

Kevin Concannon, "Robert Wilson and David Byrne: The Knee Plays," *Art New England*, December 1986/January 1987, p. 17.

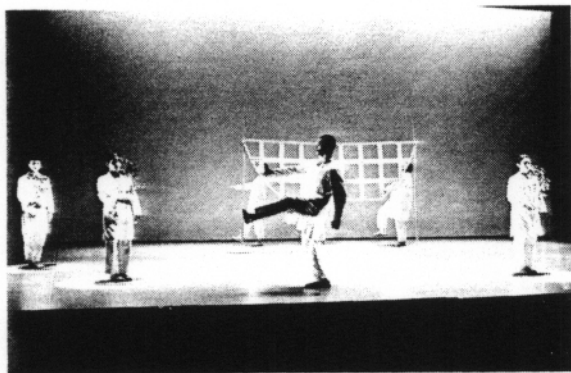


Photo: Richard Feldman

Robert Wilson—*the Knee Plays*, words and music by David Byrne

American Repertory Theatre/Cambridge

**Robert Wilson:
the Knee Plays**

Billed as the thirteen joints that bind the more substantial sections of Robert Wilson's *CIVIL WarS*, *the Knee Plays* were presented as an ostensibly cohesive production. This work is Wilson's third at American Repertory Theatre, and constitutes the "American section" of *CIVIL WarS*, having originally been presented at the Walker Art Center/Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis in 1984. Following its A.R.T. production, *the Knee Plays* begin a national tour, offering Wilson's widest national audience (at least geographically) a pale glimpse at his legendary epic theater piece, originally planned to have its only complete production at the Los Angeles Olympic Games with an all-star cast.

One can only wonder how these *Knee Plays* might weave together the various sections of *the CIVIL WarS*, productions of which have been extremely disjointed, produced in different parts of the globe at different times. It's difficult to imagine that the slapstick scene in which Admiral Perry and a Japanese fisherman bow and bang heads would have been well received in Japan. Or that the Japanese basket seller, whose baskets perform their own animated dance, would make Wilson friends in too many places.

Aside from those two questionable routines, *the Knee Plays* revolve around a two-dimensional white-gridded lattice that becomes a tree, a boat, and a book throughout the evening. Even taking into consideration that these pieces were meant to be performed in front of a proscenium, they seemed shallow in every sense of the word. Absent are the layered images so characteristic of Wilson's theater. In *the Knee Plays*, his normally rich, visual theater has been reduced to a pictographic shell of itself. The production gives less a sense of the total work than do the drawings from which Wilson works.

The music by David Byrne proved more interesting than any other part of the show. Using New Orleans jazz and funerary marches as inspiration, Byrne created a score that was as engaging as the staging was uninspired. His music and lyrics were written without benefit of seeing any other aspects of the piece in progress; no script, sets, or choreography. And while this is typical of Wilson, the parts generally serve a greater purpose: in his better productions, one is drawn from layer to layer of what at the very least is a sensuous reverie. *The Knee Plays*, on the other hand, came off as a contrived visual accompaniment to the music.

While it's likely that these joints might complement the other sections of *CIVIL WarS* very nicely, as a separate entity, they simply don't connect.

Kevin Concannon