

# Solo Proprietors

159 VILLAGE VOICE May 19, 1998

**T**he solo show is all the rest of theater in microcosm—proof both that our theater is a richly varied place, and that it's going-through an immense schismatic struggle. *Bob*, director Anne Bogart's portrait of imagist theater-maker Robert Wilson, is one side of the struggle; *Uncle Philip's Coat*, a piece written by Matty Selman and performed by Larry Block, is in many ways its symmetrical opposite. Yet, like all war-causing schisms, this one is rife with troubling ambiguities, and neither side's doctrine prevents it from using some of the opponent's tactics. "The truth," as one of modernism's great solo performers remarked, "is rarely pure and never simple."

*Bob* is a late or post-modernist work, abstract in essence and resolutely random in narrative structure. There is no author as such. The piece is "conceived" by its director, Bogart, and "created" by its performer, Will Bond, on a text, "arranged" by the Irish critic Jocelyn Clarke, for which no source is cited, but which happens to be drawn from several decades of interviews by Wilson. Bond plays a modified Wilson—with bursts of warm, extrovert humor that suggest Bogart's own, more engaging personality—while wandering, in a controlled Wilson-ish style, through the environment Bogart builds around him, thick with allusions to the visual language of Wilson's own pieces.

The set is a bare rectangle, containing, besides Bond, only a table, a chair, a bottle of milk and an empty glass. Framed at right and left by rows of huge light battens, it's richly filled, as the piece goes on, by Mimi Jordan Sherin's ever-changing lights and Darron L.

*Bob*  
No author credited  
New York Theatre Workshop  
79 East 4th Street  
460-5475

*Uncle Philip's Coat*  
By Matty Selman  
American Jewish Theatre  
307 West 26th Street  
633-9797

**BY MICHAEL  
FEINGOLD**

West's "soundscape"—an exact description of the varied range of noises, never literal, with which West animates the gleaming pastel landscapes Sherin paints around Bond's rigid, choreographed movements from chair to table and back again.

A genuine tribute to Wilson, to his vision and the influence his sensibility

has had on theater artists, Bogart's piece is also several kinds of cunning subversion of his work. As parody, it twits his mannerisms at the same time that it mimics his artistry. Because Bogart's directorial techniques can tap performers' inner resources in ways that Wilson eschews, she improves on him by adding a human element to his abstractness, drawing from Bond an engaging, disconcerting performance of a Wilson who is part lovable hick, part faux naïf, part skilled professional charmer, part weary artisan, and part ruthless flimflam artist. This tribute to human complexity, though rigorously obedient to Wilson in its avoidance of emotional signals, enriches the work with an element so wholly remote from Wilson's own vision that it amounts to a kind of gene-splicing: Thanks to its sturdy admixture of human life with abstract beauty, this is the best Wilson piece ever; pity it's not by Wilson. Bogart's tribute beats him at his own game.

At the same time, the careful arrangement of text both defines that game and supplies a devastating critique of it. The element of genius in Wilson's work has always lain, for me, in his unmediated visions; when he tries to install them on a theoretical basis, or apply them to the interpretation of preexisting work, I've always found the results particularly poisonous, subtracting far more from traditional modes of theater than they bring it in compensation. I don't claim at all that Bogart shares my feeling; she's simply too honest an artist to airbrush out of her picture the rope of words by which, in more jaundiced eyes, Wilson may be viewed as hanging himself. Bond's Bob

# THE ATER

says many things about the "false sentiment" and "emotionalism" of conventional theater, but he never ponders the sources of emotion, or notices the phrase "false sentiment" implies the existence of a real kind; for him all visible feeling is sentimentality. Pointedly absent from his words is any mention at all of narrative, out of which the emotions of drama are supposed to arise. The snippets of autobiography that Bogart and Clarke often juxtapose with Wilson's philistine half-truth about theater invite us to find source for his disengagement from feeling: in the tangled coldness of his relation with his parents; in the backwardness of his small-town upbringing; in the physical and spiritual emptiness that is the essence of Texas. If in other respects Wilson is the hero to whom *Bob* pays tribute, from this viewpoint he is something like the hero of a naturalist play—not a role model, but a case worth studying for its peculiarity.



Will Bond in *Bob*: The best in this kind are but shadows.

JOAN MARCUS