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Robert M. Wilson

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ROBERT WILSON

Biography

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The New York Times described Robert Wilson as “a towering figure in the world of experimental theater and an explorer in the uses of time and space on stage. Transcending theatrical convention, he draws in other performance and graphic arts, which coalesce into an integrated tapestry of images and sounds.” Susan Sontag has said of Wilson’s work, “it has the signature of a major artistic creation. I can’t think of any body of work as large or as influential.”

Born in Waco, Texas, Wilson was educated at the University of Texas and Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute, where he took an interest in architecture and design. He studied painting with George McNeil in Paris and later worked with the architect Paolo Solari in Arizona. Moving to New York City in the mid-1960s, Wilson found himself drawn to the work of pioneering choreographers George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, and Martha Graham, among others artists. By 1968 he had gathered a group of artists known as The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, and together they worked and performed in a loft building at 147 Spring Street in lower Manhattan.

Performing Arts

In 1969 two of Wilson’s major productions appeared in New York City: *The King of Spain* at the Anderson Theater, and *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

In 1971 Wilson received international acclaim for *Deafman Glance (Le Regard du Sourd)*, a silent opera created in collaboration with Raymond Andrews, a talented deaf-mute boy whom Wilson had adopted. After the Paris premiere of the work, French Surrealist Louis Aragon wrote of Wilson, “he is what we, from whom Surrealism was born, dreamed would come after us and go beyond us.” Wilson then went on to present numerous acclaimed productions throughout the world, including the seven-day play *KA MOUNTain and GUARDenia Terrace* in Shiraz, Iran (1972); *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, a twelve-hour silent opera performed in New York, Europe, and South America (1973); and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in Europe and New York (1974-1975). In 1976 Wilson joined with composer Philip Glass in writing the landmark work *Einstein on the Beach*, which was presented at

the Festival d'Avignon and at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, and has since been revived in three world tours in 1984, 1992 and 2012-2015.

After *Einstein*, Wilson increasingly worked with European theaters and opera houses. His productions were frequently featured at the Festival d'Automne in Paris, the Schaubühne Berlin, the Thalia Theater in Hamburg, and the Salzburg Festival, among many other venues. At the Schaubühne he created *Death Destruction & Detroit* (1979) and *Death Destruction & Detroit II* (1987); and at the Thalia he presented four groundbreaking musical works, *The Black Rider* (1991), *Alice* (1992), *Time Rocker* (1996), and *POEtry* (2000).

In the early 1980's Wilson developed what still stands as his most ambitious project: the multinational epic *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down*. Created in collaboration with an international group of artists, Wilson planned this opera as the centerpiece of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles. Although the full epic was never seen in its entirety, individual parts have been produced in the United States, Europe and Japan.

Robert Wilson has designed and directed operas at La Scala in Milan, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Opéra Bastille in Paris, the Zürich Opera, the Hamburg State Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Houston Grand Opera and the Moscow Bolshoi, among others. His productions include *Salome* (Milan, 1987), *Parsifal* (Hamburg, 1991), *The Magic Flute* (Paris, 1991), *Lohengrin* (Zürich, 1991), *Madama Butterfly* (Paris, 1993), *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* (Salzburg, 1995), *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Houston, 1996), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Salzburg, 1997), *Orpheus and Eurydice* (Paris, 1999), *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Zürich, 2000-2002), *Aida* (Brussels, 2002), Leos Janacek's *Osud* (Prague, 2002), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (Paris, 2003), Gluck's *Alceste* (Brussels, 2004), Bach's *Johannes-Passion* (Paris, 2007), Brecht/Weill's *Threepenny Opera* (Berlin, 2007), Gounod's *Faust* (Warsaw, 2008), *Der Freischütz* (Baden-Baden, 2009), *Katya Kabanova* (Prague, 2010), *Norma* (Zürich, 2011), Verdi's *Macbeth* (Bologna / Sao Paulo, 2013), a Monteverdi trilogy consisting of *L'Orfeo* (2009), *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (2011) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (2014) in Milan and Paris, *La Traviata* (Linz, 2015) and *Turandot* (Madrid, 2018).

He has presented innovative adaptations of works by writers such as Virginia Woolf (*Orlando*, Berlin, 1989), William Shakespeare (*King Lear*, Frankfurt, 1990; *A Winter's Tale*, Berlin, 2005; *The Tempest*, Sofia, 2021; et.al.), Henrik Ibsen (*When We Dead Awaken*, Cambridge Mass., 1991; *Lady from the Sea*, Ferrara, 1998; *Peer Gynt*, Oslo, 2005), Gertrude Stein (*Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, Berlin, 1992; *Saints and Singing*, Berlin, 1997), Darryl Pinckney (*Time Rocker*, Hamburg, 1996; *Mary Said What She Said*, Paris, 2019; *Dorian*, Düsseldorf, 2022; et.al.), Wole Soyinka (*Scourge of Hyacinths*, Geneva, 1999), Georg Büchner (*Woyzeck*, Copenhagen, 2000), Jean de la Fontaine (*Les Fables de la Fontaine*, Paris, 2004),

Samuel Beckett (*Happy Days*, Luxembourg, 2008; *Krapp's Last Tape*, Spoleto, 2009), Homer (*Odyssey*, Athens, 2012), Daniil Kharms (*The Old Woman*, Manchester, 2013), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Faust I and II*, Berlin, 2015), and Sophocles (*Oedipus*, Pompeii, 2018). His longstanding love to Indonesia led Robert Wilson to direct *I La Galigo* (Singapore, 2004), a play based on a sacred text from Southwest Sulawesi. Later on, Wilson directed *Rumi: in the blink of the eye*, based on Sufi mystic poetry (Athens, 2007), and *1433—The Grand Voyage*, a Ming-Dynasty parable (Taiwan, 2010).

Wilson has collaborated with a number of internationally acclaimed artists, writers, and musicians. He worked closely with the late German playwright Heiner Müller on the Cologne section of *the CIVIL warS* (1984), *Hamletmachine* (1986), and *Quartet* (1987). With singer/song-writer Tom Waits, Wilson created the highly successful production *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* (Hamburg, 1991), as well as *Alice* (Hamburg, 1992) and *Woyzeck* (Copenhagen, 2000). His collaboration with Lou Reed also resulted in three works for the stage: *Time Rocker* (Hamburg, 1996), *POEtry* (Hamburg, 2000) and *Lulu* (Berlin, 2011). With David Byrne, Wilson staged *The Knee Plays from the CIVIL warS* (1984), and later *The Forest*, in honor of the 750th anniversary of the City of Berlin (1988). He worked with poet Allen Ginsberg on *Cosmopolitan Greetings* (1988) and with performance artist Laurie Anderson on Wilson's adaptation of Euripides's *Alceste* (1986). Writer Susan Sontag joined Wilson in creating *Alice in Bed* (1993), and together they developed a new work, *Lady from the Sea* (1998), based on Ibsen's classic and since revived in many different languages. Wilson's long association with noted opera singer Jessye Norman began with *Great Day in the Morning* (Paris, 1982) and continued with a stage and video work based on Franz Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise* in 2001. Other important collaborations include *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Duisburg, 2003) and *Zinnias* (Montclair, 2013) with Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon; Büchner's *Leonce and Lena* (Berlin, 2003) with Herbert Grönemeyer; *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* (Manchester, 2011) with Antony; *Peter Pan* (Berlin, 2013), *Pushkin's Fairy Tales* (Moscow, 2015), *Edda* (Oslo, 2017), *Jungle Book* (Luxembourg, 2019) with CocoRosie, and *The Sandman* (Recklinghausen, 2017) with Anna Calvi.

Visual Arts

While known for creating highly acclaimed theatrical pieces, Wilson's work is firmly rooted in the fine arts. His drawings, paintings and sculptures have been presented around the world in hundreds of solo and group showings. Major Wilson exhibitions have appeared at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1991); the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (1991); the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston (1991); and the Instituto de Valencia de Arte Moderno (1992). Wilson has created original installations for the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (1993); London's Clink Street Vaults (1995); Museum Villa Stuck, Munich (1997);

Guggenheim Museum (2000); Museum of Art and Design Copenhagen (2000); Passionsfestspiele Oberammergau and Mass. MOCA (2000-2001); Vitra Design Museum in Weil, Germany (2001); the Parisian Galeries Lafayette (2002); Barbier-Mueller Museum for Precolumbian Art in Barcelona (2004); the Pierre Bergé Yves Saint Laurent Foundation (2004); Aichi World Exhibition Nagoya (2005); Oerol Festival (2008); Norsk Teknisk Museum Oslo (2011); Norfolk and Norwich Festival (2012); Kunstfest Weimar (2012); Minneapolis Institute of Art (2018); Max Ernst Museum Brühl (2018); Crystal Bridges (2021); Michelangelo Foundation (2022); mudac Lausanne (2022).

His tribute to Isamu Noguchi has been shown at Vitra Museum (2001), the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (2002), the Rotterdam Kunsthal (2003), the Noguchi Garden Museum in New York (2004), the Seattle Art Museum (2006) and the L.A.-based Japanese American National Museum (2006). His installation of the Guggenheim's Giorgio Armani retrospective (2000) traveled to Bilbao, Berlin, London, Rome, Tokyo, Shanghai and Milan (from 2000 to 2007). For the Louvre Museum in Paris, Wilson curated and designed the exhibit "Living Rooms," featuring around 700 works from his art collection (2013).

In 2004 Robert Wilson started his Video Portraits, a series of HD video works on subjects that include celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Brad Pitt, Winona Ryder, Alan Cumming, Jeanne Moreau, Johnny Depp, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Renee Fleming, Sean Penn and Robert Downey Jr. as well as a variety of animals (the Snowy Owl "KOOL", a black panther, a porcupine etc.). These works have been shown in more than 50 exhibitions worldwide, including at MoMa PS1, Paula Cooper Gallery and Phillips de Pury & Co. in New York, Ace Gallery Los Angeles, Kunsthalle Hamburg, ZKM Karlsruhe, Academy of the Arts Berlin, Museum of Modern Art Salzburg, Times Square New York, Palazzo Madama Torino, the University of Toronto's Art Center, AGSA Adelaide, and the Louvre Museum in Paris.

His drawings, prints, videos and sculptures are held in private collections and museums throughout the world, notably The Metropolitan Museum of Art; MoMA; the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Art Institute of Chicago; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Vitra Design Museum; Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Menil Foundation Collection, Houston.

Awards and Honors

A recipient of two Rockefeller and two Guggenheim fellowships, Wilson has been honored with numerous awards for excellence. In 1986 Wilson was the sole nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *the CIVIL warS*. He received two Hewes Design Awards for *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1975) and *the CIVIL warS Act V* (1987); a Bessie Award for *The Knee Plays* (1987); two Italian Premio Ubu awards

for *Alice* and *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1994 and 1992); the Golden Lion Award for Sculpture of the Venice Biennale for *Memory/Loss* (1993); the German Theater Critics Award for *The Black Rider* (1990); a Reumert Prize for *Woyzeck* (2001); the Smithsonian National Design Award (2001); the French Theater Critics Award for *A Dream Play* (2002); an International Design and Communication Award for *Mind Gap* (2012); and an Olivier Award for *Einstein on the Beach* as “Best New Opera Production” (2013).

Wilson was honored with several lifetime achievement awards, including: Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize (1996); Premio Europa for Theater, Taormina (1997); Tadeusz Kantor Prize, Cracow (1997); Pushkin Prize, Moscow (1999); Rosa d’Oro, Palermo (2007); Prix Italian and the Fendi Foundation Award (both in 2012); Paez Medal of Art / Venezuela (2013) and the German Goethe Institute’s Medal for the Arts (2014). He has been named a “Lion of the Performing Arts” by the New York Public Library (1989); “Texas Artist of the Year” by the Art League of Houston (1995); received an Institute Honor from The American Institute of Architects in New York City (1988); the Harvard Excellence in Design Award (1998); and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2000). The President of France pronounced him Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters (2003) and later Officer of the Legion of Honor (2014). The President of Germany awarded him the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit (2014). In 2023, he was awarded the Praemium Imperiale by the Japan Art Association.

Wilson holds Honorary Doctorate degrees from the Pratt Institute (1991), the California College of Arts and Crafts (1994), the University of Toronto (2005), the University of Bucharest (2008), the American University of Paris (2010), the City University of New York (2013), the Sorbonne Nouvelle University (2013) and the University of Hartford (2016). In 1997, April 18th was declared “Robert Wilson Day” by the legislature in the State of Texas.

Robert Wilson’s Legacy

Since the early 1990s, Robert Wilson has held workshops for students and experienced creative professionals from around the world at the International Summer Arts Program at The Watermill Center in Eastern Long Island – an interdisciplinary laboratory for the Arts and Humanities. Following a successful capital campaign, construction of a permanent facility was completed in the summer of 2006, enabling the Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation to offer residencies, lectures and performances, and educational programs throughout the year.

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