

# BACKSTAGE

October 23, 2012

## 'Neutral Hero' Is Something of a Rorschach Blot

By Sam Thielman



Richard Maxwell is a director whose work would be only briefly interrupted by the apocalypse. One pictures him, just after the end of World War III, rounding up the survivors to put on an oblique, moving show with nice-seeming scientist friends and a few radioactive mutants who've never acted before.

In "Neutral Hero," Maxwell again uses amateur actors and several longtime collaborators to tell the story of an unnamed young man (Maxwell veteran Alex Delinois) searching for his father (stage newcomer Philip Moore) and finding other relationships along the way. Maxwell's heroes go to great lengths to set the scene: "Directly kitty-corner from where your vehicle idles is the old Dean's location, still unoccupied," explains James Moore. "A sign ahead on your right on the grass welcomes you. The light turns green and you roll along into the heart of town. Coming up on the left is a mini-mall with a chiropractor, an attorney and Subway®." (Yes, the registered trademark symbol is actually in the script.) Maxwell's actors, when they're not talking, usually sit along the back wall of the entirely unadorned theater in a row of folding chairs, some of them next to musical instruments on which they play the various songs written by Maxwell for the show. These are,

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perhaps a little surprisingly, quite pretty and unpretentious, mostly with some mild bluegrass inflection. The piece has a deliberately folksy feel; it's set in a rural-feeling part of the country (again, never named), and the music has a similar countrified flavor.

It's hard to judge the acting. It is either totally without artifice or completely artificial, depending on your point of view. The actors say the lines as though they personally are feeling the emotions their characters are trying to express, rather than going through the subtle amping-up and refining actions that professional actors are so skilled at invisibly performing in order to fill the space. (The Kitchen, it should be noted, is a large space.) Yet it works somehow.

"Neutral Hero" is, as its title suggests, something of a Rorschach blot. The young man has a passionate relationship with a woman he loves deeply and then a subsequent affair over which he is consumed with unexplained guilt. Is she part of some forbidden class? Is the relationship purely sexual and enticing only for that reason? (The couple—Delinois and Rosie Goldensohn as his second lover—have an onstage tryst that is just long enough to communicate that they had sex; there's no such connection between the hero and his first partner, Jean Ann Garrish.)

As is regularly the case with Maxwell, "Neutral Hero" seems to be much, much more than the sum of its parts. It's kind of an avant-garde "Oklahoma!," in which love and loss and country life come together amid beautiful music to form a startlingly clear picture of human nature in a wide variety of its forms. It's a good show. Given the simplicity of Maxwell's own diction, that feels like enough.

*Presented by the New York City Players and the Kitchen at the Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., NYC. Oct 18–Nov. 3. (212) 255-5793 or [www.thekitchen.org](http://www.thekitchen.org).*

**Critic's Score: A**