

# **studio180theatre**

STUDY GUIDE  
2022/23

*Indecent*  
by Paula Vogel

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## A. Guidelines for Brave Classroom Discussion

Thank you for bringing your class to *Indecent*. We hope your students will have the most positive and engaging theatre experience possible. To that end, we have created this **Study Guide** to support your pre-show preparation and post-show follow-up in the classroom.

For the most robust examination of the characters and themes of *Indecent*, we recommend booking a [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#) workshop led by our experienced Artist Educators. We use drama-based activities to promote empathy and inspire critical thinking in three immersive sessions, delving into the big questions of the play. Please contact [Jessica Greenberg](#) to learn more or book a workshop.

Studio 180 is known for provocative shows that tackle potentially sensitive, personal, upsetting and controversial topics and *Indecent* is no exception as it examines sexuality, homophobia, anti-Semitism, censorship and the Holocaust, among other topics. As educators we know that we can never guarantee that all participants will feel 100% comfortable; however, we have developed the following guidelines to promote a safer space and help you lead brave and productive pre- and post-show sessions aimed at empowering **all students to feel valued, respected and able to contribute openly and honestly to the discussion.**

- Class members should make a commitment to respecting one another. Invite suggestions from students as to what **respect** means to them. Some of these guidelines may include commitments to confidentiality, avoiding side chatter, and never ridiculing or putting down participants or their ideas.
- Your class may include students from a wide variety of cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. A wide range of gender and sexual identities are likely represented amongst your students. **Teachers and students must resist the urge to place individuals in the spotlight based on their perceived identity, history or point of view.** Students will engage in the conversation as they feel comfortable.
- Family relationships and parent-child conflict and abuse are themes in *Indecent*. It is important to be mindful of family diversity and **avoid generalizations and assumptions** that could isolate or alienate individuals. Frequent reminders that there will often be as many different perspectives as there are people in the room and that there are many ways to make a family, are useful and help reinforce the value of a multiplicity of ideas and points of view.
- It is the moderator's role to establish a space of respect and inclusion, and they must take special care to **ensure that students holding a majority opinion do not vilify those "on the other side" who hold a minority view.** The moderator should also pose questions to the class to help keep the conversation on track.
- The point of a classroom discussion about *Indecent* should not be to reach a class consensus. The goal should be to **establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas.**

## B. Introduction to Studio 180 Theatre

Inspired by the belief that people can engage more fully in the world through the experience of live performance, Studio 180 Theatre engages, provokes and entertains audiences by producing dynamic live theatre and innovative Beyond the Stage experience that delve into social and political issues, asking big questions about our world, our communities and ourselves. 2022/23 marks our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary season.

Our inaugural production of *The Laramie Project* played to sold-out houses at Artword Theatre in Toronto in 2003. Its success led to a 2004 remount at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, which earned two Dora Award nominations. Since then, Studio 180 has continued to stage acclaimed productions of plays that tackle difficult issues and generate powerful audience and community responses.

As an independent theatre company, we are a nomadic group of artists. We create and produce our work in various spaces and venues across Toronto and we frequently partner with other companies in order to stage our plays. Our partnerships have included collaborations with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Canadian Stage, Coal Mine Theatre, The Musical Stage Company, The Theatre Centre, Tarragon Theatre and The Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company. *Indecent* marks our seventh collaboration with Mirvish Productions and our sixth play at the CAA Theatre.

In addition to our producing partners, we have a proud history of collaborating with community and advocacy organizations to raise funds and awareness around issues, causes and communities. Through special events, art exhibits in our theatre lobbies, pre- and post-show conversations, and panel discussions, we work together with artists, community leaders and subject matter experts to bring conversations ignited by our plays [Beyond the Stage](#). Community partners have included Supporting Our Youth, The Triangle Program, Givat Haviva, Palestine House, Democrats Abroad, The 519, AIDS ACTION NOW!, AIDS Committee of Toronto, Toronto People With AIDS Foundation, Positive Youth Outreach, HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario, Peace Now, The Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada, Women in Capital Markets, Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, CATIE, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, the Cities Centre at U of T, Feminist Art Collective, Shameless Magazine, Next Gen Men, ResQ Youth, Bad Subject, 2-Spirited People of the 1<sup>st</sup> Nations and the Dotsa Bitove Wellness Academy.

Outreach to high school audiences has always been a crucial component of our work. In 2010 we launched [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#), an innovative workshop model that fosters productive dialogue, encourages critical thinking, and promotes empathy by exploring the uniquely humanizing capacity of live theatre. Over the years, our Studio 180 IN CLASS program has grown to reach more than a thousand students across the GTA each year. We are proud education partners of the Toronto District School Board.

We love plays that ask big questions about our communities and our world, and we have introduced Toronto audiences to a significant number of socially relevant plays from international stages. In 2015, inspired by our eagerness to investigate more locally rooted questions, we launched [Studio 180 IN DEVELOPMENT](#). Working with both established and emerging playwrights and creators, we provide financial and artistic resources to a broad range of issue-based works at various stages of development. We then invite student and public audiences to hear the work and contribute to the development process. Learn more about Studio 180 Theatre, our current season, and 20-year history at [www.studio180theatre.com](http://www.studio180theatre.com).

## C. Introduction to the Playwright and the Play

### *The Playwright – Paula Vogel*

Paula Vogel is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose plays include *Indecent* (Tony Award for Best Play), *How I Learned to Drive* (Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Lortel Prize, OBIE Award, Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle and New York Drama Critics Awards for Best Play), *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, *The Mineola Twins*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Hot'n'Thrbbing*, *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *The Oldest Profession*, and *A Civil War Christmas*.

Her plays have been produced in New York by Second Stage, New York Theatre Workshop, the Vineyard Theatre, Roundabout, and Circle Repertory Company. Her plays have been produced regionally all over the United States at the 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. Her plays have been produced in English in Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand as well as translated and produced in Italy, Germany, Taiwan, South Africa, Australia, Romania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland Slovenia, Canada, Portugal, France, Greece, Japanese, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Peru, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Brazil and other countries.

Vogel has been the recipient of numerous awards including a Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive* and a Tony Award for Best Play for *Indecent*. Additional honours 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.

In addition to her writing, Vogel is a devoted teacher and mentor to some of America's most celebrated playwrights. From 1984 to 2008, she founded and ran the playwriting program at Brown University; during that time she started a theatre workshop for women in Maximum Security at the Adults Correction Institute in Cranston, Rhode Island. 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.

Learn more about Paula Vogel at [paulavogelplaywright.com](http://paulavogelplaywright.com).

## ***The Play – Indecent***

In 1923, after highly celebrated and groundbreaking productions in Europe, Sholem Asch's drama *God of Vengeance* finally opened on Broadway. What European audiences had found brilliant, dazzling and moving, as acclaimed productions were mounted in Europe's major theatrical centres (like Berlin and Moscow), Broadway audiences responded to with shock and disgust. The company was arrested and charged with obscenity. Suddenly this evocative play exploring religious hypocrisy and sexuality among other social issues, was a cause célèbre. But in the wake of this backlash and controversy, the young Jewish Polish Asch distanced himself from the play that had helped catalyze his career as one of the most significant and successful Yiddish writers of all time.

As a student in the early 1970s, Paula Vogel came across the script of *God of Vengeance*, which left an indelible imprint on the young Jewish lesbian playwright. Vogel, who would go on to become one of America's most celebrated playwrights and a teacher and mentor to other great authors, was just coming out at the time and was struck by the portrayal of love and desire between two women – in a play written more than 50 years earlier – by a heterosexual man in Poland.

Thirty years later, Rebecca Taichman (who would later go on to become an award-winning American theatre director) was a directing student of Polish Jewish ancestry at the Yale School of Drama when she discovered *The God of Vengeance* and, like Vogel, was instantly drawn to the play and its story – including its controversial obscenity trial, which became the subject of her thesis. A decade and much artistic success later, Taichman reached out to Vogel to propose a collaboration to bring Asch's story back to life for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

*Indecent* was commissioned by Yale Repertory Theatre and American Revolutions: the United States History Cycle at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (the same project that commissioned Lynne Nottage's *Sweat*, which Studio 180 produced early in 2020). It premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in October 2015 before running at La Jolla Playhouse in California. Combining music, song and dance, with an original score by Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva, and incorporating traditional Jewish songs of the era, *Indecent* takes us behind-the-scenes to tell the true story of this forgotten controversy. The play explores anti-Semitism, homophobia, genocide, censorship, the newcomer experience, shame, resilience, and the transformative power of theatre.

In 2015, *Indecent* opened in New York at the prestigious off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre. In 2017, it transferred to Broadway, where its reception was the opposite to the one that greeted *God of Vengeance* almost a century ago, winning two Tony Awards.

In October 2022, *Indecent* will have its long-anticipated Toronto premiere by Studio 180 Theatre as part of the 2022/23 off-Mirvish season at the CAA Theatre, having been postponed due to the Covid-19, since May 2020.

## D. Attending the Play

Prior to the performance, please ensure that your students are well prepared. The better prepared they are, the more they will gain from the experience. The following guidelines should help you and your students get the most out of attending *Indecent*:

- **Please arrive early.** When travelling in the city, whether by school bus or TTC, it is always best to leave extra time in case of traffic or transit delays. **Wednesday matinées begin promptly at 1:30PM.** To avoid disruption, **LATECOMERS may not be admitted.**
- **All photography and recording of the performance is strictly prohibited.**
- Please impress upon your students the importance of **turning off all cell phones** and electronic devices. If students understand *why* it is important to refrain from using electronics, they will be more likely to adhere to this etiquette. **Remind students that they will be seeing people performing live** and, as a rule, if you can see and hear the actors, the actors can see and hear you. Even text messaging – with its distracting, glowing light – is extremely disruptive in the theatre. **Please be courteous.**
- **Masks** are not mandated at the CAA Theatre, but Toronto Public Health strongly recommends wearing a well-fitting, high-quality mask in indoor public settings such as theatres. Please take a moment to remind students that since actors must perform unmasked, they are highly vulnerable to illness, thus making the entire production vulnerable to a Covid-19 outbreak. **Your consideration is appreciated.**
- **Outside food and beverages are not permitted in the theatre.** Spills are messy and noisy snacks and bottles can be disruptive for performers and patrons alike. Please ensure that students have the opportunity to eat lunch prior to attending the performance. There are many affordable food options in the immediate vicinity if students wish to arrive early and purchase lunch before the show.
- **We encourage student responses and feedback.** After all performances of *Indecent*, there is a talkback session with cast members. If students are aware of the post-show talkback, they will be better prepared to formulate questions during the performance – and they will remember to remain in their seats following the curtain call! After the show, kindly take the time to complete our online [Teacher/Student Response Form \(studio180theatre.com/education-feedback\)](https://studio180theatre.com/education-feedback).  
Your feedback is extremely valuable to us!

**CONTENT WARNING:** This play includes some **sexuality** and **violence** including themes of anti-Semitism, homophobia, child abuse and genocide. It is recommended for student groups in grades 11 & 12.

We are very happy to discuss the play's content and suitability for your students. Please contact Director of Youth and Community Engagement, Jessica Greenberg at [jessica@studio180theatre.com](mailto:jessica@studio180theatre.com) or 416-669-5377 with your questions or to request a reading copy of the script.

## E. Background Resources: Contextualizing *Indecent*

### 1. *THE GOD OF VENGEANCE* by Sholem Asch

At the heart of *Indecent* is this important Yiddish play that has captured the imaginations of audiences and theatre creators worldwide for a century. Prior to attending *Indecent*, we recommend familiarizing yourself with the content and history of this play that appears within the play. An excellent summary can be found online by the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project: <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-god-of-vengeance>

### 2. *An Interview with the Playwright: Paula Vogel on Indecent*

*This interview was conducted between Miriam Weiner, Literary Associate at the Vineyard Theatre and Paula Vogel, award-winning playwright of Indecent.*

#### **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 1907, 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.

#### **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.

#### **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/outsider 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.

**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.

### 3. An Open Letter by Sholem Asch: Author of *God of Vengeance*

*Days after the English language version of Sholem Asch's God of Vengeance opened on Broadway at the Apollo Theatre (featuring Broadway's first lesbian kiss), the entire cast and producer Harry Weinberger were arrested and charged with staging an "obscene and impure" drama. This is an excerpt from the open letter Asch wrote in response to these charges:*

"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... 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 'The God of Vengeance.'

... As to the scenes between Manke 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 unconscious mother love of which they are deprived. In this particular scene, I also wanted to bring out the innocent, longing for sin, and the sinful, dreaming of purity. Manke, 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 Manke.

As to the comment that the play is a reflection on the Jewish race, I want to say that I resent the statement that 'The 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. 'The God of Vengeance' is not a typically '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. 'The 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.

Jews do not need to clear themselves before anyone. 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 cannot now, when writing of a 'bad' one, make an exception and say that he is a Gentile."

#### 4. Studio 180 Theatre Artistic Director's Notes by Joel Greenberg

*Indecent*, more than any other play I've ever directed, lives in my bones. Paula Vogel's play awakens lived experience. I was raised by parents whose own parents were the friends and neighbours of the characters in this play. They arrived on boatloads at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeking the refuge promised in North America. They hadn't imagined that their very appearance would mark them as 'other', that their Jewishness was something worn on the outside. Assimilation was their escape route. But what they could not cover up was the sound of their voices, an alarm that others heard as a scar on their humanity. And apart from the ultra-orthodox, who accepted their outsider status and lived in the equivalent of the ghettos they'd fled, these immigrants' immediate task was to erase all evidence of their past in their children's generation and beyond. For many, changing names was the easiest and most successful strategy.

Vogel amplifies the immigrants' urgency. Names like Lemml and Reina become Lou and Ruth. And those incapable of smoothing the corners of their mittel-european accents are fired, and replaced by 'real' Americans.

In my case, no surnames were changed to speed up the acculturation process – Greenberg was neither neutral nor common currency in Canada. Added to this cultural-social schizophrenia was the fact that my mother and her six sisters spoke to each other daily, most often lapsing into Yiddish, the language of their birth, and the language that allowed them to say what their children could never understand.

By the early sixties, when I first heard the word 'Holocaust', being Jewish had gained a certain cachet. What had no allure or exoticism, however, was the sound of eastern Europe, something I heard in the mouths of many of my friends' parents. In *Indecent*, Vogel examines the curse of the accented English speaker through the words of Rudolph Schildkraut, the actor-manager: "When people hear Rifkele they got to hear a pure girl onstage. No shtetl, no girl off the boat. They got to see their own American daughter."

In a later scene, after the cast of the play has spent the night in jail on obscenity charges, an actor expresses deep shame. Of the streetwalkers with whom she shared a cell she says, "They was all American girls. Some of their words weren't so dainty, but their English was perfect. Lou, in my head, I can hear those English words so good...But then when I open my mouth, it's like the dust of Poland is in my throat."

And yet, in spite of the indignities that these artists endure, Vogel is driven to reveal their hearts and souls, their unwavering dedication to the theatre. Vogel's indefatigable belief that Art and its Creators can never be obliterated, is her overriding focus. The artists can be censored, they can be pilloried, they can be desecrated. And they can be buried. They can even be subjected to a worldwide pandemic.

But as the play's opening surtitle insists, "From the ashes they rise".

## 5. Klezmer Music: a brief overview by Eric Stein, Artistic Director of Ashkenaz Festival

Klezmer music is the instrumental folk music of east European (Ashkenazi) Jews. The music developed over the course of many centuries, reaching its apex of artistic development in Europe in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Klezmer music was a secular form that was closely integrated with the life-cycle events of East European Jewish life, in particular, Jewish weddings. Traditionally, Jewish weddings would last up to a week and many song forms and genres within what we now know as the Klezmer canon, were developed to provide form and function for the various rituals and ceremonial moments of these elaborate affairs.

Klezmer music was performed by a cohort of *professional* musicians who occupied a distinct occupational caste within eastern European Jewish society, which was in some cases formalized in a guild-like structure. Within Klezmer ensembles (*kapelye* in Yiddish), musicians were subject to an elaborate hierarchy based on age, lineage, pedigree and skill. The tradition was often passed down within families over many generations, with specific klezmer “families” tending to dominate in their own particular geographic regions. Though rooted in particular locales, the musicians were also itinerant, following seasonal patterns to seek work as well as musical knowledge and interaction with peers and with musicians from other traditions (eg. Roma musicians).

The music itself is based in a variety of sources, including liturgical Jewish music, Hassidic music, co-territorial musical styles in various locales (eg. Russian music, Polish music, etc), as well as popular or cosmopolitan repertoire of the day. Regional variations within the style, instrumentation and repertoire of the music were significant. Klezmer music was an oral tradition and the earliest and only written sources of knowledge about the music stem from field recordings and written transcriptions made by ethnographers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as opposed to by the musicians themselves. In fact, the earliest known use of the term *klezmer* to describe this genre was only in the 1930s by musicologist Moishe Beregovski. The word itself is a contraction of two Hebrew words ‘kley’ and ‘zemer’, which together translate literally as ‘vessel of song’. In its formal usage, the term klezmer has come to refer to the genre as well as to the musicians themselves (a *Klezmer* is one musician, a group of klezmer musicians are pluralized as *Klezmorim*).

Instrumentation in older European Klezmer ensembles was dominated by bowed strings (violins and cellos), flutes, *tsimbl* (hammered dulcimer), and *poyk* (a bass drum with a cymbal mounted on top). Early Klezmer ensembles were often catalyzed by a *badkhn*, usually the *poyk* player, who would act as a master of ceremonies and “frontman” for the groups while fulfilling key ceremonial functions at Jewish weddings. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wind and brass instruments began to appear more prominently in Klezmer ensembles, in large part due to the conscription of Jewish musicians into the Russian army where they were first afforded the opportunity to learn instruments like clarinet, trumpet, trombone, tuba. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly as the music moved from Europe to America with massive waves of

immigration, piano and accordion began to replace the *tsimbl*, and drum kits eventually displaced the *poyk*.

The movement of Klezmer music to America during the immigration boom of 1881-1924 resulted in new musical evolutions in which instrumentation, repertoire, style and function evolved rapidly. Klezmer musicians were influenced by the dawn of the Jazz age and American popular music traditions, while many older forms of Klezmer music began to disappear when removed from their original cultural context in Europe. Though Klezmer thrived for a generation in the immigrant communities of the northeastern US, and was deeply integrated in the golden age of the Yiddish theatre throughout the 1920s and 30s, by mid-century, assimilatory impulses and the complete destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust had doomed the music to increasing obscurity.

In the 1970s a revival of Klezmer music was kicked off by a young generation of mostly American musicians born post-WWII. In many cases these early leaders of the revival sought out and celebrated legendary European-born Klezmer musicians of the prewar golden age. Over the last 40+ years this movement has evolved at an astounding rate and has established Klezmer as a thriving form played by people of all backgrounds (professional and amateur alike), and reflecting musical and socio-cultural influences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## F. Major Themes & Historical Context

### 1. Antisemitism and the Holocaust

*Indecent* is inspired by true historical figures and events and student audience members will benefit from some pre-show preparation. Across school communities, familiarity with topics such as Jewish language and culture, antisemitism and the Holocaust will vary widely. Teachers should assess students' relationship to these topics and work to prepare classes accordingly. Students and teachers can also take advantage of this opportunity to delve into these topics, examining their historical relevance as well as their contemporary resonances both with regard to Jewish people and all communities who are targets of hate, silencing and genocide.

#### VIDEO

*The Path to Nazi Genocide* is a 40-minute video produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It provides an excellent overview but note that it includes violent and disturbing content and images – **teachers should preview this video** prior to screening for students. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/an-overview-of-the-holocaust-topics-to-teach>

### *Introduction to the Holocaust*

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. The Nazis came to power in Germany in January 1933. They believed that the Germans belonged to a race that was "superior" to all others. They claimed that the Jews belonged to a race that was "inferior" and a threat to the so-called German racial community.

By 1945, the Nazis and their allies and collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution." The "Final Solution" was the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also persecuted other groups because of their perceived racial and biological inferiority. These included Roma ("Gypsies"), people with disabilities, some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others), Soviet prisoners of war, and Afro-Germans. German authorities persecuted and murdered other groups on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds. Among them were Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Introduction to the Holocaust." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>

## *Antisemitism*

Throughout history Jews have faced prejudice and discrimination, known as antisemitism. Driven nearly two thousand years ago by the Romans from the land now called Israel and Palestine, they spread throughout the globe and tried to retain their unique beliefs and culture while living as a minority. In some countries Jews were welcomed, and they enjoyed long periods of peace with their neighbours. In European societies where the population was primarily Christian, Jews found themselves increasingly isolated as outsiders. Jews do not share the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and many Christians considered this refusal to accept Jesus' divinity as arrogant. For centuries the Church taught that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death, not recognizing, as most historians do today, that Jesus was executed by the Roman government because officials viewed him as a political threat to their rule. Added to religious conflicts were economic ones. Rulers placed restrictions on Jews, barring them from holding certain jobs and from owning land. At the same time, since the early Church did not permit usury (lending money at interest), Jews came to fill the vital (but unpopular) role of moneylenders for the Christian majority. In more desperate times, Jews became scapegoats for many problems people suffered. For example, they were blamed for causing the "Black Death," the plague that killed thousands of people throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. In Spain in the 1400s, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity, leave the country, or be executed. In Russia and Poland in the late 1800s the government organized or did not prevent violent attacks on Jewish neighborhoods, called pogroms, in which mobs murdered Jews and looted their homes and stores. As ideas of political equality and freedom spread in western Europe during the 1800s, Jews became almost equal citizens under the law. At the same time, however, new forms of antisemitism emerged. European leaders who wanted to establish colonies in Africa and Asia argued that whites were superior to other races and therefore had to spread and take over the "weaker" and "less civilized" races. Some writers applied this argument to Jews, too, mistakenly defining Jews as a race of people called Semites who shared common blood and physical features. This kind of racial antisemitism meant that Jews remained Jews by race even if they converted to Christianity. Some politicians began using the idea of racial superiority in their campaigns as a way to get votes. Karl Lueger (1844-1910) was one such politician. He became Mayor of Vienna, Austria, at the end of the century through the use of antisemitism – he appealed to voters by blaming Jews for bad economic times. Lueger was a hero to a young man named Adolf Hitler, who was born in Austria in 1889. Hitler's ideas, including his views of Jews, were shaped during the years he lived in Vienna, where he studied Lueger's tactics and the antisemitic newspapers and pamphlets that multiplied during Lueger's long rule.

*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Antisemitism." Holocaust Encyclopedia.*  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-1?series=21814>

## *Eastern European Jews in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Before the rise of Nazism and Hitler's attempted annihilation of European Jewry, Jews in Eastern Europe were no strangers to antisemitism and extreme state-sanctioned violence. Many Jews who immigrated to North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were fleeing such persecution and violence.

### *Pogroms*

A mob attack or riot, either approved or condoned by authorities, against the people and property of a religious, racial, or national minority. Usually used in reference to the attacks on Jews in the Russian empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 (Ukraine) during this time – these are referenced in *Indecent*.

#### ***Polish pogrom in Vilna, April, 1919***

The pogrom in Vilna lasted three days, during Passover, 1919. The Polish Army entered Vilna on April 19. The number of Vilna Jews murdered during that pogrom has never been firmly established. According to the Vilna registry of the WWI years, in the suburb of Lopuvka alone 67 victims died; the English-Yiddish encyclopaedia discloses that 80 Jews were murdered in the pogrom.

The pogrom was marked by barbaric murders and terrifying violence; several victims were forced to dig their own graves prior to execution, while others were buried alive. The number of people taken during the mass arrests filled up two prisons, the railway station, the post-office courtyard, several private houses, and the local bank.

According to a Vilna community report, between January 1, 1919 and August 15, 1920, hundreds of Jews, irrespective of age and gender, were viciously beaten either in their homes or on the streets and they were then thrown in jail. They were held without food or drink and were submitted to gross humiliation, physical and mental.

#### ***Kiev pogroms, 1919***

The Kiev pogroms of 1919 refers to a series of anti-Jewish pogroms in various places around Kiev carried out by White Volunteer Army troops. The series of events concern the following districts:

- **Skvira, June 23, 1919:** a pogrom in which 45 Jews were massacred, many were severely wounded, and 35 Jewish women were raped by army insurgents.
- **Justingrad, August, 1919:** where a pogrom made its way through the shtetl with an unspecified number of Jewish men murdered and Jewish women raped.
- **Ivankiv Kiev district, October 18–20, 1919:** In the pogrom carried out by Cossack and Volunteer Army troops, 14 Jews were massacred, 9 wounded, and 15 Jewish women and girls were raped over a three day period.



### Immediate reactions

The leaders of the White Army issued orders condemning the pogroms, but these were largely unheeded due to widespread anti-Semitism. Lenin had spoken out against pogroms in March, and in June, the Bolsheviks assigned some funds for victims of pogroms. However, the events received little coverage in the Bolshevik press.

### Escalation of hostility

The Kiev pogroms of 1919 proved the first of many such events. There were a total of 1,326 pogroms across Ukraine around that time, in which between 30,000 and 70,000 Jews were massacred. The pogroms were marked by utmost cruelty and face-to-face brutality. Thousands of women were raped. Hundreds of villages were pillaged, and Jewish neighbourhoods were left in ruins. According to some estimates, overall, in the pogroms of 1918-1921, half a million Jews were left homeless.

*Guthrie Theatre Indecent Play Guide. "Glossary".*

[https://www.guthrietheater.org/globalassets/2-shows--tickets/201718/indecnt/indecnt\\_playguide.pdf](https://www.guthrietheater.org/globalassets/2-shows--tickets/201718/indecnt/indecnt_playguide.pdf)

### Connecting to *Indecent*

After WWI Sholem Asch co-founded the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) – an organization that still exists today with a global mission to deliver humanitarian aid and respond to crises around the world. In the play, Asch's experience in Europe with the JDC illuminates the growing threat of European anti-Semitism at this time, along with North American complacency in the face of reports.

*How is Sholem Asch impacted by what he witnesses in Vilna and Kiev? How does the American government respond to the JDC's report and what is the impact of that response? How are Asch's personal relationships affected? What is the impact on his writing? How does he see God of Vengeance differently? In the play, he never speaks explicitly about what he witnessed. What do you think he experienced? **Combine your own research with your imagination and write a monologue for Sholem Asch – a scene not in Indecent in which he tells his wife what he saw in Europe. Imagine he is able to express himself freely.***

## *Jews in Prewar Germany*

**April 1, 1933**

### **Nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned businesses**

At 10:00 a.m., members of the Storm Troopers (SA) and SS (the elite guard of the Nazi state) stand in front of Jewish-owned businesses throughout Germany to inform the public that the proprietors of these establishments are Jewish. The word "Jude," German for "Jew," is often smeared on store display windows, with a Star of David painted in yellow and black across the doors. Anti-Jewish signs accompany these slogans. In some towns, the SA march through the streets singing anti-Jewish slogans and party songs. In other towns, violence accompanies the boycott; in Kiel, a Jewish lawyer is killed. The boycott ends at midnight. Boycotts organized at the local level continue throughout much of the 1930s.

**September 15, 1935**

### **Nuremberg Laws are instituted**

At their annual party rally, the Nazis announce new laws that make Jews second class citizens and revoke most of their political rights. Further, Jews are prohibited from marrying or having sexual relations with persons of "German or related blood." "Racial infamy," as this becomes known, is made a criminal offense. The Nuremberg Laws define a "Jew" as someone with three or four Jewish grandparents or who is a practicing Jew. Consequently, the Nazis classify as Jews thousands of people who have converted from Judaism to another religion, among them even Roman Catholic priests and nuns and Protestant ministers whose grandparents were Jewish.

**November 9, 1938**

### **Kristallnacht: A nationwide pogrom**

In response to the murder of German diplomat Ernst von Rath by a young Jew in Paris, German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels delivers a fiery speech to the Nazi party faithful in Munich; these party members are gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the abortive 1923 Beer Hall Putsch (Adolf Hitler's first attempt to seize power). The speech is a signal for an organized assault upon Jewish homes, businesses, and places of worship by members of the SA, SS, and other Nazi party organizations such as the Hitler Youth. Although Nazi officials later portray the pogrom as a spontaneous act of public outrage, the population's participation in the pogrom is limited. The violence against Jews lasts into the morning of November 10 and becomes known as Kristallnacht: the "Night of Broken Glass." At least 91 Jews are killed and up to 30,000 more are arrested and confined in concentration camps. "Aryanization," the transfer of Jewish-owned businesses to "Aryans," accelerates following the pogrom.

*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Jews in Prewar Germany." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jews-in-prewar-germany?parent=en%2F11160>*

## *The Final Solution*

The origin of the "Final Solution," the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jewish people, remains uncertain. What is clear is that the genocide of the Jews was the culmination of a decade of Nazi policy, under the rule of Adolf Hitler. The "Final Solution" was implemented in stages. After the Nazi party rise to power, state-enforced racism resulted in anti-Jewish legislation, boycotts, "Aryanization," and finally the "Night of Broken Glass" pogrom, all of which aimed to remove the Jews from German society. After the beginning of World War II, anti-Jewish policy evolved into a comprehensive plan to concentrate and eventually annihilate European Jewry.

The Nazis established ghettos in occupied Poland. Polish and western European Jews were deported to these ghettos. During the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, mobile killing squads (Einsatzgruppen) began killing entire Jewish communities. The methods used, mainly shooting or gas vans, were soon regarded as inefficient and as a psychological burden on the killers. After the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazis began the systematic deportation of Jews from all over Europe to six extermination camps established in former Polish territory – Chelmno , Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek. Extermination camps were killing centres designed to carry out genocide. About three million Jews were gassed in extermination camps. In its entirety, the "Final Solution" consisted of gassings, shootings, random acts of terror, disease, and starvation that accounted for the deaths of about six million Jews — two-thirds of European Jewry.

*The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Final Solution." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-final-solution?parent=en%2F11112>*

## *North American Responses*

### **Voyage of the *St. Louis***

The voyage of the *St. Louis*, a German ocean liner, dramatically highlights the difficulties faced by many people trying to escape Nazi terror. In May 1939, 937 passengers, mostly Jewish refugees, left Hamburg, Germany, en route to Cuba. Most of them planned eventually to emigrate to the United States and were on the waiting list for admission. All passengers held landing certificates permitting them entry to Cuba, but when the *St. Louis* reached the port of Havana, the President of Cuba refused to honour the documents.

After the ship left the Havana harbour, it sailed so close to the Florida coast that the passengers could see the lights of Miami. The captain appealed for help, but in vain. US Coast Guard ships patrolled the waters to make sure that no one jumped to freedom and did not allow the ship to dock in the US. The *St. Louis* turned back to Europe. Belgium, the Netherlands, England, and France admitted the passengers. But within months, the Germans overran western Europe. Hundreds of passengers who disembarked in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France eventually fell victim to the Nazi "Final Solution."

*The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Voyage of the *St. Louis*." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/voyage-of-the-st-louis-1?series=21814>*

**“None is Too Many”**

Jews fleeing Germany aboard *The St. Louis* were similarly denied entry to Canada. In fact, between 1933 and 1945 – during the height of Nazi terror – the United States admitted more than 200,000 European Jews, while Canada permitted only 5,000. When asked how many Jewish refugees might be an acceptable number for admission, one Canadian immigration official replied, “None is too many.” These powerful words echo today as a reminder of our country’s anti-Semitic past and a warning of how we must do better at opposing xenophobia in the face of global refugee crises.

Read the following excerpt from the *Canadian Jewish News* and reflect on **Canada’s past, present and future** with regard to how we address global atrocities and waves of migrants and refugees. Consider Canada’s relationship to conflicts in Vietnam, Syria, Rwanda, Ukraine and others, as well as our country’s responses to climate crisis events.

“Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King shared the anti-Jewish sentiments that were ingrained into Canadian society for the 19th and good part of the 20th centuries. He understood, as he reasoned in a diary entry of August 1936, that ‘there are good as well as bad Jews and it is wrong to indict a nation or a race.’ But two years later, as the pressure mounted to admit more Jewish refugees, he wrote, ‘My own feeling is that nothing is to be gained by creating an internal problem in an effort to meet an international one.’

“Echoing the popular eugenics ideas of the day, he wanted to prevent the ‘intermixture of foreign strains of blood.’ He feared that there would be riots if too many Jews were allowed entry. In short, it was politically advantageous to just say no to the ongoing lobbying efforts of the few Jewish members of Parliament and the community’s leaders who beseeched the Liberal government to admit more refugees.

“Prime Minister King remained firm in his resolve to keep the Jews out. He heeded the advice of Ernest Lapointe, the minister of justice and his influential Quebec lieutenant, who staunchly opposed Jewish immigration because Lapointe knew that the vast majority of Quebecers opposed it – and Liberal power in Ottawa was somewhat contingent on winning most, if not all, of the province’s 65 parliamentary seats in future elections.

“King was influenced as well by Frederick Blair, a long-time civil servant, who in 1936 became the director of the Immigration Branch. Blair was one of the most vocal opponents of Jewish immigration to Canada. Classically, as Irving Abella and Harold Troper note in their 1982 book, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, Blair did not consider himself to be anti-Semitic, merely ‘realistic about Canada’s immigration needs and about the unsuitability of the Jew to those needs.’”

*Canadian Jewish News*. “Pre-Apology for the St. Louis, A Look at Canada’s Determination to Keep Jews Out.” Allan Levine, October 11, 2017. <https://www.cjnews.com/perspectives/pre-apology-st-louis-canadas-determination-keep-jews-out>

## *Contemporary Threats and Continued Anti-Semitism in North America*

### **Pittsburgh synagogue gunman said he wanted all Jews to die, criminal complaint says**

By Nicole Chavez, Emanuella Grinberg and Elliott C. McLaughlin, October 31, 2018, CNN.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/28/us/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting/index.html>

The American Jewish community is in mourning after a gunman killed 11 worshippers Saturday morning in a Pittsburgh synagogue in the deadliest attack ever on Jews in the United States.

Jewish organizations said the violence at Tree of Life synagogue underscored the dangers of unchecked hatred in a time when anti-Semitic acts are on the rise.

According to law enforcement, suspect Robert Bowers targeted Jews online and made anti-Semitic comments during the shooting. While receiving medical care, he told a SWAT officer that he wanted all Jews to die, according to a criminal complaint.

Bowers, whom authorities believe acted alone, faces 29 federal charges, some of which are punishable by death. The US attorney in Pittsburgh, Scott Brady, is seeking approval from Attorney General Jeff Sessions to seek the death penalty against Bowers, according to a Justice Department spokesman.

Bowers is scheduled to make his first court appearance on Monday afternoon.

The shooting struck the heart of Pittsburgh's historically Jewish Squirrel Hill neighborhood and reverberated across the United States, closing out a week of traumatic events with common roots in hate. President Donald Trump ordered flags flown at half-staff in honor of the victims.

On Sunday, visiting dignitaries joined community leaders, politicians and residents of the metropolitan Pittsburgh area at the University of Pittsburgh for an interfaith service. They pledged to support the community and fight hate speech.

"We will drive anti-Semitism and the hate of any people back to the basement, on their computer, and away from the open discussions and dialogues around this city, around this state and around this country," Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said.

A trail of hate leads to suspect

Sunday's vigil, the second since the Saturday morning shooting, came as a fuller picture began to emerge of the suspect. The 46-year-old resident of suburban Baldwin was taken into custody after a shootout with police. He is being treated in a hospital for gunshot wounds.

"They're committing genocide to my people," Bowers told police during the shootout, according to an FBI affidavit. "I just want to kill Jews."

Investigators searched Bowers' home with a robot on Saturday and searched his vehicle on Sunday, the FBI said. They're looking for surveillance footage from the area that could provide clues.

For weeks before the shooting, Bowers targeted Jews in frequent posts on Gab, a social media platform that bills itself as "the free speech social network." He used anti-Semitic slurs, complained that President Donald Trump was surrounded by too many Jewish people and blamed Jews for helping migrant caravans in Central America.

He also posted pictures of his handgun collection. Bowers has 21 guns registered to his name, said Rep. Mike Doyle, whose district includes Squirrel Hill.

Four hours before the shooting, Bowers posted about Trump. Minutes before storming inside the building, he logged onto Gab again and wrote to his followers.

"I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered," he wrote. "Screw your optics, I'm going in."

Gab denied supporting violence and said its mission is "to defend free expression and individual liberty online for all people." Gab said it has backed up the suspect's profile data, suspended the account and contacted the FBI.

The victims have been identified

Robert Jones, the FBI special agent in charge of the Pittsburgh office, called the shooting "the most horrific crime scene" he'd witnessed in 22 years with bureau. It began as a peaceful morning as dozens of people filed inside the building to celebrate Shabbat services with three congregations, Tree of Life, Dor Hadash and New Light.

Rabbi Hazzan Jeffrey Myers with Tree of Life said the shooting began shortly after he started services at 9:45 a.m.

"My holy place has been defiled," he said at Sunday's service. He vowed to rebuild his congregation and called on those in the audience to do their part.

"Words of hate are unwelcome in Pittsburgh. It starts with everyone in this room, and I want to address for a moment some of our political leaders who are here. Ladies and gentlemen, it has to start with you as our leaders," he said to a standing ovation.

"My words are not intended as political fodder, I address all equally. Stop the words of hate."

Authorities on Sunday released the names of the 11 victims, all of whom were from Pennsylvania. They included a married couple, a pair of brothers and a beloved physician.

Joyce Fienberg, 75, Rose Mallinger, 97, Jerry Rabinowitz, 66, Cecil Rosenthal, 59, David Rosenthal, 54, Daniel Stein, 71, Melvin Wax, 87, and Irving Younger, 69, were from Pittsburgh. Richard Gottfried, 65, was from Ross Township and Bernice Simon, 84, and Sylvan Simon, 86, were from Wilkesburg, Allegheny County Chief Medical Examiner Karl Williams said.

## The Charlottesville rally 5 years later: 'It's what you're still trying to forget'

By Debbie Elliott, August 12, 2022, National Public Radio. An excerpt.

<https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1116942725/the-charlottesville-rally-5-years-later-its-what-youre-still-trying-to-forget>

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — In a downtown park, grass grows over the spot where there once stood a massive bronze statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, astride his horse Traveller. The space feels different now, says Don Gathers, co-founder of the local Black Lives Matter group.

"It's much more serene," he says.

Gathers is in the park to reflect on five years since a violent and deadly white nationalist rally ravaged his hometown.

"It's not what you can remember. It's what you're still trying to forget," says Gathers. "All the hatefulness and the evilness that transpired here."

Organizers targeted Charlottesville for the Unite the Right rally after the city voted to take down the Lee statue, part of the town's reckoning with a fraught racial history.

On the night of Aug. 11, 2017, Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen and other white supremacists marched through the University of Virginia campus bearing torches and terrorizing students with chants of "Blood and soil" and "Jews will not replace us."

The next day, they rallied around the Lee statue at the downtown park.

"This represents a turning point for the people of this country," then-KKK leader David Duke declared at the time. "We're going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump because he said he's going to take our country back."

But the rally was met with resistance from hundreds of residents who rejected racism, chanting "Nazi scum off our streets."

Gathers was there and says it quickly turned violent.

"They lobbed all manner of things – rocks, soda cans filled with concrete and cement, water bottles filled with urine, tear gas and smoke grenades."

Gathers says police didn't intervene until then-Gov. Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency and shut down the rally.

"This is an absolute outrage," Richard Spencer, an alt-right leader and rally organizer, said at the time. "You're going to have to drag us out of here."

As demonstrators were pushed from the park, they dispersed through town, leading to pockets of violence and ultimately the deadly attack on a group of anti-racists. Neo-Nazi James Fields rammed his car into the crowd, injuring dozens of people and killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer.

## 2. Ashkenazi Jewish Culture

Now that you have an introductory understanding of the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you can recognize how Jewish identity in this part of the world transcended geopolitical borders. Whether Jews lived in communities governed by Russian, Polish, Romanian, German, (etc.) governments, they were united by the common language and culture of Yiddish. Because so much of the world's Ashkenazi Jewish population was exterminated by the Nazis during WWII, Yiddish is no longer a commonly spoken language anywhere in the world. There are, however, artists, scholars and community leaders, dedicated to the preservation and continuation of the rich traditions of Yiddish language, literature, music, dance and theatre. *Indecent* represents one such celebration of Yiddish culture and at the performance you will hear several characters speak in Yiddish. You will see Yiddish dance and hear a great deal of Yiddish or Klezmer music.

On the first day of rehearsals for the Toronto production of *Indecent*, we participated in a Yiddish dance workshop led by [Avia Moore](#) who helped us unlearn a lot of the stereotypes and assumptions we have absorbed about Klezmer music and Yiddish dance.

Think about your own cultural heritage. Are there any stereotypes or assumptions that mainstream society makes about your language/music/food/traditions? How are those stereotypes perpetuated? If you were to help people unlearn these false assumptions, what would you let them know about your culture?

During the Yiddish dance workshop, Avia shared the following quotation by Yiddish folk singer Bronya Sakina that sums up the spirit of Yiddish dance:

*I hold you by the hand, but I dance to my own rhythm.*

How did you recognize this idea playing out in the dance and staging during *Indecent*? How can this phrase serve as a metaphor for how we exist in any community?

The Holocaust alone is not responsible for the waning of Yiddish language and culture. Another major theme of *Indecent* is that of assimilation. As Jews migrated from Europe to North America prior to and following WWII, it became common for them to actively shed markers of their Jewish identity to better fit into mainstream society.

Which characters, scenes and songs best represent this process of assimilation in *Indecent*? What are some cultural markers that characters feel either internal or external pressure to shed? (eg. language, accent, name, clothing, hair style...)

The pressure to assimilate is not unique to Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants. Have you experienced the pressure to either assimilate or *not* assimilate? What are the risks, benefits, costs and struggles associated with both striving to fit into mainstream culture and retaining your own cultural identity?



### 3. Homophobia & Censorship

Homophobia refers to the social, systemic and personal assumptions, practices and behaviours that impose negative value on and discriminate against 2SLGBTQ+ people. Homophobic acts can range from name-calling, to violence targeting members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, to eliminating 2SLGBTQ+ stories and identities from curriculum, or to not providing legal and social supports.

#### Connecting to *Indecent*

The real-life story of Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance* is portrayed in *Indecent*. We learn that Asch's play was the first to feature a lesbian love scene on the Broadway stage and that the scene's inclusion was shocking to theatregoers, critics and society at large. Notably, *The God of Vengeance*, premiered in Berlin and enjoyed great success across Europe prior to making its American debut in New York's Lower East Side Yiddish Theatre. Based on that success the play was translated into English and produced at Greenwich Village's Provincetown Playhouse – a downtown theatre popular with bohemian audiences. When the play moved uptown to the larger, more prestigious, more mainstream context, it was now considered scandalous; so much so, that the company was indicted, arrested and imprisoned for the crime of, "presenting an obscene, indecent, immoral and impure theatrical production."

How can we understand the dramatically different responses to *Indecent* across national, cultural and linguistic lines?

Can you think of other real life examples of art and/or media that may be subject to different standards or critiques from community to community? What is a **double standard**? Do some people still respond differently to on stage intimacy depending upon which bodies are being represented? Who, in our culture, is deemed an acceptable subjects for romantic and/or intimate scenes in art and media and who is considered unacceptable?

The shutting down of *The God of Vengeance* on Broadway was an act of **censorship**. Can you think of other examples of censorship, either historical or current? When a piece of art, such as a play or a book is banned, what is the goal? What are the results and impacts? What is the relationship between power and censorship?

## G. Prompts to Examine Theatrical Presentation

### a) ISSUE-BASED THEATRE

Studio 180 Theatre produces plays that speak to socially and politically relevant issues. We gravitate to works that ask questions rather than provide answers.

What are the social or political issues in *Indecent* and how effective are the play and the production in illuminating them? Reflect on what was **new, surprising** or **revelatory** to you. Reflect on what was **familiar, affirming** or **empowering**. Reflect on what was **confusing** or **challenging**.

**Why live theatre?** What makes theatre an effective art form through which to explore themes, issues and human behaviour? Consider **what is specific about your intellectual, emotional and communal responses to attending live theatre** compared to engaging in other forms of art, such as reading a novel, watching a movie or looking at a painting.

*HINT: How does live theatre HUMANIZE issues and why is the humanization of social and political issues important?*

Brainstorm issues that you would like to see turned into a piece of theatre. **If you were going to see another play, or write a play yourself, what would you want it to be about?** This question may serve as a jumping off point for drama students to begin their own issue-based theatre projects around stories and topics of particular relevance to them.

### b) POINTS OF VIEW – CHARACTERS

How effective is *Indecent* at exploring multiple perspectives or points of view? Which points of view came into direct conflict with one another? Did that conflict propel compelling drama? Was the play even-handed? Did you feel that a multitude of opinions and points of view were expressed? Were the characters portrayed fairly? Do you believe an even-handed or fair portrayal is important when it comes to seeing a play? Which characters and stories were the most memorable? Which voices remained with you the longest and why? Which moments had the greatest impact? Which characters surprised you? Did the play create questions for you regarding the characters or their circumstances? Did you form an emotional attachment to any of the characters? Who were you rooting for? Who did you want to see more of? Did you disagree with what some of the characters were saying or doing? What would you ask those characters, given the chance?

### c) POINTS OF VIEW – PLAYWRIGHT

What is the playwright's point of view regarding the characters and their circumstances? Do you think Paula Vogel is on the same "side" as any of the characters? Who would she be rooting for? After seeing the play, generate a list of open-ended "Big Questions" that might have inspired the writing of this play.

### d) DESIGN

How did the design of the production affect the presentation of the piece? How effective was the **set** in defining the time periods and locations? What images, environments or architecture

are evoked by the set? What mood or ambience was created? How did colour, texture and space add to the theatrical experience? How was **lighting** used to create mood or ambience? How did lighting work to define space and setting? How did the set and lights work in combination with one another? How were **costumes** used to define characters? Since the play travels through a number of different time periods, how were costumes used to evoke period and fashion? How were costumes used to represent class? How did the **sound** designer utilize sound and music to create ambience, mood, time period and location?

#### e) MUSIC

How many different styles of music were you able to identify? Playwright Paula Vogel has described the music as the heartbeat of the play. How do the musicians and the music contribute to the storytelling? Which musical elements were the most impactful or memorable? In most musicals or plays with music, the musicians are off stage or in an orchestra pit. Frequently the music is even pre-recorded. Why do you think the creators of *Indecent* determined that the musicians would be a part of the action on stage and what is the impact of this presentation?

#### f) PROJECTIONS

How are **projections** used in *Indecent*? What information do they provide and why do you think the playwright chose to communicate these details using projections? What are the **impacts** aesthetically? Dramatically? Emotionally? How did the projection designer collaborate with the creative team to incorporate projections into the design of the production?

#### g) TIME & STRUCTURE

How does Vogel play with time in *Indecent* and what is the dramatic impact? How did the director, designers and actors indicate time period in the production?

#### h) BEYOND THE STAGE

At Studio 180 we like plays that provoke big questions about our selves, our communities and our world: plays that we hope will inspire conversations that continue long after you leave the theatre. **After seeing *Indecent* and participating in the IN CLASS workshop sessions, what are you curious about? What do you want to learn more about?** Students are encouraged to select a topic or theme, inspired by the play and conduct their own research using articles, books, documentaries, or other resources. Findings can be presented in written, or oral reports, or through various artistic mediums such as video, a performed scene, poetry or fictional prose, or a painting, drawing or sculpture together with an artist statement.

If your students generate creative responses to *Indecent*, please share them with us by contacting Director of Youth and Community Engagement, [Jessica Greenberg](#).