



Press Release of the Salzburg Festival, 1 August 2025

Obituary: Robert Wilson



Robert Wilson © Lucie Jansch

(SF, 1. August 2025) "Robert Wilson was one of the very great, defining theatre and opera directors of our times. His theatrical spaces were theatrical spaces of light. With their minimalist sets and precise grammar of movement, each of his productions bore his absolutely unmistakable, poetic handwriting. With his death, the art world loses one of its most important and most original protagonists," thus Markus Hinterhäuser expresses his grief at Robert Wilson's passing.

With his suggestive light installations and characteristic productions, Robert Wilson defined a new stage aesthetic at the Salzburg Festival during the Mortier era. His interpretations of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* with Jessye Norman in 1995 were legendary and ground-breaking.

As Peter Cossé remarked: "Concentration, limitation, undermining and – in the sum of what is resisted! – maximum enrichment, that is how one could, or must, describe and praise the combination of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Arnold Schoenberg's monodrama

Erwartung in Salzburg. At the Großes Haus, one was reminded of Wieland Wagner's era of decluttering Bayreuth with the sparse, relentless glorification of light and ritualized gestures."



A. Schoenberg, *Erwartung*: Jessye Norman in Robert Wilson's production, Salzburg Festival 1995 © SF/Ruth Walz

The marble bench created by Robert Wilson, part of the sets for *Erwartung*, still stands in the Faistauer Foyer of the Salzburg Festival today.

His productions of Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1997 and Georg Büchner's *Dantons Tod* in 1998 also made Festival history.

"Without light there is no space," was Robert Wilson's central tenet. His productions were artful combinations of theatre, architecture, design, painting, dance and music, interwoven in a fascinating formal language. He created magical images of great beauty which eluded interpretation. "My theatre is not a theatre of interpretation; I oppose all forms of interpretation. I believe that even a personal form of theatre must be simple and clear," was his creed.

The *New York Times* described him as an "explorer in the uses of time and space on stage".

"Theatre is not life, and one should not try to pretend it is," Robert Wilson was convinced. "However, especially in the artificial world of theatre, one can often act more naturally than in daily life. After all, the most artificial thing is pretending to be natural."