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VOX MACHINAL: Voice in the Machine

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VOX MACHINAL: Voice in the Machine

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of *Arts*

of Bard College

by

Payton Smith

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Thank you Phoebe, Jean, Anna, Emma, Jane, Morgan, Ray, Siena, Maeve, and Gil.

It's almost like we planned it.

Table of Contents

Part 1 \ Intention	\ 1
Part 2 \ Vehicle	\ 4
Part 3 \ Execution	\ 8
Part 4 \ Reflection	\ 21
Bibliography	\ 22

PART I \ INTENTION

VOX MACHINAL is a project dear to my heart. It encompasses questions, experiences, and radical imaginings I've grappled with in these recent, pivotal years. This project speaks to theory and dramatic tool I've had the privilege to gather at Bard. In this paper, I'd like to speak on the origins of inspiration for the piece artistically, personally, and politically. Then I'll note the elements in Sophie Treadwell's play, *Machinal*, that made it the perfect textual foundation for the project. I'll look at the main parts of Treadwell's story we adapted for our project and the theatrical elements we introduced to cultivate the piece for a contemporary audience. After setting the groundwork for the piece, I'll then shed light on our theatrical choices for each scene and why they're what resulted on stage. This has been a privilege to work on this project with my artistic partner, Phoebe Hiltermann, and I look forward to sharing our development.

Before choosing to work with *Machinal* I knew I wanted to create a piece based on the story of a single woman. I hoped I could use simple gestures or one event grounded in time and space to speak to many accounts, transcending the lines between era and location. After seeing Ivo van Hove's *Hedda Gabler*, I began to think differently about the most effective way to produce a life onstage. In between scenes, Hedda is left alone onstage, and the lighting and sound transform to a space in time different from the action of the play. In the first "interlude" Hedda boredly plays with hanging blinds to the side door, causing huge shadows to dance on the high walls of the apartment. In the second, she staples flowers she had just received to the walls, and in the third she violently rips them off. Van Hove says, "Hedda is the prison of herself, of her own incapacity. She is incapable of really changing her life yet she has all the opportunities

to do that.”¹ I realized I wanted to expand within what was written to create a space for what words can’t express. I wanted to create a world rooted in the sensory experience of life, not the literal presentation of life. In other words, I wanted to theatricalize and physicalize a psychological transformation. In terms of creative inspiration before landing on *Machinal*, I have been looking back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Its use of image-based expansion within a world to investigate the psychological state of restriction is striking and expands past the single story it uses².

I also hoped to create an honest world onstage with clear rules of function, deeply investigating any element I introduced to the process. I wanted every choice and material to be necessary for the story, a vital part of the world. I wanted to open up my toolbox to include whatever most honestly answered the question of, “what does this experience *feel* like?” This resulted in an interest in using sound, humans, and materials to all do the job of each other. Theatermaker, James Thierree’s work creating full, surrealist worlds onstage through any and all theatrical devices has been particularly inspirational for me. His work is so specific, injects character and meaning into the most mundane and fantastical, creating relationship between character, object, and human that I’d never seen before.



Figure 1

³ I hoped that lines between performers and inanimate object would be blurred and would be

¹ Kate Moore, “Interview: Ivo van Hove on Hedda Gabler,” British Theater, <https://britishtheatre.com/interview-ivo-van-hove-hedda-gabler/>, (2017).

² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader : The Yellow Wallpaper, and Other Fiction*. New York:Pantheon Books, 1980.

³ Figure 1 Richard Haughton, James Thierrée’s *Raoul*. DanceTabs, <http://www.compagnieduhanneton.com/EN/show/raoul/1>, (2014).

politically activated. If anything, I wanted my senior project to explore the parts of life or the moments in ourselves that are difficult to explain in any way other than live performance. It was crucial for me to tell a story and use tools that necessitated theater's abilities.

In terms of content, I was interested in grappling with questions of female autonomy and radical change. A theater space holds the potential to drastically change shape, reflecting a irreversible transformation. This power theater holds is perfect for a story rooted in the feminist theory that has resonated with me lately. Audre Lorde's thinkings on a necessity for working outside of patriarchal tools to create change has been a foundation. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde focuses on the need for complete rejection to move forward. "[The master's tools] may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."⁴ I'll unpack how this radical thinking was approached within the performance more specifically later on. Further, Phoebe and I wanted to confront why it is so difficult to change one's condition in a radical way. We thought to Sophie Treadwell's 1928 play *Machinal* which investigates the autonomy of a single woman, creates a psychological expression onstage, and confronts radical, violent death as a form of feminist liberation. *Machinal* speaks to oppressive forces that have haunted the female condition over the past century.

⁴Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," (Berkeley, CA, Crossing Press, 2007), 2.

PART 2 \ VEHICLE

Machinal was written almost 100 years ago, so one of the first crucial questions we needed to work through in our adaptation of the script was which elements that clearly date the piece did we want to keep and which to cut. We hoped to create a piece that could resonate with women in many different decades. It felt troubling to imagine a framing this story as universal, since it clearly wasn't. Universality in storytelling doesn't come in the events or the details, but in the emotional reaction to it. If we were able to produce moments onstage that audience members from walks of life very different from *The Woman* are able to connect to some part of the story, we've accomplished a version of universality. As far as grappling with the difference in language, technology, language, and gender politics between the American 1920s and today, Phoebe and I wanted to keep a lot of what makes *Machinal* such a period piece. We wanted to use that to enunciate the fact that not a lot has changed, that the tools of oppression that were built, existed, and worked 100 years ago are some of the same ones as today.

THE VICTIM

In terms of rethinking *The Woman*'s arc through the show, Phoebe and I used what resonated with our contemporary experience as the guide to narrowing in the content. We wanted to use *Machinal* to share a story of liberation through radical rejection of an encompassing, oppressive force. It's a story about encountering a desire for autonomy and taking the risk to embody it. This was, of course, already the life of *Machinal*, so we just filed down the script to the elements most relevant to that objective. In Treadwell's writing, it's easy for *The Woman* to be played as a victim until she becomes so enraged that she kills her husband. We thought a lot about the nature of victimhood. The label of victim is intrinsically limiting; there's no action a

victim can take over their life that isn't explosive, especially if one is victim to a systematic power. We needed to look for moments in *Machinal* where The Woman definitely is making active steps to change her life and moments where she is submitting to victimhood. Practically the entire play outlines a very inactive journey. Instead of rewriting the script to tell a story of someone that seems less like a victim, we asked, why she wasn't trying to change her life? Why did she marry a man she didn't love, support her suffocating mother, or give birth to a baby she didn't want? Why didn't she quit her job, get a divorce, get an abortion? We wanted to look deeper into a seemingly passive character and make sense of her submission. It was important to legitimize her actions leading up to the murder for the audience. To start, we wanted to track an arc that's a little evident in the stream of consciousness monologues through the play, but not very outright. These could be our key into finding her activity. I thought to "The Yellow Wallpaper" protagonist and, while she isn't living an active life within the literal reality, her internal, psychological reality was pursuing freedom. The Woman in our version of *Machinal* should have a clear pursuit of freedom that expressed onstage, even if it doesn't look like it in the "machine reality." With that, we created the space and body for these in "interludes" and the soul creature, which will be explained more later.

THE AFFAIR

In our looking for the catalyst to radically change her life - or in other words kill her husband - Treadwell writes an affair that inspires The Woman's transformation into a passionate, active, orgasmic person. We knew we wanted a similar impetus, that is one dealing with a singular event that gave her a taste of autonomy, but we didn't want it to come from a man. Understandably, Treadwell does have it come from The Woman's experience with the lover, but

we didn't want him involved at all. It seemed superfluous; we'd rather it come from within The Woman. We looked for another moment in the script where she rejects the continuance of the machine world that could act as a catalyst, and remembered the hospital scene. In Lorde's "Master's Tools," she writes briefly on childbirth saying, "Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women."⁵ We were interested in taking this seemingly powerful act of making life and subverting it. We amplified the experience of rejecting the baby, making this a moment of tasting freedom. Again, I'll go through this in more detail later, here's the reasoning for keeping out the affair.

This moment of tasting freedom in "Hospital" is thematically tied to another key change in our *Machinal*. We knew we'd have to condense some action in to play to make a full arc in 25 minutes, but we were interested in changing the way time works in the play anyway. The closer The Woman gets to killing The Husband, the further into the "Interlude reality" she gets, and the more the rules of the "machine reality" break. We wanted it to be clear that her killing her husband, was a calculated choice to change her situation, rather than a hysterical act. The Woman is a result of the world that's oppressed her. There is no free option within the confines of the patriarchal structure, so it was necessary The Woman's killing her husband coincided with her accepting her own execution - thus, killing herself. In our piece, the machine world is fueled by light and sound, as it necessary in a theatrical production, and her execution/suicide is via electric chair. So in our version, the events that unfold between the murder and execution are structured as flashbacks and premonitions, supporting the time collapse taking place.

⁵ Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 1.

THE TOOLS

As I stated earlier, we really wanted to rethink the conventional elements used in this story and only use theatrical tools which demonstrated the experience of The Woman. An overarching question dictating the piece was, “what does it feel like to not to be able to say no?” The voice is crucial in marking The Woman’s autonomy or lack thereof. Naturally, we wanted an all-encompassing mechanism to fuel the machine world; one that forced The Woman into silence; one that all the characters could fit within but was still run by The Husband. I’d recently been studying the nature of the radio through the 20th century as a tool of oppression, for intimacy, and for liberation. As a technological device, it has the capacity to hold the mechanical and the human in the same voice and to create the rules of normality in its proclamatory nature. Walter Benjamin writes on the radio says,

It is the human being who has been eliminated from radio and film - the human being (to put it a little extremely) as the fifth wheel on the carriage of its technology. And this reduced, debarred human being is subjected to various trials and judged.⁶

Based in American radio tropes, it’s a space to establish dominance, making it the perfect place for The Husband to live. We cast The Husband to sound like part of the radio world and designed The Woman’s voice to sound a bit disparate. In referencing the specific historical radio drama aesthetic and the Transatlantic male voice, The Husband and radio also represent the historical work that’s been imposed on the present time. Using the radio as a container for the world blurs the division between human and technology, positioning The Woman perfectly for a journey to selfhood! If the world’s dependant upon this power source, she can’t exist onstage (be seen, heard) without it, unless she radically changes the rules. As stated, we were interested in

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Chapter 42: Theater and Radio,” In *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), pg. 395.

finding the life in each object introduced to the stage, so the different elements of the radio (song, static, light, drama, etc.) will be explored in the context of each scene specifically later.

In creating the interludes, sound should still be a basic expressive force of the world, but needed to come from somewhere else. In thinking of Lorde's essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she says we must be critical of the language that limits and enforces us.⁷ We hoped the sounds demonstrated the same haunting pull between life and death that is evident in the other elements (lighting, choreography, and material) of the interludes. While there is still a soft static that plays during the interludes, the "organic sound" is of the natural, of *The Woman*, of a radical outside.

Each of the other physical materials used to build the world around *The Woman* were chosen with care for their texture, political relationship, and theatrical ability to take on life. The border between where *The Woman* ended and the other characters/scenes began should have been blurred. It was important to us that the body and machine created onstage weren't hard lines until *The Woman* takes control of the radio at the end. This value extends to the way the ensemble/puppeteers are presented onstage. They are never hidden, we liked that their form was part of the materials, just as *The Woman's* was.

PART 3 \ EXECUTION

OFFICE

At the very top of the performance, the materials used in "Office" anchor the piece in remnants of the past. Theatrically, we are still very much stuck in the conventions established decades ago. This extends to the sonic qualities in "Office". When we hear the typing and bell of

⁷ Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider*. (Berkeley, CA, Crossing Press, 2007), "It is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it" 43.

a typewriter, it still reads as an office even though we don't use them anymore. While thinking about sound in this scene, we chose to use the language of the scene as sonic texture, rather than crucial plot points or exposition. We wanted to establish early on how the audience should be paying attention to the sounds of the radio. While it changes in each scene, at the top of the show it asks to be heard complimentary to the moment. Once should not overtake the other in clarity here.

In addition to playing on how these sounds and images, even implicitly, are still relevant to us, we wanted to start the show really highlighting the fact that The Woman is inside a machine. The world builds around her and she is activated inside it, dependent upon it. She should seem to be part of it, not an outsider to it. While the audience is watching her experience of the workplace, this positions the other performers in a state of duality. They are psychological extensions of the woman, demonstration for the audience her own workplace anxieties, but they are also coworkers that encourage her isolation and loneliness. Later in the scene I wanted to demonstrate the ensemble's simultaneous control over The Woman and their extension of her body in the mirroring. This point extends to the telephones (machines) used to control/mirror her. This final image of the telephones and ensemble seemingly extending through The Woman's fingertips and head is repeated with the soul creature later on.

FIRST INTERLUDE

As I mentioned earlier, the Interludes were a device to track The Woman's internal development through the piece. Treadwell's *Machinal* contained stream of consciousness monologues bookmarking some scenes that do a similar job. It isn't notated in the script, nor is it clear in the writing in what world these take place. They clearly aren't in the same universe as

the dialogue, but there isn't a clear development of their meaning over the course of the play. In our adaptation, we wanted to expand within these spaces to create a completely different landscape than the rest of the machine world presented in the scenes. This was an internal world with different sound, light, and object quality. The Interludes are a space where the woman encounters, pursues, and becomes her desired/liberated form of herself, over the course of the entire piece. As I touched on before, we didn't want to tell a story about a woman that doesn't take any agency over her life out of a place of helplessness and weakness, which is very easy to do with Treadwell's script. We injected moments of self-reflection and the desire for personal growth in a play that was lacking it. That's what the Interludes did.

We structured our sound so that "Office" ends with The Woman being called into Mr. J's office. Her coworkers whisper that he's to ask her to be his wife, but she hopes not, as she's disgusted by his big hands. "First Interlude" begins just as she's called in. Mr. J (who will soon become The Husband) takes the form of a bright, harsh light in our piece. Once she gets to his office/this harsh bright light, she is transported to "First Interlude." At this moment, and multiple times later on, The Woman escapes the present reality of the machine to enter a dreamlike, internal reality. This world introduces us to the "organic sounds," sound produced outside the machine, and the soul creature as expressed earlier. In "First Interlude," before The Woman even sees the soul creature, she investigates possibly marrying Mr.J. This is expressed in the stream of consciousness language-texture coming from the radio, as well as her movement. We found it important to have her voice come from the radio to show that she's still tethered to this world, even though this is a dreamspace. The soul creature becomes part of this internal dream world once we see her moving fluidly, looking inward, in a way we haven't in the machine world. The

Woman's encounter with the soul creature is strange, grotesque, enticing, and familiar. In *The Woman's* seeking to see the creature, she's blinded by the light that brings her back into the *machine reality*.

MOTHER

When thinking about which scenes were necessary for the story we wanted to tell, we always wanted to keep the relationship between *The Woman* and *The Mother*. In the beginning stages, I was often considering the perspective of someone who doesn't understand passivity and submission. The question, "why did she marry him if she didn't like him" kept coming back to me. I knew we needed to make clear sense of this to move forward with the story. We found that *The Mother* was the answer. Within Treadwell's language in "Domestic," the dependency each of them have on the other is familiar, transcends the time it was written, and makes sense out of *The Woman's* decision to marry Mr. J. *The Mother* needs *The Woman* to go to work everyday to support the two of them. If *The Woman* doesn't marry Mr.J, she loses her job, as one of her coworkers previously explains in "Office". Without money to support her mother and herself, they die. In addition to the practical financial dependency, *The Woman* sees herself in *The Mother*. *The Mother's* aging and loneliness is programmed into *The Woman* as a deepest fear. She sees her own mortality and loneliness reflected in this older, demanding version of herself that she can't rid herself of. Her mother calls her "the flesh of my flesh". This line was one of the primary inspirations for focusing on this dynamic of their relationship, in addition to inspiring the theatrical manifestation of *The Mother*. Phoebe and I asked ourselves, "what does it feel like to have something that's pressuring, restrictive, and also somehow your own blood?"

I've always been struck by the work of sculpturist Senga Nengudi, especially her work with pantyhose stretched across walls, trapping her performers⁸. I thought drawing from the politicized and personal relationship she outlines between the skin and nylon pantyhose was a great place to start texturally for *The Mother's* presentation. This material is gendered, skin tight, represents imposed beauty and age standards, and connects us to the day this was written in continually relevant ways.

In further examining the question, “what does it feel like for the restrictive force in your life comes from your own blood?” I wanted to create a world for this scene that demonstrated how simultaneously disconnected and dependent *The Mother* and *The Woman* are. *The Woman's*



Figure 2

relationship to the layers of pantyhose she continually takes off are extended in the form of a pantyhose face, *The Mother*. We really wanted *The Mother* to take up the entire space, so we hung sagging bosoms full of fruit from the rig, and had the suggestion of a hand stretch and flutter through the scene. As the conversation and *The Woman's* difficulty with the pantyhose intensify, *The Mother* puppet is conjured into space. When *The Woman* breaks composure later in the scene, *The Mother* face ages, releasing tear-like bags under her eyes at the same time *The Woman* violently cuts up the unruly pantyhose. *The Woman* never looks directly at *The Mother* puppet, demonstrating the disconnection in their relationship. In terms of sound, we wanted to extend the disconnection evident in their dialogue, so we played what's marked at “*The Mother's*

⁸Victoria Marie Taormina. “Collaborative Bodies in Action: Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. Répondez S'il Vous Plaît,” UC Riverside, California Digital Library, (2016).

song” in Treadwell’s script in such a way that it breaks up The Woman’s voice, making it more difficult for her mother, and in turn the audience, to hear her.⁹

HONEYMOON

As I touched on earlier, we wanted The Husband to take the form of light in the piece. We asked, “what does it feel like to have someone you’re completely dependent on, exposed by, exploited by, and married to?” It was important that every element of the show was purposeful, including light itself. This relationship between The Woman and The Husband was structured as a microcosm for the patriarchal landscape that marks the the era this play was written through today. Treadwell writes in her stage directions that The Woman is caught like a deer in headlights. Especially in this scene, it would’ve been really easy to allow The Woman to be a passive, thoroughly frightened character. We decided to inject the sentiment of the interludes into this scene to position them further as moments of escape and tastes of freedom in this machine-world, in addition to solving our question of passivity. We wanted to create moments of disassociation and daydream for The Woman, so we looked to the text in how to structure those.

In the beginning of Treadwell’s “Honeymoon,” The Woman gazes out the window of the hotel room in hopes of seeing the ocean, a view she was promised. She returns to this vision through the scene, saying she just wants to go to the boardwalk, as The Husband attempts to seduce The Woman, his new bride. An image Phoebe and I had been interested in exploring was that of the house as body or self. In line with the expressionist roots of the piece, we liked the idea of building the structure of a home around the action onstage, enclosing the woman’s experience as one of and within the body. We found “Honeymoon” to be a fitting scene to use

⁹ | Figure 2 Chris Kayden, image of *VOX MACHINAL*, 2019.

this imagery, in that The Woman craves what's beyond the window, beyond her body, the intangible in this life. This metaphor extends to her continual draw to the moon through the play. She is fixated on the moon and it's simultaneous otherworldliness, personal connection, tie to life and death, natural energy, and tool of escapism. In connecting this textual metaphor of the moon to the soul creature, we created a mini-shadow puppet interlude within the windows. In each of the three moments The Woman *chooses* to escape this exploitative encounter with her new husband, she and the audience see a shadowy arc of each three interludes. A sort of shadow premonition.

In terms of the soundscape of "Honeymoon," we believed staying true to the dynamics of The Husband and The Woman was important. The language used is so tangible for today, it was more effective for us to keep the focus on it than mess with it. In one of the early readings with the cast, some of them mentioned being struck how the scene could be read as funny and how much The Husband laughed. We saw that the rhythm of The Husband's language was very reminiscent of an old radio drama, so we dramaticized it by adding a laugh track to the dialogue. This caused for a striking juxtaposition between his experience in the scene and that of The Woman, which is presented onstage.

As far as choreographic structure of the scene goes, we toggle between the machine reality that is lit by The Husband light operated by the ensemble, and the interlude reality which takes place within the windows with puppets also operated by ensemble. In the machine reality, The Woman only exists because her husband shines light on her. I wanted to focus on how sensitive touch is for her and how magnified each gaze of his is. I wanted the rest of the stage/world to disappear during their interactions. When he let her go to the bathroom, she

wasn't really released. He tried to get in, forced her to hurry by counting down, and encouraged her to take off her clothes for him. Inspired by the famous expressionist *Metropolis* scene, film historian Frances Guerin maps out the picture we reflected:

[Rotwang's] capture of the good, human Maria is enabled through the beam of light of his hand torch. Rotwang finds Maria and follows her through the eerie, dark catacombs beneath the city, and all the while his presence is signaled by the light of his torch either on her body or in pursuit of her. His spotlight roams the walls of the dank, dark cave, until it finds Maria. The spotlight presses her against the wall of the cave behind her. Trapped by the harsh outline of this spotlight, Maria's face expresses her fear. She wrenches, twists, turns, desperate to escape the power of this searchlight. Eventually, this same beam pushes Maria through a trapdoor into Rotwang's Gothic house and laboratory.

Thus, she is guided into captivity through the agency of a light beam.¹⁰

We wanted to play with the hysterical gestures evident in this *Metropolis* scene and embedded in Treadwell's language. We thought it was important to acknowledge this trope of the hysterical, fearful woman by positioning her gesture as a pull between the machine and dreamlike reality. In the interludes, her movement is expressive and free while it's restricted and mechanical in the scenes. In the *Metropolis* tableaux The Woman runs from The Husband in dreamlike gesture, straining for that escape. At the end of the scene, The Woman calls out for her mother. We know she looked forward to escaping her mother's tight grip in marrying The Husband, but she's still holding on to an ideal of the mother. While she's having tastes of freedom, she's still making choices within the confines of the machine reality.

¹⁰ Frances Guerin, "The Spell of Light: Cinema as Modern Magic in Faust, Der Golem, Siegfried, and Metropolis," in *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 143.

HOSPITAL

As I mentioned earlier, Phoebe and I chose to cut the lover. We wanted her impetus for control over her life to come from herself. Within the machine reality, up until this point the woman hasn't succeeded in taking control over her body. She lashed out with her mother, but quickly apologized and agreed to marry Mr.J. In "Honeymoon" she attempted to hide from The Husband, but eventually came out to let him have his way. We knew we wanted her choice to reject the baby to be the first taste in the machine world of freedom, the first moment where the walls between the two realities begin to break down. In order to earn that moment, we needed to create an overstimulating, all encompassing environment that made sense to her cumulative moment. She wakes up after giving birth to a baby she never wanted and nurses and doctors stroll in with commands in opposition to the needs of her body. She hasn't been listened to through the entire show, but this is in the more explicit of ways. Her bodily needs are not being met. We wanted to highlight the imposed happiness of the situation, to further juxtaposed against her delirium and discomfort. Further, we wanted to present the sterility of the environment, which doesn't leave room at all for bodily baggage/imperfections. In remembering that the stage represented The Woman's psychological landscape, we made the sanitary hospital paper stretch across the entire stage, cocooning her in her delirium at the top of the scene. She is birthed (mirroring her own giving birth) into the scene as she regains consciousness. In an attempt to great a physically over stimulating environment, I knew physical touch was an important choreographic tool. The touch evoked the mechanical, serile, and insensitive nature of the hospital that reflects the time Treadwell wrote through today.

We were struck by the parallels in Sylvia Plath's poem *Tulips* to our content. In asking the question, "what does it feel like to have all control over your body restrained in a hospital?" the Plath poem evoked a relatable sentiment.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
 Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
 Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
 Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
 They are subtle : they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
 Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
 A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.¹¹

In thinking of the imposed and mechanical joy of the postpartum room for women, we wanted to overwhelm the scene with flowers that "weigh me down," "eat my oxygen," and "watch." In our staging, after The Woman has been burdened with the bouquets and examinations, The Doctor begins to write diagnoses on The Woman's hospital gown. This nods to the hysterical medical diagnosis that defined generations of women through history. While hysteria is no longer recognized as a disorder, this delegitimizing of women's pain still widely exists. The evolution of this diagnosis, from overt to covert is meant to add to The Woman's building fury, allowing her to represent more than her individual story. After The Doctor commands a nurse to bring The Woman's baby, after The Woman has weakly opposed, she finally exclaims, with her live voice for the first time in the show, "No!" This moment of rage is marks the beginning of the machine and dream world collapsing into each other, the first event of choice that changes the trajectory of her life, and the first taste of autonomy in her life. This moment of finally taking control of her body is congruent with her giving up her body in this world.

¹¹Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes. *The Collected Poems*. Harper Colophon Books: CN900. Harper & Row, 1981.

SECOND INTERLUDE

This first moment of speech in the play is meant to extend The Woman's story across time and place. Her claiming ownership over her body and future comes in the form of rejection, a crucial point in Lorde's theory where much of the piece is rooted. "I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is more desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength."¹² She goes on to say she'll die whether she speaks or not, so best to overcome the restriction. In "Second Interlude," we needed a more specific aim for the outpour of emotion that comes in the stream of consciousness style Treadwell constructs. We didn't want the audience to check out of The Woman's arc because her grip on the machine reality was breaking. We anchored The Woman in anger, not an uncontrolled hysterical moment. We chose to make her killing her husband a calculated attempt at changing her life.

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.¹³

Lorde inspired this in her speech on the uses of anger in creating radically different worlds through anger. She teaches us to channel the anger into complete change. Having the chance to compile all "no's" into one theatrical moment was a primary objective of this project.

As The Woman is having a first experience of voice, she struggles to keep the energy over the static of the radio. When she's presented with the baby, she experiences a moment of

¹² Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," 41.

¹³ Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" in *Sister/Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984), 127.

weakness under the static so she accepts the swaddle. In unravelling the swaddle, an extension of herself, she realizes the baby (or the absence of the baby) is but a branch from the soul creature. The sticks that replace the baby conjure the soul creature to give The Woman the strength to continue the pursuit of freedom.

MACHINE

The Woman turns to face the radio, the source of power in this mechanical world. The slow, calculated, controlled approach to the radio further stresses her choice to take control. The lines between reality and dream are collapsed in this scene as we toggle between her last encounter with her husband and the final episodes of her life, marked as separate scenes in Treadwell's script. The Woman sees, as both a prophecy and a flashback, her trial, her goodbye to The Mother, and the preparation for her execution. In the trial subscene, the prosecutor interrogates The Woman on the moonlight in the room the night of her husband's murder. She says all she remembers was seeing the bright moon that night although the shades were down. We chose to keep this text as it talks back to the moon's significance and The Husband having the blinds closed in "Honeymoon." We chose to bring back the "Office" staging to represent the trial. This repetition allowed us to stay within the worlds we'd already established and contribute to the cumulative effect "Machine" was meant to have. Pivoting back to The Woman and Husband's conversation, he comments on her nervous behavior that she inherited from her mother. This transitions us into The Woman's last chance to say goodbye to The Mother, to which The Woman says, "She's a stranger, take her away, she's a stranger." The Woman is finally strong enough to separate herself from her bodily connections (thinking to the baby). In terms of staging, we wanted The Mother puppet to break down in a seemingly irrevocable way.

The Mother's pantyhose fabric that constructs her face is taken apart, leaving her without an identity and likely death now that she's been denounced. We were very excited by the freedom puppetry gave us in this moment. When a puppet loses its identity, it simply becomes the thing it's made of. The last subscene shows the regiment in the execution preparation. We used the world of the hospital to look back to the sterility of the hospital, as well as nod to the historic line between electric shock and postpartum treatment.

Finally, we come back to the final moment between The Woman and Husband as she closely approaches the radio. We chose each line from Treadwell's text to look back at the images of restriction of freedom through the piece. While on different wavelengths, The Husband discredits her feeling with "No, you just imagine [the cold air];" The Woman says she "wants to get away" so that "maybe [she'd] sleep," as she's referenced in the Interlude language throughout. In this final line, The Woman grabs the cables within the radio simultaneously breaking the radio and electrocuting herself. Here, she's meant to kill her husband while also accepting her execution through electric shock.

THIRD INTERLUDE

"Third Interlude" follows the electrocution. Phoebe and I asked, what is left after the world that's been dependent on mechanical sound and light is destroyed? The woman has transcended her bodily form to become one with her organic, more-than-human, more-than-machine, grotesque soul. We are left with a light source unlike what has lit the rest of the show and only organic sound, acting as an amplification of The

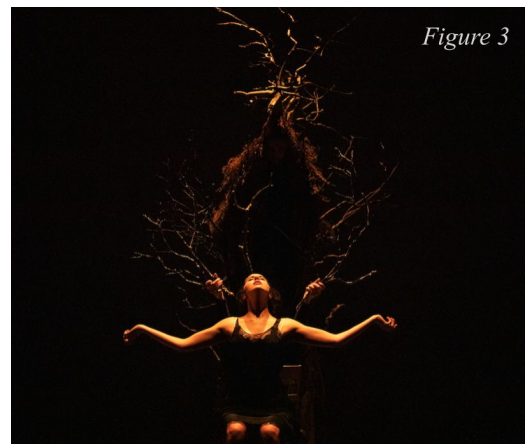


Figure 3

Woman's voice.¹⁴ The branches that seemingly extend from The Woman's arms and head as she sits in her electric chair mirror familiar the image from the end of "Office," in the shadow interludes of "Honeymoon," and hinted at in the lighting of the interludes.

PART 4 \ REFLECTION

The feedback I was given and the process of writing this paper have informed my remembrance of what *VOX MACHINAL* is about. I kept hearing that the work was poetic and haunting, so now I remember the power of metaphor in puppetry and the looming parallel between the soul creature and The Woman differently. I think this afterlife is particularly noteworthy since Phoebe and I had such a clear vision for the piece from the first day we started asking questions. We only moved forward, building on the work, theory, and vision that had come before. We each came into the collaboration with different strengths - her's in sculptural design and communication with our sound designer, and mine in choreography and production execution. We brought in varying academic knowledge - her's in the poetics of puppetry and mine in sound theory. We had equal passion in radical feminist philosophy and in big-picture, full theatrical world building. There are parts of this project I would reconsider: I would've used the transitions in between scenes to mark the time jumps and event missed; I'd make the role of lighting more specific; I'd explore different spaces other than Luma that could serve the piece differently and maybe more effectively. I'll always be proud of the professionalism, kindness, and vulnerability every performer and designer brought to this process. *VOX MACHINAL* marks a valuable, fleeting, and delicate consideration of my visions and questions of radical liberation in my time at Bard.

¹⁴ | Figure 3 Chris Kayden, image of *VOX MACHINAL*, 2019.

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