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## HI, MY NAME IS BOB!

IN BILL CONDON'S recent film *Gods and Monsters*, Ian McKellen portrays director James Whale, the man behind the great *Frankenstein* movies of Hollywood's past. It's not often that moviemakers train their eyes on the characters behind the camera, and rarer still when the theater world turns its auteurs into the objects of performance. And yet **Robert Wilson**, the creator of *Einstein on the Beach* with **Philip Glass**, and other defining works in the avant-garde, is now the subject of an unauthorized stage biography. The enigmatic director, whose profile is as understated

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as his trademark black suits, is a surprising inspiration for a one-man show by virtue of the fact that he has done amazingly little to create a cult of personality (that is to say, he seems to be neither a god nor a monster). But Wilson has been talking all this time, leaving clues with various journalists and scholars into the inner workings of his iconoclastic mind.

Leave it to director **Anne Bogart**, a similarly inspired rebel against tradition, to have the nerve to infuse Wilson's musings with an element of frank humanity, assemble them into an evening-length work created in col-

laboration with actor **Will Bond**, and title the finished product simply—even endearingly—**Bob**. Despite the challenges presented by telling the story of a person still very much alive, no one can accuse Bogart, Bond, or even text arranger Jocelyn Clarke of putting words into Wilson's mouth. *Bob*, playing this weekend as the final offering in the Walker Art Center's *Out There* series at the Southern Theater, is the result of selective cutting and pasting from Wilson's interviews and lectures.

"The challenge was to avoid doing a play for the cognoscenti," says the New York-based Bogart, in town recently to work with University of Minnesota arts students. Although the directors have met just once,

Bogart admits Wilson has had a big influence on her. "I wanted to approach him through his words and the values he's created," she recalls. "Rather than doing a play about his images or even redoing his plays, we wanted to present just him, because he is always a mystery."

Originally trained as a visual artist, Wilson began his stage work in the early 1970s and soon became known for a certain alchemy created through slow, repetitive movement, dream logic, massive casts, and, occasionally, grueling duration—elements meant to register on the audience's "interior screen" of memory. Wilson's 1973 production *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, for instance, lasted 12 hours and involved 125 actors. (*Monsters* →

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of *Grace*, his new "digital opera" created with Glass, will be performed at Northrop Auditorium February 13.)

Bogart, too, is familiar with promulgating unusual theatrical techniques through her productions with the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), which she co-founded in 1992 with **Tadashi Suzuki**. The SITI actors move with the kinetic awareness of dancers. Production tools such as sound and lighting assume the individual presence of performers. "It's meant to be cross-disciplinary," says Bogart. "The Suzuki technique is centered on the feet and we also use principles of visual art

and architecture in staging our material."

Bond, a longtime SITI member who also performed in Wilson's *Persephone*, uses his experience to consider the director from several perspectives. "Hi, my name is Bob!" he chirps at the beginning, like an overeager salesman. "You're absolutely fantastic and I'd love to work with you!" He fastidiously arranges a milk bottle on a table and then considers it from afar. "I'm not a philosopher, I'm not an intellectual, I'm an artist!" he crows. "Most artists don't understand what they do, and I don't think we have to. Other people do that better!" At times, Bob seems like an **eye-averting art geek**, but just as often he reveals himself to be a man in utter control of



**"I'm not a philosopher, I'm not an intellectual, I'm an artist!" Will Bond plays avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson**

his environment, a shaman who need not explain his deeds, a **postmodern trickster** who spends the day saying only, "Hmmm," just to

see what happens.

So what does Wilson have to say about this tribute? He hasn't seen it yet, says Bogart. "I think about him all the time. It's touring all over the world, and a lot of people are seeing it. In Berlin, where Bob has done most of his work, the audience was really in the know and thought the show was hysterically funny." She adds hopefully: "I think he's a bit embarrassed. But people keep calling him to say it's good, and not to worry." (Caroline Palmer) **CP**

Bob runs 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday at the Southern Theater; (612) 375-7622.