

# The importance of being Bob

## A brave new show interprets a theatrical giant

By Martha Lagace

Bob is coming back to Prague. Not the

Bob (— yet! —) but rather *Bob*, a unique theater production that is inspired and propelled by the life, works and artistic ideas of world-famous director Robert Wilson.

A towering figure in the arena of avant-garde spectacles, Wilson mounts huge — and hugely challenging — works of theater on a grand scale, such as last December's "digital opera in three dimensions" at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music, titled *Monsters of Grace*, which was set to music by Philip Glass and guided by a libretto based on the spiritual poetry of a 13th-century Persian mystic.

Wilson himself also graced Prague not quite five years ago, when his production of Gertrude Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* helped launch the then-fledgling experimental theater space, Divadlo Archa.

*Bob*, to be performed at Archa for three nights starting Wednesday, April 7, and continuing through Friday, April 9, was also given a kick-start, in a sense, at Archa. *Bob* is a solo performance by American actor Will Bond, under the direction of Anne Bogart, which uses a script composed of a collage of fragments from Robert Wilson's lectures, stories from his life, his personal memories and comments on art and other artists, all distilled into a spare theater piece that is tightly synched to a complex light- and sound-scape. The project was partly developed at Archa in October 1997, when Bogart and her New York-based company SITI visited Prague for a workshop on "viewpoints," her theories and techniques of actor training.

"I think *Bob* is a very important piece of work because it's something which should inspire Czech theater artists," says Ondrej Hrab, head of Divadlo Archa. "It's a very unusual

attempt at doing what I would call 'meta-theater,' because it's theater about a theater artist.... This performance is really funny and really exciting. It's a piece which is of course about Bob Wilson, but at the same time it's a real theater piece created by Anne Bogart."

However, Hrab makes clear that *Bob* is not in any way a parody, an impersonation or even a biographical profile. "This is ... about the artist himself," Hrab says, "and his image from all sides. So there are of course comical sides of it, but at the same time there are very important things and also ... important existential features of his personality which are exposed in the performance."

"In fact," Hrab adds, "I think it's about loneliness of the genius. You see that ... the person who is always working with people — who's a theater director who works with hundreds and hundreds of people, communicating with people all around the world all the time, working on three theater pieces at [once] — is at the same time lonely. He is alone, and he has to deal with that."

Actor Will Bond, the performer of *Bob*, once worked with Robert Wilson on a summer production of *Persephone* which was staged in Delphi, Greece. Interviewed via e-mail for *The Prague Post*, Bond notes that *Bob* began when he was telling stories about the experience to Anne Bogart while they were on tour with SITI for one of their own pieces. "Suddenly she said, 'We have to do a solo piece called BOB!'" Bond recalls. "I thought she was joking, but months later she had collected a thick notebook of words gathered from interviews and speeches given by Bob Wilson. We started from there."

A script based on this material was then honed by Jocelyn Clarke, an Irish theater critic, teacher and dramaturg.

"We were amazed at the script Jocelyn brought to us," Bond writes. "The form was elegant, sensitive, musically complex and finally open enough for us to create a space, not in which we were doing a finished biographical sketch, [but] rather an open piece which asks questions and allows one to hear and see in an imaginative way, draw one's own conclusions while entertaining ideas of art making, American culture, family and exile."

"In this way, *Bob* is ... a piece about what it is to be an artist in this culture. Wilson's ideas

### PREVIEW

#### Bob

A performance at Divadlo Archa (Na Poříčí 26, tel. 232 8800).

April 7-9 at 8 p.m.

Tickets: standing:

100 Kč; seated: 150 Kč (students), 220 Kč

In English with Czech surtitles

and words are a place from which we can begin to ask these questions."

Bond notes that Wilson himself has seen a video of the show and given his okay.

Hrab enthuses, "All the people who are around Robert Wilson love the show. I've spoken to producers and theater directors who have collaborated with Robert Wilson for years, and they really loved the performance."

For his part, Bond says he's not considering another solo show.

"This happened because it was interesting to me and to Anne. It just happens that the form took the shape of a solo piece. It is a terribly lonely thing to have to try and accomplish. And to some degree that works for the piece which is in part about an artist who had to make his work and reputation outside his home country — in artistic exile more or less. *Bob*: 'It's a very lonely life. It's a ... frustration. I don't want to be an expatriate, but that's the way it is.'"

"Ironically, we'll be doing *Bob* in Paris before coming to Prague — and it is the French who discovered and embraced and made his reputation for him."

"In the theater," Bond adds, "it is important to ask questions, not to give answers.... A work of art must start with a question, and the bigger the question, the more potential in the work of art."

SITI's newest piece, *Cabin Pressure*, premiered in March (to great praise in *The New York Times*) at the Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Kentucky. "It, like *Bob*," reports Bond, "is a piece about and a celebration of the theater."



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— from *Bob*

COURTESY PHOTO

"Bob says, 'The reason we work in theater is to ask, What is it? Not to say what it is.'"

Actor Will Bond, above, in the innovative solo performance inspired by the life and words of Robert Wilson.