

ROBERT WILSON OR *TIME AND IMMOVABILITY*

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Abstract: *Being convinced that “we should set the traditional school of theatre on fire”, Wilson troubled the strong tradition of Western theatre, founded on the idolatry of the word. His options unveil his affinity to mystery, symbol, ritual and the sonorous beaches on which he uses to superpose his unique imagistic scenic vision, the slowed down motions and elaborated lights.*

Key words: *image, light, ritual, opera management.*

Nowadays, one rarely finds time to think about TIME. This is, though, what Robert Wilson succeeds in his shows, transforming the scenic space in temporal images.

Robert Wilson (b.1941) first studied business management at the University of Texas (1959-1962), afterwards he studied the art of painting in Paris and then architecture, interior design and painting (again) in New-York. He has not attended a school of theatre. As major influences which have affected his creation, he mentions, beside the activity developed with disabled children, the avant-garde group formed by Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and John Cage. This group has experienced different stylistic orientations, it has moved away from serialism and electronic music to graphism and qualified sonorous constructions, and was labeled by Sorin Lerescu as free from any constraint. The musical creations of the group use to shock through the originality of the language, the exploitation of new manners of attack and the employed instrumental techniques. Cage

supports the idea that one can choreograph any music and also dance to it (see his compositions directed as motion shows, during the period 1940-1960, most of them in Cunningham's choreography).

Robert Wilson's creation for the stage has been immense, since his first motion shows were held at the end of the 60-ies, and the last ones in 2005. His shows were named by certain critics *tableaux vivants*. Just to name a few: the *Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), *Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass, *Leonce and Lena* by Georg Büchner and *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen (2005). As regards opera stage management, he produced *Médée* by Charpentier, presented together with the music version by Bryars (1984); *Salomé* by Richard Strauss at Scala of Milan (1987); *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1997); *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* by Debussy; *Die Zauberflöte* by Mozart (1991, 1995, 1999); *Parsifal* by Wagner la Hamburg (1991); *Madame Butterfly* by Puccini (1993, 1994, 1997); *The Castle of Blue-Beard* by Bartók; *Erwartung* by Schönberg in Salzburg (1995); *Oedipus rex* by

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Stravinski (1996); *Alceste* by Gluck at Théâtre Châtelet in Paris (1996); *Lohengrin* by Wagner at Metropolitan Opera in New-York (1998 and 2006); *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by Wagner at the opera in Paris (2002) and at the opera in Zürich (2006); *Osud (Destiny)* by Leoš Janáček in Prague. In 1992, Wilson founded the Watermill Center, a “laboratory” in which the didactic activity interweaves with the activity of production and of archiving his achievements. Wilson has been distinguished with numerous prizes.

For Robert Wilson’s temporal communication the second is the most important time unit: “Every second is perpetually something else, very different (...). The only constant thing is change” [8, p. 473-474]. Every cliché, every second has its own space in time – for Wilson, it is much dilated – so that the message should find its time to be both exposed and received. It is, if the comparison is allowed, like watching photographs of our childhood, in which there is comprised not only an immovable image, but a succession of images – known only by us – that only we, the watchers, can „remake” with the eyes of the mind and of the soul. In the very same way, Wilson’s shots succeed, leaving us the time to receive the succession of his intentions through our own perceptions. Wilson does not submit image to music, he uses music to create images. Even if, in theory, the images might be deemed in conflict with the dramatic musical developments (how could we imagine a static *allegro vivo*?), they submit to the latter through the very imagistic construction which supports the images of musical dynamics (not in the sense attributed by Music Theory, which is the sum of the indications with respect to the intensity of the musical sonority, but in the sense of the evolution of musical

discourse as a whole). It is like the difference between (dynamic) *instantaneous* photographs and (static) *family* photographs from the time of our grandparents, in *sepia* colours, that we surely still have, forgotten, in a drawer of old furniture.

It is said that an image *makes a thousand words*. If we were to decipher and describe every image in any of his settings and if we multiplied them by one hundred, we would discover a story which could not be displayed in days. This is the case of his very first shows, *King of Spain* (1969) - 3 hours, *Deafman Glance* (1970) - 7 hours, *Overture* (1972) - 24 hours, *KA Mountain and Guardiania Terrace* (1972) - 7 days and 7 nights. For instance, in *Overture*, only the passage of a procession from one part of the stage to the other lasted an hour – “the advancement is imperceptible, like an immobile painting in space and time” [2]. Quite similar, in *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, on a beach full of sand we could see “a turtle which traversed the stage in 34 minutes, [and] a runner which traversed the stage in approximately 7 or 8 seconds – different actions which were performed according to different rhythms, [and] different speeds” [1].

The development of Wilson’s studies with reference to the relations *sound-image* and *space-time* in the scenic space originates in the communication that he has developed with the children he adopted: Raymond Andrews – a deaf-mute child – whom he met in 1967, and with Christopher Knowles – an autistic child – whom Wilson met in 1971.

Because of their handicaps, each of the children had a different perception on the communication with the environment, being much more sensitive in receiving the “messages” coming from the exterior. Wilson noted that the scale of shading,

graduation and differentiation of the stimuli was much more sensitive as compared to the one of a normal person, giving this way birth to a wider diversity of reactions-responses. This fact led to the development of the system of communication stimulus-reception-stimulus (through feedback), based on “codes” of images and sounds. Up to the framing of the “code” within a structure of space-time there was but a step, a necessity appeared from the attempt at quantifying the dimension (as form) and the time that it needs to be perceived and understood.

Based on this (nonverbal) *communicational alphabet*, Wilson, starting from the dramatic and musical text, substantiated and developed a new “formula”, a new modality of scenic communication based on *visual codes*. These had to be explicit as to be deciphered by anyone, even by handicapped people, who might, only by seeing the shows, understand them. The codes had to possess a universal character, to exceed linguistic and cultural barriers.

In this way, as I have shown above, to every “cliché” in the stage manager’s settings there should be attributed a *form* and a *dimension*, which has to be placed in a *space* and which has to contain their own *time* interval (an interval necessary to perception).

It is argued that Robert Wilson is a continuator of Gordon Craig, since the actors playing in his settings turn into marionettes. The manager’s (Wilson’s) work with the actors focuses on the architectural dimension of the corporal design, the precision and expression as synthesized and direct as possible, determined by the moment of the situation in which the character finds himself in the respective context. “He does not want actors or singers; he wants models,

patterns” [6]. In this way, corporal-expressive mini-structures are created and integrated within a mega-structure of image. This happens because Wilson does not “present” humans and human passions, but, using this *ballet in images* with a cold, glacial, non-real appearance, with an almost non-human precision of movements, he proposes a series of esthetical-moral and scientific values which are only created by human bodies, values which do not need a real “time” frame but which exist within a *spatial temporality*.

An aspect which has a deep impact on the audience is Wilson's use of light; with its help he creates the spatial dimension of the stage. An empty stage, with no light, is static and frozen.

Whoever steps onto a stage with no light, in complete darkness, is acquainted with a non-time sensation. Wilson considers that time “flows” on a horizontal surface and space (light) on a vertical surface; the intersection of the two axes *space-time* creates what he calls “tension”. The dimension of this *dramatic tension* is deciphered by the stage manager on the basis of what we call *musical dramaturgy*. According to this dimension, he constructs every shot, every “cliché”, developing relations of complementariness among the drama, the musical discourse and the scenic image. The fragmentation of the actors’ movements and characters is like a “dissection” of the whole creation, up to words, syllables, and sounds, its reconstruction and transformation into scenic composition ensuing afterwards.

Being convinced that “we should set the traditional school of theatre on fire” [5], Wilson has troubled the strong tradition of Western theatre, founded on the idolatry of the word. Wilson has also changed the way in which the theatre

looks like and sounds” [3, p. 76]. This deeply creative stage manager, whose name has often been associated with innovation in art, has succeeded in bringing out a unique vision on theatre and opera shows. Wilson's interpretations of Wagner's and Gluck's works (two reformers of the genre who “acknowledged the priority of the drama, but [who] flooded the stage with symphonic commentaries” [4, p. 31]) unveil his affinity to mystery, symbol, ritual and the sonorous beaches on which he uses to superpose his unique imagistic scenic vision, the slowed down motions and elaborated lights.

Although a controversial artist, Wilson hopes that his inheritance will be “a footnote in the history of theatre”, being aware of the uniqueness of his artistic approach and of the influence it exercises on humankind [7].

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