



Robert Wilson's
Woyzeck at BAM,
2002. Photo:
The Ocular One

Productions

JONATHAN KALB

SONG LOGIC

“Doctor, have you ever seen anything of double nature?” asks the title character in Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*. In most productions this line isn’t taken literally. It’s handled as just one among dozens of philosophical abstractions that continually drop from Woyzeck’s mouth like half-chewed seeds.

Not so in the musical version of *Woyzeck* that Robert Wilson created with Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan—a production of the Betty Nansen Theater in Copenhagen, originally from 2000, that ran at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2002. Here the doctor is played by two actors in identical purplish black suits who hop around the stage in lockstep as a pair of rather obnoxious and abrasive Siamese twins. Asked in an interview for his reasoning on this unusual choice, Wilson said: “You want to know the truth? I liked both of the actors very much and they were very different, so I thought, why not have them be Siamese twins?”

Deliberative text interpretation has never been the prime attraction of Wilson’s “theater of images.” Famously mistrustful of words and what he sees as their overweening influence on theater art, he has frequently demoted them to verbal wallpaper. Nevertheless, he himself has exhibited something of a “double nature” with respect to literature over

the years, directing canonical masterpieces almost as often as his preferred nonsense texts and assemblages of literary fragments. When he chooses his collaborators astutely, the masterpieces can be among his most powerful productions—*When We Dead Awaken*, *Parsifal*, and *The Lady from the Sea*, for instance.

With *Woyzeck*—modern drama’s most venerable fragment, the long-lost 1837 work about a tormented quintessential nobody who murders his wife after she betrays him—it’s hard to think of a more ideal collaborator than Tom Waits. Büchner’s play is blunt and lyrical by turns, spinning out its infernal carnival of a tale in short, Shakespearean scenes almost all of which are punctuated with music: period folk songs, ditties, taproom lieder, children’s counting rhymes and more, which lighten the gloomy atmosphere. Waits reinvented and augmented this interaction of music and words without straying from his persona as pop music’s favorite carny barker. What better complement to Büchner than Waits’s ironic sentimentality, his jagged Weillesque rhythms, sweetly gloomy lyrics, and gift for making sleazy circumstances rise above cliché? (Waits had only a passing knowledge of Alban Berg’s 1925 opera *Wozzeck* before this project, and no great admiration for it—“It was pretty morose and turgid.”)

Call it a convenient marriage of opposites—in theory at least. Waits and Brennan got their fingers dirty and Wilson stayed managerially clean. The songwriters immersed themselves in Woyzeck’s sordid world, with its

chillingly realistic torments mixed with bursts of bizarre imagery, morbidly weird anecdotes, and ruminations on madness and superstition. The director stuck to his unflappable cool, his geometric designs, his antiseptically generalized modernism, insisting to all the interviewers who managed to pin him down that the play was nothing more than a simple love story. Fire and ice, substance and style, the maternal and the paternal.

The gains are many and significant. At two hours and ten minutes, *Woyzeck* is shorter, punchier, and sexier than many other Wilson productions. It's also lighter and more capricious than any other *Woyzeck* or *Wozzeck* I've seen. The lightness resides mainly in the characters' movements—Woyzeck, played by the Gumby-jointed Jens Jørn Spottag, runs in place like a computer-animated marathon man, for

also a morbid humor that is easy, fluid, and organic—an effect not of interpolated “knee plays” or other extraneous vignettes but rather of shrewd integration of Waits and Brennan’s droll and harshly seductive songs (which they recorded on their album *Blood Money*).

During the opening number, a brash, stomping carnival dirge called “Misery Is the River of the World,” the entire cast assembles and sings in front of one of Wilson’s huge, cartoonish Ab-Ex backdrops, and then everyone files out except for a mechanical monkey. Alone in a spotlight, the monkey continues the song in the inimitable, tractor-on-gravel voice of Waits (on tape): “The higher that the monkey can climb / The more he shows his tail.” Later, Woyzeck’s friend Andres sings a boozy, shanty-like number called “It’s Just the Way We Are Boys” to keep Woyzeck from brooding on the

Woyzeck. Photo:
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instance, and his identically dressed little boy dances guilelessly and dashes mischievously about. In his *Village Voice* review, Marc Robinson eloquently described this movement as a product of “immature energy that mocks despair.” The show has a deliberate pace and a forward propulsion rare in Wilson’s work, and

infidelity of his wife, Marie. The song degenerates into obscene limericks, at one point stopping abruptly for the actor to recite one without music and get a big laugh. (“There once was a man from Kent / Whose dick was so long it was bent / So to save him the trouble / He put it in double / And instead of coming he went”—in



Woyzeck. Photo:
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Brooklyn, the Danish actors spoke and sang lucid English; in Europe the play was in Danish with the songs in English.)

There is another side to this *Woyzeck*, however, acutely unsatisfying to those who know and value the material. Ultimately, one sees that Wilson has not really left interpretation to others but deliberately simplified the work so that its intricacies wouldn't complicate his schematic plans. In the shaving scene, for instance, the Captain's marvelous, belligerently desperate lines about time and morality ("I can't look at a mill wheel anymore or I get melancholy") are blotted out with grating and deafening orchestral noise, which halts only for *Woyzeck*'s monosyllabic responses ("Yes, Cap'n . . . Yes, Cap'n"). Similarly, the twin doctors are barely coherent, preoccupied as they are with vocal games such as alternating words between them and using singsongy, whiny intonations. Wilson clearly has no interest in what either character has to say. Nor is he particularly interested in the nuances of the love affair he says is the main attraction: Marie (Kaya Brüel) and the Drum Major (Tom Jensen) are costumed in matching bright red but otherwise generate little heat together.

The truth is, Wilson's real priority, as always, is design—the angular, color-coded costumes and the slow-moving tableaux backed by changing color washes and simply drawn, decoratively Euclidean backdrops, all of which are looking extremely similar from show to

show these days. Berg's opera, as it happens, is also famous for focusing its action more on the tale of romantic betrayal than Büchner did, but its close commingling of music and language gives it a strong coherence, depth, and integrity of its own. Wilson's *Woyzeck* (which uses the same scene order as Berg's *Wozzeck* until the final three scenes) relies literally on bells and whistles (and songs). It has nothing like the same sense of elemental integration, partly because of Wilson's determined naïveté (which always supports a strict parallelism of elements, not a true integration), but also partly because of what Waits described (in a May 2002 interview with *The Onion*) as "song logic":

The fact that *Blood Money* is about *Woyzeck* . . . I didn't know anything about *Woyzeck*. Kathleen knew more than I, but I didn't really know the story or anything. I was just told the story in a coffee shop in Boston over eggs a few years ago. You try to create some sort of counterpoint for this story, but you're still dealing with song logic. When people listen to songs, they're not . . . It's like a form of hypnotism that goes on during the listening process, so you're taking it up through a straw. It's like a separate little world in the world. You go in there and then you pop back out.



Woyzeck. Photo: The Ocular One

Here's the nub of the marriage of convenience in this production. Waits and Brennan saw more than Wilson did in *Woyzeck*, but they cared as much about making a good pop album as about making a good musical. Wilson trusted them to carry most of the burden of sophistication in the show because the prospect of his collaborators presiding over "separate little worlds" has never bothered him. (The raunchy number "Everything Goes to Hell," for instance, carries the production's most incisive statement about lying, and the oft-reprised ballads "Coney Island Baby" and "All the World is Green" build and maintain the whole emotional edifice about love that the plot knocks down.) It's the old John Cage/Merce Cunningham gambit of parallel creation, inviting startling fortuitous conjunctions, only here the gambit becomes an alibi for half-baked dramaturgy. No one involved conveyed genuine passion for the work itself in the end—certainly not the kind of passion that sparks empathy with murder. *Woyzeck* thus became essentially an amusement, yet another case of entertainment trumping art, graphic design trumping language, and the synoptic pop song setting the terms and limits of the culture's poetic aspiration.

ESTHER KAPLAN

THE INNOCENCE ARGUMENT

The staging is simple—it's just a row of actors on stools, really—and the lighting is stark. We mostly hear just one voice at a time, telling us a piece of a story, though these fragments accumulate a terrible momentum as the minutes pass. The plainspoken text comes straight from interviews with six people exonerated from death row. It is punctuated only by the sound of some rain or some music, and several short, contentious interchanges pulled from transcripts of the impossibly botched trials. The material is so strong that it requires actors to avoid being maudlin and simply let these stories speak.

Halfway through the play, one character, Sunny Jacobs (Marlo Thomas) reads from a letter sent by her husband, Jesse, also on death row, in which he writes that he's reading *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. And it hardly seems unwarranted for Jesse to see himself in these great tragedies. Jesse, we later find out, was executed brutally in 1990, jolted with electricity over a period of thirteen and a half minutes by a malfunctioning chair until flames shot from his head—eleven years after another man had confessed to the killing for which he'd been convicted. Even the less extreme cases have the power to stun: Gary Gauger (Jay O. Sanders), arrested for the murder of his parents less than three hours after he finds them dead, and released long after a government wiretap revealed it was the work of a motorcycle gang; or Robert Earl Hayes (David Brown Jr.), a former horse groomer and the most buoyant of the bunch, who served five years on death row only to find himself barred from the profession he loves despite his exoneration. *The Exonerated*, now in an open run at the 45 Bleecker Theater in New York City, is utterly absorbing and moving; the