

# BAD JEWS

## STUDY GUIDE



GEFFEN  
PLAYHOUSE

# **BAD JEWS**

IN THE GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE  
**JUNE 9 – JULY 19, 2015**

SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Randall Arney, Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Jeni Pearsons, Ellen Catania,  
Kristen Smith Eshaya, Scott Kriloff and Jessica Brusilow Rollins**

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

**Jennifer Zakkai**

*This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## SECTION 1

### ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT .....	4
PLAY SYNOPSIS.....	5
ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES .....	5

## SECTION 2

### THEMES & TOPICS

FAMILY COMBAT .....	6
JEWISH IDENTITY .....	8
THE LONG SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST .....	9
WHAT MAKES US LAUGH? .....	10
PERSUASIVE DIALOGUE .....	11

## SECTION 3

### PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JENI PEARSONS, DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EVENTS .....	12
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## SECTION 4

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE.....	13
POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....	14

## SECTION 5

RESOURCES.....	15
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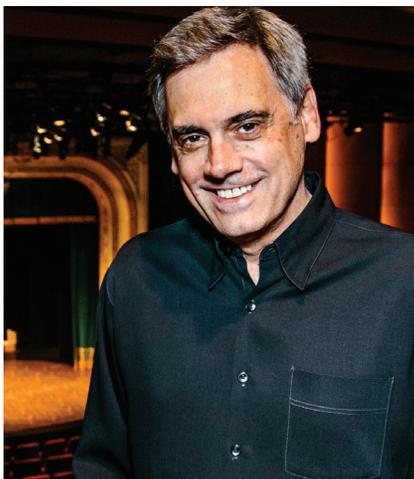
## SECTION 1

# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



JOSHUA HARMON KNOWS HOW TO GET OUR ATTENTION. With the title of his beloved comedy, *Bad Jews* starts a conversation before the audience ever gets into the theater. The question of what makes us good people – good brothers, good sons and daughters, good cousins – all of these ideas are unpacked and explored in this multi-layered play. Ultimately, Harmon has written a play about family dynamics and our place within them, and while his context is a multi-generation Jewish family, he has a gift for finding the universal in the specific.

We welcome back director Matt Shakman (*Good People, Wait Until Dark*) who has cast an extraordinarily gifted foursome of actors, and with designers John Arnone (sets), E.B. Brooks (costumes), Elizabeth Harper (lights), Jonathan Snipes (sound), he has created an environment where familial emotions have room to simmer, to boil and ultimately to explode.

As *Bad Jews* closes out the 2014/2015 season, I thank you for joining us. Whether you are a subscriber, a frequent regular ticket buyer, or a first-timer, only with your presence and participation does the art continue to thrive. We launched a season that focused on raising a voice, and over the course of this season, you have given extraordinary post-show feedback, you have responded with calls and emails to discuss the work you've seen and you have continued to nurture the art by investing sincerely in it. Theater is a collaborative venture, and you are the most vital part of this collaboration. So from the entire Geffen family, thank you for your continued investment in the art of theater.

# SYNOPSIS

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Beloved Poppy has died and his grandchildren are gathering in New York City to mourn him. College senior Daphna has joined her cousin Jonah, also a college student, in a small studio apartment down the hall from his parents' place. When his brother Liam, a graduate student, and Liam's girlfriend Melody arrive after cutting short their skiing vacation, Liam is upset to find they will be sharing the space with Daphna, whom he cannot abide. A savagely comic duel unfolds between the two cousins about who is more deserving of a pendant belonging to their grandfather, which has powerful familial and historical significance. Jonah, who does everything he can to avoid the conflict, ends up transcending it by connecting to Poppy's legacy in an unexpected and profound way.

### TIME

March. Not quite winter, not quite spring.

### SETTING

A studio apartment on the Upper West Side.

### RUNNING TIME

Approximately 90 minutes. *There will be no intermission.*

### PERFORMANCE NOTE

Coarse language is used.

# ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

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### JOSHUA HARMON (Playwright)

Joshua Harmon's play *Bad Jews* received its world premiere at Roundabout Underground and was the first production to transfer to the Roundabout's Laura Pels Theatre (Outer Critics Circle and Lucille Lortel Award nominations, Best Play). It has since become the third most-produced play in the United States this season and transferred to London's West End after sell-out runs at Theatre Royal Bath and the St. James Theatre. His newest play *Significant Other* opens at Roundabout this summer. His work has been produced and developed by Manhattan Theatre Club, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Hangar Theatre, Ars Nova, and Actor's Express, where he was the 2010-2011 National New Play Network Playwright-in-Residence. He has received fellowships from MacDowell, Atlantic Center for the Arts, SPACE at Ryder Farm, and the Eudora Welty Foundation. Joshua is a recent graduate of Juilliard and at work on commissions for Roundabout Theatre Company and Lincoln Center Theater.

### MATT SHAKMAN (Director)

At the Geffen, Matt directed the world premiere of Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation of *Wait Until Dark* and the West Coast premiere of David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People* (Ovation nomination, Production & Direction). His feature film debut – *Cut Bank* – starring John Malkovich, Billy Bob Thornton and Bruce Dern, was released by A24 in the spring of this year. Matt's television directing résumé includes the upcoming pilot for NBC's *Heroes Reborn* and the final two parts of FX's Emmy- and Golden Globe-winning *Fargo*, *Mad Men* and *The Good Wife*. He is also a director and executive producer of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Matt is the founder and artistic director of the Black Dahlia Theatre in Los Angeles, which was named "one of a dozen young American companies you need to know" by *American Theatre Magazine* and "Best Small Theatre" by *Los Angeles Magazine*. The Dahlia's new home – The Circle Theatre – will open this fall in Hollywood.

## SECTION 2

# THEMES & TOPICS

## FAMILY COMBAT

### THE JOADS

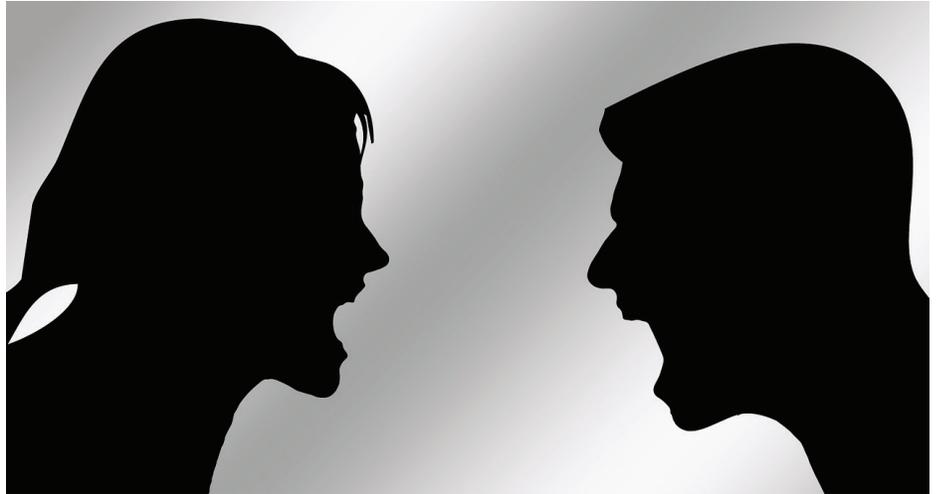
An extremely poor family of migrant farm workers featured in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck.

### PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

### SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/CNNWillBattles](http://tinyurl.com/CNNWillBattles)



Spending time with family can sometimes feel like being in a war zone. Though connected through shared ancestry, relatives can have distinctly different personalities, tastes, habits, politics and religious practices, not to mention emotional agendas. Economic necessity or special events like births, deaths and holidays often push people together, who would not otherwise choose to know, let alone live with, each other. Unless incompatible family members practice tolerance and forgiveness on a regular basis, their encounters can simmer with low-grade resentments or be riddled with explosions. Luckily for the audience – because of the biting humor that ensues – the cousins drawn together in *Bad Jews* experience envy, conflicting personalities and outright war over a family heirloom.

At the beginning of the play, Daphna teases Jonah about his parents' wealth, since they have bought an expensive studio apartment on New York's fashionable Upper West Side to house family and guests. Jonah points out that Daphna's parents, who are public school teachers, are not exactly impoverished.

DAPHNA

Compared to your family? We're like the Joads.

JONAH

I don't know who that is.

DAPHNA

You don't need to. Your parents buy you spare apartments.

In *Daphna and Liam*, playwright Joshua Harmon has created two powerful antagonists who square off in a small, messy space. Daphna is judgmental, passionate and brilliant, and seems to care little for the sensibilities of those she is trying to bludgeon into fulfilling her wishes. Liam is earnest, cerebral and, according to the playwright, “has as much of a sense of humor as an overdue library book.” He also seems incapable of acknowledging viewpoints other than his own.

The one talent the two cousins share is the ability to disparage each other with scalpel-like precision. As Liam rants to Melody and Jonah about Daphna:

LIAM

...Her name is Diana. Diana. I know she wishes she were this like barbed wire hopping, Uzi-toting Israeli warlock superhero: Daphna; but actually, Diana Feygenbaum grew up in Schnecksville, Pennsylvania, in an armpit town doing swim team badly and hysterically sobbing when she didn't get picked to be cheerleader...

Later Daphna castigates Liam about his romantic choices:

DAPHNA

...You could actually date a woman who was your intellectual equal but instead you find these tepid little Bambi creatures to impose this hyper-masculine hegemonical totalitarian regime on even though you like to like think you're like this like super sensitive in touch sensitized like dork-chic Chicago grad student who's like uber-liberal...

The battle between Daphna and Liam is most intense over their grandfather's *chai* – a medallion in the shape of two Jewish letters that symbolizes life. In this struggle, they are not alone, since heirlooms with sentimental value can cause great strife among the members of any family after a parent or grandparent passes away. The very thing that might unite them – genuine sorrow over their loss of Poppy – seems to make them fight even harder over the pendant, as if to prove not only how much Poppy meant to them, but also how much they mattered to him. This aligns with what some lawyers and psychologists have observed about skirmishes over a deceased loved one's possessions: those vying for a valued object often want desperately to feel the most loved and, therefore, the most worthy; having custody of the object is also a way to remain connected to the person and their family history.

Jonah and Melody, who are each sweet, trusting souls, try inserting more balanced views as Daphna and Liam tear into each other. When that fails, they step quickly, as they must, out of the line of fire.

### DISCUSSION POINT

What deeper issues often underlie family conflicts over seemingly minor matters?  
What are the most effective ways to resolve such conflicts?

## JEWISH IDENTITY



### BAD JEW

A term used by those who are not observant of traditions in Judaism. Someone who eats shellfish or pork, which were prohibited by religious leaders in ancient times, probably for health reasons, and are still forbidden today, would cite this as evidence of his or her being a “bad Jew.” In the play, Liam is described as having eaten shortbread during Passover and would likely self-identify as a “bad Jew” for not sticking with unleavened (without yeast) food. Most use this term ironically: according to the strictures of Judaism they may be “bad,” but in their own eyes they are not.

### PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

### SOURCES

“They’re Doing Bag Checks Outside the Theatre” by Andrew Losowsky, *The Guardian* (March 13, 2015)

[tinyurl.com/PewJewishIdentity](http://tinyurl.com/PewJewishIdentity)

In a recent interview in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Joshua Harmon observed that, “Each play is a question.” In *Bad Jews*, the 31-year-old playwright explores what it means to be Jewish, especially for young adults in America.

Most who identify as being Jewish connect to an ethnicity that reaches back to the Israelites, a tribe in ancient Israel that dispersed – usually after being exiled – mainly to the Middle East and Europe. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe, came to America in search of a better life. After World War II, many who survived the atrocities perpetrated by the German Nazis during the Holocaust – like the cousins’ grandfather Poppy – also settled in the United States.

As with other groups of settlers, the majority of Jewish immigrants aimed to both assimilate as Americans and preserve the key facets of their cultural and religious identities, including their practice of Judaism. Established approximately 3,500 years ago, this religion is monotheistic – worships one God – uses Hebrew texts and includes celebrations of the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah), the liberation of ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Passover) and the festival of lights (Hanukah); there is also a yearly day of reflection and atonement (Yom Kippur). Like other religions, Judaism includes branches that range from being extremely proscribed (ultra-orthodox) to progressive (reform). Being Jewish is carried through matrilineal lines – you are Jewish if your mother is Jewish, whether you are religious or not – or if you convert to Judaism. According to the Pew Center for Research, a majority of American Jews do not consider themselves to be religious, but identify culturally with their historical lineage and engage in certain traditions, such as the meals and rituals of Judaism’s high holy days (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur).

In the play, the two warring cousins represent different ends of the religious-cultural spectrum: Daphna is extremely observant and highly critical of Liam for being lax about, if not disdainful of, his heritage. Liam abhors how Daphna lords over others because of her relatively newfound embrace of Judaism. As is often the case, grains of truth are buried in the cousins’ assessments of each other. Since she is knowledgeable about and committed to her Jewish heritage in ways that Liam is not, Daphna’s claim to “Poppy’s chai” may be legitimately based on her being the “only one who that stuff even matters to.” Liam targets Daphna’s tendency to act superior, noting that when the family *sits shiva*, the seven-day ritual of Jewish mourning “...you watch ...she’ll get this look on her face, like, I’m above all of you, like, I’m on this spiritual enlightenment plane way above everyone else, like Poppy’s death hits me more or hurts me more...” This irks him because, as he claims accurately, he and other family members feel connected to Poppy, as family, and are also deeply saddened by his death.

# THE LONG SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST

## ANTISEMITISM

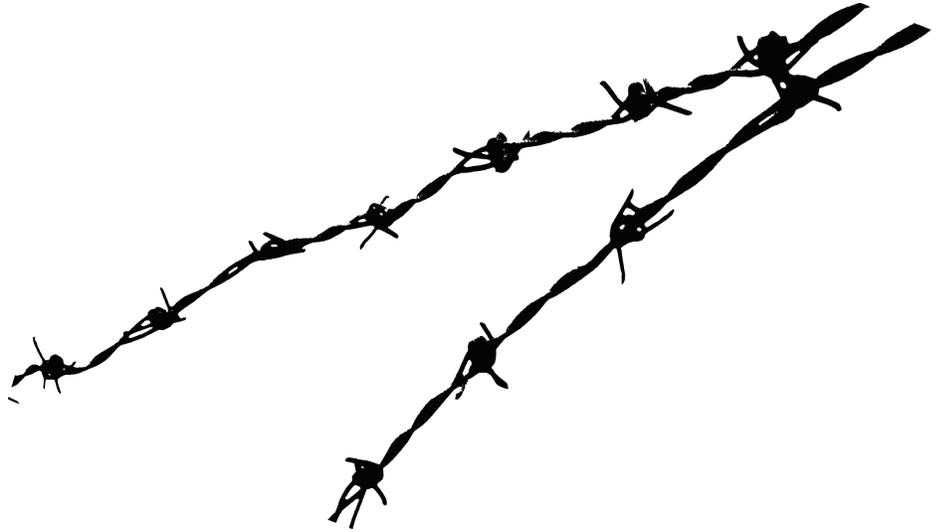
Prejudice against or hatred of Jews. The term was coined in the late 1800s to describe not only antipathy towards Jews but also the progressive political trends often associated with them, such as “equal civil rights, Constitutional democracy, free trade, socialism, finance capitalism, and pacifism.” Hatred for Jews preceded the creation of the term and the “modern era.” It was manifested in *pogroms*, “violent riots launched against Jews and frequently encouraged by government authorities,” which were “often incited by blood libels—false rumors that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes.” The Holocaust is “history’s most extreme example of antisemitism.” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

## PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/JoshHarWSJInspire](http://tinyurl.com/JoshHarWSJInspire)  
[tinyurl.com/USHMMEncyclo](http://tinyurl.com/USHMMEncyclo)



Joshua Harmon has discussed in the *Wall Street Journal* how he was inspired to write *Bad Jews* when he observed that young people at his synagogue seemed to be emotionally distanced from the Holocaust, which occurred over sixty years ago, during World War II, and was one of the most horrific episodes of genocide in human history. Adolph Hitler and the Nazis had come to power by preying on the sense of defeat and economic insecurity of Germans in the aftermath of World War I, and by demonizing Jewish citizens as different from other Germans. From 1933 through the end of the war in 1945, Hitler ordered the persecution, then the systematic annihilation of six million European Jews. They were walled off in ghettos, rounded up by death squads, gassed in extermination camps, brutalized and starved in forced-labor camps, and marched to their deaths just as the Allies came to liberate the camps. (An estimated five million political dissidents, Catholics, Gypsies, homosexuals and mentally disabled individuals also perished.)

In the play, two artifacts have significance for Poppy’s grandchildren. The pendant in the shape of a chai, which translates into “living,” likely kept his determination to stay alive while in the camp. The numbers tattooed on his arm were both a reminder of the degradation he experienced and proof that he survived.

Harmon may feel that with the passing decades, some young people regard the Holocaust as an event that affected their ancestors – a long time ago. Perhaps the intense conflict between Liam and Daphna over the necklace is his way of making this pivotal chapter of Jewish history more palpable to a younger generation.

## DISCUSSION POINT

Why do we sometimes turn away from the mistreatment of others? What are the challenges of confronting intolerance, oppression and genocide? What must we do to make the world a safer place for all people?

# WHAT MAKES US LAUGH?

### PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

### SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/HurLBenignVio](http://tinyurl.com/HurLBenignVio)



Since *Bad Jews* takes place among grieving family members and involves a dispute over an artifact that has significance because of the role it played in the life of a Holocaust survivor, what, one might ask, makes this play a comedy? The short answer: we get to revel in people behaving badly and making each other miserable.

Exaggeration and transgression are often key elements in comic plays, films and television shows. In *Bad Jews*, each character is believable but extreme in her or his own way. Daphna and Liam are outraged and hyper-articulate. Melody is painfully naive. Jonah wants to flee. Liam and Daphna have over-the-top reactions to each other's personalities, life choices and arguments. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us have learned to restrain our behavior no matter how upset we feel inside. As Daphna and Liam's vicious words and, in Daphna's case, aggressive behavior, erupt, we enjoy the vicarious thrill of characters acting out their darker impulses towards those whom they dislike or disagree with vehemently.

According to the Humor Research Lab at the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado, transgressions are not, however, enough to make us laugh. What we find truly humorous are "benign violations" – threats to our sense of "how the world should be" that occur within comfortable contexts, or are about things we feel it is okay to mock or from which we are distanced. If we feel that a situation or joke is completely safe or utterly out of bounds, we will not laugh but will be bored or offended.

In *Bad Jews*, the playwright does not ridicule being Jewish, or the Holocaust or experiencing loss, but rather exerts pressure on several young people, most of whom happen to be Jewish and related to each other. No matter how they behave, at root, they are real, vulnerable and, therefore, complex. Liam is angry with Daphna for getting in the way of his life plans with Melody; underneath Daphna's bravado lurks insecurity about her place in the family, and life. Their authentic emotions and frailties draw us in, make it safe to laugh and open us up to the play's moving conclusion.

## DISCUSSION POINT

What kind of humor do you appreciate the most and the least? Why?  
Why is it such a joy to laugh with others?

# PERSUASIVE DIALOGUE

In the play, Daphna and Liam's determination to get what they want is revealed through their vivid, emotion-filled dialogue. For example, in the following speech, Liam begs Melody not to open herself to Daphna.

LIAM

Just please Melody. Please. You don't know her, so just trust me, don't tell her things, you can't-- you can't give her one detail about even the least significant thing because she'll take that one microscopic insignificant tiny little morsel of a detail and find a way to spin it in her little web and spit it back at you with so much venom you won't even know what hit you...

Read through Liam's speech carefully and note how he conveys what he wants from Melody with feeling, details and figurative language.

Write a short speech about something you want or need badly (e.g. to sleep better, eat a good meal, earn more money, bask in solitude, elicit respect from family members or co-workers or feel less stress). Your "audience" will be a person or persons who can give you what you want, or help you get it. Your job is to persuade them to do so.

Use powerful details and/or figurative language (e.g. simile, metaphor, hyperbole) to describe your current state and make the case for what you want.

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Bring your speech to life by reading it aloud to a partner with a sense of urgency.

## SECTION 3

# PERSONNEL PROFILE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JENI PEARSONS

**What is your official title and how long have you worked at the Geffen Playhouse?**

I am the Director of Special Events and have worked at the Geffen Playhouse almost 10 years now. Wow!

**What are your primary responsibilities?**

I collaborate with the development department to design and plan fundraising events, and help marketing coordinate its events. Our team handles the installation of events – setting up and decorating the spaces being used, such as the education room or lobby, and arranging the food and refreshments and, sometimes, music. I also develop relationships with sponsors and vendors that support our events, and oversee the front of house and concessions. It's exciting to be a member of several teams at the Geffen that shape our patrons' experience of everything that happens before and after they see a play.

**What kinds of events do you create, coordinate and oversee?**

Most events that support fundraising and marketing are built around performances and can include receptions, dinners for 50 people before the show and gatherings in donors' homes. For the biggest fundraising event at the theater, *Backstage at the Geffen*, I work closely with the development department to help design and coordinate the pre-show reception at the theater; the host committee dinner, which takes place in a big tent across the street; and dessert, at several different stations in the theater, for the audience after the show. I also work with outside organizations that may be using our space, or hosting a reception around a particular show.

**What work led you to your current position?**

I've enjoyed a variety of jobs at the Geffen and most have been about creating positive experiences for our patrons. I started as an assistant to the managing director at the time then moved into events consulting for the grand reopening



of the theater after it was remodeled and the Audrey Skirball Kenis Theater was added. I also helped coordinate *Backstage at the Geffen* that year. After coming on full-time as the concessions manager then house manager, I also became the events coordinator for the theater. Two years ago I assumed my current position.

**What do you find most challenging about your work at the Geffen?**

Event planning is an active, time-intensive job. Successful events, which are amazing to see launched, are the result of long hours of communicating, over time, to make sure everything happens seamlessly.

**What do you find most satisfying?**

It is very engrossing, challenging and fun work, which takes creativity, attention to detail, patience, kindness and quick thinking. It balances the heavy lifting and logistics of installation with the nuances of design. Since I believe that theater is such a special experience, I am glad that my work supports the Geffen's education and community engagement programs. And I especially enjoy working with such a great group of people. ■

## SECTION 4

# AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

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

The audience plays an essential role in 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 the performance to life.

Since the actors can hear and see the audience, 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
- Touching or leaning on the stage.

**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 a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

# POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' 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 the play? Engaged? Distanced? Entertained? Intrigued? Bored? Moved? Put off? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- Describe what *Bad Jews* is about in one or two sentences.
- Did the interactions among the characters remind you of your own experiences with conflict, or the avoidance of conflict, in your family? If so, how?
- Did the play affirm, enhance or contradict what you know about Jewish American life? If so, how?
- Which character's arguments did you find most compelling – Daphna's or Liam's? Why?
- What were the funniest moments in the play? Why?
- How did the end moment make you feel? Why?
- Who were the strongest performers? Why?
- How did the set, props, lighting and costumes contribute to the impact of the play?
- Would you recommend *Bad Jews* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

**LEARN** what inspired playwright Joshua Harmon to write *Bad Jews*, in an interview in the Wall Street Journal at [tinyurl.com/JoshHarWSJInspire](https://www.tinyurl.com/JoshHarWSJInspire).

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**LEARN** how to handle unresolved family conflicts at [tinyurl.com/FamilyConflict](https://www.tinyurl.com/FamilyConflict).

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**LEARN** about what underlies family fights over the possessions of deceased loved ones at [tinyurl.com/CNNWillBattles](https://www.tinyurl.com/CNNWillBattles).

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**LEARN** about Jewish life in America by exploring written materials and film clips of *The Jewish Americans*, a PBS documentary at [tinyurl.com/JewishAmerPBS](https://www.tinyurl.com/JewishAmerPBS).

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**WATCH** *The Path to Nazi Genocide*, a 30-minute video on the history of the Holocaust, created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, at [tinyurl.com/USHMMHolocaustVideo](https://www.tinyurl.com/USHMMHolocaustVideo). (Suggested for adult audiences.)

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**VISIT** the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles to learn about the Holocaust and the museum's efforts to confront prejudice and discrimination throughout the world. Find information at [tinyurl.com/MuseumToleranceLA](https://www.tinyurl.com/MuseumToleranceLA).

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**LEARN** about where bigotry and hate are prevalent in the United States and how to combat intolerance at the Southern Poverty Law Center – [tinyurl.com/SPLCenterInfo](https://www.tinyurl.com/SPLCenterInfo).

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**PARTICIPATE** in Laughter Yoga meet-ups in Los Angeles, in which people gather to experience the joys and benefits of laughter at [tinyurl.com/LaughYogaLA](https://www.tinyurl.com/LaughYogaLA).

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Twentieth Century Fox  
US Bank  
Warner Bros. Entertainment  
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Westfield Group  
William Morris Endeavor

And many more!



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