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THEATER REVIEW

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The Banality of Violence In a Willfully Numb Universe

By BEN BRANTLEY

Violence isn't pretty in the listless but eventful world of "The End of Reality," the hypnotic new play by Richard Maxwell at the Kitchen. Of course, you couldn't say it's ugly either. Nor is it fast, furious, pulse-racing or any of those exciting adjectives usually applied to action movies.

No, violence according to Mr. Maxwell — and there's plenty of it in his latest work — is something more awkward and ordinary. It doesn't so much explode into the lives of his hapless, lonely characters as drip, erratically and mundanely, like water from a leaky faucet.

The urban security guards and criminals who make up the cast of characters of the play, are beaten bloody and choked and kicked and jumped upon. But their expressions rarely change, and their voices remain calm and neutral, with just a buzz of irritation at their edges. Somehow, though, all that flatness starts to sound like a sustained cry of pain.

More than seven years after making his name with "House," a poker-faced little drama with songs about a family in mysterious and mortal jeopardy, Mr. Maxwell remains the king of affecting disaffection. Whether portraying a romantic triangle, prematurely burned-out boxers or the route from cradle to grave in one man's life, his works have always been notable for their air of electrified lethargy and actors who speak with all the intensity and animation of performers in training films from the 1950's.

His style of willful numbness seemed destined to wear out its novelty. How many notes can you find in a monotone, after all? Yet Mr. Maxwell, who as a writer and director controls his work with a tightness exceeded in New York theater only by Richard Foreman, keeps digging deeper. "The End of Reality" is his most eloquent statement to date on the blurring of despair and apathy in American lives.

It is also his longest and wordiest show (unless you count his misfired staging of Shakespeare's "Henry IV, Part One" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music). And it features production values that are positively deluxe by his usual rough-hewn standards. Designed with immaculate blankness by Eric Dyer, "Reality" is set in the sterile white security station of an institutional building (of unspecified purpose) in what is obviously a very rough neighborhood.

There, a team of guards, headed by an avuncular type played by Thomas Bradshaw, fill the silence with talk on subjects small and large, while images of the rooms in the building, projected by security cameras, flash onto oversize screens. Sometimes people materialize on these screens, fuzzy but identifiably human, before disappearing in sections, as if by some computerized conjuring trick. By the evening's end, you have the feeling that the flesh-and-blood figures onstage are not much more real to one another than are the two-dimensional passers-by.

The guards of "Reality," portrayed by members of Mr. Maxwell's New York City Players, sometimes speak in those elliptical fragments that have become this playwright's signature and that have the fascinating banality of conversation overheard in a supermarket or on a subway car. As is always true of the Maxwell style, the uninflected delivery of these lines seems to magnify and dissect what is spoken.

"I'm frozen with fear," says a new member of the team (Sibyl Kempson), after one of her colleagues has been spirited away by an anonymous thug. That Ms. Kempson says this as if she were reading a bus schedule perversely makes the fear more credible — a fact of life instead of a moment of self-dramatization. The catchphrase of a cocky guard played by Brian Mendes — "What's up?" — becomes funnier with each repetition, precisely because it sounds so

The End of Reality

Written and directed by Richard Maxwell; set and lighting by Eric Dyer; costumes by Kaye Voyce; flight trainer/consultant, Brian Mendes; stage manager, Scott Sherratt; set construction, Joe Silovsky and Gary Wilmes; video consultant, Jonathan Gabel; photographer, Michael Schmelling; production assistants, Shoshona Currier and Christopher Maring; producing director, Barbara Hogue; general manager, Christina Masciotti. Presented by the Kitchen and the New York City Players. At the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, ext. 11. Through Jan. 28. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

WITH: Thomas Bradshaw, Alex Delinois, Jim Fletcher, Marcia Hidalgo, Sibyl Kempson and Brian Mendes.

empty.

But Mr. Maxwell has given his characters fuller powers of articulation than usual, and an itchy philosophical bent that doesn't really do them any good. Mr. Bradshaw's character — who would love to get the job as an extra in a movie so he could exist forever on screen — quotes from the Bible and considers the way time has warped his old neighborhood. "We're in the future now," he says. "I can feel it."

Marcia Hidalgo, playing Mr. Bradshaw's goddaughter (and temporary employee), says she senses something vague but significant happening around her, that "no pattern, no religion can claim," in which she "can't even participate." Many of these observations are made in the presence of a silent and largely ig-

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nored witness — a hoodlum (Jim Fletcher) who has broken into the building and been taken prisoner by the guards, after a painstaking, slow-motion struggle.

That fight is one of several (overseen by Mr. Mendes); all of which register as martial-arts ballets of comic clunkiness. Their lack of drama and energy not only deglamorizes violence but also suggests it has become an accepted aspect of everyday existence. References to beliefs in things mystical, from Christianity to horoscopes, abound. But everyone is ultimately a resigned fatalist. "Fate is in control," one character says. "One thing equals another, and it feels so random," says another, with a baldness that obviates pretentiousness.

The conversation gets personal now and then. Mr. Bradshaw and Ms. Hidalgo's characters argue about the boys she dates. Mr. Mendes makes a pass at Ms. Hidalgo. But no one is really connecting in these moments. They're not even connecting when they're kicking the stuffing out of one another. "The End of Reality" finds in the early 21st century an echo of T. S. Eliot's wasteland of the early 20th century, of hollow men reaching without conviction for anchors of hope and faith.

When Mr. Bradshaw delivers a eulogy for an abducted co-worker (Alex Delinois) who may or not be dead, he keeps promising to describe the real man that none of the others knew, but somehow he never gets around to it. And there is one gorgeous, simple moment when Mr. Mendes realizes he is the only person onstage and stares into the audience, looking fierce but kind of lost, like an amateur actor in a gangster melodrama. "I am alone," he says. His stiff self-consciousness only adds to the pathos.