American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART I

Realism Deposed, Reclaimed and Exposed

"PLAYS AS SCULPTURES". RICHARD MAXWELL'S DRAMATURGY OR THE ART OF INVENTING NEW SHAPES

An interview with Richard Maxwell by Emeline Jouve

Playwright and stage director Richard Maxwell is the artistic director of New York City Players. Maxwell is one of the leading figures of the experimental scene in New York City. He is the recipient of three OBIE awards for House *(1999),* Drummer Wanted *(2002) and* Good Samaritans *(2005). He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2010, the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award in 2012—he was an invited artist in the Whitney Biennial in the same year—, and The Spalding Gray Award in 2014. His work has been commissioned by venues in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Ireland. He has written more than thirty plays which explore the American way of life. He is also the author of* Theater for Beginners *(2015), a guide "for the people who want to be on stage."*[1]

This interview was conducted through video chat on October 16th, 2018.

Emeline Jouve. – Richard Maxwell, first of all, thank you very much for having accepted this interview which will deal with the notion of dramaturgy. Let's get straight to the subject and let me ask you "what is your definition of dramaturgy?"

Richard Maxwell. – My approach to dramaturgy in my work is opposed to typical American dramaturgy, which is mainly realist and based on a plot line, on the building up of characters with psychological depths... When I write, I think about shapes. I think about plays as sculptures.

Emeline Jouve. – Since you are breaking away with realism, would you call your theatre "experimental theatre"?

Richard Maxwell. – I call it "non-traditional". The tradition in American theatre is realism. Imitation is the pattern but to me nothing happens when you are just trying to imitate. I want to get away from imitation to invent new shapes, and that is why I'm trying to make exciting sculptures.

Emeline Jouve. – A sculptor has clay to fashion his pieces: what are your sculptures made of?

1 Richard Maxwell, *Theater for Beginners*, New York, TCG, 2015, p. 2.

Richard Maxwell. – Words on the page, words as they come out, bodies, faces, figures. I'm lucky to work with Sasha van Riel in production design because, literally, the physical look of the show is part of that shape: where to draw the line between whatever fiction is being told and the room that you're in. The set is very important to me and to actors, which is also why I put that chapter in *Theater for Beginners* that is for actors to build a set. That kind of spatial awareness counts, as a performer. You will behave differently if you are ignoring the room that you're in—that you happen to be in—and so understanding, having like a physical relationship to the fiction, I think is something that really affects how you conduct yourself as a performer.

Emeline Jouve. – But does that mean that you write from the rehearsal room?

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah. There are always varying degrees, but usually some form of a script exists when we start the rehearsals, but I shape the text to the staging somehow like a three-dimensional sculpture with the words, the actors and the space around. I write, or re-write, on the spot. Sometimes I'll ask an actor to put it in their own words, and I'll incorporate that right into my writing. Sometimes I'll sketch out like placeholder lines just to get from A to B. Sometimes I'll ask the team to go away for half an hour, while I sort something out, and then they'll come back and we try. Sometimes I'll cancel rehearsal so that I can finish larger sections. Writing is a very active process.

Emeline Jouve. – If you write as you are working on the staging itself, does it mean that your creations require a lot of rehearsals? And if so, this must imply practical and economic negotiations, right?

Richard Maxwell. – You mean negotiations to finance? Right. Well, financing the arts is challenging, that is a fact but I actually work very fast. So there's a lot that happens in the rehearsal room. I feel like I'm condensing traditional play development—when you have, you know, readings, workshops, rehearsals, previews—into a few weeks as if all was happening at the same time. For me, the arbiter is the text, but not the text on the page: the text in the room. That is the text in the room that the audience will discover, and to which they will react, so the dramatic composition must take place in the room to me.

Emeline Jouve. – So your approach to dramaturgy is very theatrical, in that you need the stage to write. Is this method inherited from your own training as an actor?

Richard Maxwell. – Definitely! Thinking around acting informed the writing. I learned dramaturgy not as a writer but as an actor, and I became a writer and a director because I wanted more control.

Emeline Jouve. – More control over what? What were you dissatisfied about?

Richard Maxwell. – The only training I have in theatre is acting and that's what I tried to do when I got out of school, and, for whatever reasons, it didn't work out that way. It's interesting as an actor to get a part, to learn the part and try to understand the part in a play, but I couldn't deny all the elements around the production and, basically I wanted more control over what was made, more control over the whole theatrical process. I was also interested in how dialogues can move things along. If you want to talk about dramaturgy, that really was prominent. I remember thinking about how people are able to move something forward with words. So, I got interested in directing, and then from directing, I got interested in writing. Also, I don't want to deny the musical part of my background. I mean, as a musician, I write: I've written songs and that has informed a lot how I think about writing and how I think about theatre. Music helps me find the rhythm of the lines: I don't think I'm writing poetry per se and I don't think I'm writing even verses, but what I do know is when a line is finished, I feel it thanks to my practice as a musician. So, my points of reference are the acting and the musical experiences that I've had outside of theatre. These two elements have directly and indirectly informed my writing.

Emeline Jouve. – What do you mean by "indirectly"?

Richard Maxwell. – I mean that those elements informed my conversations with actors and designers for example, which in turns influenced my writing—as the text keeps evolving in the rehearsal room. So, that's an indirect influence in that respect, I would say. And the direct influence is when I write the first sketch and I write with my background as an actor and musician in mind.

Emeline Jouve. – The influence of acting transpires very much in your writing. It seems that what you refer to as your "non-traditional" dramatic approach is linked to your "non-traditional" acting approach, as a matter of fact. As you explained, you broke away from traditional American realist writing, and this seems to be linked to your mistrust in realist acting. Is that right?

Richard Maxwell. – Yes, absolutely. My departure from traditional acting comes from the idea of "not pretending". And that rule gets broken all the time but that's where I definitely start when I start directing people. The tendency of an actor is to get the script, look at the role, unpack the role, and start to answer these questions that come up.

Emeline Jouve. – That's part of the American heritage of Lee Strasberg's Method, based on Stanislavski's Technique, which has been so influential in the USA, isn't it?

Richard Maxwell. – Right! American actors are trained to imitate. I actually never really trusted that approach, because first of all trying to answer questions about the characters is very superficial, since as a matter of fact you know nothing about

the character. To me, it is important that actresses and actors acknowledge their ignorance. I try to put across, right from the beginning, that it's OK not to know. That's a really hard thing to accept, but that's the way it is. Again, the last thing I would want you to do as an actor is to pretend to know, you see? And so it takes a lot of courage to say "I don't know, I don't know what's going on". And that can be unnerving for actors, because actors who ask me what I think about this or that, I say "I don't know, I don't know". It would be foolish for me to say "I know what this play is, from top to bottom, A to Z", without having met my cast, without having worked with them in the room: that's not what I'm going to do. I have a long history with some actors that I've worked with—like Jim Fletcher—and so we're able to peel back more layers of what "not pretending" means I suppose. When I audition people, I like to give them non-theatrical texts, which helps to establish very quickly the kind of dialectic that I want to have with the actors: right away you're taking off the notion of character, although you'd be surprised to know how much actors try to make non-theatrical texts sound like a character, there's always that tendency. If I look back at the trajectory of my plays from 1998 until now, what has happened generally is that you have fewer and fewer scenes with people talking to each other as characters in a room. Instead, you have more and more speeches that are not really meant to be acted out. *Paradiso*, for example, is mostly long, really descriptive first-person narrative based. *The Evening* is like another exploration into characters as well, it's like pulling the face off of traditional characterization. I explore questions like "what is a character?", "how do we kill characters?", "how do we pull the face off of it?". And I was interested in trying to see what's left when you get rid of the characters: do we have ghosts? Is there a material aspect, or something otherwise tangible that we can identify?

Emeline Jouve. – Your insight into characterization being so different from what most actors are trained for, it must be complicated to find the "right" performers. Is that the reason why you like working with the same actresses and actors?

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah, you're right but it's interesting because with *Paradiso* and *Queens Row*, I worked with people I hadn't worked with before... I think about casting as a jazz musician would think about an ensemble: putting together players who go together. So it's risky, because not just anyone can drop into these plays, if someone—God forbid—somebody can't do a show, the show just really can't happen without that person. The relationship I have with the actors is intense. I don't know if actors realize how important they are to what I'm doing. And because I write for them a lot. The play is not finished when I start rehearsing, so I'm tailoring the script to them. It brings into the play the notion of collaboration.

I know from experience that some actors are better than others, and I suppose it has to do with a certain generosity. And meanwhile I'm trying to be generous by writing something for them. I guess all I'm saying is that there's a symbiotic aspect that can't be overlooked.

Emeline Jouve. – Theatre is the art of the "here and now". It seems that the script is a response to the present of the rehearsal room, to the presence of the people you are working with and for whom you tailor the lines.

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah, that's what theatre is, right? "Here and now"! It bothers me when theatre is a sign of the times, and it bothers me when theatres promote theatre with video, as though you're somehow getting what the experience would be. When I write, I'm really trying to respond to what's going on in my immediate surroundings; and by immediate surroundings, I mean the rehearsal room, but also life, and unfortunately that means a lot of deaths, you know, people close to me who've died, and so that's part of what I'm responding to, in addition to whatever is happening geopolitically, which feels like very much in floods. Writing plays is a moment to moment existence: it's just like I can't finish a play before rehearsal starts. And even after the play has opened, I'm still playing with the text and changing it, basing myself on the audience's response. So, yes, I write as a response to the present, we can say.

Emeline Jouve. – It's interesting to see that you started directing and writing because you wanted to have more control over the whole creative process, when in fact you emphasize the importance of responding to the present and collaborating with the actors and spectators to adapt your script. Could you elaborate on your vision of the audience? Are the readers of your plays and spectators of your shows part of the dramaturgical process?

Richard Maxwell. – Well, the whole point is for people to be able to read something into it and get their own image from what I've written ... that's the point, that's why I'm doing writing. But most people, in fact, want to understand what the author wants to say with his work and, at least in the States, I feel that most people would rather see something more articulated, more fleshed-out and more pronounced, so that they can know what I was going for. "What the author means with the work" is, I think, a driving force behind dramaturgy in America but again, I am not interested in that tradition. Whether I'm successful or not, my efforts are to make the experience as democratic as possible with the audience members. I am trying to construct my plays so that they'll allow for the individual to make the associations that they want.

Emeline Jouve. – So you distinguish yourself from the American theatrical tradition through your approach not only to dramatic composition and acting, but also to your audience. In spite of not being "traditional", would you say that your plays are "American" nonetheless?

Richard Maxwell. – Oh, Yeah!

Emeline Jouve. – Right; but why would you define them as American, then?

Richard Maxwell. – They're American because, well, first, I'm American and I think that what is central for my writing is to understand the mythic aspect of Americana. I get a lot of traction from what we know America to be and to have been in all its iconography, and I trade on that for sure. I trade on it, and I also I get into trouble because I'm more sympathetic than you would expect maybe towards that kind of myths.

Emeline Jouve. – What are the myths?

Richard Maxwell. –That we are free, that we are independent, that we are strong, that we are self-starting, that we care about each other, that we help each other out, that we care about our families, that we like fast cars, that we have a dream… These kinds of things.

Emeline Jouve. ––With *The Evening* and *Paradiso*, you are reviving other myths—the Christian myths as Dante fictionalized them. It seems that with *The Evening* you inaugurated in 2015 a new dramatic strategy by going back to classical texts.

Richard Maxwell. – It's true that I had not so deliberately gone back to the classics before. But I would say that it was a deliberate yet unwilling choice.

Emeline Jouve. – Interesting… what do you mean?

Richard Maxwell. –Well, you know, I wasn't a good student in school and I take my share of the blame. I wish I had read more when I was younger, and so one of the things I've been trying to do is work my way through the canon of literature. So, you know, I was reading things like *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*. And I happened to be reading *Inferno* when I got this commission to do a new play from a consortium of four theatres (Performance Space 122 in New York, the One the Boards in Seattle, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh). So I was thinking of what I would do, and I just thought of what I liked about *The Inferno*: the descriptions of the underworld which are really vivid, you know, going down into the underworld with Virgil as an escort and going to the circles; the topography and the geography that were indicated were interesting to me. It was interesting to see the corollaries to Milton in *Paradise Lost* and to Greek mythology, Roman mythology, and the underworld. I was interested in this physical place in which people believed and which, although supernatural,

was clearly represented in the descriptions, but also by the beautiful drawings of what was described. It was at that time, when I was immersed in Dante's underworld and trying to make a play from *Inferno*, that my father passed away. I was grappling with this source text, and I started to blame this source text for all the problems in my life, and yet I found that I couldn't really escape it, and I felt that the only way out was to go through it and so I really trudged through that text. I guess that it's a very, well, Catholic thing, this feeling that I had to trudge through this as a punishment or something. To go through it corresponds to purgatory of course. And then there was *Paradiso*... And then I was able to convince myself that I could substitute *Samara*, which was something that I'd written before, and get through it quicker that way hopefully. I think that I'm finally through it... But only after making not three plays but four and I think since *Queens Row*, a play that I just did in London, feels very close to *Paradiso*.

Emeline Jouve. – Do you write the plays to be staged by yourself or do you sometimes write plays for others to direct them?

Richard Maxwell. – I just write plays to write plays and I wish more people knew that, I wish more directors would stage them.

Emeline Jouve. –Marie-José Malis from La Commune-Aubervilliers in France worked on *The End of Reality*, so there are people who have staged your texts.

Richard Maxwell. – Yes, there was Sarah Benson at Soho Rep who did *Samara*, and Brian Mendes directed *People Without History* in 2009. There've been some productions in Brazil... It has happened in the past that people have directed my shows and I didn't find out about it till later, so I suppose there's that going on too... Yes, there's been a few scattered productions here and there, but it's not a regular thing, and I wish that more artists would make my work their own.

Emeline Jouve. – Well, that's an invitation to directors then! Richard Maxwell, it was a pleasure to talk about your approach to dramaturgy. Thank you very much!

Richard Maxwell. – Thank you, Emeline.

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Notice

Emeline Jouve is Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture at Champollion University and Toulouse Jean Jaurès University. She has published articles on Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein, Paula Vogel, the Wooster Group, Big Art Group and the Living Theatre in European and American journals and anthologies. She co-edited Susan *Glaspell's* Trifles *and "A Jury of Her Peers"* (2015), *Unspeakable Acts: Murder by Women* (2016) and *Chronique judiciaire et fictionnalisation du procès* (2017). *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion* was published in 2017 by the University of Iowa Press. In 2018, Deuxième Epoque released her volume of interviews *Avignon 68 & le Living Theatre*. Jouve is the editor of "Ariel's Corner: theatre" for the peer-reviewed e-journal *Miranda*.

Abstract

In this interview, Richard Maxwell, writer, stage director and artistic director of New York City Players, discusses his approach to dramaturgy. Throughout the conversation, Maxwell attempts to define the nature of his writing and to pinpoint the specific features of his style, which differs from the traditional American realist trend.

Key words

Richard Maxwell; non-traditional theatre; playwriting; words / space; American myths

Résumé

Dans cet entretien, Richard Maxwell, auteur, metteur en scène et directeur artistique des New York City Players, revient sur sa façon de concevoir la dramaturgie. L'échange est l'occasion de définir la nature de l'écriture de Maxwell et de cerner ses spécificités, notamment par rapport à la dramaturgie réaliste traditionnelle étasunienne.

Mots-clés

Richard Maxwell ; théâtre non traditionnel ; écriture dramatique ; mots / espaces ; mythes américains

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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