Chapter 50

Robert Wilson

INTERVIEW

You've just returned from Paris where you produced Great Day in the Morning, *an evening of Negro spirituals, with the celebrated American soprano Jessye Norman. In the summer of 1984, Norman will also be appearing in your staging of* Civil Wars. *How did this ongoing collaboration come about?*

About five years ago I was performing in Paris and Jessye was there singing at the same time. She's a big, big star in France, much bigger than she is in America. Various people had told me that I would like what she was doing so I went to one of her performances and I was overwhelmed by her – by the way she walked on stage, the way she stood and, of course, the way she sang. With the least amount of effort she can fill an enormous hall. That's Jessye's genius. She can sing the quietest, softest sound with her back to the audience and that sound will touch the back wall of the theater. So I was overwhelmed and I went backstage and stood in line and said, 'Hello, my name is Bob Wilson. You're absolutely fantastic and I would love to work with you.' She didn't know who I was and asked, 'What is it that you do?' 'Well, I'm a theatre director and artist. I make works for the theater.' 'Well,' she said, 'Thank you very much' and that was it. Then about eight months later I was in Texas visiting my family and I read in a Dallas paper that she was appearing at Tanglewood. I was coming back to New York anyway so I decided to go straight to Tanglewood and hear her sing. Again, I was overwhelmed. I went backstage and stood in a long line and finally when my turn came, she turned and said, 'Oh, Hello, Mr Wilson, it's nice to see you again.' She has a phenomenal memory. Anyway, we had lunch the next day and I told her about a new piece that I was going to do in Berlin (*Death, Destruction and Detroit*). I made some drawings for her and tried to explain how I work. Then I told her that when I do the piece I would like her to come and see it. And she did come.

Soon after that I began to make sketches and work on an idea for her. This was about three years ago. I showed her a diagram and said, 'Here's a possible structure for a two act work for you. What do you think the music should be? Should we find a composer to write for you?' And she said, 'Well, I've been thinking of doing something with Negro spirituals, the songs of the slaves, and I think these would be appropriate settings.' And the idea interested me because it didn't have anything to do with slavery necessarily, it wouldn't have to be an illustration of the music – you know, a black person in a field of cotton. So Jessye and I began talking and thinking about what songs to use and how they should be fitted together. We began a collaboration. Over the last two years we'd get together from time to time and rehearse and gradually we found what the piece was about. It was a very close collaboration. I really think I work best when I can build and create a work with someone.

How would you characterize the relationship between the songs and your own visual presentation?

I just picked settings that I thought were appropriate in some way for this music as a group of pictures or tableaux but which didn't necessarily illustrate the music. And everything had to be in scale to Jessye. There were certain moods in the landscapes that helped in deciding what songs to use but the songs are not meant to illustrate the background. The background is like a picture book that makes sense on its own. In *Great Day*, the visual is as important as what we hear. I think it helps us hear and the singing helps us see. I think what I disliked about opera when I first went was that I couldn't hear I was so visually distracted. I heard best when I shut my eyes. It's very difficult to see and hear at the same time and mostly we do one or the other. What I try to do in all my work is make a balance between what you hear and what you see, so that perhaps you can do both at the same time.

These days your productions are usually greeted with instantaneous acclaim, but Great Day *created something of a furor at its première in Paris. In fact, you were vigorously booed by a large faction of the audience at the end of the performance. I imagine the presence of Jessye Norman might have attracted a somewhat different audience than usually attends your productions, perhaps one unprepared for the kind of work you do.*

I think it's an audience that tends to go to concerts, recitals and opera, not necessarily my audience. She had sung many times at

that theater and so a lot of people came expecting the kind of thing they had heard in the past. They also didn't understand what spirituals are. These songs are religious in nature, they're all from the Bible which was the only book the slaves had to read. They're not songs of anger; they're songs of nobility and dignity, the songs of an oppressed race. The problems resulted from a misunderstanding – audiences not knowing what the spirituals are, not knowing how the music came about or the way it was sung or simply the way it *was*, which was to some extent the way we presented it. They were frustrated and confused. The staging and designs responded to the religious nature of the music and the way the songs were sung. They were sung as a way of life – you heard singing as you woke up in the morning and dressed, you sang as you went through the day, it was the way you closed the day. Jessye said she always remembered hearing her grandmother sing all day long. Her mother too. The slaves grew up singing as part of life. It was not something they did for entertainment, it was a way of life. It was natural, like breathing, There was song all day long.

And that's actually the form of Great Day. *It's a kind of progression through the day.*

Right, that's it. It's a great day and a woman begins the morning singing. It starts early in the morning with the sunrise and it ends with the morning again. Singing is heard through the course of the day. I show various things that people would do every day. You see someone contemplating and someone walking in a forest.

You see someone waking up in bed and someone sleeping in the middle of the night. I made this room with a huge window.

It's not a specific room or even a window necessarily. It could be 1840 or 2040.

Perhaps you could describe the scene on the lake, which drew both praise from critics and scornful laughter from some members of the audience. It seems to embody the spiritual nature of the work and the meditative qualities you were seeking to capture.

There's a dock out in the lake and it's midnight.

There are stars in the sky and the moonlight is reflecting on the water. Jessye walks out in a blue robe and sings a song she wrote herself, a song based on a slave poem that's sung a cappella. There's a simple white chair at the end of the dock. She walks over to it and begins to sing 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.' A little golden light falls down on her as she sits in the white chair improvising the song. She's written a part for a cello and as it's played a grey Canadian goose moves across the sky, its wings slowly flapping. But she doesn't see it, her focus is turned inward. She has two or three very simple gestures that are counted and carefully lit. After sitting there for ten minutes or so, humming and singing, she stands up and begins to walk off. Just before she gets to the edge of the stage she kneels down and takes a handful of water from the lake and washes her face. And she begins to sing again. Then she turns and walks offstage

in profile, humming the same music. And that's how we did these songs. We didn't present them like gospel numbers, adding tambourines and banjos and making an entertainment – all that came later. And so when Jessye was humming a song for ten minutes or sitting in silence the audience became very restless. But it would have been very inappropriate to present this music any other way and that was completely misunderstood – though not by the serious writers of the French press who did understand for the most part. I must say that I was surprised by the incredible reaction at the end, the bursts of boos and bravos. Some of the press wrote that it was an occasion similar to the première of *The Rite of Spring*, which had its first performance in the same theater over sixty years before. After that, there was no way of ever getting away from the idea of a controversy because audiences came expecting a controversial event and they acted controversial.

Great Day in the Morning *was to have been presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music this winter but a few months ago performances were postponed. Was* Great Day *withdrawn so you could do some more work on it, as some have suggested, or was it once again a matter of financing?*

Financing and time. There wasn't enough time to mount it property. The work is in a finished state though I do intend to make a few changes. It will be performed in the future, possibly at Covent Garden and La Scala. It may also go to Africa and Moscow.

During the past year you also produced The Golden Windows *at the Munich Kammerspiele, a new work featuring one of your own texts.*

Yes. My text. I also designed, directed and lit it. It's a smaller scale work. I built a little house.

It's early evening. There's a door that opens – light streams from the doorway. Then midnight.

The house is in the center. Then the early morning.

The house is now at the left side of the stage. Those three perspectives.

The title of the work and perhaps a few of its images were suggested by a story in a now forgotten book of homiletic fables by the American writer Laura E. Richards (1903). What was the attraction of this obscure story book?

It was a fairy tale I heard as a child. I just remembered the story. Actually I had written the play before I thought of the title. The title didn't have anything to do with the play necessarily, but then it became part of it.

In the story a little boy gazes at a house on a distant hill which seems to have windows of gold and diamonds. One day he travels to the neighboring hill only to find a common farmhouse with ordinary glass windows. At the end of the story another house with golden windows appears to him in the distance. It is his own

house, transfigured by the light of the setting sun. While *The Golden Windows* isn't based on this story, or even directly related to it, the two works do share the image of a house on a hill – a house whose appearance changes according to the time of day it is viewed – and most importantly, a sense of the transforming power of light.

Light plays an integral role in the work. It's like an actor. Mainly, though, I just liked the title.

The play was performed in German and you worked with actors of the Kammerspiele.

Yes. I used members of their repertory company. Brilliant, brilliant actors. I think it's the most difficult thing for actors of the Schaubühne or the Kammerspiele to perform my texts because they don't tell a story. That's what all their training is aimed at – telling a story, interpreting a text, psychological theater. And if you do that with my works the audience gets confused. You have to be able to say the text in a way that one can think about many sorts of things. If you say it in such a way that you must pay attention to every word you'll go crazy because one thought doesn't follow another thought logically. One thought can set off many thoughts. You have to sort of float with the situation.

Do you think this work will ever be seen in America?

There's a possibility that *The Golden Windows* could come to the United States in the summer or autumn of 1985. That will be the first time I have any time to stage it because I'm scheduled to do other things.

American audiences have not seen a major Wilson work since Einstein on the Beach *was presented here in 1976. Money is invariably given as the reason so few of your productions reach this country. Is it solely a matter of financing or are other factors involved?*

Financing has a lot to do with it. The other problem is where do you put it. Where do you put a work like *The Golden Windows?* In Munich I'm at the Kammerspiele, a municipal theater where I'm seen by a subscription audience. I have a poster from the Kammerspiele. Look at their season – they have plays by Chekhov, Shakespeare, they have *Medea*, a Sean O'Casey play, Goethe's *Tasso* and they have my work. Where in this city would you find a program like that?

The resident theaters in this country might conceivably be a place where your work could be seen. Have you approached them?

They haven't approached me, you can put it that way. Yes, I have gone to them on occasion but I don't have time to now. I have too many other things to do.

What about the Metropolitan Opera? There was discussion at one point about an operatic version of Death, Destruction and Detroit.

Well, we had talked about it, I guess. I'm not a popular person at the Met.

You've also reached a stage in your career where you no longer have to accept compromise. You're in demand at subsidized European state theaters and festivals, organizations far better equipped to meet your exacting standards. Theater in this country usually means compromising in terms of just getting a play on.

Entirely true. The Met is a very well-organized house and the labor is probably the best in the world for working with time. Still, they don't light a show the way I do. They don't rehearse the way I rehearse. There's not the same attention placed on detail. Lighting is an important part of my work. I usually spend years on my drawings and days setting light cues. Over here they light a show in eight hours. It's very hard to do the kind of work I do in structures in this country, it really needs a festival structure. And again there's the cost. *Civil Wars* in Los Angeles will be two and a half million dollars for three performances and that doesn't even include artists' fees. It's insane. Budgets, unions. *Einstein on the Beach* at the Metropolitan Opera cost $90,000 per performance. Just to run a show that was already created.

The technical demands of your works also present certain difficulties. A Robert Wilson play can no longer be staged just anywhere.

My work is unique, it means big houses. I work best in a large scale.

You don't plan to produce your own shows in this country as you sometimes did in the past?

I can't, though really in some way I do. Contracts with houses and unions. It's a whole profession. As a producer I'm not knowledgeable.

In the past you've spoken with some bitterness of this country's lack of support for your work. Now that you're so busy creating works for the leading theaters and opera houses of Europe is this still such a concern with you?

It's . . . a frustration. I don't want to be an expatriot but that's the way it is – I'm leaving this January and I don't come back to America until the very end of 1984.

In a recent interview you announced your intention to do more interpretive work in the coming years. Great Day in the Morning, *the first piece you've created to existing texts, represents a step in that direction. What was behind this decision?*

The creation of new works is what I do best but I also think it's important to do other things, and so I want to interpret other people's work. I'm doing a new

opera with Gavin Bryars, an English composer, which is based on Euripides' *Medea*. It will be performed at the opera house in Lyon and then will come to the Paris Opera.

What attracted you to this classic text?

I don't know. I just read the play and was fascinated by it. I liked the architecture of the story. It was very different from my work and yet similar in some ways.

Your Medea *began life as a play with music. It's now a full-scale opera. What was the reason for this transformation?*

I'd just rather hear words sung than spoken, I think. I'll also be doing another version of *Medea* in Lyon, a baroque opera by Charpentier which has never been performed. Then I'm doing *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thompson opera, in Stuttgart in May of 1985. I also plan to do *Parsifal* in 1986 or 87, then a *King Lear*, yes to Shakespeare's text, and maybe later I'll do some contemporary works.

From time to time your work is described as a modern equivalent of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk. *Now you are planning to produce several of the Wagnerian music dramas. I would be interested in knowing when you first encountered Wagner's music and at what point you contemplated staging his operas?*

The Wagner family came to Spoletto when I did *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in 1974 and they said, 'Oh, Mr Wilson, it's so beautiful. You're the perfect one to do Wagner.' Well, at that time I barely knew who Wagner was. So I said, 'Thank you very much. I'm flattered.' They asked me if I would be interested in coming to Bayreuth to direct something and I answered, 'Well, possibly, but do you ever do new works because I'm really interested in creating *new* works.' Gian Carlo Menotti was sitting next to me and he started kicking me under the table. 'No, no, we don't do new operas, Mr Wilson. We only do Wagner.' 'Well,' I said, 'I'm really not interested just now.' Then they asked me a couple of years later and I actually went to the festival. Finally they came when I did *Edison* – Wolfgang Wagner and his wife – and they said, 'We're going to do a new *Parsifal* and we want to talk to you about that,' and I said I was very interested in doing it. They said, 'Well, Mr Levine has already been contracted to conduct it. Could you work with him?' And I said, 'Yes.'

After so many years as a German (even a family) institution, Bayreuth has begun seeking outside talent. There was a French team (Chéreau and Boulez) for the centennial Ring. *This summer's cycle will be essentially an English production (Hall, Solti and designer William Dudley). And you and Levine would have logically consituted an American team.*

But Levine refused to work with me and he had already been contracted. It's sad. It was the hundredth anniversary. I mean, I don't particularly like Levine though there are some things he does conduct quite well, still I agreed to work with him because the best place to do *Parsifal* is, of course, Bayreuth.

Later you were commissioned to create a Parsifal *for the State Opera in Kassel, West Germany. Although this production was eventually canceled, I know you devoted a considerable amount of time to the project. I'd be interested in hearing how you set about approaching this monumental work, which would seem an ideal vehicle for you, resonating as it does so many of the themes and concerns of your own work.*

Well, everyone always said *Parsifal* would be the work to do so I started to listen to the music and I hired Annette Michelson, a writer and scholar, to work with me for a number of months on a concept. I looked at various productions and found out what other people had done with the opera. There's a beautiful one that Appia designed and the one Wieland Wagner did in the fifties was really great, beautifully proportioned. I tried to find what Wagner was attempting to do musically and also what he was trying to say with the text. I'll only do one *Parsifal* in my life and I want this to be one of the great ones. So I thought about the text and the music and the most complicated problem to solve was how to present a work that's very religious – it's very close to what I just did with Jessye – with a sincere religious attitude. It never seemed right to me to have this fake church service with these knights standing around singing and passing this holy grail. It was somehow sacreligious, everything the work was supposed not to be. When I listen to the music here it's a religious experience but when I go to the theater and see this temple-church-whatever and these klutzy knights walking around with this cup, it's ridiculous, it's disturbing and it's all wrong. So that's one problem to solve. Then there's the idea that Parsifal is the innocent fool. How is that portrayed? Christopher Knowles would have been the perfect actor for me but someone like Manfred Jung playing this innocent fool is no good – in one sense, in another sense I guess it's o.k. You know when Levine does *Parsifal* at the Met there's a time in the third act when I feel I'm going to scream if he doesn't stop or he doesn't go faster. It's interminable. Yet it can be done in such a way that you say to yourself, 'I can listen to this for the rest of my life.' That's what's so fascinating about *Parsifal*. It can be unbearably long or it can be . . . forever. Here, I can show you the designs. They're all finished.

There's no house curtain. Instead there's a curtain of light.

Then a wall of water with the beams of light coming vertically across.

Eventually a lake appears at the back and that's the prelude.

The whole piece is in blue. Gurnemanz appears here at the downstage edge of the lake.

Just before Parsifal enters I have this enormous white swan, the swan that he's just shot, falling very slowly into the lake.

For the transformation scene – 'Time becomes space here' – I have a great disk of light that moves on stage from the side and an iceberg floating upstage.

Eventually the disk of light settles in the center of the lake. Parsifal stands downstage watching with his back to the audience the way the audience watches it.

I don't have the knights or any of that. Amfortas is carried out in his litter and he goes into the iceberg and takes out an Egyptian box. Inside is a clear glass chalice which is shaped like an X.

He holds it up and then he disappears. At the end, Gurnemanz comes into the ring of light and asks Parsifal, 'What have you seen?' And there's just the light, the whiteness. The idea is to make this mysterious temple of light. It's as if one were to see this big ring of light floating out here in the middle of the Hudson. It's all about light. And that's the first act. The second act starts the same way with the vertical beams of light crossing the water. We're still at the lake but now it's night and a metal tower rises out of the water.

It's like a fairy tale. That's where Chéreau missed the boat for me. His *Ring* is beautiful looking, gorgeous, but it's so serious and heavy. And it's fantastic to have an opera with giants and a dragon, it's stories for children. Klingsor appears in a window in the tower and he's a bad guy almost the way Ivan the Terrible is in the movie. Kundry is next to him – and I want to do it with Jessye – and her hair falls out of the tower. After their scene; the doors close and the tower sinks beneath the waves. Then we go underwater for the flower garden scene.

There are ferns and painted flowers that open. They're all flat with lights inside them, only the rocks are dimensional. The flower garden is all in color. It's like Chinese flowers that open in the water. At the end of the act Klingsor throws his spear at Parsifal. Here it's a rod of light. The scene is all back painted and at the moment Parsifal picks up the glowing rod, we turn on all the lights from behind and everything appears in cold black and white like a skeleton. Parsifal takes the rod of light and draws the outline of the chalice in light, and that's the end of the second act. The third act begins the same way as the first except that I've put the singers on the other side of the stage. For springtime (the Good Friday scene), I've created an enormous tulip that's lowered into the lake, like the big swan you saw in the first act.

I also bring all the chorus onstage for one brief moment when they're trying to convince Amfortas to perform the grail ceremony. We have him lying in his litter and they rush on and form a huge wall of bodies downstage.

The ring of light comes back on. It's now a black disk, which slowly falls into the lake, turning white when Parsifal stands on it. He takes the chalice from the Egyptian box in the iceberg and holds it up. The iceberg disappears.

At the end he leaves the stage. No one is on stage. Fire comes out of the ring of light and stars appear in the sky.

In a sense what you've done is create your own mysteries within Wagner's larger ones. Your scenario also seems to have purged the opera of what many feel is mock Christianity. What

interests me even more is how you will approach the work's complex psychological characterizations. How will you deal with Wagner's characters and the acting requirements of the piece?

I can only tell you that it won't be psychological acting. It will be the opposite of what Chéreau did with the *Ring*. I never understood why they called that naturalistic acting. It's the most artificial, unnatural way of behaving on stage that I've ever seen in my life. But they all said that Chéreau has reinvented naturalistic acting. It's just too much for me. I'm not interested in that kind of thing.

While your Parsifal *will be produced at some future date, it's regrettable you were denied the chance to stage the Bayreuth centennial production. The occasion demanded some kind of great event – either a radical re-evaluation of the work or a personal commentary by a major contemporary artist, or at least a fresh sensibility. Certainly it provided an unparalleled opportunity in terms of visibility and critical attention. All things considered you probably would have been an ideal person for the job.*

I would have been the ideal person, yeah.

Götz Friederich was eventually chosen to direct the centennial production, I believe at a relatively late date.

You know why? Because Friederich can come in and do it in two days. I saw a new production of *Tristan* he did two years ago in Stuttgart. It was the third *Tristan* he had done that year. I was there the night before the last general rehearsal and he still hadn't decided where the singers were going to be. It never *was* decided. In the second act he never even told them where to go. Now, how on this earth do you do that? They had one big vulgar spot that followed the singers wherever they went, and of course, they went where they normally go anyway. It's ridiculous. So that's why it went to Friederich. It's perfect for Levine and the way he thinks and the way they run a house and the way they make art. And did you hear anything about the performances? No one even *mentioned* the *Parsifal* last summer. No one talked about it. The hundredth anniversary!

It's been rumored that you will be staging Tristan *at Bayreuth some time in the future, possibly with Jessye Norman as Isolde.*

Well, I would like to do it. I was asked. La Scala also asked me to do the *Parsifal* and I will if I get the rehearsal time I need. I would like Abbado to conduct, if he will work with me.

You're one of the few American directors who works regularly with a dramaturg, a fixture of the German state theater system. Was the concept of a dramaturg new to you when you went to Berlin in 1979 to stage Death, Destruction and Detroit *for the Schaubühne?*

That's right. I always had various people around when I was working before – advisors, people who did research – but I never really had the concept of a dramaturg in mind. When they first gave me one in Berlin I said, 'This is ridiculous.' I walk in and there's a staff of twenty people. What are they all going to do? 'A dramaturg?' I said, 'I wrote the play! How is he going to tell me what I'm doing with this crazy American language and all?' But they were very, very helpful – I learned so much about what I was doing and about the possibilities of what could be done. I've since learned to work very closely with dramaturgs and now I think it's almost essential to have one because I'm not scholarly, I don't have a strong background in history or a lot of formal or classical education and, anyway, it's very helpful to have someone like that to talk to. In Germany they've also translated my texts so they have to be writers as well as scholars because my texts are difficult to translate – there's slang and puns and things not immediately translatable. At the Schaubühne I worked with Peter Krumme who was excellent.

Was he involved with the day to day rehearsals?

Yes, he was there all the time and was directly involved with the actors and their interpretations. We worked as a team. When I produced *The Golden Windows* in Munich, again a fantasy thing with the kind of crazy texts I do, I worked very closely with Michael Wachsmann. He's brilliant but he doesn't say very much. 'Maybe this word should be over there' or 'Take that out' or 'Maybe there should be a slight hesitation in the middle of this word.' I work with what they tell me, with what they feel is correct. It's very much a collaboration. I really like working with a dramaturg and I think they're underestimated – in terms of my work anyway.

While you've spent most of the last few years in Europe creating new works, you recently performed in Japan and will be returning there in the near future to produce several segments of Civil Wars. *I'd think the Japanese would be an ideal audience, especially since the stylization, formality and durational qualities of their own theater forms logically prepare them for the imaginative demands of your work.*

That's what everyone has said and I was very nervous about it. I did the prologue to the fourth act of *Deafman Glance*, which is a murder scene, with a beautiful Japanese actress (Chizuko Sugiura). It was actually one of the first things I ever made for the theater. They were a wonderful audience and it was very well received. There was a scholar who came and wrote a piece saying that the work was timeless but it happened in this century. In some ways the play is very modern but he saw that it was timeless, it could have happened any time. And that's the Japanese, they live with such an awareness of tradition and the past. They're very contemporary, very modern but they're still building houses with bamboo and paper.

You've made a number of video works in the last couple of years, some of which have been seen in this country. Are you planning to devote more time to media projects in the future?

I think T.V. is the future. To be very honest with you I don't watch it because it doesn't interest me, but at the same time I'm fascinated by the possibilities of the medium and am already planning more works with T.V. I went to see Martha Graham's company when I was rehearsing an opera in Washington some time ago and I noticed that a work she had created in 1946 was listed in the program as having been copyrighted in 1977. I was told that she filmed it in 1977 and that established the copyright. That's what I want to do with my works. People are asking about *Einstein* in particular, and I will do it again some place and film it.

Your works tend to play to a select, somewhat narrow audience made up of fans, theater people, writers, artists and art patrons. You've spoken in the past of wanting to attract new audiences to your work.

Right.

Are you still actively seeking a larger audience?

Absolutely. I think that's what I'm trying to do with *Civil Wars*. It's on the scale of larger popular theater. That's how I intended it. It's an event, a large popular event. It's meant to be the way rock concerts are. I was in Rome a few weeks ago and Syberberg's film of *Parsifal*, which is four and a half hours long, was shown before three thousand people in a large open air space. It was fantastic. It was a big event. There was something exciting about being there, just like at a rock concert. I saw this *Napoleon* film at Radio City Music Hall and it was very exciting. It was in Japan when I was there. Everywhere it's been, it's been something special. It's an event and I think that's great. When I first went to hear a rock concert about fifteen years ago I thought, 'Gee, this is really the great opera of our time.' I don't think that when I go to the Metropolitan Opera. Maybe I do if I go to see Patrice Chéreau's *Lulu* at the Paris Opera. That's a great cultural event, but I don't go expecting such an experience at the Met. I mean, who's going to fly from Paris to see something at the Met? Chéreau just did *Peer Gynt* in Paris and people came from all over Europe. People went to Berlin for Peter Stein's *Oresteia*. That's an event. People come from all over Europe to see *The Golden Windows* in Munich. Who comes to Broadway to see *Sweeney Todd?* Who goes to see another John Dexter production at the Metropolitan Opera? Nobody! Nobody is interested. That's what's so *dull* about this city. No one comes here to see anything. People come from New Jersey to see Broadway musicals. It's all for a suburban audience.

What about dance and avant garde theater?

Well, if I want to see the avant garde of America I'll go to Europe. You can't see it here. Richard Foreman is working at the Paris Opera. I just saw his new piece at the Festival of Autumn. I go to Europe to see that kind of thing, not America. Maybe people will go to the Village to see Joe Papp's work if there's something special about it but Joe presents his work for an audience that is very select, very narrow. He calls it a public theater, a popular theater, but I don't think it's that at all.

Do you think you can attract a popular audience as such to The Civil Wars?

I hope so. I hope we get it done.

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Source

Wilson, R. (1983) 'Robert Wilson: Current Projects. Interview with Laurence Shyrer', *Theater*, Summer/Fall 1983: 84–91.

Robert Wilson (1944–)

One of the most important examples in our time of the director as total scenographer. He is an artist who uses the stage as a three-dimensional and aural palette, working with sound, gesture, movement, light, and time, to produce theatre pieces, which are often epic and concerned with the symbols and poetics of our century. The titles of some of these – *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), *Death, Destruction, and Detroit* (1979), and *CIVIL warS* (1984) – show his interest in deconstructing twentieth-century myths and reconstituting them as elements in a total theatre piece – a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in the Wagnerian sense. He has with major choreographers such as Lucinda Childs, and composer/performers such as Philip Glass, Gavin Bryars, and Lou Reed, all of whose work helps to create a sense of material, which is constantly re-interpreting our preoccupations and ourselves. Wilson's work is often long, visually simple, and full of contrasts and contradictions that force the spectator to attend. His techniques owe much to modern technology – the freeze-frame, slow motion, playback – and his interest in the relationship between the mental and the physical has led him to examine the effects of dislocation on our perceptions of the world. Much of his later work has tended towards the interpretation and usage of classic texts or operas on the one hand, and towards installation work on the other.

In this interview Wilson's mode of thinking and perceiving is exposed by the way in which he speaks, carefully choosing words as he carefully chooses images for his

work, currently moving through a phase of approaching classic texts from European literature.

Compare this interview with writings by the following authors in this reader

Anderson, Appia, Craig and Schlemmer – other visual approaches to theatre
Bausch – performances that juxtapose the unexpected
Beckett – a total theater writer
Brecht – theatrical contrasts
Cunningham – American antecedents
Foreman – a contemporary American writer/director
Kantor – another approach to non-linear theatre
LeCompte – similar deconstructive concerns
Lepage – a parallel scope
Meyerhold – a much earlier view of total theatre
Müller – one of his major collaborators
Piscator – an earlier view of visual staging

Further reading

Brecht, S. (1979) *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Donker, J. (1985) *The President of Paradise*, Amsterdam: International Theatre Bookshop.
Williams, D. and Bradby, D. (1988) *Directors Theatre*, London: Macmillan.
Shyer, L. (1989) *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, New York: Theater Communications Group.
Holmberg, A. (1997) *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge: CUP.