

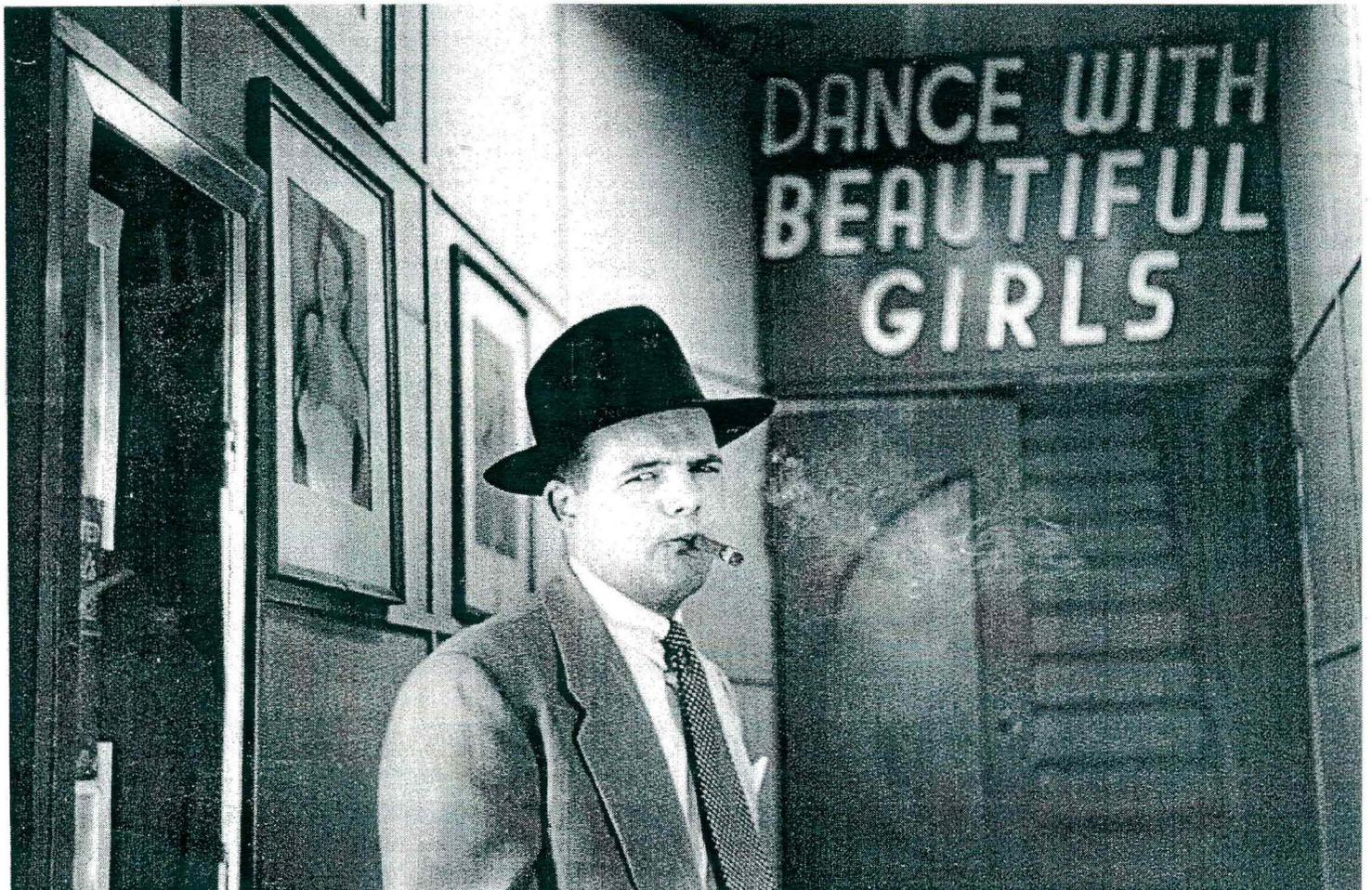
GOD OF VENGEANCE

BY DONALD MARGULIES

ADAPTED FROM THE PLAY BY SHOLOM ASCH

DIRECTED BY JEAN RANDICH

LESTER MARTIN THEATER, MAY 8, 9, & 10, 2009



God of Vengeance by Donald Margulies
Adapted from Sholom Asch's *Got fun Nekome*

Director's Note

Sholom Asch wrote *Got fun Nekome* in Yiddish in 1907 when he was still in his twenties. It was first produced by Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin in 1910, rapidly translated into many languages, and performed all over Europe.

Asch's hard poetic realism locates the tragic hero in the common man and his desire for morality in life. The tale itself is simple. A brothel owner, Yankel Tshapshovitsh, is determined to secure a dignified future for his cherished daughter, Rivkele. He wants to protect her from the temptations of evil and assure her the respectability that Yankel and his wife Sara, a former prostitute, lack. Reb Eli, a neighbor, persuades him to purchase a Torah Scroll for his daughter's dowry. In this way she can marry a pious scholar and bring blessings to the family. But Yankel hasn't accounted for what his daughter wants or needs. Furthermore, his and Sara's efforts to "keep kosher from trayf," to cloister Rivkele in her room, to deny her knowledge of the family business, have only served to sharpen her curiosity and drive her towards an intimacy with one of the prostitutes, Manke.

Startlingly enough, the brothel is part of the household. And in Margulies's adaptation, we watch rituals of respectability enacted in the apartment upstairs while money changes hands in the whorehouse below. We even see the money pass directly from a boy client to Yankel to Rivkele as if the brothel owner could buy honor with the wages of sin.

Asch was attracted to dramatic contrasts: rich and poor, sordid and sublime, sudden violence and spiritual beauty. His thematic interweaving of the opposing elements in his story captures a physical music of dueling impulses.

"What does it take to be a man?" Yiddish literature and drama posit the query: "What does it take to be a Mensch?" And from the contemporary point of view, one ponders other questions as well: What does it take to be a woman? When does a girl cease to be a child one protects and graduate to the status of a commodity to be exploited? What is the difference between Yankel's offering his daughter up for a marriage she does not seek (with a Torah scroll as her dowry) and his hurtling her downstairs into the whorehouse?

The most notorious episode in the production history of the play is captured in this newspaper headline dated 24 May 1923:

'GOD OF VENGEANCE' PLAYERS CONVICTED
Jury Takes Ninety Minutes to Find 13 Guilty of Presenting an Immoral Performance

Although *God of Vengeance* had played successfully all over the world, and even without a hitch in an English translation by Dr. Isaac Goldberg at the Provincetown Theater off Washington Square, it was the move to a Broadway theater, the Apollo on 42nd Street, in February 1923 that ignited the scandal. The Society for Suppression of Vice filed a complaint, decrying the play as "obscene, indecent, disgusting" and accused the company of corrupting "the morals of youth." A Grand Jury indicted 12 actors, including the star, Rudolph Schildkraut, the theater owner, Michael Selwyn, and the producer, Harry Weinberger, with "presenting an obscene, indecent, immoral and impure theatrical production."

The producer and star each paid \$200 in fines; the rest of the actors received suspended sentences and the play continued to be performed. This was the first time in American history that the justice system had found performers guilty of presenting an obscene entertainment. The conviction was later overturned.

Critical opinion concurs that it was not only the lesbian love story, the first ever to appear on a NY stage, but also the fact that the brothel owner, the prostitutes, and the patrons were Jewish that led to the sharp public outcry against the play. The big wave of pre-war immigration had crested and Jewish Americans were hard at work assimilating. They did not want to see Jewish criminals and scoundrels on Broadway. Asch responded:

I was not concerned whether I wrote a moral or immoral play. What I wanted to write was an artistic play and a true one As to the scenes between Manke and Rivkele, on every European stage, especially in Russia, they were the most poetic of all, and the critics in those countries appreciated this poetic view.

This love between the two girls is not only an erotic one. It is the unconscious mother love of which they are deprived.

Donald Margulies was captivated by Asch's tale, and when he was offered the opportunity to adapt a classic for the contemporary stage, he jumped at the chance and chose *God of Vengeance*. Brilliantly, he transposed the action to the 1920's and New York's Lower East Side. In one fell swoop he heightens the stakes by subjecting his characters to economic exigency, the need to assimilate, and the almost universal loss of mothers, fathers, and family that immigration can entail. Margulies sensed that Jack Chapman's dream of reclaiming his old world name and self, Yankel Tshapshovitsh, and of securing a shining future for his daughter, is not only a Yiddish tale, but the essence of the American dream. Can one thrive in cut-throat business and still rescue one's soul? But Yankel's idolatrous love for the image of what his daughter can be, and his blind eye to who she is, no matter how much she tries to tell him, will cost him all he loves. And his childlike faith in the Torah Scroll as a magic talisman that will keep his Rivkele safe will provoke a catastrophic crisis in his own faith greater than anything he could ever imagine.

Sara: You took my soul—and threw it away!

Jack: We had no choice. Rivkele has a choice.

Sara: We had a choice. You had no faith.

Act II, God of Vengeance,

by Donald Margulies

It's an honor to present *God of Vengeance*.

Jean Randich, Director
8 May 2009

God of Vengeance
by Donald Margulies
Adapted from the play by Sholom Asch

Time and Place: New York. The Lower East Side. 1923.

Director: Jean Randich
Assistant Director: Carl South
Set Design: Sue Rees
Assistant Set Design: Carly Whitaker
Costume Design: Jessie Miglus + Emily Krug
Lighting Design: Webster Marsh
Sound Design: Kyle Schroeder
Fight Choreographer- Felix Ivanoff
Technical Director: Michael Rancourt
Dramaturge: Katie Kierstead
Stage Management: Maria DiFabbio, Emily Thomas, Sara Kladky
Fight Captains- Laura Elaine Allen, Amelia Meath
Jump-Rope Captain- Jarin Schexnider
Make-up: Kristi Carroll + Katie Kierstead
Torah Vestment: Leah Teplin
Paper Flower Chain: Emily Woods Hogue

Cast:

Jack Chapman (Yankel): Kevin Lackaff-Gilligan
Sara: Tara Elliott
Rivkele: Maren Patrick
Manke: Courtney Blomquist
Hindl: Amelia Meath
Shloyme: Sean Ring
Basha: Laurel Johnson
Reyzl: Kaitee Tredway
Scribe (Reb Aaron): Andrew Fridae
Reb Eli: Josh Gulotta
Orthodox Man: Josh Max
Irish Kid: Ian Davis
Second Irish Kid: Ben Mankoff
First Indigent/ Customer: Ben Matchar
Second Indigent/ Prospective In-Law: Santino Torretti
First Poor Woman: Cate Ludin
Second Poor Woman: Aisha Cruse
Lower East Side Kids/Rope Jumpers: Jo-Anne Hyun, Anabelle LeMieux, Jarin Schexnider

Run Crew:

Stagehand- Jason Murphy
Wardrobe- Karly Blase
Wardrobe- Theo Koppel
Wardrobe- Tyler Twombly
Make-up- Faith Griffiths
Light board op- Molly Sarle
Sound board op- Sarah Robotham

Electrics Crew: Caitlin Gambill, Katelyn Nelson, Elizabeth Lacasse,
Emily Call, Ruth Nelson, Anna Dewar, Isabella Hreljanovic
Wardrobe: Brittany Olinkiewicz, Alice Tolan-Mee, Eve Garf, Ann
Stella-Taylor, Elisabeth Rupp



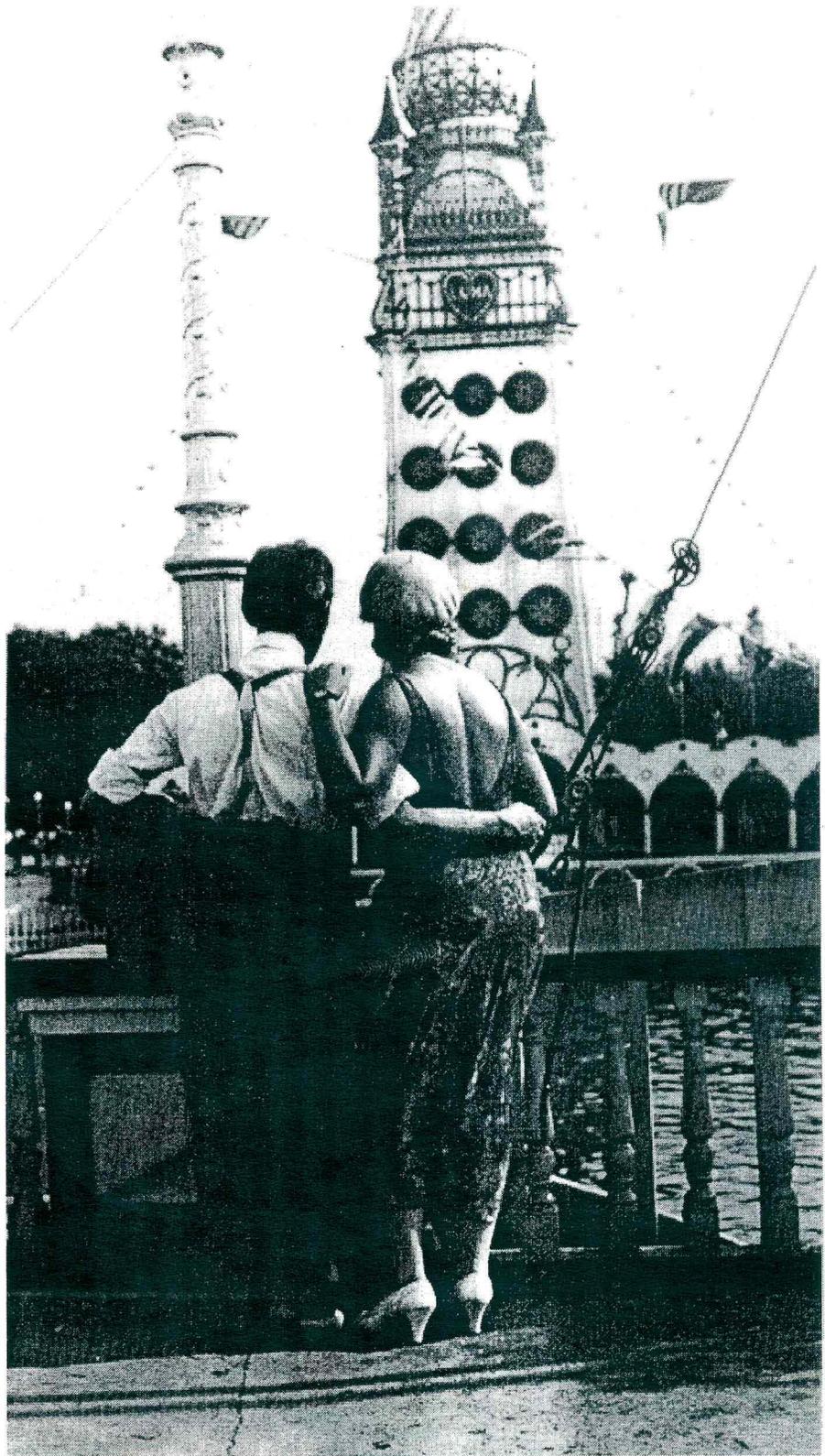
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Robert Post
Michael Rancourt
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Sue Rees
Jenny Rohn
Dan Roninson
Terry Teitelbaum

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and the Crossett Library staff
Janis Young



Donald Margulies's other plays include *Collected Stories*, *The Loman Family Picnic*, *Sight Unseen*, and *Dinner With Friends*, for which he was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Social Patron, New York City c. 1948, by Louis Faurer
Slovak Woman, Ellis Island, c. 1905, by Lewis W. Hine
Lower East Side Girl, by Helen Levitt
Coney Island, c. 1929, by Walker Evans
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