

SEANKELLY

Isherwood, Charles. "The End, if It's Up to You: 'Life and Death of Marina Abramovic' at Park Ave. Armory," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2013.

The New York Times

The End, if It's Up to You **'Life and Death of Marina Abramovic' at Park Ave. Armory**



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

That familiar fantasy of spying on one's own funeral has come spectacularly true for at least one of us mortals, the performance artist Marina Abramovic, whose work dates back to the 1970s and who has become a slavishly adored fixture on the art-celebrity circuit over the past decade. In "The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic," a new music-theater piece being presented through Saturday in the Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory, Ms. Abramovic is lying plushly in state on a giant stage draped in black and lit by glowing white neon bars.

As befits an art-world star, the drama of Ms. Abramovic's pseudo-sendoff has been entrusted to another aesthetic luminary, the avant-garde theater and opera director Robert Wilson. The inception for the project came when Ms. Abramovic called Mr. Wilson and asked if he'd be interested in staging her funeral — death being a primary preoccupation of this self-punishing artist; he agreed, as long as he got to stage the life, too. Also providing eulogistical and biographical interpretation are well-known figures from other artistic realms: the composer and singer Antony (of Antony and the Johnsons), dressed in space-age black velvet and appearing as a sort of avatar of Ms. Abramovic, and the actor Willem Dafoe, looking like a skeleton raised from the dead himself in his white makeup under a flaming pouf of red hair.

If you've ever fallen into a daydream of contemplating your own interment and selecting the guest list, you are unlikely to come away from "Life and Death" with any practical tips, unless your digital address book is likewise stuffed to the gills with the names of artistic luminaries. Nor, I'm afraid, will general theater audiences attracted by the savory soup of talent involved find much to satisfy them here. This visually opulent but dramatically opaque consideration of the life and career of Ms. Abramovic will probably give pleasure verging on the orgiastic only to fervent admirers of Ms. Abramovic and Mr. Wilson. Both artists

are known for creating work that tests audiences' (and artists') powers of endurance, and while "Life and Death" runs under three hours with intermission — a mere snap of the fingers in the timescape of their most monumental pieces — its fragmentary structure and largely static stage pictures often seem to stretch the passing minutes out indefinitely.

The artist is present onstage, to borrow the title from the recent retrospective of Ms. Abramovic's work at the Museum of Modern Art. (It was the title of her popular stare-a-thon throughout the run of that show, too, as well as an HBO documentary.) Ms. Abramovic appears in "Life and Death" in several guises. The show opens with one of its most striking images: Three almost identical-looking female figures, their faces painted vampire white (a longstanding Wilson motif) are found lying motionless on black coffinlike structures as the audience enters. Black dogs, silhouetted against a brightly glowing backdrop (another classic Wilson touch), romp across the stage, sniffing and chewing at an elegantly arranged pile of bones, each spotlighted in red light. One of the figures is Ms. Abramovic, who has written that she does indeed wish, when she's actually dead, to have three coffins involved in her burial, presumably for purposes of sowing confusion and mystery: No one will truly know what happens to the body that she employed as her primary medium.

Ms. Abramovic makes her first appearance in the disjointed biographical drama that follows portraying her own mother, who looms large as a baleful influence in her life. (At times, the show threatens to devolve into a fabulously highbrow version of "Mommie Dearest.") Most of the narration is provided by Mr. Dafoe, giving motor-mouth commentary on the action (which is glacially paced, as is Mr. Wilson's way) from a platform in front of the main stage, surrounded by piles of newspapers.

The macabre Wilson maquillage turns Mr. Dafoe into a ringer for the Joker character from the Batman franchise, and he brings a dark, mordant humor (and several accents) to his delivery of the text, which ranges from random ticker-tape bullet points from Ms. Abramovic's life ('68 — "discovering Zen Buddhism," '73 — "burning her hair, cutting a star on her stomach with a razor blade") to more elaborately related stories of her traumatic home life growing up in Yugoslavia.

The grimmer passages of her youth were clearly formative influences. At one point, Mr. Dafoe describes a fight Marina got into with her suffocating mother, which ended with her mother saying that since she'd given Marina life, she had a right to take it. With that she flung a heavy ashtray at her head; Marina contemplated letting it hit her but ducked at the last minute.

The art she went on to create would flirt with the self-destructive impulse that was awakened by this and other incidents. In some sense, Ms. Abramovic's hated mother embodied the idea of death for her, and she appears here as a sinuously menacing figure, stalking across the stage, tapping a finger on her arm indifferently, as tales of Marina's miserable childhood are depicted.

The impulse to transform her body physically through self-mutilation was born, it is humorously implied, by Marina's youthful desire to break her own nose (and have it redesigned by a surgeon to resemble Brigitte Bardot's). One of the songs written and sung by Antony underscores the idea of creating art from abuse: "I will make a necklace from the stones you throw," he croons in his ethereal sob of a voice. (Other lyrics hew more to vague New Age imagery: "I am a volcano of snow.") Ms. Abramovic does a little singing herself, in a slightly croaky, accented voice that might charitably be compared to Marlene Dietrich's.

The stories of Ms. Abramovic's rough upbringing enliven the proceedings with their bleak humor, but much of the rest of the text is more impenetrable. There isn't much cogent or sustained reflection about her career or the themes that run through her work. Instead, Mr. Dafoe gives a plodding description of some of the mundane actions Ms. Abramovic performed during her piece "The House With the Ocean View" (2002), in which she spent 12 days living on platforms in the Sean Kelly gallery, her only sustenance water, her every action on view to the public (during gallery hours, at least).

In the second act, Mr. Dafoe and Ms. Abramovic, dressed in military garb — Ms. Abramovic's parents were celebrated for heroism in the fight against the Germans during World War II — sit on the stage and trade chatter about her difficulties with romance. Mr. Dafoe's running commentary is often hilariously funny, undercutting Ms. Abramovic's lugubrious self-seriousness.

That archness also swamps the show during some other passages, as when she provides a series of recipes for “spirit cooking,” or when the cast barks out through megaphones a series of prescriptions for artists to live by. (“An artist must be aware of his own mortality.”) Whether this was intended to be satirical, I couldn’t quite tell, but then much of what takes place in “Life and Death” defies easy exegesis, or even simple comprehension.

The rigorous, elemental aesthetic that has defined Ms. Abramovic’s own works here has been amplified by the manifold contributions of her collaborators, resulting in a show whose lavish effects tend to keep the woman at its center at a distance, atop a glossy pedestal instead of uncomfortably in our faces, as she is in her solo performances. “The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic” feels more like the gilding of an icon rather than the illumination of an artist’s experience.

The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic

Conceived, directed and designed by Robert Wilson; co-creator, Marina Abramovic; performed by Ms. Abramovic, Willem Dafoe and Antony; musical director, composer and lyricist, Antony; composer, William Basinski; composer and lyricist, Svetlana Spajic; costumes by Jacques Reynaud; co-director, Ann-Christin Rommen; dramaturge, Wolfgang Wiens; lighting by A. J. Weissbard; sound by Nick Sagar; makeup design by Joey Cheng; video by Tomasz Jeziorski; music supervisor and music mix, Dan Bora. Presented by Park Avenue Armory, Alex Poots, artistic director. At the Park Avenue Armory’s Drill Hall, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street; 212-933-5812, armoryonpark.org. Through Saturday. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times