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Robert Wilson, the leading American avant-garde theatre director, revolutionized the stage by making visual communication more important than words. His productions cut across the boundaries that traditionally have defined theatre, dance, opera, and the visual arts to create a total work of art. Wilson forces the spectator to question what theatre is and how it communicates.

This book, the first comprehensive study of Wilson, traces the evolution of the director's astonishing career as well as his complex relationship to language and his visual rhetoric. It explains how he renovated the stage and describes in detail major productions such as: *Deafman Glance*, *Einstein on the Beach*, and *the CIVILwarS*. Also, the psychological significance of Wilson's work, largely ignored until now, is considered along with his artistic goals, and a detailed analysis of the major themes and images that recur in his works.

The author, Arthur Holmberg, worked personally with Wilson and as a result of numerous interviews and first-hand observations of his creative process, has written an intimate, behind-the-scenes view of one of our greatest and most original directors.

Photographs and sketches from Wilson's private collection are included, along with a chronology of his work.

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DIRECTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

General Editor: Christopher Innes

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DIRECTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

What characterizes modern theatre above all is continual stylistic innovation, in which theory and presentation have combined to create a wealth of new forms – naturalism, expressionism, epic theatre and so forth – in a way that has made directors the leading figures rather than dramatists. To a greater extent than is perhaps generally realized, it has been directors who have provided dramatic models for playwrights, though of course there are many different variations in this relationship. In some cases a dramatist's themes challenge a director to create new performance conditions (Stanislavski and Chekhov), or a dramatist turns director to formulate an appropriate style for his work (Brecht); alternatively a director writes plays to correspond with his theory (Artaud), or creates communal scripts out of exploratory work with actors (Chaikin, Grotowski). Some directors are identified with a single theory (Craig), others gave definitive shape to a range of styles (Reinhardt); the work of some has an ideological basis (Stein), while others work more pragmatically (Bergman).

Generally speaking, those directors who have contributed to what is distinctly "modern" in today's theatre stand in much the same relationship to the dramatic texts they work with as composers do to librettists in opera. However, since theatrical performance is the most ephemeral of the arts and the only easily reproducible element is the text, critical attention has tended to focus on the playwright. This series is designed to redress the balance by providing an overview of selected directors' stage work: those who helped to formulate modern theories of drama. Their key productions have been reconstructed from prompt-books, revues, scene-designs, photographs, diaries, correspondence and – where these productions are contemporary – documented by first-hand description, interviews with the director and so forth. Apart from its intrinsic interest, this record allows a critical perspective, testing ideas against practical problems and achievements. In each case, too, the director's work is set in context by indicating the source of his ideas and their influence, the organization of his acting company and his relationship to the theatrical or political establishment, so as to bring out wider issues: the way theatre both reflects and influences assumptions about the nature of man and his social role.

Christopher Innes

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Seated on his *Parzival Sofa*, Robert Wilson compleat man of the theatre: director, dancer, playwright, performer, painter, sculptor, video artist, sound artist, set designer, lighting designer, choreographer.

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The theatre of Robert Wilson

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Dedicated to Robert Wilson
il miglior fabbro

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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 no 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 meanings of words.

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

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Chronology

The following chronology lists only premieres, not revivals. It includes only theatre. Wilson often uses unconventional spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in his titles. Furthermore, on different occasions he writes the same title in different ways. These variations often arise from a concern with visual design and graphic layout. In this work, Wilson's most frequent configuration is used.

- 1965 *Dance Event*, New York World's Fair, NYC.
- 1966 *Solo Performance*, Byrd Hoffman Studio, NYC.
- 1967 *Theater Activity*, Bleecker Street Cinema, NYC; American Theater Laboratory, NYC.
- 1968 *BYRDwoMAN*, Byrd Hoffman Studio, NYC.
- 1969 *The King of Spain*, Anderson Theater, NYC. *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, Brooklyn Academy of Music, NYC.
- 1970 *Deafman Glance*, University of Iowa, Iowa City.
- 1971 *Program Prologue Now, Overture for a Deafman*, Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris.
- 1972 *Overture*, Byrd Hoffman Studio, NYC. *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, Haft Tan Mountain, Shiraz, Iran.
- 1973 *King Lyre and Lady in the Wasteland*, Byrd Hoffman Studio, NYC. *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, Det Ny Theater, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- 1974 *DIA LOG/A MAD MAN A MAD GIANT A MAD DOG A MAD URGE A MAD FACE*, Teatro di Roma, Rome. *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, Teatro Caio Melisso, Spoleto, Italy.
- 1975 *DIA LOG, II*, Public Theater, NYC. *The \$ Value of Man*, The Brooklyn Academy of Music, NYC. *To Street (solo)*, Kultur Forum, Bonn, Germany.
- 1976 *DIA LOG, III*, Whitney Museum, NYC. *Einstein on the Beach*, Festival d'Avignon, France.
- 1977 *I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating*, Quirk Auditorium, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich. *DIA LOG/Network*, Spazio Teatro Sperimentale, Florence, Italy.
- 1979 *Death Destruction & Detroit*, Schaubühne, Berlin, Germany. *DIA*

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- LOG/Curious George*, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium.
Edison, Théâtre Nationale Populaire, Lyon, France.
- 1981 *The Man in the Raincoat* (solo), Schauspielhaus, Cologne, Germany.
- 1982 *The Golden Windows*, Kammerspiele, Munich, Germany. *Great Day in the Morning*, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, France.
- 1983 *the CIVILwarS: a tree is best measured when it is down*, Dutch Section (act I, scene B), Schouwburg Theater, Rotterdam, Holland.
- 1984 *the CIVILwarS*, Cologne Section (act I scene A; act III, scene E; act IV, scene A and Epilog), Schauspielhaus, Cologne, Germany. *the CIVILwarS*, Rome Section (act V, Prolog and scenes A, B, and C). Teatro dell'Opera, Rome, Italy. *the CIVILwarS*, American Section (*the Knee Plays*), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. *Médée*, opera by Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1693), Opéra de Lyon, France. *Medea*, new opera by Gavin Bryars and Robert Wilson, Opéra de Lyon.
- 1985 *King Lear* by William Shakespeare (workshop production). Stage One, Metromedia Square, Los Angeles.
- 1986 *Alcestis*, adapted by Wilson from Euripides, additional text by Heiner Müller, American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge MA. *Hamletmachine*, by Heiner Müller, New York University, NYC. *Alceste*, opera by C. W. Gluck (1776), Staatsoper, Stuttgart, Germany.
- 1987 *Salome*, opera by Richard Strauss, Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Italy. *Death Destruction & Detroit II*, Schaubühne, Berlin. *Quartett*, by Heiner Müller, Schauspiel Stuttgart at Ludwigsburg Palace, Stuttgart. *Parzival*, a play by Tankred Dorst and Wilson, Thalia Theater, Hamburg, Germany.
- 1988 *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, ballet by Claude Debussy, text by Gabriele d'Annunzio, Paris Opéra, Paris. *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, new jazz opera, Staatsoper, Hamburg, at the Kampnagelfabrik. *The Forest*, music by David Byrne, Freien Volksbühne, Berlin.
- 1989 *Doktor Faustus* (Faustus), new opera by Giacomo Manzoni, after Thomas Mann's novel, Teatro alla Scala, Milan. *De Materie*, new opera by Louis Andreissen and Wilson, Netherlands Opera, Amsterdam. *La Nuit d'avant le jour*, Paris Opera Gala, Opéra Bastille, Paris. *Orlando*, after Virginia Woolf's novel, Schaubühne, Berlin. *Swan Song*, Anton Chekhov, Kammerspiele, Munich.
- 1990 *The Black Rider* by Robert Wilson, Tom Waits (music/lyrics), and William S. Burroughs (text). Thalia Theater, Hamburg. *King Lear* (*Lear*) by Shakespeare. Schauspielhaus, Frankfurt.

Chronology

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- 1991 *When We Dead Awaken (WWDA)* by Henrik Ibsen. American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge MA. *Parzival*, opera by Richard Wagner. Staatsoper, Hamburg. *The Magic Flute*, opera by Wolfgang Mozart, Opéra Bastille, Paris. *Lohengrin*, opera by Wagner. Zurich Opera. *Grace for Grace* by Robert Wilson. Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, NYC. *Malady of Death*, after the novel by Marguerite Duras. Schaubühne, Berlin.
- 1992 *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* by Gertrude Stein, Hebbel Theater, Berlin. *Danton's Death* by Georg Büchner. Alley Theater, Houston, TX. *Don Juan último* by Vicente Molina Foix. Teatro María Guerrero (Centro Dramático Nacional), Madrid. *Alice*, after the novel by Lewis Carroll. Music and lyrics by Tom Waits; text by Paul Schmidt. Thalia Theater, Hamburg.
- 1993 *Alice in Bed* by Susan Sontag. Schaubühne, Berlin. *Madama Butterfly*, opera by Puccini. Opéra Bastille, Paris.
- 1994 *Der Mond im Gras: einmal keinmal immer* by Robert Wilson, after fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and the grandmother's tale from Büchner's *Woyzeck*; Kammerspiele, Munich. *Hanjo/Hagoromo*. Music and libretto for *Hanjo* by Marcello Panni; libretto after Yukio Mishima's *Five Modern No Plays*. Music and libretto for *Hagoromo* by Jo Kondo, after a text by Zeami. Teatro della Pergola (Maggio Musicale, Florence). *T. S. E.* by Robert Wilson, music by Philip Glass, text by Maita de Niscemi and Brad Gooch. Case di Stefano, Gibellina, Sicily (Orestyadi di Gibellina). *The Meek Girl* by Robert Wilson and Wolfgang Wiems after Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Théâtre MC 93 Bobigny (Festival d'Automne de Paris). *Skin, Meat, Bone: The Wesleyan Project* by Robert Wilson and Alvin Lucier. Theater Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown.

Unpublished quotations from Robert Wilson come from two sources: taped interviews listed in the endnotes or from the notebooks I kept during rehearsals. Since it is important to date each Wilson quotation in terms of the development of his career and techniques (assertions from one period may contradict those made later), the title of the production he was working on when he made the statement appears after the quotation. The title has been abbreviated for ease of reference as shown in the chronology above. The statement may have been made to a group of actors, a single actor, or to me in private conversation.