

October 20, 2012

Neutral Hero

by Adam R. Burnett

Every morning I wake up and check the weather. The daily routine offers security, knowing that if nothing else, at least there will always be weather.

But weather is weather whether you feel one way or the other about it. The same goes for directions, geography: north and south, hills and flatlands. These entities, like time, exist in neutrality. It is our emotional life, with the desire for story, reflecting upon these neutral surfaces that create drama.

Richard Maxwell's new music-play *Neutral Hero* is an experience that defies reviewing in many ways. Framed by a plain unpainted wooden proscenium, twelve people attempt to tell a familiar story straight. The play opens with a weather report and introduces us to a town of "two and a half thousand inhabitants," noting every building, house and street corner, as if driving through. We are taken into a home where our Anonymous Hero's Father, portrayed by Philip Moore, is walking out on the Mother, portrayed by Paige Martin. This incident prompts the Anonymous Hero, portrayed by Alex Delinois, to journey from home to find his father and in turn, to discover himself. The play is a travelogue of Americana, with unadulterated plain music of the mountains and back porches accompanying the hero's journey across common landscapes and sceneries.

The people who tell the story are so plain, their faces so open, without any adornments, that they could be anyone. When they sing they sound like the neighbor lady, through the wall, who sings because she is doing dishes and no one is listening. It is the untrained voice, honest and raw, and without motive. This facet makes *Neutral Hero* equally boring and unpretentious while opening a space for huge revelatory, truthful moments where the faces and voices of the people on stage becomes a blank canvas for the audience's lived experience.

Yes, the play hits one intentional non-miraculous note and attempts to sustain it for 85 minutes.

These performers engage not as actors, but as people—some who have worked regularly with Maxwell for years. So, to really investigate *Neutral Hero* I have to not talk about it briefly and instead position the role of the actor in theatre.

Popular theatre is a manipulative magic act—it is the religious profundity of theatre that creates the actor's presence, which is a trinity: they are there, they are also not

October 20, 2012

there, and in this, they are also not *not* there. This became a symptom of the craft in the 19th century when the study and implementation sought realism, and in effect, signaled the dissolution of the performer and ushered in the era of the trained actor. The more “real” a performance felt the more legitimacy the play was rewarded, and the experience became lauded for its ability to cloak itself, mask the performer and ultimately disappear on itself. The comment, “Wow. That was so real,” marked the ultimate compliment.

What Maxwell has attempted to do in *Neutral Hero*—and you could say this may be his *raison d’être*—is to shake the magic act off and present the truly lived experience on stage, without any pretension and as honest as humanly possible. In this way, Maxwell persists that the performer not disappear, allowing the audience to see the stage, to witness the story, and to be more present than we are usually asked to be in a forum where our silent attention is demanded for the sake of a lie.

Maxwell may well have exorcized the magic of theatre, but in doing so he elevates its status to something pure and revitalizing. And that’s a first for me.

Neutral Hero is not for everyone. There are stretches of tedious boredom—theatre of Valium—but if you are patient, the play will reward you. It’s a reminder that boredom is okay, that we ought to welcome it, as it is from the grounded base of boredom that impulse is born.

And isn’t it remarkable that 85 minutes of sustained neutrality prompted me to ruminate on all this so heavily?

<http://www.nytheatre.com/NytheatreNow/ReviewNyte/2012-neutral-hero-adam-r-burnett>