

*Paper prepared for the
Euroacademia Global Forum of Critical Studies
Asking Big Questions Again*

Prague, 13 – 15 December 2012

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

America Played Out: Fictive Dominance in Richard Maxwell's *Neutral Hero*

Jessica Rizzo
Yale School of Drama
Yale University

Abstract: In his *Neutral Hero* auteur writer/director Richard Maxwell of the NYC Players undertakes “the utterly impossible feat of portraying neutrality.” For an artist who has spent a career effacing the extraneous vocal and physical stylings of his performers, this endeavor is in one sense entirely of a piece with his peculiarly asymptotic larger project of banishing artifice from the stage. In another sense *Neutral Hero* reveals an interest in something else, an interest that may have been latent all along, in that indivisible remainder which no amount of diligent, arithmetical manipulation can eradicate. Much has been made of the unique performance equation implied by Maxwell's trademark “deadpan” style. He adds by subtracting. Like a gallery of coloring-book plates, his work asks the spectator to complete the picture by shading in at will. By discouraging curiosity about what lies behind or beneath the words being spoken in the space, Maxwell has been praised for recalling us to presence. This is a reminder and an invitation we appreciate as contemporary theatergoers for numerous reasons, not least among them being the exhaustion setting in following a half century's all-consuming skepticism about and scrutiny of language. Having assimilated the lessons of poststructuralism, namely that we humans are distinguished as the species that is “sick with language,” we presume language to pose the greatest *challenge* to identity, to the subject's co-incidence with herself. In Maxwell's most recent work, we neither recoil from language nor revert to its instrumental usage as an *expression* of unique identity. Rather, language works as the sheet thrown over the ghost of “identity,” localized presence, making its contours, if only fleetingly, visible once again. In this paper I will explore the new and optimistic proposition for “performing identity” introduced in Maxwell's work leading up to and culminating in *Neutral Hero*.

THEATER ANTI-PRODUCTION AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE LOCALISM PRESENCE

In 2010 Richard Schechner, one of the founders of the Performance Studies department at New York University, published a cautiously optimistic prognosis for the so-called “avant-garde” theater. While “profoundly conservative aesthetically,” he wrote, American theater artists today are more in line with conservatives of the “reduce, reuse, and recycle” variety. It is a shift Schechner contends should be welcomed, as we welcome the incrementalism of the “think global, act local” green movement.

Unfortunately, for all its superficial clubbiness, there is little meaningful “localism” involved in the making of most experimental American theater today. We have Robert Wilson jet-setting around the globe, peddling his Ikea-bland wares to any national opera house capable of paying for the privilege, and a generation of Wooster Group imitators who develop and perform their work in a variety of economically sunnier climes abroad before ever having the opportunity to exhibit in New York.

This is lamentable on the levels of artistic production, social impact, and aesthetic accomplishment. But it is also rather ironic, given that the work of these now-canonical artists of the sixties and seventies was originally so compelling precisely because of its specificity, its rootedness in the particularities of the biographies, living and working conditions, and concerns of the people who made it.

Robert Wilson, for example, developed his distinctive style via the admission of unpredictable and off-ending elements into his work. Wilson's early work with disabled children, the deaf-mute Raymond Andrews, whom Wilson adopted, and autistic Christopher Knowles importantly informed Wilson's aesthetic, indelibly marking his relationship to kinesthesia, language, and emotion, but these insights have long-since calcified into an the infinitely reproducible stamp of a brand.

In humbler quarters companies like the Brooklyn-based Builders Association and Philadelphia's New Paradise Laboratories borrow the formal trappings of the pioneering Wooster Group without applying comparable intellectual

rigor to the texts or cultural mythologies they claim to “deconstruct,” artists who are in fact profoundly conservative in their troubling reconstruction of a distinction between form and content, artists who want nothing more, underneath all the po-mo bells and whistles, than to tell a good story. Meanwhile, the Wooster Group ensemble itself appears more diluted with each new production, in part because of their increasingly benign choices of source material, in part because of the company’s founding performers only Kate Valk remains, and in this current crop she alone is capable of executing a performance that thrums with the exhilarating tension between performer, media, and role that has in the past made the Group’s work as theatrically effective as it is conceptually confectionary.

The predominant response to this legacy has been what Shawn-Marie Garrett calls the “Theater of Awkwardness.” Politically disengaged, evincing a bashful and bemusing nihilism, the new avant-garde isn’t anti- or “in advance of” anything; it is utterly complacent. The celebrated Elevator Repair Service has spent the last decade making pieces based on great American novels, not for deconstructive purposes, not to expose their latent ideological underpinnings, but because they (and paying audiences) *like* them, as one might “like” a product on Facebook. Going ever so gently into that capitalist good night, accepting their roles as shoppers whose identities are shaped by what they choose to consume, they scrupulously avoid putting anything of themselves into their work. Their middle-class, middlebrow selves aren’t interesting, and maybe this self thing doesn’t even exist, but, “whatever,”¹ they seem to conclude. It’s all good. They might throw in a non-sequitur dance sequence to keep the show going, but the phantasmagoria generates its own momentum; consumption is fun! The Builder’s Association recently produced *House/Divided*, their adaptation of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and purported “critique” of the recent American foreclosure crisis. The final moment of the piece consisted of an actor narrating Steinbeck’s description of tiny blades of green grass poking through the earth in the springtime, promising hope, opportunity, new beginnings, etc., while projected onstage a red stock ticker glutted with negative indices began running the occasional positive, *green* index, promising hope, opportunity, new beginnings, etc. This is what the company landed on, casting about for an upbeat ending. Not to fear! The market will recover! The status quo will resume shortly.

A few years ago, I went to see the TEAM’s production of *Architecting* with the suddenly successful (and thoroughly orthodox) playwright Amy Herzog. She was, I think, pleasantly surprised to find nothing terribly abrasive or confrontational about this supposedly “experimental” theater I’d introduced her to. Her succinct analysis of the piece was dead on. She identified its thesis statement in a line spoken by a character who has at that point spent several hours decrying the corporate wasteland America has become. “I love McDonalds,” comes the sheepish admission. It was the most honest moment of the production. The artists themselves may or may not love McDonalds, but they obviously love America, for better or for worse. And love is all you need.

These awkwardly earnest, wide-eyed artists wouldn’t dare question the social order because, as their performance personae seek to suggest, they’re not grown-ups yet. Perpetually in over their heads, they don’t understand how things work, where we’ve come from or where we’re going as a culture. Who are they to take a stand?

According to Garrett, writer/director Richard Maxwell of the NYC Players is one of these “awkward” upstarts, but I’m afraid Maxwell is included in this “conservative” category because the critics, not the artists, are in the habit of erroneously separating his form from content, reducing it to style without substance.

Maxwell is an artist who has spent a career effacing the extraneous vocal and physical stylings of his performers. In his most recent work *Neutral Hero* (The Kitchen, 2012) he undertakes what he concludes to be “the utterly impossible feat of portraying neutrality,” an endeavor that is in one sense entirely of a piece with his peculiarly asymptotic larger project of banishing artifice from the stage. In another sense *Neutral Hero* reveals an interest in something else, an interest that may have been latent all along, in that indivisible remainder which no amount of diligent, arithmetical manipulation can eradicate.

Much has been made of the unique performance equation implied by Maxwell’s trademark “deadpan” style, a label he detests. He adds by subtracting. Like a gallery of coloring-book plates, his work asks the spectator to complete the picture by shading in at will. By diffidently discouraging the spectator’s learned curiosity about what lies behind or beneath the words being spoken in the space, Maxwell has been praised for recalling us to presence.

This is a reminder and an invitation contemporary theatergoers appreciate for numerous reasons, not least among them being the exhaustion setting in following a half century's all-consuming skepticism about and scrutiny of language. Having assimilated the lessons of poststructuralism (mainly through Wilson, the Wooster Group, and Richard Foreman in the theater), namely that we humans are distinguished as the species that is "sick with language," we presume language to pose the greatest *challenge* to identity, to the subject's co-incidence with herself.

In Maxwell's most recent work, we neither recoil from language nor revert to its instrumental usage as an *expression* of unique identity. Rather, language works as it does in the work of Samuel Beckett, as the sheet thrown over the ghost of "identity," localized presence, making its contours, if only fleetingly, visible once again.

Maxwell writes mainly in the vernacular, that is, in the parlance of the emotionally illiterate working-class American male. His needy, compulsively chattering women are often only women as observed by said intimidated male, but Maxwell's authorial presence is not and never pretends to be an omniscient one.

Maxwell's characters work minimum wage jobs at places like Burger King. In his *Billings* (The Ontological, 1997), three Movers conclude a long day at work by singing:

There are not a lot of things we can enjoy
There are not a lot of things we can afford
But there exists one pleasure for us
We just got paid
We are headed to the game
We will sit and we will stand
I'm sure you've seen us on TV¹

These are not the restless cowboys and strivers we know from the plays of Sam Shepard, an important influence on Maxwell. They are not immune to chauvinism, but their dreams are modest. They inhabit the so-called "heartland," of a nation that closed its frontier in 1890, and are for the most part obdurately, unromantically anti-urban, anti-cosmopolitan. In *House* (The Ontological, 1998) a father tells his son,

I like where we live. It isn't better than a lot of other places. But I like it. But we live on a street where there is... traffic. See? I like the sound of the cars going by my window. Listen. What is that sound. Look look look... Cars. Cars going by. Listen. They're going by. They're working. I don't like a lot of other places with other noises on the street. Sometimes there's singing or yelling on the street in some places. What is that? I don't like it. That's nonsense.¹

Maxwell's characters adore their cars. They adore their freeways, open roads that lead to nowhere, or to another town identical to their own. In this unbounded suburbia, they are insulated from engagement with people different from themselves, and their attitudes can be commensurately insular, occasionally sliding into xenophobia. In *Caveman* (Soho Rep, 2001) a woman identified only as W sings,

Now I'm a ghost here and Mexicans come
They come to my house and I feel over-run
They come to my town and expect to be fed
But I will protect those who are living and dead

When *Neutral Hero* premiered in 2011 in Paris at the Pompidou Center some French critics looked for and found a shade of irony that is emphatically absent from Maxwell's work. While it is the case that Maxwell does not shy away from underscoring the limitedness of his characters' perspectives, he never does so by mocking their ignorance. Perhaps the closest he comes is in *Showy Lady Slipper* (PS 122, 1999), when in the course of a conversation about summer vacations, Lori says,

Oh I like freedom, too. There have been so many places I've been to, too. So many places. I was on Horn Islands in the Gulf of Mexico on an Island in the middle of the ocean. It was so beautiful... Life wasn't the same after that trip. It was so beautiful. Beautiful island.¹

Horn Island is a popular recreational boating, fishing, and camping site only eight miles south of Pascagoula, Mississippi, an industrial port city. The island was purchased by the US Military in 1943 for use as a chemical weapons testing site, but in 1945 the program was discontinued over concern about the proximity of human populations. Mustard gas residue and asbestos materials have been unearthed there as recently as April 2012.

For Lori, this toxic waste dump eight miles from the mainland is a paradise in the middle of the ocean, but Maxwell neither pities nor sneers at her for this—misapprehension? Is it even fair or accurate to label it false, when for Lori it is so plainly true? Maxwell only evaluates his characters on their own terms, and in steering his performers towards an unadorned delivery style, he is practicing his own type of ethically postmodern perspectivalism. They are not deadpanning. Maxwell doesn't impose "neutrality," on these variously marked individuals. Neutral has become a dirty word because we (and Maxwell) know that when we say "neutral" what we mean, and what we unvaryingly get, is a white, male, heterosexual, middle class "neutral," and that, unremarked upon, this exercise in translation can only do violence to the bodies compelled to subsume their particularities under the heading of this "universal" subject.

In *Neutral Hero*, Maxwell never comes any closer to portraying neutrality than he does to portraying "reality." And this failure is his great success. *Neutral Hero* takes place in a crepuscular American Midwest. Time is "slipping away" with the "waning light... This day is at an end," concludes one character by way of introduction. The rest of the twelve person cast joins him on stage, sitting in a row of chairs.

Next "Bob," played by Bob Feldman, a white actor distinguished by his advanced age, comes forward and speaks:

Hey.

(pause)

We're defiant. That's the difference between what you think and what you don't understand. You want to know who we are? Freedom can explain. A message brought in the shape of 13. Let freedom ring. Freedom means a sense of security and family is *everything*.

I love my country for what it contains. Not the myth the country contains. The humanity is the people. We own our history our understanding our land. This is what they mean by the dream... Strike out and discover and capture. And emerge out on to the road, toward civilization, or a house. It can't be all soldiers, can it. That can't be. It must be citizens that I see.

This is the most overtly political statement in *Neutral Hero*, indeed in any of Maxwell's plays. It is not ironic, but while delivered with measured sincerity, it is anything but straightforward.

Seeing this piece in Manhattan in 2012, this simultaneously defiant and insecure article of faith sounded almost elegiac, a testament to the leftover pride of people that are and feel themselves left over, now that the American century has come and gone. But at the same time, this is an example of the best kind of community theater, made by and for a particular community with an earnest message to communicate. As the narrative, such as it is, unfolds, we follow Anonymous, our "neutral hero," as he wanders in search of his missing deadbeat dad. The story is as old as Homer and as fresh as the contemporary signage comprising the backdrop for this hero's journey— *Hardee's*®, *Super 8*®, *Subway*®, designated with a trademark stamp even in the play script, and invoked by the spoken text rather than visually represented in the empty space.

By pruning away the distinguishing characteristics of this generic America and the actorly flourishes of his performers, Maxwell achieves something rather extraordinary; he has made this familiar strange, quite the feat considering that the suburban American "neutral" has insinuated itself onto television screens all over the world. Bob, Mother, Father, Karen, James— these almost archetypical identities feel as small and fragile, as provisional as any identity more obviously "marked" by difference. Following J.L. Austin's original formulation of the "performative utterance," we have investigated the performative nature of identity mainly from the perspective of

those Others who, because they deviate somehow from neutral, from the “norm,” have yet to “say themselves.” Even as the field of masculinity studies has flourished, we are still accustomed to associating masculine performance “texts” with what Kaja Silverman calls the “dominant fiction,” which “solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject.”¹ In Maxwell’s *Neutral Hero*, we witness a performance of this dominant fiction that uses the tools of performance not for the purposes of production or re-production, not to bring an identity into being. This performance is an anti-production, yielding no models or templates, no types or prototypes. As if to call attention to this principle of undoing at work in his theater, Maxwell leaves his typos in the script for the performers to articulate. This is not a sacred text and we are never allowed to forget it. His words, the only “costume” the performers wear, are in as much a state of becoming as the characters represented and the nervous, untrained bodies charged with conjuring them.

Touring his piece of community theater in Paris, Brussels, Geneva, eschewing the fashionable cultural-linguistic transcendence of, say, Robert Wilson, Maxwell is alternately praised for the charm of his form and the anti-exceptionalism of his content. While surely his success abroad can be partially traced to a kind of palpable humility lacking in the more widely disseminated American political rhetoric, it is a mistake to assume such a clear-cut and hierarchical distinction between the author and his characters. Neither in Derrida’s sense nor in any other is Maxwell a “theological” writer; he exposes his own fallible self in the act of creative production onstage alongside his vulnerable performers. It is in declining to “dominate” that Maxwell opens up a compulsion-free space in which both performers and spectators can participate in an experience that is not ultimately bound to be an act of submission to a real or imagined higher power.

Notes:

¹ Garrett, Shawn-Marie. "The Awkward Age: New York's New Experimental Theater." *Theater*. 31.2 (2001) p49

² Maxwell, Richard, *plays, 1996-2000* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2004) p20

³ *ibid.* p120

⁴ *ibid.* p146

⁵ Silverman, Kaja. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p16

Author:

Jessica Rizzo is an M.F.A. candidate in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at the Yale School of Drama, where she also serves as the Managing Editor of *Theater* magazine. Her essays and criticism have been published by *Theater* and translated for publication in foreign journals such as Romania’s *Scena.ro*. She has worked as a dramaturg and assistant director at the Yale Repertory Theatre, where her collaborators have included Tina Landau and Robert Woodruff.