THE THEATRE

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIMES

Julia Cho and Richard Maxwell play with stories from the past.

BY HILTON ALS

Mrs. K. (Elizabeth Franz) is an elderly widow whose powerful, selective memory is cluttered to the rafters. And since she is, for the most part, the central force in Julia Cho's well-written "The Piano Teacher" (at the Vineyard), we have to take her word for almost everything—at first. This isn't terribly difficult to do, given that Mrs. K. has such a lovely, seductive voice: it sounds like a flute floating above the babbling brook of her various reminiscences.

Sporting a pink cardigan and sensible shoes, Mrs. K. padding around her doll-delicate parlor. She doesn't have much to do, now that her husband has gone on to his glory, and she no longer offers the piano lessons that kept her occupied for a time. Munching on cookies or chocolates, watching TV, and chatting with the audience are the amiable Mrs. K.'s pastimes now. "People assume I must eat like a horse," she says near the start of the play. But she's being a little disingenuous—she's as slight as a wren. Mrs. K. adds, "Everything I eat becomes quite attached to me, so that even if all I eat is a very small piece of chocolate, well, then, that little piece of chocolate will stay with me, become part of me."

This is one of Cho's more inventive metaphors. Mrs. K. can't let anything out, not even the truth. Still, something within her—perhaps it's the sound of silence, of loneliness, that pervades her house—compels her to reach out to her former students. They're all she has, and perhaps has ever had, in this life. Naturally, the majority of them don't remember her right away; the years make strangers of us all. But Mrs. K. chirps on whenever she gets her students on the line. "You still play?" she asks. "Do you remember me?"

The director, Kate Whoriskey, does a clean, credible job when it comes to staging the telephone exchanges between Mrs. K. and her students. She does a good job, too, of minimizing the effect of the Tony Award-winning Franz's mannerisms—like many actors who don't have to share the stage much, Franz has a tendency to use her tics as a kind of armor against the audience. Whoriskey, however, draws her out at every turn, and, in response, Franz offers up a bravura performance.

And yet one can't help wondering at times why this play exists at all. While Mrs. K. is eventually forced to listen to a former student named Michael (very well played by the lyrical John Boyd), who shows up at her house one day and imparts certain truths about Mrs. K.'s husband, the drama and its revelations feel incidental, a relay race that chooses its own finish line. Nevertheless, it's its gothic mysteries, finds its triumph, finally, in dramatizing the unknown.

The Waiting Woman, in the writer and director Richard Maxwell's new, seventy-five-minute piece, "Ode to the Man Who Kneels" (at the Performing Garage), wears a long dark skirt with a high waistband that befits her...
role as a female living in the American West during the nineteenth century. Her current beau is the Dashing Man (Brian Mendes). Although the Waiting Woman (Anna Kohler) calls him an "idiot," he will not go away; his continuing presence is a testament to her charm. Whenever he gets tired of the violence in his life, he lays his heavy head on her lap and she strokes his hair lovingly. That kind of comfort is beyond language, as tender as a sigh. But, in the world that Maxwell has created here, such sentiments are the audience's projections only; he doesn't encourage his actors to indulge in them. In fact, the five-member cast speaks and sings throughout "Ode to the Man Who Kneels" with little, if any, inflection. Maxwell denies us emotional coherence because his interest lies in the disjunctions—between gesture and speech, between intention and action, between American psychological realism and the relatively cold, stilted "anti-theatre" style that the director Rainer Werner Fassbinder developed in his early works for the stage.

Once you understand that the Waiting Woman, like the other characters in "Ode," is both herself—which is to say, a figment of Maxwell's imagination—and a working actress who is projecting her real and assumed selves simultaneously, Maxwell's playful aesthetic begins to take hold. His ambition is to make theatre new. In order to do so, he has to separate himself from his fellow-experimentalists, such as Richard Foreman and the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte, both of whom have an exceptional and singular stagecraft that can seem pretty flashy by comparison. Maxwell wipes the slate clean: limited sets, a few lighting cues, simple costumes, very little hair styling and makeup. Watching him put these elements together is, I imagine, somewhat like watching the late artist Joseph Beuys construct one of his visually minimal and intellectually dense sculptures. Like Beuys, Maxwell knows enough about his discipline not to want to dress it up.

Taking our seats in the small, high-ceilinged theatre, we face a nearly empty black stage, marked only by tape on the floor, a bench, and a railing. A projectionist sits in front of the stage, illuminating it and the actors with a solid white light that throws silhouettes on the wall. The Kneeling Man (the exceptional Greg Mehren) crouches near the Standing Man (Jim Fletcher), who holds his right hand like a gun—a gun that is cocked and aimed at the Kneeling Man's head. The Standing Man's first line is "Hello, man. You look stoopid." And we laugh, because all theatre looks "stoopid" at first—fake. Then, shifting deeper into his role as a gun-toting assassin, the Standing Man tells his victim, "Say your prayers." The Kneeling Man prays: "I'm an actor. Everything I experience in my life, everything I feel, is saying this. You know? It adds a layer to my life that I wish weren't never there. A voice in my head that says you don't count for shit, because you, what you're experiencing, you're thinking, you're counting, you're not in the real world. You're recording. You're storing up for a moment where you can use this for later." Even after he has been "shoe" by the Standing Man and has fallen, dead, to the floor, the Kneeling Man joins the other actors in a song that reveals in Maxwell's carnival of alienation. (Maxwell's music, which is performed on piano and guitar, is sad and slow; Hopalong Cassidy at an avant-garde ball.) Later, the Standing Man kills the Dashing Man and takes up briefly with the Waiting Woman. In Maxwell's world, no introductions are necessary; people just start talking, or arguing, or singing together.

Maxwell's formalism doesn’t limit his actors, who are like the dramatic descendants of the characters in Robert Altman's 1971 postmodern Western epic "McCabe and Mrs. Miller." Watching the show two nights in a row, I could see how the German-born Kohler and Mehrten, in particular, played their own formidable technique against Maxwell's. Mehrten's five-minute monologue at the beginning of the show was like the speech of a masochist pleading for understanding at the hands of an infinitely less intelligent sadist. The Standing Man eventually turns his attention to Juny (Emily Cass McDonnell), a young woman whom the Waiting Woman considers to be her friend, and, watching Kohler, I noticed the way her eyes filled with both tears and humor as the Waiting Woman told Juny that her heart was broken. In "Ode," Kohler evokes another great German star in an altogether different kind of Western: Marlene Dietrich in "Destry Rides Again."