

# Did she kill them? Go decide at UT's Carousel Theatre skillful staging of 'Alias Grace'

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Think you know novelist Margaret Atwood's story of real-life 19th-century murderess Grace Marks? Know it so well you'd skip the University of Tennessee's stage adaptation of "Alias Grace?" Think again.

The Carousel Theatre production's an often-tense, sexually charged two hours that, even with its abrupt end, should leave Atwood fans and story newcomers satisfied.

Based on Atwood's 1996 novel but no Netflix series retelling, playwright Jennifer Blackmer's play strips away side plots and minor characters to leave a sharply focused tale. The play's at the Carousel, part of UT's Clarence Brown complex, through Oct. 14. Tickets/dates are at [clarencebrowntheatre.com](http://clarencebrowntheatre.com).

A play set in 19th-century Canada resonates today. How women then were abused, assaulted, victimized and called liars is a theme not lost in today's #MeToo era. The play's themes, faithful to Atwood, include immigration, abortion, misogyny and sex abuse. Women's lives here are often wrecked by men's actions

But this isn't only about women's rights — or lack of them. "Alias Grace" is a murder mystery where answers aren't easy.

## The story behind the story

Grace Marks is serving a life sentence for killing her employer and his pregnant mistress-housekeeper. She's told several versions about the killings but now has amnesia. Is she a calculating killer? An unwilling accomplice? Crazy? Possessed by a revengeful spirit? Innocent?

Enter psychologist Dr. Simon Jordan He wants to recover Grace's memories by listening to her talk. Jordan says he has no interest in Grace's guilt or innocence. But soon he fights a growing attraction to her and his own mental anguish. As Grace claims power over her life, Jordan seems to lose control over his.

The play's told through flashbacks that intertwine with Grace's relating her past to Jordan. As Grace talks to the doctor she also acts in the flashbacks. At times, the play weaves in Jordan's dreams of falling in love with Grace. The story's murders occur off-stage.



Brenda Orellana as "Grace Marks" in *Alias Grace*; photo by Elizabeth Aaron



Emily Cullum and Brenda Orellana; photo by Brynn Yeager

Karen Kessler brings her love and knowledge of the story to Knoxville as its director. Kessler, who previously directed the Carousel's "Hank Williams: Lost Highway" directed "Alias Grace's" 2017 premiere at Chicago's Rivendell Theatre.

## **Eight strong performances**

The eight actors were note-perfect, giving well-defined characters on Sept. 28 opening night. Brenda Orellana, a second-year UT master's student in acting, masters the difficult role of Grace. Whether she's the happy teenager of flashbacks or the guarded, perhaps lying prisoner, Orellana never falters. Grace may be a murderer but she's always sympathetic.

Brian Gligor's Jordan may be the most demanding role. I can't recall a time Gligor was off stage. The Clarence Brown Theatre resident artist realistically turns Jordan from a self-proclaimed, calm "man of science" into a person struggling with inner demons.

The other actors - Collin Andrews as Thomas Kinnear, Brady Moldrup as James McDermott, Emily Helton as Nancy Montgomery and Emily Cullum as Mary Whitney — were also excellent. Cullum's scene when Mary dies from a botched abortion may be the play's most poignant.

I wished visiting Chicago actor Tim Decker had more scenes as peddler Jeremiah and later as con artist hypnotist Jerome Dupont. In a story where so many characters' inner selves are hidden by outer shells, Decker's peddler rises in society to become as he mockingly says, "a man of science."

It's great to see Katie Norwood Alley play the controlling, yet frustrated and wounded Rachel Lavell. The Bearden High School drama teacher returns to the UT theater after a 10-year absence. If there was a woman to first hate and then to pity" in this story, it's Alley's Lavell.

My only fault was that the play ended too suddenly. We're left to assume Grace was pardoned by efforts of Rachel Lavell and others. We're uncertain what happened to Simon Jordan, though it's clear by story's end this doctor needs medical intervention.

In the end Grace seems happy left with memories — or ghosts — of a comforting if somewhat creepy form of sisterhood. Good theater doesn't require happy or neat endings. And "Alias Grace" is good theater.



Katie Norwood Alley and Brenda Orellana;  
photo by Brynn Yeager