



Rich Maxwell:

Dramatizing the Mundane

by Philippa Wehle

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House: Mother (Laurena Allan), Mike (Yehuda Duenyas, standing), Son (John Becker), and Father (Gary Wilmes, on floor)

Photo: David Quantic

Father, Mother, Son (the basic family unit) stand side by side, facing the audience. Expressionless, motionless, they stare, glassy eyed, arms hanging loosely at their sides. Mom offers Dad and Son a piece of toast. They munch in silence. Behind them is a dirty white wall, blank but for a pay phone hanging at one end, take-out menus next to it, and an exposed pipe along the bottom. With Father and Son dressed in ordinary jeans, tee shirts, and athletic jackets, while Mother wears a tasteless combination of pink top with lemon yellow baggy pants, this curious family seems frozen in a Beckettian wasteland. Stage right, another man (in black suit and striped tie) stands, legs apart, his gaze a mindless blank. Six fluorescent ceiling lights make sure no shadows hide the stark presence of these strange figures highlighted against the white plaster wall. There is no place for illusion here; what we see is what we're going to get.

"Hello," says the wife, looking up at her husband expectantly. He does not respond. She continues: "I was at a ah... a ah... meeting. Do you know? It's for this group. Civic group?" Pause. Again she continues: "Yeh... meeting?" Father munches and stares. So goes the opening dialogue of *House*, a fascinating hour-long show written and directed by Richard Maxwell, a New York-based artist who has been creating quite a stir here and abroad ever since *House* opened at Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater in June 1998.

Father, played by Gary Wilmes (Maxwell's longtime friend and collaborator), frequently invites his Son to ask him questions but never gives him a direct answer. Instead, he makes long pompous speeches, with a slightly Eastern European accent, about cities, the pros and cons of school, Christianity, the devil, race cars, playing the horses, and so on. "What's the city like?" the Son asks. Father: "Cities... There are a lot of cities. And a lot more towns and villages. I've been to a lot of towns and cities. They are all de same. They want de same things. They all have streets. They all have governments. They all have civics. They all have people who want to see better things for their community. Nice things ..." and he goes on.

Clearly Father is convinced of the validity of his beliefs. He embodies the patriarch, the educator who needs to teach his son everything from his views on Slayer to how to use a bow and arrow. He even sings a heavy metal ballad to his Son (composed by Maxwell) about the pleasures of a "concert hall slash sports facility" he wants his Son to think about when he decides where he wants to live. Mother (Laurena Allan) is more tentative in her convictions but she too is concerned with education and civic matters. "They're going to put a Shakees on Northwest Highway," she announces almost doubtfully. Her speeches are filled with hesitations, pauses, "ands," "buts," and "ors," and it's a miracle if she ever finishes a sentence. Son (ten-year-old John Becker in the original cast) listens and stares, rarely showing any emotion except to acknowledge that he prefers Tacos Supreme to Tortillas Supreme. Neither Mother nor Son seems to know what Father does for a living. Mother suggests he may be retired but she doesn't have any memory of what he may have done in the past.

Enter Mike (Yehuda Duenyas), who's been standing motionless on the stage for at least five minutes. His is a mysterious presence. In a deadpan monologue, he explains that he's come to avenge his brother who was murdered by the Father. Mike and Father fight, a clumsy fight performed in slow motion, bodies slack and fists punching with barely any tension. Mike strangles Father. No tears are shed, however. Mother manages an "Oh, no! Oh, no!" but she shows no affect whatsoever. Bent on revenge, Son tries to shoot Mike with his bow and arrow and hammers at him with his little fists, but he is no match

for Mike, who kills him as well. Mike woos Mother with a song and persuades her to go away with him. Such is the plot of *House*.

Maxwell has referred jokingly to his tale of murder in a suburban family as his modern Greek tragedy. Whereas it is true that *House* is about revenge, murder, and fate and the play has the stark simplicity and concentrated plot of Greek drama, it is hardly the House of Atreus or Thebes. It is the house of an ordinary American family in a Chicago suburb, first-generation immigrants who want a piece of America but experience tragedy instead, tragedy that seems to have little effect on a wife and mother. If there is any heroism, it is in the ill-fated attempt of a young boy to avenge his father's death with a flimsy bow and arrow, a gesture that is more comical than serious.

So what is the appeal of these curious stock figures who barely move and who deliver their mundane monologues in a flat monotone as if reading from cue cards? Why are we interested in characters who do not so much speak to each other as to themselves, with no affect? Why do we care about this strange family that seems to live in a basement rather than the house of the title? In fact, Jane Cox's set doesn't even attempt to create the illusion of the interior of a house. It is an exact replica of the basement at West 48th Street where the company rehearsed the show, right down to the dark floor, splattered with white paint. And most importantly, why do we laugh outrageously from beginning to end and feel excited that we've discovered a fresh, new voice in today's theatre?

For one thing, it is refreshing to encounter theatre that isn't dependent on sophisticated technology or novel



House: Mike (Yehuda Duenyas, standing), Father (Gary Wilmes), and Mother (Laurena Allan).

Photo: Jane Cox

effects. Maxwell's return to simple, unadorned theatre, his exploration of an acting style stripped of any embellishments, and his sense of timing and delivery combine to create an original aesthetic that is both startling and very funny. Whether he writes about a couple moving from Montana to Minneapolis, a Burger King manager and his workers, or three young girls trying on new outfits for one of their boyfriends, he transforms these ordinary stories into something delightfully comedic and imminently intriguing. Clearly, he is not interested in getting across any predetermined message; he prefers to let the audience project onto what it is they're seeing and take away whatever they want. In this sense, he makes us work and asks us in fact to participate in the making of the piece by adding a third dimension to these two-dimensional characters.

attending a Maxwell play to "what it must have been like to stumble upon the baffling but seductive creations of the young Sam Shepherd in the early 1960s in the East Village."

Born in Fargo, North Dakota, Maxwell spent his early life in West Fargo. During his senior year at Illinois State University (1990), he won an artistic fellowship with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company and spent 15 months working at all areas of theatre there. In 1992, he co-founded the Cook County Theater Department with three friends eager to challenge conventional notions of making theater. They found a loft space at 23rd and Michigan, in Chicago's South Loop, and began exploring ways of breaking down and analyzing the principles of acting, inventing exercises to get the actor to drop the mask and resist the urge to perform.



Boxing 2000: Kid Hanson (Jim Fletcher), Referee (Lakpa Bhutia), and Freddie (Robert Torres).

Photo: Michael Schmelling

House was so successful at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater that it was picked up by Mark Russell, artistic director of PS 122 and given a five-week run in November 1998. There it continued to play to rave reviews and won an Obie award in 1999. Soon the European festival contingent became interested and *House* was added that summer to the programs of Germany's Teatre der Welt and the Holland Festival.

Since *House*, Maxwell has written and directed three other instant hits and become a regular on the European international festival scene. At 32, he is, in Richard Foreman's words, "one of the two or three most talented young theater artists of his generation," high praise indeed from the doyen of experimental theatre. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* recently compared the experience of

Their first show, *Swing Your Lady!*, their deconstruction of *Oklahoma!*, was presented after nine months of rehearsal, in 1992. They kept every word of the script but Dave Pavkovic and Maxwell wrote new songs for the piece. There were only four performances, but it was well received by an audience who laughed at their quirky interpretation of one of America's best-loved musicals and the company's determination to strip theatre down to its barest essentials. The company did four more shows, with Maxwell taking on various roles: actor, writer, songwriter, and finally director, a position Maxwell says he just fell into by chance and necessity rather than choice.

In 1994, Maxwell left the company and moved to New York City to pursue directing. He offered his services to the

Wooster Group as a floor sweeper, was taken in as an intern for six months, and quickly became part of New York's downtown theatre scene. In 1995, he was invited to write a play for the Blueprint Series at Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater. Interested in exploring the nature of entertainment, he wrote *Burlesque*, presented in July 1995, a "hodge podge" (his term) of loosely connected songs in the tradition of the low-brow variety shows so popular on the Vaudeville circuit.

This led to an invitation in 1996 from the Williamstown Theater Festival to do a workshop. The result was *Billings*, a half-hour piece in three short acts with five characters: Husband, Wife, and three Movers. The Husband, a hapless fellow who works in restaurants in Billings, Montana, initiates a move to Minneapolis in the hopes of finding a similar job there. There is no communication between Husband and Wife. He talks to the Movers and she speaks exclusively in monologues with a slight Eastern European accent, reflecting on such banal subjects as where she comes from, how her grandfather built the house they lived in in Billings, how poorly built it was because he was a drunkard, and so on. As they move from the house in Billings to the Amtrak train and on to the new house in Minneapolis, each Mover has a monologue on what matters to him, i.e. alcohol, pornography, and fighting.

Billings, which subsequently moved to New York, was a breakthrough for Maxwell. It allowed him to further define the kind of theatre he wanted to make, a theatre that dramatizes the mundane. He realized that trivial, insignificant subject matter interested him more than the personal psychology or motivation of a character or the need to convey a message. *Billings* also helped him to refine his directorial approach, which is characterized by his choice to flatten his characters and have them speak with little or no inflection, and his dedication to small talk (or "nothingness," as he calls it).

Invited back to Williamstown in summer 1997, Maxwell wrote and directed another short play, *Burger King*, his "labor piece," as he wryly calls it, since it concerns a Burger King franchise, its Manager, Assistant Manager, and two Food Handlers. Again, his story concerns rather ordinary people, such as a Manager who is deeply entrenched in the work philosophy and who likes to impart this "wisdom" to his workers. The drama occurs when he starts to unravel mentally in preparation for the arrival of the District Manager.

1998 was a banner year for Maxwell. Not only did he write, direct, and stage *House*, but he co-wrote and directed



Boxing 2000: Freddie (Robert Torres), Kid Hanson (Jim Fletcher), and Referee (Lakpa Bhutia).

Photo: Michael Schmelling

a new play with Jim Strahs, *Cowboys and Indians*, which premiered in March 1999 at Soho Rep. Loosely based on Harvard graduate Francis Parkman's account of his and his cousin's 1846 journey down the Oregon Trail to study and document American Indians, the play marks a notable departure for Maxwell. The two-and-a-half-hour performance showcased a large cast in period costume (ranging from Parkman and his cousin and a proper New England girl to Christian missionaries, a scout, a squaw, and a saloonkeeper). *Cowboys and Indians* featured specific historical types inspired by Parkman's journal rather than Maxwell's usual contemporary figures. There was also an emphasis on the characters' racist reactions to Native Americans. Still, the actors delivered their lines in Maxwell's familiar flat style and beautifully maintained the delicate balance between realism and parody he manages so well.

With *Showy Lady Slipper*, which premiered at PS 122 October 14, 1999, Maxwell returned to his no-frills theatre and adamantly irrelevant, trivial subject matter (in this case, a day in the lives of three typical American teenage girls, who chatter mindlessly about boys, horses, gossip, and clothes).

The set featured a painted backdrop by Billy Ahret (in a pseudo-Van Gogh style), which depicted a room with a table (covered with a white lace table cloth), chairs, a vase with flowers, brown wood paneling, and red floral-patterned wallpaper. In front of the backdrop were two real chairs and a table with a telephone on it; behind the backdrop were two musicians. The girls, Jennifer (Jean Ann Garish, wearing a pink tee, lavender pants, and sneakers), Lori (Sibyl Kempson, in a sleeveless orange denim top and black

jeans, with a band around her arm), and Erin (Ashley Turba, in a blue denim skirt and light blue blouse), enter and stand. The phone rings. Lori picks it up and announces in a monotone: "John is driving over. He wants to see what we bought." The subject of driving launches Erin into a lengthy monologue on the joys of driving long distances, while the other two girls, their faces blank, listen. Talk moves from driving to horses and it's Lori's turn to soliloquize on how nice horses are. Sprinkled with phrases like "Oh my God" and "You guys," the girls' conversation is as vacuous as their stares.

As with other Maxwell "musicals" (his preferred label for all of his pieces), there is a simple story. John comes over. Jennifer steals him from Lori. Lori and Jennifer fight.



Showy Lady Slipper: Erin (Ashley Turba), Lori (Sibyl Kempson), and Jennifer (Jean Ann Garrish).

Photo: Dona Ann McAdams

John is killed in an automobile accident and the girls are reconciled.

John (Jim Fletcher) adds little or no tension to the proceedings. When he kisses Jennifer, he is almost catatonic and she is as stiff as a board. What drama there is comes when the phone rings again at the end of the play and Erin announces that John has been killed in an accident. The tragic news is greeted with a series of unemotional "Oh my Gods" and a final song sung in unison: "You know the way home but you cannot go there. I see but can't believe it'll never be the same again."

Maxwell's *Boxing 2000* opened September 6, 2000 at the Present Company Theatorium on Manhattan's Lower East Side to consistently excellent reviews. In October, Maxwell

took *House* and *Caveman*, a new show, to Dublin's Fringe Festival and Paris's prestigious Festival d'Automne.

Boxing 2000 takes place in an urban setting (the Bronx or Brooklyn), and there is an authentic boxing ring revealed in Act II. Federico Martinez (Robert Torres), known as Freddie, has lost his job and is about to fight Old Kid Hanson (Jim Fletcher). His girlfriend Marissa (Gladys Perez) is into New Age philosophy and doesn't want him to fight. She believes Freddie could find something beautiful deep inside himself if he only would give it a try. Freddie's half brother Jo-Jo (Gary Wilmes), a custodial worker, is Freddie's trainer, adviser, and role model. Their Father (Benjamin Tejada, in his acting debut) urges his son on to win the fight. The Promoter (Christopher Sullivan) believes you

have to invest in the future and tries to get Freddie interested in what he calls his "life span theory." The Referee (Lakpa Bhutia) is frustrated in his attempts to spur the seemingly unwilling fighters to begin the fight.

Act I takes place in an empty lot in front of a store's closed metal gates. The brothers talk of what to get their father for his birthday, whether or not it pays to go to college (it doesn't, according to Jo-Jo), and mostly about boxing. Freddie proposes to Marissa, but she gives up on trying to make him to change his ways. Freddie actually wins the fight (even though he hardly knows how to box), and the play ends on an atypically upbeat note. A much-lamented ballfield which the brothers thought was going to be destroyed is going to be renovated and it looks possible that Freddie will find a job and a future.

Although Maxwell remains true to his trademark style in *Boxing 2000*, one senses a slight departure from earlier work. Is there at least an attempt at communication, a feeling of tenderness between the brothers, a vague stirring in Freddie as he wonders about his future? Maxwell says no, but the play is nonetheless more openly touching and sad, and less comical than previous work. Even Maxwell's choice of an inexperienced actor to play the Father is telling. He shouts angrily at his son, in Spanish and in English, that Freddie's fighting is "not good enough." This is not the flat delivery of the Father in *House* or the unemotional "Oh My God" of the *Showy Lady Slipper* girls. It is real.

In any case, Maxwell is well aware of the danger that his style, or rather his anti-style, can become terribly limiting. He doesn't see his style as consistent or repetitive. It's a process which allows each actor to drop the mask and be real; each person comes through in a pure form. "I like to

feel I'm not implementing a process that's immutable," he says. "It's a danger it might become a self-conscious system, whereas I see my work as about creative problem-solving. My job is to help my performers get rid of artifice. If the process doesn't allow for this, it needs to be abandoned."

One of the ways Maxwell gets "rid of artifice" is to work with nonprofessional as well as trained actors. He admits that he is rather fond of "bad acting." Untrained actors, he believes, lend an edge and an excitement to his pieces that he wouldn't get otherwise. In summers, he likes to return to his roots and work with amateur actors and other nonprofessionals. In 1996, he directed *You Can't Take It With You* in a town of 2,000 people, one-and-a-half-hours from Fargo, using a cast of 18 nonprofessional actors. In the summer of 1997, he directed a dramatization of the 125th anniversary of the history of a town near Minneapolis, written by the townspeople (who helped edit and direct the piece as well). For *Showy Lady Slipper*, interestingly, he chose to work with one untrained actor and three unknown trained singers rather than professional actors.

In rehearsals, Maxwell's actors work on exercises to help them flatten their characters. Le Coq's neutral mask techniques get them to focus on the task and resist the impulse to interpret or define a character emotionally. They practice moving without any tension in their bodies or standing motionless in front of the others, vulnerable and "naked" as it were, stripped of any props, forced to get rid of what Maxwell calls the "actor face" in order to discover their real face.

Rich Maxwell claims that he makes theatre that is adamantly irrelevant, insignificant, and atypical. True, his plays deal with the everyday, his characters are ordinary people in ordinary surroundings, and his inspiration comes from overheard subway conversations and the banter around the boxing ring. As he puts it, "my plays deal with A-1 Steak Sauce... Florida State coaches... toast... 1989..." In reality, of course, his original brand of theatre is anything but irrelevant or unimportant. "The paradox here," as Maxwell himself admits, is that "it may be that this is relevant, topical, etc. And, if an audience wants to apply this to society — go for it. I think, ironically, my plays are about theatre — laughing at it while embracing what it can do."

SOURCES

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Showy Lady Slipper: Erin (Ashley Turba), Lori (Sibyl Kempson), and Jennifer (Jean Ann Garrish).

Photo: Dona Ann McAdams