
Avant-Garde Epic: Robert Wilson's *Odyssey* and the Experimental Turn

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ROBERT WILSON is famous for his disparagement of “the text,” for his desire to break free from the strictures of the written word and compel his audience to engage with performance on a different level. So it was with some trepidation, and a sense of irony, that I began to watch his production of the *Odyssey*, now (as I write) moved from Athens to Milan.* For the play opens with Homer’s prologue, recited in ancient Greek—so far, so good: I feel on relatively safe ground. It continues in modern Greek, and this is the language with which it will remain throughout. But in Milan, the majority of the audience are not following the spoken word with their ears, but are, rather, reading the surtitles projected above the performance space. I find myself referring to the surtitles too, and using them to recall Simon Armitage’s English translation which I had re-read only that morning. For behind the spoken modern Greek and the projected Italian surtitles is Armitage’s version, written for radio and first broadcast by the BBC in 2004, and now translated into modern Greek for Wilson’s production.

All this translation (from ancient Greek to English, to modern Greek, to Italian) may leave us wondering why Wilson chose Armitage’s text. Of course, the American director would naturally have gravitated towards an English translation of Homer’s epic poem. Even the task of having that translation translated into modern Greek (by Yorgos Depastas) and into Italian (by Isabella Babbucci) for this collabo-

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ration between the National Theatre of Greece and Milan's Piccolo Teatro did not daunt him (though the decision not to choose a modern Greek translation in the first place may have ruffled some feathers, particularly in a production by Greece's National Theatre, and especially at a time when the country's financial struggles are taking a toll on national morale—certainly the vast cost of the production came in for criticism in some quarters of the Greek press).¹

Armitage's *Odyssey*, as Oliver Taplin described it in a review for the *Guardian* newspaper back in 2006, "belongs to the rattling good yarn school of Homeric retellings."² It is also not exactly a translation, but more of an adaptation: written for performance, it dispenses with lengthy descriptive passages, or even with lengthy speeches, and moves along at a cracking pace. Derek Walcott's stage version, written in 1992 and performed that same year by the RSC, did—on the surface—something similar. Indeed, Walcott's version is so condensed that it comes in at just a little over half the length of Armitage's. However, Walcott succeeded where Armitage has failed: for Armitage's rendition loses much of the nuance and beauty of the Homeric epic. This is nowhere clearer than in Odysseus' meeting with Alcinous and Arete on Scheria, when he almost immediately declares that he is Odysseus;³ my heart sank in just the same way that it did at the opening scene of Andrei Konchalovsky's 1997 made-for-television version, where Odysseus is seen hurtling over the Ithacan landscape towards Penelope, who is calling his name as she gives birth to Telemachus. Identity, we gather, in both Konchalovsky and Armitage, is not going to be a concern; yet surely that is one of the central preoccupations of the Homeric epic and one of its most engaging themes. To its advantage, however, is the pace of Armitage's adaptation and the simplicity of its language. The latter, in particular, is likely to have appealed to a director wishing that his audience engage with the *whole* performance (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) and not give undue notice only to the word. Armitage's translation does not distract with linguistic

complexity, which in turn leaves Wilson freer to engage the audience's attention with the visual, before them on stage.

In adapting the *Odyssey* for performance, and in reducing it to a viable performance length (Wilson eschewed the epic-length productions that were a trademark of his early work: his 1973 *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* ran to twelve hours, and the previous year he mounted a production in Iran that lasted seven days!),⁴ much had to, by necessity, be cut. Armitage's original radio version ran to four and a half hours, broadcast in three installments, while Wilson's production came in at a very moderate three hours. Missing from Armitage's adaptation are three primary episodes: the adventures of the Telemachy (thus Helen, Menelaus, and Nestor are never mentioned); the closing section of book 23 and the whole of book 24; and the hanging of the maids. As Taplin pointed out in his review, this last omission is particularly striking. The problematic nature of this vengeful punishment has exercised modern audiences and scholars; two of the most acclaimed responses to the *Odyssey* in the last two decades have tackled it head-on, even making it a more central hinge of the plot than in Homer's "original": Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) has a chorus of the maidservants who, from the Underworld, are revealed to have been innocent of treachery, having always remained secretly loyal to Penelope; Walcott, on the other hand, has Penelope prevent the hanging of the maidservants altogether, and thereby put an end to Odysseus' bloody revenge, which threatens to turn her home into an "abattoir" and "another Troy."⁵ The omission of book 24, of course, neatly reflects the opinion found among the scholiasts that the *Odyssey* originally ended at 23.296.⁶

These elements are absent from Wilson's production, too. Indeed, he goes even further than Armitage and does not introduce Penelope, Telemachus, and the suitors until Odysseus is safely back on Ithaca, which only occurs in the final third of the play. A number of the alterations made to Armitage's text for Wilson's staging are the work of Wolfgang Wiens, a frequent

collaborator of Wilson's and dramaturge on this production. Sadly, Wiens' death in May last year, before the completion of his work, curtailed his impact—much to the disappointment of the cast, who were not happy with Armitage's version. Indeed, Yorgos Depastas, in translating Armitage into modern Greek, has claimed that he “corrected” a number of elements that the English writer had misunderstood.

The alterations that the production finally adopted contribute to Wilson's vision for this epic-in-performance in a variety of ways. As in so much of his work, he is here interested in the solitary nature of life. The play opens with the stage bathed in blue light, a single lone sheep center-stage, and an old man, Homer, perched on the front of the stage, stage-left. The isolation of each is apparent. Yet despite Wilson's decision (following Armitage) to omit Laertes altogether, despite his sidelining of Penelope until Odysseus has returned home, despite the minimal role of Telemachus who, rather than a young man maturing, serves only as a counterpart and accomplice to his father, this production features a less isolated Odysseus than we are accustomed to seeing. His men, indeed, play a far greater role in Armitage's adaptation than in any other I have read. Part of this must be due to the need to put into dialogue the stories of Odysseus' fantastical adventures, rather than have them narrated. It is tempting to see a further strand too: the solidarity of friendship and the bonds among troops, rather than the overriding pulls of family and duty that we see in Homer, where Odysseus must return to his place as father, son, husband, and king, before he can consider himself truly home.

Another element of Armitage's translation that may have appealed to Wilson is its humor. This lightheartedness is reflected in Wilson's production, particularly in the interaction of Odysseus' men, with the first half of the play raising a number of laughs from the audience. As Wilson tells his actors, “Never do a play without humour. The darker the tragedy, the brighter the humour. You can deal with serious themes, but you must never let a play get heavy and sad and weepy.”⁷

While humor clearly need not prevent a play from reaching emotional depths, in this production there was very little emotional pull: the audience was engaged by the visual spectacle but was not, on the whole, emotionally invested in the tale enacted before them. Despite the fact that it may be harsh to criticize a work of avant-garde theater for its failure to engage our emotions, this is the area in which the play most disappointed. Like Brechtian theater, Wilson's productions nurture the "distancing effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*), but unlike Brecht, Wilson's intent is not to rouse his audience to political reflection and action; without that political dimension, the distancing can create an emptiness. Nevertheless, one episode which did have a degree of emotional intensity was Odysseus' meeting with his mother in the Underworld, which was all the more striking because it was out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the play. (That the rest of the play did not continue in this vein chimes with the dominant reaction to the *Odyssey* throughout the ages, which has aligned it more with comedy, and the *Iliad* more with tragedy—notwithstanding the powerful tragic reading of the *Odyssey* that is to be found in Adorno and Horkheimer's 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).⁸

The omissions in Wilson's production allow Odysseus' fantastical adventures to be given even greater prominence than is often the case, and these display Wilson's trademark quirkiness and visual skill to fine effect. As well as directing the *Odyssey*, he was the production's lighting director, and—as ever—the lighting was used in exemplary fashion. A number of scenes stood out for their simplicity and inventiveness, and given their effect, for their theatrical success. The Cyclops, a cornerstone of any visualization of Homer's epic, appeared (only his head in view) in front of the screen at the back of the stage, swooping in at a jaunty angle. By choosing not to depict his entire body, or to recreate the kind of monster that has become so familiar since Charles Lamb's *Adventures of Ulysses* (1808) for children,⁹ this Polyphemus had a greater power. He was not quite human, and his single



The Blinding of the Cyclops. Photograph by Patroklos Skafidas.
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blue eye was striking, but there was also something beautiful about him: this head, in a cold grey-white, reminded me of nothing so much as the marble statues of gods and heroes of antiquity that we are so familiar with.

This Cyclops then was both “other” and not “other.” Wilson created an embodiment of one of the potentials that we see in Homer: Polyphemus is, specifically, a *man* and not a monster, an *anēr pelōrios* (*Od.* 9.187). Reminiscent of Norman Austin’s perspective on the Cyclops, and that portrayed in Romare Bearden’s “Cyclops” collage (1977), the Polyphemus Armitage and Wilson portray is childish (“Aw, look at him, he’s just a big kid”), yet nonetheless brutally violent.¹⁰

Another highlight, again very much in keeping with Wilson’s style, was the Scylla and Charybdis scene. We watched as, one by one, a handful of Odysseus’ men slowly vaulted themselves over the edge of the ship and into one of Scylla’s mouths. Arms flailing, they danced off-stage as Scylla’s head retreated into the wings. There was no attempt to disguise

the artistry or artifice of this; we were not being asked to “see” Scylla devouring the men, but rather to see it “signified” and to let our imaginations do the rest. In a sense, this is what all non-naturalistic theater does, of course, and one would expect it to be a necessary component of the performance of a fantastical tale such as the *Odyssey*. At the same time, the demands that Wilson makes on his audience’s imaginations also neatly reflect the mode of oral storytelling in which the bard “signifies” by his words, but demands the collaboration of the audience’s imaginations in order to bring the story to life in their minds’ eyes. The wholeheartedness of Wilson’s “signifying” approach is what sets his *Odyssey* apart; it is this which makes him a particularly powerful director of the epic, and also which makes the epic itself an especially fertile source for Wilson.



Scylla and Charybdis. Photograph by Patroklos Skafidas.
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At the heart of the *Odyssey*'s appeal for Wilson must be its oral roots. Wilson himself has spoken, in slightly clichéd terms, about the timelessness of the story.¹¹ But the fact that the *Odyssey* is derived from an oral tradition gives an absolute endorsement to avant-garde productions of the epic. Wilson, indeed, has never feared putting his mark on canonical works without any such endorsement (his *King Lear* [1985] intercut and conflated various scenes from Shakespeare's play, and opened with William Carlos Williams' 1924 poem, "The Last Words of My English Grandmother").¹² But what the Homeric epics offer, as do all works derived from an oral tradition, is the absolute freedom to adapt them at will and to insist that the text takes second place to the performance. Working from another oral epic, *Gilgamesh*, Wilson devised a theatrical piece called *The Forest*, which was first performed in 1988; in his *Odyssey*, he returns once more to ancient epic of the oral tradition.

The freedom that Wilson senses in the *Odyssey* has not appealed to him alone, of course. The inherently performative nature of the epics, which Milman Parry and Albert Lord did so much to reveal in the 1930s, naturally appealed almost immediately to those in the performance arts; the exposure of this dimension of the poems prompted a surge of interest in their *performance*. Simultaneously and not coincidentally, this is the era in which the relatively new art of jazz was gaining ground fast. As a form of music, jazz eludes easy definition, but fundamental to it is its improvisatory nature. It is integrally and almost by definition never finished or complete, and is always unrepeatable; yet recordings are made which "fix" the music in a certain way, thereby belying an essential facet of the music's nature. In a not dissimilar fashion, the written forms of the Homeric epics hide an important part of their essence. The work of Parry and Lord unveiled and restored some of this improvisatory essence, just as live performances of jazz offer a dimension that would be lost if the music ceased to be performed and was known only by recordings.

Of course, classical epic and episodes from the epic poems had been performed since the Renaissance, but with the widespread revelation that these works contained such a strong improvisatory element within them and that the genre had always been innately performative, a further validity and impetus was given to the process of adapting and performing these works. Last year in the UK alone, three experimental versions of the *Odyssey* were staged by small, avant-garde companies on shoestring budgets. (In this they differed from Wilson's, whose immense budget of one million euros has provoked outrage in some quarters in Greece, although, in fact, the production now looks set to make a profit; coupled with the reportedly low pay of the actors involved, controversy was sparked.) Yet, in their experimental nature, and in their willingness to distance themselves from "the text," these productions were allies of Wilson's. Creation Theatre and the Factory's collaborative *Odyssey*, first performed at the Norrington Room in Oxford's Blackwell's Bookshop, in April 2012, was integrally improvised and unrepeatable, relying on audience participation to direct the style and tone of each scene. Teatro Vivo's South London-based "promenade theatre" production developed its own script, but nevertheless relied on audience participation and the actors' ability to improvise according to circumstance and audience interaction. Paper Cinema's *Odyssey* was the most polished and engaging of the three; in its coherent artistic vision and the playfulness of its approach, it had much in common with Wilson's, and was the most successful of these low-budget experimental *Odysseys*. Indeed, I would venture to say that, while in a very different medium from Wilson's theatrical production, Paper Cinema's "live animation" could be thought to rival Wilson's in the deftness of its touch. Interestingly, Paper Cinema's production moves most wholeheartedly away from the text by containing no dialogue at all: it is a "silent film" produced live in each performance by a skilled artist, puppeteer, and three musicians.

Wilson would doubtless approve of the wordless *Odyssey* of Paper Cinema, having made his name with his “silent operas,” particularly *Deafman Gance* (1970), which contained no dialogue and which followed his almost-silent *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* (1969). Louis Aragon, the French Surrealist, wrote of Wilson (in an open letter to his dead friend, the surrealist André Breton), “Bob Wilson is a surrealist by his silence, although this can be said about all painters, but Wilson binds gesture and silence, movement and what cannot be heard.”¹³ While Wilson’s *Odyssey* clearly does not fall into the category of “silent opera” (a genre he has moved away from in recent decades), it does have echoes of silent film in its movement, make-up, and musical accompaniment.

The “silent opera” *Deafman Gance* engaged with classical antiquity in its figure of the Bird Woman who murders her children: “I see her as a mother, a priest, an angel of death. Maybe she’s Medea.”¹⁴ Indeed, ancient Greek mythology has often inspired Wilson. His 1986 *Alcestis* is based on Euripides’ play, but intercuts sections from Heiner Müller’s “Description of a Painting” and from the Japanese seventeenth-century farce by an unknown author, *The Birdcatcher in Hell*.¹⁵

His *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is surprisingly true to Armitage’s text, which itself adds little to the Homeric text as we have it, beyond the extension of the roles of Odysseus’ men and the suitors. It is perhaps this less experimental nature of Wilson’s production that caused the Greek filmmaker Nikos Mastorakis to declare that Wilson’s work is now “empty.”¹⁶ Such an assessment seems swayed by Mastorakis’ anger at the cost of Wilson’s production, for his *Odyssey* deploys typically Wilsonian characteristics to great effect. The lighting, as I’ve mentioned, is spectacular, powerfully defining the mood of each scene. The rigidly choreographed, non-naturalistic movement often gives the impression that the actors are puppets being manipulated by an unseen hand, which evokes not only Wilson’s earlier, highly successful, *Ein-*

stein on the Beach (1976), but also the sense that the ancient gods direct the lives of the mortals. Much of the production is danced, with tableaux frequently staged; combined with the stunning live piano music of Thodoris Ekonomou, this powerfully recalls the stylistics of silent film.

There is also a generous smattering of surreal moments, whose obscurity seems intended as their main effect. Thus, the play opens with a mysterious shaman-like figure—named in the program as the “punk girl”—dancing across the stage as the house lights dip on and off, laughing to grab our attention, and then disappearing from view. She re-emerges at several moments, dancing jauntily, contorting her body into peculiar angles, and seems to embody Wilson’s love of the unexplainable: “Nothing is as beautiful as a mystery . . . The minute you think you understand a work of art, it’s dead. It no longer lives in you.”¹⁷

Certainly, the moment when she dances on stage only to reveal, of all things, a shopping trolley with a panda sat inside it remained a mystery to me. Other Wilsonian traits also persist: he is renowned, for instance, for his incorporation of elements of Japanese theater within his work.¹⁸ Kabuki-style make-up and movement are used for some of the characters in his *Odyssey*, though this is never explained. As well as evoking Japanese theater, not to mention the performance traditions of mime and commedia dell’arte, these simultaneously recall the figures found depicted on Greek vases.¹⁹ As Erika Fischer-Lichte has observed, “In Wilson’s theatre, elements deriving from different contexts actually show a random juxtaposition of cultural fragments, set scenes, and ready-made images. It is made up of isolated bits of information, whose very accumulation prevents the production of meaning.”²⁰

Rather than deriving the rather bleak conclusion that meaning and communication have thereby become so disconnected that they can only point meaninglessly back to themselves, Fischer-Lichte suggests that Wilson’s theater could actually be seen as “the renunciation of a Western cul-

tural imperialism that tries to force its own meaning on other cultures through its own products.”²¹ Appealing as such a notion is, it becomes further complicated—in the context of his *Odyssey*—by the mundane considerations of finances and fame: it is the seemingly unshakeable kudos of classical antiquity that motivated the National Theatre of Greece’s enormous monetary outlay for Wilson’s *Odyssey*—as well as his fame as one of the foremost practitioners of avant-garde theater.

Wilson remains a leading figure in avant-garde theater, and as an example of his own brand of the avant-garde, his *Odyssey* did not disappoint. Refreshingly, he is constrained neither by a reverence for the text (whether for Homer’s or for Armitage’s) nor by a sense of sanctity often felt to surround canonical works. His production breathes new life into Homer’s epic once more, entertaining its audience and telling the story anew. Yet for all that this is an engaging retelling of Homer’s epic, it lacks a truly sharp experimental edge. Wilson is, in a sense, a victim of his own success: having become so thoroughly established and so closely identified with specific tropes of direction and performance, can he still be seen as truly avant-garde?

One final consideration remains: Wilson takes a pride in the apolitical nature of his work (as he has proclaimed, “I’m not interested in politics in the theatre”),²² but amidst Greece’s financial crisis, is it not peculiar of the National Theatre of Greece to commission such a director and at such a vast cost? Might this not be the very time for political theater on a grand scale? If the same kind of money had been put behind a Greek enterprise, how much quieter would the voices of dissent have been; if the adaptation had been done by a contemporary Greek practitioner, might we not have seen a virulently political, path-breaking version of the *Odyssey*? Who can say? But Wilson provided an elegant, enjoyable, and engaging production of the Homeric epic, which may become a classic of Wilsonian theater, timeless in its own way, just as the *Odyssey* is so often said to be.²³

NOTES

1. See, for example, Vassilis Bouziotis' interview with Nikos Mastorakis, *Reader's Digest* (1 November 2012)—<http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/33392>, and Helen Galanopoulos' report from the National Theatre of Greece's press conference for Wilson's *Odyssey*—<http://tospirto.net/theater/news/10030> (last accessed 23 April 2013).
2. Oliver Taplin, "Homer's Wave Machine: Review of Simon Armitage's adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*," *Guardian* (20 May 2006).
3. Simon Armitage, *Homer's Odyssey* (London 2007), 66.
4. Interview by *Der Spiegel* (1987), reprinted in Patrice Pavis (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. (London & New York 1996), 99–104; 100. The production he refers to is *KA Mountain*.
5. Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (London 1993), 153; 154.
6. See, for example, Joseph Russo, Manuel Fernandez-Galiano & Alfred Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume III, Books XVII-XXIV* (Oxford 1992).
7. Quoted in Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge 1996), 103.
8. See Edith Hall, "Can the *Odyssey* ever be tragic? Historical Perspectives on the Theatrical Realization of Greek Epic," in Martin Revermann & Peter Wilson (eds.), *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin* (Oxford 2008), 499–523.
9. See Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London & New York 2008), 90–91, on the way Lamb exaggerated the negative, brutal characteristics of the Cyclops.
10. Norman Austin, "Odysseus and the Cyclops. Who is who?" in Carl A. Rubino and Cynthia W. Shelmerdine (eds.), *Approaches to Homer* (Austin, Texas 1983), 3–37; Robert G. O'Meally, *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* (New York 2007), 44; Armitage (note 3), 89.
11. "La Grecia 'in cerca di Itaca'," *Est Ovest* (3 February 2013): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXbFydCvLzI>.
12. Holmberg (note 7) 31; 158.
13. Louis Aragon, "Lettre Ouverte à André Breton sur Le Regard du Sourd: l'art, la science, la liberté," *Lettres Françaises* (2–8 June 1971), 3.
14. Wilson, *Quartet*, quoted in Holmberg (note 7), 7.
15. Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspective on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington, Indiana 1996), 178.
16. Bouziotis (2012): <http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/33392>.
17. Wilson, quoted in Arthur Holmberg (note 7), "The Disease of Art," *ART News* (February 1991).

18. See Christel Weiler, "Japanese Traces in Robert Wilson's Productions," in Pavis (note 4), 105–13.

19. The latter observation was noted in Maria Grazia Gregori, "Un'Odissea da sogno," *l'Unità* (5 April 2013), 22.

20. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Interculturalism in Contemporary Theatre," in Pavis (note 4), 27–40; 32.

21. Fischer-Lichte (note 4), 32.

22. Richard Schechner, "Robert Wilson and Fred Newman: A Dialogue on Politics and Therapy, Stillness and Vaudeville," *The Drama Review*, 47.3 (Fall 2003), 113–28; 118.

23. With thanks to Eleftheria Ioannidou and the delegates of the Oxford-Paris X colloquium in April 2013 with whom I discussed Wilson's production.