

Given a non-style that's so ultra-stylized, exactly which end of reality is this supposed to be?

"People believe everything they hear," runs a mordant song lyric by Maria Irene Fornes, "not what they see." By which Fornes didn't mean that people believe the exact words spoken to them, but that they prefer to settle for hearsay rather than experiencing something from themselves. And I'm as guilty as the next fellow: I've been staying away from Richard Maxwell's plays, under the impression—based on hearsay—that they wouldn't be to my taste. My only previous experience of his work, the famously "disastrous" *Henry IV Part 1* at BAM, started me thinking that it might be different from what was said of it. So I went to *The End of Reality* and had my half-true impressions set right. I won't pretend that Maxwell is wholly to my taste: His work is troubling, not gratifying. But the trouble is intriguing and fruitful in itself, and therefore worth having.

For starters, Maxwell's work is usually spoken of as hyper-realistic, or aggressively anti-illusionist. But this, to judge by *The End of Reality*, is itself an illusion. Situations that stem from reality are discussed in the dialogue, in language that is often naturalistic, but the situation onstage is not "real," and no pains are taken to give the actions by which it's conveyed more than a nominal reality. The famous uninflected diction, instead of being the "real" tone of miserable souls at the bleak bottom end of the social ladder, is as formalized a stylistic device as has sprung up in our time.

The affectless violence with which Maxwell's plays are said to be suffused is likewise different from what comments have led you to expect. Unlike some currently fashionable playwrights whose relish for gory details leads you to think of them as audience-torturing sadists, Maxwell uses his arbitrary biff-bangings in an eerily anti-septic, remote, almost dreamlike way, as if they rose up naturally after the tensions in a layer of cerebral cortex had been unpacked. The all-out fight at the finish of *The End of Reality* suggests a kind of surrender to the physical after emotional tension has been stretched to its limit.

The violence is metaphysical, too, in its relation to the "action"—the term has to be used loosely here—of Maxwell's play. The scene is a mysterious office in which security guards gather, but no office work is done and nothing gets securely guarded except,

maybe, the inner lives of the guards themselves. One of them seems to be in charge; another is a restless personality. A young woman trainee fails to make the grade and is dismissed; the supervisor replaces her with his goddaughter. From time to time, inexplicably, a tall guy in a ski cap comes in and starts beating up one of the guards. The first time, he apparently kills his victim; the second time, he's overpowered and left on the floor for many minutes, writhing through complex calisthenic contortions while the guards talk, ignoring him. Left alone with him, the goddaughter, full of guilt and confusion about her goal in life and her family back home, lets him go—an act as seemingly

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motiveless as everything else.

Though the talk is full of emotional revelation, no emotional connections are made; violence seems to be the only activity that links these people. Mentions of sex are mostly conceptual; it's seen as unfulfilled or unfulfilling. The supervisor's talk is heavy with soul-searching, couched in terms of Christian salvation. Mixed with the bleak panorama, the haplessly fatalistic characters, and the arbitrary events, this evokes the least avant-garde mode of theater imaginable, the drama of modernist-Catholic moralists like Claudel and Mauriac, while the detached, formal tone and allegorical placelessness summon up T.S. Eliot and Graham Greene. Despite its everyday prosiness and profanity, Maxwell's language, always yearning upward, seems far closer to them than to the recent writers he superficially resembles, like Shepard or Mamet.

The largely silent visitor who drops in so casually to beat up security guards may or may not be Death, just as the three bossy elders at Eliot's cocktail party may or may not be the Fates. Maxwell's resistance to the three-dimensional pleasures of traditional acting, too, echoes the Jansenist austerity of these writers, who sometimes give off a faintly priggish resentment at the notion that audiences should enjoy themselves at the theater: Like Maxwell, they employ theatricality in anti-theatrical ways.

These are speculations: I know nothing of Maxwell's background or his religious affiliations, if any. What seems obvious is that his considerable gifts are roughly equaled by his confusions: He's struggling to invent a theatrical form in which to harmonize a mass of conflicting and even competing impulses. The gnomic, incomplete quality of his work makes clear that he hasn't yet found that form; the self-conscious little hints of put-on that salt the piece imply a certain regret at being unable to go about things more conventionally. What will come after *The End of Reality* (significant title!) is anybody's guess, like the meaning of the event itself. For me the two fascinating points are, first, that Maxwell's much hyped gifts are genuine, and second, that our theatrical discourse overall has slipped so low that those celebrating Maxwell haven't been able to convey, to a reasonably informed person like me, any sense of his actual qualities. Under those circumstances, it's no wonder his work has a faintly puzzled air.