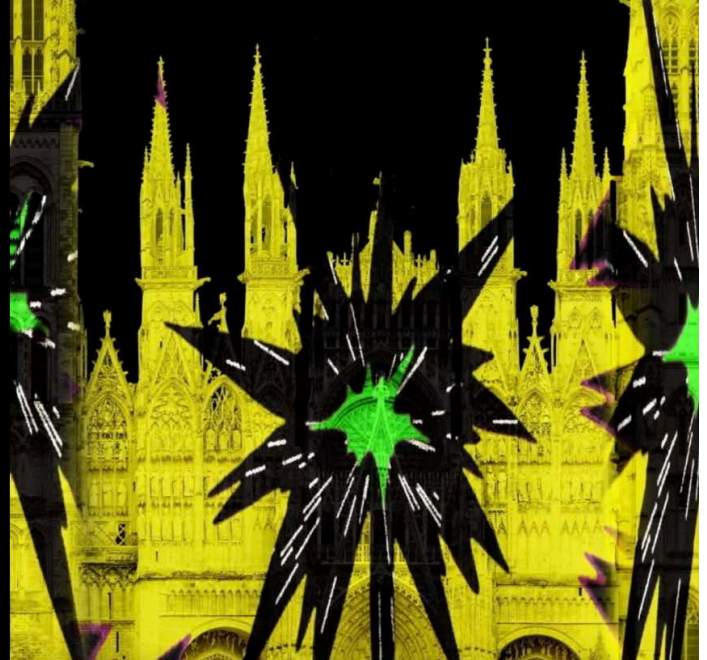


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Robert Wilson in Rouen: shining a light in dark times

Using projections, poetry and music, the artist and theatre director has created a striking installation for Rouen cathedral



“With Monet, it’s the light behind the surface of the painting that makes the paint resonate. It’s the same in the theatre; what makes the surface powerful is the space behind it,” says the theatre director and visual artist Robert Wilson. We’re meeting in Paris to discuss his installation projected on to Notre-Dame de Rouen, the cathedral famously depicted by Monet.

Entitled *Star and Stone: a kind of love ... some say*, it features music by the composer Philip Glass, a longtime collaborator, words from Maya Angelou’s poetry, and the voices of the French actor Isabelle Huppert and Wilson himself. It is among the highlights of the 12th edition of the Normandie Impressionniste festival with 150 events in Normandy marking the 150th anniversary of Impressionism.

Wilson, 82, describes it as a piece in three parts that are each divided into three sections: essentially, a matrix of nine sequences exploring a variety of themes such as ecology, art and war. A cheetah leaps across a black background, explosions engulf the sky, an elephant emerges from the waves. Monet’s painting “Le bateau à Giverny” is set against sweeping coloured abstractions and a black-and-white bustling marketplace gives way to eruptions of volcanic lava. There’s a purple spaceman surrounded by disco lights, the destruction of a glass palace and geometric drawings of pulsating circles accompanied by the sounds of children’s voices.

Wilson’s voice recites Angelou’s resilience poem “Still I Rise” in English while Huppert’s does the same in French. A burlesque epilogue with euphoric bursts of colour subtly references Japan’s Noh theatre. Overall, it gives a sense of Wilson’s rich visual and philosophical repertoire .



Robert Wilson, artist and theatre director © Bronwen Sharp



Born into a conservative, right-wing family in Texas, Wilson studied architecture and attributes his innovative approach to light to being taught by the architect Louis Kahn. Discovering the work of the choreographers George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham then drew him to the performing arts. In his long career he has produced adaptations of works by Shakespeare, Chekhov, Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf, among others, and presented his work widely in Europe and the US. Today, he remains as prolific as ever.

The originality of Wilson's work lies in his unique ways of structuring light. "When I made the opera *Einstein on the Beach*, I made drawings of the light and I gave them to Philip Glass and from those drawings, he wrote the music," he recalls of the groundbreaking, non-narrative opera with choreography by Lucinda Childs that premiered at the Avignon festival in 1976.

What also distinguishes Wilson's oeuvre is how he passionately reinterprets the classics. "The avant-garde is rediscovering the classics for me," he says. "For all artists, whether you're a composer or a choreographer, it's time-space-construction, even if you take a classical work like *King Lear*."

Wilson embraced this *modus operandi* to develop his installation for Rouen working with a "megastructure". To illustrate his point, Wilson draws sequences of horizontal and vertical lines with a black pen on several pages of white paper. "Say the Impressionists, you think 'It's the light'," he explains. "Light for me is an active participant for what I do in the theatre. So the first thing I did was to draw in the structure of the light. Because I'm a visual artist, I thought of the traditional ways that painters have looked at space. I see my hand here, it's a portrait; I see it over here, it's a still life. Go across the street, it's part of a landscape."



A giant cheetah features in a segment of Wilson's new installation

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This is the first time he has made a sound-and-light work. What new challenges did this involve? “In the theatre, you start with a quiet space and then you begin to add sound, but here you can hear an aeroplane flying overhead, dogs barking, a car passing,” he replies. “The light is unpredictable; you can suddenly have a moon or dark clouds. It’s a completely different space. That’s what makes it exciting.”

I ask him what he likes about collaborating with Huppert, with whom he worked on several other productions. “She can think abstractly,” he answers. “I’ve never told an actor what to think. So I give formal directions: quicker, slower, rougher, more interior, more exterior. I make a kind of choreography that one learns and you can’t repeat it too many times. The more you repeat it, the freer you become. Isabelle’s not afraid to do that.”

Wilson has long been revered in France, where he presented the seven-hour *Deafman Gance*, a mostly silent work based on his collaboration with his adopted deaf Black son, Raymond Andrews, in 1971. (The adoption came about almost by chance: Wilson had seen a white policeman about to hit Raymond, then a teenager, on the street and intervened. On realising that he had no legal guardian, Wilson accompanied him to court and subsequently adopted him.)

“I built it through the eyes of a deaf boy who’d never been to school but he would pick up on body signs and signals and he was reading a language that I didn’t notice in the beginning,” Wilson recalls. Observing how Raymond’s body was hearing and feeling sound through vibrations would influence how Wilson employs the subtleties of stillness in his work, how one is nonetheless breathing and moving when one is still.



‘So the first thing I did,’ says Wilson ...



...’s draw the structure of the light



“The New York Times said that nothing happened in *Deafman Glance*, just a lot of animals crawling around on stage,” Wilson recalls. “But it was different when I came to Europe, especially with the French.”

Wilson’s popularity in France is bittersweet, for him. “More people in France have seen my work than people in my own country,” he says. “That used to concern me a lot. But I’m an old man now,” he adds with a Texan drawl. The openness that the French have extended to foreign artists is something he wishes the US would emulate. “They gave a home for the 20th century to Braque, to Picasso, to Stravinsky; they’ve given me a home. It would be great to have a similar cultural policy in my country. To make our nation rich, we need to have a window to the world. And it’s not what Donald Trump says, ‘America first’.”

Besides working on multiple productions, Wilson runs the Watermill Center in New York which he established for “creative thinking”. “It has a central building with no door; it’s always open,” he says of the venue, which invites mathematicians, anthropologists, scientists and artists. Boasting an art collection from contemporary to antiquities, its origins hark back to 1967 when Wilson started the Byrd Hoffman Foundation at the age of 26. “I was working as a waiter in an Italian restaurant and with children who had learning difficulties,” he recalls. “My father was a religious man . . . he instilled in me this idea that as you get older, if you’re successful in life, you give back to the earth to which you’ve been given.”

At the end of our interview, Wilson advocates for the message of hope in art in times of conflict. “Now we’re in a very dark period of time with these wars going on, Israel and Ukraine, that’s why it’s very important to have the text of Maya Angelou,” he says, circling back to his installation in Rouen. “Her voice is light, that’s what we need to hear today.”

To September 28, normandie-impressionniste.fr