Binged it on Netflix?
5 things to know about ‘Alias Grace’ on UT’s Carousel stage

Amy McRary, Knoxville News Sentinel Published 8:00 a.m. ET Sept. 23, 2018

Another Margaret Atwood novel is getting the Hollywood treatment, this time on Netflix. Sarah Gadon stars as an immigrant maid working in Canada in the 1800s who is accused of murder. The novel of the same name is based on a true story from that time.


So was the real Grace Marks a murderer or a victim herself? Here’s what you need to know about the play before you go:

Based on a true story

“Alias Grace” is based on a notorious 1843 murder in Canada. Irish immigrant and maid Grace Marks was 16 when she was charged with helping murder her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. She and James McDermott, a Kinnear stable hand, were convicted. McDermott was hanged; Marks was sent to prison for life. But after 29 years, she was pardoned.

Add Atwood’s storytelling

Atwood’s 1996 novel is historical fiction. The author created fictional characters to help tell her story. Among them are Dr. Simon Jordan and Jeremiah, the peddler who is Grace’s friend before the murders.

Atwood also is known for writing dystopian novel “The Handmaid’s Tale,” which has been adapted into a TV series on Hulu.

New play, return engagement

“Alias Grace” is a new play. Playwright Jennifer Blackmer adapted Atwood’s novel, and Karen Kessler directed it at its 2017 premiere at Chicago’s Rivendell Theatre. Kessler, who helped found Rivendell, directs the Carousel production. She’s worked in Knoxville before, having directed the Carousel’s 2014 “Hank Williams: Lost Highway.”

The play’s title role is played by Brenda Orellana, a Los Angeles native who is a second-year Master of Fine Arts student at UT. Clarence Brown theatergoers might remember Orellana from her role as Martha Cratchit in last year’s “A Christmas Carol” or as Robby the Stockfish in last season’s “Urinetown.”
Yes, there are quilts

Quilts play an important role in “Alias Grace.” Grace Marks is a fine seamstress who creates quilts.

For the Carousel show, Knoxville resident Gail Moehlman made five quilts — four “winter” coverlets and Grace’s key and unique “Tree of Paradise” quilt.

Moehlman, who has been making quilts 30 years, began the project in mid-May and finished the quilts by Sept. 1. She estimates it takes her at least 2½ weeks, working 10 to 12 hours a day, to make a quilt. The show’s Tree of Paradise quilt took longer to piece and quilt; Moehlman said its original pattern required different than usual construction techniques.

A note theatergoers likely won't see. Since Moehlman's initials are the same as the play's title character, she embroidered the initials “GM” in a quilt corner.

Just the facts


Tickets, which are selling well, are at 865-974-5161 or clarencebrowntheatre.com. Tickets for adults are $18 for the Sept. 26 or Sept. 27 previews; $45 for Sept. 28 opening night; $25 for Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday shows; and $35 for Friday, Saturday or Sunday shows. Discounts are available for senior citizens, UT faculty/staff and students.