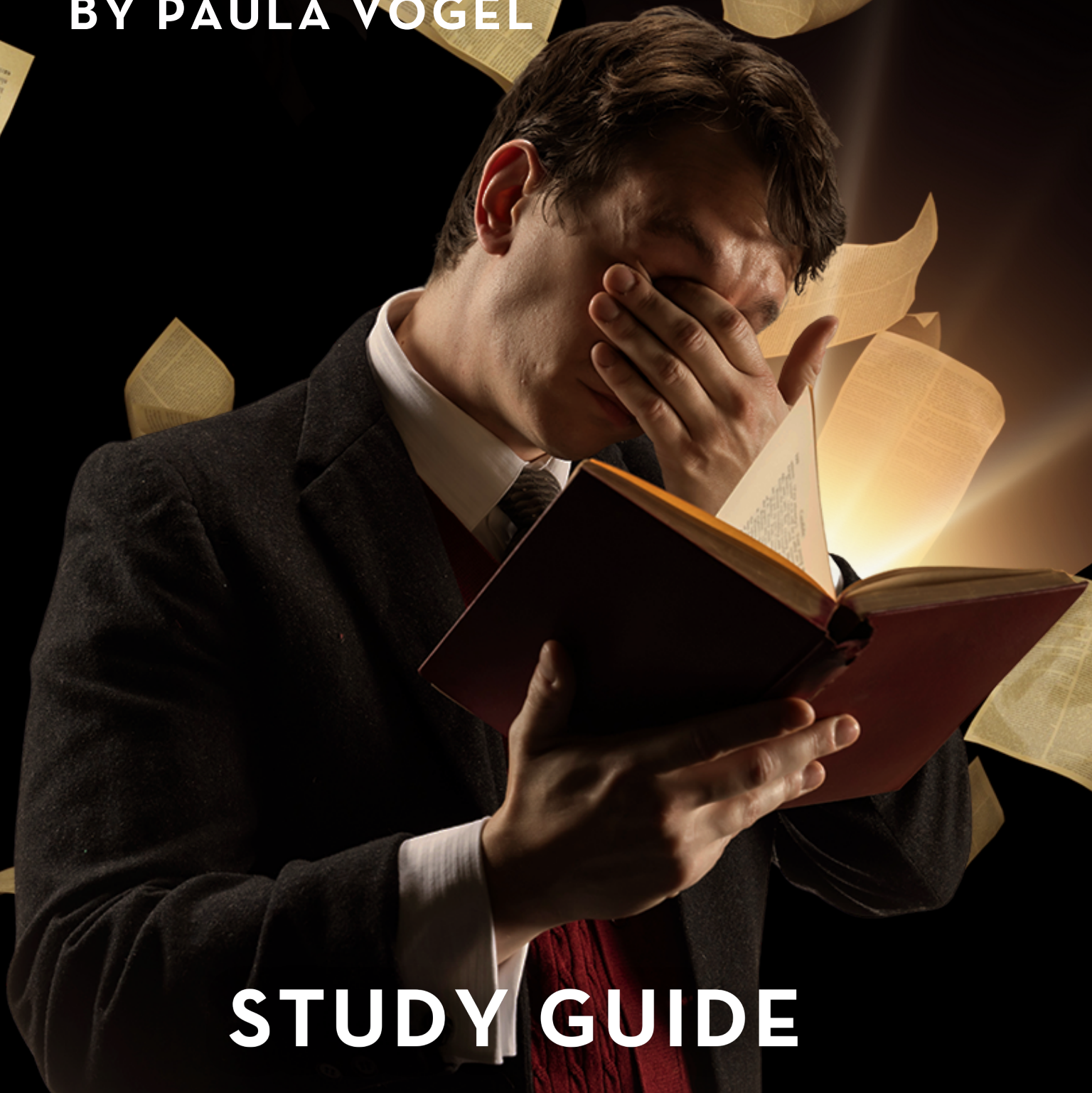


# תהשענות

BY PAULA VOGEL



**STUDY GUIDE**

## A SYNOPSIS OF *INDECENT*

*Indecent* tells the true story of the play *God of Vengeance* by Polish-Jewish playwright Sholem Asch. *God of Vengeance* was written in 1906 and was widely produced in Europe, but when it was produced on Broadway in 1923, the entire cast of the play was arrested on the charges of indecency after the first performance.

At the beginning of *Indecent*, Sholem Asch has written *God of Vengeance* about a relationship between a prostitute, Manke, and the daughter of a pious brothel-owner, Rifkele. Asch shows the play to his wife, Madje, who loves it. He then presents it at a salon, where it is largely dismissed due to the throwing of a Torah and the relationship between Manke and Rifkele. Asch is told to burn the play. However, a young tailor named Lemml, who has never seen a play, loves it, and Asch hires him to be his stage manager. Famous Polish actor Rudolph Schlidkraut joins the cast and the play tours Europe to much success, ultimately leading to a run in New York, where it is performed in its original Yiddish.

The producers then want to bring *God of Vengeance* to a larger audience, so an English translation is made. In making the translation, the American producer removes the main romantic moment which Asch calls the "Rain Scene," between Rifkele and Manke. This infuriates the actors, who insist that it is vital to the integrity of the play. Asch, who does not understand English well, signs off on the changes.

In 1923, the play premieres on Broadway. The entire cast is arrested on obscenity charges. Lemml goes to Asch's home and berates him for not standing up for the troupe in the trial. He then leaves, taking the original Yiddish script with him, and goes home to Poland.

Years pass, and letters from all around Europe come to Asch about the various performances of *God of Vengeance*. Lemml is still staging productions during the Holocaust, including one in a Polish Ghetto. As the Rain Scene happens, they are discovered by the Nazi Gestapo and taken away.

Asch is left depressed and cynical, As he and Madje begin to move out of their home, Asch sees the ghosts of his old troupe perform the play in Yiddish.



## THE CHARACTERS AND SETTING



**The Stage Manager  
LEMML**

### THE DEAD TROUPE

At the beginning of the play, a small company of actors rises from the ashes. These are the DEAD TROUPE. They play all the characters in *Indecent*. The Stage Manager LEMML introduces the actors to the audience:

### THE ELDERS

“The founding members of our troupe, Vera Parnicki and Otto Godowsky. They play all of the fathers, all of the mothers, the sagest of our characters, or the ones who remain fools at any age.” (Lemml)

**The Elder, VERA, also:** Sarah; Mrs. Peretz; Immigrant; Esther Stockton; Madje, the older

**The Elder, OTTO, also:** Yekel; Peretz; Schildkraut; Immigrant; Judge McIntyre; Asch, the older



**THE ELDERS**

### THE MIDDLES

“The members of the troupe who are in their prime! Halina Cygansky and Mendel Schultz! They play all of the vamps and all of the vice, the scarred, and the schemers.” (Lemml)

**The Middle, HALINA, also:** Manke; Immigrant; Freida; Dorothee Nelson/Dine; Dr. Hornig; Bagelman Sister

**The Middle, MENDEL, also:** Nakhmen; Immigrant; Harry Weinberger; Officer Benjamin Bailie; Rabbi Joseph Silverman

**THE MIDDLES**



# THE CHARACTERS AND SETTING

## THE INGÉNUES

“And our ingénues! Chana Mandelbaum and Avram Zederbaum. All the brides, all the grooms, the writers, the socialists. So ardent in their beliefs, so passionate in their lovemaking.” (Lemml)

**The Ingénue, CHANA, also:** Rifkele; Madje, the younger; Elsa; Immigrant Ruth/Reina; Virginia McFadden; Bagelman Sister

**The Ingénue, AVRAM, also:** Asch, the younger; Immigrant; Morris Carnovsky; Eugene O’Neill John Rosen;



## THE INGÉNUES



## THE MUSICIANS

MAYER BALSAM, Clarinet

NELLY FRIEDMAN, Violin

MORIZ GODOWSKY, Accordion

## THE MUSICIANS

### PLACES

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



# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

**PAULA VOGEL** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose plays include *Indecent*, *How I Learned to Drive*, *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, *The Mineral Twins*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *The Oldest Profession*, and *A Civil War Christmas*.

Her plays have been produced by Second Stage, New York Theatre Workshop, the Vineyard Theatre, Roundabout, and Circle Repertory Company, Center Stage, Intiman, Trinity Repertory, Woolly Mammoth, Huntington Theatre, Magic Theatre, The Goodman Theatre, American Repertory Theatre, Dallas Theatre Berkeley Repertory, and Alley Theatres to name a few. Harrogate Theatre and the Donmar Theatre have produced her work in England.

Ms. Vogel's awards include honors include induction in the American Theatre Hall of Fame, the Dramatists Guild Lifetime Achievement Award, the Lily Award, the Thornton Wilder Prize, the Obie Award for Lifetime Achievement, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the William Inge Award, the Elliott Norton Award, a Susan Smith Blackburn Award, the PEN/Laura Pels Award, a TCG Residency Award, a Guggenheim, a Pew Charitable Trust Award, and fellowships and residencies at Sundance Theatre Lab, Hedgebrook, The Rockefeller Center's Bellagio Center, Yaddo, MacDowell Colony, and the Bunting.

She is particularly proud of her Thirtini Award from 13P, and honored by three Awards in her name: the Paula Vogel Award for playwrights given by The Vineyard Theatre, the Paula Vogel Award from the American College Theatre Festival, and the Paula Vogel mentorship program, curated by Quiara Hudes and Young Playwrights of Philadelphia.

Paula was playwright in residence at The Signature Theatre (2004-05 season), and Theatre Communications Group publishes six volumes of her work. Paula continues her playwriting intensives with community organizations, students, theater companies, subscribers and writers across the globe. She is the 2019 inaugural UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television Hearst Theater Lab Initiative Distinguished Playwright-in-Residence and has recently taught at Sewanee, Shanghai Theatre Academy and Nanjing University, University of Texas at Austin, and the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. From 1984 to 2008, Paula Vogel founded and ran the playwriting program at Brown University; during that time she started a theatre workshop for women in Maximum Security at the Adults Correction Institute in Cranston, Rhode Island. It continues to this day, sponsored by the Pembroke Center for Women at Brown University. From 2008-2012, she was the O'Neill Chair at Yale School of Drama.



# THE INSPIRATION FOR INDECENT

When Paula Vogel was 23 years old, she was advised by a professor to read Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance*. She was astonished that a play touching on all of the subjects it does could have been written in 1907 by a 27-year-old man. "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."

Excerpt from an Interview with the Playwright Paula Vogel on *Indecent*," Vineyard Theatre, 2016

Many years later, Rebecca Taichman was searching the Yale Library collections for a subject for her MFA Thesis at Yale when she discovered the archived works and transcripts of the 1923 obscenity trial against the play in New York: People of the state of New York, respondents, against Harry Weinberger, Rudolph Schildkraut, Esther Stockton, Virginia MacFadden, Marjorie Stewart, Irwin J. Adler, Mae Berland, Sam Jaffe, Morris Carnovsky, Dorothee Nolan, Aldeah Wise, Lillian Taiz and James Meighan, defendants-appellants : case on appeal. It would become her performance thesis: *The People vs. The God of Vengeance*. But after the staging of her thesis play, Rebecca Taichman contacted Paula Vogel to see if Vogel would be interested in collaborating on a fuller play around the topic. The play was seven years in the making and stemmed from a time in American history when Vogel noted that hate speech was on the rise. "I don't think playwrights can choose their time," she says. "That's something Sholem Asch said at the end of his life. Art matters when we're in political danger; art matters when we're in the middle of division."

Paula Vogel quoted in Playbill, Broadway production of *Indecent*, 2017.





## SHOLEM ASCH, PLAYWRIGHT OF *THE GOD OF VENGEANCE*

Sholem Asch is a Polish-born novelist and playwright, the most controversial and one of the most widely known writers in modern Yiddish literature. He was born on November 1, 1880 and died July 10, 1957. One of the 10 surviving children of a poor family, Asch was educated at Kutno's Hebrew school. In 1899 he went to Warsaw, and in 1900 he published his highly praised first story—written, as was a cycle that followed, in Hebrew. On the advice of the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz, he subsequently decided to write only in Yiddish, and with *Dos Shtetl* (1905; *The Little Town*, 1907) he began a career outstanding for both output and impact. His tales, novels, and plays filled 29 volumes in a collected Yiddish edition published in 1929–38.



The original cast of *God of Vengeance*, 1923

# UNDERSTANDING *INDECENT*

## The Yiddish Language

Yiddish is an international language steeped in the culture of the eastern and central European Jews who created it. It is a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic and Romance languages and has been spoken since the 11th century.

It is also a literary language, used by Jewish writers like Sholem Asch, often telling stories of Jewish people. In the early 1900s I. L. Peretz encouraged Yiddish writers and made his home a place for them to gather and share work. He is called the father of modern Yiddish literature. There is also a fine tradition of professional Yiddish theater.

When Yiddish is and is not spoken is an important part of *Indecent*. Although the characters often perform *The God of Vengeance* and speak to each other in Yiddish, most of the play is written in English so the audience can understand it. The dramatic convention of the play is that when characters speak English without accents, they are speaking Yiddish. When they speak with accents, they are speaking in English.

## The Torah

Judaism is a monotheistic (belief in one god) religion. It is practiced by 14 million people worldwide. The Torah, or “the Law,” is its sacred text. In *The God of Vengeance*, the father has paid to have a copy of this holy scroll made to keep his daughter pure. When he throws it down the stairs, it is blasphemy—an act against God.

## Klezmer Music

The term Klezmer derives from the Hebrew words klei meaning “vessel” and zemer meaning “song,” literally meaning “instrument of song.” Klezmer is a musical tradition of Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern Europe. Klezmer musicians were professional musicians. A standard Klezmer band could include violinists, bass, cello, clarinet, flute, and other brass instruments.

## The Łódź Ghetto

Near the end of the play, some of the troupe perform *The God of Vengeance* in an attic in the Łódź (pronounced “Woodge”) ghetto in Poland. Ghettos were enclosed districts where the Nazis forced Jewish people to live in order to isolate them from the non-Jewish population. This ghettoization was a key step in the Nazi process of separating, persecuting and ultimately mass murdering 6 million European Jews.

## Pogroms

A pogrom is a mob attack or riot, either approved or condoned by authorities, against the people and property of a religious, racial, or national minority. The term is usually used in reference to the attacks on Jews in the Russian empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many Jews were massacred and still more were left homeless from these riots. Pogroms were carried out in the towns of Vilna (now part of Lithuania) and Kiev (the Ukraine) during this time.



## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Playwright Paula Vogel says Art matters when we're in political danger; art matters when we're in the middle of division." Do you agree? What role does theatre play in times of division in our community?
- How do you decide if something is "indecent?" Who should decide what is *Indecent* for our community?
- A major theme of the play is anti-semitism. Do you see anti-semitism in our community? Do you believe it is increasing or decreasing?
- Do you believe the actors in *The God of Vengeance* should have been arrested?

