



Script for *StageWorks* Episode 4, by Katrin Redfern

(TITLE ANIMATION) Hi I'm Katrin Redfern, and you're watching *StageWorks*. Now, as you know, a theatre-lover is spoiled for choice here in London, no matter your tastes or budget. But, in a continuing effort to bring you round-the-world content, your favourite intrepid theatre reviewer recently braved the crowds of 42nd Street in Manhattan (INSERT MANHATTAN JPG, CUT TO EXT. THEATRE VIDEO THEN AUDIENCE ENTERING VIDEO) to bring you this review.

One of the most thrilling shows on Broadway during my visit was about a woman who kills her husband in cold blood. Nope, not *Chicago*.

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (INSERT TITLE VIDEO) isn't a sexy musical but an obscure drama — one that hadn't been revived on Broadway since its 1928 premiere. It's written in a modernist prose style, which is abstract, at times even experimental, and is inspired by the real-life story of Ruth Snyder, a Long Island housewife who murdered her husband and became the first woman to be executed in the electric chair, at SingSing prison.

All told, it's a tough sell for Broadway, but acclaimed British director Lyndsey Turner and a fantastic cast (INSERT REBECCA JPG) including her star, Rebecca Hall — Scarlett Johansson's friend in 'Vicky Cristina Barcelona', and also British — have made it a must-see.

Machinal is a portrait of Helen, a misfit protagonist in a regimented universe, and a highpoint of Expressionism, a genre famous for creating physical representations of the (INSERT EXPRESSIONISM JPG) abstract forces in society. Think of the ticker tape that fills the stage in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* or the work of (INSERT O'NEILL JPG) Eugene O'Neill. What sets Treadwell's play apart is the gender of its central character, who faces an even greater tyranny of rules and limitations than O'Neill's and Rice's hapless men.

Living in the city with her mother, (INSERT BERTISH JPG) played by Suzanne Bertish, and working as a secretary, she is desperate to escape. She marries her small-minded, domineering boss — after all, what are her choices — all the while longing for an abstract and impossible freedom. (CUT TO MOM VIDEO)

Life with her (INSERT HUSBAND JPG) new husband — played by Michael Cumpsty, looking like a baddie from a '30s noir flick — turns out to be just as confining and she soon gives birth to a child she doesn't want. Restless and (INSERT SOFA JPG) unfulfilled in a passionless marriage and unwanted motherhood, she eventually rebels against the conventions of her marriage by having an affair with a strapping younger man — (INSERT BOY JPG) played by Morgan Spector in a part originated by Clark Gable. When she (INSERT MEET JPG) meets him in a speakeasy and falls in love she believes that liberty awaits her, if she can only unshackle herself. (CUT TO LOVE VIDEO) But when reality sets

in and Helen must return to her routine existence, she'll go to any lengths to regain her freedom. Things don't end well for anybody. [\(INSERT JAIL JPG\)](#)

The sense of Helen's imprisonment, which begins long before her arrest in her husband's murder, is brought to life by a brilliant design team. The first scene is a stunner. It portrays a moving subway car – 'cause what is life in NY but one long subway ride – crammed with anonymous commuters in shades of gray. Amidst the claustrophobic horror, Ms. Hall's wan but luminous face registers like a bright tulip on an ash heap. Her wide-open features signal pain and panic, which will prove to be her habitual expression. There is no chance this exotic, bruisable flower will endure. Jane Cox's eerie lights traverse the set with surgical precision, heightening the sense of exposure, like bands of lights scanning invisible bar codes.

The stage rotates and we're now in a busy New York office. Here Matthew Herbert's sober original music and Matt Tierney's oppressive sound design dominate the storytelling, assaulting [\(INSERT WORK JPG\)](#) Helen's ears with a maddening cacophony of clattering typewriters, jangling telephones and slamming file drawers, all perfectly choreographed together. This is one of the best-looking and -sounding shows you may see all year.

Throughout the production, Ms. Hall must struggle to hold her own against an overbearing co-star. That would be Es Devlin's revolving, scene-stealing set, which portrays a juggernaut of doom, i.e. modern urban existence, that flattens all in its path. We saw this turntable set design in an earlier review, of Chimerica here in London, and it seems New York wasn't content without having its own version built.

You might say such a battle, pitting a lone specimen of humanity against a marvel of technology and artifice, only underscores the haunting determinism of "Machinal," and I wouldn't argue. And even if Helen [\(INSERT DATE JPG\)](#) is clearly headed for extinction from the first scene, Ms. Hall's emotionally transparent performance is never overwhelmed by what surrounds it. So the contest between star and scenery ends in a draw. If there are any casualties in this production at all they're in the supporting cast, [\(INSERT CAST JPG\)](#) who I think somewhat dilute the hypnotic cadences and potential impact of Treadwell's drama. Because even with the salacious backstory, there's nothing tabloid about this play's style. The speech is highly-stylized, sounding as if it has come off a mass-production assembly line, spoken by people disconnected from their own words; Marx would love this illustration of alienation.

So, the same quality should also be evident in how the characters surrounding Helen talk and move. Treadwell wrote dialogue [\(INSERT SCRIPT JPG\)](#) in which clichés hammer relentlessly at her heroine. Of the large cast, only Michael Cumpsty appears to grasp fully this concept, with harshly rhythmic line readings that match the production's mechanistic feel. Take a look. [\(CUT TO MARRIAGE VIDEO\)](#) See his line delivery? He really brings out what the text is trying to convey.

Away from Helen's confining life, in her lover's arms, (INSERT BED JPG) life briefly seems real instead of a nightmare. But for these enchanted glimpses to exert their full force, we need more rigorously stylized and synchronized performances elsewhere.

The slackness has the unfortunate side effect of sometimes making Helen seem less a sensitive (INSERT COURT JPG) victim of a brute society than of her own mental illness. As a consequence, *Machinal* can occasionally feel more like a diary of a (INSERT DIARY JPG) mad housewife than the playwright intended. Still, it's a thrill to have as illuminating a guide as Ms. Hall to take us through the twisting corridors of derangement.

Machinal is a riveting look at the danger that can come from a life unlived. So check out this revival of a rarely seen modern classic. It's playing at the American Airlines Theater, don't worry, the airline didn't design the seats.

That's our show for today, hope you enjoyed it. We'd love to hear from you, on Twitter – @stageworks007 or Facebook. See you next time.

END CREDITS:

Writer Katrin Redfern

Host Katrin Redfern

Producer Katrin Redfern

Executive Producer Tony Hindhaugh

Director Tony Hindhaugh

Editor Marcus Cooper

Thank you to *Roundabout Theatre Company!*