

STAGE

'Bob' an avant-garde vision of an avant-garde visionary

By Chad Jones
STAFF WRITER

TWO weeks ago, experimental director Anne Bogart trained her focus on writer Virginia Woolf in "Room."

Wednesday, that show's companion piece, "Bob" followed its predecessor to the Cowell Theatre in San Francisco under the auspices of the Magic Theatre.

Like "Room," "Bob" is a solo show based on a real person. This time around, however, is a little more intriguing because the experimental director has chosen to explore the life and work of another experimental director.

Although not an outright biography, "Bob" attempts to create an impression of Robert Wilson, a visual artist and noted director of avant-garde theater pieces such as the seven-day play "KA MOUNTAIN and GUARDENIA Terrace" or the 12-hour silent opera "The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin."

Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize for the 1986 work "the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down" and has directed operas such as "Orlando" and the landmark 1976 work "Einstein on the Beach," a collaboration with Philip Glass.

Such an odd, hard-to-define artist deserves an odd, hard-to-define biographical sketch, and that's just what Bogart delivers. She and Irish writer Jocelyn Clarke have taken 30 years' worth of Wilson interviews and turned them into a sometimes baffling, highly physical performance piece.

The show, Bogart writes in her director's note, is not intended as a realistic portrait of Wilson but rather "a dip into an engaging perspective about family, art and American culture."

As much movement as it is dialogue, "Bob" becomes a showcase for the talents of longtime Bogart collaborator Will Bond. His Bob is immediately likeable because he makes us laugh before he guides us into his opaque creative landscape.

"I draw pictures. I don't draw messages," he says and later adds, "I don't understand my own stuff... something's missing when everything's explained."

The most extraordinary mo-



WILL BOND performs in "Bob" at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco.

ment in "Bob" almost defies explanation, which is something that would probably please word-phobic Wilson.

Bond has just discussed the notion of theater as speeded-up time. He approaches a table upon which sit a glass of milk and a bottle of milk. Attempting to slow down time, he reaches for the glass, raises it to his lips and drinks — all in perfect slower-than-slow motion. He holds the glass in his right hand. His left hand, illuminated in a golden spotlight, is raised behind him in almost absolute stillness.

It all sounds so simple, but the precision, strength and power Bond exerts to make it appear effortless are simply astonishing.

Set designer Neil Patel hasn't created a set as much as he has exposed the lighting grids above and to the sides of the stage. Lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin, on the other hand, creates numerous landscapes and moods with her crafty illumination.

The most provocative aspect of the show, aside from Bond's combination of warmth, humor

and balletic grace, is Darron L. West's sound design.

Great washes of Mozart, Beethoven, Marlene Dietrich and TV theme songs surround Bond. Planes roar overhead, ocean waves crash and synthesized symphonies rattle the rafters of the theater. We hear snippets of Martin Luther King Jr. and even listen to a Christmas greeting from the astronauts of Apollo 8.

The sound design is fascinating and becomes a worthy co-star for the hardworking Bond.

At 90 minutes, "Bob" is about a half an hour too long. Although entertaining, the piece is purposely obtuse and turns repetitive in the home stretch as Bob deals with his father back home in Texas and comes to terms with being an expatriate artist.

What has been engaging begins inching toward pretentiousness, and that's not fair to Bond, who is never less than fascinating.

"Bob" cannot fall back on the writing of Virginia Woolf the way "Room" does, but it does have an intriguing subject in Robert Wilson. For all its artistic indulgence, the show

THEATER REVIEW

Anne Bogart and Jocelyn Clarke's "Bob"
★★★ Strangely beguiling

■ Presented by: Magic Theatre

■ Where: Cowell Theatre, Pier 2, Fort Mason Center, Marina Boulevard at Buchanan Street, San Francisco

■ When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; closes March 31

■ Tickets: \$22-\$47 general; \$10 students and seniors

■ Call: (415) 441-8822 or visit www.magictheatre.org

works, even if the profoundly non-linear Bogart works overtime to make Wilson more profoundly non-linear than he may actually be.

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