

SPEECH INTRODUCING *FREUD*

Robert Wilson

Robert Wilson explains the "structural skeleton" that underpins his "dance play" about the life of Sigmund Freud. He describes the work as consisting of a number of simultaneous, yet self-contained activities, taking place in a series of "stratified zones." This spatial layering, combined with the rejection of narrative cohesion, places the emphasis on the visual as the primary mode of communication and is characteristic of Wilson's work. Moving performance away from literary structures, he places the emphasis on creating new modes of seeing, examining and revealing the minutiae of detail that make up the activities of the everyday.

The life and times of Sigmund Freud is a three-act dance play. The structure of each act is very similar. And the people, characters, materials, activities and sounds parallel and repeat throughout the entire play. Each has a full register. This means that at any one point an element may be in full focus with all its parts together and later less or more of the parts are together. Like Chinese Checkers with all the marbles in pegs some of the time, other times, less or more. There are two main levels of reality that we are attempting to maintain throughout the play. They are obvious and opposed in nature and throughout the three acts they change until the final scene they are seen to have completely reversed themselves. Perhaps it's more like making an "X" in that one level starts low and the other high; the other the opposite, that's thinking of it though in graphic terms. If you think of it in terms of color one starts out black and ends up white and the other starts out white and ends up being black. Most of each act is very self-contained, or stripped down until the end, which is very open, rich and (purposely) theatrical. But the end of each act, which in itself is very short in time, balances the preceding time – or "contained duration." Compare it to a long line with a block at one end, and the block (necessary for) balancing the line. The same basic quasi-structure is repeated throughout each act though that happening may not (upon first viewing) be apparent. And that same hidden structural skeleton is latently apparent for all three acts taken together. All three acts are contained (unto themselves) compared to the ending which is the biggest opening – in the sense of release (and relief). And that's the scene with Freud and his grandchild. I guess almost anyone setting out to do a play about Sigmund Freud the man would have become overly (and overtly?) concerned about the role of his studies and intellectual life – his mind, and what I was thinking about was that those things are popularly familiar – everyone knows them. The

things that impressed me most though about Freud as a person being and having these ideas which seemed to have influenced just about everything when reading about him was the fact that he was very human – intensely ordinary and very sort of bourgeoisie in one sense – and that was precisely part of his enigmatic brilliance. Yet while we know that attention is hardly ever given to that side of him. History has recorded him as someone who was particularly motivated by having theories – theories which, by the way, structurally and systematically seem to defy just what we mean by the words structure and system and logic. This piece though, as a kind of hybrid "dance play," doesn't deal with any big ideas – it just pays inordinate attention to small, *detail* things. Although we do see him plotting and making charts, notes, undoubtedly the most moving event in his life was when his prized grandchild, Heinerlie, died – he never got over that – something within him was smothered for the rest of his life. He said that. A very simple emotional experience. A death. And suddenly all of his ideas about living and theorizing about feeling were suspended, rendered meaningless.

There are a lot of reversals in this piece, such as the ending, a tableau in a cover with all those animals. It's like going back. Going back to some indefinable time or memory too hazy to specify in exact particulars. That is, in another sense though, I suppose, the same as moving continually ahead. Isn't that called *retroactive*? No, not actually. I mean it's going back as well as in the same time forward. That is, Freud is plotting and scheming up these charts and yet what we *see* happening – the stage activity, is very human-like – someone running and someone sitting, another making small talk, someone pouring a drink, someone dancing, people doing ritualistic exercises. The activities are just very mundane and thus in that way pointedly human.

Another thing that happens is that the stage is divided into zones – stratified zones one behind another that extend from one side of the stage horizontally to the other. And in each of these zones there's a different "reality" – a different activity defining the space so that from the audience's point of view one sees through these different layers, and as each occurs it appears as if there's no realization that anything other than itself is happening outside that particularly designated area. People might associate this with Freud and the layers of consciousness – different levels of understanding, but that kind of obvious intention has been erased or eradicated from this production. I see it more simply as a collage of different realities occurring simultaneous like being aware of several visual factors and how they combine into a picture before your eyes at any given moment. Awareness in that way occurs mostly through the course of experience of each layer rendering the others transparent. And this might, at first of course, confuse some people, because we are so being used to going to the theater and having the play explicitly narrated to us in verbal direct(ed)ness. Like Shakespeare. Like Shaw. Like Tennessee Williams. Those kinds of plays are primarily constructed *with* words, although other elements are included. On the other hand in dance, people as diverse as Jerome Robbins, Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer focus the intention of their work on the formal presentation of movement. The focus here is neither verbal nor concerned with specifying the physicality of people in virtual space. It's simply more visual. And people are just beginning to return again to discerning visual significances as a primary mode – or method – of communicating in a context where more than one

form, or "level" exists. In that sense of overlays of visual correspondences we can speak of multi-dimensional realities.

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See, we're not particularly interested in literary ideas, because having a focus that encompasses in a panoramic visual glance all the hidden slices ongoing that appear in clear awareness as encoded fragments seems to indicate theater has so much more to do than be concerned with words in a dried out, flat, one-dimensional literary structure. I mean The Modern World has forced us to outgrow that *mode* of seeing. We're interested in *another* thing – another *kind* of experience that happens when encoded fragments and hidden detail become without words suddenly transparent. Unfortunately, the usual bill of theater – like all those year-in-year-out tired Broadway productions mounted (and, destroyed) each season – is that they are dealing with all those stories, and those are the same old stories over and over. The same stories Shakespeare told. The same stories that the soap operas tell on television. The same stories that Tennessee Williams is telling. And they're ok; they're interesting, but like, you get that – you know that instantly you're just being handed the same thing over and over differently disguised and I always say, well so what? You see we're interested here in a theater that deals totally with another sort of thing, even though we're not sure exactly what that is. I feel that when theatre really connects with an audience or when a group of people really connect with one another that there are a lot of things involved. It's always a mystery, isn't it, when you have to stop to analyze it? I am now remembering something a little girl said to me about 4 years ago when I was her teacher. This child had a speech impediment and had a very difficult time speaking at every stage of learning to say a word. I was tongue-tied myself, and, so I was sympathetic with her. I could understand part of the problem though in an instant. She wanted desperately to sing but she couldn't get into the school choir, cause of course she couldn't say the words and she couldn't make those sounds. You know, like that. So I said, well, that doesn't make any difference you know, you can, you *can* sing. She said, well I can't carry a tune. She said, "I know I'd *like* to sing." So I said, well just go ahead and, you know – *sing*. So then she did and then after a couple of years of working with it she really developed an incredible thing with her voice and it was very moving to hear her sing. And eventually by gaining confidence in herself this way she learned in the same manner to talk. Two obstacles were removed. And then one day I heard her working with another child – and this child was singing along with a Bob Dylan recording or something like that. And that little girl, who originally had the speech impediment said emphatically OH NO! SHE SAYS, WHY DO YOU WANT TO SING THOSE SONGS? YOU KNOW, WHY DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MUSIC THAT WAY? You know she continued enthusiastically you can sing your own way. No; don't sing like the Beatles you know. Don't sing like Frank Sinatra. Don't sing like, you know. Sing your *own* way. And that's what interests me.

FURTHER READING

- Holmberg, A. (2005). *The Theatre of Robert Wilson: directors in perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
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SOURCE

- S. Brecht (1978). *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*. London: Methuen, pp. 419–22.