Texas A&M University
Department of Performance Studies
Presents

Machinal

by Sophie Treadwell
directed by Amy Guerin

STUDY GUIDE
prepared by
Nicholas Gee, dramaturg

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Sophie Treadwell – the playwright

Sophie Treadwell is a famous writer who had many successes in her career as a playwright who had written over thirty plays, seven of which were produced on Broadway between 1922 through 1941. Her other career roles include journalist, novelist, producer and sometimes director and actress. She has also written various journalistic articles, fictional stories, and novels.

She was born on October 3, 1885 in Stockton, California to the parents of Alfred and Nettie Treadwell. Her father, Alfred, was a lawyer, city prosecutor, justice of the peace and judge. Growing up, Treadwell saw first hand the struggles of marriage and saw her parents separate in the 1890s. Her parents did not legally divorce, making her childhood difficult as she lived with both her mother and father.

Treadwell attended the University of California – Berkley where she began to explore her passions and early development as a playwright. Her involvement at the university included activities such as drama club, foreign language, and editor of a college humor magazine. Here she received her Bachelor’s of Letters in French in 1906. Following her studies at the university, she began her career as a journalist working for the San Francisco Bulletin. It was here where Treadwell met her husband, William O. McGeehan, a fellow journalist and sports writer. The two married in 1910 and were married for nearly two decades.

As Treadwell’s career began to take off as an investigative journalist and serial writer in San Francisco, McGeehan left the Bay Area and headed to New York to work at the New York Evening Journal in 1914. In the following year, Treadwell followed her husband and was employed as a writer at the New York American.

It was in New York where Treadwell began to join political movements by involving herself in organizations in support of women’s equality and rights. She participated in marches that advocated women’s suffrage demanding the right to vote and also was a member of the Lucy Stone League, an organization in support of women’s rights. It was here where she began to introduce herself by her maiden name. Additionally, Treadwell was also supportive of sexual freedom for women and even had an affair with painter, Maynard Dixon, for a short period of time between the years 1916 through 1919.
Treadwell’s best-known work is the play titled, *Machinal.* It was directed and produced by Arthur Hopkins at the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway on September 7, 1928, which ran for ninety-one performances. This piece is remarkable in the expressionist efforts that Treadwell uses to tell a common story about an everyday woman. Her inspiration for *Machinal* stems from her career as a journalist and reporter covering murder trials of women, including the Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray murder trial, and her personal experiences.

Throughout Treadwell’s life it is evident that her career inspired her to write and experience the most for her life. On February 20, 1970, Sophie Treadwell passed away.

Works that Treadwell wrote include the following: *Gringo* (1922), *O Nightingale* (1924), *Machinal* (1928), *Ladies Leave* (1929), *Lone Valley* (1933), *Plumes in the Dust* (1936), and *Hope for Harvest* (1941).

**Leah Alexander and Elizabeth Mohr**

As a journalist and reporter, Treadwell covered a multitude of trials and cases including those of Leah Alexander and Elizabeth Mohr. In 1914, Treadwell reported on the trial of Leah Alexander in San Francisco for the murder of her lover. While in 1916, in New York, she covered the Elizabeth Mohr trial in which Mohr was accused of hiring three men to kill her husband and mistress. Treadwell’s articles covering these cases took an interesting approach that invited her readers to gain the emotional understanding of the women put on trial by analyzing their facial expressions and verbal responses while in court.

**The Snyder-Gray Murder Trial**

In 1927, the Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray murder trial caused a sensational media frenzy for newspapers and reporters publishing photographs and recordings for the public to take part in. Within just three months 1,500,000 words were written on the case and it is noted that 180 reporters were assigned to report on it. The case also received attention due to Snyder’s fate of being the first woman to be sentenced to death by the electric chair in the state of New York.

On March 20, 1927, Albert Snyder was found murdered in his bedroom. He had been beaten in the head with a blunt object, chloroformed, and strangled with picture wire. His wife, Ruth Snyder, was found alive bound and gagged outside of their daughter’s bedroom. When police arrived at the scene the house had been turned upside down, drawers emptied, and Ruth’s jewelry stolen. The police became suspicious when they found Ruth’s stolen jewelry under a mattress. Upon hearing that her husband had died, it was said by police that Snyder surprisingly shed only a few tears.
After spending almost twenty-four hours in questioning, Snyder confessed to killing her husband with the help of her lover, Judd Gray, a corset salesman. She had beaten him with the help of Gray in their bedroom all while her nine-year-old daughter was sound asleep in her room next door. Both Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray were convicted of murder and was executed at the Sing Sing prison in New York on January 12, 1928.

The image above was taken by a reporter who attended Snyder’s execution, snuck a camera into the prison by wrapping it to his ankle, and captured the this picture before her death. This image made newspaper headlines the following day.

“Treadwell does not emphasize the sensational story, however, but instead focuses on the dependent status of women in the nightmare of a loveless sexually repugnant marriage” (Greenwald...).

Neurasthenia

Women during the early twentieth century claimed to have suffered from nervous disorders such as hysteria and neurasthenia, and some believe that it had been caused by the stress of the rapid changes in a modern society. Common symptoms of hysteria include sleeplessness, anorexia, irritability, nervousness, and desire. In the play, Helen, appears to suffer from hysteria where she suffers from anxiety and complains that she cannot eat.

Treadwell suffered from neurasthenia, a nervous disorder that had symptoms of insomnia, headaches, hypochondria, digestive woes and nervous prostrations. During her time in
college, she began to have episodes of nervous ailments. Her involvement in extra curricular organizations and other activities instigated her symptoms.

Electrotherapy was commonly used to help relieve patients of these nervous symptoms. Its procedure involves rejuvenating the patient by killing the undesirable pathological elements in the body and psych. Although it is now known if Treadwell went through electrotherapy to be treated, she did spend time in a sanitarium where she was treated for her condition.

**Expressionism**

*(1905-1935)*

“The Expressionist Movement in theater began in Europe, mainly in Germany at the start of the twentieth century, and migrated to the United States around 1920. Expressionism seeks to reveal the inner emotions of the characters and expose the hidden truths of life, often through distorting or exaggerating the scenery, costumes and lighting, as well as the dialogue, the direction and stylized acting.”

The expressionist form that Treadwell used in *Machinal* was relatively new to the American theatre and audience during the 1920s. Originally, the term “expressionist” was used to describe the form of visual arts such as paintings. Van Gough and Matisse are famous artists who are distinguished in this genre.

Theatrical expressionism began in Germany at the start of the twentieth century and was introduced to American theatre audiences in the 1920s by several expressionist plays including those by Eugene O’Neill, such as *The Hairy Ape* (1922). Other influences from Georg Kaiser’s *From Morn to Midnight* and Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* also created opportunities for audiences to experience a new form of theatre.

Stylistically and historically, *Machinal*, contains the form and structure of the expressionist techniques. The characters are flat, with the Young Woman noted as an everywoman figure being forced to go through life. The dialogue and actions are repetitive. Harsh sound effects are added to create the world of the play. And the blurring of internal and external realities is often unclear. In Treadwell’s script the play is also broken into episodes rather than scenes and acts which seems to deviate from the traditional structure of a play.
The Electric Chair  
*A Brief History of the Electric Chair*

1881  
Dr. Albert Southwick suggests the electric chair as a quick form of death

1889  
New York’s Electrical Execution Law goes into effect and allows for the electric chair to be constructed

1890  
William Kemmler became the first person sentence to death by electric chair

This form of capital punishment came from the idea that an electric shock would be less painful and a much faster way to death. In 1889, the state of the New York was the first to have implemented this form of a death sentence for its criminals. The following year in 1890, William Kemmler became the first person to be sentence to death by electric chair.

**Timeline of Important Historical, Cultural, & Artistic Events**

(1990-1931)

*Key events drawn from the introduction of* The Longman Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Drama: A Global Perspective*

1919  
End of World War I

1920  
21st Amendment, prohibition on alcohol  
Women are allowed to vote in U.S. elections

1922  
Mussolini takes power in Italy

1923  
Willis Richard’s *The Chip Woman's Fortune*; first play by African American on Broadway

1925  
The Charleston becomes international dance craze

1926  
Walter Gropius’s Total Theatre

1927  
Charles Lindberg flies solo across the Atlantic Ocean

1928  
Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*

1929  
U.S. Stock Exchange collapses and the Great Depression begins

1931  
The musical *Of Thee I Sing* wins Pulitzer Prize for drama
Production History of Machinal

1928  Machinal premiered on Broadway just 8 months following the execution of Ruth Snyder

1931  Machinal performs as The Life Machine in Great Britain

1933  The Life Machine appears at Moscow's Kamerny Theatre

1960  Machinal is revived Off-Broadway

1993  Performs as Machinal for the first time in Great Britain, starring Fiona Shaw as the Young Woman/Helen

2014  Machinal revived on Broadway for the first time in over 80 years, starring Rebecca Hall as the Young Woman/Helen

Text Glossary

A
Affidavit – a written statement confirmed by oath or affirmation, for use of evidence in court

Amontillado – a medium dry sherry

B
Bailiff – an official in a court of law who keeps order, looks after prisoners, etc.
Bellboy – a bellhop

C
Cielito Lindo – roughly meaning "lovely sweet one"; refer to appendix Episode 6

D
Demurrer - an assertion by the defendant that although the facts alleged by the plaintiff in the complaint may be true, they do not entitle the plaintiff to prevail in the lawsuit.
Dregs - the remnants of a liquid left in a container, together with any sediment or grounds

E
Edgar Allan Poe - American writer, critic and editor Edgar Allan Poe is famous for his tales and poems of horror and mystery, including The Raven
Habeus Corpus - a writ requiring a person to be brought before a judge or court, especially for investigation of a restraint of the person's liberty, used as a protection against illegal imprisonment

Halitosis - a condition of having offensive-smelling breath; bad breath

Lawyer for Defense - or defense counsel is usually hired directly by the person accused and from that point forward, represents the accused throughout the legal process, including trial.

Lawyer for Prosecution - A public officer empowered to pursue cases against criminal defendants.

Matron - a woman serving as a guard, warden, or attendant for women or girls, as in a prison

Negro spiritual – a type of religious song originating among Black slaves in the American South

Pslam 102 – this psalm from the bible is referred to in Episode 9; refer to appendix Episode 9

Quien sabe – Spanish phrase which directly translates to ‘who knows’

Stenographer - a person who specializes in taking dictation in shorthand

Subpoena – a writ ordering a person to attend court
Appendix

EPISODE 6

About Cielito Lindo

Stage Direction: The hand organ is playing Cielito Lindo, that Spanish song that has been on every hand organ lately.

According to an article published by the Huffington Post, many people recognize this song upon hearing the lyrics “ay, ay, ay” are familiar with the song title, Cielito Lindo.

Like most Latin golden oldies, "Cielito Lindo" (written in 1882) has several versions and lots of meanings. A popular story has it the song was inspired by 17th century legends about a bandit-infested mountain range in southern Spain called the Sierra Morena. Quirino Mendoza y Cortes, the Mexican composer, is believed to have heard yarns about a "cielito lindo" (roughly meaning a "lovely sweet one") who was rescued from the outlaws and smuggled out of the hills. Hence the word, "contraband." – Bob Schulman, Huffington Post

This song also has many contemporary versions and forms, which many of the versions are performed by mariachi bands and other Hispanic musicians. Generally, the song has similar lyrics and sounds across the board.

Visit this link for a performance by a mariachi band:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjJDv1IeF8I

Public Recognition

Dr. Hillaire Kallendorf, a Spanish professor at Texas A&M University, has knowledge of the song’s popularity and even recalls singing the song as a young girl. Below is an interpretation of the song by a native Spanish speaker.

“Cielito is a term of endearment, but the song title literally translates to “little sky.” The song is telling the girl not to cry and instead to sing because that brings joy to the heart; however, the voice is also describing the girls physically features which he likes and appreciates.” - Cristian Martinez

Lyrics

Below are the lyrics to Cielito Lindo which closely resemble those mentioned in the script of Machinal. These lyrics come from Ana Gabriel, a Mexican singer and composer, who performed the song. The lyrics printed in blue are the lyrics found in Episode Six.
Cielito Lindo
performed by Ana Gabriel

Ay, ay, ay, ay, canta y no llores
Porque cantando se alegran
Cielito lindo los corazones

De la sierra, morena
Cielito lindo vienen bajando
Un par de ojitos negros
Cielito lindo de contrabando

Ese lunar que tienes, cielito lindo
Junto a la boca, no se lo des a nadie
Cielito lindo que a mi me toca

Ay, ay, ay, ay, canta y no llores
Porque cantando se alegran
Cielito lindo los corazones
EPISODE 9

Q. What Psalm is the priest quoting on page 77?
A. The priest is quoting Psalm 102; however, the dialogue that Treadwell provides is not a direct translation throughout. For the most part Treadwell follows the King James Version. With so many bible translations, the KJV, seems to resemble the lines the most.

Psalm 102 King James Version (KJV)

102 Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee.
2 Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily.
3 For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth.
4 My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.
5 By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin.
6 I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.
7 I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.
8 Mine enemies reproach me all the day; and they that are mad against me are sworn against me.
9 For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping.
10 Because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down.
11 My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.
12 But thou, O Lord, shall endure for ever; and thy remembrance unto all generations.
13 Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come

Source: www.biblegateway.com

Q. What is the correct pronunciation and translation of the Latin on page 78?
The Latin chant is taken from the Angelus, a Catholic prayer in Latin. Below is the direct translation to from Latin to English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oremus:</th>
<th>Let us pray:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gratiam tuam, quasumus, Domine, mentibus nostris infunde; ut qui, Angelo nutante, Christi Filii tui incarnationem cognovimus, per passionem eius et crucem, ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur. Per eundem Christum Dominum nostrum.</td>
<td>Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by His passion and cross be brought to the glory of His resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The Angelus is recited at three particular times during the day; 6 am, 12 noon, and 6 pm. Traditionally it is recited kneeling while a bell is rung. During the Easter Season, the Angelus is replaced by the Regina Caeli, a practice first instituted in 1743.”

Source: http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Cotidiana/Angelus.html

Visit this source to hear the prayer in Latin (advance to 1:10) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptyW-CWwY-I
Production Team

Director – Amy Guerin  
Assistant Director – William Galco  
Stage Manager – Katy Fullwood  
Assistant Stage Manager – Jessica Cooper

Lighting Designer – Christopher Cole  
Assistant Lighting Designer/ Master Electrician – Derek Shepard

Costume Designer – Rayna Dexter

Scenic Designer – Justin Miller  
Assistant Scenic Designer – Katherine Ortega

Sound Designer – Christopher Cole  
Assistant Sound Designer – Josh Lee

Dramaturg – Nicholas Gee  
Publicity Head – Valarie Hamilton  
Poster Designer – Pricilla Villarreal
Works Cited & Resources


