

DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS OF PAULA VOGEL'S INDECENT

By Tyler Leeps

Early 20th century Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin discusses in his final book the concept of the dialectal image. The dialectal image, when it is most simply put, is the makeup of many fragments of history that form together to make an image where the present and the past interact with one another. The dialectal image is a concept that is quite prevalent in Paula Vogel's *Indecent*. Joanna Mansbridge believes that Vogel forces us to look at history as not just snapshot of what happened at one time, but as a mirror that makes the audiences simultaneously reflect upon past historical conflicts and present upheaval that the audience currently endures. In *Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's Indecent* she states, "*Indecent* revives Asch's play and the cultural history 'between the scenes,' not to tell us what actually happened but rather to crystallize a critical moment that poses questions to the present about immigration, assimilation, art, and the ways communities are formed not only through memory but also through forgetting and gaps in self-recognition" (Mansbridge 482).

Framing history in a present social context is an aim often perused in Bertolt Brecht's work. "Brecht proposed that the theatre 'historicizes' its performed material. That is, that directors, actors and set-designers are aware that different points in history produce different values, behaviours and opinions. These circumstances can then be shown to an audience, so that they see the material in its context and ask questions about the relationship between the two" (Barret). A potential dramaturgical framework by positioning Paula Vogel's *Indecent* in a historical context while also examining its Brechtian presentation style, which could be expanded upon for productional use.

Historical Framework

Indecent becomes a difficult one to frame historically when examining the LGBTQ themes in the piece. LGBTQ is an ever-evolving term that was not established until the mid-1980's, forming as activists spoke out against the media's reference of *the gay community* and felt that *LGB Community* was more accurate. A contemporary audience will largely view *Indecent* as an LGBTQ play, but was *God of Vengeance* viewed as a *lesbian* play by its early 20th Century audiences? This is unlikely because "Yiddish doesn't have a word for *lesbian*, at least not in 1907. Only many years later will Yiddish take on the cognate *lesbianke*" (Hoffman). The term *lesbian* was not used commonly in English either and when "any language around sexual identity was invoked it was the concept of the *sexual invert*: the mannish woman who preyed on her more feminine victim" (Hoffman). This makes some of Vogel's lines problematic from a historical perspective.

Madje: My God, I am now married to a playwright! You're my warrior! My suffragette!

Asch (Hopefully): Your lesbian?

Madje: "Teach me. Take me. I want to taste you." (Vogel 13)

If the word *lesbian* has not formed yet in Yiddish, then what is Asch referencing in that line? Perhaps, Asch's use of the term is not LGBTQ in nature but rather in reference to the pure and forbidden love between his characters Manke and Rifkele. This raises the question; are Manke and Rifkele *lesbians*? This question has an obvious answer when examining through a contemporary lens, but it becomes a difficult one when viewing it with the landscape of the early 20th century because of the lack of understanding and expression of homosexuality. Perhaps this explains why *God of Vengeance* was not persecuted 1907, because *lesbianism* had not been

defined enough to be *the* issue that offended the European Jewish patrons. When *God of Vengeance* premiered the “Yiddish reviews at the time had no language to describe the relationship between the women; the handful of condemnation that was exhibited towards the play was about the brothel and prostitution, not about Manke and Rifkele’s relationship” (Hoffman). Many of the Yiddish reviews praise the rain scene in the same manner contemporary articles praised Vogel’s portrayal of it. *Indecent* is appreciated by an audience that has a growing understanding of LGBTQ, where *God of Vengeance* may be operating on the other end of the spectrum, as there was hardly any comprehension of *lesbianism* in 1907.

It is difficult to determine which variables may have led to *God of Vengeance* being heralded in 1908 Berlin and being convicted on charges of obscenity in New York in 1923. The assertion that the play was persecuted for being Broadway’s first lesbian kiss is an overly simplistic one. In the 1923 court transcripts there is “no discussion of *lesbians* in the court case” and the term was omitted from the media’s coverage of the scandal. It is most likely the lack of open homosexual expression in the 1920s that lead to the audience’s adverse reaction to the piece. The rain scene “forced audiences to question what they thought they knew about sexuality at all. In fact, it was precisely because of the lack of clarity about what we might call lesbianism today that the case against the play was eventually overturned in early 1925” (Hoffman). Clearly, *Indecent* and *God of Vengeance* offer a glimpse of same-sex female love, but “to call the play’s central female relationship *lesbian* is ultimately an inaccurate reading of sexual history.” Asch’s early success may be because “it operates outside the contemporary framework of lesbian relationships, offers audiences a glimpse of a relationship that defies sexual categories and even language” (Hoffman). Vogel’s writing substantiates this thought, because Rabbi Joseph Silverman’s monologue condemning the piece hardly addresses homosexuality and instead

focuses on the negative attention this brings to Jews, who are already facing a rise of anti-Semitism in America and pogroms in Europe.

The show begins with Lemml setting the stage talking to the audience in the present, as he and the Dead Troupe rise from ash. This is the first dialectal image, as the ash foreshadows the final Holocaust scene and makes the audience reflect upon the Holocaust immediately, but are forced to process it in the current setting Lemml is addressing them in. The first dated setting is 1906 in Warsaw, at which time, Warsaw was on strike against the Russian Tsars during the Revolution in the Kingdom of Poland from 1905–1907. *Indecent* then crosses the three global historical crises of WWI, WWII and The Cold War, while continually making connection points to the present. After a lack of initial support for Asch's play, between 1907 and 1910, *God of Vengeance* was translated to ten different languages and performed throughout Europe. In its transition to New York in the 1920's, the production receives homophobic and anti-Semitic backlash. Between 1880 and 1924 three million Eastern European Jews came to America due to the upheaval in Europe. In *Readdressing The Cannon: Essays on Theatre and Gender*, Alisa Solomon says that the anti-Semitic immigration policies set forth in 1924 were due to "the era of the Palmer raids [attacks against socialists and communists], an increasingly isolationist government, and tightened immigration laws, which deliberately choked off influx of Jews from Eastern Europe" (Soloman 117).

Hungarian novelist Arthur Holitscher wrote of his travels to New York City, capturing life the life of a Jewish immigrant in America. His 1912 writings depict Jewish life in New York as being a relatively favorable one, aligning with the idealistic vision many Europeans had for America as being a land of hope. Between 1880 and 1924 it is estimated that 3 million

Eastern European Jews moved to America, declining after unprecedented immigration reforms by the American government in 1924 in response to the massive increase of European Jews. Holitscher's writings obtain a drearier outlook throughout the 1920's, as he notices the growing wealth disparity in Jewish communities in New York City. In 1930 he writes of the most destitute areas, "in the peering filthy alleys of the oldest Jewish quarter, the benches of residents form ranks, the residents driven out of their apartments by the heat and stench of neglected ruins, according to customs of the old home" (Wallach 11). There is a rise in anti-Semitism throughout the time period.

Like Holitscher, Sholem Asch's later work is highly critical of the United States, specifically the wide wealth disparity that most Jews were victims of in the early 20th Century. "For the years before and after 1930, mass-circulated Jewish literature, including novels by Sholem Asch, Joseph Roth, and Michael Gold, and to some extent Holitscher's travelogues and Kafka's *Amerika*, provided scathing critiques of the circumstances endured by Jews in America" (Wallach 203). Anti-Semitism became rampant in the 1930's as Jews were blamed for The Great Depression due to their heavy involvement in banks. This sentiment served as a rationalization for Hitler's condemnation of the Jews. Asch's *Uncle Moses* (1918) and *Chaim Lederer's Return* (1917) captures the unfair treatment and extreme poverty many Jewish immigrants in New York faced and "yielded a convincing refutation of the American Dream" (Wallach 213). *God of Vengeance* and Vogel's retelling are repositioned when viewed through the lens of Asch's later pieces. In *Uncle Moses* and *Chaim Lederer's Return* Asch's "protagonists reflect a type of poverty that extends beyond material destitution, but which in his texts seems no less threatening" (Wallach 203). This is echoed vibrantly in *Indecent* as the protagonists are increasingly and constantly becoming *impoverished*, as a stigma is attached to the troupe that

outweighs monetary poverty. The strength of Vogel's interpretation is her showcasing of this expanding degradation of Jews. Whether disparaged by conservative Jews in 1906, or charged of a crime while performing a play in 1922 or forced to the Lodz ghetto in 1939, Vogel has used the Dead Troupe as a vessel to illustrate Jewish plight through the first half of the 21st Century.

Brechtian Elements

Indecent is filled with Brechtian elements, which is appropriate as Bertolt Brecht's work spans the time frame that *Indecent* is set in. In discussing her process in writing *Indecent*, Vogel stated, "I'm a huge Brecht fan... That presentational work, that exposure in front of the audience, the stripping down of all of the elements: this is also very much a love letter to that" (Minor). Vogel's 2012 piece *A Civil War Christmas* has a similar feel, as it also integrates music to present historical story with modern connection points. The immediate breaking of the fourth wall by Lemml, coupled with the actors playing multiple characters implements Brecht's alienation effect, where the audience becomes aware that they are watching a piece of theatre.

Lemml functions as a character that is largely Brechtian in his literary purpose. His purpose is similar to that of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *Skin of Our Teeth*. Wilder, who draws many comparisons to Brecht, uses the Stage Manager to distance the audience from making only an emotional connection and to navigate the audience through large time jumps. While the time period, location, social situation is always shifting, Lemml serves as a constant for the audience, as he sticks to his convictions despite the ever-changing societal implications surrounding him. However, Lemml's relationship with the audience differs greatly from Wilder's Stage Managers, as his journey and ultimate end deeply resonates with the audience, which is the opposite aim of Brecht and Wilder.

The specificity of *Indecent* requires many of the technical elements to echo Brecht's work. The infusion of live music, projections and a suggestive set with props used in multiple ways. Using luggage as a realistic prop that also serves as a suggestive and metaphorical one, as it could be used as a desk or a chair, would expand upon Vogel's vision of a Brechtian presentation. Using luggage in a variety of ways may be a tool used by Brecht to distance the audience from an emotional connection but in this application, it would serve the opposite function due to its historical symbolism. When visiting Auschwitz, which has been turned into a historical site, there are vats filled with the luggage and shoes which Jews were stripped of when they entered concentration camps. The implementation of luggage into the scenic design could result in a large emotional release from the audience, specifically if integrated into the final scene. Providing a potential catharsis for the audience converses from Brecht's work.

The teasing of the rain scene by Vogel seems to be a nod to Brecht, as the audience is intrigued but alienated from making a full connection. This is until the final rain scene where the audience is confronted by extreme emotions. "As the narrative moves beyond the obscenity trial toward the darker, graver conflicts of World War II, the more didactic elements of the play turn dreamy and the alienation techniques are used against themselves and something beautiful and sad transpires on the stage, building, finally to a scene from the original *God of Vengeance*" (Furst). Vogel uses alienation technique for its opposite purpose. Emotionally distancing the rain scene from the audience throughout the play and then showcasing it in its full intimacy with the rain falling creates a moment of catharsis for the audience. "Now, at the very end of the play, we watch it again, not once, but twice. And with each retelling, it takes up more space on the stage until it bursts off the stage, finally, pushing through the artificiality we've been subject to all evening. Asserting its reality. What the scene depicts is two Jewish women, filled with a pure

and joyful love for each other, dancing in each other's arms as a cleansing rain falls over them" (Furst). Ultimately, the installation of Brecht's presentational style in the retelling of *God of Vengeance* creates a powerful resonating piece that will evoke emotion in the audience that is the antithesis of Brecht.

Posed Questions

Are Yekel's actions cultural or universal?

Yekel's response to Rifkele's intimacy with a whore is driven by his Jewish faith. Although many would argue Yekel's religious morality is already compromised by his affiliations with a whore house, he has separated his actions from his faith and urges Rifkele to "keep the two world apart" (Vogel 16). Rifkele's relationship with Manke connects Yekel's business with his faith which he has clearly compartmentalized. His disdain of his child's choices and the justification of his own is presented at the end of *God of Vengeance* with Yekel exclaiming, "you know what this Torah cost? It cost all of the whores downstairs on their backs and knees for a year... God wants me to fail as a father? You both are paying me back! On your backs and on your knees" (Vogel 26). Yekel is confronted by the reality of his daughter, which he views as a disavowal of his own faith, making his resort to the one thing he knows "how to do- MAKE MONEY" (Vogel 26). Asch believes that "this is characteristically Jewish. I don't believe a man of any other race placed in Yekel's position would have acted as he did in the tragedy that has befallen his daughter" (Asch). His instinct to throw the Torah and his ultimate decision not to, grounds this moment and Yekel's modus operandi in Jewish faith. However, the scene resonates to Jews and gentiles alike.

The strength of this scene is that it is uniquely Jewish while operating as a dialectal image for the audience, which requires them to self-reflect. A gentile audience may not have connection points to the Jewish culture, but the emotion of the final scene rings true with their own personal experiences. Asch believes that if you “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 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” (Asch). Homosexuality has been shunned from Christian, Jewish and Asian cultures, Rifkele being LGBTQ is not what the masses have connected with because *God of Vengeance* gained much acclaim in the early 20th century when homophobia was normalized. Rifkele’s feelings and sensibilities not aligning with the statutes of her culture and religion is a universal conflict and not one that is specifically Jewish.

How to execute the rain scene?

The kiss in the rain scene at the end of *God of Vengeance* divisive in every sense, as some view it as a vile expression of the sins of homosexuality that should be condemned, while others view it as the purest interpretation of love, as it transcends gender and represents the human connection. Madge expresses to Asch about the rain scene, “Oh Sholem, the two girls in the rain scene! My God, the poetry in it-what is it about your writing that makes me hold my breath? You, make me feel the desire between these two women is the purest, most chaste, most spiritual” (Vogel 12). Vogel felt similarly to her character Madge when she first read the play in the 1970’s, as she was “struck especially by the lyrical love scene between two women at the end of Act Two, she recalls: ‘I felt such joy and uplift reading the rain scene... There was no

moralizing, just a matter-of-fact presentation of desire and love.’ She adds that the 1970s was not ‘a happy time to be out as a lesbian in academia’, but when she encountered Asch, he ‘seemed like a long-lost ancestor, writing a love scene between two women in the early twentieth century as though it were *Romeo and Juliet*’” (Mansbridge 484).

In the Arena Stage’s production of *Indecent*, they were focused on making it rain on stage for the performance. According to Thomas Floyd’s Washington Post article, “to create the rain effect, the crew built a showerhead-like apparatus out of plexiglass that is connected to Arena Stage’s tap-water supply. After scrapping the first three designs, they landed on a version in which the water filters through a window screen, spreading the steady stream to create a more rain-like pattern. The rain covers just a few feet onstage, engulfing the two actors but little more. Once the water hits the stage, it is drained through small holes drilled into the surface — which has been given a waterproof coating — and funneled to a spot beneath a center-stage hatch” (Floyd).

To what extent should other historical examples be connected?

The strength of *Indecent* lies in its conjuring of a dialectal image that forces the audience to simultaneously view the piece in a historical and contemporary light. America’s modern landscape has seen a sudden increase in anti-Semitism and xenophobia towards immigrants. *Indecent* co-creator and director Rebecca Taichman reflects, “my heart is broken at how much more relevant this play is today than when it opened at Yale, a mere year and a half ago” (Pollack Pelzer). There are many parallels and examples that could be connected to Vogel’s script, which could further the Dead Troupe’s journey, as anti-Semitism does not end in 1952. There are several historical instances that could be connected to the script that would showcase

how this story continues through the second half of the 20th century and into present day. These could be introduced through sound clips, projections and tableaux, which would fit naturally into a Brechtian presentation style.

The dialectal image that has been praised throughout much of the research has been criticized by some. In a *Theater Review: A Holocaust Meta-History*, in *Paula Vogel's Indecent*, Jesse Green heavily critiques the connections made by Vogel between *God of Vengeance* and The Holocaust. She writes, "I have a problem with plays, however well-intentioned, that hitch their wagon of importance to the Holocaust... The Holocaust material feels Holocaust adjacent, not integral, and though *God of Vengeance* was apparently staged in Lodz, the performances there had nothing to do with the rest of the history of that play that Vogel dramatizes" (Green). Vogel's writing and Tacihaman's directorial vision showcases the Holocaust through an artistic rendering, which is counter to the many realistic stage and film depictions of the event. Vogel's work typically steers away from naturalism, and her creative yet poignant representation of the Holocaust through the dust falling on the Dead Troupe has been applauded by most. However, Green would counter, "I would submit that the Holocaust in particular cannot yet be treated abstractly or aesthetically" (Green). *Indecent* chronicles Jewish and LGBTQ struggle through the first half of the 20th century, which could easily be expanded through present day. More historical instances could be weaved into the production, perhaps to the disapproval Green.

Potential historical connection points and intersections of Judaism and homosexuality include:

- 486 BCE - Darius I adopted the Holiness Code of Leviticus for Persian Jews of the Achaemenid Empire, enacting the first state sanctioned death penalty for male same-sex intercourse.

- 1871: Paragraph 175 is put into effect in Germany, making homosexuality between males a crime.

- 1920: Sigmund Freud's *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*

“Then aged nineteen years old, the young girl did not consider herself to be in any way ill and had only agreed to begin an analysis at her father's insistence. Her father was worried not only about his daughter's overt homosexuality but in particular about a recent suicide attempt; after he had encountered her in the street in the company of the woman with whom she was in love, she had thrown herself over a parapet wall on to a suburban railway line. The second child and sole daughter of a family of four children from the Jewish bourgeoisie in Vienna, "assimilated" by baptism, the young girl had fallen passionately in love with a "cocotte " (female prostitute) who was ten years older than she. In desperation, the family had decided to appeal to Freud”.

- 1938- The Pink Triangle: Gay Jews in ghettos we're labeled with pink triangles to separate them from the general Jewish population which were forced to where gold stars. Today, the pink triangle is used as a sign of pride.



Homosexual prisoners at the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, Germany, wearing pink triangles on their uniforms on December 19, 1938.

Corbis/Getty Images



"Stop the Brown Danger! Gays and Lesbians against Nazis!" A sticker that was worn by gay activists protesting against neo-Nazis, depicting a pink triangle destroying a swastika. (Centrum Schwule Geschichte archives, Ordner #278)

- Gad Beck: was a gay holocaust survivor.

As a person of partial Jewish ancestry (a Mischling in Nazi terminology), Beck was not deported with other German Jews. Instead, he remained in Berlin. He recalls in his autobiography borrowing a neighbor's Hitler Youth uniform and marching in 1942 into the pre-deportation camp where his lover, Manfred Lewin, had been arrested and detained. He asked the commanding officer for the young man's release for use in a construction project, and it was granted. When outside the building, however, Lewin declined, saying, "Gad, I can't go with you. My family needs me. If I abandon them now, I could never be free." With that, the two parted without saying goodbye. "In those seconds, watching him go," Gad recalls, "I grew up." Lewin and his entire family were murdered at Auschwitz

- 1969 Stone Wall Riots



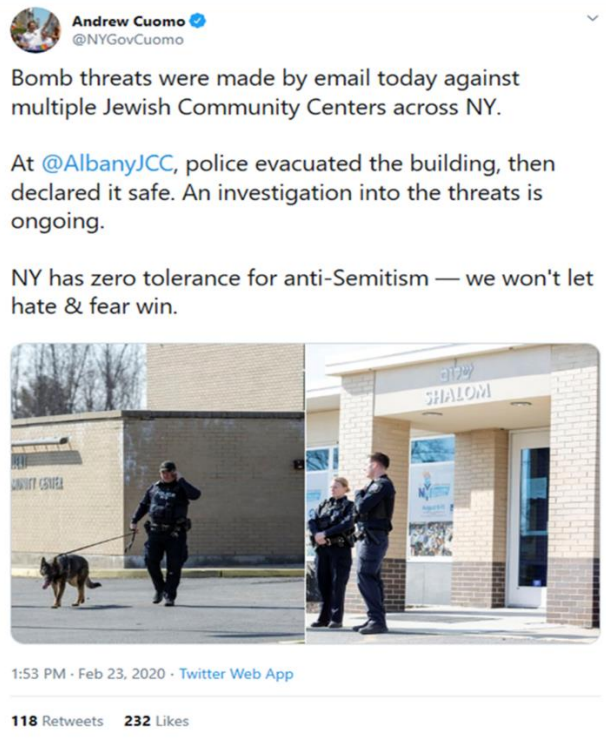
Stonewall Riots were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay (LGBT) community against a police raid that began in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village

- The Museum of Jewish Heritage, participated in the nonprofit Stonewall 50 Consortium. "Jews have always been involved in social justice in US and gay Jews and allies have been key players in the movement, said Eric Marcus, co-founder and chair

- 1972 - Beth Chayim Chadashim was founded in 1972 as the first LGBT synagogue in the world
- 1981-1987: Aids Epidemic



- 2018: 19 year old Blaze Bernstein is killed for being gay and Jewish
- 2020: Anti-Semitism rises in New York



Works Cited

- Asch, Sholem. "An Open Letter from Sholem Asch."
- Barnett, David. *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015.
- Floyd, Thomas. "How Does Arena Stage Make It Rain? In 'Indecent,' a Storm Arrives at a Pivotal Moment." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 28 Nov. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/express/2018/11/28/how-does-arena-stage-make-it-rain-indecent-storm-arrives-pivotal-moment/.
- Furst, Joshua. "Finding Beauty in 'Indecent' - a 110-Year-Old Play Set in Jewish Brothel." *The Forward*, 18 May 2016, forward.com/culture/340815/finding-beauty-in-indecent-a-110-year-old-play-set-in-jewish-brothel/.
- Green, Jesse. "Theater Review: A Holocaust Meta-History, in Paula Vogel's *Indecent*." *Vulture*, 19 Apr. 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/04/theater-a-holocaust-meta-history-in-paula-vogels-indecent.html.
- Hoffman, Warren. "Looking for 'Lesbians' in God of Vengeance and *Indecent*." *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, 3 July 2018, howlround.com/looking-lesbians-god-vengeance-and-indecent.
- Mansbridge, Joanna. "Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*." *Modern Drama*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2018, pp. 479–500., doi:10.3138/md.61.4.0965.
- Solomon, Alisa. "Re-Addressing the Canon: Essays on Theatre and Gender." 2003, doi:10.4324/9780203360460.
- Vogel, Paula. *Indecent (TCG Edition)*. Theatre Communications Group, Incorporated, 2017.
- Wallach, Kerry. "America Abandoned: German-Jewish Visions of American Poverty in Serialized Novels by Joseph Roth, Sholem Asch, and Michael Gold." *Three-Way Street: Jews, Germans, and the Transnational*, by Jay Howard Geller and Leslie Morris, University of Michigan Press, 2016, pp. 198–219.