

## **‘Alias Grace’ is a tense, mesmerizing stage adaptation**

Neeley Moore, Assistant News Editor  
Sep 30, 2018

Right in time for the cool autumn season, Clarence Brown Theatre opened its doors for the haunting yet fascinating “Alias Grace.”

“Alias Grace” is a historical psychological thriller based on the novel by Margaret Atwood and was adapted for the stage by Jennifer Blackmer. The original story is based on the real trial of Grace Marks in the mid-nineteenth century. The recent production at Clarence Brown Theatre is directed by Karen Kessler with Delyanie Rizer as stage manager, Calvin MacLean as producing artistic director and Tom Cervone as managing director.

I had never read or watched the story of Grace Marks despite the countless adaptations. Because of the show’s premise, however, I was curious to see how Grace’s fate would unfold on stage.

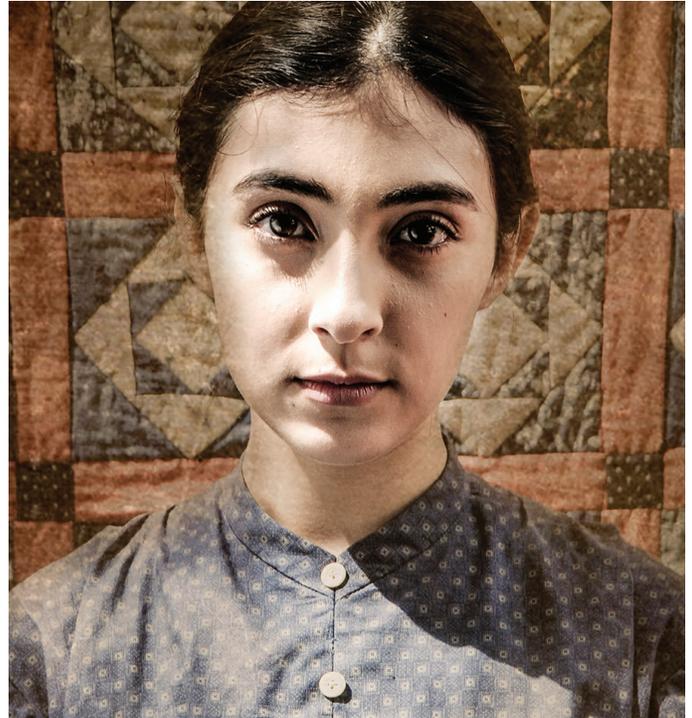
The play portrays the story of Grace Marks, a 31-year-old Irish immigrant living in Canada, who was involved in the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear, who employed Grace at Kinnear’s house in the country 15 years prior. Grace has no recollection of the murders at the present time but blames them entirely on James McDermott, the stable hand to Kinnear, at the time of the trial among other previous narratives.

Mrs. Rachel Lavell, the wife of the governor of Kingston Penitentiary where Grace is kept in prison, welcomes a doctor named Simon Jordan into the home to help Grace. Unlike the doctors in the past who have tried to fix Grace with medicine or torture, Dr. Jordan is a psychologist who researches and advocates for the mentally ill. Following his time with Grace, he hopes to open an asylum back in America.

Throughout the play, every scene and every character seems to be asking the same exact question:

Was Grace a murderer or a victim?

Grace herself cannot say for sure. And the question of her innocence is one that the play explores in tense, sensual and shocking moments. All of this happens in the one room where Grace is being examined. As Grace tells Dr. Jordan of her growing up and her time at the Kinnear’s home, the play takes place almost entirely in Grace’s memory with both Dr. Jordan and the audience watching.



Brenda Orellana as “Grace Marks” by Elizabeth Aaron

As the play goes on, it is tempting to trust Grace and grow fond of her. It is easy as an audience member to trust Grace and forget how there is no certainty that the story she tells Dr. Jordan is any more true than the four stories she told before she was placed in prison. The narrative is completely unreliable.

Until the very last moment, you don't know who Grace Marks is. The play parades around her. The play version of Atwood's novel removes the side character's narratives and the excess background information. While that removal may lead to moments of confusion, it also improves the play's overall artistic value and leaves the audience more fixated on Grace's memory than the murder itself.

One of the play's strongest points is the emphasis on the mind. In "Alias Grace," you watch as the nineteenth century idea that female hysteria was not merely madness is discussed and denied. Dr. Jordan's practices as a psychologist are foreign to the other characters.

"Alias Grace" is also a visual representation of the unheard female voice. The play deals with subjects that are known to leave women without a say including employment, abortion, abuse and power.

Visually, the play is beautiful, with the quilts on stage really standing out. Grace is often shown quilting in the play and mentions to Dr. Jordan how there are "many dangerous things that may take place in a bed." Beds are not comfortable to Grace. They are places of birth, death, insomnia and sex.

Besides the artistic value of stage design and script, the entire cast stands out with near perfect performances. Brenda Orellana, in her second-year as a UT master's student in acting, left the whole room in awe with her performance as Grace. Performances by Katie Norwood Alley as Levell, Tim Decker as peddler Jeremiah, Colling Andrews as Kinnear, Brian Gligor as Dr. Jordan, Brady Moldrup as McDermott and Helton as Montgomery were all remarkable. Emily Cullum, portraying Grace's best friend Mary Whitney, performed some of "Alias Grace's" most powerful scenes.

The question of whether Grace murdered Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear or not is one question audience members must find out when they go see "Alias Grace." But the question of who Grace Marks is, is not answered. In fact, I left the play more confused than when I arrived. Her story is twisted with deception and darkness and it seems not even Grace knows who she is. Her story is far more complicated than the stage, and just as Grace yells in the one of the final scenes, she is far more than the answers everyone wants out of her.

Perhaps the play dwells and ends on a note of uncertainty and unreliability, wrapped up in Grace, to show the fact that there is no way to really know the absolute truth in any case, no matter how deeply one studies the mind or trusts another's voice.

As Karen Kessler wrote in the playbook, "I will let our Grace speak for herself."

"Alias Grace" plays at the Carousel Theatre until Oct. 14.