

Theater

Robert Wilson Discusses North Texas, Silence and Career at Nasher Salon

By [Lauren Smart](#) Tue., Dec. 3 2013 at 9:53 AM



Photo by Kris Noteboom

Robert Wilson is a master of the silence. On Monday night as part of the Nasher Sculpture Center's Salon, he stood steps away from his director's chair staring into the audience before he repeated: "Theater 101, learn how to stand on stage."

The accidental theater artist crafted a career as a writer, director and designer in a way that few professionals find possible, but Wilson never bothered to imagine. After studying architecture at Pratt College, he dedicated his early career to developmental challenges in education and illness. Only after adopting a deaf child when he was just 27 did he find one of the first stories he wanted to tell on stage: *Deafman Glance*. In the latter half of the 20th century, he earned his reputation for directing and designing experimental theater and operas, including Phillip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach*.

Mark Lowry, the editor and co-founder of [TheaterJones.com](#), moderated the conversation -- an eager listener willing to pounce with guidance or follow-up questions. For the most part, he let Wilson tell the stories he wanted to tell, which meandered from the time he hopped a Greyhound bus from Austin to New York, to the later story of directing Wagner's Ring Cycle in France.

In the lecture hall of the Sculpture Center, the Waco native stood before nearly 100 North Texans, from Booker T. Washington students to Margaret McDermott and said, "All over the world, people ask where I'm from and I say Texas. The landscapes of this state are always in my head." And then he was silent for a few seconds of applause. These silences defined the evening. Wilson is too clever to be unaware of the rapt attention he had over his listeners Monday night. Glimmers of pride seemed to float over the audience every time this "local" genius discussed the influences Dallas Theater Center's founder Paul Baker had on his career.

"He understood the importance of theater as a complete art form, as language and movement and architecture," Wilson said. "I never saw a play in Dallas, but I took a lot from my time with Baker."

Wilson's career would be difficult to encapsulate into an hour, but in such a short time he managed to impart unparalleled specifics. Tales of asking Marlene Dietrich out to dinner or showing up backstage at an Otis Redding concert to request he sing for a group of patients relegated to iron lungs, or the more recent tales of assisting the theatricality of Lady Gaga's performances. If you weren't listening closely, you may have missed it when he said that the key to theater is that "it needs to be about just one thing. If it's about that one thing first, then it can be about a million other things."

In every moment, Wilson has sought a meaningful existence, but particularly in the silences. He sought truth in just one thing and it led to a bounty of breakthroughs. The theatrical community is forever indebted to this pioneer and not everyone will learn to appreciate that, because he's too busy participating in the beautiful, poetic, poignant silence.