The American Century Theater presents

Treadwell: Bright and Dark
by Allyson Currin

so easily pretend to be a poor stray girl

To have found you! Now to go on living without you! waking from some shocking amputation

Is man’s reputation just another of the gods’ little jokes? Is black really white?

All we can do is follow our roads reading signboards telling ourselves we choose our own direction.

Audience Guide
Compiled and edited by Jack Marshall

May 27–June 19
Theatre on the Run
About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but under-produced American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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Sophie Treadwell

— Erin Shannahan

Sophie Anita Treadwell (1885–1970) grew up on her family’s ranch in Stockton, California, the daughter of Mexican–American lawyer Alfred B. Treadwell and his wife, Nettie Fairchild Treadwell. Alfred was a powerful personality and stern disciplinarian, a trait that pervaded his career as a lawyer, justice of the peace, city prosecutor and judge, but Sophie clearly idolized him. She spent time in San Francisco after her father abruptly abandoned the family to move to the city. Her relationship with her absent father, her parents’ troubled marriage (Nettie never could bring herself to divorce Alfred), and her struggles with her mixed-race cultural identity were all strong influences on her artistic vision and her adult life.

Treadwell was obviously gifted but an indifferent student, often holding herself to impossibly high standards that undermined her confidence and success. Still, after graduating high school in 1901 she entered the University of California at Berkeley, where in addition to involving herself with the drama club, she began writing stories and poetry, editing a women’s college humor magazine, and writing as a campus correspondent for San Francisco papers. In 1906, shortly after the historic earthquake rocked San Francisco, Sophie graduated and accepted a teaching job in a one-room schoolhouse in an isolated mountain town. Later, she took a position as a governess on a rural cattle ranch, but always, she was writing. During the next two years, she completed her first compositions; one of her first essays, unpublished, shows the restless dissatisfaction and barely submerged rage that characterized Treadwell’s view of life and eroded her emotional stability. It was called, “The Story of My Life by One Who Has None.”

In 1908 she moved to Los Angeles, and enjoyed a week-long career as a singer in vaudeville before becoming disgusted with the squalidness of conditions in the theaters. Her early writing efforts brought her to the attention of legendary Polish actress Helena Modjeska, who hired Sophie as a personal typist and eventually encouraged the fledgling author to market
her plays to New York theater managers. Treadwell’s first published pieces, submitted under the name “S. Treadwell,” were assumed to be written by a man.

Treadwell left Modjeska to return to San Francisco and care for her failing mother, at which point she began writing for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. In an era when women’s rights were just emerging as a national concern, Treadwell was a true anomaly. Although she began her first professional writing career as a theater reviewer, Treadwell quickly established a reputation in the male-dominated profession of journalism through her flamboyant and powerful investigative pieces. The most famous of these was “An Outcast at the Christian Door,” her 18-part expose of the callous treatment of prostitutes and fallen women by Christian charity organizations. The assignment gave Treadwell an outlet for her acting talents, and more importantly for her career that followed, allowed her to explore the subject that would form the basis for much of her early playwriting: the plight of a young woman alone in the modern city. Her second and more fictionalized serial, the 54-part “How I Got My Husband and How I Lost Him” in 1915, would provide the basis for Treadwell’s first produced play, *Sympathy*. The two serials made Sophie Treadwell a San Francisco celebrity.

During World War I, Treadwell was sent on assignment to Europe, making her one of America’s first female foreign war correspondents accredited by the State Department. When she was denied access to the front lines, Treadwell volunteered as a nurse to get a first hand view of the fighting, and also wrote about the effect of the war on the women of Europe. Her article, “Women in Black,” was published by *Harper’s Weekly* in July 1915.

When Treadwell returned from Europe, she accepted a position as a reporter with the *New York Tribune*. There she established a national reputation, becoming a recognized authority on Mexico and Mexican–American relations. Her detailed account of Mexican President Don Venustiano Carranza’s flight from revolutionaries ran on the paper’s front page in 1920. But Sophie Treadwell’s biggest moment in the spotlight occurred when her profile of Pancho Villa introduced Americans to an unexpectedly sympathetic image of the revolutionary bandit. Sophie Treadwell was the only American journalist granted access to Villa at his hideaway in Canutillo, Mexico, and the two-day interview later served as the basis for Treadwell’s first Broadway play, *Gringo* (1922), as well as a novel, *Lusita* (1931).
Journalism also brought her in contact with William O. McGeehan in 1908, a well-known sports writer and humorist. The pair married in 1910. Treadwell continued her career as a journalist alongside her husband, though she was plagued by emotional problems soon after her marriage. She had been susceptible to panic attacks and other nervous disorders as a college student and early in her marriage committed herself to a sanitarium to recover from nervous attacks. For the rest of her life, Sophie Treadwell continued to suffer bouts of what would at the time most likely have been diagnosed as “neurasthenia,” a nervous disorder believed to be caused by the stress of modern civilization. Treadwell entered sanitariums for treatment and respite with regularity. The accumulated stress of living as a talented, ambitious woman in a society that too often neither valued the contributions of women nor respected them was a constant burden to her, but it also infused and enriched many of her best works, notably her masterpiece, Machinal.

Treadwell’s interest in theater was life long. After making her start as an actress in college and then serving her brief time in vaudeville, she authored thirty-nine plays over long her career, often producing, directing, and acting in them. Her work was never especially popular (it was often experimental and she refused to compromise her artistic goals to fit popular tastes) and critical response was sometimes harsh. Even Machinal, her most successful play, garnered just modest critical acclaim. While critics recognized it as bold and ground breaking, few actually liked the play—hardly surprising, as the critics were all male, and Machinal empathizes with a woman who kills her husband to rebel against the suffocating strictures of society. Treadwell, however, was unyielding in defending her work. She refused to compromise or modify her vision, and was notoriously obstinate regarding revisions, cuts, edits, or conceptual alterations.

Even before her first Broadway production, Treadwell was excited to learn that John Barrymore, then the most celebrated star of the Broadway stage, had loved her play about Edgar Allan Poe, which she had sent him to him for his impressions. But though he promised to produce the play and star as Poe, Barrymore never offered Treadwell a contract and failed to return the manuscript. Instead, he abruptly ended communications with her. The reason became apparent to Sophie Treadwell in 1924, when she was shocked to read that John Barrymore was preparing to appear in a new play about Edgar Allan Poe written by his wife, Michael Strange. After demanding a meeting
with Barrymore and hearing the “new” play read, Treadwell filed suit to stop production of Strange’s play as an obvious illegal adaptation of her own.

Treadwell was vilified by the press, which accused her of being a greedy and unscrupulous extortionist. Principled as ever, however, Treadwell was not suing for money, but only to prevent the theft of her work. When she refused to be bullied into dropping the suit, Barrymore returned the manuscript and never produced the play. It was eventually performed on Broadway, credited to Treadwell, as *Plumes in the Dust* in 1936, with noted actor Henry Hull as Poe.

This and other miserable experiences with producers, critics, and actors caused Treadwell to conclude that the playwright was viewed with disrespect in the theater world, especially female playwrights. She criticized Broadway’s habits of employing “script doctors,” type casting, and hasty demands for revisions. Treadwell began an untiring campaign to protect the artistic and economic rights of playwrights, a cause that would eventually lead to her becoming the first American playwright to win royalty payments from the Soviet Union for play production.

Treadwell and McGeehan traveled frequently, visiting all corners of the world for journalistic purposes and for pleasure. The couple moved around the United States, from California to New York to Connecticut. Significant portions of Treadwell’s journalistic work also involved travel to Mexico, France, Germany, and other parts of Europe. She visited the Soviet Union to oversee the Moscow production of *Machinal* and while there became acquainted with director Alexander Tairov, novelist Mikhail Bulgakov, and actor, theorist, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky. After her husband’s death in 1933, Treadwell continued to travel alone, cruising her way through Egypt, Bombay, Hong Kong and Japan. Sophie also had several stays in a Vienna sanitarium to recuperate from her recurring nervous disorder.

Treadwell was a life-long feminist, and continued to use her own name throughout her life, rather than that of her husband. She joined the Lucy Stone League, an early women’s rights group, and marched on the New York State Legislature to present a petition for women’s suffrage. Though Treadwell did follow her husband to New York when he accepted a position there, she demonstrated her independence by sometimes maintaining a separate residence. She also began a clandestine affair with painter Maynard Dixon, the man whom she regarded as the romantic love of her life and soul
mate. When the widowed Sophie adopted a German child in 1949, she named the boy William for her late husband—but gave the child the last name of Treadwell.

McGeehan often described Treadwell as “the woman who drives me,” painting a perceptive image of Sophie Treadwell as a woman radiating power and intensity, akin to a force of nature—which she clearly was. Towards the end of her life, Treadwell finally became disillusioned with the frustrations of New York theater and focused her energies instead on writing fiction, producing four novels and numerous short stories. She eventually retired to Tucson, Arizona, where she died in 1970.

Sophie Treadwell left a vast collection of papers, photographs, scrapbooks, and clippings in the care of the University of Arizona library and assigned her copyrights to the Catholic Diocese of Tucson, specifying that the proceeds were to benefit the education of Native American children. This typically unconventional gesture was also typically self destructive: the Catholic Diocese has never made promoting its Treadwell collection a high priority, and the fact that her works are not handled by a major licensing agency means that it is difficult and time consuming to arrange to produce them. This has played a significant role in keeping Sophie Treadwell’s genius in the shadows.

The Playwright: Allyson Currin

—Jack Marshall

When someone writes the one-woman show about playwright Allyson Currin, Allyson Currin might play herself. She has long been D.C.’s most accomplished actress–playwright, receiving critical success and popular accolades for both roles. Despite her long list of accomplishments, Ms. Currin is probably just entering her most productive years as an artist. But
when The American Century Theater decided that it was high time Sophie Treadwell get her opportunity to tell her remarkable story, there was really only one candidate to write the new play: Currin. Like her subject, she knows well the special hurdles placed in front of any woman trying to run the fast track of professional playwriting; like Sophie, Ms. Currin has had to balance her artistic goals with the added responsibility of being a mother (twins!) and wife. She accepted the challenge of crafting a play about an important historical figure who has never been the subject of a full biography, and, among hundreds of possible approaches and paths available to her with such a complex figure who built such a long, varied, and controversial career, she somehow chose, I think, the right one. If Sophie’s spirit pays Ally Currin a visit, I think it will only be to say, “Thank you.”

Allyson received her M.F.A. in directing from The University of Virginia, and her B.A. in Theatre and English from Wake Forest University. Including commissioned works, she has written more than a dozen produced plays, several of which have been honored by the Helen Hayes Awards, and she was honored with the Mary Goldwater Award from the Theatre Lobby of Washington, DC. She has also received numerous honors from the Washington Theatre Festival of New Plays.

Among her works: The Dancing Princesses, a world premiere musical (music and lyrics by Chris Youstra) at Imagination Stage (2010); Unleashed! The Secret Lives of White House Pets, which had its world premiere for young audiences at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2009); Love and Whiskey (2009); Radio Free America (2004); The Subject (2004); Fur and Other Dangers (2003); Learning Curves (2002); Church of the Open Mind (2002); Amstel in Tel Aviv (1997); Crash and Burns (1994); Dancing with Ourselves (1993), as well as a new adaptation of Mozart’s The Magic Flute; the book for The Vagabond Princesses, a new musical for the In Series; the book for the original musical Vaudeville for the Washington Jewish Theatre; and a new commissioned work for the National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts.

Allyson Currin first worked with The American Century Theater as an actress, in its revival of Philip Barry’s enigmatic Hotel Universe, directed by Steven Scott Mazzola. She has performed on many other stages in the Washington/Baltimore area was well, including Arena Stage, Olney Theatre Center, Signature Theatre, Washington Stage Guild, Theater J, Everyman Theatre, Rep Stage, Washington Shakespeare Company, Source Theatre.
Company, Catalyst Theatre, Church Street Theatre, Studio Theatre, Round House Theatre, and Charter Theatre.

Meanwhile, she teaches. Ms. Currin has taught acting and playwriting at George Washington University since 1998. She has also taught at St. Mary’s College (Visiting Professor, Playwriting), Goucher College (Playwriting), Prince George’s Community College (English Composition and Literature), The American School in Switzerland (Drama), The Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts (Shakespeare), and The University of Virginia (Acting).

Like all women playwrights and writers, Allyson Currin has been the beneficiary of Sophie Treadwell’s trailblazing and is a kindred spirit as well. Now, with *Treadwell: Bright and Dark*, she is giving to Sophie the one thing she craved and never quite achieved: the chance to be recognized and remembered.

**Key Figures Mentioned in *Treadwell: Bright and Dark***

**Helena Modjeska** (1840–1909)

Helena Modjeska, an early mentor and inspiration for Sophie Treadwell, is considered Poland’s greatest actress of all time, and one of the greatest American actresses as well. She was one of the most celebrated stars of the Victorian era, a golden age of the legitimate stage before the advent of motion pictures, radio and television. Modjeska and her famous European contemporaries, Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse, traveled across the United States in their private railroad cars, captivating audiences in gas-lit theatres with the mystery and magic of their acting. Bernhardt always acted in French and Duse in Italian; only Helena Modjeska played her roles in English and became an American citizen. She became the first theatre celebrity to choose southern California as her permanent home.

Helena Modjeska was born in Krakow, Poland. She was an accomplished actress, but despite her fame and success felt stifled by the censorship of the
Russian Czarist-controlled Polish theater, and, with her husband, set out to start anew in the booming city of San Francisco in 1876.

After eight long months of waiting for an audition and furious efforts to learn English, she at last made a brilliant debut on the stage of the California Theatre. Before long the theaters of New York and other eastern cities welcomed her. Through most of her American career, Modjeska directed her own company, a model that clearly inspired Treadwell. She and her acting company (and her husband, who served as her manager) traveled for nine months each year by railroad, steamship, and horse and buggy. Modjeska appeared in eight performances every week, not only in the great theaters of Boston and New York, but also in the makeshift halls and opera houses of rural America. Although she never completely lost her Polish accent, Modjeska became America's most distinguished Shakespearean actress of the 1880s and 1890s.

Pancho Villa (1878–1923)

Pancho Villa was a Mexican bandit, warlord and revolutionary. One of the most important figures of the long Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), he was a charismatic and fearless fighter, a clever military commander, and important power broker during these years. His vaunted “Division of the North” was, at one time, the strongest army in Mexico, and he was instrumental in the downfall of two would-be Mexican rulers. When an alliance of two other warring rivals finally defeated him, Villa became an independent, law-defying renegade, waging guerrilla war. Villa had once been supported by American weapons and funds, but the administration of Woodrow Wilson changed direction and backed his opponents. As his army dwindled, Villa resorted to banditry to keep his men supplied with food and ammunition. His efforts to stay supplied included an attack on Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916, which served the dual purpose of expressing his contempt for the American government that had abandoned him. After Villa attacked Columbus, the Americans sent General “Black Jack” Pershing into Mexico to capture him. Villa eluded Pershing despite several skirmishes, adding to his reputation as a folk hero. Villa retired in 1920, around the time he was interviewed by Sophie Treadwell, and was provided with a large estate which he turned into a “military colony” for his former soldiers. He was assassinated in 1923 by political enemies who feared his continuing influence on Mexican politics.
William O’Connell McGeehan (1879–1933)

Sophie Treadwell’s long-suffering and supportive husband shares something other than marriage with his wife: like her, he has been unfairly forgotten by his own profession. At one time, this would have seemed unimaginable.

He was regarded as the originator and leading practitioner of what came to be known as the “Aw Nuts!” school of sports journalism, in contrast to the “Gee Whiz!” school that typified the craft before he proved that it was more interesting to criticize sports heroes than to idolize them. William O. McGeehan was reviled by sports promoters and admired by colleagues and successors for being an honest, authoritative, and above all, imaginative sportswriter. Paul Gallico, himself a great sportswriter, who was covering sports for the New York Daily News while McGeehan was writing and editing for the New York Herald Tribune, called him the “brilliant McGeehan, the greatest sports-writer who ever lived.” Gene Tunney, the heavyweight boxing champion about whom McGeehan wrote both favorably and unfavorably, referred to him as “that prince of sports writers.” Another critic notes that in an era when the sports hero was “spiced and fattened” on the sports pages, McGeehan “refused to serve the Hero.”

And yet almost nothing remains of his memory, reputation, or output. Only McGeehan’s legacy, as practiced by virtually all sportswriters today, is vital: sharp, irreverent, critical, sports reporting. The National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association Hall of Fame, however, which has expanded its gallery to include such non-sportswriters as John Wayne and Lou Gehrig, as well as its first woman (Sally Jenkins), has no mention of him at all.

John Barrymore (1882–1942)

John Barrymore was born in Philadelphia into an already illustrious theatrical family. He was not enthusiastic about the family trade, however; only economic necessity forced him to join sister Ethel and brother Lionel on the stage, which to him was simply “the easiest place to earn a decent living.” Within a few years, his handsome profile, natural presence and exquisite timing had helped him become a popular matinee idol in light comedy and farce. He was blithe and mercurial by nature, with a penchant for alcohol and chorus girls. Barrymore never took himself or the theatre seriously. Yet when Barrymore attempted his first substantial role—Falder in Galsworthy’s Justice—his success was instantaneous, and overnight he
found himself acclaimed as a tragedian of the first rank. He also established himself as a popular and versatile star of the silent screen.

On November 16, 1922, at the Sam H. Harris Theatre, John Barrymore first played the role that he would be forever remembered for: Hamlet. Barrymore’s portrayal electrified the audience and moved the critics to proclaim him as one of the greatest Hamlets ever seen in New York. His characterization was revolutionary in its use of Freudian psychology; in keeping with the post World War I rebellion against everything Victorian, he eschewed the genteel, idealized “Sweet Prince” of 19th-century tradition, imbuing his character with danger and sexuality.

He reigned as one of the first true superstars of the 20th century theater for a decade. By the mid 1930s, however, years of hard living, reckless drinking, a mercurial disregard for his personal health, and the family curse of alcoholism had taken much of his energy, good looks, and talent. Barrymore began to experience numerous alcohol-related illnesses, and his memory became increasingly erratic: on several occasions, he found himself unable to remember his lines.

He could only do films (his one attempt at a stage comeback was a disaster), and was forced to read lines from blackboards placed just out of camera range, his roles reduced to secondary parts in inferior movies as a parody of his earlier performances. Until his death in 1942 of cirrhosis of the liver (among other maladies) Barrymore continued to perform, an embarrassing shell of his former self.

**Maynard Dixon (1875–1946)**

Dixon, in addition to being the romantic love of Sophie Treadwell’s life, was a major 20th century American artist who was inspired by the American West. He was born in Fresno, California, and studied at the California School of Design. He began his professional art career as an illustrator for several San Francisco newspapers. In 1900, Dixon visited Arizona and New Mexico, and fell in love with the desert. He developed a lifelong passion for roaming—and painting—the West. For a time he tried to live in New York with his young wife and baby daughter, but it didn’t take; soon he was back West, and shortly thereafter after his marriage ended.
Dixon developed a unique style with Western themes his trademark. He was a colorful character with a wicked sense of humor who often dressed like a cowboy. His style underwent a slow evolution, and by the Great Depression had become more political, using social realism to depict the plight of workers and the poor. Though he had several wives, notably portrait photographer Dorothea Lange, there is strong evidence that he and Sophie Treadwell remained friends over the decades—and perhaps more. Both ended their lives in Tucson, Arizona, though she outlived him by 24 years. Dixon’s paintings are still cherished today.

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*, and Ruth Snyder

—Jack Marshall

The sordid story of 1920s flapper Ruth Snyder and her lover’s murder of her husband caused a sensation in 1927, and it is not surprising that it sparked the interest of Sophie Treadwell, then a playwright looking for her first major success. Some aspects of Snyder’s marriage were similar to Treadwell’s, for example, both husbands edited sports publications. Both wives also felt stultified by convention and bored by marriage. Sophie Treadwell attended the New York City trial, not as a journalist but as an interested observer, and it is likely she had already seen in the tale unfolding at trial the perfect inspiration for an expressionist drama.

Snyder’s execution by electric chair on January 12, 1928 was photographed by enterprising (and sneaky) *New York Daily News* photographer Thomas Howard, who had managed to be selected as one of the official witnesses and had a camera strapped to his leg. He took the grisly photograph of Ruth seconds before the jolt of electricity killed her, and his achievement was run in a front page–filling blowup with the stark headline, “DEAD!” The photograph was illegal, but there were also too many copies for the police to confiscate: the *Daily News* did their part by printing an extra 750,000 copies.
Treadwell undoubtedly had a copy, and her play-to-be now had an ending, a frightening one.

Treadwell’s imagination constructed a story of how a young woman . . . an ordinary young woman . . . could come to such a terrible end. Ruth Snyder was not exactly ordinary—she was probably a sociopath—but by the conclusion of the trial of her and her lover, Judd Gray, for killing Ruth’s husband Albert, her life had given Sophie Treadwell a wealth of material to work with.

And not only Sophie, either. The Ruth Snyder love triangle spawned multiple fictionalized accounts. The famous film noir classic *Double Indemnity*, with Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, was based on Ruth’s story. James Cain’s best-selling novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and the two movie versions (Lana Turner and John Garfield in the classic; Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson in the remake) were even more directly adapted from the Snyder case. These versions, however, reveled in warped character of the real Ruth Snyder and painted her as a *femme fatale* with a heart of dark matter. These versions were also penned by men. Sophie Treadwell, in contrast, made the young woman traveling Ruth’s path her heroine. She understood, too well, how being an American woman in the Twenties could drive someone mad.

Poor Albert Snyder had been much smitten with his much younger, vivacious, and attractive wife but had neither the energy nor the personality to keep her interested in him. He was work obsessed, the art editor of a sports magazine. She dreamed of parties, luxuries, romance, and diversion; he was resolutely clueless. Their daughter was of little interest to him, serving mostly as a means of keeping his wife at home and too busy to complain. But a Fifth Avenue shopping trip brought Ruth in contact with a corset salesman named Judd Gray, and according to some accounts, they ended up *in flagrante delicto* on the back office couch that very afternoon, just as in *Fatal Attraction*. Soon they were meeting, and cavorting, in daily secret assignations. Judd, like his movie avatars, appears to have been an easily manipulated sap, with Ruth pulling the strings.

Meanwhile, she began persuading her husband to take out life insurance with a double indemnity clause. Should he perish in an accident, Ruth would get $100,000, the equivalent of about $1,000,000 today. Testimony in the trial indicates that she made several efforts to create such an accident, but
Albert was amazingly resilient, not to mention lucky. She put poison in his prune whip (as if prune whip by itself wasn’t bad enough) and Albert liked it. She tried to asphyxiate him at least twice, once in his car and once while he napped, as Ruth opened the gas valve. Albert, trusting soul, decided that “someone,” certainly not his loving wife, but someone, was trying to kill him. He bought a revolver. Ruth told Judd that Albert was close to figuring out the truth; they had to move quickly.

The murder was staged as a burglary. Judd purchased chloroform, sash weight, and picture wire; he testified that it was Ruth’s plan. She let him into the house while Albert was sleeping. “You’re going to do it, aren’t you?” Ruth whispered.

“I think I can,” Judd replied.

Judd followed Ruth to the bedroom, where he struck the sleeping victim with the sash weight. Albert, resilient to the end, instantly woke up instead of dying and began to fight for his life. He grabbed Judd by the necktie, so Ruth hit her husband with the sash weight a second time. Not good enough: Albert still was fighting them off. Ruth then chloroformed her husband but it seemed to have no effect, so she tied his hands with a towel. Then she attempted to cover his head with a sheet while Judd wound the necktie about the struggling man’s feet, tying them together.

“Is he dead?” Ruth shouted.

“No!” Judd told her.

“This thing has absolutely got to go through or I am ruined!” she screamed, according to Judd.

Judd punched Albert and shouted, “Help me, Mommie!” (“Mommie” was his pet name for Ruth.)

She then helped him by winding the picture wire around her husband’s throat, and pulling it with all her might. That did the trick, although Ruth’s earlier blow with the weight was later ruled as the cause of death. Now the killers just had to make it all look like a burglary. They burned their bloody clothes, and trashed the room to make it look like it had been ransacked. Ruth hid her jewels, and in an especially creative move, the two left an
Italian language newspaper on the floor to implicate Italian immigrants, who were apparently known for perusing the local news while killing people. Then Judd tied and gagged Ruth and created an alibi by checking into a hotel in Queens and posting a letter to her from there.

It wasn’t a good enough plan, however. The police found the suspiciously hidden jewels that Ruth said had been stolen, and with them they found a pin with Judd’s initials engraved on it. When police discovered his name in her address book and the insurance policy, the jig was up. Both Judd and Ruth were arrested, and just like in the movie, each was told that the other had confessed. The lovers eagerly set out to blame the murder on each other, a project that continued throughout the trial. The jury didn’t seem to care; both were clearly guilty.

It is interesting how Treadwell’s approach to the story differed from those of her male counterparts. In the other adaptations, the Ruth Snyder characters are cold-hearted women who manipulate their gullible and weak-willed lovers with womanly wiles—in other words, very much like Ruth Snyder. An enterprising female author of potboilers could easily have taken the opposite tack, with Snyder portrayed as a bored and neglected young woman led astray by a charismatic and murderous swain.

But Treadwell took the lover out of the murder entirely, though he is the unwitting catalyst that unlocks the murderess’s rage. In Treadwell’s telling, the love affair with Judd serves to awaken in Ruth her longing for freedom and fulfillment. She murders in spiritual self-defense, to escape, to be free, to preserve her dying individuality. Her lover never becomes involved, except to cooperate fully with the police in apprehending and convicting Ruth.

Electrocuted but not forgotten, Judd and Ruth essentially gave their lives for art. Few murderers—Leopold and Loeb, Jack the Ripper, Ed Gein, a handful of others—have inspired as many dramatic adaptations by their sinister exploits. None have inspired better ones than Machinal.
**A Sophie Treadwell Sampler**

*Compiled by Erin Shannahan*

- *A dab of cheap whitening and a dollar hat, and I, in all my little pride, became an outcast, a “down-and-outer,” a poor stray girl of the town.*

  —“An Outcast at the Christian Door”

- *In all the time that I had been wandering around the city on this “detail,” May Bertin had been absolutely real to me. She just came to me and took my place. And yet of course, I knew that I was pretending. ‘Why is it that I can so easily pretend to be this other girl?’ I often asked myself, during those days? But it was not until I met the Rev. Robert Walker that I knew. It was simply because all the people that I went to immediately put themselves, so to speak, on the other side of the footlights from me. They sat in orchestra chairs, and watched me. They made mental notes as I ‘said my lines’ before them —‘ah-ah—hum-hum—she is a girl of the underworld—ah-ah—hum-hum—and tut-tut.’ And so of course it was very easy to act. But with the Rev. Walker there was no stage and no footlights and no orchestra chairs. We were just two human beings, speaking one to the other—just two human beings—and then I knew suddenly that I was “a fake.”*

  —“Outcast”


  —“A Visit to Villa: A ‘Bad Man’ Not So Bad”

- *There is, indeed, something divine about the whole landscape. Its loveliness stretches on mile after mile without any sign of man or any of his works to once break the illusion. Its silence, and its vastness*
and its beauty seem that of eternity, of infinity, of God. So perfect is its spell it seems an unknown paradise not yet discovered by any angel. Here dwells Villa. I have never known a land of such celestial beauty and such profound isolation. It does not seem to really belong to this earth. One is aware of the sense of elevation, but not as in the high mountains. Rather one seems to have chanced upon a new and completely separate level of existence. One might be Jack of the Beanstalk just stepping from his glorious vine. What far-reaching silence!

— Villa

• Dear, I had to go away. It was the only thing to do. Sometimes one knows about a thing that way. It sounds within one like a bell. Sometimes it clangs and hurts you with the racket. Sometimes it is just exquisitely clear. You find it beautiful. Sometimes it just faintly tickles and you think maybe you don’t have to hear it if you don’t want to. But you do, you do.

—“Letters from A to B”

• To have found you! And now to go on living without you! I feel as though I were waking from some shocking amputation, knowing I must go through life without my two hands. One is kind to such a one. One gives all one can to help over the first terrible days. So I am a little bit kind to myself. I let myself think of you.

—Letters

• And then it came to me that nothing can be different. That everything that is, is. That all we can do is to follow our roads, reading the signboards as we go, the signboards that point out every turning. That is all of choice there is given us. We can read the signboards and tell ourselves we choose our own directions. But there is only one road, one road for each of us, one road with all its turnings marked.

—Letters

• The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult for her—mechanical, nerve-nagging. Only in an illicit love does she find anything with life in it for
her, and when she loses this, the desperate effort to win free to it again is her undoing.

—Author’s note to *Machinal*

- Do you get used to it— so after a while it doesn’t matter? Or don’t you? Does it always matter? You ought to be in love, oughtn’t you, Ma? You must be in love, mustn’t you, Ma? That changes everything, doesn’t it . . . or does it? Maybe if you just like a person it’s all right. . . . is it? When he puts a hand on me, my blood turns cold. But your blood oughtn’t to run cold, ought it? His hands are . . . his hands are . . . fat, Ma . . . don’t you see . . . his hands are fat . . . and they sort of press—and they’re fat . . . don’t you see? Don’t you see?

—*Machinal*

- Let me rest . . . now I can rest . . . the weight is gone . . . inside the weight is gone . . . it’s only outside . . . outside . . . all around . . . weight . . . I’m under it . . . Vixen crawled under the bed . . . there were eight . . . I’ll not submit any more . . . I’ll not submit . . . I’ll not submit . . .

—*Machinal*

- And so I know that it is stupid after all this to write down here, “do not forget me.” But sometimes it is very lovely to be stupid. Please, dear, just do not forget me.

—*Letters*
The One-Actor Historical Play

—Jack Marshall

One-actor shows in the theater have been around for a very long time.

Traditionally they have been the dramatic equivalents of performance turns by singers (Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall), performance artists (Marcel Marceau), entertainers (Danny Kaye at the London Palladium), or specialty acts (“Le Petomaine,” who packed houses in the 19th century with his program of musical farting). An actor like Ian McKellen will create an evening tailored to his dramatic talents, usually consisting of highlights from multiple plays chosen to emphasize the actor’s versatility, as well as to evoke his (or her) greatest hits. These are properly called showcases, and are almost invariably star driven. Periodically, an unusual performer like Anna Deavere Smith or the late Spaulding Gray will forge a reputation using the solo format: though it is hard to believe now, this is how Whoopi Goldberg first became a star.

The historical one-actor play started out as something very different. A little known young actor named Hal Holbrook broke the mold when he created an evening with a reanimated Mark Twain, called *Mark Twain Tonight*, in which Holbrook the actor was virtually invisible. It was an uncannily real Twain on the stage, using his own words, telling stories, and reading from his works just as the real Twain had in his own popular speaking engagements. Like most of its progeny, *Mark Twain Tonight* was designed as a touring show, playing a handful of dates before moving on to the next city. Surprisingly, it has never run longer than a few weeks on Broadway. And Holbrook kept it as his own: throughout his career, whenever there has been a slow period, he became Mark Twain. Now, of course, Holbrook is in his eighties: as he has ruefully noted, far less makeup is required,

If the one-actor historical play could be starless, selling the subject rather than the actor, it was obviously the answer to a producer’s prayer. The set requirements are minimal, costuming also, and there is also just one salary to pay. Even more happily, the play can be created out of the
famous subject’s own words, which were usually in the public domain, free of fees or copyrights. By the 1970s, it seemed everyone was working on a one-actor historical show.

The next big success was the re-creation of humorist Will Rogers’ stage appearances, performed by James Whitmore, who was a familiar character actor to moviegoers (*Oklahoma!*), but hardly a household name. The similarity to Holbrook’s show was obvious: Rogers was the next great American folk humorist after Twain and had also made stage appearances. The audience came to see Rogers, not Whitmore. But soon Whitmore’s star had risen with the show’s popularity, and he became the king of the one-man historical show, starring in *Give ’em Hell, Harry!* as Harry Truman and *Bully!* as Theodore Roosevelt.

Already, the cracks in the format were beginning to show. While both Twain and Rogers were occasionally performers (Rogers more than occasionally), making it relatively easy for the audience to believe that they were in the presence of the Great Men themselves, what was Harry Truman doing on stage? Well, he wasn’t, but that James Whitmore was doing one heck of a job giving ’em hell. The one-man historical show was returning to its roots: it was becoming a star vehicle again.

But true stars weren’t motivated to create their own vehicles. They needed plays, with scripts. Thus we had *The Belle of Amherst* with star Julie Harris playing the famous recluse poet as she sat on stage talking to hundreds of strangers. It was a great showcase for Harris’ talents, but other than her voice in her poems, Emily seemed a little out of her element. What was a recluse doing in front of all these people?

The best one-actor historical shows were those whose subjects were either performers or writers who actually appeared on stage in life: Charles Dickens, Noel Coward, Finley Peter Dunn, Paul Robeson, Oscar Wilde, John Barrymore. Humorist Robert Benchley, both a writer and a comic performer, became a perfect subject for the one-man play created and performed (for The American Century Theater, among others) by his look-alike grandson, actor Nat Benchley. Truman Capote, subject of the most successful of all one-man shows, Robert Morse’s *Tru*, was a well-known television personality in addition to his other activities. But *Mr. Lincoln*, even in the capable hands of Britain’s Roy Dotrice, whose one-man show on the life of writer John Aubrey won him a New York Drama
Critics Award, was a bust: Lincoln’s primary connection with theater, after all, was being shot in one.

Meanwhile, when stars played historical figures, the star’s personality usually obliterated the historical figure. This was clearly at work in *Clarence Darrow* by David Rintels. Darrow was indeed a performer, both in a courtroom and in speaking engagements. With a lively autobiography and volumes of published oration, he was and is a perfect subject for a one-man historical play. But Henry Fonda, in a late career stage valedictory, was not about to disappear into Darrow, as Holbrook had vanished into Twain. In its final incarnation, after Fonda’s priorities had been executed, *Clarence Darrow* became a play about merging Fonda, the Hollywood liberal, with the screen Fonda of *Mr. Roberts* and *Twelve Angry Men*. The real, far more complex Clarence Darrow? He was off playing whist with Emily Dickinson. The show effectively ended the golden age of one-actor historical plays, at least in the commercial theater. The one-actor historical play couldn’t live with stars, and couldn’t live without them.

Elsewhere, at conventions, in universities, for conferences, and before special groups, these plays flourished. Performed by unknown actors in front of audiences already enamored of figures like Jane Pittman, Davy Crockett, George Washington, General James Longstreet, Ernest Hemingway, and Eleanor Roosevelt—these often imperfectly acted plays are enthusiastically received, because they do achieve, at some level, the objective of evoking the famous and the great, giving people a sense of what they may have been like and a taste of their wisdom, wit, and style. In that, they are the true descendents of *Mark Twain Tonight*, not the star turns that took over the genre. A couple of hours with the remarkable men and women of America’s past is time well spent. When actor, subject, words, and story align properly, these figures can come to vivid life.

It is harder to achieve this than we once thought. But it is still worth achieving.
Sophie Treadwell: Life Chronology

1885
She is born October 3 in Stockton, California, to Alfred B. and Nettie Fairchild Treadwell.

1890-91
Her father abandons his wife and daughter to move to San Francisco; over the next several years, Sophie alternately lives with her father and mother.

1902-06
While attending the University of California at Berkeley, she performs in numerous sketches and plays. Her final year of college is marked by poverty and illness. She graduates with a Bachelor of Letters degree with an emphasis in French. She teaches in a one-room school in a former mining camp in Placer County, California.

1907
Sophie moves to Los Angeles and performs in vaudeville. She befriends Constance Skinner, author and former dramatic critic. She writes her first full-length play, *Le Grand Prix*.

1908
Skinner arranges for Treadwell to type Helena Modjeska's memoirs at the actress’ home in Tustin, California. With encouragement from Modjeska, she markets her play, *The Right Man*, to theatrical producers in New York. Sophie returns to San Francisco in the summer to be with her ailing mother. She is hired as a journalist for the *San Francisco Bulletin*.

1910
Treadwell marries William O. McGeehan, famed sports reporter and humorist. Six months later, she recuperates from a nervous breakdown at St. Helena Sanitarium.
1911

She finishes *The High Cost*, begun as *Constance Darrow*, and writes *The Settlement*.

1912

Sophie performs a leading role in *The Toad*, a drama of ancient Egypt, at the Forest Theatre, Carmel-by-the-Sea.

1914


1915

Her serial, “How I Got My Husband and How I Lost Him,” is adapted for the stage and produced in San Francisco under the title, *An Unwritten Chapter*. She spends four months in France writing articles on World War I for the *Bulletin* and *Harper’s Weekly*. Treadwell returns to the States in August, accepting a job with the *New York American*.

1916

She begins her affair with painter Maynard Dixon.

1916-18

She writes several plays, acting in and producing one of them, *Claws*, as a showcase in 1918.

1919

She copyrights the one-act play *The Eye of the Beholder*, previously titled *Mrs. Wayne*. 
1920-21
She covers the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, including an exclusive interview with revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, for the *New York Tribune*. She writes *Rights* based on the life of proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother of Mary Shelley.

1922
Her first Broadway play, *Gringo*, is produced by Gutherie McClintic. It is based on her experiences with Pancho Villa.

1923
Sophie spends the summer with a small group of theatre artists studying acting with Richard Boleslavsky, founder of the American Laboratory Theatre.

1924
Sophie sues John Barrymore over his failure to return her play manuscript on the life of Edgar Allan Poe. She acts in and produces *The Love Lady*, a new version of her 1918 play *Claws*, on Broadway.

1925
She acts in and produces her comedy, *O Nightingale*, on Broadway.

1927
Treadwell attends the murder trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray.

1928
*Machinal* is produced on Broadway by Arthur Hopkins to some strong reviews but scant box office.

1929
*Ladies Leave* receives a short run on Broadway. She works briefly for United Artists on script revisions and adaptations.

1930
She collaborates with McGeehan on a play, *A Million Dollar Gate*, their only time working professionally together. Both travel by car through Europe and
North Africa. While in Vienna, she is briefly confined to a sanitarium. She writes the play *The Island*.

**1931**


**1933**

She visits Moscow for the production of *Machinal* by Alexander Tairov. Her disillusionment with Communism leads her to write *Promised Land. Lone Valley*, aka *Inheritance, Bound, and Wild Honey*, fails on Broadway, closing after three performances. McGeehan dies.

**1934**

*For Saxophone* is copyrighted. Treadwell's mother dies.

**1936**

*Plumes in the Dust*, her Poe play, finally is produced on Broadway. Treadwell travels to Egypt and the Far East.

**1941**

She adapts her 1938 novel, *Hope for a Harvest*, into a play, and it is produced in New York by the Theatre Guild.

**1942**

She spends ten months in Mexico City as a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

**1944**

*Highway* is given a workshop production in Pasadena. Treadwell works briefly as a screenwriter in Hollywood.

**1949**

Touring Europe, she adopts a German baby, whom she names William. She also spends two months in a Vienna sanatorium. She divides her time over the next several years between Europe, Mexico, Connecticut, and California.
1950
Sophie writes *A String of Pearls*.

1953
Her teleplay, *Hope for a Harvest*, is aired on television’s *U.S. Steel Hour*, produced by the Theatre Guild.

1954
An adaptation of *Highway* is televised. She writes *In Loving Lost*, a.k.a. *Garry, Love for a Criminal*, and *For Love*. She sells the family ranch in Stockton.

1956-65
Living mostly in Torremolinos, Spain, Treadwell turns to writing novels. She seeks relief from a variety of debilitating ailments, emotional and physical.

1959
Her novel, *One Fierce Hour and Sweet*, is published.

1960
*Machinal* is revived off Broadway at the Gate Theatre.

1965
After another visit to her favorite Vienna sanitarium, Sophie Treadwell moves to Tucson, Arizona.

1967
Her *Woman with Lilies* is produced at the University of Arizona under the title, *Now He Does’nt Want to Play*.

1968
Sophie completes the novel, *The Great Name Story*.

1970
Sophie Treadwell, age 85, dies in Tucson, February 20. She donates her body to the University of Arizona Department of Anatomy, her papers to the University library, and her copyrights to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson.
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