

Richard Maxwell and the Paradox of Theatre

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The seemingly simple aesthetic form of performances by Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players, in which actors speak and move with minimal emotional affectation and in which the scripts are constructed largely out of apparently insignificant elements of everyday speech, seems to baffle academic and popular critics alike. We read into these choices a set of apparent contradictions and paradoxical strategies which seem to challenge our conception of how theatre works. So Philippa Wehle in *Theatre Forum* and Robin Pogrebin in the *New York Times* both grapple with the curious way in which they come to have emotional investment in the characters in Maxwell's plays, with Wehle asking "what is the appeal of these curious stock figures who barely move and who deliver their mundane monologues in a flat monotone [...]" (75) and Pogrebin puzzling that "[s]omehow the less demonstrative their behavior, the deeper they seem" (1). In the *Guardian*, Lyn Gardner similarly describes the effect as "weirdly compelling" and "curiously moving" (my emphasis), and Sarah Hemming writes in the *Financial Times*, "paradoxically, [the characters] and their troubles seemed unusually vivid and moving."

There is clearly something enigmatic about Maxwell's work, and as an audience member at 2006's *The End of Reality* at the Barbican, London, I left not quite sure of what I had seen. Despite the presence of all the traditional elements of a play – including a fixed playscript (which is available for purchase from the company), costumed actors portraying characters, an identified author and director of the work, and a single storyline presented in sequence (albeit with unsignalled

discontinuities in time) – I found it difficult to accept that I had seen a play.¹ This discomfort with identifying the work as a play, its writer as a playwright, and its performers as actors, is perhaps allied with the impulses of some critics to want to see the work as *more* than a play, as something which is built out of the elements of a play but is somehow other than a play, somehow new. And yet, ultimately, I suggest that what is revealed in Maxwell’s work is not something *beyond* theatre but is, simply, theatre itself, in an unresolved paradox of pretending to pretend.

Wehle’s piece reveals something of the desire for this work to be more than it is. Her descriptions of Maxwell’s work give it a sense of exceptionality, somehow different from other theatre – and ultimately, in her argument, as enabling an access to reality which is impossible for other theatre. Writing about the staging of *House* (1998), she says, “There is no place for illusion here; what we see is what we’re going to get” (74). Referring to Maxwell’s description of *House* as a “modern Greek tragedy,” Wehle comments, “[w]hereas 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” (75). These comments are no doubt intended to illustrate the aesthetic feel of Maxwell’s work rather than articulate an analysis of the formal processes at work. Nevertheless, I question to what extent illusion plays more or less of a role in Maxwell’s work than it does in any other theatre, even in the most conventional of plays. If there is no place for illusion, then why have characters at all, let alone a stage-set which, though stark, is not the starkness of an empty stage

¹ This difficulty with recognising Maxwell’s work as a “play” is also a consequence of the way his work is programmed in the UK, as part of the Barbican’s BITE seasons of “fresh new work that hovers on the very edges of classification” (as the Barbican describes it). The run of *The End of Reality* included a post-show discussion led by Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment and a parallel panel discussion at the Riverside Studios with Maxwell, Etchells, Phelim McDermott of Improbable Theatre, and Adrian Heathfield. Situating Maxwell’s work alongside Etchells’ explicitly anti-theatrical project, for example, certainly changes the way in which UK audiences react to Maxwell’s work and supports the notion that these works are somehow challenges to the idea of a play rather than extensions of them.

but rather the meticulously reconstructed stage-set of the empty rehearsal studio?² Similarly, the Houses of Atreus or Thebes – as represented in Greek tragic drama – are hardly the *actual* Houses of Atreus or Thebes either. That is to say, the House of Atreus we know is a house made of scripted words, actors, masks, and representations of violence – ontologically indistinguishable from Maxwell’s *House*. What is at stake in marking out this *House* as a different kind of house?

Wehle describes Maxwell’s work as transcending its theatricality through “a process which allows each actor to drop the mask and be real” such that “each person comes through in a pure form” (78). This language suggests a belief in some ultimate reality which comes through in New York City Players performances, and which is uniquely accessible because of their performance style – a suggestion which is reinforced by some of Maxwell’s own comments on the matter. After interviewing Maxwell for the *Financial Times*, Hemming hypothesises, “[p]erhaps his shows move us because he gets a little closer to what he calls our ‘core being’: what is true about a person when he or she drops the social masks.” Similarly, Sarah Gorman concludes that “Maxwell appears to remain haunted by the possibility of realizing the ‘authentic’ and the ‘real’ in performance, and also appears to hold that there might be moments or instances of authenticity which are fleeting and irreproducible” (“Dead-Panned” 14).

Yet what is troubling about this conclusion is that it tends toward a kind of teleological reading of Maxwell’s shows, in which the intricate theatrical construct which his company crafts exists *in order to* enable access to a “fleeting” reality, to the “core being” of an actor independent of the process of acting. This reading is one way in which to resolve the feeling of paradox which Maxwell’s shows produce: in the concomitant presentation of artifice and authenticity, valuing the “reality” of what

² Sarah Gorman notes that the rehearsal room was so meticulously recreated, it even included ‘the take-away menus jammed behind the phone on the wall’ (“New Theatre Making” 287).

emerges makes irrelevant the artifice of how it emerges. If the performance artifice exists in order to deliver to its audience small moments of reality, then we need not trouble ourselves that such an artificial mechanism is used to transport them.

If this is Maxwell's intention, Gorman argues, it is continuous with an American Method approach, in which the aim of theatre is the pursuit of authenticity; Maxwell's own comments on the subject certainly support the importance of authenticity to him. But I would emphasise the way in which the category of authenticity is restricted to what is possible within the context of doing a "play," not seeking through the play to get to a reality beyond it. He says, "The reality of it is we are acknowledging the artificiality, and that's what makes it real. The highest reality is that there is a play happening" (Marranca). In none of his recorded conversations does he reveal any anxiety about achieving any resonance with reality which transcends the activity of playing. In another typical statement, he says, "I never ask the actors to pretend that what people are seeing is real. The reality is that we're doing a play" (Hemming).

What's more, it is important to Maxwell that the artificial framework of playmaking remains constantly in place, that it not become invisible. In a 2006 conversation at the Riverside Studios, Maxwell described how he had been educated with the idea that "good acting is invisible" and that the intention of theatre should be that "the acting disappears." However, for him and other audiences, this style of "invisible acting" through psychological realism is now immediately visible, and incapable of becoming invisible (Etchells et al.). For Maxwell, the more actors pretend not to be acting, the more false they seem – or, inverting Pogrebin's observation in the *New York Times* cited above, the more demonstratively actors behave, the shallower they seem.

In Gorman's analysis, Maxwell might be seen to be working at the problematic borders of method-influenced realism. She refers to David Graver's description of the ways in which the actor is conventionally only visible "by mistake," embarrassing and disrupting the world of the drama (Gorman, "Dead-Panned" 12). Maxwell, Gorman argues, deliberately creates and expands this theatrical territory: these embarrassing examples of "bad acting" or "failed acting." It's easy to see how this might be read as being an artificial framework set up in order to allow something "real" to slip through, as if by accident, as I've suggested might be implied by Wehle's anti-illusionist comments. But Maxwell never allows the framework to fall away by privileging either the authentic or the artificial over each other. Hence Maxwell uses both trained and untrained actors, not just untrained ones; staging and choreography is prescribed precisely; and the performance texts, while fragmentary in their content, are treated as integral and fixed entities in their usage. In her 2005 survey of several of Maxwell's shows, Gorman writes, "On repeated viewing, it becomes obvious that these 'bad' performances have been rehearsed and 'honed' to perfection [and] that the clumsy dialogue is precisely written" ("New Theatre Making" 287). Daniel Mufson makes a similar observation, writing that "Maxwell has his actors recite their lines *under the pretense* of removing any type of attitude whatsoever towards what is being said" ("The Burden of Irony" 269; my emphasis). Mufson's qualification "under the pretense" is important for my argument, because it illustrates that the absence of a certain kind of artificiality does not make the performance "real."

Speaking about the performance result to which he aspires, Maxwell describes a kind of highly charged state of indeterminacy between reality and artifice. He says, "[t]he comments which gratify me are things like, 'I felt like while I was watching I

couldn't tell whether what I was seeing was real or fake.' Like a switch was being flicked on and off, like a constant toggling between 'This is reality' and 'This is artificiality'" (Moore). This paradoxical position is not the means to achieve something else (such as the end of illusion) but is itself the goal. Gorman writes, "The dual potential of the style of acting to register as both sincere and flawed means that the work is able to provoke a genuine sense of uncertainty" ("New Theatre Making" 288).

Markus Wessendorf suggests the framework of "postdramatic theatre," as developed by Hans-Thies Lehmann, as one way to locate Maxwell's theatrical project. This description is useful because it theorises the kind of indeterminacy which Maxwell creates by not allowing the artificial framework to become obscured. Writing about *Drummer Wanted*, Wessendorf characterises it as having a "hypernaturalistic effect of derealisation" achieved by setting "traditional naturalism as a reproduction of real-life situations and speech" against "the 'extreme naturalism' of the signifying body." The actor's signifying body "refuses to recede into the dramatic fiction that it is supposed to embody by pointing instead to its own material presence onstage." For Wessendorf, postdramatic theatre as a concept is dependent upon Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which reality is "second-order," "a universe of signs that only point to each other, cut off from any external referents."

This framework of signs pointing to each other, and images of desire without referents, describes the world of Maxwell's plays. Wessendorf's description of the sustained co-presence of mutually exclusive forms of naturalism is one such example; others include characters breaking into song (in *House*, *Drummer Wanted*, and *Ode to the Man Who Kneels*, for example) and the signification of violence in *The End of Reality*. Song is traditionally a signifier of emotional interiority, but in Maxwell's

plays (which he has often referred to as “musicals”) it is at odds with its performance framework. *The End of Reality* features carefully choreographed stage combat, which Maxwell (typically) has described as being presented without any attempt to convince people that there is *actual* fighting taking place on stage. “When have you ever seen actual fighting on stage?” he asks, rhetorically (Etchells et al.). Instead we get *actual* stage-fighting, *actual* stage-blood, and actors pretending to fight involving tremendous amounts of *actual* skill.³

The conceptual framework of “postdramatic theatre” is appealing because the absence of “real” referents keeps different orders of artifice at equal value to each other. It describes a sustained co-existence between paradoxical elements, continually deferring any resolution in significance beyond what is present, which is consistent with the kind of indeterminacy between truth and falsehood to which Maxwell aspires and which audiences seem to experience. There’s a homeostasis, a tonal constancy, which one experiences while watching one of Maxwell’s plays, which this description can accommodate without necessitating fleeting moments of “reality” to justify the artificial. There may be moments which seem to convey “real” significance, but it is the quality of their fleeting in and out of awareness, rather than any individual moment of revelation, which characterises Maxwell’s plays. The egalitarian way in which significance is distributed is also consistent with the intense level of scrutiny which every act of signification is attended – such as the idiosyncratic pauses, catchphrases, meaningless utterances, and false-starts of Maxwell’s texts.

However, there’s something which strikes me as excessive in using the language of postmodernist thinking to describe Maxwell’s work. I think Maxwell makes not “post-plays,” but “plays”; and I think the paradoxical experience of

³ On my way out of *The End of the Reality*, I overheard Donald Hutera, dance critic for the *Times* (UK), comment that the fight sequences were “the best dance choreography [he’d] seen all year.”

watching his work is not a result of a challenge to theatricality, but instead a reduction of theatre to its core proposition – which is, however, a paradoxical one. Wessendorf’s reading, in which Maxwell’s major theme is his “character’s inevitable failure to ever match up, or to get on the level with, the hyperreal,” is convincing, but it seems to me that the fundamental failure which Maxwell presents is less a postdramatic technique than a simple but elusive paradox of theatre.

In Joseph Roach’s account, Diderot’s *The Paradox of Acting* (*Le paradoxe sur le comédien*, 1773) marks a paradigm shift in the history of thinking about theatre in that it clearly prescribes a break between reality and illusion as the necessary condition of theatre. In Roach’s description, prior theories of acting were contradictory and incomplete, for the most part striving toward a theory in which “real” passion flows spiritually, mechanically, or magically through the actor into the mind and body of the audience. In the problem of “spontaneity and sincerity” as opposed to “calculation and artifice,” Diderot comes down firmly on the side of artifice (Roach 114). As Roach puts it, “[p]assions are embodied, not inspired” (120) and “true art does not really create an imitation of reality at all, but rather an illusion of reality” (125). Diderot asks:

Reflect a little as to what, in the language of the theatre, is *being true*. Is it showing things as they are in nature? Certainly not. Were it so the true would be the commonplace. What, then, is truth for stage purpose? It is the conforming of action, diction, face, voice, movement, and gesture, to an ideal type invented by the poet, and frequently enhanced by the player. (Diderot 22)

Rather than being confounded by the idea that there is a stage-truth that is artificial and that is completely at odds with any *actual* truth, Diderot embraces it. Introducing the idea of a “double personality” in which the actor is knowingly separate from his or her story (11), Diderot relishes the thought of answering an actor’s scripted call of “Where am I?” by addressing the actor rather than the character: “Where are you?

You know well enough. You are on the boards [...]" (48). This playful example acknowledges that the audience also is capable of a double personality, aware that it is watching a fiction. Though Diderot's project is very much about becoming a "great copyist of Nature" (13), something with which Maxwell would not identify, there's a strong similarity with Diderot's embrace of artifice in Maxwell's statements: "we don't really put much effort into convincing people that what they're seeing is really happening. It's very clear [...] that what they're watching is a play" (Moore).

To illustrate the wholly different nature of on-stage truth, Diderot asks his interlocutor to imagine taking a highly charged emotional scene out of one's private life and reproduce it exactly on stage. The result, he predicts, would be farcical: "You may cry to your heart's content, and the audience will only laugh" (Diderot 18-19). In an interview with Mufson, Maxwell describes the effect of including an autobiographical scene in *Showy Lady Slipper*: one of the characters learns via a phone call that another has been killed in a car crash, which is closely based on the death of Maxwell's brother-in-law (Mufson, "Hydras of Style"). In the performance, Mufson remarks, the event "provokes laughter because of the accelerated and deceptively blasé presentation of events" and the "unconvincing" final song which follows it; and yet, paradoxically, it lingers in Mufson's mind, haunting and hollow ("Burden of Irony" 270-72). This seems to exemplify the paradoxical logic of theatre, for, as Diderot puts it: "he [the actor] has had exertion without feeling, you [the audience] feeling without exertion" (17). If "exertion without feeling" describes Diderot's ideal acting, then Maxwell's "flattened" performances take this to its logical extension.

In effect, one track of acting theory continues down the line of reproducing realism on stage (though I question whether, at any point, this has been as firmly

entrenched as anti-realists claim), while another embraces the artificial. The idea of feeling-less performers is taken to an extreme in Heinrich von Kleist's proposal for a marionette theatre (1810), in which marionettes would achieve a degree of "grace" unavailable to human performers, who must always be "guilty of affectation" (Kleist 5). Edward Gordon Craig extends this argument, writing in 1908 that a marionette achieves "natural" performance because "[a]ll its movements speak with the perfect voice of its nature. If a machine should try to move in imitation of human beings, that would be unnatural" (26). To extend this to the context of Maxwell, I would argue that an actor pretending not to be pretending is "unnatural," in the pejorative sense in which Craig uses it. Maxwell's productions give us not just the actor pretending, which is inevitable, or the actor pretending not to be pretending, but the actor showing us *via acting* that he or she is pretending. That is, the actor knowingly takes on the pretence of pretending – and this, "naturally" (in Craig's sense), is what actors should do.⁴

But Maxwell's actors, like Craig's marionettes, have not transcended their theatricality; it's only the world of the play, the paradoxical framework of theatre, which supports this pretence. Maxwell's productions are still plays, with characters and stories, but we are discouraged from conflating the character with the actor. Instead, character is something which is systemically produced, a result of overlapping referents (as described by Wessendorf). Craig, according to William Gruber, envisions a similarly systemic notion of character:

The acts and words that are an individual character's most "characteristic," it turns out, are less like idiosyncrasies than symptoms – that is, not something they are entirely responsible for or able to control, and often something they seem unconsciously to "catch" or pick up from others around them. (Gruber 15)

⁴ This contrasts with Forced Entertainment, for example, who replace *the actor pretending to be a real character* with *the actor pretending to be a real actor (but disenchanted with pretending)*.

Maxwell's actors – standing in their poses, suddenly shifting into action or song, and speaking in sentence fragments as if only catching part of a conversation happening elsewhere – are like these puppets, and, paradoxically, the room can be rich with character and story, as even dissatisfied reviewers acknowledge. In the case of *Joe*, the central character is literally passed on from performer to performer, as each takes his turn delivering the title character's life story, the last being a crudely conveyed automaton. The multiracial casting of *The End of Reality* lends an additional charge to the decentred text, as having a white actor call another white actor a “trick nigga” or argue over whether or not “we all come from Africa” (Maxwell 19, 43) – all the while speaking in calm, flattened tones – takes on an uncomfortable dimension, as some aspects of character might be symptoms we do not want to catch.

Giving life to the characters and their drama necessitates the active involvement of the audience. Maxwell says, “As a director I'm trying to get out of the way and let that [story] speak for itself in the most open way possible, and I think that involves allowing the audience to interpret this place indicated in the script in as many ways as possible” (Marranca). Yet this active engagement is not unique to Maxwell's plays; as Diderot argued, it is how all theatre works. Reality doesn't transmit itself through an artful illusion; instead, we lend illusion the strength of real feeling. The only difference in Maxwell's plays is that we are asked to watch ourselves doing it. “You have the character in the present moment with the audience all the time. They are discovering what they are saying at the same time as you are” (Ellis). I found it difficult to call Maxwell's works plays because they seemed to contradict their own existence. But, I have argued, there is an essential paradox at the essence of theatrical mimesis, and with Maxwell, it is that paradox itself which is staged. Maxwell's works are plays like any other plays – only more so.

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