

JEWISH THEATRICAL RESOURCES:

A guide for theaters
producing Jewish work

The cast of Theater J's 2022 production of Nathan the Wise adapted
by Michael Bloom. Photo by Ryan Maxwell courtesy of Theater J.



A project of the Alliance for Jewish Theater

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I am a playwright who writes **unapologetically Jewish plays**. I have had some wonderful experiences at theater companies that produced my work — experiences where I felt supported as a Jewish artist both by the institution and by individual staff and team members. Unfortunately, I have found that these experiences are the exceptions, not the rule. Theaters often mismanage every step of the process: from marketing, to casting, to dramaturgical support.

When I joined the Alliance for Jewish Theater, I found I wasn't alone. Many other Jewish artists reported having similar experiences. They shared stories of **antisemitism going unchecked in rehearsal rooms, of being asked to speak on behalf of a fictional monolithic Jewish identity, of shows with Jewish content being canceled in the wake of October 7th**. Hearing their experiences compelled me to write this document.

Compiling this guide has been a uniquely complicated project because, as the saying goes, **“where there are two Jews, there are three opinions.”** Each of the contributors to this document had different feelings about how to authentically and effectively produce a Jewish play. This guide is therefore not comprehensive, nor does it authoritatively state what is the “best way” to produce a Jewish play. Rather, the guide addresses questions that keep coming up in Jewish artists' work and details how institutions and individuals may help meet their needs.

Though much of this guide details best practices when producing Jewish work, many of the topics and suggestions in this guide can apply to all types of culturally specific work.

It is important to state that **this guide is only for plays with Jewish content**, not for plays dealing with Israel and the Middle East. There could and should be a whole separate guidebook for that work. Israel and American Jewish identity are separate issues, and they should be kept so.

We know there is a lot of information in this guide. AJT is here to help! We can connect you with artists, suggest Jewish organizations with which to collaborate, and help guide you on your way. Feel free to reach out to us at admin@alljewishtheatre.org should you have questions or need assistance.

Lastly, this guide is meant to be a **“living document.”** If you spot any errors or omissions, please reach out.

As I began assembling the guide, I found that many common themes and issues emerged amongst the various theatrical disciplines. Every single focus group discussed the following topics:

JEWIS ARE NOT A MONOLITH¹

One of the beautiful aspects of Judaism is that it is category-defying. It is an ethnicity and a religion and a culture; different Jews identify with different elements within that experience. This defining trait means that Jews are not a monolith. Everyone has their own traditions, rituals, experiences, and identities within Judaism, and those personal practices may even contradict each other.

Here is a brief breakdown of some of the various identities within Judaism:

Religious identities:

American Judaism has multiple different strains. The most progressive of the mainstream strains are the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, which perform intermarriages, do not insist on Kosher laws, and have incorporated gender-egalitarian or gender-neutral language into their liturgy, as well as non-traditional music and increased use of English in services. They differ in their approach to tradition, with Reconstructionists generally incorporating a wider range of practices into their spirituality than Reform Jews.

The Conservative movement views Jewish law as binding but evolving. Though their services are gender-egalitarian, they are also more traditional and incorporate more Hebrew. Conservative Jews are far more likely to keep strictly Kosher than Reform or Reconstructionist Jews.

Modern Orthodox Jews attempt to blend strict observance of Jewish laws and values with the modern world, while the most observant sects, such as Hasidim and Lubavitchers, remain largely apart from 21st-century life and adhere to strictures similar to those observed by Jews in turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe.

Ethnic identities:

Jews are traditionally divided—based on where their ancestors ended up after the Diaspora from the land of Israel in the year 70 CE—into various ethnic identities, including: Ashkenazi (Eastern European), Sephardic (Iberian Peninsula), and Mizrahi (Middle East and North Africa). But there have been historic Jewish communities all over the world, from Ethiopia to China.

There is sometimes an assumption that Jews are white, but such an assumption is inaccurate. Not only are many Jews non-white – because they identify as Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, etc. – but this false narrative does not take conversion to Judaism or interracial inter-religious parentage into account.

To learn more, check out organizations like [Be'chol Lashon](#) and [Jews in All Hues](#), which are dedicated to celebrating and advocating for racial and ethnic diversity within Jewish identity and culture. Initiatives such as [The Workshop](#) and Theater J's [Expanding the Canon](#) specifically center the artistic work of JOCISM (Jews of Color, Jewish-Indigenous, Sephardi, and Mizrahi).

¹This section was co-written by Ali Viterbi and Gabrielle Hoyt



Conversion:

Though Judaism is not a proselytizing religion, all mainstream Jewish communities accept converts. Traditionally, a convert must ask and be refused three times before being allowed to begin the conversion process, which involves a course of study, and culminates in a ritual cleansing bath (a mikveh).

Because of Judaism's blurring of the lines between ethnicity and religion, the question of Jewish identity is a largely irresolvable one.

A succinct and elegant answer to this question of identity can be found in the writings of novelist Amos Oz, who once wrote, "Who is a Jew? Everyone who is mad enough to call [themselves] a Jew is a Jew."

IMPORTANT DATES

It's important to be mindful of Jewish dates and holidays, not just in planning the rehearsal and production schedule, but in planning any events you program in your season. To that end, there is a Jewish calendar included at the end of this document.

JEWISH REPRESENTATION

For a show with Jewish content, it is important that there are many Jewish voices and perspectives in the rehearsal room. This representation includes the cast, but it should also go beyond the cast, to the team behind the table. Doing so allows for a level of appreciation, safety, and knowledge within the room. It also creates a robust opportunity for learning and discussion, and helps your team avoid falling into stereotype and misrepresentation.

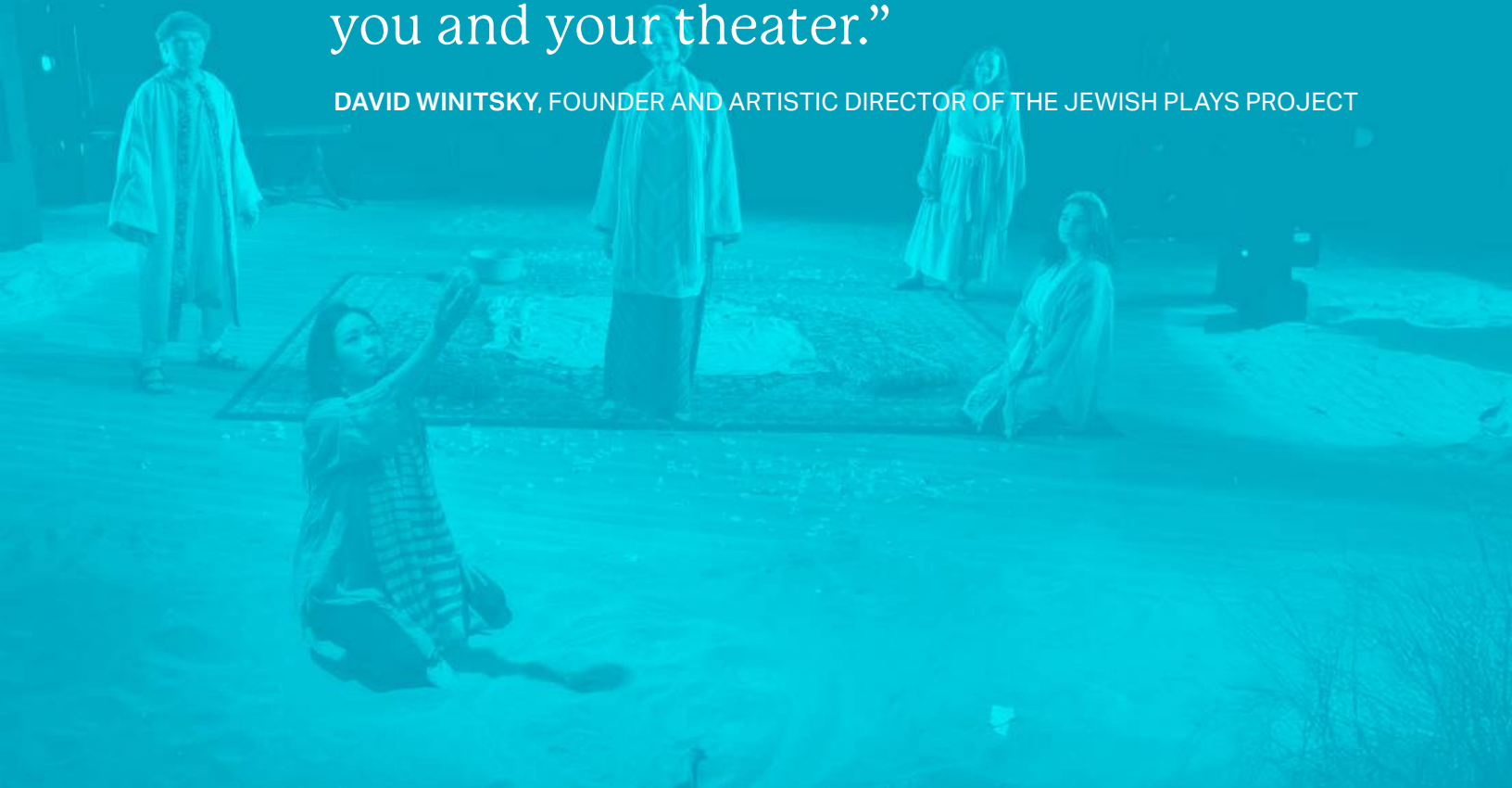
Our hope is that this document helps theater professionals at every stage of the creative process—from artistic directors to stage managers—create and produce authentic, diverse Jewish work. We hope it teaches you how to best serve your Jewish audiences and artists. We hope it encourages you to produce Jewish work that goes beyond narratives of Jewish trauma to stories depicting Jewish joy. We hope above all that this guide empowers you to program and produce unapologetically Jewish work.

—Ali Viterbi



“Programming Jewish work isn’t simple, but it offers significant opportunities for Artistic Directors to connect with a committed demographic, to build bridges across the communities they serve, and often, to be a beacon for an inclusive and connected theater culture. The keys to success are: communicate with your Jewish stakeholders early and often; be honest about the resources you have (and the ones you don’t); and be clear and bold about why Jewish work is important to you and your theater.”

DAVID WINITSKY, FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE JEWISH PLAYS PROJECT



HOW TO PROGRAM FOR A JEWISH AUDIENCE

The first step is to listen to the needs and hungers of the Jewish members of your community and audience. Only by sitting and listening can you understand what they would like to see onstage.

Connect with Jewish community leaders, including clergy, professionals, political leaders and culture mavens, and get their input at early stages of the choices. You don't need to do this outreach in grand public ways, but your efforts will be greatly appreciated, and serve you both when you are successful and when there are challenges.

Then, if you feel you're capable of producing the play and it is selected for your season:

Continue community dialogue

Be sure to continue that dialogue with members of the community, both inside and outside of the rehearsal room. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you need clarity.

Strategize audience engagement

Identify who your ideal audience is, who you want to reach with this play, and strategize ways to get that audience to come to the theater.

Investigate Your Resources

Before you choose to program a play, think about how you could execute it authentically. Does your community have a sufficient number of Jewish artists? Alternatively, do you have a budget for bringing people in from out of town? If not, really consider whether this play is the right fit for your theater.

Also, if you have a large Jewish audience, do not program major events such as opening nights on major Jewish holidays or Friday nights.

THE JEWISH AUDIENCE

Because the Jewish people are a diaspora culture, we have always been deeply invested in cultural dialogue. There is therefore a long history of Jewish support of and love for the theater, and many theaters find that Jews represent a large demographic portion of their audience.

So, if Jews already attend and support all theater (not just theater with Jewish content), why should you program Jewish plays?

#1: Respect your stakeholders

Jewish theatergoers are often major stakeholders in theater companies. Several non-Jewish artistic directors noted that Jews were the first to support their companies. It is therefore important to continue cultivating and building those relationships through programming vital, new Jewish work. Even as you try to expand your audience, you should not push away those that have supported your company from its early stages.

#2: Non-Jews love Jewish work too

Jewish plays aren't just for Jewish audiences! Artistic directors of Jewish theaters have found that a large portion of their audience and donor base are non-Jews. Many find Jewish stories meaningful and universal.

#3: Broaden your Jewish audience

Particularly in an era of increasing antisemitism, Jewish representation is more important to theatergoers than ever. Artistic directors have found that many new Jewish audience members, most of whom had never been to those theaters before, attended their plays with Jewish content.

But remember, there is not just one Jewish audience, but many Jewish audiences. Jews are not a monolith. It is therefore important to create a sense of welcome to many different identities within the Jewish community (religious and non-religious, older and younger, white and non-white, etc) in order to broaden and strengthen your Jewish audience.



HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

When you program Jewish work, you'll need to communicate about it to your full audience—not just your Jewish audience. Marketing Jewish work requires nuance and care. But to zoom out beyond marketing to your theater's overall communication strategy, here are some general principles to abide by:

Specificity

When communicating a play's themes to your audience, be as specific as possible. In the specific lies the universal. Share why you chose to program the play and why it is important. Share why this Jewish story feels particularly relevant right now. Perhaps share the Jewish resources or advisors you consulted in choosing it.

Spin is the enemy

Euphemism and spin can often be what gets you into trouble when marketing a Jewish play. Again, it's important to be as specific as possible, rather than try to spin the themes of the play in an attempt to appeal to certain portions of your audience.

For example, don't be afraid to call the play Jewish. If it's a play about antisemitism, for instance, don't just market it as a "family play." Family drama is often a euphemism for Jewish trauma in theater. Similarly, don't call something uplifting and funny if it's not uplifting and funny—these are words commonly associated with Jewish theater.

Conversations beyond the work

It is important to create conversations before, around, and after the work, so that there can be robust dialogue. Part of doing this successfully is understanding who your target audiences are, and then creating different strategies of communicating for those different groups (i.e. Jewish audiences familiar with the content vs. non-Jewish audiences who may be unfamiliar).

HOW TO ASSEMBLE THE RIGHT TEAM

Once you have selected a play with Jewish content for your season, it's important to assemble the right team to lead that production.

There should be as many Jewish voices and perspectives in the rehearsal room as possible. This representation includes the cast, but it should also go beyond the cast, to the team behind the table. This is important both to achieve a sense of authenticity in the production and to avoid falling into common stereotypes and pitfalls.

This doesn't necessarily mean that every single artist on a production needs to identify as Jewish, but if there are non-Jewish artists involved, be sure they collaborate with and defer to the Jewish artists on matters of Jewish content.

A Jewish dramaturg or cultural consultant can also be a valuable artist in the room.

When specifically programming new work, one always wants to begin your process with a conversation with the playwright. Ask them what their goals and desires are, and then you can build out the team from there. If you are not able to fulfill all of their production goals vis-à-vis representation, be upfront about that too, and see what solutions you can generate together.

If the playwright is Jewish, ask them how important it is to them that the team be all or primarily Jewish. If the playwright is not Jewish, but the content is (prominent examples include *The Lehman Trilogy*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or *The Merchant of Venice*) consider working with a Jewish director, and starting with their instincts. In any case, take care to think through the cultural competency of the team you build.

HOW TO CREATE STRONG COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Theater companies, particularly non-Jewish producers, should be aware of the Jewish resources in their community.

Reach out to local Jewish organizations, which could be great resources and conversation partners for any questions or issues that might arise throughout the process. These partnerships can be vital both from a cultural competency perspective and for addressing safety concerns. Many local chapters of the Jewish Federation have assisted theater companies in developing a security plan around shows with Jewish content. For example, one chapter advised a theater not to use haze in their production for safety purposes.

Some artistic directors have also found it valuable to connect with Jewish organizations on a more personal level. Some have served on the boards of local Jewish community organizations and have found that serving in that role has enhanced their work and helped build their Jewish audience. Other artistic directors have formed meaningful, lasting partnerships with Jewish institutions such as Jewish museums in their area. By partnering with a Jewish cultural organization, you can better understand the needs of the community, in addition to reaping the financial and marketing benefits of such partnerships.

HOW TO DO THIS WORK AT INSTITUTIONS WITH SMALLER BUDGETS

No matter the size of an organization, it is important to have a conversation upfront with the artists about how you can achieve their vision together. At theater companies with smaller budgets, being overly communicative is especially important as it can help better manage expectations of what is possible and help everyone understand what to prioritize. Be honest with your artists about the budget of your production so they can understand upfront what the limitations are. If all parties still agree to move forward, then you can figure

out how to achieve everyone's goals knowing the limited resources. For example, you can discuss whether it's more important to hire a cultural consultant or a dialect coach, whether it is more important to bring in Jewish artists from out of town or have a more minimalistic set. If everyone involved knows the constraints, you can troubleshoot solutions together.

Know too that there are many foundations, trusts, and granting organizations who are eager and willing to support work with Jewish content, either through volunteer opportunities or financial support. Do your research on what resources are available to you in your community.

HOW TO SUPPORT JEWISH ARTISTS

The most important way you can support Jewish artists in moments of increasing antisemitism is to be brave and program Jewish plays anyway.

Even when you have done this, remember that these are charged times, and it is kind to remember that your Jewish artists are on the front line. When you program Jewish work, your artists might be expected not just to create great art, but to be responsible for an entire community. You can support them with resources and tools, but also with the personal encouragement to remain bold and adventurous and to stay true to their vision as artists.

If you encounter concern or negative reactions from members of your team who are not Jewish, strive to create careful, safe, and private places to have discussions between staff and artists. Everyone needs to be on the same page to make great work.

Beyond this particular moment, there are other ways to support and uplift Jewish artists, even if you're not producing their work. You can advocate for emerging artists that explore Jewish content in a meaningful way by mentoring them, helping them find work in the field, introducing their work to other theaters, or simply taking the time to meet with them for coffee or a short phone call.

“We always strive to cast inclusively and with accurate representation. We ask 'is this the right person to tell this story?' Just as we strive to see Jewish actors playing Jewish roles, when Jewish stories are being told, Jewish casting directors should be part of that casting process.”

DARYL EISENBERG, CSA. CASTING DIRECTOR AND OWNER OF EISENBERG CASTING



JEWIS PLAYING JEWS

Jewish characters should be played by Jewish actors.

Since you cannot and should not ask an actor if they are Jewish, how can you respectfully determine if an actor is Jewish?

Breakdown language:

We believe it is best practice to describe the character's attributes, not the actors we are looking for. For example, the character is a 25-year-old German Jew; not: we are looking for 18-40 to play a 25-year-old German Jew.

Please note that Judaism is both an ethnicity and a religion, which means Jews can have all different levels of observance and can be all races and nationalities. Not all Jews are Ashkenazi (from Eastern Europe) and not all Jews are white-presenting.

To that end, here is a thoughtful phrase you can put in your casting notice that may help: "We strive to include actors who identify as Jewish and of all diverse backgrounds, as inclusive global representation is of paramount importance to us."

Slate:

You could also put one of the following questions in your slate: How do you identify with this role? Or what does being Jewish mean to you?

Audition material:

The ability to speak Hebrew is not the only or best way to determine Jewish identity. Not every Jew would be comfortable reciting a Hebrew prayer in their sides, but that doesn't make them any less Jewish or right for the role.

ACCESS NEEDS

In the same way that we give space to name access needs for accessibility issues during the casting process, there should be a place to name Jewish observances (i.e. observing the Sabbath, keeping Kosher/dietary restrictions, levels of Jewish modesty).

IMPORTANT DATES

It's important to be mindful of Jewish dates and holidays, both in setting the rehearsal/performance schedule and in the audition process. This is particularly true for processes with a majority Jewish cast and for shows with Jewish content. Even if there is only small Jewish representation in the cast, and it's not a Jewish-themed production, there should be accommodations so that Jewish-identifying actors do not need to sacrifice their observance. Note that Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover are particularly important and commonly observed holidays.

REPRESENTATION BEYOND THE CAST

There should be Jewish representation beyond the cast (i.e. stage manager, company manager—someone who interfaces with actors and is involved in a daily capacity with the theater). This is important so that Jewish actors have someone to talk to if, for example, there is antisemitism in the room or a Kosher meal is forgotten.

A FINAL THOUGHT

We strive for accurate representation, but not limiting representation. Strive is the key word. When there's lack of representation in the community, sometimes it is those pieces that the community needs to see most. In those cases where there is lack of representation in the community, if it is a new work, always consult the playwright.

“In our marketing, we aim to represent Jewish stories with authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and respect. Our goal is to engage both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences while ensuring accurate and meaningful depictions of Jewish life. We believe that marketing plays a crucial role in preserving the artistic and cultural integrity of the work.”

MATTHEW GRABER, FOUNDER OF UNITY VERTEX



ASK A JEW

Find a Jewish-identifying consultant (or multiple) to consult on your marketing. This will help ensure accurate and respectful depictions in your materials and prevent your team from using stereotyped images or offensive phrases.

Don't simply count on the one Jewish staff member in your organization to consult because a) they likely will not know everything about Judaism or the Jewish content in the play, and b) that is not what they were hired for. So hire (and compensate) a Jewish marketing consultant.

It's important to remember that the Jewish community is diverse, with different backgrounds, practices, and beliefs. Consulting multiple voices within the community ensures a richer and more representative portrayal.

COLLABORATION WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

Often a playwright and marketing director can have conflicting opinions as to how to best market the work. It is important, however, to always consult the playwright on visual representations of their work to ensure cultural sensitivity. That does not mean that a playwright should get final approval, but input and review from the playwright should be mandatory.

Balancing marketing needs and cultural integrity can be a fine line. By consulting the playwright while maintaining the freedom to market effectively, you strike the right balance between creative marketing and cultural respect.

VISUAL REPRESENTATION

In designing art for marketing plays with Jewish content, a guiding principle is for the campaign to be inclusive enough to attract both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Marketing is, of course, reductive—turning a complex story into just an image and blurb—but being reductive shouldn't mean falling into over-simplification or stereotype. Here are some practical do's and don'ts for creating marketing imagery for plays with Jewish content:

Do's and Don'ts:

Do: Use visuals that reflect the diversity and vibrancy of Jewish life today. Explore modern symbols or imagery that show the contemporary relevance of Jewish stories. Audiences want to see themselves reflected in ways that feel accurate and relatable.

Don't: Don't resort to stereotypes, lazy symbolism, and over-simplification in marketing. For example: avoid Stars of David, Seder plates, and Menorahs—stereotypical Jewish items—in your marketing, unless your approach understands what the symbol means to those in the community and how it should be represented. Also, avoid Hebrew-style fonts in your imagery.

Do: Uplift and add nuance to the way Jewish work is marketed. It's not all life or death. There's a lot of subtlety in Jewish storytelling that should be reflected in the marketing.

Don't: Don't equate Jewish content with nostalgia. Even if a story takes place in the past, avoid the "sepia-fication" of Jewish content. Judaism is not a museum piece; it is a vibrant, modern, living culture and should be presented as such.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Effective community engagement must involve creating authentic relationships—rather than extractive ones—with the communities you hope to serve. That means building a marketing approach to communities that goes beyond just ticket sales and focuses instead on long-term symbiotic connections. For example, don't ask a community to send out an email with a discount code without first asking what your organization can do for them.

Building genuine relationships with the Jewish community means engaging beyond the scope of a single production. Foster a lasting connection by creating ongoing opportunities for participation, beyond just plays with explicitly Jewish content.

Audience engagement

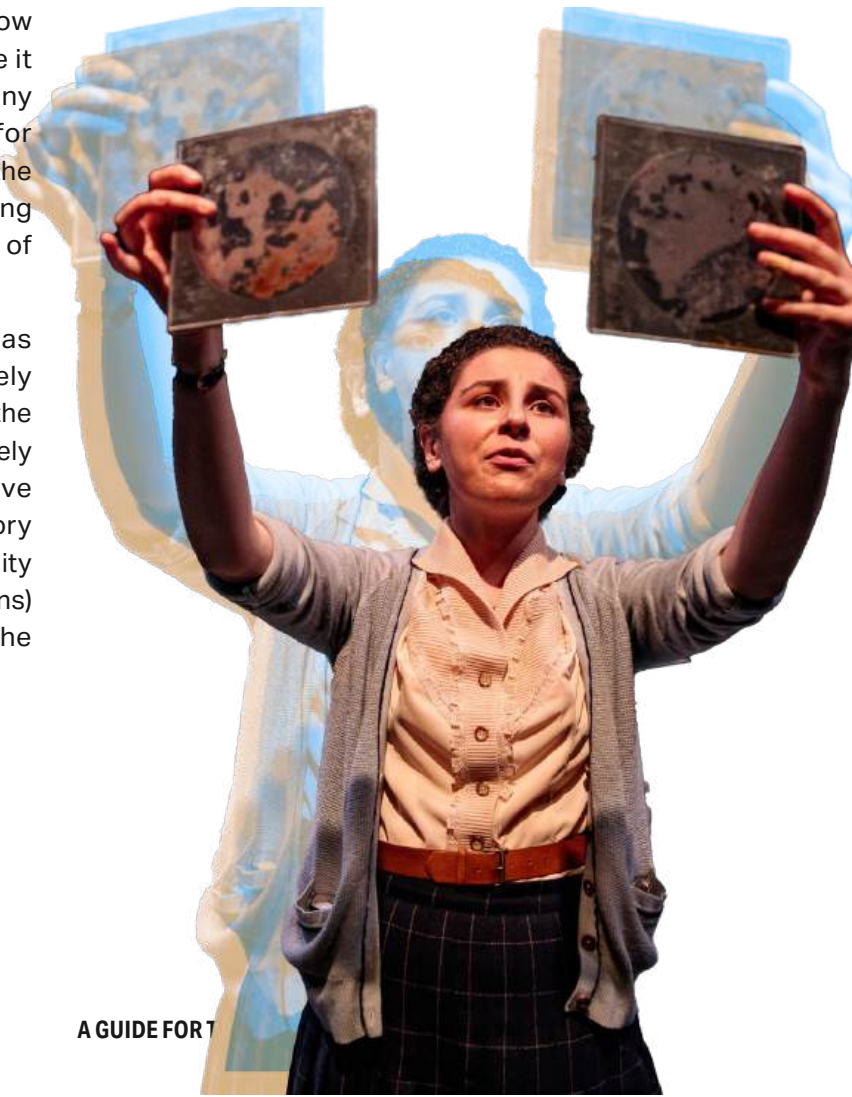
You should find a way to document anything the production does to prepare for the authentic presentation of Jewish culture. For example, if a Rabbi comes in to teach the cast how to lay Tefillin, you should film it and share it with the audience. The same is true for any dramaturgical material that is created for the show. Audiences love being a part of the creative process, and it can also help bring them into the culturally specific aspects of the show.

Audience engagement should also be as participatory as possible. Think creatively about ways the audience can interact with the art more actively than simply sitting passively in the theater and watching it. Interactive audience engagement such as participatory activities, sensory experiences, or community involvement (e.g., food, music, or discussions) helps deepen the connection between the audience and the material.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Content warnings for plays with Jewish content should be used thoughtfully, especially around sensitive topics like Holocaust references, violence against Jewish bodies and/or artifacts, and the use of antisemitic imagery.

Providing content warnings is essential, not only to avoid triggering an audience, but also as a form of marketing. Content warnings can be used to draw audiences in, so don't be afraid of them.



“Over the past several decades, fundraising work has evolved to be a process of matching donor values and priorities with the mission and activities of nonprofit organizations. This requires more thoughtful and specific relationship-building between donors and development staff. Development professionals have an obligation to grow their cultural awareness to ensure proper engagement of any donor. However, because Jews have such a long history of involvement in and support for theater, it is especially important for development professionals to reject assumptions and stereotypes and ensure that Jewish donors are being cultivated and stewarded as individuals and not as members of a Jewish monolith.”

SARA BOGOMOLNY, DEVELOPMENT MANAGER AT NORTHWESTERN HILLEL

THE PITCH

Development professions are often the first line of relationship that a donor or audience member has with a theater. It is therefore important, particularly when soliciting Jewish donors, to be sensitive to the particularities of Jewish identity and culture when making the pitch for why certain donors should give to your theater.

BREAKING DOWN ASSUMPTIONS

Discussing money and Jews can be sensitive territory. There is often an assumption that there is a lot of philanthropic capacity within the Jewish community. And while Jewish philanthropy in the arts has a long, well-documented history, it's important to let go of these assumptions, particularly when working on plays with Jewish content. Why? Because...

#1: Jews are not a monolith

Not all Jews choose to put their philanthropic efforts towards Jewish work. For example, some Jewish donors prefer to give to Shakespearean theaters, as opposed to specifically Jewish theaters. Many Jews, of course, support Jewish art, but do not assume that your Jewish donors will give more to your season just because a Jewish play is programmed.

Moreover, for those Jewish donors who tend to give to Jewish work, they may not like or resonate with the work that is being presented. Not every Jew will see themselves in the Jewish story being told.

There's a certain tokenism that can happen in theater, in which one Jew is often called upon to give their approval on Jewish programming or content. Some Jewish donors, for example, might be fine with hosting a gala on Rosh Hashanah, while others will take great offense to the scheduling. As they say, "two Jews, three

opinions." It is therefore important to note that just because one Jewish person is okay with a specific production choice or play selection, that doesn't mean that they have offered the definitive "Jewish" perspective. If you wish to program a play and are unsure whether your donors or community will show up, seek out multiple Jewish voices, particularly from the most deeply invested donors.

#2: Non-Jews support Jewish art too

Similarly and conversely, development professionals for Jewish theaters and festivals have found that while there is a predominantly Jewish support base for theaters dedicated to producing exclusively Jewish work, there are many non-Jewish donors who wish to support Jewish art because they feel it is an important perspective to uplift.

All that being said, there are many Jewish philanthropists and audience members who are interested in supporting and seeing their story being told onstage, and we hope this guide encourages you to program Jewish work and approach Jewish donors in respectful and sensitive ways.

IMPORTANT DATES

It's important to be mindful of Jewish dates and holidays, not just in planning the rehearsal and production schedule, but in planning donor events. For example, do not plan your big gala on Yom Kippur, as you risk isolating many Jewish donors. Keep traditions and observances in mind as you set your schedule for the season.

Similarly, as you steward Jewish donors, be aware that holiday wishes may feel more personal and meaningful near Rosh Hashanah or Passover, and could be worth the additional touchpoint.

“When a theater hires me, I’d like them to be upfront if they lack Jewish perspectives. They don’t need to be cagey about it. The care it takes to lay your cards on the table—to me, that’s very respectful.”

GABRIELLE HOYT, DRAMATURG



DRAMATURGICAL BACKGROUND

To many in the American theater scene—particularly those based in New York—a “lack [of] Jewish perspectives” might sound like an oxymoron. The plenitude of Jews on stages, under bylines, and in audiences has been considered a fact of theatrical life since the mid-twentieth century. But the close relationship between the American Jewish community and the American theater can lead to a false sense of expertise, which can, in turn, generate insensitivity or erasure. Even classics like *Fiddler on the Roof* contain sensitive themes, topics, and rituals; so do newer plays like Tom Stoppard’s *Leopoldstadt* and Paula Vogel’s *Indecent*. Frequently, dramatic pieces about Jewish experiences also contain explicit onstage depictions of Jewish trauma (as is the case in all three works cited). This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when considering a play like *The Merchant of Venice*, which has been roiled by discussions of antisemitism for centuries. All of which is to say: productions that contain Jewish themes require Jewish perspectives and voices. And frequently, the task of voicing this perspective falls to a Jewish dramaturg.

THE DRAMATURG AND THE CULTURAL CONSULTANT

Saying a dramaturg is a person who does research is like saying a dentist is the person who gives you a free toothbrush—not inaccurate, but just a small fraction of a dramaturg’s work.

In the past decade, the role of dramaturg has often been conflated with that of cultural consultant. Productions often seek out dramaturgs whose lived experience (religious, cultural, ethnic, sexual, racial, etc.) closely intersects with the experience(s) represented in the production itself. That said, a cultural consultant is not the same thing as a dramaturg. The primary role of a dramaturg is to support a playwright and/or production team in articulating their artistic vision.

Why can conflation of dramaturg and cultural consultant create issues when working on plays with Jewish content?

Issue #1: Jews are not a monolith

Because Jews are not a monolith, it is therefore important to note that Jewish dramaturgs cannot speak to every specific Jewish experience or production need. Avoid the assumption that a Jewish dramaturg is the cultural expert in everything Jewish and strive to bring in as many Jewish voices as possible when working on a show with Jewish content.



Issue #2: Dramaturgs are not confessors

Relatedly, just because one Jewish person is okay with a specific production choice doesn't mean that they have offered the definitive "Jewish" perspective. For example, if one dramaturg agrees with the decision to produce *The Merchant of Venice*, that doesn't mean that all Jewish dramaturgs will agree with that choice (conversely, not all Jewish dramaturgs will feel uncomfortable with such a production either!). It is therefore important, once again, to consult a multiplicity of Jewish perspectives when approaching plays with Jewish—or antisemitic—content.

A potential solution

So what is the ideal model for working on the dramaturgy of a Jewish play? When a play is selected for development in the [Jewish Plays Project's](#) Jewish Playwriting Contest, the playwright is matched with two dramaturgs: a theatrical dramaturg and a Jewish dramaturg. The theatrical dramaturg speaks exclusively to the dramaturgy of the play and the playwright's artistic vision, whereas the Jewish dramaturg speaks to the religious and cultural content in the play (and seeks outside expertise when they themselves feel that more opinions or specific perspectives might be required). At the JPP, both the theatrical and Jewish dramaturg identify as Jewish, which allows for a multiplicity of Jewish perspectives. We recognize that hiring two professionals is not in every theater's budget, but it's important to understand the difference in these roles, particularly [when working on plays with Jewish content](#).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It is important that a theater company considering a production with Jewish themes reach out to the surrounding Jewish community (not just dramaturgs/cultural consultants) to discuss the content of the play. This action is significant both from a cultural competency perspective, and through the lens of community engagement.

For example, bring in a Rabbi from a local congregation to speak to and be in dialogue with the cast and/or audience about the play. It may also be worthwhile to offer resources to audience members—such as a program note or pre-show email—to give them context for what they're about to see.

Be sure to take these steps early in the process so that you are not in a position where you are forced to do damage control, should you err in representing Jewish experiences.

IMPORTANT DATES

It's important to be mindful of Jewish dates and holidays. Fun dramaturgy fact: during the original production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Jewish cast members were required to choose between observing Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur by taking a night off. In 1966, when actor Ann Marisse (a replacement for the role of Tzeitel) didn't come in on either date, producer Hal Prince (also Jewish) [fired her!](#)



07 REHEARSAL PROCESS

“There is often a lot of discourse around how Jewish stories are told onstage, and less conversation around how to support Jewish artists and artistry in the rehearsal room. A cast and creative team that feels taken care of will pour their passion back into the process. To invite a Jewish artist into your house is to desire them to be their fullest self, and you should thus make room for all they have to offer.”

TYLER HERMAN, ACTOR, DIRECTOR, INTIMACY CHOREOGRAPHER



JEWS IN THE ROOM

For a show with Jewish content, it is important that there are many Jewish voices and perspectives in the rehearsal room. This representation includes the cast, but it should also go beyond the cast, to include members of the creative and production teams. This allows for a level of appreciation, safety, and knowledge within the room. It also creates a robust opportunity for learning and discussion, prevents Jewish members of the cast and creative team from becoming token representations of a diverse Jewish whole, and helps your team avoid falling into stereotype and misrepresentation.

Because Jews are not a monolith, having a multiplicity of Jewish voices from diverse Jewish backgrounds is critical. If you have many different perspectives in the room, there are more choices available to the team when making Jewish-specific production decisions.

COMPENSATE JEWISH CONSULTANTS FOR THEIR LABOR

While it is important for artists to bring their full selves and identities into the rehearsal room, artists should not be required to offer their experiences as culturally-specific research. Do not ask your Jewish artists (actors, designers, stage managers, etc) to consult on the Jewish background of a play for free. For example, a costume designer should not have to help you stage a prayer ritual. Instead, hire a Jewish cultural consultant to do that work. If you do need for whatever reason to ask an artist such as an actor to do that labor, you should compensate that artist - both financially and with preparation time. This compensation should go beyond the compensation they receive for their other role in the production.

Always ask first

That being said, actors in a rehearsal process are often eager to share their experiences. If you would like your actors to contribute to the Jewish discussions in the room, be upfront with them during the casting process and ask in advance if they are willing to speak to their experiences in the room so that they never feel put on the spot.

ADDRESSING ANTISEMITISM

Unfortunately, antisemitism can often find its way into the rehearsal room. Many artists reported instances of directors and other artists in positions of power making offensive comments and jokes. Jewish artists have also observed that artistic leaders feel more comfortable leaning into and encouraging Jewish stereotypes in performance (i.e. dialect, mannerisms, etc) even when studiously avoiding other racial or cultural stereotypes. It is often hard for artists, particularly actors or assistants, to speak up against these offenses, due to the power differential in the room.

It is therefore critical to create policies for addressing antisemitism should it come up in the rehearsal room. Antisemitism is often neglected in a theater's DEI statement. It should be named explicitly—not just for shows with Jewish content, but for every show you produce. Artists should also understand with whom they can safely address concerns in the event that these policies are violated.

RESPECTING OBSERVANCES

It is important to respect and accommodate Jewish artists' religious observances, including:

#1: Observing Shabbat

The weekly holiday of Shabbat is from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, a period of 25 hours. Many observant Jews "keep" Shabbat, meaning they do not work, write, drive, spend money, or use technology during this period. They also observe certain rituals such as lighting candles and eating challah. Many Jews, however, do not keep Shabbat, and some Jews keep only some aspects of Shabbat. It is therefore important to ask at the beginning of a rehearsal and/or casting process what an artist's Shabbat observances are and how you can best support them. Of course, for most productions, it is impossible to fully keep Shabbat, as performances are often on Friday nights. That being said, many artists have found useful workarounds. For example, one artist found it helpful to receive their daily call ahead of time, so they did not need to check their email on Shabbat.

Actors particularly find this challenging to bring up in a casting process, as they do not want their observances to prohibit them from getting the job. So, to create an inclusive casting process, be sure to be proactive, not reactive, and ask for their access needs upfront.

#2: Important dates

It is important to be mindful of Jewish holidays when creating a rehearsal and performance calendar. This mindfulness should not just extend to the major Jewish holidays, like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but to other holidays as well. Some Jews observe other, less well-known holidays in the same manner, so these observances should be asked about in the beginning of a casting or rehearsal process.

[see Jewish calendar at the end of this document for more specifics]

For plays with Jewish content in particular, look at the calendar in advance to see how you can accommodate Jewish holidays and observance. For example, does your equity day off need to be Monday, or could it be Saturday? Could it be the day and/or night before a holiday?

A reminder that all Jewish holidays start and end at sundown in the evening.



#3: Keeping Kosher

Keeping Kosher may be an important part of a Jewish artist's religious observance. Therefore, it is important to ask early on in the casting and/or rehearsal process how you can best accommodate their dietary needs. Keep in mind that Jews observe these restrictions differently, and the degree to which they keep Kosher (or not) does not make them more or less Jewish. All levels and manners of observance should be accommodated to the best of your availability. And keep these restrictions in mind not just for meals, but for opening night celebrations and tech snacks as well.

If you have an artist who keeps Kosher coming into the production from out of town, it would be helpful to have a list of Kosher restaurants and markets in your area as part of the welcome packet.

Please note too that there are separate Kosher requirements during the holiday of Passover and that these needs should be considered should your rehearsal or performance schedule fall during the holiday.

A JEWISH PLAY IN A JEWISH WAY

If you're going to produce a Jewish play, why not produce it in a Jewish way? When working on a play with Jewish content, it can be meaningful and productive to reflect Jewish culture and ritual in the room.

A culture of debate

Learning, arguing, questioning, and intellectual wrestling are big parts of Jewish culture. They are baked into the rituals of Jewish study and worship. Embrace that cultural value by inviting rigorous discussion into the rehearsal process and the making of the play. Just be sure to set everyone up for success in those debates and conversations by arming them with knowledge and expertise about Jewish topics.

Jewish ritual

Some directors have brought Jewish ritual into the rehearsal room when directing a play with Jewish content. For example, a team lit candles and ate challah every Friday during rehearsal. Infusing a process with Jewish ritual can be a nice addition to a room, both from a cast bonding perspective and a dramaturgical perspective.



“Jewish communities have supported theaters for generations, but the opportunity to engage with Jewish stories as a Jewish community in thoughtful, collaborative ways is still relatively rare. Opportunities to engage with contemporary Jewish stories of joy and resilience are even rarer. Engaging Jewish communities around Jewish stories, and also connecting Jewish communities to non-Jewish communities around experiences of Jewish stories — is especially meaningful in a time when anti-semitism is once again on the rise.”

AVITAL SHIRA, DIRECTOR AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZER



THE FIRST STEP

Once you decide which communities you hope to engage, the first step is to LISTEN. In order to build a relationship with a particular community, there has to be mutual listening. Only then can you understand one another, identify challenges and opportunities, and begin to address what you might accomplish together.

Be sure to involve the community in the earliest possible planning process, ideally well before a rehearsal process is underway. Particularly if you hope to affect change in a community that is historically underserved or underrepresented, engage them at the beginning of your season planning. That way, the community and those you hope to engage and impact can be in dialogue with you throughout the whole process, from program to design work. Listening and involving community early on can help you to build a sustainable relationship with a community, rather than just doing programming to or on or at them.

ENGAGING JEWISH COMMUNITY AROUND JEWISH WORK

There is a common misconception that outreach does not need to happen within the Jewish community, as Jews already come to the theater. However, this ignores important principles of community engagement.

So, once you have listened to the communities you hope to serve (in this case, the Jewish community), you can begin to think about what engagement looks like. Here are some questions to help guide you as you think about whom to approach and how:

- *What goals do you have for this work? What would “success” look like? How might you measure milestones as you work towards accomplishing these goals, and also leave enough space for your goals to evolve and change as you authentically build relationships within Jewish communities?*
- *What assumptions are you making about your audience and the greater Jewish community? And what assumptions are you making about their opinions on what it means to be Jewish? The Jewish community is far from monolithic, so the goal is to invite people in, wherever they are, with the invitation that you have something to offer, but you can never assume what a community or individual will take from it.*
- *What anchor organizations within the Jewish community might you build deep partnerships with that last not just for this show, but from season to season? And how can you ensure that these organizations capture a diversity of Jewish experiences?*
- *What are other organizations within the community, aside from the main Jewish organizations, that you could be engaging with your work? (eg. ecumenical ministries, political organizations in which Jews are part of larger community coalitions, other immigrant community organizations who have had parallel experiences to Jewish immigrant experiences but at different times in history, etc.)*
- *Who are the community stakeholders and how can you not only engage them but continue to develop these relationships over time? What community advisory groups or circles can you build to help sustain these relationships? How might you leverage these advisory groups/circles? (eg. in determining how to approach engagement, in informing season selection, in all facets of production)?*

Jewish institutions

It is also important to build long-lasting and deep relationships with Jewish organizations—not only to engage them around plays with Jewish content, but to engage them around the whole season of plays.

Some common Jewish organizations include: synagogues (of all denominations), Jewish community centers (JCCs), Jewish museums, Jewish family and child services, Jewish Federations, and Jewish community day schools.

And while engaging Jewish organizations has value, it's not the only way to engage Jews. Many Jews are unaffiliated from Jewish organizations. In fact, according to a 2021 Pew study, 41% of Jews under 30 are unaffiliated, so this is something to take into account.

Culturally Jewish entities like Jewish delis or activist organizations with large Jewish membership may also be ways to convene Jewish community that is not necessarily affiliated with more traditional Jewish organizations.

Important dates

Different elements of the Jewish community observe Jewish holidays differently, but it is important to consult with local Jewish organizations about how they observe before scheduling community engagement events on Friday nights, Saturday mornings, or important Jewish holidays (especially Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover). Sometimes Jewish organizations might be open to a combined Shabbat dinner and Friday night play experience or a performance combined with a Passover seder – but it depends on the exact observances of the community.

[see Jewish calendar at the end of this document for more specifics]

ENGAGING NON-JEWISH COMMUNITY AROUND JEWISH WORK

While it is of course important to engage Jewish audiences around Jewish work, it is also important to expand beyond serving just your Jewish audience.

Particularly in communities that are less familiar with Judaism, or in communities where antisemitism might be more commonplace, think about ways to universalize Jewish themes. For example, if your work features Holocaust stories, engagement and education could focus on all kinds of otherness, prejudice, and hate crimes. Antisemitism could then be wrapped into those narratives, along

with narratives like racism or anti-immigrant sentiments, depending on the particularities of the communities in which the art is being made.

CROSS-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

When programming plays with Jewish content, be sure you're thinking not just about how to make this art for the Jewish community, or for the non-Jewish community, but how the art can be a part of bridge-building amongst different communities. It is important for engagement to not just be targeted to specific communities in isolation, but to build cross-community engagement. Particularly around plays with Jewish content, bring Jews and non-Jews together in dialogue. Nothing is more important than cross-boundary relationship-building.

THE COMMUNITY DRAMATURG

An emerging idea in the world of community engagement is the role of "community dramaturg." Productions or institutions sometimes take from the marketing and/or engagement departments' budgets to create this role. Their responsibility is to work directly with the communities they hope to serve from the beginning of a process. This is the ideal model.

We recognize that this is not possible for every production or every theater's budget, but it is important to prioritize and dedicate time and attention to community engagement from the beginning of the process, regardless.

“We encourage theaters to bring the playwright into all artistic and producorial conversations as early as possible in the new play process to avoid falling into Jewish stereotypes and tokenization.”

ALI VITERBI, PLAYWRIGHT



JEWIS IN THE ROOM

The playwright should not be the only Jewish person in the room. Though they are the authority on their play, they are not the authority on Jewish identity; so hire as many Jewish artists and/or consultants to be in the room as possible.

Because Jews are not a monolith, it is important for someone in the room to acknowledge that there are many different experiences of Judaism (from secular to observant, Ashkenazi to Sephardic, etc), but that this new play is distilling down one particular story and experience. This will help the team feel as if this new play does not need to encompass all expressions and experiences of Jewish identity.

AVOIDING JEWISH STEREOTYPES IN PRODUCTION

Often, when theaters program new plays with Jewish content, they can fall into stereotypes, lazy symbolism, and over-simplification in the ways they are visually represented (from the production's design to marketing). For example, a Jewish play that is not about the Holocaust should not feature barbed wires in its visual marketing.

One way to avoid these common pitfalls is to focus on depicting the content of the play rather than its Jewishness. For example, if the play is about a family who happens to be Jewish, consult with the playwright and determine whether it might be better to market and stage the play as a family play, not as a "Jewish" play.

A way to avoid these pitfalls is consult the playwright early in every process, from set design renderings to marketing.

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS PLAY?

An artistic director should communicate early on with a playwright and artistic team why they chose the play for their season. This way, if they chose the play for reasons that differ from the playwright's reasons for writing the play, all team members can understand the fault lines early on in the process. This is especially true for plays with cultural specificity.

ASK THE PLAYWRIGHT

Playwrights differ on their opinions regarding casting, marketing, etc. For example, some playwrights would rather have their Jewish plays produced with non-Jewish actors if Jewish actors are not available, whereas other writers would rather have their plays not produced. Some plays may need Yiddish speakers, while others may not need any language specialists. So, ask the playwright what they need before making assumptions!



HOW THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED

Ali Viterbi reached out to Jewish artists and professionals in the field and assembled eight focus groups (i.e. an artistic director focus group, casting director focus group, etc.) Each focus group had a “section leader” who generated questions and moderated the conversation. The groups then met on zoom for 1-2 hours. Those conversations were recorded and transcribed. Ali, in consultation with the section leaders, then wrote the guide based on the ideas and thoughts generated during that meeting. Those who were unavailable to meet on zoom either met with Ali individually or filled out a comprehensive survey form.

Once the focus groups had all met, Ali reached out to several non-Jewish artistic directors and leaders in the field who had successfully programmed Jewish work in their seasons. These conversations were recorded, and their contributions were added to the artistic director section.

ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR JEWISH THEATRE

ALLIANCE FOR JEWISH THEATRE is 501(c)3 non-profit organization made up of theater artists, theaters, and other people connected and dedicated to Promoting and Preserving Jewish Theatre, including the creation, presentation, and preservation of both traditional and non-traditional theatrical endeavors by, for, and about the Jewish experience.

In brief, what AJT does is: serve as a catalyst for the development of Jewish theater; build bridges between theater artists, theaters, and the communities they serve; empower and educate theater artists to tell Jewish stories; and expand the reach of theater that explores jewish identity in a multicultural world.

As the leading organization for Jewish theater worldwide, AJT:

- *Advocates for Jewish theater and gtheater artists doing Jewish content*
- *Provides an active online presence year-round to promote Jewish theater*
- *Provides education and networking to develop works with Jewish content*
- *Develops pathways, formal and informal, to cooperatively develop new projects*
- *Hosts a podcast, [On the Bimah: Spotighting Jewish Theatre Artists](#)*
- *Seeks collaborations with other like-minded organizations that share our mission*

JEWISH CALENDAR

[Here](#) is a calendar with future dates of major and minor Jewish holidays.

Shabbat candle lighting times can be found [here](#).



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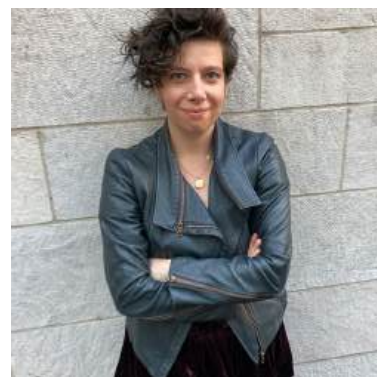
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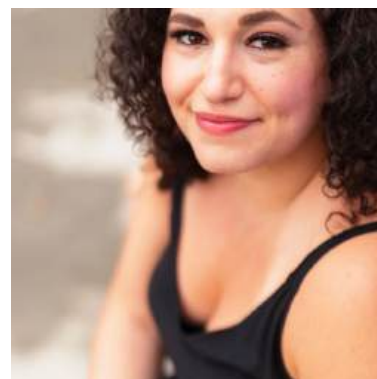
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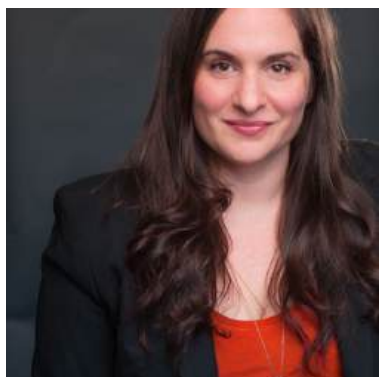
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