

CALREP Presents

by SOPHIE TREADWELL
directed by JULIANNE JUST

MACHINERY

OCT 13 - OCT 21
CALREP.ORG

CSUSB University Theatre
Individuals: \$20
CSUSB ID: \$15
Seniors & Military: \$17

PLOT SUMMARY

Helen, known only as “Young Woman”, is working as a stenographer, and her supervisor, Mr. George H. Jones, is infatuated with her and wishes to marry her. Helen is disgusted by the idea, but her mother forces her into the marriage believing it is the right thing to do. Soon, Helen and George are married and set off for their honeymoon. Even from the first day, she is already trying to fight against the marriage to no avail. Time passes, and the play follows Helen’s journey as she begins to feel more and more trapped in her marriage, especially after she has a child. Soon, she meets a man named Richard Roe in a speakeasy, and they begin a love affair as her marriage is continuing to trap her. The play jumps to a courthouse for the murder of Helen’s Husband. After moments of Helen trying to prove her innocence, the defense attorney presents some evidence that leads her to confess that she murdered him. The play ends with Helen on death row, and even at the end of her life, she is still fighting the constructs around the execution.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

- **Helen Jones:** The protagonist of *Machinal*. At the play’s start, she is a secretary at an office. The play’s plot follows Helen through a series of significant life changes: a marriage, an affair, a murder, and a criminal indictment. Throughout the play, Helen is threatened from all sides by a number of troubling forces: the stresses of modern urban life, the psychological burden of being a woman in a male-dominated society, and feelings of isolation and abandonment. Helen remains admirably resilient in the face of these forces. Treadwell is effective in providing a context for Helen’s feelings of depression, desperation, and rage. Helen serves as a representation of all women in her society. Given the challenges all such women face, Helen’s turmoil is understandable and even warranted.
- **George H. Jones:** The vice president of the company Helen works for. Between the second and third episodes, George proposes to and marries Helen. George is depicted as insensitive, unattractive, and desperate. Helen agrees to marry him out of a desire for security but does not love him.
- **Richard Roe:** The man Helen takes as her lover. Roe tells of having recently escaped from imprisonment in Mexico through violent means. Roe is handsome and suave in his presentation. Helen is infatuated with him despite his rough-around-the-edges character. Though he offers Helen affection, Roe reveals himself to be yet another danger to her.
- **Helen’s Mother:** Acts as a personification of the society that Helen wishes to escape. Helen’s mother constantly reminds her daughter that it is more important to get married before she is too old and that it is most important to marry a man that can provide financial stability. Helen’s mother is the voice that is the opposition to Helen’s feelings. She is convincing and powerful. It could be reasoned that Helen’s mother’s pressure is the catalyst that forces Helen into marriage, motherhood, and, eventually, murder.

ABOUT SOPHIE TREADWELL

Sophie Anita Treadwell was born in 1885 in Stockton, California. Although Treadwell originally excelled at school, after her father left she struggled, which others have attributed to the frequency with which she and her mother relocated. While Treadwell primarily lived with her mother, occasionally Treadwell would spend summers in San Francisco with her father. During these visits, Treadwell was first exposed to theatre.



Treadwell received her Bachelor of Letters in French from the University of California at Berkeley in 1906. During her time at Berkeley, Treadwell had a lot of experience with theater and writing and started writing early drafts of shorter plays, songs, and short fictional stories. Treadwell had her first brushes with mental illness at this time. She experienced a variety of nervous conditions that would plague her and lead to several extended hospitalizations throughout her life.

After college, Treadwell moved to Los Angeles where she worked for a brief time as a vaudeville singer. She then studied acting and was mentored by renowned Polish actress Helena Modjeska, whose memoirs she was hired to write in 1908. In 1910, Treadwell married William O. McGeehan, a beloved sports writer for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. In 1915, Treadwell moved to New York where she joined the Lucy Stone League of suffragettes. Treadwell participated in a 150-mile march with the League, which delivered a petition on women's suffrage to the legislature of New York. Treadwell maintained a separate residence from her husband, an idea encouraged by the League. Her marriage was said to be one of mutual independence and acceptance of differing interests.

In New York, Treadwell befriended and became associated with many well-known modernist personalities and modern artists of the time, notably Louise and Walter Arensberg who ran a New York Salon, and painter Marcel Duchamp. Congruous with Treadwell's advocacy for sexual independence, birth control rights, and increased sexual freedom for women, Treadwell had a brief affair with the artist Maynard Dixon between 1916-1919.

Treadwell reached the peak of her professional career in journalism and in theatre in New York in the 1920s. Treadwell attended lectures and completed an extensive study with Richard Boleslavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre which proved to be both influential and motivational for Treadwell's varied theatrical pursuits.

Treadwell lectured and advocated openly for authors rights and was the first American playwright to win royalty payments for a play production from the Soviet Union. In addition to her accomplishments, Treadwell traveled often with her husband across the United States, Europe, and Northern Africa. Treadwell's husband died in 1933 due to heart complications.

Treadwell set herself apart from many female writers of her day, by pursuing commercial productions of her works on Broadway. She is credited with writing at least 39 plays, numerous serials and journalistic articles, short stories, and several novels. The subjects of her writings are

as diverse as the mediums she was writing in. Many of Treadwell's works are difficult to obtain and the majority of her plays have not previously been produced as of this writing.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: JULIANNE JUST

Q: What motivated you to direct *Machinal*?

A: It was a play I read long ago when I was in school. Back then, I appreciated it, and rereading it 10 years later it still felt incredibly relevant, particularly to our current political climate. I know it is an older play, and I think it is very easy for these older plays to feel like museum pieces, but it still is relevant. As we are working on it, we aren't just modernizing the whole thing. At the same time, we are not adhering to the period in a straight-laced way. We are working to hopefully bridge that gap in time. I think that helps invite the audience into that realm. You see that with our design elements. We have a couple elements in terms of costuming, sound pieces, and prop items that help with that. You will see some of the costume shapes and styles are very period but with more modern textiles, so things will be made out of textures that wouldn't really have been of the period. The costumes are paying homage to the era that the play is set in, but in terms of sound we are bridging into more modern stuff. Also, some of the scenic pieces will be very period, but there will be a modern element in there. We don't want to pretend that we are in present day and that this is a brand new story. Again, trying to bridge that gap in time between the era of the play and present day.

Q: You mentioned how this play is still very relevant. In what ways do you see that?

A: We still live in a society that has prescribed ideas about what a man's role is in the world is in his personal life, his professional life and his life as a citizen versus a woman's. I think that in a lot of ways we have clearly taken huge steps forward in regards to gender equality. Still, we carry a lot of ideas about what a person's place is in the world and what is acceptable behavior based on gender. We also still live in a time where if, for example, you are a woman and you don't want have children, you still get a fair amount of surprise and pushback that you don't see that as something important in your life. I think what is relevant is the prescribed roles of society, what happens when we push against them, just how much we force ourselves into those roles, and how we feel trapped by them. I think while the world is pushing Helen into these prescribed roles, she sees herself as trapped and lets herself be trapped until the end. It's a certain amount of compliance as well. People tell us our lives have to look a certain way, so we live life based on what we are raised to believe is the way you live your life. Also, there's a lot in the play about the well-meaning people of society. It's easy to look at the world around Helen as the villain. Obviously, she feels oppressed by it and it is oppressive, but also it is very well intentioned. It is a lot of people expressing learned moralities and learned senses of social placements. A lot of the play is the idea that we live in these machines and these machines make us compliant, which I think is also really relevant today. We live in an era with great economic disparity where a lot of people are just trying to make ends meet. That's exhausting, and you wonder "How do you break the machine?" and "How do you push back against corruption when you barely have the energy to keep you and your family afloat?". That is all in this play.

Q: *Machinal* is based on a true story. In history, Helen's real life counterpart is viewed negatively, but in this play she is the protagonist. How did this affect your process as a director?

A: Truthfully, it doesn't influence it at all. I think clearly the playwright was interested in this social machine that only offers certain roles for women. Just like it seems unnatural that a woman doesn't want to have children and doesn't want to be a mother, it seems unnatural when a woman does something violent. We're not shocked by male crime in the same way we are by female crime because a female crime goes so against what we see as the inherent nature of women. Historically, it was shocking in history because we don't see women are violent or capable of violence. Helen in the play is clearly in a state of distress when she kills her husband even though he is not actively threatening her. Because Helen's the protagonist, she has been written in a way that is sympathetic to how she found herself in that position and that could explain how this could have happened. She has this line in the court room scene where they ask "You wanted to be free? Why didn't you just divorce your husband? You didn't have to kill him" and she replies "I couldn't hurt him like that." I think that shows that her killing him wasn't an act of revenge. It was an act of self-preservation in her mind. I don't think she's a malicious character, and the worst thing you could say of Helen's character in the play is that she is very self-centered. She stays very rooted in her own crisis throughout, but she is constantly trying to do what she feels is her best. The play doesn't imply there's any reason not to believe that she isn't doing her best.

Q: This production will be set as if we are in Helen's mind. Can you tell us about how you came to this concept?

A: With these different episodes that make up the play, there are these monologues that are almost fractured in how they are written. The text is very associative: it is words and short phrases compounding that it makes it feel like you are almost in someone's brain and as if you are hearing the thoughts before they are spoken. Those monologues felt that they were an invitation to explore it in different fashions. Historically, it was written in the same time that Brecht was writing, so there are already very stylistic elements in the script. Some productions are more traditional in straightforward, but some take a more experimental approach. I think this script is set up to support that. In this production, we are in Helen's head. We are not seeing things as they are but how she experiences them. I want the audience to feel one with her. We are not on the outside judging her actions, but that we are with her as she is deciding what to do. Again, putting the play into her perspective instead of us putting our perspective on her. You think about how the real life event is perceived because that is a whole world judging this woman. I think the playwright is trying to open it up from her perspective.

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

A: People get hung up on the gender side of the play. It is not a woman's play. You can see how much a man can be a cog in a machine just like a woman can. While we are seeing a woman's story, there are parts that men can relate to, such as feeling trapped and being part of a machine. It is that strange construct that people can relate to Hamlet but people can't relate to Jo March in *Little Women*. *Moby Dick* is universal but Jane Austen stories are not. In our society, a male experience is universal but a female experience isn't. They aren't "human experiences" in our society. A female experience is gendered. We see that when it comes to race as well. What do we see as specific experiences versus what we choose to see as universal? This can be seen as a woman's story and looked at only through that lens, but there is a lot that people could relate to in our own lives. Who doesn't feel trapped in some shape or form in their lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before you see the show:

1. What are society's expectations for how men should live their lives? How is that different from women?
2. Describe a time in your life where you found your unknown inner strength.
3. What parts of society and culture influence you the most on a daily basis?
4. What is holding you back from living your best life?
5. What do others expect of you? Family? Friends? Coworkers? Professors? Mentors?
6. If you could pick one thing that you could change or remove from your life, what would it be?
7. Below is an excerpt from a 1943 issue of *Mass Transit*, titled "Eleven Tips on Getting More Efficiency Out of Women Employees":
"4: Retain a physician to give each woman you hire a special physical examination – one covering female conditions. This step not only protects the property against the possibilities of lawsuit, but reveals whether the employee-to-be has any female weaknesses which would make her mentally or physically unfit for the job"
What is your initial reaction to this 'tip'? What do you think women in the workplace experience? What about men in the workplace?

After you see the show:

1. Recall Helen's journey throughout the play. Which scenes or moments resonated with you? What did you notice in these moments? Inspiration? Frustration? Sorrow?
2. Helen, while being our protagonist, is also a convicted murderer. How did your feelings towards Helen change after the courtroom scene? Did they even change at all? Explain.
3. Pretend you are an attorney for Helen's murder trial. Are Helen's actions justifiable in any way? What evidence would you bring forward to argue her innocence or guilt?
4. Where did you see modern elements mixed with 1920s elements? How do you think those elements added to the play?