

## Time Has No Concept

### *An Interview with Robert Wilson*

**THEATERSCHRIFT:** *Time has always played a special role in your theatre works. The audience becomes aware of time because some scenes are extremely slow...*

**ROBERT WILSON:** I do not consider my theatre as slow. In fact, I work in real time. I have always found that conventional theatre does not have enough time. It is too fast for me. There is not enough space around the action. Words and gestures have a specific importance and weight depending on the space. The more space around them, the bigger they become. If I put a cup of coffee in a completely empty space, a tiny cup in a huge space, the cup will appear much bigger than in a space which is filled with decor. The same is true for a movement in time. I remember when I started to go to the theatre, I always felt too much was happening. I could not focus on everything at one time. I felt I was being bombarded with too many things.

*So in your first works, things happened one at a time?*

Not quite. I had layers of activities. When I created 'The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud' in 1969, I was thinking of the stage as a battery of movements. There would be different energies on stage that would reflect the public. There would

be things moving imperceptibly slowly or things moving rather quickly or a bit quicker or a bit slower. It was a construction of different kinds of movement. The movement in stillness and sitting, the awareness of movement in standing and walking across the stage. People said that it happened in slow motion, but I never thought about it that way. I think time has no concept, so to talk about my works as being slow narrows them. A gesture, whether it is quicker or slower, is always full of time, so it is full of all kinds of energy.

*You started working in theatre thirty years ago. Do you work differently with time now?*

I think that I am now more aware of the construction of timing because I have been doing it for a number of years. I was always interested in rhythm and in the construction of time and space. When I first came to New York, I went to see abstract dance and looked at painting, sculpture, drawings. Spoken theatre seemed to me like a bad lecture. I always felt uncomfortable. There was not enough virtual space on stage and not enough mental space in the construction. All that changed when I saw the Eastern theatre, when I saw Suzushi Hanayagi, the Kabuki actress. I felt a very close affinity with her theatre because there was so much freedom. But in the beginning I liked the work of George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham – it was abstract, classical, architectural. They constructed a space which enabled me to see and hear at the same time, a mental space that opened possibilities for thoughts.

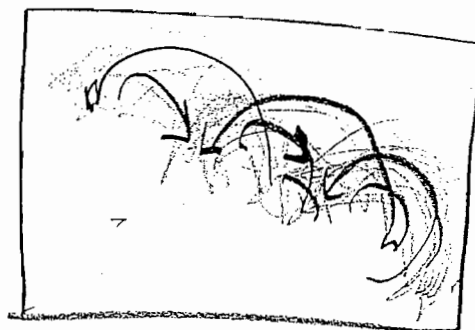
*What is a time and space construction?*

It is the frame I put around it: something that is slower, something that is quicker, something that is more interior, something that is more exterior, something that is longer, something that is shorter, something that is loud, something that is quiet...

*It seems to me that your constructions have changed in recent years. They appear lighter and faster.*

I don't know because I don't really remember what I did in the past. I probably have more contrast in the construction and I am not afraid now to be very loud. After having worked with Philip Glass in 1976 on 'Einstein on the Beach' I began to understand something about the loudness of sound. Recently I worked with Lou Reed on 'Time

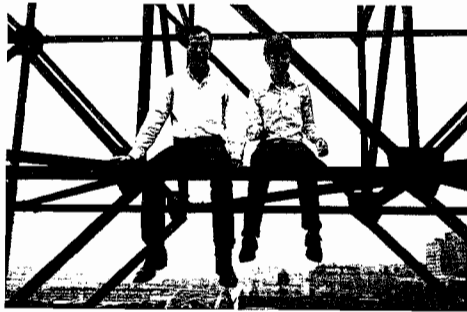
Rocker', and I came to appreciate the loudness of sound. And this fall, at the revival of 'Pelléas et Mélisande', the Debussy opera, I felt that the edges were too soft, too much one tone, that we needed more structures, edges, parts that are louder or sharper, some that are even quite loud so that the quiet moments have more weight. The difficult sounds and movements to make are those that are quieter and slower. The quicker and louder parts of a construction, generally speaking, are easier to do.



*Does that mean that your recent works are easier to do because they are in part quicker and louder?*

I think that you have to see these moments in context. The quieter and slower moments have a different weight because of what is around them. As I said, the more space around something, the easier it is to hear it or see it. My theatre isn't naturalistic. The time is more like natural time, more like watching clouds pass by. Normally in theatre, we are forced to follow a story, to see that what passes in front of our eyes makes sense. Our brain must remain alert to follow what the actors say. In my works you can let yourself float with the words and images. You don't have to follow them closely. You can associate freely, daydream. Very often in theatre, we do not have time to think, because it works with accelerated time, with anecdotes, plots which you have to follow to get from one moment to another and yet another, while our thoughts have no space. Theatre, even in Germany, is becoming more and more like TV. When you look at Broadway theatre, you will see that an audience reaction is programmed every 30 seconds. A stimulus is given to provoke a response

The text consists of one-liners, as on TV; small units, fast reactions. We are so afraid to let go, to get lost. But it is all right to get lost, to take time.



Robert Wilson and  
Christopher Knowles  
1977  
Photo: Babette Mangolte

*These days, when people want to get lost in theatre, they go to the opera. Operatic time is different, and it is given by the composer, so there is less freedom for the director. You have directed more and more opera in recent years. Has that changed your perception of theatrical time?*

Well, the music is one layer of the construction. The text is another layer of the construction, movement is another layer. And all these layers can have their own rules and laws. I don't think that in an opera the text necessarily has to follow the music, even if it was originally meant to be. The music can have a mental space that is different from the text. And the physical movements, the virtual space, the scenery, the gestures, the movements of the body can be of a different rhythm, and still work together, but in a different mental space. It is the way you put these layers together...

*How do you show time on stage?*

Time exists through space. It is the space around the time that is the construction. And the time around the space. Neither exists without the other. Although I often create a rather rigid frame of a space and time construction, it is best not to perform that way, not to think about it. Because, as I said, time is not something that has a concept. My works are full of time. If you think about it in a certain way, you miss the experience. The time and space construction is not mechanical or learned, it is something you experience. If you open yourself up, open the mind and the body up, it can be very rich, full of meanings, full of many

things. If one has to move slower than one would normally move, and one thinks about moving slower, it is boring. In the slowness there are all different kinds of energies and speeds. And that happens through the experience of time. Experiencing is a way of thinking, but it is not intellectual. It happens throughout the entire body. I always say that the mind is a muscle. It is in the elbow, it is in the toe, it is in the tips of the fingers, it is through the whole body that we experience something. This feeling which could happen through the whole body makes the work full of time; not timeless, but full of time.

*Whose experience is that? The actor's or the audience's?*

It is everyone's experience. If you go to the theatre, for the most part you see that the forehead of the actor is closed. He has formed an idea in his mind and is preoccupied with it. But if you can open the forehead so that you are receiving and you are experiencing what you do, then there is the mental space for the public to experience something, too, and that is where the exchange happens. If you are thinking of an idea or of a message of something you want to convey to a public, the mind becomes closed. So there is less mental space and therefore there are fewer possibilities of having an exchange.

*Is this exchange and experience of time in theatre different from the experience in real life?*

It is different, but in a funny way through this artificiality, the construction, it has some affinity to nature, because nature is full of surprises, changes. If you can set up this mental space then the audience will become aware of all the changes. The only thing that is constant is change. If I listen now, I hear a car, I hear a violin and someone talking in the distance. And as I am listening, every second is always different and will never repeat itself, will never ever be the same. So even though I am in the theater and I am performing this ritual or this act that is constructed in time and space with mathematics and geometry, rhythm and whatever, by listening through every moment there is this constant change and in that way there is an affinity to nature. This is true both for the audience and the actors. I think one is always changing, even if you're doing exactly the same thing, because one's experience is different. So that's

why we must not close something with a fixed interpretation. You have to leave it open. In that sense, even though an actor, a singer or a dancer is supposed to do the same thing every time, it is always an improvisation, because every second will always be completely different from any other second.

*Nevertheless, theatre is based on a system of arrangements in time and space. It is teamwork, and everyone's time is highly structured. How do you feel about having very little time for yourself?*

I think that my life is my work and it is all a part of one thing. The first line of my 'Hamlet' monologue is "Had I but time". It sounds like an insider's joke. I cannot lie on the beach doing nothing. I am always working on several projects at once. Each one is at a different phase of development. That helps me to keep them apart and think about them. Contrary to what people think, my works are not very similar. I cannot mix them up. But one project gives me the creativity for another.

*Does time pressure help you to work? To know that time is running out?*

It usually helps me to have a deadline, to know I have to finish something by a certain date. If I don't have a deadline, I am often lazy. Deadlines help to discipline myself, they stimulate me. And until now, no one has been able to prove that the quality of a production depends on the time the director has invested in it. But I usually need a lot of time for my work. It takes many years to collect information, ideas for a theme, a gesture, a text, a color, a language, a word, a light design. At some point I am ready to start realizing the project. I start with structuring all these various things in my notebook, and often this is a classical structure. Usually I start with the visual elements. I think about how a table or a chair or a gesture should look, how something should be painted. I isolate all elements, and only in the end they do come together.

*You work both in theatre and in the visual arts. Is the time of working on a drawing or a sculpture different from rehearsing a play or an opera?*

It is amazing. In some ways it is very different, in some ways it is not at all. You are still making a decision: Should this be darker, should this be lighter, is this quicker, is this heavier, softer, angu-

struction of time and space. So my drawings and sculptures are also full of time, not timeless.

*And what about the representation of time in different media?*

The experience in the theatre with a live actor is very different than in film. The time is different, the space is different. The strong impact of film is the close-up. It is the movement of the eye, the close-up of a hand, the space between the fingers. The slightest movement of a lip can have great impact. In theatre you have to work with other means. You can have someone cross the stage for half an hour. Most films move quicker and closer. But not always: I am actually making a film now where things are very very far away. The project is called 'Monsters of Grace', and it is a film with computer animated objects and live music by Phil Glass.

*Lately you have worked on projects that deal with time explicitly. 'Time Rocker' with Lou Reed is about time travel. And for 1999 you are preparing 'Death, Destruction & Detroit III', a piece about the approaching millennium. Do you see your works go with the time?*

I think my works are a sort of counterpoint. Until recently I wasn't so conscious about it. I always preferred a theatre that was quieter, more contemplative, that provided us with a relief from the outside world.

*Whether in the outside world or in theatre, do you think of time often?*

I still see time as part of a cross, a line that goes from the center of the earth to the heavens. Time is a vertical line, and space is something horizontal. It is this cross of time and space that is the architecture of everything. The tension between these two lines interests me: temporal and spatial lines can cross each other, support one another or even run parallel. I think about that more and more. If I have to stand in front of an audience to give a lecture, if I have to perform 'Hamlet', if I have to show an actor what to do. It is a way of constructing my physical presence. And there are two more lines – the natural and the supernatural. I am very often bored in theatre by naturalism: naturalistic spaces, naturalistic timing, naturalistic light. I am interested to cross the naturalistic line with the supernatural.

*What is this supernatural line?*

You can find it in all the arts. If you're playing Mozart on a piano and you press down a key, it makes a line with the string and then goes out into space. When Cézanne was making a gouache, he put a horizontal stroke here and a vertical



"Had I but time":  
Robert Wilson in 'Hamlet'  
1996  
Photo: David Baltzer

stroke there. Building a building, you are placing a post and a lintel; in a chair or a table, you always have this cross. It can be anything – that is what artists do: They make decisions, constructions in time and space. Created things are constructed things.

*Time is up, so let me ask one last question: The cross of time and space constitutes a moment between past and future, a historical moment. Do you have a concept of history?*

Artists are recording our times. If we want to go back 2000 years, what do we look at? What artists did. Art is one of the few things that will remain. Perhaps 2000 years from today, what people will be looking at will be diaries and journals, made by artists – sculpture, music, books, poetry, painting.

*But you do most of your work in theatre, in the most ephemeral art...*

Marlene Dietrich wrote at the end of her autobiography: "I hope that I have made some people happy." I would like to have a similar success. I don't think that my works will be seen any-

where once I am no longer here. They are special events. You can compare them with shooting stars. They happen once. They are a phenomenon of their time. Period. My plays are not by Shakespeare and cannot expect to be treated that way. People can talk about my works, remember them. But they are at best events and children of their time.

*Interview carried out by Jan Linders*