

THE POSTMODERN WORLD OF MULLER AND WILSON,  
OR HOW *HAMLETMACHINE* COMPLETED  
A BRECHTIAN DREAM

by

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There are few artists that have had such an influence on the world of theatre that their name has actually become an adjective. The term *Brechtian*, “attests to the influence of the dramaturgy, practice, and theory of Bertolt Brecht in the twentieth century and beyond” (Rouse “Brechtian” 185). The official use of Bertolt Brecht as an adjective illustrates just how much of a seminal figure he has been to the theatre over the past century. Brecht and his theories have been cited as the influence on countless theatrical artists. However none may be as important as the German playwright, Heiner Muller, and the American director, Robert Wilson. These two men were at the forefront of the Avant-Garde movement commonly referred to as Postmodernism. Both created strikingly imaginative works that pushed the theatre in innovative and stimulating directions. The thrust of this paper will show how Postmodernism, in particular the works of Muller and Wilson, became the actualization of Brecht’s theories on the Epic Theatre. The research will explore the nuances of Brecht’s theories and his goals and then how the works and lives of Muller and Wilson culminated in a collaboration on the play *Hamletmachine* that truly brought epic theatre to the stage.

Brecht’s main theories focused on the differences between what he called the Dramatic Theatre and the Epic Theatre. Brecht received his definitions of Epic and Dramatic theatre from the descriptions laid out by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller in *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry* (1797). “The distinction between the epic and dramatic genres of poetry (are) as follows: ‘Their essential difference lies in the fact that the epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present’” (Esslin 113). Brecht’s theories on historicification were

designed specifically to distance his own work from this distinction of the present dramatic theatre.

Brecht's first major contribution to the theatrical world on the differences between epic and dramatic theatre were laid down in the form of a table he created for his notes on the opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). A selection of what Brecht viewed as the essence the dramatic theatre included: literature was plot driven; it provided an audience with sensations; audiences' instinctive feelings were preserved; the protagonist is unalterable; there was linear development; thought determined being; the play connected to an audience's feelings. Brecht juxtaposed these views with what he saw as the essence of the epic theatre and included: literature was narrative; it forced the audience to make decisions; audiences' were brought to the point of recognition; the protagonist is alterable and able to alter; the events moved in curves; social being determines thought; the play connected to an audience's reason. At the end of his comparison Brecht made a special note to help dictate how the table could be best analyzed. "This table does not show absolute antitheses but mere shifts of accent. In a communication of fact, for instance, we may choose whether to stress the element of emotional suggestion or that of plain rational argument" (Brecht "Rise and Fall" 111).

In 1935 Brecht's *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction* elaborated on his previous ideas of the epic and dramatic theatre and attempted to answer some of the criticism that had developed around his theories:

Many people imagine that the term 'epic theatre' is self-contradictory, as the epic and dramatic ways of narrating a story are held, following Aristotle, to be basically distinct. The difference between the two forms

was never thought simply to lie in the fact that the one is performed by living beings while the other operates via the written word; epic works such as those of Homer and the medieval singers were at the same time theatrical performances while dramas like Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred* are agreed to have been more effective as books. Thus even by Aristotle's definition the difference between the dramatic and epic forms was attributed to their different methods of construction, whose laws were dealt with by two different branches of aesthetics. The method of construction depended on the different way of presenting the work to the public, sometimes via the stage, sometimes through a book; and independently of that there was the 'dramatic element' in epic works and the 'epic element' in dramatic works. (Brecht "Theatre for Pleasure" 70)

As Brecht continued in this work he sought to refine his previous table on the differences between the dramatic spectator and the epic spectator. He wanted to make it easier for the readers to understand their role as audience members and raise their consciousness to what was happening in the dramatic theatre and what their experience should be with the epic theatre. Brecht believed that:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It's only natural—It'll never change—The sufferings of this man appalls me, because they are inescapable—That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh. The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it—That's not the way—That's extraordinary, hardly believable—

It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appalls me, because they are unnecessary—That's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht "Theatre for Pleasure" 71)

Some of the most fascinating elements of Brecht's new set of distinctions can be found where the audience was supposed to feel the exact same thing, but for different reasons. For example, the goal of the epic theatre was still to make great art in the audience's mind, but because it does not present the audience with anything that should be completely self evident. Also the suffering of the protagonist in the audience's mind was appalling for both forms, but could have been avoided in the epic theatre. This ability for change would hopefully lead to the audience thinking critically about their own world and force them to take steps to make sure a similar outcome would be avoided in the real world.

Brecht's theories continued to be honed and reworked. He eventually developed the term *verfremdungseffekt* to encapsulate his ideas on alienating an audience or what according to Siegfried Mew is better defined as estrangement. "The A-effect (*verfremdungseffekt*) was achieved in the German epic theatre . . . by the music (choruses, songs) and the setting (placards, film etc.). It was principally designed to historicize the incidents portrayed" (Brecht "Alienation" 114). Historification was the action of taking a story that has relevance to the contemporary world and setting it outside a contemporary setting into the past. Historification was extremely important to Brecht because it allowed the audience to develop their own opinions during a production rather than coming into the theatre with predetermined notions that were

unalterable. Jennifer Michaels developed an excellent analysis of Brecht's use of historicification:

Brecht believed that the distancing effect of history (or geography) can make the audience more aware of the modern world: It can show that there are no universal values, that life is impermanent, that the world can be changed. Brecht notes that historical events are unique and transitory. The conduct of people in them is not fixed and universal; rather, it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and it is subject to criticism from the viewpoint of the period immediately following. As a Marxist, Brecht believed in the ultimate goal of a classless Utopia, however far in the future it may be, and this belief made him optimistic about humankind's potential and about the possibility of changing society. (Michaels 440)

Along with historicification, *verfremdungseffekt* was used to keep the audience aware that they were at a theatrical event. This distancing kept the audience critical throughout the performance. Music was used to undercut specific moments and remind the audience of what the character truly desired. Sets were minimal but contained very specifically researched elements. Projections and placards were used to inform the audience of the upcoming events in the following scene. This removed the emotional toll and let the audience focus on the circumstances around the event rather than solely on the event itself.

Brecht's theories of scenic and lighting design had two major influences, the Chinese Theatre and Opera:

Brecht admired the Chinese theater, with its stylized acting, masks, and anti-illusionist staging; his theater is similarly anti-illusionist. Narrators, film projections, and titles comment on the action and break the suspense by indicating what is going to occur in each scene. Brecht stressed that the titles must include the social point of a particular scene. The songs that Brecht includes in his plays are not an integral part of the action, as in an opera; rather, they comment on the action. When a character is about to sing, he steps forward to the front of the stage and the lighting changes. The songs thus interrupt the course of the action and change the mood of the play. The music itself serves as an alienation device, featuring jazz rhythms and ballad forms that are not congruent with the stage action. In epic theater, the sources of lighting and scene changes are visible to the audience, and scenes are often played simultaneously to heighten the audience's awareness that it is watching a play. (Michaels 440)

Brecht also developed theories on the role and techniques for actors. *Gestus* was the term he created for the actor. "In the actor/role dynamic, the key difference in the two theories (Stanislavsky's acting method vs Brecht's acting method) lies between the Stanislavskian 'embodiment' of character and the Brechtian 'demonstration' of it" (Eddershaw 19). *Gestus* created:

Gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed. It excludes the psychological, the subconscious, the



metaphysical unless they can be conveyed in concrete terms; 'All feelings must be externalized' (Willett "The Theatre of" 175)

Brecht's theories changed the landscape of the theatre. Brecht was extremely articulate with his theories and what he was trying to achieve. However, one of the fascinating things about Brecht's work is that he rarely achieved the audience reactions he sought. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, one of his most famous productions, is an excellent example of this phenomenon:

Though he insisted that spectators ought not to identify themselves with Mother Courage, he had created a character so richly human that audiences were involved despite his intentions. In fact, the bourgeois audience that witnessed *Mother Courage and Her Children* for the first time in Zurich admired the leading character for her indomitable spirit in wartime and her capitalist ability to survive. Actually, Brecht intended no such audience identification. (Jelavich 392)

This is the foundation that guided this paper. Though Brecht clearly laid out his views on alienation and the epic theatre his productions fell short of true realization. It was not until the postmodernists like Heiner Muller and Robert Wilson came along that (that) his theories were unabashedly put into action.

Now what exactly is postmodern theatre and how does it fit into the world of epic theatre? Postmodern generally refers to drama after 1960 or 1970 that rejects modernism. The modern theatre is associated with Aristotelian thought. The postmodern theatre outright rejects Aristotle's concept of a good play, most notably his conception of plot and character:

As an artistic critical term, *postmodernism* usually refers to any or all of these qualities: a mixing of different styles from different time periods, a playful or irreverent use of the past without adhering to the values of the past, multiple meanings and moods interspersed through a text or performance, a blurring of the distinction between reality and art, and a self-conscious awareness of being in a performance either by undercutting traditional techniques or by openly acknowledging the audience. (Watson 480)

The rejection of Aristotelian thought put postmodernism in line with the basis for Brecht's theories. It was Muller and Wilson that solidified the influence of Brecht on the postmodern theatre.

“Asked to describe Heiner Muller, the average theatergoer of 1990 in Frankfurt am Main might have responded that he is a sort of socialist William Shakespeare” (Hofacker, Jr. 335). Heiner Muller was recognized as one of the most influential German playwrights of the twentieth century. Many scholars, including Ehrhard Bahr, Erich Hofacker, and Carl Weber, claimed that Muller was second only to Bertolt Brecht himself in terms of European influence. Muller ushered in a new and provocative age in the theatre. His name was synonymous with the postmodern or postdramatic movement. His style has been described as:

. . . Brechtian, Artaudian, and postmodern techniques, and a vast range of reference to European literature, in blood-drenched collages of catastrophes of European Enlightenment in general and German History in particular . . . Muller's texts are often monologic; the drama of

interacting subjects, whether bourgeois or proletarian, cannot express his vision of history's horrors. Thus non-verbal images are central.

(McGowan 893)

Muller often described his works as autobiographical. His life in many ways reflected his chaotic and fractured plays. Muller created, "a theater composed of the anarchic forms of montage, ritual, pantomime, comic-strip scenes, and street-theater demonstrations of terror, cruelty, and obscenity" (Bahr 2423). Much of Muller's life can only be found in fragments due to censorship and the nature of cold war Germany, but it is exceedingly important nonetheless. It is important to understand Muller's life because it shows the kind of man that it took to fully realize Brecht's dream. He was a contrarian that truly tried to alienate an audience while still trying to raise their consciousness.

Muller was born on 9 January 1929 in a small town in Saxony, Germany. His parents, Paul Wilhelm and Elfiede Roudholzner, were working class citizens. Paul Wilhelm was a political activist who was a socialist and supporter of the Social Democratic Party. As Hitler and the Nazis rose to power, Wilhelm was a vocal support for the Social Democratic party. This culminated into one of the earliest influences on Muller:

Muller's earliest childhood recollection is of brown-shirted Nazi storm troopers breaking into the house on the night of 31 January 1933, beating his father—a small and rather helpless man—and dragging him away. His father attempted to say good-bye to Heiner, but the four-year-old pretended to be asleep. Muller feels that this first act of "treason" has deeply influenced his life and work. (Hofacker, Jr. 336)

The violence Muller's father faced is reflected in most of his work. The individual violently oppressed is seen over and over again. Ophelia at the end of *Hamletmaschine* is a prime example as she enters bloodied and is completely bound in gauze.

Wilhelm was put into a concentration camp for a time, released, and once again arrested when he vocally opposed the Nazis. During this time, Muller was forced to be a part of Hitler's Youth. In 1945, at the end of World War II, a 16 year old Muller was drafted into the death throes of the Nazi army. He witnessed the final days of World War II, where deserters were shot or hung by loyal SS. Muller was taken prisoner by American forces but managed to escape. From there Muller fled into the reportedly dangerous Soviet occupied Germany:

Rumor had it . . . the women were raped and the men murdered; Muller said that he had expected to find the first victims behind the first bushes. Instead, he was fed and assigned to a convoy walking to the next county seat; there he was freed. (Hofacker, Jr. 336)

After the war, Muller stayed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany and began a career as a journalist for *Junge Kunst (Young Art)*. His father fled to West Germany, because of his opposition to the personality cult of Joseph Stalin that had overtaken the Social Democratic Party.

While working as a journalist, Muller began writing poems, short stories, and eventually dramatic works. Muller's work as a playwright, is often defined in three important periods of his life that influenced the style and subject matter he was exploring:

(The first period is) from the early 1950's to the early 1960's, when Muller dealt with contemporary problems in industry and land reform in the GDR; from the mid-1960's to the early 1970's, when the playwright followed the trends of a socialist classicism, employing mythology and the models of classical drama; and from the mid-1970's to 1995, when Muller explored the causes and consequences of failed revolutions in Germany and the demise of the German working-class movement. In this last period he focused on the issues of cultural colonialism, the exportation of revolutions, and, especially, the struggles of the Third World. (Bahr 2425)

It was his third and final period that he truly developed the postmodern aesthetic and in doing so the realization of a truly epic theatre.

In 1955, Muller met and married a poet named Ingeborg Schwenkner. Before his relationship with Schwenkner, Muller had only dabbled with playwriting. After their marriage, they collaborated together on plays. The plays they developed became known as production plays. A production play was a work based on the common working man. Schwenkner has often been seen as the catalyst that sparked Muller's career. Schwenkner also found individual success when she received the Erich Weiner Medal in 1960 for her radio play *The Women's Brigade (Die Weiberbrigade)*. (Hofacker, Jr. 337)

The first period of Muller's career officially began 1957. He was commissioned to adapt John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* in East Germany for the fortieth anniversary of the 1917 Russian revolution. Reed's tale is his firsthand account of the

October revolution in Russia. Muller's interpretation of the novel was performed at the Volksbune.

The next year Muller was invited to join the Maxim Gorky Theatre as a dramaturg. Here he wrote his first original piece to be performed and published. (Berghaus 518) *The Scab* or *The Wage Cutter*, depending on the translation of *Der Lohndrucker*, was written in collaboration with Schwenkner. The play focuses on Hans Garbe who became the first *Held der Arbeit* (Hero of Labour) in the GDR. Garbe was a worker at the East Berlin foundry. His heroic deed was that he did not wait for the furnace at the foundry to cool down before he began to repair it. This was a very dangerous endeavor but it showed management a way to increase productivity. Both time and money could be saved to put more production out. This caused more work for Garbe's fellow workers without an increase in pay. Garbe's case is the core of many criticisms of the socialist ideal. Increased output can benefit the group but also be the detriment of the individual. Even in his early plays Brecht's political and stylistic influence shows through:

Muller showed the tensions and resentments among the workforce and the absence of a socialist work ethic in an interlocking sequence of terse Brechtian scenes. It ends with a pragmatic compromise: the Scab and his main opponent bury their differences and agree to build socialism together. (687)

This first production play is the model of Muller's work during this period of time. These plays contain an optimistic outlook of the future. This would greatly shift in his later work. Muller's production plays have a strong Brechtian message that left the

audience with the sense that things can get better if we are willing to change. Muller provided strong criticism of the socialist structure that he supported but never fully accepted on its terms. Muller and Schwenwerk received the Heinrich Mann Prize in 1959 for *Der Lohndrucker*. The Heinrich Mann Prize is an annual award given out by the Academy of Art of Communist East Germany. The Muller's received the award for the socially conscious nature of their play.

Of his production plays during this first period there are three more of note: *The Correction* (*Die Korrektur*: 1958); *The Resettler Woman; or, Life in the Country* (*Die Umsiedlerin oder Das Leben auf dem Lande*: 1956-1961); *The Construction Project* (*Der Bau*: 1965). *The Correction* was a continuation of *The Scab*. It explored the issue of quantity over quality. *The Resettler Woman* is of note because it was a play that Muller kept revisiting until the Berlin Wall went up and the authorities banned the play. The play is critical of the socialist agricultural policy.

*The Construction Project* was Muller's final production play and the one to get him in the most trouble with authorities. The play was based on *Track of the Building Stones* (*Spur der Steine*: 1964), which was a nine-hundred page novel by Erik Neutsch. The novel followed the lives of a group of construction workers on and off the jobsite.

Muller's play was:

a verse drama in ten scenes . . . the political and ethical problems which in the novel are presented in long monologues are reduced to brief, vivid lines: the political party comes and goes, we work; the world is a boxing ring, and might makes right; show me a building that is worth a human life; the world is cheap, and a human being is expensive. Muller's drama is a

litany of praise to those who worked to build the country. The victims were more important than what their sacrifices had gained. The individual ruined himself for the construction project. (Hofacker, Jr. 339)

The play came under vicious attacks from the GDR government, as it was felt the play promoted, “nihilistic, hopeless, and morally subversive philosophies” (Hofacker, Jr. 339). Official publication of the play was deterred until 1975 and even then it was not performed until 1980. The outrage of the play caused all of Muller’s works to be banned between 1965 and 1967.

Muller continued to write plays even though they were not allowed onstage in the GDR. In 1966, Schwenwerk committed suicide. She had long suffered depression and “Muller had been living under this threat for years; he made reference to it in a poem as early as 1959” (Hofacker, Jr. 339). The loss of his wife and collaborator, along with the betrayal of his government had a heavy toll on Muller and caused a shift in his writing. Muller abandoned production plays and began focusing mainly on translating and adapting classic texts. This shift to adapting primarily Greek texts is commonly referred to as his second period of playwriting.

As with all his life, Muller put out a prolific amount of work during this period. Some of the plays during this time include *Ödipus Tyrann* (1967), *The Horatian* (1968), *Prometheus* (1969), *Mauser* (1970), *Macbeth* (1971), and *Cement* (1972). The component that connected these texts beyond their classical subjects was Muller’s use of historification. Muller wove contemporary views and problems into these classic tales. In 1968 Muller adapted Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*. This play is generally recognized as a model of Muller’s adaptation style. Muller was not afraid to take artistic liberties



with his adaptations to sculpt a message relevant to his audience. This approach is evident in *Philoctetes*:

The original play by Sophocles has a rare happy ending, returning the protagonist and his invincible bow from his isolation on the island of Lemnos to the Greek army before Troy, where his festering wounds are healed. In Muller's version, the return of Philoctetes is engineered by Ulysses for the sole purpose of rallying the troops for battle . . . Achilles' son finally tells Philoctetes about the lie, a battle ensues, during which Philoctetes is killed. Now Ulysses exploits the death of Philoctetes, concocting a new lie in the service of the war against Troy . . . on its most obvious level of interpretation, the drama has been understood as an anti-imperialist play, showing the cynical exploitation of human values for the sake of aggressive wars. (Bahr 2426)

His work became popular in West Germany because of his innovative approach and ability to reach the common man. This popularity caught the attention of the GDR and caused the country to reexamine Muller's work. They decided to herald Muller as a product of East Germany's artistic output and even awarded him with the Lessing Prize. The Lessing Prize is named after the famous German playwright and theorist, Gotthold Lessing. The prize is awarded to the top East German playwright (Berghaus 518).

Muller spent 1974-1975 in Austin, Texas at the University of Texas-Austin as a playwright in residence. This greatly shifted his view of his previous work and moved him into his third period that marked his work until his passing in 1995. After finishing teaching he traveled the United States and Mexico. Afterwards he said that, "he felt his

plays of even three years earlier read like the texts of a dead author” (Hofacker, Jr. 342). Determined to write as a living playwright Muller penned some of the most provocative plays of the twentieth century. He moved away from adapting Greek plays and began writing more original works. During this time Muller still adapted more contemporary classic works. However, his treatment of the classic texts left his work almost unrecognizable to the original.

Muller returned to the GDR in 1976 and began working as the dramaturg at the Volksbuhne where some of his earlier works finally received their East German debut. Muller began his new playwriting style there with *The Life of Gundling Frederick of Prussia Lessings Sleep Dream Cry (Leben Gundlings Friedrich von Preussen Lessings Schlaf Traum Schrei: 1977)*. The play is a critique of the German Enlightenment which is exposed as the reason for universal oppression.

The new plays Muller began writing were, “historical-mythological montages which explore the role of the intellectual in the revolutionary process” (Berghaus 518). Plays of note during this time included *The Task (Der Auftrag: 1980)*. *The Task* was based on Brecht’s learning play *The Measures Taken (Die Massnahme: 1930)*. In the play, Muller combines elements of not only Brecht but also Jean Genet and Antonin Artaud. *Quartet (Quartett: 1982)* is a reimagining of *Les Dangerous Liaisons*, that reduces the cast to two characters and the text to twelve pages. Roles switch and the focus is on power making; it is very reminiscent of Genet’s *The Maids. Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man (Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann: 1995)*, was Muller’s final play he wrote. This play expressed Muller’s disillusionment with German socialism. In the end of the play Muller proclaims that the name of Brecht is as good as forgotten.

Muller's most well-known play and perhaps most popular play of all is *Hamletmaschine* (*Die Hamletmaschine*: 1977). It is discussed later for its connection to Robert Wilson.

As noted by scholars Muller did much to define the genre with his works. However, the same cannot be said of Muller when it comes to providing a clear nontextual analysis of the genre. An interview with Muller's typifies his reaction to postmodernism as movement. He was asked to define what he believed constituted postmodern theatre and drama. Muller always the contrarian replied, "The only Postmodernist I know of was August Stramm, a modernist who worked in a post office" (Huxley 314).

As for Robert Wilson he was, "an experimental performing artist whose major work has been compared to Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica* Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* (1913), and who has been characterized by Surrealist Louis Aragon as 'a miracle,' Robert Wilson is considered by many to be the single most gifted and creative theater artist of the twentieth century" (Taylor 3659). Robert Wilson was and still is an American avant-garde director whose contributions to the theatre have spanned over fifty years. His style is visually driven with an almost complete disregard for character or plot. His work often follows a dream like state of measured, meditative, striking images that come and go with little to no through line. Wilson's pension for experimentation and his willingness to push an audience's understanding of what constitutes theatre is what has made him such an enduring voice in the theatrical world and a banner man for Bertolt Brecht. His techniques as a director focus on movement versus story, works with special needs children, and the melding of roles of the director and scenic designer in the same tradition of Brecht.

Wilson's work and style has many influences from all types of art, but one of his major influences is the world of dance. His love of dance was solidified by a high school teacher named Mrs. Byrd Hoffman. Wilson during this time suffered from a speech impediment that made him very shy. According to Wilson, Hoffman "cured" him of his ailment because she taught him that he could "take his time" to express himself. (Taylor 3659) The idea of taking your time to fully express what it is you want communicate is a staple of Wilson's work and can be seen in plays like *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973) which lasted twelve hours and *KA MOUNTAIN and GUARDenia TERRACE* (1972) which performed for an entire week without interruption. For a better understanding of these plays here is a description of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* by Thomas Hischak:

*The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (12-15-73, BAM) was a theatrical event for the adventurous playgoer, the performance beginning at 7:00 pm and continuing through the night until 7:00 AM. The leisurely mosaic of scene, songs, dance, and image (both visual and aural) was very abstract and often eccentric, but most felt there were some startlingly beautiful moment in the event, which employed a cast of 144 people, mostly amateurs. A parade of characters papered, including Stalin and his family, Freud and his daughter Anna, and even Wilson's 88 year old grandmother, who showed up as herself. The collage was given two performances on successive weekends. (66)

Other choreographers that had a large influence on Wilson include George Balchine, Merce Cunningham and Jerome Robbins. Balchine and Cunningham were

perhaps the most influential because they both worked very hard to separate movement from a narrative storyline. This juxtaposition of movement and story greatly appealed to Wilson even at a young age. He claimed that when it came to theatrical performances he always found narrative uninteresting and confusing but visual elements and movement were always exceedingly engaging. (Aronson, *Wilson* 796)

On Wilson's website he has archived many of his quotations on movement. He tells a story about a concert in 1973 that he saw in Paris:

There were five singers, four of them were sitting on stage like they were waiting for a bus and one was sitting differently. It was so beautiful. Then the one singer stood up. It was so beautiful when she began to sing. This lady could sit on a stage. She could stand on a stage. It was beautiful when she sang. Western theatre has become bound by literature. If we look at the classical theatre of Japan, they learn at the age of two how to walk on a stage. They learn how to make a gesture. And even when they are 62 years old, they will still go back to their teacher thanking him for teaching them a gesture of weeping. The very same gesture they started when they were two. We never completely learn everything. We are always learning. (Wilson)

The classical theatre of Japan that Wilson refers to in this quote is that of Noh Theatre. It is often referred to as the art of walking. The influence of Asian culture is a direct link between Wilson and Brecht. Wilson's plays, like Noh plays, were often only a few pages long, but performances would run for many hours. An audience of Noh Theatre has been trained to appreciate the control with which an actor performs delicate

movements. This appreciation is a direct influence over Brecht's desire to have an audience critically view a performance.

In another section of his website Wilson discusses how he tries to communicate this reverence for movement to actors:

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

Wilson rejected traditional Stanislavskian thought of character motivation and focused on the movement and gesture. Wilson's direction style embodied the means of Brecht's *gestus*. The essential non verbal between two people is what Wilson explored.

Wilson's rejection of plot has been compared to the "landscape theatre" of Gertrude Stein:

Stein's theory of landscape theatre provides a major theoretical basis for Wilson's work. Landscape theatre, like a landscape painting, allows the viewer to perceive the entire image at once or to view it in random order and focus. It is a meditative experience in which time is almost non-existent and the spectator is not pressured or rushed. Once, in response to a question, Wilson described his work as about "nothing", but sort of

nothing that a child means when asked what he or she is doing and replies “Oh, nothing”. (Aronson, *Wilson* 796)

Throughout his career Wilson has often created works in collaboration with special needs children that have trouble trying to communicate. His desire to do this can be traced back to his own speech impediment as a child:

Wilson’s collaboration with Raymond Andrews, a deaf child, in *Deafman Glance* (1971), and with Christopher Knowles, an (autistic) youth, in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976 at the Metropolitan Opera House), offered audience not only strikingly fragmented imagery, but the challenge of relating to and accepting the pre-rational, non-narrative, multilinear forms of perception that these performer experienced in everyday life. Ironically, Wilson’s stage visions are “natural” at the deeper levels of subconscious experience even as their surface representation appears disrupted and alogical. (Leff 429)

Wilson saw this work as therapy but not in the traditional sense. With traditional therapy the goal is to try and normalize a patient’s behavior, to conform it to society’s view of what is acceptable. Instead Wilson shifted the focus from changing the patient to understanding them. He wanted to discover how their thoughts and behavior were structured. He started a group named after the dance instructor that helped him find his way to communicate his thoughts, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. Much of the work done in this group was imitating the sounds and movements of Knoweles and others in an attempt to achieve understanding:

Wilson described how brain-damaged people see the world on an “inner screen”, a view that is accessible to most people only in dream state. The almost unbearably slow pace and long duration of his works . . . was intended, at least in part, to induce a trance-like state in the audience in which the objective images on the stage would merge with the dream images of the spectators’ “inner screen”. (Aronson, *Wilson* 796)

Wilson’s influence on scenography has been far reaching. He successfully merged the role of the director and scenic designer into an uber-auteur:

From the beginning of his career Robert Wilson has always shown a distinctive affinity for the scenic, typically manifested in “operatic” productions conceived and directed by himself. In fact, many have come to see Wilson’s work as the acme of “scenic writing,” achieving Gordon Craig’s dream of the super-artist of the theatre who assumes complete control over production as auteur, designer, and stage manager. (Leff 429)

Wilson’s use of imagery in his work creates lush dream worlds that can be juxtaposed by works of haunting minimalism.

Wilson’s work as director-auteur really peaked with his masterwork *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down* (1984). The piece was a culmination of artists from six different countries working under the leadership of Wilson. It took years to put together and was supposed to be performed at the Olympic Arts Festival in 1984. Unfortunately the project had to be abandoned because of financial realities. “American audiences could only glimpse the tattered fragment of the Wagnerian vision in a tour of



the diminutive *Knee Plays*, whose original purpose was to link the larger segments together.” (Taylor 3662)

Even today Wilson continues to push the boundaries of theatre. He is extremely active internationally, even though he is currently in his 70s. He has never taken time off from the stage and stands as one of the most prolific directors of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

The sheer size of many of Wilson’s works, combined with their relative accessibility – they do not require a knowledge of complex theories or rarified aesthetics as do the works of many of his contemporaries; just “listen to the pictures” he once suggested – has made him one of the most popular figure of the avant-garde. As such he has been a major force in gaining acceptance for non-narrative theatre and weaning audiences away from Aristotelian structures and elements. (Aronson, *Wilson* 796)

Throughout their careers Wilson and Muller collaborated on many works including Wilson’s *CIVIL warS* and Muller’s *Quartet*. However, none had the impact or clearly brought epic theatre to the stage as their 1986 production of *Hamelmaschine*. The production first performed in New York at New York University. It then went on to perform in London and Hamburg during that same year. Even though the play had been written nearly a decade earlier it was the combination of Muller’s text and Wilson’s direction that made this the seminal production.

Wilson and Muller were drawn towards each other because they recognized the great artist in the other:

For Mr. Wilson, it had something to do with his need for a real writer to collaborate on projects that were already rich in visual imagery and, at least when Philip Glass provides a score, musical substance. Mr. Wilson speaks sometimes self-disparagingly about his penchant for "pretty pictures." . . . For him, America represents an extraordinary expansion of space and possibility; indeed, there has been a pronounced change in the tenor of his writing since his first visit here in 1975, from an obsession with Germany and German political issues to a broader world view. He spoke warmly of his travels in Mexico, the Mississippi Delta and the Grand Canyon, and talked of "the anarchic freedom at the edges of Capitalism." Clearly, Mr. Wilson's visual spaciousness and all-American openness represent just this sort of new energy for him. But there is more to it than that. The two men share a mysticism full of apocalyptic imagery as distant from the conventionalities of commercial American theater as from the pieties of Socialist Realism. (Rockwell)

In the play itself, Muller compressed Shakespeare's *Hamlet* down to only seven pages and there is no easily discerned plot. Characters switch roles and take the form of the actor. Muller provides scathing political commentary throughout the play.

*Hamletmachine* presents:

The total deconstruction of European drama by means of a collage of fragments from that tradition. Consisting of five scenes, the play shows the Hamlet figure at the funeral of his father and raping his mother, while the Ophelia figure destroys the home where she has been imprisoned,

and takes to the street as a prostitute. While the Hamlet player represents the intellectual betraying the revolution, the Ophelia player embodies the voice of the oppressed. In the end, Hamlet withdraws into a suit of armor, before murdering Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilich Lenin, and Mao Zedong, who appear totally defenseless as naked women. Ophelia is left behind on the stage in a wheelchair among the corpses. Her last words are a call to revolution in the Third world against European colonialism. Form and logic of classical bourgeois drama are abandoned in favor of an anarchic vision. (Bahr 2427)

Wilson had a very difficult time understanding the text and even sought advice from Muller. Muller told him to do whatever he liked with the piece and only said that, "It shouldn't be longer than fifty minutes." With free reign and a lack of connection with the text Wilson focused on what he did best, movement. He created all the movement for the piece and then overlaid the text on top of it. He did not try to emphasize any of Muller's words. He instead left the words and movements as two separate entities. The final result concluded into a sheer expression of audience alienation and engagement:

In its published version, the Muller play barely fills six pages, representing, in the author's words, "the shrunken head of the Hamlet tragedy." Merging Muller and Shakespeare, the play uses some stage directions as dialogue and creates a collage of horrific events. The Wilson variation runs more than two hours without intermission, which means that at least three-quarters of the work is Wilson's invention, beginning with a dreamlike prelude. The prelude establishes the director's presence and introduces

semblances of the characters: Ophelia in white; Hamlet in black leather jacket and jeans; a top-hatted apparition with coal-black face (the Ghost as chimney sweep?). Others are not as easily identifiable. At the center of the stage in a swivel chair is an elderly woman in a gray wig that sheds the dust of mortality whenever she moves. She is as wizened as a character in a late Beckett play. Perhaps she is Gertrude, or Mother Europe, herself. Sitting at a long table are three women, matched automatons, who choreographically imitate each other's movements. As a chorus, they could be a substitute for the three television screens suggested in the text, or they could represent the witches from "Macbeth."  
(Gussow)



*"Production photo from Robert Wilson's 1986 production" (Tenney).*

Interestingly Wilson's production disregarded the only guideline Muller gave him and produced a two hour production as opposed to Muller's suggestion that the show

should not be longer than fifty minutes. This act broke him free from all authorial intent beyond simply making sure the words made it on the stage. Wilson was very adamant that every word did appear onstage. He was so determined to make this happen that he had all the stage directions that he disregarded spoken by the actors. The effect of this is captured by John Rockwell of the *New York Times*:

It tells no story and develops no characters in the ordinary realistic sense. Instead, there is a dreamscape of fragments and hallucinations, reminiscent of Pina Bausch and full of political insight, historical evocation and psychological terror. Mr. Wilson juxtaposes this heat with one of his most coolly controlled yet ornately stylized productions, further fragmenting Hamlet and Ophelia among his 14 young actors and having them simply recite the fantastical stage directions - which Mr. Muller called "more a provocation for the director than actual directions" - instead of realizing them literally... Mr. Muller admires Mr. Wilson's work in general because, he said, "He leaves the text alone," by which, he explained, Mr. Wilson doesn't encourage his actors to freight the lines with subjective interpretations. "I am disappointed by productions of my plays in which the actors give their versions of the text," he said. (Rockwell)

This break actually fell very nicely into Muller's perspective on what a director should do with his plays and his stage directions:

When I write a play and I'm in doubt about which stage direction I should write for it, whether someone ought to walk on his hands or stand on his head or on all fours, then I know . . . that something's not right with the

text. As long as the text is right, that's not interesting for me; it's a matter for the theater or the director. . . I believe fundamentally that literature is there to pose resistance to the theater. (Kalb 125)

Wilson decided to incorporate film (a very Brechtian tool) into the production as well. For this he took the third section of the play entitled "SCHERZO". This section was mostly a dumb show, where Hamlet enters the *university of the dead*. It contains dead philosophers that throw books at Hamlet and he is stripped by women that have committed suicide. Ophelia then performs a striptease and dresses Hamlet in her clothes as he proclaims "I want to be a woman". This is followed by dance that *grows faster and wilder*. Wilson took this text and infused it with subtext for the screen. The final result was deftly described by Mel Gussow, also of the *New York Times*:

As we watch, the faces projected are transformed into apes and then, as on a computer screen, into a Cubist canvas. Flames leap up on screen, evoking an image - in my mind - of the burning Reichstag, firebombing and nuclear holocaust. The subject under scrutiny is terrorism in all its guises, from assassination to genocide. The subtext is how mankind is inured to horror, which becomes a news break between television commercials. (Gussow)

The fourth section of the play is entitled "PEST IN BUDA/BATTLE FOR GREENLAND" and did much to define the genre of postmodernism and show its connection to epic theatre. This scene can be viewed as a reference to Shakespeare's soliloquies in *Hamlet* as it is a self-reflective monologue. However, Muller rejects the tradition established by Shakespeare and has the actor step outside the character, thus

rejecting his character and address the audience as the actor. This one scene does much to define these main points. The use of Hamlet as a source harkens back to the past and Muller uses the character as he sees fit without regard for historical tradition. Shakespeare used Hamlet as a character in search of revenge and justice. Muller used Hamlet as a means to criticize communism. The blending of reality and art is seen as the actor proclaims he is no longer playing a character. Of course he is still reciting lines and is in truth no longer playing Hamlet but now the character of the actor. The direct address breaks any illusion that the audience was in the world of the play. The audience was forced to view what had become of communism through a critical and unemotional gaze.

Another important aspect of the production was the setting of a 74-seat theatre with a small stage. As is typical in a Brechtian production, the space left the audience acutely aware that they were at a theatrical production:

Wilson's scenic structure – rotating the set a quarter turn after each section and repeating the same action sequence with slight variations after each rotation – was magnificently double edged: fundamental changelessness given a semblance of variety and progress through shifting perspectives. Juxtaposed with the Muller text, this quasi-mechanical repetition became a picturization of time, history, and all the other teleological demons associated with Hamlet Actor's "drama." (Kalb 123)

The location of New York University added another integral aspect to the production with the use of student actors. Wilson was very enthusiastic about his interaction with the students:

‘You have these 18-19 year-old students . . . they know nothing about the context in which the play was written. . . And I explained nothing about it, I said only: “Speak these lines simply, these slowly, these quickly,; and so on. They don’t know what they’re saying, and that’s exactly what you want.’ Muller, for his part, admired the openness and ‘sensuousness” of the staging, especially Wilson’s handling of text ‘like a body’ – the way the choreography was rehearsed for a week in silence, then ‘layered over’ with words so that ‘ you still hear the silence that lies underneath.’ (Kalb 125)

In the end, it was the total effect on the audience that created a truly Brechtian experience. Jonathan Kalb sums this effect succinctly in his description of the 1986 production:

It was the stillness of Wilson’s production, broken only by desultory sound effects (a distant animal howl, a simple piano phrase, a machine-gun blast) and Muller’s aggressive words, that so sharpened its sense of entrapment by something immense and grinding yet invisible. Faced with Wilson’s disturbingly composed figures and his obvious indifference to illustrating or even acknowledging the text’s content – the tearing of Muller’s photo was the only prescribed image that actually appeared – the spectator worked all the harder to find points of convergence. Who were



these figures, one continually wondered, these identically dressed women who simultaneously scratched their nails on a thin table, this hopscotching man in boxer shorts, this man in jeans who kept dropping a book, and were they agents or victims of the dramatic and historical processes, objects or subjects? (Kalb 123)

This active audience was not allowed to sit and watch culinary theatre. They were forced to make decisions, to think, to engage. This production solidified Muller and Wilson's legacy among the most evocative theatrical artists of the twentieth century. It also was the realization of a truly epic theatre piece on stage. Whether an audience member loved or hated the play it was impossible not to discuss it critically afterwards. Muller and Wilson were never afraid to step on toes or to speak their mind and in doing so they created the realization of a dream laid out by Bertolt Brecht. Together they created:

Absolute text, sheltered and preserved by the theater of images and its preference for absolute textlessness: the arrangement was based on the most venerable political gambit in art, the jester's gambit, maximum integrity at the price of zero authority. (Kalb 125)

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