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Theater: The Opera *Einstein On The Beach* Triumphs (Again)!

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EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH **** out of ****
BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC

I've had to wait 20 years to see this landmark work a second time and still don't feel quite ready to talk about it. Can I see it again? Preferably not in 20 years time, but sooner?

Einstein On The Beach is a signal artistic achievement and happily remains as thrilling and rich an experience today as it was when I saw it in 1992. (The piece debuted in 1976 and was also revived in 1984.) Audiences certainly seem to have finally caught up with it. At that

1992 revival at BAM, I was astonished when a small but notable chunk of the crowd left early. Surely by then they knew what to expect from [Philip Glass](#) and [Robert Wilson](#)? And yet, it was still shocking and frustrating to those unable to adjust. Today, the piece is just as challenging. But the vocabulary it employs has become so widespread that theater-goers are ready for it. This new production makes clearer than ever why *Einstein On The Beach* reinvigorated opera; popularized the avant-garde downtown scene; and made the careers of composer/lyricist Philip Glass, director Robert Wilson and choreographer [Lucinda Childs](#).

This is not a wholly reimagined production of *Einstein*. In essence, it is the show that debuted in 1976, with technological changes and trims where appropriate. So I wasn't quite expecting how new and vibrant it would feel, how I would keep battling in my brain to compare the 2012 edition with the 1992 edition I thought was emblazoned on my imagination forever. However, that liar we call memory fooled me again and again; in particular, one action, one tableau I remember vividly from 1992 and which has been the source of an anecdote I've repeated over and over for the past 20 years actually never happened. (Instead of a moon passing across the sky from one side of the stage to the other, it remains in place and slowly goes in and out of eclipse.)

Other images and scenes struck me as radically different despite minimal changes. This shouldn't be a surprise. Since Wilson pares back moments to their essentials, even the tiniest change in color or scenery is sure to have a dramatic impact. Diving into articles about the show after I saw it, I discovered that new

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lighting equipment meant the colors were slightly different; new tools meant sometimes the instruments that had been played 20 years ago were now sampled; new speeds at which scenes could be changed meant transitions could be smoother. This is absolutely the *Einstein* I remember, but it is also fresh and new and thrillingly different.

But what exactly happens for those five hours? The piece begins with a knee play, Wilson's word for the brief front of stage actions that take place while scenery is being switched. It has its roots in vaudeville, where a comic or duo would step to the front of the stage and do a bit while a new act set up or a new scene was put in place. Half an hour before the official curtain time, two performers are front stage left, one of them uttering random numbers and the other repeating a text over and over again. Slowly more performers fill up the pit alongside the musicians. The performers on stage also make a strange, odd sort of motion with their hands. In 1992, it was merely strange and random; today, in a nice bit of synchronicity, it looks for all the world like they are manipulating a computer's mouse. Who knows what it will look like in another 20 years?

What follows are seven scenes or tableaux, two dance pieces and four more knee plays. A train pulls into a station. A trial begins. A train pulls out of a station. A trial continues and prison follows. A person in a building. A person on a bed. A spaceship lights out for the territories. A bus comes into view. The scenes are simple, iconic, even totemic. The text is seemingly random, sometimes poetic, often amusing, always engaging. The dancing is thrilling and wildly challenging for the performers. The music surges and flows and envelops it all. The result is inexplicably thrilling. I've seen plenty of avant-garde pieces where artists struggled to combine apparently random actions and events and scenes into a coherent whole. Rarely does it work. (There's a reason why characters and plot dominate the theater.) Sometimes, somehow it does cohere. If I knew why *Einstein On The Beach* doesn't merely cohere but is intellectually and emotionally powerful, I suppose I'd be making art rather than watching it. Let me see it four or five or ten more times (the way I have seen and re-seen Shakespeare's plays and my favorite movies and books and albums) and I might begin to figure it out.

Some vivid impressions.

The colors and set designs are more subtle -- apparently they're using modern lighting that creates an entirely new palette. I certainly didn't imagine the colors in the 1992 revival were primary, but they had that sort of iconic feel to them. Similarly, the train pulling into the station in Scene 1 felt like The Train, the ideal train of our subconscious, the train that would cast a shadow on a cave wall for Plato. In this production, throughout, the lighting and color and sets felt just as totemic and powerful but somehow more specific too.

Night Train is a show-stopper -- one of the tableau involves a train pulling out of a station at night. The changes are probably modest and, of course, I'm comparing this production to a production I saw only once back in 1992, but the Night Train scene felt radically different and powerful. The clouds in the dark sky are riveting, the lighting more moody and mysterious and the entire event bursting with potent meaning.

The rectangle of light -- for me, perhaps the signal moment in this show's mysterious power is the scene where the entire stage is plunged into darkness and we see a rectangle of light lying horizontally on the stage. Slowly, very slowly (this is redundant; we're watching a Robert Wilson production and everything *always* happens slowly) the rectangle of light stands on end. Then, just as slowly, the rectangle -- dubbed the "bed" by the production team -- ascends into the sky and out of sight. The music Philip Glass wrote here is among the most powerful and moving you're likely to encounter. It's as pure an act of theater as you will ever see. At the peak moment when the rectangle of light stood on end, the music briefly stops and the theater is hushed in silence; back in 1992 someone in the audience quietly spoke out, "God?" and the audience tittered. It does indeed feel like a religious moment. The rectangle of light has the majesty and impact of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Seeing the show a second time, I appreciated it more. First, we see that bright white light as a shaft of light earlier in the show. It



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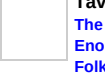


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stretches up out of sight. But when the light reappears and is contained in that rectangle of space, it pulses with more power and authority than it did when it seemed to disappear into infinity. This is surely as telling a detail as anything in the show, how containing and isolating something down to its essence can make it more compelling. Further, on that pitch black stage when all we saw was this beautiful, striking rectangle of light, this time I was just as aware of the beauty and weight of the blackness that surrounded it as the rectangle of light itself. Surely, Wilson would approve.

The silent film aesthetic -- perhaps it's my imagining, but this time around I felt strongly the influence of silent movies on the set design. In particular, the interior of the spaceship (in which workers maintain their stations in front of rows of pulsating lights) reminded me of *Modern Times* and the trial scene seemed particularly Germanic. Either one would have fit smoothly into a Fritz Lang film.

Wilson slows things down so you can truly observe them and notice things you never noticed before -- this is the great lie or, rather, misdirection of Wilson. He does not help you observe and notice everything by paring events down to their essentials and embracing a deliciously glacial pace. In fact, what Wilson does is demonstrate again and again the *impossibility* of observing everything, *no matter how pared down and slowly things occur*. Take the trial scenes. You might be watching a lawyer coming in, presumably late for their case. You might be watching the marvelous stenographers at their job. You might watch the judges pound their gavels and make pronouncements. You might watch the witness take their place. But each movement is so absorbing that no matter how diligent you are, events invariably take place and you miss them. When did the second judge leave the stage? He was there a moment ago (okay, five minutes ago) and now he's gone. It's certainly not sleight of hand; when you do catch a change, the judge slowly rises from his seat and exits while half of the judge's seating area slides off with them. You're astonished that you could have ever missed such a major change, especially when you've been staring mesmerized by this tableau for 20 minutes. But such things happen again and again.

This, I think, accounts for some of the emotional power of the show. In *Night Train*, that swirling, potent scene, we are watching a train recede into the distance as two people in the last car look back at us and wave or sing a duet or (towards the end) enact a dramatic moment. Inevitably, such a scene evokes all scenes of leaving and goodbyes, whether it's heading off to college and saying goodbye to your parents or moving from one city to another and taking leave of your friends or ending summer camp or whatever emotional goodbye sticks with you. And here we see the ultimate goodbye, acted out on stage. But no matter how closely you observe it, no matter how carefully you try to grasp every single element and detail, again and again you become absorbed with some action only to realize with a start that the train that was pulling away from the station is much farther away. When did that happen? How did you miss it? You become determined not to miss it again but then a few minutes later you realize again that the train is even further away now and you barely noticed. You have one task -- absorb this moment completely -- and you fail again and again. Can you ever capture a moment, freeze forever in your brain that last bittersweet goodbye? No, you can't and that is one reason why Wilson's work has such beauty and power. He reminds you of this simple fact: everything is slipping away into the past no matter how desperately you want to remember it. And he proves it to you again and again and again.

Sentimentality can be earned -- I guess I'm an old softie now. *Einstein On The Beach* ends with a bus pulling onto the stage and the driver offering up a story about two lovers on a park bench, one of the show's clearest and most straightforward moments of the evening. In 1992, I didn't quite mind it but felt the moment was a bit sentimental. Now that I'm older I realize how earned and necessary that sentimentality, that embrace of the simple and direct emotion can be. Twenty years from now I'll probably see it again and be in tears.

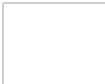
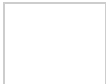
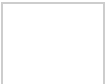
The entire ensemble onstage, in the pit and behind the scenes is superlative. Few works are as challenging to perform as *Einstein On The Beach*, both emotionally and technically, and everyone succeeds in making this a triumph. The show continues on tour with the possibility of more dates being added, so keep checking [here](#).

But let me finish by saying how absurd it is that we've had to wait so long to see it again. Robert Wilson says he doesn't think his work should be revived when he's gone? He couldn't be more wrong. Now that the original creators have passed the baton on this show, let's hope more productions of their work(s) can occur and *Einstein* can enter the canon instead of appearing only slightly more often than Halley's Comet. If *The Ring* can be revived again and again all over the world, why not Glass's Portraits Trilogy? Glass never imagined he would see *Satyagraha* again in his lifetime because it was sung in Sanskrit. But so what? I don't speak French or German or Italian either. Most operas are sung in a language most people don't speak.

I think they need [Beyreuths](#) of their own, at the very least. They need annual festivals devoted to curating and presenting their works under the best possible conditions. Further, I can see some of the sets from this tour preserved as works of art in their own right. Imagine "Night Train" or "Spaceship (Interior)" on display at [Dia Beacon](#), the museum that specializes in presenting large-scale works; they would be on an eternal loop with the sets in motion set to the music over and over for all of eternity. (If you've never been, it's absolutely worth a day trip to Dia Beacon.) I've heard suggestions of brilliant re-purposing of video of the opera in public spaces. And thank God they're filming the work. I know they've recorded a full dress rehearsal in hi-def and 3-D. Hopefully, they'll film a live performance in both standard hi-def and 48 fps or 64 fps like the latest movies so we can preserve this show once and for all. If Wilson feels uncomfortable with how it looks (he needs to sign off on it), tell him to give me a call.

How did I like it? It was four and a half hours long and when the bus appeared I knew the finale was

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approaching and I was astonished. What? It's over already? Surely it hasn't been four and a half hours yet? Does the bus appear earlier and then reappear again in an hour, I wondered frantically? No, it doesn't; the show was drawing to a close. And yes, four and a half hours had elapsed. It only felt like they had stopped time.

POSTSCRIPT: I enjoyed an embarrassment of riches and saw *Einstein* again one week later. I'm currently working on my 80 page monograph about the show but would add these comments for the moment. I truly felt like I saw the show for the first time. In 1992, I was just taking it all in. One week earlier, I was taking in a new production, comparing it to my clearly faulty memory of 1992 and my familiarity with the score and trying to absorb this monumental work in one gulp. But the second viewing, one week later, allowed me to soak in the show (and from the ideal vantage point of dead center and about 15 rows back, far better than I'd ever enjoyed before). Filming the show and recording it seems as essential to me as ever: even most of the lucky few like me who got to see the show probably had seats in the balcony or far on the side and quite frankly, it's difficult to fully appreciate the visual power of the show without that central viewpoint. A film can offer this ideal perspective to everyone; a live performance is always preferable but a filmed document of the show is the very least it deserves.

When you pronounce the name Albert Einstein and then send dancers spinning onto the stage, crossing it again and again, swirling past each other, well it may be reductive but you can't help thinking of atoms that spin around and past and into each other a la a nuclear reactor or bomb. Indeed, the late stages of the show include a scrim covered with technical information about an atomic explosion and its effect. You're also aware that the violin soloist dressed as Einstein is often on a chair elevated above the orchestra pit. That chair is almost always (or perhaps always, I can't be sure) on a platform roughly the same height as the stage and often in a spotlight even when it's empty. But it wasn't until my second viewing when my perspective changed from far, far stage left to dead center that I fully appreciated how Einstein and the dancers were on the same level, how they were dancing to the tune he played. Many other modest insights or free associations occurred throughout the night thanks to this ideal experience.

Truly great works are never timely. You might write an entertaining play about the Wall Street meltdown and people *might* enjoy its timeliness, how it details and illuminates recent events. But if its going to work twenty years from now, those trappings can't matter -- the play must be timeless and truly grapple with the eternal issues of greed and morality and love and pain and tragedy or it will soon become a relic. It was only on a second viewing this go-round I appreciated how very much of its time *Einstein* was: the speech by a woman at a gathering of activists demanding equal rights (and using the very 70s expression "male chauvinist pig"), the appearance of Patty Hearst, the fear of Cold War nuclear annihilation and other seemingly random details must have made this opera seem very timely indeed, especially when compared to say *Bluebeard's Castle* or *The Ring Cycle*. But they completely transmuted those details of the 1970s so they could breathe and live on. In 1976, Patty Hearst undoubtedly seemed ripped from the headlines, in 1984 it might have seemed dated, in 1992 perhaps ironic and today she has a symbolic power far outweighing her historical roots. Just as you need footnotes to place some of Shakespeare's historical figures, but their actions on stage embody something eternal.

So I should say thank you for the rare chance to see this show twice, but instead I'd much prefer to enquire whether I can see it again soon, maybe next March in Hong Kong?

NOTE TO LAURIE ANDERSON: One other vast and influential work that BAM has nurtured is [Laurie Anderson's *United States Live*](#), which debuted in 1983. It's part of the remarkable explosion of cutting edge but popular works that came in the wake of *Einstein On The Beach* and of course Anderson has proven one of the most enduring talents of that era. (I alluded to her work in my piece above by saying the spaceship was "lighting out for the territories," a reference to the final track in this show which itself echoes Mark Twain's *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*.)

Some believe returning to a work they've already done is uninteresting; going backwards rather than forwards. But any enduring work of art can be revisited and revitalized. Surely 30 years is enough time to pass for Anderson to bring back this signal work of the avant-garde? I've loved the boxed set audio recording of the show that came out in 1984; it looms large in my imagination even though I haven't the foggiest idea what the show itself looked like. Many artists have taken to performing their classic albums on tour in order, finding new strength in revisiting a classic work and seeing how it speaks to them and their audience today. Surely Anderson could do the same with *United States Live*? It might even be *United States Live 2.0*, with Anderson trimming the sections that don't speak to her any more and adding new ones as inspiration struck.

It's not an exhumation; that wouldn't be creatively satisfying for anyone. It would be a celebration, an embrace of the work that arose in that time and finding a way to make it speak to us today. It's the same challenge the theater and opera face when mounting a new production of a classic work; anyone who has seen a successful revival of a play or musical or opera knows how this pumps new blood into a great work and keeps it in front of audiences for generations to come. Anderson's *United States Live* deserves no less. And on a selfish level, I want to be sitting in the audience when she launches into that moving, beautiful final piece "Lighting Out For The Territories," instead of listening to it in my home or in my car, alone and wondering what I missed by not seeing it performed in person.

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