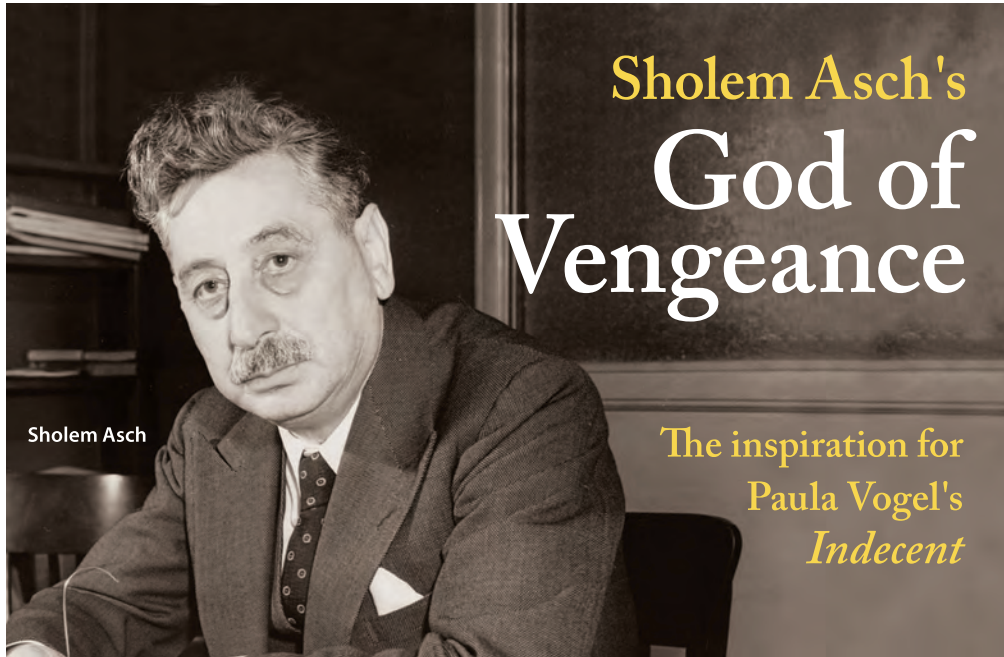




by Sheryl Flatow

On December 20, 1922, *The New York Times* ran a review of the first English-language production in America of Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance*, the play that, almost a century later, would inspire Paula Vogel's *Indecent*. *Got fun nekome*, as it's known in its original Yiddish, received its world premiere in Berlin in 1907 in a German-language production starring Rudolph Schildkraut, and quickly became an international hit. That same year, a Russian-language production was performed in Moscow and St. Petersburg and the play was also seen in New York in Yiddish. Over the next few years there were performances in French, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, and several other languages, and numerous Yiddish-language productions worldwide.

Critics everywhere recognized the importance of the play, which examines religious hypocrisy, guilt, and the limited options of women, and provides a sympathetic and compassionate depiction of same-sex love. It was also controversial:

not just because of the lesbian relationship but because it portrayed ignoble Jewish characters, which stoked fears among many in the Jewish community that the play would serve to fuel anti-Semitism. *Got fun nekome* tells the story of an Orthodox Jew named Yekel who runs a brothel in the basement of his home. He believes that if he can find a righteous husband for his innocent daughter, Rifkele, and has a Torah scroll created as a gift to the couple, he can earn respect and make amends with God. Yekel is unaware that Rifkele has fallen in love with Manke, one of his prostitutes.

When *God of Vengeance* opened at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, there was every reason to believe that the play would once again be a critical and popular success. The production was directed by Schildkraut, who was also making his English-language debut as Yekel, and included two actors who would have

long and illustrious careers: newcomer Morris Carnovsky, who, years later, would be one of the founders of the Group Theatre, and Sam Jaffe, perhaps best remembered for his portrayal of the title role in the film *Gunga Din* and the High Lama in *Lost Horizon*.

Although the *Times* gave the play a scathing review, *God of Vengeance* made its way to Broadway on February 19, 1923. Weeks later came the firestorm, when the cast was indicted for indecency. What follows is a timeline of the journey of the production in New York, from the theatre to the courtroom through the trial and its aftermath. A little over a week before the cast was indicted, a battle concerning censorship of books and movies was being played out in Albany. In the *Times'* coverage of that upcoming clash, it reminded readers of a plan for "voluntary censorship" in theatre that was hatched a year earlier. The story of the "play jury" is included here as well, as it widens the lens on attitudes about censorship and morality at this particular moment in time.

**December 20, 1922:** *God of Vengeance* opens at the Provincetown Playhouse. The review in the *Times* says that the play "has been widely played on the Continent of Europe and was produced here at the

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Provincetown Playhouse

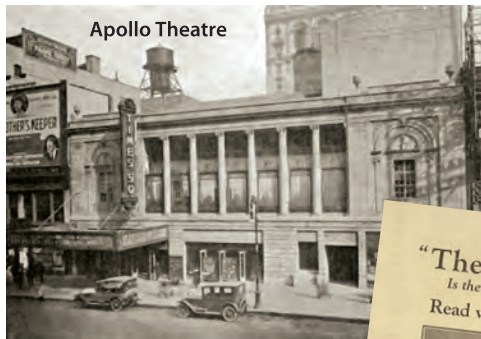


## God of Vengeance (Cont. from page 1)

Jewish Art Theatre . . . but it is not likely to achieve popularity in English unless Greenwich Village should develop an appetite for the seamy side of life beyond anything it has as yet displayed."

**February 2, 1923:** *God of Vengeance* moves a few blocks away to the Greenwich Village Theatre, where it remains for two weeks.

**February 19, 1923:** *God of Vengeance* moves to Broadway's Apollo Theatre, with significant and imprudent cuts made to the script in an apparent effort to clean up a bit of the "seamy" elements of the play for an uptown audience. In so doing, the love story between Manke and Rifkele becomes distorted.



(Right) Playbill from the Apollo Theatre, featuring Rudolph Schildkraut as Yekel

**February 26, 1923:** In an article about brewing legal action to censor literature and movies, the *Times* reminds its readers of the "play jury" formed a year earlier in response to numerous groups calling for censoring various plays. Actors, playwrights, and publishers entered into an agreement "to furnish a voluntary censorship in the form of a play jury system," with the jury drawn from the general public. Rather than prohibiting a play from opening, the jury would investigate complaints and decide whether the show could stay open. No play had yet been brought before the jury, but there were those who now wanted *God of Vengeance* to go on trial. The head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, a state censorship body, resisted, but not because he approved of the play. He felt it was not "the kind of a play the New York public will support," and as he believed it would not

run, he decided not to put it before the play jury.

**March 6, 1923:** Producer Harry Weinberger and the 12-member cast of *God of Vengeance* are indicted for "violating the penal code in giving an alleged indecent, immoral and impure theatrical performance," the *Times* reports the next day. They learn of the indictment from a detective between the second and third acts, and are told to appear in court the following day. The performance continues uninterrupted and no one is arrested. Weinberger, who is also a lawyer and will represent himself and the cast in court, tells the *Times* he believes this to be an unprecedented act and is willing "to make a test case of it, if necessary, in his fight against censorship." According to the newspaper, the indictment is the result of numerous complaints alleging that the play is anti-Semitic. Among those who filed a complaint was Rabbi Joseph Silverman of Temple Emanu-El, who said that the play "libels the Jewish religion."

**March 9, 1923:** When *The New York Times* refuses to run ads for *God of Vengeance* following the indictment, Weinberger writes to the paper, "It seems to me hardly fair or becoming for *The New York Times* to act as censor and pass judgment on a play before a final decision of a jury has been reached." The ban remains. He also invites Adolph Ochs, publisher of the paper, to attend a performance. Ochs

goes, agrees with the charges, and believes the show should be closed. The paper's hostility toward the play is ever-present in its coverage.

**March or April, 1923:** Weinberger solicits support from prominent writers, religious leaders, academics, and members of the public and issues a pamphlet defending *God of Vengeance*. Eugene O'Neill calls censorship "the last cowardly resort of the boob and the bigot." Constantin Stanislavsky writes that the play was

"presented throughout Russia during the days of the Czar and there was no protest against it."

Asch, who has remained silent throughout the ordeal, writes an open letter in which he finally speaks up on behalf of his play. "In the seventeen years it has been before the public, this is the first time I have had to defend it." Although the major outcry against the play, reflected in the indictment, is its so-called anti-Semitism, Asch also addresses the relationship between Rifkele and Manke. "The love between the two girls is not only an erotic one. It is the unconscious mother love of which they are deprived . . . I also wanted to bring out the innocent, longing for sin, and the sinful, dreaming of purity."

As to the charges of anti-Semitism, he says, "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." He rejects the label of "Jewish" writer, saying, "I write, and incidentally my types are Jewish for of all peoples they are the ones I know best." He goes on to say that the play has been seen in countries where there are few Jews, and the fact that it has been embraced everywhere makes *God of Vengeance* "universal."

**April 14, 1923:** *God of Vengeance* closes on Broadway after 133 performances.

**April 16, 1923:** *God of Vengeance* reopens in the Bronx, at the Prospect Theatre.



**April 22, 1923:** Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the renowned founder of The Free Synagogue in New York City, gives a sermon denouncing censorship of all kinds of artistic endeavors including the attack



(Continued on page 3)

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise

## **God of Vengeance** (Cont. from page 2)

on *God of Vengeance*, which he calls “one of the most deeply moral plays I have seen.”

**May 23, 1923:** A jury deliberates for 90 minutes and finds Harry Weinberger and the cast of *God of Vengeance* guilty for “giving an immoral performance.” The *Times* says that the verdict is “the first conviction by a jury in a case of this kind.” The defendants are released on bail and face up to three years in jail and a fine of \$500.

In reading the instructions of Judge John McIntyre to the jury, it appears, with the distance of time, that he was urging a guilty verdict. He told the jury to ignore the play’s reception in Europe because the moral standards and viewpoints in New York were different. He also pointed out a law prohibiting participation of any kind in an “impure, immoral or obscene play which would tend to corrupt the morals of youth or others.” He added, “The people of the State of New York are anxious to have pure drama. They are anxious to have clean plays. They are opposed to immoral and indecent productions. Decency should be upheld, and anybody who disregards decency and who portrays obscenity may be regarded by you as guilty.”

**May 25, 1923:** The *New York Times* publishes an editorial with the heading “Better Than Censorship.” The paper calls the verdict “a timely reminder that existing laws furnish adequate protection for public morals.” In essence, although they clearly didn’t see it that way, they were advocating for censorship by jury, rather than by a “censorship commission.” The editorial also reveals that “several respectable amateurs of the theatre” had been prepared to testify in defense of the play, and says approvingly that the Court determined they were just “so many irrelevancies” and did not allow them to speak. The *Times* refers to this as “due process of law, not haphazard judgments under a censorship.” The editorial concludes, “It is a wholesome thing for all to know, that there is a Penal Code to which painters and writers and playwrights and actors and theatrical managers must pay due regard.”

**May 28, 1923:** Harry Weinberger and Rudolph Schildkraut are each fined \$200 “for giving an immoral performance.” The rest of the cast receive suspended sentences and are released. Judge McIntyre explains that he chose to be lenient because the conviction was unprecedented, but warns the defendants

that if they should ever again participate in an “immoral” play, they would be sentenced to jail.

Following sentencing, Weinberger says he will file an appeal. He subsequently issues a statement addressing the verdict, which begins, “Jewish religious bigotry entrenched in power is responsible for the indictment in the case.” He goes on to say, “This case is of national importance. It is the first of its kind, and questions of vast importance about the law involved will have to be determined, if serious plays are to be presented in New York and elsewhere. If the regular Broadway managers do not realize it at this particular moment, they will in the near future . . . When [they] find conviction follows indictment and their theatre licenses revoked they may regret their rushing into print about this conviction to show how ‘moral’ they and their plays are.”

**June 13, 1924:** In response to a letter from Weinberger seeking financial assistance for his appeal, Roger Baldwin, founder and executive director of the ACLU, writes, “Of course, this is a free-speech fight and we’d be very glad indeed to give it whatever incidental aid we can.” But he makes no commitment to helping with the costs.



Roger Baldwin

### **October 1, 1924:**

Baldwin sends a letter to Weinberger explaining why the ACLU will not provide support. “We do not believe that the right of the public to censor plays on the grounds of morality can be questioned. It has been accepted for several centuries.”

**October 26, 1923:** The *Times* reports that the play jury (see February 26), which had been allowed to lapse without ever bringing a play to trial, was about to be resurrected for the purpose of adjudicating four Broadway plays currently “showing to crowded houses.” The move was made at the urging of the secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice – and following consultation with Actors’ Equity Association – who was unhappy with the handling of *God of Vengeance*. He felt that going through the court system took too long, explaining that *God of Vengeance* “ran six months after indictments were found” [including its run in the Bronx] and that

the defendants got off too lightly. The four plays targeted were not revealed “on the ground that to tell them would give undue advertising where it was not deserved.”

**October 31, 1923:** A notice of appeal is filed with the court to request review of the *God of Vengeance* verdict. In addition to trying to “vindicate the play and all those connected with it,” Weinberger says that he is also seeking “to have defined for all time the right of freedom of the drama.”

**December 7, 1923:** The *Times* runs an article with a heading that reads “Eliminate Parts of Indecent Plays,” and a subheading that says “Alarmed by Threats of Prison Terms, Producers Start a Reform Movement.” According to the piece, two unnamed plays had cut “objectionable features” following complaints. One producer also “promised to expurgate anything else considered objectionable by the proper authorities and expressed a willingness to abandon the entire play if that were deemed necessary.”

**January 21, 1924:** The conviction against Harry Weinberger and the cast of *God of Vengeance* is reversed, and a new trial is ordered.

**January 23 1924:** The *Times* runs an editorial in which it explains the decision for a retrial. Judge McIntyre did not allow the text of the play into evidence, claiming that it could have been altered after the immorality charge. But the Court of Appeals judge ruled that McIntyre should have tried to authenticate the text before dismissing it out of hand. The editorial then makes the case against the state having an official censor and against a court trial, but doesn’t dismiss censorship outright. The editorial favors the idea of a play jury in theory, but concedes that it “proved impracticable.” In the end, it says, “such cases are best left to the jury of public opinion.” It concludes that if *God of Vengeance* had been allowed to run, it likely “would have been neglected for saying an undisputed thing in a way peculiarly revolting.”

**September 25, 1924:** Following is the opening paragraph of an article in the *Times*. “The dialogue in *What Price Glory* was partly expurgated last night after Commissioner of Licenses William F. Quigley had appealed to the army, the navy, the Department of Justice, the Police Commissioner and the Corporation Counsel to assist him in suppressing profanity and nudity in Broadway shows.

(Continued on page 4)

## God of Vengeance (Cont. from page 3)

Conflicting statements were made as to whether or not the chorus in *Earl Carroll's Vanities* made additions to their costumes." The producer of *What Price Glory*, Arthur Hopkins, had received word that an arrest was to be made after the second act and the show would be used as a "test case." So, he said, some words were dropped from the script, and he would seek "legal advice before I restore them." Close to three dozen "special service men" were on call outside the theatre ready to make arrests, but the script changes kept them at bay. The secretary of the Society for Suppression of Vice actually wrote a letter to Quigley admonishing him for calling in the military.

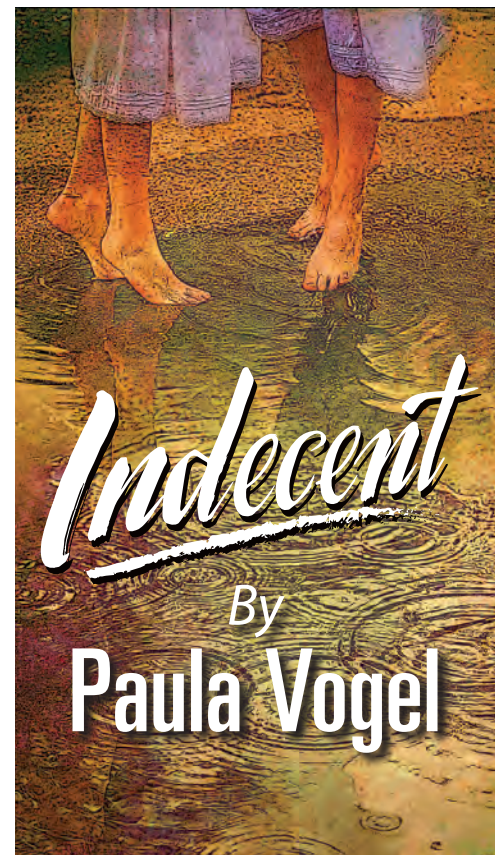
**February 25, 1925:** The *Times* reports that the play jury will be functioning again in the next few days, and that complaints against 12 shows will be submitted for review. The first jury will be chosen by the police commissioner from 130 names approved by the district attorney. The names of jurors will not be released publicly, and the titles of the shows under investigation will be confidential – not even those associated with these works will know. If the jury finds a play guilty of immorality, the script will have to be modified or the play will be closed. The article says that Actors' Equity "has written in all contracts a clause that it will abide by

the action of the jury." It is speculated that the first play to be put forth before the jury will be Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*.

**March 4, 1925:** The *Times* prints an editorial approving of the procedure above. By January, 1927, one play had been condemned, two had been modified, and four others were "passed on but not condemned."

**April 3, 1926:** The indictments against Harry Weinberger and the cast of *God of Vengeance* are dropped; there will be no retrial. The assistant district attorney says that a new trial would likely be lengthy, and "I do not believe that the interests of justice require that the defendants be retried at this time." How and why the State reached that conclusion is not explained in the *Times*, which devotes just four paragraphs to the news on Sunday, April 4. The article is barely noticeable on page 25 of a 210-page edition, in which the largest space is given over to an ad for Gimbel's department store.

**February 4, 1927:** The play jury is disbanded because, for many reasons, it didn't work. District Attorney Joab Banton, who oversaw the system, announces that although "he hates censorship almost as much as immorality," he would now criminally prosecute those involved in "indecent" plays.



**LIVE ON STAGE**  
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## New / New Year Plays The Dramaworkshop Festival

**JAN 4 - JAN 6, 2019**

**The new year is a time of new beginnings.**

Palm Beach Dramaworks will usher in 2019 with the introduction of a program that gives the general public a first look at plays so new, they're still evolving. The Dramaworkshop's first-ever New Year/

New Plays Festival will take place over the weekend of January 4-6, when five plays will receive readings on PBD's mainstage. Saturday's program will also include a discussion, "Regional Theatre and the Development of New American Plays," featuring panelists of industry professionals from major organizations.

The New Year/New Plays Festival provides playwrights with the opportunity to hear their words performed in front of a live audience, which is instrumental to the development and growth of a play. And audiences not only have a chance to feel the excitement of seeing something brand new, but to offer invaluable feedback to the playwrights.

The plays are *The Captives* by Barbara Blumenthal-Ehrlich, *Drift* by William Francis Hoffman, *With* by Carter W. Lewis, *Ordinary Americans* by Joseph McDonough, and *Red, White, Black and Blue* by Michael McKeever. With the exception of *Ordinary Americans*,

the plays were chosen from among some 300 received by The Dramaworkshop, managed by Bruce Linser, during the 2018 submission period. *Ordinary Americans* was commissioned by PBD for a future mainstage production.

"I am very excited about the Festival and I hope audiences will share my enthusiasm for this invaluable event," says PBD Producing Artistic Director William Hayes.

"From the time this company was founded, one of my goals was for PBD to be an incubator of new plays and a producer of



Bruce Linser



William Hayes

(Continued on page 5)

## New Plays Festival (Cont. from page 4)

world premieres. I knew that could only happen after we were well-established and thriving, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, in the fall of 2014, we launched The Dramaworkshop. We made the call for submissions, and the response from playwrights around the country was inspiring. The number of submissions has grown every year, underscoring the need for The Dramaworkshop and the New Year/New Plays Festival. Simply put, new work is vital to the future of theatre. The economics of Broadway discourage Broadway producers from championing plays that have not previously been done elsewhere, which makes it imperative for regional theatres to identify, encourage, nurture, and bring to life exciting new plays. And I've found that audiences are hungry for the sense of discovery that this Festival will provide. They could be seeing the next *Indecent* or *Fences*, two plays that PBD is performing this season that were developed at regional theatres."

### The Plays:

#### ***Red, White, Black and Blue* by Michael McKeever**

A national tragedy sets the stage as Lenora Waters finds herself about to become the first black female president of the United States amid cut-throat opposition and demons from her family's past. Part political thriller, part jet-black satire, *Red, White, Black and Blue* examines the upside-down world of American politics and one woman's struggle to secure her place at the top, without losing her humanity.

#### ***Drift* by William Francis Hoffman**

A crumbling family history. An orphaned piano prodigy left to wander the streets alone. His older brothers at violent ends over competing tales about their father's tragic death. Set in 1957 Chicago, in the lofted annex of a forgotten church and on the steel girders of a skyscraper under construction, *Drift* offers a concussive and heart-wrenching glimpse of a family trying desperately to uncover who they are.

#### ***With* by Carter W. Lewis**

Minnie and Clifford devolve into a world of hilarious, but ultimately heartbreaking, minutiae as they navigate a blizzard, a dead son, a rat in the kitchen, and a half-decorated Christmas tree, hoping to find the last strains of dignity in their final days together. *With* delves into the contempt and comfort of two lives devoted to each other and entwined forever.

#### ***The Captives***

##### **by Barbara Blumenthal-Ehrlich**

A gripping and darkly comic story of a death-row inmate and the closeted artist who's painting his last meal. But he wants a stay of execution – not a final meal – setting in motion a social media frenzy and a series of life-altering events for the painter, the prison warden, and the man about to die. *The Captives* rattles the cages we find ourselves in and unflinchingly asks who or what is holding us there.

#### ***Ordinary Americans***

##### **by Joseph McDonough**

In the early 1950s, Gertrude Berg and Philip Loeb, the pioneering stars of television's groundbreaking sitcom, *The Goldbergs*,

heroically struggle to save their show, their careers, and their friendship in the face of McCarthyism, anti-Semitism, and the political climate of the country. Based on actual events, *Ordinary Americans* reveals the double-edged sword between speaking out and staying silent.

### The Schedule:

#### **Friday, January 4\***

3pm - *Red, White, Black and Blue*  
by Michael McKeever

5pm - Dinner break

7pm - *Drift* by William Francis Hoffman

#### **Saturday, January 5\***

1pm - Panel Discussion: "Regional Theatre and the Development of New American Plays" \*\*

3pm - *With* by Carter W. Lewis

5pm - Dinner break

7pm - *The Captives*  
by Barbara Blumenthal-Ehrlich

#### **Sunday, January 6**

12:30pm - Lunch with the artists at  
Leila Restaurant \*\*\*

3pm - *Ordinary Americans*  
by Joseph McDonough

6pm - Champagne Toast \*\*

#### **Pricing**

**\$50** – All three days

**\$15** – Per play

**\*\$25** – All day

\*\*The panel discussion and champagne toast are free with a ticket to any play

\*\*\*\$25 – Lunch at Leila

**For more information, visit [palmbeachdramaworks.org/dramaworkshop](http://palmbeachdramaworks.org/dramaworkshop),  
or contact the box office at (561) 514-4042.**

# Introducing Studio 2 Where young professionals come to play 1

This new initiative provides young professionals who love theatre with the opportunity to see a play and meet others who share their passion. Studio 201 offers reduced-price tickets and a pre-performance cocktail hour beginning at 6pm. Studio 201 takes place on the following Wednesday evenings:

**October 17:**

***Indecent***

**December 5:**

***House on Fire***

**January 30:**

***The Spitfire Grill***

**March 27:**

***Fences***

**May 15:**

***The House of Blue Leaves***

**For more information, visit [palmbeachdramaworks.org](http://palmbeachdramaworks.org)**



# The Legacy Project

"Stories are a communal currency of humanity."

– Tahir Shah, *Arabian Nights*

The Legacy Project, a compelling and powerful intergenerational digital storytelling initiative, gives life to those words. In this new program, a collaboration between PBD and Compass Community Center, LGBTQ elders share their personal histories with participants in the Compass Youth Program, who preserve their reminiscences on video using multimedia. The Legacy Project will be unveiled at PBD on October 30 at 7pm, free to the public; reservations are requested.



"We're so excited to be teaming with Compass on this invaluable project," says Gary Cadwallader, director of education and community engagement. "Theatre is storytelling, so our partnership is a natural. We believe it's very important that the journey of older LGBTQ – their challenges, their fights for equality, their struggles, and their triumphs – should not be forgotten. We've got young LGBTQ interviewing older LGBTQ, and it's fascinating that most of these teenagers were unaware of what their elders went through. On the one hand that's great, because it's indicative of the progress that's been made over these past few decades. But it's also distressing, because it's vital for each generation to understand the journeys that have gotten us to where we are at this moment in time. And this project is doing just that."

After each one-on-one interview is completed, the young videographers will create individual digital stories enhanced by photographs, music, and voiceover. They will introduce their videos at the event on October 30.



Gary Cadwallader

Compass, located in Lake Worth, is the largest LGBTQ community center in the Southeast United States and one of the largest and most respected of its kind in the nation. Its mission is to diminish stereotypes by challenging long-standing misconceptions about the character of the LGBTQ community through education, advocacy, providing health services, and being a focal point for community organizing. Its youth program (for ages 12-18) has provided a safe space for more than 25 years, enabling participants to engage in social support, community service, arts and cultural activities, and leadership opportunities.

For more information about The Legacy Project event, contact Gary Cadwallader at (561) 514-4042, x123 or email [gcadwallader@palmbeachdramaworks.org](mailto:gcadwallader@palmbeachdramaworks.org).

Reservations can be made by visiting the Box Office or calling (561) 514-4042, x2.

*Theatre To Think About*



**Palm Beach Dramaworks**  
201 Clematis Street  
West Palm Beach, FL 33401  
561.514.4042

Palm Beach Dramaworks is located at the  
**Don & Ann Brown Theatre**  
on the corner of Clematis Street and Narcissus Avenue,  
one block west of Flagler Drive.