

# BACKSTORY



BY MASHA OBOLENSKY

# Not Enough Air



Your behind-the-scenes look at TimeLine productions

YESTERDAY'S STORIES.  
TODAY'S TOPICS.

**TimeLine**  
Theatre Company

Dear Friends,

In a strange way, *Not Enough Air* — a story of what inspired Sophie Treadwell to write her landmark play *Machinal* — has been a long time coming for TimeLine.

Twelve years ago I sat with five colleagues in an apartment on the North Side of Chicago, and we hatched an idea that would turn into TimeLine Theatre Company. Our ringleader that night, Nick Bowling, proposed doing history plays as the focus of our company. Puzzled looks ensued. Then we began a passionate discussion to ensure that our new company would do thrilling, innovative pieces as opposed to dusty, academic texts that belonged more on a shelf than a stage. As the conversation continued and we debated what exactly constituted a “history play,” Nick boldly blurted out, “*Machinal!* THAT’S the type of play we would do!”

*Machinal*, the ground-breaking 1928 Expressionist drama inspired by Ruth Snyder’s murder trial and execution, may not have been in your Drama 101 syllabus. In fact, even if you are a theater aficionado,

you may never have heard of it much less seen a production of it. But as you’ll read in this *Backstory* and in our lobby display, it is considered one of the most important plays of the early 20th Century. It brought a female playwright to the Broadway stage (six years before Lillian Hellman, by the way) and established a new theatrical style, foregoing naturalism in favor of a heightened sense of reality and introducing sex, violence and a profound new view of the role of women at home and in the workplace.

So *Machinal* is a play that TimeLine’s company members have loved for years. Nick’s assertion in 1997 that we should produce it proved slow to come to fruition, but our interest remained strong and we discussed it repeatedly through the years.

Then came a new twist to our *Machinal*/Sophie Treadwell fascination.

In 2006 I had coffee with Derek Goldman, a former Chicago director/writer/teacher and long-time TimeLine supporter. He told me of a friend in Boston named Masha Obolensky who was working on a play

called *Not Enough Air* that he thought would be a beautiful fit for TimeLine. It was about Sophie Treadwell and what inspired her to write *Machinal*. Immediately intrigued, I asked him to put me in touch with Masha.

Thus began an exhilarating two-year process that has included a back-and-forth of nearly a dozen drafts of *Not Enough Air* and two workshops to develop the script.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Derek, not only for introducing us to Masha and her thrilling play, but also for playing an integral role in the development of the script. Last winter, Masha and I traveled to Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where Derek is the head of the theater department, for an intensive workshop of *Not Enough Air* that he directed. It was one of the most exhilarating workshops I’ve ever been a part of.

Masha, a true collaborator, wrestled with big ideas, made elaborate changes and treated the process like a laboratory experiment. She made big cuts here, savvy additions there, bold re-envisionings throughout — all free of ego and with



## In the mold of Sophie Treadwell, yet with her own voice, we proudly introduce you to a fascinating new playwright, Masha Obolensky.

an eagerness to hear other people’s ideas, yet with a distinct point of view and acute sensibility.

I got back on the plane exhausted, elated and knowing that *Not Enough Air* would have its world premiere at TimeLine.

Prior to the D.C. workshop we had a provocative, unique and bold play unlike any I had read before — a script that all our company members were enthused about. We came out of the workshop with an even stronger relationship with a dynamic new writer and partner, and an even better play.

However, the process of developing a play always includes some hitches, and ours came with the realization that Derek’s obligations at Georgetown would not enable him to spend the needed time in Chicago to direct our premiere. So he graciously, and seamlessly, passed the baton to

Nick Bowling, who started TimeLine’s fascination with *Machinal* in the first place a dozen years ago.

A second workshop was held in Chicago with Nick, Masha and Derek that added more insight to the play’s structure and development. It was equally productive and exciting, leading us now to one of the most satisfying experiences a theater company can have: Giving birth to a new American play.

The ideology that prompted Nick’s 1997 statement is all coming to fruition: I assure you that this play is anything but dusty and academic! And in the mold of Sophie Treadwell, yet with her own voice, we proudly introduce you to a fascinating new playwright, Masha Obolensky.

But, as they say in late-night infomercials: *That’s not all!*

We’re giving you a double-bill to round out your

experience. In conjunction with *Not Enough Air*, we’re presenting concert readings of *Machinal* on Sunday and Monday evenings from Feb. 8 through March 2. I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity to see the 1928 play that inspired not only Masha’s *Not Enough Air* but also this grand experiment of presenting “history plays” that we now call TimeLine Theatre Company.

We do it all to continue fulfilling our initial intent: to forge a connection between the past and the present and to get you talking about it.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'PJ' with a flourish.

## the playwright

Sophie Treadwell was born Oct. 3, 1885, in Stockton, Calif. Her mother, Nettie, and father, Alfred, had a troubled marriage. Her father, a justice of the peace, was a stern authoritarian who left the family sometime between 1890 and 1891. Nettie followed her husband to San Francisco and Sophie lived both with him and apart from him for several years. Treadwell's complex feelings about marriage were shaped by her parents' troubled marriage; her resentment of her mother, who didn't divorce Alfred in spite of

saying she would; and the financial hardship she and her mother faced because of the separation.

Treadwell attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she performed in numerous plays. She graduated in 1906 with a Bachelor of Letters degree. After graduation, she worked numerous freelance newspaper and teaching jobs and dabbled in vaudeville as an actress. In 1908, a friend, drama critic Constance Skinner, arranged a job for her typing the memoir of actress Helena

Modjeska. Modjeska was supportive of Treadwell's nascent playwrighting efforts.

Soon Treadwell took a job with the *San Francisco Bulletin*, where she would meet the man she would marry, the noted sportswriter William O. McGeehan, known to friends as "Mac." After a brief courtship, they were married Jan. 27, 1910.

Six months later Treadwell was admitted to St. Helena Sanatorium, suffering from a nervous breakdown and a sudden loss of weight.

The marriage was complicated but amiable. There



Sophie Treadwell, circa 1925. (Photo by Bachrach. Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 21, File 10)

may have been tension as Treadwell's fame as a journalist grew. In 1914, McGeehan accepted a job at the *New York Evening Journal*. It would be a year before Treadwell joined her husband in New York City.

In New York she kept her name, and often her own residence, in keeping with the tenets of Lucy Stone, an early suffragist and feminist who maintained the necessity of women keeping an identity independent from their husbands.

Treadwell and Mac seem to have enjoyed each other's company and respected each other's work and need for individuality — and to have allowed each other a great deal of freedom.

Their living arrangements would have been considered unique for the early 1900s, especially since women did not receive the vote until 1920. This freedom allowed them to develop separate friends and interests; indeed, in 1916, Treadwell had a brief but intense affair with the artist Maynard Dixon. However, she and Mac never lost their affectionate relationship and frequently took driving trips together in The States and in Europe. When Treadwell adopted a son in 1949, 16 years after Mac's death, she named him William Treadwell; perhaps in honor of Mac, whose given name was William.

Treadwell's professional life was varied and acclaimed. As a journalist, she won notice for her serial exposé "An Outcast at the Christian Door," in which she disguised herself as a homeless prostitute and attempted to seek aid at numerous churches and aid societies. During World War I, she was one of a small number of female war correspondents. Officials of the countries she visited would not guarantee her safety, unsure what to do with a woman who wished to visit the front lines. In 1920 she covered the Mexican Revolution for the *New York Tribune* and

## TIMELINE:

## Sophie Treadwell's life and work

- **October 3, 1885** Sophie Anita Treadwell is born in Stockton, Calif.
- **1890** Her father, Alfred Treadwell, abandons her and her mother, Nettie, and moves to San Francisco.
- **1906** Treadwell graduates from the University of California at Berkeley with a Bachelor of Letters degree.
- **1907** Treadwell writes her first play, *Le Grand Prix*. She also freelances for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* and is an actress in vaudeville.
- **1908** Treadwell is hired to type actress Helena Modjeska's memoir; the *San Francisco Bulletin* hires her as a feature writer and theater critic.
- **1910** Treadwell marries William O. McGeehan, a sportswriter for the *Bulletin*. Six months later, she enters a sanitarium to recover from a nervous breakdown.
- **1911** She finishes the play *The High Cost*, formerly called *Constance Darrow*, and writes *The Settlement*.
- **1914** Treadwell gains a reputation in the Bay Area for her journalism because of her interview of the author Jack London and her serial, "An Outcast at the Christian Door," an exposé in which she poses as a homeless prostitute and sought assistance from various churches and aid societies. William O. McGeehan moves to New York City to work for the *New York Evening Journal*.

## Special Events and Resources

## the conversation

At TimeLine we look forward to the chance to engage our audience in conversations inspired by our productions. We hope you will join us for these special events during the run of *Not Enough Air*.

## Sunday Scholars Series

After the show on **Sunday, Feb. 8** is our Sunday Scholars Series, a one-hour panel discussion featuring experts talking about the themes and issues of the play. Moderated by Time-

Line Board member Peter H. Kuntz, **admission to this event is free**. Visit our Web site at [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com) to learn more.

## Company Member Discussion

The heart of TimeLine is our Company members, who shape the artistic vision and choose the programming. On **Sunday, March 1**, join them for a post-show discussion about how *Not Enough Air* came to TimeLine's stage.

## Post-Show Discussions

On **Thursdays, Jan. 29, Feb. 5 and 12; Sundays, Feb. 15 and 22** and **Wednesday, March 4**, stay for **free post-show discussions** moderated by a TimeLine Company member and featuring members of the production staff and cast.

## Other Resources

**Historical lobby displays, a study guide** and much more are available online at [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com).

in 1921 she was granted an exclusive two-day interview with revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.

Treadwell also was writing plays while working as a journalist. Her scripts and subjects were as varied as her journalistic work; they also were frequently inspired by her journalism and firsthand experiences.

Although best known for the Expressionist play *Machinal*, which opened on Broadway in 1928, Treadwell enjoyed experimenting stylistically. Her work included plays that followed a traditional three-act structure and plays that incorporated music, comedy and social drama in a naturalistic style. Treadwell often took an active role in her plays beyond

writing: She produced and sometimes acted in or directed them, a rarity for a woman of the era.

The latter part of Treadwell's life is characterized by travel, a shift in writing focus and her continued interest in social issues.

After the deaths of McGeehan in 1933 and her mother in 1934, plus the failure of

her play *Lone Valley* in 1933 (it closed three days after opening on Broadway), she traveled widely. In 1949, she adopted a German boy after seeing and writing about the economic hardship in post-World War II Germany.

Treadwell stopped writing for the stage in 1941, after the failure of her stage adaptation of her novel *A*

*Hope for a Harvest*, about her experiences trying to make her family's ranch successful.

Between 1956 and 1964 she traveled, until failing health forced her to settle in Tucson, Arizona. She lived to see *Machinal* revived off-Broadway in 1960.

Sophie Treadwell died Feb. 20, 1970, in Tucson.

## The Snyder-Gray Murder Trial

# the inspiration

In 1927, the trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray was a sensational murder story that created a media frenzy. More than 180 reporters covered the trial and executions.

Snyder was a Long Island housewife who, with her lover, Judd Gray, a corset salesman, conspired to murder her husband after first taking out a \$48,000 insurance policy on his life that included a double indemnity clause. After several alleged failed attempts on his life, the pair apparently beat a sleeping Albert Snyder with a window sash weight, tied a picture wire to his neck and stuffed a chloroform-soaked rag in his mouth. They then

## Ruth Snyder was the first woman sentenced to death in New York State in the 20th Century.

disguised the scene to look like a robbery. Snyder's and Gray's stories quickly unraveled under police scrutiny, and each blamed the other as the originator of the plot and the one to give the final blow to Albert Snyder.

Gray issued a statement to the press, "I warn all men against bad liquor and evil women. If I had not taken to drink, I would not have met the woman who has placed me in the position I am in now. Bad liquor and evil women make a combination too strong for any man."

The characterization of Snyder as a femme fatale was one that would be repeated and embellished by the press throughout the trial. It was Sophie Treadwell who described Snyder as "fatty," pointing out that she was more matronly than she was portrayed by others.

Snyder and Gray, who were tried together, were convicted of murder and sentenced to death in the electric chair. Snyder was the first woman sentenced to death in New York State in the 20th Century. (Notably, the jury was

comprised entirely of men, as women were not allowed to serve as jurors on murder trials at that time.)

This was not the first time Treadwell had covered a trial of a woman accused of murder. In fact, she had covered them for several newspapers. The female journalists who covered such trials were often derisively called "sob sisters."

Adding to the media frenzy was a photograph of Snyder's execution. *The New York Daily News* contrived to get a cameraman into the execution chamber at Sing Sing Prison. Afraid that the paper's staff photographers would be identified,

they hired *Chicago Tribune* photographer Tom Howard and brought him to New York City. Howard attached a camera to his leg and lifted the leg of his trousers to take the photo at the moment of Snyder's execution.

The crime and trial inspired Treadwell to write the play *Machinal*. The Snyder-Gray murder also has inspired other writers and filmmakers. It was the basis for James M. Cain's novels *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as well as the subsequent film adaptations. The film *The Picture Snatcher* features an incident much like Howard's photo of Snyder in the electric chair.

- **1914** Treadwell becomes a supporter of the principals of the suffragist Lucy Stone, who advocated that married women should keep their own names and campaigned for equality for men and women in all aspects of civil and social life. When the loose organization becomes formalized as the Lucy Stone League, Treadwell will become an active member.
- **1915** Treadwell moves to New York but soon leaves for France for four months to cover World War I for the *Bulletin* and *Harper's Weekly*. After her return, she is hired by the *New York American*. Her one-act play *Sympathy* is produced in San Francisco; it is the first of her plays to be produced.
- **1916** Treadwell has a brief but intense affair with the artist Maynard Dixon.
- **1918** Treadwell, writes, acts in and produces *Claws*.
- **1920** Treadwell covers the Mexican Revolution for the *New York Herald Tribune*.
- **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.
- **1921** Treadwell, writing for the *New York Tribune*, is the only foreign journalist to be granted an exclusive two-day interview with revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.
- **1922** Treadwell's play *Gringo*, based on her journalistic experience in Mexico, is produced on Broadway.
- **1923** Treadwell spends the summer studying acting with Richard Boleslavsky and a small group of actors.

**“The plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband, an ordinary young woman, any woman.”** —Treadwell’s script note from *Machinal*

The title *Machinal* — the French word for mechanical, or automatic — evokes playwright Sophie Treadwell’s concerns about the machine-like nature of the modern world. Indeed, when the play was first produced in London, it was titled *The Life Machine*.

*Machinal* is an Expressionist play; it focuses on revealing the emotional reality of its main character rather than a literal or naturalistic representation of the events of her life. Expressionism, which was still experimental at the time, relies on short scenes, two-dimensional characters that represent types, short lines of deliberately repetitive language, monologues, and, in *Machinal*, machine sounds and noises to create an overall feeling of mechanization, entrapment and alienation. These stylistic devices are particularly noticeable in the opening scene, which takes place in an office, dehumanized and vague but full of the repeated phrases of co-workers and the constant buzz of typewriters, telephones and machines.



Production photo of the 1928 Broadway production of *Machinal*. (Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 13, Scrapbook 10)

Not unlike a medieval morality play, *Machinal* follows a set of stations, or pivotal scenes, in the life of the protagonist. The play is divided into nine scenes in the life of a young woman, who functions as an Everywoman. Each scene depicts a subsequent phase in the young woman’s life: “To Business,” “At Home,” “Honeymoon,” “Maternal,” “Prohibited,” “Intimate,” “Domestic,” “The Law” and “A Machine.” As Treadwell notes in her stage directions, “The plan is to tell this story by showing the different phases of life that the woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any place, any peace. The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized.”

When it opened on Broadway in 1928, *Machinal* was an unqualified success. *New*

*York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson saw the play twice and compared it favorably to Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*. He called it “a triumph of individual distinction, gleaming with intangible beauty,” adding that “in a hundred years ... it should still be vital and vivid.”

In 1933, *Machinal* also had two successful runs in the Soviet Union, where Treadwell received royalties for her work, which was unusual for a Soviet production. The play, which was included in the anthology *The Best Plays of 1928-1929*, was revived off-Broadway in 1960.

The initial Broadway production starred Zita Johann (who would later star with Boris Karloff in the 1932 film *The Mummy*) as the young woman and young Clark Gable as the lover.

Sophie Treadwell, Ruth Snyder and the character of the young woman in *Machinal* all suffered from neurasthenia.

Neurasthenia, a term coined in the late 1880s by George Beard, an American psychiatrist, covered a broad range of symptoms, including fatigue, listlessness, forgetfulness, anxiety, insomnia, pain, heart palpitations, fainting and trouble breathing.

Beard believed the symptoms were brought on by the stresses of the urban world and excessive mental stimulation.

The disorder was believed to be psychological in origin, and patients often were prescribed a “rest cure,”

although electroshock therapy occasionally was used as well.

The writers Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf were diagnosed with neurasthenia and prescribed “rest cures.” However, it was not considered a woman’s disorder: It was a common diagnosis for soldiers returning from World War I.

Today, neurasthenia is no longer recognized as a diagnosis, and past diagnoses likely covered a wide range of illnesses, many of which are physical rather than psychological in origin. Illnesses that might have been diagnosed as neurasthenia include chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, as well as post-traumatic stress.

Treadwell and her husband Willaim O. McGeehan at their home in Newton, Conn., circa early 1930s. (Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 21, Folder 14)



■ **1924** Treadwell sues actor John Barrymore for plagiarism for failing to return her play on the life of Edgar Allen Poe after expressing interest in playing the role, then announcing he would play Poe in a play written by his wife. She received much negative publicity for the lawsuit.

■ **1925** Treadwell acts in and produces her play *O Nightingale* on Broadway.

■ **1927** Treadwell covers the murder trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray.

■ **1928** *Machinal*, her play inspired by the Snyder-Gray trial, is produced on Broadway, starring Zita Johann and Clark Gable.

■ **1929** *Ladies Leave* is produced on Broadway.

■ **1930** Treadwell and McGeehan collaborate on the play *A Million Dollar Gate*. The couple travels in Europe and Africa. Treadwell stays in a sanitarium while in Vienna.

■ **1931** *Machinal* debuts in London under the title *The Life Machine*.

■ **1933** After traveling to Moscow for a production of *Machinal*, Treadwell is disappointed in Communism and writes *Promised Land*. Her play *Lone Valley* closes on Broadway after three performances. William O. McGeehan dies.

■ **1934** Treadwell’s mother, Nettie, dies.

■ **1936** *Plumes in the Dust*, Treadwell’s play on Edgar Allen Poe, is produced on Broadway. Treadwell travels to Egypt and the Far East.

■ **1938** Treadwell writes the novel *A Hope for a Harvest* based on her experiences trying to make her family’s ranch in California profitable.



Recently TimeLine Artistic Director PJ Powers (PJP) interviewed playwright Masha Obolensky (MO) about the experience of writing her play *Not Enough Air*.

**(PJP)** This is your first full-length produced play, yet you've had a wealth of theater experience as a performer, director and teacher. How did you turn your attention to playwriting?

**(MO)** Way back when, I was an acting apprentice at Actor's Theatre of Louisville, where I was exposed to the work of Anne Bogart, Tina Landau and the SITl Company. I observed Tina developing her play *1969* for the Humana Festival. She wrote the piece throughout the rehearsal process, based on the work generated by her cast. I found it all very exciting, and later when I moved to New York City the first thing I did was to get involved with SITl. Most influential for me was a series of workshops that I

did with Tina on Composition, which is a method for creating original work. I was greatly empowered by this work, and I went on to create or be involved with many original theater pieces.

In fact, in writing *Not Enough Air*, while it was something that I wrote alone sitting in front of a computer, it was greatly motivated by two theater artists, Patricia Chilsen and Allison Dubin, both of whom I had taken a Composition workshop with. In the beginning of my writing process, we would meet weekly to read and discuss. Allison ended up directing the first reading of *Not Enough Air*, and Patricia read the role of Sophie Treadwell.

**(PJP)** How did you first encounter *Machinal*, the play upon which *Not Enough Air* is based?

**(MO)** I think I was looking for monologue material. I used to do a cutting from the character of The Young Woman as an audition monologue. I was immediately drawn to what I read about Sophie in the intro to the play. I was fascinated by the fact that she was both a journalist and a playwright, and I wondered why I couldn't find any of her other plays — she had written 30 of them — but all I could find was this one. I wondered what happened before and after *Machinal*.

**(PJP)** What prompted you to start writing *Not Enough Air*?

**(MO)** Again, Allison and Patricia had a lot to do with it. We three wanted to work on something together. I had this idea in the back of my head, and I put it forward. They were into it, so I began. It ended up taking a long time and the three of us did several other projects together before I presented a full draft. Another motivating factor was, I must say, boredom. I was temping back then and had a lot of down time. So, in order to not lose my mind, I wrote.

**(PJP)** Thanks to our mutual friend Derek Goldman, I happily discovered *Not Enough Air* in the summer of 2006, when he had you send me an early draft to read. And now, 2½ years later, it will have its world premiere on TimeLine's stage. Can you talk about how the play has evolved?

**(MO)** I have mined this material for years now, and, depending on the time in my life, I have found myself drawn to a different thread in the piece. I was initially most attracted to the Sophie/Young Woman relationship. Then, with my first workshop with TimeLine — which happened at Georgetown University with Derek directing — I found myself putting my focus on Ruth and Sophie. And, because of a conversation we (you, Derek and I) had, I decided to have The Young Woman and Ruth played by different actors. This led to me fleshing out both of these characters more. Then I came to Chicago for another workshop, this time directed by Nick Bowling. Nick was very attracted to the Mac/Sophie relationship. And with Janet and David, there was this great chemistry, so I found myself drawn more to their dynamic.

Really, I was so energized by all of the TimeLine actors, and I was very productive after my visit to Chicago. I had these very vivid voices in my mind that helped me to access new possibilities within all of the relationships. And Nick had taken this big leap by getting parts of the play up on its feet — I had been yearning for that. I had had plenty of readings, but the physical and visual storytelling aspects had not been tried. So that was very enlightening.

**(PJP)** Stylistically, how did Sophie Treadwell's expressionistic writing impact the structure of *Not Enough Air*?

**(MO)** Treadwell creates this pressurized environment — there is really no breath in *Machinal* with the exception of one scene — the scene between The Young Woman and her lover. She created this feeling with the use of repetition and charged situation and language, and then also with sound — she used sound for emotional effect. The sounds of the world were written into the play. They are also written into my play — although I mean them to be only suggestions or encouragement for the sound designer to be very involved in the process. I have also tried to create

■ **1941** Treadwell turns *A Hope for a Harvest* into a play. After the failure of the play she turns from writing plays and focuses on other forms of writing. She works as a correspondent in Mexico for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

■ **1949** Treadwell tours Europe; while in Vienna, she spends two more months in a sanitarium. She writes about postwar Germany for the *New York Herald Tribune* — and adopts a German boy, naming him William Treadwell.

■ **1950** Treadwell writes *A String of Pearls*.

■ **1953** A television adaptation of *A Hope for a Harvest*, produced by the Theatre Guild, airs on the "U.S. Steel Hour."

■ **1954** Treadwell sells the family ranch in Stockton, Calif.

■ **1956-1964** Treadwell divides her time between Spain, Vienna and Newton, Conn.

■ **1959** Treadwell's novel *One Fierce Hour and Sweet* is published.

■ **1960** *Machinal* is revived off-Broadway at The Gate Theatre.

■ **1965** Treadwell moves to Tucson, Ariz.

■ **1967** Treadwell's play *Woman with Lilies* is produced at the University of Arizona under the title *Now He Doesn't Want to Play*.

■ **February 20, 1970** Treadwell dies in Tucson. She donates her body to the Department of Anatomy at the University of Arizona in Tucson and wills her copyrights to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson for the education of Native American children.

a pressurized environment — one that, like in *Machinal*, is driven by men, the men are the machine. And then there are brief moments of breath. Also, by having three men play many different parts, this accentuates this machine idea. Even though Mac is this man who holds deep meaning for Sophie, he also steps back into the machine — he is, without necessarily wanting to be, a part of this machine.

My play is different structurally than *Machinal*, in that Treadwell wrote her play in nine very distinct episodes. I originally tried to mirror that, but it didn't work for me. But my play has similar abrupt transitions — almost like jump cuts in a film. We are in the *New York Herald Tribune* offices, then we are in the courtroom, then we are in Sophie's apartment — again this is meant to be a bit jarring, not flowing or natural. This society is in overdrive, and in order to live in this society, individuals must keep up.

**(PJP)** What surprised or intrigued you the most when you started doing research on Sophie?

**(MO)** I was intrigued by her ability to achieve so much — she was a playwright, journalist, novelist, producer,

actor and director in a male-dominated society. I was also intrigued by her illness. She comes across in her journals as fiercely devoted to her work and very determined. She is aware of what she is up against, and she is engaged in the fight. I mean, she was an actor, director, producer and writer because of a need to feel in control. She did not like to be out of control.

But at the same time there was a part of her that was frail — the fight exhausts her, and she is sensitive. She suffers from these “break-downs” throughout her life. I thought it was interesting that Ruth Snyder also suffered from similar ailments. And then Treadwell wrote the character of The Young Woman as someone who also suffers from “nervous weakness.” Back then it was called neurasthenia. I myself suffer something called “adrenal insufficiency” — from what I can gather, if I had been around back then, I too would have been diagnosed with neurasthenia.

Which makes me think of another intriguing aspect: From the get-go I was intrigued by the fact that Treadwell decided to write a play about Ruth Snyder rather than to cover her story solely journalistically.

I liked the idea of a woman interpreting another woman and then bringing myself into the picture — this idea of a woman, interpreting a woman who is in turn interpreting another woman. And how, in this process, a character is formed that is part imagination, part fact, part autobiography, part message.

There really is so much that was intriguing — her relationship with William McGeehan, their separate residences and their various arrangements.

**(PJP)** Sophie was a woman who continually pushed against the norm and tried to shatter barriers of the status quo. If she were around today, how do you think she'd respond to the current state of journalism and American theater?

**(MO)** Well, it seems to me that she was concerned with integrity in journalism — the Ruth Snyder-Judd Gray trial could be considered the first celebrity trial. Because of the advent of the radio, there was the ability to sensationalize on a large scale. The trial became this dramatic narrative that was often more concerned with being interesting than being truthful or substantive. Ruth Snyder was treated

## “Treadwell was always looking for the human element in her stories, and she went after stories that meant something to her and then dug very deep.”

viciously by the media. She really became this evil character in a radio drama: She was totally de-humanized, to the point that on the day of her execution there were crowds of people wearing pins and holding up signs, all very angry, and chanting “Execute her.”

It seems that Treadwell was always looking for the human element in her stories, and she went after stories that meant something to her and then dug very deep. So if the Snyder-Gray trial was disturbing to her, who knows what she would think of all our celebrity trials. And then since 9/11 when many across the country experienced the horror on television, I think our expectations that the news be a compelling and even entertaining narrative has only worsened. I think Sophie might find that aspect of our media to be upsetting.

But, then again, there are so many outlets for news today, she could get her voice heard — she was a big journal writer, maybe she'd even have her own blog.

And then, theater ... Well, there recently was an article in *The New York Times* about the nationwide bias against female playwrights — looking at the Off-Broadway 2008-09 season, men are being produced at the largest institutions at four times the rate that women are. So Sophie Treadwell would still be up against a lot.

**(PJP)** With our mission of doing plays inspired by history, I'm always curious to see how playwrights use historical research in the writing of their plays. How has it been for you?

**(MO)** I did a lot of research in the beginning. Treadwell's papers are kept at the University of Arizona, so I went to Tucson and had just

amazing access to all of this material. But after doing the research, I really sort of left it behind.

I decided that I wanted to create my own character of “Sophie” and that while she was inspired by the real Sophie Treadwell, she is really a fictional creation. Like with *Machinal*, the character of The Young Woman shared a lot of the same circumstances as Ruth Snyder: She was a stenographer, stuck in a loveless marriage to an older man, she had a strained relationship with her mother, committed murder with her lover, etc. But The Young Woman was not Ruth Snyder, she was her own thing. Same thing here. I have tried to get at the essence of this woman, but I am not trying to specifically educate people about the life of Sophie Treadwell.

**(PJP)** What's coming up next for you?

**(MO)** I am getting my MFA in Playwriting at Boston University. And I am working on a play that also takes place in the 1920s in America and is an exploration of girls' sexual desire and the physical and social consequences that come with acting on that desire.

## JOIN US!

### Step Into Time is Friday, March 27, 2009

We hope you will join us for TimeLine Theatre's annual Step Into Time benefit, which will take place on Friday, March 27, 2009.

Step Into Time is our single largest fundraising effort of the year. The success of this event is essential to

ensuring that TimeLine can continue to wow audiences with our award-winning theatrical productions. Attendees will enjoy a world-class party, featuring gourmet cuisine and spirits and entertainment created exclusively for the event.

For full details about the event or to order tickets please visit the Step Into Time Web site at [timelinetheatre.com/step\\_into\\_time](http://timelinetheatre.com/step_into_time) or call Lindsey Becker at (773) 281-8463 x26.



Left: TimeLine's 2008 Step Into Time: *The White City* transported Preston Bradley Hall at the Chicago Cultural Center back to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1898.

Above: Members of the cast of TimeLine's *Fiorello!* performed at Step Into Time: *The White City*.

## Upcoming Donor Events

### PLAY READING EVENT

**February 10, 2009**

Donors giving \$150 or more are invited to join us for a reading of a play under consideration for next season. TimeLine Company members will be on hand to answer questions about the reading and the season selection process.

### DONOR BREAKFAST

**May 31, 2009**

Guests are invited to join Artistic Director PJ Powers and Managing Director Elizabeth Auman as they discuss their vision for TimeLine Theatre. Pastries, juice and coffee will be served. Invitations are extended exclusively to donors giving \$500 or more.

*Dates and programming are subject to change. Visit [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com) for updated information, or call Lindsey Becker at (773) 281-8463 x26.*

## Event Recap: Dessert On Stage

On December 3 more than 25 donors joined the cast of *A House With No Walls* to celebrate the second production of TimeLine's 2008-09 season. Champagne and sweets donated by A Taste of Heaven were served to the group, who mingled and chatted about the provocative and entertaining production.

Artistic Director PJ Powers thanked the many donors in attendance for sustaining the theater. "We treat every donation as an investment, and through 12 years of balanced budgets we are always working to ensure that TimeLine is a sound investment for you."

Dessert on Stage was created as a way to thank our generous donors giving \$250 or more in support of TimeLine Theatre. TimeLine offers many exciting behind-the-scenes benefits to donors. To make a gift or learn more about our benefits

of giving, please contact Lindsey Becker at (773) 281-8463 x26 or email [lindsey@timelinetheatre.com](mailto:lindsey@timelinetheatre.com).

You may also make a gift by visiting [timelinetheatre.com/donate](http://timelinetheatre.com/donate)



Top: Board member John Bierbusse with donors Michelle and Steven Cucchiaro.

Above: TimeLine Managing Director Elizabeth K. Auman with donor Nancy Bradt.

Below (from left): Donor Kathleen Ruhl; *A House With No Walls* cast members Amber Starr Friendly, Mark Richard and Leslie Ann Sheppard; and donors Nancy Schaefer and Chester Kamin.



## BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

*Dramaturgy @ Historical Research by Maren Robinson*

*Written by Maren Robinson, PJ Powers & Lindsey Becker*

*Edited by Karen A. Callaway & Lara Goetsch*

*Photography and Graphic Design by Lara Goetsch*

*Not Enough Air Photo by Ryan Robinson*

*Backstory is published four times each season.*

*Pictured on front cover (from left): Actor Zach Kenney; actors Danica Ivancevic and David Parkes; actor Mechelle Moe; scenic designer Brian Sidney Bembridge; actor Terry Hamilton; and actor Janet Ulrich Brooks.*

*Pictured on back cover (from left): Actor David Parkes; lighting designer Heather Gilbert; sound designer Andrew Hansen; director Nick Bowling; wardrobe supervisor Kristin Eaves and costume designer Lindsey Pate; and actors Zach Kenney, Terry Hamilton and Janet Ulrich Brooks.*

### **Our Mission:**

TimeLine Theatre presents stories **inspired by history** that connect with today's social and political issues.

Our collaborative artistic team produces provocative theatre that engages, educates, entertains and enlightens.





January 24 - March 22, 2009

previews 1/21 - 1/23

by **MASHA OBOLENSKY**  
 directed by **NICK BOWLING**

This world premiere drama follows famed journalist-turned-playwright Sophie Treadwell as she is drawn into the real-life tragedy of Ruth Snyder's 1928 murder trial. Treadwell is haunted by Ruth's story and finds herself compelled to bring it to the stage in the form of her landmark play *Machinal*, acclaimed as one of the high points of expressionist theater on the American stage. In this astonishing exploration of media sensationalism and ethics as well as interpretation and manipulation in the creative process, Obolensky illuminates the lives of two women who pushed against the limitations and expectations imposed upon them by society.

**The Cast**

Mechelle Moe\*:  
*The Young Woman*  
 Janet Ulrich Brooks: *Sophie*  
 Terry Hamilton: *Man #3*  
 Danica Ivancevic:  
*Ruth Snyder*  
 Zach Kenney: *Man #1*  
 David Parkes: *Man #2*

\* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers.

**The Production Team**

Brian Sidney Bembridge,  
 U.S.A.: *Scenic Designer*  
 Lindsey Pate:  
*Costume Designer*  
 Heather Gilbert. U.S.A.:  
*Lighting Designer*  
 Andrew Hansen: *Original Music & Sound Designer*  
 Tramon Crofford:  
*Properties Designer*  
 Maren Robinson:  
*Dramaturg*  
 Ana Espinos:  
*Stage Manager*  
 James Ogden:  
*Production Manager*

Those designers and scenic artists identified by U.S.A. are members of United Scenic Artists, IATSE Local 829, AFL-CIO.

**JANUARY 2009**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

**FEBRUARY 2009**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

**MARCH 2009**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22						

- Regular Performance**
- Preview Performance**
- Opening Night *Sold Out***
- Post-Show Discussion** with cast & production crew **Free**
- Sunday Scholars** a one-hour post-show panel discussion with experts on the themes and issues of the play **Free**
- Company Member Discussion** a conversation with TimeLine's Company members **Free**

**SHOW TIMES**

PREVIEWS 8 PM  
 OPENING NIGHT 7 PM  
 WEDNESDAYS & THURSDAYS 7:30 PM  
 FRIDAYS 8 PM  
 SATURDAYS 4 PM & 8 PM  
 SUNDAYS 2 PM