

GAMM
THEATRE

STUDY GUIDE

BY JOSHUA HARMON

BAND JEWS



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACT I: Welcome

- Letter to Educators / pg 2
- Theatre Etiquette / pg 3
- A Guide to State & National Standards / pg 3

ACT II: Play, Playwright, & Place

- About Joshua Harmon / pg 4
- About *Bad Jews* / pg 4

ACT III: Our Production

- Who's Who at The Gamm / pg 5
- Q&A with actor Sarah Corey / pg 6-7
- Why *Bad Jews* is Good Theater / pg 8
- Cross-Curricular Connections / pg 9

ACT IV: Before The Show

- Vocabulary Context & Glossary / pg 10-11

ACT V: After The Show

- Extension Activities & Resources / pg 12

ACT VI: Epilogue

- Thank You & Learn More / pg 13
- Up Next: *The Children* / pg 14



GAMMEDUCATION

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This study guide was prepared by Jon Del Sesto and Sarah Ploskina

ACT I

WELCOME

Dear Educator,

We are delighted that you've chosen to enliven your class and curriculum with live theatre this school year!

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to prepare you and your students for our production of *Bad Jews*, by Joshua Harmon; directed by Tony Estrella. In this guide, you will find background information about the play and playwright, an inside conversation about our production, as well as activities for your classroom and questions for discussion. We recommend using this study guide before your visit to The Gamm, as well as after, to process the theatrical experience with your students.

We offer a pre-show visit with your classroom/school before your visit to help prepare your students for the play. This will stoke students' interest in the performance and encourage them to connect with the play. This visit will last about a half an hour and is offered to your classroom free of charge. Additionally, most student matinees are followed by talkbacks, which offer students opportunities to ask questions of the actors, director, designers or playwright. Talkbacks range in length and content, but we encourage you to stay and participate in these dynamic discussions.

Participation in our Student Matinee program addresses Core Standards in Theatre Arts through Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication; as well as many of the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. We have included a list of standards that align with attending a performance and using our study guide.

Prior to attending, please discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. In particular, please note that *Bad Jews* contains strong language, including loud cursing and staged, physical fighting.

Overall, it can help students prepare for live theatre to facilitate a brainstorm on how live performance is different from film, television and sporting events. We've included language you can use directly in our "A note on Live Theatre Audience Etiquette" section below.

We would love to hear about your experiences with our programming. It is a great help to us as we build our education program from year to year, striving to understand and meet the needs of our school communities.

We look forward to seeing you at The Gamm!

Sarah Matczak Ploskina

Director of Education, sarah@gammtheatre.org



THEATRE AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space, such as The Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television, you are a part of a living, collective, group experience. You are expected to pay close attention throughout the performance.

You, the audience, are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors; therefore, you play an active role in the experience of both actors and audience. The actors can see, hear, and sense all distracting behavior such as talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, and the ringing, or buzzing, of cell phones. This can affect the actor's concentration, the audience's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members.

Teachers, because we care deeply about both our audiences and actors, we insist that you and your students refrain from using phones, talking, texting, or making noise during a performance. We ask that you please address these behaviors swiftly, should they arise.
Thank you in advance!

STANDARDS GUIDE.

Here is a list of College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards that align to the information and activities in our guide:

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2] **See Themes and Questions for Discussion**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3] **See our Before and After the Show**

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4] **See our Before and After the Show**

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7] **See examples throughout our study guide.**

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9] **See our Extension Resources**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3] **See Making Connections, Digging Deeper, and Extension Resources**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1] **See After the Show Discussion Questions**

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2] **See examples throughout our study guide.**

ACT II

PLAY & PLAYWRIGHT



ABOUT JOSHUA HARMON

Joshua Harmon's plays include *Bad Jews*, *Significant Other*, *Admissions* (Gamm 2020), *Skintight*, and *Prayer for the French Republic*. He and Sarah Silverman co-wrote the libretto for *The Bedwetter* based on her memoir. His plays have been produced on Broadway and the West End; off-Broadway at Roundabout Theatre Company, Lincoln Center Theater, Manhattan Theater Club and Atlantic Theater Company; across the country at Geffen Playhouse, Speakeasy, Studio Theatre, Theater Wit, About Face, Actor's Express, and The Magic, among others; and internationally in a dozen countries. He is a two-time MacDowell fellow and an associate artist at Roundabout. Harmon was born in Manhattan and raised in Brooklyn and the suburbs of New York. He is a graduate of Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Juilliard.

ABOUT *BAD JEWS*

A beloved grandfather and Holocaust survivor has died, leaving a treasured heirloom with religious significance up for grabs. But who should get it? Volatile, self-described "Super Jew" Daphna, who plans to move to Israel after college; or her wealthy, self-absorbed cousin Liam, an ethnic studies grad student with a secular worldview and a shiksa girlfriend? Then there's Jonah, Liam's younger brother, forced to play peacemaker as the rivals argue, insult, and try to outwit each other to the play's bitter, hilarious end.

How the playwright's family helped him bring this play to life (From Broadway.com):

"I flew to New York and went to my parents' house. My little sister was away at college, but my middle sister was home, and so the four of us had dinner. Despite the celebratory nature of dinner, made in honor of my recent birthday, I was feeling really down. The (new play) residency ended in two months, and all I had to show for it was this very strange little Jewish play. What was going to happen to it? Would anyone ever want to see it? Or had I just wasted this residency? Why did I think I could be a writer in the first place? What was I going to do with the rest of my life? And what exactly was the meaning of life? And also... well, you get the idea.

Near the end of dinner, my Dad asked, "So, is this play any good?" and I don't know what came over me, but I reached into my backpack, pulled out the copy I'd printed and said, "I don't know, Dad. You tell me." And somehow, my lawyer-father and psychology-grad-student-sister morphed into actors, and we began to read.

My mom was planning to come to the reading at The Lark, and didn't want to hear it beforehand, so she went upstairs. But my father and my sister and I sat around the table and read the play aloud to each other. And though it was raw, and sloppy, and in disarray, it was also exciting. At that point, it was almost irrelevant whether any external validation ever came. What I needed most was to feel that I wasn't completely insane for wanting to be a writer. All writers are fragile, but young writers are especially so. Having the weight of my family behind me was essential; reading my play for me, taking me seriously, was an un-repayable gift my family gave to me that night. ``

MAKING CONNECTIONS: Have you ever created a piece of art or creative writing? How did your family influence it? How did you feel about sharing it?

ACT III

OUR PRODUCTION

BAD JEWS

by **JOSHUA HARMON**
directed by **TONY ESTRELLA***

SET DESIGN
Patrick Lynch[△]

COSTUME DESIGN
Jessie Darrell Jarbadan

LIGHTING DESIGN
David Roy

SOUND DESIGN
Peter Sasha Hurowitz

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT
Jessica Hill Kidd

STAGE MANAGEMENT
Kelsey Emry*

THE COMPANY

Daphna	Sarah Corey*
Liam	John Hardin*
Jonah	Hillel Rosenshine
Melody	Nora Eschenheimer*

CREATIVE TEAM

Assistant to the Director	Autumn Jefferson
Assistant Stage Manager	James Kane*
Technical Director	Max Ramirez
Assistant Technical Director	Alex Eizenberg
Production Assistant	Omar Laguerre-Lewis
Master Electrician	Alex Foley
Electricians	Audrey Visscher, Alex MacBeth
Carpenters	Nola Fox, Eddy Tavares

*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

TIP:

Before coming to the theater, discuss with your students the various professions in the theater. It takes more than just actors! When they arrive, ask them to notice evidence of those professions at work.

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I can tell you that I personally have struggled with my hair. It took me a very long time to figure out how to get nice, reliable curls. I used to brush my hair as often as Daphna does, and brushing and curly hair do not mix. Hair gets BIG. Hair gets unruly. Hair gets wild and frizzy and essentially keeps growing in volume and messiness! And all of those things are certainly metaphors for Daphna. Like her hair, Daphna is also hard to tame.

It's been exhilarating and terrifying! And so much damn fun! Daphna seems to almost only talk in "arias." I first had to figure out what Daphna intends to say before she stops herself and switches gears mid-sentence. Otherwise I'm just playing at talking fast, rather than letting my thoughts flow and expand, and allowing for the proper emotional and intellectual shifts. Which, of course, is what being an actor is all about!

I think that Daphna believes a “bad Jew” is anyone who is ashamed of their Judaism, particularly if they are openly ashamed, if they look down on other Jews, if they make fun of Jewish traditions, or if they try to distance themselves from being identified as Jewish. At best, she thinks this leads to friction within family and community. At worst, it means another ethnic cleansing or a biological elimination of the Jewish race and culture through diluted bloodlines.

6

I mean, this could be my family. Sometimes, I think it is! We're not as vitriolic to each other's faces. But these characters and the ones we hear about certainly remind me of people I know and love very well...and of myself! So far, I personally have not been involved in any inheritance arguments nearly this impassioned. I wanted Grandma's omelet pan and no one objected! Sure, we've bickered over sleeping arrangements. And I've of course had heated discussions with my brother and youngest sibling, with whom I'm exceedingly close. But our arguments were never so violent, likely not as eloquent, and they happened during our more intemperate childhood and teenage years.

I grew up in a mixed Jewish/Lebanese Christian household and both traditions were important to us. That is a huge difference between me and Daphna. Also, I have a tattoo! I do relate to the coming together in the same space after the death of a loved one or to celebrate a holiday or joyful occasion in a similarly close, chaotic setting. I've been there many, many times. And with great love, often comes great conflict, especially in times of grief, trauma and upheaval. There have been tensions both big and small around illness, death and dying in my family on both sides. Of course there is also great tenderness, and great loyalty in my family and in the Feygenbaum-Haber family of *Bad Jews*.

And on both sides, particularly on my mom's Jewish one, we have LOTS of cousins. Mom's generation, my generation, and the next generation are all very close to our cousins because we grew up together. In fact, one Passover or Thanksgiving we drew family trees to try to figure out exactly what the labels were for every relationship: Are we first cousins? Second cousins? First cousins once removed? It's complicated math!

Some people in my family are exceedingly observant, some moderately, some barely. Sometimes the same people shift over time and not always in a linear way. People have differing opinions about Israel. We have different economic situations, both past and present. There is GREAT humor and great intelligence. Family events are huge and loud.

I adored my Grandma and Pop on mom's side and my Grammy on my dad's side. I was actually in the room when Pop died in the family home. Like Daphna's family, my close relatives had come from far and wide to be there in his final days. I was sleeping upstairs when Grandma died in the same room that he did. I so intimately recognize the energy of this family, the love of this family, the volume of this family, the effervescence of this family, the sarcasm of this family, the way this family shares stories. I can relate to the food and jokes, ideas and traditions, grief and joy, good and bad habits, gossip and irritability, insults and compliments, and long, in-depth conversations about what it means to be Jewish. And why that matters. Or why it should.

I said in rehearsal, I'd be curious to know where Liam and Daphna will be in 20 years. Sometimes families grow closer over time. Sometimes they grow apart. Sometimes they have irrevocable and swift fallings out. Sometimes they reconcile. I've seen all these things in my family. I think I'll always wonder about Liam and Daphna. Working on this play has really made me appreciate my whole, wonderful, crazy, brilliant family, and my ever-expanding knowledge about my Jewish heritage.

7

WHY *BAD JEWS* IS GOOD THEATER

BY DIRECTOR TONY ESTRELLA

Joshua Harmon's *Bad Jews* is an irreverent, provocative, and ironic title for a powerful, dark comedy about faith, culture, and the nature of our debt to both family and history. In a Wall Street Journal interview, the author talked about his inspiration for the play:

"When I was in college I went to a Holocaust memorial service. I had been to many growing up, but the theme of this service was grandchildren of survivors. So instead of having a survivor speak, it was my peers at college talking about their grandparents' experiences, and I found it really unmoving. I think there's just something that happens when you're an eyewitness to something that imbues you the power to tell that story, even if you're not a natural-born storyteller. So to hear the story from someone who wasn't there. It just didn't carry the same kind of weight, and it scared me. So I left feeling a little shaken up."

This play was written and premiered 10 years ago at a time of relative stability compared to the increasing waves of anti-Semitic violence and attacks both here and around the world over the intervening decade. There's a line late in the play where the devoutly religious and stridently committed Daphna says to her decidedly secular cousin, Liam, "And so now when it's easier to be Jewish than it has ever been in the history of the world, now when it's safest, now we should all stop?"

That line resonates very differently in 2023 — its potent irony making the play even more powerful today than it was a decade ago. It is impossible now not to hear history's stark warning against moral complacency. The potential for the darkest in humanity never quite disappears. Its shadow lingers and looms larger the more we ignore it. But rather than date the play as irrelevant, Daphna's naivete makes *Bad Jews* even more resonant and reminds us of the vigilance necessary to keep the worst in us at bay.

Despite the deliberately provocative — and ironic — nature of the title, *Bad Jews* is a testament to the fact that no one person is a monolith; that there is little agreement in any culture about who or what constitutes the "good" or the "bad." There is no consensus on either the nature of our debt to the past or our aspirations for the future.

Bad Jews is a play about the power of identity, both its obligations and its limitations. The characters, as in life, are unpredictable and a mystery even to themselves. And they are not always likable, even as they make us laugh. Like all of us, they are complex, deeply human and struggling to understand and be understood.

Like the best of comedies, *Bad Jews* uses uproarious humor to both entertain and unsettle. The play remains, 10 years on, a moving and deeply sensitive work — all the more so because it is unafraid to ask what makes us "good" and "bad." *Bad Jews* suggests that, for most of us, that is a vexing and open question.

Tony Estrella, Gamm Artistic Director

DIGGING DEEPER: What obligations and limitations exist for you and your identity? Do certain pieces of your identity offer more of one or the other?

CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This production and supplement specifically addresses Rhode Island Curriculum Frameworks in Social Studies:

16-22-22. Genocide and human rights education.

C&G 5 (9-12)-2a. Students demonstrate an understanding of the benefits and challenges of an interconnected world by describing the interconnected nature of a contemporary or historical issue

C&G 5 (9-12)-2b. Students demonstrate an understanding of the benefits and challenges of an interconnected world by analyzing and evaluating a contemporary or historical issue

HP 1 (Ext) -2a. Students interpret history as a series of connected events with multiple cause-effect relationships, by analyzing cause and effect relationships.



ACT IV

BEFORE THE SHOW

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Bad Jews is a play about the concepts of faith and legacy, but it also relies on Judaism and its customs to tell its story. Before seeing the show, go over these ideas and terms with the students so that they have some context to better understand the story that is being presented.

WHAT IS JUDAISM?

Judaism is the oldest of the three Abrahamic religions, which also include Christianity and Islam. Jews believe in a single God, follow the teachings detailed in the Torah (also known as the Old Testament), and bring religious respect and reverence to their everyday lives.

WHO IS A RABBI?

The word “rabbi” translates from the Hebrew word for “teacher.” Rabbis are the spiritual leaders of the Jewish community, and offer religious counsel and support. They must receive ordination and be educated in halacha, or Jewish law.

WHAT ARE THE JEWISH HIGH HOLIDAYS?

Rosh Hashanah, a two-day celebration of the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, are the most important holidays of the year. Most Jews attend services at a synagogue or temple on these days. The two holidays are separated by 10 days, and each begins at sundown. Rosh Hashanah is a time to spend with family, prepare for the coming year, and share large meals together. Yom Kippur is a day to reflect on past mistakes, make amends, and consider ways to better oneself in the future. People often fast, and then partake in a large meal with family and friends at night.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A JEWISH FUNERAL?

Jewish funerals traditionally take place as soon as possible after the person dies, as it is considered more respectful to the deceased to avoid unnecessary delays. The casket will be closed and there will be no viewing of the deceased during funerary services. The service includes readings from the Torah and a eulogy.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “SIT SHIVA”?

Shiva is the traditional mourning period of seven days where mourners receive condolence calls from family and friends. The term “sitting shiva” refers to the tradition of mourners sitting on low chairs, stools, or boxes, representative of how their loss has laid them low. A candle is lit when the family returns home from the cemetery, and is left burning for the week.

WHY WOULD A JEWISH PERSON WANT TO MOVE TO ISRAEL?

The word Aliyah is derived from the Hebrew word “laalot”, which means to go up or ascend, in a spiritual sense. When someone makes Aliyah, they have chosen to emigrate and live in Israel, a symbolic return home after the Biblical Diaspora. A person who makes this move is referred to as an Oleh, or someone who goes up (to Israel). People who make Aliyah are often looking to uphold their Jewish national identity.

GLOSSARY OF HEBREW AND JEWISH TERMS IN THE PLAY

Hora · An Israeli dance in which the performers form a ring

JCC · Jewish Community Center

Kablooie · An imaginative rendition of ‘an explosion’ or ‘splash’

King James Bible · An English translation of the Christian Bible for the Church of England, begun in 1604 and completed in 1611

Menorah · A candelabrum used in Jewish worship, typically with eight branches

Aliyah · The immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel, one of the most basic beliefs of Zionism

Anti-Semite · Someone who has prejudice toward the Jewish people as a religious, racial, or cultural group

Chai · A Hebrew word for ‘live’ or ‘living’ that figures prominently in Jewish culture

Haifa · The largest city in North-western Israel

Hillel Club · A student group that serves the Jewish students on campus

Passover · A Jewish festival commemorating the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt

Seder · A Jewish ritual service and ceremonial dinner for the first night or first two nights of Passover

Shofars · A ram’s-horn trumpet formerly used by Jews as an ancient battle signal and now used in Jewish religious ceremonies

Slichá · Hebrew for ‘Excuse me, Sorry’

Rabbi · The spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation or synagogue

Shiksa · (Used especially by Jews) A non-Jewish woman or girl

Shiva · A traditional period of mourning in Judaism that lasts one week for the immediate family

ACT V

AFTER THE SHOW EXTENSION ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

THE FAMILY GLOSSARY

What traditions, phrases, and words does your family use? Create a glossary of terms, ideas, and events that would help a newcomer to your family understand the formal and informal traditions that you have.

DIGGING DEEPER: With a small group, improvise; or on your own, write; a scene that utilizes several of the terms from your family glossary. You might use a similar situation to what you see in “Bad Jews”.

THE OBJECT OF VALUE

Think about something, an object, that has emotional and sentimental value to you and perhaps your family - something that may be passed down from generation to generation. Research the story of this object by talking to family members.

DIGGING DEEPER: Write a monologue that shares the story of your Object of Value. Share the stories in your class.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

“Bad Jews” is a loaded title for a play. Why do you think the playwright, Joshua Harmon, insisted on this title? Having seen the show, do you think it is appropriate for the play? Why or why not?

DIGGING DEEPER: Brainstorm other loaded titles of films, novels, and shows. How do striking titles impact an audience?

RESOURCES

From Jewish Rhode Island, “The Play Behind the Title”

<https://www.jewishrhody.com/stories/bad-jews-at-the-gamm-the-play-behind-the-title,28551>

From WBUR Boston Public Radio:

<https://www.wbur.org/news/2014/10/28/bad-jews-speakeasy>

From The Jewish Chronicle:

<https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/all/welcome-back-bad-jews-6UuktlfGwYY9yQRTPdHoaa>

ACT VI

EPILOGUE

THANK YOU!

Thank you for joining us for *Bad Jews* and for working with this Study Guide to expand your theatrical and educational experiences. Please be in touch if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *Bad Jews*.

Our Education Department provides classes and camps for students and adults. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm!

To book a matinee, contact Brittany at brittany@gammtheatre.org 401-723-4266 ext. 112. To learn more about Gamm Education, find us on the web at www.gammtheatre.org or reach Sarah Ploskina at 401-723-4266 ext. 111.



COMING NEXT

APR 27 - MAY 14

THE CHILDREN

BY LUCY KIRKWOOD



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