Oh, God
A DIVINE COMEDY

By ANAT GOV
Directed by MICHAEL BLOOM

STUDY GUIDE
SEASON FOUR
Part of the Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival
Introduction

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.”—Augusto Boal

The purpose and goal of Mosaic’s education department is simple. Our program aims to further and cultivate students’ knowledge and passion for theatre and theatre education. We strive for complete and exciting arts engagement for educators, artists, our community, and all learners in the classroom. Mosaic’s education program yearns to be a conduit for open discussion and connection to help students understand how theatre can make a profound impact in their lives, in society, and in their communities.

Mosaic Theater Company of DC is thrilled to have your interest and support!

Catherine Chmura
Arts Education Apprentice—Mosaic Theater Company of DC

Written by Catherine Chmura and Shirley Serotsky
PRESENTS

Mosaic Theater Company of DC

PRESENTS

OH, GOD

By Anat Gov
Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Berris and Margalit Rodgers
Directed by Michael Bloom

Set Designer: Jonathan Dahm Robertson
Lighting Designer: Brittany Shemuga
Costume Designer: Kelsey Hunt
Sound Designer: Roc Lee
Sound Engineer: Robert Garner
Properties Designer: Michelle Elwyn
Resident Dramaturg: Shirley Serotsky
Assistant Director: Jean-Daniel Chablais

Production Stage Manager: C. Renee Alexander*

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About the Artists

Anat Gov (1953-2012) (Playwright) was one of the foremost playwrights at the Cameri Theatre and in Israeli theatre. In the past decade her plays have been performed on the Cameri’s stages: Happy Ending (2011), A Warm Family (2009), Oh, My God! (2008), Househusband (2004), Lysistrata 2000 (2001), and Best Friends (1999). Anat Gov was born in 1953 in Tiberias. She was married, and had three children and two granddaughters. She graduated the Theatre Track at the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, and did her army service in the Nahal Entertainment Troupe. She studied at the Tel Aviv University Department of Theatre Arts. Writing for television: Zehu Ze (Educational TV, 1981-1991), Yes, What? (comedy series, Channel One), Evening With Gov (Channel Two), and Best Friends (drama series, HOT). Writing for theatre: Love to Death (1991, Jerusalem Khan Theatre), Best Friends (1999, Cameri Theatre), which won the 2000 Israeli Theatre Award for Best Comedy, Lysistrata 2000 (2001, Cameri Theatre), Opposing Sides, a joint project of Israeli and Palestinian playwrights for Theater Heilbronn in Germany (2003), Househusband (Cameri Theatre), which won the 2004 Israeli Theatre Award for Best Comedy, The Troupe, a stage adaptation of the musical (2007, Habima National Theatre), Oh, My God! (2008, Cameri Theatre), A Warm Family (2009, Cameri Theatre), Happy Ending (2012, Cameri Theatre). Translations: Via Dolorosa by David Hare, and Mother Courage by Bertolt Brecht (Cameri Theatre). She was a columnist for the daily Yedioth Ahronoth, and one of the founders of the Ezrat Nashim organization for victims of sexual assault. She was married, had three children, two granddaughters, and died in 2012 at the age of 58.

Michael Bloom (Director) directed The Promised Land in Mosaic Season 1. Former artistic director of Cleveland Play House. Most recently directed The Invisible Hand at Olney Theatre Center, as well as The Price. Off-Broadway he directed the NY premiere of Sight Unseen at Manhattan Theatre Club (Drama desk nomination). Regional work includes Gross Indecency (Elliot Norton Award, Best production) at Huntington Theatre Company and the premiere of Dinner with Friends at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Other theatres include Williamstown Theatre Festival, South Coast Rep, Berkeley Rep, Old Globe Theatre, Long Wharf Theatre, Milwaukee Rep, Geffen Playhouse, Paper Mill Playhouse, Kansas City Rep, and Seattle Rep. In Tokyo: The Glass Menagerie and The Miracle Worker. Writings: Jane Austen’s Emma (Samuel French), Nathan The Wise and Thinking Like a Director.
Activities Before the Play

**EDUCATORS:** To best prepare your students for your trip to Mosaic Theater Company of DC, consider these Pre Show Activities that you can do together in class.

**MUSIC LISTENING:** Take a listen to our generated Spotify playlist to help set the tone and the mood for the play: [https://spoti.fi/2rni2jZ](https://spoti.fi/2rni2jZ).

Curriculum Connections

**DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS** Taken from the DCPS Scope and Sequence Matrix for the 2018-2019 School Year

- **Grade Level 12 (UNIT 4): The Rhetoric of Humor**
  This unit focuses on the questions: what is humor? What makes a text humorous? How do authors use humor to shape the audience's perspectives or feelings about an issue or topic?
Synopsis

In this witty and touching play, a psychotherapist named Ella, single mother of an autistic child, gets a visit from a new and desperate patient: God. The late Anat Gov was known as Israel’s Wendy Wasserstein, and in her gently veiled analogy, Ella and God must learn to help each other—after all, God is suffering from having accrued too much power, while Ella has lost whatever faith (in God) she might have had. As both battle low-grade depression, the fate of the world may just hang in the balance! With a clash of biblical quotes framed by a modern-day wit, Gov brings a funny, often brilliant text that forces us to confront our own issues of faith, hubris, and the overwhelming power of humility.
Characters

KIMBERLY SCHRAF as
Ella
A 42-year-old psychologist and single mother of Lior

SEAN MCCOY as
Lior
a 16-year-old boy with autism

MITHCELL HÉBERT as
God
Anat Gov's play Oh, God introduces us to a witty, slightly wounded Creator who is quick with a punch line but loath to self-reflect. The play poses an extraordinary question: What if God dwelt amongst us mortals? What if God sought the counsel of a very human therapist, hoping to remedy his own feelings of hopelessness and despair? What if God used numerous Torah (or Biblical, or Koranic—depending on your point of entry) references to dissect and analyze his relationship with his most valued, and likewise most exasperating, creation—humanity? This interpretation positions the play in a literary tradition that includes both highbrow (John Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost) and low (George Burns' comedic 1970s film Oh, God!, which shares a title with, but is otherwise unrelated to our play). It's amusing for humans, who have long believed that they were created in God's image, to imagine God created in humans' image. We're delighted to meet a God that is slightly awkward, somewhat neurotic, a bit narcissistic, and propelled by an endless series of questions and mysteries.

Gov (1953-2012) became one of Israel's most prolific and popular playwrights by rooting relevant, often politically progressive, themes and debates within deeply human, remarkably humane stories. She always included a liberal dose of humor: the spoonful of sugar that helped the important message go down. “Humor,” Gov insisted in an interview about her final play Happy End, which tells the story of a woman who liberates herself from the helplessness of cancer by taking treatment into her own hands and refusing invasive therapies, “is the best medicine there is—better than all the medical therapies—and it's free.” Happy End, like many of Gov's plays, reflected the author's personal experiences: Gov passed away at the age of 58 after an extended battle with cancer. Unlike her protagonist, she engaged in every possible option proposed by doctors. “I did not write a play about myself,” she explained in her final interview, with agent Arik Kneller, “but about someone I would have liked to be.” She also acknowledged that the treatments allowed her to be present for three additional productions and the births of her two granddaughters, for which she was deeply grateful.

Her funeral was a celebratory experience (very much by her own design) that drew the Israeli arts community, politicians, and other glitterati together to honor her remarkable life and accomplishments. Gov insisted that it be a joyous affair, a chance for the people she held dear to come together to share and reminisce. Reflecting on the experience of helping Gov plan her funeral, Rabbi Moti Bar-Or, director of the Kolot Torah study institution, eulogized directly to her specter, “You weren't afraid of death. You felt the end was approaching and wanted to leave without an iota of fear...”
There’s an alternate read of *Oh, God* that goes beyond the theology and scripture to dip into Gov’s own fearless politics; one that analyzes God and his use of power from the perspective of a progressive Israeli. In that same interview, which took place days before Anat Gov’s death, she explained that, “God is found in the attitude to the other, to the weak, that is what I believe, that is my God, that is the God I believe in.” Gov’s vision of a compassionate and empathic God mirrored her desires for a fully evolved Jewish state; this was not, she made clear, what she was experiencing in Israel. “This has become the index of Israel—strength instead of spirit; this is what has happened to the State, admiration of power,” she lamented. “You see these generals, how they talk and you are shocked…so we have become admirers of power and truly we have a strong army and that is important, but appearances are not everything. The strongest empires in history fell and it was the Jews who survived two thousand years in exile without any strength, just because of spirit, as the song says...”

In *Oh, God* Ella chastises God, accusing him, “You’ve got a problem of violence. You’ve gotten used to solving everything with ‘a strong hand and an outstretched arm’. You don’t want people to love you, you want them to fear you. Your blazing wrath, your raging anger!” Her allegations reflect the playwright’s own challenge to her nation, a nation she cherished and helped to build. “I am in love with this country and I was brought up by parents who founded the state,” Gov maintained. “I am the seventh generation in this country and I had the hope that there would be a good state here, a humane one that would be a light unto the nations, that would behave well towards the weak, the minorities, foreign workers, refugees.” Gov expected more of Israel, just as Ella expects more of God. Ella praises God when he admits he can no longer punish his greatest creation, humanity, with fire and brimstone, wrath and destruction. She evokes her own vision of an ideal world, one in which God is “abounding in loving kindness, merciful and gracious...towards us.” Is this description the playwright’s own vision for a fully realized Israel, one that leans into L-O-V-E and compassion? We’ll leave that up to you to decide.

The play starts and ends with love. Ella’s love for her son, her love for her life’s work, and her eventual, if complicated, love for her new patient and the flawed world he has devised. And of course, we experience the character of God’s deep and limitless love for the messy, remarkable, amazing, delightful, flawed, and complicated creation of humanity. This feels like an apt message as we enter the holiday season: let us all aspire to start and end with love as well.

*Shirley Serotsky, Resident Dramaturg*
Discussion Themes

Existentialism: The Quest for Philosophical Inquiry
Creativity from Creation: Religious Imagery in the Arts and Literature
Women in Israeli Theatre: Roles, Writers, and Reflection
Israeli Theatre Today: Current Themes and Ideas on Israeli Stages
Depression and Our Neural Circuits
In the Analyst's Chair: A Psychological Perspective
Biblical Stories: Phrases vs. Interpretations
Autism in Families
“A Blameless and Upright Man”: The Book of Job (An Interfaith Conversation)

Activities After the Play

SCENE STUDY

In this scene of Oh, God, we see Ella trying to evaluate why G has come to her, just who he is exactly, and why her?

G: It's a nice room. The garden in the entrance, too. I was very impressed.
ELLA: Thank you. Now, let's start at the beginning. I'm Ella.
G: Ella?
ELLA: After the Hebrew name of the tree, not the Hebrew "goddess".
G: Ah.
ELLA: And you? (her notebook at the ready)
G: Me?
ELLA: What's your name?
G: I am who I am.
ELLA: That's obvious. But you must have a name.
G: You can carry on calling me G.
ELLA: Look, if you're worried about publicity I can assure you of complete confidentiality. I've got some well-known patients and they know that all their secrets remain in this room...
G: The name is really immaterial. Call me whatever you like. Just choose a name and I'll answer to it.
ELLA: No problem, we'll come back to that. Do you want to tell me how old you are?
G: Five thousand seven hundred and sixty-eight... next week.
ELLA: Aha. Yes, I sometimes feel that way too. So... what do you do? What's your profession?
SCENE STUDY  continued

G:  (Pause) You can write... artist.
ELLA:  (Raising her head from her notebook and looking at him) Is that why you didn't want to tell me your name? You're... well known.
G:  Pretty well known.
ELLA:  I'm sorry, I don't see an awful lot of television, most of the time I watch Shrek.
G:  That's all right.
ELLA:  A creative or a performing artist?
G:  Both.
ELLA:  In what sphere? Painting, writing, musi... 
G:  In all spheres.
ELLA:  Ah, multi...?
G:  Yes. Multi.
ELLA:  Interesting.
G:  Yes, interesting.
ELLA:  Do you want to tell me what happened? What brought you to me?
G remains silent.
ELLA:  On the phone I heard a kind of distress?
G remains silent.
ELLA:  If it's difficult for you we can begin with something else. Would you like to begin by telling me something about yourself? Or about your parents?
G:  My parents?
ELLA:  Your parents. You know, sometimes it's easier to start from the parents. For instance, what kind of father did you have?
G:  I didn't.
ELLA:  He died?
G:  He never existed.
ELLA:  I see. So you were raised just by your mother?
G:  There's no mother either.
ELLA:  No mother?
G:  No mother.
ELLA:  From what age?
G:  From time immemorial.
ELLA:  An orphan from birth?
G:  An orphan from birth.
ELLA:  Were you ever in therapy?
G:  No.
ELLA:  You could have saved yourself so many years of suffering. Never mind, better late than never.
G:  It might already be too late.
ELLA:  It's never too late to make a change.
G:  You're optimistic.
ELLA:  Always.
SCENE STUDY continued

G: I know.
ELLA: What else do you know about me?
G: I know everything.
ELLA: Everything?
G: Every – thing.
ELLA: By what right? How? What? Have I been under surveillance? How long have I been under surveillance?
G: Calm down, nobody’s been following you.
ELLA: All right, look, I feel very uncomfortable with what’s going on here. I don’t think I can treat you.
G: You’re dropping me?
ELLA: It just seems to me that it won’t work, you see. The starting point where you’ve already investigated me makes me feel very uncomfortable. I have to be honest with you, I’m not coming into this dialogue clean, and that’s a very unpromising start for therapy. (she gets up) I’ll be happy to recommend somebody...
G: Wait! Sit down a moment. (she stops) Please… just listen to me. That’s all I ask… I’ve got to talk to somebody… or… something terrible will happen.
ELLA: What do you mean, ‘something terrible’?
G: Something extremely terrible.
ELLA: On condition that you tell me the truth.
G: Whatever you want to know.
ELLA: For instance, who are you?
G: I can’t tell you who I am.
ELLA: Perhaps you don’t want to tell me...
G: I can’t!
ELLA: Why not?
G: Because you won’t believe me.
ELLA: Try me!
G: I’m God.
Pause.
ELLA: I see. (Her tone of voice changes. She speaks to him as if to a retarded child) How long have you felt like this?
G: Like what?
ELLA: Like God.
G: I don’t feel like God.
ELLA: Thank the Lord, for a moment I thought that you said...
G: I am God.
ELLA: Aha. Listen, I’d very much like to help you, truly, I sense that you’re in serious distress...
G: You have no idea.
ELLA: But with all the will in the world I don’t think I’m the right person to treat you. I’m a psychologist not a psychiatrist, I’m not licensed to prescribe medication.

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Questions:
1. Describe the relationship between Ella and G. How did you and your scene partner express that relationship through vocal tone, body language, etc.?
2. What does G want in this scene and what are they feeling?
3. What does Ella want in this scene and what are they feeling?
4. What is the flow of the scene? Where does the scene pick up and slow down? Why?
5. Discuss the difference of the length of the lines for each character. Why do you think one character speaks more than the other?
6. What can you and your scene partner change or add to make the scene more believable and dynamic?

ARTS EDUCATION ESSAY/EXPLORATION

Religious Imagery and Pop Culture

Throughout Oh, God, the audience is painted several pictures of biblical stories through both the lens of God himself and Ella. They talk about these stories in the traditional and religious context but we have seen religious imagery in various ways through pop culture. Music, television, movies, theatre, dance, and visual art have been using biblical stories and imagery for centuries and it’s still evident centuries later in pop culture today.

Music: Madonna, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, Beyonce

Movies: Romeo and Juliet, The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Theater (Plays and Musicals): Jesus Christ Superstar, Fiddler on the Roof

Visual Art: The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo (1512), Flee From Egypt-Moses Parting The Red Sea by Reverend Albert Lee Wagner

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CREATIVE ARTS EXPRESSION
Throughout the play, we see that Ella's son Lior uses creative mediums like art and music to not only express himself and communicate but we see him using his artistic gifts as creative expression. Using a creative art medium (visual art, creative writing, dance, music, theatre, etc.) create something to help you communicate an idea or a feeling you have had trouble communicating through words. Think about how you feel when creating this work of art. How does it make you feel to be able to express yourself creatively without the use of words? Do you enjoy that your art can be interpreted in different ways by different people?

IN DISCUSSION - MENTAL HEALTH AND PROMOTING WELLNESS
In many ways, mental health is just like physical health: everybody has it and we need to take care of it. In the world today, many people from all walks of life deal with mental health issues as mental health problems affect around one in four people in any given year.

Wellness—In its pure definition, wellness is the state of being in good health, especially as an actively pursued goal, but when we say “good health” we don’t just mean physically. Both mental wellness and physical wellness goes hand in hand. In order to keep these balanced, there are lots of things to can do to promote self wellness. Yoga, mediation, and breathing exercises are all great examples of how to balance both your mind and body. Try finding a wellness app on your smartphone and use it for a week straight. Record or write down how you feel using it throughout the week and the results might surprise you!

Discuss with your class ways that you can keep yourself mentally healthy and strong. How can we as a society promote wellness and mental hygiene for all? What are some healthy ways that you can help yourself and others combat mental health issues?

Isaiah: Isaiah was an 8th-century BC Jewish prophet for whom the Book of Isaiah is named. He was the son of Amoz and a member of the royal family; he is recognized for providing instructions and guidance for moral renewal and world peace.

Abraham: According to Jewish beliefs, God promised a nomad leader (then called Abram) that he would be the father of a great people if he did as God told him. Jews regard Abraham (as he became known) as the first Patriarch of the Jewish people. Abraham taught that there was only one God; before then, people believed in multiple gods. Muslims recognize Abraham as Ibrahim, an important prophet of their faith.

The Golden Calf: According to the Torah and the Old Testament, the golden calf was an idol (an image or representation of a god used as an object of worship) made by the Israelites while Moses was up on Mount Sinai. In Hebrew, the incident is known as ḥēṭ' ha'ēggel or “The Sin of the Calf”.

Song of Songs: A collection of love poems that make up a book in the Jewish Scriptures and the Roman Catholic canon of the Old Testament, and corresponds to the Song of Solomon in the Protestant canon of the Old Testament.

Adam and Eve: According to the creation stories of the Abrahamic religions, Adam and Eve were the first man and woman. In Genesis, God fashioned Adam from dust and placed him in the Garden of Eden. Adam was told that he could eat freely of all the trees in the garden, except for a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God created Eve from one of Adam’s ribs to be Adam’s companion; when a serpent tricked Eve into eating fruit from the forbidden tree, they gained a recognition of the concepts of shame and evil.

Cain and Abel: In Genesis, Cain and Abel were the first two sons of Adam and Eve. When Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to God and Cain perceived that Abel’s pleased God more than his did, Cain murdered his brother out of jealousy.

The Book of Job: A book in the Ketuvim section of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and the first poetic book in the Old Testament, it starts with a wager between Satan and God, in which Satan bets God that Job—a pious man—will abandon his faith and curse God if his wealth and blessings are taken away. As a test, Job suffered many losses, including his children and his health, but he still refused to speak against God. Later, Job’s attitude shifts, and he begins to curse his existence. Job asks God to respond to the charge of injustice, and God speaks back to him. The book closes with an epilogue much as it began, as though Job had not uttered a single negative word; he recovers and is given a new family.

Mossad: When the State of Israel was declared, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, established the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (HaMossad LeModi’în U’LeTafkidim Meyuchadim), known as the Mossad. While the Mossad handles a wide variety of tasks and assignments, they are best known for: gathering intelligence beyond Israel’s borders; developing and maintaining special diplomatic and other covert relations with countries that avoid overt contact with Israel; preventing terrorist acts against Israeli targets abroad; producing strategic, political and operational intelligence; and, especially in earlier decades, pursuing Nazi war criminals with the goal of bringing them to justice in a court of law.

Security Services: The Israel Security Agency, better known by the acronym Shabak or the Shin Bet, is Israel’s internal security service. It is one of three principal organizations of the Israeli intelligence community, alongside Aman and the Mossad.

Shrek: A film, that was released in 2001, about an ogre named Shrek who attempts to preserve his existence, and the lives of his fairy tale cohorts, and ends up falling in love with the one-of-a-kind Princess Fiona in the process.
Qualitative PDD Impairment: Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) refers to a group of disorders characterized by delays in the development of multiple basic functions including communication and socialization. The three main markers of PDD include a pattern of restrictive, repetitive behavior, interests and activities; a qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction; and a qualitative impairment in verbal and nonverbal communication or functioning. Autism is considered to be one type of PDD but there are several other types, including PDD not otherwise specified (NOS), and atypical autism.

Learning Disabilities: The term "learning disabilities" is an umbrella term used to describe an array of learning disorders. A learning disability is a neurobiological condition that affects the manner in which individuals retain and express information, causing incoming or outgoing information to become jumbled as it travels between the senses and the brain.

Psychologist's Oath: Physicians take an oath written by the Greek philosopher Hippocrates two and a half millennia ago. The ethics pledge requires doctors to promise, "I will take care that [patients] suffer no hurt or damage". Because psychologists (and other kinds of therapists) do not attend medical school, they do not officially commit to the same principles.

Overseas Filipino Workers: There are about 30,000 Filipino caregivers (legal and illegal) living and working in Israel. Home care workers from the Philippines were initially brought in to the country by Israel's Defense Ministry to care for disabled soldiers; they now make up the majority of the field in Israel, so much so that the word "Filipina" has become synonymous in Hebrew with "metapelet" — "caregiver."

Shekels: The basic monetary unit of modern Israel; right now there are about 3.5 shekels = 1 US$.

Cassuto: Born in Florence in 1883, Umberto Cassuto came from a traditionalist Jewish family, rooted in the Florence Jewish community. He was educated at the University of Florence, where he completed his studies in 1906, and the Rabbinical College, where he was ordained in 1908. Cassuto is mainly known for his contribution to biblical studies, which focused on the existing text, analyzing its spiritual and ethical teachings, pointing out its literary devices, and discussing its potential interpretations.

Rashi: Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Shlomo Yitzhaki), known as Rashi, was one of the most influential Jewish commentators of all time. He was born in northern France in 1040 and he received an education in the yeshiva of Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar. His best-known works are his commentaries on the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud, in fact, all editions of the Talmud published since the 1520s have included Rashi's commentary. His analyses are a significant element of Jewish education to this day; and are often taught simultaneously with the Torah when students begin learning in yeshivas and Jewish day schools.

The Creation of Adam: a fresco painting by Michelangelo, which forms part of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. It was painted from 1508 to 1512 and it illustrates the Biblical creation narrative from the Book of Genesis in which God gives life to Adam.
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