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Pop and pathos in Bob's art laboratory

Jessye Norman, Rufus Wainright, Philip Glass, Jonathan Meese and hundreds of young artists from all over the world were guests in Bob Wilson's Watermill Center. The summer there has a lot of sides.

*By Jordan Mejias*

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Three herniated disks have given him lots of trouble, but Bob Wilson does not change his mind. He himself wants to show me what has just happened in his art laboratory. Therefore, he schleps himself with his cane up the stairs of the Watermill Center on Long Island, where on a normal day the most exquisite pieces of his vast art collection, composed of all different kinds of artistic, medial and ethnic areas, are enough and keep the severe order between crow black wooden floors and floral-white walls and ceilings. Enjoying the obvious shock of the visitor, he cannot help but to give a roguish grin: "How do you like it?"

Instead of an answer I grin back. Jonathan Meese was here. It would be an understatement to say he had left his mark. Meese has pitched Wilson's fastidiously styled world into the neo-Dadaistic chaos. It is not only the fat, deep red Graffiti slogans that have jumped onto the virgin-like white and yell at us: "Art is no religion, but every religion is art" or "Thank you, you dictatorship of art."

The German art agitator has torn out the colorful pages of glossies and has let them rain over the galleries like autumn foliage. He screams and yells out of the screens, sometimes even understandable sentences. Meese has pillaged Bob Wilson's collection, has mixed tribal art, bizarre works of Paul Thek and Marlene Dietrich's silver pumps, which she had worn at her last concert, with his own grotesquely arranged canvases. Throughout the hall, he has added panty hoses, dumb-bells, kids toys, posters, photographs, knobby bronze busts and his own, frenetic artistic self. To make it short, he really has raged here, probably in the sense of the quirky installation title "Marlene Dietrich in Dr. No's Ludovico-Clinic, Dr. Baby's Erzland".

The Meese bomb has really exploded in the largest, two-storey gallery. Wilson mentions that when Meese's mother, who had come with him, saw the result, had said: "This time you went too far. Clean that up, boy." This now was the outcome. But if this is supposed to be clean, I do not dare to imagine how the room had looked when it was still dirty. Alone Wilson's private apartment, just as minimalist severe as the public rooms, have been spared from the attack. Some sporadic graffiti is all what Meese has left here. Was it the mother, who could avoid the worst? Again, Wilson smiles whimsically: "Jonathan apologized that he did not finish my apartment." While saying so, he takes a deep breath.

Why then does Wilson invite an artist who, at first glance, is the exact opposite of his aesthetics? Because he sets a high value on giving a chance to other artistic temperaments and forms of expression in his Watermill Center. Because he does not want to have a Robert Wilson school. Whoever gets invited here, can do whatever he or she wants. Far over a hundred artists spent this summer at the Watermill Center. Outside, in the park, I can still see Anita Dube's sculpture, fanned with red net-like curtains, with the letters LOVE, meter-high and made out of bee wax, letting countless wicks flicker ceremonially.

In the midst of the well-kept woods, a young group from Taipei, called the "Shakespeare's Wild Sisters", rehearses their performance which is to be staged soon at a nearby golf course. A few days ago, two old-avantgardist companions, composer Philip Glass and choreographer Lucinda Childs, came over to think with Wilson about a new staging of their legendary opera "Einstein on the Beach". Performance artist Marina Abramovic wants to collaborate between art and life. He is going to stage her funeral, while she is still of best health. She wants to enjoy now, what she will probably not be able to enjoy in case it happens.

When I arrive at the Watermill Center around noon, Wilson sits under an airy tent roof, at a long table, surrounded by some of his co-workers who are avidly taking minutes. Young actors are standing right in front of him on an improvised open air stage, barefoot and in casual summer clothes. He moves them with gentle directions like figures on a chessboard. Excerpts of Claudio Monteverdi's „L'Orfeo“ come from the speakers. He interrupts the music on and off to try out new walks and movements. „Be careful not to have your eyes look too tired“, Wilson says softly to one of the performers. During the rehearsal, one can already have a sense of the hypnotical effect that he achieves on stage.

Like everyone under the tent, I had put off my shoes and had sit down in the furthest corner. Apparently I did not do it smoothly enough. Wilson turns around, nods to me and says: „Do you know what we are doing here?“ He waves me towards his table, explains that he is preparing „L'Orfeo“ for the Scala in Milan and draws me a sketch explaining how the stage design would look like, how its perspective would narrow, and how the performers would move on stage. He thinks by drawing and he draws by thinking. The one cannot be separated from the other.

Almost three weeks later, the Watermill Center throws a summer farewell afternoon concert, an event where one could feel somewhat the artistic diversity and openness of the place. Pop star Rufus Wainwright, with his love for music ranging from Franz Schubert to Judy Garland always refuses to follow the well-known patterns of the entertainment business and has not only brought half of his family, but also opera diva Jessye Norman to the „Last Song of Summer“. Of course, the revenue of the event has to support the precarious finances of the Watermill Center, and enough patrons have come to relax on the lawn with someone like Isabella Rossellini or Calvin Klein, to give some bills for Bob's Watermill dream and to be pampered with some music.

In the meanwhile, Wilson was in Taipei and underwent the feared back surgery. He follows parts of the concert from the wheelchair. It is not really a big concert, but it has more the feeling of a garden party with music. The whole event fits perfectly to Watermill, because the atmosphere is so laid back, just the opposite of a Wilson production. It fits, because the star can forget his text as well as bring on stage his mother Kate McGarrigle, aunt Anna and sister Martha to sing together.

No one would ever want to have a critical thought about Jessye Norman, while she boldly interprets Duke Ellington, wearing her black robe, combined with golden brown head and neck ornaments, slenderizing her in a chic way. She breaks up Gershwin's „Summertime“ with some scat-chirping, as if she wanted to be Ella rather than Jessye and more and more planned her career in a night club. A real diva can do anything. Somehow this is true for Rufus Wainwright, too, as he lives up to his reputation of the pop scene's gay paradise bird, wearing a pink jacket and red drainpipe pants. It is touching, how he takes back his bright, softly vibrating tenor and lets the piano swing out a phrase in the high tunes. Who can do it like him today? And which other pop singer would ever dare to recite two Shakespeare Sonnets for his audience? Wainwright does not only read them out, but has also set them to music. He presents them with a tender passion that does not know a difference between a classic and the lived presence.

Next year the Sonnets will be staged at the Berliner Ensemble, in a Bob Wilson production, of course. One can see how this concert is held in an atmosphere of rehearsal and work-in-progress, like an art laboratory, in which Jessye Norman can experiment as well as Jonathan Meese. „Over the Rainbow“, sings Rufus Wainwright at the end, lit in the golden light of the setting sun. Or is it Bob, who has taken over the light design, trying a new effect?

*Translation: Konstantin Fritz*