

THE WIZARD

ROBERT WILSON ON THE BAMBOO THRONE FROM ALCESTIS PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKI DUISTERHOF



Robert Wilson is not afraid of silence...

...and when the Texas-born stage director enters a room, in a black Armani suit, with his towering stature and rigid posture, he cuts an austere figure. The High Priest of Postmodernism (as he's been ordained by the press) knows that silence breeds attention, and he ▶

OF WATER MILL

A MASTER AT STAGING DRAMATIC ENIGMAS, ROBERT WILSON HAS TURNED AN ABANDONED FACTORY IN THE HAMPTONS INTO AN AVANT-GARDE HOTHOUSE. BY KATHERINE PEW

"IT WAS LIKE SWIMMING UNDERWATER—A FEW MORE MINUTES AND I WOULD HAVE DROWNED, BUT I GOT OUT JUST IN TIME," ISABEL EBERSTADT SAYS. "WORKING WITH BOB CHANGED MY LIFE."



WILSON'S FLOCK CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TRIBECA LOFT, WITH WILSON'S ART AND THE CHAISE LONGUE USED BY FREUD'S PATIENTS; ASHER EDELMAN WITH WILSON AT THE TWO ROOMS FUNDRAISER; ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST AND JULIET HARTFORD AT TWO ROOMS; ISABEL EBERSTADT WITH FELLOW CAST MEMBER IN *EDISON*; CHRISTOPHE DE MENIL WITH WILSON; *FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS* TABLEAU.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKI DUISTERHOF; JOE DORE (2); JOHAN ELBERS; COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHE DE MENIL; STEPHANIE BERGER

uses it to rivet his audience both onstage and off. People shift uncomfortably, waiting to see what he will do. But Wilson bides his time, until he has them rapt. Then, at the pivotal moment, he strikes. "If you can start with stillness," he says, "you will find all movement. When you begin with something quiet, you will find that it is full of sound."

Wilson is notorious for keeping people waiting. When I met him at his TriBeCa loft to discuss the Watermill Center—his colossal artist's colony in Water Mill, Long Island, which was converted from an abandoned Western Union laboratory in 1992 and is finally nearing completion—I waited an hour and a half before he showed up, only to have him cancel our interview. Granted, he had barely an hour to prepare for his performance that evening, a tribute to Edwin Denby at the Poetry Project. The following week, I waited another 90 minutes, sitting on a crate outside his building, for Wilson to appear. When he finally arrived, he informed me, as he held the door open, that this interview was not a priority. "I have no time," he said. "If you only knew how I've been working through the nights."

When I told his assistants of my plight, they assured me I should be pleased he fit me in at all. Recently, a journalist and a photographer from an arts magazine arrived at Wilson's loft at 10 a.m. and waited while he rearranged his chairs. (He has over 50 pieces from his collection in the living area, including the chaise Freud's patients reclined on—none too comfortable.) He refused to be disrupted, and they finally left in frustration at five, with neither portrait nor interview. When Edmund White flew in from Paris to interview him, all Wilson felt like discussing were various objects in his loft. Wilson wandered around, telling the history of each piece, while White trailed along, attempting to change the subject. There is no coaxing Wilson.

Such solipsism aside, Robert Wilson is arguably the most influential director working in the theater today. His new production of *Lohengrin* is slated for the Met next spring. He's collaborating with David Bowie on a millennium project for the year 2000 and recently directed Miranda Richardson in a new adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (which was originally workshopped at the Watermill Center). Last summer, his staging of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's modern opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (also developed at Watermill) was the hit of the Lincoln Center Festival. Wilson has a genius for creating intellectual extravaganzas—from his groundbreaking collaboration with Philip Glass on the five-hour opera *Einstein on the Beach* to his *Salome* at La Scala, starring Montserrat Caballé, with punk costumes designed by Gianni Versace. At the 1993 Venice Biennale, Wilson was awarded the Golden Lion for his installation *Memory/Loss*, a bust of himself deteriorating in the Mongolian desert.

Everything Wilson puts his hand to entails a massive marshaling of resources. In 1972, he staged a 168-hour, 500-actor play, set on an Iranian mountain, that required 5,000 Persian soldiers to build the scenery and 2,000 to perform. During a million-dollar remount of *Einstein* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (which Wilson took 125 hours to light), a producer likened the experience to re-creating the Roman Empire, with Wilson as Emperor Constantine. "He's the most original director of this century," says John Rockwell, director of the Lincoln Center

Festival, who has known Wilson for 25 years. "He's offered a totally new idea of what theater is."

He's also imbued his work with a social cachet that has somewhat alienated his leftist intellectual following over the years. When it comes to courting the well-to-do, Wilson is exceptionally savvy. "Bob has always been fascinated by celebrity and wealth," says Rockwell, "and many of his friends are high society. Cecil Beaton, Virgil Thomson and Andy Warhol all moved in those circles, too—there's nothing wrong with that. There's a great tradition of artists being supported by wealthy patrons, from Louis XIV to Andrew Carnegie. He could be a revolutionary leftist artist, but he wants to work here, and the money of rich Americans is what's going to butter his bread in this country. And he genuinely enjoys moving in elegant surroundings."

In 1979, when Wilson staged the play *Edison*—about one of his heroes, the inventor of the lightbulb—the cast was skeptical to learn that he'd offered one of his patrons, Isabel Eberstadt, daughter of Ogden Nash, a part in the play. "Everyone thought, 'Oh my God, what is Bob going to do with her?'" recalls Keith McDermott, an actor who's worked sporadically as Wilson's assistant for 20 years. "But Bob sensed she was going through a fragile time in her life, and he knew exactly what to do. The first day of rehearsal, he said, 'You should come out with your head bandaged—like you've just been in a car accident—carrying a white box full of roses. Cradle the box like it's a baby, and when you get to center stage, let the box fall from your arms.' That intense physicalization made her performance stage-worthy, and watching her armload of blood-red roses scatter across the stage was electrifying. Isabel's role of crash victim was somehow emblematic of what she was going through in her life, and I think it was therapeutic for her."

"Bob called me out of the blue one night," says Isabel Eberstadt (whose 1983 novel *Natural Victims* some consider to be a thinly disguised roman à clef about Wilson), "and said, 'Would you come sit down with me? I have something I need to ask you.' It turned out he wanted me to take over the lead role in *Edison*. It had never occurred to me to be an actress—I was a total amateur. But I thought, Well, I love Bob, and I love everything he does. How can I say no? Bob has a remarkable ingenuity for getting people of all sorts involved, and coming up with the one thing he envisions—whether it be a 100-foot lightbulb or a photograph of Rudolf Hess in his cell. At first the production was supposed to be just in New York, but we ended up touring all over Europe. Never in my life have I been so exhausted. I had long lines to learn that didn't make much sense, and Bob pushed us to go beyond what the human body is constructed to do—holding contorted positions for hours on end. There were some gruesome moments. Somehow Bob found ways to get around Equity rules so we could work all night. It was like swimming underwater—a few more minutes and I would've drowned, but I got out just in time. Working with Bob changed my life a great deal—his power and originality of thought, his perfectionism. It was an extraordinary, extraordinary experience."

But while Wilson's accomplishments have not gone unsung in the States and especially in Europe, he still struggles for American approval and funding, particularly for his most ambitious project to date, the Watermill Center. A multidisciplinary arts institute he founded in Water Mill, on the East End of Long Is-

land, in 1992, the center is the frenzied antithesis to Wilson's outward mask of motionlessness. Here he has conceived an avant-garde think tank buzzing with worker bees. This summer at Watermill, Wilson is directing workshops of his apocalyptic *Death Destruction and Detroit III* and Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, which will eventually tour Italy, Switzerland, France and Japan. Susan Sontag, who wrote the new Ibsen adaptation, will be in residence, along with the production's lead, French actress Dominique Sanda, best known for her performance in the Oscar-winning *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Lou Reed, who composed the music for Wilson's production of *Time Rocker* (which was originally developed at Watermill, debuted at the Thalia in Hamburg, and is coming to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this fall), will be playing at a benefit for the center in mid-August. Like so many of Wilson's events, the concert promises to be one of the most sought-after tickets of the season.

After following the highway into Water Mill and taking a series of crooked back roads, the center emerges starkly from the woods. A Western Union laboratory used as an OSS base during World War II and abandoned in 1963, the cavernous space has an eerie elegance, a cool contrast to its verdant surroundings. With architect Frederick Stelle, Wilson has made monumental renovations to turn it into a modern atelier with housing, where he and his collaborators conduct theater, dance, film, art and architecture workshops with students working closely alongside.

"I'd been searching for ten years for a place where I could develop new projects," Wilson recalls. "I looked upstate, but I always knew I wanted to be on Long Island if I could afford it. As soon as I saw this building, I knew it was right."

Wilson reportedly bid \$350,000 for the property in 1989, the first application for reuse since the 30,000-square-foot lab had closed its doors. Wilson purchased the building, with a grant from an anonymous donor, and donated it to Byrd Hoffman, the non-profit foundation he set up in 1969. Robert Duffy, Southampton's town planning and development administrator, supports Wilson's plans for the complex: "Fred Stelle's architectural designs are outstanding," he says. "It's a major addition to the cultural community that complements the economic aspects of Southampton."

Yet fundraising for Watermill has become an obsession with Wilson. Recently he held a fundraiser at the Two Rooms lounge on the Upper East Side to woo the up-and-coming young social set, including Alexandra Von Furstenberg and Carolina Herrera, Jr. "One of the biggest problems," Wilson argues, with a trace of bitterness, "is that if I were in France or Germany, I'd be given this, and the government would pay for it. But here I have to raise the money myself. It's a huge obstacle, because my work is not as well-known here, and Americans are much more conservative. The center's unique, and people try to understand it by something else that exists—but they can't, because there's nothing else exactly like it. They tried to label Andy Warhol a painter, when actually he was a filmmaker and a philosopher who invented a magazine and a way of writing and interviewing. I think that's one of the problems with Watermill; it's difficult to pinpoint what the center is—and I don't want to. On one hand, it's a structured program, and on the other, it's a free school."

I met Wilson in 1991 at the Alley Theatre in Houston, where

I acted in his production of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. When I moved to New York, I worked at his foundation. And when Wilson set up camp at Watermill, in the summer of 1992, I volunteered to help. The place was a disaster, but there was enchantment in the rubble. The absence of furniture and electricity heightened the experience. And from the moment Wilson pitched his futon, the pilgrimage began. Students and scholars, sleeping bags in tow, clamored to throw themselves into the maelstrom. The sole working bathroom was off of Wilson's bedroom, and he allowed visitors to step over his sleeping body to get to the facilities in the middle of the night. He delegated disciples to scour away 30 years' worth of grime, including ancient, backed-up toilets. Amidst the wreckage was the rusted-out hull of a cigarette machine. The only evidence of wartime communication was the mass of telegraph wires dangling from switchboards amid the cobwebs. In the basement were the relics of secret codes, revealing the meaning behind combinations of knocks to safeguard the plant. And in a corner stood a narrow metal base, which used to hold a clock, set by the official Arlington radio time signal. The clock is gone, but the base remains (builders are under strict orders from Wilson not to touch it), and its resemblance to the chairs Wilson designs is uncanny.

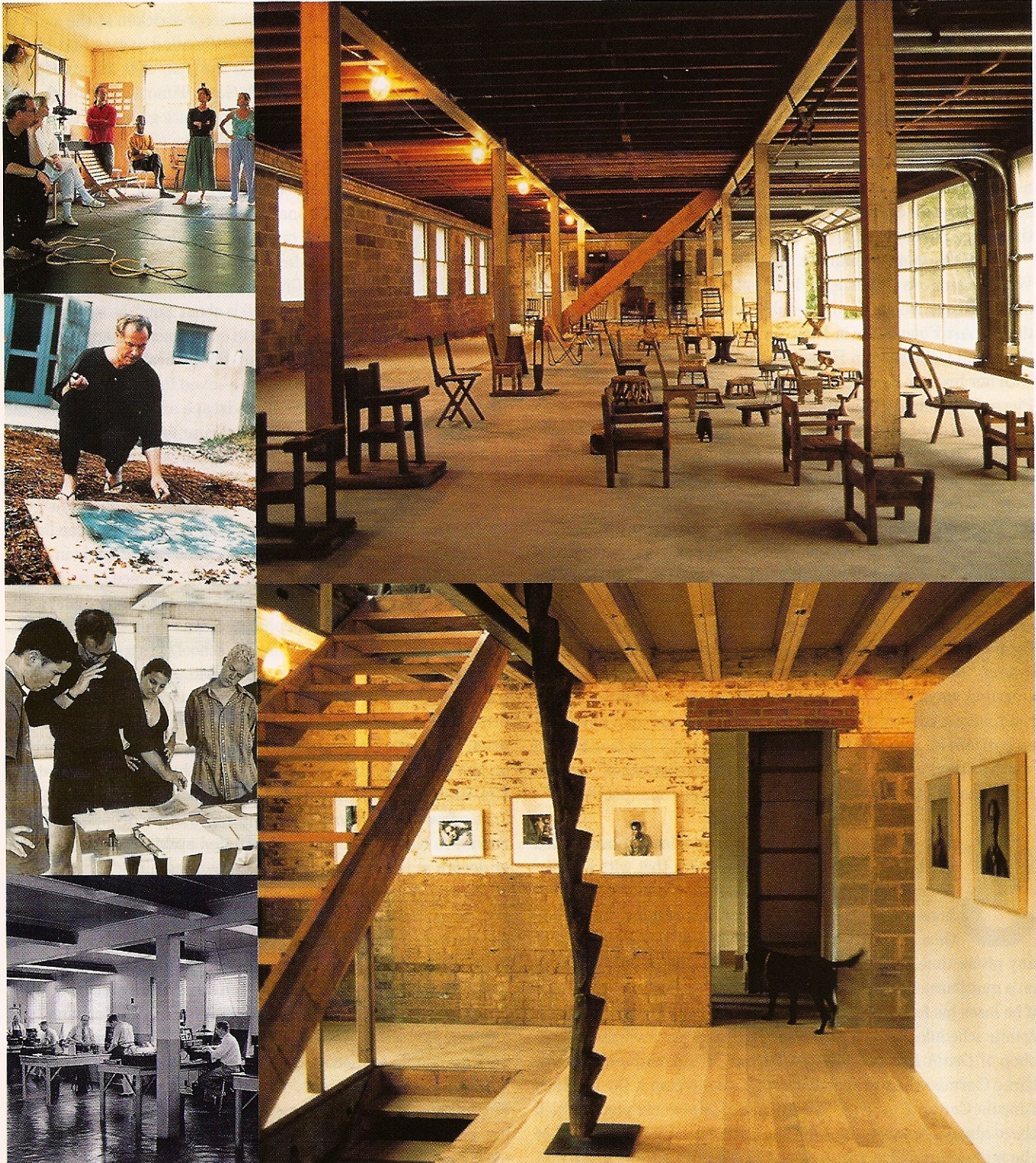
Gilbert Foster, the father of Watermill's caretaker, worked at Western Union from 1945 to 1963, doing assemblies and wiring testing. "It was the research division for electronics and engineering," he says. "Hundreds of crucial patents were invented there, including the thermonuclear detection system and the fax machine, and we had a worldwide communications radio up in the tower." Night fighter pilot training, the forerunner of today's flight simulators, was also developed at Western Union. "Four-star Air Force generals used to stop by and sit around the kitchen table to discuss how things were going."

Under Wilson's command, one is more likely to find artists communing with nature. During the first summer at Watermill, Trisha Brown and her dancers joined Wilson for a three-week workshop, dancing through the neighboring farmer's rye field, wielding long sticks with video cameras tied onto the ends, filming whatever happened to pop into frame. Dinner was cooked over a Bunsen burner—ratatouille made of vegetables from the nearby farmer's stand was standard fare. Makeshift banquet tables sprung up out of sheets of heavy plywood balanced atop cement bricks on the overgrown driveway. Dishes were washed outside with the garden hose and stacked to dry on a stone wall. Then everyone would gather around a crackling bonfire. As the flames waned, lingerers lit candles, wandering through ghostly corridors to their sleeping bags. All except Wilson, who had to watch *The Blue Angel* every night before he could fall asleep.

Wilson's fascination with Marlene Dietrich manifests itself in the style and philosophy of his work. "Her way of performing was always interesting to watch," he says. "She could be very cool in one sense—with her body and gestures formal and detached—yet at the same time vocally hot. There was something different going on between what I was seeing and what I was hearing." He admired the elegant lines of her angular movements, her attention to detail and her sensitivity to light. And like Dietrich, Wilson is known for his economy of movement, his passion for intellectual coldness and his aura of intrigue.

Marissa Chibas—who played Marie Danton in Wilson's pro-

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SPACE CADET'S CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WILSON CONDUCTING A WORKSHOP IN WATERMILL, 1992; LOWER FLOOR OF THE NEW SOUTH WING, WITH WILSON'S CHAIR INSTALLATION; UPPER-FLOOR STAIRWAY WITH WILSON'S PHOTOS, INCLUDING ONE OF MARLENE DIETRICH; WESTERN UNION LAB, CIRCA LATE '50S; WILSON WITH SUMMER INTERNS, 1995; WILSON CREATES A CHARCOAL DRAWING, 1995.

ROBERT WILSON AT WATERMILL: COURTESY OF BYRD HOFFMAN FOUNDATION; INTERIORS: KAROLA RITTER; WESTERN UNION: COURTESY OF GILBERT S. FOSTER

"WHAT GOES ON AT WATERMILL IS 99 PERCENT ABOUT BOB. HE'S CREATED A SHRINE FOR HIMSELF—HIS OWN BAYREUTH. HE HAS THAT STREAK OF MEGALOMANIA THAT ALL GREAT ARTISTS HAVE."

duction of *Danton's Death* at the Alley Theatre—comments, "Working with Bob is like deciphering a mystery. From the moment he walked into the rehearsal room, he cast a spell over us. It didn't hit me until afterward, when *Danton's Death* had closed. When I moved on to my next project, the rehearsal space seemed like an ordinary room again—there was no magic in it."

One of the more prominent figures in Wilson's circle is Christophe de Menil, a fellow Texan whose family established the Dia Art Foundation in New York and the Menil Collection in Houston. Along with her brother François and her cousin Pierre Schlumberger, de Menil was a primary backer of *Einstein on the Beach*. In 1981, after Wilson had finished a lighting installation for de Menil's apartment, he asked her to help design the costumes

for his production of *The Golden Windows*. "I just thought it would be one quick thing," she says. "I never dreamed it would continue." Although it took her six months to make her first sleeve, de Menil became the costume designer for *the CIVIL warS*, a \$7 million, 12-hour international epic composed by David Byrne that was the sole nominee for the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for drama. "Bob juxtaposes the elements of his productions in such startling ways," she recalls, "and with such visual intensity. In the final act of *the CIVIL warS*, the curtain rose on a devastated battlefield. Bob had the originality to convey the brutality of war by littering the stage with lion carcasses instead of corpses. He elicits emotion by using something totally unexpected."

Some of Wilson's producers—especially those with a good deal at stake financially—worry that with the Watermill Center and his increasing number of productions around the world, Wilson is spreading himself too thin. "Bob always has three or four projects going at any given time," says John Rockwell. "He's like a chef working on a multiburner stove who has something sizzling in every pan—if he loses his focus, it could all go up in flames." Despite Wilson's frantic schedule, Rockwell invested \$20,000 in last summer's workshop of *Death Destruction and Detroit III* (in conjunction with three German theaters) at Watermill, to develop it for the 1999 Lincoln Center Festival. "It's an end-of-the-world piece, which there always seems to be a special enthusiasm for at the end of the millennium," Rockwell says. "Bob's productions often embody apocalyptic sensibilities—falling rocks, jagged bursts of lightning and fissures opening up in the earth. *Death* will juxtapose the last millennium with this one—the monks and peasants



WILSON, TOM WAITS AND WILLIAM BURROUGHS TEAMED UP FOR BAM'S *THE BLACK RIDER*, 1993.

RALF BRINKHOFF/COURTESY OF BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC

who were terror-stricken at the sight of comets, two-headed calves and locust plagues in the year 999, as opposed to Heaven's Gate, Timothy McVeigh, and the right-wing hate groups of today."

Although Rockwell admires the scope of Wilson's vision, he is dubious that Watermill will ever be a true international arts center. Artists do come from all over the world, but their work is channeled into Bob's aesthetic and goals. "Ninety-nine percent of what goes on at Watermill is about Bob," he says. "Maybe someone in one corner is doing their own thing, but it's basically a museum for Bob's work—even the grounds reflect his idea of landscape architecture. Bob has created a shrine for himself—his own Bayreuth. He has that streak of megalomania that all great artists have. What was good for Richard Wagner was good

for the rest of the world; Bob's thinking is along the same lines."

The roots of that dynamic self-absorption can be found in Waco, Texas, where Wilson grew up feeling out of place in a conservative Baptist community. His father was a lawyer, and his mother, who'd grown up in an orphanage, was emotionally distant. As a child, Wilson struggled through school with a crippling stammer. At 17, he was cured through working with Bird Hoffman, a dance teacher in her seventies who created a program of exercises designed to activate brain cells in brain-damaged children. She fostered his innate performing talent, and he thrived on her teachings. But Wilson's father pushed him to enroll at the University of Texas in Austin to study business administration. Just a few credits short of graduating, Wilson dropped out and moved to New York, where he studied architecture and interior design at the Pratt Institute. Immersing himself in the work of George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, he supported himself by teaching body awareness and movement and by working as a physical therapist with brain-damaged children. He was appointed as a consultant to the city's Board of Education and the Department of Welfare, taught disturbed children in public schools, worked with the aged and terminally ill and was invited to lecture at Harvard. "All his work involved getting people to discover, or rediscover, their own particular 'vocabulary of movement,'" Calvin Tomkins writes in *Robert Wilson: The Theater of Images*. "Although he had no formal training as either a dancer or a therapist, Wilson had an extraordinary capacity for establishing contact with people and getting past their habitual defenses." He had a gift for being able to get through to patients who hadn't spoken in months or years.

In 1968, Wilson formed the Byrd (*Continued on page 80*)

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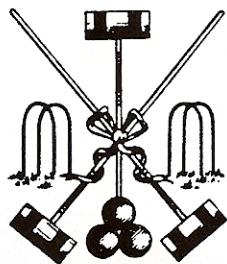
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Robert Wilson (Continued from page 76) Hoffman School of Byrds, an avant-garde theater troupe named after his Waco mentor (switching the "i" in Bird to a "y"), which he set up in his Spring Street loft in SoHo. He rescued an 11-year-old deaf-mute black child from a hostile policeman in Summit, New Jersey, adopted him, and brought him to live in his loft, where the Byrds attempted to learn his nonverbal language. Raymond Andrews had been written off as uneducable, but in working with him, Wilson discovered that he thought in terms of visual signs, and he urged him to express himself through drawing. Andrews' pieces inspired Wilson's production *Deafman Glance*, in which Andrews starred, in 1970.

During a performance of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, which starred Wilson's 87-year-old grandmother, Wilson performed for the first time with Christopher Knowles, a brain-damaged 14-year-old. After hearing a tape which Knowles had made at the state home where he was living, Wilson invited him to BAM to see *Stalin*. When Knowles came backstage before the show with his mother, Wilson spontaneously asked him to perform with him, beginning a lifelong collaboration. Knowles moved into Wilson's loft soon after, and they traveled the world for years, performing in original "dialogues" they created together. They still see each other often. Wilson remarks that he feels better just having Knowles around, and is indebted to Chris for giving him "a sense of humor, a lightness in performing, and a sense of architecture, geometry and mathematics in words and language."

Wilson is infamous for demanding perfection from everyone around him. During a performance of *Edison*, Wilson was so furious that Keith McDermott's pacing was too slow, he stormed onstage during a blackout between scenes, grabbed McDermott by the shoulders and violently shook him. When the lights went up a moment later, Wilson had disappeared and McDermott was left trembling: "It was terrifying—it took everything I had to keep from bursting into tears. Bob brings out the child in you who wants to please a demanding parent. I can only

live through the short-term doing personal work for Bob, because he has no boundaries. He doesn't know weekends or days off. He just thinks, 'I have to do all this and I can't stop for a minute,' and he expects the same of everyone else. It's impossible not to get swept up in it. On a Sunday, Bob will point to a picture in a catalogue he's picked up and say, 'Here's what we need—we need 32 of these shelves.' And his assistants will say, 'But Bob, it's Sunday.' And he'll say, 'I don't care—just do it! Just get this done.' And they do."

Wilson relies on his assistants to take care of everything, to the point where he becomes totally disconnected from ordinary reality. Assistants schedule his every waking moment, and he has to consult with them to find out what he's doing next. Once, when he was left to get to the airport on his own, he accidentally mailed his airline ticket and tried to board the plane with a postcard. Recently, when there was a fire in his SoHo building, his assistants cried out, "Bob, there's a fire on the ninth floor—we have to evacuate!" But Wilson was engrossed in a phone conversation, and he indignantly waved them away, saying he didn't want to be disturbed. His assistants were in a quandary over what to do, when suddenly Bob saw the fire ladders going up past his window and started shrieking hysterically.

It seems inconceivable, given the frenzy of Wilson's schedule and his mercurial mood swings, that he is able to channel a profound silence and stillness into his art. "Bob is in a constant state of crisis," McDermott says. "Except for in the theater. There, he is in total control." Whether or not the Watermill Center proves to be a fertile breeding ground for a multitude of artists, it is a testament to Wilson's will—and a reflection of his extraordinary persona. It makes perfect sense that his acclaimed production of *Alice in Wonderland*—which featured a 50-foot-tall inflatable caterpillar and music by Tom Waits—sprung from the center's depths; Watermill is Wilson's wonderland. ♦

Katherine Pew writes often for Time Out New York and profiled gun maker William Ruger for QUEST in March.