



## Theatre

### A woman revolts

Women's rights have regained attention with the 2017 and 2018 Women's Marches, and the #MeToo and Time's Up movements. Thus, it is surprising to discover an evocative portrait of a woman ill at ease with patriarchal society that feels entirely modern but was written in 1928. Sophie Treadwell wrote her masterpiece *Machinal*—one of the finest examples of American expressionism—almost a century ago, taking inspiration from the case of Ruth Snyder, the first woman in New York state to die in the electric chair after having been condemned for the murder of her husband. Under the assured direction of Natalie Abrahami at London's Almeida Theatre, *Machinal* still shocks in its positive portrayal of a woman who decides to kill her overbearing husband.

The power of this play comes from the convincing psychological trajectory Treadwell creates for the central character. Abrahami maintains the original structure of *Machinal* with nine episodes that are brief snapshots of the inexorable progression of the lead character towards a tragic end. The black screens at the front of Miriam Buether's set open and shut like jaws, enhancing the feeling of impending doom.

Abrahami skilfully evokes the suffocating atmosphere of a modern city where dehumanising rhythms reduce individuals to mere cogs in a ruthless machine. The soundscape—"the purgatory of noise"—plays a pivotal part in this production. Overlapping voices, radios playing endless music, construction works, clattering typewriters, all suggest a metropolis that threatens to silence individual voices. Similarly, the identity of the play's heroine is minimised by the text itself: in the first scenes she is simply the Young Woman and the audience learns her name, Helen Jones, only when the awareness of her own unhappiness becomes more overt.

From the first scene, the oppression of the metropolis is clear: Helen (portrayed with rawness by Emily Berrington)

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travels to work in a crowded subway, suffocated by the mass of people and on the edge of a panic attack. She is a stenographer who does not fit in at the office, always late for work, and forced into that alienating life by the need to support her overbearing and materialistic mother. When her insensitive boss Mr George Jones (a convincing Jonathan Livingstone), who has been harassing her, proposes to her, Helen's anguish about making a decision is palpable. This is a key passage in the play because Helen loathes Mr Jones, cringing when he touches her. But she also feels that as a woman she should marry. Fatally, she decides to conform to social expectations and enters into an unhappy marriage.

Not even the birth of a daughter brings joy to Helen. Motherhood becomes another element that traps her in a role she does not want to fulfil. Only the meeting in a speakeasy club with Richard Roe, an ex-convict who offers her some affection, gives Helen a glimpse of a different life in which she could find some meaning. Yet Helen chooses a violent way to end her oppressive marriage and pays the highest price.

This production of *Machinal* shows how a society that suppresses the voices and free choices of individuals can be alienating. This is evident in the scene at the clandestine speakeasy club. Alongside George and Helen are other people marginalised by society: an old gay man who seduces a student and a woman convinced by her partner to have an abortion because otherwise she would lose her job. In the end, Helen unleashes her anger towards an oppressive society, filled with regret that her daughter will be subjected to the same expectations she has faced. A profound and relentless sense of hopelessness pervades this play that may still resonate true for some women.

Marco De Ambrogio



Johan Persson

**Machinal**  
By Sophie Treadwell. Directed by Natalie Abrahami.  
Almeida Theatre, London, UK, until July 21, 2018  
<https://almeida.co.uk/whats-on/machinal/4-jun-2018-21-jul-2018>



Johan Persson