

Small-Town Americans, Street by Street to Eternity

By BEN BRANTLEY

Somewhere between the snug burg of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" and the wine-dark seas of Homer's "Odyssey" lies the brave new world where Richard Maxwell has set up camp. In "Neutral Hero," the remarkable new play that opened on Tuesday night at the Kitchen, Mr. Maxwell is hunting for the epic in the Everyday.

And lo and behold, if he doesn't land it as surely as James Joyce did when he sent Leopold Bloom roving through Dublin in "Ulysses." In this story of a typical, small-town blue-collar youth who gets lost growing up, Mr. Maxwell is also allowing audiences to discover the compassionate heart that was always beating within his plays, too often misperceived as icy enigmas.

During the past 15 years Mr. Maxwell has established himself as one of the few sui generis voices in experimental theater, and like all truly original talents, he has been subject to varied and captious interpretations. As a director of his own work, he is known for coaxing flat-line performances from actors (often amateurs) that suggest that they have recently been lobotomized.

His scripts, no matter how sensational their subjects, have been filled with the sort of banalities the average writer would delete as soon as they sprang to mind.

But from the moment his calm tales of desperate lives first started showing up in hole-in-the-wall New York theaters in the mid-1990s, Mr. Maxwell has had the courage of his clichés. He knew that they were the stuff of most people's thoughts, more likely than ever to surface in times of crisis. Trendy souls who read him as a cooler-than-thou kindred satirist were dead wrong.

In works like "House," "Boxing 2000" and "The End of Reality," he suggested how ordinary the extreme can seem when you're caught up in it. And when he ventured into fabled times past — the age of chivalry in "People Without History" or the Wild West in "Ode to the Man Who Kneels" — he unswervingly located the mundane in the mythic, making ancient history feel as if it had just happened.

With "Neutral Hero" Mr. Maxwell has reversed that equation, asking us to perceive the mythic in the mundane and to feel as if what is happening at this moment, in this country, were occurring in eternity. His title character is an unconditionally commonplace fellow — no braver, smarter,

crueler or kinder than most of us, and as confused and ambivalent as all of us are for most of our lives. In the script he is identified as Anonymous, and as ably played by Alex Delinois, he shows little evidence of a distinctive personality.

I suppose you could say the same of the other 11 members of the cast of “Neutral Hero,” who are dressed in street clothes (Kaye Voyce is the costume designer) like those we might see on the shoppers in any American mall. Yet as they take turns narrating and portraying characters in Anonymous’s coming-of-age journey, they achieve a sort of collective, Everyperson reality. The story of Anonymous could just as easily be theirs.

It’s true that Mr. Maxwell provides lots of concrete details of the world that Anonymous inhabits. The play begins with a series of actors on a blank stage, delivering a very particular description of a certain place on a certain day.

We move — street by street, block by block — through a Midwestern town that has its share of the brand-name stores you find everywhere, as well as a few remaining structures it can claim as uniquely its own. (It doesn’t take much digging, given the statistics the script provides, to figure out that the town is Perham, Minn.)

But woven within the facts is a continuing weather report with transcendental overtones. The blue sky at morning is “clean, unstoppable,” something beautiful that “doesn’t belong to us.” And when the sun starts to set, light begins to feel finite.

“It doesn’t last like it used to,” one speaker says, “escaping from you and you are feeling it more slip away.” And there is talk of a primal history, soaked in blood and greed, which gave birth to this placid, uneventful town.

Within this environment, both confiningly specific and limitless, Anonymous feels both at home and like a prisoner. He grew up mostly without a father, who left for reasons that are not (or can never be) fully articulated, and Anonymous (like Telemachus) will feel the need to go roaming too. There are alluring sirens and murderous monsters in that world. And though to the theatergoer’s naked eye they are just plain folks, they will charm and terrorize Anonymous as completely as Circe and the Cyclops charmed and terrorized Odysseus.

Some of the story is told through dialogue, which is as authentically elliptical and inarticulate as what you might overhear on the streets. Much of the tale, though, is delivered in a second-person narrative that slides into the coursing flow of epic poetry.

There is — let me be clear — nothing ironic or condescending in this juxtaposition of the sublime and the prosaic. Mr. Maxwell’s great achievement as a writer here is that he makes the soaringly heroic feel like the natural and inevitable subtext of the numbingly quotidian. Even in descriptions of boredom and squalor there’s a glimmer of nobility, of the valiance required to get through one day.

The cast of 12 spends much of its time seated in a long row of chairs at the back of the stage (shades of “Our Town”). When the actors rise, every movement is simple and charged with purpose. And, oh yes, they sing, and play on a variety of instruments compositions by Mr. Maxwell that are hymns to daily mysteries, fears, agonies and pleasures. Toward the end they dance, sort of, in soldierly formations that finally pull Anonymous back into their fold, which is where he (and all of us) belong.

In interviews Mr. Maxwell has said that creating a neutral hero is impossible. He’s right: Put any character at the center of a stage, and we’ll invest emotion in him. But if he doesn’t achieve neutrality, Mr. Maxwell gives us something greater: a transparency that finds the common skeleton — mortal, breakable and magnificent — in every one of us.

Neutral Hero

Written and directed by Richard Maxwell; sets and lighting by Sascha van Riel; costumes by Kaye Voyce; technical director, Dirk Stevens; company manager, Nicholas Elliott; dramaturgy by Tom King. Presented by New York City Players, Mr. Maxwell, artistic director, and the Kitchen, Tim Griffin, executive director. At the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, Ext. 11, thekitchen.org. Through Nov. 3. Running time: 1 hour 25 minutes.

WITH: Lakpa Bhutia, Janet Coleman, Keith Connolly, Alex Delinois, Bob Feldman, Jean Ann Garrish, Rosie Goldensohn, Paige Martin, James Moore, Philip Moore, Andie Springer and Andrew Weisell.