

Robert Wilson, Isabelle Huppert, and a Night of 1,000 French Kisses



Getty Images
Isabelle Huppert

"It was the French who discovered my work," the director Robert Wilson said on Monday, beaming at the Gallic crowd that had gathered to honor him (and raise money) at the French Institute Alliance Française's gala at the Plaza Hotel. He recalled that his first major work, "Deafman Glance," a seven-hour play without words, had its world premiere in France in 1970, and received a 40-minute ovation. (It had been performed only in fragments in New York, and to mixed responses.) "The French, not the Americans, commissioned 'Einstein on the Beach,'" he added. "They gave me the beginning."

The audience at the gala certainly felt warmly toward Wilson, as well as toward the colleague who introduced him, Isabelle Huppert. The actress, known for her intense performances in films like Michael Haneke's "The Piano Teacher," is in New York to play the Marquise de Merteuil in Wilson's "Quartett," based on "Les Liaisons Dangereuses," at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. (It opens Wednesday and runs through the 14th.)

"As an actress, I never feel as free as when I work with Bob," said Huppert, who has appeared in Wilson's "Orlando" as well as in a previous presentation of "Quartett." "Being seen by you, being directed by you, being loved by you is something I wish that every actress on earth could experience."

The crowd at the gala included the actress Isabella Rosselini; Françoise Gilot, the painter and former lover of Picasso; and the socialite Tinsley Mortimer, who before dinner stood outside the dining room alone, energetically texting.

Gilot — who wrote a memoir, "Life with Picasso," about her decade-long relationship with Picasso, which produced two children, Claude and the jewelry designer Paloma — later married Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine.

At the gala, she was seated near Eric Mourlot, the grandson of Fernand Mourlot, a printer who produced many lithographs for Picasso. (During World War II, the Mourlot firm also printed false papers for people who needed to escape from Europe.) Eric Mourlot now owns Galerie Mourlot on East 79th Street, which sells graphic works by 20th-century artists including Picasso, Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger, and Joan Miró. The gallery has organized a show of vintage posters — including one by Gilot and one by Picasso depicting Gilot — that opens Thursday evening at FIAF. The posters will also be for sale through a new online art gallery, www.fiaf.org/laboutique.

Last night, when the honoree from the French-American business community, Wyeth C.E.O. Bernard Poussot (who recently engineered Wyeth's \$68 billion sale to Pfizer), defended the right of drug companies to make a profit, Gilot and Mouriot couldn't help reflecting on what her late husband might have thought.

"Jonas never made a profit on the Salk vaccine," Gilot said. "He said that you can't copyright the sun."

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