

Robert Wilson and Maria Shevtsova

Covid Conversations 5: Robert Wilson

World-renowned for having made a totally new kind of theatre, director-designer Robert Wilson first astonished international audiences in Paris in 1971 with *Le Regard du sourd* (*Deafman Glimpse*) and then with his twenty-four-hour *Ouverture* at the first edition of the Festival d'Automne in 1972. He also refers in this Conversation to *Einstein on the Beach*, premiered at the Avignon Festival in 1976, as another example among more of France offering him a home before he eventually founded the Watermill Center in 1992 on Long Island in the State of New York. Watermill, a laboratory for multidisciplinary creativity, opened its doors to the public in 2006 and is a focal point of the Conversation as a whole. Wilson's immediately pre-Covid-pandemic production of *The Messiah* by Mozart was premiered at the Mozartwoche Salzburg in February 2020 and performed subsequently in Paris during a brief Covid 'lull' in September of that year. Discussion of this pivotal work leads to reflections on the opera productions that he had staged not so long before it, emphasizing the elements fundamental to his compositions – light, time, space, architecture, and silence. The Conversation, followed by audience questions addressed to Wilson, took place live online and on Facebook on 4 December 2020 as a prelude to the Festival Internacional Santiago a Mil in Chile, which opened on 3 January 2021. This was the Festival's twenty-eighth year, but in a significantly restricted form due to Covid-19. A sequel to the Santiago interchange, also online but this time located in Paris, occurred on 17 September 2021. It resumes dialogue mainly on the Watermill Center's broader cultural and social goals in the present and for the future, noting as well Wilson's then current activities in Paris: a heavy schedule of four productions from the beginning of September to the end of December 2021, and a sound installation planned for 2022.

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Maria Shevtsova *Hello again, it really is wonderful to see you [Wilson and Shevtsova had already been chatting off-air] and it's a great gift for the listeners and me to be able to be together with you like this. Are you OK? That's the big number one question.*

Robert Wilson *Yes, I'm at the Watermill Center. I've just arrived, and I haven't been here in almost a year.*

No, you've been in exile!

I'm gonna be here for the next two months.

Just as well. You know, I was watching the BBC News late last night, and the situation in the United States and certainly in New York is not looking good. So I'm glad that you're in the safer zone of Long Island.

Yes, and we have ten and a half acres of land. It's surrounded by a farming community and it's in nature and fresh air – it's great.

It is great, lucky you. I wish I could be there too. Maybe they'll invent teleport in the future and I'll just fly over within two seconds. Tell me, Bob, when you were in Berlin and news of the pandemic came out, what were your immediate reactions? I mean, there were so many different reactions from many people, but what were yours?

Well, it was a bit of a shock. I was preparing four, five, even more productions that were scheduled to be performed by the end of the year and all of them were suddenly postponed or cancelled. I was very fortunate. I was given a beautiful studio in Berlin by the Akademie der Künste and I had two floors in this enormous space. I started to make drawings. It is the one thing that I've done consistently since I was a child – draw. My mother said, when I was very young, 'Oh, Bob thinks by drawing.' And very often, when I sit down to a meeting, I have a clipboard and blank paper, and I start by sketching or drawing.

It's the origin of your visual book: you do a visual book rather than the standard conventional director's book in words. I wanted to ask you whether you began to draw what became the exhibition in Paris of The Messiah [opened in September 2020] at the same time as you prepared the production for Salzburg in February of this same year [before the Covid pandemic]. Or did it happen afterwards, at the time that you were in this wonderful apartment in Berlin? Is that when you began to do the drawings for the exhibition in Paris?

That's when I did the drawings for the exhibition in Paris, and for future works. I usually start with something mathematical, something very abstract. All of my works in the theatre I can diagram and in terms of math,

and then, from that structure, I can begin to elaborate and I'm much freer. I think from my earliest works I first made something like this [Picks up and shows a clipboard and starts to write numbers]. You see?

Yeah, I see.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. One and seven related [circling the numbers], two and six related, three and five related. The turning point was four in the centre [pointing to it] and you spiral in and out of that. This [diagram] is *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, which I did in 1972 or 1973, or something like that [1973], but I started with a diagram, and then I could see the whole quickly. And then I began to make drawings. What could one look like? What could seven look like? How do one and seven relate or how are they in counterpoint, or are they similar? And then, how do two and six relate? How do three and five relate? Four is in the centre. And which should it be? And, then, is it the turning point?

Most of my works in the theatre I thought about with classical structures. This structure is Beethoven [holding up a drawing]. This structure is Shakespeare – this is *King Lear* [pointing to number 4 at the centre of a drawing]. The central line of *King Lear* is when the king says 'I shall go mad!' And then it goes into nature. And the first half before that is in a man-made environment. This is Wagner's *Parsifal*. The kiss of Kundry is the centre bar of the music [pointing to number 4]. Here is the white knight [number 3], and here is the black knight [number 7]. [A technical glitch suddenly makes Wilson's speech barely audible for the next minute, rendered by a truncated and thus not fully comprehensible Spanish translation.]

I studied architecture. It was a five-year course taught by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. She taught the history of architecture, and she said in the middle of the third year out of five: 'Students, you have three minutes to design the city. Ready, go.' So you had to think quickly. What is the big picture? So a diagram that I did in 1970 – I can tell you in less than three minutes what the twelve-hour silent opera was. [*Twelve-hour* suggests that Wilson is referring to *The Life and Times of Joseph*

Stalin.] I can see the whole quickly. And that's important.

With *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) – no one saw it at the time – but you have one, two, three, four [*beginning a new drawing, now with reference to Einstein on the Beach*] at A and B, C and A, B and C, and A, B, C. You have four acts. You have three themes A, B, and C, and they recur three times, and they happen all together in the last act. So it's theme and variation. It didn't tell a story. It wasn't a narrative. But that's a classical structure. And people said, 'Oh, it's avant-garde. You know, it's very new.' Actually, you know, this structure is a classical structure that has been used for centuries.

Your classical structure and your capacity to enter into the classical spirit and still do this in the twenty-first century – you were way ahead of your time and yet you were with classical time. It's an amazing paradox, but it's exactly what characterizes your work. I've seen so many of your productions. I tried to count them the other day [but] gave up. I haven't seen them all, but I've seen more than most people. And I must say that I'm very struck by the fact that you work so well with classically trained performers. It seems to me that you work best with very classically trained performers – [for instance, with the actors of] the Comédie-Française, Les Fables de La Fontaine (2004) – [and] with the classical singers for the great operas, whether they're the Baroque ones or the grand nineteenth-century operatic works. When you worked in Moscow with Pushkin's Fairy Tales (2015), you were working with very finely trained – we would probably call them classically trained – actors, and your ability to work with these kinds of actors and singers is astonishing. Do you feel this yourself when you work with them – that you really excel with these incredibly well trained, classically trained, people?

Well, the classics are the only things that will last throughout time. Not the Romantics. So if we look at architecture, we look at the Egyptians. We look at the Chinese. We look at the Mayans. They're classical form, it's classical mathematics. When I came from Texas in my early twenties to New York, I had never been to the theatre. I knew very little about the arts.

I grew up in a small town in Texas where there were no art museums. And I went to Broadway and I didn't like it too much, and I still don't. I went to the opera, and I didn't like that too much, and I still don't. But then I saw the work of George Balanchine, the choreographer, and he did neoclassical ballets that I liked very much. And I liked them because they were time-space constructions. For me, he was like Mozart of the twentieth century.

I learned a lot by just looking at George Balanchine's ballets, and I particularly like his abstract ballets. I was always attracted as a child to classical architecture, classical music. And when I started working in the theatre, the actors who were classically trained were better suited for my work. Look at the Comédie-Française that you just mentioned and how the actors of the Comédie-Française could speak in lines with a text.

Most of the actors that we see today – if you look at the graduating students at Yale University, Juilliard, or Northwestern University, which are among our best schools for drama in the United States – speak in phrases, like television actors: 'Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you understand? I'm saying this, then I'm saying that'. [But] it's [*voice quickens*] 'I'm seeing this, and I'm saying that and that is that and this is what I'm saying, and that is because this is it.' That's one line. And so the techniques that you find – or found – are changing now. With the Comédie-Française in Paris – they were trained to speak in lines. Now, the actors are [in phrases] because most of their work is with television, and television is [where] you have to understand something every three or four seconds, so that's how they deliver a text. [*Wilson then recites in 'one line'*]: 'How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge! [. . .] Examples gross as earth exhort me, / Witness this army of such mass and charge, / Led by a delicate and tender prince, / The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras, / Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed / Makes mouths at the invisible event.' That's *Hamlet* [Act 4, Scene 4, interpolating the Captain's description of Fortinbras from earlier in the scene]. I learned it when I was twelve and I'm seventy-nine and I'm still saying it.

I'm amazed you still remember it. Of course, you said it in your monologue Hamlet in the 1990s [premiered in Houston, Texas, in 1995 before Europe-wide performances]. It was a magnificent production.

But if you hear the trained actors in my country speak *Hamlet* now, they say, 'How all occasions [slight pause] do inform against me [slight pause]. And spur my dull revenge [slight pause]. Examples gross as earth [slight pause] exhort me.' They speak in phrases because we have to understand every second, every two seconds. And so it's changed so much of everything in theatre.

A classically trained actor speaks in lines. You cannot begin anything. You can't end anything. And so if you are already listening to the silence, and you begin to speak, the line continues. If you're not listening to the silence and you begin to speak, the line's broken. It's the same with a classically trained dancer. If you are aware of the movement and stillness and you move outwardly, the line will continue. But if you're not aware of that inner movement within all of us, as long as we're living, and you then start to move, the line is broken. Theatre is about a continuous line. There are no stops and goes. And that's what I find also in dance or in the movement of actors – it's stopping, starting, stopping, starting, they walk, and they stop, then they walk again, and stop, and start again. But if you're walking and you stop walking, you're still moving. There's always movement. Most classical training is about that.

I saw The Messiah. I want to make it clear to the listeners that we're not talking here about Handel's Messiah. We're talking about Mozart's Messiah, and you've already referred to Mozart. To hear and see that work of yours was stunning for me because I didn't know it at all. I only know Handel's much more pompous and kind of oratorical-style Messiah. What struck me was the way that you worked with the music: you gave the music ample space to breathe and to move. Your music always moves in this endless non-stopped line. And the beauty of that Messiah, Mozart's Messiah, was how you had movement, dance, and music [go in this way] (Figures 1 and 2). Actually, in these later works –

we might have a chance to discuss it a little bit further on in this conversation – you take sound, music, into silence. It's as if what continues is the silence of music. Is that too fancy a way of putting it?

No, it's exactly right. John Cage said there's no such thing as silence. There's always sound. And sometimes when we're very quiet, we become more aware of sound than when we make a lot of sound. The interesting thing about Mozart's *Messiah* is that it's totally abstract. He says it's for a soprano. It's for a mezzo-soprano. It's for a bass. It's for a tenor. We don't know who the tenor is. We don't know who the soprano is. So you don't have a Jesus Christ figure. It's totally abstract. So that for the listener and, in my case, for the stage director–stage designer there's a tremendous freedom. One can imagine. You don't know who this soprano is and she can be many people: a prism of different moods or characters. It's a completely mathematical, classical structure of architecture, music, and sound (Figure 3).

The challenge for me as a theatre director is [whether] I can I give a space so that we can hear music and opera. And that's the biggest challenge. Usually, when I go to the opera, it's so busy on stage; there's so much going on that I have to close my eyes in order to hear carefully. So if I close my eyes, and I'm in the theatre, I hear more acutely, generally speaking. I can listen to the violin, to the harp, to the flutes, I can listen to the singer. If I open my eyes, usually I'm visually distracted. So for my work, which is highly visual, the visual must give a space for us to hear music so that, with my eyes open, I can hear better than when my eyes are closed. So it takes a tremendous amount of concentration of listening, as you said, to the silence.

Do you know, Bob, what went in so deeply and why I was so very profoundly in awe – I think that's why you smiled so sweetly at me but with amusement in Luxembourg – was the ending of La Traviata with Nadezhda Pavlova singing the role of Violetta. The last scene where she dies is, I think, one of the most astonishing articulations of silence I have ever witnessed in my life. What you say



Figure 1. *The Messiah*. Mozartwoche Salzburg, 2019. Alexis Fousekis. Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.



Figure 2. *The Messiah*. Mozartwoche Salzburg, 2019. Alexis Fousekis. Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.



Figure 3. *The Messiah*. Salzburg, 2019. Elena Tsallagova (soprano). Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.

about having the space to hear the music. You give the music ample space, all by itself without any trimmings, just to say what it has to say and then disappear into the ether where the sound continues. Pavlova, when she's talking about her love for Alfredo, sings those big notes, remember, and her index finger goes up, as if she's pointing up to divinity. I really, truly, saw an incredibly powerful spiritual dimension in your work. I think it's always been there.

It came to me when I was still a young woman in Avignon in 1976, looking at the twenty-minute beam of light that moved very slowly up, up and up and up, and I was absolutely breathless. I thought, 'Wow.' Over the years, I realized that that was already a sign of transcendence – of the 'beyond'. We don't even have to name it God or Jesus Christ. We don't have to name that transcendence. It just is. And when Pavlova sings that great aria of love, it's the transcendence of love. It's a phenomenal affirmation of love, without all the usual sentimental crap that goes with it, you know, without the chocolate boxes. It goes into this eternal silence,

this eternal love, which is somehow divine. And the strings: Do you remember how [Teodor] Currentzis hushes them right at the end? They're almost, almost going, going to vanish. And then there is this eternal silence vibrating still with the sound. Now I can tell you what I couldn't tell you that day. Why I think that is one of your great masterpieces [and Currentzis's too]. Do you understand?

Yes, I do.

It was phenomenal. Actually, I see this quality coming out very strongly in your last . . . let's say the work of your last five years. Interestingly enough, most of them are, once again, operas. By the way, you went to Paris with *The Messiah* in September. Were you afraid for yourself? Did you realize you were taking great risks with your health?

No, I wasn't because I've been very cautious. Fortunately, we were one of the few theatre events happening in Paris at the time. There

was social distancing; all of the technicians wore masks. We were all very careful and the theatre was fantastic. The way they organized the public was that, if you were on the lower level, you couldn't go to the balcony. If you were in the balcony, you couldn't go to the lower level, or to the higher balcony. And you went through several separate entrances. So the theatre was extremely cautious.

You know, in London, they closed down completely. I think nobody would have dared to show The Messiah in London in September.

Well, apparently, after we did the performances of *The Messiah*, all the theatres were closed.

It's kind of serendipitous, isn't it? It's almost as if The Messiah came at the right time. I suppose that what I'm suggesting is that its great beauty and spiritual dimension have a quality of healing, which I think we all need at the moment. Humanity is suffering; there can be no question of it.

The beautiful thing about *The Messiah* is that Mozart didn't make a religious service. If we look at Wagner's *Parsifal* – to me it's always so sacrilegious to see singers, the chorus, and the Holy Grail at the Metropolitan Opera. They have a glitter that falls from the ceiling for the Grail. The music, when I listen to a *Parsifal* of Wagner, is spiritual. Although it was written as a Christian, Catholic, ceremony, Wagner at that time was interested in Buddhism; he was interested in many different religions. And so I think religion is OK in a church, but not on the stage. It can be a spiritual experience, which you feel inside, but to try to put a church or religion on stage always seems to be wrong.

I get what you're saying there. Did you see a link between these works of the last say, five years? [Apart from La Traviata premiered in Linz in 2015,] you did Le Trouvère, which is Verdi's French version of his Il Trovatore (The Troubadour) in 2018 in Parma (Figure 4); I'm afraid I ended up not being able to go there. And then, in



Figure 4. *The Troubadour*. French version, *Le Trouvère*. Teatro Farnese/Verdi Festival Parma, Italy, 2018. Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.

the same year, you staged Turandot in Madrid. Then in 2019 you staged Verdi's Il Trovatore, the Italian version, which was in Bologna. I'm just wondering whether there's a linking thread between these works for you as an artist. Were you conscious of some kind of relationship that you were creating between them or is it I, the spectator, who sees this relationship and I just see it because I see it?

Well, I think an artist's work is like a river. Or it's like a tree. Sometimes the trees are in a storm. Sometimes they have leaves, and sometimes the leaves fall off. Einstein said, when he was asked to repeat what he had just said, 'But there's no need for me to repeat what I have just said because it's all the same thought.'

That's really wonderful. It's absolutely what a great artist does.

And Proust said that he was always writing the same novel. Cézanne said he was always painting the same still life. So, in our body, you know, it's still the same body that it was when I was three years old, and maybe it's changed now that I'm seventy-nine, but it's still my body that has produced it [the art]. So there is continuity, I think, and all artists are all of their work. It can change in time, but it's still the same hand drawing.

Would you agree that there is a thematic link with Turandot and La Traviata, going back now in time to 2016, when you did the Russian version in Perm [Opera and Ballet Theatre] with conductor Currentzis. The link is also a link of love. They [including the two Troubadours] are really works about love, aren't they?

Yes, they are. Absolutely. I think they are important. Einstein said it's one thought. In one season years ago in Germany, I did Virginia Woolf, I did Chekhov, I did Shakespeare, I did Heiner Müller [and] I did Tom Waits and William Burroughs – all in one year. A friend of mine who's no longer with us, a dramaturge, said that, although these works were so totally different – to go from Tom Waits and William Burroughs to Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare, and Chekhov – he said, 'You know, I see a line that's drawn through these very different works.'

I once did a production with Lou Reed, and Lou's music is about loudness [*Time Rocker* (1996), followed by *POEtry* (2000)]. I learned to appreciate a loud sound from Lou Reed when I did Luigi Nono [*Prometheus: A Tragedy of Listening* (1997)] back-to-back with him. Nono is all about silence, about the quietest sound you can make. And so I began to appreciate the quietness of Luigi Nono because I had just come from Lou Reed, which was the opposite. And Virginia Woolf [*Orlando* (1989)] is very different from William Burroughs [*The Black Rider* (1990)].

Oh indeed! Indeed she is! [Both laugh.]

You know, having Heiner Müller [*Hamletmaschine* (1986) and *Quartet* (1988)] and then Virginia Woolf, I began to appreciate the two writers and how they were different, but in some ways, very similar.

You like to work with juxtapositions, don't you? And in some ways you like to work with counterpoint. It's like the counterpoint of music and silence, silence and word, in your work, right through your work – in fact, in its space and time and light. I mean, light is the crucial factor.

It's the most important element.

It's the binding factor, isn't it?

Einstein said that light is the measure of all things. Usually, people who work in the theatre [do this]: someone writes a play, then they read the play, then you find the actors, then you rehearse it, then you design the stage set, you design costumes and, two weeks before you open, you light it.

Nuts.

I light it first. *La Traviata* – the first thing I did was to make drawings of light before I knew what any singer was going to do (Figures 5 and 6). With *Einstein on the Beach*, I drew that bar of light you talked about that took twenty minutes to go from horizontal to vertical. I drew, in the first act, you know, a variation of that bar of light. It was in the second scene.



Figure 5. *La Traviata*. Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre, 2016. Act 1: The Salon in Violetta's House. Nadezhda Pavlova (Violetta, Cast 2). Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.



Figure 6. *La Traviata*. Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre, 2016. Act 2, Scene 2: Party at Flora's house. Natalia Buklaga (Flora Bervoix, Cast 1), Vladimir Taisaev (Dottore, Cast 1), Chorus of the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre. Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.

So there was theme and variation. Until that one scene, [where] there was nothing else but a bar of light, moving. Philip Glass, who wrote the music, said, 'Oh, that's all?' I said, 'Yes it's just this bar of light that we see is horizontal – it's going to go up vertically, I think in about twenty minutes.' Then he said, 'So then I'll write it for a solo voice, and we'll put the solo voice in the orchestra pit so that we only hear the solo voice with the bar of light.'

And the solo voice doesn't detract from the light. It doesn't squash it and clutter it out.

That's right. But counterpoint has always been one way I structure work. I said that, if you take your cell phone and you put it on your computer, that's one thing, but if you put a rock on your computer, that's something else. And the rock can help you to see the computer maybe better than the cell phone being on the computer because their natures are different. It's how one thing can help to see another or hear another, and how it can support without

having to illustrate. Most visuals for theatre are illustrations of what we hear. You talked about *La Traviata*, the beautiful soprano: the beautiful thing is that at the end she was smiling. And Teodor said to me, 'That's the one thing I remember most' – this was some years afterwards – and he said, 'At the very end, she was smiling, smiling, smiling with her death.'

Well, she was smiling because, in a sense, she was translucent in her entire being.

[Forcing a smile on screen] Yeah. I didn't mean necessarily smiling like that.

No, she was . . . [pointing upward].

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Speaking of the beam of light, you have a fantastic beam of light – not lifting, it's already in the vertical, but it begins to become almost like a flame – in Adam's Passion [2015] (Figure 7).

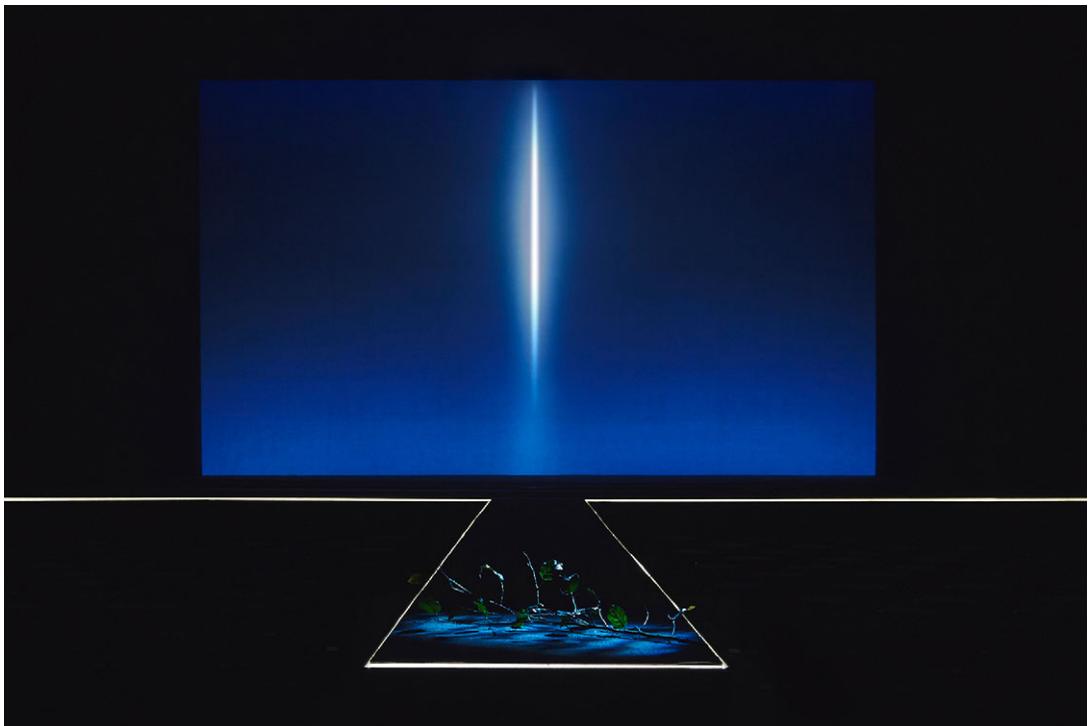


Figure 7. *Adam's Passion*. Tallinn, 2015. Photograph copyright: Kristian Kruuser/Kaupo Kikkas. Courtesy of Kristian Kruuser and Kaupo Kikkas.

Yes.

And that kind of almost burning flame of light creates that [sense of awe] – you've got it in an almost translucently empty space, it's just a lot of blue. You use a lot of blue anyway. I always describe it as the 'Wilson blue'. It's my name for the kind of blues you create. It's an electrifying moment in Adam's Passion because it allows the light to speak for itself, and it allows the light to speak with the music. It's quite extraordinary what you achieve in that very moment. Did Arvo Pärt, who wrote that music, comment on this in any way? How did he react to what you were doing?

Well, Pärt . . . actually wrote the first four minutes of *Adam's Passion* for me as a dedication. But before that, he has four minutes of silence, and then we hear four minutes of the music. But he wrote *four minutes* of silence. So that light is what creates a space, and without light, there's no space. And if you turn all the lights out in your room and you light the plant in back of you to your right, and we continue this dialogue, the plant is what we see. In that

sense, light is like an actor. It is an active participant. It's not necessarily the light on your face or in the room, but it's the light on the plant. So light, to me, is the element that helps us hear and see better. It's the element that creates the space, and it should not be an afterthought (Figure 8).

I was very fortunate. When I was a student in my first year in school, I heard the architect Louis Kahn speak. And the first thing he said in his lecture [was], 'Students, start with light. Go to a restaurant tonight. Go to the building across the street. [You will see that] the lighting is usually an afterthought. But start with light.' And Kahn did. Students: start with light. Start with light. It is going to create the space, and don't do it as an afterthought at the end.

Tell me, what did you start with to form the Watermill Center? What was the motivating force or forces? Why did you create this centre?

Well, my early works were written in a factory space in Manhattan – Lower Manhattan.



Figure 8. *Adam's Passion*. Tallinn, 2015. Michalis Theophanous (Man). Photograph copyright: Kristian Kruuser/Kaupo Kikkas. Courtesy of Kristian Kruuser and Kaupo Kikkas.

And I worked with homeless people. I worked with deaf people. I've worked with hyper-active [people]. I worked with housewives in New Jersey. I worked with people with high degrees of education. I was very closely involved with Daniel Stern, who was Head of the Department of Psychology at Columbia University. There was a whole range of people from very different backgrounds: people with high degrees of education, people with no education – no formal education. And I created my work with these people in a studio in a factory building in Lower Manhattan. And after *Einstein on the Beach*, which I had produced myself, I was in debt, and I lost my studio in Lower Manhattan.

I began to work in Europe and all over the world. In the 1980s, I guess I was going through a midlife crisis [audio breaks] [Before then, I had worked] with a thirteen- . . . a fourteen-year-old deaf boy who had never been to school. I was curious as to how he thought because I thought [that] I thought in words. I thought he was intelligent, perhaps highly intelligent, and it was apparent that he thought in terms of visual signs and signals.

So I wrote this play with him [Raymond Andrews], which was seven hours long [*Deaf-man Glance*, first performed in 1970 in Iowa City; then in Paris in 1971]. It was his way of seeing the world: his fantasies, drawings – he had images that he showed me. And after working in the 1970s and the 1980s and having success in major theatres in Europe and the rest of the world, I wanted to go back to my roots. I realized that what I was doing at this factory space in Lower Manhattan I couldn't do at the Schaubühne in Berlin. I couldn't do it at the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard. I couldn't do it at the Piccolo Teatro in Milano. I couldn't do it at the Paris Opera. So I wanted to move, to be in a natural environment.

I found a factory building on Long Island, in a farming area of the island – cornfields, potato fields, etc. And because I had been fortunate to work all over the world, I wanted to have a centre that would be international because in the United States we are very often cut off. We don't know what is happening in Afghanistan. We don't know what is

happening in China. We don't know what is happening in Ghana, what is happening in Chile. We live in this vast country but we're not so well informed about what is going on in the rest of the world.

So I wanted to have a centre. I put together an art collection. Some pieces go back to 5000 BC. We have about seven or eight thousand pieces in the collection, contemporary works – pieces from all cultures. And I think it's important for me that the Watermill Center is, first of all, in a natural environment surrounded by farmland. It's a centre that has eight thousand pieces in the collection so that we can look at what man did in the past, as we go *forward* into new works. We are looking at the past as we create new work. It's a centre for creative thinking. It's very important that we are supporting our community – the people of Long Island, the people who are in the United States. But, first, to be rich as a centre, we have to know what is going on in Chile, what is going on in Japan, what is going on with the Eskimos [Inuit] in Alaska. It's very simple. It's a centre that is looking at the past with artefacts, which are the history of man. How we create new work is [by] working with the local community and working with the community at large. So those are the founding principles of the centre.

I can do things here at Watermill that I couldn't do at the Paris Opera. I can start with a blank book. I have no idea . . . and then you begin to fill in the pages. And then it's this [*showing his drawing*] and then it's something else. So you don't have to have any idea to start. It can be a blank book and you can create it with the people that are in the room. And if you build the table where you're sitting, you have a different feeling for that table than if you buy it in a furniture shop. So here we learn by doing. We can design a play and build a mock-up – build a structure in which we then can feel we have participated. The dining tables, here, we built ourselves.

Two summers ago, I did a museum installation for Milano. I went into the south lawn and put in sticks and strings and paper and built the exhibition in a one-to-one-dimension so that I could experience it. I designed a building that way – by making. I went into

farmland nearby and did a mock-up of the building with string and paper so that I could experience the space.

Do the local people come and see some of the work you do at the centre? Is there a kind of Open Day where they can come and watch?

In the beginning they were very resistant and said, 'Oh, they have a lot of foreigners.' But you know what happened, Maria, is that the older generations were resistant, [thinking] that we were in their backyard, and rightly so in many ways because it was their home. But the children, the young kids, started to come to see workshops and they would see someone from Taiwan or they'd see someone from North Africa. They would see someone from Latin America who was creating something – and they became interested. Now they are older, and the support has now grown and it has grown because it started with the young kids coming. They were curious because there's nothing else like that happening in the community or, by and large, in the state of New York, where I live. My tax dollar can only go to support cultural events for people in the state of New York. How provincial can we be? To be a cultural capital of the world, we need to be informed about what is going on in the rest of the world.

I was fortunate that the French gave me a home. I did the inaugural event at the Opéra Bastille – an American. [This was the gala concert celebrating French composers, staged by Wilson on 13 July 1989, the eve of the date commemorating the 300th anniversary of the French Revolution. President François Mitterrand, who had taken the initiative to build the new opera house of 2,745 seats as a 'people's Opera', is largely credited for having chosen Wilson both to open the house and to take charge of France's major national ceremony.] Jessye Norman sang for the anniversary – an American. I've been asked now for my eightieth birthday next year to do a creation for the Festival of Autumn [Festival d'Automne] in Paris. Michel Guy, who was the first director of the Festival of Autumn [which he founded in 1972], had asked me to do a creation to

open the Festival of Autumn in that very first year. They have just told me it was fifty years ago. I did a creation: it was a twenty-four-hour play [*Overture*] at the Opéra Comique. I couldn't imagine that they would take the risk of opening a new festival with an American, and I could do whatever. I said, 'I'm going to do a play . . . that's twenty-four hours.' Michel Guy, the Minister of Culture in France [1974–1976], commissioned Philip Glass and myself to write *Einstein on the Beach*.

That's right. I remember. I was a student in Paris at the time, you see. That's how I managed to get to the Autumn Festival and the Avignon Festival. I was just thinking what you said about Michel Guy and generally the attitude of the French government at the time, which was incredibly open and incredibly generous. I mean, they brought Merce Cunningham; they brought John Cage – just to name those two people.

Lucinda Childs.

Lucinda Childs, absolutely.

In the 1970s – 1976, I think, in the same year that I did *Einstein* – Rolf Liebermann, head of the Paris Opera, had a full evening ballet of Merce Cunningham with stage set of Jasper Johns and light of Jasper Johns, and John Cage wrote the score, which was plucking cactus – amplified. [The allusion here is to the sounds of the plucked spines of a dried cactus, which Cage first used for his 1975 composition *Child of Tree* for Solo (otherwise known as *Animal Solo/Dance*), choreographed by Merce Cunningham.] I mean, this was at the Paris Opera. It would never have happened at the Metropolitan Opera.

You have created in Watermill a centre that is a truly international centre. You mentioned Chile earlier. In the last five years, you have also had one or two Chilean young artists as residents at the Watermill Center.

Yes, it's been a vital part of our international family. After 9/11, it was almost impossible, if you were a Muslim, to enter the United States.

I brought fifty-three people, Muslims from Indonesia, to Watermill, and we created a work.

It's a very subtle way that you have, Bob, of making a political statement.

Yes, but politics divide man. Religion divides man. We're about how we come together.

Yes, that is, in fact, what art is about, isn't it? It's about bringing people together.

Exactly, and it's the only thing that remains. If we go back five thousand years ago, Maria, we look at what artists did, we look at artefacts. We go back to the Mayans, to the Egyptians, to the Chinese. We look at artefacts. And if we don't support the art of our time, we won't have it. That is one of the few things that, five thousand years from now, would probably exist; if anything exists, it would be what artists are doing. Artists are our diaries, our journals of our time; and if we want to understand the nature of man of different civilizations throughout time, we look at artefacts. This is the history of man. And that's why I think it's important that here, at

Watermill, we live with the awareness of the history of man as a centre for creative thinking and creating new work (Figure 9).

And creative thinking will, in fact, be the memory of humankind.

Bob, much as I'd like to go on talking with you, I'm looking at the little clock on my computer. Our hour is up. I think the people online are probably desperate to have their voice heard and to ask you questions. So let me thank you for this wonderful conversation.

Thank you, it was great talking with you.

Maria Luisa, I think you have to come in now with the questions part of this evening.

[Maria Luisa Vergara joins the Conversation, greeting the audience, and fielding their questions, in Spanish. The interpreter Margit Schmohl translates these questions into English for the international participants. Since their English rendition was indistinct in the recording, Maria Shevtsova requested that Maria Luisa Vergara provide a translation from the Spanish for this publication.]

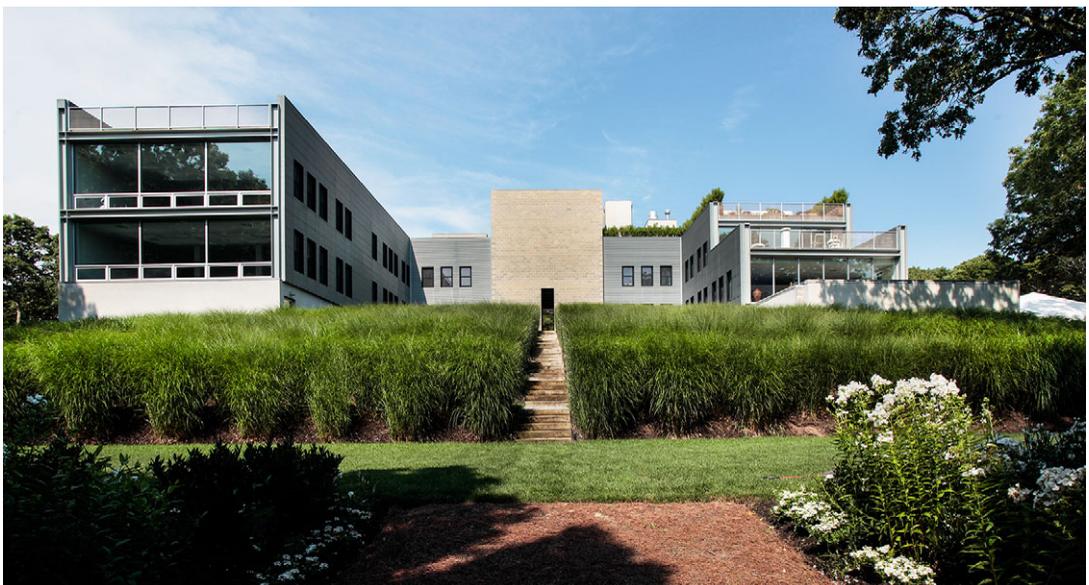


Figure 9. The Watermill Center. Photograph copyright: Lovis Dengler Ostenrik. Courtesy of Lovis Dengler Ostenrik.

Maria Luisa Vergara *Andrea is asking about Bob Wilson's opinion of the work of the Chilean artists who have been in Watermill. Was he able to see it? I'm going to read a couple of questions so that Bob Wilson can start with the one he thinks is more interesting for him. Another question, from Marjorie, is: How do you articulate the visual script in relation to music and to space, and its relation to body dramaturgy?*

Robert Wilson I think that what we hear is what we hear, and what we see is what we see. And what we hear and what we see, like in life, can be very different. I can be talking to you now and I look out the window and I see a forest of trees. To me, what we see has to be as important as what we hear. I often work on what I hear separately from what I see. We talked earlier about the Comédie-Française, when I did *Les Fables de La Fontaine* there. I turned all the lights out in the room and they recited the text. So I listened to the text like I listen to a radio and I corrected it. I said, 'Can this be quicker?' [or] 'Maybe take more time.' I give more formal directions, never interpretation. I've never, ever, in all my years of working, told an actor what to think. Then I do the stage action and say, 'OK, now, we don't have any texts, but it's like a silent movie.' And then I put the two together.

It's like putting a silent movie with a radio drama, and sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes it does. But if I started the way most directors would do with, say, a text, and I heard the text, then I would want to illustrate the text. So, what I'm seeing then is an illustration; [it] is a decoration, or seconding, of the text. But if I work on them separately [seeing and hearing] and put the two together, it's very curious the way that they can reinforce one another and their duality. It's like grids. You have a grid that's like this, and you have a grid that's like that. So most of the time, what I'm seeing and what I'm hearing in [the] theatre are aligned, but if they shift and they're in counterpoint to one another, then perhaps they support one another in a different way.

Now, my work is not arbitrary. The way I work is with counterpoint. So I can say, 'I want to kill you!' Or I can smile and say, 'I want to kill you.' Then I take a knife, and maybe the

smile is more terrifying. So it's not just any opposite that I put together. Counterpoint is very difficult to do. It's choosing the right object. It's the rock on the computer that helps me to see the rock and the computer together. So to answer your question: I often work on the audio books separately and the visual books separately, and then put them together and then see how they can reinforce one another without illustrating, so that what I see can be as important as what I hear. And that's the way it is in life. We all know that what we see is as important as what we hear, but somehow, for me, theatre got off track because usually what we see is an illustration or a decoration for our play. We don't need theatre decoration. Theatre should be architectural.

Roberto asks: I would like to know about Zoom and virtuality. How has the pandemic affected your creation?

I think it has given a different space in which it has allowed me to work, but, as I said earlier, it's still the same body that it was when I was born, and it's still the same handwriting. Every second will always be different. If we're listening carefully, the sequence of sounds that happened in that silence will never happen again. The only thing that's constant is change. So to answer your question: yes and no.

Laura is asking: Why is blue such a prominent colour in your performances?

You know, my palette in terms of light – you're probably talking about the light – is a very simple palette. It's a very strong red. It's an acid yellow green. It's a deep blue. It's a coal-steel white. And with that palette of light I can create anything. People talk about the blues, but the blues are made up of those primary colours and they very subtly shift and change all the time. I sometimes have as many as – well, we were talking about *The Messiah* (Mozart) earlier – probably a thousand, or close to a thousand, light cues. And so people say, 'Well, you know, this is the blue colour that's in Mozart.' But it's changing infinitely all the time.

The blue is [calming]. If I play the 'Moonlight Sonata' (Beethoven) and put blue light on the stage, people will be in a calm state of mind, for sure. So blue helps. Various hues of blue put people in a tranquil state of mind that gives them freedom for interior thinking. One of the problems I have with most theatre is that there's no time to think. Theatre can be a time for contemplation and should be; one needs time to think – especially [if you are] living in a city like New York City, it's necessary. We can enter the theatre and have time to reflect. Various hues of blue invite this interior reflection (Figure 10).

Thank you very much. We have room for one last question. It regards the point about politics and religion separating human beings. In the political position that is generated at the beginning of a work, the spectator becomes the master and the artist becomes a slave of the spectator. What does this political position mean?

I'm not sure that I understand that question.

Perhaps the person who wrote it can explain a little more? [The anonymous questioner did not reply.] We are going to move on to another question: How do you manage to maintain the constant movement or the stillness of the actors? What are the references for set portraits?

Well, I think that if I'm on stage as an actor, that is my responsibility. If I'm the director of the production, the designer of the production, my responsibility is to say, 'What is it? What am I saying?' I feel, very often, that when I go to the theatre, I'm in a high school and being lectured [to]. I have to think what somebody else is thinking – what the actor is thinking, what the director was thinking, what the designer was thinking – before I have my own thoughts. So, as creators of theatre, we must always leave a space for the audience to complete the action.

You have formal theatre, which mine is, that keeps a certain distance – a time and space for reflection. So I may have certain strong emotions about what I'm saying, what I'm



Figure 10. *Turandot*. Teatro Real Madrid, 2018. Act 2: Andrea Mastroni (Timur), Yolanda Auyanet (Liu), Gregory Kunde (Calaf), Raúl Giménez (Emperor Altoum), Irene Theorin (Turandot), Chorus. Photograph copyright: Javier del Real/Teatro Real. Courtesy of Javier del Real.

singing about, what I'm doing. But you have a distance, so the public can have their own ideas and own space. The reason for working is to say, 'What is something?' If you know what it is that you're doing, there's no reason to do it. The reason for working is to say, 'What is it?' So even though you're performing *Hamlet* every night, the same text of Shakespeare, it's always gonna be different because every second is always different. And if we are aware of this constant change in every second, then we can have a dialogue with the public. You must never insist too much on your idea with the public: you give a space for them to complete the action. And that's the reason why you work: you're asking a question about what it is that you are doing, and then you have a genuine dialogue with the public.

There was a Greek man who won – I don't know – eight or ten gold medals at the Olympics. He was a diver. I asked him, Gregory Louganis, 'How do you do it?' He said, 'Well, before I dive, I go into a room and I review in my mind everything I have to do. I know how many steps I have to walk up the diving board. I know I'm going to start with my left foot. I know that I'm going to put my right foot on the board first, and then my left foot. And then I know how many steps I take to the end of the board. I know that when I'm at the end of the board, before I dive, I must be balanced.' He said: 'When I'm in the air, I have the sensation that I'm going up as I'm going down. I go through all the things technically that I have to do to dive.' And then he said: '[But] when I have to do it, I have to forget it because, if I think about it, I can't do it.' So he's programmed his computer, in a sense, and then he has a kind of freedom – the freedom to be, at every moment, at that moment.

I think, you know, that's why we rehearse. That's why we make works in the theatre. But what's important, in the long run, is that you're able to look at it with a question: 'What am I doing? What am I saying?' Otherwise, it's too fascistic with the performer [saying], 'This is how I feel,' and then the audience will never be able to feel what you're feeling. So you must give the space for them to have their own ideas, their own feelings – keep a little

distance so that the audience completes the action.

Thank you, everyone. Have a good evening.

Coda: 17 September 2021

Watermill is here the focus, since this theme was pared back for reasons of time in the Santiago conversation. Reference, however, is also made to the celebration in Paris, from early September until the end of December 2021, of Wilson's life-long artistic contribution to this city and, as well, in honour of his eightieth birthday.

Maria Shevtsova *Hello, Bob, it's always good to see you. Thank you very much for your time. I realize that you're unbelievably busy, especially in Paris right now. I know you have three shows at the Festival d'Automne and then a fourth . . .*

Robert Wilson *Five! I have a project for a fifth one.*

The fourth is Turandot at the Paris Opera Bastille (Figures 11 and 12). And the fifth?

I'm planning to do a sound installation in 2022.

Ah, I didn't know about that one. There you've surprised me! The three at the Festival d'Automne – is this a celebration both of the Festival's [fiftieth anniversary] and your birthday?

Yes, I've been asked to do them especially for my eightieth birthday.

Fantastic! As you know, I wanted most to talk about Watermill this evening, so I won't be too long on what's happening in Paris, but please just say quickly how your premiere of the Bach 6 Solo went [choreography by Lucinda Childs].

Bach 6 Solo: the title is so interesting, and that's what it is. It's someone having a solo communication with this music, and Jennifer Koh plays two hours and twenty minutes. All these solo violin pieces of Bach. She said that, when she's playing, it's a dialogue with God. I think it is for me too when I'm in the audience, and for the



Figure 11. *Turandot*. Teatro Real Madrid, 2018. Act 1: Yolande Auyanet (Liu), Andrea Mastroni (Timur), Gregory Kunde (Calaf), Chorus, Antonio Carbonero and Álex Pastor (The Executioner), David Vento (The Prince of Persia), Irene Theorin (Turandot). Photograph copyright: Javier del Real/Teatro Real. Courtesy of Javier del Real.



Figure 12. *Turandot*. Teatro Real Madrid, 2018. Act 1: Oksana Dyka (Turandot). Photograph copyright: Javier del Real/Teatro Real. Courtesy of Javier del Real.

audience as well. They feel this dialogue. It's amazing that people don't move their body, they're just [still] because she's so beautiful to look at and we're in this beautiful space. It's a chapel that's an eight-sided building [the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière in the grounds of the Salpêtrière hospital], so the public is on eight sides of the performing platform.

How were the audience seated? Social distancing, keeping people two metres apart?

No, they were on bleachers and looking down into the space. Everyone wore masks. People were sitting next to each other.

It's as we were saying in our Santiago conversation – art is a record of our time. And we need to record such small details so that people of the future, the generation that's growing up during the pandemic, knows what the difficulties were for theatre artists. Otherwise they won't know.

This beautiful dome of space is built around an eight-sided floor. Acoustically it's different

[depending on] where you're sitting. It's something happening in 360 degrees. And that's a bit difficult to capture in a film, audibly and visually.

Indeed it is! So you don't really feel the impact of the Covid pandemic in Paris?

Well, the thing is actually being there. The medium of film is one thing, and the medium of theatre is different. If I have someone walking across the stage and it takes fifteen minutes for them to cross the stage in the theatre, you can have a certain impact. When you start to film it, the screen is not the same thing. The screen is about a close-up of a face or an eye moving. But if you pull back and see the whole body, it doesn't have the same impact that it does when you're on stage. And you have the presence in front of the public. So the mediums are very different. This was a real-life performance, but usually with film or the media everything is much quicker, everything. It's a close-up of an eye moving. That's where you have power and impact. To see the whole



Figure 13. *I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating.* Paris, 2021. Act 2: Julie Shanahan. Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.



Figure 14. *Jungle Book* (2019). Rehearsal with (left to right) Gaël Sall (Akela/Papa Wolf), Robert Wilson, Nancy Nkusi (Raskha/Mama Wolf). Photograph copyright: Lucie Jansch. Courtesy of Lucie Jansch.

figure crossing the stage from head to toe – it’s not the same as you see it in the theatre.

I worked again with Lucinda Childs. She performed, and we had four Greek dancers. It’s very difficult to do something with this music because almost anything you do, especially working with performers, is . . . that it distracts you from hearing the music. So, can you do something on stage that helps you to hear the music better? Their concentration and the movements they do are there to help us to hear the music.

Have you started rehearsing I was sitting on my patio?

I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating [1977]. I have, and last night we previewed, and tomorrow night, Sunday. We open on Monday. [The original production was performed by Wilson and Childs who, for this 2021 restaging, transmitted their respective roles to Berliner Ensemble actor Christopher Nell and Julie Shanahan,

dancer with Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater Wuppertal (Figure 13).]

Do you see any major difference between the Covid-period rehearsals and the pre-Covid rehearsal room?

No.

So people are close to each other. No one’s bothering with all this?

Well, in the case of *patio*, Act One is performed by a male actor and Act Two is performed by a female actor, and Act One is the same text as Act Two. They’re never on stage together, except for the applause at the end.

But in the rehearsal room, you’re all rubbing cheek by jowl with everybody else?

Pretty much, but we’re all respectful of the Covid situation, and people wear masks, and all the technicians do.

You have Jungle Book (2019) coming up (Figure 14), and that has a much bigger cast – and musicians too. So you're going to be working quite differently with that, aren't you?

The *patio* play is completely different than *Jungle Book*. It's a play of nonsense. I wrote it in 1975. And *patio* is mostly black and whites, like a black-and-white film from the 1920s or 1930s. *Jungle Book* is very colourful.

But have the theatres put into place some rules and regulations – some guidelines – or will that come later?

Guidelines regarding . . . ?

Regarding spatial arrangement, and whether you can touch people, and how close you can get to people.

My work is formal, so there's no use . . . [Both laugh.]

Bob, don't make me laugh! Are we gonna end up saying that you're the ideal director-designer for the Covid period!? It's crazy! [Both laugh.] And the general atmosphere in Paris – how does it feel?

I think it's much more relaxed than when I was here just before the summer. It's maybe too relaxed. I don't know.

It's very hard to gauge the situation with this Covid virus, isn't it? Very hard to know.

Very hard.

Now let's get on to Watermill. My first question goes back to the idea of the local, and the local community, that you talked about in our Santiago meeting. You talked about the older generation's resistance, but the young kids coming to some of the workshops – are these young local people, not artists, some aspiring artists? Or are they coming out of curiosity?

Well, it's both. What's important is that Watermill, as a cultural institution – an educational institution – has its door open. So if you're rich or poor, you can walk in the door, or if you are an atheist or a religious person, you can walk in the door. If you are left-wing

or right-wing we have an open-door policy. In fact, there's no gate on the property. You can walk in. And the central building has an opening. There's no door. So you can walk in anytime of day or night. And so it's open to the community surrounding us, and the immediate community, but it's open to the community at large. After 9/11, I brought fifty-three Muslims to the Watermill Center. With George Bush President at that time it was not possible, but somehow we found a way [see Santiago discussion above].

We have a collection of art, and we have more than six thousand artefacts, but it's a centre for creative thinking for new work, and it's very important we support *that* local community. And to make that local community rich, we support the community at large. So we have to know what is happening in Afghanistan. What is happening in Baia, in the jungle. What is happening in other parts of the world? After the past President in the United States, Donald Trump, who closed doors, it's even more important that we as an institution keep that door open.

Do some of the local kids who have been coming actively contribute now to developing the projects in the programmes? Have they actually taken a very positive hands-on kind of role?

One of the people who came as a high school student just out of curiosity started coming regularly and became very interested in the art collection. He had grown up and spent his life in Southampton [New York], so he had never seen performers coming from Brazil or from other parts of the world because there was no institution that offered such a window. He got a scholarship and went to Harvard and graduated top in his class, and he became my assistant. He came just out of curiosity because he lived a few blocks away, and he heard about this strange centre where all these strange things were happening, and his life was changed. He's working with us now on the development of the centre, and he's quite involved.

How do you help people who are economically disadvantaged? Do you have any kind of bursaries, grants . . . ?

We do. I have a mentor-protégé programme. I raised money to support young people to come in and work with more experienced, older people. We raise a considerable amount of money for that each year. I also have our Artists-in-Residence programme. We have some people who support an artist to come and stay there. They are given a small stipend. We now have a residence house, a place to live, and food is provided.

One of the great problems, Bob – we know this also from our personal lives – is supporting people economically, financially, so that they can eat while they become artists. And artists are not well treated, as you know. You’ve got to struggle to establish ways of supporting yourself while you’re creating. You’re helping people by supporting them in this financial way.

Right.

One of the most remarkable statements that I’ve read, actually yours, is on the Watermill site, headed ‘Black Lives Matter’. I find what you wrote there very powerful. What I wanted to know is: do you have a particular approach to bringing in and engaging with more Afro-Americans in the Watermill Center?

Well, this year we brought over a hundred and sixty of the protest boards that were painted in Minneapolis. And they’d never been seen outside of Minneapolis . . .

Are these the George Floyd panels?

Yes, the George Floyd protest boards (Figures 15 and 16). [Wilson and Shevtsova are using informal abbreviations for the *Minneapolis Protest Murals* at the outdoor exhibition at Watermill during summer 2021; see acknowledgements and the editorial note.] And what happened is that we brought in a large Black population. We had events happening over two weeks, and the last Saturday, somebody told me, 68 per cent of the attendees were Black. Linda Jackson, who was administrator with me for many years – we had our galas and fundraisers – said, ‘You know, I’ve been here four years and I’m the



Figure 15. May 25th. 2020. Artist: Witt Siasoco. Photograph copyright: Martyna Szczesna. Courtesy of Martyna Szczesna.

only Black person that has been at the galas or the fundraisers.’ So that was a big step forward that we brought in the Black community. People came from Manhattan and they came from all over Long Island, first of all because we had a number of Black artists performing – well-known ones (Figures 17 and 18) – but also to see these protest boards, which should go to the Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, actually. They’ve now been shipped back to Minneapolis. We went to Minneapolis and brought them to Watermill, and had a huge installation – enormous.

I saw photographs that you sent me of the 2021 festival. I wasn’t aware, until then, that you were holding festivals at Watermill. How many of them have you run?

We usually have a gala and it’s our big fundraiser.



Figure 16. *Gianna Floyd*. 2020. Artist: Jordan Roots. Photograph copyright: Martyna Szczesna. Courtesy of Martyna Szczesna.

Oh, I see.

I do two events. I do one where tickets are anywhere from \$1,000 to \$50,000 to attend.

Bob, at that price, I can't be one of your donors!

Well, we do a gala, and that's usually where we get about 60 per cent of our support for the year, which allows us to support artists, to bring them from abroad, or whatever. But then, ten days later, I usually do the same programme, and there's no fee. So you can walk in the door and you see the same programme that someone paid \$50,000 for. We usually have artist installations throughout the building and the property outdoors – ten and a half acres of land. We do site-specific installations with artists, and we work collectively together to help each other to build installations.

And the performing-arts aspect of the installations – how does that work?

Well, it's all the arts. You have composers, you have writers, you have painters, dancers – you

have scientists, anthropologists, mathematicians. We have writers we've worked with through the years. We've invited important scientists worldwide. We've worked with anthropologists. As artists . . . so that we have some idea of other fields of study [*inaudible*]. Even if you're studying medicine, you might only know just one part of the body. Or if you're studying architecture. There was a rather well-known architect – this was three or four years ago – who said, 'You know, I had no idea of how an opera is created. I had no idea how a dance is made. I sit in an office and I make these drawings and whatever, but I have no idea.' And here he walked into a painting studio and saw an artist starting with a blank canvas, and painting.

It's a tremendous thing that you're doing, Bob. It's very much a laboratory, isn't it?

Yes it is. It's a laboratory for creative thinking.

It's exactly what a laboratory should be. It should be exploring, testing, experimenting, checking,



Figure 17. Moor Mother performing with Vijay Iyer's group. Crossroads Summer Festival at Watermill Center, in collaboration with Carrie Mae Weems. Photograph copyright: Martyna Szczesna. Courtesy of Martyna Szczesna.

developing. One last question before you go, because it's fifteen past and you've got another meeting now. Have you had time to stop and think about what this legacy is going to be? What your legacy will be through Watermill?

That's a big question. Everyone asks 'Will the Watermill Center continue?' after I'm no longer here. What I'm trying to do is to leave very strong by-laws. We have a Bible that says 'Thou shalt not kill'. We have the Ten Commandments. We have the government. We have a Bill of Rights and a Constitution by which we govern our lives. You have different institutions. You have the Nobel Prize, so you give a prize that recognizes science or math or peace [or] literature. Whoever is head of the Nobel Prizes can fill in this programme.

Festivals – let's say the Salzburg Festival. You had Herbert von Karajan . . . then Gérard Mortier, and Gérard's programme was totally different from Karajan's. He brought in the avant-garde, was interested in John Cage and contemporary music. Karajan didn't care

anything about that. But the Salzburg Festival continued with different artistic directors. The institution goes on because you have a kind of programme and hopefully your by-laws are strong.

I mean, I don't agree with the by-laws of, say, the Metropolitan Opera. I don't agree with the by-laws of the Lincoln Center. I don't like the word because everyone's using it now, but it needs to be more 'diversified'. I go back to what André Malraux said as Minister of Culture in the 1950s in France: that, within the taxable monies that there are for cultural programmes, one quarter goes to support the art of the past, another quarter goes to support the art of our time, the other quarter goes to support the people of our homeland, of our nation, of our community of France, but the last quarter goes to support the art of all nations: *all nations*. It's very, very, very simple. A cultural policy. So if you're in Reims or Bordeaux or La Rochelle, you have a programme by which you try to fill the programme according to the by-laws.



Figure 18. Jason Moran. Crossroads Summer Festival at Watermill Center, in collaboration with Carrie Mae Weems. Photograph copyright: Martyna Szczesna. Courtesy of Martyna Szczesna.

The French gave a home to Picasso, to Stravinsky, to Peter Brook, to myself. If we look at the by-laws for the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States, you can't tell me what they're saying. They're unfounded. There's no clear policy, and it would be next to impossible for the National Endowment for the Arts because, without the guideline, I can't imagine that they would ever commission two Frenchmen to write an opera. Michel Guy, as the Minister of Culture, commissioned Philip Glass and me to write *Einstein on the Beach*.

The New York State Council on the Arts . . . by and large my tax dollar, [in the] state of New York can only go to support the people of the state of New York. So how provincial can we be if we want to be a cultural capital of the world – New York? What is happening in Baia, in the jungle? What is happening in Mali? What we do have in the United States is the individual who can make a decision. So

you have families who set up foundations. The Rockefeller Foundation has done tremendous work in bringing us closer to the Far East with their support of Far Eastern programmes and exchange between the United States and the Far East. So we do have a way, in our country, of doing it. But it would be good if there was a constitution by which we could make decisions.

What I'm trying to leave as my legacy – to answer your question – is a strong constitution, so that when I'm no longer here [a policy is in place]: we need to have something international; we need to have some support for the community. Let's continue with the art collection as we support creation and new work. That was why I created the foundation in the beginning.

I basically moved in 1990 from New York City, where I had been since I was a student, and moved to Long Island, to the Watermill Center, in a natural environment – I wanted to move out of the city and be in a natural environment. I think that nature influences our spiritual side. It's a different experience than working in a factory building, which I did for many years in Lower Manhattan – even before it was SoHo – where my works in the theatre were created in a factory loft space. But it's very different when you're in nature. And that has been a very important reason to bring people from outside of the community to the small community of Southampton – that is, to work in a natural environment.

The gardens are very important, and one of the things we do collectively is work in the garden together. So if you plant a tree, cut the grass, or plant the flower garden, you have a different respect for it. If you build a table on which you have dinner, you have a different feeling for that table. We have in the South Wing of the main building a black lacquer floor. If you're polishing those black lacquer floors every day, and you maintain them, you don't wear your muddy shoes on them.

What you're developing there is really the spirit of community togetherness.

It's a respect of home. I think the institutions that I attended to get my formal education were like prisons. They were a desk and blackboards and these institutional green walls.

There were corridors and lockers where you put your things.

Dare I ask you, Bob, whether you are also preparing human beings who might be able to carry forward your legacy?

Yes, of course, you always have that in mind, and those people can be totally different from myself. No one can do what I did.

No, but you're generous enough to think they can do it in their own way.

You have to. You know, my first play was written with a Black boy who had never been to school and was deaf and knew no words. I met him by accident on the street, and I wrote my first major work with him, and that's what established my career. Some years after that I wrote a play, *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974), with Christopher Knowles. It was on autistic boys. If I had gone to school at Yale University and studied drama, it would never have happened. If I had gone to the Paris Opera I would have never made *Deafman Glance*, the seven-hour play. If I had worked at La Scala . . . If I had worked at the Piccolo Teatro in Milano, or the Schaubühne in Berlin, these sorts of things would never have happened. They happened by accident, by living life, and I built them in my own studio.

And you weren't bound by any institution [other than the one you are building], were you?

No, no.

Well, maybe that's where we have to end it, Bob. [Over the years I have researched] what I call 'utopian communities', and it seems to me that aspects of Watermill could be described almost in these terms. It's probably the best that one can do – go forward as a community and look to the future. Thank you.

Thank you.

Editorial Note

The editor wishes to publish Noah Khoshbin's full text in kind response to various questions of detail:

Minneapolis Protest Murals – an outdoor exhibition of public art created organically in Minneapolis following the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd. Plywood murals, created by artists, many anonymous, during the Minneapolis uprising of 2020, were collected from businesses and preserved by Memorialize the Movement, an organization founded by Minneapolis-based activist Leesa Kelly. Featuring 150 of the nearly 900 boards collected, *Minneapolis Protest Murals* – presented in commemoration of George Floyd and support of Black Lives Matter – is the most extensive presentation of these artworks outside of Minneapolis to date. The exhibition is curated by Leesa Kelly and Noah Khoshbin.