

Resident dramaturg highlights spring seasons in Duke and Durham theater

By Danielle Muoio (<http://www.dukechronicle.com/staff/danielle-muoio>) | Tuesday, January 14 2014

Jules Odendahl-James is a visiting lecturer and resident dramaturg for the Duke Theater Studies (<http://theaterstudies.duke.edu/>) department. The Chronicle's Danielle Muoio sat down with Odendahl-James to discuss the main stage production coming this Spring, as well as other performances occurring at Duke and in Durham this semester.

The Chronicle: Can you tell me a bit about the main stage show that is coming out this Spring?

Jules Odendahl-James: The play is called "Machinal" [and] it was written by Sophie Treadwell in the mid 1920s, and it had a Broadway run in 1928. It was actually the first Broadway appearance of Clark Gable. Although people don't know Treadwell, typically, if they do know her it's in reference to this play. She actually had seven Broadway productions from the time span of the early '20s to about the mid-'40s, which... certainly today and even at that time was unusual.

This is probably her best known work, and it is loosely—very loosely—based on a true crime case in upstate New York with Ruth Snyder and Henry Judd [Gray], where [Snyder was] accused of killing her husband. The story was certainly a sensation at the time and was made even more so by the fact that she was put in the electric chair in Sing Sing [Prison]. A reporter snuck a camera in to the execution and took a photo of her in the moment she was being executed that was then splashed across the front page of New York newspapers. It's one of the most iconic and problematic news photographs in the 20th century.

Now Treadwell was journalist as well as playwright—she didn't cover the trial, but she covered a number of other trials of women accused of violence at that time. So this play took general inspiration from that and is about a woman who marries her boss, takes a lover and ostensibly murders her husband—though you don't see that in the play—and is tried, found guilty and executed. But it's not a documentary play. It makes all these people into archetypes. The main character is called the young woman, we hear her name intermittently, but she's basically a stand in for all women who find themselves on a particular path that is dictated by all sort of forces—getting a job, falling into marriage, falling into motherhood—and never having had a chance to figure out who they are.

It's always important to remember this play is very much of the '20s and was written less than 10 years after women got the right to vote. There's a lot about feeling trapped in a machine of life that pushes you along without giving you a chance to figure out who you are and why you do things. That's specifically why it attracted to me—its resonance is still there.

TC: You definitely have said a lot about how there is this resonance that still exists. Was that a main factor in why the department decided to put on this show? Were there any other reasons behind the decision?

JOJ: It's a play from a different kind of era and performance. There are lots of conventions that were brand new at the time— notions of montage where characters were archetypes as opposed to realistic drama.... It has an act of violence at its core, a courtroom scene. And she was one of the playwrights working in an era where that type of writing was still taking hold. 1928 was early modernism, so there are conventions we are now very comfortable with, but at the time were rather extraordinary.

So it's always interesting to look back on that era and try and think back to what this was like for an audience that had never seen this type of play before. Or having a chance to work the characters. It's a small cast—10 actors, nine play multiple roles. So that kind of ensemble work is certainly something that is appealing. When we have a chance to do something that is from a different era but still connects to our own.

TC: Are there any actors or actresses participating in its production this spring that we may remember from last semester's productions?

JOJ: There are four actors from the "Uncle Vanya" performance. One senior, Ashley Long, who played one of the Yelenas; [junior] Thomas Kavanagh who played one of Vanyas; [junior] Mike Myers who played one of the Astrovs. [Sophomore] Madeleine Pron, who played the older nanny, is playing the lead in [Machinal]. And then there are three first-year students who will make their debut.

TC: I know Me Too Monologues also hits stage this semester. Is there anything different going on with the show this year that we didn't see last year?

JOJ: In terms of the basic structure—the Me Too experience—it will be similar. The two biggest things this year is that we've gone to two weekends. We got so much demand last year and we really wanted to keep in that same space in the Nelson Music Room because it has a decent amount of space and also allows the performers to be connected to the audience. Anything bigger than that and you would lose that [experience].

In terms of content what I think is interesting from what we have here is just hearing new perspectives. There are some interesting monologues of male voices on campus this year that are trying to figure out their place on the advocacy of women's issues, genders, race and sexuality. I think every year, it's very unique in terms of the array of voices we get and the way we are trying to make sure we have some conversations that come up over and over again.

TC: Going out into Durham, what can readers expect from the Manbites Dog (<http://manbitesdogtheater.org/>) show, "I Love My Hair When It's Good: & Then Again When It Looks Defiant and Impressive"?

JOJ: So the piece by Chaunesti Webb is now in its second incarnation at Manbites. It happened last year in the fall and it had such an amazing response that they wanted to bring it back again because people were clamoring to see it. It's about African American women's body image—specifically hair. One of the things they are doing is having a community event on a weekend of shows with some speakers and local businesses to promote health and wellness and positive body image. So there's wonderful opportunities both to give to the community and experience the wonderful stories that Chaunesti Webb's performance has collected.

TC: What are some other ways students can connect with the theater department this spring, whether it be in Duke or Durham?

JOJ: After "Machinal" closes, there is a New Works Festival. The New Works Festival is being housed in Senior Colloquium. There will be dramatic readings....I'm not sure if they will produce some of the footage...but there might be movies shown in relation to that...They just announced the pieces that were selected, and they include work from a first-year student all the way to a senior. So they are showing an array of Duke work performed by students, produced by students.

Also, near Manbites Dog, there is another theater space called the Shadow Box where Jay O'Berski and his company, Little Green Pig (<http://littlegreenpig.com/>)... are doing a stage adaptation of a Danish film from the mid-1990s called "Celebration." So that will be at the Shadow Box, which is a scrappy little place that they are trying to convert into a regular performance venue, and it's the street behind Manbites Dog.

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You can make it a whole night of it which is really wonderful—have dinner, go to the theater and then have coffee or enjoy music...something that when I moved to Durham, in 1997, just didn't exist. so its really an exciting time to be seeing people produce work and to connect with the Durham community.

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Spring production questions freedom in "a world of money, men and machines"

By Stephanie Wu (<http://www.dukechronicle.com/staff/stephanie-wu>) | Thursday, April 3 2014



(<http://www.dukechronicle.com/multimedia/12768>)

"Machinal," by American playwright Sophie Treadwell, debuted in 1928 but was recently revived on the Broadway stage and, tonight, will premiere at Duke's Shearer Theater.

The play is loosely based on the well-known case of Ruth Snyder, whose 1928 execution by electric chair for murdering her husband was captured on film and published on the front page of the New York Times. In the subsequent controversy that embroiled both the journalistic world and public sphere, this case became the one of the most significant of the century.

In "Machinal," however, the focus is not on the young woman's act of murder. Rather, the play is a witness to her struggle with life as she marries her boss, has his child, has an affair, murders her husband and is electrocuted.

"What drives the play is her struggle, her desire to be free," said Jules Odendahl-James, resident dramaturg and "Machinal" director.

The young woman, nameless for most of the play, is eventually revealed as Helen Jones. Her character is just as archetypal and universal as her name—or lack of a name—suggests.

"She is meant to represent any woman, any identity," said Madeleine Pron, the Trinity sophomore who plays the young woman.

Stuck within the patriarchal society of the 1920s, the young woman is a mismatched gear in the machine of society, an unwilling participant in the mechanized nature of daily life. Within this structure, she is forced into the rigidity of female constraints and expectations: work, marriage and family.

"I hope the audience comes away wondering what other muddy, unclear social structures are designed to keep people down in their lives..." —junior Thomas Kavanagh

The play is defined by its disconnected, hammered dialogue, which itself seems to have been mass-produced by the all-encompassing societal machine.

"It's about a life machine, so the title is the French word for life and machine, together," Odendahl-James said. "The way that the story is told is a very heavily sensory experience. Machine sounds, the external world...all the sounds are layering in...because she can't shut off her brain and her senses."

The implicit perception of women as mere gears within a literally man-made machine is brought to the fore by the young woman's interactions with men.

"The husband, George H. Jones, is the named character...his title defines him and his position. He treats his interactions with the young woman as a business transaction and thinks of her as a piece of property to acquire," said junior Thomas Kavanagh, who plays the husband.

The young woman's inability to close off the outside world and thus escape her oppressors forces her to seek an unviable freedom. The consequences she ultimately faces suggest that perhaps there is no possibility of freedom within the structure of society—perhaps freedom can only be obtained in its absence.

"I hope the audience comes away wondering what other muddy, unclear social structures are designed to keep people down in their lives, what machines are running their lives and what machines they are a part of," Kavanagh said.

To this day, the message of "Machinal" is still relevant. The play's pertinence to the present encompasses far more than issues of gender. Whether it be in our interactions with the machines of society or in our relationships with one another, issues of oppression and constraint still prevail.

"I hope that in some way, in some scene, the audience can relate to the young woman character, understand what about her situation makes her who she is and see how she relates to their life," said stage manager Kara Post.

"Machinal" questions the meaning of freedom and its potential to exist. It shines a light on a machine-like society that continues to thrive as the young woman's story continues and repeats in the life of any woman both now and in the future.

As Odendahl-James put it, "These are conversations we are still having."

"Machinal" will show in the Shearer Lab Theater in the Bryan Center. The play opens today, April 3, at 8 p.m. and will run through April 13. Tickets are available online or at the box office. For more information, visit the Duke Theater Studies website (<http://theaterstudies.duke.edu/>).

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