

machinal



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A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR JESSICA FISCH

## WHAT DO YOU SEE MACHINAL AS BEING ABOUT?

MACHINAL was inspired by the true story of Ruth Snyder who was actually the first woman executed in the state of New York for capital murder. The actual trial was a huge media sensation. Sophie Treadwell was one of the reporters covering the case, and she wrote this play mere months after Ruth Snyder was executed. At the time, Ruth Snyder was really villainized in the press, but Sophie Treadwell was more interested in asking why a woman, in the 20s, with the limitations that she had in her life, would resort to murder. The play does a really amazing job of exploring what it feels like to be trapped inside of our lives. I think that that's something so universal and timeless, and the fact that I'm directing this play almost 85 years after it was written and it still feels incredibly relevant is a tribute to that story.

## WHY DOES THIS STORY STILL NEED TO BE TOLD?

On the surface, it takes place in 1927, and yet I feel like the story of one's life not going the way that one wants it to is something that everybody can connect with. Throughout the play, Helen, the Young Woman, tries to fit into this role in society: she tries to be a good office worker, a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. This idea of being stifled by people's expectations and feeling like you can't meet them – or that even if you could, it wouldn't really be who you are – is familiar I think, to all of us. Also, as a director, I tend to be particularly drawn to telling the stories of women who are struggling to find their voice in a society or a community where they don't fit. I'm at a point in my life where I'm always questioning, can I have it all? Can I be all of these things? And I think that was true for women in the 20s, women in the 50s, women in the 90s, and I certainly think it's still true for the millennial generation now.

## HOW IS YOUR PRODUCTION UNIQUE?

I think a lot of productions of MACHINAL go very industrial. To me a city is inherently industrial and I wanted us to feel like we were always in a city. The production relies very strongly on the verticals. We use the full height of the theatre, because I wanted people when they walk in to feel like they're entering the city. There's also a rhythm to the city – a city has

that constant beat. So there's a lot of choreographed movement, and a lot is told through the gestures of what we call the machine, the other people in the play who are not Helen. And the script is amazing because it's fully scored. Kevin O'Donnell, our sound designer who is a genius, composed music for the piece, and our entire production is underscored between the sounds of the city and the music that he's composed for the play. It's a full immersion into this world we've created.

## WHAT ABOUT DIRECTING AN EXPRESSIONIST PLAY HAS BEEN CHALLENGING FOR YOU?

Expressionism is a style that demands an attention to detail and also an overall sense of tone. Something that we've been working on is: how do we present a nonrealistic world? So much of the training of a 20th century actor is in psychology, the Meisner, Stanislavsky, but that does not actually work for this play. The way that people behave in expressionistic drama is gestural, and so the rules of how to act had to change for many of the actors and for myself too. It was about really embracing the style and knowing that even though people might behave in ways that are nonrealistic, the emotions that they're feeling are still real. There has been a fearlessness on the part of this cast that is incredibly commendable.

Presented by the Theatre and Interpretation Center at Northwestern University MFA Second-Year Collaborations Series, MACHINAL is running February 15-23 in the Mussetter-Struble Theater, 1949 Campus Drive in Evanston.

This series celebrates the shared vision of our second-year MFA design and directing students and provides TIC audiences an opportunity to see the work of these up-and-coming artists. Approximately three MFA Collaboration Series productions are staged each school year, with single tickets available to the general public and complimentary tickets available to TIC mainstage subscribers.

For more information or to purchase tickets, call (847) 491-7282 or visit [www.tic.northwestern.edu/mfa](http://www.tic.northwestern.edu/mfa).