

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

ROBERT WILSON TOM WAITS WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

The Black Rider

The Casting of the Magic Bullets

A MUSICAL FABLE

DIRECTION, SET, AND LIGHTING BY ROBERT WILSON

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY TOM WAITS

TEXT BY WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

ORIGINAL MUSICAL ARRANGEMENTS BY GREG COHEN

AND TOM WAITS

COSTUMES BY FRIDA PARMEGGIANI

DRAMATURGY BY WOLFGANG WIENS

WITH MARIANNE FAITHFULL AND MATT MCGRATH

ANN-CHRISTIN ROMMEN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

GEARY THEATER

AUGUST 26—SEPTEMBER 26, 2004

WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY

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BITE
AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE PROJECT





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SYNOPSIS OF *THE BLACK RIDER*

This production of *The Black Rider*, with English text, premiered at The Barbican Theatre (London) on May 21, 2004. The original production of *The Black Rider*, with German text, premiered at the Thalia Theater (Hamburg) on March 31, 1990.

CHARACTERS

Pegleg	A Bridesmaid
Kuno, <i>the Old Forester</i>	Young Kuno
Bertram, <i>the Forester</i>	Man on Stag
Anne, <i>His Wife</i>	Georg Schmid
Käthchen, <i>Their Daughter</i>	Warden
Wilhelm, <i>a Clerk</i>	The Duke's Attendant
Robert, <i>a Hunting Boy</i>	Ghosts
Wilhelm's Old Uncle	Birds
The Duke	Pegleg's Double
His Messenger	Wilhelm's Double

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE. Pegleg (the Devil) emerges from a large black box onstage and presents the characters of the play. Pegleg invites the audience to “come along with the Black Rider,” promising “a gay old time.” Old Uncle invites them to “step right up,” but warns, “The Devil’s bargain is always a fool’s bargain.”

SCENE I. *A room in the forestry.* Bertram seeks advice from a portrait of his ancestor, Old Kuno. Bertram’s daughter, Käthchen, wants to marry a young bookkeeper, Wilhelm. Bertram objects to the match because Wilhelm is not a competent hunter, which Bertram considers a sign of weakness. Kuno responds with baffling ambiguity, enigmatically repeating the phrase, “Do what thou wilt.” As Bertram’s frustration mounts, Anne enters, reminding him that they, too, were once young and in love. But Bertram is not convinced; he insists that his daughter must have a husband who can provide for her. Anne defends Käthchen’s right to love whom she chooses.

Käthchen and Wilhelm enter, and Wilhelm boldly proclaims his love for her. She returns his love, but is concerned about her father’s disapproval. Wilhelm worries that Käthchen will not marry him without her father’s consent and doubts that his poor hunt-

ing abilities will live up to Bertram's standards. Bertram warmly welcomes Robert, Wilhelm's rival for Käthchen's hand and Bertram's favored candidate. Käthchen, who finds Robert—a braggart convinced of the value of his own prodigious hunting skills, as well as his irresistible appeal to the ladies—repulsive, starts to run off. Robert catches her arm and tries to arouse her with his earthy woodsman's prowess. Käthchen remains unimpressed.

KNEE-PLAY. (*"Knee plays" are what director Robert Wilson calls the interludes he sometimes adds between acts to provide an antistructure that questions the main text.*) The others exit, leaving Bertram alone to explain the risks of the woodsman's life: There's always a price to be paid for bounty taken from the forest, and the Devil will have his due. Wilhelm, a city boy who does not appreciate the worth of things in the forest, may not be able to "pay" for what he takes.

SCENE 2. *The forest.* The Duke enters with his attendant and Kuno as a young man. The Duke tells a story from Kuno's youth: A man was caught prowling in the forest. He was bound to a stag, which was to drag him until he was dead. The Duke's ancestor, a prince, took pity on the trespasser, offering the forest as a reward to anyone who could "spare the man and hit the deer." Young Kuno took aim and shot the stag, without harming the man. The prince set the man free, but, suspicious of Kuno's skill, declared his achievement "a free-shot" and ordered him to prove his skill definitively with another test, by shooting a white dove out of the sky. Kuno again hit his mark and received his prize. Ever since, this test has been the trial all foresters must successfully endure to earn their position. Kuno's triumph, however, left a debt to be paid by the generations that follow.

SCENE 3. *A room in the forestry.* Käthchen and Wilhelm sing their love to each other. By the end of the song, they are flying through the air. A giant gun appears beside them, and Wilhelm reaches for it.

KNEE-PLAY. The gun falls gently to the ground and turns into a tree.

SCENE 4. Another part of the forest. Pegleg enters, leans a gun against the tree, and hides. Wilhelm enters, determined to prove himself as a competent marksman. He discovers the rifle and fumbles with it, entangling himself in its strap. Pegleg emerges, mocking Wilhelm's ineptness with the gun. A shooting gallery of wooden stags appears, which Wilhelm attempts to hit. Observing Wilhelm's pathetic failure, Pegleg offers him magic bullets. Wilhelm accepts them and this time, without even looking, hits every target.

SCENE 5. *A room in the forestry. Night.* Käthchen awakens from a nightmare of screaming birds to find her room filled with dead game. She comes upon Wilhelm sleeping next to a carcass. She rejoices that he has become a successful hunter, believing that her father will now allow them to marry. Bertram and Anne enter and bless their engagement. At the

height of their collective joy, Käthchen is suddenly overcome by fear. She quickly talks herself out of it, however, and Wilhelm goes back to the forest to hunt again.

KNEE-PLAY. Pegleg emerges from the dark. He, too, rejoices, knowing that he has also bagged his prey. He settles in to wait for the appropriate moment to collect his prize.

SCENE 6. *Another part of the forest.* Suspecting that dark powers are behind Wilhelm's success, Robert and the Old Uncle have come to the forest to spy on Wilhelm. Wilhelm enters with his gun. Animals appear; Wilhelm shoots and repeatedly misses. In a panic, Wilhelm wonders why he is suddenly no longer able to hit his mark. Pegleg appears as a huge shadow above the trees, taunting Wilhelm. After a brief chase, Wilhelm gets more bullets from Pegleg and loads his gun. Several animals appear and disappear before Wilhelm has the chance to shoot them. Finally, he fires into the air without aiming. A dead goose—it is Käthchen's—falls from above. Wilhelm picks up the lifeless bird and exits.

KNEE-PLAY. Robert and the Old Uncle predict Wilhelm's imminent doom.

SCENE 7. *A room at the forestry. Early morning.* Käthchen wanders about, still troubled by nightmares. A bridesmaid enters with her wedding dress, followed a moment later by Anne. A depressed Wilhelm enters dragging the dead goose, cursing his ill aim. Käthchen screams when she sees the goose. Their future now seems bleak. Robert leads Bertram into

the room to show him what Wilhelm has done. The goose transforms into a vulture. Bertram tells Wilhelm that, although he is fond of him, their ways must part; Wilhelm has sold his soul and will have to repay his dire debt.

A messenger arrives to announce the impending arrival of the Duke. The Duke has promised that if Wilhelm can shoot a certain wooden bird from a tree, he will win Käthchen's hand. A white veil appears (brought in by an unseen Pegleg); as the bridesmaid places the veil on Käthchen's head, however, it turns black. All are aghast. Wilhelm comforts Käthchen with a wedding song. All leave except Bertram.

KNEE-PLAY. Bertram introduces the story of Georg Schmid, who made a deal with the Devil



Matt McGrath as Wilhelm and Marianne Faithfull as Pegleg

for magic bullets. Georg learned some hard lessons: that the Devil's magic can be addictive, and that some bullets are fated to hit a specific target, no matter where a man aims.

SCENE 8. *A crossroads.* Georg appears, building a magic circle of skulls and stones. By the time he has completed the task, he has gone completely mad. Wardens appear; they strap him into a straitjacket, place him on a stretcher, and carry him off.

SCENE 9. *The forestry at night.* Wilhelm tries to sneak out of the house, but he runs into a few obstacles: Bertram, on his way to bed; a sleepwalking Anne; a variety of objects; and finally Wilhelm's Old Uncle, who sternly advises him not to sell his soul. Old Uncle exits and Wilhelm is about to leave when Käthchen approaches. Wilhelm leads her to bed, kisses her goodnight, and exits. Old Kuno's portrait falls off the wall, nearly hitting Käthchen.

KNEE-PLAY. *Pantomime.* Pegleg's double leads Wilhelm's double into the forest.

SCENE 10. *Crossroads. Midnight.* Wilhelm stands in the center, surrounded by various apparitions who attempt to scare him off. Wilhelm stands strong, however, and calls on Pegleg, demanding one last bullet. Pegleg appears and warns him that his bullets are not free. Pegleg gives Wilhelm seven bullets, saying, "Six are yours, and hit the mark; one is mine, and hits the dark." The seventh bullet is special, but Wilhelm is not to worry: "[A]s Käthchen is your love . . . you shall hit the little dove."

KNEE-PLAY. Old Uncle tells the story of another Devil's bargain. Playing the parts of Ernest Hemingway, his agent, his wife, a gun dealer, vultures, and William S. Burroughs, Old Uncle dramatizes Hemingway's sellout to Hollywood.

SCENE 11. *Pantomime in slow motion.* The wedding party enters, all dressed in white. Pegleg enters and points to the wooden dove, sitting in a tree. Pressed by the Duke, Wilhelm prepares to shoot. Käthchen runs about, stricken with fear. The ghost of Old Kuno enters, and Pegleg leaves. Wilhelm aims his gun and fires. Instead of hitting his intended target, however, the bullet follows its own path to Käthchen, who falls to the ground dead. Pegleg returns, picks up Käthchen's corpse, and leaves. The wedding party disperses and Wilhelm is left alone. He breaks down.

KNEE-PLAY. Now utterly mad, Wilhelm sings of memories from his past.

SCENE 12. Each character in the play appears and vanishes in a great cacophony of disjointed song, leaving only Pegleg.

EPILOGUE. Pegleg thanks the audience and introduces the band, The Magic Bullets, before singing his good-bye with "The Last Rose of Summer."

ROBERT WILSON ON *THE BLACK RIDER*

The Black Rider is in 12 parts and a prologue. I had the idea that there would be indoor and outdoor scenes, man-made and natural environments, and that the scenes would alternate. I made a prologue to introduce the company. It begins with a black box standing up. The Devil and the entire company come out of the box until they all stand in a line in front of the stage, as in a circus where all artists are introduced at the beginning. Then the Devil sings a song: “Come on along with the Black Rider, we’ll have a gay old time. Take off your skin and dance around in your bones. I’ll drink your blood like wine. Come on along with the Black Rider, we’ll have a gay old time.” Anyway, the audience gets a certain idea what the piece is going to be like. Then the characters disappear, and the black box gets bigger and bigger, until the whole stage is engulfed in this black spot.

The first scene takes place in an interior, with an old family portrait on the wall played by an actor. The room is full of furniture, enormous table chairs. Wilhelm, a clerk, wants to marry Käthchen, but her father, the forester, wants someone who knows his way around in the forest.



The second scene is outside, in a forest. There are expressionistic drawings of trees. It is a flashback, more colorful. In the third scene we go back to the interior. The chairs and table are smaller; they get gradually smaller through the piece. This is a love duet. I thought to have the room filled with water. The furniture disappears, and Käthchen and Wilhelm swim under water.

The next scene is an exterior landscape, the meeting of Wilhelm and Pegleg, the Devil. Wilhelm tries to shoot but fails. Then he meets the Devil, gets the magic bullets, and shoots many deer. In scene five we go back to the house, and the room is full of dead animals. The father is pleased and decides that Wilhelm can marry his daughter. In scene six Wilhelm returns to the forest and shoots again, but he has spent all the magic bullets and only gets a goose. In scene seven Käthchen is dressing for the marriage, but Wilhelm is in despair because he cannot shoot anymore.

Scene eight is another flashback. We have a crossroads with a Dutch landscape painting behind. It is the story of Georg Schmid, who got involved with devilish drugs. Then, an intermission.

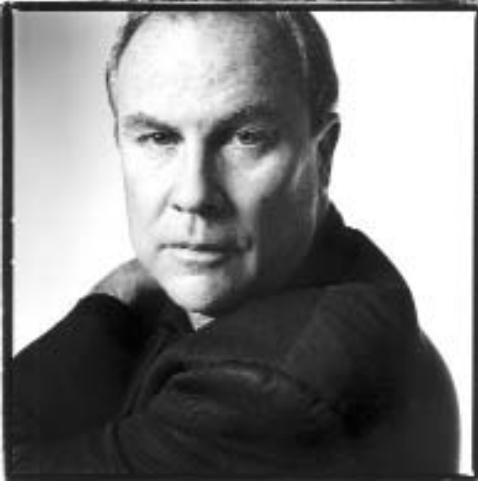
In scene nine Käthchen sits on a strangely shaped bed, in German Expressionist form. She sings a love song, and the old family portrait falls on her head. Scene ten is the crossroads scene. Wilhelm is frightened. The dead mother appears, and the Devil flies in on a chair and sings like a gospel preacher. Again Wilhelm gets magic bullets from him. In scene eleven we look through a window into the house, and the furniture is very small. Next to it is a tree with a dove on it. Wilhelm tries to shoot the dove, but kills Käthchen instead. There is an interlude with Wilhelm going mad. In the last scene the black box comes back onstage. There are curtains with madhouses flying into them, and the whole company has gone mad and is eaten up by the black box. Then the Devil enters; somebody throws him a red rose, and he sings a song about the last rose of summer. Then he gets into the black box, and the black box flies away.

The Black Rider is about timing, because it is close to comedy. In some ways a comedy is much more difficult to do than something serious; you have to be serious when you do comedy, and it is the timing that makes it funny. The story is told visually, so Burroughs's text can be more abstract and Tom's songs are poetic and complement the story. *The Black Rider* is expressionistic, quick and colorful, and highly exaggerated.

From an interview with Jan Linders in August 1992, published in *Corvidados de piedra* (Madrid, 1992); www.robertwilson.com/works/masterBlackRider.htm.

Opposite: Photo of Robert Wilson ' Brinkhoff/Migenburg, Hamburg.

ROBERT WILSON BIOGRAPHY



Robert Wilson was born in Waco, Texas, and educated at the University of Texas and Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, where he took an interest in architecture and design. Moving to New York in the mid 1960s, Wilson found himself drawn to the work of pioneering choreographers George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, and Martha Graham, among other artists. In 1969 two of Wilson's major productions appeared in New York City: *The King of Spain* and *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

In 1971, Wilson received international acclaim for *Deafman Glance*, a silent "opera" created in collaboration with Raymond Andrews, a talented deaf-mute boy whom Wilson had adopted. Wilson then went on to present numerous acclaimed productions throughout the world, including the seven-day play *KA MOUNTain* and *GUARDenia Terrace* in Iran (1972); *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, a 12-hour silent opera (1973); and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974). In 1976, Wilson joined with composer Philip Glass in writing the landmark work *Einstein on the Beach*, which was presented at the Festival d'Avignon and at New York's Metropolitan Opera House and has since been revived in two world tours (1984 and 1992).

After *Einstein*, Wilson worked increasingly with European theaters and opera houses. During this time, he created *Death Destruction & Detroit* (1979) and *Death Destruction & Detroit II* (1987). At the Thalia Theater in Hamburg he collaborated with Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs on *The Black Rider* (1990) and continued his alliance with Waits on *Alice* (1992). His most recent collaboration with Waits was an adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* (2002), which toured internationally.

In addition to his work with Waits and Burroughs, Wilson has collaborated with a number of internationally acclaimed artists, writers, and musicians, including Heiner Müller, David Byrne, Jessye Norman, Allen Ginsberg, Laurie Anderson, Susan Sontag, Lou Reed, and Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon. Over the last two decades, Wilson has directed and designed operas at La Scala in Milan, the Metropolitan Opera in New York,

the Opéra Bastille in Paris, Zurich Opera, Hamburg State Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Houston Grand Opera. In 2004 Wilson created a staged production of La Fontaine's *The Fables* for the Comedie Française in Paris, the second time in its history since 1680 that this legendary theater company, founded by Molière, has commissioned a special work. Shortly after, Wilson created an original theater work with music and dance based on one of the longest and most ancient sagas known to mankind, *I la Galigo*, an epic poem from South Sulawesi, featuring a cast of Indonesia's finest performers and musicians. The production toured Singapore, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Madrid, Lyon, and Ravenna and will be presented at Lincoln Center in New York City in 2005.

A recipient of two Rockefeller and two Guggenheim fellowships, Wilson has been honored with numerous awards for excellence, including The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize for lifetime achievement, the Golden Lion for sculpture of the Venice Biennale, the National Design Award for lifetime achievement from the Smithsonian Institution, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Each summer Wilson develops new projects at his Watermill Center, a multidisciplinary arts laboratory located in eastern Long Island, New York, where he brings together an international group of artists in a collaborative and supportive environment. Currently work is underway to substantially renovate and expand the center. *Monsters of Grace*, Wilson's digital opera with Philip Glass, was the opening work in BITE at the Barbican Theatre in London in 1998. Since then, BITE has presented his productions of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (2001) and *Woyzeck* (2002).



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE UNEXPECTED

Robert Wilson's Theater of the Future

BY JESSICA WERNER

Susan Sontag has famously described her first experience of a Robert Wilson performance—the 1971 European premiere of his seven-hour *Deafman Glance* at Théâtre de la Musique in Paris, the production that catapulted Wilson to international acclaim—as eliciting “a shock of recognition.” Years later she recalled: “I was enraptured. I had never seen anything like it before, but it was what I had always longed to see without knowing it. I needed to experience theater with that rhythm, that intensity, that beauty.” Reactions to work as visually daring and epic in scale as Wilson’s can vary widely, yet this oft-repeated sensation of being at once overwhelmed by the heightened stylized beauty and bold originality of Wilson’s stagecraft, and also, incongruously, at home in his bizarre aesthetic has become a hallmark of many first-time Wilson audiences.

This power to simultaneously surprise and enthrall may help explain the unrivalled artistic influence and enduring appeal of Wilson’s work. More than 35 years into his career, he has single-handedly done more than any other contemporary American artist to change the way theater looks and sounds, and to challenge conventional notions of what is in fact conceivable within a proscenium. Even in late 1960s New York, where he absorbed the experimental aesthetics of such artists as Merce Cunningham and John Cage and staged his own “silent operas” and “dance plays” (his terms), Wilson’s work was already heralded as a harbinger of the theater of the future. Richard Foreman wrote in the *Village Voice* of *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* (1969): “In this new Aquarian age, or in whatever new era we’re coming upon, this is the kind of theater we need.” Wilson was then just 28 years old. When his landmark opera *Einstein on the Beach* (a five-hour multimedia collaboration with Philip Glass that remains Wilson’s most famous work) premiered in 1976, theater critic Robert Brustein described it as “launching the theater into the unknown and the unknowable, in a way that makes our contemporary domestic plays look like ancient artifacts of a forgotten age.”

Today, with more than 100 original productions to his credit, Wilson is still questioning the limits and possibilities of performance, still searching for new ways to confront life’s mysteries through art, and to express art’s mysteries through life itself. Wilson himself has said: “The reason we work in the theater is to ask, ‘What is it?’ Not to say what *it* is.”

Even in today’s increasingly multimedia world, Wilson’s work remains marvelously unclassifiable, yet instantly identifiable. *New York Times* culture critic John Rockwell has

written that “within the universe of avant-garde theater, at least, the term ‘Wilsonian’ means something almost as distinct as ‘Brechtian.’”

Defying traditional categories, Wilson’s vast theatrical oeuvre represents the development and refinement of a new kind of hybrid stage work: one that showcases a rich and arresting visual vocabulary, an obsessive attention to light and shadow (Wilson likens his stage direction to “painting with light”), an emphasis on time as the primary influence on perception, and a nonlinear, associative approach to storytelling. He stands, according to *Guardian* theater critic Michael Billington, “at the tip of a large iceberg”—alongside such experimental performance giants as Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, and Pina Bausch—venturing forth to create the theater of the 21st century. Working with images on a grand scale, collectively their body of work remains theater’s most sustained and spectacular argument against the text-bound limits of realism. “What [these artists’] success shows is that audiences are hungry for outsize experiences,” says Billington, “something in which language, music, movement, and images coalesce to produce an event that works simultaneously on the ears, eyes, and emotions.”

The theatrical wonderland that is *The Black Rider*—arguably Wilson’s most accessible and popular show to date, a twisted musical fable created in collaboration with fellow American visionaries Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs (before his death in 1997)—has all the hallmarks of a genuine Wilsonian epic: an utterly seductive visual landscape aflame with saturated color, high-tech wizardry, mordant wit, distorted perspectives of line and gesture, and archetypal characterizations of our struggles with love, evil, and human folly—lit throughout with the hallucinatory intensity that is unmistakably Wilson’s own.

“LISTEN TO THE PICTURES”

By his own description primarily a fine artist who works in theater (his drawings, paintings, and sculptures are shown in museum and gallery exhibitions around the world), Wilson’s complex career is a direct expression of his manifold talents: He is a director, scenic and lighting designer (in fact the only top-tier American director to receive equal billing as a lighting designer), painter, sculptor, architect, video artist, performer, choreographer—and in his own theater productions often all of them at once.

Labeled as something of a one-man campaign to keep alive Wagner’s dream of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (universal artwork) that would demolish the borders between the discrete arts, Wilson has crossed and recrossed the boundaries that once separated the visual, musical, and dramatic arts with such fluidity and clarity of purpose that “the term ‘theater artist’ almost seems to have been coined for him,” Rockwell has written. “It defines a director/designer so powerful that his vision overshadows all else onstage.”



“I never understand how one can just be a director,” Wilson has said, “because being a director you have to know something about lights, about dress, about makeup, you have to know something about a chair, about architecture, about music, literature, and history, so that one thing leads to another. It’s all part of one concern.”

Not surprisingly, given his omnivorous mind, Wilson has commented that “the world’s a library,” indicating that ideas for the panoply of images he creates onstage come to him from sources as sundry as his window, his travels, his collaborators, his history, his memories, and even his fantasies. Indeed, Wilson’s stage pictures establish themselves with the incandescent power of dreams: unexpected, indisputably original, and charged with personal, rather than objective, meanings.

Lauded as the successor to the Surrealists, he has produced some of modern theater’s most defining and potent images: the two uneasy Victorians in *Einstein on the Beach* who, incarcerated in a carriage, slide across the stage to the sound of Glass’s arpeggios; the blood-red medieval figure of Death creeping slowly across the dazzling white backdrop of heaven in his ballet *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien* (1988); or the final moments of his 12-hour, 150-member-cast *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973)—a line of apes emerging from a shadowy forest, watching in awe as a human couple dressed in silver 18th-century finery appears, the woman’s parasol literally on fire as the curtain descends.

Above: Matt McGrath as Wilhelm

Wilson has said he deliberately creates such images to force audiences to view theater—and experience time—in a new and different way. His kind of theater encourages audiences to muse, reflect, and daydream, rather than follow a narrative thread. He admonishes theatergoers to “Go as you would to a museum, as you would look at a painting. Appreciate the color of the apple, the line of the dress, the glow of the light . . . the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures.”

Wilson scavenges for inspiration from innumerable cultural deposits: theatrical classics, newspapers, opera, pop songs, advertisements, and, increasingly in recent years, from world myths and fables: *The Black Rider*, which premiered (in German) at Hamburg’s Thalia Theater in 1990, begins a trilogy that yields clues to his literary imagination, progressing from German Expressionism to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (*Alice*, which premiered in 1992 at the Thalia, also with lyrics and music by Tom Waits), and finally to the H. G. Wells–inspired time-traveling odyssey *Time Rocker* (1996, with music by Lou Reed).

CREATING PATTERNS IN TIME AND SPACE

Robert Wilson—who once said, “I hate the word ‘religious’ and I hate to see religion onstage; my real religion is light”—was born in 1941 in the Southern Baptist stronghold of Waco, Texas. By all accounts a rather withdrawn and strangely self-possessed boy, Wilson was clearly destined for something quite different from the southern life his God-fearing parents may have wished for him. At the age of 17 he was cured of a debilitating childhood speech impediment by an eccentric Waco dance instructor named Bird “Baby” Hoffman, who would become the inspiration for many of Wilson’s early works and the namesake of his first communal performance troupe (the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds), as well as his nonprofit arts organization (the Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation). (“She was probably the first artist I ever met,” Wilson has said.) Wilson’s offbeat creative streak and penchant for nonverbal communication were in evidence early. At Waco High School, he remembers submitting a silent piece to a drama competition: “Two people in white sat in a room. Now and then there would be a knock on the door. One of them would get up and open it, but there was nobody there. That was all. It became a key piece; I keep going back to it.”

After three years studying business administration (to appease his father) at the University of Texas in Austin, Wilson quit the South for New York in 1962 to study design and architecture at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute. He had also discovered an interest and aptitude for working with brain-damaged and autistic children, whom he would tutor in various capacities for the following decade, and who would greatly influence his early theater.

Wilson was unimpressed by the mainstream theater he encountered in New York: “I went to see the Broadway plays and musicals, and they didn’t interest me at all. I went to the opera and it wasn’t interesting either. And then I went to the dance and I liked it, particularly Balanchine and Cunningham’s work. I think what interested me was that they were architectural patterns arranged in time and space.” His visual idiom began to evolve within this context of 1960s New York cultural experimentation—minimalism, performance art, and happenings provided a fertile ground for artists, like Wilson, who shared such ambitions as smudging the barrier between art and life, exploring words as sound, and replacing fictional characters with everyday people performing ordinary activities, all according to new rituals of their own design. “There was an energy in New York then,” Wilson has reminisced, “certain things going on that everyone fed off—painters, poets, writers, dancers, composers, directors. [John] Cage liberated all of us.”

Many aspects of the visual vocabulary Wilson discovered then still survive in his work. He directs almost entirely visually and intuitively, communicating mostly through drawings, and what he calls a “visual book,” which is tantamount to the score in a Wilson endeavor. “Our theatrical language has been limited by literature,” he told *New York Times* culture writer Mel Gussow. “That is not to say that words are unimportant. But the ‘visual book’ doesn’t have to be subservient to what you hear.”

AN AMERICAN ABROAD

One notable—and, to many American fans, discouraging—aspect of Wilson’s theater career, that has only begun to change in recent years, has been the remarkable dialectic between Wilson’s near cult-figure status among European theatergoers and relative anonymity among even sophisticated American audiences. He is probably the most prolific theater artist in the world, routinely presenting up to a dozen new projects every year (directing and/or designing them all), in what many consider to be a deeply rooted American aesthetic—and yet he works almost entirely on the other side of the Atlantic.

Such a discrepancy has been predicated on the very different political circumstances governing American and European arts funding. As culture budgets have been slashed in the United States, Europe’s ambitious programs of public-sponsored theater have continued to back the leading experimenters and innovators of our time. Given the oversized environments Wilson creates onstage, and the time required to rehearse and design to his meticulous specifications (for example, a crew of 56, working three to four days in advance, are needed at every staging of *Einstein on the Beach*), European theater and opera houses have embraced—and funded—his work far more consistently and generously than their American counterparts.

France and Germany, in particular—both countries with state-subsidized theaters that are the envy of the world—have nurtured Wilson’s talent ever since the French government first embraced his work (in the form of a \$250,000 gift) in 1976, enabling him to present *Einstein on the Beach* that summer at the Avignon Festival. His first German residency followed in 1979 (to create *Death, Destruction & Detroit*) at West Berlin’s Schaubühne, and over the following 15 years some of his best work has been commissioned by Germany’s venturesome public theaters, who at times even vie for the latest Wilson premiere. In 1990 alone, Wilson created four new productions in four different West German cities: *King Lear* in Frankfurt, Chekhov’s *Swan Song* in Munich, an adaptation of Woolf’s *Orlando* in West Berlin, and *The Black Rider* (in German) at Hamburg’s Thalia Theater—one of Germany’s most vibrant and innovative theaters and an increasingly important artistic home to Wilson over the last decade.

Wilson has always been a devoted collaborator, and some of his finest works to date are the result of fruitful relationships with fellow explorers into the far reaches of visual and musical experimentation. Perhaps an unlikely trio at first glance, Wilson, Waits, and Burroughs found in each other kindred spirits for the fanciful journey through German Expressionism, Faustian gambles, and surreal whimsy that are the heart of *The Black Rider*.

Pitched somewhere between a vaudevillian nightmare and a cabaret fun show, with a plot based on Carl Maria von Weber’s landmark 1821 opera, *Der Freischütz* (*The Free-Shooter*), *The Black Rider* is a contemporary (and thoroughly Wilsonian) retelling of this granddaddy of German Romantic operas. With its forest setting and tale of a forester who accepts magic bullets from the Devil to win the hand of his beloved in a shooting contest, the dark legend possesses all the right elements to inspire Wilson’s dreamlike idiom, Waits’s wry, grungy sound, and Burroughs’s drug-addled allegories and Beat reverence for the unexpected.

COME ON ALONG WITH *THE BLACK RIDER*

The Black Rider at A.C.T. marks the triumphant culmination of several years of international planning, casting, rehearsing, and staging. With an international cast of actors and musicians hailing from five different countries, *The Black Rider* is one of the most ambitious, multinational productions A.C.T. has ever launched. A coproduction with London’s Barbican Theatre, where the show enjoyed an acclaimed run earlier this summer, *The Black Rider* will travel to Australia’s Sydney Festival following its San Francisco performances.

The first major Wilson work to receive an extended run in San Francisco, *The Black Rider*’s grand scale and international collaboration team is representative of an adventurous career that continues to cross boundaries between art forms, ideas, and cultures

themselves. Wilson's overriding emphasis on the emotional power of images, rather than language, may in fact enhance his work's intrinsic international appeal, allowing it to reach across borders and into wildly disparate cultures much more easily than most language-intensive theater.

At age 63, Wilson is still relentlessly busy, with numerous projects simultaneously in various stages of development all over the globe. The past eight months are emblematic: La Fontaine's *Fables* at the Comédie Française in Paris (January 2004), Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at Los Angeles Opera (February/March); the 14th-century Indonesian epic *I la Galigo* in Singapore, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Lyon, Rome, and New York (May-July), a Giorgio Armani retrospective installation in Rome (May), *The Black Rider* at the Barbican (June), and *China Moon*, his 11th annual summer fundraiser gala (July) at the Watermill Center, Wilson's six-acre property in eastern Long Island and home to his nonprofit arts laboratory, where multidisciplinary artists from all over the world convene every summer to study and inspire each other's creative process.

Watermill (also, ironically, funded almost entirely by non-American sources) has served as the birthplace of all of Wilson's theater projects for the last several years and, as he envisions the center's central role in preserving his legacy after his death, it may be, of all his projects, the one closest to his heart. When asked to explain his vision for Watermill, and thereby his perspective on his trailblazing career's present and future, Wilson is fond of relating a story from his days as an architecture student at Pratt, in his favorite class, taught by Sibel Moholy-Nagy:

She said one day, "Students, you have three minutes to design a city. Ready, go!" I drew an apple, and inside the apple I put a crystal cube. She asked, "What is that?" I said, "A plan for a city, like a medieval village where you had a cathedral in the center." The crystal cube was the core and could reflect the universe. I've often gone back to think about that, about how our cities need centers where people can go for enlightenment, education, pleasure. The most important thing I learned from this class was how to see the big picture quickly. Theater, like design, has to be about one thing first, and then it can be about a million other things.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WILSON

Constructions in Space and Time

BY JONATHAN MARKS FOR THE AMERICAN REPERTORY THEATRE (1985)

A MERICAN REPERTORY THEATRE (A.R.T.): YOUR EARLY PROFESSIONAL WORK WAS IN THE VISUAL ARTS; YOU ALSO WORKED IN SPECIAL EDUCATION. HOW DID YOU GET FROM THERE TO THE THEATER?

ROBERT WILSON: It started with some work I was doing with a 13-year-old black deaf-mute child. At school he was thought to be uneducable. I knew that he didn't think in words, as I did, but I thought that he was intelligent and I was curious as to how he thought. I discovered he thought through pictures, and that he could understand things, see things that I wouldn't notice because I was preoccupied with words.

So we decided at one point to make a play together, and we started collecting various images: his fantasies and other things he would just point out to me. We began to work with a group of people, to stage some of his ideas, and the piece finally took shape. It was called *Deafman Glance*, a seven-hour work in four acts in silence. We wrote the production at the University of Iowa in 1969. We presented the fourth act in New York, but it wasn't until we went to France in 1970 at the invitation of Jack Lang—who was then director of the World Theatre Festival in Nancy . . . —that we presented all four acts.

Much to my surprise, the piece was an enormous success. Louis Aragon, one of the major Surrealist writers, wrote that it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. It wasn't Surrealism, he said, but it was what he had hoped the future would be for the Surrealists:

[I have never seen anything more beautiful in the world. (Theater) has never come close to this, which is simultaneously life awake and life with closed eyes, the confusion between the everyday world and the world of night, reality mixed with a dream, everything inexplicable to the eyes of a deafman. . . . Some call it low-grade or shop-window surrealism, (but) this is not surrealism at all. (It is what we,) from whom surrealism was born, dreamed it would become after us, beyond us. (How) exalted you would be at virtually every moment of this masterpiece of surprise. (This) strange spectacle, neither ballet, nor mime, nor opera (but perhaps a deaf opera) calls forth new ways with light and shadow. (It) seems to criticize everything we do out of habit. (*Deafman Glance*) is an extraordinary freedom machine.

Louis Aragon, “*Lettre ouverte à André Breton sur Le Regard du Sourd, l’art, la science, et la liberté*,” in *Les Lettres Françaises* (June 2, 1971), quoted in “Robert Wilson: A Chronological Essay,” by Trevor Fairbrother, in *Robert Wilson’s Vision: An Exhibition of Works by Robert Wilson with a Sound Environment* (quotation translated by Trevor Fairbrother).]

[Aragon’s] essay attracted a lot of attention, because it was written as a letter of reconciliation with his late friend André Breton, the principal theorist of Surrealism, with whom he had broken ranks in 1933.

It was largely because of his article that I’m working in the theater today. I immediately received invitations to work in theaters throughout Europe. I hadn’t really thought about working in the theater; I was more interested in the visual arts, painting and architecture. But I went ahead. . . .

**DO YOU THINK THAT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN SOHO IN THE MID ’60S
INFLUENCED THE DIRECTION OF YOUR WORK?**

My work was different from most of what was happening in that I’d put it, almost from the beginning, on a proscenium space, in a proscenium arch. I was using a two-dimensional space, instead of a three-dimensional space. I use space differently.

At the Whitney Museum at the end of the ’60s there was an exhibition, a summation of the ’60s, called “Art against Illusion.” I think that my theater dealt with illusion, so, again, it was different from what most people were doing at that time.

**IT’S ILLUSION MORE IN THE SENSE OF MAGIC THAN IN THE SENSE OF
REALISTIC ILLUSION?**

In that the lights are hidden, in that you don’t see the ropes that bring the scenery down, it’s illusion. I used 19th-century theater techniques, with the scenery carefully painted, flown up and down, techniques of using trap space, orchestra pits, boom space, fly space.

From the beginning, it’s worked out pretty meticulously, worked out in terms of detail, timing. Usually the work would start (and it still does) from improvisations and something very free, but it ends up being very precise. . . .

BUT YOUR ACTORS AREN’T JUST ROBOTS, AUTOMATONS, ARE THEY?

The work is very close to dance in that we’re counting the numbers, and one has to learn the choreography and then get beyond it, and it’s true that a robot couldn’t do that.

When something becomes totally mechanical, automatic, I think ultimately it becomes free.

THEN TO SPEAK OF AUTOMATONS IS NOT WRONG; THERE IS AN AIM TO MAKE IT AUTOMATIC.

Yes. My mother could type 90-odd words a minute; she said she liked to type because she could think about other things.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE AN AUDIENCE TO RESPOND DURING A PRESENTATION OF YOUR WORK? MAY IT HALLUCINATE? MAY IT DAYDREAM?

I think so. The audience is free then to draw their own conclusions. We don't do that for them—I as playwright or as director, and hopefully the actors, don't do that. The audience makes its own conclusions. And it's easier for them, because normally in a play the actor is interpreting the text. So for the audience to understand what is happening it must first understand the actor's interpretation. In this case we try not to interfere with the interpretation. We merely present the ideas.

THE AUDIENCE SHOULD NOT COME IN EXPECTING A STORY?

This piece [*the CIVIL wars*] doesn't tell one story; it tells many stories, some of them simultaneous, and *you* put them together, probably after you go home.

Most theater that we see today is thought about in terms of the word, the text. Everything is subservient to the text: the actors' gestures, the lighting, the decor, the costumes—everything is there to interpret, or to comment on, or to illustrate the text. And that's not the case with my work. In my theater, what we see is as important as what we hear. What we see does not have to relate to what we hear. They can be independent.

In the opera, in order to hear the music one frequently closes one's eyes, because what we see is distracting. It actually prevents us from hearing. And sometimes in order to see something we have to make ourselves deaf. I try to set up a space where one can easily both hear and see at the same time.

So within this theater I frequently think about the audio book and the visual book separately, and then I put the two together. They're like two separate screens; but you can adjust them so that sometimes what we're seeing actually does relate to what we're hearing. . . .

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WHAT YOU DO IS CONSTANTLY RE-EVALUATE: TO FIND THE PRECISE VALUE OF EVERYTHING, OF EVERY GESTURE, OF EVERY

SOUND, OF THE THEATER ITSELF, OF LIFE. [IN REHEARSAL] YOU TOLD AN ACTOR TO THINK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF PUTTING ON A SOCK: TO FIND THE PRECISE VALUE OF IT.

I think it's a matter of trying to have an authentic experience: not to force the experience. If you're Romeo and you say you love Juliet, it's very, very complex, and you try to be aware of what it is that you're feeling at that moment, instead of trying to project or force a feeling or an emotion or an idea. It may be different every night. It *is* different every night.

In the late '60s I saw 300 films made by Dr. Daniel Stern, when he was head of the Department of Psychology at Columbia University, films of mothers picking up crying babies. When you slow the film down and look at it frame by frame, you see that in eight out of ten cases the initial reaction of the mother is to lunge violently at the child, and the child reacts by cringing. In the next two or three frames something else happens. In one second of time something very complex is happening between the mother and the child. When the mother sees the film slowed down she is shocked and horrified; she says, "I love my child. I was simply reaching for the baby to comfort him." But it's not that simple.

It seems as if there are all these other things happening, and the body is moving faster than we think. So we try to be more aware of what it is that we're actually experiencing.

YOU HAVE, IN EFFECT, SLOWED DOWN THE FILM IN ORDER TO EVALUATE EVERY COMPONENT OF THE GESTURE.

If we take more time to do something, then our awareness is different. If I take one minute to pick up this pencil, my awareness is different than if I do it in two seconds. There's more space, there's more time to think about other things.

Usually the theater is happening so quickly that we don't have time for interior reflection. In my theater you do.

SO YOU'RE RE-EVALUATING TIME AS WELL AS SPACE?

Yes, that is primarily the concern with this construction in time and space, this work of structured silence.



DOES THIS MAKE YOUR THEATER COLD EMOTIONALLY?

Yeah. I think it has to be cold before it can be warm, and it has to have distance from the emotions in order for us to feel it. If we press the emotions on the audience then we're forcing the situation.

IN THE CONTROL COMES LIBERATION?

I think so. There's a kind of technique that's necessary for performance material. The vaudeville entertainers worked that way. I like that, because they dealt with timing, doing the same acts over and over and over again so they can be free and just concentrate on timing. They would meticulously rehearse how to sit in a chair, how to move a hand, and so they broke it down technically, analyzed it. Those American vaudeville comedians—Chaplin, Buster Keaton—continued to do routines that they grew up doing as children. Once I met Charlie Chaplin at a party, when I first went to Paris for *Deafman Glance*, and a girl came up to him and said, "Mr. Chaplin, it's so marvelous when you do the flea act. How did you come up with it?" He said, "Well, I've been doing it for 40 years." It's that kind of work that's necessary to perform my material. You can ask a dancer, "What is it that you do in the second act of *Giselle*?" She can't tell you. It's in the body. The memory is in the muscle.

My work can't be overrehearsed. It's difficult to keep it alive and interesting, but the more it's rehearsed the better. The more it's repeated. When I did *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, I staged it in two weeks, but we rehearsed it for six months. Run-throughs. We just kept repeating it over and over and over.

YOU HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR.

Yeah. It's essential. Hopefully, it's there all the time. If you believe anything too much it's dangerous.

ROBERT WILSON: STAGING PAINTERLY VISIONS

BY JOHN ROCKWELL (1992)

Robert Wilson can be considered this country's—or even the world's—foremost Rvanguard “theater artist,” a term that almost seems to have been coined for him.

Over his [37]-year career in the theater, the [now 63]-year-old director has defined a new kind of hybrid stage work, one that combines glacial movement, painterly visions, stylized articulation of text or song, and—especially when he isn't reinterpreting the classics and is creating new work of his own—a bizarre, postmodern, neo-Surrealist world view. Within the universe of avant-garde theater, at least, the term “Wilsonian” means something almost as distinct and original as “Brechtian.”

Wilson's astonishingly copious output is now produced mostly in Europe, with only occasional pieces seen here. Abroad, Wilson looks like the archetype of what Europeans prize in American renegade movie actors, jazz loners, minimalist composers, and oddball authors: a natural genius, an untutored eccentric who brings something fresh and uncompromised to the jaded European palate. He even comes from a legendary American state, Texas, to boot.

But his refusal to conform to mainstream conventions scares many Americans, unsure of their high-art credentials. His own work—from the 12-hour *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* in 1973 to the five-hour *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976 to the uncompleted daylong *the CIVIL warS: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down* of 1987—is austere, stylized, and, usually, protracted. It clashes with the staid, loosely naturalistic conventions of Broadway, films, and television: a self-contained more-than-three-hour act of *the CIVIL warS* was recommended for a Pulitzer Prize by the jury for drama, but rejected by the Pulitzer board. His interpretations of classics can seem willful and bizarre. His biggest, and hence best, works are enormously expensive to produce, both in terms of scenic requirements and especially in the huge amount of rehearsal time that Wilson demands.

Now, however, even in the teeth of the current recession, Wilson's American prospects may be improving. . . . “I don't want to be an expatriate, Wilson says. . . . “I'm an American, and I want to keep my American roots.”

As a “theater artist,” Wilson is a stage director and also (perhaps preeminently) a set and lighting designer. For the last [two decades], he has played those roles in the staging of dramatic and operatic classics and in modern repertory. . . . He has also created his own work, but his way of creating and collaborating is most unusual. Wilson is not a writer (except for occasional neo-Dadaist scenes) or a composer or a choreographer, yet he



remains the dominant force in any production. . . . Even his “dead collaborators,” as one could call Shakespeare, Mozart, and Wagner, are bent to his sensibility. Thus a Wilson staging of, say, *King Lear* is hardly the one you would like to pass on to your grandchildren (among other novelties, Wilson cast an 80-year-old German actress, Marianne Hoppe, in the title role). But as a statement in itself, a challenging clash of sensibilities across the centuries, it was fascinating.

Wilson blithely evokes canonical figures to justify his single-minded fixations: the dinosaurs, earthquake chasms, and elongated chairs that recur from production to production. “Proust said he was always writing the same novel,” Wilson says. “Cezanne said he was always painting the same still life. It is one body, one statement. But laws are made to be broken, too. You build a vocabulary and then you destroy it, and out of this destruction you build a new vocabulary. The best thing is to try to contradict yourself, to find collaborators as different as, say, Tom Waits and Heiner Müller. Listening to other people helps you to find new ideas, new windows.”

When left to his own devices, Wilson’s projects often take on a Wagnerian grandiosity. For an artist who arose out of New York 1960s minimalism, Wilson is a true maximalist of ambition and scale: For him, more is more, so that his intimate or low-budget works, the ones usually seen in New York, seriously misrepresent his achievement. . . .

What has distinguished Wilson's theater from the very beginning, despite enormous differences of subject and collaborative participation, has been his visionary stage pictures. Even without texts, as in his early works from the mid '60s to the early '70s, Wilson established a dreamlike narrative logic through a succession of vivid images, some indebted to other artists but indisputably original in their three-dimensionality and cumulative impact. No one person could say definitively what the pictures "meant" or tell their "story," but every sympathetic observer felt sure they meant something, something personal and profound. . . .

Wilson himself is guarded about the religious implications of his work. . . . "For me, to work is a religious experience," he says. "But I hate the word 'religious' and I hate to see religion onstage. . . . Religion is inside. It's truth, in here, not some big gesture—that's just *acting*."

Wilson's real religion, his God, has always been light; hence his plays about Einstein and Edison, who shared that faith, and, perhaps, his initial interest in the Gertrude Stein title *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. "Without light there is no space," he argues. "Light is the essential element in the theater, because it lets us see and hear. It's what produces color and emotion." . . .

Over the years, for better and for worse, he has changed. For some of his early devotees, fearful that his style has hardened into mannerism, it sounds like a rationalization to hear him remark: "As you grow older, you realize that compromise is part of theater. At the time, it may seem very painful, but in the long run, you learn from it."

Beyond the move [in the early '80s] to staging works by others, the major change in his working habits has been his switch from amateur, volunteer American actors, many of them overt disciples, to professionals, particularly an accomplished cadre of German and French actors. Another has been the decision not to produce his work himself, to avoid the endless fundraising and crippling financial obligations of the 1976 *Einstein*. There has been an increasing reliance on newly composed music and, more strikingly, a coming to terms with text.

A key to that development has been his collaboration with Heiner Müller, the (formerly East) Berlin playwright who looks and acts rather like Brecht and whose elliptical, densely layered works (notably *Hamletmachine*) enjoy a big reputation in Europe. . . .

It would seem an open question just how much Wilson, who speaks only English, has really changed in his approach to words, or indeed to the craft of acting, and how intellectual he really is in his conceptualization of the classic pieces he directs. He prefers short

texts, or he cuts theatrical classics radically and fills out the silences with gesture, movement, and images. And he is still a minimalist in that his designs and his philosophy of acting create a neutral backdrop against which actors simply declaim the words, avoiding traditional theatrical interpretation. Recently he has begun to employ a stiff, Japanese-style gestural language in place of naturalistic movement and articulation.

“He feels the less we inflect the line, the more impact the words and actions will have,” says Annette Paulmann, a young actress whose leading role in [1990 German production of] *The Black Rider*, a popular Wilson collaboration with the rock composer Tom Waits in Hamburg, has propelled her to stardom in the German-speaking theatrical world. . . .

Wilson is not above using psychology to elicit emotion. “An actor in *The Black Rider* was having trouble with a ballad,” he says. “I asked him, ‘Who do you love?’ He said, I have my wife, but it’s a mess. I do have my five-year-old daughter.’ So I said, ‘Sing it to her.’”

But mostly Wilson sets limits, suggests movement, and then hopes the actor will fill in the blanks. As Dunja Vejzovic, a Croatian mezzo-soprano . . . and . . . one of Wilson’s more conscientious operatic actors, puts it, “Bob’s language is pictures. He gives us the forms and we have to fill them with life.”

Jutta Lampe, the Berlin actress who played Orlando in the Wilson-Woolf monologue, says: “Bob doesn’t actually direct the pieces per se. His school is his own school.” . . .

Wilson’s directoral technique is the same for all of his operas and plays. He videotapes workshops in which he answers questions from actors or singers by miming the roles on camera. As with any innovative choreographer, his own movements, spidery and intense, are almost always more riveting than any imitator’s. Routine actors give rote reflections of his movements but miss his undercurrents of terror, surprise, and dark wit. The good ones build their own performances in a dialogue with his. The strongest ones . . . blossom in the Wilson hothouse, finding in his devices liberation and inspiration rather than constraint. . . .

“Most actors are too text-oriented,” Wilson complains. “The ones at the Schaubühne in Berlin are more into movement. Martha Graham said once that when you turn, the whole universe turns with you. I don’t want interpretation. . . . As soon as you begin to narrow the interpretation, it’s interesting but only that. . . . I look at it structurally. My idea is, If you don’t know where you’re going, you can’t get there. . . .

“The problem is when directors and actors think too much. Peter Sellars is too clever, too busy. I see Mozart, but I can’t hear the music. . . . The trick is to keep it superficially simple. Theater has to be about one thing first, then it can be about a million things.”

As he has matured, Wilson has developed a way of working that permits him to get an amazing number of complex new productions onto the stage every year: four or more is normal. The system entails workshops involving either student stand-ins or the actual principals a year or more before the formal rehearsals begin, to help him refine his ideas. Thus, at any time as many as eight or nine productions are in various stages of development. . . .

Wilson's seemingly manic overachievement—dashing about the globe to meetings and workshops and productions, bowing stiffly at one premiere and then hurrying off to the next—has led to charges that he has greedily stretched himself too thin, particularly if compared to the mystical contemplative, communal mode of working that defined his first theatrical ventures. . . .

Wilson [does] receive a salary from his foundation [and has] a sideline in his hand-crafted chairs and other furniture, which are sold as art objects. But all his income from the theater, as well as the contributions of a few longtime patrons (including Pierre Bergé of the Paris Opera and his business partner, Yves St. Laurent), goes to the foundation and is spent on workshops and other developmental projects.

Those who admire him worry about his overextension. “He does too much, but he’s a true workaholic,” says Lampe. “He empties himself.” Wilson believes his variety of work serves as inspiration. “When I was nine years old,” he recalls, “somebody asked my mother on the telephone what I was doing and she said, ‘I don’t know, but he always has a lot of projects.’ My father used to warn me to concentrate my energy on one thing. But it helps me to have many things going on at once; it makes things richer. It helped me to be working on *King Lear* and *The Black Rider* at the same time. It gave me different perspectives and let me contradict myself.” . . .

“Right now I enjoy the work, I like the work, I’m in a very productive period. . . . It’s exciting for me.

“I know myself well enough that if I stay in one place too long, I have to move on. I think I know more people now in European cities than I know in New York. It’s a very lonely life.”

TOM WAITS BIOGRAPHY



Tom Waits, a unique lyricist, composer, and raconteur, began performing in the late 1960s, inspired by a spell working as a doorman in a San Diego nightclub, where he saw a miscellany of acts and, by absorbing portions of an attendant down-market patois, developed his nascent songwriting talent. After appearing at the Los Angeles Troubador “Amateur Hoot Nights,” Waits was signed by manager Herb Cohen, who in turn secured a recording deal with Asylum Records. During the early part of his career, Waits released four albums—

Closing Time (1973), *The Heart of Saturday Night* (1974), *Nighthawks at the Diner* (1975), and *Small Change* (1976)—before the dividing line between life and art grew increasingly blurred as Waits inhabited the flophouse life he sang about. At this time, he became more influenced by Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and by songwriter Bob Dylan. Waits’s next three releases—*Foreign Affairs* (1977), *Blue Valentine* (1978), and *Heartattack and Vine* (1980)—unveiled a widening perspective, the latter two releases marked by their balance between lyrical ballads and upfront R&B.

In 1983, Waits’s new relationship with Island Records signaled a new musical direction with the release of the radical and groundbreaking *Swordfishtrombones*. Exotic instruments, sound textures, and offbeat rhythms marked a content that owed more to Captain Beefheart and composer Harry Partch than to dowdy motel rooms. Waits also emphasized his interest in cinema with acting roles in *Rumble Fish*, *The Cotton Club*, *Down by Law*, and *Ironweed*, in the process completing the exemplary *Rain Dogs* (1985). Waits’s next release, *Frank’s Wild Years* (1987), comprised material drawn from a play written with his wife, Kathleen Brennan, and based on a song from *Swordfishtrombones*. The follow-up, *Big Time* (1988), was the soundtrack to a concert film. Waits continued his cinematic career with roles in *Candy Mountain* and *Cold Feet* and in 1989 made his theatrical debut in *Demon Wine*. “Good Old World (Waltz)” was the standout track from his 1992 soundtrack to Jim Jarmusch’s *Night on Earth*. Waits’s rhythmic experimentation came to fruition the same

Photo of Tom Waits by James Michin III

year on *Bone Machine*, considered by many his finest album. The following year's release of *The Black Rider* featured music from the stage play of the same name, a collaboration with Robert Wilson and William S. Burroughs. Waits also collaborated with Wilson on *Alice* (1992) and *Woyzeck* (2002).

A perplexing genius and cult figure, Waits maintained a recording silence through most of the 1990s, but made further movie appearances in *Dracula*, *Short Cuts*, and *Mystery Men*. He left Island Records in 1998, although his legacy was celebrated on the superb *Beautiful Maladies* compilation. After signing with independent label Epitaph Records, he released *Mule Variations* (1999). The album broke into the UK Top Ten and won a Grammy Award in the United States. Waits is hardly a prolific writer, and his recent work has increasingly been confined to theater and film soundtracks. His collaborations with director Robert Wilson have been of particular note, resulting in the release of two studio albums on the same day in May 2002: the romantic *Alice*, inspired by Lewis Carroll's books, and the bitter *Blood Money*, based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which are two of Waits's finest yet most challenging recordings. As with most of his recent work, the albums were cowritten with his wife, Kathleen Brennan.

I WANT TO BUILD
A NEST IN YOUR HAIR
I WANT TO KISS YOU
AND NEVER BE THERE
I'LL SHOOT THE MOON
RIGHT OUT OF THE SKY
FOR YOU, BABY
I'LL SHOOT THE MOON
FOR YOU

—*The Black Rider*

TOM WAITS, ALL-PURPOSE TROUBADOUR

A wry pop voice harmonizes with Robert Wilson and William Burroughs on *The Black Rider*.

BY ROBERT PALMER (1993)

Tom Waits is sitting in limbo, dreaming of Harry's Harbor Bazaar. Limbo is a Mexican cafe in downtown San Francisco; Harry's Harbor Bazaar is in Hamburg, Germany, where [in 1990] the singer/songwriter/actor/composer collaborated with the director Robert Wilson and the author William S. Burroughs on *The Black Rider*, a dark Teutonic fairy tale of a pop opera. . . .

Waits, who [in November 1993] is almost 44, looks remarkably fit. . . . In his porkpie hat, black leather jacket, white T-shirt, tattoos, and motorcycle boots, he looks *exactly like Tom Waits*, the troubadour whose mid-'70s albums, *The Heart of Saturday Night*, *Nighthawks at the Diner*, and *Small Change*, celebrated a fugitive roadside America of short-order waitresses, beatniks, and barflies and established him as one of pop music's most distinctive voices.

Since then, Waits has grown as an artist, not only musically but as an actor and a composer for theater and film. Hamburg and the traditional German folk tale that provided the starting point for *The Black Rider* seem worlds away in space and time from the Kerouacian epiphanies of Waits's early work. But perhaps not; once he found Harry's Harbor Bazaar on the Hamburg waterfront, Waits felt right at home.

"It's a crude little junk shop," he says approvingly; "crude" is a positive word in Waits's vocabulary. "Sailors from all over the world, when they land in Hamburg, that's where they sell their \$2 guitars, stuffed snakes, zebra jackets. It's a real swampy place. You can buy insects from everywhere, under glass, in little boxes, elephant beetles the size of a child's shoe. It's all mildewed in there, full of weird musical instruments, half-decomposed baby giraffes stuffed with straw. They even had a shrunken head you could look at for, like, two marks. They *advertise* the shrunken head in the *window*; that's what brings 'em in. Harry's rarely there; if he is, all the prices are doubled."

Mr. Waits's eye for the specific image and the telling detail served him well on *The Black Rider* . . . which had its world premiere at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg in March 1990. . . . Inevitably, Harry's Harbor Bazaar found its way into Waits's opening song, "Lucky Day (Overture)," which also kicks off his [*Black Rider*] album. In the stage production, the actors sing Waits's songs; on *The Black Rider* (Island), he sings them himself, with a mem-

orable guest vocal by Burroughs on the opera's one nonoriginal number, a period piece called "T'Ain't No Sin" ("... to take off your skin/And dance around in your bones...").

The album also includes some of the instrumental music Waits wrote for the show with the help of his arranger, Greg Cohen, music that is by turns gloomily nocturnal and nightmarishly lively, scored for banjo, bass clarinet, cello, French horn, and other instruments not generally heard in contemporary pop music. Strains of vaudeville, rock, waltz, and cabaret weave in and out with a hurdy-gurdy regularity.

This is not such a dramatic departure for Waits. Ever since his film score for Francis Ford Coppola's *One from the Heart* (1982) and his own groundbreaking album *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), he has been resolutely broadening his musical palette, gravitating toward odd instruments (including a wheezing old protosynthesizer called the chamberlain and a percussive sound sculpture known as the conundrum) and sonic textures.

His score for the director Jim Jarmusch's film *Night on Earth* (1991) used some of the same instrumentalists and comparable, if somewhat brighter, sonic shadings. Several of the songs on his 1992 album *Bone Machine* were recorded in a shed and feature a group of musicians and friends, including his wife, Kathleen Brennan, beating on wood and metal with sticks.

The music on *Bone Machine*, which won a Grammy as best alternative album of 1992, is more intimate than *The Black Rider*, but no less bracing or challenging. With these recordings, Waits... has been creating a music that is beyond category—and beyond the scope of the character he portrayed in his early performances, the hard-drinking, gruff-voiced chronicler of bleak rooming house days and road-weary nights. Or was it a character? Will the real Tom Waits please stand up?

Thomas Alan Waits was born in Pomona, California, the son of schoolteachers. His father was from Texas and was named Jesse Frank Waits, after the outlaws and folk heroes Jesse and Frank James. Though his parents divorced when he was ten and his mother brought him up along with two sisters, Tom Waits was taken with his father's rambling ways and patterned his early stage persona partly on an idealized version of Jesse Frank.

"With my own character, I don't know, I just put together something," Waits [said] sitting at a corner table in Limbo over coffee and cigarettes. "I was trying for a little bit of Jesse Frank, a little bit of Cantinflas, a little bit of, I don't know, Crazy Guggenheim? But I found after a while that I was limiting myself. It was too much like I had my own tv

show and it was the Red Skelton show; I was doing sketches. I got kind of tied up in my own creation; I wouldn't allow myself to spread out."

The turning point came in the early '80s, when Coppola gave Waits an office and a piano at his Zoetrope studios to work on the score for *One from the Heart*. Waits found himself being highly productive, perhaps because of, rather than despite, the unaccustomed discipline. He hadn't just been chronicling the lives of the whisky-soaked down-and-outers who populated his songs, he was living that way. Writing a creative and widely praised film score gave him confidence in his work; so did meeting his future wife, who was working as a script editor at Zoetrope.

"My first record after we got married, *Swordfishtrombones*, was also the first one I produced myself," he recalls. "She gave me the guts to just *do it*. Up to that point, I think I had created a character for myself and given him lines; I had a lot of fears concerning my own growth and development. She really helped me open up and not be afraid to do something." The characters began to stay in the songs, many of which are now Waits/Brennan collaborations, and Waits began to apply his considerable acting talent to film work.

. . . His debut as a film actor was a bit part in *Paradise Alley* (1978), directed by Sylvester Stallone. After he had other small roles in *Wolfen* and *The Stone Boy*, Coppola took an interest in him and cast him in *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, and *The Cotton Club*. In 1987 he worked with Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep in *Ironweed*, but most of his fans single out his major part in Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law* (1986) as his finest acting work so far. Of course, the character he portrays in that film, and in several others, rather closely resembles *Nighthawks at the Diner*-era Tom Waits. Nevertheless, the film critics have consistently given him good reviews—better ones than he gives himself.

"I don't really consider myself an actor," he says matter-of-factly, reaching for another cigarette. "I do some acting. I've chosen to just identify myself as a creative person; I don't have the confidence I'd like to have as an actor at this point. But I've learned that the acting and the music and other projects all serve each other. There's things you learn in one that you can bring with you to another.

"I learned a lot from working with Robert Wilson. He's an actor; every physical gesture, every movement onstage, he did it first. And he puts his actors through the wringer. When we were getting *The Black Rider* together, I went onstage for an hour to stand in for somebody who was sick, and it was like, 'He's using these people like clay.' And this particular group of German actors were thrilled. They'd melt themselves down, pour themselves into any mold.

"By the end we were all transformed. I know the experience changed me. Things you planned turn out to be meaningless, and that which you accumulated without knowing it becomes your real treasure, your innocence, your confidence. I love that."

For his part, Wilson said from Paris, “Tom and I are very different men.” His soft, measured tones contrast markedly with Waits’s voluble hipster cadences and gravelly speaking voice—reminiscent of his singing voice but not as emphatically gruff. “Tom and I dress differently, have different styles; I tend to be cooler, more formal. But nevertheless, I think we’re emotionally tied somehow.

“In my work, the emotion is sometimes hidden or buried,” he continued, “and Tom’s music has a very deep emotional center for me. I immediately liked it when I first heard it; I liked it very much. And Tom knows theater; it’s in his blood. We can talk. I can ask him about how things look on the stage, and that really helps.”

Waits teamed up again with Wilson on *Alice*, another pop opera, based on *Alice in Wonderland* and the life of its creator, Lewis Carroll. It had its world premiere [in December 1992], also at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg. [Waits and Brennan are currently working on the albums of *Alice* and the musical *Woyzeck*, also a collaboration with Wilson, staged at the Barbican in 2002.] Like *The Black Rider*, he says, [they] are true collaboration[s].

Despite their busy schedules, Wilson, Waits, and Burroughs are not the kind of artists who like to work by phone and fax. “There’s a real crude aspect to the way Wilson works,” Waits says, again, admiringly. “It’s kind of like you have entered some sort of dark Cape Canaveral. There’s a long table in the dark, with a lot of papers and cups of coffee and wires and microphones and a few lights; you feel like you’re in the Pentagon or something. Onstage there’s a cleared space with black curtains, and he kinda starts with nothing, and so does everybody else.

“To go into that world, it’s like going to sleep and then being able to communicate from that state. Sometimes Wilson can be like a tyrant, sometimes it’s like he’s six years old, but everyone is very open about bringing in anything they think could be part of the show. There’s an *innocence* about the whole process.”

“Innocence” is not a word one associates with William Burroughs, the perennially iconoclastic author of *Naked Lunch*. Waits grew up reading Jack Kerouac and the other Beat writers, including Burroughs, the Beat godfather, but they hadn’t met until they sat down in the novelist’s home in Lawrence, Kansas, to begin work on *The Black Rider*. Burroughs still sounds enthusiastic about the collaboration.

“When Tom was here in Lawrence,” he said recently by telephone, “and we were sketching out the basic structure of *The Black Rider*, he had some very good ideas. I had the idea of comparing the magic bullets in the original German story to heroin. Once you

use one, you'll use another. Tom said, 'Yeah, and the first one's always free,' and of course that went right in."

Burroughs, Waits said, "was always the scary old man to me, and he was scary when I met him. But he let everyone be a part of his whole creative process." In Hamburg, Waits and Burroughs worked separately, at night, bringing their results to Wilson's rehearsals the next morning. "Because of the way we worked," Waits said, "the recordings naturally tended to be kind of crude, like work tapes, and I didn't realize at the time that a lot of these recordings would eventually be released. Which was great for me. I've always struggled with that; as soon as I think we're doing something for real, it just freezes me up. My favorite recordings tend to be those kind of uninhibited moments in music that had no idea that they were music.

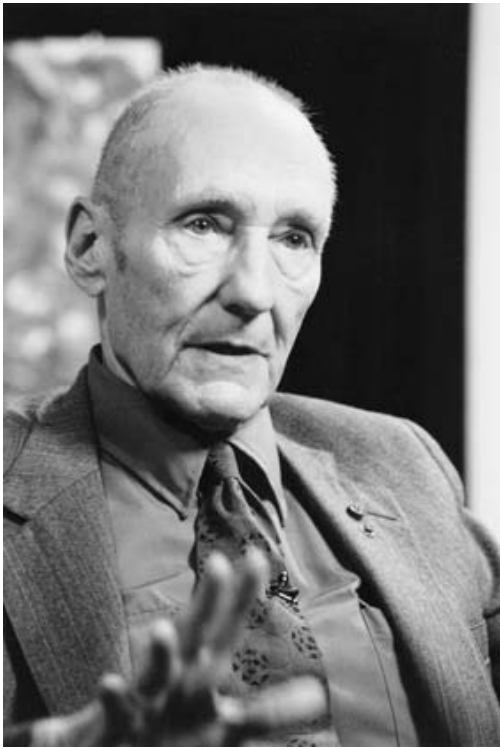
"To me, everything is really music—words are music, every sound is music, it all depends on how it's organized. In terms of an actor's choices, all behavior is fair game, so why isn't all sound considered music? I really like the physicality of music making and the possibility of human error. As much as you rehearse and perform it, the music never really wants to stay the same. You can *make* it do that, but then what you've got to do is respect the moments when it escapes your control."

But the darkness, Tom, the darkness. Waits is happily married and lives in Sonoma County, California, with his wife and three young children, yet if he's exorcised the demons from his life, he hasn't exorcised them from his music. *Bone Machine* kicks off with "Earth Dies Screaming," a song as cheerful as its title, and touches on murder and madness; *The Black Rider* concerns death and deals with the Devil, exuding an almost biblical miasma of impending apocalypse. Darkness, darkness all around. "Well, if you're a songwriter, you spend a lot of time in motel rooms, and sooner or later you're going to pick up a Bible," Waits deadpans.

"Songs about death are really as old as death itself. Writing those songs can be kind of scary; you don't know if you're keeping death away or bringing it in. Songs are like oddball prayers sometimes, they can have great power. But I've always been prone to those things, those dark places, and I'm not afraid of writing songs about that. I don't know, there's always music at a funeral. What song would you want played at your funeral? It's something to think about."

How about "Louie Louie"? Waits takes time to consider the proposition. "Good as anything," he finally decides.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS



William S. Burroughs was born in 1914 in St. Louis, Missouri, the grandson of the inventor of the Burroughs adding machine. In his early 30s, Burroughs traveled to New York, where he met Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and his future partner, Joan Vollmer Adams. Burroughs took on the role of teacher, encouraging Kerouac and Ginsberg in their attempts to write fiction and poetry, but by his mid 30s Burroughs himself had still not begun to write.

At first indifferent to serious literary ideals, Burroughs was talked into writing *Junky*, a heroin-tinged autobiography, by his old friend Kells Elvins. Ginsberg arranged for its publication as a pulp paperback in 1953 under the pseudonym “William Lee.” Burroughs followed this with a similar study of homosexuality, *Queer*, but this was too much even for the pulps, and would not be published for decades.

After Burroughs accidentally killed Joan Vollmer Adams in 1951 (in a tragically, drunkenly misguided attempt to enact for friends the fateful scene from *William Tell*), their son went to live with Burroughs’s parents, and Burroughs wandered the world from South America to Tangier. While his New York friends were becoming a popular sensation as the Beat Generation, Burroughs was living in Tangier, where he wrote the hundreds of pages that would eventually become the novel *Naked Lunch*. The book made him an underground celebrity and is widely considered his best work.

A film of *Naked Lunch*, directed by David Cronenberg, earned Burroughs much attention in the early 1990s. He has been cited as an inspiration by many musicians, and both the influential London psychedelic-scene band The Soft Machine and the American 1970s jazz-rock band Steely Dan took their names from his writings. In 1992 Kurt Cobain

released an album with Burroughs, *The Priest They Called Him*, in which Cobain plays electric guitar over Burroughs's spoken voice. In later years, Burroughs spent a great deal of time as a painter and calligrapher. He was also an animal-rights activist and environmentalist, and supported a Duke University foundation dedicated to the survival of lemurs. He died on August 2, 1997, at the age of 83.

BURROUGHS ON WILSON

Robert Wilson is primarily concerned with beauty—which implies, in certain quarters, escapism. And why should escapism carry an opprobrious connotation? Are life boats and fire escapes to be shunned as Escapist?

Recent dream research has demonstrated that dreams are a *biological necessity*. No matter how much dreamless sleep the experimental subject (animal or human) is allowed, if his REM—that is, dream—sleep is consistently interrupted, he will soon show all the symptoms of sleeplessness: irrationality, lack of concentration, hallucinations, and *eventual death*. Robert Wilson is presenting beautiful life-saving dream images on stage and canvas.

Working with Robert Wilson on *The Black Rider*, I was constantly impressed by his visionary grasp of the complex medium of opera. He sees what he wants, and is able to translate his inner vision into stage terms, and to circumvent the crippling conventions of dramatic presentation: what he calls “ping-pong dialogue” and soap opera plots.

The future of drama and opera rides with Robert Wilson.

William S. Burroughs

**I FELL ASLEEP
DOWN BY THE STREAM
AND THERE I HAD
THE STRANGEST DREAM . . .**

—*The Black Rider*

THE BEATS GO ON

BY PAUL WALSH

On October 7, 1955, the American cultural landscape shifted with seismic abruptness when Allen Ginsberg took the makeshift stage of San Francisco's obscure Six Gallery on Fillmore to recite from his new American epic, *Howl*. Inspired by a peyote-fed hallucination of the red-eyed monster Moloch wreathed in smoke on the upper floors of the St. Francis Hotel, Ginsberg raved in a new kind of poetic rapture about the realities of despair and the possibility of beatific joy. Ginsberg's friends and sometime lovers Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady stood in the back of the room, chanting affirmations and tapping time on a jug of cheap red wine. "Yeah, man, go." This was the birth of Beat, or rather, its apotheosis. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books published *Howl* the following year, it was met by a protracted pornography trial that brought notoriety and solidarity to this new school of

American poetry whose only credo was "tell it like it is."

By this point, the handful of East Coast writers who had given birth to the Beat generation—Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and William S. Burroughs—had been hanging out together and writing for over a decade. In 1955 Burroughs was in Tangiers and had been for over a year, strung out on Eukodal, a synthetic form of codeine. He had been a sort of perverse criminal father figure to Ginsberg and Kerouac when the three patrolled the gritty environs of post-World War II Times Square together in the late '40s, searching for drugs and stories and



Photo of Robert Wilson, Tom Waits, and William S. Burroughs ' Brinkhoff/Mgenburg, Hamburg.

sex. In 1951 Burroughs had killed his second wife at a drunken, drugged-out party in Mexico while acting out the story of William Tell. He shot her in the side of the head. Later he acknowledged: "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death." He published his quasiautobiographical docufiction *Junky* in 1953 under the pseudonym William Lee, and his hallucinatory novel, *Naked Lunch*, in 1959.

Kerouac published his epoch-making novel, *On the Road*, in 1957. It became an overnight success and was followed in quick succession by a half-dozen more "stream-of-consciousness" novels, including *The Subterraneans* (1958), *The Dharma Bums* (1958), *Doctor Sax* (1959), and *Visions of Cody* (1960). Each espoused the beatitude of spontaneity and the metaphysical wonders of marijuana and Benzedrine.

Howl (1956), *On the Road* (1957), *Naked Lunch* (1959): these were the seminal works of a new generation and a new movement that was decidedly and outlandishly American. And it is to the decidedly American traditions of this movement that Robert Wilson turned when crafting the libretto for *The Black Rider*, anchoring this German folk play and tribute to German Expressionism in the renegade traditions of mid-20th-century American fiction.

Burroughs's personal legacy of bullets and lifetime of experimentation made him a natural to write the libretto for Wilson's *Black Rider*, though he was living out the final years of his life in sober seclusion in Lawrence, Kansas. And the angelic yearnings and gravelly voice of Tom Waits made him Burroughs's ideal collaborator. Though of another generation, Waits, like those who came before him, celebrates the beatific visions of down-and-out late nights in America's outlaw streets. Deviant pleasures and discarded revelations speak of a humanity caught between atomization and apocalypse. Waits's songs are revelations, bemused prophecies, mystical adventures into the heart of an elusive America on the run from the stark realities of daylight. Like Burroughs and the Beats, Waits celebrates the madness of life in an exquisite pairing of words and visions that rebel against their meaning.

The Beat vision of mid-century America, and of those who followed after, was one of urban gambles strung together by miles of highway—a striking contrast to the ancient agrarian story of *The Black Rider*, of the hunter and the Devil and his silver bullets. This story, which had spawned opera in the European mold, now gives birth to a new kind of music-theater with a decidedly American flare and sound and feel. The contradiction between the openness of the wide and wild American road and the constrained darkness of a Teutonic forest creates a skewed and jagged dynamic that threatens to burst the borders of this makeshift backyard cabaret.

Here the postwar American aesthetic of unrestrained candor and freshness that grew up in the face of cold-war bureaucratic-speak, celebrating at the altar of spontaneity and preaching that “the first thoughts are the best thoughts,” proves how reminiscent it is of the inventive rawness and immediacy of the Expressionist poetry that dominated the German avant-garde in the years between the wars. Among the young radicals of Germany in the years between the wars, as among the Beats in the years following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, expression was everything and immediacy was all. Old assumptions and rules were thrown to the winds. Artists sought to give shape to what lies dormant within them, exploring extreme psychological states and disorienting emotional excesses in the quest for spiritual transcendence and hidden meaning. Created by people displaced within their own country and their own social order, Expressionist poems, plays, and films radiated a sense of mad disorientation and impotent rage. In this the Expressionists followed in the footsteps of the Symbolists, searching for a clue to the hidden meaning of the universe; and after them, by way of Abstract Expressionism, followed the Beats.

When he died in 1997, Burroughs was eulogized in *Wired News* as a “junkie faggot, interdimensional voodoo tactician, and antediluvian comedian” and as “an icon of apocalyptic hipster cynicism.” The epitaph is fitting. Nearly half a century earlier, in his poem “On Burroughs’ Work” (1954), Allen Ginsberg had written:

A naked lunch is natural to us,
 we eat reality sandwiches.
But allegories are so much lettuce.
 Don’t hide the madness.

The aesthetic that Burroughs exemplified and Ginsberg extolled in his poem was one of “actual vision & actual prisons, / as seen then and now.” It is a vision extolled by others of their generation and of generations before and later. It is this that gives particular vibrancy to the darkly enigmatic story within the story of *The Black Rider*: a German fable for all ages told in a decidedly American vocabulary.

THE FORGOTTEN KILLER

The work of William S. Burroughs, once dangerous, is in danger itself.

BY VINCE PASSARO (1998)

“To summarize, I pass along one of my specialized bits of wisdom like
‘always use poultry shears to cut off fingers’:

‘Never participate in active or passive role in any shooting things off of, or near one, or
knife throwing or anything similar and, if a bystander, always try to stop it.’”

—William Burroughs,
in a letter to Allen Ginsberg
(February 7, 1955)

To the extent that it is important to know anything about a writer’s life aside from his work, it probably is important to know about William Burroughs’s that in this droll passage he speaks with the voice of experience. Burroughs’s idiosyncratic wit and the papyry dry prose style he developed to carry it are both on display here. But the wit slices deeper when one happens to know that Burroughs did, in fact, remove a piece of one of his fingers with poultry shears and that he did participate in—or, actually, orchestrate without encouragement—the attempted shooting of a glass off his wife’s head. Fatally, he missed the glass.

When Burroughs died [in August 1997] at the age of 83, such disturbing life details were little remembered. He had been commercially morphed into the grand old man of American freakdom, the last living beatnik widow, a “cool” face in a Nike ad, and a background vocalist on Tom Waits and Laurie Anderson records. In reality, however, Burroughs was a dangerous man, not only an actual killer but a theoretician of crime and resistance, someone who strove to forge the unspeakable into an art form. With his passing, the American literary world lost more than the thin, neatly dressed Beat icon that the mainstream obituaries described; it lost the last of its revolutionary modernists.

The writers one most associates with him now, spoon-fed to us by PBS specials and exhibitions at the Whitney, are Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and a few other prominent Beats. Style- and marketing-wise, of course, this association makes sense. These men, all friends, hung together in the cafes of Greenwich Village; they smoked tea, they exchanged copies of B. F. Skinner and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, they grooved. For Burroughs, Ginsberg was even a frequent love object, as well as a supporter, an impresario, and the addressee for some of the great correspondence of the era. But in literary terms, Burroughs traveled in

much better company. He was, first of all, what no other Beat could legitimately claim to be—an intellectual. He was a satirist in the tradition of Swift, Sterne, and Gogol. He was also a Modernist with a capital M. And he was, in the most complicated historical sense, an American.

The differences between Burroughs and the Beats begin in his roots. Born in 1914 in St. Louis, he was raised by an established, prominent family and educated early enough in the century to be strongly influenced by the previous one. He was to write with a deep connection to the frontier violence and thievery that he believed lay behind most American prosperity. Like T. S. Eliot three decades before him, Burroughs emerged from a haute bourgeois St. Louis to pursue a path as ghostly Harvard man and expatriate author; in age, he was as much a contemporary of Auden and Beckett as of his future roommates in the Beat Hotel. Having grown up reading the hodgepodge American literature of the beginning of the century, and almost a decade older than Kerouac and twelve years older than Ginsberg, he was already intellectually mature by the time he met them; it was he who introduced them to the world of Times Square junkies and hipsters, whom they may have embraced aesthetically but whom he dealt with as a matter of need, because he was a heroin addict. The three met and became friendly in the 1940s around Columbia University, the neighborhood where Burroughs eventually shared an apartment with Joan Vollmer, who would become his common-law spouse and bear his child, despite his continuing and unflagging homosexuality. Burroughs (and Vollmer as well, by many accounts) had a large intellectual and literary influence on the younger men, though Burroughs was not yet a writer nor owning up to intentions of being one.

If you were to write the *Time* magazine version of late 1950s culture, you would probably offer up the thought caplet that Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac shared a common impulse to break through the barriers of literary convention and social conformity, and were part of a general push toward individual freedom that was both traditionally democratic and modern. But Ginsberg and Kerouac stand within a tradition of spiritual exuberance and preacherly optimism, traceable to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. Burroughs's influences, to put it mildly, come from deeper underground. His voices are the voices of the dark side: Edgar Allan Poe, Jack London, Stephen Crane, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Raymond Chandler, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka, not to mention science-fiction and boys'-adventure writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs. Such disparate influences led him to master both the idioms of hard-boiled pulp and the lyrics of surrealism. From them, he created a strangely effective hybrid of European symbolism and American criminality. The only American writer even

remotely similar in such dual inclinations was Nathanael West, who died in 1940, relatively obscure.

Like many modernists, Burroughs built up a large and overly significant mythological system that became the imaginative fuel for his writing.¹ He created a universe of shifting time, transmogrifying characters, and ambiguous geography in which forces of evil—generally represented as heavily repetitive, viral forms of images and addictions—are eternally and invisibly at war for Control; Burroughs, this century's great addict, as De Quincey was the last's, calls the agents of such forces "control addicts." This world appeared first in *Naked Lunch* (1959) and was elaborated in the trilogy of novels that followed in the early 1960s: *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*.

In these books, Burroughs also developed an underground politics of shamanistic resistance to 1950s u.s. triumphalism. "And the u.s. drag closes around us like no other drag in the world," he writes in *Naked Lunch*.

You can't see it, you don't know where it comes from. Take one of those cocktail lounges at the end of a subdivision street—every block of houses has its own bar and drugstore and market and liquorstore. You walk in and it hits you. But where does it come from? Not the bartender, not the customers, nor the cream-colored plastic rounding the bar stools, nor the dim neon. Not even the tv.

And our habits build up with the drag, like cocaine will build you up staying ahead of the c bring-down. And the junk was running low. So there we are in this no-horse town strictly from cough syrup. And vomited up the syrup and drove on and on, cold spring wind whistling through that old heap around our shivering sick sweating bodies and the cold you always come down with when the junk runs out of you. . . . On through the peeled landscape, dead armadillos in the road and vultures over the swamp and cypress stumps. Motels with beaverboard walls, gas heater, thin pink blankets.

In this Burroughsian sense of the universe and the self, both become a constant battleground between forces of unseen invasion and occupation and some other force, call it language, or at times even antilanguage, that is capable of revealing the invaders and rendering them harmless.

Burroughs was also driven by his appetites—for violence, for drugs, and for obliteration through an insatiable, protoplasmic sexuality that carries within its urgencies, always, a strong atmosphere of disgust and death. His favorite homoerotic image is that of the spasmodic orgasm of the hanged man, opposing themes of ecstasy and assassination that

he plays in full counterpoint, like a Bach fugue. Before *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs wrote two autobiographical narratives: *Junkie*, which was published in 1953 under the pen name William Lee, and *Queer*, an account of the months leading up to the killing of his wife that Burroughs did not publish until 1985. Although much less formally innovative than Burroughs's subsequent books, *Queer* is a crucial Burroughs text and one of his most accessible. *Queer* can be read as a key to the work that follows it, for in it Burroughs explicitly explains the personal experiences—the Burroughs character again goes by the name Bill Lee—and ideas that will drive his work for the next two decades or more. One vivid moment of self-explanation is a passage in which, as so often happens when reading Burroughs, you find him getting at something during the 1950s that became clear to the rest of us only much later, if ever. Regarding Lee, he writes:

The limitations of his desires were like the bars of a cage, like a chain and collar, something he had learned as an animal learns, through days and years of experiencing the snub of the chain, the unyielding bars. He had never resigned himself, and his eyes looked out through the invisible bars, watchful, alert, waiting for the keeper to forget the door, for the frayed collar, the loosened bar . . . suffering without despair and without consent.

This passage describes the condition of the addict, Burroughs's perennial concern. It also captures the situation of the homosexual, that indefatigable figure of commingled pride and self-revulsion who, in the last half of the 20th century, has come to signify a universal sense of ill-fitting selfhood, forever pitted against social forces that wish to destroy it or, at a minimum, render it invisible. More broadly, Burroughs captures here the individual in late modernity; Lee's condition of endless, frustrated want and the image of the caged animal predict a general return to savagery that Burroughs and other modernists identified not with the loss of civilization but with an elaboration of civilization so multiple, so attenuated, so fundamentally dishonest, hypermarketed, and lethal that it renders the individual a stranger to his community and to himself. This is absolutely the modern condition, and Burroughs was its last and one of its best American representatives. He died not like West, obscurely, but oddly famous, much photographed. Yet he remained fundamentally unrecognized as traditional satirist and as master of 20th-century affect, the king of derisiveness, self-loathing, and despair.

Two accidents of marketing and one attempt at suppression combined to ensure that Burroughs would not die in obscurity. The first marketing ploy occurred before Burroughs, already in his forties, had published in his own name. In 1956 and 1957, Ginsberg and Kerouac published, respectively, *Howl* and *On the Road*, gaining worldwide fame as spokes-

men for a group of beautifully alienated artists and social outcasts known as the Beats—or, if you were a gullible *Time* reader and Dobie Gillis fan, beatniks. Both books nod significantly in the direction of the as-yet-unknown author: Kerouac depicted him as Old Bull Lee, junkie philosopher, and Ginsberg dedicated his poem to his mentor (“William Seward Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, an endless novel which will drive everybody mad”).

Thus, by the time *Naked Lunch* was published in 1959, it had a built-in audience of the yearning-to-be-hip. As if that wasn't enough, a second big marketing boost occurred in 1962, at the International Writers' Conference in Edinburgh. Burroughs was in attendance; *Naked Lunch* had been published in Paris but was banned in Britain and only just ready for publication in the United States, because its u.s. publisher, Grove Press, had been defending bookstores against obscenity charges for selling Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and did not yet have enough money to do the same for *Naked Lunch*. Although few people had read the book, it was well enough known to become the subject of hot debate at Edinburgh and found for its defense, surprisingly, a lady of high culture and considerable influence: Mary McCarthy. McCarthy's public comments, placing Burroughs and *Naked Lunch* alongside Nabokov and *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* as the most interesting authors and books she had encountered in some time, caused a kind of literary sensation. Many critics, looking at the book in the months following and probably unable to decipher it, deplored it forthwith. The following year McCarthy, as an act of self-defense, wrote an essay about *Naked Lunch* that stands as one of the most intelligent assessments Burroughs was ever to receive.

. . . The best comparison for the book, with its aerial sex acts performed on a high trapeze, its con men and barkers, its arenalike form, is in fact with a circus. A circus travels but it is always the same, and this is Burroughs's sardonic image of modern life. The Barnum of the show is the mass-manipulator, who appears in a series of disguises. Control, as Burroughs says, underlining it, can never be a means to anything but more control—

As McCarthy recognized, Burroughs possessed, in addition to the modern European streak that the other Beats did not share, the eye and ear of the leering carny barker and the corner cardsharp. His favorite book as a boy was by one Jack Black, a second-story man, flimflam artist, and author of the autobiography *You Can't Win*. To hear Burroughs read his own work in the flat skeptical accents of the American plains was to hear a vaudeville comedian playing the fake tough guy in the snap brim hat. . . .

Although, strictly speaking, *Queer* was Burroughs's second book, it is the book that now seems to define him most. *Queer* was the first in which he found his true comic-psychotic voice and his time- and character-shredding narrative style. He wrote it in 1952 but did not

publish it for more than 30 years, ostensibly because the homosexual content was too strong for any publisher to bear. Actually, we learn in his introduction, the real problem with *Queer* those many years lay closer to home: the book recaptures the months that led up to his murder of his wife in Mexico City in 1951 and creates an atmosphere of such lethal despondency that the person who really could not bear dealing with it was Burroughs himself.

When I started to write this companion text to *Queer*, I was paralyzed with a heavy reluctance, a writer's block like a straitjacket. . . . [T]he book is motivated and formed by an event which is never mentioned, in fact is carefully avoided: the accidental shooting death of my wife, Joan, in September 1951. . . . The event towards which Lee feels himself inexorably driven is the death of his wife by his own hand, the knowledge of possession, a dead hand waiting to slip over his like a glove.

"A dead hand waiting to slip over his like a glove" is one of those Burroughs phrases, surreal-noir-sci-fi-pornographic in style, that linger in the senses like a recently encountered electric current. In *Queer*, written when he was 38, Burroughs found his voice and his technical approach—namely, a comic device he called the routine, which creates and dispenses with characters at cartoon speed, diverts the narrative, and gives Burroughs the flexibility to use his multitude of voices.² The routine was a crucial component of Burroughs's art because it relieved him of the burden of selfhood and of serious intention. The history of his relationship to his own work is one of separation and disgust. Throughout his career, Burroughs never relinquished a deep ambivalence toward writing, an attitude starkly opposed to the exuberant self-redemption the other Beats claimed to find in their art. For most of the first half of Burroughs's life, including the early years of his friendships with Kerouac and Ginsberg, he was not a practicing writer. He had written a good deal as a youth but stopped during his teens, when at the Los Alamos Ranch School for Boys (later the property of the u.s. government and the birthplace of the atomic bomb; what better site for the education of Burroughs and Gore Vidal, who also went there). Burroughs developed a crush on a classmate, the emotional pangs of which he recorded in detail in his diary. This diary, he later said, "put me off writing for many years. . . . The act of writing had become embarrassing, disgusting, and above all false. It was not the sex in the diary that embarrassed me, it was the terrible falsity of the emotions expressed. . . . [F]or years after that, the sight of my words written on a page hit me like the sharp smell of carrion when you turn over a dead dog with a stick."

Thus did Burroughs both personify and help solve the problem of the modern artist and the modern consciousness: the sensation of imprisoned individuality, of self-loathing that is almost like an infection, enforced from the outside by an invisible, guiding, ultimately tyrannical hand. Burroughs defined paranoia neatly for the generation of the true paranoids: having all the facts. All you have to do is tune in to your favorite television news magazines to see the inheritance of this state of mind. He feared and hated the proliferation of images and words that were meant to control people, yet he ended up a face that could be plastered into advertising and used in movie walk-ons, lending them the touch of the ultracool. Knowing his strong conviction that everyone gets what he or she deserves, one guesses that by the end, he didn't much care how they used his face or his ideas, as long as they paid him, which is more than they'd done in the old days.

He ended up a remarkably prolific artist for one who began in his late 30s: eleven novels, a multitude of shorter pamphlets and broadsides, a handful of collected shorter pieces, dreambooks, sketchbooks, film scripts, recordings, photographs; he was also a painter whose work was widely exhibited and sold late in his life. The best of his work—*Queer*, *Naked Lunch*, *Cities of the Red Night*, the shorter pieces collected in *Exterminator! The Burroughs File*, *The Adding Machine*, and his marvelous letters, mostly to Ginsberg—deserves to last.

¹Yeats did it with his bizarre Celtic millennialism, Eliot with his almost comically retrograde Anglo-Catholicism, Pound with medievalism, Orientalism, and, finally, fascism.

²In Ted Morgan's biography of Burroughs, *Literary Outlaw*, we get a glimpse of Burroughs's use of the routine in social circumstances: [Burroughs gave parties on Bedford Street, emerging on one occasion from the kitchen with a plate of razor blades and light bulbs, and saying, 'I've got something real nice in the way of delicacies my mother sent me this week, hmf hmf hmf.]]

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IN CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Excerpts from *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960–1997*

THE WAR UNIVERSE (1990)

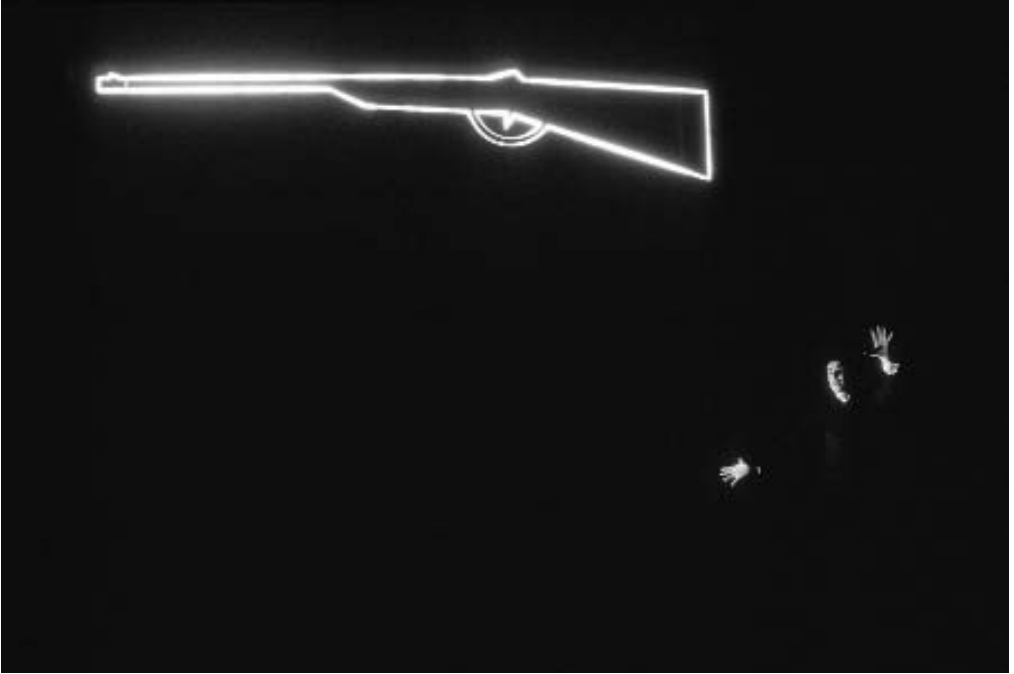
The following conversation began on a Friday afternoon in William S. Burroughs's den [in Lawrence, Kansas], over numerous glasses of the author's drink of choice, vodka-and-Coke. The following day we drove out into the Kansas countryside—as flat and dry as Burroughs's midwestern drawl—for a day of shooting. This is how Burroughs typically spends his Saturdays, taking target practice at the country home of Fred Aldrich and Napit Atkinson, joined by friends and fellow gun enthusiasts James Grauerholz and George Kaull. . . .

This is a war universe. War all the time. That is its nature. There may be other universes based on all sorts of other principles, but ours seems to be based on war and games. All games are basically hostile. Winners and losers. We see them all around us: the winners and the losers. The losers can oftentimes become winners, and the winners can very easily become losers.

I recently completed a libretto called *The Black Rider*. It is based on a story by Thomas de Quincey that is a retelling of an old German folktale, also used by Karl Maria von Weber in his opera *Der Freischütz*. Our protagonist is a clerk, and he is in love with the forester's daughter, but the forester only wants a huntsman for a son-in-law. So our clerk goes out and tries to shoot but can't hit anything. Deep in the woods he is approached by Pegleg the Devil who tells him, "You gotta have the right kind of bullet." So he gives him the right kind of bullet. Naturally. *The first one is always free*. Our clerk doesn't realize it, but he's made his pact with the Devil as soon as he picks up and uses the bullets. Before long he can't hit anything without 'em. He is completely dependent on the bullets.

Soon the wedding day arrives and he must prove his marksmanship, but he's run out of magic bullets. When he fires at a wooden dove bobbing on a perch, the bullet whistles around and kills his betrothed. The moral is, the Devil's bargain is always a fool's bargain, because you're trying to get something for nothing, and you end up giving everything for nothing. . . .

Now, Georg was a good straight boy to begin with, but there was bad blood in him someway. He got into the magic bullets, and that leads straight to Devil's work, just like marijuana leads to heroin. You think you can take them bullets or leave 'em, do you? Just save a few for your bad days? Well now, we all have



those bad days when you can't hit for shit. And the more of them magics you use, the more bad days you have without them. So it comes down finally to all your days being bad without the bullets. It's magic or nothing. Time to stop chipping around and kidding yourself, Kid. You're hooked, heavy as lead. And that's where old Georg found himself, out there at the crossroads, molding the Devil's bullets. . . . Now a man figures it's his bullet, so it will hit what he wants it to hit. But it don't always work out that way. You see, some bullets is special for a certain target. A certain stag, or a certain person. And no matter where you aim, that's where the bullet will end up. I guess old Georg didn't rightly know what he was getting himself into—but the fit was on him, and it carried him straight to the crossroads. (*The Black Rider*)

If the bullet's got my mark on it, I've had it. A special bullet for a special person. But if you know what your fate is, just by knowing it you have avoided it. They will have to change it. . . .

The gun is a very simple mechanism. There are designs for guns that can be made with a pipe and a few odds and ends you can pick up from the hardware store. It's not to compare with a nice revolver or automatic, but it can certainly kill someone at close range with one shot.

You can apply the whole Zen principle to firearms. Once you know where to point, all you have to do is get out of the way and let this thing happen. And then you can hit the target in the dark. It's all a matter of getting out of the way of yourself, or you're dead. Standing out of the way and letting what you really know take over.

To separate gun and hand and eye,
until they do it on their own:
Draw, aim, shoot, fire—
like a finely tuned machine.
Both my hands should be unlinked,
hand on trigger and hand on gun:
and still as close as twins they think,
both eyes open . . . now just one . . .
My hand and eyes know how to shoot,
and I have only to stand aside
and free the shot, and freely shoot,
to see the bullet . . . in the bull's eye.
(*The Black Rider*)

Some weapons hit you right away; other weapons may take 500 years to hit. It's like that old joke: "Well, you missed me that time." "Oh yeah? Just try and move your head." Well, just try and shake your head 500 years from now. You won't even know you were hit.

Excerpted from an interview by Raymond Foye, originally published in *Grand Street* 37 (1990): 93–108.

THE DEVIL'S BARGAIN

KLAUS MAECK: Did you know the opera or the story *Der Freischütz* before you were hired to write the text for Robert Wilson's adaptation, *The Black Rider*?

BURROUGHS: No, I knew nothing about it before Bob Wilson asked me, but I saw immediately that this was the old devil's bargain, Faust, and so on. That's an interesting subject I have a word to say about. A devil's bargain is always a fool's bargain, particularly for an artist. The devil deals only in quantity, not in quality. He can't make someone a great writer, he can only make someone a famous writer, a rich writer. The more you depend on magic bullets, as in *Freischütz*, finally you can't do anything without the magic bullets. We worked very hard; thank god it paid off. I never saw such an audience reaction.

MAECK: I heard there was a standing ovation of exactly 23 minutes at the premiere!

Opposite: Matt McGrath as Wilhelm

BURROUGHS: Yes, exactly, wasn't it great? I don't know if they'll ever show it here in America. The devil's bargain is a classic, and in so many forms—in Hollywood, advertising, job ads—selling your soul, your integrity for games or money or for time. The ultimate form is for time, for immortality.

MAECK: Were you ever interested in theater?

BURROUGHS: I tried and tried to write a play. I just never got it together. It doesn't interest me too much. Well, it was a great challenge to take an old form and do something new. Do you know Samuel Beckett's biography? There's a story that Beckett was nearly knifed to death on the street. Some male prostitute wanted his money and stabbed him, barely missed his heart. A woman found him nearly dead and took him to the hospital and later moved in with him. Well, the boy got a mild sentence and Beckett even visited him in jail . . .

MAECK: Your first publisher, Girodias, died a few days ago in Paris.

BURROUGHS: He was the first to publish a long novel by Beckett, who had so far only published short stories. Girodias published dirty books with his Olympia Press and somehow they decided Beckett is pornography. Beckett is pornography? Oh my god . . . imagine sailors jacking off to Beckett . . . [*he chuckles*] . . . It'd be hard going . . .

Excerpted from [Walking Out of the Pages,] by Klaus Mæck, originally published in *Kozmik Blues* (1990): 9–15.

INNOCENCE

KRISTINE MCKENNA: In your writings you often allude to dark and malevolent forces at work in the universe; does being aware of those dark forces make one more vulnerable to them?

BURROUGHS: No, probably the contrary.

MCKENNA: So, you don't believe that innocence can act as a shield?

BURROUGHS: No, because I don't think innocence exists at the present time. How can anyone be innocent when they're bombarded by corrupting images day and night from the media? The media certainly militates against innocence, and though you might be able to find traces of it in remote parts of the world, it's rapidly vanishing as the standardization of thought becomes more and more pervasive.

MCKENNA: What do you think happens after death?

BURROUGHS: I believe that what happens is largely governed by a person's life. This is connected with the idea of karma, which is obviously a useful and interesting concept. . . .

MCKENNA: Is the written word on its way out?

BURROUGHS: No. So long as people read—which they still do—there's no substitute for a book that you can carry with you.

MCKENNA: Is living a skill one can acquire?

BURROUGHS: It's a skill that's completely different for every person. Speaking for myself, I've learned some things.

MCKENNA: Ideally, how should art function in society? What should literature do?

BURROUGHS: We know now that dreaming is a biologic necessity. I think that's something that artists do—they dream for other people.

Excerpted from [I See with My Hands,] a 1990 interview by Kristine McKenna.

ACCOUNTABILITY

ELDON GARNET: Your shotgun paintings, in a sense, are a reverberation against the notorious action of fatally shooting your wife.

BURROUGHS: There's no real connection. Sure, well, it can't be helped. It doesn't matter.

GARNET: Have you ever written about that?

BURROUGHS: No, but I've given accounts of it. I told Ted Morgan what happened, that's all. Once and for all.

GARNET: Is that one of the moral accountabilities that might determine your next life?

BURROUGHS: That would be putting it in a very simplistic way. It isn't a question of morality anyway, it's a question of where you are now, your synchronicity, and how your actions affect your whole contacts, present, past, and future contacts. There's not morality involved. I'm not following any moral law.

GARNET: The call of "moral" is very Catholic, very cause and effect. It's too easy.

BURROUGHS: Exactly. That's the war formula, either/or. It's the barber's formula.

GARNET: It's obvious you keep striving for more. . . . You haven't laid down yet.

BURROUGHS: Heaven no. I'm collaborating on an opera called *The Black Rider* with Bob Wilson. . . . It's an old German folktale about someone who's going to sell his soul to the Devil for magic bullets. So he gets these magic bullets from the Devil and of course, disaster. A devil's bargain is always a fool's bargain.

GARNET: You've never entered any bargain like that?

BURROUGHS: God no. I'm not such a fool. This old Satan doesn't take me for dumber than I look.

Excerpted from [Afterlife,] by Eldon Garnet, originally published in *Impulse* (March 1990) 15:4.

The foregoing interviews are all published in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer (Semiotext[e], 2001).

WORDS OF ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

BY WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

I am sometimes asked if I have any words of advice for young people. Well, here are a few simple admonitions for young and old, man and beast.

Never interfere in a boy and girl fight.

Beware of whores who say they don't want money. The hell they don't. What they mean is that they want *more* money; much more, these are the most expensive whores what can be got.

Ahem.

If you're doing business with a religious son of a bitch, get it in writing; his word isn't worth shit, not with the good lord telling him how to fuck you on the deal.

If, after having been exposed to someone's presence, you feel as if you've lost a quart of plasma, avoid that presence. You need it like you need pernicious anemia.

We don't like to hear the word "vampire" around here; we're trying to improve our public image. Building a kindly, avuncular, benevolent image; "interdependence" is the keyword—"enlightened interdependence."

Life in all its rich variety, take a little, leave a little. However, by the inexorable logistics of the vampiric process they always take more than they leave—and why, indeed, should they take any?

Avoid fuck-ups. Fools, I call them. You all know the type—no matter how good it sounds, everything they have anything to do with turns into a disaster. Trouble for themselves and everyone connected with them. A fool is bad news, and it rubs off—don't let it rub off on you.

Do not proffer sympathy to the mentally ill; it is a bottomless pit. Tell them firmly, "I am not paid to listen to this drivel—you are a terminal fool!" Otherwise, they make you as crazy as they are.

Above all, avoid confirmed criminals. They are a special malignant strain of fool.

From *Spare Ass Annie and Other Tales*, by William S. Burroughs & The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy (Island Records, 1993).

STORM IN A PAWNSHOP

With its drunken piano, pocket trumpet, and musical saw, *The Black Rider* is obscure-instrument heaven.

BY JOHN L. WALTERS (2004)

The songs of Tom Waits are inherently visual—not just in their words and themes, but in the way they sound. Just as film footage of a lake, or a country house acquires mystery and glamour when underscored by a chugging Nymanesque riff, images of cheap house-fronts and dusty streets take on extra gravitas when accompanied by Waits's ragged tracks. Check out Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law* and *Night on Earth*, or Francis Ford Coppola's fabulous *One from the Heart*.

The band currently playing in the [*Black Rider*] pit have the challenge of recreating Waits's distinctive instrumental timbres every night. "There are certain things you need to play his music," says associate musical director David Coulter, chatting backstage [at the Barbican in London]. "There's upright bass, of course, and pump organ and drunken piano; lots of things that are slightly out of tune with each other, or 'sour', to use Waits's own word."

Coulter, a musical-saw virtuoso who plays another 20 instruments, is the man who put together the band for *The Black Rider*. . . .

Given the palette of sounds needed for Waits's idiosyncrasies, the band has to have a wide range of sounds, styles, and skills at their fingertips. Led by musical director Bent Clausen, who plays drums, keyboards, and marimba, the eight-piece group has the tough job of capturing the spirit of Waits's messy, freewheeling music while sticking to all the dramatic cues in this demanding, visually rich production. Clausen is a Waits veteran who played on the albums *Alice* and *Blood Money*, and worked with Waits and Wilson on *Woyzeck*.

So the musicians' pit looks like a downtown pawnshop, packed with arcane and/or beautiful instruments: bass clarinet, toy piano, pocket trumpet, accordion, Stroh violin, mandolin, ondes Martenot, glass harmonica, cristal Baschet.

The last three are specialties of Thomas Bloch, whose [résumé] includes Messiaen's *Turangalila* and sessions with Radiohead. Kate St. John (Dream Academy), Caroline Hall, Jack Pinter, and Terry Edwards (Scapegoats, Lydia Lunch) play on a huge variety of wind instruments. The ensemble is underpinned by bassist Rory McFarlane, looming out of the pit's seething activity like a mariner clutching the mast of a boat.

If you've heard *The Black Rider* [album] (Island), you'll have some idea what to expect. Except that Waits's studio recordings are more like miniatures—lovingly made “bigatures”—with Waits taking all the parts himself. The [*Black Rider*] band has to fill the theatre with a Waits-like sound and accompany a dozen diverse performers, singing, speaking, raging, howling, or mute.

This is neither [Broadway] musical nor hardcore music theater. Rather than developing motifs in a compositional way, Waits transforms his material through extremities of sounds. This is hard to notate. In the words of Coulter (who, like Waits himself, doesn't really read music), it's more “organic.”

The musical language for the show is established early, with an introductory circuslike theme that jumps in every other bar, as if transcribed from a scratched record. For another scene the ensemble boils menacingly, with little bubbles of free improv escaping from the sonic soup, while a hallucinatory three-note flugel phrase floats overhead. Another potentially static segment derives its richness from the harmonic complexity of Coulter's didgeridoo.

Out in the hall, the mix was superb, its unholy instrumental alliance sounding entirely natural. Many featured instruments—Swanee whistle, musical saw, trombone—can stray far from the diatonic path. The ensemble sections have the requisite sourness. Yet it's a disciplined, professional sound, a swanky showbiz version of the microtonal explorations of Frank Denyer or Harry Partch.

And whether the band is required to rock or swing, play sentimental ballads or demented burlesque, they never step out of character—the huffing, puffing fantasy band created from Waits's rugged templates.

This article originally appeared in *The Guardian* (London) on May 21, 2004. Guardian Unlimited ' Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO A FEW OF THE UNCANNY INSTRUMENTS PLAYED BY THE MAGIC BULLETS

GLASS HARMONICA. Glasses filled with varying amounts of water so as to alter the pitch of the sounds obtained by striking them with sticks were already used in early times by the Persians, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Arabs (the *tusut* was first mentioned in 1406), but the technique took a decisive turn in 1743 when an Irishman, Richard Puckeridge, had the bright idea of standing the glasses on a table and rubbing the rims with wet fingers. Benjamin Franklin first saw that instrument, which was also played by the composer Gluck, at a concert given by the English virtuoso Delaval. It was called the “angelic organ,” the “musical glasses,” or “seraphim.” Franklin, fascinated by the “soft and pure sound of the musical glasses,” modified them so as to increase their possibilities. He dubbed his new invention, created in 1761, the “glass Armonica.”

The glass harmonica (as it is now known) was very popular from the start. Some 400 works were composed for it, some unfortunately now lost, and probably about 4,000 instruments were built over the course of some 70 years.

The instrument, adored or hated, roused passionate responses. Paganini declared it to have “such a celestial voice”; Thomas Jefferson claimed it was “the greatest gift offered to the musical world of this century”; Goethe, Mozart, Jean-Paul, Hasse, and Théophile Gautier all praised it. Some, however, claimed that its haunting and ethereal voice drove its players insane. A dictionary of instruments, for example, mentions that the sounds “are of nearly celestial softness but . . . can cause spasms.” In his *Traité des effets de la musique sur le corps humain (Treatise on the Effects of Music on the Human Body)*, J. M. Roger in 1803 said that “its melancholy timbre plunges us into dejection . . . to a point that the strongest man could not hear it for an hour without fainting.”

It is true that some performers of the instrument ended their lives in mental hospitals, among them one of the best, Marianne Davies. In his *Anleitung zum Selbstunterricht auf der Harmonika (Method of Self-Instruction for the Harmonica)*, published in 1788, however, Johann Christian Müller answered objections: “It is true that the Armonica has strange effects on people. . . . If you are irritated or disturbed by bad news, by friends, or even by disappointment from a lady, abstain from playing, it would only increase your disturbance.” The Armonica was accused of causing such evils as nervous problems, domestic squabbles, premature deliveries, fatal disorders, and animal convulsions. The instrument was even banned from one German town by the police for ruining the health of people and disturbing public order (a child died during a concert).

Franz Anton Mesmer, a Vienna doctor known for using hypnosis to treat his patients, used the glass harmonica in his treatment. He was forced to leave Vienna after a blind pianist, Marie Paradies, recovered her sight but to the detriment of her mental health. Rumors of this kind contributed to the demise of the Armonica, which in 1829 had been considered “the fashionable accessory of parlors and drawing-rooms.”

Although Karl Leopold Röllig in the late 18th century had tried to add a keyboard to the glass harmonica in order to avoid the possible danger caused by rubbing the fingers against the glasses, few later composers were interested in the instrument. The increasing intensity of the sound of orchestras deterred musicians from using a fragile instrument with such a delicate sound. Yet, there were two outstanding exceptions. In 1835 Donizetti used the glass harmonica in the mad scene of his opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (soon replaced by two flutes), and Richard Strauss wrote for it in the last act of his opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, first staged in Vienna in 1919.

Thanks to the German performer Bruno Hoffmann, who played a *Glasbarfe* (glasses standing on a table), and to the German-born master glass blower Gerhard Finkenbeiner, who settled near Boston in the United States, a new generation of performers, composers, and instrument makers has rediscovered the glass harmonica since 1982. The Magic Bullets band features the unusual talents of Thomas Bloch, a specialist in rare instruments, including the glass harmonica and its relative the cristal Baschet, both heard in this production of *The Black Rider*. Bloch is one of only two professional glass harmonica players in the world today. (Excerpted from a radio interview with Thomas Bloch transcribed at psychevanhetfolk.homestead.com/files/EMI.txt; see also www.chez.com/thomasbloch/.)

CRISTAL BASCHET. The cristal Baschet was invented by the French Baschet brothers, Francois and Bernard, a sculptor and an engineer, respectively, who since 1952 have collaborated on creating sound sculptures and inventing musical instruments. Their original aim was to get closer to the new tones born in the early 1950s. Their visually striking instruments, which they call “*structures sonores*” (“sonorous sculptures”), are often crafted out of steel and aluminum and amplified by large curved conical sheets of metal.

A close cousin to the glass harmonica, the cristal Baschet (sometimes called the “crystal organ”) is composed of 54 chromatically tuned glass rods, which are rubbed with wet fingers. In the cristal Baschet, however, the vibration of the glass is passed on to a heavy block of metal by a metal stem, the variable length of which determines the frequency of the vibration (and therefore the pitch of the sound). Amplification is obtained by fiberglass cones fixed on wood and by a tall cut-out metal piece in the shape of a flame.

WEAVE A ROSEMARY WREATH
IN YOUR AUBURN HAIR
AND YOU'LL BE THE ENVY OF
ALL THE GIRLS
HE'LL WEAR YOUR HEART—
AND YOU WILL WEAR HIS RING
AND YOU'LL GO ROLLING
DOWN A MUSTARD HILL
PLAY A LULLABY ON
A FISHBONE HARP
RIDE AWAY ON THE GRAY
MARE'S TAIL . . .

—*The Black Rider*

“Whiskers,” placed under the instrument and to the right, increase the volume of high-pitched sounds.

Born at the same time as “*musique concrete*,” electro-acoustic music, and early synthesizers (like the MOOG), the cristal Baschet is their close relative, but completely acoustic, without any electric amplifying device. (See www.chez.com/thomasbloch/engCHRIS.htm.)

ONDES MARTENOT. Designed and built in 1928 in France by Maurice Martenot, the ondes (“waves”) Martenot is an electronic keyboard instrument with some unusual performance features, among them a finger-ring attached to a ribbon that can be pulled to achieve certain pitch-bending effects, a lever located under the keyboard to control timbral change, and a volume controller to the left of the keyboard. Music for the ondes Martenot was composed by Oliver Messiaen, Darius Milhaud, Edgard Varèse, Pierre Boulez, and other well-known composers.

The ondes Martenot (also played by Thomas Bloch in The Magic Bullets band) became the first successful electronic instrument and the only one of its generation still used by orchestras today. (See emfinstitute.emf.org/exhibits/ondesmartenot.html.)

MUSICAL SAW. The musical saw (played in The Magic Bullets by David Coulter, who also performs on the Stroh violin, mandolin, ukulele, banjo, and didgeridoo in this production) is often a standard, manual wood-cutting saw. Professional “sawyers,” however, often opt for a custom-made musical saw, which tends to have a longer blade for a greater range and thinner metal for sweeter notes.

The saw is played seated, with the handle squeezed between the legs, and the far business end held with one hand. The player creates sound by bending the saw into a lopsided s shape—the top curve is imperceptible—and drawing a bow across the bottom curve. The note produced depends on where one draws the bow, and the shape of the curves.

It is also possible to play the musical saw by tapping it with a mallet rather than drawing a bow. However produced, the sound made has an eerie, vocal quality. (Excerpted from www.infoweb.co.nz/385.html.)

STROH VIOLIN. When music recordings were made in the early 20th century, the sounds made by a performer were directed at a single large horn. Those of a normal violin were neither sufficiently loud nor directional to record well. Working in London between 1899 and 1901 John Matthias Augustus Stroh therefore invented a new kind of violin with built-in amplifying “horns,” which incorporated elements of the gramophone.

Stroh replaced the violin’s usual wooden body with a metal resonator to produce a louder, more penetrating sound. The body of the Stroh violin consists of a long narrow piece of wood, the upper surface of which serves as the fingerboard. An aluminum horn at the end of the fingerboard directs the sound either into the recording horn or into the ear of a singer. The performer places a smaller aluminum horn at his or her own ear in order to hear what is being played more distinctly.

The Stroh violin was manufactured in London by Augustus’s son Charles Stroh from 1901 to 1924, and then by George Evans until 1942. The Strohs also produced a few violas, cellos, guitars, mandolins, and ukuleles based on the same principle. (See users.hunter-link.net.au/~mbgsk/instruments.html#Stroh, and historywired.si.edu/object.cfm?ID=46.)

MARIANNE PLAYS THE DEVIL AGAIN

Former sixties wild child returns to the stage to star as central character in sinister play by old friend William Burroughs and Tom Waits.

BY DUNCAN CAMPBELL (2004)

The Devil made her do it, Marianne Faithfull announced. Or, rather, the part of the Devil in *The Black Rider*, the dark show created by the writer William Burroughs, musician Tom Waits, and director Robert Wilson, has persuaded her to return to the stage after an absence of more than a decade.

Faithfull, who once played Ophelia opposite Nicol Williamson's Hamlet, met Burroughs in the 1960s, in what sounded like the totally apposite setting of a "decadent old grand house" in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, and in a room full of "Persian saddle-bags."

She was, she said, "a little girl" of 19, too overawed to speak, who had just read his most famous work, *Naked Lunch*.

"He was in my life from an early time," the singer and actor said at a press conference in the bowels of the London Barbican yesterday. "*Naked Lunch* had a huge effect on me. I'm very much a child of William Burroughs." . . .

Jack Kerouac once described Burroughs as looking like a "shy bank clerk with a patrician thin-lipped, cold blue-lipped face." Faithfull said that she believed there was a bit of Burroughs in both the clerk and the Devil. Now 58, she said that she had renewed her acquaintance with Burroughs in the 1980s, when she performed at a poetry festival in Kansas where the writer then lived.

She liked the role of the Devil, or Pegleg as it is





called in *The Black Rider*—“for an actor, it’s like a dream part”—and she had been rereading *Naked Lunch*, along with some Dickens, only to realize that the first time around she had “completely misunderstood it. You miss so much. It was an evangelical piece against drugs.”

Faithfull, who, like Burroughs, was once addicted to heroin, said that his love-hate relationship with the drug comes through in both *Naked Lunch* and *The Black Rider*.

Faithfull, who was addicted to heroin at the time she played in *Hamlet*, said her drug-taking days were long gone.

“I don’t take anything. I don’t actually need it. I was very young and I didn’t really know I didn’t understand. I think it cut me off from the other actors.” . . .

She saw the part of Pegleg “as a sort of magical creature, a creature that can’t be anything other than what he is or she is.”

The current production came into being when Faithfull and the innovative American director Robert Wilson met at a dinner thrown for the film director Patrick Chereau at the German embassy in Paris last year. It transpired that Faithfull had seen and much enjoyed the original German production in 1991 while on tour. Wilson decided she would be a perfect Pegleg.

It has been 11 years since she played Pirate Jenny in *The Threepenny Opera* at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. She was recently offered the role of Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*, but turned it down.

“I understand stage acting better than film acting, although I’m very interested in film acting,” she said. “There is a lot of fear, the usual kind of fear, especially with a part like this. I think it’s not uncommon, some actors do get this feeling—what will happen if I go into this character and I never come out of it? That’s the great fear. The character does take over.”

She said that even after going on tour as Marianne Faithfull, the singer, she needed a month of decompression to become normal again.

She said she would like to do more stage work, but there were not that many parts engrossing enough to take her away from touring and recording.

“And the money’s not as good as it is in rock ’n’ roll.”

This article originally appeared in the Guardian (London) on April 8, 2004. © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004. Above: Marianne Faithfull as Pegleg.

“THE DEVIL? THAT WAS HIS OWN DARK SIDE”

Marianne Faithfull on the Life and Work of Her Friend William Burroughs

I knew William Burroughs in the 1960s, but I hardly ever spoke to him. I was just a little girl and was shy. Then, years later, in the mid 1980s, I was invited by Allen Ginsberg to sing at the Kansas poetry festival. Really, it was a show for William, with all his friends and people he liked. People such as Robert Creeley, Ed Sanders, and the Fugs were performing—so some of it was very nutty and very interesting. I did five or six songs with the bass player Fernando Saunders, whom I’ve worked with a lot. That was the moment William believed I was really good—he didn’t know before then. I think he thought I was just a chick. We started to talk and became very good friends.

I was a big fan of his books, and read them all when they came out. I read *Naked Lunch* when I was very young and thought it was telling people to go out and get high. I’ve just reread it, though, and realized it’s the opposite. It’s an antidrug book. What is striking is that all his visions and prophecies, all the new drugs that hadn’t been invented when he was writing *Naked Lunch*, came true. He hit the nail on the head. I last read it again a few weeks ago and the book is by no means a period piece. It’s still terrifying. The last thing *Naked Lunch* is about is drugs—they are just a sidebar. But that is how people come to Burroughs. They think he was about that one thing, but he went much further than that. What he did in his personal life and what he is as an artist are quite different.

The Black Rider is the last thing Burroughs wrote—certainly the last thing he wrote after *The Western Lands*, the novel about Egypt, which I love. I know Burroughs’s work very well, and he threw a lot from it into *The Black Rider*: there is a lot of *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*, and some of *The Black Rider*’s imagery is from *Naked Lunch*. Tattered clouds is one of his images, and there are a lot of tattered clouds in *The Black Rider*. . . .

By using an old folk tale, William was really able to write about himself. The main character, who takes the Devil’s deal that ultimately results in the death of his sweetheart and bride, is called Wilhelm. So it’s not very disguised, but disguised enough for William to have done it. His wife Joan’s shooting, in 1951, was about addiction. It wasn’t that he wanted to kill her or didn’t love her. It was because of addiction. And Pegleg the Devil—the character I play in this new production—is the metaphor for that. William makes it a tangible creature, whereas, in fact, the Devil is a part of him. In the play, you see that Pegleg is a part of Wilhelm. He’s another side of Wilhelm, the famous old dark side.

The Black Rider is very close to the Elizabethan plays, particularly to Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. It is also surrealistic in many ways. William and the artist Brion

Gysin adopted the cut-up techniques of the Surrealists and made them work brilliantly. I cannot stress enough how much Brion, William, André Breton, and Louis Aragon are connected. Gysin's work helped me to really understand Surrealism. And it was my friendship with Brion that really cemented my later relationship with William. Brion was a great friend—one of the few people who came to find me when I was living on the street. Burroughs knew about that, and he loved and respected him. Indeed, that might have been why I was invited to the Kansas poetry festival.

I first read Burroughs when I was very young, and didn't understand it all. What I did understand—and continued to recognize in all his books, and through his life—was his incredible lyrical quality. His work is almost like poetry. That lyrical beauty really steps up to the parapet in *The Black Rider*. The rhymes are spell-like: "That's the way the rocket crashes, that's the way the whip lashes, that's the way the potato mashes." I can see he had a hand in the songs for the stage production, especially the songs for Pegleg. They're full of Burroughsian stuff. Which they would be, because his interest lies in Wilhelm and Pegleg more than anything.

I saw the first production of the show in 1991, and thought it was one of the most fascinating bits of theater I had ever seen. It has everything—ancestor worship, magic, a love story, sound, and movement. William saw it on its first night in Hamburg; it was very lucky that it was staged when he was still around. The new production will be similar, but the director, Robert Wilson, is changing it to suit the new actors. This is the first time I've worked with Wilson, and this is a completely new theatrical language for me: it's not naturalistic, it's unnaturalistic, all about space and how you use it. It's like being in the middle of a whirlwind.

One of the most powerful things about this production is that we'll be using recordings of Burroughs speaking and singing "T'Ain't No Sin." I'm not in that scene but I have sat and watched it in rehearsals. When it came to the bit with William's voice I got very emotional.

Of course, there's a part of me that is honoring my old friend William. I feel very lucky to have got the role—and I'm not going to let William down.

Marianne Faithfull was talking to Tim Cumming. This article originally appeared in the Guardian (London) on May 12, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Guardian Newspapers Limited.

THE BLACK RIDER: BACK TO THE SOURCE

The Black Rider is a story about making a pact with the Devil, about what people will do when they want something too badly. This tale has a long history in Germanic folklore, and obvious connections with the archetypal ambition of Faustus. Whoever sells his soul to the Demon Hunter receives seven magic bullets, which will not fail to hit their desired mark. If the bargainer finds another victim for the Devil, he will receive a fresh supply of magic bullets; if not, his own life is forfeit.

As “*Der Freischütz*” (“The Free-Shooter”), the story first found literary form in the *Gespensterbuch* (*The Book of Ghosts*), a collection of uncanny tales written and collected by Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun (1810), which became a central text of German Romanticism. In this version, the heroine, Agathe, is shot by the marksman, who is thereafter confined to a lunatic asylum.

Der Freischütz’s scenic and musical possibilities immediately attracted the interest of German composers. Carl Maria von Weber first considered an opera based on the story in 1811, and returned to the idea in 1817. His completed work was triumphantly premiered in Berlin in 1821. The opera tapped into a swell of German patriotism, particularly following the defeat of Napoleon, but was also performed and translated throughout Europe. Weber largely follows the story as set forth in the *Gespensterbuch*, especially in the demon-infested conjuring scene of the stone circle in the Wolf’s Glen. In Weber’s version, however, divine intervention prevents Wilhelm from killing his bride and the opera ends with an exorcism.

The story also appealed to British Romantic authors. In 1816, Lord Byron and Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley were in Geneva. “The season was cold and rainy,” Mary recalled, “and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation. Two other friends . . . and myself agreed to write each a story, founded on some supernatural occurrence.” The German stories were from the *Gespensterbuch*, and the response they inspired from Mary Shelley was, of course, *Frankenstein*.

Another remarkable British author, Thomas de Quincey, wrote a version of the tale called “The Fatal Marksman,” which was published in *Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations* in 1823. It is this version, with the tale told in the *Gespensterbuch*, that provides the source material for *The Black Rider* as created by Robert Wilson, Tom Waits, and writer William S. Burroughs. Burroughs made the tale his own; as Waits explained, “Burroughs found some of the branches of the story, and let them grow into more metaphorical things in all of our lives every day that, in fact, are deals with the Devil that we’ve made. What is

cunning about those deals is that we're not aware we've made them. And when they come to fruition, we are shocked and amazed.”

This article originally appeared in the souvenir program created for *The Black Rider* by the Barbican Theatre (2004).

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A WORD ABOUT THOMAS DE QUINCEY

A 19th-century English journalist and essayist, best known for his detailed and harrowing memoir of his own addiction to opium, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (first published in 1821), Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859) was in a sense the William S. Burroughs of his time.

De Quincey was orphaned at a young age and sent away to school, where he was successful but bored and soon ran away. He then spent several years living as a vagrant in Wales, then London. In London, he was reunited with an old family friend who supported him financially and sent him to study at Oxford.

At age 28, De Quincey began to use opium (mixed with alcohol in the form of laudanum) regularly to treat severe stomach pains. Though his intake was moderate at first, he soon became addicted. At first he rationalized the use of the drug. Later, he experienced opium-induced stupors in which he could not distinguish dream from reality nor note the passage of time.

He also developed memory loss and long periods of depression. He resolved to wean himself from the drug and did so, although in the final version (1856) of his memoir he admits to having slipped back into addiction a number of times. His subsequent influence on such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, and a number of readers tempted to experiment with opium, has been immense and notorious. (See www.kirjasto.sci.fi/quincey.htm and endeavor.med.nyu.edu/lit-med/lit-med-db/webdocs/webdescrips/de.quincey320-des-.html.)

THE CASTING OF THE MAGIC BULLETS

From "*Der Freikugelguß des Schreibers*"

TRANSLATED BY BRIGITTE HELBLING

In a city in the kingdom of Bohemia there lived in the year 1710 a young man named Georg Schmid, who was about 18 years old and a clerk. This young man was on intimate terms with a hunter from the mountains nearby, who was acquainted with the magic arts. Our clerk had a passion for target shooting, which he pursued always with an eye to his own advantage and gain; and for this reason he once applied to the hunter for advice, and the other promised that he would help him. His only condition was that the clerk go out with him on the night of the 30th of July, which is Abdon's day, to cast some bullets; then he would receive 63 bullets, whereof 60 would not miss their mark, but the remaining three, which could not be distinguished from the others, would invariably fail. The clerk was blinded by his greed for money to the extent that he promised to take part in everything and could hardly await the coming of the appointed day. They then procured large forge coals, ladles, casting molds, and other items that were necessary for their work, and at nightfall they took themselves to a crossroads which was about an hour away. As soon as they had arrived there, the hunter marked a wide circle around them with his hunting knife and placed certain characters on its edge, which the clerk could not read. Then he directed the other to enter the circle and strip to the skin while denying God and the Holy Trinity. Hereafter, he ordered him to place the coals and casting things before him and advised him to take care that he finish his work between 11 and 12 o'clock, since if after that time a single bullet were missing he would belong to the Devil. He also warned him not to let anything arrest him in what he was doing, no matter what might come to his attention, so as not to neglect his work. After impressing this warning on him, and commanding him to keep his silence whatever happened, both men formed a twofold spread-eagle and silently awaited the coming of the 11th hour. The clock had hardly begun to strike when the dead coals sprang to life with fire as if they had been heated by a smith. In this way, they commenced with the casting of the bullets, but they had fabricated no more than a few when an old woman came towards them, laden with wooden scoops and raising a fearful racket. She asked them if they might not be wanting any of her goods? They, however, continued their work in silence and the hag disappeared before their eyes. Immediately afterwards, they heard several horse-drawn coaches coming from afar and heading directly towards them, which caused the clerk's flesh to creep not a little. Yet as soon as they had reached the circle, they swept over them like a strong current, like a

stormwind rushing overhead. The coaches were hardly gone when a whole troop of horsemen could be heard advancing, and it, too, made its way through the air above them. Finally, they heard a bugle sounding, and the howling of many dogs, and perceived at the same time a quarry rushing towards them and continuing its course with all the dogs above them. These were followed by a large party of hunters on horseback who were all very eager in their pursuit. Last came one riding slowly on a black horse, who halted before the circle and asked what their desire might be, since they were doing this work in his part of the country. As they were almost finished with casting, the hunter replied for himself and his companion: "We have cast 63 bullets in your name, whereof three shall belong to you, but the others you must leave to us." Upon this the other demanded that they hand him the ladle with the bullets, but the hunter said: "We have cast them in your name, and since our time is not up yet they belong to us." Directly the other, gnashing his teeth, threw something on it which evoked such a terrible stench that both men fell to the ground, scattering the bullets around them. They remained in this way until daybreak, when the hunter presently revived, being used to such doings, but the clerk found himself incapable of stirring from the spot. The other gathered his bullets and hurried towards the nearest village where he made known that a poor sick man was lying on the road nearby. Without saying anything else or even stopping a moment longer he then decamped, making his way through sequestered countrysides to the mountains surrounding Salzburg. When the half-dead clerk had been removed to the city and was questioned by clerical and secular courts as to what had befallen him, and when he had finally, after many exertions, revealed what had taken place, he was immediately put into custody, notwithstanding his illness. After having recovered to a certain extent, he was put to trial by inquisition as was the custom, and after he had confessed and given evidence he was tried by criminal procedure, as well. He was then convicted to death by the sword to be burned after, but due to various intercessions and in consideration of his youth the judgment pronounced was mitigated, and he was sentenced to six years imprisonment with hard labor.

The End.

This translation originally appeared in the program for the 1990 Thalia Theater production of *The Black Rider*. Translated from [Der Freikugelgull des Schreibers] (1730), as published in *Die Sagen der Monathlichen Unterredungen Otto von Grabens zum Stein, Corpus Fabularum I*, edited by Will-Erich Peuckert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961) and reprinted at www.keeslau.com/To m WaitsSupplement/.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is the moral of *The Black Rider*? Is there a moral?
2. What, if anything, does Wilhelm learn over the course of the story? Why do you think he agrees to a pact with Pegleg?
3. Who is Pegleg? What is his/her role in the story? Is s/he evil? How do you define “evil”?
4. William S. Burroughs said that the magic bullets in *The Black Rider* were a metaphor for drug addiction. What else might the bullets represent?
5. How is *The Black Rider* different from the theatrical productions you have seen before, at A.C.T. and elsewhere? To which artistic genre(s) do you think this production belongs (e.g., opera, musical theater, dance, theater, visual arts, etc.), and why? How is each of these genres represented in this production?
6. What is the role of love in *The Black Rider*?
7. Robert Wilson describes *The Black Rider* as a comedy. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. In an interview at A.R.T. in 1985, Robert Wilson said: “Most theater that we see today is thought about in terms of the word, the text. Everything is subservient to the text: the actors’ gestures, the lighting, the decor, the costumes—everything is there to interpret, or to comment on, or to illustrate the text. And that’s not the case with my work. In my theater, what we see is as important as what we hear. What we see does not have to relate to what we hear. They can be independent.”
How is this statement reflected in *The Black Rider*? What role do you think “the word, the text” plays in the work of William S. Burroughs? Of Tom Waits? (Consider the overall body of their work, as well as *The Black Rider*.)
9. *The Black Rider* is based on a story written in the early 19th century, at the height of the Romantic period in European art, music, and literature, and incorporates many visual and musical motifs seen in the Expressionist visual arts, film, and theater of the early 20th-century. How are the themes of both movements and historical periods reflected in this production? How are those themes relevant to art and society today?

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