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QUEENS ROW

**Richard Birkett in conversation
with Richard Maxwell**

A decade ago the New York-based writer and theatre director Richard Maxwell began presenting his productions in contemporary art galleries. Galleries, he found, were more permissive than theatres, their audiences relationship to the work more open ended. At the ICA, where his newly-commissioned play *QUEENS ROW* will receive its world premiere on Friday, Maxwell has lowered the theatre floor by 30 centimetres to create a new space. This formal gesture – a distancing from the tropes of theatre – is of a kind with his casting of non-professional actors recruited via London community centres, libraries, and the classified ads website Gumtree. Only once the three lead women were found did he feel able to begin writing the play. Set in Massachusetts in the very near future, September 2019 precisely, *QUEENS ROW* imagines a white riot that triggers widespread civil war.

RB: The setting of the play in a possible future echoes a similar method in your previous play, *Paradiso*. Is there something about the current political moment in the US and beyond that calls for such a perspective?

RM: As the last in a triptych of plays corresponding to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in *Paradiso* I imagined an after-life, an after Earth even, if that's possible. The genesis of *QUEENS ROW* was a dystopic dream I had, before the US election in 2016. I don't mean to be prophetic in this play. I'm not really a political guy. Theatre should be a dialogue. I don't see the value in presenting something that reinforces what you already believe. However, in our highly politicised times that *is* a political idea: maybe it always was, but it feels acute now to say, 'I'm going to make something that can be claimed equally by the left and the right.' I believe that attitude encourages independent thinking.

RB: I would say that your work is political – politics with a small 'p'. It addresses social relations, questions of belief and identity. Perhaps an important aspect of *QUEENS ROW* is the idea of who speaks for whom and who has a voice. Most obviously you're a man writing for three women.

RM: There will always be a power dilemma whenever a director tells actors what to do. One way I negotiate this 'power dilemma' is to have a one-to-one relationship with the actors. I certainly didn't plan for the leads to be women – they happened to be the most compelling in casting and I want to work with them because there is mutual respect and a shared sense of value in collaboration.

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RB: This dynamic is very interesting, considering the line between general political concerns and the felt politics that come with individual interactions. In the actual writing of *QUEENS ROW*, this seems present in the fact that the three characters all seem to be affected by a male figure absent in their lives.

RM: Right. In narrative film and fiction the Bechdel Test, named after Alison Bechdel, is a method for evaluating the representation of women. Simply, two women should talk to each other about something other than a man. I set out to see if I could produce something where the three women are only talking *because of* this one absent male, with whom they all have a relationship as mother, lover and daughter. I wanted to make something that felt like it was owned by the women and yet marked by this absence. It all came from this sentence 'I'm shaped by what I deny.' I think there is a lot of that going on right now. You're against Trump and that's your identity. You're shaped by that. What would it mean to embrace that? The character Naz is denying a whole lineage of men and women before her, and so that's an identity – and yet she's avoiding all the markers of her identity by saying she doesn't have a name, an ID, while claiming she has every right to exist as much as everyone else. In this way I simultaneously acknowledge that I'm a man writing a woman.

RB: Does this question of identity relate to your casting of non-professional actors?

RM: Acting is the assumption of another identity. It's really cool when you see individual personalities of actors coming through. You're looking at a person who's with you in this moment at the same time. We're not trying to pretend that we're somewhere else. That's a key fixture of what I do.

RB: The aspect of the play that brings this through most concretely perhaps is the fact of three British women playing Americans. As a new play, this is clearly an intentional decision rather than expediency.

RM: I like the duality that arises when you have people with English accents talking about America, because clearly what's happening currently in America is not disconnected to what's happening here. It'd be a mistake if an audience felt it didn't concern them because then they'd be denying what's going on within Brexit. They'd be denying what's going on with populism and nationalism throughout Europe. That's politics with a capital 'P' – that's part of this conversation.

RB: Another way to consider that question of site, and a lack of pretense around where you are, is your treatment of the physical space of the ICA theatre.

RM: I read a Donald Judd quote where he said: 'everything sculpture has my work doesn't'. And it's what I feel about theatre: everything you know/think about theatre, that is not what I'm doing. Dramaturgically this play feels more like a sculpture in a sense – the absence written into the text, is part of this play's structure.