The House of Paula Vogel: Her Theater and Her Influence on Nilo Cruz, Sarah Ruhl, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Lynn Nottage

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As both a playwright and a university professor, Paula Vogel has enjoyed a major career in postmodern American drama. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (How I Learned to Drive 1998) as well as the Obie Award (The Baltimore Waltz 1992), Vogel at age sixty-five made her Broadway debut with Tony-nominated Indecent, a collaborative work with director Rebecca Taichman, inspired by Sholem Asch’s early twentieth-century drama featuring same sex romance, God of Vengeance. After an early closure announcement, Indecent received an unusual extension when Vogel struck back at critics who had given lukewarm reviews and, consequently, ticket sales improved. The play was eventually recorded and shown on the PBS Great Performances series in November 2017. In addition to her own success as a playwright, Vogel
has taught several major playwrights at Brown and Yale. These include MacArthur “Genius Grant” winner Sarah Ruhl, Pulitzer winner Nilo Cruz (*Anna in the Tropics* 2003), and Pulitzer winner Quiara Alegría Hudes (*Water by the Spoonful* 2012). Among Vogel’s students also is Lynn Nottage, who has won the MacArthur grant as well as becoming the first -- and so far only -- woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice (*Ruined* 2009 and *Sweat* 2017). Vogel’s influence as a teacher extends beyond the university classroom into many settings, including women’s prisons and theatre audiences who have participated in an activity she invented, the drama “bake-off,” a timed writing activity that centers on a given theme and requires certain elements. Vogel has opened some workshops and mini bake-offs to the general public, including a May 2017 event at the Off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre, where both *How I Learned to Drive* and *Indecent* had their New York premiers. This dissertation explores Vogel’s oeuvre and her influence, from her hardscrabble upbringing outside Baltimore through her Broadway success and including several of her most accomplished students. It also includes a chapter on the playwrights (John Guare, Maria Irene Fornes, and Caryl Churchill) Vogel considers her “gods” and, throughout, considers the defamiliarization or ostrananië inspired by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky.

INDEX WORDS: American drama, Postmodernism, Feminism, Defamiliarization, Shklovsky, Pulitzer Prize
THE HOUSE OF PAULA VOGEL: HER THEATRE AND HER INFLUENCE ON NILO CRUZ, SARAH RUHL, QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES, AND LNNN NOTTAGE

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2018
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DEDICATION

To Alyse, who stated in 2012 that perhaps the time had come for me to earn my PhD and then stood by her word. To Eli, Esther, Ethan, and Ezra, who have understood why completing this process mattered so much and who have shown much patience and love. And at long last, to the late Newnan High School teacher "Cap" Goodrum, who hung "Professor Jones" on my eleventh grade self, and to the late West Georgia College professor Dr. Huey Owings, who wrote on my first English 299 essay that I should earn a graduate degree and become a professor.
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My first semester at Georgia State University, I mentioned Paula Vogel's importance as both playwright and professor to Dr. Matthew Roudané, who immediately replied that he sensed a topic for a dissertation he would like to direct. Spending the rest of my graduate career knowing my subject and my director proved immensely helpful as I completed coursework and prepared for comprehensive exams.

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University of Georgia professor Dr. Fran Teague, whom I have known professionally for more than thirty years, has been an invaluable teacher and mentor. When I was deciding whether or not to become a graduate student again, her simple advice, "It doesn't have to be Shakespeare," helped free me to go where my research interests took me with past as prologue but not binding commitment.

As solitary an activity as writing is, I have benefited from a small team who have shared an article or a name when I could most use an idea. They include, in alphabetical order, Deborah Hull, Brian Jones, Becca Parker, Dr. Rick Stallings, Dr. Marc Silverstein, Starshine Stanfield, and Lukas Woodward.
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1 INTRODUCTION

On April 12 – 13, 2016, Cornell University welcomed playwright and professor Paula Vogel to campus. Vogel’s long career had already included an Obie Award for *The Baltimore Waltz* in 1992, the Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive* in 1998, induction into the Theater Hall of Fame in 2012, and three decades of teaching, first at Brown (1984 – 2008) and then at Yale, with Nilo Cruz, Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl, and Quiara Alegría Hudes numbered among her students. In recognition of Vogel’s achievements all the way back in college, the American College Theater Festival’s National Student Playwriting Award, which Vogel won in 1977, had been named for her in 2002. Such an accomplished playwright and professor might have been an honored guest at any university.

Vogel was not visiting Cornell as a guest, however, but rather as a supplicant. She had spent several years in Ithaca as a graduate student and, later, an instructor until, as she recalls, she “was fired” (Vineyard) after her dissertation committee lost two members and her work became unappreciated by Cornell’s reconfigured theater faculty. By 2016, Vogel had not returned to Ithaca in more than thirty years, yet here she was again as a degree-seeking student decades after having left ABD.

The process that brought Vogel back to Cornell began in 1974, when she first encountered an English translation of the Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch’s 1906 *God of Vengeance*. For many years, Vogel sought to produce a play inspired by Asch’s yet did not achieve success until she met director and Asch scholar Rebecca Taichman. More than forty drafts later, a new Vogel play, *Indecent*, appeared in 2015 and played at Yale Repertory Theatre and La Jolla Playhouse. *Indecent*, the Cornell faculty decided, would serve as the dissertation for...
the doctoral degree Vogel had abandoned in 1981. At age 64, Vogel would receive an earned Cornell University PhD.

This degree might have been the capstone for a distinguished career, but it turned out to be one more in a growing list of achievements. On April 27, *Indecent* would open Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, which Vogel said had “made a difference in my life by giving me a home” (“Magic”) when it staged her vision of *How I Learned to Drive*, the play which garnered her the Pulitzer. Not only that, but after *Indecent* enjoyed an extended run, attended by such Vogel familiars as John Guare and Lynn Nottage and receiving a *New York Times* rating of “Terrific” (Isherwood), Broadway’s Cort Theatre would schedule an April 2017 opening of the play. After more than four decades as a playwright, Dr. Vogel would make her Broadway debut.

Vogel’s journey from her graduate student days at Cornell to Broadway, the “gods” who influenced her, and the students she first taught and who then recompensed her are among the subjects of this dissertation. I will trace Vogel from her humble upbringing in Maryland to several distinct stages of her career as she developed an independent voice, one she stoutly retained rather than make huge compromises for the sake of potential commercial success. Along the way, Vogel has enjoyed one of American theatre’s most significant post-Vietnam careers, one I intend both to explore and, in part, to explain.

2 CHAPTER 1: EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Paula Vogel was born in Washington, D.C., on November 16, 1951, the youngest child (following brothers Carl and Mark) resulting from the union of Donald Vogel, a Jewish man from New York, and Phyllis Bremerman, a Catholic woman from New Orleans. Vogel has stated that one grandfather (presumably on her mother's side) voted for George Wallace, an
electoral fact emphasizing her diverse heritage and echoed in Grandfather in *How I Learned to Drive*. The Vogel marriage failed, with Donald leaving the family while Paula was still in elementary school, and Phyllis Vogel brought up her children on what Vogel has described to Carolyn Craig as "the wrong side of the beltway" (214), near Baltimore. Before the divorce, Paula Vogel had already imbued the vastly different backgrounds of both parents, which left her with what Craig calls "a bit of a split personality – but a useful one in terms of a gift for story-telling" (214). Vogel has told Craig, "Some people says that this is very traditionally Southern, this kind of great story-telling.... Others say it's so New York" (214). To PBS interviewer Elizabeth Farnsworth, Vogel identified "the Jewish gene in me" ("A Prize-Winning") when explaining how she chooses her topics and her language.

Vogel appears to have been born bold; moreover, actress Mary-Louise Parker, who originated the role of L'il Bit in *How I Learned to Drive*, has affectionately described Vogel as "fun to listen to, tough, relentlessly friendly, and more than a little twisted" (Parker). The sister of a man, Carl, who died of AIDS, Vogel shows an ability to see humor in even ghastly situations, telling Farnsworth, "Some of the funniest moments I think I've experienced in my life have been in family funerals." Perhaps Vogel's dogged perseverance and willingness to employ dry humor that provokes even as it stimulates emerge in what Carolyn Craig calls a "loose screw" episode. While struggling to rear her children in a Baltimore-area apartment, Phyllis Vogel reported a building violation and was unjustly evicted in retaliation. Craig describes the Vogels' response to the eviction notice:

Rather than fight it, Phyllis moves her clan to a new dwelling; but not without driving them back to their old place, armed with screwdrivers. She directs them to unscrew everything in the apartment, and inscribes a circle on the living room floor. With quick,
quiet efficiency, they unscrew every light bulb and dismantle every fixture. They unhinge doors to every room, cabinet and appliance. They carefully line up the parts against a wall, and place each screw or bolt in a neat pile in the center of the floor. To this, Phyllis adds a terse note to the landlord: "Screw you!" (214-15).

This incident illustrates that more than a Jewish gene helps account for Vogel's inventiveness and originality.

The geography of Vogel's upbringing also may partly account for the split personality Vogel has described to Craig. In the 1950s and 1960s, the area between Washington and Baltimore did not consist of the endless suburbs of today. South of the Mason-Dixon Line, the area was part of a state that did not secede yet maintained segregation through much of the twentieth century. Neither fully Northern nor truly Southern, the Maryland of Vogel's youth comes out in How I Learned to Drive. At the same time, Vogel reflects her father's New York Jewish roots in Indecent.

Vogel learned early on to stand as a minority of one and as someone comfortable with apparent contradictions. From working-class roots, she rose to be an Ivy League professor (Brown and Yale) for more than 30 years. A lesbian married to Ann Fausto Sterling, Vogel acknowledges attraction to men, a fact which may explain why And Baby Makes Seven (1984) has a woman in a same-sex relationship engage in heterosexual coitus so that she may conceive a child. A young wordsmith who lamented, "I didn't know any women writers" (Craig 216), Vogel struck out for a writing career regardless. A good speaker assigned many of the male parts in her school plays, Vogel intuited gender bending, another component of And Baby Makes Seven, with female characters taking Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? one step farther and playing their own imaginary sons.
Although Vogel has reported that, when five years old, she "fell in love" with Mary Martin's portrayal of Peter Pan (Mansbridge 2) and has never recanted her love for theatre, especially musicals, she was not the first Vogel child with literary aspirations. Carl Vogel began writing but gave up the craft after he came out to his family several years before Stonewall and became the subject of relentless homophobic bullying. Carl then left the family when his sister was sixteen. This turn of events must have been troubling to Vogel, who had her first lesbian experience and in turn came out when she was seventeen, months before Stonewall, but it was significant in her development. She explains, "When he stopped writing,... I started" (Craig 215). Writing seems to have replaced acting for Vogel while in no way diminishing the performative elements of her work, as her writing career and teaching accomplishments show.

Vogel pursued her education, becoming "the first generation in my family that had graduated high school and the first generation to go to college" (Mansbridge 3). After earning her undergraduate degree at Catholic University in 1974, Vogel applied to several universities, including Yale, where she would have been a classmate of Wendy Wasserstein, had not the program rejected her. She did gain admission to Cornell, however, where she quickly set about making her mark. Twice she won the Forber Heerman and George McCalmon playwriting competition, a university award (Warner). She also revised one of her prize-winning plays, a feminist take on Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, into a longer drama, *Meg*, which garnered the American College Theater Festival's National Student Playwriting Award in 1977. The prize, which came with a William Morris agent (Mansbridge 4), would be renamed for Vogel in 2002.

Vogel followed *Meg* with *Desdemona*, a recasting of Shakespeare's *Othello* entirely in the domestic sphere. *Desdemona* makes a powerful statement by giving its title character
agency, but it is not clear who was able to witness it during the 1970s. Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*, published in 1996, records only one pre-1993 "production," a "staged reading October 1977 at Cornell" (174). Bigsby, however, reports that in 1979, *Desdemona* "had been successfully staged … at the New Plays Festival in Louisville" (*Modern* 411). While this statement is credible, Bigsby's assigning the Cornell University staged reading to 1973 is problematical at best, given that Vogel was only 21 or 22 and still at American University that year. Still, Bigsby is correct in calling any small success *Desdemona* enjoyed in the 1970s "something of a false start" (411). Bigsby adds that "Paula Vogel sees her career as having started" in 1980, the year she "sent her play *The Oldest Profession* to theatres across the country only to have them reject it" (411).

While Vogel was experiencing a false start in national and regional theatres, her fortunes at Cornell were worse. "Animated by the emerging discourse of feminist dramatic criticism that she was helping forge," Sara Warner writes, Vogel was writing "a revisionist approach to theater history in her dissertation, 'Hiding Scenes in Restoration Comedy'" (Warner). Calamity struck when two members of Vogel's committee left Cornell, replaced by new faculty who left Vogel only one option if she were to finish the degree: "'start over on page one,'" Vogel recalls (Warner). Vogel eventually left Cornell in 1981 involuntarily and ABD; as she told a 2016 audience, "I was fired" (McCasland).

A position teaching playwriting at Brown University, where Vogel worked from the mid-1980s until Yale hired her away in 2008, afforded Vogel a secure living while she tried to build an audience for her plays. Brown also gave her an opportunity to teach some talented members of the next generation such as Nilo Cruz, Lynn Nottage, and Sarah Ruhl. Even before Vogel achieved her first national success with Obie Award-winner *The Baltimore Waltz* (1991), she
developed enduring friendships, including one with emerging critic David Savran. Savran acknowledged Vogel as a muse of sorts in his 1988 *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*, which includes a note of thanks to "Paula Vogel, who instigated the project and advised me every step of the way" (vii). Savran also recalled how, when he and Vogel "were in graduate school," they experienced the thrill of discovering new work at the Public Theater or La Mama, the exhilaration of seeing Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* or Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* or John Guare's *Gardenia*" (xiii).

The particular playwrights Savran lists among those who exhilarated him and Vogel are interesting selections, given Vogel's mature choices and acknowledged influences. *Sweeney Todd*, by Sondheim, is a musical. Many of Vogel's plays are infused with music; for example, in her "Production Notes" for *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel writes, "**As For Music:** Please have fun. I wrote sections of the play listening to music like Roy Orbison's 'Dream Baby' and The Mamas and the Papas' 'Dedicated to the One I love'" (574) and so forth. She even adds, "Other sixties music is rife with pedophilish (?) reference: the 'You're Sixteen' genre hits; The Beach Boys' 'Little Surfer Girl'; Gary Puckett and the Union Gap's 'This Girl Is a Woman Now'; 'Come Back When You Grow Up,' etc." (574). What is more, Vogel's *A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration* features public domain nineteenth-century songs, and *Indecent* both includes klezmer musicians and has the actors co-perform original compositions.

Of even greater interest is Savran's recollection of Churchill and Guare. In 1998, interviewer Elizabeth Farnsworth asked Vogel, "And who have been the most important influences on your life?" Vogel replied, "I have to say that there are three playwrights that I always list as my gods. "One," she continued, "is John Guerre [sic], the incredible playwright who may be best known for *Six Degrees of Separation*. He has mentored me on the page.
Another extraordinary playwright, American playwright,” Vogel went on, "is Maria Irene Fornez [sic], who is just a remarkable voice, a Cuban-American playwright. And lastly," she concluded, "there is the divine Caryl Churchill, a British playwright, the writer of Top Girls and Cloud Nine” (“A Prize-Winning”).

Joanna Mansbridge notes, "To see a Paula Vogel play is to participate in a three-way dialogue with the dramatic canon, social history, and contemporary American culture" (1). As noted above, Meg reimagines Bolton, Desdemona elaborates upon Shakespeare, and And Baby Makes Seven employs an Albee device. The Baltimore Waltz borrows characters from Carol Reed's film The Third Man as well as the technique of squeezing an entire story into an instant in actual time from Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Other canonical writers who influence Vogel include David Mamet (in The Oldest Profession and possibly How I Learned to Drive), Nabokov (in Drive), Thornton Wilder (in The Long Christmas Ride Home and Indecent), and of course Sholem Asch, who not only influences but appears in Indecent.

With the exception of Asch (Indecent not appearing until after Mansbridge published her volume Paula Vogel), Mansbridge has commented upon the dialogues involving each of these writers.

Although important to Vogel, neither Shakespeare, Albee, Mamet, nor any other writer has risen to the level of being deemed among Vogel's "gods" alongside Guare, Fornes, and Churchill, two of whom Savran has recorded Vogel appreciating back in the 1970s. Vogel does not employ either of her gods in the same way that she does Shakespeare and the other mere mortals she has acknowledged. Their influences upon her exist in their being older contemporaries and in analogues that we may see in her plays after we first take a look at theirs.
1.1 Vogel’s “Gods”: John Guare

Among Vogel’s “gods,” John Guare has enjoyed the greatest commercial success. Indeed, although the one acts “Cop-Out” and “Home Fires” ran at the Cort Theatre for less than one week in April 1969, Guare has been on Broadway every decade since the 1960s. The book and lyrics that producer Joseph Papp commissioned Guare to write for a production of Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which ran at the St. James Theatre for 614 performances between 1971 and 1973, garnered Guare a Tony Award and two Drama Desk Awards as well as “allowing him to pursue his playwriting in the enviable position as an experimental writer with a degree of mainstream acceptance” (Urban 60).

Born in New York in 1938 and brought up in the Queens borough, Guare wrote in the “Foreword” of *The House of Blue Leaves*, “I never wanted to be any place in my life but New York” (vii). Both of the plays generally acknowledged as Guare’s finest, the aforementioned *The House of Blue Leaves* (1971) and *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990), take place entirely in New York City although in different boroughs (Queens and Manhattan, respectively) and among different milieus (the working class and what the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 would call the one percent). In both of these plays, however, as Krasner notes, “Guare discloses the cost of rubbing elbows with the high and mighty” (151).

In explaining the genesis of *Blue Leaves*, Guare asked, “Why shouldn’t Strindberg and Feydeau get married, at least live together, and *The House of Blue Leaves* be their child?” (x-xi). This mixture of styles and influences illustrates what Ken Urban calls “John Guare’s war against the kitchen sink” (58). A “1959 performance of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*,” Urban adds, “crystallized Guare’s decision to fight against the conventions of naturalism” (58). Guare noted Hansberry’s use of both the actual kitchen sink and couch, each of which Urban
calls a “hallmark” (58) of naturalism, but Guare was far more intrigued by “the moment when Beneatha and her brother Walter dance to a ‘Nigerian melody’ and the pair are transported ‘back to the past’” (Urban 58). From this moment, Guare discerned the possibilities in exploding naturalism, breaking the fourth wall, incorporating music, employing “radical shifts in tone” (Urban 58), and whatever else seems necessary to get at truth beyond pure representation.

*The House of Blue Leaves*, Guare’s first full-length play, is a semi-autobiographical work that incorporates an historical event, Pope Paul VI’s visit to New York, which took him through Queens. When Guare, who was in Cairo, Egypt, at the time, received a postcard from his parents, detailing “the wonderful experience of a lifetime they had seeing the Pope on Queens Boulevard” (Plunka 70), “Guare began writing the play that day” (70). Guare has acknowledged much of his father in Artie Shaughnessy, for the elder Guare “worked for the New York Stock Exchange, but he called it a zoo and Artie in the play is a zoo-keeper” (ix). In addition, “The Huckleberry Finn episode that begins Act Two is an exact word-for-word reportage of what happened between Billy and me at our first meeting” (x).

Gene A. Plunka describes the actual moment in detail, telling how Guare, only eight years old, “believed that fate would choose him to be Huck and thus to accompany Billy back to Hollywood” (69), where he would join Gene Kelly and Danny Kaye in a musical version of the Mark Twain novel. Realizing only at the last minute that an audition is necessary for a movie role, “John went into a wild routine that included singing, dancing, laughing, and standing on his head, finishing the performance with a deep bow” (69). In front of Guare’s embarrassed parents, Guare’s Uncle Billy, the prototype for Billy Einhorn, uttered Einhorn’s devastating line, “‘You never told me you had a mentally retarded child’” (*Blue Leaves* 55).
While teenaged son Ronnie’s monologue, which begins Act Two, recounts the boy Guare’s Hollywood dream, Ronnie is not the only Shaughnessy fixated with celebrity. Artie dreams of becoming a celebrated musician, and his dream is supported by his mistress, Bunny Flingus, even though his songs keep sounding like “White Christmas” and his lyrics are typified by such fare as “Where is the devil in Evelyn?” (3). Artie soldiers on in his endeavor even though he plays for tiny audiences and, at age forty-five, repeatedly acknowledges, “I’m too old to be a young talent” (12). Bananas, whom Artie intends to commit to a mental institution where a tree has blue leaves (giving the play its title), has her own literal dreams of celebrity, as she reveals when discussing a dream involving Cardinal Spellman, Jackie Kennedy, Bob Hope, and President Johnson. In her dream, Bananas drives a car that she offers as a “gypsy cab” (45) to provide all four celebrities a ride. The dream culminates when Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope appear on Johnny Carson’s show, “and they tell the story of what happened to them” to “[t]hirty million people [who] all laugh” (46). These are the major events of Act One and the start of Act Two.

After Ronnie completes his monologue and exits, the drama resumes but is much darker. Urban argues that the play “becomes a farce” (62) and offers “a dark parody of a Kunstlerroman, the story of an artist’s maturation” (61). Ronnie is AWOL from the military and has brought a bomb, which he intends to use to blow up Pope Paul VI. Instead, the bomb goes off in the apartment building, killing two nuns who have come to watch the parade and figuratively blowing up any expectations of a realist drama. Corinna, a partially deaf former actress who is Billy Einhorn’s girlfriend, also perishes in the blast, but Billy moves on very quickly to Bunny, telling Artie that his place is with Bananas.
Although much of Bananas’ behavior and her name itself (given to her, we learn, by Billy) suggest insanity, she has some important moments of lucidity. She achieves pathos in a long speech that includes the lines “Now I don’t mind not feeling anything so long as I can remember feeling” and “Don’t look at me dead. I’m no Georgina. I’m no Corinna. Help me. Help Ronnie?” (86). Guare has suggested regarding Bananas as something of a sympathetic figure. In response to a John DiGaetani question that used the words “neglectful mother Bananas” (108), Guare retorted, “Was she neglectful? The family there is a very solid unit. The people can’t get out of that house, and she’s been driven mad, but if anything, she is not neglectful” (109). Guare adds, “All she wants to do is stay at home. Her purest happiness is being home as a wife and mother” (109).

Is Bananas denied or granted this happiness? And, if so, do the circumstances negate the audience’s ability to evaluate what happens in moral terms? After Billy leaves with Bunny, Artie choke[s] the life out of Bananas even as “[s]he smiles radiantly at him” (99), and then Artie ends the play as he begins it, playing directly to the audience until “The stage is filled with blue leaves” (100). Artie’s killing Bananas seems morally challenging, at best; moreover, the blue leaves that appear when Artie is alone onstage call into question who is insane and who is not. Christopher Bigsby finds in Artie, Bananas, and the other characters of The House of Blue Leaves “a form of moral anarchy” that contains “something of Nathaniel West” in that “reality has been so completely colonized by fantasy that it no longer has true meaning, as there is in [Guare’s] portrait of a society which puts no limits on possibility and hence loses any coherent moral shape beyond an unregulated desire” (Modern 381).

While Guare’s work on Two Gentlemen of Verona established him commercially, The House of Blue Leaves signified he had become a significant Off-Broadway playwright as well,
for it ran for 337 performances at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre and won both an Obie Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Award for Best American Play. Revived Off-Broadway in 1986, the play moved to Broadway’s Vivian Beaumont Theater and later to the Plymouth Theatre. This production won multiple Tony Awards, including laurels for Jerry Zaks (director), John Mahoney (actor), and Swoozie Kurtz (actress), as well as the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Revival. A second revival, in 2011, ran at the Walter Kerr Theatre and was nominated for one Tony Award (Edie Falco, actress).¹

What Gene A. Plunka calls the “finest theatrical achievement” (186) of Guare’s career, *Six Degrees of Separation*, achieved two distinctions that have eluded Vogel and her other “gods”: it was adapted into a successful film, and it introduced an expression (adapted from the 1929 Frigyes Karinthy short story “Chains” or “Chain-Links”) into the common lexicon. In the Karinthy story, the narrator states that technology is causing the world to become smaller. He then goes on:

One of us suggested performing the following experiment to prove that the population of the Earth is closer together now than they have ever been before. We should select any person from the 1.5 billion inhabitants of the Earth – anyone, anywhere at all. He bet us that, using no more than five individuals, one of whom is a personal acquaintance, he could contact the selected individual using nothing except the network of personal acquaintances. For example, “Look, you know Mr. X. Y., please ask him to contact his friend Mr. Q. Z., and so forth.”

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¹ New York productions of *The House of Blue Leaves* have a fascinating history involving the marriage and professional partnership of Anne Meara and Jerry Stiller. Meara premiered the role of Bunny Flingus in the 1971 original. Then, in the 1986 production, Meara and Stiller’s son, Ben Stiller, made his stage debut as Ronnie. By 2011, Ben Stiller had aged into and portrayed Artie.
The discussion then demonstrates how one of the characters could contact either Nobel Literature laureate Selma Lagerlof or an anonymous employee of the Ford Motor Company in between two and four steps. Guare’s increasing the number of steps to six for the title of his play has made the “Six Degrees of Separation” a common expression, even one that has evolved into a parlor game involving actor Kevin Bacon and a charitable organization Bacon, after initial reluctance about the link between him and the “six degrees” concept, has come to support.

Like The House of Blue Leaves, Six Degrees of Separation draws upon an historical event, albeit one arguably less significant than a papal visit, for its source material. During the 1980s, hustler David Hampton, whom Morgan Falconer has described as “an ingenious conman …, in his early twenties, began inveigling his way into the homes of wealthy white New Yorkers, including Melanie Griffith and Calvin Klein, often by saying that he was a friend once removed … and claiming that he was the son of the actor Sidney Poitier” (Falconer 4). Falconer adds, “At least a dozen people let [Hampton] stay or gave him money” (4). Hampton served as the model for Guare’s character Paul, the catalyst of Six Degrees.

Paul achieves a level of success similar to that of David Hampton by preying upon the sympathies and stereotypes of Central Park New Yorkers in what Urban calls “a critique of white liberalism” (70). We see Paul first as he is encountered by one wealthy couple. Flanders (“Flan”) and Louisa (“Ouisa”) live in a 5th Avenue Upper East Side Apartment, where Flan operates an art business, quietly selling paintings worth millions and keeping a generous commission on each sale. Ouisa seems to feel no need to work outside the home. The Kittredges can afford to keep a two-sided Kandinsky hanging in their home. Their three children (2.6 rounded up?) attend the “right” schools, Groton and Harvard, and feel secure enough in their preppy environment that their son Woody receives a pink shirt for Christmas. If asked, the
Kittredges would most likely describe themselves as happy and, with what they deemed just the right level of modesty, as upper middle-class. If the Kittredges lived in the early 21st century and occupied more or less the same social milieu and had similar experiences today, the Kittredges would probably say they voted for Obama – twice – and consider themselves post-racial. They would patronize museums and meet their own definition of an ideal family.

To put it another way, the Kittredges are ideal marks for an expert conman like Paul. They are what Urban calls “the kinds of New Yorkers who do not know Black people, who do not understand the lives of people not in their class strata except as ‘anecdotes’ at dinner parties” (70). When Paul spins a yarn of being Sidney Poitier’s son and of his father being in town to attend a performance of *Cats* with an eye toward making a film version, when Paul teases the Kittredges with bit parts in the movie, and even when Paul expertly prepares a dinner for the Kittredges and their guest, extremely wealthy (“King Midas rich. Literally. Gold mines” [7]) South African Geoffrey, Paul’s audience is enchanted at each moment. No one challenges or checks any of Paul’s statements because each is willing to believe. Paul gives a credible and detailed explanation of his purported thesis on Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, particularly as it has influenced such assassins as John Hinckley, Jr., and Mark David Chapman, who shot President Reagan and John Lennon, respectively. Plunka points out that Paul also throws in references to such figures as Freud, Chekhov, Beckett, and Tolkien (Plunka 191), who along with T.S. Eliot are four of the DWEMs (Dead White European Males) one expects to hear a Harvard student of his time comprehend and discuss.2 This discussion, accompanied by Paul’s

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2 Plunka fails to mention one reference Paul makes that is perhaps the most interesting: George Orwell’s *Down and Out in London and Paris*, to which Paul alludes, only in part, just after saying his “father” will arrive at the Sherry hotel the next day (23). The actual David Hampton, who died of AIDS-related complications in 2003, shared both poverty (albeit perhaps
detailed knowledge of the Kittredge children’s names and the names of their friends, renders them sympathetic to his self-described plight as broke and homeless for the evening, as well as susceptible to the larger tall tale he tells.

The Kittredges are particularly vulnerable to Paul because just as they are his marks, so, too, is Geoffrey theirs. They need Geoffrey’s millions to secure the sale of a Cézanne, which will pay them a commission, and thus Flan rejoices when, after Paul cleans up from dinner, Geoffrey tells Flan, “There’s all ways of doing business. Flanders, walk me to the elevator” (37). The money then secured, Flan explains his surreptitious, hustling business to Paul, makes an ethnic slur about an “Eye-tie store front” (42), and gives Paul fifty dollars and his younger daughter’s bed for the night. The following exchange ensues. “FLAN: There is a God.”
“OUISA: And his name is --.” “FLAN: Geoffrey?” “OUISA: Sidney.” Both Kittredges then sleep, dream (of the aesthetics of film and of the aesthetics of art and money, respectively), and feel “safe” (46).

Guare, intriguingly, does not begin the play with the core scene involving the Kittredges, Paul, and Geoffrey; rather, he starts in medias res as Flan and Ouisa “speak to us” (11). The first line, Ouisa’s “Tell them!” (11), draws the audience in immediately. Before we learn what has happened, we hear Ouisa say “it was awful awful awful awful” (12). Then, Flan and Ouisa “pull off their robes and are dressed for dinner” (12), the dinner which Paul ends up preparing. The first hint at what has gone wrong comes the morning after, when a sudden “blindingly bright” (47) appearance of male nudity occurs as a literally “phallic” detail, as what Lacanians call an “uncanny” moment. Flan and Ouisa’s world is defamiliarized to them as they learn Paul voluntarily, for Hampton’s father was a doctor in Buffalo, New York) and an early death from a terminal illness with Orwell.
has invited a hustler into their apartment. Not only that, but as Plunka also points out, “The original stage production depicted fellatio at this point in the play” (172)\(^3\) The next moment may seem “awful awful awful awful” to Ouisa, but it more nearly resembles pure farce. Plunka writes, “The scene of a naked, aggressive hustler chasing Flan and Ouisa around their apartment is as demonstrative as any sick behavior represented in classical farce from Moliere to the Marx brothers” (201).

The language both Ouisa and Flan adopt when addressing the hustler is telling. Ouisa exclaims, “You went out after we went to sleep and picked up this thing?” (48, emphasis mine). After Paul’s brief apology, Flan continues, “You brought this thing into our house! Thing! Thing!” (49). This use of “thing” denies the hustler his basic humanity, positing him among those who occupy space outside tony Central Park apartments and constitute an identifiable “other.” Flan and Ouisa cannot identify with the hustler because they conduct their whoring on a much more abstract, higher class level (Flan’s protestation that “I’m not a star fucker” [30] notwithstanding). The word “thing” also operates here as a synecdoche that dates at least back to Shakespeare. In the 16\(^{th}\) century, the word “thing” commonly represented the penis while “no thing,” or “nothing,” represented the vagina. Thus, Shakespeare’s title *Much Ado about Nothing* contains a serious pun on both male and female genitalia. For Ouisa or Flan, then, to stare or point at a penis, particularly a phallic erection, while exclaiming, “Thing! Thing!” makes perfect sense.

That the “thing” or penis, which is visibly external to the rest of the body, could serve as a synecdoche for the body itself also is consistent with the Kittredges’ character as presented thus far in the play. A literal male prostitute, especially one who operates in streets, back alleys, [3 Plunka does not specify who fellated whom.]
and dark corners of parks, is largely defined by his genitals. The Hustler demonstrates a casual attitude toward and acceptance of nudity anywhere behind closed doors by the tone he adopts in comments such as “I gotta get some sleep” and “Hey! How ya doin’?” (48) Uniquely, the Hustler retains control throughout the scene. When Ouisa nonsensically exclaims, “Stop it! He might have a gun!” (49), the Hustler, stark naked joins in with “I might have a gun. I might have a knife” (49). The Hustler’s act and words of aggression seem prompted mainly by annoyance and not particularly threatening. In response to Flan’s order, “Go back to sleep in the gutter” (49), the Hustler “viciously grabs FLAN by the lapels of his robe” (49) but soon leaves with nothing stronger or more ominous than a parting “Fuck you!” (50) before he “throws FLAN back” (50) and presumably goes in search of a flop or his next trick.

The ensuing actions and investigations, with the notable of exception of Paul’s likely last marks, the tragic Utah couple Rick and Elizabeth, mostly involve characters who are unlikeable and whom D.H. Lawrence would identify as “flat.” Ouisa, however, is another matter altogether. She is affected, David Krasner notes, as “Paul’s body becomes a vessel fulfilling the Kittredges’ longings: connected vicariously to the ‘son of a famous actor; helping a troubled youth; and the satisfaction of aiding a ‘victim’” (150). When Ouisa asks Paul, who is considering how to turn himself in for arrest, “What did you want from us?”, she is moved by his reply, “Everlasting affection,” even though she insists, “Nobody has that” (54). What Paul wants, or at least in Ouisa’s eyes credibly claims to want, is a sense of connection. It is thus appropriate that into Ouisa’s mouth Guare puts the speech which contains the central conceit and title of the play.

Ouisa explains,

I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet. The president of
the United States. A gondolier in Venice. Fill in the names. I find that A] tremendously comforting that we’re so close and B] like Chinese water torture that we’re so close. Because you have to find the right six people to make the connection. It’s not just big names. It’s anyone. A native in a rain forest. A Tierra del Fuegan. An Eskimo. I am bound to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people. It’s a profound thought… Six degrees of separation between me and everyone else on this planet. But to find the right six people. (45)

Paul, for all his conning and cunning, has tried to connect with, among others, Sidney Poitier and Flan Kittredge. Ouisa, to her great surprise, ends the play trying to connect with Paul. Plunka asserts that “Paul the catalyst is similar to the role that Mildred Douglas plays in O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape” (198).

Ouisa’s recalling what she “read somewhere” illustrates how Paul serves as a catalyst to her development as a round character. Almost certainly, this notion of six degrees originally was nothing more than an interesting bit of information upon first read. Ouisa’s experience with Paul takes her beyond the abstract Tierra del Fuegan of her recounting to her actual attempt to connect with another human being. She senses that her children, their friends, and perhaps even Flan are too superficial to serve; ironically, however, Paul who is everyone and yet no one, touches Ouisa. Plunka writes, “Ouisa begins to understand the need to connect with others by using our imaginations to hold onto a purity of experience that may be alive, vibrant, and poignant rather than to substitute it for disposable anecdotal information” (199).

In trying to connect with Paul, Ouisa makes a promise to be with him when he turns himself in for arrest. She tells him, “We’ll be there. Paul. We love you” (60). Paul replies, “Ouisa. I love you. Ouisa Kittredge. Hey? Bring a pink shirt” (60). The pink shirt, which
recalls Woody’s shirt from Brooks Brothers that Flan and Ouisa give a bleeding Paul when they first meet, has become a symbol for him. It also has, for Ouisa, the significance of all those splashes of color rediscovered in the Sistine Chapel when workers cleaned it with cotton swabs and water. Gordon Slethaug sees this use of pink as empowering for Ouisa, for he writes, “The ‘burst of pink’ is identified with a powerful feeling of imaginative freshness, divine communication and transcendence, in which, as a result of Paul’s intervention in their lives, she can now imaginatively touch the hand of God” (87). A more sinister meaning, one perhaps not immediately apparent when the pink shirt appears, suits Paul later on. The pink triangle, of course, denoted homosexuality during the Holocaust.

A mix-up causes Paul to be arrested before Flan and Ouisa can arrive, an experience that troubles Ouisa. Forced to acknowledge that “I wasn’t family” and “I didn’t know Paul’s name” (61), Ouisa is powerless even to inquire after what has happened once Paul is in custody. She declares, “I will not turn him into an anecdote” (61) before wondering, “How do we fit what happened to us into life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you’ll mouth over and over years to come” (60–61) and “How do we keep the experience?” (61). Learning a young man in Riker’s Island Prison has committed suicide by tying a shirt around his neck and hanging himself, Ouisa asks, “Was it the pink shirt? This burst of color? The pink shirt? Was it Paul?” (62). She knows only that she cannot know. What began as chains or chain-links for Frigyes Karinthy have become degrees of separation for Ouisa Kittredge. We are not linked; we are separated. As Bigsby writes, the play exposes “the gulf between the rich couple and their son, the shallowness and self-serving nature of their supposed moral values, the gap between themselves and those beyond the supposedly secure doors of their handsome apartment” (Modern 385). Ouisa’s self-awareness is the only consolation Guare offers.
Six Degrees of Separation premiered at Lincoln Center in what Urban calls “a rarity in the American theatre” (68), a production “without any readings or workshops” (68). The production, which (like the 1986 revival of The House of Blue Leaves) was directed by Jerry Zaks and which featured Stockard Channing² (Bunny in that same production of Blue Leaves), was a huge success. It transferred to Broadway and the Vivian Beaumont Theater, eventually running for 485 performances total. Both Guare and Channing won Obie Awards, and the Broadway production won a Best Director Tony Award for Zaks. While Guare did not win the Pulitzer Prize, for which he was a finalist, he did win the Olivier Award after the play began a 1991 run in London. It has been revived many times, including a 2010 revival in London and a 2017 limited run at Broadway’s Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

Plunka argues that the original production of Six Degrees of Separation has a structure that “is congruent with Guare’s attempt to dismantle the realism of kitchen-sink drama” (189). According to Guare, “All I knew about the play was that it had to go like the wind” (8), and “Jerry Zaks felt it crucial to translate that speed into stage terms” (8). The thrust stage at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater seemed to Guare “ideal for a play that addresses the audience in a very intimate, friendly fashion” (8), but it posed the problem of possibly long walks “for entrances and exits and pulse-killing scene changes.” Zaks and Tony Walton, however, found a solution by having “the actors (except Paul, the Hustler, and the Doorman) … sit in the front row

² In his “Production Notes” for Six Degrees of Separation, Guare tells the story of how Stockard Channing came to be cast at Ouisa. He writes of a “casting error” that left the production with “sixteen actors and no lead.” “One morning,” however, Guare writes, “we read in the papers that a play starring Stockard Channing expected to open on Broadway would instead terminate its run in San Diego.” Offered the role of Ouisa, Channing accepted, “closed in San Diego on a Sunday and came to us on Tuesday and we didn’t miss a beat.” “Has any other actress,” Guare asks, “been scheduled to open in New York at a certain time and, indeed, did however in another play?” (9).
for the course of the performance.” There, they were constantly “appearing and vanishing, handing up, holding and receiving props and costumes as needed” (8). Miming and extensive handling of props were minimized, for in this production, “They just talk” (9).

According to Plunka, “The theater-in-the-round staging works perfectly for this type of play that relies on metatheatrical techniques that assist the actors in addressing the audience in an intimate way” (189). Plunka adds that the “Brechtian alienation effect of having the actors sit so close to the stage to appear and vanish at will, reinforcing the notion that the tale is being narrated as performance art, also serves to raze fourth-wall conventions” (189 – 90). Running the play with no intermission “kept the energy of the play at a high pace usually found in [Guare’s] black comedies,” and the “form of the play thus meshed well with the ideas Guare was trying to convey” (190).

When Guare adapted the screenplay for the 1993 film, both he and director Fred Schepisi strove to maintain the play’s “like the wind” feel and its sense of mocking posh New York sensibilities. Schepisi faced a challenge “to make a film that would be as emotionally rousing as the play while maintaining its poignancy” (Plunka 188). The filmmakers retained Stockard Channing as Ouisa, giving Channing a major film role that would countermand her 1978 Grease “bad girl” Rizzo persona. Donald Sutherland was added as Flan, Ian McKellen as Geoffrey, and Will Smith as Paul.5 According to Plunka, “The critics acknowledged that the cast was uniformly excellent, perhaps with Will Smith the weakest of the lot” (189).

Other critics, while not minimizing the strong work of the other actors, were kinder to Smith. Jerry Portwood, while not entirely impressed by Smith’s acumen as an actor, notes that

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5 Will Smith was in the middle of a six-season run as television’s Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Playing Paul afforded him a chance to show his skills as a serious actor.
“he turned out to be extremely successful at seduction. He makes audiences, everyone near him, believe whatever he's selling.” A comment at rottentomatoes.com referenced “astute direction and fine performances -- particularly from an against-type Will Smith.” Perhaps some of the uncertainty regarding Smith’s performance stemmed from the fact that his Paul is not entirely the Paul of the play. At a time when network television had never portrayed a same-sex male kiss, Smith declined, based (Jerry Portwood reports rumor to have alleged, on the advice of Denzel Washington) “to give a big, wet smooch to his co-star Anthony Michael Hall” but, instead, “a series of clunky camera tricks” created the illusion of a kiss (Portwood). The strongly implied sex in the brief scene involving the nude male prostitute and a nude Smith, however, seems to make this omission a small one.

New York, both the city and some of its prominent denizens, plays an important part in the film. Plunka mentions “the added glamor that the New York City locales provided,” including “the Gotham Bar and Grill and … the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” and “several of Guare’s favorite stomping grounds” (189). Artist Chuck Close, seen repeatedly as an observer, provided a nod to many viewers as did, to a much larger degree, Kitty Carlisle Hart. Hart, who had acted in several 1930s films, including the Marx Brothers’ 1935 classic A Night at the Opera and who was the widow of playwright Moss Hart, had become best known as a game show panelist and general New York doyenne who had occasionally dated Thomas Dewey. Hart’s character, Mrs. Bannister, may represent social climbing or even social descent, and when she tells Ouisa, “There was nothing else you could have done,” she seems to absolve Ouisa, from an upper class New York point of view, of any responsibility for Paul’s eventual, unknown fate.

6 This Thomas Dewey was the Dewey of “Dewey Defeats Truman” fame – and mockery.
The film version of *Six Degrees of Separation* seems important for two different reasons. First, it has had a great influence on John Guare’s reputation. Turina writes, “The film contributed noticeably to widening the reception and the impact of Guare’s seminal work and to strengthen [sic] its status as the playwright’s major theatrical achievement” (57). The film has also effected a phenomenon I noted above, that of putting the concept of Six Degrees into the mainstream of American consciousness.

Writing in 1988, Vogel’s friend David Savran acknowledged the “exhilaration” of seeing Guare’s 1974 *Gardenia* with Vogel (*Words* xiii). Then, after winning the 1998 Pulitzer Prize, Vogel told interviewer Simi Horwitz, "In my mind I talk to John Guare every day and bless him for never writing the same play twice, for his stylistic leaps and bounds, and fearlessness.” These examples illustrate how Guare gained his place among Vogel’s “gods,” and they also set a theme that recurs with María Irene Fornés and Caryl Churchill. One common characteristic of Vogel’s “gods” is that each of them has been praised for having a broad range and, rather than relying on familiar and comfortable themes and tropes, creating a unique work with each drama. Finally, at least one critical survey of contemporary American drama, while not commenting upon Guare as a Vogel “god,” nevertheless acknowledges a close relationship between the plays of the two. Krasner writes, “Whereas Guare is interested in connections between people, Vogel is concerned with connecting past and present” (151).

1.2 Vogel’s “Gods’': María Irene Fornés

Among Paula Vogel’s “gods,” Cuban-American María Irene Fornés is the only non-native English speaker. Fornés never acquired native fluency, telling interviewer David Savran in the 1980s, “My vocabulary in English is very limited. When I read a newspaper or magazine article I’m constantly finding words that I don’t know” (63). The possibility, however, that as a
writer Fornés first thinks in Spanish and then translates into English before putting her words on the page has not diminished what Diane Lynn Moroff identifies as the “lyricism” in Fornés’s dramas, especially her best-known play, *Fefu and Her Friends* (33).

Fornés was born in Havana on May 14, 1930, to a family that “was poor and moved often” (5). Despite their poverty, Fornés and her five older siblings “knew that their family was somehow different” (6) but could not identify the source of the difference until they saw the film *You Can’t Take It With You* in Havana. Fornés realized that in her parents’ “‘thinking, the way they thought about life,’” she saw something Bohemian “‘at a time when there was no such thing as Bohemian life in Havana’” (Kelly A8, qtd. in Cummings 6). This Bohemianism did not spring from any keen interest in the arts but rather what Fornés described as the “‘books, books, books, ideas, ideas, ideas’” (Kelly A8, qtd. in Cummings 6) her parents constantly discussed.

The death of Fornés’s father precipitated her family’s emigration to New York, where Fornés, who “spoke little English when she arrived in the USA” (Cummings 7), gradually insinuated herself into the Bohemian life of Greenwich Village. There, she ultimately resided in the same apartment for forty years. Before settling in on 16th Street and becoming part of what Catherine A. Shuler calls “the alternative, experimental theater of the 1960s and 70s” (218), however, Fornés lived for three years in Europe, her major artistic interest lying in painting. During this time, Fornés experienced a theater epiphany when she attended the premier of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Although Fornés spoke no French and had never read *Waiting for Godot* in any language, the experience moved her. “‘Imagine,’” she told Scott Cummings, “‘a writer whose theatricality is so amazing and so important that you could see a play of his, not understand one word, and be shook up’” (Cummings 1985 qtd. in Cummings 9).
This epiphany turned literally Joycean in 1958, when she saw Zero Mostel in *Ulysses in Nighttown*, an experience she recounted decades later to multiple interviewers.

Results from these twin epiphanies were not immediate, for Fornés did not write her first play until 1960, when she used letters written by her great-grandfather to craft a Spanish-language play *La viuda (The Widow)*, which she entered in a playwriting contest sponsored by Fidel Castro. Since nothing further came of the play and since Fornés never translated it into English, Cummings deems it “more a precursor than a first play” (10). Plays such as *There! You Died!* soon followed, however, and by the time Off-Off Broadway was recognized as an actual entity, Fornés was prepared to join it. By 1966, Fornés became the first Off-Off Broadway playwright on Broadway, when Jerome Robbins, best known for *Fiddler on the Roof*, was hired by The Establishment Theatre Company to bring *The Office* to Henry Miller’s Theatre. The play, despite a cast that included Elaine May, Jack Weston, and Doris Roberts, ran for only ten previews before the producers canceled the show, which never officially opened. Those previews were the closest Fornés would ever come to Broadway success, and she never revised or developed *The Office* further.

Decades later, John Guare hinted at the sting this near brush with commercial success may have brought Fornés, for in 1999 – 2000, Fornés “became the ninth contemporary American playwright to be celebrated by New York’s Signature Theatre with a full season devoted solely to her work” (Cummings “María Irene Fornés 33). During the season, Fornés participated in a roundtable interview with fellow honorees Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Horton Foote, and John Guare. As Cummings writes, “With unmentioned irony, Guare later referred to Fornés’s ‘very, very bad experience in the commercial world’ – 34 years earlier! – when Jerome Robbins ‘pulled the plug’ on *The Office* days before it was to open on Broadway” (155n).
What might have been a crushing experience helped drive Fornés, instead, to pursue alternative avenues for producing her and other Off-Off Broadway playwrights’ works. In 1975 she became centrally involved in INTAR (International Arts Relation), which evolved into “the leading Hispanic arts center in New York” (Cummings 57). Not only did Fornés create and direct works for INTAR, but she also brought new talent into the group. Fornés recruited numerous fledgling playwrights, including one, Nilo Cruz, whom she not only brought into INTAR but also passed along to Paula Vogel.

In 1977, after what Assunta Bartolomucci Kent calls an “inordinately long (thirteen-year) gestation period” (120), Fornés produced what remains her most famous play, *Fefu and Her Friends*. Fornés “forced herself to finish the play by slating it for production at Theater Strategy” (Kent 121), indicating a difficulty working with the subject matter which required Fornés to “set up an atmosphere that discouraged distraction and elicited more focused images and dialogue” (121). This atmosphere included “listening to recordings of the passionate Cuban singer, Olga Guillot” (121).

Completing the script of *Fefu and Her Friends* may have indicated that Fornés had finished the play, but the exigencies of Off-Off Broadway staging required additional creative work on the part of the playwright. In the highly experimental and innovative Part Two of *Fefu*, the directions state, “The audience is divided into four groups. Each group is led to the spaces. These scenes are performed simultaneously.” Annette Saddik tells how this part came to be this way:

In the play’s first production in a Soho loft space in downtown New York, the audience was taken out of the auditorium and divided into four groups for Part Two of the play. Each group had to physically move to another part of the theatre, rotating through four
spaces that represented rooms in Fefu’s house in order to see four separate yet related scenes that the actresses performed simultaneously, repeating the action until all four groups had seen all four scenes… Rather than writing the play this way and then searching for a space that could accommodate it, Fornés found the space first and finished the play to take advantage of the space. (168)

This anecdote relates the unique needs a playwright who writes for small theatres and audiences faces in bringing a creative vision to life. It also explains why Saddik does not hesitate to find something of the avant-garde in the dramaturgy Fornés uses.

*Fefu and Her Friends* is a unique work in more ways than just the staging of Part Two. Part of the uniqueness comes from the way the play defies expectations. The play nominally tells the story of Stephany Beckmann, who goes by the nickname Fefu, and her peer group, who meet at Fefu’s “country house in New England” (*Fefu* 7) in 1935 to plan a fundraiser. The absence of the *dramatis personae* notwithstanding, the play’s initial stage directions set up a Chekhovian parlor drama. Fornés writes, “The décor is a tasteful mixture of styles” (7), and her description of the living room includes a couch, a coffee table, “two chairs on each side of the table,” a piano, “an open liquor cabinet,” and even “a dish with chocolates” (7). Moroff calls the “initial frame … structured by three women, one standing, one lying down, one sitting,” a “revised image of Chekhov’s three sisters” (37). Cummings writes, moreover, that the play’s three “Parts” (as opposed to acts) proceed “with a rhythm that is casual, playful, and Chekhovian, governed by the simple ebb and flow of a social gathering” (65).

Within a matter of minutes, the play drastically defamiliarizes the Chekhovian drama, however, by violating the “Chekhov’s gun” dramatic principle. The opening directions state, “A double barrel shotgun leans on the wall near the French doors” (7). The audience expects, then,
that the gun will be fired, possibly to deadly effect, somewhat later in the play. No viewer could possibly predict, however, that only about five minutes into the play, Fefu will grab the gun, aim, shoot, and then cheerfully tell her guests, “It’s a game we play. I shoot and he falls. No matter where he is, he falls” (11). Cindy says soon after, “The gun is not loaded” (12) – or is it?

A sense of play in both the literal and metadramatic senses permeates *Fefu and Her Friends*. At one point, Sue comments, “I had no idea we were going to do theatre” (21). Emma replies, “Life is theatre. Theatre is life. If we’re showing what life is, can be, we must do theatre” (22). On whose terms this play occurs has long been a topic of concern for critics. Fefu’s first line, “My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are” (7), sets a tone that is expounded most fully in a long speech Julia gives in Part Two. After Julia “sits up as if pulled by an invisible force,” she articulates, “The human being is of the masculine gender.” Later, she adds, “Women are Evil. – Woman is not a human being. She is: 1 – A mystery. 2 – Another species. 3 – As yet undefined. 4 – Unpredictable; therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil” (35). This speech, which Julia terms “my prayer” (34 and 35), combined with the way the various female characters frequently define themselves in terms of their relationships with men, may give rise to a feeling that the play is antifeminist. After all, as Moroff points out, even the idea that Fefu ultimately controls the phallic gun is an illusion (39), for as Fefu states, “[Phillip] told me one day he’ll put real bullets in the guns. He likes to make me nervous” (13). Fefu’s “shooting” Phillip and his falling each time she shoots are all part of a larger theatricality in which “Phillip has really been controlling these events” (Moroff 39).

Critics generally do not read the play overall this way. As Moroff points out, even though Fefu’s “self-control is jeopardized, or at least mediated, by Phillip, she can still
effectively banish him from this drama” (39). Moroff, moreover, understands Julia’s negative speech about women as an act of “ventriloquism” (48) in which although “Julia seems to embrace the male discourse, she also undermines it by elevating it to that peculiar combination of lucidity and madness” (48). Kent almost certainly speaks for many when she says that in Fefu and Her Friends, Fornés has “improvised an intriguing dramatic form through which to selectively familiarize or defamiliarize everyday (misogynous) truth and to re-assess their insidious effects on even well-educated and relatively privileged women” (146). In so doing, Fornés make a powerful statement and crafts what Cummings calls “one of the most important American plays in the last quarter of the twentieth century” (64).

Kent notes “a Latina magical realist perspective” in Fefu. While I concur that the play contains elements of magical realism, I believe the play also reflects broader concerns of surrealism. As noted above, Fornés spent several years in the 1950s as a painter, going so far as to study under the abstract expressionistic pioneer Hans Hofmann at his 8th Avenue studio and his Provincetown school (Cummings 7). A German who left permanently for the United States in 1932, Hofmann was acquainted with, among others, Braque, Picasso, and Leger. No stylistic purist, he explored in various modes and, according to his page at theartstory.org, “At various times his work blended Cubist structure with Fauvist color, Expressionist energy, and touches of Surrealism.” Such touches, I believe, appear in Fefu.

The most clearly Surreal moment in Fefu and Her Friends is the play’s enigmatic ending. The directions state, “There is the sound of a shot. Christina and Cecilia run out. Julia puts her hand to her forehead. Her hand goes down slowly. There is blood on her forehead” (61). Then, Fefu enters, “holding a dead rabbit” (61), and states the last spoken line, “I killed it … I just shot … and killed it….Julia…” (61). The directions conclude, “Dropping the rabbit, Fefu walks to
Julia and stands behind the chair as she looks at Julia. Sue and Cindy enter from the foyer, Emma and Paula from the kitchen, Christina and Cecilia from the lawn. They surround Julia. The lights fade” (61).

As Cummings notes, the ending raises more questions than it answers. To wit: “Is Julia dead? Did Fefu kill her? Is Fefu acting of her own volition or is she now an agent of ‘the judges’? What does the rabbit symbolize?” (67). These questions illustrate the truth behind Helene Keyysar’s observation, “If there were prizes given for generating most discussion after a theatre performance, Fornés might win” (184). Keyssar adds, “Nothing, including my own sense of stability as a spectator, remains constant or steady in this play” and goes on to note “Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic imagination at work in Fornés’ drama” (186). Matthew Roudané traces some of the uncertainty to an unacknowledged potential source, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” writing, “Just as [Gilman’s] narrator … tries to kill the women in her hallucinations, so Fefu tries to kill Julia, her way of blotting out a ‘loathsome’ woman who reminds her of herself and her status” (145). Thelma R. Hall, who has noted that Gilman’s “first husband Walter Stetson was an artist” and that Gilman “worked for a time as a commercial artist and art teacher” (1), considers “The Yellow Wallpaper” a literary precursor to surrealism even though the story predates 1920s surrealist manifestoes by three decades. Whether Fefu and Her Friends reflects a direct influence of “The Yellow Wallpaper” or not, the play’s ending nonetheless leaves its audience contemplating and most likely discussing a concluding presentation of Surrealism.

Paula Vogel’s acknowledged use of another literary precursor of Surrealism, Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” in The Baltimore Waltz, a topic I will consider more fully later, constitutes an analogue to what Fornés may have done with Gilman. The stage
history of *Fefu* is also illustrative. Stating that a “comparison of two notable productions of *Fefu and Her Friends* helps to demonstrate its delicate and crucial relationship with the physical space where it is staged” (72), Cummings argues that the play’s original Off-Off Broadway staging space was not merely a happy accident; moreover, something resembling it becomes integral to a successful performance. Fornés herself, Cummings notes, directed a 1986 production “in Minneapolis with members of a feminist theater collective called At the Foot of the Mountain” (72). In a careful redesign so that the play fit into a former firehouse, Fornés “instigated a spectatorial self-awareness that was immediate and thrilling and that strengthened a sense of intimacy and identity with the audience as a whole and with the cast of female characters” (Cummings 73).

A 1992 Yale Repertory Theatre production directed by Lisa Peterson, Cummings notes, employed a “cleverness of its staging strategy [that] backfired” (74). Having the audience members “look for a colored dot on the cover of their playbills and then move to the corner of the auditorium where a Yale undergrad wearing a bright sweatshirt of the corresponding color was waiting to guide them to the four locations” (74) of the play “undermined the dynamic of the play” (73). Likewise, the fact that the “start of each Part Two scene was signaled by a series of recorded chimes, as was the stipulated moment to move to the next location” created “an undesirable Pavlovian effect that made the experience of the play more mechanical and consumerist” (74). Cummings partly excuses what he perceives as the failures of the Yale production by pointing out that “The Yale Repertory Theatre seats 500” (74), an audience by definition larger than an Off-Off Broadway theatre accommodates while the “more compelling Minneapolis production had an audience of one hundred or less” (74).
Most likely sympathetic to the demands of adapting *Fefu and Her Friends* to differently sized theatres, Fornés took yet another approach when, in 1996, she directed the play at Muhlenberg College. This time, Fornés “took the opportunity to adapt the script for a single setting” (Cummings 75), with “the four scenes of Part Two … rewritten to take place in Fefu’s living room as well” (75). The playwright’s “decision to reconfigure the play for one setting is radical for those who regard the environmental second act as essential to the play’s meaning and experience” (75), Cummings writes. Moreover, “It demonstrates a playwright’s desire to have her work seen as widely as possible” as well as her “particular attitude towards her plays as never altogether finished” (75). For a writer who has said, as Vogel told Mary Louise Parker, “Every script, every new play is a theory” (*Vogel Bomb*), this willingness resonates.

Although *Fefu* remains Fornés’s most popular work, it is by no means representative of her career. Echoing Vogel’s praise of John Guare, playwright Lanford Wilson told David Savran, “I’m crazy about [Fornés’s] work,” for “She’s unlike anyone else, which is amazing to see. And she’s like me in that one play is not much like the next” (*Voice* 319). The play David Krasner considers Fornés’s finest, *Mud* (1983), demonstrates her range. Granted, as Kent acknowledges, *Mud* shares with *Fefu* the notion of the “trapped” woman, and “The shots fired at the end of *Mud* recall the ending of *Fefu*” (163); however, the plays are very different in tone and circumstance.

Just as *Fefu* contains notes of Surrealism, *Mud* has moments that Moroff identifies as “absurd” (66). The play has three characters, starting with Mae and Lloyd, who Mae says “are related but I don’t know what to call it. We are not brother and sister. We are like animals who grow up together and mate” (28). Mae introduces a third character, Henry, because while she and Lloyd are illiterate, Mae describes herself as a “hungry soul” who feels satisfied “to hear
words that speak ... lovingly to my soul” (27). Henry, who can read some, brings joy even as he morally defiles Mae by his “absurd objectification” (Moroff 66). Eventually, Mae becomes fed up with her ill treatment by Henry and Lloyd and attempts to flee the quicksand-like mud, only to have Lloyd shoot and kill her, carrying her body, “drenched in blood and unconscious” (40), back onto the stage. A dying Mae utters, “Like the starfish, I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I long for it. I thirst for it. I would die for it” (40).

Audiences may find Mae’s death dissatisfying. Rosemary Curb writes of a 1986 audience that considered Mud “an anti-feminist, negative portrayal of women” (10). This audience asked why Mae had to die, a question Fornés answered by replying “that she too would like to see women liberated, but to allow Mae to escape from her situation in any way other than death would not be true to the dramatic situation or to the relationships” (10). In true Fornés fashion, the question of how much Mae escapes by dying is a significant one. Kent argues that Lloyd “inadvertently released [Mae] ... from the mud of earthbound existence towards the light of the guardians” (163).

Fornés remained a productive playwright through The Signature Theatre Company’s 1999 – 2000 dedication of its season to her, for which she produced her last play, Letters from Cuba. Soon after, dementia took away her creative capabilities and forced her to leave her beloved Sheridan Square apartment. By this time, however, Fornés’s reputation as one of her

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7 David Krasner argues for a historic context for Mud, writing that the play ”countermands the optimism of Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’” (119). Reading the play, and particularly Mae, this way sets up the possibility of a comparison that includes Vogel’s The Oldest Profession, a direct indictment of Reaganomics, and Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls, with its commentary on the English predecessor of Reaganomics, Thatcherism. Such a discussion, however, is beyond the purview of this dissertation.
era’s foremost playwrights was well established, as was her acknowledged impact upon Vogel’s work.

1.3 Vogel’s “Gods”: Caryl Churchill

Among the three playwrights Vogel has listed as her “gods,” Caryl Churchill is the only non-American as well as the only one upon whom Vogel has bestowed the appellation “divine” (Farnsworth). Born in London, England, on September 3, 1938, Churchill was a small child during World War II and the final dissolution of the British Empire. After her family emigrated to Montreal, Canada, when Churchill was ten, she returned to England for her university education and has remained there. Best known early on for a series of BBC radio plays while Churchill was having her sons, born between 1963 – 1969, Churchill began “working with companies” such as Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment in 1976 (Aston xi) and has written more than thirty plays since.

Churchill is best known for *Cloud Nine* (frequently written out as *Cloud 9*), her 1979 drama that moved to New York and won the Obie Award in 1982, and *Top Girls*, her 1982 play that won the Obie the following year. As the 1982 Obie indicates, *Cloud Nine* offered what Amelia Kritzer has called Churchill’s “first experience of solid (though certainly not unanimous) critical acclaim” (112). The success of *Cloud Nine* most likely made theatre companies and producers receptive to another Churchill script in *Top Girls*; Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond warn, however, against in any way regarding the second play as a sequel to the first. They write, “Both from a critic’s perspective and from a performer’s point of view, seeing or being involved in one Churchill play is not a way of being prepared for the next” (13). Echoing what Vogel has said about Guare and Lanford Wilson has said about Fornés never writing the same play twice,
they cite a David Benedict comment during a Theatre Voice discussion that “with Churchill ‘there are no repeats’” (13).

*Cloud Nine* consists of two acts, the first set in colonial Africa during the nineteenth century and the second in London a century later, although the characters have aged only twenty-five years. The play literally starts with a song of empire, beginning with the lines, “Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride. / Now meet the world united, now face it side by side” (1). Black servant Joshua’s first line addresses the racism explicit in empire, paraphrasing Line 2 of William Blake’s “Little Black Boy” almost verbatim: “My skin is black but oh my soul is white” (2). In addition to its critique of the British Empire, the play also displays physical colonialism, with the stage directions specifying that in Act One, Betty, the colonial administrator’s wife, be “played by a man;” Joshua, “his black servant [be] played by a white;” Edward, “his son [be] played by a woman” (n.p.). “Victoria, his daughter, represented by a doll, is,” Aston notes, “like her governess and Clive’s mother-in-law, not important enough to be properly introduced” (32). In Act Two, Clive is deceased, possibly as a result of the stage direction “JOSHUA raises his gun to shoot CLIVE” (47) at the conclusion of Act One. Clive’s death symbolizes the death of the Empire. Now, too, Victoria has been given a (female) body and a (male) husband, Martin.

In its cross-gender casting and its representation of same-sex love both in the first act (Harry Bagley, “an explorer”) and the second (Edward and his lover, Gerry, among others), *Cloud Nine* destabilizes and defamiliarizes sexual orientation and gender identity, making gender performative rather than innate, to effects audiences frequently have found pleasing. Churchill proceeded with serious intent, however. “During the research period,” Kritzer writes, “in addition to hearing guest speakers and sharing books, each member of the workshop took a turn
to tell her or his life story and answer questions about personal sexual experiences.” In addition, “the actors participated in improvisations based on social status and social norm-breaking” (112).

The New York production of *Cloud Nine* particularly demonstrates Churchill’s commitment to the experiments. As Helene Keyssar writes, director Tommy Tune “firmly resisted a campy or caricatured presentation of characters” (95), directing the actors “to play their parts with authenticity and commitment” (95). Churchill intervened when she “returned to New York a few months after the production had opened there” and “told the man playing Betty that she did not like the bits of business and hamming he had added to his performance” (95). After the actor “saw a video tape, [he] agreed with Churchill’s judgment, and changed the performance” (95). Subsequently, Churchill recalled, “at one point during rehearsals … she had ‘forgotten’ that the actor playing Betty was a man, despite the fact that he was dressed in jeans and sweatshirt and sporting a full beard” (95).

When Act Two begins, the audience may have become familiarized to Churchill’s casting requirements and the statements they make, but the sexual politics are still radical for a play that has begun as has *Cloud Nine*. Lin, a new character, tells us not only that “I am a lesbian” (51) but also that “I hate men” (52). Lin also greets Edward with “You’re gay, aren’t you?” (52), a statement he initially denies. Lin propositions Victoria, “Will you have sex with me?” (57), as Scene One ends. Then, Scene Two begins with Edward and his lover Gerry, who gives an extensive monologue about performing oral sex on a stranger on a train (59). All the characters, writes Kritzer, “are involved in working out sexual and relationship problems and exploring new options” (115). These options include Edward’s “*ménage a trois* with Lin and Vic” (Kritzer 115), a sex act or performance that is not only transgressive but incestuous since Victoria is his sister. All the same, asserts Kritzer, “Victorianism has not been entirely laid to rest, despite all
the evidence of sexual liberation: its ghosts drift through the second act” (115). In the case of Betty, the ghosts can be literal, for the play ends as “BETTY from Act One comes” and “BETTY and BETTY embrace” (87).

Perhaps one reason *Cloud Nine* would help place Churchill among Vogel’s “gods” is something asserted by Janelle Reinelt, who believes that *Cloud Nine* “perfectly matched its content and form to the zeitgeist\(^8\) of the time – it captured the tumultuous project of sexual experiment in its utopian aspect while equally capturing the confusion and pain of rapid social change” (27). The play “has also presented within it the pain and confusion of gender ambiguity and radical socio-sexual change across a range of subject positions, including class, sexual, racial and generational differences” (Reinelt 29). Aston views “the sexual politics in *Cloud Nine* as a ‘subject’ which concerns us all” (37). This subject recurs in Vogel’s work.

So, too, do the “subject of feminism as an issue of immediate, although not exclusive, concern to women” (Aston 37) and Churchill’s acknowledged socialism as expressed in *Top Girls*. *Top Girls* arose from what Aston calls a concern for “bourgeois feminism” (38) that peaked in England with Margaret Thatcher’s election as prime minister in 1979. Churchill saw Thatcherite conservative policies as inimical to her belief in “the inseparability of feminism and socialism” (Kritzer 149). Churchill has told Lynne Truss about a trip to the United States around 1980 and her conversations with “‘women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-president and so on’” (Aston 38). Churchill felt the need to comment upon the difference between this attitude and that in England, “‘where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with

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\(^8\) I will return to the idea of zeitgeist in the chapter discussing Paula Vogel’s *Indecent*. 
women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder’’” (38). These notions “‘fed into Top Girls’’” (38), which Churchill completed in 1982.

The ostensible protagonist of Top Girls, Marlene, is highly problematized, not a “transcendent female figure” but rather “a woman who accepts male models of success as exemplary and is thus not someone we are meant simply to admire’’ (Keyssar 98). Marlene is a “top girl” who has earned a promotion at the eponymous employment agency where she works. The play begins as she hosts a dinner party that includes women, real and imagined, from a wide range of history and cultures: explorer Isabella Bird, the possibly fictional Pope Joan, Japanese courtesan Lady Nijo, Dull Gret of the Breughel painting, and Chaucer’s Patient Griselda. This reimagining of a celebratory dinner as such a conversation is likely something Joseph Marohl had in mind when he wrote that “‘what the audience experiences during the performance, then, is defamiliarization of the ordinary (alienation effect)” (in Aston 43).

Any hopes the audience may have of witnessing a display of these women’s glorious achievements, however, are quickly dashed. Lady Nipo tells a heartrending tale of losing one child after another before she leaves behind being a concubine and becomes, instead, a wandering nun. Patient Griselda has not ultimately lost her children but has endured a sort of trial by ordeal from her husband before being allowed to keep them. Pope Joan has faced the worst fate. Having gained the papacy even though “[w]omen, children and lunatics can’t be Pope” (20), Joan has unknowingly become pregnant and misunderstood what was happening to her body all the way until the moment when “the baby just slid out onto the road” (21) during the Rogation Day procession. Almost instantly, the cardinals and townspeople “took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death” (22). Hardly “top girls,” these women have
all “based their lives on imitation of and obedience to masculine authority” (Kritzer 143-44). After Act One Scene One, they never appear again.

The audience may be forgiven for feeling confused by the ensuing scenes, well into Act Two, involving the Top Girls agency and Marlene’s sister, Joyce, and niece, Angie. Act Two Scene Two, the final scene, brings everything into focus, however. Set a year before the preceding scenes, this scene takes place in the home of Joyce, Marlene’s sister, where Angie has invited her aunt in her mother’s name but without her mother’s knowledge. Marlene enters as a doting aunt, “taking presents out of a bright carrier bag” (86), among them the dress the audience has already seen Angie wear in Act One. Within minutes, however, the scene devolves into a spectacle of confession and argument that has something of Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in it.

The scene reveals what Marlene has given up to become a “top girl” and what Joyce has given up by staying home to care for her mother and her daughter. When Joyce reminds Marlene, “You’re the one went away, not me. I’m right here where I was” (90), the audience may reasonably accept that Marlene has made a fairly simple decision. Marlene acknowledges, “Of course I couldn’t get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who’d come home pissed?” (102). Joyce, Joyce and Marlene’s mother, and such a husband, we quickly learn, are not all Marlene has abandoned, however. Joyce’s “I don’t know how you could leave your own child” (102) comes as a complete shock and completely changes the way many will see Marlene. The “niece” about whom Marlene will say, one act earlier but one year hence, “She’s not going to make it” (86), turns out to be her biological daughter, whom she has left for Joyce to raise.
Marlene has internalized a scenario that has her decision to leave Angie work out for everyone. After all, she reminds Joyce, “You were quick enough to take her” (102), and Joyce has no other children. Marlene has “had two abortions” (105), but her reply to Joyce’s suggestion that she could still “[h]ave a child now if you want one” is, “I might do” (104). This view is highly problematized, however, for Marlene has not seen her family for six years and has been so out of touch that she doesn’t know Joyce’s husband has been gone for three years. Nor does Marlene know that Joyce “did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after your fucking baby” (105) or that Angie has “been in the remedial class the last two years” (100). Almost Marlene’s only contact with Angie has been what Aston calls “the clichéd wish-you-were-here postcard which Angie treasures” (43) that Marlene sent from America.

The friction between Marlene and Joyce and their ensuing argument over Thatcher and Reagan take on much larger dimensions. The play overall and this scene in particular illustrate what Reinelt calls “the personal costs paid by women who attained the status of ‘high flyer’ (a term Marlene uses … to describe herself)” (30). “What price independence?” (Reinelt 30) Top Girls asks. One price, Kritzer argues, “of winning such competitions is abandonment of the responsibilities and relationships central to the caring ethic,” especially as shown in its last scene, “with its strong image of Marlene’s cold dismissal of her terrified daughter” (141-42). Kritzer believes that this scene “provokes anger and energizes a revisioning, as well as a redistribution of, power” (142).

Marlene’s clearly opting for a pursuit, or perhaps an imitation, of patriarchal power is of a piece with the Act One women’s “inability to listen to and to share experiences with women,” a lack “indicative of intrasexual oppression” (Aston 39). As Keyssar writes, “Marlene is a woman we must take seriously but she is also a woman who accepts male models of success as
exemplary and is thus not someone we are meant simply to admire” (98). She represents what Reinelt calls “the tensions between the various types of feminism and the lived reality of life in the heyday of the Thatcher government” (30). Marlene, in her support for Thatcher, may even see herself as something of a feminist, but her praise for Thatcher is in quasi masculinist terms: she calls Thatcher “a tough lady, Maggie.” She then jumps quickly to announcing, “I support Reagan … and I want to be free in a free world” (111). She betrays no sense of the “caring ethic” Kritzer says is lost to her worldview.

The political argument between the sisters descends to the worst clichés Conservative and Labour partisans hold against each other. Marlene says, “I hate the working class” (110), presumably including the very people for whom her agency locates employment. Joyce retorts, “I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring” (111). Marlene adds, “I don’t believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes” (111). Joyce sets a trap by asking, “And if they haven’t?” (111), to which Marlene callously snorts, “If they’re stupid or lazy or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I?” (111). Joyce’s plaintive “What about Angie?” (111) should stop Marlene cold, but it does not. Her reply, “You run her down too much. She’ll be all right” (112) is already belied by what she tells Win one scene earlier yet one year later. Small wonder, then, that the literal last word of the play, spoken by Angie, is “Frightening,” which Elin Diamond points out is the English version of Pope Joan’s last word, “terrorum.” Diamond adds that Joan and Angie are often portrayed by the same actress (127).

Although originally a response to the bourgeois feminism of Thatcher England, *Top Girls* has held up well beyond its London and Off-Broadway success. Responding to historian Rosalind Miles’s comments about a 1991 revival, for example, Aston writes, “The need for Churchill’s socialist-feminist critique of class and gender issues is arguably, therefore, all the
more critical in the current backlash climate of the 1990s when even the acceptable face of bourgeois feminism is under attack” (44-45). Then, in response to a 2008 Charles Isherwood review comparing a production of *Top Girls* with *Sex and the City*, Reinelt concluded, “Even if Isherwood has to water down the sophistication and politics of Churchill’s work in order to make this connection with pop culture, he illustrates the way *Top Girls* continues to address topical issues about how women live their lives twenty-five years after its premiere” (32). I believe the events of America’s 2016 Presidential election make Churchill’s play at least as resonant today.

Caryl Churchill enjoys one of the finest reputations of any living playwright, not only in the eyes of Paula Vogel but in those of many of her peers. In 1998, Caroline Egan, interviewed nine writers for *The Guardian*, asking whom each considered the “playwright’s playwright.” Four (Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp, Shelagh Stevenson, and Phyllis Nagy) selected Churchill (Egan TO13). A similar 2011 survey of twenty dramatists for *The Village Voice* found that, once again, a plurality of four playwrights (Vogel, Adam Bock, Julia Cho, and Sheila Callaghan) chose Churchill (Soloski “Who Is”). The term “playwright’s playwright” will resonate later in Joanna Mansbridge’s assessment of Vogel.

This esteem for Churchill has also translated into action. Dan Rebellato reports that the Royal Court Theatre “held not one but two seasons of her work in the 2000s” (163). Both 2002 and, “to mark her seventieth birthday” (163), 2008 were so devoted, with 2008 featuring “ten playwrights [who] directed staged readings of ten of her plays” (163). Also in 2008, Mary Catherine Garrison, Mary Beth Hurt, Elizabeth Marvel, Martha Plimpton, Marisa Tomei, Jennifer Ikeda, and Ana Reeder gave sixty-three performances of *Top Girls* at Broadway’s Biltmore Theatre. *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley gushed that director James Macdonald and the performers had “done full justice” to Churchill’s text. Brantley went on, “And it’s a
delight to see how each settles so comfortably into different complex roles without signaling how clever she is” (“Ladies”). Churchill remains the essential writer Brantley called, in a 2015 review of Cloud Nine, “one of the wisest and bravest playwrights on the planet” (“Review” Cloud Nine C1).

Vogel’s choices of “gods” give a sense of the dramatic principles and techniques she has followed throughout her long career, whether she has been adapting Shakespeare, Albee, Ambrose Bierce, Nabokov, or Sholem Asch. Defamiliarization and negative empathy are among the identifying markers for most Vogel plays. In the next chapter, I will look at how Vogel developed her independent voice through such works as Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief, The Oldest Profession, and And Baby Makes Seven. Vogel’s particular take(s) on feminism, supply-side economics, sex work, and same-sex relationships will inform this chapter.

3  CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING A UNIQUE VOICE

A close observer of American theatre in the late 1970s may plausibly have concluded that Paula Vogel was a potential up-and-coming important playwright. Vogel had twice won the Forbes Heerman and George McCalmon playwriting competition at Cornell University, the second award coming for A Woman for All Reasons, “a feminist take on Robert Bolt’s A Man for All Seasons” (Warner). Vogel then revised this play into Meg, which won the American College Theater Festival’s National Student Playwriting Award in 1977 and was also published the same year by Samuel French. Vogel had already finished Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief, which received a staged reading at Cornell in 1977, if not more9. Other plays were under development as well.

9 Bigsby reports that Desdemona “had been successfully staged” in 1979 “at the New Plays Festival in Louisville and before that, in 1973, in a staged reading at Cornell University” (Modern 390). The 1973 date is highly problematical, given that Vogel did not enroll at Cornell
A decade later, that same observer may have regarded Vogel as a playwright whose early promise had come to very little. Granted, Vogel was ensconced in a prestigious faculty position at Brown University and was both friend and confidant to rising critic David Savran. Her plays, however, were rarely performed, and when they were, they played at such places as San Francisco’s Theatre Rhinoceros and Edmonton, Canada’s, Theatre Network. Vogel had not managed to publish any additional plays. The number of people who had read or seen a Paula Vogel play remained, of necessity, tiny.

This is not to say that Vogel was not writing important plays during this time. Three of the plays she wrote in the 1970s and 1980s – the aforementioned Desdemona, The Oldest Profession (1980), and And Baby Makes Seven (1984) – would eventually run Off-Broadway and make their way into print. Not until the success of Obie Award-winner The Baltimore Waltz (1992), however, would Vogel’s plays from these decades begin to attract significant reading and viewing audiences. It comes as no surprise, then, that C.W.E. Bigsby would point to Vogel’s earliest success as “something of a false start” that required “another fourteen years before a successful revival” (Modern 412). Vogel lived for years with the sting that followed her 1980 experience when, Bigsby adds, “she sent her play The Oldest Profession to theatres across the country only to have them reject it” (411).

Why Vogel languished for so long and how she persevered as a productive, if only marginally known, playwright warrant consideration. In Desdemona, for instance, shifting the focus from Shakespeare’s Othello to the wife Othello strangles and giving Desdemona sexual agency would appear, at first glance, well suited for 1970s feminism. Even though Vogel has

until 1974, and Vogel, when she published the play in The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays, in 1996, did not list a Louisville production. (See Chapter One.)
long considered herself a feminist and, in the 1970s, started a dissertation “[a]nimated by the emerging discourse of feminist dramatic criticism that she was helping forge” (Warner), feminist theatrical groups avoided *Desdemona*, just as they later would *The Oldest Profession* and *And Baby Makes Seven*.

One reason Vogel was, as Joanna Mansbridge writes, “excluded by feminist theater and theory in the early stages of her career” (11) lies in Vogel’s tendency to create what “[t]heater audience in the 1970s and 1980s were not receptive to seeing,” namely “female characters behaving badly” (33). Vogel, Savran adds, “reacted strongly against the first wave of feminist theatre that surfaced during the 1970s, the ‘let’s celebrate-ourselves-as women’ brand of feminism that [Vogel] regards not just as simplistic and ahistorical but also as exclusionary because certain kinds of women (depending on their class or racial or occupational position) inevitably get left out of the celebration” (“Loose Screws” xii). Writing in 1996, Savran posited that for Vogel, “feminism means being politically incorrect” (xii), even in plays Vogel wrote several years before the term “political correctness” entered the lexicon.

Bigsby states that Vogel experienced “marginality, not least because she was not only a woman but an avowed lesbian” (*Modern* 411). Gay playwrights, up until then, Bigsby argues, “had been men and their protagonists, largely, likewise” (411). Bigsby points out that gay male playwrights “could lay claim to a tradition that went back … through Tennessee Williams, Albee, Lorca and Oscar Wilde” (412). Vogel, stylistically “drawn to the expressionists and the absurdist” (412), could offer “an equivalent to Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness” (412), hardly a basis for building a dramatic career, but, Bigsby implies by omission, to few or no
playwrights. Vogel’s response to her lack of success did not include compromising her artistic vision, but it did lead her “to develop works which required little in the way of resources” (411). Very low budgetary requirements might have increased producers’ willingness to stage Vogel; alas, however, either they did not, or they did so only slightly.

Vogel’s artistic vision derives from influences that are not only particular but also unusual. According to Savran, Vogel has read from Brecht and, like Brecht, “writes from a deeply rooted political sense” (“Loose Screws” xi). “[E]ven more significantly,” Savran writes, Vogel reflects the influence “of Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist from whom Brecht purloined the Alienation Effect” (xi). What Savran calls the “Alienation Effect” Vogel and most other readers of Shklovsky derive from Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization,” sometimes rendered as ostranenie. In the simplest of terms, defamiliarization means making the familiar strange. Shklovsky writes that “life becomes nothing and disappears. Automation eats up things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war.” He goes on,

And so what we call art exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things. The device of art is the “ostranenie” of things and the complication of the form which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art. 80

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10 Vogel’s 1998 Bomb magazine interview given to Mary-Louise Parker suggests Vogel did have a playwright in mind. Asked for her five ideal dinner guests, Vogel included Aphra Behn, whom she described as “the first professional playwright in England during the Restoration. She wrote plays, but they were all condemned by the critics.” This comment also gives a sense of what Vogel would have written in her 1970s Cornell doctoral dissertation.
The artist, according to Shklovsky, should seek to make the familiar strange, and so if defamiliarization does not explicitly make the “object” (whether person, place, thing, or even idea) new, it at minimum requires a new look at the object, thereby paralleling if not following Ezra Pound’s modernist dictum to “Make it new.”

In addition to defamiliarization, Vogel also uses negative empathy because she believes, as she said at the 2012 Comparative Drama Conference, “The purpose of drama is to make us project ourselves into everything that we fear and everything that we resist and everything that we are revolted by” (“Paula Vogel on Negative Empathy”). Negative empathy forces us to develop empathy for people we would ordinarily expect to despise. For example, a reader may feel empathy for Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita, a novel which Bigsby cites as an influence upon Desdemona (412) and which also partly inspired Vogel’s How I Learned to Drive. Such a feeling exemplifies negative empathy, as do any positive feelings we project upon Vogel’s character in Drive, child molester Uncle Peck.

While negative empathy constitutes a powerful tool, it has also long been a tough sell to the popular theatre. In her Comparative Drama Conference remarks, Vogel continued, “What we are experiencing in the commercial theatre are models of dramaturgy that have been a purgation of negative empathy,” for popular theatre today is “based on only positive empathy.” Producers and playwrights, Vogel argues, exclusively ask themselves, “Do I like this character?” rather than a question Vogel frequently poses herself of whether she can make her audience, at least to some degree, like an unlikeable character (“Paula Vogel on Negative Empathy”). It is arguably not simplistic to say that the theatres Vogel approached in the 1970s and 1980s, concerned with
fundraising and board members, among other matters, did not want – or dare – to find out. The same is true of many venues, none more than Broadway, today.  

As noted above, *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*, although ignored for more than a decade, eventually earned its due as an important early Vogel play. *Desdemona*, Vogel’s earlier play *Meg*, and her unfinished dissertation on Restoration Drama (as well as her comment on Aphra Behn) indicate that in her twenties, Vogel was highly interested in Renaissance and Restoration England. In later published plays and in her interviews, Vogel frequently alludes to or directly mentions plays of these periods, but she has not offered a subsequent drama set then. She has, however, built upon the use of defamiliarization evident in *Desdemona* throughout her long career.

*Desdemona* defamiliarizes Shakespeare’s *Othello* in a variety of ways, most obviously in its setting and its concomitant focus. Vogel moves the action backstage and makes all of her characters women: Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca from Shakespeare’s tragedy. At the end of Scene 5, the directions state that “we hear the distinct sound of a very loud slap” (186), the blow Shakespeare has Othello strike in Act 4 Scene 1. Mansbridge writes that “Shakespeare’s closed moral universe permeates *Desdemona* from behind the scenes, effecting the bodies, desires, and relationships of the female characters” (42). The play going on front stage, however, does not directly obtrude upon *Desdemona* beyond the slap. We know and the characters discuss but we do not directly see or hear any other action from the masculine realm Shakespeare presents.

Like the backstage setting, Vogel’s title significantly defamiliarizes Shakespeare. The First Folio title of Shakespeare’s play, published in 1623 by the late playwright’s former colleagues John Heminge and Henry Condell, is *The Tragedie of Othello, the Moore of Venice*.

11 This situation makes Vogel’s 2017 debut on Broadway all the more astonishing.
This title, which repeats all the key words from the quarto version published by Thomas Walkley in 1622, leaves little to no doubt as to the tragic figure of the play. Vogel found this emphasis troubling. She has told C.W.E. Bigsby that “‘in the 1970s, when I had read Othello, I was struck by the fact that my main point of identification, of subjectivity, was a man who is supposedly cuckolded, that I was weeping for a man who is cuckolded rather than for Desdemona… and it wounded me a great deal that Desdemona is nothing but an abstraction and that I didn’t find any way of identifying with her’” (Contemporary 299-300).

It is both tempting and facile to say that as the title figure, Desdemona is the protagonist of Vogel’s play that bears her name. While trying to make Desdemona a “real” character rather than an abstraction, Vogel nevertheless toys with the notion of a protagonist in Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief, as a close reading of her title reveals. Indeed, Vogel says that the play literally is about the handkerchief of both Shakespeare’s and her play, which Desdemona demeans as a “crappy little snot rag” (179). Referring to Tom Stoppard’s 1966 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Vogel told Bigsby that she found the play regressive because of its “‘reinforcement, through the Chain of Being motif, of a class structure.’” She added, “‘By foregrounding secondary characters, it was actually saying that there are protagonists’” (300). Then, one of Vogel’s “gods” intervened, for “‘along came Harold Pinter’s Old Times and Maria Irene Fornes’s Fefu and Her Friends and that made me question the whole idea of protagonists’” (300). Wishing to provide a counterpoint to Stoppard, Vogel created Desdemona.

Mansbridge asserts that the subtitle of Desdemona “points to the over determination of this prop and introduces the motif of ‘stealing’ in the play: Emilia steals the hanky, Bianca steals a hen for its blood, Bianca thinks Desdemona steals Cassio from her, and Vogel steals Shakespeare’s play” (43) In stealing Desdemona from Shakespeare, Vogel lets her audience
decide whether to weep for a woman murdered by her husband even while she defamiliarizes Desdemona away from the chaste wife Shakespeare presents. As Mansbridge notes, Vogel dares to ask the following: “What if Iago was telling Othello the truth about Desdemona’s infidelity? How would that challenge our emotional response to the play? Would we champion her death? Why do we weep for Othello, instead of Desdemona?” (33).

Vogel makes Desdemona unfaithful, but her infidelity comes with a defamiliarized twist: she is innocent of any sexual contact with Cassio. Desdemona protests “and of all people to accuse – Michael Cassio!” (183) not as a declaration of virtue but rather as a dismissal of her husband’s lieutenant, whom she calls a “prissy Florentine,” snorting, “Leave it to be a cuckold to be jealous of a eunuch” (183). We are left with no doubts about the extent of the cuckoldry. In addition to a pre-marital sexual history that Emilia calls “giving hand jobs in the pew” (192), Desdemona has gone so far as to work in Bianca’s “establishment … on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights” (194). Desdemona, thus, literally works as a whore, giving her a sexuality far beyond anything her husband suspects. Mansbridge errs in calling Desdemona “exactly the whore Othello imagines her to be” (24) but comes closer to the mark when she adds, “Maybe worse” (24). Whether the way Desdemona exercises her sexual agency is worse than what Othello fears is arguable, but that she is a different kind of whore becomes clear.

Not only does Vogel defamiliarize Desdemona as possessing sexual agency beyond the “once each Saturday night” (195) that Emilia describes with Iago, but Vogel goes a step farther in defamiliarizing the nature of sex work. Rather than making Desdemona a passive receptacle of the sweat and semen of those who purchase time with her body, Vogel presents a Desdemona whose relationship with these men is almost predatory. “I lie in the blackness,” she says, where “they spill their seed into me, Emilia – seed from a thousand lands, passed down through
generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe” (194).

Desdemona describes herself as “taking them all into me” (emphasis mine), adding, “[O]h, how I travel!” (194). Desdemona’s initial attraction to Othello turns out to have been sexual and a means of expressing her acquisitive desires. She recalls “the first time I saw my husband and I caught a glimpse of his skin, and oh, how I thrilled” (193). Desdemona has imagined “a man of a different color” as if he were from “another world and planet,” a means by which she has once thought that “I can escape and see other world” (194). Then, alas, she recalls that “under that exotic façade was a porcelain Venetian” (194).

Desdemona’s sexual agency is problematized by issues of class and race. This and other Vogel plays, Mansbridge notes, “work to champion feminist claims to authority, even as they complicate those claims by drawing attention to the intersection of gender, sexuality, and class” (27). Desdemona may choose to play the bawd on an occasional evening, but Bianca implicitly calls our attention to the stratifications of Venetian society that differentiate her from other sex workers. Bianca tells Desdemona that “if you weren’t born a lady, you’d a been a bleedin’ good blowzabella” (212). Desdemona was born and will die a lady, however. Bianca aspires to what, for a moment now and then, Desdemona casually tosses away, for Bianca dreams that Cassio will marry her and liberate her from Venice and her brothel. “Aw’ve got a tidy sum all saved up fer a dowry” (214), she tells Emilia and Desdemona, and she fantasizes how, as Cassio’s wife, “Aw’d get us a cottage by th’ sea,” and “Aw’d be bearin’im sons so’s to make ‘im proud” (214). Likewise, Emilia shares comments about “the curse of aristocratic blood” (190) even as she acknowledges, “I’d like to rise a bit in the world” and longs for the day Iago can “make me a lieutenant’s widow” (187).
Race is problematized by comments such as Desdemona’s already referenced “porcelain Venetian” remark and also by jokes about sexual potency and phallic endowment at Iago’s expense and, ostensibly, Othello’s “credit.” We learn, by comparison, that “The wee-est pup of th- litter comes a-bornin’ in the world with as much” (182) as Iago, who very likely has patronized Desdemona. When asked for details about her customers, Desdemona says, “There was one man who … didn’t last very long” (219), to which Emilia replies, “Aye. That’s the one” (219). Indeed, Emilia describes her own sexual experiences with Iago by recalling, “He’d be all through with me by the time of the third ‘Hail Mary’” (220).

A hoof-pick Desdemona finds sets up more racist and phallic comments. Desdemona proclaims that “if I could find a man with just such a hoof-pick – he could pluck out my stone” (181). Mansbridge considers the hoof-pick “a metonymic representation of the male-driven playworld of Othello [that] acts as a masculine counterpart to the handkerchief” (44). Desdemona whispers to Bianca that Othello is “constantly tearing his crotch hole somehow” (205), a likely reference to his libido and endowment. Then, in Scene 19, which contains no dialogue, at Emilia’s expense, “Desdemona holds up the hoof-pick, and Bianca and Desdemona explode in raucous laughter,” leaving Emilia “furious” (206). Desdemona, who derides Emilia so much as to call her “a vessel of vinegar” (203, emphasis mine) after Iago’s “spilling his vinegar into her for fourteen years of marriage, until he’s corroded her womb from the inside out” (203), dismissively tells this wife of a poorly endowed man lacking stamina, “Oh, hush, Mealy – just mend your crotches, and don’t listen” (209). One woman is demeaned because of her white husband’s lack of sexual prowess while the other relies on a racist trope as she takes her black husband’s potency for granted, pining instead for Lodovico, of whom she boasts, “[T]hat was a lover!” (191).
Desdemona finally defamiliarizes Shakespeare’s play through its negation of two of the play’s most famous lines, “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (5.1.7), and “Of one that loved not wisely but too well” (5.1.361). Vogel specifies that Desdemona, which “was written in thirty cinematic ‘takes’” (176), should be performed in “jump cuts,” with “no blackouts between scenes” (176). “In the 1993 Circle Repertory production,” Mansbridge reports, “the brief scenes were divided by bulb flashes followed by frozen tableaux” (37), providing “at once, historical portraits – a museum diorama – and also contemporary images – a film still” (38). The lack of blackouts negates Shakespeare’s “Put out the light.”

Near the end, Desdemona then poignantly defamiliarizes through negation “one who loved not wisely but too well.” Realizing, the directions state, that “Othello’s been smelling the sheets for traces of a lover,” she wails, “That isn’t love. It isn’t love” (223). Desdemona’s ensuing comment, “Surely he’ll not … harm a sleeping woman” then rings hollow not just because we know her over determined end but also because she subconsciously realizes the lengths to which her jealous husband is being driven. Emilia brushes Desdemona’s hair, preparing her for what we know will be her death scene, giving exactly “ninety-nine” (224) strokes before the play ends one stroke away from impending death. When Vogel finally gives the stage direction “Blackout” (224), we realize the sad finality of the moment. Vogel’s powerful use of the “put out the light” and “that loved not wisely” lines from Othello is all the more remarkable given that she told a 2012 audience that she “didn’t re-read it on purpose” (Herren 12) while writing Desdemona.

Desdemona did not attract attention outside Ithaca, New York, and possibly Louisville, Kentucky, until the success of The Baltimore Waltz helped prompt New York’s Circle Repertory Company to perform the play in 1993. The production’s mixed reviews lauded Vogel’s
“extended bit of intellectual vaudeville” that offered “a certain shocked gratification” (Brantley “Iago’s Subterfuge”) and saw a “biting diversion” (Gerard) in its premises. For Ben Brantley, however, “the novelty of the joke wears thin” while Jeremy Gerard deemed the entire play “woefully underwritten.” Both critics compared Desdemona unfavorably with Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Comments on the actors were kinder, especially for Cherry Jones. Brantley wrote that she “finds a moving, wounded quality in Bianca that transcends the lines she has been given to speak.”

The passage of two decades and the emergence of new critics would see Desdemona receive more favorable reviews. Keith Glab opened his review of a 2013 production at Chicago’s Sea Change Theatre with a neutral comparison between the play and Stoppard’s. After a cautionary note about “bastardizing a Shakespearean masterpiece,” he concluded by saying the production “lands enough interesting moments in this ambitious undertaking to make the show worth a view.” One year later, Camilla Gurtler, in reviewing a Park Theatre production in London, was less ambivalent to the point of gushing. She called the play “a hilarious and incredibly imaginative other side to the lives of the women.” She considered the entire production “incredibly funny and touching, and a female tour-de-force.” It offered, Gurtler concluded, some “secret voices of Shakespeare’s women.” Perhaps more importantly, as noted by Mansbridge, Desdemona remains “the work of a young playwright immersed in a canon weighted heavily toward British plays” and so neither as original nor as unique as Vogel’s work would soon become. All the same, Mansbridge points out, in Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief, “we can hear Vogel defining her own authorial voice” (47).

12 Perhaps Vogel had these reviews in mind when she lamented to David Savran, “Tom Stoppard can do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but Paula Vogel can’t do Desdemona” (Savran, Driving 16).
In *The Oldest Profession*, that voice has addressed topics closer to home and, although Vogel had not yet turned thirty, matured. As in *Desdemona*, *The Oldest Profession* engages in dialogue with an existing text, but this time the author is American (David Mamet) and the text contemporary (*Duck Variations*). *Duck Variations* (1972) has only two characters, a pair of elderly men who tell stories about ducks that are, in reality, meditations on their fear of aging and dying. In *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel expands the cast to five women in their seventies and eighties who are “sitting in the sun” on a “long bench on 72nd Street and Broadway, New York City” (131). The play is set “shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980” (130). During a series of blackouts, the cast is reduced one character at a time until, just before the final blackout, the sole remaining character sits “plaintively quiet, at times watching the traffic” from “the middle of the bench.” She looks “very frail, and a bit frightened” during “a slow fade-out” (172).

The play is not so much about death, however, as it is about the memories the women cherish and the present they inhabit. They differ from almost any such group of five women presented onstage in that they are all geriatric practitioners of what is euphemistically called “the oldest profession,” sex work. The word “oldest” in the play’s title cleverly puns off this euphemism and the fact that an audience is probably not prepared for five working prostitutes of these ages. Seeing women who toil at what feminism generally regards as work demeaning to women also contrasts with the “sunny day” (130) on which the play commences. Although “morning in America” will not become President Reagan’s campaign slogan for another four years, this play makes clear that the prosperity alluded to in the slogan has not taken these five women off the street.
In *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel defamiliarizes Mamet’s work by making the characters women and increasing their number. This defamiliarization has little to no effect on an audience that is far less likely to be familiar with *Duck Variations* than with *Othello*. Vogel’s more difficult task lies in defamiliarizing older women and sex work: society does not normally associate older women with prostitution or prostitution with the elderly. Indeed, viewing senior citizens in any context involving sexuality was problematical in 1980 and, despite various productions and publications addressing the subject, may remain so today. Mansbridge notes here a “double defamiliarization” in that the play “works against the desexualization that typically accompanies being a senior citizen, by transforming this stage of life into one of social virility” and because “prostitution is defamiliarized as a profession built on nurturing, compassion, and love, rather than corruption, disease, and social deviation” (94). Furthermore, as troubling as sexually active women may have been when *The Oldest Profession* was written, the play also addresses and defamiliarizes another subject that may be even more problematical. Ronald Reagan was and is associated with the robust presentation of capitalism, but a valid question is whether what the women in *The Oldest Profession* are engaging in is capitalist activity or something more generally associated with at-risk teens who are often LGBT runaways, survival sex.

Understanding *The Oldest Profession* requires simultaneously balancing the political and economic issues the play raises with the individual personalities of the women involved. Bigsby defines them not by their means of income but rather, like Mamet’s two old men, by stories. “Like Mamet’s characters they, too, are storytellers,” Bigsby writes. “Their meaning lies in part in their stories, as in their sense of social utility and shared circumstances” (*Modern* 412).
Deaths silence these storytellers until “the play ends with a Beckett-like moment of silent stasis” (412).

We must ask ourselves what to make of these individual women and the stories they tell. For Vogel, the individual women and their stories are extremely important. As she has told Bigsby, “I named the youngest prostitute after my grandmother,” who “suffered a heart attack that fall before I wrote [the play] and she was the youngest of five.” Vogel adds, “All of the prostitutes are based on stories and characters of my older aunts and they died in the order that they died in the play” (in Bigsby, Contemporary 300, emphasis mine). Vogel’s choices here came as a shock to some, none more than Jon Jory of the Actors Theatre of Louisville who had “commissioned this as a one-act.” Jory’s horror “that I would have my grandmother as a prostitute and that I would use the women in my family in that way” was so great that it “ruptured forever [her] relationship” (Contemporary 300)13 with him.

Of the five characters, 83-year-old Mae is the oldest and has the oldest stories. She even discusses “[t]he depression of ’97” (most probably the year of her birth), when her father’s patronage of a brothel in Storeyville14 ensures that madam “Miss Sophie saved our lives” and “couldn’t let us starve,” so she “came and put groceries on our back step” (139). Mae, by 1980, has retired from sex work and become a madam, or management, herself. Still, she nostalgically recalls how after her father became solvent again, her mother became pregnant with a boy, and “Miss Sophie said she’d be real pleased if they named that boy after her gentleman protector”

13 In Modern American Drama, 1945 – 2000, Bigsby cites Louisville as the city where Desdemona was staged at the New Plays Festival. Although Bigsby does not mention Jon Jory or Actors Theatre of Louisville, this city and Vogel’s subsequent rupture with Jory may hint at why Vogel does not mention a Louisville production in The Baltimore Waltz and other Plays, where, in 1993, Desdemona was finally published.

14 Storyville, on which Storeyville seems based, was the name for the New Orleans section where prostitution thrived at the time of Mae’s childhood.
This story is quite familiar to the other four women, who chant in unison “Radcliffe” when Mae starts, “So they named my brother” (140).

“Germanic” (130) Ursula, at 79, is the oldest practicing prostitute. Her stories recall both the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression of 1929. “I was making a pretty penny in 1927,” she recalls of the Prohibition era, “until someone – one of you! – snitched on me” (140). Although Ursula acknowledges the effects of the Great Depression with her attack on banks in “I learned that the hard way in ‘29” (136), she nevertheless denounces “the whole Keynesian economy claptrap” and eschews the notion of an old age pension, proclaiming, “Subsidized begging – Medicare. Social Security has no place in a free market” (135). Ursula proclaims the value of advertising, which she calls “the soul of the modern marketplace” and recommends that the women “place pithy personals in the Village Voice” (141). She also suggests a niche market such as “a Harold and Maude situation” (142), citing the 1971 Hal Ashby film about Harold (Bud Cort), a young man in love with death, who has a consummated relationship with Maude (Ruth Gordon), an old woman in love with life.

Lillian, a 75-year old to whom “[a]ge has been gentle” (130), “wouldn’t mind being eligible for a government subsidy each month in recognition of all my years of public service” (135). Hampered by failing eyesight and bad knees, she has gone from being “Miss Mae’s Wild Irish Rose” and “the prettiest of us all” with her “loveliest skin” (153) to reduced circumstances that leave her “blowing half of Jefferson Square” (154). She also services a Mr. Loman, the father of “[t]wo good-for-nothing sons who are God-knows-where” (146), who pays with “long silk stockings circa 1945” (145) until Lillian dies and we learn he has “gone to the Presbyterian Home” (155).
Edna, a “good time girl,” is 74 but still “[l]oves her work” (130). She is also Vera’s best friend. Edna’s “willing to die trying” (147) cheerful approach to her work helps make her financially productive, as when she brags, “Fourteen AND two dollars and fifty cents in tips” (144) about her haul in the first scene. Still, Edna seems to speak derisively when she says, “[Ursula’s] been reading the Wall Street Journal again” (142), and she voices no concern about Mae’s egalitarian attitude of dividing the funds equally. Ursula takes over after Mae’s death and, her Depression-era distrust of banks notwithstanding, puts part of the group’s funds into a certificate of deposit, which Edna calls “an account where we can’t touch it” (160). Ursula’s business approach inevitably contrasts with Edna’s good time aesthetic, resulting in an “I quit” and “You can’t quit. You’re fired” exchange (164). Shepard and Lamb point out that “Edna … wants nothing to do with Ursula’s promotion of such late-capitalist virtues as hyper-efficient worker productivity and profit maximization” (201). Edna finally reveals a secret she has held for more than four decades: “The money thing has always gone to your head. The same thing happened when you were bootlegging liquor; you turned strange. I couldn’t stand it. That’s why I turned you in” (164). A few tense moments later, Edna returns from the third blackout with “I thought she’d never die” (167).

Vera, the character named for Vogel’s grandmother, is as noted above, the youngest at 72. Her character description is that she “[l]oves the sun” (130). Vera clings to a dream of leaving the Life, telling her four companions that a “Mr. Simon has asked for my hand in marriage” (149). Mae takes the offer seriously, telling Vera, “Mr. Simon has a pension. And money in the bank. It’s security” (150). Ursula attempts to dash Vera’s hopes, however, with “Vera’s not just a Woman with a Past; she’s a Woman with an Epic” (150). Although Vera occupies herself with quotidian matters one might expect of a woman who desires a marriage,
such as her opening speech on lemon sole, her meditation on a “cake for my birthday” that is “made with Grand Marnier” (134), and her concern for the price of brie at Mr. Zabar’s (135), she nevertheless indicates loyalty to the group, telling them, “I can’t do this to you. I’ll just thank Mr. Simon for the honor but —” (151). The entire discussion is rendered moot when we learn that Mr. Simon’s “kids have kidnapped him to New Jersey” (155), perhaps indicating their horror at the idea of a sexually active elderly father, particularly one who, seriously or not, proposes marriage to a whore.

Bigsby regards the play’s final scene, which contains no dialogue but offers a “frail” and “frightened” Vera “sitting alone in the middle of the bench” as “a Beckett-like moment of silent stasis” (Modern 412). Together, the five elderly sex workers have eeked out an existence; alone, Vera finds herself in a world where she must fend for herself without the benefit of what Reagan and others have called a social safety net. The earlier discussion of Social Security and Medicare has been pointless, for none of these five women qualify for either. As Mansbridge points out, they “represent the alienated labor force” (96) that is part of an underground economy. Vera’s brief dream of a marriage also seems a chimera, especially in a society where children may overrule the wishes of parents simply because the parents have grown old and perhaps expressed a desire to behave contrary to the way that society defines “appropriate” behavior for people of that age. Vera may “like Donnie and Marie” (134), but the wholesome Osmonds would undoubtedly recoil in horror at the way Vera has lived her life and may even be literally unable to fathom her.

Two sets of allusions in The Oldest Profession may help us get at what Vogel is doing in the play. The aforementioned Mr. Loman is part of an extended homage to Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller’s searing indictment of the American Dream. Not only does the play refer to Mr.
Loman’s silk stockings and good-for-nothing sons, but it even contains an ersatz “requiem for Mr. Loman” (146) that recalls Miller’s final scene. Mansbridge asserts that Lillian’s relationship with Mr. Loman brings “the prostitute out of the shadows of Willy Loman’s failed life and into the spotlight” (101).

For all their realization that “Mr. Loman has lost his marbles” (145), the women actually sound like Arthur Miller’s character at such moments as Ursula’s recalling her “pretty penny in 1927” (140) and their description of the defunct brothel at Storeyville. Edna recalled, “I liked Storeyville when it was legal,”15 to which Ursula adds, “The working girls loved Storeyville” (140). Mae waxes nostalgic about “the House where we all first met” and a time when “[t]here was honor in the trade” (139). Ursula even ironically echoes Willy’s parting speech about loyalty to Howard when she says, “Men who treated their wives and mothers right treated their mistresses right, too” (139).

The name Storeyville gives a mythic quality to the place the characters in The Oldest Profession describe, just as their reminiscences suggest a Golden Age of prostitution that recalls Willy’s mythologizing his brother Ben and the early years of his own career. Other characters challenge Willy’s inflated claims about the past, and we may do well to wonder whether a brothel really existed where the workers “knew them all; knew their wives and kids, too” (139). Shepard and Lamb argue that the women’s “art of taking each other and us on tours of their rich lives in Storeyville … necessarily demands narrative selection and suppression” (201). Both Willy and the women of The Oldest Profession want to believe in a past and a set of possibilities, but legitimate questions persist about the extent to which their desires coincide with the realities

15 Prostitution, although nominally illegal, was tolerated in the Storyville section of New Orleans until the district was officially closed in 1917.
available to them. Just as Willy’s do, their wants may reflect a phenomenon James Truslow Adams identified in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. Adams coined the term “American Dream” and defined it as

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

Both Willy’s and the women’s recollections intimate a time when they lived the American Dream; both sets of reminiscences, however, are highly suspect.

Another possible allusion in *The Oldest Profession* as yet unacknowledged by critics and more subtly detailed is to Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, particularly to its character Amanda Wingfield. Vogel has long been an admirer of Williams, telling Elizabeth Farnsworth of “the remarkable women characters written by Tennessee Williams” (“Prize-Winning”). Amanda Wingfield qualifies as one of Williams’s great mature female characters. Born in the late Nineteenth Century in a minimally Reconstructed South, Amanda has not pursued nor does she expect for her daughter Laura an American Dream based on “ability or achievement” in any profession. In Scene VI, Amanda tells Laura, “All women are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be!” This trap can even include the bra stuffers Amanda says are called “‘Gay Deceivers.’” Although Amanda has failed to keep her own husband at home after he “fell in love with long distance” (Scene I), she nevertheless hopes her daughter can
both trap and keep Jim O’Connor, the “gentleman caller” Tom invites unawares into the Wingfield home.

Amanda Wingfield does not cast the same long shadow over *The Oldest Profession* as Willy Loman, yet her presence is recognizable. Ursula, the least nostalgic of the women, specifically mentions “gentlemen callers,” who she says “are a dying breed” (141). Mae’s “menfolk bathed, their hair combed back and dressed in their Sunday best, waiting downstairs happy and shy” (139) at the House in Storeyville call to mind Amanda’s “Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain” when she “received seventeen! – gentleman callers” and when “sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all” (Scene 1). A discerning audience may see Storeyville representing to the women of *The Oldest Profession* what Blue Mountain does to Amanda Wingfield. Similarly, the clients Mae, Ursula, Lillian, Edna, and Vera have serviced become analogous (down to the choice of terms) to Amanda’s “gentleman callers.” Last, and perhaps most importantly, the artful seduction a prostitute would have learned in a more reputable brothel seems eerily similar to the “pretty trap” Amanda thinks it a woman’s duty to set for a man. Perhaps Bigsby had Amanda Wingfield in mind when he wrote that *Profession*, “like Tennessee Williams’s drama, places time and its ironies at the centre of attention, which dramatises the losing battle between love, or perhaps more patently, fiction, and the deconstructive logic of time” (*Contemporary* 303).

The characters in *The Oldest Profession* never address whether they entered the Life as an entrepreneurial choice, as an economic necessity, or for another reason. The cross purposes they have reached during their decades of sex work hint at multiple motives that would explain why Ursula speaks in late capitalist terms against which Edna pushes back hard. Savran argues they look back to and thus have emerged from “a time when there was a palpable connection
between people and both the work they performed and the things they consumed” (“Screws” xv). Mansbridge, on the other hand, situates the women in both the times of their youth and of their present, calling the play “[e]qual parts Beckett, Vaudeville, and *The Golden Girls*” (92) and also referencing the 1980s film *Cocoon*, another work that contains “elderly women with active libidos” (93).

Whatever their motivations and perhaps despite their origins, *Profession’s* quintet give a take on the American Dream. Mansbridge attributes the play with “[i]nserting prostitution into the most enduring national myth – the American Dream – [when] Mae question the work ethic of the street prostitutes” (95). Mae demands, “Where the hell is their pride? Where the hell is their ambition? This is America, where any girl can start in the alley and work her way up to Madam.”  

But is Mae correct? In an era following free love and in a city where Mayor Ed Koch has already begun what subsequent Mayor Giuliani will intensify as what Mansbridge calls “the hypercommercialization of midtown Manhattan and the subsequent displacement of many prostitutes and strip clubs to the outer corners of the island” (94), are the madams, like their erstwhile clients, a dying breed?

Mae has done a remarkable job of holding her band together, rightfully boasting, “Well, I’ll tell you what – this has been our beat for over forty-five years, and listen, baby, we still tick!” (137). What is more, the women, even as they occupy themselves with stories of days gone by, have also made attempts at keeping up with the times, rather than completely giving themselves over to the past. Ursula’s free market advocacy and Mae’s reminder that “President Reagan has

16 Mansbridge writes, “This line was added to the Signature Theatre production and does not appear in the published play-text” (202).
called on all Americans to reduce the deficit, and to balance the budget” (148) reflect their efforts at self-reliance and ongoing relevance.

Still, even as they have persevered, the women have begun enduring hardships they lack the power to overcome. Ursula’s rant against Social Security, a program already in place for more than forty years by 1980, seems untimely, and certainly contrary to her own best interests. Worse, Vera’s concerns about food prices are justified, for after Mae counts a day’s take, she tells the women, “[W]e are depleting our savings account to the tune of fifty dollars per month” (148). None of the suggestions for additional work and income seem feasible.

The women have also fallen behind culturally. Shepard and Lamb point out that Harold and Maude is “Ursula’s referent film” (201). “Edna’s last movie,” they add, was The Sound of Music, the 1965 musical that “romanticizes the pleasure of foiling fascism, [and] makes risk somewhat glamorous” (201). It is a dated film set in an even more distant past rendered ahistorical to the point that pluck and excellent show tunes provide everything one needs to escape even as existential a threat as the Nazis. Neither it nor anything else prepares Vera for the final scene, when, a forlorn figure, she sits alone in a world she no longer recognizes. She may occupy the middle of the bench, but she has symbolically come to the end of her road. She knows of no new madam to help market her aged body, and she possibly does not even know where she will lay her weary head when this night and the night after that inevitably come.

Like Desdemona, The Oldest Profession found only miniscule audiences for at least the first decade of its existence. The first published edition records only a New York City Hudson Guild production before 1988. In 1990, Vogel directed a reading of the play at Brown, with a
cast that featured three professors, Susanne Woods, Anne Shaver, and Coppelia Kahn. Finally, in 2004, the Off-Broadway Signature Theater Company, in a season devoted to Vogel’s plays, staged a production that featured Marylouise Burke as Vera, Joyce Van Patton as Ursula, Carlin Glynn as Lillian, Katherine Helmond as Mae, and Priscilla Lopez as Edna.

Reviews of this production and of the play itself were mixed. Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* found “some of [Vogel’s] distinctive talent” in the play, which he called “Vogel’s most Brechtian play,” reflecting what “is not an approach that comes easily to her.” He added that “Vogel gives the impression that she is leading with her heart instead of her head.” David Rooney, writing for *Variety*, all but dismissed the play as “a distinctly minor early work” that was, in seemingly equal parts, “cryptofeminist sitcom,” “poignant drama about the economic realities of aging women in a phallocentric world,” “Lifetime movie,” and “afterlife musical.” Rooney praised the director, David Esbjornson, who he wrote “elevates the work” and all five performers, especially “the marvelous Burke, who invests slightly befuddled, tirelessly optimistic Vera with enormous heart.” Brantley thought that “a more surreal, exaggerated style than Mr. Esbjornson has chosen” might have led to a stronger production, but he shared Rooney’s appreciation of “the delightful Marylouise Burke.”

Both Brantley and Rooney recorded noteworthy elements of the production not present in Vogel’s printed text. While the 1996 text simply has characters disappear when they “die” during blackouts, Brantley writes that “they fall off the street-side bench where they assemble

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17 Now Professor Emerita at Brown, Kahn is one of America’s foremost Shakespeare scholars, and she served in 2009 as president of the Shakespeare Association of America.
18 Katherine Helmond played 83-year-old Mae when she was 75, Joyce Van Patton 79-year-old Ursula at 70, Carlin Glynn 75-year-old Lillian at 64, Marylouise Burke 74-year-old Edna at 63, and Priscilla Lopez 72-year-old Vera at 56. While Rooney described Lopez as “perhaps too young to be a contemporary of the other gals,” the ages of the actors compared with their characters appear to have gone unnoted.
and into their graves – or, to be exact, into a bordello heaven of a red velvet piano parlor, where they sing lustily in the styles of Bessie Smith and Mae West.” The result is a “mix of social instruction” (much of it, Brantley notes, about supply-side economics) “and stylized musical interludes.” Rooney provides additional detail, reporting, “As each of the women expires she sheds her outer garments, revealing vampy bordello-wear underneath, and launches into a bawdy, innuendo-laden number.” He specifically mentions one song, Edna’s (Priscilla Lopez, a late replacement for Anita Gillette) “Sugar in My Bowl,” which he deems “the show’s musical highlight.” The vampy music and upbeat “bordello in the sky” tone probably diminished the audience’s appreciation of Vera’s loneliness and isolation at play’s end, a change that, while it greatly enhanced the spectacle, took away something of the original script’s pathos.

Granted, the director tried to retain at least part of that feeling. Vera is seen, Mansbridge writes, ultimately “trying to shield herself from the elements with a worn-out trench coat and newspaper” that constituted an “image of poverty” Mansbridge considered “jarring here, since we have seen Vera in better times and listened to her stories of past flames and home-cooked food” (103). All the same, with the four deceased prostitutes singing “The Sunny Side of the Street” as they remain “visible at the side of the stage, secure within the brothel!” (Mansbridge 103), it is at least plausible that the audience would have felt Vera’s temporal plight less keenly. Vera, even as she “skittishly digs through the garbage for a half-eaten sandwich” (Mansbridge 103), is less a portrait of destitution than a presentation of traditional Christianity: paradise awaits.

Over the next few years, productions of The Oldest Profession remained sporadic and continued to receive mixed reviews, with a 2015 production at Washington, D.C.’s, Rainbow Theatre Project constituting a noteworthy exception. Writing for DC Metro Theatre Arts,
Michael Poandl questioned the choice of the play for an LGBTQ theatre but nevertheless awarded *Profession* four out of five stars and called the “vibrant and usual” characters written for older actresses “so satisfying to watch.” Poandl found the play’s central concept “borderline dangerous,” for no one should be fooled into thinking this is anything like what the sex trade was ever like, in 1980 or otherwise.” He allowed a “theatre is fantasy to an extent” spirit to prevail, however, and praised the show as “warm and funny,” with “cabaret-style numbers [that] are a blast.”

*DC Theatre Scene* critic Jeffrey Walker awarded the production a “Highly Recommended” rating. With Emily Morrison as Mae, Tricia McCauley as Ursula, Diana Haberstick as Lillian, Desiré Dubose as Edna, and Charlotte Akin as Vera, Walker deemed the cast “uniformly excellent in portraying the delicious individuality of each character.” He also appreciated director Elizabeth Pringle’s allowing “the simplicity of the play and its metaphysical atmosphere to intermingle,” as well as “fine work by Maureen Codelka as the resident honky-tonk piano player,” who took on the apparently new role of “narrator throughout the play.”

In addition to the narrator, this production also presented another stylistic change. To incorporate the “paradise waiting … beyond the grave” (Walker), Pringle and set designer Greg Stevens divided the space into an upstage area and a downstage area. Downstage consisted of “nothing more than a park bench, upon which the entire two hours traffic takes place” (Poandl). Poandl found the upstage part far more interesting, describing it as a “luscious harem-style quarter that can only be described as ‘Whore Heaven.’” This staging resulted, Poandl added, “in the speaking actors getting upstaged quite a bit.” Here, as in the Signature production, the tone may well have been greatly altered from the published version.
For all the difficulties Vogel faced reaching an audience with *Desdemona* and *The Oldest Profession*, however, she regards her 1984 work *And Baby Makes Seven*, with what Savran calls an “ill-fated production history,” as her “‘Scottish play’” (“Screws” xiv). This designation derives, in part, from the “Out, d-damned Spot!!” *Macbeth* reference in Orphan’s “death” scene that concludes Scene Six. More significant, however, is what happened to the play in what Mansbridge calls “an early experience at LA Theatre Works” (64), one not cited in the published version of the play. The “‘artistic director,’” Vogel recalled in an email to Mansbridge, “chose the play to prove to his literary managers that it was a bad play, and chose a director who was hostile to the play,’” setting up a situation where, Vogel adds, “‘There was a lot of homophobia expressed in the room’” (cited in Mansbridge 64). The production, predictably, “was disastrous” (Mansbridge 64).

This early treatment of *And Baby Makes Seven* contrasts tremendously with a note director Marc Stuart Weitz felt obliged to write when New York’s Ohio Theatre staged a revival in 2014. Carey Purcell quotes Weitz as saying, “‘Paula imagined this particular non-conventional family amidst a very different cultural landscape.’” Weitz continued, “‘Modern families are becoming more visible on television, in movies, and on-stage.’” This word choice is almost certainly a nod to the commercially and critically successful ABC television series *Modern Family*, which includes a gay male couple bringing up a family in suburban Los Angeles. Despite advertised Wednesday night “Baby Talk” conversations that promised to “include Tony Award winner Pam MacKinnon, [MacArthur “Genius Grant” winner and Vogel student] Sarah Ruhl and [veteran Vogel director] Mark Brokaw” (Purcell), this production also failed. *The New York Times* critic Eric Grode acknowledged that Vogel had “broached the topic of gay parenting a generation ahead of the curve” but then dismissed the play itself as “reductive,
repetitive and extremely off-putting.” Grode asserted that “the sight and sound of grown-ups mimicking high-pitched children will never not get old,” indicating that he most likely walked into the theatre predisposed against the play.

Understanding why two productions, more than a generation apart and approached by critics and audiences with different prejudices and mores, would fare so poorly requires a close examination of both the environment in which Vogel wrote *And Baby Makes Seven* and the ambitious goals she undertakes dramaturgically as well as sociologically in the play. *And Baby Makes Seven* emerged from a time when a march toward legal equality for gay and lesbian Americans was far from certain. Stonewall was only fifteen years behind, and, following successful bans on gay teachers in Oklahoma and Arkansas, a coalition that included President Jimmy Carter, future President Ronald Reagan, Governor Jerry Brown, and San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk had beaten back California Proposition 6, aka The Briggs Initiative, only six years earlier. This initiative would have gone so far as to ban anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, who supported gay rights. Despite his opposition to Proposition 6, Ronald Reagan had then won the White House with enthusiastic support from the virulently anti-gay “Moral Majority.” What is more, the United States Supreme Court decision, Bowers versus Hardwick, which upheld the constitutionality of state laws criminalizing private, consensual oral and anal sex still lay three years ahead. Finally, and frighteningly, the United States was just learning of the AIDS pandemic, which despite HIV’s relative rarity among lesbians, was provoking yet another reason to panic against LGBT Americans.

Into this climate Vogel presented a play that engaged with the Edward Albee classic *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. This time, however, George and Martha gave way to Anna Epstein and Ruth Abrams, a lesbian couple. The imaginary child in Albee’s play was replaced
by Anna’s very real pregnancy by Peter Leven, a gay friend, plus three imaginary children: Cecil Bartholomew, a nine-year-old “genius” (63) played by Anna; Henri Dumont, an eight-year-old inspired by the 1956 Albert Lamorisse French short *The Red Balloon* and played by Ruth; and Orphan McDermott, a feral seven-year-old rescued from stray dogs at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and also played by Ruth. Anna has not conceived by artificial insemination, proclaiming, “No turkey baster for little Emma” (73), who later turns out to be a Nathan. Instead, she has had heterosexual coitus with Peter, complete with such “little plots” as a “Nubian boy spread on a Persian rug,” an “English school boy being disciplined,” and a “young Greek sailor, swabbing the deck on his knees in the hot Mediterranean sun” (73).

This brief synopsis demonstrates that in *And Baby Makes Seven*, Vogel is defamiliarizing Albee, the notion of a settled couple, the idea of family, and a larger sense of what constitutes play. Mansbridge writes, “With its theatricalization of domestic conflict, use of broad comedy, and heightened emphasis on role-playing, *Baby* can be read as a burlesque of *Woolf*” (50). What Vogel is burlesquing deserves mention. *Woolf* has earned canonical status, and the play’s longstanding influence plus its run of 664 performances that began on October 13, 1962, a time when, as Matthew Roudané writes, “Broadway had reached a low point” (33), may obscure the shock value it initially held for the American theatrical audiences Albee infamously called “placid cows.” Roudané notes that *Woolf* “earned Albee the reputation of being a nihilist, social protestor, moralist, allegorist, parodist, dramatic innovator, affirmative existentialist, charlatan, and absurdist” (33). George and Martha’s *Walpurgisnacht* subjects Nick and Honey to an experience which, at minimum, borders on sadism before the play’s “Joycean affirmative texture” hints at “more than a reconciliation of man and wife; it further suggests that they can now accept their life, with its cajoling ambiguity and terrifying flux, without illusion” (Roudané
38). To any audience approaching *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? for the first time, even today, Albee’s drama likely defamiliarizes both the idea of play and the notion of what a play can do.

Coming shortly after *The American Dream* (1961), *Woolf*, Bigsby notes, comes with Albee’s “assurance that George and Martha derive their names from the first president and his wife”\(^\text{19}\) and that he sees the play as an examination of the fate of American values” (*Modern* 131). Such an examination is reflected in George’s career as a professor at the college where Martha’s father is president. George is at mid-career stasis. George and Martha’s marriage also merits a close look as a commentary upon the American nuclear family, replete with picket fence and children. The elaborate fiction George and Martha have constructed around an imaginary child leads to what Bigsby calls “apocalyptic implications of this betrayal of the real as he and Martha are forced by the logic of their own myth to surrender the child” (131). Matthew Roudané posits this apocalyptic potential as giving way to possible redemption, stating, “For O’Neill illusions help; for Albee they destroy” (36), and calling *Woolf* Albee’s “most affirmative work” (35). The play’s ending itself contains potential affirmation, for the last two words, Martha’s “I am,” function not only as an answer to the titular question but also as an existential declaration of her own existence.

For Anna and Ruth (as, indeed, for Anna, Ruth, and Peter), career concerns give way to the larger existential question that, in post-structuralist terms, is always already there for what everywhere in 1984 and in many places today remains a highly unconventional family. Vogel compounds the matter by refusing, as Pellegrini says, to “offer us a cozy homosexual version of

\(^\text{19}\) Although George Washington has long been called the “Father of His Country,” his and Martha’s marriage, like that of the George and Martha in Albee’s play, was childless. Washington did help bring up Martha’s children by her deceased husband, Daniel Parke Custis.
the idealized heterosexual family unit (mother, father, and baby makes three)” (480).

“[I]nstead,” Pellegrini continues, Vogel “blows the lid off the fantasy that any family structure is normal” (480). Mansbridge characterizes Baby as “intent on defamil iarizing moral responses to sexuality – which categorize it as either good or bad – presenting it, instead, as something positive, playful, and open to revision,” with it and gender being “merely fictions, ‘cultural conceits,’ albeit with real, material effects” (59). For Pellegrini, such work is part of the way Vogel uses negative empathy “to shock audiences out of their complacencies in order to challenge our accustomed ways of seeing the world, even, sometimes, our accustomed feminist ways” (480). Vogel’s refusal to “add same-sex couples and stir” thus “ultimately offers something far richer and more complex than mirror images” (480). As a result, And Baby Makes Seven transcends being a burlesque of Woolf and stands as an independent work.

Bigsby notes that “in some respects And Baby Makes Seven begins where Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? ends – with the killing of the fantasy children” (Contemporary 305). Bigsby even quotes Vogel joking about Albee’s play, “‘[W]hat a shame they killed off their son. They could have had another wonderful ten years of marriage!’” (303). One way Vogel goes well beyond Albee is in resurrecting the fantasy children after ostensibly “killing” them first and, as Bigsby writes, in that “Vogel’s definition of reality incorporates fantasy, which is merely located at another point on the spectrum” (303). To some, “the romantic symbol or animal force” (Bigsby 303) Orphan McDermott represents the id, Henri the libido, and “the effete intellectual” (303) Cecil the superego. As such, they may be temporarily repressed at Peter’s insistence, but they cannot or will not ultimately disappear from the play. Peter behaves as he does, contends Mansbridge, because he “is not as invested in fantasy as Anna and Ruth and so feels left out of
their imaginary lives and extraneous to the experience of pregnancy, or as Ruth and Anna jokingly call it, ‘Woman Creating’” (55).

The rich, dense texture of allusions to literature and film woven throughout And Baby Makes Seven, makes for a play Bigsby deems “almost perversely metafictional” (Contemporary 306), with a “metatheatrical element” which possibly “extends to Vogel’s own fantasy child, namely the play itself” (Modern 413). Jill Dolan identifies here a “curious, absurdist environment” that “exemplifies the range of Vogel’s theatricality and her social imagination” (498). It is somewhat the case that Baby metatheatrically has characters speak in allusions in the scenes dominated by the “imaginary” characters and then speak about the allusions and metatheatrical moments in the scenes where the “real” characters prevail, but this distinction breaks down, particularly toward the end. Such important signifiers as props or set pieces help us identify which “world” we are in at certain moments. For example, in the Prologue to Act One, Prologue to Act Two, and Epilogue, the stage directions all three times call for a “clown night-light” to provide the only light onstage. This child’s light immediately signifies that we are in the realm of Henri, Cecil, and the Orphan. Similarly, at the end of Scene Eleven, when “Ruth holds out a deflated red balloon” (109), this stage property tells us Henri has (temporarily, it turns out) left the play even as it recalls the Lamorisse short.

The first Prologue consists of a discussion of how babies are made. When Peter provides the semi-pornographic description that a “man rams his hot throbbing member into a woman and humps so hard that he explodes just as she’s screaming: ‘Don’t stop, don’t stop!’” (65), Cecil

20 A clear sign that Peter, at this point, feels “in the way” (73) or excluded from the “Woman Creating” activity comes in his response to this phrase: he tells both women, “Shut the fuck up!!” (71).

21 Whether in an intentional or unintentional homage to this word choice, Vogel will later write a play called Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, which I will discuss in Chapter Three.
replies, “Uncle Peter … you’re not a well man” (65). Then, in the first line of Act One Scene One, Peter tells Anna and Ruth, “I think they have to go” (67). He has noticed, he says, the women “[g]oing into character” (67) so much that the “’kids’ are always with us” (67) at home. He adds that “the line between reality and you know … well, it’s getting dangerously thin around here” (70). Ruth’s assurance, “We never do it out of the house” (70), the domestic sphere where this family that is unusual on so many levels enjoys a safe space, gives way to Ruth/Orphan biting Peter “savagely” (70), a moment that acquires new significance in Scene Fourteen. Peter leaves the home, mouthing, “I’ll … I’ll see you later” (71) in an echo of Sam Nash’s farewell, “I’ll … I’ll see you” in Neil Simon’s Plaza Suite. Nash leaves his wife Karen alone in a hotel room allegedly to attend to business but almost certainly to continue his affair with Miss McCormack. Peter’s needs are different, for he returns in the next scene to the question, “Did you have a good time with the boys?”(72) and the admonition, “Promise me you’re being careful” (72). These words all but declare that like Nash in Simon’s play, Peter goes out for sex, but his preference is an anonymous gay hookup. In 1984, the caution to be careful carried special meaning and connoted great concern for Peter’s health, but it did not pose an immediate existential threat to Peter’s relationship with the women. He lives under sexual mores different from those of the middle aged World War II generation portrayed by Simon 22.

Anna and Ruth eventually agree to dispense with the imaginary children but not before, Ruth says, she gets her “last inch of fantasy out of them” (84). Already, a scene that has begun with Ruth/Henri making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich has turned into a metatheatrical (or

22 Providing further support to Pelligrini’s assertion that Vogel eschews the “add same-sex couple and stir” possibilities in Baby, Peter manifests a sexuality more complicated than that of the gay friend sperm donor. As already noted, he engages in heterosexual coitus with Anna, and he tells her that “the fantasies weren’t … necessary” (73) for him to achieve orgasm, adding, “I really miss breasts.” Scene Two ends with a tableau of Peter and Ruth at Anna’s breasts.
metacinematic) “Dr. Strangelovian battle” between the Ruth/Henri hand and the Ruth/Orphan hand. Ruth agrees, however, “We’re going to tidy up the plots. No loose ends dangling.” “We’re going to kill them,” she adds, “One by one. First Orphan. Then Henri. Cecil will be the last to go” (84). True to her word, Ruth shrugs off Anna’s lament, “I can’t go through with this. This is just too awful” (88) by giving Orphan a death that befits his having been raised by stray dogs, a fatal case of rabies. In what is most likely the play’s most metatheatrical scene, Orphan’s death recalls “the many voices of Mercedes McCambridge in The Exorcist” (88), alluding (in order) to the William Friedkin film, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire, Shakespeare’s Othello, Henrik Ibsen’s Ghosts, the 1940s swing tune “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and the 1950s television show Lassie – all “badly quoted,” as Anna later notes (95).

Once Orphan has died, the play hints at his possible return when Anna/Cecil points out that “matter can’t be destroyed, but only changed” (91). Before the destruction proceeds, however, Anna reacts peculiarly when she discovers Ruth wearing Peter’s shirt. After querying Ruth, “Did you ask if you could wear it?” (96), Anna escalates the situation until she exclaims, “I’m supposed to give up coffee, smoking, drinking, fucking, spicy foods, and I’m expected to be understanding of what Ruth wants, what Peter needs. – Who the fuck am I, some kind of knocked-up Miss Manners?” (97). Anna vehemently denies that her anger derives at all from her late stage pregnancy, shouting from offstage, “AND DON’T YOU DARE TELL ME IT’S HORMONES!” (97). Especially in light of Shepard and Lamb’s observation “that Ruth, who is not pregnant, feels threatened by the biological bond between Anna and Peter” (202), as simple a gender-bending gesture as Ruth wearing a man’s shirt would seem innocuous, but it is worth noting that Mansbridge characterizes Ruth/Henri’s declaration to Peter, “I want to have your
baby!!” (Baby 66), as an attempt on Ruth’s part “to seduce Peter” (59) by which “any attempt to view sexuality as a fixed identity is comically subverted” (59). What appears to have happened here is a blurring of the lines between the “real” world of the play and the “play” world of the play, with Anna unexpectedly jealous of the way Ruth and Peter interact. Ruth’s being able to wear Peter’s shirt while a pregnant Anna cannot becomes a metonym of all the activities open to Ruth but temporarily closed off to Anna. It is also Vogel’s way of showing how even in the nontraditional household of Baby, one woman’s resentment of the way a non-pregnant woman, even if that woman is her partner, can arise. Vogel simply won’t let us have a happy, newly defined nuclear family living in domestic bliss.

In the next scene, Scene Nine, Peter, Ruth/Henri, and Anna/Cecil leave their apartment for the first and only time. While at a zoo, “Henri” and “Cecil” never break character, with Henri making juvenile comments about a monkey “pulling his pudding” (99), and Cecil quoting Darwin’s “one general law – namely, Multiply, Let the Strongest Live, and the Weakest Die….” Having the play’s only scene outside the domestic sphere take place in a zoo, at minimum, suggests an analogue to Albee’s 1959 play The Zoo Story, in which one of the two characters is also named Peter. Filled, like this moment in Baby, with what Henri discerns in Cecil as “angst” (100), which Peter characterizes as a “German sadness” (100), The Zoo Story is, Matthew Roudané writes, “a classic fable of anxiety and identity” (28). And Baby Makes Seven’s Peter ending this scene with the imperative, “Come on, boys, let’s go home” (100) calls to mind Jerry’s reflection that “sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly.” This statement ultimately is true of the Henri part of Ruth. “The balloons come,” Anna proclaims, “and take him away. He just … disappears” (106), a moment represented iconically with the deflated red balloon at the end of Scene Eleven. This
sense of distance is heightened when Peter mentions “a sighting over the Atlantic by the Coast Guard” (111). Shortly after, Anna/Cecil quotes Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “‘runs’ on the ‘sword’” (114), and so dies a noble Roman, killing off the superego just as the death of Orphan has killed the id and that of Henri the libido.

Something, however, has gone awry. By Scene Ten, Ruth challenges the agreement to eliminate the imaginary children, telling Anna, “I don’t see why we can’t change the … the narrative at this point” (105). Anna is dismissive here, responding, “We can’t stop now. Not in the middle of the story” (105). Ruth’s suggestion gains impetus, though, in Scene Twelve, when Peter suggests to Cecil, “Look – do you think maybe we could … change the ending? Deus ex machina? I’d really like it if you could stick around” (113). Anna, speaking as Cecil, again declines, having Cecil say, “I don’t think so. Not without Henri” (113) and then “die” within a few lines.

Any doubts the audience may have about the rationale for dispensing with the imaginary children seem dispelled after Nathan is born and we see Ruth and Peter at the “end of a very long day” in Scene Thirteen. Here, Ruth and Peter, truly alone together for the only time in the play, have the sort of conversation that likely has occurred in one of the offstage moments that have provoked Anna’s jealousy back in Scene Eight. Ruth speaks at great length, giving Peter a history of her and Anna’s desire to have a child and why Ruth has ceded the actual childbirth to Anna. Ruth tells Peter, “I can always see my own face anytime I want in the mirror.” Through a baby, however, Ruth can appreciate “Anna’s face at birth, Anna in diapers, a little Anna coming home from school.” In perhaps a surprising development, Ruth confides that a boy child would be “even better” because he would give her a glimpse of “his Adam’s apple beneath her chin” and “that awkward moment right before puberty, before his voice changes, when I mistake his
hello on the phone for hers” (116). This last image hints at the fluidity of gender and even sex itself as well as letting us see why the presence of someone with a y chromosome does not threaten the home or relationship Ruth and Anna have built. Although abandoned by his own father, Peter may freely “make it up on [his] own, this father thing” (113).

This agency granted Peter helps explain what Shepard and Lamb call the “magical realism” (204) of Scene Fourteen and the Epilogue. Scene Fourteen begins with Anna “sitting in profile to the audience, nursing Nathan” (118) and then presents Anna, Ruth, and Peter sitting down to a dinner of pasta Raphael while the baby rests nearby. During a quotidian conversation about “dishes,” “diapers,” and “the life” Peter acknowledges “[m]ost men dream of” (120), Peter’s behavior grows ever stranger until he exclaims, “Orphan! Revenge! Oorrppphannnn…” (121). Ruth’s “Orphan?!” and Anna’s “What does he…” (121) reflect an initial amazement that quickly gives way to a joint “Rabies!!” (122) that indicates the game is on again. Cecil, Henri, Orphan, Anna, Ruth, and Peter all speak in the Epilogue, and the baby coos along. The last spoken line is Peter’s “I’m eating you up, yummyyummyyummyyummy-yummmm – Nathan’s all gone!” (125) before the apartment, per the stage directions, becomes “one apartment among hundreds of their neighbors” and “Nathan’s giggles and squeals” (125) take the play to curtain or blackout.

If we acknowledge Orphan, Henri, and Cecil representing id, libido, and superego respectively, their return is necessary on the most basic of psychological bases: they are essential to human psychology. Dismissing their reemergence as nothing more than that undermines their dramaturgical importance; to wit, Bigsby quotes Vogel as saying their representing the id, libido, and superego “was not that tidy” (Contemporary 304), suggesting we do her characters a disservice by viewing them purely in Freudian terms. Bigsby explains, “Life, like this play, is
interlaced with fiction and, indeed, having killed off their fantasies, Peter, Ruth and Anna reinvent them rather than settle for a life untransformed by the imagination” (Contemporary 306). Bigsby moreover believes that the “reverse zoom” after the dialogue ends makes the audience “become aware that this ‘family’ is in essence like all those which surround them in the city just beyond their apartment” (306). Mansbridge adds that Baby “undermines traditional psychological paradigms of sexual development and family structures, suggesting that the Oedipal mother-father-child triad is no longer a sufficient model with which to conceptualize the American family,” and in addition, the play proves “the Lacanian Imaginary-Real-Symbolic … to be an inadequate framework” (57). Replacing these Freudian and Lacanian paradigms, Mansbridge argues that “the Imaginary (associated with the mother) is just as anchored in the material, linguistic, and social as the Symbolic (associated with the father), just as the Symbolic is as permeated with the phantasmic as the Imaginary” (57). As a result, she believes that the “reverse zoom contextualizes this new family within the larger cultural sphere, framing this scene as, at once, private and public” (62).

Mansbridge does not accept any notion that the concluding image replaces “a zone of heterosexual privacy with a zone of homosexual privacy” (64) but, rather, posits this scene and the entire play as showing “how public/private, hetero/homo, fantasy/reality work mutually to define one another as either real or not, livable or not” (64). Mansbridge, finally, finds it significant that “the play begins and ends with a creation story of sorts,” for “the Prologue features the three boys talking squeamishly about ‘how babies come to be made’ [63],” and “the play’s Epilogue offers a tale of how families come to be made – and remade – a cultural counterpart to the biological creation story that begins the play” (64). Mansbridge believes the entire “form of Baby is brilliantly conceived” (55), a sentiment that somewhat echoes
Pellegrini’s statement that, when compared with what an audience may anticipate as “comfort zones, right, left, and sideways,” Vogel’s play “ultimately offers something far richer and more complex than mirror images: a deliriously queer vision of kinship outside the bounds of the expected” (480).

Although, as noted above, Vogel has dubbed *And Baby Makes Seven* her “Scottish play” and some theatre critics have been, at best, unkind, the play has found some receptive viewers. Even in a generally negative 1993 *Variety* review of “a small play” with a “small punch,” Jeremy Gerard discerned that Anna and Ruth “seem to believe that preparation for parenthood must include putting out the child within us, and of course the opposite is the case, as Vogel’s coda makes clear.” Mel Gussow, another critic generally unsympathetic to the play, still credited the same 1993 production with an intermittent “responsive note, especially at those moments when the characters jettison their invented friends” and praised the “intuitive charm and intelligence” of Cherry Jones as Anna, adding, “The fact that she can be so lightsome while playing a pregnant woman pretending to be a schoolboy is testimony to her theatrical alchemy.”

Sophia Polin, writing in 2014 for *Stage Buddy*, wrote that the New Ohio Theater production found “the emotional core of the play” in “the murders – and subsequent resurrections” of the imaginary children. Finding Anna and Ruth “intentionally underdeveloped,” Polin praised Constance Zaytoun and Susan Bott less for their portrayals of Anna and Ruth, respectively, than for their presenting the children, writing, “Witnessing a grown woman playing a feral child dying in a rabid fit with all the verbal frills of a Shakespearean suicide should intrigue you.” According to Polin, Bott’s performance here was “clever enough

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23 Gussow, who Mansbridge says also reviewed the 1984 production, cryptically refers to “an earlier version, which was presented by the playwright under a pseudonym.”
to keep you wondering about the true source of the scene’s power,” which “isn’t obvious.”  
Zachary Stewart’s 2014 *Theater Mania* review concurred with Polin about Bott’s performance of Orphan’s death scene, which he called “a tour de force.”  Stewart also wrote sensitively about Peter (Ken Barnett), describing him as “a gay(ish) man” and commenting on this “pansexual threesome” by quoting Vogel’s recollection, “I wrote this play in the twentieth century, when I still had the energy to envision a sexual utopia.”  Stewart even went so far as to eschew easy comparisons with *Modern Family* and *The New Normal*, considering *Baby* “a reminder of a time when gay people weren’t so obsessed with the desire to fit in.”  Stewart concludes by observing that even as we recalls how “LGBT rights have made huge gains in the last three decades,” *Baby* “urges us that, in observing that fact we should also stop and ask ourselves, ‘What has been lost?’”

Whether reviews such as Stewart’s indicate that *And Baby Makes Seven* will ultimately be consigned as a period piece or will take its place in the canon is a matter that only time will tell.  I am more sanguine about *Desdemona* and even more so about *The Oldest Profession*, with two caveats: artistic directors of theatres large and small need to produce these plays more frequently, and scholars and critics of theatre need to assign and study them.  As the 1990s dawned, these happenings would have seemed highly improbable.  Then came *The Baltimore Waltz* and, with it, an upward arc to Vogel’s career that has seen her reputation climb, at times in fits and starts, for more than a quarter of a century.
In 1986 older brother Carl invited Paula Vogel to travel with him to Europe. Thinking herself short on money but, in her mid-thirties, long on time, Vogel declined. She could not have been more wrong about time. Unbeknownst to her, Carl had been diagnosed with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Carl Vogel died on January 9, 1988, but even during what Vogel decades later called “that final watch,” he said, with “a twinkle in his eye,” from his deathbed, “You’re going to write about this, aren’t you?” (“Paula Vogel on The Baltimore Waltz”). “BECAUSE,” she wrote, “I CANNOT SEW” (Baltimore Waltz 3), Vogel did not opt to memorialize her brother through the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt conceived by Cleve Jones. Instead, during a summer 1989 stay at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, she treated Carl’s words as “a deathbed wish that I had to do.” In “completely unplanned” fashion, Vogel went into what she later called “this state” and “didn’t sleep for two weeks” (“Paula Vogel on”). Simultaneously grief-stricken and inspired, Vogel called upon her skill as a dramatist and crafted a play about “a journey with Carl to a Europe that exists only in the imagination” (Baltimore Waltz 2). This play is the drama that earned Vogel a national reputation, The Baltimore Waltz.

Of all the Vogel plays printed and published to date, The Baltimore Waltz is the most intensely inspired by her own biography. Because the trauma behind the play was so great, Vogel of necessity drew upon all her dramaturgical resources. Vogel told David Savran, “If I had sat down and said, ‘I’m going to write a play about my brother’s death from AIDS,’ I never would have written a play, I would [have] simply curled up in a little ball and wept. But if I say I’m going to write a play on language lessons, knowing full well it’s about my brother’s death, you allow yourself to forget” (“Driving”). As a result, David Krasner notes that even in its exploration of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s “stages of grief,” The Baltimore Waltz “provides a
refreshing perspective on AIDS” (151-52), functioning “[i]n contrast to the powerful but overwrought AIDS ‘rage’ dramas of the 1980s such as Normal Heart and As Is’” (American 152). Vogel apparently looks back less in anger – or sorrow – than with an odd sense of mirth.

_The Baltimore Waltz_ defamiliarizes AIDS into Acquired Toilet Disease, scourge of elementary school teachers. The play also employs dramatically the narrative structure of Ambrose Bierce’s 1890 short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” a surreal (before the term surrealism was invented) tale which takes place entirely in the mind of Confederate sympathizer Peyton Farquhar during the moment he is executed by hanging. Vogel sets _The Baltimore Waltz_ entirely in the moment Anna’s brother Carl dies from AIDS-related complications, but Vogel conceals this fact through the first twenty-nine scenes of the play. As Mansbridge writes, “We watch the play believing that Anna has just been diagnosed with Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD), while Carl is the healthy brother who accompanies his sister on a European adventure” (149). Along the way, a stuffed rabbit, fantastical urine-drinking Dr. Todesrocheln (German, notes Bigsby, for “death rattle” [Contemporary 310]), the “little Dutch boy who put his thumb in the dyke” (33) at age fifty, and other characters – all of them played by the same actor – appear. The 1949 Carol Reed film noir _The Third Man_, based on a Graham Greene script, and its mysterious Harry Lime, portrayed cinematically by Orson Welles, also loom prominently.

In Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief, the first stage is denial, and as Krasner, also referencing “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” points out, “Denial is the force which drives both Bierce’s and Vogel’s characters’” (151). So, too, does music. The “Playwright’s Note” reproduces verbatim the letter Carl Vogel wrote his sister “after his first bout with pneumonia at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland” (2), the city where Anna has her vision. Carl
writes, “I would like really good music,” such as Fauré, Gluck, and Verdi, as well as “I Dream of Jeannie,” a spiritual such as “Steal Away,” perhaps ‘Nearer My God to Thee,’ and maybe even one of the Jeannette MacDonald tunes from San Francisco” (3). Add what Bigsby calls the “mysterious images, oblique symbols,” and “lush lighting,” and “a kaleidoscope of scenes (thirty in all) which reflect a mind flicking restlessly through a distorted memory bank” (Modern 413) ensues.

In this play that deals intensely with recollection and loss, the first words that emerge are Anna’s “‘Help me please,’” followed soon after by “‘There’s nothing I can do’” and “‘I have no memory’” (7). Ostensibly, these words reflect Anna’s efforts toward and failure at translating her ideas into passable Dutch and French, but in reality, they are both her and Vogel’s attempts to translate a loss into something each may process. Bigsby states that “the writing of the play was a therapeutic gesture, a way of discharging a mixture of anger, regret, obligation, a means of coming to terms with the finality of death” (Contemporary 307) for Vogel. The same applies to Anna. In Scene XXX, the audience hears the Doctor tell Anna, “I’m sorry. There was nothing we could do” (56), a declaration of finality faintly foreshadowed in Anna’s opening speech. At the beginning, however, the power of denial is too strong for the audience to predict or understand what will come.

Turning AIDS into ATD defamiliarizes the syndrome that during the 1980s became all too familiar, especially to the LGBT community and its allies, “through the parodic humor and displacement of the causes, symptoms, and group associated with the disease,” writes Mansbridge (149). Anna quickly dispels any possibility that ATD may be a sexually transmitted disease, asking the Doctor, “So there’s no danger to anyone by … what I mean, Doctor, is that I can’t infect anyone by –“ (11), to which the Doctor assures her that if she will “use precautions”
(12) such as “wash your hands” and “never lick paper money or coins” (11), “she can fuck her brains out” (12). Anna, who has contracted ATD as what Bigsby calls “a virginal school teacher” (310), resolves therefore upon the sexual conquest of “every Thomas, Deiter und Heinrich” (42) she likes in Europe.

Vogel’s decision not to make ATD sexually transmitted has more than one result. Peter Dickinson states, “Indeed, one of the things that was so refreshing about Vogel’s play when it first appeared was how exuberantly ‘unchaste’ it was in its AIDS dramaturgy” (201). This distinction, or lack of chastity, matters because of the stigma attached to AIDS, which many powerful individuals and groups in the United States saw as a disease of marginalized people based on such factors as risky sexual behaviors and intravenous drug use. Writing against the “innocent victim” trope, Vogel reversed what is innocent and what is deviant in Waltz, Mansbridge writes, and so “defamiliarizes right-wing definitions of AIDS, which saw the disease as a form of retribution” (151). Dickinson adds that “Anna’s potty mouth, speaking from and to the pathogenesis and the pathologisation of her disease, expresses what Kubler-Ross has no room for in her strictly delimited five stages of grief, namely the eros of loss” (201).

Mansbridge and Bigsby, among others, do note that the play hints obliquely at AIDS and public indifference or antipathy toward it when an “Agitated” Carl remarks, “If just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing, … that would be the last we’d hear about the space program. Why isn’t someone doing something?!” (12). Otherwise, however, AIDS is far in the background and sexuality in the foreground. After racing through the five stages in the Kubler-Ross model, The Third Man mentions a sixth not usually included, Hope, followed by something unique to Vogel. The Third Man tells the audience, “Unbeknownst to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, there is a Seventh Stage for the dying” which he calls “a growing urge to fight the sickness of the
body with the health of the body” (29). In keeping with Dickinson’s comment about eros, the Third Man adds “The Seventh Stage: Lust” (29). Fittingly, then, sexual activity is salutary, not life threatening, and as the Radical Student Activist tells Anna, “Fucking is a revolutionary act” (45). Anna’s reply, “Your hovel or my hotel?” (45), connotes both humor and concurrence. Mansbridge comments that “sex is the only literal thing in the play – nothing more and nothing less than what is it [sic]: a bodily act” (156).

In addition to the Kubler-Ross model, The Baltimore Waltz also offers a series of lessons, all of them about language. Lesson Number One deals with the “Subject Position,” expressed as “I. Je. Ich. Ik” (9), or “I” in four different languages. From there, the lessons move to “Basic Dialogue,” specifically the phone call (13), followed by “Pronouns and the Possessive Case” (14), “Present Tense of Faire” (14), a “Basic Dialogue” for the airport (15), “Direct Pronouns” (17), and finally “Basic Vocabulary. Parts of the Body” (23). The total number of seven language lessons, when combined with the play’s unique seven stages of dying or grief, calls to mind the Biblical connotations of seven, especially since the final stage, lust, is also one of Christianity’s seven deadly sins. In the Revelation of John, the opening of Seven Seals brings forth the Second Coming, indirectly hinting at a connection with another apocalyptic AIDS-related play, Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, which was concurrent with The Baltimore Waltz.

The last language lesson is a bawdy discussion of body parts between Anna and the Garcon that seems directly inspired by Shakespeare’s Henry V Act 4, Scene 3. Shakespeare has Alice give Princess Katherine of France, the future wife of English King Henry V, a course in English vocabulary until Katherine becomes exasperated by “foot” and “count.” These words sound enough like the French words foutre and con, vulgar French terms that refer to having sex.
and the female genitalia, respectively, that Katherine denounces them but not without uttering them three times. Much the same goes on between Anna and the Garcon except that this time, the French speaker enthusiastically participates in the lesson. Anna has already told Carl that the Eiffel Tower “looks so … phallic” (19). The Garcon reinforces this Freudian interpretation when he refers to his penis as “Ma Tour Eiffel” and “Charles de Gaulle” while also recalling that his grandfather “called his Napoléon” (25). In response to Anna admiring “I guess it runs in your family,” the Garcon goes on to discuss his “Grand-mère” and her “con,” pausing to ask if Anna can tell “what I am meaning?” (25). Anna replies, “You’re making yourself completely clear,” in response to which the Garcon adds, “We called hers the Waterloo de mon grand-père” (25). The scene ends not in anger but, rather, after Anna “[d]igs under the sheets more,” with the Garcon cryptically answering, “Only the Germans have a word for that” (25) just before Carl enters and disrupts the discussion.

Before the language lessons even begin, however, Anna hints at something deeper than merely translating English into other languages spoken in Europe and having some bawdy fun while doing so. Anna reflects a true horror at and an ultimate need to fuse what Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure famously termed the langue and the parole, the signified and the signifier. When Anna says, “It’s the language that terrifies me” (10), unbeknownst to her audience, she is recoiling against words like “AIDS” and “death,” and she enters the fugue state where Carl says, “I’m here, darling. Right here.” Then, Carl gives Anna her first language lesson, which fittingly details first person pronouns and statements of regret, and he accompanies her on this imaginary voyage that ultimately results in her unconscious processing what she already consciously knows.
Not only is the truth about the language Anna hears withheld from her conscious, but by hiding it behind a flurry of jargon, Vogel keeps it from the audience as well. Consider, for example, one of the Doctor’s speeches when he is asked to “explain it very slowly” (9): “Also known as Löffler’s Syndrome, i.e., eosinophilia, resulting in fibroblastic thickening, persistent tachycardia, hepatomegaly, splenomegaly, serious effusions into the pleural cavity with edema. It may be Brugia malayi or Wuchereria bencofii – also known as Weingarten’s Syndrome. Often seen with effusions, either exudate or transudate” (9). Each term in this speech has a literal meaning, but together the result is an effusion of words that only a medical doctor (and most likely one with multiple specialties, at that) or researcher could understand. Anna and Carl’s confusion in response to the doctor duplicates what AIDS patients and their supporters felt when first encountering such terms as Kaposi’s sarcoma or cryptococcal meningitis, maladies that went from being little known to common as the AIDS pandemic spread.

As Anna moves from the Baltimore hospital to her remaining language lessons and her European adventure, she will be reminded of her “first sense of loss” and how “[i]t’s not a crime. It’s an illness” (17). Such recollections serve toward Anna’s exorcising herself of any internalized homophobia (what Vogel finds so objectionable about the “innocent victim” notion). Lesson Number Two introduces The Third Man’s Harry Lime to the play. Later, the focus of Lesson Four on verb tense is rendered all the more poignant in the final scene, when the Doctor hands her the “brochures for Europe” and Anna says, “I’ve never been abroad. We’re going to go when he gets—“(57). Here, she pauses for a moment before resuming, “I must learn to use the past tense. We would have gone had he gotten better” (57).

The play is set, with the exception of the end, in the liminal time when Anna cannot yet use the past tense to talk or think about her brother, and so she resurrects him, just as Harry Lime
is resurrected in *The Third Man*. Since, as Bigsby notes, the “fact of death must be countered by evidence of life” (*Contemporary* 310), Harry Lime, an American in Vienna whose illicit involvement in delivering or denying the new life-saving drug penicillin and who found faking his death only to reappear convenient, serves as a useful, possibly ideal foil. An important difference lies in the fact that penicillin has, in fact, saved millions of lives since it was introduced to common usage just as World War II wound down in 1945. The expensive “new drug” available only via the “[b]lack market” (13), we eventually learn in Scene XXVIII “won’t help” (50), is likely azidothymidine (AZT), which, from the mid-1980s on, provided medical relief and a measure of hope to some patients until better medication became available a decade later. Lime plays upon the idea that his drug serves *his* purposes when he tells Carl, “Listen, old man, if you want to be a millionaire, you go into real estate. If you want to be a billionaire, you sell hope” (50). Those upon whom Lime preys remind us of how, Shepard and Lamb note, “America feeds on disenfranchisement” (205), just as Lime reinforces the play’s “analogy between Cold War-era anxieties about subversive infiltration and Reagan-era anxieties about the risks posed by those infected with HIV” (205).

The Vogel version of Harry Lime offers no more hope than the man he calls the “Yellow Queen of Vienna” (50), Dr. Todesrocheln, who reenacts the *And Baby Makes Seven* Strangelovian scene, this time replacing the peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a flask of Anna’s urine, from which he drinks. At the conclusion of the Todesrocheln scene, the stage directions call for “the stage lights [to] become, for the first time, harsh, stark and white” (54). The odd slides from Scene XIX, which were all (three Disneyland slides excluded) purportedly from Carl’s experiences in Europe but in reality a series of depressing photographs of Baltimore, now at last come into only too clear a focus. The audience realizes that the slides have depicted
Baltimore not because Carl has been deceived but, rather, because Anna has deceived herself while she struggles to process what she, who has “never been abroad – unless you count Baltimore, Maryland” (7), has just experienced and witnessed.

Finally, the instant in which *The Baltimore Waltz* takes place constitutes, on the part of both Anna and Vogel, a first step in what Jacques Derrida has called “ethical mourning.” As Meyda Yeğenoğlu explains, “According to Derrida, mourning, or rather the ethical mourning implies an unending dialogue with the dead other” (27). This “understanding of mourning is based on the question of how to be responsible to the other/friend one mourns for and enables its voice to be heard” (27). Through the play, Anna and, in a much larger sense, Vogel allow both the dramatic Carl and the actual Carl Vogel to speak and, moreover, to do so in a manner Carl Vogel’s 1987 letter to his sister very much suggests he would avow. The many ways the play burlesques other works of literature and film is consistent with the “full drag” (*Baltimore* 5) Carl teasingly (?) mentions. Yeğenoğlu adds that “what Derrida calls ethical mourning is about not repressing, eliminating, burying or discarding the dead or non-present other” (26). Rather, “memory [of the deceased] is not simply about the past but is a future oriented one” (27). “Derrida,” Yeğenoğlu adds, “suggests that the dead other is part of us and speaks through us and because the other is infiltrated to us, it speaks through us; it resists all kinds of annexation” (27).

This definition of mourning contrasts greatly with the Freudian and psychoanalytical notion that “the mourner must relive and consequently renounce his/her attachment to the other” and that the mourner “must slowly detach its libido from a loved object and has to put to death the loved one” (Yeğenoğlu 26). Derrida’s model of mourning acknowledges what Vogel accomplishes in *The Baltimore Waltz*. Neither she nor Anna denies the “otherness” of Carl, going all the way back to what the Third Man calls the “first separation – your first sense of loss”
when Anna was five, Carl was seven, and their “parents would not let [them] sleep in the same bed anymore” (17). Anna does acknowledge the need to use the past tense going forward, but each time the play is enacted, Carl exists for its first twenty-nine scenes in the present tense and retains a voice. Carl Vogel is deceased, and yet both his memory and even his presence live on in an ongoing dialogue between Anna and her Carl.

*The Baltimore Waltz* prompted two major critical responses that enhanced Vogel’s career. Told by her committee at Brown University, where she was up for tenure, “You’re a wonderful teacher. We want to keep you here, but you haven’t written a play since *And Baby Makes Seven*” (“Paula Vogel on *The Baltimore Waltz*”), Vogel interrupted her research for *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* to write *The Baltimore Waltz* and earned tenure. More famously, the play also received the 1992 Obie Award for Best New American Play, as well as an acting Obie for Cherry Jones and a directing Obie for Anne Bogart. It was widely, but not universally, praised. Frank Rich, writing for *The New York Times*, wrote that it is a “brittle play” that the Circus Repertory production “handled … sensitively.” Rich found Cherry Jones, “that wonderful actress,” an “irresistible human guide through the heady wordplay of Ms. Vogel’s text.” He deemed Richard Thompson “likable in the role of Carl” but was more impressed by director Bogart’s “principal accomplice” Joe Mantello (the Third Man and other roles), “who winningly performs a potpourri of burlesque turns in cameo roles of several nationalities and sexual dispositions” (Rich, “Play About AIDS”).

Malcolm L. Johnson, *Hartford Courant* Theater Critic, also reviewed the Circle Rep production, and countered Rich’s claim that “[w]ho Carl is we can only imagine,” identifying *The Baltimore Waltz* as “Vogel’s reflection on the life and death of her brother Carl.”

Mansbridge writes, “If [Rich] had read Carl’s letter printed in the playbill, he would have found out” (161) who Carl was.
conceded that the play “sounds like one of those cutesy, self-indulgent, even tasteless new plays that can make theater-going a dreaded experience” but then quickly added that despite, “no, rather in large part because of” such odd touches as the rabbit, the sex scenes, and the ATD jokes, “Vogel’s uproarious, searching and finally devastating creation adds up to the very best of theater.” Johnson wrote that Vogel “can do as she wishes with an audience” and that Anne Bogart’s direction was “finely calibrated, yet free and easy.” Jones, she wrote, was “winsome” and “appealingly off-kilter,” while Mantello played the “showiest roles.” It was Thompson, however, whom Johnson called “the most watchable and charming of actors.” Johnson also added the information that Bogart was the “deposed artistic director of Providence’s Trinity Repertory Company (which refused the sizable production grant)” offered for the play.”

J. Wynn Rousuck, the Theater Critic for *The Baltimore Sun*, was unstinting in her praise for a Baltimore Center Stage production that ran just after the Circle Rep production ended, “[o]pening the same day that former tennis star Arthur Ashe announced he has AIDS.” Rousuck called *Waltz* a “landmark play” which “is perhaps the most glowing and creative theatrical effort yet to demystify this dreadful disease.” While Rousuck praised the way director Michael Greif “manipulates the play’s delicate tone shifts” and also found much humor in Robert Dorfman’s “performance in a dozen different roles,” she found as much, if not more, to like in Kristine Nielsen (Anna) and Jonathan Fried (Carl), who conveyed “palpable sibling affection.” Rousuck added that “Vogel has said she envisioned [Fried] when she wrote the role of Carl” (Rousuck *Baltimore*). Unlike Rich, who noted that the play’s lack of an intermission “did not prevent

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25 Johnson’s tone makes clear his opinion that releasing Bogart and not producing the play was Providence Repertory Company’s loss and Circle Rep’s gain.
several Circle Rep subscribers from walking out at a critics’ preview,” Rousuck found “no question audiences will view [AIDS] differently by the end of this 90-minute production.”

Rich’s largely unfavorable response could be dismissed as an outlier, but the unwillingness of the Providence Trinity Repertory Company to stage the play, even with a production grant, requires at least a look. The resistance from some theatre companies and critics to The Baltimore Waltz seems to stem from reaction to the play’s emphasis on sex as a life force. Mansbridge’s comment, already cited, on sex as “the only literal thing” (156) in Waltz perhaps hints at why the play was not for everyone, but not necessarily in the way one might expect. It is not only the prurient who might object; indeed, Mansbridge also writes, “Innocence and deviance are, in Waltz, reversed, and the play overturns conservative AIDS rhetoric along with the reactionary rhetoric of AIDS activists” (151).

One potentially problematical scene, with its transgressive possibilities generally ignored except for a couple of hints from Mansbridge, is Scene XX, in which Anna seduces the “very young” (40) Munich Virgin. The lad is a “bellhop” (40) in a hotel owned by his “vater” (41), where he hopes to work his way up to “the responsibility of the front desk” (41). Anna tells the Munich Virgin that she is “very honored” at being his first, for “[y]ou always remember your first time” (41). Anna adds, “I’m a schoolteacher” and offers a “little lesson” (41). Mansbridge notes that this youth’s age is “ambiguously described” (158), but the way she chooses to characterize Anna’s seduction and concomitant lesson is “tender, almost maternal” (158), with Anna assuming “a position not unlike that of L’il Bit in relation to the young man on the bus trip in upstate New York” 26 (158). At minimum, both the seduction in Waltz and that in Drive

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26 I will return to the bus scene in How I Learned to Drive and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the word “man” later in this chapter.
require that we consider how we feel about sex between a woman who is approximately thirty years old and a male who is almost certainly a teen. We must also keep in mind that both females are teachers who seduce the much younger male. In light of these considerations, we must contemplate whether such behavior is “almost maternal,” predatory, or a little of both.

In addition to the award of tenure and the Obie Award, another direct consequence of *The Baltimore Waltz* and its success is that theatre companies began to perform Vogel’s previously neglected plays. Cherry Jones, coming off her own Obie win for *Waltz*, appeared as Anna in a 1993 Circle Rep production of *And Baby Makes Seven* and, later that same year, as Bianca in the same company’s production of *Desdemona*. In Chapter 2, I have cited the plaudits critics accorded Jones even as they varied in their opinions of these two plays. Anne Bogart facilitated the meeting, encouraging Vogel to work with Jones and vice versa. In a joint 1998 interview, Vogel recalled Bogart saying, “‘There’s this great woman. You’ve got to meet her,’” and Jones remembered, “‘There’s this great playwright and this great play. Will you do it?’” Although Jones, who described herself as “thick when it comes to reading plays,” did not argue with Vogel’s later assessment that she “‘didn’t understand a word’” (“Role”) when she first read the play, Jones accepted the role and began a productive collaboration between playwright and actor.

Vogel and Jones experienced professional highs and lows together. Each receiving an Obie Award for *The Baltimore Waltz* was a major high. After the success of *Waltz*, Jones later recalled, her partner “Mary and I would get postcards from Paula and Anne [Fausto-Sterling, Vogel’s partner] from exciting locales like Italy or Brazil—and all because productions of the play were being put on there. Suddenly Paula Vogel, this little girl from Maryland, was traveling the

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27 If a Vogel equivalent to David Mamet’s famous “Mamet Mafia,” numbering such stage and screen luminaries as William H. Macy, Felicity Huffman, and Joe Mantegna, existed, Cherry Jones would undoubtedly be a charter member.
world because of this play she had written for the love of her brother” (“Role”). A significant low soon followed in each woman’s experience with And Baby Makes Seven. Jones received some favorable reviews for her performance, but her recollection was that “it was the biggest disaster I ever had in my career. I had a nervous breakdown.” Vogel concurred: “I was close to a nervous breakdown. As a matter of fact, I was sitting in the back of the theater the week before we opened. [A friend of mine] came because she knew I was in trouble. I held her hand and wept, and I said to her, ‘I'm so glad that this is happening after my brother died, because I know that that's real tragedy and this is just going to be a show that flops’” (“Role”).

Neither Vogel blamed Jones nor Jones Vogel for this production of Baby’s lack of success. Jones recalled, “There were marvelous people involved all across the board. It just was not the time, and maybe that's all we should say.” Vogel offered an assessment of the play itself when she added, “I actually think it's a very sweet little play. It seems to work well as long as it's done on no budget somewhere and if I'm not ever involved” (“Role”). Hence, the two worked together again on Desdemona. Indeed, a further collaboration was in mind a few years later when, Vogel told Rosemarie Tichler and Barry Jay Kaplan, “I was going to write a play about a castrato for Cherry Jones … I was going to write her a ‘breeches’ role about the greatest castrato of all time, Farinelli, as a young man” Vogel said that she had “the whole thing worked out” (121) until fate intervened via a phone call from Jones, who told Vogel, “’I got the role in The Heiress. My first Broadway lead’” (121). Vogel simply said, “‘You’ve got to take that’” (121), and moved onto another idea, which became How I Learned to Drive.28

28 By the time Vogel and Jones spoke with The Advocate, both were history-making figures. Jones, in 1995, “became the first lesbian actor to thank her partner from the stage as she accepted a Tony award for Best Actress for her role in the play The Heiress. And in 1998, in recognition of her smash hit How I Learned to Drive, Vogel became the first out lesbian to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama” (“Role”). Both in their collaborations and in the professional results of their
The importance of *The Baltimore Waltz* in launching Vogel’s career as a national (even international, according to Jones) playwright is difficult to overstate. Given its centrality in the Vogel canon, Vogel made a surprising revelation when, in March 2017, San Francisco’s Magic Theatre mounted a “Legacy Revival,” directed by Jonathan Moscone. “I have not been involved in a production of *Baltimore Waltz*,” Vogel acknowledged, “since the fifth anniversary of my brother’s death.” She then explained, “I needed to let the play go in the same way that I needed to let my brother go.” Indeed, “it’s a necessary part … of grief.” This creating distance between both Carl Vogel and *Waltz* as a work of art initially seems more consistent with Freud’s view of mourning than with Derrida’s ethical mourning. Vogel, however, did not close with these words. Describing her own experience in San Francisco nearly thirty years after her brother’s death, Vogel spoke of “the ability to go back to the magic, come home here, and be back in the city that he loved where every neighborhood I was in I can feel his footsteps.” Here, she remembered “what I’d forgotten” as she “looked at these actors,” namely, “The thing that we don’t know when we are in our 30s, when we are living our daily lives, [is] oh how beautiful we were. We were beautiful” (“Paula Vogel on *The Baltimore Waltz*”).

Vogel’s 2017 description of *Waltz*, I believe, explains why ultimately the play is not one of anger or one about AIDS but rather “a play about memory, love, and grief.” As the Carl of the play speaks in present tense and as Vogel has returned to it decades after temporarily walking away from it, she engages in an act of ethical mourning that any person who has lost a loved one too soon may understand. That the AIDS pandemic, at least in the first world, has largely subsided thanks to protease inhibitors and Truvada (PrEP) in no way minimizes the effect *The
Baltimore Waltz may have upon one who mourns someone taken away by an as yet unnamed pandemic, accident, war, or any other death that comes far too early.

David Savran writes that Vogel’s plays are about “a return to the scene of the crime, as it were, that signals that everything has remained the same and, simultaneously, changed radically” (“Loose Screws” xiii). In no case is this statement more true than of the play that followed The Baltimore Waltz, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing (1995). Vogel recalls that “the play’s ending came upon [her] with a terrible clarity” (Baltimore 229) while she drove around Provincetown, Rhode Island, late at night, in 1985. Her research took a more formal turn in 1990, “after [her] brother’s illness and Baltimore Waltz,” when Vogel “began reading about domestic violence” after she overheard a violent incident in a car, “drove behind the car at a fast pace until [she] could flag down a police car to pursue the chase,” and recoiled in horror when the female victim “declined to press charges” (229). Less than one year later, Vogel writes, she had accumulated a file “crammed two inches thick” (230) of newspaper clippings that reported domestic violence in the city of Provincetown alone.

The 1990 plight of the “NEA Four” (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes), who lost their proposed grants because National Endowment for the Arts chairman John Frohnmayer deemed their works obscene, struck Vogel as akin to domestic violence. Learning that “‘obscene’ came from the Greek, for ‘offstage’” (231), Vogel responded to the obscenity pledge required of all NEA fellows when she “applied for an NEA grant, received one and wrote Hot ‘N’ Throbbing to see just what would be perceived as pornographic, eager to test
By 1995, however, Vogel would write that she sensed less of a threat to the artistic community from “Jesse Helms and the fundamentalist Right” than from a reliance on “seasonal offerings and often vacuous theatre” as “theatres have been choosing their seasons from fear rather than conviction” (230). Her own agent, Peter Franklin, whom Vogel characterized as “a man of both literary discrimination and marketing savvy,” responded to the first draft of *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* by telling Vogel, “I think we may get two productions of this play – one here and one abroad” (230). Vogel expressed her fear that “a benign censorship, a censorship within” could signal “that there is no longer a place for audiences to come to a civic space – the theatre – to confront the disturbing questions of our time” (230). In *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*, she both fearfully (because the play may not be performed) and fearlessly (because she moved the obscenity onstage) sought to shine “a communal light in the darkness of our theatres” (231).

Years earlier, in *Desdemona*, Vogel had contemplated the moment before Othello “put out the light” (*Othello* 5.2.7) of Desdemona’s life. In *The Oldest Profession*, death takes away Lillian, Mae, Ursula, and Edna, one by one. *And Baby Makes Seven* “kills” Cecil, Henri, and Orphan (albeit temporarily). Finally, *The Baltimore Waltz* has Carl succumb to AIDS. In each case, however, the violence is either at least an instant away in time and/or place or farcical. *Desdemona* ends one brushstroke before Desdemona goes to her deathbed. The women in *The Oldest Profession* all die offstage, of natural causes, and in a timely fashion. The imaginary children’s “deaths” in *Baby* inflict no real pain. Even Carl’s death in *The Baltimore Waltz*,

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29 Bigsby says Vogel considered the obscenity pledge “a deliberate affront” (*Contemporary* 312). Given the tone both of Vogel’s introduction and of the play itself, plus Bigsby’s report that Vogel sent “a copy to Jesse Helms with a note thanking him for his work in destroying civil rights,” Vogel seems to have regarded the pledge more as an assault than an affront.
which occurs because of the devastation wrought by a horrible illness, occurs offstage and is
defamiliarized to the point that when Anna finally confronts it, she does so in the sterile light of a
hospital corridor.

*Hot 'N' Throbbing* is Vogel’s first play to enact what the audience should regard as an
actual death onstage. What is more, in what Shepard and Lamb call “Vogel’s grimmest play”
(205), she opts to put out the light in a gruesome manner, the “lust murder” (286), or “snuff film”
(235). The masculine Voice, through Claude Dwyers, strangles Charlene with his bare hands,
“reenacting Othello’s murder of Desdemona” (Shepard and Lamb 206). This act destroys not
only the life but also the willed fiction of Charlene, who has thought she was “in control” of “her
body,” “her thoughts,” and “of … him” (235). A battered wife who has taken out a restraining
order against her husband, Charlene lives in what the directions call “a townhouse that cost
$79,900 five years ago, on a 9 ½% mortgage, no deposit down” (233) with “oh yes – wall-to-
wall shag” (234). There, she strives to support her fifteen-year-old daughter, Leslie Ann (who
prefers Layla, a name meaning “night’ and connoting intoxication and desirability), and
fourteen-year-old son, Calvin, by writing women’s erotica for Gyno Productions. Like the Voice
Over and Gyno Productions, Charlene tries “to create women as protagonists in their own
dramas, rather than objects. And we try to appreciate the male body as an object of desire”
(262).³⁰

From the beginning, *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* raises compelling questions of control, not only
in the immediate environment of Charlene Dwyers’ home but also in the larger sense of who

³⁰ Charlene’s work is a forerunner of what Jill Soloway, inspired by feminist theorist Laura
Mulvey, describes as the “female gaze” (Nussbaum) and tries to film in her Emmy Award-
winning television series *Transparent*. I will return to Soloway’s work in Chapter Five.
maintains control in what some view as erotica, others as pornography, and still others as obscenity. Bigsby sees this play as a particular instance of how Vogel has created “her Yoknapatawpha County” in “work [that] is deliberately sexualized,” including a drama “which is simultaneously aware of the degree to which sexual imagery has a history that is predominantly, if not exclusively, male” (Modern 415). Although Charlene, at her typewriter, strives to write in her own voice, she also, Mansbridge notes, “is negotiating her place between … two traditions, trying to become an author of female pleasure and desire within a history that persistently positions women as object and spectacle” (68). The traditions are represented by two characters, The Voice and the Voice Over (V.O.) Mansbridge calls The Voice “both an embodied, male character and an omniscient voice who narrates passages from canonical texts” (68), among them Joyce’s Ulysses, Nabokov’s Lolita, and Shakespeare’s Othello. These allusions “both pervade and interrupt Charlene’s own narrative voice” (Mansbridge 68). The V.O., on the other hand, “is a female character who enacts – more particularly, overacts – and directs the erotic screenplay that Charlene is writing” (68). This female V.O. “represents women’s most commodified role on the popular American stage – the stripper” even as she “enacts the hypersexualized female body in popular culture” (68). The Voice eventually turns out to be not only omniscient but also omnipotent, telling V.O., “Cut! Listen, there’s been a change in the script” (287). Over the V.O.’s protest, “That’s not what we rehearsed,” The Voice retorts, “Since when are movies made by screenwriters? Directors make the movies. Not some broad sitting on her ass” (287). Over the course of the play, Charlene has gone from the illusion that she is in control to her diminution into a female object that will soon be destroyed.

That this destructive process would ensnare even as comparatively a liberated woman as Charlene results from an ever increasing need for more exotic and violent sex fare on the part of
Clyde and the masculine impulses he represents. Several times, Vogel employs the words of “William Acton, nineteenth-century sexologist” (296) and author of what today’s reader would recognize as the pseudoscientific and pseudo psychological text *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*, which she notes came out in its third edition in 1871. She then attributes quotations from Acton’s book on male sexuality, especially masturbation, to Richard von Krafft-Ebing, another sexologist who attributed what he called “cerebral neuroses” involving sexuality to masturbation among boys.

At other times, Vogel states in a footnote, she has “fabricated Case 103 quotes in the style of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*” (296) and used them to describe Clyde’s “case.” The Voice, in a Krafft-Ebing tone, narrates how Clyde, “‘as a schoolboy, faced disciplinary action due to hyperesthesia sexualis – Masturbatio Coram Discipulis in Schola’” (254). The V.O., at first, “is impressed” and responds “[e]rotically” (254) to this apparent show of erudition. Despite this “‘self-abuse,’” we learn, Clyde “‘fulfilled his marital duties in a typical if somewhat energetic manner, not yet exhibiting the traits of hysteria virilis that led to the breakdown of said marriage’” (255). Moments later, The Voice (as Krafft-Ebing) ominously continues, “‘However, in time the constant excitation of hysteria virilis leads in turn to paresthesia sexualis. The subject became convinced in his mind that only violence done to his fetishized obsession could restore him to his former virility’” (263). We see such violence enacted in a flashback to three years ago, when The Voice tells us, “Subject increasingly resorted to violence against wife as an erotic stimulus for erec—’” (274). Stage directions state, “*The Man strikes The Woman hard on the face; in slow motion, it almost looks like a caress*” (274). Perhaps a degree of apparent
confusion between love and violence helps explain why Charlene waits before leaving Clyde and, eventually, seeking legal remedy against him.

The next time the subject of Clyde’s increasing need for violent stimulation comes up, it does so in his own words. He tells Charlene, “I go into a corner bookstore, and it’s packed. And I change a five into quarters, and slip into the booth…and I—“ (283), leading her possibly to believe he satisfies his lust until he confesses, “All it does it get me even more agitated.” Clyde goes on, “I’m like numb to that by now” (283), and so he searches his truck for the money to hire a prostitute. Clyde has wound up at Charlene’s house because finding only “a lousy eighteen dollars and thirty-seven cents” (283) means he cannot afford a sex worker. Clyde’s hopes for a satisfactory sexual experience with Charlene seem to be a chimera, however, for he admits that “lately nothing really seems to do it for me,” and “all the usual … uh … escapes … turn me on but they don’t work anymore” (284). He acknowledges that “it’s building up into a big problem now” (284) and soon breaks into tears.

Charlene’s decision in response is as shocking as it is unfortunate for her. She tells Clyde, “Okay --- listen. I’m just a woman on a Friday night, okay? I’ve come down on my price for you – just one – just tonight – for $18.37” (285). Clyde, “unable to believe his luck,” tells Charlene, “I don’t have … anything on me … you know? In case” (285). Charlene laughingly replies that she has “got some protection in the house” (285), in response to which Clyde “scowls,” and the Voice echoes, “She’s got protection in the house” (285). Soon after, what the Voice calls “a change in the script” occurs, and the V.O. fruitlessly protests, “Hey, guys, wait, these restraints are awfully tight” (287). As the action returns to Charlene and Clyde, they exchange what at first seem tender embraces until Clyde, perhaps ritualistically, “rubs her face with the blood” (289) she drew earlier when she shot him in the buttock. During the ever more
violent scene that follows, the Man (Clyde) lip synchs what The Voice says while the Woman
(Charlene) and V.O. do likewise. The Voice asks if the female(s) remember “the last time,” an
occasion “[w]hen I beat you to within an inch of your life,” but even so, she “didn’t learn did
you?” (290).

The “heavily stylized” yet “raw and painful” (Shepard and Lamb 207) murder scene
enacts many of the tragic clichés of domestic violence. The Voice calls V.O./Charlene a “Bitch”
and demands, “What makes you think, with your big fat butt and your cow thighs, that you’re
worth eighteen bucks?” (292). When Clyde’s voice takes over, he states even as he cries,
“You’re the one making me do this, Charlene. You should never – never gotten that restraining
order” (293). “A man’s house,” he goes on, “is his Castle. His. Fucking. Castle. What we do
here is our business” (293). The Voice, in a speech “[w]hispered under/simultaneous with
Voice-Over,” cites Molly Bloom’s lines that conclude James Joyce’s Ulysses, including a “yes,”
while V.O. states Charlene’s efforts to survive and ends with “no” (293). Clyde ends Charlene’s
bid for freedom and life when he “strangles The Woman with his bare hands” and “leaves”
(294). Continuing to quote Joyce, The Voice concludes with Molly Bloom’s final echoed
“’Yes’” (294), perverted beyond anything besides rote recognition. Mansbridge writes that it is
“the combination of Clyde’s humiliation, his emotional vulnerability, and his discomfort with
Charlene’s new writing career [that] lay the ground for the sudden shift from sexual desire to
violence that provides the climax of the play” (84). She avers, moreover, “The precise shift from
eroticism to violence occurs when Charlene assures Clyde that she has protection” (84). The
idea of Charlene possessing sexual agency that excludes him renders Clyde temporarily mad, as
he indicates when telling her that she’s “the one making me do this” (293, emphasis mine). “As
fantasy and reality converge,” Mansbridge continues, “Charlene and Clyde seem suddenly to be
caught in scripts and performances that neither is able to control” (85). For this reason, Joyce, wrenched horribly from context (or placed firmly within context as what Bigsby calls “a male attempt to enter a female sensibility, to understand something of female sexuality” [Contemporary 314], depending upon one’s point of view), fittingly narrates the events surrounding this ultimate confrontation of and combination between sex and violence.

Arguably even more than Voice and V.O. or Charlene and Clyde, the third set of two in *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* – The Girl/Leslie Ann/Layla and The Boy/Calvin – constitute the most problematical pair in the play. The first two couples behave in a way that is both canonically and culturally overdetermined. Vogel’s use of the canon shows, note Shepard and Lamb, “that it is a shorter distance than is usually acknowledged from *Ulysses, Plexus, Lolita,* or *Othello …* to its own final scene” (206). Charlene’s agreement to prostitute herself for Clyde’s benefit, Shepard and Lamb go on, “is a fantasy she has agreed to act out because her cultural training to please her man overrides both her memories of their relationship and her instincts” (207). Vogel reinforces the cultural component with her file, “crammed two inches thick” of local domestic violence articles and her reminder that the “premiere of *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* occurred two months before the murder of Nicole Simpson” (230). Vogel also presents Leslie Ann and Calvin so as to reinforce that what they observe around them imprints itself upon their adolescent consciousness (and consciences).

The play opens when, “[i]n a growing blue light, we see The Girl dressed in very tight pants and a halter top, making suggestive stripper or vogueing movements” (235), inappropriate attire and activities for a child of approximately fifteen. When she speaks soon after, although she remains “dressed as before,” her words suit her age better. “MAAHM!” she screams. “WHERE’S YOUR EYELINER?” (235). Part of what follows echoes a scene repeated in
families every weekend night across America: Leslie Ann wants to go to her friend Lisa’s for a sleepover, Charlene initially forbids her to go because she does not believe Lisa is properly supervised, Leslie Ann disobedies and flees to Lisa’s car while Charlene is annoyed enough to say, “Oh, Jesus. I could use a cigarette” (241). Charlene’s fears soon give way to the pressure of being “behind … schedule,” for “I’ve got to get out forty pages by the first mail tomorrow morning, and I’m on page twenty-six” (237).

These words and actions may seem ordinary or “normal” enough until they are juxtaposed with other parts of the first scene. Granted, Vogel has told Bigsby, “I would not believe ANYTHING in Hot ’N’ Throbbing that takes place under blue light … like Peter Shaffer’s Black Comedy, the stage lights are a device to separate stage worlds: the blue lights signify a stage fantasy that is not literally true” (Contemporary 313). Nonetheless, both what happens under the blue light and the stage light can be disturbing. Before Calvin speaks, under blue light we see “[e]xaggerated movements of Boy humping Girl from behind with clothes on” (237). Under stage light, Calvin asks, “Are you going out in those tight pants?” (237), which he says are “so tight you can see your P.L.s” (237). Leslie Ann calls Calvin a “creep” (237) and suggests, “Why don’t you just go beat-off in your room, you little pervo…” (238). Over Calvin’s denial, Leslie Ann insists, “You beat-off! In the catcher’s mitt Daddy gave you for Christmas! I can feel the walls shaking!” (239). Rather than inquiring into her son’s sexual habits, Charlene immediately eroticizes his possible fetish, “making notes” that include, “Catcher’s mitt. Open Window. Show Clipboard. Notes: Leather catcher’s mitt’” (239). Still under stage light and while Charlene is absorbed with her work, Leslie Ann tells Calvin, “I might just learn you

31 When Charlene asks, “What are P.L.s?”, the only answer she receives is Leslie Ann’s “Nothin’” (238). Perhaps the most P.G. interpretation of what the abbreviation means is “panty lines.”
something interesting” so that “you won’t haveta hang in the bushes outside the house” (240). When Calvin “is suddenly quiet, beet red,” Leslie Ann confirms her suspicion that “it was you. Watching me undressing” (240). Rather than becoming angry, however, she goes on, “Yeah. I might just let you learn” (240). A blue light scene with a quotation from Lolita follows, and soon after comes another scene where The boy “stands, like a somnambulist, with his catcher mitt, looking up, staring” (244) and later, under stage light, “fondling his catcher’s mitt” (245). This youth, “not yet old enough to shave” (244), already possesses what Mansbridge calls a “burgeoning sexuality,” and the references, both under blue light and stage light, to Calvin’s masturbation reveal “the ubiquitous and intersecting ways we learn and perform our sexualities, both inside and outside the home” (75). That these performances can be intertwined with members of our biological families may hint at the greater dysfunction within the family of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing or may be Vogel’s way of making a point about society as a whole.

When Clyde breaks down the door to Charlene’s house, violating both the restraining order and what should be the safe space in which Charlene, Leslie Ann, and Calvin live, Calvin interrupts his reverie of mindlessly feeding quarters into a peep show and tries to come to his mother’s rescue. Charlene and Clyde begin to kiss, only to be interrupted when “The Boy flies into the room” and, assuming the role of Charlene’s protector tells his father, “I AM. GONNA. KILL YOU!!” (266). Although Charlene interrupts, “CALVIN! NO! STOP!” (267), father and son wrestle, and “The Boy, from behind, gets The Man in a lock” and even begins “choking him” (267). In a moment which recalls August Wilson’s Fences, winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize, Calvin echoes Cory’s “You don’t count around here no more” when he says, “You don’t live

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32 The Baltimore Waltz and How I Learned to Drive contain direct references to teenage male sexuality. Neither, however, describes a boy quite as young as Calvin or clearly calls the teenager “Boy.”
here anymore. Get it?” (287). Clyde is no more receptive to his son’s assertion of masculine power than is Troy Maxson in *Fences*, gaining the upper hand but, unlike Troy’s banishment of Cory, inducing Calvin into a chorus of “I’m warmer than shit and tighter than mud” (269). This moment fades, however, into an argument over drinking milk and Calvin’s demanding of his mother, “Did. You. Kiss. Him? Mom? After all he’s done?” (273). The Voice recites Molly Bloom while Charlene tries to explain about “old time’s sake” (273). Perhaps to no one’s surprise, Calvin exclaims, “I AM SO FUCKED UP!” (273) before he slams the door and leaves, not to reappear until, “watching the action,” he “cries” during the eventual “snuff film” (288). He disappears for good just after Clyde murders Charlene. Calvin, arguably in hopeless, repetitive fashion, exemplifies what Bigsby calls “the voyeurism which is [the play’s] apparent subject but then led, by a seemingly inexorable logic, to the violence which provides its climax” (*Contemporary* 316). The oddity of Charlene’s describing to Calvin, early on, her frustrating search for synonyms for “throbbing” (242 ff.) gives way to the horror of the youth viewing the action that results in his mother’s body no longer throbbing or its heart beating at all. His final words are both true and prophetic.

Leslie Ann is no less problematical than her brother. The attire she wears when we first see her, which seems inappropriate to her age, fits with initial movement under the blue light as well as with an elaborate fantasy life Calvin constructs for her. Calvin describes a complicated trip into town and “this joint” where the bouncer “always pats Leslie Ann on the fanny” (246). Changing into “the scanty sequins and the two inch heels,” the “jailbait” teens “wrap their legs around the poles” and eventually perform “full splits to scoop up the dollar bills that will pay for the midnight double feature at the Mall and the burgers afterward at Big Bob’s” (247). This juxtaposition of the striptease and teens enjoying the Mall and burgers jars the audience’s minds,
most likely even after Calvin tries to calm his mother’s worries with “Jesus, mom. Take a joke, will ya? She probably hangs out at Lisa’s being dumb” (247). This more benign vision is, indeed, what Vogel has told Bigsby is the way she understands Leslie Ann, who she has said “is innocently with her girlfriends at a slumber party and driving around, and watching horror movies in someone’s basement” (Contemporary 314). That may well be. A seed has been sown, nevertheless, that blooms into Calvin’s eroticizing and fetishizing his sister’s body. Clyde even joins in, telling Calvin, “You gotta watch her, son” because “That body of hers … your sister should be licensed” (269). Calvin’s “I watch her all the time” (269) reveals more than he intends.

Mansbridge calls attention to the moment when “The Man hands Girl five dollars” (280), doing so, Mansbridge writes, “just as any father would” (75) but with greater consequences and significance than the typical father giving his daughter an allowance has (or ought to have). Mansbridge says this exchange “further highlights the value of bodies and desires in a heterosexual economy” (75). Drawing parallels to Clyde’s and Calvin’s discussions of Leslie Ann’s body and possibly keeping their activities at peep shows in mind, Mansbridge argues how “[f]emale and male sexuality are ‘normalized’ within the nuclear family” (75-76) to the point where, Vogel’s “situating family within the wider context of cultural production, Hot shocks the audience into a reconsideration of the inviolability of this central unit of American culture” (76). Charlene participates in the heightened sexuality within her own family, for driven by her need to earn a living through her words, she draws erotic material not only from Calvin and his catcher’s mitt but also from what seems to be (but may not necessarily be) a fantasy of her stripper daughter.
When Leslie Ann finally discusses sexuality while apart from her nuclear family, she does so while addressing “her best friend Lisa” (276) but in reality hearing replies from V.O. Leslie Ann opens with an unsurprising question: “Do you … do you … think of boys a lot?” (277). V.O./Lisa replies that she does, and then Lisa greatly intensifies the discussion. “[D]o you think of them, like, ‘hurting’ you?” (278) she demands. Then, she adds, “Well, I don’t mean like hurting you, but like, you’re tied down and you can’t stop them.” She qualifies her comments by claiming that “it makes you get hot only it’s ‘cause it’s not for real” (278). The notion that Leslie Ann’s fantasies draw influence and inspiration from her mother’s writing makes perfect sense and renders Charlene’s next line, “Leslie Ann is still a child. And I want her to have every second of childhood that she can get” (278) all the more hollow. This wish comes too late, as Leslie Ann hammers home when she concludes the play by sitting at her mother’s chair and retyping the first words of the play, down to Vogel’s tag, “VOICE-OVER: She was hot. She was throbbing. But she was in control. Control of her body. Control of her thoughts”’ (295).

Shepard and Lamb despair in the conclusion. They note that Leslie Ann “seems unmoven by Woman’s [aka her mother’s] cooling body on stage as she enters and picks up where Charlene had stopped in the first scene” (206). From this and other evidence in the last scene, they lament that “the hint that Woman may have died in vain is difficult to ignore” (208). Bigsby finds more ambiguity in the conclusion, writing, “In one sense [Leslie Ann] deliberately de-feminises herself, … avoiding the male gaze, refusing to be looked at, but also replicating her mother’s actions, apparently learning nothing” (315). Bigsby does grant, “In another sense, she becomes the manipulator rather than the manipulated” but then blasts any hopefulness by nothing “that in this play the two roles hardly seem to differ” (315).
Mansbridge discerns Vogel’s own “difficulty in finding a way out of the cycles of violence” (86) represented in Hot ‘N’ Throbbing in a discussion of three different stagings of the end that were put onstage between 1994 and 2005. In one of these productions, Molly Smith overruled Vogel’s desire to present Leslie Ann “as a university professor, giving a lecture to her students on the relationship between sexuality and violence” (Mansbridge 87) and, instead, had Leslie freeze upon encountering her mother’s corpse and then relax upon hearing, “‘It’s okay. It’s all right’” (Mansbridge 87) from V.O. Finally, in the 2005 Signature Theatre production, Les Waters directed a version that offered what Mansbridge calls “Vogel’s preferred ending” as it “flashes forward ten years, to show Leslie Ann as a literature professor and Calvin as a Hollywood screenwriter” (87). “This ending,” Mansbridge writes, “emphasizes the possibilities of change that can come out of an intellectual engagement with the past, a critical questioning of the ideas and images that have been passed down, and a revision of the texts that continue to inform our bodies and imaginations” (87-88). This brief history illustrates a willingness on Vogel’s part to revise, even after a work has appeared in print (as Hot did in 1996) because, as Hamlet notes, the play (not the text) is the thing.

Reviewer Markland Taylor wrote that the 1994 American Repertory Theatre production, directed by Anne Bogart, was “finding it hard to live up to [major financial supporters’] faith in it” and “may have more impact if it were simplified or if it were turned into a film script.” Taylor did grant that “Vogel poses numerous questions, including what differences there are between pornography, erotica and adult entertainment and what, if anything, they contribute to sexual abuse” and, moreover, that it “is a legitimate reaction to the current rash of sexual

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33 Mansbridge writes that Vogel so disapproved of Smith’s staging that this “conflict of opinion marked the end of the professional relationship between Vogel and Smith” (87).
revelations on the sleaze-talkshow [sic] circuit.” Ultimately, however, Taylor found the play “just another reworking of the dysfunctional family cliché.”

_Baltimore Sun_ critic J. Wynn Rousuck thought more highly of the 1999 Molly Smith-directed production than Mansbridge’s commentary would seem to warrant. Calling the play “a theatrical 911 call that no serious theatergoer can afford to ignore,” Rousuck found in the Arena Stage Production “an ending that now contains the slightest vestige of hope for the next generation” while, at the same time, _Hot_ “still seems uncompromisingly honest, and it is performed with searing intensity -- and occasional flashes of humor -- by Smith's closely attuned cast.”

The 2005 Signature Theatre production, directed by Les Waters, concluded a Signature season devoted to Vogel’s works. Dan Bacalzo, writing for _Theater Mania_, deemed it “a nice way to wrap up the company’s season.” Bacalzo acknowledged the production as “not perfect,” particularly the performance of Matthew Stadelmann as Calvin, whom he called “never believable” and whose “awkward mannerisms take the viewer out of the production.” Among the “few plot holes that are hard to swallow,” Bacalzo did not cite anything pertaining to the ending, and he praised the rest of the performances as “absolutely terrific” and singled out the set design, light design, costuming, and sound as all praiseworthy.

_New York Times_ reviewer Jason Zinoman wrote as if he had seen a different play and production. Zinoman sarcastically wrote of Vogel’s preferred ending, “The play concludes, appropriately enough, in a lecture hall” and added that the play was neither “hot” nor “throbbing.” Zinoman granted that Vogel’s “kind of daring has resulted in some triumphs,” but

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34 Rousuck’s generally favorable review suggests that a reassessment of the 1999 Arena Stage production, directed by Molly Smith, with whom Vogel broke off professional relations afterwards, may be appropriate.
he added that “it also has potential pitfalls, some of which are prominently on display in Les Waters's off-key production.” While “[c]elebrities like Paris Hilton and the porn star Jenna Jameson have helped put pornography increasingly into the homes of mainstream American families, making this play seem as relevant as ever,” Zinoman went on to say, “the play still feels as if it could use one more round of editing.” This statement, Zinoman understood, applied to the third different version of the play.

These varying responses to the multiple versions of *Hot 'N' Throbbing* seem to make it what Shakespeare scholars would call a problem play. Vogel appears to have written a harsh critique (or three harsh critiques if we view each ending as producing a separate play) of the masculine gaze, even when a woman attempts to be “in control” of it. This message has not impressed itself upon many reviewers, who often do not know what to make of the stage business that is not performed by the central characters onstage. Nor do reviewers like Zinoman understand the didactic nature of a grown up Leslie Ann as a professor, for they pass the lecture hall off as yet another place of dull speeches. The central conceit in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* remains elusive, at least for now.

To a lesser extent, the Munich Virgin in *The Baltimore Waltz* and, to a far great extent, the Girl/Leslie Ann of “[a]bout fifteen” and the Boy/Calvin of “[a]bout fourteen” (*Hot* 232) in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* demonstrate how, by the 1990s, Vogel was coming to terms dramatically with characters who are physically mature yet who legally are still children. The multiple endings of *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, the first of which imagines the Girl maturing, dressing, and becoming “protected from our gaze” (294) until she takes her mother’s place at the keyboard, and the last of which presents her as a university professor who has achieved “an intellectual
engagement with the past” (Mansbridge 87-88) which liberates her from writing pornography and puts her under a gaze stereotypically addressed toward male authority figures, strongly suggest the playwright’s own struggles to reconcile these issues for herself. In *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), the play that, as Mansbridge writes, “earned [Vogel] international recognition as an important voice in American theater” (123), Vogel confronted the issue of adolescent sexuality directly and achieved her greatest success to date.

*How I Learned to Drive*, like Vogel’s earlier works, both engages canonical texts and incorporates autobiographical elements. Unlike the way Vogel uses names in *The Oldest Profession*, she does not employ autobiography whimsically, nor, since she has maintained she was not molested and is not the model for L’il Bit, does she do so with the haunted sense of *The Baltimore Waltz*. Rather, Vogel sets the play in Beltsville, Maryland, in the 1960s, approximately the place and time she grew up, and she invokes her own grandparents, including the Grandfather L’il Bit identifies as the source of her “cracker background” and who “[v]oted for George Wallace” (580). L’il bit also mentions Grandmother believing in “all the sacraments of the church, to the day she died” [591] and has her mother ask, “What does an eighty-year-old priest know about love-making with girls” (595), positing an unusual identity of a Catholic “Cracker” that seems consistent with what we know of Phyllis Rita Bremerman Vogel’s family. Finally, if Grandfather is the “Cracker” in L’il Bit’s genealogy, this fact suggests her father, who is absent just as Vogel’s was for much of her childhood, is of a different lineage. Grandfather’s voracious sexual appetite, which is consistent with the othered low-class white, dates back to his having sex thrice daily with Grandma when she was a “child bride” who still “believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny” (591), and functions, at least somewhat, to problematize the
audience’s attitude toward the only comparatively recent illegality of Peck’s behavior toward L’il Bit.

Vogel’s engagement with other literary texts is also less pervasive than when Desdemona goes behind the scenes of Othello or And Baby Makes Seven elaborates upon unusual families as presented in Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? In fact, if not for Vogel’s comments about Drive, at least one of the influences might have gone unnoticed. C.W.E. Bigsby writes that Drive “was inspired, or perhaps provoked, by Mamet’s Oleanna” (Modern 415), a play Bigsby describes as “purported to create a balance between its two characters, one male, one female” (Contemporary 318). Mansbridge challenges Bigsby’s characterization of Oleanna, noting that the play’s “linear naturalism … makes its conclusion logically inevitable” (123). Drive, on the other hand, has what Mansbridge calls “a recursive structure that defies resolution” (123-24). This recursive structure is both reminiscent of such earlier plays as Waltz and a way for Vogel to withhold or disclose information as she wishes.

The more obvious influence on Drive comes from Nabokov’s Lolita; indeed, Vogel has described the play to Elizabeth Farnsworth as “Lolita from Lolita’s point of view” (“A Prize-Winning”). This statement requires considering Lolita from Vogel’s point of view. In her interview with Farnsworth, Vogel calls Drive “in many ways a love story between Little [sic] Bit and her uncle, Uncle Peck” and asserts “that it’s a mistake to demonize the people who hurt us” (Vogel “Prize-Winning”). In addition, while interviewing Vogel, Arthur Holmberg stated, “Drive dramatizes in a disturbing way how we receive great harm from the people who love us.” Vogel would have none of that. Instead, she said, “I would reverse that. I would say that we can receive great love from the people who harm us.” She tells Holmberg this reversal comes as a denial of the “culture of victimization,” where “great harm can be inflicted by well-intentioned
therapists, social workers, and talk show hosts who encourage people to dwell in their identity as victim.” Despite the pain we may endure from others, Vogel argues that “great gifts … can also be inside that box of abuse” (Hollmberg “Through the Eyes”). From these statements, we may infer that Vogel feels at least a modicum of sympathy for Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert.

This understanding of Lolita is controversial and hotly debated. Lisa Zunshine calls Lolita “another novel that challenged its readers’ metarepresentational capacity with its figure of the unreliable narrator” (101). In Zunshine’s view, Humbert is nothing more than a liar and a “sexual predator” (101), and she cites none other than Nabokov himself as an author who “felt compelled to correct his readers’ misperception” (102) and called Humbert “a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear touching” (Nabokov 94). Deborah Hull points out that Lolita and Drive both rely upon the automobile, which Humbert Humbert utilizes as “a confined space in which Humbert can forge a closer relationship with his step-daughter” (49), even though, it must be noted, Lolita is trapped in the vehicle while L’il Bit is literally at the wheel. Hull echoes Zunshine (and, in fact, Nabokov) in her declaration “that Nabokov never intended for his audience to sympathize with Humbert Humbert, as Vogel does with Uncle Peck” (4). To readers who agree with Zunshine and Hull, Vogel’s sympathy for Humbert (and, similarly, perhaps for Uncle Peck) will be discomfiting.

This is not to say, however, that Vogel wishes the audience to sympathize entirely or even primarily with Uncle Peck. Peck’s name, Vogel has said repeatedly, was inspired by the actor Gregory Peck, who portrayed Atticus Finch in the 1962 Robert Mulligan filmed version of Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. The play tells us, however, that Peck’s name has another source than the actor’s idyllic portrayal of a father. The adult L’il Bit recalls, “In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia. Uncle Peck, for example” (578). Peck, then,
which L’il Bit all but announces derives from the crude slang term “pecker,” is not even Uncle Peck’s real name, an appellation we never learn. Uncle Peck’s being identified and driven by his genitals clearly lessens both sympathy and empathy directed toward him. Still, in keeping with Vogel’s telling Holmberg that “it takes a whole village to molest a child” (Vogel “Through the Eyes”), Vogel has Peck behave very differently from Humbert in that he agrees to clear boundaries with L’il Bit, telling her, “Nothing is going to happen until you want it to” (588), and Uncle Peck repeatedly brings L’il Bit home to her family, where he is accepted and even loved. His wife Mary suspects something amiss but does not blame her husband. Mary tells the audience, “And I want to say this about my niece. She’s a sly one, that one is. She knows exactly what she’s doing.” Mary also defends Peck: “My husband was such a good man – is. Is such a good man” (609).

Peck tells L’il Bit, “I’m just a very ordinary man” (586), but he is unordinary both in the ways he inflicts and reflects trauma. Vogel withheld the full extent of L’il Bit’s trauma until the final two scenes, the first of which reveals that Uncle Peck began molesting L’il Bit when she was only eleven years old. Her response was one of denial and possibly disassociation: “This isn’t happening,” she says, “[t]rying not to cry” (621). The last scene then begins with L’il Bit recalling, “That day was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the ‘fire’ in my belly ever since” (621). Alan Shepard and Mary Lamb discuss this disjunction of mind and body, discovering in the entirety of Vogel’s plays “that memory is recorded and recalled through sensory experiences, that the human body is an archive of its past, that the past is sometimes known to the body generally but not to the mind itself” (208). They argue that when Uncle Peck “aims to coax L’il Bit into yet one more hotel bed by reasoning that ‘sometimes the body knows things that the mind isn’t listening to’ [81],” he proffers a “corrupt
version of the theory” (208). Shepard and Lamb also assert a theory that is less persuasive, in
light of the way L’il Bit seems to perpetuate the cycle of violation in the carefully choreographed
scene, all the way down to her using “dramaturgically speaking” (594), with the youth who
claims to be a high school senior at Walt Whitman High School. According to Shepard and
Lamb, “L’il Bit’s recovery from the abuse does not depend on her telling her story as a kind of
therapy,” but rather the story “emerges in a controlled, distanced way,” neither as “unmediated
recolletion” nor “the return of the repressed” (208). The play undercuts this notion at least three
times. One comes in L’il Bit’s plaintive query, “Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were
you? Were you eleven?” (619). Furthermore, she describes how she was “kicked out of that
cancy school in 1970” because of her “constant companion,” the alcoholic beverage “Canadian
V.O. A fifth a day” (582). Then, in a moment that echoes Uncle Peck’s having missed
Thanksgiving of 1964 because “there were … ‘things’ going on” (611), L’il Bit tells the
audience, “I stayed away from Christmas and Thanksgiving for years after” (619). Such
moments imbue some of the play’s funnier moments such as the “Walk Down Mammary Lane”
(600) with a humor that seems more gallows than controlled and distant.

In the most obvious sense, the “it” that L’il Bit believes happens to Uncle Peck is sexual
violation like that he perpetrates upon her and, by inference, Cousin Bobby in South Carolina.
Bigsby notes that the scene with Bobby “had not featured in [Vogel’s] own outline for the play,”
but nevertheless, “[w]hen she was invited to delete the scene she insisted on retaining it” because
she saw Peck’s “equal attraction to young girls and boys as a necessary counterbalance to
assumptions that paedophiles are gay” (Contemporary 322) and as a way defending Carl Vogel
posthumously against gay slurs. The very inclusion of this scene requires a willing suspension of
disbelief by the audience, for it is the only scene which L’il Bit, the narrator of the play, has no means of witnessing.

This “it” may also extend beyond sexual exploitation. We learn that Uncle Peck is a World War II veteran who, when L’il Bit inquires about his service, becomes “[s]uddenly taciturn” and stutters, “I … I did just this and that. Nothing heroic or spectacular” (585). Although Uncle Peck’s World War II service comes long after he is eleven, the experiences he had while fighting may well have had the same traumatizing influence upon him as one or more sexual molestations. Aunt Mary refers to his “troubles” and says, “I wonder, sometimes, what happened to him during the war,” a time when soldiers “didn’t have ‘rap sessions’ to talk about their feelings” (609). She believes this troubling dating to the 1940s “has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue” and, with unspecified frequency, leads to his “having a bad spell” that renders him passive “until it passes” (609). Bigsby calls it “tempting” (Contemporary 318) to analogize Uncle Peck and Joe Christmas, the Light in August character Bigsby paraphrases Faulkner as saying “did not know who he was” (318). Although ultimately Bigsby backs away from denying Uncle Peck self-knowledge, he does describe the man as “plainly lonely and disturbed, driven by demons he can neither name nor defeat” (326). Nor may L’il Bit or Aunt Mary name what affects and afflicts Uncle Peck, other than to offer cogent guesses about its origins.

A twenty-first century audience may identify what we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as the source of Uncle Peck’s problems. As Hull points out, however, “it was not until 1980 that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was coined in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)” (17-18). “Terms,” Hull adds, “such as ‘soldier’s heart’ or ‘irritable heart,’ ‘shell-shocked,’ and ‘combat fatigue’ dominate the rhetoric of war history” (17) and literature prior to the identification and naming of PTSD. This
is not to say that pre-1980 war literature lacked examples and a language to describe what we would eventually see as PTSD. Ernest Hemingway’s 1925 story “Soldier’s Home,” for example, introduces the character Harold Krebs, who “came back much too late” (86) to his Oklahoma home town from the Great War, or what we now call World War I. Krebs experiences a time when he “did not want to talk about the war at all” (86), and when he does, he tells lies twice and then “had a reaction against the war and against talking about it” (87). Krebs then lives in an ennui, most likely depression, which seems an ongoing version of Uncle Peck’s “spells.” Krebs only minimally experiences sexual desire: “Vaguely he wanted a girl but he did not want to have to work to get her” (88). “You did not need a girl” (88), he tells himself. After an extended period, Krebs’ worried and confused parents finally intervene, with his mother delivering the message that he needs to stir from home and the library. When Harold shows no real interest in “mak[ing] a start at something” (92), his mother implores, “‘Don’t you love your mother, dear boy?’” (92). The heartrending (to her) answer is, “‘No.’” (92). An ensuing lie that he “didn’t mean it” (92) seems to bring the mother some comfort, but it leaves Krebs still numb, for “none of it had touched him” (93). A “sick and vaguely nauseated” Krebs does not require alcohol, as does Uncle Peck, to cope, but his method of coping, in the short period the story covers, seems scarcely more effective than Uncle Peck’s.

Hull “cannot say with authority that Uncle Peck satisfies the two criteria necessary to be diagnosed with PTSD” (19); nevertheless, she believes the evidence “shows Uncle Peck has deep and lasting psychic alterations caused by the war” (19-20). For both Uncle Peck and Harold Krebs, however, an attempt to psychoanalyze thoroughly and render a diagnosis may result in a futile struggle with semantics. David Morse, the actor who originated the role of Uncle Peck, states simply, “He’s a guy who’s been through World War II and suffered terrible things over
there…which are only hinted at in the play” (Morse). We don’t need to know the exact nature of what either Krebs has seen in the trench warfare of World War I or Uncle Peck has experienced “in the Pacific Theater” (585) scenes of Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and the kamikaze pilots of World War II to understand how each man is traumatized to the point of dissociation and impaired function such as that which has Uncle Peck finally drink himself to death circa 1976. Uncle Peck’s having been, in L’il Bit’s mind, almost certainly the victim of molestation before World War II only renders his life more complicated and treacherous. Perhaps these dual traumas explain why L’il Bit employs a familiar metaphor to describe Uncle Peck, saying, “Sometimes I think of my uncle as a kind of Flying Dutchman.” Somewhere, “in his Chevy ’56, a spirit driving up and down the back roads of Carolina,” L’il Bit’s imagined version of Uncle Peck seeks, perhaps not doomed never to find her, “a young girl who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him” (619).

To this point, I hope to have shown how Vogel uses repetition and nonlinear structure to defamiliarize sexual abuse to the point where the audience is unlikely to see Uncle Peck as the monster usually associated with pedophilia. A secondary but important narrative voice, that of the driving instructor (identified in the didascalia simply as “a Voice” (574) with the capital letter possibly assigning status approaching that of a deity), serves the function of “[f]urther defamiliarizing the action” (Mansbridge 131) away from a simplistic analysis. Bigsby, too, discerns an “attempt to create a character with negative empathy, to find ways of engaging audiences with a character to whom they would feel instinctively hostile” (Modern 415). The pastiche of attitudes toward adolescent sexuality presented in the play draws at least some attention away from what we may, at first, call perversion on Uncle Peck’s part. His behavior, while almost universally denounced as transgressive, is not particularly dissimilar from that of
Grandfather. Back when, Grandmother recalls, “[i]t was legal, what Daddy and I did” and “fourteen was a grown-up woman” (591), Grandfather singled her out as “the baby of the family” (592) with an entire “herd of [older] sisters” (592) and began imposing his sexual will upon her immediately. The ensuing decades have neither left Grandfather showing tendencies of a pedophile nor adopting a more enlightened attitude toward women. At a “typical family dinner” (578), he objectifies and embarrasses a seventeen-year-old L’il Bit when he says, “She’s got all the credentials she’ll need on her chest” (580). He mocks L’il Bit’s exceeding Grandmother’s wish (expressed later in the play but earlier in the chronology of the play) that “maybe someone in this family will finish high school” (595) by being accepted to college. When L’il Bit speaks enthusiastically about a Shakespeare course, Grandfather snorts, “How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?” (580). L’il Bit retaliates effectively, threatening that Grandfather’s ignorance will “send [his] ass to fry in hell with all the other crackers” (580), but the damage to L’il Bit’s esteem and dreams is done. Even so, however, while Grandfather is clearly a misogynist with a disgusting male gaze at his own granddaughter, he never crosses a line toward pedophilia and seems to have his desires still sated by the young girl, now grown old, he married.

Neither Grandmother’s early history nor Lolita readings by such critics as Zunshine suggest any agency on the part of L’il Bit that would further mitigate our attitudes toward Uncle Peck, but other factors do. Not the least is Vogel’s own attitude toward Lolita. Bigsby quotes Vogel in the Century Theatre Playbill as calling Nabokov’s novel “‘fascinating to me because it was so even handed and so neutral’” (Contemporary 319). Viewing Lolita requires, if not quite seeing the novel as a love story, at minimum granting Lolita some agency. Bigsby takes the next logical step, saying that How I Learned to Drive is, in fact, “a genuine love story in which love
finds its apotheosis not in consummation but sacrifice” (Contemporary 319). The play’s only mention of pedophilia is in a neologism, “pedophilish (?)” (574), which comes in a stage direction describing sixties music.

Music in Drive helps portray a zeitgeist where dismissing the possibility of L’il Bit having agency solely on the basis of her age is difficult. Dipa Janardanan raises the issue of how music problematizes our understanding of L’il bit, writing, “Or, is there something larger going on? What should we think of a song that calmly echoes, ‘She was too young to fall in love, and I was too young to know’ (Sam Cooke “Only Sixteen”), or ‘My eyes adored ya. Though I never laid a hand on you’ (Franki Valli “My Eyes Adored You”).’” As Vogel includes in her stage directions, “any Sam Cooke will do” [31] (144). Vogel’s directions also say that “sixties music is rife with [such] references” and cite what she calls the ‘You’re Sixteen’ genre hits” such as “Little Surfer Girl” (The Beach Boys), “This Girl Is a Woman Now” (Gary Puckett and the Union Gap), and “Come Back When You Grow Up” (31). L’il Bit develops a woman’s body early, and Vogel repeatedly calls attention to her breasts, packaging the play with The Minneola Twins in a volume titled The Mammary Plays and taking the play first on “A Walk Down Mammary Lane” (600) during the ninth grade dance and in the shower scene, when two girls confirm that L’il Bit’s large breasts are not the result of padding her brassiere. One girl exults, “Told you it’s not foam rubber!” (601).

The legal system may lay one claim about whether, during her early teens, L’il Bit bears any responsibility for what happens, but Bigsby writes, “as L’il Bit’s grandmother reminds her, the law and biology are not the same” (Contemporary 326). Granted, Mother’s telling eleven-year-old L’il Bit, “I’m warning you – if anything happens, I’m holding you responsible” (620) is a cruel echo of what Grandmother once told an unwed, pregnant Mother, and the timing could
not be worse: it immediately precedes the first molestation. We must note, however, that the ongoing sessions between the two are presented as L’il Bit’s idea. While Uncle Peck washes the Christmas dishes in 1964, a thirteen-year-old L’il Bit suggests, “We could meet and talk – once a week” (611). The secrecy surrounding these meetings also comes from L’il Bit, who says, “I don’t think I’d want Mom to know. Or Aunt Mary” (611). She knows either will suspect a relationship that falls somewhere on a spectrum between child molestation and an affair. An emotional affair seems a distinct, albeit unnerving possibility. At seventeen, L’il Bit says, “That’s right” when Uncle Peck reminds her, “I’m not gonna do anything you don’t want me to do” and grants him permission to “undo” her bra as long as he will “be quick about it” (576).

The time is “an early summer night,” presumably after L’il Bit has graduated high school and can speak calmly, in retrospect, of “parking off a dark lane with a married man” (575). This scene, which is presented at the beginning of the play so as to build sympathy for Uncle Peck before darker revelations come, illustrates what Bigsby calls “the arbitrariness of the lines drawn by society” (Contemporary 322) between statutory rape and legal sex.

L’il Bit can hardly control the way society genders her precociously female body nor the early attention it receives, any more than the automobile can choose how it will be gendered. The audience actually witnesses the moment when L’il Bit genders Uncle Peck’s automobile. “It doesn’t have to be a ‘she,’” Uncle Peck says, recommending that L’il Bit “close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch – someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for” (600). Having been taught “to drive like a man,” meaning “with confidence – with aggression” (599), L’il Bit recalls, “I closed my eyes – and decided not to change the gender” (600). This particular lesson seems to Mansbridge part of L’il Bit’s effort “to find the ontological middle road between active subject and passive object, masculine and
feminine, power and powerlessness” (132). Although Uncle Peck sees himself as subject and L’il Bit as object, his insistence that she learn the “control” that “[m]anual gives you” (598) allows her to view herself as a subject and the car as an object. Uncle Peck’s teaching L’il Bit to drive ultimately gives her a power he almost certainly cannot anticipate, the power the (barely) adult L’il Bit has to drive him away when her response to his marriage proposal is “You should go home to Aunt Mary. Go home now, Uncle Peck” (618). Her never seeing him again is proof that these are not idle words. It might even be argued that L’il Bit, without both the positive and negative influences of Uncle Peck, never could have moved into an independent adulthood with an identity not fully determined by her unsympathetic family. This potentiality is lost, to be certain, on an audience that focuses entirely on both age and gender, however. Graley Herren points out that “L’il Bit angers some audience members by not being sufficiently angry at Peck” (112). Even Mary-Louise Parker noted the occasional outrage, telling Vogel, “They walked out of How I Learned to Drive sometimes.” An unfazed Vogel replied, “There’s something wrong with the play if they don’t” (Paula Vogel Bomb).

Both the text of Drive and the extant criticism emphasize the importance of gender and the controversial nature of age. Two comments by Bigsby are particularly illustrative. The first statement is, “If the genders were reversed we would have Tea and Sympathy” (Contemporary 321), and the second is, “Reverse the genders and you have The Graduate,” in which Bigsby discerns “what appears to be a compassionate act of initiation into the adult world, an act not without its humor” (Modern 416). Depending upon the reader’s point of view, the contrast between the play (later motion picture) and novella (far better known through its film adaptation) referenced by Bigsby may constitute a slight difference or a chasm. The Graduate and Tea and Sympathy both feature prominently the seduction of a young male by a much older woman, but
the circumstances are very different. The Benjamin Braddock seduced by Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* is twenty-one years old and pondering graduation from college. In every legal sense of the word, he is an adult. On the other hand, *Tea and Sympathy*’s Tom Lee, whom Laura Reynolds pursues sexually in part because he is taunted for perceived effeminacy and possible homosexuality, is a seventeen-year-old student at a private boarding school. Although posited as occupying the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood, he is legally, like L’il Bit at the opening of *Drive*, still a child. Bigsby’s simply substituting one work for the other does not reflect upon the legal ramifications of one affair as opposed to the other because the genders are reversed from *How I Learned to Drive*.

Andrew Kimbrough explains this double standard that Vogel has bluntly pointed out to Holmberg: “Leonardo DiCaprio enjoys cult status because he looks prepubescent” (Holmberg). Kimbrough notes that “it is acceptable and encouraged in American culture for boys to experiment sexually at a young age, but not girls” (58). Examples abound in popular culture of how this experimentation may involve adult women and juvenile males. One that particularly resonates with respect to *Drive* portrays Hermi, a character largely based on the real life experience of screenwriter Herman Raucher, in the 1971 hit movie (later novel) *Summer of ’42*, who is only fifteen when he presumably has sex with the newly widowed Dorothy. After one night of comfort and passion, Dorothy leaves, and the film ends with middle aged Hermie wondering what has become of her. He evinces no sense of violation, nor did most of the millions of viewers who enjoyed the film or readers who bought the subsequent novel Raucher

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35 For purposes of this discussion, I will include only elements where the film is true to the original source.
wrote during post-production.\textsuperscript{36} Audiences simply ignored the legal status of sex between a fifteen-year-old and an adult and assumed Hermie possessed the agency to consent.\textsuperscript{37}

Even when the relationship between female adult and teen is a custodial one, such as teacher and student, society and even the law have been willing to minimize the technical crime involved. One egregious example, the 2006 case of Debra Lafave, shows that even if the woman is a teacher, she may face a far less harsh sentence than a man guilty of the same crime with a student the same age, especially if her lawyer may plausibly argue she is “too pretty for prison.” Lafave seduced a fourteen-year-old, even having sex with him in a school classroom, a space where her physical custody over him was most strongly defined. Nevertheless, reporter Suzanne Goldenberg wrote at the time, “Her victim was turned into a running joke on late-night television. Didn't every teenage boy fantasise about having sex with his hot blond teacher?” This widespread attitude led the victim’s mother to spare her son having to testify in court, regardless of the consequences for the legal case.

\textit{Drive} problematizes the way we understand Uncle Peck and, even more so, L’il Bit during the “long bus trip to Upstate New York” (593) in 1979, when L’il Bit is in her late twenties. Now a teacher, L’il Bit meets a youth with “that miserable equivalent of vocal acne, not quite falsetto and not tenor, either” (593). He “concentrate[s] on lowering his voice” and proclaims, “I’m a senior. Walt Whitman High” (594). L’il Bit recalls that “perhaps he was – with a very high voice” (594). Then, she shifts into the role of dramatist, telling us, “I could see

\textsuperscript{36} The 2008 film \textit{The Reader} drew some critical remarks because of its portraying a graphic sexual relationship between thirty-something Hanna Schmitz and fifteen-year-old Michael Berg, but most of the criticism focused on Kate Winslet’s Oscar-winning performance as Hanna.\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Drive} contains a very brief scene, \textit{Implied Consent} (608), that nominally refers to an agreement to take a sobriety test but that, in the context of the play, clearly suggests sexual conduct.
the whole evening before me,” when “dramaturgically speaking,” there will be a “slightly
comical ‘first act,’” the “very briefest of intermissions, and an extremely capable and forceful
and sustained second act,” followed by “the second act climax and a gentle denouement” – and
then a “post-play discussion” (594). L’il Bit tells us that between denouement and discussion, “I
lay on my back in the dark and I thought about you, Uncle Peck” (594). Kimbrough explains,
“At the age of twenty-eight, after Peck had been dead three years, and ten years since she saw
him last, L’il Bit allows herself a liaison with a young man whom she does not believe when he
claims to be a senior in high school (emphasis mine)” (58). “In essence,” Kimbrough argues,
“L’il Bit identifies herself as the transgressive other when she decides to engage in behavior
identified with her pedophilic uncle – having sex with a minor, someone under the age of
consent. However, it is unlikely that many in the audience would understand this particular
implication of the scene” (58).

This scene calls to mind not only Uncle Peck but also Vogel’s earlier Baltimore Waltz
and the Munich Virgin scene. Anna, who is also a schoolteacher, seduces the Munich Virgin,
telling him, “I’m very honored” (41) after she verifies that this is “[his] first time” She asks if
she may offer a “little lesson,” and she tells him that if he will be “just a little bit nervous … like
[he is] right now,” “it will always be the first time” (41). L’il Bit describes her experience with
the Walt Whitman High student as “Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the
teacher, the epicure, the already jaded” (594). Until the word “jaded,” which likely reminds us
of why L’il Bit thinks of Uncle Peck and recalls his own transgressions toward her, this speech
sounds like something Anna may have told the Munich Virgin and hints, as do both the artistic

38 Anna’s follow up, “Because if you feel it, you’ll remember it. And then maybe you’ll
remember me” (41), may be influenced by the final line of Tea and Sympathy, “Years from now,
when you speak of this, and you will, be kind.”
and historical examples cited above, that something of the day when what Grandmother and Grandfather did was legal lingers.

*Drive’s* eventual revelation that Uncle Peck began molesting L’il Bit when she was only eleven, like the Cousin Bobby scene, takes us back to the sad fact that Uncle Peck causes real harm. Indeed, L’il Bit presents a litany of symptoms: her drinking, her expulsion from school, her “string of dead-end jobs that didn’t last very long” during the 1970 “Nixon recession” (582), and her recollection of Uncle Peck while she figuratively directs what a teen believes is his seduction of her. Together, these point toward the possibility that she has “retreated above the neck, and … lived inside the ‘fire’ in my head ever since” (621) the first day Uncle Peck violated her because she is experiencing dissociative PTSD. One of the questions she asks Uncle Peck posthumously, “Were you eleven?” (619), emphasizes the difference between what we finally learn and such other moments as the opening car scene and L’il Bit’s time with the student. Just as *Summer of ’42* and the real life case of Debra Lafave illustrate, we retain a jumble of feelings about certain sexual activity between adults and people who are legally children. We seem to draw, almost unanimously, a mental line that prohibits such conduct with eleven-year-olds. Not coincidentally, I believe, between age eleven and age fourteen, most children experience puberty.

Puberty ushers children into adolescence, when, strictly speaking, attraction toward them transforms from pedophilia to ephebophilia. Kimbrough notes, however, that the term ephebophilia was “not coined until 1955 because before then attraction to adolescents was not viewed as a problem” (64n). Most of us do not recognize or use this term because, according to Kimbrough, “ephebophilia is not considered as transgressive as pedophilia, and therefore not as attractive and useful to a public discourse that aims to inflame rather than dispel hysteria and misinformation” (51). As a result of such hysteria, “U.S. media no longer uses the term ‘youths’
in reference to teenagers, but instead employs ‘children’ to refer to everyone between infancy and seventeen, particularly in stories about child pornography” (64n). Kimbrough notes ephebophilia in L’il Bit’s actions and thoughts on that 1979 bus trip, postulating, “In her quest to understand her uncle, she learns to recognize the ephebophile/pedophile within her” (59). We are unlikely to judge L’il Bit here at least in part because the student has gone through puberty and could present himself as an adult. Uncle Peck’s behavior toward Cousin Bobby and eleven-year-old L’il Bit (even though her bust has begun to develop), however, is another matter.

L’il Bit, all the same, is not fully trapped in her traumatic past. She functions as the narrator of the play, and we see the events in an order she determines and from a perspective she employs. In this way, according to Herren, L’il Bit “breaks the stereotype of helpless victim by taking creative control over the staging of her memories” (112). L’il Bit “presides as the memory maestro of a highly selective, highly stylized rendition of her past,” a “memory play [which] traces its descent through The Glass Menagerie line” (Herren 107). She recalls Tom Wingfield, who tells us in his first line, “I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve.” Carolyn Clay asked Vogel about the “arguably provocative appellation” The Mammary Plays, an obvious pun on Tom Wingfield’s “memory play,” which the reader encounters shortly after the direction that “memory is seated predominantly in the heart.” Vogel explained, “‘All of my plays are concerned with the different ways it feels to be a woman in this world, to walk down the street as a woman. I don’t know if there will ever be a way to solve the biological rupture, but the culture differences wrought by secondary sexual characteristics are great’” (Clay “Drive,
She Said”) Does Drive, then, hint that memory somehow resides in the mammary glands?

While a definite answer to this question seems elusive, Herren believes memory, which must be stored somewhere in the body, has given L’il Bit, just as it did Tom Wingfield, a conduit to freedom. L’il Bit and Tom Wingfield, he tells us, “already got it before we meet them; they cannot quite get over it, but they do get it, and they want to try to give it to us, too” (107).

L’il Bit’s final memory and final gift to the audience contains Uncle Peck, this time as a “spirit” now “sitting in the back seat of the car” (622). When L’il Bit “sees him in the mirror,” we learn, she “smiles,” he “nods at her,” and “[t]hey are happy to be going for a long drive together” (622). L’il Bit has not exorcised herself of Uncle Peck; rather, she has incorporated both the good and the bad and has settled in for a ride that may seem as endless as that of the Flying Dutchman but far more pleasant. Herren and Savran argue that we have witnessed healing and maturation. Savran calls Drive’s technique a “slyly subversive dramatization of how a girl – perhaps any girl – becomes an adult” (“Driving”). Herren adds that “under L’il Bit’s able direction, the theatre becomes an ideal place for narrating, witnessing, and healing drama” (106). Herren goes on, “The theatre is perhaps second only to the courtroom as a forum for therapeutic testimony about previous trauma before a roomful of witnesses.” Linking courtroom witnesses with a theatrical audience further, Herren adds, “The place she is at is the theatre, before an audience, and we are as necessary a catalyst for her healing as is her epiphany of

39 Vogel also told Clay that “she wrote [Drive] picturing longtime American Repertory Theatre actor and current queen of the New York stage Cherry Jones,” the Obie-winning actress whose performance of Vogel’s characters I have already discussed. Drive would have been Jones’s fourth Vogel play, but she was unavailable, and so the part went to Mary-Louise Parker.

40 The possibility of memory residing in the glands calls to mind William Faulkner’s Nobel Acceptance Speech criticism of the author who “writes not with the heart but with the glands.” Significantly, the hypothetical author addressed is a “he.” If Vogel is moving the location of a woman’s memories to her mammary, she is making a strong feminist statement consistent with the “biological rupture” she described to Clay.
forgiveness” (111). Savran concludes, “She learns how to use the theatre, and the act of self-preservation, to put herself quite literally in the driver’s seat” (“Driving”). The performance ends when L’il Bit “floor[s] it” (622), signifying that she exercises control.

*How I Learned to Drive*, directed by Mark Brokaw and featuring Mary-Louise Parker as L’il Bit and David Morse as Uncle Peck, debuted at the Vineyard Theatre in March 1997. Vogel tells us, “The role of L’il Bit was originally written as a character who is forty-something” (Drive 574), but Parker was only thirty-two when the play opened. Vogel explained the effects of a younger actress to Clay: “With an older actress, the play becomes more contemplative, whereas when you cast it younger, there's more immediate danger. I had originally intended, in terms of the divided empathy, for Li'l Bit to be becoming Peck's age” (Clay). When Vogel published the play, she granted “a great deal of flexibility in age” (574), cognizant of the different effects the age of the actor could have. Using a younger actor in New York did not perturb critics; Mansbridge writes that “the reviews of Drive’s original New York production were almost unanimous in their praise of the playwright’s keen sense of balance and the play’s nuanced depiction of a delicate subject” (143).

New York Times reviewer Ben Brantley called David Morse “excellent” as Peck, whom he considered “surely the most engaging pedophile to walk across an American stage” (“Pedophile”). Brantley also credited “the captivating Mary-Louise Parker” as a L’il Bit who is “a lyrical, ambivalent narrator of her own memories in the tradition of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*.” Director Mark Brokaw was, according to Brantley, a “fast-rising star,” and the play overall constituted “a lovely, harrowing guide to the crippling persistence of one woman’s memories.” In Brantley’s judgment, Vogel “couldn’t be better served than she is by this production,” including its minor characters and its skillful employment of the music suggested in
the directions. He even considered the music “Li'l Bit's main defense against the sound of her own feelings of guilt.”

*Variety* reviewer Robert L. Daniels also praised the play highly, calling it “a potent and convincing comment on a taboo subject,” with “its impact sneak[ing] up on its audience” (“Review”). Daniels saw Morse’s Uncle Peck as “tragic, rather than chilling,” and noted in Parker “an expressive range, from the cautious, manipulated teen to a mature but permanently scarred college student.” Although Daniels did not comment on the music, he did praise Mark McCullough’s lighting, Brokaw’s “fluent staging,” and supporting actor Johanna Day’s characterizations, which included “offering an amusing dissertation on what drinks young ladies should shun to prevent the advances of older men.” On the other hand, however, John Heilpern wrote a contrarian *New York Observer* review in 1997, and his attitude only hardened before he published *How Good Is David Mamet, Anyway? Writings on Theatre and Why It Matters* in 2000. In a chapter called “Safe Pedophilia,” Heilpern blasted Vogel as “earnest” but not possessing “any humor” (134). “What’s Ms. Vogel’s Message?” he demanded. “Relax with incest? Pedophilia, the tragicomedy?” (134). Overall, he found *Drive* a “bland, ingratiatingly poor drama,” (134) a work by a “timid” playwright who has “neutralized the issues” and rendered them “more or less harmless”41 (136).

Jill Dolan’s *Theatre Journal* review of the Vineyard Theatre production comes close to definitiveness. Dolan identifies Vogel as a playwright who “tends to select sensitive, difficult, fraught issues to theatricalize, and to spin them with a dramaturgy that’s at once creative, highly

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41 Heilpern, it must also be noted, has written of *Lolita* that the brilliance of Nabokov’s novel “surely resides in its metaphor of old crumbling Europe (Humbert Humbert) being seduced by the lollipop charms of young, irresistible, uncultured America (Lolita) (135), an interpretation I have already explored as problematical.
imaginative, and brutally honest” (127). Dolan praises both of the lead actors, writing, “As played with affable gentility and gentleness by Morse, Peck is charming, kind, and sympathetic, a man driven toward children by his own demons but attentive to L’il Bit’s adolescent needs in ways that are never violent, paternalistic, or condescending” (127). Similarly, “Parker’s virtuosic performance illustrates the nuances of L’il Bit’s desire and loathing for a man who taught her so much and could finally give her so little” (127). Dolan adds, “Through Parker’s and Morse’s multilayered performances, power and danger are always present, but so are moments of understanding and mutuality” (128). In sum, “Vogel’s play is about forgiveness and family, about the instability of sexuality, about the unpredictable ways in which we learn who we are, how we desire, and how our growth is built on loss” (128).

Drive won several important awards, including Vogel’s second Obie; Obie Awards for Brokaw, Morse, and Parker; Drama Desk Awards for Vogel, Brokaw, and Morse; the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Play; and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play. More importantly, the play garnered the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, making Vogel only the tenth woman and the first out lesbian ever to win this award. To emphasize the importance of this last accomplishment, Bigsby writes, “The woman whose first play about an immoral Desdemona was turned down by every theatre to which it was initially sent had won one of the country’s major prizes without ever compromising on her determination to sail against the current, to challenge theatrical models and moral presumptions alike” (Modern 418).

Although Desdemona had something of the feel of an apprentice play, the bold imagination that

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42 Margaret Edson’s Pulitzer for Wit the following year marked the first time ever that women had won the Drama Pulitzer in consecutive years. In comparison, three women—Willa Cather, Margaret Wilson, and Edna Ferber—won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction consecutively in 1923–25. Women have been far more successful in winning Pulitzers for Fiction and Poetry than for Drama.
had defamiliarized Shakespeare’s chaste victim into a literal whore who is still, nevertheless, a victim had endured throughout a quarter of a century. To be sure, most of Vogel’s works remain even less known well into the Twenty-First Century than does Desdemona; according to Bigsby, The Baltimore Waltz, “her previously best-known play … was her twenty-second”\(^{43}\) (Contemporary 290).

None of this is to say that Vogel has not accepted and even embraced certain compromises. Bigsby writes of the shift from Reagan’s to George H.W. Bush’s America and a time when, in response to pressures such as those exerted by Jesse Helms, “financial restraint gave further impetus to a conservative impulse by reducing the resources that theatre, and hence the playwright, could command.” Vogel, he reports, “saw in this not only a challenge to be addressed but further validation of the free imagination pressed ever closer to the margin” (Contemporary 296). If conveying her message required few actors, simple sets, and minimal properties, Vogel made the necessary concessions to keep a Paula Vogel production inexpensive. The aftermath of Vogel’s Pulitzer for Drive made public the compromises Vogel is willing to make when she collaborates with a director. I have already discussed one such compromise in the substitution of thirty-something Mary-Louise Parker for forty-something Cherry Jones, the actress Vogel originally hoped would play L’il Bit. Vogel’s note in the script about a L’il Bit in her forties has gone unheeded, even though L’il Bit’s line, “And before you know it, I’ll be thirty-five. That’s getting up there for a woman” (622), would better parallel Uncle Peck’s “I’m forty-five. That’s not old for a man” (618) if L’il Bit said “forty-five” rather than “thirty-five.”

\(^{43}\) I could find no record of how many plays Vogel wrote in the quarter-century after The Baltimore Waltz. Her going through more than forty revisions of Indecent, when combined with the twenty-two plays she wrote by approximately age forty, reinforces, all the same, that she is prolific.
To wit, Molly Ringwald (in New York and Los Angeles), Elizabeth Reaser (2012 Second Stage New York revival), and Olivia Poulet (2015 Southwark Playhouse London revival) have played L’il Bit while in their thirties. Even Molly Smith, who had commissioned Drive while serving as Artistic Director for Perseverance Theatre (Juneau, Alaska) either tacitly accepted the change in L’il Bit’s age or bowed to commercial pressure when she cast thirty-six-year-old Deirdre Lovejoy as L’il Bit in the 1999 Washington, D.C., Arena Stage production.

This compromise made to meet the needs of casting is only one example of the way Vogel manifests a flexible style. Copyright law binds acting companies to a playwright’s printed words and vision, to the extent that in one infamous episode, Mamet shut down a Milwaukee production of Oleanna after only one performance when he learned Alchemist Theatre had cast a male actor, Ben Parman, as Carol (Foran). Line or wording changes may likewise result in cease-and-desist letters. All the same and despite a view of the play text as sacrosanct that drives the search for the “true” Hamlet to this day, Vogel told Parker, “Words are cheap. They are very cheap. If they don’t work, drop them, cut them, change them, it doesn’t matter. What matters is simply that I’m writing notes for you to play the violin, as an excuse to hear you playing the violin” (Vogel Bomb). Rather than a finished, fixed product, Vogel added, “Every script, every new play, is a theory.”

To illustrate how, in spite of laws governing published scripts, Vogel sees at least the process that leads up to written publication as collaborative, she told Parker, “If I wanted everything to be exactly as it was in my head, exactly word for word, I should be writing novels. The play doesn’t belong to the playwright.” Vogel goes on to describe what she observed Parker and David Morse (who originated Uncle Peck) do: “You guys, and Mark Brokaw, the director, knew that sections were overwritten, and you very gently waited for me to catch up. You were
already editing the script with your acting” (*Bomb*). In a comment that explains why she may find an ongoing string of thirty-something L’il Bits acceptable, Vogel also stated that she leaves opening night with a different vision from the one she had when she handed over the script, and also a different one from anyone who buys and reads the script. “I don’t remember what L’il Bit was before I saw you,” she tells Parker. “The same way that I don’t remember what Peck was in my head before I saw David. They’re gone now. They’ve been effaced by your interpretation. You’re seeing something on the page I don’t see any longer” (*Bomb*).

In this chapter, I hope to have shown how Vogel’s many years of hard work lifted her from comparative obscurity to becoming one of America’s best respected playwrights, one whom Joanna Mansbridge, in her *Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights* chapter on Vogel, calls “a playwright’s playwright” (372). Vogel’s decades of teaching playwrights how to write and the success many of them have enjoyed support Mansbridge’s definition. While it is clearly intended as a compliment, however, this statement is not what Vogel or almost any playwright would like to have as the last word about her. Ultimately, a playwright will want to become an audience’s playwright whose works can draw people to come see them. In 1998, as a new Pulitzer winner, Vogel could hardly know what direction that quest would take. David Savran asked Vogel about future plans. “I’m hoping I can finally do this full-time. That’s my goal,” she said. She also spoke of a desire to “try and figure out what my voice is cinematically.” “I’m starting an adaptation of *How I Learned to Drive*, which I originally saw as a movie and not a play,” she added. Then, in a statement at variance with what scholars and critics have written about Vogel, she told Savran, “I want to start to write for musical theatre” and even “I’m mostly burning up to write musicals and movies.”
A film career did not await Vogel, at least not over the next two decades, but success with plays that incorporate music performed onstage was another matter. Before discussing these dramas, however, I will write about Paula Vogel, Ivy League professor, her pedagogy, and four of her most successful students, who among them own four Pulitzers, two MacArthur Genius Grants, and some of the finest reputations in contemporary American drama.

5 CHAPTER FOUR: THE HOUSE OF PAUL A VOGL

From 1977 through 1984, Vogel lived in New York City, where, Bigsby records, she “continued to write plays at the rate of one a year, though without any success and with no financial resources” (Contemporary 295). Then, in 1984, Brown University hired Vogel to teach playwriting, and she remained at Brown until 2008, enjoying “a base from which to work” (295) and her longest tenure ever in any single location. While at Brown, Vogel earned both her Obies and her Pulitzer and was financially successful enough that in 1999 Megan Rosenfeld noted that she had “made enough money to buy a vacation home in Cape Cod.” Vogel left Brown for Yale, becoming a faculty member, ironically, in the very program that had rejected her student application thirty-four years earlier.

When Vogel the playwright finally reached Broadway in April 2017, Mark Kennedy summarized some of the highlights of her teaching career, writing, “Don’t ask where Paula Vogel is, ask where isn’t she” (Kennedy). Noting that Indecent had just opened at the Cort Theatre, Kennedy wrote, “A few blocks away, former student Lynn Nottage has opened Sweat. A stone’s throw from that,” he continued, “Steven Levenson, another former Vogel apprentice, is enjoying success with Dear Evan Hansen.” Not only that, but “Over at Lincoln Center, there’s a
new play [*How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*] by former Vogel pupil Sarah Ruhl. And former protégé Gina Gionfriddo just opened her new work [*Can You Forgive Her?*] at the Vineyard Theatre,” which had offered the New York premieres of both *How I Learned to Drive* and *Indecent*. This list alone justifies Kennedy’s claim that “the modern theater landscape is rich with [Vogel’s] DNA,” but it was hardly an exhaustive list. Kennedy also mentioned “onetime Vogel collaborator Ayad Akhtar, whose play *Disgraced* won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and was nominated for a Tony Award in 2015;” Pulitzer-winners Nilo Cruz, Quiara Alegría Hudes, and Lynn Nottage; 2017 Pulitzer finalist Sarah DeLappa, whom Kennedy characterized as “also a former Vogel student;” “Oscar-winning *Moonlight* playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney;” “Pulitzer-nominee Rajiv Joseph, who wrote *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*;” and “[a]nother former student, Stephen Karam, [who] last year had two works on Broadway, including *The Humans*, the Tony-winning best play last season.”

Vogel has hardly restricted herself to teaching Ivy League college students who frequently go on to write famous or high-regarded plays, however. Beginning in 1984 in “Gordon Edelstein’s downtown loft on Chamber St. in New York City,” where, Vogel claims, she, Mac Wellman, Connie Congdon, and Jeff Jones initiated “a ‘kvetch’ session” (paulavogelplaywright.com) that developed into a forty-eight hour drama bake-off, Vogel has taken this concept around the country. She has also conducted what she terms drama “boot camps” to audiences as diverse as maximum-security prison inmates, juveniles in detention centers, and according to attendee and drama critic J. Wynn Rousuck, possibly “even another

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44 Both *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*, by Ruhl, and *Indecent*, by Vogel, were directed by Rebecca Taichman.
critic” (48). Rousuck attributes to Vogel “an uncanny knack for getting inside a student’s head, understanding where the student is going, and helping guide the way” (51). Vogel has stated, “I think everybody is a playwright regardless of whether or not you own it” (22 May 2017 workshop); moreover, she has acted on this belief by taking the craft to the masses.

In discussing Vogel’s teaching career, I will focus this chapter on two elements. First, I will discuss her involvement with highly successful professional playwrights Nilo Cruz, Sarah Ruhl, Quiara Alegría Hudes, and Lynn Nottage, reserving Nottage for last because she is the first woman ever to win two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. Individual works by each of these playwrights will contribute to this discussion, especially the works that have been nominated for and frequently won major awards. Where possible, I will include comments Vogel has made about these students or they about her. Second, I will provide an overview of Vogel’s bake-offs and boot camps, citing remarks by participants and focusing at length on my own experience of attending the 22 May 2017 one-day Vineyard Theatre boot camp, which Vogel called “her first workshop aimed at the general public in 13 years” (Chow). Since the stated “aim” of this boot camp was “each participant writing a short play by the end of the day” (Chow), I will include my own play as an appendix. Throughout, I will try to convey a sense of Vogel’s influence and importance, both among the elites and as a democratizing figure among major American teachers of playwriting.

Nilo Cruz, the first of Vogel’s students to win a Pulitzer Prize (Anna in the Tropics 2003), was a literal “gift” (Herren Text 14) from one of Vogel’s gods, María Irene Fornes (who told Vogel, “I’m sending you my pearl!” [14]), and a person whose life and career manifest the

45 On May 22, 2017, this list grew by an English professor-cum-graduate student when I attended the one-day boot camp at the Vineyard Theatre.
magical realism associated with Fornes or a fictional Gabriel García Marquez work. Born in Matanzas, Cuba, around 1960, and a 1970 refugee “legally – on an airplane, not on a raft” (Tichler and Kaplan 261) from Fidel Castro’s nation, Cruz is also the first Latino playwright to have won the Pulitzer. Cruz’s life and career reflect the influence of what may be regarded as a series of fairy godmothers, including Fornes, Vogel, and Cruz’s own mother. Cruz writes how, during his early years in Cuba, his mother “used to find escape through prayer, and used cigar smoke to send her supplications to the Divine” (4). In a scene that seems to come straight out of Marquez, Ms. Cruz “made her own incense by inhaling the burning end of the cigar into her mouth and exhaling her breath through it,” creating “a surge of smoke that bathed all her sacred status in a blue cloud” (“The Alphabet of Smoke” 6). Already, the boy had experienced a profound moment at a cabaret that arguably contributed to his future in theater.

Only a year or two before the Cruz family left Cuba, they found themselves at a resort where everyone wanted to attend the cabaret, leaving no one behind to watch young Nilo. Because the father knew the owner of the restaurant, the family snuck Nilo in through the kitchen and hid the lad under the table. “‘Oh, he can stay,’” the waiter said upon discovering Nilo, allowing him to witness a combination of “burlesque comedic sketches” (Tichler and Kaplan 260) and, Cruz has told interviewer Ben Hodges, “ballet too” (14). Cruz has described “a lot of flesh, but no stripping and really wonderful, electrifying Cuban music” (Tichler and Kaplan 260). He has also called himself “dazzled by the vibrant music, by the exuberant energy coming from the stage” (Hodges 14).

Upon arriving in Miami, Cruz dedicated himself to becoming Americanized as soon as possible. “I realized I had to get out of ESL,” he recalls. “I really wanted to integrate, I wanted to be American” (Tichler and Kaplan 261). As a result, his teacher soon moved him out of ESL,
and Cruz began reading more and more in English, including the poetry of one of his possible fairy godmothers. He says, “I had discovered a poem by Emily Dickinson at the library at the school. I was completely taken by her work” (Tichler and Kaplan 263). Although Cruz no longer remembers which Dickinson poem he encountered when “I must have been eleven years old,” he clearly remembers saying, “Ah, this is what I want to do. I want to write. I want to write like this” (263). Toward that goal, one of Cruz’s earlier fairy godmothers, his mother, made an important contribution by buying teenaged Cruz his first typewriter (Gussow). Cruz’s adult style may be something of an amalgam between Dickinson’s precise diction and the lyricism of his Cuban forebears, for a later godmother, Vogel herself, recalls Cruz saying, “My ancestors, my family, have never before in the history of theatre, been articulating themselves on stage.” Moreover, their language, Cruz told Vogel, was “original” (Vineyard Boot Camp).

Cruz’s introduction to drama followed “an epiphany that I had to go to the theatre. That night I went to the regional theatre in Miami at that time, which was the Coconut Grove Playhouse, and I saw The Dresser,” a Ronald Harwood play, later adapted into a film by the same name, about a dresser for a Shakespearean actor. Then, “the next day I decided to enroll at a drama school at Miami Dade [sic] College” (Hodges 15). Cruz soon immersed himself fully in college theatre. Even though his first class was not for credit, Cruz wrote scenes and cast classmates in them. Soon, the professor, Teresa María Rojas, whom Cruz has described as “magical” (Tichler and Kaplan 265), told him, “’You’re a writer. You need to continue writing’” (264). While still a student, Cruz directed the world premiere of the play (also an autobiography and later a film) Before Night Falls, by another Cuban who escaped to America, noted gay author and political dissident Reinaldo Arenas.
While taking a class taught by Patricia Gross, founder of Miami’s South End Alternative Theater (SEAT), Cruz gained the opportunity to direct Gross in *Mud*, by Fornes. Fornes came to Miami to conduct a workshop around the time of the production, and while she was there, Patricia Gross told her of Cruz’s writing and showed samples of it. Fornes invited Cruz to come to New York and join her workshop at INTAR (International Arts Relations), one of the United States’ oldest theatres producing Latino voices. Cruz recalls,

I had to make my decision right away because the lab was starting on Monday, and I had met Irene on Friday. And I had to move to New York immediately. I didn’t even have money to move to New York. Thank God I had a friend in New York. I called her up and asked her if I could crash in her living room, and she said yes. I got some money, I had a little bit of money, I think I probably asked my parents for some money, and I came to New York, and I started to study with María Irene Fornes. (Tichler and Kaplan 265) Cruz adds, “I borrowed a winter coat from a friend – I didn’t even have a heavy coat, because you don’t need one in Florida.” The outcome was dramatic: “I studied with [Fornes] for three years. And as a result, my life changed” (Hodges 16).

In his early years as a playwright, like Fornes (but with greater facility as a stronger English speaker), Cruz chose to write primarily in English and not restrict himself to one ethnic community or region. José Esteban Muñoz discerns the clear influence of Fornes in this decision, writing that Fornes’s plays “appear mysterious to North American eyes because they represent a specifically Latina/o *manera de ser*” (458). He writes of *Mud* that although “Mae’s plight is meant to be felt by anyone who is sensitized to the transnational gendering of poverty, … it speaks to a Latina/o cognoscenti in powerful and culturally specific ways. The

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46 For a discussion of *Mud*, see Chapter One.
mysteriousness of Fornes is akin to a mysteriousness that saturates Cruz’s work” (458). Cruz has observed of Fornes’s work that “there is something about the sensibility of Mud that feels like it comes from my country (Hodges 18). As a result, it seems fair to say that Cruz’s dramaturgy and characterization, like his understanding of Fornes’s dramaturgy and characterization, are such that a Cruz or Fornes character may feel Latinx to an audience without having to be Latinx because of the sensibility the playwright brings both to the character and to the work.47

This account of how a child from Matanzas, Cuba, came to study in New York with and be artistically informed by Maria Irene Fornes contains hints both of surrealism and magical realism. Other surprises were yet to come. After Cruz had been at INTAR for a time, “Paula Vogel, who was the head of the playwriting program at Brown University, asked Irene if she had any participants in the lab that were interested in going back to school.” Cruz “wanted to continue studying, so [he] applied to the master’s program at Brown and was accepted” (Hodges 18). Evidently, Cruz required some persuading, however, for Vogel has recalled him saying, “’I don’t want to go to university, I don’t want to become academic, I don’t want to write university American English’” (Herren Text 14).

Vogel was better situated than many, if not all, playwriting professor to respond to the objections Cruz raised at a time when he had finished assimilating to his own satisfaction and seemed more interested in developing his own voice. “’Why would you want to do that?’” (Herren 14), Vogel asked, eliciting, “’Okay, here’s my play’” (14). Vogel then more than adequately filled the role of fairy godmother to Cruz, for Brown “gave [him] two years to be in a

47 Most of the extant criticism of Mud I have located has discussed the play in socioeconomic and feminist terms, at times portraying it as of a piece with such other English-language plays as Churchill’s Top Girls and Vogel’s The Oldest Profession. I have not surveyed the Spanish-language criticism of Mud, nor is such a survey necessary to conclude that the way Cruz, like Muñoz, understands Fornes provides a helpful means of analyzing Cruz.
safe environment” (McAuliffe 466). Cruz acknowledges Vogel as “very influential … more as far as structure is concerned” and describes her as “so supportive that there was no right and there was no wrong. And you can see that with her structures: watching slides from a trip the actors never take in *Baltimore Waltz*, and lessons on driving in *How I Learned to Drive*” (466). Perhaps Cruz did find a way to do something marginally wrong in one of Vogel’s bake-offs, however, for as Vogel recalled decades later, he produced 110 pages of *Dancing on My Knees* during only forty-eight hours.48 “We almost killed him,” Vogel said with a chuckle (Vineyard Workshop).

After earning his MFA from Brown in 1994, Cruz enjoyed minor successes with such plays as *Night Train* and *Two Sisters and a Piano* and became the playwright-in-residence at the New Theatre in Coral Gables, Florida. While at New Theatre, Cruz wrote *Anna in the Tropics*, and the play premiered there on 12 October 2002, directed by Rafael de Ache and with set design by Michelle Cumming, music and sound by M. Anthony Reimer, and costume design by Estela Vrancovich. The show’s modest four-week run was a most inauspicious beginning for a play soon to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The original production seems not to have been reviewed, nor did any of the 2003 Pulitzer jurors see *Anna in the Tropics* before casting their votes. The play was a huge underdog to *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* by Edward Albee, and *Take Me Out* by Richard Greenberg.

When *Anna in the Tropics* unexpectedly won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2003, it established two historic firsts. It was the first play to win the award with the jurors having only read the script and not seen the play; moreover, it was the first Pulitzer-winning drama by a

48 Although the anecdote about *Dancing on My Knees* appears in several sources, I could find no record of the play ever having been produced.
Latino playwright. Emily Mann, who had “been waiting for an opportunity to direct one of [Cruz’s] plays,” finally “took the leap” (Mann) and directed a production that debuted on 18 September 2003 at the new Roger S. Berlind Theater, Princeton, New Jersey (Glissow). This production, featuring Jimmy Smits as lector Juan Julian and Daphne Rubin-Vega as Conchita, then traveled to Broadway’s Royale Theatre on November 16, making Cruz not only the first Vogel student to win a Pulitzer but also the first to have a play on Broadway.

*Anna in the Tropics* has an element of a Latinx play, even a Cuban play, in its primarily Cuban cast of characters and its island setting. Unlike Cuba, however, the island in *Anna* is an island surrounded by dry land, the Ybor City region of Tampa, Florida. Drawn by Don Vicente Martinez-Ybor’s cigar factories, immigrants from Cuba have helped make Ybor City the world’s unofficial cigar capital. In the Ybor City of *Anna’s* time, workers in a given factory often pool their wages and hire a lector, a “reader,” who, while they roll cigars by hand in the Cuban tradition, reads them the newspaper in the morning, followed by literary fare in the afternoon.

*Anna* captures this culture on this dry island at a pivotal and even liminal time, 1929. The sounds of machines will soon drown out the voice of the lector forever. What is more, the worldwide Great Depression looms, bringing economic calamity to these proud craftsmen and craftswomen. Just as literal islands are often washed away by erosion and rising sea levels, external forces are about to obliterate the cultural island where the family and employees of Don Santiago still dream as their new lector enthralls them with Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, even as the magic of the tale takes them over one by one.

Despite the majority of its characters, *Anna* is not properly a Cuban play. Ofelia, the wife of factory owner Santiago, tells the new lector, Juan Julian, that one of the workers, Peppino Mellini, is an Italian from Napoli who “sings Neapolitan songs at the end of the day” (20).
Another, “Pascual Torino from Spain,” “wants to go back to his country and die in Granada” (20). Nor is the factory intended to be a new Cuba. Ofelia, Santiago’s wife, explains, “We are still trying to create a little city that resembles the ones we left back on the island” (21, emphasis mine). When Cheché tries not only to rid the factory of the lector but also to modernize it by bringing in a machine to roll cigars, Ofelia demands that the matter be put to a vote because she prefers to “do it the American way” (42). This emphasis on the universality of the immigrant experience and the process of becoming American has led director Emily Mann to say, “Going back to my culture, sometimes I look at Anna as a Jewish play” (“Nilo Cruz” Bomb). This statement comes as no surprise to Cruz. He tells Mann, “I wrote an article, for a local Jewish literary magazine that had to do with the play and with people fleeing Cuba on rafts. I made parallels. I think I actually quoted from Lillian Hellman’s Pentimento” (Bomb).

Cruz has written of “an old cigar box” where he magically located “all the ingredients I needed for my play,” namely “love, literature, politics and loss of innocence”49 (5). This first “ingredient,” love, strongly affects Santiago, Ofelia, Conchita, Palomo, and Marela. Santiago and Ofelia have been together for more than thirty-two years (their daughter Conchita’s age), yet they retain great love for each other. Santiago, true, has temporarily forgotten how to love, and he tries to locate a substitute for romantic love in betting on cockfights, where he consistently loses, necessitating loans from his half-brother Cheché that jeopardize his ownership of the factory. Then, during a hilarious fight by proxy, using younger daughter Marela as a go-between for two combatants who hear each other perfectly well, Santiago discloses to Ofelia that the character Levin in Anna Karenina has inspired him to reclaim his position as head of factory and

49 These “ingredients” call to mind the ingredients in a Paula Vogel bake-off.
family. The debut of the Anna Karenina cigar marks a victory, however temporary, for Santiago and Ofelia’s love and the old-fashioned way of production as a craft.

Loved-starved Conchita, married to the philandering Palomo, continues to love her husband and does not challenge his assertion that “divorce is out of the question” (30) because of their families. She responds by having an affair of her own with the lector, generating in her husband the jealousy that leads to his recovering his love for her. Palomo objects, saying, “I think you’re taking this a little too far” (29), and he alone votes with Cheché to banish the lector. He speaks the last words of the play, however, a quotation from Tolstoy: “In his letter he was going to write everything he’d been meaning to tell her” (60). In this moment, he has become the lector, Conchita is his oidora (listener), and the two have some hopes of restoring their marriage.

Marela’s relationship with love is the saddest. From the beginning, she is in love with the idea of love itself. She idolizes Juan Julian, the lector, before she actually sees him and tells her mother, Ofelia, “I wrote the lector’s name on a piece of paper and placed it in a glass of water with brown sugar and cinnamon” (16). Marela does not heed Ofelia’s warning never to “alter other people’s destiny” but instead falls in love with the world of Anna and even fancies she is in love with Juan Julian. “I’d like to go to Russia,” the enchanted Marela proclaims in response to Cheché’s lament that the factory and family are “never going to get anywhere” (39). For her, putting on the full Anna Karenina attire is the ultimate romantic, and with Cheché malevolently lurking, it portends her experiencing Cruz’s final “ingredient,” loss of innocence.

With the Great Depression and mechanization just ahead, all the characters in the play are about to lose the innocence of working in a democratically-run factory with what Cruz calls “the necessary silence, which offers a stage for the spoken word” (“Alphabet 7). Cheché’s cold-blooded murder of Juan Julian represents a loss both of life and whatever innocence Cheché may
have retained. Conchita loses her innocence of certain worldly matters when she embarks on an affair with Juan Julian, but perhaps in a sense suggested by William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Blake’s subtitle, *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*, makes the claim, developed at length in “The Lamb,” its contrasting poem “The Tiger,” and the different “The Chimney-Sweeper” poems, that the knowledge which comes with experience, rather than the theistic notion of guilt, replaces the innocence of childhood and ignorance of the world.

By far, however, the most poignant loss of innocence to traumatizing experience is Marela’s. Just before Juan Julian appears at the end of Scene 1, Marela seems childlike when she says, “I’m so nervous I think I’m going to pee-pee on myself” (18), something she does a moment later. Her first response to the lector’s readings is trusting and guileless: “I don’t try to understand everything [the words] say. I let myself be taken” (26). Neither she nor the audience would necessarily hear menace in her half-uncle Cheché’s “You look beautiful” (44) when he sees her dressed as Anna Karenina, but Cheché’s intention soon become clear when “[h]e tries to kiss her” (46). Rebuffed, he begs, “Marela, please. Come close … You don’t know…” (46). Marela banishes Cheché for the moment, commanding, “Don’t you ever touch me again!” as “[s]he pushes him to the floor” (46). For the moment, Marela returns to her Anna Karenina fantasies, looking “like Anna on the night of the ball” (52). Marela even acknowledges her growing sexuality and romantic feelings for Juan Julian, asking “Lend me the book,” and promising “not to get ahead of the story” (56). Juan Julian responds with appropriate restraint, “[k]issing her face” (56), and quietly leaves. Only now does the full menace of Cheché emerge along with him. He steps out of the shadows, where he has witnessed the moment just prior, and steps toward Marela with a “glance … full of desire” (56). Marela’s defense this time is
symbolic, for she “closes the book” (56), attempting to break the fantasy before it becomes a horrifying reality. Marela’s attempt fails, and as the scene goes to a blackout, Cheché grabs Marela’s arm and presumably rapes her.

The culminating events of Anna in the Tropics follow in rapid succession that is more realist than magical. Marela enters during the penultimate scene, still wearing her Anna Karenina coat and explaining, “All those months that cover the earth with snow and make everything still. That’s how I want to be, layered and still” (58). These words evoke a tragic death like Anna’s, one Cruz spares Marela, but only at great cost. Juan Julian observes that Marela “seems to be in a state of dismay” (58); before, however, he may offer comfort, Cheché murders Juan Julian, and then “Marela reaches out to touch the dying lector” (59). Perhaps he, along with his profession, dies in her stead. In the concluding scene, three days (but only four lines) later, Marela still wears the coat, and only here do her eyes briefly fill with tears while she contemplates whether she “should write [Juan Julian’s] name on a piece of paper and place it in a glass of water with brown sugar, so his spirit knows that he is welcomed in the factory, and he can come here and drink sweet water” (49). Marela’s last line concerns Palomo, the new and temporary lector. She says, “Stories should be finished, Papá. Let him finish the book” (60). Perhaps a slight amount of healing for Marela’s violated body and spirit comes here as she instructs Palomo regarding how to literally finish Anna Karenina and figuratively close the book on this sad story of how she lost her innocence. Amid the joy of Conchita and Palomo finding the extent of their passion for each other, Cruz does not let us forget Anna’s fate or ignore Marela’s.

The play received both positive and negative evaluations, sometimes within the same review. New York Times reviewer Ben Brantley found it “earnestly poetic, with some of the
most densely lyrical language from an American playwright since Maxwell Anderson.” “No one, it seems, is able to speak without summoning a poetic conceit,” wrote Brantley, suggesting that the lushness of the language eventually cloyed. Brantley commented upon the play’s winning the Pulitzer unseen in a way that does not speak well of it, for “[o]n the page, such rhetoric scans better than it does on the stage.” Brantley did not seem to note the potential reference to Chekhov in the gun that appears – and is fired – several minutes before the play’s climax, but he did repeatedly note Chekhovian tones in the play. Brantley wrote that the “three female characters in Anna temperamentally evoke Chekhov’s eponymous three sisters,” and he observed “appropriately Chekhovian shadows of regret and muted desire” (Brantley “Poetry”) in the actresses, Vanessa Aspillaga (Marela), Priscilla Lopez (Ofelia), and Daphne Rubin-Vega (Conchita). Dismissing the nominal star, Jimmy Smits (Juan Julian), with the comments that he is “[d]ashingly clad in white linen” and “arrives bearing books,” Brantley concluded that “for all its imperfections, Anna in the Tropics brings a welcome streak of heat to an especially forbidding November” (Brantley “Poetry”) of 2003.

Matthew Murray, reviewing the same production for Talkin’ Broadway, found less to like. After first damning Anna with faint praise, finding it “a more satisfying and substantial play than last year’s Pulitzer winner, Topdog/Underdog” by Suzan-Lori Parks, Murray quickly called Anna “both too slight and too overblown to be completely effective.” “[O]ne can’t help,” he wrote, “but wish Cruz had come up with a slightly more surprising or original way of dealing with the story and its unique issues.” Murray did credit Cruz with “a strong enough voice to merit careful attention in the future” and possibly allow him to create the truly unique, original

50 This relatively traditional use of the Chekhov’s gun principle stands in contrast to and may be influenced by the way Fornes employs the gun in Fefu and Her Friends, discussed in Chapter One.
play he is obviously capable of,” but *Anna in the Tropics*, he concluded, is “nothing we haven’t seen before” (Murray).

In October 2004, *Theatre Journal* ran a highly favorable review of the New York production. In this review, Jason Ramirez succinctly writes of the way Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* informs the play, stating, “The play mixes dialogue and narrative, simultaneously injecting the world of the novel into the world of the play” (480). The effect evokes, Ramirez asserts, comparisons to “the type of magical realism we see throughout Latin American and Latino theatre” (482). He proposes that Smits, as Juan Julian, “poses like an angel dressed in white at the rear of the stage” (482) while Rubin-Vega, as Conchita, “convincingly creates a frustrated and trapped wife” (482).

Since writing *Anna in the Tropics*, Nilo Cruz has gone on to a significant career even though he has acknowledged that “the Pulitzer Prize is definitely a blessing, but it’s also a curse” (Tichler and Kaplan 280). The blessing, Cruz explains, comes in having theater companies not only perform the play that won the prize but also consider the playwright’s other works as well. For example, Lawrenceville, Georgia’s, Aurora Theatre staged a 2015 production of Cruz’s *Sotto Voce*, a play performed in English with Spanish subtitles, followed by a 2017 production of *Pais de Bicicleta* (“Bicycle Country”), performed in Spanish with English subtitles. I attended performances of both these plays, which reflected language choices consistent with what Cruz told interviewer Rebecca Sutton in 2016. Describing his projects at Miami’s Arca Images theatre company, where Cruz is artistic director, the playwright said, “We're doing plays in English and in Spanish. Sometimes when we have a play in English, we have an audio system in which non-English audience members can listen to the play in Spanish, and vice versa. We're trying to reach out to different kinds of communities by providing simultaneous translations”
(Cruz “Art Talk”). Although the Aurora Theatre experience of simultaneous translations was visual rather than auditory, I did not find it disruptive regardless of the language I heard versus the language I saw; moreover, the combinations of English and Spanish I heard fellow attendees speak indicated that Cruz was reaching audiences who preferred (or were limited to) each language.

Cruz has spoken more than once about the “curse” of winning the Pulitzer, noting that “people anticipate that you will write another play like Anna in the Tropics” (Tichler and Kaplan 280) even though he describes himself as “not interested in formulas” (280). During the years Cruz was the only Latinx winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Cruz recalled being mentioned as, “Oh, well, he’s the Hispanic writer?” (283). Even after Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda also won Pulitzers, Cruz told Sutton, “I think there’s still some xenophobia in the field” (Cruz “Art”). He also said, “Because I am a Latino writer, theaters put a lot of pressure on reaching out to the Latino community to come see my work, which I think is great and they should do that. But at the same time, I write plays for the world.” “I’m not just interested,” Cruz insisted, “in reaching out to the Latino community; I’m interested in the Asian community; I’m interested in the Haitian community here in Miami. So how can we bring all these communities to see the work? It’s a complicated question.” (Cruz “Art”).

This question of creating universal art has haunted writers and artists whom critics, artistic directors, and even audiences have pigeonholed as “the gay” artist, “the feminist” artist, “the African-American” artist in a particular field, and so on. Cruz’s winning the 2009 PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award for a playwright in what the PEN American Center calls “mid-career” testifies that he has achieved a degree of universality, as
does his reaching such regional professional theatres as the Aurora. Cruz is Maria Irene Fornes’s gift to Paula Vogel and the rest of the theatrical world who goes on giving.

Vogel discovered Sarah Ruhl in a memorable way, in 1995, when Ruhl was a student in Vogel’s class at Brown. “In ‘Dog Play,’ her first piece, a ten-minute exercise assigned by [Vogel],” John Lahr writes, “Ruhl synthesized Kabuki stage techniques with a suburban American environment to evoke her grief over her father’s death” from cancer in 1994, when Ruhl was twenty years old. Vogel told Lahr, “I sat with this short play in my study and sobbed. She had an emotional maturity that no one else in the class had” (Lahr “Surreal”). The memory has remained vivid for Vogel, who in telling her 22 May 2017 Vineyard Theatre Playwriting Workshop audience about a ten-minute assignment to write a “short play that is impossible to stage,” mentioned a variation that requires a dog protagonist. In response to this particular requirement, Vogel indicated she had collected and kept many very good examples, including one from Ruhl that led the professor to ask her student, “Do you want to be a playwright?” (Vogel Vineyard).

Since completing her MFA at Brown in 2001, Ruhl has enjoyed almost continuous success. Several of her plays had already run at respected theatres by 2005, when her 2004 play *The Clean House* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. The MacArthur Foundation recognized her with its Fellowship, aka the “genius grant,” in 2006. She also won the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award in 2006. Then, in 2009, Ruhl made her Broadway debut with *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, her second work to become a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. *In the Next Room* quickly became both Ruhl’s most famous and her most infamous play.

Sarah Ruhl has acknowledged that *In the Next Room* responds to at least two sources, Rachel Maines’s *The Technology of Orgasm* (1999) and Phyllis Rose’s *Parallel Lives: Five
Maines writes of the “androcentric definition of sex,” which “recognizes three essential steps: preparation for penetration (“foreplay”), penetration, and male orgasm” (5). The occurrence of a female orgasm, according to this definition, is an inessential detail that does not diminish “the legitimacy of the act as ‘real sex,’” a significant point since “more than half of all women, possibly more than 70 percent, do not regularly reach orgasm by means of penetration alone” (5).

Maines evinces no surprise that doctors defined innumerable women as “abnormal or ‘frigid’” and, with so many frustrated women having doctors define them in terms of a malfunctioning or even dislocated womb rendering them “hysterics,” many nineteenth-century doctors claimed “hysteria was pandemic in their time” (5).

Thanks to the pioneering work Thomas Edison performed in the late 1800s, widespread commercial availability of a household electric current led to a short lived, if inaccurately recognized, revolution in female sexuality. The electric vibrator relieved medical professionals of the duty to induce manually what they called “paroxysms” in women diagnosed with hysteria. The vibrator became so popular that by 1918, the Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogue included a page of “Aids That Every Woman Appreciates.” Along with electric fans and sewing

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51 Rose uses the term “marriage” loosely or even ironically because one of the relationships she discusses is the unconsummated union of John Ruskin and Effie Gray, which was annulled after Ruskin could not overcome his revulsion to his wife’s pubic hair.

52 Zeus and Hera argued over which sex took more pleasure from coitus, with Zeus attributing more pleasure to the woman and Hera to the man. Tiresias, who had lived and had sex as both a man and a woman, was uniquely qualified to answer the question. After Tiresias sided with Zeus, Hera struck him blind; however, Zeus gave some recompense by awarding Tiresias second sight, or prophecy.
machines, this icon of American mail-order selling offered a portable vibrator for $5.95 plus shipping and, for another $1.35 plus shipping, an attachment set to complement the vibrator (Maines 105). Edison’s gift of readily and affordably available electric current allowed American women to please themselves with clinical detachment.53

Vibrators’ popularity can be attributed both to the “technology of orgasm” referenced in Maines’s title and the defamiliarization of orgasm obvious to today’s audiences but all but unknown when Sears sold vibrators. Ruhl presents Dr. Givings, a fictional prototype of a doctor in “a prosperous spa town outside of New York City, perhaps Saratoga Springs” (7), who uses the vibrator to treat hysterics, both female and male. Dr. Givings’s wife, Catherine, finds herself wondering what actually goes on in her husband’s treatment room, which is located in the Givings home, right in the literal next room over from the living room. Dr. Givings meets with the Daldry couple and decides Sabrina Daldry is a good candidate for treatment from him and his nurse, Annie. Perhaps adding to Catherine’s curiosity are the feelings of inadequacy she experiences because she has had to hire an African-American woman named Elizabeth, whom the “Personages” record as “a wet nurse by default” (7).

Mrs. Daldry’s description of her first paroxysm is strikingly graphic. Warned by Dr. Givings that patients “often call for God” (23), she tells him, “My feet are very hot – dancing on hot coals – and down – down there – cold and hot to the touch – my heart is racing” (22). Later in her treatment, Sabrina responds to Catherine’s question about whether the sensations is pleasurable or painful by saying, “Pleasure, and pain all at once – electrical current runs through my entire body – I see light – patterns of light, under my eyelids – and a kind of white-hot coal

53 Vibrators became victims of their own success when they began appearing in pornography. They were banished from mainstream sales papers after roughly 1930 and avidly outlawed by many state legislatures.
on my feet.” Sabrina continues, “I shudder violently, as though struck by a terrible lightning – and then a darkness descends, and I want to sleep” (59). This description may owe something to a possible unacknowledged source, a lyric from Sappho, which Anne Carson has translated as including the following lines:

oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking is left in me
no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears
and cold sweat hold me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead – or almost
I seem to me. (639)

These lines from Sappho are generally interpreted as the experience of a woman’s jealousy and of her orgasming in a way very unlike the androcentric model. Even if the audience (as is likely) misses this possible reference to Sappho, the audience is in on the idea that Mrs. Daldry has a powerful orgasm that seems clitoral rather than vaginal.

Yet the word “orgasm” never appears in the play, nor does Sabrina Daldry or Catherine Givings, who eventually experiments with the vibrator herself, accept the idea that their physical experience could be at all related to sex. Ruhl elaborates upon this point when Catherine and
Sabrina contrapuntally describe for Elizabeth “two experiences of the very same event’ (114). Catherine goes first with “Either: you have shivers all over your body, and you feel like running, and your feet get very hot, as though you are dancing on devil’s coals--.” Sabrina counters, “Or you see unaccountable patterns of light, of electricity, under your eyelids – and your heart races – and your legs feel very weak, as though you cannot walk --.” Catherine interjects, “Or your face gets suddenly hot, like a strange sudden sunburn --.” To this, Sabrina adds, “Or there are red splotches up one side of your entire body – a strange rash – here.” The directions tell us, “She points to her chest” (114). The women also describe a “feeling of burning,” a “mouth [that] is dry,” “a very ugly expression” (114), and even “sometimes a great out pouring of liquid” (115).

James Al-Shamma notes the non-literal use of color here and also Mr. Daldry’s earlier statement, “I find her weeping at odd moments during the day, muttering about green curtains or some such nonsense.” When Dr. Givings asks a question, Sabrina Daldry tells him, “The green curtains give me terrible headache. The color. Old ghosts in the dark” (11). For Al-Shamma, these curtains point to another possible unacknowledged source, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” an autobiographical short story Gilman wrote to protest Dr. Simon Weir Mitchell’s “Rest Cure,” a standard nineteenth-century treatment for hysteria. Al-Shamma also cites Helen Horowitz’s “Hysteria, Mysteria,” which states that Mrs. Daldry’s words about “the terrible dirty green curtains” remind Horowitz of “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s harrowing and widely read short story” (21). Horowitz then quotes part of an interior monologue by Gilman’s anonymous narrator: “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly Sulphur tint in others” (420). For Al-Shamma, “The curtains” in Sabrina Daldry’s frightening memory “appear to have been inspired by” Gilman (151). Al-Shamma notes another,
more subtle, connection between Gilman and Ruhl in a four-year Sapphic friendship between Gilman and a neighbor, Martha Luther, and Gilman’s pain at losing Martha to marriage. He writes, “Societal pressures foiled her happiness, as mirrored in the play in the truncated romance between Sabrina and Annie” (151).

Since, according to Al-Shamma, Horowitz’s article “was on sale in the lobby when the play appeared on Broadway” (151), many audience members would have been alert to the possible borrowings from Gilman. The onstage audience for Catherine and Sabrina’s description, Elizabeth, cannot be expected to observe allusions to a literary work that may not yet have been written in the play’s time (circa 1880), nor does she. Elizabeth asks, “Is that a riddle?” as well as “Does anything unite [the sensations]?” (115). Told by Catherine Givings, “Many of them are down below,” Elizabeth suggests that “the things you describe, some of them … sound like sensations that women might have when they are having relations with their husbands” (115). At first, the other women seem confused. “With their husbands?” Catherine asks, followed by “How interesting” from Sabrina. Now comes Elizabeth’s turn for bewilderment. “These sensations you are describing,” she asks, “they are not from having relations with your husbands?” (116). Such a notion has not occurred to either Mrs. Givings, who exclaims, “Good heavens, no!” (116) or Mrs. Daldry, who follows, “No! Good God” (116). Then, “They laugh”54 (116) before resuming the conversation.

As Al-Shamma has pointed out, presenting Elizabeth as the lone representative of her race and social class is a potentially dangerous choice for Ruhl, and positioning her “as the one female who is cognizant of sexual pleasure, in contrast to her clueless white counterparts” (154),

54 When I saw In the Next Room at the University of Georgia in September 2012, Catherine Givings and Sabrina Daldry laughed with a mixture of complete surprise bewilderment. The audience then laughed not with but at them.
takes the further risk of identifying sexual experience with the “exotic” individual. Ruhl avoids stereotyping Elizabeth, however, by presenting Elizabeth and Sabrina as more stereotyped characters, at least to today’s audience. Women, whether British or American, of the Victorian era are expected to be innocent of sex, and the idea of orgasm would not even need to be defamiliarized to them because they would never have experienced it. Ever true to this idea, Ruhl tells us that “[Catherine] has never seen [her husband] naked before” (143) the concluding scene. So it is with Sabrina’s description of sex. She states that her husband “tells me to keep my eyes shut, and I do – so I feel only the darkness – and then the pain – I lie very still – I do not see his face – my husband is – has always been – very considerate” (116). Since, then, Sabrina Daldry and Catherine Givings are women of the upper class who have never borne a son, in all likelihood, neither has ever seen a penis or understands the difference between an erect penis and a flaccid one. Elizabeth’s conversation is normative; theirs is antiquated, even quaint.

Dr. Givings’s male patient, Englishman and artist Leo Irving, might seem out of place in the play but for Ruhl’s historiography that presents him as appropriate, if not entirely typical, in such a practice. Leo tells the story of “my boyhood friend” who “is now a very famous art critic” (68) and that friend’s marriage that “went unconsummated for three years and was then annulled” (69) after the friend “was repulsed by his wife’s body” and “something monstrous” he saw “down there” that reminded him of “a beast!” (68). This something was pubic hair, a shock to someone who “had seen the female form only in marble statues – no body hair!” (68). Whether or not Dr. Givings believes this story is true of Leo’s “friend” or of Leo himself, who has been unable to paint for nine months, never becomes clear. All the same, Dr. Givings diagnoses Leo. “It is very rare, a case of hysteria in a man, but of course we do see it” (70), Givings says before revealing “the Chattanooga vibrator,” which he calls “[m]y own invention.”
Although designating Dr. Givings as inventor of the Chattanooga vibrator, which “slips into the anal cavity” in order “to stimulate the prostate gland” (72), seems fanciful, in fact, the Chattanooga vibrator did exist. Maines documents this machine selling in 1904 for “about $200” (16), the equivalent of several thousand dollars in twenty-first century money. A doctor who understood business would seem unlikely to make this large an investment into a piece of medical equipment he expected to use only in “very rare” cases.

From the first time Leo experiences “an anal paroxysm” (73) until he proclaims “It is Elizabeth who I love” (136) and announces he will “go to Paris alone,” resolutely “married to my solitude” (137), questions about the exact identity of the “friend” Leo mentions and also Leo’s sexual orientation linger. The comparisons between the story Leo tells and the life experiences of Pre-Raphaelite John Ruskin are impossible to ignore. Ruskin never remarried after his annulled union with Effie Gray; moreover, arguments about his sexuality, especially as it may have involved Rose La Touche, go on even now. Leo’s professed love for Elizabeth, who as an African-American married woman is all but unattainable to him, stands in stark contrast to the “Are you out of your mind?” (135) with which he responds to love-starved Catherine’s suggestion, “Take me with you” (135) to Europe. Any consideration of Leo’s possible homosexuality, however, must be tempered by the fact that German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing did not write his work introducing the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” until 1886. In the early 1880s, what Lord Alfred Douglas would give voice, in his 1894 poem “Two Loves,” as “the Love that dare not speak its name” did not yet even have a way of saying it could not be discussed. In the end, the play does not clearly answer questions about Leo.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840 – 1902) is the Austro-German psychiatrist mockingly imitated in Vogel’s *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* (1994).
The absence of a term, however, does not preclude one clear example of Sapphic affection. Annie, who is Dr. Givings’s nurse, and Sabrina Daldry discuss love and marriage, with Annie confiding, “One day, I woke up, and it was too late” (127) to marry. Then, the stage directions call for Sabrina to play a song on the piano, Annie going to sit beside her. After Annie applauds Sabrina’s playing, “They kiss” (129). Monosyllabic exchanges of “What?” and “Oh” (129) quickly lead to Sabrina Daldry saying, “I had better not see you ever again” (130). Annie’s “I suppose not” offers no resistance. The women have no name for what they have done, but they know they cannot continue to do it.

*In the Next Room* finally familiarizes Catherine Givings with sexual intimacy near the end. Until this time, she has been, as both Elisabeth Mahoney and James Al-Shamma have noted, similar to Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, the shocking 1879 play regarded as a pioneer in realism. According to Mahoney, “Ibsen has Nora dancing a defiant tarantella; Ruhl has women discovering the power and solace of orgasm and acknowledging their desires.” Like Nora, Catherine feels straitjacketed by society and by her husband. Nora famously seeks freedom by leaving her husband and children, with the sound of an unseen door closing offering finality that stunned audiences of *In the Next Room*’s imagined time. Catherine, similarly, offers to leave her husband and child, but only if she may go with Leo. Such a substitution, for reasons involving both Catherine and Leo, will not do. Instead, as Al-Shamma writes, the Givings “house must be dissolved in order to completely break down the architectural division and hierarchy that it represents” (149).

“Ruhl finds an alternate solution to Catherine’s geopathology,” Al-Shamma explains, “that departs from realist conventions: she makes the house, rather than the protagonist, go

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56 I will discuss what Vogel has to say about “realism” in drama later in this chapter.
away” (157). After Givings blesses Catherine and they kiss, the stage directions read, “Although the domestic space seemed terribly permanent – a settee, a statuette – suddenly it disappears and we are in a sweet small winter garden. Snow covers trees that in the spring flower with pink flowers” (142). To Al-Shamma, this moment is Edenic, for “Catherine has eaten of the tree of knowledge through her experiments in selfhood and in conference with her female companions, and this emboldens her to stage a return to the garden with Adam in tow” (175). Catherine undresses her husband, and Ruhl tells us, “We don’t need to see all of his body” (143), perhaps in a nod to the fact that avoiding male full-frontal nudity might facilitate staging the play in relatively conservative locales. Al Shamma writes, however, “He drops his authoritative persona with his trousers and stands exposed before her” (173) – and, most effectively, us. Here, in this garden where trees “in the spring flower with pink flowers” (Ruhl 142), Dr. Givings surrenders to his wife as one not vanquished in battle but rather “giving” his body to his wife.

Dr. Givings exposes himself not only to the audience but also to the feminine gaze. Heidi Schmidt writes, “She is clothed, he is exposed; she looks, he is looked at; she touches, he is touched; she speaks, he listens and obeys” (54). Rather than the erect phallus of pornography, Catherine Givings and the audience witness what Al-Shamma calls the “depornification” (176) of nudity and even sexuality. This scene, in Schmidt’s words, gives us a situation where “[s]he is constructed as the active subject, he the object of this encounter” (54). The Broadway production further emphasized this depornification when, according to Al-Shamma, “Michael Cerveris as Dr. Givings played against the line to strong effect, shivering violently as he denied that he was cold” (159). Earlier, Givings has indicated his fear of a “perverse kind of onanism” (95) that might result from women gaining agency over the vibrator and their paroxysms. Here, he surrenders to that agency. The stage directions tell us, “He lies on his back” and “She lies on
top of him” (143), strongly suggesting coitus. The final line of the play, Mrs. Givings’ “Oh, God. Oh, God, Oh, God” (144), would then indicate that she has achieved orgasm through sex. The boundaries creating “the next room” are literally gone, and the boundaries separating Catherine Givings from her husband’s body and her own orgasm are likewise dissolved. Like Nora Helmer, Catherine Givings is free, but not at the cost of her marriage or motherhood.

Reviews of the play were generally positive. The play “received its world premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theatre” (2) in February 2009 and then moved to Broadway’s Lyceum Theatre in a Lincoln Center production that November. Les Waters directed both productions. Robert Hurwitt found that the Berkeley production’s “period setting lends the comedy of unfulfilled lives an air of unrealized Chekhovian aspirations.” Overall, Hurwitt called the play “beautiful,” and he concluded, “Like most of the play, the end vibrates with sexually charged comedy and affectionate striving. Despite the spots where the paint hasn’t dried, Ruhl’s ‘Room’ is a very pleasant place to visit.” Reviewing the same production, Charles McNulty noted the “potential to be a modern masterpiece” despite “a sentimental ending.” McNulty added, “Ruhl is no card-carrying feminist when it comes to her writing … [T]he woman-centered whimsy of ‘In the Next Room’ is ultimately more personal than political.” McNulty did offer the play’s final moments a harsh critique: “the ending involves the making of marital snow angels, a metaphor that was banned in short stories ages ago and should be outlawed from this point forward in the theater.”

*The New Yorker* theater critic John Lahr disagreed strongly with McNulty about the ending. Lahr lavished praise on the Broadway production, writing, “The standoff is resolved only at the finale, which feels – and almost sounds – Shakespearean.” Lahr characterized the play as Ruhl’s “most commercial and her best to date,” in large part due to “her nonjudgmental
attack on a sensational subject.” Charles Isherwood, writing for *The New York Times*, did not gush, but his review was nonetheless positive. He wrote, “Insightful, fresh, and funny, the play is as rich in thought as it is in feeling. It is also Ms. Ruhl’s most traditional work, taking place as it does in a single setting … and hewing loosely to naturalism.” He did call the play “a little overplotted as it attempts to explore so many different aspects of women’s lives in the Victorian era,” a deficiency he believed Ruhl may have introduced because “linear dramaturgy is not her specialty.” Nonetheless, Isherwood seemed likely to have concurred with Lahr’s contention, “All we can know of Heaven, Ruhl seems to be saying, is the joy we can make for one another here on earth.”

Writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, Chris Jones considered what a twenty-first century audience would have known and what Victorian characters would not have known, and wrote, “Ruhl exploits this premise, which puts the audience in a position of superiority, which audiences invariably like, very deftly.” Jones looked closely into both onstage rooms and added, “There is a Victorian peep-show, but the Ruhl attraction is full of more substantial stuff.”

Elisabeth Mahoney, in reviewing a Bath, England, performance, wrote of the play’s subject that “really, it is about Ruhl including in her drama, set in the 1880s, the thoughts and words of women that are rarely articulated in plays and novels from that time.” John Nettles, writing for Athens, Georgia’s alternative magazine, *The Flagpole*, focused somewhat less on women’s thoughts and words than on their physical bodies. In his review titled “Little Death,” Nettles declared, “It is shocking to realize that an organ as important (and celebrated) as the clitoris could be so overlooked by the medical field, until we remember that it was not so terribly long

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57 When, during a May 2017 Vineyard Theatre workshop, I suggested to Paula Vogel that *In the Next Room* is a thought-driven play that withholds the thought from the characters but not the audience, Vogel concurred, noting, “That’s cool.”
ago that female orgasm was regarded as a myth, like the Loch Ness Monster.” Then, Nettles returned to the idea(s) behind the play. Proclaiming that “the UGA Theatre’s current production does [the play] justice and then some,” Nettles added, “The play may be subtitled The Vibrator Play, but its soul is in its main title, about the courage it takes to open the door into the next room where anything could happen.”

As noted above, In the Next Room was the second Sarah Ruhl play to be a Pulitzer Prize finalist, losing the 2010 award to Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey’s rock musical Next to Normal. The Broadway production garnered three Tony Award nominations: Best Play, Best Featured Actress (Maria Dizzia as Mrs. Daldry), and Best Costume Design (David Zinn). It did not win in any of these categories, but Ruhl shows no signs of having been discouraged by being nominated but not victorious. With The Oldest Boy (2014) and How to Transcend a Happy Marriage (2017), both directed by Rebecca Taichman, Ruhl has seen her work performed at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. The latter play demonstrates that Ruhl has earned the reputation to attract some big name stars, including Academy Award-winner Marisa Tomei and Tony Award-winner Lena Hall. Ruhl has also continued winning awards, including the 2016 Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award and the 2016 Samuel French Award for Sustained Excellence in American Theatre. Sarah Ruhl is already one of America’s most successful playwrights, with her work drawing audiences and scholarly researchers alike, and her career shows every sign of remaining on the rise as the playwright, born in 1974, enters her mid-forties.

The “About Quiara” link from Quiara Alegría Hudes’s website, www.quiara.com, identifies the playwright as a “barrio feminist and native of West Philly, U.S.A.” Hudes became the first and, to this date, only Latina playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2012.
when *Water by the Spoonful* garnered the award. She is best known among audiences for her collaboration with Lin-Manuel Miranda, arguably America’s first celebrity playwright to emerge in the twenty-first century, on the 2008 Tony Award-winner (and 2009 Pulitzer finalist) musical *In the Heights*, which ran at Broadway’s Richard Rodgers Theatre for 1,184 performances, not closing until 2011. Because of Hudes’s unique status as a Latina Pulitzer-winner for Drama and because *In the Heights* is a Hispanic-themed play, audiences and critics often focus on the “barrio” in Hudes’s self-description and pigeonhole her as a Latina playwright even though she also includes such identifiers as “strong wife and mother of two.” To do so is to err, not only because it runs the risk of stereotyping but also because it overlooks that fact that Hudes may be the renowned student of Paula Vogel who is most like the professor herself.58

Like Vogel, Hudes, who was born in 1977, is the daughter of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. Henry Hudes, a carpenter, “sanded the curly maple of my writing desk” (Hudes 4), his daughter wrote in the Acknowledgments for *Water by the Spoonful*. Virginia Perez is “a native of Arecibo, Puerto Rico who moved to Philadelphia when she was 12 years old” (Bryer and Hartig 152). Like the marriage of Vogel’s parents, the Hudes’s marriage ended while the playwright was a child, and Quiara grew up with her mother and stepfather, Sedo Sánchez. Hudes spend much of her childhood only a two or three hour drive from where Vogel spent most of her childhood, in what John Timpane calls “the rich, diverse neighborhood at 49th

58 Anne García-Romero connects Hudes with one of Vogel’s “gods,” María Irene Fornes, in *The Fornes Frame Contemporary Latina Playwrights and the Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016). Although Hudes never studied with Fornes, García-Romero nonetheless suggests the influence of Fornes on Hudes’s “theatrical experimentations” and her “questioning established forms and generating new dramatic structures” (174), particularly in *Yemaya’s Belly* (2003) and the first play in the Eliot trilogy, *Elliott, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006). She also quotes a 28 November 2007 Hudes email interview stating that Fornes’s “‘playworlds are so tasty and tactile you can smell them, and that is how I found my way in’” (30).
and [appropriately for a future Vogel student] Baltimore.” Also like Vogel, Hudes comes from a family of storytellers; indeed, she has commented, “I felt there were incredible American stories in my family and in my community that deserved retelling, … funny painful, wonderful stories” (Timpane). It is at least plausible that Hudes’s own storytelling in her plays stems in part from what Vogel has called “Jewish genes” as well as the background of a mother born in the hemispheric South. Likewise, the fact that Victoria Sánchez is a composer, coupled with Bryer and Hartig’s note that Hudes’s “father’s sister, a composer, taught her the importance of music” (152) shows how Hudes has inherited the dramatic use of music, something else she shares with Vogel, from both sides of her family.

“Hudes’s mixed heritage,” David Low writes, “has influenced and inspired her writing. Growing up, she observed educational and economic differences among her relatives.” Hudes says, “I found myself in this strange situation of being at Thanksgiving dinner and to my left is a cousin who is on food stamps and struggling in severe poverty and on my right is an aunt who is a city councilwoman and across from me is another cousin who didn’t finish middle school or is illiterate” (Low). The playwright, with two Ivy League degrees, has the most formal education of anyone at this Thanksgiving table, for Hudes holds an undergraduate degree from Yale and an MFA from Brown, where she studied under Vogel. This “crackling mixture of who we are and who we relate to in our family lives and communities,” Hudes adds, “has found its way into my writing” (Low). Because of the diversity in the barrio, Hudes has cautioned against using identity politics as a template for understanding her work. As Hudes has told Victoria Myers, “I think there’s a danger whenever there’s a slot for the “outsider play,” whether it’s aesthetically or the way we categorize human beings. It’s just dangerous, and it leads to boring theatre and boring audiences. It’s not healthy for anyone” (Hudes “An Interview”). Just as Vogel has
recorded that Tom Stoppard does not face questions regarding his take on *Hamlet* that she does for hers on *Othello*, Hudes points out that Edward Albee “never gets asked, ‘What does being a white male playwright mean?’” He never gets asked that kind of stuff” (Hudes “An Interview”).

Hudes, then, self-identifies as a barrio playwright, but she does not want to be restricted to the barrio or Hispanic audiences. Her Elliot trilogy focuses on a Latinx man, Elliot Ortiz (based on Hudes’s cousin) with an Anglo first name who serves the United States in the second Iraq War. Hudes began her first Elliot play, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006), while a student at Brown. Already a playwright of note, having won the Paula Vogel Award in Playwriting and other awards in 2003 for *Yemaya’s Belly*, which received several productions, Hudes conceived of *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* as a play “that dramatized the effects of three wars (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq) on three generations of a Puerto Rican family” (Johnson) and that “was also inspired by Bach’s music” (Low). Hudes, by her own reckoning, “had only written twenty pages” (Signature Season) when, during Vogel’s Signature Theatre Residency 2004–2005 season, Vogel arranged a series of readings by her students, including Hudes.

Hudes’s 2004 Signature Theatre reading from *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, constitutes a moment of important theatre history. “Terrified of audience talkbacks” (Signature Season), Hudes agreed to be interviewed by Vogel in the talkback for her reading. “It just so happened,” Hudes later recalled, “that in that audience were some young men who [sic] I had recently met named Tommy [Thomas] Kail and Lin-Manuel Miranda who had come to me when I moved to New York and said, ‘Would you like to work on this musical with us?’” (Signature Season). The musical, of course, was *In the Heights*. Because Hudes was “dressed very professionally and [she] had on this button-down white shirt and a blazer” (Signature Season), Kail and Miranda told Hudes, “We are really intimidated to work with you now,” an impression Hudes attributes to
“Paula’s very respectful framing of the … event” (Signature Series). Hudes adds, “That was a very nice way to start my collaboration with them, too, because they got to see who I was on my own terms, outside of this joint venture we were about to start” (Signature Series).

Both Hudes’s collaboration with Kail and Miranda and her own work enjoyed great success. The team won the 2008 Tony Award for Best Musical for In the Heights, and Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Hudes subsequently won the Pulitzer for Water by the Spoonful in 2012 as did Miranda for Hamilton in 2016. Hamilton has arguably elevated Miranda to the status of America’s first true celebrity playwright of the twenty-first century, and possibly the nation’s playwright best known across popular culture and students of contemporary culture ever, with the likely exception of Arthur Miller during his courtship of and marriage to Marilyn Monroe.

Water by the Spoonful is the second play in an Iraq War trilogy that Maurice Decaul has compared with David Rabe’s Vietnam War trilogy The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel (1971), Sticks and Stones (1971), and Streamers (1976). Born in 1940, Rabe drew upon his own 1960s Vietnam experience plus stories he had heard, while Hudes drew inspiration from the Iraq War without having gone in country. Hudes’s central character Elliot is based, Hudes told Decaul via email, on a “younger cousin [who] fled the fallout and snares of the war on drugs in Philadelphia by enlisting” (Decaul 22). This cousin saw the military as “his means to a paid salary, to an honored place in society” (22). After the cousin suffered a leg injury in Iraq, Hudes visited him at his California base and “registered an immediate but subtle change in his eyes” (22). Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue resulted from Hudes’s need “to understand what had changed, how his selfhood and manhood had developed during his active military duty” (22).
According to critic Stuart Miller, the Elliot trilogy became a trilogy accidentally in much the same way that August Wilson’s ten-play twentieth-century cycle likewise started out as something more modest. “Hudes didn’t set out to write a trilogy,” Miller writes, “but she eventually felt compelled to return to Elliot’s story” (87). *Water by the Spoonful*, the second play of the trilogy (followed, in 2013, by *The Happiest Song Plays Last*) marks this return. Twenty-four-year-old Elliot Ortiz, in *Water by the Spoonful*, has left the Marines by 2009 for his native Philadelphia and found work at a Subway Hoagies shop. Although this chain has a shop “around the corner” from where Elliot lives with his biological aunt Ginny, whom he calls Mom, he works “half an hour away” because he consider what he does a “[n]ot normal job. Shit job,” dismissing himself as “a butler. A porter of sandwiches” (17). The only relative seemingly allowed to see Elliot in his Subway Hoagies polo shirt is his thirty-one-year-old cousin Yazmin, referred to as Yaz, who has made her family proud as an adjunct professor of music at Swarthmore and with what Elliot calls a “Cosby Show” (10) marriage to William. Yaz does not share this positive assessment of herself, telling Elliot that she had imagined herself “Waaay tenured, like by the age of twenty-four” and possessing such a reputation that “Carnegie Hall debuts Yazmin Ortiz’s Oratorio for Electric Guitar and Children’s Choir” (56). The younger Yaz wrote her professional goals as well as “[t]wo kids” and an “[e]qual housework marriage” on “a piece of paper and dug a hole in Fairmount Park and put it in the ground” (56), promising herself to return at thirty and “’cross it all off,’” something she now says she will “never have the courage” (56) to do. Her marriage is also over but for a final “John Hancock” from a witness (10), which she requests from Elliot within the first few lines of the play.

As the play opens, Elliot has come to meet Yaz at Swarthmore College because he is haunted in two senses: Eugenia Ortiz (Mami Ginny), despite chemotherapy, is dying of cancer,
and Elliot needs someone to translate the Arabic statement, “Momken men-fadlucky ted-dini gawaz saffari?”, which has burned itself into his memory. Yaz has arranged a meeting with Swarthmore professor of Arabic Aman, who she hopes can translate the expression and provide Elliot a measure of relief. Aman proves unable to give any closure simply by providing a “[r]ough translation, ‘Can I please have my passport back?’” (12). He does, however, come with a director friend’s request for a military veteran and “right-hand man, an expert to help him” with such matters as “How do Marines hold a gun?” or “How do they say ‘Ooh rah’ in a patriotic manner?” (12). Elliot declines the request for the present, but he does accept a business card and hint, “If I have a minute, I’ll dial the digits” (12) in order to get the translation he desires.

After introducing Elliot and Yaz, the play takes an unexpected turn into the home of Elliot’s biological mother (a fact initially withheld from the viewing audience), Odessa, who “works odd janitorial jobs” and “lives one notch above squalor” (6) while she operates a chat room, identifying herself as HAIKUMOM, periodically providing her chatmates – crack cocaine addicts in various stages of recovery all – an occasional haiku, and policing the room for vulgar language and personal attacks. The members of the chatroom, from ORANGUTAN to CHUTES&LADDERS to FOUNTAINHEAD, are scattered around the country (and, later, the world) and are also haunted by the consequences of their own drug use. How their situation and particularly that of Odessa are connected to Elliot is at first unclear, but after the trauma of Eugenia’s death and a confrontation between Elliot and Odessa, at last comes into heartrending light of day.

The stage directions specify that Aman should be played by the same actor who portrays the Ghost and also the Policeman in a scene set in Japan.
Odessa has abstained from crack cocaine for years, but when Elliot and his younger sister Mary Lou were small children, they came down with a case of the flu so severe that they vomited without relief for three complete days. Elliot recalls, “Medicine, juice, anything we ate, it would come right back up” (38). The only treatment their small bodies could tolerate was “a spoonful of water every five minutes,” a “small enough amount that they can keep it down” (38). At first this process of water by the spoonful every five minutes went well, leading Elliot to think, “Family time” and “Wow, I love you, Mom. My moms is alright” (38). Alas, this familial scene was destroyed when Odessa left for a fix, and “Six hours later a neighbor kicks in the door” to find Elliot unconscious and Mary Lou dead, so dehydrated that even her tear ducts dried. Angry that Odessa can seem to offer no financial contribution toward a suitable funeral for Eugenia, Elliot reminds Odessa of every detail. The ensuing funeral is beautiful, but Odessa is not present, for she has returned to using drugs and, but for the ministrations of John (FOUNTAINHEAD in the chatroom), could die of the overdose. Perhaps surprisingly, when Elliot and Yaz take Eugenia’s ashes to Puerto Rico, there to scatter them, Elliot holds a container of the prescription drugs that have addicted him in his hand and acknowledges to Yaz, “I wanted Mami Odessa to relapse, Yaz. I wanted her to pick up that needle. I knew precisely what to do, what buttons to push, I engineered that shit, I might as well have pushed the thing into her vein” (61). Recognizing that he lacks the “armor” and “ideas” to protect Yaz, Elliot tells her that a dream involving Mami Ginny has led him to change his return ticket to L.A.X. and Hollywood, where presumably he will follow up on Professor Aman’s offer. Yaz, who as FREEDOM&NOISE has already replaced Odessa in the chatroom and who has bought Eugenia’s ashes home, will return to Philadelphia as head of the family, keeping “a plastic-
covered sofa waiting for” Elliot. Elliot has discovered, as Thomas Wolfe memorably wrote, that he cannot come home again.

As Richard Zoglin has noted, *Water by the Spoonful* marked “the first time a play has snagged a Pulitzer without a New York staging since Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics* in 2003.” In addition, just as Cruz was the first male Latinx playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Hudes was the first female Latinx. Zoglin considered it “no accident that both” of these two dramas to win the Pulitzer before playing New York “come from Hispanic-American playwrights,” adding, “Plays that reflect America’s ethnic diversity tend to get more attention in regional theaters than in the New York hothouse.” Reviewing *Water’s* 2013 New York premiere at the off-Broadway Second Stage Theater for *Time*, Zoglin noted that “we provincial New Yorkers can see what we missed,” which he deemed “[q]uite a lot.” He adjudged that writing “controlled and graceful,” the fifteen scenes “perfectly balanced,” and “the language both lyrical and lucid” without descending into “community-organizer didacticism or sentimentality.” The direction by Davis McCallum, Zoglin found, had “a warm, welcoming spirit and a life-affirming message.”

*Variety* critic Marylin Stasio argued that the play “doesn’t fully achieve its lofty aspirations.” Nevertheless, she noted, “Armando Riesco originated the role of Elliot in “A Soldier’s Fugue” then played him again in the original production of “Water By the Spoonful” at Hartford Stage, and as far as this reviewer is concerned, this powerfully committed actor can play him until hell freezes over because the performance he gives is that intense.” Stasio also found Yaz, played by Zabryna Guevara “quite nice” and Liza Colón-Zayas’s portrayal of Odessa

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60 Presciently anticipating Lucas Hnath’s straight-to-Broadway 2017 drama, the critically acclaimed *A Doll’s House, Part 2*, Zoglin singled out “experimental reworkings of Ibsen” as the fare likely to run onstage in New York.
“a most understanding performance.” Although Stasio also admired the performances of Bill Heck (Fountainhead), Sue Jean Kim (Orangutan), and “Broadway veteran Frankie Faison (Chutes&Ladders), she argued that “the playwright’s disinterest in establishing one last, deep connection — by integrating their life stories with the larger drama of Elliot and his mother — keeps her play from really knocking us out.”

Writing for Backstage, Erik Haagensen contended that the play “has all the power expected of a Pulitzer Prize–winning drama, but even so “for much of its duration, this uncontestably warm and generous play is hampered by conventional plotting and engaging but predictable characters.” Particularly offputting to Haagensen was the way how, during “large stretches of Internet conversation,” the play suffered when “the scenes go on too long, and the lack of subtext (which barely exists on the Web) is a hindrance, flattening the drama.”

Haagensen praised Ryan Shams’ portrayals of Professor Aman, the Japanese policeman, and “especially the ghost of a young Iraqi.” He also found Zabryna Guevara as Yaz “charmingly earnest as she questions her privilege and relevance, then moving in a sudden epiphany about the need to forgive.” For Haagensen, however, the standout performance was that of Lisa Colón-Zayas as Odessa. He wrote, “It will be quite a while before I forget the image of Liza Colón-Zayas as Odessa Ortiz, broken and alone, sitting on the floor of her threadbare Philadelphia home while ladling spoonfuls of water into empty air.” Here, in fact, he found the power one demands in a Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

New York Times theatre critic Charles Isherwood offered perhaps the fullest analysis and most favorable of the major reviews. Although Isherwood thought “Neil Patel’s unattractive set” felt “oppressive” and the “dovetailing of some of the stories does occasionally seem too pat,” particularly the conversations that led to Chutes&Ladders’s “impulsive trip to Japan,” he
nonetheless noted that “Ms. Hudes writes with precision and economy, so that the play doesn’t feel unwieldy or overstuffed.” Isherwood recognized the very deep conflicts in the play, writing that “[a]lmost all the characters in this moving collage of lives in crisis have a grim history – and maybe a grimmer future – of substance abuse.” Such abuse and its sometimes dire consequences did not detract, for Isherwood, from the “shimmering, sustaining warmth” in “people helping one another to face down their demons [so] that regeneration and renewal always seem to be just around the corner.”

Among the critics I encountered, only Isherwood commented on the important role music plays in Hudes’s vision. He noted the two instances of Yaz teaching her students John Coltane’s 1964 “A Love Supreme,”’ first to demonstrate how Coltrane “uses dissonance as ‘a gateway to resolution’” and later to explain how Coltane’s “ideas had evolved, so that ‘the ugliness bore no promise of a happy ending.’” Isherwood saw Water by the Spoonful as “occupy[ing] the territory somewhere between these two strategies.” “Resolution,” he wrote, “remains tentative for most of the characters.” Similarly, “while the promise of a happy ending is in sight for at least some of them, all have learned from hard experience that people break promises as often as they keep them.” Beginning with “the play’s final tender image” between FOUNTAINHEAD (John) and HAIKUMOM (Odessa), and perhaps before, Isherwood seemed eager to encounter The Happiest Song Plays Last, whose upcoming Goodman Theater spring 2013 production he mentioned.

In terms of major awards, Lynn Nottage, one of Vogel’s earliest students at Brown University, is also easily her most successful. Nottage enrolled at Brown in 1982, two years before Vogel arrived, as a pre-med student, until “she gravitated toward her playwriting professor, George Bass, the executor of Langston Hughes’s estate” (Schulman 32), who placed
some of Hughes’s ashes into Nottage’s hands. After studying with Bass and Vogel, Nottage moved on to the Yale School of Drama, only to leave and pursue other interests because she “didn’t think the school was invested in her as a playwright, and in turn she felt less invested in playwriting” (Schulman 32). Nottage has said, “I felt as though I had spent my entire life in school and I needed an alternative experience” (Nottage “Esteemed”), which she gained, along with social activism, as press person for Amnesty International. Once Nottage resumed writing plays, she recalls, “I cashed in my 401k, and I temped and I struggled for many years” (“Esteemed”) before she enjoyed both commercial and critical success, starting perhaps most notably with *Intimate Apparel* (2003). Like Sarah Ruhl, Nottage has won a MacArthur “genius grant;” like Nilo Cruz and Quiara Alegría Hudes, Nottage was won a Pulitzer (for *Ruined*, 2010); unlike any other Vogel student or, indeed, any other woman to date, Nottage also won a second Pulitzer (for *Sweat*, 2017).

Born in 1964, Nottage is the daughter of Ruby and Wally Nottage, “‘what you’d call black bohemian folks’” (Iqbal), who brought her up in the home where she resides today in Brooklyn, New York. Ruby Nottage, a school teacher, “gave her children an Afrocentric education, and filled in their picture books with a brown marker – the Little Prince became black” (Schulman 32). At the same time, Nottage also grew up friends with author Jonathan Lethem, with whom she commuted to the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. When Lethem later asked Nottage about what she remembered about the Boerum Hill neighborhood where they grew up, “‘She said, ‘Every kid we grew up with either went to jail or into law enforcement.’ [Lethem] replied, looking at her and [him]self, ‘There was a third way – you could become a writer’” (in Schulman 32).
*Intimate Apparel* traces its genesis to the moment Nottage, while cleaning the house of her ailing grandmother, who was dying from complications of alcoholism, located the passport photograph of great-grandmother Ethel Armstrong. Lacking any living person with the capacity to tell her about Ethel, Nottage transformed Ethel into Esther and invented a history for her that included living and working as a seamstress in New York City in 1905. While Nottage crafted Esther from scant biographical details, she did draw upon both her family’s past and present in presenting her. “’In my family history, there are generations of women who were abandoned by men,’” (Zinoman), Nottage has said. Esther, who is literally a “spinster” of thirty-five, is courted remotely by George, a Barbadian laboring on the Panama Canal. Throughout her long distance relationship with George and even after Esther marries him, she develops an unlikely friendship with Mr. Marks, a Romanian Jewish immigrant, also engaged to a woman who lives afar, who calls on her ostensibly to sell fabric but, over time, to conduct an extremely discrete, unconsummated courtship through life discussions. George proves a faithless husband, as phony as the letters he has ghostwritten for him and sends, never having read them, to Esther, takes her money, and wastes it before abandoning her. After George betrays Esther, she returns to the boarding house where she lived before he came to America, there to resume working as a seamstress and sustain her friendship, across the racial and religious divides of the first decade of the twentieth century, with Mr. Marks. Nottage herself has described *Intimate Apparel* as “’a lyrical meditation on one woman’s loneliness and desire’” (Zinoman).

The past and the historical great-grandmother Ethel are present in *Intimate Apparel* not only in the abandonment but also in the nature of Esther’s work and in her husband being an immigrant from the Caribbean. The present features in Esther’s affection for Mr. Marks, which is inspired by Nottage’s own marriage to a Jewish man, filmmaker Tony Gelber, with whom she
has children Ruby and Melkamu. Living a century later than Esther and Mr. Marks, Nottage and Gelber enjoy the ability to share not only affections but a marriage and family such as scarcely could have occurred to Esther and the deeply religious Mr. Marks. The Nottage-Gelber marriage enacts where desire may lead if unfettered by prejudice, and achieves where *Intimate Apparel* meditates. Within the hard boundaries Esther faces, however, she lives with, possibly loses, and even if so regains a quiet dignity. Actor Viola Davis was already a Tony Award-winner (August Wilson’s *King Hedley II*, 2001) when her 2004 portrayal of Esther Off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre garnered an Obie Award for what John Lahr calls “a particularly arresting reserve, a quality of silence that translates with equal power to her screen performances” (“Act of Grace” 60), including Mrs. Muller in the 2008 screen adaptation of John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*. Hilton Als likewise found an “inherent dignity” in Esther and particularly in the way Davis portrayed her “backbone and her bravery” (Als, “Unnatural History”).

As both filmmaker and husband, Geller joined Nottage in 2005 when she traveled to East Africa in 2004 with director Kate Whoriskey. The three were unable to enter the Congo then “because war was still raging in the Ituri Rainforest area and Congolese refugees kept flowing over the border into Uganda” (Gener “Defense” 118). Nevertheless, inspired by the Bertolt Brecht 1939 anti-war play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Nottage had Geller film while she interviewed refugees whose plights “provided a catalogue of routine brutality: conscription into prostitution, rape as an instrument of terror and, most harrowingly, the genital mutilation that [would give *Ruined*] its title” (Weinert-Kendt 35). Prompted at first by a belief frequently articulated by Vogel, her “gods,” and her students that “‘I certainly don’t want to write the same

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61 Davis’s performance in *Doubt* earned her first Oscar nomination and prompted costar Meryl Streep to exclaim, “‘Somebody give her a movie!’” (Lahr 52). The Oscar came, in 2017, for another adaptation, that of Wilson’s *Fences*. 
play again and again’” (Zinoman), Nottage initially envisioned what she later described to Nilo Cruz as “a modern adaptation of Mother Courage set in the Congo” (Nottage “Nilo Cruz & Lynn Nottage” 24).62 As a result, however, of “interviewing the women, traveling the landscape, absorbing the culture, eating the food, and listening to the music,” Nottage came to realize she had found “a story that was so specific to Africa and the Congo, that suddenly Brecht’s Mother Courage template was no longer applicable” (Nottage “Nilo” 24). While acknowledging that a debt to Brecht remained, Nottage focused so closely on “gender specific human rights abuses, and the way in which women are preyed upon during armed conflicts” that Ruined “is a departure from Mother Courage” (24).

Both music and film were integral parts of Nottage’s writing process for Ruined. “Before Nottage starts a new play, she makes herself a soundtrack,” notes Schulman (33). Intimate Apparel emerged from a soundtrack that included ragtime composer Scott Joplin. Ruined reflects the impact, both immediate and long lasting, of the music Nottage heard while onsite, conducting interviews and field research in East Africa. The films of interviews confirmed, after the fact, how much of the interviews went into the play’s text. As Nottage told Cruz, she “didn’t revisit them until many years later,” for she “knew it would be difficult to revisit them because of the nature of the stories” (24). When she did return to these heartrending and graphic tales, Nottage discovered that “[o]ne woman was named Mama Nadi, another was Salim, and another’s name was Sophie” (24). Since all three of these names appear in the play, “unconsciously [Nottage] had woven all of them into Ruined” (24).

62 The fact of Nilo Cruz interviewing Nottage for The Dramatist, like that of Vogel interviewing Sarah Ruhl for Bomb, is a moment of “House of Paula Vogel” congruence that informs this dissertation throughout.
Ruined takes place in the establishment of Mama Nadi, a woman in her early forties with “an arrogant stride and majestic air” (5). Mama Nadi’s is a liminal space, with its “makeshift furniture;” its “rundown pool table,” and a general air that a “lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful” (5). It is part bar and part brothel, founded by a woman who says, “I didn’t come to this place as Mama Nadi, I found her the same way miners find their wealth in the muck. I stumbled off of that road without two twigs to start a fire. I turned a basket of sweets and soggy biscuits into a business” (57). Wise in the necessities of staying alive, Mama Nadi operates an establishment that sits in rebel territory in one scene and in government territory in another, the change marked by something as subtle as “a bright red kerchief around her neck, in recognition of the rebel leaders’ colors” (14). More than anything else, Mama Nadi prizes safety, as illustrated when she tells government Commander Osembenga, “Monsieur, I must ask you to leave your bullets at the bar, otherwise you don’t come in” (29). Both rebels and government soldiers generally obey this rule.

As a madam, Mama Nadi realizes she faces the charge that she exploits the women who work for her. She deflects criticism with a comment that is universal to brothel owners, “The front door swings both ways. I don’t force anyone’s hand” (57). Then, she adds something particular to the extremely dangerous climate of the Congo: “My girls, ask them, … they’d rather be here, any day, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard. They’re safer with me, than in their own homes” (57). Before Mama Nadi offers this justification to Christian, “a perpetually cheerful traveling salesman” (5), Nottage has already established that it contains much truth. In the opening scene, Christian brings Sophie and Salima to Mama Nadi, collecting a fee for one but almost begging Mama Nadi to take the other. Mama Nadi initially prefers Sophie, “a luminous beauty” (8), but Sophie, we learn, “is … ruined” (10).
Mama Nadi ends up paying for Salima, “a sturdy peasant woman whose face betrays a world weariness” (8) even though she tells Christian, “I have a half a dozen girls like her, I don’t need to feed another plain girl” (10). Whether out of pity or because she recognizes the financial value of a pretty woman who “sings like an angel” (10), Mama Nadi accepts both.

The play withholdst exactly what “ruined” means in the Congo other than occasional hints. These include the fact that “Sophie walks with some pain” (9), Christian’s reference to how the “militia did ungodly things to the child, took her with … a bayonet and then left her for dead” (10), and the pamphlet Sophie produces when she tells Mama Nadi, “A woman that comes in here said she can help me. She said there is an operation for girls” (37). Perhaps Nottage withholdingst the details because they might overwhelm the audience, to the detriment of plot and character. By initially presenting being “ruined” only as something vague that prevents a woman from working as a prostitute, Nottage draws the attention of some astute observers to the way “ruined,” in this play world, starkly contrasts with the traditional understanding of a prostitute as “ruined” in such works as the Thomas Hardy poem “The Ruined Maiden.”

Salima and the other sex workers at Mama Nadi’s place have not suffered Sophie’s specific injury, but they are no less “ruined” in the sense Hardy meant – and worse. Salima’s husband, Fortune, comes for her, but Salima asks the other women to help her hide from him. Mama Nadi confirms Salima’s refusal to return to the husband waiting for her, explaining, “He’ll see you, love will flood into his eyes, he’ll tell you everything you want to hear, and then one morning, I know how it happens, he will begin to ask ugly questions, but he won’t be able to hear the answers.” Whether because of self-interest, in brutal honesty, or both, Mama Nadi declares to Salima, “The woman he loved is dead” (44). Then, in the play’s most poignant moments, Salima recounts why she has come to seek refuge from Mama Nadi. She describes
how she was captured and her child, Beatrice, “stomped on her head with [a soldier’s] boot” (46) as if she were a piece of fruit. Then, Salima goes on, “They tied me to a tree by my foot, and the men came whenever they wanted soup.” Worse, “I lay there as they tore me to pieces, until I was raw … five months. Five months. Chained like a goat” (46). Worse, yet, when Salima finally gained her freedom and returned home, she “walked into the family compound expecting wide arms. An embrace. Five months, suffering” (47). Instead, she recalls, “my family gave me the back of their heads. And he, the man I loved since I was fourteen, chased me away with a green switch. He beat my ankles raw” (47). If not dead in the sense Mama Nadi describes, Salima realizes through horrible experience that she is “ruined,” worse than any Victorian English prostitute, as a possible wife.

*Ruined* carries us through some of the stages of Salima’s pregnancy with “the child of a monster” (46). Salima defers the ultimate decision about her pregnancy until after Sophie is nearly raped by Commander Osembenga and his men. Even within the comparative safety of Mama Nadi’s place, the assault seems destined to happen until Sophie exclaims, “I am dead. *Shetani!* [Satan!] Fuck a corpse! What would that make you!” (55). Then, after Fortune informs on rebel leader Jerome Kisembe, Osembenga barges into the establishment, seizing control from Mama Nadi. Rather than be forced back to Fortune, Salima takes the ultimate action against this potentiality. She enters, a “*pool of blood form[ing] in the middle of her dress,*” and exclaims, “STOP! Stop it!” (63). Salima tells the assembled men, ‘You will not fight your battles on my body anymore,” “*collapses,*” and “*dies*” (63).

The play’s concluding scene reveals that just as Nottage has withheld the specifics of being “ruined” from the audience, she has also withheld an important fact, that of Mama Nadi herself being ruined. Christian becomes the vehicle by which this information is finally revealed
when he tells Mama Nadi that “you look like you need someone to make love to you” (66) and then, asks, “I’d like to have the truth … why not us?” (67). Mama Nadi’s declaration, “I’m ruined. (Louder.) I’m ruined” would seem destined to end this proposition as Christian “absorbs her words” (67). Christian surprises both Mama Nadi and the audience, however, when he replies, “God, I don’t know what those men did to you, but I’m sorry for it. I may be an idiot for saying so, but I think we, and I speak as a man, can do better” (67). Mama Nadi initially resists Christian’s attempts at physical intimacy, but as the play ends a moment later, she has joined him in a “measured dance” (68). Ruined, through Mami Nadi’s final experience, which is accompanied by Josephine’s whispered “Go, Mama” (68), ultimately offers the most unlikely of happy endings.

Reviewing the Off-Broadway Manhattan Theatre Club production after Ruined won the Pulitzer, Rob Weinert-Kendt called it “a major play by a major playwright” that made for a “watchable and memorable evening of theater” (36). Weinert-Kendt added that this theatre’s “palpable corporeality renders the play’s central image – the notion that the wars in Africa are being fought on women’s bodies – all the more devastating and immediate” (37). Ben Brantley found Sophie and Salima’s arrival “persuasively and quietly harrowing” and Condola Rashad’s performance of Sophie “exquisite” (“War Terrors”). Brantley also found “forceful Junoesque centeredness and a willful air of denial” in Saidah Arriah Ekulona’s Mama Nadi. While he found Ruined a “comfortable, old-fashioned drama” in comparison with “another and more innovative study in wartime atrocities,” Sarah Kane’s Blasted, Brantley nevertheless saw past what he deemed “artistic caution” and a “well-shaped, sentimental ending” to praise the “raw and genuine agony” and characters’ “strength that transforms this tale of ruin into a clear-eyed celebration of endurance.” Brantley also recorded Derek McLane’s set, Peter Kaczorowski’s
lighting, composer Dominic Kanza’s music, and Kate Whoriskey’s direction among the elements that made the production “vivid.”

New Yorker critic Hilton Als referred to Nottage as working “in the tradition of Eugene O’Neill and Theodor Dreiser,” sharing with them a desire “to tell big stories about America.” The setting of Ruined did not alter Als’s view, for, he wrote, Ruined’s “drama could just as easily have unfolded among the gangs of South Central Los Angeles” (“Life During Wartime”). Als identified a “unifying dramaturgical force” in “the humor in horror,” and he added that “the phenomenal Cherise Booth,” as Josephine, “most fully embodies the play’s tragicomic spirit” (“Life”). Contrasting Nottage with black female contemporary playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks and Anna Deavere Smith, Als called her “an old-school dramatist, charmingly unchic.” Als saw Nottage as “interested in dramatic unity: the tale and its inhabitants” (“Life”). Although he found some of the speeches near the end of the play “too self-consciously purposeful not to be corny,” Als nevertheless granted that “we believe them, if only because Nottage does.”

Returning to his concept of Nottage as a distinctly American playwright, even to the point of Ruined nearly being a definitive American play, Als identified, in the ending, parallels to President Barack and Michelle Obama, then less than one year into the Obama presidency. In Mama Nadi and Christian’s dance, he wrote, “we are reminded of the many images we’ve recently seen of that other black couple [the Obamas] dancing slowly, their belief in each other similarly having overcome all manner of obstacles, including the hatred of some of their countrymen” (“Life”).

The subsequent articles about Ruined in scholarly publications have acknowledged that an interpretation of the ending such as Als’s is a controversial, perhaps simplistic one. Randy Gener writes, “The persistent criticism of Nottage’s achievement is that offering Mama Nadi the
possibility for romantic love at the play’s climax may be too upbeat or false a conclusion for a play about war, rape and survival” (“In Defense” 122). Gener defended the play against this criticism, asserting that “Nottage is a confident yet individual artist who writes big-hearted political stories about the ways of women in the world” (122). Gener considered the ending a “strange denouement” marked by “a dance of hesitance” (122).

For Ann M. Fox, “Where friends who saw [Ruined] were moved, I was angry: at the horrible violence against women, but also at the play’s romanticized conclusion” (1). “Why,” Fox wondered, “would a work that had labored to expose the violence of a war fought for the economic gain of a mercenary few (and, thanks to the conflict minerals, our own ability to purchase cheap cell phones) become transformed in the end to an individuated, happily resolved love story?” (1). For Fox, the answer to her concerns came when she examined the play through the lens of Disability Studies. Such an analysis yielded “something more nuanced and significant happening in Ruined than is suggested by its crowd-pleasing final slow dance” (2). “Representing disability and African identity,” according to Fox, “it links disability, sexism, and colonial oppression” while it also “engages contemporary global activism, as Nottage places before us bodies that are imperiled by war” (7). Commenting on the title, Fox notes that “even as the term is harshly judgmental, it is likewise curiously euphemistic” (8). Fox explains, “Being ruined refers to the supposed lack of honor, but, through Sophie’s impaired body, it also points to the injuries that some women experience that have been rendered culturally invisible” (8). Due at least in part to this ambiguity, “Disability exists in this play as that upon which, like gender and race, meaning is projected; yet, as performed, it also has an important visibility and material existence we cannot simply metaphorize away” (8). Fox points out that just as Mama Nadi’s “ruined” status as having been maimed with a vaginal fistula remains, so, too does Christian’s
disability of alcoholism; likewise, “through Sophie, disability resists closure,” for “Sophie’s body remains on stage in the play’s final moment, still disabled” (12). “The dance of Mama Nadi and Christian,” Fox concludes, “may have solicited the approving gaze of the audience, but it is Sophie’s disabled body we are also compelled to recognize in its multiple significations” (13) – maimed, “dishonored” in the minds of her tribe, and possibly infected with HIV. Fox incorporates not only a close reading but also a close viewing to caution against a simplistic understanding of Ruined as well as to call attention to the varieties of disabilities the play presents and the ways they enrich the play.

In its original performance, Ruined won not only the Pulitzer Prize but also numerous other awards as well. It gained Obies for Best New American Play and for acting: Quincy Tyler Bernstine (Salima), Saidah Arrika Ekulonia (Mama Nadi), and Russell Gebert Jones (Christian). Ruined also won Outstanding Play and, for Dominic Kanza, Outstanding Music in a Play at the Drama Desk Awards. The Louise Lortel Award for Outstanding Play and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding New Off-Broadway Play both went to Nottage. However, although Michael Schulman reports “talk of moving it to Broadway,” Nottage told him, “’repeatedly I heard, ‘There are no black actresses who can open a Broadway play’” (31).

Indeed, not Studio 54 not transferred Sweat (perhaps not coincidentally a play with several major white characters) to Broadway in March 2017, the April 2017 announcement that made Nottage the first woman ever to win two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama may have passed without its honoree ever having been performed on Broadway. Even the Pulitzer could not sustain Sweat’s run, however, for it closed after 105 performances, shortly after it failed to win the Tony Award.63

63 Believing that lukewarm reviews by male reviewers helped close Sweat and doom Indecent to an announcement it would close on the same day, 25 June 2017, Paula Vogel used Twitter to
Her lack of success on Broadway notwithstanding, Nottage is unquestionably a major figure in early twenty-first century American drama. Already a staple Off-Broadway and in regional theatres, Nottage is now reaching larger audiences with *Sweat*, especially given the role played by Reading, Pennsylvania, where *Sweat* is set, and other “rust belt” towns in the 2016 election. Hilton Als’s comments about how *Ruined* called to mind the newest inhabitants of the White House in 2009 may have been a stretch, but if applied to the way *Sweat*, which was written in advance of the 2016 election, reflected the events of 2017, they turned prophetic.

A recounting of the many awards and positive reviews enjoyed by such Vogel students as Nilo Cruz, Sarah Ruhl, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Lynn Nottage, and others clearly shows how she may call herself professor of some of America’s most accomplished playwrights of the early twenty-first century. Vogel’s ongoing relationships with her former students establish that they view her not only as a former professor but also as a teacher. Ruhl, for example, conducted talkbacks at the 2014 New Ohio Theatre production of *And Baby Makes Seven*. Rebecca Taichman, who had already directed several Sarah Ruhl plays, including *The Clean House* and *Stage Kiss*, co-created *Indecent* with Vogel before directing it at first Yale Rep and La Jolla, California, then off-Broadway at the Vineyard (2016), and finally in Vogel’s Broadway debut at the Cort Theatre (2017), for which Taichman won the Tony Award for Best Direction. At the same time that Taichman was directing *Indecent* on Broadway, she was directing Ruhl’s *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* at the Lincoln Center. Vogel, moreover, interviewed Ruhl for *Bomb Magazine*.

denounce the critics and declare her solidarity with Nottage. Chapter Five will discuss this story in more detail.
Ruhl is hardly the only former student to maintain a professional relationship with or offer praise to Vogel. On 18 April 2017, opening night for *Indecent*, Hudes tweeted that this event, along with Nottage’s second Pulitzer (for *Sweat*), marked a moment of “Broadway feminist joy” and mandated, “Pens out, historians!” (@quiarahudes). Because *Sweat* marked Nottage’s Broadway debut and because the 2016 election made the play seem especially timely, *The New Yorker* wrote a lengthy profile of Nottage, who “didn’t think the [Yale School of Drama] was invested in her as a playwright, and in turn … felt less invested in playwriting” (Schulman 32). The article, nevertheless, acknowledged Vogel as a “teacher” who, according to Nottage, “introduced me to the notion that you can make a career as a playwright” (Schulman 32). On 16 June 2017, Nottage tweeted a nod to her teacher in the news that Vogel had won the Hull-Warriner Award for *Indecent* (@Lynnbrooklyn). Then, too, is the example of Steven Levenson, winner of the 2017 Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *Dear Evan Hansen*. Levenson stated, “Paula Vogel was my teacher in college and she has been a mentor to me” (Brunner).

Vogel has spoken of the importance that teaching and mentoring have played for her. In an interview called “The Urgency of Indecent Art,” Vogel told Helen Eisenbach, “I always said I wanted people to enter [the classroom] as my students and leave as my peers and colleagues, and that I wanted them to make it in the field before I did.” The playwright and professor went on to say, “As a mentor and a godparent and a fan and a believer I’ve been [on Broadway] for Nilo Cruz, for Quiara Hudes, for Sarah Ruhl, and they’ve all honored me by sitting next to me to watch their play.” Vogel characterized her life’s work as “not about getting through the door alone; it’s about forming circles. Circles rise faster than individuals can” (Vogel “Urgency”). These invitations from Cruz, Hudes, and Ruhl, all of whose work appeared on Broadway before
Vogel’s did, offer powerful testimony to the unbroken circles she has created as a professor who is truly a teacher.

The examples of successful Vogel students I have given speak to her importance as a teacher, but they do not tell us about her teaching style. Fortunately, evidence abounds. Steven Levenson provides one good example, declaring that Vogel’s “‘whole attitude is to teach fearlessness and just start writing. The hardest part about writing is writing. She urged us to just go. Don’t judge, just start and finish’” (Brunner). As evinced in the comment that “‘everybody’s a writer, everybody’s an artist, and everybody can write plays’” (Rousuck 48), a statement Vogel has frequently given voice over the years, she believes that the writing itself is the thing, and she encourages her students to do it.

Vogel’s definition of students is broader than that of most Ivy League professors. Although Vogel welcomes male students and has had them go on to success, perhaps most notably Cruz and Levenson, she has worked especially hard to expand opportunities available to lesbians and women in general, responding, at least in part to a feeling for which she has said “[t]here should be a word – it’s beyond homophobia and misogyny – for a bias against lesbians that’s very particular” (Savran “Driving”). At the same time, Vogel has resisted universally condemning men, commenting, “To say that men are the enemy is patronizing. It makes me a victim, and I am not comfortable as a victim” (Holmberg). Vogel took a major step toward creating opportunities for women to write plays when, in 1984, she joined Mac Wellman, Connie Congdon, and Jeff Jones at “a ‘kvetch’ session that occurs between artists who cannot, as the saying goes, get arrested” (paulavogelplaywright.com/booth-camp). This meeting occurred at the New York loft of Gordon Edelstein, and from it emerged the idea of “the great American Play Bakeoff,” inspired by the Bake-Offs sponsored by Pillsbury since 1949. Vogel writes, “I loved
the idea of creating plays as recipes, as a group responding to a staple in our diet and creating endless variations” (paulavogelplwright.com/boot-camp).

Along with her playwriting bakeoffs, Vogel has also created “boot camps,” which she has offered beyond the walls of Brown and Yale, including such places as “juvenile detention centers, theatre boardrooms and maximum-security [women’s] prisons” (Rousuck 48). Vogel has said of all her students, whether at Brown or a Provincetown detention center, “Anyone who writes in my class and puts their heart into it, I will support, encourage and love. Period” (Craig 223). These democratizing activities have occurred simultaneously with such financially necessary functions as what Randy Gener calls “daylong workshops for various species of theatrical creatures (producers, funders, subscribers, students).” Vogel gave Gener a picture of who, in her mind, should join these functions, saying, “I disagree with the stance of critics being objective journalists outside the theatre community,” and adding, “Such an attitude is becoming destructive to our field, and I imagine it’s hard for them to maintain their love of theatre as outsiders” (Gener 15). Former Baltimore Sun critic J. Wynn Rousuck has taken Vogel’s words as an invitation to participate in one of her boot camps, but Rousuck seems to have been alone, commenting ironically, that “once, I’ve heard, there was even another critic” (48).

Rousuck’s experience offers an invaluable account of Vogel in the classroom. Rousuck writes that Vogel has a “perpetual sparkle in her eyes,” and her “hair seems to bristle with energy” as she moves at “warp speed” (50). Carolyn Casey Craig adds that, in general, Vogel “gives the strong impression that she never thinks, talks, or writes in anything but high gear” (213). “Impossible to teach’ is what many would claim of playwriting,” Rousuck notes, but “it’s certainly not true in Vogel’s classroom” (48). Her assignments speak to ambitious goals and her quirky personality: “Write something in pure form,’ ‘write a five-act play,’ ‘write a
farce,’ ‘use an older form to make it strange’” (Rousuck 50). A particularly intriguing assignment followed reading Lorca. Vogel told her students, “Go to a Providence truck diner; think of the truck as a puppet apparatus, and include the poet, the town bully, some description of Providence politics, and a vulgar ditty” (Rousuck 52). Rousuck reported, based on her own experience, that Vogel manifests “an uncanny knack for getting inside a student’s head, understanding where the student is going, and helping guide the way” (51).

On 14 May 2017 The New York Times reporter Andrew R. Chow wrote that Vogel would “conduct a free playwriting workshop at the Vineyard Theatre on May 22.” This opportunity would constitute what Vogel called “her first writing workshop aimed at the general public in 13 years,” and the participants would be “the first 30 people who RSVP to indecentbootcamp@gmail.com starting at noon on Tuesday,” 16 May (Chow). Perceiving what may be a unique opportunity, I sent an RSVP almost immediately after noon and waited nervously. Shortly before 10:00 a.m. six days later, approximately thirty other people and I began arriving at the Vineyard, where we had our names checked against the list, and whether for the first or tenth time, met Paula Vogel. Consistent with what Rousuck and Craig have written, the Vineyard employee or volunteer who verified my name on the list observed the large cup of coffee in my hand and commented, “You’re going to need that caffeine.” Although my first impression, as an early arrival was that of a warmly smiling playwright dressed in black who greeted several of us warmly and without apparent rush, I soon learned that the observation was correct. The “Stop me – stop me” offer Vogel gave for anyone who felt confused by her presentation several times proved necessary, not because she spoke particularly quickly but because even in a workshop organized so as to present multiple clear themes and ideas, Vogel
mentioned offhandedly so many anecdotes and examples that the sheer volume was both impressive and at times overwhelming.

Indeed, a simple account of Vogel’s presentation would read as a stream-of-consciousness Proustian rumination leavened with a great quantity of specific names and facts. I discerned, nonetheless, several topics that explicate, at least in part, Vogel’s theories on drama and writing plays. Vogel acknowledged that what we were experiencing was “not per se a boot camp,” which would normally consist of “an entire week … limited to ten or twelve” participants who, based on her having led many, would have a “bonding experience” that could result in participants keeping in touch for decades.\(^64\) The overall impression, however, was not so much that Vogel felt forced to omit major topics from a typical workshop as from having to condense her presentation and give participants/students much less time to complete much briefer assignments. This workshop was hardly the first time Vogel had offered a shortened version of the boot camp, for she acknowledged that 2017 marked the third year she had done so at the Vineyard, with the previous two years’ opportunities limited to playwrights and patrons of the Vineyard Theatre.

Since “the aim of each participant writing a short play by the end of the day” (Chow) was a stated goal of the workshop, Vogel told us something she has stated frequently, albeit in slightly different words, namely, “I think everybody is a playwright regardless of whether or not you own it.” She then gave an overall theory of art, which she attributed to her former Cornell University professor and mentor Bert States. Vogel recommended a States book, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985), a phenomenological volume which, according to Vogel,

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\(^64\) All quotations in this section of this chapter, unless noted otherwise, are from the notes I transcribed during the 22 May 2017 workshop. Any errors are inaccuracies result from writing and listening simultaneously.
posits that all art moves through three stages: naïve, sophisticated, and decadent. Naïve art, she noted, can consist of artistic endeavor initiated at an informal gathering, such as Dada. It is strange and defamiliarized, with the audience unaware of the rules. Sophisticated art ensues when someone with a general awareness says, “Let’s go see Dada or performance art.” The sophisticated soon gives over to decadence as soon as the reaction is “Dada again?!” Form is developing, Vogel commented, faster than we can fix it, and “plays decay within a single performance” or as audiences become familiar with a work that is at first very strange. As an example of this latter phenomenon, Vogel cited Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*. This play was in naïve form when audiences first encountered actors of color rapping the story of America’s founders. Its popularity resulted in sophisticated form as the defamiliarization of style and performers fell away. Now, when audiences arrive prepared to sing along with the lyrics, *Hamilton* has moved on to decadent form. If Miranda wants to return to naïve form, he will have to create something very different from *Hamilton*, and the structure of naïve, sophisticated, and decadent form leaves a critic unable to predict what such form this next work will need to take.

At the beginning of the workshop, Vogel had already written six types of dramas on the white board in front of the Vineyard stage. Her discussion filled in details about the six types: 1) Syllogistic i.e. linear i.e. Cause and Effect, 2) Qualitative i.e. Associate i.e. Shakespearean i.e. Epic, 3) Circle, 4) Pattern – repetitive, 5) Generic i.e. Conventional, and 6) Synthetic fragment. Understanding these types, Vogel stated, depends upon an awareness of the “engines” that drive dramatic creation. These engines fundamentally correspond with Aristotle’s six essentials of drama: plot, character, thought or idea, language, spectacle, and music/harmony.65 She

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65 Vogel noted that audience is not among Aristotle’s essentials of drama and added, perhaps half ironically (given the chuckles from the workshop participants), that she has written many plays without an audience.
suggested that playwrights consider switching their engine from play to play as one of several “ways not to write the same play over and over again.” While Vogel shared that she removes the Aristotelian essential (or engine) thought when writing, wishing to take a play through the naïve, sophisticated, and decadent stages by focusing on the how rather than the what (thought being the what), she also acknowledged having been “in love with spectacle or plasticity” for the past twenty years. She emphasized her own belief that spectacle is, indeed, plasticity, which she defined as every non-verbal element that fills the cube of space which is the play. Vogel’s devotion to plasticity as an engine driving not only the writing of plays but also their performance is such that, she confided, she almost never uses the words “stage directions” because they interfere with the plasticity of the play world playwright, producer, director, and performers have created.

Referring to her own list on the white board, Vogel began explaining each type of play and providing examples as appropriate. The first, Syllogistic, she defined as quite rare, commenting, “There’s no such thing as pure plot,” or to put it another way, no one-to-one relationship between plot and our time, such as we experience when we cough or hear a fire alarm. Associate, however, she identified as quite common and the genre of Shakespeare, who she asserted writes plays that are very close to syllogistic except that he’ll interrupt for an “Alas, poor Yorick” moment or a drunken porter in Macbeth scene that suspends time and gives the audience an opportunity to reflect. Strindberg, Vogel explained, invented the one-act play to stay in “real” time while presenting a drama. Vogel concluded her discussion of Associative drama by saying it is the default form in American drama.

66 This suggestion calls to mind critics’ comments about neither of Vogel’s “gods,” Guare, Fornes, and Churchill, writing the same play twice.
Playwrights who do not opt for the default still have multiple dramatic forms available to them, starting with what Vogel called “Circle” plays. Examples of this form include the play version of *The Wizard of Oz*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, Sartre’s *No Exit*, and much of Beckett. Vogel described “Circle” plays as presenting “toc tic as opposed to tic toc,” offering a vision of time without end.67 Such plays have a cousin in “Pattern” plays. Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* operates according to a type of pattern, according to Vogel, as does English playwright Nick Payne’s 2012 drama *Constellations*, which has been performed to acclaim in London and New York and which is now a staple of regional theatres. For Vogel, the works of David Ives, in general, fall under the heading of “Pattern” plays. Vogel concluded her discussion of “Circle” and “Pattern” plays by discussing an 1897 play that was controversial a century ago and remains so (although largely forgotten) today, Arthur Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*, originally titled *Reigen*, both of which names refer to a dance accompanied by music called a “round,” or circle.

“Generic,” of course, is a loaded term that Vogel unpacked for the workshop. The audience already knows the form or genre and has expectations for a “Generic” play. It may contain syllogistic, qualitative, circular, or patterned elements, but they are presented in a ritualistic way. In such hybrid form (e.g. “Generic” and “Circular”), these plays may be quite lucrative. As examples of “Generic” plays, Vogel provided the examples *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, both of which have enjoyed regional, national, and international success for decades.

The final form Vogel discussed was what she describes as a “Synthetic Fragment,” a postmodern form that may present all of time simultaneously. The most famous example of such a play Vogel cited was Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, but she also referenced several other

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67 Vogel also enumerated, under “Circle” plays, “every faculty meeting I’ve ever attended.”
comparatively recent plays, including Heiner Muller’s *Hamletmachine*(or *Die Hamletmaschine*), a 1977 take on Shakespeare’s masterpiece. In addition, she included Lisa Loomer’s 1996 play *The Waiting Room*, which was performed at the Vineyard Theatre among other places, and Katori Hall’s 2009 account of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s, final night, *The Mountaintop*, which includes a collage of historical events between King’s assassination and the moment the play is being performed. The “Synthetic Fragment,” of course, may contain elements of the other dramatic forms, as Vogel indicated by stating that changing plot form among the six types she had listed allows a playwright to add variety, break up monotony, and as Ezra Pound discovered from his studies of Chinese culture and mandated to modernists, “make it new.”

Almost as soon as Vogel finished her presentation on forms of drama, she interrupted the flow of the workshop by instructing the audience, “Please write a short play that is impossible to stage,” adding, “I will see you at 11:30.” Vogel returned to have several participants read their plays, telling us that a variation on the assignment is a play with a dog protagonist. She went on to describe having collected many very good plays from such assignments, including the aforementioned composition that led her to recommend a playwriting career to a very young Sarah Ruhl.68

Vogel described how she has developed her own categories for drama and characters that include the archetypal versus the individuated and the original versus the wounded, “borrowed,” or “programmed.” In her Vineyard Theatre workshop, Vogel devoted more time to discussing archetypal versus individuated than toward original versus wounded, reflecting a concern she has with “realistic” drama. We are using the term “realism,” Vogel insisted, to describe dramas that are actually based on the well-made play, and playwrights or critics who are responsible for these

68 My composition in response to this assignment is Appendix A to this dissertation.
“realistic” dramas are, according to Vogel, “reviving the patient” that should be dead.

“Realism,” she added, “is a way that we pretend that we are being objective” when, in fact, the plays most contemporary audiences see result in viewers being “conditioned” rather than defamiliarized, or shaken. Vogel does not find realism entirely objectionable, for in Ibsen’s day it “was an avant-garde movement” that, over time and the conditioning she mentioned, has become bourgeois. It has also led to some interpretations of plays that border on the bizarre. Indicting critics who insist upon seeing “realism” where the term has no place, Vogel quipped, “I actually wrote a realistic play called *How I Learned to Drive.*” Readers and viewers influenced by this way of treating a defamiliarized play such as *Drive* have asked Vogel, many times, “What does Uncle Peck do for a living?” Her answer was and is concise: “I don’t care,” for Uncle Peck’s profession is not part of the play world Vogel has created in the play.

Part of Vogel’s objection to what she views as misapplications of the term “realism” stems from some of the assumptions in the current theatre. Without being too critical, Vogel suggested forgetting temporarily about Stanislavsky and the Method. She pointed out an assumption in today’s drama that characters have full psychologies when not all do. Indeed, audiences generally assume characters are (or are based on) real people, what Vogel called “objective truth.” Our dramatic ancestors who are archetypes lack such psychologies. Specifically, Oedipus and Everyman are archetypal, not three dimensional with psychologies. The same is true of Romeo and Juliet although they do provide movement toward the

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69 Vogel’s comments about some well-made plays may have suggested that Ibsen, Chekhov, and others have cloyed for her, a possibility she undermined by saying that “good directors have to defamiliarize” the scripts of classics.
individuated Hamlet. Archetypal characters have not ceased emerging from playwrights’ imaginations to this day, for Vogel pointed out that from Shakespeare’s day until today, female archetypes, such as Linda Loman, have stood onstage alongside individuated male characters, such as Willy. We can also encounter archetypal characters in places we might not expect to find characters at all: in particular, Vogel cited FBI profiles and obituaries as bad archetypal playwriting, and she told us she sometimes asks her students take a “Most Wanted” or deceased person and make that person a character in a scene that portrays an unexpected side of the character’s now individuated psychology. Group company theatres, Vogel explained, are currently taking on the task of turning archetypal characters into individuated ones as are some television programs airing away from the traditional major networks. Asked for an example, Vogel cited the Netflix series *Stranger Things*.

In transitioning to her distinction between characters who are original versus those who are wounded (or borrowed or programmed), Vogel focused closely on dialogue. Playwrights craft wounded language when characters cannot express in the moment what is happening. The fractured syntax critics have labeled “Mamet speak” exemplifies wounded language familiar to today’s audiences, as does the language characters use in Quentin Tarantino’s films. The technique has a long history as well. King Lear, for example, uses wounded speech, perhaps most memorably in his “Howl” speech (5.3.270 ff.). Similarly, the playwrights of ancient Greece employ wounded speech.}

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70 Going back at least as far as Freud colleague and biographer Ernest Jones’s work on Hamlet and Oedipus, the highly individuated psychology of Hamlet has been the topic of so much criticism as to become a cliché.

71 Apropos of the Greeks’ use of wounded speech, Vogel commented that the eye hears and the ear sees in theatre. Our ears “see” what is told of Medea’s treacherous gifts and their effects. Likewise, Sam Shepard’s *The Killer’s Head*, Vogel commented, is a play that has the audience
Vogel’s comments on wounded speech segued into a discussion of plasticity. Vogel acknowledged that many levels to plasticity exist, but she chose to emphasize four, commenting that Tennessee Williams sometimes uses all of them at once.

1) Plasticity of the play world refers to emotional speech, how the space “feels.” A line, which Vogel did not attribute, such as “The sky is the color of disappointment,” helps create the plasticity of the play world. To design the plasticity of the play world for actors and the director (but not the audience), Vogel suggested that playwrights consider describing an action offstage.

2) Plasticity of the stage is a concept not intended to direct, but it does offer reminders. It tells us when we will see the color red, a pumpkin, or an actor entering the audience, etc. 72

3) Plasticity of the page refers to the physical page specific to every play world a playwright creates. The physical layout, including spacing and font, can attract or repel a reader’s attention. Vogel suggested that playwrights design their own manuscript pages.

4) Plasticity of the playwright is the playwright’s own, perhaps unintentional, intrusion into the play. Vogel paraphrased her former professor Bert O. States describing this as virtually nonexistent, with most drama what she recalled as “the only form of writing where the playwright is not present.” Vogel disagrees with States and sees the young Tennessee Williams present in a certain line of a play like The Glass Menagerie. She “see” through their ears. Vogel also mentioned but did not elaborate upon a story of crossed perspectives when attending a performance of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? 72 It is largely a reflection of her desire not to direct her own plays from the page, Vogel said, that prevents her from using the words “stage directions.”
also discerns this plasticity whenever a note includes such words as “My grandmother used to say.”

The moment I had most been looking forward to came just before the lunch break when Vogel introduced the concept of the bakeoff that she and a group of her friends originally developed more than three decades ago. Before the writing began, Vogel discussed what she called “the maliciousness of objects,” a concept she said her brother Carl had introduced to her and that we see reflected in works as seemingly disparate as *The Third Man* and the “Chucky” films. She also described a notion familiar to readers of her plays, negative empathy, and stated that it is atypical in commercial theatres and studio films. As an example of negative empathy, Vogel described herself as a playgoer saying, “I’m not Othello. I’m not Othello. Oh, yes, I am,” adding that if she as a woman may make such a statement manifesting negative empathy about Othello, anyone can. In the abbreviated bakeoff plays we were about to write, she emphasized, we would defy current entertainment’s striving to make us feel good all the time and would therefore leave open the possibility for negative empathy.

Some of the “ingredients” for our bakeoff would result from a majority vote, but Vogel insisted upon two before the discussion began: Kellyanne Conway and Le Petomane. Almost no one had heard of Le Petomane, the stage name of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century French performer Joseph Pujol (1857 – 1945), for whom the terms “fartiste” and “farteur” (“flatulist”) was coined. Participants then offered approximately

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73 Carol Reed’s 1949 film noir *The Third Man* plays an important role in Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz*, which I have discussed in Chapter 3.
74 Kellyanne Fitzpatrick Conway, born 1967, is the first woman to run a winning United States presidential campaign.
fifteen choices, among them an act of coitus interruptus, a tiny hand, and an alternative fact. The ingredients receiving the largest number of votes, however, were a malicious object, a tweet, and a moment of music. We were given the lunch hour to write a one-act play using Kellyanne Conway, Le Petomane, and the three ingredients selected by participants.\textsuperscript{75} As Vogel departed, leaving us to go wherever we wished and write, she called out, “The thing about bakeoffs, they’re supposed to end in the middle of a sentence.”

Bakeoffs dominated the after lunch portion of the workshop. First, Vogel had several participants read their brief plays. In a longer workshop, she told us, participants would critique one another’s work, but in this abbreviated version, we would not critique, and she would not collect any of the compositions. Once we had heard three compositions involving the odd juxtaposition of ingredients required, Vogel described other types of bakeoffs she enjoys conducting. Ideally, she informed us, she likes to hold a bakeoff over a forty-eight hour period that follows a group of friends or other participants reading and viewing common works. For example, she described the “Possession” bakeoff, which she likes to begin with the film \textit{Prelude to a Kiss}, the S. Ansky play \textit{The Dybbuk}, and a barely known play that Vogel adores and highly recommends, Tom Cone’s 1975 work \textit{Herringbone}. As ingredients for this bakeoff, Vogel likes to use a trance, a prance, and a kiss; a betrothal; and, for extra credit, a child’s toy.

Other bakeoff subjects include Don Juan, St. Joan, and Leda and the Swan. For the Don Juan bakeoff, Vogel recommends the ingredients a ghost, a statue, a master, a servant, swordplay, and a moment of \textit{coitus interruptus}. The St. Joan bakeoff calls for a visitation of a girl in a field, convincing a higher authority, a defense of cross-dressing, and a match.

\textsuperscript{75} The one-act play I wrote during the workshop is Appendix B to this dissertation.
Finally, the Leda and the Swan bakeoff could use two races, two species, the sky, a gust of wind, and a feather, with a plate glass window or electrical appliance suggested for extra credit. Vogel included recommended reading or viewing sources for this last bakeoff: Egloff paintings, Harold Bloom’s writings on rape versus consent, and Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.” Regardless of the subject, however, Vogel warns against treating the product of the bakeoff entirely as a play. Think of it, she admonished us, as a poker game with friends and a strict deadline. Very often, the friendly competition will lead to a complete play, one fueled, Vogel added, by alcohol, coffee, and food. In all cases, the encounter with the sources should occur at the beginning of the process.

Vogel concluded the bakeoff unit with a different kind of bakeoff, what she called a “Shakeoff,” an homage to Shakespeare’s plays. This concept, she acknowledged, has evolved beyond a competition among friends. She referenced her work with the Hudson Shakespeare Company in New York, where she has designed bakeoffs for works being performed and invites audiences to join in. She mentioned that she would like to see companies do these sorts of activities with each of Shakespeare’s plays, and she added that the idea of bakeoffs specific to other playwrights appealed to her as well. Vogel’s tone and enthusiasm hinted at unlimited possibilities for bakeoffs, ranging from the brief, informal session offered as part of her one day workshop to far more intense and competitive experiences intended both to prompt a better understanding of an important extant work and possibly produce something new of significance as well. Decades after that day in Gordon Edelstein’s New York loft apartment, Vogel continues to develop new variations on an idea.

The Vineyard Theatre workshop ended at approximately 3:00. Not once had Vogel’s energy flagged, nor did she ever mention that the same evening, she would receive a Lifetime
Achievement at the 62nd annual Obies and would give an acceptance speech. During the brief time I spent with Vogel, I developed an understanding of the way she has inspired and encouraged students over the years. Standing among the participants who were taking our leave of Vogel, I blurted out, “Now I want to write a play!” In the same tone of voice I had just used, Vogel immediately replied, “Do it!” I intuited that Vogel does not view other playwrights as competitors but rather, as she has all but told Craig in as many words (23), as colleagues. I also sensed that were I ever to spend a semester or longer with Vogel, as Cruz, Ruhl, Hudes, and Nottage have done, I would consider her a mentor and would want to maintain a relationship with her. She seemed a professor who would become a valued friend.

Vogel’s enduring friendships with her former students who are professional playwrights illuminate her teaching effectiveness, but her relationships with her graduate students provide another perspective. Ruhl and Nottage, for instance, came to Vogel as undergraduates still in or barely out of their teens. Marc Silverstein (PhD 1989) is a professor at Auburn University on whose dissertation committee Vogel served in her early years at Brown. According to Silverstein, “I owe Paula for being on [his committee]” because Vogel did not know Silverstein when Silverstein, on the advice of dissertation director John Emigh, asked her to serve. Vogel’s initial unfamiliarity with Silverstein did not prevent her from taking an active role. Silverstein recalls that Vogel, who was jointly appointed in English and theatre at Brown, “had in mind that I was chiefly writing for a dramatic literature audience” but was nonetheless able to tell him what theatre scholars would want to see in his dissertation, which

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76 In an interview on 22 August 2017, Silverstein told me he believed he may have been the first graduate student to have had Vogel on his dissertation committee. Vogel, in a 23 August 2017 tweet, affirmed, “I think so too” (@vogelpaula).

77 All quotations and paraphrases about Silverstein’s experience with Vogel derive from a personal interview on 22 August 2017.
was about Harold Pinter. Vogel remained mindful of what Silverstein calls the “eighties old saw – theory and theatre come from the same root” even as she advised Silverstein when his dissertation dealt too heavily with theory and if he risked veering into the notion that playwright and theoretician perform the same work.

Silverstein speaks highly of Vogel not only as an academic advisor but also as a human being. He recalls that she never gave him dissertation feedback solely through written notes but invited him to her office, where she encouraged him to play backgammon on her office computer around sessions. Not only that, but Vogel invited Silverstein to her Providence home, where conversations about his dissertation continued over bagels and coffee. Both in her office and in her home, Vogel would speak to Silverstein on a combination of professional and human levels when she made such comments as, “Your argument makes sense to me.”

Silverstein also attributes to Vogel one valuable piece of advice that he regrets not taking. Vogel encouraged Silverstein, before completing his dissertation, to direct a Pinter play and “engage it at some level performatively yourself” so as to understand it on a deeper level. Back in 1989, Silverstein’s desire to complete his degree before moving to a tenure-track job waiting for him at Auburn prevented him from having time to direct a play, but he has grown to appreciate the insights such an experience could have yielded then or could yield yet. This sort of insight and, indeed, Silverstein’s overall comments about Vogel confirm the vision of her as an engaged teacher and professor who contributed to the development of a developing and ultimately successful scholar.78 The Vogel Silverstein described to me conformed to the

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78 Among the Vogel anecdotes Silverstein shared, one involved her recommending Bert States’ *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*. This story documents Vogel’s admiration for States enduring for several decades.
expectations her playwright students’ comments, the recorded reactions of her boot camp participants, and my own experience as her student for a few hours created. Paula Vogel has clearly enjoyed a significant career as a teacher of dramatists and a professor of drama.

6 CHAPTER 5: VOGEL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In her 2008 play *A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration*, Vogel put live music on stage, performed by the actors themselves. Regarding Daryl Waters’ adaptations of circa 1864 public domain songs, many of them Christmas carols, Vogel has written that “if the audience sings along on some of the carols, better still”79 (8). *A Civil War Christmas* turns Vogel’s attention to a topic she had told David Savran several years (“Driving” 353) earlier mattered immensely to her, musical theatre, as well as to a topic that would inform her Broadway debut several years hence, American history. What is more, in a manner that should hardly come as a surprise to students of Vogel’s career, *A Civil War Christmas*, by incorporating the word “celebration” into the title of a play about what Chorus 5 calls “the most brutal harvesting of men” (14), announces itself as a bold drama intended to provide Christmas cheer from one of the literally and figuratively coldest Decembers, 1864, in Washington, D.C. history. Joanna Mansbridge characterizes the work as a “pageant play,” a “more traditional form than Vogel’s previous plays” (Paula Vogel 180).

*A Civil War Christmas* emerged from what Vogel has called an “annual rant” that “theaters across the U.S. celebrate the [December] holidays with a story about 19th-century London” (Andrade). “During a dinner break while in tech at Berkeley Rep in 1997,” Vogel recalls, “I had dinner with my artistic director Molly Smith” and “broke forth: ‘Why are we doing *A Christmas Carol* about Victorian London poverty? Where is the American *Carol?!*””

79 The audience at the performance I attended in November 2014 in Dallas did not sing along.
(ix). Her own new play “came to me in a flash: and with crayon on the paper table cloth, I diagrammed the play” (“Preface and Acknowledgments” ix). Since Vogel grew up near Washington, D.C., visiting such sites as battlefields and the historic Peterson House, where the fatally wounded President Lincoln died, this location seemed a natural for the play as it developed first on a table cloth and, a decade later, on the New Haven, Connecticut, Long Wharf Theatre stage.

Shifting America’s bloodiest war into a subject for celebration requires all Vogel’s skill at defamiliarization. After all, more than 150 years after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, wounds still fester for many. Mississippi still features the “Southern Cross” on its state flag, and cities such as Charlottesville, Virginia, and New Orleans have struggled with the proper place for statues of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and others. By December 1864, as Mosby Raider 2 sings, “Three hundred thousand Yankees is still in Southern dust!” (81), and hundreds of thousands of Confederates also lie in the ground. History, nevertheless, offers information that allows the defamiliarization to begin. In Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, for example, the president stood amid temporary gravesites in November 1863 and pronounced a “new birth of freedom” based upon his having turned the war into a crusade against human slavery. So, too, does literature, such as the Walt Whitman poem “Reconciliation,” which ends with the speaker kissing his dead former enemy, and both the “Word over all” (1) and the fact that “war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost” (2) are described as “beautiful” (1 and 2).

Fittingly, the patriotic yet conciliatory Whitman appears in Vogel’s play.

Vogel further defamiliarizes the war in the way she plays upon such historical Civil War tropes as the noble Lee, the drunken Grant, the melancholy Lincoln, the alternately grieving and frantic Mary Todd Lincoln, the killing machine soldier, and so forth. With the play’s cold
Christmas setting, Vogel transforms Grant, Lee, and Lincoln into the “three wise men” (15) of Christmas lore. True to his nature, Lee declines a gift of coffee from Mosby’s Riders, telling Willy Mack, “If my men can’t have coffee, I can’t have coffee” (16) before gallantly acknowledging, “We’ve lost” (16). Grant scoffs at Christmas coffee, saying, “I’d rather drink my way into Christmas Oblivion” (18). Lincoln meditates upon a disturbing dream. Then, at the same time, all three “wise men” join in the final verse of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” which concludes with the words “peace on earth, goodwill to men” (20).

Two figures taken from history – first lady Mary Todd Lincoln and boarding house owner Mary Surratt, who would later hang as a coconspirator in Abraham Lincoln’s assassination – meet ahistorically, giving the play the “raw dough” moment Vogel believed she needed to connect the pieces and make her play cohere. As Vogel explained to Doris Kearns Goodwin, her favorite cartoon, a New Yorker work by Roz Chast “graphed two lifelines: one was the lifeline of Kafka and the other one was Daniel Boone. These two lifelines crossed in the middle” (“Afterword” 127). On the one line, Kafka, “age five, first nervous breakdown; writes The Castle, fiancée rejects him; commits suicide” (127). Then, on the other line, Daniel Boone “wrestled his first alligator; elected to Congress; dies at the Alamo!” (127). Last, noted Vogel, ‘in the middle she’d drawn these two intersecting lines, with a little circle, and in the middle it said: ‘Liked to eat raw dough.’” (127). These words prompted an epiphany, a question, and an answer: “I’ve got to find the raw dough,” “where is the raw dough?”, and “Well, they’ve got to be looking for the Christmas tree” (127). Mary Lincoln and Mary Surratt’s moment of collision when they meet while searching for a Christmas tree, a rarity in America at the time, gives a
touch of pathos when Surratt “could sense the saddest-looking woman” (50) in Lincoln and defamiliarizes the play further away from the high historical drama being enacted.

While such a meeting between Mary Lincoln and Mary Surratt almost certainly never occurred, *A Civil War Christmas* uses several fictional or composite characters and historical events that enhance verisimilitude. In heartrending fashion, composite character Sergeant Decatur Bronson, an African-American soldier, recalls the Battle of Fort Pillow, where black Union troops were eventually forced to surrender; then, once they were disarmed, kneeling, and helpless, “The Confederates put a bullet through the brain of every last man” (23). This memory, plus Bronson’s initially vague recollection that a certain word has two R’s, explains the rigorous motto, “Take no prisoners!” (24), Bronson has adopted. Similarly, thirteen-year-old Raz Franklin (whose character Vogel calls a “nineteenth-century breeches role” for an “actress” [9]), in his attachment to Mosby’s Raiders, still a real threat in December 1864 and deemed the “darlings of the Confederacy, the curse of every Yankee!” (29), combines an original character, history, and — in this instance — humor and empathy. Raz surveys his family’s ruined farm and decides to pursue “revenge” and “glory” (29) by finding and joining these marauders. Little do we surmise early on that Bronson and Raz are bound for an encounter, one that defamiliarizes the 1864 relationship between black and white so that this time, Bronson captures the white child.

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80 When Bronson’s wife reads a proposal from her newly literate husband, she tells him that “there are two R’s in marry” (79). Reinforcing a major theme, she goes on, “Think of all the words that sound the same: ‘Mary’ as in the Virgin; ‘Merry’ as in Christmas” (79), and she is about to go on when Bronson corrects his sentence to “Will you marry me” (79). Rose’s acceptance of the proposal and her theft by slavers both reinforce the theme of the play’s two Marys and underscore Bronson’s understandable anger that sometimes boils over into rage.
we have previously seen as a comic foil and must weigh fully whether “Take no prisoners” is, indeed, an absolute.\footnote{Bronson saves Raz on a technicality, that of treating him as Christmas “guest” rather than “prisoner” (115). In so doing, Bronson salvages his own humanity and, along with Raz and Quaker Chester Saunders, becomes one of the new “three wisest men in the country” sharing “yuletide toasts on the banks of the Potomac” (116).}

While Decatur Bronson and Raz draw ever closer to their potentially fatal encounter, Vogel provides her own version of the familiar Christmas story that centers on a mother and child desperately seeking sanctuary. Escaped slave Hannah and her daughter Jessa, ever mindful of the slave catchers they still fear who would sell them back into captivity, have spent four days fleeing toward Washington, where Hannah expects the President lives in “the largest white plantation house in town” (42). Confronted by Union soldiers at Long Bridge, which crosses into D.C., Hannah sneaks Jessa onto a wagon and tells the child she will find her mother at Lincoln’s house. Unable to read and woefully underclad for the frigid weather, Jessa wanders the city more and more erratically, coming ever closer to freezing. Chorus 1 then (just before intermission) sings a poignant line from the Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker Christmas standard, telling us that “a child, a child, shivers in the cold” (60). If not for Hannah’s improbably arriving at the White House and literally knocking at the front door, an ad hoc search posse would not have been organized by the now nearly forgotten “African village” in the basement and kitchen of the Lincoln White House (100).

This group includes one of the play’s most impressive characters, the formidable Mrs. Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Todd Lincoln’s seamstress and confidant. Among the many congruencies between characters, Mansbridge points out that Keckley, who lost her only son in the war, shares a powerful sense of loss with Bronson; likewise, Mansbridge adds, “Keckley
shivers when Jessa shivers” (193). Mrs. Keckley, Jessa, Bronson, the two Marys, and others embody Lincoln’s call, from his brainstorming for his second inaugural address, to “bind up the nation’s wounds” (95). Unknowingly, they participate in what Mansbridge calls “ongoing work of unifying the body politic,” something they advance “through the invisible threads of empathy and recognition that foster connections among the characters and between the characters and audience” (193). Ms. Keckley, at minimum, understands the historical significance of what Lincoln, his nation, and the soldiers under his command accomplish, as we note when she tells Mary Todd Lincoln, “I would like to have the glove that Mr. Lincoln wears to his second Inaugural Ball.” When Mrs. Lincoln asks why, Mrs. Keckley replies, I want the glove from the hand that signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (40). This symbolic choice exemplifies how Mrs. Keckley looks forward, just as does her being the character who decides to import “a Bavarian custom” (39) and bring a Christmas tree into the festivities. Mrs. Lincoln momentarily questions the tree as “a bit, well, pagan” (40) before deciding that she, too, desires one and goes on the quest that brings her in contact with Mary Surratt. Mrs. Lincoln eventually gets her wish, and Jessa, who has been found, revived, and presented as “the youngest arrival in the Cox Home” (119), brings deep spiritual joy as she “got to put the star on the tree!” (119).

As a play about war, however, A Civil War Christmas cannot present every ending as joyful. True to Vogel’s multicultural vision that “whether it’s Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or New Year’s – it’s a time when we fell our connection to the larger community” (14), the playwright introduces Moses Levy. Levy is a dying Jewish soldier from the New York 40th Infantry spending his final hours in a Union hospital, where Walt Whitman, a “funny poet fellow with the slouchy hat” who “didn’t care where you come from, or what god you worship” and who “certainly didn’t care who your bedfellow was” (87), has attended him. Mary Todd
Lincoln, in the guise of “a woman in veils … making her rounds in the ward” (85), visits Levy. Although Mary Todd Lincoln laments, “I don’t know any Jewish songs,” she offers to “sing some more” (89) and performs “Silent Night.” The Chorus simultaneously creates a moment of magical realism, for it “steps forward and begins to sing the Kaddish” (89), the traditional Jewish song for mourners and the dying. The effect of the one song superimposed upon the other, when I saw the play in Dallas in November 2014, was hauntingly beautiful, itself a “raw dough” moment such as Vogel found in the Roz Chast cartoon.

As noted above, *A Civil War Christmas: A Musical Celebration* appeared first at New Haven, Connecticut’s Long Wharf Theatre, where it debuted on December 3, 2008, directed by Tina Landau. A year later, the play opened on November 18, 2009, at the Boston, Massachusetts, Huntington Theatre Company, directed by Jessica Thebus. In both productions, “the music was supervised, arranged and orchestrated by Daryl Waters” (2 & 3). Andrew Resnick directed/conducted the music both times. The Huntington production also afforded audiences an early chance to appreciate the work of Emmy Award-winning actress Uzo Aduba.⁸² In keeping with Vogel’s statement that “the real fun of *A Civil War Christmas*” comes from “the doubling, tripling and quadrupling of parts” (8) in a play where “African Americans may comment on the white Washingtonians, women may comment on men,” and, moreover, “gender changes with a hat or a shawl” (9), Aduba played Hannah, Rose, Aggy, and Matron. Lincoln and Whitman are generally doubled, and in Dallas I even saw the same actor (Bryan Lewis) portray

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⁸² For her portrayal of Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren in *Orange Is the New Black*, Aduba won for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series (2014) and Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series (2015). She and Ed Asner, who played Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as well as *Lou Grant*, are the only performers to win Emmy Awards in both categories for the same role.
both General Grant and John Wilkes Booth, at least hinting at how a different war over a
different cause may have placed either in the other’s situation.

Reviews of the 2008 and 2009 performances generally praised the play. *New York Times*
reviewer Charles Isherwood, for example, in reviewing the Long Wharf Theatre 2008
production, wrote, “Ms. Vogel weaves a complex tapestry of plotlines that include numerous
celebrated figures along with several fictional or composite characters.” Isherwood noted
Vogel’s “pains to include all strata of society and a variety of religious and racial backgrounds in
her cast” most of whom “Vogel manages to humanize … in a few crisp strokes of dialogue, so
they come across as full-blooded people, glimpsed clearly if quickly, rather than talking statues
in a historical diorama” (“A Nation Divided”). To be sure, Isherwood acknowledged “so many
people (and a few horses and mules) crossing paths that the narrative takes a long time to gain
any momentum and eventually becomes unwieldy as characters continue to be introduced well
into the second act.” Nevertheless, he found the overall production “the rare holiday
entertainment that brings intellectual nourishment as much as it entertains – and it goes easy on
the sweets to boot – so that it should be made as accessible as possible for children and young
adults.”

One year later, *The Theatre Journal* critic Miriam Chirico reviewed the Huntingdon
Theatre Company production and note that “Vogel deliberately portrays the Civil War from a
multi-cultural perspective,” offering “a panoramic view of Washington, DC, and its surroundings
at Christmastime” (629). Chirico praised what she called “a synchronistic snapshot of the
ordinary people who comprise Civil War history but who often are overshadowed by historic
figures, such as Lincoln, Grant, and Lee” (629). Chirico did write that the episode nature of the

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83 Lewis also played Mary Surratt, hinting at even more possibilities I will not explore here.
play kept the “audience at an emotional distance,” and she added, “[Vogel’s] approach is somewhat academic” (629). Not only that, but “with so much information to master, the musical’s overall impression is dazzling but dizzying; coherent, but not always cohering” (629). In general, however, Chirico did acknowledge the accuracy of the period’s social diversity and the plausible if not historically accurate encounters among actual people. Chirico considered the play as exemplifying a current trend to call badly needed attention to “marginalized groups and peripheral personages” (629) in an engaging way.

A negative assessment came in a Hilton Als 2012 New Yorker review of a production at the New York Theatre Workshop. Als wrote that he “could go on about the narcotizing effect” (“The Theatre”) that “Paula Vogel’s political correctness” had on him. While acknowledging that “the show is a fable, more or less, a form that demands a certain lightness of touch,” Als lamented the lack of the “filthy realities” in this brutal time when the slaughter endured and the Lincoln assassination loomed. “[T]he script,” Als wrote, “leaves the bodies and blood out.” Under the direction of Tina Landau, this production became “an opportunity for her actors to go mad with cute.” Als lays more of the fault at the feet of Vogel, however, for he claimed the “play is the sort of spic-and-span, full-of-hope text that actors and audience members like to be a part of because it’s an easy fantasy about goodness, and obdurate when it comes to pain.”

Als’s comment about audience members has not inspired artistic directors, especially in the South. Most of the occasional productions have been performed in the Northeast, the 2016 Portland, Oregon, production being a notable exception. Moreover, aside from the 2014 Dallas, Texas, production, described during the curtain speech as the play’s “area premier,” A Civil War Christmas appears never to have been performed in any of the former Confederate States of America until Auburn University scheduled a November 2017 production. The American Civil
War has not yet become a time for musical celebration, regardless of whether Vogel’s contribution is considered a true work of art or an ersatz crowd pleaser. Charles Dickens’s Tiny Tim, not Vogel’s Abraham Lincoln, Decatur Bronson, or Moses Levy, remains the dramatic character most responsible, come Christmastime, for wishing that “God bless us, every one.”

On Tuesday, April 18, 2017, Quiara Alegría Hudes wrote, “Pens out, historians!” (@quiarahudes). Prompting Hudes were two events: Lynn Nottage winning the 2017 Pulitzer (for *Sweat*, which I have discussed in Chapter 4), making her the only woman twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; and the official opening night of Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* at Broadway’s Cort Theatre. After more than four decades as a playwright and university professor and with two Obie Awards, a Pulitzer, and induction into the American Theatre Hall of Fame, Vogel, at age sixty-five, was at last a Broadway playwright. Originally “commissioned by Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s American Revolutions and Yale Repertory Theatre” (“Paula Vogel to Receive”), *Indecent* emerged in close collaboration with billed co-creator Rebecca Taichman (who directed the play multiple times, including on Broadway) and was produced at both Yale Repertory Theatre and California’s La Jolla Playhouse in 2015 before it ran successfully Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, where *How I Learned to Drive* appeared also nearly two decades earlier, in the spring of 2016. Then, in October 2016, Robert Viagas reported that the play would move to the Cort Theatre in April 2017, as it did (Viagas).

Attendees at a performance of *Indecent* saw projected onstage the words that they were about to view “the true story of a little Jewish play.” To Vogel, the “little Jewish play” referenced, Polish writer Sholem Asch’s 1906 drama *God of Vengeance*, was anything but a “little” play. According to Vogel, she first encountered *God of Vengeance* in 1974, when she was still coming to accept her identity as a lesbian. Already the teenaged Vogel had taken
advantage of many forged sick notes from her mother and spent hours reading “out-of-print novels about lesbian life from the 1920s, 30s, and 50s” (Vogel, “A Note”). Vogel reports “a growing dismay” from reading these novels: “they ended with the protagonist crying to heaven: why can’t I be normal? Or the girlfriend married a man who rescued her. Or worse yet, a la Lillian Hellman, there were a lot of suicides” (“A Note”). These novels, undoubtedly often similar in content and theme to Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, must have left the young Vogel frightened and disturbed.

Cornell professor Bert States came to Vogel’s rescue when he “gently said, ‘I think you should read *God of Vengeance*’” (“A Note”). Vogel “raced to the library, found a yellowing copy of an out-of-print translation, and stood in the stacks” (“A Note”). When Asch wrote *God of Vengeance* in 1907, he was a recently married man in his mid-twenties. Having grown up in a traditional Jewish community, he almost certainly encountered little to no Sapphic literature during his education. Nevertheless, Vogel reports, “I was stunned.” “To this day,” she goes on, “I have not read so beautiful a scene between two women, one that accorded their love the pure desire of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony” (“A Note”). In Vogel’s mind, *God of Vengeance* was “filled with a kind of feminism” or, to put it another way, represented “Arthur Miller before Arthur Miller’s time in terms of what we are presenting onstage as tragedy” (“Livestreaming a Reading”). Why, Vogel and a few other fans of the play wondered, did such a work, with its 1918 Isaac Goldberg English translation called, by influential *Jewish Daily Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, “not only a thoroughly correct and felicitous equivalent of the original, but a piece of art in itself” (“Preface” vii), remain virtually forgotten? Not only did some of the few who knew the play find merit in it, including Pulitzer winner Donald Margulies,84 who brought

84 Margulies won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Dinner with Friends*. 
out a 2004 adaptation, but the play also had a fascinating stage history. After touring Europe successfully and being translated into many languages, the play ran in New York’s Bowery and was put on by the Provincetown Players before it transferred to Broadway’s Apollo Theatre. There, in response to the first same-sex kiss in Broadway history, the authorities halted the production, tried, and convicted the performers on charges of obscenity.\textsuperscript{85}

The kiss and the ensuing trials are landmark moments in American theatrical history, yet they received very little attention by scholars. C.W.E. Bigsby only barely elides by the event when his authoritative \textit{A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama} states that the “Neighborhood Playhouse, established in 1912, … was an eclectic theatre, drawing on Noh drama and Hindu plays as well as work by Leonid Andreyev, Arnold Bennett, Harley Granville-Barker, George Bernhard Shaw and Sholem Asch” (vol. 1 pg. 9). Nowhere else does Bigsby mention Asch, and never does he refer to the play. Perhaps one reason is that Asch himself eventually despaired of \textit{God of Vengeance} and, upon learning of a planned 1946 Spanish-language production in Mexico City, “warned the Mexican theatre against producing the play and appealed to the cast to discontinue rehearsals” (“Sholem Asch Bans”). Asch even went so far as to announce his having “prohibited the production of his play … in any language in the United States and in other countries,” explaining cryptically that “the situation described in the play is dated and exists no longer” (“Sholem Asch Bans”). Most theatrical companies would have required little to no explaining. By the late 1940s, Asch’s reputation was in such flux that even formerly staunch defenders such as Cahan accused him of “having gone off the rails”

\textsuperscript{85} Although the convictions were eventually overturned, the damage to the play was done.
(Umansky) after Asch embarked on a series of novels that critics generally deemed more Christian than Jewish.  

All the same, while Vogel pondered God of Vengeance and how to write about it, Yale drama student Rebecca Taichman became fascinated by the obscenity trials and produced as her masters thesis the 2000 play The People Vs. “The God of Vengeance,” which the Yale Repertory Theatre performed May 8 through 13 in conjunction with a May 13 – 15 “Sholem Asch Reconsidered” conference. Alvin Klein wrote that Asch’s play and the trial had “aroused” Taichman “to reignite a once flourishing tradition of theater and to find parallels between the repressions of a silenced past and the ostensibly liberated attitudes of the [2000] present.”

Klein discussed Donald Margulies’s adaptation, then in progress, and quoted Taichman as saying that God of Veneagnce’s “‘moment has come’” as part of a “‘Yiddish renaissance.’” Taichman added, “‘This story has entered my soul. It seems to be my destiny.’”

Taichman’s prophecy about the story behind God of Vengeance and the obscenity trials having become part of her destiny was proven true in her collaboration with Vogel on Indecent. What neither Vogel nor her co-creator anticipated, however, was how long the process would take. In fact, but for Taichman taking what she has described to Olivia Clement as “‘the longest shot that I could ever dream of’” and placing what Clement calls a “hopeful cold call” to

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86 What Umansky calls Asch’s “attempt to return Yeshua ben Joseph to the people of Israel” and even his pronouncement, “‘I am a Jewish writer, who has all his life tried to understand the Jewish spirit’” gained him many new readers and financial security even as they cost him some of his early defenders. It is altogether plausible that the controversy surrounding Asch’s Christological works contributed to God of Vengeance being neglected while the Holocaust became a (if not the) dominant topic of Jewish literature and thought.

87 Klein also noted that Taichman’s work was facilitated greatly by the fact that Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library is “the repository for Asch manuscripts, memorabilia and books,” including “the trial transcripts, too.”

88 Vogel told the HowlRound livestreaming that this conversation took place five years earlier, or around 2011.
Vogel, *Indecent* might never have appeared. Unbeknownst to Taichman, Vogel “‘had been tracking [Rebecca’s] work and watching her productions, and just thinking what a remarkable gift this director has’” (Clement “How One”). “That hussy Sarah Ruhl,” Vogel later jokingly recalled, had not only “started working with” Taichman (“Theatre Uncorked” podcast Episode 2), but the student had decided to give something back to her professor. “‘You really should work with Rebecca; you really should get to know each other’” (“Uncorked”). “‘Within five minutes’” of Vogel’s accepting Taichman’s phone call, Taichman remembers, “‘she said yes and we embarked on this extraordinary adventure together.’” (Clement “How”). Taichman credits Vogel with taking “this tiny little idea that I had and turn[ing] it into an extraordinary epic masterpiece” (Clement “How”). Vogel contradicts the modesty in Taichman’s reference to a “tiny little idea,” saying, “We have two minds as well as one. We have two visions and her vision always seems to open a door for me” (Clement “How”).

By the time the play reached the Vineyard Theatre, this collaborative vision had seen many iterations: “I’m on my forty-first draft,” Vogel told a 2016 HowlRound livestreaming. More drafts would come before the play reached Broadway, and the sharing between the playwright and the woman who was her co-creator and eventual director would continue to occur in unusual, perhaps unexpected ways. During a June 2016 Drama Book Shop discussion, Vogel provided two examples of how close the collaboration was. While the play was being performed at Yale, Vogel recalled, she and Taichman stayed together, and the Vogel delved so deeply into her research that she would appear at breakfast and greet Taichman with a statement such as “‘Eugene O’Neill just appeared to me last night’” (Vogel and Taichman). Not only that, but Vogel added that “as a woman playwright, when I take a bathroom break, I am sitting next to my
director in the next stall,” where, at times, “there’d be a little knock on the wall” (Vogel and Taichman), and one collaborator would promote her ideas to the other.

Taichman retrieved boxes of original, historical documents from the Beinecke Library, including her own dramatic account of the trial, and brought them to Vogel. Vogel realized early on that the eventual work should encompass more than the trial, for she has said that “it’s a bigger story” (Vogel and Taichman) than the trial itself, which Taichman had rendered directly quoting the trial transcripts and acknowledging, “I am really not a playwright, and don’t have the capacity to write dialogue” (Vogel and Taichman). Fortunately for Taichman, her writing dialogue was unnecessary while she worked with Vogel. Often, Vogel and Taichman stated during a Drama Book Shop discussion that was livestreamed over the Internet, Taichman would produce an idea that Vogel translated into dialogue and action. Vogel attributed the ending to Taichman, telling the Drama Book Shop and online audiences that “she came in with the most fabulous bit of stage magic” (i.e. the final rendition of the rain scene). Disagreements seem to have been few, with Vogel reporting “one thing that was contentious, which was what was the title of the play” (Vogel and Taichman). Doug Wright of Sundance, himself a Pulitzer winner (I Am My Own Wife, 2004), suggested a short title in contrast with the Taichman’s thesis title. Both women agreed, but rejected what Vogel describes as “six or seven single spaced pages of different titles,” including other one-word options such as Obscene and Immoral, sometimes pondering the notion of a theatre goer requesting a ticket to Obscene. Wright, Vogel told David Noh, asked, “‘What about quoting the original obscenity indictment?’” (Noh), and it was there that she and Taichman found and agreed upon Indecent.

Indecent is a play that both defamiliarizes and (re?)familiarizes. The defamiliarization occurs mainly in terms of what a 1923 district attorney and perhaps even some audience
members today would regard as obscene, prurient, or primarily sexual. Vogel’s technique of
telling and showing bits of the rain scene repeatedly has the effect of taking such elements from
the scene. Vogel has the actresses portraying Rivke and Manke in the 1923 production
strenuously object to removing the rain scene, building sympathy for Asch’s and stage manager
Lemml’s (a Vogel and Taichman creation) original version. Critic Ben Brantley describes these
re-presentations as “fuguelike variations, performed with grace,” until the “dominant note of this
erotic encounter isn’t prurience, though; it’s piety” (Brantley Review Indecent). Picking up on
this religious, or at minimum spiritual, element in a play some readers in Isaac Peretz’s salon, as
portrayed by Vogel, found sacrilegious, I tweeted that Lemml’s devotion, which is nowhere
greater than it is in this scene, “suggests theatre as a sacrament that counters darkness,” including
censorship such as God of Vengeance faced in America and the antisemitism Peretz and others
feared it might provoke. Vogel signaled her agreement by replying, “Thank you!” Vogel then
retweeted my remarks, tagging the production and Playbill as she did so (@VogelPaula,
@IndecentBway, @playbill 25 April 2017).

Indecent must familiarize or refamiliarize its audience with “the true story” it presents. It
is the most metadramatic play yet by a highly metadramatic playwright, incorporating not only
the love scene which initially drew Vogel to the play in 1974 but also Asch’s concluding scene,
in which the brothel owner responds to his daughter’s love for one of his prostitutes by
condemning mother and daughter to the brothel downstairs and hoisting a Jewish Torah so as to
hurl it to the floor (but not actually doing so in Vogel’s retelling). This scene is played ever
more melodramatically as the play is translated into multiple languages and moves from place to
place, including Berlin and Bratislava. This melodrama serves an important dramatic function,
keeping the audience entertained while also emphasizing just how successful was God of
Vengeance throughout Europe. Rudolph Schildkraut, an important member of Max Reinhardt’s theatre company and an early star in German silent films, repeatedly portrayed Yekel, the brothel owner, husband, and father. When the play came to America in the late 1910s, Schildkraut resumed the role in the English-language Broadway production that created Broadway history and resulted in Schildkraut’s arrest.

Indecent may play a role in (re?)familiarizing the audience with the zeitgeist in pre-Nazi Europe twentieth century continental Europe. Around 1891 Frank Wedekind wrote and in 1906 Max Reinhardt directed Frühlings Erwachen, the play depicting puberty, casual sex, abortion, and homosexuality that writer Steven Sater and composer/lyricist Duncan Sheik brought to Broadway as Spring Awakening in 2006. Spring Awakening won eight Tony Awards and four Drama Desk Awards as well as running for more than 800 performances and winning a Grammy Award for its cast recording. The play was a huge success for young audiences who were completely unaware they were viewing a show more than a century old and that had been bowdlerized (e.g. a rape scene replaced by a more ambiguous loss of virginity) before being presented to them.

Asch and Wedekind were hardly alone in considering topics that would seem very new or even controversial a century later. As works that could shock an audience, God of Vengeance and the play that evolved into Spring Awakening offer mild fare when compared with Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi. Jarry’s infamous play, which ran for a single night in December 1896 and which was witnessed by William Butler Yates, began with a variation off the French word merde (“shit”) and included what can best be described as vulgar, even scatological, homages to some of Shakespeare’s plays, sparked a riot, and was outlawed. Nevertheless, Ubu Roi is considered an influential work, a text possibly influencing such movements as dada, futurism, and even
modernism. A century later, in his 2001 polemic “How Sick Can We Get?”, Richard Alleva acknowledged that “Jarry’s writings influenced those of Apollinaire, André Breton, and Roger Vitrac, and eventually, at the end of a long chain of surrealists, those of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett” (17). Alleva then provided an extensive list of Ubu’s more recent “progeny” (17) that included radio “shock jocks,” the television series South Park, and the film There’s Something about Mary, before concluding, “King Ubu has been surpassed but King Ubu still rules” (18). Jarry, for decades, has been far more influential than he ever was during his own lifetime.

Subject matter and ideas that could seem brand new to contemporary audiences also came from Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Research), which Hirschfeld opened in Weimar Berlin in 1919. Already having coined the term that translates as “transvestite” in 1910, Hirschfeld advocated for women’s rights, gay rights, and transsexual rights. Hirschfeld also both befriended and employed Dorchen Richter, one of the first people to undergo gender reassignment surgery. While the 1933 rise of the Nazis resulted in the immediate closing of the Institute, the burning of most of the books and records contained there, and, indeed, Hirschfeld’s never returning to Germany, enough documentation of his work remains that the twenty-first century has seen a recovery of Hirschfeld’s thought and accomplishments, including a direct portrayal of Hirschfeld in the television series Transparent’s Tante Gittel storyline and in the character Ali’s gender studies.

The enduring influence of Ubu Roi, the popularity of the musical Spring Awakening, and the critical success of Transparent suggest something in the American zeitgeist of the 2010s that anticipated Vogel’s retelling the story of Broadway’s first same sex kiss. Perhaps placing Indecent in this context helps explain why the graduate faculty of Cornell University selected
this play at this particular time as the work for awarding Vogel an earned PhD. The play’s university origins likely helped as well. Jeff Lunden reports that “Vogel developed … *Indecent*, at Yale while she taught at the school,” and the play was performed in 2015 by the Yale Repertory Theatre. According to Vogel, “New Haven is exceptional in the conversation I have with audience members. … They want to be engaged in the conversation – they’re not looking for the next play on its way to Broadway” (Lunden). Artistic Director James Bundy characterized *Indecent* as “a play that really fulfills Yale Rep’s mission” to “make theater that’s really worth making” (Lunden).

Vogel received her earned PhD from Cornell just before *Indecent* began its 27 April – 19 June 2016 run at the Vineyard Theatre. Taichman, who was listed alongside Vogel under “created by,” directed, with choreography by David Dorfman, lighting design by Christopher Akerlind, costumes by Emily Rebholz, sound design by Matt Hubbs, and stage management by Terri K. Kohler. Reviews were enthusiastic, if perhaps at least once underestimating the play’s potential. Aiming too low, *Variety* reviewer Marilyn Stasio declared the play “a sure bet for the regional theater circuit” while praising it as a “riveting backstage drama” such that “while we don’t actually see the play performed, we’re left with a vivid impression of the drama, beginning with its origins” (“Off Broadway Review”). Stasio particularly singled out for praise “Taichman’s impressionistic direction and David Dorfman’s stylized choreography” alongside Christopher Akerlind “for the eerie lighting design that has this phantom troupe suspended somewhere beyond time and space” (“Off”).

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89 Vogel’s statement notwithstanding, Lunden’s article cites Yale Repertory as an “incubator” for Broadway plays by August Wilson, Danai Gurira, and of course Vogel.
Writing for *The Guardian*, Alexis Soloski called the backstory “a small flashpoint in Jewish and queer theatrical history” before favorably comparing *Indecent* with *Shuffle Along* as “a project of reclamation, an homage and a recuperation of a text that had its cultural moment and then vanished almost entirely.” *Indecent*, unlike *Shuffle Along*, Soloski adjudged, “has tremendous affection for the whole of the [recovered] play and makes you long for the scenes – late arriving, but exquisite – when two of the women finally perform Asch’s love scene.” Soloski declared the restoration of the rain scene, which was cut from the 1923 Broadway production, “[o]ur great gain.” (“Indecent review”). Similarly, Stasio called the scene “austerely beautiful” and “played in the rain with singular grace by the alluring Katrina Lenk and Adina Verson” (“Off Broadway”).

*The New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood made *Indecent* a Critics’ Pick, calling it “powerful” and “superbly realized” while, like Stasio and Soloski, also noting the similarity to *Shuffle Along*, “another terrific show about a landmark Broadway production (almost) lost to history”.

Isherwood praised the songs, music, choreography, lighting (especially use of projections), and “the forceful performance of its cast.” Isherwood found a “tender poetry that clutches the heart more than a century later” in the rain scene and “gentle ardor” in country cousin Lemml’s (Richard Topol) initial reaction to *God of Vengeance*, which Isherwood considered the true protagonist of *Indecent*, through to Lemml’s taking on the job of stage manager across Europe, in New York, and finally and tragically, during the Holocaust in the Lodz ghetto. According to Isherwood, Vogel and Taichman provided “small doses” of Asch’s

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90 *Shuffle Along, or, the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* was a 2016 Broadway production that retold the story of *Shuffle Along*, the 1921 black-written and black-directed unexpected Broadway hit that helped promote several careers, including those of Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson.
play, yet “they retain a remarkable power.” While Isherwood acknowledged the “necessary but still blunt expositional passages” and “occasional polemical touch,” he believed that the “complex plot” was nonetheless “shaped by its creators with unusual finesse, using techniques associated with Brecht” (or, as Vogel might insist, Shklovsky). The question that began Isherwood’s final paragraph, “What follows?”, was intended to comment on the fact that “we never get to see a scene from the last act again” (“Review: Indecent”), but it might have been a musing upon what would next happen to Vogel’s (and Taichman’s) reimaging of Asch.

Omnipresent social media facilitate knowledge about Vogel’s interactions with her students, other playwrights, and even one of her “gods.” On 21 May 2016, Stuart Emmrich of The New York Times tweeted, “Celeb spotting at #Indecent, picking up tix at Vineyard box office. ‘John Guare. That’s G-U-A-R-E’” (@StuartEmmrichNY). One of Vogel’s “gods” viewed Indecent91. So, too, two weeks later, did Vogel student Lynn Nottage, who tweeted on 9 June 2016, “Poetic & poignant. Gorgeously staged. Was totally taken” (@Lynnbrooklyn). An appreciative Vogel replied the same day, “Looking forward to seeing SWEAT. Xxp” (@VogelPaula). Vogel and Lynn-Manuel Miranda (for Hamilton) both earned nominations for the Edward M Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History, an award won by Miranda. Vogel tweeted, “Congrats LMfor Kennedy Prize: Hope to see all nominations in 2016. Honored to be in your midst92” (@VogelPaula 22 February 2016). Miranda replied the same day that he was “honored to be in YOURS, maestro, thank you,” adding that he was “about to see our mutual homey Quiara [Alegría Hudes]” (@Lin_Manuel). The combination of Manuel’s using

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91 The box office worker, unaware of or unimpressed by Guare’s status, “didn’t blink an eye,” Emmrich reported.
92 The missing spaces between words are Vogel’s, a necessity of completing her message in the 141 keystrokes allowed per tweet.
the masculine “maestro” and his reference to Hudes suggests he was thinking of Vogel both as
professor and playwright. Had he addressed her solely as professor, the feminine “maestra”
would have fit better; instead, he used a term normally reserved for conductors of great
orchestras, who are themselves considered both teachers and, especially, artists.93

On Saturday, June 18, 2016, I attended the penultimate performance of *Indecent* at New
York’s Vineyard Theatre.94 The walls just outside the house were covered with references to
Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance*, for which Vogel has said that *Indecent* is “product
placement” (Pollack-Pelzner), as well as articles and quotations from articles detailing the
controversy, convictions, and successful appeals resulting from the Apollo production. A
handout by Katie N. Johnson of Miami University, Ohio, “When Lesbian Love Came to
Broadway,” was available near the box office.95 Johnson quoted 1922 newspaper pieces
describing *God of Vengeance* as an “ugly story, hopelessly foreign to our Anglo-Saxon taste and
understanding” and “one of the most terrible plays ever presented in New York.”

Inside the theatre were projected the words “the true story of a little Jewish play.” All the
way upstage sat ten people clad in old-fashioned attire who waited, looking impassively
downstage, as the audience took our seats. Male and female, these ten people represented a
*minyan* (for the non-Orthodox) of ghosts; what is more, this combination of characters and words
imaginatively transported us back to Asch’s time and text. Although the program was
conspicuously absent of playwright’s or director’s notes, it did divide the performers into seven

93 Miranda indirectly supports the thesis of this dissertation, that Vogel is the foundation of a
literary “house,” all but acknowledging her as the patriarch (in her case, of course, matriarch) of
a theatrical “family.”
94 Both *How I Learned to Drive* and another 1990s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Edward Albee’s
*Three Tall Women*, premiered Off-Broadway at the Vineyard.
95 I have reproduced Johnson’s composition and added it, as Appendix C, to this dissertation.
members of “The Troupe” and three of “The Musicians.” The program identified the musicians by the multiple instruments each played; however, six of the seven actors were listed simply as “Actor.” Only Richard Topol garnered a specific listing, that of “Lemml, The Stage Manager.” Given the first dialogue, a brief conversation about the play that Lemml says “changed my life” before concluding cryptically that “I can never remember how it ends,” Lemml, Soloski notes, and his “air of rueful compassion conjure Thornton Wilder” (*Indecent*), whom Vogel has cited as an influence.

Before Lemml could speak, however, the full cast rose from their chairs and began dancing to the klezmer music performed by Lisa Gutkin, Aaron Halva, and Mike Cohen. Sand “fell in thin streams,” notes Isherwood (“Review: *Indecent*”), symbolizing the dust to which all humans return, the millennia of wandering by the Jewish people, and – for students of Vogel – perhaps the dusty copy of *God of Vengeance* in its 1918 Isaac Rosenberg translation that she read in the Cornell University Library stacks. Not until much later will we see what Isherwood calls the “haunting significance” of this “arresting image of the cast … rising from chairs at the back of the stage and stepping onto a simple wooden platform” while dust pours forth. For the moment, the play entertains its viewers with the early image of Sholem Asch, in his apartment in 1906 Warsaw, reading his new play to his wife, Madje. She remarks upon the “purest, most chaste” desire between Rifkele, the brothel owner’s daughter who is improbably being groomed to be a rabbi’s wife, and Manke, a prostitute. Identifying herself as a twentieth-century woman aware of Freud, Madje Asch adds that “we’re all attracted to both sexes” and jokes with her

96 Because the Vineyard text remains unpublished, all quotations from it come from my notes and published reviews from 2016.
97 Wilder remains the only writer to win the Pulitzer for both fiction (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927) and drama (*Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* 1942). Lemml seems directly inspired by the narrator in *Our Town*. 
husband about what her affair with a woman or his with a man might (or might not) mean. Further suggesting the fluidity of gender and attraction, Madje ironically points out that the women’s passionate declarations of their love for each other has come from Sholem’s seduction of his own wife. Thus, Vogel dramatically offers an interpretation for how Asch, a young, heterosexual, newlywed male, may have produced the Sapphic language that so captivated her more than forty years earlier.

The play next shifts to the prestigious Warsaw salon of I.L. Peretz, where Nakhmen, one of the regulars, has brought his cousin from the country, Lemml, a tailor who has never seen a play. Lemml immediately becomes enraptured by the play world and cannot understand the argument that ensues about this play that depicts a Jewish pimp and Jewish prostitutes. Peretz, in particular, insists upon not throwing rocks “outside the tent” and maintains that producing this scandalous play would “pour fuel on the fires of antisemitism.” Asch’s retort that his definition of a minyan has come to be “ten Jews in a circle accusing each other of antisemitism” only angers Peretz further. His instructions to Asch come down to two dyspeptic words: “burn it.”

Disappointed by the reception from Peretz but with the support of Madje and, now, Lemml, Asch presses on to Berlin. Here, two women, violinist Lisa Gutkin and one of the actresses provide Indecent’s first same-sex kiss. Later, when a gentile actress who is slated to play Manke mentions to her Rifkele cohort the need to learn some Yiddish before performing the part, the younger actress tells her, “I am Jewish.” “That is very brave of you,” “Manke” replies in a laugh line that will later turn tragic.

Vogel’s production performed the very end of God of Vengeance four times, facing stage left, stage right, upstage, and finally downstage toward us. In Asch’s powerful ending, the father demands to know whether his daughter has remained a chaste Jewish maiden. Uncertain what
her experiences with Manke mean in terms of virginity, she replies “I don’t know.” Enraged, Yekel declaims that he knows how to make money and that the Torah in his hand has been earned by women performing on their backs and on their knees. Yekel then condemns Rifkele and her mother, apparently a former prostitute, to repay the cost in similar fashion. He hoists the scroll as if to hurl it, as in Asch’s play, but in Vogel’s rendering Yekel never actually throws even what Lemml has pointed out an imaginary Torah. The first three times the Vineyard’s company performed this truncated version of the scene, it was met with rapturous applause from an imaginary audience. The fourth and final time, Yekel and company faced Vogel’s live audience, which even after having witnessed the scene three times, audibly gasped at the scene’s raw emotion.

*Indecent* occasionally flashes forward, and one of those times comes as the play moves forward to Ellis Island and “an impossibly long line,” which here represents freedom and opportunity but will take on a more sinister meaning later. Lemml, in broken English, proclaims, “America, I here am.” The carefully teased curls of young American women remind the immigrants of the *peyes* worn by Orthodox Jews back home. As the actors have done earlier, they continue performing *God of Vengeance*, in Yiddish, at The Bowery Theatre. Vogel then defamiliarizes metadrama, having the actresses who depict Rifkele and Manke falling in love “really” being in love but able to show this love only when enacting the love scene onstage. As do most immigrants, the actors, Lemml, and -- foreshadowing his actions during the upcoming trial -- Asch struggle with different languages. The play offers a delightful pun over one actor’s pronunciation so that “whore” and “hair” sound virtually identical. Almost without the audience noticing, Vogel defamiliarizes “real” and “foreign” language themselves. To wit, when the actors would address each other in “Yiddish,” they would speak what we heard as clear
American English. Their “English” was heavily inflected by Yiddish. In fairly typical Vogel style, then, we were defamiliarized away from our own native language when we saw it experienced as a second or third or even fourth tongue by the characters before us.

By 1922, Lemml has been anglicized to “Lou,” and the Provincetown Players\(^9_8\) are ready to perform *God of Vengeance* in English, but with certain unwelcome changes expected. The “very brave” Jewish actress portraying Rifkele has been replaced by an American-born alumna of Smith College.\(^9_9\) Although Adina Verson, who earlier plays Madje Asch, portrays both the “Jewish” Rifkele and the “American” Rifkele, a quick change of accents and physical demeanor alone suffices to show the anguish felt by two women in love but now separated from their only means of displaying that love. Strikingly, however, Vogel has Verson’s American Rifkele enthusiastically practice kissing Manke, with an “onstage” Provincetown Players kiss extending beyond the curtain.

Flush from the 1922 success of O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* and their production of *God of Vengeance*,\(^1_0_0\) the Provincetown Players take the Asch play uptown for its 1923 premier at the Apollo Theater. More changes are required. This time, the rain scene (which we have heard mentioned but have never actually seen) must go. The actress playing Manke protests to no avail, complaining that the production retains the sex while eviscerating the romance between

\(^{9_8}\) Beginning with the memorable 1915 season, the Provincetown Players produced some of the most important early works by Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, Paul Green, and a young Eugene O’Neill. Many scholars, including C.W.E. Bigsby, consider the Provincetown Players seminal in the development of modern American theatre.

\(^{9_9}\) Dramaturgically, Smith College has the most Anglo-sounding name Vogel could have chosen.

\(^{1_0_0}\) Many volumes have been written on the importance of 1922 as the year Sylvia Beach published James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* came out first in magazine and later in book form. This dissertation seeks, in part, to place the Provincetown Players’ English-language performance of *God of Vengeance* alongside such major literary events as these and O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*. 
Manke and Rifkele, and Manke now seemed not to love Rifkele but rather to sentence her to “a life of white slavery.” The performers discuss the perennial Broadway dilemma between what the actress playing the mother called the need to “sell tickets” versus artistic integrity. Lemml is dismayed to hear that Asch, whom we have seen being treated for “nervous exhaustion” and prescribed the bedrest often useful to “women and writers,” has approved the changes. Then, a weird interlude of the song “Ain’t We Got Fun” interrupted the Vineyard performance, conveying a sense of 1920s commercialism and a decade that famously roared. The play within the play next resumed, and the Broadway production brings both a tender same-sex caress and a policeman bearing orders to arrest the cast once the performance is finished. A kiss that the rest of the cast confess to having watched, touched deeply, from the wings many times now results in arrest and criminal charges. The rules, we see dramatically ritualized before us, differ uptown from those in the Bowery – and in Europe.

Ensuing events pass quickly and bring numerous surprises. We learn that the complaint against the play has come not from an anti-Semite but, in fact, from Rabbi Silverman of Temple Emanu-El who boasts, “I registered the complaint.” Silverman denounces the play, sneering that it is possible two Jewish women will one day exchange wedding vows under the _chupah_, but only in the sense that it is possible one day pigs will fly. Eugene O’Neill, from his perch at Hell Hole, a West Village bar, calls _God of Vengeance_ “cracking good” and indicates a willingness to testify on behalf of the play. The prosecutors have cleverly blocked O’Neill and all the other witnesses to the play’s literary worth by putting not the text on trial but rather the actual

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101 Perhaps this line contains a reference to the infamous Zwi Migdal, an actual white slavery racket based in Buenos Aires that preyed on young Jewish women in Eastern European shtetls, promising them lives of New World wedded bliss but actually sending them to servitude and sex trafficking in a foreign country.
performance at the Apollo Theater. Since O’Neill saw the Provincetown Players version rather than the Apollo performance, he and many others are ineligible to testify.

A significant surprise comes in Sholem Asch’s unwillingness to testify on behalf of his own work. Lemml confronts the author, demanding, “Why did you agree to these cuts?” In his defense, Asch claims barely to have understood the English revisions and to have accepted them while less than fully informed. Asch acknowledges to Lemml that he has not tried to testify for *God of Vengeance* because of the fear that his own broken and accented English would make him appear ignorant before the court. Ego seems to have prevailed over artistic vision. A broken hearted Lemml takes his leave of Asch, saying again that the play “changed my life,” and returns to Europe. Lemml cannot know, but the audience knows only too well, the gravity and consequences of this decision. Meanwhile, after another unexpected interlude, this one by the Catskill performers billed as “The Bagelman Sisters,” the play moves forward into the 1930s. Asch falls upon increasingly hard times in the United States. Abraham Cahan, who says he earlier defended *God of Vengeance*, denounces Asch for “apostasy” in 1938 after Asch begins writing about Christian subjects.

By now, *God of Vengeance* exists only in the Lodz ghetto and only because of the tremendous exertions by Lemml. Forced to wear the hated yellow star, constrained from staging a full performance by a curfew, and having to make do with a suggestion of a stage and threadbare costumes, Lemml still maintains, “On the seventh night, God created Yiddish theatre.” One act per week, Lemml manages to stage the first two acts, including our first view of a truncated rain scene and Manke’s loving “You let me wash your breasts in the rain.” We even witness an ersatz wedding and *chupah.*
Lemml’s “God willing, next week we will still be here to present Act III” is not to be, however. The words “a blink in time” projected three times, the Lodz actors join a second “impossibly long line,” this time to death. Now are projected that Lemml “closes his eyes” and “makes a wish” for it not to “be the ending.” In a moment of theatrical magical realism, Rifkele and Manke escape, just before “Lemml opens his eyes.” The words “ashes to ashes – the troupe returns to dust” remind the audience starkly of the ovens of Auschwitz and call to mind the sand from the beginning in heartrending fashion. Yet the play does not end here.

Just as the intrusion of “Ain’t We Got Fun” in the 1920s and Borscht Belt Catskills entertainment in the 1930s have struck a discordant note, so now do a few bars from Oklahoma. Is Vogel reminding her audience of the purely escapist fare that sold very well throughout the entertainment industry while the ashes of God of Vengeance’s final European performers were irretrievably lost and the English translation of Asch’s play gathered dust in American libraries, where Vogel, at age 22 (Warner) would eventually discover it and begin the process that led to Indecent? Lemml’s wish and a reminder that while his death in the Holocaust prevents a performance “next week” of Act 3, the still mostly withheld rain scene, its performers having escaped in Lemml’s mind, echoes in Act 2 while we see Asch one last time. Now an old man played by Tom Nelis, who has earlier portrayed Peretz and the father in God of Vengeance, Asch encounters a young scholar from Yale named Rosen,102 played by Max Gordon Moore, who has earlier portrayed the young Asch. After a quip from Asch that it is easier for a camel to pass

102 I have been unable to verify the existence of Rosen. Perhaps he is a purely imaginary character or a composite of eager fans who may have contacted Asch during his later years. The tone of Asch’s response to Rosen, however, is a documented historical fact. In May 1946, Asch “announced that he ha[d] prohibited the production of his play … in any language in the United States and in other countries.” Asch stated that “the situation described in the play is dated and exists no longer” (“Sholem Asch Bans”).
through the eye of a needle than for a Jew to gain admission to Yale and a lament that *God of Vengeance* has caused him decades of grief, Asch brings the story of the play full circle. Revealing that he is under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an arm of the McCarthy era “red scare” because of favorable comments he made regarding socialism years earlier and that is he is leaving the United States, Asch tells Rosen that he will repeat the words of a far wiser man: “burn it.”

Vogel ends *Indecent* not with the chronological end of Asch’s life but with an unexpected and transcendent moment from the scene of the true protagonist of *Indecent, God of Vengeance* itself. Water began gushing down a large area downstage, and Rifkele and Manke reappeared, dressed in white. With the cast and musicians watching from upstage and Lemml smiling, they performed the rain scene. After an hour and forty minutes of waiting without intermission, the audience could witness the “purest, most chaste” love Magde Asch, in 1906, read on the page. Manke and Rifkele frolicked. They embraced. They were a couple in love. When this scene ended, the water stopped pouring, and the play was over. The audience stood as one for an enthusiastic standing ovation and then slipped quietly, scarcely a word heard, into the June night. This reaction suggested to me a notion I had not previously considered, that of theatre as sacrament. The play then closed the following day.

Stasio’s intimation that the future of *Indecent* would consist of the play’s moving to regional theatres did not prove prophetic. Vogel achieved her goal of restoring interest in Asch’s play, including New Yiddish Rep performing *God of Vengeance* in Yiddish, with English

103 I estimate conservatively that I have witnessed or acted in more than 200 performances of plays, and I have never seen a response like the one this evening to *Indecent*. The audience’s near silence while exiting was like that of a group leaving a particularly moving temple Sabbath service.
subtitles, in June 2016 (Chow). Just over two months after Indecent closed at the Vineyard, Vogel told Talya Zax, “Would I like to see this show be on Broadway? You bet,” adding, “I would put on a sandwich board and walk the street in front of the theater every night to see that happen” (Zax). Preliminary speculation about a Broadway future for Indecent transformed into concrete planning on 26 October when David Gordon reported, “Paula Vogel’s acclaimed drama Indecent will move to Broadway this spring, producers Daryl Roth, Elizabeth Ireland McCann, and Cody Lassen have announced.” Gordon added, “The work will open April 18 at a Shubert-owned venue to be determined.” Just as the location was uncertain then, Gordon wrote that “casting [is] still set to be announced.”

By March 2017, Indecent was set for the Cort Theatre, with the entire cast from the Vineyard production returning. Michael Paulson noted that Indecent would be one of only two plays by women that Broadway season, the other being Lynn Nottage’s Sweat, and wrote, “The fact that these two writers are just now making their Broadway debuts raises uncomfortable questions for the theater industry, which season after season sees plays by men vastly outnumber plays by women in the all-important commercial spaces where money can be made, reputations burnished and Tony Awards won”104 (Paulson). Reflecting the moment in both her biography and theatre history, Vogel stated, “You feel the ghosts in a really great way, … and they’re the kind of ghosts that are saying, ‘Welcome home’” (Paulson). This sense of a homecoming did not preclude Vogel from making a pointed criticism that she found it “interesting watching Blackbird,” which Paulson described as “the play by David Harrower about a sexually abusive relationship between an adult man and an adolescent girl that was staged on Broadway last year.”

104 “It’s about damn time,”” Pulitzer-winner Marsha Norman (‘night, Mother 1983) told Paulson, adding, “Thank you, universe.””
Vogel reminded Paulson that *How I Learned to Drive* “‘is being done all over the world. It’s being done on large Broadway-sized stages in Iceland, for God’s sake. So why is it not universal? Why are we not in that canon?’” Paulson could only mention “many theories about why [Vogel’s and Nottage’s] earlier plays never reached Broadway,” including “timing.”

In bringing *Indecent* to Broadway, Vogel commented upon the anti-Semitism faced 90 years earlier by Asch’s play as well as upon America’s political climate of 2017. Vogel told a BroadwayCon audience that *God of Vengeance* “was a play in 1906 that said we are all lesbians and we are all Jews” (in Fierberg). She continued that “theatre tells the truth, and we need the truth right now. Not alt-facts, but the truth” (in Fierberg). Then, in “A Note from the Playwright” published in the *Playbill* for *Indecent*, Vogel wrote of not anticipating that *Indecent* “would be as relevant today as it is; we again are witnessing an upheaval of fear, xenophobia, homophobia, and yes, anti-Semitism.” “In this moment of time,” she went on, “we must say that we are all Muslim…. We must remember where the closing of borders in the 20th century led nations around the globe.”

The Broadway reviews were less favorable than the ones of the Vineyard Theatre production. Sometimes, the reviewer seemed predisposed against the play, as did Jesse Green, who compared *Indecent* with *Sweat* and J.T. Rogers’s *Oslo*, each another 2017 Broadway play “taking a huge slice of cultural and social history as its subject,” and called Vogel’s play “in some ways the most ambitious of the three, and in all ways the least convincing.” Later, Green disclosed “a problem with plays, however well-intentioned, that hitch their wagon of importance to the Holocaust” and even went so far as to add, “I would submit that the Holocaust in particular
cannot yet be treated abstractly or aesthetically.” Green did attribute “one thing perfectly right” to the Cort production, namely the rain scene, which Green found “something shocking and sacred – and character-driven,” as “[m]ost history is” (Green).

Although in 2016 The New York Times reviewer Charles Isherwood had made Indecent a Critics Pick, the 2017 reviewer from the same newspaper, Ben Brantley, leavened his praise with less positive observations. Brantley recorded Indecent as a “long-awaited Broadway debut” that showed “four decades in the theater have not jaded Ms. Vogel” (“Review: Indecent”), and he termed the play a “heartfelt ode and elegy to a landmark of modern drama.” The tone of the “erotic encounter,” Brantley wrote, which had earned the play Vogel’s title, “isn’t prurience, though; it’s piety.” Brantley termed Indecent “decent, in the most complete sense of the world,” as well as “virtuous, sturdily assembled, informative and brimming with good faith.” All the same, however, Brantley argued that “the ardor that must have informed the writing and early performances of Vengeance only occasionally blazes forth” in Vogel’s recounting, and he thought the rain scene was “perhaps repeated once too often.” In sum, Brantley concluded that Indecent “may not inhabit the lightning-struck stratosphere of the play it portrays,” all but stating that he would have preferred reviewing a Broadway return of God of Vengeance.

Indecent earned three Tony Award nominations: Best Play, Best Director (for Taichman), and Best Lighting Design (for Christopher Akerlind). Despite these nominations, the play struggled for commercial success. In fact, “In the week ending June 11, the final week leading to the Tonys, the play brought in $277,395 in ticket sales — up from $227,045 the week before but still only 30 percent of its potential gross” in the “relatively large” Cort Theatre (Barone). June

105 Why, one might reasonably wonder, was this review assigned to Green by the editor at nymag.com offshoot Vulture?

11, the night of the Tonys brought both success and disappointment to Vogel. Akerlind and Taichman won in their categories. *Los Angeles Times* reporters Jessica Gelt and Patrick Pacheco described Taichman as “shocked” with her win and “trying multiple times to get the words out through her surprise” when she “made it clear that playwright Paula Vogel's story of defiance in the face of censorship spoke to the importance of social justice in an unjust world” (Gelt and Pacheco). The opportunity extended to all four playwrights (Vogel, Nottage, Rogers, and Lucas Hnath for *A Doll’s House, Part 2*) nominated for best play to speak briefly brought Vogel directly to almost certainly the single largest audience she had ever addressed. The biggest prize went to Rogers, and three days later the June 25th closings of both *Indecent* and – despite its Pulitzer Prize victory -- *Sweat*, the two new 2017 Broadway plays by women, were announced. Joshua Barone noted that *Indecent*, after 15 previews and seventy-nine regular performances, would be the first Tony Award-winning play of 2017 to close.

Vogel and Nottage took to social and other media to denounce what they perceived as Brantley’s role in closing the two plays. Vogel tweeted, “Brantley&Green 2-0. Nottage&Vogel 0-2. Lynn, they help close us down,&gifted str8 white guys run: ourplayswill last.B&G#footnotesinhistory”107 (@VogelPaula 14 June 2017), to which Nottage replied, “The patriarchy flexing their muscles to prove their power” (@LynnBrooklyn 14 June 2017). Lest anyone suspect Vogel was jealous of the success of Hnath and Rogers, Vogel also tweeted, “O &ps for folks who can't read tweets much less plays: Hnath deserves every rave ALL give him. Alas, have not yet seen OSLO! Congrats JT!” (@VogelPaula 14 June 2017). Then, unexpectedly came “an upsurge in ticket sales” for *Indecent* that led producer Daryl Roth to “keep the show open through August 6 (for a total of just sixteen weeks)” (“A Collective Call”).

107 Vogel was referencing Jesse Green, also of *The New York Times*. 
This increase of “more than a $100,000 difference from the previous week,” followed by “[t]his number then doubl[ing] the following week,” led Roth to what Olivia Clement called the “gutsy” decision to extend the play’s run (“Daryl Roth”).

Describing herself as “‘very instinctive about everything I do in the theatre,” Roth rejected the descriptor “‘gutsy move,’” preferring “‘emotional decision’” instead (Clement). She told Clement, “‘Once that [closing] posting was up, you would not have believed it. We sold out like we were the biggest hit on Broadway.’” A veteran of more than 60 Broadway productions, Roth “suddenly regretted the decision to close.” She explained, “‘I had been so unhappy since posting the notice and I just couldn’t really live with myself because I just wanted this play to be seen by more people, ... I felt it hadn’t lived its life.’” A combination of the rise in ticket sales and the availability of both the Cort Theatre and the performers helped Roth persuade the other producers to give Indecent six more weeks to reach a live audience. This potential audience then grew exponentially when, after this “outpouring of support from the theatre community and pushing back [of] its closing date” (McPhee), Indecent was filmed by BroadwayHD on August 3rd, just three days before the play’s eventual closing. BroadwayHD announced plans to make the film “available on the theatre streaming service in January 2018 in honor of International Holocaust Remembrance Day” (McPhee). The likely audience then grew yet again when PBS announced that this film of Indecent would “air on PBS Great Performances November 17” (Hetrick “Broadway’s”). This broadcast seems unlikely to enjoy the “huge numbers” of Hamilton’s America, the documentary about Lin-Manuel Miranda’s play that drew a reported 3.6 million viewers (Hetrick “Hamilton’s”). If even modestly successful when first shown, in reruns, and through streaming, however, the PBS broadcast could attract more viewers than all live performances of Vogel’s plays combined to date. At a minimum, Vogel’s brief Tony
Awards speech and the showing of *Indecent* on PBS are bringing the playwright her largest audiences ever. Growing audiences illustrate how, in her mid-sixties, Paula Vogel is on a career upswing. When David Mamet “instituted a clause through his licensing company which prohibits theaters producing his work from sponsoring post-show talks within 2 hours of performances” (Singer), Alexis Soloski of *The New York Times* sought out near-contemporary of Mamet (born 1947) and fellow Jew Vogel, among others, for comment. Vogel stated, “I enjoy talkbacks,” adding that her favorites occurred during those after *Indecent*: “Having [sexologist] Dr. Ruth [Westheimer] dance in the aisles with Tom Nelis. Finding relatives of Sholem Asch in the audience” (Soloski “David Mamet”). Then, asked for her thoughts on the Mamet prohibition, Vogel declared, “In my opinion it is censorship. I believe that artists are public servants and the play belongs to the audience. If we are not in a place to have the conversation, we playwrights can let the discussion continue without us. Hopefully it will continue without us after we’ve left this Earth, right?” (Soloski).

More than as a peer to playwrights of Mamet’s generation, however, Vogel enjoys relevancy and continues to reach new audiences through her relationships with younger people. Vogel responded to an Olivia Clement question about students, “One of the gifts that these younger writers have given me is a total acceptance of who I am. I may feel uneasy in my own peer group, but I don't feel uneasy with younger people. It's almost nostalgic to think of me as a lesbian in a way. They don't even blink” (“The Myth”). Although Vogel granted, “All playwrights should be angry in their twenties,” she indicated that in *Indecent*, she identified most closely with the young, polemical, idealistic, and love struck Asch, not his struggling middle aged or frustrated older incarnations (or with any of the women). “I still continue to be angry,”
she continued, “but I don't see myself as an angry person. I think that we've created a myth of feminism that involves anger versus involving love — a love to make things different for the next generation.” Expressing her joy over the Pulitzer winners she was taught, Vogel stated that she has “now been able to scream and jump up and down thanks to” their success. Rather than seeing playwriting as competitive, per the business model, Vogel concluded, “I want [other playwrights] to be brilliant so that I can try and catch up with them.” These are the words of a writer who, despite tweeting about Indecent, “This show is the best i got in me” (25 May 2017 @VogelPaula), still dreams of more and better work ahead.

After the Vineyard Theatre workshop on 22 May 2017 ended, I asked Vogel first if I could take a photographic “selfie” with the subject of my dissertation, a wish she quickly granted, and then, as the playwright made her way toward the front door, I asked a question about her long road to Broadway. Had she known, I wondered, about the more than forty years that would pass between her arrival at Cornell and her opening on Broadway, what might she have done? Vogel looked back over her shoulder and said, wryly, I thought, “I might have gone to law school.” Her broader acclaim, however late it may have come, and the ongoing accomplishments of the playwrights who have emerged from what I have termed the House of Paula Vogel make me and many others glad that she persevered. The House of Paula Vogel may yet expand into one or more new wings, and if it does, American theatre will grow with it.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Eden

Enter God.

God builds a mountain so large that God cannot move it.

God creates Adam and a can of gasoline.

Adam contemplates whether the gasoline is flammable, inflammable, or both.

The can of gasoline explodes, killing Adam but not God.

God utters God’s true name and creates Eve.

Eve looks at God but cannot see God.

Eve catches a glimpse of God and goes blind.

Eve takes colored pencils and paper and draws an apple.

We cannot see Adam eat the paper apple.

Adam puts on a pair of Calvin Klein tighty whities.

Eve develops menstrual cramps, and God tells Adam, “Get a job.”

A serpent appears and devours everything.
Appendix B: Le Petomane Does America

Kelly Ann Conway sits at her desk. On a screen behind her are projected the cartoon images of characters Beavis and Butthead. Beavis appears to be staring down at Kelly Ann.

Offstage, the director, who is not watching the performance, is sending tweets to his mistress. His fingers move quickly because he has very small hands. He tweets, “Feeling Shakespearean tonight. Will part you like the Red Sea when I see you. Sweet!”

A large puff of smoke appears, and from it emerges Le Petomane. He squirts a stream of water through his anus that blasts a hole into Kelly Ann’s pancake makeup. Beavis appears to giggle.

Kelly Ann: What the --?

Le Petomane: Quelle -- ? (He shakes his head back and forth) What? Wait. What am I saying? What language is this? Who are you, and why do you have a portrait that looks like a sketch at Moulin Rouge?

Kelly Ann: I am Kelly Ann Conway. I am communications director for the leader of the free world, and you just farted water in my face. What gives?

Le Petomane: I am the only and only Le Petomane. I have entertained princes and potentates the world over, and I have a “The” at the beginning of my name. I fart in your general direction.

Kelly Ann: That fart was not in my general direction. It was a direct hit.

Le Petomane: Obviously, figurative language and references to British films that will not be made during my lifetime are lost on you.

Kelly Ann: Speaking of lost, you’d better get lost, you filthy pervert. (Le Petomane does not move or give any response)
Kelly Ann: Say, where did you learn to do that?

Le Petomane: What are you talking about; I am Le Petomane. It means maniacal farter in French. I can put out a candle at six feet, and I have an entire symphony up my anus.

Kelly Ann: A symphony? You mean you can…

Le Petomane: Name a piece of music, any piece, and I will fart it for you.

Kelly Ann: You’ll do what?

Le Petomane: Allow me to demonstrate. Do you know where the Lone Ranger takes his garbage? (He begins farting the “William Tell Overture, singing as he does, “To the dump, to the dump, to the dump, dump, dump.”). Voila! I can do this all day.

Kelly Ann: You know, you might come in handy at a campaign event.

Le Petomane: What do you mean, “campaign?” I did not have to campaign to be Le Petomane. It is a gift from God.

Kelly Ann: (Opens her mouth to speak, but the image of Beavis flies off the wall and covers her face. She sputters and then screams, as Beavis molds to fit her and begins to turn beet red. Smoke begins to rise from her hair.)

(Le Petomane calmly walks over to Kelly Ann’s desk and creates a suction that empties a glass of water into his anus. He aims at Kelly Ann’s face and blasts a stream that encircles her until the smoke stops and Kelly Ann is no longer screaming. The image of Beavis falls off her face and flutters to the floor, where it rests crumpled.)

Le Petomane: You were saying I am a pervert. Well, this pervert just saved your life, lady.

Kelly Ann (gasping): I need a doctor. I must have third degree burns. But you did save my life. What can I ever do to thank you?
Le Petomane: Book me at Mar-a-Largo.

Kelly Ann: Mar-a---?

Le Petomane: Yes, I am tired of Moulin Rouge. Toulouse Latrec is the worst audience hog you ever saw in your life. I want to be the main attraction when the Saudi prince comes to town. I want to show the world what is really happening when an 85-year-old man walks around with raven black hair.

Kelly Ann (giggling in spite of herself): I can tell you about old men and funny hair. (Then, catching herself) Forget what I said. You cannot insult the prince. That is impossible.

Le Petomane: I come all this way and save your life, and you won’t even let me gunk up a little hair dye in some dude’s hair?

Kelly Ann: He’s not some dude. His family controls one-fifth of the world’s oil reserves.

Le Petomane (sulking): I still don’t see why I can’t have a little fun with him.

(Kelly Ann picks up her phone. She begins composing a tweet.)

Le Petomane: Don’t ignore me. Who are you tweeting? And how in le monde do I know what a tweet is since I will die in 1945?

Kelly Ann: What difference does it make? I’m calling up Comey for your FBI profile right…

Le Petomane: Aha! You fired the FBI director, and there is no new director in place yet. You’ll have to get my profile yourself. Anyway, by the time the FBI was founded, I had retired and become a baker. (He looks at Kelly Ann’s phone, which she has stopped using.) Would you like my croissant recipe?
Kelly Ann: Do I look like someone who has eaten in the last twenty years? Look, if I promise you a good gig at Mar-a-Largo, will you just go? Maybe you’d like to knock off Pope Francis’s miter? I’m telling you, he’s hell on the Secret Service.

Le Petomane: I cannot say because my Wikipedia page does not specify whether I am a good Catholic or a Protestant. Maybe I should take any chances when it comes to a world religious leader.

Kelly Ann: My boss has insulted him more than once, and it doesn’t seem to have hurt him any.

Le Petomane: I think I see your boss now.

(The director wanders onstage. Le Petomane farts “Hail to the Chief” until he leaves.)

Kelly Ann: Well, if you don’t want to insult the Pope, what would you like to do?

Le Petomane: To tell you the truth, I think I’d like to go home. You’ve given me an excellent idea for how to make our dancers’ pasties twirl.

Kelly Ann: You know I have no idea how to….

(A second large cloud of smoke appears. When it is gone, so is Le Petomane.)

Kelly Ann: Ow! My face really hurts. I’m going to need some aloe. (She stomps the crumpled sketch of Beavis.)

(The director enters and heads to Kelly Ann.)

Director: Am I imagining things, or did I just see--?

Kelly Ann: See what, Mr. President?

Director: I just saw some dude farting music through his ass. Even I can’t do that.

Director: Wait until I tell Vlad.

The End
Appendix C: When Lesbian Love Came to Broadway

“[It’s an] ugly story, hopelessly foreign to our Anglo-Saxon taste and understanding.”


In 1922, “one of the most terrible plays ever presented in New York,” as the Evening Telegram (Dec. 20, 1922) called it, shocked Broadway with its portrayal of a family that lives off prostitution, a father’s failed attempts at Jewish respectability and, most importantly, a riveting lesbian love scene. Prostitute plays were hardly new to American audiences; indeed, an entire genre of what was then called “brothel drama” dominated much of early 20th-century stages and was central to the formation of modern American theatre. Although plays about prostitution had been brought up on charges of obscenity before, Sholem Asch’s The God of Vengeance was the first play in thirty years to have its producer and lead actor arrested and found guilty of obscenity on the New York stage (though eventually they would win on appeal).

Asch’s drama, original titled Gott fun Nekoma in Yiddish, had played throughout Europe after its premiere in 1907 at Max Reinhardt’s Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Gott fun Nekoma had also played successfully in the United States for seventeen years in Yiddish. Even when translated into English by Isaac Goldberg in 1918, the play was still untouched by controversy when it ran at the Provincetown Theatre in the Village. Only when the English version moved to an uptown venue (the Apollo Theatre) did Asch’s creation encounter problems. Why, on the heels of Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize-winning success with his prostitute play, Anna Christie, in 1921, did Asch’s drama meet so much controversy? Why did a play that had been produced in Yiddish without major incident since its inception in 1907 stir such controversy when it hit the
Great White Way? One hundred years since the play’s creation, it is worth revisiting this threshold-breaking drama to consider its contribution to American theatre, popular culture, and sexual discourse.

While it is quite true that *The God of Vengeance*’s Yiddish and international origins spawned a xenophobic backlash, its English-speaking debut demonstrates the limits of portraying non-repentant prostitution, unconventional brothel interiors, and non-normative sexual desire, including most notoriously a lesbian love scene. It was this element that mobilized what could be called a sex-hysteria, and culminated in a high-profile obscenity trial in 1923. An examination of the trial transcript shows that there were repeated efforts by lawyers, policemen, judges, and art critics alike not only to define lesbianism, often without naming it, but also to label sensuality between women as alien and degenerate and thus deserving censorship from the stage.

**PERFORMANCE ONSTAGE**

Ironically, respectability is a key motif in *The God of Vengeance*, albeit with a twist. A Jewish brothel owner, Yekel, and his former-prostitute wife, Sarah, strive to raise their daughter without her being tarnished by the sex trade going on in the basement. A kind of Jewish Mrs. Warren, Yekel strives to promote his daughter, Rifkele, with the profits from his brothel. In order to facilitate a middle-class marriage (and thus gain respectability) for Rifkele, Yekel buys a Torah scroll for his home. However, her isolation and her father’s strict and abusive hand have produced the very curiosity that will be her eventual undoing. Rifkele befriends Manke, a prostitute living and working in the basement brothel. Manke eventually seduced her and the “fallen” daughter loses her currency on the marriage market.
While other scholars have addressed how *The God of Vengeance* sparked charges of anti-Semitism from the Jewish community, my interests lie elsewhere. In addition to the ways in which *The God of Vengeance* transgresses perceptions of normative Jewish identity, the play’s remarkable controversy can be further explained by looking at three additional points. First, unlike O’Neill’s Anna from *Anna Christie*, who repents and achieves respectability through marriage, the characters here are hopelessly trapped by commercialized vice from which they profit. Second, unlike other censored brothel plays, which almost without exception excised the brothel altogether, *The God of Vengeance* firmly resituated the brothel back into the heart of the drama – literally into the foundation of home. Third and most importantly, *The God of Vengeance* features a lesbian romance on stage. Given these mimetic transgressions, it is no wonder the The God of Vengeance [sic] was charged with obscenity.

What is astonishing about *The God of Vengeance* is its unique portrayal of lesbian love between Manke and Rifkele. **Contemporary critics and modern theatre historians alike agree that this scene is remarkable**, if not controversial. Indeed, what ranspired during the so-called seduction scene became hotly disputed during the trial. In Goldberg’s translation of Asch’s script, Rifkele sneaks downstairs into the brothel one night, and Manke offers to comb Rifkele’s hair “as if she were a bride.” Pursuing the marriage metaphor further, Manke makes a proposal:

> MANKE: Then we come close to one another, for we are bride and bridegroom, you and I. We embrace. *(Places her arm around Rifkele)* Ever so tightly. And kiss, very softly. Like this. *(Kisses Rifkele)* And we turn so red – we’re so bashful. It’s nice, Rifkele, isn’t it?

> RIFKELE: Yes, Manke … Yes.
MANKE: (Lowering her voice and whispering into Rifkele’s ear) And then we go to sleep together. Nobody sees, nobody hears. Only you and I. Like this. (Clasps Rifkele tightly to herself) Do you want to sleep with me tonight like this? Eh?

RIFKELE: (Looking about nervously) I do… I do… [original ellipses]

It is a stunningly sensual scene that’s unprecedented in brothel dramas, as well as most American drama of the day. In stark contrast to other brothel dramas, this well-written dialogue also demonstrates Asch’s naturalistic talents as a writer. Manke and Rifkele’s desire is not romanticized nor demonized, but it also does not go unchallenged. Yekel confronts Rifkele about her night with Manke, asking, “Are you still as pure as when you left this house? Are you still a virtuous Jewish daughter?” Rifkele can only reply, “I don’t know.” With this line, Rifkele may be articulating sexual innocence but it is more likely that she’s questioning whether her lesbian affair is impure. She also attacks Yekel’s hypocrisy in moralizing about sexuality: “It was all right for mamma, wasn’t it? And it was all right for you, wasn’t it? I know all about it!” While Asch is vague about what it is that Rifkele knows, it seems clear that efforts to protect Rifkele from sexual knowledge and desire have backfired. Asch subverts society’s sexual moralit, demonstrating that the illicit love between Rifkele and Manke is the only relationship that has integrity.

The site for both respectable and aberrant sex in The God of Vengeance is the basement brothel in Yekel’s home. Asch’s location of the brothel could not be more immediately threatening to the family. While other brothel plays featured limited excursions to a brothel, usually too [sic] far away sites to rescue white slaves, The God of Vengeance integrates the brothel into every scene and places it literally within the home. The brothel is the literal foundation upon which the family is built. Indeed, as Harley Erdman has observed (in Theatre
Survey, May 1999), “the play uncomfortably foregrounds the extent to which bourgeois respectability is maintained economically by a system of sexual exploitation, as well as the way that middle class propriety is balanced on a shaky foundation of repressed, shadowy desire.”

It’s no wonder, then, that a critic like Heywood Broun (in New York World, Dec. 21, 1922) was made “distinctly uncomfortable” and “a little sick” by The God of Vengeance. Many critics couldn’t bring themselves to write explicitly about the lesbian scene or other brothel commerce, using euphemisms such as Broun’s “the perversion of a young girl.” The news media latched on to the theme of the play’s “foreignness.” Both the prostitute and the Jewish immigrant were displaced persons in the American nation, while the play itself, notwithstanding its Yiddish origins, fell outside the parameters of traditional brothel dramaturgy. The Globe and Commercial Advertiser critic wrote (December 20, 1922), for instance, “this is alien stuff, and because it is alien, thoroughly offensive.”

**PERFORMANCE IN THE COURTROOM**

On May 23, 1923, Harry Weinberger, the producer of The God of Vengeance, and the twelve cast members were found guilty of giving immoral performances. The New York Times reported (May 24, 1923) that it was “the first conviction by a jury in a case of this kind and the second conviction in this city under section 1,180 of the penal law, the first being thirty years ago… against the producers of Sam T. Jack’s burlesque show Orange Blossoms.” Weinberger and lead actor Rudolf Schildkraut appealed to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, but lost. Charges were reversed on January 21, 1925, and a new trial ordered, and in April the assistant district attorney dropped all charges.

At the heart of the obscenity case was the controversial lesbian love scene between Rifkele and Manke. Scholars who have written about the portrayal of lesbianism in The God of
Vengeance (including Harley Erdman, John Houchin, Curt Kair, and myself) have drawn our analyses from the printed version of the play, translated into English by Isaac Goldberg in 1918. However, my recent examination of the promptbook from the 1923 production at the Apollo Theatre, which was entered as evidence in the obscenity trial leads me to draw new conclusions about the obscenity debates and particularly about the staging (and expurgation) or lesbian desire, a desire haunted by the specter of its “foreignness” invading midtown Manhattan.

The 1923 script reveals a stunning fact: the lesbian love scene was never performed. Moreover, careful consideration of the court transcripts reveals that the 1923 production, directed by lead actor Rudolf Schildkraut, omitted the supposed incendiary dialogue, as well as other, more overt, references to lesbian lovemaking. During the obscenity trial, Harry Weinberger (the producer of the show and the defense lawyer for all indicted) repeatedly denied that this dialogue took place. For example, in response to the District Attorney’s question, “Didn’t she say, ‘Come with me; we will sleep together every night?’” Weinberger replied, “They never said it at the Provincetown or the Greenwich Theatres or the Apollo, and what is more, you know it very well.” Was Weinberger telling the truth? Two pieces of evidence – his own testimony and the promptbook itself – suggest that he was. But if he was telling the truth, then why, in spite of the censored scene, did so many people – including the prosecuting attorney – believe that the controversial scene was in the play? And did the D.A. in fact “know very well” that the scene from the original play had been preemptively excised from the performance?

One possibility is that the printed text simply became confused with the 1923 production. What I think happened is that the 1918 Goldberg translation – the play with the lesbian love scene – supplanted the Apollo performance as the “authentic” artifact. Published plays are, after all, readily accessible – in the case at hand, the 19918 version was even sold in the lobby of the
Apollo Theatre – whereas performances, ephemeral in nature, resist documentation. What I want to argue is that this version was intentionally used by the District Attorney during the trial, even though he knew very well that it was not the version as performed. In doing so, the D.A. turned the trial into a kind of tribunal on the morality of lesbianism, which he sought to depict as a perversion.

According to trial transcripts, the District Attorney repeatedly read from the Goldberg translation while questioning witnesses. Weinberger argued that the 1918 play text did not faithfully represent the production and made repeated objections during the trial:

MR. WEINBERGER: We did not present the play as it is printed in that book. That book does not properly represent it.

THE COURT: Are you going to dispute the book?

MR. WEINBERGER: It is absolutely not correct.

THE COURT: In other words you say that the lines contained in that book are not the lines that were uttered and enunciated on the stage?

MR. WEINBERGER: That is our contention.

Although Weinberger’s objection was granted at this point in the trial, later on the D.A. returned to the printed play as the definitive record. While questioning the policeman who visited the theater, for instance, District Attorney Wallace kept reading lines from the 1918 script – including the lesbian love scene – and asked if the witness recalled the dialogue (which he often did not). When the witness didn’t recall the dialogue, Wallace read from the Goldberg script. Wallace’s method of “refreshing” the witness’s memory by reading from the Goldberg version was repeatedly objected to by Weinberger, who said: “I say that is leading the witness by describing something that is not correct, and apparently putting into this witness’s mouth certain
words.” Weinberger moved to have Manke and Rifkele’s dialogue – words he claimed they never spoke – stricken from the record; yet his objections were overruled. “The real point of my objection at this time,” Weinberger clarified in the trial, “is that I want to protect the record. I object to the book being read as not being the book of our play.” But Weinberger was repeatedly overruled. The D.A. kept reading from the wrong script, “refreshing” witnesses’ memories. It became the permanent record.

Equally fascinating in the trial is the judge’s perception that his court was being called upon, not only to determine whether the play breeched the obscenity code, but also to sort out the distinctions between normative and aberrant sexuality. In response to Weinberger’s repeated objections, the Court offered this explanation for using the Goldberg play text over the Apollo promptbook: “This might tend to show there was conduct between these two women and that this conduct indicated a desire on the part of one towards the other to do an act of moral perversion. If that is the purpose of the District Attorney, I am going to allow it.” The task at hand, the judge admonished Weinberger, was to establish what had occurred between these two women – “if it occurred between two men, it would be called homo sexualis and the same might be said of two women – that one is desirous of knowing the other immorally, unnaturally.”

Thus the Court was struggling to identify and name same-sex desire between women, a practice for which it even lacked a name. The newspapers merely hinted at what transpired on stage – “the terrible details need not be recorded here,” explained the Evening Telegram – leaving the production of sexual morality to the domain of jurisprudence, as Foucault has famously observed in The History of Sexuality.

If there’s a silver lining in this otherwise bleak episode, it lies in Weinberger’s steadfast refusal to be drawn into the D.A.’s rhetorical maneuvers, which were designed to
trap him into agreeing that lesbianism is “wrong” or a “perversion” or “degeneracy.” This can be seen in further questioning during the trial between the D.A. and Weinberger:

DISTRICT ATTORNEY WALLACE: Don’t you know that the scene between the two girls and the prostitute in the second act was wrong, it presents the show to the audience as a scene of degeneracy?

WEINBERGER: It certainly was not; that is in your own mind…. WALLACE: Don’t you know that the kisses and caresses by the prostitute towards this young female were such as to give that impression to any person of the wrong mind in the audience?

WEINBERGER: Not of the normal kind; the normal mind would see an older girl caressing the younger girl.

Even as Wallace seeks to pathologize lesbian desire – with language clearly borrowed from pseudo-sciences like sexology – Weinberger resists such a characterization. Clearly, such moves to paint lesbianism as degenerate or “wrong minded” were tied to the play’s Jewishness, as Alisa Solomon has noted in Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theatre and Gender. And while never explicitly articulated such anti-Semitism ran like an undercurrent below the trial’s homophobic deliberations. The fact that Weinberger refused to accept the terms of Wallace’s questions – and his ultimate victory in court on appeal – suggests that the entire performative frame of The God of Vengeance offered more transgressive possibilities than we may have previously believed.

An editorial in The New York American (March 26, 1923) lambasted the “senseless censors” as well as the despotic methods employed by the “misguided minorities” in charge of censorship. In a pamphlet called “The God of Vengeance: Is the Play Immoral? Is it a Great
Drama?”, several prominent New York authors and critics, such as Frank Crane of Current Opinion and Philip Moeler of the Theatre Guild, came out in support of the play. Charles Fleischer from The New York American wrote, for instance: “One would rather not look too far into the hearts of the censorious, for fear of finding rampant there the viciousness they condemn.” Publisher B. W. Heubsch of the Freeman added, “Public opinion is the only effective censorship. Through any other agency, censorship, in the long run, proves a boomerang.” Supporting quotes from notable playwrights Elmer Rice and Eugene O’Neill were also included in the program. And although this pamphlet was of course advancing its own kind of propaganda, it demonstrates that this play generated vital and necessary sex debates, as well as debates about what constituted obscenity.

A kind of performance itself, the obscenity trial for The God of Vengeance showcased how various discourses sought to regulate sexuality, but it also revealed ruptures in the regulatory ideal of sex. Although initially censored, the play with America’s first lesbian love scene won its day in Appellate Court, prevailing over the regulatory powers that sought to pathologize or eradicate its most notorious scene. The play’s staying power is evident in the fact that Donald Margulies came out with a new translation of the play in 2004 and the fact that, on the centennial of its first opening in 1907, The God of Vengeance is still great theatre.

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