

## **Awardee: Robert Wilson**

### **Director and visual artist, USA**

**Robert Wilson is one of international contemporary theatre's most noteworthy representatives, working as a director, set designer, architect and designer. He has fundamentally renewed theatre and performance art since the mid-1960s. Early on, Wilson's career also led him to Germany, where he produced his plays at the major theatres, providing the German theatre world with important stimuli. His production of *The Black Rider*, a musical version of Weber's *Freischütz*, was a worldwide success for Wilson, who to this day produces German works – for example by Büchner, Brecht, Wagner and Strauss – on international stages.**

Robert Wilson was born in Waco, Texas in 1941, studied business economics, architecture and stage design and showed an early interest in theatre work with amateurs, in particular for the deaf who reveal different perceptions of the world on stage. Working in theatre since 1966, Wilson's international breakthrough came in 1971 with the seven-hour silent opera *Deafman Glance* and with Philip Glass in 1976 with the opera *Einstein on the Beach*. His work is particularly distinguished by its unusual combinations of dance, movement, light, sculpture, music and words. For more than forty years, Robert Wilson has lastingly influenced and altered the theatre landscapes on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world. At the very beginning of his career, Wilson was drawn to Germany, where he re-interpreted many plays by German and international writers at a variety of theatres, such as in Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg, thus making a considerable impact on the development of contemporary German theatre. Many of his works had their world premieres in Germany and he also made lasting contacts with German theatre people including Heiner Müller. In addition to his work in theatre, Wilson is known for his many paintings and sculptures, which are exhibited internationally at shows and many museums. Robert Wilson has received many awards for his work, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination, a Golden Lion from the Venice Biennale and an Olivier Award. Today, Robert Wilson lives in New York where he is the artistic director and founder of the Watermill Center.

### **Quotes by Robert Wilson**

“I first become acquainted with museums and theatre in New York in the sixties. I went to see the Broadway shows, but I didn't like them and still don't, for the most part. Then I saw the work of George Balanchine in the New York City Ballet. His work I liked very much. I liked it because of the space: the mental and the virtual space. It was classically constructed and formally performed. The dancers danced from within themselves, allowing the public to come to them without insisting too much on the public's attention. I liked it because I could hear the music and I could see something. What I saw helped me hear and what I heard helped me see. Looking back on the work that I am doing today, dance was the first major influence.”

“I think an artist’s work is always one body. You could run it forward, you could run it backward, or you could put it in a different order. It really does not matter.”

“There is no such thing as no-movement. So, when I begin to walk, the line continues. And if I stop, the line goes on. It is all one thing.

“My work is like a ballet in which light, actors and the set dance with one another. I set the rhythm and for that, I need technicians who understand what I mean. This fantastic theatre offers me all of that. My work is almost better known here in Berlin than in my home city of New York.” (Robert Wilson in an interview with Jessica Schulte am Hülse, *Die Welt*, September 2007)

“An artist recreates history, not like a historian, but as a poet. The artist takes the communal ideas and associations that surround the various gods of his or her time and plays with them, inventing another story for these mythic characters.” (Robert Wilson in conversations with Umberto Eco, *Performing Arts Journal*, January 1993)

“...Light is not an afterthought. It’s something that’s architectural, it’s structure, it’s thought about from the beginning, it’s part of the book, it’s like an actor. So it’s not a decoration.” (Robert Wilson in an interview with John Bell, *Theater Week*, January 3, 1994)

“I have never told an actor ‘this means that.’ I create a very strict structure as far as choreography is concerned, I am strict when I give directions for movement, but not thought. The directions I give, if I give them, to the actors, are about them being more inward, faster or slower – formalistic directions. ‘Quieter,’ ‘Stronger,’ ‘Faster,’ ‘Pull that.’ I don’t discuss with the actors what they say on stage or what they think. Sometimes I tell them, ‘You believe too much in what you are saying and so you are not believable.’” (Robert Wilson interviewed in *The Vima*, 2001)

### **Quotes about Robert Wilson**

“But then the stage changes its colour once again and is the influential theatre of images that penetrates deeply in minor scenes and is more convincing in the details than as a total work of art. When, for instance, the mast to which Wendy is lashed slowly sways and the woody creaking symbolizes the deadly peril like a ticking clock while everything is illuminated in glistening beauty – that’s Robert Wilson at its best.” (*Nachtkritik*, Simone Kaempf, April 2013)

“The hundred-fold proven aesthetics of the director, set and lighting designer Robert Wilson consists of one third pantomime with words, one third the way the people move haltingly as if some godlike puppeteers were pulling on their marionette strings and one third shadow play reminiscent of the poetry of Lotte Reiniger’s silhouette animations.” (Matthias Heine, *Die Welt*, September 2007)

“First the light! Between non-light and a desert of white light. The Robert Wilson sky, which seems to have more colours (between black, white and grey, between sea blue and rosy red) than the real sky itself or at least competes with it grandly. These silent, ghostly transformations and scene changes! The actors, who finally do not portray and have to strenuously imitate people, but are themselves spacecraft, mysterious gliding and flying objects!” (Benjamin Henrichs, *Die ZEIT*, June 1996)

“Theatre lives in the moment, from the fascination of transience, it is mortal like the humans that act in it, speak, dance, sing, play music. Wilson never settled for that. He holds onto the stuff that dreams are made of and Albert Einstein’s world theory. Time stretches out on this beach, on this sea of Glass’s composed waves to infinity. No mortal halts time. But Wilson and Glass and the choreographer Lucinda Childs perpetuate the moment.” (Rüdiger Schaper, *Der Tagesspiegel*, February 2014)

## **Theatre work**

### **Productions (selection)**

- 1970 *Deafman Gance* at University Theatre in Iowa City
- 1973 *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* in Copenhagen, New York and São Paolo
- 1976 *Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass, world premiere, Festival of Avignon, with performances in Europe and at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City
- 1978 *I Was Sitting on My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating*, Theater des Westens, Berlin
- 1979 *Death Destruction & Detroit*, music: Alan Lloyd, sound environment: Hans Peter Kuhn, Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer, Berlin
- 1981 *The Man in the Raincoat*, sound environment: Hans Peter Kuhn, Cologne
- 1986 *Hamletmaschine* by Heiner Müller, performed in New York and Hamburg
- 1987 *Death Destruction & Detroit II* by Robert Wilson, music: Hans Peter Kuhn, Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin
- 1989 *Swan Song* by Anton Chekhov, Münchner Kammerspiele
- 1990 *The Black Rider*, world premiere, Thalia Theater, Hamburg, libretto: William S. Burroughs, music: Tom Waits
- 1990 *King Lear* by William Shakespeare, sound environment: Hans Peter Kuhn, Schauspielhaus Frankfurt

- 1991 *Lohengrin* by Richard Wagner, Opernhaus Zürich
- 1992 *Alice* by Tom Waits and Paul Schmidt, world premiere, Thalia-Theater, Hamburg
- 1994 *Der Mond im Gras*, Münchner Kammerspiele
- 1995 *Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók and *Erwartung* by Arnold Schönberg at the Salzburg Festival (Grosses Festspielhaus)
- 1997 *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, Salzburg Festival (Grosses Festspielhaus), Palais Garnier, Paris
- 1998 *Dantons Tod* based on Georg Büchner, Salzburg Festival (Landestheater), Berliner Ensemble, Berlin
- 2000 *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner, music: Tom Waits, Betty Nansen Theater, Copenhagen
- 2002 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by Richard Wagner, Opernhaus Zürich
- 2003 *Leonce und Lena* by Georg Büchner at the Berliner Ensemble, music: Herbert Grönemeyer
- 2005 *The Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare at the Berliner Ensemble, Berlin
- 2006 *Fidelio* for the Valencia Opera House
- 2007 *Die Dreigroschenoper* by Bertolt Brecht, Berliner Ensemble, Berlin
- 2009 *Der Freischütz* by Carl Maria von Weber, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden
- 2011 *Lulu* by Frank Wedekind at the Berliner Ensemble, Berlin, music: Lou Reed

**Award-winning productions (selection)**

- 1971 Drama Desk Award for Direction for *Deafman Glance*
- 1974 Obie Special Award Citation for Direction for *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*
- 1975 Maharam Award for Best Set Design for a Broadway Show for *A Letter for Queen Victoria*
- 1977 Lumen Award for Design for *Einstein on the Beach*
- 1979 Best Production of the Year, German Critics Award for *Death Destruction & Detroit*

Invitation to the Theatertreffen at the Berliner Festspiele with *Death Destruction & Detroit*

1982 Der Rosenstrauss from the Munich tz for *The Golden Windows*

1983 Invitation to the Theatertreffen at the Berliner Festspiele with *The Golden Windows*

1984 First Prize, San Sebastian Film and Video Festival for *Stations*  
Invitation to the Theatertreffen at the Berliner Festspiele with *The CIVIL warS*

1985 Franklin Furnace Award for *Einstein on the Beach*

1986 Obie Award for Direction for *Hamletmachine*

1987 Le Syndicat de la Critique Musicale Award for Best Foreign Play for *Alceste*  
Invitation to the Theatertreffen at the Berliner Festspiele with *Die Hamletmaschine*

1990 German Theatre Critics Award, Best Production of the Year for *The Black Rider*

1991 Invitation to the Theatertreffen at the Berliner Festspiele with *The Black Rider*

1994 Premio Ubu, Best Foreign Performance for *Alice*

1995 Best Director, International Widescreen Festival for *The Death of Molière*

2001 Reumert Award for Best Set Design for *Woyzeck*

2008 Best Theatre Production in Czech Republic for *Threepenny Opera*

2013 Olivier Award: Best New Opera for *Einstein on the Beach*

## **Awards**

1986 Sole nominee, Pulitzer Prize for Drama for the *CIVIL warS*

1988 Institute Honour, American Institute of Architects  
Premio Mondello, Award for Theatre

1989 New York Public Library Lion of the Performing Arts

1991 Honorary doctorate from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York

1994 Honorary doctorate from the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California

- 1995 Texas Artist of the Year, Art League of Houston
- 1997 B.Z.-Kulturpreis, Berlin
- 1999 Honorary Award, 11<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Theatre Festival
- 1999 Pushkin Prize, Moscow, Taganka Theatre
- 2000 American Academy of Arts and Letters, American Honorary Member
- 2002 Thomas Jefferson Award, American Institute of Architects, Houston, Texas
- 2003 Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres, France
- 2005 Honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto
- 2008 Honorary doctorate from the University of Bucharest, Romania
- 2009 Hein Heckroth Prize, Lifetime Achievement for Scenic Design, Germany
- 2010 Der Steiger Award, Germany
- 2010 Honorary doctorate from American University of Paris
- 2012 International Design and Communication Award
- 2013 Honorary doctorate from the City University of New York  
Honorary doctorate from La Sorbonne, Paris