

An Open Letter
from
SHOLEM ASCH



Author of "THE GOD OF VENGEANCE"

BECAUSE of the wrong interpretation of my play, "The God of Vengeance," now running at the Apollo Theatre, I wish to make the following statement:

I wrote this play when I was twenty-one years of age. I was not concerned whether I wrote a moral or immoral play. What I wanted to write was an artistic play and a true one. In the seventeen years it has been before the public, this is the first time I have had to defend it.

When the play was first produced, the critics in Germany, Russia, and other countries said that it was too artistically moral. They said that for a man like "Yekel Shepshovitch," keeper of a brothel, to idealize his daughter, to accept no compromise with her respectability, and for girls like Basha and Raizel, *filles de jois*, to dream about their dead mother, their home, and to revel in the spring rain, was unnatural. About two years ago I was approached by New York producers for permission to present the play in English. I refused, since I did not believe the American public was either sufficiently interested or adequately instructed to accept "The God of Vengeance."

I don't know whether I can explain the real feeling I wanted to put into this play. It is difficult for an author to comment on his own work.

As to the scenes between Manke and Rifkele, on every European stage, especially the Russian, they were the most poetic of all, and the critics of those countries appreciated this poetic view. This love between the two girls is not only an erotic one. It is unconscious mother love of which they are deprived. The action portrays the love of the woman-mother, who is Manke, for the woman-child, who is Rifkele, rather than the sensuous, inverted love of one woman for another. In this particular scene, I also wanted to bring out the innocent, longing for sin, and the sinful, dreaming of purity. Manke, overweighed with sin, loves the clean soul of Rifkele, and Rifkele, the innocent young girl, longs to stay near the door of such a woman as Manke, and listen within.

As to the comment that the play is a reflection on the Jewish race, I want to say that I resent the statement that "The God of Vengeance" is a play against the Jews. No Jew until now has considered it harmful to the Jew. It is included in the repertoire of every Jewish stage in the world and has been presented more frequently than any other play. "The God of Vengeance" is not a typically "Jewish play." A "Jewish play" is a play where Jews are specially characterized for the benefit of the Gentiles. I am not such a "Jewish" writer. I write, and incidentally my types are Jewish for of all peoples they are the ones I know best. "The God of Vengeance" is not a *milieu* play — it is a play with an idea. Call "Yekel" John, and instead of the Holy Scroll place in his hand the crucifix, and the play will be then as much Christian as it is now Jewish. The fact that it has been played in countries where there are few Jews — Italy for instance — and that there, the Gentiles understood it for what it is, proves that it is not local in character, but universal. The most marked Jewish reaction in the play is the longing of "Yekel Shepshovitch" for a cleaner and purer life. This is characteristically Jewish. I don't believe a man of any other race placed in "Yekel's" position would have acted as he did in the tragedy that has befallen his daughter.

Jews do not need to clear themselves before anyone. They are as good and as bad as any race. I see no reason why a Jewish writer should not bring out the bad or good traits. I think that the apologetic writer, who tries to place Jews in a false, even though white light, does them more harm than good in the eyes of the Gentiles. I have written so many Jewish characters who are good and noble, that I can not now, when writing of a "bad" one, make an exception and say that he is a Gentile.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sholem Asch".