In Memory

Wilson and Müller in Prickly Berlin

Jonathan Kalb

In the summer of 1986, as a 27-year-old doctoral student, I arrived in West Berlin for what would turn out to be more than two years. I hadn't come to study Robert Wilson or Heiner Müller. I'd come to finish a dissertation on Samuel Beckett, who'd directed eight of his plays there; and to improve my German, as well as understand the cultural pulse of that famously divided city with its abundance of lavishly funded, artistically adventurous theatres. To my surprise, I found myself increasingly fascinated by the strange and counterintuitive Wilson-Müller partnership, which I thought might be related to what I was studying, though I didn't yet understand how.

The sheer unlikeliness of the Wilson-Müller alliance, when it began, has been remarked on often: the reticent and meticulous visual artist from Waco, Texas, who had no evident politics and claimed to have read only a handful of books in his life teamed up with the messy, gnomically articulate, committedly Marxist intellectual from East Germany whose works were so drenched in history they practically dripped references. The uniquely history-soaked atmosphere of West Berlin at that time—the politically stalemated, bitterly fortified DMZ of the Cold War, a prickly island of Western privilege and smug satisfaction floating in the grey and ominous sea of East Germany—acted then as a sort of clarifying draught for me. It helped me understand, in ways I couldn't see in the US, what these almost absurdly mismatched artists needed from one another.

Wilson and Müller were both already famous in Europe in the early 1980s, but neither could be seen very often then in the American theatre. They were present mainly as touchstones, exciting reports from abroad, and only occasionally in actual productions. Then, seemingly in an instant, scarcity changed to plenty. Müller's *Quartet* and *Hamletmachine* had American premieres in 1983 and 1984 and *Einstein on the Beach* had a high-profile 1984 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—the first appearance of Wilson in America in eight years and the first time I saw his work. Several other much-discussed events followed: Wilson's *The Golden Windows* at BAM (1985), the Cologne section of *CIVIL warS* at the American Repertory Theater with a text by Müller (1985), and two landmark productions of Müller plays directed by Wilson in 1986: *Hamletmachine* at NYU and *Description of a Picture* at ART (presented as a prologue to Euripides's *Alcestis*).

All these works were fresh in my mind when I left for Berlin, particularly the stunning NYU *Hamletmachine*, which had been extolled by the better-informed American critics (such as Gordon Rogoff and John Rockwell) for being a limit case of postmodernism. Because its action was almost completely noncontingent on its text, Müller was lauded as a great poet of hermetic runes, with Wilson as his consummate sibyl. Wilson compared the Müller texts he used to "rocks," as he had Philip Glass's music. Müller himself called them "stones" over which the river of Wilson's imagery flowed (in Shyer 1989:123). I asked Müller a few years later why that submersion was appealing to him, and he answered, "Because I know nothing can happen to my texts that way" (in Kalb 1990:51).

That winter, 1986/87, a new Wilson-Müller collaboration opened at the Berlin Schaubühne—*Death, Destruction & Detroit II*—and I was so eager to see it I went the first week. I sat down,

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TDR 70:1 (T269) 2026 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325101202
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325101202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

looked at my program, and found a stuffed insert there by Müller titled "Letter to Robert Wilson," explaining that he had tried and failed to write the text he'd promised for the show. *DD&D II*, he said to Wilson in the letter, "more than any of your previous works consists in its own explosion [...] Perhaps the explosion had already spread too far, the degree of acceleration already too high, for a text, which necessarily means something, to be able to imprint itself on the whirlwind of the eruption" (Müller 1987; my translation). Now what was going on here? I remember wondering. Was this a breakup note—trouble in postmodern paradise? Was the dreaded specter of meaning now rising from the grave of heroic modernism to spoil the highbrow theatre's most compelling creative affair? It was not a breakup note, it turned out, but the fractures it exposed were important and real. The rest of Müller's letter described vivid imagistic dreams he'd had about Wilson, and Wilson, ignoring the zinger line about meaning, inserted the whole letter into the show. What the incident revealed, I believe now, was that both artists were responding then to enormous cultural-historical pressures they may not have completely understood, which were pushing them out of their comfort zones regarding explicit and implicit meaning, distinct and oblique politics. In different ways, each was being forced to explore unfamiliar new artistic paths to achieve his goals.

Most commentary on the Wilson-Müller partnership accepts that its core was their mutual aversion to interpretation and commitment to open-ended meaning in theatre. Laurence Shyer, for instance, wrote in 1989: "Though the motives of the two men might be very different—Müller's rejection of interpretation is both an aesthetic and political position, while Wilson seems more concerned with preserving a sense of mystery—both seek the same thing: an open-ended art" (1989:122). Yet the full picture was a little more complicated. Müller did harbor considerable resentment then about the tendency of the typical German *Regisseur* to apply "brilliant" concepts to his works to highlight particular meanings, and Wilson was an antidote to that. The fact is, though, Müller also applied subtle interpretive concepts himself when directing his own works. He also gave several interviews saying he wished he could've created a piece with Wilson from scratch instead of always providing texts for visual structures already in place, suggesting a desire to have more say in their open meanings (Kalb 1990:51). My perception is that the main appeal for Müller in this partnership was emotional. The lightness of Wilson's approach was a tonic to him. Wilson's spirit of pure childlike play in theatre, which Müller called "very American," was unlike anything he'd experienced in the notoriously analytical German theatre (51).

No less important, Müller was also an essential new foil for Wilson, who was at that time just beginning to direct classic plays—something he'd long avoided. The zeitgeist had changed since he made his mark as an avantgardist in the late 1960s. MTV, for instance, had arrived in the early '80s and made mass circulation, trivializing, and commercialized images the principal expression of media-age consumerism. The new ubiquity of image-swarm in the West meant that the countercultural edge of images per se could no longer be taken for granted in any serious art. Jean Baudrillard lamented the new "indifferent" attitude of the Western public at the time in his 1987 book *The Ecstasy of Communication*, which argued that consumer society had regressed to an "obscene" condition in which images that had previously sparkled and delighted as "spectacle" had now become dulled, cheapened, and banalized by overexposure:

> [T]oday there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility, availability [...] It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret. (1987:22)

In this new, visually flooded information age, Wilson's gorgeous, slow-moving stage pictures needed "legible" ballast to qualify as edgy and retain mystery. Müller was his first trusted source for this ballast.

Müller died in 1995, so the period of Wilson's direct collaboration with him was brief, less than a decade. Yet that decade was transformative for him. I believe Wilson's transformative influence on Müller has been insufficiently understood by critics of both artists. Müller suffered from a prolonged writer's block starting in the early 1980s, and his frustrations drove him to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325101202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reinvent himself as a canny director and provocative public intellectual whose preferred métier was the maddeningly self-contradictory interview. One of his most prominent projects in this period came in 1987/88 when he pulled off a remarkable bureaucratic coup in his native GDR, securing permission to direct one of his plays at the prestigious Deutsches Theater in East Berlin.

The backstory of this project is essential to understand.[1] After decades of banning him, ignoring him, and offering him a passport in the hope he'd defect to the West, the East German government in 1986 had finally caved to the pressure of Müller's Western fame and decorated him with its national literary prize. Their new tactic to neutralize him was to try to appropriate him, and the Deutsches Theater offer was part of that. The sticky question was what play he would direct. Most of his plays had still never been performed in the East then because, though thoroughly Marxist in spirit, they nevertheless oozed frustration with the frozen state of "real socialism." His choice was shrewd. He proposed one of his old, apparently harmless "production plays" from the 1950s, written before his East German production ban—*Der Lohndrücker* (*The Scab*)—which mollified the censor. This play tells the story of a worker-hero in the early GDR beset by colleagues who try to sabotage him. Its surface is easily read as a straightforward, loyalist, and realistic fable about the complications of building socialism. That is not what audiences found when they arrived for the premiere.

Müller didn't collaborate with Wilson on this project, but if you watched it without reading the program you might have easily assumed that he did. His staging was built entirely around striking and precise pictures created by the celebrated Frankfurt designer Erich Wonder that strongly recalled Wilson. The central image was an abstracted industrial kiln whose blazing fire pattern brought to mind sundry other literal and metaphorical conflagrations (Nazi ovens, the burning of Stalingrad, industrial and governmental tyranny). Against these pictures, Müller arranged his actors in exactly the static, Symbolist ways that Wilson typically did: posing them in statuesque tableaus for long intervals, having them speak in clipped and musically patterned tones, sometimes repeating their lines multiple times. It was a startlingly nonrealistic and extraordinarily open mise-en-scène that made the state's preferred patriotic reading of the play seem irrelevant. This was itself aggressive, but Müller sharpened the provocation even further by inserting two nonapproved texts—*The Horatian* and *Volokolamsk Highway IV: Centaurs*—that satirized the brutality and cluelessness of Communist officials. He was practically daring his government to shut him down.

My point in recounting this episode is to highlight an underexplored dimension of the Wilson-Müller collaboration: it provided both artists with political benefits. Each needed a new political edge at that time, which he found in the experience of their shared work. Wilson acquired from Müller a comfort with "legibility" (to use Baudrillard's term for the new demands of the info age) that he would soon put to extraordinary use in productions of Shakespeare, Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, and even Brecht, drama's most invested rationalist. And Müller acquired from Wilson a technique that could effectively smuggle dissent into the jittery environment of the East Berlin theatre; his use of "theatre of images" visual ambiguity pried open a window of interpretive freedom there.

Müller would go on to direct four other powerful East Berlin productions that spanned the period of head-spinning political change as his homeland, the GDR, was dissolved and absorbed into West Germany: *Hamlet/Machine* (1990), *Mauser* (1991), *Duell/Traktor/Fatzer* (1993), and *Quartet* (1994). All these productions contained more coordination of image, sound, and text than Wilson was comfortable with. Nevertheless, they were all deeply indebted to Wilson in their reliance on static performers framed in sharply resonant tableaus. In 1993, Müller accepted an uncharacteristic offer. He went to Bayreuth—the infamous temple of Wagnerism and locus of right-wing cultural nationalism—to direct Wagner's notoriously death-obsessed love opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Again partnering with Erich Wonder, he applied the Wilsonesque techniques he'd been using but also conceived a fresh provocation: alluding pointedly to Beckett's *Endgame*. In the final act, instead of lingering in the castle garden Wagner called for, Müller had the wounded Tristan await Isolde and

1. A detailed account of this production may be found in Michael Wood's *Heiner Müller's Democratic Theater: The Politics of Making the Audience Work* (2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325101202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

death in a desolate gray bunker strewn with rubble. No glorious and blissful *Liebestod* here—in this version, the opera simply wound down to nothingness in grumpy denial of romantic conceits.

When I moved to Berlin in 1986, I had just conducted a probing interview with the renowned Beckett actor Billie Whitelaw, who famously claimed that she never interpreted texts.

> I place myself totally at [Beckett's] disposal, and I can be a tube of paint or a musical instrument or whatever. I won't argue, I won't argue, because I trust him totally, and have absolute respect for his integrity and his artistic vision. (in Kalb 1989:235)

At the time I didn't connect these remarks with Wilson or Müller, but in hindsight I do. In my book *Beckett in Performance* I referred to Whitelaw's creative process as "inadvertent interpretation," because despite her claim to being a neutral vessel channeling Beckett's meanings without conscious inflection or interference, she did, as she admitted when pressed, engage her imagination in performance enough to absorb her characters' dark thoughts to the point of exhaustion (1989:21).

It seems to me that something very like that process of intuitive, or inadvertent, interpretation was always at work in Wilson and Müller's collaborations. These two men read one another's work acutely, consistently, and even ruthlessly; the dramaturg Wolfgang Wiens, for instance, estimated that Wilson cut 80% of the material Müller contributed to *CIVIL warS* before its Cologne opening (in Shyer 1989:128–29). Their instincts, however, ensured they never put too fine a point on discrimination, lest they spoil the affectionate and supportive mood between them. That's the lovingly evasive spirit in which they could flourish, separately and together. Wilson said in 2002:

> He gave a kind of weight to what I was doing that I didn't have without him. We were actually very good friends. It was strange, because we were so different. Once we were at Harvard at a conference and someone said, "Mr. Müller, can you tell us the difference between Mr. Wilson and yourself?" He said, "Oh, it's very simple, Bob likes vodka and I like scotch." (in Schechner and Friedman 2003:123)

It's hard to think of a better non-answer.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325101202 Published online by Cambridge University Press