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English and Government

“Politics of Homophobia and Anti-Semitism in Theater: *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent*”

I. Abstract

In 1923, twelve members of the cast *God of Vengeance* — the first Broadway show to stage two women kissing each other — were arrested for “violating the penal code in giving an alleged indecent, immoral and impure theatrical performance” (*The New York Times*). Almost a century later, playwright Paula Vogel remembers this controversy in her play *Indecent* as a meditation on sexuality, religion, and censorship in the intersection of American politics and drama. Vogel’s play has been successfully produced in collaboration with the director Rachel Taichman across the country since its publication in 2017. This summer, I will be researching the production history and the public reception of *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent* to map out the changing currents of anti-Semitism and homophobia in American politics. Specifically, the history of the former play will be used as a focal lens for foregrounding Vogel’s *Indecent* as a reflection of the American psyche around sexuality and religion. I will conduct most of my research through the New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Collection and through various theater companies like Vinyard Theatre, New Yiddish Rep, and La MaMa, that have recently produced *God of Vengeance* and/or *Indecent*. Some of my research will also be done in the Harry Weinberger archives at Yale University.

II. Biographical Sketch

I am a first-semester senior born in Busan, South Korea and raised in San Ramon, California. I am majoring in English and Government with an interest in the intersection of law and theater. On campus, I sing in the Cornell University Chorus, Chamber Singers, and After Eight A Cappella. I am also a former news editor of The Cornell Daily Sun and a former editor-in-chief of The Cornell International Affairs Review.

My interest in American theater began in high school when I attended a playwriting workshop at the Eugene O'Neill Tao House for three summers. Each year, I wrote a 15-minute original play which was produced in collaboration with the student actors with the help of a professional director and the resident playwright. At Cornell, I have developed my love for theater through various courses in the English and PMA departments, and I hope to use this research to immerse myself in the performative space in New York City and dive deeper into American theater as a student of literature and dramaturgy.

III. Statement of Purpose

This summer, I will be researching the production history and the public reception of *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent* as a focal lens for mapping out the changing currents of anti-Semitism and homophobia in the United States. Recognizing that theater is critical in understanding the past and the present, I hope that a close comparison between the texts, productions, and public reactions of the two works will shed light on the current American psyche around religion and sexuality, and on how we continue to grapple with and make meaning out of the contradictory beliefs we live by.

Originally written and produced in Yiddish in 1906, Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* follows a pious Orthodox Jew, Yankl, who runs a brothel below his family's apartment. Yankl strives to safeguard his daughter's innocence in the eyes of God, but she nonetheless falls in love with one of his prostitutes. The following conflict between Yankl and his daughter is an intensely personal story of reckoning between religion and sexuality, between men's relationship with God and identity. The play was produced in Yiddish and German throughout Europe and was met with mixed reactions: some lauded it as a groundbreaking work in Jewish culture while some condemned it as sacrilegious and demanded the script to be burned. In 1922, it premiered in English in the U.S. at Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, and upon its success, moved uptown in 1923 to Apollo Theatre on Broadway where the show was shut down by the police on charges of public obscenity (Cummings). The staging of two women kissing in *God of Vengeance* — the first ever on Broadway — was deemed “violating the penal code in giving an alleged indecent, immoral, and impure theatrical performance” and the director Harry Weinberger and the cast were convicted and fined (*The New York Times*). It was over two years later that Weinberger successfully appealed the conviction before the New York State Court of Appeals.

Almost a century later, Playwright Paula Vogel's *Indecent* reimagines the controversy surrounding the production and the trial of *God of Vengeance* as a forthright meditation on sexuality, religion, and censorship in American politics and drama. In the introduction to *Indecent*, Vogel writes, "The love scene [in *God of Vengeance*] between the two women written by a twenty-something-year-old newly married man stunned me ... it left me with an indelible impression on my twenty-two-year-old mind" (Vogel v). Decades after Vogel's initial encounter with *God of Vengeance*, director Rebecca Taichman contacted her in 2009 and asked if she would be interested in writing about the obscenity trial of *God of Vengeance*. For the next seven years, Vogel and Taichman collaborated in recreating not only the trial, but also the complex web of dynamics between the audience and the play, the English actors and the Yiddish actors, the actors and the characters, the author and the director, in grappling with their own religion, sexuality, and identity in *Indecent*. Ultimately the finished product of this collaboration, among other things, was an open-ended indictment on how American culture and politics fail to reckon with issues of religion and sexuality among the minority community. *Indecent* has been successfully produced by director Rebecca Taichman across the country from San Diego to New York and has been lauded as a seminal work "foregrounding the role of theatre in constructing cultural memory" (Mansbridge 479).

There already exists a wide academic discourse on *God of Vengeance* as it relates to politics, feminist studies, dramaturgical analysis, and so on, but the discourse on *Indecent* is still in its nascent stage. Given the commercial and artistic success of *Indecent*, I hope to add to the dialogue the historical and dramaturgical analysis of Vogel's *Indecent* in relation to *God of Vengeance*, especially along the themes of sexuality, religion, and censorship in American politics. There are several specific questions that will guide my research: What are the changes in the scripts in *God of Vengeance* and how are they reflected in *Indecent*? How do the legal

documents of the obscenity trial tie the two plays together? How different are the audience reactions between the two plays and why? These questions will relate to the more general discourse on how the medium of theater has shaped our notion of sexuality, religion, and censorship in the American identity, and how *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent* challenge and de/reconstruct these value systems in meaningful ways. I hope this research will add important comparative historical and literary analysis to the greater discourse of the intersection of drama and politics in America.

The majority of my research will be done through the New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the largest theater archive in the world. The Billy Rose archive houses scripts, programs, recordings, interviews, and reviews of the productions of *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent*, including their respective 1923 and 2017 Broadway premiere, unavailable anywhere else. Having access to the primary sources in this archive will be especially important in the initial stages of constructing the evolution of the two productions. I also hope to visit various theater companies like Vinyard Theatre, New Yiddish Rep, and La Mama, that have recently produced *God of Vengeance* and/or *Indecent*, and interview those who have worked on the production of the two plays. Various Cornell faculty members, including J. Ellen Gainor of Performing and Media Arts and Jonathan Aaron Boyarin of Near Eastern Studies, have personal connections at these theater companies, and I hope to utilize these resources as much as possible this summer. I also plan to travel up to Yale University in New Haven to access the Harry Weinberger papers in the university archive. These papers consists of legal writings and notes throughout Weinberger's career as a lawyer and a director, and will provide the legal dimension of understanding the history of *God of Vengeance*.

The potential for this research is endless — the history of Yiddish theater, the political climate in the early 1900s when *God of Vengeance* was premiered, the history of homosexuality

in American theater, the history of the American-Jewish community in the Lower East Side, the evolution of censorship law in the United States, and so on, are all critical facets of understanding *God of Vengeance* and *Indecent*. For the purposes of this summer project, I intend to specifically focus on the American productions of the two plays and to use this historical understanding to deeply engage with the play texts themselves. The primary question of the research will be on understanding the dramaturgy of the two plays in light of a clearer understanding of the social and cultural context of the productions. Depending on the direction the research heads this summer, I intend to continue working closely with my faculty advisor in the following fall semester to write a final research paper.

I am currently enrolled in three courses at Cornell that should assist my research. The first, *Contemporary American Theatre on Stage and Screen*, will equip me with a broad understanding of the history of American theater in the 20th century and of the most seminal works of the 20th and 21st century. It will also hone my dramaturgical analysis and writing skills in preparation for this research. The second, *Thirteen Plays*, likewise will provide me with an extensive background in the evolution of theater and playwriting from Shakespeare to 21st century playwrights. Lastly, *Law and Literature*, will help me more critically engage with the intersection of law and theater as a background for understanding the obscenity trial of *The God of Vengeance*.

Partial Bibliography of Relevant Works

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