

Whatever I do, whether it's an installation in a museum or a gallery, or a work in the theatre, or an architectural project, I always start with light first. Without light, there is no space. For example, I was having some glass made in Marseilles, based on designs I made nine years ago. I saw, looking at the early drawings, that they were not so much about the design of an object as about an idea of light. Later they transformed themselves into something that was three dimensional, an object – but it started with the feeling of light, what was the light going to be, that was what created the object, the space for the object. Einstein on the Beach, the opera I did with Philip Glass, if one looks at the early drawings, lighting was not something we added two weeks before we opened, it was a fundamental part of the work from the first day, it was in the structure, the architecture of the piece.

(Bob Wilson)

WITHOUT LIGHT THERE IS NO SPACE

by Sue Jane Stoker

Robert Wilson is a unique figure in the modern theatre. Fusing visual and performance art, he paints with light on the cyclorama and on the bodies of the performers with the skill and subtlety of a Renaissance master. The spectator struck by the overwhelming beauty of the final effect has no idea of the long, laborious hours spent experimenting with intensity and balance to create it. For every new light look, Wilson spends hours in the darkened theatre, studying the variations caused by adding four points of intensity to the greens illuminating the cyclorama from below, by adding six points, by adding eight points, before finally settling on an additional seven points of intensity as the perfect blend with the 39 degrees of intensity coming from the cool blues above. The lesson one learns in working with Wilson is, as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said, "God is in the details," (or, if you will, the closest to perfection we can manage). Over the years many people have commented on his amazing versatility. Is Robert Wilson a theatre director and designer, a painter, an architect, a designer of unique furniture, glassware, jewelry, a sculptor? He is all of these and more. He approaches each of these fields bringing with him his experience in all fields. How does an architect design for theatre? How does a theatre director create a piece of jewelry, or a painting?

He has also embraced an extraordinary range of styles from American vaudeville to Japanese Noh theatre, opera to jazz to cabaret; his theatrical works show the stylistic influence of film noir, Mapplethorpe and photographic portraits of the great divas of the past century. As a visual artist, his personal collection includes artwork, vases, chairs, tables, from all over the world, antiques from Bali, from China, from Africa, the most modern work being done today by young Russian, Cuban, African, European, American artists and everything in between. All of these are looked at, pondered, absorbed, transmuted by the alchemy of his artistry into something that is a new form, all his own. Paul Schmidt, a friend of Wilson's from his school days, likened Wilson's work to the late 18th/early 19th century form of tableaux vivant, in which performers and scenic elements were placed and lit to create a living painting, often a recreation in the flesh of a historical work. In considering this idea, theatre artist Ivan Nagel commented that the fundamental difference between these historical tableaux and Robert Wilson's theatre is that he is always working with time, "...unlike a painter, he creates his pictures in time." He has found a way in the theatre to create the paradoxical combination of the frozen perfection of the visual arts with a constant awareness of the passage of time.

COLLABORATION AND HUMOR AS KEY ELEMENTS IN WILSON'S

Over the years Robert Wilson has collaborated with some of the most interesting artists in every field: director/choreographers such as Meredith Monk, Andrew de Groat, Suzushi Hanayagi, and Lucinda Childs; writers, among whom William Burroughs, Heiner Müller, Umberto Eco, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Marguerite Duras, Susan Sontag; composers such as Philip Glass, Hans Peter Kuhn, Tom Waits, Lou Reed, David Byrne, Michael Galasso and Ryuichi Sakamoto; fashion designers Giorgio Armani, Kenzo, Louis Vuitton, Gianni Versace, and Donna Karan; great performers in every discipline such as Jessye Norman, Fiona Shaw, Isabelle Hupert, Miranda Richardson, and Dominique Sanda to name just a few. Each of these people, and many others, has brought to Wilson's world a new and unique sensibility and artistry, and often the traces of their contributions continue to linger on in his work even after the initial collaboration has ended.

This is a reflection of one of Wilson's greatest strengths as an artist: his openness to people, his ability to listen to others' ideas and see their strengths and their personalities, and to incorporate them into his world and his vision in a way that at once celebrates the original artist and yet remains true to his own aesthetic. He also has a great gift for transmitting his enthusiasm for a project to all those involved. He involves people in his vision on a very personal level, seeing what unique contribution they might make to a work, and conveying to them his personal sense of excitement and urgency at the birth of a new creation. All who get caught up in the whirl of a Wilson production have experienced the heady sensation of making an irreplaceable contribution to something that is new and vital. People who know Robert Wilson's work only by reputation tend to think of him as an austere, deeply serious artist. Yet, while it is true that the slowing down of time and gesture and strange, dream-like images are an important part of his work, humor of all sorts has an equally important place. The art of Wilson finds its strength in contrasts, and moments of great tranquility and beauty are made all the more poignant by juxtaposition with humor that often could be described as slapstick. In fact, in Wilson's work, one sees the profound impact of such unexpected art forms as vaudeville, silent film comedy, traditional American soft shoe and cabaret. As in his relation with people, Wilson's lack of snobbery and pretension, and openness to see what there is of value in forms that others dismiss as "low" gives his work a richness and variety that is always fresh and surprising. His omnivorous gaze takes in everything around him and processes it all through the filter of his aesthetic, creating a new form that retains clear traces of its roots while taking its place as part of Wilson's repertoire.

Sound is one of the media through which Wilson's sense of humor finds expression. Often the stillness and seriousness of a scene's movement will be contrasted or subverted by a sound score of roosters crowing, sheep baaing, bangs, crashes and silly effects. Language itself mutates; starting

from a neutral, simple delivery without emotion it becomes fragmented. Some words are drawn out, broken up into stuttered bits, screamed, wailed, interrupted as the speaker begins to bark or make animal cries. Then suddenly, in the midst of an almost incomprehensible tangle of words, or of a slowly spoken, clearly enunciated and emotionally uninflected passage, a very banal conversation in an everyday tone rings through: "How are you?" "I am fine." "What did you do this morning?" "I got up. What did YOU do this morning?" And it is exactly its mundane quality that makes it shocking, and funny. Thus, in a subtle, nonjudgmental way, Wilson draws our attention to the absurdity of everyday life.

Wilson's theatre might be said to be a theatre of extremes. As it is with language which is extremely slow and uninflected or at the other extreme speeds up until it breaks down into barks and cries, so too is it with movement: some things are drawn out in extreme slow motion, others are speeded up or repeated obsessively. In general the expression of emotion, of normal human experience, is dealt with either in a highly restrained, stylized way (a gesture Wilson discovered in the very formal Japanese Noh theatre, a person's tears represented by a hand, fingers closed together, held on an angle close to the eye, appears often in his work), or in a highly exaggerated manner, in screams, howls, and wild uncontrollable laughter. The human form itself is often exaggerated – one sees in many Robert Wilson shows human figures that are impossibly tall and thin, three times as tall as any human could ever be, and next to them walk impossibly short, fat men. Costumes are used to create impossible effects, but Wilson also casts people of extreme physicality, an 8' tall man opposite a 4'10 woman. Heiner Müller, a frequent collaborator and a writer whose work had a great impact on Wilson, says in Howard Brookner's very interesting documentary *Robert Wilson and the Civil War*, "We must realize that (Wilson) had a very lonely childhood in Waco, Texas. Now he plays with the theatre's machinery and with the actors like a child." Like a child he is fascinated by animals, images of animals, people dressed as animals, acting like animals, making sounds like animals as a child does, playing.

In creating a show, Wilson thinks always of rhythm and contrast. So, within a scene extremes of physical and emotional representation may alternate, and in the overall structure of a show, one scene will play off another, a scene of great tranquility and beauty followed by one of wild, crazy humor.

Wilson often speaks of creating parallel tracks that go along together but do not necessarily relate to or enhance one another. Thus, the actors' movement is one track, the sound is another, the text yet another. He was inspired by the working process of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, in which the music for a piece would be composed completely separately from the creation of the movement, and at the end the two elements would be put together without any adjustment; left to find their own moments of serendipitous coming together and other points in which they function without reference to each other. However, Wilson always stressed that he finds this interesting as a beginning tool, but for him there is a next step. All elements may be crafted separately, but in the end there is the intensive tech period in the theatre in which all elements are elaborated together. In his theatre, if there is contrast or contradiction, it is chosen, as surely as the moments of integration. Over the years, in constructing the "mega installation" that is his world, the myriad of individual works that together make up the great, single work that is the summation of Robert Wilson, he has built up a roster of collaborators to aid him in the elaboration of the web of controlled chaos over which he rules. As a great orchestra conductor chooses his musicians, and, knowing their unique gifts and voices, places them and coordinates them for maximum effect to allow each one to shine, so does Wilson shape his world. Those not part of this world often have the impression, seeing a work by Robert Wilson, that he is a cold, remote genius, plotting each detail alone in his ivory tower and emerging to impose them arbitrarily on those around him. This is far from the truth. Wilson works best in the presence of others; he finds inspiration by surrounding himself with artists, scholars, children, and students. He encourages all to speak up, and as the ideas bounce back and forth, he catches something said here, something said there, somehow sees a connection, starts sketching a design, or finds the inspiration for a series of movements.

ROBERT WILSON' THEATRICAL INSTALLATION

Although this publication is primarily geared towards an examination of theatre, it is nevertheless interesting to look at Robert Wilson's installations, as his approach to them is highly theatrical. He views an installation as a stage setting shaped by objects, lighting and sound, through which the viewer travels. Thus, viewing one of his installations might be said to be the most intimate way to experience the theatre of Robert Wilson.

In 1993, representing the United States at the Venice Biennale, he created "Memory/Loss", a work inspired by a letter Heiner Müller had written him describing a Mongolian torture in which a subject was deprived of memory by being buried to his shoulders in the earth, with a tight fresh animal skin wound around his head. As the sun dried the skin, it tightened and forced the hairs into the scalp. If a person survived this treatment, he would be an easily manipulated worker devoid of memory. The viewer entered a large room whose floor was covered with cracked, dried mud. In the distance one saw the bust of a person buried, head wrapped in the strange device. This sculpture was modeled on Wilson himself. The air was filled with strange sounds, cries, and voices speaking fragments from Müller's letter in a sound installation developed by Hans Peter Kuhn. This installation won the Golden Lion award for sculpture.

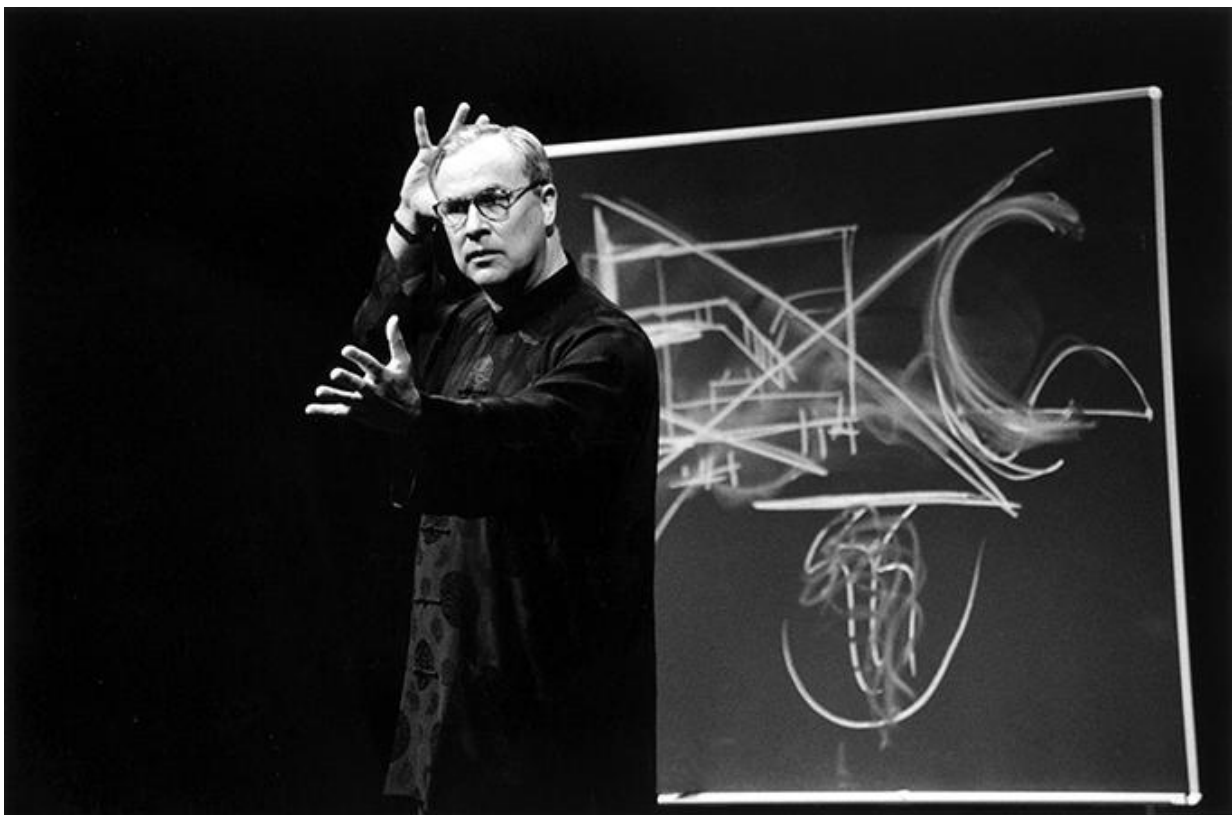
In "Anna's Room", seen as part of "Stanze e Segreti" (Rooms and Secrets) at the Rotonda della Besana in Milan in 2000, the viewer entered a room filled with enormous tree trunks planted in rough, springy soil. The trunks were so wide that they vanished into the mist hovering above, giving a sense of tremendous height. The floor had been built up in such a way as to give the sensation that around the edges space fell away into nothing and light shone out from the ground. The air was filled with the natural sounds of a forest, water dripping, bird cries, and the voice of a woman speaking German in broken words and phrases (Edith Clever reciting Meroe's monologue from Kleist's *Penthesilea*). A woman dressed in a stylized Victorian dress, another reincarnation of the Byrdwoman, walked slowly through the space, stray gleams of light catching now her face, now her hand. Above the spectator, a tiny window shone with light, and above the forest floor floated a tiny white bed caught in a ray of light.

In 2001, as part of the first Bienal de Valencia in Spain. Wilson designed the mega-structure for the "Russian Madness" installation. Working with a group of 14 young Russian artists to whom he had been introduced by curator Victor Misiano, he filled the vast Atarazanas building with an amazing, colorful interpretation of the Volga River as the wild heart of Russia. He created a dramatic path of sharp contrasts, heightening the viewer's experience of each part of the journey by playing it against what had come before. Seen from the outside, the Atarazanas is a medieval building in rough brown stone. In front of the door, Wilson set a futuristic, silver-colored "beehive" through which the viewer passed to enter the installation. Within the beehive were hundreds of television monitors, rising up in arches to the ceiling. These monitors showed videos designed by the 14 artists, each given a very rigid time structure by Wilson, but within that structure left the freedom to interpret his dictates as they would. Passing through this kinetic, noisy, hyper-modern chaos, the viewer entered a long corridor, dim and low-ceilinged, papered completely, walls, floor and ceiling, with black and white wallpaper renderings of the artists' works. The corridor was lit by a series of naked light bulbs dangling on long cords from the ceiling, suspended knee-high. Coming to a low doorway, the visitor looked out at a solid white wall that blocked the view of the next room. Entering, one suddenly found oneself in an enormously wide, high, open space through which ran a series of banquet tables holding the remains of a feast, spilled wine, dirty plates, monitors showing wedding celebrations. These tables wound through the space, creating the image of the Volga, and above and around them the colorful, energetic and beautifully realized works of the Russian artists joined together to create a visual celebration. The works of the various artists were joined in a unified whole by the sound and light installation designed by Wilson.

Recently he was given a similar challenge for the “Imagining Prometheus” installation in the Palazzo della Ragione in Milan. He was asked to create an overarching installation into which the installation works of seven other artists could be set, in such a way as to present a unified landscape through which the viewer could travel, appreciating both the overall effect, and the individual pieces for their own sakes. In discussing his approach to this work, Wilson commented, “The essential challenge was, I think, designing two different kinds of spaces, or landscapes, one interior and one exterior, and in making a megastructure, in the sense that it has its own aesthetic, but it doesn’t interfere with other people’s ideas and aesthetics, that it isn’t something that is bombastic, that it creates an ambience without imposing my aesthetic on the other’s contribution.” The theme of this installation, Prometheus – light and fire in human myth and culture, interpreted through Wilson’s vision became a lunar landscape, filled with strange plants and rocks, television monitors glowing, half buried in the piles of lava sand that filled the Palazzo, displaying images of the earth seen from the heavens, meteor showers, galaxies spinning. Visitors followed a path of rough shredded rubber that wove through the space, leading them to the various artists’ light and fire inspired creations. The overall effect, on entering the huge, dim room, was of seeing a solar system, strange and beautiful planets hovering above an otherworldly landscape. The sound and light component, also shaped by Wilson, gave the journey through the space a dramaturgy, alternating periods of calm contemplation with wilder, more joyful outbursts.

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Images



Robert Wilson



Death, Destruction & Detroit II, Schaubuhne Theater, Berlin 1987



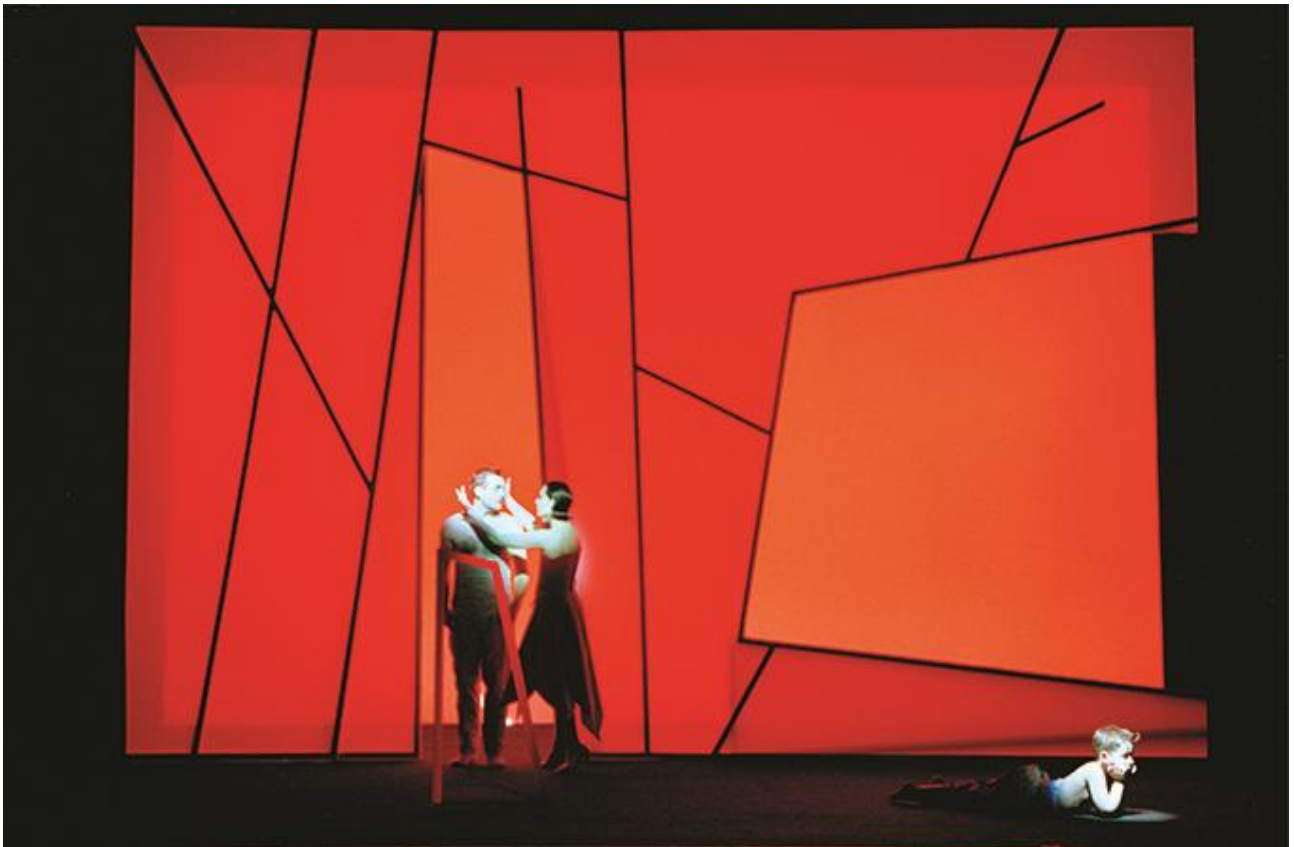
Lohengrin, Zurich, 1991

Robert Wilson's the theatrical installations



G.A. Story, 1996

WOYZECK



Premiering in 2000 in Copenhagen, this piece has had an enormous success and toured throughout Europe and to the United States. Its striking and beautiful design is the result of a series of developmental workshops involving Wilson and a group of his long-time collaborators: composer and lyricist Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan, co-director Ann Christin Rommen, adaptators Wolfgang Wiens and Ann Christin Rommen, Costume designer Jacques Reynaud, and co-lighting designer A. J. Weissbard. The audience enters to see the show curtain on which the title *Woyzeck* appears as if hand-lettered by Wilson. This use of text from the piece or its title as part of the set design appeared first in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* almost 30 years ago. By now Wilson's admirers recognize his unique calligraphy. On the apron in front of the drop are a series of what seem to be strange, distorted toys. The lights slowly pulse up and down, highlighting now a wire rocking horse, now a silver ball or globe. As the overture begins, they drift slowly offstage. A drum roll signals the start of the show and the lights come up on a wildly colorful and kinetic painted backdrop before which stands a tall, odd, white figure, a sort of carnival barker. As he calls for the audience's attention, figures wearing bright primary colors with stark white faces and the exaggerated makeup of a silent movie enter. *Woyzeck*, in contrast, wears only simple dull pants, no shirt, no makeup. He arrives and runs in place desperately, going nowhere. A small boy dressed identically wanders through the strange crowd onstage looking curiously around. At the end of the scene the lights black out, leaving illuminated only a small monkey puppet who finishes the song begun by the barker: "Misery is the River of the World." In the world Wilson has imagined for *Woyzeck*, nothing is upright, geometry is distorted. All angles are extreme and walls and buildings tilt impossibly. Patches of light shining through doors are wrong – they do not match the shape of the frame, and such normally stable structures as houses are made of dark lines leaning against each other with no sense of order or logic; the walls are sheer fabric, giving the sense that the slightest wind could blow them away, destroying them. In an early scene, *Woyzeck* speaks a few lines. His voice is calm, simple and human, as opposed to the others who sing and speak in a harsh, growling style accompanied by discordant instruments, or speak so calmly and almost mechanically as to appear drained of all emotion until they break out in sudden screams that echo into the distance. The costumes also emphasize *Woyzeck*'s difference from the others. He is shirtless or dressed simply in white in a world of people clothed in bright colors and strange, fantastic shapes that are as striking in silhouette as they are in full light. Only his young son and his friend Andreas resemble him.

In *Woyzeck*, one sees the technological mastery Wilson and his collaborators have achieved, and the advances made in light and sound technology in the years since Wilson began his exploration of their possibilities. The beautiful cycloramas, the swift changes of color, the synchronization of sound, light and movement, the pinpoint precision of a spot picking out a hand outlined in white makeup standing out starkly against a black cloth or a white face glowing in a colored void – all of these are elements Wilson has developed and perfected over the years, and in *Woyzeck* he uses this vocabulary with absolute mastery.

The house that *Woyzeck* shares with his unfaithful wife Maria and their son is all off-kilter lines and distorted angles. The light fills the space with extreme colors, harsh, acid and neon. A few tender moments of unexpected humanity are broken by a thunderclap that throws one figure into an arched shadow frozen against a yellow-green backdrop.

In a later scene distorted windows float in the air at odd angles, and a pine tree that resembles a child's cut out in bright green paper lists at an odd angle, and later unfolds to a great height. The air fills with unnatural noises, screeches that sound like metal being twisted and warped; they seem to be the aural representation of *Woyzeck*'s growing confusion and despair as he realizes he is losing his wife. In a touching scene the pine tree, grown enormously tall, towers over the seated *Woyzeck*, and as he sings a love song, a crescent moon half embedded in the stage floor glides onstage. In sharp contrast, the next scene is the drum major's seduction of Maria. Both are dressed in deep red, and the entire stage and cyclorama glow hot red. Maria is the perfect realization of the "hot and cold" vamp, at the same time a parody of and an homage to the classic screen divas. As the play

progresses and Woyzeck slides further into despair and madness, the architecture becomes more and more distorted. Where before there was one house, now there is a whole town of distorted, sheer-cloth buildings. The world reflects a multiplication of disorder. In the midst of all this distorted geometry, there is one scene set in front of a simple white wall with a window and door, and here the lines are straight, verticals and horizontals. Woyzeck and Maria try to reconcile their differences. They reprise his love song as a duet, but as it goes on, their motions become jerkier, wilder and more mechanical, and their voices build up to a frantic scream that throws the stage into darkness. When the lights come up, the wall is gone, the stage is empty save for Woyzeck and Maria embracing silently center stage against a red sky. The red slowly bleeds to the top, leaving them silhouetted against white, and then abruptly flashes red again. The stage is once again plunged into darkness, and when the lights return we are back in front of the wall, the couple as they were at the moment of their scream. Woyzeck leaves. The following scene returns to a world of distorted buildings, houses falling upside-down from the sky. The work moves inevitably forward to the moment of Woyzeck's murder of Maria. He leads her away from the house and child, out into an empty void centered on a pool of white light. They stretch their hands towards each other, reaching across the pool but unable to meet. As he slowly forces her down into the pool, holding a huge stylized knife over her, a giant black circle descends from above, gradually blotting out the white sky. As she slowly settles into a twisted shape, the cyclorama glows red.



