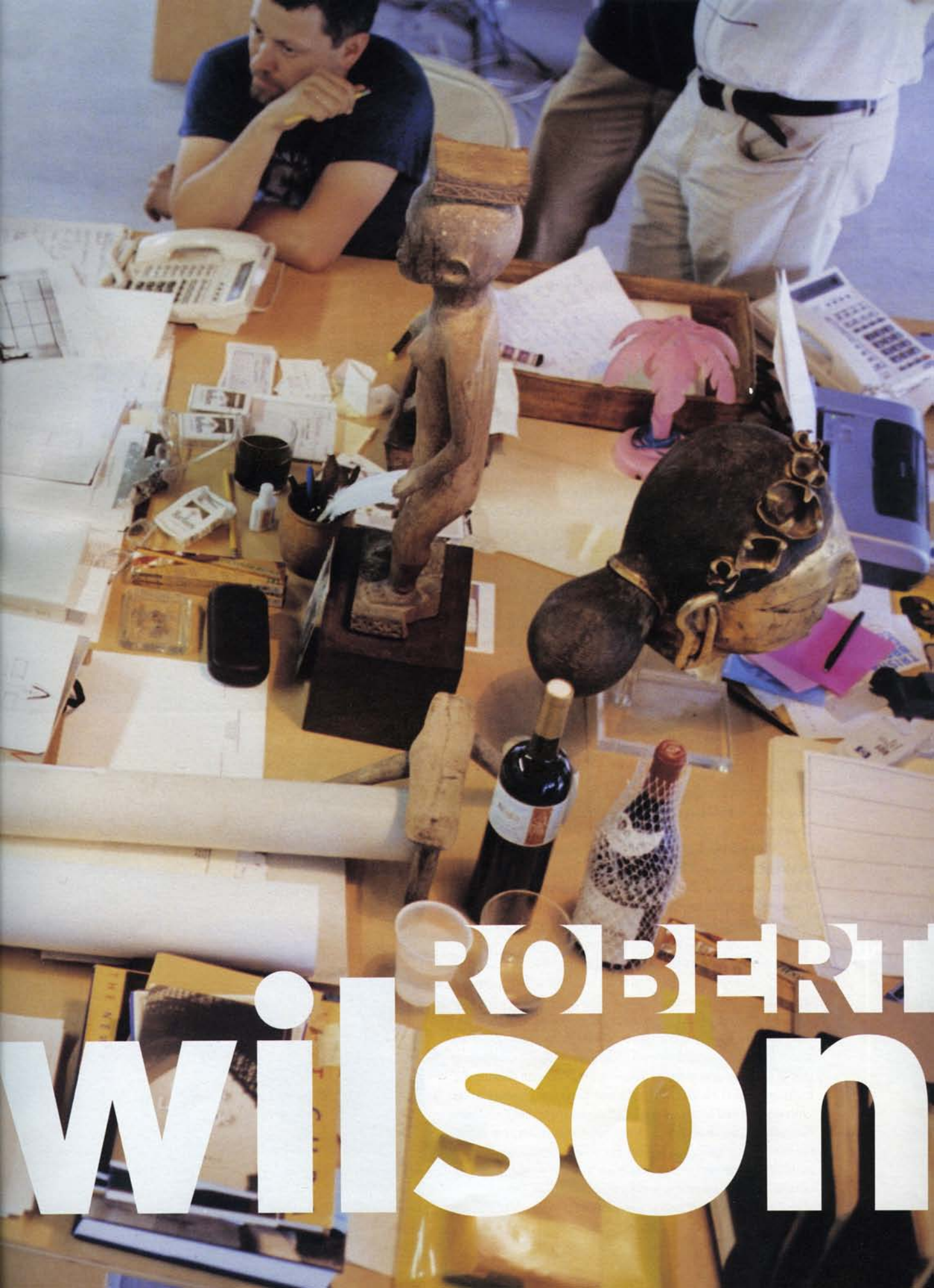




At his artists' workshop,
onstage and in galleries,
the celebrated designer-
director makes an
art of collaboration
By Barrymore Laurence
Scherer Photographs
by Dean Kaufman

"Communities need centers," says Robert Wilson, who founded the Watermill Center to that end. Every summer, Wilson (in T-shirt at left) brings together artists and performers from



ROBERT wilson

THE HAMPTONS HAS ITS SHARE of talented artists, but for sheer productivity it's hard to match Robert Wilson. The veteran theater director stages roughly a dozen major performances and art installations a year on both sides of the Atlantic. What's his secret?

Just ask the artists at the Watermill Center, the summer residency program in Southampton that Wilson founded a decade ago. Each year, he invites dozens of established and emerging artists to Watermill to collaborate with him on a wide range of theatrical and artistic projects. That's how he produced Richard Wagner's four-opera Ring Cycle for the Opernhaus Zurich, which is heading to the Opéra Bastille in Paris in 2005, and that's how, more generally, he completes an almost inhuman amount of work. Watermill is Wilson's guild, where one generation of artists learns from another.

This makes Wilson a polymath twice over. For along with being a stage director, designer, playwright, painter and installation artist, he now serves as a choreographer in the largest sense, an artist who guides fellow artists' work. At 61, he looks the part more than ever. Tall and handsome, with penetrating blue-grey eyes, he still moves with the buoyant step of a dancer. He speaks softly, slowly—the result of his early training to correct a childhood stammer.

"I bought the six acres for Watermill in 1989," he says. "It used to be the site of a Western Union laboratory, where the fax machine was invented in 1946." Wilson had intended to use the old facility as the nucleus of Watermill (named for the local village), but to comply with building codes the original structure had to be razed. The construction of a three-story headquarters and exhibition space, designed by Richard Gluckman, is still in progress, with a projected completion date of summer 2005.

For now, Wilson and his colleagues work in a quadrangle of tents, with rehearsal and study areas separated by curtains. The arrangement has a breezy glamour that evokes, perhaps, *Lawrence of Arabia* being filmed in a silent movie studio. The tents are remarkably well appointed, with objects ranging from antique musical instruments to Asian ceramics. Indeed, art is everywhere at Watermill: Wilson has scattered ancient stone carvings and vases in the gardens, and his temporary office exhibits framed drawings by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and John Cage, among others. The office also contains chairs by Carlo Bugatti, Frank Lloyd Wright and Marcel Breuer, part of Wilson's noted 500-piece chair collection.

"Why do we lock art away in museums when it is meant to be integrated into our lives?" he asks, pointing to a 14th-century Tibetan head and a 3000 B.C. Neolithic pot in his office. "It's fundamentally important that we live with a sense of the past. And one way we understand the nature of society is through the history of art." All told, the wizard of contemporary theater has acquired some 8,000 objects spanning thousands of years, with the help of curator Noah Khoshbin, an artist who previously worked with Jeff Koons and Christo.

Wilson's entourage has never been so large. This summer, Watermill accepted some 80 participants from over 30 countries to work on projects of their own and, more typically, on projects that Wilson has generated. There was a big German contingent, including Izabel Mellinshoff, 27, a one-time investment banker who was invited to the center as a "media specialist," and Jörn Kengelbach, 29, an architect turned photojournalist now working as a videographer for Wilson. Jay Soontornsawad, 37, who hails from Thailand and lives in New York, is working as a set designer on *2 Lips*, a production for the Netherlands Dans Theater slated for November 2004, and Ellen Hammer, in her 50s, a





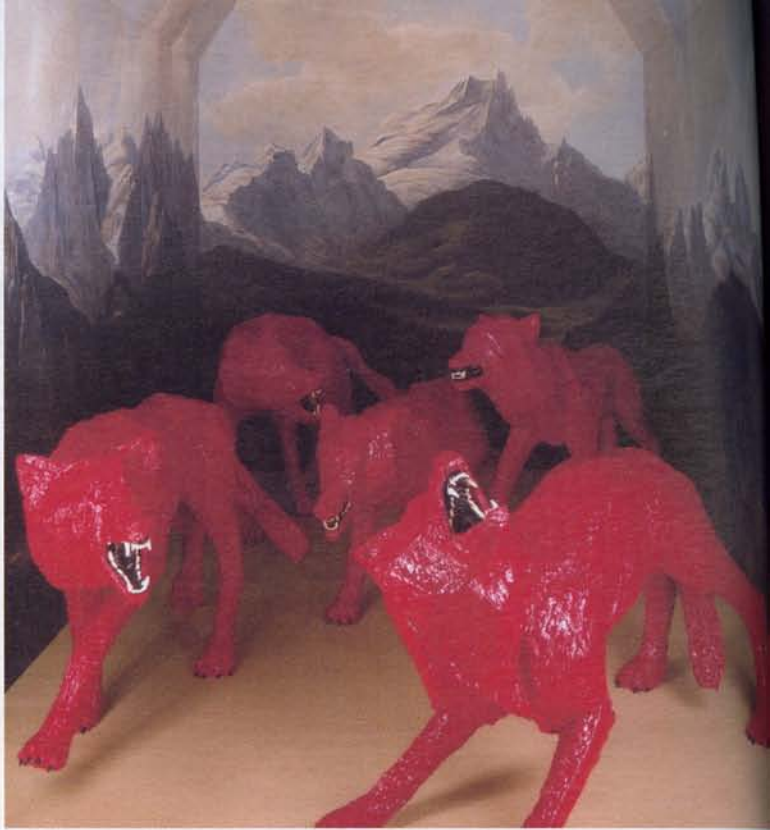
At Watermill, the new Richard Gluckman-designed building, above, and rehearsals under the tents for a 2004 production of *Les Fables de La Fontaine* by the Comédie Française



German dramaturge now living in Paris, who is working on the Comédie Française's 2004 production of *Les Fables de La Fontaine*.

Indeed, the more Watermill participants you meet, the more you realize that Wilson has created a European outpost on the south shore of Long Island. His work has always been better known across the Atlantic, with many productions making their debut in Paris or Rome. As Wilson sees it, Europeans are drawn to Watermill because they appreciate his collaborative artistic model, not just because of his reputation. "There's a much longer tradition there of going to the theater and to art museums, a longer tradition of collecting and a higher level of curiosity about the arts," Wilson says. "Europeans live much closer together, and their countries have invaded one another during their long history of warfare, so there's a habitual exchange of ideas. We've never been invaded. We live in this vast country with seemingly endless borders where more than 50 percent of our congressmen don't have passports, where the president of the United States hardly ever traveled outside the U.S. before he entered office."

Hearing Wilson talk, it's easy to forget he was born in Waco, Texas, and raised by middle-class parents who had little interest in the arts. "My early education was conventional and boring," he says. Then, when he was a teenager, he met his first artist, Byrd Hoffman, a classical dance teacher enlisted to help him overcome his stammer. "Byrd and her sister often worked with athletes and people with learning disabilities, helping us through movement. She loved Mozart and would teach us classical ballet steps to his music and then have us improvise to it. She not only helped me



Wilson brings to his art installations the stylized movements and stark

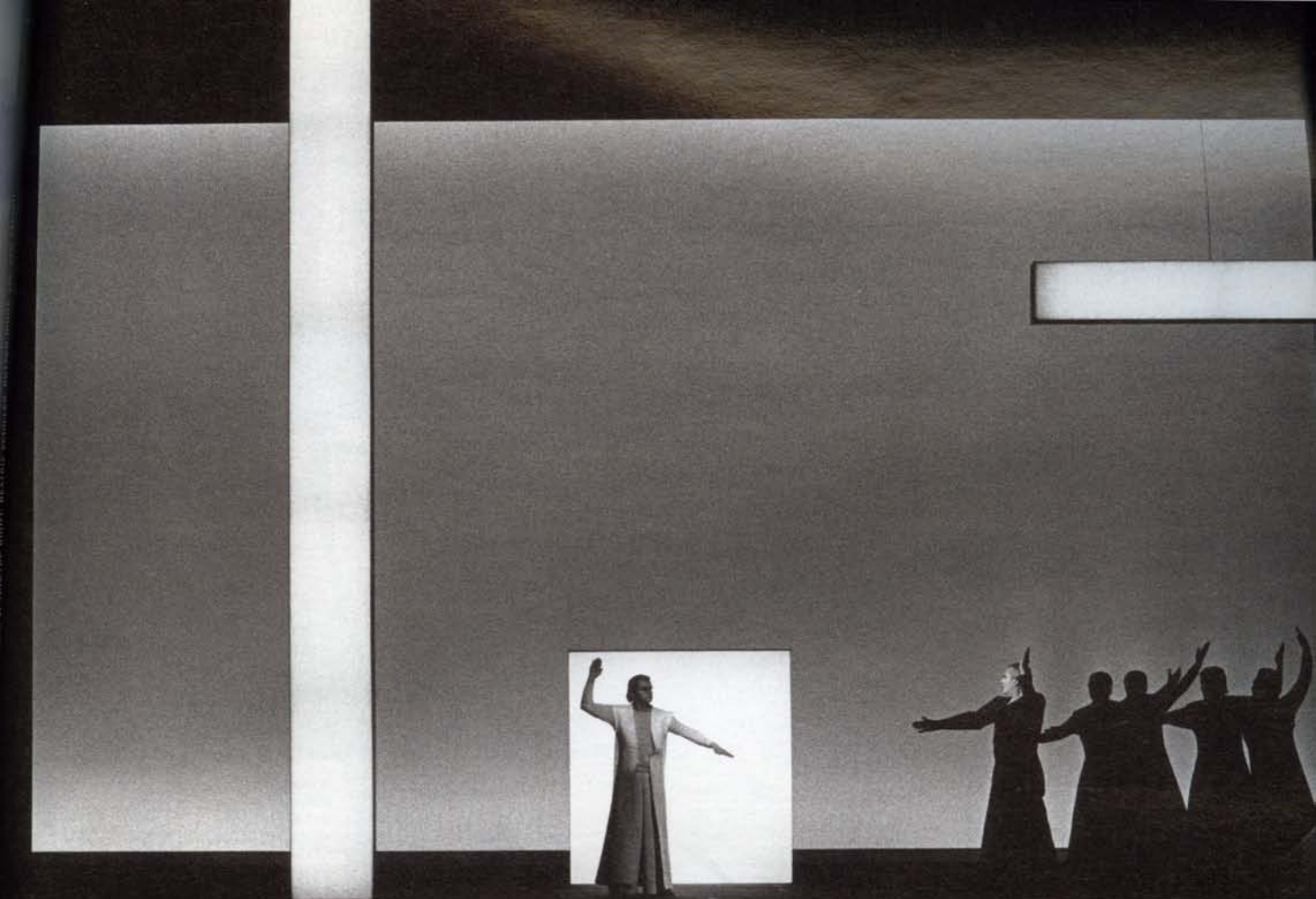
conquer my stammer, but opened up the door to a whole world I didn't know before. Because she changed my life, I named the Byrd Hoffman Watermill Foundation after her."

Eventually Wilson studied architecture at Pratt Institute in New York and painting with George McNeil at the American Center in Paris. In the mid-1960s he moved back to New York, where he worked with learning disabled and retarded children at a Harlem public school and in municipal hospitals while gravitating toward New York's experimental dance and theater scene.

In 1968 he founded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds in New York, his first atelier for artists, and adopted Raymond Andrews, a deaf-mute African-American boy. Raymond had grown up in Alabama and Louisiana, Wilson says, "with people who thought him a dullard because they didn't understand the real problem. He had never been to school, knew no words and was thought to be uneducable. But it became apparent to me that he was intelligent, only he thought in terms of visual signs and signals. He would see things that I wouldn't see because I was preoccupied with what I was hearing. He would make drawings of his observations and dreams." In his 1970 "silent opera" *Deafman Gance*, Wilson transformed Raymond's sign language into his own highly stylized vocabulary of stage gesture—abstract, angular movements in the spirit of Merce Cunningham and George Balanchine.

Deafman Gance and subsequent productions toured internationally to increasing acclaim, but Wilson's real breakthrough came in 1976 with the premiere of *Einstein on the Beach*, his celebrated collaboration with composer Philip Glass. A four-hour drama without the trappings of drama (that is, conventional plot and character development), this minimalist extravaganza brings together symbolic stage scenery (including a handleless clock eclipsed by a large black disk), a chorus dressed like Einstein and





visual contrasts he creates for his most celebrated stage productions

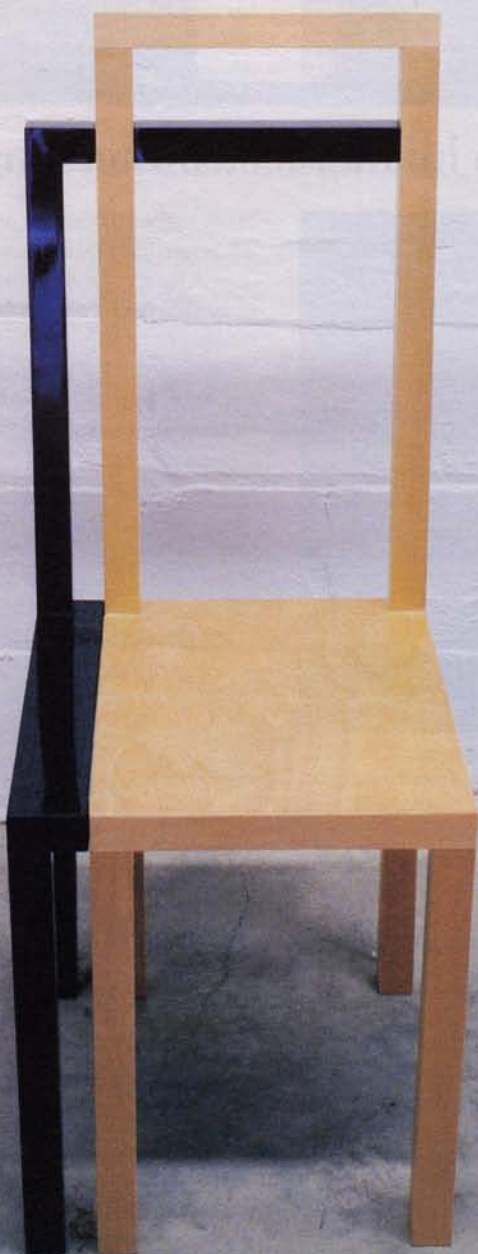


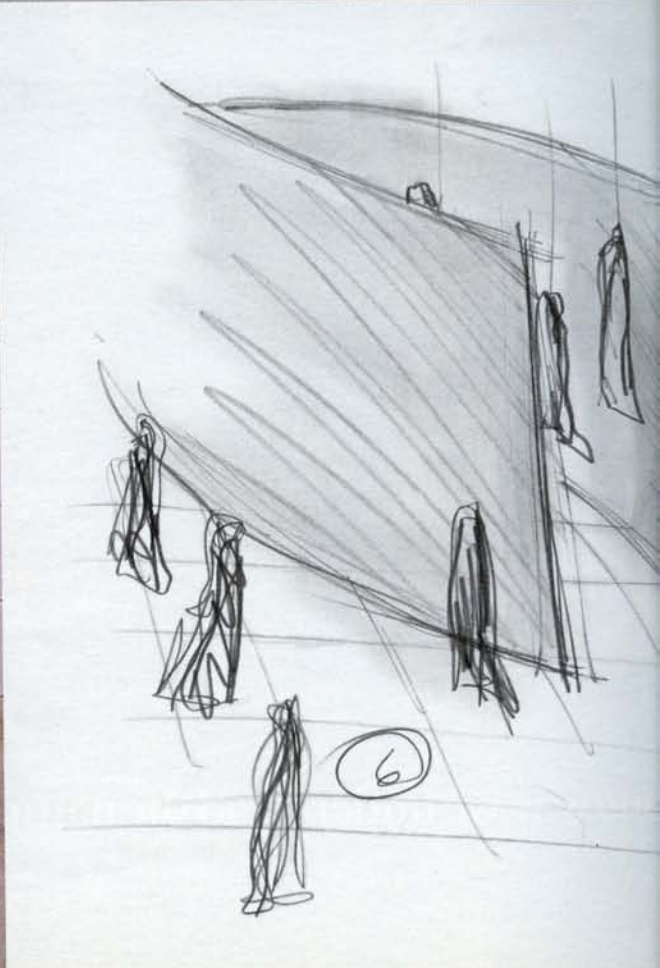
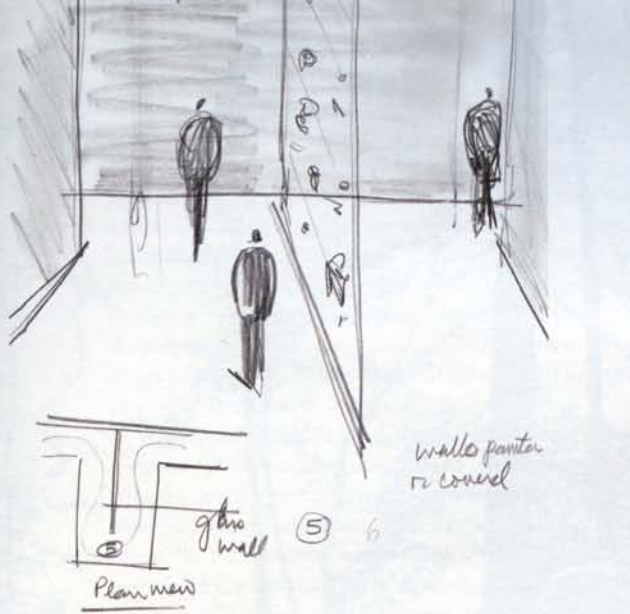
Clockwise from bottom left: An exterior scene of the German installation *14 Stations*, in Oberammergau, 2000; a detail of the same work; the 1998 Metropolitan Opera production of *Lohengrin*; and the





Wilson has collected some 8,000 works of art, including 500 chairs. Clockwise from top: Chairs by Gio Ponti, Carlo Bugatti, Donald Judd and Wilson himself. The drawings at right are Wilson's sketches for the Armani exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London this fall







“one way we understand the nature of society is through the history of art”

musical pieces that recite numbers as well as words. First performed at the Festival d'Avignon in France, *Einstein* later traveled in Europe and landed, controversially, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York—a run that prompted SoHo dealer Paula Cooper to give Wilson his first one-man show, of preparatory theatrical drawings. In the early '80s, Wilson produced his exceedingly ambitious *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down*, a multinational, multilingual epic with music by David Byrne that would run 12 hours if performed complete. (It never has been, though sections have been performed around the world.) It tests the endurance of both audience and performers, especially of one singer who must perform while hanging from steel tubing 15 feet above the stage.

Whether developing a dance, drama, opera production or installation, Wilson controls every aspect of the process, from creating the initial sketches of the scenic elements to directing the hand positions of performers in rehearsal. Visual design dominates. "Bob constructs his pieces as layers," says Watermill participant Catherine Mongin, a French stage director based in Geneva with her own company, Interscènes. "He first conceives of the tableau, the scenery, the staging, even the props. And once everything is designed, he adds the movement and then either the music or the words or both. His inspiration comes from many different kinds of dance. You can see that he has been working for a long time with people who don't move or behave like everybody else. And he has integrated that into his creative work. At first you might think it may not make sense, but when you arrive at the whole thing, it is very subtle and very beautiful."

Wilson brings the same level of attention to his non-theatrical projects, whether *14 Stations*, his monumental installation on the Passion of Christ shown at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, in 2001, or his exhibition design for the Giorgio Armani show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2000, which opened this fall at the new Burlington Gardens galleries of the Royal Academy of Arts in London and runs through February 15. There, you can see Wilson touches in the floor of cracked mud, in the silhouette lighting designed to bring one object to life, and in the translucent scrim that transform viewers passing behind them into wraithlike patterns.

In the 2004 theater season, Wilson will chalk up several more production credits. The Comédie Française stages *Les Fables de La Fontaine* in January and the Staatsoper Berlin unveils a new



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version of Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* in August. The Watermill artists have also designed a park bench, painting one of Wilson's concrete poems on a standard bench for the Target Benchmarks Central Park exhibition in New York in October. (The bench itself will be auctioned at Christie's on November 20.)

With the help of Watermill, the ever-industrious Wilson produces 12 to 15 theatrical works, installations or other creations around the world each year. But he observes that in a deeper sense, "an artist makes only one work in his lifetime. Proust said he was always writing the same novel, and Cézanne said he was always painting the same still life." Asked how he keeps his various projects straight in his mind, he replies, "Heaven and Hell are really one world, two as one. And sometimes by putting opposites together, I can see the works more clearly. A couple of years ago I did [*Time Rocker* with] Lou Reed back to back with Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*. Nono is about the quietest, most discreet sounds, and Lou is about loudness. You clarify one thing by placing it in the context of another."

If context is one key concept for Wilson, community is another. He is especially committed to nurturing Watermill's relationship with the larger population of the Hamptons. "Our communities need centers," he says. "Medieval communities had cathedrals, where the people gathered for light, for knowledge, for congregation and the exchange of ideas. This is a center of this community where we can come together, from private schools and public schools.

"We have to think of Long Island as a community, as a village, where art and creativity flourish," Wilson continues. "It's a place where someone like the scholar Benjamin Barber from the University of Maryland can present his latest sociopolitical findings, where the psychologist Daniel Stern can lecture, where someone like George Soros can come for an exchange of ideas, where someone like the poet Christopher Knowles has a voice to express himself." (Knowles, who has been diagnosed as autistic, has been a Wilson collaborator since he was a child in the 1970s.)

"Hopefully," Wilson adds, "if I can plant this seed carefully, it will be a center that will go on when I'm no longer here. I don't want a school about my work, some marble palace dedicated to me. Right now Watermill is closely identified with me, but once it's up and running, I hope that it will be a center for all sorts of artists, thinkers—for their children and their children's children."

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Opposite: Wil Watermill, an stone monolith Indonesia. An artist's sketch the upcoming Comédie Française production of *Fables de La Fontaine*



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