“The Play Belongs to the People”

“The play belongs to the people who labor in it, and the audience that put aside the time to be there in person.” So says Michael Mendelson’s Lemml in conversation with Joshua J. Weinstein’s Sholem Asch. It was an amazing opening for Director Josh Hecht and everyone involved with the production of Paula Vogel’s *Indecent*. But sitting in the audience, both during previews week and during opening night, I couldn’t help but think about this line. *Who does a play belong to?* There is something in this author’s core that wants to take Sholem Asch’s side in this argument: it’s your text, so it’s your play. You can change it as you wish. But, it’s important to note the argument Lemml and Sholem engage in doesn’t seem to be about who owns the *text*, but who owns the *play*.

When I started working with Artist’s Rep and working on these “Fresh Eyes” pieces, I wouldn’t have stopped to think about the distinction between those two nouns. For a nascent playgoer like myself, the text was the play. But having the fortune to attend pitch meetings, choreography rehearsals, tech week, run-throughs, previews, etc. etc. has altered this specific point of view. Lemml is right: the *play*, that confluence of dramaturgs, designers and directors; choreographers and costumers; and actors who bring their own ideas and ideals, belongs to those people. The text is a jumping-off point; a specific datum from which all measurements and methodologies can emerge.

Lemml, played with such vivid range by Mendelson (an actor I’ve long admired as an Artist’s Rep playgoer), has given his life to this play. Literally. He’s spent most of his adult life as stage manager for *The God of Vengeance*, in all of its myriad stagings and translations (see my first post for more musings on how Vogel’s play really encounters the concept of translation in a startlingly fresh way). He tells Asch, his accented English: “your play, it changed my life.” And for everyone who has read or seen a piece of art that influenced them so, they can understand that sentiment. But, beyond even the notion of sentiment, there’s something more. The change isn’t just about art, or the symbol of true, untarnished love in the unaltered Yiddish version of *The God of Vengeance*. The change is the entire course of Lemml’s life.

When I first saw the run-through of this production, I thought, perhaps, this would be a play about how art couples people together: in love, in friendships, and in suffering. I’m thinking, perhaps, of Miriam Schwartz and Jamie M. Rea’s Chana and Halina, respectively, running off-stage in the penultimate scene, escaping the “impossibly long line.” It’s a scene that connects two images: the first, marching towards an illuminated pile of shoes stuck at the vanishing point of our view of the set, which evokes a number of important connections to the holocaust. For me, I can only think of the United States Holocaust Museum’s picture of a discarded shoes belonging to victims of *Flossenbürg*. The second, perhaps much more “meta” than the first, is that this moment of escape, this freedom from the fires of fascism, is an image we’re told is only in the “mind’s-eye” for Lemml. Mendelson says, with a tenor we can feel in our seats: “please don’t let this be the ending.”

We know, of course, that for so many in the Łódź ghetto in 1943 Poland, this was the end. But we also know that Lemml has been changed by Sholem Asch’s play. His whole life, as he has told us. He’s managed every version, in every translation, of this play. He’s calmed actors in the throws of stage-fright and swept the dust from hundreds of creaky floorboards. He’s called actors to the stage,
and sent those same actors on their 10-minute breaks, exhausted from a long day of rehearsal. This one man, this tailor from Balut, has spent his life in the service not of plays, not even of actors and playwrights, producers and financiers, but in the service of the collective imagination created by the confluence of all of those people. It's this experience that's allowed his "mind's eye" to set free the most perfect symbol of love he's ever encountered, even against the impossibility of history. As Mendelson's Lemml says to Schwartz's Virginia:

“Maybe how your Rifkele feels for Manke is a sin in your church. In this play, how you feel for her and she for you—to me—After the Messiah comes. No hate. No beating. No sin.”

Who does the play belong to? To the players that labor in it. To the audiences that take their time and their money and patron it.

What can a play do? Well, if you ask Lemml, it can change your life. Maybe it can even change the world.