

**This interview with
PHILIP GLASS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on August 24, 2020**



Library of Congress: Of all the 20th century figures you could have built this piece around, why Einstein? What does he symbolize to you?

Philip Glass: Einstein didn't so much symbolize something, as he was something. I was born in 1937. By the time I was nine, everyone knew who Einstein was, largely because of his contributions to the development of the atomic bomb. He was a superstar by 1946. Aside from his connection to the atomic bomb, here he was, a Jewish man writing books all about relativity. People who didn't know anything about science suddenly got interested in science. He was one of my childhood heroes. If you were alive then, you would remember how much of an impact he had on our everyday lives.

Bob Wilson liked to do pieces based on famous people. This made it easier to put the subject on the stage, because there was an understanding that people "knew" Einstein--relativity, the bomb, science. But they didn't REALLY know him. There was much speculation about Einstein. Which gave us room to tell a story.

There was a lot of talk about who Einstein was during the creative process. At one point in the piece, I said, "Bob, where's Einstein?" He said, "I don't know!" so I said, "Why doesn't he play the violin?" That's how Einstein began playing in the knee plays. He became, not a ghost exactly, but the father of the piece in a way. In fact, he's not mentioned in the piece. You see him, see him playing the violin, but no one talks about relativity and science. You didn't need to because everybody knew. And when you saw the female violin player walk out with a shock of white hair in the 2012 production, you knew it was Einstein.

At any rate, Bob and I were at the beginning of our careers. We were going through a list of people trying to figure out a subject we were interested in. We talked about Chaplin, among others. When we finally got around to the scientific guys, we said, what about Einstein? And that was it. Einstein became very famous when Bob was young too. Despite his fame, he was a real person. He really changed the world of scientific history, and he did it when he was very young. So, "Einstein on the Beach" began.

LOC: Did you maintain a regular schedule during your writing/composing of this work? At that time--or now, for that matter--do you try to compose at the same time of day everyday, maybe even in the same spot?

PG: Yes, I had a regular schedule. I got up in the morning, wrote music all day, ate and went to sleep. I had plenty of time writing and playing music, thinking about music. I've been in my house in the East Village since 1984. Most of my music has been composed here, or up in Canada. Besides that, when I was on tour, I took my music with me. It was very common for me when I was traveling in Europe not to sleep at night because of the time difference--I'd wake up and write music. I'd write whole pieces when I couldn't sleep! Apart from traveling and working as a performer, when I wasn't on the stage playing, I was in the hotel writing music. I never really had a "regular" schedule. The chances were if you'd call me up, I'd have just been working, currently working, or about to go to work.

LOC: When the work was first staged, it confounded many (including, reportedly, Arthur Miller). Do you feel a need to try to explain or should a work simply be left to fully open to interpretation?

PG: This was the collaborative work of downtown New York. When you look up "Einstein on the Beach," it says that it is a piece by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. That's not true. This isn't a piece that we just dreamed up and appeared--the original choreographer was Andrew de Groat. The original texts were written by Christopher Knowles, Lucinda Childs and Samuel M. Johnson. Bob and I didn't write all the words--these were the writers! Lucinda Childs did her own choreography, Michel Guy commissioned the piece and brought it to Avignon, Jerry Robbins convinced someone from the MET to see it, and they brought it to New York for their Sunday night program. This is the kind of thing people did when you lived in the East Village. You did everything yourself. That's what we brought to "Einstein." It was completely its own. One of the important things about "Einstein" that should not be forgotten--this wasn't a creation of Bob Wilson and Philip Glass. It was a group effort.

LOC: The work is an epic one--almost Wagner-like--did you, when you began, intend to create such a monumental work or did the creative process simply lead you there?

PG: We had absolutely no idea where the work was going to go. We were just making a piece! We knew we needed an orchestra, and a dance company of 6-8 people. We had four major actors--one was Samuel M. Johnson, one was Lucinda Childs, and one was Christopher Knowles. When theater agent Ninon Karlweis came to see the piece, she knew she was going to tour it in Europe. She was the one who got it into theaters in Paris, Brussels, Rotterdam, all over Europe.

At the end of it, when we got off the plane in New York, we heard we were playing at the MET. We just had no idea.

LOC: Do you like to see re-stagings of the work? Of those you have witnessed, have there been any that have particularly stood out for you?

PG: You know, relatively, there actually haven't been many re-stagings. Even so, this work has had a great impact on the world of opera and music theater. And, even without a glimpse of it, apart from audio recordings, its influence is strong up to the present day.