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**Wilson and Musical Collaboration: the
dramaturgy of music and musicians in Robert
Wilson's practice**

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Abstract

This dissertation looks to investigate the intricate dramaturgies of Wilson's practice by focusing on the devising process he has shared with a number of composers and sounds artists, namely Philip Glass, Hans-Peter Kuhn, Tom Waits, and Antony Hegarty. This will challenge the notion of Wilson being the sole author of "Wilsonian theatre," as well as argue for the importance of music within his practice. It will also engage with ideas of musicalization, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann, by performing a close analysis of several of productions that Wilson has directed, such as *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Christoph Gluck's *Alceste* (1987), *Orlando* (1989), *The Black Rider* (1990), *Madama Butterfly* (1993), and *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011).

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1.2 Einstein on the Beach 1976 project book, courtesy of the Robert Wilson Archive. Document part of the Robert Wilson Collection at the Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY. Photo by: Markee Cardwell-Rambo, 70.

Overview

When I was first introduced to Robert Wilson's directorial style in a 2006 revival of *The Black Rider* at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, California, I had little knowledge of Wilson's aesthetic before entering the theatre. I was very familiar with the score for the piece, as I had listened to the Tom Waits' album of the same title, which he had released in 1993. I, like many before me, was taken with the intense visual imagining of the staging, lights, costumes, and sets. The thing that lingered most in my mind after seeing this production was the particular manner in which the theatrical elements had come together. There seemed to be a precise way that the piece had been staged that had a certain musicality to it, which was entirely separate from the musical contributions from Waits. Each actors' gesture, pattern and shapes of lights, movement of props and set pieces, and the aural sound environment all felt as though it were attached to an invisible time signature, yet what was before me was distinctly different from what one might find choreographed in a musical, opera, or dance piece. It was clear that time and space were active components of Wilson's directorial style, and that they held just as much importance as the spoken text and musical compositions. This observation is what laid the seeds for the research for this dissertation.

After being introduced to Wilson's work, there were two things that had become readily apparent to me. Firstly, that music was integral to Wilson's work, and secondly that there was some method in which the theatrical elements were tightly woven together in order to form a compositional whole. In order to discover how these two aspects manifested themselves in Wilson's practice and if these two aspects

were interrelated, this thesis investigates the musical underpinnings of Wilson's theatre process and practice. By focusing on the musicians and sound artists that Wilson has worked with, the thesis challenges the idea of 'Wilsonian theatre' by demonstrating that Wilson's practice is deeply collaborative.

I decided that the best method to interrogate the relationship of music and musicians in Wilson's practice was by critically analysing the dramaturgy of the devising process of a number of pieces that Wilson directed. Because of my familiarity with *The Black Rider* (1990), I chose this as one of my case studies for this research. I thought that *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) would form a good counterpart to *The Black Rider* as it was devised early in Wilson's career, was significantly different in its form and structure as a classified opera, and because it had contributions by Philip Glass, which were musically different from Waits' style. Lastly, I chose a piece that Wilson had created with the sound artist Hans-Peter Kuhn, as I was aware that Kuhn had been a long-standing collaborator in Wilson's practice. I decided to use *Orlando* (1989) as a case study because it was contained a largely written and verbalised text based script. I also chose it because the piece was smaller in scale than the others, and because chronologically it fell in the middle of Wilson and Kuhn's collaborations with one another. In addition to this, I wanted to compare these older pieces with Wilson's contemporary practice in order to chart the progression within it, and therefore chose the piece he was working on during the completion of this thesis, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011), to analyse. In addition to these pieces, in which Wilson worked with a composer to create original music, I also wanted to look at Wilson's practice in relation to pre-composed music. I therefore turned to the operas that Wilson

directed, and decided to focus on Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1993) and Christoph Gluck's *Alceste* (1987).

In order to investigate the relationship with music in Wilson's practice I chose to conduct a close analysis of the collaborative processes between Wilson and the composers that I have named above. I did this by visiting Robert Wilson's Archives in New York City, the New York Public Library's Performing Arts Library, and the Butler Library's Robert Wilson Collection at Columbia University. At all three of these establishments I was able to watch original video footage of both the rehearsals and performances of my case studies. I was able to access documentation, notes, sketches, and correspondences between Wilson and the sound artists he collaborated with. The archival video footage for *Madama Butterfly* and *Alceste* was particularly valuable to this research because it showed hours of Wilson's 'silent workshops' that have been a major component of his theatrical processes, and allowed me to engage with Wilson's views on sound and the absence of it. I also conducted a personal interview with Hans-Peter Kuhn and attended a lecture given by Philip Glass. In addition to this, I attended rehearsals for *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, and watched the live performance at The Lowry in Salford, United Kingdom.

In order to interrogate the relationship of music and musicians in Wilson's practice, I firstly turned to Lehmann's theories on the postdramatic as a methodology, because he engaged significantly with Wilson's work in his theories as well as the concept of musicality, which I felt could shed light onto Wilson's musical and theatrical dramaturgy. The postdramatic is a thread that runs throughout the entirety of this thesis as a means to interrogate the manner in which Wilson and the artists he

collaborated with have built their theatre. I also used the music and performance theories of John Cage as a basis for my investigation of Wilson's work as a way to look at the link between physical actions and their aural counterparts within the framework of predetermined timings. In addition to these, I also used theories around dramaturgy, specifically as detailed by Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, as a means to explore Wilson's collaborative process, his practice, and the staged pieces that he has directed.

The first chapter of this dissertation engages with critical literature on Wilson, his practice, musicalization, and dramaturgy. Chapter two outlines Wilson's early history and practice from his childhood to the formation of the theatre collective, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. Chapter three isolates case studies of Wilson's theatrical collaborations in order to analyse the dramaturgy of the devising processes; these are *Einstein on the Beach*, *Orlando*, and *The Black Rider*. Chapter four focuses on his more recent working practice, with an emphasis on *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, and Wilson's work with staging classical operas, in order to investigate the use and value of musical collaboration within his practice.

Chapter 1

Robert Wilson and Critical Literature: musicalization, dramaturgy, and collaboration

“...what’s most important for me is your experience.”¹

- Robert Wilson on the role of the spectator.

The majority of academic research on the American theatre director Robert Wilson discusses his practice in relation to his theatrical vision; this thesis argues that Wilson’s work is equally entangled with music and soundscapes. By only defining Wilson’s work in relation to its visual attributes, this does not acknowledge the collaborative aspects of his theatre practice. This dissertation seeks to investigate the intricate dramaturgies of Wilson’s practice by focusing on the devising processes he has shared with a number of composers and sound artists. This will challenge the notion of “Wilsonian theatre” as containing a sole author, as well as argue for the prominence of aurality within his practice.

Laurence Shyer’s book, *Robert Wilson and his collaborators*, offers one of the few analyses of Wilson in relation to the musical artists with whom he has collaborated with, and focuses on Alan Lloyd, Igor Demjen, Philip Glass, and Hans-

¹ Wilson, Robert *Lecture* Video Recording. Tape 1(Warsaw: May, 1997) 00:97:20.

² Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators* (New York : Theatre Communications Group, 1989).

³ Ibid. 205.

⁴ Ibid. 208.

⁵ Ibid. 209.

⁶ Ibid. 213.

⁷ Ibid. 233.

Peter Kuhn.² Shyer explores the collaborative nature of Wilson's practice and offers a series of case studies that fall under the following five categories: performers, writers, dramaturgs and texts, designers, sound artists and musicians, and producers. Alan Lloyd, as Shyer claimed, was the first composer that Wilson worked with in 1969 on the production *The King of Spain*. Not only did Lloyd provide incidental music for Wilson's early productions but he also spent days sewing giant cat legs which appeared in the piece, and he ended up performing the title role.³ Early in his working practice Wilson worked with musicians who contributed to a variety of theatrical roles, outside of musical composition. Another musician who contributed to Wilson's practice was Igor Demjen who was the musical coordinator for *Deafman Glance* (1970), Wilson's self-proclaimed "silent opera."⁴ Damjen worked mostly with cassette tapes and stated that 'a lot of what I did was meant to enhance the silence, to focus the ears in a very subtle way.'⁵

Philip Glass collaborated with Wilson on *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976. Because of the acclaim that *Einstein on the Beach* generated for both of these artists, Shyer argues that Glass is the composer with whom Wilson is most closely associated, despite their limited number of collaborations.⁶ In contrast to Glass, Shyer claimed that Hans-Peter Kuhn was one of Wilson's most frequent collaborators.⁷ Kuhn first worked with Wilson on *Death Destruction and Detroit* (1979) and as Shyer described their collaborative relationship was not harmonious and was often filled

² Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators* (New York : Theatre Communications Group, 1989).

³ Ibid. 205.

⁴ Ibid. 208.

⁵ Ibid. 209.

⁶ Ibid. 213.

⁷ Ibid. 233.

with arguments. Shyer's book is primarily descriptive and although it offers valuable history and contextual information on Wilson's working relationship with the artists he has collaborated, it does not engage critically or analytically with the theatrical process itself, as this thesis intends to do.

Stefan Brecht's book, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, offers a detailed description of many of Wilson's early productions in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ As Brecht was a member of the collective Wilson founded, The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, his account is first hand as a participant and as a spectator. This book is a collection of interviews with Wilson, reviews of his work, Brecht's own reflections on working with Wilson, as well as systematic description of various productions. Even though Brecht's book highlights the collective devising processes of Wilson's early practice, Brecht designates Wilson as the author of the work produced by The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, as well as the founder of a new type of theatre making which Brecht identifies as the Theatre of Visions. The concept of a Theatre of Visions, does not engage significantly with the sonic aspect of Wilson's work, even though, as this thesis seeks to argue, the prominence of music and sound lay at the foundations of Wilson's practice. Both of these discrepancies are addressed in more detail in chapter two of this dissertation in which I consider Wilson's early practice.

Another major writing on Wilson's practice is Maria Shevtsova's book *Robert Wilson*, which offers a general overview of his life and work.⁹ The book features a description of Wilson's work from the 1960s to the 2000s, with a particular emphasis on *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). Shevtsova also devotes a chapter to what she

⁸ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (London: Methuen, 1978).

⁹ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007).

delineates as Wilson's methods, elements, and principles. Notably, she discusses Wilson's work in relation to its musical attributes claiming that '...his work is always musical, relying on rhythm, pitch, tone timbre, intonation, volume, cadence and pause...' since the premiere of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974).¹⁰ Even though Shevtsova acknowledges the collaborative nature and musical attributes of Wilson's practice, her book is primarily descriptive, and much like Shyer's book, does not interrogate the intricacies of Wilson's practice in relation to his fellow collaborators. This means that there is little supporting evidence in her book to substantiate this musical categorization, nor very little indication as to how this categorization may be useful in analysing Wilson's work.

Arthur Holmberg's book *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* categorises Wilson's practice around the use of language.¹¹ Holmberg discussed Wilson's use of language as a means to produce pure sound, thus an antithesis to that for semantic meaning.¹² Holmberg claimed that Wilson would string together words not as a means to transact meaning or content, but for their aural qualities, thus exhibiting as Holmberg puts it 'an almost Mozartian sense of classical composition.'¹³ Therefore Holmberg's structuring of Wilson's practice by language also focuses on the musicality of the aural components of the pieces. Even though Holmberg acknowledges the influence

¹⁰ Ibid. 36. I would argue that Wilson's preoccupation with sound and music began even before *A Letter for Queen Victoria* as evidenced in productions such as *Deafman Glance* (1970). Although this was a "silent opera", the idea of silence as an active component of musical composition and a way to open up space for unintended sounds is echoed in many of John Cage's theories on music.

¹¹ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 9-40.

¹² Ibid. 72.

¹³ Ibid. 72.

that collaborators such as Müller had on Wilson's practice, he still refers to Wilson as an auteur director, and consistently uses such terminology as 'Wilson's theatre.'¹⁴

Several other critical works contextual Wilson within his historical and cultural background by discussing him alongside his peers; namely Arnold Aronson's *American Avant-garde Theatre*, James Roose-Evans' *Experimental Theatre*, and Nick Kaye's *Postmodernism and Performance*. These books do not engage with his work in relation to its musical attributes, nor with the collaborative aspects of his practice.

In New York in the 1960s, Wilson was surrounded by a rich group of peers whose work formed a dialogue with Wilson's practice both directly and indirectly. These include, but are not limited to Richard Foreman, Jack Smith, Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Robert Rauschenberg, The Living Theatre, Meredith Monk, The Open Theatre, and Philip Glass. As Aronson claims Wilson is often discussed alongside the work of Richard Foreman because initially Wilson and Foreman's theatre were received as synonymous and 'critics often discussed them as almost identical; their names were even linked as if a single word: 'Foremanandwilson'.¹⁵ James Roose-Evans argues that Wilson and Foreman's practice are similar because they both can be seen as auteurs, however, this is something that will be challenged within this dissertation. Additionally, Roose-Evans classified the two directors as American New Formalists, which, as he defined

¹⁴ Ibid. 186.

¹⁵ Aronson, Arnold *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (London & New York, Routledge: 2000) 112.

are theatre makers who composed their pieces with an emphasis on form and structure.¹⁶

Aronson also claims that the filmmaker and theatre practitioner, Jack Smith, largely influenced Wilson and Foreman.¹⁷ He says that Jack Smith was best known for his film *Flaming Creatures* (1963); a film with screenings that were often populated with rioters or even banned from cinemas.¹⁸ Perhaps most notable for Wilson's practice was Smith's suspension of time in his films and performances.¹⁹ Smith built tension by including long pauses between dialogues, which sometimes lasted up to twenty minutes. Foreman recounts a conversation between Wilson and Smith saying: "...Bob came out and lamented, Oh Jack, this is going so terribly, what should I do?" and Jack, who had a very funny voice, said, 'Oh, just make it *s-l-o-w-e-r*, Bob, it should be *s-l-o-w-e-r*.'"²⁰ This type of exchange between artists was fundamental to the artistic environment that Wilson was a part of as illustrated in a quote by Philip Glass:

But in the SoHo of the early seventies I would do programs and benefit concerts with John Cage and Laurie Anderson and David Byrne and Bob Wilson...It would have been almost surprising if my music and his theatre didn't fit. We were experiencing the world of contemporary art, theatre and performance at almost the same time, we were having identical experiences. I can remember very clearly going to see a Richard Foreman play called *China Hotel* in 1971 and sitting with Yvonne Rainer, Richard Serra and Michael Snow – a dancer, a sculptor and a filmmaker. It was a completely ordinary thing to be in constant contact with people that way.²¹

¹⁶ Roose-Evans, James *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005) 115.

¹⁷ Aronson, Arnold *American Avant-garde Theatre*, 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 117.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 121.

²⁰ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 301.

²¹ *Ibid.* 231-232.

This quote illustrates both a direct and indirect dialogue between the art world of the seventies and the personal lives of the people that participated in it, this may have accounted for the collaborative and devising methods that arose from it, as many of the artists from the seventies developed a shared sense of participation which arose from being an audience member together, which was then translated into their practice. Nick Kaye also discusses Wilson alongside Richard Foreman in addition to Michael Kirby in his book *Postmodernism and Performance*.²² Kaye claims that unlike Foreman and Kirby, Wilson did not have the same link to artistic influences that Kirby and Foreman had, and that his development as a theatrical practitioner sprung from his involvement in using theatre for therapeutic purposes.²³ Kaye argues that the main thing that these three practitioners had in common was that they shared in the formulation of a type of theatre that displaced meaning and focused on the event of the theatrical experience.²⁴

Additionally in Kaye's book, he quotes Franny Brooks, one of the members of the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, as stating that Wilson was initially influenced by the music and theories of John Cage.²⁵ This is apparent in Wilson's use of silence, repetition, collage, and found artistic material. In Cage's book, *Silence*, he discusses some of his basic principles and theories on his interpretation of music. Firstly, in an article titled "Forerunners of Modern Music" (1949), Cage delineated definitions for many of his theories and concepts behind music.²⁶ Cage stated that musical material is

²² Kaye, Nick *Postmodernism and Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 1994) See chapter 3 titled "Looking Beyond Form: Foreman, Kirby, Wilson".

²³ *Ibid.* 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 70.

²⁵ Kaye, Nick *Postmodernism and Performance*, 48.

²⁶ Cage, John "Forerunners of Modern Music" *Silence* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 62-66.

comprised of sound and silence.²⁷ He further defined sound as containing four characteristics – pitch, timbre, loudness, and duration. He claimed that duration is the only aspect of the four that contain both sound and silence, as duration involves the alternation between the two. Many of Wilson’s early pieces contained large moments of silence, or used silence as a primary theme such as with *Deafman Glance*. However, Cage’s theories will prove integral to this research as his thinking influenced Wilson’s early work. As Natalie Crohn Schmitt claims in her article ‘John Cage, nature, and theatre’ Cage ‘thinks of his musical performances as theater.’²⁸ Crohn Schmitt compares Cage to Aristotle stating that both believed that art should imitate nature, but also identifies that their aesthetics are in opposition.²⁹ Aristotle discussed the idea of mimesis, a representation of the natural world on the stage, whereas Cage encouraged the listener to accept non-intentional sounds from nature as part of a composition.

In addition to the intermixing and socializing of various artists and disciplines in New York, there was also a social awareness during the art world in the 60s that aimed to challenge pre-existing performance methods. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty remarks when referring to the Judson Dance Theater it ‘emerged at a cultural moment when ideas about direct communication and unmediated interaction were brought into focus and invested with significance in a new way across a range of disciplines and contexts...’³⁰ This concept is found in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theories of the

²⁷ Ibid. 62.

²⁸ Crohn Schmitt, Natalie ‘John Cage, nature and theatre’ *A John Cage Reader* (New York, NY: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982) 17.

²⁹ Ibid. 19.

³⁰ Lambert-Beatty, Carrie *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2008) 24.

postdramatic, most prominently in the negation of language as the primary carrier of a narrative as experienced through a parataxis of theatrical materials.

Hans-Thies Lehmann refers extensively to Wilson's practice in his book, *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), in which he delineates the progression of a theatre practice that emerged in the 1960s; a theatre which demonstrated an awareness and rejection of the dramatic form. The emphasis for the postdramatic piece, he argued, lies in the handling of a text (whether it be written, visual, audio, et cetera) and does not need to exist solely to transact meaning or to provide a singular narrative.³¹ The majority of discussion surrounding Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre* is occupied by the dichotomy presented between postdramatic theatre and its proposed counterpart, dramatic theatre.³² Catherine Bouko in her article "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs" claims that Lehmann's theories have not been widely accepted in Europe, especially in France and that his work has been taken as the "putting to death" of the dramatic form.³³

Despite its mixed reception, *Postdramatic Theatre* offers a paradigm in which to discuss and situate Wilson's work in relation to its musical components.

Lehmann's section on the musicalization of postdramatic theatre identifies Wilson along with a handful of other practitioners who use form, structure, and composition

³¹ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre* trans Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006). 17.

³² The controversy of this book is addressed in Catherine Bouko's "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs" *Studies in Musical Theatre* vol 4 no 1 (Bristol: Intellect Limited, 2010) 75-76; Price B. Stegemann's "After Postdramatic Theatre" *Theater* vol 39, no 3, tran Price, Matthew (New Haven: Duke University Press, 2009) 11- 23; David Barnett's, "When is Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts" *New Theatre Quarterly* vol 24 part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Feb 2008) 14- 23.

³³ Bouko, Catherine "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs" *Studies in Musical Theatre* vol 4 no 1 (Bristol: Intellect Limited, 2010) 75-76.

as a primary means of devising a piece of theatre. Lehmann's book does not offer an analysis of musicalization in relation to Wilson's practice in his book. In light of this, I will refer to the theories outlined by Lehmann, with a particular emphasis on his theories of musicalization, to explore the dramaturgy of music in relation to Wilson's practice.

In Bouko's essay she challenged the notion of a strict binary between dramatic theatre and postdramatic theatre and argued that the majority of theatre exists on a spectrum between the two. In this article Bouko defined musicality, or *musicalité* in French, as the musical construction of the performance, or a piece of theatre that is constructed as music.³⁴ This is very similar to Lehmann's description of musicalization, or *Musikalisierung* in German, as identified through the quote by Eleni Varopoulou in Frankfurt of 1998:

...music has become an independent structure of theatre. This is not a matter of the evident role of music and of music theatre, but rather of a more profound idea of theatre as music.³⁵

Lehmann does not engage significantly with Varopoulou's quote, other than to state that musicalization is an important factor of postdramatic theatre as it aids in an emergence of auditory semiotics. However, this concept of musicalization does not clarify where music ends and theatre begins. Lehmann does not engage with this in his book other than by giving a few examples to demonstrate his point, such as the fact that Wilson tends to term his work as "operas."³⁶ This example further

³⁴ Bouko, Catherine "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs", 76.

³⁵ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*, 91.

³⁶ Bryan Simms supported the idea of *Einstein on the Beach* (as well as several other of Wilson's pieces) as an opera when he stated "These works approach the genre of opera except for their lack of dramatic narrative and traditional signing." Simms, Bryan R. *Music of the Twentieth Century: Style and Structure* Second Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group/Thomson Learning, 1996) 417.

complicates the idea of “theatre as music” and is something that I believe needs further investigation.

The idea of Wilson’s theatre as opera can also be discussed through the idea of the neomyth, which Lehmann offers as a postdramatic method where a production can transact meaning without providing a singular narrative through the use of shared mythology. Lehmann does state that this method is not exclusive to Wilson, nor to postdramatic theatre, but that theatre makers have been reinterpreting myths throughout the existence of the art form. Wilson reinforces the neomyth within his practice by directing classical operas in addition to his contemporary pieces. He maintains a similar aesthetic and production process when directing classical operas as he does with his devised pieces, and through this similar handling, argues for a link between the two. This does bring forth questions about Wilson’s process, and how similar these two types of productions can be when one has music that has been composed prior to the beginning of the production process, and one has music written during its creation. These questions will be explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis titled ‘Dramaturgies of musical collaboration in Wilson’s later practice.’

David Roesner discussed musicalization in his article “The politics of the polyphony of performance: musicalization in contemporary German theatre” and its use in devising and rehearsing, as an organizer of time, as well as the role it plays in spectator reception.³⁷ Roesner identified the particularities of postdramatic musicality when he stated that:

³⁷Roesner, David “The Politics of the Polyphony of performance: Musicalization in

Secondly, in comparison to a more implicit, ‘subcutaneous’ musicality, that any form of theatre could rightfully claim, the past couple of decades have seen a shift towards a more explicit and self-reflexive use of music, musical parameters and forms. There has been a stronger emphasis on the musicality that is inherent in theatrical speech, movement, sound, and structure.³⁸

His idea of a subcutaneous musicality is something that exists under the surface of scripted dramatic speech, and is placed in juxtaposition to a postdramatic musicality, which draws awareness to itself. He claims that postdramatic theatre emphasised the musicality of the spoken word at the expense of the semantic content. In this article Roesner looked specifically at what he termed *Sprechttheater* (spoken theatre). His first heading titled “Musicalization and Process” engaged with the use of musical logic in the rehearsal and devising process.

Roesner identified musicalization in the devising process as anything that was initiated with a musical idea, such as the use of a musical setting, or the use of a musical piece, which is later assigned spoken or written text. He does not distinguish this mode of devising from that of opera or musical theatre, which could also be argued, is composed in the same fashion. In addition, he does not differentiate musicalization from the term musicality, which could also be defined in a similar matter. He does identify musicalization as that which ‘reassesses theatre from a musical perspective’, which is one manner in which this dissertation will approach the

contemporary German theatre” *Contemporary Theatre Review* vol 18 no 1 (London: Routledge, 2008) 44-55. Roesner’s PhD also engaged with the idea of musicalization specifically in the work of Christoph Marthaler, Einar Schlee and Robert Wilson. He specifically looked at Wilson’s *HamletMachine* and how this piece was motivated by musicality. His PhD has not been translated into English but can be found under the German title “Theater als Musik. Verfahren der Musikalisierung in chorischen Theaterformen bei Christoph Marthaler, Einar Schlee und Robert Wilson” (Tu“bingen: Gunter Narr, 2003).

³⁸ Roesner, David “The Politics of the Polyphony of Performance”, 45.

use of this term.³⁹ However, taking the above into consideration one could define musicality as a piece of theatre that is composed in a similar method as music, in the broadest sense of this term. Musicalization can be defined a theatre which invites the spectator to view it as music, in a similar fashion as Cage invited his listeners' to accept non intentional sounds as musical material.

Lehmann also discusses the idea of a theatre after Bertolt Brecht, hereafter referred to as B. Brecht to differentiate between his son Stefan Brecht also referred to in this thesis, and claims that Heiner Müller considered Robert Wilson as B. Brecht's "legitimate heir."⁴⁰ He stated that postdramatic theatre is post-Brechtian because:

It situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new 'art of spectating'...It exists in a time *after* the authoritative validity of Brecht's theatre concept.⁴¹

Brechtian inquiries of representation refer to his theory that the fictive cosmos of a theatrical event can never become what it is trying to represent, but can only be a representation of the represented and that it should show an awareness of this fact.⁴² Although B. Brecht questioned many of the same principles of dramatic theatre that postdramatic practitioners also question, the primary difference between epic theatre and postdramatic theatre is that B. Brecht maintained a written text to transact

³⁹ Ibid. 46.

⁴⁰ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*, 32-33.

⁴¹ Ibid. 33.

⁴² This is seen with B. Brecht's theories on the alienation effect in which the spectator is distanced from the piece of theatre so as to attain a level of critical awareness of the act of spectatorship. These theories are apparent in the majority of B. Brecht's writing, however a basic clarification can be found in B. Brecht's charting of dramatic theatre against epic theatre in "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" and in B. Brecht's article "Street Scene" both found in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* tran & ed John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 33-42; 121-129.

meaning through the use of a fable. B. Brecht's narrative was episodic and sometimes fractured, but it still aimed to transact a political message. Additionally, Lehmann indicated that postdramatic practitioners challenged B. Brecht's ideas of representation and the role of the spectator, which of course had already been called into question by a number of academics and theatrical practitioners prior to them.⁴³

Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling position Wilson's practice in opposition to collaborative creation in their book *Devising Performance: A Critical History* by stating:

The work of Robert Wilson and Tadeusz Kantor, though employing modes of performance-making very different from the collaborative companies we have covered here (they are typically thought of as 'auteurs')...⁴⁴

With this statement Heddon and Milling are inferring that Wilson's practice is not the same as the rest of the collaborative work they engage with in their book, and label Wilson as an auteur. They differentiate between the terms 'devising' and

⁴³ Scholarly writing that interrogates B. Brecht's theories and music include: JH Calico's *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008). Calico discussed Brecht's relationship to music, but most specifically the genre of opera. Although Brecht claimed to be creating a new and modern theatre with epic theatre, Calico discussed various parallels that Brecht's model shared with classical opera, specifically with opera seria. Another academic is Martin Esslin in his book *Brecht: A Choice of Evils: A Critical Study of the Man, his Work and his Opinions* Third edition (London: Eyre Methuen Drama, 1980). This book appeared in the US in 1959 and was one of the first books that introduced B. Brecht to the Anglophone. Although Esslin does not interrogate B. Brecht's theories, he does discuss the controversies of B. Brecht's lifestyle and his theatrical practices (such as his various affairs and his proposed plagiarism). Additionally, Kenneth Fowler discussed the complication of the term *gestus*. In his book *Received Truths: Bertolt Brecht and the Problems of Gestus and Musical Meaning* (New York: AMS Press, 1992). This essay was written in response to the unclear definition given by B. Brecht and his composers regarding *gestus* and specifically its role in music. Fowler looked at the discrepancies between B. Brecht's own definitions of the word, especially as they evolved and contradicted one another, Fowler also interrogated the various definitions of *gestus* given by critics and academics who he claimed for the most part, were unfounded. Lastly, Kim Kowalke discussed the tension between B. Brecht's theories and that of his composers in "Singing Brecht vs. Brecht Singing: Performance in Theory and Practice." *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 5:1 (March 1993). B. Brecht developed many theories on how the music in his pieces were meant to be sung, however these seem to contradict the way in which the songs were composed and the theories discussed by the composers (specifically with Kurt Weill).

⁴⁴ Heddon, Deirdre & Milling, Jane *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 82.

‘collaborative creation’ in their book stating that:

When used in non-theatrical settings, ‘devising’ suggests the craft of making within existing circumstances, planning, plotting, contriving and tangentially inventing. By contrast, the phrase ‘collaborative creation’ more clearly emphasises the origination or bringing into existence, of material *ex nihilo*...At the core of all devising or collaborative creation is a *process* of generating performance, although there is an enormous variety of devising processes used.⁴⁵

In the above quote Heddon and Milling point out a distinction between devising and collaborative creation, stating that the later is the formulation of a piece of theatre through the act of shared creation. As Wilson has collaborated with a number of musical composers and artists, this dissertation will look at the dramaturgy of his practice in order to challenge the concept of Wilson as auteur and to help redefine the manner in which critical discussions engage with ‘Wilsonian’ theatre. Also, by looking at the musical collaborations, this dissertation will highlight and argue for the prominence of music within his practice.

Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrnt’s book *Dramaturgy and Performance* offers a definition of dramaturgy that is similar to the methodology that this dissertation will undertake. They define dramaturgy as a ‘...term for the composition of a work, ‘the internal structure of a production’, as well as, it would seem, a word for the collaborative process of putting the work together.’⁴⁶ They further state that it may:

⁴⁵ Heddon, Deirdre & Milling, Jane *Devising Performance*, 2-3.

⁴⁶ Turner, Cathy & Behrnt, Synne K. Behrnt *Dramaturgy and Performance* (NY, New York: Palgrave, 2008) 17.

...imply an engagement with the actual practical process of structuring the work, combined with the reflective analysis that accompanies such a process.⁴⁷

This dissertation will focus on the internal structure of the production and the collaborative processes of Wilson's practice through the use of individual case studies, and through a wider analysis of Wilson's practice. In as many cases as possible, the actual practical process will be engaged with, through the use of video recordings of rehearsals, rehearsal notes, correspondences, and published documentation from primary and secondary resources. In the cases of *The Black Rider*, *Einstein on the Beach*, and *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* I was able to attend a live performance, which is integral to theatre research. However, before the three case studies are analysed, the following chapter will offer a brief history of Wilson's life and early theatre practice.

⁴⁷ Turner, Cathy & Behrndt, Synne K. Behrndt *Dramaturgy and Performance* (NY, New York: Palgrave, 2008) 3

Chapter 2

Robert Wilson and his early theatre practice: history and context

Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.

John Cage⁴⁸

This chapter will outline Wilson's early history up until the point of his first major commercial success, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). It will argue for the collaborative nature of Wilson's early theatre practice and investigate the use of sound in relation to his self-termed "silent operas." This chapter also identifies the influence of John Cage on Wilson's early career and contextualises Wilson within the culture and history of New York in the 1960s and how this affected the early development of his own collaborative process.

Robert Wilson's early history

Robert Wilson was born in Waco, Texas in 1941.⁴⁹ He was born into a strict Southern Baptist family who attended church every Sunday. His father, Digid M. Wilson, served as Mayor, a city manager and leader of the community in Waco. The

⁴⁸ Cage, John *Silence*, 12.

⁴⁹ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 1.

idea of leadership was strongly maintained in Wilson's life from a young age. Wilson described his mother, Loree, as being 'cold, distant' because she engaged in 'almost no personal communication' and often dressed in formal attire.⁵⁰ He also had a younger sister named Suzanne.

As a child Wilson suffered from a speech impediment that left him self-conscious of his own ability to speak and engage with his peers. Wilson's only friend was a boy named Leroy who was the African American son of a woman who worked in his household.⁵¹ They grew up together from the ages of nine to seventeen, and spent almost every day together. Wilson had to hide this friendship with Leroy because Waco was segregated and his father was embarrassed of the relationship. Wilson would join Leroy at his African American church services where he was introduced to, what seemed to him, a new style of music and religious culture. When Wilson's sister talks of their childhood she says:

From my earliest memory of Bob, he's always directed. He would, um, have me stand in chairs and sing little songs, like I'm a little teapot, and he just always had a project, circuses or plays and different kinds of clubs and he would be the founder of it, and the organizer of it. He never really talked about that he wanted to be a director, he just did it.⁵²

Wilson confirms this by saying 'I think what I was always good at is kinda organizing people. And then letting other people do something.'⁵³ From an early age Wilson adopted the role of a leader and began arranging people into various forms of activities.

⁵⁰ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson: The Biography* Video Recording (Prestel: Film Manufactures, 2006) 00:05:00.

⁵¹ Ibid. 00:08:46.

⁵² Ibid. 00:10:50.

⁵³ Ibid. 00:11:23.

The ballet instructor Byrd Hoffman, who taught children in Waco, cured Wilson's speech impediment when he was seventeen.⁵⁴ Wilson claims this was his first contact with an artistic person. In order to help Wilson with his stutter, Hoffman told him to take more time when trying to talk. She helped Wilson explore his own capacity of movement as a means to combat his speech difficulties. Wilson discussed the techniques that Hoffman used in order to help him when he says:

...she noticed I was, that I was very, very tense all through the shoulders and through here and she talked to me about the energy in my body, about relaxing letting energy flow though...she would play the piano and-and I would, I would just move my body.⁵⁵

Hoffman's influence on Wilson's life can be followed throughout his early theatre career, most notably with the naming of his theatre collective, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, and the names and the characters in his early productions, along with the methods used during his workshops.

After Wilson graduated from High School, he began working with children in a devised theatre setting.⁵⁶ In 1959 Wilson began a pre-law course at the University of Texas, but dropped out in 1962 because as he states, 'I know I want to do something else – I just left.'⁵⁷ When Wilson dropped out of University, he also came out to his father as a homosexual, and admitted that he wanted to be an artist; all things he felt his father would disapprove of. His father's immediate response to this was that he wanted to 'cure' Wilson's homosexuality. It was at this point that Wilson left Waco for New York City.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 00:11:45.

⁵⁵ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 15.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 15.

Wilson, Cage, and New York

When Wilson first moved to New York in 1963 to study architecture at the Pratt Institute, he was introduced to a variety of different artistic events, however the work of George Balanchine at the New York City Ballet and the collaborations between John Cage and Merce Cunningham attracted his attention the most.⁵⁸ Wilson claims that the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham was a primary influence on his own theatre practice.⁵⁹ Cage's influence on Wilson's practice is echoed in a quote by Franny Brooks, a member of the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, when she discusses the effect Cage had on Wilson's work:

These early pieces were very sparse, - I think he was influenced a lot by John Cage around this time,... the concert where he played one note,... he was very strongly influenced by this kind of minimalist, you know, thinking.⁶⁰

This aesthetic can be located in a number of Wilson's early works during which the smallest of movements were given upmost significance. For example this approach is found in the 1969 production of *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*. The performer, Sheryl Sutton, wore a black Victorian gown with a raven on it and kept her eyes at a forty-five degree angle for forty minutes.⁶¹ Moments before the conclusion of the piece, she lifted her head and looked directly at the audience, at which point the curtain fell. As Wilson notes, this was significant because prior to this point no eye contact had been made with the audience by any of the performers.⁶² Because this was the final action of the piece, it served as a reminder to the audience of their role

⁵⁸ Shevtsova, Maria, *Robert Wilson*, 2.

⁵⁹ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:05:33.

⁶⁰ Kaye, Nick *Postmodernism and Performance*, 48.

⁶¹ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:54:40.

⁶² *Ibid.* 00:54:40.

as a spectator. Sutton's action returned the spectators' gazes back upon themselves to emphasize the theatricality of the moment.

One of Cage's major theories argues that all sounds could be considered musical material if one decides to listen to them in this manner. In his talk titled 'The Future of Music: Credo' given in 1937 Cage states 'Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.'⁶³ According to Cage, it is the act of listening that becomes the active component of musical reception. Cage is claiming that listening is the primary aspect in musical reception, and it is how the listener perceives the sound that qualifies it as music or noise. This was based on Cage's discovery that silence, for a functioning ear, cannot exist. In 1951 he went into an anechoic chamber that blocked out all sounds; he could still hear his nervous system operating and the circulation of his blood.⁶⁴ Cage's discovery led to theories on musical performativity as Arnold Aronson identified:

...if there is no such thing as silence, then any action may produce sound or may structure the hearing of sound; thus all action is, in a sense, music and, by reverse implication all music is action.⁶⁵

In this quote Aronson supports Cage's theory that all sounds can be music if listened to as such, but also argues that all actions can also be perceived as music if linked to their corresponding sound. This is because all sounds require an action for their ignition; therefore all music is preceded by a corresponding action. If Cage argues

⁶³ Cage, John 'The Future of Music: Credo' *Silence*, 3.

⁶⁴ Aronson, Arnold *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 32.

that all sounds could be considered music, then this should be inclusive of all of their corresponding actions.

John Cage began writing music in the early 1930s and continued until his death in 1992, ultimately producing around 350 pieces.⁶⁶ Cage studied with Henry Cowell, Arnold Schoenberg, and Oskar Fischinger from 1934 to 1937.⁶⁷ In 1938 Cage moved to Seattle and began working at the Cornish School. He also started composing for Bonnie Birds' dance company, where Merce Cunningham was a student.⁶⁸ Bonnie Bird recalls the collaborative processes that took place with Cage:

It was mostly talking back and forth, but it wasn't simultaneous. It was as though he sat at the piano and I was on the floor working with the dancers. He would watch what I was doing, frequently, and then he was no doubt making mental notes – maybe he even fiddled around at the piano at times – but usually we talked and he wrote something, and then we tried it out.⁶⁹

This description of Cage's early devising process establishes the independent yet collaborative nature of his compositions. This is seen with the verbal discussion between Cage and Bird, the independent devising of the music by Cage and choreography by Bird, and then the collaborative working out of these two components in conjunction with one another. Cage was involved with three theatrical pieces while at the Cornish School: *The Marriage of the Eiffel Tower* (1938-39), *Imaginary Landscape* (1939), and *Bacchanle* (1940).

⁶⁶ Fetterman, William *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996) xiv.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 5.

Cage and Cunningham were officially introduced at a New Year's Eve party in 1941 when a friend of Cage's suggested he should compose music for a duet with Jean Campbell, a principle soloist with the Martha Graham Company, and Cunningham.⁷⁰ Cage recalls that by the end of the night, he and Cunningham had agreed to work on a piece together, and they discussed the logistics of this collaboration. As Cage states:

So there was the plan, how would Merce and I work together? Well, neither of us wanted to be choreographed, we both wanted to choreograph, so what we did was to agree on two or three duet ideas, and then each of us compose our own parts.⁷¹

This statement highlights the ethos behind Cage and Cunningham's working relationship. They agreed on a separate but equal collaborative status. Often the first time that Cunningham would hear a Cage score for a piece he had choreographed was on the opening night. As Wilson says 'the dancers didn't rehearse with a sound score in most cases. It was by chance one found relationships between the two.'⁷² Cunningham affirms this by saying of his work 'that music and dance could be separate entities independent and interdependent; sharing a common time.'⁷³ Thus the commonality of Cunningham's choreography and Cage's compositions were primarily found within the time and space that the two shared, and any other similarities were left to chance.

The two men felt that their artistic components should be created independently from one another, so that they could hold equal collaborative status; neither wanted to

⁷⁰ Ibid. 11.

⁷¹ Ibid. 12.

⁷² Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:06:27.

⁷³ Cunningham, Merce 'A Collaborative Process Between Music and Dance' Brent, Jonathan; Gena, Peter; and Gillespie, Don (eds) *A John Cage Reader: In celebration of his 70th birthday* (New York, London and Frankfurt: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982) 107.

be the director or auteur. Although the above piece, *Credo in Us*, was their initial collaboration, Cunningham marks their 1944 recital *Four Walls* as being their first piece together. It was performed only once at the Perry-Mansfield Workshop in Colorado.⁷⁴ Cunningham states that firstly he and Cage decided on the length of *Four Walls* and then composed their own components separately using the “square-root formula.”⁷⁵ Cage defined the square-root formula as music that was composed of micro and macrostructures of temporality that had a larger unit as well as segments of smaller units.⁷⁶

From the mid 1940s to the 50s Cage and Cunningham presented annual concerts of their pieces. In 1953 Cunningham formed the Cunningham Dance Company, where Cage was an active composer until his retirement from the company in 1988.⁷⁷ Cage and Cunningham became renowned for composing pieces called events or happenings. These events were fostered from Cage’s *Theatre Piece I* (1952) at Black Mountain College, which was a collaboration between Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Olson and various other artists. Cunningham then participated with the Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s.⁷⁸ The Judson Dance Theater fostered the careers of a number of female choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti as well as Lucinda Childs who was featured in *Einstein on the Beach*. In addition to being an informal collaborative dance environment, the Judson Dance Theater also explored and challenged the existing spectator and performer relationship. For example, Rainer was often praised and criticised for her

⁷⁴ Ibid. 14.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 108.

⁷⁶ Fetterman, William *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces*, 15.

⁷⁷ Fetterman, William *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces*, xv.

⁷⁸ Sayre, Henry M *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 103.

lack of engagement with the audience. While she danced she ignored her spectators by not meeting their gaze, thus exhibiting a dancer who dances for herself, and not for the recognition of the audience. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty argues:

Displaying the moving body for you, without any attempt to seduce or affirm you, does not remove dance from the condition of exhibition, after all. It reduces the performance situation to the fact of display.⁷⁹

She argues that Rainer was not trying to ignore her audience by not meeting their gaze, but was challenging her relationship with them. She was not a dancer dancing for herself, but a dancer dancing for herself with the addition of an audience. She was someone who was inviting others to watch her dance for herself.

The spectator's gaze is also something that is reflected in Wilson's reception of Cage and Cunningham's work in the 1960s when he states that:

I liked it because it was something I could easily hear and see...and it was very curious as how what I saw was so different from what I heard. And how these two things together, standing independently could reinforce one another.⁸⁰

This disjunction yet synchronicity that Wilson speaks of can be seen in Cage's theories on chance operations. The music and the choreography were premeditated as independent mediums, and it was only by chance that the two would mirror, reflect or reinforce one another. Cage and Cunningham would often work from the same formulaic equations for devising, so some of this paralleling between mediums could be attributed to the structures they were contained in. Wilson states that he was attracted to Cage and Cunningham's work because he could easily hear and see it, and

⁷⁹ Lambert-Beatty, *Carrie Being Watched*, 8.

⁸⁰ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:05:50.

this also how he refers to his own work. For example, when asked what music meant for his own practice in an interview in *Ear Magazine* he said ‘We hear and we see. These are the two primary senses with which we relate to one another.’⁸¹ This concept is also reflected in Cage’s own theories when he states:

I would simply say that theatre is something which engages both the eye and the ear. The two public senses are seeing and hearing; the senses of taste and odor are more proper to intimate, non-public situations.’⁸²

Both Wilson and Cage define their concepts of theatre as being visual and aural, above anything else. When Cage’s music is spoken of without its visual component, or Wilson’s visual theatre without its audio counterpart, a fundamental aspect of their theatre is being neglected. Thus Cage’s quote at the beginning of this chapter comes into play when he states, ‘Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.’⁸³ Just as with Aristotle, Cage argues for the purpose of art to resemble reality. He also views theatre as the most active artistic medium to capture this because it stimulates all of the senses, but especially the aural and visual.

While Wilson acknowledges the influence that Cage and Cunningham left on his work, he also claims that his own practice is different because, although he used chance at the beginning of his creation process, he carefully constructed his pieces during the final stages of rehearsals.⁸⁴ Despite this, there are numerous parallels

⁸¹ Dalton, Jody ‘Robert Wilson: Seeing the Forest for the trees’ *Ear Magazine: New Music News* (vol. 13, no. 8, 1988) no page number given.

⁸² Fetterman, William *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces*, 21.

⁸³ Cage, *John Silence*, 12.

⁸⁴ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 2, 00:36:55.

between Wilson's practice and Cage and Cunningham's. This can be seen in both of their theatre processes that are constructed with alternating moments of collaboration and isolation, the use of rhythmic structuring for devising, and how these methods actively break down communication between performer and spectator.

While Wilson was still studying at Pratt Institute for his architecture degree, he earned money working with brain damaged hyperactive children with the Department of Welfare.⁸⁵ Since these children often had difficulty learning tasks such as tying their shoelaces and learning the alphabet, Wilson did simple exercises with them, like having them look at their hands and crawl.⁸⁶ Stefan Brecht stipulates that much of Wilson's early theatre practice was developed from these types of sessions, which had originally been inspired by Hoffman.⁸⁷ Wilson's work with children led him to explore movement, performance, and interactive sculpture that caught the eye of the choreographer Jerome Robbins who invited him to teach movement classes at the American Theatre Laboratory.⁸⁸

Wilson graduated from Pratt in 1965 with a degree in architecture. Wilson says he did not want to be an architect, but that he completed the degree because he was interested in the logic and thinking that was incorporated with it. After graduating from Pratt, Wilson was unsure of his future, and decided to go back home to Waco.⁸⁹ Upon returning home, he became clinically depressed. Wilson went to a small town close to Waco and tried to commit suicide by taking fifteen sleeping pills and a bottle

⁸⁵ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 34.

⁸⁶ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 17.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 212.

⁸⁸ Aronson, Arnold *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 124.

⁸⁹ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:21:30.

of Whisky. At some point during this act, he called a friend in New York, who got in touch with his sister. His sister found him passed out and took him to a hospital. After this incident Wilson was placed in a mental institution, and as he remarks, formed an affinity with the aesthetics of the building and enjoyed being alone.⁹⁰ He was released on a Friday afternoon and left the next day to go back to New York. In 1967 Wilson began working for the Goldwater Hospital for the terminally ill.⁹¹ He was hired to encourage the patients to speak, fifty of whom were in iron lungs and catatonic. Because many of the patients at Goldwater Hospital were paralyzed, Wilson began working with what movements they could do, which were mostly small actions with their hands or faces.

The influence of Hoffman during Wilson's childhood and his work with brain-damaged children and adults underpinned much of Wilson's early theatre career. This is reflected in his later staged work where he showed an interest in engaging with non-performers and people with learning difficulties, and his use of structural composition instead of a singular narration as a means of formulating theatre. Cage and Cunningham's practice also left an imprint on Wilson's devising process as can be seen in his separate but equal approach with the artists he collaborates with and his focus on the visual and the aural as the two primary preceptors of human interaction.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 00:22:45.

⁹¹ Ibid. 00:24:30.

Wilson's early practice and the Byrds

In 1968 Wilson established the theatre collective, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, hereafter the School of Byrds. They worked and performed at the 147th Spring Street Loft in Manhattan, which was previously home to The Living Theater.⁹²

Wilson set up a series of workshops where he explored movement and performance exercises, similar to those he had used with the brain damaged children he worked with.⁹³ In order to advertise these workshops, Wilson created a Xeroxed sign that read 'Workshops for all ages. Movement – Sound – Dance – Music' thus identifying that his exploration would centre on the physical and the aural.⁹⁴ The School of Byrds was primarily comprised of non-performers. Sheryl Sutton, one of the Byrds, states that during these workshops:

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.⁹⁵

The term "theatre collective" is somewhat misleading when referring to the School of Byrds, because the activities enacted were not focused on building theatre activity, but on the semiotics of the human body. This highlights Wilson's active use of a negation of meaning during the devising process. By working with performers and encouraging them to disrupt the meaning of their actions, it makes them unstable signifiers. This contributes to a parataxis of signs by identifying the performer as a player who aims to interfere with the transaction of meaning. Brecht also notes that

⁹² Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:29:16.

⁹³ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 7.

⁹⁴ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:30:06.

⁹⁵ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 4.

much of the work with the Byrds, especially the earlier work, had a limited number of performances, thus shifting the focus from the product of a piece to the process.⁹⁶

Charles Dennis, one of the Byrds, discussed the collaborative nature of the School of Byrds' open houses that took place on Thursday evenings. He claims a variety of people would walk in from the street; some of them non-performers and others of them were established artists such as Spalding Gray, Douglas Dunn, Jerome Robbins, and Joan Jonas. These open houses largely consisted of playing popular rock music over loud speakers and encouraging the participants to express themselves physically in whatever way they wanted. He says:

There was a piano up in the loft and people like Bob Telson, who at the time was working with Philip Glass, would come and jam. Sometimes people would use sounds or words while they were dancing. There were also places to go off and talk – the office and basement – and a lot of collaborations got formed.⁹⁷

This description highlights two major components of the creative dynamics of the School of Byrds. Firstly, even though Wilson organised the formation of the group, the emphasis was on self-expression and artistic collaboration. Secondly, both movement and sound were the primary performance materials used during the School of Byrds' open houses.

Within the same year of establishing the School of Byrds, Wilson met another primary influence on his theatre practice, a boy named Raymond Andrews. Wilson was in New Jersey and stumbled upon a policeman beating a young boy with a club.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 199.

⁹⁷ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 33.

⁹⁸ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 3.

Wilson claims that the policeman was threatening to club the thirteen-year-old Andrews because he threw a stone through a church window.⁹⁹ Wilson quickly recognised that the sounds the boy was making was that of a deaf mute and ran to the boy's rescue. He went back to the police station with Andrews, and eventually the child was released to him. He escorted Andrews back to his home, which was a two-room apartment with thirteen people living in it.¹⁰⁰ Andrews was at risk of being put into a home for young delinquents because none of the people living with him realised he was a deaf mute. Wilson was told that if Andrews had a legal guardian then he might not be institutionalized. Wilson adopted Andrews and began integrating him into the workshops and performances at the School of Byrds.

The Byrds began to expand their Thursday night workshops into performances and premiered their first piece titled *Baby* (1967).¹⁰¹ It was roughly one and a half hours long and the theme of a baby was repeated at various points in the piece. In one section the rails of a toy train were suspended in the air and Wilson lay underneath them, moving like a baby in a crib. At another point, Wilson metamorphosed his body by gradually increasing its size with strips of coloured plastic, thus physically “growing-up” as a child would.¹⁰² At the conclusion of this piece, an un-played piano was illuminated with a photo of a baby placed upon it. Liba Bayraks, a Byrd, described this piece as having no dialogue, however each segment seemed largely reliant on its fixity to the duration of Bob Dylan's album *Bringing it all Back*

⁹⁹ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:08:15.

¹⁰⁰ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:37:20

¹⁰¹ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 31. Please note that the date given by Brecht for this piece is an approximation.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 32.

Home.¹⁰³ The piece opened when the beginning of this record was played and when a new song began; at times it instigated a new action on the stage. For example, when the song ‘Maggie’s Farm’ began to play, Wilson entered the performance space and began to walk across a thin, elevated plank of wood. Thus the duration of these songs were used as a vehicle to propel the actions forward.

Another piece, *ByrdwoMAN* (1968) was performed in the Byrd Loft and in the alley of Great Jones Street.¹⁰⁴ The first part of this piece was set in the Byrd Loft, which was covered with hay, and had wires and boards stretched across the performance space. Wilson played the part of the Byrdwoman. He entered through a window from outside the fire escape to a song from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Jill Johnston’s review identifies the song as the ‘ape music’, which either refers to Gregory Ligeti’s *Requiem* or Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. The second half of the piece was performed in an alley outside. The audience was transported from the loft in trucks adorned as hay wagons. In this section Wilson and Meredith Monk performed a dance in the alley, which was largely out of sight of the audience members. At the end of the piece a rock band came in and played live music while the audience members were encouraged to dance along.

Wilson’s next major piece, *The King of Spain* (1969), was approximately three hours long and was set in a stage space that resembled a Victorian drawing room.¹⁰⁵ At the centre of the stage sat a man, the King of Spain, with his back to the audience.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 31. Please note that Brecht provided two different spellings of Bayraks’ forename on the same page, as both Libe and Liba.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 37.

¹⁰⁵ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 216.

Throughout this piece a chair extended from above, a boy stood motionless on a stool, a blind man played chess, a photographer took pictures, and a performer was dressed as a walrus. At one instance a pair of giant cat's legs, which were stretched from the top to the bottom of the proscenium arch, walked across the stage. Towards the end of the piece, the King of Spain turned to face the audience, revealing a grotesque face and long ratty hair. Luis Arata observed the performing score of *The King of Spain* was constructed for the individual performers and not the other way around.¹⁰⁶ This is further supported by Sutton when she explained that '...each of us had a forte, something we did especially well, and he would incorporate it into the play. My Shtick was floating.'¹⁰⁷ Sutton's "floating" was used in a number of pieces, perhaps most notably in *Deafman Glance* where she performed a slow and methodological murdering of her children. She was attired in a long Victorian dress so that her feet were not visible, thus giving the impression that she was gliding across the stage. In this sense the actors and their abilities became active creators within the devising process.

The next major piece by the School of Byrds was *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, hereafter shorted to *Freud*. It premiered in 1969 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York and ran for slightly under four hours. Act one was comprised of a beach scene, with sand covering the stage and a projection of the sky on the backdrop.¹⁰⁸ The performers enacted various activities such as running, crawling, dancing, and lounging, while crossing the stage. The act ended with twenty

¹⁰⁶ Arata, Luis O 'Dreamscapes and Other Reconstructions: The Theatre of Robert Wilson', *Kansas Quarterly*. Date Unknown. Contained in the Robert Wilson Collection at Butler Library, Columbia University, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 425.

to thirty performers, including Wilson, dressed in blackface as “black mammies” who danced to Strauss’s ‘Blue Danube’ in the sand. The middle act contained a reworked and shorted version of *The King of Spain*. The third act of *Freud* was comprised of a cave filled with performers behaving as animals. There were several other scantily clad performers, who basked in the sunlit ambiance. At one point a set of bars separated the animals from the humans. A performer dressed as Freud entered amongst the wild animals and sat at a table, at which point a young boy knelt at his feet, weeping.

Although Wilson described this piece as silent, Brecht noted that there were two hidden microphones that picked up footfalls, glasses tinkling, chairs moving, as well as a sequence which played recorded seagull calls accompanied by the slap of a rope on the floor to mimic the ocean waves.¹⁰⁹ Wilson affirms this by claiming that one of the chairs had a microphone on it and there was a microphone rigged next to glasses filled with ice cubes. He stated that he did not want the amplification to be apparent to the spectators.¹¹⁰ Wilson claims that sonically the last act can be read as a culmination of all of the previous sounds since the animal noises, ocean sounds and hum were performed at the same time.

The School of Byrd’s next full-length production, *Deafman Gance*, premiered in 1970 at the University of Iowa, and was four and half hours long. Another production in New York in 1971 lasted eight and a half hours because it included *Freud* as part of its fourth act. Another version, which took place in Rome, as Brecht

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 46.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 403.

identified was of a “normal theatre length,” which could be taken to mean roughly two hours long.¹¹¹ As with *Freud*, Wilson classified *Deafman Glance* as a “silent opera,” despite the fact that it contained a rich soundscape. Some of the sounds that Brecht notes in his description of the piece include: a low hum, heavy bell like chords which operate as the magician’s motif, the *Moonlight Sonata*, sounds of ice cubes in a shaker, forest noises (made by paper clips), gongs, bells tinkling, sounds of the ocean, organ music, signing wine glasses, the pop tune ‘Mutual Admiration Society,’ Fauré’s *Requiem*, the song ‘When you’re in Love, It’s the Loveliest Time of the Year’ played on an accordion, and a muted scream.¹¹² The muted scream is significant because Andrews performed it, which as Brecht notes, is the only kind of scream a mute is capable of.¹¹³ With the exception of the sounds that were performed live during the performance, the rest were captured on a cassette tape by Igor Demjen, one of Wilson’s early composers, who typically mixed these tapes live during performances.¹¹⁴ Demjen had just begun a music degree at the University of Iowa when he began working with Wilson. Demjen was influenced by Cage’s reflections that any sound could be music, and was working with recorded sounds, looping, splicing, and synthesizing. When discussing the music for *Deafman Glance* Demjen says:

You must remember that because of the silence every step was audible. The crux of the performances was quiet, attention and mutual respect. Every sound, every noise, every single uttered syllable became part of the work’s rhythmic beat. So a lot of musical things had to be toned down so they didn’t draw attention to themselves...A lot of what I did was meant to enhance the silence, to focus the ears in a subtle way.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ibid. 197.

¹¹² Ibid. 54-83.

¹¹³ Ibid. 101.

¹¹⁴ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 208.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 208-209.

For example, Demjen composed a piece titled ‘Tape’ which lasted the length of one of the acts in *Deafman Glance* and was comprised of a high pitched continuous noise accompanied by deep rumbles, that he claims went largely unnoticed by the audience. The term ‘silent opera’ could be misleading, especially when considering Cage’s theories on silence. This concept of a ‘silent opera’ will be challenged even further in the fourth chapter of this thesis when Wilson’s work on classical opera’s is interrogated. Wilson claims that he uses a ‘silent-workshop’ within his processes, but his concept of silence only extends as far as the performer’s voices.

In addition to the above-mentioned soundscape in *Deafman Glance*, there were several moments of verbalised text. Wilson recited a tale of an occult experience into a microphone while he was seated at a banquet table along side several other fantastically attired performers.¹¹⁶ Another performer seated at the banquet table had a set of cards with phrases written on them, and at the performer’s discretion would speak the lines written on them.¹¹⁷ A performer dressed as a waiter sneezed at one point, which was followed by a man wearing one large eye who said ‘don’t sneeze.’ A woman with a bird stated ‘Don’t take my plate. I want the bones’ when the waiter began to clear the table.¹¹⁸ A man dressed in black and a woman seated opposite him engaged in a dialogue that was partially unintelligible, and in multiple languages. As Brecht notes, the verbal texts in *Deafman Glance* were:

...appendages of the images, like the balloons in comic strips. That they are spoken into microphones, electronically transformed and transmitted through amplifiers located away from the speakers enhances their character of quotations.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 63.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 64.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 65.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 113.

Brecht describes the verbal text as secondary to the visual images. For him they did not offer an authority in the story telling, but were additions and enhancers to the actions taking place. Brecht's interpretation of the soundscape is dependant on the corresponding images, which was not necessarily the case. For example, Wilson's account of an occult experience does not have a direct semantic tie to the visual images or actions that took place. Brecht's observation of an alienation between the sound and the instigator highlights the intentional displacement of sound from its image. By electronically projecting and moving the voice away from the performer it drove a wedge between the spoken word and the act of speaking, thus presenting the two as separate artistic materials.

When referring to *Deafman Glance*, Brecht states that the creative process was a collaboration throughout:

A delicate process during the working-up of the show of mutual adaptation to externally minor vagaries of expression that individual members of the group come up with – in a spirit of membership – makes for a (secondary) collective authorship: the show is not only Wilson's and Andrew's.¹²⁰

This description of the School of Byrd's theatrical process challenges the idea of Wilson as auteur. Demjen further supports this when he states: 'The great thing about the Byrd Hoffman Foundation was that it was so deeply collaborative. On the inside this was well known but on the outside it was always Robert Wilson's work, which it never was.'¹²¹ An example of this can be seen in the collaborative processes between Wilson and Demjen when building audio scores for the theatre pieces. The two of them would sit and listen to Demjen's recordings and together would decide where

¹²⁰ Ibid. 109-110.

¹²¹ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 211.

they should appear within a piece. As Demjen says ‘It’s very hard to say whose ideas were whose.’¹²²

The next major piece by the School of Byrds was titled *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE, a story about a family and some people changing* (1972), hereafter *KA MOUNTAIN*. The length of the show lasted one week continuously. It was performed in Shiraz, Iran at the Haft Tan foothills leading to Persepolis.¹²³ The piece was structured for thirty members of the School of Byrds and twenty Iranians. The Byrds constructed the piece in only one month. The time was so limited because Wilson had been jailed in Greece for the possession of hashish while trying to board a plane.¹²⁴ Instead of cancelling the epic one hundred and sixty-eight hour show, he worked on the plans while in prison and smuggled out sketches to the rest of the Byrds. Wilson was eventually released and the show was put into production.

For *KA MOUNTAIN* the spectators were encouraged to follow the Byrds over the seven mountains, all the while encountering symbolic imagery such as Noah’s Ark, the Sphinx, American suburban houses, dinosaur footprints along the pathway, and a Western Saloon. During the final moments of *KA MOUNTAIN*, the top of the seventh mountain was blown up with dynamite and the set erupted into flames. Lehmann refers to this mixing of imagery as the neomythical, that which exhibits ‘a kind of universal history that appears as a multicultural, ethnological, archaeological *Kaleidoscope*.’¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid. 210.

¹²³ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:87:46.

¹²⁴ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:46:42

¹²⁵ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*, 79.

Various activities were enacted throughout the journey over the seven mountains. For example, one actress spoke continuously for twenty-four hours and performed any actions she chose to. Brecht recounted his experience working on the piece claiming that each participant had a particular activity that they would engage in. Additionally:

There was an hour by hour schedule (rehearsals consisted largely in Bob telling people what they were to do during what hour), it could be consulted on the wardrobe walls: a few things were actually rehearsed during the week preceding the show. Bob (Wilson) stood in the wings, sending people in, sending messages to the lighting booth, to Igor on the tapes... Nicolas Baltram maintained his lotus position for 24 hours. Cindy who had shaved her hair like a Jewish bride, stayed out front throughout...¹²⁶

There was flexibility in the types of activities, and each action was largely reliant on the strengths of the Byrd performing it, but *KA MOUNTAIN* was underpinned by a strictly timed schedule that was propelled forward by Wilson's structuring of time. Wilson had also erected a stage space on one of the mountains that consisted of a platform, proscenium arch, but had no structured backdrop. Instead the natural scenery of the mountains could be viewed behind the performers. Performances were enacted in this stage space continuously throughout the seven days and nights. Brecht also referred to the use of a glass-covered booth. He recounted that the soundscape was more or less filled with auditory drones and stated that there were typically four to six performers in the booth during the entirety of the piece reading from self chosen texts into the microphones.¹²⁷

After *KA MOUNTAIN*, the School of Byrds staged another "silent opera" titled *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), hereafter *Stalin*, which was created by

¹²⁶ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 195.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 195-196.

compressing *Freud, King of Spain*, and *Deafman Glance* into a singular performance.¹²⁸ It was twelve hours long, had a cast of one hundred and twenty eight people, took nine months to devise, and had a total of seven acts.¹²⁹ It was at this point in Wilson's career that he met the autistic teenager, Christopher Knowles, who he cites is the fourth major influence on his practice after Cage, Cunningham, and Andrews. Wilson was first introduced to Knowles' work through a cassette recording given to him by George Klauber, a previous teacher at Pratt, during a School of Byrds open house.¹³⁰ The cassette tape was filled with recordings of Knowles' unintelligible utterings that were dominated with repetitions of "Emily likes the TV." The repetitions that were seemingly random were in actuality carefully calculated by a complex mathematical formula.¹³¹

After hearing this recording, Wilson wanted to meet Knowles so he invited him and his parents to a production of *Stalin*.¹³² Knowles and his parents came back to meet Wilson before the performance. Wilson asked Knowles if he would like to perform that night, and Knowles agreed. Wilson invited Knowles onstage during the first act of *Stalin* approximately twenty minutes after the beginning of the piece and recited "Emily likes the TV, Em Em Em Em" to which Knowles responded with a segment of his tape.¹³³ Knowles' fascination with text and its structural attributes could be due to his outstanding talents. Apparently Knowles' IQ tests revealed an extraordinary ability to identify patterns and structures, but a difficulty with

¹²⁸ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:92:10.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 00:26:44.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 00:20:45.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 00:39:10.

¹³² *Ibid.* 00:29:10.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 00:36:03.

language.¹³⁴ Wilson stated that Knowles would be able to look at a room and could immediately know the exact number of seats. He could also know the precise number of words on a page with a single glance.¹³⁵ Before meeting Knowles, Wilson rarely incorporated large sections of spoken text in his work, however Knowles' writing allowed him to use text as a structural unit, instead of for semantic transaction.

The first example of this can be seen with the next School of Byrds' production titled *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974), hereafter *Queen Victoria*, which incorporated spoken text throughout. Wilson would bring found dialogue into rehearsal and have the performers read through the material, alternating between each person, and cutting the ends off of their lines in order to make them fit into the time allocated for each scene.¹³⁶ This method illustrates Wilson's use of language for its aesthetic qualities. This also shows Wilson's consideration of time as a structural component of his devising process. Instead of using the end of a sentence to determine a finite amount of time, Wilson had predetermined the length of a segment prior to the construction of the sentence. Other than the found dialogue, Knowles wrote most of the text for this piece.¹³⁷

It had four acts with a preface and epilogue, and was accompanied by continuous music played by a string quartet, flute and voice.¹³⁸ This was the first time Wilson used continuous scored music in one of his productions. Alan Lloyd and Mike Galasso composed the music for this piece. Laurence Shyer describes Lloyd as

¹³⁴ Arata, Luis O 'Dreamscapes and Other Reconstructions: The Theatre of Robert Wilson', 78.

¹³⁵ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:46:12.

¹³⁶ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 273.

¹³⁷ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 1, 00:46:47.

¹³⁸ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 12.

being the first composer who Wilson worked with.¹³⁹ Lloyd made his appearance in the School of Byrds production as the title character in *The King of Spain*. At this same point he began providing incidental music for Wilson's pieces, sometimes from a piano onstage and sometimes from off in the wings. Also, with *Queen Victoria* Wilson first incorporated the audition process. This was partially used as an attempt to disband the School of Byrds, as it was only the more professional and trained Byrds who were cast in this piece.¹⁴⁰ In comparison to previous pieces, the cast and crew were small, totalling fourteen people including Wilson and Knowles.¹⁴¹

Wilson's use of found material was inclusive of all areas of his life, including his personal one, as seen with the use of one of his family members in this production. When *Queen Victoria* was on tour in Europe, Wilson called his grandmother and invited her to play the part of Queen Victoria in Paris.¹⁴² He met her at the airport and as they were driving back Wilson asked how she was and she said 'oh I'm pretty good... You know Bob I have to take nine pills a day to stay alive.' and proceeded to describe the pills. When she asked if she had any lines in Wilson's play, he told her she could say what she just said.¹⁴³

As with the previous pieces from the School of Byrds, the aural components of *Queen Victoria* played a large factor both in the live performances and during the rehearsal processes. In reference to the soundscape for *Queen Victoria*, Brecht states that:

¹³⁹ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 205.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 61.

¹⁴¹ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 268.

¹⁴² Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:01:03.

¹⁴³ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 2, 00:03:20.

...*Letter* worked only, - even more so, - by the right rhythm of the dialogue, shifting from scene to scene, for each scene subconsciously settled on by the performers by mutual adjustments, guided by the music, over a period of rehearsals and performances, and by some feel – that seemed to come about by itself – for the right tone.¹⁴⁴

The cadence of the dialogue was given more significance than the semantic meanings, especially since a large portion of the dialogue was nonsensical or did not point to any particular signifier. Additionally, Brecht states that many of the performances were guided by the continuous music that played throughout. This, just as with earlier productions, sees Wilson's use of scored music as a means of marking durations of actions.

In addition to this, Brecht discussed the collaborative processes that took place between Wilson, Lloyd and Galasso for the music for *Queen Victoria*, as he states:

Alan Lloyd wrote the music off on his own in the U.S. while we were on tour with *Stalin* after attending only a few early rehearsals. Mike Galasso, the chef d'orchestra adapted his mailed scores to the evolving stage performance. My feeling was, Wilson didn't care what music he got.¹⁴⁵

This apparent indifference resonates with Cage and Cunningham's devising processes. The idea that Wilson 'didn't care' could perhaps be better articulated in that he wanted to develop a parataxis of aesthetics and did not want his staging to be directly informed by the musical compositions. Brecht further supports this theory when he comments on Wilson's relationship to the sound stating:

...but the mikes, tapes and sound systems were consistently bad. Wilson also wanted the music loud, and while he consistently spent scarce time lavishly on lighting and relighting, he could not find time

¹⁴⁴ Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions*, 275.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 275.

to work on the sound: as though he didn't want the words understood.¹⁴⁶

This shows a conscious abandonment of transacting meaning through semantic forms. This example of theatre making, just as with many of Wilson's contemporaries, aimed to offer a parataxis of meanings without offering an authority over their authorship.

This can also be seen with Wilson's collaborative process, where no particular member of the creative team had ownership of the piece. This separation during devising allows for the simultaneity of meanings to be projected. In addition to the postdramatic theories elucidated by Lehmann, this relationship with semantic signification can also be paralleled with Cage's theories on listening:

New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds.¹⁴⁷

Just as Cage encouraged of the listener, Wilson also challenged the use of words as semantic signifiers in theatre and argued that words could also be used for their aural attributes. Wilson, and his peers, challenged preconceived notions of the spectator-performer relationship. When the performer's role negated signs or offered a multiplicity of them, the audience was invited to take on a greater sense of authorship. As Barthes discussed, in his seminal work 'The Death of the Author,' once a sign is identified and used solely as a mediator to transact meaning, the author dies.¹⁴⁸ If a signifier were disrupted, unidentified, or offered a multiplicity of meanings, then the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 276.

¹⁴⁷ Cage, John *Silence*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Barthes, Roland 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 142-148.

author could exist throughout the devising and reception process. In Wilson's theatre, and with his postdramatic contemporaries, the author dies when the spectator begins writing his/her own narrative, and not beforehand.

As seen with the concept of the neomyth in *KA MOUNTAIN*, the majority of Wilson's productions centre on fables or historical figures such as Einstein, Queen Victoria and Sigmund Freud. Wilson says of the neomyth in his work:

Men of the theatre like Euripides, Racine, and Molière frequently wrote about the gods of their time. I think that figures like Sigmund Freud, Joseph Stalin, Queen Victoria, and Albert Einstein are the gods of our time. They are mythic figures, and the person on the street has some knowledge of them before he or she enters the theatre or the museum space. We in the theatre do not have to tell a story because the audience comes with a story already in mind. Based on this communally shared information, we can create a theatrical event.¹⁴⁹

The use of the neomyth also aids in breaking down the narrative, because many spectators already know the story; the myth does not need to be contained within the narrative. By using the name of the historical figure in the title of the piece, Wilson encouraged the spectator to come to the theatre with his or her own memories and stories related to the person in question. Thus in Wilson's practice the figures of Einstein, Queen Victoria and Freud were placed alongside Medea, King Lear and Orpheus. This statement also identifies Wilson's view of the spectator as a final collaborator within his practice, and challenges the concept of Wilson as auteur.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, Robert & Eco, Umberto 'Interpretation and the Work of Art' *Conversations on Art and Performance* eds. Gautam Dasgupta and Bonnie Marranca (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 172-173.

In May of 1975 the Byrds dissolved, even though the performers within the School of Byrds were resistant to this.¹⁵⁰ Many of the Byrds were dependent financially, emotionally, artistically and socially on the School of Byrds, and it was difficult for them to not be a part of it. Wilson expressed that he no longer wanted to work with large groups of people and by this point had already begun weekly meetings with the minimalist composer Philip Glass to discuss a collaboration of a major opera, later to become one of Wilson's most renowned pieces, *Einstein on the Beach*. Although this saw the end of his work with the Byrds, he did continue to work with some of the members of the troupe, most namely Sutton and Andrew de Groat, and continued to employ the use of untrained performers. At this point in Wilson's career he began working with highly skilled performers and creative minds such as Glass and the dancer Lucinda Childs. Maria Shevtsova contributes part of this shift to a sense of professionalism found with his recent success in Europe and the fact that the French Ministry of Culture offered to sponsor *Einstein on the Beach*.¹⁵¹ This added a pressure of commercial success that had not previously existed with his work with the School of Byrds.

The above history only captures a small portion of Wilson's early productions as a means to outline his early practice. Both Wilson and Cage viewed the two primary aspects of theatre as those linked with sight and sound. The role of sound in Wilson's theatre supplies a variety of signs, which often challenges or negates the surrounding artistic materials by offering contradictory interpretations. Additionally, the collective collaboration shared by the School of Byrds means that further interrogation and examination should be made of terminology such as "Wilsonian

¹⁵⁰ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:01:05.

¹⁵¹ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 13.

Theatre” and the concept of Wilson as an auteur-director. The following chapters will offer a further investigation of the collaborative process between Wilson and the composers he has worked with as a means to unpick this delicate balance and reframe Wilson’s practice.

Chapter 3

Wilson and Musical Collaboration: 1976-1990

But you have to realize that a lot of what Bob does is collaborative...That's one aspect of his genius is the ability to bring, um, people from all different cultures and different arts together to create these works.¹⁵²

- Geoffrey Wexler, Wilson's previous Archivist

This chapter investigates Wilson's relationship with the musicians he has collaborated with, and how these partnerships influenced the development of his theatre practice. Thus, by following the process of his production meetings, rehearsals, and performances from three pieces that Wilson has directed, this chapter identifies the musical dramaturgies of Wilson's practice. In particular this chapter will explore the relationship between Wilson and three musicians that he has worked with, and will focus how collaboration factors in to his theatre processes.

This chapter contains three pieces from Wilson's extensive oeuvre, in order to explore the foundations and early development of his working process. The first piece, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), with music composed by Philip Glass, is perhaps

¹⁵² Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:34:55.

one of Wilson's most acclaimed productions. This opera is well represented in scholarly discussion, but despite this there has been little attention paid to the working relationship between Glass and Wilson and how this affected the dramaturgy of the opera. The second production, *Orlando* (1989) is rarely discussed in academic literature. This piece was created with Wilson's long-standing sound artist Hans-Peter Kuhn. This piece falls in the middle of their collaborative working relationship, and adds a different model of collaborative devising to the narrative of Wilson's practice. Also, *Orlando* was adapted from a novel written by Virginia Woolf, unlike *Einstein on the Beach* that was not developed from a written text. The third piece, *The Black Rider* (1990), was Wilson's first collaboration with the musician Tom Waits. Unlike *Einstein on the Beach* and *Orlando*, the music in *The Black Rider* is not continuous but instead exists within self-contained units, similar to musical theatre numbers. In addition, Waits was a well-established musician at the time of this collaboration, which offers another perspective onto Wilson's collaborative practice. This chapter will scrutinise each case study in isolation and examine the relationship between Wilson and the composers he has collaborated with during the devising and rehearsal processes. It will consider his working relationship with his collaborators and how it is reflected in the performances. The analyses of specific productions will help to uncover the musical dramaturgy of Wilson's practice, which will be explored in a wider context in the following chapter.

Case Study 1: *Einstein on the Beach*

History and Context

Einstein on the Beach is one of Wilson's most cited pieces in academic literature, in light of this, the following section will offer a minimum of contextual description and focus on the musical attributes and collaboration between Wilson and Glass to form a dramaturgical analysis.¹⁵³ *Einstein on the Beach* was originally produced by The Byrd Hoffman Foundation, which had formed out of the disbanding of the School of Byrds. Glass and Wilson devised the piece, and it had texts written by Christopher Knowles, Samuel M Johnson, and Lucinda Childs, all of who performed in the piece, with choreography by Andrew de Groat. Rehearsals began in December of 1975 and lasted for three months.

It premiered in France at the Festival d' Avignon in 1976 and toured to Venice, Brussels, Paris, Hamburg, Amsterdam and then concluded its tour at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. It was revived in 1984 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music where it subsequently toured around the United States, Melbourne, Barcelona, Madrid, Tokyo, and Paris. It began its most recent tour in 2012 in the United States, France, Italy, England, Canada, Mexico, the Netherlands,

¹⁵³ This literature includes, but is not limited to: Glass, Philip *Opera on the Beach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988); Duckwork, William ed. *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and five generations of American experimental composers* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1999); Glass, Philip 'Composing for the Opera' *Conversations on Art and Performance* eds. Marranca, Bonnie & Dasgupta, Gautam (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999); Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007); Brecht, Stefan *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (London: Methuen Drama, 1994); Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his collaborators* (New York : Theatre Communications Group, 1989).

and China.¹⁵⁴ The piece is four hours and forty-eight minutes long, without an intermission. It is comprised of four acts with scored continuous music. The orchestra is comprised of electric organs, flutes, a piccolo, a saxophone, a clarinet, and a violinist dressed as Einstein, in addition to a small chorus of twelve singers.

Philip Glass: The Composer

Philip Glass was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1937. He received his musical education from the Julliard School in New York. Glass claims that his work in Paris with his teacher Nadia Boulanger and his work with the Indian musician Ravi Shankar were most influential on his work.¹⁵⁵ After this, he began composing theatre music, which led him to work in New York, and to eventually establish the Philip Glass Ensemble in 1968.¹⁵⁶ Glass is often discussed as one of the leading composers of the musical minimalist movement, but Glass claims this was not the case:

If you were in New York in 1967-68, it wasn't clear at all who the three important composers were. The way people look at that history is very skewed now. What was really going on was that there was a generation of composers who were in open revolt against the academic music of the world.¹⁵⁷

Peter Salus claims that Glass was relatively unknown until his success with *Einstein on the Beach*, and supported himself as a plumber and a cab driver at that time.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ This information was taken from the 2012 programme of the production, produced by the Barbican Theatre in London.

¹⁵⁵ Glass, Philip 'Glasgow Unesco City of Music Inspiring Encounters' lecture chaired by Brown, Svend (Glasgow: UNESCO) Thursday 24th May, 2012.

¹⁵⁶ Glass, Philip *Opera on the Beach*. ed. Robert Jones, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 6-8.

¹⁵⁷ Duckwork, William *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and five generations of American experimental composers* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1999) 335.

¹⁵⁸ Salus, Peter 'Wagner under Glass: Two operatic tetralogies' *The Semiotic Bridge: Trends from California* eds. Rauch, Irmengard & Carr, Gerald (Berlin & New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989) 191.

Glass also claimed that *Einstein on the Beach* is often used as a benchmark within his minimalist period even though it was at the end of it.¹⁵⁹ Glass states that his first contact with postmodern and postdramatic theatre was in 1957 when he saw performances by The Living Theatre.¹⁶⁰ He also cites Robert Wilson, The Performance Group, Meredith Monk, Richard Foreman, Joseph Chaikin, and Mabou Mines as theatre practitioners who helped him lay the foundations of his own compositions for theatre music.

Many of Glass' compositional techniques can be found in his score for *Einstein on the Beach*, namely his additive and subtractive processes, extended lengths and repetition, and the postdramatic relationship between the lyrics and the staging. Additive, subtractive and cyclic processes can be found in the foundations of Glass' work after his seminal *I+I* composition in 1968. Glass attributes this inspiration to his encounter with the sitar player, Ravi Shankar and drummer Alla Rakha during which he was introduced to non-Western approaches to composition. However, the kinds of additive, subtractive and cyclic processes found in Glass' work are not used in classical Indian practice and Glass' borrowing of these techniques should be read as an exploration of these and not a direct representation.¹⁶¹

Additive and subtractive processes involve the adding or subtracting of beats within a repeated phrase. Glass' oft cited piece *I+I* demonstrates a clear use of this technique. In this piece he gives two rhythmic notations; two semi-quavers combined with a quaver and a single quaver. No time signature or meter was indicated. He

¹⁵⁹ Glass, Philip 'Glasgow Unesco City of Music Inspiring Encounters' lecture.

¹⁶⁰ Glass, Philip 'Composing for the Opera' *Conversations on Art and Performance* eds. Dasgupta, Gautam and Marranca, Bonnie, 201.

¹⁶¹ Potter, Keith *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 273.

instructed the player to combine the two units by using ‘continuous, regular arithmetic progressions.’¹⁶² As illustrated by Keith Potter in his analysis of Glass’ musical development, *I+I* could be broken down into the following pattern:

1+2; 1+2+2; 1+2+2+2; 1+2+2; 1+2 etc.¹⁶³

Therefore “1”, or the two semi-quavers attached to a quaver, remains static with each combination, appearing only once and in the first position. The single quaver, “2”, expands and contracts with each combination. As Glass did not include a defined limitation on the number of expansions and contractions, the duration and rhythmic cycles of this piece were determined by the performer. This illustrates the adding and subtracting of notes or beats within a given measure, thus creating asymmetrical measures. This method of additive and subtractive processes became the foundation of much of Glass’ compositional technique and can be seen in his compositions for *Einstein on the Beach*.

The collaborative process of *Einstein on the Beach*

This section considers the collaboration between Wilson and Glass during the devising process for *Einstein on the Beach*. It aims to investigate the delicate balance of their working relationship as they shared equal responsibility for its conception and development, while at the same time maintained their designated roles as a director and composer. This collaboration began during what Wilson terms as the table workshops, which were discussions between Wilson and the creative team through

¹⁶² Ibid. 271.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 271.

which they devised the piece.¹⁶⁴ Wilson and Glass began their table workshop in 1974 over lunch meetings that took place roughly twice a month.¹⁶⁵ Firstly, Wilson and Glass decided on a subject matter for their opera; in this case they wanted it to be about Einstein.¹⁶⁶ Once the subject had been decided, they began to discuss the structure of the opera. They divided the opera into four acts, with five interludes layered between them. These five interludes were called “knee plays.” Glass attributed the name to ‘...the ‘knee’ referring to the joining function that human’s anatomical knees perform.’¹⁶⁷ This can be observed with the placement of the “knee plays” as a cushion between each act as well as their function as a transition from one act to the next. The “knee plays” did not directly comment on the actions surrounding them and they contained two out of three major musical themes of the opera.¹⁶⁸ They also repeated a visual theme by using the same two performers and chorus throughout the staging of them.

Once Wilson and Glass had divided the opera into acts, they determined the major visual themes of the opera. They decided on three visual themes and titled them A, B and C. Then they established the thematic ordering of the opera based on a simple mathematical formula; according to which all of the combinations of A, B and C must be used without any repetition and with a minimum of two themes per act.

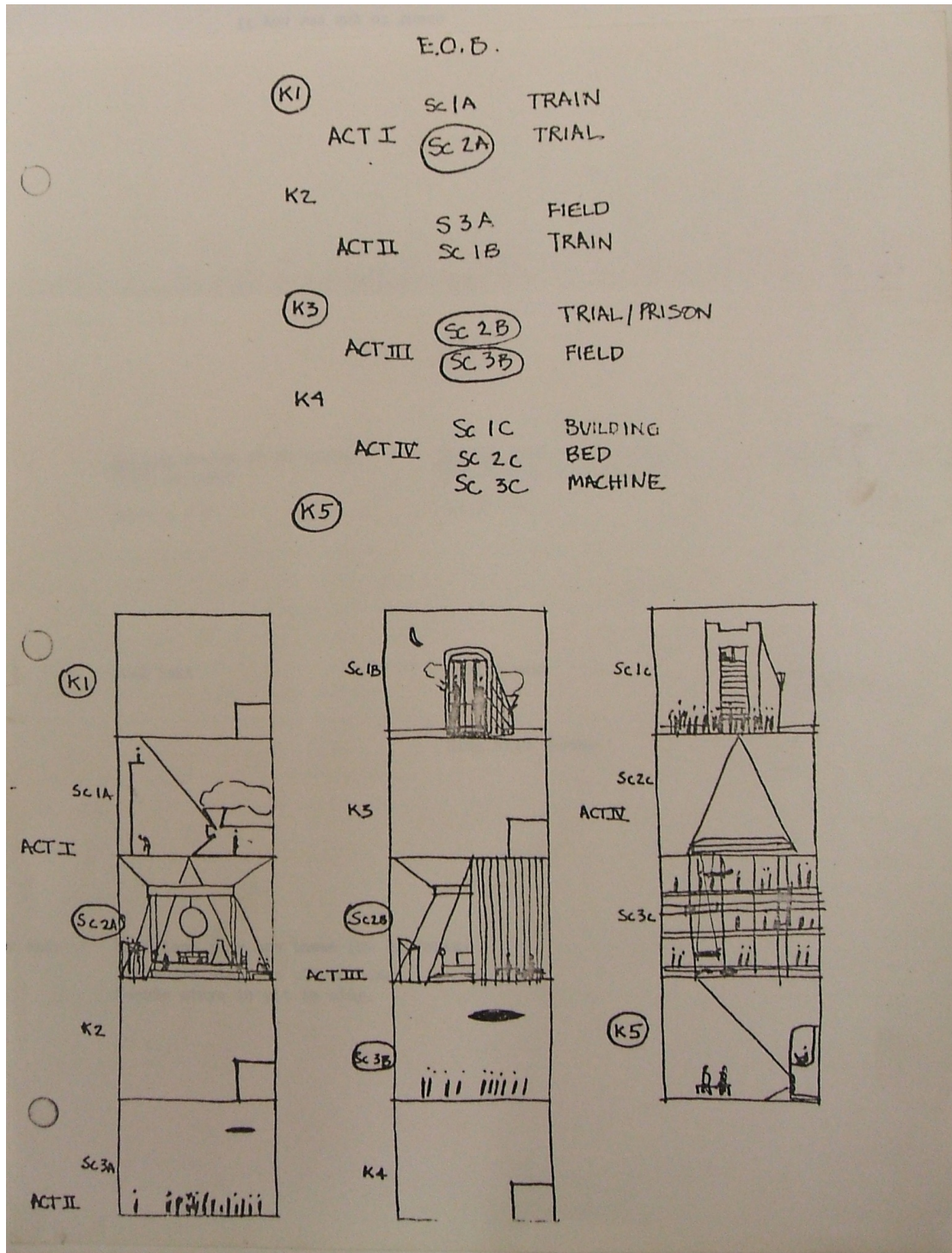
¹⁶⁴ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 42.

¹⁶⁵ Glass, Philip *Opera on the Beach*, 28.

¹⁶⁶ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 2, 0:10:30.

¹⁶⁷ Glass, Philip *Opera on the Beach*, 30.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 61.



1.1 Einstein on the Beach 1976 project book, courtesy of the Robert Wilson Archive.

Structure of *Einstein on the Beach*

- Prologue
- Knee Play 1
- Act 1 - Theme A
- Theme B
- Knee Play 2

Act 2 - Theme C
Theme A
Knee Play 3
Act 3 - Theme B
Theme C
Knee Play 4
Act 4 - Theme A
Theme B
Theme C
Knee Play 5

A= Train Theme, B = Trial Theme, C= Field Theme

Each act was assigned a combination of themes, act one was given themes A and B, act two C and A, act three B and C, and act four contained all three themes. After these themes were placed within the structure of the opera, they were assigned a corresponding visual theme. For theme A the corresponding visual theme was a “train”, for B a “trial”, and for C a “field”. Wilson later developed these visual themes through a series of sketches, which were colligated into his visual book (refer to figure 1.1 in order to see an early sketch by Wilson for *Einstein on the Beach*).¹⁶⁹ The visual book operated as a sort of storyboard for the production. The visual book was also used as a catalyst for the creative team to design and compose their artistic contributions and thus was given to Glass for the composition of the music after the table workshop.

Before the visual book was completed, Glass and Wilson decided on the length of their opera. Wilson asked Glass if he conceived this opera to be in proportion to Wagner’s epic pieces, to which Glass agreed. They decided that their opera should last exactly four hours and forty-eight minutes.¹⁷⁰ In keeping with the chosen structure, each interlude and act of *Einstein on the Beach* was divided into

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 38.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, Robert *Lecture*, Tape 2, 0:11:00.

corresponding lengths of time in order to maintain an entire running length of four hours and forty-eight minutes.¹⁷¹

In May of 1975 Glass was commissioned to write a piece titled ‘Another Look at Harmony.’ Glass suggested to Wilson that they use some of the music that he had written for ‘Another Look at Harmony’ in *Einstein on the Beach*, to which Wilson agreed.¹⁷² Glass composed *Einstein on the Beach* for a small chorus with a featured soloist. Wilson claimed that the singers in *Einstein on the Beach* were professionals, but they did not have strong singing techniques.¹⁷³ When Glass discussed his reason for not choosing trained vocalists he states:

For the most part, singers work within a very limited range of music and sing in a certain style that is not appropriate for my music. With the *Einstein on the Beach* music, I was working with nonsingers and I got out of them what I wanted, but there were real limitations in what they could do.¹⁷⁴

Glass stated that he dedicated time in rehearsals to vocal training in order to prepare the singer’s voices to perform his difficult material. Originally the chorus’ part did not have lyrics, so Glass used numbers to represent the beats and solfège syllables for the notes as a means to help the singers memorise the music. This method was then adopted as the lyrics for the performances.¹⁷⁵ Although the use of numbers and solfège syllables for the performances seems uninfluenced by the content of the opera, it serves many purposes in building the postdramatic nature of the piece.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 0:11:30.

¹⁷² Robert Wilson Collection, Box 118. New York: Butler Library, Columbia University.

¹⁷³ Dalton, Jody ‘Robert Wilson: Seeing the Forest for the trees’ *Ear Magazine: New Music News* (vol. 13, no. 8, 1988) 18.

¹⁷⁴ Glass, Philip ‘Composing for the Opera’ *Conversations on Art and Performance*, eds. Dasgupta, Gautam and Marranca, Bonnie, 195.

¹⁷⁵ Glass, Philip *Opera on the Beach*, 44.

Firstly, even though it was originally unintentional, the use of numbers instead of words could be read as a direct homage to Einstein himself. Glass later defended his use of solfège syllables when he discussed his experience as a spectator at an opera by Benjamin Britten in English saying ‘...I understood maybe 40 percent of what people sang. Most of the time I was in an agony trying to understand the other 60 percent. It definitely limited my ability to experience the opera.’¹⁷⁶ This ambiguous choice of lyrics disrupted the narrative and allowed room for interpretation among its spectators. Numbers and solfège syllables are not attached to any emotional meaning thus their use allows the music to function solely as music. The listening spectator may choose whether or not he/she would like to interpret the words or messages of the song, and/or focus on the shifts in the music. Because the terminology of solfège syllables is linked only to musical pitch, the use of these as lyrics for *Einstein on the Beach* places a further emphasis on the music itself.

Glass used Wilson’s visual book as an inspiration for his compositions, but it is also apparent that Wilson’s staging was influenced by Glass’ music as seen in Glass’ notes to *Einstein on the Beach* when he states:

I worked with the singers and rehearsed the dance sections with Andy de Groat and the dancers. Bob Wilson, working with the company set the action to music.¹⁷⁷

Wilson supports this claim when he discusses the role of Glass’ compositions during the rehearsal process. In an interview conducted by Maxime de La Falaise with Wilson for Andy Warhol’s magazine *Interview* Wilson states:

¹⁷⁶ Glass, Philip ‘Composing for the Opera’ *Conversations on Art and Performance*, eds. Dasgupta, Gautam and Marranca, Bonnie, 202.

¹⁷⁷ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 118, from Philip Glass’ ‘Philip Glass: Notes on “Einstein on the Beach” Part Two’.

The actions that I've done on stage have nearly always been tightly linked up with the music. For *Einstein*, when I was setting these actions Phil would tell me about the music and what the counts were and how many sections there were and I would map out something along those lines and they fit together with his music. Sometimes I worked against the music, sometimes with it.¹⁷⁸

This statement elucidates the importance that music has within Wilson's practice as he states that his staging, especially in the case of *Einstein on the Beach* was dependant on the scored music. Even though Wilson says at times he actively worked against the music, this still shows an awareness and responsiveness to the music and how it could create or negate a union with his staging.

Glass' role as co-author within the devising process is further supported by an interaction in a later collaboration with Wilson called *The Palace of the Arabian Nights* (1992). Originally the production team also included the writer, Thomas Körner. However a 1988 fax to Jurgen Fabritius, the director of the Staatstheatre Stuttgart, from Jedediah Wheeler, the director of the International Production Associates, it was revealed that Glass was responsible for the majority of the text:

The choice of the vocal text is to be made by the composer. Philip Glass has chosen the text (Sufi poetry) which he will use in the opera. And he has determined which stories he wants the opera to be based upon... Would you please ask Mr. Korner what he will write?¹⁷⁹

This is later supported in another fax in which Wheeler states: 'However, the authors of the opera have always been and always will be Mr. Glass and Mr. Wilson. Your insistence upon including Mr. Korner as an author has no basis on fact.' This fax reveals the status of both Wilson and Glass as equal co-authors to their opera, and

¹⁷⁸ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 118. from Robert Wilson's 'Einstein at the Met (an operatic interview)' Feb 1977, 27.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 257, from 'crono correspondence Sept 16th – Nov 30th 1988'.

shows that Glass determined more than just the musical materials involved in the creation process. Although Wilson and Glass had defined roles within the process, they also held equal authorship over the devising of the piece. This can be seen with their equal approach to the initial creation of the opera during the table workshops, and in their separate compositions that they brought into the rehearsal processes.

Glass views his collaborative endeavours as just as influential on his compositional style as his teachers had been. Before the premiere of *Einstein on the Beach* in Paris in 1976 he wrote:

Looking at the work as a whole I see that I worked in a way really quite differently than I had before. Whether a fresh point of view (Bob's) added to my own or simply the excursion into a new medium contributed to this I cannot say.¹⁸⁰

When I asked Glass during a lecture he gave to share his opinion on how the collaborative process affected his compositional style he explained that he has never had an issue establishing a musical voice, but that he has spent most of his career trying to get away from it.¹⁸¹ He used his collaborations as a means to challenge his musical aesthetic, even though he admitted this approach did not always work.

Wilson's collaboration with Glass had a long-term effect on Wilson's practice, as will be explored in the following case studies within this chapter.

¹⁸⁰ Robert Wilson Collection, box 118.

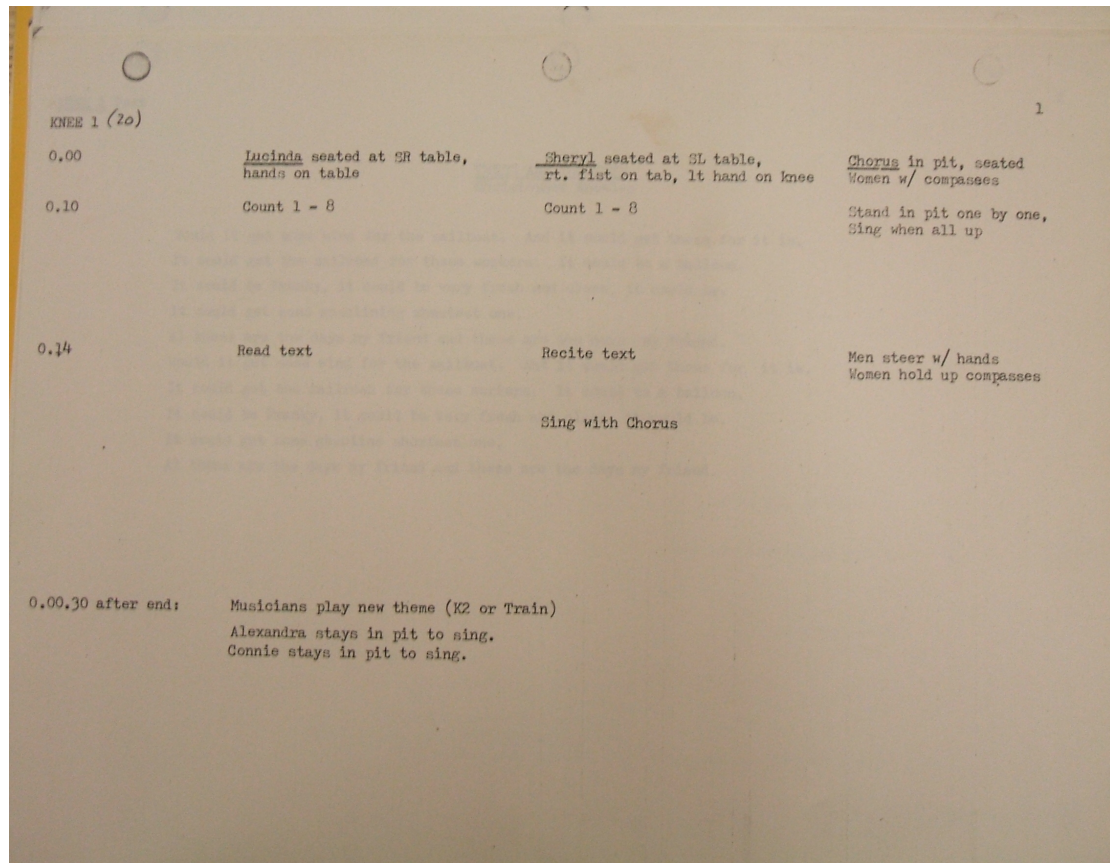
¹⁸¹ Glass, Philip 'Glasgow Unesco City of Music Inspiring Encounters' lecture. Question asked during the Q&A session.

Dramaturgies of music and image in *Einstein on the Beach*

The following section provides an analysis of the structural compositions of *Einstein on the Beach* by identifying the musical logic found in the visual staging. This section aims to offer a musical dramaturgy for the visual components of Wilson's staging in order to explore the influence of the dramaturgical relationship with Glass. The transaction of meaning is not necessarily contained only in the semiotics of the visual images, but also in the underlying structure and musicality of the piece. Glass' compositions are an integral part of *Einstein on the Beach* and they have been discussed extensively in academic literature, not least of which is Glass' own notes titled 'Notes on *Einstein on the Beach*.' I will detail Glass' musical themes briefly; but this section will focus on the musical dramaturgy of Wilson's staging.

Glass' musical themes in *Einstein on the Beach* can be broken down into five sets, one comprised of five chords, one of four, one of three, one with two, and the last with one. The most prominent musical theme of the opera has a progression of five chords and is found in Act one: Scene one, "knee play" two, "knee play" three, "knee play" four, and Act four: Scene two. The second musical theme contains four chords F, E flat, C, and D and is in Act one: Scene two, Act three: Scene two, and Act four: Scene two. The three chord musical theme is located in the two dance sequences that make up the majority of the field themes and is placed in Act two: Scene one and Act three: Scene two. The visual theme of the trial also contains the two chord theme which is in Act one: Scene two and Act three: Scene two. The final theme, comprised of one chord contains Glass' additive process as he explains: 'A simple additive process begins as each successive figure adds a single eighth note,

thereby changing its overall rhythmic character and causing the figure to gradually expand' and is found in Act one: Scene two in the violin's part.¹⁸²



1.2 Einstein on the Beach 1976 project book, courtesy of the Robert Wilson Archive.

The scripts for *Einstein on the Beach* and *The Black Rider*, which will be discussed in further detail later, both contain the estimated performance times marked out (see figure 1.2). For example, the script for *Einstein on the Beach* has the numbers of minutes for each action indicated on the left hand margin. On page one of the script, the title reads 'Knee 1', indicating the first song of the opera. There are four columns on the script; the first lists the timing of the actions beginning with

¹⁸² Glass, Philip 'Notes on *Einstein on the Beach*' *Performing Arts Journal* Vol two; No 3 (Winter 1979) 70.

‘0.00’, the second lists the actions for the performer Lucinda Childs, the third for Sheryl Sutton, and the fourth for the chorus. During the first ten minutes, marked ‘0.10’ in the script the performers are given the following actions:

Lucinda: seated at SR table, hands on table.
Sheryl: seated at SL table, rt. fist on tab, lt hand on knee.
Chorus: in pit, seated. Women w/ compasses.¹⁸³

For the first ten minutes of this song, the performers maintained this staging, the two women were seated at tables and the chorus was in the orchestra pit. The next set of instructions listed on the script detailed the next four minutes, both Childs and Sutton were instructed to count between one and eight while the chorus moved into position in front of the platform upon which the two women were seated. Their counting and movements were not in time with the music, and their counting was not sequential. This reinforces the idea of text, music, and movement as three separate elements that are not necessarily reliant on one another, but regardless are contained within a singular structure of organised time. Once the chorus arrived in their positions, they were instructed to begin singing. This type of division of time is continued throughout the entirety of the script.

The cue sheet for *Einstein on the Beach* also indicated a tight correlation between the music and the timing of the lighting and staging cues. The cue sheet begins with ‘House open, Music’ at 6:40. The next cue, at 6:50, instructs a stopwatch to be pressed as Childs and Sutton enter the stage. The next cue states: ‘House down 10° ince starting 6:52 – every two minutes.’ After this the cue sheet calls for ‘Lx3 go 4 beats after music ends’ and another instruction for the stopwatch to be pressed when

¹⁸³ Robert Wilson Collection, box 118, from ‘Production Files, *Einstein on the Beach*, Research Scripts and Notes’.

there is a change of music into the trial scene.¹⁸⁴ This type of demarcation can be compared to musical notation. Each player is given a particular instruction to carry out over a specified time in conjunction with the other players in the same way that musicians are instructed to perform certain actions during a composition. Although there is room for each performer's interpretation in both of these forms, their actions are restricted to timings in which the compositions are contained. The musicians are not restricted to clock time, but they are still restricted to the metre that the piece of music is composed in.

In addition to Glass's minimalist compositions, Wilson also adopted similar qualities in his staging. For example, as discussed previously, the opening of *Einstein on the Beach* contained actions that were reduced to their most minimal forms and stretched over extended periods of time. The only other staging of the opening sequence that was not previously described above included the two women speaking a fractured text written by Knowles. In the same manner that Glass and his fellow musical minimalists stripped their compositions back to its basic components, Wilson also looked to explore basic human gestures in his theatrical stage space. The focused and repetitive movements of the two women in this opening sequence are mirrored in the ostinato and minimalistic structuring of Glass' music. Although there is not a semantic connection between the music and the staging, the two are linked through their similarities in musical minimalist theories of basic structuring.

An example of Wilson's use of musical techniques can be found in the theme and variation of the visual themes in *Einstein on the Beach*. Both Glass and Wilson

¹⁸⁴ *Einstein on the Beach* Running Book, located at the Robert Wilson Archives, NY, New York.

used themes in their composition of this piece, but the themes in the music do not double the themes in the staging. This can be seen in a quote by Wilson when he discusses how he approached his staging of *Einstein on the Beach* in relation to Glass' music:

Here the visual book was sometimes deliberately attacked by the audio book. Musically, Phil would be developing a theme in the first act that would later be fully realized in the fourth act. That corresponding visual theme may be in its fullest in the first act and in a diminished form in the fourth act. Or sometimes the music and the staging worked together. In most of the cases they worked in opposition.¹⁸⁵

This illustrates deliberate moments of synchronicity and disjunction between the music and visual aspects of the opera. These moments reinforced the idea that the music and staging were related to one another, albeit at the same time they were not dependant.

Wilson used musical variation in the repetitions of his visual themes in *Einstein on the Beach*. As mentioned previously, Wilson and Glass used three major visual themes throughout the opera, and each appeared three times. The use of theme and variation can be seen with the progression of all three themes throughout the course of the opera. Firstly, the train theme was introduced directly after the first "knee play." It returned twice as a variation on this initial theme. The first appearance of the train theme was represented through a large moveable set piece that simulated the side of a train through size and shape, and was brightly lit. Throughout the duration of this scene the train continually attempted to cross from stage left to right, however, a vertical beam of light repeatedly interrupted it. When the train hit

¹⁸⁵ Dalton, Jody 'Robert Wilson: Seeing the Forest for the trees', 18.

the beam of light it was forced to return to stage left and begin its journey again.

Einstein used the description of a moving train as an analogy to describe his theories on the relativity of simultaneity, and thus the use of the train could signify this. In one of his descriptions Einstein described the image of a moving train, which was intercepted by two lightening flashes, at two different points at the same moment, and argued that because of the train's velocity the points of lightening that intercepted the train would differ from those received on the train's embankment.¹⁸⁶

The second appearance of the train theme in *Einstein on the Beach* is also the first variation on this visual theme, and appears in act two. The visual representation of the train was still represented through a large set piece; however in this case the perspective of the train was changed from its side to its back. In addition to this, the stage was dimly lit to suggest a transition from day to night, thus signifying a passage of time. The second variation on the train theme occurred in act four. This variation did not include a visual representation of a train, but instead contained a large set piece constructed in the shape of a building. As Wilson claimed, this building was still a representation and variation on the initial train theme because both were drawn from the same visual perspective.¹⁸⁷ Thus the train appeared firstly as a theme, then as a variation that slightly strayed from the original theme, and then as a variation in a further abstracted form.

The second theme of the opera, the trial, appeared in act one after the initial train theme, and in act three and act four after the first and second variations of the train theme. As with the unfolding of the train variation, the trial first appears as a

¹⁸⁶ Einstein, Albert *Relativity: the Special and the General Theory*. trans. Lawson, Robert (Ancient Wisdom Publications, 2010) 20.

¹⁸⁷ Wilson, Robert *Lecture* Tape 2, 0:11:10.

theme, then in a slightly altered form, and thirdly in a further abstracted representation. The trial theme is first realised through a visual mimesis of a courtroom. The stage space is set with benches, a jury, two judges, a witness who remains stationary in a chair, and a lawyer.

Also, in the centre of the stage Wilson placed a large bed. Wilson claimed that he included this bed within this theme because he felt that our society put Einstein on trial for being a dreamer.¹⁸⁸ When Einstein first reached popularity, a number of organisations demonstrated resistance to his theories. Most prominent of which was Paul Weyland who organised a meeting against Einstein's theories on relativity in 1920 in Berlin. As Philip Frank states: 'Einstein attended this meeting as a spectator and even applauded the attacks in friendly spirit.'¹⁸⁹ Frank described Einstein as someone who liked to regard events in the world around him as if he were a spectator in a theatre, which perhaps accounts for the reason why Wilson and Glass situated the violinist dressed as Einstein in front of the stage to act as a spectator during their repetitions of the trial theme. The first variation of the trial theme appeared in act three. The stage was similar to its original thematic counterpart; but there was now the addition of vertical bars that intercepted stage left. Behind these bars were dancers dressed as prisoners, thus highlighting ideas of judgement and punishment of Einstein's dreams. In the final variation of this theme the stage was blacked out, the only object on stage was a large horizontal beam of light that slowly rotated into a vertical position throughout the entirety of the scene. As Wilson stated, this beam of light was an abstracted representation of Einstein's bed from the initial

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 0:10:20.

¹⁸⁹ Frank, Phillip *Einstein: His Life and Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948) 198.

theme and the first variation, underlining the triumph and also isolation of the dreamer.¹⁹⁰

The third theme, the field, followed a similar pattern in its execution as the first two themes; it appeared in an initial form followed by two variations. The initial theme fell at the beginning of act two, the first variation was in act three after the first variation of the trial, and the second variation of the field was in act four after the second variation of the trial. The initial field theme was realised through an empty set filled with approximately ten dancers, and a lit backdrop signifying an open field. Throughout the duration of this theme, a small disc of light appeared, which represented a spaceship. The first variation on this theme returned again with an empty stage filled with dancers. A slight alteration occurred between the initial theme and the first variation with the size of the spaceship. In the initial theme, the spaceship was small, but in the first variation the spaceship was slightly larger, thus signifying the spaceship approaching Earth. In the second variation of the field, the visual representation of an open field was removed and replaced by a large grid of scaffolding three squares tall and five squares wide. Each grid was large enough to encompass a human body standing upright. On the back of each square of the grid was a rotating pattern of lights, and placed in front of the set of lights was a performer who manipulated the lights with his/her fingers. This signified a further progression of time as it showed the spaceship had landed on Earth and the dancers had entered it. The use of a field could be read as a literal interpretation of Einstein's Unified Field Theory as seen in a quote by Einstein in which he makes reference to his field and relativity theories by stating: 'There is relatively little tobacco, but it is from a good

¹⁹⁰ Wilson, Robert *Lecture* Tape 2, 0:12:00.

field'.¹⁹¹ As well, the use of a spaceship in the field theme references Einstein's famous twin paradox in which the progression of time in space versus time on Earth is calculated by sending one twin into space while the other stays on Earth. When Wilson discussed his use of the themes he said 'It sort of measures the time span of Einstein's life: when he was a young man there were steam engines and when he died a few years ago, we were flying in space machines.'¹⁹²

All three themes, the train, the trial, and the field, followed a similar pattern in their execution. Each had an initial visual representation, followed by two variations. The first variation on the themes largely restated it but with a slight change. With the train, the lights were first bright and then dimmed for its first variation, and the train rotated from its side to its back. With the trial, the courtroom was whole and then in the first variation a jail cell intersected it. With the field, the spaceship was first small and then large. The second variation on the themes presented an abstracted version with only one link to the original theme. For the train, the building and the stage piece representing a train were linked in visual perspective, for the trial the bed was the only remaining set piece, and in the field the visual images were linked through the concept of a spaceship. These variations adhere to the same pattern throughout their execution and were similar in their placement and intensity. Thus musical logic can be found in the conception and placement of the visual themes in *Einstein on the Beach*, and thus could be argued contain a musicalization through the act of being interpreted as one would a piece of music. Even though the opera does not adhere to a singular narrative arch or "story," its dramaturgy can be uncovered in the structure and form that the opera exists in.

¹⁹¹ Frank, Phillip *Einstein*, 267.

¹⁹² Robert Wilson Collection, Box 118 from Robert Wilson's 'Einstein at the Met (an operatic interview)' Feb 1977, 27.

Case Study 2: *Orlando*

History and context

Orlando premiered in 1989 in Berlin with the German actress, Jutta Lampe, as the sole performer of the piece. The text for *Orlando* was adapted from Virginia Woolf's book of the same title by Darryl Pickney and Robert Wilson. Brigitte Walitzek translated it from English to German. It was revived in 1993, in what Kuhn described as an almost "identical version," in Lausanne at the Theatre Vidy with the actress Isabelle Huppert.¹⁹³ In 1996 it was staged with Miranda Richardson for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Currently the Robert Wilson Archive in New York houses VHS recordings of the 1989 version with Lampe and the 1993 version with Huppert. The Lampe recording is damaged and not viewable. Joseph Bradshaw, Wilson's archivist at the time, affirmed that the two stagings were very similar, much in the same manner as Kuhn described them to me in his one on one interview. Even though the archival material attained for this chapter centres on the original Lampe production, whenever the performance itself is referred to, it is the Huppert production. For the sake of simplicity, I have decided to use the term "the actress" when discussing the performance of the character Orlando in a wider context. However, this must be considered with the above information and the knowledge that no two performances are ever identical.

¹⁹³ Kuhn, Hans-Peter 'Interview' ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee (29th January, 2012).

Hans-Peter Kuhn: The Sound Artist

Hans-Peter Kuhn grew up in West Germany and studied at the University of Berlin until he dropped out and was hired as a sound engineer at the theatre Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer.¹⁹⁴ Between the periods of 1978 to 1998 he created, what he termed as “sound environments,” on thirty productions in theatre, film, and art installations.¹⁹⁵ He worked as a sound engineer on such productions as Peter Stein’s *As You Like It* and Klaus-Michael Grüber’s *Die Winterreise*.¹⁹⁶ As Kuhn detailed in an interview with me, his work is:

...based on field recordings, but unlike other artists I use the recorded sound effects and create complex compositions with these sounds. In order to do so I manipulate the sounds, but usually not too much. Editing, a bit filtering and sometimes pitch changing are the main things I do to sounds, but then I mix them and distribute them over multichannel sound systems. Very often the sounds are moving in space surrounding the listener or along lines of loudspeakers.¹⁹⁷

He further states that ‘It is becoming possible to manipulate and structure the entire sonic space of a theatre in a targeted fashion.’ As technology advances it gave more creative flexibility to sound in the theatre as it could be manipulated in ways that did not exist in nature or with live instrumentation. Lehmann discusses a compositional style very similar to Kuhn’s when he identifies the postdramatic use of musicalized theatre:

In electronic music it has become possible to manipulate the parameters of sound as desired and thus open up whole new areas for the musicalization of voices and sounds in theatre. While the individual tone is already composed of a whole array of qualities – frequency, pitch, overtones, timbre, volume – which can be manipulated with the help of synthesizers, the combination of

¹⁹⁴ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 233.

¹⁹⁵ Kuhn, Hans-Peter ‘Interview’ ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

¹⁹⁶ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 233-234.

¹⁹⁷ Kuhn, Hans-Peter ‘Interview’ ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

electronic sounds and tones (sampling) result in a whole new dimension of ‘sound’ in theatre.¹⁹⁸

Considering that Lehmann refers quite heavily to Wilson’s work in his book, this quote could be referring directly to some of Kuhn’s soundscapes. Lehmann’s mention to a new dimension of sound relates not only to the ability that electronic music has to produce a new method to compose sound, but also the “new” sounds that it could create, new in the sense that a spectator had not listened to it before. Kuhn has a tendency to record sounds that existed within the space of the performance and manipulate them in order to create something which did not exist before naturally. As Holmberg identifies, Kuhn travelled with nearly two thousand sound effects when preparing for a production.¹⁹⁹ He used found recorded sounds and often mixed two sounds together that did not coexist in nature. For example, Holmberg states that for *When We Dead Awaken* (1991) Kuhn placed the sounds of a spoon squeaking against a coffee cup and a pneumatic pump recorded in a coal mine together. This technique delivers a soundscape that is not immediately identifiable.

Like Wilson, Kuhn also stated that one of the major influences on his compositional style was the thoughts that John Cage had on musical composition, which could explain his attraction to Wilson’s work. Kuhn states that:

My experience of the world is that we perceive always with all our senses simultaneously, there is no such thing as only listening or only watching... When you are in a philharmonic concert hall... all your senses are active at the same time when you only listen to music. Still the music in this case is the most important part of the whole show. For me in theatre it is similar, the text (when it is narrative) is the most important thing but everything around is equally important. R.W. (Wilson) is the one that put this straight on the table, this is one of the

¹⁹⁸ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*, 92.

¹⁹⁹ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 177

things he certainly deserves praise for, that he opened the theatre for a more holistic view of the world.²⁰⁰

This is similar to Cage's theories that the listener has the choice to accept all sounds as musical material, and that live performance opens up the spectator's ability to engage with multiple senses. Kuhn's discussion of theatre also introduces the idea of a parataxis of theatrical components, which is similar to the theories discussed by Lehmann on the postdramatic. Lehmann argues that in postdramatic theatre, often a non-hierarchy of signs is used in order to disrupt the transaction of a singular meaning, thus allowing the spectator more freedom of interpretation.

Kuhn was first introduced to Wilson's work when the Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer commissioned Wilson to produce a piece of theatre, and Kuhn was assigned to work on it as his sound engineer.²⁰¹ The title of this piece was *Death, Destruction and Detroit* (1979). Kuhn claimed that their first collaboration was difficult for them because prior to Wilson, Kuhn was used to working with directors who dictated precise sound designs, and Kuhn was not used to exploring his own ideas. When Kuhn approached working with Wilson in this manner, the two found collaboration difficult. They got into a series of arguments until Kuhn left rehearsal and decided, upon return, that he would stop trying to please Wilson and began to design sound on his own. As Kuhn stated:

From that moment on there were no real problems. I realized the way to work with Wilson was to try to please myself first. Before, I was always thinking of how to make it the way he wanted it and that didn't work because what he needs is people to add ideas.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Kuhn, Hans-Peter 'Interview' ed. Carwell-Rambo, Markee.

²⁰¹ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 234.

²⁰² *Ibid.* 235.

Even though Wilson's practice can be highly collaborative at points, there also are moments such as the above, which are done in isolation. This working practice of a separate but equal collaborative status is similar to the process that Wilson shared with Glass on *Einstein on the Beach*. This process allowed for an element of planned disjunction between the two artistic components. Kuhn's creation of the sound design in isolation does challenge the idea of Wilson as an auteur, as Wilson had little to no directorial control of the sound with this method.

The collaborative process of *Orlando*

As discussed previously in the section on *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson has a particular way in which he arranges his production process. Kuhn confirms this in his interview with me, claiming that Wilson had a very distinct manner in which he scheduled the rehearsals and it was split into three parts: a table workshop and two stages of workshops with the performers.²⁰³ The table workshops consisted of the basic development of the piece with the creative team. The table workshop for *Orlando* began in November of 1988, when Wilson began thinking of creating a piece for Jutta Lampe based on Woolf's book.²⁰⁴ A month later, Pinckney joined the creative team and agreed to write the script.

In March of 1989, a fax from Dennis Redmond, the director of the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, tells that Wilson originally asked the composer Stephen Sondheim to compose the music for this piece, but there is no response from

²⁰³ Kuhn, Hans-Peter 'Interview' ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

²⁰⁴ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 257, from 'Chrono correspondence Sept 16th, 1988-Nov 1988'.

Sondheim.²⁰⁵ Redmond then proceeded to request the addition of Kuhn or Michael Gottfried to the creative team stating ‘Bob has requested the participation of a sound designer (not a sound engineer), to be brought in from outside the theater if necessary.’²⁰⁶ Wilson’s desire to work with Sondheim, whose compositional aesthetic is vastly different from Kuhn’s, could be interpreted one of two ways. Either Wilson’s original concept for this piece was compromised because he was unable to work with his desired composer, or that the sound design was intentionally left open to the interpretation of a musical collaborator and not to Wilson, and thus it was a role that could be inhabited either by Kuhn, Gottfried, or Sondheim. These chains of faxes also highlight the importance of the role of the musician in Wilson’s creative process when he specifies the difference between a “sound designer” and a “sound engineer.” This meant that it was important to Wilson that his sound designer be someone who had creative license over the work, and not a person only there to operate the soundboard. A later fax in May, displays Kuhn’s availability, thus indicating that he had joined the creative team.

The second stage of the production process began at the start of the workshops, and was the point during which the actors and performers joined the collaboration process. Kuhn was also a part of this process as he states ‘I was participating in these early stages and started to play music and sound events during the rehearsal time.’²⁰⁷ During these rehearsals he would play pre-recorded and modified sounds, usually on tape recorders, but with *Orlando* he was able to work with newer technologies as he says:

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Kuhn, Hans-Peter ‘Interview’ ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

Working with tape recorders is extremely slow and it is difficult if not impossible to make some quick improvisations. So what I did was making some “dirty” quick tapes in the rehearsal studio and later in the evening made them up in the sound studio. During *Orlando* this changed since I could work with a so-called sampler that allowed me much faster work in the rehearsal studio.²⁰⁸

Kuhn’s working practice, as with many sound designers, was tied to the musical technology available to him. As his work on *Orlando* saw a shift in equipment, it also allowed Kuhn an immediacy that had previously been difficult to procure. Because Kuhn was able to work with an early version of a sampler, this allowed him more room for experimentation, improvisation, and responsiveness within the rehearsal environment. Kuhn discussed the devising process with Wilson as one that evolved through trial and error. He claimed that the music and sound were used from the first rehearsals, and thus integral to the devising and collaboration process.²⁰⁹

The next set of workshops involved adding specificity and definition to the piece, and they often contained more prepared artistic contributions. For these Kuhn says:

I prepared some work, but not in the same way. Since sound and music are time related arts they are totally depending on the duration of events, specifically when they ran for the whole length of a scene. But R.W. (Wilson) very often changed the orders of events within a scene and the duration very often got longer during the rehearsal process.²¹⁰

Because Kuhn provided sound that lasted throughout an entire scene at times, his compositional process had to be adaptable to fit these requirements, much in the same way that Glass indicated an undefined number of repeats in certain passages of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 239.

²¹⁰ Kuhn, Hans-Peter ‘Interview’ ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

Einstein on the Beach. This flexible approach to section durations is inevitable for any artistic contribution that is reliant on synchronising at particular points with one another. This is one manner in which Wilson's work differs from Cage and Cunningham's because he does have moments of planned unity. Also, Kuhn's quote identifies one way in which Wilson disrupts the transaction of meaning by regularly rearranging the order of events in his staging. This action shows an interruption of a linear narrative and supports a postdramatic telling of a piece.

The third stage of the production process happened before the premiere and consisted of a few weeks in a rehearsal studio and two to three weeks in the theatre. As Kuhn stated, this period was mostly devoted to allowing Wilson to achieve his lighting designs. Also during this time Kuhn 'finalized the compositions and specifically the sound system in the theatre' as he used multichannel sound systems and various speakers throughout the auditorium.²¹¹ As Kuhn states:

During the 3rd stage I also made the mix of the sound, whatever happened in the rehearsal studio were sketches and now on stage in the auditorium I could make the sound mix as I wanted it to be. Actually something that theatre were not used to in those days and I always had to fight for the time to do so. Today soundcheck and sound mixing time is part of the normal production schedule.²¹²

The quote discusses the final stages of the rehearsal process for Wilson and Kuhn, and also highlights how Kuhn contributed to the acceptance of the importance of soundscapes within the theatre institution. After this stage of the rehearsal process was finished, the piece would be premiered.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

The dramaturgy of *Orlando* and its sonic environment

In the performances of *Orlando*, Wilson and Kuhn broke down the relationship between sound and the body through the use of alternating points of disjunction and conjunction between the sonic environments and their associated physicalizations. Wilson's intention with *Orlando*, as discussed below, reinforced the audio space of Pickney's script and Kuhn's sound design:

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* was set in a small, intimate space; it was all black and white, a very abstract scenery, almost no pictures in it, so that the words of the text created the pictures. One actress was speaking a monologue for two hours and 20 minutes.²¹³ For example, twenty four minutes into the piece, the footfalls of the actress and the removal of an article of clothing dominate the sound space. Forty-three minutes into the piece, all of the actress' speech and movement are performed in darkness. There are no visuals, other than darkness, for a minute and a half, only aural.

As illustrated in the above quote, there are several instances in *Orlando* where Wilson and Kuhn intentionally alienated the voice from the body. The actress wears a body microphone throughout the piece, even though it is performed in an intimate space. This in itself creates an immediate separation of the voice from the body, because the voice is being unnaturally projected away from it. Another moment of this separation can be seen when the actress performs her speech in darkness. Although the body has visually been removed from sight, the actress still continues to recite her text, and because it is amplified, it remains unchanged in the sonic atmosphere. This technique can be traced back to Wilson and Kuhn's first collaboration on *Death, Destruction and Detroit*. For this production, Wilson had wanted all of the actors to wear body

²¹³Wilson, Robert, 'Robert Wilson on The Black Rider' *Projects: The Black Rider RW Notes*. New York: The Robert Wilson Archives.

microphones but he wanted their voices to be amplified away from their bodies, but as Kuhn stated:

I felt if that was what Wilson wanted we must do something more. Just separating the voice from the performer is not very interesting. It's like having a TV with the speakers on the side, after a while you hear the sound coming from the images anyway. It's an acoustical-psychological phenomenon, your brain switches it over. So I said why don't we make something more complicated, something that makes a complete other space.²¹⁴

In addition to removing the actress' body from the visual space while maintaining her speech, Kuhn tossed her voice across different speakers at various moments in the production, creating a physical parameter of sonic space. Shyer sees this technique as falling in line with Cage's theories on a total sound space in which sound is evenly spread throughout the auditorium.²¹⁵ In *Death, Destruction and Detroit*, there were ten speakers around the sides and back of the auditorium, nine in separate spots in the house, speakers in the ceiling, proscenium arch and backstage.

When I asked Kuhn how he felt his sound designs contributed to Wilson's overall practice he stated:

I cannot judge if or how much I inspired his thinking, I know that the sound in his pieces were different before we met compared to after we met. I am pretty sure that I had influence on his way of creating the work, simply because before me, the sound was different.²¹⁶

This can be seen in an example taken from *The Black Rider*, which I will discuss in further detail in the next section. Wilson premiered *The Black Rider* a year after *Orlando*, and Kuhn was not a part of the creative team. Despite this, the above technique can still be seen in the opening of *The Black Rider* with the entrance of the

²¹⁴ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 235.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 235.

²¹⁶ Kuhn, Hans-Peter 'Interview' ed. Markee Rambo-Hood.

Old Uncle, played by the actor Jörg Holm. The Old Uncle is stationed in the audience aisle, holding a loud speaker to his mouth. An audio track begins to play along with the orchestra. The audio track begins a speech, and Holm mimes along with the words and vocalisations, in an exaggerated manner. At times he intentionally drops a word, or mimes a different syllable, until he eventually moves into speaking in his own voice along with the audio track. This action disrupts the association of the voice to the body, as at first it is difficult to know if the dialogue originates from Holm, or it is a recording. It is only later that this association is broken down, when the two voices emerge, one live and one recorded. This also plays with notions of temporality, as one voice exists in the present and one in the past, yet they are both contained in the same time and space of that particular theatrical moment.

Kuhn claims that he does not read the texts of plays, nor translates them if they are in another language, before composing his soundscapes because ‘I prefer not to understand the text, it’s easier for me. If it’s in English or another language, I just listen to the sounds.’²¹⁷ This technique helps in building a parataxis within the theatrical production Kuhn is composing for, as it reinforces sound as its own artistic element, and not as something which is an aid to the written and verbal text in transacting its associated meanings. Kuhn says that ‘the audio is pretty much separate and I try to keep it that way because I don’t want to illustrate. The things I do should be another world.’²¹⁸ From this statement it can be taken that Kuhn’s soundscapes are not intended to double the meaning of the words, or deliver the fable or story of the piece, but are meant as responses to the auditory experience of hearing

²¹⁷ Shyer, Laurence *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, 239.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* 239.

a word, phrase, or piece spoken out loud. This perhaps is one way in which theatre can be perceived as music, or musicalized, as defined by Lehmann in his theories on postdramatic theatre.

In addition to breaking down the visuals to their associated sound, Kuhn's auditory compositions in *Orlando* evoke an idea of physical actions taking place. All sounds are precipitated by an action, a catalyst that propels them forward. This is especially evoked in Kuhn's soundscapes, because many of his sounds seem to be remnants of banal actions. The sound of someone pushing a chair into place, someone chewing, or trying to open a door; this adds another level of physicality to the performance, even though there is only one body on stage. The sound of someone dragging something across the ground evokes a sense of movement outside of the stage space, as if someone else is waiting to emerge. This is highlighted in a quote from Kuhn when he discussed the sonic environment for *Orlando*. He claims his intentions were as follows:

Well, the idea was to create some kind of background for the story, something like the weather inside the theatre (not naturalistic weather)...I made a faint distant music that ran through most of the piece with some little reminders of the time the story plays in...Anyhow mostly R.W. (Wilson) let me do as I liked, he asked for some special effects here and there but the main work I decided myself.²¹⁹

This statement highlights the working relationship that Wilson and Kuhn had in regards to the formulation of the sound. Although Wilson set parameters, Kuhn was responsible for the entirety of the recorded and amplified sound environment. The theatre that Wilson participates in is often called Wilson's "vision," referring to both senses of the word. It could be argued that Wilson is largely responsible for the

²¹⁹ Kuhn, Hans-Peter 'Interview' ed. Cardwell-Rambo, Markee.

visual side of the pieces he directs, but that Wilson chooses people to be responsible for composing the other elements, and thus components like the sound are not necessarily part of his auteur “vision,” but instead could be argued are actually Kuhn’s auteur sonic “vision.” Considering the music was present from the beginning of the rehearsal process, it could also be argued that, much like the process of *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson’s staging was effected by the compositions of Kuhn, and vice versa. In addition to this, the table workshop also shows a collaborative relationship between Wilson and Kuhn in the development of the materials for the piece. This observation lies in stark contrast to the moments in which the two composed their artistic contributions separately from one another. This reinforces a separate but collaborative theatrical process that can be traced back throughout Wilson’s practice.

Case Study 3: *The Black Rider*

History and context

The Black Rider premiered in the Thalia Theater in Hamburg in 1990.

William S. Burroughs wrote the text and Tom Waits composed the music. Wolfgang Wiens and James Grauerholz worked as the dramaturgs, translators, and editors for the piece. It had an English-language premiere in 1998 at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival in Canada. It was based on a German fable about a young man who wanted to win the love of a woman, but was unable to because he was not a huntsman. He is given magic bullets by the devil, which gives him perfect aim. He is

able to marry the woman, but on the day of their wedding one of his bullets goes astray and kills her.

The Black Rider contained a cast of twelve performers. Dominique Horwitz played Pegleg, the devil, Annette Paulmann performed Katchen, the woman who is killed by the magic bullet, and Stefan Kurt was cast as Wilhelm, the young man who falls into the devil's trap. Waits' orchestration is scored for a keyboard, contrabassoon, clarinet, tuba, toy piano, percussion, marimba, trombone, jap banjo, pumporgan, ukulele, singing saw, flute, viola, bamboo trumpet, okarina, glasses, jiggle bells, conga, logdrum, didjeri, and a train sample.²²⁰ Also, during the 2006 restaging of the piece in the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, the orchestra pit contained a glass harmonica and Ondes Martenot.

Tom Waits: The songwriter

The public persona of Tom Waits is often elusive and shrouded in half-truths and metaphors as captured in Keith Phipps opening line in his article on Waits, 'Tom Waits was born on December 7, 1949, in the back of a truck (or a taxi, depending on which account, if any, is to be believed) in the Los Angeles suburb of Pomona.'²²¹

Waits's carefully calculated persona is also discussed in an interview with Michael O'Brien for Mojo magazine:

People form their opinion about you based on what you give them to choose from. So obviously I have an act; the real me is really for my family and my friends. I don't know professionally how open I really

²²⁰ Taken from the 'Black Rider General Musical Score' in the Project Files at the Robert Wilson Archive in New York.

²²¹ Phipps, Keith 'The *Onion* Interview' *Innocent When you Dream: Tom Waits Reader* ed Montandon, Mac (NY: New York, Avalon Publishing Group, 2005) 363.

am, but then again some places you find that the best place to hide the truth is *in* the truth. The best lie is the truth.²²²

Waits produced his first album, titled *Closing Time*, in 1973 at the age of twenty-three. Ten years later saw the release of his ninth album, *Swordfishtrombones*, of which he began collaborating with his long-term partner, Kathleen Brennan who he married in 1980 and began a family with. Waits is often referred to as a solitary composer, but most of his music is jointly written with his wife, Brennan.²²³ When Waits talks of creating the music for *The Black Rider* he says:

But Kathleen and I, we're like Plink and Plank. I call her "Plink" and she calls me "Plank." I certainly don't have any formal background in music. When you say you're doing an opera, it's like when you're a seven-year-old and say "I'm off to Washington, Dad." You kind of go, "Sure. Sure you are, son." We still go into a room and sit at the piano and go plink...and...plank. And that's what the songs come out of.²²⁴

Waits says that it was Brennan who encouraged him to begin producing his own albums and to claim ownership over his music and persona.²²⁵ There is no clear delineation of Waits' and Brennan's role within their collaborative process. This is similar to Wilson's own practice, and perhaps accounts for the reason why they were attracted to each other's work. Just as with Waits and Brennan, Wilson also breaks down the roles within the collaborative process and encourages musical composers to contribute text, story, dramaturgy, and personas, outside of their musical compositions. It is also significant to note that Waits' claims he has no formal background in music. This is also similar to Wilson, who has not taken courses in theatre composition or directing, and is a nod back to some of his earlier work with

²²² O'Brien, Michael 'The Rag and Bone Man' *Mojo* (Issue 200, July 2010) 74.

²²³ Dansby, Andrew 'Another Night at the Opera for Waits' *Rollingstone.com* (3rd of November, 2000).

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Gross, Terri 'Tom Waits: On "Alice" and "Blood Money"' *Fresh Air*, (www.npr.org) 21st May, 2002, 00:22:40.

the School of Byrds, where he gathered people who had no training in theatre, dance, or music.

The collaborative process of *The Black Rider*

The Black Rider was not Waits' and Brennan's first foray into theatrical composition. In 1986, Waits and Brennan released an album called *Franks Wild Years*, which was based on a 1984 musical theatre piece they wrote for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre.²²⁶ It was shortly after this that Waits began his collaboration with Wilson on *The Black Rider*. Wilson claims that 'Tom Waits approached me in 1984 after he had seen the revival of *Einstein on the Beach*, and he wanted me to direct a play he had written.'²²⁷ Waits says of their first encounter:

I first met Bob in New York in 1983. My wife and I had written a play called *Frank's Wild Year*. We asked Bob if he would direct the play, and one thing led to another. We didn't actually do that project, but we went on ultimately to do two other projects together.²²⁸

The two other projects that Waits refers to, in actuality were three projects: *The Black Rider*, *Alice* (1992), and *Woyzeck* (2002).

Wilson did not end up working with Waits on *Frank's Wild Year*, but he was intent on collaborating with him and as Wilson recalls '...and one summer I came upon this old German ghost story. I sent it to Tom and he thought it was a good idea' and from that point Waits and Wilson began their collaboration on *The Black*

²²⁶ O'Brien, Michael 'The Rag and Bone Man', 77.

²²⁷ Wilson, Robert 'Robert Wilson on The Black Rider', The Robert Wilson Archives.

²²⁸ Wilson, Robert & Laugesen, Peter 'The Poor Soldier Gets Those Proletarian Lovesick Blues' *The Independent* (November 19, 2003). *Innocent When you Dream: Tom Waits Reader* ed. Montandon, Mac (NY: New York, Avalon Publishing Group, 2005) 278.

Rider.²²⁹ Waits and Wilson began conceiving *The Black Rider* in 1988, two years prior to its premiere. Wilson met with Waits in California and began developing the piece. Wilson goes on to further describe the collaborative process:

Tom did not want to write the text but thought I could do it. But I did not want to do it either. So I approached Allen Ginsberg with whom I had done the *Cosmopolitan Greetings* in Hamburg. He said that his old friend William S. Burroughs would be better suited, and William was very interested. Then we all met and discussed our ideas, and I made a storyboard and give it to Tom and William. The piece was developed from this storyboard.²³⁰

Wilson was unable to secure his original choice of writer, as also seen with the composer for *Orlando*, because he was unable to have Waits or Ginsberg write the libretto for *The Black Rider*, however this once again points to the openness of the contributions of the artists that Wilson collaborates with.

By December of 1988, Burroughs was brought into the collaborative team and as indicated in a fax from Dennis Redmond, the director of the Byrd Hoffman Foundation:

Bob feels that Burroughs should be considered a part of the collaboration and not “for hire.” Bob therefore agrees that Burroughs should be included in the commission of the work and should receive an equal share (\$50,000) with Bob and Tom Waits.²³¹

This fax is significant because it discusses Burroughs’ place within the collaborative process. It specifies that Burroughs is not “for hire,” but an equal collaborator alongside Waits and Wilson, as delineated by the equality in pay that the three of them received. Burroughs’ writing technique helps aid the postdramatic telling of

²²⁹ Wilson, Robert ‘Robert Wilson on The Black Rider’, The Robert Wilson Archives.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 258, Series 3; subseries 3.1, from ‘Chrono Correspondence, Dec 1988-March 1989’.

the fable of *The Black Rider* as demonstrated in a letter sent to the Byrd Hoffman Foundation from Burroughs' assistant, Grauerholz, in which he explains Burroughs technique:

I am attaching 3 sample pages of "read-across" automatic cut-up texts, made by stripping all formatting from the 36-page text and printing it in columns – this is a WSB technique he first used in 1959. From these, certain "read-across" phrases will be underlined and selected by William, and put together as a cut-up word-cloud text.²³²

This cut-up word-cloud method resonates with Lehmann's theories on the postdramatic, and Wilson's previous directing styles, such as with the reordering of actions and sequences in *Orlando*. The use of Burroughs text throughout the piece, in both spoken monologues and during some of the songs, helps negate the narrative of *The Black Rider*. This challenges the role of text and music as bearers of a story, because they interrupt and betray the transaction of the fable to the spectators.

Also the previous mention of the use of a storyboard, or visual book, used in *The Black Rider* is a method that can be traced throughout Wilson's practice, and was mentioned previously with his work with Glass on *Einstein on the Beach*. These visual books often contain a sharp precision and calculation of time, in a similar way that his scripts do. This can be seen with the strict marking out of lengths of time in the far columns of the pages. Wilson refers to this technique in an interview conducted by David Rieff for the magazine *Connoisseur*. As Rieff recalls in a conversation with Wilson about *The Black Rider*:

For openers, he (Wilson) managed to keep the usually verbose Burroughs in check. "Everything was timed," he recalls. "I would

²³² Robert Wilson Collection, Box 259, from 'Chrono correspondence May 16th- 31th, 1989'.

draw storyboards of all the scenes and then give them to Burroughs with the running times for each marked down.”²³³

In addition to offering a map for Wilson's collaborative team, the demarcation of time in Wilson's scripts also allowed them to behave in a similar way to a musical score. It is important to note that these visual books were created during the table workshop, where the majority of the creative team was present. Although Wilson takes ownership of these visual books, his co-collaborators influenced them.

The storyboard was also used to create a structure to house the music, in addition to its use as a means to structure Burroughs' text. Although Waits and Brennan were left to compose the music for the piece, they were still reliant on the storyboard as indicated in a fax to Wolfgang Wiens, the dramaturg for the piece, from Ronald Vance, on Waits's behalf, dated 29th of November, 1988:

Tom will write the lyrics for his music. He would like to know from you where the songs will be positioned in the work, who will sing them, whether they will be for individuals, duets, etc.²³⁴

This fax seems to indicate that Waits was hugely reliant on the storyboard for his compositions, but Waits was still integral to the collaborative team. In a further fax from Redmond he says, 'Bob thinks it is important that Tom Waits and Wolfgang Wiens meet with Burroughs in Kansas in January to begin to discuss the text together.'²³⁵ This quote is important because it highlights Waits' role within the collaborative process. Waits and Brennan wrote all of the music for *The Black Rider*, and Waits also played a role in developing the written/verbal text for the show. In

²³³ Rieff, David 'The Exile Returns' *Connoisseur Magazine* (London: Unknown Publisher, 1991) 34.

²³⁴ Robert Wilson Collection, Box: 257, from 'Correspondence Sept 16th – Nov 30th, 1988'.

²³⁵ Robert Wilson Collection, Box: 258, Series 3; subseries 3.1, 'Chrono Correspondence, Dec 1988-March 1989'.

another fax dated the 2nd of February, 1989 from Wilson to Waits, it indicates that the three of them had met by that point. In this letter Wilson writes to Waits:

Perhaps you could pull from his (Burroughs) rather free texts other text-ideas which could be developed as lyrics for songs, or perhaps some of Burroughs' texts could be set to music... With Burroughs' writing I would simply distribute the lines to the various actors in a non-illustrative way, meaning I would break up lines, words, etc. in an acoustical rather than literary way. I can see your songs being a somewhat different architectural form in front of Burroughs' clouds.²³⁶

This same letter indicates that Wilson intended to hold auditions in March and that 'both, the theatre and myself, feel that it is essential that you (Waits) be a part of the selection of the actors/singers' meaning that Waits was influential in the selection of the performers alongside Wilson.

In the fall of 1989 Wilson began the workshop phase of his rehearsal process at the Thalia Theater, where he worked out his blocking and staging.²³⁷ This workshop was recorded, and given to Waits and Burroughs to use as a means to construct their compositions, even though Burroughs was also present at the workshops. It was at this point that Waits and Burroughs began composing their artistic contributions. The artistic team met again in the spring of 1990 for the third stage of the rehearsal process, where they combined all of their contributions and workshoped the piece for six weeks.²³⁸ This rehearsal process is similar to the one that Wilson had been engaging in throughout the entirety of his practice, which shows a type of separate but equal relationship between the collaborators, and was originally inspired by the working process of Cage and Cunningham. The three collaborators discussed *The*

²³⁶ Robert Wilson Collection, Box 258, from 'Chrono correspondence Feb 16th- 28th, 1989'.

²³⁷ Wilson, Robert 'Robert Wilson on The Black Rider', The Robert Wilson Archives.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Black Rider throughout its conception, but it was only in the last six weeks that all of the theatrical components contributed by them were brought together, and shared for the first time.

The collaborative process of *The Black Rider* is discussed in *Rolling Stone* magazine when Waits says, regarding his music, ‘I don’t even entirely know what it is yet, because it’s not done. It’s not on its feet yet, so I’ll probably undergo a lot of changes between now and the end.’ To which the interviewer states ‘Isn’t the debut just a few weeks away? You’re really going to have to whip it into shape.’ Then Waits’ responds with ‘Yeah, you *do* have to whip it. And there’s a lot of elements, and even where you get it where you like it, it’s not gonna stay. It’s like drawing in the dirt with a stick.’²³⁹ This highlights the allowance for disorder within the separate but equal theatrical process in which the three collaborators combined their contributions within a limited time. This means that there was a significant amount of planning beforehand; but there was still an element of chance that added to the disjunction of the piece.

Despite this ephemerality and disjunction, there was a juxtaposition of a tight structuring, often enforced by Wilson’s directorial style. For example, a video recording of the final rehearsals of *The Black Rider* showed the cast and production team working through the process of combining all of the artistic contributions together. The recording began with the prologue of the piece and contained several other scenes throughout the rehearsal period. At the beginning of the recording, an amplified voice counted: ‘6,7,8,9,10,11,12, hold for 4, 3, 4, down in 3,2,3 lights on

²³⁹ Dansby, Andrew ‘Another Night at the Opera for Waits’ *Rollingstone.com*.

curtain hold for 3, 3, black curtain off, music.’²⁴⁰ This voice is unidentified in the footage, but it has the same broad American inflections tinged with the Southern drawl of Wilson’s accent. The reason that the counting began at six is likely due to the fact that it is at the beginning of the recording, thus one through five were not captured on film. After the above commands were given, the music began and two stagehands positioned themselves at each end of a long rectangular black box. The next verbal command given was ‘Box is moving up in twenty-four seconds’ and this was preceded by a steady count to twenty-four during which time the stagehands manipulated the box upwards. The voice counted to twenty-four, and stated; ‘Box in place, leg,’ it was at this point that the box stopped moving and a leg extended out from it. These four words signalled to the stagehands to stop the movement of the box and instructed an actor to step inside the box and to extend a leg out from it. The movement and duration of the leg extending out of the box was not dictated. It was only once the leg was retracted back into the box that the amplified voice said ‘music’ and the first song, ‘The Black Rider’, began.

Thus in this manner, Wilson became the conductor of a score. Wilson established the tempo and initiated the cues and entrances. And just as with a score, some passages were rigidly fixed in time, as experienced with the twenty-four seconds given to the movement of the box. Also, as found in a musical score, some passages were open to interpretation; this can be correlated to the freedom in timing with the action of the leg.

²⁴⁰ Wilson, Robert *The Black Rider: The Casting of the 12 Magic Bullets: Rehearsal* video recording (Hamburg: Eine Aufführung des Thalia Theaters, 1989) 0:00:01.

Typically the role of a musical score is to coordinate a group of musicians to play in conjunction with one another. The twenty-four seconds given to the moving of the box in *The Black Rider* mirrored this tight structuring of multipart players. A number of players were co-ordinated during these twenty-four seconds, namely the two stagehands, the spotlight operator, the musicians, and the actor playing leg. The verbal demarcation of the actions existing within this time and space of twenty-four seconds allows for a precision to the actions that is often found in the theatre that Wilson directs. However, the interpretative moment of the leg was allowed to behave differently. In music, passages such as recitatives, cadenzas and spaces marked with a fermata are not as tightly structured, usually due to the fact that there are minimal orchestrations during these passages. This leg solo did not need the same rigid structure, because the only instrument in motion was the leg. However, the players were cued back in with the command 'music' once the leg solo reached its conclusion. When reading this section as one would read a piece of music certain logic comes to the forefront. This type of musical logic focuses on the practicality of the ordering of the performers. This is not to say that these actions and images do not hold connotations that enrich the story, but that staging influenced by musical logic could also account for the actions that took place.

A dramaturgical analysis of the performance and the music

The separate but equal rehearsal process carried out by Wilson, Waits, and Burroughs meant that a certain amount of alternation between points of disjunction and conjunction took place within the final production in regards to the transaction of the fable of *The Black Rider*, resulting in a postdramatic telling of the story. This can

be seen in the use of the music, both in its style, staging, and in the personification of Waits and Burroughs within the narrative of the piece.

The style of Waits' and Brennan's music for *The Black Rider* can be linked back to early discussions between the collaborators. Burroughs viewed the story of *The Black Rider* as having similar themes to *The Great Gatsby*, of which James Grauerholz, Burroughs' assistant, writes in his notes:

Thinking of Tom Waits's talents, one considers the possibilities of the 1920s atmosphere conjured by *Gatsby* – costumes, music, specifically an American music – and the idea of a fairground or circus or amusement park: Ferris wheel, spook-house, tunnel of love, shooting gallery, etc.²⁴¹

This concept is reiterated in another letter dated the 31st of May, 1989 from Grauerholz to Redmond detailing notes from a meeting between Waits and Burroughs:

Tom is well aware that Wolfgang's – and the Thalia's – wish is for a German opera, and that the Carnival motif presents difficulties from that point of view. However, as William points out, if an American theme or treatment was not desired, why has the Thalia engaged an American songwriter and an American writer? – not to mention the American director.²⁴²

Instead of conforming to the theatre's wishes and creating a 'German' play by trying to reinforce the German fable through text and music, Waits and Burroughs took on a decidedly different approach and exaggerated their American roots. The sense of Americana was apparent in the spaghetti Western twangs of songs like 'Just the Right Bullets' and the vaudeville-esque opening song 'The Black Rider' underscored by a steady organ reminiscent of a carnival. These devices stand out in stark contrast to Wilson's use of white makeup, typical of German expressionism. This creates a

²⁴¹ Robert Wilson Collection, box 258 from 'Chrono correspondence Feb 16th- 28th, 1989'.

²⁴² Robert Wilson Collection, box 259, from 'Chrono correspondence May 16th- 31th, 1989'.

disjunction between the visuals and the sound, thus offering two strong signifiers of location and culture. These two signifiers often blend in *The Black Rider*, as the German speaking performers struggle to sing their English lyrics to Waits' songs or speak their segments of Burroughs' English text, thus bringing attention to this disjunction.

Of the case studies discussed thus far in this chapter, *The Black Rider* is the only one that does not contain a continuous soundscape. Instead the musical numbers are dispersed amongst blocks of text and action. When discussing his views on theatre music Waits states:

I told someone the other day that the song doesn't begin at the beginning of the song. You don't want to feel the sense of stopping and then planting your feet, looking up to the balcony, throwing your head back and starting a song. You really do want to create a condition of music that starts at the beginning of the play, or in the lobby.²⁴³

Continuous sound can be found in both *Einstein on the Beach* and *Orlando*. With *Einstein on the Beach* the music and actions had already begun as the spectators were being seated, thus there was a sense of the actions and sounds starting prior to the entrance of the audience. For *Orlando*, the sound and amplification was constant throughout the piece, but at times it was almost unperceivable, thus drawing awareness to it through the act of questioning its existence. Unlike these two cases, the sound in *The Black Rider* is not continuous. Instead, each song is identifiable as a separate unit, with a beginning and end. In order to offer a juxtaposition against this, perhaps Waits encouraged his singers to approach his music with the above mind-set, thus adding to

²⁴³ Wilson, Robert & Laugesen, Peter 'The Poor Soldier Gets Those Proletarian Lovesick Blues' ed. Montandon, Mac *Innocent When you Dream: Tom Waits Reader*, 279.

the musicalization of *The Black Rider* by encouraging the performers to approach the entire production as a piece of music.

The staging of *The Black Rider* breaks down the boundaries between the musicians and the performers, much in the same way that this relationship was challenged during the collaborative process. During the song 'November', the singing saw player is brought out of the orchestra pit and placed on the stage and is lit by a spotlight. The actors continue to perform the song, without recognising the addition of the musician within their stage space. The act of being brought up on the stage illustrates that the musicians and the actors held a mutual importance in the play, but were also separate; much in the same way that the violinist in *Einstein on the Beach* was costumed as Einstein and put on a platform outside the proscenium arch to act as both a spectator and performer.

In addition, Waits kept a certain distance from the fable of the piece during his composition process, which aids in the disruption of a transaction of the meaning. As Waits states about a later collaboration with Wilson titled *Woyzeck*; 'The fact that *Blood Money* is about *Woyzeck*...I didn't know anything about *Woyzeck*. Kathleen knew more than I, but I didn't really know the story or anything. I was just told the story in a coffee shop in Boston over eggs a few years ago.'²⁴⁴ This intentional ignorance of the piece is similar to Kuhn's unwillingness to translate or read the text of his collaborations with Wilson. This is not to say that the text, story, or fable is unimportant in these particular pieces; this avoidance on the composers' part helps to

²⁴⁴ Phipps, Keith 'The *Onion* Interview' ed. Montandon, *Mac Innocent When you Dream: Tom Waits Reader*, 363.

define the soundscapes as its own, independent unit, and not as something that has a dependency on the meaning of the text, at least not during the compositional stage.

Although all three case studies illustrate a collaborative process that was similar, they each produced performances comprised of artistic elements that were starkly different from one another. *Einstein on the Beach* consisted of four hours and forty-eight minutes of visual and musical meditations loosely based on Einstein. *Orlando* used Woolf's text to create a one-woman performance set alongside Kuhn's sound environment. *The Black Rider* combined the artistic contributions of Burroughs texts and Waits songs in order to deliver a retelling of a German fable. In some ways these three productions had a similar visual aesthetic, due to Wilson's scenographic signature, yet the three sound environments had very little in common, other than the fact that they all existed within a 'Wilsonian' production. This challenges the concept of Wilson as an auteur, which will be further investigated in the following chapter when Wilson's practice as a whole is discussed and his more recent collaborations are explored, as well as his directorial endeavours within the operatic genre, and how this affects the dramaturgy of 'Wilson's music.'

Chapter 4

Dramaturgies of musical collaboration in Wilson's later practice

'Go as you would to a museum, as you would look at a painting' Wilson says, *'You just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures.'*²⁴⁵

When looking at the devising processes of *Einstein on the Beach*, *Orlando*, and *The Black Rider* the separate yet collaborative nature of Wilson's rehearsal practice becomes apparent. There is a strong sense of collaboration within the initial stages of the devising process, but each member of the creative team composes their contributions separately. This method of Wilson's practice is also maintained throughout his more recent works, as will be explored in this chapter.

In the late 1980s Wilson began working with pre-existing written narratives, as seen with both *Orlando* and *The Black Rider*, and this is seen in his wider practice as he also began working with classical scripts and scores. Wilson directed such productions as Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1985) and Euripides' *Alcestis* (1986) with musical contributions by Laurie Anderson. Over the last thirty years he has collaborated with and adapted the work of artists such as the late German playwright Heiner Müller with *Hamletmachine* (1986) and *Quartet* (1987); David Byrne on *The Forest* (1988); Allen Ginsberg for *The Cosmopolitan Greetings* (1988); Susan Sontag

²⁴⁵ *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* Programme Notes, Lyric Theatre, The Lowry, Salford, 2011.

on the creation of *Alice in Bed* (1993) and *Lady from the Sea* (1998); *Time Rocker* (1997) and *POEtry* (2000) with Lou Reed; and *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2007) in collaboration with Rufus Wainwright and performed by the Berliner Ensemble.

Wilson founded the Watermill Center in New York in the early 1990s, and completed the rebuilding of the site in 2006. He currently uses the Watermill Centre as a place to hold table workshops with collaborators. During the summer Wilson brings together seventy to ninety artists from all over the world to devise and create upcoming pieces and he usually works on several productions at the same time.²⁴⁶ Shevtsova says that Wilson's table workshops usually consist of Wilson, his assistant director Ann-Christin Rommen, who has been a permanent member of his team since 1984, a dramaturg, a scenographer, a costume designer, and a composer, in addition to the other artists who join the production team for a given piece.²⁴⁷ It is this group of people that devise the structure and the script. The fact that Wilson invested so much time and money into a Center such as the Watermill, which focuses on bringing people together, shows the centrality of collaboration within Wilson's practice.

The rehearsal process outlined in the previous chapter, with *Einstein on the Beach*, *Orlando*, and *The Black Rider*, is similar to the practice he maintains up unto this day. Typically, after the table workshops, the next phase of Wilson's production process includes the casting of the performers and the first workshop with the actors. As opposed to the method of monologue recitation, Wilson typically asks auditioning performers to do simple gestures and movements such as walking, sitting, shouting

²⁴⁶ Otto-Bernstein, Katherine *Absolute Wilson*, 00:34:15

²⁴⁷ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 46-48.

text, singing, or repeating movements.²⁴⁸ Once the actors have been cast in a piece they are invited to attend the first set of two workshops with Wilson and the rest of the artistic team. In addition to the research materials gathered and presented at the Watermill Center, Wilson also asks the actors to bring in items to the first set of workshops, which are related to the production in some sense and to place them on the walls of the studio. From this, Wilson chooses particular stimuli to use in the production itself.

As mentioned previously, Wilson takes a video recording of the first set of workshops and gives them to the rest of the production team to use as a catalyst for composing their artistic contributions. This, on first glance, could be read as Wilson exerting auteur ownership over his pieces. Yet as Wilson discusses in regards to the process of *The Forest* (1988), with David Byrne:

I suggested where it could be. Now whether they have placed it there, I don't know. What I did was to stage the work as a dumb play, where there is no text. I did all the blocking, the staging. I designed the scenery and I videotaped a workshop with people where the staging was mapped out. It's not complete but it's more or less thought out for all seven acts. The authors, the writers and the composer, David, have taken that videotape, those timings, those ideas, and are scoring it.²⁴⁹

The video recording of the first workshop acts as structure for the artistic team to compose around, but even this structure was not Wilson's creation alone. It was informed by the table workshop, where all of the artistic team were present. In addition to this, often members of the collaborative team attended the first set of workshops, as seen with Glass during *Einstein on the Beach*, Kuhn with *Orlando*, and Burroughs for *The Black Rider*, and thus had influence over the staging as well. As

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 48.

²⁴⁹ Dalton, Jody 'Robert Wilson: seeing the forest for the trees', 20.

Wilson indicates in the above comment, even though he offers a guide and suggests where the artistic materials could go, he does not feel he has control over their actual placement. This challenges the idea of “Wilson’s vision” because it is also the vision of the entire creative team who work with him. By discussing “Wilsonian” theatre as belonging to Wilson, this undervalues the contribution from his artistic team and performers.

The separate but equal collaborative approach seen in Wilson’s theatre process can be viewed as a re-envisioning of B. Brecht’s epic theatre theories on a separation of the elements. B. Brecht believed that the theatrical elements of the theatre should operate independent from one another. As Martin Esslin remarked of B. Brecht’s theatre:

The musical numbers are no longer smuggled in at the point when the emotional charge of a scene rises to a climax and speech merges into song – but are introduced as entirely distinct ingredients of the play, which interrupt its flow, break the illusion, and thereby render the action “strange”.²⁵⁰

This “strangeness” is what is often referred to as the alienation effect. By alienating a song, this brought awareness to its existence as a piece of music, and not only as a conduit for storytelling. B. Brecht and the composers he worked with commonly placed their songs at junctures within the narrative, such as at scene changes, not to heighten the mood, but to draw attention to the surrounding situation. This can be seen with the “Solomon Song” in B. Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). The song is performed in front of the curtain by the character Jenny. In this song she compares the character of Macheath to other historical figures, such as

²⁵⁰ Esslin, Martin *Brecht: A Choice of Evils: A Critical Study of the Man, his Work and his Opinions* Third edition (London: Eyre Methuen Drama, 1980) 118.

Solomon, Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, and identifies the decline of each one. This song does not aid in the telling of the narrative, but instead comments on the actions of the play as well as on society itself. B. Brecht contextualises Macheath as a part of a neomyth alongside other historical figures, as a means to pass judgement on the surrounding action.

Also, because the “Solomon Song” was performed in front of the curtain it was not only separated in context from the rest of the narrative, but also physically, outside of the stage space, thus maintaining a separation of theatrical elements. This technique can also be seen with Wilson and Glass and their use of “knee plays” in *Einstein on the Beach*. Each of these “knee plays” were placed in front of the stage space, and contained the same two actresses joined by the chorus in the orchestra pit. The “knee plays” contained themes of Einstein, as realised through projected photographs, costumes, and the use of plumbing items as furniture, this staging was unique to the “knee plays”, and did not appear in the Acts themselves. These could be seen to operate in a similar manner as B. Brecht and Weill’s musical numbers, as they reflected on the postdramatic narratives of *Einstein on the Beach*, instead of building on them.

In many ways the collaborative process of Wilson and B. Brecht are similar. They both worked closely with a team of artists in order to develop the theatre they directed. The majority of the time B. Brecht did not build his scripts from scratch, but

used pre-existing fables, a team of dramaturgs, writers, and musical composers to build it with him.²⁵¹ As Wilson observes:

I think that the theatre I try to make is an epic theatre in the sense that Bertolt Brecht talked about... Theatre can be a gesture, it can be a light, it can be a sound, can be a word, can be a color. It can be anything, and there are all of these stratified zones that you are layering together and structuring, in my case often through counterpoint... and you can make a choice of how you put them next to each other and how they complement each other. The text is one of those layers. I try to make what we see as important as what we hear.²⁵²

As seen in the above quote, Wilson envisions his separation of theatrical elements as integral to his practice as well. Both of the two men's work identifies the importance of each individual element of the theatre. For B. Brecht, he explored this by separating and emphasising them, for Wilson he engaged in a parataxis of theatrical elements that resulted in a counterpoint between disjunction and synchronisation in order to highlight each element. This technique can be identified in what Wilson calls his computer-on-a-baroque-table theory, where he explains that a computer on a baroque table is more identifiable than a candle would be. The aural and visual theatrical elements of the theatre that Wilson directs functions through coordinated points of synchronicity and disjunction. These opposing moments offer a counterpoint in which a dialectical conversation between the two is enacted. As David Bernstein states in his chapter on Cage and high modernism:

Cage viewed composition as an activity integrating opposites: the rational and the irrational. He juxtaposed the composer's ideas of

²⁵¹ Rambo-Hood, Markee H. *What a Difficult Task it is for Music to Fulfil the Demands of an Epic Theatre: a Discussion of the role of epic music in Bertolt Brecht's plays* (University of Glasgow: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2298/>, 2009). In this thesis I look at the working relationship between B. Brecht and his musical collaborators while interrogating the role of music within B. Brecht's concept of Epic Theatre. I look at a number of case studies in this thesis, and in each one, B. Brecht relies on his collaborators to help him build the materials for the script and production.

²⁵² Wilson, Robert & Newman, Fred 'A Dialogue on Politics and Therapy, Stillness and Vaudeville', ed. Richard Schechner *The Drama Review* (vol. 47, no. 3, T179, Fall 2003) 125.

order on the one hand, his or her spontaneous actions and inspiration on the other.²⁵³

This can be found in Cage's collaborations with Cunningham, in which the two created careful compositions separately, that were left to chance when the two compositions were conjoined in a performance. Wilson's computer-on-a-baroque-table theory is similar in its engagement with opposing elements.²⁵⁴ Wilson explains his theory, which he refers to as counterpoint, saying 'Perhaps it is easier to see the laptop on a baroque table than a candle,' because the laptop is unexpected, whereas the candle is a common association found in our Western culture.²⁵⁵ Wilson also states: 'I try to contradict myself as much as possible...It's boring if you believe anything too much.'²⁵⁶ This idea can be seen in the opposition between his artistic and his personal life. He admits that even his lifestyle reflects this conflicting juxtaposition of sentiments; his theatre is calm and slow, his life is busy and hectic.²⁵⁷

As outlined in the previous chapter, after Wilson completes the first set of workshops, he holds a second set.²⁵⁸ These are held a few weeks before the premiere, the length dependant on the contract between Wilson and the theatre. It is during these workshops that all of the artistic contributions from the creative team are utilised.²⁵⁹ After completing the first workshop, the actors are sent away with material to learn. As Shevtsova explains, by the start of the second workshop:

²⁵³ Bernstein, David 'Cage and high modernism' *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* ed. Nicholls, David, 193.

²⁵⁴ Holmberg, Arthur. *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 175

²⁵⁵ Wilson, Robert *Lecture Tape 2*, 00:38:40.

²⁵⁶ Quoted by Jody Dalton 'Robert Wilson: Seeing the Forest for the Trees', 19.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 53:35.

²⁵⁸ Shevtsova, Maria *Robert Wilson*, 50.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 50.

...the actors are expected to have memorized the movement score and internalized its tones, rhythms and phrasing. “Score” here intentionally echoes Meyerhold’s term (which originates with Stanislavsky) for the idea that movements can be as precise as musical notes and follow their intrinsic logic without any recourse to “natural” behavior or psychological justification for it.²⁶⁰

Shevtsova’s statement identifies the musicality of the first phase of “silent” workshops, claiming that even with the removal of the audio track, musicality can be found in the body of the performers with their movements. In this sense, Shevtsova regards Wilson’s composition as similar to a musician, the difference being that his music is composed for the human body. This concept will be explored further in the following section, when the “silent” phase of workshops will be further investigated in relation to classical opera pieces. This section gave a general overview of the rehearsal process that Wilson currently engages in. This is not to suggest that every production operates in the same manner, and thus the rest of this chapter aims to offer more precision by using specific examples.

Wilson and classical opera

Wilson began staging classical operas in the 1980s; he directed international productions such as *Médée* (1984) by Charpentier, Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (1991), Debussy’s *Pelleas et Mélisande* (1997), and Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1991), *Lohengrin* (1991), *Rheingold* (2000), and the entire *Ring* cycle in 2006. Holmberg argues that Wilson was attracted to the operatic genre because he ‘has always been interested in language as sound, opera helped him to make the transition to the classics.’²⁶¹ In opera, music and text exist in an equal and symbiotic partnership. Opera allows for

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 50.

²⁶¹ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 28.

wordless sound, a slowing down of language, and a fracturing of narratives, all qualities already apparent in Wilson's work before this point, and accounts for much of Lehmann's theories on the postdramatic in Wilson's work.

This section will focus on two of Wilson's operas; Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1993) and Christoph Gluck's *Alceste* (1987). *Alceste* and *Madama Butterfly* were both sung in the classical operatic style with trained opera singers, and the orchestration was largely unchanged from the original score. By using these two examples as case studies, this section will explore Wilson's relationship with music. With these case studies, the music was composed prior to the staging process, as opposed to the case studies that have already been discussed thus far in this dissertation. This section will explore how the dramaturgy of Wilson's practice changes when these factors are added.

When directing operas, Wilson does not deviate significantly from the production process outlined within this dissertation; he still engages in a table workshop and two sets of workshops. Wilson refers to the staging of his first set of workshops as a "dumb play" or "silent workshop" because when he stages his work, he does not allow the performers to sing their material. As Wilson states:

I start all works silently. If I am doing the 'Ring' of Wagner, it drives the singers absolutely mad, that I say "No music, nothing. We do the movement first." They have never done this because they are singers. They want to sing. But we do the movements first and we see what it

is and what these relationships are. Then I go back and I put the music on.²⁶²

Even though the text and the music are written prior to the beginning of Wilson's rehearsal process, he still tries to maintain a separation between the theatrical elements. He does this by focusing on the staging in isolation from the music and text of the opera. Often it is not until the second workshop that Wilson links the movement to the other theatrical components of the piece.

Wilson claims that he begins the rehearsal process without sound, but this does not mean that these workshops are silent. Evidence of this can be found in several VHS recordings that were taken of the workshops for *Alceste* and *Madama Butterfly*. In these videos both pre-recorded and live music of the score of the opera were played while the actors performed their movements. With *Madama Butterfly* an audio recording of the opera was projected over speakers, but due to the poor quality of the recording it was difficult to tell if this was a recording from another performance of the opera, or one created by the cast prior to rehearsals. This in itself presents confines, as the singers had to coordinate their own movements with a recording that was fixed in time. In the video recordings of *Alceste*, there was a rehearsal pianist and rehearsal singer who performed all the music live. The opera singers themselves did not sing along, or even mime the words. Instead they completed their actions along with the soundscape. Their faces remained motionless and in some cases the singers would remain still for an entire aria.²⁶³ Even though Wilson often refers to these as silent workshops, the above instances suggest that they

²⁶² Wilson, Robert *I Have you been here before 2 No this is the first time: An evening with Robert Wilson* (Robert Wilson official site, <http://www.robertwilson.com/press/presskit>) 9.

²⁶³ Wilson, Robert *Alceste: Workshop* Video recording (Stuttgart: Staatstheater Stuttgart, 1986).

are only silent in so far as the actors themselves do not speak or sing, and the presence of the music could effect the decisions that Wilson made while staging the opera. Thus, even in the case of his operatic work, a type of collaboration is formed between the aural and the visual.

In addition to the music used during the workshops of *Madama Butterfly* and *Alcestes*, there was an audio command that instigated each actor's movements. With *Madama Butterfly* there was an amplified voice that read out commands in French. Due to the poor quality of the sound, and my inability to translate French I cannot tell what these commands were instructing, but it was apparent that the words and blocking was linked. Each time a command was spoken, an actor on stage would respond with a change in movement. By giving the physicalizations aural components, this made the relationship between the actions and the music easily identifiable. The majority of the audio commands were given in time with the music. They flowed at regular intervals, typically equidistant. The spoken commands rarely exceeded three syllables, thus punctuating the beats they fell on. Therefore the spoken commands, which informed each movement, were contained within the rhythm and tempo of Puccini's original compositions.

A similar observation can be made for the rehearsals of *Alcestes*, as the movements were also initiated by an audio command. In this case a clap was used, which was likely made with kabuki clap sticks as the tone of the clap was hard and wooden. Once again, the clap almost always fell on a beat, however they did not always correlate with structurally significant beats within the aria. The movements often started on the beat, but they did not necessarily remain with the tempo, and

often fell out of rhythm with the music. Although the initiations of the movements were informed by the tempo of the music, the movements themselves were not necessarily tied to it.

An example of this can be seen in the first phrase of Cio-Cio San's aria, performed by Cheryl Barker, titled 'Un bel di, Vedremo'.²⁶⁴ Seven verbal commands were given out over the space of eight bars in this section of the aria. The music is in three-four time, but I will discuss it in beats of six. Of the seven commands that instigated seven movements over these eight bars, the first one was given on the first quaver of the first measure. When this command was given, the actress playing Cio-Cio San began to walk slowly forward, but her steps did not fall in line with the metre. The second command was given on the fourth quaver of the second measure; the actress then stopped walking and began to raise her left arm towards her body. The third command was given on the fourth quaver of the third measure at which point the actress moved her right arm away from her body. No command was given in the fourth measure of the aria, but the first beats of measures five, six, and seven again had corresponding movements. The final command of this phrase was given on the eighth measure between quavers 1 and 2 to indicate a cessation of movement. With the exception of the final command, all of these commands were administered on a beat. The tempo of the music in *Madama Butterfly* affected the pacing with which the movements were executed by both aligning, and at the one moment intentionally going against the scored tempo and rhythms of Puccini's music.

²⁶⁴ Wilson, Robert *Madame Butterfly: Workshop* Video recording (Paris, 1992).

The act of choreographing the tempo and rhythms of the music with the staging can be illuminated in a quote from Wilson. In an informal interview that was conducted and recorded during rehearsals for *Madama Butterfly*, Wilson states that ‘The basic idea is to create a space where one can hear music.’²⁶⁵ This is similar to Wilson’s thoughts on his other work with musicians when he discusses the music for *Woyzeck* with Waits and states that:

I think my responsibility is to provide a space where I can hear Tom’s music. Can I make a picture, a color, or setting where we can listen to this music? Often, when I go to the theater, I find it very difficult to listen: the stage is too busy or things are moving around too much and I lose my concentration. If I really want to concentrate deep, I have to close my eyes to hear. I try to make a space where we can really hear something: what we see is important because it helps us hear.²⁶⁶

Wilson’s contribution to the collaborative process is primarily visual, and this quote identifies that his concern is to make a space in which the visuals do not interfere with the music. By linking the actions with the music, or disrupting the flow of the narrative he hopes that this allows the spectators to listen to the music, instead of focusing on the story.

There is an apparent correlation between the tempo of the music and Wilson’s staging in these operas, but this does not mean that the music holds dominance over the other theatrical components. As touched on previously, the choreography of the aria ‘Un bel di, Vedremo’ was both intentionally aligned and misaligned at alternating points. In the cases of *Madama Butterfly* and *Alcestes*, the tempo of the music typically initiated an action, but the action itself rarely maintained any rhythmic correlation with the music. For example, when the singer playing Cio-Cio San walked

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 0:00:34.

²⁶⁶ Wilson, Robert & Laugesen, Peter ‘The Poor Soldier Gets Those Proletarian Lovesick Blues’ *The Independent* (November 19, 2003) published in *Innocent When you Dream: Tom Waits Reader* ed Montandon, Mac, 278.

forward in her aria, the action began in time with the music, but her footfalls deliberately fell out of time with the tempo as she walked forward. This display of alternating cases of disjunction and synchronisation are important because it established a link between the actions and the music, but not a dependency. The two elements met at certain points, but they also existed on their own, as two distinctly separate components. This creates a parataxis of theatrical elements that are interrelated, without one holding dominance over the other.

As discussed in chapter two of this dissertation in relation to Wilson's early practice, the idea of the neomythical can also be directly linked to Wilson's work with classical opera. As Lehmann says '...mythical imagery here takes the place of action, satisfying a "postmodern" pleasure in the quotation of imaginary worlds whose time has passed.'²⁶⁷ Through the use of myth, Wilson can rely on his spectator to supply the narrative arch without incorporating it into his theatre piece. In order to interfere with the transference of the narrative, Wilson leaves his operas un-translated and without supertitles.²⁶⁸ The concept of the neomyth is apparent in the majority of classical opera as composers pulled from mythology, often Greek and Roman, in order to construct a story for their audiences. This is why Wilson's work on *Alcestes* and *Madama Butterfly*, can coexist alongside Einstein, Stalin, and Queen Victoria in Wilson's practice.

²⁶⁷ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*, 80.

²⁶⁸ In response to a fax from the opera singer Jessye Norman expressing her concerns about the use of supertitles during a production of *Alcestes* that Wilson had directed, Wilson writes 'I do not like surtitles. I am opposed to titles while singing is going on.' Robert Wilson Collection, Box 258. New York: Butler Library, Columbia University.

This section on Wilson and the operas he has directed does not imply that they are to be viewed as separate or different from the rest of his work. Even Wilson's work with Waits can be viewed as opera. Wilson discusses the music in pieces like *The Black Rider* and *Time Rocker* as music of our time in operas of our time.²⁶⁹ He supports this by saying that when he went to rock concerts in the 1960s, he saw this as similar to the operas to the twentieth century, and was thus trying to recreate this in his own practice. He felt that operas used music that was contemporary, and displayed it in a spectacular theatrical fashion, and in this same way his pieces use contemporary composers to create a piece of theatre which relies heavily on the aural and the visual, just in the same way rock concerts also could be argued contain these same components.

The Life and Death of Marina Abramović: a case study

This section will investigate the collaborative process of one of Wilson's most recent pieces, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011), *Marina* hereafter, in collaboration with the singer/songwriter Antony Hegarty. As it states in the programme notes 'Four years ago, the performance artist, Marina Abramović made a phone call to the director Robert Wilson, to ask if he would stage her death. His response was "only if I can also stage your life..."²⁷⁰ The director of the Manchester International Festival, Alex Poots, which *Marina* was a part of, indicates that the creative team was comprised of Wilson, Abramović, Hegarty, and Willem Dafoe stating 'collectively they have carved out and composed this union of stagecraft,

²⁶⁹ Wilson, Robert *Lecture Tape 2*, 00:54:50.

²⁷⁰ *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* Programme Notes (The Lowry, Salford; 9th July – 16th of July, 2011) The programme does not have page numbers, but the sections that I am referring to will be clearly stated in the body of my writing.

performance art and music.²⁷¹ Abramović invited the collaborative team to work on her life story, but she felt she gave herself over to the creative ownership of Wilson, Hegarty, and Dafoe. As she states in the programme ‘Every time I do a biography I start with the same principle: to completely give up control...I’m material, nothing more.’²⁷² Hegarty discusses the initial phases of collaboration for this project, stating:

Marina asked me to collaborate with Robert Wilson on a piece inspired by her biography. On the first day of rehearsal at the Watermill Foundation, index cards containing elements of her biography were laid out on a round table. There for the first time we perused Marina’s recollections of childhood, a chronicle of terrible abuse.²⁷³

This quote highlights the initial stages of the collaborative process at the Watermill Center, and also Hegarty’s role within it. As mentioned previously, it is typical that materials are gathered together during Wilson’s theatre process to allow the creative team to use it as a catalyst for devising, however in this case the materials gathered were stories of Abramović’s life. Hegarty confirms that he was present at this table workshop and thus was able to contribute to the construction of the piece from the beginning.

Hegarty is listed as the musical director, composer, and lyricist in the programme for *Marina*, but a musical team of artists such as the composer William Basinski, the composer and lyricist Svetlana Spajić, the sound designer Nick Sugar, and the music supervisor and music mixer Dan Bora also supported him. In fact, out of the sixteen creative designers for *Marina*, five of them specifically contributed to the soundscape.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

In the programme notes, Hegarty discusses the process of building the sound team, under a section titled ‘Collaboration.’²⁷⁴ He says that he was first approached by Abramović to work on this piece, as she was a good friend. Hegarty then attended Abramović’s retrospective staging of one of her pieces, ‘The Artist is Present’, in the spring of 2010, where she sat in the atrium in New York City’s Museum of Modern Art for three months. At a dinner celebrating this piece, Hegarty watched the Serbian singer, Svetlana Spajić, sing to Abramović, and afterwards invited her to contribute to the soundscape of *Marina*. He then invited Basinski to compose music for the piece because he felt Basinski’s music ‘revealed itself over the course of hypnotic, subliminally evolving cycles, and that felt aligned with the way Marina utilized duration in her work.’²⁷⁵ Hegarty then recruited musicians for the orchestra consisting of Doug Wieselmann a composer/arranger on clarinet, guitar and percussion, Oren Bloedow who is half of the band Elysian Fields on bass and guitar, Gael Rakotondrae a member of the band CocoRosie on piano and percussion, and the band Matmos, comprised of MC Schmidt and Drew Daniel, to create electronic sound art. The orchestration was written for Hegarty’s voice, a small choir, in addition to the Svetlana Spajić’s group, a Siberian a cappella quartet.²⁷⁶ The only addition that Wilson made to the soundscape for *Marina*, was introducing Antony to a counter tenor named Christopher Nell, a member of the Berliner Ensemble. Even though the initial stages of *Marina* consisted of a strong collaboration between Hegarty, Wilson, Abramović, and Dafoe, Hegarty primarily built the musical team in isolation.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ During rehearsals the choir was made up of five people, including Antony. There was much discussion as to whether Antony should be a part of the choir for the performances. As the orchestra pit was dark during the performances, I could not ascertain the final number of performers in the pit, although it did sound as though Antony had joined them. I sat in on rehearsal on 30th of June and 1st of July, 2011 in the Lowry Theatre, Salford.

This shared sense of acoustic ownership between these musicians' aids in creating a soundscape that is multi-layered. This is because each artist provided an entirely distinctive sound, which signified different times, places, cultures, and instruments. This soundscape is joined by Dafoe's iconic voice detailing Abramović's life. Dafoe remarked on the shared acoustic ownership, as well as ideas concerning the postdramatic, during rehearsals for *Marina*, while the sound was being mixed for Hegarty's 'Saints Ascend.' Dafoe was concerned that he could not hear his speech on the monitor, and could not tell if he was speaking loud enough. However he stated, 'It's all music to me', insinuating that his voice was part of the soundscape. He said his text was a nice story, but that it was not necessary that the audience heard it, and that he would rely on the sound mixer, Bora to ensure that voice level was what the sound team desired.

Even though Hegarty was responsible for building the soundscape for *Marina*, the idea of collaboration was maintained throughout the process of *Marina* as seen in the second set of workshops, a few weeks before the premiere. For example, Wilson could not decide if he wanted the actors to wear masks during the section titled A5/ 'Trail of Tears' and 'Saints Ascend.' Instead of making an executive decision, he went around and asked members of his production team who were situated in the auditorium, including Basinski, who was in the auditorium listening to the soundscape for his composition 'Trail of Tears.' This once again reinforces the idea that the sound artists had input outside of their musical compositions, and that their presence within the workshop had influence on Wilson's staging.

As theatre creators Kirk Lynn and Shawn Sides, say of their own collaborative practice ‘The dramaturgy of our work is often derived from our own history, bringing back characters, images, props, and chunks of text.’²⁷⁷ This idea can also be found in Wilson’s practice with his use of the “knee plays” as a device throughout his history. Wilson and Glass originally developed the “knee plays” for *Einstein on the Beach*, and placed them equidistantly throughout. *Marina* also makes use of five “knee plays,” in almost the exact same placement as they were in *Einstein on the Beach*. Also, the “knee plays” in both productions were staged on a square platform in front of the far downstage left corner.

Glass was not the only musician to leave an impression on Wilson’s practice. Kuhn’s impact can also be found in *Marina* though the use of a separation from the performer’s voices to their bodies. For example, in the section titled ‘I am Seething/Dream Crusher’ Dafoe mimes to a recording of himself speaking. Also, in the section titled ‘Oj Jabuko Zeleniko/The Cut’ Svetlana interrupts her own singing by miming her lyrics.²⁷⁸ Both of these examples show a disjunction between the voice and the body from which it originates, which can be found in the origins of Kuhn’s collaboration with Wilson. This continuity of devices directly taken from Wilson’s first collaborations with Glass and Kuhn, informs the dramaturgy of Wilson’s continuing practice, because it highlights the significance of music and aural soundscapes.

²⁷⁷ Lynn, Kirk & Sides, Shawn ‘Collective Dramaturgy: A Co-Consideration of the Dramaturgical Role in Collaborative Creation’ *Theatre Topics* Vol 13 No 1, March 2003(John Hopkins University Press & Project Muse) 112.

²⁷⁸ These observations were taken from the 19:30 13th of July 2011 performance of *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* at the Lowry Theatre, Salford.

Certain commonalities appear in Wilson's practice when unpicking his relationship with musical composers over the decades that he has been creating theatre. These commonalities include the use of certain techniques, such as "knee plays" and a separation of the voice from the body, which can be directly traced back to his work with composers. Also, Wilson's work with opera shows his interest in using the neomyth as a means of breaking down the narrative arch in both his classical pieces as well as his devised ones. The operas that Wilson has directed also display moments of synchronicity and disjunction found in the choreography between the movement and the music, as originally seen in the practice of Cage and Cunningham. Also, the idea of a separate but equal collaborative environment is apparent in the majority of Wilson's practice, and it questions his role as auteur, specifically when his relationship with musicians and composers is investigated. Wilson's practice is collaborative at times, but it also has defined moments of separation between the production team and their individual compositions.

This separation not only resounds with Cage and Cunningham's practice, as well as B. Brecht's epic theatre theories on a separation of elements, but it also can be found in Wilson's own theories on the role of music and musicians in his practice. When asked in an interview for *Ear Magazine* what music meant to him in his work he says 'The music should be like a silent movie. The edges of the audio score are boundless – an audio screen. We hear and we see. These are the two primary senses with which we relate to one another.'²⁷⁹ Wilson further elucidates this by saying 'If you have uh, uh a silent movie you can imagine any kind of audio score and if you

²⁷⁹ Dalton, Jody 'Robert Wilson: seeing the forest for the trees', 21.

have a radio drama you could imagine any kind of picture score.’²⁸⁰ Wilson’s intention is for the sound and the image to function as two separate units within the theatrical environment. By keeping them separated, his aim is to leave their interpretations open to the spectators.

Giving Wilson sole authorship of “Wilson’s theatre” is not only complicated by the collaborative nature of his practice, but also by reception theory which argues that all theatre is a collaborative exchange between the production team, performers, and the spectators. As Susan Bennett states:

Cultural systems, individual horizons of expectations, and accepted theatrical conventions all activate the decoding process for a specific production, but, in turn, the direct experience of that production feeds back to revise a spectator’s expectations, to establish or challenge conventions, and, occasionally, to reform the boundaries of culture.²⁸¹

This means that a single author cannot control the transaction of meaning between a theatrical production and the spectator, but that various factors affect this exchange. The idea of authorship cannot be located to a single person, sign, or action. These theories can be found in Wilson’s directorial style as identified in the same interview for *Ear Magazine* when he states:

What I’m simply saying is that we’re free to imagine a space that is not defined by the authors, by the directors, by the performers or the composers, but one that’s left for the audience. Because it’s the audience that we make the work for, and it’s the audience that completes the actions.²⁸²

Although collaboration is used throughout Wilson’s practice, according to him, the audience completes the final stage of his collaborative process. This resounds with

²⁸⁰ Wilson, Robert *Magazine Tube* videorecording (New York Performing Arts Library) 00:00:44.

²⁸¹ Bennett, Susan *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London & NY: New York, Routledge) 207.

²⁸² Dalton, Jody ‘Robert Wilson: seeing the forest for the trees’, 21.

Barthes theories on the relationship between the author and reader of a text when he states: 'Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit to that text.'²⁸³ This is why Wilson uses oppositional moments of synchronicity and disjunction, the neomythical, a parataxis of signs, and musicality in both the structuring and staging of the theatre he directs, in order to give room to the spectator to become the final collaborator within his practice, for it is the spectator's interpretation which closes the dialogue of semiotic transaction. This calls into question the idea of Wilson as auteur, and means that the concept of Wilsonian theatre must be reframed as a whole.

²⁸³ Barthes, Roland *Image-Music-Text*, 147.

Conclusion

This conclusion will consider the previous points highlighted in this dissertation in order to argue for the prominence of music within Wilson's practice, challenge the notion of Wilson as an auteur, and discuss the implications of a dramaturgical musical analysis of Wilson's practice. It will look at how the concept of "Wilsonian" theatre is addressed in critical literature, and how this should be reexamined in light of the collaborative findings within this dissertation.

Wilson's practice has been informed and shaped by a number of musicians whose collaborative dialogues have both directly and indirectly influenced his work. This dissertation has focused on Wilson's collaborations with sound artists and composers, but this is not to minimise the role that other artists and collaborators have played in Wilson's practice. This research has argued for the importance of sound within Wilson's practice and therefore the aurality and musicality of his collaborations have been identified and isolated at the expense the other artistic contributions.

Wilson's interaction with the choreographer, Byrd Hoffman, during his childhood gave him confidence to speak and move and provided him with the tools necessary to teach others these skills. When Wilson experienced Cage and Cunningham's performance pieces as a young man this shaped the foundations of his practice, which can most clearly be seen in the workings of his devising process; in its collaborative but separate nature. The separate but equal status of Wilson and the

artists he has collaborated with allows for a performance that is meticulously calculated in its conjunction, and left to chance for its disjunction, or sometimes vice versa. Also, the influence of Cage, Glass, and Knowles helped Wilson approach theatre with an emphasis on formalism when structuring a piece. Wilson's directing style, which was often comprised of tight numerical calculations, had a resemblance to scored music, and also possessed many qualities outlined by Lehmann in his work on postdramatic theatre. And lastly, Cage's influence on Wilson's practice is perhaps most apparent in the belief that the arts should effect all of the senses, and that the two primary senses for human communication are the visual and aural. Because much critical discussion on Wilson and his practice focuses on the visual, this dissertation has investigated the more neglected of the two, highlighting the prominence of music, musicians, and music theory in the building of Wilson's practice. This in turn also accentuated the collaborative nature of Wilson's practice, and challenged the idea of Wilson as an auteur. This however, does not intend to undervalue the contributions of non-musical collaborators.

In his book *Robert Wilson: Theatre of Visions*, one of the first texts written on Wilson's practice, Stefan Brecht uses such term as Wilsonian Theatre, Wilson's Theatre, The Wilsonian Performer, and a Wilsonian Spectacle, when referring to Wilson's early work in the 1960s and 1970s. This type of phrasing has been adopted in academic literature when discussing Wilson's practice, with the exception of Shyer in *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*. In Lehmann's section on Wilson in his book on postdramatic theatre, he uses phrases such as Wilson's theatre, Wilson's

aesthetic and states: 'Wilson calls his auditive environments 'audio landscapes.'²⁸⁴ Lehmann does not make mention of any sound artists when discussing these audio landscapes, even though my own research has shown that Wilson has little to no involvement in composing the soundscapes for the pieces he directs.

Holmberg argues that Wilson is 'A real collaborator, he works closely with dramaturgs, playwrights, and actors, but he is the one who controls the script; it reflects his vision.'²⁸⁵ It is accurate that Holmberg identifies the practice that Wilson engages in as collaborative, but this dissertation has challenged the concept that Wilson controls the script and that it is his vision in entirety. Holmberg is referring to a script in the larger sense of the word, and not limiting it to only the written or verbal text. I would argue that although it may be Wilson's "vision" and images, it is not necessarily entirely his own overall vision. This was most clearly elucidated in Wilson and Glass' collaboration on *Einstein on the Beach*. The devising process for this piece was shared equally between the two men. Wilson was primarily responsible for the visual components and Glass the aural, to claim that *Einstein on the Beach* was Wilson's 'vision' and that Glass was only a collaborator under Wilson's auteur control runs contrary to the evidence this research has uncovered. To discuss it in this manner would devalue Glass' role within the devising process as well as undervalue the importance of his compositions within *Einstein on the Beach*.

Heddon and Millings' definition of Wilson as an auteur is contrary to my research in regards to Wilson and his collaborative processes. Wilson's practice is

²⁸⁴ Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*, 78. Examples of these types of phrases can be found on the following pages: 58, 78, 80, 95, 125-126, 151, 165.

²⁸⁵ Holmberg, Arthur *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 28.

different from many of the devising companies Heddon and Milling investigate in their work, yet Wilson's practice still involves a large component of collaboration as illustrated throughout this dissertation. If one takes Heddon and Millings' concept of auteur as meaning '...the single dominant personality behind a work of film art, a creative personality whose imprint should be discernible throughout the body of his or her films' then Wilson, in some ways could fall into this category.²⁸⁶ One could argue that Wilson is an auteur of his theatre, and this is because of the highly visual aspect that Wilson is directly responsible for. However, one could not perform an auteur reading of Wilson's soundscapes, as these are as varied as the different sound artists who have composed them. As both Glass and Wilson could be seen as auteurs within their own fields, this would raise many questions of ownership within productions like *Einstein on the Beach*.

By bringing into light these contradictions, this dissertation does not intend to undermine the creative and influential work that Wilson has engaged in. It instead aims to re-contextualise the theatre he is a part of. Even though Wilson's presence as a director in his work means that he could exert a certain amount of control over the productions he participates in, it is inaccurate to think of "Wilson's theatre" as only belonging to Wilson. And it is entirely inaccurate to attribute such aspects of the theatre he directs, such as the sound to Wilson, as he largely has no hand in creating or controlling this.

²⁸⁶ Chown, Jeffrey *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1988) 9.

In order to further substantiate the claims laid out by this thesis, it would be important to analyse the role of the other artists that Wilson has collaborated with, as this thesis chose to focus only on the aural and musical contributions. Although this research has challenged preconceptions of Wilson's practice and how it is discussed in critical literature, there are further questions regarding how to talk about a practice where certain aspects are a collaborative effort, and other contributions are by a single artist. This of course is not limited to Wilson's practice, but is applicable to many of his peers and to contemporary theatre makers. This can especially be seen in the cases of theatre collectives such as Forced Entertainment who as Alex Mermikides states 'while the company has the ensemble's permanence and longevity, it is not dependent on the near-deification of its director.'²⁸⁷ Or Catherine Alexander's description of *Complicite* as 'a constantly evolving ensemble of performers and collaborators' with the director Simon McBurney who joined the company in the early 1980s.²⁸⁸ These examples call for an investigation of a tension between devised theatre, collaborative theatre and a 'director's theatre.'

This dissertation has analysed the dramaturgy of Wilson's practice by interrogating the relationship between Wilson and the various sound artists with whom he has worked. In doing so, this research has identified the importance of music within the theatre that Wilson participates in, and has also explored the collaborative nature of his processes. The reading contained in the dissertation challenged previous conceptions of Wilson's practice by making them unstable, and by creating different

²⁸⁷ Mermikides, Alex 'Forced Entertainment – *The Travels* (2002) – The anti-theatrical director' *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* eds Harvie, Jen & Lavender, Andy (Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press, 2010) 118.

²⁸⁸ Alexander, Catherine 'Complicite – *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003/4) – 'The elephant and keeper have vanished completely... They will never be coming back'' *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* eds Harvie, Jen & Lavender, Andy, 59.

manners in which to see Wilson as a director. He offers a dialogue between synchronicity and disjunction, a dialectic between the audio and the visual, and a practice that is both equally collaborative and separated. This intentional framing of opposing forces within his practice allows for a plural reading which ultimately is saved for the spectator to assimilate.

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