

Sarah Mitchler stars in the American Expressionist theatre piece "Machinal" at Cabrillo College's Crocker Theatre. Credit: Steve DiBartolomeo

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A beautiful machine of despair: Cabrillo Theatre Arts delivers a stunning 'Machinal'

BY JAIMA MARCUS November 3, 2026

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Quick Take

Cabrillo College's Theatre Arts brings Sophie Treadwell's nearly century-old drama "Machinal" to breathtaking life. With Robin Aronson's imaginative direction, stunning scenic design by Skip Epperson and a sensational performance by Sarah Mitchler, this visually dazzling production explores a woman's struggle for freedom in a world determined to control her.

It's always fun to see what's happening at Cabrillo College's Theatre Arts department. It's long been a place where emerging actors and theater artists can stretch their abilities, tackle challenging material and share the stage with seasoned local performers. And every so often, a production comes along that demonstrates just how much can be accomplished when ambition, talent and imagination meet.

Such is the case with Sophie Treadwell's "Machinal," a visually breathtaking production directed by Robin Aronson that transforms the vast Crocker Theater stage into a haunting industrial world where human beings seem little more than cogs in an enormous machine.

If you go

Who: Cabrillo College Theatre Arts department
What: Sophie Treadwell's "Machinal"
When: Through Nov. 15
Where: Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos
Tickets: Click here or call 831-479-6154

Written in 1928, "Machinal" is a seminal work of American Expressionist theater, influenced by the German movement that rejected realism in favor of revealing a character's psychological experience. Dialogue becomes fragmented and repetitive. Movements turn mechanical, and environments take on a disturbing quality.

Treadwell, an American journalist and playwright, used those techniques to explore the suffocating expectations placed upon women. Inspired by the notorious Ruth Snyder murder case, "Machinal" follows a young woman trapped in a life she has little power to control.

The characters are identified largely by their roles rather than their names. The Mother, the Husband, the Lover, the Doctor. They inhabit a world where marriage, motherhood, work and obedience are treated as inevitable steps in a woman's existence.

There's an interesting irony in the timing of "Machinal." Treadwell wrote about a woman trapped by society's expectations just eight years after American women won constitutional protection for their right to vote. It was a time of enormous social change, when new freedoms existed alongside deeply entrenched expectations about women's roles.

Nearly a century later, that tension between progress and resistance feels uncomfortably familiar. At a moment when women's reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are once again the subjects of fierce political battles, Treadwell's portrait of a woman denied control over her own life carries a disturbing relevance.

The expectations may have changed, but the underlying question remains: Who gets to decide how a woman should live her life?

A world of steel, shadows and machinery

Scenic designer Skip Epperson has created a magnificent industrial collage of platforms, scaffolding and architectural fragments that fills the enormous Crocker Theater stage without overwhelming it. Rising two stories high in places, the predominantly black structure becomes an imposing landscape of steel and shadow, suggesting a world built for machinery rather than human comfort.

At moments, brilliant gold welding sparks flare against the blackness, adding another striking dimension to this industrial world.

Even the stage floor is part of the design, painted white with bold black sections that reinforce the stark geometry of this industrial universe.

Action unfolds high above the stage, deep upstage, downstage and behind translucent scrims where dreamlike tableaux appear and disappear. Performers move through the structure in carefully choreographed patterns, sometimes resembling workers on an assembly line, sometimes becoming part of the machinery itself.

The transitions have an almost cinematic fluidity. Rather than stopping for conventional scene changes, Aronson allows the world to transform before our eyes. Set pieces shift, costumes are changed onstage, and the actors flow from one episode to the next, making the production feel like one continuous, troubled dream.

It's a world constantly being built and rebuilt around the lead character, the Young Woman, who has almost no say in its design.

Costume designer Maria Cruch extends that vision through a carefully controlled palette. The women appear in steel blue and gray dresses, blending into the cold industrial environment. As the play progresses, hints of color emerge, particularly in the second act, when red appears strikingly against the landscape.

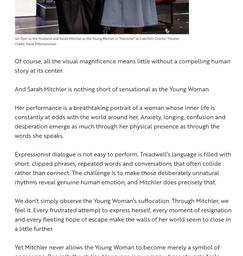
Lighting designers Rhys Morgan and Kelly Mack complete the picture with evocative shadows, muted colors and shifting pools of light, giving the stage an almost grimy industrial atmosphere, at times claustrophobic despite the enormous space surrounding the performers.

Elk Latham's sound design moves between the mechanical rhythms of daily life and softer musical passages that underscore the production's dreamlike moments.

Every element belongs to the same world, and the visual storytelling is so assured that the stage itself seems to breathe at times.

And just when you think you've seen everything this production has to offer, the final scene delivers an image that deserves to remain a surprise.

The woman inside the machine



Ian Dyer as the Husband and Sarah Mitchler as the Young Woman in "Machinal" at Cabrillo's Crocker Theater. Credit: Steve DiBartolomeo

Of course, all the visual magnificence means little without a compelling human story at its center.

And Sarah Mitchler is nothing short of sensational as the Young Woman.

Her performance is a breathtaking portrait of a woman whose inner life is constantly at odds with the world around her. Anxiety, longing, confusion and desperation emerge as much through her physical presence as through the words she speaks.

Expressionist dialogue is not easy to perform. Treadwell's language is filled with short, clipped phrases, repeated words and conversations that often collide rather than connect. The challenge is to make those deliberately unnatural rhythms reveal genuine human emotion, and Mitchler does precisely that.

We don't simply observe the Young Woman's suffocation. Through Mitchler, we feel it. Every frustrated attempt to express herself, every moment of resignation and every fleeting hope of escape make the walls of her world seem to close in a little further.

Yet Mitchler never allows the Young Woman to become merely a symbol of oppression. Beneath the stylized language is a woman whose struggle feels painfully real.

Aronson surrounds her with an impressive ensemble that functions almost as a mechanical chorus. Workers, doctors and courtroom spectators move and speak in coordinated rhythms, reinforcing the sense of a society operating according to rules nobody thinks to question.

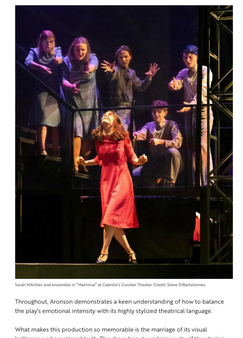
Aronson has guided her cast with care, creating a unified theatrical style while allowing individual performers their moments to shine.

Among the standouts is Cody Balcomb-Bartok as The Lover, whose wonderfully natural performance offers a welcome contrast to the rigid world surrounding the Young Woman. His command of Treadwell's unusual dialogue gives their scenes a sense of genuine human connection, a glimpse of the freedom she desperately craves.

Liam Armitage is equally compelling as both the Man in the Bar and the Defense Lawyer. He has an excellent feel for the rhythm of the language, delivering his lines with a confidence and naturalness that makes even the most stylized exchanges feel spontaneous.

Ian Dyer gives a quietly effective performance as the Husband, a man whose conventional expectations become another part of the Young Woman's confinement. What makes him disturbing is not overt cruelty, but his complete obliviousness to her unhappiness. He assumes marriage entitles him to certain things, never considering that his wife might feel otherwise. Dyer's matter-of-fact portrayal makes that casual sense of entitlement all the more unsettling.

Jack Marshall makes a memorable impression as the Judge, while Nick Bilardello, as the Priest, delivers a haunting sequence that lingers beyond the final scene.



Sarah Mitchler and ensemble in "Machinal" at Cabrillo's Crocker Theater. Credit: Steve DiBartolomeo

Throughout, Aronson demonstrates a keen understanding of how to balance the play's emotional intensity with its highly stylized theatrical language.

What makes this production so memorable is the marriage of its visual brilliance and emotional truth. The sheer beauty and ingenuity of the staging can be overwhelming, yet Mitchler never lets us lose sight of the woman trapped inside it. We marvel at the world Aronson and her designers have created even as we understand how desperately the Young Woman wants to escape it.

There's something particularly meaningful about young performers bringing a nearly 100-year-old play to life for a contemporary audience, especially when the questions it raises are hardly settled.

But this production deserves to be judged on more than its educational merits. It's a striking, imaginative and deeply affecting piece of theater.

And perhaps its greatest irony is that a production so magnificent to look at leaves us feeling just how unbearable it would be to live inside it.