

Sophie Treadwell
and *Machinal*

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for the John Waldron Arts Center's production of
Machinal by Sophie Treadwell
2006

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Sophie Treadwell

An overlooked and underrated American playwright, Sophie Treadwell had an extraordinary life. “A Californian, a mixture of the old 49er and the original Mexican, with a strain of Pennsylvania Dutch, Scottish Presbyterian and English” was her description of herself. Born in 1885 in California, Treadwell was the only child of a mother of Scottish descent and an English born father who was raised in Mexico. A lawyer fluent in five languages, Alfred Treadwell attended the theatre in California regularly. Sophie Treadwell accompanied her father as a child and began writing plays and short stories at the age of eight. One of the earliest performances Treadwell attended was one starring the Polish actress Helena Modjeska, who would later discover her and claim her as a protégé.

Treadwell attended the University of California at Berkeley from 1902 until 1906, while also taking college courses in shorthand and typing. The practical skills she acquired assisted her in finding work to support herself and her mother, who was abandoned by her father. While going to school full time, Treadwell held two jobs, served on various student committees, edited a college magazine, and performed frequently in campus productions. She also composed and performed songs to accompany theatrical sketches for cabaret nights. Treadwell’s main course of study was, like her father, foreign languages, although she did a fair amount of creative writing for English classes.

After graduation, Treadwell pursued acting professionally, and worked for several years in vaudeville theatres while also working for various newspapers in San Francisco and Los Angeles. In 1909, after the death of her mentor Helena Modjeska, Treadwell began work as a journalist for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, initially covering the police beat, and later writing play and book reviews. She married the journalist William O’Connell McGeehan in 1910 but retained her maiden name.

Before being produced as a playwright, Sophie Treadwell was among the first women war correspondents. Although French law forbade her to report from the front line, she was a regular correspondent throughout the First World War. Due to her mastery of the Spanish language, she was assigned to cover the Mexican Revolution. She travelled to the hideout of the reclusive revolutionary Pancho Villa and was the only American journalist granted an interview with him. She accompanied the women’s suffrage group the Lucy Stone League on a 150-mile march from New York City to Albany in 1914, in the interest of pressing the state legislature to take action.

Treadwell and McGeehan settled in New York City in 1919, in order to further both of their careers. While Treadwell continued to work as a journalist, she dedicated herself to playwriting and advancing her knowledge of all aspects of play production. She studied the Stanislavsky system of acting by attending Richard Boleslavsky’s Laboratory Theatre in 1923, and was invited by him to give lectures on playwriting. Although Treadwell wrote over 50 plays, only seven were produced on Broadway and only *Machinal* was met with critical acclaim. Treadwell’s other plays produced in New York include: *Gringo* (1922), *O Nightingale* (1925), *Ladies Leave* (1929), *Lone Valley*, (1933), *Plumes in the Dust* (1936) and *Hope for a Harvest* (1941). Sophie Treadwell died in Tucson, Arizona, in 1970.

A journalist playwright

Treadwell's development as a playwright is closely linked with her experiences as a journalist, often the stories she covered or the causes she became involved with led to her creative work. Her first play, *Gringo*, was inspired by her experience interviewing Pancho Villa, while her march to Albany with the suffragettes led to her play *Rights*, about the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. While working for the San Francisco Bulletin, Treadwell was assigned to do a series of articles about the city's crackdown on prostitution. Treadwell did so by employing her acting skills: she disguised herself as a homeless prostitute, wandered around the city, and attempted to obtain assistance from various charitable institutions. Her serial, entitled "An Outcast at the Christian Door," documented the help that was available to women—and created a sensation in the city. Another serial followed, "How I Got My Husband and How I Lost Him," which inspired Treadwell's play *Sympathy*.

The inspiration for *Machinal*

In 1927, Treadwell was assigned to cover the Ruth Snyder—Judd Grey murder trial, in which a Long Island housewife and her lover were accused of killing Snyder's husband. The case became a media frenzy, with over 180 reporters covering the affair. Although there was substantial evidence that Ruth Snyder and her nine year-old daughter were the victims of physical and emotional abuse, Snyder was villainized in the media and portrayed as a scheming adulteress. Her lover, Judd Grey, was charged with conspiracy to commit murder, and depicted as the victim of an evil temptress. Ruth Snyder was convicted of murder and became the first American woman to die in the electric chair.

Treadwell denied that *Machinal* was a dramatization of the well-known trial, any more so than it was a dramatization of any woman's murder trial. She had covered various sensational trials in the years leading up to writing *Machinal*, including the trial of Elizabeth Mohr, who had murdered her husband and maimed his lover, and the trial of Leah Alexander, who had murdered her abusive lover. Early drafts of *Machinal* reveal references to the specifics of the Ruth Snyder trial, which Treadwell later edited out for the sake of creating her protagonist as "an ordinary young woman, any woman." What was more important to Treadwell was to portray *how* such an ordinary woman—with feminine emotional needs—was mechanized by a modern, masculine world.

Treadwell's Notes on *Machinal*

The title for *Machinal* comes from a French word describing automatic, mechanical or involuntary actions. In the stage directions to *Machinal*, Treadwell described the play's aim:

The Plan is to tell this story by showing the different phases of life that the woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any place, any peace. The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult for her—mechanical nerve nagging. Only in an illicit love does she find anything with life in it for her, and when she loses this, the desperate effort to win free to it again is her undoing.

Told in nine expressionistic scenes, Treadwell creates the various environments—professional, domestic, maternal or otherwise—that alienate a woman from herself. The main character, "Young Woman," is frustrated at every turn; unable to find the happiness and love she desperately seeks. The fragmentary or "telegraphic" style of dialogue, which Treadwell adopts in *Machinal*, captured, in her words, "the rhythm of our common city speech."

The production history of *Machinal*

Machinal received its premiere in New York in September of 1928. The original production received mixed reviews but has since seen several major revivals, including one at the Public Theatre in New York in 1990, and at the National Theatre in London in 1993. Frequently produced by universities across the country, *Machinal* is an excellent example of feminist criticism and theatrical expressionism. Treadwell's innovations, in form and content, have been too often overlooked by the annals of theatre history. With each production, however, as Frank Rich described *Machinal* in 1990, "What the audience hears is the piercing voice of a forgotten writer who, in an act of justice unknown to her tragic heroine, has been miraculously reborn."

The Jazz Age and Prohibition: speakeasies, gin joints and rum runners

The 1920s saw unprecedented economic prosperity and radical social changes in the United States. The modern world—with its phonographs, radios, talking films, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators—transformed the largely agrarian and rural American landscape. Traditional morality and gender roles were called into question, as were styles of dress and social behavior. Women wore trousers and more revealing clothing, cut their hair short, and openly smoked and drank. Dance marathons, widespread advertising, and brilliant skyscrapers created, in the words of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, the "Jazz Age."

The laissez faire mentality of the era was met with strict opposition from traditionalists, who saw its gaiety as decadent self-indulgence. Those that affirmed traditional roles for men, women, minorities and the working class justified their strictures along religious lines and capitalized on ignorance and intolerance. During the Red scare, anti-capitalists and trade unionists attempting labor reform were branded communists or anarchists. Blacks, immigrants, Jews, and Catholics were targeted in numerous lynchings as the Ku Klux Klan resurfaced, claiming four million members nationwide.

Puritanical attitudes towards alcohol resurfaced with the passing of the eighteenth amendment to the constitution in 1920, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States. Illicit drinking clubs, known as "speakeasies" or "gin joints" took the place of taverns, providing access not only to alcohol, but also gambling and prostitution. Not surprisingly, organized crime syndicates ran many of these establishments and employed "rum runners" to transport alcohol from bootleggers and overseas exporters. The violent rivalry between crime syndicates reached its peak in 1929 with the St. Valentine's Day massacre, in which Al Capone established his supremacy in criminal underworld of Chicago. This period in United States history, known as prohibition, officially ended in 1933, when the eighteenth amendment was repealed by the twenty-first amendment.