

Director's Notes: Why *Machinal*?

Based on the real life of Ruth Snyder, who was executed in 1928 for the murder of her husband, *Machinal* premiered that same year on Broadway and, despite having Clark Gable in the cast, ran for just 91 performances. The play was revived this year (86 years later!) on Broadway for a brief run of 52 shows. Although there have been two Off-Broadway productions (1960 and 1990) as well as a few regional and British productions, Sophie Treadwell's "best" play is produced only infrequently and then usually by colleges that have run across it in their overpriced classroom anthologies. Why, then, are we producing *Machinal*? Simply put, we wanted something that would challenge our actors and designers and audiences in new and different ways. *Machinal* certainly does this.

As an audience member, you immediately will note the projections on the towers. While we have used projections before (*Enron* and *Trojan Women*, for example), we have never used them so pervasively nor have we used a technology known as "mapping," by which still images and videos are fitted (mapped) to specific surfaces. Quickly becoming an industry standard, this technology is visually exciting and greatly enhances the drama onstage, but it also is difficult to design and execute and, like all computer programs, susceptible to malfunction. So be it. Kudos to Liz Freese and Connor Toups for their artistry, willingness, countless hours, and enduring patience in making this next big step finally happen for us.

We also are using a new style of makeup and application. The makeup was inspired by something I had seen on television, when a drag queen named Detox appeared in public in complete grey-scale dress and makeup. Costumer Kris Hanssen was game for this grey-scale approach and introduced another new technology—airbrushed makeup—which then was designed to stunning effect by senior Jenn Sullivan. The process is long, tedious, and expensive but helps keep Sam Houston at the cutting edge of what is happening professionally, to say nothing of how cool it looks.

As important are the challenges for our actors. The script is classic American Expressionism: what the audience sees and hears is not real life but, rather, what our protagonist (Helen) experiences, hence the visual distortions, Ryan Brazil's odd music, and Eric Marsh's eerie, shadowy lighting. Consequently, the staging demands a different style of acting to create what Treadwell calls a "purgatory of noise." The acting must illustrate Helen's experience, her repression and eventual destruction by the "machine" of this greedy, industrial society that has little place or regard for its women. Also,, the actors must function as a well-tuned ensemble of worker bees that perform a variety of functions to keep the machine running. They are figures more so than characters; the machine has destroyed their individuality and humanity.

Why *Machinal*, then? To experiment, to learn, to grow...as faculty and students, as artists and technicians, as producers and as audience members. That is, after all, why we do educational theatre.