

October 24, 2012

Richard Maxwell Shifts Into *Neutral Hero*

The Kitchen hosts the newest from the noted avant-garde writer-director
By Alexis Soloski

The writer-director Richard Maxwell, whose new show *Neutral Hero* is now playing at the Kitchen, has always had a BYOF policy—Bring Your Own Feelings, no corkage fee. Though much of his early work (like the mesmerizing *House* and the delightful *Showy Lady Slipper*) traded on melodramatic tropes, with plenty of ensuing sex and violence, he has always encouraged his actors to speak in more or less uninflected tones, saying the words as plainly and clearly as possible. When the text encourages them to yell, they simply say them a bit louder. Facial expressions, gestures, and all but the most necessary gestures were similarly disincentivized. If we in the audience wanted emotionalism, we would have to supply it ourselves, knotting event and audience together intimately.

This via negativa never served as mere schtick—but rather as a way for Maxwell to reconcile himself to the inherent falsity of theatrical practice, to remove pretense. If actors recited his lines just as written, then they were simply people present in the space speaking those lines—you could never accuse them of faking it. Happily, he also locked



on to the inadvertent comedy of disjunction between content and expression, which renders his plays more compelling than a description of his method suggests. Deadpan was never his goal, simply a consequence of his rigorous search for time-based truth. Yet Maxwell inevitably developed a reputation as “affectless” or “monotone,” which he believes misrepresents his work. As he told the website Culturebot, he developed *Neutral Hero* to set himself “the task of achieving neutrality onstage. Which is impossible, it turns out.” *Neutral Hero*, played by a cast of 12, three of whom double as a band playing country folk songs, is a sort of American *Peer Gynt*, minus the trolls—a tale of a centerless young man, Anonymous (Alex Delinois), moving through the world.



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Deliberately or otherwise, *Neutral Hero* may stand as Maxwell's least involving work. Some of this owes to the cavernous space of the Kitchen, which distances the audience from the actors. (Some of it may even owe to my seat, quite high up and far away.) Whether purposeful provocation or accidental misstep on Maxwell's part, it seemed incredibly difficult to engage with the action, to give yourself over to the moment. Even the songs, typically highlights of any Maxwell show, didn't much register. The actors—young, old, black, white, experienced, and otherwise—recited the text faithfully, in precise declarative sentences. But these words, these voices somehow failed to convey human experience, which his other shows poignantly achieve. Here, the rigorous paring down seemed less startling and more stagey. "Life is so boring," the anonymous young man declares, and here—as never before—Maxwell made it seem so.

<http://www.villagevoice.com/2012-10-24/theater/richard-maxwell-shifts-into-neutral-hero/>