

# MACHINAL AT THE OLD VIC



**TEACHING  
RESOURCE**

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## Teaching resources

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Further details of this production  
[oldvictheatre.com/stage/  
event/machinal](https://oldvictheatre.com/stage/event/machinal)

# MACHINAL

**A Ustinov Studio, Theatre Royal Bath production  
in association with The Old Vic**

Presented by arrangement with Nick Hern Books

# INTERVIEW

with Hyemi Shin — Set Designer

## Can you tell us about the process for designing the set for *Machinal*?

I start my process with an initial read of the text — ideally done in one sitting. I start script breakdowns from the second read; making notes about the structure, locations, main events, characters, furniture, props, etc.

After the initial read of *Machinal*, we had a first meeting with Richard Jones, the Director. I did these first meetings with an open mind, without any visual research or sketches. It is a very exciting moment to hear the director's initial thoughts and ideas. We discussed important words, themes and elements.

Then I started visual research into many different directions. I shared those images with Richard and saw which ones were exciting and felt right to us.

We did most of the design meetings with Nicky Gillibrand, the Costume Designer — it was very useful because we could share references with each other. Also, when I worked on personal props for each character, the character's costume was a very important element to consider.

I worked through making models, I got the theatre plans at an early stage and prepared a 1:25 scale model box — a theatre visit was essential too so I could feel the space and check details.

I tried different versions of rough structure in the model, based on the discussions with Richard. When a design

was roughly formed, we sat down with the model box and worked through each scene by putting figures and furniture inside and developed the structure further.

Then I worked on details, colour and materials and made a final model. I prepared technical drawings with CAD (computer-aided design software) and developed the storyboards alongside the model making too.

Once the design had been approved, I worked closely with the Production Manager on technical elements to bring the 1:25 design to life on stage. I visited the set builder's workshop, share the props list and references with the Props Supervisor and Stage Management team.

I am around regularly during rehearsals; it is a crucial part of the design process to accommodate new ideas, changes and needs during this real creation period. Especially for *Machinal*, the actors did all the scene changes, so it was even more important to provide them enough information about the set and keep up with their actions with props and the movements around the set and the doors.

During the final week of rehearsals, I'm in the theatre for the get-in as the set is assembled in the theatre. I try to be around during the lighting technical session as the set will look very different under different lights, which is very exciting. I keep working, making small changes until the opening night to ensure the design is the best it can be. This involves paint calls and some last-minute changes if necessary.



Model box: 'To Business'



### What research did you do to support your design?

As *Machinal* is loosely based on the murder trial of Ruth Snyder, my first research was about that. Her execution photo, secretly taken by a journalist, was very inspiring. I researched 1920s subways, offices, tenements housing, speakeasy bars. I also researched conceptual images, modern spaces and photography. The 1920s films, including the German Expressionism movement, were important references for my design.

Although our production worked in an abstract way without an accurate period setting, I always find it useful and essential to do historical research. Many of the design elements, details and props are inspired from those period images, even if they end up looking different.

I also research posters, paintings and design objects of the era — this was very useful and led me to use a specific shade of yellow.

### What was the overall vision for your set design and how does that fit in with the overall vision for the production?

Making a claustrophobic space was the main vision for me. An abstract but suffocating space that the Young Woman is trapped in, and all the things are happening around her, too closely. I think it served well for the story and other things that were important to us; we wanted to make everything appear as machinery — timing, rhythm, precision were crucial for us. Richard and Sarah Fahie (Movement Director) worked closely with the actors and choreographed to enhance this. The actual limitation of the space was super challenging for everyone, but they were forced to be precise. Otherwise, they would bump into each other and that tiny delay would have knock on effects after.

### Were there any challenges whilst designing this production?

We premiered *Machinal* at Ustinov Studio, Theatre Royal Bath, which is small but with good energy and possibilities. Richard wanted to make the space even smaller and it met with the vision of the claustrophobic space. However, having no wing space was really challenging. I had to be very careful when I divided the stage and backstage by the sizes and angles of the walls to accommodate the 12 actors, props for each scene, and clear space for door openings. The backstage was incredibly tight as we had the Stage Management team, props and furniture for all nine episodes and backstage traffic.

### Can you highlight a specific design element that you think served the story particularly well and describe the decision-making process behind this?

*Machinal* has a unique structure — nine episodes with the titles for each, rather than acts and scenes. Richard had the idea of using the titles of each episode from a very early stage.

I designed the front of the stage to rest the letters on. We developed the idea from arranging individual letters onto the frame to having the full nine titles. They were intended to have black backings, but we discovered the shadow effect during the lighting session. It was too good to miss, and I had to make the last-minute changes to achieve the effect.

These titles are very simple but cleverly manifest each episode and the Young Woman's journey; having them visually fly up and down and cast shadows on the walls heightened the impact even further.

The aim is to give punctuation for each scene. With the shadow, the sound design and the different speed for flying up and down, the overall effect was elevated to another level.



Model box: 'The Law'



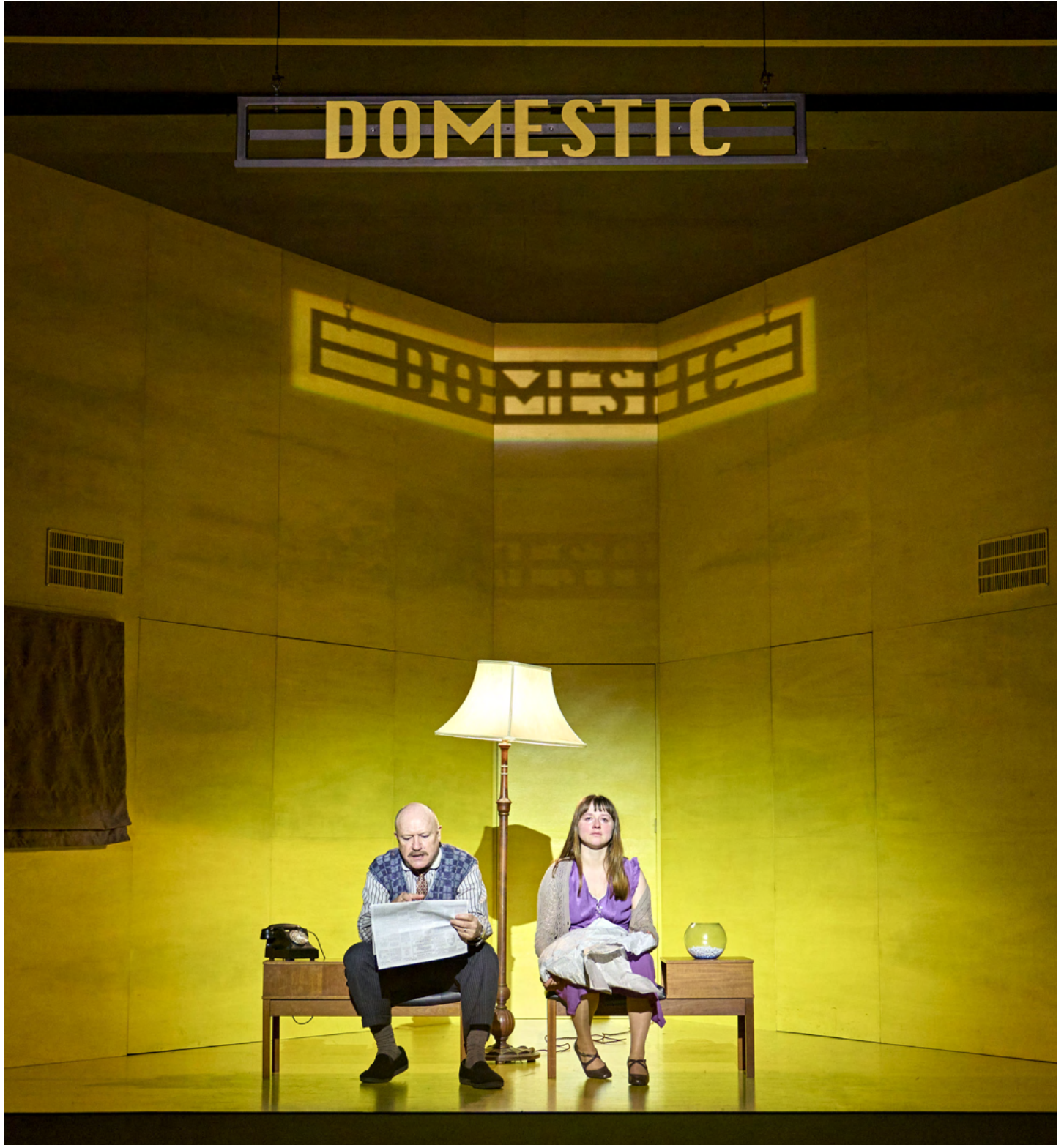
**What was your favourite episode to design and why?**

'Domestic' — I love the dialogue for that episode — simple, funny and terrifying. To design the episode, I tried to make it as boring as possible, using a boring lamp, sofa and blind. There are deliberately no 'interesting' design features about them — however, it was very interesting to design to achieve this. I think the 'boring' setting worked well to make the episode even more suffocating and horrible.

**Do you have any advice for future set designers?**

It's very important to talk to other creatives during the design process. For *Machinal*, I discussed the use of yellow in the design with Nicky, the Costume Designer, the ceiling and lighting with Adam, the Lighting Designer, and the speaker positions with Ben, the Sound Designer.

By asking questions and talking to other collaborators, including technical staff, I can plan things better and find more creative solutions when I face problems.



# INTERVIEW

with Nicky Gillibrand – Costume Designer

## Can you tell us about the process for designing the costumes for *Machinal*?

I usually have quite a few meetings with the director, this is where you learn a lot about the ideas that may be circulating. I always insist on being part of the collaboration in the early stages as it's important to hear all the ideas and to be able to contribute. This means I can go and do my research knowing the influences and what time frame we are looking at in terms of period. With *Machinal*, we talked about the relevance of the 1920s to the play and whether we needed to reference that with the costume.

## What research did you do to support your design?

When researching, I will always look at many areas of interest regardless of whether they are directly related to the play or not. For instance, for *Machinal* I researched offices and the dates in history when women started working in offices. I researched artists of the time, plus many photos of ordinary people on the streets of New York. I gather mostly visual information but it's always good to read as I always gain a different insight from written material — it's really valuable to have many points of reference.

## What was the overall vision for your costume design and how does that fit in with the overall vision for the production?

The budget will always influence how I design costume. In this case we needed to achieve many different characters for each performer, apart from our main actress who needed to stand out from the dark silhouettes of the others. I decided I only needed to suggest the '20s so using lovely 1920's hats on the actors gave them great outlines and made them feel quite expressionistic — like a painting.

As the set was a strong yellow, it felt right to use a lot of black for the ensemble but with lots of textures. In the transition to the 'Honeymoon' episode, there is a moment where some actors dance — I looked for a collection of dresses that were a mixture of fabrics and made each one different to each other.

## Can you highlight a specific costume design element that you think served the story particularly well and describe the decision-making process behind this design?

Mixing the 1920s with the 1980s was particularly effective as it meant the characters were not weighed down by the period. I felt this worked really well and gave the audience a hint of the '20s without it becoming the sole focus.



**What was your favourite episode to design and why?**

I think they were all my favourite episode! But I did especially love the prologue on the subway and the crowd of characters surrounding the leading actress was great.

**Do you have any advice for future costume designers?**

My advice would be to be always observant — whether that is to do with designing or being in the rehearsal room. In my experience there is always something you can learn and it is always good to understand the play/ opera really well. Understand scene changes and where actors will be involved onstage, including where they might have quick changes. Really get to understand the characters.

For me one of the most important members of the design team is the lighting designer as they have the huge job of bringing all the elements together during the technical rehearsals. They are the person who brings the show alive so I always try and involve them in how I am going to design, what colours I am using, etc. Adam Silverman's lighting for *Machinal* was absolutely beautiful — I am lucky both Hyemi Shin and Richard Jones are my closest colleagues. Theatre is at its most exciting when you have all worked as a team and the end results really do show that collaboration as something distilled and perfect.



# INTERVIEW

with Adam Silverman — Lighting Designer

## Can you tell us about the process for designing the lighting for *Machinal*?

There are usually five steps in the process of lighting a show for me and *Machinal* was no exception.

First, the process begins with reading the play and discussing the text with the director. These conversations begin to paint a picture in my mind about how this production of the play is going to be approached. Research would begin at this point too.

The second step is about the visual and physical space the show will take place in — the scenic design. In this case the Director Richard Jones and Set Designer Hyemi Shin already had a clear idea for the set when I first met with them both. The discussions we had were about the details of the design, the colour and the finish.

The third step for me is combining my interpretation of the director's approach to this production of the play with the architecture of both the set design and the theatre space. This combining manifests itself in a technical drawing showing where different lights will go and what they'll be used for.

The fourth step is about consolidating all of the above information while watching the rehearsals in the rehearsal room.

The final step is getting the play on its feet. Focusing the lights and turning them on or off to create the show.

## What research did you do to support your design?

I often do lots of research — including reading around the play, listening to relevant music, watching films and looking at all kinds of images like architecture, art or pop culture.

## What was the overall vision for your lighting design and how does that fit in with the overall vision for the production?

I think the whole Design team had the same vision in this production — an expressionistic one where the playwright's stylized and idiosyncratic story of loss and fear and isolation are etched out in bold images and actions.

## Were there any challenges whilst designing this production?

The biggest challenge of this show was the size of the space it takes place in, but this challenge was turned into its greatest asset. A monotonous and claustrophobic world.

## Can you highlight a specific lighting design choice that you think served the story particularly well and describe the decision-making process behind this?

Lighting the episode signs was always part of my lighting design. But in adjusting the height of the sign during the installation of the set, I discovered I could create interesting shadows on the walls of the set if it was lower than we had originally planned. I think my decision then to light each episode name from a different angle served the production well. There was a repeating motif of graphic letters, but whether the shadows were distorted, or on an angle or crystal clear assisted to make each scene appear to be in a completely different location with a different atmosphere.

## What was your favourite episode to design and why?

I have no favourite episode, but I liked that 'Intimate' (episode six) is completely different from the rest. It was Richard's suggestion from our first conversation that the scene would be in a complete theatre blackout — exit signs and all. I could only imagine one way to light Man's basement flat before and after the blackout and that would be a half broken table lamp set on the floor — a bare bulb blinding us and gently bathing the lovers. I wanted to reinforce that the audience wants to believe the Young Woman believes what she says in episode six, but we're not blind, we can see the truth between the lines.

## Do you have any advice for future lighting designers?

Never forget that you are a part of the whole creative team making a production. You have a responsibility to set the tone, illuminate the action, support the telling of the story. The whole team works best when we're all individuals — we're all leading and all working toward the same end following the director's vision.

# INTERVIEW

with Benjamin Grant — Sound Designer

## Can you tell us about the process for designing the sound for *Machinal*?

I worked lots with Richard Jones to look at how sound design can enhance the staging and storytelling in each scene. *Machinal* contains lots of sound-related stage directions in the play text, so we took these as a jumping off point, and then creatively responded to these.

I organised studio sessions to record the actors' voices and the accordion during 'Intimate'. These were then able to be manipulated and treated as source material for soundscapes, as well as sourced music. Once we entered the theatre, we then began to look at treating (i.e. changing/altering) the actors' voices, which formed another key part of the sound design.

## What research did you do to support your design?

I do lots of music research — looking at period music but also music beyond the immediate scope of the production's setting for inspiration. Also looking at previous productions and how other teams have approached the play is always useful.

## What was the overall vision for your sound design and how does that fit in with the overall vision for the production?

The overall vision for the sound design was to reflect and intensify the emotional state of Young Woman through each scene. For some scenes, this meant underscoring using music and/or soundscapes to heighten the sense of emotional distress, and for others this meant stripping back the use of sound to heighten the sense of panic and/or intimacy (for example, in 'Intimate' and 'Domestic'). The production is very rhythmically tight, and so sound also had to be similarly well-paced and tightly wound.

## Were there any challenges whilst designing this production?

There were a number of challenges — the rhythm of the piece is incredibly precise, and so making sure the sound design was responsive to these details took lots of work between me and our very talented Deputy Stage Manager. During 'At Home', the offstage voices are performed by the rest of the ensemble from a vocal booth offstage — this took lots of refining to make sure the actors offstage were able to hear the actors on stage for timing, and vice versa!

## Can you highlight a specific sound design choice that you think served the story particularly well and describe the decision-making process behind this?

Throughout the play, we use radio mics on the cast to provide very subtle vocal reinforcement across the theatre. However, at the very start of 'Intimate' for the first few minutes, we lower the volume level of these mics very slightly lower than we have had for the rest of the show. It is a largely imperceptible difference but encourages the audience to 'lean in' very slightly — giving the scene a very subtly different dynamic to the rest of the piece at the most intimate point in Young Woman's story.

## What was your favourite episode to design and why?

I think it has to be 'At Home'. Despite not being the most immediately attention-grabbing sound design moment in the play, it took a lot of work to carefully create the world outside of the room. Richard and I worked hard to find the right moments for the outside world to delicately interrupt, and in ways that help to serve the narrative of the scene itself.

## Do you have any advice for future sound designers?

I would say listen to as much as you can, all the time — whether TV, film, online content, music. Listening critically to various media can really help to develop an understanding of how sound can help to create or enhance a narrative. On a more practical note, I would say joining the Association of Sound Designers is super helpful — they have tons of resources to learn from that have been invaluable to developing my practice.

# VIDEO RESOURCES



**An interview with Director Richard Jones**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=3OJsR6uKWFE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OJsR6uKWFE)



**An interview with Rosie Sheehy, who plays the Young Woman**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=5yFCfRnnHTA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yFCfRnnHTA)



**Inside rehearsals for *Machinal***  
[youtube.com/watch?v=UF3kxI2ntro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF3kxI2ntro)



**Behind-the-scenes of *Machinal***  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Jc8eKI-IXYU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc8eKI-IXYU)

# WHO WAS SOPHIE TREADWELL?

Sophie Treadwell, writer of *Machinal*, was a leading playwright and journalist in the early 20th century, but was largely forgotten until a renaissance of her work in the 1990s. She was a pioneer in both theatre and journalism, pushing the boundaries of what was expected of, and possible for, women during her lifetime. As the Daily Telegraph wrote in 1993, 'Treadwell is one of those fascinating people whose life was full of adventure but about whom little was ever recorded.'

## A daughter

Sophie Treadwell was born in Stockton, California in 1885 to parents of Scottish and Mexican heritage. Her parents had a troubled marriage with Treadwell's father leaving his family to live in San Francisco in 1891. Although Treadwell's mother had always vowed to divorce him, she was unable to due to financial and emotional hardships. References to Treadwell's heritage and parent's marriage can be seen throughout her journalism and plays, including *Machinal*.

Eventually Treadwell and her mother joined her father, Alfred, in San Francisco, which is where she first experienced theatre. She saw Helena Modjeska, a famous contemporary actress, perform in *The Merchant of Venice*.

## A performer

Treadwell attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she became involved with theatre and journalism — both of which would remain parallel interests during her career. After university, Treadwell moved to Los Angeles to pursue acting, working in vaudeville. In 1908, she found work typing the memoirs of Helena Modjeska who encouraged her to pursue writing.

## A wife

In 1910 Treadwell married William O. McGeehan, known as 'Mac', a noted sports journalist who she met while working at the San Francisco bulletin. Although their marriage was amiable, it was unconventional for the time, with Treadwell keeping her maiden name and living apart from her husband for long stretches in their marriage.

Six months after their wedding, Treadwell suffered the first of several mental health breakdowns and was admitted into St. Helena Sanatorium. Her mental health can be seen mirrored in her characters, including the Young Woman in *Machinal*. She would struggle with these for the rest of her life.



## A journalist

Following her stint in vaudeville, Treadwell pursued a career in journalism but did not leave her acting skills behind. In 1914 she posed as a homeless sex worker and tried to seek aid from several Christian organisations for an article titled 'An Outcast at the Christian Door', gaining her recognition for her journalism. As a woman, she was not permitted to access the frontlines and instead wrote articles focussing on the realities of war for the women in Europe. Treadwell later became a specialist reporter on the Mexican Revolution for the New York Tribune and in 1921 was the only foreign journalist allowed to interview the revolutionary Pancho Villa. The interview lasted two days and became the inspiration for her play *Gringo*.

In 1927 and 1928, Treadwell sat in the murder trial of Ruth Snyder and Henry Judd Gray, even though she was not reporting on it. As a journalist, her interest was piqued by the story that had captured such great media attention, and watching the trial unfold caused her to consider what crushing circumstances would lead a woman to murder her husband in order to achieve freedom. This question is what went on to inspire *Machinal*. The play was the perfect blend of Treadwell's interest in social issues and women's rights, with her artistic skills as a journalist and a playwright.

## A playwright

Treadwell is known to have written at least 39 plays, however only seven of these were ever produced. Her plays were often inspired by her journalistic interests, as can be seen in *Gringo* and *Machinal*. She wrote her plays with a female audience in mind and, unusually for female playwrights of the time, often also produced, directed and performed in her plays.

Treadwell faced many challenges as a woman in her industry, most notably her lawsuit against playwright John Barrymore for plagiarising a play she had written about Edgar Allen Poe. Although she won the case, she was heavily criticised in the media and struggled to receive opportunities on Broadway following the case. In 1933 Treadwell suffered both the loss of her husband and the failure of her new play *Lone Valley* which closed only three days after opening. It is then that she began to focus on making her family ranch profitable.

In 1941 she produced a play adaptation of her novel *A Hope for a Harvest*, based on her experiences on the ranch. The failure of this adaptation would mark the end of Treadwell's playwrighting career. *Machinal* remains her most successful play by far, and she lived to see it revived off Broadway in 1960.

Despite the adversity she faced, Treadwell's work remained her driving force until she died. Towards the end of her life, she said, '*Work is the greatest thing on earth, greater than love, greater than death... Work is the product of time and energy — and time is the brother of death. Death is the reward for having lived.*'



# THE TRUE CRIME CASE THAT INSPIRED MACHINAL

Although Ruth Snyder may not be a household name anymore, in 1928 America this murder case sent shockwaves throughout the country after a photo of her execution was published on the front page of a newspaper. Sophie Treadwell, who was attending the trial as a journalist, refused to write about the trial, instead writing the play *Machinal* as a way to reclaim Ruth's story.

## STORY TIMELINE

### 1915 — May Ruth Brown meets Albert Snyder

In 1915, at age 20, May Ruth Brown (who went by her middle name Ruth) meets Albert Snyder, age 33, an artist who works as an editor for *Motor Boating* magazine. It was said that the two were an odd pairing, with Ruth being gregarious while Albert was more reserved.

Ruth knew quickly that marriage was not for her and is reported as saying '*I don't know what possessed me to marry him. His interests were not mine.*'

Albert had a previous fiancé, Jessie Guishard, who died ten years earlier, who he described to Ruth as '*the finest woman he ever met.*' This, alongside Albert naming his boat after Jessie and hanging a picture of her in their house, causes further tension within the relationship.

However, the pair remained married, and in 1918 Ruth gives birth to their only child, a daughter named Lorraine. It has been noted that Albert was emotionally and physically abusive towards both Ruth and Lorraine, blaming Ruth for the birth of a daughter rather than a son.

### 1925 — Ruth begins an affair with Henry Judd Gray

In 1925, Ruth meets Henry Judd Gray, a travelling corset salesman from New Jersey who is also married and has a family. The two fall into a passionate affair and devise a plan to commit insurance fraud. They will murder Albert and stage it as a robbery, claiming the insurance money for themselves.

Ruth persuades Albert to purchase life insurance with a clause that specifies an additional \$48,000 (worth over half a million dollars today) if the insurance holder dies by an unexpected act of violence. Snyder later says she prevented Albert from discovering the changes she made to his life insurance policy by telling the postman to ring the doorbell twice when these arrived, delivering them only to her. This is said to have inspired the title for James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

### 20 March, 1927 — Ruth and Henry kill Albert Snyder

According to Henry, Albert survives seven murder attempts before Ruth and Henry finally succeed. In March 1927, the couple strangle Albert with a picture wire, stuff chloroform soaked rags in his nose and beat him with a sash weight. The pair stage the murder as a burglary, however police find little evidence of a break in and discover the 'missing' items reported by Ruth hidden within the house.

### May 1927 — The trial takes place

During the trial, Ruth and Henry turn on each other, with each blaming the other for conceiving of the plan. Both are found guilty and sentenced to death.

The trial captured the public imagination, fuelled by a tabloid press war between the *Daily Graphic*, the *Daily News* and the *Daily Mirror*. The tabloids sensationalised the murder, terming Ruth a 'femme fatale' and giving her the nickname 'Ruthless Ruth'. Henry also frequently spoke to the press, painting himself as Ruth's victim in the scenario.

The trial was packed with 1,500 people every day, with up to 2,000 people gathering in the streets outside the courthouse. Hawkers sold fake tickets to the trial for \$50 and people sold souvenir pins representing a sash weight in the street.

### 12 January, 1928 — Ruth is executed

At 11pm on 12 January 1928, Ruth becomes the third woman to be executed in the state of New York at Sing Sing prison, 10 minutes before Henry was executed in the same electric chair. When asked for her last words, she said '*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*'

There were strict rules against photographers in execution rooms. Knowing that local photographers would be recognised, the *Daily News* recruit Tom Howard, a young reporter from Chicago. He straps a hidden camera to his ankle beneath his trousers and sets off the shutter with a hidden switch in his jacket at the moment of execution.

**13 January, 1928 — The execution photo is published on the front page**

Overnight, the photograph was published on front pages across America under a headline that read 'DEAD!'. New York State attempts to prosecute both Tom Howard and the *New York Daily News* but has no success. For years afterwards, witnesses at executions underwent searches and were asked to hold up their hands so they could not operate any hidden switches.

**7 September, 1928 — *Machinal* premieres**

Although Sophie Treadwell attended the trial throughout, she did not report on it for a newspaper. Instead, she wrote her play *Machinal*, positioning Ruth as an everywoman character who is pushed to breaking point by society's expectations of women. The play premiered just eight months after the execution.

Critics praised Treadwell for her ability to transcend the sordid details of the trial as had been the fascination of the press for months, instead creating a nuanced character study of a woman while making no excuses for the tragedy.



# THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF RUTH SNYDER'S TRIAL

The case of Ruth Snyder and Henry Judd Gray, which inspired Sophie Treadwell to write *Machinal* in 1928, also captured the imagination of writers and directors for decades to come. The 1920s saw the emergence of the true crime genre in American books and magazines, and the Snyder/Gray case swept the nation into a tabloid frenzy. In the real-life case, Ruth Snyder and her lover Henry Judd Gray murdered Snyder's husband in order to claim his life insurance policy. Here we take a look at some notable adaptations of the case.

## **1933 – Lloyd Bacon directs Picture Snatcher starring James Cagney as a reformed gangster**

Inspired by the photographer who snuck into Ruth Snyder's execution to take a picture of her electrocution, *Picture Snatcher's* protagonist is a former gangster who quits to pursue his dream of becoming a newspaper reporter. He ends up landing the gig by stealing a wedding picture, and later goes on to take a picture of a woman's execution that directly mirror the circumstances of Ruth Snyder, using the same infamous hidden camera strapped to his ankle.

## **1934 – James M. Cain writes his novel The Postman Always Rings Twice**

Cain attended Ruth Snyder's trial in 1927 as a journalist alongside Sophie Treadwell. Cain was intrigued by the details of the crime, but also by Snyder and her lover Gray turning on each other during the trial. The title of the novel is inspired by a key detail from the case — Snyder agreed with the postman that he would ring twice to signify whenever he has insurance documents to deliver so she could stop her husband from receiving them. The novel was notorious at the time of publication and its sexual and violent content caused it to be banned in Boston. Several film adaptations are made of the novel, in Hollywood as well as France, Italy and Brazil.

## **1935 – James M. Cain writes Double Indemnity**

Cain returns to the Snyder Gray case as the inspiration for his novel *Double Indemnity*. The novel follows an insurance agent who is seduced by a married woman and convinced into murdering her husband, depicting the woman as the stereotypical 'femme fatale'. The novel is published as a series in *Liberty* magazine and is later published as a complete novel in 1943.

## **1944 – Billy Wilder directs the film adaptation of Double Indemnity**

Although *Double Indemnity* was initially deemed 'thoroughly unacceptable for screen presentation' by the Hollywood coding office in 1936, the film rights were eventually bought by Paramount in 1944. The film was immediately successful and is regarded as being one of the key examples of Film Noir in Hollywood.

## **1954 – William March writes his novel The Bad Seed**

March's novel *The Bad Seed* depicts a mother's realisation that her young daughter is a murderer. In the novel, the character Bessie Denker is referenced throughout as a well-known serial killer. Denker's execution is based on the details of Ruth Snyder's death.

## **1981 – Lawrence Kasdan makes his directorial debut with Body Heat**

*Body Heat* was part of the neo-noir movement in the 1980s, directly inspired by *Double Indemnity*. Like *Double Indemnity*, *Body Heat* cast the Ruth Snyder stand-in as a classic femme fatale. Kathleen Turner, the actor in the role, was named one of the '100 Sexiest Stars in Film History' by *Empire* magazine, with them citing her role in *Body Heat* in the article, and in 2005 the *New York Times* credited the role as starting her career built on 'frank sexuality'.

## **1991 – Guns N' Roses release Use Your Illusion featuring the image of Snyder's execution in the artwork**

The band are pictured posing in front of a picture of Ruth Snyder's execution under the headline 'Dead!', the notorious tabloid front page. The picture is part of the enclosed album artwork and sold on posters.



# CLASSROOM EXERCISES

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## HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

This workshop plan can be used as a pre or post show workshop. If using it as a pre-show, you might want to share a synopsis of the play with your students as well as a brief overview of the context and style of the play.

### Age range:

This workshop is suitable for years 9–13.

### Objectives:

- Explore *Machinal* through the lens of the Movement Director
- Explore how a movement director might work with a company: ensemble, character work and creating the world of the play
- Put all new movement skills and techniques together to create a short scene from *Machinal*

### Resources needed:

- A large drama studio/hall
- Scripts extracts pages 24–25

### Time:

This is a 2-hour workshop.

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## WARM UP — MIME DOWN THE ALLEY

### Time:

10 min approx.

### Purpose of activity:

To get the students warmed up to specificity of movement.

- Split the group into teams of six. Create five lines in the room one behind the other
- Everyone in the lines turn to face the back of the room, apart from the people at the front of the line
- First round — teacher show a simple mime to the first person in the line (something silly e.g. a kangaroo on a scooter, octopus putting on a hat, etc.). Then one by one each individual will turn around and copy the mime exactly to the next person. When the last person in the line has done it put up your hand. Try and guess what the mime was
- Now ask one line to do the mime at the same time — did the detail drop as you went down the line? Which line kept the same detail of the mime the whole way down?
- Swap the lines so that the person at the back is now at the front
- Second round — teacher to give the title of the mime to the first person in the line. That person can then decide how to demonstrate that mime
- Did everyone in your line get it? If they did, why was that? Emphasise the importance of detail and quality of movement

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## EXERCISE 1 — ENSEMBLE

### Time:

25 mins approx.

### Purpose of activity:

To introduce students to working as an ensemble

- This activity explores working as an ensemble and creating your own version of the tube journey that the Young Woman takes before work. This scene is not in the script but is one that Richard Jones and Sarah Fahie added to the production
- Get the students to find a space in the room by themselves. Set the scene for them — they are on a busy tube train in the morning on their way to work. Get a bounce rhythm going to show the movement of the train

**Note** — You can use music to help set the rhythm — in the production the piece was an adaptation of 'Study No.30 for Prepared Piano' by Conlon Nancarrow. This piece was what Sarah Fahie used when choreographing the piece but you might have your own music that will work. 'It's Not Working' by Daniel Pemberton also works well.

- Keep the bounce going and ask students to imagine that the train has jolted and everyone is going to jolt to the left hand side, count them in on a count of four. Repeat this to the right, forward, backward. Ask them to create movements that are repeatable
- Ask the students to each choose a simple movement that you might do on a train e.g. reading a book/newspaper, playing a game on your phone, yawning, looking for something in your bag. Decide on a movement and make it repeatable
- Now split the group into larger groups of 10

**Note** — Depending on the size and dynamic of your class, you could do this with one whole group, two groups that switch between audience and actors, or smaller groups of six.

- Get the groups to form a clump or flock and imagine they are on a packed train. In rehearsals, Movement Director Sarah Fahie asked the actors to all join hands and then weave in and out of each other to tie themselves in a knot to form this clump
- Ask each clump to have one person at the front — this person is the leader and will be representing the Young Woman. If you are the Young Woman, you are wanting to get off the train; you are hot and feeling claustrophobic. The Young Woman needs to find a movement that shows how they are feeling inside, e.g. patting chest to show fast heartbeat, playing nervously with hair, hands on face, etc.
- Get the group to start the bounce movement and remind them to stay clumped together like they are on a packed train
- The Young Woman is the leader — if the Young Woman starts to make their gesture, that is the cue for the rest of the group to start making their repeatable gesture. Every time the Young Woman makes their gesture, the rest of the group must make theirs
- After around 10 seconds, someone from the back of the clump is going to push their way from the back and take the place of the Young Woman — the previous Young Woman goes to the back and we repeat the same thing
- Repeat until a few students have had a go at being the Young Woman
- Encourage students to think about the nightmarish and distorted quality of expressionist theatre — can they start to make their movements less realistic? Perhaps the commuters move in a more menacing way to show how the Young Woman is feeling. Are the commuters moving more as one machine and less as individuals?

**Note** — The piece that was created for the performance was tightly choreographed to a count. You might want to try adding a count in and layering on the jolt to the left, etc. You could also add in moments of pause or focus — e.g. everyone is moving except the Young Woman.

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## EXERCISE 2 — CREATING THE WORLD

**Time:** 25 mins approx. to include sharing back

**Purpose of activity:** To think about how a movement director might support creating the world of the play.

- Ask the students to walk around the room like they have just got off a busy tube
- Add in 'Stop and Go' and try to encourage the group to stop and start at the same time
- Ask the group to quicken the pace, by imagining they are late for work
- This time when the group stops, ask them to think of a movement/gesture that shows typing on a computer. Once everyone has a repeatable gesture, ask them to exaggerate the movement
- Repeat the above to add in movements for: moving documents in the office and answering the phone. By the end, each individual should have a movement for three office jobs
- Get the students into groups of five or six
- Start a group discussion about creating the world of the play through the lens of the Movement Director. Just like a lighting or set designer will help create the world of the play, a movement director will do the same
- In groups, the students are going to create the world of the first episode in *Machinal*: 'To Business'
- In the students' groups of five or six, each individual will be doing one of the tasks they created gestures for:
  1. Typing on a computer
  2. Answering a telephone
  3. Taking important documents from one place in the office to another
- Get the students to assign tasks within their groups (groups of six will have two students performing each task)
- Students now must create a short movement sequence that creates the office environment. They can use the movements for each task that they have worked on. Students can think about the work they have already done, e.g. when they were on the tube. Will that impact movement in the office?
- Get the students to think about where they are on the stage. Encourage them to think about levels and how they might make their performance more interesting for an audience
- Next they should think about to enter the space — one by one? All at the same time? Are you entering from the same place or different?
- Get the students to consider how it will end. Will they repeat each movement a certain number of times? Does one person freeze and the rest follow?
- Allow the students five minutes to create their scene and then share back, either group by group, or all at the same time, depending on time

**Note** — You can put music on to underscore this scene if helpful for students.

- Hand out lines from Script B to the students and ask each student to pick a line to say along with their movement. Add these lines to the scene — they don't need to make a realistic conversation, as they are just creating the environment of a busy office. The movements are the priority, so don't let them drop

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## EXERCISE 3 – CREATING CHARACTER

**Time:** 15 mins approx.

**Purpose of activity:** To support students to create a character through movement.

- Ask students to find a space in the room on their own
- Ask students to close their eyes if they are comfortable to. Ask them to think about their office character and consider if that character were an animal, what animal would they be? Give prompts and examples if needed
- Ask students to settle on an animal and count down from 10 to one to create a frozen image of their animal
- Bring the animals to life in the room and spend a few minutes exploring how your animal moves: speed, weight, focus
- Encourage the students to really think about the quality of movement and make it as clear as they can. If it's helpful, they can try exaggerating and making it as silly as possible first
- Get the students to imagine their animal is a level 10 and their human character is a level one. Ask the students to move around the room as their animal (level 10) and then count down from 10 to one and transform into their human character
- Repeat the above but go from one to 10
- Repeat the above but go from 10 to three
- At level three, the character should be mostly human but with animal characteristics. Prompt students to consider how the animal qualities affect movement, speech, etc.
- Now the students need to take an element of their animal and bring it into their character. It could be the way they move their head, their posture, or a hand gesture
- Ask students to think about earlier in the workshop when they were coming off the tube and walking to work. Ask them to repeat the same exercise but incorporating their animal characteristic
- Get the students to go back into their 'To Business' groups and repeat the scene but with their newly developed character movement
- Start a discussion: how did this change affect the scene?

## EXERCISE 4 – TEXT

**Time:** 45 mins approx. to include sharing back

**Purpose of activity:** To put together everything they have worked on so far and to use the movement work to inform how they add in the text.

- Hand out the Script A text to students. This is an edit of a different section of the 'To Business' scene, which shows the Young Woman entering the office late
- Ask students to read the text in their group and support with any questions about meaning
- The students now need to take all of the movement work they have done already — the ensemble, creating the office work and character work, and use this along with the text to create a full scene. Students should think about how they can use movement to perform the text and how they might layer in previous work, e.g. do they say a couple of lines and then move into their office movements, do they have a leader like in the ensemble work that dictates when they do certain movements, do they have moments of stillness when certain characters speak?
- Give your students the following options depending on the group:
  1. Put together all the sequences created so far and then transition into the first scene
  2. Use the edited script but include the office movements and animal character movements to lead how that scene is presented
  3. Repeat the movements created for the office scene and add in additional lines from Script A to create a longer piece
- Encourage students to create a clear beginning and end of the scene

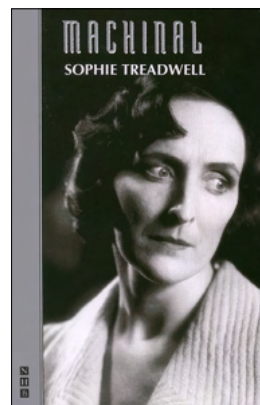
**Note** — If the lines are holding back the movement, take the lines away and focus on the quality of movement.

### BUY THE PLAYSRIPT

*Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell is published by Nick Hern Books.

**Save 30%** when you order direct from [nickhernbooks.co.uk/machinal](http://nickhernbooks.co.uk/machinal) and enter discount code **OVMACHINAL** at checkout.

 **Nick Hern Books**  
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# SCRIPT EXTRACTS

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## SCRIPT A – TO BUSINESS (EDIT)

Enter *Young Woman*.

**Stenographer** You're late!

**Filing Clerk** You're late.

**Adding Clerk** You're late.

**Stenographer** And yesterday!

**Filing Clerk** The day before.

**Adding Clerk** And the day before.

**Stenographer** You'll lose your job.

**Young Woman** No!

**Stenographer** No?

**Young Woman** I can't!

**Stenographer** Then why are you late?

**Young Woman** Why?

**Stenographer** Why?

**Young Woman** The subway?

**Telephone Girl** Long distance?

**Young Woman** I had to get out!

**Adding Clerk** Out!

**Filing Clerk** Out?

**Stenographer** Out where?

**Young Woman** In the air!

**Stenographer** Air?

**Young Woman** All those bodies pressing.

**Telephone Girl** Mr. J. wants you.

**Young Woman** Me?

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## **SCRIPT B — TO BUSINESS (EDIT)**

**Line 1** Profits, Plans, Purchase

**Line 2** Accounts — A. Bonds — B. Contracts — C.  
Data — D. Earnings — E.

**Line 3** Dear Sir — in re — your letter — recent date  
— will state —

**Line 4** Hello — Hello — George H. Jones Company  
good morning — hello hello — George H. Jones  
Company good morning — hello.

**Line 5** Shipments — sales — schedules

**Line 6** I'll take the letter

**Line 7** One thing at a time and that done well

**Line 8** My Machine's out of order

**Line 9** 5,000, 10,000, 15,000

**Line 10** I'm sorting the mail

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time of going to print, but may  
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Additional thanks to Old Vic staff