

# WOMEN and PLAYWRITING

"A Native American Comedy, by a Mrs. Mowatt, is rumored to be in rehearsal at the Park. We have little confidence in female dramatic productions, of the present time, but we wish the lady a happy debut although it may be in five long acts."

An 1845 New York newspaper announcement about Anna Cora Mowatt's play *Fashion*

"But let me tell you it takes a tremendous effort to shake my woman's guilt. Who knows how many potential playwrights there may be out there fixing bag lunches for their children who would be attempting to write their plays and get them on, were it not for the fact that they would guiltily consider their efforts self-indulgent folly."

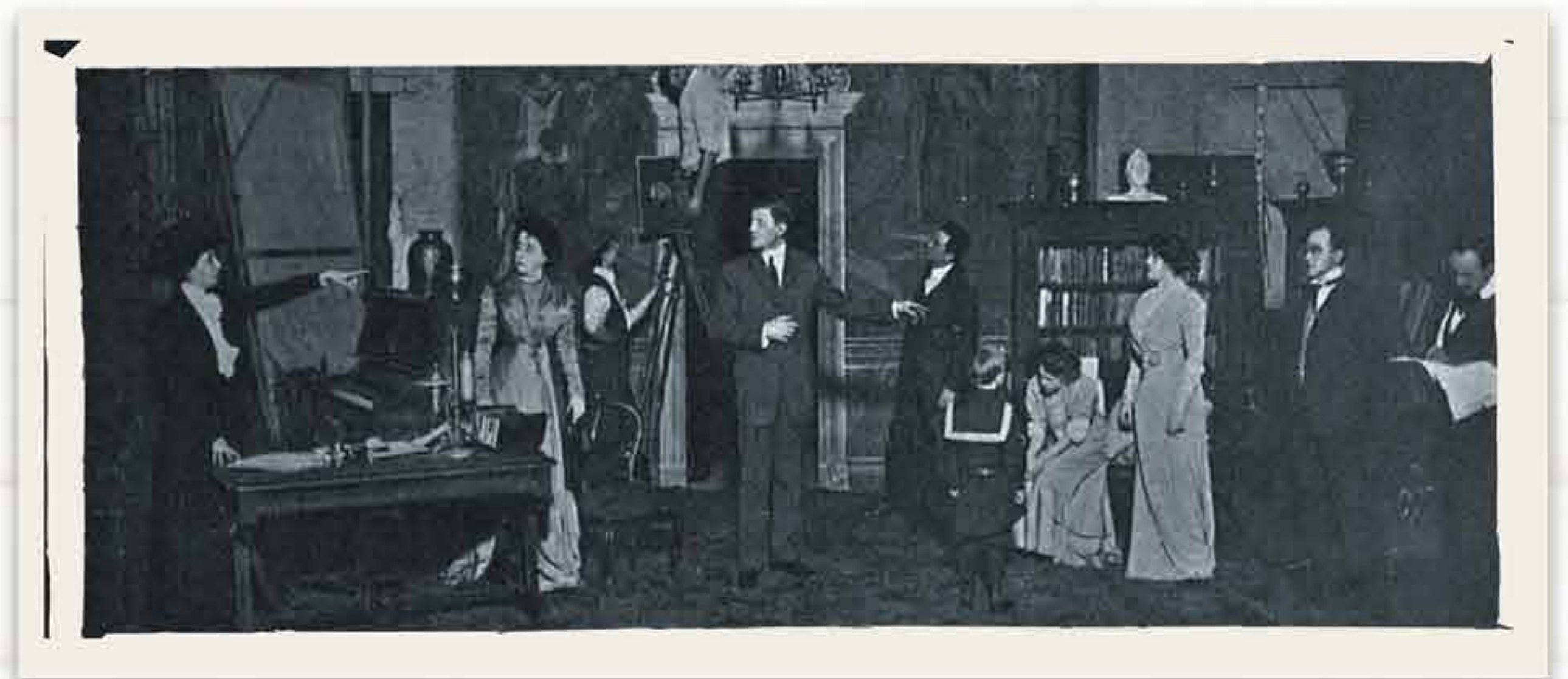
Playwright Gretchen Cryer in a May 20, 1973, article in the *New York Times*, "Where Are the Women Playwrights?"

"Would Eugene O'Neill have been a great playwright if he happened to be born a woman? No. He was in as much pain as most women are, but because he was a man, he was allowed his anger because that is 'manly.'"

Playwright Renee Taylor in a May 20, 1973, article in the *New York Times*, "Where Are the Women Playwrights?"

"I personally don't think playwriting is a gene on the Y chromosome."

Playwright Theresa Rebeck in a October 25, 2008, article in the *New York Times*, "Charging Bias by Theaters, Female Playwrights to Hold Meeting"



In 1929, Virginia Woolf published her essay "A Room of One's Own," based on lectures she delivered at women's colleges at the University of Cambridge in England. In it she examined the lack of women writers and the challenges facing women who want to write, in terms of a tradition of women writers, the economic freedom and the privacy to write.

In the theater, the problems facing women writers seem even more challenging.

In America, the moral prohibitions of Quakers and Puritans set back the growth of theater as a whole and work by women in particular. However, there were women who wrote. Mercy Otis Warren, a friend of John Adams, wrote Tory-leaning satires in the late 1770s that circulated in manuscript form but were not performed. Susana Rowson, better known for her novel *Charlotte Temple*, wrote and acted in her play *Slaves in Algiers* in 1794. Anna Cora Mowatt overcame her fears about the immorality of the stage, which she had learned as a child from a preacher, to write for the stage. Her play *Fashion*, a comedy about the American preoccupation with the fashions and tastes of Europe, was a success. Mowatt also became a professional actress and elevated the acceptability of women as actors, which also improved the type of audience. In 1906, Virginia Frame published "Women who have Written Successful Plays," an article in which she noted more than a dozen women who are not familiar to modern audiences.

The 1920s and 1930s saw a flowering of women playwrights and women with roles in theaters, but they still lacked the prestige of their male contemporaries. Lillian Hellman may be the best-known female playwright.

Women often found roles in administration. Hallie Flanagan headed the Federal Theatre Project. Cheryl Crawford was one of the founders of the Group Theatre in New York, although her reputation has been eclipsed by the large personalities of her co-founders, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg.

In 1921, Zona Gale won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Miss Lulu Bett*. Rachel Crothers also was immensely popular. In 1929, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* debuted to nearly universal praise. Susan Glaspell switched from writing fiction

to writing for the stage. Two of her works are *Trifles* (1916), which, like *Machinal*, examines the situation of a woman alone and isolated in a loveless marriage who murders her husband, and *Alison's House* (1930), about Emily Dickinson and which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. However, she is probably better known for her work with the Provincetown Players, which she helped found, and as a "discoverer" of Eugene O'Neill. In 1935, Zoë Akins won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *The Old Maid*, but it is Eugene O'Neill and Thornton Wilder, male Pulitzer Prize winners of the same era, who are the household names today.

Judith E. Barlow in her revelatory introduction to *Plays by American Women: The Early Years*, points out that many of these women wrote in other genres. Several were journalists. She also notes, "Mowatt, Crothers, Glaspell, Gale and Treadwell (not to mention Lillian Hellman, America's most outstanding woman dramatist)—is it coincidental that none of these women bore children?"

Newspapers seem to be asking the perennial question, "Where Are the Women Playwrights?" That was the title of a 1973 *New York Times* piece in which six women playwrights were asked to answer these questions: "Why don't more women write for the theater? Why do those who do tend either to write sporadically or drift away altogether after a period of activity?" More than 35 years later those questions still do not seem to have been answered.

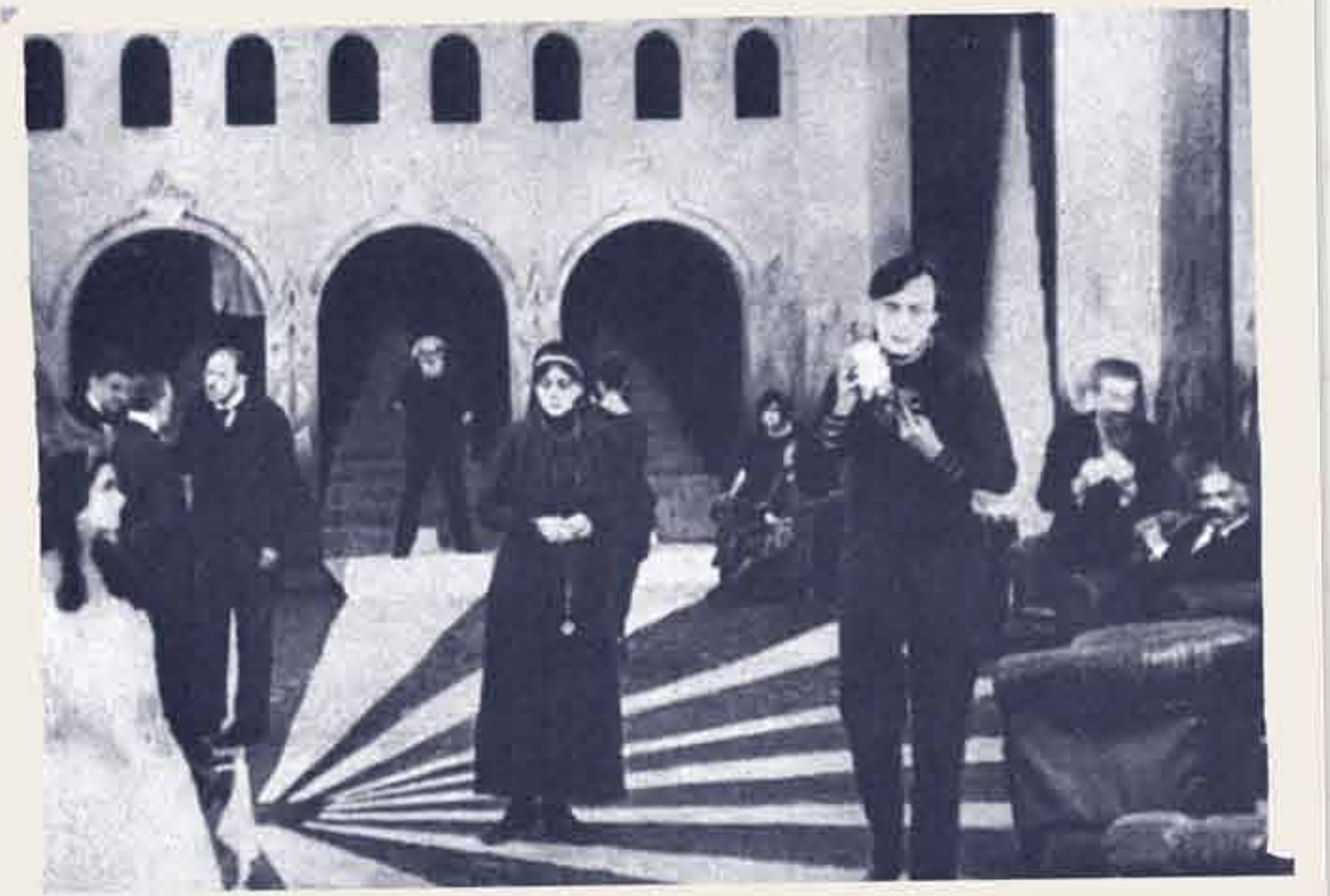
In 2008, similar articles questioning the lack of productions by female playwrights have appeared in the *New York Times* and the *London Times*. In the *New York Times* article, playwright Sarah Schulman contends that during the 2008-2009 season, at least 50 plays by living American playwrights will be on view at 14 of the largest Off-Broadway theaters, but only 10 are by women. ("Charging Bias by Theaters, Female Playwrights to Hold Meeting," *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2008).

Images (from left): Sophie Treadwell Portrait circa 1925, Photo by Bachrach Courtesy of the University of Arizona Library Special Collections, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS381, Box 21, File 10; Lillian Hellman, Playwright; Rachel Crothers directs a rehearsal of her play *A Man's World*

# EXPRESSIONISM and its INFLUENCES in AMERICAN THEATER

"Expressionism, with its explosive syntax, its disintegrating forms, and its panoramic simultaneities, had a kinship with many other modern-art movements, including futurism and cubism; it borrowed from Rimbaud and the French symbolists, it was influenced by Dostoevsky and Strindberg, and it was motivated by Freud's explorations of the unconscious. ... The expressionists felt that they created rather than merely reproduced, and that they were reacting against what they regarded as the predominately surface approaches of such nineteenth-century movements as naturalism and impressionism. For the most part these were concerned, for all their differences, with material aspects; the expressionist regarded themselves as concentrating upon the spiritual."

Harry T. Moore, in the preface to *Accelerated Grimace*  
Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s



In the early 20th Century, particularly in the aftermath of World War I, visual artists as well as artists in the theater and cinema began experimenting with non-realistic representations in art such as Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism and Expressionism. The rising influence of Freudian psychology and psychology in general contributed to an interest in the subjective internal life of an individual rather than just the external reality.

Expressionism, by the nature of its focus on the subjective experience through abstract methods, is unwieldy and difficult to define. For reference in other artistic genres: In music, Arnold Schoenberg is considered an Expressionist. In art, although he precedes them slightly, Edvard Munch—and his "The Scream"—was an inspiration for many Expressionists. Art movements like Fauvism, (which included Henri Matisse), with its bright colors and abstraction, had similar artistic impulses. Jackson Pollock's mid-century works of Abstract Expressionism is a philosophical descendant of the early 20th Century Expressionists.

Germany is generally considered to be the birthplace of Expressionism. In the post-war era there were no large budgets for films or the theater. Designers turned to abstract, exaggerated sets that represented a central character's subjective emotions. Many of the designers who worked on these films and plays were members of the group that published the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* (storm).

Often called *stationendramen*, or station plays, these new works echoed the tradition of religious station plays that focused on the spiritual life and major events in the life and death of Christ. In Expressionism, the events and awakenings that occur in the life of a central character take the form of short scenes, often with heightened or stylized language. The awakenings may be dark and represent a character's psychological journey to madness or murder.

American Expressionism grew up concurrent with Europe's Expressionist movements in art, film and the theater. However, American playwrights may have been more influenced by German Expressionist films than its Expressionist plays. The plays of German Expressionist playwrights Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller did not receive American productions until after American Expressionist plays had been produced. However, films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Golem* had been shown in America by 1921, with *Nosferatu* in 1922 and *Metropolis* in 1927.

Expressionism is not easily described as a single cohesive movement. In the United States, it was not organized as a group. Additionally, confusing the matter, some critics referred to the movement as Impressionism. American playwrights, though, enjoyed success with experimental plays: Eugene O'Neill's plays *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* employed Expressionist techniques, as did Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* and *For Saxophone*.

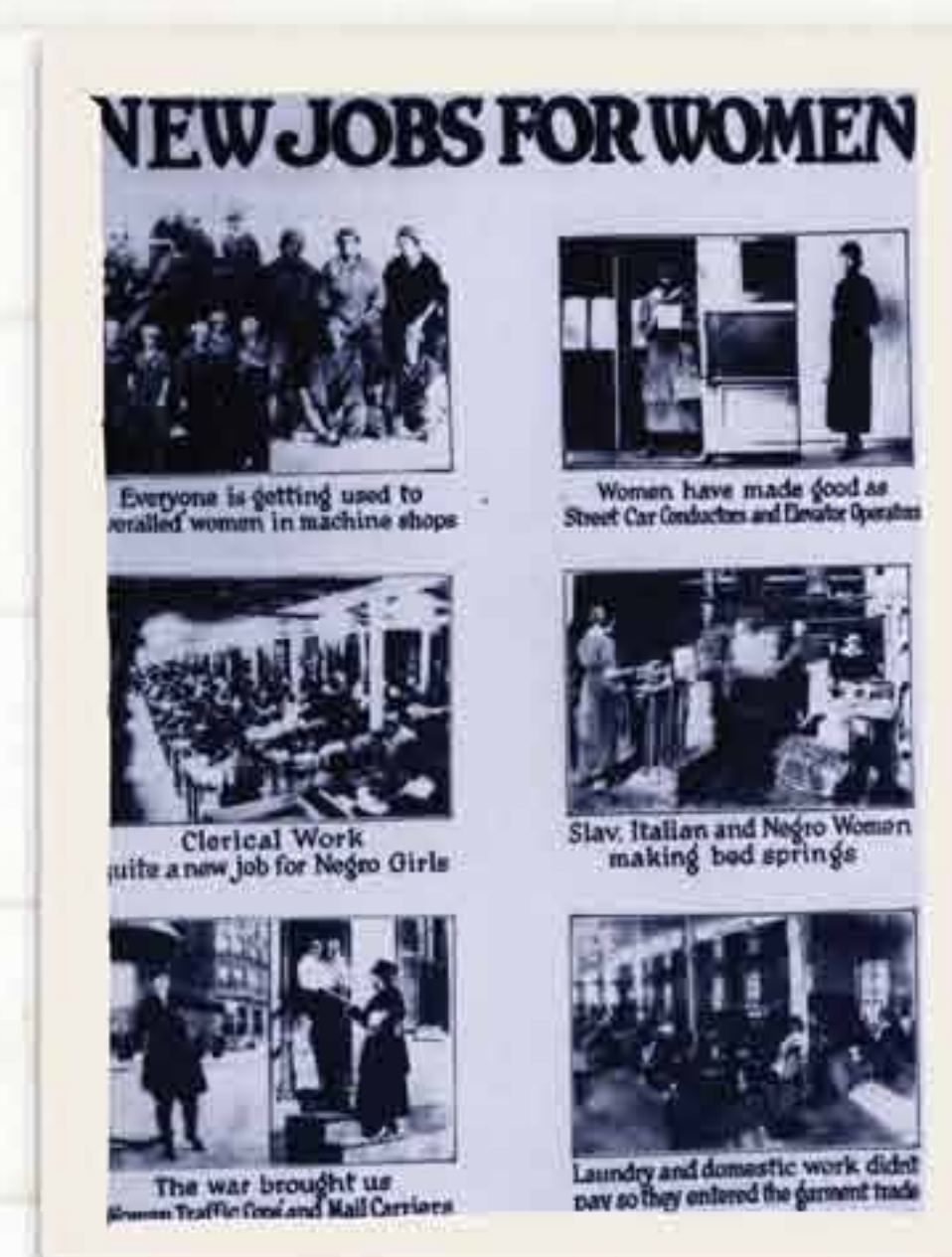
American playwrights working with Expressionist forms were particularly interested in social concerns: the role of the worker in a changing world, the effects of social classes and the circumscribed roles available to women. In *The Hairy Ape*, the main character, Yank, labors in a ship's engine room. But when he is called a "filthy beast" by a rich girl, he begins a journey where he finds he does not fit with any social level of humanity and so seeks solace with a gorilla at a zoo, where he dies. In *The Adding Machine*, the adding clerk, Mr. Zero, is expecting a raise and is instead fired. Told he is being replaced by a machine, he murders his boss and is sentenced to death. When he is given the option of a more peaceful afterlife he chooses to be reborn into a new life in an office. The Young Woman in *Machinal* is ill-suited to life in an office and equally ill-equipped for a marriage of security with a man she does not love. It leads her to murder him—and to her death sentence.

Although Expressionism, much like Dadaism and other experimental forms, faded from popularity, its techniques are still found in the theater and film. Film, in particular, benefited from the influx of German filmmakers who immigrated to the United States as the Nazi Party came to power. Both the film genres of horror and film-noir use techniques pioneered by Expressionist filmmakers. Playwrights too still use Expressionist techniques and David Mamet's *Edmond* may be considered the heir of that tradition.

Images (clockwise from top): *Machinal* production photo, courtesy of the University of Arizona Library Special Collections, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 13, Scrapbook 10; Movie still from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, from the Museum of Modern Art Film Library; Movie still from *The Golem* from the Museum of Modern Art Film Library; César Klein's Sketch for Georg Kaiser's play *From Morning to Midnight*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

# Timeline: History of American Women's Rights and Achievements

- 1833** Oberlin College becomes the first coeducational college in the United States.
- 1841** Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown graduate from Oberlin.
- 1848** The Seneca Falls Convention on Women's Rights is held, and the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, which argues for equal rights and suffrage, is signed.
- 1848** The Married Women's Property Act of New York State grants women the right to own property after marriage and retain the ownership of any property owned before marriage.
- 1849** Elizabeth Blackwell earns her M.D. degree from the Medical Institution of Geneva, N.Y., becoming the first woman in the United States with a medical degree.
- 1850** The first National Women's Rights Convention is held in Worcester, Mass.
- 1851** Former slave Sojourner Truth delivers her "Ain't I a Woman" speech at a women's-rights convention in Akron, Ohio.
- 1855** The case State of Missouri v Celia, A Slave finds that Celia is property and therefore not entitled to protect herself against her rape by her master.
- 1869** Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association. Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell and Julia Ward form the American Woman Suffrage Association. The Territory of Wyoming passes women's suffrage.
- 1872** Victoria Claflin Woodhull is the first woman to run for president on the Equal Rights Party ticket.
- 1880** Through special congressional legislation, Belva Lockwood becomes the first woman lawyer to try a case before the Supreme Court.
- 1890** The National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association.
- 1893** Hannah Greenbaum Solomon forms the National Council of Jewish Women.
- 1896** The National Association of Colored Women is formed.
- 1903** The National Women's Trade Union League is formed to advocate for improved working conditions for women.
- 1911** Mrs. Arthur Dodge forms The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.
- 1912** Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party adopts a woman-suffrage plank.
- 1912** After getting involved in the Girl Guides program in England, Juliette Gordon Low founds the first Girl Guides chapter in the U. S., which would be renamed the Girl Scouts in 1913.
- 1916** Margaret Sanger opens a birth-control clinic in Brooklyn. The clinic is shut down 10 days later, and she is arrested.
- 1920** The United States Congress passes the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibits denying any citizen the right to vote because of gender, in effect granting women the right to vote.
- 1925** Nellie Tayloe Ross is elected governor of Wyoming. She is the first woman governor in the United States.
- 1932** Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.
- 1933** Frances Perkins is named Secretary of Labor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She is the first female Cabinet member.
- 1935** Mary McLeod Bethune forms the National Council of Negro Women to lobby against discrimination.
- 1960** The Food and Drug Administration approves birth-control pills.
- 1963** Congress passes the Equal Pay Act, making it illegal for employers to pay a woman less than a man for the same job.
- 1964** Title VII of the Civil Rights Act makes it illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of race or gender. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is formed.
- 1966** The National Organization for Women is founded.
- 1968** Shirley Chisholm is the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.
- 1969** California adopts a no-fault divorce law that allows a couple to divorce by mutual consent. It will take until 1985 for the last of the other states to adopt similar laws.
- 1978** The Pregnancy Discrimination Act is passed, making it illegal for a woman to be fired or denied a job because she is pregnant.
- 1981** Sandra Day O'Connor is the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States.
- 1983** As a crewmember on the space shuttle Challenger, astronaut Sally Ride becomes the first woman in space.
- 1984** Geraldine Ferraro becomes the first woman vice-presidential nominee of a major American political party.
- 1985** Wilma Mankiller becomes the first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation.
- 1990** Dr. Antonia Novello is the first woman and first Hispanic to be appointed Surgeon General.
- 1992** Carol Mosley Braun of Illinois is the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate.
- 1993** Janet Reno is the first woman to be appointed Attorney General.
- 1993** Sheila Widnall is appointed head of the U.S. Air Force.
- 1994** The Violence Against Women Act tightens penalties against sex offenders and funds services for victims of rape and domestic violence.
- 1996** Army Sgt. Heather Johnsen is the first woman to guard the tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery.
- 1997** Madeleine Albright is the first woman to be appointed Secretary of State.
- 2000** Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York is elected to the U.S. Senate, becoming the first former First Lady elected to national office.
- 2005** Condoleezza Rice is the first African-American woman to be appointed Secretary of State.
- 2007** Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California is the first woman to become the Speaker of the House of Representatives.
- 2008** Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton wins the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary, the first woman in U.S. history to win a presidential primary.
- 2008** Army Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody is promoted to four-star general, the first woman to attain this rank.
- 2009** Michelle Obama becomes the first African-American First Lady in U.S. history.



Images (clockwise from top): Lucy Stone, Early Suffragist; Amelia Earhart, First Woman to fly solo across the Atlantic; Margaret Sanger and Dr. Charles Drysdale at the sixth International Birth Control Conference; "New Jobs for Women" poster of the Women in Industry Service

# MACHINAL

*“The plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman.”*

—Sophie Treadwell’s script note from *Machinal*

*Machinal* is presented as nine episodes in the life of a young woman. It may be deliberate that Sophie Treadwell chose nine episodes mirroring nine months of a pregnancy. The style of the play echoes German Expressionism and other American Expressionist experimenters like Elmer Rice, whose play *The Adding Machine* Sophie Treadwell cited as an influence.

The episodes, with their flat characters, also echo allegorical medieval morality plays like *Everyman*. The characters are types rather than well rounded, and the episodes highlight a moment of choice or emotional turmoil for a character.

Notably, in *Machinal*, the major event of each episode in the life of The Young Woman happens off stage. For example, the proposal, the consummation of her marriage, the birth of her daughter and the murder of her husband are not depicted. The scenes on stage reflect only the turmoil of her inner life.

She is identified in the script as The Young Woman, but she is also called Helen Jones, a name that also indicates her role as an Everywoman. Jones is a common, almost generic, surname and Helen, like Helen of Troy, is a cipher, a blank slate upon which external forces and ideas are enacted.

# MACHINAL

## episode 1: To Business

Adding Clerk: "She doesn't belong in the office."

The first episode of *Machinal* opens in an office where the monotony and isolation is immediately indicated not only by the noise of the machines but also by the repetitive phrases of the office workers: The adding clerk is reciting a series of numbers, the file clerk lists his alphabetized filing, the stenographer recites portions of a letter, and the telephone operator repeatedly answers the phone with the same words. The Young Woman arrives late into this scene and is out of place. The adding clerk says, "She doesn't belong in an office" and later, "She's artistic." She is out of tune with the mechanized and mercantile world around her. The Young Woman is summoned by her boss, George H. Jones, who proposes to her off stage. She returns to her desk and sits, unable to use her machine, which is broken. She is unable to take any initiative until the stenographer tells her to sort the mail.

The noise of the office echoes The Young Woman's inner turmoil. As the stenographer recites an ordinary line from a letter, "awaiting your answer," it resonates with her own need to answer the marriage proposal.

The episode ends with The Young Woman's monologue recited over the clamor of the office. It is in short, disjointed phrases filled with Treadwell's dashes and also incorporates the business phrases of the office: "Marry me—wants to marry me—George H. Jones—George H. Jones and Company—Mrs. George H. Jones..."

# MACHINAL

## episode 2: At Home

Mother: He's a decent man, isn't he?

Young Woman: I don't know. How should I know—yet.

Mother: He's a Vice President—of course he's decent.

This scene takes place between The Young Woman and her mother. In the background are the conversations of neighbors, which act like a chorus echoing The Young Woman's emotional state. The mother urges her daughter to eat a potato she does not want, while The Young Woman struggles to discuss the marriage proposal with her mother. At first her mother is against the marriage, but when she learns it is from the vice president of the company and that he would agree to care for her as well, she encourages it. She disregards her daughter's desire for a love match.

Outside the apartment we hear a young boy argue with his mother, who wants him to come inside. Husbands and wives argue, and a young boy urges a young girl to sneak outside and meet him. The Young Woman's decision to marry George H. Jones comes at the end of the scene in a resounding, "I suppose so." It is more a response to her mother's nagging than based on any personal longing.

# MACHINAL

## episode 3: Honeymoon

Husband: You don't have to go in there to take your clothes off.

Young Woman: I want to.

Husband: What for?

Young Woman: I always do.

Husband: What?

Young Woman: Undress by myself.

Husband: You've never been married till now—have you?

The episode opens as the young woman and the husband arrive at a hotel. Outside, people are dancing and music is heard; the husband insists on closing the blinds. The Young Woman is nervous and unresponsive to his suggestions. The husband tries to tell her a few dirty jokes, but The Young Woman recoils from the jokes—and his touch. She finally changes into her nightgown, but emerges from the bathroom in tears. As the scene ends, The Young Woman calls for her mother, then just for "Somebody."

# MACHINAL

## episode 4: Maternal

Young Woman: "Let me alone—let me alone—let me alone—I've submitted enough—I won't submit to any more—crawl off —crawl off in the dark—Vixen crawled under the bed—way back in the corner under the bed—they were all drowned—puppies don't go to heaven—heaven—golden stairs—long stairs—long—too long..."

The Young Woman is in a hospital. She has given birth but is unable to speak. The husband, nurse and the doctor all insist she is doing better in spite of her vehement gestures to the contrary. The husband lectures her in platitudes: "But you've got to brace up now! Make an effort! Pull yourself together! Start the uphill climb!" The Young Woman chokes and is unable to breathe.

The husband leaves and the doctor arrives, but he ignores the information given by the nurse in prescribing a course of treatment. He declares The Young Woman should see her baby, to which she responds with an audible and resounding, "No!" The doctor takes her speaking as proof that her condition has improved.

The doctor and nurse leave to get the baby, and The Young Woman has another monologue, in which she expresses her desire to be left alone. She describes a vixen hiding under a bed and the pups being drowned, and staircases to and from heaven with the dead going up and children coming down to be born.

She ends with the refrain, "I'll not submit. I'll not submit."

# MACHINAL

## episode 5: Prohibited

First Man: There were a bunch of banditos—bandits, you know, took me into the hills—holding me there—what was I to do? I got the two birds that guarded me drunk one night, and then I filled the empty bottle with small stones—and let 'em have it!

Young Woman: Oh!

First Man: I had to get free, didn't I? I let 'em have it—

The episode takes place in a bar. There are three tables. At one, an older man is seducing a young man and plying him with liquor. At the second, a man and woman discuss whether she will have an abortion.

At the third table, two men wait. The Young Woman arrives with a girl. The girl and the Second Man have already planned an assignation and quickly depart. The Young Woman remains with the First Man.

He talks about his love of travel and freedom. He describes escaping some bandits in Mexico after filling a bottle with small stones and beating his captors to death with it. He tells The Young Woman she looks like an angel, and she agrees to go to his apartment with him.

# MACHINAL

## episode 6: Intimate

Young Woman: We're going to stick together—always—aren't we?

Man: [honestly] I'll have to be moving on, kid—someday, you know?

Young Woman: When?

Man: Quien Sabe?

The Young Woman and the man are in bed. They listen to a hand organ and singer outside. They talk more about the man's life and travels. The Young Woman sings some children's songs. She asks if they will stick together, and the man responds honestly, who knows? The Young Woman describes herself as feeling "purified." She realizes how late it is and dresses to go home. Impulsively, she asks for a bowl filled with pebbles and a lily that the man has in his window. He gives it to her. She bids him goodbye and thanks him.

# MACHINAL

## episode 7: Domestic

Husband: You don't breathe deep enough—breathe now—look at me. [He breathes.] Breath is life. Life is breath.

Young Woman: [Suddenly] And what is death?

Husband: [Smartly] Just—no breath!

Young Woman: [To herself] Just no breath.

The Young Woman and the husband sit on opposite ends of a sofa. The Young Woman reads newspaper articles: "Girl turns on gas—" "Woman leaves all for love—" "Young wife disappears—". The husband talks about work, deals and property. He repeats the same business story to his wife and in phone calls. The Young Woman wants the curtains and window open, but the husband wants them closed. The Young Woman describes feeling stifled, and the husband suggests she doesn't breathe deeply enough.

The Young Woman begins to hear the voice of her lover, describing his break for freedom, and other disembodied voices, which urge her on in choral fashion with phrases like, "free—free—free", "Who'd know? Who'd know? Who'd know?" and "head stones—head stones—head stones." The Young Woman cries out, "Oh! Oh!" The scene ends, in darkness.

# MACHINAL

## episode 8: The Law

1st Reporter: [Writing rapidly] The defense sprang a surprise at the opening of court this morning by putting the accused woman on the stand. The prosecution was swept off its feet by this daring defense strategy and—

2nd Reporter: Trembling and scarcely able to stand, Helen Jones, accused murderess, had to be almost carried to the witness stand this morning when her lawyer—

The scene opens in a courtroom. Several other cases are dispatched with, and then The Young Woman is cross-examined about her husband's death. Throughout the scene, reporters give differing interpretations of her testimony and character. She describes two men standing over her husband. She tries to justify washing her bloody nightgown and denies having seen a lily bowl. The Young Woman breaks down after an affidavit from her lover is read that describes their affair and the lily bowl and pebbles he gave her. She confesses.

# MACHINAL

## episode 9: A Machine

Young Woman: "Oh, Father, pray for me—a prayer—that I can understand!"

The Young Woman is in prison. A priest prays a repetitious litany of prayers. In a cell offstage, a fellow condemned prisoner sings a spiritual. The Young Woman fails to understand the prayers of the priest. She seems calm but struggles against the barbers who have come to shave part of her hair for the electric chair. She shouts her refusal to submit, but she is subdued and her hair shaved. The Young Woman asks the priest questions. She can't understand how her moments of freedom have all been sin. She sees her mother, but the mother is taken away before The Young Woman can give her a message for her own daughter. The Young Woman is led away. In the darkness, the voices of the priest and reporters continue.

The Young Woman calls out "Somebody! Somebod..." and is cut off mid-sentence. Her cry echoes the one she made at the end of the "Honeymoon" episode. The scene ends with the priest continuing to pray: "Christ have mercy—Lord have mercy—Christ have mercy—"