

## 1 Contextualizing Wilson: from semiotics to semantics

The essence of great art is its infinite power of suggestion.

Baudelaire, "Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris"

The Merlin of the avant-garde, Wilson's career astonishes. First, the sheer size of his œuvre; he now has over one hundred productions behind him. The fecundity of his imagination and the range of his work have no parallel in contemporary theatre. Second, the multifaceted nature of his talent: director, dancer, playwright, performer, painter, sculptor, video artist, sound designer, set designer, lighting designer, choreographer, pedagogue, therapist, entrepreneur. Since he is the complete *homme de théâtre*, his work cuts across traditional genres: drama, dance, opera, visual art, performance art, video, film, music, vaudeville. According to Jean-Marie Blanchard, former General Administrator of the Opéra Bastille in Paris, Wilson "opened a breach in the schizoid classifications of opera-theatre-dance-plastic arts to blaze a trail through a new space of representation."<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the word *Gesamtkunstwerk* arises when discussing Wilson's multichannel theatre. Third, the enormous influence he has wielded, especially on the Continent, where he is regarded as America's greatest director, and where he has been one of the strongest – if not the strongest – influence on theatre for the past fifteen years. Fourth, his perseverance in pursuing – against reason, against hope – the visionary gleam. It takes more than genius to have a career like Wilson's. "The most important lesson I learned from Wilson," owns Julie Archer, who collaborated on the lights for the *the CIVILwarS Knee Plays*, "was how to fight to insure quality."<sup>2</sup> Fifth, the multicultural nature of his work with influences from America, Asia, and Europe – a paradigm of the global village. Sixth, his constant growth as an artist. Continually challenging himself, just as he challenges others, the development of Wilson's career is paradoxical: always the same, always different. Wilson changed the way theatre looks and talks. Unmistakable, all his productions have a unique signature. But each production is also different, and his career has evolved in unexpected and exciting ways. Talking about a living artist like Wilson – still growing, still searching – is as easy as trying to catch

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Halley's Comet with a butterfly net as it streaks across the sky. He will continue to experiment, continue to astound. To appreciate the arc of Wilson's career, it makes sense to divide his development into four major periods: (1) silent operas; (2) deconstructing language; (3) from semiotics to semantics; (4) "how to do things with words": confronting the classics.

### SILENT OPERAS

The first period – silent operas – culminates in 1973 with *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, a twelve-hour epic with 150 performers that incorporated material from *The King of Spain*, *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, and *Deafman Glance*.<sup>3</sup> Like all the early work, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* was non-linear; the director conceived it as pictures structured architecturally. Consisting of seven acts, visual parallels linked acts I and VII, II and VI, III and V. Using a classical structure, IV was the turning point. At this time, a Wilson script consisted of stage directions.<sup>4</sup> Wilson thinks big. Although he has also done small chamber pieces, his mythopoetic vision inclines to epic: *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDENIA TERRACE* lasted seven days.

Wilson began his professional career in New York in the 60s, a bubbling cauldron of artistic experiments that changed the face of theatre.<sup>5</sup> Happenings, postmodern dance, performance art, Warhol's movies – trailblazers explored the borders of art, questioned genres, pushed against limits. Collective scripting, communal living, erasing the barrier between life and art, exploring the word as sound, replacing character with everyday people performing everyday activities, rejecting the literary in favor of other theatrical codes, non-linearity, a return to ritual – these war cries of the avant-garde sum up the climate in which Wilson forged his first works.<sup>6</sup> "There was an energy in New York then," Wilson reminisces, "certain things going on that everyone fed off – painters, poets, writers, dancers, composers, directors. Cage liberated all of us" (*Lear*).<sup>7</sup>

But Wilson quickly points out how different his theatre was from the usual downtown fare. Once I suggested that his theatre came from the sixties. He replied:

No I came out of it. I hated the theatre in the 60s. 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 nineteenth-century theatre and vaudeville than with those groups. I was formalistic. I used the proscenium arch. My theatre was interior, and I treated the audience with cour-

tesy. When New York was going for minimalism in a big way, I was doing rich, baroque pieces like *Stalin* and *Deafman Glance*. (*Faustus*)

After graduating from the Pratt Institute of Art in 1965, Wilson worked with people suffering from a wide range of physical and mental handicaps.

I worked with hyperactive and brain-damaged children. Then I started working with people in iron lungs, many of whom were catatonic. I was hired to get the patients to talk. The director of the hospital thought it was important for the patients to communicate with each other and the staff. I worked there for two years, and at the end of that time I came to the conclusion that it wasn't necessary to try to encourage those people to speak. I worked with pre-school children in Harlem, with aged people in New Jersey, and with patients in mental institutions. In all these classes I wasn't there to teach anything, but to listen to find out what they were interested in and help them do whatever they wanted to do.<sup>8</sup>

The important point is that Wilson did not impose society's standards of normality on the people he worked with. Rather, by listening and looking attentively, by trying to understand them, he met them on their terms, not his, not society's. "I believe in autistic behavior," he declared.<sup>9</sup> Wilson recognized and respected differences, and this sensitivity to difference would later enable him to restructure theatre according to alternate modes of perception and communication.

Meeting one handicapped youth – Raymond Andrews, a deaf-mute, African American teenager – was the critical turning point in Wilson's career. Walking down a street in Summit, New Jersey, in 1968, Wilson saw a policeman beating a twelve-year-old boy over the head with a club. The boy was making strange, inarticulate sounds. Wilson intervened and accompanied the officer and boy to the police station. Later, he found out that the boy lived in two rooms with twelve other family members and had been declared uneducable. Wilson adopted the child to try to educate him. As it turns out, the child also educated Wilson. "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" (*Quartet*). Wilson explored Raymond's body language in workshops; deaf-mutes rely heavily on movement to communicate. From Raymond, Wilson learned how subtle and sophisticated body language can be. These explorations were to culminate in *Deafman Glance* – a play without words based on the drawings Raymond made to communicate with Wilson.

Using non-professionals and gathering round a group of disciples called the Byrds, Wilson created his early pieces through workshops that

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centered on movement and body awareness. "We felt we were working as much on the self as on the work," Sheryl Sutton recalls. "It was a process of personal growth. We started with movement to learn to listen with the body. It was like a laboratory. We were doing research on perception and communication. And each of us had a forte, something we did especially well, and he would incorporate it into the play. My shtick was floating."<sup>10</sup> By floating Sutton means a virtually seamless, invisible movement, movement so slow, so smooth, so controlled that the spectator is not aware that the person has been moving until, with a jolt, he realizes that the performer is on the other side of the stage.

"Directing," Wilson says, "is like bringing together in a kitchen different kinds of people who ordinarily wouldn't meet – different ages, talents, physical types, backgrounds. To make dinner you find out who can make chicken soup. Who can make spaghetti? Salad? Apple pie? Put it all together, and you have a good meal. Making theatre is an exchange. You learn from each other" (*Quartet*). Wilson keeps growing as an artist because he keeps learning from the people he works with. Wilson creates his pieces through a workshop process, generating the material by working closely with collaborators. "I don't think in the abstract," he says. "I have to see it in the concrete to respond. I create best in a rehearsal room filled with people, not alone in my loft" (WWDA).

*Deafman Glance* – the signature piece of this first period – begins with a silent prolog: on a white platform, her back to the audience, a mother (Sutton dressed in a black Victorian gown) stands next to a bottle of milk on a high, white table (see figure 1). Reading a comic book, a little boy sits on a low stool. On the floor, a little girl sleeps, covered by a white sheet. The mother, wearing red gloves, puts black gloves over them. In extreme slow motion (the prolog takes forty-five minutes), she pours milk, gives it to boy, returns to table, picks up knife, gently stabs boy, wipes knife clean. Stage left, an older brother (Raymond Andrews) witnesses the event. He screams. The ritual – first milk, symbol of life, then murder – is repeated on little girl. Older brother screams again. The mother puts her hand over his mouth. Traumatized by witnessing the murders, he loses the gift of speech. Gray drop, showing a cracked wall, goes up, revealing a magic forest with a pink angel walking backwards. Nine ladies, elegantly clad in white Victorian gowns with white birds on their fingers, listen to "The Moonlight Sonata." The boy enters this dreamworld. Wonders ensue: A giant frog – dapper in velvet smoking jacket and cravat – lounges at a banquet table, sipping martinis nonchalantly. Men with yellow fish on their backs float across a red river. A magic bench flies the boy through the air (see figure 2). A giant bee and giant bunny wiggle and bump to the



1 The slaughter of the innocents: Sutton performing the ritual murder in the prolog to *Deafman Glance*.

pop tune "Mutual Admiration Society." An ox swallows the sun, his stomach glows, his head falls off. Nine apes crawl up from the ground. As Fauré's *Requiem* sounds, apes pick up red apples. George Washington and Marie Antoinette stroll in. The queen's parasol bursts into flames. Apples float into space. Stars fall from the heavens. Drop comes down as a banjo strums "When You Are in Love, It's the Loveliest Night of the Year."

Designed by Fred Kolo, one of Wilson's principal collaborators in the early days, the set drew on nineteenth-century stage craft: scenery painted on flat canvases using classic perspective. Kolo also cites the painting techniques of René Magritte and Edward Hopper as influences. Both painters represented objects with a simplified realism based on form, color, and light. "By being grounded in *trompe-l'œil* painting, the set created a place you had never been before but where all these strange events seemed plausible," Kolo says.<sup>11</sup>

Launching Wilson's international career, the work stormed America and Europe. European critics showered kudos on it. Louis Aragon lauded

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2. *Deafman Glance*. Raymond Andrews sailing through the air in Wilson's magic forest. By comparing the trees in this scene with those in *The Forest* (figure 37), one can gauge how the geometric aesthetic came to dominate. In later productions, tall abstract verticals signify trees. For the sake of contrast, in his highly abstract *King Lear*, Wilson used a real tree for Gloucester's death scene. The old man walked into the tree and merged with nature, joyfully seeking the release of death. Wilson loves trees and pores over books with photographs of trees from all over the world.

it as a "miracle," a work to "heal congealed art": "The spectacle has recourse to new methods of light and shadow, to machines reinvented from before the Jansenism of the eyes . . . It criticizes everything we have become accustomed to. *Deafman Glance* is an extraordinary mechanism of liberation, liberation of the soul, liberation of the body."<sup>12</sup> In discussing *Deafman Glance* Susan Sontag recalled:

My first encounter with Bob's work was *Deafman Glance* in Paris in 1971. I went to the opening and went back every night. I was enraptured. I saw it with a shock of recognition. I had never seen anything like it before, but it was what I had always longed to see without knowing it. I needed to experience theatre with that



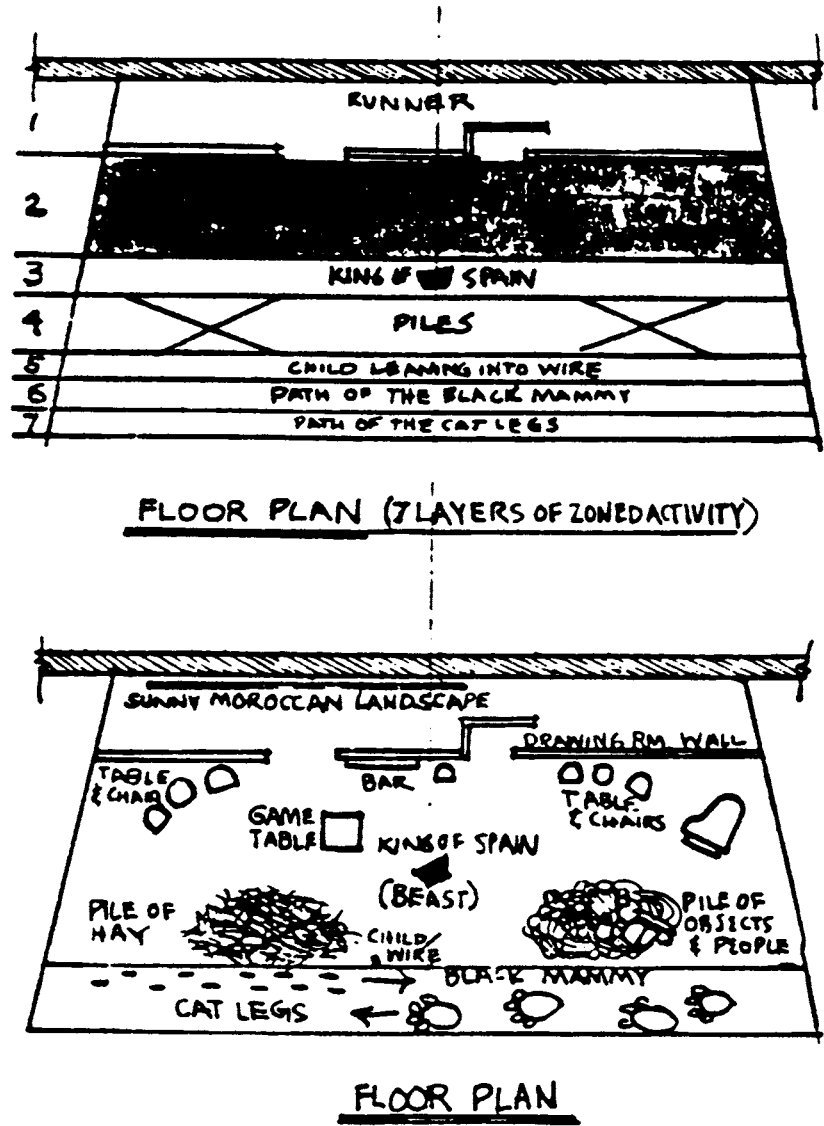
rhythm, that intensity, that beauty. Why is Wilson's work important? It's profound and profoundly visionary. It has the signature of a major artistic creation. I can't think of any body of work as large or as influential. To be so prolific, to have such a large palette, to do so many different things is part of his genius. His is the great theatre career of our time.<sup>13</sup>

After the success of *Deafman Glance* Wilson, who had considered himself a painter, contemplated a career in theatre.

Underneath the surrealist fairy tale, the images bodied forth an archetypal pattern of death and rebirth. Inspired by Raymond's drawings, *Deafman Glance* dramatizes a child's attempt to grapple with the mysteries of life ending and life beginning. Before their murder, Bird Woman, albeit detached, shows concern for her children's physical well-being: she feeds them. Who is this Bird Woman, she who gives life and death? "I don't know," Wilson demurs. "By turns I see her as a mother, a priest, an angel of death. Maybe she's Medea. It's not a violent murder. It's tender. She's a mystery. I try to open up, not narrow down meanings. There are many interpretations" (*Quartet*). "I never thought of it as evil," Sutton notes. "No emotion was implied. No anguish. No suffering. It was more subliminal. I thought of it as a ritual, like a mass. Raising and lowering the knife was like raising and lowering a chalice." Sutton's allusion to the chalice used in the mass cuts to the heart of *Deafman Glance*. The mass – Fauré's *Requiem* is the musical climax of the piece – centers on the violent murder of a Passover lamb: Christ. His blood, symbolized by the wine in the chalice, purifies, cleanses, renews. This symbology knits up together in a *complexus oppositorum* images of destruction and creation, death and rebirth. Through death, life lives. Through violence, violence is transcended. Images of violence and ritual sacrifice thread through the work: the hut burns and collapses into the earth, the innocent ox, like a scapegoat, is offered up. The sacrificial victims are both human and animal. As a symbolic act, sacrifice exhibits contradictory aspects: it is both a sacred duty and a criminal act. "Violence and the sacred," René Girard argues, "are inseparable."<sup>14</sup> From the outset, Wilson's imagination has been epic, poetic, mythic, and deeply spiritual.

Part of the appeal of the early work was its naivete, a naivete that, while never totally lost, ebbed as formality and refinement increased. Technically, *Deafman Glance* shows characteristic Wilson touches. A stage divided into horizontal zones parallel to the proscenium (see figure 3). Processional movement in straight lines across these zones, creating layers of activity. The additive process, which gradually fills a space with energy and people, then gradually empties it out. Formal design replaces a chronological story line. A kaleidoscope of images explodes on stage.

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3 The floor plan for *The King of Spain*, showing the stage divided into zones of layered activity parallel to the picture plane.

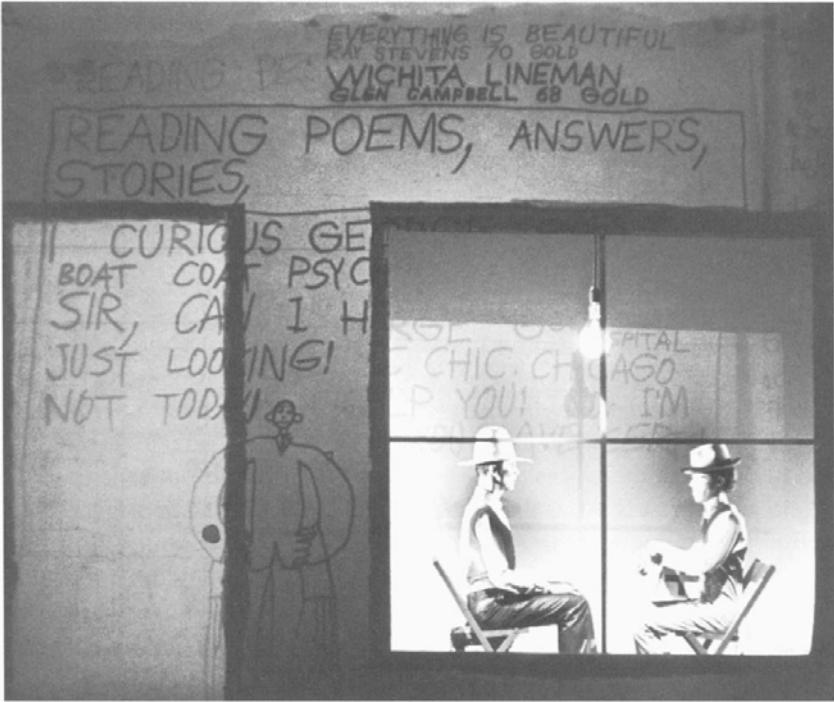


Instead of a traditional narration, these images explore a sensibility: they express the inner life. Wilson moves the theatre away from drama towards lyric poetry.<sup>15</sup> The play took place in what Wilson calls “the time of the mind”; the slow movement installed a trance-like state. And from this stage, language was banished. Silence reigned. In the program Wilson quoted Ezra Pound: “And the fourth, the dimension of stillness and the power over wild beast . . .”

#### DECONSTRUCTING LANGUAGE

If in the first period Wilson ignored language, in the second he deconstructed it, toying with its foibles. If in the first period Raymond, a deaf-mute, was his muse, in the second Chris Knowles inspired him, an autistic child who plays with language like a jigsaw puzzle, arranging and rearranging the pieces into unexpected patters and patterns according to sounds, visual architecture, and mathematical formulas. The second period begins with *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, although Wilson’s interest in the theatrical use of language had begun somewhat earlier, in, for example, the dinosaur chant for *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDENIA TERRACE*.<sup>16</sup> Some of Raymond’s unconventional writings had piqued Wilson’s curiosity about breaking linguistic codes and creating new ones. At this time, Wilson disbanded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds and began working more with professionals. He also assumed the role of playwright, generating scripts with Chris, including the *DIA LOGS* (see figure 4), and writing plays of his own like *I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating*, which incorporated rags and tatters of found language. Visually, his style evolves as well. In the first period, the stage pictures referred playfully to nineteenth-century illusionistic theatre (*The King of Spain*); to Edward Hicks and America folk painting (*Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*); and to childhood fantasy – children’s drawings and storybooks. In the second period, Wilson’s geometric aesthetic – minimalist in sympathy – sharpens. The range of color narrows: black and white and gray prevail. By restricting color, Wilson privileges architecture, line, design. The use of sidelight increases, etching the body in space. Visually the work becomes less “naive,” more sophisticated and formal, more abstract and elegant. In *I was sitting on my patio* all these elements are magnificently on display.

*Einstein on the Beach* (1976), the most celebrated work from this period, marks a date in cultural history. A mystical farce, *Einstein on the Beach* rampages through the absurdity of the human condition with unflagging brio and comic élan. It brings together music, dance, drama, and visual



4 Wilson, a tall Texan in a tall cowboy hat, and Christ Knowles, autistic savant, perform *DIA LOG / Curious George*. Note the concrete poetry scribbled on the walls like childish graffiti. *Curious George* was inspired by a child’s book about an impertinent monkey that Chris loved.

art in one big bang – the nuclear fission of theatre. The neutrons and protons of drama are still flying through outer space. Writing in *The New York Times*, Robert Brustein observed, “With this work, [Wilson] is launching the theatre into the unknown and the unknowable, in a way that makes our contemporary domestic plays look like ancient artifacts of a forgotten age . . . Like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain, we are beginning to discover that we have been speaking prose all our lives – and we have been listening to too much prose as well. But the nonlinear theatre fulfills some of the conditions of poetry by introducing us to the unexpected, and bringing us beyond the prosaic formulas of our social-psychological universe.”<sup>17</sup>

Einstein’s theory has given the twentieth century its name – the Age of Relativity, summing up our myths and shibboleths.<sup>18</sup> Relativity has so