

NOA COHEN
IN *MACHINAL*

A MODERNIST MASTERPIECE OF A MURDERESS

University Theatre takes on Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*

Calling all Murderinos! — The University of Oregon is putting on Sophie Treadwell's hauntingly beautiful expressionistic play *Machinal*.

Inspired by the real-life high-profile murder trial of Ruth Snyder in 1928, Treadwell's play, written that same year, tackles the societal pressures placed on

women in a male-dominated world. Sound familiar?

The story follows "A Young Woman" (Noa Cohen), who is financially pressured into marrying her repulsively hand-obsessed boss, Mr. J (Natalie Swire). From marriage to bearing a child to the electric chair, Cohen tragically captures the anxiety and desperation of a woman drowning

in domesticity. As someone with five kids of my own, let me just say: I hear ya, sister.

The real goodies of this show come from the art itself. Director Ellen Gillooly-Kress collaborates with visual artist Chelsea Couch to create a highly stylistic revival of Treadwell's scathing commentary on industry, the treatment of mental illness, media hysteria and, of course, the systematic oppression of women.

Though a bit over-stimulated, the visual elements of Couch's work build on the ever-present tensions on stage. The tumultuous interior of the protagonist and her circumstances is palpable throughout the small Hope Theatre.

The dialogue, often frantic and fragmented, is cooperatively paired with the avant-garde projections and awkward movements on stage. Likewise, the harsh, mechanical sounds of Gordon McFarland's audio design add to the whole bad acid trip vibe going on.

The art deco scenic (Jerry Hooker) and costume design (Jeanette deJong) are a real treat for modernist nerds like me. Black, grey, sharp, angular prints, hidden splashes of red and purple among the steel girders, shade coverings, pin-striped suits and cloche hats of a cruel April in New York — the whole aesthetic in collusion with the clicking of slick typewriters is quite lovely.

Gillooly-Kress notably casts a small group of actors, many of whom are playing against type in an effort to emphasize "the refusal to give in and do what is expected." The choice is a stunning and yet seamless fit to Treadwell's rebellious masterpiece.

Likewise, the director plays on the main character's refusal to submit. I don't, however, see the protagonist as someone who rises above her circumstances. While she does rebel against her marriage, she rebels to the point of self-destruction, only to again find herself at the mercy of another institution.

Sure, the last scene is a bit ambiguous and shrouded in religious overtones, yet we still have a sense that she is beaten down by the system. The beauty of *Machinal* is not in the young woman's refusal to submit, but rather the way in which art captures the tragedy of her circumstances. The real triumph is in the rejection of conformity in the expression of art itself.

Though the mission statement and the actual focus of the play seem to differ a bit, *Machinal* is highly creative, unconventional and yet so obviously relevant in today's market of toxic masculinity and media frenzy.

Of course, I'm just the media, so what do I know? ■

Machinal plays through Feb. 9 at Hope Theatre on the UO campus; \$8-\$10, tickets at door.

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