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SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Bob

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The Magic Theatre is presenting the SITI production of *Bob*, a theatrical profile of the international avant-garde director and visual artist Robert Wilson. Mr. Wilson is well known for designing opera sets, mostly in Europe, and for his wonderful set of the Metropolitan Opera production of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. As actor Will Bond says at the beginning of the solo 90 minute performance, "I directed 12 premieres in 10 months last year but I don't know exactly why." This production is a compilation of hundreds of print interviews and recorded conversations with this genius of theater art. It was all arranged by dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke.

This production is not an autobiography of Mr. Wilson, but more a feeling of the man and a paean to his work. There is a salad of words pouring from Mr. Bond and many times he repeats anecdotes and then breaks off onto other tangents. Occasionally, the production is impossible to comprehend. After the performance, I was reminded of what New York Time's critic Peter Marks said of the play in 1998. He said that there were two couples sitting in front of him at the presentation of *Bob* at the New York Theatre Workshop who, throughout the play, said "What planet have we landed on?" I had the same thought while watching this avant garde piece.

The play opens with Mr. Bond sitting on a chair with his back to the audience. The stage is bare with the exception of the chair, a bottle of milk, and an empty glass onto top of a table. Mr. Bonds begins by stating the premise of *Bob*:

"The fact is, I don't really understand my own stuff. Artists very seldom understand what they are doing. My work is a mystery to me and I feel the words only confuse people about my work. I don't wish to mystify people. It's best not to say anything at all - its best to remain silent".

Oh how true that turns out to be.

At times Mr. Bond is lucid, as when he tells a story about the Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*. He talks about language placing constraints on productions' imaginations. He saw Katie Reid playing the salesman's wife and of end of the play, when she worried that her husband might be dead, Mr. Bond says "I felt like saying 'Relax, lady, we knew it was

going to happen - on my ticket, it said "Death of a Salesman."

There are some wonderful scenes in *Bob* involving the lighting, the music of Beethoven, Wagner and even Marlene Dietrich. In one scene, Mr. Bond slowly, oh so slowly, goes to the table and reaches for the bottle of milk. There is the music of Wagner's *Lohengrin* coming from the sound system. The lighting is also fading and a bright orange spot light like the sun appears in the background. He slowly takes the bottle, pours milk into a glass and then drinks it as the music becomes louder and louder and the lighting continues to dim almost to blackness. It is a simple task but so beautiful done by Will Bond.

Will Bond is mesmerizing in this role. He has the precision and droll humor of the Texan hauteur. He is animated, playful and just a little camp. He moves with mathematical precision to the music when it is played over the sound system. It is a tour de force by this actor.

Bob plays through March 31 at the Cowell Theatre, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. For tickets (\$10 - 47) call 415-441-8822 or visit the Magic Theatre web site at www.magictheatre.org.

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