

Designer as Dramaturg: Robert Wilson's *Danton's Death*

By

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ABSTRACT

Generally recognized as one of the most influential theatre artists working today, designer/director Robert Wilson is best known for his original, conceptual theatre pieces –‘signature’ works such as *King of Spain* (1969), *Deafman Glance* (1970), *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974), *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and *the CIVIL WarS* (1984). These genre-defying performance collages have garnered Wilson considerable critical attention, awards and accolades and established him as perhaps the premiere avant-garde’ theatrical auteur of our time.

Less attention has been given to Wilson’s stagings of established, or canonical texts such as his *King Lear* (1985), *Alcestis* (1986) or *When We Dead Awaken* (1991). Of Wilson’s classical productions, his 1992 staging of Georg Buchner’s *Danton's Death* is of special significance: it was his first project as Artistic Associate of Houston’s Alley Theatre, and the play itself is noted for extensive text and rhetorical subtleties, two qualities generally not characteristic of Wilson’s work.

Wilson’s version of Buchner’s epic tale premiered in 1992 at the Alley Theatre in Houston after an eight-month creative process led by Wilson as director and designer. The production resulting from that process, which effected a startling revisioning of this classic work, is the subject of this study. My analysis explores how Wilson’s directorial and design choices (casting, textual editing, mise-en-scène) deviated from the original text, and the artistic and/or sociopolitical significance of those deviations.

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As a scenic and lighting designer, my research interests are within the field of scenography. The designs of John Conklin are the subject of my dissertation: a semiotic analysis of his work - emphasis on his use of architecture in creating the stage image.