

Opera behind the Myth:
An Archival Examination of *Einstein on the Beach*

by

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List of Abbreviations

ATL	American Theater Laboratory
BAM	Brooklyn Academy of Music
BHF	Byrd Hoffman Foundation
JDT	Judson Dance Theater
NEA	National Endowment for the Arts
NYSCA	New York State Council on the Arts
PGE	Philip Glass Ensemble

Abstract

The celebrated 1976 European tour and sold-out Metropolitan Opera House performances of director Robert Wilson's and composer Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach* heightened its artists' reputations and amplified public awareness of American musical minimalism. Previous studies have assumed *Einstein's* artistic value, focusing on technical aspects of its music and staging. This study instead examines the discursive construction of that value, drawing on European and American archival evidence, as well as oral history, to demystify the process by which an interdisciplinary "downtown" New York work became an internationally acclaimed avant-garde opera.

Primary and secondary documentation in the Robert Wilson Papers, New York University's Downtown Collection, the New York Public Library, Metropolitan Opera and Brooklyn Academy of Music Hamm Archives, Bibliothèque nationale de France, and Maison Jean Vilar reveal the cooperative networks behind *Einstein's* 1976 production, 1984 New York revival, and 1992 and 2012 international tours. Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory and Howard Becker's Art World method provide frameworks that address the social dimensions of art, offering new insight into the roles that SoHo-based artists like Lucinda Childs, Andrew de Groat, Christopher Knowles, Samuel M. Johnson, the Philip Glass Ensemble musicians, and Mabou Mines actors, organizations like the Byrd Hoffman Foundation and Performing Artservices, Inc., and French administrators like Michel Guy, Paul Puaux, and Ninon Tallon Karlweiss played in the work's creation and success.

This dissertation tracks the promotional and critical use of the word “opera” to refer to the work, Glass’s and Wilson’s strategic deployment of avant-garde aesthetics, *Einstein’s* collaborative creative process and authorial negotiations, and the cultural, political, and economic ramifications of its European (especially French) patronage. By focusing on the discursive dimensions of *Einstein’s* early production and reception, this study investigates the social construction of canonicity. It also examines arts festivals as vehicles of cultural exchange, and the role of the avant-garde in cultural diplomacy between the U.S. and Europe during the American Bicentennial. In so doing, this study explores *Einstein’s* substantial contribution to the cultural accreditation of the 1970s Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene, which continues to influence global vanguard art in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1

Playing with Opera: *Einstein on the Beach* and the Downtown Scene

Some works of art become mythical, either because they are so important or because few people actually know them. ‘Einstein on the Beach,’ the 1976 intermissionless four-and-a-half-hour opera by Robert Wilson and Philip Glass, qualifies on both counts. . . . Beyond the careers of its creators, ‘Einstein’ was perhaps the proudest product of the extraordinary Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene in the 1970s. Its dreamy, painterly beauty; its mystical longueurs; its hypnotic music; its allusions to the brilliance and danger of Einstein’s work without ever quite stooping to the mere telling of a story: all spoke to a generation that still exerts a powerful hold on American, and global, vanguard arts.

— John Rockwell, “‘Einstein’ Seeks the Old Relativity,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2012, New York edition, AR1.

1.1 Setting the (Downtown) Scene

Amid the social and political turbulence of the 1960s, a community of aspiring bohemians, seeking an alternative to commercial or academic “uptown” careers in the arts and confronted with a shortage of affordable housing in Manhattan, began to congregate below 14th Street. They required a place in which they might both live cheaply and make, show, and sell noncommercial art, and the neighborhood of historical cast-iron-fronted buildings that extended north-to-south from Houston Street to Canal Street and east-to-west from Crosby Street to West Broadway—named SoHo for its location south of Houston—became the locus of their activity. Artists residing in its industrial buildings began to organize politically as early as 1961 to pressure New York’s Buildings Department to relax its eviction policies and to protect downtown loft space from demolition to make way for a proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway. In 1964, groups like the Artists’ Tenants Association made headway when the state legislature amended the Multiple Dwelling Law to allow artists to live and work in manufacturing and commercial buildings in the city, though rigid fire codes still obliged many artists to run afoul of the law. The formation of the politically assertive SoHo Artists Association in 1968 marked the official push to gain legal

residency in the neighborhood, and in 1971, the City Planning Commission relaxed fire and building codes, fulfilling the empty promise of the 1964 legalization. By the early 1970s, SoHo had become a veritable artist colony, with upward of eighty percent of the population consisting of artists and their families. Gentrification, however, had begun to impact the mixed-use neighborhood as early as the late 1960s, when conflict between co-op dwellers (who could buy their lofts) and renters (who could not) conspired to drive up prices and encourage rent gouging by unscrupulous landlords. By the late 1970s, skyrocketing real estate costs, accompanied by the legal settlement of non-artists in the increasingly trendy neighborhood, effectively fragmented the avant-garde scene across Lower Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs.¹

During the heyday of the SoHo art scene, the cavernous lofts of the neighborhood's nineteenth-century warehousing days were a boon to artists whose work required ample light and space. Indeed, when legislators first rezoned the district, they rationalized the legalization based on this need, and consequently defined an artist as one working "in the visual fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, on a professional fine arts basis and so certified by an art academy, association, or society, recognized by the municipal office of cultural affairs or the state council on the arts," amending this definition in 1968 to include those "regularly engaged ... in the performing or creative arts, including choreography and filmmaking, or in the composition of music on a professional basis."² Excluded, according to downtown writer Richard Kostelanetz, were arts that were considered commercial in nature, and whose needs were thus seen as better suited to the office than the loft: graphic and fashion design, photography,

¹ The brief history of SoHo's mid-twentieth-century art scene that I outline draws primarily on the work of Stephen Petrus, "From Gritty to Chic; the Transformation of New York City's SoHo, 1962-1976," *New York History* 84 (2003): 50-87. See also Marvin J. Taylor, *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), and sociological studies including Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Charles Simpson, *SoHo: The Artist in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and James R. Hudson, *Unanticipated City: Loft Conversions in Lower Manhattan* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

² Petrus, "From Gritty to Chic," 66.

architecture, writing, and acting.³ This legislative partiality ensured that for over a decade, only artists could live in SoHo, but it also shaped the types of artists and art that the community produced. Artists trained in single disciplines became renaissance men and women, collaboration abounded, and theater, music, dance, and the plastic arts interacted and merged in unusual ways.⁴

In 1967, a twenty-six-year-old native of Waco, Texas and recent graduate of Brooklyn's Pratt Institute named Robert Wilson announced his downtown presence with a solo performance in his 147 Spring Street loft, funneling his formal training in art, architecture, and design through theater. That same year, the thirty-year-old composer Philip Glass, a graduate of the University of Chicago and the Juilliard School, concluded two years of study abroad with the French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. Along with four colleagues with whom he had been performing progressive literary theater in Paris, he resettled in New York, lured by the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the artistic chain migration that was taking place in SoHo. There he and his wife, the director JoAnne Akalaitis, helped to co-found the theater collective Mabou Mines, and Glass began playing with fellow composers and musicians, a handful of whom would coalesce by the mid-1970s into a permanent ensemble.⁵ Making a living was, for Wilson and Glass as for all of their downtown peers, an ongoing struggle. The director and designer taught disabled children and established a theater school/collective and foundation to support the production of his original theater pieces, which drew critical attention for their striking neo-surrealist imagery and monumental scale. Glass learned to plumb, worked as a

³ Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of An Artists' Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15–16.

⁴ Artists of all stripes continued to reside downtown in an illegal capacity even after the 1971 relaxation of fire and building codes, so legal protection only partly determined the demographic makeup of the scene. For practical reasons, however, artists who needed lofts in which to create and/or present their work tended to predominate, drawn to the scene by the promise of both adequate space and likeminded peers.

⁵ In his doctoral dissertation, David Chapman combines archival research with oral history to track the transition of several of Glass's colleagues, most notably Steve Reich and Jon Gibson, from a loose confederacy of mutually supportive composers and musicians to members of distinct ensembles. See David Allen Chapman, "Collaboration, Presence, and Community: The Philip Glass Ensemble in Downtown New York, 1966–1976" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2013).

mover, and drove a cab. As a composer, he served as Mabou Mines' musical director and performed his and his colleagues' reductive, process-oriented work in local venues. He toured to European summer festivals and American universities and offbeat organizations for part of the year, supporting his increasingly formal Philip Glass Ensemble during the off-season by applying for unemployment.

Fast-forward to December 1973. Glass was putting the finishing touches on *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–74), a three-and-a-half-hour study in minimalist rhythmic and harmonic technique, and was thus in the market for a new project when he attended a performance of Wilson's newest opus, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At the cast party following the all-night performance, the director and composer were formally introduced, expressed admiration for one another's work, and agreed to begin meeting for lunch to explore the possibility of a collaborative project. Both men were interested in larger-than-life historical figures, and they eventually agreed on Albert Einstein, toying with the title *Einstein on the Beach on Wall Street* before shortening it to simply *Einstein on the Beach*. As drama and music would be equally prominent, they decided to call the work "opera," but like many of its SoHo theater peers, it would be non-literary in character, driven by slowly unfolding musical and dramatic processes rather than plot. Three images loosely associated with Einstein's life and scientific contributions—a train, a trial, and a field with a spaceship—would serve as thematic reference points, repeating three times each and undergoing a transformation during the final act. Short interludes that Wilson called Knee Plays because of their joint-like function would divide the opera into four hour-long acts, producing a performance slightly less than five hours in duration (Figure 1.1).⁶

⁶ This structural scheme of acts and scenes is a composite of: Robert Haskins, "The Music of Philip Glass, 1965–1975: An Analysis of Two Selected Early Works and *Einstein on the Beach*" (master's thesis, Peabody Conservatory of Music, Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University, 1995), 51–2; *Einstein on the Beach* program, Festival d'Avignon, 1976, Series I, Box 116, Folder: "EOB Program Book," Robert Wilson Papers 1969–1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York; and *Einstein on the Beach* program, Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival, 1984, Box: "Artist Talks: Wilson Box #1," Folder: "Programs Dec. 11–23, 1984 Philip Glass 'Einstein

Knee Play 1

Act I Scene 1A Train
 Scene 2B Trial (Bed)

Knee Play 2

Act II Scene 1C Field (Space Machine) (in distance)
 Scene 2A Train (at night)

Knee Play 3

Act III Scene 1B Trial (Bed)/Prison
 Scene 2C Field (Space Machine) (closer perspective)

Knee Play 4

Act IV Scene 1A Building (in same perspective as the train in Act II, scene 1B)
 Scene 2B Bed
 Scene 3C Space Machine (interior)

Knee Play 5

Figure 1.1 *Einstein* act, scene, and interlude structure.

In the interest of frugality, the seven-member Philip Glass Ensemble would serve as *Einstein's* pit orchestra. Furthermore, company members, all of whom would be costumed as Albert Einstein, would be required to both act and sing in a chorus, as well as dance during two scenes choreographed by Wilson's colleague Andrew de Groat. Wilson invited the up-and-coming Judson Dance Theater performer and choreographer Lucinda Childs to join the company as a soloist, and by the time the opera premiered at France's Festival d'Avignon in July 1976, she and two other company members had been recruited to pen its spoken text. *Einstein* was collaborative music theater produced on a scale and executed with professionalization unprecedented among the New York downtown avant-garde. Responding to the unusually passionate critical acclaim the work

on the Beach,'" Hamm Archives, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, N.Y. Scene numbers correspond to their relative positions within the acts, while scene letters correspond with the repeating train, trial, and field images.

generated as it toured Europe's summer and fall festivals, the Metropolitan Opera House invited the *Einstein* company to present the opera as a special event on November 21, 1976, marketing the work to its regular patrons. Glass's and Wilson's friends and colleagues, of course, needed no persuading to buy tickets, and when the first performance sold out, the Met added a second one a week later, which also sold out. These performances marked the first time that a product of the downtown theater scene was shown at such an august uptown venue, and demonstrated the increasing marketability of New York's native avant-garde to a general audience. The 1976 tour thus marked a turning point not just for Glass's and Wilson's careers and the trajectory of musical minimalism, but also for the artistic community that *Einstein* represented, a scene whose trendiness and international prestige positioned it on the verge of cultural consecration.

Einstein's own production history traces the institutional acceptance of the 1970s Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene. In 1984, the Brooklyn Academy of Music remounted the opera as the centerpiece of its second annual Next Wave Festival, an event commemorated by the nationally broadcast documentary film *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera* (1985; dir. Mark Obenhaus). In 1992, one of Glass's and Wilson's longtime representatives, Jedediah Wheeler, produced a second successful tour that expanded the opera's international reach to Asia and Australia. Finally, in 2012, after a decade-long campaign by Wheeler's colleague Linda Brumbach, eleven commissioning organizations across four continents committed to a third revival tour. Over the course of this tour, four further presenters added the opera to their seasons, turning a one-year remount into a three-year celebration of a now-canonical work. In addition to these live performances, a new documentary film and a full-length filmed performance streamed live on the Internet also marked the occasion. How did *Einstein*, just one of many downtown performances labeled operas during the 1970s, achieve such extraordinary international recognition, and what can that story tell us about the cultural field and the historical moment from which it emerged? The answers to these questions, I will argue throughout this study, lie not in traditional analysis of *Einstein* as an autonomous art object, but rather in

the examination of its biography (i.e., its motion through its context): where and how it was “born” and “raised,” who constituted its “family,” where it traveled when it left home, who it encountered on that journey, and what impact it had on them and vice versa. The brief origin story whose details I sketched above have become the basis of the *Einstein* myth, which treats the opera as a landmark theater work that, like Richard Wagner’s operatic experiments, blew open the possibilities of its genre for a new century. It is a story whose triumphant arc—from Glass’s and Wilson’s early lunch meetings to *Einstein*’s Met premiere—grew out of promotional interviews and writings by the composer, director, and their administrative colleagues, and has been taken up by critics and scholars without much skepticism. I do not mean to suggest that the story is apocryphal. Because Glass and Wilson have been allowed to control the narrative, however, their memories and interests have long dominated *Einstein*’s reception, restricting our access to the opera behind the myth, and the real social and material considerations that molded its production history and reputation.

In fact, *Einstein* was and continues to be shaped by the dynamic activity of a wide variety of people, artists and non-artists alike, ranging from the composer and director to a French Minister of Culture, a family of wealthy art philanthropists, and Italian set builders. As a representative member of its downtown generation, moreover, *Einstein* has much to tell us about the downtown milieu from which it hailed, and specifically the social network that supported this community and implicated it in an international circuit of art and prestige. To offer a case in point, rewind to August 1976. The American Bicentennial was in full swing, the European summer festival season was nearing its end, and after a successful French premiere, the *Einstein* company had returned to New York to work, rest, promote, and fundraise between its premiere at the Festival d’Avignon and Italy’s Biennale di la Venezia. There was a problem, however: having returned home, there was no money left to fly the company back to Europe. In a 2013 interview, the opera’s lighting designer Beverly Emmons, now a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, recalled what happened next:

Bob [Wilson] had the plane reservations to get everyone back to Venice and in those days you could make reservations without actually paying

the money. But he didn't have the money. He worked the Hamptons, he worked everywhere trying to get the money. It was now the day before the flight and still no money. So he had his manager make a list of the travel agencies on 5th Avenue and rent a stretch limousine with a driver that wore a livery. He went down the Avenue and had the limo pull up in front of an agency. He had the driver get out and slowly help him on with his coat. He went in and very politely said, "I'd like to take two friends to Europe," and plunked down his little green American Express card. And in those days they would have had to call to check his limit and charges. None of them called. He got back into the car with the tickets and crossed two names off the list and the driver pulled up to the next agency. By the end of the day he had charged something like \$24,000 on his \$1,500 credit line. This is how he got his troupe back to Europe.

The bill came in and of course he couldn't pay it and the interest was 19 percent a month. In the meantime, *Einstein on the Beach* had garnered so much interest it was booked into two performances on a Sunday at the Met. . . . Bob's Byrd Hoffman Foundation bought a half page ad in the program thanking American Express for supporting *Einstein on the Beach*. Bob sent a copy of the program to the president of American Express with a note saying we've already thanked you publicly, now would you like to make this a reality? "No" was the answer. With the success and excitement of the production Bob was being fêted around the city. At a party, a woman he met let it drop that her husband was a VP at American Express. Bob became fast friends until he could explain his little problem. American Express cancelled the interest and eventually Byrd Hoffman paid off the balance.⁷

At first glance, this anecdote may seem like little more than an amusing footnote to the story of how *Einstein* came to occupy a privileged position in narratives of twentieth-century music and theater. The opera's lighting designer, a technical rather than creative member of its company, recounted it, it tells readers nothing about the aesthetics or semiotics of the work that Wilson's charade and networking were intended to facilitate, and the sheer improbability of the tale renders it suspect as historical evidence.

First glances, however, can be deceiving. That the opera's lighting designer, rather than its director or composer, interrupted an interview about her own career to relate a story about one of her theater colleagues reveals the strong sense of community that characterized the downtown scene. "No one had any

⁷ Beverly Emmons, interview by Monica Snellings, "In Conversation with Beverly Emmons" (September 26, 2013), *Culturebot*, 2016, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://www.culturebot.org/2013/09/19149/in-conversation-with-beverly-emmons/>.

money, but we did have that communal feeling,” Glass recalled of the 1976 tour. “The theater spilled over into our personal lives. Life and art mixed together.”⁸ This community extended not just to the *Einstein* company, but also to the small number of agents, administrators, and technicians like Beverly Emmons who Glass, Wilson, and many of their peers relied upon to get their work seen and heard. Furthermore, Emmons relates Wilson’s mid- and post-tour financial straits specifically to make the point that although European festivals like the Biennale di la Venezia made room for unconventional American performing arts, governmental funding opportunities for noncommercial artists in the United States were few and far between, even for artists who had achieved substantial critical success. This state of affairs not only produced a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among downtown artists, as Emmons’s fond recollection of her work with Wilson suggests, but also compelled enterprising artists to exercise considerable craftiness in pursuit of private contributions and, in particularly dire situations, to resort to the sort of artifice Wilson supposedly practiced on 5th Avenue travel agents. Wilson’s supposed adoption of the trappings of the moneyed elite eloquently demonstrates the division between the humble downtown bohemian lifestyle and the lifestyles of the wealthy patrons who underwrote many of their activities. His ability to convince the travel agents in the story, moreover, offers insight into the demographics of the downtown avant-garde, which was by and large populated by *elective* bohemians. That is to say, the scene was composed mostly of white, college-educated men and women between the ages of twenty-five and forty with the backgrounds and experiences that enabled them to impersonate—and more importantly in terms of attracting commissions, to socialize gracefully with—New York’s aristocratic class. Furthermore, Emmons’s recollection of Wilson’s audacious attempt to recruit American Express as a sponsor, and the adroit social networking that enabled him to eliminate the interest on the opera’s debt, illustrates how important entrepreneurial savvy and well-tended social and professional networks were to artists working without the stability of institutional and state support for new performing arts. Finally, Wilson’s concealment of his countercultural artistic

⁸ Philip Glass to John Rockwell, “‘Einstein’ Seeks the Old Relativity,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2012, New York edition, AR1.

identity in order to get his company to Venice can be seen as a metaphor for *Einstein* itself: a downtown spectacle born of avant-garde creative impulses that its composer and director “dressed up” as opera and, with the aid of an extensive and devoted administrative team, sold to opera houses at home and abroad.

Emmons’s anecdote about *Einstein*’s 1976 financial difficulties thus suggests that the opera’s historical and artistic relevance lies not just in experiences of the work itself, but more importantly, in the social activity in and around it. In fact, the very unlikelihood of her tale, little of which is easily verifiable, evinces the impact this activity continues to have on the construction of the myth around *Einstein*’s reputation as a theatrical landmark. Demonstrating how thoroughly the Romantic ideology of the lone artistic genius continues to permeate historical narratives around expressive culture, Emmons portrayed Wilson as a sort of puckish wunderkind. Realizing that his performers (and presumably Glass) depended upon him to get the company back to Europe, Wilson supposedly carried off an impressive feat of financial risk, cunning, and sacrifice in pursuit of his art. Truth is of only secondary importance in this sort of story, whose arresting details are engineered to hold readers’ attention while conveying a much more mundane reality—the problem of domestic funding for unconventional art in the U.S.—of an art world and one of its most charismatic figures.⁹

While Emmons’s story offers a taste of the dynamic social, political, and economic milieu that set the scene for *Einstein*’s splashy European and American

⁹ The German scholars Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, in their 1934 study *Die Legende vom Künstler*, discuss just the sort of anecdotes that Emmons recounts, handling them as myth-building discursive tools rather than evidence pointing to verifiable facts: “In the numerous accounts of the lives of painters and sculptors that have come down to us from the Renaissance onward one repeatedly encounters typical leitmotifs—themes that recur in numerous biographies with little or no variation. These relate either to the career of the artist—particularly to his childhood—or to the effect of his works upon his public.” Shortly thereafter, they explain, “Anecdotes have indeed been repeatedly used as sources in the writing of history. The fact that they occasionally convey something significant about their hero, and very often provide a deeper insight into his personality than other sources, evidently induced Nietzsche to assert that one could sum up the character of any historical person with the aid of three anecdotes.” Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 8, 10–11.

premieres, critics and scholars have by and large overlooked this context in favor of more traditional analyses of the opera as a work object and its role in its primary artists' stylistic development. Along these lines, in his 2012 retrospective article on the opera's importance, the longtime *New York Times* music critic John Rockwell implied that *Einstein's* mythic stature has derived from its "dreamy, painterly beauty; its mystical longueurs; its hypnotic music; its allusions to the brilliance and danger of Einstein's work without ever quite stooping to the mere telling of a story."¹⁰ Like Rockwell's assessment, previous academic explorations of the opera have invariably homed in on the hermeneutics of Wilson's drama and/or Glass's music. On one hand, attempts to come to terms with the opera's internal logic offer a valuable perspective on the opera. On the other hand, they expose the disciplinary barriers that have limited understanding of its historical relevance as a whole by dividing *Einstein's* reception between musicology and drama studies. Furthermore, attention to the opera's intriguing postmodern characteristics has undersold the opera's significance by glossing over or outright ignoring its participation in a larger story of international exchange of avant-garde art and capital during the 1970s.

1.2 *Einstein in Music and Theater Scholarship*

Style histories of American musical minimalism generally treat *Einstein on the Beach* as the project that enabled Glass to extend his pared-down musical vocabulary, based in principles of cyclic harmonic patterns and additive rhythmic development, from the concert hall to the stage and film.¹¹ The musicologists Keith Potter and Robert Haskins, music theorist Milos Raickovich, and composer and critic Kyle Gann have produced nuanced analyses of the score, filtering their assessments of its importance through the lens of Glass's individual compositional development and its relationship to concurrent musical

¹⁰ John Rockwell, "Einstein' Seeks the Old Relativity," *New York Times*, September 2, 2012, New York edition, A1.

¹¹ See, for example, Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1991 / R1983), 79–82; Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 238–39; K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1996 / R2008), 128–38; Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 323–39. See also Robert Maycock, *Glass: A Portrait* (London: Sanctuary Publishing Ltd., 2002), 33–6, 183.

experimentation by downtown colleagues like La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich.¹² Potter, for instance, suggests that the composer's "increasing interest in tonally directed motion," exemplified by *Einstein's* harmonically-driven thematic material, "forms the crucial link between his music of the early 1970s, especially in the final stages of *Music in Twelve Parts*, and the whole of his later, 'post-minimalist' development."¹³ Likewise treating musical text as a primary analytical lens, John Richardson's monograph on Glass's third opera *Akhmaten*—related to *Einstein* by virtue of their inclusion in Glass's so-called "Portrait Trilogy"—centers around theoretically informed readings of the operatic score and libretto.¹⁴ The Italian musicologist Alessandro Rigolli has followed suit, reading *Einstein* as an "anti-dialectic, anti-narrative melodrama" in a 2001 article on the opera.¹⁵

Scholars approaching the opera from the perspective of theater history also tend to focus on the operatic text and implications of the work in connection to artist biography. Like the musicologists who read Glass's career as a significant strand of minimalist historiography, Wilson's biographers assess *Einstein* within the

¹² Haskins claims that the opera's significance lies in its shifting combinations of forces, variety of formal designs within and between scenes, and a handling of harmony that "is considerably more flexible and sophisticated than anything which had been produced by his contemporaries." Similarly, Raickovich, a music theorist, locates *Einstein's* operatic radicalism in its lack of pitch content outside its unified themes, which derive from a core motive (the A–G–C descent of the organ in the Prologue). Finally, Gann, looking back on the opera forty years after first encountering it as a critic, investigates its "playful, intuitive technique of recomposition." Haskins, "The Music of Philip Glass, 1965–1975," 122–3; Milos Raickovich, "*Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass: A Musical Analysis," (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 1994), 36–52, 70–3; Kyle Gann, "Intuition and Algorithm in *Einstein on the Beach*," *NewMusicBox* (March 6, 2013), *NewMusicBox*, 1999–2016, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/intuition-and-algorithm-in-einstein-on-the-beach/>.

¹³ Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 339.

¹⁴ John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's Akhnaten* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). Richardson devotes a chapter to Glass's theoretical ties to Brechtian, Artaudian, and Indian Kathakali theater, and concludes with a brief consideration of the opera's reception. While both discussions gesture toward the art world context in which Glass participated, he primarily uses them to support a traditional musicological analysis of the musical score and libretto and their dramatization.

¹⁵ Alessandro Rigolli, "*Einstein on the Beach* di Philip Glass e Bob Wilson: caratteri de una 'non-opera,'" *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 36, no. 2 (January 2001): 351–73.

specific trajectory of the director's career.¹⁶ Wilson's early output was strongly informed by his relationships with the deaf mute boy Raymond Andrews, who inspired the wordless, imagistic dramas that earned works like *Deafman Glance* (1971) the critical moniker "Theatre of Images" and the autistic teen Christopher Knowles, whose Gertrude Stein-like poetry impacted the gradual introduction of spoken language and music to Wilson's oeuvre.¹⁷ Wilson scholars generally agree that *Einstein* marked the apogee of this second period, as well as a turning point in his working habits. After *Einstein*, he began to collaborate regularly with artists outside his discipline, hire professional actors, and rely on producers outside his Byrd Hoffman Foundation to fund and organize presentations of his work.¹⁸ Among drama scholars who, like Rigolli, have addressed the opera as a single case study, Frederick Ruf has investigated *Einstein's* dramatic voice, while Susan Broadhurst has borrowed philosophical concepts from Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida to map its non-linear temporality.¹⁹

As this brief survey of literature on the opera suggests, privileging textual and biographical approaches has resulted in an academic reception largely divided between musicological concerns (*Einstein's* relevance to Glass's career and minimalism) and dramaturgical concerns (*Einstein's* relevance to Wilson's career

¹⁶ See Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978); Lawrence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989); Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Miguel Morey and Carmen Pardo, *Robert Wilson* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2003); Maria Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁷ The drama scholar Thomas Lindblade explains that the label "Theatre of Images" "was initially created by Bonnie Marranca and later extended, in a series of excursions, by Stefan Brecht." Thomas W. Lindblade, "Tactical Measures: The Interaction of Drama with Music" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1995), 134. See also Bonnie Marranca, *The Theatre of Images* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977) and Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions*.

¹⁸ See, for example, Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 30–2; Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 7–14, 88–9.

¹⁹ Susan Broadhurst, "Einstein on the Beach: A Study in Temporality," *Performance Research* 17, no. 5 (October 2012): 34–40; Frederick J. Ruf, *Entangled Voices: Genre and the Religious Construction of the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65–76. "Like a lyric poem," Ruf claims, "*Einstein on the Beach* presents the author's [Wilson's] psyche, but in a dramatic form, which is to say through multiple oblique voices (and characters) and the depiction of objects and actions, rather than through the use of the singular, authoritative lyric voice." Ruf, 67.

and experimental theater). Seeking to ameliorate this disciplinary division, Thomas Lindblade, in a dissertation addressing the second-class status of Glass's musical text in theater scholarship on *Einstein*, has made a strong case that, "[f]or Wilson, texts are co-equal," and that to fully address his dramaturgy, one must therefore attend to their interaction, "observing what the multivalent palimpsests produce."²⁰ Monographs like the essay collection *The Legacy of Opera* (2013) and Jelena Novak's *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (2015) similarly offer methodological possibilities for evaluating *Einstein's* artistic significance without privileging the contributions of either its director or composer.²¹ Both studies participate, along with books like Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi's *The New Music Theater* (2008) and Mladen Ovadija's *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre* (2013), in addressing the increasingly murky definitional boundaries separating theater, music theater, and opera in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the hands of vanguard dramaturges and composers.²²

While such scholarship on works like *Einstein* is concerned with textual analysis, artist biography, and style history rather than the social construction of meaning, it has produced constructive insight into the application of experimental theatrical aesthetics to a highly conventionalized genre like opera, and particularly the problems it presents to analysts. For instance, according to the critic Barbara Baracks, poet and dance critic Edwin Denby once remarked of Wilson's theater, "You can describe three images or four, or you can describe 30 or 40 of them if you have the time. . . . But what you can't describe is the logical

²⁰ Lindblade, "Tactical Measures," 2–3; see also 127–57.

²¹ Dominic Symonds and Pamela Karantonis, eds., *The Legacy of Opera: Reading Music Theatre as Experience and Performance* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2013); Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015).

²² Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theater: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mladen Ovadija, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

narrative connection."²³ In the 1990s, the theater scholar and dramaturge Arthur Holmberg offered a compelling explanation for this ineffability:

[O]ne characteristic of a Wilson production like *Einstein on the Beach* is the profusion of narrative fragments that cross, crash, and collide on stage. These narrative fragments, however, may be difficult to recognize. The gaps between the fragments are larger than the fragments, giving the spectator who wants a story acres of empty space in which to construct one. Moving theatre away from narrative toward lyric poetry, Wilson privileges formal patterns; he foregrounds spatial and temporal, not narrative, structure. By emphasizing artistic devices rather than story line, he veils narrative. In Wilson, the aesthetic organization interrogates and celebrates itself. For all that, ghosts of stories haunt Wilson's works. But ghosts – elusive and ethereal – are not always easy to spot. The stories in Wilson may not have beginnings or ends, but the seeds of numerous narrations are there.²⁴

In *Einstein*, Glass's music works in tandem with Wilson's patterned profusion of narrative fragments, presenting listeners with musical conventions—like the perfect authentic cadence that opens and closes the opera—that rely on competency in following the narrative logic of Western tonal music. The repetitive, additive development scheme in which he situates these gestures, however, constantly undermines this logic, cadences repeating over and over in isolation to produce a competing sense of dynamism and closure. This manipulation of established conventions to produce unconventional effects is best exemplified by the climactic theme (Theme in f–E) of Act IV, scene 3C (Space Machine), whose harmonic motion repeats over and over in the first and last scenes of the opera. Because of the short duration of the harmonic motion, Glass's unusual modulation between keys a half-step apart enables listeners to hear the final chord in the sequence simultaneously as a cadential arrival on I in E major *and* as the leading tone of F minor. The result is the aural equivalent of a

²³ Barbara Baracks, "Einstein on the Beach," *Artforum* (March 1977): 35; Craig Owens, "Einstein on the Beach: The Primacy of Metaphor," *October* 4 (Fall 1977): 24. The dance critic and art historian Craig Owens makes a similar point: "If the space evoked in *Einstein* was dream-like, one important difference must be noted. Wilson's images, unlike those of dreams, are not open to interpretation. Dream-images are the *mediated* representations of dream-thoughts; hence, their interpretability. Wilson's images are, on the contrary, immediate, presentational, resistant to analysis. This is supported by the subsidiary function assigned to speech and spoken texts in all of which works. For language is, above all, the medium of interpretation."

²⁴ Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 11.

Möbius strip, which seems to move forward, but constantly turns back on itself (Figure 1.2).

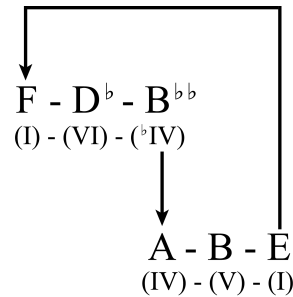


Figure 1.2 Theme in f–E.

Like Glass’s music, Wilson’s drama tantalizes spectators with the familiar while pulling the conventional rug out from under their feet, forcing them to develop new reading competencies and enticing scholars to speculate on how such competencies might function. In a recent consideration of *Einstein’s* temporality and its affect on hermeneutic possibilities, for example, the drama scholar Susan Broadhurst has suggested that the repetitive deployment of *Einstein’s* visual motifs (echoed by its musical themes) within a patterned but non-narrative structure produces an atypical pattern of expectation that she terms “antiphonal time,” or “an awaiting of mutually answering, mutating items within a hieratic order.”²⁵ Drawing on Heidegger’s concepts of the hermeneutic circle or the interpretive spiral, in which “at each turn of rumination on content, fresh insights are produced, without any fresh matter emerging, nor any conclusion to end future and further turns,” Broadhurst compellingly puts her finger on the problem that an image- and process music-driven opera like *Einstein* presents to musicological analysis rooted in musical text or performance, and by the same token, to theatrical analysis based on a literary script or its dramatization:

[W]e approach the work ‘fore-having’ a range of traditional meanings for operatic work, but our ‘fore-sight,’ our choice between any one of these *genre*-based interpretive routes, is continually thwarted by its aporetic

²⁵ Broadhurst, “*Einstein on the Beach: A Study in Temporality*,” 37.

character, and so our 'fore-conception' . . . our resolved pursuit of a particular route, is always blocked.²⁶

The "fore-having" that Broadhurst describes, which might also be framed as cultural capital or reading competency, rewards spectators for their knowledge about details of Albert Einstein's life that appear in the opera or their recognition of traditional operatic conventions like a love duet or an aria. The non-linear narrative dramatic and musical structures into which Wilson and Glass load conventional imagery and musical gestures, however, prevent the "traditional meanings for operatic work" or "genre-based interpretive routes" from cohering. As a result of this conventional hybridity and the hermeneutic open-endedness it produces, *Einstein* has long intrigued critics and scholars as an object of analysis in spite of its resistance to that very methodological approach. In sum, then, scholarship devoted to Glass, Wilson, *Einstein*, and the genre-challenging postmodern music theater history in which it participates has produced an academic reception history rooted in the opera's aesthetics and semiotics and their relationship to the artists' professional chronology. As I have briefly shown, such work has exposed key facets of the opera's appeal to analysts, but it has also demonstrated its own limitations, both in terms of dividing its reception along methodological lines between music and drama specialists and fixating on text to the relative exclusion of context.

Beverly Emmons's anecdote about Wilson's financial negotiation of the opera's first tour, on the other hand, suggests an entirely different mode of interrogating *Einstein* as a cultural artifact, one that borrows concepts from the sociology of art. Approaching the opera socially, using archival and secondary documents to illuminate the network in and around *Einstein*, not only allows us to approach its hermeneutics historically rather than theoretically. It also illuminates the social, political, and economic conditions of the downtown avant-garde art world from which it hailed in the mid-1970s. Robert Fink nudged minimalist historiography in this culturally oriented direction with his 2005 study *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. He referenced *Einstein*, for instance, as an indicator of minimalism's uneven reception in the 1980s, juxtaposing

²⁶ Ibid., 39.

reviews of its 1984 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with critical disdain toward the LP-mediated “barococo” phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s to demonstrate that “attacks on minimalism, like attacks on the Baroque revival, are at root class-based defenses of the masterworks canon.”²⁷ Responding to this shift from text to context, musicologists have begun to reevaluate established narratives of the downtown music scene, and especially the emergence of minimalism as a distinct trend, with an eye to the social complexities of its artists’ careers, the avant-garde’s participation in public discourse on American identity, the negotiation of authorial claims, and the roles of historical actors like musicians, impresarios, and the American arts funding apparatus.²⁸

1.3 Approaching *Einstein* as a Discourse

The theoretical framework that I mobilize to examine *Einstein on the Beach* amplifies media theory with sociology, and is based on two hypotheses supported by archival research. First, the historical significance of *Einstein* is best understood as a function of its music, drama, and dance *taken together* rather than assessed separately. Taking the opera as a synthesis offers important insights into *Einstein’s* relationship to the 1970s Lower Manhattan art scene and this scene’s institutional viability. Second, the opera’s role in grand narratives of non-literary theater, opera, and minimalist music is more profitably understood as the product of extensive cooperative activity than purely (or even primarily) as the product of its two chief artists.

In fact, *Einstein* collaborator Lucinda Childs told one interviewer shortly after the 1976 tour, “*Einstein* was more of a political breakthrough than an artistic

²⁷ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 189.

²⁸ For example, Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: the New York Avant-garde and its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community”; Ryan Scott Ebright, “Echoes of the Avant-garde in American Minimalist Opera” (PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014); Sasha Metcalf, “Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2015); Tamar Barzel, *New York Noise: Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Scene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Patrick Nickelson, “Transcription, Recording, and Authority in ‘Classic’ Minimalism,” presentation, Eighty-first Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Louisville, KY, November 12–15, 2015.

breakthrough. Getting the Met to put it on The artistic breakthroughs happened before *Einstein*.”²⁹ By the mid-1970s, downtown performing collectives and individuals like the Living Theatre, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, Mabou Mines, Meredith Monk, and John Cage and Merce Cunningham were producing experimental works that combined the performing arts in novel ways. As a result, they received substantial critical attention and support at home and abroad. Quite a few of their projects, including Meredith Monk’s *Quarry*, which premiered at the same time *Einstein* had its first rehearsal performance in New York, were presented as operas. To discover what made *Einstein* different, that is to say, what compelled the Met to add it to its special events schedule while *Quarry* remained largely unknown outside Lower Manhattan, one must look beyond the work itself and even its composer and director to the artists, administrators, patrons, and critics who made *Einstein* happen.

In *Experimentalism Otherwise*, Benjamin Piekut adopts a similar approach to four artistic skirmishes in the context of New York experimentalism in 1964, using Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory to demonstrate that the American experimental tradition “wasn’t something that magically coalesced around shared qualities,” but rather “was a network, arranged and fabricated through the hard work of composers, critics, scholars, performers, audiences, students, and a host of other elements including texts, scores, articles, curricula, patronage systems, and discourses of race, gender, class, and nation.”³⁰ *Einstein*, like the musical encounters that Piekut addresses, comes into focus as a historically and culturally relevant work not through study of the opera as an autonomous object of analysis, but rather as a socially constructed and negotiated discourse that takes the shape of the network that produced (and continues to produce) it in various medial forms. The documentary film made following the 1984 remount, for instance, is noteworthy as a pedagogical tool that has bolstered *Einstein*’s inclusion in college courses on twentieth-century opera.³¹ This film, a significant

²⁹ Lucinda Childs, interview by Jeff Goldberg, “Interview / Report: Robert Wilson and ‘Einstein on the Beach,’” *New York Arts Journal* (Spring, 1977), 17. Ellipsis in original.

³⁰ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 19.

³¹ *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*, directed by Mark Obenhaus (1987; Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema, 2007), DVD.

vehicle for enhancing the opera's academic canonization, was not the direct outcome of Glass's and Wilson's labor, but rather the cooperative activity of the 1984 *Einstein* company, the director Mark Obenhaus and his film crew, the Brooklyn Academy of Music administration, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. These performers and institutions balanced the monetary and reputational value that mediatizing the opera in the form of a documentary film promised to each stakeholder. In fact, it was Sue Weil, PBS's senior vice president of programming during the mid-1980s, rather than the opera's artists or presenter, who mobilized this cinematic contribution to the *Einstein* discourse. Weil had previously been involved with postmodern dance at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center, and exploited her position to increase the national visibility of a downtown spectacle that she believed to be culturally salient.³²

Wishing to highlight the impact of exchanges like that between the 1984 *Einstein* company, Mark Obenhaus, and BAM and PBS leadership on the *Einstein* myth, as well as the individual motivations that guided such exchanges, I employ intermediality as a broad conceptual frame. This theory, initially developed by German scholars during the 1990s to discuss new media, digitization, and the Internet, has more recently been applied to discussions of theater as a hypermedium and even early twentieth-century dance performance.³³ Intermedial theory's strength is that it avoids reducing expressive culture like *Einstein* to one or just a few manifestations (e.g., live performance, audiovisual recording, musical score), and thus offers a way to account for the opera's many forms of inscription and embodiment without being constrained by the ontological conventions of particular critical and academic disciplines. Instead, the theory emphasizes intersections and relationships between *any* media that comprise or are associated with the work, including offstage evidence like flyers,

³² Mark Obenhaus, telephone conversation with author, December 8, 2014.

³³ See, for example: Lars Elleström, ed., *Media Borders, Multimodality, and Intermediality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); Chiel Kattenbelt, "Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions, and Medial Relationships," *Culture, Language and Representation* 6 (2008), 19–29; Mary Simonson, *Body Knowledge: Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

programs, interviews, reviews, contracts, and personal correspondence.³⁴ As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, for example, *Einstein's* acceptance as a legitimate opera owed less to its partial adherence to the musical and dramatic conventions associated with the genre than to: Glass's and Wilson's shrewd promotional strategies, critical reviews that responded favorably to those strategies, and *Einstein's* performances in venues intended for opera.

Additionally, intermediality offers a fitting lens through which to address the downtown avant-garde scene, as the legal foundations on which the community was built facilitated social and artistic exchange that regularly led to the application of the rules of one art to another (e.g., Wilson's application of painterly perspective to theatrical stage design). Hence, too, the migration of minimalist principles from visual art to music, theater, dance, and eventually film. This was a community in which visual artists purchased Philip Glass's musical equipment for him and attended his early concerts, and a musical accompanist, at the behest of John Cage, led the workshop that served as the fountainhead of postmodern dance.³⁵ An intermedial perspective on *Einstein* therefore facilitates a more fluid account of the on- and off-stage performances associated with the opera, softening the academic disciplinary boundaries that have limited previous analyses by focusing on the opera's music, drama, or dance in isolation from the others, and highlighting often ignored artists and support personnel who tend to fall through the cracks of musicological narratives.

³⁴ I conceive the term "work" in the same sense as the opera scholar Carolyn Abbate. In her discussion of ontological debates surrounding music as object versus performance, she contends, "[w]hen musical works are required to represent pure structure or autonomous discourse, detached from the social conditions of their production and reception, something has been lost," and she goes on to account for these conditions by defining music works as neither scores nor performances, but rather as "phantoms inhabiting a network connecting composer, inscription, performer, interpretation, realization, and reproduction . . ." This definition applies as readily to performing arts other than music as well. Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), ix, xiii.

³⁵ Philip Glass, interview by Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellerman, "Phil Glass: interview," *Semiotexte* 3, no. 2 (1978): 188; Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962–1964* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), 1–7.

Within a general intermedial framework, concepts derived from the Field and Art World theories developed by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Howard S. Becker during the same period in which the downtown avant-garde scene was most active facilitate an expansive view of the collaboration that distinguishes *Einstein* from other operas. Indeed, their work provides frameworks that account for non-artist contributors whose activity was nonetheless crucial to *Einstein's* performance and reception as a revolutionary opera. Bourdieu's structural model of individual actors, conditioned by habitus and involved in the negotiation of power in the form of tangible and intangible value, or capital, within a field, is useful in challenging our tendency to assume Glass's and/or Wilson's authority over the work, and to focus on questions of aesthetic merit. Instead, Bourdieu's model invites us to widen our view to take in the roles of their collaborators, creative and non-creative alike, and to attend to the give-and-take of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital among these players, especially the two whose reputations stood to gain or lose the most with the opera's success or failure. "It is not sufficient to say that the history of the field is the history of the struggle for the monopolistic power to impose the legitimate categories of perception and appreciation. The *struggle itself* creates the history of the field," Bourdieu writes. "Words—the names of schools or groups, proper names—are so important only because they make things"; they "are produced in the *struggle for recognition* by the artists themselves or their accredited critics and function as *emblems* which distinguish galleries, groups and artists and therefore the products they make or sell."³⁶ History within Bourdieu's framework, that is, is not a series of events, but rather of dynamic human interactions and confrontations in which language is used to broker power.

Becker's sociological approach to art complements Field theory in a plainspoken manner that more easily accommodates the individual agency of his actors. He focuses not on the negotiation and transformation of value in an abstract social field, but rather on the mundane, but rarely formally considered, cooperative

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and intro. Randal Johnson (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993), 106.

activity of people around art, including the establishment or variation of conventions, the mobilizing of resources, the distribution of art works, and the role that non-artists (from editors and curators to the state) play in the life and death of art works. “All artworks, like all human activity, involve the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people,” he explains in his 1982 study *Art Worlds*. “Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world.” A sociological approach to the arts, he continues, “is not an approach that produces aesthetic judgments,” but rather, “an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens. . . . [B]y observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves,” he concludes, “we can understand much of what goes on in that world.”³⁷

In an effort to use *Einstein on the Beach* as a lens to peer into the downtown art world of the 1970s, I rely on archival documentation located in New York and France, oral history, written accounts by artists, performers, and administrators, and a variety of cultural production that has accrued around the opera (e.g., documentary films and videotaped interviews). Taken together, this evidence builds a picture of the opera as a culturally vital, textually mutable, and socially negotiable discourse. This discourse wrestles with basic questions about cultural expression that were of particular interest to the downtown avant-garde: How do we categorize art works by discipline and genre? What role should the spectator adopt in relation to performance? Who should be able to claim artistic and legal responsibility for collaboratively made art? And who, to paraphrase Bourdieu, is the true producer of value: the artist(s) themselves or the network of performers, administrators, impresarios, technical professionals, critics, and other art world participants without whom art could not be experienced or

³⁷ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th anniversary ed. (1982; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1, 36.

appreciated by an audience?³⁸ It is to these questions that this study attends with respect to *Einstein*. This project may thus be described as a production and reception history that is oriented toward the work as a multimodal discourse constructed and maintained in a nexus of human activity.

1.4 Summary of Chapters

Each of the chapters in this study asks a simple question about the discursive production and negotiation of *Einstein on the Beach*: Who determined that *Einstein* was an opera, and how? What aesthetic lineage informed the artists' work and their critics' reception of it? How did *Einstein* cross a collective downtown theatrical model of authorship with a more conventional operatic model to appeal to both the "home crowd," so to speak, and season ticket-holders at the Metropolitan Opera? How have conflicts of interest between *Einstein's* composer, director, choreographer, and musicians within this model affected the production and reception of the opera? And how did the opera's patronage at home and in Europe reflect the circulation of unconventional art, money, and prestige between New York and Europe during the 1970s, particularly during the American Bicentennial year? The first part of the study tracks discourses of ontology and influence, and seeks to understand *Einstein* as an art world hybrid balanced precariously between downtown social and aesthetic impulses and conventional theatrical modes of distribution and reception. The second part rallies critical, administrative, and institutional discourses to address *Einstein* as a collaborative construct that is organized and mobilized: on one level, by not only Glass and Wilson, but also an extended group of creative contributors; and on a second level, as a work whose success depended heavily on individual and especially institutional patrons, agents, managers, and critics in the United States and Europe.

Chapter 2, "Playing with Names," circumvents the aesthetic judgment implicit in critics' favored review opener, "Is *Einstein* really an opera?" by instead asking, "How did *Einstein* become an 'opera'?" As early as 1971, the French Surrealist poet Louis Aragon publicly praised Robert Wilson's completely silent play

³⁸ See Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 76.

Deafman Glance as a “deaf opera,” and thereafter, the director began calling all of his theater pieces “operas” in the etymological sense, as “works.” Beginning with background on Glass’s and Wilson’s theatrical and musical exploits leading up to their collaboration, this chapter demonstrates that it was Wilson’s presentation of all of his works as operas, rather than insistence on the composer’s part, that triggered *Einstein’s* genre designation and conditioned European audiences to accept the label.

Extensive, largely unexamined critical reception in Europe and New York in 1976 and 1984, when considered side by side with Wilson’s and Glass’s promotional writing and interviews, reveals a delicate discursive negotiation of *Einstein’s* validity as an opera. The director and composer, more interested in attracting spectators than inciting high-minded ontological debates, strategically evaded discussions about *Einstein’s* operatic legitimacy during the first tour, publicly advancing the claim only after its celebrated Met performances. In doing so, Glass and Wilson helped to ensure that comparisons of *Einstein* with canonical works like *La bohème* or *Parsifal* would not scare off conventional opera aficionados who might otherwise be persuaded to try something new. Meanwhile, critics vacillated between the wish to acknowledge the artists’ clever manipulation of operatic conventions and the obligation to warn potential audiences of its experimentalism. Two contextual factors absent in current scholarship on the work ultimately guaranteed *Einstein’s* general acceptance as an opera even as critics continue to debate this issue. First, a music critic at the French newspaper *Le Monde*, possibly influenced by a colleague’s review of the scandalous Chéreau-Boulez Jahrhundertring performance at Bayreuth a week before *Einstein’s* world premiere, made an explicit connection between the American work and Wagner’s operatic innovations. This initial comparison rippled through *Einstein’s* Italian, German, and American reception. While the opera diverged in important ways from Wagner’s conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the association, paired with *Einstein’s* appearance in opera houses, was enough to distinguish the work from less ambitious downtown theater projects. Indeed, it was *Einstein’s* appearance in venues intended for opera, rather than the smaller, less conventional spaces available to Off-Off-

Broadway performances, that most securely conditioned the work's acceptance as a bona fide opera. Once that discursive hurdle had been leapt, I show, subsequent debate became purely academic, a means for generating interest in the piece with each revival rather than a threat to the work's ontological status.

Chapter 3, "Playing with the Avant-garde," is concerned not with the cooperative links between the artists and their critics, but rather between the artists and the art and theater lineage that undergirded the avant-garde art world in which *Einstein* participated. If individual disciplines often give rise to their own art worlds, with conventions specific to, say, painting or jazz, the downtown art community's shared artistic and philosophical orientations across disciplines rendered it an art world unto itself, although a diverse and unstable one. Indeed, it was no accident that music composed by Glass, Steve Reich, and their peers acquired the label of "minimalism," as its paring down of materials, repetitiveness, and orientation toward patterns and process were analogous to the Minimalist movement in visual art.³⁹ *Einstein's* drama, music, and dance thus share many of the same aesthetic concerns rooted in avant-garde theater, film, dance, music, and poetry. "No one falls out of the sky," Glass insisted to the *Los Angeles Times* critic Mark Swed in 2011. "We come out of trees where there are other apples. There is a lineage to this work. But it was not *known* in the world of conventional theater and the world of conventional dance and the world of conventional opera."⁴⁰ This chapter investigates that lineage, beginning with Marcel Duchamp's reorientation of what constitutes art from the object itself to the spectator's experience of it. The theater historian Arnold Aronson connects Duchamp's ideas to their later manifestation in the work of John Cage and Gertrude Stein, the first of whose writings in *Silence* (1961) powerfully impacted Glass and Wilson along with their peers. Also, Stein's idiosyncratic approach to narrative prose and her 1927 experimental operatic collaboration with the composer Virgil Thomson, *Four Saints in Three Acts* present important forerunners to *Einstein's* approach to opera. This chapter concludes with a

³⁹ See Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 242–4.

⁴⁰ Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs, interview by Mark Swed, "Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs Discuss *Einstein on the Beach*," UC Berkeley Events, April 29, 2011, accessed January 28, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8Cx7XOYj_w.

consideration of the opera's relationship to the dramaturgical writings of Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and Jerzy Grotowski, as their work collectively laid the foundations for the entire non-literary theater scene in New York, informing *Einstein's* critical reception at home and abroad. Although many of these figures appear in general discussions of Glass's and Wilson's backgrounds, scholars have not examined the opera in light of the composer's and director's own references to these forerunners, and have therefore missed the strategic ways in which Glass and Wilson exploited avant-garde art and theater aesthetic ideas to simultaneously align their work with the downtown scene and advertise its accessibility to scene outsiders.

Chapter 4, "Playing Together," proposes a new model for addressing *Einstein's* unusually collaborative approach to opera, which hybridizes the authorial conventions of collective, non-literary theater and score- and libretto-driven opera. Downtown theater troupes often placed primary creative control in the hands of one director, but also valued a collective model of authorship. Standard opera, on the other hand, traditionally reserves creative authority for a composer, with the relative authorial contributions of librettists, directors, and other interpreters arranged below this figure in a hierarchical manner. Drawing on theories of authorship among film scholars, whose medium is by necessity collaborative, the chapter proposes that *Einstein's* creative process and billing valorizes Glass and Wilson as the opera's conceptual authors and their performer-collaborators as its contributing authors. This two-tiered authorial arrangement has given rise to professional tension between collaborators over the course of the opera's production history, but it also enabled *Einstein* to reconcile the collaborative "downtown" impulse with the conventions of hierarchical "uptown" theater in such a way that the work appealed to spectators and critics associated with both art worlds.

Chapter 5, "Playing Nice," applies the model described in the previous chapter to three instances, newly uncovered in the archives, in which *Einstein's* collaborative authorship shaped the legal, production, and reception histories of the opera. The first case study tracks a three-year legal dispute between Glass and Wilson surrounding the production of a sound recording, a dispute whose

resolution in the form of a legal contract set the terms for the opera's later production possibilities, as well as reserving all creative authority over the opera for its two primary artists. The second case study considers the evolving creative authority of Lucinda Childs, the performer and spoken text contributor who became *Einstein's* choreographer in 1984, and who, over the course of four productions, has been caught between reception that increasingly treats her as a third primary author and a legal and administrative situation that carefully maintains her status as a secondary author. Finally, the last case study, drawing on interviews I conducted with the Philip Glass Ensemble musicians Richard Landry and Andrew Serman, considers the solo tenor saxophone improvisation that dominates the first scene of the last act. This scored improvisation has roots in the early performance practices of Glass's ensemble, and in 2012, generated interpersonal and creative tension between Wilson and Serman. This confrontation and its subsequent resolution exposed a weakness in the "firewall" separating the artistic territory over which Wilson and Glass exerted control, revealing the limitations of the collaborative authorial model the artists employed, but also demonstrating how that model continues to provide room for creative flexibility.

Finally, chapter 6, "Playing American," brings to light archival documentation in New York, Paris, and Avignon, focusing on the European and American administrators and patrons whose financial and organizational support made the opera's 1976 European tour possible. Central figures include Kathleen Norris, the managing director of Wilson's Byrd Hoffman Foundation for the duration of the tour, and the opera's European agent Ninon Tallon Karlweiss and representative Bénédicte Pesle, who corresponded with fellow administrators at institutions with the resources to present the traveling opera. These presenters included the Biennale di la Venezia in Italy, which both presented *Einstein* and built its sets, and the French Festival d'Avignon and Festival d'automne à Paris, directed by Paul Puaux and Michel Guy, respectively. The latter two festivals provided the American opera with nearly half of its tour performances and twice the funding of any other European country. They also facilitated the critical reception that prompted the Met special events organizer Jane Herman to approach the opera

house's executive director about bringing *Einstein* to Lincoln Center. In supporting *Einstein* as a gift to the U.S. for the American Bicentennial Celebration and contributing the prestige of overseas performances and critical praise, the opera's European backers thus not only engaged in cultural diplomacy and served their own audiences, but also made the work attractive to its homeland bastions of symbolic and cultural capital.

The New York performances were crucial to the opera's American consecration, to demonstrating the commercial viability of its 1984 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and to its effect on the city's art worlds. Indeed, they elevated *Einstein* from one more downtown performance piece patronized by adventurous European festivals to an internationally recognized masterpiece. The crucial but historically marginalized role that female administrators played in these negotiations invites an element of gender critique in considering *Einstein* as a cooperatively produced institution. Furthermore, a fuller consideration of the role European money and prestige played in the opera's early production and reception reinforces Becker's astute claim that "[i]deas and visions are important, but their success and permanence rest on organization, not on their intrinsic worth."⁴¹ This chapter demonstrates that the nationality of *Einstein*'s artists, especially in 1976, was key to generating European interest and support, and that while the opera was conceived in America, it was institutionally "made" in Europe.

1.5 Playing with Opera

Each of the chapters in this study begins with the same word: playing. I have chosen to foreground my discussions of *Einstein on the Beach*'s reception, aesthetics, authorship, and patronage and distribution with the concept of play for a number of reasons. Foremost among them is that whether "playing" calls to mind the activity of children, a musical performance, a physical or intellectual contest, or artifice, it is not something that one does alone. Even a musician playing in a room by him- or herself typically relies upon many other art world participants to do so. A typical Western classical musician may depend on a

⁴¹ Becker, *Art Worlds*, 310.

craftsman to produce and maintain the instrument used, a composer to write the music played, a manufacturer to produce the stand that holds that music, and someone to teach the musician to read the symbols on the page and interpret them appropriately. Playing, that is, implies intrinsic social interdependence, even when actors like the instrument-maker or manufacturer are not immediately visible. The concept of play also captures specific avant-garde, theatrical, performative, discursive, and interactive aspects of the *Einstein's* identity and relevance.

First, the concept of play captures the opera's savvy avant-gardism. In order to produce and sell a work that convincingly balanced unconventional aesthetic strategies with standard operatic conventions, *Einstein's* artists and promoters had to be familiar with the applicable cultural "rules of the game." Pierre Bourdieu, with characteristic prolixity, captures the sense in which such avant-garde artists play games with consecrated culture, and by extension, with the cultural and symbolic capital it bears. Artists, he writes, abetted by the aestheticians who chronicle and interpret their works, "can constantly invent the distinguishing strategies on which their artistic survival depends" by manipulating:

[the] knowingness and naïveté, calculation and innocence, faith and bad faith that is required by *mandarin games*, cultivated games with the inherited culture, whose common feature is that they identify 'creation' with the introduction of *deviations* [écarts], which only the initiated can perceive, with respect to forms and formulae that are known to all.⁴²

Glass, Wilson, and their collaborators, that is, used their knowledge of conventional forms and formulae to play with both the genre of opera and their audiences' assumptions about it.

Einstein is theatrical (that is, a play performed by a company of players) in the general sense that it is a staged performance, as well as in the more particular sense of being aesthetically indebted to a specific theatrical milieu whose members endeavored to rework the interdisciplinary medium to emphasize its

⁴² Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 109–10.

ritualistic, intellectual, and political capacities. “The concept of theater as *process*,” the critic Barbara Rose commented in 1972, “is essential to a number of our most impressive theater groups such as Richard Schechner’s *Performance Group*, Joseph Chaikin’s *Open Theater*, and André Gregory’s *Manhattan Project*, all of which are involved with returning theater to its origins in ritual and archetypes. The kind of theater evolving from these intense, dedicated non-commercial groups resembles an ecstatic *rite de passage*.”⁴³ When Wilson, Glass, and their collaborators staged an opera in 1976 that one downtown critic called “a religious, a holy, a mystic event,” *Einstein* thus joined numerous other downtown projects in a collective quest to discover theater anew and galvanize spectators to experience the medium in ways that challenged their assumptions and sensibilities.⁴⁴

Einstein is performative, or plays, in the sense that it is non-literary music theater whose live performances differ substantially from its written or recorded versions. The experience the title signifies thus resists reduction to a single medial inscription, trapping *Einstein* uneasily between disciplinary narratives in which a particular manifestation like a musical score or script takes a dominant position in reception as “the work.” Carolyn Abbate has addressed this issue with respect to opera head-on, commenting that, “[a]lthough musicologists may focus on performance as an activity, speculation within this domain about the ontological status of musical works remains unusual, as do doubts that musical works have a stable identity.” She offers a compelling alternative: “Perhaps it is the works that are the aftershocks, lingering shapes that give voice to an uncanny phenomenon.”⁴⁵ *Einstein* presents particular problems for musicologists working within the traditional mode that Abbate rejects because Wilson adopted an atypical operatic directorial role as a *metteur-en-scene* (i.e., a theatrical *auteur*) alongside the composer. Musicologists, then, cannot reasonably downplay his contribution without also sacrificing the collaborative element that made *Einstein*

⁴³ Barbara Rose, “Museum as Theater,” *New York Magazine*, May 15, 1972, Series X, Box 45, Folder 1651: “1972 New York Magazine article,” Mabou Mines Archive, Downtown Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York, N.Y.

⁴⁴ Robb Baker, “Times Three,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17.

⁴⁵ Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, xi, xiii.

distinctive among operas, and the reverse is true for theater historians and Glass's contribution. The opera's hybridization of downtown theater and opera therefore encourages a methodology that welcomes varied forms of discourse associated with the opera, so that "work" does not narrow our conception of what *Einstein* signifies. Rather, as Abbate suggests, the work may be understood as a phantom whose physical manifestations are imprints of performances by artists, performers, and others whose labor transforms inscription into performance and vice versa.⁴⁶

Finally, the concept of play also captures the discursive nature of *Einstein* because expressive culture cannot exist in a vacuum. Every manifestation that we might consider to be or to belong to *Einstein*—a live performance of the full opera, a sound recording, Wilson's drawings, sets and costumes, posters, programs, contracts, and even remixes of the music produced by new artists—contributes meaningfully to what the phrase "Einstein on the Beach" signifies. This signification is constructed and maintained in a social field, and by observing the ways in which people have interacted with *Einstein-as-discourse*, one can better understand its value to individuals, institutions, and societies. Similarly, the idea of play captures the interactive aspect of *Einstein*, both because it depends on the cooperative activity of people to signify, and because the drama itself implicates spectators in the assembly of a non-linear narrative. Wilson's dream-like tableaux vivant, Glass's minimalist music, Andrew de Groat's and Lucinda Childs's abstract dances, and Childs's, Christopher Knowles's, and Samuel M. Johnson's spoken text (the words of which bear no direct relation to the drama) combine to produce a symbolically overdetermined performance that tempts spectators down an interpretive rabbit hole from which there is no single point of entry or exit. *Einstein* plays with references to the life and work of Albert Einstein as deftly as its artists play with operatic conventions, and invites its spectators to play along.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xiii.

Chapter 2

Playing with Names: *Einstein's* Acceptance as "Opera"

"The word 'opera' is commonly applied by Glass and Wilson, as well as Meredith Monk, Richard Foreman, and others, to describe work which has clearly evolved mostly out of theatre, dance, and the visual arts. Of course, 'opera' originally meant simply 'work,' but it lost that neutral tone long ago. To discuss Glass's music as 'opera' would imply that it uses opera singers and has at least something in common with 'La Bohème.' But it doesn't."

—Tom Johnson, "Philip Glass Writes an 'Opera' for Ordinary Voices," *Village Voice*, January 26, 1976.

"Bob Wilson has taken apart Wagner and split him in two: on the one hand, the theoretical contribution, to exploit; on the other hand (negligible), the dramatic variable. Wilson indeed shows, in the most concrete way in the world, that opera is nothing other than time and space."

—A. R., "Trois temps dans l'espace du théâtre musical," *Le Monde*, August 5, 1976.⁴⁷

"Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world."

— Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th anniversary ed. (1982; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 36.

2.1 The Name Game

Reflecting on early reactions by critics and spectators to *Einstein on the Beach* four decades after the opera's first tour, Glass recalled, "Some of their questions were inane and some interesting. The best questions were *both* inane and interesting. For example, the question, 'Is *Einstein* really an opera?' was both stupid and intriguing at the same time."⁴⁸ The composer concludes this anecdote with the

⁴⁷ The original French reads: "Bob Wilson a démonté Wagner et l'a scindé en deux. D'un côté, l'apport théorique, à exploiter. De l'autre, négligeable, la variable dramatique. Wilson montre en effet, le plus concrètement du monde, que l'opéra ce n'est rien d'autre que du temps et de l'espace." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁴⁸ Glass, *Words Without Music*, 297.

puckish declaration that neither he nor Wilson “really cared what people thought.” Given the artists’ shrewd promotion of *Einstein* and their later legal quarrel over rights to the work, however, Glass’s claim that he and his collaborator did not care if critics categorized *Einstein* alongside operatic masterworks or fringe theater pieces rings hollow. After all, had critics summarily rejected *Einstein* as an opera, it would not have: launched Glass’s and Wilson’s prolific opera careers; opened American theater institutions like the Metropolitan Opera House to downtown performing artists; or extended the stylistic potential of American minimalist music (previously the province of composers’ own ensembles) to opera. In point of fact, shortly after glossing over this question in his memoir, Glass himself acknowledged that *Einstein*’s success abroad led directly to the Dutch and German commissions for his second and third operas, *Satyagraha* (1979) and *Akhmaten* (1983). The three works together, which Glass calls his “Portrait Trilogy,” spearheaded a career that, at twenty-five operas, is approaching Giuseppe Verdi’s output.⁴⁹ Likewise, *Einstein* introduced Robert Wilson to the world of institutional theater as not only a creator of original plays, but also a director of pre-existing operas, especially in Europe where he has received the most institutional and governmental support. Since his operatic directorial debut with Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s *Médée* in 1984, he has directed repertory operas by Monteverdi, Verdi, Weber, Gounod, Wagner, Debussy, Strauss, and Janáček, as well as new operas by Glass, Gavin Bryars, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, in the process influencing operatic design, lighting, and directorial practices well outside the experimental downtown theater scene in which he gained his first toehold and in which *Einstein* was gestated.

Furthermore, although the opera’s American premiere performances at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976 did not immediately incite the conservative institution to commission another such iconoclastic piece, the Met’s production of *Einstein* as a special event signaled the institution’s interest in extending an olive branch to hitherto unsupported young artists concentrated in and around the SoHo neighborhood, beginning a trend that continued throughout the 1980s in spite of declining American governmental funding for the arts during the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 305, 313–14, 324–25.

Reagan administration. That Glass and fellow American minimalist composer Steve Reich, who by the mid-1970s had earned particular critical distinction among their downtown musical peers, almost simultaneously completed major process-based works in different genres—Reich’s concert piece *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1974–76) and Glass’s opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1975–76)⁵⁰—also encouraged critics and then academics to receive their work as part of a single, historically relevant movement, thus enhancing both of their reputations.

Finally, by being accepted as an opera, *Einstein* has exerted notable influence on later operatic commissions and productions both in the United States and abroad. One particularly prominent example is the Met’s extraordinary \$325,000 commission for Glass’s *The Voyage* (1992), which for Glass represented a moment of coming full circle that had begun with two sold-out *Einstein* performances at the same venue sixteen years earlier. Indeed, Glass’s and Wilson’s immediate embrace by operatic institutions abroad following their first collaboration enabled their distinctively downtown aesthetics and collaborative working habits to begin to be integrated into the institutional world of traditional opera.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The completion and American and European premieres of both works run in parallel. Glass completed the *Einstein* score in autumn of 1975 and first presented it to a New York audience as a rehearsal at the Video Exchange Theater on March 4–5, 1976, his ensemble also playing excerpts at The Kitchen, the Museum of Modern Art, and Yale and Princeton Universities in late March and early April. Reich began sketches for *Music for 18 Musicians* in May 1974 and completed the piece in March 1976, giving the piece’s first public performance at New York’s Town Hall on April 24, 1976. Glass and Reich then crossed paths in Europe at the Festival d’automne à Paris that October: *Einstein* was performed over two weeks from 4–13 October, and *Music for 18 Musicians* was performed by Steve Reich and Musicians on October 19 and 22, 1976. The fact that neither composer had presented a new work since 1974, that New York critics like Tom Johnson had already begun to treat them as a pair, and that both were presenting new works in France at the same time, somewhat paradoxically both reinforced their reception as a ‘school’ and elevated their reputations as individual composers; for example, Alain Dister, “Les Palais de Glass,” *Rock & Folk* no. 117 (October 1976), 62–4, 139, Series I, Box 123, Robert Wilson Papers. The above information about the early performances of *Einstein* and *Music for 18 Musicians* can be found in: Steve Reich, “Composer’s Notes: *Music for 18 Musicians*,” Boosey & Hawkes, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Steve-Reich-Music-for-18-Musicians/548>; Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community,” 287.

⁵¹ Following the success of *Einstein*, the City of Rotterdam commissioned Glass to compose a second, more conventional opera, *Satyagraha*, which was premiered at the Netherlands Opera in 1980. Almost simultaneously, Wilson began a new collaboration with the English minimalist composer Gavin Bryars, the result of which was a new operatic version of the Medea story that was performed in an open rehearsal at the

Glass's operatic trilogy, for instance, set the stage for John Adams's successful first contribution to the genre (*Nixon in China*; 1987), likewise a portrait opera produced collaboratively (with director Peter Sellars, librettist Alice Goodman, and choreographer Mark Morris), and commissioned not just by a European Opera Houses (the Netherlands Opera), but also by several American opera houses (The Houston Grand Opera, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Washington Opera, along with the Netherlands Opera).

In sum, then, had critics not accepted *Einstein* as a legitimate opera in 1976, it would likely have been relegated to the margins of music theater history as a notable outlier, rather than a landmark or turning point in the development of a five-hundred-year-old genre. It is, of course, impossible to guess at how Glass's and Wilson's careers, and the careers of those directors and composers who rode their coattails, would have been different had *Einstein* been presented and received as a musical, performance art, conceptual art, or a happening. It is, however, both possible and vital to determine *how Einstein* came to be considered a legitimate opera in order to understand its landmark status, its myth, its influence, and its enduring popularity in elite intellectual circles and in popular culture alike.

Tracing this development requires a temporal detour to five years before *Einstein's* premiere, and not to Glass's first foray into theater, as one might expect, but rather to Wilson's. Before considering the work's precedents and its journey through the cycle of performance and reception to its arrival at acceptance as an opera, however, I wish to begin by introducing *Einstein* in the context of its rehearsal period and first tour, to give a sense of what Glass's and Wilson's claim would have meant to New York tastemakers and what stake they had in defending it. Instead of asking if *Einstein* really is an opera, then, I will simply begin by asking what critics from Avignon to Manhattan invariably did

Kennedy Center in 1981. In 1982, the Wagner family approached Wilson about directing the Bayreuth centenary production of *Parsifal*, and while the opposition of conductor James Levine prevented this project from materializing, Wilson went on to stage his and Bryars's *Medea* alongside his version of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*, in Lyons, France in 1984. Glass's and Wilson's operatic careers continued to flourish following these initial post-*Einstein* projects.

when confronted with an opera that has nothing, as Tom Johnson put it in his *Village Voice* review, in common with *La bohème*: what exactly is *Einstein on the Beach*?

Its title, as printed in every program and in the liner notes of every new recording, suggests that it is “an opera in four acts.” On the surface, this description may not seem disingenuous, for any stage work that combines music, drama, and spectacle, as *Einstein* does, may reasonably stake a claim to the generic designation. Indeed, in his introduction to the *Grove Dictionary* article on the subject, Howard Mayer Brown explains:

Most narrowly conceived, the word ‘opera’ signifies a drama in which the actors sing throughout. There are, however, so many exceptions among the operatic works of the West—so many works popularly called operas in which some parts are spoken or mimed—that the word should be more generically defined as a drama in which the actors sing some or all of their parts.⁵²

By these criteria, *Einstein* sits comfortably within opera’s broad definitional boundaries. It has four acts composed of nine scenes and five thematically related Knee Plays (which function as interludes), a clear dramatic climax in Act IV that is followed by a brief denouement, music that is played throughout, actors whose gestures, monologues, and song delineate the drama, a chorus, a duet, an aria, and two extended dance sequences. *Einstein’s* grandiose stage dimensions, structure, and dramatic arc all point toward the five-hundred-year-old form of music theater with which it claims kinship, and importantly, it has played in opera houses around the world, including five performances in Venice, a city that nurtured opera in its infancy.⁵³

Remove the trappings of performance context and confront the work in its aesthetic details, however, and it becomes immediately apparent that while most conventions that have come to structure opera from Monteverdi to Gershwin are present in *Einstein*, they have been drastically refracted through the aesthetic

⁵² *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Opera (i),” by Howard Mayer Brown, et al., accessed February 3, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/>.

⁵³ These five performances at the Biennale di la Venezia constituted the second of nine stops on its 1976 European tour. The Biennale also co-commissioned the opera alongside the Festival d’Avignon and Festival d’automne à Paris and built its sets.

milieu of New York's avant-garde theater, minimalist music, and postmodern dance. As the critic Tom Johnson's incredulity toward Glass's and Wilson's claim in this chapter's epigraph indicates, if *Einstein* is opera, then it is opera reflected in a funhouse mirror, loosely recognizable as the genre its creators claim, but distorted to such an extent that, at least from a formal perspective, it calls into question the capability of the word "opera" to communicate much about that particular form of theater beyond the barest of conventions. In filling a traditional operatic structure with content that bears more resemblance to the Expressionist films of Fritz Lang, the surreal paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, and Indian classical music than *La bohème* (to use Johnson's representative example), Glass and Wilson take a page out of John Cage's book, both figuratively and literally.⁵⁴

In 1952, that notable downtown denizen's "4'33" had drawn attention to the arbitrariness of classical concert-going etiquette by emptying the musical structure of its expected content, simultaneously deconstructing Western classical concert behavior, redirecting spectators' attention to sensory phenomena they would typically not notice or would actively suppress, and inviting them to become coauthors of their own experiences of the piece. *Einstein*, conversely, treats audiences to an opulent audiovisual spectacle closer to four hours and thirty-three minutes in length. Combining music and spectacle in an approach closer to Cage's collaborations with Cunningham, Glass and Wilson likewise coax their audiences into confronting the social constructedness and even absurdity of taken-for-granted operatic conventions—those that govern the

⁵⁴ As I explore in greater detail in chapter 3 of this study, both Wilson and Glass have noted in interviews and personal writings the profound influence the writings and lectures collected in Cage's *Silence* (1961), as well as his collaborative work with the dancer Merce Cunningham and their creative presence in New York and Europe, exerted on them as young artists. See, for example, Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, "Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—Einstein on the Beach," *Charles Ruas's Audio Experimental Theater*, 99.5 WBAI FM, November 12, 1976, accessed May 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyuNtYi4i6o> (video removed from site); Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 37; Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, interview by Anne Bogart, "The Power of 2," Penny W. Stamps Distinguished Speaker Series, University of Michigan Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design (January 15, 2012), Ann Arbor, MI, accessed April 5, 2014, http://playgallery.org/video/the_power_of_2/; Glass, *Words Without Music*, 94–7.

activity of artists, performers, and audience members—by satisfying those conventions with content a postmodern paradigm shift away from Puccini. In Act II, scene 2A (Night Train), for instance, a man and woman lip-sync a love duet, at the end of which the woman pulls a gun on the man, and throughout this scene and the others that comprise the opera, audience members are encouraged to come and go, taking intermissions at their leisure. *Einstein* gently subverts opera house etiquette not by eschewing scheduled intervals in favor of breaks taken at each patron's discretion, and the music begins when the house opens rather than when the curtain does, simultaneously troubling the theatrical fourth wall and the implicit boundaries between life and art. While neither Glass nor Wilson has explicitly articulated a political aim on par with Cage's controversial "silent" work, the composer insinuated early on in *Einstein's* production history that the artists did intend to adopt a confrontational stance toward traditional expectations of opera.

In a 1976 interview with Charles Ruas on New York's WBAI radio station a week before *Einstein on the Beach's* legendary Metropolitan Opera premiere, for example, Glass had this to say about the nature of his collaboration with Wilson:

Neither of us works from a really **didactic** position about what we think art should be. Very often Bob will say, 'Well this feels right,' or I'll say, 'Well this sounds right or it seems right,' and the final judgment for either of us has been very subjective. I work that way; I mean Bob says that I understand that that can be a final judgment, and Bob understands that with me, when I say it seems right, that's the final judgment, rather than some **didactic** position about what opera should be or theater should be. It became easy to break rules even if we had made them up at a different place in the opera. Something different could happen.⁵⁵

The deliberate choice to be guided by intuition over convention, and the audacity to not just create new rules for opera, but also to change them as the project progressed, suggest ambiguous motives on the part of composer and director. Taken at face value, Glass's liberal attitude toward the collaborative process and compositional norms suggests that *Einstein* developed as an optimistic endeavor conceived in a hothouse of artistic experimentation by two men with a shared

⁵⁵ Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, "Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—*Einstein on the Beach*" (my boldface and underline).

vision and a company of mostly young performers eager to take part in something new. On the other hand, in emphatically refusing to define what opera or theater should be, Glass signaled a shrewd awareness of artistic politics at odds with his and Wilson's seemingly ingenuous rhetoric by establishing a stance toward drama that does not just embrace novelty, but also *opposes* a particular foe: didacticism. In the United States in the 1970s, Glass's positioning of *Einstein's* compositional process against didacticism would likely have registered with music critics and academics as a thinly veiled assault on the hegemony of serialism in the academy and the composer as researcher that Milton Babbitt so infamously defended in his 1958 essay "The Composer as Specialist," better known by the title under which it was published, "Who Cares If You Listen?"⁵⁶

Glass confirmed this connection between didacticism and establishment-enforced serial composition in his 1987 autobiography, writing of his experience with Pierre Boulez's concert society while he was studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, "Occasionally the 'Domaine Musicale' would play a work by an American such as Earle Brown, John Cage or Morton Feldman, and they always came as a breath of fresh air after so much heavy European didacticism," which he earlier identified with dodecaphony.⁵⁷ Glass's use of the word "didactic" twice in his conversation with Charles Ruas in 1976 thus signals a conscientious positioning of *Einstein-as-opera* outside the grand narrative of Schoenbergian serialism and its adherents in Europe and America. For Glass as an aspiring opera composer, that is, *Einstein* seems to have served an artistic political agenda beyond its co-creator's personal fulfillment. Just where and how Glass and Wilson positioned their opera in relation to other operas and, more generally, to grand narratives of musical and theatrical experimentation, comprise the subject of the next two chapters. While the latter chapter explores

⁵⁶ Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares If You Listen?" *High Fidelity* (February 1958): 1–5.

⁵⁷ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 12. It is worth noting that in his 2015 memoir *Words Without Music*, Glass adopts a more generous attitude toward Boulez and his circle. Though he maintains a similar position with respect to influence, having abandoned twelve-tone composition before he even matriculated at the Juilliard School, he does claim to have come to respect and enjoy the French composer and conductor's music. Glass, *Words Without Music*, 115.

Einstein's avant-garde aesthetic lineage, however, this first chapter illuminates the degree to which Glass's and Wilson's use of the work to advance their careers played out on the field of names. Two questions drive the following discussion: first, how did *Einstein* paradoxically challenge and conform to the conventions of opera as a genre in 1976? Second, how did the promotional and critical discourse surrounding the work affect its acceptance as an opera? This discourse encompasses Glass's and Wilson's own commentary on the piece, as well as critical reception of the work during its 1976 European and American tour and 1984 remount at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Together, these productions were formative in shaping public and academic discourse with regard to both what the opera was and what it meant to those with a stake in its reception.

With these questions in mind, Glass's claim that to ask whether or not *Einstein* is an opera is "both stupid and intriguing at the same time" is a useful jumping-off point for a discursive examination of the work's ontology.⁵⁸ One might say that asking, "Is *Einstein* really an opera?" is stupid (or at least not terribly productive) because it wrongly assumes the definitional stability over time of socially agreed-upon categories like genres. Rather, genres are collectively constructed and maintained concepts that allow people to group expressive culture in socially and economically useful ways, and are thus subject to the constant negotiation and renegotiation of expectations between art world actors and audiences. Furthermore, what a genre (like opera) signifies changes as new cultural expression (like *Einstein*) enters the field, prompting reassessment of that which came before. That is to say, asking if Glass's and Wilson's work *is* an opera relies on the faulty premise that there is some unchanging platonic ideal against which *Einstein* might be measured. The question fails to recognize the flexibility of artistic discourse, and thus also fails to credit the enterprising artists and promoters who successfully exploit that discourse to their own ends. Once we recognize that flexibility, however, *Einstein's* fidelity to its purported genre begins to become intriguing, prompting an altered version of Glass's question: *who* determined that *Einstein* was an opera and *how* did they do so? By turning to the art world that the work inhabited rather than theories of ontology, and by

⁵⁸ Ibid., 297.

thus asking how the work was discursively constructed as an opera rather than whether or not it *is* one, we can better understand how Wilson's and Glass's celebrated operatic careers began. Such an exploration also reveals the extent to which the cooperative activity central to Becker's sociology of art impacted its reception.

To contextualize the significance of *Einstein's* reception as a legitimate opera, Glass and Wilson were hardly the first downtown artists to attempt to attach the label of "opera" to their work. In fact, as rehearsals of *Einstein* were concluding in April of 1976, the composer and performer Meredith Monk presented *Quarry*, which she also called an opera, at the La Mama Annex in the East Village. If *Village Voice* critic Tom Johnson reacted to Glass's and Wilson's work with skepticism, the critics who reviewed Monk's work reacted with attitudes ranging from confusion to glib skepticism. "Miss Monk," wrote *The New York Times* art critic Clive Barnes, "describes her latest work, 'Quarry,' as 'an opera in three movements.' Well, at least, it isn't an opera. Beyond that it [sic] difficult to be more definite."⁵⁹ Seven months later, the same critic wrote of *Einstein*, "In the past, Mr. Wilson has casually called his works 'operas,' and we theater or dance critics have grinned indulgently and not worried. He has cried wolf too often on this account. This time, together with Mr. Glass, the man has actually written an opera."⁶⁰ He continues, "'Einstein on the Beach' is scarcely Puccini, but I have rarely heard a first-night audience respond so vociferously at the Metropolitan

⁵⁹ Clive Barnes, "The Stage: Is It a Play? Is It a Dance?" *New York Times*, April 7, 1976; see also Douglas Watt, "Imitation Wilson," *Daily News*, April 7, 1976, Series I, Box 225, Folder: "Book #24, April 1976 – June 1976," Robert Wilson Papers. Watt's review is resoundingly negative, and he places scare quotes around the word "opera" every time he deploys it in connection with Monk's piece, presumably to indicate his skepticism.

⁶⁰ Clive Barnes, "'Einstein on the Beach' Transforms Boredom Into Memorable Theater," *New York Times*, November 23, 1976, 33, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. It is notable that in both Monk's and Glass's and Wilson's cases, the critics reviewing their projects were responding to theater and dance, *not* music. That the reception of stage works by downtown artists was taken up primarily by non-music critics—even when music played a significant role in the drama, as it did in *Quarry*—is indicative of both the extent to which interdisciplinary practices thrived below 4th St. in Manhattan, and the resistance of the critical musical establishment to respond to those practices.

Opera House as for this bizarre, occasionally boring, yet always intermittently beautiful theater piece.”⁶¹

While *Einstein* and *Quarry* indisputably emerged from the same artistic milieu and certainly have more in common aesthetically than *Einstein* and any opera by Puccini, the particular confluence of drama, music, and dance in Glass’s and Wilson’s collaboration, propped up by the artists’ and their promoters’ savvy marketing, led critics from *Le Monde* to *The Soho Weekly News* to make comparisons between *Einstein* and the total work of art theorized by Richard Wagner in his mid-nineteenth-century essays *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) and *Oper und Drama* (1850–51).⁶² These references effectively christened *Einstein* an opera without Glass or Wilson having to defend the claim in earnest. Moreover, *Einstein*’s successful positioning within the sphere of opera by Glass, Wilson, and the cooperative networks of collaborators, administrators, and critics that surrounded it, rather than theater more generally, enabled the work to bypass the hostile politics between the Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off-Broadway theater scenes in New York. Indeed, thanks to the French Minister of Culture Michel Guy, agent Ninon Tallon Karlweiss, and European representative Bénédicte Pesle, *Einstein* was presented at Europe’s premier performing arts festivals and opera houses. Moreover, thanks to a small group of well-placed female administrators in New York, *Einstein*’s American premiere took place not in a Broadway theater, the City Center, or the Juilliard Opera Theater, as Glass had expected, but rather at the prestigious and highly symbolic Metropolitan Opera House. Taken together, these European and American venues cemented *Einstein*’s early reception as opera rather than theater simply by virtue of where it was performed.⁶³ As it turned out, Glass and Wilson offered Europeans and then

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² April Kingsley, “What You See is What You See,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 15; A. R., “Des Arts et des Spectacles,” *Le Monde*, August 5, 1976, 9, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Score,” Hamm Archives.

⁶³ Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, “Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—Einstein on the Beach.” My transcription. Glass tells Ruas, “When we began to look around for houses to play it in New York, that one [The Met] never came up. We talked about a lot of other possible places; there are good houses besides the Broadway houses, like the City Center or the Juilliard Opera Theater, there are a number of places that

New Yorkers a paradigm-shifting music theater experience in their most elaborate opera houses on what turned out to be the cusp of a significant growth in institutional support for new American opera in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁶⁴ With *Einstein on the Beach*, Glass and Wilson played the name game, and they played to win.

2.2 Opus (sing.), Opera (pl.)

Glass's and Wilson's decision to identify *Einstein on the Beach* as an opera was influenced by more than just their downtown theater colleagues' concurrent use of the term to describe stage works that combined music, dance, and drama. A brief consideration of the composer's and director's artistic activities in the years immediately preceding 1976 reveals that Wilson, in particular, had a vested interest in identifying his large-scale pieces as operas for the purpose of exploiting his initial acclaim by the French avant-garde art world, led by the surrealist poet Louis Aragon. Glass likewise benefitted from identifying *Einstein* as opera because regardless of its impact on Wilson's reception as a director, opera has historically been the province of composers, musicians, and the critical and academic establishment that constructs and maintains their histories. Never having composed in the genre before, however, Glass profited from Wilson's star status among the European avant-garde. Furthermore, by teaming up with an experimental director who had a track record of taking his theater productions on tour to major European festivals, the composer both avoided the conservative approach to the genre and the geographical restrictiveness that led concurrent

could hold the piece, but that one, we never thought of. And when I heard—it was in August—that the talks had reached the point that it became a real possibility, I was astonished. It seemed to me that they have never ventured into something anywhere near like this before.”

⁶⁴ Sasha Metcalf's dissertation contests the widely accepted view among scholars and critics that Glass is the sole agent of his own popularity by foregrounding the network of patrons, institutions, directors, critics, and performers who have supported and influenced his operatic work from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Glass's promoters, she demonstrates, supported him for financial as well as artistic reasons. To explain, the National Endowment for the Arts' newly instituted Opera-Musical Theater program and OPERA America's "Opera for the Eighties and Beyond" program made available an unprecedented amount of money to sponsor collaborations between opera and theater companies. This "operatic Golden Age," to use Metcalf's words, lasted until the mid-1990s, when Congress, under House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich, cut NEA funding, causing the dissolution of the Opera-Musical Theater program. Metcalf, "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera."

operas like Roger Sessions's *Montezuma*, which also premiered in 1976, to attract comparatively scant critical attention.

2.2.1 Glass and Theater as a “catalyst for musical innovation”

Prior to working with Wilson, Glass's experience composing music to accompany visual performances was limited to his transcription of Ravi Shankar's and Alla Rakha's music for Conrad Rook's 1966 film *Chappaqua* and the incidental music he provided for the New York-based theater group Mabou Mines, of which he was a cofounder. His affiliation with the troupe that became Mabou Mines upon its establishment in New York City began while he and his first wife, the director JoAnne Akalaitis, were still living in Paris in the 1960s, and continued through the 1970s and into the early 1980s.⁶⁵ The incidental music he contributed ranged from stark, additive rhythmic pieces like *1+1* and *Calling Pieces 1–3* for the original plays *The Red Horse Animation* (1970) and *The Saint and the Football Player* (1973), respectively, to the choral *Music for Voices* (1972)—reminiscent of Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1968 foray into minimalism with *Stimmung*—which Glass supplied for Mabou Mines's play of the same name.⁶⁶

In his first monograph, however, Glass identified his development as a theater composer as stemming as much from his work with what became the Philip Glass Ensemble (PGE) as from his collaborative work with Mabou Mines. The reason, he explained, is that in the downtown art community visual artists, composers, dancers, and theater troupes frequently made use of the same spaces, often at the same time.⁶⁷ “For me,” Glass recalled, “theater became the catalyst for musical innovation, and the Ensemble gave me both the instrument and the

⁶⁵ Glass composed incidental music for or collaborated with Mabou Mines on the following productions: *The Red Horse Animation* (1970), *Music for Voices* (1972), *The Saint and the Football Player* (1973), *The Lost Ones* (1975), *Cascando* (1976), *Dressed Like an Egg* (1977), *Mercier and Camier* (1979), *Dead End Kids* (1980), *Cold Harbor* (1983), and *Company* (1983). Mabou Mines, “Mabou Mines Archived Productions,” Mabou Mines, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.maboumines.org/archived-productions>.

⁶⁶ Glass composed *Music for Voices* to be sung by a chorus of amateur singers, an experience that would have prepared him for working with non-professional singers on *Einstein*.

⁶⁷ See, for instance, David Chapman's discussion of Glass's early concerts at the Film-Makers' Cinematèque and his involvement with the landmark Anti-Illusion show. Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community,” 49–54, 73–8.

opportunity to develop ideas apart from the practical, and more circumscribed, demands of the theater itself. Looking back, it now seems obvious that these two activities would eventually merge.”⁶⁸ They first did so in *Einstein on the Beach*.

Given Glass’s claim that his work with the PGE affected his approach to theatrical composition, it may come as little surprise that his experimentation with applying additive process to harmony and rhythm in the two major instrumental works immediately preceding *Einstein*, *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–4) and *Another Look at Harmony* (1975–6), strongly impacted his musical approach to his first opera. In fact, the latter piece served as a vehicle for working out the operatic score, Glass lifting music wholesale from *Another Look at Harmony* for his new theater piece.⁶⁹ Thus, the composer did not approach his first opera by adjusting his idiom to the stylistic expectations of the genre, but rather imported the process-based music that he had been developing with his ensemble to the structure of acts and interludes that he and Wilson had predetermined. The PGE served as his pit orchestra, untrained singers comprised his chorus, and just as in *Music in Twelve Parts* and *Another Look at Harmony*, the opera’s sung text was composed entirely of solfège syllables and numbers that outline the harmonic and rhythmic structure of the music. Glass, then, relied upon the length of the show, the ubiquity of his music throughout, and that music’s aesthetic interdependence on Wilson’s staging to classify *Einstein* as opera rather than as a theater piece with incidental music like *Music for Voices*.

2.2.2 Wilson and Theater as “a deaf man’s opera”

Robert Wilson, on the other hand, undertook *Einstein* having already directed three so-called “operas”: *Deafman Glance* (1970), *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1975). Of these works, *Deafman Glance* included no speech or music at all, *Stalin* included some incidental music by the composer and violinist Michael Galasso, but no spoken or sung text, and *Queen Victoria*, acting as a bridge to musical theater, included both speech and music

⁶⁸ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 22–4.

⁶⁹ The composer explains, “Parts 1 and 2 of ‘Another Look at Harmony’ became the basis of Act I, Scene 1 (Train) and Act II, Scene 1 (Field) of the opera and were the starting points from which additional material and devices were developed.” Philip Glass, “Notes on *Einstein on the Beach*,” *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978): 68.

(the latter by composer Alan Lloyd, collaborating with Michael Galasso, who served as music director and first violinist). Produced in collaboration with Raymond Andrews, a deaf African American teen with whom Wilson worked therapeutically and artistically, *Deafman Gance* had brought Wilson to the attention of the movers and shakers of the international avant-garde, and particularly the respected French surrealist poet and novelist Louis Aragon.⁷⁰ After witnessing a French performance, Aragon was so moved that he wrote a posthumous open letter to his colleague André Breton in which he christened Wilson the heir apparent to the French surrealists, publishing the letter in the *L'Humanité* literary supplement *Les lettres françaises*, of which he was the editor.

This letter is worth quoting at length, and not only because Aragon smoothly articulates Wilson's relationship to both neo-surrealism and opera, concepts that have come to define his reputation in the theater world. Its reproduction in English translation in the inaugural issue of *Performing Arts Journal* in spring of 1976 also made Aragon's ecstatic embrace of Wilson's work available to New York's downtown art community at precisely the same time that *Einstein's* rehearsal period was coming to an end and hype was building around its premiere performance in July at the Festival d'Avignon. Early in the letter, Aragon extols the virtues of *Deafman Gance* as the surrealist work that his own generation dreamed of but was unable to implement:

The world of a deaf child opened up to us like a wordless mouth. For more than four hours, we went to inhabit this universe where, in the absence of words, of sounds, sixty people had no words except to move. I want to tell you right away, Andre, because even if those who invented this spectacle don't know it, they are playing it for you, for you would

⁷⁰ While Wilson's career has largely been buoyed by European support, he was not unknown in the United States during the early 1970s. Indeed, the *New Yorker* included a piece on *Deafman Gance* as part of its opening "Talk of the Town" section in an early 1971 issue, suggesting that American critics and readers outside the immediate downtown orbit were aware of his early work. "Non-Verbal," *New Yorker*, March 27, 1971, 29–30. Nevertheless, as the fellow SoHo artist Frances Alenikoff explained in the prelude to an interview with Robert Wilson, the director's performer, administrative assistant, and archivist Robyn Anderson commented to her, "it was this letter [by Louis Aragon] that marked the breakthrough, inciting interest in Wilson's work." Frances Alenikoff, "Scenario: A Talk with Robert Wilson," *Dance Scope* 10, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1975/1976): 13. The programs for both the 1993 and 2012 revival performances of *Einstein on the Beach* in France also include this letter in full.

have loved it as I did, *to the point of madness*. (Because it has made me mad.) Listen to what I say to those who have ears, seemingly not for hearing: **I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born. Never never has any play come anywhere near this one, because it is at once life awake and life of closed eyes, the confusion between everyday life and the life of each night, reality mingles with dream, all that's inexplicable in the life of deaf man.** . . . Bob Wilson's piece . . . is not surrealism at all, however easy it is for people to call it that, but it is what we others, who fathered surrealism, what we dreamed might become after us, beyond us.⁷¹

The editors at *Performing Arts Journal*, in maintaining Aragon's stress on phrases like "I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born" and "[n]ever never has any play come anywhere near this one," and even italicizing the writer's aside, "[b]ecause it has made me mad," reinforce the extent to which one respected artistic forebear of the downtown scene commended Wilson's work as an extension of his own. Although the editors do not stress Aragon's later comment that *Deafman Glance* "is what we others, who fathered surrealism, what we dreamed might become after us, beyond us," this pronouncement had introduced Wilson to the French in 1971 as not just a better or next-generation surrealist, but rather as the American scion of French surrealism and an offshoot worth supporting. Having established Wilson's connection to the French surrealist movement, Aragon struggles later in the open letter to pin down the genre of the theater piece that so moved him:

⁷¹ Louis Aragon, "Lettre ouverte a André Breton sur *Le Regard du Sourd l'art, la science et la liberté*," *Les lettres françaises*, June 2, 1971, 3; Louis Aragon, "An Open Letter to André Breton from Louis Aragon on Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance*," trans. Linda Moses, Jean-Paul Lavergne, and George Ashley, *Performing Arts Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 4. Boldface and italics in original documents. The original French reads, "Le monde d'un enfant sourd s'ouvrait à nous comme une bouche muette. Plus de quatre heures, nous allions habiter cet univers où, en l'absence des mots, des sons, soixante personnages n'auront de parole que bouger. Je veux te le dire tout de suite, André, parce que même se ceux-là qui ont inventé ce spectacle n'en savent rien, c'est pour toi qu'ils le jouent, pour toi qui l'aurais aimé comme moi, à la folie. Car j'en suis fou. Ecoute ce que je dis a ceux-là qui ont des oreilles, semble-t-il, pour ne pas entendre : *Je n'ai jamais rien vu de plus beau en ce monde depuis que j'y suis né, jamais jamais aucun spectacle n'est arrivé à la cheville de celui-ci, parce qu'il est à la fois la vie éveillée et la vie aux yeux clos, la confusion qui set fait entre le monde de tous les jours et le monde de chaque nuit, la réalité mêlée au rêve, l'inexplicable de tout dans le regard du sourd.* . . . Le spectacle de Bob Wilson . . . n'est pas du tout *du* surréalisme, comme il est aux gens commode de dire, mais il est ce que nous autres, de qui le surréalisme est né, nous avons rêvé qu'il surgisse après nous, au-delà de nous."

The spectacle, for what else can I call it? It is neither ballet, nor mime drama, nor opera (although it is perhaps a deaf man's opera, **a deaf opera**, as if we were at this moment in a world like sixteenth century Italy which had seen [Italian Renaissance mathematician Jérôme] Cardan and watched the birth from Caccini to Monteverdi, l'opera serio, baroque of the ear, passing from the vocal counterpart of religious chants to this new form of art, profane in its essence . . .)⁷²

While Aragon does not settle on an established generic category for *Deafman Glance*, discarding first dance, then silent drama, and then opera, his attempt to pin down Wilson's theater ontologically by calling it "deaf opera" ("opéra sourd") leads him to rather extravagantly suggest that this piece is nothing less than an entirely new form of drama. In so declaring, however, he invokes not great dramaturges or writers of the past, but rather musical composers, implying—ironically, given the play's silence—that *Deafman Glance* is on par with the revolutionary *music* theater experiments of the early sixteenth-century Italian composers Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi, whose association with the Florentine Camerata led to the emergence of the genre of opera.

In other words, Aragon does not argue that Wilson's silent work *is* opera and try to defend that position; rather, he poetically invokes the widely accepted narrative of Western music history in which Caccini's and Monteverdi's development of secular ("profane") operatic monody succeeded religious vocal polyphony to produce a new genre of art, one that has since come to function for music historians as a key bridge between the Renaissance and Baroque eras. He then applies that approach to Wilson, although he shrewdly refrains from articulating exactly which eras the twentieth-century director may be bridging. In equating Wilson's work with that of Caccini and Monteverdi, not only does Aragon present Wilson as their visionary equivalent in the theater world, but he also constructs a powerful association between *Deafman Glance* and early opera, even as he claims that it is not opera.

⁷² Aragon, "Lettre ouverte a André Breton," 3; Aragon, "An Open Letter to André Breton," 6. Bold and italics in original documents. The original French reads, "Le spectacle, ca comment le nommer? ce n'est ni le ballet, ni le mimodrame, ni l'opéra (encore que ce soit peut-être cette étrange chose, un *opéra sourd*, comme si nous étions à un moment du monde analogue à ce seizième siècle italien qui avait vu Cardan et voyait naître, de Caccini à Monteverde, l'*opera serio*, le baroque de l'oreille, passant du contre-point vocal des chants religieux à cet art nouveau, profane en son essence . . .)"

Wilson, responding to Aragon's praise, seized upon the poet's use of the word "opera" to differentiate his epic theatrical experiments from the smaller-scale experimental theater of downtown troupes like The Living Theatre, The Open Theater, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, and Mabou Mines. Prior to working on *Einstein on the Beach*, though, he made abundantly clear in interviews that he applied the descriptor "opera" to his theater in its Latin sense as the plural form of opus, or work, rather than in the generic sense that Aragon had paradoxically both rejected and embraced. Given that, five years later, Wilson and Glass did seek to pass off their collaborative effort as an opera in the sense of both work and genre, the editors of *Performing Arts Journal* could not have chosen a more ideal time to publish an English translation of Aragon's letter for a downtown readership.

Indeed, with *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, the first large-scale work to emerge from Wilson's collaborative relationship with the autistic teen writer Christopher Knowles, Wilson had already begun to edge closer to opera-as-genre in the year immediately preceding *Einstein's* premiere. It was with this work that he began to introduce sound, and especially continuous music, to his oeuvre. In spite of its similarly operatic stage dimensions and musical score by Alan Lloyd, though, *Queen Victoria* has never been accepted in the same category as *La bohème*, while *Einstein*, for all of its innovations, has become a canonical opera. This leaves us with an important question in addressing *Einstein's* reception: how is it that *Einstein* could successfully claim opera as both opus and genre while Wilson's earlier stage works, particularly those with musical accompaniment like *Queen Victoria*, left critics skeptical?

2.3 From Incidental Music to Opera Score

"The whole of the first phase of Wilson's work is articulated around *Deafman Glance* (1971), and is clearly marked by his having met [the deaf-mute teen] Raymond Andrews," Miguel Morey and Carmen Pardo write in their monograph *Robert Wilson*. "The next stage was launched with *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974)."⁷³ The latter was the third of Wilson's works that he identified as

⁷³ Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 31–2.

an opera following *Deafman Glance*, and the play that immediately preceded his work on *Einstein on the Beach*.⁷⁴ As Morey and Pardo, along with other Wilson scholars, regularly note, *Queen Victoria* was also a turning point in Wilson's oeuvre in that it was the first of his large-scale works to incorporate non-ambient sound—in the form of spoken text, vocalizations, and music—as a featured component of the drama.⁷⁵ Indeed, Wilson's biographer Maria Shevtsova notes that *Queen Victoria* was “the hub of a series of verbal pieces for two written and performed by Wilson and [his writer-collaborator Christopher] Knowles,” and the work's spoken text consisted of “non-sequitur monologues, and bits of dialogue, some of which are nonsensical, others like overheard conversation and still others like trivia pretending to be formal speech.”⁷⁶ To be clear, *Queen Victoria* did not significantly incorporate singing, operatic or otherwise. Rather, the composer Alan Lloyd contributed music in the early Romantic vein of Franz Schubert, scored for a chamber ensemble of a string quartet and flute.

2.3.1 *A Letter for Queen Victoria as Opera*

In spite of the fact that *Queen Victoria's* quintet and its musical idiom were more evocative of the nineteenth-century salon than the opera house, the American music critic William Weaver took a generous stance toward Wilson's employment of the term “opera” to describe the work. Responding to a performance at the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto, Italy in June of 1974, he opined, “Not everyone agrees with Wilson's use of the word opera, but what word could define more categorically the sort of spectacle he devises? There is music (a string quartet with flute), some singing, and a good deal of dance and mime: a fusion of the arts in other words, such as opera has always been.”⁷⁷ Echoing Howard Mayer Brown's broad *Grove Dictionary* definition of opera—i.e.,

⁷⁴ In the interim, Wilson produced *KA MOUNTain and GUARDenia Terrace* (1972) and *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), as well as several small-scale works, including *DIA LOG* and *The \$ Value of Man*, which he did not identify as operas.

⁷⁵ See also Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 13; Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 9; and Franco Quadri, Franco Bertoni, and Robert Stearns, *Robert Wilson* (Firenze, Italy: Octavo, 1997), 18.

⁷⁶ Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 11–12.

⁷⁷ William Weaver, “A Robert Wilson ‘Opera’ at Spoleto,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 18, 1974.

a dramatic work in which actors sing some or all of their parts—Weaver focuses on a “fusion of the arts” as the defining trait of Western opera.⁷⁸

Another American critic, writing for *Newsweek*, adopted a similarly flexible stance toward Wilson’s labeling system, though with reservations: “Like most operas, Wilson’s are rich in spectacle, but their music is mostly the sound of silence, a rhapsody of pauses and mutterings punctuated by eloquent bursts of speech.”⁷⁹ *Le Monde* music critic Jacques Lonchamp even invoked the spirit of Richard Wagner, contributing to a growing discourse around Wilson’s productions as postmodern total works of art whose rhetoric intensified as he increasingly incorporated music into his theater. “A Wagnerian opera that makes one think of the magnitude of the breath and the entanglement of the leitmotif? No,” he concluded, “more like an opera by Schubert, who is everywhere in Alan Lloyd’s music for string quartet.” Lonchamp adopted a neutral position on Wilson’s use of the term “opera” by invoking yet another musical genre, commenting that “the art of Wilson has not changed, but the music and song lyrics have taken on greater importance in this *Letter for Queen Victoria* and have become part of the hitherto primarily visual symphony.”⁸⁰ Drawing a synesthetic connection between the narrative and emotive power of Schubert’s songs and Wilson’s gestural and symbolic vocabulary, Lonchamp expressed an attitude that would be echoed by many music and theater critics a year later in response to *Einstein*; that is to say, he was less concerned with pinning down *Queen*

⁷⁸ Brown, et al., “Opera (i).”

⁷⁹ “Instant Replay,” *Newsweek*, July 1, 1974, 49, Series I, Box 205, Folder: “Clipping – Artservice – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers.

⁸⁰ Jacques Lonchamp, “Un opéra? Non, un flux musical,” *Le Monde*, June 7, 1974, Series I, Box 207, Folder: “Clippings – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original French reads: “Un opéra wagnérien auquel fait penser l’ampleur du souffle et l’enchevêtrement des leitmotive? Non, plutôt un opéra de Schubert, qui est partout dans la musique pour quatuor à cordes d’Alan Lloyd.” Earlier in the article, Lonchamp writes, “l’art de Wilson n’a pas changé, mais la musique et le chant des paroles ont pris dans cette Lettre pour la reine Victoria une importance plus grande et sont devenus partie intégrante de la symphonie jusqu’alors essentiellement visuelle.”

Victoria's genre than with examining Wilson's peculiar integration of visual and aural elements.⁸¹

In contrast, art- and theater-oriented critics tended toward hard skepticism in their attempts to reconcile *Queen Victoria's* generic label with the reality of Wilson's intermedial theater. The surrealist poet and illustrator Maurice Ropin, for example, critiqued the work as bearing too much resemblance to a student exercise and voiced his doubts about Wilson's genre claim, complaining that the show "very quickly becomes tiresome for the viewer, who has great difficulty in making sense of the avowed 'opera.'"⁸² His judgment of *Queen Victoria* as "un exercice d'élèves" [a student exercise] also points up a shift in performance forces from the 1974 work to *Einstein* that may have played a role in critics' unwillingness to consider *Queen Victoria* an opera. Namely, between *Queen Victoria* and *Einstein*, Wilson began to move away from working collaboratively with his Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds—a large, non-professional troupe of New Yorkers who took classes with Wilson—in favor of a more traditional approach to directing professional, auditioned actors.⁸³ Though only one among many factors that set the 1976 project apart from the 1974 one, the increased professionalization of the *Einstein* company played a role in determining the types of venues in which it could play, enabling Wilson and Glass to achieve a

⁸¹ Ibid. Lonchamp writes, "The identification of this music with a composer who has been dead for nearly one hundred and fifty years, with his seemingly inimitable genius, is one of the most fascinating elements of this show. Schubert also, since gestures and symbolic scenes often have the freshness, simplicity, depth, meaning, and enigmatic anxiety of his songs. The words speak less than his music." The original French reads, "L'identification de celui-ci avec un compositeur mort depuis près de cent cinquante ans, avec un génie apparemment inimitable, est un des éléments les plus fascinants de ce spectacle. Schubert aussi, puisque gestes et scènes symboliques ont souvent la fraîcheur, la simplicité, la profondeur, la signification énigmatique et angoissante de ses lieder. Les paroles parlent moins que sa musique."

⁸² Maurice Ropin, "Une lettre pour la reine Victoria de Robert Wilson," *Le Figaro*, October 7, 1974, Series I, Box 205, Folder: "Clipping – Artservice – 1974," Robert Wilson Papers. Ropin writes, "[C]ela présente l'inconvénient d'assimiler trop souvent le spectacle à un exercice d'élèves et de devenir très vite lassant pour le spectateur qui a beaucoup de mal à trouver un sens à 'l'opéra' annoncé."

⁸³ In her biography of Wilson, Maria Shevtsova notes, "*Queen Victoria* was the beginning of the end of the Byrds as a collaborative group. The burden of sustaining a large creative community had become too great and, by the time of *Einstein*, Wilson knew that he wanted to operate in a more professional context." Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 13.

degree of polish atypical of most downtown experimental theater productions of the 1970s.

Even if Wilson had worked with professional actors on *Queen Victoria*, however, the play still likely would not have achieved critical acceptance as an opera as easily as *Einstein* did two years later. As the Belgian literary critic Robert Kanters cautioned his readers, “The word opera must not lead us astray,” for while “there is almost continuous music by Alan Lloyd ... [his] score sounds, to a layman’s ear, like chamber music that might as easily have dated from the time of Queen Victoria herself.”⁸⁴ The inclusion of “almost continuous” music, in other words, was enough to compel music, art, and theater critics to at least consider opera as a genre designation, but early Romantic chamber music and opera were simply too distant in terms of their formal conventions and performance practice for most critics to embrace the term as anything more than a Wilsonian affectation. Glass’s employment of keyboards, woodwinds, violin, and chorus in *Einstein*, on the other hand, eschewed the conventions of both classical chamber and orchestral music. His powerful amplification of those forces furthermore enabled what was essentially an enlarged chamber ensemble to produce sound on a symphonic scale.

Clive Barnes, the *New York Times* theater and dance critic who so disparately received Monk’s *Quarry* and *Einstein* as opera in 1976, had this report for New Yorkers about the same performance that William Weaver witnessed in Spoleto:

Mr. Wilson calls his new theater piece ‘an opera in four acts’ but what is going on in the Teatro Caio Melisso is certainly not an opera in any usual sense of the word. But then it is not a play either, and to call it a ballet is

⁸⁴ Robert Kanters, “La parole du bègue,” *L’Express*, July 15–21, 1974, Series I, Box 205, Folder: “Clipping – Artservice – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original French reads: “Le mot opéra ne doit pas nous égarer. Il y a bien une musique à peu près continue d’Allan Lloyd, dit le programme, mais, alors que le Festival de la Rochelle est conçu comme un grand hommage aux maîtres de la musique contemporaine, de Varèse à Boulez, la partition d’Allan Lloyd sonne, pour une oreille profane, comme un musique de chambre qui pourrait aussi bien dater du temps de la reine Victoria elle-même.”

almost as perverse as calling it an opera. The truth is that Mr. Wilson is a great theatrical original, and his work does not encourage labeling.⁸⁵

Mirroring Louis Aragon's florid struggle to define *Deafman Glance* three years earlier, Barnes runs through a handful of options before washing his hands of ontological responsibility, concluding that Wilson's work eschews the kind of generic labeling intended to facilitate effective communication between critics and their readership. Wilson devotees, he indicates, could expect from *Queen Victoria* the same visual and gestural vocabulary as the director's earlier silent plays with the addition of incidental music and verbal word games, but not a foray into a new genre.

It is noteworthy that Wilson developed the spoken text of *Queen Victoria* in collaboration with the autistic teen and typographic artist Christopher Knowles, who also wrote the majority of *Einstein's* spoken text, so both works share a similar aesthetic signature. Crucially, however, *Queen Victoria* did not include the continuous music and singing of *Einstein*, and as Morey and Pardo rightly underscore, Glass took Knowles's place as Wilson's primary collaborator in the creation of the later work, emphasizing the musical rather than the verbal plane.⁸⁶ As a result of Lloyd's secondary authorial position beneath Wilson and Knowles, the earlier work's interdisciplinary dramaturgy—combining gestural theater, spoken word, design, dance, and music—did not register generically for Barnes (or, indeed, for any critics other than Weaver) as belonging to opera, but rather to experimental theater with incidental music. Moreover, the fact that Wilson presented *Queen Victoria* in New York in a rented Broadway theater rather than in an opera house further located the play in the theatrical, rather than the operatic, sphere.⁸⁷ This did not seem to bother Wilson, for as the Italian critic Alberto Blandi related in his *La Stampa* review of *Queen Victoria*, the

⁸⁵ Clive Barnes, "Theater: A Robert Wilson at Spoleto," *New York Times*, June 22, 1974, 19, Series I, Box 205, Folder: "Clipping – Artservice – 1974," Robert Wilson Papers.

⁸⁶ Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 32.

⁸⁷ *A Letter for Queen Victoria* had three previews and eighteen performances at the ANTA Theatre (now the August Wilson Theatre), located at 245 W. 52nd Street in midtown Manhattan, between March 19, 1975 and April 6, 1975. Digital photographs of the original playbill can be viewed at: <http://www.playbillvault.com/Show/Detail/5261/A-Letter-for-Queen-Victoria>.

director “prefers that it be considered, as it in fact ‘looks,’ like a *figurative composition*.”⁸⁸ Wilson’s European agent Ninon Tallon Karlweiss, later *Einstein’s* champion in Europe, likewise defended the young director’s use of the descriptor “opera” as a label that enabled him to differentiate his theatrical experiments from those of his downtown contemporaries. “In *A Letter for Queen Victoria*,” she explained to Louis Lanne of *Sud-Ouest*, “Wilson conducted an experiment on sound: music comes into play on several levels, as recorded music, as singing musicians on stage, etc. But contrary to the belief of the regulars at La Scala, this is not an opera, but rather a work in his oeuvre.”⁸⁹

Wilson may have been perfectly content to have critics likewise identify *Einstein on the Beach* as another “work in his oeuvre,” but as a composer, Philip Glass had a great deal more riding on critics’ recognition of the 1976 work as an opera. After all, theater scholars may discuss *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in terms of Wilson’s development and Knowles’s text, but Alan Lloyd’s contribution has all but become a scholarly footnote, and he certainly did not earn the kind of recognition that Glass hoped to achieve with his first foray into opera. Fortunately for the composer, *Einstein’s* combination of dramatic structure, marketing, early reception, and performance venues provided the piece’s creators, producers, and presenters with enough ammunition to pass it off as the sort of opera that belonged in La Scala. Given that Wilson did not change his approach to staging between the 1975 and 1976 projects, how did the director and composer achieve this?

2.3.2 *Einstein on the Beach* as Opera

In order to understand how Glass and Wilson were able to not just get their work into opera houses, but moreover to convince a majority of critics that it belonged there, it is first helpful to consider how its structure and dramatic arc correspond

⁸⁸ Alberto Blandi, “Sei ore di teatro col texano Wilson,” *La Stampa*, June 16, 1974, Series I, Box 205, Folder: “Clipping – Artservice – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers (my italics).

⁸⁹ Louis Lanne, “Bob Wilson: ‘Des années lumière en avance,’” *Sud-Ouest*, July 3, 1974, Series I, Box 205, Folder: “Clipping – Artservice – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original French reads: “Wilson fait une expérience sur le son: la musique entre en scène a plusieurs niveaux, musique enregistrée, musiciens sur le plateau chants, etc. Mais contrairement à ce que croyaient les habitués de la Scala ce n’est pas un opéra mais un opus dans son oeuvre.”

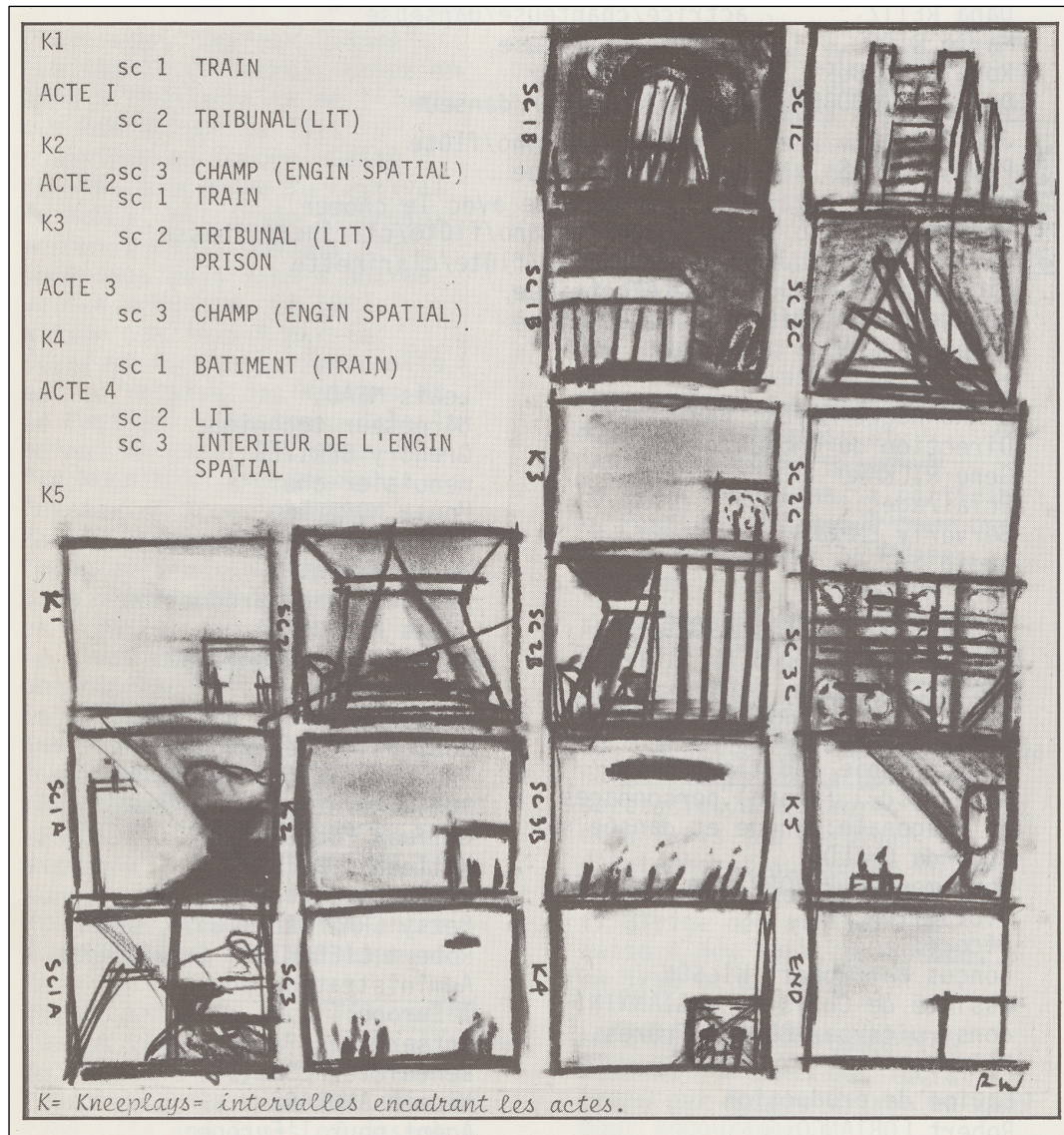
to and depart from those of more traditional opera. The tendency of international critics to summon the ghost of Richard Wagner (namely, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) in evocative but ambiguous terms is indicative of a more general critical inclination in 1976 to base discussions of *Einstein's* operatic legitimacy on its broad structural gestures (e.g., acts, scenes, interludes) and the relative prominence of drama, music, and dance, rather than on the repetitive, non-narrative details of its content.⁹⁰ This is not particularly remarkable given the extent to which modernist composers had by the mid-1970s already used opera as a vehicle to question or meditate on the genre, from Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's absurdist *Einstein* precursor *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) to Luciano Berio's three-act *Opera* (1970; rev. 1977), which gestured in a Wilsonian direction with its titular double meaning (of opera as both work and a specific type of music theater), as well as its incorporation of material from a play by the downtown Open Theater troupe. Indeed, like these earlier theater pieces, *Einstein on the Beach* provocatively garbed a classical form in chic, postmodern aesthetics.

Einstein's basic structure is classical in the sense that it is predicated on a balanced temporal and thematic division of dramatic action and accompanying music. This division includes four acts, its nine scenes separated by five short interludes, or Knee Plays. Developing the opera not through linear narrative, but rather by means of thematic repetition with permutation, Glass and Wilson based *Einstein* on three images loosely associated with Albert Einstein's life and scientific theories: a train, a trial, and a field with a spaceship. These images form the basis for the nine main scenes, each linked to a specific harmonic profile in Glass's score; for example, the primary mode of all three scenes based on the image of the train is derived from a pentatonic A-flat major scale.⁹¹ These images

⁹⁰ It is worth noting that when Richard Wagner authored *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) and *Oper und Drama* (1850–51), the Total Artwork that he theorized was itself a construct intended to promote and legitimize his own operatic experiments. From that perspective, although at the time of *Einstein's* premiere Wagner's reputation remained tarnished by his anti-Semitic writings and the exploitation of his work by the Nazi Party, his reception as a historically important operatic reformer invited parallels with Glass's and Wilson's experimentation.

⁹¹ Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 328–9. Potter offers a particularly lucid harmonic analysis of the opera's tonal structure. In addition to recurring modal or tonal profiles that characterize the opera's central images, two further themes are of importance to the

(and their associated harmonic profiles) repeat in that order three times each, but without any two images ever being juxtaposed in the same way within a single act. Furthermore, all three images undergo radical transformations in the fourth act so that the train becomes a building, the trial a bed, and the field an interior view of the spaceship that had previously appeared as a distant object suspended over the stage (Figure 2.1).



musical drama. The first, in C major, is unique to the Knee Plays. This theme is based on a descending A, G, C bass ostinato, and Glass refers to it as the "trilogy theme" because he recycled it in the two operas (*Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten*) that, along with *Einstein*, form his trilogy of portrait operas about "great men." The second theme, built on five chords, perpetually modulates between F minor and E major, turning on the I chord of the latter key, which is the VII chord in the former.

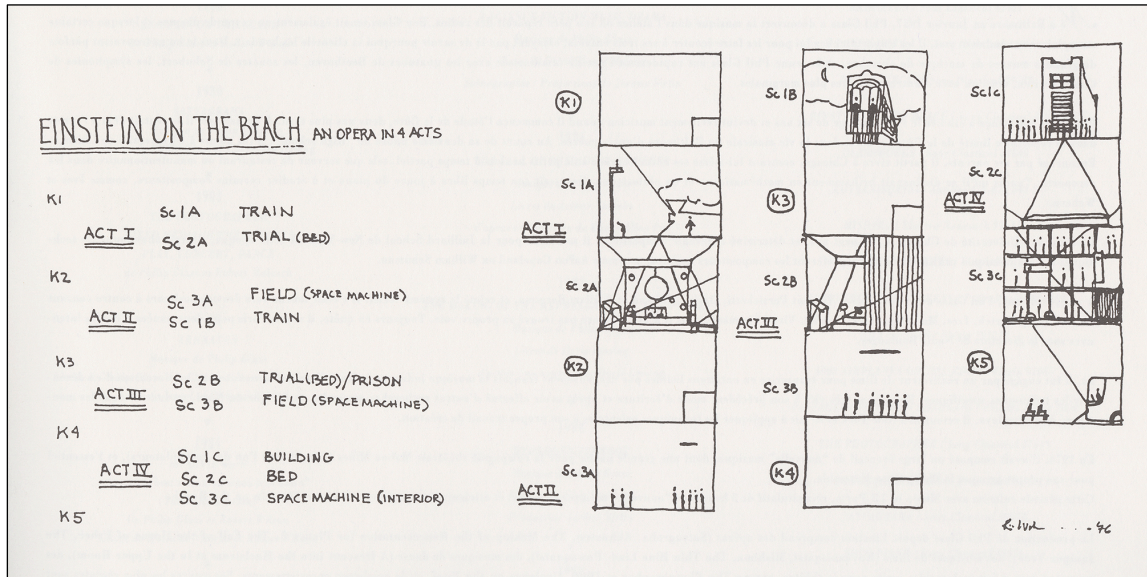


Figure 2.1 Wilson's sketches of the nine scenes and five knee plays.

These sketches were reproduced in programs for the 1976 Festival d'Avignon and the 1992 MC93 Bobigny performances. Series I, Box 116, Folder: "EOB Program Book" and Series III, Box 283, Folder: "O. Einstein on the Beach Program, Festival d'automne, Paris, December 1992," Robert Wilson Papers 1969–1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York. Reproduced with permission.

The subject of the Knee Plays is only tenuously related to these larger scenes, but they are internally linked through two musical themes. The first, a three-chord progression in C Major—reused in Glass's next two operas and thus christened by him the "Trilogy" theme—features a descending 6–5–1 (A–G–C) bass line is among the most memorable musical gestures in the opera. The second, a five-chord progression, takes the form of a perpetually modulating cadence from F Minor to E Major (Figure 2.2). The scenes and interludes are further distinguished from one another through perspective, their spatial orientations rotating through the three classical perspectives of Renaissance painting: portrait (Knee Plays), still life (Train and Trial scenes), and landscape (Field scenes). Substituting letters for these three images, *Einstein's* structure thus takes the form AB–CA–BC–ABC bookended and separated by the Knee Plays.

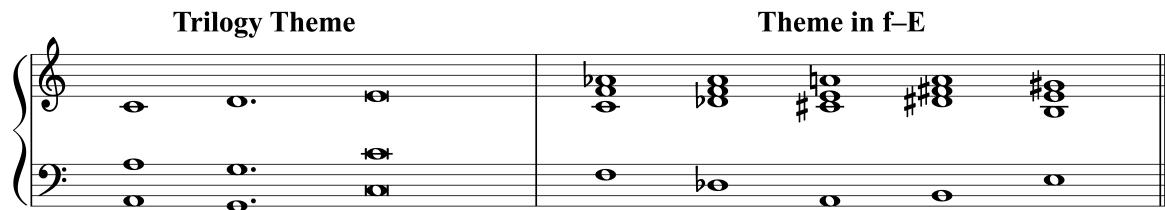


Figure 2.2 Trilogy Theme and Theme in f-E.

The three-chord progression, or Trilogy Theme, is heard in *Knee Plays* 1, 3, 4, and 5. The five-chord Theme in f-E is heard in *Knee Plays* 2, 3, and 4, as well as during Act I, scene 1A (Train), Act IV, scene 1A (Building), and Act IV, scene 3C (Space Machine).

As an interdisciplinary endeavor, *Einstein* is also structured by a unique integration of gestural vocabulary, music, spoken text, and dance. Wilson controlled the design of the theatrical sets and lighting, costumes (almost all of which are the Albert Einstein “uniform” of gray slacks, short-sleeved white button-down shirt with suspenders, and tennis shoes). The director’s trademark slow-motion, stylized gestural idiom derives in large part from American vaudeville and Japanese Noh traditions. Glass supplied the instrumental and choral score, confining the sung text to numbers (e.g., 1, 2, 3) and solfège syllables (e.g., do, re, mi) and thus identifying this text as “lyrics” rather than as a “libretto.” While Wilson’s theater of images and Glass’s minimalist music drive the operatic dramaturgy, spoken text written by Wilson’s aforementioned collaborator Christopher Knowles, the elderly amateur actor Samuel M. Johnson, and the dancer-choreographer Lucinda Childs also play a significant role.

Of these writers’ eleven texts, the minimalist music scholar Keith Potter concisely observes that “some are poetic in form, some prose, some a combination of the two. Nothing in their imagery relates in any obvious way to the simultaneous stage action; their respect for grammar, and even straightforward meaning, is sometimes only intermittent.”⁹² Knowles, a teen with autism who collaborated with Wilson and eventually became a typographical artist, contributed the bulk of the speeches. Lines like, “That it could be somewhere into where that it could be into some” recalled the poetry of Gertrude Stein and emphasized *Einstein’s*

⁹² Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 325–6.

stylized approach to operatic convention.⁹³ The four speeches that Johnson and Childs wrote and delivered respect grammatical rules, but while Johnson's contributions to the first Trial scene and Knee Play 5 contain narrative structure and even humor, Childs's brief but memorable speech, repeated ad nauseam during the second Trial scene, takes the form of a dreamy recollection of a visit to a supermarket. Collectively, these speeches make only oblique references to the beach in the opera's title, but their widely divergent styles and juxtaposition with Glass's minimal lyrics enrich *Einstein's* audiovisual semiotics and deconstruct the libretto-as-convention.

While *Einstein's* structure and integration of the performing arts are vital to its dramaturgical success with its audiences, it was Wilson's staging specifications and the type of musical forces that Glass employed, taken together, that nudged it toward opera, just as *Queen Victoria's* greater emphasis on verbal play and use of a small chamber ensemble for continuous (but non-vocal) music had nudged that piece toward theater. "With *Einstein on the Beach*," the director told filmmaker Mark Obenhaus during an interview for a 1985 documentary film made about the opera's first remount, "you have all the conventions of an opera, in that it's within a proscenium arch, you have an orchestra pit with musicians, you have singers, you have recitative parts, and you have parts that are sung. So in a sense, it is an opera."⁹⁴ Wilson's explanation omits standard operatic conventions like plot, set pieces, and specialized vocal training, but his mention of venue, performance forces, and sung and spoken vocal parts is indicative of his confidence (or at least his hope) that audiences would latch onto just a handful of key genre markers that differentiate opera from other types of theater. Wilson might also have mentioned the integration of dance into his drama, for like French grand opéra, *Einstein* incorporates two scene-length dance sequences in Acts II and III that function as discrete units within the opera while supporting the overall dramatic arc by conveying one of its three rotating images (the Space Machine). Moreover, although Wilson does not mention *Einstein's* duration in his

⁹³ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 67.

⁹⁴ Robert Wilson, interview by Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*, directed by Mark Obenhaus (1987; Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema, 2007), DVD. My transcription.

discussion with Obenhaus, the work's length played a key role in nudging an otherwise difficult to categorize piece away from Broadway and toward opera houses.

Indeed, in its 1976 iteration, *Einstein* could run as long as five and a half hours with set changes, though with reductions to some of the longer scenes, the show's standard running time has, since the 1984 revival, been approximately four hours and forty-five minutes.⁹⁵ Wilson built his reputation on extremely long and slow-moving works, ranging from four hours to seven days, and while *Einstein* was modest by Wilson's standards, it would nevertheless have been deemed excessively long in the traditional theater world. By operatic standards, however, a running time between four and six hours is long but not unheard-of. Presenting *Einstein* as an opera therefore enabled Wilson and Glass to show the piece at the length they wanted without flying completely in the face of their audiences' expectations. In fact, when it premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House on Sunday, November 21, 1976, it was sandwiched between two Wagner operas that were part of the Met's regular season—*Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*—both of which run between four and six hours with intermissions.⁹⁶

Although duration alone does not make an opera, basic structural elements like time, acts, scenes, and interludes also played a role in enabling Glass's music to be interpreted through the lens of opera. This was important because minimalism does not readily conform to operatic musical formulae. To explain, the composer's music of the 1970s, the developmental logic of which Robert Fink has compellingly described as "recombinant teleology," ventured away from previous musical approaches to opera in its emphasis on *process* over form and

⁹⁵ Due to the music's additive processes and cyclic structures, extending or reducing its length could be managed easily by simply adjusting the number of internal repetitions per rhythmic or harmonic cycle. By altering the corresponding onstage action, Glass and Wilson were thus able to trim the work to a tighter four hours and forty-five minutes for the 1984 revival, and Glass reduced the score still further in order for the first recording to fit on four LPs.

⁹⁶ Met Opera Database, The Metropolitan Opera Archives, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm?>. *Lohengrin* was performed on the evening of November 20, 1976 and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* was performed on the evening of November 22, 1976.

content. Glass's theatrical compositions also sought to achieve equality between melody, harmony, and rhythm, upending the traditional Western emphasis on melody and harmony over rhythm. For a decade, Glass separated and reduced these musical elements to the bare minimum in order to investigate new methods of development predicated on his encounter with Indian classical music in the mid-1960s. Rather than base composition on metrical regularity and either motivic or serial harmonic development, Glass instead experimented with additive approaches to rhythm and cyclic rather than linear development. With the instrumental work *Music in Twelve Parts* and the choral study *Another Look at Harmony*, Glass began to recombine the Western music fundamentals he had been treating individually, uniting instrumental and choral forces in *Einstein on the Beach*. Indeed, the first two parts of *Another Look at Harmony*, which Glass claims was an exercise to "link directly rhythmic and harmonic structure," became part of *Einstein*.⁹⁷ Glass's cyclic and additive compositional devices result in scene-length musical compositions whose development sounds nothing like traditional operatic forms. Even the soprano solo that accompanies the rising of the "bed" (a panel of light) into the wings in Act IV pushes the definition of "aria" to its limit: the singer is located in the unlit orchestra pit instead of on stage and her wordless song is more akin to *vocalise* than an aria. Moreover, departing from the closed form typical of operatic arias, the melody consists of sustained tones that support the repeating four-chord harmonic phrases of the organ accompaniment (Figure 2.3). The soprano may be the star of the scene, but the aim of Glass's music is no longer the expression of a character's emotional state. Rather, his aim is to reveal the sensuous surface of the music itself: the timbre of the singer's voice and its ability to draw out various individual pitches within the music's repeating harmonic structure.

⁹⁷ In his 2015 memoir, Glass explains, "*Another Look at Harmony, Parts 1 and 2* became the source for two important thematic units of the work I was doing for *Einstein on the Beach*. Using them, I was able to compose all the music for 'Train I' (that would be our A section) and 'Dance I' (that would be our C section). Through writing *Einstein*—but beginning with writing *Another Look at Harmony*—I continued the integration of rhythmic and harmonic and cyclic music into one coherent system." Glass, *Words Without Music*, 288–9.

Meno Mosso

The musical score is for a rehearsal of Act IV, scene 2B (Bed). It is marked 'Meno Mosso'. The Soprano part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The Organ part is written on two staves, treble and bass clefs. The organ accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. The score consists of four measures.

Figure 2.3 Act IV, scene 2B (Bed), rehearsal 35.

Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach* (London: Chester Music, 2003), 162.

Given its formal and developmental departure from operatic convention, *Einstein's* musical score could just as easily have been labeled a concert piece or even a minimalist oratorio. In fact, it is doubtful that it would have been accepted as an operatic score on its own had Wilson's contribution not set this music against a five-hour interdisciplinary stage spectacle structured by acts, scenes, and interludes. With Wilson's contribution to frame Glass's music, however, musical elements that could have been experienced as part of an instrumental concert or theater production instead took on the semblance of retooled operatic conventions. The Philip Glass Ensemble became analogous to a pit orchestra, the chorus to an opera chorus, and the PGE's soprano to a character singing an aria. Furthermore, the actors who deliver the eleven speeches written by Knowles, Johnson, and Childs throughout the opera frequently perform them in a non-notated but carefully modulated manner, the expressive contours and held tones of their enunciation not uncommon in experimental theater, but also appropriately operatic in their similarity to the practice of Sprechgesang.

Just as Wilson's drama directed spectators to interpret Glass's musical forces and techniques through an operatic lens, so Glass's continuous score for ensemble and singers did the same for Wilson's painterly, architectural tableaux. Both men were acutely aware, however, that with or without continuous music, *Einstein's* dramatic content had the potential to disaffect vast swaths of opera patrons who were not among Wilson's theatrical devotees. Indeed, downtown theater groups

beginning in the late 1950s with the Living Theatre frequently (and politically) abandoned narrative, or plot, as the engine of drama in favor of gesture or mime, non-narrative exposition, improvisation, and even audience participation. Glass's and Wilson's decision to construct what Glass has called "a series of ... poetic or poetical images" of a major cultural figure was thus more in step with their Off-Off-Broadway theater colleagues than opera composers and directors. Their choice of the internationally famous Albert Einstein, however, enabled them to present non-narrative theatrical content that looked more like paintings in motion than set pieces because they knew that their audiences would bring stories about Einstein into the theater with them. In other words, the scientist's celebrity guaranteed that both Wilson and Glass would have a rich well of associations on which to draw in their creative process, and this fame likewise precluded the necessity of narrative to guide their audiences. As Glass explained in his 1987 autobiography, he and Wilson felt that for the postwar generation,

it was impossible not to know who [Einstein] was. The emphatic, if catastrophic, beginning of the nuclear age had made atomic energy the most widely discussed issue of the day, and the gentle, almost saint-like originator of the theory of relativity had achieved the 1940s version of superstar status. Besides articles in the popular press, there were any number of public discussions led by physicists, officials and other prominent figures. Among the many books that appeared at the time, quite a few were popular works 'explaining' relativity, and a very notable one was by Einstein himself. Furthermore, Einstein as a personality had become, not for the first time in his life, the subjects of books, photographs, gossip, rumor, et al.⁹⁸

As Glass's explanation suggests, the scientist's fame in both the United States and Europe would have increased the accessibility of Wilson's theater for his patrons. Furthermore, like a silent film whose intertitles could be adjusted with each border crossing, the image-, music-, and dance-driven *Einstein* traveled well abroad.

The fact that Einstein was an amateur violinist provided a convenient link between drama and music unavailable to Wilson in his earlier "operas." It also enabled Glass to draw on an operatic convention extending back to Monteverdi's

⁹⁸ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 29.

L'Orfeo by incorporating musical performance into the onstage diegesis. To reference Einstein's musical hobby, Glass has a violinist costumed as Albert Einstein make regular appearances—during Knee Plays 2, 4, and 5, both Trial scenes, the second Field scene, and the climactic Space Machine scene—seated near the edge of the stage, participating in neither the onstage action nor the orchestra pit, but rather bridging the two. This was not the only way in which Glass and Wilson used music to connect stage and pit. While the soprano in the PGE remains in the orchestra pit for the duration of the performance and functions as an instrumentalist rather than an actor, a twelve-member SATB chorus whose members are also costumed as Albert Einstein perform the other singing roles. These singers move fluidly between the pit, where they serve as a sort of Greek chorus, and the stage, where they (along with the dancers in the company) act out Wilson's drama. Admittedly, the minimalist idiom of the choral score, the replacement of a standard libretto with speeches and numbers and solfège syllables that outline the rhythmic and harmonic structure of the music, and the extension of the choral singers' role to include spoken and silently mimed parts, have as much in common with Mabou Mines's theatrical *Music for Voices* as they do with opera. The duration and structure of the pieces, stage dimensions, and performing forces, however, clearly distinguish the two works as different types of musical theater. Furthermore, the onstage participation of the chorus in Wilson's dramaturgy (for example, as the jury during the first Trial scene and as a crowd that gathers on stage during the Building scene) gestures distinctly toward the operatic convention of having the chorus fill a role like that of film extras during crowd scenes.

As the above discussion demonstrates, many elements of *Einstein on the Beach's* dramaturgy are consistent with the kinds of music theater productions traditionally commissioned by and performed in opera houses. The aesthetic impetus behind these elements, however, is less consistent with opera than with theater, dance, and performance art in the non-literary vein fostered during Wilson's and Glass's early years in New York by the Living Theatre as well as John Cage and Merce Cunningham. In eschewing story, which conventionally binds together operatic musical numbers and provides a narrative logic to which

music lends its heightened expression, the non-literary approach instead presents signifiers without the benefit of narrative logic, implicitly asking the audience to complete the work. As early as 1927, the American composer Virgil Thomson and writer Gertrude Stein had gestured toward this type of drama with their own opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, of which both Glass and Wilson were aware and which I will treat in more detail in the following chapter.⁹⁹ While *Four Saints* benefitted from the traditional pairing of composer and librettist, it encountered even greater difficulty than *Einstein* in making its mark on opera houses. In fact, its producers anticipated the downtown community's modus operandi by almost fifty years by premiering the opera at an art museum (the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut) before opening on Broadway in 1934. If Glass and Wilson were to get their experimental piece into opera houses, then, they would have to do Thomson and Stein one better, not appearing on Broadway, but rather in America's temple to opera. Beyond Glass's joint authorship with Wilson and their employment of continuous sung music throughout, *Einstein* departed from operatic convention frequently and radically enough as to offer only partial evidence of its critical acceptance as an opera.

What, then, more fully accounts for *Einstein's* ontological sleight-of-hand? The music theorist Eric Drott, in his recent monograph on music and cultural politics in France during the period in which *Einstein's* first tour took place, offers a clue. Drawing on the sociological work of Howard Becker and Keith Negus, he explains, "genre culture is defined not solely in terms of a repertoire's musical characteristics, its 'melodies, timbres and rhythms,' but also by such criteria as

⁹⁹ Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, "Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—Einstein on the Beach." Ruas prompted Wilson to discuss the influence of Gertrude Stein's writing on his work. Wilson responded, "I had actually thought about that work, yes, a lot." Wilson also later undertook productions of *Four Saints* and Stein's later 'opera' *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. A brief description of *Four Saints* by its authors, which Wilson kept among his personal papers, reveals strong resonance with *Einstein* in terms of the earlier opera's attempt to create a portrait of four saints rather than tell a story about them, and its openness to audience interpretation: "Please do not try to understand the words of this opera literally or seek in the music of it any direct references to Spain. If, through the poet's liberties with logic and the composer's constant usage of the simplest formulas in our musical vernacular, something is evoked of the inner gayety and mystical strength of lives consecrated to a non-material end, the authors will consider their message to have been communicated." Series I, Box 131, Folder: "Four Saints — Scripts," Robert Wilson Papers.

'audience expectations, market categories and habits of consumption.'"¹⁰⁰ As I will demonstrate in the remaining three sections of this chapter, then, to understand what it meant (and still means) to call *Einstein* an opera, one must step back from the artwork itself to consider extra-textual evidence in the form of marketing and reception discourse around the artwork by its artists and their critics, as well as the final piece of the puzzle: where and in what kinds of venues the piece was performed.

2.4 Glass and Wilson on *Einstein* and Genre

In a February 11, 1976 letter of progress to the French Minister of Culture Michel Guy, a personal friend of Wilson's and a key financial supporter of *Einstein*, the director related, "During the rehearsal period the ~~work~~ opera has grown to be five hours long, and it's non-stop with no intermissions," crossing out the typed word "work" and replacing it with the handwritten descriptor "opera."¹⁰¹ While the substitution of "opera" for "work" may seem unremarkable given Wilson's penchant for using the two words interchangeably, the timing of the correspondence, just after the first draft of *Einstein* had been completed in New York during its long winter rehearsal period, is indicative of an important change in the director's promotional aims. So too is the exacting attention with which Wilson edited that single word. No longer restricting his use of the term "opera" to an Aragon-inspired synonym for "work," Wilson (with Glass's enthusiastic participation) sought to frame *Einstein* as an opera in marketing materials and program notes, subtly shepherding critical discourse surrounding the spectacle in a direction that best served both him and his new musical collaborator.

Given the well-established association of operas with their musical composers, Glass seemingly had more to gain than Wilson by having *Einstein* accepted as an opera. The director also had a reason for wanting the work to play in opera houses though. Namely, he claimed to want to cultivate audiences outside the traditional avant-garde purview of fellow artists, intellectuals, students, and

¹⁰⁰ Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968–1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁰¹ Letter, Robert Wilson to Michel Guy, February 11, 1976, "Wilson, Robert," Correspondance adressée à Michel Guy, Fonds Michel Guy, Archives et Manuscrits, Département des Arts du spectacle, La Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France.

wealthy patrons.¹⁰² *A Letter for Queen Victoria's* disappointingly unpopular performances on Broadway the previous year had demonstrated to Wilson and his Byrd Hoffman Foundation that his plays, no matter how well-received by European critics, had little hope of achieving success in American commercial theaters. The extremely long, slow-moving, neo-surreal works simply presented too great a mismatch between the musical theater conventions promised by Broadway venues and the experimental theatrical aesthetics Wilson offered. Still aspiring to attract a general audience, the director tried a different tack with *Einstein*, forgoing commercial theaters to set his sights on opera houses since they were also equipped to stage his demanding spectacles, but had the added bonuses of already offering noncommercial musical, theatrical, and dance fare, and of cultivating and serving audiences more likely to appreciate that fare. As Wilson's early title page sketch and Glass's handwritten title page of the score, both of which describe *Einstein on the Beach* as "an opera in four acts," the artists did not decide to identify their collaboration an opera partway through the creative process in response to pressure from critics or peers.¹⁰³ Rather, they conceived the work as an opera from the beginning of the project.

In spite of the flexibility of the non-narrative piece, which saw important additions to its content by Lucinda Childs, Samuel M. Johnson, and Joan La Barbara shortly before its French premiere (as well as a complete change in

¹⁰² Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, "Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—*Einstein on the Beach*." My transcription. Ruas prompts Wilson, "But that's also been one of the clearest thrusts in your career: that you want to take your work to new audiences all the time, you know? So that, if I can use categories, you're one of the first 'downtown people' to take a production to Broadway, you know? So that, does the Metropolitan represent a new audience for you?" Wilson responds, "I think so. I think there are a lot of people that go the Met regularly that wouldn't see this work otherwise, in fact. I think that's important and that's what our work it about. It can reach any community." Later in the interview, Ruas asks, "But you've never been fazed by the separation between commercial and non-commercial, have you Bob?" to which Wilson responds, "No, no. I think hopefully the piece is very accessible, as we said before, to all kinds of people, and that regardless of what country you're in or what kind of people are viewing it, somehow someone can get something from it."

¹⁰³ Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, autograph score, on deposit in Paul Walter Collection, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY; see also the title page of the Wilson's "visual book" related to *Einstein on the Beach*, which can be found in Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta and New York: Dissident Industries, 2012).

choreography for the 1984 remount), Glass's and Wilson's billing of the work as an opera remained one of its most stable elements throughout its rehearsal period and first tour. Translation of the work's full title (*Einstein on the Beach: an opera in four acts*) into French, Italian, German, Dutch, and Serbian, however, raised the possibility of genre ambiguity. In Italian, for example, 'opera' retains the double meaning of 'a work' and a work in a specific genre, an issue that was not lost on Italian reviewers.¹⁰⁴ Presenting parts of *Einstein* in New York for sympathetic audiences ahead of the tour helped to offset some of this ambiguity by introducing the piece as an opera several times before the company packed up and headed to Avignon. For instance, advertisements for *Einstein*'s first public run-through and concert of the Knee Plays at the Video Exchange Theater and Museum of Modern Art, respectively, in March of 1976, conditioned *Einstein*'s New York reception as "a new opera" (Figure 2.4).

Indeed, when it eventually returned to the Met in November bolstered by positive European reviews, the venue made no effort to present the piece as other than legitimate opera, and many of the opera's critics likewise allowed themselves to be persuaded by the subtitle. Thomas Quinn Curtiss of the *International Herald Tribune*, for instance, explained to his readers, "According to the program notes, it is an opera in four acts, nine scenes and five 'kneeplays.' Its elements, which include instrumental and vocal music, dance, staging and set designs, are those of classical opera. Even the kneeplays introducing each act appear as a modern version of baroque intermezzi."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Mario Messini, "Biennale: In 'Einstein' grande regia per una musica ovvia: i prodigi di Bob Wilson," *Il Gazzettino*, September 15, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. Messini writes that while *Einstein on the Beach* aims at being "un'opera," it is not truly "una nuova opera musicale," so he feels compelled to identify it more generally using the term "spettacolo" to avoid confusion between opera-as-work and opera-as-genre.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Quinn Curtiss, "Bob Wilson Spectacle, 'Einstein on the Beach,'" *International Herald Tribune*, July 31–August 1, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "EOB Intl. Herald Tribune, July 31, 1976," Robert Wilson Papers.

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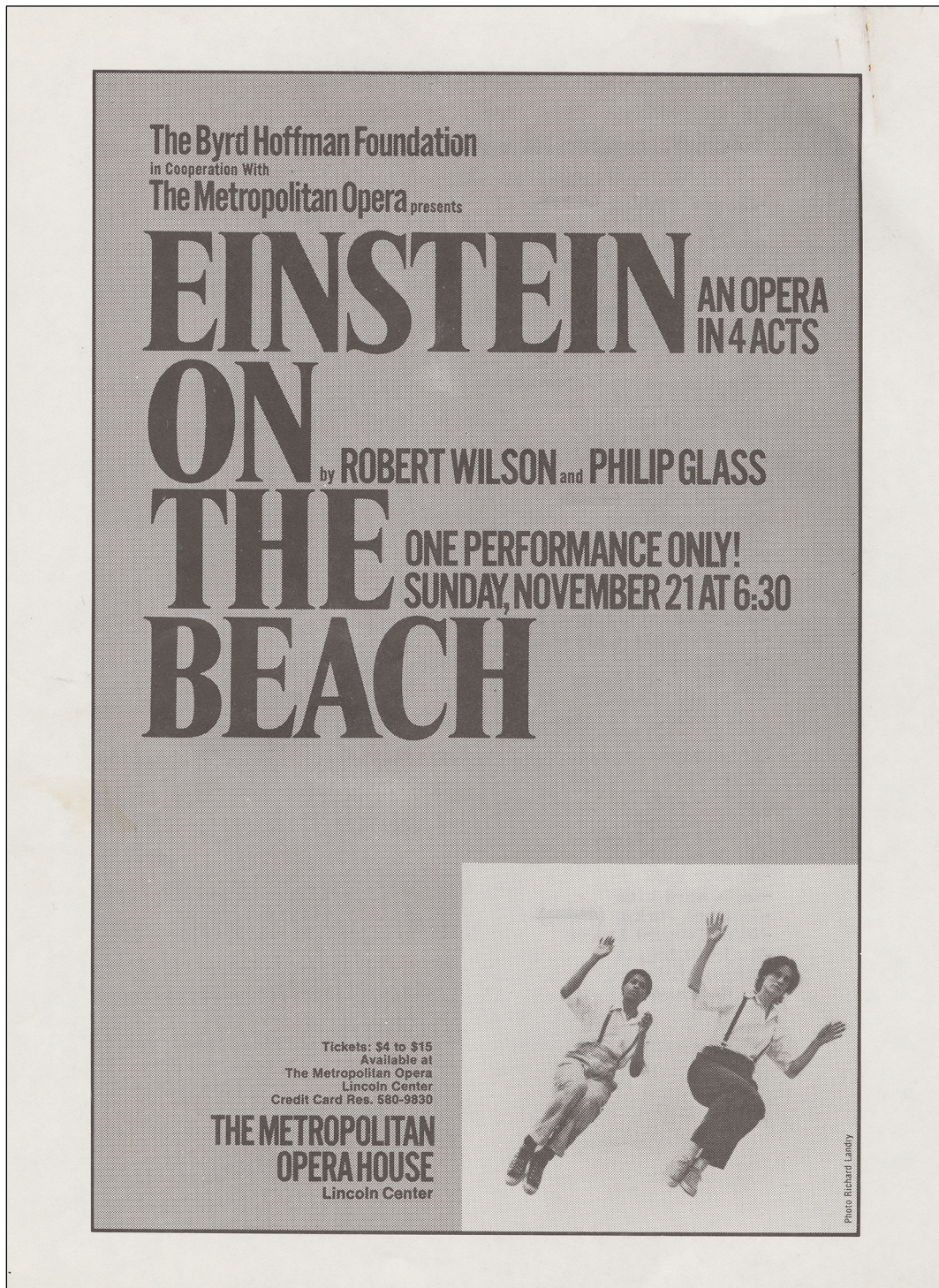


Figure 2.4 Flyers advertising 1976 New York performances of *Einstein*.

The above flyers advertised run-throughs at the Video Exchange Theater, excerpts at the Museum of Modern Art, and the American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House. Series I, Box 118, Folder: "Einstein on the Beach Press Package" [flyers 1 and 2] and Series I, Box 113, Folder: "EOB – Sources of Funding" [flyer 3], Robert Wilson Papers. Reproduced with permission.

Given how much Glass and Wilson had to gain by breaking into the operatic art world and how careful they were to build their work's genre into its billing, then, it is curious that in promotional interviews—which provided Wilson and Glass a forum to exert control over the critical presentation of their ideas to the public—they refrained from highlighting *Einstein's* operatic qualities. Rather, they used the terms “opera,” “work,” “piece,” and “collaboration” freely and interchangeably.¹⁰⁶ In an interview with the German critic Renate Klett published two days before *Einstein's* first Hamburg performance, for example, Wilson responded to the question of how *Einstein* came about by saying, “Phil Glass and I met in New York in 1973 and decided to collaborate on an *opera*.” Shortly thereafter, however, when asked if rehearsals included discussions about principles, theory, aesthetics, or formal issues, he responded, “No, we only talked about how we could work out this particular *piece*, never about the problems at hand. It's not such a mystery, after all. We said, this is how we want to do it, and then we went and did it, that's all. *Performances* consist of rational work, not emotional.”¹⁰⁷ Though Glass was less frequently quoted in the European press during the summer tour due to Wilson's greater celebrity, the composer largely imitated Wilson's offhand, intermittent deployment of the term opera. “An opera for our century,” Lise Brunel quoted Glass saying in an interview printed in *Les lettres françaises* during *Einstein's* run at the Avignon Festival. “We have kept only the specific things from Einstein's life, eliminating the anecdotal story. It is more a *poetic story* with an emotional logic,” Glass

¹⁰⁶ Glass continues to use a variety of terms to describe *Einstein*; see, for example, the chapters devoted to the work in Glass's two autobiographies, *Music by Philip Glass* and *Words Without Music*.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Wilson, interview with Renate Klett, “Ein Interview mit Robert Wilson: Träumer und Segler,” *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Die Zeit 10/15/76, Ein Interview mit Robert Wilson, Renate Klett,” Robert Wilson Papers (my italics). The original text of the first interview question and answer cited above reads, “Und wie ging es dann weiter, wie entstand *Einstein*? WILSON: Phil Glass und ich haben uns Ende 1973 in New York kennengelernt und wollten zusammen eine Oper machen.” The second interview question and answer reads, “Gab es während der Proben viele Diskussionen über Grundsätzliches, über Theoretisches, über Ästhetik, über Formprobleme? WILSON: Nein, wir haben immer nur darüber gesprochen, wie wir das Stück machen können, nie über abstrakte Ideen, immer nur über die praktischen Probleme. Das ist alles nicht so geheimnisvoll. Wir haben gesagt: Das und das wollen wir machen, und dann haben wir es gemacht, das ist alles. In der Aufführung ist alles sehr rational, nicht emotional.”

continued. “We just started with time ... because it was what theater and music had in common.”¹⁰⁸ As these brief examples demonstrate, while Glass and Wilson may have opened discussions by calling *Einstein* an opera, they did not press the issue, instead moving on to emphasize its innovative musical and theatrical attributes and what audience members might expect.

This restraint in discussing *Einstein's* implications for opera as a genre turned out to be a shrewd promotional tactic. In festival programs, playbills, and advertisements, formats in which critics could not contest generic claims, Glass and Wilson unapologetically billed their work as “a new opera” or “an opera in four acts,” and because interviews almost invariably appeared in *previews* rather than *reviews*, the artists instead reserved newspaper and radio commentary for use as marketing platforms to entice spectators, discussing *Einstein* as opera only insofar as they thought statements like “an opera for our century” might enhance ticket sales. To that end, then, Glass and Wilson treated interviews as opportunities to discuss topics that would be most likely to pique the interest of readers and listeners (e.g., Einstein as cultural hero, the role of the audience in completing the work) and to build their individual reputations (e.g., the nature of the collaborative creative process, their aesthetic approaches as outgrowths of earlier work).

In fact, they discussed genre concerns only when directly questioned, and even then, while Glass demonstrated relative ease in drawing connections between *Einstein* and more conventional operas, Wilson avoided questions of categorization with a reserve bordering on discomfort. In Glass's case, this caution seems to have stemmed primarily from a desire to skirt the kinds of musical ideological debates that had led critics and colleagues to question the musical validity of his and other so-called “minimalist” composers' work. Robert

¹⁰⁸ Robert Wilson and Philip Glass, interview with Lise Brunel, “Un entretien avec Bob Wilson et Philip Glass a propos d'*Einstein on the beach*: La mise en pièce d'un demi-siècle,” *Nouvelles Littéraires*, July 29, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers (my italics). The original French reads: “Un opéra de notre siècle . . . nous avons gardé de la vie d'Einstein les choses spécifiques, en éliminant le récit anecdotique. C'est plutôt une histoire poétique avec une logique émotionnelle. . . . Nous sommes précisément partis du temps . . . parce que c'était ce que le théâtre et la musique avaient à partager.”

Fink succinctly summarized the scope of this negative reception in his 2005 cultural study of minimalism, explaining,

If minimalism makes no sense on its own terms [for its detractors], perhaps it can be understood as a kind of social pathology, as an aural sign that American audiences are primitive and uneducated (Pierre Boulez); that kids nowadays just want to get stoned (Donal Henahan and Harold Schonberg in the *New York Times*); that traditional Western cultural values have eroded in the liberal wake of the 1960s (Samuel Lipman); that minimalist repetition is dangerously seductive propaganda, akin to Hitler's speeches and advertising (Elliott Carter); even that the commodity-fetishism of modern capitalism has fatally trapped the autonomous self in minimalist narcissism (Christopher Lasch).¹⁰⁹

Needless to say, given Wilson's dream-like contribution to Glass's already hypnotic additive and cyclical musical processes, the composer had a vested interest in skirting these kinds of debates inasmuch as was possible. *Einstein's* conception, Glass defensively told one Belgian interviewer the day after performances concluded at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, "comes out of our experience and not out of a philosophy or a theoretical position. And you won't find either with me or with Bob, that we start from a pedagogic point of view."¹¹⁰

Even when speaking with Charles Ruas, a sympathetic interviewer whose program, "Charles Ruas's Audio Experimental Theater," was broadcast on New York's leftist, non-commercial WBAI station, Glass was restrained in his claims about what *Einstein* was or what it was attempting to do in relation to music theater. For example, in response to Ruas's point-blank question, "What made you decide to work on an opera?" Glass initially ignored the political implications of the query, detailing how he and Wilson had reached the ends of large-scale works in 1974 and wished to collaborate on a new project. Only when the interviewer followed up with a second question, "What did you decide to do with voices?" did Glass warm to the subject. "It's not a traditional kind of sense of an opera," he explained. "We never thought about a story that way, nor did I

¹⁰⁹ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 19.

¹¹⁰ Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, interview by Vlaamse Radio en Televisieomroep, "Einstein on the Beach [—interview and Performance Excerpts]," Brussels, Belgium, September 30, 1976, Theater on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y. My transcription.

really think of the singers as being people that would stand up and sing arias, though in fact there turns out to be an aria in the opera, in the last act.” Likely knowing that the audience for that particular interview would have little interest in a new opera that sought to imitate conventional uptown fare, Glass went on to emphasize the difference between his joint authorship with Wilson and the traditional division of labor between composer and librettist: “When Bob and I began working on it, Bob would say, well this is the trial, and these people on the stage, and then I would say, well, how many people are going to be singing? I didn’t just write an aria and say, Bob, stick this into the opera.”¹¹¹ Regardless of audience, then, while *Einstein* was on tour, Glass remained cautious about comparing *Einstein* with other operas, likely because he intuited that the average spectator would be less interested in high-minded ontological debates than in what they would see on stage, but also likely in part due to a desire to avoid debates about the validity (or dangers) of minimalist music.

Wilson, on the other hand, was extremely reticent on the subject of genre, his reluctance rooted less in concern about that particular work’s reception than from a general aversion to defining any of his plays.¹¹² In fact, even in an interview for a documentary film specifically intended to celebrate *Einstein*’s impact on opera following the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s 1984 remount, Wilson told the director, “People said in the beginning, ‘Well it’s obviously not a play,’ because it didn’t have a text that told a story. And they said, ‘Well, it’s not

¹¹¹ Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, “Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—*Einstein* on the Beach.”

¹¹² Wilson scholar Maria Shevtsova provides an illuminating discussion of the director’s position with regard to avant-garde art and politics, separating his work, which emerged from study of nearly every art *except* for theater, from that of his theatrical peers like the overtly political Living Theatre. Explaining that during the 1960s and 1970s, “doubts about materialism, consumerism and other givens of the American way of life led, in some quarters, to sullen anger and, in others, to cultivated insouciance,” Shevtsova places Wilson among the latter, adding, “Wilson was reticent about ‘hot’ politics and this, together with his immersion in avant-garde dance, music, painting and design, but *not* the theatre, could be taken as a sign of his political attitude,” for as she notes, quoting the writer Henry Sayre’s 1989 study *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, “While avant-garde dance and music have both succeeded in providing important models for the avant-garde, they have remained, as it were, aesthetic. Few people know about either, and fewer are willing to read into their performances implicit political positions.” Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 19, 24.

a dance,' because it's not just dance. And they said, 'Well it's not a painting,' because it's not a painting. So I call them operas, because it means opus or work."¹¹³ While Wilson's carefully cultivated apathy (even antipathy) to theatrical theory has become a well-known idiosyncrasy, there remains the previously cited letter to Michel Guy to contend with, as it offers at least some evidence that Wilson recognized the utility of *Einstein* being accepted as an opera alongside works by the likes of Verdi and Puccini.

Wilson's own contribution to the interview in which Glass admitted that *Einstein* "was not an opera in any traditional sense," however, supports the idea that his concern with categorization was more practical than ideological. In order to present *Einstein* in the way that he wanted, he explained, "You need a classical Italian theater, with a thirty-four-foot opening [at] minimum, thirty-eight to forty feet deep. We have fifty-nine hanging pipes that are used in the show. We need an orchestra pit, we need wing space, trap space. . . . It's a big theater we're talking about, a proscenium theater."¹¹⁴ In other words, Wilson's large-scale works necessitated the staging and lighting resources of opera houses or similar venues, and having *Einstein* accepted as an opera not only enabled that work to be presented as he wished, but also held the potential for future commissions from such institutions. With the exception of this material consideration, however, Wilson's interests remained largely aesthetic. As he commented to Claude Baignères of *Le Figaro* in between *Einstein*'s French runs in Avignon and Paris, "It is the double nature of Einstein, that of the mathematician and that of the artist," as opposed to political or theoretical concerns, "that interests me."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Wilson, interview by Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*. My transcription.

¹¹⁴ Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, "Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—*Einstein on the Beach*."

¹¹⁵ Claude Baignères, "Recontré Aujourd'hui, Bob Wilson: Einstein existe je l'ai recomposé . . ." *Le Figaro*, August 8, 1976, "Einstein on the beach, mise en scène de Robert Wilson [Document d'archives]: dossier de presse, RPFA – 1976 support: dossier de coupures de presse, Maison Jean Vilar, Avignon, France. The original French reads: "C'est la double nature d'Einstein, celle du mathématicien et celle de l'artiste, qui m'a intéressé."

Glass's and Wilson's avoidance of overtly genre-based discussions of their collaborative work, which likely came about as a result of wanting to highlight its aesthetic novelty without stirring up academic genre debate or baiting critics, had the serendipitous effect of concentrating both European and American critical attention on the *how* of the show rather than the *what* of the piece; that is, its unusually large-scale and polished fusion of minimalist music, postmodern dance, and non-literary drama rather than its iconoclastic approach to opera. What was in essence a smart approach to marketing, then, not only helped *Einstein* to draw spectators in Europe and New York, but also enabled the artists to reap what Pierre Bourdieu would identify as the *symbolic capital*—or what, in less specialized language, Howard Becker has identified as *reputational value*—of having authored an opera while only having to defend that claim in passing.

In sum, Glass and Wilson had many opportunities to use *Einstein* as a tool to generate debate about contemporary opera in 1976, but extant promotional material from the first tour suggests that they instead avoided such debate, presenting their work as neither a slap in the face to standard opera nor as a clarion call for operatic institutions to support musical theater like theirs, but rather as a goodwill ambassador of the avant-garde, advertising what the downtown art scene had to offer the commercial art world. Having both previously endured critical contempt and dismissal, Glass and Wilson were undoubtedly aware that to present a work in major opera houses was to wade into a critical shark tank, and that by downplaying *Einstein's* ideological and genre implications, they stood a better chance of emerging from that tank unscathed. As I will show in the following section, this self-preserving promotional strategy was largely successful, especially among left-leaning critics. Furthermore, it was abetted by the fact that *Einstein's* first production coincided with both the American Bicentennial and the Jahrhundertring celebration of the centenary of the Bayreuth Festival and its first full production of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle.

Before considering the critical reception of *Einstein on the Beach* as opera in 1976, however, it is worth briefly looking beyond the first tour to how Glass and Wilson treated *Einstein* as opera after its initial acceptance. Firstly, their

increasing comfort in speaking about the work as a contribution to the genre serves to emphasize the restraint they displayed before the sold-out Met performances and positive New York reviews sealed *Einstein's* acceptance as opera. Secondly, their growing confidence in speaking about *Einstein* as opera demonstrates that the 1976 production was only the first (though vital) step in an ongoing reception process that has been reinvigorated by revival productions in 1984, 1992, and 2012–15. Indeed, when the two artists (along with collaborators Andrew de Groat and Christopher Knowles) spoke to Maxime de la Falaise and Nenna Eberstadt in an “operatic interview” following the November 1976 Met performances, Glass’s jubilant, almost swaggering attitude regarding the work’s operatic legitimacy offers such a contrast with his guarded discussion with Charles Ruas a few months earlier that it bears quoting at length:

I think we both wanted to take a shot at classic opera! I’d never written a real opera before in the sense that this is a continuous music piece, with action set to music. I don’t think that any of my previous work, or Bob’s, could have gone into the Met: it simply wasn’t in that tradition. **I think that when we both started working, we were both consciously taking a shot at that tradition and trying to do a piece that would fit into that genre. I think it’s an opera for our times.** I mean, most of the opera that we know is nineteenth century and, of course, that’s very flamboyant and grandiose and romantic. The kind of focus, discipline and clarity of this opera is something which is very much attuned to our time. Aside from our stylistic difference, I think it’s certainly an operatic tradition. Operas were the original mixed media: they always contained dance, singing, singing [sic] and music. The thing about opera that appealed to people who worked in that genre, was that you could do anything! The fact that in this opera the combining of the sort of intense visual imagery that Bob works with and my musical imagery can evolve into a situation of classic opera is not surprising. People who find it so new and original just aren’t very familiar with that tradition!¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Philip Glass, interview by Maxime de la Falaise, “Einstein at the Met (An Operatic Interview),” *Andy Warhol’s Interview* 7, no. 2 (February 1977), Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers (my boldface); Philip Glass, interview by Jeff Goldberg, “Robert Wilson and ‘Einstein on the Beach,” *New York Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 16. Glass was similarly brazen in his presentation of *Einstein on the Beach* as a traditional opera in a second interview given around the same time. When interviewer Jeff Goldberg asked Glass, “What do you mean when you say that *Einstein on the Beach* belongs to the tradition of grand opera?” the composer responded, “I mean that ultimately it will find its home in traditional opera houses. It may take time. It took 40 years for *Porgy and Bess* to be accepted as opera.” Goldberg then followed up with the query, “Did you listen to and study classical operas in preparation for *Einstein*?” to

Although Glass and Wilson were hounded by behind-the-scenes financial and legal troubles when this interview was published in February of 1977, the overwhelming public and critical responses to *Einstein's* Met performances nevertheless fueled this exultant outburst by Glass. With a commission from the City of Rotterdam—one of *Einstein's* European tour stops—for a second opera (*Satyagraha*) following soon after *Einstein's* success, Glass had every reason to feel confident. So too did Wilson, who by 1981 was working on another operatic collaboration, this time with the English composer Gavin Bryars.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), led by the downtown performing arts champion Harvey Lichtenstein since 1967, had indicated an interest in presenting *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976, but was unable to raise the funds to include it in its 1976–77 season. With the official inauguration of its Next Wave Festival, a forum for presenting avant-garde music, dance, and theater, in 1983, BAM was in a better position to present *Einstein*, and in 1984, the organization remounted the work for twelve performances. While these performances did not sell out as the storied Met performances had, they not only increased public awareness of *Einstein* as a challenging contemporary opera, but they also offered Glass and Wilson a chance to polish the opera with a more professional cast in a single location, and introduced Lucinda Childs's now-permanent choreography. Moreover, in presenting *Einstein* for a second time, BAM immediately increased the opera's visibility among new contributions to the genre, few of which have had repeat performances.

With eight years between the 1976 tour and *Einstein's* first revival, BAM administrators worked particularly hard to remind patrons of the opera's initial New York success, attract Glass and Wilson fans who had not been able to get tickets to the first production, and continue the process of sanctifying *Einstein* as a landmark opera, even going so far as to speak for the artists in claiming that

which Glass answered, "I didn't say to myself, 'Oh, I'm going to write an opera, I'll go out and look at opera.' I never thought I would write and opera, but as a composer of course I studied it. I listened to most of Wagner, Verdi, Rossini, and Mozart. That's like asking, 'How long did it take you to write *Einstein*?' It took 20 years. I spent *years* at the Met when I was a kid at Juilliard, sitting in 50¢ seats at the very top of the house; and when I studied with Nadia Boulanger, I went to the Paris Opera."

Einstein was a “real” or “classic” opera. “In creating *Einstein on the Beach*,” the 1984 Next Wave Festival program proclaimed, “both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass felt very strongly that despite its differences from the nineteenth-century romantic works still dominant in the operatic repertory, their work was a real opera, in the tradition of classic opera. Their subsequent work, especially Mr. Glass’s *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten* and Mr. Wilson’s *The CIVIL WarS: a tree is best measured when it is down* (part of which has music by Mr. Glass),” the notes continued, framing *Einstein* as the innovative precursor to the artists’ more recent operas, “indicate not only a continued interest in this tradition, but the truly experimental nature of *Einstein on the Beach*.”¹¹⁷ In 1984, Glass and Wilson had less reason than they had in 1976 to slip *Einstein* into the operatic art world under the radar, so to speak, for the work had already achieved acceptance as a novel contribution to the genre, and they were no longer financially responsible for the inevitable deficit the work would incur. Freed from the necessity of professional self-preservation—in fact, encouraged by BAM’s investment in the work as an opera—Glass unabashedly placed himself and Wilson in the company of the genre’s leading historical innovators in an essay in the program book, telling the writer Sean Taylor, “We’re both theater people and we had to embrace the strategies of the theater. Verdi did it, so did Mozart, so did Wagner.”¹¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, then, when the Senior Vice President for Programming of PBS approached Harvey Lichtenstein and director Mark Obenhaus about making a documentary film for WNET to commemorate *Einstein’s* remount, both the BAM administration and Glass and Wilson were happy to support the film’s

¹¹⁷ *Next Wave Festival Program*, Brooklyn Academy of Music (October–December 1984), 37, loose documents; J. H., “RE: MARKETING *EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH*,” August 31, 1984, Box: “1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy),” Folder: untitled, Hamm Archives. BAM formed marketing alliances with the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera in order to improve ticket sales for all three organizations. One internal document explains, “Both the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera have been contacted and are willing to work with us. At the time of *Akhmaten* [sic] NYC Opera is willing to stuff their programs with EOB flyers, with the understanding that we would reciprocate at a later date. The Met is ready to proceed on a joint subscription offering (EOB at BAM, *Lulu* and *Wozzeck* at the Met) as soon as we know what our seat inventory will be.”

¹¹⁸ Sean Taylor, “‘Einstein’ on the Stage,” *Einstein on the Beach* program (December 1984), 4–5, Box: “Artist Talks: Wilson Box #1,” Folder: “Programs Dec. 11–23, 1984 Philip Glass ‘Einstein on the Beach,’” Hamm Archives.

pedagogical thesis that *Einstein on the Beach* had “changed forever the image of opera.”¹¹⁹ Glass, continuing to draw comparisons between himself and respected opera composers of the past by way of their relationship to theater, told Obenhaus, “I grew up in a theater that was not based on a literary tradition. For example, it would never occur to me to take a play and set it to music, when in fact a lot of operas are done that way. [*Madama*] *Butterfly* was done that way. The Shakespeare operas of Verdi were done that way.” For Glass, however, who with the previously cited 1977 interview had already begun to position himself as an opera composer in keeping with his time, as Verdi and Puccini were in theirs, “It never occurred to me to begin with a literary product and then turn it into a musical theater product. The theater I came from didn’t work with text to begin with.”¹²⁰

Wilson, characteristically, avoided direct discussions of genre even in a film devoted to establishing *Einstein* as a landmark opera, his only reference to opera appearing in an explanation of his background as a theater director. His first major work, *Deafman Glance*, he explained, “was seven hours long and four acts, and was completely silent. It was, as the French said, they called it a ‘silent opera.’ And I thought that was a very good way to describe it because it was structured silences.”¹²¹ In spite of his reluctance to speak about *Einstein* as opera, however, Wilson demonstrated that he could deal in cultural capital just as adeptly as Glass. In one such instance, he casually noted that the way

¹¹⁹ *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*, dir. Mark Obenhaus (1987; Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema, 2007), DVD. This phrase recurs multiple times in the film. According to Obenhaus, PBS Senior Vice President for Programming Suzanne (Sue) Weil initiated the film project because her previous position as Director of the Performing Arts Program at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, a major American center for contemporary performing arts, had facilitated her engagement with the downtown art community. She, Lichtenstein, and Great Performances director Jack Venza cobbled together the necessary funding for the film, which not only commemorated BAM’s investment in the opera and made Wilson’s visual contribution available to the public as a recording for the first time, but also created a pedagogical tool that continues to be used in twentieth-century survey and opera courses at the college level. Mark Obenhaus, telephone interview with author, December 8, 2014.

¹²⁰ Philip Glass, interview by Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*. My transcription.

¹²¹ Robert Wilson, interview by Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera* (my italics). My transcription.

Christopher Knowles—the autistic teen with whom he had worked during *Einstein's* creation and who contributed much of the opera's spoken text—"was arranging words and sounds was *not unlike Mozart*," for his writings "were classical compositions, and things placed not arbitrarily for content of the language, but also," and here Wilson implicitly gestures toward the literary innovations of Gertrude Stein that he had previously acknowledged as an influence on his work, "very much for the sound, and how the sound was structured."¹²²

Over the course of the 1992 and 2012–15 revivals of *Einstein*, both of which were mounted as international tours in the same vein as the 1976 production, Glass and Wilson steadily maintained these stances toward *Einstein's* relationship to classical form and opera. Once established, their stories of how *Einstein* came to be became as repetitive as the music and motions of the work itself, the opera's importance in catalyzing their meteoric theater careers gradually taking on the cadence of myth with regular recounting. One has only to compare Glass's chapters on *Einstein on the Beach* in each of his memoirs, one published in 1987 and the other in 2015, to see that the arc and key points of the narrative recur (in some cases, verbatim) from one telling to the next.¹²³

While Wilson has refrained from putting either his approach to theater or his biography in writing, in interviews in recent years he has begun to follow Glass's

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 27–56; Glass, *Words Without Music*, 283–302. Key points mentioned in nearly every retelling of the *Einstein* creation story include: early lunch meetings beginning in 1974 followed by separate intensive work periods in 1975; auditioning and rehearsing the seventeen-member company in early 1976 and decamping to Avignon for a final intensive rehearsal period that July; generating a critical buzz across Europe for four months that mounted to the two capstone performances at the Metropolitan Opera; and meeting the financial challenges that the project produced both before and after this career-making tour. While Wilson less frequently relates the *Einstein* creation story in detail, as Glass has done in his writing, he does use the same anecdotes in interviews with regularity, particularly his introduction to Glass after an all-night performance of his play *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, the importance of a large proscenium stage to *Einstein's* production, favorite quotes by Albert Einstein, John Cage's reaction to the opera as being something "different," and the way in which visual and aural stimuli interact in a series of slow-motion films of mothers reacting to crying infants made by the Columbia University psychologist Daniel Stern.

lead in connecting *Einstein* to earlier opera, demonstrating how his extensive engagement with the genre since this collaboration has retroactively colored, and perhaps even altered, his memory of the work's conception. For instance, in a 2009 interview with John Rockwell presented in front of an audience, the director explained *Einstein's* gestation in this way:

This is just how we made it. So we said, ok, let's make it in four acts. Let's call it *Einstein on the Beach*, E.O.B. Ok, Phil, how long do you want it? How long should this be? I don't know. **Should it be Wagnerian?** Yeah, why not, ok: four hours and forty-eight minutes. It's true. These were the first things we did. So we said, ok, AB, CA, BC, ABC. It'll have this structure. It's all the possible combinations you can have of A, B, and C together: A and B, C and A, B and C, A-B-C together. We'll have 1-2-3-4-5, five interlude scenes. I call them Knee Plays, like a leg has a knee that links to separate elements. So now let's put [in] times: 4, 4, 5, 4, 4 minutes; 24, 23, 22, 23, 24, 22, 18, 16, 17 [minutes]. Those are the times. So now I know 1A is going to be 24 minutes. What's it going to look like? Well, it's going to be a train that's going to cross the field. It's going to be an act of passage. Things are going to be passing in the space. The second one's going to be a courtroom, a trial. This is an act of collection. People are going collect in the space, or whatever. It's a courtroom. So then I knew the stage settings. Based on this, Phil wrote music.¹²⁴

Wilson's description of *Einstein's* thematic and temporal structure, central images, and collaborative method has been typical of his and Glass's descriptions since 1976, if more formally and aesthetically oriented than the composer's diachronic, narrative recollections. What is new and notable in this description, however, is the director's offhand implication that the artists initially conceived the four-and-a-half-hour work not as a comparatively brief Wilsonian "opera" in the vein of *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, but rather as an epic Wagnerian opera. In other words, Wilson retroactively implied that the relationship between *Einstein's* temporal grandeur and that of Wagner's operas was causal, rather than (as available evidence from 1975–1976 suggests) incidental.

Because *Einstein*, as theater scholar Maria Shevtsova has articulated, "crystallizes and transcends the experimental trends of all the arts across the board during the

¹²⁴ Robert Wilson, interview by John Rockwell, American Theatre Wing and Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation Masters of the Stage, March 20, 1997, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://sdcfoundation.org/conversations-community/masters-of-the-stage/> (my boldface). My transcription.

1960s and 1970s in the United States,” it is not unreasonable that its creators would have made the link between their artistic fusion and the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹²⁵ As it so happens, though, they did not need to make the link on their own, for the notion that a Wagnerian impulse was at work in *Einstein* originated as early as August of 1976, with the opera’s critics. In fact, just as Wilson exploited Louis Aragon’s identification of his stage works as operas, so he likely borrowed his comparison of *Einstein* with Wagner’s operatic innovations from a French critic who was perhaps under the influence of the conductor Pierre Boulez and director Patrice Chéreau’s infamous centennial production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at Bayreuth from July 19–29, 1976 (overlapping with *Einstein*’s July 25–30 premiere in Avignon). This comparison then reverberated geographically through the Italian, German, and American press, and temporally as critics, preparing for each of *Einstein*’s revivals, rehashed critical verdicts from preceding productions. Indeed, the reception discourse surrounding *Einstein*, like any publicly presented artwork, grew out of a reciprocal exchange of symbolic and cultural capital between its artists and their critics, mediated by administrators and spectators. As critics’ voices were undoubtedly the loudest and reached the largest audiences among these groups, their evaluations of *Einstein* and engagement with questions of genre were vital to the work’s recognition as a valid contribution to the operatic repertoire.

2.5 Early Critical Reception of *Einstein* as “Opera”

As discussed above, during *Einstein on the Beach*’s 1976 rehearsal period and European tour, Glass and Wilson promoted their work by deflecting questions about theory and genre, instead emphasizing the novelty of their work by focusing on the idea of process, both as a collaborative creative activity and an aesthetic ideal. During the 1976 tour, which conditioned the promotion and reception of the next three revival productions and codified the work as an opera, critics across Western Europe and in New York responded to *Einstein on the Beach* and to this politically ‘cool’ promotional strategy in a variety of ways, ranging from rapture to exasperation. Nearly all critics, however, had reservations about Wilson and Glass’s claim that *Einstein* was “an opera in four

¹²⁵ Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 88.

acts,” and tracking critical responses in the order in which the opera traveled through Europe and returned home to New York reveals: the roots and impact of critics’ comparison of *Einstein* with Wagner’s *Artwork of the Future*; the power of accumulated references to canonical grand operas to predispose future critics to accept *Einstein* as opera; and the effects of nationality (particularly domestic versus international) on critical responses to *Einstein*’s hybridization of downtown theater and opera. Moreover, reviews depended not only on each writer’s individual response to a work, but also on each critic’s previous exposure to Wilson’s and Glass’s work, and the relative conservatism or liberalism of his or her publication. As Glass later recalled, “Some of the reviewers . . . refused to review it. They said this is not real music making. The French left-wing publications, including *Libération*, loved it, while the right wing hated it.”¹²⁶

As Glass’s example suggests, outside of a desire for recognition on their home turf, French critical reception was of particular importance to him and to Wilson, in part because the primary commissioner of the work—cultural minister and Festival d’automne à Paris director Michel Guy—was French, and in part because *Einstein* began its tour and had the greatest number of performances in the country. The July Avignon premiere set the tone for critical and audience response during the September runs in Venice, Belgrade, and Brussels, and the Paris performances in early October conditioned reception in Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam later that month. Moreover, the success of the two Met shows in November rode to a large extent on European reviewers, whose praise gilded the opera with a cosmopolitan sheen only tastemakers from the countries who invented and developed the genre could provide. Indeed, in its first press release announcing *Einstein*’s American premiere, the Metropolitan Opera introduced the work with the statement, “‘Einstein on the Beach’ had a sensational European tour, opening last summer at the Avignon Festival where it was acclaimed as ‘triumphant.’ It subsequently has been performed at La Fenice in Venice, the Opéra-Comique in Paris, and at the Theatre of Nations BITEF,

¹²⁶ Glass, *Words Without Music*, 297.

Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and had an enormous impact on the music and theatre world.”¹²⁷

Glass and Wilson both had strong professional ties to France in particular: Glass’s formative experiences studying with Nadia Boulanger and, briefly, Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha had occurred while he was living in Paris from 1964–66. Wilson’s earliest triumph with *Deafman Glance* had so endeared him to the French arts establishment that Michel Guy actually approached *him* about funding the project that became *Einstein*. Both artists had built their reputations in other European countries as well, particularly in Italy, the Netherlands, and what was then West Germany. The United States and France, however, were the linchpins of the 1976 reception that secured *Einstein’s* status as the apotheosis of the downtown performing-arts scene and a paradigm-altering moment in opera history. The role of French and American criticism in *Einstein’s* operatic “name game” thus merit special consideration.¹²⁸ In fact, as I will show at the end of this section, the collective impact of these critical “bookends” on either end of the 1976 tour, aided by early academic acceptance of Glass and *Einstein* into musicological reference texts, was strong enough that by the time of the work’s first remount by the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1984, *Einstein’s* landmark

¹²⁷ Press release, Metropolitan Opera Press Department, “American Premiere of Wilson/Glass Opera ‘Einstein on the Beach’ at the Met on November 21st,” October 19, 1976, Box: “Einstein on the Beach,” loose documents, Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York, N.Y.

¹²⁸ I explore the social, professional, and political networking that enabled *Einstein* to form a link between the United States and France in greater depth in the final chapter of this study. Generally, the United States has been essential to *Einstein’s* acceptance as a canonic work for the simple reason that Glass and Wilson hail from and continue to live and work in the U.S., and critics in North America and Europe have thus received *Einstein* not as a cosmopolitan contribution to opera, but rather as an essentially *American* opera. BAM’s 1984 remount of the work solidified its identity as the theatrical apotheosis of artistic experimentation nurtured in 1970s New York, and BAM has maintained this connection to *Einstein* by presenting it in 1992 and 2012. Furthermore, while funding from abroad has largely supported the artists’ careers, they (and in the case of the 1992 and 2012–15 tours, the producers Jedediah Wheeler and Linda Brumbach, respectively) have sought to make inroads with audiences in their home country. French presenters too have maintained a close relationship to the opera, supporting its first rehearsal period in winter of 1976, and giving it world premieres in Avignon in 1976 and Montpellier in 2012. Additionally, French arts organizations presented it at the Festival d’automne à Paris in 1976, at MC/93 Bobigny in 1992, and at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in 2014, the last of which was the only performance to be filmed specifically for viewing by the public.

reputation no longer hinged upon its operatic aspirations, which had originally captured and held critics' attention. "As everybody surely knows by now," the art critic Kay Larson could write in early 1985 with no trace of irony, "*Einstein* is a classic of a genre too new to have a name."¹²⁹

2.5.1 European Reception

The overall trajectory of *Einstein's* reception during its first tour was one of gathering momentum between the Théâtre Municipal and the Met. The opera's presentation at contemporary performing art festivals in Avignon, Paris, Venice, and Belgrade, rather than solely as part of more traditional opera seasons, cushioned its avant-gardism while fueling its trendiness. These four festivals helped Glass's and Wilson's agent Ninon Karlweiss to secure contracts with Belgium's Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Germany's Hamburger Schauspielhaus, and Holland's Rotterdamse Schouwburg and Theater Carré. The Festival d'Avignon in particular also caught the interest of the Metropolitan Opera, thus instigating the performances that fueled *Einstein's* New York celebrity, and providing the necessary combination of prestige and nostalgia to facilitate its first remount at BAM in 1984.

As critical consensus about what *Einstein* was and what it was about built additively over the course of 1976, it makes sense to begin where the opera itself did, in France, and with the critics that hailed from that country, as they provided the vast majority of reviews of these performances. Notably, nearly half of the performances on *Einstein's* tour took place at the Festival d'Avignon in Provence and the Festival d'automne in Paris (Table 2.1). The positive reviews these performances generated throughout the French (as well as the more general European) press, abetted by Wilson's well-established reputation in the country, were a particular boon to the new work's rising celebrity. Indeed, Glass's recollection in his memoir that *Libération* "loved it" is something of an understatement. The left-wing paper, mirroring the three-page *Soho Weekly News* spread that would accompany *Einstein's* Met performances six months later,

¹²⁹ Kay Larson, "The Player and the Game," *New York*, January 7, 1985, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB Publicity," Hamm Archives.

devoted an entire page-and-a-half to the opera, the critic Philippe Gavi gushing, “Every day newspapers relate events that readers will experience only through the reports that are made about them. So, ‘Einstein on the Beach’ is a far more important event than the Olympic games or Giscard’s last speech. We wanted to go on record to stress that something very important, very marvelous was taking place in the field of cultural creation.”¹³⁰ Other critics likewise taken with the show referenced the sensation that *Deafman Glance* had caused in 1971 when, following its European premiere in Nancy, Louis Aragon named Wilson heir to the surrealists. For instance, using this show as a point of reference, Robert Kanters of the ‘limousine liberal’ magazine *Le nouvel observateur* told his readers, “I believe that this is the most successful show and the most beautiful by Wilson since *Deafman Glance*, which made his reputation.”¹³¹ In the United States, Aragon’s open letter in response to this play may seem a document of special interest only to historians, artists, or Wilson enthusiasts, but its consistent reprinting in French *Einstein* programs during both the 1992 and 2012–15 international revival tours suggests that it continues to be a significant purveyor of cultural capital for the French, and perhaps indicates a sense of self-satisfaction at having been a key early (and ongoing) champion of a now internationally celebrated dramaturge.

¹³⁰ Philippe Gavi, “Bob Wilson: Architecte de l’instant: Cinq heures de travail sur le temps, l’espace et les images, sur tout,” *Libération*, August 3, 1976, 10, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives. The original French reads: “Tous les jours, le journal parle d’événements que les lecteurs ne vivront qu’à travers les relations qui en sont faites. Alor, ‘Einstein on the beach’ est un événement, plus important que les jeux olympiques out la dernière déclaration de Giscard. Nous avons voulu marquer le coup indiquer que quelque chose de très important, de très merveilleux était en train de se passer dans le domaine de la création culturelle.”

¹³¹ Robert Kanters, “Einstein à Avignon: Dans l’immense foire à l’ancienne du Festival d’Avignon, une exception de marque: ‘Einstein on the Beach,’ le plus beau spectacle de Bob Wilson depuis ‘Le Regard du sourd,’” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, August 2, 1976, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives. The original French reads: “Je crois que c’est le spectacle le plus réussi et le plus beau de Wilson depuis ‘Le Regard du sourd,’ qui a fait sa réputation.” This same review was concurrently published in *L’Express*.

Year	Presenter (Festival/Institution)	Venue	City	Country	Dates
1976	Le XXX ^e Festival d'Avignon	Théâtre Municipal	Avignon	France	25–30 July
	La Biennale di Venezia	Teatro la Fenice	Venice	Italy	13–17 September
	Belgrade International Theater Festival (BITEF)	Théâtre des Nations	Belgrade	Yugoslavia	22–23 September
	L'Opéra National de la Monnaie	Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie	Brussels	Belgium	28–29 September
	Le Festival d'Automne	Opéra-Comique	Paris	France	4–13 October
	Deutsches Schauspielhaus	Hamburger Schauspielhaus	Hamburg	Germany	17–18 October
	Rotterdamse Schouwburg	Rotterdamse Schouwburg	Rotterdam	Netherlands	22–23 October
	Amsterdam	Theater Carré	Amsterdam	Netherlands	26 October
	Metropolitan Opera	Metropolitan Opera House	New York	United States	21, 28 November
1984	Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music	BAM Opera House	Brooklyn	United States	11–23 December
1992	Princeton University	McCarter Theater	Princeton	United States	24–25 July
	Oper Frankfurt	Die Oper am Theaterplatz	Frankfurt	Germany	19–22 August
	Melbourne International Arts Festival	State Theater	Melbourne	Australia	17–20 September
	Gran Teatre del Liceu	El Liceu	Barcelona	Spain	29 September–3 October
	Teatro Madrid	Teatro Real	Madrid	Spain	7–10 October
	Art Sphere	Art Sphere Theater	Tokyo	Japan	18–25 October
	Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music	BAM Opera House	Brooklyn	United States	19–23 November
	Le Festival d'Automne (MC93 Bobigny)	Maison de la Culture de la Seine-Saint-Denis	Bobigny	France	11–21 December
2012	UMS, University of Michigan (previews)	Power Center	Ann Arbor	United States	20–22 January
	Opéra et Orchestre National de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon	Opéra Berlioz le Corum	Montpellier	France	16–18 March
	Fondazione I TEATRI di Reggio Emilia	Teatro Valli	Reggio Emilia	Italy	24–25 March
	The Barbican	The Barbican Theatre	London	England	4–6 May
	Luminato, Toronto Festival of Arts and Creativity	Sony Centre for the Performing Arts	Toronto	Canada	8–10 June
	Brooklyn Academy of Music	BAM Opera House	Brooklyn	United States	14–16, 19–23 September
	Cal Performances University of California	Zellerbach Hall	Berkeley	United States	26–28 October
	The National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA)	Teatro del Palacio de Bellas Artes	Mexico City	Mexico	9–11 November
2013	De Nederlandse Opera/The Amsterdam Music Theatre	Het Muziektheater	Amsterdam	Netherlands	5–7, 10–12 January
	Hong Kong Arts Festival	Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre	Hong Kong	China	8–10 March
	Arts Centre Melbourne	State Theatre	Melbourne	Australia	31 July–4 August
	LA Opera	Dorothy Chandler Pavilion	Los Angeles	United States	11–13 October
2014	Le Festival d'automne	Théâtre du Chaletet	Paris	France	8–12 January
	Berliner Festspiele	Haus der Berliner Festspiele, Grosse Bühne	Berlin	Germany	3, 5–7 March
2015	Asia Culture Center	Asian Arts Theatre	Gwangju	South Korea	25 October

Table 2.1 *Einstein* production history, Glass/Wilson version, 1976–2015.

In fact, as a result of Wilson's works' regular appearances in France, some critics seemed to assume that their readership would be familiar enough with the American director's idiosyncratic use of the term 'opera' that the genre designation merited no special consideration, while others were careful to inform readers not to expect traditional opera in spite of *Einstein's* presentation in Avignon's Théâtre Municipal (now the Opéra Grand Avignon) and the Parisian Opéra-Comique.¹³² Philippe Gavi of *Libération* and Nicole Salabert of *La Marseillaise*, for instance, both carefully tagged their reference to *Einstein* as an opera with the caveat that Wilson called all of his works by that title.¹³³ Several writers, however, shrugged off the question of the work's ontology not as a matter of little concern, but rather as an indicator of a specifically American iconoclasm toward traditional genres and forms of which they tacitly *approved*. "After three months of work in downtown New York," drama critic Guy Dumur told *Le nouvel observateur* readers the day before *Einstein's* premiere, "rehearsals went on for days and days in the only enclosed area of the festival, far from the Provençal light, as if these very pale Yankees wanted, more than anything else, to deny a thirty-year tradition. But [Avignon Festival director Jean] Vilar's

¹³² Several reviewers did not comment on Wilson's use of the term 'opera' at all, including: Dominique Jamet, "Au Theatre Municipal d'Avignon: 'Einstein on the beach' (Bis, ter et boules de gomme)," *Aurore*, July 28, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "EOB Aurore 7/28/76," Robert Wilson Papers; Jean-Jacques Lerrant, "La création de 'Einstein on the beach': Cinq heures de fascination et de rêve au festival d'Avignon," *Le progress*, July 27, 1976, Series I, Box 124, Folder: "EOB – Artservice – Press," Robert Wilson Papers.; Jean Abel, "Avignon: 'Einstein on the beach: Très remarquable," *Le Provençal*, July 27, 1976, 14, Series I, Box 124, Folder: "EOB – Artservice – Press"; and Matthieu Galey, "L'oreille de l'aveugle," *Nouvelles Littéraires*, July 29, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.

¹³³ Nicole Salabert, "Einstein on the beach: une performance," *La Marseillaise*, July 28, 1976, Series I, Box 124, Folder: "EOB – Artservice – Press," Robert Wilson Papers; Gavi, "Bob Wilson: Architecte de l'instant" (my italics). Salabert writes, "To attend a four-hour-and-forty-minute performance without intermission is already a performance, in the athletic sense of the term. Doubtless not for R. Wilson, whose operas (*which he calls most of his works*) can last twelve hours or even seven days and seven nights." Likewise, Gavi writes, "The opera, as Bob Wilson insists on calling his works, lasts five hours." The original French for each reads, respectively: "Assister sans interruption à un spectacle durant quatre heures quarante c'est déjà une performance, au sensé sportif du terme. Sans doute pas pour R. Wilson, dont certains opéras (il appelle ainsi la plupart de ses oeuvres) durent douze heures ou même sept jours et sept nuits"; "L'Opéra, Bob Wilson tient à appeler ses oeuvres des opéras, dure cinq heures."

successor, Paul Puaux, has but one motto for his festival: ‘Freedom or death.’”¹³⁴ The following day, writing in the far-left *L’Humanité*, Jean-Pierre Léonardini expressed a similar view of American artists. “Can almost mathematical premeditation go hand-in-hand with a quest for transcendence?” he asked his readers rhetorically. “Of course,” he continued, “and what is more American?”¹³⁵ The day after *Einstein’s* last Avignon performance, the critic at *Le Rouge* articulated this attitude even more clearly: “The significance of American artists such as P[hilip] Glass and B[ob] Wilson comes from the innovative approach they take to their art, against the traditional form of Opera.”¹³⁶ Taking into account that, at least among left-leaning critics, *Einstein’s* challenge to tradition was considered more admirable than its ability to conform to it, the fact that few critics were willing to hail the work as an outright opera does not (as Gavi’s elated review indicated earlier) mean that *Einstein* was considered any less successful by the French critics who reviewed it, particularly among the young and intellectually-inclined demographic of spectators who frequented the Festival d’Avignon.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Guy Dumur, “Vilar est mort, vive Vilar!” *Le nouvel observateur*, July 26, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.. The original French reads: “Après trois mois de travail en plein New York, on a répété des jours et des jours dans le seul lieu clos du festival, loin de la lumière provençale, comme si ces Yankees très pâles voulaient, eux plus que d’autres, nier une tradition de trente années. Mais le successeur de Vilar, Paul Puaux, n’a qu’une devise pour son festival: ‘La liberté ou la mort.’”

¹³⁵ Jean-Pierre Léonardini, “Une conjuration non violente ‘Einstein on the beach’ au théâtre municipal,” *Humanité*, July 27, 1976, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives. The original French reads: “Une préméditation quasi mathématique peut-elle aller de pair avec la quête d’une transcendance? Bien sûr, et quoi de plus américain?”

¹³⁶ D. Rouvière, “AVIGNON 76 Un opéra de Bob Wilson et Phil Glass: ‘Einstein on the beach,’” *Le Rouge*, July 31, 1976, “Einstein on the beach, mise en scène de Robert Wilson [Document d’archives]: dossier de presse, RPFA – 1976 support: dossier de coupures de presse, Maison Jean Vilar.

¹³⁷ Claude Samuel, “Avignon: l’opéra qui vient d’ailleurs,” *Le Point*, August 2, 1976, and René Cenni, “Avec Bob Wilson, la trentaine, triomphante du festival d’Avignon,” *Nice-Matin*, July 27, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “1976 EINSTEIN,” Robert Wilson Papers. Claude Samuel was one of the few critics who did make this claim. More common, however, were opinions like that of René Cenni, who wrote, “‘Einstein on the Beach’ may not be theater; it is certainly not an opera in a lyrical sense of the term. But it is an eye-opening fairy tale, and an extraordinary means of cognition.” The original French reads: “‘Einstein on the beach,’ ce n’est peut-être pas du théâtre; certainement pas un

It is perhaps a bit ironic, then, that the single French review that ultimately had the greatest impact on *Einstein's* reception, coloring the work's promotion and criticism with each revival production, was not one that praised it for its beauty and iconoclasm, but rather one that claimed for the work the right to stand alongside the most traditional of operas. The week after *Einstein's* Avignon run, a critic at *Le Monde*, France's primary newspaper of record alongside *Le Parisien* and *Le Figaro*, wrote impressionistically:

The fragmented duration of Mozartian opera (via recitatives, pauses within arias) and the continuum of the Wagnerian ceremony have substituted a freed temporal flow, stressed only by limitations (beginning and end) of the show, limits which, in the [Ring] Tetralogy, tend to be blurred. The public must be able to leave the auditorium to eat and sleep: basic amenities granted to the body. With this, one could perhaps think that *Einstein on the Beach*, recently created at Avignon . . . is part of the Wagnerian heritage. More precisely: Bob Wilson has taken apart Wagner and split him in two. On the one hand, the theoretical contribution, to exploit; on the other hand (negligible), the dramatic variable. Wilson indeed shows, in the most concrete way in the world, that opera is nothing other than time and space.¹³⁸

The writer presents Wagner's legacy, or "l'héritage wagnérien," as having both theoretical and dramatic components: converting entertainment into ceremony,

opéra au sens lyrique du terme. Mais c'est un conte merveilleux à ne pas dormir debout, et c'est un extraordinaire moyen de connaissance."

¹³⁸ A. R., "Trois temps dans l'espace du théâtre musical," *Le Monde*, August 5, 1976, 9, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "EOB Le Monde 8/5/76"; Claude Baignères, "Einstein rêvé par Bob Wilson: fascinante invitation au voyage," *Le Figaro*, July 27, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "E.O.B. 7/27/76, 'Le Figaro,'" Robert Wilson Papers. Because *Le Monde* identifies A. R. only by his or her initials, it is difficult to tell whether he or she is a theater or music critic, but because Jacques Lonchamp served as the paper's primary music critic until 1990, it is likely that A. R. was instead a theater critic. The original French reads: "A la durée morcelée de l'opéra mozartien (à-coups du récitatif, pauses des airs), le continuum de la cérémonie wagnérienne a substitué un flux temporel libéré, scandé seulement par les limites (début et fin) de la représentation, limites qui, dans la Tétralogie, tendent à s'estomper. Il faut bien que le public quitte la salle pour manger et dormir. Simples commodités concédées au corps. En cela on peut penser peut-être qu'*Einstein on the Beach*, récemment créé à Avignon . . . s'inscrit dans l'héritage wagnérien. Plus précisément: Bob Wilson a démonté Wagner et l'a scindé en deux. D'un côté, l'apport théorique, à exploiter. De l'autre, négligeable, la variable dramatique. Wilson montre en effet, le plus concrètement du monde, que l'opéra ce n'est rien d'autre que du temps et de l'espace." Lest it appear that only left-leaning cultural critics approved of *Einstein*, Claude Baignères of *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde's* center-right competitor, also loved *Einstein*, though he refrained from referring to it as an opera, simply identifying it as "un spectacle."

and replacing set pieces with continuous dramatic action. *Einstein*, in the critic's opinion, is a stripped-down version of "la cérémonie wagnérienne," one that all but does away with "la variable dramatique" common to both Mozartian and Wagnerian opera (i.e., the narrative content), thus revealing time and space as opera's foundational components. Though, with the exception of *Einstein*'s American operatic forbear *Four Saints in Three Acts*, both Glass and Wilson denied that *Einstein* was intended to engage operatic history or theory, by writing that Wilson "has taken Wagner apart and split him in two," the critic implied that the director intentionally created *Einstein* as a response to Wagner's total art works, initiating a trend that has continued to shape Wilson reception, and creating a useful self-promotional toehold for Glass in selling his first opera. Wagner was, after all, first and foremost a composer, and although Glass was irritated that Wilson commanded the majority of critical attention in Europe in 1976, reviews like that in *Le Monde* provided him with a point of comparison that he could leverage to his own advantage.

One might reasonably ask, however, why the critic may have so explicitly compared *Einstein* with the work of Wagner, rather than the aesthetically closer operas by Brecht and Weill or Thomson and Stein, which surfaced in other reviews. And is the comparison to Wagner (and its relative appropriateness) useful in understanding *Einstein*'s perceived importance as a theatrical landmark? In answer to this second question, linking Wilson and Glass to the nineteenth-century opera innovator first offered critics and their readers a way to understand an artwork whose integration of multiple performing arts was familiar from opera, but whose aesthetic impulses were foreign to their experience of that genre. Later, it offered administrators promoting revival productions with a convenient foil against which to convey *Einstein*'s innovativeness in 1976 to potential ticket buyers in 1984, 1992, and 2012. The Wagner connection also provided a rationale for historians tracing Wilson's and Glass's careers and the critical coming-of-age of American minimalist music to integrate it into linear historical narratives of music, theater, and music theater. It is worth noting, however, that it does not seem to have been particularly important to *Einstein*'s early critics that it conform in its precise details to the

ideal Artwork of the Future Wagner envisioned in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*. The fact that Wilson and Glass offered a fresh and appealing approach to opera that integrated many artistic disciplines united in their aesthetic aims was enough to generate and sustain the comparison. Indeed, once the comparison had been made, the idea that *Einstein* was a postmodern *Gesamtkunstwerk* became not the subject of an aesthetic or music-theoretical debate, but more a shorthand way to communicate the piece's generally agreed upon critical and academic reputation as a seminal American contribution to music theater.

To return to the question of why the *Le Monde* critic may have made the connection between *Einstein* and Wagner's operatic experiments in the first place, the interdisciplinary and intermedial aesthetics of Wilson's so-called 'theater of images' does present a rough parallel (if an imperfect one) with Wagner's attempts to create music theater that fully integrated all of the arts. Also, like Wagner (and *unlike* many of Wilson's downtown peers, who allowed their economic circumstances to determine the scale of their productions), the director envisioned his original works on a grandiose scale that both flew in the face of operatic convention and was frequently financially prohibitive. Glass, lacking Wilson's prestige in the field of theater, was (ironically, given his role as *Einstein's* composer) only implicitly included in the comparison, though one German writer did go so far as to compare the minimalist score to that of *Parsifal*.¹³⁹ Perhaps more important than any textual comparison, however, was the context in which the French critic received the new American work.

A week before the review of *Einstein* appeared in *Le Monde*, the newspaper's music critic Jacques Lonchamp printed a review entitled "Scandal at Bayreuth" that described a near riot that French director Patrice Chéreau and conductor Pierre Boulez had provoked with their centennial version of the Ring Cycle at the

¹³⁹ Klaus Geitel, "New Yorks Opernfans stürmten die Premiere von 'Einstein on the Beach,'" *Berliner Morgenpost*, November 25, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "Berliner Morgenpost, 11/25/76, EOB," Robert Wilson Papers. Geitel writes, "Mysteriously enough, Glass again succeeds in presenting and interpreting music of great similarity to Wagner's *Parsifal* in modern and original terms." The original German reads: "Auf mysteriöse Weise gelingt es Glass immer wieder, seiner Musik auf eigene und heutige Weise ähnlich verklärende Wirkungen abzugewinnen wie Wagner in den statischen, in sich kreisenden Entwicklungen der 'Parsifal' Musik."

Bayreuth Festival during the last week of July in 1976. This was the same week that *Einstein* played to enthusiastic (largely French) audiences in Avignon. Seen in this light, the *Le Monde* art critic's Wagner comparison may therefore have been the serendipitous product of French critical attention focused on both its own festivals and the French infiltration of Bayreuth in 1976 (and the nationalistic pride Chéreau's and Boulez's directorship occasioned). This is particularly likely given that Chéreau's industrial revolution-era reimaging of the Ring mythology served as a powerful reminder that the German composer's operas, in spite of their often-conservative staging and unfortunate association with Nazism, had been artistically radical in their own day.¹⁴⁰

When the *Einstein* company decamped for the next stop on the tour, La Biennale di la Venezia, Sergio Colomba of the Bolognese newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* picked up on and embellished the *Le Monde* review, telling readers during the opera's run in Venice, "In August, at the Avignon Festival, it sparked great enthusiasm: *Le Monde* spoke of 'time within time,' even identifying Robert Wilson as the sole heir of Wagner."¹⁴¹ At the same time, *la Repubblica* critic Ugo Volli wrote that Glass's musical contribution to *Einstein* was "key to the provocative central element of this work [quest'opera] that *Le Monde* has called Wagnerian," likewise keeping the Wagner comparison alive in the press while highlighting *Einstein's* generic ambiguity.¹⁴² The critic at *La Stampa* similarly

¹⁴⁰ See Jacques Lonchampt, "Scandale à Bayreuth," *Le Monde*, July 27, 1976. Although neither Lonchampt nor A. R. mentions the concurrent nature of the Bayreuth and Avignon Festivals, nor does A. R., in the later *Einstein* review, note the irony that a non-traditional interpretation of a traditional opera cycle (The Ring) was the cause of a near-riot, while an experimental work posing as classical opera (*Einstein*) won praise from audiences and critics alike. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that the critic who reviewed *Einstein* was aware of the French production of The Ring and approached the Glass-Wilson opera with that context in mind.

¹⁴¹ Sergio Colomba, "Attesissimo debutto di 'Einstein on the beach' alla Biennale-Teatro: Bob Wilson: lo spazio e il tempo," *Il Resto del Carlino*, September 15, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. The original Italian reads: "In agosto, al Festival di Avignone, aveva scatenato grandi entusiasmi: Le Monde aveva parlato di 'tempo dentro il tempo,' identificando in Robert Wilson addirittura l'unico erede di Wagner."

¹⁴² Ugo Volli, "Sogno e mito sull'ultima spiaggia," *la Repubblica*, September 15, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. The original Italian reads: "la musica di Phil Glass, elementare fino alla provocazione elemento centrale di quest'opera che Le Monde ha definito wagneriana."

adopted a sympathetic, if confused, stance toward *Einstein*, stating that, “‘Einstein on the Beach’ . . . is definitely an opera in as much that both Wilson and Philip Glass may be considered its composers (as Andrew de Groat, the choreographer, may be),” but acknowledging that Wilson does not fit the traditional role of a librettist, and that *Einstein* itself is hardly a typical opera.¹⁴³ In likewise struggling to convey the ways in which *Einstein* adhered to and disregarded operatic convention, but coming down more decidedly on the side of skepticism, the *Il Gazzettino* critic Mario Messini completed a picture that repeated throughout the European tour¹⁴⁴: a few critics argued that *Einstein* was a legitimate opera, and some shrugged off the label as a well-established Wilsonian affectation, but most often, writers openly struggled to communicate what *Einstein* was, as its inclusion of Glass’s score and key operatic conventions (especially the use of singers) placed it outside the bounds of Wilson’s earlier plays. As a result, while many critics warned their readers not to take the subtitle “an opera in four acts” too seriously, many also included suggestive descriptors that tied *Einstein* to operas by Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, or Wagner.

European criticism overall during the summer and fall of 1976, then, was characterized by a surprisingly high variation in reviewers’ interest in engaging *Einstein* as an opera, even given Glass’s (largely correct) estimation that most of the news sources who sent critics to review the work were politically moderate or left-leaning and that they were therefore predisposed to give its artists the benefit of the doubt. One Belgian critic, for instance, opined, “Here one can talk about opera if only taking into account the diversity of the means used: song,

¹⁴³ Alberto Blandi, “Biennale-teatro a Venezia: Tutto Einstein per cinque ore con Bob Wilson: Uno spettacolo di immagini e suoni,” *La Stampa*, September 15, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “1976 EINSTEIN,” Robert Wilson Papers.

¹⁴⁴ Mario Messini, “Biennale,” *Il Gazzettino*. Messini writes, “Glass’s musical ideas manage, at their best, to act as a sustaining factor in the opera,” so, “in spite of the continuous presence of sounds, we do not find ourselves at a new musical opera, but rather at a gigantic productive invention which takes over every single aspect of the performance.” The original Italian reads, “le idee musicali di Glass invece sono colonne sonore divulgative, spesso grevi e prevaricanti e finiscono per svolgere, ivitial, più, la mera funzione di supporto coesivo dello spettacolo. . . . Ancora una volta, insomma, nonostante la continua presenza del suoni, non ci troviamo di fronte ad una nuova opera musicale, ma ad una colossale invenzione registica, che finisce per invadere ogni aspetto dello spettacolo.”

mime, dance. . . . *Einstein on the Beach* has nothing in common with *Fidelio* or *Aida*," while another placed the Glass–Wilson collaboration in the company not of opera, but rather of spectacles by figures ranging from the American and British playwrights Neil Simon and Harold Pinter to the circus impresarios Barnum and Bailey.¹⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, the Dutch critic Jaap Joppe gestured in both operatic and theatrical directions, echoing the *Le Monde* reviewer with the observation, "'Einstein on the Beach,' opera, musical theater, total theater, whatever one wants to call it, is a surprising and particularly confusing phenomenon," and then pivoting to invoke Bertolt Brecht with the statement, "the opera, to use the word that Wilson and Glass themselves employ, also seeks an alienation effect that is indeed achieved."¹⁴⁶

For every critic that either shrugged off Wilson's crying wolf, so to speak, with the term opera or vacillated regarding *Einstein's* ability to claim the genre, however, there were an equal number—particularly in Germany—willing to give Wilson and Glass the benefit of the doubt. Gerhard Koch of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for example, told his readers, "the work is described as an opera in four acts," and "this work, which cannot be accurately described as mixed media or collage, is exactly so structured: with clearly defined scenes, instrumental and vocal interplays and ballet interludes. Therefore the description

¹⁴⁵ P. A., "Spectacles: Ni Golfes Enchanteurs, ni Démonstrations Mathématiques: Einstein on the Beach," *La Drapeau Rouge*, October 6, 1976, and "'Einstein on the Beach' seeks to link boredom, creativity," *Brussels Times*, October 6, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. The original French of *La Drapeau Rouge* article reads: "On peut ici parler d'opéra si l'on ne tient compte que de la diversité des moyens utilisés: chant, mime, danse. . . . Einstein on the Beach n'a pourtant rien en commun avec *Fidélío* ou *Aïda*." The unidentified *Times* critic muses, "To our modern, fragmented, Time-Magazine mentality, with an attention span of a four-year-old child, *Einstein on the Beach* is repulsive. It's reason to get up and move onto something new, which raises the question the Wilson-Glass production asks most fundamentally. Is theater an excuse for shock tactics? Is it only a show place for Neil Simons who sends us home with belly aches? Or for Pinters who dazzle us, with ever-clever double entendre? Or for Barnum and Baileys who belt us with newer and newer acts? Is the only catalyst of insight surprise?"

¹⁴⁶ Jaap Joppe, "Einstein on the Beach fenomenaal muziektheater," *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, October 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers. The original Dutch reads: "'Einstein on the Beach,' opera, muziektheater, totaaltheater, hoe men het ook wil noemen, is een verrassend en vooral verwarrend fenomeen. . . . de opera, om dat woord, dat Wilson en Glass zelf gebruiken, ook maar te bezigen, beoogt een vervreemdingseffect dat weliswaar wordt bereikt."

of the genre on the program note is to be taken far more literally than presumed” by those familiar with Wilson’s work.¹⁴⁷ The *Berliner Morgenpost* music writer Klaus Geitel, vying with the critics at *Libération* for most laudatory review and likewise echoing *Le Monde* by applying the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* to *Einstein*, went so far as to indicate that artists like Wilson and Glass were the most important, but unrecognized, theatrical figures of their generation. Dismissing concurrent attempts to revitalize opera by the German-Argentine composer Mauricio Kagel and the Hungarian composer György Ligeti, he maintained that Wilson’s and Glass’s unorthodox approach to audience etiquette brought to mind “the old, ancient times of the Italian opera,” and that Wilson still pursued the “old dream” of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. “The standing ovation accorded to Wilson and Glass was seldom given a performance such as [*Madama*] *Butterfly* or *Tannhäuser*,” he concluded. “The public was quite aware that here was an epoch-making happening: the dawn of a new era of the music theater, an era of an unmistakably American influence.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Gerhard R. Koch, “Geschichten aus dem Raumzeitwald: Robert Wilsons ‘Einstein on the Beach’ im Hamburger Schauspielhaus,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 19, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Oct. 19 ‘76”; “Kultur: Theater: Robert Wilson, Genie in Zeitlupe,” *Der Spiegel* no. 42, 1976, 218, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “1976 EINSTEIN,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original German of the Koch article reads: “Gleichwohl wird das Werk als ‘Oper in vier Akten’ bezeichnet. In der Tat ist das Werk, dem mit Begriffen wie ‘mixed media’ und ‘Collage’ nicht recht beizukommen ist, exakt strukturiert: mit klar gegliederten Szenen, instrumental-vokalen Zwischenspielen und Balletteinlagen. Die Gattungsbezeichnung ist wörtlicher zu nehmen, als es zunächst den Anschein hat.” The critic at *Der Spiegel* similarly notes that *Einstein* was “the first work in which Wilson has really committed to the category of opera,” citing the music and dance contributions of Philip Glass and Andrew de Groat. The original German of the *Der Spiegel* article reads, “‘Einstein On The Beach’ [ist] das erste Werk, in dem sich Wilson wirklich auf die Kategorie Oper verpflichtet hat (Musik: Philip Glass, Choreographie: Andrew deGroat) gliedert sich so: Das Stück hat vier Akte.”

¹⁴⁸ Klaus Geitel, “New Yorks Opernfans stürmten die Premiere von ‘Einstein on the Beach,’” *Berliner Morgenpost*, November 25, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Berliner Morgenpost, 11/25/76, EOB,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original German reads: “Eines schönsten Tages wird man wohl darüber staunen, dass die beiden bislang wichtigsten Beiträge zum zeitgenössischen Musiktheater unserer Tage außerhalb des Blickfelds der musikinteressierten Öffentlichkeit entstanden: die ‘Frauen von Troja,’ die Elizabeth Swados für André Serbans ‘La Mama’-Compagnie Klang werden leiß—und in dieser Oper von Glass und Wilson. Neben ihrem Ernst und Spruch nehmen sich selbst die avanciertesten Versuch der Modern bei Kagel und Ligeti aus wie das in Szene gesetzte Achselzucken genialer Versager. . . . Der Begriff ‘Opera’ visierte bei Wilson mehr als nur

While Geitel's prediction of the ascendancy of American musical theater was not a view that was unanimously expressed by his fellow European critics, it does point up the degree to which the idea of a new revolutionary in opera coming along once every century or so—Wagner in the nineteenth century, Wilson in the twentieth—impacted critical assessment of unconventional operas. Geitel's prediction also reveals the extent to which nationality colored his and his colleagues' reception of the work. Namely, regardless of their attitude toward the opera, European writers filtered *Einstein* and its perceived significance as an opera through an understanding of the work as not just a new approach to musical theater, but also as essentially *American*. Critics in the United States necessarily took a substantially different view of *Einstein* as opera, for it was a homegrown work that, by traveling throughout Europe, acted as a cultural ambassador representing the cutting edge of American art. *Einstein* also invited consideration of how it fit within the specific historical trajectory of earlier American attempts to write operas that could stand alongside their European counterparts as works of equal quality, rather than as aspiring but ultimately second-rate products of a former European colony. Key tendencies, however, did carry over from Europe to the United States, particularly disagreement over what *Einstein* was and the comparisons with the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

2.5.2 American Reception

Writing almost exclusively for New York-based publications, American music and theater critics in 1976 were divided in their attitudes toward *Einstein*. Their position as cultural natives led them, on the one hand, to be less hesitant about

den vollgepackten Orchestergraben und die aufgesperrten Singmünder auf der Bühne an. Für ihn war 'Oper' ein griffiges Wort für die Einheit aller in einem kolossalen Werk integrierten künstlerischen Kräfte. Auch bei Wilson wird der alte Traum vom Gesamtkunstwerk weitergeträumt. . . . Er nutzt voll seine Mechanismen, um sich dramatisch zu artikulieren. . . . Dann geht man leer aus—oder hinaus ins Foyer, isst, trinkt, plaudert eine Weile und kehrt dann zurück ins Parkett wie in den kruden altitalienischen Opernzeiten. . . . Als es auf Mitternacht ging und der Schlussvorhang langsam fiel, war die Metropolitan denn auch annähernd so voll besetzt wie zu Anfang. Man brachte Wilson und Glass stehend Ovationen dar, wie sie selten selbst eine 'Butterfly' oder ein 'Tannhäuser' in New York erlebt haben dürften. Das Publikum war sich offensichtlich darüber im klaren, einem Epoche machenden Ereignis beigewohnt zu haben: dem Anbruch eines neuen Zeitalters des Musiktheaters, das unverwechselbar amerikanische Züge zu tragen scheint."

objecting to elements of the work they found pretentious or gratuitous. On the other hand, some also basked in the glow of European praise. In general, whether American critics lauded *Einstein* as a paradigm-changing opera or less forgivingly identified it as downtown theater hoping to pass itself off as opera depended largely on which generic conventions they found more important: structure and performance forces or aesthetics. Those in the former camp, like the novelist and essayist Edmund White, accepted *Einstein* as a bona fide opera because of its incorporation of all of the performing arts, particularly music. “Although Wilson has called his previous works ‘operas’ by way of acknowledging their length and epic grandeur,” White wrote in an early issue of the gay-oriented literary magazine *Christopher Street*, “*Einstein* is his first piece to merit the designation in a conventional sense, for it alone has a score that runs through every moment of the evening.”¹⁴⁹ John Rockwell of the *New York Times* took the same view, claiming that *Einstein* “is more legitimately an opera than anything [Wilson] has done so far” because Glass “provided nearly five hours of continuous music to accompany the action.”¹⁵⁰ Reviewers in the other camp, however, sought to deny it entry to the genre on account of its extreme aesthetic departure from audience expectations, frequently citing Wilson’s habit of referring to all of his works as operas. For instance, Martin Gottfried of the *New York Post* claimed, “Only in the semantic sense (‘opera’ meaning a work) does Wilson do opera. Metropolitan Opera subscribers wouldn’t put up with it for a minute amid their regular ‘Aida’ and ‘Rigoletto’ and ‘Tosca’ diet nor should they. Those are what they pay to see.”¹⁵¹

The majority of writers, however, adopted a hesitant stance between these two positions. Even Gottfried, who was insistent that Wilson’s work “must be called musical theater,” was quick to temper his skepticism toward *Einstein*’s operatic legitimacy by defending Wilson as “one of the great theater minds of our time,”

¹⁴⁹ Edmund White, “Einstein on the Beach,” *Christopher Street*, January 1977, 53, Series I, Box 125, Robert Wilson Papers.

¹⁵⁰ John Rockwell, “‘Einstein,’ New Wilson Opera, Taking Shape,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1976, 32, Series I, Box 114, Folder: “EOB – MOMA, Tour – 1976,” Robert Wilson Papers.

¹⁵¹ Martin Gottfried, “Robert Wilson’s Extraordinary Art,” *New York Post*, November 27, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.

expressing frustration that the American theater establishment continued to snub his unconventional work because of fear about its commercial appeal, and concluding his review with the provocative statement, “If we [Americans] do not provide a means of support for [native artists like Wilson], we are not entitled to consider ourselves civilized.”¹⁵² The political overtones of this last statement are particularly indicative of the tenor of New York reception of the work, for unlike European critics, American writers were more immediately concerned with the aesthetic and socio-economic implications of opera—a commercially unsupportable enterprise that since the late nineteenth century had been the province of the wealthy and well-educated—and the related deficiency of governmental funding for non-commercial art in the United States. For that reason, the idea of *Einstein* as an expression of a fundamentally American artistic and cultural sensibility did not arise in early domestic reception as it had in European reviews, while concerns about its commercial viability at home, the symbolic weight of its performances at the Met, and its comparability with more traditional operas dominated. Indeed, *Village Voice* executive editor and theater writer Ross Wetzsteon told his readers, “Like much contemporary art, this opera seems to be largely ‘about’ itself—its origins, its language, its forms.”¹⁵³ While Wetzsteon’s readers would likely have read “contemporary art” through the lens of the intellectual and aesthetic currents of New York’s downtown art scene, as the alternative weekly hailed from the neighborhood, he and his colleagues at establishment publications like *The New York Times* consistently responded to *Einstein* as a nationally unmarked participant in the international avant-garde. In doing so, Wetzsteon, along with Gottfried, White, and the *Times*’ music and theater critics, among others, implicitly asserted Glass’s and Wilson’s right to play on the same field as European composers and dramaturges. As Gottfried’s earlier statement connecting generous artistic funding to civilized societies implies, presenting *Einstein* as a cosmopolitan work of high stature also provided ammunition for Wilson’s defenders to call for domestic support on his behalf.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ross Wetzsteon, “Theatre Journal: The Making of a Masterpiece Blah Blah Blah Blah Blah,” *Village Voice*, April 12, 1976, Box: “1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy),” Folder: “TOUR – EOB Press,” Hamm Archives.

Unsurprisingly, those critics who drew the most attention to the symbolic importance of the Metropolitan Opera performances within the context of American institutions hailed from and served the downtown scene itself, and it was these critics more than any others who took *Le Monde's* cue and compared Wilson's and Glass's accomplishment with those of Richard Wagner. "New operas that are both intellectually respectable and decently popular simply are not forthcoming. Yet the idea of 'opera' remains our principal repository for a supra-rational theatre of style and symbol," John Rockwell, writing under the pen name David Sargent, wrote in a polemic *Village Voice* review of the Met premiere.¹⁵⁴ "Both Wilson and Glass work in a manner that can easily be called Wagnerian," he continued. "Wagner, of course, was the most visionary reformer in the whole, 400-year history of opera." Allowing that *Einstein's* audience had thus far been limited mainly to "European sensation-seekers, students, devoted avant-gardists, a few rich patrons, and a few political radicals," and that it would be easy to be dismissive about the trendiness of that demographic, he instead defended *Einstein* by cautioning naysayers, "Wagner was trendy in his day, too," claiming that if Glass and Wilson could only find "an impresario of imagination and energy who believes in it and will spread it to its audience" as Angelo Neumann did for Wagner in the late nineteenth century, their opera might find success outside the confines of its home city.¹⁵⁵

Sargent (a.k.a. Rockwell) was hardly the only critic to make the Wagner connection in a bid for *Einstein* to be recognized as a major American contribution to the operatic canon. *The Soho Weekly News* devoted an extraordinary three-page spread to the opera on the occasion of its Met homecoming, including five articles, three of which invoked Wagnerism in

¹⁵⁴ David Sargent, "The Met Will Dance to a Mysterious Tune," *Village Voice*, November 22, 1976, 53, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "EOB – ARTSERVICE – PRESS," Robert Wilson Papers. See also John Rockwell, *Outsider: John Rockwell on the Arts, 1967–2006* (Limelight Editions: Pompton Plains, NJ, 2006), 88–9. In a note on the reprint of this article in the book, Rockwell explains, "This article appeared under the byline David Sargent, a pen name I used for articles written either for money against *The New York Times* policy (like a music column for *Vogue* magazine) or when I was unable to get an article I wanted to write accepted for publication by the *Times*. The *Times Magazine* rejected an article about Wilson, Glass, and *Einstein*, so I turned to *The Village Voice*."

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

connection with the new work. As in much of the European criticism, it was (ironically) Wilson's contribution and not Glass's that led April Kingsley to call *Einstein* "a totally dimensional collage, a visual and auditory *gesamtkunstwerk*," opening her review with the statement, "I dare say that, even if you were deaf, you'd find *Einstein on the Beach* a wholly satisfying aesthetic experience."¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Gerald Rabkin identified Wilson's grand visual gestures as "the most praiseworthy quality of Wilson's work: the ability to make us see and hear freshly by returning our sense of unfrenzied, contemplative inner rhythms. And this quality," he concludes, "is easily lost amid the public clamor and the Wagnerian ambition."¹⁵⁷ Finally, Robb Baker countered Rabkin's invocation of Wagner to complain of *Einstein's* grandiosity with an opposing invocation of his own: "I would guess Max Reinhardt's grand-scale theatrical productions had something of this magic, or the Bayreuth mountings of Wagner, but I can only guess at that."¹⁵⁸ Giving Glass his due, Edmund White further strengthened the Wilson–Glass–Wagner link with his review in *Christopher Street*: "Just as Wagnerism dominated the last part of the nineteenth century," he asserted, "in the same way Wilsonism represents a monumental vision of life and all the arts that I predict will become the strongest force of the future. . . . Though Glass sounds nothing like Wagner and altogether lacks Wagner's searching chromaticism," he adds, "in both cases the music envelops listeners and instills in them a sense of duration that defies clock time."¹⁵⁹ Notably, neither Glass nor Wilson initiated or particularly encouraged these comparisons in their

¹⁵⁶ April Kingsley, "What You See is What You See," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 15.

¹⁵⁷ Gerald Rabkin, "Beached," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17.

¹⁵⁸ Robb Baker, "Times Three," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17. Four months earlier, responding ecstatically to the Avignon premiere, Baker had remarked, "*Einstein on the Beach* is more than brilliant, more than a masterpiece, *more than mere total-theater*. It is the first complete art-statement . . . of our times, of our schizophrenic split between mind and soul, between science and magic, between material reality and desired transcendence." Robb Baker, "Waves of Power," *Soho Weekly News*, August 12, 1976, 13, 17 (my italics).

¹⁵⁹ Edmund White, "Einstein on the Beach," *Christopher Street*, January 1977, 53, Series I, Box 125, Robert Wilson Papers. Published between 1976 and 1995, *Christopher Street* had a circulation of 11,000 in 1989, including 6,000 subscriptions, so although it was based in New York, it would have reached a national LGBTQ readership. See *Christopher Street That New Magazine, Inc.* records 1979–1982, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

promotional efforts, though they certainly did not discourage them. Rather, it seems that sympathetic critics, most of whom worked for downtown publications, recognized the cultural capital that Wagner's name carried as a canonical musical reformer, and wished to use their reviews as forums to seek prestige for *Einstein*, and by extension, for their own community.

While primarily downtown publications emphasized *Einstein's* comparability with operas by Wagner, of equal importance were the positive local reviews to hail from establishment critics at the *New York Times* (John Rockwell, Mel Gussow, Clive Barnes), *The New Yorker* (Andrew Porter), and *New York* (Alan Rich). These reviews helped to enhance *Einstein's* reputational value and establish the legitimacy of Wilson's and Glass's work outside the art and intellectual scene that nurtured it. Notably, both Porter and Rich joined Sargent (a.k.a. Rockwell), White, and *The Soho Weekly News* critics in gesturing toward the Wagnerian qualities of both *Einstein's* scale and its interdisciplinary, yet aesthetically cohesive, text. "It is a *Gesamtkunstwerk*," Porter declared, "in which Wilson's romantic profusion, allusiveness, and collage techniques are tempered by Glass's sharp-focus insistence on pure structure."¹⁶⁰ Similarly, while claiming that *Einstein's* postmodern sensibility inhibited comparisons with the past, Rich also clearly echoed the *Le Monde* critic's reference to *Einstein* as the innovative heir to both Mozart and Wagner when he opined, "The trashy, formal atmosphere of the Met, so suitable for the likes of *Esclarmonde*, cast its pall. Yet Robert Wilson and Philip Glass have called their work an opera and, in its own way, it is. Words, music, movements, and visual images all work—as *Mozart and Wagner conceived that they should*—to hold an audience, perhaps to irritate."¹⁶¹ In general, as F. Joseph Spieler summed up a few months later in his *Harper's*

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Porter, "Musical Events: Many-Colored Glass," *New Yorker*, December 13, 1976, 165.

¹⁶¹ Alan Rich, "From Byzantium to the Beach—The Lunatic Fringe of Opera," *New York*, December 6, 1976, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB Publicity," Hamm Archives (my italics). The reviewer at *Le Monde* had specifically cited Mozart and Wagner as innovators in connection with *Einstein*, noting the way in which both composers played with the temporal flow of musical theater, which resulted in "the fragmented duration of Mozartian opera (via recitatives, pauses within arias) and the continuum of the Wagnerian ceremony." See A. R., "Trois temps dans l'espace du théâtre musical."

review of the *Einstein* tour, “Almost all the New York critics took *Einstein* to their hearts, even if they didn’t know what to make of it,” one of the *Times*’ music critics having poetically suggested that *Einstein* was “less a play or an opera than an organism with its own pulsating heartbeat.”¹⁶²

Notable about New York’s establishment reception, besides its overwhelmingly positive bent, is that these publications, some of which circulated nationally, also geographically expanded the opera’s celebrity. The *Times*’ reach in particular would have been matched only by the *Wall Street Journal*, and reviews in *Time* and *Newsweek* likewise introduced a general American readership to an avant-garde work with a heretofore more limited audience.¹⁶³ Because only a single urban American newspaper of record sent a critic to the Met premiere—the theater critic of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*¹⁶⁴—these nationally circulated reviews took on elevated importance in constructing *Einstein*’s reputation as a landmark

¹⁶² F. Joseph Spieler, “Adrift Among Images,” *Harper’s* 254, no. 1522, March 1977, 124, and Mel Gussow, “‘Einstein’ Is A Science-Fiction Opera-Play,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1976, 97, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives.

¹⁶³ Jack Kroll, “Mind-Bender,” *Newsweek*, December 6, 1976, 101, Series I, Box 205, Folder: “Clipping – Artservice – 1974,” Robert Wilson Papers; Edwin Wilson, “An Avant-Garde Production at Met,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 1976, 8, Box: “1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy),” Folder: “TOUR – EOB Press,” Hamm Archives; and Spieler, “Adrift Among Images,” 123–4, Box: “Box: 1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives. Kroll’s complimentary *Newsweek* article described Glass’s score as “exciting to listen to, providing much of the emotional kick and color of the work,” and Wilson’s contribution as “shimmer[ing] with a subtle naiveté.” Although Edwin Wilson, in his *Wall Street Journal* piece, called on Wilson to abandon “certain elements which only a coterie of ardent admirers could find artistically defensible” in order to find an audience among “the cultural mainstream,” he nevertheless praised the “the freshness and intensity of [Wilson’s] vision.” Likewise, though Spieler critiqued *Einstein* as “add[ing] up to distinctly less than the sum of its parts,” he headed off his review by describing the opera as “the media’s cultural darling of the season,” sealing its celebrity and perceived cultural importance even though he “neither hated it nor loved it.”

¹⁶⁴ William B. Collins, “Met scores with 5-hour ‘Einstein’ epic,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1976, 8A. Collins likely attended the Met performance because, as he mentions at the end of his laudatory review, there still remained in November the possibility that *Einstein* would be presented at American venues outside New York, including Philadelphia’s Annenberg Center, a performing arts venue connected to the University of Pennsylvania and thus a good fit for *Einstein*, which began three of its four touring productions with rehearsal periods at universities. In the case of the Annenberg Center, however, the cost was likely prohibitive, as the mention of the venue does not appear in the Byrd Hoffman Foundation’s internal documentation of the 1976 tour or in correspondence.

American theater event, a reputation that became particularly useful to the Brooklyn Academy when it promoted its revival production eight years later.

For instance, while the *Wall Street Journal* and *Harper's* critics Edwin Wilson and F. Joseph Spieler pulled no punches in their neutral assessments of the avant-garde opera, by identifying Wilson "one of our major avant-garde artists" whose work "is heavily funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and other governmental and private agencies"¹⁶⁵ and describing *Einstein* as "the media's cultural darling of the season,"¹⁶⁶ they indicated to their readers that Wilson and Glass had become figures to know, amplifying the struggling artists' cultural (if not economic) capital at home. Aside from strengthening the work's claim on opera, which as we have seen, many critics contested during its first tour, such reviews also helped the work to achieve recognition by the critical and academic establishments in Europe and the U.S. as a "seminal," "legendary," "classic," and even "quasi-mystical" theater event.¹⁶⁷

By 1984, when the Brooklyn Academy of Music remounted *Einstein* as the centerpiece of its Next Wave Festival in a bold assertion of the opera's cultural importance and staying power, the Wagner comparisons that began with one critic at *Le Monde* continued in earnest. In an early 1985 issue of the international contemporary art magazine *Artforum*, for example, John Howell declared *Einstein* "a rare *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the '70s," and by the conclusion of the 1984 BAM revival, even critics who did not particularly like the work readily admitted to the cultural importance it had achieved in less than a decade. "'Einstein on the Beach' is—to paraphrase a remark attributed to Sir Rudolf Bing—longer than

¹⁶⁵ Edwin Wilson, "An Avant-Garde Production at Met," *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 1976, 8, Box: "1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy)," Folder: "TOUR – EOB Press," Hamm Archives.

¹⁶⁶ F. Joseph Spieler, "Adrift Among Images," *Harper's* 254, no. 1522, March 1977, 123.

¹⁶⁷ For examples of criticism responding to the 1984 BAM remount that employ these descriptors, see, for example: John Howell, "Forum: What a Legend Becomes," *Artforum*, March 1985; Peter Goodman, "A revival of 'Einstein on the Beach,'" *Newsday*, December 17, 1984, 17; Joseph H. Mazo, "Einstein: More Bland than Brilliant," *The Record*, December 21, 1984; Mel Gussow, "Theater: 'Einstein' Beckons Us to The Fourth Dimension," *New York Times*, December 23, 1984, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB Publicity," Hamm Archives.

'Parsifal' but not as funny," Joseph Mazo wrote in the New Jersey newspaper *The Record*. "Like Wagner's last opera," he continued, "'Einstein' is easy to dislike, to ridicule, even to sleep through, but impossible to ignore,"¹⁶⁸ and *The New York Times* theater critic Stephen Holden succinctly concluded Mazo's point with his headline: "The Avant-Garde Is Big Box Office."¹⁶⁹

Incredibly, given the academic community's tendency toward caution in incorporating new artists and works into its canons, music historians in particular responded to *Einstein* almost immediately after its first production on the strength of its international impact. Musical minimalism was still so new a phenomenon at the end of the 1970s that it appeared only as a secondary definition of the term "system" in the 1980 first edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the chief English-language musical reference source. Philip Glass, however, was awarded his own entry, and on the strength of its presentation at Paris's august Opéra-Comique, *Einstein* was listed separately from the composer's other works under the heading "opera."¹⁷⁰ In accepting *Einstein* as an opera—Glass's entry concludes with a brief description of "the opera *Einstein on the Beach*, a single act of some four and a half hours composed in collaboration with Bob Wilson"—musicologists thus conferred upon the work establishment recognition as an official entry into operatic history, rather than consigning it to a more ambiguous category like "music theater" or simply "other works." By 1992, the *Grove Dictionary of Opera* had devoted a two-page entry to the opera, complete with musical examples and illustrations by Wilson.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Joseph H. Mazo, "Einstein: More Bland than Brilliant," *The Record*, December 21, 1984, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB Publicity," Hamm Archives.

¹⁶⁹ Stephen Holden, "The Avant-Garde Is Big Box Office," *New York Times*, December 16, 1984, 23, Box: "1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy)," Folder: "TOUR – EOB Press," Hamm Archives.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Griffiths, "System (ii)," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 18 (New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 481; Arnold Whittall, "Glass, Philip," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 427.

¹⁷¹ Tim Page, "Einstein on the Beach," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, vol. 2, edited by Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1992), 27–8.

Admittedly, the fading of the “quasi-mystical aura” unique to the 1976 production that had plied glowing reviews from New York’s usually skeptical critics led some writers (most notably Clive Barnes) to express disappointment in the Brooklyn Academy’s much-hyped revival.¹⁷² Nevertheless, the remount further reinforced the opera’s status as a historical landmark, aided by European commissions for two more traditional operas by Glass, *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten*, the latter of which premiered in Stuttgart only eight months before BAM’s *Einstein* remount.¹⁷³ Indeed, when Donald Grout and Claude Palisca updated their widely used music history textbook *A History of Western Music* for publication in 1988, not only did they set aside a full page and a half to musical minimalism at the end of the last chapter, but in the wake of Glass’s completion of *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten*, they devoted an entire paragraph discussing the operatic trilogy that began with *Einstein*, thus positioning the avant-garde work as the starting point of Glass’s by-then-promising operatic career.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Howell, “Forum: What a Legend Becomes”; Clive Barnes, “‘Einstein’: The Relatively of Rubbish,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1984, 11, 15, Box: “1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance,” Folder: “EOB Publicity,” Hamm Archives. John Howell described the effable, unrecoverable quality of the 1976 production that had generated its international celebrity thus: “In 1976, Glass and Wilson ‘stole’ respectability; they schemed, intrigued, and cajoled *Einstein* into dramatic existence. The activity around the piece became a metaperformance, with overtones of a religious-esthetic crusade, a missionary cause for the true believers—artists and audiences—which added another ring to the layers of quasi-mystical aura built into the piece itself.” Barnes, on the other hand, mused, “Had Einstein changed very much over the years, or was it me, converted from Paul to Saul after years in the inhospitable desert? There were certainly times when I thought the mood of these particular performances of *Einstein*, its pristine amateurish, liturgical mixture of camp and solemnity, had been hopelessly disturbed. But my disillusion was not honestly based on a different perception of the work’s realization. No, I was more basically disappointed. I was disappointed in what I once thought to be Wilson’s brilliant visual imagery and his imaginative dislocations of time, and most of all I was sickened by the sheer ponderous pretentiousness of the text, and even more, the music.”

¹⁷³ According to the composer’s website, *Akhnaten* was commissioned by the Württembergisch Staatstheater, and was premiered in Stuttgart, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, on March 24, 1984. Dunvagen Music Publishers, “Philip Glass: Akhnaten,” 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.philipglass.com/music/compositions/akhnaten.php>.

¹⁷⁴ Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 877–8. They write, “His opera *Einstein on the Beach* in one act and four and a half hours, a collaboration with Robert Wilson (scenario and staging), was given a premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976. Two other operas followed: *Satyagraha* (1979), about Ghandi’s [sic] nonviolent struggle,

Amid the critical clamor to convey Einstein's cultural importance to American audiences and music students in the 1980s, one last factor crucial not only to the development of that celebrity, but also to *Einstein's* critical and academic acceptance as opera was all but ignored: venue. Indeed, *Einstein's* Paris premiere at the Opéra-Comique was used to justify the work's designation as an opera in the first edition of the *New Grove Dictionary*, and music history textbooks that make mention of *Einstein* as an exemplary manifestation of early minimalist impulses invariably mention its American premiere at the Met, the symbolic value of this institution is so important that writers sometimes erroneously cite those two New York performances as the work's world premiere.

2.6 Downtown Theater on an Uptown Scale (Venue and Genre)

When Glass and Wilson set out to create an opera together, they set their ambitions against the material reality that had theretofore shaped the theater coming out of the downtown scene. This art world's audiences were frequently its own artists, whose work was often inaccessible to general audiences, and whose non-commercial (even anti-commercial) orientation restricted theater and dance to small and/or non-traditional spaces with do-it-yourself production and promotion and largely amateur or self-taught performers. Instead of allowing their limited means and the expected audience for their avant-garde theater to dictate *Einstein's* scale and production values, Wilson and Glass embarked on a work of monumental scale. They knew that—as with Wilson's earlier “operas”—its performance would require the physical dimensions and technical resources only large theater institutions intended for opera or Broadway theater could offer, but thanks to Wilson's established reputation in Europe and the early promise of funding from the French Minister of Culture in 1975, the composer and director had reasonable confidence that an unusually large-scale downtown work could succeed overseas. In an interview for the 1985 documentary film

commissioned by the Royal Netherlands Opera, and *Akhnaten*, about an Egyptian pharaoh martyred for his monotheism. Otherwise he wrote mainly for his ensemble. *Einstein* is nonnarrative and has no sung text other than solfège syllables, and the orchestra consists of electric keyboard instruments, woodwinds, and a solo violinist.” By comparison, the three other American composers most frequently associated with minimalism, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich, receive cursory consideration, and only Reich's piece *Violin Phase* is accorded in the same attention as Glass's operas.

Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera, Glass acknowledged Guy's impact, but also emphasized the novelty of his and Wilson's break with their peers' creative practices. "The thing about the people of my generation who worked in the theater, as I include myself," he explained, "we had worked in all manner of places whether they were lofts or in basements." Citing Meredith Monk, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, the Performance Group, and the Open Theater, he added, "No one ever worked in a big scale theater. They simply were not available."¹⁷⁵ Listing *Einstein's* physical requirements, which included adequate flyspace, wingspace, and a stage at least forty feet wide and deep, Glass commented, "You can call *Einstein* whatever you wanted to—an opera, not an opera—but if you wanted to put it on, you had to do it in an opera house. That's the only place you could do it in. It's the only place that could hold it."¹⁷⁶ He did not stop there though, insinuating that it was neither naiveté nor cockiness that drove him and Wilson to create theater on an operatic scale, but rather the vision and the courage to venture away from the financial and social safety net of their own scene:

I think to an extent Bob, before anyone else of our generation, was taking a stand and making his mark on these physical institutions. I'm talking about opera houses. I'm talking about large proscenium theaters with a large array of lighting equipment, with orchestra pits, flyspace, wingspace. . . . I had worked with the Mabou Mines since '65. . . . But as I said, the theater that I knew didn't challenge, didn't take up the challenge of the larger spaces.¹⁷⁷

Because opera houses were, along with some performing arts venues of a more miscellaneous nature (like the Belgian Theater Carré), "the only place[s] that could hold it," Glass and Wilson had to rely for success on the appeal of the finished piece, the persuasiveness of their administrators, and the interdisciplinary work's ability to pass as opera when framed by the structure of an opera house and its attendant codes of behavior. During the first tour, *Einstein* was shown in nine venues that were primarily used to present conventional

¹⁷⁵ Philip Glass, interview by Mark Obenhaus, 1985, 32, transcript, Box: "1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy)," Folder: "TOUR – EOB Press," Hamm Archives.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 33–4.

operas, a trend that continued during its 1984, 1992, and 2012 remounts (see Table 2.1).

In sum, by allowing creative impulse to dictate *Einstein's* performance venues rather than allowing the likelihood of interested venues to determine *Einstein's* scale, the director and composer gambled on their ability to get the piece into a type of institution whose mission usually precluded avant-garde ventures. Their ability to do so stemmed in part from their own effort: careful curatorship of the work's presentation as "an opera in four acts," combined with their increasingly well-regarded reputations abroad. *Einstein's* ability to get into the French Festival d'Avignon and Festival d'automne, interpolated among six other European stops and the Met in New York, also relied heavily on the efforts of their administrative leaders and well-connected administrators like Michel Guy and their European agent Ninon Karlweiss. Once the tour itself was in progress, positive early reviews from France and Italy secured not only opera houses in Germany and the Netherlands, but also New York, earning the work the genre identification to which its director and composer aspired by virtue of institution.¹⁷⁸

2.6.1 Institutions as Accomplices

Recalling with some amusement the downtown artist Jack Smith's "perversely original" adaptation of an Ibsen play a few weeks before *Einstein on the Beach* filled the house at the Met, the *Soho Weekly News* writer Gerald Rabkin observed that Smith's production, no matter how outrageous, could not make as appreciable an impression on the world of theater as Wilson and Glass's opera because it was "witnessed only by a few adventurous explorers who [sought] him out in the wilds of lower Manhattan," whereas Wilson, "more than any

¹⁷⁸ France's Avignon and Autumn Festivals and Italy's Venice Biennale played a key role in filling out *Einstein's* European schedule and setting the precedent for its reception as a major theater work not only because, as mentioned earlier, the dates (in late July, mid-September, and early October) were spread such that other engagements fit easily between them, but also because they provided the opportunity for so many performances: five in Avignon, nine in Paris, and five in Venice, compared with only three or less in each of the other cities to which it traveled. This also meant that these three festivals contributed proportionally more money to the overall production, and therefore had a higher financial stake in the work's success, so their advertisement of the piece as an original approach to opera was both expedient and critically influential.

other figure of the contemporary theatrical avant-garde . . . has been successfully provocative by not remaining in his place below 14th Street.” Indeed, Rabkin went on, “Through a combination of publicity, showmanship and financial resourcefulness, he has chosen to storm the citadels of the theatrical establishment, and on a grand scale. One result of Wilson’s incursions into Broadway (with *A Letter for Queen Victoria*) and Lincoln Center (with *Einstein on the Beach*),” he claimed boldly, if a bit optimistically, “has been a partial restoration to mainstream theatre of the spirit of *scandale* and provocation which characterized the early Dadaist and Futurist invasions of the temples of artistic conventionality.”¹⁷⁹ In this comparison of two roughly concurrent downtown theater works, Rabkin persuasively insinuated that Wilson’s works were “successfully provocative” not just because of their visual opulence, but also because of the physical and social contexts in which he chose to present them. Indeed, as *Einstein’s* “invasion” of the Met attests, venue as much as title, discipline, form, or performance forces, is a key (if often undervalued) genre convention, determining how expression is created, presented, and received. Whether conceived as physical spaces or media, venues place important limitations on what artists can create and how that art will appear to spectators, and they color audiences’ entire experiences of the expressive activity they contain.

Sensitive to the framing effect of venue, Wilson engineered *Einstein* as a meta-performance in which “the temples of artistic conventionality” became active, indeed necessary, participants in his drama. Wilson himself offered a compelling example of how this worked in the 1985 documentary film *Einstein on the Beach*:

¹⁷⁹ Gerald Rabkin, “Beached,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17. Rabkin’s comparison of *Einstein on the Beach’s* “uptown” reception with its avant-garde predecessors’ reception in conventional art venues accorded with the views of many of the opera’s early supporters, not least of them his colleagues at *The Soho Weekly News*. Even among Glass’s and Wilson’s downtown colleagues, however, critics like Bonnie Marranca expressed skepticism toward the mystique that Wilson cultivated around his theater: “There is something terribly chic about the mounting of *Einstein* at the Met. As Renato Poggioli has astutely pointed out, fashion is undeniably a factor in the sociology of taste. The avant-garde used to be characterized by *scandale*, now it is *au courant*. Robert Wilson has supped with the Shah of Iran.” Bonnie Marranca, “Robert Wilson, the Avant-Garde and the Audience,” *New York Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 19, Series I, Box 125, Robert Wilson Papers.

The Changing Image of Opera: “If you take a Baroque candelabra and you put it on a Baroque table, that’s one thing. But if you take a Baroque candelabra and you place it on a giant rock, that’s something else. And maybe it’s easier to see the candelabra when it’s on a rock than if it’s on the table.”¹⁸⁰ A Baroque table supporting a Baroque candelabra, like Puccini at the Met, may make for a satisfying aesthetic experience, but is not likely to challenge audiences to think about opera beyond its dramatic and aesthetic quality. *Einstein* at the Met, on the other hand, is analogous to the candelabra displayed improbably and thus provocatively on a giant rock, calling into question the relationship between art and institution, and thus making *Einstein*’s originality “easier to see” than if it were presented in a downtown haunt like Ellen Stewart’s La Mama or the Video Exchange Theater.¹⁸¹ In this way, the opera house functioned as more than just a place to present *Einstein*: it became a genre convention integral to both the work’s aesthetic of juxtaposition and its departure from the aims and ambitions of its theatrical peers, reinforcing its sense of “importance” both within and outside its home scene. This reliance on the opera house alone should not, however, have been enough to convince spectators of the work’s operatic legitimacy, for like Cage’s *4’33”*, ensconcing *Einstein* in a conventional setting served as much to emphasize the work’s unconventionality as to point up its operatic qualities. Rather, the key to *Einstein*’s successful infiltration of opera houses *as* an opera was the institutions themselves, or more particularly, how those institutions represented *Einstein* to their patrons.

¹⁸⁰ Robert Wilson, interview by Mark Obenhaus, *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*. My transcription.

¹⁸¹ Arguably, critics’ comfort with evoking Wagner in connection with *Einstein* suggests that the opera may not have been out of place at the Met by the time it arrived back in New York in November of 1976. Because Glass and Wilson were so closely identified with the downtown community and anti-establishment art, however, from the standpoint of artistic politics, *Einstein*’s uptown presentations were, for the downtown artists who helped to fill the Met, a sort of avant-garde Trojan Horse being wheeled into an institutional Troy. From that perspective, European comparisons of *Einstein* with the Artwork of the Future and its American echoes were not indicative of some hidden conventionality. Rather, they indicated Glass’s and Wilson’s successful manipulation of operatic conventions and promotional language as a strategy to sneak downtown avant-garde aesthetics into cultural institutions whose administrators and patrons were generally averse to such experimentation.

The Festival d'Avignon initiated the custom of presenting *Einstein* as an opera, placing it in the Provençal city's regional opera house and describing it as "un opéra" in the program, an approach that was replicated at each of the European tour stops. While the Metropolitan Opera relied on this accumulation of institutional endorsements of *Einstein*-as-opera in its October and November promotion of the work, the New York venue's role in *Einstein*'s accreditation carried considerably more weight in the grand scheme of the opera's production history than its Continental performances. This is because the performances at the Met smoothed the way to the opera's first remount at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). BAM may have been led by a downtown proponent (Harvey Lichtenstein), but such an expensive avant-garde behemoth was unlikely to receive the backing of donors and the board of directors without evidence that it was worth the investment. Two sold-out New York shows in 1976 supplied that evidence, enabling the 1984 production to inaugurate a tradition of reviving *Einstein* at semi-regular intervals, and hastening the work's critical and academic acceptance as a landmark of both American opera and musical minimalism.

The Met helped to consecrate *Einstein* as not just a special theatrical event at Lincoln Center, but also as a legitimate opera, through a promotional approach that acknowledged the venue's technical support. As stipulated in the contract between the Byrd Hoffman Foundation (BHF) and the Metropolitan Opera Association, the BHF paid the Met a labor deposit and rent. In return for the financial security of Wilson's foundation taking on any lingering debt, the Met gave the BHF permission to advertise *Einstein* as a co-production with the institution, resulting in advertisements in local newspapers and playbills that read: "The Byrd Hoffman Foundation *in cooperation with* the Metropolitan Opera presents *Einstein on the Beach*, an opera in four acts."¹⁸² These materials enabled

¹⁸² The contract stipulated that both the labor deposit and rent would be taken out of ticket sales when they exceeded \$30,000, which eventually left the Foundation with a bill of just over \$20,000. Letter, Michael Bronson to Kathleen Norris, September 30, 1976, and contract, Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc. and Byrd Hoffman Foundation, Inc., September 29, 1976, Folder: "Einstein — Contract," Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York, NY. See also: advertisement for November 21, 1976 performance at the Metropolitan Opera House, Series I, Box 113, Folder: "EOB – Sources for Funding," and advertisement for November 28, 1976 performance at the Metropolitan Opera House,

the work to be more readily accepted by its spectators as an opera because beyond being presented at the Met, *Einstein* was also publicly recognized by that venue as belonging to the genre. This recognition was reinforced in 1984 when, in a reciprocal marketing effort, the New York City Opera agreed to stuff its programs for Glass's opera *Akhmaten* with *Einstein* flyers, and BAM and the Met agreed to a joint subscription offering for *Einstein* in Brooklyn and *Lulu* and *Wozzeck* in Manhattan.¹⁸³

In sum, then, Glass and Wilson took a gamble by creating a work whose scale and technical requirements could only be met by opera houses or equivalently well-equipped theaters, and that therefore relied on European impresarios' interest in funding and presenting the work. Thanks to their own creative promotion, the skill and efforts of administrators who networked industriously on their behalf, and the commitment of such impresarios as Paul Puaux (Festival d'Avignon), Michel Guy (Festival d'automne), and Anthony Bliss (Metropolitan Opera) to present *Einstein* as an opera, spectators tended to respond to the work as an opera far more readily than they had to Wilson's Broadway debut with *A Letter for Queen Victoria*. Indeed, had *Einstein* followed the same performance trajectory as *Queen Victoria* and premiered in a Broadway theater without the technical support and institutional credibility the Met offered, the opera may well have gone down as a footnote in the history of the thriving downtown performing-arts scene patronized by European summer festivals, but only rarely by single institutions, and almost never in the United States. Getting *Einstein* played in opera houses did not just provide a key convention that allowed spectators, critics, and eventually scholars to confine the ontologically slippery musical theater work to a single genre. The splashy, sold-out finale performances at the Met further secured its reputation as an opera by virtue of the notoriously conservative institution's endorsement, the venue's implication in New York's

New York Times, November 21, 1976, Series I, Box 118, Folder: "EOB Press Packets," Robert Wilson Papers. See also: Metropolitan Opera House playbill, November 21, 1976, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB publicity," Hamm Archives (my italics).

¹⁸³ Internal memorandum, "Re: Marketing *Einstein on the Beach*," August 31, 1984, Box: "1984 Einstein on the Beach Material (Moldy)," Hamm Archives.

uptown/downtown dynamic making this endorsement the more astonishing and significant for its lack of precedent.

Ultimately, while many critics familiar with Wilson's work were inclined to look upon the subtitle "an opera in four acts" with a jaundiced eye, the work's presentation *as* an opera *in* opera houses went a long way toward attenuating their skepticism, the physical framing function of the venue and the conventions it implied tempering *Einstein's* radicalism by swathing the spectacle in traditional opera-going mores. In the end, even a discerning establishment critic like Clive Barnes conceded, "In the past, Mr. Wilson has casually called his works 'operas,' and we theater or dance critics have grinned indulgently and not worried. He has cried wolf too often on this account. This time, together with Mr. Glass, the man has actually written an opera," for, "I have rarely heard a first-night audience respond so vociferously at the Metropolitan Opera House."¹⁸⁴

2.7 Playing with Names

In 1975, Glass brought to *Einstein on the Beach* an established ensemble and considerable experience working in contemporary theater with Mabou Mines, while Wilson contributed his financially nimble Byrd Hoffman Foundation and a formidable European reputation that earned him not just the early patronage of the French state cultural apparatus, but also the praise of the surrealist poet Louis Aragon. Indeed, it was Aragon's somewhat paradoxical christening of Wilson's *Deafman Glance* in 1971 as a "silent opera," rather than Glass's work in theater, that inspired the American artists to conceive of and subtitle their collaborative work as an opera, for in the intervening years Wilson began referring to all of his original plays by the plural form of opus. Aware of the symbolic capital to be gained by having *Einstein* accepted by the critical establishment as an opera in the dual sense of work and genre, but equally aware of the precarious nature of the claim given the piece's markedly downtown theater, music, and dance aesthetics, Glass and Wilson largely deflected questions of genre during the 1976 tour. Instead, they relied on the piece's

¹⁸⁴ Clive Barnes, "'Einstein on the Beach' Transforms Boredom Into Memorable Theater," *New York Times*, November 23, 1976, 33, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers.

classical structure and musical forces and program notes to persuade critics of the work's operatic veracity while instead promoting *Einstein's* novelty, reserving bold declarations that *Einstein* was their first "shot at classic opera" until after their successful Met debut.¹⁸⁵

Critics in Europe and New York responded to this strategy with varying degrees of enthusiasm, bemusement, and outright skepticism. While many such writers, especially in Europe, considered *Einstein* in light of Wilson's Aragonian conceit, however, the majority acknowledged that because Glass's contribution bore considerably more resemblance to an operatic score than Alan Lloyd's chamber music for *Queen Victoria*, the work had a stronger claim on the genre than its immediate Wilsonian predecessor. Furthermore, one French critic's interpretation of *Einstein* as an engagement with Richard Wagner's theorized Artwork of the Future—a link that may have been inspired by the notorious Boulez/Chéreau *Jahrhundertring* at Bayreuth that ran concurrently with *Einstein's* Avignon premiere—sent a ripple of critical echoes across Italy, Germany, and finally the United States. There, finding precious few parallels between Glass and Puccini, critics impressed with the downtown work's ambition were inclined to invoke Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal.

With this critical discourse leaving *Einstein* on the fence between reception as an avant-garde musical theater piece with pretensions to the great Western music-dramatic form and a bona fide opera so aesthetically innovative that its success could only mark a turning point in the history of the genre, *Einstein's* presentation by operas houses *as* an opera became the deciding factor in its favor. Among these houses, the Metropolitan Opera played the most important role in *Einstein's* immediate establishment as a landmark opera, for the endorsement of *Einstein* by such a conservative institution situated so close to Broadway and its theatrical offshoots signaled an important shift in the relationship between New York's uptown and downtown art worlds; namely, the former's attitude toward the salability of the avant-garde in its own backyard to current and desired

¹⁸⁵ Glass, interview by Maxime de la Falaise, "Einstein at the Met (An Operatic Interview)," *Andy Warhol's Interview* 7, no. 2 (February 1977), Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.

patrons. Indeed, the 1984 BAM remount of *Einstein* that secured the opera's masterwork status in academic histories and set the tone for its later production history relied on nostalgia for the short-lived but celebrated Met performances eight years earlier, their reputation as sold-out shows indicating the financial viability of BAM's investment.

Although debate about whether or not *Einstein on the Beach* really is an opera has continued unabated over the course of four decades and as many revival productions, its ultimate reception as such in 1976 was vital to Glass's and Wilson's careers, as well as to American opera houses' openness to commissioning more aesthetically adventurous works than before. For instance, following the European commissions of Glass's second and third operas in 1980 and 1983, the Netherlands Opera teamed up with three American institutions, the Houston Grand Opera, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Washington Opera, to commission *Nixon in China* (1987). This opera took a more conventional approach to scoring and storytelling, but like its avant-garde predecessor, presented a portrait of a larger-than-life figures of the twentieth-century, featured music that owed a clear stylistic debt to minimalism's repetitive processes, and was produced through the collaborative creative effort of a composer (John Adams), director (Peter Sellars), librettist (Alice Goodman), and choreographer (Mark Morris).

Einstein's 1976 acceptance as an opera also served as a particularly visible indicator of American performing-arts institutions' growing awareness of the financial and commercial potential of its native avant-garde. As musicological reference sources and textbooks published during the 1980s indicate, the work was quickly taken up as evidence that musical minimalism was a serious enough trend to attract the patronage of major performing arts venues and the (sometimes grudging) respect of establishment critics. Glass's and Wilson's triumph in playing the name game with *Einstein*, then, was not in getting spectators, critics, presenters, and academics to revise their definition of what "opera" was. Rather, their triumph was in convincing their audience that no matter how thoroughly their work eschewed traditional operatic conventions, it belonged in opera houses, and that a handful of walkouts notwithstanding, the

avant-garde could speak to a general audience and sell out even New York's most conservative performing-arts venue. Conversely, institutions like the Met and BAM realized that they could enhance their own reputations as not just guardians of official culture, but also trendsetting tastemakers by accepting works like *Einstein*. In other words, over the course of the opera's early production history, Glass, Wilson, and their supporters engaged in a discursive dance with would-be presenters to maximize the exchange of symbolic and cultural capital between them. Glass, Wilson, and their administrative team ultimately won the game because they were able to demonstrate—in part thanks to the attendance of their own colleagues—that a downtown opera could draw sell-out crowds to the Met as well as to European contemporary art festivals. Thanks to *Einstein's* hybridization of uptown structure and downtown content, bolstered by smart marketing and a generous critical response, the Met's special events organizer Jane Herman could tell Wilson in 1976, "the avant-garde has become official."¹⁸⁶

In closing, in discussing *Einstein's* ontological construction, I might as easily have called the work a "show" or a "spectacle," for the term "opera" has come to mean so many things that beyond its historical designation, it retains relatively little value as a descriptor of what one will actually encounter in a theater. Just because the term has been stretched thin to the point of breaking, however, does not mean that it has been relieved of its hefty symbolic baggage. Likewise, the terms "classical," "popular," and "folk" are little more than outdated relics at a time when tracks and playlists shape music consumption far more than albums and commercial sales categories, yet they continue to shape our understanding and discursive negotiation of value and preference. To that end, it does not ultimately matter whether or not *Einstein* conforms to the musical or dramatic conventions of opera in any way. What does matter is that the term offered Glass and Wilson the prestige and the institutional access that they desired. Thanks to a cleverly structured work, a European critical apparatus sympathetic to the American avant-garde, and the close proximity of the downtown community to America's most famous opera house, the composer and director were able to give

¹⁸⁶ Wallace Shawn, "Einstein at the Met," *New Yorker*, December 6, 1976, 43.

their collaborative project the visibility necessary to eclipse their downtown theater colleagues' smaller-scale work. In the wake of the 1976 tour, they had the name recognition at home and abroad to draw conservative and adventurous patrons alike to the theater, and were therefore well positioned to do future business with arts institutions interested in commissioning new operatic productions.

Chapter 3

Playing with the Avant-garde: *Einstein's* Aesthetic Lineage

FRANCES ALENIKOFF: "Can you talk about the sources from which you think your works stem?"

ROBERT WILSON: "Well . . . of course it's a mystery. . . . It's hard for me to know why I do something. People ask me and I say why I do it and then I think that's not really why. I just did it. Most young artists today are very intellectual. I'm not one of those. I think other people understand better what I do."

—Frances Alenikoff, "Scenario: A Talk with Robert Wilson," *Dance Scope* 10, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1975–1976): 14–15.

"We were of a generation that came right after Duchamp and John Cage, and we were told and we believed—and I do to this day—that the meaning of a work is completed by the audience: that it's not inherent in the work itself, but that the transaction that happens between the authors, the performers, and the audience is what gives meaning to the work. . . . What was surprising about [*Einstein on the Beach*] was that we were taking ideas that were well known in the art world and the world of theoretical theater, so to speak. We came out of the world of [Jerzy] Grotowski and the Living Theatre and Peter Brook. I mean, no one falls out of the sky. We come out of trees where there are other apples. There is a lineage to this work, but it was *not known* in the world of conventional theater and the world of conventional dance and the world of conventional opera."

—Philip Glass, interview by Mark Swed, "Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs Discuss *Einstein on the Beach*," *Cal Performances*, Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley, April 29, 2011.

3.1 A Lineage that "was not known"

The twentieth-century legacy of Richard Wagner's theoretical Artwork of the Future played a notable role in the 1976 reception that hastened the operatic accreditation of *Einstein on the Beach* in critical and academic circles. Indeed, Glass's and Wilson's ambition, the work's monumental scale, and an unbroken line of avant-garde influence extending back to French Symbolism and many of its early adherents' Wagnerian sympathies supports a historically-informed

reading of *Einstein's* cultural relevance in light of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal.¹⁸⁷ From a more immediate contextual perspective, on the other hand, the sociopolitical and cultural milieu that informed the German composer's theoretical writing was over a century out of touch with the 1970s American avant-garde and the cooperative networks that characterized that specific cultural field. As the critic John Rockwell commented in an essay on Wilson's theater in the mid-1980s, although antecedents to the director's work can be found in movements both before World War I and after World War II, "[t]he movements in present-day theater that anticipate or parallel Wilson's work are almost too numerous to mention," from the "disjointed mysticism" of Samuel Beckett to the "dreamy confusions" of 1960s happenings and "general esthetic notions" of John Cage. "Such theater troupes as the Living Theater, the Bread and Puppet Theater and, especially, the Open Theater," he continued, "have had an impact both on Wilson and on the climate in which he was first received."¹⁸⁸ The same can be said of Glass, whose work with the theater collective Mabou Mines during the 1970s and early 1980s placed him within the same downtown performance sphere.

Even though Wilson is forthcoming about influences on his gestural vocabulary (e.g., his therapeutic work with disabled children, vaudeville comedy, and Japanese Noh theater) and use of space, color, and light (e.g., the paintings of Paul Cézanne, Bauhaus design, and George Balanchine's abstract ballets), the director's comments to Frances Alenikoff in this chapter's epigraph exemplify the deliberate artlessness with which he responds to questions about the

¹⁸⁷ John Rockwell, "Robert Wilson's Stage Works: Originality and Influence," *Robert Wilson: The Theater of Images*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 10–18. Rockwell makes a convincing case that Wilson's theatrical innovation falls into the former of two very broad twentieth-century camps: the visionary-mystical descending from Richard Wagner and the naturalistic-sociological, descending from the nineteenth-century dramatic parallel to the bourgeois novel. This oversimplified dichotomy does not leave much room for the impact of Brecht's Epic Theater on Wilson's dramaturgy, but it does stress aesthetic as well as professional parallels between Wilson and Wagner, and the French symbolist and surrealist movements that link them across time.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17; Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 4. Rockwell emphasizes the Open Theater because, as Shevtsova notes, in 1966 Wilson had constructed the doll heads worn by actors in "Motel," one of the three one-act plays that comprised the troupe's performance of Jean-Claude Van Itallie's satirical play *America Hurrah*.

theoretical underpinnings of his work.¹⁸⁹ Wilson's "operas" are collage-like in their piling of diverse references and quotations into elegant formal structures. Though one can track those immediate influences, however, more difficult to pin down is the logic by which the drama generates meaning. Glass, on the other hand, has proven eager to discuss the theoretical impact that art, music, and theater forerunners from Duchamp to Peter Brook have had on his artistic outlook in general and on *Einstein* in particular.¹⁹⁰

During an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* music critic Mark Swed shortly before the third *Einstein* revival tour, Glass insisted that, contrary to many critics' claims over the years, neither he nor his collaborators had invented the artistic language that had made the opera so famous. "What was surprising about [*Einstein*]," he contended, was that they were for the first time deploying "ideas which were well-known in the art world and the world of theoretical theater," but that were "*not known* in the world of conventional theater and the world of conventional dance and the world of conventional opera" in venues intended for grand opera.¹⁹¹ Glass's claim that it was the incongruity of *Einstein's* avant-garde aesthetics in a traditional operatic context (rather than artistic ingenuity) that surprised many early spectators suggests that downtown community insiders and outsiders understood *Einstein* to be revolutionary for very different reasons:

¹⁸⁹ For extended discussions of Wilson's avowed influences, see Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*; Stefan Brecht, *Theatre of Visions*; Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*; Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*.

¹⁹⁰ Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 265–6; Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 241. In interviews and in his autobiographies, Glass regularly points out the impact that progressive literary theater in the vein of Brecht, Beckett, and Genet, as well as experiences of original productions by the Living Theater, had on him while he was completing his musical education in Paris. Just as Wilson made a point of distancing himself from other downtown theater groups for aesthetic as well as reputational reasons, the musicologist Keith Potter notes that for many years Glass was unwilling in published interviews to speak about the nature and extent of his relationships with minimalist visual artists. This may have been because Glass did not wish his music to seem stylistically derivative, or because, as Strickland has noted in his style and reception history of minimalism, "by the time the term Minimalism had been (re)introduced in the visual arts in 1965, the best of Minimalist painting had long since been done. By the time the term was affixed to the music, the period of strict Minimalism was long since over and the composers had evolved in distinctly non-Minimal directions."

¹⁹¹ Glass and Childs, interview by Mark Swed, "Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs Discuss *Einstein on the Beach*."

to insiders, for its infiltration of the Met; to outsiders, for its challenge to operatic conventions. Furthermore, his pointed use of the word “we” (i.e., Glass and Wilson) suggests that regardless of Wilson’s antipathy toward theoretical posturing, the aesthetic discourse typical of the downtown art world was an inescapable fact of life for all of its denizens. That is, to live and make art in and around SoHo in the 1970s was to immerse oneself socially and professionally in a milieu that impacted not only what artists made, but also how that work was understood and received by scene insiders versus outsiders (i.e., the standards or models against which artists and art were judged). From that perspective, examining the opera’s aesthetic lineage reveals how its artists and critics have aligned the opera aesthetically in order to derive the greatest benefit from its downtown pedigree.

The composer and director, aided by their choreographers and support personnel, appealed to their colleagues by discussing the work in terms of forerunners and conceptual ideas that undergirded the downtown art scene at large, subtly encouraging writers for SoHo-based newspapers and journals to embrace *Einstein* as representative of the best the scene had to offer. Meanwhile, those same ideas—most prominently, that the spectator “completes the work” and therefore need not be an avant-garde insider to find the experience meaningful—provided the artists with a marketing tactic to appeal to patrons unfamiliar with and/or leery of the avant-garde. Scholars summarizing Glass’s and Wilson’s careers regularly allude to the immediate social and artistic context in which they worked, including significant avant-garde and theatrical influences like John Cage and Antonin Artaud. *Einstein’s* specific relationship to these influences, however, remains unexamined, and the following discussions thus offer original readings of the opera’s relationship to key theoretical and aesthetic ideas that undergirded the downtown scene in the 1970s.¹⁹² Because of *Einstein’s* signal contribution to the dispersal of its scene’s artistic ideas and

¹⁹² For example, Ovadija, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre*, 179–205; Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 26–9; Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, 260–70; Haskins, “The Music of Philip Glass, 1965–1975,” 10–15; Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*. In addressing the early style history of minimalism in New York generally, Strickland makes apparent the crosscurrents between music by Glass and many of his peers and the world of visual art.

practices within and outside of Lower Manhattan, and because of the role they played in increasing *Einstein's* appeal to spectators downtown and uptown, the particular ways in which the opera engaged those ideas and practices bear closer scrutiny.

3.1.1 Influences and Audiences

Howard Becker's discussion of conventions and their relationship to art worlds indicates why some of *Einstein's* critics hailed it as revolutionary while others saw it as no more than a particularly outstanding example of what the downtown writer Richard Kostelanetz termed "mixed-means performances."¹⁹³ "Knowing the conventions of form," Becker explains, "serious audience members can collaborate more fully with artists in the joint effort which produces the work each time it is experienced," while "less involved audiences look precisely for the conventional formal elements the innovators replace [in order] to distinguish art from nonart."¹⁹⁴ In other words, in spite of the fact that many of *Einstein's* establishment critics looked for the conventional formal elements of opera in order to assess *Einstein* as a contribution to the genre, spectators acquainted with New York's downtown art world largely bypassed questions of genre. Instead, they responded in ways that pointed up shared theoretical and aesthetic knowledge and artistic experiences.¹⁹⁵

The interwar theoretical writings of German poet, playwright, and director Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and French poet, actor, writer, and director Antonin

¹⁹³ Richard Kostelanetz, "A Theater of Performance, Not Literature," *Dialogue* 8, no. 2 (1975): 39–47, Series I, Box 229, Robert Wilson Papers.

¹⁹⁴ Becker, *Art Worlds*, 48, 50.

¹⁹⁵ April Kingsley, "What You See Is What You See," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 15–16; Robb Baker, *Soho Weekly News*, April 15, 1976. Kingsley describes the opera for a downtown readership not by detailing the opera's structure or distinctiveness from grand opera, but rather by comparing it with other local theater, painting, and sculpture that it departed from or reminded her of. Similarly, Baker's praise of *Einstein* following its rehearsal performances indicates the extent to which the opera was received not as a standalone work, but rather in the context of other downtown theater and dance projects: "First Bob Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*, previewing at Westbeth with a mindboggling score by Phil Glass and a portrayal by Lucinda Childs that is perhaps the single finest performance that I've ever seen on a stage. Then Monk. And now Laura Dean's *Song*, premiered in Minneapolis prior to a run at the LePercq Space in Brooklyn at the end of the month."

Artaud (1896–1948), as well as the reductive theatrical experiments of Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999) and his Polish Theatre Laboratory in the 1960s and 1970s, were particularly important references for the downtown theater scene from which *Einstein* emerged and in relation to which a number of its critics (and many of its early spectators) received it. As an interdisciplinary collaboration involving a composer, choreographers, and a director trained in painting and architecture, however, *Einstein's* aesthetic lineage was not just restricted to the theatrical realm. To that end, the theater historian Arnold Aronson has noted that for the American postwar avant-garde at large, “the wellspring was Marcel Duchamp and its pillars were Gertrude Stein and John Cage.”¹⁹⁶ Of these, Cage lived downtown and was therefore a particularly visible influence. His collection of writings and works published as *Silence* (1961) inspired Glass, Wilson, de Groat, Childs, and many of their colleagues to (as the French artist Marcel Duchamp had decades earlier) question the basic ontology of their arts. Cage’s collaborations with the choreographer Merce Cunningham also provided an important model for Glass and Wilson as equal authors. Stein too exerted a notable influence on downtown artists, particularly writers, and her unusual operatic collaboration with the composer Virgil Thomson on *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927; premiered 1933) is *Einstein's* closest precedent in terms of its distortion of operatic conventions. A brief consideration of what “avant-garde” meant to Glass, Wilson, and their colleagues is instructive in bringing *Einstein on the Beach* into conversation with these forerunners, as the term “avant-garde” and what it signified for artists in the United States and Europe in the 1970s was not universally agreed upon.

3.2 Avant-garde Lineage (The Duchamp—Cage School)

Historically, “avant-garde” has been at least as troublesome a term to define as “opera.” In his influential 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg characterized the avant-garde as the detached cultural wing of Western bourgeois society whose function was “to find a path along with which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion

¹⁹⁶ Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

and violence” of the industrial revolution and the birth of mass culture.¹⁹⁷ As Greenberg implied, the term seems to have come into use in the nineteenth century in France as one expression of the societal fragmentation caused by industrialization, and Renato Poggioli agrees that the artistic vanguard has traditionally defined itself by its opposition to bourgeois culture. Whether or not it succeeds in that endeavor, however, is a subject of ongoing debate. Indeed, the critic Bonnie Marranca pointed out about *Einstein's* Met premiere in the spring following its first tour:

Wilson makes us question in sheer quantitative terms whether audiences have changed or whether certain segments of the avant-garde have become fashionable. In *The Dehumanization of Art* Ortega [y Gasset] observed that “the characteristic of new art from a social viewpoint consists of dividing the public in two classes of men: those who understand and those who do not.” To update this observation for the present situation one might enlarge his statement with the phrase, “those who don’t understand but think they should.” There is something terribly chic about the mounting of *Einstein* at the Met. As Renato Poggioli has astutely pointed out, fashion is undeniably a factor in the sociology of taste. The avant-garde used to be characterized by *scandale*, now it is *au courant*. Robert Wilson has supped with the Shah of Iran.¹⁹⁸

Marranca puts her finger squarely on the perplexing, even paradoxical, nature of an avant-garde artist’s or art movement’s migration from the margins toward a more central position in the cultural field, a migration that Abstract Expressionism, followed by Pop Art and Minimalism, had already begun to make in the years leading up to *Einstein's* “invasions of the temples of artistic conventionality.”¹⁹⁹ More helpful for understanding the avant-garde with which Glass and Wilson aligned themselves, and therefore the standard by which they invited their colleagues to judge *Einstein's* artistic relevance, is Arnold Aronson’s discussion of the twentieth-century American theatrical avant-garde. Aronson, for the purposes of connecting several generations of theater practices built upon common theoretical foundations, sets aside the question of artists’ reception as scandalous or *au courant* in defining the avant-garde, instead emphasizing artists’

¹⁹⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* (1939): 36.

¹⁹⁸ Bonnie Marranca, “Robert Wilson, the Avant-Garde and the Audience,” *New York Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 19, Series I, Box 125, no folder, Robert Wilson Papers.

¹⁹⁹ Gerald Rabkin, “Beached,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17.

aesthetic orientation toward what they experienced as the changing nature of reality in the age of mass production. He thus defines the term primarily as the product of a distinctly twentieth-century understanding of reality informed by Albert Einstein's scientific revelations concerning the relativity of time and space. "Reality, of course, is merely a way of organizing perceived phenomena," he explains, "and Western reality had been shaped by neoclassical concepts since the Renaissance. The transformation brought about by Duchamp, Stein, et al. marked a major shift in modern Western cultural thinking. Seen in this light," he concludes, "the avant-garde may be defined in part as *that which reorganizes the perception of reality.*"²⁰⁰

In a 1978 discussion with Sylvère Lotringer in the downtown journal *Semiotexte*, Glass offered a perspective on what the term avant-garde meant to him and his colleagues that resonates strongly with Aronson's description, and that likewise implicates Duchamp, Cage, and Stein as pillars of the aesthetic lineage from which *Einstein* emerged. Glass told Lotringer:

The problem that [French composer and conductor Pierre] Boulez has specifically is that he thinks he can establish credentials for the avant-garde, and that they will be established in terms of the language, the grammar of music. But it's not that at all. Rather it's in terms of *how* we experience it that music can be altered radically. Even when using the language of Satie or Brahms we can still write pieces that are extremely radical; something that [Frederic] Rzewski knows. And John Cage knows. People that are working in this way found that what makes a piece new isn't a new harmony or a new kind of tonal organization; it's a *new perception.*²⁰¹

Although Glass's encouragement of his audience to view his work in opposition to that of the serialist Pierre Boulez engages a specifically musical discourse on style, he deliberately extends the lineage he claims outside of music. In doing so, he makes explicit the mobility of the avant-garde ideals that nurtured *Einstein* across disciplinary boundaries: "You know the thing about America, if you look at it, we're very connected to the Surrealist tradition. When you see what came

²⁰⁰ Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 22–3 (my italics).

²⁰¹ Philip Glass, interview by Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellermann, "Phil Glass: Interview," *Semiotexte* 3, no. 2 (1978): 185, Series I, Box 229, Robert Wilson Papers (my italics).

from France it turns out it wasn't Picasso, it was Duchamp."²⁰² Surrealism may not be an obvious influence on Glass's music, as the composer did not undertake methods like automatic writing, nor did he engage in the writing and visual art for which the movement is primarily known. Wilson's theater, on the other hand, has clear connections to Surrealism: the director frequently showed his 1970s "operas" at night (sometimes all night), encouraged spectators to surrender to a state between wakefulness and dreaming, and juxtaposed symbolically charged imagery in ways that suggested a subconscious imagination at work. As Glass's earlier comments indicate, however, it was not necessarily Surrealism's specific stylistic markers, but rather its artists' attitude toward the perceptual relationship between art and spectator, that he sought to highlight in discussing his and Wilson's aesthetic approaches to *Einstein*.

To contextualize Glass's claim, both Picasso and Duchamp were associated with the French Surrealist movement, but the former interrogated style, not the medium itself. The latter (in his association with Dada), on the other hand, was the most visible pioneer of conceptual art, a direct antecedent to the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and early musical minimalism. In drawing a mustache on a print of the Mona Lisa (*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919), and in exhibiting objects like a snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915) and a urinal (*Fountain*, 1917) as art, Duchamp did not seek primarily to impact the means or modes of representation in painting or sculpture, but rather to question the means by which we identify art as art. To that end, he deliberately blurred the separation between art and life with projects like his Ready-Mades, which presented mass-produced objects as art. He furthermore conceived of the artist not as the arbiter of meaning, but rather as the medium through which the concept of a work passes to the spectator, who completes the work through his or her perception. Prefiguring both Cage's use of chance operations to deprive the artist of total control over the creative act and Glass's subsequent claim that the listener completes the work, Duchamp wrote, "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering

²⁰² Ibid., 190.

and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”²⁰³

For many of Glass’s and Wilson’s critics, joining the concepts “opera” and “avant-garde” seems to have been less an expression of awareness of the work’s non-operatic aesthetic lineage than an efficient method of acknowledging *Einstein’s* adherence to a number of traditional operatic conventions without losing sight of its countercultural sensibility. Considering Glass’s suggestive comments to Lotringer to an artistic trail initially blazed by Duchamp and the Surrealists, however, the opera’s historical avant-garde roots clearly extend much deeper than this generalized use of the term would suggest. The relationship of *Einstein* to the work of John Cage and Gertrude Stein, two figures who transferred Duchamp’s ideas to Glass, Wilson, and their downtown peers, reveals how strongly *Einstein’s* dramaturgy resonated with the scene from which it emerged, and how eager the artists (particularly Glass) were for their interviewers and critics to know it.

3.2.1 The Spectator Completes the Opera: John Cage and *Silence*

By the time Glass and Wilson met, John Cage had long since cultivated a reputation as a sort of philosopher-guru in the downtown scene, together with his partner and collaborator, the dancer Merce Cunningham. Glass regularly cites the older composer’s influence both in terms of looking for support and audiences among non-musical artists as Cage had looked to dancers, and of the idea that the audience completes the piece. “For me,” he told Sylvère Lotringer, “the main thing he did was to make the composer, the work, free of intention. The whole development of aleatory music was a very rigorous working out of that idea. I didn’t participate in that experiment but I benefitted from it.”²⁰⁴ Indeed, one of the key techniques associated with musical minimalism, and the crux of Steve Reich’s 1968 manifesto “Music as a Gradual Process,” is restricting

²⁰³ Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 140. Aronson likewise includes this quotation in his brief summary of Duchamp’s foundational role in the development of the American twentieth-century avant-garde. See Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 25.

²⁰⁴ Glass, interview with Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellermann, “Phil Glass: Interview,” 189–90.

the composer's control to setting up a musical process, but then allowing it to unfold without intervening on a note-by-note basis, an approach that Lucinda Childs transferred to dances like her *Reclining Rondo* in the mid-1970s (a similarity I treat in more depth in chapter 5). Over a decade later, Glass reiterated this point with more emphasis on the implications of Cage's relinquishment of compositional control for the relationship between music and narrative in theater, opera, and film scoring:

When I think of Cunningham and Cage . . . the meanings of their fusions of dance and music are essentially inferred; and inferred, generally speaking, by each individual viewer. Their work did not have implicit content of its own. In other words, it was a situation where individual members of the audience had to make up meanings for themselves. Now I don't approach it in that way. Nor have I used random chance procedures like Cage in my work. But the lesson of including the viewer wasn't lost on me. So, for example, if you tell a tenth of a story, the audience will make up the other nine-tenths of the meaning, or narrative, or whatever the case may be. In fact, very little of the story needs to be told.²⁰⁵

As Glass's inclusion of Cunningham's choreography and its relationship to Cage's music suggests, those two older artists often exerted influence on younger artists as a collaborative pair. Indeed, both Andrew de Groat and Lucinda Childs acknowledged Cunningham as an important influence, and Childs's explanation of that influence bears striking similarity to Glass's discussion of what he claims to have learned from Cage. While de Groat came to dance by way of his friendship with Wilson—both men were untrained but were influenced by abstract ballet—Childs was involved with the postmodern dance scene in Greenwich Village. She told one interviewer, "During the early '60s, Cunningham's use of space was completely new. Before that, dance was storytelling. I prefer the audience to come away with their own idea of the meaning of the dance."²⁰⁶ That Childs's views on dance echo Cage's views on sound owes to the social networks that characterized Artists' SoHo. That is, the Judson Dance

²⁰⁵ Philip Glass, interview by Charles Merrell Berg, "Philip Glass on Composing for Film and Other Forms: The Case of *Koyaanisqatsi* (1990)," *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. and intro. Richard Kostelanetz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 141.

²⁰⁶ Lucinda Childs, interview by Jeff Goldberg, "Robert Wilson: 'Einstein on the Beach,'" *New York Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 17.

Theater workshop, which crystallized American postmodern dance, took place in Cunningham's studio, and its leader, Robert Dunn, was an accompanist at the Cunningham and other modern dance studios. Dunn had taken Cage's "Composition of Experimental Music" class at the New School for Social Research in the late 1950s, and it was John Cage who asked Dunn to teach the class. As the dance historian Sally Banes explains, citing Dunn, Cage-inspired "chance and indeterminate structures were given to the students not as musical forms, but as time-structures 'derived from and applicable to all the arts or future arts which might take place in time.'"²⁰⁷ Cage was just one of several aesthetic stimuli for dancers rebelling against the strictures of Martha Graham's modern dance technique, but his impact was particularly profound.

Along the same lines, the artist Wilson most frequently discusses as an inspiration for his abstract, audience-determined approach to theater is the Russian choreographer and New York City Ballet founder George Balanchine. In a 1965 article in *Life* magazine, Balanchine conveyed an attitude toward dance that was very much in sync with Childs's observation Cage and Cunningham:

People criticize me because our [the New York City Ballet] dancing is not intellectual, because it doesn't mean anything. Dances are just flowers, and flowers grow without any literal meaning, they are just beautiful. We are flowers, we just grow, so you can't reject us and say, "You don't mean anything to us, what are you telling us, what's the story? Out!" We just smell nice and we look pink. I have to defend myself because I'm a flower?²⁰⁸

While Balanchine, who came into maturity working with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes before immigrating to the United States, did not cross paths with the experimental denizens of the downtown scene, both Balanchine and Cunningham sought to move dance away from storytelling and toward "find[ing] interesting proportions of movement in time and space because music is time," in Balanchine's words. "It's not the melody that counts, it is the time it

²⁰⁷ Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 1–3.

²⁰⁸ Robert Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004), 203–4. The essay I cite, which Gottlieb reprints in full at the end of the biography, is entitled "Mr B Talks About Ballet," and was originally published in the June 11, 1965 issues of *Life* magazine.

gives you.”²⁰⁹ In fact, in the case of Cage and Cunningham’s collaborations, time was frequently the only thread connecting their contributions, synchronization arising by accident rather than by intent. This time-oriented outlook reflects not only the way in which Glass and Wilson claim to have structured *Einstein*, in which the pre-determined temporal structure superseded moment-by-moment adjustments. It also reflects the philosophical approach toward sound that Cage developed most influentially in his 1961 monograph *Silence*, and that downtown artists of all stripes quickly applied to non-musical media.

Wilson’s professed attraction to Cage’s ideas lay in the latter artist’s refusal to judge some sounds more desirable or musical than others, much as Balanchine had defended abstract dance as flowers, which one may or may not recognize as beautiful and to which one may or may not attribute meaning. To call sound music, movement dance, manipulated media plastic art, or words literature, Cage implied, was to impose a subjective value judgment on select phenomena. By resisting the urge to make such judgments, he suggested, we might more fully appreciate the aesthetics of everyday life as art and vice versa. In one 1977 interview, for example, Wilson explained that the clock in *Einstein’s* Trial scene referenced a 1919 solar eclipse that helped to support Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity, but he strategically avoided suggesting *why* he put it when and where it appears in the opera.²¹⁰ That answer, for him as it would have been for Cage, was beside the point. “And what is the purpose of writing music?” Cage had asked in *Silence*. “One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds.” Here, one might easily substitute “images” or “gestures” for “sounds.” Cage continues, “Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play.”²¹¹

This idea of purposeless play, of arranging people, props, sounds, or other materials not to communicate a particular message, but rather to see what

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 204.

²¹⁰ See Robert Wilson, interview by Maxime de la Falaise, “Einstein at the Met (An Operatic Interview),” *Andy Warhol’s Interview*, February 1977, 27–9, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.

²¹¹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 12.

happens and if it is aesthetically pleasing to the one playing, coincides neatly with both Wilson's educational and therapeutic work with children—in the case of *Einstein*, the autistic teen Christopher Knowles—as well as his conception of the opera as analogous to a child's storybook.²¹² Because of their emphasis on images over text and the pre-literate audiences to which they are directed, picture books (while they may contain simple narratives) are often intended to be read in any order and thus invite the interaction of the reader. Wilson's flexible approach to visual material and invitation to employ child-like reading practices on *Einstein* may not seem connected to artistic philosophy, but the inspiration can once again be traced to Cage. In a public interview during the opera's preview performances in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2012, Wilson explained, “when I read *Silence*, this book [Cage] wrote, it changed my life. It was the early sixties and I was a student. You could read it from the back to the front, and from the middle to the back. It didn't matter, and it was a totally new experience for me.”²¹³

In the same interview, Wilson explained his interest in creating theater pieces of unusually long duration thus: “I was thinking that theater could be something that was always going on. . . . You could come and go and it would always be going on, something always happening. There wouldn't be so much difference between, say, art and living.”²¹⁴ Glass, in response, broke in, “that reminded me of John Cage, because he used to say that he didn't want art to be separate from

²¹² Wilson, interview by Maxime de la Falaise, “Einstein at the Met (An Operatic Interview),” 29. “Its so nice, it's like a child's guide to Einstein!” Falaise exclaimed, to which Wilson responded, “It really is. It's like a child's story book!” Wilson likewise referenced the opera's similarity to a children's book in an interview intended for Belgian television, telling the interviewer, “With Einstein, I dealt more just with the acts of behavior: the way he held his hands, the way he dressed, images that he referred to, almost like you would find in a children's book, where he talked about horizontal elevators and vertical elevators and clocks and compasses, and there's a gyroscope that goes down a wire.” “*Einstein on the Beach*: interview and performance excerpts,” Brussels, Belgium, September 30, 1976, NCOW 305, Theater on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. My transcription.

²¹³ Glass and Wilson, interview by Anne Bogart, “The Power of 2”; Cage, 98. Cage himself encourages this approach, introducing his essay “Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” by telling readers, “It may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order.”

²¹⁴ Glass and Wilson, interview by Anne Bogart, “The Power of 2.”

life, that he wanted them to be all mixed together."²¹⁵ Musically speaking, Glass was hardly the only composer on the downtown scene who responded to Cage's perception-oriented revision of musical ontology. In fact, in *Minimalism: Origins*, Edward Strickland claims that pieces like the infamously silent 4'33" and 0'0" "provided both theory and practical models for the concept-art compositions of [La Monte] Young and others in the early 1960s" that helped to codify musical minimalism as a distinct musical approach.²¹⁶ This approach generally favored process over the narrative development of the sonata form, and produced music that "exposes the components of its medium in skeletal form."²¹⁷ Glass lays bare the basic musical components of melody, harmony, and rhythm in *Einstein* by subjecting them to gradual additive processes organized into cyclical structures, and by conspicuously choosing to use numbers and solfège syllables that outline these processes in place of a poetic libretto.

As foreign as Glass's compositional technique was to that of nineteenth-century opera, however, the harmonic language with which he worked was firmly rooted in the common practice period, and reflected a postmodern attitude derived from Cage. "It goes without saying," Cage had commented in the essay "Experimental Music," "that dissonances and noises are welcome in this new music. But so is the dominant seventh chord if it happens to put in an appearance."²¹⁸ Taking this sanction of traditional harmony to heart, Glass admitted to Lotringer, "I think 'Einstein' really is in the style of Berlioz, if nothing else in terms of the harmony. On the other hand . . . the thing that makes the perception of it so radical is not the stylistic features of the work."²¹⁹ That is to say, the deployment of nineteenth-century harmony within a minimalist framework was not ultimately how Glass sought to sell *Einstein's* avant-gardism to his colleagues. Rather, Glass sought to convey to *Semiotexte's* downtown readership that his first opera was radical because, in marrying nineteenth-

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 125.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

²¹⁸ Cage, *Silence*, 11.

²¹⁹ Glass, interview by Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellermann, "Phil Glass: Interview," 186.

century harmony to twentieth-century technique, it exploded a teleological concept of style history:

Music for us does not advance down the road of Schoenberg and Wagner and so forth. The biggest cut to that tradition is to say: what tradition? You don't care. I can say—I'm going to use Berlioz; I'm going to use Mozart; I'm going to use myself; but, I'm going to fashion it in a way that the subject of the work is in fact the juxtaposition between the listener and the work itself and not anything stylistic in the work.²²⁰

This is essentially the same logic that Duchamp applied when he drew a mustache on a print of the Mona Lisa, shifting the subject of the work from the painting itself to the viewer's confrontation with an altered version of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait. This is also the same logic that informed Cage's 4'33" and musique concrète pieces like *Williams Mix*. Cage's radical declaration that music is simply "organized sound" presented as profound a challenge to the "tradition" Glass references as Duchamp's *Fountain* (a signed urinal) did to an art history predicated on a succession of styles. Viewed from this angle, the question of meaning or interpretation becomes secondary to the perceptual act from which meaning or interpretation arises, and emotion is displaced from the artwork to the spectator. Notably, Glass says, "Music for us," not "Music for me," discursively proclaiming his affiliation with composers and musicians who, like him, had rejected conventional institutional careers to pursue postmodern composition that was not yet welcome in American universities and conservatories.

Cage's principal influence on *Einstein*, then, lies in neither the material aspects of the opera nor its artists' compositional techniques. Rather, it lies in his Duchamp-derived emphasis on the spectator's participation in the production of meaning. "Emotion takes place in the person who has it," Cage wrote of experimental music,

[a]nd sounds, when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly. The opposite is what is meant by response ability. New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand

²²⁰ Ibid.

something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words.²²¹

One might easily revise this last statement to apply to *Einstein*: “Not an attempt to understand the opera’s meaning, for if the opera had a particular meaning, the drama would be given the shape of a linear narrative.” Indeed, Wilson echoed Cage’s musical sentiment when he told the German interviewer Renate Klett that a spectator “experiences space and time structures and that is not an emotional experience.” On the other hand, Wilson went on, “naturally [the spectator] is free to react to it emotionally,” just as “sounds, when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly.”²²² Similarly, in a 1983 conversation about his approach to composition, Glass told David Garland of *Downbeat* that what he learned from Cage was that, “[t]he interface of the music and the listener,” rather than any specific stylistic conventions and the emotional states they convey, “is what the emotional content of the music is.”²²³

While the directorial and compositional strategies the artists employ are not without baggage, nor are their effects on Western eyes and ears entirely unpredictable (e.g., the impact of atomic bomb imagery during the Cold War, or expectations for tension/release patterns in conventional harmonic progressions), the imagery and music are nevertheless organized in a non-linear fashion that eschews straightforward interpretation. In effect, by regularly reinforcing the fact that *Einstein*’s dramaturgy rests on the spectator’s agency, and that no one meaning or emotional response is correct, the opera’s artists succeeded in flagging their mutual avant-garde lineage while removing the onus from both the spectator (to decode their intentions) and from themselves (to have an intention to decode). As Glass wrote in his first memoir, “The point about *Einstein* was clearly not what it ‘meant’ but that it was *meaningful* as generally experienced by the people who saw it.”²²⁴ For Wilson, Glass, and their

²²¹ Cage, *Silence*, 10.

²²² Robert Wilson, interview by Renate Klett, “Ein interview mit Robert Wilson: Träumer und Segler,” *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Die Zeit 10/15/76, Ein Interview mit Robert Wilson, Renate Klett,” Robert Wilson Papers; Cage, 10.

²²³ David Garland, “Philip Glass: Theater of Glass,” *Downbeat* (December 1983): 18.

²²⁴ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 33.

choreographers, it was not Cage's specific techniques, but rather his (and Cunningham's) ideas about the ontology of art and the location of its meaning outside the art object and the artist's intentions that freed them to pursue their own technical and aesthetic vision. In so doing, they sought to align themselves with an avant-garde based in perception rather than style. Furthermore, over the course of the opera's four-decade production history, both Glass and Wilson have regularly invoked the downtown guru as a legitimizing force, emphasizing the centrality of his ideals to *Einstein's* drama as evidence of the opera's downtown integrity.

3.2.2 "Divine nonsense structured in time and space": Gertrude Stein and *Four Saints in Three Acts*

If John Cage is the godfather of *Einstein's* avant-garde aesthetics, then the modernist writer Gertrude Stein is surely its godmother.²²⁵ Before Glass and Wilson were even born, Stein had reflected on the relationship between plot and narrative, and pioneered a sound-based approach to language that anticipated the collapse of form and content several decades before the severely reductive art of the minimalists. She and the American composer Virgil Thomson also provided Glass and Wilson with a model opera on which to pattern *Einstein on the Beach*. "What [Gertrude Stein] and Virgil Thomson did in the early thirties with *Four Saints in Three Acts* was a great inspiration for me because it was not a narrative," Wilson commented in 2012. "It was theme and variation, and her text [was] divine nonsense that was structured in time and space."²²⁶ While several of *Einstein's* early critics, especially in Europe, reached for what may have seemed the most logical theoretical point of orientation, Richard Wagner's total artwork, American critics more familiar with the *Einstein* creative team's influences lighted on the Stein-Thomson work, a comparison much closer to home aesthetically, temporally, and geographically. Indeed, the week before *Einstein*

²²⁵ Glass, interview by Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellermann, "Phil Glass: Interview," 189. In fact, Glass has on more than one occasion spoken of Cage in explicitly familial terms, identifying the older artist as a sort of patriarch of his generation. As early as 1977, he told Sylvère Lotringer, "The people [Cage] likes to acknowledge are much closer to him but I have told him: you know, I'm one of your children, whether you like it or not. He doesn't see me as part of his family but I am."

²²⁶ Glass and Wilson, interview by Anne Bogart, "The Power of 2."

premiered at the Met, Charles Ruas asked the composer and director during an interview for his WBAI “Audio-Experimental Theater” program, “[H]ow much of your work here is influenced by Stein or by an affection for Gertrude Stein’s writings, dramatic writings?” further prompting them to discuss her work on opera. “Had that thought struck you?” he asked, to which Wilson replied, “I had actually thought about [*Four Saints in Three Acts*], yes, a lot. . . . I especially enjoyed reading her libretto. My favorite line is, ‘Scene once seen once seen once seen.’”²²⁷

Stein’s idiosyncratic approach to language was only one of several ways in which *Four Saints* paved the way for *Einstein*. As Wilson and the writers he invited to contribute speeches built *Einstein* around images and spoken text unrelated to the opera’s subject, much of which favored sound over sense, so the core of *Four Saints* lies in Stein’s libretto, which has no linear narrative and whose nonsensical text revels in associational and homophonic word play. Compare the following extracts from the opening interludes of *Einstein* and *Four Saints*:

Christopher Knowles, Character 2, Knee Play 1, *Einstein on the Beach*:

Will it get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is.
It could get the railroad for these workers. And it could be were it is.
It could be Franky it could be Franky it could be very fresh and clean.
It could be a balloon.
Oh these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends.²²⁸

Gertrude Stein, Chorus 1, Prologue, *Four Saints in Three Acts*:

To know to know to love her so.
Four saints prepare for saints.
It makes it well fish.
Four saints prepare for saints it makes it well well
fish it makes it well fish prepare for saints.²²⁹

²²⁷ Glass and Wilson, interview by Charles Ruas, “Robert Wilson and Philip Glass—*Einstein on the Beach*”; Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts: an opera to be sung*, intro. Carl Van Vechte (New York: Random House, 1934), 32.

²²⁸ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 65.

²²⁹ Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 15.

Similarly, Stein's and Thomson's opera offered an abstract portrait of larger-than-life historical figures, Catholic saints, just as Glass and Wilson constructed *Einstein* as a poetic homage to the life and work of Albert Einstein. *Four Saints*, like *Einstein*, also featured singers specifically chosen for their non-operatic vocal training, and grew out of an institutionally unsupported collaboration initiated by its artists. As a result, the first production of *Four Saints* (like many of Wilson's pre-*Einstein* silent operas) took place in nontraditional venues—a premiere at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut followed by a six-week run on Broadway—and “attracted the smart set of art patrons, fanciers of the avant-garde and the curious.”²³⁰ Thomson's own description of why he felt that his music was ideally suited to Stein's texts reveals deeper aesthetic parallels between the collaborative dynamics of Stein and Thomson versus Glass and Wilson:

My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, then the meaning would take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way, were manna. With meanings already abstracted, or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no temptation toward tonal illustration, say, of birdie babbling by the brook or heavy heavy hangs the heart. You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed, an accompaniment equally functional.²³¹

While spoken text played a more subsidiary role in the image- and gesture-driven drama of *Einstein* than in *Four Saints*, both operas were non-literary in the sense that, as Thomson stated above, the syntactical meaning was “already abstracted, or absent.” Both Thomson and Glass, then, were freed from the opera composer's conventional fidelity to a narrative libretto, and were thus able to write music that aesthetically paralleled the other main elements of the drama without having to illustrate a particular action or emotion. The freedom that allowed Thomson to “make a setting for sound and syntax only” likewise

²³⁰ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Thomson, Virgil,” by Anthony Tommasini and Richard Jackson, accessed November 26, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/>; Rosalind Constable, “New York's Avant Garde, And How It Got There,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1964, 10. In her 1964 article, Rosalind Constable explained, “A great deal of avant-garde activity in the 1930s took place not in New York but at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, Conn., under the directorship of A. Everett (‘Chick’) Austin jr.”

²³¹ *Ibid.*, quoting Virgil Thomson's 1966 autobiography.

allowed Glass to produce a score based on repetitive rather than narrative structures that matched dramatic units, both full scenes and transitions from one series of repetitive actions to another within scenes (as in, for example, Trial 1, in which the court proceedings are interrupted visually and musically by a whimsical lunch break, after which the actors resume the trial).²³² In fact, Christopher Knowles wrote the majority of *Einstein's* text, and its aforementioned Steinian emphasis on sound over meaning enabled Glass to produce process-based music that might parallel or run in counterpoint with, but not seek to represent, the actors' dramatic declamation or Wilson's action.

Stein's lectures on narration, delivered in the United States two years after the premiere of *Four Saints*, likewise offer insight into Glass's and Wilson's non-linear approach to *Einstein's* drama. In characteristically unmarked prose, Stein defined narrative in the broadest of terms as, "what anybody has to say in any way about anything that can happen has happened will happen in any way."²³³ Stein furthermore proposed that Americans, as citizens of a young, industrializing nation, conceived of the progression of time in a fundamentally different way than Europeans, setting the stage for an avant-garde predicated on a different perception of time, and thus reality. As Liesl M. Olsen notes in the foreword to Stein's published lectures, "Stein suggests that American writers—Henry James, for instance, one of her most important literary models—changed narrative structures in exciting ways to reflect new narrative forms in modern life. That is, Americans understood the fundamental openness of 'a beginning and a middle and an ending.'"²³⁴ Olsen draws particular attention to a moment in Stein's second lecture when she describes how during the First World War,

²³² Garland, "Philip Glass: Theater of Glass," *Downbeat* (December 1983): 16–18. Glass contextualizes the substitution of repetitive structures for narrative structures in music in an interview with David Garland during the mid-1980s: "'One of the keynotes of this music,' Glass explains, 'has been the substitution of repetitive structures for narrative structures. What I call 'narrative structures' are anything that comes out of the dialectic of the sonata form. This links us, as a group of composers, to other contemporary art forms— theater, dance, and film—where some artists are also using non-narrative forms.'"

²³³ *Ibid.*, 31–2.

²³⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Four Lectures on Narration*, intro. Thornton Wilder, fwd. Liesl M. Olson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935/R2010), ix.

she experienced French people watching “American soldiers standing, standing and doing nothing standing for a long time not even talking but just standing and being watched by the whole French population.”²³⁵ That is to say, in twentieth-century American art, “A ‘modern’ narrative need not have an event . . . nothing need ‘happen.’”²³⁶ The audience for this new kind of narrative becomes paramount, as it does in *Einstein*, for as the American soldiers stand, it is only through the perception of the French population that any sense of linear causality may (or may not) emerge.²³⁷ In other words, Gertrude Stein’s lectures on narration indicate, and her writing offers a practical demonstration, that there is no story without an audience.

In sum, Stein’s sound-oriented deployment of language—which many critics compared to the text Christopher Knowles contributed to Wilson’s works in the mid-1970s—and its narrative possibilities and implications, provided an important precursor to and influence on *Einstein*’s textual semiotics. The later opera is indeed perfectly narrative in the sense Stein describes, providing spectators with something to watch and listen to, but it is also basically non-linear, lacking the kinds of events that lend themselves to causal arrangement and interpretation. As Stein’s lectures on narration suggest, a modern American narrative need not have a conventionally related events to satisfy spectators. *Einstein* presents a case in point, its language and myriad narrative fragments inviting audience members to experience them in the same way as the French supposedly enjoyed the spectacle of American soldiers: as an emotionally and

²³⁵ Ibid., 19.

²³⁶ Ibid., ix–x.

²³⁷ Ibid., 49. In the fourth lecture, in particular, Stein muses on the nature of a literary audience, but her perceptive discussion extends to the temporal or performing arts as well. In the following passage, she locates the beginning of any audience within the individual perceiver, whether he or she is the author of a given art work or a performer or spectator. She also suggests that narrative can only exist in the mind of the perceiver and during the act of perception. “So then the audience is the thing. It helps a lot to know anything about this thing if you think are always really always thinking about the narrating of anything of narrative being existing,” she writes. “I wondered often when I was quite young and watching and still I am doing that thing watching anything inside me happen in relation to myself or in relation to any one what any one being as it were as if they were to be as I was where and when I am would believe as to what was happening. Do you see what I mean. That is the beginning anyhow one beginning of an audience being existing.”

symbolically charged scene, but one with neither a clearly delineated beginning and ending, nor a series of causal events by which spectators might attribute a particular meaning to the activity they witness. Furthermore, the operatic model that Stein and Thomson offered Glass and Wilson with *Four Saints* not only demonstrated to the younger artists how they might compose an opera without a traditional plot, but also confirmed the plausibility of passing off such a work as opera within an art world for whose participants that genre indicated music theater traceable to the Renaissance experiments of Claudio Monteverdi.

In sum, Glass and Wilson regularly gesture toward Duchamp's conceptual approach to art, filtered through the work of Cage, Stein, and their collaborators, as the avant-garde lineage with which they align *Einstein on the Beach*. By discursively (in interviews and writings) rooting the opera's reception in this strain of avant-gardism, the composer and director branded their work as an interdisciplinary representative of New York's downtown intellectual and artistic milieu. They also skillfully manipulated the Conceptual Art and Surrealist elements of this lineage as a marketing tool, emphasizing the spectator's interpretive role in order to attract audience members who might otherwise be frightened away by Wilson's and Glass's counterculture reputations.

Along with the Duchamp—Cage avant-garde, the composer (and to a lesser extent, the director) also positioned their opera in relation to experimental theater. Indeed, as a result of Wilson's distinguished reputation in Europe and newspaper editors' consequent deployment of theater critics to review the opera, *Einstein* drew many comparisons with innovative theater in New York and Europe. Many of the non-literary theater collectives that sprung up around SoHo in the late 1960s and early 1970s (i.e., the field against which *Einstein* was judged) owed their theoretical and aesthetic orientations to dramaturges working during the interwar period, including Brecht and Artaud. Also, coinciding with Glass's and Wilson's own generation, Grotowski exercised a significant influence on downtown theater groups after Ninon Tallon Karlweiss—the same agent who curated Wilson's early career—brought his troupe to lower Manhattan in 1969. To that end, *Einstein's* critics frequently gestured toward Glass's and Wilson's

clever interpolation of traditional operatic and experimental theatrical conventions as evidence of its value to the cultural field. In spite of Wilson's dismissal of several well-known downtown non-literary theater collectives (most notably, the Living Theatre), *Einstein* unmistakably inhabits the art world of Off-Off-Broadway theater from which it emerged. Previous scholars of *Einstein* have noted the downtown theater background against which the opera was received, but none have taken the time to closely examine the work's correspondences and tensions with the aesthetic lineage that informed downtown theater in the 1970s and the critical discourse that accompanied it. By exploring the ways in which this lineage reflects Glass's and/or Wilson's creative approaches to *Einstein* and the narratives they have spun around it, we can get a better sense of how the composer and director positioned their opera in relation to their colleagues' work. We can also see how *Einstein's* close association with progressive theater offered critics a point of entry other than opera by which to access and make sense of a work whose interpretive resistance made it difficult to describe for their readers.

3.3 Theatrical Lineage (Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski)

"The defining element of the avant-garde in the 1970s," theater historian Iris Fisher-Smith claims, "was its search for living tradition through the shaping of community, which brought together like-minded artists 'outside' the ideology of mainstream culture."²³⁸ This community-oriented ethos found particularly vivid expression in the performing arts, whose realizations by ensembles, rather than single artists, fostered creative collaboration. Perhaps nowhere was this collective activity more strikingly on display than in performances by the many theater troupes that sprang up during the 1960s and 1970s in SoHo, following the lead of the abstract expressionist painter Julian Beck and the German-born Judith Malina, a student of the theatrical innovator Erwin Piscator. Indeed, Beck's and Malina's Living Theatre (1947–present) became a source of inspiration for counterculture artists of all stripes.

²³⁸ Iris Smith Fischer, *Mabou Mines: Making Avant-Garde Theater in the 1970s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 2011), 11.

In his first memoir, Glass recalls, “After the late 1960s, there came a progressive proliferation of these ‘new theater’ ensembles, all working, generally speaking, toward a similar goal.”²³⁹ Citing Joe Chaikin’s Open Theater (1963–73), Richard Schechner’s Performance Group (1967–present; now the Wooster Group), Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theater (1968–present), and the work of Meredith Monk and Robert Wilson, Glass describes this group as a “lively community” very much aware of one another’s work, often supportive and just as often critical. “In all of this activity,” he continues, “the Living Theater served as inspiration and, at least to many young theater people like ourselves, standard-bearer for the new theater.”²⁴⁰ According to Glass, a performance of the Living’s *Frankenstein* in France in 1964 made “an enormous impression” on the twenty-seven-year-old composer, as it stressed not text, but rather image and movement, and radically extended what he later described to Sylvère Lotringer as colloquial time in a manner he was to encounter in all-night Kathikali theater during the trip he and his first wife JoAnne Akalaitis made to India following his studies in Paris. “I encountered it again in New York in the early work of Robert Wilson,” he explained. “But what later came to be called Wilson’s ‘theater of images’ I saw for the first time with the ‘Living’ in the early 1960s.”²⁴¹

3.3.1 Glass’s and Wilson’s Avant-garde Theater Backgrounds

When Philip Glass and Robert Wilson began meeting for lunch in 1974 to hammer out the structural details of the opera they would oversee, neither man was a stranger to the theater, and particularly theater of the avant-garde strain that was in full bloom downtown at the time they became acquainted. After performing with colleagues during his first few years in New York, Wilson had founded his own semi-educational, semi-therapeutic company, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, in 1967. Across the Atlantic in Paris, a small group of friends with whom Glass had been performing English-language progressive literary theater decided, upon the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (and thus the promise of funding at home), to decamp to SoHo. Glass

²³⁹ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 6–7.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

thus became one of the founding members of the Mabou Mines, a group known equally for its original productions and its imaginative interpretations of Samuel Beckett's work.

To provide a more detailed summary of the theatrical paths these artists traversed to arrive at *Einstein on the Beach*, while Wilson arrived at theater through study of arts traditionally confined to the *mise-en-scène*, in the introduction to Glass's first memoir, the critic Robert T. Jones noted that the composer "gravitated toward the theater in his student years and has been there ever since."²⁴² Glass himself has recalled that as he came of age, he was exposed not to the naturalist theater of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams, but rather the progressive literary theater of Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter. As a student of the French musical pedagogue Nadia Boulanger during the 1960s, he remembers attending Roger Blin's production of Genet's *The Screens* and an early production of Beckett's *Happy Days*, as well as the Berliner Ensemble's productions of Brecht's work. This was theater, in Glass's view, "that challenges one's ideas of society, one's notions of order," and when he, his then-girlfriend JoAnne Akalaitis, the couple Lee Breuer and Ruth Maleczech, and the actor David Warrilow began presenting English-language theater in Paris, Brecht's *Mother Courage* was one of their first projects.²⁴³ The five performers had met during the 1960s through their association with the San Francisco Actors' Workshop and the San Francisco Tape Music Center. Upon returning to the United States, the company, which had assembled as an expatriate troupe in Paris, officially formed as Mabou Mines—named for the Nova Scotia mining town where the group held retreats—and the group began producing non-narrative theater "associated with the conceptual art movement in general, performance art and minimalist music in particular."²⁴⁴

²⁴² Ibid., xiv.

²⁴³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴⁴ "History," Mabou Mines, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.maboumines.org/history>. In 1971, the actors Frederick Neumann, Bill Raymond joined the company, and in 1973, Terry O'Reilly joined as well. As of 2015, of the original founders and 1970s additions, Breuer and O'Reilly remained associated with the group.

Glass, who co-founded the group but left in an official capacity by the time of *Einstein* in order to pursue work with his ensemble, has linked Mabou Mines' first original piece, the "stage image" *The Red Horse Animation* (1970), to Artaud and Grotowski, the latter with whom Glass, Akalaitis, and Maleczek studied in France in 1969. In a short article on the collective in *Alternative Theatre*, Diane Nardone both corroborated this connection and situated the troupe within a distinct downtown context. She noted, "Its members have studied and utilized methods from Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brecht; they identify with the work of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, André Gregory and Joseph Chaikin. But what does make Mabou Mines unique is its interest in what Breuer calls "poet's theatre" . . . in which movement, spatial relationships, music and language achieve an identical, but heightened level."²⁴⁵

One particular experience that Glass returns to with regularity in writing and interviews, which pinpoints the influence that this work in theater had on his thinking about music's dramatic function, is Mabou Mines' production of Samuel Beckett's *Play*. As the company's resident composer, Glass regularly attended rehearsals, and because he created a tape of his minimalist keyboard and soprano saxophone duet for use during performances, he had the opportunity to witness *Play* many times in Paris and then in New York from a spectator's point of view.²⁴⁶ He explained:

I found, during my many viewings, that I experienced the work differently on almost every occasion. Specifically, I noticed that the emotional quickening (or epiphany) of the work seemed to occur in a different place in each performance—in spite of the fact that all the performance elements such as light, music and words were completely set. This puzzled me. It also made me extremely curious, since traditional theater 'works' quite differently. Every time you see *Hamlet*, for example, the catharsis, or emotional high point, of the play comes in the same place.

²⁴⁵ Diane Nardone, "Mabou Mines: From Beckett to Breuer," *Alternative Theatre*, Jan–Feb 1975–1976, Box 45, Folder 1656: "1975-76 Alternative Theater article," Mabou Mines Archive.

²⁴⁶ Glass describes his early role as Mabou Mines' resident composer in *Music by Philip Glass*, 7.

. . . When confronted with Beckett's *Play* I was forced to see that the psychological mechanism was working quite differently.²⁴⁷

Eventually Glass came to the conclusion that what he was experiencing was non-Aristotelian theater whose relationship to the spectator was more consistent with the aesthetic aims of conceptual art than of theater constructed around a linear narrative conveyed in spoken language. For Glass, "Beckett worked for me the way it did because it was not a theatrical object with an interior mechanism designed to evoke a specific response," and thus, "the emotion of Beckett's theater did not reside *in* the piece in a way that allowed a complicated process of identification to trigger response." In other words, *Play* "[did not] exist separately from its relationship to the viewer, who is included as part of the play's content," and as a result, "the power of the work is directly proportional to the degree to which we succeed in personalizing it."²⁴⁸

How did this relate to his compositional approach? Like Beckett's (and Wilson's) theater, Glass's minimalist music of the 1970s avoided narrative structures like the exposition–development–recapitulation model familiar to classical music aficionados as sonata form, or to take a form specific to opera, the da capo aria. "One of the keynotes of this music," Glass told composer David Garland, "has been the substitution of repetitive structures for narrative structures," which Glass defines as "anything that comes out of the dialectic of the sonata form."²⁴⁹ Instead of two contrasting themes that undergo development and, through harmonic development, are finally brought into accord in a moment analogous to narrative theater's moment of epiphany, Glass's *Einstein* score offers single phrases or chord progressions that repeat with regular, minor alteration until he chooses to end the process (which can sound quite abrupt to the uninitiated). In sum, Glass's statements about his experience with *Play* and the musical techniques he developed in accordance with that experience suggest that while Cage was an important progenitor for both Glass's and Wilson's work in theater, so too were dramaturges of progressive literary and non-literary theater.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 35–6.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁴⁹ Garland, "Philip Glass: Theater of Glass," *Downbeat* (December 1983): 18.

Wilson, like many artists of his generation who found a home for their outsider art downtown, entered the discipline for which he has become known with little formal training in that discipline. Upon departing his native Texas in 1962, he followed a similar geographical route to Glass, first traveling to Paris, where he studied painting with the abstract expressionist George McNeil. The following fall, he returned to the United States to study exterior and interior architecture and art at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, where he encountered two lasting influences: the professor Sybil Maholy-Nagy, who had direct connections to the Bauhaus (the influence of which can be seen in *Einstein's* simple, geometrical drops and furniture), and Paolo Soleri, with whom he worked during a stay at the architect's Arcosanti complex in Phoenix, Arizona. Of the latter, he told Umberto Eco in 1991:

He didn't know what he was going to come up with—a casino, a theatre, I don't know. He simply started to draw. This was how he conceived a building. It was amazing to see an architect work in that way. That really made an impression on me. The same with Einstein. Einstein was a dreamer too. At the time when I was finishing my course, I was completely lost, and those men helped me to see clearly, because I was a dreamer too.²⁵⁰

Soleri's approach to architecture, then, impacted Wilson's improvisational approach to theatrical compositions, and Albert Einstein was for Wilson, like Glass, a subject of far greater personal interest than merely a topic both men could agree on. During his student years, in addition to attending Balanchine's abstract ballets and Cage's and Cunningham's collaborative performances, Wilson also sat in on the choreographer Martha Graham's classes, and in 1965 dipped his toes into the downtown theater scene by creating doll costumes for part of the Open Theater's *America Hurrah*. The entrée to the stage that set him apart from his contemporaries was his regular work with children. In Texas he had worked at the Baylor University Children's Theater, and when he moved to New York, he began working with mentally disabled children, two of whom became important collaborators: the deaf-mute boy Raymond Andrews and the

²⁵⁰ Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 14. Morey and Pardo quote Umberto Eco, "Robert Wilson and Umberto Eco: A Conversation," *Performing Arts Journal* no. 43, 15:1 (January 1993).

autistic teen Christopher Knowles.²⁵¹ When one Belgian interviewer asked about the relationship between his theater and his work with disabled children during the 1976 *Einstein* tour, Wilson hesitatingly answered, “the context of theater seemed to be a form that permitted a number of the things I was interested in: architecture, or painting, or dance, or certain people who necessarily weren’t acceptable in society because of their kind of behavior, and, you know, sometimes they were allowed to behave [as they wished] in the context of art or in theater. Even for my own self . . . this madness . . . could have an outlet in theater, and it didn’t seem so strange.”²⁵² Indeed, just as many performance artists, following in the footsteps of Fluxus, sought to provoke audiences by acting in unusual or taboo ways, Wilson integrated his work with disabled children into most of his early original plays. He even allowed it to shape works, as Andrews’s visual experience of a silent world influenced *Deafman Glance’s* dramaturgy and Christopher Knowles’s sonorous, nonsensical text became a cornerstone of *Einstein’s* symbolic content.

Another central experience in Wilson’s relocation of his artistic and therapeutic work to theater came in 1966, when the choreographer Jerome Robbins, disenchanted with Broadway commercialism and interested in exploring avant-garde theater, created the American Theatre Lab (ATL). Wilson was one of its participants and, according to a critic at the *New York Post*, was “surely Robbins’s pride” and “enough to justify [the ATL’s] existence.”²⁵³ The Lab’s aim was to pursue “‘total theatre’: a ‘poetic,’ non-realistic meld of acting, dance, singing, performed by a group of actors and dancers in a closed workshop setting.”²⁵⁴ Although the ATL concluded in 1968, some of the ideas Robbins worked on there impacted his 1972 ballet *Watermill*, for which Wilson tellingly named his art

²⁵¹ Similar descriptions of Wilson’s early education and influences can be found in Arnonson, *American Avant-garde Theatre*, 122–5; Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 11–17; and Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 1–7.

²⁵² “*Einstein on the Beach*: interview and performance excerpts,” Brussels, Belgium.

²⁵³ Martin Gottfried, “Robert Wilson’s Extraordinary Art,” *New York Post*, November 17, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: untitled, Robert Wilson Papers.

²⁵⁴ Jerome Robbins Foundation and Trust: Robbins Rights Trust, Catalogue of Work, “American Theatre Laboratory,” accessed December 8, 2015, http://jeromerobbins.org/rights_trust/view/American-Theatre-Laboratory.

center on Long Island. Emerging from this workshop setting, Wilson began performing original pieces like *ByrdwoMAN* and *Alley Cats* (1968) with the avant-garde dancer Kenneth King and the composer Meredith Monk, and founded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, the group of disciple-like performers that was to function as a fluid pool of actors for his monumental original works up to the mid-1970s.

The director has claimed that he did not draw inspiration from the concurrent post-literary theater collectives around him in SoHo, to the extent that when Arthur Holmberg suggested to him that his theater was of a piece with his downtown competition, he rejoined:

I hated the theater in the 60s. I was never part of that movement. What I was doing did not resemble the Living Theater, The Open Theater, or the Performance Group. I went against everything they were doing. I loathed the way their theater looked. I had more in common with nineteenth-century theater and vaudeville than with those groups. I was formalistic. I used the proscenium arch. My theater was interior, and I treated the audience with courtesy. When New York was going for minimalism in a big way, I was doing rich, baroque pieces like [*The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* and *Deafman Glance*.²⁵⁵

Indeed, it was precisely these Wilson trademarks that made *Einstein on the Beach* attractive to larger, more traditional theater venues than to small downtown spaces. As earlier details of his biography indicate, however, while Wilson's so-called "theater of images" may not have looked like other downtown theater, it unmistakably inhabited the same art world, and not only because he put down roots at the corners of Spring and Greene Streets in the heart of SoHo. Wilson also collaborated with the same artists, spoke to the same interviewers, was reviewed by the same critics, and performed at many of the same international festivals as the Living Theatre, Open Theater, and Performance Group, among others. The milieu, in other words, was inescapable, and paired as Wilson was with Glass, their opera's structure and semiotics could not help but resonate strongly with a dramaturgical ideas that were so pervasive in the downtown scene by the 1970s as to be almost invisible. The critic Benjamin Henrichs exemplifies critical reception of *Einstein* in light of its downtown theater context,

²⁵⁵ Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 2–3.

writing for *Die Zeit* in 1976: “The twentieth century theater has been through many prophets and prophecies: Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty was one of these transcending sketches, Brecht’s Theater of the Age of Science was another, Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theater was still another. Wilson, whose new spectacle *Einstein on the Beach* is now touring Europe, seems to be one of those great prophetic personalities.”²⁵⁶

3.3.2 “Opera—with innovations!” Bertolt Brecht and the Epic Theater

Following the October 22–26 performances of *Einstein on the Beach* in the Netherlands, the critic Jaap Joppe reported, “‘Einstein on the Beach,’ opera, musical theater, total theater, whatever one wants to call it, is a surprising and particularly confusing phenomenon. . . . For the opera, to use the word that Wilson and Glass themselves employ, also seeks a distancing effect that is indeed achieved, though through theatrical sledgehammer blows.”²⁵⁷ The key phrase that Joppe employs is “distancing effect”—“vervreemdingseffect” in Dutch, or “Verfremdungseffekt” in German—a principle that Brecht developed during the interwar years in the service of his Marxist political theater. By having actors address the audience directly or read stage directions aloud, for instance, Brecht sought to remind spectators of the constructed nature of the theatrical event, forestalling audience identification with the onstage characters and submersion into the narrative. The climax and attendant catharsis built into Aristotelian theater, he believed, rendered the audience too complacent. His goal, which

²⁵⁶ Benjamin Henrichs, “Theater ohne Ende,” *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1976, 37, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Die Zeit, Theater ohne Ende, von Benjamin Henrichs,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original German reads: “Das Theater des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts hat viele Propheten und Prophetien erlebt: Artauds Theater der Grausamkeit war einer dieser transzendenten Entwürfe, Brechts Theater des wissenschaftlichen Zeitalters ein ganz anderer, Jerzy Grotowskis Armes Theater ein wieder anderer. Der Amerikaner Robert Wilson, der mit seinem neuen Spektakel ‘Einstein on the Beach’ jetzt durch Europa zieht . . . scheint eine dieser großen Prophetengestalten zu werden.”

²⁵⁷ Jaap Joppe, “Einstein on the Beach fenomenaal muziektheater,” *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, October 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “1976 EINSTEIN,” Robert Wilson Papers. The original Dutch reads: “‘Einstein on the Beach,’ opera, muziektheater, totaaltheater, hoe men het ook wil noemen, is een verrassend en vooral verwarrend fenomeen. . . . Want de opera, om dat woord, dat Wilson en Glass zelf gebruiken, ook maar te bezigen, beoogt een vervreemdingseffect dat weliswaar wordt bereikt, maar door middel van theatrale mokerslagen.” See also David Sargent, “The Met Will Dance to a Mysterious Tune,” *Village Voice*, November 22, 1976, 52–3, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “EOB – ARTSERVICE – PRESS,” Robert Wilson Papers.

extended the aims of his predecessors Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold, was to turn the theater into a forum for political ideas. To that end, he endeavored to facilitate critical engagement on the part of spectators; hence *distancing* effect.²⁵⁸

The distancing effect is just one aspect, though probably the best known, of Brecht's multifaceted "epic theater" (which he contrasts with "dramatic theater"). In the notes to his opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, he included a helpful chart to guide viewers in their confrontation with the piece that likewise serves as a revealing introduction to his theatrical convictions. In the epic theater, he sought to replace, for example: plot with narrative, experience with a "picture of the world," "one scene after another" with "each scene for itself," growth with montage, linear development with "curves," "man as a fixed point" with "man as process," and feeling with reason. Instead of implicating the spectator in the stage situation, Brecht sought to turn the spectator into an observer, arousing rather than wearing down that spectator's capacity for action, and enabling him or her to stand outside the drama rather than being stuck "in the thick of it."²⁵⁹

As discussed earlier, Glass has spoken fairly explicitly to the influence of this dramatic reorientation toward the spectator's role in relation to the work on his own approach to scoring theater and opera. To return to his aforementioned experience with Beckett's *Play*, he told Sylvère Lotringer in 1978:

²⁵⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 136. Brecht explains, "The aim of this technique, known as the alienation effect, was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident. This means were artistic. The first condition for the A-effect's application to this end is that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic tensions' should be set up. [...] The first condition of the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience." Brecht hoped that this effect would enable a non-Aristotelian dramatic experience that "would at all costs avoid bundling together the events portrayed and presenting them as an inexorable fate, to which human being is handed over helpless despite the beauty and significance of his reactions; on the contrary, it is precisely this fate that it would study closely, showing it up as of human contriving." *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

I was in the presence of a piece of work which I couldn't enter in any way through simple identification. It resisted the efforts of my normal instincts to experience it as a confusion between myself and it. So there it was—resolutely impregnable through the normal approaches and there I was confronting it.²⁶⁰

What Glass described for Lotringer was the essence of Brecht's distancing effect, and for Glass, this offered a theatrical model that he not only felt strongly attracted to, but that he, like Brecht, felt committed to for more than just an aesthetic reasons. In a conversation with Charles Merrell Berg in 1988, for example, he explained, "Early on in my work in the theater, I was encouraged to leave what I call a 'space' between the image and the music" that was "required so that members of the audience have the necessary perspective or distance to create their own individual meanings." Comparing television commercials to propaganda, Glass contended that when music and image contrive to fully immerse the viewer, "They're not allowing you to look. They're *making* you look. They don't allow you to see and react or think for yourself."²⁶¹ The sound theorist Michel Chion made essentially the same point in his influential 1990 study *Audio-Vision*. Offering the example of a television anchor, he emphasized the power of the verbal commentator to direct viewers' attention and shape their attitudes toward what they see: "The added value that words bring to the image goes far beyond the simple situation of a political opinion slapped onto images," he writes. "[A]dded value engages the very structuring of vision—by rigorously framing it."²⁶² As Glass's comment to Berg indicates, the composer was aware of the structuring capacity of music as well as speech, and deliberately sought to return control to spectators by writing music that was not entirely synchronous (e.g., different tempo, different emotional connotations) with the moving images it accompanied. Given the non-literary and often political character of Off-Off-Broadway theater, it is little wonder that many collectives, including Glass's group Mabou Mines, looked to Brecht as an important model for their own work.

²⁶⁰ Glass, interview by Sylvère Lotringer and Bill Hellermann, "Phil Glass: Interview," 182–3.

²⁶¹ Glass, interview by Charles Merrell Berg, "Philip Glass on Composing for Film and Other Forms: The Case of *Koyaanisqatsi* (1990)," 141.

²⁶² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 7.

Indeed, while Wilson was less familiar with Brecht's ideas than Glass, there are several good reasons why *Einstein* struck critics like Joppe as particularly comparable with the German director's early twentieth-century theater experiments.²⁶³

First, echoing the adjustments Brecht made to dramatic theater in pursuit of an epic theater, the downtown opera likewise presented suggestive onstage action that sidestepped linear causality, forestalled character identification, and included a number of techniques that called attention to theater *as* theater. To give just a few examples, the first scene change takes place in full view of the audience, a man recites a nonsensical speech while facing away from the audience, and a man and woman lip-synch a love duet onstage while chorus members sing the parts from the pit. It is not insignificant that Brecht's son Stefan became a poet and theater critic who wrote about and participated in productions by downtown theater troupes. In fact, he developed a particular interest in Wilson's work, appearing as an actor and singer in *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, and authoring a monograph entitled *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*.²⁶⁴ He also began an unfinished monograph on Mabou Mines.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ David Sargent, "The Met Will Dance to a Mysterious Tune," *Village Voice*, November 22, 1976, 55, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "EOB – ARTSERVICE – PRESS," Robert Wilson Papers. While Wilson does not cite Bertolt Brecht as a member of his artistic lineage, Jaap Joppe was not the only critic to note striking similarities in Brecht's and Wilson's treatment of the audience. "Wilson owes much of his artistic strength to his unabashed naivité [sic]," the American critic John Rockwell, writing under a pen name, claimed in his *Village Voice* review, "but that naivité [sic] is not always obviously intentional or effective. Sometimes in conversation he will hint at a Brechtian aesthetic. For instance, the ascending bed was lifted at Avignon by wires and pulleys, the pulley attached to an ancient crank turned with sweating effort by two French stagehands. The bed *pulsed* upward rather than rising with mechanical smoothness, and its awkward inching toward center stage before it began its vertical rise broke the illusion of mystical levitation. . . . The Avignon performances were full of moments that could have been accomplished more smoothly and efficiently, and Wilson went out of his way to include some of the stagehands in two scenes, undercutting [sic] the magic of his illusions with the intrusion of the mechanisms necessary to create them."

²⁶⁴ Stefan Brecht, *Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*.

²⁶⁵ Stefan Brecht's involvement with New York's avant-garde theater is well documented in the Stefan Brecht Papers (1960–2000) in the Downtown Collection, located in New York University's Fales Library & Special Collections: <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/brecht/index.html>.

In addition to resonating with several aspects of Brecht's epic theater, *Einstein* also presented an operatic collaboration between a composer and director, recalling Brecht's work with the composer Kurt Weill on *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930). In his notes on *Mahagonny*, Brecht explicitly addressed views on the future of modern opera, heading his essay with the provocatively capitalized "OPERA—WITH INNOVATIONS!" Brecht attacked the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* as "a muddle" in which arts that were supposed to fuse instead, in his view, became "equally degraded" and, worse, caused the spectator to become "a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art."²⁶⁶ Brecht instead called for "a radical separation of the elements," claiming:

Once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function.²⁶⁷

Brecht's ideas were formative across the arts, finding later reflection in Cage's conviction that the arts "are not isolated from one another but engage in a 'dialogue.'"²⁶⁸ Indeed, *Einstein's* musical score, mise-en-scène, choreography, and spoken text relate in a manner that is conversational rather than illustrative. Inhabiting the same time structures, those discrete elements interweave to produce a poetic portrait whose visual and sonic narrative fragments relate in ways that are at times clearly referential, and at other times highly tangential, to Albert Einstein's biography. In other words, while *Mahagonny* may bear little obvious resemblance to *Einstein*, the grafting of avant-garde theater practices onto a traditional (or what Brecht calls "culinary") operatic structure—which Brecht notably proposed in 1930, midway between *Four Saints in Three Acts'*

²⁶⁶ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37, 39.

²⁶⁸ John Cage, *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 149. Aronson likewise draws attention to this statement in his discussion of twentieth-century avant-garde performance art and theater practitioners' rejection of Wagner's proposed fusion of the arts in favor of independent arts in conversation with one another.

composition and premiere—provided an important forerunner to Glass’s and Wilson’s similarly hybrid piece.

3.3.3 “Metaphysics-in-action”: Antonin Artaud and the Theater of Cruelty

Antonin Artaud’s theoretical writings, like Brecht’s, properly belong to the political, intellectual, and theatrical climate of the interwar era in Western Europe. As the theater scholar Kimberly Jannarone has explained, however, “In the ’60s, Artaud’s works were embedded in a context we can broadly call leftist: one characterized by a striving, through the advancement of human awareness and creativity, to create a new social and political world in which a greater number of people could enjoy a greater amount of individual liberty and happiness.”²⁶⁹ Indeed, in his description of Mabou Mines’ original works, Glass explained that a key principle by which their (and other downtown collectives’) communal, performance-oriented, non-literary theater functioned was the democratization of text and other aspects of the *mise-en-scène*, dethroning the script as the locus of a work’s value. “This was hardly our own invention,” he admitted, “since its roots can be found in a still earlier period—specifically in the works of Artaud, who attempted to transcend words by creating a theater of pure expression in Paris during the 1920s.”²⁷⁰ The ideas Artaud expressed in his essays, Aronson confirms, were often amorphous, but their fiercely iconoclastic attitude and poetically ambiguous articulation made them attractive to “much of the avant-garde theater from the late 1950s to the early 1970s,” while his “Theater of Cruelty” manifesto “became a veritable bible for avant-garde theater artists of that time,” most notably the Living Theatre, who played a leading role in Artaud’s American reception and for whom it remains a foundational text.²⁷¹

Whereas Brecht questioned narrative conventions in theater and their undesirable emotional and intellectual effects on spectators, Artaud—while

²⁶⁹ Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and His Doubles* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 2.

²⁷⁰ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 6.

²⁷¹ Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*, 30. The English translation of *Le Théâtre et son double*, which was published in 1958, played a key role in introducing Artaud’s French-language writings on theater to Americans, and it is therefore that series of essays that exerted the most profound influence on the downtown theater scene, led by the Living Theatre.

agreeing that Western theater failed to “question our social and moral system”—did not seek to produce the distancing effect that impacted Glass’s approach to theater and film scoring. Rather, more like the surrealism-influenced Wilson, Artaud wished to entrance his spectators “like the snakecharmer’s subjects and conduct them *by means of their organisms* to an apprehension of the subtlest notions”; that is, to a direct apprehension of theater that circumvented language and thought.²⁷² Likewise, while Brecht called for a separation of the arts in order to avoid the ‘muddle’ of the Wagnerian total artwork, a separation that Glass and Wilson honored by erecting what one Philip Glass Ensemble member has called a “firewall” between stage and pit, Artaud called for a ritualistic mass spectacle.²⁷³ In this spectacle, “everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on stage” acts upon spectators in concert, “creating beneath language a subterranean current of impressions, correspondences, and analogies.”²⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, this vision of drama also presages *Einstein*, for Artaud’s language is reminiscent of both the Symbolists’ concern with synesthesia and preverbal associations and the later attempts by the Surrealists to release the subconscious through art and writing.

Indeed, given Wilson’s particular affinity for Surrealism—one *Soho Weekly News* critic noted the uncanny resemblance of the first Train scene to Giorgio de Chirico’s architectural landscape paintings²⁷⁵—as well as formalist non-Western

²⁷² Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 81; Antonin Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 4 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 97–8. Italics in Richards’s English translation, but not in Artaud’s original essay in French. Artaud writes, “je propose d’en agir avec les spectateurs comme avec des serpents qu’on charme et de les faire revenir par l’organisme jusqu’aux plus subtiles notions.”

²⁷³ Andrew Serman in conversation with author, June 6, 2014.

²⁷⁴ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 38; Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” 46. Of the physical language he posits, Artaud writes, “Il consiste dans tout ce qui occupe la scène, dans tout ce qui peut se manifester et s’exprimer matériellement sur une scène . . . de créer sous de langage un courant souterrain d’impressions, de correspondances, d’analogies . . .”

²⁷⁵ April Kingsley, “What You See Is What You See,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 16. “Wilson makes dozens of references to contemporary painting and sculpture during the course of the opera. . . . Scene one of Act I, ‘The Train,’ is markedly de Chiricoesque. Anticipated by a puff of smoke (a ubiquitous feature in de Chirico, as is the train) a simplified gray steam engine moves slowly in from the right.”

theater traditions, it should come as little surprise that the *théâtre de cruauté*, or Theater of Cruelty, Artaud envisioned resonates in key ways with *Einstein's* image-driven dramaturgy. Perhaps the two most obvious ways in which Artaud's theater served as a progenitor of the opera are the French poet's call for the director (*metteur-en-scène*) to take creative control over the drama, a privilege formerly reserved for the playwright, and accordingly, for the elements of the *mise-en-scène* to take precedence over a script. Wilson did indeed adopt the role of *metteur-en-scène* as the Artistic Director of his School of Byrds and Byrd Hoffman Foundation, fulfilling Artaud's vision that "the old duality between author and director will be dissolved, replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot."²⁷⁶ While Glass's equal control over *Einstein's* creation nudged the opera away from the more narrowly theatrical model Artaud envisioned, the composer's and director's strategic distortion of the concept of a libretto—replacing it with numbers and solfège and including text only in the form of sporadic speeches—owes as much in terms of semiotics to Artaud's admonition that any words should have "approximately the importance they have in dreams" as to Gertrude Stein's modernist libretto for *Four Saints*.²⁷⁷

To that end, while the musical score is the traditional vehicle of operatic drama, just as the script rules literary theater, in *Einstein*, Glass's score is on equal footing with Wilson's stage design and direction. The fixed character of Wilson's contribution to the opera had important implications for the work's ontology as well as its authorship, and this character may be linked directly to Artaud's frustration with "the exclusive dictatorship of speech" and the consequent treatment of gesture, costumes, lighting, and sets—what Artaud calls "everything I consider specifically theatrical in the theater"—as less valuable

²⁷⁶ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 93–4; "Le Théâtre et son double," 112. The original French reads: "Et c'est dans l'utilisation et le maniement de ce langage que se fondera la vieille dualité entre l'auteur et le metteur en scène, remplacés par une sorte de Créateur unique, à qui incombera la responsabilité double du spectacle et de l'action."

²⁷⁷ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 94; "Le Théâtre et son double," 112. The original French reads: "Il ne s'agit pas de supprimer la parole articulée, mais de donner aux mots à peu près l'importance qu'ils ont dans les rêves."

“craft.”²⁷⁸ Wilson, coming from an architecture and design background, expressed precisely the same frustration in an interview promoting the third revival production of *Einstein*, telling one interviewer, “[S]o often what happens in the visual ‘book’ of theater is that it’s seconding what I’m hearing, or it’s illustrating or it’s decoration. You can call it stage decoration, it’s a horrible word.” Responding more particularly to the function of text, he added, “too often I find that a director takes a text, he reads the text, and he figures out, ok this movement will be the illustration for this text. But,” he admonished, referencing films the psychologist Daniel Stern made of people interacting in daily situations and then analyzed frame-by-frame, “the body is moving faster than we think. It’s very complex, what’s going on. So what we’re seeing doesn’t necessarily have to relate to, say, the written word in the text or what we’re thinking.”²⁷⁹ While it was Wilson’s background in architecture, painting, and sculpture, rather than a specific desire to reinvent theater, that led him to valorize production elements other than the script, Artaud’s call for “concrete language” in the theater nevertheless served as an important foundation upon which Wilson was able to establish his theater a half-century later.

As to the nature of this “concrete language,” Artaud, Wilson, and Glass all place particular emphasis on a technical vocabulary that derives from encounters with non-Western theater. Artaud theorized his Theater of Cruelty in light of Balinese drama, while Wilson and Glass brought to *Einstein* their experiences with Japanese Noh and Indian Kathikali theaters.²⁸⁰ Common to all three Asian

²⁷⁸ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 40; “Le Théâtre et son double,” 48–9. The original French reads: “Quoi qu’il en soit de ce langage et de sa poésie, je remarque que dans notre théâtre qui vit sous la dictature exclusive de la parole, ce langage de signes et de mimique, cette pantomime silencieuse, ces attitudes, ces gestes dans l’air, ces intonations objectives, bref tout ce que je considère comme spécifiquement théâtral dans le théâtre, tous ces éléments quand ils existent en dehors du texte, sont pour tout le monde la partie basse du théâtre, on les appelle négligemment ‘de l’art,’ et ils se confondent avec ce que l’on entend par mise en scène ou ‘réalisation,’ bien heureux quand on n’attribue pas au mot de mise en scène l’idée de cette somptuosité artistique et extérieure, qui appartient exclusivement aux costumes, aux éclairages, et au décor.”

²⁷⁹ Glass and Wilson, interview by Anne Bogart, “The Power of 2.”

²⁸⁰ Jerome Robbins Foundation and Trust: Robbins Rights Trust, Catalogue of Work, “American Theatre Laboratory,” accessed 8 December 2015, http://jeromerobbins.org/rights_trust/view/American-Theatre-Laboratory; Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 95. Wilson had encountered the conventions and aesthetics of the

traditions was an orientation toward drama that foregrounds elements like scenery, costumes, and complex, codified gesture and sound vocabularies rather than a dramatized script. This orientation was particularly attractive to Western dramaturges that wished to undercut the dominance of the written word and to cultivate perceptual experiences that required audiences to acquire new interpretive competencies.

In his essay "On Balinese Theater," Artaud contended that, "the Balinese have realized, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theater" in which the "fertility and intricacy of all the artifices of the stage," overseen by the *metteur-en-scène*, "impose upon our minds like the conception of a metaphysics derived from a new use of gesture and voice."²⁸¹ Artaud favored the "complex of gestures, signs, postures, and sonorities" that form the vocabulary of Balinese stage performance over the "psychological tendencies" of Western plays because the former presented theater akin to poetry, while the latter presented theater comparable to prose. In Western literary theater, he claimed, spectators are asked to "analyze a character, to resolve the conflicts of love and duty, to wrestle with all the problems of a topical and psychological nature that monopolize our contemporary age," just as one conventionally reads prose text for the narrative information it conveys.²⁸² In its elimination of the script in favor of symbolic

traditional Japanese theater during his participation in Jerome Robbins's American Theater Laboratory, one project of which rendered the Warren Commission's report on the Kennedy assassination as a Noh play. Glass, on the other hand, had experienced Kathikali, which he describes as "traditional song, dance and story-telling combined in one theatrical form," in India while visiting a friend in 1970, and found both the visual effects and the extended timescale of the theater "particularly striking."

²⁸¹ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 54; Artaud, "Le Théâtre et son double," 64–5. The original French reads: "En somme les Balinais réalisent, avec la plus extrême rigueur, l'idée du théâtre pur, où tout, conception comme réalisation, ne vaut, n'a d'existence que par son degré d'objectivation sur la scène. . . . Les thèmes sont vague, abstraits, extrêmement généraux. Seul, leur donne vie, le foisonnement compliqué de tous les artifices scéniques qui imposent à notre esprit comme l'idée d'une métaphysique tirée d'une utilisation nouvelle du geste et de la voix."

²⁸² Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 41. Artaud, "Le Théâtre et son double," 50. The original French reads: "Je sais bien d'ailleurs que le langage des gestes et attitudes, que la danse, que la musique sont moins capables d'élucider un caractère, de raconter les pensées humaines d'un personnage, d'exposer des états de conscience clairs et précis que le théâtre était fait pour élucider un caractère, pour la solution de conflits d'ordre humain et passionnel, d'ordre actuel et psychologique comme notre théâtre contemporain en est rempli?"

gestures, sounds, and images, Artaud claimed, Balinese theater more closely approached the realm of poetry and ritual, which “brings into play all the relationships of object to object and of form to signification.” Artaud thus wanted to invite his spectators to participate in the production of meaning in the same way that *Einstein* invites spectators to assemble its carefully assembled signifiers into meaningful narrative units, a process Artaud describes as “metaphysics-in-action.”²⁸³ Indeed, in the middle of one of his essays on the virtues of Balinese theater, Artaud commented, “This spectacle is more than we can assimilate, assailing us with a superabundance of impressions, each richer than the next, but in a language to which it seems we no longer have the key.”²⁸⁴ Artaud might as easily have been describing *Einstein*, and indeed, Susan Broadhurst closely echoed the French writer when she wrote of the opera, “We are presented with a puzzle, an *aporia*, and so are induced to suspend any definite conclusions, to ‘dwell in uncertainties.’”²⁸⁵

The hermeneutic agency with which Artaud sought to endow his spectators was predicated on an attraction to anarchy worthy of the Italian Futurists and a related desire to force his spectators into profoundly uncomfortable positions, a “cruel” attitude more in line with the confrontational approach Fluxus artists adopted toward their audiences than the courteous relationship Wilson and Glass sought with *Einstein’s* spectators. Unlike many of Wilson’s and Glass’s theater colleagues, who embraced Artaud’s anarchic tendencies but not his interest in “the artifices of the stage,” however, Wilson shared the poet’s interest in becoming “a kind of manager of magic, a master of sacred ceremonies” whose “spectacle offers us a marvelous complex of pure stage images.”²⁸⁶ Recalling the

²⁸³ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 43. Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” 52. The original French reads: “On comprend par là que la poésie est anarchique dans la mesure où elle remet en cause toutes les relations d’objet à objet et des formes avec leurs significations.”

²⁸⁴ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 57; Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” 68. The original French reads: “C’est quelque chose qu’on ne peut aborder de front que ce spectacle qui nous assaille d’une surabondance d’impressions toutes plus riches les unes que les autres, mais en un langage dont il semble que nous n’ayons plus la clef.”

²⁸⁵ Broadhurst, “*Einstein on the Beach: A Study in Temporality*,” 38.

²⁸⁶ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 60–1; Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” 72–3. The original French reads: “C’est un théâtre qui élimine l’auteur au profit de ce que dans

famous Art Against Illusion exhibition at the Whitney Museum that informally announced the arrival of minimalism, Wilson contrarily opted for more illusion. "In my theater, he said, "you could not see ropes that supported the backdrops, you could not see the light sources that illuminated the faces."²⁸⁷

Similarly, just as Glass expressed a commitment to maintaining critical 'space' between spectator and spectacle in his theater and film composition, so Wilson regularly communicates a desire to provide his spectators with as much visual and auditory perceptual latitude as possible by having sound and image run parallel to or in counterpoint with one another, rather than illustrating one another. Wilson regularly refers to external screens (what is literally on stage) and internal screens (what spectators perceive to be onstage, filtered through their ears and their open or closed eyes). As Morey and Pardo explain in their illustrated monograph on Wilson's work, "The spectator does not expect anything, but looks at and listens to the itineraries of the audio-visual screen. For Wilson, these itineraries are like what we do in a museum ... leaving the time that is needed to see the work as a picture, as a multiplicity of pictures that offer themselves to the dream of the gaze, a dreaming that the night increases."²⁸⁸ Many of Wilson's early 'operas,' including *Einstein*, took place during (and sometimes all) night. Similarly, Artaud was interested in engaging his audiences with image-driven staging that blurred the division between waking and dreaming modes of perception. He, like Wilson, envisioned a theater that would "cause not only the recto but the verso of the mind to play its part; the reality of imagination and dreams will appear there on equal footing with life."²⁸⁹

Finally, moving away from a shared Surrealist orientation, we might also say that Artaud and Wilson share common ground in the sorts of behavior they wish their theaters to express. Wilson spoke to the theater as a forum in which behaviors not otherwise acceptable in everyday life become acceptable for the

notre jargon occidental du théâtre, nous appellerions le metteur en scène; mais celui-ci devient une sorte d'ordonnateur magique, un maître de cérémonies sacrées. . . . Ce spectacle nous donne un merveilleux composé d'images scéniques pures . . ."

²⁸⁷ Morey and Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, 27.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

duration of a performance, and people whose behavior society classifies as indicative of mental disability or illness are free to engage in that behavior as artistic expression.²⁹⁰ It is not unimportant that Artaud himself suffered from mental illness, spending nine of his last eleven years in and out of institutions, and in *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision*, author Bettina Knapp has argued, “Since Artaud’s ideas concerning the dramatic arts were born from his sickness, he looked upon the theater as a curative agent.”²⁹¹ The circumstances of Artaud’s mental health and “cruel” theatrical response contrast strongly with Wilson’s therapeutic early approach to theater, in which he sought to make room for unusual behavior not only on his own part—strikingly exemplified in his wild 1976 performance of the flashlight dance in *Einstein’s Spaceship* scene—but also on the part of socially marginalized collaborators like Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles. “The theater is an excuse for everything,” Wilson told Renate Klett in 1976. “For me it was for a long time a dispensation for a certain kind of madness.”²⁹² Whether approaching theater as a form of aggressive audience therapy or gentle artist therapy, both dramaturges nevertheless share an underlying sensibility that configures theater as a creative zone in which those deemed in some way “deviant”—from medicalized mental illness or disability to non-medicalized social eccentricity—by their community and/or society might express themselves freely.

Admittedly, Wilson and Glass may not have first encountered ideas about theater as ritualized spectacle, non-Western formalist acting, the director as *auteur*, or the stage as a forum for prohibited behavior through Artaud’s essays. As we have seen earlier, however, Glass was aware of the French poet’s ideas in

²⁹⁰ Robert Wilson’s artistic collaboration with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles was in fact a controversial subject among critics during the 1970s. I address critical concerns over art and disability, and particularly the possibility of exploitation, in the following chapter on authorship.

²⁹¹ Bettina L. Knapp, *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision* (Chicago: Swallow, 1980), 46. Earlier in her biography of Artaud, Knapp similarly notes, “Artaud was in essence constructing an entire metaphysical system around his sickness, or, if you will, entering the realm of the mystic via his own disease.” Knapp, 24.

²⁹² Renate Klett, “Ein Interview mit Robert Wilson: Träumer und Segler,” *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1976, Series I, Box 123, Folder: “Die Zeit 10/15/76, Ein Interview mit Robert Wilson, Renate Klett,” Robert Wilson Papers.

relation to his encounters with the Living Theatre and work with Mabou Mines. Similarly, when Jerome Robbins initiated the American Theater Lab that helped to nurture Wilson's emergence as a *metteur-en-scène*, it was out of interest in 1960s theatrical experimenters like Grotowski and Peter Brook, whose work was predicated on Artaud's theory. That is to say, Glass and Wilson did not need to read *The Theater and Its Double* for its impact to ripple through their work because the text was so foundational for other members of the theater scene to which they belonged. Indeed, performers and critics from the Living Theatre to Susan Sontag had cultivated Artaud's American reception as a visionary figure since the late 1950s. The extent to which his thoughts and convictions saturated the scene in which the *Einstein* company participated thus makes him an indispensable figure in discussing the dramaturgical mechanics of the opera. Similarly, while Grotowski proposed a Poor Theater in the 1960s that would seem to be diametrically opposed to as 'rich' a theatrical experience as *Einstein*, the minimalist aesthetics that Grotowski shared with Glass and Childs, and the concern with the relationship with between spectator and spectacle that drove Grotowski, were mirrored in Glass's and Wilson's opera, revealing how deeply embedded the uptown-bound opera's aesthetics were in the artistic politics of downtown theater.

3.3.4 "What takes place between spectator and actor": Jerzy Grotowski and the Poor Theater

"The concept of theater as *process* is essential to a number of our most impressive theater groups," wrote the art historian and critic Barbara Rose in 1972, "all of which are involved with returning theater to its origins in ritual and archetypes. The kind of theater evolving from these intense, dedicated non-commercial groups resembles an ecstatic *rite de passage*," she contended, linking such American theater to "the physicality and synesthetic and ritual dimensions of the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's 'poor theater.'"²⁹³ While Rose goes on to describe these dimensions by virtue of their reductive aesthetics—"They work without conventional sets and costumes, and discipline their bodies and voices

²⁹³ Barbara Rose, "Museum as Theater," *New York Magazine*, May 15, 1972, Box 45, Folder 1651: "1972 New York Magazine article," Mabou Mines Archive.

through specialized exercises"²⁹⁴—a virtue that the visually lush *Einstein on the Beach* did not fully share, the notions of process and ritual likewise permeated early reception of the Glass/Wilson opera.

"*Einstein* is a religious, a holy, a mystic event. A rite of passage," Baker wrote ecstatically in *The Soho Weekly News* following the opera's Met premiere. "It's impossible to discuss it, to understand it, to (I imagine) even endure it without that acceptance."²⁹⁵ Almost a decade later, the opera had lost none of this force: "For all its complex layers, its counterpointed and interlocking structures, and its careful images, *Einstein on the Beach* is a mantric meditation on the ideas of our time," John Howell wrote in *Artforum* following the opera's first revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). "The *Einstein* of Glass and Wilson makes gibbering believers out of sophisticated viewers and repels those who stop blankly only at its surfaces. It demands a leap of faith to be totally 'gotten.'"²⁹⁶ "Poor" *Einstein* was not, yet like the Performance Group, Open Theater, and Manhattan Project works to which Rose alludes, it emerged from (and spoke to) a downtown theater community collectively engaged in exploring theater's ritualistic capacity, in many cases under the influence of Grotowski's systematic interrogation of the medium in the 1960s. Unlike Brecht and Artaud, Grotowski was a contemporary of Glass's and Wilson's, and his approaches to the function of theater in society and the internal workings of non-commercial theater collectives thus both respond to these earlier writers and model many of the concerns that drove the scene from which *Einstein* arose.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Robb Baker, "Times Three," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 17. Other early reviews that likewise described performances of *Einstein* in explicitly ritualistic or religious terms include: Patrick Piet, "Le rencontre de Bob Wilson et d'Avignon: Nous sommes des mutants, nous sommes des mutants," *Libération*, August 3, 1976, and Jacques Mairel, "*Einstein on the Beach*, de Bob Wilson, au T.R.M.: pourquoi vouloir annihiler la durée à tout prix?" *Le Soir*, September 30, 1976, Series I, Box 122, Folder: "Folder: 1976 EINSTEIN," Robert Wilson Papers; Benjamin Henrichs, "Theater ohne Ende," *Die Zeit*, October 15, 1976, 37, Series I, Box 123, Folder: "Die Zeit, Theater ohne Ende, von Benjamin Henrichs," Robert Wilson Papers; and Jamake Highwater, "A Primal Drumming," *Soho Weekly News*, December 2, 1976, 15.

²⁹⁶ John Howell, "Forum: What a Legend Becomes," *Artforum*, March 1985, Box: "1984 Next Wave Festival: Einstein on the Beach, Desert Music by Performance," Folder: "EOB Publicity," Hamm Archives.

After establishing a reputation in his native Poland for revolutionizing theater acting, Grotowski and his Polish Theatre Laboratory reached an American audience when his writings on his methods, *Towards a Poor Theater*, were published in English in 1968. His company made its debut in the United States under the auspices of BAM in the fall of 1969, and the organization built a theater for the group in the Washington Square Methodist Church in Greenwich Village. There, the group's plays *Akropolis*, *The Constant Prince*, and *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* had a three-week run. Glass in particular cited this contemporary director as part of *Einstein's* dramatic lineage by way of Mabou Mines, explaining that two of the five founding members of the group, his wife JoAnne Akalaitis and Ruth Maleczech, had taken the opportunity to study with him in 1969, while still in France.²⁹⁷ Indeed, Grotowski's 1964 *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, which disposed of props entirely in favor of the actors' bodies representing different objects, foreshadowed the human horse and rider—composed of three actors—of Mabou Mines's first major original piece *The Red Horse Animation* (1971), a production for which Glass provided music and with which he was involved for the entire year-long rehearsal process.²⁹⁸

Unlike Brecht, whose epic theater retained a relatively conservative relationship to text, and Artaud, whose theory Grotowski regarded as “an astounding prophecy” but not “the product of long-term practical investigations,” the Polish director envisioned what might as easily be called a minimalist theater as a poor theater.²⁹⁹ Grotowski was initially driven to synthesize a new theatrical methodology in response to what he perceived as competition between theater and film and television. “No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources,” he wrote in 1968, “it will remain technologically inferior to film and television,” and so he instead proposed to take theater out of competition by radically reducing all elements that were not unique to the

²⁹⁷ Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 6. Glass goes so far as to claim that Akalaitis and Maleczech “were among the first Americans who brought his ideas back to New York.” As Grotowski had not, in 1967, presented his theater in the United States, this may well be true.

²⁹⁸ Theodore Shank, excerpt from “Collective Creation,” *The Drama Review*, June 1972, Box 45, Folder 1652: 1972 Drama Review article, Mabou Mines Archive.

²⁹⁹ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 24.

medium, including makeup, costumes, scenery, lighting, special effects, and even the stage.³⁰⁰ The only element theater could not exist without, according to Grotowski, was “the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion.”³⁰¹ The Poor Theater, then, responded to the theatrical predecessors of the prewar era with a challenge to the medium on par with the most reductive minimalist art, music, and film, rejecting “the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines – literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting (under the direction of a *metteur-en-scene*).” Instead, he proposed a definition of theater—“what takes place between spectator and actor”—that rendered most elements considered vital to theater supplementary, echoing minimalist composers’ concurrent reductivism in the service of discovering new means of musical development.³⁰²

The materials of Grotowski’s Poor Theater would seem to be (as indeed they are) diametrically opposed to the luxurious symbolic stew of Wilson’s neo-surrealist theater. Where Grotowski trimmed away all but the most essential elements of theater (actor, action, audience), discarding even the stage in favor of a unique performance space for each play, Wilson adamantly defended the proscenium stage. He became a master lighting designer, and engaged in precisely the “artistic kleptomania” that Grotowski decried, filling his stage like an artistic magpie with props, furniture, scrims, costumed actors, speech, and music that intertextually referenced culture high and low.³⁰³ In fact, Glass’s minimalist musical techniques and de Groat’s (and later Childs’s) reductive, patterns dances

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 19.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 32–3.

³⁰³ David Sargent, “The Met Will Dance to a Mysterious Tune,” *Village Voice*, November 22, 1976, 55, Series I, Box 122, Folder: “EOB – ARTSERVICE – PRESS,” Robert Wilson Papers. The critic John Rockwell, writing under a pseudonym, noted that Wilson seemed to walk a fine line between a Brechtian distancing effect and sometimes clumsy attempts at enchanting stage artifice, prudently leaving his intentions unclear: “Sometimes in conversation [Wilson] will hint at a Brechtian aesthetic. For instance, the ascending bed was lifted at Avignon by wires and pulleys, the pulley attached to an ancient crank turned with sweating effort by two French stagehands. The bed *pulsed* upward rather than rising with mechanical smoothness, and its awkward inching toward center stage before it began its vertical rise broke the illusion of mystical levitation. Wilson said in Avignon that he wouldn’t use a hydraulic lift if he had one; he will have one at the Met, and it will be interesting to see whether he uses it.”

more closely align with Grotowski's aims. By eliminating the narrative trappings of Western art music forms, Glass had, upon returning to New York in 1967, focused on bare rhythmic and melodic processes, eventually reintroducing harmony, but still restricting the sung text of *Einstein* to technical descriptions of the rhythmic (1, 2, 3) and harmonic (do, re, mi) processes themselves, and presenting short melodic phrases or harmonic progressions that repeated with only the most gradual alterations over the course of ten to thirty minutes. Similarly, de Groat and Childs worked with a restricted movement vocabulary, creating a sense of dynamism by shifting the abstract patterns their ensembles assumed. Grotowski offered a minimalist theater where Glass, de Groat, and Childs offered minimalist music and dance.

In spite of their opposing approaches to the 'richness' or 'poverty' of theater, however, Grotowski and Wilson did share a view of theater as a therapeutic space; hence critical reception that remarked on the ritualistic overtones of both. Extending to more general sympathies characteristic of non-commercial theater in the 1970s, *Einstein's* director and composer also both shared with the Polish director a collective approach to creating original theater that envisioned the producer (a leadership role divided between Wilson and Glass) "guiding and inspiring" his performers while retaining openness to being guided and inspired by the performers' own capabilities. Grotowski defended this approach as "a question of freedom, partnership," which "does not imply a lack of discipline but a respect for the autonomy of others."³⁰⁴ This partnership likewise describes the creative process that produced *Einstein's* staging, music, choreography, spoken text, and even performing: Wilson invited choreographers to shape the opera's dance and Knowles and two performers to provide its dialogue, while Glass asked his musicians to engage in collective (later solo) improvisation in first scene of the final act.

This particular strain of openness to the creativity of performers, which places a director in control but stretches the authorial possibilities of the theatrical medium, is one of the key ways in which *Einstein* interpolated downtown theater

³⁰⁴ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater*, 258.

practices into opera. It also connects *Einstein* to a lineage extending back to Artaud and Russian theorists like Vsevolod Meyerhold and his mentor Konstantin Stanislavski a generation earlier, who developed systems of expressing emotion physically through learned gestures and movements, connecting psychological and physiological processes. In *Towards a Poor Theater*, Grotowski claims to have studied the major actor-training methods of Europe (Dullin, Delsarte, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vadktanghov) as well as non-Western theater methods (Beijing Opera, Indian Kathikali, and Japanese Noh), and like Wilson, he was attracted to formalist approaches: “Creativity, especially where acting is concerned, is boundless sincerity, yet disciplined: i.e. articulated through signs,” he explained, noting that spontaneity and discipline are both foundational to the craft.³⁰⁵

In closing, while Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski envisioned different theoretical paths along which twentieth-century theater might tread, all three men’s writings and direction were foundational for the aesthetic milieu in which *Einstein on the Beach* participated. Accordingly, traces of their ideas can be found in Glass’s and Wilson’s approaches to the relationship between their opera’s visual and sonic components and their attitude toward collaboration, and these resonances provided critics with a generic point of entry into the work alongside opera. Indeed, as the downtown writer Richard Kostelanetz mused in an essay in 1975, *Einstein* was par for the course among what he called the downtown “theater of mixed means.” “Rather than linear narrative,” he explained, “the new theater presents a succession of sequences which relate to each other in various ways. In this respect, the form of a mixed means piece is closer to vaudeville than literary theater.” He continued:

Whereas our most prominent playwrights have been melodramatists, to various degrees of heavy-handedness, performance-theater generally avoids such focused and dichotomous interpretations of experience; and like the best American fiction, it similarly eschews any naturalistic claims. Among the mixed-means works of the past decade that continue to haunt my memory are the Performance Group’s *Dionysis in '69*, Merce

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 261.

Cunningham's *Winterbranch*, Alwin Nikolais' *Scenario*, and the extravagant performances of Robert Wilson.³⁰⁶

From this perspective, much of *Einstein on the Beach*'s appeal to its early critics lay in Glass's and Wilson's shrewd exportation of the avant-garde theories of art and theater that undergirded New York's Lower Manhattan art scene to the conventional art world of theater, music, and opera. There, as Glass had told Mark Swed, Duchamp and the Surrealists, Cage, Stein, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski, along with the colleagues among whom their ideas circulated, comprised "a lineage that was not known," offering downtown insiders a chance to witness their artistic ideals infiltrate conventional venues, and outsiders a novel but aesthetically accessible experience.

3.4 Playing with the Avant-garde

In a review of *Einstein on the Beach* written in November of 1976, the dance critic Sally Banes neatly described dramaturgy indebted to a multifaceted aesthetic lineage: "*Einstein* is not always easy or intelligible. At times it makes the audience work; at times it makes us hallucinate. Ultimately," she concluded, "it provides us with extraordinary frameworks and systems with which we can rediscover basic realities."³⁰⁷ Exploring key "frameworks and systems" that linked *Einstein* to the performing-arts scene from which it emerged enables us to see the work as not just an unconventional contribution to the genre of opera, but also as a representative product of a particular art world characterized by the very challenges to tradition that fueled *Einstein*'s uptown celebrity.³⁰⁸ Indeed, the mismatch between aesthetic impetus and the venues in which *Einstein* was presented accounts for the opera's differing reception in countercultural and conventional art worlds.

On one hand, critics who were not conversant in the artistic debates of the Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene measured *Einstein*'s artistic success against

³⁰⁶ Richard Kostelanetz, "A Theater of Performance, Not Literature," *Dialogue* 8, no. 2 (1975): 42–3, Series I, Box 229, no folder, Robert Wilson Papers.

³⁰⁷ Sally Banes, *Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and Paratheater in New York, 1976–85* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 25.

³⁰⁸ Childs and Glass, interview by Mark Swed, "Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs Discuss *Einstein on the Beach*."

traditional operatic models, pronouncing it innovative on those grounds. On the other hand, Glass's and Wilson's colleagues, some of whom regularly called their own performance art "operas," viewed neither *Einstein's* aesthetics nor its opera label as pioneering. Rather, they reserved their admiration for its artists' expression of aesthetic concerns central to downtown avant-garde art, music, theater, and dance. *Einstein*, that is, put the New York avant-garde art world on display in venues and for audiences to which most of Glass's and Wilson's peers did not have ready access. In that sense, the scene's insiders saw not *Einstein's* non-narrative, audience-oriented drama, but rather its successful incursion into traditional opera venues, as groundbreaking. By making inroads with established theater institutions, *Einstein* held the promise of new opportunities for downtown art distribution, and it hastened the cultural accreditation of ideas and performance practices that were, in Glass's words, "not known in the world of conventional theater and the world of conventional dance and the world of conventional opera."³⁰⁹ Or as Lucinda Childs told Jeff Goldberg offhandedly in a 1977 interview, "*Einstein* was more of a political breakthrough than an artistic breakthrough. Getting the Met to put it on. . . . The artistic breakthroughs happened before *Einstein*."³¹⁰

3.4.1 Aesthetic Lineage and Collaboration

One crucial theme that unites *Einstein's* lineage in terms of not just aesthetics, but also the cooperative social activity that gave them form, is the collaboration that abounded among downtown artists in the 1970s. Glass and Wilson embarked on their joint project in the wake of similar collaborations between John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, and Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, and from these predecessors among others they learned that creative relationships could produce successful results without necessarily conforming to genre-specific authorial conventions (e.g., a composer authors an opera, a playwright authors a play).³¹¹ In *Einstein's* case, the composer and director

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Childs, interview by Jeff Goldberg, "Interview / Report: Robert Wilson and 'Einstein on the Beach,'" *New York Arts Journal* (Spring 1977): 17. Ellipsis in original.

³¹¹ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater*, 23–4. Artaud, while a foundational figure of American postwar avant-garde theater, does not offer a model collaborator largely for

shared *equal* authorship over the opera, and they further solicited creative contributions from several of their performers, most notably de Groat, Childs, and the spoken text writers Christopher Knowles and Samuel M. Johnson. By dividing primary creative authority between a theatrical *auteur* (Artaud's *metteur-en-scène*) and a composer, Wilson and Glass walked the line between downtown theater conventions and operatic conventions. Furthermore, by inviting a handful of collaborators to contribute substantial creative material to the opera, the director and composer imported to opera the collective creative practice that embodied downtown theater troupes' alternative to commercial theater's conventionalized hierarchical models of authorship.

Wilson and Glass were intimately familiar with intensive collaboration from their work with the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, and with Mabou Mines and the Philip Glass Ensemble in its early incarnation as a loose band of composer-performer colleagues. The unusual two-tiered authorship they established as joint creators overseeing contributions from invited collaborators, however, was as unusual for downtown theater as it was for conventional opera. Exploring the hybrid theater/opera model that facilitated the creation of *Einstein on the Beach* reveals a key way in which Glass and Wilson negotiated the work's ontological construction as opera. It also sets the scene for considering the contributions of marginalized collaborators, and for assessing the impact of *Einstein's* authorial model on its ongoing production and reception history.

the reason that Grotowski downplays his influence on the Polish dramaturg's work: "Artaud was an extraordinary visionary, but his writings have little methodological meaning because they are not the product of long-term investigations. They are an astounding prophecy, not a program." That is, Artaud wrote about theater, but by the time he wrote his influential treatise *The Theater and Its Double* in 1936, he was in and out of insane asylums.