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Richard Maxwell

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

The idiosyncratic writer/composer/director finds theatricality in the mundane

By Alexis Solaski

In the halcyon '80s, Richard Maxwell fronted the band Rickie 'n' the Croatians. Maxwell sang as "Rickie" and the appropriately Croatian Pavkovic brothers—Dave and Steve—backed him on drums and bass. The trio strummed and thumped rockabilly standards—Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly—and, later, original tunes with a sociopolitical bent. "These songs were meant to change the world," Maxwell says.



A triple threat: Richard Maxwell

"And failed miserably." The band gigged at now-defunct Chicago clubs until college ended, then broke up. Now, 10 years later, Maxwell's rock-and-roll adventures are through, but he continues, as Buddy Holly might say, "to rave on."

These days the former rocker-with-a-cause is a triple-threat theatre artist—writer, composer, director—who has downtown Manhattan circles hailing him as something of a theatrical wunderkind. A 32-year-old jumble of neck and spectacles and angular limbs, Maxwell converses in an intelligent, considered fashion, rarely betraying the zaniness that marks his work as inimitably special. Since his arrival in New York five years ago, Maxwell has composed and directed nine plays, all musicals. The three produced most recently are the Obie-winning *House*, a tragedy with heavy metal ballads; *Cowboys and Indians*; a history play with 19th-century warbles; and *Showy Lady Slipper*, a comedy-drama with radio-ready confections. Though markedly different in form and content, each piece bears the earmarks of Maxwell's unique "process," which



DAVID GUANTIC

Flattened tones and startling topographies: Laurena Allan, Gary Wilmes and John Becker with Yehuda Duenyas (on the floor) in Maxwell's House.

asserts itself in performance as an extravagant attention to the text, minimal blocking and no attempt at any sort of emotional verisimilitude.

This method developed in the wake of Maxwell's 15-month internship at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, after which he and several friends—all actors—founded the Cook County Theatre Department. They needed a director, and Maxwell volunteered. "Or, rather," he says wryly, "I was volunteered." For its first production Cook County created a deconstruction of *Oklahoma!* titled *Swing Your Lady!* "We preserved all of the text," Maxwell says, "but Dave Pavkovic, the musical director, couldn't resist writing all new songs." In preparing *Swing Your Lady!*, Maxwell began to define his directorial approach. He would start by choosing two actors, putting them before an audience, setting a stopwatch and saying, "Okay, you're on stage and we're going to watch you for five minutes. Just go." And, nervously, they would.

A COMMON OUTCOME TO THESE EXERCISES

soon became apparent. Maxwell found the actors would feel "a pressure always to perform, to entertain, to do a tap dance of some sort. We started analyzing that impulse, trying to come to grips with that instinct." The director's desire to

relieve this pressure forged his rehearsal style. "In rehearsals, I'm trying to strip away any predisposed inclination that a performer has—not because I think

their instincts or their training are invalid, but I think it's important to clean the slate, start from zero or as close to zero as we can get." As a result, he sub-

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jects his actors, many of them novices, to an almost unceasing interrogation regarding their impulses and actions. The Maxwell catechism asks, "Do you need to do that? Why are you doing that? Is that necessary?" As the answer often is "no," Maxwell manages to trim away all excesses—including nearly all variations of tone and intonation.

The hallmark of a Maxwell actor is his or her vocal resemblance to a first-grader reading a primer or perhaps an instruction manual composed in a foreign language. Each syllable is lent equal weight, every emotional vicissitude performed in monotone. A similar qual-

ity also governs the actors' extremely limited gestural lives and facial expressions. The surprising thing is, after a few minutes, these stylizations prove neither boring nor contrived. They begin to seem, in fact, ineffably *theatrical*.


Watching a Maxwell play, one finds oneself giving undue attention to the most mundane observations—such as the *Showy Lady Slipper* line "Horses are nice," or *House*'s "You're all buttery." The Maxwell actor's delivery lends sincere gravity to the casual, the tossed-off and the thoughtless, imbuing unconsidered language with wit and portent. And the audience is made to work hard

at assigning the correct emotional value to the blank expression and verses. Eventually the deadpan grows to seem quite lively, and the flattened tones take on a startling topography. Furthermore, the nonrealistic movement work, stolid blocking and emotional absence—perhaps *abscence*—jar the spectator alert, preventing an easy escape into the world of the play.


Few moments are more jarring than when the characters actually break into song. In an instant of heightened emotion (at least in Maxwellian terms), an actor will hit *play* on a hand-held tape recorder or pause and wait for live accompaniment to kick in. Then, flat as ever and frequently straining for the high notes, the actor will perform an air only tangentially related to the stage events. Typically, each character receives one song. Duets are rare. The Maxwell song has forced rhymes or no rhymes at all. And though many of the lyrics stand as melodic non sequiturs, they do reveal elements of personality and temperament. In *House*, for example, a father bent on educating his son sings, "I saw Whitesnake play with Motorhead./ I saw Kenny Rogers play with Sawyer Brown./ I saw Moody Blues play with Blue Oyster Cult./ I saw hockey there and opera too."

"MUSIC WORKS ON A LEVEL DIFFERENT from text," Maxwell says. "It tends to get to the heart of an issue quicker, it's more immediate in an emotional sense." In writing songs, Maxwell adds, he enjoys asking himself, "What would this character choose to sing about in this moment? My characters seem to all have a favorite song coming from a certain genre, whether it's pop or country rock or even, like in *Cowboys and Indians*, Bach."

Showy Lady Slipper marks the first play for which Maxwell searched out trained singers (he placed an ad in *Backstage* calling for musical theatre actresses), a choice that allowed him greater freedom: "I could do a three-part harmony without worrying if they were going to hit the notes." In fact, he



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Philip Goodwin as King John in the Shakespeare Theatre's 1999 production, directed by Michael Kahn.

Photo by Carol Rexegg.

changed a major plot point—retrieving one of the characters from a cruel death—just so that harmony could be achieved. But, though he hoped they might, the trained actors did not alter his process, which he's begun to find somewhat constraining.

Maybe Maxwell's transformation will occur when he completes the play that returns him to his rock-and-roll roots. "I have an idea in the back of my head," he explains, "to write a musical about the life of a rock band. But every time I get to a certain point I realize it's been done before—and brilliantly—by Spinal Tap."

It may be years before Maxwell develops a new process—or a hard-rock magnum opus—but expect him to keep busy in the meantime. He recently directed students of NYU's Experimental Theater Wing in his *A Boxing Play* and made plans to tour *Showy Lady Slipper* and *House* at several European festivals (*House* enjoyed enthusiastic notices during runs in Amsterdam and Berlin last summer). January found him rehearsing *A Cave Man Play* for a workshop production in Soho Repertory Theatre's research and development series.

At a Saturday rehearsal in Tribeca, Maxwell's working the latter show with barely off-book actors—a man in a leather jacket and a woman in a housedress—encouraging them to experiment with new riffs, rhythms and pauses. The woman enters, exits, reenters and stops. In a somber monotone she says, "I want to make you something. Can I make you something?" It's an everyday line, unremarkable as they come. But in the scene's context—and by dint of Maxwell's process—it sounds strange, new and resonant. From his fourth-row perch, Maxwell is making sweet somethings out of seeming nothings. **AT**

Alexis Soloski is a 1999–2000 American Theatre Affiliated Writer, with support from a grant by the Jerome Foundation. She is also a frequent contributor to the Village Voice.



Stolid blocking and emotional absence: Jean Ann Garrish, Ashley Turba and Sibyl Kempson in *Showy Lady Slipper*.

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