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Theater: "Bob" A Clear-Eyed, Clever Look At Director Robert Wilson

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BOB *** 1/2 out of ****

SITI COMPANY AT NEW YORK LIVE ARTS

What a puckish, bold enterprise. Not only is *Bob* a show about one of the most acclaimed theater and opera directors working today -- Robert

Wilson -- it profiles him by using elements of his distinctive, ground-breaking style. It was conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, created and performed by Will Bond (who has worked with Wilson) and has text adapted by Jocelyn Clarke from interviews Wilson has given over the years. With the landmark work *Einstein On The Beach* touring the world and set to arrive at BAM in the fall, it's an ideal time to revisit this look at Wilson.

The director's own words tell us about his childhood, his insights on art, his working methods and stories from his career, all of it presented in a style reminiscent of Wilson's own. But here's the important distinction: *Bob* is not imitative. Ultimately it is nothing like what Wilson might do with the same material. It's rich in anecdote, quietly moving, funny and features a strong narrative as we learn his story.

Wilson began as a little boy growing up in Waco, Texas, with parents utterly bewildered by their son's artistic leanings. Wilson describes an early piece he staged in his garage, with apparently the garage door closing and then opening to reveal a new tableaux, such as one featuring his grandmother and sister moving around the room ritually. Neighbors dragged their kids away and Wilson's dad found it not only weird but genuinely upsetting. Flash forward to years later when Wilson calls his dad to describe his latest work: several thousand people show up every night to see a piece that contains no dialogue and it's seven hours long. "I want you to come see it," says Wilson while we laugh.

Just as absorbing as Wilson's life story are the comments he makes about art in general and the way the show illustrates how he'll come up with a movement and then refine and repeat it over and over. It's all performed on a stage with Bond traversing a bare space defined by one giant square divided into nine smaller squares. In one corner Bond begins the show sitting in a chair, staring at the quart of milk sitting on a table in the square at the opposite corner.

Throughout the show Bond approaches and surveys and plays with the quart of milk and the glass originally hidden behind it. Clearly not lactose intolerant, Bond has devilish fun toying with these simple elements in a formalized dance that embodies some of Wilson's approach to art. Artfully done on every level, anecdote intersects with insight; at some stages Bond as Wilson hesitates and stumbles over his words, at others he wonderfully demonstrates ideas like how the text can be divorced from movement and strengthen the impact of both and the importance of slowing things down.

Wilson was profoundly influenced by a study that filmed new mothers in the act of reaching towards their baby when the child was crying. At regular speed, you see a mother moving to comfort her child. Slow it down frame by frame and the facial expressions and actions take on an entirely different light. Mothers seem to *lunge* for their child in an act of anger and frustration. It's a funny, fascinating tale, especially for those who know how ritualized and...measured Wilson's direction can be. We hear the story and later we see Bond act it out, frame by frame and again and again we circle this story, revealing it for the turning point it became in his growth as an artist.

Like that film, *Bob* slows down the wildly prolific artist and let's us examine him step by step, frame by frame, revealing the heart and intellect embedded in Wilson's avant-garde style. All of this is presented in an impeccable production by Bogart whose every element works in concert. The set by Neil Patel, the costume by James Schuette, the lighting by Brian H. Scott (with original lighting design by Mimi Jordan Sherin), and especially the soundscape by Darron L. West (which combines everything from scraps of songs by Harry Nilsson to muttering voices and orchestral passages to capture the quicksilver imagination of Wilson) each work together beautifully. They pay the ultimate compliment to Wilson by not merely copying his art but using it as a springboard for their own imaginations.