

STUDY GUIDE

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

A WICKED SOUL IN CHERRY HILL

WORLD PREMIERE
**A WICKED SOUL
IN CHERRY HILL**

06.23–07.24.2022

GIL CATES THEATER

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Lesley Rochelle Gouger, and Gil Cates, Jr.

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

Brian Allman

This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.

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ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

A WICKED SOUL IN CHERRY HILL

WORDS & MUSIC BY
MATT SCHATZ

DIRECTED BY
MIKE DONAHUE

SCENIC DESIGNER
ALEXANDER WOODWARD

ORIGINAL SCENIC DESIGN
DANE LAFFREY

COSTUME DESIGNER
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LIGHTING DESIGNER
JOSH EPSTEIN

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CASTING DIRECTOR
PHYLLIS SCHURINGA, CSA

THIS PLAY WAS CREATED DURING THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE INAUGURAL THE WRITERS' ROOM PROGRAM, IN WHICH SIX LOS ANGELES PLAYWRIGHTS DEVELOP NEW WORKS WITH THE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE OF THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE ARTISTIC TEAM

RECIPIENT OF THE EDGERTON FOUNDATION NEW PLAY AWARD

MAJOR SUPPORT FOR THIS WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCTION PROVIDED BY THE EDGERTON FOUNDATION NEW PLAY PRODUCTION FUND

CAST



**JAHBRIL
COOK**
THE SON
& OTHERS



**ZEHRA
FAZAL**
THE LADY ON
THE RADIO
& OTHERS



**NICHOLAS
MONGIARDO-
COOPER**
THE JUNIOR RABBI,
THE PRIVATE
INVESTIGATOR
& OTHERS



**RIVKAH
REYES**
THE DAUGHTER,
THE REPORTER
& OTHERS



**DANNY
ROTHMAN**
THE RABBI
& OTHERS



**JILL
SOBULE**
THE CANTOR,
THE RABBI'S WIFE
& OTHERS

SYNOPSIS

On a November night in 1994, a murder was committed in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. In this poignant true-crime story told completely through song, a tight-knit Jewish community gathers to recount, remember, and reckon with the details of what happened in—and to—their town. This wholly original production, written by South Jersey native Matt Schatz, asks what it does to our souls when our leaders fall from grace.

SETTING/TIME A Jewish Community Center, the evening of November 1st.

RUNNING TIME 90 minutes, with no intermissions

PRODUCTION NOTES Contains profanity and the smoking of herbal cigarettes.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



MATT SCHATZ *Playwright & Composer*

Matt Schatz is a writer and composer. His plays and musicals include *A Wicked Soul in Cherry Hill* (Edgerton New Play Award), *An Untitled New Play By Justin Timberlake* (ASCAP Foundation Harold Arlen Musical Theatre Award), *The Door You Never Saw Before* (Geffen Stayhouse), *The Burdens* (O'Neill Conference, Riva Shiner Comedy Award, Broadway World Pittsburgh's Script of the Decade), *No One Sings Like You Anymore* (Seattle Rep Commission), *Georama* (5 New York Musical Festival Awards, including outstanding lyrics), *Dunkfest '88* (Jonathan Larson Award Finalist), *Love Trapezoid* (Kleban Prize for Musical Theatre), *The Tallest Building in the World* (EST/Sloan Commission), and others. His work has been developed and produced by theaters and universities all over the country. Matt has had television and film projects sold to and developed for Fox, USA, Fullscreen, TBS, Warner Bros, EOne, and others. Matt wrote the songs for Season 3 of the Spotify/Gimlet podcast series *The Two Princes* and was a writer on Netflix Animation's upcoming *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* adaptation. Matt has recently worked on projects with Michael Arndt, Lynn Nottage, and Taika Waititi. Currently, he is a story consultant for Lucasfilm Ltd. Matt is from New Jersey and lives in Los Angeles with his wife and their daughter.



MIKE DONAHUE *Director*

NYC credits include: world premieres of Ana Nogueira's *Which Way to the Stage* (MCC Theater); Matthew López's *The Legend of Georgia McBride* (MCC Theater, Geffen Playhouse, and Denver Center for the Performing Arts); Jen Silverman's *Collective Rage* (MCC Theater, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company) and *Phoebe in Winter* (Clubbed Thumb); Jordan Seavey's *Homos, Or Everyone In America* (Labyrinth Theater Company); and Ethan Lipton's *Red-Handed Otter* (The Playwrights Realm). Regionally: *Little Shop of Horrors* with Mj Rodriguez, George Salazar, and Amber Riley (Pasadena Playhouse), and world premieres of Jen Silverman's *The Roommate* (Humana Festival, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Long Wharf Theatre); Rachel Bonds' *Curve of Departure* (South Coast Repertory, Studio Theatre) and *The Wolfe Twins* (Studio Theatre); Kate Cortesi's *Love* (Marin Theatre Company); Matthew López's *Zoey's Perfect Wedding* and Lauren Feldman's *Grace, or The Art of Climbing* (Denver Center for the Performing Arts); and Shostakovich's *Moscow, Cheryomushki* with a new libretto by Meg Miroshnik (Chicago Opera Theatre). Upcoming: Euripides' *Bakkhai*, in a new version by Anne Carson with music by Diana Oh (Baltimore Center Stage); and the Los Angeles premiere of Matthew López's *The Inheritance* (Geffen Playhouse). Mike's first short film, *Troy*, will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival this June.

HOW DOES A COMMUNITY HEAL?



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

Playwright & Composer Matt Schatz

AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT & COMPOSER MATT SCHATZ

BY AMY LEVINSON, GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

AMY LEVINSON: Understanding that this is sensitive subject matter, what inspired you to write a play about the events in Cherry Hill?

MATT SCHATZ: Though I also write for television and film, I consider myself first and foremost a playwright. Most playwrights I know write when they are wrestling with something. And this is a story I've been wrestling with for a long time.

I am Jewish. My family is from South Jersey, where we've been part of the Jewish community for generations. In 1997, when I was a senior in high school, we moved to the Landmark Apartments in Cherry Hill. When this trial was broadcast on Court

TV, we learned that the hitmen had lived not just in our building but in the very same unit. I found this to be fascinating, haunting, and a little embarrassing. There are moments in this story that take place in the same room where my prom pictures were taken, where I sat at the piano and made up songs, and where I spent time with my family.

My family were never members of the temple at the center of the play, and I did not grow up in Cherry Hill. But because of our history in the area, I have many personal connections to the material. And I'm not saying that a writer needs to have a personal connection to retell a story, only that

ARTIST INTERVIEW

these connections certainly influenced my desire to explore it, and I believed I could do so honestly and authentically.

This story has been covered and retold in so many ways over the years, but always with a focus on the event rather than the impact it had. For me, the questions raised by this story are universal. How does a community grapple with terrible events, especially when it involves someone the community admired and trusted? How do we keep our faith when our faith leader turns out to be a murderous sociopath? And should we even try?

After the rabbi was found guilty, I remember my grandmother saying that she believed he was innocent because he was a rabbi. A rabbi would never do such a thing. And that always stuck with me.

AL: How does music help tell this story?

MS: I'm a songwriter, and I find that music and lyrics are the best way to connect with an audience. It's a way to talk about difficult things. It evokes emotion in a way that it's hard to with words alone.

But another reason I chose to recount this story using a series of songs is that I wanted to hew as close to the documented facts as possible. Music and lyrics, rhythm and rhyme, various song styles, and narrative points of view help me retell this story clearly and hopefully compellingly without needing to make stuff up. Though it was still necessary for me to change some details given the sensitivities surrounding this subject, I would have had to change more if this were a conventional docudrama or a traditional musical.

AL: What inspired the idea of a community coming together to look back and retell this story?

MS: Jews are a people of memory. We don't bury the ugly chapters of our history. We remember. Basically, every Jewish holiday includes a recounting of something terrible that happened to us. Jews are also known to use music to deal with such things. By their very nature, all true-crime stories are about actual people, many of whom are still grieving and reckoning with what happened in a very personal way. In telling this story, I made every attempt to honor the life and memory of the very real victim and be respectful to those who mourn her.

It's important to remember what happened because it can happen again. And it can happen to any community, not just the Jewish community. Blind faith in our leaders can sometimes be misplaced. I think that's one of the themes of this show. In recent years, we've had to reckon with a fair number of leaders, artists, and entertainers who have done bad things. Can we still enjoy what they've given us? Can we still learn from what they've taught us?

AL: What do you hope audiences take away from the piece?

MS: In any play, artists hope that audiences are compelled by, and even learn from, the story. And I think all playwrights want their audiences to engage with the play. I hope that audiences come away from this story asking questions. I firmly believe theater is a way to try to answer unanswerable things. It's a way to try to make sense of the senseless. There are two ways people try to do this: art and religion. With *A Wicked Soul in Cherry Hill*, you get a little of both.

THE ANNA M. SAMPLE SHELTER FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN

This show deals with violence against women and the impact of that violence within a community. The Anna M. Sample Shelter for Women & Children serves as a crucial lifeline for residents of Camden County New Jersey, where Cherry Hill is located.

We encourage you to learn more about this organization that provides safe harbor for women and children in this community at voadv.org/family-shelters.

A WICKED ACT



Rabbi Fred Neulander founded *M'kor Shalom* ("Source of Peace"), a Reform synagogue in affluent Cherry Hill, in 1974. Twenty years later, more than 900 families belonged. It was the largest Jewish temple in South Jersey. Charming and charismatic, Neulander won people over by the force of his personality.

The murder of the rabbi's wife came as a shock to the community and the congregation. Still, there had been persistent rumors of the rabbi's interest in other women. He was known for lavishing special attention on attractive women during Friday services at the temple.

The rabbi was at Temple *M'kor Shalom* on the night of the slaying. Witnesses said it was extremely unusual for the rabbi to be there on a Tuesday evening. He sat in on his assistant rabbi's Judaism class—which he hadn't done in four years. He walked into choir practice—the cantor testified that he was in "a good mood." Prosecutors claimed Neulander was establishing his alibi.

According to authorities, on the evening of Tuesday, November 1, 1994, Carol Neulander, co-founder of the Classic Cake Bakery and well-known community volunteer, opened the door of her home in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and admitted two men who claimed to know her husband. She was killed during a staged robbery so her husband could continue the latest in a series of extramarital affairs.

Rabbi Fred Neulander continued to be a prime suspect in his wife's death. Investigators developed "a very powerful circumstantial case" against the rabbi, but could not identify the killers, said Edward F. Borden Jr., who was Camden County's prosecutor at the time.

In December of 1994, [Neulander] failed a lie detector test. No charges were brought until September 1998, when the

rabbi was accused of conspiracy to murder and being an accessory to murder. Finally, more than five years after Carol's death, a grand jury indicted Fred.

The Neulander case had received widespread media attention for years, but Camden County Judge Linda Baxter rejected a defense request for a change of venue. Jury selection in Neulander's trial began on August 20, 2001, and testimony began on October 15. By this time, Rabbi Fred Neulander was 60 years old. The entire trial was televised by Court TV.

Neulander took the stand in his own defense on October 30, saying he was innocent. But the rabbi withered under intense cross-examination from the prosecutor, James Lynch. Neulander was forced to admit that he lied to the police immediately after the murder when he denied any extramarital affairs.

Although many observers thought Neulander's testimony did little to help his case, the jury was unable to reach a verdict. The first trial ended with a hung jury and the judge declared a mistrial on November 13, 2001.

In the second trial, eight years after Carol Neulander died, the jury found the rabbi guilty of murder—for which he could receive the death penalty. Fred Neulander is the only rabbi ever convicted of capital murder in the United States. He has a parole eligibility date set for June 2030.

SOURCES

Jim Walsh, *Courier Post*; Lovefraud.com; Wikipedia; CourtTV; *Philadelphia Inquirer*; *New York Times*; *Associated Press*

AN ACT OF REVERENCE & RESPECT

In the Jewish faith, the act of baking and breaking bread with others is considered a *mitzvah*, or “good deed.”

Challah’s first appearance was in the Torah, as a symbolic representation of the *manna* (heavenly bread that fell from the sky, feeding the ancient Israelites for forty years). After the Israelites exile in the desert had ended, God decreed that whenever they made challah, they would set aside a portion of the dough in order to make more bread – as a way for the Jewish people to show their gratitude for being allowed into the Holy Land. This separated piece of dough was referred to as the challah. To this day, it still symbolizes thankfulness, and the making of it heralds the beginning of the Sabbath (Shabbat).

Depending on the celebration, though, challah is prepared differently. For Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), round loaves are baked and eaten with honey to symbolize continuity and a sweet year. While for Yom Kippur (the Holy Day of Atonement), ladder-shaped breads are served before the meal to suggest high hopes for the months ahead. The most popular variation, however, is the braided kind, where intertwined strands of dough are meant to symbolize unity, and the 12 humps so distinct to the challah loaf represent 12 loaves for the 12 tribes of Israel.

We invite you to gather with your family and friends to make and break bread together. This family recipe is courtesy of Lesley Rochelle Gouger.

SOURCE

Breaking Bread: The Rise of Challah
(www.booking.com/articles/breaking-bread-the-rise-of-challah.html)

CHALLAH Yields: 2–3 loaves—sometimes more!

INGREDIENTS

- 2 packages of active dry yeast
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups lukewarm water
- 1 tablespoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup melted margarine (or butter) or all-purpose vegetable oil. (We use margarine or butter-melted)
- 7 cups all-purpose flour, unbleached, and SIFTED!
- 3 eggs and 1 egg white, beaten (save yolk for later of the one egg)
- For the glaze: 1 egg yolk mixed with 1 teaspoon cold water, and poppy seeds which you sprinkle on top of the bread before baking.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Dissolve the yeast in water. Let rest in bowl for about 5 minutes, and then add salt, sugar and butter or margarine.
2. Blend in 3 cups sifted flour and then add the eggs. Beat thoroughly. Add remaining flour, a little bit at a time, kneading it with your hands, until dough forms ball and is no longer sticky. Turn out on a well-floured board and knead until smooth and elastic.
3. Place in a well buttered bowl, turn to grease top (with the butter), cover and let rise until doubled—about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours.
4. Punch the dough down and turn it out again onto a floured breadboard. Divide in half or thirds. Cut each portion into 3 15-inch strips, roll them out lengthwise and braid without stretching dough, beginning in the middle, and working towards each end.
5. Place on a greased cookie sheet, cover, and let rise for 1 hour or until almost double. Brush with egg wash (egg yolk) and sprinkle with poppy seeds. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
6. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes for larger loaves, or about 30 minutes for smaller loaves, or until crust is golden brown on the top and the loaf sounds “hollow” when tapped on the bottom.

You can use a clean dish towel to cover the dough during the times the dough must rise.

MUSIC MATTERS

Unlike most shows at Geffen Playhouse, the narrative of *A Wicked Soul in Cherry Hill* is told completely through song. This style of storytelling through related songs, specifically designed to form a musical entity, is known as a “song cycle.” In contemporary history, the idea of placing poetry and music together became very popular throughout Western Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. More recently, song cycles have been used to tell a story in ways that traditional verse cannot, including serious sensitive stories like “A Wicked Act.”

Song cycles written by popular modern musicians (also called rock operas) are a short series of songs that tell a story, or focus on a particular theme, with more contemporary sounds and lyrics. A song cycle is similar to a song collection, and the two can be difficult to distinguish. Some type of “intentionality”, however, is regarded as a necessary attribute of song cycles. It may derive from the text (a single poet; a story line; a central theme or topic such as love or nature; a unifying mood; poetic form or genre, as in a sonnet or ballad cycle) or from musical procedures (tonal schemes; recurring motifs, passages or entire songs; formal structures). These unifying features may appear singularly or in combination. Because of these many variations, some say the song cycle “resists definition”. The nature and quality of the intention within a song cycle must therefore be examined “in individual cases”. (Source: Wikipedia)

ACTIVITY

Create your own song cycle. Choose up to 10 songs that represent the different stages or major events of your life. If you were to develop your own song cycle, what would those songs be? List the Song Title and Singer/Band in the spaces below, in a specific order.

Song #1 _____ by _____

Song #2 _____ by _____

Song #3 _____ by _____

Song #4 _____ by _____

Song #5 _____ by _____

Song #6 _____ by _____

Song #7 _____ by _____

Song #8 _____ by _____

Song #9 _____ by _____

Song #10 _____ by _____

QUESTION

Why did you choose the songs you did? Was there a specific theme or arrangement to the songs you picked?

TELL IT AGAIN

In the scene, “Tell It Again” from the play *A Wicked Hill in Cherry Hill*, we are introduced to “Len,” one of the characters accused of murdering the wife of Rabbi Fred J. Neulander, who is well-known for telling “tall-tales” about his life. Len made many claims and bragged about even wilder exploits to those in town. When Len talked about his past, the people of the community could not tell what was real and what was made up.

ACTIVITY

In a group or with a partner, take turns giving information about yourself. Come up with four (4) over-the-top, ridiculous, or hard-to-believe tall-tales (*lies*) about yourself. Also include one (1) true event about yourself that may seem ‘unbelievable’, but none-the-less, is totally true. Let those listening guess which of the stories told is the true one. Take turns until everyone has had a chance to go.

Falsehood #1: _____

Falsehood #2: _____

Falsehood #3: _____

Falsehood #4: _____

Fact About You: _____

AFTERWARDS

- Who made up the wildest story? Why?
- Which true story seems the most unbelievable? Why?
- BONUS: Take the four falsehoods you created and write a short story.

AN INTERVIEW WITH YOURA KIM



PHOTO BY ISAAK BERLINER

What is your position and how long have you been at the Geffen?

My position at the Geffen Playhouse is a Junior Accountant in the accounting department and I've been working with Geffen for 4 months!

What educational, artistic, and professional experiences led to you working at the Geffen?

I always like watching movies and shows and thought it'd be really fun and exciting to work in this kind of industry. Being able to see how live performances are put together by all these incredible people at work has been truly amazing!

What are your primary responsibilities as a Junior Accountant?

My responsibility as a Junior Accountant is processing financial transactions for Geffen! My primary duties are recording financial transactions, processing due invoices for payments, and maintaining financial documents.

What key skills and dispositions do accountants need to possess in this day and age?

I think some of the important skills are time management and attention-to-detail skills. It's important to know how to identify and correct errors because you'll see a lot of numbers. And, regardless of what kind of job you have, it's good to know how to manage your time and be able to stay on top of multiple tasks.

How important is accounting to a theater company?

Accounting is the language of business. It's important to track where the income comes from and how that income is used for expenses to operate the business! Part of the revenue is coming from the shows that we do, and a lot of expenses are made to make those shows happen at a theater.

Was there a pivotal moment when you realized you wanted a life in the arts, or did it occur incrementally?

I don't think there was any pivotal moment in my life, but I've always wanted to be a part of something creative and active. As I mentioned, my enjoyment of shows and movies made me realize that I'd be happy if I could become a part of that.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

It could be challenging when I need to process high-volume accounts payable. When there are a lot of invoices you need to process, it could be hard to code invoices with the correct account and catch errors in supporting documents for payment.

What do you find most rewarding?

The most rewarding aspect of my job is developing my skills and being surrounded by supportive people! It makes my work so much more enjoyable and makes me look forward to coming to work every day!

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette.”

THE AUDIENCE’S ROLE The audience plays an essential role during the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring their performance to life.

BEHAVIORS TO AVOID Since the actors can hear the audience so clearly, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them—and fellow audience members. These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA We appreciate you sharing your Geffen Playhouse experience via social media, but ask that you **do not do so inside the theater, where the use of electronic devices is prohibited.**

We recommend that you post your status in the lobby after the performance, and invite you to tag @GeffenPlayhouse and use #GeffenPlayhouse to share your experience and continue the conversation with us online.

AUDIENCE AWARENESS ACTIVITY Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with:

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television

DISCUSSION POINT

- If you were onstage performing in a play, how would you want to experience the audience?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

Depending on the time available and your participants' interests, guide them to respond to questions selected from those suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Ask for several volunteers to share their groups' answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching *A Wicked Soul in Cherry Hill*? Engaged? Conflicted? Amused? Inspired? Provoked? Put off? What made you feel this way?
- What did you enjoy most about the play? What did you find difficult to enjoy? Why? (Provide direct evidence from the production.)
- How would you describe the inner life of each character in the play? Are they conflicted? If so, how and why?
- Did you identify or empathize with any of the characters? If so, which character(s) and why? If not, why not?
- What is it about "true-crime stories" that gets so many people interested in watching TV shows and plays, and listening to podcasts about them? Do you enjoy watching/listening to real crime stories? Why or why not?
- What was it like to see a play told completely through song?
- Would you like to see more shows at the Geffen Playhouse that are told through song?
- What did you find most moving about the play?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, props, costumes, and music contribute to the impact of the show?
- As asked/sung in *A Wicked Soul in Cherry Hill*: Where is it we go when we die? Where is it we go when we die? Do we go above? Join the ones we love? Where is it we go when we die?
- Would you recommend this production to other theatergoers? Why or why not?

RESOURCES

READ the original article about the case at www.tinyurl.com/28d4fdmm.

DISCOVER more in-depth details about the real-life case from the True Crime Brewery Podcast “The Good Wife: Carol Neulander” at www.tinyurl.com/3w8a5jrv.

WATCH the Court TV archives on the Neulander case at www.tinyurl.com/2p9m5auy.

PLAY BrainPOP Educator’s We the Jury Game at www.tinyurl.com/2p9daz8n.

LISTEN to “Cherry Hill Park” by Billy Joe Royal at www.tinyurl.com/bdeep584.

LEARN how to read and notate rhyme schemes at www.tinyurl.com/2p82496x.

WRITE your own song by following these steps www.tinyurl.com/544ccpa3.

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And many more!

