

# Portrait of a theater artist

## Complex 'Bob' at Cowell Theater

By Steven Winn  
CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

**"B**ob," a multilayered solo theater piece with the plain vanilla title, serves up a tantalizing paradox at the Cowell Theater. Brimming with ideas and imagery about the danger of thinking too much in the theater, this "dramatic portrait" inspired by avant-garde stage director Robert Wilson is hot ice and cold fire.

It bears the clear conceptual and staging imprint of Anne Bogart, whose SITI Company completes a heady twin bill with this Magic Theatre presentation. "Room," a companion piece based on the writings of Virginia Woolf, ended its Cowell run Sunday. "Bob" plays through March 31.

The famously laconic Wilson, director of such spectacles as the seven-hour "Einstein on the Beach," the never-fully-produced "the CIVIL warS," and many operas, is played here by the hyperkinetic Will Bond, an actor who seems perpetually on the brink — and sometimes well over it — of physical and psychological eruption. Abrupt blasts of light (Mimi Jordan Sherin) and diverse music and sound effects (Neil Patel and Darron L. West) punctuate glacially paced Wilsonian tableaux of this theatricalized "Bob" Wilson slowly reaching for a glass of milk or offering up his becalmed anti-interpretation mantras.

"Most artists don't understand what they do," he declares early in this 90-minute evening, "and I don't think we have to." Linear progression, naturalism, even causality kill art's mysterious lightness of being, he advises. "If you know why you're doing something, don't do it," Bond offers



KATY RADDATZ / The Chronicle

Will Bond portrays the avant-garde theater artist Robert Wilson in the solo show "Bob" at Magic Theatre.

with a jaunty, manic grin. His critique of "Death of a Salesman" is impishly perverse.

Knowing that the text (adapted by Jocelyn Clarke) is drawn entirely from 30 years worth of Wilson interviews and recorded conversations only complicates matters. It's all Wilson and not Wilson at all. The relishing of complication and contradiction is where Wilson and Bogart meet as like-minded artists, and where this show finds its maze of aesthetic wiring.

So thinking, as it usually does in a Bogart piece, proves to be a major component of the hum and buzz after all.

"Bob" is about as far from conventional docudrama as a piece drawn entirely from the subject's own words could be. Rhapsody, homage, deconstruction, affectionate satire and self-reference all factor into this Bogart-Wilson connection.

Bogart may finally be saying as much about Wilson's presence (and absence) in her own work as she is about Wilson himself. And that, in this nest of interlocking ironies, may be the most direct and immediate way of getting at Wilson's essence.

Facts about him emerge in pointillist fragments. He reminisces cryptically about his Texas childhood with parents uninterested in art. He stutters periodically — Bond registers a kind of puzzled spirit possession when it happens — but never discusses the speech disability that fed Wilson's

early work with autistic children.

Dressed in the black-on-black uniform of his profession, Bond's Bob is both open and guarded, with the occasional smirky hint of a put-on when he booms out one of his aphorisms: "I hate therapy." "I believe in autism." But when he laments his status as an American director whose work is mostly seen elsewhere or pleads that theater must be experienced and not explained, he's dead earnest.

Inevitably, given Wilson's own penchant for magisterially slow stage actions, "Bob" plays with time itself. Bond works through a series of repetitions and rituals with a table, chair and milk bottle and glass. He executes super-slow motions and startling stop actions. It's an amazing feat of concentration and focused energy from an actor best remembered here for his frenzied portrayal of Marshall McLuhan in SITI's "The Medium" at Theater Artaud in 1995.

"Bob" is not an easy show to love or warm up to, just as Wilson's stage productions, for many audiences, are not. This show lacks the pulsing human warmth and emotional catharsis that Ellen Lauren found in the astonishing "Room." The fragments, repetitions and hard-edged lighting and sound wear a little heavily in spots.

Underneath, the show conjures a wistful, musing, lonely austerity in this singular artist. Mechanized and objectified by his own art processes, he's also a plainspoken Texan who can stroll downstage



**BOB:** Solo theater piece. Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. Text adapted by Jocelyn Clarke. Performed by Will Bond. (Through March 31. At the Cowell Theater, Pier 2, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. One hour, 30 minutes. Tickets: \$27-\$47. Call (415) 441-8822 or visit [www.magictheatre.org](http://www.magictheatre.org).)

and share an anecdote about losing an airline ticket minutes before takeoff.

Like the art he values and creates, where things that look simplest on the surface are terribly complex, "Bob" proposes that artists are, too. Viewers may not comprehend Wilson by the end of the performance, but they'll certainly have a sense of all they don't and maybe cannot know.

Which is all just as well, as far as Bob's concerned. It's the experience, not the explanation, that counts.

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