

*MACHINAL*: SILENCE, STAGE DIRECTIONS AND SOPHIE TREADWELL

BY

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Theatre and Film  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts.

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## I. Introduction

Twentieth century playwright Sophie Treadwell's descent into relative obscurity is a widely commented upon topic. In his review of the 1993 London production of her play *Machinal*, Nicholas De Jongh refers to her as "the long lost heroine of modern American theatre" (Ch. 1, 17). Likewise, the *New York Times* article on the 1990 Public Theatre production of that same play announces "Play Proves Its Point in Obscurity" (Collins 7) and Jerry Dickey writes, "Scholarly assessments of Treadwell's contributions have been slow to evolve, with mention of her largely consisting of passing references in historical texts" (13). In the preface to her 1982 dissertation on Treadwell, Nancy Wynn comments:

I was disappointed and puzzled to find that [Treadwell] did not appear in current theatre history textbooks nor in such reference works as *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama* or *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. It seemed a safe assumption that the playwright who wrote *Machinal* also wrote other plays which merited recognition from scholars and artists of the theatre.  
(v)

Wynn's disappointment stems from the strange silence that surrounds both Treadwell's life and most profoundly her theatrical work with the noted exception of *Machinal*. Treadwell was, after all, a playwright who had multiple plays produced on Broadway, yet her current commercial legacy consists of cyclically being salvaged from obscurity by a singular play. This thesis will examine that play, *Machinal*, by putting it into conversation with this legacy of silence. I will be placing my focus specifically on the stage directions of *Machinal*. I will argue that these stage directions are a vehicle for Sophie Treadwell's silenced voice and that, in production, they can be used to voice the silence.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will contextualize the play within its literary and production history. It will investigate *Machinal's* authorial origins as well as how the play fits into the theatrical genre of expressionism. I will then investigate how various productions have staged *Machinal*. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to how Treadwell's stage directions manifest themselves in production. The second chapter will put these stage directions in conversation with both Martin Puchner's definition of modernist anti-theatricality and Umberto Eco's definition of an open work. By doing so I will examine how Sophie Treadwell provides a space for theatrical innovation within her often anti-theatrical stage directions. Finally, the third chapter will propose a production concept implied by my findings. I will use Marvin Carlson's definition of "ghosting" to discuss how Treadwell's ghost can be brought out through these stage directions in production.

Sophie Treadwell and the Young Woman upon which *Machinal* focuses are examples of a history and society that has rendered many women silent. In the production concept that I will propose in the third chapter of this thesis, I propose a way to voice this silence. It is the hope of that production concept and this thesis to interrupt this silence by encouraging discourse as well as the excavation of silenced women and ignored literature from the dusty archives of forgotten history.

## Chapter I: *Machinal* in Context

### Part I: Sophie Treadwell and *Machinal*

Sophie Treadwell was born in Stockton, California, on October 3, 1885. She received a degree in French from the University of Berkeley in 1906. Her interest in theatre began when she was in college and continued throughout her life. She wrote her first play, which was entitled *Le Grand Prix*, during 1906 and 1907 and continued writing and revising work through the 1960s. Upon her death in 1970, Treadwell had completed thirty-nine plays, many of which were produced on Broadway. Jerry Dickey writes,

[Treadwell's] plays often decry capitalism and cheer for the small, hardworking individual who is tied to the land and sustenance, yet she often preferred life in the city and was determined to succeed within the structure of commercial, Broadway theatre. (14)

As Dickey states, Treadwell's works received mixed reception on Broadway often due to their subversive content. She would stop writing for Broadway in the 1940s.

Despite her varying success in commercial theatre, Treadwell supported herself throughout most of her life with her writing. In addition to her theatrical work, Treadwell worked sporadically as a reporter for various news publications. In fact, it was through her journalistic connections that Treadwell gained admittance to the murder trial that would serve as the inspiration for *Machinal*. Although Treadwell was a rather prolific playwright, only two of her plays made it to publication: *Machinal* and *Hope for a Harvest*. Produced on Broadway by the Theatre Guild in 1941, *Hope for a Harvest* dealt with immigration, the economy

and the growing diversity of America (Dickey 12). Critical reaction to the Broadway production was mostly negative and the production closed shortly after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, an event that made the play topically uncomfortable for American audiences. *Machinal* proved to be by far the most successful of her works. Although it only ran for 91 days on Broadway, the play received stellar reviews, and eventually became anthologized, and has enjoyed many revivals. It is through *Machinal* that most are introduced to Sophie Treadwell and her legacy.

*Machinal* premiered on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1928 at the Plymouth Theatre in New York. The production was directed by Arthur Hopkins and designed by Robert Edmond Jones. The *New York Times* review that ran on September 8<sup>th</sup> states “Subdued, monotonous, episodic, occasionally eccentric in its style, *Machinal* is fraught with a beauty unfamiliar to the stage” (Atkinson 18). Indeed, *Machinal* was a critical hit. An advertisement which ran in the *New York Times* three weeks after the play’s opening:

*Machinal* emerges as a triumph of individual distinction, gleaming with intangible beauty. Sophie Treadwell’s abstract treatment of the story, Zita Johann’s pellucid acting in the leading role, Mr. Hopkin’s immensely skillful production, have wrought an illuminating, measured drama such as we are not likely to see again. (NYT 9/23/1928, pg. x3)

The play did not, however, fare so well amongst the commercial theatre going audience. The public did not appear concerned with seeing *Machinal* again and it closed, lauded and ignored, after ninety-one performances, a comparatively short run on Broadway.

Despite its lack of commercial success *Machinal* did make it into Burns Mantle's *Best Plays of 1928-1929* which, published in 1929, arrived in bookstores not long after the closing of Treadwell's play. Mantle states that he "debated long" as to whether *Machinal* should be included in his list or excluded in favor of a more crowd drawing play by Federick Longsdale entitled *The High Road* (Mantle vii). In the end, Mantle decided to include Treadwell's script because it "seemed a much more significant character study" (Mantle vii). In addition to Mantle's collection, *Machinal* is also included in a collection entitled *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre: Early Series* edited by John Gassner. Gassner writes that *Machinal* was "one of the most unusual plays of the twenties" (494). In this volume, originally published in 1949, Gassner includes *Machinal* alongside such canonical works as Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*.

*Machinal*'s ability to remain in publication though collections and anthologies has contributed greatly to its production history. In an article about the Public Theatre's production of *Machinal* published in the *New York Times* in 1990, Matt Ellis, the manager of cash and investments for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson to which Treadwell had left the rights to her plays, states:

We allowed *Machinal* to be published by Applause Books in a collection called *Plays by American Women* in 1982, and since then about 12 colleges and universities have made inquiries for productions. (Witchel C2)

As this quotation suggests *Machinal*'s production history became far more dense in the 80s and 90s. The introduction to *Machinal* in *American Drama: Colonial to Contemporary* states "Revivals of *Machinal* in the 1980s and 1990s have both

garnered generally positive critical reviews and attracted enthusiastic audiences in London, New York and San Francisco” (362).

## **Part II: Ruth Snyder, Expressionism, and *Machinal***

There are a number of factors that could have contributed to *Machinal's* initial lack of Broadway longevity as well as its recent popularity. Two of the most glaring are its historical subject matter and its experimental style. Treadwell used the plight of infamous housewife turned murderess Ruth Snyder as her point of inspiration for the play. In 1927, Ruth Snyder, a Long Island housewife, colluded with her lover, Judd Gray, and killed her husband, Albert Snyder, with a window sash weight. The ensuing murder trial captivated America. Jennifer Jones writes:

For eight months the country was obsessed with the Snyder/Gray murder trial; over 180 reporters from across the nation were assigned to the case, and readers hung on every word they wrote. When the two lovers were finally convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair there was, literally, dancing in the streets. (39)

Treadwell utilized her connections as a reporter to gain access to the trial of Ruth Snyder, which was, as Jones reports, a literally high priced, ticketed event:

Over fifteen hundred people attended; for the first time in history, microphones and speakers were set up in a court room so that everyone could hear the testimony. One had to have a ticket to be admitted, and scalpers were ready, as always, to make a quick buck, selling tickets for fifty dollars apiece. (42)

While Sophie Treadwell did manage to gain admittance to the trial, she did not attend to officially report upon it. Treadwell had previously officially reported on two other high profile murder trials that featured female defendants. The result of Treadwell's courtroom observations would be *Machinal*. Jerry Dickey writes:



Rather than reporting on the events of the press, however, Treadwell used Snyder as point of departure for a dramatic indictment of a society whose masculine laws and orientations stifled the emotional needs of women. (11)

She took this very real point of inspiration and transplanted it into a framework of theatrical expressionism thus allowing for some artistic distance between the non-fictional and the theatrical. At her trial Ruth Snyder stated that the motive behind her and her lover's murderous act was to take "a step toward a larger freedom, a fuller enjoyment of life..." (Wynn 109). Nancy Wynn writes that

the paradox of the brutal act juxtaposed with the rationale that this was a step toward freedom piqued Treadwell's curiosity: what crushing set of circumstances could compel the woman to murder her husband to attain freedom? (109)

The expressionistic style that Treadwell utilized as the dramatic structure of *Machinal* allowed her to use the Snyder murder trial non-specifically. Within *Machinal* Treadwell does not tell a biographical story of Ruth Snyder but rather a story of a Young Woman whose life *resembles* that of Ruth Snyder and whose society *resembles* our own. As an expressionistic work, *Machinal* eschews realism. The public had already seen realism when they witnessed the trial and execution of Ruth Snyder. Within Treadwell's play we never see the execution of Young Woman. The play concludes just previous to her demise. The stage directions in the final episode of the play state: "The TWO GUARDS take YOUNG WOMAN by the arms, and start through the door in the bars and down the passage, across the stage, and off" (401). As a result, the Young Woman is represented by the sound of her voice pleading from offstage throughout the final moments of the play until it is eventually silenced by, we assume, death. In

reality, a reporter for the *Daily News* managed to sneak a camera into Ruth Snyder's execution and took a picture of her electrocuted body. This photograph ran in the paper the following day. The visual reality of Ruth Snyder's executed body did little to engender sympathy and instead served as one more piece of spectacle for the "real" drama the public had been following for eight months. Realism was obviously not a space that would allow for a reexamination of events or for a reevaluation of the societal response to a woman murdering her husband. By placing her examination of society within the expressionistic theatrical space, Treadwell was able to distance her play from the "objective reality" her audience had already accepted and make way for less biased discourse and, perhaps, even sympathy (though, in 1928, it was perhaps too soon to hope for a non-biased audience).

The expressionistic theatrical style Sophie Treadwell employed in *Machinal* was relatively new to the theatrical world in 1928 and was especially new to the American theatre. The term "expressionism" was initially used to describe a trend in visual art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Styan writes:

In the 1900s it was a useful word to distinguish early impressionist painting from the more energetic individualism of Van Gogh and Matisse, each of whom refused to render exactly what he saw, in order, Van Gogh said, 'to express himself with force' [...] The expressionist flatly rejected any realistic style as being obvious imitation: he was not interested in objective reality, and he refused to be wedded to surface detail. (1-2)

Defining expressionism as a theatrical genre is a difficult task. While it is an often referred to genre, pithy definitions of expressionism are rare. Styan writes that, like many theatrical genre titles, "the term is generally applied after the fact, and

is often better defined by the play to which it is applied than by the critic who applies it" (1). The roots of *theatrical* expressionism are generally traced to the early 1910s in Germany. Expressionism was introduced to American theatre-going audiences in the 1920s, perhaps most famously by Eugene O'Neill's 1922 work *The Hairy Ape*.

Critics appear to be in agreement that *Machinal* fits into the expressionist theatrical tradition. It does, for one, fit into the correct time period. It also exhibits many of the structural techniques used by other practitioners of the style. *Machinal* abandons the style of the well-made play and is written episodically rather than in traditional Act/Scene structure. In her script, Treadwell categorizes each of the nine scenes as "episodes" and gives each a subtitle (e.g. "Episode One: To Business," "Episode Six: Intimate"). The way in which Treadwell identifies her characters (by title rather than formal name) is also an expressionistic technique. Styan writes, "Characters lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like "The Man", "The Father", etc" (3). Treadwell's script introduces us to such characters as Young Woman, Husband, Mother, Man, Telephone Girl, and a host of others whose character identities are routed in these generic titles. This aspect of Treadwell's script is of particular significance because the characters' actual names are eventually made known to the audience even though their official character names remain titles. We learn, for example, in "Episode Five: Prohibited" that Young Woman is named Helen. The character of Husband is actually George H. Jones and we are

aware of this fact from the very first episode, yet his character name remains an alienating title throughout.

Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf state that the “chief element of expressionist drama to the stage” is “the use of the central character’s completely subjective point of view to develop the action and distort the other characters” (207). Young Woman is the most developed character within *Machinal*. All the other characters remain stereotypes. In her original production notes for the play, Treadwell wrote that these characters “are to be played as ‘personifications’ of what they represent (genuinely, type actors giving type performances)” (Wynn 115). Treadwell provides us with descriptions of these “types” in her stage directions. She describes Telephone Girl as “young, cheap and amorous” (366). And “young, cheap and amorous” Telephone Girl remains when we rejoin her in “Episode Five.” Stenographer is “drying, dried” (366). The character of 1<sup>st</sup> Man, who becomes simply Man once he becomes Young Woman’s lover, is described as “pleasing, common, vigorous” and his friend, 2<sup>nd</sup> Man, “is an ordinary salesman type” (Treadwell 380). These succinct descriptions stand in contrast to the paragraph long description of *Machinal*’s protagonist that Treadwell provides at the beginning of the play. She writes:

Of these characters, THE YOUNG WOMAN, going any day to business. Ordinary. The confusion of her own inner thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams cut off from any actual adjustment to the routine work. She gets through this routine with a very small surface of her consciousness. She is not homely and she is not pretty. She is preoccupied with herself—with her person. She has well kept hands, and a trick of constantly arranging her hair over her ears. (366)

In keeping with her “subjective point of view,” Young Woman is the only character to undergo any sort of emotional transformation within the course the play.

*Machinal* represents the American strain of expressionism which has long been identified by its relationship with its German predecessor. However, In her book *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre*, Julia Walker suggests that American expressionism developed independently from its German counterpart. Walker theorizes that a general apprehension of new developments in communication styles produced a theatrical niche for this style of drama.

Walker writes:

Frequently featuring bodies “seen but not heard,” “voices heard but not seen,” and telegraphically terse dialogue, these plays figure such fears not only thematically in their dystopic vision of modern life, but formally in their expressionistic style. (2)

Developing technology and its effect upon communication is well represented within the body of *Machinal*. The play opens in an office amid the “Mechanical Offstage Sounds” of “Office Machines (Typewriters, telephones, etc.) Electric Piano” (365). The first three characters to speak do so in mechanically “monotonous voices”:

ADDING CLERK: (*in the monotonous voice of his monotonous thoughts; at his adding machine*) 2490, 28, 76, 123, 36482, 1, ¼, 37, 804, 23½, 982.

FILING CLERK: (*in the same way—at his filing desk*) Account—A. Bonds—B. Contracts—C. Data—D. Earnings—E.

STENOGRAPHER: (*in the same way—Left*) Dear Sir—in re—your letter—recent date—will state— (366)

This passage illustrates the staccato speech pattern that Treadwell employs throughout the play. These speech patterns are indicative of the estranged

relationship between the characters of *Machinal* and communication. When Young Woman first enters she tells a story of her inability to breathe or speak in this new world of stale, mechanized, and stripped down communication.

*Machinal* features both “characters seen but not heard” and “characters heard but not seen” (Treadwell 365). Treadwell prescribes these characters in her opening stage directions and their voices and bodies enter and interrupt the play throughout. Each presents an identity in fragments, alienated from either embodiment or vocality.

### **Part III: The Arthur Hopkins Production of *Machinal***

Treadwell writes in her opening stage directions that

The HOPE is to create a stage production that will have “style,” and at the same time, by the story’s own innate drama, by the directness of its telling, by the variety and quick changingness of its scenes, and the excitement of its sounds to create an interesting play. (365)

I will now examine how different theatrical productions of *Machinal* have responded to Treadwell’s “hope.” How does one stage the story as well as the structure of *Machinal*? I will be specifically focusing on the 1928 premiere production, the 1990 Public Theatre production, and the 1993 London National Theatre Production.

What artistry so enamored the critics and alienated the public in the original production of *Machinal*? Arthur Hopkins, the director of the production, is historically well respected within the theatrical community. Jennifer Parent reports that “On his death, the *New York News* said that a list of Hopkins’ failures

is more interesting and important theatrically than the list of many another man's successes" (89). One is left to wonder upon which list the *New York News* would have placed *Machinal*.

Hopkins himself wrote that "the two essentials in this kind of direction are for the director to know exactly what he wants and to make sure he can get what he wants from the people he has selected" (Parent 90). Hopkins selection of Zita Johann as Young Woman reportedly fit these essentials. J. Brooks Atkinson's review of the play states, "Zita Johann acts the leading part with a bewildered droop and a wistfulness that quite redeem the chief character from the commonness of the environment" (18). Hopkins also cast Clark Gable in the role of Man (Young Woman's lover). Despite some confusion over his actual identity, Gable likewise gained praise for his performance as Man. Expressing the dangers of expressionistic character titles, Jerry Dickey reports that

the playbill's listing of characters by type not name created some confusion about who actually played this role. Some critics credited Hal K. Dawson (listed as "A Man" in the playbill) with this role, a mistake which led numerous critics and scholars subsequently to state that Hal K. Dawson was actually Gable's stage name. (70)

Hopkins' production of *Machinal* was designed by Robert Edmond Jones. For *Machinal*, Jones created what Parent refers to as "one of his most inconspicuous" sets. According to Parent "the basic unit was a large neutral greenish frame set with a curtained proscenium" (91). The set was convertible. Scenes changed with switching of background flats, furniture and props. Only the essentials were used. The costumes, Parent states, were "as unobtrusive as the sets and often simply functional" (91).

Light and sound are of particular importance in *Machinal*. Parent writes

there is, also, the use of many different sounds chosen primarily for their inherent emotional effect (steel riveting, a priest chanting, a Negro singing, jazz band, etc.) but contributing to the creation of a background, an atmosphere. (364-365)

Parent refers to “machines” becoming “prominent ‘actors’” via the sound design. She writes “sound was constantly used to indicate offstage life ”(91). She continues that the many sound effects featured “office machines, bells buzzers, steel riveting, telegraph instruments, airplane engines” –all sounds called for by Treadwell’s original stage directions (91). Audiences weren’t quite sure what to make of all the noise. In Atkinson’s review of the play, commentary on sound design is noticeably absent. Parent writes that “Though some reviewers implied that the production was wonderful despite the exaggeration, harshness, distortion of lights and sounds and images, most agreed that it was the most highly stylized scenes...that worked the best” (88).

The lighting design (also by Robert Edmond Jones with “unspecified” aid from George Schaff) adhered to Treadwell’s request for “concentrated and intense” lighting (Parent 91). The lighting in the final scene was apparently very effective. Mantle describes it in his notes on the play. Of the last scene he writes, “Gradually the light increases—first, a faint blue, then red, then pink, then amber. Now all are thrown on full. An indescribable glow suffuses the scene. The curtain falls” (251). Parent echoes his sentiment when she writes that “The very final red gold glow of the lights on the empty stage was peace for the audience as well as for the Young Woman” (88).



#### **Part IV: The Public Theatre Production of *Machinal***

The Public Theatre's production of *Machinal* opened in New York in October of 1990 and has the happy distinction of being extremely successful. Directed by Michael Grief as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival, the run of this production was, unlike the original production's, *extended* through the end of November. This production's "Aha moment" of creation can be attributed to the aforementioned publishing of *Plays by American Women*. Glenn Collins reports in his *New York Times* piece entitled "Play Proves Its Point in Obscurity" that Grief became acquainted with the play when Jodie Markell (who would become his Young Woman) "showed him *Machinal* which had been reprinted in *Plays by American Women*" (Collins C17).

In his staging, Michael Grief found his own innovative ways to emphasize and illustrate the unspoken portions of Treadwell's play. Grief's production explored and utilized some Brechtian distancing techniques. Grief had each episode title projected onto a screen on stage. Jill Dolan writes in her *Theatre Journal* review of the production that "the episodic text was choreographed to move fluidly among interlocking scenes, whose titles were announced to the audience" (Dolan 97). Grief also chose to have this play, which on the surface appears to be mostly concerned with gender issues, emphasize racial issues as well. He did this by using a multi-racial cast. This choice is supported in Treadwell's original text by references made in the stage directions to "the voice of a Negro singing" (a "character seen but not heard") in the final episode of the play (Treadwell, 399). Dolan writes that

Grief's multi-racial production emphasized race and ethnicity, which are also considered in Treadwell's text, connecting the Young Woman's plight with a black man whose haunting gospel song sounded like a lament behind her execution. (96)

This note on the sound of Grief's production leads to what appears to be a defining characteristic of his version of *Machinal*—it was really noisy. Dolan writes:

Daunted by urban industrialization, represented here by deafening machine noises, train whistles and welding and riveting sounds, the "Young Woman" as she is emblematically called, is the center of a web of social discourses that constrain her choices both as a worker and as a woman, and squelch the more romantic, spiritual impulses of her life. (Dolan 96)

Frank Rich writes in his review,

In keeping with Treadwell's original intentions, Mr. Grief folds each scene within the "purgatory of noise" that marks the urban jungle: jackhammers and subway trains and grinding manufacturing of machinery (C14).

The rest of the design also impacted the critics. Like the original production, Grief's version benefited from a convertible set. Rich writes "[Grief] places the entire action within a skeletal factory that is constantly and subtly reconfigured to serve as such settings as a speak easy, a furnished room, a resort hotel, a maternity ward and a courtroom" (C14). In other words, the set functioned very much like a machine that adjusts to action while simultaneously always imprisoning it. Rich describes the smoky, dampened color palette used on the set.

He writes:

The tall green shades, the chiaroscuro of dark lamplight and shadows, the spooky silhouettes that rise in the smoky glass panel of an office door all conspire to re-create the lonely, sometimes surreal, often macabre American cityscapes found in the

contemporaneous paintings of Sheeler, Shahn and Hopper. (Rich C14)

It would seem that this production's emphasis on shadows and the scenically advantageous disparity between light and dark paid particular attention to Treadwell's stage direction that reads "LIGHTING concentrated and intense: Light and shadow—bright light and darkness" (Treadwell 365).

### **Part V: The London National Theatre Production of *Machinal***

London's 1993 National Theatre Production, directed by Stephen Daldry, featured Fiona Shaw in the lead role. This production serves as a useful foil to the other two I've selected to study for a number of reasons. First of all, it transplants an American play that spoke with specificity to its American audience about an American plight through American expressionism. Second of all, the production celebrated machinery through its spectacular use of theatrical technology—it made a mechanical spectacle of itself. Paul Taylor states in his review for the London news paper *The Independent*:

The whole proceedings could be said to be embroiled in an exhilarating irony, for, as it is staged here (using Ian MacNeil's awesome designs), Treadwell's damning expressionist vision of the metropolis can't help but impress itself on you as an uplifting celebration of the vast mechanical resources of the Lyttleon [theatre]. (Arts 19)

Nicholas De Jongh opens his review of the National Theatre production with a rather contentious and melodramatic statement. He writes

THE BARE, old bones of this forgotten American play have been disinterred by director Stephen Daldry and his constant designer Ian MacNeil to create one of the most devastating theatrical experiences of my life. (7)

It seems odd that a production so close on the heels to the successful Public Theatre production would be credited with resuscitating a play that, while ignored, was never entirely forgotten. De Jongh goes on to state, “Sophie Treadwell, whose *Machinal* triumphed on 1920s Broadway, is a lost heroine of modern American theatre” (7).

While De Jongh does appear to be a bit misled on the production history of Treadwell’s play, he does offer some insight into how the National Theatre transformed *Machinal* through machinery. He writes, “Never before have the Lyttelton’s resources been so thrillingly exploited, with trucks, lifts and mobile circular grill” (7). Taylor produces a more specific mental image when he cites “the revolving cubicles of a packed cacophonous office loom in from the back of the stage, like some beaucocratic circle of hell that Dante had overlooked” (19). One is left to wonder how this glorification of stage machinery affected the play’s suffocating metaphorical societal machine.

Fiona Shaw possesses a very recognizable name. The name “Fiona Shaw” does not summon to mind an “ordinary young woman, any woman.”

Taylor, though complimentary, seems to agree with this sentiment. He writes,

[Young Woman] is supposed to be a representative example of the way women are constricted and crushed by a system evolved to suit men. But she comes across, both in the writing and in Fiona Shaw’s splendid, unsparing performance, as such a congenital martyr to nerves and high-strung fastidiousness as to constitute a special case. (19)

As previously discussed, a key disorienting quality of *Machinal* is derived from the fact that Young Woman is any woman. She is ordinary. She is everyone.

She kills yet we don't indict her. By taking *Machinal* out of its contextual nest, this London production literally spun the play in a much different direction than one would expect from Treadwell's original script.

I have just discussed three productions of *Machinal* that sought to satisfy Treadwell's expressionistic script through inventive staging and ordinary young women. It is significant that productions of *Machinal* found more receptive audiences near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps Treadwell's play was written for a society unreceptive to both Treadwell's topic and *Machinal's* style. Time has distanced us from Ruth Snyder and her crime. The judgment that condemned her is now treated with suspicion rather than acclaim. Audiences, it seems, are more open to a theatrical retrial. This "retrial" lends itself to the theatrical innovations that have occurred since its original authorship. *Machinal* can be projected and spun out of "obscurity" through contemporary production. In the next chapter, I will address how *Machinal's* stage directions have likewise been spun and projected into production.

## Chapter II: Theorizing the Stage Directions of *Machinal*

### Part I: The Status of Stage Directions

In most cases, the discussion of stage directions has two manifestations. The first is a discussion about whether or not they should be heeded, and the second, and interconnected, topic concerns their authorial purpose. This study is focusing specifically on author provided stage directions, *not* those inserted by stage managers and publishers retroactively. Elaine Aston and George Savona write in their work *Theatre As Sign-System* that stage directions are “a markedly underworked area”(182). Before entering into a discussion of how stage directions function within *Machinal*, it is necessary to discuss how stage directions function in general within scripted theatrical works.

The status of stage directions is a contentious topic in performance. They can be viewed as an authorial attempt to control and, as a result, inhibit creativity in the production process. Citing theorists Keir Elam and Patrice Pavis, Aston and Savona write:

Critical opinion is divided as to the usefulness of stage directions, in particular the more “visible” extra-dialogic mode. Elam and Pavis, for example, share the view that directions constitute for the dramatist a means of asserting authorial control over the process whereby the text is realized in performance. (124)

Placing preference on authorial intention is no longer a popular literary stance especially since Roland Barthes infamously declared authors dead in 1967.

How much is too much authorial control? Despite the ample space for creative freedom in the production of a theatrical work, when working with scripted material one is always tied to that script. A playwright’s scripted dialogue is rarely

ignored but it is fairly common practice to disregard the “extra-dialogic” words provided by the author through the script. Pavis "suggests that the textual status of extra-dialogic directions is ‘uncertain’, and that the director is therefore relieved of the obligation of adhering to them" (Aston and Savona 124).

This uncertainty seems a likely reason for the practice of disregarding stage directions. Their nature is mysterious and they can be difficult to embody, as is sometimes the case with the stage directions of *Machinal*. In my analysis of these directions, I will investigate the mysterious nature and mine it for theatrical usefulness. I will be focusing my theoretical analysis of *Machinal*'s stage directions around two terms: anti-theatricality and the open work. I will first discuss the function of the stage directions within *Machinal* by viewing them through the lens of modernist anti-theatricality, as identified by Martin Puchner in his book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*. I will then argue that, despite their anti-theatrical nature, these stage directions signify an “open work” as defined by Umberto Eco. As a result, they are meant to be interpreted by a reader/director and put into the theatrical space to be further interpreted by an audience. I will provide specific examples of ways in which this “open work” has been treated by the different reader/directors by analyzing the productions I previously discussed in Chapter One.

The directions upon which I am focusing are included in the published versions of the play. Jerry Dickey writes:

Although there are several different versions of the play which have survived, most retain the same basic arrangement of scenes and action. Some contain variant titles for the individual episodes, and

the 1928 production manuscript includes a stage direction of the Robert Edmond Jones/George Schaff lighting effect. (69)

These other versions appear to exist in isolated libraries across the country. The acting version of the 1928 production resides in New York while many of Treadwell's drafts are in the extensive collection of her works that is held by the University of Arizona. A single version seems to have made it to widespread publication. While the stage directions I am analyzing within this study do not appear in the first published version (the aforementioned *Best Plays of 1928-1929* composed by Burns Mantle), Treadwell's stage directions have been restored to later published editions. Jennifer Parent refers to the Burns Mantle edition as a "condensation of the script" which explains its lack of original extra-dialogic text (Parent 88). Mantle's volume *Best Plays of 1928-1929* is composed entirely of such "condensations." He includes snippets of each script but ties each snippet together with his own explanation of scenes and events. The scripts in their entirety are not reproduced. The stage directions have been restored in John Gassner's *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, Judith E. Barlow's *Plays By American Women: 1900-1930, American Drama: Colonial to Contemporary*, as well as the 1993 publication of the play that occurred in correlation with the London National Theatre's production (which interestingly leaves the directions alone and does not add any notes specific to that production). These stage directions allowed Treadwell to layer meaning within her script and also allowed her to influence the theatrical choices made outside of the script: lighting, scenery, acting choices, etc. Nancy Wynn writes of Treadwell's stage directions that



There has been some speculation concerning just how much of the final production of *Machinal* was Treadwell's idea and how much was provided by Arthur Hopkins and Robert Edmond Jones. These notes make clear that her style of writing and original intention not only dictated the scheme for Hopkins' production but the set design and striking lighting effects as well.... Because of the unity of her single artistic vision, she was more responsible for the total masterpiece of *Machinal* than most playwrights are in other commercial productions. (115)

The fact that Treadwell's stage directions contributed to her responsibility for the overall aesthetic vision of *Machinal* is indicative of the strong authorial influence over production that she infused into her script. Through her stage directions Treadwell describes the effects that are necessary to create an effective and "unified" production of *Machinal*.

## **Part II: Stage Directions: Anti-theatricality and the Open Text**

### **Modernist Anti-theatricality**

*Stage Fright*, the title of Martin Puchner's book, refers not to the state of anxiety that commonly attacks actors in the wings but instead to an actual fear of the stage—a fear of what happens to a text when performance is inflicted upon it. In *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*, Puchner details the anti-theatrical elements employed by modernist playwrights to protect their works from the effects of unpredictable performance. Puchner loosely defines the term "anti-theatricality" as follows:

The best way to characterize this constitutive anti-theatrical dynamic within modernism is a form of resistance...The negation and rejection inherent in the term anti-theatricalism is therefore not to be understood as a doing away with the theater, but as a process that is dependent on that which it negates and to which it therefore remains calibrated. (2)

Stephane Mallarmé, whom Puchner uses as one of his modernist playwright case studies, wrote closet dramas in an effort to confine his plays to the page and keep the performative act at bay. Another playwright Puchner discusses within his work is Samuel Beckett. Beckett's anti-theatricality manifests itself in a quite different manner than Mallarmé's. Beckett wrote for the stage but exerts authorial control via carefully crafted scripts.

Putting a text into performance involves a double act of interpretation. The text is first interpreted by a production team (director, actors, designers, etc.). The result of this primary interpretive act is then interpreted by the viewing audience. The number of interpreters involved in a theatrical production accounts for some of the queasiness Mallarmé felt for live theatrical performance. By confining his plays to the "closet" Mallarmé sought to delete one of these acts of interpretation and, therefore, confine meaning.

In his analysis of Mallarmé, Puchner describes the trappings Mallarmé placed within his closet drama to ward off the adulterous effects of performance. Mallarmé's first closet drama, *Herodiade*, began as a failed stage venture. Upon its theatrical failure, Mallarmé set about stage proofing *Herodiade*. Puchner writes, "The clearest external marker for this change from play to closet drama is that Mallarmé erased all stage directions, as if to prove how little he was thinking of theatrical representation" (59). Instead Mallarmé incorporated the description of physical action into the dialogue of *Herodiade* in a poetic style designed to specifically defy embodiment. Puchner writes:

Mallarmé is not content merely to rebuff the external world and physical human interaction in order to create a more refined and mysterious world in its stead. Rather, he attacks the very mimesis: Herodiade isolates herself and, once isolated, recreates herself through speech and that is directed against the very possibility of physical embodiment. (62)

Puchner then cites a line from *Herodiade* that reads “Stand back./The blond torrent of my immaculate hair/which baths my solitary body” (62). In performance this statement would immediately fail. The heightened expectations created by such a line are impossible to satiate. A “blond torrent” of “immaculate hair” effectively describes the physical while simultaneously rendering physical embodiment futile.

Another of Puchner’s case studies, Samuel Beckett, instills his plays with significant authorial stage directions. Unlike Mallarmé, Beckett intended his works to be performed but, as Puchner observes, Beckett used various means to set very specific physical and vocal parameters for actors performing his works. He experimented in radio plays (plays without gestures) as well as two plays that are composed entirely of gestures and, as a result, stage directions. These plays are appropriately titled *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*. When Beckett enabled actors to both gesture and speak within a single play he set parameters for both via detailed direction. Puchner attributes the importance of Beckett’s stage directions to Beckett’s use of the symbolist style within his plays. Puchner calls symbolist theater

a quintessential theater of objects and isolated gestures, a theater in which objects and gestures compose an ensemble of primary signifiers on which the play relies and in which it invests much of its signifying gestures. (161)

Beckett's stage directions are considered to be so integral to Beckett's work that a law suit was famously filed when Joanne Akalaitis adjusted some for her 1984 production of *Endgame*. Puchner writes:

If today we are surprised that Beckett would go so far as to threaten lawsuits when directors did not respect his stage directions, as in the case of JoAnne Akalaitis' 1984 production of *Endgame* at the A.R.T., we have to remember this symbolist heritage places all of its holes on single isolated objects and gestures. (161)

Puchner's argument that Beckett's stage directions are indispensable because of Beckett's "symbolist heritage" is provocative but also places a work's genre above the work itself. I would argue that the stage directions of Beckett's work as well as the stage directions in the work of symbolist playwrights are indispensable because they are integral to meaning making within the respective works they occupy. Without the stage direction something is definitely lost. This importance to making meaning of a theatrical work renders certain stage directions crucial to the production of a play regardless of genre.

Sophie Treadwell did not write for the closet. She wrote *Machinal* for the most commercial of theatrical locales: Broadway. Treadwell, like Beckett, does set up resistance between action and dialogue within her work. Treadwell's script is meant to illustrate a disjointed and impersonal society. If as Puchner suggests, Beckett's use of stage directions serves to "create a rupture between words and gestures," then *Machinal* is a play that concerns itself with such ruptures in society (159).

Treadwell's authorial voice is evident in her stage directions and, while they do add a sense of authorial guidance, they avoid falling into a dictatorial or

overly controlling tone. The anti-theatrical style in which *Machinal's* stage directions are written provide room for directorial artistic interpretation. It is Treadwell's combination of the difficult to manifest stage direction and her ever-present authorial voice that creates a space for theatrical innovation. In this way *Machinal's* stage directions act as an "open work."

### ***Machinal's* Stage Directions as an Open Text**

The concept of an "open work" is discussed by Umberto Eco in his 1959 essay "The Poetics of an Open Work." An "open work" is a work that leaves room for significant artistic innovation by its reader/performer/interpreter. The work is left incomplete in a way that allows the interpreter room to reinvent it. At first this seems an obvious artistic observation and Eco does recognize that every work of art undergoes a certain level of transformative interpretation. He writes, "every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself" (49). However, Eco also recognizes a distinct openness within works that call for particularly active innovation. Of the "open work" he writes:

In primitive terms we can say that they are quite literally unfinished: the author seems to hand them on to the performer more or less the components of a construction kit. He seems to be unconcerned about the manner of their eventual deployment. (49)

According to this definition, theatre is a form of art that particularly lends itself to such 'openness.' A play, when considered in a performance rather than literary

tradition, is never complete. Different productions will continually “complete” the play with an endless array of production possibilities. Patrice Pavis observes:

The performance text is thus always an open structure or at least, “half-open,” according to the textual genres and the style of the *mise en scene*. Not only is it never fixed, as in the cinema, but there is always “play in the structure” and the writing of this text depends, to a considerable extent on the structures organized by the audience. (Pavis 138)

This “openness” in the theatrical structure presents a source of anxiety for interpreters and authors alike. It causes playwrights, such as the “anti-theatrical” practitioners previously discussed, to seek greater *authorial control*. It also causes the producers of scripted theatre to rebel against this control to seek greater *artistic freedom*. Stage directions provide a theatrical space for this theatrical tug-of-war. Let us recall that in order to render his play a less “open work,” Mallarmé deleted his stage directions and that Beckett sought to restrain a certain level of ‘openness’ by employing detailed and even legally binding stage directions. However, ‘openness’ does not have to be inhibited by stage directions. Authorial stage directions can encourage ‘openness.’

Aston and Savona write “If, in the context of theatrical practice, it is less than necessary to accord canonical status to stage directions, it is equally unproductive to reject them on principle of directorial autonomy” (125). I contend that the status of stage directions depends on two previously discussed criteria: a) who supplies them and b) their importance to meaning making within the theatrical piece. The stage directions within *Machinal* are not merely complements to their corresponding dialogue but are, instead, in conversation with that dialogue, and it is through this conversation that *Machinal* can be

transformed through the openness of performance into the type of theatrical experience to which the script aspires. It is the very anti-theatricality of these stage directions that identify them as an ‘open text.’ While we are told, for example, by Sophie Treadwell that “the sound of [Young Woman’s] voice was beautiful,” we are also left to create that beauty for ourselves (Treadwell 385).

### **Part III: *Machinal*’s Stage Directions on the Stage and Page**

Written in 1928, *Machinal* is positioned squarely within the anti-theatrical modernist era of which Puchner writes. Its mechanical focus and expressionistic style are both symptoms of its modern heredity. I will begin my discussion of *Machinal* and its stage directions by couching it within the concept of resistance. How do *Machinal*’s stage directions resist? What do they resist? And what does this resistance signify? Like Mallarme, Treadwell includes, within her script, embodiment defying descriptions of physical action. However, she also creates resistance between stage directions and dialogue a la Beckett. These sites of resistance assist in illustrating the ways in which Treadwell’s societal machine suffocates, silences, and kills the “ordinary young woman” of its focus. This anti-theatrical tension can “utterly transform” this play when it is interpreted as an ‘open work’ in performance.

*Machinal* follows Young Woman from a proposal of marriage to her execution via electric chair as a result of the murder of her husband. Instead of following Young Woman from event to event (i.e. wedding to child birth, etc.) Treadwell illustrates Young Woman in moments before and after the major life

events she endures. All of the major “actions” that control the plot of the play do not actually take place as part of the play’s action. It is between episodes that Treadwell’s Young Woman gets married, has an initial traumatic sexual experience with her husband, gives birth to a daughter, has a momentarily freeing sexual experience with a man who is not her husband, and then murders her husband. It is just after the final episode “A Machine” that Young Woman is indeed executed in an electric chair—a smaller machine of death within the greater societal machine that dooms Young Woman to murder and death from the very first episode.

A typical vehicle of resistance, language, falls within this restrictive societal machine and, as a result, will not allow for desires that fall outside of the accepted system. Treadwell presents her audience with a theatrical microcosm in which an overarching “ordinary” structure is at fault—the titular machine. This structure is represented within the play in part by language that fails its protagonist. *Machinal* exhibits a distrust of a constraining system of language and its protagonist attempts to *actively* break out of the system to no avail. Yet we are not allowed to witness her bids for freedom. The machine will not let us. We are instead left to witness Young Woman’s *attempts* to communicate between events.

The failure of the linguistic system is presented in Young Woman’s speech patterns. She is constantly out of breath, cutting herself off, and allowing others to cut her off. Her speech is riddled with dashes. The concluding monologue of



“Episode 1: To Business” is a prime example of Young Woman’s inability to form meaning within the linguistic signifying structure. She sputters

Marry me—wants to marry me—George H. Jones—George H. Jones and Company—Mrs. George H. Jones. Dear Madame—marry—do you take this man to be your wedded husband—I do—to love honor and to love—kisses—no—I can’t—George H. Jones—how would you like to marry me... (370)

Since Young Woman is unable to articulate or find meaning via the linguistic, stage directions are helpful in investigating her attempts to make and locate meaning within the script. While still language based, these stage directions are outside of the failing language machine of *Machinal* and reside, instead, in a meta-language structure. The stage directions of *Machinal* become a vehicle of Young Woman’s resistant nature in the face of an uncompromising language system. In my analysis I will be focusing specifically on the stage directions within four portions of the play: “Episode One: To Business” (including the opening stage directions that precede it), “Episode Five: Prohibited,” “Episode Six: Intimate” and “Episode Nine: A Machine.”

*Machinal* is a play about actions and choices that we do not witness and that are spoken of with great difficulty. As a result, many of *Machinal*’s stage directions express qualities rather than actions. I will be referring to these types of stage directions as “qualifying stage directions.” Qualifying stage directions lack a certain specificity that active stage directions possess. As opposed to providing a site for authorial control, they instead serve as a site for artistic inspiration. Qualifying stage directions present anti-theatricality through their impracticality. The quality of “ordinary” is called for often within the stage

directions of *Machinal*. Likewise, “a beautiful voice” is necessitated in “Episode Six: Intimate.” George H. Jones (aka the husband) fails qualitatively in one of his Episode One stage directions. Treadwell writes

JONES: (*starts—turns again: attempts to be facetious*) Tell Miss A. the early bird catches the worm. (367)

Putting the words “beautiful,” “attempts to be facetious,” and “ordinary” on stage is an inexact process due to their lack of technical specificity: success is elusive and difficult to prove. Such words influence intuitively rather than in a measurable manner. One would have to survey the audience to see if they had their desired effect and one would most certainly find variety within the results. Treadwell describes the desired effects of moments but not the means for achieving them (unlike Beckett’s use of a controlling stage direction to exact a desired effect). Within these qualifying stage directions, Sophie Treadwell guides theatrical artists via terminology riddled with semiotic openness.

The first stage direction within *Machinal* states, “THE PLOT is the story of a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman” (364). This first instance of prose within the script performs the odd task of giving away the major plot twist within the play. This signifies that this play is not about what happens but rather how it gets there. This supposition is supported by the aforementioned lack of performed action. *Machinal* is a play comprised of “moments before” and “moments after.” This initial stage direction inhibits surprise at plot twists and focuses instead on the play’s structure and the individual development of its main character. How does an “ordinary young

woman” come to kill her husband? The reader/theatrical audience is invited to ask this question from the moment the curtain rises.

How does a production get an audience to posit this question? The audience for the original 1928 production was already conditioned to ask it after a year of dealing with the reality of Ruth Snyder. The critics’ reaction to the connection between the play and the actual trial is complicated. Brooks Atkinson chose to compartmentalize the connection to a “superficiality” of the play. In his review of the production he wrote:

From the sordid mess of a brutal murder the author, actors and producer of *Machinal* [...] have with great skill managed to retrieve a frail and somber piece of beauty. In superficial details the play resembles the Snyder/Gray murder case. But Sophie Treadwell, who is Mrs. W.O. McGeehan in private life, has in no way capitalized on a sensational murder trial [...] Subdued, monotonous, occasionally eccentric in its style, *Machinal* is fraught with a beauty unfamiliar to the stage. (18)

This need to distance *Machinal* from the grisly case that inspired it lessened as Ruth Snyder faded in infamy and as societal views on woman were transformed by feminism. The 1990 Public Theatre production blatantly associated itself with Ruth Snyder by printing the infamous photograph of the executed Ruth Snyder on the cover of the playbill. This production choice managed to give away the ending (in accordance with the previously discussed opening stage directions), set an initial grim tone, and contextualized the play within its all too real and deadly heritage. Jill Dolan makes mention of the initial stage direction of *Machinal* in her review of the Public Theatre production. She writes:

The Public’s production, directed by Michael Grief, embodied the raw power of a play whose plot, as Treadwell describes it, is “the

story of a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary woman—any woman.” (96).

The 1993 London National Theatre production was marked by its *extraordinary* use of technology. Jerry Dickey writes:

As staged by the Royal National Theatre in London in 1993, *Machinal* again divided the critics on its merits. Several applauded the play’s rediscovery while other liked the staging better than the script. Many reviewers cited the lack of sufficient justification for Helen’s extreme reactions. (71)

How could one not be overwhelmed by spinning cubicles, fluctuating ceilings and frequently used hydraulic systems? The glorification of theatrical machinery stands at odds with Treadwell’s modernist condemnation of a mechanized society. While the original Arthur Hopkins’ production did “liberate the stage from the confinement of box sets and give greater scope for lighting” it did so in the service of the script rather than in the service of spectacle (“*Machinal* to Open Sept. 6” 11). One is left to question if showing the wonders of the machine did much to build sympathy for the young woman within. The “extreme” use of technology seems to have added a level of extremity to *Young Woman* that undermines her own “ordinariness.”

Perhaps it is the lack of context that skews the expression of *Machinal* in London. A 1931 production (which was banned by Lord Chamberlain after it opened) did not fare well because it was thought to be too graphic. In New York in 1928, *Machinal* was only as graphic as the corresponding murder, trial, and execution that had played itself out for the American Public. The fact that *Young Woman* (or even Ruth Snyder) could be “an ordinary young woman” and “a woman who murders her husband” was all too “ordinary” and frightening for the

New York viewing public and apparently not “ordinary” enough for British audiences at the time. Jerry Dickey writes:

London critics, reviewing the play in 1931, frequently referred to the overly graphic nature of the play’s content. Of particular concern were the honeymoon and speakeasy scenes [...] Similarly reviewers noted the play’s morbidity or overall inappropriateness of theme. Often, critics felt the Young Woman was upset over nothing of consequence. (71)

The National Theater’s 1993 decision to emphasize spectacle lessened the critical dislike of the play but does not seem to have proven the “consequence” of Young Woman’s problems. Taylor writes in his review

I began to side with her crassly materialistic, but not unkindly husband. During the trial, she recoils from the idea that she could have opted for divorce rather than murder: “I couldn’t hurt him like that!” If this is female sensitivity, God protect us from it. (19)

Taylor’s review not only echoes the reaction of 1931 London critics, it also echoes the reactions to Ruth Snyder throughout her trial.

The episode in which “sufficient justification” and sympathy must at least be possible for the audience is “Episode Six: Intimate.” It is within this episode that Young Woman as well as the audience realize what is at stake and “of consequence” for Young Woman. The personal freedom that Young Woman experiences ever so briefly in this episode is the direct motivation for the murder that follows. It is in between “Episode Five: Prohibited” and “Episode Six: Intimate” that the title “Young Woman” suddenly shifts within the script to the title “Woman.” “Young Woman” is only “Woman” for “Episode Six: Intimate.” Following that she returns to her regular nomenclature. What causes this shift in

character title? What happens between these two episodes to illicit such a change?

The characters of Man and Young Woman have the following exchange near the end of “Episode Five: Prohibited” as they decide whether or not to go his place together:

**Young Woman:** Oh I couldn’t—what is it—a room?

**1<sup>st</sup> Man:** No—an apartment.

**Young Woman:** That’s different.

**1<sup>st</sup> Man:** On the ground floor—no one will see you—coming or going.

**Young Woman:** (*getting up*) I couldn’t.

**1<sup>st</sup> Man:** (*rises*) Wait a minute—I got to pay for the damage—and I’ll get a bottle of something to take along.

(384-385)

Young Woman makes a decision in this passage. This decision is subversive and is presented to the reader/audience member through her choice to rise rather than what she says. Even as Young Woman states “I couldn’t,” she rises to join this man who is not her husband. In spite of this subversive choice, Young Woman’s phrasing remains socially acceptable. This is a site of resistance within which meaning is located between stage direction and dialogue. Young Woman is doing something she wants to do that the language system does not officially allow so this decision must be signified through the unspoken.

In the episode that follows, the two characters are in bed, presumably following an adulterous event. They are now referred to as merely “Man” and “Woman.” Woman is at ease. Her speech is not panicked and interrupted as it has been in previous scenes. The scene opens in darkness.

**Man:** You’re awful still, honey. What you think about?

**Woman:** About sea shells. (*STAGE DIRECTION: The sound of her voice is beautiful*)

**Man:** Sheshells? Gee! I can't say it! (385)

Woman is finally able to articulate in "Episode Six: Intimate." The power dynamic has also shifted. Man is now having an issue using language. Near the end of this scene Woman states, "I never knew anything like this way! I never knew I could feel this! So,--so purified!" (388). Despite Man's assertion that he understands what Woman means by purified, one gets the idea that he has not a clue. Man considers Woman's use of the word "purified" as a mere reference to feeling after a sexual act, but Woman is talking about much more. She's not referencing the physical but something more evasive and ideal, something as beautiful as the sound of her voice when she says "about sea shells."

It is of interest that many reviewers skip discussion of this particular episode within the play. Early reviews comment most on the topic of adultery and how it is "handled" within the play. Dickey writes, "The scene in Roe's apartment was noted for its sensitive treatment of adultery" (70). Atkinson refers to the scene as "deadly average" (18). In his review of the London production Nicholas De Jongh collapses the moment to "a transient young man provid[ing] the first flash of sexual passion. This escapist encounter fires a daring to kill her husband" (7). Jill Dolan, however, finds a bit more to discuss within this episode in her review of the Public Theatre's production. She writes:

In particular, the romance of the adultery scene, in which the Young Woman is seduced by a handsome Young Man who offers her escape fantasies of the west coast and Mexico, devolved into sentimentality that made their situation appear unique rather than structural. (97)

This escape from “structure” is precisely what Young Woman’s rise to Woman signifies within the script. For a fleeting moment she is free and “purified” from the machine before being remanded back to it for the remainder of the play.

In Jennifer Parent’s detailed 1982 report of Arthur Hopkins’ staging of the play “Episode Nine: A Machine” is split into two portions. The latter portion is entitled “Episode Ten: in the dark” (Parent 126). The cause for this split is most likely due to the amazing lighting effects designer Robert Edmond Jones employed for the final moments of the play. Nancy Wynn writes:

Not indicated in this published version is the description of Episode Ten—In The Dark—found in the acting version of *Machinal* at the Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in New York City. Lines are spoken in darkness until a light comes at the end. The acting version specifies: “Overhead lights come up on cyclorama first faint blue—then red—then pink—then amber—they are thrown full—pause—then curtain.”(126)

It is implied that this “episode” of lighting stage directions was production specific which explains why it is not included in the widely published version. It was also, as Wynn writes, a “contribution” by the designer as opposed to that of the author. Even in the absence of “Episode Ten,” Treadwell does provide some descriptions of lighting effects throughout the final episode. In the opening stage directions of the play Treadwell writes, “Lighting concentrated and intense—light and shadow—bright light and darkness” (365).

Darkness is where the script leaves the play. Previous to her execution Young Woman receives a number of visitors. She is first visited by barbers, who cut her hair before her execution, and then by a priest, who gives her last rites. Young Woman asks the priest, “Peace. Rest and peace. Will I find it tonight



Father? Will I find it?" (401). He responds "Trust in God," and as he does "a shadow falls across the passage in front of the stage" (401). From that moment onward the scene continues to darken both thematically and practically. Young Woman's mother visits her. Young Woman's inability to speak has returned since her fleeting moment of purification in Episode Six. Her mother has come "to say goodbye" but Young Woman claims to not know her. The scene is as follows:

YOUNG WOMAN: But she's never known me—ever—(to the Mother) Go away! You're a stranger! Stranger! (Mother turns and starts away Reaching out her hands to her) Oh Mother! Mother! (They embrace through the bars.)

This stage direction site is similar to the one that precedes Young Woman's extramarital affair. It is a place where meaning is located in the resistance between stage direction and dialogue as a result of Young Woman's inability to articulate. Her words and actions "say" two very different things. A portrait of an alienated woman desperate for connection is created with this opposition.

Jill Dolan writes:

The Young Woman's death by electrocution for her husband's murder is meant as the final imposition of ideological discipline, but Treadwell carries her resistance to the end. The Young Woman is a tragic heroine, perhaps in a revisionist, materialist feminist sense of the term, who can't change the structures that defeat her but dies protesting them. (97)

Young Woman may die protesting, but her protests upon her death are just as ineffectual as her other attempts to communicate with the mechanized world she inhabits. The darkness within which Treadwell shrouds her main character in her final moments is indicative of this hopelessness.

Almost every review/article/book study about *Machinal* refers to its obscurity and rebirth. What is the statute of limitations on the rediscovery of a play? I would argue that it is limitless. Plays are always rediscovered and reborn via performance, and some provide more open space to do so than others. *Machinal* is one such play. It lends itself to transformation and re-envisioning. Its protagonist's inability to speak and eventual forced silence causes one to want to make this play speak—not to allow it or its author to remain silent. In his review of the Public Theatre production Frank Rich writes:

Ms. Markell sometimes could be a shade less tentative in her portrayal of an Everywoman, however ordinary, swept up in forces beyond her control. Even so, her anguished cries for peace and freedom are so affecting that they never fail to overwhelm the churning mechanical sounds of the hellish city engulfing her. What the audience hears, of course, is not just the passion of a young actress, but the piercing voice of a forgotten writer, who, in an act of justice unknown to her tragic heroine has been miraculously reborn.  
(2)

Can “the piercing voice of a forgotten writer” cry out from *Machinal* in a less subtextual fashion? In the final chapter of this thesis I will propose a production concept in which I take the ‘open text’ of *Machinal*'s stage directions out of the page upon which they usually reside and provide them to the audience directly in production. By putting these embodiment defying directions that contain Treadwell's strong authorial and poetic voice on display for a theatrical audience, it is hoped that this production concept can serve as an “act of justice” for its overlooked author.

### Chapter III: The Ghost of Sophie Treadwell: A Beautiful Voice

#### Part I: Silence and Obscurity: Sophie Treadwell, her work, and her voice

*Machinal* deals with the gendered concepts of silencing and subjugation that posthumously plague its author and her work. The Young Woman's inability to find her voice foreshadows the silencing of the playwright that created her. Perhaps their silences even coincide. Why did Sophie Treadwell decide to guide performances of her plays silently through extensive stage direction? Does her very present voice in the stage directions represent a resistance to her own silencing by the societal machine?

It is telling that Brooks Atkinson felt the need to point out that Sophie Treadwell was actually "Mrs. W.O. McGeehan in private life" (18). Even in a very positive review of her personal work, Treadwell is inserted into the marital machine not only to normalize her choice of profession but also to excuse her choice of topic. This apparently pleasant marital attachment distances her from the reality of Ruth Snyder as well the fiction of *Young Woman*. "Don't worry. She's married. And she's not going to kill her husband" is the message sent by this simple act of renaming. Sophie Treadwell actually took many steps to safeguard her independence *in spite of* her status as a married woman. "Sophie Treadwell" remained her legal name even after marriage. She was not "Mrs. W.O. McGeehan." Treadwell and her husband also maintained separate residences throughout the majority of their married life due to Treadwell's insistence on remaining personally independent. Julia Walker writes, "However

much she may have loved McGeehan, she appears to have distrusted the dependent role that marriage assigned to woman” (223). Despite the physical and legal steps Treadwell utilized to remain socially independent, she was still defined in 1928 society by her male attachment.

By choosing to write her play in the mode of expressionism, Treadwell provided a dramatic frame in which she could practically use silence to guide her creation. *Machinal* lives in performance, and its author’s voice lives not only in her dialogue but also in the italics that surround and describe that dialogue. It can be argued that Treadwell’s “beautiful voice” locates itself most prominently within these stage directions because they lack the filter of characterization. Sophie Treadwell finds her voice within her extra-dialogic text, and producers of *Machinal* are left to do the same.

I will be dividing the stage directions that Sophie Treadwell uses within *Machinal* into two types: those that are actively performable and those that qualify performance. I will be specifically examining these stage directions as they relate to the concept of sound and voices. It is notable that Treadwell uses many of her silences to make noise. These active stage directions call for a variety of sounds. The play is riddled with the sounds such as “Office Machines: typewriters, telephones, etc” (Episode 1: To Business), “steel riveting” (Episode 4: Maternal), and an “aeroplane” (Episode 9: Machine). In “Episode Six: Intimate” Treadwell writes, “The hand organ is playing “Cielito Lindo,” that Spanish song that has been on every hand organ lately” (385). A radio and a kitchen buzzer create distraction throughout “Episode 2: At Home” in which the

Young Woman attempts to talk with her mother about the concept of matrimony. A jazz band accompanies her wedding night in “Episode Three: Honeymoon” and an electric piano plays in the bar in “Episode Five: Prohibited.” Ticking telegraph instruments count down to Young Woman’s conviction in “Episode 8: The Law.” In addition to all these mechanical sounds, Treadwell also includes “Characters in the background heard but not seen” to add to the overall cacophony of the aural setting. For instance a host of characters including a baby, a husband and wife, and a janitor vocally create the setting of an apartment building in “Episode Two: At Home.” “The voice of a Negro singing” a spiritual is directed for the concluding moments of the play (399).

In her description of the Arthur Hopkins production of the play Jennifer Parent writes:

Though the unsentimental approach of the production to the inexorable grind of this domestic tragedy made viewing uncomfortable for some, ultimately the effect was exhilarating. The very final silence of the red-gold glow of the lights on the empty stage was peace for the audience as well as for the Young Woman. (Parent 88)

The impression of this ceaseless din is echoed in Glenn Collins’ article on the 1990 Public Theatre production when he states, “The nightmarish sound track, for example, a cacophony of jack hammer din, adding-machine clangor, airplane noise and industrial clamor is specified in Treadwell’s stage directions” (C15). Treadwell’s stage directions are, in these moments, yelling, screeching and clattering off the page. It is, however, also feasible to bring Treadwell’s qualifying stage directions off the page and into the theater. As discussed in Chapter Two

of this thesis, these stage directions present an open text that can be mined and interpreted through production concepts.

How does one bring out Sophie Treadwell's qualifying sub-textual voice in performance? For instance, how does one present the shift of "Young Woman" to "Woman" in "Episode Six: Intimate" on the stage? At this point quite honestly an audience member could have easily forgotten that the Young Woman's character name is Young Woman. In the play's dialogue she is referred to as Helen, albeit rarely. Is the switch from Young Woman to Woman only meant to inform those producing the play during the production process rather than those receiving it? One assumes that it would affect acting choices, but is that its only purpose? How does one transform the unspoken into the stageable? What would happen if one wrestled this previously silent text out of the subtext?

Jerry Dickey observes that upon its 1990 performance by the Public Theatre,

critics were divided on the play's merits. Some hailed it as a lost treasure while others felt it a dated work with a victim for a central character...Some critics, though felt the play anticipated the dialogue structures found in David Mamet's work. (71)

As Dickey hints at with his reference to David Mamet, in some ways *Machinal* is a play ahead of its time. *Machinal's* experimental style lends itself to the theatrical innovations that have occurred in the seventy years since its first performance. Despite the fact that *Machinal* continues to age, there is something relevant about the work for contemporary audiences as well as contemporary theatre makers. *Machinal's* relevance and ability to be revamped with contemporary theatrical techniques accounts for the commercial success of both

the Public Theatre and the London National Theatre productions. The London National Theatre chose to apply contemporary theatrical technology to the play to emphasize the machine within which Young Woman. In the 1990 Public Theatre production Michael Grief had the titles of each episode projected for the audience to see in a technique reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht.

This use of projections is of particular interest to this study because it provided the audience with text that does not necessarily require direct stage presentation. The projection of these titles influences the audience's viewpoint with Treadwell's telling episode titles. As Young Woman cries on her wedding night, they are directed to the irony of the title "Honeymoon." When Young Woman and Man talk after making love in "Episode Six: Intimate," the audience is reminded that the scene is not focused on the physical act that has just concluded but instead on the deeper personal and emotional connection/transformation that has resulted. In the final moments of the play, its title receives extra meaning as Young Woman's life is ended within "A Machine," as the episode is entitled.

This use of projections also leads to the question: what if one took them further? What if one were blatantly to show or tell the audience stage directions? One could use projections or even actual voices to inform the audience of Treadwell's extra-dialogic voice. This route could also be used to establish the emphasized "ordinariness" of the *Machinal* world as well as to allow the audience to consider the beauty of "sea shells." After all, asking an actress to sound specifically beautiful is similar to asking one to perform the role of Helen of Troy:

it rarely lives up to the hype. In the following section I will discuss a production proposal that allows more of *Machinal's* stage directions to sound.

## **Part II: Voicing the Silence: A Production Proposal**

I will now outline a general production concept. Specific moments within the play will be provided as case studies of the overall concept. There are undoubtedly more that exist within the script and still more that could be found through practical theatrical experimentation. This production concept is merely hypothetical. It is recognized that throughout any production process new discoveries are made even while some theoretical production intentions lose themselves within the pragmatics of a physical theatrical space. Having said that, I have created this production concept with feasibility of staging in mind.

*Machinal* has twenty-two characters. While the original performance (as well as a number of subsequent productions) chose to cast twenty-two actors, double casting in this case is effective and beneficial both logistically and symbolically. The hope is to emphasize the stereotypical and superficial nature of all characters other than Young Woman through double casting. The cast will be reduced to eleven. Young Woman, Husband, and Man will each have a devoted actor. The scene with the most characters on stage at one time are "Episode 5: Prohibited" and "Episode 8: The Law" each of which requires eight actors. While the latter scene also calls for additional spectators, the spectators in the audience will do nicely. These eight actors will split the remainder of the speaking roles as well as serve as extra bodies and voices when necessary.



Projections, similar to the ones Michael Grief utilized in the Public Theatre production, will also be used to provide the audience with generally silent scripted material. Projections will announce episode titles as well as character titles. In this way, the ever enlightening episode titles are never far from the audience's interpretation of scenes and situations. The announcement of character titles allows the audience to absorb the objective expressionistic character titles. It also lessens any confusion caused by said titles as well as any confusion caused by double casting. Most importantly the displayed character titles allow the audience to assess when they change. This device will give the audience the opportunity to analyze and complicate "Episode Six: Intimate" by noting that Young Woman is suddenly and fleetingly Woman. Imparting this scripted character title change is intended to add import to the scene as well as build sympathy and "justification" (Dickey 72) for the events that follow Young Woman's moment of "purification" (Treadwell 388).

The major conceit for this production concept is that some of *Machinal's* qualifying stage directions are given a literal voice primarily through the use of pre-recorded voice. The "HOPE" is to connect the silences of Young Woman, Ruth Snyder, and Sophie Treadwell in performance through a "character that is not seen but heard" and, as a result, provide a space for discussing the societal silencing of ordinary women, any women. The voiceover is recorded by the actress playing Young Woman. This voice, however, lacks the "confusion of her own inner thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams" that the character Young Woman possesses (Treadwell 366). This voice comments as if its owner is

looking down at the production and audience from above commenting and announcing but with a certain familiarity—an air of omniscience. As a result some of its spoken “directions” can be performed as realizations because the voice is caught up within the play despite its omniscience. It is imperative that this voice encourages the rhythm of each episode, propelling the play forward. The recorded voice also announces the title of each episode. The concept of darkness is thematically important to the play and the use of the voice over during blackouts can both keep momentum through scene changes and serve to disconcert the audience. It will also add to the cacophony of Treadwell’s scripted noise.

In giving examples of the spoken stage directions, I cite *examples* of moments when this voice will be utilized. The recorded voice is intended to be present throughout the production, and these are merely examples of types of moments in which it is utilized and of the general production guidelines that control it. In the opening moments of the production, for instance, the voice announces sections of the The Plot, The Plan, and The Hope of the production in darkness:

THE PLOT is the story of a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman.  
 THE PLAN is to tell this story by showing the different phases of her life that the woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any peace[...]  
 THE HOPE is to create a stage production that will have “style,” and at the same time, by the story’s own innate drama, by the directness of its telling, by the variety and quick changingness of its scenes, and the excitement of its sounds, to create an interesting play. (Treadwell 365)

Cuts have been specifically made to “The Plan” section due to length as well as their expository nature (they describe the sounds, the scene structure, the dialogue, etc.) Following the announcement of the plot, plan and hope, the voice states, “Episode One: To Business” as that title is suddenly projected for the audience to view and the clatter of office machines begins.

The voice will also seem to make realizations about Young Woman and the events of the play through the announcement of some stage directions. In “Episode Six: Intimate” the voice, *realizing* the beauty in Young Woman’s voice says “The sound of her voice was beautiful” while occasionally humming along to Cielito Lindo. The voice will make a similar but less positive realization in “Episode Eight: The Law.” The judge asks Young Woman “Mrs. Jones, why—“ (399). Young Woman responds by beginning “to moan—suddenly—as though the realization of her enormity and her isolation had just come upon her. It is a sound of desolation, of agony, of human woe.” Once the actress playing Young Woman has begun to embody this moan, the voice will vocally realize the conclusion of that stage direction. Per Treadwell’s direction, this moaning now identified by “desolation,” “agony” and “woe” continues to the end of the scene.

The final moments of the play are as follows:

**Priest:** --Beseech Thee—hear us—that would’st spare us—that thou would’st pardon us—Holy Mary—pray for us—

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reporter:** There—

**Young Woman:** (calling out) Somebody! Somebody—(her voice is cut off.)

**Priest:** Christ have mercy—Lord have mercy—  
CURTAIN (402)

The voice, in its final act, will announce “CURTAIN” cutting off the priest, and ending the play. At this moment the projected episode title “A Machine” will also disappear. This moment is not merely the “curtain” of the show but also that of a woman’s life. It is hoped that in this moment the ghostly quality of having the actress playing the Young Woman’s voice also acting as the voice over will be particularly effective.

### **Part III: Conclusion**

As all who have attempted to write about theatre are aware, performance is a problematic topic. Live performances are unstable and impossible to document fully. The experiences of theatre makers and viewers within a theater cannot be recreated or fully illuminated outside of the specific theatrical moment. Commenting about performance is just as slippery as commenting for performance, a task the stage directions perform within *Machinal*. Within this study, I’ve been commenting about commenting. By utilizing performance descriptions my hope was to investigate not only how production concepts treated the play and its extra-dialogic text but also to examine the reaction these productions produced.

In *The Haunted Stage* Marvin Carlson writes:

Theatre... is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection. (2)

The production proposal for *Machinal* that I have just outlined is quite literally haunted by a voice. Unlike Carlson's ghosts, this voice has been ignored and forgotten by cultural memory. Within this study I have put the comments made about *Machinal* into dialogue with the comments Sophie Treadwell made within her play. This intertextual discussion is meant to summon the forgotten ghosts that inhabit performances of the play as well as discussions of its playwright. My hope is that Sophie Treadwell's ghost will gain power within cultural memory by a rediscovery of her voice. Sites for this reversal of silencing exist not only in the stage directions I have chosen to make the concern of this thesis but also within her many additional plays that have not yet been able to rise out of their obscurity in the fashion of *Machinal*.

It seems odd to rely upon the linguistic to create stage images in a play where one witnesses language fail its protagonist. However, like *Young Woman*, without Treadwell's stage directions the play loses its ability to resist, and resistance, it seems, is the point. The solution of actually presenting the audience with Treadwell's stage directions both simplifies and complicates the creation of *Machinal's* stage directed images and revelations. The audience is told that a voice sounds beautiful so they are then left to wrestle with what that signifies within the structure of the play as well as in relation to the specific performance they are viewing. I concede that presenting the audience with the stage directions of the play could be seen as an anti-theatrical impulse—an impulse to demystify intention and production proof the script. After all, the difficulty of

signifying a beautiful voice or an identity shift from Young Woman to Woman or the extreme ordinariness of the world of *Machinal* could very well be the point. However, the production concept does not aim to anti-theatrically demystify *Machinal* but instead to experiment with shifting certain sites of signification and further opening the “open text” of the play’s stage directions for audience interpretation.

Similarly, this thesis has sought to emphasize the silent legacy that surrounds Sophie Treadwell. It has aimed to encourage discourse on that silence by investigating the stage directions that provide a space for her authorial voice within *Machinal*. Discourse on Treadwell is growing, as can be seen by the growing production and publication history of *Machinal*. However, *Machinal* is not the only play to have fallen into “obscurity” and at this point is very much the least “obscure” of Treadwell’s work. Sophie Treadwell, her story and especially her work are awaiting rediscovery and reassessment. Ruth Snyder, likewise, is in a position to be reassessed. She died condemned and demonized, but recent works, such as Jennifer Jones’ *Medea’s Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills*, are providing her a less spectacular and less biased investigation in a post-feminism age. The artistic investigation that *Machinal* provided Ruth Snyder did not invoke her infamous name but instead spoke of “an ordinary young woman, any woman,” many a woman. The quest of this thesis is to highlight the existence of these voices that have been silenced by society—ghosts that have been forgotten—and that can now be given voice.

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