

56th Berlin Film Festival—Part 3

The work of theatre director Robert Wilson and other documentary films

By Stefan Steinberg
11 March 2006

“*I do theatre, I do not do meanings*”—exchange between Robert Wilson and film director Katharina Otto-Bernstein.

Absolute Wilson by Katharina Otto-Bernstein is a documentary film treating the life and work of American-born Robert Wilson, one of the most prolific theatre directors currently working on the European continent. Having made a reputation in the US in the 1970s with works such as *Deafman Glance* (1970) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Wilson has in recent decades concentrated on working in western Europe, where various countries, such as Germany and France, have a far more developed system of state-subsidised theatre than the US.

Wilson’s artistic roots lie in the 1960s, in his collaboration with renowned choreographers George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, and musicians such as John Cage and later Philip Glass. Unlike virtually any other contemporary director, Wilson seeks to control and influence all of the various elements of his plays, combining dance, set design, lighting and costumes (he also occasionally performs in his productions) into his own version of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. During the summer of each year, Wilson, who is undeniably a workaholic, teaches students theatre craft at the Watermill Centre outside New York.

Over the years, Wilson has built up a sizeable and enthusiastic lobby of support for his work. Having acknowledged that she had seen *Deafman Glance* on numerous occasions, critic Susan Sontag (now deceased) concluded that Wilson’s was “The greatest theatre career of our time.” Tributes to Wilson’s work also come in the film by Otto-Bernstein from musician David Byrne, the former creative director of the Paris Opera House, Charles Fabius, opera singer Jessye Norman and many other leading artistic figures.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Wilson rejected the anarchic revolt against traditional theatre and the collective approach associated with ensembles working in New York such as the Living Theatre and Open Theatre, in favour of a much more formalistic, elaborate and almost baroque-type theatre in which he retained a large degree of control. His productions tend to be quite consciously formal, cold and distant, without much human interaction or dramatic content. Script and dialogue have always been a long way down the list of priorities. In Wilson’s 1993 version of *Hamlet*, he scrapped nearly two thirds of Shakespeare’s text to produce one hour of drama. Earlier, in 1973, he directed and produced what is described as a 12-hour “silent opera” entitled *The Life and Times of Josef Stalin*. The piece was executed without a script and based largely on Wilson’s own stage directions.

In a text from 1982, Wilson describes his relation to the written word: “When I write these lines I don’t think about who’s going to say it or what it means. I don’t think about emotions or ideas. It’s just something to hear on a stage.”

Perhaps Wilson’s unease with the spoken word and plot has some basis in his pedagogical work with handicapped and autistic persons, but it certainly complements the emergence of ideological tendencies in the 1970s that increasingly questioned language as a basis for accurately reflecting the objective world. Writing on Wilson, Arthur Holmberg firmly situates him in the orbit of post-modern art and culture. Holmberg describes Wilson as the originator of a “radical relativity” in theatre and goes on to delineate the sort of ideological background to Wilson’s work.

“‘To tell a story,’ [the French author] Robbe-Grillet argues, ‘has become strictly impossible’, and [the French philosopher] Lyotard characterises the post modern condition as the tumbling down of narrative. The grand narratives have collapsed, and we are left with scraps of stories. From these scraps Wilson builds a new acoustical space where texts comment on each other. ‘Collage,’ writes [art critic Harold] Rosenberg, ‘is the form assumed by the ambiguities that have matured in our time concerning both art and the realities it has purported to represent.... Twentieth-century fictions are rarely made up of the whole cloth.... Collage invites the spectator to respond with a multiple consciousness....’”

This is the familiar litany of post-modernist claims. The “grand narratives”—according to Lyotard and others, including socialism—have collapsed. All that artists and intellectuals can do is rummage amongst the ruins and patch a few shards together in an appealing manner that will win the acclaim of fellow intellectuals. If things still seem confusing, then it is because we are not using a sufficient number of our “multiple consciousnesses”!

It may well be that Wilson has found a poor advocate for his work in the shape of Arthur Holmberg, but in his own statements and interviews he repeatedly emphasises that the job of the artist is to steer clear of interpretations. The best the artist can do is pose questions: “I’m an artist, not a philosopher. I don’t make meanings. I make art.... Theatre that imposes an interpretation is aesthetic fascism.”

While this may be a fashionable point of view in some circles, such a stance is thoroughly blinkered and in the long term counterproductive for compelling and enduring art. Of course there are considerable differences between the artist and the philosopher, just as there are numerous examples in the twentieth century of the degeneration of art into crude propaganda (or interpretation)—most notably by Fascism and Stalinism. But then to conclude that interpretation—the struggle to make sense of the world in such a fashion as to be able to communicate it to others—has no place in the creation of a work of art is both reckless and ultimately, for the artist, a suffocating and limiting influence. The artist may wish to ignore social life, but social life does not ignore him, and, whether he likes it or not, social influences will inevitably find expression in his work.

These are not new questions. Already early in the twentieth century, the Russian revolutionary G. Plekhanov wrote in his analysis of the advocates of *l'art pour art*: “[T]here is no such thing as an artistic production which is devoid of an idea. Even productions whose authors lay store only on form and are not concerned for their content, nevertheless express some idea in one way or another.” A few sentences further, Plekhanov remarks: “Productions whose authors lay store on form always reflect a definite—and as I have already explained, a *hopelessly negative*—attitude of their authors to their social environment.”

A brief glance at Wilson’s past work makes this point clear. Wilson exhibits expertise in combining formal elements of theatre to produce at times engaging and attractive images, but, whether he is conscious of it or not, he works within a definite social and political context.

Alongside the formal aesthetic elements in Wilson’s marathon *Einstein on the Beach*, the play also had a very definite political and ideological content. The piece ends with nuclear destruction, and throughout the play Wilson pits the figure of the scientist against that of the artist, and he portrays them as possessing two entirely opposed ways of seeing the world. The scientist with his thirst for knowledge leads us to—or takes us over—the brink of destruction. The artist is our potential saviour. We are reminded of the dichotomy introduced by the English romantic poet William Blake, who once wrote: “Art is the tree of Life.... Science is the Tree of Death.”

Again, in some of his most recent works—e.g., *Black Rider*, *Alice and Woyzeck*—Wilson has not only drawn heavily on the visual style of German expressionism, but also on its often apocalyptic view of mankind and his future. Thus in *Woyzeck*, we are treated to lyrics by singer Tom Waits, “Call no man happy ‘til he dies.... All the good in the world you can put inside a thimble,” in a song entitled “Misery is the River of the World.” Wilson has taken out a monopoly on cultural pessimism in modern theatre, wagging his finger in admonishment at the sins of humanity.

Unfortunately, none of these issues are taken up by Katharina Otto-Bernstein in her film. She is a fan, for whom Wilson can do no wrong. At the same time, her work does offer a fascinating, although largely uncritical, glimpse into the social roots of Robert Wilson’s work.

In fact, Wilson had an intriguing and obviously very difficult childhood, which contradicts his efforts to deny the role of social and political factors in his work. He was born in 1941 in the town of Waco, Texas, which he describes in *Absolute Wilson* as a cultural and spiritual backwater. A sensitive and shy child with a pronounced speech defect, Wilson reveals that his first childhood friend was a black boy—a choice frowned upon by his father and much of the local community.

His father was a businessman—for a time the mayor of Waco—who was determined that his son should follow in his footsteps. Wilson submitted at first to his father’s wishes but then in the early 1960s broke away from his family to embrace the alternative culture scene in New York. His life was further complicated by his struggle as a young man to find acceptance for his homosexuality.

Now over 60, Wilson has traveled a long way from his roots in Waco. A restless spirit, one is left with the impression of a man who has continually overcome considerable hurdles in his life to pursue his art. Chapters of his life have been closed, but little thought has been given to the broader social and political implications of the journey he has made. Capable of glittering, at times intense imagery, there is a lingering emptiness at the heart of Wilson’s work. The persistent depiction, in his pieces, of mankind driven and manipulated by dark and inexplicable forces indicates in the final analysis...a fundamentally *negative* and *confused* attitude towards his social environment.

Featured at the Berlinale was a fascinating semi-documentary from India, *John & Jane*, directed by Ashim Ahluwalia. It deals with the nuts and bolts of today’s globalised capitalism and in particular with what lies

behind the term “outsourcing.” The film concentrates on the working lives of six young Indians working in a modern call centre on the outskirts of Bombay.

The title of the film—*John & Jane*—refers to the anonymity with which the call centre employer deals with his staff, as well as to their phony American personas. In one of the film’s images, we see a large poster hanging on the wall featuring photos of the staff. Alongside each photo is a reference number and the blood group of the employee. Names have entirely been dispensed with. In the modern globalised economy, the names of ordinary workers have decreasing value—an individualised number means that any confusion arising from similar-sounding names is avoided, and the identification of blood group means that in the event of the employee being taken seriously ill, basic information exists that could save his or her life. More information about the employee is neither necessary nor encouraged.

The young, evidently well-educated staff sit like battery hens at their computer screens and answer calls from and make them to America. They work in shifts around the clock and have little time for any sort of private life. They earn a meagre wage, but compared to others around them who earn nothing, they are privileged. Ringing from Bombay, they ask customers in the US if they might be interested in obtaining medical insurance, a revolutionary new device for mowing their lawns or a worthless plastic toy.

Before beginning work, the staff are indoctrinated in the (supposed) values of American society. US and Indian teachers instruct the call workers in voice training so they can understand and even respond during calls with the correct intonation. In other seminars, they are quizzed on American culture and the shopping habits of its citizens. Meanwhile, US “culture”—McDonalds, Wendy’s, Burger King—is doing good business and springing up all over downtown Bombay. One worker, Naomi, has taken the message to heart; a young Indian with blonde hair and eyelashes, she speaks with a hybrid Midwest US accent and boasts, “I’m totally very Americanised.”

Two of the staff thoroughly hate their jobs, despise their manager and cannot wait to get out and find something better. Another young male worker is convinced that his job in the call centre is a stepping-stone on his path to becoming a billionaire. He has pictures of expensive luxury products—e.g., a top-end motorbike—on his wall, with dates a couple of years in the future indicating when he has decided he will purchase them. Also on the wall is a photo of Elvis Presley, whom he admires, he says, because he was a billionaire.

A third young woman, who grew up without her proper parents, loves her job and regards the call office and her fellow workers as her new family. Another young couple have recently married. Each works in a call centre on a different schedule, and they hardly see one another apart from a snatched shared hamburger during shift change.

In what is perhaps the most fascinating segment of the film, we are allowed to eavesdrop on some of the calls made by the call workers. Most of those phoned are elderly men and women living in the American South and Midwest. “Would you like to obtain a revolutionary and cheap means for communicating with your friends and loved ones?” the young Indian call worker asks. The vast majority of customers are abrasive and quickly hang up. One old tired voice at the end of the line replies that he does not really need such a service; he has no friends, and he only uses his telephone to call a relative once every few months. He is a retiree and has to watch his income.

We observe young, poorly-paid, alienated workers in India making contact, or trying to make contact, hundreds of times a day, with elderly, poor and thoroughly lonely workers in the United States. Modern computer technology linked with the internet has so much potential to revolutionise and improve living and cultural standards. However, as *John & Jane* makes clear, as long as the accumulation of profit remains the

driving force in society, such developments only serve to intensify isolation and alienation.

Beyond Hatred by Olivier Meyrou is a sensitively made French documentary that centres on the family of a young man who was murdered in 2002 by three skinheads. The neo-fascist youth were prowling a park looking for an Arab; instead they encountered François, who was homosexual. Twenty-nine-year-old François Chenu sought to defend himself and branded his attackers cowards. Savagely beaten, he drowns in a nearby pond.

Meyrou interviews François' mother following the attack and prior to the trial of the three skinhead youths who were arrested shortly after their crime. The mother declares that following the shock of her son's death, she has discovered entirely new aspects to her character. In her current state, she declares, she is capable of using the same degree of violence on her son's murderers as they used against François. The film quietly and unobtrusively follows the development of the mother and other members of François' family, who in the course of the trial learn more and more about the appalling social deprivation and neglect suffered by the murderers in the course of their short lives.

Eventually, the anger of the family gives way to despair and finally the strength to extend a hand of reconciliation to the young killers of their son, who are sentenced to long periods in prison.

The film briefly features shots of French media representatives eager for interviews with the family and keen to give the story their own sensationalist twist—as was the case in the recent coverage of the murder of the young man Ilam Halimi. Filmmaker Meyrou takes an entirely different approach, calmly and sympathetically chronicling the torturous emotional journey undertaken by the Chenu family.

A weakness of the film is its failure to make any sort of comment on the French prison system. At the end of the film, we are left with the impression that justice has been done and now it is up to the young convicts to make the best of the French prison system to achieve their redemption. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of the French prison system knows this is a fairly forlorn hope.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>