Modes of Engagement in Paula Vogel's *Indecent* (2017) as a Salvaging Adaptation of Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance* (1907)

Dr Khaled Saad Sirwah*

Abstract

Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, this paper tackles the American Paula Vogel's play *Indecent* (2017) as a salvaging adaptation of the Polish-Jewish Sholem Asch's play *The God of Vengeance* (1907), the first Yiddish play to have been translated and staged in Europe. Theatricalizing the historical events reflected in the latter, Vogel has depicted its author, the actors performing it, the controversy afflicting it, and the lost culture it came from. The paper attempts to answer the following question: How have the different adaptive modes of engagement (telling, showing, and interactive) utilized in Vogel's *Indecent* contributed to salvaging Asch's *The God of Vengeance*? The paper has reached the following findings. First, Vogel's adaptation has spelt out some ambiguous issues about Asch's piece, such as the real reasons for banning it, by virtue of the telling mode. Second, the showing mode—based on metatheatre—has been demonstrated to pave the way for the moral deterioration represented by what has become known as the LGBTQ theatre, a phenomenon forbidden more than one century ago. Third, it was shown that Vogel has dramatically managed to salvage Asch's play, and thereby reviving the dead Yiddish culture by employing Yiddish songs throughout via the interactive mode. Fourth, it is through Vogel's play-within-the-play technique that the issue of immigration, along with homophobia and anti-Semitism, has been adaptively entextualized in a way that breathed new life into Asch's *Vengeance*, rendering it more contemporary and relevant.

Keywords: Anti-Semitism, Asch's *God of Vengeance*, homophobia, Hutcheon's adaptation theory, immigration, LGBTQ theatre, moral deterioration, Vogel's *Indecent.*

***An assistant professor of English literature, Faculty of Arts, Kafreshikh University**

أنماط التفاعل بمسرحية بذيء (2017) لـ "بولا فوجل" بوصفها معالَجة مُخَلِّصة لمسرحية إله الانتقام (1907) لـ "شوليم آش"

د. خالد سعد سرواح

المستخلص

اعتمادًا على نظرية التكييف لـ "ليندا هاتشون"، يناقش الباحث مسرحية بذيء (2017) للكاتبة الأمريكية "بولا فوجل" بوصفها معالَجَة مُخَلِّصة لمسرحية إله الانتقام (1907) للكاتب البولندي اليهودي "شوليم آش"، وهي أول مسرحية يديشية تُرجِمَت وعُرضت بمختلف أنحاء أوربا. وفي أثناء معالجة "فوجل" المسرحية للأحداث التاريخية التي تناولتها مسرحية "آش"، فإنها صورت حياة مؤلِفها وكذلك الممثلين القائمين بعرضها والجدل الذي اكتنفها، فضلاً عن الثقافة المفقودة التي قَدِمَت إلينا من خلالها. ويحاول الباحث الإجابة عن التساؤل التالي: كيف ساهمت أنماط التفاعل المختلفة بنظرية التكييف (الحكي والعرض والتفاعل) والتي تم استخدامها بمسرحية بذيء لـ "فوجل" في الدفاع عن مسرحية إله الانتقام لـ "آش"؟ وقد توصل الباحث إلى النتائج الأربع التالية. أولاً، فسرت معالجة "فوجل" بعض القضايا الغامضة حول مسرحية "آش"، مثل الدوافع الحقيقية لحظرها، وذلك بفضل نمط الحكي. ثانيًا، استُخْدِم نمطُ العرض المسرحي (معتمدًا على آلية ما "حول المسرح") الذي مهَّد بدوره الطريقَ للانحطاط الأخلاقي عن طريق ما عُرِفَ لاحقًا بالمسرح المِثلِي، وهو ظاهرة حُظِرَت منذ أكثر من قرن. ثالثًا، نجحت "فوجل" دراميًا في إنقاذ مسرحية "آش"، ومن ثَمَ أحيت الثقافة اليديشية الميتة بتوظيفها لأغانٍ يديشية عجَّت بها المسرحية من خلال نمط التفاعل. رابعًا، أحيَت "فوجل" مسرحية "آش" على النحو الذي يجعلها أكثر عصرنةً وملائَمة وذلك بإضافتها قضية الهجرة لقضيتي فوبيا الشذوذ الجنسي ومعاداة السامية وذلك من خلال تقنية المسرحية الداخلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معاداة السامية، مسرحية إله الانتقام لـ "آش"، فوبيا الشذوذ الجنسي، الهجرة، نظرية التكييف لـ "هاتشون"، المسرح المثلي، الانحطاط الأخلاقي، مسرحية بذيء لـ "فوجل"

Introduction

Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* has been employed to examine many literary genres including the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) novel, but there is not a single study attempting a play of the first kind. This may be because this kind of play is not so common and Hutcheon's theory is not so old. The studies using Hutcheon's adaptation theory in this field are related to fiction. F. J. Klein Hesselink's thesis, "LGBTQ Characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*: LGBTQ Treatment and the 'Bury Your Gays' Trope in Atwood's Novel and Its 2017 Adaptation" (2019), tackles the "Bury Your Gays" trope in Margaret Atwood's novel (1985) and its adaptation (2017). The study points out that the adaptation shows more LGBTQ characters than those included in the novel and how they are finally treated unfairly by having such ill-fated endings as death, being unwillingly silenced, or being removed from the story. The study argues that the adaptation is "guilty of burying its gays"

(1). It has utilized the adaptation theory to substantiate why necessary changes are made in the story. The most recent study employing Hutcheon's theory in dealing with that kind of literature is also confined to fiction. It is Maria Jakobsen's "Expressions of Mood in Cinematic Adaptations of Patricia Highsmith's Novels…" (2021). It tackles the adaptation of Highsmith's suspense novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and lesbian romance *The Price of Salt* (1952) into two films—Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) and Todd Haynes's *Carol* (2015). The study shows the different ways the films express the typical Highsmith story through mood and how these representations affect the stories' general experience. Jakobsen concludes that the cinematic/film adaptations "defy the notion that" they are "in any way inferior to the novel as an art form" (78). However, the only play of the kind that has been adapted is the French Edouard Bourdet's *La Prisonniere* (1926). The American producer and director Gilbert Miller adapted it into English in the same year as *The Captive*, a three-act melodrama. After several performances, the play was shut down and the cast was arrested for dealing with obscenity and causing a scandal in New York (Maginness 21). However, this adaptation has never been studied.

Sholem Asch (1880-1957) is a celebrated Polish-Jewish writer in the Yiddish language. He is best known for his controversial three-act tragedy, *The God of Vengeance* (1907). It revolves around a Polish-Jewish brothel-keeper (Yekel) trying to make a bargain with God (by buying a Torah scroll) to protect his daughter (Rifkele) and keep her virginal. When Rifkele and Manke—one of the prostitutes Yekel employs downstairs—fall for each other developing an affair, the father casts his daughter and the Torah down into the brothel. The play has been translated into many different languages. Referred to as filthy, immoral, and indecent by Orthodox papers, it is described by radical papers as moral, artistic, and beautiful. However, Yiddish intellectuals and even the play's supporters had a bone to pick with Yekel's use of the Torah; using it for cheap effects stigmatizes Jewish people who have already faced much anti-Semitism. Rabbi Joseph Silverman, the chief witness against the play, argues: "This play libels

the Jewish religion. Even the greatest anti-Semite could not have written such a thing" (Qtd in Fife, "*Best Revenge*," 16). On the contrary, Abraham Cahn, the editor of *Jewish Daily Forward*, regards Asch's piece as the "strongest play [and] one of the best things he has written in any form" (Asch v). He sees its theme as "thoroughly original and unique" reflecting "the artistic traditions of the country in which the author was born and bred" (*Ibid*). Cahn further regards Yekel as a man who "is stirred by the noblest ambition known to a father in the world of Orthodox Judaism" (*Ibid* vi). In his introduction to the play, Isaac Goldberg argues that it "is not a sex play"; it "possesses a certain moral beauty" (*Ibid* xi). However, after the Holocaust and due to accusations against it, Asch "requested that the play not be shown anymore for fear that it would be used as anti-Semitic propaganda. The controversial themes of sex and prostitution were also unwelcome at a time of censorship and homophobia in the US" (Aliza *para* 2).

There are four adaptations of Asch's *The God of Vengeance*. The first adaptation is Stephen Fife's *Best Revenge* (2004), directed by Joseph Chaikin and falling into sixteen pages. Fife argues that by adapting Asch's play in 1992, he has ended up "writing a memoir of [his] experience with" it ("Is There…" *para* 4). The second adaptation of Asch's play is by Donald Margulies—under the same title *God of Vengeance* (2000)—portraying a father coming to the United States as a "scrawny orphan with nothing" (Mazower *para* 11). Fife regards Margulies' adaptation as having "nothing to do with Asch's original play" (*para* 7). The third adaptation is the British writer Atar Hadari's *Merciful Father* (2016), which provides a version of Asch's piece stressing the original's outlook of religion and pure love (*Ibid*). The fourth—and most recent and famous—adaptation of Asch's play is Paula Vogel's *Indecent* (2017), directed by Rebecca Taichman.

Vogel (1951-) is a productive American playwright whose plays include *The Oldest Profession* (1981), *Desdemona* (1993), *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2004), *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq* (2014), and *Indecent* (2017). Her plays examine traditionally sensitive and controversial issues such as sexual

abuse and prostitution. She argues: "My writing isn't actually guided by issues.... I only write about things that directly impact my life" (Semaj *para* 12). Vogel is regarded as a playwrights' playwright; her plays have interacted with and rewritten plays by such playwrights as Shakespeare, Wilder, Albee, Shepard, and Mamet, readjusting their plots, reorganizing their conflicts, and revising their *dramatis personae*. Joanna Mansbridge argues that Vogel always "shifts the focus away from an often universalized, truth-seeking male protagonists and places women at the centre of action. Her highly meta-theatrical plays borrow not only from the traditional canon, but also from the wider spectrum of theatre history and cultural production" (*Methuen Drama* 372). Inspired by the real-life controversy about the 1923 production of Asch's play, Vogel's *Indecent* merges historical information with fiction to settle everything down. It spans two world wars by depicting Asch's life, his play from its writing to its staging in Europe, to the cast arrest in New York, and the subsequent murder of the main player in the Holocaust. By means of the storytelling mode, *Indecent* stresses the different issues reflected in Asch's piece such as homophobia and anti-Semitism, adding immigration. In an interview with Joel Berkowitz, Vogel argues that the "reason the script has been indelible for [her] is that when [she] read it, as a 23-year-old feminist, [she] was struck by the sensitivity and understanding that Asch had for women characters" (*para* 4). Daniel Pollack-Pelzner points out that Vogel "was particularly enthralled by" the moving rain scene in the 2nd act between Rifkele and Manke: "I felt such joy and uplift reading the rain scene. There was no moralizing, just a matter-of-fact presentation of desire and love" (*para* 2). Her fascination with Asch's play has not only motivated Vogel to adapt it in her *Indecent* but also let Brenna Maginness regard the latter as a play "about the playwright" (44).

Since there has not been a single study attempting a lesbian play as an adaptation of another work, this study will tackle Vogel's *Indecent* as an adaptation of Asch's *The God of Vengeance*. It will see how far the former employs the three adaptive modes of

engagement—telling, showing, and interactive—to defend and salvage the latter, bringing it to life once again.

Theoretical Framework

There are different theories of adaptation by such theorists as Brian McFarlane, Robert Stam, Julie Sanders, Christine Geraghty, and Linda Hutcheon. The latter's *A Theory of Adaptation* is so comprehensive that it has been applied to various genres such as plays, novels, operas, television, poems, paintings, songs, and dances. Prefacing her book with stating that everyone has experienced adaptation and hence has a theory of adaptation (xi), Hutcheon argues that "most of the work done on adaptation has been carried out on cinematic transpositions of literature" (xii). She prefers the term "adapted text" to "source"/"original" text (xiii), arguing that adaptations are not only deliberate and announced "revisitations of prior texts" but also creative and interpretive acts that keep the aura of the adapted text (xiv). At the same time, she refutes the assumption that the purpose of adaptations is just reproducing the adapted text, stressing that an "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (7). It implies many things: "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works," "a creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging," and "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (8). Adaptation is, after all, "a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary" (9).

Hutcheon deals with adaptation as both a product and a process. As a product, it is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (7). This product can imply a change of medium (from a novel to a play) or a change of frame and context like narrating the story from a different perspective (like creating another different reading). This "transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictional narrative or drama" (8). As a process of creation, an "adaptation involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-creation); this has been

called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective. For every aggressive appropriator outed by a political opponent, there is a patient salvager" (*Ibid*). Adaptation is also a process of reception, "a form of intertextuality" we experience through our memories "of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (*Ibid*). It involves "a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents" (18). Adapters, thus, indulge in a double process of interpreting and creating. Adaptation cannot remain entirely faithful to its adapted text. It is "a form of creativity" that is neither "plagiarism" nor "slavish copying; it is a process of making the adapted material one's own" (20).

Hutcheon defines three modes of engagement in the process of adaptation: the telling mode (fiction), the showing mode (drama), and the interactive mode (videogames). The telling/narrating mode has to do with the imagination controlled by the "directing words of the text" and "unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural" (23). Not restricted to novel, the telling mode is "the best at depicting time" showing "relations among the past, present, and future" (63). In her article "Adaptation and Storytelling in the Theatre," Frances Babbage argues that storytellers must build on the past, traditions, and stories handed down over ages. They translate from different languages to both facilitate understanding and create meaning: "Nothing is inanimate in their hands and mouths. They are animators, breathing life into all things and all beings" (*para* 7). The storyteller's task necessitates adapters deal with their sources with fascination and scepticism. However, this fascination by the source and "excitement of reinventing a text in theatrical terms must not blind them to its 'faults'" (*para* 8). The adaptation based on storytelling must be justified by being pertinent to the present, to the moment (*para* 9). In this way, theatre can establish "resistance to the problematic assumptions or moral stance of a text within a production, and without necessarily changing the course of the narrative" (*para* 17). This task can be done by adding further data

and arguments that support the narrative, as it will be pointed out in the case under discussion.

The showing/performing mode, associated with the opera, theatre, and cinema adaptations, includes various methods of engaging with the audience *via* audio and visual performances. It reflects reality by arguing that "language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories" (Hutcheon 23). Theatre connects the narrating aspects of literature with the showing ones through dialogue and performance (Broch 11). The showing mode implies "embodying and enacting, and thereby often ends up spelling out important ambiguities that are central to the told revision" (Hutcheon 28). In moving from the telling mode to the showing one, each live staging of a text/play can be theoretically viewed as an adaptation. The text of a play is not expected to notify the actor about such issues as "gestures, expressions, and tones of voice to use in converting words on a page into a convincing performance" (39). Hutcheon argues that in dramatization, there must be a concentration on the plot, themes and characters, and that the ideological differences and conflicts between characters must be made obvious (40). This can be seen as a main part of the adapter's task since adaptation is entitled to focus "on the marginalized and the powerless" (84). This task may include several changes in the source material, such as adding new *personae* and new locations, and developing the progression of the story (Broch 29). All these changes can be done in the showing mode by means of such elements as irony, ambiguity, metaphor, symbols, and silence that are significantly addressed in showing modes (Hutcheon 71). However, showing is different from telling in that stage audiences have other demands and expectations than those of television and film audiences (124). In the former, "the camera records" the action in addition to the "audience responses and the actors' activities backstage" (*Ibid*). The audience's responses to the actors' activities have to do with the interactive mode.

The interactive/participatory mode has to do with the opera, where the music accompanies the singer or the audience interacts

with the instrumental music that takes place during the action. Hutcheon argues that in films, music has a significant role in connecting us with the scene/spectacle "by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colours, and changes in dynamics" (60). Since an adaptation pays attention to changes in the time of the story including the time technicalities "needed to change scenes" (65), these changes can be delineated by the addition of music to a play. Hutcheon agrees with Lawrence Kramer in stressing the significance of music for the theatre since it relies much on text and staging. Music also expresses meaning *via* the chorus which is entitled to comment on characters' motivations, stressing their intentionality. To Hutcheon, when involved characters break into a song, they "must spill over into it, and into rhythm, singing and movement" (41). Stressing the obvious significance of "music to the success of the adaptation" process, Hutcheon argues that "composers usually work from the script, not from the adapted text, because they have to write music specifically to fit the production's action, timing, and budget" (81). It is not strange, however, that the adaptation of a play into a play can employ all three modes of engagement—telling, showing, and interactive. The means by which the different modes of re-interpretation effect one another point out the significance of the adaptation process (Jakobsen 18).

The adaptation for performance on the stage can be complex for the playwright and the director as potential adapters. Hutcheon discusses the diverse motives for adaptation: this framework is restricted to those only applicable to the current study. A prospective adapter, as an interpreter before being a creator, can be "a masochist, as well as having all the other qualities said to be ideal: humility, respect, compassion, wit, and a sharp razor" (86). In his adaptation of the opera *Aida*, Elton John admits that "the fact that it had already been done by Verdi was playing with fire… . It appealed to my sense of masochism" (Qtd in Hutcheon 86). An adapter may receive an adapted text and deal with it as a way of reverence,

homage, tribute, or "a way to supplant canonical authority" (93) as is the case with those who adapt Shakespeare. An adapter may approach an adapted text to be part and parcel of a larger social/cultural heritage or to shy away from it, as in the case of A. W. Mason's oft-filmed novel, *The Four Feathers* (1902), by Shekhar Kapur as a director and both Hossein Amini and Michael Schaffer as scriptwriters (94). Moreover, an adapter may enjoy, and be moved by, a love story as was David H. Hwang by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's stage musical (1958), which was originally an adaptation of *The Flower Drum Song* (1957), a novel by C.Y. Lee. Enjoying the adapted film for representing the love story, Hwang keeps the general story-line and most of the characters, claiming thus to "be 'faithful' to the 'spirit' of Lee's book. All this information seems to me to be of both interest and importance to our understanding of why and how an adaptation comes into being" (*Ibid*). The motives for selecting the story in each case are extremely private. They are "deeply embedded in the individual histories of the adapters" (106). In addition, "the specific aesthetic form each adaptation [takes depends] upon the particular abilities and interests of the new creators" (*Ibid*). These interests may be regarded as a strong motive for the adapters' adaptation since the former come as a logical consequence of the latter's fascination with the adapted text.

Furthermore, the autobiographical intentions of the adapter can be "potentially relevant to the audience's interpretation" of the adaptation. "They are often recoverable, and their traces are visible in the text. The political dimension—in, for instance, feminist, queer, postcolonial, race, or ethnic studies—has been rescued" (107). To Hutcheon, if an adapter cannot negotiate the creative process, he/she will not comprehend the motive behind adapting nor can they understand the process of adaptation (*Ibid*). However, transcultural adaptations imply "changes in racial and gender politics" because "[s]ometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial" (147). A prominent motive for adaptation is adding a feminist attitude to the adaptation, as in Patricia Rozema's film

adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (152). Likely, a feminist writer may introduce themes that have been silenced by the earlier works by men, such as sexual/physical abuse (149). Adapting through cultures is not just an issue of translating words. The audiences experiencing adaptations in the showing and interactive modes are entitled to convey and adapt the cultural and social atmospheres to "a new environment through what Patrice Pavis calls the 'language-body'" (Hutcheon 149).

Analysis

Vogel's *Indecent*, a based-on-a-true-story one-act play, recounts Asch's *The God of Vengeance* from the time of its writing in the 1900's till the 1950's, depicting its author's life, the actors performing it and their arrest in New York, the controversy afflicting it, and the lost Yiddish culture it came from. Vogel has been fascinated with Asch's play regarding it as indelible. She read the play long time ago, when stunned by the first love scene between two women written by a newly married twenty-one-year old man: "It left an indelible impression on my twenty-two-year-old mind" (v). Vogel is astonished by Asch's bravery in equating the Jews with people of any other religion who may sell it "for a profit or who are hypocrites. That's a very hard thing for a man to do, especially in a time of burgeoning anti-Semitism" (Weiner *para* 2). She has been taken by the thoughtfulness and compassion Asch had for women in "writing the most astonishing love story between two women" (*Ibid*). Explaining to Miriam Weiner how she was convinced of the idea of adapting Asch's play, Vogel says that in 2000, she saw Rebecca Taichman's MFA Thesis production at Yale interweaving the text of Asch's play "with the transcript of the 1923 obscenity trial against the play in New York" (*para* 3). As soon as Rebecca called her to get involved in the adaptation, Vogel accepted it as a fascinating idea (*Ibid*). This is why and how fascination has been one of the main motives behind Vogel's adaptation of Asch's play.

Whereas Asch's *The God of Vengeance* opens with Rifkele and her parents negotiating the Torah Scroll that will be bought to be

kept in the daughter's room, Vogel's *Indecent* opens with Lemml, the stage manager of the inner play (Asch's *Vengeance*), introducing the troupe going to perform it. Before this, Vogel has told us that the play she is adapting is an old one, indicating this fact by means of the stage directions (telling/narrating mode): "*[W]e see a dusty figure in an old suit. He stretches limbs that haven't moved in decades. He lifts one arm; sawdust pours from his sleeve. He lifts the other arm; more sawdust. He shakes his legs vigorously; more outpouring of sawdust*" (9). Hence, the troupe's rising and removing cascades of ashes from their sleeves imply "a haunting evocation of a past of persecution and flight" (Brantley *para* 9). Thus, Vogel alerts us that she is reviving an old play from ashes—a word that has much in common with Asch—making it relevant and contemporary. Echoing Taichman, the director who has been much fascinated with Asch's play, Lemml introduces the latter: "We have a story we want to tell you … About a play. A play that changed my life" (10). Lemml's play opens with the troupe singing the socialist anthem "Ale Brider" (10) in Yiddish. This anthem/song "sets the time and place. Sholem Asch is trying to recruit actors and backers for his new play, *God of Vengeance*" (Himes *para* 2). The Yiddish song followed by its English translation facilitates understanding and creates meaning: nothing is inanimate in Vogel's hands and mouth. She is an animator, "breathing life into all things and all beings" (Babbage *para* 7). Thus, music is employed here specifically to fit the production's action and timing, expressing the meaning implied in the playwright's song. In addition to creating meaning, the song—accompanied by music—indicates the audience's interaction with it and the troupe singing it.

Lemml's play starts with Madje Asch's reading *Vengeance* "in bed with" her husband in 1906 (11). Vogel's play is replete with stage directions, which have much to tell about Asch's family. A twenty-three-year-old playwright, Asch waits for his wife to finish reading his play's finale. Her weeping (12) after reading her husband's play may imply the latter as a possible autobiography, especially as Vogel's piece refers later to their daughter. In her depiction of Asch's wife (Madje), Vogel shows how the latter is, like the former, fascinated

with the love scene between the two women—Rifkele and Manke. Madje says to Asch: "You make me feel the desire between these two women is the purest, most chaste, most spiritual" (12). Madje's words to her husband shed light on their life: "It's interesting to hear your words the night you seduced me…in the mouth of a prostitute" (13). Aware of the troubles Asch's play will lead to, Madje argues that all "the writers will be green with envy" (13). This fact, however, paves the way for Vogel to defend homosexuality and, hence, Asch's play by arguing:

> **Madje:** … We are all attracted to both sexes. I promise I'll understand if you get attracted to a man… But I'll kill you if it's another woman.
>
> **Asch:** I promise you I'll understand if you get attracted to a woman. (13)

Thus, Vogel expands upon the content of the adapted text by adding new characters and new locations (Asch, his wife and their house), and altering the progression of the story to support her approval of homosexuality instead of being ashamed of it. This is the world the contemporary Asch and his wife (in Vogel's *Indecent*) believe in. More evidently, Vogel indirectly argues that had Asch and his wife been above ground, they would have seen homosexuality as a matter of course.

Setting this fact as a background for her adaptation/play, Vogel rehearses Asch's play focusing on and repeating the love/rain scene between the two women as part of the contemporary life of which the world should be convinced. Therefore and *ipso facto*, she starts defending Asch's piece against all those who opposed it. Chris Jones rightly regards Asch's play as "admired, translated, parodied, panned, banned, prosecuted, withdrawn, forgotten, revived, celebrated" and Vogel's as a successful drama reflecting the tortured real history of *Vengeance*, a passionate drama chronicling religious and social hypocrisy (*paras* 2, 3). In this sense, Jesse Green regards Vogel as equal to Shakespeare in taking "care to write about events no one could possibly remember" (*para* 1). However, Asch has negated that his play was against the Jews; they "do not have to clear themselves

before anyone" ("Open Letter" *para* 6). Although Asch has, later after losing his audience members, bitterly said that he "will not let this play be produced" because he "wrote it in a different time" and the "time has changed on" him (Qtd in Mansbridge "Gestures" 493), Vogel, defending him and salvaging his play, makes him talk of Rifkele thus: "The daughter. She's seventeen. She's pure. And very beautiful" (15). Vogel wants to get us, audience/readers, accustomed to Asch and his wife as part of the queer world he himself has depicted and she is now salvaging by bringing it to life once again. Moreover, Isaac Peretz, the founding father of Yiddish literature, did advise the young playwright to burn his play; otherwise he would be "torn limb from limb if the public sees this play" (20). Despite this fact, Vogel makes Asch say about Peretz: "I want him to play the protagonist" (15). Actually, Asch (as a character in Vogel's play) makes Peretz the main character (Yekel) of his own play, *The God of Vengeance*, which is the inner play in Vogel's adaptation. Vogel wants to tell us that time has changed and what had been morally forbidden more than one century ago is no longer seen as such nowadays.

Vogel's fascination with the love/rain scene in Asch's play is reflected in focusing on and expanding it throughout her play. It has been rehearsed many times throughout by different actors as part of the inner play. Asch the playwright trains Nakhmen, Lemml, and Peretz to the roles of Rifkele, Manke, and Yekel. The showing/performing mode shows it thus:

> **Asch (***Reading the stage directions***):** Manke enters, nuzzling Rifkele. Washed in the rain, their soaked nightgowns drip water on the floor…
>
> **Nakhmen (***As Manke***):** Are you shivering, Rifkele? Warm yourself—rub up against me, that feels—
>
> **Asch (***Sotto voce to Nakhmen***):** Higher voice, please…
>
> **Nakhmen (***As Manke***):** Rest your face against my—
>
> Wait. Wait. … I am not reading this garbage. (16)

Vogel points out how actors are reluctant at first to perform such a queer scene. Nakhmen feels loath to not just acting but "reading" such a scene calling it "garbage." The stage directions—the telling

mode—show us that Nakhmen "*tosses the script down*" and "*Asch picks up the discarded script and gives it to Lemml*," asking him to "[r]ead Manke's lines" (16). Lemml too feels ashamed to play Manke:

> **Lemml:** You want me to say the word 'breast' in this living room?
>
> **Asch:** Read, damn it!
>
> **Lemml** (*As Manke*): *Rest your face against, against my… (Takes a breath, plunges on*) Yes, oh yes… And embrace me with your body. (16)

However, Nakhmen argues: "None of us are reading this garbage. (*The three men toss their scripts to the floor*)" (17). As a result, Asch the playwright plays Manke and Lemml the director plays Rifkele. This complex situation reminds us of Hutcheon's argument that "adaptation for performance on the stage can be complex" for the playwright and the director as "potential adapters" (84). Regarding the performance of such parts as garbage by Nakhmen echoes the complex situation of playing such immoral parts at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By this first rehearsal of the rain scene Vogel points out how difficult it had been at first to perform on the stage before an audience. The performing/showing mode clarifies this fact through the following lines:

> **Lemml (***As Rifkele***):** I have never done one woman, much less two, Mr. Asch!
>
> **Asch:** Okay. You read Rifkele. I'll be Manke. **(***As Manke***)** You smell like grass in the meadows….
>
> **Lemml (***As Rifkele***):** Yes. Yes. (*He sees the next line; closes his eyes, takes a deep breath*) Teach me. Take me. …
>
> **Asch (***As Manke***):** I can't breathe. (17)

Vogel expands on this scene repeating it many times and dilating on its consequences. It is clear throughout the cuts and ellipses made by the playwright that Lemml himself is shying away from performing it at first. Therefore, he, as Jennifer-Scott Mobley argues, "summoned the actresses back from the dead to perform at last the celebration of love and human spirit embodied in the exchange between two

women embracing in the rain" (251). Thus, Vogel's adaptation of the dead work by bringing it as an inner play of her *Indecent* points out how the cause of deadening Asch's play—the love scene which has been cut from some versions of the original—has become the very reason for reviving it. Mobley is aware that the two women's "union onstage elicited a palpable catharsis for the audience" (*Ibid*). This is what Vogel actually is in need of showing, *i.e.*, performing the scene is so critical and shameful for audiences at first. Lemml's clause "I can't breathe" reminds Mobley that "liberation is fleeing in a society where bodies are policed by cultural forces" (*Ibid*). Mobley comments on *Indecent* by arguing that "bravery and truth in art are ethical imperatives and necessary beacons, especially when current political rhetoric seems to endorse xenophobia, bigotry, fear, and intolerance" (*Ibid*). Mobley's endorsement of Vogel's adaptation as bravery accentuates that such immoral scenes have become accustomed to by contemporary critics as well as playwrights.

The stage directions or, to be contextually relevant, the telling/narrating mode plays a significant role in Vogel's adaptation of Asch's play. In making Peretz and Lemml play the parts of Yekel and Rifkele, Asch reads them the stage directions before enacting their parts. Since her play spans about fifty years, Vogel uses such technicalities of time as "a blink in time" to both indicate the passage of time and the change of scenes, and hence to pave the way for her audience's gradual approval of the critical issues tackled by Asch's play. These changes in time are delineated by the addition of music, which, in Taichman's words, seemed the best way to feel those blinks" (Berlowitz *para* 16). Performing the last scene of Asch's *Vengeance*, both Peretz and Lemml (acting Yekel and Rifkele) have the following exchanges:

> **Peretz (***As Yekel***):** Rifkele: You ran away with Manke last night. Don't tell me where she took you. Daughter, just tell me: Are still a virgin? …
>
> **Lemml (***As Rifkele***):** I … don't know. ..
>
> **Peretz (***As Yekel***):** I'll tell you what you know. You know what this Torah cost? It cost all of the whores downstairs […]

for a year! And for what? Look at me! God wants me to fail as a father? As a husband? Well there's one thing I know to do—MAKE MONEY. You are both paying me back! […]

Down into the whorehouse with you!! And take the Holy Scroll with you! I don't need it anymore!

Asch (*Reading the stage directions***):** Yekel hurls down the Torah. End of play. (17-18)

The scene, echoing the original one in the second act of Asch's *Vengeance*, has different impressions on Lemml, Nakhmen, and Asch:

Lemml (*Crying*)**:** This is Theater?!! Oh. Oh, Mr. Asch. It is wonderful

Nakhmen: Are you crying? Asch has desecrated the Torah!

Asch: My character Yekel does—I do not! (18)

Although Vogel defends Asch's play indirectly by arguing that a playwright does not necessarily adopt his/her characters' views, she does adopt her characters' views. This argument is well proved through her adaptation which keeps repeating the love scene throughout her meta-play.

However, when Peretz, dissatisfied with the scene he has taken part in, asks Asch about the audience he writes for, the latter tells him that he writes "for everyone" (19). Here is the argument reflecting the one in reality between Asch the playwright and his mentor Peretz:

Asch: You told me we need plays in Yiddish which are universal.

Peretz: Plays that represent our people as valiant, heroic—

Asch: —Why must every Jew onstage be a paragon?!!

Nakhmen: You are representing our people as prostitutes and pimps!

Asch: Some of our people are!

Peretz: You are pouring petrol on the flames of anti-Semitism. This is not the time.

Asch: When! When will be the right time? (19)

The above-quoted lines show the diabolic opposition between Asch as a realistic playwright depicting Jewish people objectively and his mentor Peretz as a critic who asks him to shed light on the Jews they should be—as heroes and paragons. Depicting Jewish people as they are, Asch argues that some of them are "prostitutes and pimps." When Peretz points out that it is not the right time to pour "petrol on the flames of anti-Semitism" in time of burgeoning anti-Semitism, Asch asks "When it will be right time?" Vogel's adaptation of Asch's play answers his question. However, Peretz and Nakhmen attack Asch:

> **Peretz:** You cannot translate…this hateful play. If you must throw stones, throw them outside the tent.
>
> **Nakhmen:** Oy veh iz mir. This is a play written by a Jew who hates Jews! …
>
> **Peretz:** Sholem! You will be torn limb from limb if the public sees this play. Listen to me: about your manuscript?—BURN IT. (20)

Asch responds to Peretz by saying: "I'm taking my stones outside the tent with me" (20). He takes it to Berlin where it is performed by other characters who sing in German. The rain scene is re-enacted by Freida and Elsa under the supervision of the same director—Lemml—who introduces Asch as "the genius" (24). At such a moment, Freida's comment "A Yiddish genius" leads Lemml to add: "This play will be done all over the world" (24). This is tantamount to a challenge to Peretz' opposition to the play.

Asch's play has not only presented a physical relationship between two women as something normal but also closed with a desecration of the Torah. As soon as Peretz hears about it, he advises Asch to burn it for the implied critique it has of Jewish life, which he and "other naysayers were reacting" against (Ellenzweig *para* 3). Moreover, Rabbi Silverman regarded it as casting negative aspersions on the Jews, especially at a time of growing anti-Semitism and, hence, he and other opponents "cooked up the obscenity charges, prompting fast action by the vice squad" (Reimer-Torn 10). Thus, Asch refused allowing any performance of his play for a decade

fearing that it would be taken for anti-Semitic propaganda (Fife, "Something," *para* 15). Vogel and Taichman are aware of such an atmosphere. The former argues that anti-Semitism was escalating at that time. For instance, Henry Ford spoke of the Jewish conspiracies inundating banking, theatre, and music. The "storm for anti-Semitism" has reached its climax and Silverman was afraid the issue would escalate animosity against Jews (Shapiro *para* 2). While Taichman's "heart is broken at how much more relevant this play [*Vengeance*] is today than when it opened at Yale" (Pollack-Pelzner *para* 3), "the success of *Indecent* feels defiant, if not triumphant" in a time of burgeoning anti-Semitism, homophobia and anti-immigration sentiments (*Ibid para* 5). This fact substantiates Maginnes's argument that Vogel does not gloss over the two obstacles obstructing Asch—homophobia and anti-Semitism (43). More evidently, since the adjective "obscene," coming from the Greek *obskene*, means offstage or behind the backdrop, the purpose of the theatre is to reveal what is offstage. The purpose of theatre, according to Vogel, is to "wound our memory so we can remember" (Qtd in Sigal 8). She hopes that the knowledge of Yiddish in the rain scene will enable us to remember the culture and lives existing before the 1940's. "Theatre is a living memory" (*Ibid*). Thus, Vogel's inner play often rehearses the rain scene (followed by Yekel's throwing the Torah Scroll down). Likely, Yekel's words to his daughter, "And take the Holy Scroll with you! I don't need it anymore!" (27), have been performed many times at different places throughout Europe. Therefore, each time the two accusations set against Asch's play are rehearsed, they become more familiar than before.

Moreover, the troupe adapt themselves to the places they wander by singing Yiddish songs followed by their English translation (20-2). The lengthy stage directions (28-9) have much to do with Vogel's adaptation *via* the three modes of engagement—telling, showing, and interactive. It is through the telling mode that Vogel shows us how the troupe move from one place to another through time for enacting Asch's piece, how "*the song's lyrics*" are translated "*from Yiddish into English*," and how songs are utilized as an

interactive mode in celebrating the troupe. "*As they sing, and celebrate their entry into America, they slowly strip their shtetl clothes*" (29). Again, the troupe sing in Yiddish: "Vot Ken You Makh in America?" (29). In fact, Vogel's text is replete with different languages, such as Italian, French, German, and Yiddish. For instance, in directing Nakhmen to raise his voice, Asch (as a character is Vogel's adaptation) uses the Italian adverb "Sotto voce" (16) meaning "Speaking quietly." The dialogue between Sarah and Yekel in Vogel's inner play is based on Yiddish (31). In addition, by making the troupe of her inner play sing Yiddish songs, Vogel not only defends Asch's play but also tries to salvage a dead language through her adaptation. Hence, she informs Joel Berkowitz: "*Indecent* creates a longing to read Yiddish" (*para* 19). It is noteworthy that when the troupe leaves for New York in the 1920's, they indulge in singing English songs. These songs, representing the interactive mode of engagement, are utilized to indicate Vogel's recurrent blinks in time and scene changes. Both Vogel and Taichman regard music and songs as indispensable for their play. On the one hand, Taichman admits that she "cannot imagine the play without music. The songs move the play through time as it hurtles forward various blinks in time" (Berkowitz *para* 17). On the other hand, Vogel says to Joey Sims: "I don't think that anything I can write has the power that music does" (*para* 7). That is why Mansbridge argues that music is "the animating force" connecting "subtext, rhythm, and social history" with one another in Vogel's play (486). Music has brought the dead troupe of Asch's piece to life once again. This fact recalls Hutcheon's "in stage musicals, the music has been called 'the embodiment of excess'" (41).

When Dorothee and Reina come to play Manke and Rifkele, they feel expansive to have a chance never got by their parents: "We are the first generation that gets the chance our parents never got. To tell our stories. On American stages" (32). They later insert Yiddish words in their exchanges to keep the play they are rehearsing close to the original. Virginia replaces Reina in playing Rifkele; now she and Dorothee play the two women in love by rehearsing the love scene.

The indecent scenes and acts implicitly referred to in Asch's play in 1907 are now explicitly enacted and more vehemently than before (when Nakhmen, playing Manke, "*tosses the script down*" (16)). That is to say, the love scene between the two women has become familiar and more accepted with the passage of time than before. Furthermore, unlike Nakhmen, Virginia expresses her happiness with the scene by saying: "I don't ever want to stop acting. Ever" (41). Thus, unlike Nakhmen who has refused to go on in acting Manke saying "I am not reading this garbage," Dorothee refuses acting in the play after cutting the love scene saying: "I am not acting in this garbage. They've cut the rain scene" (42). The stage directions read: "*Dorothee throws the script on the floor*" (42). She further exclaims to Asch's approval of the "cuts in the most beautiful love scene he will ever write," lamenting: "My Manke is no longer a woman in love" (42). However, this diabolic opposition between Nakhmen and Dorothee shows how impressions change through time. More evidently, unlike the former who has regarded the love scene as garbage he should not take part in, the latter regards the play without that scene as garbage she should not act. Both actors thus throw the script on the floor as garbage for completely opposite reasons.

Vogel's play delineates Asch's life as passively influenced by the threats and the police surrounding the love scene downtown. Vogel shows him and his wife attending the 1923 Broadway opening of his play. This is preceded by a song ending with a reference to *Vengeance* as "the first kiss between two women" (47). Vogel argues that the cause of stopping Asch's play has nothing to do with its themes:

> **Madje:** Are they going to stop the show? Because of the lesbianism? Because of the Torah? Because of the prostitution?
>
> **Asch:** Because I'm Jewish. We're polack kikes! (48)

She refuses the extrinsic themes tackled by the play—homosexuality, desecrating the Torah, and prostitution—as the real reasons for stopping it shedding light on the playwright's nationality as the

intrinsic cause of stopping his play. Convinced of this argument, Vogel never shies away from telling us what Rifkele has suffered at the hands of her Manke. She utilizes the telling mode to show us how Sarah confronts her daughter and Manke. The stage directions read: "(*Offstage*. *Sarah threatens. Rifkele resists and clings to Manke. And then, Manke lets Rifkele go. The lovers part. Sarah roughly hauls her daughter out of bed.*)" (49). Although this part is reflected as offstage in Asch's play—the inner play of *Indecent*—due to its obscenity, it has become onstage in Vogel's own play. However, it is not novel for Vogel to defend Asch's play in general and its love scene in particular because there is great evidence that she herself is a gay. She has once admitted: "But being openly gay made me extremely aware of class, race and gender" (Qtd in Rosenfeld *para* 19). She remembers that a professor advised her once to read Asch's *Vengeance* because he knew she was a gay who should know her history. Accordingly, she read the play that astonished her (Shapiro *para* 4). Moreover, Vogel has, in Lee Jones's words, "experienced marginality because she was not only a woman but an avowed lesbian" (46). This latter fact is further emphasized by other critics like Jon Craig (*para* 5). However, if Vogel has been marginalized as both a woman and a lesbian, her adaptation is meant to focus on the marginalized and the powerless, as Hutcheon has argued above. All these arguments vindicate that Vogel's defence of Asch's indecent play by her more indecent one is not groundless.

The play-within-the-play in *Indecent* centres on the love scene and the desecration of the Torah in addition to the different reactions to them. Again, getting no answer from his daughter to his question: "Are you still a virgin?," Yekel indulges in the most quoted and rehearsed lines in Vogel's play:

> You know what this Torah cost? It cost all of the whores downstairs on their backs and their knees for a year! And for what? Look at me. God wants me to fail as a father? As a husband? Well there's one thing I know to do—MAKE MONEY. You are both paying me back! Down into the

> whorehouse with you! […] And take the Holy Scroll with you! I don't need it anymore! (50)

Regarding this scene as obscene, "*Silverman appears on a pulpit*" and "*straightens his beautiful suit*" while "*Lemml and Asch remain frozen at the curtain*" (51). He comments that he lifted his face to the heavens and prayed his Lord not to "let them be Jewish! This is what it means to be Jewish in America" (51). This attitude leads Silverman to ask for restrictions "on the so-called polack, litvak, greenhorn!" (51). He later expresses his happiness when the play is closed down and the twelve-member cast are arrested for obscenity (52). Moreover, Ford has created a paper saying that Jews are polluting American stages and taking over the country (Glanville *para* 14). This is how Asch's play has led to not only homophobia but also anti-Semitism.

Silverman and Ford's opposition to both Asch's play and its Jewish migrants/actors is of undeniable significance to Vogel's adaptation here. Both the adapted text and the adaptation reveal such themes as sexuality, homophobia, and anti-Semitism; but the adaptation adds the theme of immigration that Vogel has contrived from the difference between the cast performing Asch's play in Poland and the 1923 performance in New York. The obscenity trial ensuing from the love scene's homophobia and anti-Semitism led not only to Ford's "denouncing Jews as un-American" and rallying "a campaign against the play" (Pollack-Pelzner *para* 1) but also to the U.S. government's passing of radical laws restricting immigration. Taichman points out that this wave of anti-immigration sentiment has overwhelmed the country when "dirty Eastern European Jews" came and took over (Lunden *para* 7). This issue is further intensified when Lemml decides to move back to Poland as a result of being laughed at in America: "I am done being in a country that laughs at the way I speak. They say America is free?" (61). He adds that they have done the play all over Europe—Berlin, Moscow, Odessa—without being shut down (61). The additional "it" in his "Mr. Asch! Your play it changed my life" (61) indicates Lemml's weak English as an object of sarcasm and hence supports the wave of anti-

immigration sentiment. This point justifies why Vogel believes her play-within-the-play makes Asch's *Vengeance* both contemporary and relevant (Glanville *para* 16). Her adaptation has thus added a vital issue to the adapted text, *i.e.*, immigration.

It is remarkable to observe that Reina and Dorothee, who have played Manke and Rifkele more than one time in the inner play, behave as recognizable gays in Vogel's *Indecent*. The former admits that she has not "slept in weeks" since she left the latter's bed (53). Vogel wants to tell us that there is no difference between the roles Reina and Dorothee play on the stage of the inner play and those they play in real life—in Vogel own play. Vogel is bold enough not only to repeat rehearsing the love scene in her inner play but also to show her real characters as gays. She reinforces this attitude by inserting the figure of Eugene O'Neill as a character in her play. O'Neill appears after the trial scene to express his admiration for Asch's play and further decipher the real reason behind its stopping. He tells Lemml that "the play itself isn't on trial for obscenity" (55). O'Neill obviously argues that the authorities have closed the play not "because of *Homo sexualis*," but because of anti-Semitism: "the play shows that every religion—even Jews—sell God for a price" (56). He further regards Asch's *Vengeance* as a crafted play, a memorable "lighthouse" and "beacon" (56). Despite all this, Judge Mcintyre—another real character in Vogel's play—argues that "the defendants have been found guilty of presenting an indecent, obscene, and immoral play" (58). Again, the significance behind the appearance of O'Neill in Vogel's play is to defend Asch's *Vengeance* against obscenity and hence to defend Vogel's own situation since her play can be regarded as a play about its playwright, as Maginness has argued previously (44).

Vogel gives us more information about Asch and his family, not to add his gloominess after the trial. Asch's wife, Madje, sides with him in his impasse. He does not want people to know that he is sitting in his "house, weeping." He decides to "write a letter to the court" (58) to change their view of him. Lemml argues with him about cutting the love scene due to the 1923 trial in New York: "Why

did you agree to those cuts? You cut the love between those two girls" (60). When Asch replies that it is his play, Lemml argues that "the play belongs to the people who worked in it! And the audience who put aside the time to be there in person!" (61). Asch cannot walk into the court and confront "all those American reporters" who will laugh at him as they have done with Lemml before (61). Despite the excisions and cuts, Asch's play is still regarded as morally belligerent and is, hence, closed by the police a few weeks after it opened at Apollo Theater (Brantley *para* 2). It is not novel, however, that Ben Brantley, in the same article, regards *Indecent* as "decent," "virtuous, sturdily assembled, informative and brimming with good faith" (*para* 5). Brantley's different views on Asch's and Vogel's plays seem contradictory but they may be contextually accepted. In other words, although the love scene is mentioned only in the second act of Asch's three-act play and repeatedly rehearsed throughout Vogel's one-act play—and, hence, the latter can be objectively regarded as more indecent than the former—Brantley, like the actors performing the love scene, has come to be accustomed to it as something normal. Such an argument echoes Babbage's above that theatre can establish resistance to the problematic assumptions or moral stance of a text within a production, and without necessarily changing the course of the narrative. This fact shows that the moral deterioration forbidden more than one century ago has become part and parcel of the contemporary life depicted by American theatre.

The passage of time in Vogel's play is indicated by (seventeen) blinks in time. These blinks are usually followed by stage directions, a new rehearsal of the love scene, and/or a song, whether in English or in Yiddish. These three techniques are, respectively, indicating the three—telling, showing, and interactive—modes of engagement employed in Vogel's adaptation. These modes are intermingled with one another in *Indecent*. The telling mode can be indicated by not only the stage directions preceding or following a rehearsal of a scene in the inner play but also by the different comments on the love scene revealing different views/arguments. Moreover, the telling mode has to do with translating from different languages to

facilitate understanding and create meaning, as Babbage has previously argued. This is obviously seen in the many songs disseminated in the last part of the play. For example, Halina and Chana—two new actresses—sing Yiddish songs/lyrics such as "Bei mir bist du sheyn, please let me explain,/Bei mir bist du sheyn, means that you're grand/Bei mir bist du sheyn, again I'll explain/It means you're the fairest in the land" (63). Vogel has listened to so many songs and infused her story with some of them that the play seems to be written around songs: "[M]usical theater has been my first love. So I listened to about 600 songs. I found about 10 or 12 songs I really loved, and I wrote the play around those songs" (Zeller *para* 9). She utilizes these songs to indicate the audience's interaction with the instrumental music during the action. In reply to Joel Berkowitz's question about her use of Yiddish in an English play, Vogel replies: "That is the challenge, isn't it? This is perhaps the most challenging play I've written. Hopefully *Indecent* creates a longing to read Yiddish" (*paras* 16-17). However, the play's swarming with Yiddish songs and French sentences may indicate Vogel's desire to universalize Asch's play. For example, when Nakhmen likes to "speak to the French Ambassador," he "*practices his French*": "Je voudrais parler à l'ambassadeur" (64). Hence, he paves the way for both Halina and Chana to indulge in their Yiddish songs again.

The last pages of the play are abundant in Yiddish songs and conversing in different languages including Yiddish too. Yiddish is employed as "a gesture of remembrance, a reminder of the losses that accompany historical change and geographical migrations as well as a testimony to the afterlives that emerge from those losses" (Mansbridge, "Gestures," 494). On the one hand, Chana and Halina indulge in singing Yiddish songs (64-5) delineating Asch's state after leaving New York for Poland. On the other hand, Nakhmen converses in different languages (such as Yiddish, French, Spanish, and Chinese) attempting to talk to the ambassador to allow him leave (65-6). Employing Yiddish songs in the inner play facilitates interaction between the audience and the actors singing them, reviving a dead language and a lost culture. In addition, manipulating different

languages signifies that working in a Yiddish play performing it in different places provides its actors with different languages. After the authorities arrest the troupe confiscating their passports, Nakhmen writes to Asch asking him: "Is there any way you might put in a word to the consulate to make an exception for me?" (67). This situation points out "the anti-immigrant hypocrisy of a country that prided itself as a light unto other nations for most of the 20th century" (Jakes *para* 4). Immigration is again highlighted as a new issue added to Vogel's adaptation.

However, Lemml directs Chana and Halina to play Rifkele and Manke "in the rain scene" (68) and introduces his new troupe to the audience asking the latter to applaud for the former: "Let's have a round of applause for our band" (69). He reminds the audience that they gather together six nights a week "to sing songs" they "know and love" to escape their daily lives. "God created Yiddish theater. Tonight we are going to perform Act Two of the greatest play ever written by one of our countrymen, Sholem Asch" (69-70). Laura Collins-Hughes aptly regards *Indecent* as so infused with music and dance that it "revolves around a troupe of actors who perform and cherish *The God of Vengeance* through decades" (*para* 12). However, the stage directions show us "*Manke and Rifkele into a flood of light. They turn their faces up to the light. They feel the rain. They reenter the brothel wrapped in their shawls. Manke leads Rifkele to the sofa*" (71). The love scene has been so gradually expanded on that it reaches its climax with Chana and Halina who, playing Rifkele and Manke, utter the most indecent words reflecting the first lesbian kiss in the longest love scene (71-2), a scene that turned New York upside down in the 1920's. Thus, by having the scene re-enacted by different actors more indecently here (through the showing mode) than before in 1906 (16-17), Vogel argues that it is no longer odd to have lesbians nowadays in New York, the very place which banned them before. Therefore, Mobley argues: "*Indecent* recovered the lesbian love scene in all of its purest beauty and finally brought it to Broadway" (251). It has become a matter of course to read such obscene scenes on the page and watch them on the stage.

After a blink in time, the stage directions show us "*the troupe form[ing] a single-file line*" and one of them sings Ilse Weber's song "*Wiegala*": "*The wind plays on the lyre. The nightingale sings, the moon is a lantern…sleep, my little child, sleep*" (72). The song is sung in its original language—German—by Halina and Chana: "Vigala, Vigala, Vayer/Der Vind shpilt aufder Layer…." (73). Such and other songs are manipulated by Vogel to support the love scene in its original language. However, another blink in time moves us to Asch and Madje's house in 1952, when they prepare themselves to leave for London. Before leaving, they are visited by John Rosen, who has translated Asch's play into English and wishes "to bring it to American audiences." When Rosen informs Asch that his "grandparents speak Yiddish" but his parents do not, the latter comments: "Your parents wanted you to grow up American. […] Madje tells me you got into Yale! It is easier for a camel he should go through the eye of a needle than a Jew he should enter the kingdom of Yale! Madje has read your new translation of the play. I have not. She tells me it is good" (75). In depicting how impossible it is for a Jew to enter the sanctum of Yale under the "Nazi restrictions on Jewish life" (Ellenzweig *para* 7), the embittered Asch abandons his play refusing future performances of it. As a young man starting a new "company for the great classic works of the stage that ask urgent moral questions," Rosen argues that "*Vengeance* has the urgency of today" and hence must be brought to American audiences as typically written by Asch (75). This argument implies that the American authorities, which have opposed and hence refused Asch's play in the past, must accept it in the present for the urgent moral questions it poses today. Rosen can be seen in Vogel and other adapters of Asch's piece—like Stephen Fife, Donald Margulies and Atar Hadari—who have actually adapted it focusing on its moral issues that had been much negotiated by opponents as well as proponents.

When Asch informs Rosen that he no longer cares "what is done on" American stages and "*brings out a letter from his jacket pocket*," the latter replies: "Mr. Asch! You must fight this!" (76). This letter seems to be the "Open Letter" wherein Asch defends his play

against its opponents. But Asch is not ready to fight a bit; he is still influenced by the socialist anthem with which his play has opened: "We are all brothers! Ale brider!" (76). He admits: "I too have lost audience members. Six million have left the theater. […] I will not let this play be produced. No more. I wrote it in a different time. The time has changed on me" (76). Moreover, when "*Rosen, stunned, stands, then moves toward the door, Asch calls out*: In the words of a much wiser man—if I was you, burn it!" (76). At such a moment Rosen assures him that he may have to wait for years, but he will produce his play one day (76). Rosen's argument assures that if Asch's play had not been suitable for his time, it would be more relevant and convenient in the coming years. This argument may signify and substantiate what Vogel and Taichman have done by producing Asch's play now. Thus, "Vogel," to quote Chris Jones, "clearly was on a mission to do for Asch what he could not finish for himself" (*para* 4). This view echoes Hutcheon's argument that there is always a patient salvager for every aggressive appropriator outed by a political opponent.

Vogel's *Indecent* and its inner play—Asch's *The God of Vengeance*—end together culminating in the love scene staged in Yiddish. The stage directions inform us that as Asch "*picks up the two suitcases and starts to exit*, *the ghost of Lemml stands in his way*" (76). Brantley rightly comments that *Indecent* reflects not only a history of styles of theatre "and their political contexts but also a portrait of Asch as he progresses from youthful enthusiasm to embittered old age" (*para* 6). The telling mode also shows: "*Asch suddenly turns back into the room. And there in his empty living room it starts to rain. The dead troupe rises to join him, watching from the wings. He remembers*" (76):

Manke: Rifkele, Rifkele—Di nakht iz azoy lib, der regn iz azoy frish, un alts shmekt azoy in der lufr.

Rifkele: Shvayg, shvayg. Der tate hot mikh geshlogn. Er hot di shtib tsugeshlosn, un hot dem shlisl bahaltn—

Manke: Er vet dikh keynmol mer nisht *vey* tin.

(As Rifkele and Manke dance in the rain, Lemml and Asch join them.) (77)

The play's finale where the encounter between the two women is restricted to Yiddish has much to say. First, Vogel not only adapts Asch's play but also adopts his own Yiddish language to indicate that the first love scene between the two women should be read and understood in its original language. Second, by not following this encounter with its English translation (as she has done previously with some Yiddish songs), Vogel accentuates that Yiddish culture is not lost. Third, although Asch has been convinced to cut the love scene from his own play (because it was written in a different time), Vogel repeats it throughout her adaptation. Fourth, she insists on ending her own American play *Indecent* with the very scene for which the American authorities banned Asch's Yiddish *The God of Vengeance* before. Thus, Vogel succeeds not only in reviving Asch's reputation but also in retrieving the memory of a lost Yiddish culture. Fifth/Finally, the very last line of the play—the stage directions as a means of the telling/narrating mode—tells us that Asch and Lemml, as contemporary characters in Vogel's inner play, join Rifkele and Manke, who "*dance in the rain*" (77), endorsing the love scene and its implications.

Conclusion and Findings

It has been demonstrated throughout that Vogel's fascination with Asch's *The God of Vengeance* (1907) has been embodied in her announced and extensive transposition, *Indecent* (2017). Written as both a (re-)creation and a (re-)interpretation of Asch's play, *Indecent* has manipulated Hutcheon's theory of adaptation employing its three modes of engagement (telling/narrating, showing/performing, and interactive/participatory) as a salvaging technique. In other words, while the play had been closed and its embittered playwright outed by a political opponent, there has been a patient salvager, Vogel, who defends Asch and salvages his play reviving their lost Yiddish culture. She has achieved a number of the motives negotiated by Hutcheon in her book. These motives include receiving

and dealing with the adapted text as a way of reverence and tribute (and hence defending Asch and his play against their opponents showing the changing views on moral issues over time), merging the adaptation with the adapter's autobiography, engaging a larger social and cultural critique, and adding a feminist attitude to the adaptation. Further targets achieved by Vogel's adaptation are fulfilling the purpose of theatre by revealing what is offstage/obscene to be onstage and reviving a dead culture by utilizing many songs belonging to it. However, the paper has reached four main findings.

First, Vogel's adaptation has spelt out some ambiguous issues about Asch's piece, such as the real reasons for banning it, by virtue of the telling mode. Since it is the best at depicting time showing relations among the past, the present and the future, the telling mode—indicated in *Indecent* by means of both stage directions and dialogue—has to do with fifty years spanned by the play. On the one hand, the stage directions, including different dates and blinks in time, narrate many facts about Asch, his play, and the troupe performing it as a play-within-the-play. The passage of time has paved the way for revealing some issues about *Vengeance* including the circumstances wherein it was written and anti-Semitism as the outstanding reason for banning it. On the other hand, Vogel has translated from Yiddish and other languages such as German, French, Italian, *etc* to facilitate understanding and create meaning. In other words, she has enriched her adaptation with different languages to make it easy for readers to understand the context wherein Asch has written his play. However, based on storytelling and stage directions, Vogel's adaptation is justified by being pertinent to the present/moment. It resists the problematic assumptions or moral stance of Asch's play without changing the course of its action.

Second, the showing mode—based on metatheatre—has been demonstrated to pave the way for the moral deterioration represented by what has become known as the LGBTQ theatre, a phenomenon forbidden more than one century ago. Including Asch's *Vengeance* as a play-within-the-play spanning about fifty years, Vogel has been enabled to stage the most indecent love scene repeatedly

throughout. In doing so, she has made several changes, expanding upon the content of Asch's piece, such as adding real characters (like Eugene O'Neill, Asch and his wife Madje, and Peretz), and new locations and times (like Warsaw 1906, St Petersburg 1911, Constantinople 1914, New York City 1922, Broadway 1923, the French Embassy in Poland 1939, and Poland 1943, *etc*), altering the progression of the story. Given this fact, the showing mode has entailed embodying and enacting the love scene by means of different actors over ages until it has finally succeeded in getting the audience gradually to the love scene as a matter of course. Hence, the moral decline, represented by the LGBTQ theatre forbidden more than one hundred years ago, has become approved of with the passage of time.

Third, it was shown that Vogel has dramatically managed to salvage Asch's play, and thereby reviving the dead Yiddish culture by employing Yiddish songs throughout via the interactive mode. It has been pointed out how so indispensable music is to both Vogel and Taichman that they cannot imagine *Indecent* without. In addition to moving the play through blinks in time, music is the means by which the audience interact with the singer and the action of the play. Moreover, the many Yiddish songs with which the play is infused are accompanied with music, which expresses meaning and, hence, supports the love scene being performed in the inner play. In other words, performing the love scene repeatedly through time by means of different Yiddish songs has paved the way for both salvaging Asch's play and reviving his Yiddish culture of which both the first love scene between two women and the miscellaneous Yiddish songs are part and parcel. This has been accentuated by the very last encounter between the two women—Rifkele and Manke—which is written in pure Yiddish, not even followed by any translation. This fact implies that one must identify with Yiddish to figure out the play's finale.

Fourth, it is through Vogel's play-within-the-play technique that the issue of immigration, along with homophobia and anti-Semitism, has been adaptively entextualized in a way that breathed new life

into Asch's *Vengeance*, rendering it more contemporary and relevant. Vogel's adaptation has added the theme of immigration contrived from the difference between the cast performing Asch's play in Poland and the 1923 performance in New York. The obscenity trial ensuing from the love scene's homophobia and anti-Semitism has led to both denouncing Jews as un-American and the U.S. government's passing of radical laws restricting immigration. Both Asch and Lemml have further supported this issue as two characters in the inner play. On the one hand, Lemml decides to move back to Poland as a result of being laughed at in America. On the other hand, Asch follows suit after being convinced that his play was stopped not because of the themes it tackles—prostitution and anti-Semitism—but because he is Jewish and Polack. This is how Vogel's adaptation has made Asch's *The God of Vengeance* contemporary and relevant.

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