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### THEATER REVIEW

## Portrait of an Imagist By a Like-Minded Artist

By PETER MARKS

The avant-garde has found a new pastime. Whether it is Joanne Akalaitis creating a résumé in sound and movement of the career of Jack Kerouac in "Ti-Jean Blues" at the Actors Theater of Louisville, Ky., or Robert Lepage taking stock of Frank Lloyd Wright in his "Geometry of Miracles" at the du Maurier festival in Toronto, stage directors who specialize in arresting images suddenly seem to have developed a passion for, of all things, biography.

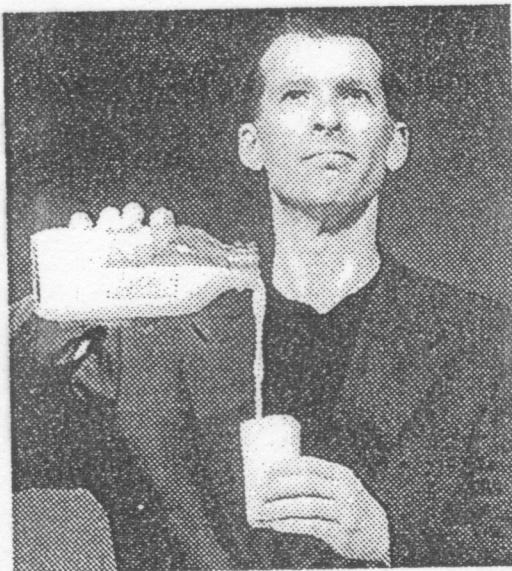
Now, the experimental director Anne Bogart adds to the library with a performance piece based on the life of another experimental theater director. "Bob," at the New York Theater Workshop, is a strikingly composed 90-minute rumination on the work and ideas of Robert Wilson, the visually virtuosic director best known for his stagings of original operas like "Einstein on the Beach" and reconsiderations of "Lohengrin" and others.

Featuring a technically assured performance by Will Bond, who collaborated with Ms. Bogart on this one-man show, "Bob" attempts to render an artist's life on a stage using the artist's very own tools. It is as if a portrait of Seurat were assembled out of a million pinpoints of paint, or Philip Glass's achievements tabulated in becalming musical measures. While the project cannot obscure a degree of academic twee-ness — there is the self-conscious stamp of one "genius" taking on another — "Bob" boasts the advantages of Ms. Bogart's inventively glossy surfaces and Mr. Bond's balletic precision.

Undoubtedly, "Bob" will perplex theatergoers wedded to more familiar approaches to storytelling: the two couples sitting in front of me exchanged looks of "What planet have we landed on?" throughout the show. Their confusion was understandable. Because "Bob" is stingy with the facts, the production is impenetrable for quite some time. But

### BOB

Concept and direction, Anne Bogart; creation/performance, Will Bond; text arrangement, Jocelyn Clarke; sets by Neil Patel; costumes by James Schuette; lighting by Mimi Jordan Sherin; soundscape, Darron L. West; assistant director, Andrew Kranis; movement consultant, Barney O'Hanlon; company stage manager, Megan Wanlass. A Saratoga International Theater Institute production presented by New York Theater Workshop. At 79 East Fourth Street, East Village.



Joan Marcus/"Bob"

Will Bond as Robert Wilson, the experimental director, in "Bob."

despite its exotic tendencies, it eventually evolves into a fairly straightforward dissection of how an artist develops an esthetic, and of the influences emotional, intellectual and environmental that help to shape his creations.

This does not mean, of course, that "Bob" is biographical in any conventional sense. As with the recent works by Ms. Akalaitis and Mr. Lepage, Ms. Bogart's production attests to her aversion to the linear. The circuitous "Bob" tells the story of Mr. Wilson's relationship with and attitudes toward art through a seemingly arbitrary arrangement of images and the articulation of career-summarizing aphorisms.

"I draw pictures, I don't draw meanings," Mr. Bond intones at one point, standing on a bare stage

framed by twin towers of lights displayed symmetrically in rows. "You can't explain theater, you have to experience it," he says at another. In the meantime a hot white beam of light is trained on a bottle of milk that sits on a table. The household object is made beautiful in the intense illumination. Even milk bottles, it seems, make pretty pictures, if someone has the interest in pointing it out, and someone else is around to acknowledge it.

The relationship between artist and audience is one of Ms. Bogart's recurring themes in "Bob"; another is the conflict between the power of the visual versus the verbal, an issue that comes up frequently in discussions of the work of imagists like Ms. Bogart, whose essentially cold creations reveal a greater comfort with pictures than with words. In a medium so driven by language, the lack of a verbal acuity to match visual stylishness can leave audiences feeling a bit empty.

Ms. Bogart suggests, however, that language, too, places constraints on theatrical imagination. During the show, Mr. Bond relates a story about a production of "Death of a Salesman," and coming to a point at which Linda Loman worries that her husband might be dead. "I felt like saying, 'Relax, lady, we knew it was going to happen — on my ticket, it said 'Death of a Salesman.'"

"Bob" may seem a tribute to a like-minded artist. But it is also Ms. Bogart's clever use of biography to make the case for her own art.