should be able to continue with the customs they were used to.



Jews in prayer on Yom Kippur, near New York City, c. early 1900s

In the early 20th century, Abraham Cahan, editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, a Yiddish-language newspaper, offered advice and encouragement to a generation of Jewish immigrants. His words assisted newcomers to assimilate and inform themselves about the issues of the day. Many Jews took pride in representing their country by serving in World War I.

Learning English was a critical part of assimilation. At New York's Educational Alliance, countless Jewish immigrants took classes where they not only learned English, they also learned about American customs. Historian Beth Wenger points out, “The quest to become American could also be seen in the numbers of Jews learning English and attending night classes; by 1906 Jews made up the majority of students enrolled in New York's evening schools. Many immigrants mastered only rudimentary English, but they sent their children to the public schools in overwhelming numbers. Although many families needed their children's income to survive, education was the key to mobility until the next generation. Most Jewish children did obtain at least an elementary education during the immigrant era.”

Unfortunately, assimilation for Jewish people was, in some cases, met with hatred and violence. The lynching of Leo Frank, a prominent Jewish businessman in Atlanta, alarmed Jewish Americans in 1915. He was falsely accused and convicted of killing a worker, Mary Phagan, in the pencil factory that he managed. After Georgia Governor John M. Slaton stayed Frank's execution because of a lack of evidence, a mob dragged him from the jail and lynched him. Though an isolated tragedy, it caused a ripple effect of fear.

The Leo Frank incident also led to a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). By the mid-1920s, the KKK claimed to have four million members, more than all the Jews in the United States. In the midst of this turmoil and despite protestations at the time, President Woodrow Wilson nominated Louis D. Brandeis to the Supreme Court in 1916. As the first Jew to serve on the Court, Justice Brandeis had to endure bitter taunts, particularly from fellow justice James C. McReynolds. In the 1920s, Henry Ford, who revolutionized mass production in American industry, relentlessly blamed Jewish Americans for many of the nation's ills in his newspaper, “The Dearborn Independent.” By this time formerly European Jews had also begun to learn of the horrors in the place they came from. It was heartbreaking, and caused many to feel they had no safe place to be.

Source: pbs.org

Further reading:

[Assimilation in the United States, 1920s: Jewish Women's Archive](#)

[Assimilation: Jewish Virtual Library](#)

[The American Jewish Experience in the 20th Century: National Humanities Center](#)

YIDDISH THEATRE

Yiddish theatre in America began to take shape in the 1880s, but reached a new level of popularity during the Russian Revolution around 1905. As Jewish people came to the United States, Yiddish theatre troupes popped up throughout New York City, largely on the lower east side, where much of the Jewish population had settled. Audiences were loud, opinionated, and laughed frequently. In 1908, The New York Times compared Yiddish Theatre to Elizabethan Theatre: "The dense Jewish population on the lower east side of Manhattan shows in its appreciation of its own humble Yiddish poetry and the drama much the same spirit that controlled the rough audiences of the Elizabethan theatre. There, as in the London of the sixteenth century, is a veritable intellectual renaissance."

The mission and style of Yiddish Theatre evolved quickly. By the 1920s, when the troupe arrives in *Indecent*, the productions were becoming increasingly political in nature. At the Bowery Theater in New York, Yiddish audiences responded very well to *God of Vengeance*. The production was translated into English for the experimental [Provincetown Players](#) (a prolific company dedicated to new works in America) and Jewish audiences came in droves.

By the 1920s, Yiddish speakers were dissipating due to immigrants of previous generations wanting their children to grow up American, and therefore encouraging them to learn English. While there was still an audience for Yiddish plays, it declined as European Jews assimilated. However, Yiddish theatre had an unusual number of resurgences throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Its distinct style of comic timing bred actors such as Molly Picon, Eddie Cantor, Paul Muni, and Edward G. Robinson.

Further research:

[Yiddish Theater in America \(Jewish Virtual Library\)](#)

[Section on Yiddish Theatre from PBS Documentary "The Jewish Americans"](#)

THEATRE IN THE HOLOCAUST GHETTOS

As the Nazi regime gained power, Jews and others were forced into tiny portions of cities called "ghettos," Crowded, underfed, and lacking medical care, these ghettos subjected their residents to inhumane treatment.

Much has been discovered about how the residents found some joy and hope in their time in the ghettos. In *Indecent* we see the troupe perform Act II of "God of Vengeance" in an attic. Trained professional artists who had been relegated to these areas channeled their fears through their art. Art was even performed in certain concentration camps.

Many of the records of what was performed and when were destroyed, but photographs and journals do remain to help historians piece together how art served as a temporary beacon of hope for those facing darkness.



"The Eternal Jew" being performed in the Vilna ghetto

[Find numerous resources on theatre in the ghettos and concentration camps here.](#)

KLEZMER AND THE MUSIC OF *INDECENT*



A klezmer band in Ukraine, c. 1925

Indecent uses a significant amount of music to indicate times, places, and moods. In addition to using songs popular through each decade of the story, composers Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva wrote original underscoring for the production in the style of Klezmer music. Klezmer is a musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. Played by professional musicians called *klezmerim* in ensembles known as *kapelye*, the genre originally consisted largely of dance tunes and instrumental display pieces for weddings and other celebrations. In the United States the genre evolved considerably as Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who arrived between 1880 and 1924, came into contact with American jazz. Typically, it is played by violin, clarinet, and accordion (as in *Indecent*), as well as trombone, trumpet, piano, double bass, cello, and flute.

Klezmer is easily identifiable by its characteristic expressive melodies, reminiscent of the human voice, complete with laughing and weeping. This is not a coincidence; the style is meant to imitate khazone and paraliturgical singing. A number of *dreydlekh* (a Yiddish word for musical ornaments), such as *krekhths* ("sobs") are used to produce this style.

THE SONGS OF INDECENT

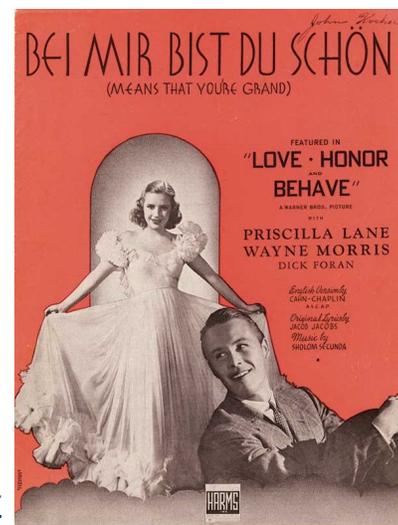
"Ale Brier (We Are All Brothers)" is a traditional Yiddish folk song made popular during the labour movement and left-leaning Jews of Europe at the turn of the century. [Learn more here.](#)

"Ich Hab' noch Einen Koffer in Berlin:" A testament to Berlin as home and place of acceptance, this song by Paul Lincke was mentioned in a speech by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. It was covered by numerous artists including Marlene Dietrich. [Learn more and read the lyrics and translation here.](#)

"Vot Ken You Makh? S'iz Amerike!": This comedic song debuted in the 1922 musical *The Litvak Yankee*, written by Aaron Lebedef and Alexander Olshanetsky. A deceptively dark piece, it describes the assimilation challenges Jews were faced with when coming to America from Europe. [Hear a recording and read the lyrics and translation here.](#)

"Bei Mir Bistu Shein" (Yiddish: "ביי מיר ביסטו שיין, To Me You're Beautiful") is a popular Yiddish song written by Jacob Jacobs (lyricist) and Sholom Secunda (composer) for a 1932 Yiddish language comedy musical, *I Would If I Could* (in Yiddish, *Men Ken Lebn Nor Men Lost Nisht*, "You could live, but they don't let you"), which closed after one season at the Parkway Theatre in Brooklyn, New York City. The original Yiddish version of the song (in C minor) is a dialogue between two lovers. Five years after its 1932 composition, the song became a worldwide hit when recorded under a Germanized title as "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön" by The Andrews Sisters in November 1937. [Learn more and here recordings here.](#)

"Wiegala": Ilse Weber, a Czech Jewish woman, worked the night shift in the children's hospital at the combination ghetto and concentration camp [Theresienstadt](#). There, she did all she could for the patients without the help of medicine, as it was forbidden for Jewish prisoners. It is said that Ilse sang "Wiegala" to her son and many other children as she accompanied them voluntarily into the gas chambers. [Learn more and read the lyrics and translation here.](#)



Sheet music for the Andrews sisters

GENDER AND LESBIANISM IN THE 1920s



Iconic flapper Clara Bow, c. 1925

In *Indecent*, we frequently hear of the “rain scene” in Scholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance*. This scene serves as a beacon of light and hope in the midst of chaos and despair.

Throughout the 1920s, women were asserting their independence in ways they had not previously. The right to vote was earned in 1920, and the flapper became a sex symbol. Flappers, with their short haircuts, immodest dresses, penchant for jazz and dancing, and sexual freedom were laughing in the face of traditional womens’ roles.

In spite of the flappers exerting their independence, sexism was prevalent as women moved into the workforce and politics. Women worked in “feminized positions” and even female politicians were relegated to speaking and working only on “womens’ issues.” Women were also paid far less. Perhaps the most prevailing concern, even for flappers, was reputation. Sexual and personal freedom could damage their reputation and mean they wouldn’t find a husband. That often meant their desire to express their sexuality had to be repressed.

For some sex couples, that was not a concern. In the United States in the 1920s, homosexuality was far from unheard of. The 1920s, particularly in larger cities like New York, brought about what was known as “The Pansy Craze,” which included numerous same-sex nightclubs and performing arts venues. While considered to be on the “fringe” of society, these locations were wildly popular. This could be a partial explanation for why *God of Vengeance* was successful at the off-Broadway, less traditional Bowery Theatre and Provincetown Players, in addition to the strong Jewish following in that area.

Literature featuring homosexual relationships was also becoming popular during this time period. With authors like [Gertrude Stein](#), [Alice B. Toklas](#), and [Elsa Gidlow](#), who wrote the first openly gay volume of poetry to be published in the United States.

As we learn in *Indecent*, the literary depictions of same sex couples still suffered censorship. Under the [Comstock Laws](#) of 1873, the U.S. postal service was banned from sending anything deemed “obscene,” as well as contraceptives, sex toys, personal letters with sexual content or information, and more. [The Hicklin Test](#), used by the federal government until 1933, defined “obscene” material as anything sexually explicit or dealing with contraceptives or abortion. Amongst many societal restrictions, the laws were a legal way to regulate womens’ expressions of sexuality.

As we see in *Indecent*, *God of Vengeance*, upon being translated for the Broadway stage, removed the nuance of the womens’ relationship, adding to sentiments that it was a play that portrayed Jews in an unflattering light. The sexuality depicted in the play contributed to the actors themselves eventually falling victim to obscenity charges.

Not long after the events of *Indecent* took place, as the Great Depression began, the no-holds-barred attitude of the 1920s dissipated, and “the closet” was born. Art began to portray lesbianism in particular as a tragedy.

Further research

[...America was awash in incredible queer nightlife: Atlas Obscura](#)
[How flappers redefined womanhood: History.com](#)
[Paula Vogel on Love: YouTube](#)
[Paula Vogel rain scene interview: YouTube](#)
[History of lesbianism in the United States](#)



REFLECTION QUESTIONS ON INDECENT

FOR GENERAL REFLECTION:

- Playwright Paula Vogel asks, “How do we suppress art, and why?” How would you answer this question? How is that question addressed in this play?
- What could have been different if *God of Vengeance* had been accepted in America?
- How can art help or hurt assimilation into other countries?
- How can art help or hurt those who do not wish to assimilate?
- Why must we create art in the face of adversity?
- Are there instances where censorship is appropriate in art?



AFTER SEEING INDECENT:

- Why was a European Jewish audience so accepting of the play when it portrayed some of their people in an unflattering light?
- *God of Vengeance* ends with Yekel hurling down the Torah scroll, in a scene we see portrayed many times in *Indecent*. In what ways might this seem like a Torah is being desecrated, even if it is only a prop? What arguments are there for and against portraying unholy acts on stage?
- Was *God of Vengeance* a "lesbian" play?
- During the play, what does it mean when we see the list of current Broadway shows playing in 1923 and, later, 1952, projected?
- What does the playing of the title song of “Oklahoma!” mean?
- Playwright Sholem Asch was a popular writer who could have used his influence to keep *God of Vengeance* open, but he didn’t even speak at the actors’ trial, even though he does send a letter. He claims he is preoccupied with the pogroms in Europe, but later admits he is embarrassed about the way he speaks. What do you make of this?
- What makes the rain scene so powerful?
- Why is there tension between Reina and Dorothee (Dine) as they rehearse for the English debut?
- What do the musicians and the underscoring add to the story?
- After Reina is fired, the company hires a young, Christian, inexperienced actress to play Rivkele. Was this a good choice? Would we make this choice now?
- Why does Lemml return to Europe? What might he expect to find there?
- In what ways could the events of this play transpire today?

