

Indecent tells many stories

By Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

I saw the play *Indecent*, by Paula Vogel, on October 19 at the CAA Theatre in Toronto. I came out of the theater brimming with thoughts and have been struggling to write something coherent about it since then. Part of the problem has been self-doubt: I'm not well-versed in theater. I don't really know if the narrative and staging and storytelling choices the play made are especially unique or just another day at the theater. Maybe the concept of telling the story of another play within this one isn't that special! *Hamlet* did it, after all. Ironic, the feeling that anything I can say wouldn't be worthwhile, given the context of this play: a playwright and company who are so convinced this story is worth telling they will go up against the vice squad, other Jews, and Nazis to keep telling it.

Part of it, too, has been the feeling that I have too much to say. One can analyze *Indecent* through so many lenses and they all clamor in my head to be talked about simultaneously.

Indecent tells the story of the controversy surrounding the play *The God of Vengeance* by Polish-Jewish playwright Sholem Asch. Ten actors play more than 40 characters across the two levels of the narrative. *Vengeance*, which tells the story of a Jewish brothel owner who attempts to become respectable by commissioning a Torah scroll and marrying off his daughter to a yeshiva student (instead, she falls in love with one of his prostitutes), was written in 1906 and widely produced in Europe, but when it was produced on Broadway in 1923, the entire cast of the play was arrested on obscenity charges after the first performance.

Translation

Indecent is a love letter to Yiddish theater, and a bit of a memorial to its loss — and the show itself is a part of that loss: in the performance I saw, nobody in the cast spoke Yiddish. They hired consultants to get the non-English parts right.

Still, language and translation are fundamental to the show, on many levels. The dialog is multilingual, with captions projected above the stage to tell us what language is being spoken, or to provide translations. The script of *God of Vengeance* is translated and re-translated: what meaning and context is lost in the move across the Atlantic and onto Broadway? Is it even the same play? An actor is recast for the English language performances because her accent is too strong and the audience wants to see an “all-American” girl in the role. Is it even the same story anymore?

We can and do ask the same questions, of course, of other works. Shakespeare's plays are constantly being reimagined and recontextualized for different audiences, for different time periods and cultural touchstones. In a Q&A session after the play, one audience member talked about a production of *Indecent* that she had seen that had no Yiddish and no music; a cast member responded, “I don't think you saw *Indecent*.” How much, and which, of the parts of a story can you remove before it's fundamentally a new story?

The God of Vengeance is itself a character in the play, as are scenes within it, several of which get character arcs of their own. Scenes are recontextualized — translated by time and new knowledge — to the viewers, even when the dialog remains exactly the same.

The final scene in *Vengeance*, where the

father angrily orders his daughter into the brothel to work off her debt and throws a Torah scroll down the stairs after her, is repeated many times in *Indecent*. The first iteration demonstrates *Vengeance*'s success: we see the scene as if from backstage, to riotous applause from audiences across Europe. With every repeat of *Vengeance*'s final scene, you find yourself expecting it to be the last ... , but no! Here it is again! And with each repetition, changes are wrought in the script — in the name of pal-

same way, we in the audience have a dual role, as the audience for *Indecent* and as actors playing audience members in *Vengeance*. Lemml, the stage manager and *Vengeance*'s greatest advocate, talks directly to us at the beginning. He announces at one point that the audience are a part of this show too, just like the actors, as an argument that they must continue performing it: because we need to see it. (We could also ask: does this include the Broadway audiences who only saw the translated, mutated form of the

God of Vengeance might never have been staged. There are of course the two main female characters in *Vengeance*, the brothel owner's daughter Rifkele and the prostitute Mannke, dancing in the rain and affirming their love; and simultaneously there are the various actors who play Rifkele and Mannke, across Europe, in New York, on Broadway, and back in the ghetto. The actors reinterpret and recontextualize their roles throughout the show, pulling different aspects from the characters in every



atability to white and English-speaking audiences — changes that seem to rip the soul from the play and replace it with shock value ... until finally, the cast of *Vengeance* are arrested on their Broadway opening night on indecency charges.

The pivotal rain/love scene from *Vengeance* is a recurring character in *Indecent*, a character we only know by its absence through most of the play — people talking about how beautiful it is, what a pure expression of love, lamenting its loss from the Broadway edit.

Lemml, the stage manager for *Vengeance* through all its original runs, from Europe to the U.S. and back to Europe and into the ghetto, tells us this: that everything comes down to these two women, dancing in the rain together. Remember that. When we finally see the scene in full, it is in Yiddish, in a vision Asch sees late in life, performed by actors who did not survive the Nazi death camp. There are no captions for this scene. By this point, we don't need them; we know what they're saying (and, frankly, if there had been captions, I'd have been crying too hard to read them anyway).

Stories About Stories

The play-within-a-play structure of *Indecent* makes *The God of Vengeance* a character in its own right, casting the actors in two roles simultaneously: both playing their parts, and playing their characters playing a part. In the

show, too? Is the play theirs? What responsibilities come with that ownership?) In the end, we pay witness at *Vengeance*'s final showing and death. It matters that we were there.

The music in the play functions on two levels as well: at times, the musicians are characters, onstage, interacting with the other actors; at times they are kept apart, witnessing along with the audience but unable to affect events. The play isn't a musical, but the music is essential all the same.

“The music composed and arranged by Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva is not just a score. It's an exquisite heartbeat of the show, so transportive, so much a spirit that it is indeed a member of the cast. I cannot imagine the play without this music that has haunted me from the start in our first New Haven rehearsal at Yale. It grows, it changes, as all great scene partners do, according to the ensemble, the audience, the company. It will continue to transport us throughout the companies and the years, I know, as it did in our first rehearsal hall. The music allows us to dance, to celebrate, and to yearn. I am grateful.” —Paula Vogel, playwright of *Indecent*

The Role of Women and Homosexuality

So many women in *Indecent* play pivotal roles. There's Madje, the wife of Sholem Asch the playwright, without whose insistence *The*

appearance. One actor sees the role as an opportunity to show her lover and co-star her true feelings in public, without having to hide; another invests the on-stage relationship with an almost religious level of importance, calling it the most chaste and pure depiction of love; a third uses her performance as a chance to explore her own sexuality and rebel against her conservative parents. All valid readings of the original text, given different emphasis by the people bringing it to life!

Meanwhile, the old men at the salon where Asch first read his play are horrified at the mere concept, though it's not clear whether their horror is at the depiction of lesbians, or at the portrayal of Jews as brothel owners and prostitutes.

“Bad Jews”: Assimilation versus Tradition

“What's the definition of a minyan? It's ten Jews standing in a circle calling each other antisemitic.”

Sholem Asch is accused of being a self-hating Jew, for writing a play depicting Jews as prostitutes and brothel owners; the quote above was his response. People are afraid his play will feed into existing negative stereotypes of Jews: as if making ourselves more palatable has ever stopped antisemitism before. There is a heartbreaking reveal after the cast are arrested on the night of their Broad-

Community

way premiere on indecency charges, when we see a prominent rabbi in New York admitting — declaring — that he is the one who called the vice squad. The Jews in the story do each other so much harm, in the name of protecting themselves.

And then Asch misses a chance to stand up in court and defend the cast from the indecency charges because he is distraught, traumatized, by the pogroms he has seen in Europe. The struggles of his play seem so unimportant in comparison, even though the courtroom was a situation where he could have made a real difference, contrasted with the futility of his push against the pogroms. And then the end of the play takes place in Nazi-occupied Europe, in ghettos and then a concentration camp. Because in the end, as we know, to antisemites there is no such thing as a good Jew or a bad Jew; those are lines we draw among ourselves.

(This seemingly obligatory Holocaust scene had me silently sobbing, of course, as with every Holocaust scene I've encountered since I was a child; but at the same time, in a detached way, I was resentful, that once again it seemed the only time I got to see Judaism portrayed in media was when we were being shot by Nazis.)

The entire history of Judaism is one of tension between assimilation and tradition. It's a tension we will always grapple with. We'll probably still be dealing with it in the World to Come. And it's a tension that's at the forefront in *Indecent*. Assimilation has been a survival tactic, a trauma response, a form of self-negation. There's a song in *Indecent* in which a group of characters, newly arrived to America and dressed as Chasidim, lament this pressure to blend in, as one by one they remove their peyot, the most visible markers of their faith and culture. It's a universal issue, but there is also a uniquely American pressure to conform and add yourself to the melting pot, to not keep your culture your own because doing so is seen as un-American. That pressure can lead to pushback, a reinforcement of practices and a return to tradition in an attempt to keep the borders of our culture safe: it can lead to a rabbi calling the

vice squad on his own people for showing an "immoral" play.

There's a reading of the story of the Tower of Babel that says, in counterpoint to the common narrative that God's actions are a punishment to the makers of Babel, that the act of dispersing them and confusing their languages was actually a preventative action. That the tower, and the "same language and same words" that everyone there used, was not to challenge God at all, but was instead a move born from a fear of another world-destroying flood — after all, they were only a few generations away from Noah's time and the disaster would have been fresh in their minds still. In their desire to prevent another flood, the residents of Babel sought to enforce one language on all the people in the tower, one set of words, one mode of thinking. If we all think the same way, surely we cannot slide into corruption, we cannot fill the world with lawlessness as before (if we act like Americans and not like Jews, they won't find reasons to hate us) ...

Right?

But God sees that this is only a path to tyranny, not righteousness, and that this is a reaction from fear and trauma. So God confounds their speech and scatters them over the earth, so they do not end up replacing one mistake — the one that led to the Flood — with another — the tyranny of conformity.

There's no tidy answer here, and nor is there in *Indecent*; if there were, we wouldn't still be wrestling with the question.

I promise, I'm still leaving things unsaid! I didn't talk about the fictionalized, romanticized idea of the shtetl and how that played into people's resistance to *Vengeance* in the first place. (We have, effectively, always lived in diaspora. We've always lived in conversation and tension with goyim. We've definitely always been sex workers.) I didn't talk about the staging itself, or about the tragedy that the "Land of the Free" is the place where the cast got arrested. But that is ok: every performance brings new meaning and every analysis brings new depth. The conversation continues the next time *Indecent* is staged. ■

Antisemitism, continued from page 1

"I appreciated the distinction of these three types of antisemitism," said participant Ellen Abramson. "It was helpful to distinguish the ignorance-based, which is not malevolent and can (hopefully) be addressed effectively through conversation."

Following Professor Veidlinger's remarks, the program shifted to provide an opportunity for participants to share their own experiences. Three community members set the stage by recounting personal stories of antisemitism to the group. Sylvie Bleckman, a freshman at Skyline High School, spoke about overhearing and calling out antisemitism at a crew regatta. Neal Elyakin, a former administrator at Washtenaw Independent School District, recounted a time when a parent was openly antagonistic and would not participate in a conference with Neal because he was Jewish. And Jason Gumenick, a teacher at Saline High School, shared his experience advocating to change the date of that school's Homecoming, which had been scheduled on Yom Kippur.

Participants then broke into 12 facilitated small-group conversations to share their own personal experiences and concerns. Themes that arose included feelings of vulnerability, particularly when in more sparsely Jewishly populated areas; the impact of antisemitic incidents in formative years; and a desire to have the skills to bet-

ter navigate and stand up in difficult situations.

Finally, participants were asked to brainstorm concrete ideas for addressing antisemitism locally. Rabbi Asher Lopatin, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council/American Jewish Committee in metro Detroit, spoke about the importance of developing relationships with other faith, cultural, and civic groups, which is a primary purpose of his organization. He shared some efforts that might be replicated in Washtenaw County. Participants recorded their suggestions for outreach and relationship-building, advocacy, community safety and security, and educational programming within the Jewish community.

In the coming weeks, these ideas will be aggregated, and participants will have an opportunity to reconvene on Zoom to comment and prioritize next actions to be taken in the months to come. "I was pleased to see so many people invested in this issue," said Babette Levy Daskin, a member of the organizing committee. "This is an indication that committees resulting from the event will be robust."

Community members interested in being part of the conversation should contact the Jewish Federation's Community Relations Manager McKenzie Katz (mckenzie@jewishann Arbor.org). To report antisemitic incidents to the ADL, visit Michigan.adl.org ■

JFS reflection, continued from page 1

to ease access for those with childcare and/or transportation barriers. Thrive's behavioral health counseling logged its busiest year on record. Thrive added staff and intern capacity to support the community's burgeoning mental health needs. Thrive has also reintroduced in-person counseling, while telehealth remains an ever-popular option.

JFS was delighted to resume some in-person community programming in 2022. The Mosaic event on June 12th celebrated Mark and Fran Berg's contributions of time, energy, and resources to support JFS, and received the agency's Amster Award for outstanding support. The agency also honored the individuals who helped to purchase its forever home at 2245 S. State Street and recognized them all with the Bernstein Award.

In October, over 200 community members turned out for the Walk a Mile in Our Shoes event in support of JFS Resettlement Services. Patty Benson and Brian Chodoroff served as grand marshals, Congresswoman Debbie Dingell shared her love for the Ann Arbor community, and Lada Protcheva shared her heart-breaking experience of being a Ukrainian refugee. Through JFS' ongoing relationship with Eastern Michigan University, Lada is now an EMU student, supported by a scholarship from EMU's

New Future Fund. Together, these two events raised over \$350,000 for the agency, which looks forward to hosting both events in 2023.

At the close of 2022, construction was approximately 60% complete on JFS' new commercial kitchen and renovated Specialty Food Pantry. Once finished, the kitchen will be a hub of activity for volunteers, clients, and staff. The kitchen will be used to prepare culturally and medically appropriate meals, provide hands-on job training for employment seekers, support small business owners who need space to scale up their food business, and to help with processing bulk deliveries of food into manageable packages for clients.

While the above narrative doesn't tell all of the year's accomplishments and milestones, it certainly represents how busy JFS was, working in partnership with our dedicated community, meeting the needs of so many. Looking back on the year, one highlight has been the excitement and opportunity enabled by the ability for staff, clients, donors, supporters, and volunteers to interact in person in ways we have longed for throughout the pandemic. There is tremendous energy in the building, and excitement is growing in anticipation of more opportunities to gather, celebrate, serve, and interact in 2023. ■

AARC events in January

For more information about Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation services or events or to receive Zoom links, please email: aarcgillian@gmail.com or go to our website, aarecon.org

Second Saturday Morning Shabbat Service. January 14, 10:30 a.m.–12 p.m. This is a hybrid Shabbat service led by Rabbi Elliot Ginsburg at the JCC. Everyone is welcome! Zoom link will be sent out the week before the event.

Fourth Friday Kabbalat Shabbat.

January 27, 6:30 p.m., in person at the JCC and on Zoom.

This is a hybrid service led by members of the congregation. Everyone is welcome!

AARC Book Group.

January 29, 11:30 a.m.–1 p.m. on Zoom. We will be reading *Dinners with Ruth: A Memoir on the Power of Friendships* by Nina Totenberg. Please email Greg Saltzman for more information: gsaltzman@albion.edu. ■

Pardes Hannah events for January

All events are in Zoom unless otherwise noted. Please check our website (<https://pardeshannah.org/>) for the latest information, including registration links, on these or any of our ongoing services, rituals, circles, and teachings, or call Renee Robbins at 734-904-5459.

Shabbat Morning Services

Saturday, January 21, 10 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Rosh Chodesh Sh'vat Online Minyan
Monday, January 23, 9–10:15 a.m.

Rosh Chodesh Sh'vat Circle
Monday, January 23, 7–8:30 p.m.

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