THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

Near the end of the play, some of the troupe perform The God of Vengeance in an attic in the Łódź (pronounced “Woodez”) ghetto in Poland. Ghetto was enclosed districts where the Nazis forced Jewish people to live in order to isolate them from the non-Jewish population. This ghettoization was a key step in the Nazi process of separating, persecuting and ultimately mass murdering 6 million European Jews.

Life in the ghetto was marked by extreme poverty, forced labor and widespread Starvation. Over 245,000 Jews lived in Łódź ghetto, with an average of 3.5 people per room. In ghettos, Jewish people were stripped of their right to do business with those outside the ghetto. As a result, they were completely dependent on the hostile German regime. Other ghettos included those in Krakow, Kovno, Minsk and the Warsaw ghetto, which was the largest ghetto in Poland.

Over time, the Nazis deported Jewish people from the ghettos to death camps, like Auschwitz, or to internment and labor camps, where they suffered starvation, rampant disease and, in many cases, death.

THE TORAH

Judaism is a monotheistic (belief in one god) religion. It is practiced by 14 million people worldwide. The Torah, or “the Law,” is its sacred text. The God of Vengeance, the father has paid to have a copy of this holy scroll made to keep his daughter pure. When he throws it down the stairs, it is blasphemy—an act against God.

THE PLAY

First Setting: 1906, Warsaw, Poland

Sholem Asch, a young Jewish playwright, has just had his first play, The God of Vengeance, read aloud for the first time. Midway through, one reader calls it “garbage” and refuses to continue.

One objection is a love scene between two women, kissing in the rain. Another is that the play’s characters, including prostitutes and a brothel owner, are Jewish. The readers, all Jewish men, fear the world seeing Jewish people in an unfavorable way. Hatred toward Jews is already rampant. They don’t want to fuel the fire.

Another person, Lemmi, loves the play. He is a tailor from the country and theater audience. To help the performers do their best, he can see and hear you in the front of the theater, even before or after the play.

Resources

For more information, visit www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org and see “History and Overview of the Łódź Ghetto.”

RESOURCES

From the Director’s Notebook

“Introduction to the Holocaust.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
“Yiddish.” About Work Languages.
“Introduction to the Holocaust.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Klemmer Music. EncoreسهBITS ביצות.
The project took them seven years and over 40 drafts. An out, feminist playwright with a Jewish father, the play people from olden days or people who are different. It is important to remember that Indecent.

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

Indecent is told by a dead theater troupe that rises from the ashes at the beginning of the play. In the tradition of early theater troupes, they are accompanied by a trio of musicians. These performers are the actors in The God of Vengeance and also act out its true story. Two actors, “The Elders,” portray all the real and fictional characters that are older and sometimes wiser. Two actors, “The Ingetunas,” play all the young people. Then, there is Lemml, who is the stage manager and narrator.

YIDDISH: THE LANGUAGE OF INDECENT

Peretz: Yiddish is our mother tongue. The language of our myths, our songs…


Yiddish is an international language steeped in the culture of the eastern and central European Jews who created it. It is a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic and Romance languages and has been spoken since the 11th century. It is also a literary language, used by Jewish writers like Sholem Asch, often telling stories of Jewish people. In the early 1900s, I. L. Peretz encouraged Yiddish writers and made his home a place for them to gather and share work. He is called the father of modern Yiddish literature. There is also a fine tradition of professional Yiddish theater. When Yiddish is and is not spoken is an important part of Indecent. Although the characters often perform The God of Vengeance and speak to each other in Yiddish, most of the play is written in English so the audience can understand it. The dramatic convention of the play is that when characters speak English without accents, they are speaking Yiddish. When they speak with accents, they are speaking in English.

SIDE BAR:

Prior to the Holocaust, there were about 11 million Yiddish speakers among 17 million Jewish people worldwide. The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 6 million Jews from 1939-1945. The 6 million European Jews killed in the Holocaust comprised most of the world’s Yiddish speakers. Their death dealt the language a near mortal blow. Today, Yiddish is spoken mostly in Israel, the U.S. and Russia by about 80,000 people.

OBSCENITY LAWS & THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Before the 1923 Broadway premiere, performers and producers of The God of Vengeance knew the show could be stopped for being immoral under New York State’s obscenity laws. “Obscenity” is a legal term that can refer to offensive sexual, religious or treasonous material. Writing or art that is deemed “obscene” is outlawed and not protected by the First Amendment. One difficulty of obscenity laws is that the definition of obscenity differs from person to person.

The campaign against The God of Vengeance was led by Rabbi Joseph Silverman. Silverman objected to the characters—all Jewish—being brothel owners, hypocrites and prostitutes. Jews were already victims of anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish prejudice and discrimination). Silverman and others did not want a mainstream, Broadway audience to see Jewish people in the worst possible light or to affirm negative stereotypes. In an article in Jewish Currents, Susan Reimer-Torn gives this context: “This was during a time when the fate of Jewish immigration to the U.S. was being debated in Washington…The Jewish opposition to the play might best be understood in contemporary terms by recasting the setting and characters: Imagine the effect today of a well-crafted play about Muslims that featured honor killings, just as the travel ban and immigration quotas are being debated on Capitol Hill. Does the right to free speech and artistic expression override the damage such a portrayal might inadvertently cause?”

A PLAY WITH MUSIC

“Every piece I write starts with music,” playwright Paula Vogel said in an interview with Vineyard Theatre. Indecent is a play with music. It includes traditional Yiddish folk songs and original arrangements written for the production. Songs that were popular in the different time periods of the play are also featured.

Vogel said, “There’s an unfolding of time that feels effortless…The music takes us by the hand and hurries us through time.”

Indecent’s music director at Arena Stage, Alexander Sovronsky, said, “The music is a cultural touchstone and a theatrical convention. It serves both functions.”

A trio of Klezmer musicians help create the atmosphere, tell the story and celebrate music in Jewish and theater traditions. Klezmer means “vessel of music” and is a genre of Jewish music. It usually features violin backed by a bass or cello and sometimes clarinet, flute or other instruments.

In early theater, musicians traveled with actors as part of the troupe. Indecent’s live music, supported by the actors, is in keeping with this tradition.