

# *Robert Wilson, Provocative Playwright and Director, Is Dead at 83*

He upended theatrical norms with his own stunningly visualized works and his collaborations with a wide range of artists, from Philip Glass (“Einstein on the Beach”) to Lady Gaga.

**By Allan Kozinn**

Published July 31, 2025 Updated Aug. 1, 2025, 9:47 a.m. ET

Robert Wilson, the acclaimed theater director, playwright and visual artist who shattered theatrical norms with stunning stagings of his own imaginative works as well as innovative collaborations with a diverse roster of artists, from Philip Glass to Lady Gaga, died on Thursday at his home in Water Mill, N.Y. He was 83.

His death was confirmed by Chris Green, the executor of his estate and the president of the Robert Wilson Arts Foundation. He did not specify the cause, saying only that Mr. Wilson died after a brief illness.

Tall, soft-spoken and a conservative dresser, Mr. Wilson looked more like an accountant than an avant-gardist with a long résumé of provocative productions. But there was nothing conventional about his sense of the stage. He often said that he was less interested in dialogue and a narrative arc than in the interaction of light, space and movement. Even when he watched television, he said, he turned the sound off.

Early in his career, Mr. Wilson established a working method in which new pieces would begin not with lines of text but with richly detailed visual images, which he would either draw or describe in a 9-by-12 ledger he carried with him.

“I’ve had the idea for a long time of a room with lots of books, all placed neatly on shelves, and something slicing through the shelves” was how he described his startling vision for his 1977 theater piece “I Was Sitting on My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating.” In an interview with The New York Times shortly before its premiere, he went on: “There is a telephone, and a telephone wire. There is a scrim or gauze over the front of the stage, and images are sometimes projected on it.” (In its subsequent review, The Times took note of the work’s “monstrous title.”)

Dialogue would find its way into the ledger later in the process. It might be fragmentary and repetitious — or there might be none at all. The seven-hour “Deafman Glance (Le Regard du Sourd),” from 1971, and the 12-hour “Life and Times of Joseph Stalin,” from 1973, were entirely silent.



Sheryl Sutton, seated, in Mr. Wilson's "Deafman Glance," staged in 1971 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Ivan Farkas

Even when directing Shakespeare, Mr. Wilson sometimes had his actors distort the rhythms of the dialogue to suggest new meanings. Other times he trimmed the text radically, as in a 1990 production of "King Lear" in Frankfurt.

Time was an important element for Mr. Wilson, too. Where playwrights traditionally compressed time in their works, Mr. Wilson expanded it. His stage work "KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE," which had its premiere in 1972 at the

Festival of Arts in Shiraz, Iran, ran 168 hours and was presented over 10 days. Viewers were astonished and outraged to see actors taking hours to complete actions as simple as walking across the stage or slicing an onion.

“To see someone try to act natural onstage seems so artificial,” he told The Times in 2021. “If you accept it as being something artificial, in the long run, it seems more natural, for me.”



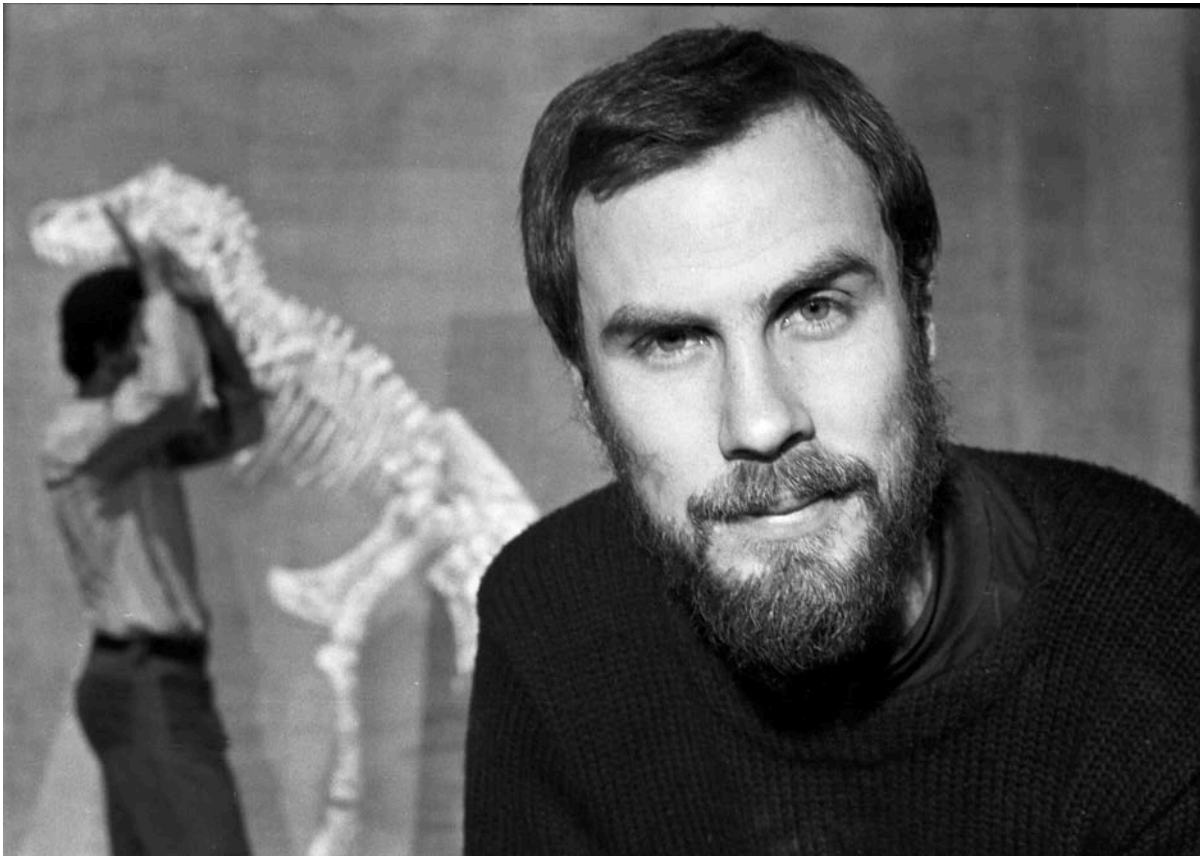
Mr. Wilson, left, with Philip Glass in 1976 in Avignon, France, where their collaboration “Einstein on the Beach” was having its premiere. Philippe Gras/Le Pictorium, via Alamy

By contrast, Mr. Wilson's first foray into opera, and his first collaboration with Mr. Glass, "Einstein on the Beach" (1976), is a comparatively trim five-hour work. It has no plot, but its tableaux touches on nuclear power, space travel and even Einstein's love of playing the violin. And while it has plenty of text — counting sequences, solfège syllables, the lyrics to the pop song "Mr. Bojangles" and sections of poetry and prose by Christopher Knowles, Samuel M. Johnson and Lucinda Childs — none of it is dialogue. The audience, free to leave and return during a performance, is presented with ideas about Einstein by inference and metaphor rather than directly.

## A Son of Texas

Robert Wilson was born in Waco, Texas, on Oct. 4, 1941, to Diugiud Mims Wilson Jr., a lawyer, and Velma Loree Hamilton, a homemaker. Because he had a stammer as a child, his parents sent him to study dance in the hope of building his self-confidence. His teacher, Byrd Hoffman, noticed that the boy's problem was that he was trying to speak too quickly, and his words were colliding. She taught him to slow down and focus his thought processes, and he overcame his impediment, although he later used the halting patterns and repetition of his childhood stammer as an element in his work.

"Byrd Hoffman was in her 70s when I first met her," Mr. Wilson told the website Theater Art Life in 2020. "She taught me dance, and she understood the body in a remarkable way. She talked to me about the energy in my body. About relaxing. About letting my energy flow through."



Mr. Wilson in 1972. He had grown up in Texas, where his parents sent him to study dance in the hope of building his self-confidence. Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

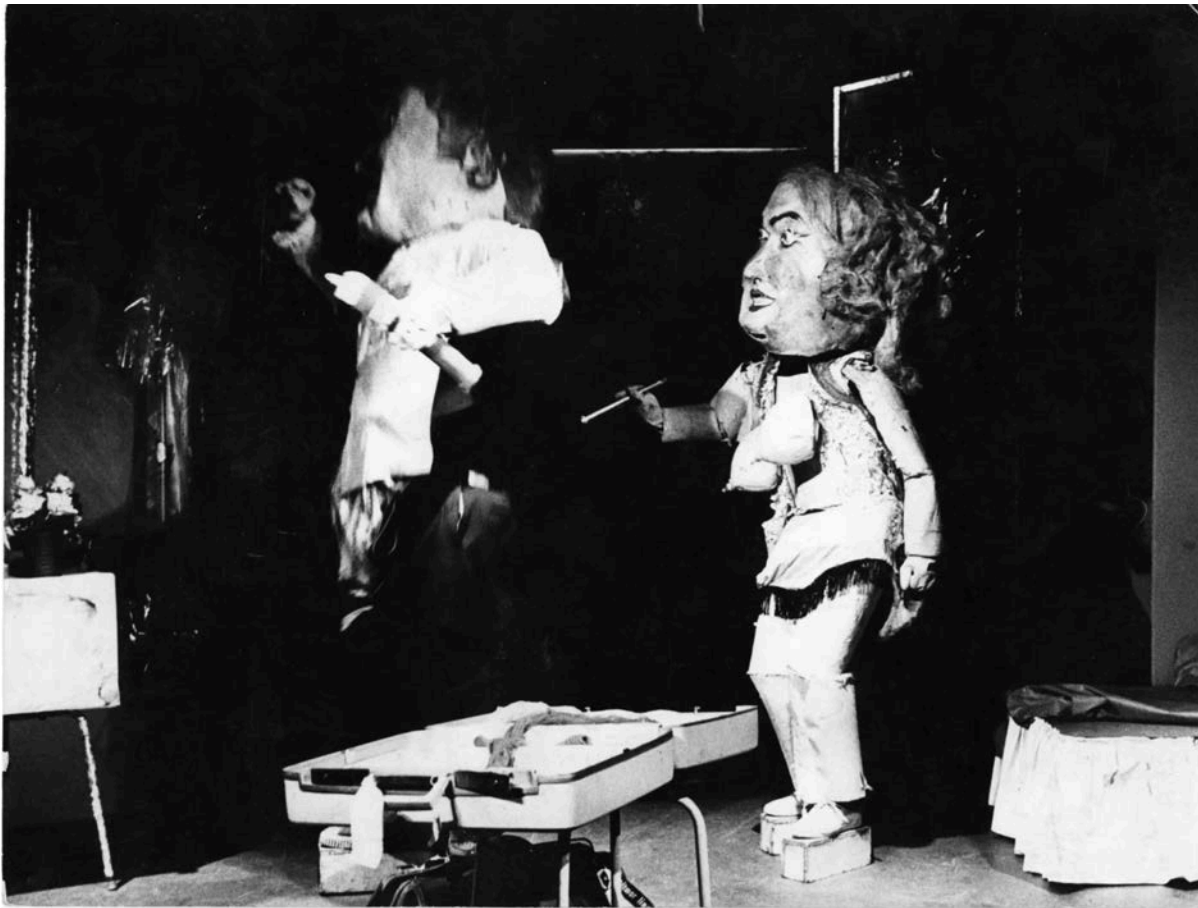
He memorialized his teacher by using her name in several projects, including his first New York ensemble, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, and the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, which underwrites various projects of his, including the Watermill Center, a 10-acre arts incubator on Long Island's South Fork.

Mr. Wilson enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin in 1959 to study business administration but dropped out in 1962. While there, however, he took a job working in the kitchen of the Austin State Hospital for the Mentally Handicapped. At his request, he was soon reassigned to the hospital's recreation department, where he used the skills he had learned from Byrd Hoffman to help patients channel their energy into making art.

He moved to Brooklyn in 1963 and studied architecture and interior design at Pratt Institute, earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1965. While a student at Pratt, he designed puppets for "Motel," the final play in Jean-Claude van Itallie's satirical



“America Hurrah” trilogy, which was staged at the Pocket Theater in New York and at the Royal Court Theater in London. He also earned money working as a therapist for brain-damaged children.



A scene from “Motel,” the third of three segments of Jean-Claude van Itallie’s “America Hurrah.” Mr. Wilson designed the puppets while he was student at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in the 1960s. Lilian Bolvinkel

Mr. Wilson presented experimental works of his own at the Peerless Theater, a movie house across the street from Pratt. He briefly returned to Texas at his parents’ insistence, but his life as a young gay man with theatrical interests proved difficult for him under the eyes of his deeply religious family. He attempted suicide, he said, and was briefly institutionalized in Texas.

On his release, he returned to New York, where he rented a loft in SoHo and started the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. While writing his early plays, he supported himself by teaching acting and movement classes in Summit, N.J., where one day, in 1968, he saw an altercation between a police officer and a young Black man,

Raymond Andrews, who was deaf and mute and unable to defend himself. Mr. Wilson took the teenager under his wing, appearing in court on his behalf and eventually adopting him.



Robert Wilson last year in Water Mill, N.Y., where he had a home and arts center. Lindsay Morris for The New York Times

Mr. Andrews survives him, along with a sister, Suzanne, and a niece, Lori Lambert.



Mr. Wilson collaborated with Mr. Andrews on “Deafman Glance” (1971), which he described as a “silent opera.” By then, he had attracted notice with his first mature work, “The King of Spain” (1969). Seeing this three-hour, plot-free play, Harvey Lichtenstein, the director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, commissioned Mr. Wilson’s next work, “The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud” (1969).



Mr. Wilson’s “The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud,” from 1969, questioned aspects of contemporary life, including racism. BAM

“Freud” questioned several aspects of contemporary life, including racism. In one scene, a troupe of minstrels in blackface danced to Johann Strauss Jr.’s “Blue Danube Waltz.” Reviewing the production in *The Village Voice*, the director Richard Foreman called the play “one of the major works of the decade, based on an aesthetic quite different from one that underlies most of the current work in the theatrical avant-garde.”

## **‘Einstein on the Beach’**

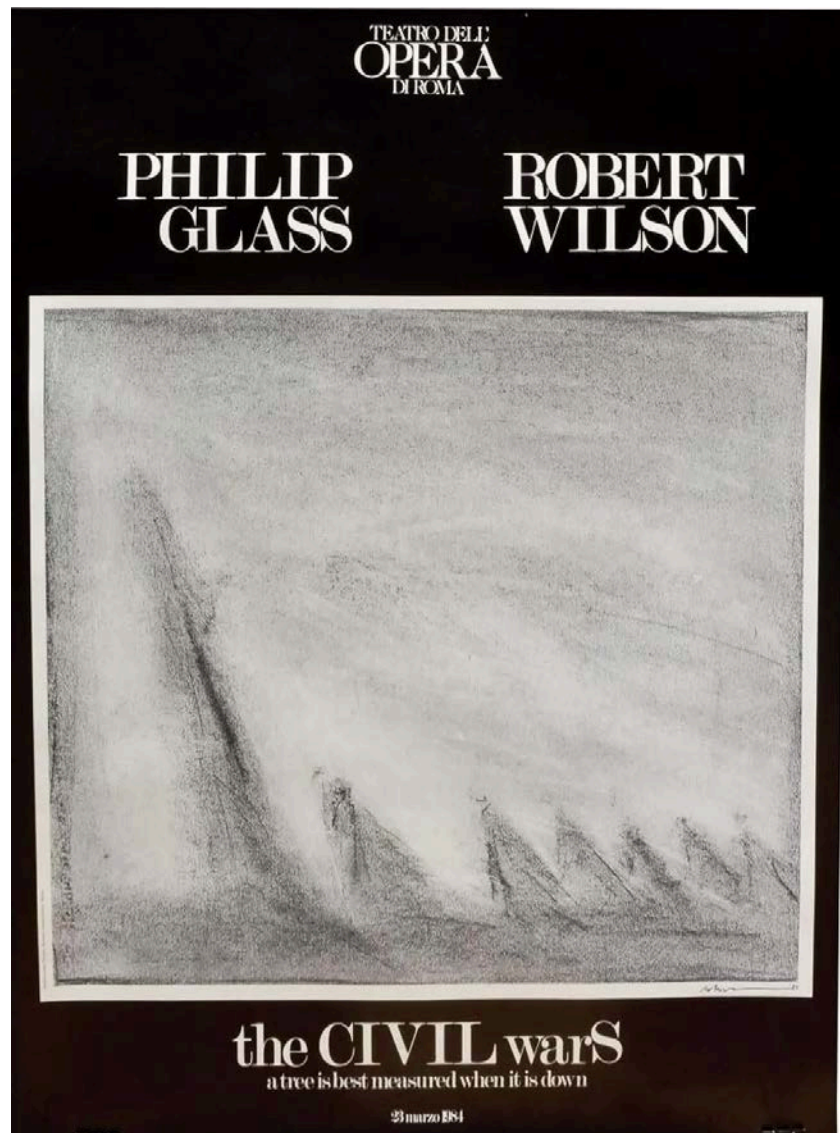
In 1975, shortly after producing “A Letter for Queen Victoria” and “The \$ Value of Man,” Mr. Wilson disbanded his Byrd ensemble and — after two years of discussion about a subject — began work with Mr. Glass on “Einstein on the Beach.” Mr. Glass, recognizing that he and Mr. Wilson shared ideas about the expansiveness of time, had approached him about collaborating in 1973.



"Torch Dance," from "Einstein on The Beach," 1976. via RW Work, Ltd.

"Einstein," which had its premiere at the Festival d'Avignon in France in July 1976 and was staged at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York that November, has proved to be among the most durable works in Mr. Wilson's and Mr. Glass's catalogs. It has been recorded three times and revived regularly, with world tours in 1985, 1992 and 2012-15.

“What it means exactly is hard to put in words,” John Rockwell wrote in *The Times* after the Avignon premiere. “Mr. Wilson calmly accepts most interpretations people care to make. The phrase ‘on the beach’ may have some reference to the post-apocalyptic novel of that name. The overall theme of the play might be said to be a consideration of the same moral and cosmic issues that concerned Einstein himself in his later years, principally the role of science in the modern world and the relation of science to religion.”



Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass teamed up again for the opera “The Civil Wars: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down,” first performed in 1984. Teatro Dell Opera

Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass teamed up again, in 1984, to produce “The Civil Wars: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down,” the fifth act, called “the Rome Section,” of what was to be a 12-hour opera, with other sections composed by Jo Kondo, David Byrne, Gavin Bryars and others. Because of funding problems, the full work was never produced. But Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass went on to produce two more operas, “White Raven” and “Monsters of Grace” (both 1998). In 2022, Mr. Wilson produced “H-100 Seconds to Midnight,” a work inspired by the physicist Stephen Hawking, with texts by Etel Adnan and music by Mr. Glass and Dickie Landry.

Mr. Wilson began directing other writers’ works in 1985, starting with Shakespeare’s “King Lear” and adaptations of Chekhov’s “Swan Song” and Virginia Woolf’s “Orlando.” He went on to apply innovative approaches to, among other works, Shakespeare’s “Tempest,” Strindberg’s “Dream Play,” Handel’s “Messiah,” Puccini’s “Turandot” and Wagner’s “Ring” cycle and “Lohengrin.”

In some adaptations, Mr. Wilson transformed the original work enough to take ownership. “The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets,” his 1989 collaboration with the singer-songwriter Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs, was based on the August Apel and Friedrich Laun story from 1810 that inspired Carl Maria von Weber’s opera “Der Freischütz” and the writer Thomas De Quincey’s English reworking, “The Fatal Marksman,” both in the 1820s.





A scene from “The Black Rider” in 1990, the year it had its premiere. Clärchen Baus-Mattar, via RW Work, Ltd.



Tom Waits, left, with Mr. Wilson during rehearsals for “The Black Rider.” via RW Work, Ltd.



William S. Burroughs, right, also collaborated with Mr. Wilson on “Black Rider.” via RW Work, Ltd.



Reviewing the work in *Opera News* in 1993, Mr. Rockwell wrote: “The show — and that is what it is, not a revue or an opera or musical theater in its more earnest, pretentious form — is in essence ‘Der Freischütz’ meets ‘Cabaret,’ with a dash of ‘The Rocky Horror Picture Show’ on the side. Things keep zooming off on zany tangents, with a Joel Grey-style interlocutor, a campy devil and Burroughs’s equation of soul-selling with heroin addiction.”

The work, which had its premiere in 1990, was the first panel of a trilogy of collaborations staged at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg, Germany. It was followed by “Alice” (1992), a reconfiguration of Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories, also with music by Mr. Waits, and “Time Rocker” (1996), with music by Lou Reed.

## From Ginsberg to Gaga

Mr. Wilson’s other notable collaborations include Euripides’s “Alcestis” (1986) with Laurie Anderson; “Cosmopolitan Greetings” (1988) with Allen Ginsberg; a Spirituals recital, “Great Day in the Morning” (1982), and stagings of Schoenberg’s “Erwartung” (1995) and Schubert’s “Winterreise” (2001) for the soprano Jessye Norman; “The Old Woman” (2013) with the choreographer Mikhail Baryshnikov and the actor Willem Dafoe; and “Bach 6 Solo,” a staging of Bach’s unaccompanied violin works, played by Jennifer Koh and choreographed by Ms. Childs.

He also worked several times with Lady Gaga, including one work at the Louvre in Paris in 2013 involving what he called “Video Portraits” of her, posing her in the guise of subjects of historic paintings.



Mr. Wilson's collaboration with Lady Gaga in the video portrait "The Death of Marat," in 2013.

Robert Wilson/RW Work, Ltd.



Lady Gaga's video portrait as "Mademoiselle Caroline Rivière d'après Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres," 2013. Robert Wilson/RW Work, Ltd.

Mr. Wilson's other creative partners included Brad Pitt, Winona Ryder, Renée Fleming, Alan Cumming and several animals (including a porcupine and a snowy owl), all of whom sat for "Video Portraits" he produced in 2004. The series has been screened at more than 50 museums and galleries around the world, as well as in Times Square.

“My theater is formal. It’s different from the way most directors work,” Mr. Wilson told Texas Monthly in 2020. “It’s another world I create; it’s not a world that you see wherever you are, if you’re in your office or if you’re on the streets or at home. This is a different world. It’s a world that’s created for a stage. Light is different. The space is different. The way you walk is different. The way you sing is different than the way you sing in the shower.”

He added: “Theater serves a unique function in society. It’s a forum where people come together and can share something together for a brief period of time. Art has the possibility of uniting us. And the reason that we make theater — the reason we call it a play — is we’re playing. We’re having fun. And if you don’t have fun playing, then don’t do it.”

Ash Wu contributed reporting.