



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

# Theater: "Indecent" Captures Your Head If Not Your Heart

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INDECENT \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

CORT THEATRE

It's indecent that playwright Paula Vogel is only now making her Broadway debut, decades into an acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-winning career that includes *How I Learned To Drive*, *The Civil War Christmas* and *The Baltimore Waltz*. It's embarrassing (and fascinating) to learn that a shockingly frank 1907 Yiddish classic created a stir around the world yet only when it came to New York City was the cast thrown into jail and the show banned. (Critics!) And it's awkward to say at this auspicious moment when Vogel celebrates the making of that play — *The God Of Vengeance* — that the resulting show is beautifully crafted, strongly acted and respectable in every way, yet not as soul-stirring as one would want (or apparently the original proved when Vogel first read it).

Anyone with a serious interest in theater will appreciate the scope and intelligence on display but I fear they better act fast. (As they must with the revival of *Present Laughter* with Kevin Kline — here on a limited run — and the excellent revival of *The Glass Menagerie* with Sally Field and Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House, Part 2*, which one hopes deserves the buzz from cognoscenti and will get reviews to make it a commercial contender. Musicals are flourishing but straight plays on Broadway struggle even under the best of circumstances these days.)

Even with famous actors topping the bill, art isn't easy. Imagine the challenge more than 100 years ago of mounting a Yiddish play that even Yiddish people feared. Sholem Asch's *The God Of Vengeance* was a play that shows a Jewish brothel owner turning his back on God, a daughter falling in blissful romantic love with one of the whores in a lesbian romance and a finale that includes a Torah being tossed to the ground. It was a thunderclap of a play that did the Jewish people the great service of showing them in all their complexity — good, evil, passionate, greedy, kind, loving and above all human. Only when a group feels free to create art that isn't mere agitprop for their worthiness can they be seen as real people (even by themselves).

*Indecent* tells the remarkable journey of this landmark work from its very first scandalous reading to a triumphant tour around the world. It tracks the playwright's paralyzing reaction to the pogroms taking place in

Eastern Europe and the cast's success as they are first celebrated and then trapped by a show that took them from country to country (and ultimately the Lodz ghetto in World War II — symbolically if not literally the same actors from start to finish). *Indecent* also shares a wealth of information, showing Yiddish theater's rightful place in theatrical history, capturing a deep love between two women at a time when such was shunned, the never-ending anti-Semitism, prudishness, the joys of language, how self-censorship can be the most dangerous censorship of all and the ways art can fall understandably dumb in the face of evil. So much is tackled that the drama falls by the wayside. *Indecent* is never uninteresting but it's more panorama than play.

But how beautifully it's presented! The show begins with the excellent Richard Topol as Lemml, the Stage Manager setting the scene for us as he begins the story of a play that would change his life. The cast is introduced and they step forward with sand or dust or...*something* drifting out and down from their sleeves and pants and skirts, a haunting image whose import only becomes clear towards the end. Still, the somber but gorgeous effect captures what *Indecent* does at its best.

Katrina Lenk (so good in *The Band's Visit*) is one of the two actresses playing lovers in the play. She's matched by Mimi Lieber, who doubles as her lover and a replacement actress in America that sports a pretty hilarious Southern accent. A famed scene of the two characters in *God Of Vengeance* opening their hearts while standing in the rain is reenacted here (perhaps once too often) and one can easily imagine what a life-raft it must have seemed to the queer community in the early 1900s. Yet as with so much else, their story slips by so quickly it never quite registers emotionally. In one scene we see them rehearsing and realize they're lovers. Later they break up and towards the end they reunite but it all happens in a flash — if the show had focused

on them rather than so much more, the play might have caught fire.

But there is indeed so much more. Tom Nelis is excellent as a patron of the arts fearful of the play's impact and also as a famed actor who finds the lead role of the brothel owner to be his albatross. Stephen Rattazzi has a memorable one-two punch when he jumps from an Irish cop shuttering this filthy show to a Jewish rabbi delivering a scathing take-down of the play who couldn't be happier about it. And so on. Among the cast, only Max Gordon Moore falters as the playwright Asch. He's very good in the passionate early scenes when fighting for his work to be heard. Later, when he has traveled to Eastern Europe and seen the horrors of the pogroms, Asch simply cannot speak or take action. Again and again we return to him and each time I feel reminded — oh yes, he's married (his wife might as well be his maid for the connection one feels between them) and oh yes, he's trapped by the crimes against humanity he knows are taking place. One understands it but one never feels it. I would place more blame on the writing than the actor, though it must be said when Nelis takes over the role in the final minutes he brings some welcome blood and tears to the existential pain of Asch.

Vogel wrote the play but it was created in tandem with director Rebecca Taichman, who handles her part impeccably. This isn't a musical as such, but there's a strong component of music, composed by Lisa Gutkin & Aaron Halva that does yeoman's work in capturing an era, the heartbreak of this story, the specific vibe of Weimer-era cabaret and more. All the tech elements are equally superb, from the scenic design of Riccardo Hernandez to the costume design of Emily Rebholz to the often haunting lighting of Christopher Akerlind. The choreography of David Dorfman beautifully knits it all together without missing a step. That's a lot of praise and indeed the craftsmanship and care is apparent from start to finish. If *Indecent* is indecently ambitious, if it wants to share absolutely everything about the fascinating history of an almost forgotten work of Yiddish theater that shook the world, well one can only wish more shows were so admirably flawed.

## Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

The Liar \*\*\* 1/2

Jitney \*\*\* 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) \*\*\* 1/2

Significant Other \* 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth \*\*\*

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) \*\* (third visit, but \*\*\* if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) \*\* 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) \*\*\* 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) \*\*\*\*

The Light Years \* 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) \*\*\* 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

Miss Saigon \*\*

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba \* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s \*\*

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) \*\*\*

Latin History For Morons \* 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) \*\*\*

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

Indecent \*\* 1/2

The Hairy Animal \*\*\*

The Antipodes \*\*

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***Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.***