

Thinking Spatially, Speaking Visually: Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles

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Abstract

Director Robert Wilson and autistic poet Christopher Knowles produced several cutting-edge theatre pieces that Wilson refers to as 'operas' because they combine live music, dance, spectacular imagery, and unusual dramatic storylines. Arendell believes these productions to be "Autistic Operas" given their structural connection to autistic ways of processing sound, language, and rhythm. Wilson's is a new-age opera, differing from more traditional styles of Wagnerian opera and the like. Rather, his is an opera of images, sounds, and motion that gives primacy to the sort of patterned arrangement of ideas and images in which those on the autism spectrum excel. Wilson's *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1974) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) employ autism as a new stage idiom that transformed theatre in radical ways consonant with early postmodern performance. Arendell draws on Wilson's work with Knowles in the early years of this director's career as one example of contemporary theatre's appropriation of autism as an artistic vehicle for the expression of alternate musical and stage perception.

In the early 1970s, international stage director Robert Wilson began working with a young autistic poet, Christopher Knowles (b. 1959). Knowles's approach to language as a spatial, pictorial, and sonic art form shaped Wilson's 1974 piece, *A Letter for Queen Victoria* and his later opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). Knowles, who helped Wilson write the text for *Einstein*, remained his apprentice and muse for a number of years. The notion of collaboration between a subsequently world-renowned theatre director and an autistic minor whose own artwork and career fell out of view is riddled with complication. I draw on Wilson's work with Knowles as one example of contemporary theatre's appropriation of autism as an artistic vehicle for the expression of alternate perception. How do we explain this extraordinary collaboration between a major director and a young autistic poet? Wilson's interest in performers such as Knowles reflects an artistic desire to disrupt conventional representational structures. Knowles's use of autistic language patterns—repetition of sounds and phrases in echolalia,² a play on word arrangements, and imitation of media banter—reinforced Wilson's own distrust of the spoken word. Wilson's micro-managerial directing style both encouraged and appropriated Knowles's natural ability to reconstruct language as a primarily visual form of artistic communication. Their collaboration created a highly precise form of theatrical order that generated both innovation and controversy.

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²According to Anne M. Donnellan, David A. Hill, and Martha R. Leary, "Many people now understand that echolalia is neither always meaningless nor always meaningful; rather it serves a variety of pragmatic functions on a sociolinguistic continuum. Although sometimes not intentional, echolalia may be used intentionally by many who lack other strategies for communicating to maintain relationships, improve their comprehension of spoken language and to express meaning. ... Acknowledgements to a person's efforts to accommodate, improvise and create meaning is a cause for celebration and an opportunity to improve communication and boost self esteem." "Rethinking Autism: Implications of Sensory and Movement Differences," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30:1 (2010), 17 of 32.

Autism as an Aesthetic Anchor

Theatre scholar Bonnie Marranca believes that “by finding a creative place for Knowles in his theatre Wilson has challenged psychologists’ insistence that the autistic child cannot be integrated into society. He has proposed him as a model member of a new society through his use of the phenomenology of autism as an aesthetic anchor of his theatre. . . .”³ Although I embrace Marranca’s concept of “autism as an aesthetic anchor” in Wilson’s work, I find this terminology somewhat ironic. In an obvious way, an anchor limits motion, and the physical movement in *Einstein* is anything but permanent stasis. From a medical perspective, individuals on the autistic spectrum often require literal physical anchoring to calm an out-of-control inner anxiety in response to external overstimulation. Moving beyond Marranca’s observation, I suggest that Wilson’s use of autistic perception constitutes what Disability Studies scholar Lennard Davis might call a “dismodern” deconstructive theatre practice.⁴ Davis argues for an end to identity categories altogether and imagines the body as completed by prosthesis, technical aids, or surgical intervention (for example) as part of a “dismodernist” era wherein disabilities—due to age, disease, accident, inheritance, or otherwise—are potentially common denominators. He suggests that difference of all kinds is what the human populace has in common, rather than what separates us. In Wilson’s early work with Knowles, autistic perception is partnered with a postmodern fragmentation and minimalist automatism. Wilson runs the risk, in this pairing, of holding both parts together too tightly. Autism cannot and should not be equated with postmodernism or automatism. Wilson explores the intersection of multimedia, postmodern performance, and disability to question the act of representation itself without making his own representational politics transparent. This new method of conjoining disability with postmodern art practices was perhaps more the result of synchronicity than of progressive thinking on Wilson’s part.

He clearly saw in Knowles an avenue less traveled in artistic circles and leapt to claim this pathway as his own. He integrated Knowles’s autistic processing of time and space in ways that couched this set of perceptions in a broader context of experimental art. He used Knowles and other artists with disabilities as innovators, but also as contemporary spectacles. In effect, he created a “dismodern” theatre aesthetic by employing the alternative perceptions of disabled performers in the course of his artistic experiments. The term “experimental theatre” takes on a slightly different set of connotations in this light. Wilson’s theatre is not a theatre that stages physical disability; rather, his is a theatre that uses cognitive and sensory disability as the *modus operandi*. His first few productions involved performers who were deaf, autistic, or schizophrenic but not mobility impaired. The ‘dis’ of disability disappears on Wilson’s early stages in terms of actual representation, and yet he has already made choices to exclude visibly impaired participants in his early work. The presence of his disabled performers is full and functional, not lacking, but their input in these early collaborations was always tempered by Wilson’s editorial license. Disability is a key part of Wilson’s process, not just the final representational product, and yet he holds the ultimate authority over any final production. If anything, this inclusion of disabled perspectives in the collaborative assembly of performed material may be one of Wilson’s saving graces. This is not just a contemporary freak show, but Wilson rides a fine line between representing difference and revising representation to allow for different perspectives.

Performance Always Starts with the Body

What is it, then, that makes collaborative performance, as opposed to more conventional presentations of pre-scripted dramatic texts, more useful as a starting point in the discussion of disability in stage representation? Performance always starts with the body as a primary site of representation, knowledge, and experience. Performance must always address the body; it has no other choice. Dance works in similar ways, but even in dance the body is somewhat masked by technical movement motifs and gestural symbols. In performance art, the body becomes the text. In Wilson’s brand of operatic performance art, written text takes a back seat. Pictures, sounds, and movement choreographed to look naturally mechanical are all texts of various bodies. Some of these body-texts are highly precise, some are naturally awkward, some display awkward precision and/or precise awkwardness. Room is made for all of these modes. When Wilson slows these movements down on stage, all motion takes on a ritualistic beauty.

³Bonnie Marranca, *The Theatre of Images* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 44.

⁴Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

Entertainment is impossibly fused with purpose, and the simplicity of slow motion becomes incredibly complex with the closer scrutiny that slower movement demands. At slower speeds, the most awkward movement is graceful, and grace suddenly becomes an agonizingly awkward series of events. It is in this slower moment of physical motion that Wilson's vision resides. He works with extremes both temporally and spatially toward this same end. Stage images that are too big to fit within the confines of the set are a popular Wilson technique. One of his earliest operas, *The King of Spain* (1969), used an oversized cat whose legs were so long that these were all that was visible. Enormous cat legs traipsed through the living room of a Wilson set without being noticed by the scene's other characters. Life is absurd in moments when extraordinary dimensionality becomes the norm. This is no doubt Wilson's purpose in slowing time down to a near standstill and blowing space up to circus proportions. These revisions of time and space have more to do with disability in Wilson's work than anyone has previously recognized. He values the extraordinary, and he recognizes in disability an extraordinary existence. In Wilson's early operas, disabilities become visionary powers, tools to open the universe to new avenues of perception, raw materials for the construction of an entirely new aesthetic system that employs these same sorts of extraordinary proportions and circus motifs. The use of freak show or circus venues and narratives in experimental theatre of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries might be construed as an example of cutting edge theatre expanding into disability as both a means of innovation and an appropriation of identity politics. Wilson was not the only U.S. director who dabbled in disability representation throughout his career. While director Joseph Chaikin may well have used Disability Theatre for similar purposes late in his career, he himself was a practitioner with disabilities, and his collaboration with disabled playwright John Belluso (*Body Pieces*, 2001) marked a genuine interest in actual representation of impairment on stage.⁵ I am not sure that we can make the same argument for Robert Wilson's early work with performers with disabilities. Perhaps the consciousness we now recognize in theatre practice in relation to disability was not present at the time of Wilson's early work. We might try to imagine what his 1976 *Einstein on the Beach* would look like if Wilson had created a truly collaborative performance piece with Knowles using a post-Millennial awareness of neurodiversity. Needless to say, this might or might not radically alter the piece's structural (or über-structural) organization.

Wilson's Intersection with Disability

Although he never self-identified as an individual with disabilities, Wilson has claimed a personal history with impairment, and this aspect of his own life is one possible point of connection with Knowles and other children whom he fostered in his early career. Although Wilson underwent treatment for a speech impediment, members of his family deny his childhood stutter. His sister, in particular, claims no memory of her brother's difficulty with spoken language.⁶ This begs vital questions about Wilson's entire theatre career, as he founded his company on training that he received from dance instructor Byrd Hoffman to correct this stutter and named his company after her. Hoffman led him to a different understanding of representation and perception that underlies all of his work on the stage, disability related or not. Could this mean that Wilson owes his artistic methods to the treatment of impairment? For scholars who have dubbed *Einstein on the Beach* as a touchstone or cultural zeitgeist of the twentieth century,⁷ the answer might be a loaded, but resounding, affirmative. There exist clear connections between Knowles's personal affect and the performance style Wilson directed his actors to apply in his early works. In rehearsal for *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, for example, Wilson instructed his non-autistic performers to imitate Knowles's movements and vocal delivery. In Knowles's speech, words and phrases often came across as devoid of emotional affect. More attention was paid to the pure sound of language, which fascinated Wilson. Wilson instructed his non-autistic performers to speak in a mode that was based in part on Knowles's own vocal patterns, and in part on the influences of minimalist music. *Einstein's* Phillip Glass or composer Steve Reich's work with subtle chord progressions over extended time in highly repetitive structures provide strong examples of this style. The presumed irony of Wilson's stage direction for *Letter* is that Knowles's presence in this piece appeared more live, more full, than did any other performer's.

⁵Wilson's vision begins within a space of appreciation for disabled realities, and yet his reference to circus dimensions is one that possibly ties him to both Joseph Chaikin's late work with playwright John Belluso, *Body Pieces* (2001) and to other disabled theatre practitioners. Chaikin incorporated a circus motif in this work by using one-legged actress Anita Hollander as a mermaid and an apparently non-disabled actor, Wayne Maugans, as a circus barker. For a discussion of Chaikin and Belluso's piece, see my article, "Freakery and Prosthetic Actuality in Joseph Chaikin's *Body Pieces*," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25:3 (Summer 2005) or the chapter, "Chaikin's *Body Pieces*: Prosthetic Legs and Missing Words" in my 2009 book, *Performing Disability: Staging the Actual* (VDM, 2009).

⁶See Stefan Brecht's *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (Germany 1978, translated edition in London: Methuen Drama, 1994) for more about Wilson's family and upbringing.

⁷Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

This heightened presence belies the false stereotype about autistic individuals that they are absent in interactions with others. The distillation of language in *Letter* transformed Wilson's non-autistic performers into automatons, while Knowles was fully present and fluent in the abstract phrases he helped create. This apparent paradox—that Knowles's autistic sensibility appeared as the most present presence in Wilson's early operas—troubles stereotypical assumptions about autistic speech as empty or void. Although communication with others is often a challenge for those on the autism spectrum due to difficulties in reading affect or body language, this should never imply a lack of presence or a desire to be isolated. Wilson's non-autistic actors borrowed this stereotype of affectless speech to create a group phenomenon of automatism on stage.

Wilson and Autism

Wilson's interest in autism might also have implications that reach beyond his personal history and his work with Knowles. A number of the protagonists featured in Wilson's productions have various cognitive disabilities. In an anonymous review of Thomas West's 1997 *In the Mind's Eye*, the online staff writer observes that this book "never mentions autism (referring instead to 'dyslexia' and 'learning difficulties') but many of the people profiled are possibly autistic. Profiles include Faraday, Maxwell, Einstein, Dodgson, Poincaré, Edison, Tesla, da Vinci, Churchill, Patton, and Yeats."⁸ It might be more accurate to suggest that a few of these notables were known to have what we now recognize as autistic tendencies. Wilson's operas have featured three of the thinkers included on this list. *Einstein on the Beach* contains both a physical representation of the brilliant physicist and an aesthetic approach that features an autistic ability to make everything mathematically precise, repetitive, and densely patterned. In *Edison* (1979), Wilson's love of intricate and expressive stage lighting pays full tribute to this inventor. Edison's deafness also harkens back to Wilson's 1970 work with Raymond Andrews in *Deafman Glance*. Wilson's *Alice* (1992) focuses less on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* character, and more on its creator, Charles Dodgson. Dodgson was apparently a "life-long stutterer,"⁹ and was no doubt of personal interest to Wilson in this respect. Granted, I am not trying to paint all points on the autism spectrum as akin to savant existence, just as I would not claim autistic behavior for all of Wilson's characters. While Wilson's choice of these particular historical figures may be purely coincidental, I find it noteworthy that these individuals had learning differences. I both applaud Wilson's interest in autism as an alternative mode of perception and duly acknowledge his potential artistic exploitation of disabled performers in his collaborative work with them. Lennard Davis's notion of the "dismodern" serves in Wilson's work with Knowles as a means to an end; autism is a difference that re-lenses the way an audience sees the stage. Under the rubric of "avant-garde art," Wilson translates what he perceives as Knowles's autistic interaction with the world for international audiences. As with any translation, Wilson gives us his interpretation of autistic perception, which is no doubt an interpretation that misses some things and misrepresents others.

I would like to take a moment to focus more specifically on autism and Wilson's relationship to this particular disability. Although critics rightfully question the veracity of Internet posts, curated sites on the Internet can provide useful information about autism from both experiential and medical perspectives. Contributors to websites such as "autistics.org" offer an embodied knowledge about this disability. In "Don't Mourn for Us," autistic advocate Jim Sinclair writes that: Autism isn't something a person *has*, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is *pervasive*; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with.¹⁰ Robert Wilson's use of Christopher Knowles as a muse for his early work gives credence to Sinclair's statement. This director did not necessarily go in search of autism as an artistic approach. Wilson apparently saw in Knowles a unique experiential knowledge and cognitive perception that harmonized with his own artistic pursuits. Although language was a large element of his work with Knowles, there are other representational structures that this autistic perspective changed in equally radical ways. Time, space, movement, and technology are points of intense intersection between Wilson and portions of the autistic community. Wilson connected with Knowles for very specific, idiosyncratic reasons that fed his impulses to control language and space on stage.

⁸Staff writer, <http://www.autistics.org/library/reviews.html> (Unlisted review date, book published in 1997). Website is obsolete.

⁹Thomas G. West, *In the Mind's Eye: Visual Thinkers, Gifted People with Dyslexia and Other Learning Difficulties* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 133.

¹⁰Jim Sinclair's controversial essay "Don't Mourn for Us" can be found at http://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html.

Spatial Thinking and Language

For some autistic individuals, space takes a priority as a means of engagement. In her article, "Being a Spatial Thinker," Amanda Baggs describes in detail how autism has shaped every aspect of her experience: I am very good at spatial things.... Spatial thinking is a way of organizing things in my head. ...I do not think with language. ...Linguistic things are not natural to me. Spatial things are more natural, and the thing that is most natural is non-symbolic whatsoever. ...I have several internal spatial maps of my mind, which vary according to situation. ...These models are all manifestations of one model that I have. However, it does not translate easily into a three-dimensional and linguistic representation. It is almost like a four-dimensional (or more) object intersecting with three-dimensional space.¹¹ For Baggs, representation itself is tied to spatial definition. All discourse is affected by an ability to spatialize. If linguistic concepts cannot be spatialized in retentive ways, Baggs cannot command these concepts. Her experience with language connects with Robert Wilson's creative process in the spatial mapping of conceptual and linguistic thinking. When asked about his work (either in retrospect or with a current project), Wilson's first response is to find paper and pencil to draw pictures of his ideas. This consistent reaction is noted by all of Wilson's biographers. Spatial thinking is one of his trademarks. His theatre is most often referred to as a theatre of images rather than words or dance or song, although his operas include all of these things. It is important to recognize, however, that not all individuals on the autism spectrum process communication in spatial terms. For some, an auditory modality works far better. Even Amanda Baggs, who self-identifies as a spatial thinker, has online testimonies such as "In My Language," which is posted with its own translation.¹² She can fairly easily move back and forth across the dividing line between conventional language use and something that more closely resembles music or architecture.

Baggs claims that she "...once met an autistic woman who could sing out the tonal aspects of a conversation without saying a single word," and Baggs understood this woman's conversation entirely.¹³ Part of why she understood what most would find nonsensical was, as Baggs explains, "precisely because that is how my mind most readily processes conversations." She goes on to clarify that: Language patterns, however, are merely the tip of a larger and far more interesting iceberg. Everything I perceive—from the movements of my body to the smells in the air—goes into my mind and sifts itself into similar kinds of patterns. Some of them correspond to what other people are usually aware of, and some of them don't. I consider these patterns and connections to be more my language than the words that appear on the screen when I let my fingers use the keyboard. And far more my language than the words that have popped out of my mouth throughout my life. They are how the world makes sense to me. Anything else is just the artifact of a shoddy translation. (3 of 8) For Baggs, language is less a rational system for constructing meaning and more a series of phonetic and spatial images that follow patterns. As she attests, "This is why I was able to work out which words go with which responses long before I was able to work out the meaning of the words and why—to this day—my ability to fit words into familiar patterns outstrips my ability to understand the words themselves" (3 of 8). Baggs's language and sensory perception thus follows a consistent, but unconventional, process of pairing meaning with sounds.

Translating Disability

In a 1982 interview with Arthur Bartow, Wilson says of Knowles, "Christopher was totally involved with organizing words in geometrical ways, with arranging them architecturally the way music is arranged, and was quite stubborn in his determination to speak or to write, verbalize himself this way. Hence, he was institutionalized, and they were trying to correct it. What I did was to simply take him from the institution and say, 'Great! It's fantastic what you're doing. It's beautiful. I support it, and I'd like to learn more about it.' And I incorporated what he was doing in my work."¹⁴ Wilson took on these perspectives as new ways of seeing, new means to see what had not been seen before. Wilson no doubt took the liberties familiar to most translators of any language who try to approximate a meaning structure across the divides of multiple word systems.

¹¹Amanda Baggs, "Being a Spatial Thinker (one kind of autistic thought)," <http://main.autistics.org/node/35>. Website is obsolete. See more about Amanda Baggs at

<http://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com> <Accessed on 06/03/13>.

¹²See A.M. Baggs, "In My Language," a video posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc>

¹³Amanda Baggs, "Cultural Commentary: Up in the Clouds and Down in the Valley: My Richness and Yours," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30:1 (2010), 4 of 8.

¹⁴Arthur Bartow interview with Robert Wilson, 1982, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Wilson's early productions are different from many other twentieth-century artistic representations of disability because they start in a place where disability is the norm, in translation or otherwise. All avenues of perception, cognition, reason, and action begin in a space of mental and physical alterity. Wilson invites his audience into worlds that are deaf, worlds whose language is scrambled, worlds that present the schizophrenia of contemporary existence, worlds that change the perceptual length of a single minute, and worlds that never take any mental thought or physical movement for granted. Wilson's theatre starts from these places. It is a theatre that employs what Disability Scholars in Performance Studies have called a "disability aesthetic."¹⁵

Process and Production

Wilson's use of disability exists as much in the process of producing as in the product itself. He used actors who were disabled for his early works, but he made their disabilities an aesthetic starting point rather than a representational marketing tool. Christopher Knowles's cognitive differences are only recognizable in conversation or in close visual observation of his physical movements. Knowles is the master of his own form of poetry, and Wilson credits this ability. But until this actor opens his mouth on stage, the audience does not necessarily mark him visually as impaired. His written language patterns reflect ways of processing verbal information as pictures. Much as Amanda Baggs does, autistic authors Temple Grandin and Donna Williams visualize concepts and make pictures in their minds as a way to understand speech and to construct meaning from language. Grandin has a kind of photographic memory for space and image. I will discuss her spatial imaging in more depth in a later chapter. Wilson shares this need to draw images, to use storyboards rather than words. His and theirs is a language of pictures, what he calls "visual music."¹⁶

Visual Music in Space

In keeping with this visual orchestra, Knowles's autistic use of language as a repetitive series of sounds introduced Wilson to the concept of words as pure sound rather than principally cognitive elements. Wilson appreciated Knowles's ability to turn language and visual imagery into a more numerically arranged system. Knowles could look at written phrases and rearrange the words or letters to form geometric sculptures. Letters were quite literally building blocks, units of both musical and architectural construction. Although language was a large part of Wilson's work with Knowles, other stage elements also changed in equally radical ways. For example, Wilson's operas celebrate a primacy of space and a suspension of temporality. His construction of action sequences is often non-causal, involving instead an atemporal sequence of visual images. Here we find a loose homology: many autistic children visualize single frames one at a time, processing one thought at a time, rather than creating a comprehensive story.¹⁷ Stage images are repeated in many of Wilson's productions in lieu of causality, and their repetition becomes the only structural marker of continuity. Does this mean that Wilson creates all of his productions from an experiential knowledge of autistic behavior and perception? No, and I would never go so far as to argue that extreme. However, there are similarities, homologies if you will, between this director's methods and aspects of Knowles's cognitive processes. Wilson's operas often originate in countries where his direction requires an interpreter and/or the final product employs languages that Wilson does not speak. I found myself listening to the Swedish actors in Wilson's 2001 Brooklyn Academy of Music production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* with more attention to the sound of their native language—for example—than the sense of its delivery, which never directly matched the translation posted above their heads on the stage. Words and bodies existed in the same physical space, but were oddly distanced from each other. The repetition of words and movements in a single scene offered a moment of recognition, relief in an appearance of the known. Wilson took the things about Knowles's speech and social interaction that made him different and normalized these attributes within the structure of his operas. The whole concept of automatic speech and movement gets thrown into relief as dancers spin in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* while other performers speak sentence fragments in non-dialogic dialogues or simultaneous non-sequiturs. These sound much like overheard bits of conversation that collectively form a stage fabric of noise and action.

¹⁵Petra Kuppers and Carrie Sandahl are two other noted scholars working at the intersection of Disability Studies and Performance Studies who reference this term.

¹⁶Sylvère Lotringer interview with Robert Wilson, 1978, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹⁷Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 454.

The overarching images for Wilson's set in this piece include a courtroom (one of his favorites, and it takes on a larger prominence in *Einstein*), a prison, a war-ravaged landscape (complete with Knowles, who flies in from the wings claiming to be an airplane), and a garden party where silent people gesticulate furiously with hand movements before breaking into what amounts to a word salad. In this particular production, Wilson used Knowles's approach to language as the organizing principle and Knowles's autistic presence as the primary source of liveness on the stage. Whereas he literally disappears in *Einstein*, Knowles is the one performer who fits into *Letter's* linguistic mesh. It is as if all movement and action were lifted from another context and voided of its original language and meaning. Now new language fills the void and is extra-sensical by conventional standards in both contextual and syntactical ways. Movements are seemingly symbolic, but the context for reading them is absent, so they remain as empty signifiers, consciously cluttering the stage space.

As Ralph Savarese writes in conversation with autistic author Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, "Both in your 'tangential perception' and your way with language, ...the object, or signified, is not completely mastered by the word, or signifier. [Thus]...everything seems much less fixed and settled in your work, thereby allowing for surprise and fresh insights."¹⁸ Amanda Baggs's ability to arrange words in familiar patterns by "...perceiving connections without force-fitting a set of thoughts on top of them" employs a similar separation of signifier and signified that rearranges these connections in alternative ways.¹⁹ Savarese indicates a kind of breath in Mukhopadhyay's writing that allows and encourages the reader to wander through his words, as if the words populate the space in a relaxed time frame that makes room for new meanings. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, autism serves as a new spatial, linguistic, and temporal order—one in which Christopher Knowles is both a co-author and the realest reality within a framework of re-articulated language. The danger here is, of course, that Wilson may be too closely pairing postmodern minimalist approaches to language or music with autistic experience. Although, Savarese commits a similar artificial overlay of poetry and autism when he suggests that: "Perhaps the medium of poetry best captures with its interruptive force the rapt attention of autistic engagement" in his interview with Mukhopadhyay.²⁰ Perhaps autism represents, rather, a set of experiences that parallel certain trends in postmodern artistry that attempt to breathe poetic space into language, that loop and slow down time, or that reimagine space as a continuum of repetitive moments.

Autistic Parallels in *Einstein on the Beach*

In *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson plays with these sorts of parallels. His performers speak in the same tones of neutrality found in television advertisements or the rehearsed banter of airline stewards. Their repetition of number sequences, musical solfège (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do), and minimalist note phrases is truly mesmerizing. All of what at first appears random quickly seems painstakingly planned, both musically and choreographically, in this piece. The music is so continuous that Wilson's singers must practice circular breathing in order to ensure no breaks in the sound. In one of the character Einstein's appearances, he sits playing continuous violin accompaniment, and viewers may appreciate the stringed instrument as one that needs no breath. This song's relentless repetition of notes and patterns feels like a very active vocal conversation that seems improvised but is actually highly structured. Minimalist music is mathematically precise, which goes far beyond composer Philip Glass's use of numbers as part of the score for this piece. At best, it is a repetitive methodical madness disguised as ultimate control. As you might imagine, when this cacophony pauses, the silence is the emptiest of empty spaces and comes out of nowhere. This kind of cybernetic exactitude in Wilson's productions does not make the performers immune to their surroundings or fellow artists, however, and this may be one clear point of departure from various autism narratives that cite difficulties with interpersonal communication. Inter-actor connections are crucial to the overall functionality of Wilson's productions. Without this timed blocking and precise motion, his performers would quite literally collide. Wilson's theatre establishes "physiopsychic relationships" between the performers as one means of avoiding injury or otherwise.²¹ These relationships extend to the props and set pieces on Wilson's stages. In a sense, the human element is given no more importance than the various design elements, and Wilson makes these inert physical objects come to life while lending his human performers a more mechanical function within the stage picture.

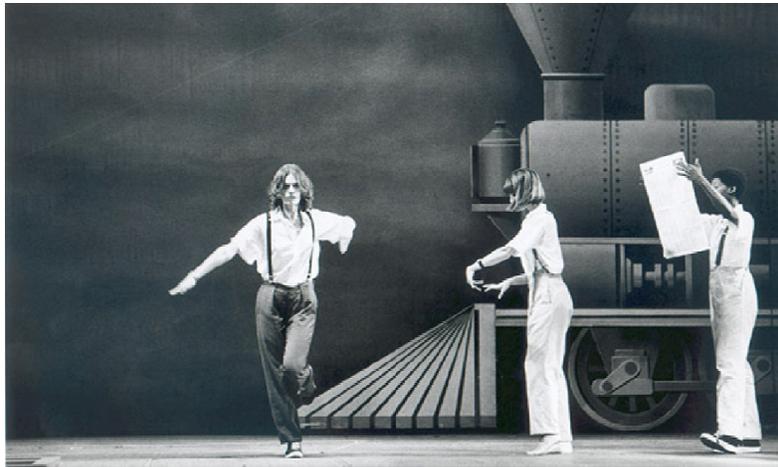
¹⁸Ralph James Savarese, "More Than a Thing to Ignore: An Interview with Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30:1 (2010), 10 of 23.

¹⁹Baggs, "Up in the Clouds," 3 of 8.

²⁰Savarese, "More Than a Thing to Ignore," 4 of 23.

²¹Franco Quadri, "The Life and Times of Robert Wilson," *Robert Wilson* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1998), 19.

Performers and musicians work as an ensemble to create an interactive communications network. The objects within this space hold equal status as performative items within the pictorial and sonic stage environment. In *Einstein*, we again see the courtroom and the prison, joined by a giant classroom, a beach scene, a train, and a spaceship.



Lucinda Childs (left) in *Einstein on the Beach*.
Photo credit: Patrick Bensard.

Each scene and set arrangement return with slight differences several times; for instance, the courtroom returns in the second half of the piece with an oversized bed, and literally pokes fun at popular culture's admixture of juridical procedures and bedroom politics. Knowles wrote much of the text in *Einstein*, but did not appear on stage for any part of this show. The lack of his physical presence in this larger work eradicates any moments of unrehearsed live sensation in the midst of Wilson's heavily programmed automatons. In Wilson's early operas, disabled collaborators and performers such as Knowles helped fashion a unique aesthetic that Wilson has retained throughout his career, even when he stopped relying on their live presence. The use of repetition, words as sounds, poetic or pictorial space, and an equal emphasis on all stage elements are among the tools that Wilson brings into any new production. If one were to categorize or label Wilson's use of this performance mode, one might say that his characters live in a constant state of dismodern disconnect. Language has failed them in its normative usage, time is looped and locates them in a continuous present, and image repetition is the guiding organizational principle.

Multiplicity in Wilson's Opera

Wilson's use of input from collaborators with disabilities has always involved a sharing of ideas and methods that purportedly benefits all of the parties involved. Actors working with Wilson are trained by his process to be capable of doing multiple simultaneous physical and verbal actions. Wilson uses this technique to encourage both his actors and the audience to think simultaneously on multiple levels without distraction. In this multiplicity, a space opens in the brain that allows for dreamlike perception where the periphery becomes the focus. Whether it is a remapping of the soundscape in a silent *Deafman Glance* or a primacy of circular motion and word salad in *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, Wilson takes different modes of perception as points of departure for what we can now refer to as a dismodern aesthetic. Clearly, Wilson supported cognitive difference in part because it let him do unprecedented innovative work on the stage. Donna Williams describes her autistic perspective as "a culture looking for a place to happen."²² Wilson created such a place on stage for Christopher Knowles, and in doing so, brought disability into conversation with cutting edge artistic movements of the late twentieth century, possibly before the art world was ready to hear these voices as dismodern rather than postmodern. Whereas *A Letter for Queen Victoria* was a flop on Broadway, *Einstein* was hailed as a crucial contribution to the twentieth century. What does it mean that an essentially autistic opera became such an emblem? Wilson changed spatial and temporal definitions just as Einstein did.

²²Donna Williams, *Somebody Somewhere: Breaking Free from the World of Autism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 76.

He chose autism as the grounds for a new aesthetic in part because he saw autistic behavior as an appropriate response to the chaos of contemporary industrial life, just as Antonin Artaud and the Surrealists of the 1930s embraced madness as a strategy of resistance to the stifling conformity of the bourgeois society of that era. I end with a tribute to Christopher Knowles's words that helped make Robert Wilson famous for his best known piece, *Einstein on the Beach*.

Will it get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is.
It could get the railroad for these workers. And it could be were it is.
It could Franky it could be Franky it could be very fresh and clean.
It could be a balloon.
Oh these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends.
It could get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is.
It could get the railroad for these workers. It could get for it is were.
It could be a balloon. It could be Franky. It could be very fresh and clean.
All these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends.
It could be those ways.²³

²³Christopher Knowles, "Knee Play 1," Character 2, *Einstein on the Beach* manuscript, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.