

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Ultimate Decency of Indecent

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 12th, 2019

What is so striking about *Indecent*, the Paula Vogel play that opened Sunday at the Ahmanson, is not just that it tackles lesbianism head-on, but that it does so by tackling so much more. It burrows deep emotionally to come up with the approbation of our most inalienable and fundamental passion: the fulfillment of love found, accepted and unjudged. Yes, we have a right to be happy.

Based on Sholem Asch's 1907 Yiddish play, *God of Vengeance*, so shockingly groundbreaking in its day thanks to its singeing subject-matter, it seems timely, not to say overdue, in ours. We've only had a few plays about women's attraction to women in the modern repertoire (Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, Diana Son's *Stop-Kiss*, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*), and those have been mostly suggestive. None achieves the candor, power or soaring poesy of *Indecent*.



l-r, Lisa Gutkin & Elizabeth A. Davis in *Indecent* The Ahmanson Theatre.

As a play, *Indecent* is complex enough to feel composed by more than one writer. That is not an insult but a compliment to Vogel, who clearly understands that writing in the theatre is a first step. It takes a company to do the rest.

The thing that so eloquently enlarges the literary scope of *Indecent* is Vogel's close collaboration with its excellent director Rebecca Taichman in re-imagining the construct of Asch's piece for a modern audience. Independently and together, they have augmented the piece by capturing its historical resonance in a more current context. The problem for *Indecent's* creators was how to make new art out of old politics.

The plot revolves around the love of a prostitute for the innocent young daughter of the owner of the whorehouse where she works. Given the volcanic nature of this plot, Asch's attempt to get the play staged in the early part of the previous century ran into all the censures that would greet such forbidden actions at the time. The play went some distance in the Yiddish theatre and in parts of Europe, but when it opened in English on Broadway in 1923, in a fatally chastened version that wanted to mitigate the very shock value that made it great, the entire troupe was arrested and the production shuttered.

Vogel and Taichman approached their reinvention of Asch's piece by going to unconventional places, not just in substance but also, significantly, in form. They opened up the play, using

ensemble groupings on stage that work as a collective story-telling ensemble. Only one character is given a name, the stage manager Lemml (exuberantly performed by a seductively star-struck Richard Topol), while the six other actors, accompanied by three actor-musicians, take on many roles and go only by the name “actor” in the cast list. They are consummate artists who breathe life into everything they do, earning the right to be named here: Elizabeth A. Davis, Joby Earle, Harry Groener, Mimi Lieber, Steven Rattazzi and Adina Verson.



l-r, Adina Verson & Elizabeth A. Davis in *Indecent* at the Ahmanson Theatre.

Much of the movement is choreographed by David Dorfman, assisted by Sara Gibbons, with a precision and sobriety that has the rigors of a dance piece without exactly being one. It lends a poetic formality that tells us that this is as much a dream as a reconstituted event.

The mood embraces the play’s Judaic roots, from the somber browns and blacks of Emily Rebholz’s traditional Jewish costumes and Tal Yarden’s award-winning projections of Hebraic text, to Lisa Gutkin and Aaron Halva’s original music and score. Their Klezmer flavored music is sprinkled with snatches of American popular tunes that remind us of the country we live in and its persistent problem with not harboring the “other.”

Violinist Gutkin and musicians Matt Darriau and Patrick Farrell are essential to the production, delivering not only accompaniment on several hand-held instruments, but humor too, as they mingle with the actors in physically moving the play along with welcome song and dance.

Ricardo Hernandez’s scenic design effectively utilizes the full height and breadth of the Ahmanson’s proscenium, with Christopher Akerlind’s lighting serving to focus on the action. But it is ultimately the living heart of that action that grips us. At an hour and 45 minutes, performed without an intermission, this can feel long to some (it did to my theatergoing companion), but it is material that demands that slow crescendo. It has a culminating scene of triumphant delicacy and almost childlike joy that begs for it.



l-r, Elizabeth A. Davis & Adina Verson in *Indecent* at the Ahmanson Theatre.

That climactic scene between the two women is a vindication of the love they share. It is the soul of this piece—a clasping moment in the rain that symbolically cleanses and exalts them.



The cast of *Indecent* at the Ahmanson Theatre.

Vogel and Taichman added a coda that invokes the evil of the Holocaust and the persistence of anti-Semitism in the world. It may be seen as a bit of a stretch, but in fact it serves to reconnect us to Asch, who was damaged by the misunderstandings and abuses heaped on his play and, in general, to its much broader point: the failures of hatred and the urgent and universal significance of love.

Top image: The cast of Indecent at Center Theatre Group’s Ahmanson Theatre.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: Indecent

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, and 135 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Added 2pm performance July 3. No performance July 4. Ends July 7.

HOW: Tickets \$30-\$149 (subject to change.), available by calling 213.972.4400, online at CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the Center Theatre Group Ahmanson box office. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Info & charge, visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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