

## **Award ceremony Goethe Medal 2014**

Thomas Oberender: Laudatory speech for Robert Wilson

(Check against delivery)

### I – Goethe and Wilson

What links the two; Goethe, the poet, privy councillor, draughtsman, art theorist and naturalist with the director, playwright, painter, lighting designer, stage designer, video artist and architect Robert Wilson? Is it the universality of their interests and fields? Both are, as we say today, intermedia artists who combine and consolidate work in a variety of media: poetry and theatre, the drawn image and scenery, encounters of natural sciences with the logic of dreams and myth.

Both made impacts beyond their own cultural groups and made their boundaries more permeable, both were agents of dialogue, interpreters in one way or another. Goethe absconded from a cultural climate that we today call “Eurocentric” and drew eyes eastward in his search for “world literature.” Robert Wilson grew up in a society in which racial segregation was the rule and became a teacher, trainer and artist who brought together in his work that which divided society. It may be a coincidence that the introverted mayor’s son Wilson Junior quietly and loyally befriended the son of a black maid in Waco, Texas. He remained this child to whom a world opened as a result of deep insights and his will for freedom. Like Goethe, Wilson is a figure to whom people pilgrimage, who is style defining, something that became fashion, a cosmos. Goethe needed as little sleep as Wilson, who, creatively speaking, works uncompromisingly, driven by endless diligence and boundless ambition.

Both grew through encounters with power and patrons – they needed and need midwives for their works and enablers of their earthly dream of being. Wherever these two artists are, they create a visionary world and truly also something like anti-province, fields liberated by art.

Both artists connect their thinking to objects; both design furniture, and are collectors. Goethe collected minerals, graphic art, castings, gems, books, Wilson chairs, masks, pictures, and both collect people, create networks around them. The Goethe-Institut honours a great, universal and somehow monumental artist. But let us not forget what distinguishes the two artists: one is a writer, a man of the book, the other a stage designer, one who writes rooms, creates spatial images. The worlds of words and images – we can also see a turn of the century in this, the meeting of the old and new world.

### II – Wilson’s Journey to the World of Language

Robert Wilson’s work began with dance performances and scenic inventions without spoken words: The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud, The King of Spain, Deafman Glance – these were complex tableaux vivants, a dynamic constellation of precisely steered movements of people and objects, sounds and areas of light. His seemingly insurmountable aversion to narrative language led to exuberant dream scenes without words, where, as Louis Aragon wrote in 1971 to his late Surrealist friend Andre Breton, “at once life awake and the life of closed eyes” reveal “the confusion between everyday life and the life of each night.” We could say that Robert Wilson began his life’s work with “Faust II.” With Christopher Knowles, Wilson found a way to allow words to enter the world of his images in the form of Knowles’ phonetic architecture, speech patterns, anti-texts, as Wilson later discovered in Gertrude Stein and Heiner Müller.

With these artists, Wilson developed stage worlds of autonomous logic that do not want to be a picture of the world out there, do not emulate anything, but are worlds in themselves. If you compare the production of that early period with that of Robert Wilson today, it is striking that at that time,

his creative process focused on one project at a time. Only one creation into which all was invested and in which everything bore fruit. Of course, these compilations were of excessive length, of course, people were allowed to come and go during the performances, of course, Wilson hired the Met in NY for Einstein on the Beach and sold tickets for \$20 next to seats for \$2,000. Again, he was more courageous than the theatre director Goethe.

Wilson's worldwide success, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, led to offers from large institutions to stage their repertoires. Thus for the first time, in the mid-eighties literary narratives now permeated Wilson's productions. At the same time, new ways of working arose, which marked the next step: working on several productions at the same time, on pre-existing works, operas, ancient and contemporary pieces. Robert Wilson still tends to treat them today as the word scores by Christopher Knowles; as abstract structures in a certain sequence: elapsed time, a pattern of entrances and exits, ensemble and solo scenes. The text spoken is not evaluated by Robert Wilson, not illustrated, but treated as a form. Its narrative raw materials are extracted, we see them as spaces and props, but, as it were, lost and released into something magical.

In the priceless bonus material to Katharina Otto-Bernstein's magnificent film essay "Absolute Wilson," David Byrne described how Wilson turned plays he staged "from the inside out" - that is, treated exactly the other way around. They do not penetrate the hidden depths of the characters and action from the outside, into the world below or behind the words, as they can be revealed through analysis and research, but the other way around. He halts the times, extracts the elements, rhythms and changes as well as the fundamental messages. And based on this analysis, with Wilson, aesthetic ceremony replaces imitation on the stage. His productions function as quasi-liturgical regimes consisting of song and speech, movements and images that realize a precise formal structure, which is primary. Wilson's scenography serves nothing; it is the work. Robert Wilson's ceremonialness creates a world of aesthetic autonomy. Here nothing is reproduced or alienated; what we see is the foreign, an ever specific other world in the sense of Goethe's "world literature." In it, Wilson does not grab hold of the people playing there. He shows them as types, as dream beings, as purified phenomena, and he sees many of them with a sense of humour. He constructs spaces, gradients and sounds around them, but he respects them as untouchables, strangers, distant, intact.

All this is truly has become an unmistakable Wilson cosmos; a space of shapes or behaviours recognizable in all materials, which has reached an impressive extent. Often investigation of the work is as interesting as the consideration of the structures that produce it. Robert Wilson also always created a social sculpture around himself. In the early eighties, the living and production community Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds was replaced by an intermedia and international educational and experimental laboratory, the Watermill Foundation. With it, Robert Wilson created a free academy for young artists from all over the world and at the same time a kind of superstructure for his own productivity; a creative centre that allows similar productivity as the workshop of Jeff Koons, the office of David Chipperfield or the studio of Dries van Noten. Lukas Cranach worked similarly here in Weimar. A researching, healing climate is growing in Watermill that does not separate between art and life, as Goethe, but not Robert Wilson, had to do.

### III - A Special Kind of Enlightenment

I have always felt Goethe was the opposite of the gifted, tragic Kleist. He was an artist with a successful life out of which the works grew, as they arose in Kleist's from failure. We know that there was a moment of hopeless darkness in Robert Wilson's life, after abandoning his studies and an unhappy return to his parental home in Texas, that he only survived by a hair. But then, thank God, a second life of happy developments began for him, this time in the theatre world, resulting in a perhaps unprecedented redemption of his life in his work. When Robert Wilson founded the Watermill Center, he called this new place "a place of enlightenment, a place of congregation for a global village."

In Wilson's sense, enlightenment is a process that primarily sheds light – lots of light, rigs and spotlights en masse – because without them there would be no shadow, no dawn, no twilight. Light: we are aware of the importance of this word in his work. For Robert Wilson, enlightenment is not an act of rational or moral training, no offer of final solutions, but a process without conclusion that adheres to a more comprehensive idea of education that schools itself on the marvellous, includes liberality, promotes sense and respect for intrinsic qualities and leads to creativity. Goethe and Wilson are both theatre people. Unsentimentally, they see the world as phenomenologists: in shapes and types. One wrote plays, the other drew and developed them. Goethe arranged tableaux vivants for parties at the Weimar court theatre and used them as literary images in his "Elective Affinities." Robert Wilson, with his magical imagery in Aragon's eyes, was the legitimate heir to the surrealist movement. However, the fact that he did not write *Einstein on the Beach* in words, but in drawings, was the reason that the copyright for this play was denied him in the United States.

It is therefore doubly opportune that Robert Wilson is being honoured today with the Goethe Medal. One who fled the language will be honoured for his invention of a universal language today. Robert Wilson, motivated by your repugnance of our being described in a language that is used up and consumes its speakers, you have found a new language, a lingua franca of diction both strict and liberating, of exquisite beauty and attentive of us in our endeavours, which shows great achievements in a friendly and essentially human way, thus letting us grow in freedom. For this, we wish to express our gratitude.