

**ROARING  
TWENTIES SCANDAL:**

**Yiddish  
Lesbian Play  
Rocks Broadway**

by Kaier Curtin

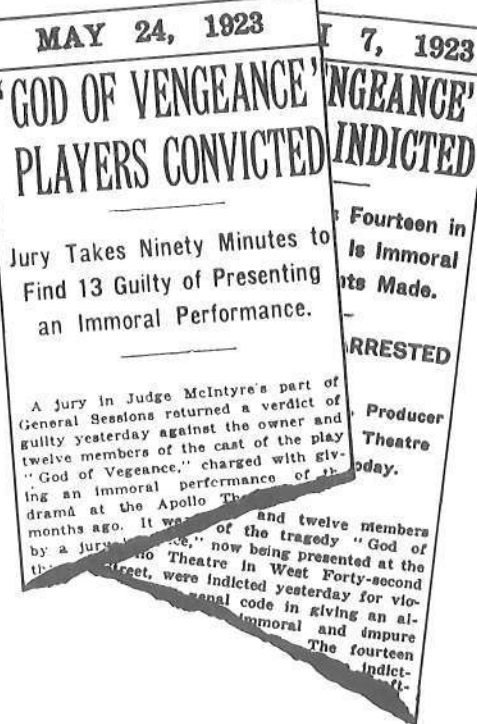
**T**he first lesbian character seen on the New York stage was introduced by a playwright far removed from the English-speaking world.

Sholom Asch – whose novels in translation from the Yiddish eventually won him international popularity among both Jewish and non-Jewish readers – was only 21 when he wrote *Gott fun Nekoma* – “The God of Vengeance” in 1907.

The play was seen for 17 years in productions at New York’s Yiddish theatres and throughout Germany, as well as in Russia, Austria, Poland, Holland, Norway, Sweden, and Italy. It ran into trouble only after it was translated into English and moved from the Provincetown Theater in Greenwich Village to the Apollo Theater on Broadway in 1922.

“The God of Vengeance” is set in a Jewish house of prostitution in a provincial town in Poland. The proprietor naively believes he can raise a teenage daughter untouched by the sensuality of the brothel he operates in the cellar of his home, only one floor below the family’s living quarters.

To insure that his closely protected daughter marries a respectable, middle-class scholar (instead of following



in the footsteps of her mother, an ex-prostitute), the father buys a Torah scroll for his home. He expects the Pentateuch to protect the girl and placate the vengeful God of the Old Testament.

Once the problem has been presented early in the first act, the outcome is predictable. The surprise comes in the person of a young prostitute who sneaks upstairs to visit the

daughter. Instead of being lured below by a male patron or male procurer, the young girl becomes involved in her own home with the prostitute – a possibility that never occurred to her overprotective father. As the curtain descends on Act One, the two young women, locked in an embrace, passionately kiss.

In Act Two, Rivkele, the daughter, sneaks out of her bedroom while her parents sleep to join Manke, the prostitute, for a frolic outside in the warm May rain. Barefoot and dripping wet, Rivkele and Manke come into the basement bagnio, wrapped together in a wet shawl.

Manke proceeds to seduce the young girl in a frank and sensual scene of lesbian lovemaking, the like of which has never been repeated in a Broadway play. As they snuggle closely on the sofa, Manke fondles Rivkele’s breast and washes her face in the girl’s loose hair.

The proprietor’s daughter runs off with Manke to spend the night with her in the house another prostitute shares with a procurer. As Act Two comes to a close, the enraged father discovers too late that his daughter has escaped from the bedroom in which he had locked her.

In the final act, the procurer returns

