

Play provides stylized, insightful story

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

MONMOUTH — How does life get so awful that it feels like the only reasonable choice is murder?

Young Woman, also known as Helen Jones, has been oppressed her whole life — by her mother, her coworkers, doctors, nurses, her husband — and reaches a breaking point that ultimately will cost her her own life in the play, “Machinal,” by Sophie Treadwell.

The play opens Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Western Oregon University. The cast of 14 weave the tale of Helen Jones and her torrid affair with Richard Roe, reinventing the true story of Ruth Snyder.

The play is based on the true-crime story of Snyder after Treadwell sat in the courtroom during Snyder’s trial for murder.

“It’s a very stylized piece, expressionism,” director Michael Phillips said. “There’s the idea of being in an overwhelming environment that sort of oppresses everybody, which inspired the set.”

Meghan Doerfler, who plays Young Woman, said her character is basically an average jane.

“She’s trying to fit into society that she doesn’t fit into,” she said. “And it’s constantly oppressing her. She’s trying to find some way to survive in that type of society, and eventually she just can’t anymore.”

Everything the woman does to fit in works against her, Doerfler said.

“So she does the one thing she thinks she can do to be free, and that ultimately ends up being just an awful decision,” she said.

In some ways, Doerfler can relate to her character’s feeling of oppression because she’s a woman.

“The situation is much more drastic than it is now, but there’s still a lot of in-



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Meghan Doerfler, center, plays Young Woman in “Machinal.” The Western Oregon University production begins Thursday at 7:30 p.m.

stances that I can relate to it,” she said. “There are instances where people are going to be like, ‘Oh my god, I see that in my everyday life, too,’ or, ‘I witness that still,’ and that’s why the play is still relevant.”

In other ways, the character’s plight is so heightened, Doerfler has to dig deep to find things to substitute for what she’s feeling.

“Like, she marries a perfectly nice guy,” she said. “Who she absolutely detests, and she doesn’t know why, and that’s one of her biggest frustrations.”

While her husband is not terrible, the Young Woman reacts to him like he’s the most disgusting human being, Doerfler said.

“But he’s just a product of the society, and society is disgusting,” she said.

Doerfler said it won’t be

Machinal

What: Western Oregon University Department of Theater presents, “Machinal,” by Sophie Treadwell.

When: Curtain is at 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, and again Nov. 16 through 19, with a 2 p.m. showing on Sunday, Nov. 13.

Where: Rice Auditorium, WOU campus.

Admission: General admission, \$14; seniors, and WOU faculty and staff, \$10; students \$8.

Of note: Shows will be translated into American Sign Language on Nov. 11 and 18.

just women who relate to the play.

Gabriel Elmore plays the Lover — characters in the play are not referred to by name, just by titles. Phillips said that allows the play to be bigger than just one person.

Elmore said his character is the “muse ... that really coaxes the Young Woman out of this routine, mundane existence that she’s

adjusted to with the rest of society.”

The expressionist style of the play has been challenging for the actors, who are trained in more realistic acting, but Elmore said one of the things that makes his role different is his scenes are more naturalistic.

“His scenes are the only ones that feel like normal, and intentionally so,” Elmore said.



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“Machinal” is based on the true-crime story of Ruth Snyder.

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