

Before the Scenes With Richard Maxwell

paul david young 04/27/12

"Wait, where are you going?" theater director/writer Richard Maxwell asked a few museumgoers leaving his rehearsal at the Whitney Museum Thursday afternoon during his five-day residency on the museum's fourth floor this week. "This isn't a lounge," he joked to another couple seated on the floor watching.

Most theater rehearsal spaces are dingy places. Maxwell's rehearsal space is impossibly grand: 4000 square feet of landmarked modernity designed by one of the most renowned architects of the twentieth century.



VIEW SLIDESHOW Photo by Sascha van Riel.; Photo by Sascha van Riel.;

The museum bills the event somewhat mysteriously on its web page, saying that Maxwell "will work on a new original play, proceeding with no intent beyond a commitment to the specificity of the circumstances." Translation: Maxwell is rehearsing a play.

Since the script is his, he's doing some rewriting as he goes along. He's trying one thing and then another, doubling back once he's got a few parts in place to see how it all plays in a sequence. Wearing a peach polo shirt, jeans and sneakers, Maxwell improvises some chords on the piano and urges the audience to join in the choral singing for the beginning of a scene. There's boredom when nothing happens. Maxwell occasionally walks around in a circle before announcing some new blocking for the scene. An actress tries on a costume. People check their messages.



The play he's rehearsing appears to be an adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, though the museum's press office denied this was the case. The actors are wearing period Puritan costumes, as if for a Thanksgiving play. The text is wildly verbose, oscillating between lengthy monologues that are entirely guileless ("I haven't felt good about myself in a long time. I'm being torn in two.") and a more affected style. The acting style Maxwell cultivates is completely deadpan, which can work well for him, as when an actress declares without any inflection, "I'm really upset." At the Whitney, though, there was a fair amount of "acting" from time to time, which perhaps the rehearsals will quash in time. The cast consists of Roy Faudree, Eleanor Hutchins, Linda Mancini, Sheena See and Brian Mendes.

In these rehearsals Maxwell doesn't intervene architecturally. He leaves the large window on the western wall of the enormous room uncovered and relies on the museum's installed lighting. He has taped a rectangle on the floor to outline the playing space at the center of the room. His set consists of collapsible tables and the museum's black folding chairs. The only visible props are some vegetables, bread, dough, a plastic glass, and a pitcher of water. There's one paper outline of a lifesize human figure, hung from the ceiling in a black frame, ready to be set on fire by the attached electrical chords. This stripped-down aesthetic is typical of his productions.

There are rewards for watching. Hearing the dialogue again and again as museumgoers sauntered in and out, some lines took on different connotations. "What are you seeing? Can you describe?" the interrogator asks in the trial scene. The witness answers, "It doesn't have a name." As the repetitions accumulated through the rehearsals, it was interesting to consider that what we were seeing was the same and yet different each time. The rehearsal gave new meaning to the play.

Maxwell and company are on view through Sunday, April 29.

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