

## EINSTEIN INTERRUPTUS

Some years ago I was lying on a Costa Rica beach, reading, and every once in a while I 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 more 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 the fondness for objects to move so slowly that 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, that 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.

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*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 wearing white shirts, light-gray long pants with suspender-clasps glistening in the brilliant white light. 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 a steam-engine, spewing endless smoke, poked out its nose and began its progress at a tempo similar to a strong man pulling it along with a rope.

A couple of minutes after the show “began”, an usher holding a bright flashlight scurried down the aisle to escort a couple of latecomers to their seats. That was annoying. And 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 being presented. Besides, what had happened to the convention where late arrivals are allowed into the auditorium during an intermission or an earlier suitable moment least likely to distract the rest of the audience?

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

Once the first tableau was over we were treated to a scene change, a most protracted one. 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 the precise setting up of a scene and time was never a factor as it was deemed more important to work as a unit. The idea, no doubt, was to maintain the plodding pace of much of the action that had just occurred. But guess what? Technicians are not performers and their lack of precision glaringly showed. The overall quality of the *real* performers was excellent and I have no idea why Wilson would allow that standard’s dilution. Seeing the already enormous size of the company brought in from New York, why not take that extra step and bring along 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 that the “jurors” gave up counting numbers and switched to the musical scale’s vocabulary, “do re mi fa sol la si do”. Then - enter 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 had held to her ear. Once the curtain came down on that cartoonish courtroom the same woman came back with the same seashell and placed herself in a mirrored pose. For how long? For precisely the amount of time it took to effect a set change. Here is where I began to smell the rat of

intellectual fraudulence. Leaving aside the question of why we were to be privy to some scenery-shifts and not others, there is something dishonest when an image is disguised as part of the art-work when, in fact, its real purpose is to be a filler, an *amuse œil* masquerading as content. And it was just so blatantly obvious what was going on. As soon as that seashell-woman appeared, I whispered to my friend - *Scene change*.

What the curtain's rise revealed was that same steam-engine, now presenting 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 to each other. 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 of simultaneous high-speed 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 the skill of a chef rapidly cutting bunches of carrots into ridiculously perfect half-millimetre 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, a tedium of monochrome monotony. Once a tableau began a pattern of notes was presented, repeated and then, at predicable ten-or-so-second intervals, a little alteration in the "melody", a supporting line added in the bass, which would continue for another bunch of seconds until a new mini-change was introduced. I was surprised to have programme notes reveal the score had been fashioned on the ages-old principle of theme and variations. Try theme and *permutations*. When I think of classical piano's grand variation-sets, Bach's *Goldberg*, Beethoven's *Eroica*, Brahms' *Handel*, each of them conveys an extreme range of expression - 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 be able to 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 the 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: inevitably rapid and busy, a blurring cascade of notes. I had always thought a state of distraction-free quiet calm would be the one most conducive to hypnosis. With this barrage of notes, a mass of 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 end-car's, what followed next was an even greater contrast: pure dance by members of Lucinda Childs' company afront an image reminiscent of a horizontal charge of electricity. This *tranche* was appropriately named Field Dances, the bare stage suggestive of an open grassy field or 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 the repetitiveness of Glass' music. Everything was soft, curvy and untrammeled, eschewing all pyrotechnics, though the occasional high bent knee was a nice little tip of the hat to the angularity of most everything previous. Yet I was not entranced. Pleasant as this interlude was, the utter lack of dynamics, the unchanging tempo of the movement soon induced indifference, a wandering mind.

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 one 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 the purchase of a Fourth-of-July-coloured 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 visit-to-the-mall 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 front of the stage, put on a necklace and, in a Patty Hearst flashback, grabbed and aimed at the audience a sizeable weapon, the exact identity of which would be much more readily ascertained by God-fearing Americans than gun-shy Canadians. *Oh my!*

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

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Now, as promised, I want to 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 the 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 a sharp head-turn, 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, the right arm flying out and back while the 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 flailing. A glorious sense of liberation was emerging as she seemed no longer confined and the maintenance of her rhythmic steps 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 extent of energy and concentration required to maintain that clockwork tempo and the precision of those movements. Over the course of twenty minutes, the pain in her outstretched left arm must have been considerable. I have no problem with extraordinary demands being made on performers - and in *Einstein* there were 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 the service of the gorgeous. Still, any performance must be memorable for its beauty, not for its superhuman effort. And herein lay one of my problems with *Einstein*: all these artists, stretched to their limits, yet to minimal effect. It was increasingly uncomfortable and dismaying to watch these great exertions only to grow continually less interested in following their devotions.

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I would not go so far as to say performers were abused though the audience certainly was. In the months and weeks leading up to the show, we had heard that 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.

Most every situation when people gather together there are rules outlining accepted behaviour or terms of engagement. An intermission at the theatre may have several functions, one of them admitting that 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 thus allowing people to chat, stretch their 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 paid more attention 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 the local reviews a few days later, I was astonished to read that signs had been posted informing audience members they could enter and exit at their own 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 that 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 that people do not necessarily consume their pre-show minutes with a sharp study of the programme. This festival’s booklet consumed a great number of 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 the festival’s attractions, could easily have included a brilliant banner clarifying our audience-rights.

When the terms of engagement are particularly crucial and so integral to the 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 the terms of engagement 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 the viewing's unique circumstances. Personally I welcome the right for every director to decide the terms dictating how her piece is to be seen. However this show-specific solution to be adhered to 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.

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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 the play's action. "Five hours with no intermission" would seem to indicate an essential continuity, ideally not to be broken as any interruption in the flow would be injurious to artistic integrity. Here again this much-heralded work slides, in rather bewildering ways, into a puddle of intellectual confusion.

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 stupefyingly 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 continuity achieved not via story-line but rather by aural and visual means.

I would beg to differ. The music may have been similar in nature and style but nothing more. Classical opera's musical continuity is achieved with themes, recurring melodies with key instruments signaling the arrival of specific characters, 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 from scene changes. I would argue that the time consumed to set 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 that both Wilson and Glass “stress” that *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 devoid of content while simultaneously drenched with meaning! Wilson himself, before the remount-tour’s first performance in Ann Arbor, did not clarify matters by informing us that 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 non-number texts, which were 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 the 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.

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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*, and 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 its 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 this *Einstein* should be laid to rest. I say let’s fill a ship with all the sets and props and drift it out to sea. When it arrives in calm waters, throw out the anchors and



drill one tiny hole, both in the bow and stern, in a spot 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.