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# **The Theme of Alienation in Lanford Wilson's Plays**

Jawaher Saleh Alghamdi

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the  
requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Faculty of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

This is a thematic analysis of the theme of alienation in the plays of the American playwright Lanford Wilson (1937-2011). With the revival of Wilson's play *Burn This* (1987) in 2019, it is surprising that such a prolific playwright with an acknowledged presence in American theatre who emerged in 1960s Off-Off-Broadway venues and moved to Broadway theatres has not received dedicated critical or academic attention. Wilson's modest presence in critical literature is identified in terms of gay theatre, realism, and dramatic literary criticism, which are limiting and inaccurate approaches to his work. The focus on Wilson's sexual identity, though legitimate to an extent, has excluded further possible interpretations of his plays. While maintaining its thematic analytical approach, this thesis challenges such problematic approaches by critically identifying and engaging with methods and ways that have dominated criticism in American theatrical history and performance studies and therefore influenced the critical literature on Wilson.

Through exploring selected texts and performances of plays produced between 1962 and 2002, the thesis provides critical and historical accounts of Wilson's presentation of 'alienated' identities and their emergence and development in connection with their social, economic, cultural, and theatrical contexts. Alienation as a term is abundantly present in American theatre studies and Wilson's critical literature. However, the term is rarely defined or extensively investigated in relevance to the contexts of the plays written and performed since 1962. The thesis focuses on the theme of alienation as defined by Marx's theory of alienation, existential writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Kafka, and Melvin Seeman's definition of alienation. The alienation that haunts both Wilson's plays and his theatrical career are

used broadly to refer to various expressions of indifference and feelings of futility, powerlessness, hopelessness, normalness, and both spatial and emotional isolation. The experience of alienation in the plays is strongly and directly attached to certain American issues such as the 1960s social movements, including the Vietnam War, the Cold War and McCarthyism, the AIDS pandemic, and multiculturalism. Alienation, in various forms, influences the formation of characters' identities and Wilson's identity as a playwright, as I argue in this thesis. The primary influence is the disturbance of the possibilities of creating cohesive narratives or developing stable and meaningful manners of identification. In the theoretical framework of the experience of alienation that is established in the introductory chapter, the presentation of variations of overlapping individual identities (gender, sexual, racial) and collective identities (national identity) are investigated in Wilson's plays.

By following a thematic analysis approach incorporating an examination of historical records, performed plays, and relevant contexts, I attempt to provide a cohesive critical account to situate Wilson's plays in American theatrical and dramatic contexts. The thesis considers the performed plays which methodologically adds to the discussion on the intricate connection between dramatic text and performed plays in American historiography. Exploring alienation, identities, narratives, and the ways they interact with each other and with their contexts adds up to the studies on identities and narratives in American theatre. Additionally, this thesis makes original contributions to several areas of American theatre studies such as the presentation of American national identity, spaces of performance, disability on stage, and rituals and narratives.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the man who was always there for me but who would not be happy with the recurrent imperfections in my project, my father, Saleh Jidwan Alghailani.

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:

DATE: 20/08/2020

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## INTRODUCTION

In July 2019, the Hudson Theatre in New York closed its 2018-2019 season with a revival of Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* (1987) conveniently coinciding with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots in 1969.<sup>1</sup> The revival of *Burn This* represented an increasing interest in Wilson's plays after his death in 2011. Though his plays are still popular in many regional theatres in America, the last performed play in New York before the Hudson Theatre's production was the revival of *Burn This* in the 2002-2003 season of the Signature Theatre Company, an Off-Broadway non-profit theatre company.<sup>2</sup> The premiere of his last written play *Rain Dance* took place in 2002 at The Purple Rose Theatre Company, a regional theatre company in Michigan.<sup>3</sup> The nearly two decades' absence of Wilson's plays from New York theatres developed an increasing anticipation and expectancy for the 2019 revival. However, the reviews of the much awaited *Burn This* production are disappointed mainly because of the marketing and direction approaches that were not

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<sup>1</sup> I had the chance to attend the performance and include this performance as part of my research in chapter three.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.sigtheatre.org/>

<sup>3</sup> The Purple Rose Theatre Company was founded by Jeff Daniels (1955-) in 1991. Daniels was part of the Circle Repertory Company casting in Wilson's plays *5<sup>th</sup> of July*, *Lemon Sky* and *Redwood Curtain*. Later, his company produced other Wilson plays on stage such as *Book of Days*, *The Hot l Baltimore* along with many plays of key American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder. The company also produced Daniels' own written plays. Steven Samuels documents the history of the Purple Rose Company in his book *Theatre Profiles 12: The Illustrated Guide to America's Nonprofit Professional Theatres* (138).

able to convey a meaningful or relevant-to-the-time play (Brantley 2). The play was advertised as a play about a passionate and spontaneous love affair between two strangers.<sup>4</sup> However, the play's director Michael Mayer remarked that it was approached as "Wilson's AIDS play" (*Interview* with Rayan McPhee 2019). The two perspectives have never come through, and with the comic "stereotypically gay mannerism" the play appeared "dated" and awkwardly irrelevant (Hempstead 2).

This production of *Burn This* is one example of the consequences of insufficient critical literature on Wilson's plays and the limited and dominant existing critical understandings that some parts of this thesis seek to challenge. This thesis aims to add to the potentiality of theatrical interpretations of Wilson's plays, examining the cultural, socio-political, economic, and theatrical situations required to present the dramatic texts and performed plays in their relevant-to-time context. The focus of this thesis is on the experience of alienation as a dominant theme in Wilson's plays. I argue that alienation, in its various and complex forms, interferes with the characters' abilities to express their identities, and Wilson's identity as a playwright, in social and theatrical contexts. This thesis will consider the theme of alienation and the ways it influences identity formation and expression in selected published plays written between 1964 and 2002.<sup>5</sup>

In this introductory chapter, I will start with a brief biography of Lanford Wilson, then a review of the critical literature on Wilson's work to identify how his

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<sup>4</sup> The introduction to the performance on the Hudson Theatre's website describes the play as a story of "a mysterious death brings together two unlikely strangers, their explosive connection sparks a chemistry too fiery to ignore" (<https://www.thehudsonbroadway.com/whatson/burn-this/>).

<sup>5</sup> The term alienation will be defined in a later section of this introduction. In this thesis, the term alienation is used as the popular translations of "Entfremdung and/or Entäusserung" (Sayers 1). To avoid confusion, I will not use alienation-effect, A-effect that are common translations of Verfremdungseffekt in Brecht theatrical practices. For such theatrical practice that occurs in this thesis, I will use the term, distancing-effect.

plays are situated in American theatre history and American drama studies. The prominent, and in some cases problematic, traditions and trends in the critical literature on Wilson will be identified in the wider context of American theatre studies. In the third part of this introduction, I will introduce the terms and the theoretical framework to be used in the analysis. The last part of the introduction includes the research methodology, sources and limitations of the research, and the chapters plan.

Lanford Wilson (1937-2011) was an American playwright prominent in the Off-Off-Broadway movement and a Pulitzer Prize winner in drama (1980). He was a co-founder of the Circle Repertory Company in New York along with actress Tanya Berezin (1941-), director Marshall Mason (1940-) and actor and director Rob Thirkield (1937-1986). The company started in 1969 and closed in 1995 after years of financial struggle (P. Williams 14).<sup>6</sup> Wilson started his career at the Caffè Cino; one of the first Off-Off-Broadway venues in Greenwich Village, New York, that started in 1958 (Fig. 1).

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<sup>6</sup> For more detail on the company production history, see *A Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason and the Circle Repertory Theatre*, by Philip Williams and *The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years*, by Mary S. Ryzuk.

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Photograph removed due to permissions issue.

Fig. 1 Caffe Cino, a photo by James D. Dossage, from Robert Patrick's blog,  
<https://caffecino.wordpress.com/>

Wilson moved from Chicago to New York in 1962 with a dream of establishing a career as a playwright in Broadway theatres (Busby 7). Between 1958 and 1967, the café was a free space for many emerging and experimental playwrights, such as William Hoffman and Robert Patrick, who self-identified as gay (Bottoms 39). Wilson worked at the café occasionally as an actor and director, but his interest in writing made him one of the most prolific playwrights of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s (Fig. 2). The plays written at the time were all one-act plays, a form that was popular due to the limitations of Off-Off-Broadway venues at the time (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 371). Plays such as *Home Free!* and *The Madness of Lady Bright*, both written and produced in 1964, established Wilson's success, allowing him to move from underground theatre venues to co-founding the Off-Broadway professional Circle Repertory Company. He started to write two-act plays and some of the plays moved to Broadway due to their commercial and critical success such as



*5<sup>th</sup> of July* (1978), *Talley's Folly* (1979), and *Burn This* (1987). In his later years, during the 1990s-2000s, particularly after the closing of the Circle Company, Wilson wrote five two-act plays with a focus on narratives and rituals. The artistic and dramaturgic variations in Wilson's playwrighting career due to such developments will be debated throughout this thesis.

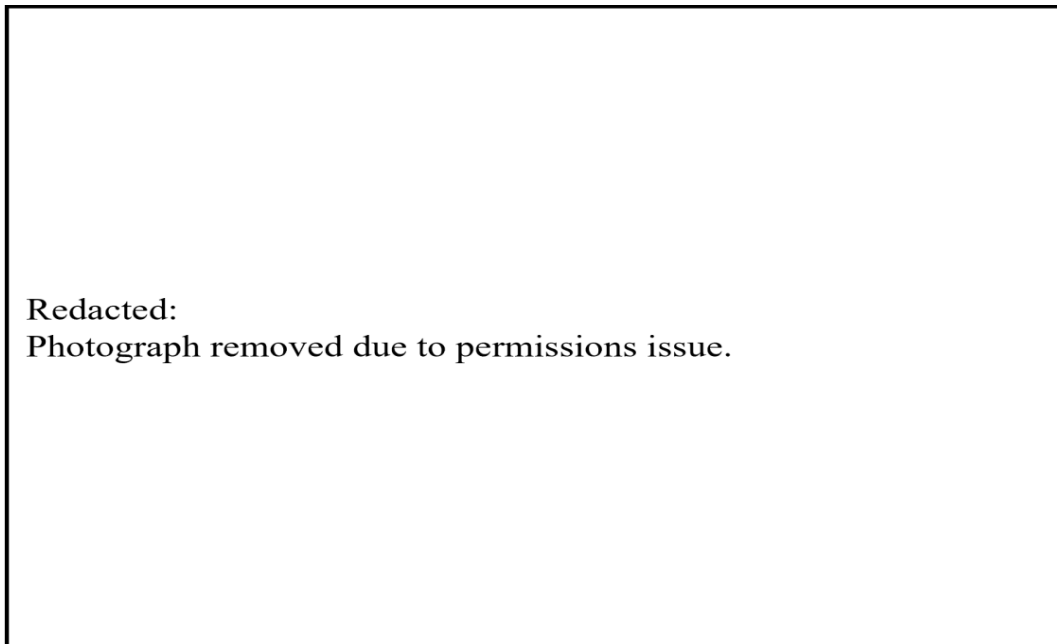


Fig. 2 Lanford Wilson in the 1967 Caffè Cino production of Claris Nelson's play *The Clown* from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Lanford Wilson: photographs, 1960s-1980s (T-Pho B, Wilson, Lanford).

## **THE ABSENT VOICE: IDENTIFYING GAPS**

The critical attention paid to Lanford Wilson's work is still insufficient, considering his presence on American and international stages, his commercial successes, and the reception of his works from considerable theatre critics such as Frank Rich (1949-) and Walter Kerr (1913-1992). This "absent voice" of critical consideration of Wilson could be explained in part by the lack of critical examination of modern American drama (after the 1950s) in general (Biggsby, *A Critical* 1-13).

This lack of attention to American drama in general and certain playwrights and movements, in particular, can be attributed to several reasons and has produced certain traditions in the fields of American theatre historiography, American drama critical analysis, performance studies, and identity politics studies. Such traditions (identified in the following paragraphs) have influenced the limited existing critical studies on Wilson. Susan Harris Smith initiated a discussion on the neglect of American drama in academic and scholarly publications in the *American Quarterly* in March 1989. In her article, she called American drama the “unwanted bastard child,” (112), arguing that drama has been marginalised by scholars, critical researchers, and theatre historians. Smith introduces several academic and commercial publications on American art, literature, and theatre where American drama has been always absent (112-122). The British theatre historian Christopher Bigsby agrees that “there is still no comprehensive history of American drama, no adequate critical analysis of the achievement of many of its writers” (“A View” 128).<sup>7</sup> In several books, he identifies not only the lack of historical publications on American drama, but also the tendency to ignore many playwrights in particular such as Richard Nelson, David Rabe, Adrienne Kennedy, and Lanford Wilson (*Contemporary American* ix).

Smith quotes scholars such as Eric Bentley and John Gassner who attribute this absence to the belief that American drama is neither professional (as staged) nor literary enough to be considered as part of the literary canon. She positions this “critical and academic bias against American drama” (115) in a “Western tradition” of “antipathy towards the theatre” resulting from a Puritan antitheatrical attitude (116).

---

<sup>7</sup> Bigsby has largely contributed to American theatre history and criticism with publications such as: *Staging America: Twenty-First-Century Dramatists* (2019), *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights* (2017), *Contemporary American Playwrights* (2010), *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (2008), and *The Cambridge History Of American Theatre* in three volumes.

In response to Smith, Joyce Flynn agrees that such critical neglect is due partly to the “Puritan roots of antitheatrical prejudice” in America that have affected the progress and role of theatre and drama, but the main reason is the fact that “theatrical activity was the habitual sphere of outsiders in American culture,” as theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century was a source of expression and “testimony” of countercultures including those of immigrants and minorities, expressing challenging ideas around race, gender, and class (124). This can explain the exemption of theatrical underground movements in 1950s-1960s America such as Off-Off-Broadway from the theatrical and dramatic histories until the beginning of the twenty-first century when critics and historians started to document such marginalised movements. The Puritan antitheatrical attitude can be valid to some extent, but the attitudes in critical literature and historical records do not seem intentionally or wholly antitheatrical or anti-counterculture.

The 1980s debate coincided and probably resulted from a vague position (which still exists in American studies) of drama and dramatic texts in academia. The growing number of theatre departments in American universities from the 1950s onwards were more interested in theatrical practices and performance than dramatic texts (Kruger 701). This vague position is not exclusive to American theatre and drama research. To date, the debate of the dynamic relationship between the dramatic text, performed event, and theatre practices and their existence in academic departments (English, English Literature, Theatre Studies, Theatre and Performance, Creative Writing, Literary Criticism, etc.) continues. According to Smith, the literary analysis of dramatic texts does not belong to performance and theatre studies that engage with the performed event, and the literary criticism in English and literature departments definitely ignore the uniqueness of the play text as a text written to be

performed (115). The literary analysis of dramatic texts does not belong to performance and theatre studies that engage with the performed event. Additionally, in a theatrical context, many theatre departments in America have been struggling with a “double identity,” unable to define or carry out practices of practical performance and academic studies at the same time; “the scholarly and the creative” aspects (Flynn 125-26). Alongside this double identity, two more issues have affected critical approaches in theatre studies; first, the separation between criticism and history in theatre and dramatic studies, and the interference of the commercial theatre politics and practices (Lim 121; Smith 115-116).

The previous debate affirms the absence of firstly, sufficient research on American drama in theatre history and other interdisciplinary fields, and secondly, the methodological and theoretical approaches as essential tools and frameworks for studying drama and plays scripts. By closely considering the existing publications on Wilson, and other American playwrights who are part of the thesis’ theatrical context (such as David Rabe, David Mamet, and Sam Shepard), and anthologies and collections on the history of American theatre, I was able to recapitulate six characteristics or trends that, I argue, have shaped the practices of theatre historiography and criticism in America. The limited amount of academic research on Wilson’s theatrical experience has been affected by such practices. Though one purpose of this thesis is to add to the critical literature and historical account required to position and contextualise Wilson in American theatre history, the directions of my research and methodology have been in interaction, affected by, and attempting to challenge the following trends present in academic printed sources. These trends apply to American theatre and drama studies in general, and studies available on Wilson’s theatre and drama

The **first** major problematic tradition in the historiography of American theatre is the focus on certain playwrights and plays (Biggsby, *Contemporary American* iii). This is closely related to the **second** feature, which is the continuous “dominance of traditional, white male authors” where historians ignored many African American and Native American playwrights in their research. The focus has been on popular Broadway playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams, so “much regional and experimental drama is often lost as literature” (Smith, “Generic” 113-116).<sup>8</sup> Though Smith identifies this tradition of selective attention as dominating critical material published between the 1920s and the 1980s, the tradition continues. In 2004, Stephen J. Bottoms discussed the “dismissal of Off-Off-Broadway” in publications of Arnold Aronson and Christopher Biggsby (1-7). Bottoms claims that ignoring the movement is valid, but Lanford Wilson is concisely present in the writings of Arneson and Biggsby. In such writings, Wilson is always contextualised in an after the Off-Off-Broadway phase which is a problematic and inaccurate approach that I explore in chapter one. Another example of the continuity of such practice is that of Gerald M. Berkowitz’s book, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*. The book covers the history of American theatre from the 1890s to 1990s where Off-Off-Broadway context and practices are not included, and its absence is not justified nor explained.

Where Wilson is present in critical literature, a **third** problem arises, the excessive reliance on the practices of historical documentation. Documenting theatrical events is always necessary, but not sufficient to understand a past event. Thomas Postlewait argues that one of the flawed traditions in theatre historiography is

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<sup>8</sup> Lately, since the late 1990s and early 2000, there has been an increasing, though not enough, interest in playwrights from different ethnical and racial groups, American female playwrights, and queer theatre and performance.

focusing on collecting information but neglecting synthesising such evidence in a context. This neglect is intentional in many cases where “the evidence, arranged in some kind of conventional or self-apparent order (e.g., chronological and alphabetical sequences), speaks for itself” as a “safeguard against preconception, bias, prejudice, ideological judgment, and misinterpretation” (157). Such tradition is acquired from the practices of history departments where theatre historiography has started relying on “approaching the theatre from social and cultural history” (Flynn 123). The avoidance of critical engagement with theatrical evidence is demonstrated in the theatre history that “contains plot summaries of the plays ... but make[s] no attempt to analyse or contextualise American drama” (Smith 118). Loren Kruger explains this problematic tradition as “data to be accumulated, as background to the biography of theater practitioners, or as themed and metaphors reflected in dramatic or critical texts” (703).<sup>9</sup> Wilson’s presence has been always marked by what Bigsby called a “critical monograph” of one or two of his plays (*Contemporary American* ix). The literature on Wilson’s plays tends to be a superficial documentation of plots and characters, an approach that always resists any in-depth analysis. Such quality of available literature has limited the usefulness of published sources and reviews in my analysis.

Gene A. Barnett’s book *Lanford Wilson*, published in 1987, is one of the early studies of Wilson’s plays. Barnett follows a chronological order, maintaining a structure of separating one-act plays of each decade from the longer two-act plays. The author claims to document Wilson’s dramatic text in “an overall view of all the playwright’s oeuvre” (Introduction n.p.). The book is an example of the critical

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<sup>9</sup> The American spelling “theater” will occur throughout the thesis as it occurs in original titles and quotations. Otherwise “theatre” will be used.

monograph mentioned earlier. It lacks any in-depth analysis or attempts to contextualise the plays in American theatre history. The chapters briefly introduce the plot and characters in a descriptive style with a general commentary on themes based on critics' reviews or interviews with Wilson. Despite its lack of theoretical framework or contextualisation of Wilson's plays, the book is still a useful source compared to another early book published in the same year, *Lanford Wilson* by Mark Busby. In around fifty pages, Busby comments on the plots and themes of about twenty plays without a clear methodology or any cross-referencing. Like Barnett, he relies on a chronological order of the plays. The two books do not consider the performed plays, Wilson's theatrical views, production history, or audience reception. Both books on Wilson are good examples of the nature and quality of available scholarly material; dominated by descriptive style, documentation of textual contents, the lack of critical engagement, and the absence of social, cultural, and theatrical contexts. Documentation and descriptive styles are justified in considering playwrights such as Wilson where historical evidence is not documented previously, but even then, the documentation fails to be historically or methodologically accurate.

In 1994, Jackson R. Bryer published an edited collection of twelve scholarly articles in *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook*. The collection examines essential aspects of Wilson's plays such as space and place (Alder 3-20) and the family structure in Wilson's plays (Martine 37-64). The book concludes with an interview with Wilson and director Marshall Mason, who directed most of Wilson's plays (161-202). Another essential source is *A Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason, and the Circle Repertory Theatre* (1993) by Philip Middleton William. The book documents the production history of the Talley's trilogy along with interviews with Wilson, Mason, and other Circle Repertory Company members. Anne Dean's

book *Discovery and Invention: Urban Plays of Lanford Wilson* (1994) presents a different methodology by exploring the theatrical performances of three plays, *Balm in Gilead*, *The Hot l Baltimore*, and *Burn This*. Though these sources include a fair amount of descriptive documentation, the style of historical documentation is methodologically accurate and synthesised in the aimed study.

My research includes an essential amount of historical documentation as well, especially in chapter one where identity and alienation are examined in the context of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the early 1960s. The underground theatrical movements and their interactions with the counterculture at the time have not been sufficiently established in theatre studies. Books such as David Crespy's *Off-Off-Broadway Explosion* (2003), Stephen J. Bottoms' *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (2004), and *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* by Wendell C. Stone (2005) documented the theatrical context based on the limited available and fragmented sources that are still worth further investigation. Such publications are an example of what Postlewait calls "document history" that does not engage with the "cultural history" (26).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while working with such existing works, I will add to the historical documentation based on archival materials on Wilson in the early phase. Unlike the rest of the thesis chapters, chapter one will be based on historical documentation and analysis of Wilson's contributions to the Off-Off-Broadway movement. I also argue that the beginning of his career in such fringed venues represents a state of alienation from the mainstream theatre in New York that has shaped Wilson's identity as a playwright.

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<sup>10</sup> Postlewait explored the separation of "the documentary facts and the contextual conditions" in theatre studies and histories asserting that "historical study should not be reduced procedurally to a basic, two-part division between the event and its context" (196).



The underground movement also connects with the politics of the counterculture and identity politics in a state of alienation from the social mainstream context at the time.

The **fourth** trend in American theatre historiography, and most relevant to this research, is the focus on realism in American drama; realism that is shaped by the European dramatic conventions of Ibsen and Chekhov (Murphy x; Smith 180). Aronson defines realism in American theatre as “Strindberg-like inner landscapes, dream sequences, flashbacks, poetic language, lyric realism, symbolic settings, and archetypal characters” presenting Ibsen-like themes of “morality, social responsibility, the individual versus society in large, the familial relationships” (2). Similarly, Brian Richardson defines American realism in theatre by its attention to “social and psychological issues,” and eliminating the “metaphysical” aspects (5). Richardson argues that theatre productions that do not identify with realism conventions present a “mythic vision of American society” that is not critically or commercially required (6).

Though realism was labelled as “backwardness” by many theatremakers in the 1960s, it has remained the dominant trend in text-based theatrical productions and critical literature (McCarthy 22). The American producer, playwright, and critic, Robert Brustein, attacks American drama’s attachment to realism and the inability of American playwrights and theatremakers to expose “domestic realism as a cardboard illusion” as European theatremakers have done for ages (22). William W. Demastes described the “Tyranny of realism” in American theatre despite being a “structurally unambitious, homogenous, tunnel-versioned form” that presents “the same fundamental message and denying creation of a more open, pluralistic theatre” (x-ix). The popularity of realism in American reception studies has not been proven or

systematically examined. Alder Steven claims that the Broadway audience is always interested in “the easy-to-digest, unabashedly romantic spectacles” provided in realistic theatre productions (5). Such claims can explain some theatremakers’ and playwrights’ interest in realism, but certainly not the critical literature focus on realism.

Schlueter indicates that “European experiments such as Surrealism, Dadaism, Expressionism, and epic theatre” have all been present in American theatre since O’Neill’s Expressionistic play, *The Hairy Ape* in 1922. However, the critical literature has always been more interested in the conventions and styles of realism (305). Terms such as “domestic realism,” “lyrical realism,” “social realism,” and “poetic realism” are widely used in American theatre studies to describe almost all American playwrights or aspects of their writings, but remain undefined collectively (Marranca and Dasgupta 27; Gassner 3). However, is this a problem of the critical literature focusing only on realistic drama, or is it a problem of the dominance of realism in theatrical and dramatic productions? Arnold Aronson argues that criticism of realism in American theatre was largely evident during the 1960s with the evolving avant-garde artistic and theatrical movements and the increasing interest in the plays of Brecht, Becket, and Artaud (11-15). In the American theatrical context, realism (in form and content) did not allow playwrights and theatremakers to express their individuality and could not appropriate its techniques to emerging artistic, social, and theatrical experimentation (Bigsby, “A View” 130-131). With the absence of historiographical and critical approaches to examining experimental theatrical experiences at the time, realistic theatre and drama is more accessible to critics deriving their tools from existing literary criticism.

The conventions of realism in America are associated with the well-made plays model that has been popular as well as, more prominently in Broadway. Melodrama and well-made play are two products of Ibsen's and Chekhov's realistic styles in theatre (Lewis 180).<sup>11</sup> Styan identifies a well-made play as "any mechanical playwrighting which placed too much emphasis upon an efficient plot and a satisfied box-office" (4). The realistic well-made plays were the dominant model receiving most of the academic, critical, and commercial considerations. The mould became the model many playwrights aspire towards to access the mainstream theatre. This thesis demonstrates how Wilson's theatrical career develops from the experimental theatrical styles of Off-Off-Broadway in the 1960s and early 1970s to his attempts at writing realistic well-made plays for Broadway theatres in 1975 to 1980s. This trajectory is not exclusive to Wilson; many playwrights who started in venues outside Broadway in the 1960s turned to more realist models (realistic setting and family drama or domestic realism), in the vein of O'Neill and Williams; examples include David Mamet, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepard (Damastes xvi).

Wilson's style has been always identified as lyrical realism (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 327). This term has been used to describe Tennessee Williams' combination of realism and poetic language (Fisher and Londré 554). In all the publications on Wilson, attention is paid to this similarity with Williams, focusing on the two-act (well-made) plays written in the same style. This identification and approach to Wilson's work as realistic is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, the

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<sup>11</sup> The well-made play model in Chekhov and Ibsen has several aspects in the published sources. Though it is used often in American theatre studies, the definition of a well-made play is still vague. In considered sources on Wilson, a well-made play comes to refer to a conventional structure with a plot that develops to a climax and conclusion. This mould contrasts the fragmented scenes that represent the characters' experiences not necessarily united in a plot. In chapter two, I will identify the aspects of realism that are relevant to Wilson's dramaturgy and their significance.

experimental elements in Wilson's plays and theatrical productions (early plays and later one-act plays in particular) have been neglected by critics and scholars in favour of situating him in an existing narrative of American realism. Secondly, the interpretations and revivals of Wilson's plays have limited any possibilities outside such identification. The third problem is that realism as a dominant form interfered with the directions and quality of Wilson's, and arguably other playwrights', theatrical productions, compromising and alienating him from his authentic expression to fit into the mainstream theatre as I argue in chapter three.

Another aspect that might have contributed to Wilson's interest in writing realistic plays is the direction styles of directors who worked with him during his career. Marshall Mason (1940-), the artistic director of the CRC 1969-1987, has directed most of Wilson's plays (Fig. 3). In his introduction to *Plays from the Circle Repertory Company*, Mason uses the term "lyric realism" to describe Wilson's plays in the collection (v-vii).<sup>12</sup> Mason's directing style is realistic and interpretive. In interpretive directing, the director tries to "translate the play from the page to stage" to stay "true to text" (Downs, et.al. 188). This interpretive realistic style of direction is evident in all of Wilson's performed plays that I examined in the archives and will be discussed in this thesis. Stage directions are written in detail only in the original scripts of experimental plays (chapters 1 and 4), where Wilson focuses on body movement, space, and play rhythm. Based on the absence of stage directions from original plays' scripts, the published versions of Wilson's plays are not the pre-existent text. In an interview with Jackson R. Bryer, Wilson confirmed that the

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<sup>12</sup> Bigsby defines Wilson's theatrical style as "lyrical, allusive, layered, a realism suffused with the poetic" (*Contemporary* 372). In several interviews, Marshall Mason uses the term "lyric realism" to refer to the critics' categorisation of Wilson's plays style as "lyrical realism". As mentioned earlier in this introduction, Bigsby and other critics use the term 'lyrical' and apparently, Marshall Mason used 'lyric' to refer to the same idea.

published plays are the transcripts of the performances, where Wilson's or Mason's contributions are not necessarily identified. The stage directions are added after the performance for publication purposes. Wilson also explained how a play's plot might change during the rehearsals according to Mason's suggestions (196).<sup>13</sup> The added stage directions and the changes in the plots suggested by Mason (Chapter 2 and 3) show how the collaborative approach of Wilson and Mason might have interfered, and, I argue, placed Wilson's plays in a realistic frame. Even though Wilson's later plays (Chapter 4) included experiential attempts with rituals, social practices, body performativity, experimenting with boundaries of acting and narratives, the plays were directed by Mason, in a nonreciprocal approach that resembled a play reading.<sup>14</sup>

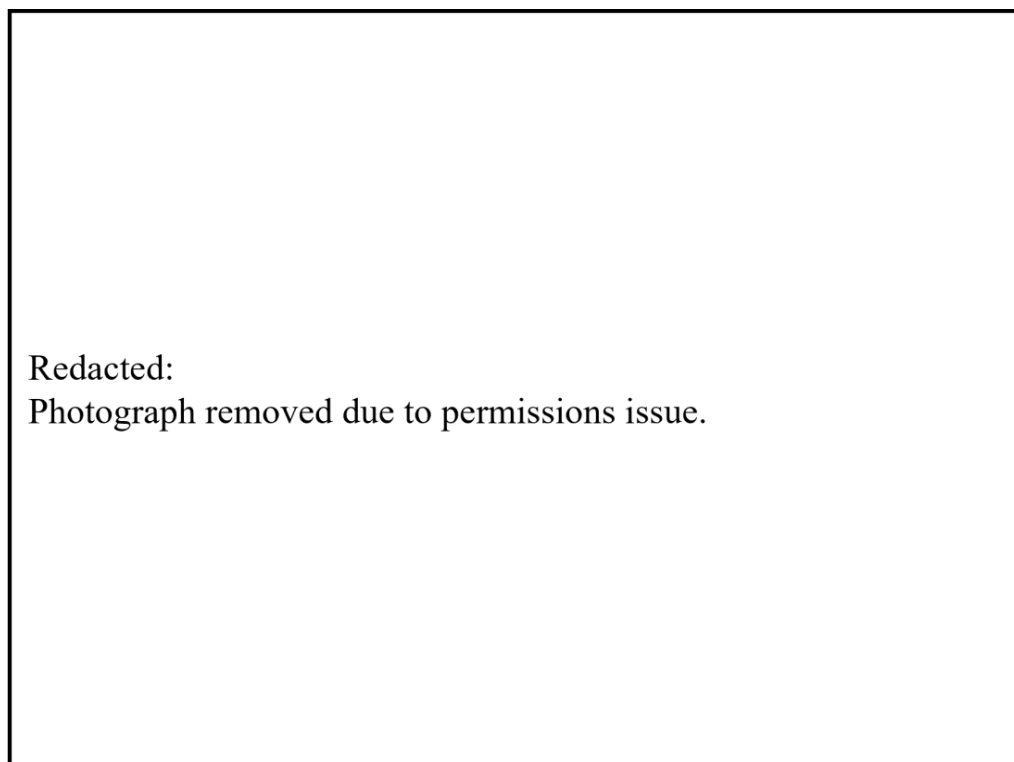


Fig. 3 Lanford Wilson (1937-2011) and Marshall Mason (1940-) at the Caffè Cino, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffè Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson explains in his author's note to *Talley's Folly* (1979) how he changed the plot based on Mason's suggestions (*Collected Works* 102).

<sup>14</sup> The performances of later plays are examined in chapter four.

The **fifth** challenge in American theatre history and studies is the lack of feminist and LGBTQ theoretical approaches. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992) along with emerging queer and feminist theories have attracted more interest in LGBTQ studies in American theatre. However, such interest is dedicated to plays written from the 1990s onward. Michael Cadden confirms the "literary tradition" of the absence of a feminist critical examination of drama. According to Cadden, there is a need for minorities studies and LGBTQ studies to find ways to look "at the theatrical texts from their traditions" and create "culturally appropriate critical methods" to evaluate and position theatrical contributions in a comprehensive theatrical context (136). Plays written and produced before the AIDS epidemic have not received attention in critical literature. Most of the LGBTQ theories and identity politics applications that I have worked with for this research are from European theatre traditions or studies on American plays written after 1990.<sup>15</sup>

Wilson is identified as a gay playwright both by the fact that he started writing and acting in a gay venue, *Caffe Cino* (Stone 92),<sup>16</sup> and by his presence in gay playwrights and gay plays anthologies (Nelson 450; Summers 192; Schanke 96). Wilson never expressed his sexual orientation or identity explicitly, neither did he deny the assumption. Gay characters are present in his plays, but they do not engage in any direct discussion of homosexuality or gay identity. Wilson is "a gay playwright who has seldom chosen to make that gayness the centre of his work" as Bigsby notes

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<sup>15</sup> The interest in gender studies, LGBTQ plays, and feminist approaches in American theatre studies has increased since the beginning of the twenty-first century in books such as: *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* by David Savran (2003); *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History* by Ed Robert, A. Schanke and Kim Marra (1998); and *Staging Desire: Readings of American Theater History* edited by Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (2003). However, the presence of pre-Stonewall plays in such studies is still limited.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen J. Bottoms challenges this by suggesting that the venue was not exclusively gay. According to him, "sexuality was by no means a defining theme" in the venue, but rather "the bizarre, the ridiculous, and the taboo" (39). This is demonstrated in the discussion of identity and space in chapter one.

(*Contemporary* 429). Though Wilson's presence in gay theatre literature could be justified by being in a what was identified prominently as a gay space at the time (Caffe Cino), the way in which his sexuality informed his writing requires further investigation.

The playwright's sexuality is not the topic of this thesis but positioning Wilson in a frame of gay theatre is problematic.<sup>17</sup> In an interview with John L. DiGaetani, Wilson expressed his frustration with being identified as a gay playwright assumed to be writing about homosexuality. He notes "I don't really think of myself as writing about homosexuality, but I realise that I've written about more homosexual characters than most people have. I see them all around so I'm just writing what I see. I've never written about homosexuality as an issue because I've never seen it as an issue" (291). Throughout his career as a playwright Wilson was expected to write about his experience as a gay person, an expectation that he resisted even when he wrote *Burn This* (1982) amid the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the gay community. However, the attempts to decode his plays for homosexual references and gay themes continue. Such approach was problematic for other playwrights. Edward Albee, for instant, refused the attempts to read and interpret his work based on his gay identity. He identifies himself as "a playwright who happens to be gay," declining the "obligation to write about gay subjects with gay characters" expected by critics or audience (186). Albee goes further to call it a ghettoizing of the plays and literature written by gay playwrights and a form of "prejudice and censorship" (187).

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<sup>17</sup> In *Burn This*, Burton is a male who is in love with Anna, the female dancer, but also has homosexual fantasies. His sexual orientation is not clear or defined and the struggle with his sexual identity is obvious. In an interview with Zinman, Wilson described the play as "personal and private" and that Burton is an autobiographical character (qtd. in Bigsby, *Contemporary* 14)

Wilson's approach to normalising homosexuality and gay characters in the plays, presenting them as a natural occurrence in the social context, has not been examined yet. His contribution to American theatre has been minimalised to being one of the first playwrights to introduce gay characters on stage, neglecting the complexity of such presentation and other themes such as drag identity, incest, sex politics, national identity, and interracial relationships that this thesis will consider. The limited attention paid to Wilson's work in academic and scholarly critical literature has been largely superficial and restricting. Framing his plays in a realistic style model and identifying him as a gay playwright in the available studies, have limited both, the potential interpretations of his plays, and the proper contextualising of his work in American theatre.

The **sixth** and final issue that has affected the content and nature of the available historical documentation and criticism of American theatre is the commercialism of mainstream Broadway and its hostility towards emerging playwrights, especially those who are racially or sexually minoritised. This issue is relevant to the broader perspective of critical and historical approaches and to the case of Wilson. As mentioned before, the politics of commercial theatre have interfered with academic approaches to theatre and drama. Commercialisation is not a problem according to Cadden, as he argues that professional theatre has been commercialised since Shakespeare (136). Broadway has been established as a commercial enterprise that controls the American theatrical scene (Steven 2). Broadway theatres have created a commercial system that is damaging to American theatrical and artistic landscapes and to Broadway as a commercial enterprise. The increasing prioritising of profit in the 1950s destroyed the artistic and professional role of Broadway and its mission of training and introducing emerging successful productions moved to Off-



Broadway (Bottoms 2). As a result, according to Alder Steven, by the 1960s, Broadway was considered by many theatre makers, playwrights, and critics as a “faded anachronism” (4). Producers relied on imported English productions in the 1960s-1970s and the revivals of realistic well-made plays by Miller, Williams, and O’Neill which did not allow space for emerging playwrights or experiential plays to exist in Broadway (Steven 6-7). Bigsby illustrates the problematic dominance of commercialisation in Broadway in the “star system,” for instance; prioritising movie stars on stage for marketing purposes regardless of their stage-acting skills (Bigsby, “A View” 129- 130). Based on the earlier discussed problematic traditions in American historiography, one can clearly identify Broadway’s role in shaping such traditions.

Firstly, the cost of productions and expected profits allowed only shows and playwrights who are commercially successful (Steven 4). This allowed no space for experimentation or emerging playwrights. Secondly, despite its problematic commercial system, Broadway remained, and probably still is, the “only one standard left” for success as O’Neill complained (qtd. in Miller, *Collected Essays* 445). Playwrights and theatremakers are either following such standards to fit in, producing commercially demanded content; or producing their artistic projects outside Broadway with limited audiences and less profit. After World War II, Broadway witnessed a high demand for realistic well-made plays and musicals (Harris 71). Additionally, Arthur Miller noted that “Broadway is hostile to serious work” focusing on entreating, accessible and nonprovocative themes and styles (367). That does not necessarily mean that well-made plays and musicals are not serious or provocative, but there are always compromises to be made in form and content to fit the Broadway standards of entertainment and profit. Many playwrights, and Wilson in particular,

had to design their writings to the commercially demanded style to get access to Broadway. In an interview with David Savran, Wilson mentioned that the Talley's trilogy was written as well-made plays were "hearing the click and the incredible disappointment at the same time, that it is that kind of play" (312). Wilson presents his perspective on Broadway in *Burn This*. Burton, the writer in the play, is torn between his authentic written work and writing for commercial purposes.<sup>18</sup> Writing for Broadway, according to Wilson, is "just a design. It's not really people at all, just this incredibly well-made piece of machinery" for a "business" enterprise of playwrights, producers, and critics (312). A similar idea that O'Neil wrote about in a letter in 1940, "because theatre is no longer a theatre of true integrity and courage and high purpose and enthusiasm. There are just groups, or individuals, who put on a play in New York commercial theatres" (514). Broadway commercialisation escalated until the artistic and theatrical interests moved to Off-Broadway semi-professional, and in many cases non-profit, venues.

Based on the six traditions developed in American theatre studies, I conclude this section by summarising how they relate to the critical literature of Wilson's plays. The focus on Broadway playwrights and the exclusion of experimental theatrical experiences and playwrights on account of their racial or sexual marginalisation has resulted in limited attention being paid to Wilson's work in literary and theatrical histories. The dominant descriptive documentation style in the history of American theatre has affected the nature of the sources available on Wilson as they lack in-depth examination of themes in Wilson's plays. Wilson's interaction with the American theatrical scene, where he existed (in terms of space, place, and time), is hardly

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<sup>18</sup> This point will be discussed in chapter three in relevance to Marxist alienation and identity expression.

contextualised in the critical literature. The focus of the existing literature remains on his realistic plays and on homosexuality, which can limit the possibility of recuperating his contributions to American theatre. Additionally, due to the unresolved relationship between drama/theatre/performance in American historiography, Wilson is always present as a playwright only. His theatremaking approaches are not considered.

This thesis, though focused on the theme of alienation and identity, engages with examining such themes in the social, political, economic, and theatrical contexts of the plays. The analysis accentuates the ways the experience of alienation creates, influences, has been shaped and presented theatrically within such contexts. In this thematic analytical process, identities (their politics and theories) and the relevant theatrical practices including politics of space, place, form, and narratives are explored. This approach will offer an in-depth reading of different aspects of Wilson's theatrical and dramaturgical approaches in an interdisciplinary framework guided by the theories of identity politics, gender and Queer theories, and theatrical and performance studies. Such an approach will add to the accumulated literature on Wilson and help to situate him in American theatre and identify his contributions and interactions with such contexts, challenging the limiting and excluding frameworks mentioned earlier. In a broader sense, in the process of this discussion, several areas that have not been explored sufficiently in the historical and critical literature of American theatre are introduced. These areas include gay theatre before the Stonewall riots (1969), underground theatrical movements, rituals in American plays, racial and black identity in plays written by white playwrights, disability presentation on the American stage, and the politics of gay identity, sexuality, and American national identity. The approach of this thesis will also introduce the discussion relevant to

theoretical challenges and problematic approaches in American theatre history and studies. Additionally, exploring alienation and identities not only in the socio-political and cultural contexts but in the theatrical context and introducing the complexities resulting from such interactions, will add to theatre studies on theatre and identity. In the overall thesis, while maintaining the analytical approach as the focus of the thesis, historical accounts are included and synthesised when required to add to the existing critical literature on Wilson.

### **ALIENATION AND IDENTITY: DEFINING THE TERMS**

Alienation is a complex term. The term has aroused a wide range of discussion and controversy in the western world for centuries. It is not easy to give a precise definition of the term since it involves different fields such as philosophy, sociology, history, economy, and religion. Moreover, it has developed to present a multi-dimensional human experience both on individual and social levels. The use of the term has accumulated from the thoughts of philosophers such as Hegel, Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Marx along with other following scholars in different fields. Since it is impossible to present all the literature on the term or the experience of alienation, the purpose of this part of the introduction is to reach a basic understanding and defined background of the term, its complications, and types that are related to the aim of this thesis, which is alienation in Lanford Wilson's plays.

Bigsby, who used the term alienation generously in his writings, claims that "the central theme of twentieth-century American drama is alienation: man from God, from his environment, from his fellow man and from himself" (*A Critical Introduction* 125). In American theatre critical literature, the term alienation has been used abundantly since the 1970s to refer to a recurrent experience that is rarely

defined. Broadly speaking, Henry Winthrop presents alienation as a term that “refers to any psychological feeling of separation from persons, groups, institutions, ideas and ideals, places and things” (290). In a more general sense, Frank Johnson states that the term “is used as a concept denoting the element of separation of two entities, with resulting tension and frustration” (28). Bigsby relies on Erich Fromm’s sociological concept of alienation, that I will discuss in the coming parts, to examine the experience of alienation in the dramatic productions of Albee, Miller, and O’Neil. In other studies, Bigsby uses alienation to mean “estrangement” and as the opposite to “regimentation” (*Contemporary* 259-262). Julia A. Walker refers to the “alienating conditions of modernity” that separates body and mind particularly in O’Neill’s plays (5). Alienation is also used to refer to social isolation, imposed or chosen, in Tennessee Williams’ plays (Adam 87). In other several occurrences in the critical literature on American theatre, the term alienation is used to refer to “a sense of isolation and helplessness” (Dean 42), “loneliness” (Hodgson 36), “apathy” and “disengagement” (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction* 9), and “separation” (Schroeder 23). The varieties of meanings and experiences to which the term refers in American theatrical studies share two aspects; firstly, alienation is an individual and collective crisis that is a product of postmodernism (Heuvel 26).<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the term expresses a distressing situation resulting from the separation of two entities (body and mind, a person and a god, individual and society, etc.).<sup>20</sup> Bryer argues that Wilson’s *Angels Fall* (1982) presents an experience of “culture alienation” (114). Though its meaning

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<sup>19</sup> In this context, postmodernism refers to a transitional and confusing period after the vanishing “cultural formations” of modernism. In postmodernism, “truth and illusion are often indistinguishable, identity is not fixed, and differences co-exist in the same sphere” (Saddik 6).

<sup>20</sup> Adam Schaff believes that alienation became a “fashionable” idea in the 1950s onward due to rediscovering Marx theories. The theory helped to understand and describe a unique human state other terms could not describe at the time (2).

is not defined, alienation occurs again in reviewing *Balm in Gilead* to refer to the experiences of “social outcasts” (143). Bryer continues to use alienation to refer to “self-imposed isolation” in *Burn This* (147). In the examples mentioned, alienation is attached to the characters’ ability/inability to belong in a social or cultural context. Alienation can be concluded as referring to a disturbing feeling resulting from the separation of individuals from one or several elements that they identify by, to, or in (self-identification elements, social, cultural, religious, sexual, or national). Due to such separation, individuals are unable to experience, express, or relate to such identifications. Such distressing feelings are communicated individually or collectively in certain behaviours, attitudes, and activities.

In Wilson’s plays, alienation is present in two senses that are the focus here: the Marxist sense of alienation, and the existential sense of alienation. The two overlap and include several terms used repeatedly such as social alienation, self-alienation, and religious alienation. The theme also interferes with the presentation of identity (such as gender, sexual, national, and artistic) in individual and collective senses. The two senses of alienation also interact with a wide variety of sociological theories that are summarised in Melvin Seeman’s well-recognised article “On the Meaning of Alienation” (783-91). Considering Seeman’s five variations of alienation (to be discussed later in this introduction), the Marxist and existential senses of alienation are introduced. This approach will allow me to present a relatively cohesive and conceivable background, of the term and relevant theories, that explains the variations of sources, experiences, and expressions of alienation that will reoccur in the following chapters.

Both Marx's theory of alienation and existential alienation are introduced in American drama and theatre studies as a direct result of the American sociopolitical, economic, and religious contexts. Though alienation in Marx's critique of capitalism is restricted occasionally to the workplace policies and the capitalist economic system, it affects individuals' feelings of belonging and fulfilment. The "middle-class, adult American" is always "frustrated over high taxes, and incomprehensible war abroad, campus riots, and political indecision, he is becoming more and more alienated from the traditional institutions of American society" (Mizruchi 123). Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is one example that expresses "a version of the alienation of man under capitalism" (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller* 484). Anne Dean asserts that David Mamet's plays always reflect on the capitalist sense of alienation (*David Mamet* 52). Additionally, according to David Krasner, the theme of alienation emerged prominently in the post-Great Depression plays (1929-1941) as influenced by the European existentialism which was "a version of existentialism indigenous to America" that "concentrated on the nature of individualism or individuals who, through their actions, examined life's meaning and value" (5). The existential writings of Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus, and Kafka, Beckett's absurd Drama, for instance, became a source for works expressing "anger, alienation, and rebellion" in American plays such as Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of our Teeth* (1942) (Cotkin 228).<sup>21</sup> Wilson's plays are directly influenced by Sartre's philosophy as I argue in chapter three. In the 1960s, with unsettled situations such as the Civil Rights movements, the Vietnam War, anti-war movements, feminism, and artistic movements, the interest in existentialism was revived in theatre (Krasner 64).

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson notes that his plays are influenced by Wilder and critics have noted some dramaturgical similarities that are discussed in chapter three.

Existentialism as a philosophy and writing style allowed playwrights to examine and seek a meaningful, valuable, and purposeful narrative about society and life in general.

In Marxist and existential senses, alienation is always experienced, individually or collectively, in a social context and in relation to social institutions or systems. Sayers argues that in pre-modern societies people used to be identified by their social beings, not by their individual beings. In modern societies, where such fixed social identification does not exist, individuals need to shape their own individual being and “identity” (10). Morton A. Kaplan, in *Alienation and Identification*, suggests that each individual in a social group has “individual history” and individual meaning of life that is different to other members of that group. He explains that “for life to have meaning and for an individual to have identity, there must be ordered sets of relationships within which particular actions have meaning. These ordered structures include the physical, the biological, the psychological, the social, the economic, and the political” (160-163). The ordered structures are the normative systems that provides a group with mutual and common aspects to unify its members whether that group is a family, a political system, a social movement, or a nation (Hechter and Opp xi).

Since identity can be developed, experienced, and expressed only in a social context, belonging to a community or a social group is essential to reach a satisfactory sense of self-identification that reflects one’s own authentic beliefs and values (Schacht “Future of Self-Alienation” 132-33). Fromm, in *The Sane Society*, believes that a person has an essential and instinct need for “rootedness” and “relatedness” to a collective entity which can be fulfilled by belonging to society, another person, or a



group (61). To develop that relatedness, people need to maintain a relationship that is satisfactory to themselves, their social institutions, and other people.<sup>22</sup> From a sociological perspective, being in a society or “the social self” is important as it provides the individuals with “feelings of attachment, sympathy, affliction, devotion, respect for others’ expectations, common goals, understanding and acceptance” (Jarymowicz 44).

In Hegelian philosophy, social context is essential in shaping and practising identity. This can be achieved by what Hegel called, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the ethical order” (266). The ethical order includes family, civil society, and the state, where state represents the ultimate form of harmony of all social elements (Reyburn 204). The social involvement and participation in the social structure (starting with family) is essential to self-identify with one’s ethics and values; a state that is not possible in a private context (Sayers 4). Allen Wood indicates that Hegel’s ethical order’s strength is “not in force, but in the way its social structure organises the rights, the subjective freedom, and the welfare of individuals into a harmonious whole, whose rational unity makes possible each individual’s identity as a free person, a moral subject, and a fully self-actualised human being” (230). Hegel presented a utopian society where people can recognise and shape their identities. A family, a civil society, or a state should all work in harmony to help each individual to reach that desired identity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I argue that Wilson’s attempts to belonging to the theatrical mainstream is evident in his playwriting development. A broader sense of aspiration to acceptance and integration is present in his later plays (chapter 4) using space, rituals, and narratives.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel referred to the Greeks as an ideal society where people can reach their identity and be united with the social context they are living in (Taylor 90).

Though being or belonging to a society is essential for self-identification, society is the main source of alienation. In *The Empowered Self*, Thomas Franck indicates that the problem arises when a social group starts to create an “imposed identity” for all people; a situation that would lead to the loss of individuality in the collective identity. As a result, people try to develop an individualistic definition of themselves away from the group (280). Heidegger proposed two concepts the existence “real” being as an individualistic sense of self, and “being-in-the-world” as a social being (236). The two beings can be separated by society. A society enforces rules and values that make all people identical, “faceless”, and unable to be identified as individuals (Wisnewski 60).<sup>24</sup> Another manner of existence, encouraged by some societies or groups, is the “passive manner of existence” (Schacht “Future of Self-Alienation” 132-33). This manner urges individuals to be indifferent, invisible, and powerless to minimise their contribution in challenging the norms of the group. Therefore, if identification is not imposed by the society, the individuals in the best scenario will not be allowed to develop their own sense of identity. A relevant example to both manners is that of a capitalist society that identifies people according to their roles in the production process regardless of other aspects of self-identification such as gender, sexuality, or ethnicity (Kaplan 115). In such a case, individuals are identified by their roles in the production process and at the same time, their involvement in the process is minimised to serve only within their assigned roles. Outside that system, an individual feels alienated “from statues assigned to self by others” (Couch 255). By objectifying individuals into an imposed identity (by the

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<sup>24</sup> Fromm presents the same idea in *The Sane Society*. He describes the tendency of twentieth-century societies to dissolve the individuals into ‘stereotyped’ or uniformed objects. “It [the society] needs men who co-operate smoothly in large groups; who want to consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardised and can be easily influenced and anticipated...to fit into the social machine without friction” (110).

social system or any collective group), a person fails to reach a meaningful self-identification within that system.

In cases of social change or social crises, the familiar social structures change, and the collective bonds start to diminish causing alienation (Israel 139). Moreover, if the social institutions fail to consider the individuals' needs in forming the social, cultural, or political policies, those individuals feel alienated. Taylor summarises that case as; "when the public experience of my society ceases to have any meaning for me" (88). The experience of belonging in a social context, practising one's identity is meaningful and motivating for those who can relate to such context and fit in, but for those who cannot relate or fit in, the social context and the experience of belonging are both meaningless. The latter individuals would feel alienated, unwelcome, and excluded from society. Social alienation, in this case, refers to the state of individuals' feeling of loneliness, isolation, and dissatisfaction in their social context. Thus, their social involvement in such a society is minimum (Winthrop 291). Additionally, social activism to challenge social context can occur because of such feelings of alienation. Durkheim's anomie (11) and Seeman's normalness (788) can be provoked by a sense of self-alienation or isolation causing extreme behaviours or social actions.

Even in relatively stable societies, belonging to a society or a group requires surrendering some of one's individuality to fit in. In that sense, for Hegel, an acceptable level of self-alienation is inevitable (Inwood 249). Similarly, Fromm affirms that to be united or be part of a society or a group, a person should submit some of their being to the other unit. Therefore, one gets separated from an "individual existence" to be part of the other entity or to belong to a social group. For Fromm, this is the only way to overcome loneliness and separation- being an outcast

(30). This level of self-alienation is not necessarily a negative experience (Schacht *Alienation* 36). However, the problem occurs when the social belonging process demands an individual to sacrifice all their authentic being or an essential part of it. Irene Taviss asserts that social alienation and self-alienation can be caused by the conflict between the needs and values of oneself and the needs and values of the society. Social alienation occurs when people feel that they are not able to live in a social system that ignores their needs. On the other hand, self-alienation occurs when people feel that they are forced to “manipulate their selves” to be accepted in that society (46-47). A relevant example here is the position of the American gay community in the 1960s. They had to choose either: to be part of the heteronormative society and stay in the closet, or to express their sexuality publicly and be outcasts, physically and socially isolated (Leer 1; Troiden 272).

In existential philosophy, and in Wilson’s plays, belonging to a society is the source of self-alienation. Being in a society is destructive to individuality, and in that case, alienation from society is a solution and a necessity. The existential concept of alienation is concerned with not how a person can be alienated ‘from’ society but ‘by’ it. Kierkegaard and Heidegger presented modern society as a sick society that destroys creativity and individual identity. A society is a controlling group which people “lose” themselves in (Sayers 6-12). Kierkegaard believed that relying on society to develop a meaningful identification or being is a failure task for individuals who “are fearful of existence, because... only in great masses do they dare to live, and they cluster together *en masse* in order to feel that they amount to something” (*Concluding* 318). To reach self-identification, according to Kierkegaard, one should be liberated from all the standards and laws of a society, a culture, or a religion that alienate from self and generate a sense of “anxiety” (Watts 5). In *Sickness Unto*

*Death*, Kierkegaard considers despair the obvious result of a person's inability to identify one's authentic "self" (43). It is not only that some people cannot find that sense of identity, but others "deliberately" try to ignore their real identity and fit themselves into another one that looks convenient and unchallenging. By doing so, individuals are trapped in an endless state of self-alienation (Harper 96).

Contrary to Kierkegaard, Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* believes in the sociological aspects of identity. One cannot experience identity alone outside a social context. People need a "reflection" to identify themselves and compare with where their reflection refers to other members of the group ("looking-glass self" in Turner's self-categorisation theory).<sup>25</sup> However, this reflection can be problematic because it introduces the "real being" as outside being determined by others; a being that exists only with their existence (246). Kierkegaard confirmed reflection and "reflective thought" as an obstacle in the way of experiencing identity ("The Present Age" 8). According to Kierkegaard, isolation from society is the only way to overcome self-alienation and reconnect with self, feelings, and values. In contrast, Sartre believes that alienation is inescapable. It is impossible to reach self-identification and free oneself from that state of alienation. Reaching self-identification and overcoming self-alienation requires another kind of alienation (externalisation) which also involves feelings of despair. Sartre believes that a person is doomed to be in an endless and hopeless quest to reach an unreachable purpose (Howie 57).

A relevant idea that Sartre introduced in his book, *Being and Nothingness* to explain the experience of alienation is that of "bad faith" (71). Sartre describes bad

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<sup>25</sup> In (Turner 35). Wilson used the metaphorical image of the mirror in his early play, *The Madness Lady Bright* (1964). This metaphor in relevance to alienation and identity is examined in chapter one.

faith as a person who denies their own identity; “bad faith is a lie to oneself,” recognising that lie as different from lying to others. A person lies “consciously” denying the truth of their authentic identity (71). Detmer explains that bad faith means a person’s choice to be “deceived” or misled into a lie as a fact by agreeing to be “persuaded by weak evidence” (75-84). In such a case, it is not an imposed identity but rather a chosen one; deliberately alienating oneself from being.

Whether bad faith is caused by a social context and the existence of others is still controversial between researchers. Sartre suggests that bad faith is enforced directly or indirectly by the social powers that make people fit into a given “social identity” (Santoni 23-26). Sartre differentiates that from the imposed identity, discussed earlier, that is usually identical for all people. In bad faith, social identity is created by the individuals and they are totally responsible for the choice (90). Sartre’s bad faith comes as a way of “rationalisation”, “denial”, and “self-deception” where people are aware of the lie, but they proudly continue to present it as the truth (Detmer 75-79). It a process of identity remodelling to tolerate a certain social context. Sartre’s bad faith is a way of escaping the feeling of separation and conflict within self. Instead of engaging in an agonising journey to reconnect with oneself (as in Kierkegaard) or expressing own identity (which is impossible according to Sartre), a person acquires an identity imposed by society or by others (social identity) living with the alienating feeling of “I am not what I am” (Howie 59). Alienation in such a case is expressed as “anxiety, restlessness, aloneness, despair, and nothingness” (Barakat 2). In sum, bad faith is a self-deceiving practice that reflects a state of self-alienation and at the same time, it is used to replace the alienated self with another being to escape alienation and anguish.

Marx's concept of alienation is caused mainly by the dehumanising process of production. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx summarised the ways the capitalist system and its workers interact:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts *it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer*. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement, as alienation*. (29-30)<sup>26</sup>

In a capitalist mode of production, workers are objects enslaved by the capitalists. Workers are involved in producing a product that is irrelevant to them, does not satisfy their needs, and does not express their values. The capitalist objectifying process leads to four variations of alienation from the production process (one's own work), from self, and from other members of society, and from the final product of the production process (14).

The mechanical process of production ignores the human aspects of its workers, but it interferes and controls their whole existence. The competitive nature of capitalism obstructs people from establishing a meaningful connection with their

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Milligan, the translator of this version states that, "Marx frequently uses two similar German terms, "*Entäusserung*" and "*Entfremdung*," to express the notion of "alienation". *Entfremdung* is translated as estrangement "because in the later economic works (*Theories of Surplus-Value*) Marx himself used the word "alienation" as the English equivalent of the term "*Entäusserung*" (30).

social context. The objectification and competition become a manner of existence and surviving (Caoili 370). Mandel explains that alienation in modern capitalist societies limits individuals' abilities and is expressed by the lack of communication with others and the feeling of isolation and loneliness (25-30). Workers are only functional and can only self-identify with a capitalist system. The focus of the whole process of production is on the final product no matter how destructive the process is.

A better understanding of capitalism and resulting alienation can be understood in conjunction with Seeman's five dimensions of alienation. Melvin Seeman has presented an essential contribution to the study of alienation in his article "On the Meaning of Alienation". He has presented five dimensions of alienation in modern society: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Seeman explained the social, psychological, and political complications of alienation. He asserts that "powerlessness" is the most used meaning of alienation in modern writings. Powerlessness refers to the individual losing control over the social and political policies in a society (785). An individual's decisions or opinions have no impact in a social context. This leads to a sense of apathy or passive existence mentioned earlier. The second meaning of alienation is meaninglessness, which refers to the individual's inability to establish an opinion towards a certain event due to the lack of clear and relevant meaning (786). As a result, a person is incapable of forming an opinion, relating, or responding to a meaningless situation. Both powerlessness and meaninglessness are related to Marxist alienation. Marx believed that workers are firstly alienated from their product because the product is meaningless to them. Both the product and the production process are not relevant to the worker's needs, values, or understanding of the world. Therefore, the product is meaningless and accordingly, the workers feel powerless as they have no control or ability to change or modify the



product or the process. Seeman stated that the two forms of alienation; powerlessness and meaninglessness are always related (786).

The two dimensions (meaninglessness and powerlessness) apply to the social and political scene in America in the 1960s and 1970s. The political and social matters were meaningless to many Americans and the new generation. The Vietnam War, for instance, appeared to be meaningless for young people of the time. They felt powerless as they had no influence to change the political decision about such a worthless war (Sontag 168). In such challenging and disturbing events, individuals experience the meaninglessness of the situation and the feelings of powerlessness within the social and political system (Twining 422). This situation leads to the third dimension of alienation.

Seeman defines normlessness as a situation where “there is a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals” (788). In the fourth dimension, isolation, Seeman refers to physical and spatial isolation, the lack of “social adjustment,” and the intellectual state where the values, targets, and beliefs of the individuals do not match the values of the society. Such isolation and feelings of being outsiders can lead to rebellious acts in that society to change the social system (789). Alienation can lead to apathy, avoiding any involvement in the system, or revolutionary acts to change the system (Lystad 92; Scaff 180). In America, the rebellious youth movements such as the Hippies and the Yippies of the 1960s were a result of alienation (Mizruchi 119). The young generation of the time was alienated from any social context, starting by alienation from the family structure and ending with alienation from the national context (Lystad 97). Another example in the American context is the Beat Generation in the 1950s. “They reacted in common

against an America they found surfeited with authority, which denied intuition and stifled emotion...they asserted the right of people to be themselves, take risks with their own fate, defy the limitations the society imposed on them” (Viorst 55). In a general sense, it can be argued that the Beat culture influenced American social activism and inspired several artists to challenge the social normative narratives (Waldman xvi).

The capitalist mode of production, with its resulting variations of alienation as explained in the previous part, is not exclusively a system of oppression to groups or individuals who do not self-identify with the process. The interactions of existential alienation, capitalism, and sociopolitical contexts in America with gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, and national identity are to be investigated in detail in the following chapters. The presentation of such interactions in Wilson’s plays remains the focus of the thesis while theories and theatrical context to explain such presentation are considered whenever relevant.

## **METHODOLOGY, SOURCES, AND LIMITATIONS**

The methodology of the thesis follows a thematic analysis approach that incorporates a historical approach in some stages of Wilson’s career, such as the underground theatre venues and practices in chapter 1. Due to the limited critical literature on Wilson and the descriptive quality of many of the available sources, a recurrent theme cannot be efficiently and accurately considered without historical documentation and enquiry of sources. In that sense, the thesis does not offer a theoretical interdisciplinary approach to examine alienation, identity, or Wilson’s plays. However, the discussion engages with the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks already present in American theatre history and studies and

critical literature on Wilson. Theories of gender, space, place, politics, American nation identity, narratives, and politics of body are purposefully integrated throughout the discussion.

Patric Pavis indicates that “in the western theatre tradition, the distinction between language and stage is maintained at all costs: hence the separation between dramatic literature and performance practice” (153). Such separation between dramatic text and performance practices is prominently present in American theatre and dramatic studies. In case of Wilson, and similar playwrights, a performance of a play can be considered separately from the script and the playwright, but this does not dismiss the fact that it is originated from a script written by a playwright. Therefore, while examining the performances of Wilson’s plays, I approach them as performances, but acknowledge the distinction between the textual and the theatrical, and between the playwright’s product and the performance team’s product. In Wilson’s case, as mentioned before, the two considerably interfere as the plays’ published scripts include a description of the performed plays and not only the pre-existent plays’ scripts. Available historical records on the performances of Wilson’s plays are significantly limited. Therefore, research in this thesis is based on two categories of source: the first, is the collection of critical and historical publications on Wilson, such as books, articles, and reviews that are mentioned earlier in the literature review. The research engages, works with, and challenges such sources critically. The second source includes all the direct sources of the dramatic texts or performances, such as scripts, published plays, commentaries, and interviews with Wilson and the other theatre makers involved, images and videotapes of performances, playbills and posters, prints of setting designs, and personal and professional correspondences. The second category of sources is limited to the published and performed plays, and the

premiere performances. I incorporate analysis of the performances that are authenticated in the Lanford Wilson Collection (at Missouri University) and The New York Public Library of Performing Arts.

### **THE ARCHIVES:**

The thesis consulted three archival collections in the USA: Lanford Wilson Special Collection, which is located at the University of Missouri, The Circle Repertory Company Records, and The Caffe Cino Collection, both of which are located at The Billy Rose Theatre Division at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Archival materials were examined during research trips to Missouri and New York during the years 2018 and 2019.

The materials found in the three archives have inspired and directed the engagement of this thesis beyond the thematic analysis of alienation into broader methodological and theoretical contexts such as identities, rituals, and narratives. The access to primary and original archival materials has provided relevant information on the contexts of the theatrical events in question. Before considering the ways such materials have been collated and incorporated in the thesis, I will provide a concise account of the content and nature of the mentioned archives.

The first archive collection is the Lanford Wilson Special Collection that includes a massive amount of Wilson's professional and personal items and records. The collection contains personal items such as letters, notebooks, drawings, a house and garden collection (which was one of Wilson's interests), and personal photos. The collection also includes primary resources and records of Wilson's theatrical career such as playscripts, directors' notes, rehearsal notes, theatre reviews, posters, images, cast shots, playbills, and video recordings of some of Wilson's plays. Records of

materials produced by other artists during the Circle Repertory Company (Circle Rep) years are also present in the collection.

The items in the collection are organised by type under eight series titles: correspondences, printed and duplicated, works and manuscripts, other people's work, audio-visual, awards and objects, miscellaneous materials, and photographs.<sup>27</sup> Each series is divided into sub-series and organised alphabetically either by creators' last names (such as in correspondences) or by plays' titles (such as reviews, clippings, and images). The abundant materials in the collection are undisputedly useful; however, the collection that was obtained by the University of Missouri in 2011 is still of limited and local impact in the academic and artistic fields. Only one book based on the collection materials was published in 2017 by David Crespy, professor of playwriting, acting, and dramatic literature at the University of Missouri. *Lanford Wilson: Early Stories, Sketches, and Poems* contains non-theatrical items such as short stories, poems, and drawings produced by Wilson in the 1960s. No examination of the collection's theatrical and dramatic items is published to date. This is, arguably, due to the limited attention paid to Wilson's theatrical career and the dominant practices of textual analysis of the published dramatic texts in American theatre studies.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, by introducing the archive and incorporating certain items in the discussion, this thesis reaches beyond the local impact of the archive and gains access to a largely undiscovered and unexploited archive. By highlighting the presence of such unexplored materials, the thesis draws attention to the prospects of using the archive not only to explore Wilson's contributions to American theatre, but to other playwrights' contributions as well. Additionally, the collection contains materials and

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<sup>27</sup> More information on the collection sub-series and their contents is available in The Lanford Wilson Collection website, [https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=41770723](https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/ld.php?content_id=41770723).

<sup>28</sup> Detailed discussion on such problematic traditions in American theatre studies has been established in the second part of the introduction section of this thesis.

theatrical records that can contribute to unravel certain gaps in American theatre history such as the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway productions and theatre companies in the 1970s.

The majority of the collection materials are scripts of produced and unproduced plays which were useful for textual analysis and examining the development of productions. The textual analysis of playscripts in the thesis is incorporated with the rehearsal and directors' notes, play reviews, published interviews with Wilson and artistic teams, and the personal correspondence between Wilson and production teams to understand and demonstrate the process and development of productions in relation to the thematic analysis of the plays. For instance, notes handwritten by Wilson on the scripts are significant in highlighting the process of developing thematic emphasis.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, available post-production images, posters, and playbills were explored for performance and production analysis whenever necessary. However, the video records in the archive were of insignificant use as some of the VHS tapes contain either a few minutes of the play's productions or different irrelevant material. The rest of the VHS tapes were damaged, which made this part of the archive unusable for this research. The collection restrictions of photocopying delayed the process of examining materials onsite.

The second archival collection is the Circle Repertory Company Records which are located at The Billy Rose Theatre Division at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The collection includes artistic, financial, and administrative records documenting twenty-seven years of the Circle Rep history (1965–1996). The scripts of produced and unproduced plays and productions are arranged by theatrical

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<sup>29</sup> Such is the case in notes of *Angels Fall* (1982) cited in chapter 3.

seasons. The collection consists of production materials of Wilson's plays beside plays and performances by other playwrights and artists who worked with Circle Rep. The performance and production materials, scripts, commercial contracts, financial records, images, set designs and rehearsal drafts are all original sources from the company records. Due to the fact that the collection is that of a professional theatre company, the contents of the archive are preserved, introduced, and organised according to productions of the plays. The collection contains 415 boxes of items placed in twelve series. Items of an administrative, legal, or financial nature were excluded from the research as they provide little contribution to the thematic analysis of Wilson's works. The focus of research was on Wilson's works and other playwrights' productions to identify the theatrical and artistic context where Wilson's plays (produced during the 1970s and 1980s) can be located. Besides images, posters, reviews, and other production elements, video recordings of Wilson's key plays such as *Burn This* (1982) and *Fifth of July* (1978) were used alongside the thematic analysis of the dramatic texts to demonstrate the presentation of alienation in the performances of the plays. Access to other video recordings of some of the other plays such as *Talley's Folly* (1979) and *Angels Fall* (1982) was limited due to the unannounced process of digitalising The Billy Rose Division video and audio contents as part of the Theatre on Film and Tape (TOFT) project that took place during the research trip in 2019. The archive allows photocopying, which reduced the time spent on examining and analysing items on site, and granted access to more items in comparison to Lanford Wilson Special Collection.

The collection includes the Circle Rep records of productions for other significant American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams' *Battle of Angels* in the season 1974–1975, *Cities in 40 Nights* by Jeff Daniels and Danton Stone (1982), *Fool*

*for Love* by Sam Shepard (1982), *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* by John Patrick Shanley (1983), *As Is* by William M. Hoffman (1986–1987 season). The collection also includes the works of the prolific American scenic designer John Lee Beatty (b. 1948) during his years at the Circle Rep. Such materials are useful in understanding the aesthetic vision of the Circle Rep and contextualising Wilson's plays in the broader theatrical context of the company.

The third and last archival collection is the Caffè Cino Collection in The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The collection includes rare photos, handwritten flyers, and posters of performances from the early days of Caffè Cino in the late 1950s. Unlike the previous two collections, Lanford Wilson's plays are not the focus of this collection, but the Off-Off-Broadway venue of Caffè Cino. Several images of the venue demonstrate the nature of the space and its performers and audience. The collection includes images of Doric Wilson, Sam Shepard, and Diane Di Prima among many others who were part of the venue and the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s. The majority of the collection holdings are posters, flyers, and images of the Caffè Cino space, productions, and members. Analysis of the images of productions and performances from the collection is essential to contextualise the 1960s at the Caffè Cino, not only as a space of theatrical and artistic performances, but also as a space of performing the LGBTQ identities in the wider cultural scene of Greenwich Village at the time.



The first chapter of this thesis relies on materials obtained from this archive. Such materials have directed the chapter focus to the interaction between spaces and places of performance, identities, and the experience of alienation within the context of the 1960s' counterculture.<sup>30</sup>

The items used from the archives are cited in the thesis using the box and file numbers and titles whenever they are available. The reviews, images, and clippings are assembled inside files according to the plays, but the items inside are not organised or categorised in any specific order. Therefore, the files' titles or numbers are used to facilitate locating such items. In the case of the Caffe Cino collection, some of the images are digitised and available in The New York Public Library digital collection.<sup>31</sup> In organising the materials and discussion, I follow a roughly chronological line. The presence of alienation as a theme in the plays, as I argue, coincides with the development of Wilson's theatrical career. This does not mean that the introduced themes are present exclusively in the targeted period, but they are subjectively more prominent in the chosen plays and their contexts. The recurrence of themes in different plays and chapters will be acknowledged.

The purpose of the archival research was not exclusively to trace the presence or presentation of the theme of alienation and identity in the plays, but also to contextualise the plays in their theatrical and historical contexts. Therefore, it is noticeable, for instance, that the reliance on archival materials is more prominent in

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<sup>30</sup> My visit to The New York Library for the Performing Arts in 2019 coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the of the Stonewall Riots that took place at the Stonewall Inn in June 1969. The library hosted an exhibition of *Love & Resistance: Stonewall 50* (14<sup>th</sup> of February–13<sup>th</sup> of July) which contained photos by the leading photojournalists of the 1960s, Kay Tobin Lahusen and Diana Davies. The exhibition also featured some of the library's holdings of archival items relevant to LGBTQ history and was accompanied with panels and discussions. Though not directly cited in this thesis, this exhibition was beneficial to understand the context of the LGBTQ movements in relation to Wilson's early plays. For more information and reading recommendations, see: <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/02/04/stonewall-core-reading-past-present-and-future>.

<sup>31</sup> NYPL Digital Collections: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>.

Chapters 1 and 2 due to the lack of published critical literature and studies on American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. The Lanford Wilson Special Collection and the Caffè Cino Collection provided a source of original materials on Wilson's plays in his early years. Posters, images, programmes, interviews with artists from the 1960s productions were all invaluable to understanding the theatrical context and demonstrate several aspects of the Off-Off-Broadway venues and spaces. Images, in particular, contributed to illustrate the Caffè Cino spatial and visual elements and the arrangements of performers and members of the audience in the performance space. The production images of *The Family Continues* (1971), for instance, show the use of body movement and positions of actors on the stage to present the family structure. Furthermore, Wilson's personal notes and changes to the scripts suggest his attempts to focus, redirect, or introduce certain experiences or themes. Interviews of Wilson, directors, and actors reflect, in several instances, on the socio-political and theatrical contexts of the plays. The video recordings of the plays' performances are significant as they reveal the ways such themes are developed and introduced on stage in relation to the artistic, cultural, and theatrical practices at the time.

This thesis is not an archive-based historical account of Wilson's theatrical career and does not offer historiographical approaches to American theatre studies. However, there are several archival research methodological practices and theoretical complications that need to be untangled. In incorporating archival research in the process of the thematic analysis of the plays, the following four theoretical complications of using archives in theatre and performance studies are addressed in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, even with the abundance of historical records of a performance, it is impossible to assume an accurate historical account of that performance, audience's

experience of the performance, or the performance's theatrical and cultural contexts. In his book *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, Patrice Pavis asserts that any past performance "is lost for ever; and we can no longer have an aesthetic experience of it." Therefore, "we must settle for a mediated and abstract relationship with the aesthetic object and aesthetic experience" (10). The impossibility of experiencing, reconstructing, or reviving any finished performance is asserted by Walter Benjamin in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." He argues that even with the presence of documentations of any artistic product, "one thing is lacking: the here and now." The attempts to document, revive or reproduce a certain artistic product always lack "authenticity" and uniqueness that are "jeopardized" by historical documentation of any kind (13).<sup>32</sup> Inherently, theatrical performances are irreplicable, but the play scripts and some performances have "a high degree of *consistency*" and a relatively "organized aesthetic structure" that allows for analysis and examination (Balme, *Performance Analysis* 134).<sup>33</sup> This challenge of documentation and using archival records in performance analysis, or any form of art, is still open to argument. Accordingly, while considering and incorporating archival items in the thesis, the purpose is not to reconstruct a past performance or using a historical approach to Wilson's plays. Archival items, existing historical accounts and narratives in American theatre history, thematic analysis of published play scripts, and social and cultural contexts

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<sup>32</sup> Though Benjamin's discussion is in relation to reproducing works of art in a capitalist system, his point is valid here; the relationship between the work and the reproduced versions or items from the work are relevant.

<sup>33</sup> According to Jim Davis, Katie Normington, Gilli Bush-Bailey, and Jacky Bratton in "Researching Theatre History and Historiography," there are established practices that consider the play text "as a blueprint for performance" which, problematically, might assert the tendency to analyse the play texts as literature or analyse the performances as performed texts (101).

are all utilised to examine the presentation of identities and alienation in Wilson's plays.

Secondly, theatre historian Christopher Balme asserts that due to the fact that a performance is lost once it finished, "we can only have access to it via conceptual constructs that we ourselves create" ("Theatre Historiography" 101). The inevitable absence of authenticity or accuracy of historical documentation of any performance and the reliance on constructed theoretical frameworks imply a limited degree of objectivity. In the field of historiography, and theatre historiography in particular, a theatre historian, researcher, or artist must acknowledge and accept the absence of "objective truth" of past theatrical events (Davis et al. 90).<sup>34</sup> Therefore, according to theatre and performance scholars Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, when using theatre archives, researchers should "understand their own ideological position and recognise the ideological biases which operate in the archive they are using" (21). Such biases function in the process of archiving and the approaches of examining and utilising archival items.<sup>35</sup> This discussion of biases is ignited in the field of theatre history and performance analysis because several research approaches try to "reconstruct" past performances based on the assumption that "the first, or original, state [of a performance] can be rebuilt" (Davis et al. 96). Markus Friedrich in *The Birth of the Archives*, insists that researchers do mistakenly approach archives "too naively as simple storehouses of objective facts about the past" (10). Thomas Postlewait approves the French philosopher Raymond Aron's argument that historical

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<sup>34</sup> Davis et al. suggest a process of "revival" which "revitalises past performance for the present" rather than reconstruction (98). They argue that reconstruction ignores the present and attempts to reconstruct the performance based on past evidence, while revival works to place the performance in a present context (99–100). The difference is not illustrated clearly or practically in the discussion. However, it allows for further exploration on existing and potential approaches to performance.

<sup>35</sup> A full discussion of the archives' biases lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

research is “an interpretive procedure that limits that positivist principles of objectivity.” Therefore, theatre history studies proceed within the limitations of “relativism in history” and “limits of historical objectivity” (6). Acknowledging the facts that: archives are not the only source of truth or interpreting a performance, and the impossibility of objectivity, the archive materials used in this thesis are approached carefully alongside with existing literature and varied historical narratives of the theatre events and their contexts. The use of archive collections is approached with caution, avoiding drawing presumed conclusions. Moreover, presenting the archival materials such as images, but not necessarily engaging with a detailed examination, allows for further future interpretations and discussions that might challenge existing narratives on Wilson and American theatre. The images were used to demonstrate the ways the play is presented or performed on stage, acknowledging that they engage other artists involved in the production itself (directors, scenery designers, lighting and sound technicians, etc.) and the producers of images (photographers).

Production and performance items such as images and video records should be approached cautiously. Such items can be “problematic” because they hold their own aesthetic meaning (Balme, “Performance Analysis” 139). Such aesthetic meanings do not necessarily reflect the intentions of the playwright or the production team. This third complication of using archived items in performance analysis and theatre research is significant in this case. Images and videotapes always carry their own meaning, produced or intended by their creators and not necessarily by the playwright, producer, director, actors in a performance. Christopher Balme in “Theatre Historiography” has discussed in detail the complications of using archival items in examining, interpreting or reconstructing performances, referring specifically

to images and playbills. A photograph of any theatre production is always “an image of an image” that cannot reflect objectively or authentically the performance or its experience (Benjamin, 106). Comparatively, video recording is the closest medium to the performance itself and allows access to several parts of the staged play (De Marinis 198; Balme, “Performance Analysis” 135). Despite their problematic and aesthetic meaning, visual records of a production demonstrate many aspects of the production such as set design and costumes, as well as certain physical aspects of acting such as gestures, facial expressions, and actors’ movement. Interpreting such items will always borrow from other disciplines as much as analysing play text will always borrow some narratives from literary theories. One example provided by Gale and Featherstone is the interpretation strategies of visual objects that are borrowed from Roland Barthes’ and John Berger’s theories of reading images (20).

The last and more relevant complication of using archives in this thesis is the need to place archival materials in a historical and theatrical context. Examining archived materials should engage with their socio-political, cultural, and theatrical contexts (Davis et al. 89). Both Christopher Balme and Thomas Postlewait assert the importance of contextualisation in theatre historiography (52; 299). In the absence of the possibilities of objective and authentic records of performances in their time and place of occurrence, placing them in certain cultural or social contexts is required. The historical traditions indicate the importance of “placing events within some kind of narrative” so “then we identify the large social, economic, religious, or political institutions, forces, or ideologies that contain or determine the meaning of the narrative” (Postlewait 10). For instance, the theatre of the 1960s is presented, explored, and interpreted in different contexts and within various narratives: as an experimental theatre, as a part of the social activism at the time, or as part non-

commercial bohemian artistic movement by others, exclusive to one context or inclusive of two or more contexts.

However, Bruce A. McConachie insists that theatre performances are not “social events” and thus should not be approached within such a narrative or in consideration of social and cultural contexts (465). Similarly, Tracy Davis argues that contexts and narratives are used to fill in the presumed “gaps” in historical research, while an approach to theatre should be concerned with and introduce the “empty spaces” not the “re/contextualised ones” (204). The process of contextualising will remain problematic but necessary. Examining archival materials within a specific context or suggesting a single approach or narrative ignores the interdisciplinary nature of theatre and its impact beyond the physical space. In the case of the Caffè Cino and similar venues of Off-Off-Broadway, in theatre history the venues are placed in a gay or LGBTQ context and within the homosexual/heterosexual narrative. Such contextualisation is problematic and limiting. Therefore, the examination of the images and posters from the Caffè Cino collection calls for a collaborated methodology that approaches the space, not exclusively as a gay space, but as a space of identity, theatricality, activism, and creativity. Approaching similar spaces in a collaborative, cooperative approach and introducing potential narratives to identify the role of such spaces in the history of American theatre, calls for further research on interactions with several contexts.

## **CHAPTERS PLAN**

Chapter 1 explores the theme of alienation in Wilson’s early plays written between the 1960s to mid-1970s. The plays include *Home Free!* (1964), *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964), *Ludlow Fair* (1964), *This is the Rill Speaking* (1965), *Days*

*Ahead* (1965), *Balm in Gilead* (1965), and *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973). The plays demonstrate an extreme sense of alienation shown through the spatial isolation of characters on stage from the mainstream society, and of the Off-Off-Broadway movement venues from the mainstream theatrical scene. The experience of alienation in the plays is that of marginal characters, outsiders. The characters are isolated from the social context and express a process of self-identification. Drag, camp, anti-normative sexuality, and anti-social behaviours are discussed as both sources and results of alienation. The 1960s counterculture is integrated into such expressions of alienation and identity. Wilson introduced space and place and their politics as an active agent in his early plays. Accordingly, gender, sexuality, and race are three manners of identification that interact with space and place. Alienation of such individual identities in a disturbed society and excluded venues is the focus of this chapter.

American national identity and alienation in a collective sense are present in Wilson's Talley's Trilogy written and performed in the 1970s. The American national identity as a collective identity (presented through the dysfunctional family structure/system) becomes a meaningless manner of identification after the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Alienation is illustrated by a disconnection from American idealism, history, and national identity. In the trilogy, alienation is caused by the failure of the American political and social system to sustain its integrity in response to national issues such as the Vietnam War and the 1960s movements. The discussion of such national themes gained Wilson his success in mainstream Broadway theatres. This chapter explores alienation in the following plays: The Talley's Trilogy: *Fifth of July* (1978), *Talley's Folly* (1979), *Talley and Son* (1985, a rewriting of *A Tale Told*, 1981), and two one-act plays: *Victory on Mrs.Dandywine's Island* (1970) and *The*



*Family Continues* (1972). In the trilogy, the sociopolitical situation of the Vietnam War is historical in the context of American involvement in World War II. The post-war American national identity is embodied through the Talley family. American identity is metaphorically performed as gay, white, disabled, and shattered, and isolated male. Alienation in such sense is examined considering masculinity, white supremacy, capitalism, and nationalism.

Chapter three examines alienation in an existential and individualistic sense not relevant directly, or necessarily exclusive to a particular social context. Wilson presents self-alienation as an experience in modern, industrial, and capitalist societies. The characters are successful people, artists, or thinkers who fail to find their calling. It is a personal quest for the meaning of all human beings in the modern industrial and materialistic world. Placed in confined space, characters are concerned with the process of self-identification in an outside controlled by fear and anxiety. In the 1980s/early 1990s atmosphere of the AIDS epidemic and the Cold War threats, the possibilities of communicating fearlessly and safely with others diminished. The fear of being and artistic expression in the plays' parallels with Wilson's personal experience as an artist and a playwright. Additionally, religious alienation in the plays is more of an individualistic feeling of alienation from God in an existentialist sense. Both self-alienation and religious alienation are demonstrated by the anxiety, isolation, despair, and bad faith as present in the writings of Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka. The focus here will be on Wilson's two-act plays in the 1980s: *Angels Fall* (1982) and *Burn This* (1986). The two one-act plays *Say de Kooning* (1983) and *A Poster of the Cosmos* (1987) are also discussed.

The last chapter explores the least critically examined plays of Lanford Wilson from 1990s onwards. At that point, Wilson was established as a prolific playwright in Broadway. His plays incorporate several experimental elements and written purposefully to fit a mainstream audience. The plays are distinctive with their multiculturalism concerns and the use of rituals, performativity, supernatural elements to create narratives of identity and belonging. Acting techniques are explored as they are used purposefully on stage to reflect on the issues of multiculturalism and belonging. Alienation will be explored in the following plays: *Redwood Curtain* (1992), *A Sense of Place (Virgil is Still the Frogboy)*, 1996), *Sympathetic Magic* (1998), *Book of Days* (2000), and *Rain Dance* (2002).

## CHAPTER ONE:

### FRAGMENTED SPACES AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The year 1964 marked the beginning of Lanford Wilson's career as a playwright in Off-Off-Broadway venues in Greenwich Village, New York. His first produced plays took place at Caffe Cino, a café that opened in 1958 and started to serve as a free space for many emerging playwrights such as Lanford Wilson, William Hoffman (1939-2017), Sam Shepard (1943-2017), Robert Patrick (1937-), and many actors, and directors. The café was identified by several critics and theater historians as the birthplace of the Off-Off-Broadway theatrical movement (Stone 1-7). At the time, the café's team staged classical plays such as Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), Sartre's *No Exit* (1944), and Brecht's adaptation of *Edward II* (1924). Although Robert Patrick has provided flyers, photos, and information on such productions, he still calls it the "silent era" of the café (*Patrick's Archive*). This is due to the loss of relevant records during the fire at 1965 (Fig. 1.1), and the lack of proper documentation of the early productions.

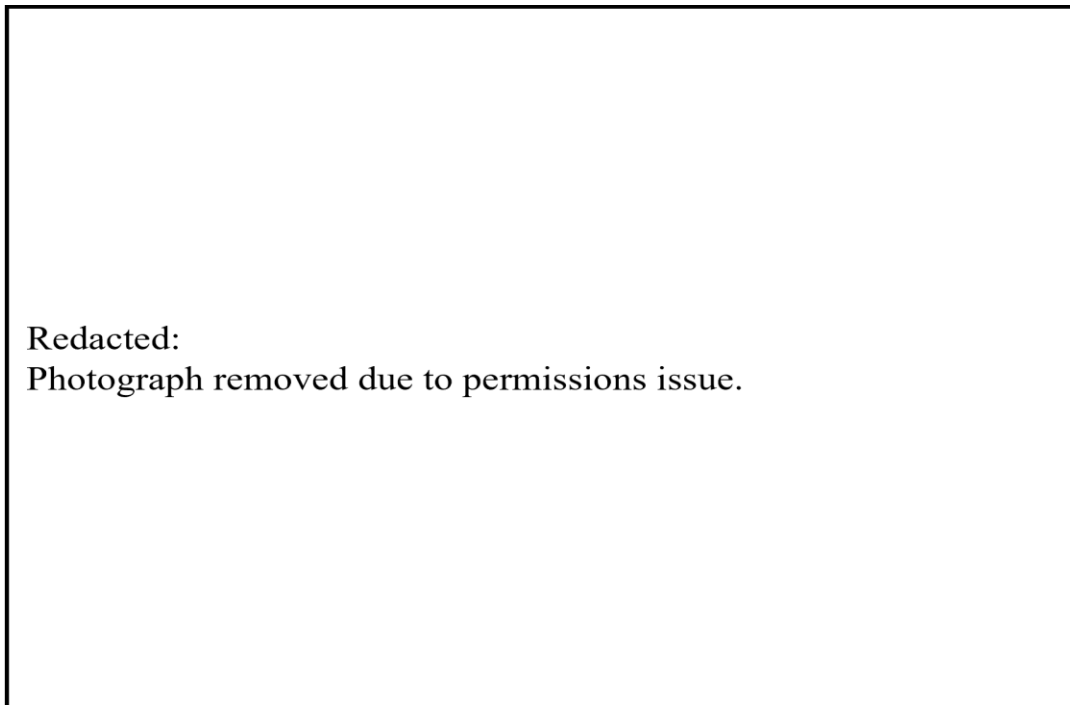


Fig. 1.1 Joe Cino (1931-1967), the owner Caffè Cino after the fire in 1956, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffè Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

The café and its theatrical role became known only when Jerry Tallmer, the critic in the *Village Voice*, introduced the venue as part of what he coined as the “Off-Off-Broadway movement” (Suràez 133). The private nature of the café and the selection of plays suggest its interests in themes relevant, but not exclusive, to its largely gay audience (most of the plays implicitly or explicitly challenge gender and sexual identities). In his book, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, Stephen J. Bottoms rejects firstly, the Off-Off-Broadway label as it suggests “an integral, vertical relationship with the establishment” which is Broadway (2).<sup>36</sup> Secondly, he argues that “sexuality was by

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<sup>36</sup> Bottoms continue to use the Off-Off-Broadway label in his book despite his objection.

no means a defining theme” of Caffè Cino and subsequently Off-Off-Broadway venues, but rather “the bizarre, the ridiculous, and the taboo” (39). Such defining theme, in terms of the owner’s, some playwright’s, and majority of audience’s homosexual orientation, is problematic as I have discussed in the introductory chapter. Framing the movement and its contributors in gay theatre terms, has limited the approaches and the critical exploration of Off-Off-Broadway’s theatrical politics. Bottoms maintain a theatre-focus approach to the movement where sexuality is an element but not a defining aspect.

Wilson achieved critical recognition with the success of *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964) as it was the first Off-Off-Broadway play reviewed by *The New York Times* and the longest running performance with 205 performances in the venue while other plays normally ran for a week or two (Blaney 3-4). The play has been produced for decades later nationally and internationally. The play’s enduring significance and success at the time is due to Wilson’s challenging presentation of gender identity, sexuality, and the experience of alienation in the subculture of drag queens. As I argue in this chapter, the play “traversed the huge psychological barrier between making gay-friendly theatre, and making theatre about gay characters- a move that shocked even the Caffè’s clientele” (Bottoms 53). Wilson’s presentation of gender and sexuality did not only challenge the heteronormative social context, but also challenged the homosexual normativity that identified the Caffè Cino and its crowd in a uniformed identity based on their sexuality.<sup>37</sup>

From a theatrical perspective, *The Madness of Lady Bright* along with Sam Shepard’s play *Chicago* (1965) exemplified the form and aesthetic techniques of the

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<sup>37</sup> Wilson used “queer” rather than “gay” in his early plays, a significant and deliberate use that will be considered in detail in the third section of this chapter.

movement. They are one-act plays, remarkably experimental with form and content where conventions of theatre such as unity of action, space, and time are abandoned. The plays do not have a plot or a storyline, but a fragmented scene. The boundaries between what Gay McAuley identifies as theatre, performance, and audience spaces are blurred and metaphorically smashed.<sup>38</sup> Michael Smith describes the plays as “anti-naturalistic” and “anti-illusionistic” as the audience was always “reminded that [they are] watching a theatrical event” (*Eight Plays* 12). He refers specifically to *The Madness of Lady Bright* as anti-sentimentality and “very contemporary anti-hero” play (15). Such influences of Brechtian techniques, the Theatre of the Absurd, and Tennessee Williams’ lyricism are evident in Wilson’s early plays.

Off-Off-Broadway as a theatrical movement played a significant role in shaping Wilson’s theatrical career and his plays influenced the movement in return. The nature of the movement located in the Greenwich Village venues, separated from the mainstream American theatres and also invisible to those who are not interested in the performances, allowed Wilson, and other playwrights, to experiment with theatrical form and content; an influence that reappeared in his later plays. Wilson’s plays attained critical recognition for the Caffe Cino venue, and the Off-Off-Broadway movement as mentioned earlier. Along with his experimental attempts, he had a continuous aspiration to belong to the mainstream theatrical scene. Changes of dramaturgical techniques and content are evidence of such ambition that Wilson mentioned in several interviews.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, Wilson’s theatrical approaches and openly staging certain themes such as drag and nonnormative

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<sup>38</sup> The detailed reference to McAuley’s *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (2000) will occur in the discussion later.

<sup>39</sup> This aspiration is discussed in the introductory chapter and will be traced in the following chapters.

sexualities challenged the mainstream avoidance of such themes and the Off-Off-Broadway venues' homonormativity.

In this chapter, I argue that the experience of alienation resulted from the sociopolitical and theatrical context of the 1960s is manifested through the characters' manners of experiencing and expressing identities. Imagined spaces in the early plays at the actual space at Caffè Cino are essential part of experiencing alienation and identity. The presentation of identities (gendered and racial identities in particular) is examined in connection with the sociopolitical context of the 1960s and the theatrical spaces of performance. Off-Off-Broadway politics are essential to understanding the politics of gender identity, racial identity, and sexuality in Wilson's plays. Therefore, after this introductory section to the relevant 1960s sociopolitical and theatrical contexts, I introduce a historical background of Caffè Cino and other relevant underground venues. The third section examines the gender identity and sexuality in the plays and their interactions with space. Racial identity and Wilson's presentation of racism and interracial relationships is explored in section four. Finally, the changes of the theatrical and dramaturgical style in Wilson's plays performed outside Caffè Cino are explored to further develop the argument on space and identity.

The combination of the theatrical experience, Wilson's career as an emerging playwright, an American person experiencing the unsettling changes in the American society at that time, is reflected in the characters' attempts to belong and identify with a certain identity in isolated, undefined, unrecognized, and queer spaces. Such attempts of self-identification cannot be considered outside of their spatial and temporal contexts. Therefore, to examine that experience of constructing, expressing and affirming individual identities in a chaotic hostile context (which is the purpose of this chapter), it is necessary to briefly introduce the relevant 1960s social and political

contexts, and then present the historical background of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. Both frameworks will be linked to the discussion of identity and the experience of social alienation in Wilson's early plays.

Wilson's early plays presented the uncertainties of gender, sexuality, social roles and racial segregation that dominated the 1960s' American culture. The early plays manifested an extreme sense of social alienation, borne out of the difficulties with self-identification that marked many of the sociopolitical contexts of the time. Wilson's references to counterculture, drug use and sexual behaviours, marginalized or minoritized groups, and the presentation of the failure of attempts at self-identification, are all expressions of isolation that motivated those characters to create an alternative experience of expression.

In relevance to this chapter, three social norms have been challenged radically in the 1960s America: the established gender binary, sexual acts, and racial segregation. Such challenges were active decades before. However, the 1960s witnessed a wider engagement and prominent political and social activism defying the legal laws and aiming at securing certain rights for groups or minorities (gay and African American in this case). Up to now, the controversy about the 1960s decade in America is still present and it is impossible to give a comprehensive overview here.

The 1960S decade was dominated by the Civil Rights Movement, women's rights movements, the Vietnam War, and the Anti-war Movement, and the emerging Gay Liberation Movement. The politics of each movement are tangled in and affected by politics of race, class, and gender. The resulting values and ideals of the decade are usually referred to as the "counterculture" which, according to the historian Doug Rossinow, is used "to group together values, visual styles, social practices, and



institutions that were widely disparate but considered by most to be unified in their rebellion against the dominant culture of advanced industrial capitalism, or even against a broader regime” (79). The previously mentioned movements’ aim was to challenge the American status quo. In that sense, counterculture is an act of normlessness in reaction to a state of alienation. Normlessness is “a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals” (Seeman 788).<sup>40</sup> The 1960s’ political, social, and ideological movements challenged failing conventions and social and cultural institutions and structures. At that time, whoever identified themselves with any of the previous movements, was to be marginalised individually or collectively.

## **1.2 OFF-OFF-BROADWAY VENUES:**

The 1960s’ artistic and theatrical scene was influenced by the ideal of the Beat generation (Stephen xi). The Beat generation as a phrase coined in 1948 by Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes to refer to the “influence of literary and artistic activities” or artists who “refreshed the long-lived bohemian cultural tradition in America” (Ginsberg xiv). According to Anne Waldman, the term is derived from jazz music to mean “down and out” (xxii). Key works such as *Howl* (1956) by Allan Ginsberg (1926-1997) and *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) represented the ideals and beliefs of the generation. Ginsberg claims that the beat values contributed into the sexual revolution and the LGBTQ movements at the time (xvi). The Beat literature is wide-ranging and would require a dedicated discussion that is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, critics and theatre historians have

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<sup>40</sup> See more details in the introduction of this thesis.

identified thematic and stylistic influences of the Beat generation on the 1960s' counterculture and experimental theatre.

The Beat writers claimed to be “against cynicism, apathy, injustice, compromise, racism, consumerism, wars and...censorship” (Waldman xxi). Themes such as using substances, seeking sexual pleasures, spiritual liberation, and multiculturalism, claiming safe spaces for free expression especially for minorities and ethnicities are all present in the Beat writings (Ginsberg xvi). The experience of alienation and isolation from social contexts is also present in their literature (Stephen 1). In his book, *A Queer History of the United States*, the American historian Michael Bronski insists that the history of LGBTQ in America should not be singled out from the wider American context (xi-xx). He traces the history of homosexuality and queerness since the very beginning of American history. However, he marks the 1950s and post-war era as the point challenging social gender roles became normalized on TV, films, and publications. Examples such as women wearing trousers, some homosexual male characters appearing in novels and films helped in “blurring” the binaries between men and women, homosexuality, and heterosexuality. Though homosexuality was illegal at the time, its culture started to creep through to the mainstream (194-200). Bronski positions the emerging gender and sexual changes in the 1960s, with its root back in American history, in a wider context of the Beat Generation. He states that: “Ginsberg credits the Beats with launching the radical women’s liberation, Black Power, and gay liberation movement; promoting sentiment against the war in Vietnam; igniting an interest in Eastern religions and philosophy; and fostering the idea of free love” (201). Gay people, for instance, were always considered to be a threat to the “American way” and “the acceptance of the gay minority implies acceptance of a group that asserts values and behavior that differ in

many ways from the most deeply held views about the organization of private life and sexuality” (Altman ix). Gay identity and homosexual behavior both were considered a threat to “social boundaries, defining ‘real’ masculinity” (Connell 40). Challenging gender, sexual or racial established binaries and politics resulted in stigmatization, fear and rejection by others and social institutions (such as family) forcing minorities outside the dominating social normative narrative both physically and mentally. Spatially, gay communities in 1960s America, according to Alian Sanzion, were situated in ghettos, “the homosexual space is both the expression of the place assigned to homosexuals by society and the possibility of living openly, thus destroying this social reality... [The ghetto] is a territory of desire and in this sense it escapes the heterosexual model” (qtd. in Altman 32). Although Altman presents such spaces as an escape for gay people from the pressures of heteronormativity, he asserts the presence of feelings such as “self-hatred” which are inescapable just like the inescapable racism among blacks (220-21). The discussion of whether the Beats should be credited with such changes is not relevant here. The main conclusion of such historical documentation is affirming that the 1960s witnessed radical and opposing reactions to certain established social, cultural, and political norms aiming at challenging the normative narratives of race, gender, sexuality, and art.

According to Bottoms, the Beat generation poets’ presence and their poetry readings in Greenwich Village since the 1940s and later in the 1960s within The Poetry Project in St. Marl’s Church, influenced the styles of poetry performativity in Off-Off-Broadway venues (116). Bottoms claims that the Living Theatre adapted “the same aesthetic and political concerns” of the “traditional bohemianism of the Village” inspired by “the raw energy of jazz musicians and Beat poets” (28). Such influence of

the Beat generation poetry readings is clear in Wilson's use of music, voices, and poetry in his plays as will be demonstrated in the discussion.

The presence of themes such as homosexuality, addiction, prostitution, incest, and suicide can be read as expressions of an alienated theatrical scene that struggled to stay faithful to its intentions of free expression, but also tried to contribute to challenging the commercial reality in Broadway theatres. Off-Off-Broadway was itself part of the 1960s normlessness.

By the end of the 1950s, American theatre was in a serious "crisis" as Bigsby describes it. The classical plays of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill on Broadway, representing the "epitome of the capitalist enterprise", could not survive the new "competition from television" (369). The commercialized nature of Broadway as J. Chris Westgate affirms in his introduction to *Brecht, Broadway and United States Theatre*, was directed "by pressures of place, culture, and history toward making profits rather than producing innovative or political theater" (xviii).<sup>41</sup> Smith radically attacked the commercial enterprise of Broadway and its ideology, "Broadway won't die; it has to be assassinated" (18). Thus, Off-Broadway started as a reaction to the commercialism of Broadway, allowing affordable spaces for emerging actors, producers, and playwrights. However, by the early 1960s, the role of the movement started to decline due to the "increasing commercialization of Off-Broadway theaters during the 1950s" that "had effectively wiped out their traditional role as a training ground for the next generation, and the next generation, consequently, began to resort to performing in tiny, nontheater spaces such as cafes, churches, basements, and lofts" (Bottoms 2). Marvin Carlson confirms that the

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<sup>41</sup> The effect of Broadway commercialisation is introduced in the introduction to this thesis.

placement of Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatres in Greenwich Village and East village in New York, reflected the conflicted relationship between theatre as an artistic space and theatre as a profitable institution (98). Theatres outside Broadway did not necessarily aim at challenging a capitalist profit system and in many cases, productions aimed to achieve enough critical success to move to theatre venues. However, Off-Off-Broadway isolated venues, with their non-profit nature, can be argued to be part of a theatrical counterculture attempting to challenge the rules and limitations of the institutionalization and commercialization of American theatre.

Juan Suárez affirms that Off-Off-Broadway was part of a wider artistic counterculture in the early 1960s that reacted to the modernism's climate of elitism and withdrawal by attacking the autonomy of art, and by trying to close the gap between art and the practice of everyday life. Their ideological stance led to the production of ephemeral forms that could not be collected or commodified and existed only as performances and happenings- placing art in traditionally non-artistic contexts such as streets and public spaces, and underplaying the artist's uniqueness, stressing amateurism and spontaneity. (88)

In such culture, several trends and theatrical directions grew not only to dominate the underground scene, but also to shape what would become mainstream in later decades. Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, Edward Albee were some of the playwrights who started in such spaces and venues. Dramatic and theatrical techniques such as, antinarrative plots, fragmentation of content and form, using

bodies and spaces to create meaning, improvisation, integrating found spaces, and presenting marginalized antihero characters are present in Wilson's, and many Off-Off-Broadway plays.

The Off-Off-Broadway venues included a variety of theatrical and performances styles. Theater historians and critics such as Bottoms identifies the venues' productions as directors-led or playwrights-led venues (4). Venues such Caffè Cino, Judson Poets' Theater, La Mama theatre, and Theatre Genesis hosted text-based productions most of the time. The Open Theater, The Play-House of the Ridiculous, The Living Theater were concerned with the performative aspects of theatre that emerge from performance not text (Bottoms 16). Such distinction is not necessarily accurate especially in case of the productions of Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater and Richard Schachner where the borders between performance, dram, text, and script are always challenged. Such distinction is important to understand the aesthetic, spatial, political, and stylistic grounds that collectively identifies the Off-Off-Broadway movement and its venues or distinguish each venue or theatre company/group individually. However, it is problematic as it identifies the venues as production companies.

Bottom's distinction is based on the nature of the productions: the ones that were based on a text or a playscript, and the ones that originated from directors' visions and improvisation. However, a practical distinction should be introduced between the venues as performances spaces and theatre groups and companies. For instance, the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club (La Mama ETC), founded in 1961 by Ellen Stewart (1919-2011), was identified as a performance space where Jean-Claude van Itallie premiered his play, *America Hurrah* (Saddik 112). Several plays by

Wilson and Caffe Cino's playwrights were performed at the La Mama especially after the café closure in 1965. William Coco stated that from 1963-1966 workshops of the Living Theatre took place in the LA Mama theatre (27). Therefore, the La Mama cannot be identified according to Bottoms' classification of text-based or director-led theatres. Similarly, Caffe Cino is a space of performance where the remained documented records show the emergence of playwrights and text-based productions that gained public and critical recognition. Compared to the Living Theatre and The Open Theater, and The Play-House of the Ridiculous, Caffe Cino was not established by theatremakers and it did not identify as a theatre group or company. There was no professional theatrical vision, political purpose, or artistic direction of the performed materials. La Mama, as a venue at the time, allowed a space for new playwrights, directors, and artist to present their works. Stewarts stated the absence of any approach in choosing the plays, "the plays that we're doing are the plays I want to do. I don't interfere in how they get to be that way" (qtd. in Bottoms 166). Thus, it is more accurate to consider spaces such as the Caffe Cion and the La Mama spaces of performance rather than theatrical companies.

Off-Off-Broadway venues' engagement with the sociopolitical, cultural, and artistic movements of the 1960s varies. In an interview with Mark Amitin, Julian Beck states that the Living Theatre was always occupied with the social and political affairs, not only in terms of expression, but also in activism and enforcing a change (27). The Living Theatre radical experimental theatrical approaches were not always welcome by audiences or critics. Richard Gilman comments on "theoretical anarchists" and activists" in the Living Theatre as they try to present what is "real," but "landed in another kind of artificiality after its flight from the artifices of theatre" (29). Bigsby indicates that Caffe Cino playwrights, and Wilson in particular, are not

radical in terms of experimenting with theatrical form or engaging with political activism. The performative aspects such as improvisation, using actors' bodies, and stage movements demonstrates the influence of with Antonin Artaud theories and the Living Theatre's practices (*Contemporary American* 380).

### **1.3 CAFFE CINO: IT'S MAGIC TIME!**

At Caffè Cino, Joe Cino used to announce the beginning of the performance, "Ladies and Gentlemen, it's Magic Time!" (Stone 14). In a note, Cino described the nights when a performance is progress while the police officers were walking outside knocking on the doors and disturbing the audience (53-54). Despite that, the performance continued to be "a mirror of all the madness of everything that is happening" (Cino 54). Joe Cino (an Italian American) started the Caffè Cino in 1958 at 31 Cornellia, New York. The café continued to host new artists and performances until a fire closed it in 1965. Bottoms describes the Café's space which turned into a stage whenever it was required:

the derelict ground floor store space- a long rectangle about forty feet deep and just fourteen feet wide. At the front, on either side of the door, were window cases featuring a decorative coffee-machine and an easel-mounted poster advertising current attractions. Immediately inside, the main body of the room was filled with a motley collection of tables and chairs salvaged from a variety of sources, amid which a space could be cleared to create a temporary "stage" area. The counter area, complete with working coffee machine and sink, was located toward the back of the room. A partition wall then masked off the toilet and a small private room, which came to double as a dressing room. Eventually, on either side of the entrance to the narrow passageway leading to these rooms



were placed a lighting control board and a record player for music and sound effects. (42)

Caffe Cino was intimate and small but allowed new playwrights and performers to use the space to express their identities and feelings. Such detailed description of the space is essential. Several theatrical techniques that Wilson used in his early plays along with the dramaturgical notes and use of setting and lighting in a metaphorical manner were inspired by and designed according to this space. There is no defined theatrical space; the space that is left after the seating arrangement is the performing space (Fig. 1.2). The boundaries between the audience, actors or attendants are absent. So, the theatrical space was created by the acting or performing bodies of the actors, lighting, and audience's imagination.

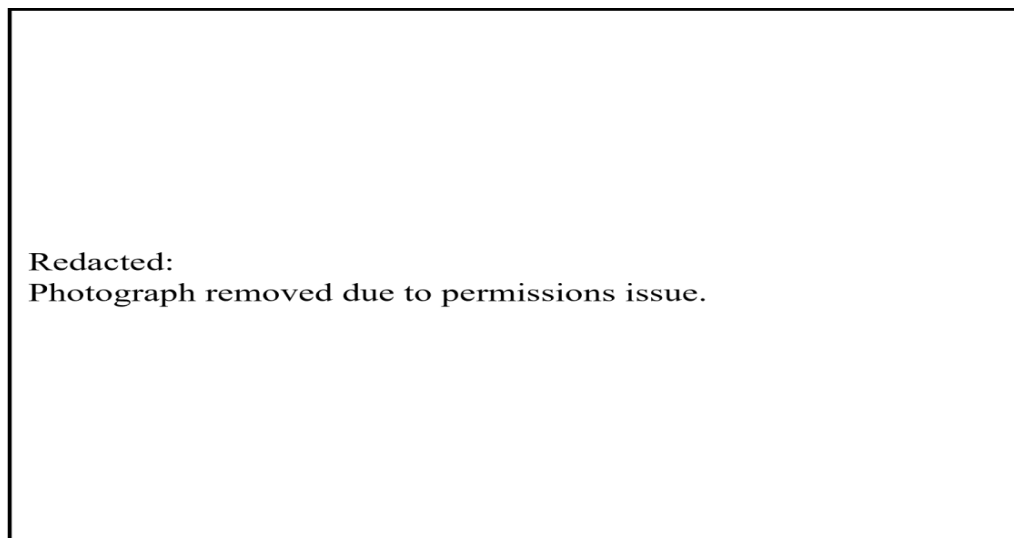


Fig. 1.2 Caffe Cino, Unidentified performance, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffe Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

In his introduction to *The Off Off Broadway Book: The Plays, People, Theatre*, a book edited by Albert Poland Bruce Mailman, Lanford Wilson described his first experience watching the production of David Starkweather's *So Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?* (1962):

A long narrow room with a stage against one wall and tables and chairs (nothing matched) wrapped around it. The stage was constructed of bunched-together, unsecured milk crates covered with carpeting. The crates rocked under the rug and were of uneven height. The actors had difficulty keeping a sure footing. The tables were so near the actors you could watch them sweat (it was January but it was hot). I was banked against a stranger at the table behind me. The table would not have held a regulation-size chess board; it also wobbled, spilling the cup of cappuccino into my lap. The wire ice-cream chair was poking through my coat into my ribs, but I couldn't complain as it was clearly not done: the stranger who shared my table (without asking) was sitting on an upended coke-case...for the first few seconds I couldn't take my eyes off the noisy, rocking floor...I was in the light and conscious of being visible to the people across the stage (maybe ten feet away)...By degrees it all disappeared: the table, the wobble, the audience, the insidious chair, the black Levis meant to match the suit jacket, the western buckle, the tin can spotlights, the glittered posters on the wall, the hissing espresso machine, the street yells outside. (66)

Wilson's experience as part of the audience at Caffe Cino is significant. His presence and engagement with the performance in such an intimate space can be applicable to other members of the audience since we do not have any records of audience reception in the venue. Being seated on an uncomfortable chair or on a wooden box, and close to the actors where there are no definite architecture borders of the stage, generated extremely personal and individual meanings of the performances. The detailed description of the place demonstrates the politics of communication between

members of the audience among each other and their interactions with actors as well. Actors are part of the audience and the audience can participate in any form in the performance. Wilson also confirms the power of the imagined space of the play. Where a setting is not available in a conventional manner, members of the audience are creating the imagined space, which makes the performance not only of a personal nature but of unstable nature. The space of the performance is not one space created by light and actors' presence, but different generated spaces that generate different meanings and different experiences. For instance, in figure 1.3, two of the audience are seated closely to the actors where there are no indications of the audience space, or the performance space. The space of performance as a bedroom setting is imagined rather than physically and naturalistically created in the space. Such fluidity of space is part of the fluid nature of the venue, fluid identifies, fluid space, and fluid language.

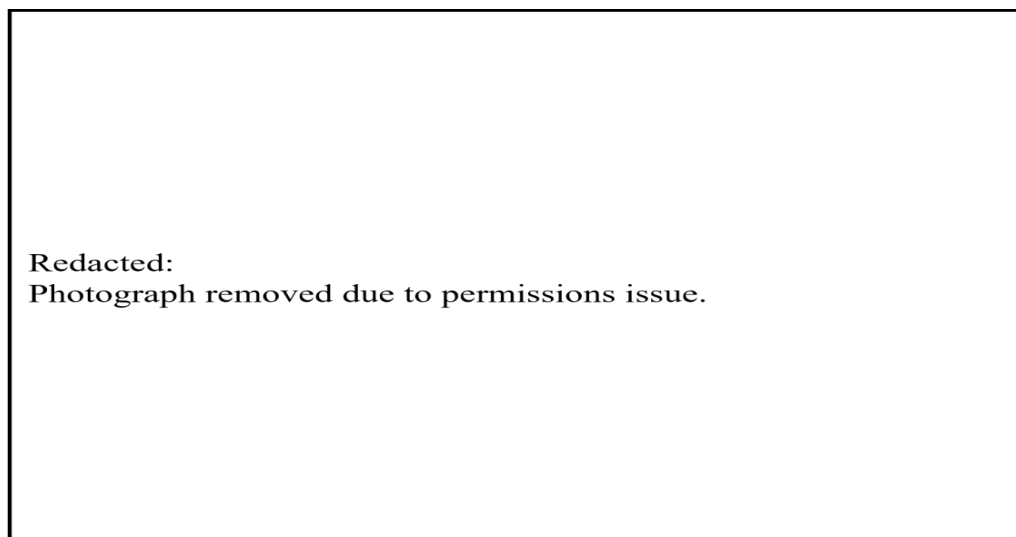


Fig. 1.3 The 1965 production of Heide's *The Bed* at Caffè Cino. From Robert Heide's Collection.

In an interview with David Savran, in 1986, Wilson describes the spontaneous and improvisational nature of working at the café, “we had to do everything ourselves—sets, lights. We had to get the actors, we had to get replacements when the actors got jobs, we had to act ourselves when the replacements got jobs” (312). The space was always cluttered with props collected from the street to be used in the performances (Bottoms 47). The cluttered props are present in most of the performances. They are cleared or covered for minimalist settings (Fig. 1.4). The presence of cluttered props that are not necessarily part of the performance, creates further potential meanings in the performance. Uncertainty results not only from the meaning of the props, but from what the audience can see or chooses to notice, decide which props are purposeful part of the performance and which are not.

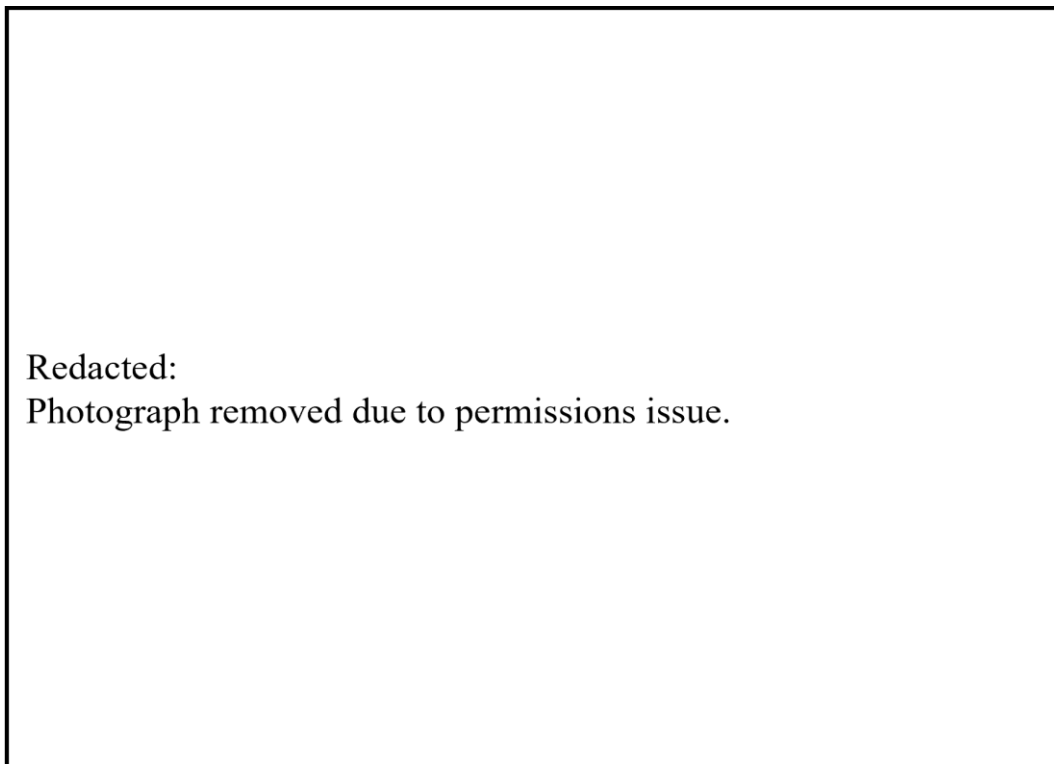


Fig. 1.4 Caffe Cino. From The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffe Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

The location of the movement in Greenwich village with its bohemian nature and nightlife style suggests specific politics and dynamics in relation to other parts of artistic movements: “the Village became a playground where uptowners could indulge in wilder forms of sensuality....Beyond that, the Village, then as now, had the reputation for homosexuality” dominated by white homosexuals and a high sense of “fantasy” (Erenberg 253-254). The venues, especially Caffè Cino in this case, looked like a closet for many gay inhabitants and gay artists at the area. However, the fact that such venues were identified as gay spaces provided a chance of coming out without being explicit. Whether that was acceptable to the outside world or not, middle-class, white, males were identified as gay by being in such space. The way people identified with space, though problematic as it encouraged assumptions, is significant. The space works as a safe hidden seclusion to experience one’s identity, but at the same time it is a manner of identification. People become defined and identified by the space, “identity and location [are] inseparable: knowing oneself [is] an exercise in mapping where one stands” (Keith and Pile 26).

This does not necessarily mean that the venue was exclusively a gay space. Sam Shepard, for instance, was part of early productions at the café. Nevertheless, the majority of works by Robert Patrick and William M. Hoffman were mainly concerned with representing gay identity and emerging gay activism such as Patrick’s *The Haunted Host* (1964) and Hoffman’s *Good Night, I Love You* (1966). The presentation of such gay characters and issues is complex and reflects on issues relevant to other manners of identification and feelings of powerlessness and isolation. Even with gay characters and issues in the venue’s productions, Steve Susoyev believes that Caffè Cino should not be identified in terms as a gay theatre. Hoffman’s and Patrick’s mentioned plays reflect more on the fear of intimacy and

friendship (8-9). In *Good Night, I Love You* a young gay male, Alex, played by Lanford Wilson, is on the phone with his straight female friend, Lisa. He tells Lisa about his attempts to get pregnant with his gay lover (185). The two friends, regardless of their sexual identities, exchanges “I Love You” all night (193). Wilson’s early plays, except *The Madness of Lady Bright*, did not touch directly on any gay issues or sexual identities.

The ways space identifies its theatergoers and is identified by the audience and performers are significant. The space of the café creates the boundaries between the safe inside and dangerous outside. The outside that is threatening not only for gay people, but to anyone trying to challenge the mainstream binaries or convictions (challenging gender binaries, sexual behaviour or marital structure). This concept of the inside and outside will reoccur in Wilson’s 1980s plays (about the fabricated fear in chapter 3). The space is shaped by the presence of attendants (performers and audiences) who challenge the boundaries of space, body, and social structure creating a space that can be safely called a queer space.

### 1.3 POLITICS OF QUEER SPACES

Wilson’s most celebrated play at the time, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, was first performed in Caffè Cino May, 1964 (*Collected Works* 23). The play is inspired by Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964). In his author’s note, Wilson explains that when he watched *Funnyhouse* “about African American girl quietly going mad in her apartment...I said, “Who cares? I’d as soon see a play about a screaming queen going stark raving” (22).<sup>42</sup> Like *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the play

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<sup>42</sup> Some of Wilson’s personal comments and comments by his characters seem racist. Except for one play (*Gingham Dog*), the narrative that Wilson presents in his plays and so his characters are primarily white. In *Gingham Dog*, that will be examined later in this chapter, the language used to refer to

promotes a particular political point of view about identity. *The Madness of Lady Bright* is about a drag queen in a one-act monologue play recalling past lovers, childhood identity crisis, and constant attempts to belong and fit in a society. Wilson introduces the main character as Leslie Bright, “A man of about forty; he is a screaming, preening queen, rapidly losing a long-kept “beauty”” (23). Lady Bright is a man who self-identifies as Leslie Bright, an aging drag queen struggles with loneliness, aging, and fading beauty. The flat is as one-room with a wall filled with signatures of past lovers, as Lady Bright asks every one of them to leave his signature on the wall. There are also two characters of a boy and a girl who appear on stage to play Leslie’s past experiences with lovers (32) (Fig. 1.5).

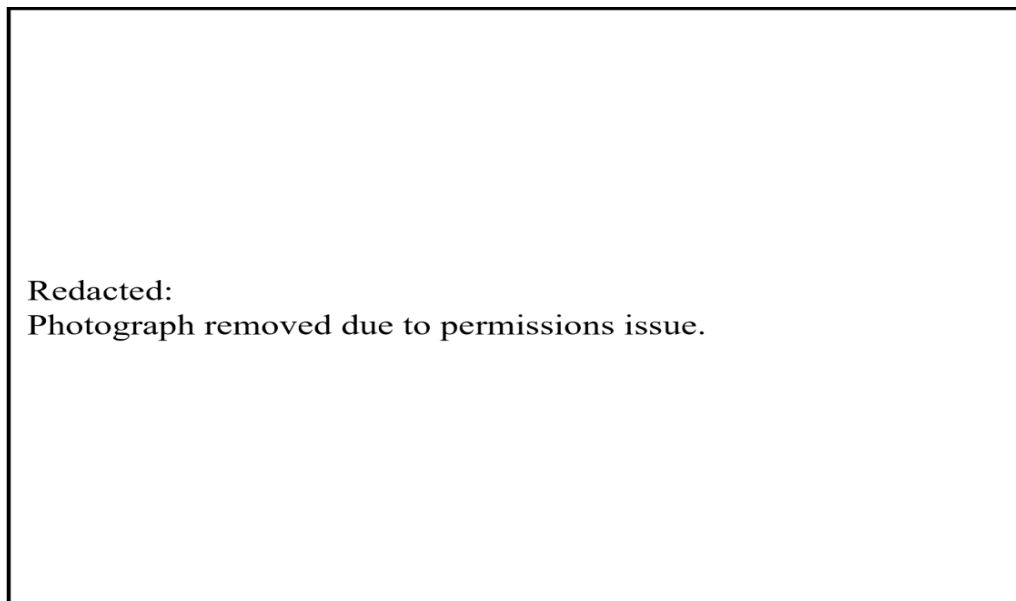


Fig. 1.5 The 1964 production of *The Madness of Lady Bright* at the Caffe Cino, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffe Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

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African American people or black people is offensive which can be interpreted as part of the dramatic representation. Hence, whether Wilson adopted a racist attitude or not cannot be determined. The absence of African American culture and black actors and actresses from Wilson’s plays, and the Caffe Cino’s playwrights, is worth investigation.

The fact that the play is inspired by another play about African American identity set up a scene for a serious identity crisis. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is about black identity, but Sarah, the main character, is not proud of her heritage or history. She is struggling to fit in a white community, where she is not accepted, and a black community that imposes black normative narrative that is meaningless and irrelevant to her. On the walls of the flat there are picture of white characters and the flat comes to represent the inner mind of Sarah. Sarah expresses her feelings of shame and estrangement from a black heritage in a mainstream normative whiteness. In the play, Sarah is a confused black female and the uncertainties of her race and existence are embodied on stage by the presence of other several characters who represent her in different situations. In the same way, *The Madness of lady Bright* does not celebrate a drag queen who is proud and secure with her gendered and sexual identities.<sup>43</sup> The setting becomes a stage for Leslie's inner mind and recalled memories.

Besides the drag queen, there are a boy and a girl on the stage. The characters of the Boy and the Girl "are used to move the action- to Leslie's memories, moods. They express, as actors, various people, voices, lovers. Sometimes they should be involved, sometimes almost bored, impatient, sometimes openly hostile, as the people he has known" (Wilson 24). The emphasis on the gender of both characters to present the normative gender binary is linked to Leslie's references to childhood struggle to identify as a girl and later as a woman, while she is forced into a biological and social identification of a boy or a man. Leslie calls herself a "faggot" several times in the play, "You. Are a faggot. You're funny but you're a faggot. (*Pause.*) You have *been* a

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<sup>43</sup> The pronouns used to refer to Leslie's character throughout the discussion are based on the pronouns used by Wilson and the character in the play. Wilson refers to Leslie as he while Leslie self-identifies as a she. In some cases, Wilson deliberately confuses the pronouns to challenge the ways Leslie identifies herself.



faggot since you were four years old. Three years old.... You're not *built* like a faggot-necessarily. You're built like a disaster" (25). The word faggot is an offensive slang word that has been used to refer to gay people. Clearly, Wilson's use of the word is not aiming at reappropriating the term but to show Leslie's attempts to familiarise herself and the audience with the social identification allocated by others outside the stage space and the café space. In other parts, the word is used along with the word "queer" as an insult for her ex-lover, who are identified as gay males, "Samuel Fitch! You liar! You vicious faggot! You Queer! You were not a man, you were some worm" (30).

The presentation of a drag queen challenges the homonormative narratives of gender and sexual identities. The subculture came to attention during and after the Stonewall Riots (1969). Drag is considered as an act of subversion (Baker 239) that challenges the binaries of gender, but drag performance reconfirms with a social perception of womanhood with the exaggerated makeup, wig, and clothing. The "hyper-femininity" performed by drag queens is inspired by women in their social context (Murnen and Byrne 480). The identification of Leslie's physical body, gender, social role, and own self-perception are all confusing. Leslie insists on being a woman and performs acts that identifies women in the heteronormative society such as applying nail polish (Fig. 1.6). In one scene, Leslie is examining her smoothly shaved and fair skin that conforms to the expected American standards for a female body (30). In her preface to *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler questions, "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" (viii). Drag does challenge the heteronormative narratives and presentations of gendered identities, but at the same time, it asserts the same narratives (Harris 62). The overemphasis on certain performative acts that identifies

being a woman, such as smooth shaved skin and nail polish in case of Leslie, reasserts the heteronormativity and binaries of gendered identities instead of challenging them. Butler argues that drag affirms the fluidity of gender and that as “a site of a certain ambivalence” could “be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (85). The play was celebrated in the gay community as it presented a drag queen on stage. The conflicting dual functions of drag as a rebellious act of celebrating and expressing gay identity, and a feminine performative act that reasserts the heteronormative definition of gender, are present in the play. Baker describes drag as “subversive to the extent that it reflects on the initiative structure by which hegemonic gender itself produced” (125). Wilson’s choice of a drag queen rather than a gay male complicates the discussion of gender and sexuality. It also confused the Caffe Cino audience at the time who always expected proud secure gay characters not a confused drag queen. Jeff Grace suggests that Leslie represents a “gay who exhibits feminine gender behaviour by dressing in women’s clothing,” and the screaming is a way of metaphorically expressing identity “rather than wear[ing] it” (181). Leslie’s position and real performance of identity in the play is that of a woman who engages in failing love affairs with men. The artificial identity that the audience see is that of a gay man. During the play, Leslie does not wear her drag costume, but act like a woman in a fully manly appearance which a challenging image for those who are used to see a dressed drag queen on stage.

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Photograph removed due to permissions issue.

Fig. 1.6 Neil Flanagan in *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964), from  
<https://Caffecino.wordpress.com/>

Space in this play and Wilson's early plays in general is significant. The experience of loneliness, isolation and aging is placed in a cluttered flat and walls covered with names and signatures:

The stage within a stage is set as Leslie Bright's one-room apartment. The walls are light and covered over with hundreds of signatures, or autographs, mostly only names, in every conceivable size and writing medium. The name "Adam is prominent on one wall; on another is "Michael Delaney." There is addresser with nail polish, hair brush, lipstick, various clutter across the top. ... The room seems tucked like a pressing book with mementos, post cards, letters, photographs, pictures, of men from body-building magazines. A bed with pink and white silk sheets is against one wall. A window looks out to the back of buildings across the back yard below, a scene like the seventies between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues in upper Manhattan. The room is very sunny. (23)

The flat of Leslie Bright is a closed space, cluttered with memories and past experiences. It is a space of her inner mind, where the thinking process and confusing personal experiences are explicitly visible to the audience. However, the fact that Leslie wants to go home indicates that being inside such a personal space is not where she belongs or wants to belong. The outside of that imagined space is where Leslie wants to belong. This binary of inside and outside, related as it is to coming out and coming in, is of recurring significance in the plays.

The presence of a mirror that Leslie keeps looking at, examining her physical appearance, is metaphorically the only way she can reflect on aging. Leslie turns the mirror back whenever it is not pleasant to “see” the truth, “Whatever you’re telling me I don’t want to hear it” (27). As a person, Leslie is getting old regardless of gender or sexuality, “Oh, not good. Not good at all. All those spidery little wrinkles showing your a-g-e. Exposing yourself, aren’t you? And a gray hair or two- and your whole face just collapsing. Built like a disaster” (27). Ironically, the play starts with Leslie calling the Dial-A-Prayer line and looking through a notebook for numbers to call, ringing, holding the phone on one shoulder and applying nail polish at the same time, “No one is home” (24). The play ends with Leslie screaming “Take me home” (37).

Another play of Wilson is *Home Free!* That was premiered at the Caffè Cino in August 1964 (author’s note 2, *21 Short Plays*). Wilson indicated that the play is based on true encounter of people, “who lived I’m afraid, very much like HOME FREE! Surprise box, imaginary characters and all.” (*21 Short Plays* 1). The two characters are Lawrence Brown and Joanna Brown, a brother and sister in their mid-twenties. Joanna is six months pregnant because of an incestuous relationship. Edna

and Claypone are imaginary girl and boy characters that are not to be seen by the audience. The setting of the play is:

A small, cluttered room, where they eat and sleep... There is a Ferris wheel that Lawrence has made; a large, colorful, highly-decorated wheel that turns and has (perhaps ten to twelve) seats that swing as the wheel turns, all but two seats are on the wheel. A colorful box with a decorated lid, the Surprise Box, where gifts are placed. Perhaps a blackboard somewhere, and stools or chairs for Edna and Claypone.

(2)

The play starts with Lawrence and the imaginary characters as his students, and he is teaching them about the Pleiades (Seven Sisters) and the “expanding universe” (3).

Unlike the Boy and Girl in *Lady Bright*, the imaginary characters here do not appear on stage as actors. They do not have any physical presence on the stage. Lawrence expresses his worry about Joanna who has gone out to the “outside” world and is not back yet. The outside is a dangerous and hostile place, “– you go out, you get almost hit with some car or truck and it just drives me crazy trying to keep track of you. And besides you hate it out there!” (4) Lawrence’s anxiety and fear are not only from the outside, but of being alone inside: “You’re not going to leave me here alone”.

Wilson’s stage directions reveal the physical manifestation of Lawrence’s panic and fear: “*He forces himself down between the desk and bed, on the floor*” (4). The fear in the play is a fear of the outside world.

When Joanna comes back knocking agitatedly on the door, she acts as if she has been followed by someone: “They’re coming. ... She saw me! (*Still whispering.*) She saw me coming in. She was right behind me. She’s right outside. Shh! Listen!”

(4). They refer to the landlady, Miss Pruneface.<sup>44</sup> Joanna explains how she keeps meeting her outside and making lies about Lawrence being her husband who is travelling abroad. In the play, the landlady is the representation of the fear on the other side of the flat door: “she’s out there- she’s right on the other side of the door. I can’t go out there” (20). Inside the flat is a safe space for Lawrence and Joanna to talk about their childish dreams, behave in a silly and playful way and carry on with their incestuous sexual behavior. The couple talk naively about the possibility of Joanna getting pregnant again for taking a teddy toy with them in bed while having sex (11). The Surprise Box is used as a distraction for Lawrence who is always eager to find out what is there but unaware of Joanna’s stories to distract him while sliding an item in the box (10). Lawrence acts in an immature, childish and absent-minded manner. He is unable to go outside or consider a world beyond his Surprise Box and wheel (Fig. 1.7). On the other hand, Joanna acts in a responsible manner, proud of being a good liar who can convince the outside world and Lawrence with her lies (8). The Ferris wheel “symbolizes the fantasy world into which they step, a world in which they are protected from a reality which they can only engage with when they have transformed it” (Bigsby 374). Besides the evident fear of the outside and their attempts to hide their incestuous relationship, both Lawrence and Joanna are aware of the consequences of having an unwanted baby, already identified as a girl:

JOANNA. ...she says I can’t have the baby here- because they don’t want the noise, Lawrence”.

JOANNA. They don’t want the mess.

JOANNA. They’re afraid of the baby.

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<sup>44</sup> The name is metaphorically significant here, suggesting the scary and unpleasant nature of Miss Pruneface.

JOANNA. They do not want the pain! (7)

The child is already not accepted by the outside world either because she is a result of a socially unaccepted relationship.

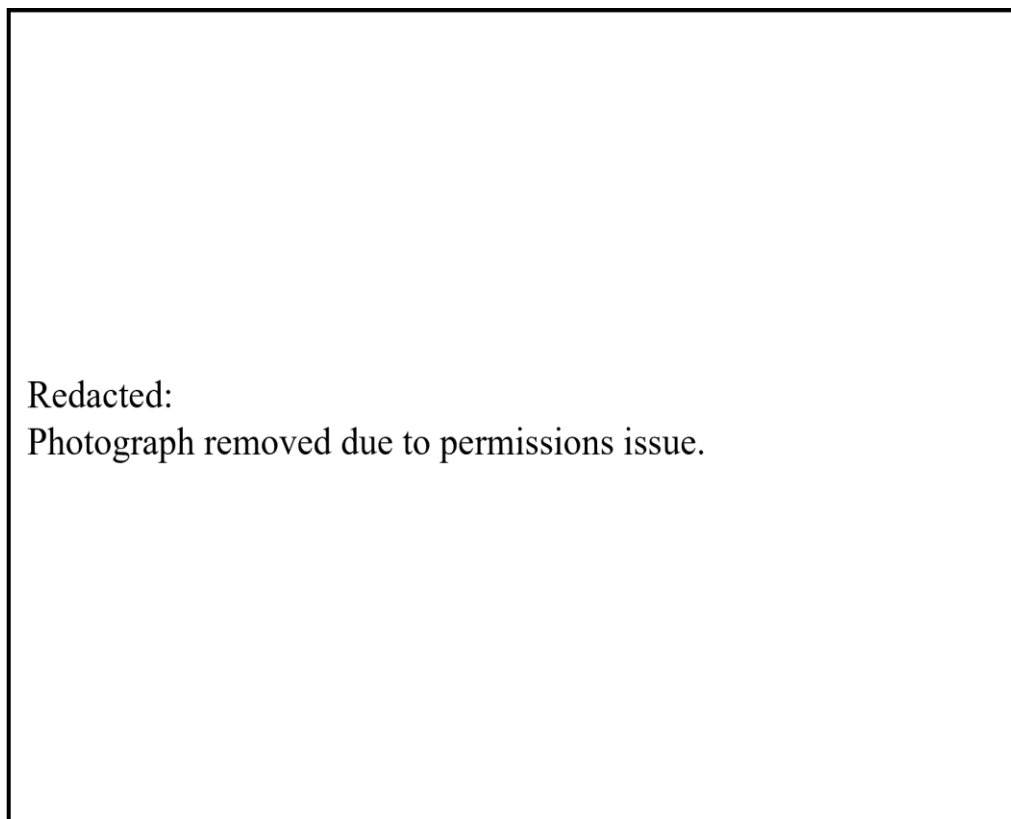


Fig. 1.7 The set of *Home Free!* (1964), from <https://caffecino.wordpress.com/>.

Joanna is aggressive towards the girl, Edna, and in one scene expresses clearly the expected accepted social behaviour from Edna: “ You must wear tall black stockings and a long gray skirt and a wine-colored apron and your hair will be combed straight back ...and you will sit with both your hands on your knees or folded in your lap and you will not think about what’s between little boys’ legs and you will

speak when you're spoken to" (6). The direct reference to such suppressed behaviour suggested by a woman could suggest that Edna is representing Joanna's own suppressed behaviour. When she speaks to Lawrence about her pain at the end of the play, she is completely ignored. And when she insists on him to go out and find a doctor to save her, he calls her a "whore" and sends the imaginary Edna outside. Joanna is aware that Edna is imaginary and keeps insisting on him to go out and seek help. However, he keeps ignoring her out, turning the wheel on and talking to her while she eventually stops talking or moving (20).

The play creates an experience of intense insecurity and fear, manifested physically by the characters and Wilson's stage directions. For instance, "*Lawrence is talking to the imaginary characters, (He is getting nervous, frightened.)* – you go out, you get almost hit with some car or truck and it just drives me crazy trying to keep track of you. And besides you hate it out there. You know how you are! You make me so ashamed- stuttering" (4) Lawrence does not allow the girl and the boy to go out and he is getting nervous thinking about Joanna being outside, reluctant to consider that she might be in danger and might not come back. This manifestation of fear continues throughout the play, reaching its peak at the very end when Joanna is in great pain and asks him to go out and gets a doctor for her, "No, I can't. I can't. Don't make me. Don't make me. Please don't make me. I can't go out. They'll take me off. I can't go, don't make me." (20). Joanna shares the same fear of going out, but she is mostly concerned about their landlady finding about their incestuous relationship. She is presented to be a wife of an absent husband and is always terrified that the lie will be revealed. She also talks to the imaginary characters and entertains her brother's disturbing illusions through the surprise box. However, at the end when he pretends to



send the imaginary children to get the doctor, she tries to make him see the truth but fails.

In both plays the girl and boy imaginary characters suggest a certain attitude towards gender identity and social gender roles. In *Lady Bright*, the girl always plays Leslie's role in the relationship when she is recalling her past experiences. The boy plays the role of the male ex-lovers. In *Home Free!* the suppression and aggression are always directed to the female characters; Edna the girl and Joanna. While Joanna plays what is supposed to be a masculine (male) role in the family, she is also playing a biological female role as a pregnant woman.

The incestuous relationship between Joanna and Lawrence seems to challenge a normative narrative of sexuality and social structure. However, Judith Butler argues that incest does not only "forbid and dictate sexuality in certain forms, but it inadvertently produces a variety of substitute desires and identities that are in no sense constrained" (*Gender Trouble* 97). Foucault argues that sexuality "incestuous from the start" (108). The incestuous act in the play, though identified as a nonnormative sexual behaviour in a social sense, it is still a heterosexual act. Sexuality here does not define the participants or their gender, but an act of intimacy and communication. This perception of sex is present in another play by Wilson, *Sex is Between Two People* (1965). Roger and Marvin are in their early twenties in a "public steam bath" (284). The dialogue is Beckettian in style. Throughout the play, the two men do not touch each other, they do not engage in any discussion of sex and sexuality, but they are haunted by a sense of fear and paranoia (290).

Spaces in previous mentioned plays is always defined by walls. In *Sex is Between Two People*, the room is all white, white walls and white beds (284). Both

*Home Free!* and *The Madness of Lady Bright* are set with imaginary walls that separates the inside and outside. In *Identity and Community in the Gay World*, Carol A. B. Warren explores the experiences of gay people in 1968-1972 in America. She stated that “walls imply walling out as well as walling in; gay people learn to wall themselves out of straight places” (17). Walls are not used for gay people only, but as a barrier between people in general. *Days Ahead* (1965) is a play about walls. The main character is a man in his forties or may be older. He sits next to the wall and starts talking to someone on the other side of the wall, supposedly a woman. He starts to dig into the wall with a fork (76). “(His hand passes over the wall.) And this impromptu wall. I promised to keep you informed, and I have! (Defensively.) But each year, when I talk to you, I scratch the wall: it’s almost as if unconsciously I wanted to see you again, isn’t it? I’ve never mentioned it, but I rub the wall with my hand, fill my fingernail with plaster, all white; dig and chip. ... Whatever it was in me the-...” (75). In the space of Caffe Cino, the walls are imaginary with the absence of physical walls on stage. They are imaginary walls created in space and influencing space.

In the space of Caffe Cino, Wilson continued to experiment in plays such as *Ludlow Fair* (1965), *Sextet (Yes)* (1969), *Stoop* (1969), and *Wandering* (1967). He experimented with dialogue and characters’ presence on stage. The plays do not have plots or story lines. They are fragmented scenes that do not reflect on any conventional or unconventional themes. For instance, in *Wandering*, the stage directions start with, “*He and She are standing at attention, side by side. Him inters and sits. The actors should retire to the attention position when not speaking. Actions and props should be pantomimed, and the play should be done very rapidly without pause except toward the end, as indicated. The play runs through Him’ life span of*

*about forty years with several recaps at the end. Actions and characterizations should be very simple*” (78). The dialogue goes between He and She as one person completes the other’s line and then breaks in with HIM with a question or a line to change the direction of the dialogue, The rhythm of the play or the pace is fast to reflect on the ways people can get caught in a social process constructing and determining their lives:

SHE. You don’t believe in anything.

HIM. It’s just that no one else seems to believe- not really. ...Like this pride in country. ... And this pride in blood. (80)

The play seems to be about an attempt to convince Him to enlist without any reference to a specific war or context. The enlisting is enlisting for a social role as well. This hasty process, which sees the social context engulfing Him’s individual identity, is reflected by the pace of the dialogue that goes quickly from one thing to another without touching on anything substantial. Unlike *The Family Continues* (that comes later in the 1970s), there is no engagement in discussing or meaningful conversation between characters. The hasty and meaningless dialogue indicates the absence of communication between characters and their inability to communicate and express themselves in a meaningful manner.

*This is the Rill Speaking* (1965), is one of Wilson’s more ambitious plays in its experimentation with dialogue. It toured through Europe with La MaMa Repertory Company ... and opened as part of the Six from La MaMa program at the Martinique Theatre in New York on April 11, 1966” (55). Wilson stated that the play is “a play for voices” that is “a deliberate exercise to set down just the sound of the people, without thinking about how the play was to be done... I divided the 16 or so parts

among 6 actors dresses in ordinary, nondescript clothes. I directed this one myself so I'd be sure nobody smoked a corncob pipe." Wilson was also trying to get out of the clichéd presentation of Missouri people on stage, "...always barefoot, smoking a corncob pipe, lying down in the road with a jug or a hog, wearing faded gingham, the boys in overalls, the girls with their hair in pigtailed" (54). The play takes place on a country house porch (55). The characters are supposed to group and regroup, some of them are wandering around. The speeches are said simultaneously where no one can listen or make sense of what is happening. Wilson attempted to present characters who try to express their identities through voices and vocal communication but fail due the lack of structure or order.

In the middle of the simultaneous talking, actors change characters suddenly, from Willy to Ellis, Judy to Martha. Sometimes the shift is not marked by anything, it just happens. The content of the dialogue is irrelevant, does not carry meaning, does not communicate anything to other characters or audience but rather its dynamics of that is suggestive:

PEGGY. ... Fine...

MANNY. ... In the corner...

ALLISON. ... Yes...

EARL. ... Four in the side...

KEITH. ... Okay?...

ALLISON. ... No...

JUDY. ... No...

MOTHER. ... What?...

WILLY. ... What?...

JUDY. ...Isn't it ...

MOTHER. ...Will-y! ...

WILLY. ... What ...

JUDY. ... Just ...

WILLY. ... What do you want?...

JUDY. ...lovely?! ...

MOTHER. ... Come on, now...

KEITH.... Okay?...

PEGGY. ... Yes!...

ALLISON. ... Yes! ...

PEGGY. ... Yes, it is! ...

FATHER. (*Very loud.*) ... Willy! ...

WILLY. ... All right!... (68)

After a few lines characters circle back around Ted who feels sick going back to the early scene of the drinking teenagers, the scene is intensified with the shouting, calling, and overlapping singing (69). The dialogue goes back to a calm rhythm towards the end of the play.

The rhythm and pace of dialogue in such plays presents the state of dissonance of individuals who are not able to belong in a social context. The lack of communication with others and isolated spaces are both expressions of alienation. Music is used in the play to reflect on the idea of dissonance. For instance, in *Stoop*, which was first performed in Nov. 1969 (author's note 83), there are three women, different ages who try to follow the *My Old Kentucky Home* song playing at the background. It is a short play of regular everyday talk and stories. The focus is on the way those stories are delivered: in the stage directions Wilson affirms,

“*Philosophically, but most of the lines are to be spoken philosophically*” (84). The philosophical delivery of everyday talks is a reminder of the illusionistic performance (distancing in Brecht’s sense). The piano keeps playing in the back with the mistaken notes interfering with the lines of the characters. By the end of the play and after several attempts, the first line “*Oh-the-sun-shines-bright-on-my old-Kentucky-home!*” is played correctly (86). The broken lines from the song and the disrupted music operates as the main storyline in the play. The music is constantly interrupted music and the song that cannot be plays represent a sense of dissonance and disturbance that dominates the play.

The normative narrative is presented in *Sextet (Yes)* (1969). All characters’ names start with a B and they automatically and dully share their first kisses and first heterosexual experiences. In the stage directions: “*They are seated at random on chairs, sitting up, waiting. Polite. At the beginning Bill speaks almost in answer to a question- and again when we begin again (on page 91 with “Occupation?”) Voices rather removed, not too involved. All “Yes” quietly, as in “That is so, yes:” quiet confirmation. Backlit, very little light on their faces, but it grows during the play and fades toward the end as does the back light*” (89). The word ‘yes’ is used excessively and meaninglessly throughout the play. Submission to the normative narratives of society, by saying yes, is to be identical, “faceless”, and unable to be identified as an individual (Wisnewski 60).

In spatial studies and social theory “space is produced and reproduced and thus represents the site and the outcome of social, political and economic struggle” (Keith and Pile 24). In this sense, I argue that Off-Off-Broadway location in New York and the nature the Caffe Cino space influenced Wilson’s plays specifically in

terms of the construction of spatialized social identities. The fragmented nature of the movement made the movement, and Wilson's plays, antinarrative. The invisibility and indefinability of the movement influenced the visibility of characters and their identity politics. Characters are nameless and their dialogue does not express their identities. In *Wandering* (1967):

SHE: Where have you been?

HIM: Wandering around.

SHE: Wandering around. I don't know why you can't be a man; you just wait till the army gets ahold of you, young man.

HE: They'll make a man of you.

This play relies massively on the process of gendering and constructing social identities. Though it is still general, in some parts there are references to constructing an American identity. The young man Him, tries to break out of the social norm and find his own values and beliefs. Whether She and He stand for parents or certain social institutions, they are trying to mold him according to the mainstream narrative.

By considering Caffè Cino a queer space, rather than a gay space, the complexities of gender and sexuality and their presentation in Wilson's plays can be tangled in relevance to the theatrical and sociopolitical contexts. Nonnormative Gendered and sexual identities are not necessarily an expression of rebellious acts to the normativity of the mainstream context. Such identities do challenge the homonormativity emerged within the marginalized spaces. Wilson's experimentations with spaces, voices, dialogues, and faceless characters should not be limited by the politics of gay theatre and spaces. Caffè Cino, despite its limited physical space, allowed Wilson, and other playwrights, to challenge social and theatrical norms.

#### 1.4 THE GINGHAM DOG

One of the distinguished characteristics of Wilson's early plays is the prominent political voice. *The Gingham Dog* (first performed in 1969) is a play about a failing marriage between a black wife and a white husband living in the East Village, New York. Gloria is described as young, educated, charming but 'vulgar'. Her husband is white, attractive, and exhausted (4-5) (Fig. 1.8). The failing interracial marriage is a direct allegory to the relation between white and black Americans of the time. The couple are splitting their belongings inside the flat and the audience can easily see the references to the situation outside. The situation in the play is illustrated by Gloria's growing anger and threats to burn everything down, and Vincent's affirmations of the stereotypes by calling her uneducated and disillusioned in her own world (8-9). In some parts of the play, they try both to regain closeness, but it becomes more complicated. Eventually, they start fighting and growing apart again (14). The play ends with Vincent leaving for good with no hope of reconciliation.



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Fig. 1.8 *The Gingham Dog* at the Caffe Cino, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, Caffe Cino (New York): photographs, T-Pho B.

In his review of the performance, Edward Sothern Hipp admired the politics of “a woman who has made a career of glorifying her blackness while assailing his whiteness” (B7, F3, S2). The simplified reading of the play assumes that the racial discrimination is caused by the identity politics of the black people at the time. Bigsby attributed the failure of the play that only lasted for five days to the loss of interest in the case as the Vietnam War was the centre of attention at the time. Bigsby also believed that the characters were “unconvincing” and “speeches are over-explicit” (*Contemporary American* 388). However, Hipp’s reading of the performance politics is biased, if not racist. And the play’s failure as Bigsby described it, could be more relevant to the sensitivities of such discussion. The play introduces a direct discussion of racism. The “straightforward argument” places a husband and a

wife who were in love in a radical positions representing the extreme white and extreme black (Gottfried 2). The two parties, according to the play, are unable to communicate as they are trapped in stereotypical narratives of their racial differences. In some parts, the two characters use offending language. Wilson presents racism as equally problematic for both whites and blacks, which is not accurate in American history:

VINCENT: (*Overlapping a good deal*) – You obviously aren't familiar enough with the history of mankind to be-

GLORIA: -The White people have-

VINCENT: -The Black people didn't-

GLORIA: - The Black people at least-

VINCENT: - The White people did the-

GLORIA: - The Black people were-

VINCENT: (*Finally overriding her.*) – The Black people rotted from screw-worms in the jungle that they didn't have the sense or intuition to cultivate or build- just bringing them to a better climate was their first advancement in fifteen thousands years. And *then* you had to be dragged out of the goddamned *trees!* (17)

Gloria's aggression, according to Wilson, is a result of the victimization narrative in the African American history. She attempts to challenge all the stereotypes of her race by insisting to leave the flat "almost compulsively" before leaving (20). Vincent comments on her attempts, "if you clean it up, they'll only say "What a pretentious (educated nigger), she only cleaned the filth to prove (how white she is)" If you leave it dirty, they'll say "(what would you expect?)" (brackets are from original 9). The discussion develops violently between the two about history,

politics, social implications of racism. Vincent, as a white person, believes that racism is a myth and the situations of poverty and mistreatment is equally applicable to classes but not races. The Civil Right movements and groups that demand equality and justice for black people imposed a narrative of hatred and violent. Gloria attempts to convince him of the eligibility of her anger towards racial injustice, but fails:

VINCENT. ... You joined CORE and SORE and POOR and MORE and God knows what other equal groups; every excuse to hate and all you do now is fight. Hate and fight. And fight for what? For freedom, for equal rights, for dignity? ... You used to be a human being, but in the last two years you've become a "black;" a professional Negro, and I didn't marry a Black. (36)

Gloria's confusion with her black identity, similar to that of Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, is evident throughout the play. She is educated and behaves in a white manner as Vincent describes it (40). However, she is not satisfied and feels alienation from her family and her racial group. The play ends with Vincent leaving in anger after insulting Gloria, "I loathe the look of you, and the oily feel of you and the bitter ear-wax taste, the sour orange-rind smell of you. You disgust me in every way- your strength and muscle. I loath you because you made me hate. Everything else. And everyone else. You destroy" (40). Wilson's condemnation of the 1960s identity politics is obvious in the play. Characters who self-identified according to such politics are always alienated and incapable of overcome their sense of powerlessness.

## FALLING OUT OF/IN THE NORMATIVE NARRATIVE

In 1965, Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead* was premiered at the La Mama after the fire destruction of the Caffè Cino.<sup>45</sup> *Balm in Gilead* and *Hot l Baltimore* (1973) mark a transition period in Wilson's theatrical style. Moving to the La Mama theatre and eventually to Off-Broadway, allowed Wilson to work in bigger spaces with large casts of characters. Wilson stated in an interview with Terry Miller that he wrote *Balm in Gilead* "to break out of the physical limitations inherent in writing a play for the Cino" (96). Wilson described the play as "a rebellion against the limitations" of space at Caffè Cino (185). Frank Rich recalled the play's premiere as, "The play - a naturalistic visit with 29 low-life denizens of an all-night Upper Broadway coffee shop - caused a sensation at the Cafe La Mama in 1965; witnesses say that the doors had to be locked to keep out excess theatregoers (3)". The play has 23 characters inspired by people that Wilson met in real life (Wilson, *In Their* 312). Brustein described the play as a "post-naturalist triumph" where "Wilson's sketchy, aimless investigation of underground Americans is presently providing the occasion for a brilliant piece of theatre" (*Reimagining American* 33). The play does not have a developing plot, but introduces characters who "wander onto the set" and gather in and outside a café in Upper Broadway, New York City (6-8). Wilson states in the stage directions that the play "consist of several simultaneous conversations" and "everything seems to move a circle" around the centre piece on the stage, a counter (7). The characters are described by Wilson as "riffraff, the bums, the petty thieves, the scum, the lost, the desperate, the dispossessed" (7-8). They live on the marginal side of a society and though their gathering in the café provides a sense of belonging

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<sup>45</sup> After the fire in March 1965, the founder of the La Mama, Ellen Stewart (1919-2011) offered the space for the Caffè Cino artists to present their plays on Sundays and Mondays (Stone 79).

to a space, they are lonely and disconnected from each other. The experience of alienation from a social context is intensified by the dissonance of their voices and conversations.

Due to the lack of documents for the early performances, I will refer to two later performances in 1989 and 2007. The performances are chosen based on their professionalism and how close they interpret the play script. Figure 1.9 shows a space that Wilson describes in the play as “all-night coffee shop and the street corner outside. Upper Broadway, New York City...everything seems to move in a circle” (7). The play focuses in some parts on Joe, the twenty-four-year-old drug dealer, and Darlene, the young “stupid” new girl (9). There are twenty-five characters in the play all present simultaneously on the stage (Fig. 1.10).

Outside the Off-Off-Broadway venues, *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973) was one of the most successful plays produced by the Circle Repertory Company, co-founded by Wilson.<sup>46</sup> The play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play 1972-73 and an Obie for Best Off-Broadway Play. It ran for 1,166 performances at Off-Broadway (Biggsby, *Contemporary American* 401). In an interview with Philip Williams, Marshal Mason stated that the play’s success introduced the company to the mainstream theater and gained recognition in New York theatre companies at the time (33).

Compared to *Balm in Gilead*, *Hot l Baltimore* is performed in a similar setting but with a smaller number of characters (13 characters), and a slower and less hectic rhythm. In both plays Wilson sustained experimental approaches with more characters, compared to his Off-Off-Broadway plays of one to three characters. In an interview with Bryer, Wilson stated that he wanted to create a theatre that is “the

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<sup>46</sup> See the thesis introduction.

three-ring circus” (185). The dynamics of the plays are vigorous, and characters are moving in space detached from past and future connections. They are the product of a meaningless and chaotic present where they momentarily belong and exist. Characters are rootless, they exist and are identified only in and by that space (a café or a hotel lobby), but the audience is not provided by the characters’ backgrounds or histories. Characters do not share any history or narrative of belonging. Some of them do not have names such as the Girl in *Hot l Baltimore* and the Entertainers *Balm in Gilead*. Both plays do not have plots. In the two-act plays, characters are gathered in marginalised spaces. In *Balm in Gilead*, characters gather at Frank’s café in New York. In *Hot l Baltimore*, characters are drug dealers, prostitutes, and thieves gather in a decaying hotel where the (e) letter dropped from the neon sign of Hot l Baltimore. The historical contexts of the place and the background of characters are not present. The repetition of lines and scenes is one distinctive device that Wilson uses in the play. Repetition, rehearsing scenes, and simultaneously acted events identify the play with avant garde theatre of the time (Witham 34). In that sense, the theatrical styles of *Balm of Gilead* and *Hot l Baltimore* are influenced by the works of the Living Theatre. Annette J. Saddik explores Jack Gelber’s *The Connection* with the Living Theatre in 1959 and the techniques of a play-within-a-play to blur the lines between reality and illusion and invite the audience into the performance space to destroy the borders between theatre and life (110). The group of addicts are waiting for the Cowboy to arrive with heroin.

In *Hot l Baltimore*, the characters of the play are the hotel staff, residents, and visitors. The staff are Mr. Katz, the hotel manager, Mrs. Oxenham, Mrs. Bellotti, and Bill Lewis who are all in their forties. The residents are Mr. Moore who is seventy years old with “a sense of outrage” and Millie who is a retired waitress in her late

sixties (*Hot l Baltimore* xi). Also, there are four female residents who are prostitutes: The Girl who is nineteen years old, Jackie who is twenty-years old, and April Green and Suzy both in their thirties. Paul Granger III and Jamie (Jackie's brother) are two visitors of the hotel.

Much like *Balm in Gilead*, the play “comes dangerously close to being plotless” (Barnett 86). The play lacks a story line and characters' developments. *Hot l Baltimore* opens in the Memorial Day, with the staff and residents receiving a month notice to evacuate the hotel as it is listed to be destroyed by authorities. In the first act, there are multiple dialogues taking place simultaneously on stage. April is complaining about the conditions in the hotel such as the broken water pipes; Millie is describing the ghosts in the hotel restaurant; and Suzy enters with a customer (9-17). Before the end of the first act, the customer comes down and leaves followed by Suzy rapped in a towel and disturbed by the customer's beating and mistreatment. At the same time, Jamie is running down with a box of stolen stuff, he trips on Suzy. She drops her towel standing naked on the stairs, and the stolen contents of the box are scattered on the stairs (17).

The play is structured in a three-act play form where act one serves to establish the atmosphere in the hotel and introduces characters. The second act is about the Girl trying to encourage hotel staff and residents to prevent the demolition of the hotel help Paul to find his grandfather. The hotel is the last place Paul's grandfather was seen and Paul tries to find out where his grandfather might have headed afterwards. There is no background information on Paul or his grandfather, nor there is an explanation of the reasons the grandfather is missing. Girl's persistence and dedication to the two cases: the destruction of the hotel and Paul's missing grandfather. In the final act, Paul tries to convince Girl that he is not

interested in pursuing the search for his grandfather. However, Girl insists on continuing the search which makes her attempts irritating “radioactive mix of concentration and anarchic glee” as Ben Brantley puts it in his review of the play (2). By the end of the third act, Suzy leaves to stay at her pimp’s flat, and the play ends with April inviting Jamie to dance on a radio song while Bill is watching and Mr. is drinking (153). The sketches of the play do not allow any space for characters’ developments.

The four of the seven female characters are prostitutes. Similarly, in *Balm in Gilead*, there “a number of girls” who “might be prostitutes as well” (8). The presence of such number of prostitutes in the plays, especially in *Hot l Baltimore* where the leading character is Girl, can identify the play as a brothel play. The genre was identified by many critics in American theatre during the early years of the twentieth century. Though the genre is not widely used and not agreed on by other critics, In her book, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920*, Katie N. Johnson examined the female characters who are presented outside the normative narrative of femininity and womanhood in American drama. The exotic presentation of females as “New Women” who smoke, dress in revealing clothes, and selling sex was popular in American culture and in theatre at the time (1-3). She defines the genre as plays with prostitutes as main or leading characters or presentation of prostitution on stage (4). Though not necessary agreeing with the identification of genre as such, because it is problematic, however, placing *Hot l Baltimore* in such narrative is required. The play does not engage with any discussion of prostitution or social complications and backgrounds. Prostitution is not heightened, but used to identify female characters in the plays. Thus, it is important to consider the presentation of prostitutes in the play



within the context of American theatre rather than identifying the play as a brothel drama.

In her following book, *From Sex for Sale: Six Progressive-Era Brothel*, Katie N. Johnson argues that the term brothel drama “was synonymous with ...red-light drama, white slave drama, vice drama, underworld drama” (2). Such stories of prostitutes were faced with sponsorship and attacked by many critics of Broadway productions (2). Johnson insists that these plays reflect on the American society’s “attitudes regarding sexuality, gender, and the politics of women’s work” in big cities such as Chicago and New York (2-3). Johnson includes Eugene O’Neill’s *The Web* (1913) as one of the key models of the brothel drama genre in American theater (15-30).<sup>47</sup>

Eugene O’Neil play, *The Web* is a one-act play about a girl, Rose, who has the attitude of “deepest dejection” (18). The action of the play takes place in her room. Sympathetic narrative with the girl as a victim is the narrative in brother dramas in American theater at the time (Katie N. Johnson 5). With the presence of Steve, the violent and vicious pimp, and Rose’s illegitimate baby girl, the play challenges the legislations of prostitution and birth control pills in America at the time. In a similar manner, John Reed’s play *Moondown* (1915) engages with the social and legal “criminalisation of prostitution” (Katie N. Johnson 30). In one scene, Steve asks Rose to put the baby on the floor so he can use the bed for sex (22). The play ends with Rose accused wrongfully of a murder and sent to prison. The end demonstrates the denial of female, motherhood, or any other identification of Rose (Katie N. Johnson 16).

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<sup>47</sup> Other plays included in the collection are Rachel Crothers’ *Ourselves* (1913), John Reed’s *Moondown* (1915), and Pendleton King’s *Cocaine* (1916).

The presentation of prostitution and prostitutes in *Balm in Gilead* and *Hot l Baltimore* does not comply fully with such narratives of Broadway. Broadway plays that focused on the white slave narrative where “the capture of innocent, young *white* women” (Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin* 7). However, April Green, with her metaphorical name and bright sarcastic character, falls into the narratives of what Katie N. Johnson calls “hookers with hearts of gold” in American theatre (*Sisters in Sin* 11). April’s last name is “symbolic” (Barnett 91). Her first name, April, refers to the fact that she is already ageing, and her days have passed while Green can refer to hope in the future. Suzy, on the other hand, is presented as a prostitute who is abused physically and mentally by her customers and her pimp. She leaves the hotel to live with him in his place, but try to convince everyone that she will stay with her anonymous boyfriend (134-135). Even outside that temporary space of the hotel, Suzy is forced into the narrative that identifies her as a prostitute but not as a girlfriend.

The Girl is the leading character in the play. Wilson describes The Girl as “A call girl, nineteen. Light, blond, maddeningly curious; a romantic enthusiasm and youthful ebullience” (5). The fact that she does not have a name but is identified as a generic character is significant. Names are a way of revealing or concealing identity (Nicolaisen 261). The last name provides a sense of belonging and social identification (Aldrin 387). The absence of a first and a last name present a generic character that can represent any American as she gives herself several names during the play. Christopher Bigsby comments on lack of last names and lack of names in general can represent a detachment from, “they have no history and, it seems, no future” (*Contemporary American Playwrights* 399). The Girls is rootless. The characters are detached from any past of future, they are the product of the present

where they belong and exist only. In some parts of the play, the Girl works as the narrator telling stories and gossip (88).

The Girl is the only character that expresses her dissatisfaction and anger because of the planned demolition of the hotel and the other characters' apathy towards the situation. She screams, "They're tearing down the hotel; they're gonna tear down this building" (30). She recalls the history of the town and the decaying railways in Baltimore recollecting the exact timing of the trains. Her childhood memories of living next to a railway waving to travellers (30-31). None of the other characters share the interests of keeping the hotel building with the Girl. When Paul comes to look for his grandfather past, Girl is dedicated to a new mission (70). There is no motive or reason for her commitment or enthusiasm to find Paul's grandfather especially with Paul refusing proceeding with the search. At some point the Girl seems to be obsessed with the case (119-130). Her obsession and commitment towards Paul's search, though personally meaningless for her and others, is an attempt to create or fabricate a unifying purpose for the hotel people, "we're going to find some trace of the old man. Something to go on" (119). The Girl explains her obsession over finding the grandfather even after Paul left, "I just think it's really chicken not to believe in something" (148). In such a temporary alienating and rootless present, Girl attempts to create a narrative that might engage everyone and eventually help saving a decaying place.

The setting is the focus of *Hot l Baltimore*. The decaying and destroyed space of the hotel is metaphoric. The hotel as the "heart" of the play (Biggsby (Contemporary American 395). The stage directions of the play state that:

*Once there was a railroad and the neighbourhood of the railroad terminals bloomed (boomed) with gracious hotels. The Hotel*

*Baltimore, built in the late nineteenth century, remodeled during the Art Deco last stand of the railroads, is a five-story establishment intended to be an elegant and restful haven. Its history has mirrored the rails' decline. The marble stairs and floors, the carved wood paneling have aged as neglected ivory ages,...The Hotel Baltimore is scheduled for demolition. The Theater, evanescent itself, and for all we do perhaps itself disappearing here, seems the ideal place for the representation of the impermanence of our architecture* xiii-xiv.

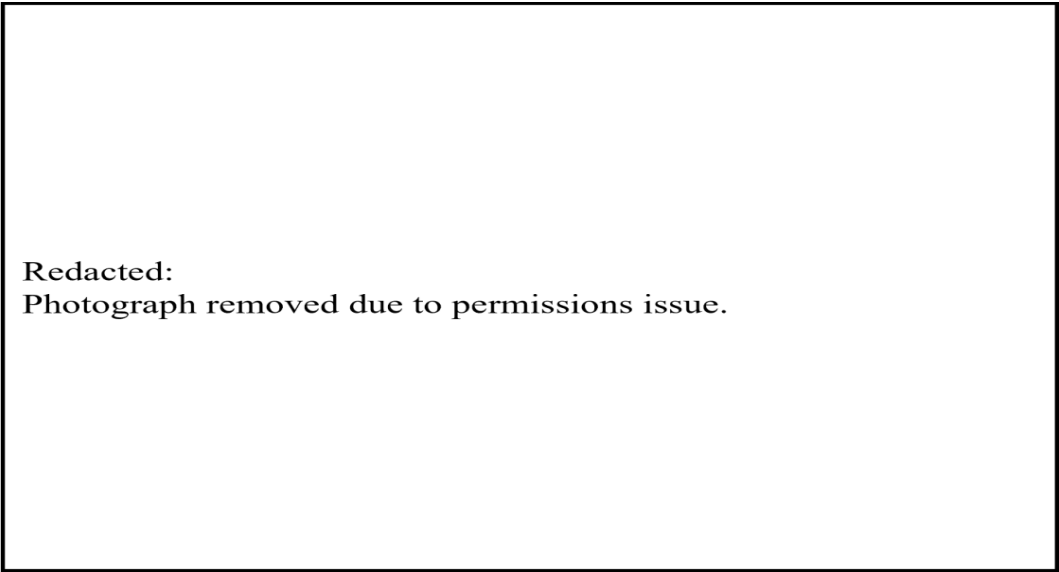
Wilson attaching the hotel building to theatre and focusing on the ephemeral of both I metaphorical for the American culture that is decaying. The physical decay of the hotel architecture is accompanied by a decline of its community and residents. The only connection they have is a space or a place that is decaying already. The physical demolition of the hotel will occur later because of the decaying community inside.

Most of the play action take place, “in the area behind the front desk” (7) (Fig. 1.11). In such depressing setting, characters do not conform with any gender, sexual, professional, or social manners of identification. They are hopeless, alienated, and express a state of meaninglessness (Fig. 1.12).

Another important aspect that Wilson's use in the play is music. He writes in the stage directions that “*the play is designed to incorporate music popular during production*” (xiii-xiv). The incorporated music maintains the performance's relevance to its context at any point of time. It also works to sustain the play's rhythm.

Overlapping conversations is another technique Wilson uses in the play to create a certain atmosphere and a hectic setting. Conversations between Jackie, April, Bill and the Girl are taking place simultaneously (25-27). The conversation is meaningless as people are talking, but do not communicate anything meaningful to the audience or to

each other. Moreover, the conversations are usually irrelevant as characters avoid / discussing what happens around them or to them. In his review, “*Stage: The Unwanted People of ‘Hot L Baltimore,’*” Mel Gussow asserts that Lanford Wilson writes with understanding and sensitivity about unwanted people.



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Fig. 1.9 *Balm in Gilead* by Lanford Wilson, directed by Dennis L. Dalen from Ohio University School of Theatre, 1989.

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Fig. 1.10 *Balm in Gilead* 2007 production, directed by Joseph Blatchley, by the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Photograph by Clive Barda, <http://www.doraschweitzer.com/balm-in-gilead.html>.

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Fig. 1.11 The front desk, from *Hot l Baltimore*, 1973 production. From New York Library of Performing Arts Research Collections – Theatre (\*T-Pho B (Hot L Baltimore)).

In such depressing setting, characters do not conform with any gender, sexual, professional, or social manners of identification. They are hopeless, alienated, and

express a state of meaninglessness. The absence of a narrative or a storyline is one expression of such state (Fig. 1.12).

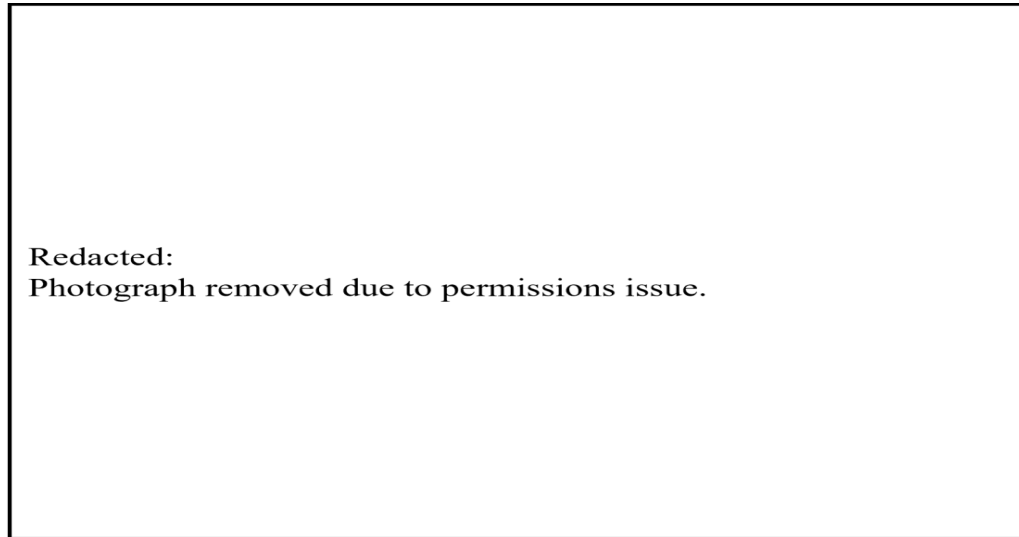


Fig. 1.12. From *Hot l Baltimore*, 1973 production. From New York Library of Performing Arts Research Collections – Theatre (\*T-Pho B (Hot L Baltimore)).

## 1.6 CONCLUSION

Despite the limited sources on Lanford Wilson’s early plays at the Caffe Cino, Wilson’s presence in the Off-Off-Broadway movement is prominent. Challenging the identifications of gay theatre that are established with the movement and the Cino venue in specific allows for further interpretations and considerations not only for Wilson but for other playwrights. Examining the movement and its venues as part of a wider experience of alienation in social and theatrical contexts reflect on its role in American history. In his plays, Wilson always refers to gay characters as queer. So, I believe it is eligible to define, if I must, him and the venue as queer rather than gay. Queer as used by Wilson does not identify homosexual or gay individuals, but people who do not fit in any existing identification or narrative. A Queer does not only challenge the heteronormative social context, but also challenges the

homonormativity, the commercialisation of art and theatre, and limitation of space and place.



## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **PERFORMING AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

By the end of 1960s, Lanford Wilson was already established as a prolific playwright with plays such as *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964), *Balm in Gilead* (1965) and *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973). As discussed in the previous chapter, Wilson's early plays were characterised by their experimental nature, lack of a structured plot, and examination of individual identities in the 1960s' radically changing and challenging socio-political and theatrical contexts. However, in *The Hot l Baltimore*, Wilson started to develop an interest in exploring America as a whole instead of focusing on gender and racial identities. The declining hotel building stands as a direct metaphor for "the inexorable deterioration of America" (Dean 27). Though the play remains engaged with marginalised individuals and their experience of social alienation, the metaphorical setting marks Wilson's noticeable involvement in investigating the American national identity as a collective identity and an ideology.

By contextualizing the plays written about the Talley's in their post-Vietnam War scene, I will investigate the ways Wilson challenges and redefines American national identity as embodied by characters and performed on stage. The chapter will start by theorizing American national identity and ideology, then will analyse its presentation in Wilson's plays. The contextualization is aimed firstly to broaden the limiting gay theatre narrative that Wilson has been placed in as I have already discussed in the thesis introduction. And secondly, to resituate the plays, and Wilson, in the American theatrical scene of post-Vietnam War (1970s- early 1980s) and the larger scale of staging American national identity.

The focus of this chapter will be Wilson's plays written between 1970 to 1985 including the Talley's Trilogy: *Fifth of July* (1978), *Talley's Folly* (1979), *Talley & Son* (1985) (previously *A Tale Told*, 1981), with reference to two short plays: *Victory on Mrs. Dandywine's Island* (1970) and *Family Continues* (1972). The trilogy presents a chronological account of the Talley's family history since the end of World War II to 1977. *Fifth of July* was the first written play of the trilogy; premiered Off-Broadway in 1978 and moved to Broadway on 1980 for 159 performances and was adapted into a television film in 1982 (Hischak 87-88).<sup>48</sup> Afterwards, Wilson decided to trace back the story of Aunt Sally (a character in *Fifth of July*) and her husband in the second play: *Talley's Folly*. The play was a critical and commercial success and won Wilson the Drama Critics' Circle Award and Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1980. The third play was first written and produced as *A Tale Told* in 1980. In 1985, *Talley and Son* was premiered as the rewritten version of *A Tale Told*. Through three

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<sup>48</sup> The play is still performed in many regional theatres in America.

generations of a rich American family, Wilson attempted to identify the values of the American national identity shaped by certain political ideologies.

The noticeable changes in plays' content and focus on national themes cannot be considered separately from the theatrical forms and styles. After spending years writing experimental plays for Off-Off-Broadway and Off-Broadway venues, Wilson started to aim at writing a "well-made" play that will fit Broadway standards. Arthur Miller indicated that by the end of 1960s, such style of writing "a play with recognizable characters and a beginning, middle and end" was "condemned as 'well-made', or ludicrously old-fashioned" (61 'Behind *The Price*'). However, Miller suggested that a serious issue like the Vietnam War cannot be presented through experimental forms of theatre. He also pointed out the "absence" of a historical narrative of the Vietnam War that is adequately responsive to the tragedy and accessible to most people (61-62). Miller's essay is a commentary on the process of writing *The Price* (1968) which is a reaction to the avant-garde theatrical styles of the time with a realistic style and a conventional narrative of dysfunctional American family after war. Miller's reaction towards the theatrical scene and the engagement with the Vietnam War is in several ways similar to Wilson's, and possibly other playwrights of the time. Shifting to well-made plays and structured forms can indicate an attempt to create a meaningful personal, artistic, and national narratives; narratives that were required after the 1960s dissonance. However, the well-made play structure is not merely a form that might have contributed in creating a narrative in Wilson's 1970s plays. The conventional form with a unified plot, maintaining the unities of space and time in *Talley's Folly* for instance, when considered in the context of Wilson's career as a playwright, could exemplify his struggle to "fit-in" or belong in the mainstream scene of critical and commercial success of Broadway theatres.

The 1970s marks a transitional phase in Wilson's career as a playwright. The Circle Repertory Company was founded in 1969 with an artistic statement describing the company as:

a non-for-profit institutional theatre, was found in July, 1969, in a second floor loft at Broadway and 83<sup>rd</sup> Street by director Marshall W. Mason, playwright Lanford Wilson, director Rob Thirkield, and actress Tanya Berezin. Their goal was to establish an on-going ensemble of artists -actors, directors, playwrights and designers- who would work together to create a living play. (qtd. in Ryzuk 4)

Aspiring towards working for an "institutional" and professional theatre was one of Wilson's ambitions. In an interview with John C. Tibbetts in 1991, Wilson explained that the purpose of starting a theatre company was to have an artistic space like the Café Cino but "a little more professional" (178). Part of his effort to engage in the professional scene was writing well-made classical style plays. *Talley & Son*, for instance, adopted the same narrative and plot of Arthur Miller's *My Sons*. Wilson clearly did not deny such attempts in his introduction to the play describing it as "the sort of influenced-by-Ibsen plays Lillian Hellman was writing at the time" (125).<sup>49</sup> The struggle to join the mainstream Broadway scene is evident throughout Wilson's career. He expressed that moving his plays to Broadway required major changes in content that might affect his intentions. One example of such changes are the ones made for the 1980 Broadway production of *Fifth of July*.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, gaining

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<sup>49</sup> Both influences will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>50</sup> For detailed information on the changes made in the 1980 Broadway production compared to the 1978 Off-Broadway, *A Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason and the Circle Repertory Theatre* by Philip Middleton Williams, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 1993. I will refer to the changes relevant to the discussion when needed.

critical attention, though a legitimate purpose, haunted Wilson in this transitional phase. In a published article titled 'The Critic on my Shoulder' (1996), Wilson tries to untangle his relationship with critics. He identifies Walter Kerr and Harold Cluman as the two critics in his "imaginary circle" or targeted audience (par.2). He believes, though it is difficult to admit, that the commercial and critical success that can be achieved by a positive review from Kerr, cannot be achieved otherwise. Kerr, as a critic, was Wilson's "authority figure", "if he didn't like your play, it wasn't as if he just offered an opinion, it was more like you had failed him. And failing him you failed your whole circle" (par. 4-5). Such struggle to belong and create an artistic identity will settle in the 1970s and early 1980s with a dominating realistic and conventional style of writing and recurrent themes, directed by Marshall W. Mason. Nevertheless, Wilson still expresses this struggle between his attempts to belong (be liked) and staying genuine to his artistic expression in *Burn This* (1987) which is to be discussed in the following chapter.

## **2.2 DEFINING AMERICA**

Anthony D. Smith defines national identity as "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (14). However, as Benedict Anderson notes, such identity is still an "imagined community" because it is based on imagined bonds and unities of nationalism that bring strangers together (Anderson 6). Such bonds are declared through codes or symbols such as a flag and ceremonies or the folklore and the literature of that nation (Smith 159). Though the idea of a society unified by a common purpose and a sense of nationhood is appealing, it always risks encouraging feelings of nationalism or

exceptionalism. According to Ernst Gellner, Nationalism is as a “self-deception” associated with the idea of superiority and uniqueness of a nation compared to other nations. It is also linked to patriotism and a constant need for affirmation (56-107). The dangerous outcome of a national identity based on expressions of nationalism is the tendency to assert itself through violence and war.

For a nation to survive, it requires limitations that identify the members of the nations and the “outsiders”. The elements of identifying who is in or out are certain rules (biological, religious, ethnical, ...etc.), values, and the legacies accepted and embraced by members. In a political sense, such a way of identifying a national identity creates a fear of outsiders and consequently fear can work as a national bond; fear of outsiders and fear of losing members, collective rules, values, or legacies. Therefore, war, presumably initiated to defend a nation, would be used to reinforce sense of national identity, and unify people within. On the other hand, a nation needs a past that should be bright, rich, heroic, unique and inspiring to keep people involved in the national historical narrative (Smith 91-161). A war creates what Benedict Anderson calls a “heroic memory”. War generates myths and memories of glory and ideals for the coming generations (146). The legacy of glorious history and common values can keep people united and serve as the roots of a nation. At the same time, glorifying a past could be a deceiving myth full of lies and illusions that people might feel ready to die for.

In the case of America, the concept of heroes’ sacrifices for humanity affirms American exceptionalism. The idea of an exceptional nation started way back in the eighteenth century after the American Revolution and received a huge reaffirmation during the Great Depression (1929-1939) introducing America’s “rendezvous with

destiny” and new popular terms at that time such as, “the American goals, the American mission, the American purpose, the American style, the American civil religion, the American idea” (Mann 47-57).<sup>51</sup> Until the 1970s, both American exceptionalism and patriotism became part of an American national identity based on the Creed and “Anglo-Protestant culture” (Huntington 38). These elements of the religious virtuous mission, the exceptional nation, the land of heroes, and endless opportunities were not necessarily exclusive to American identity, but they continued to be a source of affirmation and security during World War II and the 1950s. After the war, America, in media and popular culture, was believed to be a victorious nation fueled by patriotism and a sense of meaningful universal purpose in the world. This myth was based on another myth of a good war. By the end of the World War II, the middle-class white American family became a representation of an idealistic unified society (Wilmer 12-127). However, the mainstream narrative of utopian cohesive familial structure representing a gratified nation was challenged. Frederick Sontag affirms that the apparent social “harmony” in the 1950s was merely concealing a state of alienation and insecurity (169).

Challenging the utopian American national identity, as defined above, became the focus of Wilson’s trilogy. The plays propose war as the core flaw of American culture and historical narratives. There is a tendency to engage in war and to romanticise combat which problematically recurs in American history. Such a tendency and flawed historical narratives have contributed to the construction of a sense of national identity, a political ideology that justifies violence and war regardless the authenticity of aims and values retained. The trilogy depicts two wars:

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<sup>51</sup> The phrase “rendezvous with destiny” was used by Franklin Roosevelt in his presidential nomination acceptance speech in 1936, “This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny” (qtd. in Dallek 256).

World War II (1939-1945) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). The latter is used as a reference point and a manifestation of America's unresolved trauma that keeps resurfacing every time a crisis of national identity occurs. In a later play, *Redwood Curtain* (1995), Wilson presents the Vietnam War through a homeless veteran hidden in the woods (this play will be discussed in detail in chapter 4). This use of the Vietnam War as the main reference point in American history is not only because it was the most recent war at that time (1970s), but also because the amount of controversy around the war at the time would not have allowed Wilson's to challenge the patriotic narratives supporting war. The Vietnam War aftermath generated a sense of alienation and disturbance of national identity. Such disturbance was not triggered by the Vietnam War only, but as discussed in the previous chapter, the movements of the 1960s and socio-political context contributed in causing many Americans to question what defined them as a nation especially in face of a long exhausting war. In Wilson's trilogy, the Vietnam War exposed the myths that shaped American national identity; an identity shaped by a historical narrative based on illusions, lies, and self-deception. The Vietnam War and its aftermath provoked a sense of alienation demonstrated in war veterans' individual experiences, and in the 1960s generation and its unsettling concerns. At the same time, the experience of a lost war generated an urgent need to question the American historical narratives of past victorious legacies of war and claimed achievements.

In an unpublished essay for *Forbes*, Wilson wrote, "Our Founding Fathers cursed us with a beautiful, tantalizing lie. ...it does no good to keep repeating 'America is the greatest country on earth' and all patriotic mantras. As things stand right now you could pick a better country out of a hat" (1-2). He points out the failure of such narratives, and myths that shaped America and its national identity. By



questioning that, he tries to offer an understanding of the damaged areas of American history, especially the ones associated with war and violence, and question the morals of the governance system at the time. Wilson suggests that war has been a way of concealing a sense of alienation, normlessness, anxiety, and futility that dominated the nation for decades. In that sense, war represents a desperate attempt to re-establish bonds of national identity. However, this reclamation of a collective national identity through war ended up more alienating by exposing the claimed myths of exceptionalism, equality, and nationalism.

### **2.3 WORLD WAR II NARRATIVE**

In an interview with Williams Wilson asserted that the Talley's story documents the ways war has "affected" America; when asked which one, he answered, "through each one...kept changing" (82). The trilogy deals with two different wars, World War II and the Vietnam War. Wilson's presentation of each war is significantly different. In *Fifth of July*, the family are trying to cope with the trauma of the Vietnam War avoiding the combat horrors or Kenny's experience in war. The play deals with characters in a right now, right here context (after the end of the Vietnam War). Kenneth (Kenny), the veteran, has no intention of recalling his war experience; his family and friends are not interested in asking or "knowing". *Talley & Son* and *Tally's Folly* come as fully engaged in a war assumed to be a win decade earlier with a defined narrative of a "good war". However, the exploration of WWII is not about that war in specific or the history of the Talley's only. It is an exploration of all wars in American history challenging the narratives of romanticizing and validating war and its legacy.

In the Talley's Trilogy Wilson challenges: the myth of World War II as the good war, the myth of American Exceptionalism, and the resulting American national identity. His purpose of reexamining the mainstream narrative of World War II is to reveal the misleading beliefs that fueled the war in Vietnam based on the legacy of World War II as a glorious victory. Such legacy affected the narrative of the current war in Vietnam at the time and its post-war literature. The comparison in the plays is not between the two wars but between the legacies of the two wars and how American national identity changed accordingly.

The myth of World War II as the good war is the focus of *Talley & Son*. The play is written in the realistic, well-made play style of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939) as Lanford Wilson indicates in his note to the play (125). *Talley & Son* is about the Talley family business and the future of Talley & Son factory. It shares with Hellman's play the same tendency to cling to the illusion of a utopian American identity. However, *Talley & Son* shares more with Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) in its focus on war business and the way war changed Americans' self-perception. The plot of both plays is similar. Like Joe Keller in *All my Sons*, who hopes for his son Larry to return from war and continue the family war aircrafts business, Eldon Talley is also a father of two and while one of them has returned home, he is waiting for Timmy to come home and carry on the family war uniforms business. Both plays question the eligibility of war and the authenticity of values and morals Americans embraced during the war. Choosing to duplicate the plot of *All my Sons*, is quite significant.

The action of *Talley & Son* takes place on the evening of Independence Day, 1944 (130). Immediately with the opening of Act I, we notice that, "*In one of the*

*windows is a two-star flag*” (131). The flag shows two stars showing that the family has two sons fighting in the war, Buddy, who is already back home on a short leave, and the young Timmy, who is supposed to join the family by the end of the day. The flag presents a sense of nationhood and patriotism embraced by American families in wartime, feelings to be shattered later by Timmy’s death destroying the illusions and lies of victory and pride. Timmy appears at the beginning announcing that “America won the Second World today” (131). He continues to describe the contrasting ideas of victory and death combined in one scene, “If the family ever went to the movies, they could watch us win the war next week on the Movietone Newsreel. They could see me die” (133). Timmy will be the dead narrator who is present but invisible to other characters on stage. His ghostly presence serves to reveal the reality of war and its cruel scenes of blood and death that his family, and people back home, struggle to comprehend or acknowledge. They choose to avoid the reality of the combat happenings and engage in the myths of patriotism, victory, and a family union. Timmy’s invisible presence and the inability of other characters to hear his account of combat demonstrate the absence of a counternarrative that can disturb the glorified image of war created by media and politicians and embraced by his family and many Americans.

Driven by a patriotic impulse, Timmy enlists as it is the right thing to do according to his family’s values: “it makes a difference when you do something right” (159). He enlists with naive views and expectations; excessively proud of his family’s history and the nation he is defending. He thinks he is exceptional and popular belonging to a family whose name is tagged on every single uniform worn by his fellow soldiers. The fatigues are produced in his father’s factory with “Inspected by E. Talley” labels (159-160). However, as time passes, Timmy’s expectations and beliefs

of being special and his pride in defending the nation are shattered by death. One of the emotional scenes is when Timmy is on stage and though all his family are there, he is not able to communicate with them as he graphically describes the moment he was killed on the battlefield. The feelings of disappointment and loneliness are intensified by his inability to share it with others:

Dad said he didn't even know where I fell. That official "fell." Like a lotta people he gets very- not just correct, but formal- under pressure. Hell, "fell" isn't half of it. Splattered is more like it. Didn't feel a thing. ... I felt a force all against me and suddenly I've got a different angle on the terrain. I'm looking up into the tress instead of out across the jungle floor. I thought, How am I looking at that? Then I thought, Oh, sure, I'm flat on my ass looking up. ... Then the corpsmen come and, oh, Daddy, I knew from the look on their faces that this is bad. This young recruit, couldn't be sixteen, turned around and I thought he was gonna puke, but he flat our fainted before he had the chance. You could tell he'd enlisted in this thing ten minutes after seeing *To the Shores of Tripoli*. Then all of a sudden I'm on a stretcher and they're rushing me off to somewhere. You understand, you don't feel the stretcher under you, you just know they're rushing you to somewhere. You're looking up into the sun; some guy is running along beside you, trying to keep his hand over your eyes, shade them from the sun; you'd kinda rather see it. And all the corpsmen are still looking so cut-up I said, "Hey, do you raggedy-asses think I don't know you're razzing me? I got a pass to go home, you're trying to make me think I won't get there." Or, actually, I thought I said that; then I realized nothing had come out. .... Granddad Talley would say, "Pride goeth before a fall, sir." ... You can feel- barely, a little bit- that your body is urinating all

over itself and your bowels are letting go something fierce. ...If those guys hadn't looked so bad, you might have gone all to pieces, but they're so torn up, you feel somebody has got to take this thing lightly. (174)

The dramatic, poetic, and vivid description of death contrasts with the idea of how simple and meaningless death could be. Timmy, much like other young soldiers, went out hoping to get back to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with his family. He just simply “fell”. In *A Tale Told* (the original version of *Talley & Son*), Timmy -who was “all sozzled on patriotism” (164)- imagined that his death would be a meaningful death announced on the news, “Good Evening Mr. and Mrs. North America..Flash! Private Tim Talley had a Flash! About what’s being fed to Mr. and Mrs. North America, saw red, stepped on a land mine and went Flash! And was seen by all the ships at sea” (255). World War II was always justified by powerful feelings of patriotism and exceptionalism that encouraged young soldiers to enlist without questioning its legitimacy or the ugly side of the war.

*To the Shores of Tripoli*, a 1942 movie, is not the only reference to the role of the media in propagating delusions. In *A Tale Told*, there is a part where Timmy describes the shooting of a movie in the battlefield.<sup>52</sup> During the war, military propaganda aimed to encourage enlisting, to tutor soldiers and most importantly to gain more support from the public. Unlike the Vietnam War, World War II did not trigger the same amount of controversy because of the unquestionable dominating patriotic and national sense (Springer 69). Surely, there was a counternarrative questioning the war both in literature and theatre. In the play, Timmy witnessed a TV team coming with cameras to “Show all moms and pops and all the guys and gals

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<sup>52</sup> This part is not included in the rewritten version, *Talley & Son*.

back home how we're beating the Japs", as the cameraman puts it (253). The process of creating that illusion involves shooting soldiers laughing and impressively enjoying their time at war; no deaths, no blood, no pain, nothing like the truth. When a soldier gets shot in front of the camera and his whole head is blown away, the TV team decide not to show it, "I got that guy's face blowing up. I'm on a morale detail for the Homefront; all I wanted was a shot of him laughing. Jesus, I can't use this", said the cameraman (254). The horrifying images from the combat should always be hidden from the public to maintain a heroic narrative and a glorious the American nation. World War II was not a good war and according to the play, it was not a victory as it is documented in American history. It was a war that is, like any other war, brutal and immoral, and that required killing of the nation's young, disillusioned boys and claimed to achieve mythical victories.

The dysfunctional family structure and system represented the dysfunctionality of the nation and lost values and ethics. The dysfunctional family metaphor has been used widely in American theatre since the 1940s. The term "domestic realism" has been used in critical literature and American theatre history to describe post-World War II plays that utilized the dysfunctional family model (Schlueter 298). The term has been used by scholars such as Christopher Bigsby, Gerald M, Berkowitz, and Don B. Wilmeth and many others. The term identifies plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) by Tennessee Williams, *All My Sons* (1949), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Price* (1968) by Arthur Miller, and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979) and *True West* (1980) by Sam Shepard. It is debatable that the term does not efficiently identify a genre of a certain trend in American theatre. The term is used loosely, by many critics, to describe realistic plays that present that failure of the

conventional family model in America. *Talley & Son* fits into that category by using the family model; however, it is arguable that *Fifth of July* and *Talley's Folly*, both present a nonconventional family model.

The Talley family is an example of the dysfunctional American family that, in appearance, still holds the structure of an extended family but fails to function well. In that sense, it is used as a metonym for a nation that appears to be patriotic, unified, and structurally blended, but dysfunctional and fractured. The moral system of the family is illustrated, analogically to the national system, by Talley. He is the eighty-years-old grandfather who already lost a son in World War I and a grandson in World War II. He is described as a sneaky, deceiving, greedy capitalist who is never ashamed of doing anything to keep his business going including war business and corruption. He represents that essence of evil in the family, and in a metaphoric sense the nation. Even though his daughter Lottie keeps reminding him of the awful thing he did for people, he still considers himself as a good Christian. Talley brags about his success in anticipating the war and making a good business out of it, "I saw what was coming in 1914. You stuck your head in the sand" (168). In a different incident he is proud of deceiving another businessman to take over his land and factory. Talley is supposed to be sick, insane sometimes, and partly paralyzed by a stroke. Other characters always comment on the fact that his paralyzed face looks ugly and disgusting. Lottie feels disgusted by his laugh and wonders if he is crying or laughing (150). The outside grotesque appearance reflects his personality and attitude. Talley is not afraid of dying because he knows that he will never die, as his son Eldon puts it (149). Talley represents the heart of American identity at the time with his pragmatic attitude, racism, and white right-wing conservatism with a sense of claimed pride and superiority. He destroys the land of another businessman to be able to claim it, asks

to be paid for destroying a land that will turn into profitable possibilities, he laughs commenting “Use your eyes. Know the worth of a thing” (150). The destruction and use of violence are justified as long as people are making a profit. For Talley, a war is justified and required for economic gains.

Wilson uses the same image in *A Tale Told* when Timmy explains the mission of the American army abroad. The soldiers are playing with the bombs as toys for fun destroying the lands and make it look like they are clearing them for others to start fresh and clean; “with a bomb... But what the hell, it’s a new toy.... We’re good at that. Then when we’ve all gone home the Nips’ll come back and the Portugese’ll come back and start growing their fields of whatever-it-was again right up to the base of the marker. Which, you know, is inevitably what happens, and should happen, whatever field you’re talking about” (253). The destruction of the field, whether it is American or not, indicates a tendency to destroy and start a mess and then leave claiming a mission accomplished. This tendency does not target other countries only but American land itself. The self-sabotaging of the nation’s values and land is present also in the one-act play *Victory on Mrs. Dandywine Island* (1977), a metaphorical play where Mrs. Dandywine<sup>53</sup> is on a barren island where “nothing could possibly grow” (109). She is trapped in the historical victories she claims: “I remember only a sense of victory which has remained with me ever since. My achievement was- my accomplishment has been the victory” (111). Miss Liveforever is the embodiment of power and destruction burning everything declaring, “[there] are other islands” (114). She burns her own house, laughing hysterically. The conflict of

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<sup>53</sup> The names in the play are metaphoric.



power between Dandywine, who is disillusioned, weak, confused, and isolated, and Liveforever who has “the hoards...the masses” is over a barren island of salt (111).

The war, as Wilson suggests, is not a war on other people, but a war at home, a distraction from a sense of meaninglessness and dysfunctionality. The immorality of Talley and Miss Liveforever is the sins of the American past and damaging myths that are not disappearing and will haunt every generation unless they are ready to acknowledge and redefine their historical narratives. The resulting American national identity is embodied by Talley, a white supremacist Christian male who is racist, misogynist, profit-oriented, apathetic, homophobic, violent, and partially disabled with a toxic masculine power. The presence of violence, rape and murders in the Talleys’ house turns it into a war field barrel to that of the World War II combat. Talley is the core reality of America not the glorious narratives and values of American identity established by the Founding Fathers or the Creed.

Talley’s presentation of misogynistic attitudes is expressed verbally in the play, “Never trusted those women. Broken homes and moral weakness” (158). He also involves in a violent act slapping Avalaine, the young daughter of Viola the maid. Avalaine confronts Talley and Eldon with the fact that Buddy raped her several times (161). The family’s secret reveals another relationship that went between Eldon and Viola in the past and Avalaine the child born as a result. This suggests the incestuous act between Buddy and Avalaine. In order to hide the scandal, Talley tricks Avalaine to travel away with her boyfriend where he will provide them with money and a job in one of his factories (179). The act of rape and violence towards women is not about the sexual pleasure as Susan Broenmiller and other feminist writers affirm but an act of aggressing, “a deliberate by-product of male domination”

(Bourke 140). Talley, Eldon, and Buddy with a history of rape in every generation demonstrate that the act is a result of a violent tendency especially towards women. Buddy taking Avalaine to the woods to rape here is the same scene that her mother describes of Eldon raping her which resembles the act of rape associated with war, the Vietnam War in specific. Rape here is an expression of a threatened masculinity that men from different generations try to conceal. Women are objectified in the play, not only the maids, but the two wives as well. Eldon's wife (Netta) and Buddy's wife (Olive) are both naïve, superficial, weak, and submissive to their husbands. Netta fails to have any reaction as a wife and as a mother except for the hysterical fragile expression to her son's death. War, violence, and rape are presented as demonstrations of male power over female, "nothing more and nothing less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (Brownmiller 15). Talley's misogynistic attitude towards working women, widows, divorced women, and unmarried mothers is shown when he describes them as being the "moral corruption" in the town (157). Any woman who does not fit the normative social role assigned and controlled by her man is a threat to society. Unlike her mother, who is submissive, Avalaine's confrontation is an act of challenging Talley's power as a man. Beyond Talley's aggressive and violent reaction is a threatened masculinity.

Desexualizing rape in Foucault's sense in this context indicates another power conflict, a social class conflict. The Talleys, as a bourgeois family, imposes their power on the labour class. As a white supremacist capitalist, Talley controls the politicians and the economic system that allows him to put his hand on any land he desires (150). His claimed ultimate power should not be challenged not even by Franklin Roosevelt who is the "son-of-a-bitch Democrat cripple in the White House

playing king” (170). His daughter, Lottie challenged his authority leaving the house to work, but she returns home sick and dying of toxic paints in the factory. Her failure to work and stay away from the family, becomes Talley’s joke and evidence that no one can leave. In reaction to his dying daughter’s wishes for him to burn in hell, he is indifferent “I ain’t anxious; ain’t scared. I’ve lived a good, clean, Christian life” (149).

The delusional state of Talley along with physical appearance of his waxy face is a manifestation of the grotesque. The political metaphors used in the play could reflect anxieties not only of threatened masculinity but of a threatened national identity. In his book *The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque*, Mark Fearnow argues that “the grotesque object operates as part of a social ‘machine’ that transforms vague anxieties and discordant fears of a culture into forms in which they are represented and mingled with comic elements. Thus, reified, these cultural ‘nightmares’ are rendered less frightening but remain troubling and disruptive of an easy acceptance of ‘reality’” (12). In this case, Talley, though not necessarily presented in a comic way, performs as the anxieties the rest of the family must acknowledge and live with. He is the ugly part of America that is persistent, destructive and continues to feed the fake myths. Fearnow points out the use of grotesque objects was popular in the post-World War II theatre when the country needed to acquire a “clearer idea of its own identity” (153), suggesting that the grotesque was an expression of a missing sense of national identity. The grotesque came on stage to express and relieve feelings of fear, isolation, and aggression after the war (117).

## 2.4 POST-VIETNAM WAR NARRATIVE

*Fifth of July* is largely contextualized in the American critical literature either as part of gay theatre, written by a gay playwright about gay people.<sup>54</sup> Except for a few comical references and stereotypical comments by Kenneth (Ken), the characters are not engaged in discussing homosexuality or the gay couple situation. Ken passes self-stigmatizing comments referring to his PTSD pills as birth-control pills for instance: “in my condition we can’t take chances” (13-54). Arguably, such comments can reflect the homophobic attitudes towards gay men that were still prominent at the time, especially when supported by Ken asking Jed to get out of the dreamy garden where he chooses to “hide” most of time. The silent presence of Jed is limited with few lines on plants and building his garden (8). He works as Ken’s supporter both physically (helping him to stand and move around) and mentally as a partner. Through the rest of the play, he escapes to hide in the garden. This interpretation of the couple’s interaction is legitimate but not necessarily enough to label it as gay theatre.

Labelling and contextualizing Wilson’s plays as part of gay theatre has been problematic, limiting the potential interpretations of themes, and spectators’ reception as mentioned in the thesis introduction. In the case of *Fifth of July*, the play was immediately celebrated for the gay characters that it introduced into mainstream theatre. In his review, theatre critic Larry Murray titled his review as “Great American Gay Play”. He points out that the play “represents a major milestone in the evolution of gay theatre characters” at the time when “objective discussion of gay issues was

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<sup>54</sup> Neill Bartlett and Michael R Schiavi argues that gay theatre as “a genre” of plays “written by and for homosexuals” is outdated and relevant only to certain era and venues (248). However, they use the term to refer to any play that presents gay characters or focuses on homosexual themes, which is subjective and debatable.

still pretty much forbidden in print” and “it was the first time to have gay characters in a mainstream play who were ‘normal’ people, not swishy queens”. Frank Rich, the well-known theatre critic at the time, reviewed the play and later pointed out that the word gay was still not publishable in the *New York Times* even in the early 1980s. He described Ken as “a Vietnam hero and a homosexual”. However, he celebrated the fact the two homosexual characters are kissing on a mainstream stage in New York calling it “the best American play of the Broadway season”. This approach categorized the play as a gay play because of the playwright’s or the characters’ sexual orientations. Larry Murray compares the original production when it was a full house for the 511 performances mostly because people wanted to see the blunt gay kiss on stage.<sup>55</sup> In the 2010 production, the play did not have the same reaction and enthusiasm from the audience or Larry himself. In his review of the same production, David Frinkle called it a “period piece” in terms of its representation of a gay couple. This marketing approach, whether intended or not, along with the critical literature of the play, has restricted the reception of other interpretations and encouraged critics to consider sexual orientation as the dominant theme of the play even if that is not thoroughly supported by evidence.

This approach in documenting American theatre history and interpreting or adopting plays accordingly has affected not only Wilson, but most of his generation who started from Off-Off-Broadway. Unlike Wilson, Edward Albee was vocal about it in several occasions. He expressed his frustration of being labelled as a gay playwright, describing it as “prejudicial” (Interview with Rebecca Montage). In his acceptance speech of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Lambda Literary Award in 2011, he stated that,

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<sup>55</sup> The kiss is a quick greeting kiss that Wilson and Mason kept changing to shift the focus of the play and control the expected reactions (Clum 18).

“[a] writer who happens to be gay or lesbian must be able to transcend self. I am not a gay writer. I am a writer who happens to be gay”.<sup>56</sup> Wilson did not comment directly on the labelling of his play, but he clarified that his plays are about gay characters as part of society and not about homosexuality or gay identity in isolation. He explained that he has never seen being gay as a problem, but more of a normal occurrence that does not require much attention or discussion, “I’ve never seen it as a problem...I was always going to write a play about a homosexual couple where it was not even mentioned that they were gay” (Interview with Di Gaetani 285-293). In spite of that, Wilson’s *Fifth of July* has been received and examined as a play written by a gay playwright, presenting gay characters which immediately identified it as a gay play.

Such identification could be justified to some extent as the play appeared at a time when LGBTQ studies were just emerging and having a gay character on stage was not completely normalised. Thus, the play received attention as a gay play for a while, but its dominant political content has gone underread; this is the content that Wilson referred to in his interview with Felice Picano (23). Most of the critical literature has paid attention to everything in the play except its political content and context. Philip Williams explains that the play is not solely about a gay couple. He argues that Wilson “wanted to write a play about the effect of war on American society; he wanted to write a play that depicted a gay relationship in which the subject of homosexuality was not a central issue in the story; and he wanted to write about family relationships and the connections of family that run through generations” (43). Thus, by recontextualizing the play in the post-Vietnam War scene, Ken (the gay veteran) is more than a representation of a gay identity on stage.

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<sup>56</sup> Lambda Literary Award started in 1989 as a literary award for distinguished LGBTQ based in America. Albee’s acceptance speech received negatively due firstly to the nature of the award, and secondly, his declaration was perceived by the gay community as denying his pride in his gay identity <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2011/06/edward-albees-pioneer-award-speech/>.

*Fifth of July* is a two-act play taking place on the evening of the Independence Day, 1977 in the Talley house near Lebanon Missouri. Ken and his partner Jed are hosting family members and friends; Aunt Sally who arrives to scatter her dead husband's ashes and attend the funeral of her ex-fiancé Harley Campbell, Gwen and her husband John who are old friends and visiting with a business proposal to buy the Talley's place, and June Talley, Ken's sister with her daughter fourteen-years-old Shirley. Ken, June, Gwen, and John were all part of the Berkeley protest groups at the University of California in the 1960s. In the play, they recall the 1960s and their activism and dreams which is closer in that sense to Robert Patrick's *Kennedy's Children* (1974), where five characters in a bar expressing their disappointment in the 1960s idealistic values and hopes.

The key character is Ken, a masculine, handsome, mid-thirties disabled gay veteran. He is the embodiment of American identity after the Vietnam War. Through Ken, Wilson suggests a certain American national identity that, unlike the one in *Talley & Son*, is feminised. The national identity performed on stage by Ken is white, gay, feminised, and disabled. Wilson showed that the post-World War II American identity, is white, supremacist, racist, homophobic, insecurely masculine, misogynist, violent, savagely capitalist and profit-led contrasted to the identity that some people, and politicians, try to reidentify with especially during the 1960s ; an identity based on equal rights, freedom and democracy. However, such identification failed, leaving America as a gay, feminised, and disabled nation. The suggestions of weakness, powerlessness, indecisiveness, and dysfunctionality that are associated, in the play, with being gay, feminine, and disabled are problematic and affirm the stigmas that might have been linked to such identifications at some point. These problematic associations will be unpicked in the following discussion.

The post-Vietnam War narrative in *Fifth of July* is presented as a feminine narrative in contrast to the World War II masculine narrative. Gendering the Vietnam War and its dominant narrative as feminine is suggested in Susan Jeffords' well-known book, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Through examining the literature of war, she argues that fragmentation of narrative is associated with a male voice/narrator, while meaning and coherence is associated with female voice (165-66). She defines "remasculinization" as "a regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and the definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it is formulated" (51). The definition of hegemonic masculinity in an American context has not been stabilized as suggested by Michael Kimmel (58-66). Kimmel relies on Robert Branon's definition of manhood; avoiding any associations with femininity, demonstrating power, being detached, and being aggressive (62). Talley, as discussed earlier, embodies the white American masculinity that is homophobic and threatened by femininity, concealing its fragility and fear in excessive demonstrations of power and aggression. However, the Vietnam War has drastically changed the definition and reality of white American masculinity.

In contrast to the good war narrative of World War II, the Vietnam War is the "bad war" and because of its aftermath "from the uncontrollable, the unreasonable, and the unstructured. It cannot influence chaos because it *is* chaos" (Jeffords 47). The history of the Vietnam War is fragmented and antinarrative. In the 1970s, America had to deal with thousands of veterans who were deformed physically and mentally, and a meaningless defeat. The damage of the war extended beyond the 58,220 casualties to a national fracture that did not end with retreat from the theatre of war. Based on World War II myths of victorious heroes and patriotism, soldiers were



always assumed either honorably dead the moment they leave for war or return as victorious heroes. Vietnam veterans returned defeated, hurt, distorted and weak, distorting the public image of heroic veterans. The weak veterans were a symbol of America's defeat and weakness. They were stigmatized by the defeat and by the horrific actions reported from the combat such as rape and killing children and unarmed Vietnamese civilians. Also, to the nature of the rotation of soldiers during the war, veterans were not welcomed, and they were isolated from other soldiers and from their community (Taylor 133-135). The image of Vietnam veterans, according to Jason Katzman, was that of alienated and disconnected individuals. They are presented in media as disgraced, mentally unstable, and fierce (7). Thus, stories of the war in Vietnam were an unwelcome subject in theatre for decades. Arnold R. Isaac in his examination of the Vietnam War legacy asserts that there is no "narrative structure" of the war. The mainstream culture tried to avoid talking directly about it. One explanation of that silence in the 1970s is that the situation was still confusing and unclear to many (262).

Claudia Springer refers to the TV propaganda that played an important role during and after the war. A very important film released in 1965, *Why Vietnam?* reflected all the confusion and uncertainty of the American government in that war; no clear goals, no justification (98). They used "freedom" and other confusing images of patriotism and national interests, like those deployed through World War II, to rationalize the deaths of Americans in another country. It is presented as *The Unique War* (1966) that saved the life of Vietnamese people from Communism (102-104). *Tour in Vietnam* (1970) is a training film classified for soldiers that presented misleading expectations of adventures, exploring nature, and learning about other cultures while fighting for freedom (Springer 107).

Ken has lost both legs in the Vietnam War and throughout the play, people keep telling Ken that he does not look well but nobody engage in any further questions (21). Unlike *Talley & Son*, there are no details of the war, its horror, or Ken's personal experience. The tendency to avoid talking about the war or dealing with the past is presented in the following dialogue:

GWEN: You gotta hear it so you know how to deal with it.

SHIRLEY: No, I never want to know a thing.

GWEN: It gives you strength.

KEN: They tell you things they don't believe; want you to do things they don't believe. (97-98)

Kenny is identified by his lack of commitment, something that is associated with the veterans and the war itself (Katzman 19). Kenny is unable to commit to his teaching job as he feels irrelevant to his current American context, a generation that "don't even know where Vietnam is" (40). The political reaction to the war was also described as reluctant and lacked commitment to win the war.

Ken, according to Jeffords' argument, has an identity constructed by war. Her argument that "war is a formation of gender" (51) is based on a historical association between gender and war. Men are the warriors and women are the peacemakers. Both war and violence in the western context are ways of asserting masculinity (Elshtain 4). So, what makes the identity that is product of the Vietnam War feminine and not masculine? Ken is gay, but Wilson insists on describing him as masculine. In the casting for the premiere and all following performances, Ken has always been played by masculine looking actors including William Hurt in the 1978 production, and Christopher Reeve in the 1980 Broadway production. Ken does not act his gay

identity. Throughout the play, the only indications of his homosexuality are his comments mentioned above (suggesting that he is a woman) and the kiss with his partner Jed. Performing a conventionally masculine character, rather than a feminised version of a gay character. a normal male character, not a gay one, is what Wilson considered as normalization of being gay.

Ken is gay and disabled with “a hollow leg” as John describes it in the play (85). He is victimized and unable to carry on with physical activities without Jed’s help. His physical disability reflects a meaningful narrative about the war. It is the collective post-war trauma that caused the country to collapse: “I’m just knocked out. ...I really have knocked myself out” (66). The disability is not only of lost legs, but of a burden of the past that he carries around and it keeps haunting him. Disability is usually associated with “dependency, loss, tragedy” (Kuppers 6). However, Tobin Siebers, a key scholar in disability studies, suggests that considering the body as “socially constructed”, means a person is only disabled in a certain social context that challenges his abilities (738).<sup>57</sup> Siebers associates disability with dysfunctionality in a social context. A disabled person is someone who cannot function and deliver their role in a community. Gwen refers to Ken’s dysfunctionality after the war and the attempts to recover his ability to perform sexually: “I didn’t get off till he told me Kenny’s sexual performance would be in no way impaired” (55). The main function of Ken’s body is sexual according to Gwen who herself is obsessed with the idea of sexual performance. Her intense passion about money and sex reflects a pragmatic attitude that dominated individuals of the ‘me generation’ in the 1970s.

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<sup>57</sup> He suggests that a person can be disabled because of his skin colour in a discriminating social context.

Physical disability is also a form of normlessness challenging the social norms of able bodies. In that sense, Robert McRuer argues that both homosexuality and disability are constructed similarly as a result of compulsory heterosexuality and “compulsory able-bodiedness” in a capitalist society (2).<sup>58</sup> Disability and gay identity both challenge the normative narratives. In the play, Ken’s identity as a gay veteran disturbs the Vietnam War narrative that was dominated by the white, heterosexual, male version. In his stage directions, Wilson uses Ken’s falling, sometimes in a funny way, as a way to disturb the flow of action in the play (66). The compulsory able-bodiedness that McRuer refers to in a capitalist society can be linked to the functionality of the body in such system. A body is disabled if it is not functioning as it supposed to, as previously discussed. In a capitalist society, a body that is not able to work is disabled. The homosexual body is also a disabled body because it does not function according to the heteronormative social system. A sick body is also disabled as it is dysfunctional.

The sickness is used in the three mentioned plays in association with various sorts of dysfunctionality. Sally in *Fifth of July* is sick in her fifties and in *Talley’s Folly* she is also sick as a young woman and infertile as a result. Lottie’s sickness in *Talley & Son* is a result of her rebellious attitudes as a woman who refuses to conform to her assigned social role. She chooses to be a working woman in the 1940s not only against the social norms of the time, but also against her family’s class and economic morals (143). As a result of disturbing the normative social and gender roles, she is dysfunctional and dying. She encourages Sally to leave and marry the man she loves

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<sup>58</sup> McRuer asserts that his theory is examined in an economic and cultural system of “neoliberal capitalism” (2).

against her family will. In the plays, women who try to revolt are deemed sick and functionally disabled in their social context.

Sally is infertile in *Talley's Folly* due to sickness. Arthur L. Greil describes infertility as a failure of both physical body and self-identification (106). In terms of physical ability, Sally is disabled, as she cannot perform her biological and social role as a woman and a mother. However, acknowledging such disability with that fact that she is getting married to someone who does not want kids re-enables her and places her in a context where she is not disabled anymore. This redefines her as a woman capable of perform out of her social and familial context. It is worth mentioning here the use of infertility of women and the image of the barren land in *Victory on Mrs. Dandywine's Island*. Identifying America as a barren land seems to be inescapable fate.

The American national identity that is, feminine, disabled and white is the identity constructed by a history of myth and lies. The alienating experience of the 1960s and the Vietnam War interrupted the sense of belonging and social stability. Nadine Holdsworth asserts that radical challenges in any society “can also ignite feelings of alienation and fear and a nostalgic sense that the nation is not what it once was,... after riots the society is sick, social commentators highlight contributory factors that expose the fragility of the nation and the myth of a cohesive national symbolic community unified by a common goal and purpose” (23-42). It was clear at that point of American history that any sense of collective national identity was going through a crisis. The sense of belonging and unity dissolved over a decade of consuming uncertainty. Lanford Wilson believes that revisiting history is important to debunk accumulated illusions and myths. Reconnecting to a certain desired part of

history means regenerating the values that inspired and brought people together in the first place. The need to connect with meaningful bonding memories increased during the disruptive era of the 1960s either through recalling theatrical forms or revisiting American historical narratives. Robert Lowell proposes a similar approach in his play *The Old Glory* (1964) where he goes back to the American Revolution time to identify a nation associated with violence in its roots. American plays of the 1960s and 1970s revisit the World Wars as “parallels” to Vietnam War (Bonin 68-69). Violence and war that are falsely justified by a unifying national goal and a godlike mission are the main flaw of American history, on which the national identity is based. Retaining such historical narratives means the same identity crisis will be repeated.

The legacy of the war is still confusing, painful and hard to deal with. In his introduction to *Coming in Terms: American Plays & the Vietnam War*, James Reston Jr. comments on the difficulty of approaching Vietnam War collective memory as it has distorted America emotionally and culturally; it is “still denied and repressed” (ix-x). The Vietnam War is still recalled and compared to any war in American history. Compared to Vietnam War, the World War II was a “good war”. The Gulf War (1991) was a way of burying that “sin” away and put it to an end (Summers 53). American playwrights responded to Vietnam War in three ways; in realistic documentation of the combat (usually based on a personal experience of the war), such as in the work of David Rabe and Stephen Metcalfe; in nostalgic comparison to World War II, as in Wilson’s *Talley & Son*; and finally in a complete avoidance of the war and its memory. Meanwhile, in his examination of 1970s drama, Mark Fearnow concludes that there was a trend towards a “drama of malaise”. He identifies the following plays drama of malaise: *Kennedy’s Children* (1975) by Robert Patrick,

*Streamers* (1976) by David Rabe, and *5<sup>th</sup> of July* (1978) by Lanford Wilson. Fearnow notices that they share a sense of being drained up or exhausted after the upheavals of the 1960s (425). It is true that the three plays incorporate that sense of disappointment in the lost hopes and idealism of 1960s America, but they are different in their projection of the Vietnam War experience. Rabe's plays, for instance, mostly document the war itself and what was happening in Vietnam. *Kennedy's Children* shares the same frustrations of the post-war generation with the *5<sup>th</sup> of July*, but it is not only focused on the Vietnam War. What distinguishes Wilson's play is that he does not document anything about the war. Unlike *Talley & Son*, in *5<sup>th</sup> of July* nothing is communicated about the war or what happened in the war field. That part is irrelevant according to Wilson. What really matters is how these experiences redefined and reshaped the veterans, American individuals, and the American nation.

## 2.5 MYTHS AND COUNTERMYTHS

The myths that Wilson questions, as explained in the past part of this chapter, are the mainstream myths of freedom, equality, pride, patriotism, and democracy that contradicted their practices. He concludes in *Fifth of July* that there is no "Saving Grace" of the Vietnam War or any other American war (89). The American myths are as meaningless as the Eskimo's myth that Weston tells the group. The Eskimo family ice all the meat in one block and cannot melt it when they start to feel hungry. One person farts on the meat to melt the ice and the whole piece is ruined. The family starved to death (49). The moral of the myth according to John is "Heroic actions must have saving result" (51). Ken, who interprets the myth as a Vietnam veteran, expresses the futility of any heroic actions. His personal experience is the experience of a generation, including John, Gwinn and June, who realizes that the war "fucked

us” (88). The anger and disappointment that they still hold is not a result of the war only but is a comment on the failed idealism of the 1960s more generally.

The Berkeley student protests campaigned for freedom, equal civil rights, feminism, social equality and ending the war. Their dreams, as they recall in the play, were naïve and unrealistic. To admit that they could not achieve what they had aimed to is still difficult. They created their countermyths and dwell on their claimed achievements. June responds angrily to her daughter who does not understand their history, “You’ve no idea of the country we almost made for you. The fact that I think it’s all a crock now does not take away from what we almost achieved” (57). Gwen’s response to the discussion is simply suggesting to allow people live in their own delusions, “you really don’t tell someone that they aren’t what they think they are” (57). Certain narratives should not be questioned or challenged. And though the 1960s generation questioned old mainstream American myths, they are not ready to let anybody examine their countermyths.

The anti-Vietnam War movement is one example of the countermyths. It is still debatable whether it contributed to ending the war as many of its advocates claim or whether it had no effect on the war outcomes. The legacy of the anti-war movement, according to June, is honourable; it saved lives and changed history. However, Gwen cynically describes the demonstrations scene:

Five hundred thousand people, speaker’s platforms, signs thick as a convention, everybody’s high, we’re bombed, the place is mobbed, everybody’s on the lawn with their shirts off, boys, girls; they’re eating chicken and tacos, the signs say: End the War, Ban the Bomb, Black Power and Gay Power and Women’s Lib; the Nazi Party’s there, the unions,



demanding jobs, they got Chicano Power and Free the POW's, and Free the Migrants, Allen Ginsberg is chanting Ommm over the loudspeakers, Coretta King is there: how straight do you have to be to see that nothing is going to come from it? But don't knock your mother, 'cause she really believed that "Power to the People" song, and that hurts. (58)

Gwen explains how they believed in myths at that time, just like Ken enlisting for believing in fighting for his country. According to Wilson, even the 1960s movements should not acquire a legacy as idealistic. They had their mistakes and activities avoided facing their own myths, trying to have their own saving grace.

By examining both the myths and countermyths in the plays, it seems that Wilson is suggesting that mythology is the source of national and collective identification in American history; the one-sided political narrative of war in American history which encourages a never-ending cycle of violent reactions towards "others" who are not identified as Americans.

The continuity of the nation's mythmaking which produces a cycle of violence, alienation, and is presented in Wilson's short play, *The Family Continues* (1972). There are no props in the play, the cycle and actions are carried out by actors (Figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). Actors' bodies are used to perform as a car or any required props. The play has an existential tone both theatrically and thematically. It is a bare stage with actors playing several repeated roles (138). The play starts with Steve and a narrator telling the ten phases of Steve's life. Then, he starts with another New Steve and the same ten phases are repeated in an endless cycle. The cycle life of Steve is a failure and no Steve manage to survive because he is always doomed to go through the same steps. The failure starts at "Phase three. Enlistment and leaving home.

Basic training and two years service- ... killing his second person, drunk and disorderly, A.W.O.L. ... dishonourable discharged, getting out” (141). Steve, who represents any American, is directed to do everything according to a social, political, and educational system that is irrelevant to him. No matter how he resists or fights he will end up dying for nothing. Unlike his other plays, Wilson here is cynical and gloomy. It looks like an endless process with no hope of breaking the cycle or changing the course of history.

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Photograph removed due to permissions issue.

Figs. 2.1 *The Family Continues*, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, photographs, T-Pho B.

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Photograph removed due to permissions issue.

Fig. 2.2 *The Family Continues*, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, photographs, T-Pho B.

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Fig. 2.3 *The Family Continues*, from The New York Library of Performing Arts, Billy Theatre Division, photographs, T-Pho B.

## 2.6 CONCLUSION

The Talley's trilogy marks transition to the realistic well-made plays in Wilson's playwriting career. In terms of content, the concentrated political expression is evident. In his Introduction to the trilogy, Wilson indicates that the purpose of the trilogy is to reflect on a generation that, like Kenny in *5<sup>th</sup> of July*, "felt misled, deceived" by "a defeat: the war [that] was all but forgotten, pushed under the rug" (1-2). References to World War II, the Vietnam War, and the politics of the Cold War are a presentation of the American process of recreating myths and reconstructing historical narratives to survive an idealistic national identity that does not exist. The conflicted situation between a nostalgic sentiment to an absent national identity and the characters' current context, identifying as an American becomes impossible.

The political voice in the plays is direct, radical, and gloomy. An American national identity that was present at some point of history to represent values of dignity, justice, and equality has never been and will never be. The narratives that invented such idealistic values of a unifying national identity are all based on myths.

The 1960s conflicts exposed the applicability of such values in wars and in social challenges. The possibilities of regaining or reconnection with similar national collective identity have diminished. Wilson integrates the use of narratives, bodies, plays' structure, and distancing techniques into well-made conventional plays about war and American family. Characters' collective and individual experiences are very American. Alienation in unsettling war situations disturbed the unifying social bonds and the national sense of belonging.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FEAR AND EXPRESSING IDENTITY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Lanford Wilson's Archive in The University of Missouri, I examined a box of early drafted scripts of *Angels Fall* (1982) where most of Wilson's notes and changes towards the final acting and published editions are focused on highlighting the fear created by an outside source of threat in the play.<sup>59</sup> *Angels Fall* tells the story of six characters; four of them are lost and they reach an old church building in New Mexico. There has been an accident outside, and all roads are announced to be closed. The first script of the play was titled *The Bridge is Out*, as the alleged accident is a bridge out of order preventing everyone from resuming to their intended destinations. However, Father Doherty, the elderly church priest, denies the existence of any bridges outside, insisting that "there's no bridge out... There is no bridge" (5). The situation is intensified by a "freak-out" reaction of Niles, the prancing professor who is accompanied by his young wife Vita on their way to admit the professor to a mental institution (2-6). In the acting and published editions, the accident, as announced by authorities, is a nuclear one, leaking uranium, while Zappy (the tennis player) insists it is just a truck accident on the road (80). The essential experience of the play is not about the source or nature of the presumable threatening accident, but the resulting sense of fear, as I argue in this chapter, reacts instinctively to an existing threat (nuclear accident), fabricated threat (the bridge is out), or exaggerated threat (a truck accident).

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<sup>59</sup> Series 3, Box 10, Folders 3-4.

In the plays written in the 1980s, Wilson shifts from focusing on national identity and the collective experience of alienation, as discussed in the previous chapter, to alienation as an expression of individualistic and existential identity crisis in a culture of fear. The two sources of threat in the plays are: the risks of a nuclear war because of the Cold War (1947-1991), and the outbreak of the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in America in 1981. The threats create an intense sense of anxiety and fear of the outside and outsiders, forcing characters to seek seclusion inside locked settings (a loft or a church in this case). The metaphorical sealed setting allows characters to reflect on a social context where their expression of identities is minimised by politics of fear and their existence is objectified by capitalism. Unlike marginal characters in Wilson's earlier plays, where alienation was manifested by explicit social isolation, here characters are successful individuals who seem to live in harmony with their social contexts but feel a deep sense of self-alienation. In that sociopolitical contexts, this chapter examines, firstly, the presentation of the characters' experiences of self-alienation concealed by their identifications (teacher, doctor, priest, artist) in external social contexts. Secondly, the chapter considers the manifestations of self-alienation through fear of intimacy, inability of self-expression or artistic expression, and a sense of meaninglessness and powerlessness. The contrast between the terrifying outside and the safe inside was present in Wilson's early plays at the Caffe Cino as examined in chapter one.

This existential experience of alienation will be examined in two-act plays: *Angels Fall* (1982) and *Burn This* (1986), with reference to three one-act plays: *Say De Kooning* (1983), *A Poster of the Cosmos* (1987), and *The Moonshot Tape* (1990).

*Angels Fall* was first presented at The New World Festival in Miami in 1982. Later that year, it opened at The Circle Repertory Company in New York. It moved to

The Longacre Theatre on Broadway in 1983 but did not manage to run for more than few performances due to lack of marketing according to Wilson. It was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play in 1983 (*Collected Works*, 193). The play received a harsh review from theatre professor, Jonathan Saville in 1984 describing it as “a bad play” and insisting that “characters lack the ability to compel our interest because the playwright has been feeble, or uncertain, or shallow in endowing them with objectives” (2). His criticism of the presentation of characters as “states” rather than people that audience can relate to is arguable, as Wilson intentionally introduces characters in a state of self-alienation; lost, aimless and existentially exhausted. In the examined archival production history of the play, it has not been produced in theatres after 1985 (B.10 F.3-4). The combination of intense philosophical arguments and lack of an energetic plot and action (the sense of fear and exhaustion) might be the reason of the lack of interest in reviving the play.<sup>60</sup>

The second play, *Burn This* premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, 1987, then in the 890 Theatre in New York. In the same year, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company presented the play at the Royal George Theatre in Chicago. It moved to Broadway in the Plymouth Theatre in October 1987. In 1990, it was performed in London at the Hampstead Theatre and then moved to the Lyric Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue (Dean 28-29). Internationally, the play was produced by Sydney Theatre Company in October 1990 and in Japan with Japanese casting in September 1991 (B.6 F.13). The most recent Broadway revival of the play in Hudson Theatre closed in July 2019 and was

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<sup>60</sup> One explanation of the play’s failure to continue in Broadway or receive further productions is the bleak atmosphere. Most of Wilson’s plays lack a unifying plot and they can be identified as state or situation plays, but they will be able to engage audience due to their dynamic nature (movement, music, etc.) and interesting characters. In *Angels Fall*, characters are exhausted (physically and mentally) and intentionally lack any interest due to their existential crisis.



nominated for three Tony Awards including best revival, best leading actor (Adam Driver), and best featured actor (Brandon Uranwitz).

### 3.2 FEAR AND IDENTITY

In his book *Culture of Fear Revisited* (1997), sociology professor Frank Furedi suggests that every society has a “distinct” culture of fear including sources of threats, social responses, and ways of expressing fear. Due to being “preoccupied” by such threats for long, fear has become the “default response to life itself” (ix). In *Politics of Fear*, (2005), he examines the applications of fear culture in political systems (2). Furedi argues that fear and anxiety generated by politicians make people feel powerless and unable to engage in any political activity. They turn into a “passive” mode of being due to “exhaustion of public” (72-73). The exhaustion is a result of continuous futile engagement in intimidating and aggressive social and political activities (4).<sup>61</sup> Though such conclusions are not framed by a certain political system (he refers to Western countries in general), they were useful to the American sociology professor Barry Glassner to apply them to the American context. In *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (2010), Glassner lists the threats fabricated or exaggerated by politicians and media. He points out the “sick-society” narrative creating during the 1980s and early 1990s. He defines it as a society intimidated by many threats such as war, crime, death, and terrorism, but unable to confront such risks as individuals or communities. They are forced into an exaggeratedly generated

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<sup>61</sup> Furedi refers also to the exhaustion of the political system that fails to end the state of fear and anxiety (15).

fear response to be controlled by the political system (295).<sup>62</sup> Fear is more likely to paralyse any public reaction or shift public's unquestionable trust to authority figures and politicians, in the case of 1980s America, the rising Right-wing conservatives during Ronald Regan administration (Wodak 5-8). The inability to engage in political activities and political change is resulted from the state of powerlessness that I have explained in the introductory chapter.

The two major sources of anxiety and fear in the plays' contexts are the nuclear war threats in *Angels Fall*, and AIDS in *Burn This*. In both plays, the social spaces outside the locked settings are presented as intimidating and unsafe spaces, in quest for destructive nuclear power, indifferent towards people and have a capitalist, industrial, and inhuman nature.<sup>63</sup> This leads characters to be alienated; not only in the sense of being spatially and architecturally isolated in locked settings, but being terrified, and emotionally and physically drained. This experience of alienation is expressed in several ways such as incapability of expressing individual identity, self-delusion, bad faith in Sartre's sense or a lack of passion and meaning in life.

It is a crisis of the modern individual in an industrial and materialistic society: an experience intrinsic to human existence in general. Though alienation was still prevalent in the American society of the time, Wilson explored the sources and implications of such

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<sup>62</sup> Glassner insists in his writings that is used as a marketing tool in American culture even before 9/11. Such examination of fear in marketing whether in economic or political sense requires engaging in an interdisciplinary discussion that it is not relevant to the argument of this chapter. *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, edited by Brian Massumi; *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America*, by Christopher D. Bader et al.; and *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* by Corey Robin can be consulted for further details on the politics of fear in American context.

<sup>63</sup> The concept of social spaces is multi-dimensional and complex. Here it is used to refer to the spaces where characters presumably engage with their assigned social roles (either by choice or enforced by social pressures) outside the staged settings. This is based on sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin's definition of social spaces in his book *On the Practice of Sociology* (1998). The social space, according to him, is a space where a group of people are defined by their social interactions with others (208). In that sense, the staged settings are social spaces as well. Accordingly, the contrast (in the plays) is not only between the inside and the outside as personal and public spaces, but also between two different social spaces.

experience in a wider sense. Unlike in earlier plays where alienation was mainly social and explicit, here it is the experience of people who seem to live in harmony with their social contexts but feel a deep sense of self-alienation. This sense is no longer expressed in physical isolation, or even the rejection of society. Characters are successful in monetary terms and lead the lives they are expected to, however at some point, they come to face the fact that they are pretending to be fine, and that the kind of life they live does not represent or reflect how they see themselves. In a society with a capitalist system and an industrial and materialistic nature, they live as inhuman beings, working only to respond to the system's needs and requirements, and not to express or satisfy their own needs.<sup>64</sup>

To start with, *Angels Fall* is an apocalyptic narrative of six people locked in a church. The first couple is Professor Niles Harris, who is a fifty-six-year-old history of art professor, and his young wife, Vita. They are on their way to a psychiatric institution to admit Niles. The second pair of characters are Zappy, a professional tennis player and a “toyboy” for Marion Clay, an old widow. There is also Father Doherty, the sixty-five-year-old priest, and his foster son Don Tabaha, a half-Native American intern (5). Placing the characters in a ruined and isolated church building in the middle of the New Mexico desert is essential in creating an atmosphere of threatening fear (Fig. 3.1).

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<sup>64</sup> This meaning of alienation is discussed in detail in the introduction to the thesis.

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Fig. 3.1 From left, Professor Niles, Marion Clay, Vita, and Father Doherty in *Angels Fall*.  
From New York Public Library, Performing Arts Research Collections – Theatre (\*T-Pho B  
(*Angels Fall*)).

In *Angels Fall*, Wilson presents four characters with four different images of self-alienation. Niles's failure to reach a required identity, Don fights an imposed identity, Zappy and his self-deceiving mechanism, and finally Father Doherty who is the ultimate presentation of bad faith. One can look at the characters' expressions of self-alienation as four levels or stages of coming from a total unawareness of self-alienation (Doherty), to a state of anxiety and feeling of not belonging (Zappy), to the struggle for self-identification (Don), and finally, coming to full realization of the inescapable alienating nature of this world (Niles). Whether we look at it as stages of the same process or images of self-alienation, they are still four different individual experiences that would sum up the existentialist dilemma of self-alienation.

The most explicit and dramatic experience of self-alienation is that of Niles. Professor Niles Harris is an author and a professor in art history for thirty years. He

comes to the church with his wife Vita, on their way to a mental institution. He went through a moment of realization where he felt that everything he has been doing before is meaningless. Reaching that moment led him to the dramatic point of tearing his books apart in front of his class. It was a relieving thing to do and to announce that the whole teaching process is useless. He then drove his car into the college gate, got fired, and celebrated with a drink (36-37). It looks like a moment of relief and that Niles has expressed his opinion out loud to the world. However, it is clear that he was going through a lot of anxiety and stress before and after that moment. Niles explains his crisis that led to the point of breakdown,

NILES: I used to be a professor, and I used to be an author. But fortunately I experienced what you might call a crisis of faith, a disturbance in my willful suspension of disbelief that allowed me to see what I had done for what it was. You see, while framing the schema of my new book, I made the tactical error of rereading my other books. (34)

Niles comes to the moment of realizing that what he did for thirty years is not a genuine representation of who he is as a human being. It looks as if he was living a life controlled by unknown power that led him that way. Going back to read his previous books before publishing the new one woke him up to the confront his journey and production in life objectively,

NILES: Never again, never again. All I said, really, was that I reread the three books that I had written and didn't believe a word of them. Not one. So, naturally, I asked myself what on earth I had been doing for thirty years, and woke up one morning to discover that I suspected that I had been bought.(35)

The expression Niles uses “been bought” is part of the religious image that Wilson draws for Niles from the very beginning of the play, “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings (*New International Version*, 1 Cor. 7. 23). To understand this reference let us go back to the two verses before, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord’s freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave (1 Cor. 7. 21-22). Throughout the play, Father Doherty repeatedly insists that the job is a call from God. Whether a teacher, a player, a priest, “One of those professions, I’ve always thought, one is called to. As an artist is called, or as a priest is called, or as a doctor is called” (96). Looking at the whole idea of doing something in life as a call is Doherty’s way of turning jobs that alienate people into a meaningful mission. Giving that meaning to a job would help those people to continue living and doing what they are asked to do. In the Bible, people were not free without God. They are slaves to their needs, limitations, and (if taken literary) they can be slaves to others. The only way to be free is by join God or Christ. Ironically, the freed person will be a slave of God. In that sense, The “called” person is “bought” and changed from being a slave of an earthly being to be a slave of a heavenly being. Doherty believes that people, including himself, are called to serve God and their earthly jobs are a way of serving God in that sense.

Niles gets to a dramatic point in the play where he is done with arguing with Doherty and fighting for Don. Father Doherty calls him a doctor and Niles to response to that in a very aggressive and irritated way,

NILES: “(*Loud*) I’m never addressed as “Doctor,” and I’ve recently turned in my badge. “Professor” was preferred to “Doctor,” but I didn’t insist on it. I’m sorry. I’m being snide and I don’t know why. My wife and I are accustomed to being

mildly insulted by students. I'm not myself, as I said. And whomever I am, I have little control of him. (54)

Later on, Niles collapses physically and mentally, and Don suggests it is only low blood sugar. However, Niles is aware that this is a representation of his own situation. It is not a physical problem only; he feels sick spiritually as well, "I refuse to believe all my histrionics can be ascribed to low blood sugar" (92). After his big fight with Doherty, Niles felt as if he is drained and unable to fight anymore. He starts to act calmly and even agree to stay with Vita for the ceremony.

Another image of alienation is presented through the character Don Tabaha, the "half-Indian intern" (36). Don faces a conflict between two identities. Through Don and his identity crisis, Wilson presents the issue of Native American identity crisis. In Wilson's previous plays, except one character in *Gingham Dog*, characters are white Americans. The Native American identity in the American context appears in Wilson's in two manners: The individual identity crisis in *Angles Fall* as presented by Don Tabaha and the collective cultural identity of Native American and the expression of identity through ceremonies, rituals, and cultural activities in later plays, *Redwood Curtain* (1992), *Sympathetic Magic* (1998), and *Rain Dance* (2002). Wilson introduces Native American ceremonies, dances, and stories in a context of misrepresentation. In later plays, there the use of Native American ceremonies and dances introduce the cultural representation that will be discussed in chapter 4.

There is a lack of theatrical studies on the representation of Native Americans in American theatre. However, there are a good number of studies on Native

American identity and culture that gain attention in the 1960s (Garrouette 6).<sup>65</sup> The Native American studies documented the institutional and organised practices and policies of what Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler and Christy Stanlake called “ethnic cleansing” by American authorities under The Indian Removal Act in 1830 (17). The white-dominant government attempted not only to demolish the physical presence of Native American, but also to demolish their individual and cultural identities, their self-expression, their governance, and their sense of tribal belonging (Wilmeth and Miller 276; Dunbar-Ortiz 5-7). The resistance of such discriminatory policies continued for decades but gained attention of the American public through the Red Power Movement in the 1960s that demanded reclaiming identity and Natives rights. This encouraged many Native Americans to reclaim their Native American identity by using their original names and claiming their tribal belonging that they had to abandon to fit in the mainstream systems (Edmunds 734). The demands to recognise the Native American identity and the right of people to claim and express their beliefs and culture increased and achieved political gains in the 1970s (Stanlake, 8). Besides the social and legal recognition, such efforts allowed for more representation of the Native American culture and introduced a growing interest in their performances, introducing many Native American playwrights, performers, and artists into the 1960s scenes (Geiogamah and Darby 1).

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<sup>65</sup> In Native American studies and literature there are several terms to refer to the same group of people, such as Native Americans, Indians, American Indians, and indigenous people. In this thesis I will use the two terms used by Wilson to refer to the same group of people which are Native Americans and Indians. Aware of the complications that might raise from using them, but not necessarily relevant to the discussion here. For more on terms and complications of the discipline see *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* by Hazel Hertzberg (1971), and M. Roemer’s introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* edited by Porter/Roemer and Joy Porter (2005).



In Wilson's play, *Angels Fall*, there is a pressure on Don to abandon his Native American identity or conform to stereotypes of mainstream America. Such pressures existed in the literature of native American studies. Don is a foster of Father Doherty who attempts throughout the play to force Don to be identified in a certain way and try to take away his sense of self-governance and self-determination. The policies of "Amiricainazation" of Natives in America started through education and engagement in the work force (Hertzberg 23-24). The Native American families were forced to send their children to certain schools that did not allow self-expression or practicing their cultural activities (Edmunds 734). According to Margaret D. Jacobs Source, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (bia), "claimed that many Indian individuals and families lacked the resources and skills to properly care for their own children" and hence encouraged the process of adapting those children by white middle-class American families. She insists that the processes of children removal from their families and their tribes, and the normalisation of such practices caused several social problems such as separation trauma, isolation, and identity crisis (137-140). Darby et al. also reveals that the "practice of re-educating youth in accordance with white, Christian, patriarchal values" with support of the church started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (23).

In the play, Dan Tabaha is a young Native American, foster son of Father Doherty in exitance of his Indian community. Don is torn between staying with his Native American people working as a healer or join the melting pot of America and pursue his dream in a cancer research institution in the city. The conflict is apparently before the nuclear incident and people arriving the place. Father Doherty tries to prevent Don from leaving the place by every possible way. Sometimes, Doherty hides the keys of the motorcycle, other times by emotionally blackmailing, and in few times

by talking down to him and reminding him of his inferiority as an Indian. Doherty insists that Don should stay and it's his right as a foster father to keep him, "he must follow his calling and minister to his own people" (50).

Don's crisis of his Native American identity is demonstrated in the play through three situations: the attempts to change his original name, and the repeated stereotyping attempts, and Doherty's attempts to control Dan's future. To start with, from the very beginning he is so attached to his Indian name and does not accept Doherty calling him with what appears to be a translation of the name,

DOHERTY: Don "By-the-River"

DON: Tabaha

DOHERTY: No no, "By-the-River." Don "By-the-River." Like the song.  
"Don-by-the-riverside." (109)

Doherty's attempts to change Don's family name is significant. It is part of Doherty's attempts to take away any kind of identity and sense of belonging that Don has so he would be easily controlled.

Doherty is degrading Don as a Native American with Doherty bigoted and racist comments. That insist on placing Don with the stereotypes about being Indian. Such stereotypes were popularised in the American society through media such as the images of the "savage Indian" (Stanlake 4), or "uncivilized" people (Jacobs 139). When Niles asks Doherty if Don's father is Indian the answer is, "We wonder lately if he was even human" (31). In another incident he says to Don, "I think he wanted to be reassured that you wouldn't scalp your co-workers" (81). At the same time, he keeps

accusing Don of being selfish; giving up on his people and wanting to belong to the white people society, “Clean surroundings, intellectual problems, no patients, no pain, no filth, no ugliness. Only success. Even the rabbits and the mice are white” (83).

Don identifies himself as a Native American but not as a doctor. He does not accept the idea that he should deny his own feelings and needs just to prove or validate his origin. Doherty who keeps asking others to consider their jobs as “calls”, laughs at Don’s desire to follow his own call. He attacks the whole idea of cancer research and questions Don qualifications as they are not the reason behind the offer, “Drafting a woman and Indian. It’s a wonder he didn’t grab a black and a Chinese. Oh, they’re probably already there (82). The purpose of getting Don to the institution is only to show diversity and acceptance of others. Doherty keeps criticizing the path that Don is going to take in life and Don is unable to express himself or face Doherty directly because of his emotional attachment to Doherty as a father and to his own people.

The conflict with Doherty is Don’s fight for his freedom to choose and be a person that is responsible for his own life. It represents Don’s attempts to gain self-governance and resentment of any authoritarian attempts to place him in context that does not express his identity. In When Doherty says that Doctor Alice, another inter, is not “under my wing”, Don response angrily to that, “I’m not under your wing, Father” (75). In a last attempt to convince Doherty, Don announces at the end that, “I discovered I have a very special talent for research. If that’s hearing a call, then I’ve been called”. However, Doherty deceptively asks if he was called to leave his people (102). The call is a call imposed by authority and control not a free individual and personal call.

Zappy and Doherty are the two characters who believe they are satisfied with following their “call”. However, saying that loud to other people does not mean it is necessarily true. Self-alienation, and any other form of alienation, is not really a problem if people are not aware of it. It is only a problem if the individual is aware of it and feel that he is missing a connection with something outside or inside his being (Sinari 127). Niles is clearly aware of his alienation and he expresses that in every possible way. On the other hand, Zappy feels that he is fine and already know what he is supposed to do in life. His speech on the moment he discovers that he is a tennis player shows certainty and satisfaction of being able to identify himself and work within that identification,

ZAPPY: ... I said “This is me. This is what I do. What I do is tennis.” And once you know, then there’s no way out. You’ve been showed something. Even if it’s just tennis, you can’t turn around and say you wasn’t showed that. So I went to church and said a novena for those meatballs, ’cause they didn’t know all the butterflies that was in my stomach, that they’d been my angels. ... That’s what I am, ’cause once you know what you are, the rest is just work (97).

In his monologue, Zappy explains the moment when he found out he is a tennis player. He is in fifth grade, weak, skinny, feeling inferior and insignificant. However, the moment he held the racket by accident and decided to give it a try, he decided that it is his calling and purpose of life. The incident of trying to play tennis gave him recognition and acceptance from others. At such young age, looking at that moment as revelation or inspiration in a spiritual sense is naive. Like Doherty, he believes that it is a magical “call” from God, “That “call” man, that’s the moment, man. That’s magic. That’s magic. That’s magic” (96). For Zappy, a person is identified by his work “that magic that happens and you know who you are, you know? Like, “I’m a doctor is what I do.” Or “I teach kids.” Or like Marion (96). This immature embracing of tennis playing as a

“magical call” is a deceiving sense of self-identification that is supposed to make his life meaningful. Does all that mean he is not self-alienated? Of course, not. Zappy’s restless behavior, his constant escapes from others by putting on music, and not being able to connect to others all show a contradictory image. Kaplan indicates that in a psychological sense, “those with a poor sense of identity suffer from anxiety in situations that normal people accept calmly” (162). Without his speech, one might assume that Zappy is a lost immature boy looking for his mother. He is overreacting to the situation of being late or missing a match next day and makes it a life-or-death situation. Out of any context that would not make him a tennis player, he might be lost as a person and even dead. His self-deceiving mechanism is also shown in his repetition of this line for example, “I’m healthy, I’m healthy. I’m a physical specimen” (24). As mentioned in earlier, Zappy is not aware of his self-alienation and it feels safe to him to keep himself unaware, “I don’t want to know. I know already. I can’t talk about it. I want to hear this (66). He always keeps his music on and ignores the world. The whole time he was anxious to leave, but when the road is clear, he stands there watching the cars moving, “Oh boy, now I don’t want to go” (104).

If we are to consider the four characters as representatives of different phases of self-alienation, Father Doherty would be the most alienated one. First, he is a priest socially alienated from the world in an isolated church. The only people who would come to his place are the Native Americans. Yet, he still thinks of himself as God’s representative with a mission of guiding people and protect them from the horrible world outside. He is physically isolated, and he knows that his church cannot be found, “No one finds the place unless they’re lost” (11). This image of social alienation is present in Wilson’s early plays. People shut themselves from the world and live in isolation so they can live in their controlled created world that would not be disturbed by reality. His wife is also offstage and not willing to contact people at all.

Doherty is a provocative and irritating person. He knows the truth but chooses to ignore it all the time. He is living in a state of bad-faith or self-deception in Sartre's sense. Sartre introduces the idea of "bad faith" in his book, *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre describes bad faith as a person who denies own self; "bad faith is a lie to oneself", recognizing that lie as something different from lying to others. A person is lying "consciously" knowing the real truth about real identity but still choose to deny it. This does not necessary mean pretending or making up a new identity (like Kierkegaard suggests). The fact of denying what is true is a lie "bad faith" (71). Detmer explains that lying to oneself means that the person knows the truth and he/she chooses to ignore it but at the same time, he/she should be "deceived" or misled into the other lie as a fact. One way of doing this is by agreeing to be "persuaded by weak evidence" (75-84).

Wilson said that he wanted to present a perfect priest who still believes in the possibility of human salvation in a scary world, "how novel, how interesting, how absolutely retrograde to write an intelligent priest who actually believes in God and the betterment of the species. The Brave-with-Arrow Doctor is a composite portrait of some of the Maddening Native Americans I Have met" (192). Nonetheless, in the play, Wilson ends up presenting a sad priest who is so self-deceived that he does not recognize lies or truth anymore. Of course, Don is also not that brave Indian but rather a young lost man fighting for his choice in life. Wilson maintains the hope of salvation represented by Niles.

### **3.2 ART AND RELIGION**

In his introduction to the printed version of the play, Wilson calls *Angels Fall* a "situation play". He also asserts that he wanted to write the play in a closed setting. He called it "a Locked Door play" where "Everybody gets trapped in a place and can't leave and the experience of being cooped-up changes them- or not" (*Collected Works* 192). The

setting is a closed area usually with an entrance but no exit. The characters are trapped once they enter by an incident happening offstage. Once they are in, they are forced to stay in, or they choose to stay. Some characters might try to go, but they fail for a reason, or are simply not willing enough to leave. Walter Kerr, in his article “The Hazard and Pains Plaguing an Actor’s Life”, categorises *Angels Fall* as a “snowbound play”, where “a group of strangers, constituting something of a social cross-section, is forced by natural or unnatural means to remain where it is until the weather or the gunsmoke clears, by which time some or all members of the imprisoned party will have undergone character transformations” (2-3). Though it is true that the play fits such categorisation, as all of the characters are strangers forced to stay in because of a nuclear incident, the experience is not a changing or transformational one, it is more like a confessional. The characters do not really go through major changes, at least not by the end of the play.

Wilson uses this kind of setting in his early plays to emphasise the physical isolation from the world. However, the setting of the isolated church here goes beyond that direct idea. The characters are forced or allowed to look at their realities in an objective way, either by getting out of their social context, separating from their partners who identify them, or facing their real situation through others’ experiences. They have no choice but to face the truth of their alienation that is concealed by the harmony and success they live in in the outside world. More importantly, the setting is symbolic. It represents the feelings of people living in the modern world who feel trapped in a scary atmosphere.

The setting of *Burn This* is totally different from that of *Angels Fall*. *Burn This* takes place in a New York flat. Anna is a choreographer coming back from the funeral of her best friend and flatmate, Robbie, a gay dancer. Robbie’s death during a boat trip with his boyfriend is the focus of the whole play. Larry is another gay flatmate working for an

advertising agency. Anna is already in a dull relationship with Burton, a science fiction writer. Later on, she meets Robbie's brother, Pale, and they start a passionate love affair. The play is not a sealed setting play like *Angels Fall*, however, the setting is significant as it reflects a very industrial looking place. The flat is similar to a factory in its design; it is "a huge loft in a converted cast-iron building in lower Manhattan, New York City. *Factory windows, a very large sloping skylight... The place is sparsely furnished. ...There are pipes on the ceiling, an old sprinkler system is still intact. ... A fire escape runs across the entire upstage*" (5). Later, Pale calls it a factory place where they can make cars (28). The loft setting represents the typical loft lifestyle that was popular in New York and its combination of art and industry such as Andy Warhol's Factory studios in the 1960s (Fig. 3.2). In her book *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Sharon Zukin explains that embracing such lifestyle by artists was a way of emphasising their "individuality" as the assumption (which not necessarily true) was that lofts attracted unusual people looking for original spaces (14-69). A more important indication is that loft lifestyle means that artists can work and live at the same space to overcome the separation between work and personal life (68). The idea is that Capitalism, according to Marx, alienates people because they are producing things that are irrelevant to their needs. When it comes to art, artists need to express themselves through art so that separation between product and the worker is not there anymore. However, as that will be discussed later, artists still need to make their products "marketable" in the same capitalist system they are trying to escape. They become either isolated from the system or self-alienated from their artistic self-expression.



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Photograph removed due to permissions issue.

Fig. 3.2 The setting of *Burn This*, 1987 production by John Lee Beatty. From New York Public Library of Performing Arts, Performing Arts Research Collections – Theatre (\*T-Pho B (Wilson, Lanford).

The factory-like setting of the loft in *Burn This* contradicts the artistic nature of its inhabitants. They are stuck in a materialistic and capitalist world that treats them as workers in a factory producing things that are irrelevant to their artistic talent. Except for Pale, all the characters are artists who feel that there is an imposed materialistic pressure that prevent them from producing a satisfying artistic work. This can also apply to the church that is supposed to be a spiritual and religious place but contradicted by Father Doherty marketing religious activities and trying to sell them to more people.

Both the church and the factory in the plays have changed to another space for different purposes. They are both turned into living or artistic spaces. By presenting such “transformation”, the space is both alienated and alienating. They are alienated from their nature and the main purposes they are supposed to serve. On the other hand, the settings create confusion causing a sense of physical displacement and alienation to the characters (and audience to some extent). The loft, for example, is not artistic as it supposed to be, it is a cold factory, and the church is nothing but a ruined building.

In *Angels Fall*, alienation in the Bible refers to the idea of being alienated from God by sins, when the person is not following the way of God in living (Schacht 7). The idea of alienation in Christianity, according to Mészáros, is always presented in connection with disobeying God, as “man has alienated himself from ‘the ways of God’” (28). This state started with the story of Man falling from Eden because of the Original Sin, which represents the first separation from God. Following this incident, Man was alienated from God and from his own nature of purity and spiritual perfection, and he was banished from Eden (the epitome of perfection and eternal happiness). This idea of separation by sins clearly makes alienation from God an inevitable experience for all human beings, as they are all sinners. The only way to escape alienation is by reconnecting to God by following the Christian doctrine.

This separation from God can be a form of self-alienation. The biblical idea is that a person as a being consists of man and God on the one hand, and body and soul on the other. Any separation between any of the two items will cause alienation. The two entities are supposed to be united. However, as man is separated from God by his sins, his soul and body are also separated, and his soul is trapped in an earthly body (Macquarrie 312). Therefore, by being alienated from God, man is alienated from an important part of his own being. The Bible states, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (*New International Version*, Colossians 1:20-22). Assuming that God is an existing part in human beings, losing that connection with God means losing connection with self (self-alienation).

The problem here is that overcoming alienation by reconnecting with God looks impossible. First, because the image of God presented by Christianity makes God a

stranger: an unreachable image for people. Self-alienation, as Hegel believes, is caused because man is not able to find his self-realisation without connecting to an outer stranger (God). A person always needs to overcome that feeling of being a sinner; a sin that separates him from that divine being. Therefore, reconnecting with God looks like the only way to understand one's self, nature, and the world. Humans are not free to find the truth in themselves and in others, but are imprisoned by the idea of God and sin. Not being able to avoid the inherent nature of sin, a person will fail to relate to God and consequently fail to reach self-realisation and overcome alienation (Baum 8-13).

Secondly, the concept of God has disappeared in the modern world. Frederick C. Beiser suggests that Christianity itself contributed to the diminishment of the concept of God. The Christ who represented the only connection between man and God is dead. By Christ's death, there is no connection between God and man on earth anymore. It is as if "God himself is dead" (137).

Facing the fact of God's death demonstrates modern man's experience of alienation from God in Wilson's plays. In that experience, "man is seen as not only separated from God, but as separated from meaningful experience with other men, institutions, Nature, and himself" (Johnson 8). At the same time, the god that people are looking for is dead or distorted by Christianity that has made it impossible and irrational to believe in Him. Nietzsche states that "'God is dead'; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable" (228). Durkheim also expresses the problem of the dying concept of God as "The former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born" (429). People need God to relate to and overcome their state of spiritual alienation, but the image of God is not convincing or satisfactory anymore, and this is presented as the fault of the Christian religion. Normally, people go to church to seek refuge from the outside world. They come to find peace and connect with God. However, in *Angels Fall*, the church is a delusional place which promotes lies and bad faith. The delusional role of

religion is suggested by Marx. He wrote in his introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (4). Ironically, Niles who does not believe in anything anymore, replaces the church with Valium. In a sarcastic way he says, “Sanctuary. Well, half a sanctuary” (4). His wife thinks he is talking about the church, while he is actually holding the Valium pill. The church, presented by Doherty, creates that illusion of hope; hope for salvation, or hope that by carrying on in life, people will eventually be rewarded by God.

The idea of self-alienation as caused by alienation from God cannot be missed in *Angels Fall*. The play is full of religious metaphors and references. Wilson starts with an epigraph: a vague poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a nineteenth century poet who was also a priest. Hopkins had some similarities with Father Doherty. The poet kept travelling to serve God, ending in an isolated and depressed state because of his isolation in a church in Dublin. Likewise, Doherty has kept moving from one place to another before ending up in the wreckage of a church in New Mexico that only serves some Native Americans. Serving God is presented as the only way to happiness and meaningful existence. However, ironically, Hopkins’s writings reflected his depression and misery, and as Giles suggested, poetry was his only escape from that misery (183). Father Doherty is actually miserable and disconnected, and expresses his bitterness towards the world by his excessive singing all the time.

Doherty believes that in the modern world, people have replaced God with an uncontrolled quest for nuclear weapons. The church is in New Mexico, the place that witnessed the detonation of the first nuclear bomb in the world. Owning a nuclear weapon and a uranium mine, regardless of how destructive that could be, would lead to the end of

the world. “These shows of power. They’ve always wanted a big terrible God of the Old Testament and now they have Him. They want to see the fiery cloud” (99). The nuclear accident is only a side effect of that quest. It is terrifying to people inside the church, but still less frightening than the idea of having a weapon that could end the world in a minute. Doherty considers such incidents as “rehearsals for the end of the world”, and the positive side of this is that it can bring people together to face it (94). However, Wilson does not offer the church, God or Niles as options for human salvation. Niles indicates that the end of Peter, who responded to Jesus's and God's call, was crucifixion upside down.

In *Angels Fall*, Wilson presents self-alienation as an experience different from one individual to another. Every one of his characters is self-alienated to some degree. Though Wilson does not directly suggest that self-alienation is inherited like the original sin, his existentialist approach of presenting it suggests that it is an inescapable feeling especially in the modern world. The four main characters represent four different images of self-alienation. Some of the characters are aware of their alienation and others are not. In between, we have those who are aware but choose to keep the illusion, as it is their only way to survive. Such tendency is reminders of Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Clinging to illusions and “pipe dreams” was a survival technique for characters. However, Wilson insists on bringing his characters to face the illusion and realise their alienation and experience others’ alienation as well.

In *Burn This*, Wilson presents a more contemporary experience of alienation. It is set in the middle of New York City in a factory style loft, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. Unlike *Angels Fall*, with its philosophical and religious concerns, *Burn This* is more relevant to the modern world of the 1980s, and relates to Wilson’s experience as an

artist as well. The idealistic views of the 1960s were coming to an end. People who cherished human and artistic values came to realise the necessity of joining the real world and focusing on gaining personal success. More specifically, New York represented a welcoming home of arts and creativity, and everybody started to change. Wheeler Winston Dixon describes the rise of the 'yuppie' in New York at that time,

This is the terrible secret, and the burden that all those of my generation who tasted the sweetness of life devoted to the humanities, to the arts, and now have to live in the arid world of the yuppie dead, share. The shift from hippies to yuppies has destroyed the soul of a generation, and left a world populated with the living dead; no wonder zombie movies are so popular now! We have become the zombies, or if we have managed to hold on to some portion of our humanity, we have to live with zombies.... This is the true legacy of yuppiedom; we have become so identified with the products we buy that we have become the product itself. (227-28)

The city started to be less human and more like a big factory where people care only about earning money and progressing, rather than humanistic values. It was difficult for some people to be there, especially those who dreamed of presenting an individual sense of expression. To fit in, they would have to be alienated from their humanity and be a piece in a giant machine. The situation in New York embodied a typical capitalist and materialistic system. However, New York as a city was not only associated with being scary and overwhelming for some people but also by the intense feeling of loneliness due to its alienating and isolating nature.

In Marx's theory, alienation is caused by the competitive nature of capitalism. According to Marx, alienation is caused mainly by the dehumanising process of production, which starts by alienating man from his product. That leads to alienation from

the production process (man's own work), from himself and, from the other members of his society (14). In capitalist societies, working men are only objects or 'abstraction', as Marx calls them, enslaved by the capitalists. People are forced to produce a product that does not satisfy their needs or does not feel relevant to them as human beings. The whole production process treats people as an object or a machine to produce things, ignoring their individual human needs, values, or abilities (Beiser 248). The production process not only affects man's work, but his whole existence. Mandel explains the different images of alienation in modern capitalist societies. They include limiting people's abilities, the lack of communication with others and the feeling of isolation and loneliness (25-30). Fromm also considered alienation as the main influence of capitalism on man. A person is not allowed to contribute to society as he does not have any real involvement or impact on what is going on. Working in such a society simply becomes a way to get financial support and keep living in that society (120-180). This leads to the alienation from others. The competition for getting a job and work becomes only a way of surviving in such a society (Caoili 370). This competitive nature makes it hard for people to relate to the social context and to other people in a human way.

Erich Fromm describes the kind of character that would fit in to such a system as a character that is ready to work in harmony with others, ready to consume; they should be independent, but at the same time easily controlled by the system. (110). He specifically refers to the fact that work is of no value to people but is done solely to pay their bills. However, workers would eventually feel that money, as a purpose, is not satisfying or rewarding. People work in an alienating system to earn money and subsequently spend that money to consume things that alienates them even more (128- 86).

The feeling of being trapped in a job that looks alienating is even worse for people who believe they have creative talents. Anna and Burton in the play are aware of their potential as artists, but they are unable to free themselves out of the system to work on their passions. Anna is a thirty-two-year-old choreographer who has just returned from Robbie's funeral. She is depressed and struggling to get back to work and life. Such feelings could be a result of losing her best friend (33). However, as the play goes on, we find out that she is in a boring relationship with Burton that does not really involve any physical or emotional attraction. Oddly, she is considering marrying him, which cannot be explained as a natural result of a good and satisfying relationship, as Anne Dean suggests (109). The only possible reason for this is because she feels that as a woman, she is supposed to get married and have children, even if she does not really want to. Larry suggests she should marry Burton to get enough money to buy things (19). Anna also makes fun of the idea of having children and comments on the missing sexual relationship with Burton (57). The idea of marriage is not an expression of Anna's love or feelings towards Burton; it is rather a part of the expected lifestyle she is supposed to be leading.

On a personal level, Anna feels she is not producing any meaningful dances because she has lost the only person who believed in her talent, Robbie. Nevertheless, later she comes to realise that, "as an artist I have absolutely no life experience to draw from. Or else I'm just too chicken to let anyone see what I really am" (53). Only when she meets Pale does she recognise that fear is what is holding her back from expressing herself. Pale is a typical blue-collar New Yorker: rude, aggressive, very blunt, and completely the opposite of the image of an artist that she is looking for. Anna falls passionately in love with Pale, who is already married, while she is still in a relationship with Burton. There is no conflict, for she clearly knows that Pale will



bring her back in touch with her body and her talent, but she keeps pushing him away. Most of the time she is not able to express herself or explain what she is doing, but Pale puts it simply and says that she is scared to “feel something” (85). She alienates her feelings and accepts to be with Burton and in a boring job, rather than acknowledging her human essence and living accordingly.

Burton is a successful science-fiction writer. His success is in term of selling a lot of books. However, much like Anna, he feels trapped and unable to express his talent as a writer. Burton writes science-fiction by mixing all the appealing things of the age together, much like making a commercial product. Larry wonders if turning Burton’s scripts into some cheap movie would bother him, and Burton’s answer is, “I saw my bank account when they bought it” (16). Writing for commercial success gets the money needed for leading a luxurious life in New York. Underneath that, Burton is aware of his self-alienation and feelings of loneliness that are expressed later in another script. Anna reads the script and comments on how sad it makes her feel:

ANNA. Oh, I like it. It’s so sad. God.

BURTON: Sad? I thought they were having fun.

ANNA: Oh no, sure. But underneath all that, God, they’re so lonely.

BURTON: Yeah, I know, but I don’t want to think about that part or I won’t be able to do it. Aw, to hell with it, anyway. I want something larger than life.

Those people are smaller than life. (52)

Ironically, Burton is never able to express anything in words. He always uses disconnected sentences with no real meaning. An example of that is when he is telling Anna and Larry about his new book:

BURTON: Takes place in may be Jasper, way up in northern Alberta in ...with the aurora and ... I don't know, about ten different things. This one's weird. Amazing things happen to your mind, you feel like you're all alone, or you're one with the ... something, or ... well ... we don't have to talk about it now. (12)

The only time Burton can express himself in a very artistic way is when he is telling Anna and Larry about his dream of writing a love story. He imagines how he would write a love story, and wonders about the kind of feelings that keep people waiting for each other, allowing them to go through all the miseries of life. Then all of a sudden, going back to reality, he changes it into a horror story (13-14). He also expresses his nostalgia for the old days when people “felt things in a much more profound way” (13). The literary expression of such feelings still attracts him to write a love story that would not fit in with the contemporary world. He says, “I had this book of Nordic tales, totally foreign from our stupid urban microcosm, all that crap” (13). Though Burton does not embrace his dream of writing what he believes, he gives Anna a piece of advice for her artistic project: “Make it as personal as you can. Believe me, you can't imagine a feeling everyone hasn't had. Make it personal, tell the truth, and then write ‘Burn this’ on it” (60). It is a suggestion Anna uses later and designs a dance about her love story with Pale.

At this point, it is important to refer shortly to a one-act play called *Say de Kooning*. The play was written in 1983 for the East End Gay Organization. The main focus of the play is Bob who is a gay painter intimidated by the overwhelming nature of New York, so he locked himself in a summerhouse. He is occasionally visited by Willie and Mandy who are lesbian couple. Bob fails to get recognition as he is isolated from the outside world and at the same time, he tries to find his own voice in painting. Willie expresses the nature of New York lifestyle that Bob is avoiding, “My life is spent in a

system designed exclusively to grind down my energy. The city bureaucracy from clerk to judge is manned by a special senseless, sexless breed of worker-bee that cannot hear, see feel, smell or taste. They have no eyes, they have no ears, they have no nerve endings” (207). Later, they discuss how Bob is scared from people who move in crowded places in hurry (213). He is not able to live or express himself in such hostile environment. The period he lived in New York he managed to paint and sell paintings, but he was not happy with that. However, he realized that he could not do it anymore. That moment came when The famous American artist Willem de Kooning saw Bob paintings and commented, “the most beautiful work I’ve ever seen, only now you have to go on and say who you are with the drawing. Go on to express you” (214). Bob leaves New York and he has no intention of going back. He prefers to express himself isolated from the crowd rather than living scared and alienated elsewhere.

Returning to *Burn This*, Burton’s failure to express himself and submitting his writings to the pressures of marketing requirements reflects Wilson’s own experience as a playwright. Wilson’s early plays in the Caffe Cino such as *Home Free!* and *The Madness of Lady Bright* marked his way of experimenting with theatre forms and controversial themes. This was part of the experimental and controversial nature of Off-Off-Broadway movement. Stephen Bottoms indicates that coming overground, later, and having the recognition by commercial theatre led to the decline of such movement as it lost its distinguished nature (259). Wilson, and other playwrights in such venues, was unrecognized or seen by the mainstream audience. This isolation allowed free and unconditional self-expression to artists and playwrights. However, after receiving commercial and critical recognition in Broadway by plays such as *5<sup>th</sup> of July* and the *Hot l Baltimore*, Wilson felt the need to maintain that and he started to write accordingly. Though his major plays in the 1980s (*Angels Fall* and *Burn This*) were well structured and conventional, Wilson felt alienated from his artistic expression. In several interviews,

he expressed how he needed to compromise and avoid radical themes or direct presentation of such themes of as he used to do earlier. Such anxiety towards expressing himself showed in the way he tried to modify his plays to fit in Broadway shows. John Clum in examining gay plays mentioned that Wilson thought that people might not accept the gay kiss in *5<sup>th</sup> of July*, so he tried to make it less noticeable by moving it from the middle of the play to the very start before the play actually begins (19). Such anxiety could explain Wilson's different presentations of themes throughout his playwriting journey.

Both Anna and Burton have given up on their artistic talents to fit in to the world. They have submerged their individual expressions to fit in to a materialistic system. As a result, they have lost the passion and meaning of whatever they do. Although this situation has them "doing fine" as a couple living in New York, they are both sad and miserable. Life for them is monotonous, cold, and hopeless. As artists, they miss inspiration and passion. As human beings, they miss feelings and intimacy. In fact, all three characters in the loft miss emotional connections with others. They are so involved in modern life and in their jobs as part of that life. They do not have personal lives or fulfilling relationships. Burton wonders why those feelings are missing, "Where's the pain? Where's the joy? Where's the ebullience?" (52). Anna wonders what it looks like to have feelings for someone (84). And lastly there is Larry, who has no interest in life anymore. They are all intimidated by the idea of embracing their human feelings. Embracing such feelings would make them vulnerable in facing the world outside their loft.

The inhuman nature of the society that those characters are living in alienates them in many ways. It alienates them from their human essence to fit in, but at the same time, it isolates them by its terrifying atmosphere. Wilson presents a hostile world

towards Anna, Pale, Larry, and even towards the dead Robbie. Frank Rich, in a *New York Times* article, considers Pale and Anna as “lamenting an alienating modern civilization in which people must fight to preserve their humanity in the face of daily indignities, from battling for parking spaces to real or figurative rapes”. Pale moves around with a gun and he is very violent and angry. His anger is expressed in outbursts, especially in Act 1 (34-35). He believes that “People aren’t human”, and in order to survive he needs to be alert all of the time (31). A simple thing like finding a park turns into another outburst: “Goddamn this fuckin’ place, how can anybody live this shit city?... Who are these assholes? Some bug-eyed, fat-lipped half nigger, all right; some of my best friends, thinks he owns this fuckin’ *space*. The city’s got this *space* specially reserved for his private use” (25). Pale’s aggressive attitude towards the world is an expression of his accumulated anger of pretending and fighting to keep living. His feelings towards the world can be summed up in one line, when he says, “The only thing save this part of the city, they burn it down” (26). On the other hand, Anna is scared to be herself because she might not be accepted in the world. Her ultimate fear is not of physical rape or assault, but of a world taking away her soul and passion. She says, “I’m sick of the age I’m living in. I don’t like feeling ripped off and scared” (87). She is terrified that she might be paralysed by fear. Larry suggests that if she is not scared, she might be pillaged or raped in the real world. However, Anna almost breaks into tears, and says, “I’m *being* pillaged and raped. I’m being pillaged and I’m being raped. And I don’t like it” (88). The real world is metaphorically stealing away life by making her passive, submissive, and passionless.

Larry and Robbie face another source of alienation and hostility in this society because they are gay. In the play, Wilson presents three characters who are identified as gay. Two of them are already dead (drowned), and Larry is the only living gay person. Larry works for an advertising agency and still lives with Anna. The death of Robbie,

who used to be a very well-known dancer, haunts the whole play. He went on a boat trip with his boyfriend and they drowned. Anna questions Robbie's choice of going on a boat trip when they do not know how to swim (8). As the play goes on, we come to the point where Anna is discussing with Larry the possibility of Robbie's death not being a mere accident. She is referring to Pale's story about a night out drinking with his father. One person in the bar said something about seeing his gay brother, Robbie, on national TV. He says, "All the usual fag-baiting braggadocio. Someone ought to off the fucker, embarrassment to the family, that crap. And a couple of nights later, Robbie's dead, so he had no way of knowing if--" (74-75). The suggestions regarding Robbie's death are that he was killed or has committed suicide. Both facts are references to the fear of an age - the 1980s - when gay people were identified with the emergence of AIDS.

### **3.3 AIDS AND CLOSET POLITICS**

At its outset, AIDS was considered a gay epidemic. People used the disease to express certain attitudes towards gay people and their sexual behaviour, and male homosexuality specifically (Herek 1110). David Jefferson, in his article "How AIDS Changed America" 2006, describes how the press avoided publishing and educating people about AIDS, because it would mean discussing homosexuality more generally. Stigmatising AIDS as a "gay cancer" created a hostile attitude towards gay people. After two decades of fighting for their rights, gay people had to face a disease that shook their world and beliefs. The stigma led to discrimination against gay people in general, and AIDS patients in particular. As a result, they were afraid to check themselves for the disease, look for help and support, or tell others if they were infected (Herek 1111). AIDS affected people on two levels; first some people ignored the human side of the story and it was a problem for gay people to take care of themselves or die alone. Secondly, gay people started questioning their identity. In his book, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay*

*Identity*, Simon Watney tracks how AIDS affected the sexual identity of people. He argues that the assumption that once a person is identified as gay, that that sort of identification cannot change or be altered, is wrong. Therefore, a situation like facing the crisis of AIDS would change the gay identity and social response to it (66-67). AIDS did not only isolate gay people more in the 1980s, it caused them to question and doubt their identities. Presenting AIDS as a punishment from God for a sin verified the fears of some gay people that they were doing something wrong and unacceptable to God (Feldman and Miller 4). The whole atmosphere was terrifying and discouraging for them, not only to come out about their sexual identity, but also to embrace that identity.

Though Wilson did not say anything directly about AIDS and the feeling of alienation related to gay people, he reflects a very hostile and disturbing atmosphere. In his article, "When the 'A' Word is Never Spoken: Fear of Intimacy and AIDS in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*", Ray Schultz examined why Wilson did not talk directly about AIDS, which was at its peak at that time (1987). However, he argues that Wilson presents AIDS in his play through "coded references" to the immune system, or other issues related to AIDS in a general context (49). Schultz has gone too far trying to find that in the text, because compared to other plays written at the same time or later, Wilson's refusal to write about AIDS directly is surprising. Schultz assumes that a play written by a gay playwright with three gay characters and an artistic atmosphere associated with male gay dancers at that time, would not possibly ignore the elephant in the room. For instance, he refers to the incident of Burton having oral sex with a random person in the street. Larry and Anna's indifferent reaction towards this dangerous behaviour is an act of "nostalgia" (50). Schultz also assumes that Larry is a perfect presentation of a gay person who might have AIDS, but Wilson does not present any details about his life or his relationships with other gay men (62). He thinks that by ignoring the direct treatment of the topic, Wilson actually "eliminates the threat of AIDS" from the play. Wilson tries to

make a sexual act look safe, and the two gay people in the play die by drowning, not from AIDS. The true reflection of AIDS and its effect on people's lives is shown through the lack of intimacy and emotion (52-64). However, the lack of intimacy is not something Wilson associates with sexual behaviour only. It is part of the hostile and alienating nature of living in a big city like New York as explained before.

Schultz and other critics commenting on Wilson's avoidance of this topic is not surprising. Wilson does not talk about AIDS in his later plays, neither does he talk about homosexuality in a direct way. Sexual identities and sexual behaviours are always part of a broader image. The world depicted in the play is a world that is terrifying and homophobic where no one can be safe.

Larry is a gay person who is scared to live outside the loft. He is always in, has no social life, no friends, no family, and though he has a job, it does not look like he is even leaving for work. When Burton is recounting his homosexual experience, Larry is fantasising about it, and sees it as a dream he would use in his loneliness (63). He is alienated from the world and feels unwelcome out there. The worst part is that he has to experience the sense of an unwelcoming atmosphere right at his home, the only place he feels safe. Hostility is brought from the outside world by Pale who says, "I thought you clowns were supposed to be worthwhile in the kitchen at least" (77). Even Burton sees him as a loser or useless person when he makes a remark about Anna's future plan to stay with Larry (90). Larry is aware of how people are treating him, but he does not stand up for himself or say anything back, as if that kind of behaviour is expected or acceptable. He looks cheerful and funny most of the time. He describes his cheerfulness as his "protective sense of humor" (56). His pretending to be happy and fine all the time is a way to hide his fragility, uncertainty, and self-doubt. His failure to go home to his family is symbolic. Such a journey would mean facing the world and exposing his identity as a



gay person to the stigmatisation of society at that time. He fails in the outside world, and he gets back to his loft feeling sad, lonely, and miserable (55-56). Wilson presents Larry's feelings of alienation and loneliness as a reflection of the feelings of social and self-alienation felt by gay people due to an asocial situation.

Robbie is another gay character who could not survive in the real world. The suggested causes of his death, discussed earlier, are significant. The suggestion of his suicide is reinforced by Larry when he says, "Have you ever been to a gay New Year's Eve party? The suicide rate is higher than all of Scandinavia combined" (57). In a review of the literature on suicide rates, Haas et al. put a great emphasis on the higher risks of suicidal behaviour among LGBT due to discrimination and feelings of social isolation. Suicide rates were even higher among HIV positive gay people (10-51). Even though Robbie is not announced as an AIDS patient in the play, Larry, Pale, and Anna are considering the possibility of Robbie committing suicide out of guilt, because of the public shame he caused to his family as a gay person. Pale does not hide the fact that his family might have wished Robbie dead, and somehow their wish comes true a few days later (78). Although Robbie was known on national TV and everywhere as a gay dancer, Anna is shocked that his family ignored that fact at his funeral. They have never accepted the fact that he was a dancer and that he was gay, and she states, "And none of them had seen him dance!" (9). Anna has to pretend to be his girlfriend in the funeral (10). Burton wonders why his family would ignore that. He feels that it is not like he was hiding his identity, and says, "he was hardly living in a closet. I mean, interviews in *The Advocate*" (10). Anna still feels that Robbie's family did not know he was gay. However, later on she tells Pale about it,

ANNA: It was very humiliating. They didn't know; it wasn't my place to tell them.

PALE: They know, they just don't know. (40)

Pale knew about his brother and so did his family, but they are not ready to embrace that fact or verify it in public in such a situation. It is easier to pretend that he is not gay, or to pretend that they do not know anything about his personal life.

Whether gay or not, all the characters in *Burn This* are trapped in a terrifying world looking for passion and freedom. They look like the people on Larry's plane on New Year's Eve. He says, "I was praying we would crash and burn. There was not a happy person on the plane. Everyone was going to a party. ... Midnight came and went, nobody said a word. We just glared at each other" (56). It is a quest for human love in the contemporary world where the "L" word is never mentioned either.

Compared to other plays written about gay and AIDS crisis such as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985) and *The Destiny Of Me* (1992), and later on Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), *Burn This* can hardly be a play about gay and AIDS. Wilson not writing directly about gay issues at that point is a statement that he embraced in his early plays, as mentioned earlier, that homosexuality is not a problem or an issue. However, AIDS crisis was different and more dramatic than the idea of gay people looking for acceptance in society. Wilson comes to realize that fact later on as he felt the need to write his one-act play, *A Poster of the Cosmos* (1987). The play was written as a response to a letter Wilson received blaming him for not writing about AIDS in *Burn This*. Wilson thought that *Burn This* could be "a play about the loss of a dear, important and talented gay dancer, a play I'd been agonizing over for 2 years in response to the almost weekly loss of some of the most beautiful people I'd known" (*Collected Works* 242). It was presented in the Ensemble Studio Theatre's Marathon '88 in New York. The play takes place in a police station. At the beginning Tom, the only character, is questioned by unseen police officer. Tom is recalling his memories with his partner

Johnny. He describes how Johnny sleeps like a scared person all the time (245). He goes on to reflect on their dreams and hopes. Then, he announces the fact that Johnny was sick the moment they met. Despite knowing that that might be AIDS, they fell in love and had sex during their three-years relationship (248). Tom is amazed that he did not get infected and at the same time he feels guilty about it that he tried to get infected to the last moment of Johnny's life (249). The play is a monologue on the loss of a loved one and the journey of pain, silence, and confusion facing AIDS, "Probably it was just this big dark thing in front of him that he couldn't tell what it was and it scared him. He didn't understand it" (249). Though Tom here is describing their favorite Cosmos poster that Johnny could not recognise at his last days. However, it symbolically stands for stand for the scary mysterious things that Johnny was facing along with other gay people, AIDS.

The most dramatic and powerful moment comes at the end when Tom describes what he did after Johnny's death. He took off his clothes and was naked next to Johnny on the hospital bed, "So he died in my arms and I held him a long time and then I cut a place on his cheek where he used to dig and on his chest where he used to gouge out these red marks and in his hair. And when the blood came out I licked it off him". Because of the terrifying scene of blood on him, the staff though that he killed Johnny but they were not able to come closer, "I guess they was afraid of me. Or maybe of all the blood" (250). This scene is symbolic and directly reflects all tragic fears and pains of gay people. It also reflects the fears of other people of AIDS and other patients. Tom shows that he is not afraid to be in contact with Johnny and goes further by his last attempt to get infected by licking the blood. At that point people were scare of blood as it is identified, like sexual contact, as a way of getting infected. Though Tom would not get AIDS that way, his act of being naked and covered with the blood of a dead gay AIDS person is a huge statement by Wilson. The play is very short but comes with a direct, assertive, and realistic statement about how alienated gay people felt at that time. Wilson's awareness that *Burn*

*This* was not enough to express that experience led him to write *A Poster of the Cosmos* in a beautiful way that could have led to a greater and longer play.

### 3.4 AN EXPRESSIONIST

In his major plays *Angels Fall* and *Burn This*, Wilson presents the experience of self-alienation in the modern world. In both plays characters are alienated from their human nature, feelings, needs, and self-expression. As a result, they are unable to pursue the kind of life that satisfies them. Their life journey is dedicated to fulfilling others' needs and expectation turning it into a meaningless and excruciating journey. The experience of self-alienated is more persistent in the case of artists, writers, and people who are eager to express themselves through their work. Their need to modify their creativity by the limitations and requirements of their world is the main source of self-alienation. The source of such alienation in both plays is the materialistic, hostile, capitalist nature of the modern world. Another source of self-alienation is the tendency to get attached to illusions and self-deception as a way of surviving in such world. People might come to realize that they are self-alienated, but it is their choice to stay in such situation or decide to take responsibility and claim their right of being themselves.

Wilson mentioned that Burton's experience and struggle of being a writer is a representation of his own experience and struggle. In an interview with Zinman, Wilson described the play as "personal and private" and that Burton is an autobiographical character (qtd. in Bigsby, *Contemporary* 14). Wilson artistic identity as a playwright developed from the experimental theatre venues of Off-Off-Broadway to writing well-made realistic plays that can entertain the audience and gain critical attention, but not necessarily represent or express his own identity. In *Say de Kooning*, Bob who is a gay painter who fails to get recognition in the artistic scene and tries

desperately to find his own voice in painting. Both Bob and his friend Willie find it difficult to live in the crowded and insanely competitive atmosphere of New York (207). When Bob visited New York, he the famous American artist Willem de Kooning. Bob recalls Kooning's comment, "the most beautiful work I've ever seen, only now you have to go on and say who you are with the drawing. Go on to express you" (214). Bob chooses to live in isolation outside New York to be able to express himself rather than painting for a commercialised competitive market that will alienate him from his artistic identity. The reference in the play to the well-known American abstract expressionist painter and sculpture Willem De Kooning (1904-1997). Wilson expresses his fascination by De Kooning work and admits that his painting style is identified as expressionistic and influenced by De Kooning style (Box 3, F5).

The plays discussed in this chapter show a different style of playwrighting compared to the one -act experimental plays of the 1960s and the 1970s' idealistic and surreal plays. The huge success and recognition gained by *Burn This* was not satisfactory for Wilson in terms of self-expression. In an interview with Savran, he refers to *Balm in Gilead* as the best representation of his theatrical talent and style (310). In the 1990s plays, Wilson shifts back to his 1960s style of expressionism and experimenting with the play form. Such style is identified by the use of ritual, ceremonies, chorus, symbolism, multiculturalism, body movements, with little focus on the plot. The influences of Brecht, Chekhov, O'Neil's early plays, are surfacing back in the all the plays coming after *Burn This*.

The existence of expressionism in American theatre context has been established with Off-Off-Broadway experimental theaters in the 1950s-1960s and the

experimental styles that emerged in the 1920s after the war. The influence of German expressionism in American drama was massive in the 1920s-1930s in plays such as Eugene O'Neill *Hairy Ape* (1922) and Elmore Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923). Wainwright et al. defines German Expressionism as a theatrical style that "objectified or externalized theatrically either what is subjective and internal" of the characters, the playwright, the director, or creators. Thus, the resulted performance is "distorted, abstracted, and fragmented representational event" that represents "destruction, madness, and irrational emotional expression" (91-92).<sup>66</sup> While it is true that American and German expressionist dramas share many of these traits, it is not necessarily true that German expressionism was the only influence in developing expressionism in American drama (Walker 4).

Expressionism as a theatrical style is complex and difficult to define. Many critics argue that expressionism is a "subjective" term that cannot be simply and objectively identified (Valgemae 228). Patricia R. Schroeder believes that the expressionism as a theatrical style in America is "vague" and its influence existed for a limited and short period of American theatre history (26). Bigsby, in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, repeatedly uses the term "Abstract Expressionism" rather than Expressionism as an influence of the European alternative theater (154;249). He does not present any distinction between the two terms. Therefore, it is useful to identify the elements of expressionist style as established by theatre critics and researchers rather than attempting to define the term.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, Expressionism revived and became popular as a theatrical style of production especially in the Off-Off-Broadway venues. This

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<sup>66</sup> He argues that the German film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* introduced Expressionism to American audience (111).

can be attributed to Brecht's influence on American theatre as established in the first chapter of this thesis. Bertolt Brecht in "On the Experimental Theatre" describes the experimental theatre that "led to an almost complete destruction of plot and the image of man in the theatre" (5). Such style is "theatre's answer to the great social crisis" and "a revolt of art against life." The theatrical performance of a world "strangely shattered, the off- spring of frightened minds. Expressionism...showed itself in no position to interpret the world as an object of human usage" (8). In American context, Expressionism was essential because it provided "a method for revealing interior reality" in a world of distorted experiences (Patricia R. Schroeder 26). As a dramatic and theatrical style, Expressionism was a way of expressing the playwright's or artist's authentic experience.

In *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* Julia A. Walker uses Elmer Rice's play as an example, to place expressionism in American theatre in a context of anxiety and fear in a capitalist mechanical, industrial styles in artistic scenes. Thus,

displacing the human artist from act of making meaning, mechanically reproducing bodies (e.g., in film), voices (e.g., in phonograph recordings), and words (e.g., the typewriter). Frequently featuring bodies "seen but not heard," "voices heard but not seen," and telegraphically terse dialogue, these plays figure such fears not only thematically in their dystopic vision of modern life, but formally in their expressionistic style. (2)

Walker suggests the expressionism was a reaction to the artificiality and mechanicalistic style of art production. Therefore, she suggests that the aesthetic aspects of art and theatre should be considered as responses not to the influences of

German Expressionism, but as required response to a social context (6). In the same, sense the changes in Wilson's theatrical and dramatic approaches should be considered in the commercialised mechanical and mass production style of art that he presented in *Burn This*. As a playwright he has to write in a form that will commercially successful but not necessarily expressing his own feelings or intended experiences.

One style of expression that Mardi Valgema identifies in American theatre is plays that "depict the inner world" that allows for a self-expression and self-exploring that do not conform to the pressures of artistic forms or commercial needs (230). Wilson's early plays such as *Home Free!* and *The Madness of Lady Bright* are plays that present the inner worlds of the characters. Bigsby, the playwright "substitutes to the visual object reality his own image of this object, which he feels as an accurate representation of its real meaning. The search of harmony and forms is not as important as trying to achieve the highest expression intensity, both from the aesthetic point of view and according to idea and human critics" (*The Cambridge History* 249). Burton in *Burn This* is afraid to explore his homosexual experience any further, but he is not able to experience is claimed heterosexuality with Anne. He is not able to express his personal feelings or write anything that can be personally or intimately relevant to him as a person as an artist. Anne, on the other hand, manages to reach personal and professional satisfaction as she expresses herself and her feelings in a dance.

Stylistically, expressionist theatre style is often introduced as "opposite" to "well-made play model" (Schroeder 26). Bigsby asserts that Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s was similar to the Beat culture. They both "sought out text that eschewed narrative and challenged traditional dramatic structure" (119). The plays usually have



elements of the “scattered dialogue” and characters “who are constantly changing identity” (Valgemae 230-233). Eugene O’Neill’s *Empower Jones* (1922) is as another example of expressionism in American theatre. In such plays, “distortion” is the key term; distortion of reality, of present, of characters, or of plot (Waincott s 111). Pavis describes the Expressionist *mise-en-scène* where “particular aspects and features of reality are clearly emphasized, as if to express the personal attitude of the director” (*Analyzing Performance* 211).

J. L. Styan’s exploration of the elements of American Expressionism identifies the elements presented in such plays and performances. The performance usually have a “nightmarish” or “dreamlike” atmosphere intensified by the visual aspects and use of lightening and probs. The setting is basically to demonstrate the theme of the play. The fragmented play structure replaces the developing plot in a well-made play. The dialogue is fragmented and incorporates the use of pauses and silence. He also adds the use of masks such in Eugene O’Neil plays (3-4). One or more of these elements can be present in any kind of performance, style of production, or playwrighting and they do not necessarily identify as expressionist. For instance, *Burn This* is not an expressionist play compared in comparison to *Balm of Gilead*. It still works as a catharsis of Wilson’ own loss of his voice. Walker quotes Rice’s words in the *Minority Report*, “the case [of] history of one of the slave souls who are both the raw material and the product of a mechanized society” (qtd.in 173).

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

The politics of fear are present in Wilson’s plays since his early one-act plays in the 1960s. The inability of characters, and Wilson himself, to express their authentic identities or communicate their artistic and personal experiences is

intensified in *Angels Fall* and *Burn This*. The fabricated fear, created or exaggerated, by the governance system and institutions in America forced characters to a closet of safety (inside). This inwardness complicates the process of communicating and developing any sort of self-expression or self-identification. Wilson's personal experience, presented by Burton, expresses the sense of alienation from authentic artistic expression. The need to be acknowledged as a playwright, critically and commercially, directed Wilson's writing to the popular realistic style of Broadway. Despite the acknowledgment of the Talley's trilogy in Broadway theatres, Wilson felt that he had to compromise his political voice and artistic expression to fit the Broadway standards. Notably, he avoided direct engagement with controversial issues such as AIDS as I explained earlier.

*Burn This* is a play that present the fear of the outside, but also reflect on the commodification of art, theatre, individuals, and love. It also challenges the homonormative definition of gender and sexuality. Burton is in a sexless love affair with a woman but expresses his homosexual desires. However, he is not a bisexual person. It is not a state of confusion, but an apathy towards sexual or gender identification. This resistance to self-identifying is worth further investigation as it reoccurs in many of Wilson plays. In the following chapter, this resistance continues, but identities are replaced by a structured narrative.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **AN UNINTERRUPTED NARRATIVE**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter examines the plays written by Wilson and performed between (1990 – 2002). *Rain Dance* (2002) was the last produced play of Wilson. There are no existing records of any written or produced theatrical works after 2002 until his death in 2011. I came across few articles written by Wilson later in his life and they are held by the Lanford Wilson Collection at the University of Missouri Special Collections. The reference to such essays (though not considered as part of a theatrical contribution) is essential in this chapter as they reflect on American current affairs and relevant to the plays. After the closure of The Circle Repertory Company due to financial difficulties in 1996, Wilson struggled to write as a freelancer out of a theatre company context (Biggsby, *Contemporary* 400). Wilson wrote in a personal note “Circle Rep was gone and I fell into a deep depression...After twenty five years, I had no theatre to write for ...Into the vacuum” (13). Plays written and produced after *Burn This* (1987) have not been examined in the academic critical literature. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the later works as they are marked by: first, Wilson’s attempts to move away from the conventional two-act form that dominated 1970s-1980s plays and starting to experiment form, characters, and theatrical space. Second, in these plays –as I argue in the chapter- Wilson tries to create a narrative using social and religious rituals. As the plays reflect a metaphorical sense of alienation, disorientation,

and a desire to return to origins and roots, rituals are performed to overcome individuals' sense of alienation.

The plays to be examined in this chapter are: *Redwood Curtain* (1992; Broadway 1993), *A Sense of Place* (1996), *Sympathetic Magic* (1998), *Book of Days* (2000), and *Rain Dance* (2002). The plays are situated in a context of reexamining past historical events of American history such as The Vietnam War, AIDS crisis, the nuclear bomb experiments, the Cold War politics, and the Native Americans culture. It seems that Wilson attempted to conclude with a collective, cohesive, deliberately constructed narrative that is meaningful and satisfactory for him and for his audience. The themes and experimental techniques Wilson uses are not novel to his theatrical career. He touched on them on various sociopolitical and theatrical context in previous plays and they appear briefly in the discussion in the previous chapters.

Despite of the diversity of themes, the late plays share distinctive qualities that are to be discussed in detail in this chapter. The plays are presented as scenes leading and interfering with one other without any divisions of acts or scenes. The sequence and continuity of the scenes suggest an uninterrupted narrative that Wilson tried to present on stage. The use of social and religious rituals along with supernatural and metaphysical power are both present in the plays. The setting is always minimalistic and does not carry any references to spatial or temporal contexts. Additionally, along with the fluidity of scenes, actors are also fluid and free to interchange between acting and nonacting modes.

In *Angels Fall* (1982), examined in chapter three, the priest performs a short version of the Sunday service at the very end of the play. However, in all the later

plays: *Book of Days*, *Sympathetic Magic*, *Redwood Curtain*, and *Rain Dance*, rituals take a considerable and significant space and time. In *Sympathetic Magic*, for example, the scenes at the house, the library, and the bar always interfere with a scene of performing rituals at the church. There is not a plot or a storyline, like most of Wilson's plays, but discussions between characters on life, art, science, and philosophy. Liz Barnard, who is a retired anthropologist in her late fifties and an AIDS patient, starts the discussion on rain rituals and how "one performs to cause what one wants to happen" (62). Then, she compares such rituals to life itself as a series of collective ritualized acts. Marriage, parenthood, love, and partnership are socially generated rituals performed to bring about what people want not what existed already, "That's not life, that's voodoo" (62). Earlier in the play, Andy, an astrophysicist in his thirties, describes to Liz his experience of sperm donation as a kind of ritual. He calls it "the most thoroughly satisfying sexual experience of my life" (30). In the following parts of this chapter, I will examine the use of rituals, chorus, supernatural elements, and metatheatricality to create a structured and ant-structure narratives that function to fulfil the characters' desire of belonging.

## **4.2 RITUALS AND NARRATIVES**

In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Victor Turner argues that rituals are not only "reflection or expressions of economics, political, and social relationships," but they are "decisive keys to understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships" (6). Turner's examination of the tribal rituals is essential to the ways we approach the meanings and purpose of rituals on stage. Rituals, according to Turner, are involved in establishing the social and cultural paradigm of power, identifying social roles, and maintaining the paradigm that serves

as a social bond (183-184). In that sense politics of gender, class, and race are established and reacts within the established social system. Additionally, Turner argues that rituals are “anti-structure” and such function serves to generate “new structures of meaning” (8). Rituals, according to Turner function, according to their type and context, to demonstrate and perform social structures and to ruin these structures and create new ones. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel argued that Turner’s approach to rituals as performing a social structure reflects a “utopian vision” of communities and culture (1). Schechner and Appel approach rituals in relevance to “transformation of being and/or consciousness” (4). This approach to rituals is also relevant to the discussion of Wilson’s use of rituals.

As a social practice, rituals are part of the performativity of the social structure and identities. Rituals also provide a sense of “social control,” and express social beliefs, “behavior, tradition, and change” (Bell 8-16). In that sense, rituals require a belief and an orientation behind them (Bell 19). Rituals as social practice based on a belief share their origin with religious rituals.<sup>67</sup>

In the theatrical scene, rituals have been part of American drama and performance since 1950s (Stayn 145). Erika Fischer-Lichte in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, determines the ways rituals as a performance on stage “destabilized the identity” of the audience and the performers (219). Her conclusions are based on assuming that a social identity is a stable identity before or after the ritual performance. The 1960s use of rituals in performances and plays did not serve the function of performing or constructing a social structure (219).

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<sup>67</sup> There is still a debate on the use of rituals and the interdisciplinary meanings attached as the meaning of rituals, in communities as they are examined by Turner and other anthropologists, are different from performed rituals on Western stages (Graham-White 318-319). The debate engages with the approaches suitable for each type and context.

Rituals as rehearsed acts on stage served the function of “unending social structure and rules that generate alienation and isolation” and generating the structured social narratives (Deegan 8-9).

Rituals in Wilson’s mentioned plays are of Christian religious origin such baptism and exorcism in *Book of Days*, secular such as the theatrical performance of St. Joan, everyday social practices such as friendship and sexual acts, and primitive such as the Native American rain dance or eagle call in *Rain Dance* and *Redwood Curtain*.

In *Redwood Curtain*, Geri Riordan seventeen years old Asian-American tries to find her real biological father who is supposed to be a Vietnam veteran. By the end of the first scene, the girl tries to perform a certain ritual to call the eagle which also linked to Native American rituals (20). At the end of the second scene the girl uses the same ritual to call the veteran back. In both cases she fails, but the rituals and the claims of having a supernatural powers work to identify her in a certain way. Her desire to find her biological father in the woods is a desire for belonging and finding her roots somewhere or to someone, a desire that can be fulfilled with such rituals.

*Rain Dance* was first produced and commissioned by the Purple Rose Theatre Company in 2001. In the play, Wilson refers to the rain dance rituals of Native Americans. A group of scientists are waiting to conduct their experiment on a nuclear bomb. This play is set in a minimal style setting, and there are no stage directions. The play starts with Hank admiring the view of the sunset and referring to Native American mythology:

This is the hour that the mountains were named. You can imagine the explorers camping down by the creek- that they called the “Great

River.” The sun had gone everything except the mountains, they’re reddish anyway, some, and if there’s enough dust in the air to make a really good, red sunset- you can just imagine the priests looking up at the mountains, red as they are now, dropping their shovels or whatever, grabbing their crosses, and saying, “Oh! Bless us! The blood of Christ!” (5)

Hank attempts to romanticise the Indian rituals and dances such as the Ceremonial Buffalo Dance and the rain dance (14). His fascination with the Native American culture is always objected by Tony. Hank reflects on a culture that does not have religious rituals. The role of dances and rituality is providing a sense of belonging, “I mean we’re absurd loners” as Hank describes his scientist colleagues (13). There is nothing to happen in the paly except group of scientists anticipating the beginning of their experiment.

*Sympathetic Magic* is similarly set in the outskirts of the city, with the same sense of gathering and anticipation of a scientific event. The recurrent reference to the anticipated scientific event, which also severs as a social event, introduces the complexities of modern civilization and people’s attempts to create and recreate illusions. Wilson describes the changing scenes in *Sympathetic Magic* as “One scene should flow into the next instantaneously, overlapping fluidly. Let the lights tell us where we are and when” (5). The scenes interchange abruptly between the house, the bar, and the main scene at the church. In the church Pauly is leading a Choir for a group of AIDS patients (23). The scenes overlap, “All of a sudden from the church and Pauly singing to (*A dark bar, a jukebox is playing. Andy sits with Mickey. ...Italian...*) (24). Barbra, the angry feminist instincts discussion on society and



individuality, feminism, and art. The purpose here is not to analyse such discussion, but to examine the ways they are performed. Wilson keeps the play going without intervals scene break maintaining the continuity of a narrative. The play works in rhythm rather than scenes and acts. Some scenes are intense like Andy and Barbra's abortion discussion with Liz then moving to another intense scene in the observatory and watch the telescope where Andy is late and there is a storm in Hawaii that ruins their readings (37). Then the next scene is on the beach with the ladies, all calm and relaxed (40). The narrative that Wilson tries to establish in the play is that of a scientific "unified theory", "The Theory of Everything" as Sue puts it (53). In *Sympathetic Magic*, and *Rain Dance* the rituals are not performed on the stage but act as the main theme of the discussion.

*Book of Days* is the longest play of the four plays. It was commissioned and produced by The Purple Rose Theatre Company in April 1998. The play evidently reflects Wilson's attempts to put together a cohesive narrative of what America is and what will become of the country in the future, "We're a religious community. An ordinary, God-fearing, churchgoing people. Every community has its own standard of morality; we have ours. And one of the basic tenets of our morality is Church authority. An entertainment that's anti-Church, we hold dear and important and- I'm trying not to say "fundamental" (64). The play relies majorly on the fluidity of space and characters. Keeping it in two acts, the scenes interfere and occur simultaneously.

In the play the rituals are religious ones: baptism and exorcism. Both rituals recreate new identity. The baptism of Earl, the killer is the climax of the play. While everyone knows that he is responsible for killing Walter, the cheese factory owner who died mysteriously, Earl is baptism by Reverend Groves in presence of the whole

town. The dramatic scene where Earl emerges out of the water with spotlights on his naked body represents a new beginning for him, and a new accepted constructed narrative of corruption and sinfulness.

The act of exorcism is performed on Ruth, the activist in the town who exposed the earl's crime. The reverend as other members of the group insist that Ruth is possessed. The performed exorcism ends with Ruth "defeated" and collapsing on the floor. The dramatization of this point of conflict and resolution confirms the narrative of corruption created and demonstrated by the baptism ritual previously.

*Book of Days* is set in Dublin, Missouri, representing a typical American town, described as an "Educated community" where there are four bars, five churches, family restaurants, community theater, movie theater, Video rental, Pizza Hut, library, golf course, two malls: a "Prosperous town" (1). Through the chorus, there is a detailed description of how the town is "American" especially with its history. Add Though the story takes place in the 1940s, it is hard to link it to any specific context except to the fact that it is "American" at any point of time. rephrase James Bate tries to take over the business of his father and works with the town priest and other officials to be elected to a state senator and a politician. The father has died in a storm accident with his assistant Earl, but Ruth is the only person who believes that it was murder. Throughout the play, Ruth takes her role as an American middle-aged woman and in other parts she plays and acts like Joan of Arc trying to face the corrupted officials of the town. It is not only Ruth acting Joan, but in some parts, the play itself is no more the Book of Days but Saint Joan. There are some scenes that are a rewritten version of Saint Joan.

Ruth plays Joan of Arc in Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Throughout the play, Ruth confuses the two roles, and everyone is convinced that she is acting like a real Joan. Ruth's confusion about her identity and her theatrical role also causes confusion for the reader/audience. Wilson uses the metatheatricality and such confusion to the maximum with actors' roles throughout the play. They change between chorus and characters, they change between characters and other characters in another performance, they change between characters in what appears a random way.

The play is an obvious allegory for the American political system. Covering up the murder, hiding James's marriage infidelity and the fact that he is living with a pregnant mistress, as well as the corrupted theater producer who is a pedophilic sex offender, and the young reverend who is pursuing the rich widow, show this. The arrangements between Reverend Groves and James, the corrupted politician who will be running for a Jefferson City representative position, reflect the corruption of the American political system and social structure. The play ends bleakly with a passive note from the chorus:

SHERIFF ATKINS (*To the audience*) Good night.

BOYD (*To the audience*) Sleep well.

MARTHA (*To the audience*) Safe home. (105)

Sharon Bates, who is described as "a good Christian lady" (28) confuses her identity with her role in Shaw's play. In another incident she is acting like Hamlet claiming that she saw Walt's, the killed victim, ghost (53).

The most significant ritual in the play is that baptism of Earl, the killer, "the church congregation has been singing a hymn. Just as I am- for a choice. They hum now as Reverend Groves stands in the church's baptismal. Earl takes off a robe and,

only in his undershorts, walks into the water” (53). The ritual of baptism identifies those in power, James and Reverend Groves, and the rest are the powerless characters in the system.

Another essential scene is that of the exorcism rituals performed by Sheriff Atkins on Louann:

SHERIFF ATKINS I am here in My house with you always, be not afraid. There is a serpent amongst you. It comes like a thief in the night and steals the goodness from My people. This rotten apple can spoil the whole town. Allow this devil not in My house again.

*Louann reels as though struck. She falls to the floor, speaking in tongues: groaning, mouthing harsh syllables. The Sheriff stands, hands to the ceiling, yelling, interpreting the “tongue.” Reverend Groves Kneels, praying quietly. (93)*

The Sheriff performs a god-like figures. The exorcism rituals are directed to Ruth who tries to expose the corrupted system, institutions, and officials involved in the killing, “Ruth is defeated; she sinks to the floor” (94). The play ends by James winning the elections and Earl’s body found in the woods, poisoned by James as suggested by Ruth.

Baptism and excursion rituals are both part of the Christian church practices. Baptism is the identification with Christian identity, a being dedicated to God. The symbolic rebirth through baptism contradicts the fact that Earl is a killer and Reverend Groves is aware of that. In this sense baptism does not serve its purpose of

rebirth and identifying a person as a good Christian. Baptism serves as a concealing ritual.

Wilson focuses on the religious and political institutions as the source of corruption expressing alienation from religion, church, and political system. Alienation from the political system is also considered to be part of the social alienation. Seeman's powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and isolation dimension is of the most interest in political field (Koff 272). Though the term "political alienation" is used in political studies, but it still involves all the social, psychological, philosophical, and economic aspects of the alienation in general. I refer here to political alienation as the alienation from the political system, institutions and representatives as part of the social context people live in.

The use of rituals and references to Native American ceremonies is significant. In chapter 3, the discussion started on the Native American identity crisis as presented through Dan in *Angels Fall*. However, in his later play, Wilson engages more with the artistic and cultural aspects of the Native American culture. The presentation in these plays is a presentation of the collective culture in a multicultural American scene. The misconceptions and misrepresentations of the Native American culture in American public culture are also introduced in *Redwood Curtain* (1992; Broadway 1993), *A Sense of Place* (1996), and *Rain Dance* (2002).

The lack of recognition of Native American culture and expression of their identities comes as a result of institutional oppression that started in the nineteenth century (D'Aponte 3). As established in chapter 3, the interest in Native American identity started in the 1960s with the demands of the Red Movement as part of the Civil Rights Movement and minorities demands. The attention gained for such minorities and the systematic and governmental oppressing policies, allowed for them

to express their collective identity and their oppressed historical memory. The scene of American theatre in the 1960s, witnessed the emergence of several Native performing artist who “re-presented” their cultural through music, dance and performances (Geiogamah and Darby 1). Cristy Stanlake explored the presence of such performances in American theatre in his book *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective* (2010). He introduced several Native American performers and artists.<sup>68</sup> The mainstream theatrical scene did not allow much space for narratives that are not white dominant. Thus, the presence of Native American performers, artists, and playwrights was more prominent in Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway venues (23).

Another result of the increasing interest in Native American performative art is that “performance venues, such as theatre, cinemas, dime museums, wild-west shows, and world’s-fair exhibitions, capitalized on the exotic allure of the “vanishing race”” (Stanlake 4). This explains the romanisation of Native Americans and their culture as presented by Hank in *Rain Dance*. However, most of the literature on Native American performances, including Stanlake, explore performances and artistic activities by the Native American artists and their presentation of their cultural and artistic heritage. The difference between the presentation of Native American identity by people who identify as such and the presentation of Native American identity and its culture in plays written by non-Native American playwrights are different. The 1960s theatre was inspired by Native American performances and dances. The incorporation of Native characters or actors in drama and performance aimed to

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<sup>68</sup> More on the Native American performances in American theatre in *Where the Pavement Ends: Five Native American Plays* edited by William S. Yellow Robe Jr (2009), *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* edited by LeAnne Howe Jennifer Elise Foerster Joy Harjo (2020), and *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History* by Birgit Däwes (2014).

challenge the existing stereotypes of Native Americans existed in films and popular culture (Wilmer, *Native American* 1). Moreover, such interest raised question about the authenticity of such identification and the ways Western playwrights or directors might have incorporated some of the western traditions of performances in such representation (Mielke and Deloria 2).

In the introduction to *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*, Jacqueline Shea Murphy argues that the critical literature should not focus only on literature produces by Native Americans, but engage with presentation by non-Native works to examine “the ways in which white Americans used Indianness in creative self-shaping” without recognising the oppressiveness and inequality that Native Americans has been through (3). She continues to assert that many performances would claim presenting or staging American identity by “playing” Indian, drawing attention to the difference between white actors playing Native American and Native American performers (3).

In *Rain Dance*, Tony is the Native American character. He is irritated by Hank’s (white American) fascination and interest in Indian culture. Tony, with a very westernized name, does not identify himself as American Indian or Native American. In the play, the Native American ceremonies and rituals are introduced by white Americans such as Hank. The rain dance is discussed between the play characters in Tony’s presence. The other characters comment on the dance as a form of magical ritual (16). Tony comments sarcastically on such misconceptions about the Indian culture. He states, “the Indian can’t hold all the mystery you kids pour into them. They’re simple-living people. And poor. You can’t understand them so you make them wonderful” (6). Tony is not identified as Indian by Wilson or by himself but by

other characters which also raise the question of identity and self-identification, “You always say “them,” not “us”” (6).

Through dances, Native Americans can express, explore, reclaim their identity (Murphy 11). The rain dance is one main aspect of their spiritual life that celebrate nature and its variant beauty. It is not a dance to “control nature” or magically create the rain as it is popularised in the American media. The ceremonies are celebration of life that works to “deepen their awareness ...feel reconnected to their ancestors, and reexperience their own identity” (Laderman and León 211).

Hank describes the scene of the Great River according to The Native American folklore in a romanticised manner:

This is the hour that the mountains were named. You can imagine the explorers camping down by the creek- that they called the “Great River.” The sun had gone everything except the mountains, they’re reddish anyway, some, and if there’s enough dust in the air to make a really good, red sunset- you can just imagine the priests looking up at the mountains, red as they are now, dropping their shovels or whatever, grabbing their crosses, and saying, “Oh! Bless us! The blood of Christ!” ... It was just a religious culture, priests were like their chaplains, probably. (5)

To which Tony sarcastically responds: ...everything is sacred to the Indians. It’s enough to make you sick (5) The discussion of the Indian dances continues as Irene reveals that she was raised by the Indians (14). The discussions on the Native American culture, dances, and ceremonies are introduced in the background of the main plot of the play. Scientist who are waiting for the nuclear experiment to start.



In *Redwood Curtain*, the girl is identified as both Asian-American, “Geri Riordan 17 Asian-American” and “totally American” (6). However, her connection with the Native American Culture is prominent in the play. Wilson states that she is “totally American” and “little American” (6) without explaining what that really means or how those characters are supposed to be American or little American. In her discussion with Lyman, Geri explains how she feels about her identity:

GERI: American don't look each other in the eye for all our straightforwardness.

LYMAN: You consider yourself American?

GERI: You kidding? I was adopted into one of the Former Top Ten Families of California. I just don't know where I was born. Somewhere in the old country. To an estranged mother and a father wandering around Eureka, California in the fog. With one blue eye and one brown. (18)

In one incident, Geri, changes the weather into darkness and brings thunder and lightning. She explains to Lyman, “...I could will it to rain or thin the turbulence, send the clouds out over the ocean and inform the sun to burn through the fog and warm the earth. ...Except for the eagle. He protects me” (17). The eagle is a very important symbol in Native American culture. Trying to end the scene in a mysterious and thriller way as she faints, an eagle at the background, a sun and then darkness (20).

In *Sympathetic Magic*, there are no Native American characters. However, there is a discussion on magic, rituals, Native American tribes and rain dances. It is hard to tell whether characters are celebrating or looking for a narrative to belong. The narrative of Native American ancestors and their sense of belonging is

introducing in the three plays as a suggested replacement for the feelings of rootlessness and anti-narrative being of white Americas.

### 4.3 THE CHORUS

The chorus is used in *Book of Days* as to announce the change of time or place. However, the chorus is not used in a conventional way. The characters play the chorus whenever it is required: “the entire cast acts as Chorus” (9). The use of chorus in contemporary drama is not uncommon. The American playwright, Suzan- Lori Parks uses chorus in plays such as *The American Play* (1994) and *In the Blood* (1999) to create a collective narrative of the black identity. In Greek theatre, the chorus is part of the acting cast. In *Poetics*, Aristotle confirms that the chorus “should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole and share in the action” (chapter 18). Brecht also used the chorus in his theatre. Martin Revermann suggest that Brecht uses of the chorus as a collective singing group that does not dance (253).

In Wilson’s *Sympathetic Magic*, the chorus maintains the role of a singing group. However, in *Book of Days*, the role of the chorus is more complex. They do not sing, and they are not a fixed group but rather a role played by actors. The process of changing actors and performing in the chorus is ritualistic:

RUTH (*To the audience*) If you listen very closely you can hear it in the distance.

*Everyone listens. Silence. Silence. Then a very distant shotgun shot.*

CHORUS

MARTHA If you listen very carefully. *Silence. Silence. Then a very distant shotgun shot.* (44)

SHARON expresses her despise to Walt picking the ugly stone for her husband's grave

SHARON ...I said, just the biggest, most vulgar one you've got. (46)

The chorus in the play is a hidden structure that connects characters and identifies them with certain scenes, but also allow them to move freely between roles. The chorus also serves as a reminder of the changing of space or time, and in sometimes comments of the story progress (77). The chorus is a fluid group that does not remain stable for long (Fig. 4.1).

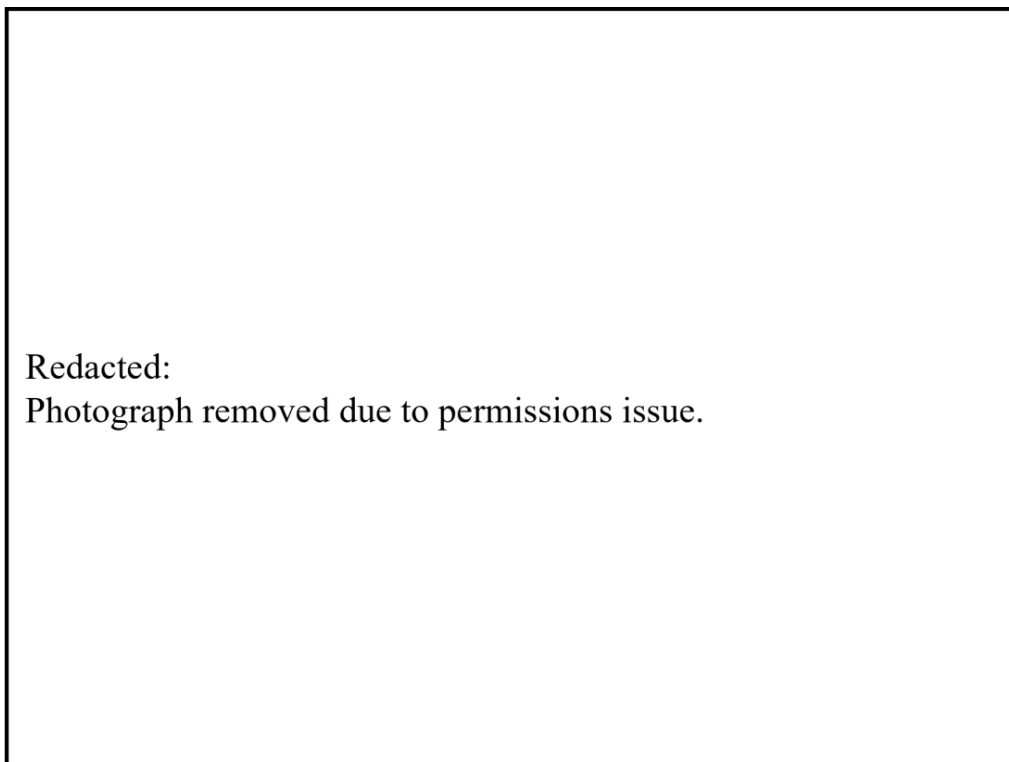


Fig. 4.1 *Book of Days* by Lanford Wilson, directed by James Kuhl, May 2005. From <https://www.alma.edu/live/galleries/102-book-of-days>.

As mentioned earlier, the chorus in Brechtian drama works as a distancing technique (Brooker 194). It reminds the contemporary audience of the illusion they

are watching. However, in this context of the plays' narrative and structure and anti-structure emerging by performing rituals, the social role of the chorus is applicable. Peponi argues that the main function of chorus in Greek drama is representing a "a cultural formation" (26). Chorus in this sense is "a social ritual" (Billings and Macintosh 2). The Brecht's interest in choral performance is relevance to the ritualistic nature of the chorus (Revermann 152). In *Book of Days* the chorus and rituals both overlaps, and the chorus performance is ritualistic. In *Sympathetic Magic*, the church choral group are closer to the conventional Greek signing chorus. They are a group of AIDS patients and their singing is the background of several scenes. If explored in terms of structure functionality, the chorus like in the one in *Book of Days* serves as a unifying uninterrupted narrative that maintain the continuity of the scenes and the structure of the social group. The chorus is the underlying voice, or narrative that resists the chaotic dynamics of the scenes and events.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

The chapter examined one dimension that is relevant to the theme of alienation and identities in Wilson's plays. The use of rituals, chorus, and narratives to perform the existing social structures, or challenge and recreate new meanings and structure is an unexplored area in these plays. The challenge is to contextualise such use in a sociopolitical context as the plays are written and performed after 1990s, but they are set in a specific timeframe. *Rain Dance* action takes place in 1945, but other plays' times are not identified. In performances, the plays are directed in a realistic way that fails to bring their ritualist nature in focus. For instance, in Markland Taylor's review of the *Book of Days* premiere production, he states that the play "went wrong" as "Even the creators and producers of the play don't seem to know what they have on

their hands, promoting it variously as a murder-mystery” (1). The use of rituals is not mentioned or examined in other reviews on the plays. This can indicate an absence of proper staging of rituals and chorus performances, or the iniquity of rituals performed to engage the audience or deliver the required meaning.

## CONCLUSION

In her article, “The Context Problem,” Tracy C. Davis draws an analogy where theatre historians try to fill the gaps in their search of truth the same way someone examines the white spaces in a painting to find meaning. The “absence” of colour is required to “create harmony” in the painting just like the gaps are required in any context (204). Agreeably, “Sometimes gaps left unfilled tell us more as ‘empty’ spaces than ‘full’/re/contextualized ones” (Gale and Featherstone 24).

When this search on Lanford Wilson started in 2016, there were many gaps in American theatre history that required attention. Wilson’s presence in the theatrical studies was limited and confusing. He is presented as a prolific playwright with successful plays that are still performed to date. However, except in case of Bigsby, Wilson is introduced in theatre critical studies briefly and his main contributions remained the gay characters he introduced to the mainstream audience in plays such as *5<sup>th</sup> of July* (1982) and *Burn This* (1987). Wilson, as a playwright, seemed to be alienated in the context of American theatre history and performance studies.

This thesis focused on the theme of alienation. In the process of working on examining the theme in the selected plays, a substantial amount of historical, social

and theatrical contexts was noticeably absent. The necessity to document or accumulate enough information to use in the research has been always a major distraction from the thematic analysis process. Wilson's plays and performances that are examined in the literature were placed in a limbo except the gay plays that are always situated in a context that is based on the playwright's sexual orientation.

The theme of alienation is used as a thematic thread that runs through out Wilson's play and divaricates to engage and interact with several socio-political and thematical contexts such as: space and Off-Off-Broadway spaces, LGBTQ, racial identities, experimental theatrical styles in chapter 1; national American identity, the Vietnam War and presentation of war and disability in chapter 2; the culture of fear, AIDS, commercialisation and artistic expression, and religion in chapter 3: and rituals, narratives, American political system and corruption, and Native American identity and culture in chapter 4. The thesis also engages in of exploring the works of other American playwrights whenever relevant, such as Arthur Miller, David Rabe, Sam Shepard, William M. Hoffman, Susan Lori-Parks, and many others. Introducing Wilson in a theatrical context allows for emerging perspective to consider the theatrical context and other playwrights in light of alienation as a theme.

The thesis demonstrated that the two senses in which alienation is present in Wilson's plays: the Marxist sense of alienation, and the existential sense of alienation that always overlap and interfere with the individuals' ability to express identity, claim or reclaim identity, or explores potential manners of self-identification. That also overlaps with Wilson's experience of alienation as an artist that he expressed in chapter 3. Wilson introduced the impossibility of expressing identities in social contexts that do not provide any space for self-expression and sometimes distort the

sense of identity, dehumanise individuals and minimise their contribution and interaction with others. Also encourages a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, normlessness and self-alienation. Introduction of alienation and identity problem in the sociopolitical contexts of the plays allows for a better understanding of the themes, character, and their representations on the stage.

In the introduction to this thesis, six trends and traditions that, I argued, have shaped the practices of theatre historiography and criticism in America. The limited amount of academic research on Wilson's theatrical experience has been affected by such practices. Throughout the thesis, challenging narratives have been introduced to cross examine the existing literature and overcome any possible limitations or misconceptions. This introduced several perspectives to Wilson's scripts and productions. For instance, the existing narrative that considers Wilson's plays in a context of LGBTQ themes and presentations of gay characters, has been challenged in the first chapter but reframe the plays in a wider context of Off-Off-Broadway spaces and performativity of identities. The interactions between spaces of performances, performers or actors, and audiences refocus attention to the social and theatrical contexts and stimulate further investigation of the plays' role in such contexts. The thesis situated Wilson's early plays in the theatrical context of Off-Off-Broadway as space-based productions.

The introductory chapter provided a detailed description of the three main archive collections used in the thesis; collections in the USA: Lanford Wilson Special Collection at the University of Missouri, The Circle Repertory Company Records, and The Caffe Cino Collection, at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The complications of using archival items in theatre history and performance studies



are introduced as well. The use of theatre archival materials and documentation of performances have been a source of debate in academia. The thesis is not an archive-based, nor it is a theoretical or methodological based thesis. Therefore, it does not propose to resolve such complications, but it is essential to clarify and the ways they influenced the use of the archives and the collation of materials in the discussion. A combination of methodological approaches is incorporated to allow using the archived materials in a productive way. In approaching and using archived materials, accepting the presence of research gaps that will remain in any narratives is essential. The interpretations and analysis of any material are introduced as possibilities rather than facts; a place from where further research can be carried out into new directions. Untangling such issues resolves any complications that could have been aroused in the following chapters. Moreover, introducing such archives to readers and researchers, either in this thesis or in conference papers, will widen the recognition and allow for more use of the unexploited archival materials not only to explore Wilson's plays, but the history of American theatre and performance in general.

The thesis engages with discussing some problematic terms and identification used substantially in the field of American theatre studies such as lyrical realism, expressionism and Abstract Expressionism, Avant Garde or underground theatre, and well-made plays. Such terms have the limitations, ambiguities, and complications when used to contextualise the plays and the playwrights.

Introducing the cultural, socio-political, theatrical and artistic contexts of Wilson's plays does not necessarily suggest direct influences or representations of such contexts but suggests an interaction where his works may have influenced and been influenced by such contexts. The engagement of theatre in social activism and

social changes debatable and should be approached carefully. Nevertheless, it should allow for further investigations of social contexts and the role of theatre in society especially in the 1960s America.

The focus of Wilson, as a gay playwright, continued during the 1970s. In more than ten plays during that time, there are only 2 gay characters. In chapter two, I chose to examine the national identity and alienation in a collective sense. The issues of sexuality and gender were integrated as part of such experience. Alienation comes as a personal experience in Wilson's career, as I argued. The 1970s marked his transition to realism and well-made plays following the models of Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman. Realism and well-made plays were required in Broadway by audiences and critics. Despite the thesis's challenge of identifying Wilson as realist playwright, it was impossible to exclude the realistic plays from the discussion. This thesis attempted to challenge the dominating narratives in the critical literature on Wilson that situated him exclusively in gay theatre and. By identifying such problematic approaches, the directions of my research were dedicated to exploring the plays in different theatrical and dramatic perspectives of space, identity, and politics. This can be extended to playwrights who are identified by certain narrative and still endure further investigation.

Chapter 1 explores the theme of alienation in Wilson's early plays written between the 1960s to mid-1970s. The plays include *Home Free!* (1964), *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964), *Ludlow Fair* (1964), *This is the Rill Speaking* (1965), *Days Ahead* (1965), *Balm in Gilead* (1965), and *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973). The plays demonstrate an extreme sense of alienation shown through the spatial isolation of characters on stage from the mainstream society, and of the Off-Off-Broadway

movement venues from the mainstream theatrical scene. The experience of alienation in the plays is that of marginal characters, outsiders. The characters are isolated from the social context and express a process of self-identification. Drag, camp, anti-normative sexuality, and anti-social behaviours are discussed as both sources and results of alienation. The 1960s counterculture is integrated into such expressions of alienation and identity. Wilson introduced space and place and their politics as an active agent in his early plays. Accordingly, gender, sexuality, and race are three manners of identification that interact with space and place. Alienation of such individual identities in a disturbed society and excluded venues is the focus of this chapter.

In the first chapter, the gender and sexual issues that identified Wilson's early plays at the Caffe Cino as gay plays, were examined in relevance to space and identity politics. The presentation of alienation and the resulted sexual behaviours in the plays, are not exclusively a rebellious act to challenge the heteronormativity of the social norms as the politics of counterculture and gay theatre suggests. Characters in *The Madness of Lady Bright* and *Home Free!* challenged and questioned the normativity of the Caffe Cino space. The stylistics and structural approaches in the plays were shaped by the anti-narrative, unstructured, and fragmented nature of the Off-Off-Broadway.

In chapter 2, American national identity and alienation in a collective sense are explored in Wilson's Talley's Trilogy written and performed in the 1970s. The American national identity as a collective identity (presented through the dysfunctional family structure/ system) becomes a meaningless manner of identification after the Vietnam War (1955-1975). The presentation of American

national identity in American plays and theater can endure further exploration. The thesis suggests that the sense of alienation presented in the 1970s plays by Wilson is a result of the failure of the American political and social system to sustain its integrity in response to national issues such as the Vietnam War and the 1960s movements. Shorter plays such as *Victory on Mrs. Dandywine's Island* (1970) and *The Family Continues* (1972) were also explored. A thematic comparison between the trilogy's presentation of war and Arthur Miller's plays is revealed. The parallel that Wilson carries in the plays between the sociopolitical situation of the Vietnam War and the historical context of American involvement in World War II suggests an American flaw of tendency to violence and war. The violence directed to women and lower-class individuals. The post-war American national identity is embodied through the Talley family. American identity is metaphorically performed as gay, white, disabled, and shattered, and isolated male. Alienation in such sense is examined considering masculinity, white supremacy, capitalism, and nationalism. The thesis showed the use of actors' movements on the stage to demonstrate metaphorically the structure of American family.

Chapter 3 focused on the theme of alienation as an existential and individualistic experience relevant directly to a particular social context. Wilson's personal experience of alienation as an artist and a playwright is explored. Self-alienation is an experience of inability to express or practice one's identity in modern, industrial, and capitalist societies. The characters are framed in an atmosphere of fabricated and exaggerated fear. In their personal quest for the meaning and ways to communicate their feelings and expressions, they are controlled by fear of others, the unknown, and the outside. The atmosphere of fear, in the plays, is introduced with references to the AIDS epidemic and the Cold War threats. Noticeably, characters

lose any possibilities of communicating fearlessly and safely. It is a fear of being and a fear of artistic expression that both parallel with Wilson's personal experience as an artist and a gay playwright. The sense of religious alienation from God and from the Christian institutions is expressed by Niles' extreme sense of anxiety, isolation, and sickness in an isolated church. Wilson's personal sense of alienation was explored in relation with Expressionism in American theater and his nostalgic comments on his earlier plays as the authentic expression of his talent and feelings.

The last chapter investigated the least critically examined plays of Lanford Wilson from 1990s onwards. As established in chapter 3, after *Burn This*, Wilson decided to reclaim his earlier playwriting style by incorporating several experimental elements written purposefully to fit a mainstream audience. The plays are distinctive with their multiculturalism concerns and the use of rituals, performativity, supernatural elements to create narratives of identity and belonging. Acting techniques are explored as they are used purposefully on stage to reflect on the issues of multiculturalism and belonging. In this chapter, the crisis of Native American identity and its representation in theater, is explored. By using Native American dances and performances in the plays, Wilson tried to create narratives that

The limited availability of the video records for most of Wilson's performed plays has limited the engagement of this thesis with performance studies. However, the thematic analysis can contribute to any future productions of Wilson's plays. The future potential revivals of the plays can benefit for the different narratives and approaches introduced in this thesis. Since the beginning of this research in 2016, there has been increasing interest in reviving Wilson's plays including the 2019 Broadway production of *Burn This*. The production failed to relate to its current context and the play was received by many critics as a homophobic presentation of gay people. The

production was introduced in the past 1990s' context of a deadly pandemic and fear of sexual intimacy, both were irrelevant in 2019. Therefore, further investigations that challenges the existing narratives of Wilson's plays are required for future revivals.

In Academic theatre and performance studies, by the thematic and contextual analysis, Wilson can be positioned as an American playwright whose plays, in various stages, engage with nonnormative contexts and presentations. His presentation of American experiences is not necessarily radical especially in later plays, but it is still genuine and explicit. The ways Wilson used spaces, bodies, and theatrical techniques to introduce certain meanings, is a field that require further examination. There are several areas in American theatre history that are still blank such as the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s. The existing literature focuses largely on mainstream playwrights and Broadway and Off-Broadway productions of those periods. However, the marginal and underground theatrical performance can endure further exploration.

Finally, Within the thematic analysis, the thesis investigated areas that are emerging in performances and theatre studies such as disability, incestuous and sexual behaviours, national identities, intimacy, the Native American narratives, and the use of rituals. All these areas can be explored not only in Wilson's plays, but in plays by other past or American playwrights. The thesis also calls for approaching theatrical spaces in a collaborative, cooperative approach that would introduce potential narratives to identify the role of such spaces in the history of American theatre.

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