

Q & A with Fiona Shaw

London's leading actress on her role in *Machinal*.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Anyone who has seen Fiona Shaw on stage will know why it's worth taking a trip across the Atlantic to catch one of her performances. It's a great shame that apart from small roles in the movies (most recently *Undercover Blues*) the work of this Irish born actress remains largely unknown in this country. Plans to bring her to New York in Deborah Warner's outstanding production of *Electra* were dropped due to lack of funds, but television audiences may have caught Shaw's Hedda Gabler in the film Warner made for the BBC based on her acclaimed stage production. Shaw is currently in the National Theater production of Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*. We talked about her role of the anonymous Young Woman who out of despair murders her husband.

TheaterWeek: What is it like playing an American for the first time?

Fiona Shaw: I wouldn't dream of getting caught on the technical achievement of the accent. I was very keen to have an Irish mother in the play because I think in order for us in Europe to make sense of it, the ethnic origin of all the characters must be considered. *Machinal* is about a city that is endlessly rebuilding and reinventing itself. If we share certain rhythms and pretend we are not from different places, we can get on and head towards success. The cost of that, I think, is a lesson for all urban life.

I tried to pursue a way of speaking [rather than an accent] and luckily the way the play is written, it lends itself to the sort of short sentence structure that Americans are so good at. I may use about twelve different octaves when I am talking to you, but the American accent is rather flat with the emotion put into the elongated vowels. The language is very forward moving. So in a way, you are talking about paring away those little dances that we do, probably the decadence of Europe, as we endlessly apologize. There is so much ritual and decoration about offering a cup of tea for example: "Would you like a cup of tea?"

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Fiona Shaw in *Machinal* at the National. Ivan Kyncl

"Could I possibly offer you one?," whereas the Americans would say, "Do you want tea?"

What do you make of the short disconnected scenes of *Machinal*?

Most plays are structured on a coherent universe where the images marry other images very obviously and the audience and the actors are in agreement about that universe they are both sharing. This play opens corridors in your mind that do not share passages. The lovely thing about life is the way people repeat themselves, you meet people you have met before. But there is also the man you notice as you pass on the street, who you never will see again, or the thought that goes by your mind which you will never see again—somewhere there is an emotional value in that. The disassociated images in the play

become a great challenge because you have to freefall without a parachute in the doing of it. You know, the more I got through *Hedda Gabler* the more I saw things married, one person's choice of phrase would marry somebody else's choice of phrase in the writing. The writing in *Machinal* is far more barbaric than that.

What about the heroine of the play? She's very different from the classical roles you have played in the past.

It is not a comfortable journey because you are dealing with things that you can't get hold of. There is no point in the play where I can shake hands with the audience and say now you have got me; that's because the character hasn't got herself. This girl barely knows she's alive. She refuses to join the machine—not because she knows any alternative, but because she has to acknowledge her unconscious.

I kept on feeling that I was inadequate to the task of playing her because I think very quickly and this girl doesn't. That's not because she is stupid—she is probably far more intelligent than I am—but because she is in tune with something for which her vocabulary is too small. Her emotional vocabulary must be even tinier because nobody has ever loved her. A life without love is like a life without knowledge, and she has neither.

Is it significant that this young woman is driven to murder rather than to suicide?

Women have a tendency to damage themselves rather than others. In Holloway, the women's prison, they tend to cut their own hair off and tattoo or scar themselves, whereas male prisoners tend to be much more active and aggressive, taking their pain out on others. This woman is in some ways connected to the testosterone of life. I am sure as a man you will acknowledge that! [She laughs] She appears to be passive, but in fact, I do think that the unconscious is a dangerous bomb that will explode unless we all acknowledge each other, unless people are heard. TW