

THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

360° SERIES

VIEWFINDER: FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES
ON THE PLAY, PLAYWRIGHT, AND PRODUCTION



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Credits

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THE PLAY A NOTE FROM RICHARD MAXWELL

WRITER & DIRECTOR, *ISOLDE*

Back in 1990, I left Illinois State University without a degree and started a theater company with friends I met in Chicago (among those friends, Brian Mendes and Gary Wilmes). We called it “Cook County Theater Department,” hoping to confuse the county into granting us funds.

We would meet and discuss possible plays we liked, from Brecht to O’Neill to Rodgers and Hammerstein. We kept up a torrid love affair with the theater, and after arguing and many months of plywood and pine studs and discarded velvet seats – we had ourselves a theater inside of an old DeSoto dealership (3,000 sq. feet for \$800/month). We lived and worked, froze and sweltered, and then nine months later, lo and behold we had a show: a re-imagined *Oklahoma!*, with the book intact, word for word.... Ultimately we did what many have done - we made a company where we could make the rules.

Since coming to NYC in 1994, I have made plays and directed them and then founded New York City Players in 1999. My wife, Tory, and my friend Jim have been working with me for a long time now too. The rules that got broken and remade back in Chicago are still being tested here with *Isolde*.

Jeffrey Horowitz came to see *Isolde* in 2014 at Abrons Art Center, and since then we have worked together to find a way to remount this show. I had of course hoped to do so all along but we needed the right theater. When Jeffrey gave me a tour of the Polonsky Shakespeare Center, that was the clincher. I knew Sascha’s set would work great and the arrangement and outfitting would suit this play which is, among other things, about theater.

We at New York City Players are happy to be a part of Theatre for a New Audience’s expanding artistic scope.

Richard Maxwell



Richard Maxwell. Photo by Juri Junko

DIALOGUES DESIGNS FOR LIVING: RICHARD MAXWELL'S *ISOLDE*

MARC ROBINSON

Neurological distress, an adulterous affair, professional rivalry, and the threat of violence, all set against the tragic background of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*—the materials of Richard Maxwell's *Isolde* would seem to demand the most passionate, even lachrymose mode of performance. That this production forgoes almost every opportunity for operatic drama—and tamps down (even, at one point, mutes) those that remain—may seem a betrayal of such an eventful narrative and its vulnerable characters. But in place of ecstatic highs and devastating lows, Maxwell gives audiences a more nuanced portrait of anguish. He demonstrates the procedures of passion, not just its eruptions and destructive aftershocks. In this play filled with talk of architecture—whose characters, like those in Maxwell's early work, *House* (1999), uneasily occupy their domestic spaces—relationships take shape according to a binding or estranging geometry.

This approach derives from a fundamental Maxwellian article of faith—that actors reveal more when they show less, when (as he once put it) they refuse to shoulder “the burden of emoting.” He continues: “I don't want them to pretend to feel anything.” The results are far from cold. In an ideal production, “slowly the ‘performer’ disappears and a person emerges.” Declaring even more

boldly his apostasy from acting orthodoxy—especially from the dominant school of training that teaches actors to identify what their characters *want* from every given encounter—Maxwell's performers develop “the courage to *not* know what [they] want, to be nervous, afraid.” From such anxiety come crystalline, naked moments of expression—arresting in their clarity, poignant in their directness, with actors fully responsive to the treacherous experience of being exposed onstage. “The only reality that concerns me,” Maxwell once said, “is the reality that we are presenting a play.” Even so, the stakes are high: Under such austere conditions, Maxwell warns, “everything that you do onstage registers.”¹

Maxwell's actors are hypersensitive as a result, and as they grow more deliberate, his audiences, ideally, grow more attentive. We learn to catch the disclosures from exploratory voices, diffident faces, and stiff gestures—these actors' surfaces are matte in comparison to the brighter sheen

1 Quotations from Richard Maxwell in Sarah Gorman: “Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players—*The End of Reality* (2006)—Exploring Acting,” in *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, ed. Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (Manchester, UK: Manchester Univ. Press, 2010), 181, 185; Sarah Gorman: “Refusing Shorthand: Richard Maxwell” (interview), in *Contemporary Theatre Research* 17:2 (2007), 237; and unpublished statements.

Isolde at Abrons Arts Center, 2014. From left: Tory Vazquez, Jim Fletcher, and Gary Wilmes. Photo by New York City Players.



DESIGNS FOR LIVING: RICHARD MAXWELL'S *ISOLDE* MARC ROBINSON

on other stages. Here, what usually passes for theatrical candor merits only our skepticism. After all, as a character in Maxwell's 2006 play *The End of Reality* puts it, "It's easy to do things that *look* like love." She continues, in words that sound like a damning indictment of other theater's manipulateness: "Suffer in silence. And we don't mean *pretend* suffer—a ploy to gain attention or pity." After such facsimiles of emotion have their moment—in *Isolde*, they include a strenuous, breathy sex scene and an explosion of undirected rage, both of which are like steam vented from a pressure-cooker—Maxwell's characters become less legible, but also less guarded—simultaneously opaque and transparent. They deliver themselves of worried non-sequiturs, run-on epiphanies, or fragments of complaint and desire, or they listen to music—or they simply say or do nothing, standing arms akimbo and staring into the middle distance, perfecting an unflappability capable of absorbing all stimuli.

"She's—y'know, she is what she is," says a man in Maxwell's *Showy Lady Slipper* (1999), anticipating an equally matter-of-fact line in a later play, *Joe* (2002): "this is me and here I am." Both characters articulate, precisely, the playwright's immaculate minimalism. Maxwell further refines his definition of the ideal protagonist in the title of a 2010 play, *Neutral Hero*. Another work, *People Without History* (2008), celebrates a similarly unencumbered, unmarked version of character. To be without history doesn't mean to lack context, or to float freely. And "neutral," here, doesn't mean passive, or low-wattage, or empty. Far from it: In rehearsal (as the critic Sarah Gorman tells us), Maxwell often tells actors to "remember your task" and "return to your task"—confident that if he can keep his collaborators occupied with external obligations, then internal processes—the realm of psychology—will be more authentic and economical. "I'm not acting," said a performer during rehearsals for *The End of Reality*, "I'm concentrating."²

Like this actor, Maxwell is enthralled by the close yet ambivalent kinship between emotion and thought. His characters analyze, anatomize, cross-examine, and declare feelings more than they experience them. "I'm telling you this," says a woman in *The End of Reality*, "just so you

know I have feelings." Another character, in *Drummer Wanted* (2001), inverts her announcement: "I've gotten really good at not feeling anything." In both cases, and in many other instances in which speakers caption rather than embody psychology, the richest drama occurs in the carefully measured distance between the onset of a sensation and its conscious, spoken acknowledgment. Stepping back from an emotion, Maxwell's characters aim to defamiliarize it, to become connoisseurs rather than victims of affect. When they fail, or when words fail them, they are no less eloquent. In their embarrassment, doubt, or churning confusion, they allow an unforgiving light to fall in those corners of character that other playwrights leave in shadow.

This is the context for a recurrent complaint in *Isolde*: "I feel an evil un-feeling," says the title character, an actress no longer able to remember lines or retain other short-term memories. Her well-meaning husband, Patrick, thinks emotion can supply what intellect cannot: "Forget what you remember," he suggests, "you must *feel* something." But emotion is a poor adhesive: "when you break thought down," she later says, "you see there is, you *feel* there is nothing connecting...." As every experience or perception fades, she concludes, "you're only left with the ghost of some longing." So, too, are Maxwell's other characters. Patrick, gruff and stoic in middle-age, wistfully recalls going to the symphony, opera, and dance when he was in his twenties, being "moved so much... thinking 'this must be what love is.'... This feeling." Now a contractor—"what he becomes," says Isolde, implying a disappointing collapse of early ambition—he spends his time away from work watching *SportsCenter*. His friend Jerry has perfected an especially unyielding game-face, but he, too, confesses that "something will always be missing" in his life. "You ever feel like, alone?" he asks in his only undefended moment. "Like, no one can hold you? Just want a space where you can be like, I don't know, not feel that way." Even the play's remaining character, Massimo—a successful architect ostensibly able to tap a reservoir of passion as he pursues a not-so-secret affair and delivers effusive paeans to "beauty"—is at a loss to manage such desire, or simply to translate his seductively vague feelings about design into workable plans.

² Quoted in Gorman, "Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players—*The End of Reality*," 189.

DESIGNS FOR LIVING: RICHARD MAXWELL'S *ISOLDE* MARC ROBINSON

This strand of *Isolde*'s plot—the contest between romantic and pragmatic views of architecture—offers an irresistible analogy to Maxwell's theatrical principles. At times, almost all the characters seem to speak for him. "Function has its own kind of beauty," says Massimo, "I think fundamentally: what is a wall...a ceiling—what is their essential function"—a view that wins quick agreement from Isolde, who prizes "the grain, the strength, the inherent colors of material." They should both appreciate the unpainted surfaces of many Maxwell characters; the narratives that eschew filigree; a presentational and efficient directorial style ("remember your task!"); and dialogue of such directness that every change in key—to soaring lyricism or burrowing self-reflection—stands out clearly. Yet Patrick urges even greater attention to fundamentals. "I want to see axial schemes put on an XY quadrant, a format, a grid," he tells Massimo: "a blueprint." What Massimo won't, or can't, provide, the scenery does. In this production, we are invited to appreciate the materials and function of the set itself—to delay imagining what it represents until we register what it is. The walls are plain wood, and we can see the armature enabling them to stand up. A low platform lies atop the stage-floor, underscoring the surface supporting the actors—its flooriness. The chairs—almost the only furniture—ask that we distinguish three distinct aesthetics (Barcelona, Danish modern, and patio-plastic). Lest we fail to value all this self-consciousness, a stage curtain depicting a lake landscape hangs, gathered, to one side, its allure contained by the rest of the set. It will finally be drawn, revealing its imagery, near the end, by which time we should have learned the cost of such illusion.

That lesson extends beyond décor. Maxwell draws attention to how he and his collaborators build every element of the production—and to when those elements buckle under the strain of performance, or collapse altogether. Forgotten lines (and Isolde's actual script, visible on stage, from which she retrieves them) remind us of Maxwell's own pages. When Isolde walks in circles in one scene, or when two men sit, man-spreading, in a strict horizontal line, or when one actor extends a hand that another fails to shake, we can't forget that all stage behavior has been blocked. Nor can we ignore the fact that these fabricated characters are flesh-and-blood actors—at least not when one man exposes his

backside, and another pulls up his shirt and sticks out his belly. They, no less than the building materials that Isolde fetishizes, have texture, color, and weight.

"We know the story." The play's first line casts into relief everything else about a production—everything we usually *don't* know, or know enough about, or fail to value properly, at least not until Maxwell subjects it to scrutiny. And even after he's done, he is rigorous enough to deny himself, or us, any feeling of mastery over what we've seen. As *Isolde* ends, we peer into a stage lit only by a ghost-light, denuded of the few elements that had oriented us, and populated by lost characters who know less than when they first appeared. The erosion of knowledge has been steady. All have proven that they often don't know what to say (especially when speaking fluently), or how to be intimate with one another (especially when touching). "I need to know your bodies," says Massimo to his clients, but the yawning distances between them on this stage remain unbridged. "Talking cancels it," says Isolde, severely, after sex with Massimo, denying him one method for understanding what just happened. When, later, she interrupts her own speech to say, "hostile buildings and learned men," we may hear the enigmatic line as mockery of her companions. Mockery of Maxwell, too? No matter how well he distills experience on the page, will talking onstage still "cancel" it—remind us of its ephemerality? No matter how skillfully he constructs declarative, concrete dialogue, will it still end up "gone," as Isolde says at the end, dissolving in the painful ellipses that mark the final erasure of her memory? For all the care Maxwell takes to respect the materiality and boundaries of the stage, will space always be "hostile," alien—never to be claimed as his own? And finally, can the actors' presence, no matter how unadorned, be trusted? "I'm not here...yeah...I don't exist," says Isolde in her last appearance. "Hurling," she adds, "moving...uhhh, the velocity." That condition—Isolde, and *Isolde*, receding and then disappearing as time passes—is the final, irreducible fact of all performance. Even as Maxwell emphasizes it, he joins us in mourning the loss. •

MARC ROBINSON is Professor of English and Theater Studies at Yale University and Professor of Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at the Yale School of Drama. He is the author of *The American Play: 1787-2000* (2009), winner of the George Jean Nathan Award in Dramatic Criticism, and the editor of *The Myopia and Other Plays* by David Greenspan (2012), winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Drama.

DIALOGUES RICHARD WAGNER'S *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*



From left: Minna Wagner with dog Peps, by Clementine Stockar-Escher, 1853; Richard Wagner, by Clementine Stockar-Escher, 1853; Mathilde Wesendonck, by Karl Ferdinand Sohn, 1850.

In 1857, as Richard Wagner wrote the libretto for Tristan und Isolde, he and his wife, Minna, lived in Zurich, in a cottage on the grounds of a wealthy silk merchant, Otto Wesendonck. The extent of Wagner's relationship with his patron's wife, Mathilde Wesendonck, is uncertain. The following are excerpts from Wagner's memoir, Mein Leben (My Life), describing this period.

As I firmly believed in the wisdom of husbanding my artistic power, I now prepared to write out *Tristan*.... About this time the Wesendoncks moved into their villa, which had now been embellished by stucco-workers and upholsterers from Paris. At this point a new phase began in my relations with this family, which was not really important, but nevertheless exercised considerable influence on the outward conduct of my life. We had become so intimate, through being such near neighbours in a country place, that it was impossible to avoid a marked increase in our intimacy if only through meeting one another daily.

I had often noticed that Wesendonck, in his straightforward open manner, had shown uneasiness at the way in which I made myself at home in his house. In many things, in the matter of heating and lighting the rooms, and also in the hours appointed for meals, consideration was shown me which seemed to encroach upon his rights as master of the house. It needed a few confidential discussions on the subject to establish an agreement which was half implied and half expressed... and necessitated a certain measure

of precaution in an intimacy which had now become exceedingly close. These precautions were occasionally the source of great amusement to the two parties who were in the secret. Curiously enough, this closer association with my neighbour coincided with the time when I began to work out my libretto, *Tristan und Isolde*....

On the 3rd of April I sent the manuscript of the score of the first act of *Tristan und Isolde* to Leipzig to be engraved; I had already promised to give Frau Wesendonck the pencil-sketch for the instrumentation of the prelude, and I sent this to her accompanied by a note in which I explained to her seriously and calmly the feelings that animated me at the time. My wife had for some time been anxious as to her relations with our neighbour; she complained with increasing bitterness that she was not treated by her with the attention due to the wife of a man whom Frau Wesendonck was so pleased to welcome in her house.... So far she had not really expressed any jealousy. As she happened to be in the garden that morning, she met the servant carrying the packet for Frau Wesendonck, took it from him and opened the letter. As she was quite incapable of understanding the state of mind I had described in the letter, she readily gave a vulgar interpretation to my words, and accordingly felt herself justified in bursting into my room and attacking me with the most extraordinary reproaches about the terrible discovery she had made.

RICHARD WAGNER'S *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

She afterwards admitted that nothing had vexed her so much as the extreme calmness and apparent indifference with which I treated her foolish conduct. As a matter of fact I never said a word; I hardly moved, but simply allowed her to depart. I could not help realising that this was henceforth to be the intolerable character of the conjugal relations I had resumed eight years before. I told her peremptorily to keep quiet and not be guilty of any blunder either in judgment or in act, and tried to make her realise to what a serious state of affairs this foolish occurrence had brought us. She really seemed to understand what I meant, and promised to keep quiet and not to give way to her absurd jealousy. Unfortunately the poor creature was already suffering from a serious development of heart disease, which affected her temper; she could not throw off the peculiar depression and terrible restlessness which enlargement of the heart causes, and only a few days after she felt that she must relieve her feelings, and the only possible way in which she could think of doing so was by warning our neighbour, Frau Wesendonck, with an emphasis she thought was well meant, against the consequences of any imprudent intimacy with me....

As I was returning from a walk I met Herr Wesendonck and his wife in their carriage just starting for a drive. I noticed her troubled demeanour in contrast to the peculiarly smiling and contented expression of her husband. I realised the position clearly when I afterwards met my wife looking wonderfully cheerful. She held out her hand to me with great generosity, assuring me of her renewed affection. In answer to my question, whether she had by any chance broken her promise, she said confidently that like a wise woman she had been obliged to put things into proper order.

I told her she would very probably experience some very unpleasant consequences through breaking her word. In the first place, I thought it essential she should take steps to improve her health as we had previously arranged, and told her she had better go as soon as possible to the health resort she had been recommended at Brestenberg on the Hallwyler Lake.... A few days later, therefore, I took her and her parrot to the pleasantly situated and well-appointed watering-place which was about three hours distant. Meantime, I avoided asking any questions as to what had taken place in regard to our neighbours. When I

left her at Brestenberg and took my leave she quite seemed to realise the painful seriousness of our position. I could say very little to comfort her, except that I would try, in the interests of our future life together, to mitigate the dreaded consequences of her having broken her word.

On my return home I experienced the unpleasant effects of my wife's conduct towards our neighbour. In Minna's utter misconstruction of my purely friendly relations with the young wife, whose only interest in me consisted in her solicitude for my peace of mind and well-being, she had gone so far as to threaten to inform the lady's husband. Frau Wesendonck felt so deeply insulted at this, as she was perfectly unconscious of having done any wrong, that she was absolutely astounded at me, and said she could not conceive how I could have led my wife into such a misunderstanding.... I was given to understand that henceforth it would be impossible for the injured lady to enter my house again, or indeed to continue to have any intercourse with my wife. They did not seem to realise, and would not admit, that this would entail the giving up of my home and my removal from Zurich. I hoped that although my relations with these good friends had been disturbed, they were not really destroyed, and that time would smooth things over. I felt that I must look forward to an improvement in my wife's health, when she would admit her folly, and thus be able to resume her intercourse with our neighbours in a reasonable manner....

[Two years later,] I regarded it as a freak of fate that Minna should announce her readiness to join me in Paris, and that I should have to expect her arrival shortly. In the selection as well as in the arrangement of the little house in the Rue Newton I had had particular regard to our future existence together. My living-room was separated from hers by a staircase, and I had taken care that the part of the house to be occupied by her should not be wanting in comfort. But, above all, the affection which had been revived by our last reunion in Zurich had prompted me to furnish and decorate the rooms with special care, so that they might have a friendly appearance and make life in common with this woman, who was becoming quite a stranger to me, more possible to bear. •

Richard Wagner, My Life: Volume 2 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1911), 667-723

THE PLAYWRIGHT RICHARD MAXWELL, *THEATER FOR BEGINNERS*

Excerpt from [Theater for Beginners](#) by Richard Maxwell, Theatre Communications Group, New York, 2015.

I am rehearsing *The Long Voyage Home* by Eugene O’Neill with Bobby, Tory and Jim. A young sailor (Bobby) is planning to return home with his savings and contribute to the family farm. We see the bartender (Jim) put droplets in the sailor’s drink. A conversation between a woman (Tory) and the sailor unfolds. She gets him talking about his family, his past, and finds connections with him.

An exchange of glances between the bartender and the woman at the beginning of this scene could have easily conveyed that the two are in cahoots, working together to drug the sailor in order to empty his pockets. Instead, as the scene progresses, the gaps in the text are not filled in. The actors commit to the blocking sequence as it is laid out, and the words, in black and white, on the page. As a result, the spectator’s mind reels with questions, with uncertainty and possibility: is she in cahoots with the bartender? Maybe she was in cahoots but has decided she’s falling in love with the sailor and is abandoning the plan. Maybe, she’s oblivious; an unknowing pawn within the bartender’s larger plan. Maybe she is actually the one in charge.

The audience’s work is made more important by this indeterminacy and openness, since the nature of the relationships, the extent of the woman’s complicity, and the sequence’s sum have not been determined for the audience in advance.

If the actors didn’t know their lines or their blocking; if they were tired, or uninterested in each other or in the sequence of events; if they had made decisions ahead of time, if they were not listening to each other, these possibilities would not exist.

I think back to the day-to-day decisions that get made in rehearsals and the difference between the things that stay in the show versus the things that get cut: the moments that stay are recognizable yet leave enough room to be peculiar. Not peculiar weird, but peculiar special — something is lifted about it. Words and moments have a shape that is recognizable and therefore resonate with the viewer, but they are porous and therefore move and breathe. The moment, if you will, goes someplace else, neither here nor there. And it’s not a trick or something clever. Something matters not about the way it looks, but in the “why” behind it.”



Rehearsal for The Wooster Group’s 2012 production of Eugene O’Neill’s *Early Plays*. Richard Maxwell, right, with (from left) Brian Mendes, Kameza Schaal, Kate Valk, Alex Delinois and Lakpa Bhutia. Credit: Richard Termine for The New York Times

INTERVIEW HOLDING IT TOGETHER WITH RICHARD MAXWELL



Jim Fletcher, Brian Mendes, Gary Wilmes and Tory Vazquez in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *Isolde*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

Before returning to rehearsals for *Isolde*, **Richard Maxwell** sat down with **Jonathan Kalb**, Resident Literary Advisor of Theatre for a New Audience, for a conversation on his theatre. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

JONATHAN KALB: Your theater has a reputation for uniqueness. Do you think you make theater for different reasons from other artists?

RICHARD MAXWELL: You start with a tough one. I really don't know. I wonder if other playwrights and directors make theater more for themselves than for the audience. I wonder how much they think about the audience. I probably make it differently because of my overarching concern that the audience has the kind of latitude I want to have when I watch theater.

KALB: What is that latitude?

MAXWELL: It refers to an openness for the viewer to imbue the scene with whatever they want from their experience. You could think in terms of drawing comics. The more detailed a comic is, the more you

fill it in, the less universal it becomes. The most extreme example is a restroom sign, which is either male or female, a universal value assigned to a shape.

KALB: Are you saying that even though you're not making a theatrical cartoon, you are striving for something of that cartoon universality?

MAXWELL: Yeah. There are lots of examples on TV from the other end of the spectrum. We're really talking about archetypes in theater. At the other end would be serials like *True Detective*, which are like novels on a screen. It's nice to see the freedom afforded to these new shows, but I feel like they're resisting archetypes. There are so many details. It's almost like they're trying to void the relationship to the archetype. This also pertains to acting behavior.

KALB: How?

MAXWELL: The conversation I'm having with actors all the time is about, given that we have this laid-out fiction on a page, and these lines we're

INTERVIEW HOLDING IT TOGETHER WITH RICHARD MAXWELL

going to say in order, and given the reality of this room, what is the right way to behave? You can't work like that in TV. But onstage it's a different set of circumstances, you can't ignore the reality of your body in real time inside of a story in front of a viewing audience. That all has to be factored in in some way. A reasonable actor will say, "Well, I wanna follow what I think the author's intentions are," or "I wanna follow what I think the character's psychology would be." And I'm always challenging them because, as the author, I can say, "It doesn't matter what I think as the author." I actually believe that.

KALB: Why then do you care about accuracy in line readings?

MAXWELL: I'm not saying the writing isn't important. Jim makes an analogy that I like-- treat the text like a musical score. As a player if you're handed a piece of music, you don't rearrange the notes. Also, you don't concern yourself with what it means. And so, yes, let's be accurate to see what the

possibilities are. Because I feel like in theater there really aren't that many tangible things and you have to grasp the ones you have. There's the words on the page and the blocking. There's what you say and the place that you go onstage at that point. Those things can be mastered. Those are questions that you can answer, tasks that can be executed, so why not master them, know them completely, and then let the rest of the chaos unfold as it will?

KALB: Some commentators have called your theater banal—because of the general low-tech, the straightforward focus on fulfilling specific tasks, the static tableaux, the actors not always playing up their characters' emotions. Is banality something of value for you?

MAXWELL: I'm gonna make a crazy leap here and say that banality belongs in theater. I think we're constantly being told what to think, what to feel, in entertainment, and I have this subversive streak in me that challenges that through banality. "Banality"



Jim Fletcher and Gary Wilmes in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *Isolde*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

INTERVIEW HOLDING IT TOGETHER WITH RICHARD MAXWELL

is a little pejorative. You used the word “stillness” the other day, and I thought that was a nice word. Not that it has to be solemn or sacred. But I think stillness or silence are key ingredients of the theater environment.

KALB: I found the stillness in *Isolde* particularly moving, because it underscored how provisional and temporary the world in the play is. It could just disappear at any moment, which is what the play is about in a way as the title character is losing her memory.

MAXWELL: Right.

KALB: She says “I don’t exist” three times near the end.

MAXWELL: Is that too many?

KALB: Buster Keaton would say it’s exactly the right number.

MAXWELL: Well, that’s good.

KALB: Can I ask you about the dream house she’s building?

MAXWELL: Sure.

KALB: What does she hope to accomplish with that? Is it a hedge against memory loss—building a quintessentially concrete thing, a house, because she’s losing her ability to do the more abstract thing she usually does, which is to embody characters on the stage?

MAXWELL: Yeah, yeah.

KALB: But how plausible is that? Could anybody ever replace the desire to make theater with a construction?

MAXWELL: For me there’s a very evident link between the two things. I don’t know if it’s possible to replace one desire with the other, but I think that there’s something combustible about talking about building a house, a concrete thing, *in* the theater. I really like that idea, and I think we get traction



Jim Fletcher, Gary Wilmes and Tory Vazquez in Theatre for a New Audience’s production of *Isolde*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

INTERVIEW HOLDING IT TOGETHER WITH RICHARD MAXWELL

from it somehow in the play. I think the audience does, too.

KALB: Patrick, her husband, is extremely practical. His job is to build houses. And the love triangle sets us up to believe that maybe she's married to the wrong person. Yet he tries to help her with her acting, her memorization problem. He says, "Did you ever try just saying what you feel?" Is that his way of, maybe without knowing it, trying to pull her into his orbit, his practical way of living?

MAXWELL: I don't know. I can't really say. I really try to avoid getting into the characters' heads. I know it might be frustrating to others but I see my characters as people who are saying lines that are shapes, and I'm not sure what it all adds up to.

KALB: But you must have your own feelings about what you've created.

MAXWELL: It's weird, I really don't. It's maybe sacrilegious to say that as a playwright, but I don't. I recognize their value as types. But when an actor asks me, "What should I be feeling? How should I be motivating myself?" I don't know what to say. The thing about theater is, it's like here we are in this live situation. This is a rehearsal, or a performance, and we're performing onstage. We're in this live moment, and all that matters is right now. That's all that matters: right now, right now, right now. It's a continual right now sense of being. So history has a weird relationship to it. I'm not gonna deny that I felt something when I wrote some of those lines. I can probably trace back and find, oh yeah, I felt this or that, but it doesn't matter. Here we are now, and the audience is supplying the things that I was once supplying, and the actors too.

KALB: In rehearsal, you don't think about the effect of the show that's emerging? You don't think about, say, whether a particular speech is landing or not?

MAXWELL: Yeah, but I probably think about it for the wrong reasons. I think, would an audience like this? Does this work as a theatrical vehicle? Is it holding together? Basic storytelling. If you as a viewer are interested, that's important to me. If

you're interested and engaged, but you're having trouble drawing a bead on what's going on, that's good. That's exciting to me. If you feel like there's something going on, but you can't put your finger on what it is, to me that's everything.

KALB: I want to ask you about humor. Details of the humor are always surprising in any new production, but a director often has a sense of general tendencies. People laughed at many points when *Isolde* was done at the Abrons Arts Center, and I'm wondering if you have thoughts about why. Where the play is funny, why do you think it's funny??

MAXWELL: That's a really good question. There are some lines, I wish I knew.

KALB: Well, what do you think of irony? Since sometimes your actors make no effort to enact the fictional emotions behind their speeches, maybe that disconnection is part of what's funny.

MAXWELL: Yeah. Well, I think it's not disconnection. It's actually uberconnection. It's like being very self-aware. Self-awareness kicks in in these moments, a recognition of the situation. It's a shared thing, like an aside, the classic aside to the audience, as in Shakespeare. Is it ironic to do an aside?

KALB: That would be a great question to put to Shakespeare. I'm asking you.

MAXWELL: I love the mystery of why things are funny. It almost feels like you kill it to talk about it too much, you know what I mean?

KALB: All right, well, speaking of killing humor, can we talk about Brecht?

MAXWELL: Okay.

KALB: A critic once wrote that one of your primary goals was "to make visible the labor behind theatrical illusion." Do you agree with that?

MAXWELL: I think that may have been true earlier on. It has limited appeal to me now. I think this goes back to the irony question. I've learned that irony shouldn't be the goal. Like, is it irony for irony's sake,

INTERVIEW HOLDING IT TOGETHER WITH RICHARD MAXWELL

or does it come out of something earned in terms of effort and time?

KALB: It's been said that irony is intelligence because it involves seeing what isn't there, drawing inferences through interpretation. The moments in *Isolde* when the physical action described by the actors isn't actually played might be examples: when the men are watching football on TV and there's no TV, for instance, or when Massimo is showing his house drawing and there's no drawing. We fill in those blanks with imagination, sometimes with laughter, and that can play as ironic.

MAXWELL: The main thing is to make sure those moments are open and interesting. It can't be just, "Oh, you told us that we're watching a play!" That's not enough, that's not gonna cut it. You know, one thing we're not talking about is the actors themselves. Tory, Jim, Gary, Brian—their bodies, their physiognomy, the clothes they wear on stage, these are things that I think people take for granted a

lot in the theater. It's not just people spouting words and being dramatic. We get so much information from looking at the way human beings emit signals. Sometimes we're right about whether the signals are what they meant, or what I meant, sometimes wrong. It doesn't matter. Meanwhile there's a story happening, and we imbue these human shapes with our own lives. I think it's actually really challenging for an actor to allow all the possibilities to exist, to take a drink of water or hold hands or walk together in a way that allows for openness for the viewer.

KALB: Let me paraphrase what I hear you saying, if I might. Are you saying that you choose to work with an actor like Jim Fletcher partly because you like him and partly because he's a great projection surface, someone the audience can read as a lot of different things?

MAXWELL: Yes. When Jim auditioned for me the first time years ago, I was really excited that I had this guy in front of me who looked like a football



Jim Fletcher and Brian Mendes in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *Isolde*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

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player, sounded like Ted Levine from *Silence of the Lambs*, and yet could sing, could handle the lines and who also had a deep appreciation for the written word. All of that corresponded with my work in a fantastic way. We've worked together for years. Yet I could say that about all the actors in this show. Does that make them all great projection surfaces? I don't know, but it's nice to be able to have a dialogue about that with actors.

KALB: One last question. Although *Isolde* is about love and memory, it's also about the theater in some ways. There's a famous opera hovering in the background, and it starts with two people running lines. Have you done other plays about theater, or is this a first for you?

MAXWELL: It's the first character I've written who's an actor, and maybe the first time anyone speaks about the job aspects of being an actor. But there's an accumulation of indirect writing about the theater in my plays. And if I don't write about it, then I direct with that in mind. There's also the question of music. Music has always been an

important element in writing for me, even in early plays like *House*. They all had songs, usually written by me. There are only two plays, *The End of Reality* and *Isolde*, that have no original music at all. And in other ways music is happening all the time. That is something that you'll hear me talk about with the actors quite a bit: rhythm, timing and silences. Silences are rests. This show began at Theater Basel in Switzerland, and there was live music in it then, some written by me, most by Daniel Ott, a composer in Basel. It had sequential interludes and underscores. All of that just got cut out. I started to believe in the silences for this play. •

Interview on July 30, 2015. This interview has been edited and condensed.

JONATHAN KALB is the Resident Literary Advisor and Dramaturg at Theatre for a New Audience. He is a professor of theater at Hunter College, where he was Chair of the Theatre Department for six years, and an internationally acclaimed theater critic and scholar. A two-time winner of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, he has published five books on theater and has written for dozens of publications including *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *New York Press*, *The Nation* and *Salon.com*. His book *Great Lengths: Seven Works of Marathon Theater* won the George Freedley Memorial Award for the outstanding theater book of 2012.



Tory Vasquez and Gary Wilmes in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *Isolde*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

THE PRODUCTION CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

JIM FLETCHER (Patrick) has performed in New York City since 1998. Most recently in *And That's How the Rent Gets Paid* by Richard C. Martinez and Jeff Weiss (2015, The Kitchen), *Cry, Trojans!* by The Wooster Group and William Shakespeare (2015, St. Ann's Warehouse), and *The Evening* by Richard Maxwell (2015, The Kitchen).

BRIAN MENDES (Uncle Jerry). In New York with NYCP: *Henry IV, Joe, The End of Reality, Ode to the Man Who Kneels, The Darkness of this Reading, Infinite Jest, The Evening, Isolde, People Without History*, and *Saxophone*. Has also worked with The Wooster Group, Adam Rapp and Annie Baker. Internationally, with Hebbel Theater, Intangible Studios, Forced Entertainment, Theater Bonn, Theater Basel and Gekidan Kaitaisha Tokyo. Founding member of Cook County Theater Department Chicago.

TORY VAZQUEZ (Isolde). With Richard Maxwell/NYCP: *Early Plays* (with The Wooster Group), *Das Maedchen, People Without History* (dir. Brian Mendes), *Caveman* (Soho Rep). With Elevator Repair Service: *Gatz, Shuffle, The Sound and the Fury* (April 7, 1928), *Cab Legs, Total Fictional Lie*. Has worked with Mallory Catlett, Tim Etchells/Forced Entertainment, Jim Findlay, Amy Huggans, and Aaron Landsman. Her own work: *Wrestling Ladies, The Florida Project* (PS122), and *Isabel* (Dixon Place). Vazquez is the lead teaching artist for The Kitchen's education program at Liberty High School for Newcomers.

GARY WILMES (Massimo). Theater: *Chinglish* on Broadway; *Straight White Men* with Young Jean Lee's Theater Company and *Gatz* with Elevator Repair Service at the Public Theatre; *Cry, Trojans!* with The Wooster Group; *Bad Boy Nietzsche* and *Paradise Hotel* with Richard Foreman; *House* and *Boxing 2000* with Richard Maxwell. Film: *Irrational Man, 5 Flights Up, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, Salt, A Mighty Heart*. Television: *Louie, Elementary, Homeland, The Lottery, Blue Bloods, Nurse Jackie, Jon Benjamin Has a Van*.

RICHARD MAXWELL (Author & Director) is the artistic director of New York City Players. He is a Doris Duke Performing Artist. Maxwell has been selected for a Guggenheim Fellowship, two OBIE Awards, a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grant, and was included in the Whitney Biennial. He wrote the text for choreographer Sarah Michelson's *Devotion*, and directed *Early Plays* by Eugene O'Neill for the Wooster Group. His latest play, *The Evening*, was a commission by the 2014 Spalding Gray Award, presented in New York by The Kitchen and Performance Space 122. His book, *Theater for Beginners*, was published this year by TCG. In the spring, he will direct the New York City Players' production of Jackie Sibblies Drury's play *Really* at Abrons Arts Center.

THE PRODUCTION CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

SASCHA VAN RIEL (Scenic & Lighting Designer) studied theater design in Utrecht (Netherlands) and began her career assisting Jan Versweijveld on several projects produced by Het Zuidelijk Toneel and Toneelgroep Amsterdam. She met Richard Maxwell while working as Stephanie Nelson's assistant on Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Good Samaritans*. She designed the set and lights for Richard's plays *The Frame*, *Das Maedchen* (premiered at Theater Bonn), *Ode to the Man Who Kneels*, *Neutral Hero*, *Open Rehearsal* (Whitney Biennial), and *Isolde*, nominated for the Henry Hewes Design Award. She has worked as a freelance set designer for a variety of Dutch and Belgian companies including the Flemish Opera House and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, and also teaches set design at the High School of Arts Utrecht.

ROMY SPRINGSGUTH (Original Costume Design) is a set and costume designer for theatre, dance, film and opera based in Switzerland. She studied theatre design in Berlin and received her master's degree in 2006. She started her career assisting at the Volksbühne Berlin, Wiener Festwochen and Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen. Since 2010 she has worked as a freelance set and costume designer for various international theatres and companies, including the artist collective deRothfils, Ludger Engels, Ulrich Rasche, and Ramin Gray. *Isolde* is her first collaboration with Richard Maxwell.

KAYE VOYCE (Additional Costumes). Previously with Richard Maxwell and New York City Players: *Henry IV, Part 1*; *The End of Reality*; *The Frame*; *Neutral Hero*; *Open Rehearsal*; and *The Evening*. Other credits include the Broadway productions of *The Real Thing*, *The Realistic Joneses*, and *Shining City*; Off-Broadway productions of *Significant Other*, *The Mystery of Love and Sex*, *Detroit, 4000 Miles*, and *Heartless*. Designs for dance include Trisha Brown's final dances: *Toss...* and *Rogues*.

RACHEL GROSS (Production Stage Manager). Off-Broadway: *An Octoroon* (TFANA); *10 out of 12*, *An Octoroon*, *Marie Antoinette* (Soho Rep.); *While I Yet Live*, *Harbor*, *All In The Timing* (Primary Stages). Regional: *Cloudlands*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Borrowers* and *Jane of the Jungle* (South Coast Repertory). Additional credits: *Shiner*, *Do Like The Kids Do* (IAMA). Rachel is thrilled to be back at TFANA with New York City Players' *Isolde*. Thanks to her fellow Pineapple for the constant love and support.

NEW YORK CITY PLAYERS is a theater company founded by Artistic Director Richard Maxwell in 1999. NYCP has been presented in New York and in over twenty countries and has received national and international recognition, including five Obie Awards. In March 2016, the world premiere of New York City Player's *Really* by Jackie Sibblies Drury will be presented at Abrons Arts Center. www.nycplayers.org

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About Theatre for a New Audience

Founded in 1979 by Jeffrey Horowitz, the mission of Theatre for a New Audience is to develop and vitalize the performance and study of Shakespeare and classic drama. Theatre for a New Audience produces for audiences Off-Broadway and has also toured nationally, internationally and to Broadway. We are guided in our work by five core values: a reverence for language, a spirit of adventure, a commitment to diversity, a dedication to learning, and a spirit of service. These values inform what we do with artists, how we interact with audiences, and how we manage our organization.

Theatre for a New Audience Education Programs

Theatre for a New Audience is an award-winning company recognized for artistic excellence. Our education programs introduce students to Shakespeare and other classics with the same artistic integrity that we apply to our productions. Through our unique and exciting methodology, students engage in hands-on learning that involves all aspects of literacy set in the context of theatre education. Our residencies are structured to address City and State Learning Standards both in English Language Arts and the Arts, the New York City DOE's Curriculum Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Theater, and the Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts. Begun in 1984, our programs have served more than 126,000 students, ages 9 through 18, in New York City Public Schools city-wide.

A New Home in Brooklyn: Theatre for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center

After 33 seasons of award-winning and internationally-acclaimed productions, Theatre for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center is a centerpiece of the Brooklyn Cultural District.

Designed by celebrated architect Hugh Hardy, the Theatre's Polonsky Shakespeare Center is the first theatre in New York designed and built expressly for classic drama since Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont in the 1960s. The 27,500 square-foot facility is a unique performance space in New York. The 299-seat Samuel H. Scripps Mainstage, inspired by the Cottesloe at London's National Theatre, combines an Elizabethan courtyard theatre with modern theatre technology that allows the stage and seating to be arranged in seven configurations. The new facility also includes the Theodore C. Rogers Studio (a 50-seat rehearsal/performance studio), and theatrical support spaces. The City of New York-developed Arts Plaza, designed by landscape architect Ken Smith, creates a natural gathering place around the building. In addition, Polonsky Shakespeare Center is also one of the few sustainable (green) theatres in the country, with an anticipated LEED-NC Silver rating from the United States Green Building Council.

Now with a home of its own, Theatre for a New Audience is contributing to the continued renaissance of Downtown Brooklyn. In addition to its season of plays, the Theatre is expanding its education and humanities offerings to include lectures and activities for families, as well as seminars, workshops, and other activities for artists, scholars, and families. When not in use by the Theatre, its new facility is available for rental, bringing much needed affordable performing and rehearsal space to the community.

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Theatre for a New Audience's Humanities, Education, and Outreach programs are supported, in part, by The Elayne P. Bernstein Education Fund, a permanently endowed fund of the Theatre. The Theatre's Humanities programs, including *The 360° Series: Viewfinders* are also supported by the Theatre's permanent Humanities Endowment Fund.

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