American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART III

The Pursuit of Community

INDECENT: CHALLENGING NARRATIVES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM THROUGH COLLABORATIVE CREATION AND THE USE OF MEMORY AS A DRAMATURGICAL DEVICE

Sarah Sigal
Independent scholar and freelance theatre-maker

Co-created by writer Paula Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman, *Indecent* was co-commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, premiering at the La Jolla Playhouse and then the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2015 before transferring to New York in 2016, where it played for a year. *Indecent* is a play-within-a-play, telling the story of the play *God of Vengeance* by Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, from its beginnings in the theatres of turn-of-the-century Europe to its downfall in 1920s New York where it was censored for indecency for portraying a lesbian kiss on stage. When I saw the play on Broadway in 2017, I was struck by two central elements. Firstly, the themes in *Indecent* felt incredibly relevant, reflecting the socio-political shifts that occurred during its conception, development and production—the changing ways in which American society (and the US government) perceived immigrants and minorities. Secondly, in conjuring up historical memory, not only of *God of Vengeance* but also of early twentieth-century European Jews, *Indecent* made the act of memorial both theatrically inventive and emotionally wounding for the audience.

The act of making this play, of telling this story, demonstrates Vogel and Taichman's profound ambivalence about America's trajectory as a country; *Indecent* is a celebration of queer stories but also a mourning for the decline of liberal democracy and progressive foreign policy. They use Asch's play and the story of its production in order to comment on the parallels between the rise of populism, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in early 20th century and during the Trump Administration, while also creating what Joanna Mansbridge calls a "site[s] for remembrance" for the tragedy of the Holocaust.[1] Since that fateful Broadway production of *God of Vengeance* in 1923, there have been significant victories for the LGBTQ community in terms of legislation and also the representation of queer stories on stage, as evidenced by the critical and box office success of *Indecent*. In April 2016, Vogel was finally awarded the

1 Joanna Mansbridge, "Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*", *Modern Drama*, vol. 61, no. 4, Winter 2018, p. 489.

Ph.D. Cornell University had refused her many years ago, accepting *Indecent* as her revised dissertation project. "To go back and receive the generosity and mentorship of younger colleagues who embrace queer and lesbian studies makes me think you just have to live long enough," she explained.[2] However, Vogel's play asks us to also consider the parallels between draconian immigration policies passed in America in the 1920s and those that have been passed by the Trump Administration. The metatheatricality of the play-within-a-play conceit allows the piece to reflect the changes in the socio-political landscape occurring during the creation and production of their show, from the Obama Administration to the Trump Era. "It's terrifying to think that we're at another swing of a pendulum. We can't let it turn back."[3] In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which Vogel and Taichman engage with the story of *God of Vengeance* to explore the historical limits of American liberalism through collaborative theatre-making and the use of memory and memorial as dramaturgical devices, asking the audience to consider their contemporary political context.

RESTAGING AND REIMAGINING *GOD OF VENGEANCE*

Indecent is the product of Vogel and Taichman's collaboration, using the creation, production, performance and reception of *God of Vengeance* as a way of interrogating history through various modes of performance. Vogel and Taichman developed the play together during multiple residencies, workshops and commissioning periods, alongside co-composers Aaron Halva and Lisa Gutkin and choreographer David Dorfman. Vogel and Taichman had come across *God of Vengeance* individually, as university students, harbouring a love for the play and a need to find a way of telling the story of its creation and the night it was censored in New York.[4] In her programme note for the Broadway production, Vogel says, "A young married man, Sholem Asch,

2 Paula Vogel quoted in Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, "With her eerily timely 'Indecent', Paula Vogel unsettles American theatre again," *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2017.

3 *Ibid.*

4 "I started thinking about the story that was at the heart of *Indecent* 20 years ago. As a student, I happened on all the materials about the play *The God of Vengeance* and its obscenity trial and I tried to make a piece then. It was called *The People vs. The God of Vengeance*. It was clearly a meaningful story but not well enough told. As a writer, I was trying to figure out how to do it myself and I couldn't figure out how to contain the complexity of it. I pursued, I never let go of, the longing to tell that story. [...] When finally I found Paula Vogel, who had an equal passion for *The God of Vengeance*, it felt like a miracle." Rebecca Taichman, quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, "Stage directions: Tony Winner Rebecca Taichman Explains How Indecent Permanently Changed Her Outlook", *Playbill*, February 14, 2018.

wrote this love scene between two women in 1907? To this day I have not read as beautiful a scene between two women, one that accorded their love the pure desire of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony."[5] Written in Yiddish by Asch in Warsaw in 1906, *God of Vengeance* is about Yankl, a Jewish brothel owner, whose daughter Rifkele falls in love with Manke, one of the sex workers in the brothel, during her betrothal to a young man from a respectable family. Yankl has had an expensive Torah scroll made to raise his daughter's status in the eyes of her fiancé's family but when he discovers the affair, he banishes both the scroll and his daughter to the brothel in anger. Although the play toured Europe before and after the First World War to great acclaim and full houses and had a successful run in downtown New York theatres (in Yiddish and then English), when the English language version transferred to Broadway in 1923, the entire cast was thrown in jail under an obscenity law for depicting the first lesbian kiss staged in an American theatre.

Vogel and Taichman use excerpts from *God of Vengeance* within the format of the metatheatrical play-within-a-play, manipulating the passage of time and illuminating the significance of the changing socio-historical setting to the journey of the play, as well as its creators.[6] *Indecent* is seen through the eyes of Lemml, a shtetl tailor who becomes the play's stage manager when he hears Asch read his play in Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz's Warsaw salon. We follow Lemml as he travels with the play around Europe and then to New York, seeing short fragments from *God of Vengeance* that highlight the various themes within it: sin, salvation, sexuality, greed, pride and love. This mechanism gives a context for the story, allowing us to explore different cultural norms and speculate on the contrasting audience reactions, why Europeans applauded and Americans were shocked. *Indecent* is both scripted and staged in order to perform these episodes by engaging with different theatrical tools; Vogel and Taichman utilise scenes from *God of Vengeance*, historical events (such as the obscenity trial),[7] speculative historical scenes (such as Lemml's encounter with American playwright Eugene O'Neill), fictional scenes and sequences that imitate early 20th-century Yiddish performance. Mansbridge writes that in her work, "Vogel mobilizes a variety of dramatic forms,

5 Paula Vogel, *Indecent* Playbill programme, 2017.

6 It is interesting to note that neither Asch's play nor an English translation are cited anywhere in the programme or the published play text, leaving us to wonder if the scenes from *God of Vengeance* are direct quotes, paraphrased lines or Asch's dialogue as rewritten by Vogel.

7 As with dialogue purporting to be from *God of Vengeance*, there is nothing to indicate whether the historical scenes, such as the court trial or Rabbi Silverman's denunciation of the play, are taken verbatim from transcripts or if they were rewritten by Vogel.

like circular and repetitive structures, to reconfigure Artistotelian elements, reorient audiences' expectations, and subvert habitual ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling."[8] These episodic, continually changing ways of telling the story ask the audience to interrogate history, questioning expectations we may have about early 20th-century emigration to America; this, we learn, is not a story of the triumph of the Ellis Island immigrant seeking the American dream, but rather one of American intolerance and its consequences. Towards the end of the play, when Lemml decides to return to Poland, he tells Asch:

> I am done being in a country that laughs at the way I speak. They say America is free? What do you know here is free? All over Europe we did this play with no Cossacks shutting us down. Berlin, Moscow, Odessa—everywhere there is theatre! [...] I am leaving this country.[9]

We see Lemml return to Poland, only to meet his fate in a concentration camp years later. As the audience is forced to confront the painful dramatic irony of Lemml's statement, the play creates a site for Holocaust remembrance, not only for the six million Jewish people who were slaughtered but also for the lost culture of those people that once thrived in Europe.

As Vogel herself acknowledges, the inherently collaborative nature of *Indecent*, the interweaving of text, dance, music and design, enables the play to bring together multiple settings and time periods, activating complex ideological, political and historical concepts for the audience. The production features a small company of seven performers who sing and sometimes play instruments, along with a three-piece klezmer band; these performers and instrumentalists worked with Vogel, Taichman, their composers and choreographer over the course of two years to develop the work. The director calls *Indecent* a hybrid form of theatre, music and dance, explaining that, "the music...propels us through time", serving as connective tissue for the different locations and time periods, from Peretz's salon in Warsaw in 1906 to Asch's house in Connecticut in 1952.[10] This interweaving serves a practical function, facilitating transitions between countries and time periods without significant set or costume changes; because the play is ultimately being presented as a production of *God of Vengeance* in a Jewish ghetto during the war, (though this is not explicitly suggested in the published play text) Taichman dressed the actors in clothing from the 1940s

8 Joanna Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 7.
9 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, New York, TCG, 2017, p. 61.
10 Rebecca Taichman, interviewed by Charlie Rose for *Charlie Rose*, August 1, 2017.

throughout and limited the set to a wooden stage, a table, some chairs, blankets and suitcases, making an allusion to the war years and the Holocaust that the audience doesn't necessarily comprehend until later on in the play. For example, the troupe performs a 1923 Broadway hit song, "Ain't We Got Fun," in brash American accents, top hats and kick lines, aping the hedonism and superficiality of America in the Roaring 20s and providing a counterpoint to the next scene where Asch is talking to his doctor about his compromised mental health, induced by a trip to Europe where he witnessed pogroms in Jewish villages.[11] The play uses this transition to move the narrative quickly between different locations, creating a stark contrast in tone to underscore the theme of the danger of America's increasingly isolationist foreign policy and its link to the vulnerability of European Jews. Feminist theatre scholar Sharon Friedman categorises the plays of Vogel and playwrights that work with adaptation as "re-visions".

> [They] stress the element of interpretation involved in the productions [...].The artists' visions, their approach to elucidating prior texts, though certainly varied, share an awareness that we are all subject to historical contingencies, beliefs, and commitments that inform our responses and expectations. Re-vision means to see and see again. Theatre artists observing, reflecting on their observations, and interrogating the underpinnings of their responses to works that have historical currency produce new texts that are layered and open-ended, inviting audiences to engage in the process of interpretation.[12]

It is the layers of *Indecent* that allow us to find meaning in the story of *God of Vengeance*, as the Jewish company performs the play again and again for us from their Polish ghetto, revealing itself not only to be a reminder of lost Yiddish worlds but also, as Taichman says, "a reminder to love in times of hatred".[13] At the beginning, when Asch's wife Madje reads the play for the first time, she tells him, "My God, Sholem. It's all in there. The roots of all evil: the money, the subjugation of women, the false piety...the terrifying violence of that father...and then, oh Sholem, the two girls in the rain scene!"[14] In *Indecent*, Vogel and Taichman are re-visioning *God of Vengeance* as a play about love between two women against the odds, and the ghetto production of the play as an act of love and faith in and of itself in a time of intolerance and isolationism.

11 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

12 Sharon Friedman, "Introduction", in Sharon Friedman (ed.), *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works: Critical Essays*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009, p. 8.

13 Rebecca Taichman, interviewed by Charlie Rose for *Charlie Rose*, August 1, 2017.

14 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

USES OF MEMORY AS A THEATRICAL DEVICE

In his seminal 1940 essay "On the Concept of History', written before he attempted to flee Nazi-occupied Europe, Walter Benjamin wrote, "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger."[15] Benjamin acknowledges how subjective the concept of history is because it is bound up with the nebulous, unpredictable, human mechanism of memory, that the only way to try to understand history is to attempt to interrogate the individual memories and images we harbour. Vogel and Taichman also acknowledge the conundrum of the difficulty of dramatizing history, centering *Indecent* around these images, these flashes of Lemml's memories, blending together history and historical fiction. We learn at the end of *Indecent* that we have been watching the story of Asch's play through the lens of a performance of it, produced in secretive, dire conditions in an attic in the Łódź Ghetto in 1943 (a documented, historical occurrence) through the fictional character of Lemml. It is the way that Vogel has chosen to present this revelation that is so poignant—that for nearly two hours we do not realise that we have been watching a doomed people, or as Vogel calls them in the script, "The Dead Troupe."[16] By the end of the play, we realise that what the Troupe empties out of their pockets at the beginning of the show is not dust or some iteration of the sands of time, but rather ashes from the camps. This image, this memory flashing by in a moment of danger, is one that challenges Lemml's statement about the freedom to perform in Europe, reminding the audience how fleeting and precious such a freedom can be while also creating a powerful visual shorthand linking this physical sequence to the Holocaust, further contributing to the performance as a site of memorial and mourning. In his essay on Freudian theories on trauma and mourning and artistic representations of the Holocaust, Eric L. Santer writes that taking Nazism and the Final Solution seriously as a trauma "means to shift one's theoretical, ethical, and political attention to the psychic and social sites where individual and group identities are constituted, destroyed, and reconstructed," which he connects to Freud's theory on mourning as "a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses".[17] Thus, the repetition of the performance of the ghetto

15 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Dennis Redmond, Marxists Internet Archive.

16 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

17 Eric L. Satner, "'History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma", in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of*

production of *God of Vengeance* works simultaneously as an act of wounding, mourning and memorial.

Vogel and Taichman arrange the different theatrical elements at their disposal not only so that they behave as *aide-mémoires* for Lemml, through whose eyes we are watching the story unfold, but also so that we the audience feel as if we were recalling the story of *God of Vengeance* along with the stage manager in an act of collective memory. The play treats the history it dramatizes as a kind of theatrical palimpsest, as moments and scenes overlap and are layered in order to create meaning for the audience. Mansbridge notes that, "*Indecent* redistributes dramatic and historical agency to the theatrical event, using gestures as the agentive force of remembrance," and that these gestures are "used to crystallize a critical moment [...] in order to ask what it means to the present," and illustrating "the way history, like theatre, is an ongoing act of recognition."[18] The writer and director use a number of signifiers that are repeated again and again so that we come to recognise what they are signalling: the projections detailing place names, dates, subtitles, translations and explanations; the repetition of certain scenes from *God of Vengeance*; and the use of a layering of voices, costumes, people and music, one on top of the other. The projections on the back wall of the theatre indicate time and place, linking disparate events in history for us, but also conveying the passage of time by acknowledging its movement. For example, we often see the projection, "A BLINK IN TIME."[19] When *God of Vengeance* comes to Broadway, all the titles of the plays that were on Broadway that year are projected onto the back wall, immersing the audience in the world of the 1920s and treating us as if we had been there ourselves.[20] In a moving exchange entitled "1939-1941: LETTERS FROM POLAND", we hear fragments of letters written to Asch from company members back in Poland and Asch's powerless reply from America read side by side, presented like memories, reminding us of the changing political conditions in Poland as the war begins, tapping into a collective understanding of the Second World War.[21] Nakhmen, another Yiddish writer, says:

> My dear Asch, it has been a long time since we read your brilliant little play in the living room. A lot of Yiddish water has flowed over the Polish dam. It is hard for me to ask

Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution", Cambridge & London, Harvard UP, 1992, pp. 153 & 144.

18 Joanna Mansbridge, "Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*", art. cit., p. 479.

19 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

you: The authorities have confiscated our passports. Is there any way you might put in a word to the consulate to make an exception for me?[22]

Nakhmen highlights the passage of time by reminding Asch of the first reading of *God of Vengeance*, thus reminding us of how different wartime Warsaw is from that of the turn-of-the-century Warsaw we saw when we first heard Asch read his play in Peretz's salon. These fragments are designed to trigger the audience's memory of this fictionalised representation of the reimagined historical event presented earlier in the play to place us in time, but they also create parallels with our current political situation, foregrounding the consequences of racist immigration policies—the closure of national borders, restriction of movement, implementation of quotas. There is a brief but affecting moment towards the end of the play where we hear an old recording from the American musical *Oklahoma!* which serves as a bridge between the demise of the Dead Troupe in a concentration camp and the final scene of the play where we see a young writer approach Asch in his Connecticut home in in 1952, asking permission to produce a new translation of *God of Vengeance*.[23] The contrast is stark and the strains from the popular 1943 Broadway musical have a chilling effect; this comparison of cultures and time periods reminds us that in the same year that Americans watched a joyful (and also nationalistic) musical about the Wild West, European Jewry was being extinguished.

Serving as a kind of fulcrum around which all the other memories turn, Lemml's most powerful memory is that of the rain scene, where Rifkele and Manke kiss in their nightgowns in the rain. Other scenes from *God of Vengeance* are repeated throughout the play, but the rain scene is the only one that is presented first in English and then in Yiddish at the end, with rain coming down from above onto the performers in an unusual naturalistic gesture, highlighting the celebration of love and setting it apart from the rest of the play as a moment of transcendence. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson writes, "Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it."[24] We are not simply watching two women kiss on stage, the audience is bearing witness to a kind of triumph in spite of a tragic tale; the other images with which Vogel and Taichman have presented us complete the picture of these two women, making the case that this

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

23 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

24 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962, p. 170.

act of witnessing is an act of celebration and memorial. In recreating the rain element on stage for the audience, this scene reminds us of, but also transcends, its first mention at the beginning of the play. In the first scene of *Indecent*, Lemml tells the audience:

> We have a story we want to tell you… About a play. A play that changed my life. Every night we tell this story—but somehow I can never remember the end. (*He indicates his mind is failing. He turns to the others for help. No one can.*) No matter. I can remember how it begins. It all starts with this moment. Remember this:
> (*Lemml gestures to two women of the troupe, holding each other, and then the troupe explodes in a joyous klezmer song and dance.*)[25]

Lemml cannot remember because it gives him a reason to tell us the story of Asch and his play but also because the ending which he meets is almost too terrible to be retold, the pain too much to endure. Lemml and the Dead Troupe of Vogel and Taichman's imaginations stand in for lost Yiddish culture and the Jews of pre-war Europe who perished in the Shoah. In her programme note for the Broadway production, Vogel explains, "I believe the purpose of theatre is to wound our memory so we can remember. […] I hope that the acquisition of Yiddish in the rain scene helps us remember the culture and lives that existed before 1940. Theatre is living memory."[26] In playing the final depiction of the rain scene in Yiddish, the audience is reminded that Yiddish was once the language of a thriving culture, connecting people and languages across national borders, and that the theatre is a place for remembering and commemorating. Mansbridge explains:

> To see a Paula Vogel play is to participate in a three-way dialogue with the dramatic canon, social history, and contemporary American culture. […] Vogel crafts collage-like playworlds that are comprised of fragments of history and culture that feel, at once, inclusive and alienating, familiar and strange, funny and disturbing. […] Although frequently at odds with the social worlds they populate, these characters also forge a sense of belonging, often through the creative forces of fantasy, memory, storytelling, and other unauthorized acts.[27]

Indecent is a collage of memories, of moments of time and fragments of history and culture, layered one on top of another. The characters become alienated by their act of emigration to the United States, by their foreignness in a land foreign to them, but

25 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
26 Paula Vogel, *Indecent* Playbill programme, 2017.
27 Joanna Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

they forge a sense of belonging through the repeated ritual of the performance of Asch's play, even in the ghetto where they perform fearfully and in secret. The rain scene at the end of *Indecent* provides a duality; it is a triumph that we the audience finally see this censored moment but the tragedy is that it is only conjured up by Lemml's memory of it as he goes to meet his death in the camps.

LINKING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT DAY

The America *Indecent* depicts is both that of the fabled Roaring Twenties and also an America eerily familiar to 21st-century audiences. Vogel and Taichman use the story of *God of Vengeance* as a way of exploring America's political history and also its political present. Within the world of the play, the American setting changes the way the company members perceive each other, and the pain of assimilation is felt keenly. The lead actor of *God of Vengeance*, Schildkraut, fires Reina, the young woman playing Rifkele, explaining, "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."[28] When *God of Vengeance* is translated into English for the production at the Provincetown Playhouse, Schildkraut feels the pressure to erase its Yiddish origins to fit a New York audience's expectations for the youth and purity of the character of Rifkele, which cannot be tainted by the imperfect, accented English or the Jewish features of the actor playing her. The interwar period in American history that acts as a backdrop for much of the play is one that witnessed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, racist immigration policies, racist domestic policies and the use of eugenics in academic discourse and governance. Historian David J. Goldberg writes:

> Between 1890 and 1914, Americans began to reassess their attitudes toward immigrants. Many old-stock Americans (the term includes descendants of immigrants from northwestern Europe and Canada, but not Native Americans or African-Americans) became disturbed by the arrival of millions of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, whom they deemed to be inferior to those who had arrived before 1890. On the West Coast, a virulent anti-Japanese movement had emerged. Despite the growing opposition, before the war no significant restrictionist legislation had been passed. The Great War marked a turning point. In 1917, Congress, overriding [President] Wilson's veto, enacted a literacy test requirement for new arrivals. Anti-immigrant attitudes, fed by racial theories, hardened in the immediate postwar years, leading to the passage of the

28 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.,* pp. 33-34.

> Emergency Immigration Act in 1921. In 1924, Congress passed the National Origins Act, a law that favored so-called Nordic immigrants and that stood out as one of the most significant pieces of legislation enacted during the entire decade.[29]

This passage is sadly reminiscent of a political episode in January 2018 where President Trump expressed racist views about immigrants from African countries, Haiti and El Salvador, stating that countries like Norway should have priority in the lottery for US visas.[30] In the issue of *The Economist* published in March 2018, it was noted that, "This year's refugee quota, 45,000, is the lowest in three decades, and is not expected to be met," explaining that the Refugee Admissions Programme, "has had an average quota of 95,000 refugees a year, more than that of any other rich country. [...] Because refugee policy is one of the few bits of the immigration system President Trump controls, he has ravaged it."[31] In the 1920s, the United States saw a popular and political backlash to the previous decades of waves of immigration, as well as to the Great Migration when people of colour migrated from the agrarian South to the industrial North to take up jobs in factories, contributing to what Goldberg calls fear of "an increasingly urban and racially mixed society".[32] The US Government passed acts that imposed quotas on immigrants from certain countries, sharply limiting immigration from countries like Italy, Japan and those in Eastern Europe, sure to bring in large numbers of Jews fleeing pogroms after the war and the Russian Revolution.[33]

Indecent is a different kind of Holocaust play; it is designed to remind us of what happened to the Jews of Europe when they were turned away from countries that could have been safe havens, and also frames this history in such a way that we consider the politics and immigration policies of both historical but contemporary America. This is not to say *Indecent* makes an equivalent of restrictive immigration policies and Holocaust, but rather suggests a historical connection between the two. For example, in *Hitler's American Model: the United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, James Q. Whitman makes the case that the Nazi regime was inspired by American legislation around immigration quotas and segregation with respect to the race laws

29 David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, p. 140.

30 Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, "Trump decries immigrants from "shithole countries" coming to the US," CNN, 12 January 2018.

31 "Lost Boy found", *The Economist*, March 1, 2018, p. 41.

32 David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America*, *op. cit.,* p. 127.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

they implemented.[34] It is the collaborative interplay, the layering of dialogue, music, dance and design, of historical fragments and memories, that provokes the audience to consider the contemporary relevance of the piece, warning us of the fate that awaits the immigrants we turn away at our borders. Between the premiere of *Indecent* in 2015 and its closure on Broadway two years later, the United States saw a presidential election that divided the country sharply between left and right in a series of political and cultural wars, culminating in a win for the Trump campaign that was accompanied by a startling increase in and proliferation of racist, xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Islamic sentiment and hate crimes. In an article for *The New Yorker* in May of 2017, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner writes, "In a climate of resurgent anti-Semitism, homophobia, and hostility to immigrants, the success of 'Indecent' feels defiant, if not triumphant," reporting that Taichman told him, "'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.'"[35] *Indecent* is, in itself, a plea for tolerance and for love, for the hope that words and performances can bring people closer to their own humanity. After Asch has gone to report on the pogroms in Lithuania in 1923 for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, he tells his wife Madje:

> I can't get the images out of my head. It's hard for me to kiss our children at night. And when as head of our delegation I reported all the atrocities I saw what is the response from our State Department?...These things happen. [...] I have to write something to change the way gentiles see us—that make them see that we are one people with one common root—or they will rip us out, root by root, from the earth until we are no more.[36]

Asch is desperate to make the plight of Eastern European Jews a crucial issue for the government, through the only way at his disposal—by writing. Likewise, Vogel and

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34 "Just eight days after the Reich Citizenship Law, the Law on the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, and the Reich Flag Law were formally proclaimed by Adolf Hitler, 45 Nazi lawyers sailed for New York under the auspices of the Association of National Socialist German Jurists. The trip was a reward for the lawyers, who had codified the Reich's race-based legal philosophy. The announced purpose of the visit was to gain 'special insight into the workings of American legal and economic life through study and lectures,' and the leader of the group was Ludwig Fischer. As the governor of the Warsaw District half a decade later, he would preside over the brutal order of the ghetto." Ira Katznelson, "What America Taught the Nazis" (Review of *Hitler's American Model: the United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* by James Q. Whitman), *The Atlantic*, November 2017.

35 Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, art. cit.

36 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.,* p. 58.

Taichman hope that, by producing *Indecent*, they can do the same. They can wound us in order to make us remember, to make us believe, to make us care and, as Vogel says in an interview, to wake us up so we pay attention.[37]

During the Broadway run of *Indecent*, Vogel said:

> I think it's a very incredible responsibility that we have as artists, to be witness to our own time, but also to make sure that we don't forget those who came before us... I wanted it to be a larger story of us as Americans and not just about the moment in time when the truth became censored on a Broadway stage.[38]

Vogel and Taichman use the story of *God of Vengeance* and its rejection by the American public in 1923 as a means to engage with both history and contemporary political life through performance. While *Indecent* celebrates the fact that two women in love can kiss on a 21st-century Broadway stage, it confronts the audience with the cyclical nature of history, warning us that the isolationist and racist policies of the 1920s which are being repeated again could lead to another tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust. Vogel and Taichman blur the lines between historical fact and theatrical fiction in a gesture that is at once an act of commemoration, wounding and remembrance.

37 Paula Vogel, "Interview", *Indecent* Broadway website (offline), accessed on 20 February 2018.

38 *Ibid.*

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Notice

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Abstract

This paper considers the ways in which writer Paula Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman use collaborative approaches to writing and staging in *Indecent* (2015) in order to dramatize the story of Yiddish writer Sholem Asch's 1907 play *God of Vengeance*, thus delving into the history of populism and intolerance in Europe and the United States in the 20th century. *Indecent* explores the journey of *God of Vengeance*, from its successful tour of European theatres to the English-language production in New York in 1923, where it was censored for indecency for depicting the first lesbian kiss seen on an American stage. Vogel and Taichman comment on the perils of rising populism and racism in America since the rise of Trump by presenting Asch's play and its Jewish performers and stage manager (newly arrived in New York from Poland), against the backdrop of an increasingly racist, populist and anti-immigrant America in the 1920s. Vogel and Taichman's interweaving of text, dance, music and design enables the production to present multiple settings and time periods, as well as the interlocking stories of real people and imagined characters. This paper also explores the idea of the "dramaturgy of memory"—how the writer and director arrange fragmented theatrical elements almost as *aide-mémoires* for the audience, as if they were remembering moments from *God of Vengeance* and the tragic fate of its company as the Holocaust looms in the background.

Key words

contemporary American theatre; dramaturgy; playwriting; adaptation; yiddish theatre; queer theatre; women playwrights; Rebecca Taichman; Paula Vogel; Holocaust

Résumé

Cet article examine les méthodes collaboratives utilisées par l'autrice Paula Vogel et la metteuse en scène Rebecca Taichman dans leur création *Indecent* (2015). *Indecent* met en scène l'histoire de la pièce *God of Vengeance* (1907) de l'écrivain Yiddish Sholem Asch, et se penche ainsi sur l'histoire du populisme et de l'intolérance en Europe et aux États-Unis au cours du XX^e^ siècle. *Indecent* explore le voyage de *God of Vengeance*, depuis sa tournée triomphale dans les théâtres européens jusqu'à sa mise en scène en langue anglaise à New York en 1923, où la pièce fut censurée pour cause d'indécence, après avoir montré le premier baiser lesbien sur une scène américaine. Vogel et Taichman soulignent les dangers du populisme et du racisme en Amérique depuis l'ascension de Trump en présentant la pièce de Asch, de ses comédiens juifs et de son régisseur (nouvellement arrivé à New York de Pologne) dans le contexte d'une Amérique des années 1920 de plus en plus raciste, populiste et xénophobe. L'imbrication du texte, de la danse, de la musique et du décor permet à Vogel et Taichman de présenter les histoires croisées de personnes historiques et de personnages imaginaires. Cet article explore l'idée d'une « dramaturgie de la mémoire », et questionne la façon dont l'autrice et la metteuse en scène proposent des éléments théâtraux fragmentés en guise d'aide-mémoires pour les spectateurs, comme s'ils se souvenaient de moments de *God of Vengeance* et du destin tragique de sa compagnie alors que la Shoah se profile à l'arrière-plan.

Mots-clés

théâtre américain contemporain ; dramaturgie ; nouvelles écritures ; adaptation ; théâtre yiddish ; théâtre queer ; autrices de théâtre ; Rebecca Taichman ; Paula Vogel ; la Shoah

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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