

The Politics of Power, Gender, and Story

in Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite*

The English royal court in 1711. A Jewish theatre troupe in the years preceding the Holocaust. Three power-hungry noblewomen. An oppressed minority struggling to tell their uncensored story. These two worlds, at first glance, appear to be as far apart as two can be, a duo of unrelated tales based on true events. However, when one delves into their construct and ambitions, Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite* have far more similarities than differences. They come in the exploration of gender and sexuality, the illustration of unending power struggle, and the affect deep grief and loss has on one's mind. While *Indecent* may have been far more successful in its undertaking (a point that shall be discussed), the two stories are twins in their ultimate goal.

Both Vogel's play and Davis and McNamara's film are, first and foremost, intimate explorations of gender, sexuality, and how the two intertwine. As Ryan McPhee observes in "Paula Vogel Put Her Story as a Gay Jewish Woman Onstage in *Indecent*," the play was "born primarily out of [Vogel's] own personal sense of marginalization: marginalization as a gay woman with a Jewish legacy" (McPhee). While the play follows the inception and subsequent indecency trial of Shalom Asch's revolutionary *God of Vengeance*, tracking the play and its contemporaries from 1906 to 1952, the main draw is of Jewish female lesbian identity. Asch's play was the first to put a kiss between two women on the main theatrical circuit, and to do so in a way that empathizes with and humanizes queer women in a space that never did. It is a "compassionate understanding of the powerlessness of women in that time and place — Asch is a young married man, in a very early work, writing the most astonishing love story between two women," as Vogel herself has said (Weiner). As one can easily imagine, lesbianism was not an accepted identity in the early 20th century, especially not in America. Women already had so little power outside of the domestic sphere; add to that the love of another woman—accepted in the privacy of European homes; vilified in American, well, everything—and they could bid any form of normalcy, self-sovereignty, or socioeconomic improvement good-bye. Asch not only accepted the identity of a queer woman, but put it

on the stage as a viable character, illustrating the pain the queer identity was put through. As the actress Reina tells stage manager Lemml before she is fired for being unable to speak English, “This will be the only role in my lifetime where I could tell someone I love that I love her onstage” (Vogel 34). *Indecent* takes precisely the same stance, exploring feminine power and queer identity in an environment that normally would hold the opposite.

The Favourite aims to do much the same. Women, in the time of the 18th century, held no power unless they also held the favoritism of the monarch. Once that was accomplished, they wielded remarkable political and governmental sway. Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, was Queen Anne’s favorite for several decades. Her representation in Davis and McNamara’s film illustrates her power hold in a rather avant garde way: costumer Sandy Powell turned the idea of historical femininity on its head, dressing the real-life noblewoman in traditional male attire of the Stuart era: “I wanted her to be strong and in command, if not ‘masculine’ in the sense we usually see...The idea had been that as any emancipated woman might, she could incorporate menswear into her outfits and look great in it...” (Brooke). In contrast, Abigail, Baroness Masham (Sarah’s cousin and newfound competition), explores female duality in her delicate dresses and brute force hunger for power. As Tomris Laffly observes in his review of the film, while it would be “unwarranted to define ‘The Favourite’ [sic] as a timely feminist film,” there is “a certain timelessness in its old-fashioned frankness about a woman’s fight to get what she wants and demand what she deserves by any means necessary; brains, sexual appeal or usually, a combination of both” (Laffly). For Sarah and Abigail, their power struggle does, indeed, combine both mental and sexual prowess as the two become warring mistresses for Anne’s heart. Their queer identities are kept a secret from the remainder of the court: bisexuality is still contested in 2021, much less 1711. It is only in darkened corridors and behind closed doors that Anne’s sexuality is revealed and satiated; even if Sarah and Abigail are only engaging in sexual acts to gain an upper hand, there is still some exploratory part of them that is revealed.

Two related questions that are posed by both works of art are, “Do you dare to say this in public? Do you dare to show this in public?” (Vogel, via Weiner). It is answered in two vastly different ways.

Indecent embraces what is considered taboo, providing its audience with an uncensored, empathetic look at the power struggle provided by the combination of gender, sexuality, religion, and circumstance. The reason *God of Vengeance* was delivered an indecency verdict of “guilty” is made painfully clear in Vogel’s play: anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny. Nothing sexual happens onstage; it is merely the power of this Jewish troupe’s words, the humanizing effect of their unrepentantly Jewish female story, that frightens nationalistic America. Vogel’s Reina and Deine (and their characters, Rifkele and Manke) are unapologetically proud of their identity. They do not back down onstage, in court, or in real life; even in the Łódź ghetto, awaiting imminent death, they are still performing this piece. It is only Asch’s cowardice, caused by a brain ravaged by witnessing pogroms and the coming Holocaust, that causes the play to be destroyed. In *The Favourite*, on the other hand, the necessity of covert exploration is made apparent. Every grasp for power is underhanded; every facet of love happens behind locked doors. Queen Anne is “a ruler who treats her ladies-in-waiting like playthings out of a deep, insatiable desire for attention and affection” (Sims); she is desperate for an affection that never came for her, something that never would, as a queer woman of position in an unaccepting time. All three women are aware of the fragile position they hold. It is made clear to the audience that this secrecy is imperative for their survival, a humanizing effect in its own way.

There is one more thing that conjoins *Indecent* and *The Favourite*: mental strife caused by loss. It is most apparent in the latter. Queen Anne is a woman plagued by poor health, a mercurial temper, and unending suffering. Most of this comes from intense grief: she has lost 17 children, no heir surviving. As she herself says, in a rare moment of tender vulnerability, “Each one of them that dies, a bit of you goes with them” (Davis and McNamara 43). Anne has lost a piece of her soul, a piece of her identity, every time a child has died. As noted by Travis Bean for *Film Colossus*, the 17 rabbits Anne owns “didn’t just represent her 17 children—they also symbolized the life Anne had left in her” (Bean). And what *is* left? As one can easily imagine, not much. It’s no wonder she went somewhat mad. A similar situation occurs to Shalom Asch in Vogel’s play, though his response is less outwardly pervasive than Anne’s. He is a man who has borne witness to pogroms, who, after transferring his play to New York, went back to see

the beginnings of the horrors of the Holocaust. The guilt, the anger, the fear have so ravaged his brain that his entire personality has shifted. The psychoanalyst Dr. Hornig asks, “Is he often this...angry? Does he exhibit signs of paranoia?” to which Asch retorts, “Ask her if there’s anything in her charts that can map the disintegration of the Jewish psyche due to centuries of persecution?” (Vogel 46). He feels the loss weighing heavily upon his soul, and his guilt at feeling powerless drags him down so far that he won’t even defend his beloved play. When Madje, his wife, and Lemml, his best friend and manager, plead with him about the importance of such a play, he shouts back, “There are massacres right now all over Europe! And I’m supposed to care about a play I wrote when I was in short pants?...I can’t. I just can’t” (Vogel 57). The loss of his people and of his culture have blinded him to the importance of his story, leading to its annihilation and further anti-Semitism. *God of Vengeance* remained that way until its resurrection in the late 20th century, as the play later reveals.

Clearly, these two vastly different worlds have more similarities than can be seen at surface level. However, this writer would argue that Vogel’s *Indecent* far surpasses *The Favourite* in its success. Though both utilize unconventional means (Vogel uses time jumps and multi-character actors; director Yorgos Lanthimos takes stylistic chances with avant garde lenses) and aim to accomplish the same thing, Vogel’s audience is left far more satisfied and touched than Davis and McNamara’s. This is largely due to staging, I would venture. Lanthimos’s unnecessary fish-eye lenses (horribly distracting), nondescript sound barks (why the odd, startling organ?), and incorporation of modernity with antiquity (break-dancing at a ball?) obstructed the powerful message the script was trying to convey; on the other hand, *Indecent* director Rachel Taichman’s use of klezmer, costume, and scattered ashes (symbolizing the resurrection of a revolutionary phoenix) are both far more viable and far more enveloping. In short, they made sense. One could be fully swept into the world of *Indecent*, allowing the heart, the mind, and the soul to go with. *The Favourite*, with its jolting preference for style over substance, fails in that regard.

Vogel’s play succeeds, too, in its ending. As the playwright herself has observed, “‘There’s nothing more deadly to our ability to fight back and resist than being deadly serious and solemn’” (McPhee). Though *Indecent* tackles intense, topical issues, it never loses its sense of wit, cleverness,

family, and, most importantly, hope. Through all the horror, all the struggle, all the loss and grief and strife, Vogel's characters remain connected to the importance of the story they tell and their importance to each other. They smile, they laugh, they pray and hope. The play does not end with the cattle cars to Auschwitz. Instead, it ends with two girls kissing in the rain, proclaiming, "Er vet dikh keynmol mer nisht vey tin (He won't hurt you anymore)" (Vogel 77). It ends with love, and with hope. It is far more powerful than *The Favourite's* somewhat confusing ending: Abigail nearly kills one of Anne's rabbits, and Anne retaliates by forcing Abigail down to massage her legs while a filter of hopping bunnies overcomes them both. Supposedly, "...now that she's lost both Sarah and Abigail during her final years (in real life she would die just a few years later), her reaction is to go to a dark place and demean someone she once bonded with" (Bean), but it simply doesn't read as well as it should. Most would take Vogel's "love story in terrible times" (Weiner) any day. I would agree with them. Bittersweetness, hope, and a possible solution for future generations will always trump unnecessary, muddled sadness.

In short, though both Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite* strive to explore gender, sexuality, power, and mental health, the former is far more successful. One is left both with the feeling of having learned something very important and of the heart being torn to shreds and rebuilt again. It's no wonder audiences often left the Tony-nominated play with tears welling in their eyes. *The Favourite*, on the other hand, though powerful at times, often leaves audiences bewildered, ruining whatever touch the script may originally have had. Both works of performative art have promising plotlines, significant stories, and intense, necessary statements to make. It is both unfortunate that only the theatrical one delivered and fortunate that at least one of them did. Paula Vogel emerges triumphant in the exploration of gender, sexuality, illness, and their entwinement with power.

Works Cited

- McPhee, Ryan. "Paula Vogel Put Her Story as a Gay Jewish Woman Onstage in *Indecent*." *Playbill*, Playbill, 18 Apr. 2020, www.playbill.com/article/paula-vogel-put-her-story-as-a-gay-jewish-woman-onstage-in-indecent.
- Weiner, Miriam. "An Interview with the Playwright: Paula Vogel on INDECENT." *Vineyard Theatre*, The Vineyard Theatre, 26 May 2016, www.vineyardtheatre.org/interview-playwright-paula-vogel-indecent/.
- Vogel, Paula. *Indecent*. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2017.
- Brooke, Eliza. "The Strange, Beautiful, Gross Aesthetic of *The Favourite*." *Vox*, Vox, 21 Feb. 2019, www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/21/18233815/favourite-oscars-visual-costumes-makeup-cake.
- Laffly, Tomris. "*The Favourite* Movie Review & Film Summary (2018): Roger Ebert." *Roger Ebert*, RogerEbert.com, 20 Nov. 2018, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-favourite-2018.
- Sims, David. "'The Favourite' Is a Deliciously Nasty Satire of Royal-Court Intrigue." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 23 Nov. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/11/the-favourite-movie-review-yorgos-lanthimos-emma-stone-rachel-weisz-olivia-colman/576520/.
- Davis, Deborah and Tony McNamara. *The Favourite*. Searchlight Pictures, 2018.
- Bean, Travis. "Queen Anne and Her Rabbits: The Ending of *The Favourite* Explained." *Film Colossus*, Film Colossus, 12 Aug. 2019, filmcolossus.com/the-favourite-explained/.