

Statement of Purpose

Machinal: Costume Design, Research, and Inspiration

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The goal of this project was to visually represent the world of the play, and the intentions and purposes of the people who occupy this world through the visual appearance of each character.

Machinal, written by Sophie Treadwell and directed by Kirtsen Brandt, is a play that takes place in the late 1920s and is about a young woman named Helen Jones, who is stuck in a life of routine and expectations. Her desperate need for another life, leads her to an affair that inspires her to murder her husband in order to feel free. These expectations surround the idea of what a woman should be and should do. In the new age of industrialization and speed, there is an additional expectation of as the family provider that is thrown upon a woman by society. Expected to be a mother, wife and provider creates a mixture of burdens for Helen Jones, who simply wishes to live a spontaneous life that keeps moving and is free of outside pressures. She is stuck within her own head filled with emotions. There are monologues in *Machinal*, made by Helen Jones, which consists of disconnected words that represents the constant thoughts of emotions that rush through her head.

Treadwell based *Machinal* on the true murder trial against Ruth Snyder, who killed her husband with her lover. This case was important to society because of the break from the old ideals of what a woman should be. This idea of the “new woman” started with this trial among other breaks in this traditional role. The social reaction to this case were based on (different word?) thoughts of Snyder as a cold murderer, however, through Helen Jones, Treadwell was able to create sympathy or even an understanding for Snyder’s plight to escape the life she had been forced to live. Showing the progression of frustration and emotional distress, Treadwell created a rationality behind her murder of her seemingly charming husband. In a way, Helen Jones tries to get away from the machine that is her society by killing her husband, which in turn makes her fall deeper into the system, eventually wearing their colors of gray and black stripes, then finally all black. Like Ruth Snyder, Helen Jones suffers from a life that was stuck in a world in which a self-actualized life could not develop.

As the costume designer, I kept the costumes within 1920s fashion and also took from the contemporary refashioning of that decade. However, the shapes and colors were a result of a multitude of art and decorative art movements of that era. I took my inspiration from Art Deco, German Expressionism, and Russian Constructivism. Many expressionist painters and artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner influenced the heavy, dark, sharp, and blurred lines found in the costumes. His influential works upon this project includes his woodcut of *Woman Buttoning Her Shoe* (1912) and *Potsdamer Platz* (1914). These works also influenced the darkened looks of their character’s faces. The patterns and shapes within the costumes themselves were influenced by Russian Constructivist artists, predominantly Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg’s geometric forms, and clean cut lines; making the idea of their separation and indifference towards one another more apparent. Their pieces called *Six Girls Seeking Shelter* (1927), *Dr. Jack* (1922), and

A Screw from Another Machine (1926) are some of the many pieces that showed these contrasts of colors and the repetition of geometric forms, such as bold stripes and checkered print.

For this play, I wanted to make a clear distinction between Helen Jones (also known as the Young Woman in the script) and the rest of the “Machine World”. These Machine People are deranged and numbed from their continuous acceptance of their mechanized existence. Therefore, they are harsh, emotional, and cold. This world is full of people who are essentially very small and insignificant parts of a huge, overarching machine. I decided to keep these machine people in cool tones that echoed metal or steel. The characters who surrounded Helen Jones were people who were distant and indifferent and were very mechanical in their movements and voices. The color palette of her society was strict and set in grayscale and/or cold tones such as white, black, gray, dark blue, and silver. All of them wore at least one garment or accessory that echoed the geometric shapes of Art Deco and Russian Constructivism, such as dots, stripes, triangular shapes, and so on. All of which remained in the realm of this color palette. Many ensemble characters, who played these “machine people” wore silver. This silver, in contrast to the gold and brown tones of Helen Jones, presented this world as metal pieces making up cogs within a machine. This decision of using these silver tones echoed the metal or steel material of her environment, which represented the ever so clear cut demands of her society. I liked the idea of representing these cold people with high contrast make-up that deepened their eyes and bones; creating the effect of being extremely sleep deprived and even making them look almost lifeless. They were quite literally sick and tired of their lives but they were nowhere near doing anything about it, and the make-up made this clear.

On the other hand, Helen Jones is a woman stifled by her society. Her garments consists of fabrics that flow easily with movement, similarly to the existence she dreams of one day obtaining. I represent her in warm, natural tones that reflect and echo natural forms such as flower petals. Brandt chose to represent the Young Woman, also known as Helen Jones, with three very different actresses. Helen Jones contains a great deal of thought that made it reasonable to share such a presence with at least two other figures. All three of these actresses were present on stage throughout the duration of the play as a group of hovering alter egos. However, as the play progressed, each actress playing Helen Jones took the stage as the predominant Helen Jones in at least three consecutive scenes. These switches in character are found when something profound happens in her life.

The first being her marriage and her uncomfortable honeymoon which results in her switch of character once her baby is born. The first Helen Jones is show running late to her office job which later leads her to a phase of pre-marital confusion. Her costumes stayed within a childlike and innocent color palette of pastel pinks, greens, creams, and light browns. The pinks represented the flower petals, whereas the greens and browns represented the stem, leaves, and soil. Her representation echoed natural forms not only in the color but also within the material itself. I chose to present her in a light pink knit sweater, with cream lace on the side, which is reminiscent of her the veins of flower petals and the roots in which it grows. In addition to this her sweater, a multiple rounded collared blouse was worn underneath it; letting the idea of Helen Jones as a flower in a rigid world creep into the minds of the viewers. Her pink skirt was then layered with a brown chiffon fabric that emphasized her elegant and graceful movements, in contrast to the stiff movements of her fellow workers and neighbors.

The next switch happens after she gives birth to her daughter, and this Helen Jones rebels against her routine and goes out to a speakeasy, resulting in an affair. We first see Helen Jones in a plain hospital gown in a hospital bed. This garment speaks to her vulnerable state. The scene shifts to a speakeasy where Helen Jones and her co-worker, the Telephone girl, are found with two other men. Helen Jones wears a cream lace skirt that is layered with a cream and gold floral beaded blouse that is draped over with a white sheer beaded shawl. The beading reminds the audience of her now affluent position due to her recent uncomfortable marriage to her corporate husband. She is the only one who wears gold and cream. In a way, this displays her desire for purity and even foreshadows her entrance to a higher spiritual place, after her execution, as something similar to an angel. This foreshadowing comes from the statement made by her lover: “..you know what you seem like to me?...an Angel. Just like an Angel” (Treadwell 43).

This following switch from one actress of Helen Jones to another is made once she returns home from her affair which results in her neurotic and distant behavior with her husband. Thus, following in his murder and her overall demise. This actress was put in a cream dress with a brown chiffon overlay and a cream lace collar. This brown chiffon fabric is reminiscent of her character at the beginning of the play that indicated her free flowing movement. However, now it encompasses a larger portion of her body. This helps the audience make the connection that her desires from the beginning has not been suppressed, but strengthened by her oppressed life style. After she comes to an epiphany to murder her husband, the next time we see her is in a court room, sitting in a witness stand. She quickly changed from her free flowing brown dress to a black and gray prison dress. She now bears the colors of her society as she sits in the middle of the institution itself. As she is proclaimed as guilty for the murder of her husband, she is quickly changed into a black, pleated dress as she awaits her execution. This representation shows her loss of identity and life through the colors that she wears. The colors and structure of her costumes made her unique from the other members of her society. Now, in all black, her plight for freedom drove her deeper into the machine in which she attempted to escape.

The costumes were not only there to play the role of bringing an overall identity to the society or to specific characters through color and shapes, but also as a tool used to remind the audience of certain characters. In the *Prohibited* scene, taking place in a speakeasy, the Telephone Girl is found in a blue satin dress with fringed shoulders and a white beaded front that echoes the signature Art Deco triangular form. This form is found on her office sweater in the first scene, where is introduced. Due to the amount characters played by each actor, creating a recognizable form for this ensemble character who appears more than once, was a crucial part in reminding the audience of her existence in this play, as well as allowing the audience to perceive development of her character.

Another important goal of my costumes, was to create an understanding of her society, by using relatable situations, and inserting unusual appearances. The Doctors and Nurses in the *Maternal* scene were in all white and all wore round clear glasses. Creating a cult-like appearance for the medical workers reminded the audience of the mechanically driven society in which Helen Jones lives in. Medical workers are supposed to be the caring sector of the government, therefore showing their cold, distant attitudes creates an eerie, uncomfortable feeling that the audience could dread and understand. Unlike many characters, the main nurse was the only one who shows a sense of remorse within her tone of voice. Due to this contrast in tone, Brandt and I decided to represent this dash of warmth in her costumes. This was signified

with a row of pink-peach pleats that hung at the hem of her nurse's dress, which showed her attempt at hiding such a trait, but also the obvious appearance of it.

Other key characters in this play developed an understanding and explanation for Helen Jones' unique perspective in life. One of these key characters is her mother. As Helen Jones cries out to her mother for help and advice, her mother turns her back on her, and manipulates Helen into a feeling of guilt for having such intentions of freedom. The mother of Helen Jones is represented with a long, bold striped black and white dress with a dull blue apron, and dark deepen shadows under her eyes. Her make-up is the most intense in shadows due being the result of living as a traditional woman and managing a life in an industrial world. She is the most worn out, and tired of all the characters. Helen Jones looks to her mother as a possible route that her life could take, and she dreads this idea.

The purpose of the costumes in this production of *Machinal* takes a variety of forms. One of which is found in the color palette, material, and structure of each costume. These components are used to indicate differences of goals and personalities carried by each character. Costumes also serve as a tool of reminding the viewers/audience members, which makes the understanding of the developing plot a simple process. Another use of the costumes can be found in creating an emphasis on key characters who help to understand the plight of Helen Jones, which conclusively leads to her death.
