INDECENT

A PLAY BY
PAULA VOGEL

DIRECTED BY
GARY GRIFFIN

STUDY GUIDE
CONTENTS

GREETINGS FROM ROXANNA .............................................................................................................. 3
ABOUT THE PLAY ............................................................................................................................. 4
ACTORS & CHARACTERS .................................................................................................................. 5
INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT .............................................................................................. 6
GLOSSARY OF TERMS ...................................................................................................................... 8
ABOUT YIDDISH .................................................................................................................................. 8
COMPARING HEBREW + YIDDISH ................................................................................................... 9
SHOLEM ASCH’S GOD OF VENGEANCE COMES TO LIFE ............................................................. 10
ABOUT GOD OF VENGEANCE .......................................................................................................... 11
AN OPEN LETTER FROM SHOLEM ASCH ...................................................................................... 14
WORD SEARCH .................................................................................................................................... 17
1923 TIMELINE .................................................................................................................................. 18
WRITING PROMPTS ............................................................................................................................ 20
PUBLIC PROGRAMS ............................................................................................................................ 21
LINKS .................................................................................................................................................... 22
JOIN VICTORY GARDENS THEATER’S TEEN ARTS COUNCIL ....................................................... 23

SUPPORT FOR VICTORY GARDENS EDUCATION DEPARTMENT PROVIDED BY

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY

2018/2019 SEASON SPONSORS

THE HARVEY L. MILLER SUPPORTING FOUNDATION
BILL & ORLI STALEY FOUNDATION
HELEN ZELL

SEASON SPONSOR PARTNERS

CONANT FAMILY FOUNDATION
GEORGE A. JOSEPH
MARCELLE McVAY & DENNIS ZACEK
JEFFREY RAPPIN & PENNY BROWN
JANE M. SAKS, NATHAN CUMMINGS FOUNDATION

MAJOR PRODUCTION SPONSOR
HELEN ZELL

PRODUCTION SPONSORS
JARED KAPLAN & MARIDEE QUANBECK
MERLE RESKIN
SARAH BEARDSLEY
SONDRA BERMAN EPSTEIN

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY

VICTORY GARDENS THEATER • INDECENT STUDY GUIDE 2
Welcome to the 2018/19 Season! I’m thrilled to join Victory Gardens and look forward to continuing our tradition of excellence in Arts Education with students across the city.

While researching for this study guide, I was struck by the number of issues that we continue to face that were prevalent in 1923. More than a century has passed since Sholem Asch wrote *God of Vengeance* and we still have so much to do in our society regarding equality, race, culture, religion and love. During the first rehearsal for *Indecent*, Artistic Director, Chay Yew stated, “This play is about the endurance and power of art.” I am hopeful this production will encourage all audiences to embrace not just the power of art, but the importance of history, and our capacity to connect and empathize with one another.

This study guide will provide you and your students with an introduction to the world of the play, which spans 1906 to 1952. It should also challenge your students to think about the themes of the play from their point of view before and after you see the production. Throughout the guide you will find CHECKPOINTS, a new feature developed for further exploration and activation of the material as you move through it. Each checkpoint is on a single page, allowing you to make copies for your students as you see fit. The study guide still includes the ANTICIPATION SURVEY with statements that we would like students to consider pre and post performance, to determine if the play supports their opinions, or causes them to change. You will find these questions on pages 8 and 9 in this edition. The WRITING PROMPTS will challenge your students to make personal connections to the themes of the play. We believe the study guide should provide an opportunity for analysis, expression and reflection. In the future, we will continue to adapt their content.

We look forward to seeing you at the matinee and hearing from your students during the post-show discussion immediately following the performance.

Best,

Roxanna Conner
Director of Education
Victory Gardens Theater
ABOUT THE PLAY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE:</td>
<td>When characters speak their native language, they speak perfect English (when Sholem Asch, Madja Asch speak Yiddish, for example). When characters speak English as their second language, they speak in a dialect (Reine, Madja, Esther, and Asch, for example; Rudolph Schildkraut has the most intense dialect in America).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUN TIME:</td>
<td>100 minutes; no intermission.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sholem Asch’s play *God of Vengeance* tells the story of Yekel, who, though he owns a brothel and is married to a former sex worker, desperately wants to establish himself as a respectable man in his community. He’s focused and determined to find a proper husband for his daughter, Rifkele. Once a matchmaker finds a suitable candidate, Yekel commissions a sacred Torah scroll, which he plans to hang in Rifkele’s room in order to protect her. However, he’s blindsided when he discovers that she’s developed an intimate relationship with Manke, one of the brothel’s sex workers.

Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* follows the original productions of *God of Vengeance*, from its 1907 premiere in Berlin, through its acclaimed European tour and performances in the United States. When the production makes its English language premiere on Broadway in 1923, the team of Jewish artists find themselves wading through legal trouble after a local prominent rabbi files complaints about the content of the play. *God of Vengeance* is temporarily shut down, while the producer, director and some of the actors are charged with obscenity.

Inspired by research found in the archives at Yale University, *Indecent* merges historical information from the documents of producer Harry Weinberger and playwright Sholem Asch, with fiction. It was Rebecca Taichman’s thesis project *The People vs. The God of Vengeance* at the Yale School of Drama that served as a catalyst for she and Paula Vogel to collaborate in the creation of *Indecent*. 
The Victory Gardens production features a cast of seven actors, who between them play a total of forty-one characters. Two musicians will play live music throughout the performance. *Indecent* focuses on the spirit of a company of artists and the sacrifices they made for their art.

**BENJAMIN MAGNUSON**
Stage Manager: Lemml

**KIAH STERN**
The Ingenue: Chana

**NOAH LaPOOK**
The Ingenue: Avram

Rifkele, Madje, Elsa, Immigrant, Ruth/Reina, Virginia, Bagelman Sister

Asch, Immigrant, Morris Carnovsky, Eugene O’Neill, John Rosen

**CATHERINE LeFRERE**
The Middle: Halina

**ANDREW WHITE**
The Middle: Mendel

**CINDY GOLD**
The Elder: Vera

Manke, Immigrant, Freida, Dorothee/Deine, Doctor, Bagelman Sister

Nakhmen, Immigrant, Harry Weinberger, Officer Benjamin Bailie, Rabbi Joseph Silverman

Sarah, Mrs. Peretz, Immigrant, Esther Stockton, Madje

**DAVID DARLOW**
The Elder: Otto

**ELLEON DOBIAS**
Violin: Nelly Friedman

**MATT DEITCHMAN**
Accordion: Moritz Godowsky

Yekel, Peretz, Schildkraut, Immigrant, Bartender, Judge McIntyre, Asch
What was the seed of Indecent?

I read Sholem Asch’s play God of Vengeance when I was 23 years old, and I was astonished by it. In 1906, 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.

Many years later, in 2000, I saw Rebecca Taichman’s MFA Thesis production at Yale, which interwove the text of God of Vengeance with the transcript of the 1923 obscenity trial against the play in New York. I thought it was a fascinating idea. Flash forward to five years ago, when I got a phone call from Rebecca asking me to be involved. It took me thirty seconds to say yes.

Can you think of a contemporary play that has provoked similar outrage?

The plays that I admire, and the playwrights that I admire, are not shying away from the complexity of racism, bias, sexism and the things that hurt us. I’d point to An Octoroon by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. That is a play that has an insider/outside perspective. A musical I thought was astonishing was The Scottsboro Boys. It’s a brilliant, virulent show and I’m glad The Vineyard’s production succeeded in London but it tells me a lot that it wasn’t as well-received on Broadway. We are no different than the audiences who sat and watched God of Vengeance.

Can you talk about your collaborative process with Rebecca Taichman?

When Rebecca brought me into this project, I didn’t see this as a play about the obscenity trial, as her thesis project had been; as an older writer, there was a larger story that I engage in. About a fiery young playwright — not just Asch, but me, too — ignored for decades and then embraced by students. Rebecca was open and generous and allowed me to explore my ideas. I knew right from the beginning that I wanted music and a klezmer band, and Rebecca brought on composers, dancers and a choreographer. We talked over every page that I wrote; she showed me things in her staging that opened up the play for me and vice versa. She is an extraordinary, open-hearted collaborator.

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.
You mentioned music, which 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.

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.

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.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- 1907 was the busiest year in the history of Ellis Island, with 1.1 million immigrants entering the U.S. from the island.

- 109 years after Sholem Asch wrote *God of Vengeance*, same sex marriages were legalized in all 50 states by a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on June 26, 2015.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ANTI-SEMITISM
Prejudice specifically against Jewish people.

COSSACK
Refers to one from southern Russia or the Ukraine.

EUGENE O’NEILL
Famous Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright.

FARSHTINKENEH
Yiddish word for “stinking”; a rotten person.

GELYM
A Hebrew word used in the Jewish community for Non-Jewish people.

CHUPPAH
Canopy under which a Jewish couple stands during their wedding.

KETUBAH
A Jewish prenuptial agreement setting the responsibilities of the groom to the bride.

MESSIAH
The prophesied savior of the Jewish people.

MINYAN
The group of ten Jewish adults required to perform certain religious practices and prayers. Historically it must consist of men, ages 13 and over. Some modern synagogues accept women as members of a minyan.

RABBI
A Jewish scholar/expert on Jewish law; often the leader of a Jewish congregation.

RUDOLPH SCHILDKRAUT
Famous Austrian actor and member of the original 1923 American cast of God of Vengeance.

SHOLEM ASCH
Polish-Jewish playwright and novelist; writer of God of Vengeance.

SHTETL
Yiddish term for a small Jewish village or town in Central and Eastern Europe.

TORAH
The holy text of the Jewish faith.

For help with the pronunciation of some of the glossary words visit: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/

TRUE OR FALSE?

Q. Yiddish is the nickname for Hebrew, which is the official language of Jewish people.

A. ________

Q. Individuals immigrating into the United States in 2018 face different issues from immigrants in the 1900s.

A. ________

ABOUT YIDDISH

Yiddish was first used by the Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. At that time they were forced to live in segregated communities, were not permitted to own property and worked menial jobs. It was in these segregated neighborhoods that Yiddish was created. It was originally a German dialect with words from Hebrew and several modern languages and is today spoken mainly in the US, Israel, and Russia.
**HEBREW**

- Has been interpreted to mean, “from the other side of the river/desert.”
- The official language of the Jewish people.
- Is the first spoken language in Israel.
- Referred to as “the holy language.”
- Likely formed between 1200–586 BCE, making it one of the earliest spoken human languages.
- The earliest reference to “Hebrew” as a language is found in the prologue to the “Book of Ben Sira” from the 2nd Century BCE.
- It is the only remaining Canaanite language being used.
- The Hebrew alphabet is comprised of 22 letters.
- Hebrew is currently spoken by over 10 million people worldwide.

**YIDDISH**

- When translated it means Jewish.
- Is a combination of languages that formed around the 10th century as Jewish immigrants moved across Europe.
- It combines Hebrew, German, and Aramaic as well as Slavic and Romance languages.
- It was spoken primarily by “Ashkenazi” Jewish communities from Central and Eastern Europe.
- The first printed record of Yiddish was found in 1272.
- Uses the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet.
- Yiddish is currently spoken by about 3 million people.

**TRUE OR FALSE?**

Q. Individuals tend to judge their own race/culture more harshly than those outside of the group.

A. ________

Q. Art is meant to entertain, provoking thought isn’t part of the creation process of the artist.

A. ________

Q. I don’t believe I will connect with the play, because it was written so long ago.

A. ________

Q. Due to content, some art should be censored.

A. ________
ON MARCH 26, 1923, shortly before curtain time, the cast and producers of Sholem Asch’s play, God of Vengeance were arrested by a vice squad and thrown into jail to await trial on obscenity charges. The arrest took place fifteen days after the Yiddish play had its English-language debut on the Great White Way, with hopes of crossing over to the American mainstream. It would not be until the 1964 production of “Fiddler on the Roof” that a play depicting the traditional Jewish world of Eastern Europe enjoyed a long-running triumph on Broadway, eventually enchanting crossover audiences worldwide. In the shared themes and subtle differences between these two plays, we can find clues to their very different fates.

The play’s alleged offense was sexual indecency: For the first time ever, two women, one a sex worker and the other the brothel owner’s daughter, shared a long, passionate kiss on stage. This violation of the moral code, sacred to puritanical Americans if not to their hopelessly decadent European counterparts, served as a workable pretext to throw the director and thirteen actors into the slammer, later to be freed on $300 bail, to await trial. Their indictments ignited a free-speech campaign led by Harvey Weinberger, the show’s producer and a famous civil rights advocate, who took on the censors in a legal battle. (Meanwhile, once bail was posted, performances resumed and the publicity was arguably a plus for box-office receipts).

The campaign against God of Vengeance was spearheaded by Rabbi Joseph Silverman, spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-El, the most prestigious and wealthy congregation in America. Silverman contacted his friend the district attorney, and together they cooked up the obscenity charges, prompting fast action by the vice squad. It is tempting to conclude that the more genteel members of the Jewish community were mortified by the brutish, criminally-minded Jews in Asch’s drama, but while public shame on the part of the German-Jewish community, surely played a part, a closer look at Silverman and his milieu reveals more complex stakes.

The fate of Jewish immigration to the U.S. was being debated in Washington. Within a year of the vice-squad raid, Congress would enact the Johnson-Reed Act, instituting discriminatory immigration quotas based on the racist and anti-semitic theory of eugenics. Silverman was trying to forestall the calamitous consequences for Jews, which were nonetheless realized in the form of restrictive quotas that would ultimately help condemn millions to the Nazis’ death camps.

The Jewish opposition to the play might best be understood in contemporary terms by recasting the setting and characters: Imagine the effect today of a well-crafted play about Muslims that featured honor killings and money laundering, just as the travel ban and immigration quotas are being debated on Capitol Hill. Does the right to free speech and artistic expression override the damage such a portrayal might inadvertently cause?

God of Vengeance goes beyond an unflattering picture of its Jewish characters. It also plays fast and loose with gender stereotypes. By 1923, there had been plenty of plays with “working girls” in full view of Broadway audiences, including George Bernard Shaw’s Mrs. Warren’s Profession. None of these were brought up on obscenity charges. Was the difference really the lesbian kiss?

Asch’s depiction of these women may have startled audiences. But it’s likely that what terrified them was the spectacle of manhood unraveling. This is not merely a matter of a play’s sleazy criminal types, something to which audiences were well accustomed. What they needed to shut down was Asch’s attack on the self-image of the Jewish American male.
ABOUT GOD OF VENGEANCE

Young playwrights committed to preserving the Yiddish language often had their plays read at salon (a cultural gathering) at the home of Yiddish writer and scholar, I.L. Perets.

In 1906, 26-year-old writer Sholem Asch followed that tradition when he wrote Got fun nekome (God of Vengeance). After the reading, Peretz instructed the young playwright to destroy the play. Ironically, God of Vengeance was the first Yiddish language play to be translated and staged across Europe. Asch’s play was translated into Russian, Polish, Hebrew, English, Italian, French, Dutch, Czech, Swedish, and Norwegian.

In 1912, the Moscow branch of cinema firm, Pathé Frères, released a silent film of Got fun nekome (The God of Vengeance) with Russian subtitles. Unfortunately, the film is presumed lost.
CHECKPOINT

In the early 1900s, Jewish immigrants were pressured to speak English rather than use Yiddish in order to appear ‘American’. In fact, many parents instructed their children to focus on learning and speaking English. Using the space below, make a list of what you believe the Jewish immigrants may have lost when they stopped speaking and teaching their children Yiddish.

What does the United States lose when its immigrants (past and present) leave their languages behind in an effort to appear more ‘American’?
CHECKPOINT

Many Yiddish words are commonly used in conversation. Read the words and definitions/examples provided below. Check the appropriate box(es) “I’ve Said This” and/or “I’ve Heard This”. Compare your responses with a classmate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I’VE SAID THIS</th>
<th>I’VE HEARD THIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schlep: To go a far distance out of your way; “I have to schlep all the way to Evanston this afternoon.”</td>
<td>☐ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meshuganeh: Crazy; “You’re meshuganeh!”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutzpah: Nerve, guts; “He’s got some serious chutzpah.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmutz: Dirt or gunk; “You have some schmutz on your pants, wipe them off.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kvell: Exclaiming with pride; “My mom was kvelling about my great report card.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kvetch: Complain; “Stop kvetching and eat your vegetables.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mensch: Good deed doer, decent person; “She volunteers at the homeless shelter on weekends, she’s a real mensch.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosh: To peck, nibble, or pick on food; “Stop noshing. You’ll spoil your dinner!”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oy Vey: Expression of woe; ‘oh boy’; “Oy vey.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmooze: To make small talk; “During a university visit, prospective students have to schmooze with the admissions officer.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tchotchke (Choch-kee): Small toy or knick knack; “Every McDonald’s happy meal comes with a little tchotchke for the kids.”</td>
<td>☑ ☑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because of the wrong interpretation of my play, God of Vengeance, now running at the Apollo Theatre, I wish to make the following statement:

I wrote this play when I was twenty-one years of age. I was not concerned whether I wrote a moral or immoral play. What I wanted to write was an artistic play and a true one. In the seventeen years it has been before the public, this is the first time I have had to defend it.

When the play was first produced, the critics in Germany, Russia, and other countries, said that it was too artistically moral. They said that for a man like “Yekel Shepshovitch,” keeper of a brothel, to idealize his daughter, to accept no compromise with her respectability, and for girls like Basha and Raizel, filles de joie, to dream about their dead mother, their home, and to revel in the spring rain, was unnatural.

About two years ago I was approached by New York producers for permission to present the play in English. I refused, since I did not believe the American public was either sufficiently interested or adequately instructed to accept God of Vengeance.

I don’t know whether I can explain the real feeling I wanted to put into this play. It is difficult for an author to comment on his own work. As to the scenes between Manka and Rifkele, on every European stage, especially the Russian, they were the most poetic of all, and the critics of those countries appreciated this poetic view. This love between the two girls is not only an erotic one. It is the unconscious mother love of which they are deprived. The action portrays the love of the woman-mother, who is Manka, for the woman-child, who is Rifkele, rather than the sensuous, inverted love of one woman for another. In this particular scene, I also wanted to bring out the innocent, longing for sin, and the sinful, dreaming of purity. Manka, overweighed with sin, loves the clean soul of Rifkele, and Rifkele, the innocent young girl, longs to stay near the door of such a woman as Manka, and listen within.

As to the comment that the play is a reflection on the Jewish race, I want to say that I resent the statement that God of Vengeance is a play against the Jews. No Jew until now has considered it harmful to the Jew. It is included in the repertoire of every Jewish stage in the world and has been presented more frequently than any other play.

God of Vengeance is not a typical “Jewish play.” A “Jewish play” is a play where Jews are specially characterized for the benefit of the Gentiles. I am not such a “Jewish” writer. I write, and incidentally my types are Jewish for of all peoples they are the ones I know best. God of Vengeance is not a milieu play — it is a play with an idea. Call “Yekel” John, and instead of the Holy Scroll place in his hand the crucifix, and the play will be then as much Christian, as it is now Jewish.

The fact that it has been played in countries where there are few Jews, Italy for instance, and that there the Gentiles understood it for what it is, proves that it is not local in character, but universal. The most marked Jewish reaction in the play is the longing of “Yekel Shepshovitch” for a cleaner and purer life. This is characteristically Jewish. I don’t believe a man of any other race placed in “Yekel’s” position would have acted as he did in the tragedy that has befallen his daughter.

Jews do not need to clear themselves before any one. They are as good and as bad as any race. I see no reason why a Jewish writer should not bring out the bad or good traits. I think that the apologetic writer, who tries to place Jews in a false, even though white light, does them more harm than good in the eyes of the Gentiles. I have written so many Jewish characters who are good and noble, that I can not now, when writing of a “bad” one, make an exception and say that he is a Gentile.

—Sholem Asch
CHECKPOINT

Sit down with someone from an older generation and ask what was censored or considered indecent when they were young adults. The following are questions that may help you get the conversation started.

• How were music, literature, clothing, and relationships monitored by adults during that time?

• Did you rebel against those rules?

• What were the consequences of crossing the line of decency that others had established?

• As an adult are there things you previously considered taboo, but after time your perspective has changed?

• What do you think caused that change?

DID YOU KNOW?

• Censorship in the United States can be traced back to Massachusetts in 1692.

• The U.S. Government had an Office of Censorship from 1941-1945.

• 1957 Elvis Presley’s performance on the Ed Sullivan Show filmed from the waist up because his dancing was deemed “indecent.”
A **tableau** is a silent image made by participants assuming frozen poses to convey an idea, mood or perspective. In small groups, create a tableau of one of the following:

- Rabbi Silverman watching the performance of *God of Vengeance*. (Is he the only audience member offended? What are the other audience reactions? Does your tableau include images of both the stage and audience?)
- Rabbi Silverman meeting with the District Attorney to file a complaint about the performance. (Who is in the room? Does everyone agree with the Rabbi? Select a specific point in the conversation that your tableau captures.)
- The vice squad arresting the cast and production team of *God of Vengeance*. (What are the reactions of the cast? How much force did the vice squad use? Does anyone resist arrest?)
- The courtroom during the obscenity trial. (Who is in the courtroom? What are the facial expressions of the accused, Rabbi Silverman and others? Select a specific moment during the trial.)

**KEEP THE FOLLOWING IN MIND WHEN CREATING A TABLEAU:**

- Use levels to create an interesting picture; create a mixture of sitting, standing, squatting, lying down, etc.
- Use the space available to create depth and relay information about relationships. (what does two people huddled together tell you about the relationship vs. two people glaring at one another several feet apart?)
- Freeze in a position the represents an action (e.g. pointing, mid-stride of walking, reaching, etc).
- Freeze in a position that can be held for a couple of minutes while the audience observes the image.
- Create a facial expression and physical position that tells the story of your character.

As a class, each group should share their tableau while the audience discusses the image. If groups explore the same scene, discuss the differences in interpretation that each represents.
WORD SEARCH

CHUPPAH  KETUBAH  KVETCH  SCHLEP
CHUTZPAH  KLEZMER  MENSCH  SCHMOOZE
HEBREW  KVELL  MINYAN  TCHOTCHKE
INDECENT  SCHMUTZ  NOSH  TORAH
JUDAISM  SCHTEL  RABBI  YIDDISH
1923 TIMELINE

*God of Vengeance* made its Broadway premiere in 1923, below is a list of cultural factors shaping American behaviors, and events that occurred during that year.

**PROHIBITION LAWS** were four years into the 14-year ban on the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States.

**INSULIN** is mass produced and sold to the public to treat diabetes.

**FROZEN FOOD** was invented by Clarence Birdseye.

North Dakota **OUTLAWED DANCING** on Sundays.

**FEBRUARY 5:** United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind: The Supreme Court decides that Bhagat Singh Thind cannot become a naturalized U.S. citizen because, as a Punjabi (Indian) Sikh, he is not a “white person.”

**FEBRUARY 16:** King Tut’s burial chamber opened in Egypt.

**MARCH 3:** The first issue of *Time* Magazine was published.

**MARCH 23:** The first anti-Darwinian legislation is passed in the U.S. when Oklahoma governor signs House Bill 197 outlawing the theory of evolution in public school textbooks purchased by the state.

**APRIL 15:** The first sound on film motion picture is shown at the Rivoli Theatre in New York City.

**AUGUST 2:** President Warren G. Harding dies and is succeeded by Vice President, Calvin Coolidge.

**OCTOBER 16:** The Walt Disney company was founded by Roy and Walt Disney.

**NOVEMBER 8:** Adolf Hitler leads the Nazi Party in a failed coup to overthrow the Bavarian government in Germany.
CHECKPOINT

In small groups or as a class, read Silverman’s monologue from Indecent. What strikes you about the monologue? What ideas do you identify with? Considering our current society, who might have similar feelings about the portrayal of their culture, race or religion?

SILVERMAN:  And so every time I pick up the paper and I read about:
   A robber who assaults an eighty-year-old grandmother—
   A mother who was at a bar when a fire broke out
   and consumed all of her children at home—
   Men who were caught together in the park in the light of day—
   I lift my face to the heavens and I pray, please,
   oh Lord, please do not let them be Jewish!
   This is what it means to be Jewish in America.

EXTENSION: Write a monologue that addresses the issues and stereotypes you fear being associated with (e.g. crime, illegal drugs, specific behaviors). Are you most concerned in a particular setting? End your monologue using the line, “This is what it means to be __________ in __________.” You may choose to end with America or name a different location.
WRITING PROMPTS

• Sholem Asch titled his play *God of Vengeance*. How does vengeance play a role in *Indecent*?

• Our standards of decency are personal and influenced by many factors including religious, cultural and family beliefs. What do you believe crosses the line of decency? Write an argumentative essay to persuade the reader to agree with your perspective.

• Is there something you’re willing to fight for the right to participate in? Explain its importance in your life.

• In one minute write as many words/phrases that you consider synonymous with obscene.

• Who do you believe has more power, the artist or the audience? Defend your statement.

• Imagine you write an advice blog. You receive a message from a teenager whose parents are pushing them toward a career, college, or relationship that doesn’t align with their own goals. Answer their request for help by providing a suggestion for how they can approach their parents to discuss their dreams.

• *God of Vengeance* was an incredible success in Europe. Why do you think it was received so differently in the United States? Was it cultural differences? Do you think that difference in mentality and culture remains today?

• According to the article by Susan Reimer-Tom, Rabbi Silverman used his considerable power and influence to steer the district attorney to charge the *God of Vengeance* team with obscenity. How are influence and power used to guide policies and laws in 2018?

• Write an argumentative essay, declaring whether you believe censorship is appropriate.
PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Public Programs is an event series designed to enhance your experience by exploring themes and issues within Victory Gardens’ productions. Connecting our theater to the world beyond the stage and rehearsal room, Public Programs bridge ideas, provoke dialogue, and deepen the relationship between our audiences and our productions.

AFTERWORDS
AFTER EVERY PERFORMANCE OF INDECENT (UNLESS NOTED) • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
Join us for one of our intimate post-show conversations led by members from the Victory Gardens community, reflect on what you’ve seen, and share your response.

CONVERSATION: PAULA VOGEL
SUNDAY, SEP. 23 • 4:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
Playwright Paula Vogel wanted to explore the journey of the actors of God of Vengeance and celebrate the power of theatre. But how did that idea evolve into the Tony Award-nominated play Indecent? Join us as Paula Vogel discusses her work and process with dramaturg Skyler Gray.

CELEBRATION: FREYLACH: FOOD, MUSIC, AND STORYTELLING
THURSDAY, SEP. 27 • 9:00PM • POST-SHOW RECEPTION
Jewish culture from Eastern Europe (Ashkenazic) is known for its particularly appetizing foods such as knishes, kugels, pickles and more. And wouldn’t it be more freilich (joyous) to nosh (eat) with music and short shpiln (plays)? Nosh, shpil, and schmooze (enjoyably converse) with us!

SPECIAL EVENT: THE WORLD ONLY SPINS FORWARD
MONDAY, OCT. 1 • 7:00PM • READINGS OF EXCERPTS, DISCUSSION, AND BOOK SIGNING

PANEL: YIDDISH THEATER AND ITS IMPACT ON POPULAR CULTURE
THURSDAY, OCT. 11 • 9:00PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
The Yiddish Theater was one of America’s most vibrant ethnic theaters, from plays about immigrant Jewish life, to Yiddish-language versions of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and more. This panel will discuss the uniqueness of the Yiddish Theater and its continued reverberations.

PANEL: QUEERNESS TODAY
TUESDAY, OCT. 16 • 9:00PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
Discrimination against queer bodies has plagued society for generations. Indecent shows us some of that discrimination in 1924 New York, but how has it evolved? LGBTQ community leaders will discuss how queer communities have changed, and how queerness functions in America today.

PANEL: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER
WEDNESDAY, OCT. 24 • 9:00PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
The God of Vengeance actors came to America seeking success, but were faced with anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, and censorship. How do artists make their way in 2018? Local artists will discuss how art allows them to express themselves in an oppressive political climate.

SALON: LIVING TRADITION
THURSDAY, NOV. 1 • 9:00PM • POST-SHOW PERFORMANCE
In a country profoundly comprised of people from other places, how do we carry on those traditions from our past? How do those long-standing traditions inform who we are today? Join us in the lobby after the show as three Chicago poets explore tradition in their own lives.

PANEL: THE CONSEQUENCES OF HATE
SATURDAY, OCT. 6 • 4:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
A recent survey showed 22% of millennials have never heard of the Holocaust. With so many people uninformed about such atrocities, how can we use history to save us from its repetition? Indecent consultant Dr. Alvin Goldfarb and other scholars discuss the lasting impact of genocide and how we can work towards a less hateful world.
LINKS

If you are interested in finding out more or ways you can help, here are some useful links.

YIDDISH THEATER HISTORY

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

MORE ARTICLES ON GOD OF VENGEANCE

https://yiddishstage.org/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-god-of-vengeance
https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/12/21/but-is-god-of-vengeance-good-for-the-jews/
https://jewishcurrents.org/writings-grid/the-brothel-owner-and-the-milkman/

KLEZMER MUSIC EXAMPLES

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rigu36KzQ6Q
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ePg9XwAyXw&pbjreload=10

A WORLD-RENOWNED LIBRARY AND ARCHIVE OF JEWISH HISTORY AND CULTURE

https://www.yivo.org/

MORE ON YIDDISH

https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yiddish/
https://www.diffen.com/difference/Hebrew_vs_Yiddish

CENSORSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship_in_the_United_States

IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1924

JOIN VICTORY GARDENS THEATER’S TEEN ARTS COUNCIL!

Victory Gardens is now accepting applications for our Teen Arts Council

The Teen Arts Council gives high school students the opportunity to explore one of the most celebrated theaters in Chicago, see new and exciting shows, and have a unique perspective of the Chicago theatre community. With the support of Victory Gardens Theatre, the Teen Arts Council is provided with the resources to grow as the next generation of theatre artists and audiences.

To download an application, visit http://victorygardens.org/about/education/teen-arts-council/ and send the completed form to: Roxanna Conner, Director of Education, at rconner@victorygardens.org.

LIKE US ON FACEBOOK • FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM