

## FACEBOOK TRIBUTES

### RICHARD WILBUR, BERNSTEIN, CANDIDE

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**AMERICA'S SECOND POET LAUREATE AND TWO-TIME PULITZER PRIZE WINNER, RICHARD WILBUR, DIED LAST WEEK (Oct 14, 2017 — age 96). He left a legacy of significant poetry, of course, but my guess is (and such is the way of the world) that Richard Wilbur will largely be remembered for the superb lyrics he supplied for the first production of Leonard Bernstein's legendary Broadway musical score for "*Candide*." How I met the poet/lyricist Richard Wilbur involved the Regional Theatre movement, the Ford Foundation, Houston's Alley Theatre — and my first professional production.**

**In the early 1960s, The Ford Foundation's W. McNeil Lowry funded a number of professional Regional Theaters to set up permanent acting companies (the beginning of the Regional Theatre movement). Nina Vance, then Artistic Director of Houston's Alley Theatre, wanted a new play to *kick off the Ford Foundation program and selected my play, "The Library Raid"* (later produced Off-Broadway by Edward Albee as, "*Night Of The Dunce*"). "*The Library Raid*" was my first professional production.**

**There was also a parallel Ford Foundation program supporting prominent poets and novelists to attend rehearsals at Regional Theaters, to see if writing for the theatre might turn them on to writing plays. Poet Richard Wilbur and poet/novelist George Garret were the in-residence observers at the Alley during my "*Library Raid*" production.**

**I didn't know Mr. Garret's work or Mr. Wilbur's poetry then—but I did know Mr. Wilbur's superb lyrics for the Leonard Bernstein comic**

operetta, "*Candide*," based on the Voltaire satire. I had seen the original production twice on Broadway. Bernstein's score was magnificent and the show's lyrics were some of the wittiest I had ever heard in the theatre.

When I was introduced to Mr. Wilbur at The Alley, he was beginning work on his translation of Molière's *Misanthrope* (which became the gold standard for his Molière translations). I vaguely recall, over dinners, my constantly questioning Mr. Wilbur about his "*Candide*" experiences. Never took notes, alas. Had I done so, I might have been able—now— to better navigate through the difficulties of finding out who did what lyric in "*Candide*." I knew that John Latouche had been an early "*Candide*" lyricist, but he died before his collaboration with Bernstein had progressed. Other contributors apparently included Dorothy Parker, James Agee, Lillian Hellman (who wrote the original book) and Bernstein himself, who wrote his own lyric for the "*Candide*" song, "*I Am Easily Assimilated*." In later productions, Stephen Sondheim and John Wells and others contributed songs. The subsequent productions — especial the wildly successful Hal Prince production — offer a dizzying array of talents and major revisions. But, in the original production, poet Richard Wilbur was listed as "Lyrics By" on the cast album. My recent research reveals that, besides writing the complete dazzling aria, "*Glitter and Be Gay*," he also wrote the finale, "*Make Our Garden Grow*" (both pieces, I believe, were used in all subsequent "*Candide*" productions), and Mr Wilbur, in that first production, apparently doctored lyrics of other writers' lyrics throughout the piece. But it is hard to pin down the titles of the other complete lyrics Mr. Wilbur wrote for that first production.

Decades later, at poet Sam Hazo's unique Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, I attended Mr. Wilbur's poetry reading of his own poems and, after the reading, we chatted a bit and reminisced about the Alley experience. But, regretfully, I never stayed in touch with him.

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In Mr. Wilbur's poems, (as in the poetry of all poets) the inherent music is embedded in his poetic lines. In musical theatre, the sung words need to conform to the external music of the composer

(usually a different artist) — and to the needs of characters in a dramatic event. Richard Wilbur had the chops to satisfy those musical theatre needs and collaborated magnificently with Leonard Bernstein on “Candide” — and seemingly effortlessly — as if to the lyricist manor born.

Here are links to the Bernstein/Wilbur “*Glitter And Be Gay.*” The two times I saw the original “*Candide,*” Barbara Cook, the first Cunegonde, stopped the show. All the sopranos who tackle this sung scene always seem to stop the show. The first link — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zafYrxC1YE> — has soprano Dawn Upshaw singing the aria, while all the lyrics are posted for you to follow. The second link — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnJIMSy-o4k> — has Kristin Chenoweth acting and singing the entire scene in an hilarious concert staging that includes the jewel props needed for her to resolve her comic moral conflict: Namely, how to justify the jewelry she loves and has accumulated from her many lovers. The final link is from the original cast album, Barbara Cook singing — [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF3fwp\\_VrdQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF3fwp_VrdQ).  
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IN HIS POEMS, I love how poet Wilbur often uses rhyme — Good preparation, as it turns out, for slipping easily into the making of theatre songs (which usually require rhyme).

Here’s a favorite Wilbur poem I love to share and show: It’s called, *THE BOY AT THE WINDOW*. The sense of empathy from the boy’s point of view and then from the snowman’s, standing alone outside in the freezing snow, I find very moving — and the rhymes, for me, contribute to the song-like feeling of the piece. (American composers, looking to set poems for Lieder concerts, take note)

“Seeing the snowman standing all alone  
In dusk and cold is more than he can bear.  
The small boy weeps to hear the wind prepare  
A night of gnashings and enormous moan.  
His tearful sight can hardly reach to where  
The pale-faced figure with bitumen eyes

Returns him such a God-forsaken stare  
As outcast Adam gave to paradise.  
The man of snow is, nonetheless, content,  
Having no wish to go inside and die.  
Still, he is moved to see the youngster cry.  
Though frozen water is his element,  
He melts enough to drop from one soft eye  
A trickle of the purest rain, a tear  
For the child at the bright pane surrounded by  
Such warmth, such light, such love, and so much fear.”

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Here’s to the memory of a great American poet who — in collaboration with the genius, Leonard Bernstein — and in one lyricist leap — contributed some stunning lyrics to our musical theatre legacy. RIP Richard Wilbur: Artist, stylist, erudite mensch, gentleman, man of humor — and heart.



