


THEATER

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Bway Critics Mostly Marvel at Machinal



Rebecca Hall, a Golden Globe nominee for "Vicky Cristina Barcelona", makes her Broadway debut last night, Jan. 16, in "Machinal", a landmark 1928 drama by Sophie Treadwell. The play, based on the true story of a woman given the electric chair for murder, tells of an office worker who follows society's idea of how women should go through life – that is, until she has an affair and kills the boss she felt obligated to marry.

"Machinal" was first produced at Broadway's Plymouth Theater in fall 1928 where it starred Zita Johann and featured a pre-"GWTW" Clark Gable. Roundabout Theater's production at the American Airlines Theater, staged by Lyndsey Turner and scheduled through March 2, also features Suzanne Bertish, Pearl Theater veteran Arnie Burton and Michael Cumpsty, who, only weeks ago, finished his duties in the Roundabout's "Winslow Boy" revival.

In a recent Backstage interview, Hall said of her character, "What the play is really trying to do is basically say the measure of a civilized society is how they treat the weak ones. I had to show her as a weak one you can relate to."

So did the Broadway theater critics relate to this seminal drama or did they dismantle the workings of "Machinal"?

Chief New York Times scribe Ben Brantley calls the production "an intensely stylish revival of...Sophie Treadwell's fascinating play." He's a fan of actress Hall and notes that she and Es Devlin's "scene-stealing set" go head-to-head throughout the evening, with the supporting players becoming the casualties. "The ensemble acting is so diffuse and varied that scenes that should be achingly suspenseful, like the climactic trial, often sag," Brantley clucks.

In his *** review for the Daily News, Joe Dziemianowicz applauds the Roundabout for doing "this atypical and rather risky show...but kudos don't equal success." Dziemianowicz doesn't think much of the play itself, faulting its "illogical plotting" and unconvincing character twists. He also finds Hall "emotionally empty," though he does compliment the show's design: "Purring with sleekly elegant beauty, the physical staging is the star here."

Newsday's Linda Winer also lauds the "lavish yet beautiful stark production" on "Es Devlin's extraordinary set." For Winer, this is "a dazzling, daring revival that feels especially startling in the doggedly conventional environs of the Roundabout Theater Company's American Airlines Theater." Helping matters is Hall, "with a beanpole body like an exclamation point and a face of a thousand worried looks -- brings us deep inside the long, virtuosic bursts of halting half-sentences and tangled mazes of internal monologues."

Variety's Marilyn Stasio agrees that the production is "stunning" and has "masterful staging... But it's tough to empathize with someone who lacks a backbone and hasn't a brain in her head." She concludes by adding, "this affectless Woman is too passive and dull-witted to become the Everywoman victim of the first industrial age of automation."

TheaterMania reviewer David Gordon raves that Roundabout's "extraordinary production" is a "bold choice [that] pays off big time" as a "vibrant rediscovery of an American classic." He adds that the "magnificent" Rebecca Hall infuse[s] this woman with an intelligence that's well beyond her 31 years, but she burrows herself so deeply in the character that we lose sight of the fact that she's an actress playing a role."

Writing for his New York Theater blog, Jonathan Mandell finds the production stunning, though the play shows its age: "What was avant-garde then is familiar now, requiring of current-day audiences nearly an exercise in anthropology." Mandell compliments the "spot-on" Michael Cumpsty (as the husband) but admits that the show's leads "are supporting players to the work of the designers. ...This may be the best-staged play of the season, certainly one of the most aptly designed."

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