The Life Machine: Twenty-First Century Explorations into Machinal

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The Life Machine: Twenty-First Century Explorations into Machinal

by

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A THESIS
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ABSTRACT

This artist statement is a companion document to the 2019 production of Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* produced by the School of Creative and Performing Arts at The University of Calgary. The goal of this document is three-fold: first to illuminate the thinking around, research behind, and vast amounts of inspiration for the choices in this production as can be found in Chapters one, two, and three. Second, to demonstrate the application and execution of these ideas in collaboration with creative partners, including designers and performers in Chapters four and five. And finally, to reflect on the process from both a leadership and directorial standpoint, pieces of which are explored in various chapters, but predominantly discussed in Chapter six.

In adherence to departmental guidelines the names of all undergraduate student artists involved in the creative process have been omitted from the document and are referred to by their title within the production, i.e. assistant director, stage manager etc.
PREFACE

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Z. McKendrick.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to the SCPA for the incredible opportunity to work on such an important and powerful piece of theatre.

All the gratitude in the world goes out to the creatives and technical staff that made this production of *Machinal* possible: my Stage Manager and Assistant Director, Andrew, Trevor, Scott, Carolyn, Lisa, and Halina your endless amounts of hard work is appreciated more than I will ever have words to say. It has been a pleasure getting to work with all of you.

Scott, thanks for the beautiful lighting. Sorry about the moving targets and steep angles.

April, I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to have worked with you on this show. You took all my crazy ideas in stride and made them a hundred times better. It was a real treat getting to jam with you creatively and watch you work.

Thank you to my supervisor Christine Brubaker for your guidance and encouragement in and outside of the classroom and rehearsal halls over the past two years. I have learned so much from you and am eternally grateful.

To my cast, thanks for all getting on the bus and going over the cliff with me. I appreciate your trust, patience, and dedication to this project. Boom-boom.

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To all my friends back home, AL, JC, JF, D & IL, S & KA, thanks for all the love, laughs, and strength when home seemed really far away. I miss you guys.
DEDICATION

For my Family who have always been my loudest cheering section.

* * *

For my Dad who taught me the value of hard work and sacrifice.

My sister who is a constant inspiration in perseverance and determination.

And for my Mom who always encouraged me to follow my passions and taught me to never be afraid to ask questions.

Monkey say, “Cool Breeze.”
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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

I first encountered *Machinal* in the fall of 2017 at the University of Calgary. The play was assigned reading for an Introduction to Theatre lecture class for which I was the teaching assistant. I was struck by some components about Sophie Treadwell’s 1928 Expressionist drama: first and foremost, how shockingly relevant the play felt nearly 100 years after its initial production; second, the tension and subtle shifts in how Treadwell names her protagonist in the stage directions and how this naming elucidates the themes in the play. Finally, I was fascinated by the Expressionist style of the piece and wondered about the limits and possibilities of a twenty-first century imagining of a twentieth-century play generated in such a style. These ideas formulated the initial thoughts that I would eventually place at the heart of my thesis production.

Upon reading *Machinal*, I found an examination of the misogynistic, patriarchal social structures and the questions of autonomy, expectation and prescriptive cultural norms that were inherent in it. After taking a few notes for potential talking points to facilitate a group discussion, I did some preliminary research on the play digging through interviews, critiques, production photos and recordings. I found a tension between Treadwell’s writing and her messages within the play in an interview from 1960 with New York Times writer Louis Calta where Treadwell states the play “isn’t at all allegorical. It is an emotional play about a woman”. This seemed at odds with her description of the plot in early pages of the script where she states: “the plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband – an ordinary young woman, any woman.” It was the “any woman” that perplexed me; how could the protagonist be both an individual and any woman? This question was further complicated when my research revealed that the inspiration for the play commonly attributed to the murder trial of Ruth Snyder, a Queens Village housewife whose life also inspired the novel and subsequent film *Double Indemnity* some six months before the play’s writing. Treadwell was also following two similar,
albeit lower profile, murder cases around America; cases that were as much about innocence as they were about “embodying the type of womanhood sanctioned by patriarchal society” (76) as noted by López-Rodriguez in the book “Violence in American Drama”. The correlations to these murder cases became more complicated with research exposing parallels between Young Woman/Helen’s onstage journey and Treadwell’s struggles as a journalist and early feminist. It was the tension in presentation and intention that piqued my interest in the play.

As I continued my research, I found the quality of media I encountered varied as much as the quality of productions, from high school and college recordings to images and interviews from professional runs on Broadway and in London. With each production, I was struck by one commonality: all the clips and pictures I found placed the show in the early twentieth century. The combination of shapes and colours in the costumes and sets were muted and industrial, and only served to turn a shockingly relevant piece of theatre with contemporary resonance, into a period piece more concerned with reproducing 1920’s America than tackling the constant reinforcement of patriarchal norms. While the themes I found in reading the play were still present in these productions, their relevance felt lost as the play appeared to be dealing with issues of a bygone era. The loss of contemporary accessibility caused by the presentation of a period piece in the productions I mentioned led me to wonder if there was a way that I could stage the play and maintain the Expressionist style ingrained in the text, but remove it from the shackles of industrial America? How had Expressionism changed? Could I embrace the stylistic elements of Expressionism in the twenty-first century in a way that felt true to the artistic intention of the movement? What would that even look like?

The resonance of major themes the play contained with modern audiences persisted; lecture discussion resulted in conversations addressing the agency of Helen or lack thereof.
However, amongst discussion I was surprised to find a lack of questions surrounding the naming of Young Woman/Helen. In hindsight, facilitating and listening to feedback from lectures about Machinal was excellent preliminary research as I was able to witness the direct impact the play had on a room of sixty plus students, ninety years after its inception. This experience showed me that the themes in the play are still relevant for a modern audience, though questions about the style of the piece and the naming of Helen as "Young Woman" perplexed me still.

I came to the University of Calgary with a background in martial arts, stage combat, professional wrestling, technical theatre skills, acting, and directing. I started directing as an undergraduate and became obsessed with the German composer Richard Wagner’s concept of a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total or complete work of art. I should not have been surprised to be fascinated with an Expressionist piece of theatre. William Elwood, William Gruber, and Harris Gruman provided valuable insight into the philosophical differences between German and American interpretations of the movement, with the former concerned with the emotional expression through acting, and the latter leaning heavily on aesthetics through sets and lighting choices. I thought combining these two cultural interpretations of Expressionism, heightened emotion reflected within the setting would be aligned with my pursuit of this idea of a complete work of art. My investigation of the play through production translated to all aspects of a show elevating both message and medium, as the set, costumes, and action onstage are an external expression of Young Woman’s internal struggle, for Machinal elevation equalled reinforcement of ideas through design which I address in more detail in Chapters Three and Four.

The majority of my first year of research at the University of Calgary centered around violence as a tool for narrative progression. Specifically, I was looking at the cross over space between traditional stage combat practices and professional wrestling techniques as a way of
engaging with what Meron Langsner dubbed "fightaturgy" (Howlround, 2013) to answer the question, what does it mean to stage violence? My pre-thesis show, Trafford Tanzi, was the culmination of years of personal interest and praxis. It was a significant undertaking putting a wrestling ring and live band in the middle of a five hundred seat theatre and then allowing for only a hundred or so audience members. Inside of it, I found a variety of successes; I was able to take a cast of six student actors and teach them correct professional wrestling technique that was consistent with their characters and evolved with the storyline. The physical action and choreography in Tanzi were well executed and impressive, though my explorations in the style of acting, Bouffon and Pantomime, were underdeveloped. I keenly felt that weak spot in my directorial technique. I approached Machinal, terrified at the prospect of exploring Expressionism through the acting as my understanding of the genre was limited, and I had seen enough shows to know that genre plays can easily miss the mark and come across as weak performances.

I find genre pieces and plays exciting as the departure from a Naturalism creates more freedom to challenge expectation and exploration. Machinal fell into this category for me, specifically concerning violence. There is only one instance of overt physical violence displayed within the story, but closer reads of the script and additional research into Expressionism revealed approaches to posture and rhythm creating a bridge into a physical language to I could use to understand and frame the action. Machinal felt very Greek in its exploration of violence as the story leads us to the point of action but then jumps to a scene that recounts the events for the audience via a courtroom murder trial, instead of showing what happened. My challenge became finding ways to communicate violence without it ever being seen onstage, a departure from my previous explorations in creating more realistic representations of physical violence. I turned to
other performance languages to explore how to find connectivity and a distinct vocabulary on stage with all action being rooted in and influenced by the history of action in the narrative. My investigations led me to Laban Technique and Delsarte’s Systems of Expression. Laban would be useful as I was familiar with it as an actor and I liked how the qualities of the physical movement described in the system were specific, measured, and translatable. Explorations into Delsarte, on the other hand, was a result of my research on American Expressionism which highlighted ties to Romanticism through its use of exaggerated physical gesture. Delsarte’s postures are arguably less active than Laban in their static uses of space but were useful in clearly indicating moments such as longing and distress. The two systems provided vital elements of physical language that I would implement in rehearsal which I address specifically in Chapter Four.

While my work on Trafford Tanzi served to answer questions surrounding the use of violence, it sparked several other areas of curiosity and interest: does my work with physical language extend beyond shows involving/about professional wrestling? How does physical expression affect space and atmosphere? To what extent can I carve out a highly specific physical language that clearly communicates intention to the audience? Alternatively, how do space and atmosphere contribute to audience experience? Can I exercise control over these two elements to create extended resonance for the audience?

The other plays I had pitched for my thesis production were genre plays each with their stylistic parameters and challenges and with varying levels of personal, body to body violence. I had pitched plays by Qui Nguyen, Carol Churchill, Frederick Knott, and William Shakespeare. All the plays I had pitched were because of their intrinsic use of violence. Machinal represented a shift in my pursuits. A departure from my early research interests, and except for the execution of Helen on the last page of an 83-page script, the play is devoid of interpersonal violence. The
murder of George H. Jones in Episode Seven is handled off-stage more akin to a Greek tragedy and only referenced in further scenes. What I found was a shift from direct outward violence to an exploration of systemic violence, and oppressive systems. I knew that Machinal would be an excellent extension of my violence research as well as a significant and worthy challenge for my directorial pursuits.

In addition, the challenge of presenting violence in the play, as well as the questions I identified earlier around the themes of contemporaneity and female agency, persisted: how is the play about any woman and yet not an allegory? Is there a way to present the issues of female autonomy that can resonate directly with modern audiences? What is it about Expressionism that fascinates me, and what value does Expressionism hold in the 21st century? I was uninterested in presenting a period piece as I had seen in production photos - doing so felt like an easy way of dismissing the complexities in the show as the struggles of a bygone era. I was having trouble conceptualizing my approach to the work. With each reading of the script, what I wanted to say clarified, but how to say it still eluded me. Despite its title, I was not able to fully connect to the tension of the mechanical aspects of the show. I found the original British title, The Life Machine to be incredibly helpful in creating connections between the form and content. It shifted my focus from purely mechanical aspects of the story (the typewriters and electric chair) to the social constructs and Treadwell’s subversion of the male dominated Expressionist genre by centering the action around a woman. Attempting to better understand the connections between and subversion of style led to further research into Treadwell’s history as an active early feminist through the works various contemporary feminist theorists such as Julia A. Walker, Miriam López-Rodriguez, and Anthony Martinelli and artists like designer Es Devlin.
In order to properly address the questions I was encountering in the play I knew that I would have to find the most appropriate language to communicate to my collaborators the more difficult theories I was exploring. Particularly, questions I identified early on around themes of contemporaneity and female agency. For the purpose of my explorations, and subsequently this document, I refer to definitions found in the Oxford English Dictionary. Therefore, when I reference autonomy I am speaking about the “liberty to follow one's will; control over one's own affairs; freedom from external influence, personal independence” (“Autonomy”, 2011). Likewise, by agency I mean an individual’s “[a]bility or capacity to act or exert power” (“Agency”, 2012). For a definition of feminism I refer to Lorna Finlayson’s 2016 book, “An Introduction to Feminism”, in which she identifies feminism as “a theory which identifies and opposes what it calls sexism, misogyny or patriarchy” (4), and “a way of living and struggling against the status quo” (ibid), both of which are at play in my thinking about the script and how to approach the creative process.

Understanding Expressionism was my next major challenge. I needed to find a solid support structure for my explorations of oppressive patriarchal social conventions and their impacts on modern society. J.L. Styan's writings provided links between German Expressionism and Brecht's Epic theatre. I used the writings of Brecht and his work with alienation and style as an entry point to the form of the play and coupled that with Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk. I began to see parallels between the externalizing of the struggle of Young Woman against oppressive social constraints and a theatre experience that reinforces her struggle.

Expressionism (both German and American) has had a lasting impact on subsequent artistic movements and theatre practices despite being, at the time, loosely defined and regressive compared to the popularity of psychological realism and Naturalism in the early twentieth
century. My research into Expressionism led me to the Modernist movement in art, which led to Post-Modernism and then to Futurism. There were connections to Wagner’s complete work of art at work in architecture, design, fashion, and furniture. It was not until I found two futurist furniture pieces that my aesthetic vision of the world of the play began to form, giving me a conceptual framework for my approach. Design became a huge factor in my understanding of and approach to Expressionism, providing grounding and inspiration for my production of *Machinal*. Design considerations also allowed me to explore how was I going to externalize the internal struggle of Young Woman.

My journey into all of this research and Expressionism became about exploring the theme and the message of the play through form, specifically, space, proximity and relationship. With my production, I sought to embrace a heightened performance aesthetic and all the challenges that entails, while attempting to find the balance between presenting an emotionally honest story that is representative and inclusive without being allegorical. At the heart of the production, I wanted to implicate the audience in the outcome of the story as an attempt to keep the themes of the play relevant and current despite it being almost ninety years old.
CHAPTER TWO: Research and Development

2.1 – THE PLAY IN CONTEXT

“Machinal is the testimony, disallowed by the court of law, that Treadwell wished to introduce into the court of public opinion. She sets forth her argument in a drama, not to prove Snyder's innocence, but to ask if perhaps there is another way of looking at the case, that an all-male jury in predominantly male press corps did not understand.”

Jennifer Jones – In Defense of the Woman, 486

First produced in 1928 at the Plymouth Theatre in New York and directed by Arthur Hopkins, Sophie Treadwell’s Machinal blended her background as a journalist, playwright, and theatre critic. Writing nearly forty plays in her lifetime, Treadwell also acted as a news correspondent and nurse during the first world war, and later as an expert in Mexican-American relations for the New York American newspaper in the early 1920s. Treadwell was an activist as a member of the Lucy Stone Society, a Feminist group fighting for a woman’s right to keep her last name after marriage. Treadwell insists in the introduction to the play that her work is the story of any woman. Indeed, Machinal is regularly cited as inspired by trials of women accused of murdering their husbands; perhaps, most infamously the case Ruth Snyder. A closer look into Treadwell’s biography suggests several parallels between her Expressionist protagonist and herself, most notably her bouts with mental illness, her relationship to Mexico, and the dual her subjugation to a typewriter as a trained stenographer in her professional life, and liberation by a typewriter as a creative writer and journalist. Julia A. Walker notes in her chapter of Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre that Treadwell suffered from nervous exhaustion and was hospitalized on two separate accounts between 1906 and 1909, a trait that is shared by Young Woman.
It is worth mentioning, albeit not surprising given the year in which the play was staged, that men helmed the 1928 Broadway production. Robert Edmund Jones served as scenic designer, and Hopkins worked not only as the director but also dramaturg of sorts, contributing as editor of the script specifically on Young Woman’s monologues (Dickey) resulting in ten drafts of the script before the production opened. Arthur Hopkins’s stylistic intentions were clear from the outset of production, stating in a 1928 New York Times interview that his staging of *Machinal* “will seek to liberate the stage from the confinement of box sets and give greater scope to lighting” a feature that would become synonymous with American Expressionism. Indeed, in her essay “In Defense of the Woman,” theatre history scholar Jennifer Jones cites *Machinal* “to be one of America's finest expressionist dramas” (485), ranking the play, and subsequently Treadwell, amongst her often more recognized male contemporaries Rice and O’Neil. New York Times theatre critic J. Brooks Atkinson validated Hopkins’s efforts in his 1928 review describing the production as a “strangely moving, shadowy drama” that was “fraught with beauty, unfamiliar to the stage”. While Atkinson described the themes in *Machinal* as “no fresh conception on stage or in life” (1928) he would continue to praise Edmond Jones’ set as “cryptic by comparison with the customary representational frame settings, but they are alive and splendidly lighted” (ibid). However, the critics were split; while Atkinson was praising the use of Expressionistic techniques in Treadwell’s play “to play upon the nerves of the spectators,” columnists such as Percy Hutchinson expressed his disdain with the directorial and stylistic choices. In his article entitled “As The Theatre Practices the Art of Homicide”, identifying the play as a “specimen of this new art as expressed in the theatre” (November, 1928). Hutchinson found “as art it was inadequate” (ibid), going as far to say “in the purely visual appeal there was no appeasement of the intellectual gnawing. Machinal sadly notified one of the inadequacies of
modern art” (ibid). Critics like Robert Bell agreed with Atkinson that Edmund Jones created “a rather extraordinary picture” (“Echoes”, 1929). However, it would appear that audiences tended to agree with Hutchinson, as Bell notes the play “was found so utterly depressing by the average theatergoer that the public soon refused to attend any longer” (ibid), resulting in a run of 91 performances from September to November 1928. There have been several revivals, and adaptations of *Machinal* since the play’s initial Broadway run, including two, made for TV movies (c. 1954, 1960), and several professional and semi-professional productions in the past two years alone.

One thing I noted inside of all of the reviews I encountered, past and present, is that whenever the play is praised, the character of Young Woman is critiqued for being seemingly too fragile or of no consequence. New York Times critic J. Brooks Atkinson summed the play up as “the tragedy of one who lacks strength” (1928), Ben Brantly suggests that Young Woman is “headed for extinction from the first scene” (2014), which made me wonder about the function of Young Woman as the protagonist. She clearly is read as lacking any power or agency. I wondered what it would mean to try and mine Young Woman’s agency through the existing text. Are there any glimmers of her power in the script, and if yes, does this change the assumed meanings of the play; rather than a play about a woman who lacks agency in the world, could it be interpreted as a story of a woman who is trying desperately to have autonomy and free will in a world that does not permit it?

I found this tension compounded by Sophie Treadwell in a 1960 interview with Louis Calta of The New York Times, where Treadwell states the play “isn’t at all allegorical. It is an emotional play about a woman”. In the author’s notes about the story of the play, Treadwell states, “[t]he plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband – an ordinary young woman,
any woman” (*Machinal*, xi). I wondered if that was the genesis for how Young Woman was received, attempting to exist as both an allegory and emotionally realized character?

I drew on numerous points of inspiration for my production in an attempt to answer my questions about Young Woman. Authors Jennifer Jones and Julia A. Walker provided contemporary reflections on *Machinal* that were incredibly helpful in deciphering relevant commentaries and situating the play in a modern landscape. Walker’s in-depth investigations into Treadwell, the play, and around the objectification of women in “Sophie Treadwell’s pretty hands” (2009) helped tease out some of the significant social tension points and the importance of embodied forms of communication present within the play. Lindsey Turner’s 2014 Broadway revival and Natalie Abrahami’s 2018 Almeida Theatre productions were incredibly helpful in understanding how the work was being presented visually, how Expressionism was approached, and what the directors of each production sought to discover or share in their productions; what were they investigating in the play as contemporary female artists?

Turner (Broadway, 2014) and Abrahami (Almeida Theatre, 2018) both set their productions against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, but what does that do to the investigation of the play when the issues are still very present? How would dislocating the play from history, setting it in the near future, and attempting to give Young Woman a sense of agency change the trajectory of the narrative? Furthermore, how would my production be received by audiences? My goal was to present *Machinal* as a sort of cautionary tale vision of the future, highlighting the possible dangers if movements for fairness and equality are ignored. I discuss my apprehension further in Chapter Two, Section Three, looking at how my position as a male Feminist and ally informs my approach to this play and this commentary. Am I able to accurately portray another look into the murder cases Treadwell was exploring as Jones suggests,
or would I fall in with the male press corps and jury and not understand? Would I even know if I didn’t?

2.2 – EXPRESSIONISM, ALLEGORY, AND MACHINAL: THE TANGLE OF MY QUESTIONS

There were so many approaches to Machinal I was interested in exploring, but I couldn’t do eighty things, or eighty things well, and I knew my job as the director was to tell a cohesive story, a challenge given that my questions were not cohesive. This section attempts to identify some of these points of research and issues I started to unpack, some successfully, some not.

With limited theoretical exposure to Expressionism and even less practical experience, I knew that I would have to understand the conventions of the style to apply them effectively. It has been exciting to find that the resurgence in Machinal’s popularity in production has been coupled with a surge of critical writing about the play in the last several decades focusing specifically on the Expressionist elements and theories about exactly what Treadwell was attempting to tackle with her writing. The contemporary approaches of Yiyi López Gándara and Julia A. Walker provided modern perspectives on Treadwell’s writing and American Expressionist theatre practices while Harris L. Gruman, William E. Gruber, and William Elwood contributed historical reference for and comparisons between German and American movements.

Expressionism exists in two sects, American as seen in the plays of Eugene O’Neill and Elmer Rice, and German which is linked to the works of Georg Kaiser and Ernest Toller. Modern theatre scholars include Treadwell amongst the ranks of O’Neill and Rice as examples of the height of the Expressionist movement in America with comparisons most frequently drawn between Rice’s Adding Machine and Machinal for their direct examination of the
industrialized world and its impacts on the individual. It would have been simple enough to examine the American movement and apply my findings to my production. Given German Expressionism was the predecessor to American Expressionism and my interest in Wagner, Brecht, and German performance theories, I wanted to extend the scope of my investigations to the distance between the two, how I might bridge that distance, and how cultural factors impacted the focus of each respective style be it in content, form, or message.

Harris Gruman cites in “Performance and Theory” that, “Expressionism created characters which were more archetype than character in the traditional sense. Identified generically, they were embodiments of the human spirit in varying conditions of agony, growth or transcendence” (120). William Elwood turns to psychology in his explanation of the emotional journey of an Expressionist protagonist, “[i]n typical Jungian form, mankind's inertia and power yearn for transcendence and the status quo at the same time” (Elwood, 91). This tension is exemplified in Young Woman’s monologue at the end of Episode One and throughout her conversation with her mother in episode two where she struggles to negotiate her desire for freedom, which I have translated as free will or autonomy. In both cases, the conversation revolves around the struggles between love and duty, personal desire versus social convention. During her monologue, Young Woman weighs the options between marrying for love and having a family, or marrying her boss, the mere suggestion of which causes her physical discomfort. Treadwell questions the validity of love on several occasions. While Helen is in a loveless marriage, the closest thing to love that she can achieve comes in the way of her affair with Dick Roe. Here, the vows of love are never explicitly exchanged, and the tone of writing and shift in Helen’s behaviour are clear as she exclaims that she “has never felt so high up” and “didn’t know such things were possible” (Episode Six). The inclusion of songs compounds the
change, specifically “Cielito Lindo” which Dick informs her is Spanish for “little heaven.” The tension returns as the following Episode finds Helen back at home with her husband negotiating her role as a housewife. It was paramount that Episode Six was a standout moment in the production to emphasize the change in Helen.

2.2 - DESIGN INSPIRATION

I began to look through a variety of media looking for inspiration: classic movies, sci-fi series, Netflix shows featuring designers from a variety of mediums from sneakers and cars to print and architecture. The juxtaposition of classic black and white movies from the early twentieth century and profiles of people who push the edges of design shaped the play in my head. The episode on Architect Bjarke Ingels prompted thinking about ways to maximize modern minimalist design. Es Devlin threw theatre convention out the window to allow for discoveries around the use of space. Humphry Bogart and Vivien Leigh’s noir genre acting in “Gone with the Wind” (1939) was stylized and specific, yet honest and authentic. The classic films presented a tone that was familiar, depicting the attitudes of early twentieth century American drama. The sci-fi programs offered alternative approaches to depictions of dystopian futures that were not grey and hopeless and created a more inviting world. The design programs presented a bridge between the two. I wanted this approach to the future and design to mirror the reality of the patriarchal social structures; a world that was too utilitarian posed the same problems for me as doing the play as a period piece; the play could be dismissed too easily as an issue of another world or another time that was too distant from our own. Getting the tone and atmosphere of the world was vitally important as the play is a story of one woman against the world. The world needed to have more impact on her than any other aspect of the show. Netflix’s
Abstract: the art of design (2017), a designer docu-series opened my eyes to the effects of design, which aligned with my research around American Expressionism, balancing the movement and acting style of German Expressionism.

I found a wooden chair, ergonomically designed for comfort, seemingly carved out of a single piece of wood and polished until it looked plastic and an oval bench with a wooden top, polished white sides and base and lighting under the seat. The composition of the bench revealed that the struggle of the play is in the dissonance between organic and manufactured materials. Young Woman/Helen is the natural being in a mechanized world. Elwood notes that “German expressionism may be defined as the attempt to express the essence rather than the appearance of reality through the use of non realistic symbols or the juxtaposition of ordinary non related realistic symbols” (103). The tension of natural and manufactured material is a good representation of reality versus non-reality. Scholar and scenic designer, Ola Kraszpulska’s discussions around design in her chapter of Old Stories, New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama titled Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Work of Sarah Ruhl introduced me to the concept of metaphysics. Explorations into metaphysics brought me to Paul Monaghan’s 2006 essay on Metaphysics in Symbolist and Expressionist Theatre. Both authors presented definitions of metaphysics as interested in “the fundamental nature of reality and being” and “relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses” (Miriam-Webster).

My new understanding would become the foundation of my ideas around the set, staging, and how Young Woman would interact with the world. I started to think about Young Woman’s relationship to the playing space and using her as a conduit to extend the play into the audience. Rooting this extension in Young Woman meant that the audience would only be perceptible to
her when she was trapped on stage, coming into view during moments of duress as if spectators watching reality television live. J.C. Cooper’s *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* Monaghan states that “in the mythology of many cultures, stairs connote the passage from one plane to another or from one mode of being to another and the ascending power of man’s consciousness passing through all degrees of existence” (2). I knew I wanted to incorporate the idea of this transcendence visually through the use of a staircase and ramp that provided options for exits and entrances, though all the while not allowing Young Woman to ever leave the space. She would be trapped, stuck in a circular pattern and unable to transcend her circumstances and obtain the freedom she desperately cries out for. The stairs and ramp, therefore, symbolizing a sense of futility which I discuss further in Chapter Three.

2.3 – CONSIDERATIONS, FEMINISM, AND THE MALE GAZE

I had reservations about what it meant to be a male director working on a play that in many ways, has been as a piece of early twentieth century Feminist theatre. I was worried that I was reading into the play things that weren’t there or that my approach would be counterproductive too, or at worst, reinforcing the patriarchal norms I wanted to address in the piece. I consider myself a feminist and an ally, but even as such not having lived the experience of a woman I knew I would have to navigate the blind spots of my maleness leading me to wonder, what does it mean to be a white, cisgendered, male from North America holding space and discussing issues around feminism? Would my male gaze persist despite efforts to dismantle it? After many discussions with influential female artists and role models in my life I realized that despite my different experiences within the structures I wanted to explore and critique, being an ally is essential for progression, as is being aware of position and privilege and doing
everything possible to include the experience and voices of the people I am attempting to represent.

I approached this factor of my maleness in a female-centered story through an investigation of leadership and how I might disrupt some of the paradigms of power inherent in both my maleness and the hierarchical structure of directing. As a graduate student at University of Calgary my research focused on onstage violence. I examined how to create it and stage it through the implications of presenting violence, taking many cues from the works of stage combatants Meron Langsner, Robert Najarian, Christopher Duval and performance scholars Bruce McConachie and Lucy Nevitt. In Nevitt’s *Theatre and Violence* (2013), she “argues that studying violence through theatre can be part of a desire to create a more peaceful world” (Cover copy). In this same way I wanted to use the instances of social and structural violence in *Machinal* to impact the audience and move them towards questioning patriarchal social norms. McConachie’s writings in *Theatre and Mind* (2013) focus on “mindful bodies” (30) and “psycho-physical” (ibid) connectivity encourage intellectual engagement and awareness through physicality resulting in more comprehensive performances: what our bodies say and how they are saying it. When applied in practice to Laban and Delsarte we start to see an engagement that resembles German Expressionism acting techniques.

Working with Intimacy Directors International has also shifted my perspectives on how to approach work within the rehearsal room. Holly L. Derr’s essay for Howlround.com titled “Feminist Theatre What Does it Do and How Does it Do it?” Is about what exactly Feminist theatre is and does in practice and has been of particular interest. Attempting to enter a discussion around my own process as a director I identified with Derr’s definition of feminist Theatre as “one that provides an alternate not just to the male gaze but also to the normative
assumptions about identity, dismantling binaries, and creating equality” (2013). Attempt to embrace Derr’s approach to theatre making translated to the intentionality of creating an atmosphere of open collaboration in rehearsal, engaging and crediting my female artistic partners for their contributions to the show, and seeking ongoing feedback on my directorial process. I speak more about my collaborations, specifically with my Assistant Director and Stage Manager in Chapter Four, Section Three. Striking a balance between open collaboration and more hierarchal models of theatre creation was difficult, especially given the varying experience levels of my cast and creative team within rehearsals, but I was interested in the disruption of said models in pursuit of the praxis Derr outlines.

This disruption of the hierarchical method also extends to my interest in how I engage an audience. Theatre is, of course, the exploration of bodies in space, and part of the director’s job is to use those bodies to create pictures and tell stories. I think this is a driving factor in my interest in theatre in the round. By releasing the structure of a proscenium stage/audience relationship and placing the audience all around the action performed, the audience becomes a part of the action as they are visible throughout the play. Incorporating the audience in the action of the play is easier to do in a black box theatre given the malleability of the space, but my experimentations in collaborative experience in spaces through studio practice and pre-thesis work yielded promising results.

A short studio exploration into devised theatre as part of my graduate directing course opened some exciting avenues for me. One channel was looking at what it means to be a participating audience member, and the other was how to keep actors on their toes by highlighting the unique challenge of directly engaging with a new audience each performance. For example, what does it mean to have an audience participate in the narrative construction of a
piece of theatre? What are the boundaries around that? If working with a set script, is it possible or does it just become a game of distracting the actors? My motivation to explore audience engagement was born out of a personal artistic question: what does it mean to activate audience experience in traditional theatre settings? Within *Machinal* I found two significant elements through which to explore my question. Young Woman/Helen has two monologues in the play, at the end of Episodes One and Three. Both monologues are fractured, almost stream of consciousness speeches that presented the internal conflict of Helen at critical points in her life. I wanted to avoid the monologues being internal as I felt that would be uninteresting to watch, particularly the second monologue which quite long and presented alone onstage. The second element was Helen’s calls for somebody to help her that appear throughout the show. As I continued to conceive of the action, I wondered what would happen if Young Woman/Helen looked someone directly in the face and asked them to help her during a moment of duress? How would convention play into the response? I also identified an interesting parallel inside of these questions that Helen is unable to affect the world she is in, and likewise, the audience’s default mode is to be spectator also incapable of helping Helen. I put that in quotes because, of course, an audience member could halt the action on stage, but would they? Theatre convention says no, they would sit and observe the play but I was fascinated with the prospect of creating something that moves people to action.
CHAPTER THREE: Conceptualizing Modern Expressionism

3.1 – CONCIEVING THE PRODUCTION

In attempting to explore Expressionism through space, proximity, and relationship, design became a crucial element in the execution of the patriarchal pressures of Machinal. Julia A. Walker notes that “Machinal illustrates how gender roles are produced and reproduced through the mechanistic process” (215). I was immediately drawn to a comparison of organic and manufactured materials through the tensions of Young Woman’s attempt to exist as a living creature in the mechanised world of the play and how the two coexist in our modern landscape. What does it mean for a person to attempt to exist in a world that is not intended for them? In other words, what happens to organic material inside the machine?

Architecture and interior design became points of interest, how spaces are manufactured and designed to elicit particular responses. My line of thinking was compounded by a Tedtalk and Netflix design profile. In his 2017 Tedtalk “How Architecture Can Create Dignity For All,” John Cary discusses the limitations of current architectural design and attributes the exclusivity of spaces to the designers who create them. He highlights his argument early on by examining disproportioned bathroom lineups for men and women in public spaces and suggests that this is due to a lack of attention to user experience. In Netflix’s Abstract: The art of design interior designer Isle Crawford discusses how the forefronting of user experience and combination of individual textures and fabrics can influence mood and how one engages with space. Taking these two points into consideration I began to think about how I could apply design on stage and in the audience to create a world that was not designed for Young Woman and then extend and shift those elements to encompass the audience and create physical empathy?

In his essay “Stairways of the Mind” architect Juhani Pallasmaa, suggests that “[a]rchitecture is engaged in articulating and expressing the human existential experience. The
art of architecture creates spatial and material metaphors of our fundamental existential encounters” (7). Cary suggests any designed structure is filtered through the lens of the person creating it, and therefore the goal for *Machinal* was to present shapes and structures that would be able to convey clear meaning to the audience and creating what Pallasmaa refers to as an “architectural metaphor… a highly abstracted and condensed ensemble that fuses the multitude of human experiences into a single image” (7). Kuhns’ suggests that ascension is central to the expressionist actor’s desire to be alive, which led me to the question, what happens if there is no ascension, or worse, only the illusion of ascension? The combination of the ever turning revolve with a ramp and staircase that lead Young Woman back to where she started created a beautiful representation of and way to visually emphasize for the audience Young Woman’s inability to transcend her plight.

![Figure 1 - Futurist chair design, carved from one piece of wood. Visual inspiration for Machinal design.](image)

*Figure 1 - Futurist chair design, carved from one piece of wood. Visual inspiration for Machinal design.*
Figure 2 - Modern bench, practical design influence Machinal.

Figure 3 - The Mechanics of History by Yoann Bourgeois (2017)
3.2 – DESIGN INSPIRATIONS

I took design inspiration from Yoann Bourgeois’ 2017 installation titled “The Mechanics of History,” a rotating staircase wrapped around a trampoline. The installation presented in the Pantheon in Paris is a meditation on gravity. It shows three performers traversing the staircase one step at a time and after each step plunging themselves down toward the trampoline only to rebound and back into their previous position and continue their ascent. Mechanical connections aside, the futility of this movement aligned with my interpretation of the Young Woman’s aspirational, yet thwarted, journey to ascend beyond the confines of patriarchal social agendas.

I extended this idea to a conception of the stage action that could achieve the same purpose. To do so, I needed a mechanical revolve that would operate the entire length of the show. I furthered this idea to include a ramp on the rotating platform to indicate Young Woman/Helen’s inability to escape her surroundings; she would be able to cross up or down the ramp without ever leaving the main playing space. The revolve and the ramp would allow me to create precise pictures on stage without the worry of sightlines, in fact, if I could stage the pictures correctly the audience would be able to catch glimpses of the action from a multitude of perspectives. Something that is not possible for the audience in static spaces.

The script for Machinal includes in its scenic description the requirement of one window with specific instructions as to its dressing in each Episode. Looking back at some of my early research each of the productions I had encountered included some version of Treadwell's window, existing as an obvious impermeable barrier for Young Woman, or a way of framing the outside world. Almeida Theatre's 2018 production in London went so far as to have the window be a mirror that hung over the stage at a slight angle allowing the audience a sort of bird's eye or double view of the action while reflecting the audience into the house. I knew I wanted to
incorporate some form of audience existence in space. The mirror was a good tactic for exploring questions of subject and object, observer and observed, relationships I also wanted to investigate. A revolve would allow me to keep one central location, remove the need for a door, and wrap the window around the playing space as if to form a tube which would trap Helen inside despite a lack of apparent physical barriers. Also, the revolution of the deck would echo the cyclical nature of personal encounters onstage and the inability of Helen to escape her environment. I had the idea to continue this imagery with three tubes suspended over the stage two of which acting as terrariums for manufactured goods presented as natural items in the way of taxidermy heads and curated driftwood. The center tube would replace the electric chair thereby returning Helen to a place of artificial existence; unable to operate within the confines of the machine, she returns unto it. The center tube would also be a sort of sword of Damocles, hanging above Helen’s head foreshadowing her demise.

In trying to follow the progression of artistic styles I looked to visual art and architecture as I was able to find direct influences from one form to the next. My research looked closely at and borrowed from postmodernist and post futurist philosophies and design. For the futuristic setting, I took design cues from the film HER, specifically a YouTube video essay by KaptainKristian entitled “Building a Beautiful Future.” In his video essay, KaptainKristian looks at the ways Spike Jones’s film creates a future that is familiar and optimistic about our relationship with technology and presents an alternative to the more traditional cyber-punk depictions of capitalist futures as found in films such as Ridley Scott’s Bladerunner, or Luc Besson’s Fifth Element. Most useful to my investigation was the essay’s examination of the use of materials in the film which also sought to balance the organic with human-made objects, resulting in the incorporation of wood and foliage with glass and
plastics. It was important that the time frame was believable and recognizable to a modern audience. I was concerned setting the play in a purely technological world similar to Star Trek or similar media would pose a similar problem to presenting the misogynistic, patriarchal themes of the play as a period piece. Combining organic and manufactured materials would also help to ground the play.

An episode of Seth McFarlan’s sci-fi sitcom *The Orville* depicts a planet that operates as a true democracy with one’s worth judged by peers. The episode showed people walking around wearing badges with two arrows, a green one pointing up and a red one pointing down so that during daily interactions your behaviour could be judged on a one to one basis. The amount of social points one gathered directly impacted the way they were able to interact with the world: if a person’s points dropped low enough, they were sent to be “corrected.” I wanted to pull the play out of the 1920s and into the future as an exploration in the relevance of (wo)man versus machine narrative structure. As I found the machine in *Machinal* to be the deeply ingrained social and cultural behaviours we adhere to, this episode of *The Orville* was particularly relevant. I considered the idea of incorporating similar imagery, but decided against it as I felt the function of the buttons would be unnecessarily complicated to communicate to the audience, but the feeling of the world is what persisted. The characters were human, and though the fashion was different, the planet seemed like parallel earth. The idea of a familiar future became the foundation for my exploration into the future setting; one where everything seemed near to our own world, but hid something more sinister in the complacency of the society. In other words, the world didn’t look or feel dangerous, nor did it feel that far from our contemporary culture, and for me, that’s where the terror existed.
CHAPTER FOUR: Execution Through Design

4.1 - PREPRODUCTION

“Typically, the most successful expressionist directors were those who boldly shape the acting to serve their ideas of the scripts, even if those interpretations differed markedly - as they sometimes did - from the stated intentions of the playwrights.”

David F. Kuhns – “German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage”, 18

The biggest challenge I faced going into Machinal was casting. I knew no matter what the cast size I needed a really strong actor to play the role of Young Woman/Helen, someone that was both vulnerable and driven, that was able to take the internal struggle of the character and not be precious about it but instead share it with the audience. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the theme of Young Woman’s frailty persists among most reviews, regardless of actress or production. In his review of the 2014 Broadway production David Cote notes, “Rebecca Hall’s neurotic, trapped Everywoman is neither passive victim of society nor romantic sociopath; we can ascribe her fate to pre-Zoloft, prefeminist limited options” (Time Out New York). I wanted to challenge this perception of Young Woman and see if there were different ways to present her that wouldn’t build sympathy, but rather cultivate empathy for the frustrations of Young Woman.

I feel like the ambiguous nature of Young Woman comes from her existing in a space between being an actualized individual and allegory for the plight of women in two centuries. Following this led me to think about where the power of the play’s message exists, as allegory or a play about an individual? I wrestled with this question as I tried to find the balance between individual and allegory throughout my rehearsal process. I found director Lyndsey Turner’s 2014 Broadway production notes helpful in finding that balance as she identified the stylistic shifting nature of each episode from very Expressionist to almost Naturalism. I began to
conceive of a hyperawareness for Young Woman. Only she could acknowledge the shifts and changes of the machine. Adding the element of Helen/Young Woman being watched, created a voyeuristic paranoia and an atmospheric tension for the character and would make the audience aware of the structure in which they are participating. I discuss my audition and rehearsal process in more detail later in this chapter, as well as the difficulty I faced in finding the balance I wanted in Young Woman.

4.2 - WORKING WITH CREATIVE PARTNERS: SET

I was lucky to have worked with the professional designer, Professor April Viczko, for set, props, and costumes. We started working together with initial design meetings happening at the beginning of September 2018 for the February 2019 performance run. Professor Viczko and I discussed how best to communicate the themes of systemic oppression I was finding in the play and using a future setting to highlight the thematic relevance of *Machinal* a near century after its initial production. I was adamant about removing the play from its 1920’s setting to avoid the play coming across as a period piece. As mentioned earlier, I was watching a good many sci-fi programs and design documentaries that were influencing my thinking about and around futuristic settings and getting me excited about the capabilities of good design. My research into early productions of *Machinal*, and indeed Expressionism, foregrounded the importance of design in establishing an outside world that is reflexive of the antagonist’s internal struggle. Having seen some of Professor Viczko’s work in presentations and seminars I attended in the first year of my MFA, as well as her work on *antigone lives*, primed me a bit for her style and approach to design. In our first meeting, Professor Viczko challenged my concept for the show finding the limits of my arguments about the piece while picking up on reoccurring images
and themes. Through her questioning Professor Viczko exposed the weaker, or unclear points in my concept and revealed the strength of reasoning in other areas such as my proposal for multicasting the character track of George H. Jones/Dick Roe/Judge/Priest. I was grateful for these discussions as much of my thinking and development around the play had been somewhat insular and introspective (aside from the scholars I was engaging with through various essays and book chapters). Meeting with Professor Viczko provided a reassurance that what I was pursuing made sense and could be executed well onstage. Major focuses from these early meetings were how to depict the negotiation between organic and inorganic materials, systemic misogyny, and the use of what we deemed sexy modern design aesthetics to build the nondescript future setting, the inclusion of technologically suggestive props, and the revolve.

All my early concepts for the play involved a revolving surface as the main play space to signify Young Woman’s circular existence which was the most significant design element to conquer. There were many financial and logistical questions surrounding its inclusion. Though April was confident that the school had access to a revolve through Alberta Theatre Projects, transport, assembly, and technical constraints were the most prominent concerns brought forward. Artistically there were several points of consideration brought to my attention: traditionally revolves are not used in the round as the seating provides the encompassing sightlines for audience members, and the constant motion would both generate some noise and ran the risk of making the audience dizzy. While issues with noise pollution would prove to be a recurring theme throughout the production process, the use of constant movement was paramount to my exploration of Young Woman/Helen’s journey. The side effect of the audience becoming dizzy or nauseous felt to me like an extension and amalgam of both German and American approaches to Expressionism. The moving floor would create a feeling in the audience
that paralleled that of the protagonist clearly indicating her struggle to find rest and causing the audience to long for their rest only to be released from the motion at the same moment Helen is, her death.

Despite early logistical reservations, April was onboard to explore the use of the revolve. Early iterations of the design and audience configuration resembled a nineteenth or twentieth-century operating theatre, with an elevated first row and deep raked seating creating a bowl effect which played into my ideas of the audience as an active observer within the world of the play. We wanted to incorporate recurring themes in the design that reflected the circular, episodic nature of the play: the “bowl” seating was a direct reflection of the bowl that contained the flowering lily that is in both Episodes Six and Eight. Our original height and depth of seating changed over the development process to its final state after logistic conversations about sightlines, materials, and audience accessibility. The influence of shape, however, remained with the audience in a curved alley configuration to emphasize the shape of the revolve, reflected the terrarium tubes hanging from the ceiling, which also mirrored the death machine hanging at the center.

Once we generated some ideas around the general shape of our space and the more significant elements the conversation shifted to style and materials. For the future aesthetic, Professor Viczko suggested a minimalist design. Incorporating my desire to include visibly manufactured material against natural elements, we decided the main deck would be painted to look like polished marble, with the ramp constructed out of OSB or chipboard. To continue the design throughout the space LEDs would be placed on the interior facing of the ramp, the facing of the audience risers, and on the walls of the exit passageways. I wanted to see how far I could extend the commentary of the show as a play that presents destructive patriarchal social
structures. Engaging with my desire to create an atmosphere for the play that extends into the audience as an exploration of audience interactions with space, Professor Viczko and I discussed the possibility dividing the audience into male seating and one as female seating sections with signs. I was curious to see if anyone would notice and participate and if by reinforcing these social constructs, would the audience reflect on them and hopefully even examine them.

Figure 4 - Initial set sketch
Figure 5 - Initial set sketch, top view

Early set drawings show the initial design of ramp and revolve as two nested pieces with the ramp remaining stationary as the interior revolve spun, see Figures four and five.

4.3 – WORKING WITH CREATIVE PARTNERS: COSTUMES AND PROPS

The props and costume design part of our meetings took up a substantial amount of time in our discussions, partially due to both of Professor Viczko’s and my mutual appreciation for fashion and how essential costumes would be for setting the action of the play out of time. Fashion and technology are clear social, temporal, and cultural indicators. Our set design embraced the minimalist philosophies of postmodern architecture and modern commercial
design trends. With the key elements of the set established our goal became to create more distinctive otherworldly looks with our costumes.

Professor Viczko and I discussed the cyclical nature of fashion and how within the past three decades we have seen the re-emergence of trends in colour, shape, and texture and the boom of upcycled clothing that has created a culture of amalgamated fashions. Imagining where these trends might go in the next two decades, we looked at current trends and searched for commonalities from the past. What we settled on was taking texture, patterns, and lines from various eras and pairing them with modern silhouettes. Conversations became a matter of what would count as business attire versus casual wear. Costume became an essential signifier of Young Woman’s disconnect from her surrounding world. The idea became to dress the ensemble in a high fashion style, with Young Woman in a previous season’s sale item. Her costume was meant to be entirely functional. Most of the costumes were a buy or pull from stock, Young Woman’s costume was a custom build. The fabric flowed nicely but was coarse to the touch. The pattern was deep purple colour with white blocks throughout it. The purple felt like a nicely saturated colour but was not too bold, and the print of the fabric looked like the windows of city buildings. I was adamant about using this pattern as I felt it was indicative of the impact the city/environment/machine has on her body from the moment she enters.

I wanted the props to be as suggestive and straightforward as possible while still having a grounding in real-world utility and functionality. For this, I looked at market trends and predictions in personal technologies from the past decade and noticed a shift in the way we use devices in our daily lives. I worked in mobile phone retail and communication solutions for commercial business for several years and saw the impact that technology has on our daily lives, with devices changing based on their use, e.g. cellphones getting smaller while touchscreen
interfaces get more massive, people carrying around a smartphone, tablet, and laptop despite their functionality being near identical. There is a tactile response to function so Professor Viczko and I discussed how the world might evolve and settled on the idea of a different piece of tech for each task and using a goggle set up as an interface. For the cast, this translated to an augmented reality scenario in which the glasses were the unifying factor amongst devices.

One design element Professor Viczko and I briefly discussed was the inclusion of video projection as a way of getting the movement I desired onstage. The integration of video technologies also would have shifted the play from the mechanized industrial setting of the early twentieth century, into the digital era of the twenty-first century. However, after further consideration, I opted for the contrast of the mechanical versus the technological as it seemed to parallel the outdated social norms and conventions that are antiquated amongst digital technologies and ways of thinking. Also, knowing the capabilities of the equipment available in the theatre from my work as a technician with University Services and my involvement with *antigone lives*, I didn’t think it would be possible to get the elements to a place where they felt seamlessly integrated. I was also concerned about the amount of time in our technical rehearsals that adjustments would require. It was important to me to have the time, space, and technology available to work on seamless integration of technologies, or at least explore the capabilities/possibilities for integration. I do think that there is a version of this show that exists in that realm. I would love to explore what that looks like and push the barrier between the mechanical and digital parallels, but that would include a deeper understanding of tech, language, and the time to explore how projection design would impact the conversation in *Machinal*. 
4.4 – WORKING WITH CREATIVE PARTNERS: SOUND

“Proponents of expressionist culture believed that the industrial rhythms of modernization had thrown the body's natural rhythms out of alignment … only by learning to re

coordinate the three languages of the body, could one overcome the spiritual

alienation caused by maternity.”

Julia A. Walker, “Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre:

Bodies, Voices, Words”, 276

Technically, the sound was the biggest obstacle of the production for two reasons: first, I was without a sound designer until halfway through my rehearsal process; second, as the revolve was built and explored, the greater the concern about sound pollution from the motor and the wheels drowning out the actors. Despite these challenges, I pressed forward in hopes that sonically the show would work the way I conceived. In my research on Expressionism, the sound was rarely written about or discussed beyond the use of the human voice. The stylistic atmosphere was attributed more to set and lighting elements, with the exception being William E. Gruber’s arguments for Brecht’s Epic theatre as an off-shoot of Expressionism and Brecht’s use of song as a mode for alienation. Therefore, the absence of a precedent for the use of sound to create an Expressionistic atmosphere left the playing field wide open for me. Complications hiring a sound designer meant this element did not get explored until very late in the process. In advance of rehearsal, I created a playlist with over five hours of music from Nine Inch Nails, Portishead, Massive Attack and several other ambient bands which eventually became part of the score in the final production. I had three particular goals/ideas for our soundscape. I wanted to use a room tone to create tension in the atmosphere, generate sound from the audience to assist
with the deconstruction of the fourth wall during critical moments of action and find something that would work as a piece for what Treadwell dubbed a “negro spiritual” in the prison scene of Episode Nine. In pursuit of my goals negotiating the production challenges of sound would become the most difficult technical aspect to settle.

While rehearsing for *antigone lives* in the fall of 2018 in the Reeve theatre, one of the common struggles was competing with the air handling unit that would buzz and hum throughout rehearsal. The tonal shift in the room that came after the unit had shut off and our ears readjusted to the space. It is a common problem that I have encountered in many performance spaces I have worked in and as I began to think about how that sound impacted my body and the tension release that occurred with the sound shift. I started to wonder how I could recreate this feeling in *Machinal*. In 2013, Smithsonian.com published an article entitled “Earth’s Quietest Place Will Drive You Crazy in 45 Minutes” about an anechoic chamber in Minnesota dubbed “the quietest place on Earth” discussing the unnerving quality of a room without room tone. Room tone is the ambient sound that our ears naturally tune out to allow for better hearing of primary sounds. The question for me became, could I use sound to create the illusion of the air being sucked out of the room? Furthermore, how could the concerns about the revolve be addressed? Any solutions I was able to come up with were only theoretical until the sound designer came on board.

One of my challenges was the integration of speakers into the house that would generate mechanical and digital sounds expanding the world of the show into the audience. The idea was, during specific moments where Young Woman is entering her fractured state or becomes aware of the fact that she is being watched the fourth wall would disappear amid ringtones and vibrations from the audience. The additional sound elements combined with a slight bump up in the house lights would have a doubling effect as the audience too would become aware of each
other’s presence in the room. I wanted the shift from audience to voyeur in these moments to create the sensation of a mock bystander effect, the social phenomenon in which people are less likely to respond to someone in duress in a large group. This audio, lighting combo effect was a major convention in the world of *Machinal* as Young Woman found herself crying out for help to a room full of strangers that were sitting and watching her, periodically disappearing into the dark.

4.5 – WORKING WITH CREATIVE PARTNERS: LIGHTING

Lighting was a crucial factor in the design of the 1928 production and often hailed as the defining element of Expressionist design in America. Arthur Hopkin’s stylistic intentions were clear from the outset of production, stating in a 1928 New York Times interview that his staging of *Machinal* “will seek to liberate the stage from the confinement of box sets and give greater scope to lighting.” New York Times theatre critic J. Brooks Atkinson validated Hopkin’s efforts describing the production as a “strangely moving, shadowy drama” that was “fraught with beauty, unfamiliar to the stage” (1928). I appreciated this idea of the shadowy drama and spoke to Mr. Reid about how to achieve the feeling of being inside of Young Woman’s head shifting between a dream and nightmare state.

Mr. Reid had two significant challenges ahead of him: first the action was set on a moving platform making it challenging to create pinpointed specials or isolated looks; second, the depth of angle created by the seating arrangement meant that we were looking at having a lot of top light to prevent catching the audience in the face and blinding them. Despite the challenges, Mr. Reid managed to create distinct looks that spoke to the action of the show, creating fractured lighting states to reflect Young Woman’s mental space, subtle shifts from
episode to episode and deep colour saturation. Mr. Reid was able to make these challenges work to his advantage choosing gobos that caught characters onstage in moments of light, and bumping levels highlighting the scenes as Young Woman interacted with space.

4.6 – AUDITION PROCESS AND ASPIRATIONS

When considering casting, I was immediately faced with some difficult choices. The original script calls for a cast of thirty-three which logistically was problematic. Attempting to have a cast that size was unrealistic and needed to aim for a smaller cast as the challenge of managing that many students for a thesis project would be a challenging undertaking. Auditions for previous projects allowed me to see the growth and development of the undergraduate body over the first year of my MFA, but a poor track record of audition attendance was a worry. Early conceptual approaches regarding the exploration of reoccurring faces to exemplify ingrained social norms and patriarchal oppression, led to the idea of multicast tracks, thereby emphasizing the reappearance of actors playing different characters with the only single role being that of Young Woman. I was able to take an original cast of thirty-three down to ten actors. The only thing more difficult than casting Helen was figuring out who to cast for the track of George H. Jones/Dick Roe/Judge/Priest as I needed someone versatile and dynamic to pull the changes off. These two actors would need to be competent enough to carry a ninety-minute show and be able to have the chemistry required for all the distinct character interactions.

I was intrigued by the parallels between George H. Jones, Dick Roe, Judge, and the Priest. These four central male figures represented to me the misogynist commentary of the piece, with Jones representing the social expectation of marriage and motherhood, Roe being the objectification of women, with Judge and Priest being the patriarchal, judicial and Judeo-
Christian backdrops, respectively. The more I read through the play, the more I started to see that no matter where Young Woman turned, be it her husband for financial liberty, her lover for physical freedom, the judge for legal freedom, or the priest for spiritual freedom, none were concerned about her voice or autonomy, and therefore all were perpetuating the same destructive cycle. The idea of Young Woman visibly caught in a destructive cycle is what led to casting all four characters as the same actor, thereby reinforcing the illusion of freedom and commenting on the deeply ingrained social behaviours that contribute to the perpetuation of sexist ideals and practices. This repetition of form and figure reappearing throughout Young Woman’s life also fit within the structures of Expressionism where she would essentially be forced to encounter the same figure in multiple scenarios creating a cyclical journey that would be echoed in shape by the set. The extension of the idea prompted me to see what other character tracks I could double up on, which created the atmosphere of a nightmare for Young Woman where she keeps encountering the same people over and over. The challenge of casting then became finding actors capable of portraying dynamic characters.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that more than sixty students had signed up for auditions, the majority of which were lower year undergrads. Primary auditions consisted of two monologues and small pieces of direction to gauge impulse and flexibility. Had I not already conceived of my multicasting idea, I would likely have been able to cast the entire show from this set of auditions as almost half went on to callbacks.

Original inceptions of the play contained intensely stylized physical movement to address the externalizing of tension within the dramatic action of the play. My research brought me to Delsarte’s System of Bodily Expression, Bogart’s Viewpoints, and Laban’s Movement Analysis to create dynamic and specific physical language. It was essential to establish any auditioning
actor’s body and spatial awareness. To achieve this, I enlisted Professor Val Campbell to assist with callback auditions. Professor Campbell took the first hour and a half to facilitate the exploration of the ensemble through Viewpoint work. Professor Campbell’s work was immensely helpful in the decision process as I was able not only to see how the actors responded to one another in space, but also gauge their physical spatial awareness, familiarity with Viewpoints, and picture how the performers would translate visually onstage.

After the physical work we went into a group call back in which actors were partnered to read scenes together. This method of call backs generates a level of healthy competition in the room with auditionees able to see the choices made by others in the audition and make their own choices accordingly. As the evening progressed, I released people until I was left with three actors, one male, and two females attempting to sort out who would be my leads based on chemistry, versatility, and visual balance onstage.

In the days following the audition, I was confronted with two significant challenges that would lead me to call into question my values as a director. The first challenge was a sense of departmental pressure to cast upper year actors, as there had been several who had auditioned that were on track to graduate and had yet to be featured in a mainstage production. The issue was not one of ability, but that there was a great deal of potential in some of the younger actors that had auditioned from outside the drama department and I was inclined to give them an opportunity. The choice came down to experience over potential; thinking about the amount of time I would have to invest teaching the theoretical and physical forms working with actors who had encountered these ideas and practices in classes would undoubtedly expedite the rehearsal process. The suggestion that upper-year actors would have access to faculty that would be beneficial to them for outside rehearsal development also helped my decision. The additional
support proved helpful for Young Woman who would book a time to explore various modes of physical exploration with Professor Val Campbell as rehearsals progressed. The only first-year student I had in the cast was a result of an actor declining their role and having to reconfigure my casting with the people available. Additional benefits to casting upper years actors was that I had the opportunity to work with several of them on previous projects. The advantage was that we were familiar with each other’s style of work and I knew I could direct them and what I would be able to achieve from them.

The second and more difficult challenge I confronted was despite my outspoken desire to be inclusive in my work, my cast was all Caucasian. This fault was my own as I had inadvertently not cast anyone of colour. The most upsetting component was that I had not realized this until I had already sent out casting offers, and I had to readdress my casting tracks after losing an actor. Upon realizing what had transpired, I wanted to rescind my offers and return to the drawing board, but that felt unfair to those who had been cast and meant that I would have to entirely restructure my casting. This has been a point of personal reflection: I had a clear opportunity to exercise my desire for onstage diversity and representation and I failed. But this realization has reinvigorated my desire to be inclusive in my practice and will serve as a reminder for future productions.

4.7– REHEARSAL PROCESS DESIGN

My first approaches to the rehearsal process felt ambitious. I wanted to use a combination of Laban, Bogart, and Delsarte movement systems to create an onstage vocabulary akin to German Expressionist theatre. Using a Viewpoints approach, I envisioned the stage as a grid, which I referred to as a circuit board to create specific movement tracks for each character with Young
Woman being the only one allowed to move freely on the board. I wanted this physicality to mirror the tension of the show providing the illusion of freedom and opposition to the mechanical structure of the world. Delsarte would provide striking postures filled with emotional resonance carved in space, allowing for an exploration of negative space and stillness; while Laban’s work would allow for scaffolding of precise movement exploration to help develop and externalize character work.

As a director, I have been working to develop a way of communicating in rehearsal as effectively as possible to achieve performance outcomes from the actors, while still allowing space for discourse and actor engagement. Developing my communication practices has proved challenging as my default approach to working with actors has been to facilitate discovery. Part of the difficulty was working with young actors who are still developing and discovering their praxis. Asking questions about the material can only yield so much when also teaching acting fundamentals and dealing with self-conscious performers. It also takes up a considerable amount of time to get answers and choices that are motivated by the text and the concept of the piece. The alternative it appears is more akin to treating actors like Gordon Craig’s Ubermarionette, which takes away agency from the actor and treats them as an instrument more than a collaborator. Trying to find balance in approaches I have been experimenting with what I call Zen Directing: the ability to go with the flow of the room and process. What this means is allowing time and space for discovery and connection to both text and fellow performers. Zen Directing is also an exercise in how to give clear and concise direction that articulates what a scene needs, or where the piece needs to go without directing something to death. The only way that I have been able to achieve this is through a complete understanding of the material I am
directing so that any notes I give are specific and serve the vision of the piece. In practice, I have found success in the application of verbing/actioning and imaging.

A recent addition to my approach came from Siobhan Richardson’s Intimacy Director’s workshop. In the workshop, Richardson introduced the concept of “perfectly responsive, not perfectly repeatable” (November 2018), for addressing choreography. What this means is creating space for scene partners, allowing for necessary adjustments in response to unknown factors. In terms of violence and intimacy choreography, it requires awareness of movement restrictions either personal or as a result of obstructions, injuries, sensitivities, etc. Applied to my directing praxis, responsive, not repeatable is not freedom from the text, blocking, or character work, but is meant as an invitation to be open to discovery to promote listening and authentic responses onstage. Responsive, not repeatable thinking would be applied to rehearsals of *Machinal* to encourage connectivity to partners and text work to prevent anyone from locking into an acting choice too soon in the process. Combined with actioning, or verbing, I was able to explore with the actors a depth of active decisions motivated by connections with scene partners.

I encountered actioning, or what some people describe as verbing, the process of giving an actor an action to play, through my studio work with Professor Christine Brubaker. Her approach was a departure from my usual way of working, which was to engage with an actor’s feelings. Feelings in their reproduction on the stage are false and disconnected from the action on stage, but playing the action of a line clarifies the intention created clear tactics for approaching text and partner work. The scene becomes about the other person who leaves room for a genuine response. Through the inclusion of Laban technique, I was able to craft a series of specific physical movements and gestures attached to active verbs. In working with Siobhan Richardson of Intimacy Directors International, I found an interesting correlation between intimacy directing
practices and the use of verbing, specifically the ‘perfectly responsive not perfectly repeatable’ (Richardson, 2018) approach. The application of verbs as motivation for text combined with the idea of responsiveness allows for genuine or authentic interaction on stage creating space for discoveries. I found imaging to be helpful when working with student actors as well as it provided an opportunity to extend the world of action beyond themselves.

Another substantial challenge in my work with the undergraduate student body was the limited amount of rehearsal. Despite my streamlined cast size, there was a great deal to tackle in rehearsals. In dealing with a style piece, it is essential to ensure the actors have a clear understanding of the conventions of the Expressionistic genre, or at least my interpretation of this genre. Similarly, when incorporating new acting technique, such as verbing, or movement languages such as Laban and Viewpoints, I knew that there would be a learning curve as some students would have encountered this work through various acting classes, but the application within an Expressionist framework would take time. What this translates to is thirty-six hours of rehearsal a week (minus breaks) to direct, teach Expressionism, and movement to the cast.

The short rehearsal period was one of several anticipated challenges of working within the university structure. While the university provided access to actors, professional designers, and entire departments for props and wardrobe, it was abundantly clear that while my thesis show would get a certain amount of attention from the faculty and undergraduate community, it was not the only priority of my collaborators. It would not have been mine had I not loaded my schedule in such a way that freed me to focus exclusively on Machinal during the rehearsal process. I knew student actors would be juggling rehearsal hours with classes and employment, and the designers would have obligations not only as staff and faculty members but as professional designers working on outside projects. Outside obligations were less of a concern
from a design perspective as the creative team undoubtedly had experience performing various roles around mainstage productions at the university, but casting students represented an unknown factor. The university structure provided support from and access to the dedicated creative departments mentioned while at the same time represented a system I was not used to working in. I found there were specific channels and modes of acquisition that had to be adhered to. My experience directing independent theatre created a guerilla or pirate theatre philosophy of obtaining and/or building materials for productions myself lending to a sense of control of the final vision of the pieces I would work on. Even my pre-thesis show, due to its position in a larger festival, and the assignment of student designers allowed me to be hands-on in the creative process, investing in, acquiring, and transporting a wrestling ring from Edmonton myself for use in the show. I knew with the focus given to my thesis production as a singular event that this sort of involvement would be less likely which required a thorough understanding of the concept to articulate precisely what I envisioned and allow space for input and creative license.

Given our timeline and the density of the material, I wanted to set my actors up for success at every avenue possible. I scheduled a read through of the script a month before official rehearsals started. At the read-through, the actors were given an overview of the concept I was investigating and a rough design intro on set and costumes. The goal was to provide the cast with an idea of where the play lived and over winter break start exploring Expressionism and Laban while learning their lines without prescribing character traits in hopes that this would alleviate some of the time required in the rehearsal room. My plan was not as successful as I had hoped. Not only were the majority of actors unfamiliar with their lines when we reconvened in January, but many had decided on character choices that were misaligned with both the style of the play and the communicated concept. The result meant that time I had wanted to dedicate to building,
instead went to unlearning and tweaking the choices that were brought forward. It also led to
tension in rehearsal as there was a clear divide between those who were actively working on
getting off book and those who weren’t when the designated off-book date arrived.

The script presented a fair share of challenges above and beyond the stylistic elements. *Machinal* included several uses of racial slurs directed at Latin, Italian, Indigenous and African Americans, which I knew would be challenging given the makeup of the student body, and my position as a white male director. While the language was difficult, I felt it was an essential piece of the play as it added to the commentary of the experiential disconnect and who is excluded when subscribing to patriarchal social structures. This extended commentary is most apparent in Episode Nine in which during the reading of Young Woman’s last rites Treadwell calls for a “Negro Spiritual” to be heard from off stage only to be silenced by the Jailer exclamation to “Stop that nigger yelling” (78). Julia A. Walker suggests that “[a]lthough she seeks spiritual freedom by identifying with the Negro’s song, she is disciplined back into her position of subjugation by the priest” (233). The identification of a mutual struggle and subjection within white patriarchal social structures that Treadwell was exploring persists throughout the play. Treadwell’s inclusion of this comparison, however problematic, was one that I found interesting as issues surrounding gender, and racial oppression are incredibly relevant in our modern society.

Along with issues around language, my position as director also required sensitivity in my approach to the rehearsal room. *Machinal* not only calls for Young Woman to be executed at the end of the play, but there are two scenes in which the protagonist is found in her undergarments, one of which containing moments of post-coital physical intimacy between her and her lover. On a practical level, it was essential to present these moments as authentically as
possible while maintaining the security and dignity of the actors involved. Holly Derr’s Feminist theatre principles provided a framework for me to communicate in rehearsals my position as a Feminist and ally. Using the communication tools Derr outlines I encouraged honest investigation of themes in the play and discussed how best to present these moments authentically making sure that moments of vulnerability were conceived of without influence of my male gaze. Treadwell disrupts Expressionist convention by placing a woman as the central figure of her play, I wanted to continue that disruption and not reinforce the very structures I was critiquing.

The shift of female character from object to subject is contained within the text, more challenging to navigate was Derr’s assertion that “[i]n order for the audience to see the world from their point of view, women characters have to act rather than simply be acted upon” (2016). The idea of Young Woman acting is hard to achieve as she is presented as a victim of the machine she exists within. Activating Helen/Young Woman meant attempting to highlight specific moments of the disconnect between male and female perceptions through the play. The difference in perception is clearest in Episodes Three, Four, and Seven. I positioned George H. Jones not as malicious, but as oblivious to the needs and emotional state of Young Woman. From a praxis standpoint, I found the tools that came out of the workshop I attended with Intimacy Directors International helped provide language and tactics to creating a professional atmosphere for both physical and emotional vulnerability. Having a rehearsal team comprised predominantly of women was also helpful as I was able to rely on them for input and feedback as to how moments were reading.

With rehearsals set to start in January of 2019, I made sure to acquire a tentative rehearsal template from the production manager and meet with my stage manager to discuss goals and
timeline. Working backward from our performances we scheduled our entire production run leaving flex days for clean up and addressing any unforeseen difficulties. The scope of the production was large and strict rehearsal planning was paramount to our success. My stage manager and I worked the schedule out so that by the end of our second of seven weeks of rehearsal we would have touched on each episode of the play twice. Four-hour days were dedicated to an hour working exclusively with Young Woman on monologues with the remainder of the time split between two episodes. Weekend rehearsals consisted of one eight-hour day reserved for reviewing the week’s work and running groups of scenes together where possible to establish flow and address transitions. I knew I wanted the transitions to be carried out by the actors to create the image of the world changing around Young Woman, thrusting her from one episode to the next which articulated her struggle to keep find footing in the mechanical world. With the moving revolve still in play it was vital that we dedicate time to the exploration of transitions as it would require actors to enter and exit a moving surface.

I wanted to use a circular deck and not having the revolve in the rehearsal room for these explorations, meant we needed to create points of reference for onstage action. To accommodate the lack of a moving surface, we established a clockface for movement. The stage managers table was placed in the rehearsal room where the booth would be in the performance hall and was set as our twelve o’clock. From there the revolve surface was taped out on the floor complete with ramp and one foot by one-foot grid pattern that would serve not only as a visual anchor point for the performers in terms of blocking and placement but would become the early track for viewpoint exploration. Using the step side of our ramp as our minute hand meant that we could theoretically track the positioning of the open side of the revolve for entrances and exits.
Rehearsal routinely started with an exercise to promote collaboration, ensemble, focus, and intention. In pursuit of these objectives I incorporated a variety of Jillian Kiley’s exercises as learned through my time working with Professor Brubaker: exercises such as Kiley’s you and me both for ensemble building and Brubaker’s this is a fork for intention work. As the rehearsal process continued, I began to incorporate a game of word association prompted by tossing a ball around the room meant to engage instincts and active listening. I would then transition into physical exploration using Ann Bogart’s Viewpoints to explore special awareness and kinesthetic response. Laban technique was incorporated with image work, which is creating an image in the mind’s eye, receiving it into the body and allowing it to affect not only movement, but how one perceives the world around them. The exercise allows actors to explore where image and physical gesture manifest in the body and how it is then outwardly expressed. Image work was crucial to the exploration of Expressionism as it created an internal sensation via an image that an actor could relocate and manifest physically leading to specific movement language that could be accessed and utilized depending on the character and episode combination. Image work was also important as much the world we created in the play was non-existent and communicated only using plexiglass tablets and safety goggles. The focus on image work created an extended world within the world of the play crucial to the believability for our nondescript future setting. The incorporation of movement and image is best executed in the office in Episode one with the entire office engaging with digital imagery accessed through their tablets and using their engagement with this world to propel them through space.

Once the actors were physically engaged, we would read through the scene locating the intentions and arguments for each character and addressing any questions the cast might have. I then used Professor Brubaker’s technique of lifting off, a process whereby an actor takes their
time with their lines taking a small portion at a time in their mind, lifting their eyes from the page and delivering said portion to their scene partner. This process continues until all the text of one character has been said piece by piece. Their partner responds with their line. Lifting off proved incredibly helpful as my initial idea of providing the scripts ahead of the rehearsal process proved unsuccessful and yielded some character choices that needed to be examined. Taking time with the script allowed the actors to become familiar with the text from a memorization standpoint and created space to discover the intention of lines and to whom they were speaking. The practice of lifting off also meant that I could employ some breath coaching encouraging each piece of text to be delivered on a new full breath. My hope was that breath work would help ground intention and allow for the vocal power necessary for projection.

Along with movement, image, and text exploration, intimacy work became a significant focus of later rehearsals. Episode Three required Young Woman to undress at the request of her husband in anticipation of consummating their marriage. Episode Six finds Young Woman in bed with her lover the evening of her affair. These two scenes give unbridled access to Young Woman seeing her at her most vulnerable points: the first an object; the second as agent. The pursuit of her affair in Episode Six signals her shift towards autonomy and is the first time the audience encounters Young Woman/Helen as herself, without the restrictions the world of the play has placed on her. I was optimistic about my ability to address and choreograph intimacy following the Banff Centre workshop I attended in the fall. Unfortunately, the difference between a room full of professional artists interested in exploring approaches to intimacy and undergraduate students doing a play accounted for some difficulties resulting in more time being devoted to the choreography than initially anticipated. It took quite a bit of time for the actors to find their comfort and even then, they were plagued by insecurity either their own or from their
significant others, resulting in stiff choreography instead of connected moments of physical intimacy. The actors were uncomfortable and unsure. Despite these efforts, Episode Six never got to where I wanted it to a moment of pure post-coital bliss, but I do believe it was the result of a lack of comfort and life experience from young performers.

I cast my lead actor because she exhibited qualities that resembled the ones I found when reading the character of Young Woman. She had an Everywoman quality that was simultaneously believable in the 1920s and today. When rehearsals began the actors were exhibiting a limited range of expression, a layer of affectation, and an inability to make a range of choices. I had seen flexibility in her audition and thought that through a combination of movement and intention, she would shed her posturing. I asked Professor Val Campbell to explore unlocking her lower body in hopes to find some grounding and emotional resonance. The difficulty in connecting actors to their choices was made more complicated as an actor I had cast declined her role in the play. This actor was one of the stronger ones in the department. I had worked with the actor that declined in previous as an actor and had wanted to work with her as a director. She was a contender for the lead role, but as she was the more versatile of the two actors up for Young Woman, I felt it would be better to cast her in multiple roles as I was having difficulty finding actors capable of presenting diverse characters. I also felt the multi-cast track would be an excellent challenge for and a showcase for this actor ability, and that her mainstage experience amongst the undergraduate community would make her a rehearsal leader requiring everyone else on stage to meet her level of professionalism. The actor in question was disappointed not to be cast as the lead and felt her time would be better spent pursuing other endeavors. I was already conscious of my casting and as we got deeper into our rehearsals, and Young Woman was displaying inconsistencies in her work, I worried that I had made the wrong
decision. Thankfully work in the choreography of Episode Three, and feedback from my AD and SM led to a discovery in a rehearsal of Episode One providing a solution that would carry forward to the performance.

As rehearsal progressed, the revolve remained a consistent worry due to issues of noise pollution and mechanical problems throughout the build and rehearsal process. As the movement was central to my conception of the show, I preferred to remain optimistic that these issues would be solved and continued with my staging.

My stage management team and assistant director became an indispensable part of the rehearsal process. I relied on them heavily to check my position as a man talking about systemic pressure against women, particularly when it came to discussing scenes of intimacy and partial nudity. My team was candid with me both about my approach and outlook on the play, how it was tracking and being received by the audience, as well as communicating with me complications that arose in, or as a result of rehearsal.

4.8 – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR AND STAGE MANAGER

I was hesitant to take on an assistant director on this project because I was unsure of how I would use one. The situation was also complicated by the fact that I had been approached by several undergraduate students interested in being my assistant. I was familiar with the student that was ultimately selected by the department having seen their work before and did not think our styles would mesh well together. Every director I had worked with as an assistant proved to be a very different experience; As an assistant I had sat silently watching. With others I had taken notes from the director verbatim. Still with others, I had rehearsed characters and scenes. I wanted to make sure that the experience was a valuable learning opportunity for my assistant
director. I made sure to carve out time at the end of each rehearsal to chat with her and address any questions she had about my process and approach to the play. She proved invaluable taking notes throughout rehearsals on the feedback I was giving to actors and ideas that were generated in the room. Having access to the documents my assistant director was creating allowed me to cross reference my notes and goals for rehearsal against what was accomplished keeping me honest with my use of time and conceptual pursuits.

Having strong female voices on my creative team, specifically my stage manager and assistant director was vital for intimacy rehearsals which can be vulnerable for veteran performers, let alone students. Outside of relying on my creative team to help address any issues of comfortability they also provided perspective as I approached the development of the story through choreography. In Episode Three, titled Honeymoon, George H. Jones makes several attempts to initiate the consummation of the marriage, which has happened off stage between scenes. Young Woman is reluctant as she feels uncomfortable in her new role as a wife. I wanted to avoid depictions of George H. Jones as malicious in his pursuits of Helen, instead opting for an obliviousness which I felt could be equally as damaging and would help to create a split in the audience as to the negative impact of George’s actions. I was attempting to create intimately physical gestures for George that would read as uncomfortable and even creepy, but not violent or aggressive, essentially things that would be welcome from a wanted lover or partner to do, but not for a stranger, or someone that doesn’t have permission. My stage manager and assistant would give me feedback as to what moves were reading correctly and how to adjust them for resonance in the audience.

It was on break when talking to my AD and SM about my frustration trying to find the vulnerability when the AD referenced the work we had done in Episode Three and how the lead
actor was able to be vulnerable and still fight for her objectives. Episode One takes place in the office of George H. Jones and sets the pace of the play which was crucial to set the tone of the rest of the show. After issues balancing the emotional connectivity and authenticity against the machine-like efficiency, I wanted resulted in very affected responses from Young Woman I was at a loss. The office workers felt very combative, and as a result, Young Woman came off as snappy and defensive. I was worried that this tone would shut the audience down from listening and that it would lay the groundwork for a whole show about people bickering with one another. When we returned to Episode One after the break I started asking the questions, “Who is the play/scene about?” and “Who are you talking to?” I thought it would be an interesting experiment as we ran through the scene to touch base with each character and ask who the scene was about; inevitably the answer would be Young Woman, but I shifted their focus to think the scene was about themselves. That shift in thinking, combined with a focus on the idea of efficiency created a powerful motor for the scene resulting in each person onstage serving a specific purpose, the introduction of Helen/Young Woman then disrupting the flow. Even with her introduction, we focused on the idea that no one was ever speaking directly to her. What this did was created a feeling of erasure in Young Woman as she was being talked at instead of talked to, giving her a very real hurdle to attempt to overcome and creating a lovely juxtaposition in Episodes Five and Six when Young Woman is finally spoken to. This new layer felt counter-intuitive to initiate in rehearsal but encapsulated the sorts of behavior I was hoping to critique: the act of objectification and dehumanizing of Young Woman within the machine.

4.9 – REHEARSAL SET AND PROPS
Despite initial concerns, I was pleased to have been able to participate in the construction of the set, prop and costume pieces. In addition to building and painting the hanging tubes, dressing the tablets, paper props, I was also the inspiration for several costume looks. Professor Viczko commented during a design presentation that when developing the costumes for the show she just asked herself what I would wear and selected items from there. Beyond my choices around Young Woman’s dress, I was also able to curate some of the ensemble outfits with Professor Viczko being open to my presence and input. Working in independent and semi-professional theatre as a director, actor, technician, and builder has shaped my process and approach to theatre-making, not just in the applied philosophy of a Gesamtkunstwerk, but in understanding the tangible limits of the world of the play. Knowing the size and feel of the set and prop pieces, or the what fabric feel like on the and colour palettes they create in relation to one another allow me to be a better director as I am more familiar with how items will respond in the presence of live bodies. Doing the hands-on work is also cathartic and inspiring. I often found myself in the build shops when I was having a thought blockage or was overthinking the about play. Allowing myself the space to focus on a singular, or series of finite tasks contributing to the actualization of the show provided grounding and a sense of accomplishment. I also think it is essential to be involved in the process, which admittedly becomes more difficult in union houses, but for all the close work with designers, I found crawling on the floor assembling the tubes, painting, or applying hundreds of eye screws with the crew a tremendous motivational measure.

4.10 - REHEARSAL SOUND
After several weeks of rehearsal, speculative sound design, and building rough playlists we were assigned a sound designer. It was helpful to have the designer in the room, but their late arrival gave only about two weeks until tech week. To make matters more complicated, our designer was a student that only recently completed a course in sound design. The absence of a designer had me worried and meant that I started to design many of the elements myself. In pursuit of my original goal of using sound to build to a final moment of the air escaping the room, I investigated a variety of ambient sounds to layer into the underscoring of the show: from cars driving in rain to cityscapes. Everything I found sounded too atmospheric and/or instrumental. The difficulty was finding something that was consistent, yet unrecognizable to allow it to become part of the sonic landscape almost immediately. To achieve tone I wanted, I turned to Jocelyn Bell’s 1967 pulsar recording titled “Little Green Men 01” a recording of a pulsar, a star collapsing in on itself that she recorded as a graduate student at Cambridge University. “LGM-01” is perhaps most recognizable, not from its sound, but from its waveform, which became the famous cover of Joy Division’s 1979 album Unknown Pleasures. The pulsar recording sounded like a heartbeat from ultrasound, and the paralleling of a dying star echoed nicely the imagery and tone I was going for in the piece.

I hoped that creating an underscore present during the entire show would help with noise issues from the revolve, folding the rumbling into the underscoring and elevating the last image of the play. I wanted to snap the underscoring out and halt the revolve with a blackout at the height of the execution leaving the audience in a blackout of lights and sound as the final image. In tech rehearsals, we were getting the desired effect, but the problem of noise pollution from the revolve was still proving to be an issue.
I also hoped that getting a sound designer would alleviate some of the sound stresses of the production, but I found it resulted in different challenges. It was an awkward position to be in, coming in late to production with little understanding of what we were attempting to achieve and only slightly more knowledge than that of what the job entailed. Our onstage tech days for level sets ended up devoted to the building of cues which pushed our timeline back significantly. Thankfully there was departmental support from Luke Dahlgren who acted as a supervisor for actor recording sessions and tech week.
CHAPTER FIVE: Violence of decision making begins

5.1 - DESIGN BUDGETURGY

Design budgeturgy is a concept introduced to me by my supervisor Professor Brubaker. It describes a process in which one must look at the costing of materials and determine what physical elements are most important to the realization of the final production. While initial design meetings were positive, I found myself asking questions regarding budget. Having worked as a production manager, builder, and technician in the past, I was aware that material costs could add up and random surprises throughout production can impact budgets.

Production costing from the initial meetings came back at $30,000. The show was budgeted for $10,000. Material cost for the tubes and main deck ended up being the two most significant cost factors of the design. Initially, the tubes were to be surrounded in a plexiglass or plastic sheeting to look like terrariums, and the main revolve was going to be sixteen feet across with an additional four to a six-foot extension to accommodate the step and ramp. To try and balance our budget, we shrunk the revolve and parked the ramp on top, reducing the overall size of the main playing area creating a concentrated focus space. Other elements that were adapted included the wood wall panels for entrances and exits, a line of drapery that would run behind the audience enclosing the seating, and the LED facing on the revolve and audience risers. The budgeting series of meetings were complicated as I experienced the stress of having to make cuts to what was a dream set. Instead, it would have been beneficial to have a realistic depiction of what could have been afforded and work with that in mind.

As difficult as it was to see a configuration of my dream version of the show slowly change, the exercise did result in a few positives. By going through the budget item by item, I was able to assess the things that were essential for telling the story physically in space, honing my vision for
the play. I knew that I wanted to keep the deep rake of the audience, the floating tubes and the revolve.

5.2 – THE BRUTALITY OF SHIFTING

The original script of Machinal contains four instances of racial slurs from a variety of characters on stage. Most notably, the use of the “n-word” in Episode Nine, where a prison guard yells it to a voice singing off stage. Julia A. Walker addresses the use of the word in Expressionism and Modernism stating that

“although Treadwell problematically conflates gender and racial oppression in this passage, she suggests that the only freedom available to the young woman is outside the dominant structures of society… Because her act was authentically her own, she will accept her new role as a criminal. But, if that role places her outside the structure of oppressive gender norms, it also places her back into the interpolating structure of the law. This is the ultimate irony, Treadwell suggests: there is no freedom from the gender-prescribed roles that society imposes upon women.” (219)

Despite its problematic usage in a contemporary context, there was something inside the complexity of Treadwell’s inclusion of racially charged language that I found intriguing. Having investigated Treadwell’s background and her Mexican heritage, I found exciting correlations to other aspects of the play inspired by her own life. So, was the use of racially charged language and references just a result of the time, or was it Treadwell’s attempting to express a difficulty she found in negotiating her identity as both a woman and a cultural minority? The prevalence of gender and racial oppression still exists in modern society, and Walker is correct in identifying how problematic the comparison which is a sentiment shared by Professor Brubaker. After a lengthy conversation with my supervisor regarding language, cultural makeup of my cast, and myself and a careful examination of the script, we agreed that it would be best to cut the problematic language from the text. The removal would not change much of the exploration of
the show, but would serve to highlight my issues around casting (as discussed in Chapter Four Section Six) and only slightly impacted the audio selection for a song that was to be played off stage.

Initially, the script calls for a “Negro spiritual” (Machinal, 78) to be sung offstage. Without the connections to race, I was worried that this correlation would be lost and so opted for something more contemporary that involved more of the religious imagery present in the final scene. What I found was an isolated vocal track of Chris Cornell singing Audioslave’s Like a Stone (2002) which gave a haunting, lamentation for Young Woman’s final moments.

Another design choice Professor Viczko and I had talked about was inspired by a production of David Mamet’s Oleanna, a two-person play that staged in an alley configuration in such a way that depending on which side of the house you were in, it would change the character with whom the audience sympathized. The level of direct audience engagement and impact in that production led us to the idea of an extended audience engagement investigation by having signs or markers over each bank of seating designating either as male or female inviting the audience to engage with or disrupt a prescribed gender binary. The idea was two-fold: to extend the misogynistic realities of the show into the audience in a tangible way, similar to the soundscape and moments of illumination; second, to create an experience in which the spectator could take in the show from a defined perspective, hopefully leading to discussions with people from the opposite bank after the show. When the idea was conceived of the revolve was moving throughout the action of the play, and therefore both sets of audience seating would be subject to the same pictures. The intention was to create an experience that would generate extended conversation beyond the confines of the theatre, but I was less interested in having facilitated discussion around the experience and letting it live in conversation. However, several concerns
were raised around the idea. There was a concern that because there was no context to my seating experiment and no formalized follow up, my inquiry would negatively reinforce a gender binary. Asking the audience to gender identify created the problem of potentially alienating patrons that struggle with rigid gender confines or could cause a backlash within the community that would distract from the larger message of the play. It was also poor timing as I would be asking audience members to gender identify during the school’s week of inclusion and visibility which was focusing on gender diversity. In retrospect, I would have approached my ideas about audience separation differently. I would have introduced the concepts that I was investigating to the audience in a pre-show lobby chat. I would have included a more formalized feedback process through either facilitated discussion or audience response waivers that could be filled out and submitted after the show and attempted only one performance in this structure.

These changes, removal of language and audience separation, were peripheral areas of exploration meant to enhance the experience within and discourse around the subject matter of the play. The departure of these elements did not change the fundamental exploration or execution of the production. The difficulty of the changes was in their late and rapid succession in deployment in the rehearsal process. If either one of the two conversations had happened, or if they had both happened earlier in the process, I think their removal would have felt less impactful. Ultimately, much like the decisions made around budgeting, these changes were an exercise in focusing on the core values of the production. My difficulty in reconciling these two events is the negotiating of the unforeseen. I had constructed a rehearsal framework that allowed for ample exploration time and would have been able to accommodate the shifts and changes had I further considered how problematic they might be if they had happened sooner. When the changes presented themselves, I was worried that it would reflect negatively in the rehearsal
room and call into question my leadership ability. Additionally, while I was able to maintain core integrity, their loss was compounded by the most challenging hurdle I had to overcome.

5.3 – THE VIOLENCE OF DECISION MAKING

Concerns about the revolve were raised from the beginning, and they persisted throughout the rehearsal process: sound being the biggest, but also the effect of continuous motion on the audience, and the actor’s ability to negotiate blocking and scene changes on a moving surface. The impact of movement on the audience was intriguing, and I liked the idea of the audience being affected by it as an extension of Young Woman’s experiences as discussed in Chapter Three. After several working trials with the revolve, I was excited to see how quickly the actors took to the motion and were able to negotiate the space both in scenes and transitions. I think that the actor’s adaptability to the physical challenge of the revolve boosted my confidence in their ability to manage the vocal/volume challenges as well.

On Saturday, February 2nd, 2019 my supervisor, Professor Brubaker, attended an open tech rehearsal for invited members of the department to watch and provide feedback on the show. Despite technical challenges with sound design and the revolve, I was confident going into this run as I had designed my rehearsal process in such a way that our technical days would be dedicated to rehearsing transitions and cleaning up onstage business in scenes. It was at this rehearsal that it became clear the revolve was causing problems that were not being resolved.

The motor powering the revolve was leaking and causing issues with overheating resulting in automatic shut offs. The weight of material combined with the off-centre distribution of the ramp and the constant shifting of bodies on and off the surface made mitigating speed an issue and was making the motor work hard. We proceeded with a contingency plan in place,
dressing the backstage crew in coveralls and prompting them via headset to manually restart the revolve if the power cut out. While not the most ideal situation, I thought the visual of a mechanic coming from out of nowhere to reboot the machine worked with the concepts of systemic oppression: the machine keeps on turning. A harder piece to conquer was the noise issue.

The revolve sat on top of a hollow stage that essentially acted like a drum amplifying the sound under the deck. The issue was flagged early on by both my supervisor and set designer, but I was hoping that my actors would be able to overcome it similarly to how they overcame the challenges of negotiating a moving stage. By the time we reached this tech rehearsal I believed they were successfully topping the noise obstacle, volume and projection were constant rehearsal notes priming actors for when we got on stage. What was more likely was that my ears were tuned to the language of the script which meant I was able to follow the narrative despite the volume issues. Not everyone was able to follow the text, however, and on the Monday after the tech rehearsal I was confronted with a harsh reality: the mechanically operated revolve had to go.

This was a critical moment as the motion was central to the blocking of the show and would demand significant reworking. The staging I had created was focussed on minimizing movement and creating static pictures on stage that took cues from Delsarte’s *System of Expression*, relying on the rotations to allow the audience to see the action from all sides catching glimpses into scenes through the negative space between bodies. Our lights were built and set around the moving revolve. This meant that while in motion there were key points the actors were told to hit physically while in that would catch them in the most amount of light, for instance, the top of the ramp as “bathroom” in Episode Three’s Honeymoon, without the movement, the show appeared poorly lit. Losing the movement of the revolve also meant losing
the movement of the lights on the deck which were designed to have an unnerving effect as Young Woman was often isolated by light or intentionally made to pass through small pools and shafts of light.

The string of cuts and changes in the last few weeks of rehearsal heavily impacted the shape of the final production. Losing the revolve three days before opening was the most challenging aspect to negotiate practically as it only left two rehearsals to try and implement changes, and was difficult emotionally as I had been so invested in the use of a moving revolve. With no additional rehearsal time available beyond tech dress and a full dress rehearsal, I had to decide whether to find quick solutions that would salvage the blocking, or take the rehearsal time to redo the entire show and then send the actors out on opening night having rehearsed a new show only once. Starting from scratch would also impact our lighting, which I knew we did not have time to adjust while working on new blocking. I opted to try and salvage the pieces that we had and use our time to integrate them into the play.

Knowing that I still wanted motion, I went back to a conversation I had with my supervisor weeks before, and took her suggestion to get the revolve to move manually by having actors drive the disk with poles attached to the outside. What this created was similar to my backup of the manual intervention of stagehands, where the motion of the machine became a result of social perpetuation. Unfortunately, even the steady pacing of a manual revolve resulted in significant noise. I opted to have the stage rotate at specific points in between episodes. The manual drive ended up creating a wonderful image of the death machine in Episode Nine being activated by the people in the play, the perpetuators of the patriarchal structures having a hand in her death. There was beauty too as not only was the death machine powered by kinetic energy but the sound of the revolve rotating at such a quick pace generated noise for the actors to
compete against at a moment that felt driven by the action of the play. The build of the sound to the eventual hard stop achieved the vacuum of sound, I was hoping for in early conceptions of the play. While I do feel that the changes were successful given the time constraints, some aspects of the show lacked the crispness and specificity of gesture that I desired. The timing of the cut was difficult, but after such a long process of having to cut so many other items to accommodate the revolve, losing it was the hardest to deal with.

I was tirelessly optimistic about the revolve, despite feedback and concerns that it wasn’t working. I was deaf to the warnings, and any failure in execution comes down to an issue of my leadership and inability to separate myself from the work and objectively acknowledge that there was a big problem in the room that needed to be addressed. The revolve got to the point where it was doing a disservice to the show and I was unable or unwilling to see that. I didn’t have back up plans because I desperately believed that the revolve would work. When it didn’t, and it came time to make some changes, I had to work harder to problem-solve.

The logical resolution was to take the suggestion made weeks prior and start investigating the manual operation of the revolve, essentially inverting the image of motion at the end of the play that I had initially conceived of. What did come from this work was the implication of bodies as perpetrators of the social structures the play sought to critique. This was most apparent as the actors began rotating the stage manually as the death tube dropped on Young Woman, thereby having an active hand in her death, a departure from my original idea of the revolve moving seemingly on its own as a reflection of deeply ingrained social conventions that persist as part of legacy, heritage, and/or tradition. I would have liked to curate the turning of the playing space to face a different side of the audience for each Episode better; this would not have
resolved all of the sightline issues in the final production but would have shared some of the images more evenly.
CHAPTER SIX: Post Show/Process reflections.

I am conflicted about my production of Machinal. On the one hand, I am very proud of what I was able to achieve. I feel that I successfully combined elements of both German and American Expressionism to explore the contemporary resonance of themes of patriarchy and social misogyny present within the work of Sophie Treadwell’s Machinal. I also think that I was able to engage new forms within my directing praxis, incorporating feminist theatre practices, intimacy, and actioning work to achieve moments of authenticity and genuine connectivity on stage. My thinking around “Zen Directing” has evolved through the integration of these approaches, allowing me to get more diverse in my toolset and therefore more specific with my applications in praxis. On the other hand, I relied so heavily on one design aspect to help convey the messages of the play that the loss of it, and my inability to identify it as a problem exposed holes in my leadership ability and caused an unnecessary amount of stress and tension in the final days of production.

With all that being said, there is a version of this play in my head that I was able to catch glimpses of late in the rehearsal process. I was able to see the other elements at play, and while sound would have been a surmountable challenge for the actors, the show worked beautifully. I never considered myself precious about elements that are not working in projects I direct, but I was so attached to this revolve I find myself caught wondering if my exploration could have been successful? Or how I could have adjusted elements of the show to work as effectively given myself some backup options, more time to rehearse and problem solve?

There’s a tension that I’m finding that comes from my interest in motion, form, and content that I’m having difficulty negotiating. At this point in my praxis, I considered myself a text-based director relying heavily on the text to motivate all of the action and find answers to the play, often engaging in minimalist projects to let the text do the work for the piece. I find
myself in rehearsal with my head buried in my script listening to how the text is delivered and that becomes my most significant cue for where we should go and what needs attention searching for the connective tissue and the verbal motivation or connectivity to the text. This approach shifted for Machinal as I would often be on my feet exploring the room and seeing how the motion would affect the shape. Machinal was a departure, an exploration into form in a way that I had never really worked before. I was concentrated on creating simple stage pictures that were enhanced by the motion of the revolve that in my mind, freed up the actors to work harder on the connection with their scene partners.

One of the first books Professor Brubaker assigned as reading for my time at The University of Calgary was Anne Bogart’s A Director Prepares. Chapter Two is titled “Violence” and deals primarily with the violence of decision making, of eliminating all other possibilities or recognizing when something isn’t working and being able to make a hard choice. The challenge is knowing which choices to make. Assembling a team of trusted creatives can be an incredible asset in decision-making, but ultimately it comes down to the director.

Machinal confronted me with many hard choices. The most difficult thing to negotiate is that I honestly think I would have proceeded with the revolve as it was, despite warnings, and in doing so, I may have undermined not only the hard work of the actors but also the philosophy I have been touting about inclusion and collaboration. I didn’t see how negatively it was impacting the production and I wasn’t hearing the voices around me because I wanted the idea or image to work; I believed in the beauty of what was being created. I still do and still think it is worth investigating. Under different circumstances maybe the revolve would have worked, and I imagine I will seek out opportunities to tackle the challenge in the future. It is a difficult thing to
know what to fight for as an artist. It is a harder thing to negotiate the differences between compromise and collaboration.

Throughout this process, and in reflection, I have learned a great deal. I have learned that aesthetics are a big part of my work as a director. I like playing with pictures and images on stage the same way some directors approach film which comes from deep love of both mediums and wanting to see how I can use the best of both worlds to create something compelling and tangible. I realized that in the past two years of study, highlighted by my pre-thesis and thesis shows, that I love messing with theatre convention and subverting audience experiences and expectations and I will continue to explore forms of audience engagement. I learned that diversity and inclusivity are essential values to me and in my work and that I can not rightly call myself an ally or advocate unless I uphold these values in both my personal life and the work that I present. I have learned the value of the best idea in the room wins and knowing which thoughts help to serve the show and a reliable, creative team is an invaluable asset. *Machinal* provided me amazing collaborators in all phases of production, and a big part of collaboration is trusting the people you are working with. I have learned that leadership is not only the ability to craft solid plans and execute them, but also being prepared to make hard decisions and have contingencies in place to continue forward.
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