

EINSTEIN INTERRUPTUS

Some years ago I was lying on a Costa Rica beach, reading, and every once in a while would close the book and gaze at the vast endless Pacific Ocean. At one point, far away, slightly puncturing the horizon, I saw a cruise ship. When minutes later I looked up again it had advanced maybe an inch. I began to follow the ship's laboured progress repeatedly, all the time thinking – *Why does this look so damn familiar?* It took me about an hour to figure it out – *I was watching an excerpt from a Robert Wilson show, not on stage but in real life.*

At that point I had never seen any of his early work but was certainly familiar with their outrageous durations, his predilection for mind-numbing repetition and fondness for objects to move so slowly their progress becomes all but imperceptible. The intent is surely to alter our sense of time and space thereby inducing a dream-like trance. This coincides with some of the Surrealists' goals and when *Deafman Gance* (1971) was shown in Paris it must have been a supreme compliment to hear the aged Louis Aragon say, in essence, Wilson had finally brought to life what they had always imagined.

Wilson had become a significant artist by the early seventies but it was the almost-five-hour opera *Einstein on the Beach*, with music composed by Philip Glass, that thrust them both into the international spotlight forever to stay. Beyond Aragon's panegyric, it is hard to believe any show could bear so much praise, its 1976 premiere being compared with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, and so on. An iconic work? Without a doubt. But does this modernization of Wagner's "total artwork" concept rank, as seen by some, among the most sublime art ever created? By grace of Toronto's *Luminato* Festival, we would be able to judge for ourselves.

Einstein on the Beach, like much of Wilson's work, is a series of more-or-less static tableaux and it was a delight to see the prologue, so familiar from photographs, already in place as we took our seats: two schoolboys sitting in chairs placed in one corner of the stage with a dozen-member choir in the orchestra-pit sing-chanting – *one two three four five six seven eight*. Everyone was wearing white shirts, light-gray long pants with suspender-clasps glistening in brilliant radiance. House-lights dimmed to black and the first tableau's ingredients arrived in increments: a fellow frozen mid-step on a diving-board jutting from atop a ladder; a tall pony-tailed girl high-stepping a diagonal line back and forth (more on her later); some indefinable small object brightly shining in the corner opposite the chairs; a man in red sharply inscribing numbers in the air at regular intervals; another man walking in a quirky fashion from left to right following an inscrutable route seemingly defined by chessboard squares. Soon, at the very back, a steam-engine spewing endless smoke poked out its nose and began its progress at a tempo similar to a superman pulling it along with a rope.

Minutes after the show “began”, an usher, with bright flashlight, scurried down the aisle escorting some latecomers to their seats. That was annoying. Then it happened again and again, every couple of minutes, for a little over half an hour. Those jarring interruptions made it quite difficult to focus on the spectacle. Besides, what had happened to the convention where late arrivals are allowed into the auditorium during an intermission or earlier suitable moment least likely to distract?

There were other flashes of unwelcome light, however these were from within the audience. People taking photographs with their smartphones? Reading text messages? Checking in on a Euro 2012 soccer game's progress? We have become used to the pre-show voice over loudspeakers instructing us to turn off beepers, cellphones, forbidding taking flash-photos as they are hazardous to dancers. This is not an option, however, when a show is in progress before its announced curtain-time, though signs placed at hall's entry-points might have induced more courtesy.

Once the first tableau was over we were treated to a scene change, one most protracted. Perhaps six people, dressed all in black, moved on and off the stage setting up a large “courtroom”. These technicians, all from Toronto, had been instructed to move slowly, deliberately and not to swing their arms. Their goal went beyond precise scene set-up; time was never a factor as it was deemed more important to work as a unit. The idea, no doubt, was to maintain much of the action's plodding pace having just occurred. But guess what? Technicians are not performers and their lack of precision glaringly showed. The overall quality of the *real* performers was truly excellent and I have no idea why Wilson would allow that standard's dilution. Seeing the company's already enormous size, all brought in from New York, why not take that extra step and include stagehands equally trained and committed as the other artists?

Finally set up, the trial tableau – replete with two judges sitting side by side, ten jurors, four schoolboys and two stenographers air-typing – was a mockery, an incomprehensible farce. Perhaps it was here the “jurors” gave up counting numbers and switched to musical scale's vocabulary – *do re mi fa sol la si do*. Then entered Einstein, a gray-wigged woman who sat down and proceeded to play the violin for a long time. Here is where the production began to lurch towards the unbearable amidst the drone of non-stop repetitive scale-segments and equally dreary variants, all played *fortissimo*.

The aforementioned “indefinable small object” turned out to be a seashell which a coy-smiling Asian woman later held to her ear. Once the curtain came down on that cartoonish courtroom, the same woman returned with the same seashell and placed herself in a mirrored pose. For how long? For precisely the time it took to effect a set change. Here is where I began to smell intellectual fraudulence. Leaving aside why we were privy to some scenery-shifts and not others, something is dishonest when an image is presented as an art-work-component when, in fact, its real purpose is to be filler, an *amuse œil* masquerading as

content. And it was all just so blatantly obvious. As soon as that seashell-woman appeared, I whispered to my friend – *Scene change*.

What curtain's rise revealed was that same "train", now sufficiently advanced to display its caboose. This tableau lasted a month – well, in compressed time, as a crescent moon gradually became full. A man and woman, in formal evening dress, were singing. This was not a typical opera duet where I sing something to you, you respond, we overlap and sing together. No, this was non-stop singing *at* one another, a face-to-face confrontation, simultaneous unintelligible syllables fired at breakneck machine-gun pace. This "exchange" seemed cordial enough until she pulled – well, not exactly "pulled", as it was in customary extreme-slow motion – a pistol, causing his hands to levitate into surrender-position with face contorting into a horror-struck rictus-mask.

Both this couple and the violin-sawing Einstein displayed extraordinary virtuosity – but to what end? I was dazzled by the technique, not the music. I might well admire a chef's skill while she rapidly cuts bunches of carrots into ridiculously perfect half-centimetre discs but after three, not thirty, minutes I would need no further proof of her dicing dexterity. Boredom would set in. The result would be a mound of carrot-circles. So what? Freak-show prowess should not be confused with artistry.

Glass' music was, for me, tedious monochrome monotony. Once a tableau began, a pattern of notes was introduced, repeated and then, at predicable ten-or-so-second intervals, a little alteration in the "melody", a supporting bass-line added, continuing for another bunch of seconds until a new mini-change was introduced. I was surprised to have programme notes reveal this score had been fashioned on the ages-old theme and variations principle. Try theme and *permutations*. When I think of classical piano's grand variation-sets, Bach's *Goldberg*, Beethoven's *Eroica*, Brahms' *Handel*, each conveys an extreme expression-range: from tumultuous to tender, joyous to tragic, shattering to soothing, and most everything in between. These masters' ingenuity transforms themes to the point where only the most trained ear will ascertain which element has been retained as any variation may be based exclusively on the harmony, melody, bass, rhythm, tempo.

Minimalism, the style championed by Glass, is based on the use of small units of sound with repetition's purpose being a gateway to a hypnotic state. Once you create the nucleus you are chained to it. The problem with *Einstein's* score is the nature of the nuclei: invariably rapid and busy, a notes-cascade blur. I had always thought a state of distraction-free quiet calm would be the one most conducive to hypnosis. With this notes-barrage, snakes slithering around in a glass cage, my brain became numb, reduced to a state of stupor.

As different as the trial scene was from the train's, what followed next held even greater contrast: pure dance by Lucinda Childs' company afront an image alike a horizontal electricity-charge. This *tranche*, appropriately named Field Dances,

the bare stage suggested an open grassy field, even the immeasurably vast “fields” of physics. In Childs Wilson had found the ideal choreographer. Her eleven dancers flowed on and off in various combinations, endless pirouettes mimicking Glass’ repetitiveness. Everything was soft, curvy and untrammled, eschewing all pyrotechnics, though the occasional high bent knee was a nice little hat-tip to the angularity of most everything previous. Yet I was not entranced. Pleasant as this interlude was, the utter lack of dynamics, the unchanging movement-tempo soon induced indifference, mind-wandering.

Perhaps I should not have been grateful at dance’s end, as what was to follow became increasingly distressing. The courtroom scene was laboriously set up again – only to have half of it promptly removed. Did we really need to be reminded of all those trappings? Or was it significant to witness the white-dressed woman progress from her previous high perch to a metres-away slightly-raised platform onto which she slowly rolled until ideally positioned to address, though not face, us? She proceeded to recount a trip to the mall where she’d contemplated purchasing a Fourth-of-July-design bikini until remembering she’d not been going to the beach recently. If I were now to type out one full page of those three mall-visit lines I might reach the half-way mark of her repetitions, all identically delivered, pitch-perfect aural photocopies. When she got up, never ceasing to share her memory of that momentous contemplation – who knows, maybe we hadn’t yet realized its full import by the seventieth, eightieth, ninetieth iteration – she made her way along the stage-front, put on a necklace and, in a Patty Hearst flashback, grabbed and aimed at the audience a sizable weapon, the exact identity of which would be much more readily ascertained by God-fearing Americans than gun-shy Canadians. *Oh my!*

Both our patience had been tried for some time but this verbal effluence had pushed them right to the brink. We decided to give the performance one more chance – if we did not like next segment’s looks we would leave. And then we got lucky. Einstein, the fiddler, once more made her way onstage and there was nothing to consider. Neither of us was willing to put up with her playing for one more minute. We had spent three hours on *Einstein* and theatre’s dark was replaced by June’s delicious dusk-light, a perfect backdrop to animated conversation on our walk back home.

Now, as promised, I will revisit the first tableau with that – *tall pony-tailed girl high-stepping a diagonal line back and forth*. She is *Einstein*’s only element that still clings to me – nor would I want her to let go. Right from the first moment she exuded confidence, determination and single-mindedness, right arm curved in ballet’s second position with rigid outstretched left arm’s index finger pointing forever skyward at a 120-degree angle. She knew her ordeal had just begun and she was on a mission to conquer. Conscious, no doubt, but seemingly oblivious to everything around her, the crisp steps of her prescribed route were punctuated by sharp head-turns, making her ponytail fly from one shoulder to the other. The

man whose walk seemed determined by chessboard squares seemed on a collision course with her. Marching backwards and missing him by inches she did not flinch. I have no doubt had he been in her way she would have knocked him over without a second thought and, retracing her path, would have stomped on him had he not had the good sense to get out of her way. I was enthralled, gripped. Nothing else on stage concerned me, my eyes not bearing her out of my sight. I thought – *This girl transcends humanity, she is a machine that can do anything she wants.*

After a while the diagonal line shifted, her route grew longer, right arm flying out and back while left arm remained in that unwavering salute. Head-snaps occurred at different intervals, other things changing in tiny ways I was not interested in keeping track of. I was more than content just watching her. Towards the end both arms began rapid, disconnected precise motions, though never seeming wildly flailing. A glorious sense of liberation was emerging as she seemed no longer confined and her rhythmic steps' maintenance became a propulsion towards freedom. That progression from imprisonment to controlled abandonment was the culmination of one of the most exhilarating solos I have ever seen.

I would love to hop into a bus right now and go see her perform again, best in an empty space with no music. I imagine most people have no idea how grueling that sequence was. Without personal experience it is difficult to conceive the energy- and concentration-extent required to maintain that clockwork tempo and movement-precision. Over twenty minutes the pain in her outstretched left arm must have been considerable. I have no problem with extraordinary demands made on performers – and in *Einstein* we saw a disproportionate number of heroics, though Childs' dancers were mercifully spared. I am never troubled by performers' suffering when the results are compelling, when their sacrifices are in service of the gorgeous. Still, any performance must be memorable for its beauty, not for its superhuman effort. And herein lies a significant problem with *Einstein*: all these artists, stretched to their limits, yet mostly to minimal effect. It was increasingly uncomfortable and dismaying to watch these great exertions only to grow continually less interested in following their devotions.

I would not go so far as to say performers were abused though the audience certainly was. In the months leading up to the show, we had heard a phrase – *five hours with no intermission* – so often it became a mantra. You might think this commendable on the festival's part, giving us a clear indication of what was awaiting us and technically yes, the performance *was* (close to) *five hours with no intermission* – yet in reality this mantra proved a fabrication, a touch of intellectual dissimulation.

In most every situation when people gather, rules outline accepted behaviour or terms of engagement. An intermission at the theatre may have several functions,

one of them admitting people's receptivity might be enhanced if the work was presented not as a three-hour chunk but rather in three one-hour units with two twenty-minute breaks thereby allowing people to chat, stretch legs, drink something or, conversely, relieve themselves.

My friend and I paid some attention to audience members' departures as we had seats at the back and coveted better ones. Might a few people give up on this marathon and thus relinquish prized places? Just as we were about to pounce though, that couple returned. What was going on here? As we became more attuned to audience comings-and-goings we came to realize we were free to exit and return at will. It was frustrating. We certainly did not wish to usurp fine seats only to be booted out of them.

When perusing local reviews days later, I was astonished to read posted signs had informed audience-members they could enter and exit at their pleasure. *What* signs? Of my three friends, two reported not having seen any but just "knowing" they could wander in and out. The third saw a glimpse of one but remembered nothing of its nature or location. For my part, I *did* see signs, all announcing a 45-minute introduction to the show – just the thing I need before embarking on a five-hour voyage. I grabbed my programme. Almost half-way through the seven-page spread I found the fine print – ... *the audience is invited to leave and re-enter the auditorium quietly as desired*. Thank you for finally letting me know, though, as I said, it *did* become quite clear people would not be barred from returning. Re-enter "quietly", not animatedly, not noisily? Well, I suppose hushed back-and-forth bustling would not interfere with the aimed-for altered consciousness whereas rowdier ones might.

I really wish theatre-makers would for once and all realize people do not necessarily consume pre-show minutes with programme's sharp study. This festival's booklet consumed many pages. It would take a little time just to find those devoted to *Einstein*. And how hard it would be to not get caught up in the greetings and well-wishes of no less than our Prime Minister, our Premier, our Mayor! The Sony Centre's expansive foyer, with its huge display promoting festival's attractions, could easily have included a brilliant banner clarifying our audience-rights.

When engagement-terms are particularly crucial and so integral to audience's experience, it is incumbent upon the theatre to announce them in a similarly emphatic way. If you're going to hammer away at – *five hours with no intermission* – you must pound away equally at – *enter and exit at will*. Just think about it. Some law or other states that if gunshots are fired during a play (and now, apparently, ditto smoking) there must be clear notification, a prominent proclamation. Leaving aside the spurious nature of this edict – I mean when a gun is aimed, what are we expecting will emerge from its barrel, birdsong? – can you imagine the lawsuit if a patron were actually to succumb to a heart attack upon gunshot blasts? I don't think that little note on page four would carry much weight for the defense.

I realize my point is made, but when engagement-terms are so markedly different from the norm I insist that double the care, double the effort should be made to ensure everyone has been clearly apprised of viewing's unique circumstances. Personally I welcome the right for every director to decide the terms dictating how her piece is to be seen. This show-specific solution to be adhered to, however, should be emphasized, not hidden somewhere in the programme. In the end, the mantra became a sort of misleading publicity gimmick. Why not be straightforward? *Five hours long. Make your own intermissions.* – conveys not only accuracy but adds a delicious *frisson* of freedom denied to most audiences.

Examine now another facet of that same theatrical convention, this one suggesting breaks may clear the brain for new location-settings or re-enforce a time-lapse in play's action. *Five hours with no intermission* – would seem to indicate an essential continuity, ideally not to be broken as any flow-interruption would be injurious to artistic integrity. Here again this much-heralded work slides, in rather bewildering ways, into intellectual confusion's puddle.

To begin with, *Einstein* was never a story and the nature of any action – I would call it activity – was contained exclusively within each separate scene. Beyond the stupefying repetitive music, visual imagery (steam-engine, courtroom) was the only element providing connections, *not* what actually occurred during each tableau. I'm sure the creators would insist that was the point, therein the revolution: an opera's progression achieved not via story-line but rather by aural and visual means.

I beg to differ. The music may have been similar in nature and style but nothing more. Classical opera's musical equilibrium is achieved with themes, recurring melodies with key instruments signaling specific characters' arrival, various orchestrations supporting differing emotions. Continuity was not achieved by Einstein playing only the violin and never switching to cello or piccolo.

The visuals were no more helpful. If you can actually manage a connection between steam-engine and courtroom, it still takes a tremendous mind-stretch to link them with Field Dances. And even if you are able to tie together all three, it is well-nigh impossible to argue continuity in the presence of visible, not-visible and cutsey distractions by scene changes. I would argue: time consumed setting up the first courtroom scene was, in fact, an intermission *within* the piece, its own little "tableau" devoid of any intellectual content. I have no idea why we were "required" to see it. Were we to gasp at the striking novelty of watching a scene-set-up mid-performance? The dance section, moreover, contrasted so drastically with everything previous it was begging to be preceded with an intermission. How delightful it would have been to re-enter the theatre, all refreshed, only to be surprised by the opera having morphed into a ballet!

The mixed signals would not abate. The programme notes, written by festival Director Jörn Weisbrodt, a man who should know, having served for years as Wilson's personal assistant, state both Wilson and Glass "stress" *Einstein* has – *no content* – only to continue with the bracketed – *yet is, at the same time, full of meaning*. No wonder this opera is considered so unique: a work lacking any content while simultaneously drenched with meaning! Wilson himself, before remount-tour's first performance in Ann Arbor, did not clarify matters by informing us much of the text may seem nonsensical at first – *but there's a deep inner logic to all of it that emerges eventually*. Leaving aside the prologue's numbers-incantation, at times overlapped to the point of unintelligibility, I do not see how one can bring vitality, never mind logic, to countless recitations of those scale-notes and digits one through eight, no matter how many permutations one wrings them through.

Anyone who knows me personally will attest to the degree of sympathy I have with Wilson, or any director, not wanting to talk about the meaning of his work: it's not his job. And he generally does restrict himself to commenting on formal structures, leaving, as well he should, interpretative considerations to audience members thus inclined. So all the more surprising to hear Wilson descend into verbal convulsions about *Einstein's* text, logic and meaning when all he needed was to remember his own quote from the particularly handsome book, *Absolute Wilson – It's an abstraction*. Perfect. No need to say anything more.

Though I have carped a fair amount about *Einstein*, I must admit had I seen it back in 1976 I would undoubtedly have been more taken, would have embraced the daring, the innovation, the radical edge. And no question of me leaving until the ovations had subsided. But this is 2012 and familiarity has impinged on the daring, the innovation has become not the norm but just more *normal*. The radical edge is no longer there. It has been rubbed smooth.

It pains me to say this but reading about *Einstein* and looking at photographs inspired me far more than the reality of seeing it live. At one point it *had* to be glorious – too many so attest. But further corrosion must be forestalled and *Einstein* should be laid to rest. I say: let's fill a ship with all sets, props, costumes and drift it out to sea. When it arrives in calm waters, throw out the anchors and drill one tiny hole, both in bow and stern, just barely above water-level. Everyone who wishes may then gather on the beach and watch *Einstein*, in hyper-slow motion, inexorably succumb to gravity – for at least *five hours with no intermission*.