

ALMEIDA THEATRE MACHINAL

**BY SOPHIE TREADWELL
DIRECTED BY NATALIE ABRAHAMI**

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RESOURCE PACK



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PLOT SUMMARY

“Your skin oughtn’t to curl - ought it - when he just comes near you- ought it? That’s wrong, ain’t it? You don’t get over that, do you - ever, do you or do you?”

The city. A woman is restless. A woman is suffocating. A woman is silenced.

The woman revolts.

Machinal follows the life of Young Woman who, constrained by a society that favours men and money, marries her employer despite not loving him. As we move through her life from marriage, to honeymoon, into motherhood and eventually an affair, the audience are asked to question if it is possible for women to live independently of men. It is the story of a woman battling the consequences of decisions she felt powerless to overturn, a woman who murders her husband to free herself from a suffocating marriage, a women finding agency in her life.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SOPHIE TREADWELL

The society that journalist, novelist and prolific playwright Sophie Treadwell inhabited was one in which it was still acceptable to write this:

“Even the best of our women playwrights falls considerably short of the mark of our best masculine... Why should it be that women, when it comes to the confection of drama, are most often inferior to their boy-friends?”

The critic George Jean Nathan wrote that in 1941, just after Treadwell's play *Hope for a Harvest* opened - and then closed two weeks later - on Broadway. It was her seventh and final Broadway production, a great three-act drama about a ranch that's failing because of cheap immigrant labour on neighbouring farms, and racist attitudes towards those neighbours. In the play Treadwell suggested that the future of America would be in embracing its immigrant population, not blaming it.

First, it was savaged by critics such as Nathan for being “overly simplistic”. Then Pearl Harbor happened, pushing xenophobia to a peak in the US and alienating Treadwell's audiences. After that the woman who had, in great bright bursts, expanded both the narrow confines of a deeply risk-averse Broadway and the form of playwriting retired from stage writing. She continued to write novels, a couple of one-acts, but American theatre was done with her, and she with it. When she died in 1970 the vast majority of her 39 plays were unpublished and unproduced, and Treadwell's influence on American theatre in the early twentieth century was almost forgotten.

Almost.

Born in 1885, America during Treadwell's life experienced staggering social and political upheaval - not that you'd have known it from the state of Broadway at the beginning of the 20th century. Theatre managers plumped for shows that had already proven successful in Europe, and particularly London. The box office was all that mattered.

The great American playwright Susan Glaspell, Treadwell's contemporary, wrote: “We went to the theater, and for the most part we came away wishing we had gone somewhere else...What was this ‘Broadway’ which could make a thing as interesting as life into a thing as dull as a Broadway play?”

Out of this stasis a group of frustrated artists coalesced around a movement they called ‘little theatre’, a proto-Off-Broadway scene, driven by the twin aims of exploring social issues, and using European and other influences to work towards a new American idiom.

One of these little theatres was the Provincetown Players, which secured its place in history for discovering Eugene O'Neill. In 1916 Glaspell, who founded the Players, wrote a play called *Trifles* while working as a journalist covering a murder trial. It explored how societal pressures could make a woman murder her husband while he slept.

In *Trifles* Glaspell challenged the narrative of cosy domesticity that prevailed in late 19th century literature and limited fictional women to the home. Glaspell burned that patriarchal narrative - and it's easy to see how Treadwell inherited the torch. Because twelve years later, working as a journalist covering the sensational, media-saturating trial of Ruth Snyder, Treadwell wrote *Machinal*. The parallels are uncanny.

With *Trifles* and then *Machinal*, Glaspell and Treadwell were the first women to develop a feminist aesthetic for theatre. The academic Jerry Dickey, who almost single-handedly rehabilitated Treadwell in the late 1980s, argues that not only was Treadwell putting women centre-stage, she was also writing specifically for women.

She had written about the oppression of women in her extensive journalism, even spending a period undercover as a homeless prostitute. But by foregrounding female characters in her fiction, and giving them depth at the expense of formal structure, Treadwell made it difficult to get her plays produced. They weren't seen as commercially viable. So in 1925, after a few years performing in vaudeville and with some one-acts under her belt, Treadwell just did it herself. Her comedy *O Nightingale* opened at the 49th Street Theatre on Broadway, and she directed, produced and acted in it.

By this time Treadwell was starting to experiment with form, and in the late twenties she caught the current of expressionism that had already found success in the European-influenced Little Theaters. Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* had premiered in 1920, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* in 1923. Alice Gerstenberg had written *Overtones* in 1913, Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* in 1921. There were also successes in European imports from Georg Kaiser, Franz Wedekind, Ernst Toller, August Strindberg, Franz Werfel. In 1928 Treadwell caught the movement's tail-end with *Machinal*.

Expressionism doesn't define neatly, nor is there much to unite the expressionist successes in Europe and America at the time, but broadly they privilege inner and subjective emotional states over representations of outer and objective reality. They employ symbols, often exaggerated, to give a nightmarish quality. Sounds and sound effects play a big part, as do short episodic scenes.

But *Machinal* was different. Treadwell wasn't simply aping expressionistic successes, nor latching onto a form that happened to be in vogue. Her triumph in *Machinal* is to have made expressionism mature by blending its European traits with the very American form of realism.

For previous great expressionist successes, the form was only a vehicle for a central political point. Treadwell's point, however, is that life for women had become like living in an expressionist play. Women were not allowed to be the protagonists in their own lives. They had to exist as objective beings for the pursuits and pleasures of men. Like *Jane Eyre*, Treadwell was asking "do you think I am an automaton? — a machine without feelings?" The best way to do that was through expressionist techniques. For Treadwell, the content drove the form, and the two meshed completely.

The play itself could almost be a metonym for expressionism in American theatre. On its London premiere in 1931, *The Times* described the play as "the sharp flashes of an expressionist lantern turned upon selected episodes". So it was with expressionism as a form: rather than being a sustained movement, expressionist successes such as *The Adding Machine* and *The Emperor Jones* were lantern flashes, and *Machinal* a last great flash that blew the bulb.

To read now, *Machinal* could be a long succession of tweets, or the aphoristic outpourings of some artificially intelligent robot with only a dictionary of English idioms installed in its mechanical mind. No wonder the critics - anachronistically - described the 1993 National Theatre revival as Pinteresque, and compared the language to Mamet and Beckett.

Machinal was a huge success on Broadway. Legendary New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson reviewed it twice, and Burns Mantle included it in his yearbook *Best Plays*. Treadwell never matched *Machinal*'s success, not in the three dozen other plays she wrote, or the novels, or the serials or articles. Her next play was a comedy of manners called *Ladies Leave*, and critics couldn't square its conventionality with *Machinal*'s daring.

Treadwell returned to expressionism one more time with *For Saxophone*. She tinkered with the play for seven years from 1934, and never published it. The bad timing and negative reception of *Hope for a Harvest* combined with the deaths of her husband and mother caused her to retreat. Although female characters remained at the forefront of her works, she returned to realism permanently.

But it's completely obvious, as *Machinal* shows, what a disservice history has done to her. In 1981 the academic Judith Barlow included *Machinal* in an anthology of plays by American women, and so began a slow resuscitation, still ongoing, that places Treadwell firmly in the canon - not just for *Machinal* but for the comedies and the realist dramas too, most of which are long overdue reanalysis and recognition.

In Treadwell's enormous back catalogue there is mediocrity, certainly. But in the history of playwriting there are many dramatists for whom, if they had written *Machinal*, it would be considered their crowning glory. These dramatists get biographies, revivals, reams of thought and criticism and analysis dedicated to their mediocrity. And Treadwell "has company in anonymity", as Barlow puts it. Josephine Preston Peabody, Alice Brown, Alice Gerstenberg, Rachel Crothers, Zona Gale - they all deserve another look.

It may be that Treadwell suffered from bad timing. She wrote expressionist plays after its popular peak, comedies when people wanted seriousness, pro-immigration pieces when her country was being whipped into xenophobia. She certainly suffered defeats and setbacks, and her attacks on the patriarchy were written in a period when almost all producers, directors and critics were men. These are failings of the age, not the person.

When we hear the quick and fragmented flow of speeches by Beckett, or the economy of Pinter's language, or the American idioms of Mamet; when we see theatrical experiments that put women at their forefront, like Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* or Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* or Ella Hickson's *The Writer*; even when we watch a big, brash musical like *Chicago*, which looks at the punitive existence of women whose fates are decided by men, all of them - consciously or indirectly - catch echoes of Sophie Treadwell and the extraordinary shout she delivered almost 100 years ago.

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SOPHIE TREADWELL AND RADICAL THEATRE

Sophie Treadwell drafted numerous versions of the *Machinal* script before she reached the final one. Here Resident Director Joseph Winters shares what it was like working with these drafts for the current production, and how the process gave him a true understanding of radical theatre and the power it has.

I love the word radical when approaching theatre because it means ‘going back to the root’. Ninety years and multiple productions stand between us at the Almeida and Sophie Treadwell sitting at her typewriter, working on her first drafts in 1928. And yet, Natalie Abrahami, who directed this production, was clear that we should try to get as close to Sophie Treadwell’s original writing process as possible. As we begin to assemble our rehearsal script, she told me, “when I’m working on a text with a playwright who can no longer be in the room giving notes, I always imagine she would be whispering in my ear, ‘Make my play seem like a new play.’” Luckily, all ten of Treadwell’s original drafts for *Machinal* are kept at the University of Arizona and one of Natalie’s first decisions was to get as many of these as possible scanned and sent through to us so that we could see how Sophie Treadwell crafted her play, and if there was anything we wanted to restore from earlier versions.

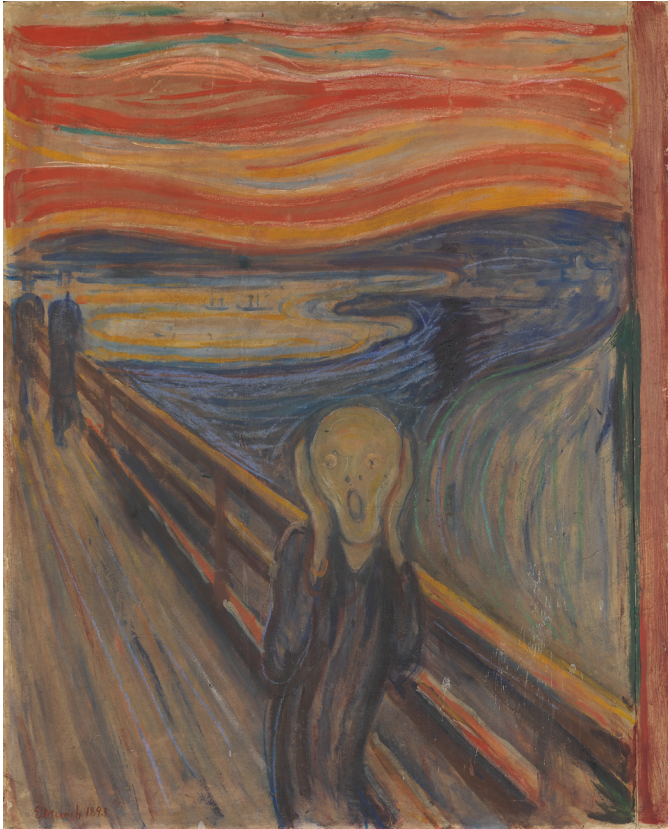
We each sifted through the drafts, looking for lines which might have been cut by previous directors, or censors, or even by Treadwell herself. In an alternative version of the first scene we found a manager bellowing at his overworked employees, “Profits – give me profits!” In our post-financial crisis production, and with what we now know about the 1929 Wall Street Crash that came months after Treadwell’s play opened, this line felt totally vibrant, so back in it went. One scene towards the end of the play, titled ‘Domestic’, seems to have gone through many different iterations, some entirely naturalistic, some so expressionist as to suggest the supernatural. We took this as in an invitation to delve in and explore all the possibilities, trying to find what felt right for 2018.

The most exciting revelation of all was the myriad versions of each of the Young Woman’s monologues. These are the spine of the play and help to chart the Young Woman’s inner life; getting our hands on Sophie Treadwell’s handwritten drafts was an incredible tool for understanding her original intentions and thoughts about the character. There are sections in one draft so specific about the realities of pregnancy and childbirth that they were excised from the text performed in her lifetime, and, to our knowledge, haven’t made it onto a stage since. We thought they were full of fire and honesty, so in they went too.

The result was a new rehearsal draft. It is largely the final script that Sophie Treadwell approved before her death, but coloured with all our re-insertions and a few interventions made entirely new for this production. The text is multi-coloured and filled with footnotes so that Natalie and I can quickly see at a glance where each part of the script came from. Once we’d settled on a stable rehearsal draft, we created another draft for the actors - this is clean of all the extra information, with all of Sophie Treadwell’s stage directions and line-readings also stripped out. It was a clean slate, ready to encourage actors’ original responses, though of course they were always welcome to cross reference with our fuller, slightly unwieldy documents, once rehearsals were underway. Natalie described it in terms of rehearsing music: the actors have their libretto, and we have the whole musical score.

Such an approach to the play is grounded in the writer’s own radicalism: Sophie Treadwell is one of the most inspiring playwrights I’ve ever read. Writing over fifty plays in a culture that openly privileged male artists, she produced her own work on Broadway, as well as writing novels and producing pioneering journalism. The work she made is coruscating and delves straight to the base fabric of her society, stripping away the polite theatrical conventions of her age and establishing a radical new theatrical form in order to explore her culture. Often we come across the phrase that Sophie Treadwell was ‘ahead of her time’ or that she ‘anticipated’ the concerns of our age. This kind of thinking is flattering, but it lets us off the hook. In truth, Sophie Treadwell did not write *Machinal* in order to be relevant ninety years after her own opening night. The shocking thing is not how contemporary the past feels, but how outdated the present really is. This is the value of staging classic plays: they hold a mirror up not only to a singular cultural moment but

also to the passage of time. In many ways, as we watch each scene of *Machinal*, it becomes clear how far we have come since 1928 – but in many ways it also reveals how the overarching structures of our lives, how the archetypes sitting underneath our relationships, have barely shifted at all. Ultimately, what becomes clear is how well Sophie Treadwell understood the nature of capitalist, patriarchal society, and its degrading consequences for individuals stuck within the urban machine. As such, we should not praise Sophie Treadwell for her foresight but for her insight. We should not marvel at her prescience but at our own impotence.



EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism began in Germany at the beginning of the 20th Century. Work of this genre is characterised by distortion or exaggeration of the art in order to convey emotion over reality, often evoking a visceral reaction in the audience.

Expressionist plays often have a dreamlike (or nightmarish) quality with a disjointed structure or episodic scenes presented as a sequence of dramatic statements. Characters are often nameless archetypes that represent groups of people rather than individual characters; and dialogue is fragmented and poetic over conversational. Performances of this genre move away from naturalistic styles and ask actors to present ideas rather than people, requiring the audience to confront social problems.

- What characteristics of Expressionist Theatre can you identify in *Machinal*?
- What effect do these have on the audience?
- What challenges might they present in the rehearsal room?

When looking at these characteristics you can see why Treadwell's play which follows this modern Everywoman is often categorised as an Expressionist play. However, Natalie Abrahams (Director) was interested in delving deeper into the characters and exploring a more psychologically truthful approach to the play.

Emily Berrington (Young Woman) said;

"Natalie Abrahams and I agreed that we wanted to not worry about it being Expressionist and just look at the truth. Rather than trying to play an everywoman, what would it mean if we tried to make her a real woman that you might know? The style of the writing and set design did all the expressionist work for us. I didn't feel I had to change my performance, I could just worry about the truth of each scenario and it's the story itself that is maybe expressionist because it is telling a story that could take place at any time with anybody in any place."

TREADWELL AND THE PATRIARCHY



When we look at *Machinal* as a progressive feminist analysis, it's remarkable to think that Treadwell wrote this in the male-dominated early 20th century. The relationship between Young Woman and Husband reflects how women were drawn into loveless marriages as a result of finances. Stenographer says "she'll lose her job" if she doesn't marry George Jones and when Young Woman says she can't marry him because she doesn't love him Mother says "Love!- what does that mount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?" and "He's Vice-President- of course he's decent". Any concerns her friends or family have for her impending nuptials are purely financial and not related to her happiness.

- What were the expectations of men and women in the 1920s? Has this changed?
- How is the relationship between Young Woman and Jones relevant to 2018?
- Was Young Woman right to marry George H. Jones?

1920 was a pivotal year for feminism as the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted American women the right to vote, a right known as women's suffrage, ending almost a century of protest. This began to shift the role of women in politics, work and home life, with many women questioning the traditional roles of daughter, wife and mother, (housekeeper and sexual object).

In *Machinal* Treadwell presents the audience with a woman who is grappling with this shift and beginning to consider a future for herself which looks different from the one laid out for her. At every decisive point in the play she is seen wanting to make a different choice to the one that she is expected to make, to make something more of her life and to follow a different path. But instead she is persuaded to stay quiet and conform; and each time she does she becomes increasingly trapped by her own choices. She increasingly sees no way out for herself, no way off the conveyor belt. The moment at which she actively seeks something more for herself and has an affair with First Man, allowing herself a moment of passion with a lover, her life is changed forever.

Treadwell's Young Woman perfectly represents the challenges (and consequences) of trying to break away from patriarchal constraints, rebelling completely against the maternal, innocent, weak and moral image that women were expected to uphold.

She acts out of hopelessness, for her, there is no other escape. Her husband is symbolic of the patriarchal world that she feels is suffocating her and which she must fight to be free of.

Young Woman feels that the patriarchal abuse she suffers is built into a cycle which has been handed down through the generations. She attempts to challenge this with her mother who doesn't respond to her questions and cries out in the final scene "Wait! Wait! Tell her! Wait! Just a minute more! There's so much I want to tell her – Wait" indicating that she hasn't yet given her daughter the tools she needs to break out of this cycle of male dominance.

- Can you identify examples of ways in which this cycle may still occur in 2018?
- What do you think Young Woman's advice to her daughter would have been?
- What still needs to change in our society today?

Throughout the play Treadwell examines the ways in which an ordinary woman can be driven to commit an unthinkable and violent crime.

Key statistics from [Women In Prison](#) indicate the number of women within the criminal justice system in the UK who have been victims of trauma and abuse.

- 46% of women in prison report having suffered domestic violence.
- (We estimate that 80% of the women Women In Prison works with have experienced domestic violence).
- 53% of women in prison report having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood.
- 31% women in prison have spent time in local authority care as a child.

- The play is based on the real life case of Ruth Snyder who murdered her husband and was the first woman to be executed in the electric chair. Research this case.
- What are the parallels between Ruth Snyder and Young Women?
- Can you set up a trial for Young Woman in your classroom?

ANALYSIS OF THE EPISODES

- Why might Treadwell have chosen to create nine episodes?
- Looking just at the titles of the episodes, what do you think Treadwell is trying to represent in showing us these fragments of Young Woman's life?

TO BUSINESS

The production opens with Young Woman feeling claustrophobic on the subway, a visual metaphor for her battle against the city, her environment and the rise of technology, illustrated also in her machine being out of order when she does arrive at the office.

She is late to work, immediately shifting her out of place in the world. The rhythm of language, movement and sound in this scene catapults the audience into the emotional world of our central character Young Woman. The constant hum of the office reveals the chaos of her world and mirrors the rise of industrial America.

We are introduced to the theme of marriage and gender politics in this scene with the prospect of a proposal from the Manager George H. Jones. It is clear from the start that in this world, marriage is less about love and more about power, money and status. Young Woman's co-workers reflect this by caring little about whether she actually has romantic feelings for George.

- How might events in this episode relate to our world and politics today?

AT HOME

The capitalist view of marriage present in the first scene feeds into the next episode, At Home, with Young Woman's mother concerned with how she might benefit financially from her daughter marrying George and deducing that, because he has money, he must be a good man. Throughout the scene Young Woman is desperately trying to make her mother agree that an emotional investment is as important as a financial one, but her mother bluntly responds; "Love! - what does that amount to? Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?"

It is in this episode that we get the first foreshadowing of Young Woman's violent act when, in the heat of the argument with her mother in which she is continually called crazy, she says "I'll kill you!" The constant reference to being crazy is a comment on Young Woman's mental health. She seems to be describing having a panic attack on the subway, but her mother is unable to have an open conversation with her about this.

- How has our understanding of mental health changed since the 1920's?
- How would Young Woman's challenges with her mental health be different if she was a young woman in 2018?

HONEYMOON

We are catapulted from the moment at which it seems Young Woman has made the decision to marry George, straight to the beginning of their married life together in the next episode and are left to guess what their wedding was like. Despite being in the Honeymoon suite it appears that love is still vacant in their relationship, in fact Helen seems frightened of George and we are beginning to see what this relationship will be like going forward. George is seen throughout the episode using his status as Husband to make demands of his new wife. His desire for her to pull down the blinds, locking them into the room just the two of them brings with it a feeling and metaphor of entrapment. She already seems sick of his jokes and stories when they arrive and ends the episode crying and calling out for "somebody" indicating the huge disconnect in their relationship.

MATERNAL

In this episode we see Young Woman suffering with what we might now understand to be postnatal depression. In this episode we see that by rejecting her baby she is defying the constraints and expectations of her gender which is symbolised further when the nurse comments that her milk hasn't come yet. She is especially unhappy to have had a girl, perhaps because she knows the fate of women in this world. The nurses and doctors appear offended that she doesn't feel connected to her baby and are unsympathetic towards her feelings of unhappiness about being a new mother. George is no better, telling her to "brace up", once again failing to emotionally connect to or understand his wife. The character of the doctor further symbolises the patriarchal force Treadwell is highlighting by completely disregarding the female nurse and overriding any decision she makes about the care of Young Woman. It is only when Young Woman is left alone at the end of the episode that we really hear her speak. Her rambling monologue speaks of escape and having to love God- perhaps as the ultimate patriarchal symbol.

PROHIBITED

The Prohibition Era in America ran from 1920 – 1933 and resulted in a ban on the production, transportation or sale of alcohol. Speakeasies were bars that illicitly sold alcohol during this period.

Here we see Young Woman and Telephone Girl on a date with two men in one such bar. The bar is a place for people hiding away from society, a place of forbidden activity. It is another world, it is risky and it is sexy. It is a big jump from the last episode to see Young Woman in this context, sociable and untied to her husband and family. In juxtaposition to the title of the episode, this is the freest we've seen Young Woman yet. This is in stark contrast to the woman at another table being encouraged to have an abortion who is told her independence is at stake by having a child; "You got to keep your job, haven't you?"

Despite Young Woman's freedom here, she is still nervous, restless and feels she is less than somebody else, here the Telephone Girl. A lot of the conversation in this episode revolves around the man Young Woman is with telling a story of how he killed two men with a bottle filled with stones "To get free". This later becomes the weapon she uses to murder her husband.

- What else might be prohibited other than alcohol for characters in this episode?

INTIMATE

Here we see Young Woman behave in the way we might have expected to see her in Honeymoon; wrapped up in bed with her lover. The act has liberated her, she is now relaxed. But life isn't much greener on the other side. Young Woman is depicted childlike in her singing of nursery rhymes and Man continually calls her "kid". Man shows himself to be another patriarchal figure, unable to read and be sensitive to her emotions, brushing off any question about whether they will see each other again. When she explains that she came back home with him because he said she looked like an angel his reply epitomizes the way in which men view women throughout the play – not as individuals but rather as an homogenous group who exist to serve the patriarchy; "Jeez, honey, all women look like angels to me". Throughout this episode her character name is Woman and not Young Woman, perhaps indicating that this has been a pivotal encounter and transitional moment for her.

DOMESTIC

Back at home the staging of this scene creates a physical distance between husband and wife which reflects the void in their emotional connection and is in stark contrast to how we have just seen Young Woman with Man. This is further emphasised in this production with the placing of their child between them. We also see here how removed Young Woman is from motherhood; she completely rejects the expectations of her, fighting in front of her child, barely having any physical, verbal or emotional connection with her daughter at all.

At the start of the scene George and Young Woman's conversation about the newspapers is disjointed – George concerning himself with business and money and Young Woman with tragic stories of women. This is another moment of foreshadowing; we know she will soon be the subject of one of these headlines.

When George talks of how uncomfortable she is with his touch he fails to see that this is anything to do with him and aligns it to her “purity” painting her in the picture of innocent virginal woman. Young Woman wants to get away, get away from him but again George fails to properly read his wife and selfishly makes the getaway about getting a Swiss watch, a symbol of money. When George mentions Rio Grande, Young Woman is reminded of the man of her affair, this triggers a series of thoughts around stones in the bottle used to kill the bandits that culminates in her jumping from her seat, driven to act out.

THE LAW

Young Woman appears in court on trial for the murder of her husband. We hear her name in this episode for the first time. We also hear that the couple have never had an argument in the six years they were married, which seems at odds with the loveless marriage we know they had. But the couple were so removed and distanced from each other that to argue would have been too much of an investment in the relationship from either party. The Lawyers throughout ask extremely leading questions, put words into Young Woman's mouth or scrutinise what she says, adding to the countless men who want to speak for or over her, or ignore or manipulate what she says in this play.

We already felt as though Young Woman cared a lot more about the affair than Man but when he testifies against her, this disloyalty confirms that he had no emotional connection in the affair. When finally she confesses to the murder she states that she did it to be free but by the end of the episode “the enormity of her isolation” overwhelms her; she may be free of George but she is far from free.

Throughout this episode we see two reporters recount the trial and give completely different accounts of the proceedings, the only fact that they do agree on is that she is guilty.

- What is the purpose of the reporters?
- What do their conflicting accounts symbolise?

A MACHINE

Young Woman's understanding of the Black man is contrasted with her lack of understanding of the priests Latin prays; she knows what it is to be oppressed and ignored. She again talks about being alone and even now the patriarchy is taking further power over her by physically restraining her and shaving her hair. She is obsessed with freedom. Just as the play opened with the subway, we see now an aeroplane. These machines should be the symbol of journeys to new places, but for Young Woman, represent a feeling of entrapment and a battle against the advances of the technological world of the 20th Century that favours men. As she is calling out for “Somebody” again her final words are cut off. She is silenced. By a patriarchal system, by technology, by the electric chair.

- What is the significance of the electric chair?

THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN

Miriam Buether's design for *Machinal* went through numerous conceptions before resulting in a black box with shutters at the front which opened and closed to mark the transition between each episode. The top and bottom shutters were lined with bright white lights that effectively 'blinded' the audience during these transitions. The black box was filled with a different set of furniture to signify the location of each episode and a giant tilted mirror was housed at the back of the box reflecting the world of the stage back to the audience.



- What are the advantages and challenges of the mirror as a director?
- What effect does the mirror create for the audience?

Director Natalie Abrahami says;

"The thing that is so tricky about this play is that Sophie Treadwell is so ahead of her time in the way she writes with cinematic jump cuts and blackouts that take you from scene to scene. You go from an office to a tenement apartment and then to a honeymoon suite in a hotel in Florida and then you're on a maternity ward. We really wanted to serve that sense of propulsion [and asked] how do you create these kind of juggernauts, this woman being pushed from moment to moment? We went through lots of iterations of different designs that would try and serve that. We would meet and read the play and she [Miriam Buether] would come up with an idea overnight or I would come up with an idea and then we would test that idea against every scene in the play. We would try to test different ideas whether it was in a glass box, whether it was in a kind of jaw that shut, whether it was in a cylinder that rotated, whether it was site specific and the audience went from location to location and then finally we got to this shutter idea that felt like it was something we could deliver within the time frame that we had, within the budget we had and within what would sit well in the Almeida."

- What would your design concept be for the play?
- What key elements of the text would you draw on for your inspiration?
- Can you create a mood board or model box for your design?

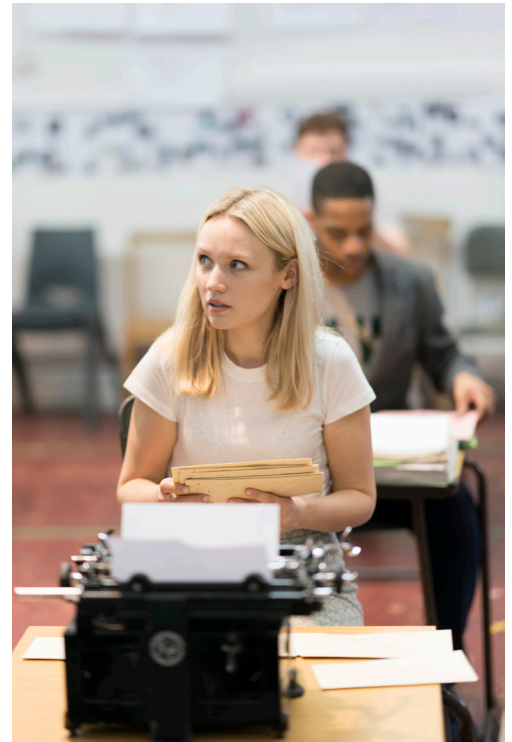
A key feature of the design for this production was the concept that the setting of the play could jump through time. The play begins in 1928 and in this production it moves forwards 11 years each episode so that by the time we get to the final scene we are in the modern day. The set design is supported by the costume and sound design that draws on clothing styles and popular music that immediately transport the audience to a particular decade.

- What is the effect of moving through time during the play, why do you think the director and designer chose to do this?

PREPARING AND PLAYING YOUNG WOMAN

What was your first impression of the play?

My first impression was just how epic it was. The huge milestones in a person's life it covers, and the questions it raises from how to behave in an office through to what happens after you die. I couldn't believe the span of the play; it seemed so enormous. I also really liked that because lots of the characters don't have names or you don't learn them until later, it gave a sense that these characters could be anything. Names often subconsciously tell you quite a lot, like how old someone is or what country they are from. This was really good in making the characters blank in my mind, which means you are not being subconsciously told what that person is like. It meant that we could make something completely from nothing.



What was your first impression of Young Woman?

I initially thought that Young Woman was someone that things happened to or someone that more powerful people and institutions impacted. Then, as we rehearsed the play more I realised she has more agency and self-determination than I initially thought she did.

She is constantly trying to make decisions that will make her life better but either they are unhelpful decisions, or someone else cuts them off before they can come into fruition.

The structure of the play is interesting in that we never see the decisions; we never see the wedding, her having the baby or the murder, what we see is the consequences and the moments where she realises this is the wrong decision or that she has been forced into something terrible.

Young Woman isn't just a victim, she does murder somebody and she doesn't have to. She makes a decision that isn't a good one but that in the moment feels totally justified, which is the story of so many women in our criminal justice system. So often in the media (another interesting element of the play) women are portrayed as the saint or the sinner. As soon as someone discovers something that shows her to be the opposite the media goes ballistic.

Why is this play important now?

When we started working on it I thought it would be interesting to see what within this play speaks to now and the more we worked on it the more I thought everything! All the themes are completely relevant now. We rehearsed *Maternal* on the day of the Repeal the 8th Referendum in Ireland and I remember thinking that some of these lines about not wanting a baby and being trapped, and the physical risk attached to having a baby you don't want completely speaks to that whole moment. The Me Too movement ties in completely with **To Business** which is a classic case of workplace harassment and dangerous power dynamics.



What were the key challenges of approaching this role ?

It was a very difficult role to rehearse as she is on stage for nearly the entire play so it was only when we began running it as a whole piece that various things were uncovered. Rehearsing each individual episode felt often like an academic study of that piece; it was only when we started running it that I was able to feel what place she might be in or what state of mind she might be in. For example from Intimate into Domestic, I was only able to get a grasp of what it might feel like suddenly going from the complete bliss and joy of being in the intimacy back to her husband who she is deeply unhappy with and feels oppressed by when we were running it. Huge amounts changed late in the process because of this.

In the beginning we were rehearsing her very much as someone with no agency, someone that was a limp, powerless figure that more powerful things happen to. It was only later on that we discovered that she was trying to achieve something.

Learning the lines was really challenging because of the huge monologues, but the way to learn them was by connecting the thoughts. So even when it looks like she is on a completely random train of thought, when you start to look for the connection and what compels her from one word to the next, then suddenly it became very easy to learn.



How did you bring this character to life physically ?

With our choreographer Arthur Pita I tried a version of her where she was completely limp and weak with a walk that had no energy, even my hands I made really floppy like two bits of raw fish and thought about what this did to her. We then tried another version of her where she was energised and dynamic.

I thought about different animals that she might be similar to so in one version she was a nervous little rabbit, and in the next run she was a bird with very keen eyes. I found this really helpful.

- What animal would you connect with each character in the play? What quality of this animal is important?

What were the key challenges and questions you explored in rehearsing Honeymoon ?

The big challenge was working out how good Young Woman is at trying to play the role of new wife. She has decided to get married.

You could argue that it was something she was forced into or you could say that there was an element of choice in it. But I think in this scene she is beginning to realise that this is a bad decision, she maybe suspected it before but it is only really becoming clear now.

We did loads of imagining of what happened beforehand, what the wedding was like, what the drive to where they are was like? We decided it was in Florida so they would have had a really long drive, George has told loads of terrible jokes in the car, she has managed to maybe smile along and laugh at them. It was helpful to imagine everything leading up to it so then the situation felt very real.

We did some versions where she arrives and she is already completely distraught that she has made this decision and wants to escape and then another version where on the outside she is actually playing along quite well, trying to make the best of it, trying to have a good time but there is something internal telling her this is terribly wrong. We realised the more interesting one was the second one. It helps George to not be a complete villain. If he is seeing someone who on the outside appears to maybe be having an okay time and he can tell himself that she is nervous.

It's not a play of villains and victims but of people who are complicated. If you see someone on stage who appears to be a monster you go, oh I'm not like that and I don't know anyone like that, but if it's someone who appears to be nice on some level but just isn't tuning in to what someone is trying to say to them, that is more likely to make someone look at themselves and go do I always check that someone feels comfortable in my presence.

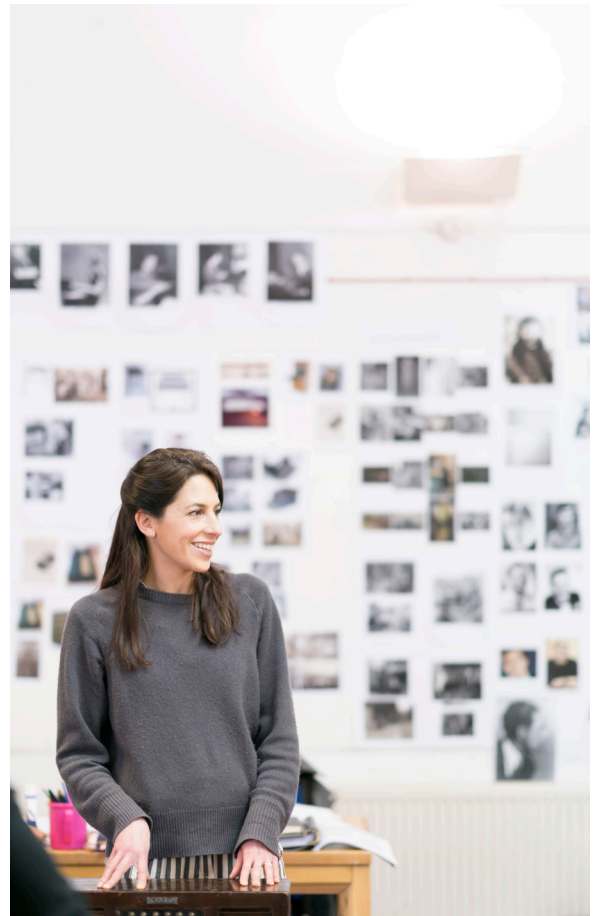


A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS

We spoke to Director, Natalie Abrahami, about casting, the relevance of the play today and her process for directing *Prohibited*.

What were you looking for in casting *Young Women*?

It is such a hard part and I wanted to make sure that we could find someone that could deliver every stage. *Young Woman* starts as 23 years old and lost in the world but has a sense, or a conviction, that maybe she deserves more. We wanted someone who was gradually finding their voice, who had these instincts but wasn't sure that they could deliver on them and is gradually railing against society and the machine and the oppression and the patriarchy. So we were initially looking for someone who could convey that needfulness and innocence and openness but then could also take us to those final scenes in *A Machine* where she's saying to her mother 'let her live, don't let what happen to me happen to my daughter'. So we met lots and lots of people, I worked with Julia Horan the Casting Director and we met lots of very, very young people and tried to explore what it would feel like to watch a very, very young person on stage and then as we continued our process we thought actually maybe we need someone whose got a bit more experience and a bit more stage craft because in 90 minutes you have to chart so many peaks and it's such an energetic and nearly impossible role so we continued our search and then we felt like we'd really found the right person and that person was Emily Berrington.



- Can you create a casting brief for *Young Woman* or any of the other characters in the play?
- What are the key features and abilities you are looking for in an actor playing these roles?

What about casting George H. Jones ?

I think in terms of George Jones we really wanted to make sure that there were no enemies in the play. Sophie Treadwell is really careful to make sure that everyone is flawed and human and as complex as they are [in real life]. In fact *Young Woman* is our heroine but she's by no means perfect, there are lots of things about her behaviour that one would question. *Young Woman* didn't want to marry George, but actually you see that the stenographer thinks he's rather wonderful, she's always flirting with him in that opening scene. It's not that her husband is awful, her husband is just somebody who isn't right for her. She didn't want to marry him and she knew that instinctively and that was the problem.



It's quite interesting casting George Jones now in 2018, post #metoo. We were so aware of gender politics and how people should act towards each other and I think men have found it really hard to engage with this role in today's society. We met lots and lots of different people for the role of George and there was an openness in Jonathan [Livingstone] that we really, really liked. It felt like he really understood all of those dynamics and the nuance of what we were trying to convey.

Often when casting it's a very exploratory process and we learn so much about the play and how it works through the casting process. Our production of the play goes from 1928 to the present day and we wanted that to be conveyed in our casting as well. We wanted to convey the sense that the sad thing is that that play happened then but obviously it was still happening now.

Why is this play so relevant now?

It's got such a pace and momentum to it and it feels an important one for our times, almost more contemporary in some ways than it has for a while. We had so many conversations about how subversive the play was when it first opened and it feels even more subversive now. In so many ways our society has changed and in so many ways it hasn't and I think that was a key thing for us to convey. Young Woman says she couldn't divorce George and I think that is something that really applies to lots of women now. Hopefully they don't feel they have to resort to something so extreme but it is still very taboo for women to leave their husbands, it is taboo for women to have an affair, it is taboo for women to leave their children and that is something that feels very provocative even now.

How do you manage a large ensemble with many actors playing multiple small parts in these short episodes?

I think it is really hard when some people have such a big journey and some people don't have that same kind of journey, you need to make sure all the actors have enough food for thought and enough things to be working on to keep them stimulated within that larger story and I think that's where the actors passion for the stories they're telling is really vital.

There are some people who only play one character and that's something that we increased so telephone girl only appears in To Business and in Prohibited but actually we added her in The Law because we felt that she would, as young woman's friend, be there in attendance. We also added the mother and the daughter into the play so people follow those characters because there are so many characters that get left behind we thought it was useful to keep seeing the ones that do travel through the play.



The scene At Home between the mother and the Young Woman is sort of a four act play about a relationship between a mother and a daughter and yet it occurs in about 8 minutes and that's a really hard thing to do if you get off on the wrong foot and you tell too much of the story at the beginning of the scene you don't have anywhere to go. And that was something that everyone was conscious of, how you give these snapshots of a character in the moments that they have on stage to do so.

- Can you create a character map for the different people that Young Woman encounters in the play? How long has she known them for? How close are they?
- What events might happen in between the episodes we see with these people?
- Improvise or write a scene between Young Woman and one of the characters that depicts a moment we do not see in the play.

Why did you choose to work with a Choreographer?

It was particularly to do with To Business knowing that in order to create the cacophony of that office it was going to be very important to have a sense of rhythm to it. I also thought that it would be important to work with a choreographer on Prohibited, where you have the three different tables, to create a sense of how those tables are still alive when another table is in focus, how are they in minor when the other ones in major.

I also wanted to look at the choreography of the scene Intimate when they're in bed together because I knew that I wanted that to feel really special in the play, it's the only scene in which she's called woman it's the only scene in which you get two people who are actually listening to each other, it's the only scene where there is real intimacy, in the sense that they are in a bed naked and that world is just there's.

What were your considerations when directing Prohibited?

It's called Prohibited, it's set in 1928, there's a sense of alcohol being prohibited but also the interaction itself being an illicit encounter between a married woman and a man. So we wanted to create that same feeling. We did try and move through periods of time in our production but we didn't change the text so there are some references that do feel more 1920s. In terms of the staging we didn't go ok it's now the 1970s and therefore none of these things about backstreet abortions apply, we've left that all in as it originally was so we weren't changing the characterisation suddenly because that would kind of undo the play. We were very conscious of each conversation being a situation where there was a male dominating another person, often a woman, but also in this scene a young man. So the man who is sitting with the young man is on stage right, in opposition to the man who is sitting with the woman and encouraging her to have a termination so we can draw the parallel between these two dominant people. Then you have these two men in the centre of the stage who are the two men who are having an affair, he's a married man and what's interesting is that you don't judge him but people do tend to judge her for having an affair.

How did design elements support this scene ?

There was quite a lot of staging that Miriam Buether [Set Designer] and I needed to think carefully about in advance when designing it. Making sure that the audience was able to see the three tables in this scene was key and that's actually where our mirror came in. The mirror serves the purpose of holding a mirror to the audience and asking what in your life is trapping you in terms of this machine, of our patriarchal society? I also thought that holding the mirror up to what is happening in this scene would really help because we see the tables reflected so you can see stuff that's happening on the table top in terms of whether people are flirting with each other or touching each other and also you can see them in a different way so that the two tables that are further back don't feel quite so removed from the audience.



Alex Lowde [Costume Designer] provided lots of costume references for the 1970s so that telephone girl who wears olive green in the first scene continues in that colour wearing a bronzey olive dress and clearly in make-up from the 70s and ditto Young Woman whose in a pale white top and a slightly bolder skirt . I guess as the centuries go on and confidence is growing you see that reflected in Young Woman and how she's dressing and how she is acting. In lots of ways we felt like she was a 2018 person stuck in a 1920s world, that's kind of how we saw her at the beginning of the play and gradually as she progressed through the play her thoughts and thinking become more in tune with each period.

How did you rehearse this scene with the actors?

To begin with we looked at the scenes within this episode in isolation, so initially we had conversations with the couples, just those people so not a full ensemble call, just looking at each individual couple and

what their relationship might have been like and the context of how they met each other. That wasn't to say they were then held to that, in fact I initially suggested that the older man was a college professor and that the young man was a student of his and they were meeting to talk about literature but actually the actors didn't want to do it like that and they came up with a different context and then in the end we did come back to that, so it's always a collaboration and a journey.

Then we did some work listening to some music and thinking with Arthur Pita [Choreographer] about what a condensed version of having lots of drinks over the course of a night in a bar would be and we found a choreography for that, which to a few bars of music was essentially repeated- leaning back in a chair, raising a glass, putting money in the jukebox - everybody had 4 moves. In the end we did actually cut that in the beginning of the scene. Then we explored the passing of the baton from scene to scene so that as one table's scene ended another table would pick up the energy in the next scene and we did that with sound initially but then in the production we did it with light, so you see the light picking out each table but of course we didn't have that in the rehearsal room so sound became our rehearsal room stand in.

- Try out this technique creating 4 movements for being in a bar. Can you try this as a whole class? How can you pass the focus from individuals or small groups?

Did you use any specific exercises in rehearsals?

In To Business we did do quite a lot of work with a metronome. Every day we did the equivalent of a speed run, they had their activities that they would do at their desks, whether it was with their files or with their stamps or stamping letters or typing, we did that to a certain rhythm and then every time we did it we would do it a little bit faster so they would really get the sense of the pace of the scene.

- Why do you think rhythm is so important in the direction of this play and this scene in particular? What might be the effect of varying this rhythm?