

## Texas native Robert Wilson lights up Puccini's 'Turandot' for HGO

Andrew Dansby, Staff writer

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The “notable people” section of Wikipedia’s Waco, Texas, page begins with nearly 20 athletes, which it differentiates from the 15 men next listed as professional baseball players. The page goes on to document notable film and TV personalities like Steve Martin, Chip and Joanna Gaines; followed by politicians and musicians. The final alphabetized subset is “Other.” Scroll to the very bottom of “Other,” past war heroes, virologists and cult leaders, and one finds Robert Wilson.

In light defense of this filing system, a succinct summarization of Wilson doesn’t exist, so perhaps “other” is as good as any. He has for more than half a century created a body of work for the stage that finds a rare balance between its narrative variety and its cohesive visual language. Wilson has staged plays and operas with origins that span centuries, with a look and feel that is arresting, provocative and somehow — all these years later — modern.

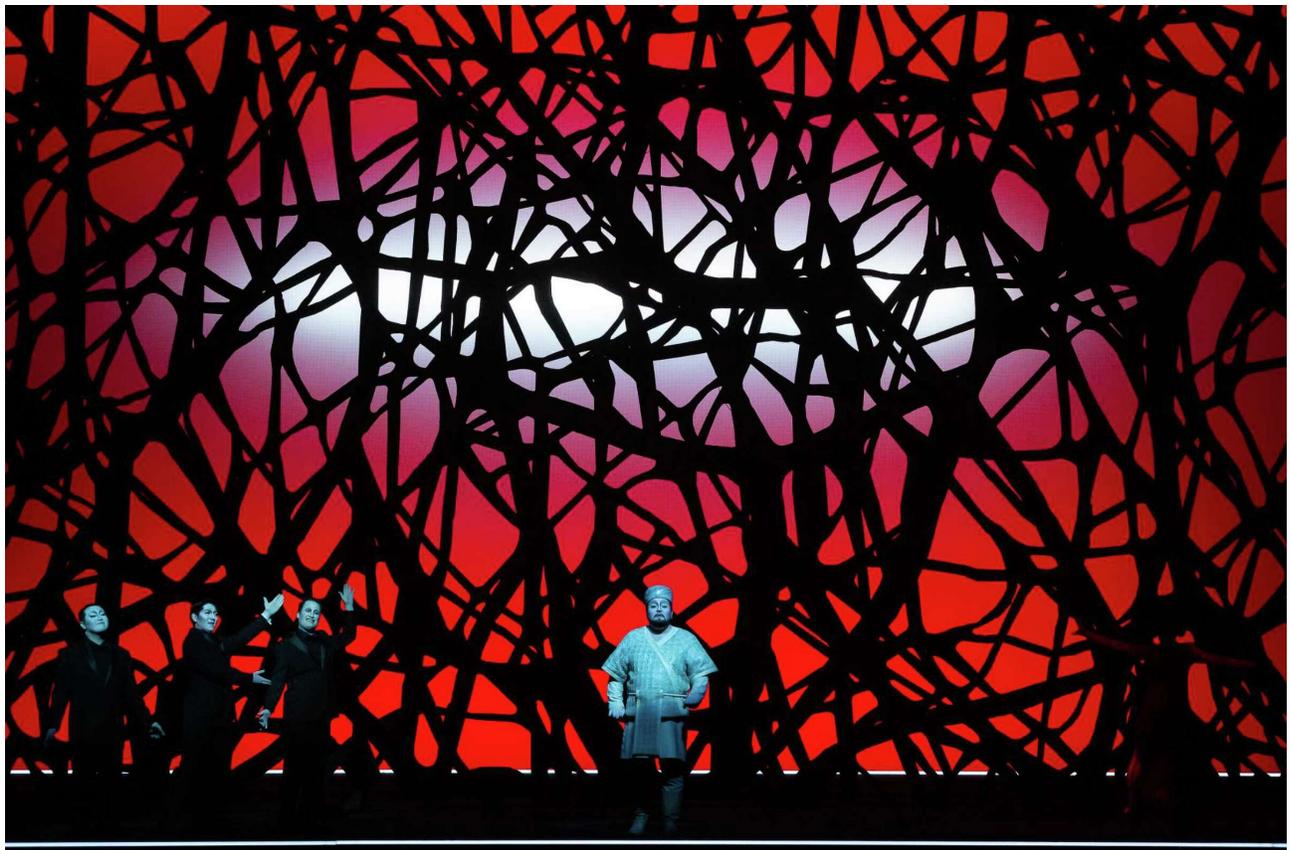
So HGO's production of "Turandot" — to be staged six times between April 22 and May 8 — will sound familiar to those with an affinity for Puccini's opera, which premiered in 1926, two years after the composer's death. It will not, however, look familiar.

The opera opens in China, with Princess Turandot on a balcony. But this balcony is not the sort of ornamental elevated space we've come to associate with royalty. Resplendent in red, Turandot stands on a sleek, dark plank, almost hovering above the other characters, some awash in light blue, others silhouetted. Their movements throughout the show will undoubtedly be measured. In addition to his distinctive visual sensibility, Wilson is known for a unique approach to movement. His characters often appear to drift rather than walk.

Just discussing the source material, Wilson touches on the subject. "It's a classical story," he says. "So it's not timeless, but it's full of time. The story really goes back to Persia, centuries ago. The Italians then took the story. It's a story full of time."

Years ago, I talked to musician Tom Waits about "Woyzeck," one of several theater collaborations he's done with Wilson.

"Working with Wilson is like an underwater ballet," he said. "Once you've seen that and been in one, wherever you go, you want to tell people to *slow* the hell down. He has a worldview on light and movement and text that takes the world apart in a way that I like very much. But it does kind of ruin you for Neil Simon, you know."



## **Painting with light**

Wilson says, “To me, lighting in works of mine is like painting. I’m just painting with light.”

In the case of “Turandot,” Wilson calls the princess “the throughline in the work. So the first thing, I had to figure out what her line was through it. She’s the first thing we see and the last. Her all alone, high in this balcony space. When I’m working on something like an opera, I always try to find a color in the beginning. I just did Verdi’s ‘Otello’ in Athens. That had a dark blue, and blue was the main color through the piece. I wouldn’t light this one or dress it in dark blue. But red felt like the color that was appropriate. It’s a fairy tale. It’s a love story. And it’s also a dark story. So red was one of my earliest decisions.”

The darkness emanates from Turandot’s consideration of three suitors. She begrudgingly decides to marry but with a sinister couple caveat. She’ll marry only a suitor who can solve three riddles, and the cost of an incorrect response to any one riddle is beheading. Suffice to say, stakes are high.

When Wilson speaks of darkness and light, he sometimes refers to lightness as far as tone. Though his aesthetic is sharp and distinctive, he shows affinity for humor and irony.

“The darkness will be darker if you have light,” he says. “That makes the dark darker.”

The comment could refer to actual lighting or tone. His works are not void of humor. He understands the value of contrasts in art at the granular level and then projects those contrasts to the stage. Sometimes the contrasts are levity in a narrative with high-stakes riddles. Sometimes the contrasts are in the ways he presents positive and negative space on stage. While Wilson used red as his focal point, he makes ample use, too, of blue and gray. And the use of black in relief — an embrace of silhouette — provides variety, certainly, but also contrast.

At 80, Wilson has sailed past the retirement age for nine-to-fivers. But in the 21st century, he has remained busier than ever, with a global demand and a work schedule that produces its own energy.

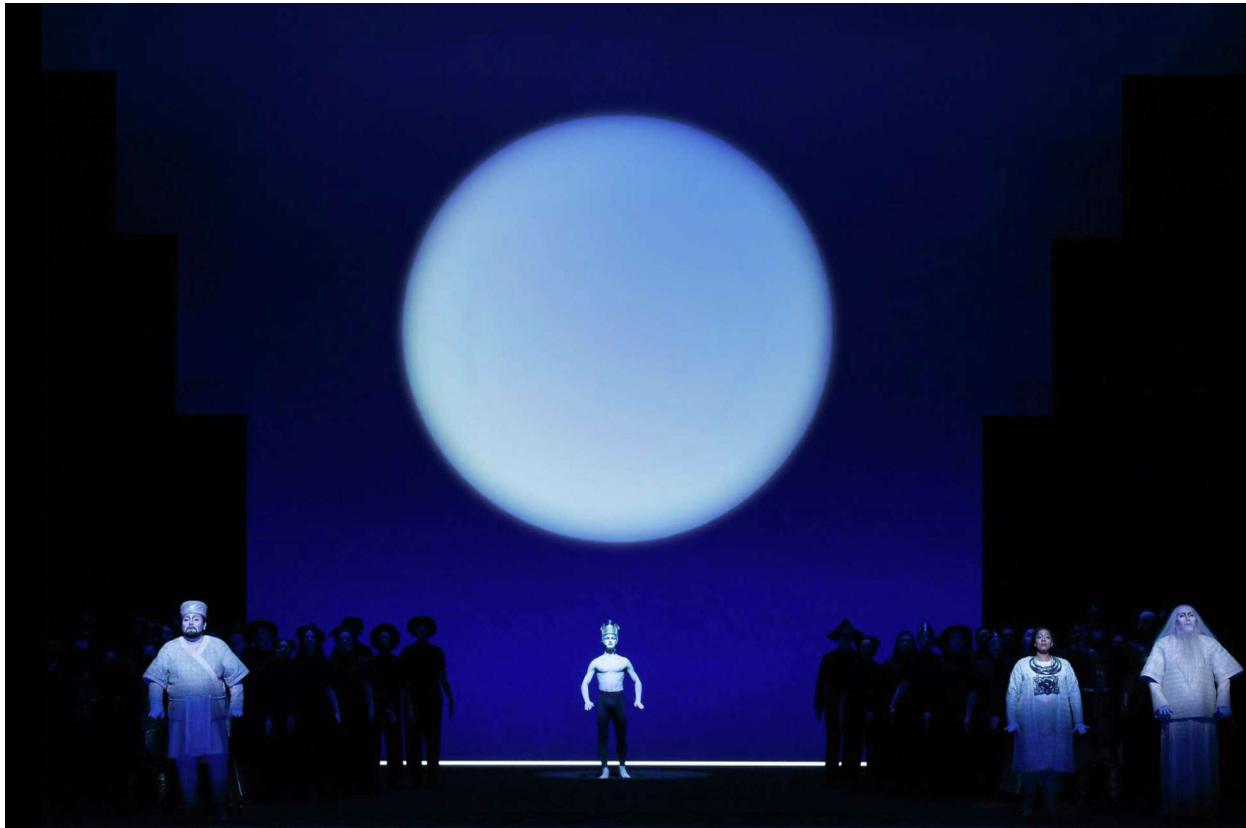
## **From Waco to the stage**

Little in Wilson’s life in Waco suggested a career in theater. Born into a rigid Baptist family, he certainly sought a different sort of path far from home as a gay man. He appeared headed toward a straightforward business-minded career — his course of study at the University of Texas — but a vibrant and restless art scene in New York City, where he landed in the early 1960s, prompted a course correction.

He founded the Byrd Hoffmann School of Byrds theater company and presented “The King of Spain” in 1969, recruiting young artists for two nights at an East Village theater for a performance more attuned to vaudeville than lacquered Broadway productions. A New York Times account suggests a show that spoke to a spare aesthetic that Wilson would further investigate in the coming years. He also rarely made concessions to the clock: His “The Life and

"Times of Joseph Stalin" played at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1974. Its run time was half a day — and not metaphorically. It ran 12 hours.

He collaborated with Philip Glass on "Einstein on the Beach," a five-hour, intermission-free opera from 1976. Music critic Robert Palmer wrote, "Another way of looking at Wilson's operas is as mediations, with their central figures serving as mantras. However one conceives them, the event is only partly on stage. Part of it, perhaps the most significant part, is triggered by Wilson's images but takes place in the viewer's mind."



## Houston return

Though he flourished far from Waco, Wilson is no stranger to Houston. He worked here several times in the '80s and '90s, with credits including Henrik Ibsen's "When We Dead Awaken" for the Alley Theatre more than 30 years ago. He also presented and performed "Hamlet: A Monologue" for the Alley. And he staged Virgil Thomson's "Four Saints in Three Acts" for Houston Grand Opera, as well as a notable staging of Wagner's "Parsifal" for HGO in 1992.

But "Turandot" feels like the end of a long quiet spell and a welcome return.

Wilson's visual palette is so distinctive and has been applied to so many projects over the years that his work now feels like an inevitability. He presents as the sort of artist who'd inevitably find his way to cinema. But his distaste for artifice in performance is such that he comes across as a

poor match for actors obsessed with replicating reality. His currency is feeling, not a gnashing physical replication of feeling.

Waits also said, “I don’t think Bob really likes words. He kind of thinks of them as tacks on the floor of a dark room and you’ve got to walk to the door. I think he handles them very carefully.”

Wilson says his process includes simultaneous creation of sets and costumes and lighting, and he workshopped it at his Watermill Center, a “laboratory” space he founded 30 years ago in Long Island, N.Y. True to Waits’ comment, Wilson with a group of students worked on lighting, blocking, movements and other visuals “silently without any singers.”

After a year, he brought in the music. “Turandot” isn’t his first dance with Puccini: He’d staged “Madama Butterfly” with the National Opera in Paris in 1993. “Turandot” premiered in late 2018 at Teatro Real in Madrid and has made a few stops before reaching Houston Grand Opera, where Tamara Wilson — an HGO Studio alumna — will play the titular role.

Wilson’s comment about the story being “full of time” resonates particularly when tracking the origin of the “Turandot” story. Prior to Puccini’s composition, the story dated back to a 12th-century Persian poet, before being adapted a half millennium later as an Italian play. Even the lag between the premiere of Wilson’s version and the HGO presentation has left impressions on the work with a pandemic and conflict. He notes the show begins and ends with Turandot standing elevated and isolated.

“One does think about it differently,” Wilson says, “with a horrible war going on now and other things. We reflect on our lives and situations in totally different ways. So I definitely see the work with different associations than when we first made it.”

So for three hours, Wilson creates an environment where viewers can feel time differently.

Waits places his work “somewhere between Freud and NASA.”

“It’s like looking at water for the first time under a microscope. You say, ‘My god, there’s a world in here! ... I don’t know if I should drink it anymore.’ ... He has tremendous leadership qualities, and you embark on an expedition with him,” he said. “And you have to suspend disbelief in order to go. That’s always thrilling, because real life can be kind of tedious.”