

TELEVISION

'The Space In Back Of You' – A Conversation with Director Richard Rutkowski



By: [Chi-Hui Yang](#) on August 25, 2013 in [Cinema Asian America](#), [Xfinity On Demand](#)



"The Space in Back of You."

This month, Cinema Asian America on Xfinity On Demand presents the award-winning new documentary, "[The Space In Back Of You](#)." Directed by renown cinematographer **Richard Rutkowski** ("The Americans", "Requiem for a Dream") and made in collaboration with legendary theatre director **Robert Wilson** ("Einstein on the Beach," "the CIVIL warS") "Space" is a portrait of trailblazing dancer and choreographer **Suzushi Hanayagi**, whose work from the 1960s-1990s revolutionized the American avant-garde theater and dance worlds.

Presented in collaboration with the Center for Asian American Media, "The Space In Back Of You" is available to view for free for the month of September on Xfinity On Demand.

As described by the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival:

“When I first started performing classical and modern dances in New York, I felt I was two halves. In Japan I felt I could fuse the two. They became one,” says Suzushi Hanayagi in “The Space in Back of You,” a film as compelling as the avant-garde dancer and choreographer it pays tribute to. Director Richard Rutkowski intersperses Suzushi’s quotes with footage of her performances and interviews with her many collaborators, including dance pioneer **Anna Halprin**, filmmaker **Mollie Davies**, musician **David Byrne**, and long-time collaborator **Robert Wilson**, who simply calls Suzushi “my teacher.” As in Suzushi’s work, the film’s beauty and strength lies in the simplicity with which it handles a complex life, one punctuated by powerful performances, a transnational career, the loss of a child and, eventually, a debilitating disease. Robert Wilson finds her in a home for the elderly in Osaka, suffering with an advanced stage of Alzheimer’s. There is much meaning to glean from *The Space in Back of You* about dance, loss, renewal and memory, yet it also remains abstract, allowing viewers to understand the purity of a life’s movements on its own terms. Director Richard Rutkowski answered a set of questions about the making of the film, and his relationships with Suzushi and Robert Wilson.

You work primarily as a cinematographer, but also have a background in documentary, and have collaborated with many artists and filmmakers. This is the first project that you’ve produced and directed – what drew you to Suzushi as a subject?

RR: I actually started out making short films in 16mm during and after filmmaking studies at Harvard College. The program there was taught by documentarians and the aesthetic was very much doing it yourself or with a minimum of people on your crew. I made some very simple short films and also some more elaborate ones. In 1986 I made a film about the artist Christopher Knowles, who like Suzushi was a great influence on Bob Wilson. That film was called “Sunshine Superman” and has screened many times over the years. My background with Suzushi goes back to 1985 when I met her at Harvard. She came to the American Repertory Theater there to work with Bob in a production of “Alcesteis.”

This film was made in close collaboration with theatre director and playwright Robert Wilson, who is also a key character in the documentary. Can you discuss your creative relationship with Wilson, and how he, and his relationship with Suzushi came to figure so centrally in this film?

RR: To answer the second part first, Bob really came up with the idea of a tribute work to Suzushi after he learned that she was in poor health and had moved to a nursing home. He called me to ask if I could collaborate with him on it by shooting portraits of her in HD video and also assembling material of her history in dance to use as projections on the screen behind a dance production he would direct based on her work. The documentary was a natural outgrowth of that. I kept shooting the process of our work in Japan and also at the Guggenheim Museum where he staged the tribute piece to her in 2009. From that footage and from the work we had done to create images of her in video projection I was able to assemble a shorter documentary piece that aired on Arte in France as well as the Sundance Channel. With the additional interviews with Suzushi's collaborators we were able to make a longer and more detailed film about her.

I met Bob Wilson in 1984 when I was cast in his production of "the CIVIL warS" at the A.R.T. in Cambridge. It was an amazing experience and in the middle of it he asked me to help him with the creation of some models for an installation in New York. That led to my working with him off and on throughout my college years as an assistant. Then over the years we have worked together on film or video projects, especially at the Watermill Center on Long Island.

Before the making of "The Space In Back Of You", to what extent was Suzushi's work and legacy documented? What kind of materials did you have to work with to construct this film?

RR: There had never been a documentary about her but she and her friend and collaborator Carla Blank did have extensive videotapes of their work together and some very striking still photographs going back as far as the early 60s. Also, Bob Wilson has an extensive and well organized archive and he made its contents totally available to the project. This assisted in not only documenting their work together but also showing the similarities in their artistic approaches as younger performers.

This film is about many things – a creative life, collaboration and mentorship, memory, movement... – did your inquiry into Suzushi’s life open up new ways to consider your own process and creative endeavors? How might you describe what her legacy is?

RR: Susuzhi’s legacy is in the work she did and powerfully visible in any image of her incredible presence on stage. She truly understood the power of stillness and the universal language of movement. What I most enjoyed in creating a film about her was seeing the interchange between the modern and the ancient, how she could make the old dance look new and imbue new work with the great weight and timelessness of her traditional background. I felt honored to be part of Bob’s tribute to her and of course in the process felt I was giving something back to these two great artists who have inspired me over many years. Working mostly on fiction projects there was also a true joy in the possibilities of documentary, the freedom it allows. Almost any technique or type of imagery was valid, as long as it brought us back to the fundamental appreciation of Suzushi’s artistry.

What are you working on next?

RR: I am about to start the second season of “The Americans” for the FX network. I filmed the first season of this show and enjoy the cast and the writing very much. It has historical aspects as well, taking place among Cold War spies in the early 1980s.

Link to original article: <http://my.xfinity.com/blogs/tv/2013/08/25/the-space-in-back-of-you---a-conversation-with-director-richard-rutkowski/>