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Why Theatre? A Study of Robert Wilson

Rachel Elinor Bennett
Butler University

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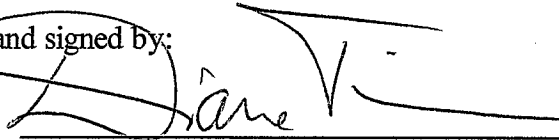
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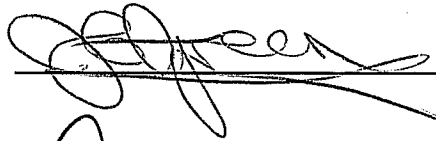
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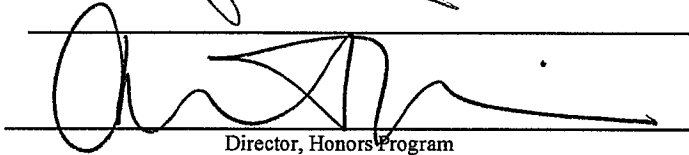
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A Study of Robert Wilson**

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Rachel Elinor Bennett

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Introduction: Why Robert Wilson does Theatre

“I think why one does theatre profoundly informs what one does in Theatre”
(Fred Newman in A Dialogue 115).

During the 20th century theatre experienced many changes and developments. Some of these developments were due to more advanced technology, such as significantly improved possibilities in stage lighting. Other developments were due to innovative visionaries. Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia changed how theatre artists thought of stage design. Instead of performance spaces *before* an intricate drop, Craig and Appia created architectural spaces *in* which to perform. Some of the motivations for these innovations were seemingly unrelated to the innovation itself. Erwin Piscator is one visionary whose innovations were motivated by a seemingly unrelated idea. Piscator, a theatre director in Berlin during the 1920s and early 1930s, was an early proponent of Epic Theatre and pulled together many older techniques as well as some newer innovations to create his theatre. One of his most exciting new techniques was his use of film in live theatre; no one else had used film in this way before. What is interesting about Piscator’s innovative aesthetic is that he was not aesthetically innovative in order to be innovative, but in order to further his communist political agenda.

Piscator was one of many directors who were innovative and contributed to forever changing how we look at and create theatre. Some of these other directors include Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Peter Brook. Each of these men contributed something new to theatre for different reasons including political, social, and spiritual ones, but none focused on human beings in the way Robert Wilson did. Wilson is another director who developed incredibly innovative theatre productions. One of the most innovative parts of Wilson’s work is not his aesthetic and the avant-garde nature of his work, but his

acceptance and presentation of marginalized people. His theatre is like a forum where their voices can be heard and not just discussed.

The impetus for much of Wilson's innovative work comes from people in his life. Raymond Andrews, Wilson's adopted son, pushed him to create works like *Deafman Glance* (1970) because, as a deaf person, he communicated differently and saw the world differently. Wilson wanted to include Raymond in his work and therefore he needed to create work differently. This challenge led to theatre that emphasized images over words. Later Wilson incorporated more language into his work. Again the motivation for this change came through a person: Christopher Knowles. Knowles is autistic and Wilson met him while working at the institution where Chris lived. When Wilson read what Knowles was writing he was inspired to work with him to make theatre. Rather than seeing Knowles writing as requiring correction Wilson saw it as valid art and poetry. Wilson's theatre gives marginalized people a voice and accepts their differences. It is not a therapeutic theatre that tries to change or fix someone; rather it accepts what is different and validates it as art. This respectful acceptance in Wilson's work is radical. Wilson has said,

My work has often been, I think, misunderstood in that it was thought to be therapeutic. I have never been interested in theatre that was therapeutic. I mean, I've worked with people that society has rejected—for example with Christopher Knowles—but I wouldn't correct anything. I don't want to change anything...I encouraged him to do more. I said, "We'll put it onstage." But that wasn't therapy. We were not trying to correct this kid. We were saying to society, "Quit saying 'No! What's wrong with it?'" I know it's strange, it's unusual, but what's wonderful about theatre is that there's this plastic world here. We can have many different voices onstage. We can stretch time, we can compress it, we can do whatever we want. You can't do that in a restaurant or on the street because they will lock you up, but you can get away with it in the theatre. That's one of the things that fascinates me about the stage. (A Dialogue 119)

Wilson's work not only benefits those involved in creating it, but also the audience who is given a chance to see the world from outside of themselves. The topics Wilson explores in his work further establish his connection to humanity and questions of humanity.

His works on major historical figures do not say who they are, but rather they ask what the figure's effect on society was and they discuss their humanity and make that side more accessible to the audience. One clear example of Wilson's look at a major figure's human side is *Death, Destruction, and Detroit* about Nazi war criminal Rudolph Hess. "As in all of his work, he is peering, staring into a being as if to discover and reveal its essence. But we have to remember it is not Hess, only an image of Hess, nothing more than an emulsion or ink on paper. We will never learn more about Hess, not more about Freud, Stalin, Queen Victoria, Einstein, or Edison if we expect Wilson to tell us about them. But we might come to see and feel their impenetrable presence" (Theatre of Images 43). These figures are well known and their names alone can provoke strong reactions. This causes the audience to bring their own ideas to theatre and become more active in finding meaning. Wilson uses these "gods" of our time to connect to deeper human issues and fears. Wilson's work is not only an exploration of the humanity of well-known figures, but of all people. The performers on stage represent the public and reflect their voices (Delgado 305). Wilson's theatre often gives a voice to people that usually are not heard from in art or society in general. Although Wilson may work with ill or challenged people, his work is not therapeutic in that it does not attempt to fix anything. It is simply an outlet and one opportunity for communication and acceptance.

Wilson has created a theatre unlike anything else and this unique vision inspires others to be more innovative in their art and how they perceive the world. "With Wilson we are never lost in wonder at the fact that something has happened, or that someone has entered. Our wonder is much deeper than that. What we admire is not that something has been born, but that it exists at all" (Pilinszky 34). After seeing Wilson's breakthrough production of *Deafman Glance* in Paris in 1973, Hungarian poet János Pilinszky met one of

the actresses from the company, Sheryl Sutton. Wilson's work and Pilinszky's conversations with Sutton inspired his book *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton: The novel of a Dialogue*. This work beautifully describes Wilson's work with the eyes of a poet and it fills out Wilson's work in a way that he hopes all his work will inspire the audience. Wilson does not give the audience all of the answers, he presents a situation that the audience must complete with their own knowledge and bring the complete sense of meaning to it. Philip Glass wrote of *Einstein on the Beach*'s meaning, "In one of our early conversations, Bob said to me,

"I like Einstein as a character, because everybody knows who he is." In a sense, we didn't need to tell an Einstein story because everyone who eventually saw our *Einstein* brought their own story with them. In the four months that we toured *Einstein* in Europe we had many occasions to meet with our audiences, and people occasionally would ask what it "meant". But far more often people told us what it meant to *them*, sometimes even giving us plot elucidation and complete scenario. The point about *Einstein* was clearly not what it "meant" but that it was *meaningful* as generally experienced by the people who saw it" (Glass 33).

Pilinszky is not the only artist to be inspired by Wilson's work to then create something of his own. In 1998, Anne Bogart and her theatre company created the show *BOB* using the text from various interviews with Wilson. Bogart is concerned with American art and identity and Wilson, although he works a lot abroad, is an important American artist who has changed and continues to change theatre.

Wilson's move towards using more formal language in the 1980's again came to him through a person in his life. Wilson worked with Heiner Müller on his international project, *the CIVIL WarS*. Müller uses language, but not like any traditional theatre uses language. Wilson did not dramatically change the visual aesthetic of his work while incorporating more language, but rather saw it as one more layer to add greater meaning and complexity. Wilson does not try to interpret the written text in his work because a strong text does not require his interpretation. Müller's plays were an interesting transition for Wilson from his new works to more traditional texts like Shakespeare. Müller uses language in a meaningful way

and uses many literary and historical references, but he still challenges the traditional use of language in theatre and he still uses a strong visual element. Müller refers to his texts as “stones lying at the bottom of a river, submerged in Wilson’s imagery which flows around them without discoloring or obscuring them” (Ebrahimian 20). Müller and Wilson bring very different perspectives to the theatre, but their work together created strong, complex theatre. Through human connections and his own unusual perspective, Wilson has developed an innovative and daring vision for art and theatre.

Robert Wilson’s art is about showing us things that exist. He shows us what people do. He does not tell us why they exist. As in dreams, shapes and actions present themselves, disappear and return in other forms. We as the dreamers may be delighted, surprised or terrified, but the dream is independent and can’t be controlled. Awake we analyze, interpret and try to find meanings. But Wilson’s art is as elusive as the stuff of dreams. His theatre is of images. He paints, constructs, and architects the space of the stage and the time of our viewing with events, coincidents and objects, which animate his personal and visionary landscape. (Theatre of Images 32)

Wilson has collaborated with many people who were very different from him and who look at the world differently. These differences do not weaken the result, but rather they strengthen his work. In his productions Wilson does not repeat himself with each elements, but all the disparate elements work together to strengthen the piece. In a similar manner Wilson has no need to collaborate with someone who is the same as him; each person, as with each stage element, creates more complexity. There is an immense sense of diversity and contrast in Wilson’s theatre, perhaps stemming from his numerous collaborations and openness to new ideas and directions. Wilson has worked with casts of actors ranging from one to two hundred; he works in small and large venues; he’s had budgets ranging from a few thousand dollars to over a million dollars; he explores the old and the new. Wilson began his life in theatre focusing only on creating new works. He now

continues to work on creating new works, but he also uses older written texts and pulls these works into his aesthetic and gives them a new life and a new perspective.

In a dialogue with director Fred Newman Wilson said of his reasons for making theatre, “I see theatre as a forum. In this forum we can bring together anyone, and we can have an exchange. I’m attracted to the theatre because it brings together my interests in architecture, painting and social concerns. I think that I am still fascinated by the same things that interested me in the very beginning of working in the theatre. It’s a way of hearing, a way of seeing—a mental landscape for thinking” (A Dialogue 115). There is no specific message to hear or lesson to learn in Wilson’s theatre, but there is a general challenge inherent in his theatre because it is so different. Wilson does not try to give any answers, but rather he asks questions in his work. It is a challenge to see the world from a new perspective. This perspective is expressed through every motion and detail in Wilson’s work. Slow motion is common in Wilson’s work because it allows one to really see and observe each detail and to experience this alternative view of the world. There is a sense of reverence in Wilson’s theatre for others and their point of view. The striking nature of Wilson’s work stems from his interactions with others and his respect for others, even those who are different. Wilson’s aesthetic innovation has long been recognized, but this thesis will show that Wilson’s most exciting innovation is in his use of and interaction with people.

A Historical Perspective

The sheer beauty of his theatrical visions, the dreamy rightness of action, the hypnotic blend of non-linear disjunction and deeper coherence—all of these seize one’s attention and if one is particularly susceptible to Wilson’s power compel one into thinking that nothing like this can ever have happened on a stage before. (Theatre of Images 10)

Although Wilson's work is unique, it has roots in the history of theatre and performance. It is important to understand the traditions that came before Robert Wilson in order to understand his place in the history of theatre and how he challenged and changed theatre with his work. Wilson created a unique place for himself in recent theatre history, but other artists established a base for Wilson to stand on. "Great originals manifest such a powerful artistic personality that influences are subsumed into them" (Theater of Images 10). Wilson is one of these great originals.

Opera legend, Richard Wagner, was another great original. Robert Wilson's genius has been compared to that of Wagner. Richard Wagner, one of the first directors, made major contributions to how theatre is seen and created today. Wagner believed one person should serve as the writer, composer, and director. This single person would be able to unify those elements in order to better form a Gesamtkunstwerk. Gesamtkunstwerk is one of Wagner's better known theories on opera and theatre. It means that all the elements—music, words, action, scenery, and lighting—should be integrated to create a "total theatre". Wagner's forceful and egocentric personality helped him to forge a new kind of opera. Wagner's operas, such as *The Flying Dutchman* (1843), *Tannhäuser* (1845), and *Lohengrin* (1848), were loved by audiences, but hated by critics who opposed his idea of total theatre. In 1876 Wagner used his theories to stage his great operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in his new theatre in Bayreuth. In figure A, we see a drawing depicting Wagner's *Das Rheingold* a part of the cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The theatre and his staging were very different from what came before him. Wagner used intricate backdrops and was innovative in creating stage illusions. He did not allow musicians to tune their instruments in the pit; audience members were not to clap during the presentation; and house lights were extinguished to focus the audience's attention. Wagner left a huge impression modern theatre practice through his

ideas on the Gesamtkunstwerk and his work as a director. Wagner's family continues his work and each year the Bayreuth Festival revives Wagner's operas in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Wieland Wagner, Richard Wagner's grandson, applied Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig's simple performance spaces to the Bayreuth Fest from 1951 to 1966. This produced "hypnotic grandly simple productions painted almost entirely with light" (Theater of Images 14); this description closely parallels how many would describe a Robert Wilson production. Indeed, Wilson has directed three operas written by Wagner.

In the transition from the 19th into the early 20th centuries we see many new movements in Western art. Each used different ways to manipulate aesthetics and present historical and social issues. Many of these movements affected theatre. Realists tried to represent everyday life on stage. There was no verse in the text and the supernatural was gone from the stage. The action on stage reflected the audience and their daily concerns. Figure B shows a scene from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This play, a prime example of a realistic portrayal of everyday issues, was revolutionary and "scandalized" the audience.

One reason is that realism touched a raw nerve. In the attempt to portray daily life, realists argued, no subject matter should be excluded from the stage. Among the taboo subjects dramatized by realists were economic injustice, the sexual double standard, unhappy marriages, venereal disease, and religious hypocrisy. In fact, many realists believed that the purpose of drama was to call the audience's attention to social problems in order to bring about change. (Wilson 375)

Realism dominated much of the 20th century's theatre, but other movements also experimented in theatre and questioned what it could be. Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig made major contributions to the move away from realism in stage design. Both men, independently, moved away from realistic box sets and embraced new possibilities for lighting in the theatre. Appia was the first to develop antirealistic staging. He was trained in music and admired Wagner's operas, but felt that realistic staging detracted from them. He advocated simple sets that worked with the actor and colored lighting that would "paint the

stage and move in harmony with the production” (Wilson 395). Appia commonly used stairs and columns to create spaces in which to perform, rather than intricate backdrops or realistic settings, as seen in figure C. Craig began as an actor in England, but eventually turned to design. “Craig wanted to free theatre from dependence on realism, literature, and the actor, and to create a unified artwork—with light as a key element—under the control of one person” (Wilson 395). Expressionism, futurism, Dadaism, surrealism, Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, and Epic Theatre each experimented with what theatre could and should be. The tumultuous history of the 20th century influenced these artistic movements and their view of the world and theatre’s place in it.

There are many connections between surrealism and Robert Wilson’s work. Louis Aragon, one of the leaders of the surrealist movement, called Wilson’s work “the future that we predicted” (Rockwell in *Robert Wilson: The Theatre of Images* 17) after seeing *Deafman Glance* in Paris. The ideal of the surrealist movement is the creation of fantastic imagery through unnatural or irrational juxtaposition or combination. Surrealism developed from the Dada movement around 1924, though French playwright Guillaume Apollinaire described his plays *The Beasts of Tiresias* and *Parade* as surrealist as early as 1917. “The surrealists argued that the subconscious was the highest plane of reality and attempted to re-create its workings dramatically. Many of their plays seem to be set in a dreamworld, mixing recognizable events with fantastic happenings” (Wilson 420). French playwright Jean Cocteau was influenced by surrealism. His plays *Antigone* (1922), *Orpheus* (1926), and *The Infernal Machine* (1934) were based on the Oedipus story contrasted with modern ideas. Figure D shows a typical surrealist scene from Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un Poète*. Elements of the surrealist’s fantastic imagery can be seen in Wilson’s theatre Figure E shows a scene from Robert Wilson’s *The King of Spain* (1969), which demonstrates some of the dreamlike, surrealist imagery Wilson

incorporated into his productions. French surrealists wanted to create “a theater of dreams” (Theater of Images 17). Their aspirations anticipated Wilson and his work *Deafman’s Glance*. Louis Aragon, also wrote of *Deafman’s Glance*, “it is at once life awake and the life of closed eyes, the confusion between everyday life and the life of each night, reality mingles with dream, all that’s unexplainable in the life of a deadman” (Delgado 302).

Written text became less sacred to many directors in the 20th century; the existing plays they used were subject to change and were often secondary to the physical presence of the actor and the stage. The vision of the director became the main source for staging a production. Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht were two such directors and theorists, who changed the way theatre artists work and the possibilities they saw in the theatre. Artaud worked in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s. He was primarily a theorist who felt that theatre did not affect the audience as much as it could. He came up with the idea of the Theatre of Cruelty, which was supposed to shatter false reality and use physicality and imagery rather than words to affect the audience. His book, *The Theatre and It’s Double*, expressed Artaud’s ideas on theatre. When we look at some of what Artaud wrote in *The Theatre and It’s Double*, his influence on Wilson becomes clear.

A theatre which subordinates the *mise-en-scène* and production, i.e. everything in itself that is specifically theatrical, to the text is a theatre of idiots, madmen, grammarians, grocers, antipoets and positivists...There can be not complete theatre...which does not add to our fully known feelings the expression of states of mind belonging to the half-conscious realm, which the suggestions of gestures will always express more adequately than the precise localized meaning of words. (Artaud qtd. in Holmberg x)

Bertolt Brecht, a German poet, playwright, and theatre director, was another important director whose work significantly changed theatre and influenced Wilson. He developed Epic Theatre, which exposes the technology of the theatre and constantly reminds the audience that they are in a theatre. Epic theatre tries to avoid creating emotional connections between the characters and the audience; it wants the audience to think, not feel. Brecht was

a devoted communist and believed that his Epic Theatre could help to promote and teach communist ideals. Brecht's communist ideals motivated his theatre innovations, but much of what Brecht practiced could be applied beyond his personal goals. Brecht developed Epic Theatre by incorporating many older ideas and methods in addition to his new ideas on what theatre should be and what it should do. Wilson incorporated older methods and ideas in his work, but he also borrowed from many disciplines outside of theatre and applied it to his work to produce something no one had really seen before and few could ever image. Wilson is an original, but he does not come out of a void (Theatre of Images 10); his work reflects and rejects what came before.

Robert Wilson's Personal History

Robert Wilson is an American director who has worked primarily abroad. His theatre work is always rooted in the fine and visual arts and he has been recognized for his drawing, painting, and sculpting. Wilson's directing style comes out of his experience as a painter and architect, and due to this experience his work cuts across traditional genres. Wilson "challenged the stability of representational art and fractured the traditional boundaries which separated theatre, opera, film, and the plastic arts" (Delgado 300). Wilson uses and combines techniques from many disciplines including dance-movement, world theatre, video, painting, sculpture, installation, music, and site-specific work. Since Wilson does not come from a traditional theatre background, he approaches theatre with a different value system. His background gave Wilson the freedom to create a new theatre (Absolute Wilson). Wilson is not only a product of his experiences in the arts, but also his life growing up in Waco, Texas, his early experiences in New York in the 1960s, and his travels since then.

Wilson grew up in Waco, Texas. Byrd Hoffman was the first artist Wilson remembers having contact with as child (Absolute Wilson). Byrd Hoffman taught dance lessons in Waco, among other artistic endeavors. Hoffman left a significant impression on Wilson through her presence as an artist and by helping him to overcome a speech impediment when she told him to take more time while speaking. This slowing down changed Wilson's perception of the world (Absolute Wilson). He was able to express his ideas rather than allow the flood of images in his head to overwhelm his speech.

Wilson had a strange childhood in Waco. He lived in a strict community and an even stricter family. Wilson stuttered and was a slow learner. He was a leader and liked to organize people, but he had few friends. One boy with whom Wilson developed a close friendship was the housekeeper's son, Leroy. Leroy was African-American, so it was not seen as an appropriate friendship, but Wilson remained friends with Leroy for many years. Occasionally Wilson went to church with Leroy. Wilson was attracted to the honesty and hope of black culture and music. This later applied to Wilson's work when he directed a show of black spirituals. Many of Wilson's early relationships served as a kind of indirect collaboration in that these people significantly influenced Wilson's work, even though they did not actively work on theatre with him.

After high school, Wilson studied business administration at the University of Texas from 1959-1962 before moving to New York to attend the Pratt Institute where he received his BFA in 1965. Wilson focused in painting and architecture during this period of formal learning. In 1968, he founded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, an experimental performance group, named for the artist who helped him to overcome a speech impediment as a teenager. Beginning in the early 1970s, Wilson found success in Europe, where there was an interest and the resources needed to produce his work. Wilson also creates

sculptures, drawings, and furniture designs in addition to his performance work. Examples of his work are features in museums through out America and Europe. In 1992 Wilson founded the Watermill Center in Long Island, New York as “an international, multi-disciplinary center for studies in the arts and humanities” (robertwilson.com). It is a laboratory in which artists from a wide-range of disciplines can create and explore. Wilson works there every summer to develop new work. Wilson is heavily influenced by his collaborators who stimulate much of the continual development of Wilson’s theatre. These strong influences will be discussed in more detail later on.

Wilson was influenced by New York in the 1960s and the art he saw there, but he was not inspired by much of the theatre he saw.

I hated the theatre in the 60’s. I was never part of that movement. What I was doing did not resemble the Living theatre, the Open theatre, or the Performance group. I went against everything they were doing, I loathed the way their theatre looked. I had more in common with 19th century theatre and vaudeville than with these groups. I was formalistic. I used the proscenium arch. My theatre was interior and I treated the audience with courtesy. When New York was going for minimalism in a big way, I was doing rich, baroque pieces like *Stalin* and *Deadman Glance*. (Wilson)

The abstract ballets of Balanchine had a greater effect on Wilson’s work than other theatre movements of that time. Wilson’s training as an architect and his work with visual artists were also part of the important experiences he had at that time, which directed to his approach to theatre. If Robert Wilson had entered into theatre through more traditional routes, he would not make his unusual kind of theatre that has had such a significant impact on modern theatre.

Although Robert Wilson is an American and he sees his work and deeply rooted in America, his work is mostly produced abroad. Few American audiences outside of New York have had the opportunity to see Wilson’s work. The elaborate and avant-garde nature of Wilson’s theatre does not appeal to a wide section of American society and few theatres

can afford to produce his elaborate works. Wilson's home country may not provide Wilson with a large following, but Europe, Asia, and the Middle East can provide Wilson with the audiences and support needed to produce his work. Wilson has a respect for world cultures and his world travels provide him the opportunity to learn from and observe other cultures. His work has been affected by Asian art, black American music, and Russian ballet, opera, and theatre (Theater of Images 14). Meyerhold is one specific Russian theatre artist whose work had a significant impact on Wilson. Japanese and Chinese theatre gestures and the use of gestures with the eyes interest Wilson and are applicable to Wilson's theatre. Wilson's travel allowed him to see America's isolation (Absolute Wilson). The distance allowed for perspective as well as an opportunity to grow and develop his work beyond what might have been possible in America.

Characteristics of Robert Wilson's Theatre

Robert Wilson's work is unique for many reasons. One significant aspect of Wilson's work is his visual aesthetic, which is innovative in its use of space and movement and his strongly architectural perspective. Lighting also plays an important and active role in Robert Wilson's work. Sound and language is another important layer that Wilson is once again innovative in using. Although it is a more abstract element of Wilson's style, time is also used to complete the overall experience. Wilson is very careful and specific with each element in order to create the exact image he is working towards. For example Wilson works closely with the people who construct the set and props and will have a prop changed twenty times if he is not satisfied or feels that there is possibly something better. Lighting is another element that requires an unusual amount of effort due Wilson's exacting eye. Writing light cues for one of Wilson's shows can take a week or more of technical rehearsals; this is

approximately the amount of time usually given to do all of the technical work needed in most professional productions. Each element is equally important to Wilson as they each contribute another layer and add to the complexity of the production; “Wilson’s aesthetics...are a combination of layered elements of different artwork (Ebrahimian 18). Each element works independently of the others, but there is a sense of unity among the elements. Due to this attention to detail and the extended time frame he provides, looking at Robert Wilson’s theatre is like looking at a portrait, a still life, and a landscape. This is an entirely unique way of using theatre and a different way of looking at the world.

Everything on Wilson’s stage is deliberately there and a part of the text or interpretation. If Wilson presents a pair of objects that means that there is a relationship between the two and they are not meant to be seen in isolation (Theatre of Images 39). Wilson draws on clearly defined structures, shapes, and forms to create the image. With Wilson the stage vision becomes a text. Figure F is a scene from *Death, Destruction, and Detroit*, which depicts Rudolph Hess, prominent figure in Nazi Germany, in Spandau Prison. Although knowing the story behind those images helps to understand their meaning, it is not necessary to understand the oppressive, prison atmosphere shown in this scene. Wilson’s sets include elements of everyday life and world history. One can find Greek icons and Egyptian hieroglyphics as well as television screens and airplanes (Cinematic). The scene from *A Letter to Queen Victoria* shown in figure G demonstrates the influence of everyday happenings in Wilson’s imagery. The scale of the stage elements in Wilson’s work is unusual. There is a sense of sculpture in his work. One interesting recurring element in Wilson’s work are chairs. These chairs are not mundane chairs, but art pieces that comment on the whole piece and are often featured in museums after being featured in Wilson’s work. The beach chairs featured in *Death, Destruction, and Detroit*, shown in figure H, show Wilson’s unique idea

of props in his theatre. Wilson performs in traditional and alternative spaces. He often uses a proscenium arch, but will also do site specific work, such as his seven day play *KA MOUNTAIN* that was performed in Iran in 1972. Wilson's approach to theatre was unique in New York during the late 1960's and 1970's when he really began to get seriously involved with theatre. Avant-garde work was common, but not avant-garde work with the elaborate detail and scale that Wilson worked in. He glorified the proscenium arch. His work is epic in its scale of set, lights, and even the amount of actors he used, which was sometimes over 200, though Wilson can also make a piece that is just as interesting with two actors. The presence of line in Wilson's work has evolved over his career, but it has always an important element. There is a balance between vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines on Wilson's stage. Wilson sees the stage as a flat picture space and a sculptural volume to be composed. This can result in a full and complex image or something very simple as seen in Figure I from *Death, Destruction, and Detroit*. This is a way of creating theatre that comes from Wilson's training as an architect (Theatre of Images 37). Wilson's spaces are a landscape of images that are not dependant on character or written text.

Wilson's stage image is created through "human figures that are sharply defined by posture, costume, and light, all moving in a distinct manner to a given rhythm" (Ebrahimian 16). He uses precise movements that are slow, minimal, and repetitive from everyday movements and gestures as well as his personal history. Movement in Wilson's work is highly choreographed and incorporates elements of dance. Wilson's movement was influenced by the abstract dance of George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham. Wilson gives his actors very specific movements with specific angles, shapes, and durations. Much of the actor's job in a Wilson piece is exactly mimicking Wilson and counting how long each movement lasts. All of Wilson's work is precisely choreographed. Wilson uses slow motion

in much of his work. This controlled slowness adds weight to the movement. Wilson's use of "slow motion is not like film or mime; it is more beautiful and more precarious and clumsy" (Pilinszky 25-6). According to some observations one hardly notices the entrances in Wilson's work (Pilinszky 33) because they are so extremely slow. Wilson not only is concerned with the movement itself, but the space around the movement. He talks of being aware of the space behind one's head or under the arm. This awareness gives the movement greater weight and presence. A single hand gesture holds much more weight when there is space around it and nothing to distract the viewer.

When Wilson began creating theatre, lighting played a lesser role than the stage and movement, but early on he learned about lighting and used it as an integral element of the stage image. In his opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), the lighting did more than illuminate the stage. It acted as a part of the scene and at times moved across the stage to the music. It became an actor (Ebrahimian). Whether the lighting is designed by Wilson or with another designer, the lights play a significant role. Wilson's precise lighting requires time and attention to minute details in order to get the exact time, angle, color, intensity, and focus desired. At times Wilson uses light from unconventional sources and as a way to highlight certain elements of the stage imagery, both of these devices can be seen in figure J. Wilson has a deeper understanding of light and how it behaves than most other directors; light is important in his work and in his thought from the beginning (Monologue). "Wilson exploits light to mold and change his spaces, forms, and surfaces. Light bulbs, fire, and sophisticated theatre lighting have been used in almost all of his works" (Theatre of Images 40). Susan Letzler Cole described the lights in Wilson's *The Golden Windows* after observing rehearsals for the production,

Being 'in the dark' is something the actors experience from their first day...We in the theatre auditorium are also in the dark, a literalization of our own experience in

trying to make discursive sense out of these actors' presence on the stage before us. They are always illuminated in part, never entirely. That is their condition and ours, watching them. The back of a head, a right hand with outstretched finger, a beautiful line curving from neck to left shoulder, are visible, highlighted. The whole figure is not: it remains ultimately unknowable, as it is, Wilson seems to believe, in our daily experience outside the theatre. (Cole 149)

One of Wilson's actors in *Golden Windows*, David Warrilow, says of light, "Light is like a three-dimensional object. It has a presence, weight, power. It takes up space and it demands respect... If an actor doesn't find his light properly, he won't create properly and fully a sense of theatrical presence." (Cole 151). Lighting serves a purpose beyond illuminating the stage in Wilson's theatre; it speaks to the overall meaning of his work and adds one more layer to the visual text.

Robert Wilson takes time with his work. The audience is able to enjoy and absorb every line and gesture to its fullest because everything matters and contributes to the entire aesthetic and stage picture. The extended time frame in Wilson's work allows time to observe all of the details. It is important to see these details because "if we miss the details, we miss the point" (Theatre of Images 37). Wilson manipulates the audience's sense of time in his theatre through long productions and the slow movements. Boredom is an understandable reaction to this manipulation; the duration of some movements and works is so long that one cannot help feeling bored. After the moments when one's attention drifts away, it will return to the stage for the next moment. Wilson "risks boredom" in his work. There is a different quality of time, a "more condensed whole" (Pilinszky 26) in Wilson's work. This extended time frame may also go back to Wilson's connection to visual arts; the extended time allows the audience to look at the stage image like one looks at a painting in detail. *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, which premiered in 1973, was a twelve-hour spectacle that combined some of Wilson's earlier work as well as some new sections. Although the show was twelve hours long, there was a lyrical flow to it and much of the audience stayed

awake and focused. “With Wilson, however, the sun doesn’t indicate time, it simply rises in its grandeur; it is there, as it is in sentences of great poetry” (Pilinszky 30).

“Wilson’s theatre was silence rediscovered” (Pilinszky 31). Robert Wilson’s early productions presented strong stage images without words. Later he incorporated the deconstruction of language and eventually classics and existing works, which used language in a meaning way, but Wilson never allows language to dominate. With or without written text, sound is important and creates a rhythm. This rhythm may come from music or words; it may also be a rhythm that is expressed through movements done in silence. “He succeeded in drawing back from provocative theatre into silence... Onstage—if nowhere else—Wilson reestablished the beyond-boredom period of silence and beauty” (Pilinszky 32). Wilson’s silence allowed the audience to focus all their attention on the visual; it allowed them to fully absorb each detail. Even when there is sound present, it is not necessary for the audience to make meaning of the words or music. One doesn’t have to listen to the words as information, but it can simply be sound and part of the music scape (Monologue).

Wilson treats existing texts as a scenario for his stage images. Words can also function as sound and music rather than always being a source for information and meaning. Heiner Müller said of Wilson’s relationship with text,

Bob treats a text like a piece of furniture. He doesn’t try to break it up or break it open or try to get information out of it or meaning or emotion. It’s just a thing. That’s what I like about his way because a text can stand for itself. It doesn’t need support, it doesn’t need help. (Ebrahimian 20)

The text is one theatrical element among many. Müller refers to texts as “stones lying at the bottom of a river, submerged in Wilson’s imagery which flows around them without discoloring or obscuring them” (Ebrahimian 20). With Wilson “words become sounds, sounds become images, and the original text remains only as a trace that will be reconstructed by the spectators” (Ebrahimian 17-18). There is a disjunction between the

word and the image. Wilson's theatre is not aggressive; "What would happen you said, if Wilson's figures started to speak? You said that at first they would probably just talk to themselves for a long time" (Pilinszky 73). This is an interesting prediction that Pilinszky made as this idea is present in some later work from Wilson. In his version of *Hamlet* he performed the text as a monologue. The entire play was seen through the perspective of one character, Hamlet, and the other characters were only present as memories and through the filter of Hamlet's own mind. Another demonstration of Wilson's level of regard for written text is that the physical movements in Wilson's theatre are strong and can be contrary to or separated from the text, but they nonetheless reinforce it (Monologue). Text works with the other elements, rather than dominating them. In *Absolute Wilson*, a film about Wilson's life and work, Wilson says, "Language is the barrier of the imagination". Wilson's theatre is not reliant on language for meaning or a primary text. Words often lose meaning in Wilson's theatre if they are even present. Language is simply one tool among many that Robert Wilson can use to create his theatre.

Rather than search the text for meaning, Wilson treated it as just another piece of furniture, which like all objects, props, and even human bodies in his zoological world would—given enough time, space, and, yes, tolerance—generate their own *raison d'être* and pattern systems. (Müller 74)

Wilson makes existing texts his own. He may reconstruct the text to suit his purposes. Wilson, working with writer Wolfgang Wiens, adapted *Hamlet* to function as a monologue. The text was in a new order, but retained the basics of Hamlet's story. He also makes other writers' texts his own by pulling them into his aesthetic through Wilson's strong visuals and the performance of the text. Figure K shows Wilson in his performance of *Hamlet*. The show uses many colors in the lighting, but Wilson and the stage was darker and used a lot of black and white. All elements are equal to Wilson and given equal importance. No text is given more importance than the rest of the elements. Unlike much of Western theatre

where text dominates everything else, in Wilson's theatre, spectacle maintains a place of importance. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, spectacle is listed last in the element of drama and hardly mentioned beyond that in the text. Aristotle is writing about the writing of drama in the *Poetics*, but most of Western theatre goes back Aristotle's *Poetics*, hence most of Western theatre is centered on the written text, relegating spectacle to a supporting role. With Wilson, spectacle becomes independent of the text and glorified. Spectacle is not used to dominate the text either; every element is significant and contributes to the overall experience in Wilson's theatre. Heiner Müller said of Wilson's treatment of theatre's elements,

‘What I find interesting about Wilson after working with him,’ Müller once said, ‘is that he permits the individual parts, the elements of theater, their own freedom. Wilson never interprets; a text is simply there and it is served up, and not tainted in any way and not explained. It is there. And in the same way an image is there, and the image is also not interpreted, it is simply there. And then there is a voice, and it is there and it is also not interpreted. I find this important. It is a very democratic concept of theater’. (Bathrick 65)

Not even Wilson's central topic dominates the other elements. Wilson often uses prominent historical figures as the central topic, but “even with such politically charged figures as Stalin and Hess, what Wilson is really concerned with is deeper questions of authority, terror, fear, and hope, and the smaller (deeper?) human quirks of such seemingly overpowering figures” (*Theater of Images* 27). These big and provoking titles and figures force the audience to bring some of their own preconceived notions to the theatre. It challenges them to find connections between that name and what they see and hear on stage. The connections people find may not even have been intended, but they force the audience to consider the questions Wilson poses with his work. Wilson's theatre is theatre as a vehicle for asking questions; “Not to say what something is, but to ask what it is” (Delgado 305). Wilson may explore some very deep ideas and questions in his theatre, but humor remains important. Wilson believes that “humor is necessary in all works” (*Monologue*) and he

wouldn't do something if there were no humor in it. Some of this humor comes from "knee plays" or brief and humorous moments he inserts into his new works and in classics (Ebrahimian 19). In Figure L we see a scene from *DIALOG/ Curious George*. Well-known figures, such as Curious George, as well as movement and speech patterns contribute to the humor in Wilson's work. Although Wilson reveres humanity, he is also able to make fun of humanity's quirks.

Wilson generally does not worry about interpreting the text when he works with one. The words have a strength that does not require his explicit interpretation of them. The audience or the actor (within Wilson's structure) can take those words and choose if and how to interpret them. Wilson does not concern himself with what the actor thinks and does within the frame of movement and sound he has given them, though he sees a difference when there is a deeper level of attention and emotion within the actor. Wilson does not discuss meaning or why things are as they are. "Wilson works visually, he doesn't need to talk concepts or ideas, the ideas can come later from the image in that moment" (Müller in Ebrahimian 20).

Robert Wilson's work uses elements of dance, music, visual arts, and traditional theatre. This alternative way of creating theatre changes the dynamic of the viewing experience and how the audience perceives the world. In Wilson's theatre the spoken word exists to work with the visual aesthetic, not to dominate. Wilson experiments with the aesthetics of the stage and the role of written text; he does not just tell a story. Speaking about his responsibility as an artist, Wilson says, "I feel my responsibility as an artist is not to say what something is, but to ask what it is" (Delgado 305). Since Wilson does not come from a traditional theatre background he approaches theatre with a different value system from many theatre artists. His approach is heavily influenced by his background in painting

and architecture. Wilson draws from all of these sources in his work and refers to his work as opera.

For me it's all opera and it's opera in the Latin sense of the word, in that it means work: and this means something I hear, it's something I see, it's something I smell. It includes architecture, painting, sculpture, light: all of the arts are in opera. So in a sense all of my work or works are operas...meaning 'opus'. (Delgado 303)

Working with Wilson

Robert Wilson begins directing through drawing. These drawings are the start of the set, the lighting, and the overall stage images. Figure M shows one of Wilson's sketches for *Einstein on the Beach*. It is not a technical sketch, but one that shows the light and shadow and an overall sense of the setting. Everything comes out of and exists in Wilson's mind (Monologue), so these drawings provide something concrete to start with, as opposed to a written text, which most directors begin with. "I think I've always begun with the body. For me the body is our resource. I start with the body first" (Wilson in Delgado 306). Figure N shows Wilson in rehearsals with David Warrilow for *The Golden Windows*. Wilson is very active in his rehearsal. He moves a lot and will demonstrate and correct actors until they get each movement right. The next step in Wilson's process is to develop a "book of gestures" or set of movements and to work separately with the text; only after developing these two elements separately does he layer them. This separation allows the movement and words to be independent of each other and creates more complexity in Wilson's work. At first Wilson is spontaneous when developing the movement and how written text is spoken, but he narrows the details down through rehearsal process. Below is Wilson's description of a rehearsal.

I would have a woman scratching her head and smiling for eighteen seconds and then she would bring her hand down in twelve seconds and then put her hand in her mouth

for seven seconds or something. So that was the visual book. Then I put the text on it (not into it) “so with bleeding hands she would tear apart the photographs of the man she loved” or something. What happened was curious, because if I had started with the text I probably would never have thought of these movements, these gestures...It’s true that they are parallel and exist for themselves, . . . but it’s not random the way these parallel events are arranged. I would let a woman scream in the play, but I wouldn’t let her scream “I want to tear apart the photographs of the men I have loved.” I might do it if the women were smiling at the same time . . . to end it all as a deliberate structure. (Müller 73)

Wilson does not try to match text and movement as they come together because he wants this disjunction; it allows each element to stand on its own, so neither is subservient to another. In developing his production of *Hamlet*, Wilson had to use video and work with an assistant director because he performed *Hamlet* alone.

Wilson develops a work like one edits a film; “Frames of thought, personal experiences, previous images, time, space, and color suspend in his memory to provide the basic elements. Cutting and splicing, a work emerges as the collected images are collated and a structure begins to take shape through the ordering of these images” (Theatre of Images 37). “It’s an architectural arrangement in time and space and it’s the same if you have an actor or don’t” (Delgado 306). It seems as though this process of developing a work and Wilson’s method of keeping the elements separate would be emotionally blank, but Wilson says of working on *Hamlet*, “Doing this role is very personal. It’s like a diary or a journal. There is something autobiographical in my approach to it, the way I identify with it in the movement, in the color of the voice, in the speaking of the text and the associations of the text” (Wilson in Monologue). Wilson worked on *Hamlet* for two years before it all came together (Monologue). Wilson always wants more and is not happy with what he gets (Absolute Wilson); he has very specific ideas, he is willing to work hard to get every element perfect, and he expects as much from others.

Wilson's actors are professional and non-professional. He started out using primarily non-professional actors, but he has moved to using more professionals. There are advantages and disadvantages with either group in works like Wilson's. Professionals offer a subtle characterization underneath the structure Wilson provides, but they also tend to think too much. One problem Wilson often encounters is that a professional actor lacks "a sense of uniqueness of his own body" (Delgado 308). In auditions it is important for an actor to replicate Wilson's movements exactly. Movements and timing must be exact. Wilson's work may seem cold, but he is interested in working with others and creating a sense of community through the arts. In the 1960's Wilson wanted to create a school that anyone could join and be equally valued (Absolute Wilson). This idea led to the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, the group Wilson worked with during his early career. Some of the members of the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds say of working with Wilson, "everyone is completely changed after working with Bob, he is so open and encourages you to dig deep and make it work" (Absolute Wilson). Now much of Wilson's sense of creating community through the arts happens through the Watermill Center. "I don't see it [Watermill] as a place where work is going to be formal or presented, but it's work where ideas are developed. It's a kind of think tank or laboratory space" (Wilson in Delgado 307). Watermill is meant to bring people together; Wilson believes that many things can divide people, but art can bring people together, so he "passionately believes in art" (Absolute Wilson).

"One of Wilson's actresses once said that she liked performing in his plays because it gave her so much time to think. Wilson would like his audiences to feel the same freedom" (Theatre of Images 54). Interpretation is the audience's job. The written text and stage images merely create a scenario, so it is important that the audience be engaged in order to get the full impact of Wilson's work. "Stage images are presented to the audience in their full

richness—with all the different elements at work—and the audience is invited to watch and walk away with an archive of images stored in their ‘museum of memories’, enabling the images to resonate and produce meaning with time” (Ebrahimian 20-21). Wilson believes that although all theatre should be entertaining, one does not have to constantly respond. It is okay to let the audience get lost in the work (Monologue). “As his works are largely nonverbal, they require no translation. Through an internally defined language of visual and aural patterns, he is able to communicate equally with non-English speaking audiences and with people who do not need to communicate with language at all” (Theatre of Images 36). Wilson simply offers observations and an alternative viewpoint; the audience must put an interpretation together for themselves.

Wilson is willing to and does work with anyone. For *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* Wilson asked a man he spotted on the street who looked like Stalin to be in his show. Wilson’s grandmother went to Paris to perform in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* as Queen Victoria. She asked what she would have to say and Wilson asked her to say what she had just told him about her medications. “You know Bob. I have to take nine pills a day to stay alive. I have to take one heart pill, one sugar diabetic pill, one liver pill and without all those pills I’d just collapse” (Absolute Wilson). These kinds of unexpected contributions can be seen in all of Wilson’s work. Wilson’s work with The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds and at The Watermill Center further demonstrates Wilson’s openness to other people and other disciplines. Wilson’s openness is unique. He has a true and honest interest in people without a need to control them. Wilson provides a highly structured environment, which each actor fills with his or her own ideas. Wilson gives people the freedom to fill the structure each in their own way. This way of working is freeing for everyone involved. Even the audience is given a lot of freedom and a chance to be involved. The situation that Wilson presents and

the fullness the actors create are only part of the meaning and interpretation in Wilson's theatre. The audience must complete the production by bringing their own ideas and preconceptions to create their own meaning. Being in the audience at Wilson's productions is like being in an art gallery. There is a lot of freedom to interpret the work like one interprets a painting: with plenty of time to observe and think and no one telling you what to think.

Robert Wilson's Development as a Theatre Director

Robert Wilson's work has changed and evolved during the approximately four decades since he began to work in theatre. His work, which has been anything but static, demonstrates significant diversity and development. In his book, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Arthur Holmberg describes four stages in Robert Wilson's career: silent opera, deconstructing language, from semiotics to semantics, and classics or works with words. These four stages are very useful in clarifying how Wilson's work has developed, though each stage is not entirely separate. For Wilson each work is a passport to the next. The seed for each phase was planted in the previous one by something that sparked Wilson's interest and pushed him to try something new, though certain elements continue from phase to phase and preserve Wilson's individual style, a strong visual aesthetic incorporating alternative perspectives that challenges most traditional ideas on what theatre is.

One can look at Wilson's development through looking at the changes in his aesthetic or use of language, like Holmberg, but it can also be looked at through his collaborators at each stage. This way of examining Wilson's career demonstrated the importance of people to Wilson's development. These collaborators had a significant effect in how Wilson worked and where he went with his work.

Wilson's work is sumptuous, expensive, grand in several senses, and yet the sources of his work, especially if one traces it back to its beginning in the 1960's and 1970's

are in psycho and physical therapy, the enabling of worldviews that up to that point had been ignored or repressed. In his workshops and in such pieces as *Deafman Glance* (1970), *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974), and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Wilson collaborated with differently abled young artists such as Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles, people who were deaf, autistic—not ordinary. He gave them a voice, expression, a place, dignity. (A Dialogue 113)

Wilson's visual arts training, experience with dance and movement, and his work with disabled people led to the creation of a unique visionary artist. His visual arts and movement experience gave Wilson the tools to make his theatre, but his experience with "differently abled people" and his own challenges provided him the motivation and focus to push further and be more innovative in his early theatre productions. Wilson has always collaborated in his work. As a theatre artist one must always collaborate since most theatre, especially the elaborate productions Wilson creates, requires the efforts of many people to realize the final vision. Wilson thrives on this collaboration and sees art as a way to bring people together. I have already discussed some of Wilson's early experiences with people who later had an influence on Wilson's theatre such as his friend Leroy and the artist Byrd Hoffman. Byrd Hoffman would later be the inspiration for the name for his early group, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. Wilson's experiences with individuals are important in addition to his work with larger groups. Four of Wilson's most important and well-known collaborators are Raymond Andrews, Christopher Knowles, Philip Glass, and Heiner Müller. Each of these men (and boys, Andrews and Knowles were still in their teens when they began collaborating with Wilson) has worked with Wilson on significant projects and helped Wilson to develop his work in exciting and meaningful ways. Through these collaborations Wilson continued developing his sense of "time, slow motion, and an affinity for textual ruptures" (Ebrahimian 17).

Throughout Wilson's career in theatre people have been important and collaboration has always been a part of that, especially collaboration with unexpected artists. After

graduating from the Pratt Institute, Wilson sometimes worked with children including those who were brain damaged and disabled. In Waco, Wilson directed one project with delinquent boys that involved cellophane, transistor radios, and shaving cream. This kind of avant-garde work was not really accepted in Waco at the time (Absolute Wilson). After returning to New York, Wilson continued working with brain-damaged children to support himself. He used simple theatre exercises and physical activities to help these children learn because they needed a different way to learn. In 1967, Wilson worked at Goldwater hospital for the terminally ill (Absolute Wilson). Many of these patients were in iron lungs and catatonic. Wilson's job was to help them speak. He again used theatre exercises to connect with these people. Through the use of limited movements and control of lights, Wilson was able to develop a theatre piece with the patients and help them to communicate. This slow motion dance enabled a psychic kind of communication, rather than verbal communication (Absolute Wilson). Slow motion was often a part of Wilson's "therapy" work (Theatre of Images 19). Wilson enables a group to interact and react and respond to images through his more therapeutic work and through his more formal productions.

Wilson began the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds as a group to experiment and create theatre and art in 1968. Wilson's New York loft served as the center point for the group. Many of the people involved in the Byrds considered themselves to be artists, but anyone was welcome: young, old, male, female. The work they did mostly began with movement. The company contributed to Wilson's early productions including *King of Spain* (1969), *Deafman Glance* (1970), *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974). It was not only members of Wilson's company that performed in these productions. Wilson presents perfect and imperfect, incidental and indisputable, and disabled and star athlete (Pilinszky 63). If Wilson saw someone who looked like they might

fit a part Wilson would put him or her in the show. Most of Wilson's performers were not professional at this time. They were just people who were interested in art and found Wilson inspiring. In some ways Wilson's following was almost religious and cult-like. *A Letter for Queen Victoria* the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds ended its work. Wilson felt many of the members were too dependent and everyone was too comfortable. They all needed to move on artistically and create art in new and exciting ways.

Although Wilson refers to all of his work as opera, the description is particularly apt for the work that Holmberg calls silent opera, much of which was developed while working with the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. This work was focused on strong stage images. This focus is partially inspired by Raymond Andrews, his adopted son, who Wilson discovered thinks in images rather than words. The strong visuals are not accompanied by written text nor are the visuals drawn from a written text. One such strong image can be seen in figure O, which shows actress Sheryl Sutton with a raven in *Deafman Glance*. The prime example of this phase is *Deafman Glance*, which is also the work that first gained Wilson international praise.

...In relation to Wilson we could just as well be speaking of the silence beyond silence and the beauty beyond beauty. With him, dumbness is speech that cannot be dumbled, and what is beyond beauty—whether beautiful or ugly—has a swan's neck too, everything is beautiful again...Wilson has discovered what fever-sufferers can see and the depressed can bear. (Pilinszky 55-56)

With *Deafman's Glance* Wilson created something new and pushed the boundaries of theatre. *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, another production that fits into this early phase in Wilson's career, ran seven days and nights continuously in Shiraz, Iran at the 1972 Festival of Arts (Theatre of Images 56). One woman was told to perform for 24 hours straight saying whatever she wanted. This work came from Wilson's idea of a constant

theatre—theatre people could visit on a coffee break and experience in short sections (Absolute Wilson).

Wilson has always been concerned with working with others, especially others who are different and bring another point of view to his work. Wilson's association with Raymond Andrews began in an unusual way. One day as Wilson walked down a New York street he saw a police officer about to hit a boy. He recognized the sounds the boy making as those of a deaf person. Wilson intervened and stopped the officer from hurting the boy, then eventually saw his living conditions. No one in his home understood what was wrong with the boy. Wilson decided to adopt him, so he would not be sent to an institution. Raymond Andrews became an important collaborator in Wilson work after his adoption. Wilson wanted to involve Raymond in his work. In order to involve him Wilson had to change his approach. Raymond thought and communicated differently. Wilson tried to empower and help him; he wanted to validate Raymond's way of thinking. "He began to make drawings to point out various things to me that I wouldn't notice and that he would be more sensitive to because of his being deaf. Then I realized that he thought not in words, but in visual signs" (Wilson). This collaboration led to *Deafman Glance*, Wilson's "silent opera". *Deafman Glance* presented Raymond's way of looking at the world and gained Wilson international renown. Figure P shows Raymond performing in *Deafman Glance*.

The next major influence on Wilson work came through Christopher Knowles, an autistic boy. Wilson's move to work with language started while working with him. Christopher Knowles is autistic and Wilson met him while Knowles was living in an institution. Knowles liked to type on a typewriter. The nurses and therapists wanted to "correct" Knowles, but Wilson found what he wrote fascinating. Wilson saw Knowles' work as a valid contribution, as poetry, and Wilson used Knowles' poetry in his theatre. This was

not a conventional use of language in theatre in that the words did not provide a plot or character. Knowles' language was deconstructed. Knowles' parents were grateful for what Wilson gave Chris. Wilson accepted him as a person without wanting to fix or change him (Absolute Wilson). Wilson explains his interest in Knowles, who he began collaborating with at age 14,

I was fascinated from the very beginning with what Chris was doing with language. He'd take words we all know and fracture them and then put them back together in a new way. He'd invent a new language and then destroy it a moment later. Words are like molecules that are always changing their configurations, breaking apart and recombining. It's very free and alive. Language is his own kingdom. (Ebrahimian 17)

Wilson does not just see an autistic boy in Knowles. He sees an artist and a person whom he respects. *A Letter to Queen Victoria* was Wilson and Knowles' first collaboration. Some of *Victoria's* written texts were by Christopher Knowles; Wilson used language as never before in his work. The show toured for one year and was a huge success. Wilson tried to bring *A Letter to Queen Victoria* work to America, but its run on Broadway was not the success it had been in Europe. Knowles also contributed some of his poetry to the 1976 production of *Einstein on the Beach*. The text was not about Einstein's biography or work. Knowles' text for act I, scene 1 of *Einstein on the Beach* begins,

This love could be some one
Into love
It could be some one that has been somewhere like them
It could be some like them
'Tis one like into where that one has been like them
Well, it could be be some like them
Those like into where like that into this
This one has been broken like into where
But it could be some that it could be some like into like
into like into
like into where like that. (Glass 65)

Robert Wilson primarily collaborated with Philip Glass to create *Einstein on the Beach*, which has been called "one of the great theatre works of the 20th century" (Absolute

Wilson). This work was an incredibly unusual opera as it was constructed around stage images from Wilson, complex rhythmic music from Glass, and a vague sense of Albert Einstein as one of the “gods of our time”, a passivist who helped to split the atom (Absolute Wilson). The opera does not depict a story or consistently recognizable characters. Figure Q depicts Act I, scene 1 of *Einstein*, which uses three main images to tie the show together: a train, a trial, and a spaceship. Any plot that one might find changed with each audience member. “Wilson’s lyrical mysticism was lent muscle and body by Glass’s structuralism, and the mystical implications of Glass’s hypnotic music, always just beneath the surface, were made manifest by Wilson’s theatrics” (Theatre of Images 22).

Philip Glass and Robert Wilson began their first collaboration very casually. Both were familiar with the other’s work and knew some of the same people in New York. They eventually came together and began meeting for lunch each Thursday both were in town. They decided to do something together. This first collaboration was *Einstein on the Beach*. Glass’s music could complement and stand up to Wilson’s striking visual imagery and movement. Glass and Wilson worked very well together because many of their ideas on theatre lined up and major decisions were easy to make. On the development of *Einstein on the Beach* Wilson wrote,

We knew from the beginning that the piece would have to be presented in a large venue equipped with all the mechanical facilities—lights, bars, wing space, orchestra pit—one would expect to find in a modern theatre or opera house. Besides that, there were a number of presumptions Bob and I made about the work, which, though they might be common ideas in the emerging New York counterculture, would appear quite startling in a larger cultural context. Interestingly enough, these were things that Bob and I had never needed to discuss. I suppose it was precisely because we did not *have* to discuss our way of working that we were drawn together in the first place. (Glass 32)

Einstein was a huge artistic success for both Wilson and Glass (though not financially successful, the production cost \$900,000 and only brought in \$810,000 leaving them with

about \$90,000 of debt). The two men did not collaborate again for many years, but nonetheless this work influenced Wilson and his development.

Wilson's move to written texts using language in a more meaningful way was again precipitated by collaboration. This time Heiner Müller sparked Wilson's interest and provoked him to develop his theatre in a new direction. Müller's work is

Dense, elliptic, and abrasively lyrical – Müller's script uses language in a literary way. A text of Müller's lends itself to exegesis. Words have meanings. Where they are put on a page and who says them has something to do with semantics. Something we recognize as character exists, and something we recognize as a tale is told. Characters engage each other in something we recognize as dialog. Hardly conventional, Müller does not take the tools of the dramatist's trade at face value, but in his theatre plot, character, and dialog live and breathe in postmodern paradox: elusive and fragmentary, colored by parody and pastiche. Fast and furious come the allusions in Müller's texts. To fight your way through his labyrinth of words requires erudition and imagination. (Holmberg 22)

Müller's texts are experimental and still challenge the way language is used—though in a different way than Wilson experiments with language. Early in his career Wilson resisted using pre-existing texts, but Müller's work seemed like a natural step. There is some meaning to all of the words, but there is still a lot of room for Wilson's imagination to run wild and create more complex levels of elements in his staging. The work that came from two very different men combined to create a strong production with more levels and complexity to explore.

Heiner Müller became one of Wilson's regular collaborators and a good friend in the 1980's, after working on *the CIVIL WarS: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down*. The production was meant to be performed at the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, but did not have enough funding and was never fully realized. The show was to be twelve hours long in six parts created through extensive international collaboration. The Pulitzer Prize jury voted to award Wilson the prize for drama in 1986 for *the CIVIL WarS*, but the supervisory board rejected the choice and awarded no prize that year. It is one of the great tragedies of

Wilson's career. Müller contributed some text to *the CIVIL WarS*. "Rather than create an original script, Müller constructed a collage of fragments, including elements from his own work, as well as other texts and text fragments dealing with family conflicts. In keeping with Wilson's predilections, Müller did not structure his collage to complement or illustrate Wilson's architectural images or acoustic patterns but rather to affiliate with whatever was present on the stage" (Müller 66).

They worked well together; they came from opposite worlds, but this opposition resulted in successful and exciting productions.

Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson came from very different social and aesthetic worlds: the one a Marxist dialectician from Saxony, Germany, who emerged from the rubble of World War II to immerse himself in the cultural politics of a major communist state; the other a politically naive and dedicated individualist from Waco, Texas, of the 1950s, committed to the commercial success of his art and career. What drew them together was a profound disdain for any predetermined aesthetic utterance where an author knows more than the metaphors he or she employs and where the audience is always expected to search for preordained referential meaning. (Müller 65)

Wilson and Müller bring their differences to collaboration. Like all of Wilson's work these differences are striking and a big part of what makes Wilson's theatre so innovative.

"Though Müller's texts are heavily historical, political, and culturally specific; Wilson directs them regardless of their content most times not even bothering interpreting them"

(Ebrahimian 19). It is not necessary for Wilson to use stage imagery to strengthen Müller's writing because there is so much strength already filling those words. Wilson used his own images to play off of the text. Both Müller and Wilson appreciate the clash in their work.

"Müller called Wilson's production of *Hamletmaschine* 'the best production ever' of this work, praising it for its 'lightness' and absolute dearth of interpretive staging" (Müller 67). Some critics could not appreciate what the contrast between Müller and Wilson's theatres did for the production. Benjamin Heinrichs article "Saxony Is Not Texas" concludes,

Despite the separation of production and text, the spectator has the ominous feeling

that at some point Müller's play will have to find its way back into the performance; that we will have to be taken out of Wilson's no-man's-land and transported back to the world of Western culture, out of these shimmering images and into the world of literature. . . Müller's writing is burdened with cares that Wilson's theater has long since jettisoned or never even knew in the first place. . . In Wilson's *Hamletmaschine* the images blur, anesthetize the text, and the text cripples the images. (Müller 68)

Not all critics felt so negatively about Wilson's treatment of *Hamletmaschine* as we see with Henning Rischbieter's, the editor of Germany's leading theater journal *Theater Heute*, response in his article "Deutschland, ein Wilsonmärchen" ("Germany, a Wilsonian Fairy Tale"),

By not illustrating the text but instead juxtaposing his very American (under)world figures, Wilson enables the spoken word to be heard and understood. The text happens within a sound scape, in which it becomes hard to tell what is live and what is being broadcast over microphone and speaker. Only rarely is the text spoken directly by a single actor without first taking an electronic detour. The text doesn't manifest itself visually but acoustically, and it does so with considerable clarity and plasticity. (Müller 69)

Although some people are offended by Wilson's treatment of text, others, like Müller himself, realize that Wilson frees the text. The words in Wilson's work stand on their own, as do all elements in Wilson's work.

Near the beginning of his career, Wilson was concerned with creating "new works for our time...[Wilson] was asked to direct plays and operas, but [he] still didn't like theatre and I wasn't interested in pursuing that field as a career. [He] refused to direct other people's plays. [He] thought it was more important to create new work" (Wilson in Holmberg 22).

After working with texts such as Heiner Müller's, Robert Wilson became more comfortable with using other people's words in his productions and directing more traditional works with words. Opera was an important part of this transition "since Wilson has always been interested in language as sound" (Holmberg 29). Wilson's first opera was *Salome* in 1987. He has directed other operas since then including *Lohengrin* (1991), *Das Rheingold* (2000), and *Götterdämmerung* (2002) by Richard Wagner who wrote about total theatre, an idea reflected in

some of Wilson's own work in the theatre. Figure R shows Wilson's production of *Lobengrin* at the Met in New York City. The strong, simple, abstract image seen in Wilson's production is a large contrast from figure A's idea of what Wagner's operas would look like.

Wilson's 1995 performance of *Hamlet* as a monologue contained all the elements of a Robert Wilson piece and turned this classic play into a fresh and new work that was more of a commentary on *Hamlet*, rather than just another interpretation of it. This approach is similar to *Einstein on the Beach*, which did not tell the story of Albert Einstein's life, but rather was a discussion of the scientist's responsibility for his ideas and creations and their effect on society. Wilson pulled Shakespeare's text into his aesthetic by reformatting the text and using strong imagery in staging it. The device for the monologue is that the play begins at the end. It is a flashback beginning seconds before Hamlet's death. Wilson uses Shakespeare's play as raw material; he sets up a conversation with the play. Other characters are present, but spoken through Hamlet. "Hamlet is a play that can be done in different ways. That's the beauty of it. It's become a prism, and in this prism are many reflections. It can be done any way, and this Shakespeare text—an indestructible rock—is not destroyed" (Wilson in Monologue). Wilson's work on *Hamlet* was very personal and autobiographical in his approach. No one else would do it the same.

Wilson does not just direct classic productions with written text, but he also develops new works, which use more plot and character than he would have early in his career. *The Black Rider* was one such new work that Wilson worked on with Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs and was very successful (Absolute Wilson). The text of *The Black Rider* used written text in a more traditional way. The story is based on a German folktale and opera about Wilhelm, a file clerk, who must prove himself as a hunter before marrying the woman he loves. He is a terrible shot until he makes a pact with the devil for magic bullets. All of

the bullets are in Wilhelm's control except one, which kills his bride on the day of their wedding. By this stage in Wilson's career he is able to use recognizable language and elements like plot and character without allowing those elements to dominate the visual and aural aspects of the production. He does, however, have to approach these texts differently than he would a work without a traditional theatre script.

Conclusion

Collaboration is an important element of Wilson's work. Wilson has a full work schedule with new productions (where there is an element of collaboration), but the Watermill Center in eastern Long Island is where Wilson brings all sorts of people together to experiment and create work without concern for creating a finished product. The center, started in 1992 and located about two hours away from New York City, creates a supportive environment for emerging artists in an exploration of theatre and its related art forms. Robert Wilson's website says of Watermill, "Watermill supports projects that mix and integrate different genres and art forms, break with traditional forms of representation, and develop democratic and cross-cultural approaches. Watermill is about living and working together, about creating your own environment and sharing this experience with others" (robertwilson.com). Each summer Wilson invites artists of all levels to Watermill for workshops to develop his new work. Watermill also provides time and space for about fifteen artists' residencies. With this center Wilson is able to work with others and support other artists in their own endeavors. This center demonstrates what is important in Wilson's career: people and innovative work. Wilson's unusual background influenced both the avant-garde nature of Wilson's theatre and the humanity present in his work. Wilson accepts the

people in his life as they are without trying to change them or ignore those differences.

Wilson gives these people and their perspective, which society so often rejects, a voice. He sees art where others see a problem. Wilson's theatre looks like nothing else, but his respect and acceptance of others, even those who are different and almost invisible to most of society, are just as innovative and refreshing to see in theatre.

Illustrations

Figure A



http://www.wagnermuseum.de/_franz/wahnfried/big_rheingold_1876.html

Figure B



Wilson 377

Figure C



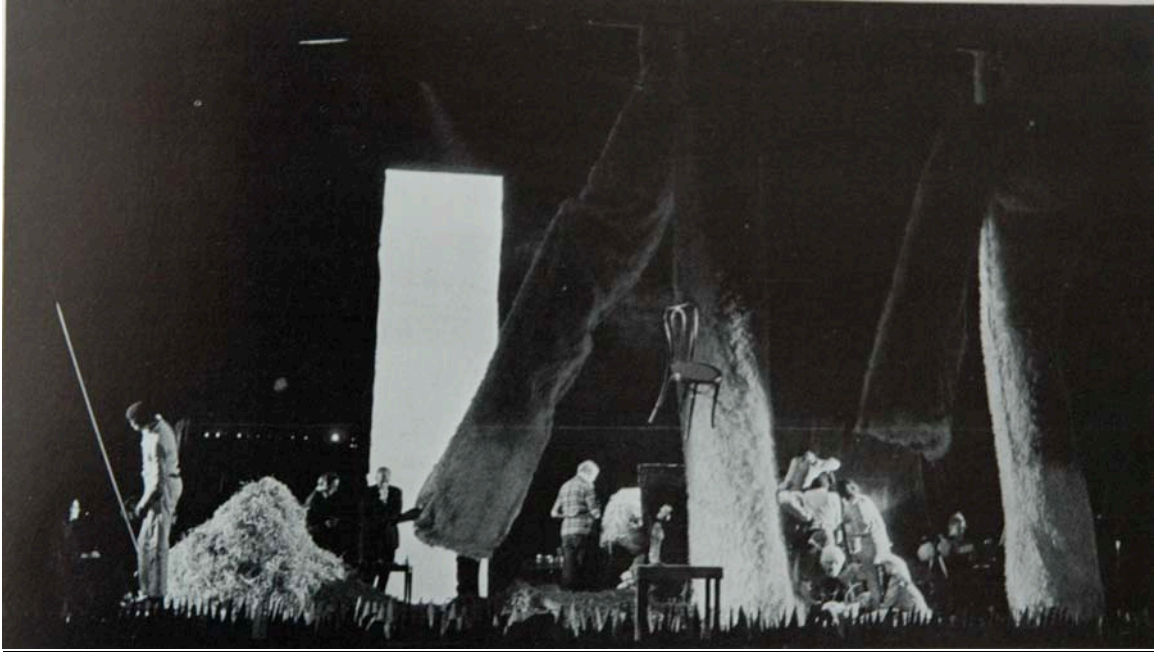
Wilson 395

Figure D



Wilson 421

Figure E



Theater of Images 11

Figure F



Theater of Images 65

Figure G



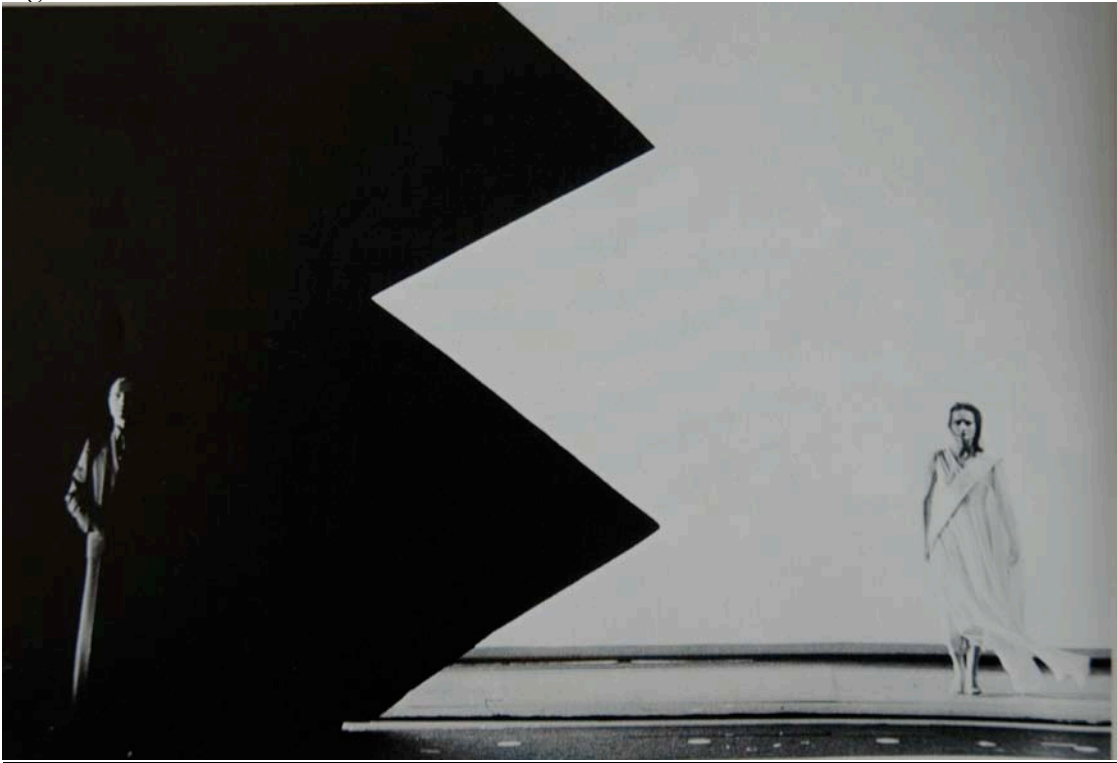
Theater of Images 35

Figure H



Theater of Images 73

Figure I



Theater of Images 70

Figure I



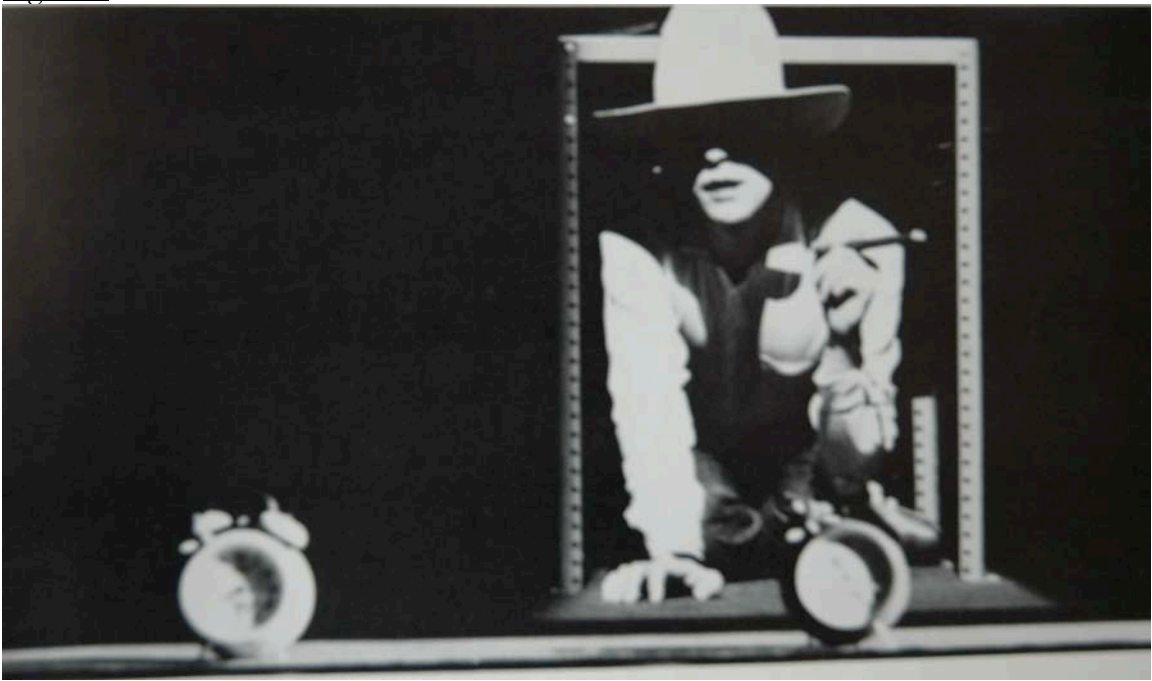
Theater of Images 74

Figure K



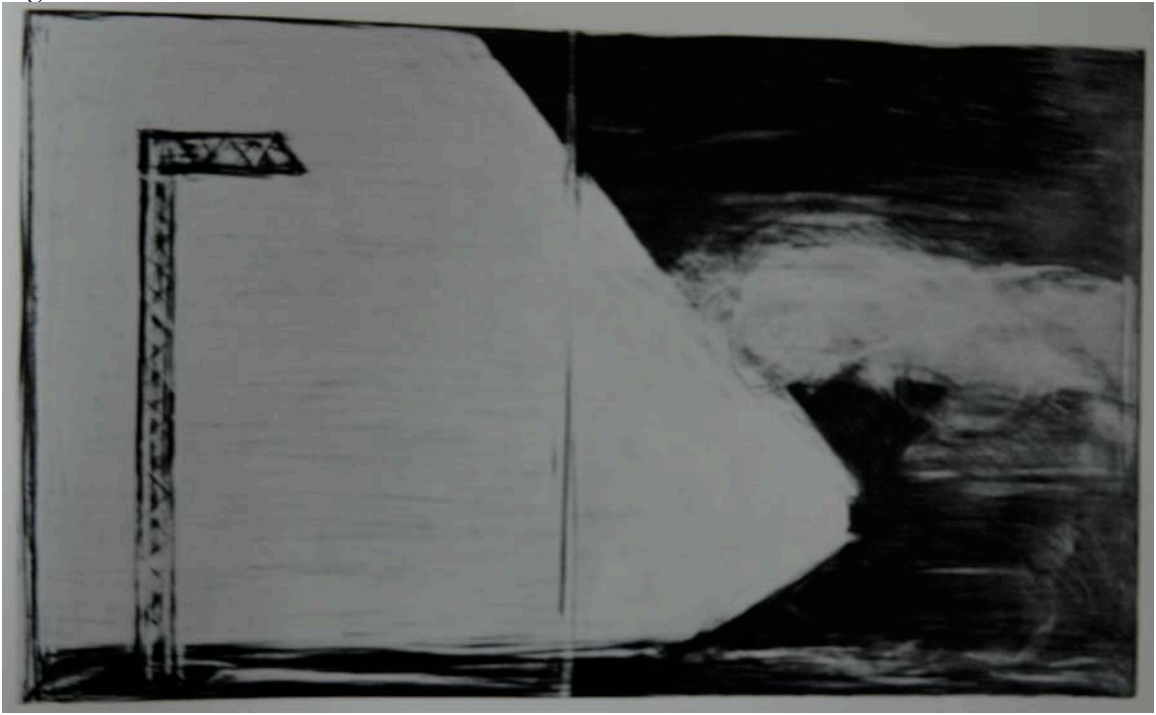
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Figure L



Theater of Images 63

Figure M



Theater of Images 147

Figure N



Cole 144

Figure O



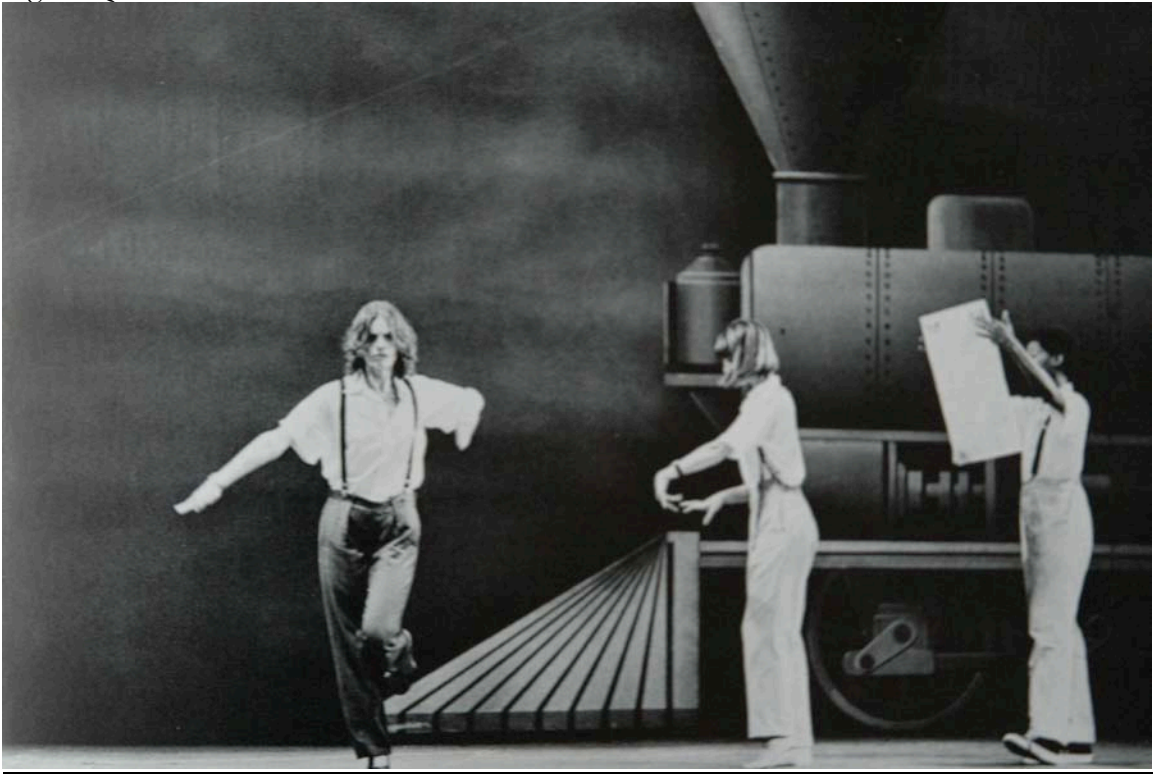
Theater of Images 15

Figure P



Theater of Images 18

Figure Q



Theater of Image 47

Figure R



<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/19/arts/music/19lohe.html>

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